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# ABBY JIMENEZ

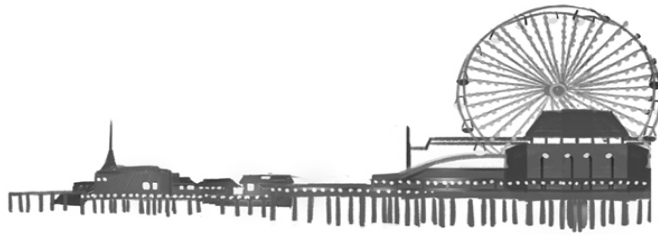
## *SAY YOU'LL REMEMBER ME*

"No one does funny, emotional,  
life-affirming love stories  
quite like Abby Jimenez."

—EMILY HENRY



# SAY YOU'LL REMEMBER ME



ABBY JIMENEZ



FOREVER

New York Boston



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# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[A Note from the Author](#)

[1: Xavier](#)

[2: Samantha](#)

[3: Xavier](#)

[4: Samantha](#)

[5: Xavier](#)

[6: Samantha](#)

[7: Xavier](#)

[8: Samantha](#)

[9: Samantha](#)

[10: Samantha](#)

[11: Xavier](#)

[12: Samantha](#)

[13: Xavier](#)

[14: Samantha](#)

[15: Xavier](#)

[16: Samantha](#)

[17: Xavier](#)

[18: Samantha](#)

[19: Xavier](#)

[20: Samantha](#)

[21: Samantha](#)

[22: Xavier](#)

[23: Xavier](#)

[24: Samantha](#)

[25: Samantha](#)

[26: Xavier](#)

[27: Samantha](#)

[28: Xavier](#)

[29: Xavier](#)

[30: Samantha](#)

[31: Xavier](#)

[32: Samantha](#)

[33: Xavier](#)

[34: Samantha](#)

[35: Xavier](#)

[36: Samantha](#)

[37: Xavier](#)

[38: Samantha](#)

[39: Xavier](#)

[40: Samantha](#)

[41: Samantha](#)

[42: Samantha](#)

[43: Xavier](#)

[44: Xavier](#)

[45: Samantha](#)

[46: Samantha](#)

[Epilogue: Samantha](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Xavier's Anniversary Playlist for Samantha](#)

[Discover More](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Abby Jimenez](#)



*To Lilia.*  
*We will never forget you.*

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## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

While my books are all rom-coms, there are still some themes in this story that may be triggering for some readers. If you feel trigger warnings are spoilers and you don't need them, please skip the next paragraph and jump right in.

This book contains detailed descriptions of someone with advanced dementia. There's mention of a cheating spouse of a side character, mention of past child abuse both physical and emotional. Mention of animal abuse, cruelty, neglect, and death. There's a scene where a dog is in peril. (The dog doesn't die. The main character's dog will NEVER die.) Sudden off-page death of a side character with a heart condition.

# 1



## XAVIER

YOU WANT ME to do what?" I asked.

The middle-aged woman stood on the other side of the exam table, her dog between us. He was looking back and forth at our faces like he understood the conversation. For his sake I sincerely hoped he didn't.

"I want you to put him down," she said.

"He's healthy," I replied.

"I know," she said, peering at him forlornly. "My mom took real good care of him before she passed."

"Then why?"

She breathed out a dramatic sigh. "It's what she wanted. She didn't want him to have to live the rest of his life without her. He'd miss her too much."

"He can bond with someone else."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. He's too old."

"He's *four*."

She looked me in the eye like she was about to argue with me over taking an expired coupon. "Look," she said. "I'm gonna level with you. Me coming here was a compromise. My husband wanted to take him out in the woods and shoot him to save us the three hundred dollars. I told him that's not humane, and that Mom would have wanted him to go peacefully, so here we are. But if you won't do it, he will—and he's not a very good shot. Might take a few tries."

I stared at her blankly. This is why I hated humans. They were the worst animals on the planet.

The dog looked up at me with sad eyes. "It's four hundred for euthanasia," I said flatly.

It wasn't. It was three hundred. For everyone but her.

She agreed to the cost, and I took the dog and did what I had to do.

An hour later I was sitting in the back room, charting the visit, more irritable than usual by the event.

Tina, one of my vet techs, was standing there glaring at me with her arms crossed.

"What?" I said, without looking up.

"You know what."

I shot her a look.

"What am I supposed to give her when she comes back for his ashes?" she asked, cocking her head.

"Do you have a fireplace?" I asked.

"No."

"A charcoal grill?"

She twisted her face thinking about it. "I think it's gas."

Maggie, my other tech, opened the cabinet and put a file away. "Didn't we cremate that one rescue dog that didn't make it? The St. Bernard mix?" she said. "We can give her those."

"Fine," I said. "But give her half. It's too much."

Tina was scratching the very not-dead dog's chin. "What are you gonna name him?" she asked.

"I have no idea," I mumbled, standing.

I was getting a headache. Clenching my teeth.

"I need you to cut his hair," I said. "Give him a schnauzer cut or something. Make him look different."

"But he's so cute fluffy!" Tina said.

I made pointed eye contact with both of them. "I don't think I need to remind you that I could lose my license for what I just did."

Tina looked at me adoringly. "We know. You're such a hero."

Maggie was biting her lip and nodding.

They were smiling at me. Beaming actually.

It made me more irritable.

"Do not take any pictures of this dog," I said. "No social media. Don't call him by his name. We don't breathe a word of this to anyone."

"We'll take it to the *grave*," Tina said, clutching her hands at her chest.

"I'd lie for you in court," Maggie said. "Hand on the Bible and

everything.”

Tina nodded emphatically.

“I know you don’t like to hear it,” Maggie said. “But you are truly one of the best people I know, Dr. Rush. It’s an honor to work for you.”

I frowned at the compliment. I didn’t like flattery or praise.

I did like dogs, though. I liked all animals, but especially dogs. We didn’t deserve them—and some people deserved them less than others.

“You have one more patient in room six,” Maggie said. “And God bless you, Dr. Rush.”

I gave her one more flat look, then I grabbed the tablet she handed me as I walked out. They smiled after me.

They’d never tell anyone. I trusted my team with my life—or in this case my license. But I didn’t need all the fawning over me.

I walked into room six reading the chart. Patient was an abandoned kitten, found a few hours before in a wood pile.

“I’m Dr. Rush,” I mumbled, coming in without looking up.

I went to the sink to wash my hands. I shut off the water, took a paper towel, and turned to look at the woman sitting there. Instant jolt of surprise when I saw her.

She was beautiful. My age, maybe twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Long black hair, brown eyes. Curvy.

She had the kitten in her bra. It was tucked in her cleavage sleeping, its chin balanced in the V of her shirt.

“Hey, doc,” she said, standing. “Hold on, let me get her. I think she’s a her? I’m not really good at looking at little kitty bits.”

She pulled the white-and-brown fluff ball out and set her on the table between us. It was purring.

I’d probably be purring too if I’d been in there.

I cleared my throat and started my exam.

“About five weeks old,” I said, my voice low.

The kitten’s gums looked good and pink, eyes were clear. It was underweight. No fleas. Looked in its ears. Mites, but not too bad. I felt the abdomen. Bent its legs and ran my fingers down its spine to check for abnormalities.

The woman was watching me. I couldn’t explain why, but it made me self-conscious.

*Nothing* made me self-conscious.

But for some reason her eyes on me made me wonder whether I'd shaved this morning.

I could smell the kitten. It smelled like her. Like flowers.

"Are you keeping it?" I asked.

She leaned on the exam table. "I mean, yeah. You don't turn down the cat distribution system."

The corner of my lip twitched.

"Did you check around?" I asked, listening to the kitten's lungs. "Make sure there weren't any others?"

"Yeah. Just this one." She gazed at me through thick lashes and smiled.

My heart picked up. My *God* this woman was gorgeous. I did my best to act like I didn't notice.

I put my stethoscope around my neck and went to take the kitten's temperature, trying to act like I was unaffected by her watching me.

When I lifted the tail, I froze.

I raised my eyes to the woman, and she peered back at me. "What?"

"I'd like to get some imaging."

A half an hour later the scans were done, and I was there to deliver the bad news.

"The kitten has a congenital condition," I said. "It's called atresia ani. It's when the rectum and anus don't fully develop."

She blinked at me, then at the kitten back in her shirt. "I'm sorry. What?"

"She doesn't have a functional anus or a rectum."

She stared. "You're saying this kitten doesn't have a butthole."

"That is what I am saying."

She pulled the cat out of her bra and lifted its tail. Her eyes went wide. There was a little fleshy bald spot where the anus should be, but barely a pinprick of an opening. It was easy to miss if you weren't looking right at it.

"But... but she poops," she said. "She's used the litter box."

"She's developed a rectovaginal fistula. She passes feces through her vulva. She has stomach parasites, so her stools are watery. This is likely the only reason she's survived as long as she has. There's a surgery that could potentially correct this. I don't do it. She'd need to be seen by a specialist, a board-certified veterinary surgeon."

She nodded. "Okay. How much is that?" she asked.

"It runs between five to ten thousand dollars."

Her mouth fell open.

"My recommendation is to put her down," I said.

She studied the floor a moment before coming back to me. "But... but she's *happy*. She's a happy baby. I'm not putting her down."

"Miss—I'm sorry, what is your name?" I asked.

"Samantha. Diaz."

"Miss Diaz, one of two things is going to happen here. She will become impacted, she will suffer, and she will die. Or she will get an infection, she will suffer, and she will die. Even with the surgery, the prognosis is guarded at best. She'll need round-the-clock care until she's recovered—"

"I work from home. I can do that."

"There's often further complications that will require additional investment. If you're not able to or interested in getting her the surgical procedure, I strongly recommend euthanasia."

She clutched the kitten to her breast. "I *can't*."

"So you'd like the referral to the surgeon?"

"I don't have that kind of money. Is there a rescue that could help?"

"It's kitten season," I said. "The rescues are inundated. And they can save a hundred kittens with the funds it would take to *maybe* save this one. You could certainly reach out to a few and ask, but I think it's unlikely they'll be able to help. I recommend putting her down," I repeated. "Immediately. Before she's in pain. Do you have any more questions for me? If not, I can give you some time to say goodbye."

She stared at me. "I will *not* be putting this cat down."

Maybe the knee-jerk annoyance I felt was an overreaction. Maybe it was just the end of a rough day at the end of a very long week and I was already frustrated by the dog situation from earlier, but I couldn't contain my irritation.

I crossed my arms. "Why bother to come ask for my expertise if you don't intend to take my advice?"

She blinked at me. "There have to be other options—"

"There aren't. So what is your plan?"

"I... I don't know..."

"So it's the suffering then. Got it."



She gawked at me. I didn't care.

I had seen every evil known to man walk through these doors but most of all I was tired of the selfishness and general stupidity I witnessed on a daily basis. The animals that should live, they want to put down, the ones who will suffer, they want to keep alive. They neglect and abuse them, they don't spay and neuter so the shelters overflow, they dump them, get tired of the responsibility, and abandon them. Well-intentioned stupidity is still stupidity. She was going to prolong this animal's misery. I hated it and for some reason I also hated that it lowered my opinion of her. I think out of everything, that was bothering me the most.

"Anything else?" I asked. "Or are we done?"

Her eyes flashed. "Has anyone ever told you your bedside manner could use some work?"

"As a matter of fact, they have," I said. I pushed off the exam table. "Let me know when she stops eating, her stomach distends, and she's in enough agony for you to make the hard choices that come with pet ownership."

I walked out.

She followed me.

"What makes you think that I can't fundraise this money?" she said to my back.

I scoffed. "Human nature?" I said, handing a wide-eyed Maggie the tablet on my way to the office.

"People are inherently good," she said after me. "They *want* to help."

I turned and pinned her with a stare. "People are inherently assholes."

"Yeah?" she said. "Well, so are you."

She stood there, her cheeks pink, the kitten's head poking out of the top of her cleavage. Sexy.

I don't know why that's what I thought of in this moment, but sexy was all I could process.

"Fair enough," I said.

I went to my office and closed the door.

## 2



## SAMANTHA

YOU ACTUALLY DID it,” Jeneva said.

“Nothing motivates me more than being told I can’t do something.”

My sister chuckled.

It was four days after the visit with Dr. Asshole. The GoFundMe had almost nine thousand dollars in it.

Pooter was playing with the jingly cat ball I got her in my living room. She’d swat it, then chase it across the floor and pounce on it. I smiled at her on my way to the couch.

“Did you know it was going to go viral?” Jeneva asked.

I shrugged. “I mean, I can’t always be sure. But sort of. Cute baby animal in need, clear call to action, catchy slogan.”

“‘Pooter Needs a Poop Chute’ was genius...”

“It’s what I do.” I plopped onto the sofa with my iced coffee.

“I hope he sees it,” she said.

“I hope he sees it too. Dick. You know what’s even worse?”

“What?”

“He was like, seriously fucking hot. When he was being mean to me, he actually got hotter. Why am I like this?”

Jeneva clinked dishes around. “Did you write him a bad review?”

I dragged a throw blanket across my lap. “Nah. Honestly, I picked him because he had such good ratings. The reviews actually warn you that he’s all brilliant and crabby, some moody animal whisperer or something.”

“We do love a cranky king,” she said distractedly.

“I mean, I could see where he was coming from, he just didn’t have to be rude about it. I never get why white men are grumpy. Like, we’re living

in a patriarchy. You're the most privileged class on the face of the earth. You're not walking to your car with your keys through your fingers like wolverine and you've got bodily autonomy, why the bad mood?"

"What did he look like?" she asked.

"Like if Rhysand from the ACOTAR series were a real person," I said, putting my straw between my teeth.

"No..."

"I swear to God. Hold on, I'll google him, see if I can find a picture."

I put her on speaker and typed *Xavier Rush veterinarian* into the search bar and hit images.

A picture of him holding an award popped up on the American Veterinary Medical Association website. He'd been recognized last year for some gargantuan amount of volunteer hours treating rescue animals.

He looked irritated, like he didn't want to be there. Handsome, but definitely a hostage situation.

"Here," I said, sending her a screenshot.

I sipped my coffee while I waited for her to look at it.

"Oh yeah..." she said.

"If he doesn't do the bat wings, tattoo thing for Halloween it's a seriously missed opportunity," I said.

"Do you think he smiles at the dogs at least?"

"Probably not."

"My toxic trait is thinking I could change him," she said.

"Ha. My toxic trait is not caring if I could change him."

She laughed.

I could hear Mom come into the room in the background.

"Tell her hi," I said.

"Samantha says hi."

"Who?" I heard Mom say.

"Samantha," Jeneva repeated.

Silence followed. Mom didn't say hi back.

I stared at Pooter while I tried to get my feelings about this to flatten.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Fine." Then to Mom, "I'm making you dinner. We're having pasta. No, you don't need to help, I got it."

I reached under the sofa and pulled out my laptop to check the Pooter

funds. This was the core source of my serotonin this week. Well, the kitten too. But the GoFundMe was a multipart success for me. It meant I could save my baby, it renewed my already high faith in humanity, and it meant Dr. Asshole was wrong, which was a petty kind of joy, but a solid one nonetheless.

The page loaded and I smiled. Almost ten thousand now. I was close enough that I felt comfortable scheduling the surgery. And just in time too. I was heading to California in six weeks and I'd have to take Pooter with me, so the sooner she started healing the better.

"I'm excited for you to see the house," Jeneva said. "We've done a lot of repairs."

I heard Mom again.

"We're having pasta, Mom," Jeneva said. "Yes, I'm making you dinner. No, just sit, you don't need to help, I got it."

I moved the phone away from my mouth like she could hear my expression. Then, instead of letting the knot in my throat thicken, I hit refresh on the donations page.

Someone just donated \$500.

I sat up.

Most people gave twenty-five. Maybe fifty. I'd gotten a handful of hundred-dollar donations. Nothing this high. I looked at the name and my eyes went wide.

Jeneva must have heard the gasp. "What?" she asked.

"The grumpy vet," I breathed. "He just donated all this money to my GoFundMe."

"Really?"

"Yes!"

I read the note. My three favorite words: You were right.

# 3



## XAVIER

THIS LOOKS TERRIBLE,” I said.

Tina shrugged. “You told me to make him look different. He looks different.”

My dog smiled up at me with the goofiest haircut I’d ever seen. He had the beard of a schnauzer and the shaved legs of a poodle. He’d be embarrassed if he cared.

I blew a breath out. I guess ugly was better than dead.

“Still no name?” Tina asked.

“No. I’m waiting for something to speak to me,” I said.

It had been over a month since his “death.” The lady had come in and collected the St. Bernard ashes weeks ago. I figured she wouldn’t have any reason to come back to the clinic, so I’d brought the dog to work so he wouldn’t be home alone. That meant he needed the haircut now that he was out and about—and he needed a new name. I’d been calling him by his old one this whole time, but that wouldn’t work if he wanted to make public appearances.

“So are you definitely keeping him?” Tina asked.

“I think I have to. I can’t exactly put him up on an adoption site.”

“None of your friends can take him?”

“No.”

She scratched behind his ear. “He’s a good boy.”

“They’re all good boys,” I grumbled.

My stomach growled. I looked at my watch. Two o’clock. I’d worked through lunch again.

I was the only doctor at my practice. If a patient needed a last-minute

visit, I didn't like to send them to the ER vet if I didn't have to. It meant I didn't always get breaks—in fact most days I didn't.

Tina must have read my mind. “We brought you some chicken enchiladas. They're in the fridge.”

“Thanks,” I said.

They were always feeding me. It happened so much I'd started paying them for the groceries.

I opened up the laptop to respond to emails while my dog sat with his chin on my thigh.

“So you're going with Chris tonight to the thing, right?” Tina asked, leaning in the doorway.

“That is the plan,” I said, not looking up.

“Is he still single?”

“As far as I'm aware.” Chris, Mike, Jesse, Becca—they were all my best friends, practically family.

“You should ask him if he wants to meet my sister,” she said. “She just broke up with that youth pastor?”

“Chris is too busy for dating,” I said, skimming an email about a vaccination clinic for the rescue. “And I am too busy to be in the middle of it.”

“What about Mike?” she said, going on unfazed. “Although he might be too muscly. Not sure she'd like that. Too bad Jesse isn't single, he'd be perfect. They're both in finance, you know? But Chris is a pharmacist, that's really good too. Also, he likes to read and she likes to read. I bet they'd get along, you should ask him.”

How these women managed to glean this much about my friends from the handful of times they'd come in here and the limited information I provided them was beyond me.

Maggie burst into the back. “Dr. Rush!” She was panting. “That lady is here!” she hiss-whispered.

I blinked at her. “What lady?”

Her eyes were wide. “The butthole cat lady.”

I froze. Samantha.

After I'd sent the donation last month, I got a generic thank-you email—not that I expected anything beyond that. I didn't send it in the hopes she'd reach out, I sent it to help and to apologize. But so much time had passed...

“What does she want?” I asked.

“An exam?” Maggie said. “Says she’s flying with the cat and she needs a health certificate and a sedative.”

Why would she come to *me*?

I’d been reliving that entire encounter in my head on a loop for the last six weeks. I couldn’t let it go.

I’d acted badly. My behavior had been unprofessional and uncalled-for. The culmination of exhaustion and the general fatigue of dealing with other human beings, but I’d atoned for it and usually that was enough for me to move on.

But I couldn’t shake this and I didn’t know why.

No. I *did* know why. It was her.

Normally things people said about my personality didn’t bother me. I was dry. I’d always been dry. She had every right to say what she did and call me what she had. She wasn’t even the first person to do it. But coming from this woman it had hit differently for some reason. It bothered me that I’d let her down.

It had made me work more these last few weeks to be softer with people. Like she’d somehow know if I was short with someone and it would disappoint her, which was ridiculous on a thousand different levels, but I was doing it nonetheless.

And now she was here.

I went to the bathroom to check my hair. Then I was mad at myself for checking my hair because she wasn’t here to look at *me*, she was here for *me* to look at her cat. I came out and went straight to the hallway to go get this over with, then immediately turned around. “What room?”

Maggie was waiting for me. “Two.”

I left again. Then I came back.

“Tablet,” I said.

Maggie was standing there smiling, holding it up, like she’d known I was coming. I narrowed my eyes at her, took it, and left. Again.

When I opened the door to room two, Samantha was in the same place as last time, cat in her shirt.

“Hello, Dr. Rush,” she said wryly.

Beautiful. Even more than last time.

“Miss Diaz,” I said, my voice low.

I went to the sink to wash my hands, mostly to buy myself time before I had to talk to her.

When I turned back around, she was smiling at me. “Would you like to see my kitten’s butthole?”

I snorted. Then I straightened and tossed the paper towel in the trash. “I actually would like to see that.”

She pulled the cat out of her bra and handed her to me.

I set her on the exam table and lifted her tail. Then I raised my eyebrows. “That’s an excellent-looking butthole.”

“Riiiiight?” She grinned.

I had to work to keep my face straight.

“The surgeon said the deformity was more minor than we thought,” she said, watching me examine Pooter. “She came through it great, she’s not incontinent or anything.”

“Are her bowel movements normal?” I asked, feeling her stomach.

“Yup.”

“How many a day?”

“Two to three,” she said.

“How do they look?”

“I brought you a picture because I just *knew* you’d want to see it.”

She took out her phone and swiped and then held it out to me. I nodded sagely. “Perfect.”

I felt her watch me as I checked the kitten’s teeth and eyes.

The cat smelled like her perfume again. Again I liked it.

She put her phone back in her purse and leaned against the wall. “I accept your apology by the way,” she said.

I glanced up at her. “I was wrong. I can admit when I’m wrong. I underestimated the people of the internet.”

“No, you underestimated *me* and how funny I can be, which is worse.”

She got a small smile out of me.

I took out my stethoscope and listened to Pooter’s heart and lungs.

“You raised more than you needed,” I said. “What did you do with the rest?”

“I donated it all to Bitty Kitty Brigade.”

I wrapped the stethoscope around my neck. I liked that.

“I think she’s in good shape,” I said. “I can clear her to fly. I’ll give you



something for the trip.”

“Thanks.”

Then she waited, giving me a *Well?* look.

Well indeed.

“Would you like to go on a date with me?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” she said without even thinking about it. “But you have to take me tonight. I leave tomorrow.”

“Pick you up or meet you somewhere?” I asked.

“Pick me up.”

“Six thirty?”

“Sounds good,” she said. “My number’s in Pooter’s chart.”

I handed her the kitten, took the airline health certificate she brought for me to fill out, and I left.

I saw Tina in the back. “She needs a prescription for gabapentin and proof of vaccinations. I’ll fill out the health certificate before I leave.”

I was talking to Tina but looking through the tablet for Samantha’s number.

“Oh my God, he’s smiling,” Tina said.

My head jerked up. “What?”

She was looking at me with wide eyes. “You’re *smiling*.”

“He *is* smiling.” Maggie’s mouth was open. “Is it her? Do you *like* her??”

I didn’t get to answer. Tina gasped and started bouncing. “He likes her!”

“Stop it. No I don’t.”

Maggie made a circling motion with her finger. “Yeeeeessss you dooo! We can tell.”

I stared at both of them flatly. Then I turned toward my office and shut the door. I stood in front of my desk and wiped a hand down my mouth.

I felt bad that I said I didn’t like her. It wasn’t true.

I came back out.

“I do like her. We’re going on a date tonight. I don’t want to hear anything else about it, it’s not a big deal.”

Apparently it was a big deal. They started screaming.

“This isn’t my first date,” I said defensively.

“Oh, we know,” Maggie said, beaming. “But this one is different.”

“Why?”

“She called you an asshole.”

I snorted.

“Normally I would tell you not to be all scary and serious, but I think she’s into it,” Tina said.

“Thank you, but I do not need your advice. I do not exactly have a difficult time finding people to go out with me,” I said.

I didn’t. I don’t know why they were so excited.

“You go on dates with a very specific kind of woman,” Maggie said.

“Do I,” I said, unamused.

“Your girls are always A-type personalities,” Maggie said. “They’re all Ivy League grads with perfect clothes and zero sense of humor. You’re intense and brooding and she’s always mad and texting furiously into her phone because she’s a CEO or a lawyer or something with a super tight bun —”

“Yeah! The bun!” Tina said. “They always have the bun!”

“The last one did not wear a bun,” I said, annoyed.

“No. But she had bun energy,” Tina said.

“You need someone who will argue with you,” Maggie said. “And loosen you up.”

“Someone nice but not like, too nice,” Tina said. “You’re too scary for too nice.”

I scoffed. “I am not scary.”

Both women looked at me with their *awwww, bless your heart* faces.

“You don’t smile a lot, sweetie,” Maggie said.

“Also, you’re very tall,” Tina said. “You can’t frown and also be tall. It’s intimidating.”

“Where are you gonna take her?” Maggie asked.

“It should be a public place,” Tina said. “You’re too big and frowny to take her somewhere secluded on the first date.”

I gave her a look. “Is my face really this much of a problem?”

They both sucked air through their teeth.

“Sort of?” Tina said. “Like, conceptually it’s fine? In a romance novel you’d be an alpha-male vampire,” Tina said, matter-of-factly. “That’s really good.”

“A werewolf,” Maggie corrected. “He’s sort of growly.”

“A werewolf,” I deadpanned.

“No...” Tina said to Maggie, not to me. She paused dramatically. “Rhysand.”

Maggie gasped. “Yessssssss! Because he’s all cold and handsome and dangerous looking.”

“He even looks like him. Like if Rhys were human?” Tina said.

“Oh my God, totally,” Maggie said.

They kept going on about it and I watched them, highly unamused.

“While you two figure out which fictional monster I am, I’m going to get back to work.” I gave them a pointed glance. “It’d be nice if you also resumed working at some point.”

They continued on, talking about faeries with bat wings.

I retreated to the office again before they could ask me any more questions, and I started second-guessing my plan of where I wanted to take Samantha.

It didn’t help. Then I second-guessed my second-guesses.

Usually I made choices quickly and confidently, and they tended to be the right ones. But for some reason with this, I wasn’t sure.

I don’t know why, but I felt like I was only going to get one shot with Samantha. The shot felt important. Maybe because the entire date was a second chance to begin with?

And what did they mean I don’t smile? I smile.

I looked up over the desk at a photo Maggie had framed of the three of us at the grand opening of the clinic two years ago. One of the happiest days of my life.

Okay, maybe I didn’t smile.

I should work on that.

I blew a breath through my nose. Then I called Jesse’s girlfriend, Becca. She answered on the second ring. She sounded like she was in a drive-through—a muffled voice was telling her to pull forward to the next window.

“Xavier?”

“Hi. Can I ask you a question?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Am I intimidating?”

There was a beat of silence.

“Hello?” I said.

“I’m trying to figure out how to say this nicely.”

I rubbed my temples.

“You are very tall, and you don’t smile very much,” she said. “You can come off a little grumpy. I think you are a little grumpy, actually.”

I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Why? Do you have a date or something?” she asked.

I felt like a dark cloud. “I do.”

“Do you want my honest opinion?” she asked. “Like honest, honest?”

When I didn’t answer she went on.

“Be yourself. If you’ve gotten this far, she’s probably got an idea of how you are already. And you’re not scary once someone gets to know you.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“I’m serious. You’re not. You’re not charismatic. Or charming or extroverted or fun or—”

“Okay, I get it.”

“No, let me finish. You’re other things. You’re dependable and loyal. You’re stable and hardworking and kind. You always do the right thing, and you have a ton of integrity. That’s the stuff that matters.”

I softened a little.

“You’ve never cared before what anyone thought,” she said. “This must be a big date.”

I didn’t respond.

“Hold on, I have to pay for my coffee.”

“That’s all I need. Thank you for the feedback,” I said.

“You got it.”

“Don’t tell Mike or Chris I called you,” I said. “Or Jesse.”

“Okay, I won’t, I promise. Just lean into the smoldering romance hero thing you have going on. Embrace your inner Rhysand.”

Sure. I had no idea what that meant. I was thinking I should probably google it since it was the second time I’d heard the name in ten minutes.

“Good luck,” she sang.

I hung up and stared at the photo on the wall. I wasn’t going to force it. I was going to be myself.

Hopefully that’s what she liked.

# 4



## SAMANTHA

I'M GOING ON a date with the guy."

Jeneva gasped. "The vet? How did *that* happen?"

"He asked me at Pooter's vet visit."

I did a final swipe of mascara and stood back to look at myself in the bathroom mirror. Not bad considering the late notice. I was in a sundress and sandals. I had sunglasses in my purse and a hat I wore to the beach. I didn't know how "outside" we were going to be.

"Are you done packing?" she asked. "Do you have time for this?"

"Totally packed. I had nothing to do tonight. And honestly, I could use the distraction."

"Where's he taking you?"

I rummaged for my favorite lipstick. "I don't know. He asked me if I like boats. I didn't want to ask too many questions. I kind of like the thrill of the unknown."

"Yeah, well the thrill of the unknown is what gets you murdered. Text me when you get to where you're going. Is he picking you up?" she asked.

"Yeah. Figured why not save the money on an Uber."

"Oh God. It's like you've never seen *Dateline*."

I smacked my lips. "You know, I tend to have pretty good instincts about people. I think you should give me some credit."

Pooter rubbed her face on my leg, and I picked her up and set her on the sink.

"Well, provided you don't become a missing person, I'm excited to see you tomorrow," Jeneva said.

"What about Mom?"

There was a pause. “I think once she sees you it’ll be fine.”

Another pause. “Yeah.”

Though we both knew it probably wouldn’t be fine. It hadn’t been for a while.

Our mom had dementia. She was only fifty-four.

It started a few years ago with problems focusing after a small head injury. She thought it was just the concussion taking longer to heal or menopausal brain fog. But then it turned into other things. Repeating questions, getting lost—crashing the car into a palm tree outside of a Whole Foods in Pasadena because she’d gotten the pedals mixed up.

Now she didn’t know my name.

That was the catalyst for me going to California this week.

I hoped when I got there it would be better. It had been almost eight months since I’d been home, so she hadn’t seen my face. Maybe that was it? She just needed the context—she had to be in the same room as me, then it would all come back.

At least that’s what Jeneva and I were hoping.

“How is it, living at Grandma’s?”

“Weird,” she said. “But Braden and Holden love the house.”

“The house *is* nice,” I said, petting my kitten. “Have you found any of the jewelry?”

“Not a single thing. I searched for weeks. I offered the boys five bucks if they find any of it.”

“Are they actually looking?” I asked.

She scoffed. “No. Maybe I should offer them Roblox cards instead. Might renew their sense of urgency.”

Mom had lost all the family jewelry in the months before Jeneva moved in. Great-Grandma’s wedding ring and heirloom locket, the diamond tennis bracelet that Dad had given her for one of her birthdays, her diamond earrings, her engagement ring, her wedding ring—irreplaceable memories somewhere in the house and our best hope for recovery were an eleven- and twelve-year-old with ADHD. That scavenger hunt would be the first thing I started when I got there.

“I wish I would have thought of hiding that stuff,” Jeneva said.

“We didn’t know what we didn’t know.”

I misted my makeup with setting spray.

My sister went quiet on the other end.

“I need to tell you about something before you get here,” she said.

I lowered my hand. “Don’t tell me you’re back with your ex...”

“What? Ew, no.” She stopped. “I shouldn’t say that, that’s my babies’ daddy. But no.” I pictured her shuddering. “Dad had to put child locks and alarms on all the doors,” she said.

My face fell. “For Mom? Did she take off again?”

“She did.”

I let out a puff of air and sat on the closed lid of the toilet.

She’d done this a few years ago during a visit here to see me. It was the first time we realized things were worse than we thought. She’d had a UTI we didn’t know about and it had exacerbated her symptoms. She was disoriented and didn’t know where she was and she’d wandered out of my apartment. Some strangers found her at a bus stop.

She hadn’t done that since. But now her condition was progressing. We knew it would. But the scary things were happening now. The dangerous things were becoming more common.

“Do the locks help?” I asked.

“Sort of? She can figure them out, but it takes a minute. Most of the time they frustrate her and she just gives up, but I still have to watch her constantly.”

“Is there a GPS tracker we can put on her?”

“She takes it off. Dad tried necklaces, bracelets. He hid an AirTag in her shoe, but she doesn’t always put on her shoes. Or put on both.”

I squeezed my eyes shut at the visual of my beautiful, sophisticated, *young* mother leaving the house barefoot.

I let out a long breath. “I’ll be there soon and you guys will get a break.”

A message came through. It was Xavier telling me he was outside.

“He’s here,” I said. “I have to go.”

“Text me the whole time.”

“I will.”

I hung up and sat there for a moment, just to gather myself.

After the incident with the bus stop, every time I saw a missing person alert on the news, I thought of Mom. Wandering off, getting lost, getting hurt, getting kidnapped. It was like she was a full-grown toddler who had to be kept from accidentally killing herself.

She kind of was.

Dad worked. He couldn't be home with her all the time. They'd moved in with Grandma for extra help, but then Mom became too much for her too and Jeneva moved in next. Three grown adults there and I was still worried it wasn't enough to keep her safe. And a facility wasn't an option.

We'd talked about this as a family early on, with Mom while she could still give us her thoughts. We wouldn't be putting her in memory care.

She wanted to be home. We *wanted* her home. We wanted her with people who loved her in a place she'd remember as long as she possibly could. She grew up in that house, it was familiar to her. Her long-term memory would be the last to go and being there would be comforting. So we had to make this work. We had to figure it out. *I* needed to help figure it out.

But I couldn't think about this now. I'd think about it tomorrow when I saw her. When I was there and it was in front of me.

For now I wanted to forget.

I got off the toilet seat, spritzed myself with perfume, and went to meet my date.

When I got outside, Dr. Rush was standing there looking very serious and holding a small succulent.

"Hi," I said, putting my back to the door.

"Hello."

I nodded at the pot in his hand. "Is that for me?"

"I wanted to bring you flowers, but you said you're going out of town."

"Awwwww. So you brought me something that can survive long bouts of absence and neglect instead? That's really thoughtful—and also completely appropriate for my gardening abilities."

The corner of his lip twitched.

"You look very nice." He said it like it was his duty to inform me. It cracked me up.

Xavier was dry. He spoke in matter-of-fact tones. Sort of brooding.

Extremely, *alarmingly* handsome.

He was wearing a navy button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. He really leaned into the blue thing—he'd been wearing navy-blue scrubs both times I saw him at the office. He must know it brings out his eyes. He had these really piercing crystal-blue irises. They reminded me a



little of a kaleidoscope. Darker on the outside and then clear and pale.

It was sort of a shock to see him out of the white veterinary jacket and scrubs, but a good shock. He definitely knew how to dress. Also, he smelled amazing.

Smart, successful, gorgeous, good with small vulnerable creatures. This man must get so many women, my *God*.

He gave me the plant and I held it up. “Thanks. Let me just put this inside and grab my purse.” I squeezed back through the crack in the door, put the plant where Pooter couldn’t knock it over, got my bag, and came out.

“So where are we going?” I asked, letting him walk me to his large black SUV.

“A sunset cruise on Lake Minnetonka.” He opened the door for me.

“Is there going to be food?” I asked, getting in. “Because if not we need to stop and get me a milkshake or something.”

He closed my door and got in on the other side. “There’s going to be food. And puppies. It’s an adoption cruise for Midwest Animal Rescue.”

I stared at him. “Did I just get invited on the perfect date right now?”

Amusement etched the corners of his eyes as he started the engine.

I looked around the vehicle while he pulled away from the curb.

The SUV was clean. Sort of. The front half was fine, but when I looked over my shoulder the back looked like a dog transport. It probably *was* a dog transport. The seats in the third row were down and two large animal crates were in the trunk. He had seat covers on the two captain chairs, but they were coated in dog hair.

He saw me looking.

“I didn’t get a chance to clean it before picking you up. I do a lot of animal rescue stuff,” he explained.

“I know, I googled you,” I said. “I saw the award you won.”

He didn’t respond, but his jaw ticked the tiniest bit. I wondered if praise made him uncomfortable. He gave me that vibe. That’s good. At least he wouldn’t spend the night bragging about himself. I’d been on that date. Many times.

“Are you hot?” he asked. “Do you want me to adjust the air?” He angled the vent toward me.

“I’m fine. Thank you. So tell me, Xavier, what do you do for fun?” I

asked, launching into my first-date questions.

“I did a spay and neuter clinic last week.”

He said this *completely* unironically.

I grinned at the side of his face. I couldn’t help it. “While I’m sure that was rewarding, I’m not sure that was fun,” I said. “You know, fun? That thing that makes you laugh and have a good time? Typically removing balls is not involved.”

This got him. His smile cracked and his whole face changed.

WOW.

What a beautiful, *glorious* thing. I was *instantly* addicted to it.

“I like the volunteer work. I do have fun doing it,” he said. “I go up north with my friends twice a year. But mostly I work.” He got onto the freeway. “So what do you do for a living?” he asked.

“I’m a social media manager for a mustard brand,” I said. “Murkle’s Mustard. Basically they pay me to abuse their customers.”

“I think I need you to elaborate...”

“Okay. I reply to social media comments with witty, biting repartee. I make graphics,” I said. “Write the newsletter, plan campaigns. I execute them and manage the comments and DMs. It is my perfect job. I get to work from home and be on the internet all day.”

“So you have a marketing degree?”

“Yes. But it doesn’t teach you how to do what I do. I mean, it does a little, but you have to ‘get’ people to be able to do it.”

“And you get people?” he asked.

“I do. You can’t sell someone something if you don’t understand them.”

He glanced at me. “I can see that. You can’t be a good vet if you don’t understand animals.”

“Is it hard to understand patients who can’t talk?”

“Not at all. They talk to me fine.”

I smiled at this.

When we pulled into the parking lot across from the lake, he came around and opened the door for me. Then when we paused to cross the street to the dock, he put his arm in front of me while he checked for cars.

“So do they do this every year?” I asked when we got to the marina. I knew which boat it was immediately because there were dogs being led up the ramp. It was a huge yacht.

“Third year.”

He stood back and let me go first.

The weather was perfect. Warm, a slight breeze, the sun was out in full force. One of those ideal Minnesota days you waited all year for. Kind of sad I was leaving tomorrow. It’s always better to bail on Minnesota in the winter.

My phone vibrated halfway down the dock to the boat. “I’m sorry, I have to check this,” I said, rummaging in my bag. It could be Jeneva. Probably just a spam call, but also a decent chance it was about Mom and no phone calls about Mom should ever be ignored at this point.

I pulled it out, caught a glimpse of my sister’s number—and then knocked my phone into the strap of my purse, out of my hand, and right into the lake.

I watched in horror as it swiveled down into the depths, still ringing.

“No...” I breathed. “No, no, no, no, no!”

Xavier peered around me. “What?”

I set my purse on the dock and got onto my knees to look into the water. “I just dropped my phone in the lake.”

This was literally my nightmare.

That was everything down there. My ability to work, the Uber I’d need to get to the airport, my plane tickets—Apple Pay. I couldn’t even call my sister and tell her what happened. I didn’t know her number by heart—she’d think I’d been thrown into a trunk on this date.

“I have to get it,” I said, standing.

It was at least six feet down.

It sat there on the sandy bottom, staring up at me still lit with the call notification and fish swimming around it.

I was going all the way in. Hair, makeup, dress—everything was getting wet. This fabric was probably see-through. Didn’t matter. I needed the phone.

I started to take off my sandals, resigned to my fate.

“Don’t,” Xavier said next to me. “I’ll get it.”

I looked over and he was already unbuttoning his shirt.

“I... no, you’ll be soaked.”

“It’s fine,” he said in an *end of discussion* tone.

Then he peeled off his shirt and my eyeballs dropped to his chest and

exploded out of my head.

Holy SHIT.

This man was *sculpted*.

It was like one of those cologne commercials where everything's in slow-motion black and white. I stood there wide-eyed while he finished undressing, oblivious to his shock factor.

He took his phone and wallet out of his pocket, put them in his shoe. I got a glimpse of an equally muscled back when he bent down. Someone whistled from the direction of the yacht and he shot an annoyed glance to the bow. Then he jumped in.

I don't think I could have been any more turned on than if this man was saving my baby.

He came up a second later with my phone in his hand and cheers came from the boat.

"Thank you so much," I said, on my knees. "You have no idea."

He handed it to me. "You're welcome. I hope it's waterproof."

"It is."

He nodded back to the shore. "I can't get back up from here, it's too high, I have to swim out."

I ran to the boat to ask for a towel while he made his way to the beach. The bar staff gave me four clean rags and I sprinted back to meet him as he climbed out of the lake.

"Thanks," he said, taking the towels.

"Do you want to go home and change?" I asked.

He shook his head, wiping down his magnificent chest. "No, we'll miss the cruise."

"But your shorts are soaking."

"It's okay. It's no different than sitting around in wet swim trunks. I'll dry."

I slumped. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be sorry," he said. "It was an accident."

"Looking good, Dr. Rush!" a woman's voice called from the yacht behind me followed by a group of female giggles.

He didn't look amused.

The man was literally glistening. His hair was tousled, he was tan.

I crossed my arms. "Okay, but can you blame them, though?" I said.

“You’re out here on this beach looking like paparazzi photos of Chris Hemsworth.”

He snorted.

“How much do you work out?” I asked.

“Enough. I need to be able to carry any sized dog.”

“Of course.” I tilted my head. “What if this was just me trying to get your shirt off?”

“You could have done less.”

I laughed. This man was so unintentionally funny.

I let out a deep breath. “My mom is sick,” I said. “That was my sister calling. That was really nice of you to get my phone.”

“Did you call her back?” he asked.

“Not yet.”

He nodded at my purse. “Call her.”

He left me on the beach to grab his clothes on the dock and I stood in the sand dialing Geneva.

“Hey, what’s up?” I said when she answered.

“Nothing. Just checking to see if you need an emergency Get Out of Date call.”

I scoffed. “No, definitely not. I just saw him half naked.”

“Ooooh! What was that like?”

I glanced over my shoulder at him while he buttoned up his shirt. “It’s giving Greek god vibes,” I said. “I have to go.”

“Have fuuuuun.”

I hung up and met Xavier mid-dock. He was fully clothed now. “Everything okay?” he asked.

“Fine. False alarm.”

“Good. Shall we?” He motioned for me to go first.

There were two floors—an upper cabin with an enclosed restaurant-style seating area and an outside deck with tables and chairs. Downstairs had another dining room with more booths, a cherrywood bar, and a buffet. There were volunteers stationed around the boat with rescue dogs you could pet.

He knew all the dogs’ names.

Passengers were still arriving, so Xavier took me to the bar to get a drink. He ordered us the signature cocktail. A salty dog. He ordered his as a

mocktail.

“You don’t drink?” I asked, leaning on the bar.

“No.”

“Why? Are you sober?”

“I don’t like the feeling of being out of control. Also, I’m driving you.”

Okay. I liked that. “Do you think they’ll all get adopted?” I asked, watching a shaggy mixed breed parade by on a leash.

He shook his head. “No. Most of them won’t, not here. This is mostly for fundraising.”

I peered around the room. “Were you already coming to this tonight?”

“I was.”

“And you didn’t have a date?”

“I had a date,” he said, sliding me my drink. “It was my friend Chris.”

“And what happened to Chris?”

He picked up his tumbler. “I told him I needed his ticket,” he said, talking into his glass.

“And how did Chris feel about being punted from tonight’s activity?”

“He is a very good friend who knows I wouldn’t ask unless it was a good reason.”

I smiled. I liked being a good reason.

“Want to sit on the top deck?” I asked. “Dry out in the sun?”

“Sure.”

He led me back upstairs and we found a spot outside.

Servers with trays of appetizers were walking around and he got me one of everything and slid them across the table to me like tiny offerings. There was only one stuffed mushroom left and he put it in front of me without even asking.

Then we sat there in silence, sipping our drinks while he gave me what I could only best describe as a contemplative gaze.

I didn’t care. I gazed back.

His black hair was messy now that it was wet. He had to keep raking it back from his forehead in the breeze. A strong angular jaw. The faintest hint of a five-o’clock shadow.

Everyone on this boat knew him. Volunteers and a lot of the guests too. And to his credit they seemed to like him. They’d say hi as they walked by, clearly excited that he was there, even though his body language didn’t

match their energy. He'd smile, but it wasn't anything overly enthusiastic. He wasn't being rude, just reserved. Not prone to outward displays of emotion. Self-contained.

My late grandfather was like this. Introspective and observant and not at all as intimidating as he appeared—and neither was Xavier.

If Xavier were actually as scary as he looked, these people wouldn't dare hoot at him while he was shirtless or make it a point to come over and say hello. They were used to him, they liked and respected him, and they knew how he was. He was obviously thoughtful. Kind to animals. Maybe a little grumpy, but he *did* say he thought most people were assholes, so that would explain that. A bit of a resting bitch face, but it was still an excellent face.

I knew more about him in five minutes of seeing him interact with the people and the dogs on this yacht and watching him watch me than I probably would have gotten small talking with him alone literally anywhere else.

And I liked him. I felt a little flattered that he'd asked me here.

"What was your last girlfriend like?" I asked.

He peered off over the lake. "Carolyn was an acquisitions attorney."

"And how long did you date?"

"Five, six months?"

I put my straw to my lips while the boat cast off. "Why'd you break up?"

"She didn't like dogs."

I choked. "How did *you* end up dating someone who didn't like *dogs*?"

"She was a cat person, so I let it slide."

"Ah."

His gaze came back to mine. "Who was your last boyfriend?" he asked.

I twisted my lips thinking about it. "I take that title pretty seriously, so I haven't had one in a while. The last guy I dated long-term was a semiprofessional baseball player. Oscar."

"Why'd you break up?"

"He didn't like mustard."

He laughed, smiling out over at the passing mansions. The air was warm, but the breeze off the lake made it comfortable. The view from the top deck was spectacular.

This was the perfect thing to do today. If he hadn't asked me out, I'd just be sitting in my apartment, eating food out of takeout boxes—which honestly sounded kind of nice too. But this...

"Is your mom okay?" he asked, breaking into my thoughts.

I set my drink down and gave a one shoulder shrug. "No. But that's not what the call was about."

"What was it about?"

"It was my sister wanting to know if I needed to be rescued from this date."

"And do you?" he asked.

"If I got rescued from this, I'd want to be rescued from the rescuers."

He made an amused sound through his nose, and I got another one of those smiles that reached his eyes.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Twenty-nine. You?"

"Twenty-eight. So do you have any siblings?"

"No."

"Cousins?"

"No. I have a group of friends that I'm close with," he said.

"And what do your parents do?" I asked.

He gave me his expressionless look. "I don't talk to my parents," he said.

"Oh." I picked up my drink. "Well, boundaries are important."

He didn't react to this.

"What do your parents do?" he asked.

I looked at the ice in my cup. "My dad is a regional manager for a furniture company. My mom..." I paused. How to answer this?

Do I tell him who she used to be? Who she still thinks she is because she can't remember she's not anymore? Or do I tell him what she is now?

You know how when someone dies, all anyone cares about is how? Somehow the moment that takes them out is more interesting than decades worth of life and accomplishments and living. I hated it.

I didn't want Mom's dementia to be that for her. The summary of everything she's done and everything she means to me, reduced to her disease. Because she's more than that and she always will be.

"My mom's a CEO," I said. "She runs my family's landscaping business



in Los Angeles.”

“And your sister?” he asked.

“A special education teacher.”

A volunteer with a pit bull mix came to the table.

“This is Peanuts,” the woman said. “He likes treats and sleeping.”

I leaned over and ruffled the dog’s ears. “Same, Peanuts. Same.” I looked up at my date. “Cute name. Who comes up with them?”

“Whoever wants to,” he said. “His whole litter was named after nuts. Walnut, Macadamia, and Almond.”

I smiled and the dog licked my hand.

“If Pooter was a boy I was going to call him Prison Mike,” I said. “Kind of bummed I can’t use it.”

The volunteer left to go to the next table, and I sat back in my seat.

“You’re good with names,” he said.

“Picking names is fun. I had a lizard named Elizardbeth once.”

The eyes again.

“What would you name a dog in the witness protection program?” he asked.

I tilted my head. “Wow, sounds serious. Boy or girl?”

“Boy.”

“What kind of dog?” I asked.

“Mixed breed. Long hair.”

“What color?”

“Brown,” he said.

“I’m thinking... Jake from State Farm? That way when someone says, ‘Where’d that dog come from?’ you can be like, ‘State Farm.’”

He huffed. “I like it.” He regarded me in that quiet way he had. “You’re not going to ask me why the dog is in witness protection?”

“He turned state’s witness, obviously.” I ate the cherry out of my drink and his eyes dropped to my mouth. “You give me John Wick vibes, Xavier. Dexter, but for pets. I have a feeling that whatever you did to put this dog in witness protection, I’d one hundred percent bail you out of jail for.”

He smiled.

A member of the service staff gestured to the lower level. “Dinner is being served,” she announced.

She looked at Xavier a moment too long. He ignored it. He didn’t ignore

her, just the flirting.

All his attention was on me.

# 5



## XAVIER

I NODDED AT the cherry in my glass. “You want mine?”

“You don’t like them?” she asked.

I did like them. I handed her the toothpick anyway. I liked her more.

We’d just had dinner. She’d enjoyed these cheese popovers they served and I’d gone down twice to get her another one.

I felt like a bird bringing a potential mate little gifts. The urge was surprisingly strong. I’d worried over what to get her right up until I got to her apartment and handed her the succulent. Not that I *had* to show up with something, but for some reason with her I wanted to.

The sun was setting. It was warm and the breeze on the top deck was pleasant. Not enough to dry my shorts unfortunately, but nice enough. Thankfully I had a high threshold for discomfort.

“Thanks,” she said, taking my toothpick and sliding it between her teeth.

I thought about going down to the bar and getting her a bowl of cherries. I had to talk myself out of it. I was afraid of overkill.

Samantha had pulled her hair over her shoulder and braided it to keep the wind from whipping it around. Her skin was sun kissed and her dress hugged her in all the right places.

I was with the most beautiful woman on this boat. And she was funny too. Intelligent. In fact there wasn’t anything about her that I didn’t like. And why when she mentioned the semiprofessional baseball player did I immediately wonder how I measured up?

“I’m going to run to the ladies’ room,” she said, setting down her drink. “I’ll be right back.”

I watched her go.

While I was waiting I opened up Instagram and found Murkle's Mustard. The last post was a graphic with a picture of their bottle that read:

This mustard just got 1 million likes on Instagram and  
you can't even get a text back.

I snorted.

Then I went to the comments. The top one said, "Mustard is gross tho fr" and Murkle's Mustard replied, "Oh, you don't like mustard? Grow up."

The comment from Samantha had fifty thousand likes and the whole comment thread was laughing emojis.

I had never in my life felt compelled to follow a mustard brand until today. I hit follow.

I looked at my watch. The cruise was almost over. It ended at nine, then I guess I'd have to take her home.

I didn't want to take her home.

I started googling ice cream places, thinking maybe we could go do that when we're docked, but as soon as I started, the cruise staff began setting out desserts. I'd have to find something else. I wanted to have an idea before she came back so I did the desperate thing. I texted the group chat for my best friends Jesse, Mike, and Chris.

**ME:** Need ideas for places to take a date tonight, not ice cream, not food, open late. Urgent.

Jesse replied immediately with Hotel?

Mike responded with a laughing emoji and then Movie?

Not a movie. I wanted to talk to her.

A second later Chris came through with a link to a miniature golf place open until 1:00 a.m. on Fridays. Mother Putters.

I clicked on it. Cheap beer and pizza, arcade, laser tag, hokey golf courses.

I hated places like that, but I'd hate dropping her off more.

I saw her coming from the bathroom from the side of my eye and

slipped my phone back in my pocket.

“You know what they had in the ladies’ room?” she said, sitting down. “This little ancient Pomeranian who doesn’t like men, so they put him in the women’s bathroom to meet people.”

“That’s Renegade. He’s fourteen.”

“Does he like you?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She smiled. “Of course he does.”

I cleared my throat. “The boat docks in ten minutes. I was wondering if you’d like to play some miniature golf after this. There’s a place in—”

“Yes. I’d love to.”

The corner of my lip quirked.

“Do you mind if we stop at my apartment so I can change?” I said.

“Are you still wet?” she asked, looking sorry.

“A little. It’s fine. You can stay in the car. I don’t expect you to come in.”

“What if I want to come in?”

I arched an eyebrow. “Do you?”

“I want to see what your place looks like,” she said.

“I wasn’t expecting company.”

“That’s the point. You didn’t have time to clean between getting off work and picking me up so I’m seeing you in your natural habitat.”

I thought about it. “Can I have a ten-second start?”

“No. You can hide a lot of stuff in ten seconds. Wedding photos, clown costumes, ridiculous amounts of flip phones that you have absolutely no explanation for—”

I smirked. “Flip phones? You think I’m a drug dealer?”

“I think if you were you’d one hundred percent swipe those into a drawer before I got there to see it.”

“I think I’d prefer to stash the clown costume first, but that’s just me.”

She laughed.

I didn’t have anything in my apartment that she couldn’t see. Maybe a few dishes in the sink or a wet towel that fell off the rack. I’d still like to be able to show her the best version of it though. Oh well.

Thirty minutes later we were at my place. My dog met us at the door.

“Who’s this?” she asked, crouching to pet him.

“This is Jake,” I said. “From State Farm.”

She laughed and pet him.

“Give me five minutes,” I said. “Feel free to look for clown costumes.”

I left for my room. The marina wasn’t exactly the cleanest water the lake had to offer so I decided to take a quick shower. I threw on fresh clothes, messed with my hair, brushed my teeth, and came back out. She was sitting on my sofa with Jake’s head in her lap.

“You only have French’s mustard in your fridge,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said, crossing my arms and leaning in the doorway. “I’ll do better next time.”

“I hope so. It’s all fun and games until you ruin your wiener.”

I coughed out a laugh.

She was smiling. “I like your dog,” she said. “Weird haircut though.”

“Did you find any burner phones?”

“I didn’t. And I really looked too. Your place is nice. But you’re not here much, right?”

“Not really.”

She put out her lower lip. “Poor Jake.”

“I take him to work now. It’s not ideal. Hoping nobody recognizes him.”

“Put a pink bandanna on him,” she said. “In case someone takes a picture. Throw the mafia off the tracks.”

“Not a bad idea.” I looked at my watch. It was almost 9:45.

She was in her summer dress still. She hadn’t brought a sweater. I didn’t know if the place would be chilly. I turned back to my room and grabbed a hoodie for her. “Ready?” I asked, handing it to her.

There was a small moment where she didn’t move, and I almost wanted to ask if she just wanted to stay here. I could make us drinks, we could sit outside on the patio... anything really. But I worried that was too forward and she’d feel trapped or like I’d planned to get her here, so I didn’t say anything. I drove us to Mother Putters instead.

I couldn’t tell you why, but the second I got out of the car something felt off. Some deep, strange foreboding premonition. When we walked inside, I found out what was causing it.

My friends were here. Every single one.

## 6



## SAMANTHA

XAVIER HAD GONE dark. Well, darker than usual.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“My friends are here.”

I turned to look around. “Oh, which ones?”

“All of them.”

A group was approaching. Three men and one woman, all smiling.

“Heeeey, look who’s here,” the tallest one said. He was tan, brawny, and handsome, like the AI-generated version of a football player. “I’m Mike,” he said, putting out a hand.

“Samantha.” I shook it.

Xavier did *not* look happy. “This is Chris, Jesse, and his girlfriend, Becca,” he said, like he was being forced.

I lit up. “Ah, Chris. I think I took your cruise ticket?”

“Happy to give it up,” Chris said.

He was also good-looking, but in a bookworm kind of way. Becca was pretty. His whole friend group looked like a lineup of Instagram models actually.

“What are you doing here?” Xavier asked.

“Golf,” Mike said. “Maybe bumper cars, nachos—”

Xavier pinned him with a look that didn’t faze Mike a single bit.

Mike put an arm around my cranky date. “Imagine our surprise when we found out *you* wanted to play laser tag. We just had to see this with our own eyes. You guys want to join us?” Mike said.

I brightened. “Sure—”

“Give us a second,” Xavier said.

Mike released him and put his hands up playfully and backed away.

Xavier brought me to the side. "I'm sorry," he said, quietly.

I laughed. "For what?"

"You didn't sign up to meet my friends. I didn't know they'd be here. I wouldn't have sprung this on you without your permission."

"Awwww. That's very sweet to consider. But honestly, it's fine."

He didn't look convinced.

"Why don't we play a couple rounds of miniature golf," I said. "Hand them their asses, and then take it from there."

"Are you sure this is okay?" he asked.

"I promise you, I will always tell you if things are not okay."

He studied me for a moment.

"So you're not a miniature golf kind of guy, huh?" I whispered.

"No. I asked you to come because I didn't want to take you home yet."

"I didn't want to go home yet." I nodded at his friends. "Still don't."

His friends were hovering, waiting to see what we decided. I looked back at him. "It's kind of cute, actually. They're clearly obsessed with you."

"I think they're more obsessed with you," he said, his voice low.

"Huh." I tipped my head up so my mouth was just a few inches from his lips. "Well, let's give them something to talk about."



# 7



## XAVIER

I HADN'T LAUGHED this hard in *years*. Maybe I never had.

We destroyed everyone in miniature golf. We moved on to laser tag and beat everyone there too.

We spent half an hour in the arcade, got shitty pizza, then went on the bumper cars with all of them.

Everyone loved Samantha. She slid into my circle like she'd known them as long as I had.

She was the kind of person who met strangers at a bar and was in somebody's wedding by the end of the night. Extroverted and easy. It made it easy for me too.

I wasn't social.

I wasn't an introvert so much as people just irritated me. I didn't like dealing with humans I didn't know. I didn't like parties unless they were intimate and I knew everyone there. I hated mingling, I hated networking even more.

When it came to meeting with my friends, I didn't like group dates unless I'd been dating someone for long enough that bringing them around was the next step, and even then I didn't love it because it meant I had to play the host and entertain them to make sure they were comfortable. I didn't have to do that with Samantha. I would have, but I didn't have to.

I couldn't believe how much I liked her.

I kept waiting for the shoe to drop and it never did. For the conversation to fall flat or for her to seem annoyed when Jesse told one of his corny jokes or for Becca to give me that look that meant it was a no. But it didn't happen.

By midnight everyone was going home. We were saying goodbye to them by the entrance.

I didn't want the night to end. I was exhausted, but I'd never been more awake. I didn't know how much longer I could reasonably drag it out though. Then when Jesse and Becca left and we were alone, Samantha turned to me. "Hey, what do you think about doing the escape room?" she asked.

My smile got bigger. It was like this night had turned the feature on and I couldn't wipe it from my face now.

"We wouldn't get out until one a.m.," I said.

"I don't care. I'm not tired. Are you?"

"No," I said.

"So yes?"

"Let's do it."

The place was clearing out. There were only a handful of people still here and even fewer employees. We finally found one sitting behind the prize desk texting.

Samantha leaned over the counter. "Is the escape room still available?" she asked.

The kid looked up from his phone. "Uh... I don't know? I don't work that section."

"Do you know who does?" she asked.

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah. I guess, like, give me a second."

He dragged himself off his stool and wandered out from behind the desk at a snail's pace. Samantha turned to me with her back against the counter and smiled. "Have you ever done one before?"

"Never. You?"

"No."

She looked around the prize desk. "God, do you remember winning these things when you were a kid?"

I came up next to her and looked into the glass case that was the countertop. It was full of cheap prizes that cost way too many tickets from the games.

My parents never took me to places like this as a kid. Dad said it was a waste of money. The only time I got to go was if one of the guys was having a birthday party.

There were rubber bouncy balls and Ring Pops, fake tattoos and mood rings and noisemakers.

I forgot how much I loved this part. This place wasn't my idea of a fun adult night on the town—until now. But I did really love it as a kid.

"I always wanted to get enough tickets to get the lava lamp," she said, nodding at the big prizes on display on the wall.

"Me too. You could just buy it somewhere else," I said. "Get it for a fraction of the cost."

"It's not the same if you get it somewhere else. It just hits different from the prize counter."

She was right. It did.

"How many tickets do we have?" she asked.

I pulled them out of my pockets and set them on the counter. She did the same. We had a decent amount. "Let's feed them into the counting machine and see how much it is," I said.

When we got the paper with the total, we reconvened.

"What do you want to do?" I asked. We didn't have enough for the lava lamp, but we could get a stuffed animal, or a board game if she wanted to go bigger.

"Let's get a bunch of the smaller ones," she said. "That way we can split them."

The employee came back looking bored. "The guy who does the escape room went home already, but I can let you in I guess."

"Great!" she said. "And we want to pick a few prizes."

We loaded up on random trinkets and candy, and I put it all in my pockets. Then we followed the employee to the escape rooms.

"We've got three rooms," he said. "There's like a basement escape one and an office thing and an alien spaceship—"

"The spaceship!" she said.

The kid nodded to some lockers. "You have to lock up your stuff. You can't take your phones or your smartwatches."

We put our phones and her purse in a locker. Then he took us to the room and we stood outside the door.

He pulled out a laminated piece of paper and read off it in a monotone voice. "'You're on a lonely country road and a beam of light encloses your car and you wake up in the belly of an alien vessel. The spaceship has

crashed in the woods and the aliens are outside repairing it. They'll get it fixed soon and take you to Mars and probe you. You have one hour to escape the ship before takeoff.'" He swung open the door and we peered in.

The room was decorated like the hull of a spaceship. I had to admit, it wasn't half bad. There was a control panel full of knobs and levers. They had a wall of specimens behind plexiglass, a fake human head in a jar, small plastic rodent-sized alien creatures in leafy terrariums. The only thing not in theme was a large digital timer on the wall and a disco ball hanging from the ceiling.

"Good luck on your mission," the kid said. Then he shut the door behind us, the lights turned off, a black light came on, and the wall timer started.

"Ready?" she asked.

We split up and started poking around. "Call out anything you find," she said, opening drawers under the control panel. "A screwdriver!" She held it up.

"There's a clipboard with hieroglyphics on it," I said.

"Ooooh, I bet it's a key." She looked around the room. "Look! There's one of the symbols on the wall."

A little dog-shaped hieroglyphic was next to a box with the letter *P* on it.

"So that one means *P*," she said. "Let's look for more."

We scoured the room and deciphered the clipboard code. Then we moved on and solved a series of puzzles that opened a locked cabinet with a safe in it. Samantha found a riddle on the underside of the captain's chair. A song with a famous phone number. "867-5309." We tried it on the safe and got it open. It had a missing lever for the control panel that opened a secret door in the wall. We went through the door and found a trunk with more clues.

She was good at this. We both were. I think normally these rooms were done with a group, but we were killing it just the two of us.

We solved the room at fifty-six minutes. When we pulled the final lever up, the digital clock froze, and the disco ball kicked on from the ceiling, spinning and flashing us in prisms while "Come On Eileen" played at full blast.

She bounced into my arms, jumping up and down, and we both cracked up. This whole thing was so cheesy, but I loved it. I wanted to come back and do the other two rooms.

She looked up at me, her hands on my chest. “That was so fun! You are brilliant! The way you figured out how that air lock had to turn—”

“How did you know to look in the wires under the fuselage?”

“I just figured if the door wasn’t bolted shut...” She shrugged.

We beamed at each other while “Come On Eileen” went into the chorus.

This was the best date I’d ever been on. Period. I didn’t even care that my friends had crashed it. I was *glad* they’d met her because now I had someone to talk to about her.

I wanted to see her again. Tomorrow. Breakfast maybe before her flight. I didn’t even want to take her home. I was already planning the next date when she got back. I had free clinics all weekend, but I could make it work after that, anything and any time she wanted.

My hands were around her waist and she was pressed into me, disco lights flashing across her face.

I gazed at her lips. “Did you have a good time?” I asked, my voice low.

“I really did,” she said, looking at my lips too. Then she drew her brows down and peered around. “Shouldn’t the door have opened?”

“I don’t know. Maybe when you’re done you just leave?”

“It’s locked, though. I tried it when the kid left.”

My eyes came up to hers. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, look.” She leaned over and jiggled the handle. “Locked.”

“Huh. Maybe it opens at the one-hour mark?”

She scrunched up her face. “Maybe. So what do we do for four more minutes?” She bit her lip.

My heart rate picked up.

“Aren’t there cameras in here?” I asked.

We both looked up. There were.

“Damn,” she whispered. “But if anyone’s actually watching they’d know we were done and they’d let us out, right?”

“You really want me to kiss you in a spaceship, don’t you,” I said.

“I kind of do...”

I grinned and pulled her against my hips.

“I don’t want to kiss you on camera,” I said, slipping a hand over her cheek. “I like the way you smell...” I whispered.

“I like the way *you* smell,” she said in an out-of-breath way that made me reconsider not kissing her.

Her hands wrapped around my waist and she pulled me closer.

“Do you want to come over after this—” she breathed, rubbing her nose against mine.

“Yes,” I said.

“Immediately yes?”

“*Immediately* yes.”

“Come On Eileen” came to a close. Then it started again. It was playing on a loop.

“What time does your flight leave tomorrow?” I asked. I wanted to know how long I had her.

“Seven thirty a.m. Will you drive me to the airport?”

“Ahh, is that why you want me to come over?” I said, my lips a fraction of an inch from hers.

“That and I want you to give Pooter her sedative. She’s wiggly.”

I chuckled.

“How long is this song?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Three, four minutes maybe,” I said distractedly.

Then I felt her body change. She paused and made space between us and turned to the digital clock. “I feel like it’s been more than four minutes.” She looked back at me. “Why would they let the song repeat?”

I snapped out of the daze I’d been in. I let go of her and went to the door and knocked on it. “Hello?”

Nothing.

I knocked louder. Still no answer. I got a sinking feeling in my stomach.

“Did they forget us?” she asked.

“They probably do a check of the building before they close,” I said. “And there’s a camera in here. There has to be a surveillance screen where they’ll see people are still inside.”

She went to the camera mounted in the corner of the room and waved her arms. “Hello? We’re still in here!”

I pounded on the door while she paced behind me, chewing on her thumb. After ten minutes of this we gave up.

“They close at one, right?” she asked, looking worried.

“Yeah.” I dragged a hand down my mouth.

“They’ll see your SUV outside,” she said. “They’ll know we didn’t leave.”

“There’s a bar. People probably leave their cars in the parking lot all the time and take Ubers home.”

“*Crap.*”

When “Come On Eileen” ended for the fourth time, she put her ear to the door. “I can’t hear anyone out there.”

She listened for the five seconds of silence before the song started again, then she looked at me, the reality of this situation setting in. “We’re stuck here. I have a flight to catch in six hours. Our phones are in the locker, my sister’s gonna think you murdered me!”

I laughed dryly at this even though it wasn’t funny.

“I’ll try kicking it in,” I said.

It was useless.

The door was like a bank vault. Maybe it *was* a bank vault. The building was old, it was definitely possible this place used to be something else.

Two hours later we were still trapped.

We’d moved to sitting on the floor about an hour and a half ago. I had my back against the wall and she was curled up against me, tucked under my arm. We both had Ring Pops.

“Come On Eileen” was *still* playing.

“I can’t tell if this is the best story ever, or if we’re being tortured,” she said.

“Torture,” I muttered. I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I think this is my fault,” I said.

She tilted her head to peer up at me. “Why?”

“I didn’t want the night to end. I think I willed this into existence.”

“Did you will the song to never end too? Because that’s the fucked-up part.”

“If I never hear a fiddle again...”

She was cracking up. I hugged her and put my nose to her hair. I was infinitely glad I’d given her the hoodie. The room was cold and we were huddled on the ground.

“Come On Eileen” stopped. We sat there in the five precious seconds of silence that we got every four minutes. Then it came on again.

She groaned. “This song is going to be my villain origin story.”

“You know what? I’m turning it off.”

She sat up and I got to my feet.

I had to climb the control panel to reach the speaker in the ceiling. I yanked the wires out of it and held them up victoriously while she cheered.

I peered around and my eyes settled on the camera. I felt instantly pissed off.

They didn't bother to check it before leaving and then they'd get to replay our night in their little spaceship prison later and laugh about it—and they *would* replay it. They'd probably think this was hilarious.

She must have known what I was thinking.

"Cameras are expensive... they're not speakers," she said.

"They can sue me."

I reached over and pulled the wires from the back of the camera and watched the little red light turn off.

She was grinning when I turned around. "My hero."

I jumped down and sat against the wall again. She scooted up next to me and put her head on my shoulder. I wrapped my arms around her and when she breathed out, I went tighter.

"Are you cold?" I whispered. "Do you want my shirt for your legs?"

"Always trying to take off your shirt," she said tiredly, snuggling into me. "What time do you think it is?"

"It feels like four a.m."

"I want to lie down. Do you think they've ever cleaned this floor?" she asked.

"Never."

"Ugh. Gross. Never mind."

I tucked her under my chin and I wished we were in a bed. Not to do anything, just so I could make her warm and comfortable. Let her sleep.

I had the strongest, most pervasive feeling of protectiveness over her.

I didn't like her on the ground. I didn't like that she might need something that I couldn't get for her here. She was calm and taking this well so it made me less agitated, but I had a feeling if she was panicking I'd be trying to rip through the walls.

"This is so unacceptable," I grumbled. "I will be writing a *very* strongly worded letter."

"You need to write a strongly worded Google review. It hurts more."

I bet *her* Google review would be hilarious.

I tilted my head to look down at her. "Is it hard to make mustard



interesting?”

“It is very hard to make mustard interesting. The sriracha and queso guys have it easy. Team Mustard’s in the trenches—I’m fighting for my life daily.”

“Do you like it though?”

“I do. I love it.” She looked up at me, her mouth a fraction of an inch from mine. “What about you? Do you like your job?”

“I like the animals.”

She laughed. “What does *that* mean? You hate the people?”

“Sometimes.”

*Most of the time.*

“I don’t like most people,” I said.

“Well, most people don’t like themselves. So the feeling is mutual,” she said. “Is that why you became an animal doctor instead of a human one?”

I let out a breath. I didn’t want to tell her the story of why I chose my profession. Not the real one anyway. So I told her the reason, not the canon event that led to it.

“I wanted to help animals. I wanted to lessen their suffering.”

“Ehhhh, no,” she said.

I cocked an eyebrow at her. “No?”

“No. I don’t buy it. I mean, I do? I’m sure that’s a part of it. But there had to be something you saw that led to that. Was it street dogs in Mexico? A visit to the shelter? A dog that died in your arms? What was your veterinarian moment of inception?”

“You don’t want that story.”

“Uh, yes I do.”

“That’s not a first-date conversation.”

“And are we currently experiencing a first-date activity, Xavier? ’Cause last I checked we were locked in a room with jars full of human heads.”

I laughed dryly. I stared at the digital clock, frozen on fifty-six minutes, debating how much to say.

“My dog growing up,” I said. “Winnie.”

“What happened to her?” she asked.

I didn’t answer.

“I haven’t unlocked this challenge yet?” she asked.

“No. Not yet.”

I looked back down at her. “Who was your first pet?”

“Are you changing the subject?”

“Maybe. But I do like this question.”

“Ha.”

She sat back and crossed her legs. Her hair was messy from laying against me and her eyes were red from lack of sleep but she was breathtaking anyway.

“My first pet was an orange Persian cat named Ginger,” she said. “We found her in a trash can. This cat was so gross, Xavier. She looked soggy, like one of those koalas that has chlamydia—”

I choked.

“I think she was like fourteen or something when we found her? She lived to be nineteen.”

I was smiling. “Then what? What else did you have?”

She scrunched up her face. “I had hamsters.” She glanced at me. “Don’t be mad at me, but they all died premature deaths.”

“Yes, they tend to do that,” I said.

“Is that just a universal experience? Because everyone I know had a hamster who died in some tragic accident.”

“They’re escape artists and they’re prone to cardiac arrest. Most need enclosures much bigger than they’re given. Also, they hibernate. People don’t know that and they bury them thinking they’re dead.”

She stared at me. “Are you telling me that I might have buried Hambert alive?”

I sucked air through my teeth.

“Xavier! I’m going to cry!” She laughed.

“I’m sure Hambert was dead. Or that he died peacefully in his sleep. In his shallow grave.”

She did a laugh-gasp. “Please tell me that you’re taking on the hamster education crusade, because I did not know any of this.”

I held up my hand. “I will make it my life’s work.”

She shook her head at me with a smile. “What about you? What animals did you have growing up?”

“Only Winnie.”

She pulled her face back. “Just one dog?”

“That’s all. I’ve fostered a lot, but with school and work it wasn’t really

feasible for me to have one.”

“So is Jake your first dog? Since Winnie?”

“Pretty much.”

“Wow. Is he okay by himself right now?” she asked. “I didn’t even think about that. Pooter has the litter box and her food and water and stuff.”

“He’s fine. He has pee pads and water. He’s just lonely.”

She put out her bottom lip. Then she yawned into the back of her hand.

“Come here,” I said, pulling her back in. She nestled up against me and we sat there in a long sleepy pause.

“We never made it out of the spaceship,” she said, tiredly. “We got probed.”

I snorted. “Did you see the wooden wands on the wall with the hieroglyphics over them?” I asked.

“Yeah...”

“It says probes.”

She burst into weary laughter. I smiled until it died down and she slipped into silence.

“I willed tonight not to end too,” she said softly.

My heart leaped.

“I like you,” I said.

“I like you too,” she said, her cheek pressed to my chest. “I like that your friends love you so much. I like that Becca said good things about you in the bathroom. I like that the dogs on the boat liked you, even the one who didn’t like men,” she said. “I think you can tell a lot about someone by how animals react to them.”

“You can tell a lot about someone by how they treat their pets,” I said.

“Is that why you asked me out?” she asked. “You like how I treat my cat?”

“That and other things.”

“What other things?” she asked.

I paused.

“I think you’re beautiful,” I said. “I like how you smell. Pooter smelled like you. I like that you rescued her and didn’t give up on her. I liked that you did what you said you were going to do and tried to save her. And I like that you told me I’m an asshole.”

She barked out a laugh. “Why would you like *that*?”

“Because most people don’t say what they think. Animals do. They’re transparent. Their body language doesn’t lie. They always tell you the truth if you pay attention. People lie all the time.”

“Huh.” She nodded against my heart. “I liked that you apologized, even though you thought you’d never see me again. I also liked that you advocated for Pooter. I get why you were upset with me at first. I also think you’re very handsome. I told my sister that when I got home. And again when you took your shirt off earlier.”

I made my expression flat the way I always did when someone was paying me a compliment, but my heart picked up again. She had to feel it.

“I’m sorry you had to call me an asshole the day you met me,” I said quietly.

“Is that really what you’re thinking about?” she said, looking up at me.

I held her gaze. “I was embarrassed that you pointed out my bedside manner that first day,” I said. “It bothered me for weeks that I acted that way.”

“Why?”

“Because I care what you think. I didn’t like that you thought I was rude, even though I was. I was having a bad day and I let my emotions get away from me.”

We peered at each other.

“I wasn’t really myself that day either,” she said.

“Why?”

She went quiet and I thought she wasn’t going to answer.

“My mom has dementia,” she said. “She’s fading away and I haven’t been home in seven months. Everyone is taking care of her but me and she doesn’t know my name anymore and I feel like that’s my fault because I could have come sooner but I didn’t because I wanted to forget it was happening. And then it happened without me and now I can’t get it back.” There was pain in her voice.

I didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry...”

Then I told her something I didn’t tell anyone. “I don’t talk to my parents because they were abusive,” I said.

She sat up and looked at me. “Abusive how?” she asked.

I let a breath out through my nose. “Physically. Verbally. Mentally. Emotionally. I left when I was seventeen. I moved in with Jesse’s family

and I never spoke to mine again.”

She looked stricken.

“I think...” I had to stop and start again. “I think that’s *why* my emotions don’t get away from me.”

“Why?”

“Because when I showed how I felt, that’s how they knew how to hurt me.”

I watched this move across her face. Understanding, empathy, sorrow. But for some reason it didn’t make me feel overexposed like I think it would with anyone else.

I didn’t talk about my childhood. To anyone. Ever. Only the guys knew what it was like, and they only knew because they’d been there.

There was something cathartic about admitting that it had shaped me in ways that weren’t always for the better.

For the most part I liked to think my upbringing had made me a stronger person. It taught me independence and self-reliance. I was someone who would never raise a hand to my own children, someone who knew the power of encouragement and compliments—even if it was too late for me to be the kind of man who could accept them myself.

My dad’s insults and barbs drove me. I heard them in the back of my mind, every day of my life, telling me I was lazy and pathetic and I would never amount to anything. Proving him wrong was the fuel behind every single thing I did.

I put myself through college and veterinary school working two jobs. I built my own practice from the ground up. I tried every day to be the kind of man who could look in the mirror and *know* that I was good and smart and accomplished no matter what he’d said.

And I was also the kind of man who didn’t open up easily. I didn’t trust people. Even Maggie and Tina, who obviously cared about me and would never hurt me, had to gather information about me from the glimpses they got by accident. I was too afraid to let anyone in and say the kinds of things that I’d just told Samantha after less than twelve hours in her presence.

And I don’t know why she did this to me. I just knew that she did.

She peered at me gently and I gazed back at her. Her mouth was red from the Ring Pop. Mine was probably blue. The disco ball shimmered and threw prisms over us and not a single part of any of this felt believable. I

didn't know how or in what way, I just knew something important was happening and that knowing it in real time was a gift.

The moment was shattered by the sound of a lock being turned.

The door to the room flung open.

SAMANTHA

I AM SO, so, so sorry.”

The manager had been apologizing to us for a solid five minutes. “Please, let me give you some gift certificates or...”

I grabbed my phone from the locker while Xavier told her in his scary calm but *definitely disappointed in you* voice that this could have had serious repercussions had one of us had medical issues.

My phone had thirty missed calls. I texted Jeneva I’m alive, I’m fine, I got locked in an escape room.

Then I looked at the time. It was almost 5:00 a.m. My flight was in two hours.

“We have to go,” I said, looking up. “Now. I can still make it.”

The manager followed us out, pleading with us to let her make it right.

“Train your staff,” Xavier said flatly. “And fix the door, you shouldn’t be able to lock it.”

“Yes. Absolutely,” she said, nodding while she ran after us. “Is there anything else I can do?”

He stopped and looked at her. “Actually there is.”

I held the lava lamp he made her give me in my lap the whole way back to my apartment.

When we got there I ran in, Xavier on my heels.

“I have to take a quick shower,” I said, already pulling his hoodie over my head while he stood in my living room looking around in bewilderment.

“Where is your furniture?” he asked.

“I don’t have any.”

Pooter came running out of my room and he picked her up.

“Her gabapentin is in the kitchen,” I said, darting to the bathroom. I closed the door, finished stripping, and started brushing my teeth while the water heated up. Then I jumped in and took the fastest shower I’d ever had in my life while I swished mouthwash. I didn’t really have time for any of this, but I’d rather miss my flight than wear the dirt from the floor of the escape room to California.

I came out a few minutes later with my only towel wrapped around me. Xavier was in my room.

“Your bed is an air mattress,” he said.

“I know. Can you deflate it for me while I get dressed?”

I didn’t wait for his reply. I shoved my dirty clothes into the suitcase I’d been living out of, I grabbed a clean outfit, and sprinted back to the bathroom.

When I was done I took everything on the sink and put it in my luggage, including the wet towel. I dumped out my water bottle and put the succulent he gave me inside it, pot and all, and I screwed on the lid. By the time I was done with this, the air mattress was almost flat. I threw myself on top of it to press out the last of the air, beating it down and folding it in half and then in half again while Xavier held my cat and watched me like I’d lost it.

When it was compressed I put it in the empty luggage next to my open one. I shoved in my pillow and blankets, grabbed the charger from the wall and put it in my purse, zipped everything, and I was ready to go. The only thing left in the whole apartment was Pooter’s litter box, two paper bowls I was using to feed and water her, and some iced coffee in the fridge. The cleaning lady would take care of that stuff. My whole life was packed into two bags.

I panted, standing next to my luggage. “Ready.”

He blinked at me. “Are you moving?”

“Yes.”

He paused. “To where?”

It was a long moment before I replied. “California.”



SAMANTHA

YOU'RE MOVING TO California..." he said like he hadn't heard me right.

"Yes. To Glendale. I need to help take care of my mom."

He stared at me. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I sort of did. I told you I was leaving—"

"On a trip. Not leaving the state."

"I never said it was just a trip."

He pressed his lips together.

I looked away from him. "I'm sorry." I looked back up. "Do you wish I'd said no to the date?"

He gave me one of his contemplative gazes. "No."

For some reason this made it worse.

We stood there, in my empty bedroom next to my luggage, in a standoff of silence. Pooter mewed from his arms.

I'd only spent twelve hours with this man. I didn't owe him anything. He was a guy I'd *just* met. But I felt like I'd betrayed him anyway. Like we'd been dating for a year and looking at rings and I just sprung the news on him that I was leaving without telling him or asking him what he wanted or inviting him to come with me.

And I knew why.

Last night was a core memory.

He was filed away in a place that my brain would forever protect. And I knew how special that was, now more than ever—but I also knew that it didn't matter. Because I was going home and there was nothing and nobody that could make that any different.

I took my kitten from him without making eye contact and put her in the travel case I got for her. When I looked back up, Xavier had gone flat. His expression set back to neutral, the way it was in the beginning before I'd earned the creases at the corners of his eyes.

He was upset. And you know what? So was I.

Why did I say yes to last night? I shouldn't have gone. But I didn't know it was going to be what it was.

I thought it was going to be some nice but otherwise unremarkable evening with a good-looking guy who was going to buy me dinner and take me somewhere.

I didn't know...

The drive to the airport was silent.

"You keep the lava lamp, okay?" I said, two exits from the airport.

"I got it for you," he said dryly.

"My luggage is full."

"I'll mail it to you."

"It's probably going to be more expensive to ship it than it is to just buy a new one," I said.

"But it won't be that one."

This ended the conversation.

When we pulled in front of the drop-off area he got out and took my bags from the trunk. Then he handed me his hoodie. "The plane will be cold," he said quietly.

"Thanks..."

I stood in front of him on the curb, looking down at the hoodie. I couldn't even explain how shitty this felt.

"Thank you for last night," I said.

He didn't respond.

"You're mad at me..."

"I'm mad at the situation," he said. "Not you."

I looked away from him and stared at the luggage cart machine by the Delta curbside check-in counter.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

I had to check in. We both knew it. I had less than an hour, I had to go. I came in and hugged him and he folded around me. I breathed out and he took the extra space.

“What happens now?” he asked quietly.  
I squeezed my eyes shut.  
“You forget me.”

SAMANTHA

I SAT WITH my sister in her car in the driveway of Grandma's house. Pooter mewed miserably from the back seat.

We'd just arrived.

I was exhausted. I slept two of the three hours of the flight, I felt hungover, whiplashed, and entirely not ready for what was next.

"So come in quietly," Jeneva said. "No big hello. I'll introduce you, she might be quiet. Just give her some time to get used to you."

Introduce me. To my own mom.

I blew out a breath. "Okay."

"We can do this later," she said. "You can unpack, get situated—"

"No. I want to do it now."

We didn't move to get out.

"Are you going to tell me about the escape room?" she asked, eyeing the Rush Veterinary Hospital hoodie I was wearing.

"What's to tell?" I mumbled.

"You got locked in a UFO with a hot veterinarian. You have nothing to say about this?"

I put my head in my hand. I had a lot to say about it.

"I liked him," I said. "It was a really good date."

I'd lived in Minnesota for four years and I hadn't met *one* guy who even remotely touched Xavier and in the wee hours before I leave...

You know what? No. I wasn't falling down this rabbit hole. I was allowing myself some grace to focus on what I actually needed to focus on, which was Mom and my new old life and mustard. I didn't have time to dwell on a guy.

I was going to manifest.

Mom was going to remember me. I was going to walk into that living room, her face was going to light up, and she was going to say, “Samantha! I’m so happy you’re home!”

And then I was going to find all the jewelry. After that I’d forget Xavier existed and I’d laugh like a Disney villain every time it was negative thirty in Minnesota and it was seventy-two here. I didn’t want to be in the Midwest with the hot guy I was into. I didn’t belong in a state that required grit to make it through the winters. I wasn’t a grit kind of girl. I’d live in my sunny paradise where it never dipped below fifty and it didn’t rain because my hair would hate that anyway and I’d make sexy yellow condiment content and live happily ever after.

I got out of the car.

Jeneva watched me grab my cat from the back. Then I marched up the steps to the porch and carefully, gently, like I was going to startle a roost of pigeons, I opened the front door.

Mom was sitting in the living room on the green chair watching TV with Grandma. Mom looked over at me, her face flat.

Jeneva pushed past me. “Mom? Samantha is here to see you.”

Mom stared at me blankly. No recognition. No suspicion, no surprise, no reaction at all.

Jeneva said they’d had to put her on some medications and that they sedated her. But nothing could have prepared me for this.

She wasn’t there. Like a light had been turned off.

I swallowed and came in. “Hi, Mom. I’m home.”

Pooter mewed from her carrying case and Mom looked down at that, like she was trying to make sense of the noise.

She’d aged. I just saw her at Christmas and now she looked ten years older. Her hair was gray, her makeup wasn’t on.

Mom was always so put together. She liked fashion and getting her nails done and dressing up. She never went anywhere without her face.

She looked so tired now, like she was blurring along with her memory. Smearing and fading and wasting away.

“Mom?” I said, sitting gingerly on the ottoman in front of her. “It’s me, Samantha.”

Her eyes came back up to mine and I watched the wheels turning and

hope fired up inside my heart. Maybe she was making the connection, she was recognizing me. Then she spoke.

“Who are you?”

**S**HE *LEFT*?" MIKE said, looking at me over his dumbbell.

"Yeah. Two weeks ago." I was sitting on a weight bench across from him, Chris, and Jesse. We'd just rowed for half an hour and now Mike had us doing arms. Mike was a personal trainer and he trained us for free. The same way I'd take care of their pets for free and Jesse would give us financial advice for free and Chris would pick up the phone to answer medication questions any hour of the night.

These were my closest friends. They were the nearest thing I had to family.

And I'd purposely avoided seeing them for the last two weeks because I hadn't been ready to talk to them about Samantha. I still wasn't.

The spaceship had altered my DNA. I couldn't stop thinking about her.

I thought giving it some distance and time would make it better, but it hadn't.

I'd been crabby since she left. Maggie and Tina kept asking how the date went and I kept brushing them off because I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't want to talk about it with the guys either. What was there to even say? I had the best date of my life and then she took off forever? I didn't want their opinions about it or their pity either, and they'd probably try to give me both.

"Have you talked to her?" Jesse asked.

"I texted her," I said. "The day after our date. Asked her if she got in okay and if the cat's been having normal bowel movements."

Mike put his weight down with a clank. "You asked her if her cat took a shit..." he deadpanned.

“Travel can be stressful on medically fragile animals—”

“Yeah, dude, I get the whole veterinarian thing—” He shook his head at me. “Did you try *talking* to her? Like an actual conversation that isn’t about her kitten’s asshole?”

Chris snorted.

“She told me to forget her—”

“I know what she told you. I just didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to actually do it.”

“What else am I supposed to do?” I said. “She’s two thousand miles away.”

“People date long-distance,” Chris said.

“How?” I said. “I barely get days off. How would I see her if she’s not here?”

“Aren’t you the boss? Can’t you decide what days you get off work?” Mike asked.

“It’s not that easy. I have to be available on Saturdays for my patients because I’m the only doctor. And I have the rescue.”

“Then do less of the rescue shit,” Mike said. “They don’t even pay you.”

“That’s not the point. They need me,” I said.

“You can take a pass once in a while, it’s not gonna be the end of the world.” He picked up his weight again. “I have never seen you like that with anyone. Why would you let that go, dude?” Mike shook his head.

“Agree,” Jesse said.

Chris nodded.

I stared out into the gym. They weren’t wrong.

I checked Murkle’s Instagram half a dozen times a day. It was getting pathetic. I had to physically restrain myself from liking every mustard post she did so I didn’t look like a serial killer.

“Why don’t you fly out and see her?” Chris asked.

I raked my fingers into my hair and squeezed. “I can’t afford to start something like this. The clinic isn’t paid off. I barely take a paycheck. I have rent, student loans, a car payment, *bills*.”

“Okay. Then forget her,” Mike said, doing his reps.

I couldn’t do that either.

The truth was I’d already planned the trip. I’d done everything short of actually booking it. I’d been doing it since three days after she left.



I was hoping my friends would talk me off this ledge or at least talk some sense into me because every single thing I'd said was true. I didn't have the money *or* the time. There was absolutely nothing rational or practical about any of this. But...

Maybe I *needed* to go.

Maybe I would see her and the magic would be gone. Or maybe she was dating someone else already. An old boyfriend who'd popped up when she got back in town. Some guy in my same situation, who'd lost her to the Minnesota relocation and was just waiting for the chance to have another shot, swooping in and sweeping her off her feet. Maybe it was the semiprofessional baseball player. I definitely did *not* like the ex-boyfriend scenario. *At all.*

In fact, now I felt a little panicked. What if I'd messed up and waited too long and now she was with someone else and I'd never know if it could have been something. I'd have zero closure, I'd always wonder what if.

All this for a woman I'd spent twelve hours with and hadn't even kissed. It was absolutely ridiculous.

My brain didn't care.

I slipped into a dark silence while the guys talked among themselves. When it was my turn to do reps, I waved them off.

I felt like I should call her. Now. Get up and go to the parking lot and call her from the car.

Or text her. Maybe calling was too aggressive.

But I really wanted to talk to her.

Fuck, I was a mess.

I pulled out my phone and checked the newest post on Murkle's Instagram page. It was a meme of a woman looking longingly at a mustard bottle with the caption "Mustard doesn't ask silly questions. Mustard understands."

The corner of my lip twitched up.

We'd never followed each other on socials. I'd tried to search for her, but she didn't come up so I'd made my account public in case she tried to find me instead. I'd posted an Instagram story yesterday of me holding a puppy at the clinic. I knew she'd like it if she saw it.

I went to the story and clicked to see who'd viewed it, hoping maybe her name would be there. Then I remembered why I kept my personal socials

private.

My dad's little profile picture made my jaw go tight.

My parents didn't keep tabs on me because they were proud. They did it because they wanted to be proven right: that I was a failure and didn't amount to anything after I'd left the regiment that was their household. And even though it was clear that I *had* made something of myself, I knew what they were hoping for every time they looked. They didn't wish me well, they didn't smile when they saw me thriving.

An old family friend had reached out to me a few years ago. Sent as an ambassador in an attempt at a reconciliation.

Apparently my mother had developed MS and my dad was disabled. The friend left the details of that part of it vague, but if I had to guess it was alcohol-related in one way or another.

This friend let me know that it was my duty to honor my aging parents and care for them after "all they did for me." I'd scoffed in his face.

No apology, no reflection on their behavior, no ownership over how I was treated or mention of them missing me. Just indignation that I wouldn't blindly cater to and respect them simply for bringing me into this world.

A few days later my dad emailed me an incoherent rant about how ungrateful I was and how I'd die alone for how *I'd* treated my family. And now he checked on me every chance he got, just to make sure he was right.

He was too social media inept to know I could see when he viewed my stories.

I didn't want to block him. Blocking him was engagement. It let him know that I'd noticed he was there, and that it bothered me enough to remove him. Blocking him or putting my profile back to private was a reaction and I swore they'd never get a reaction out of me again. So I did nothing.

I put my phone down instead.

SAMANTHA

GRANDMA, YOU SAID you had a car for me...”

We were standing outside the garage, staring at the teal-blue vehicle my five-foot-one, seventy-seven-year-old grandmother just unveiled.

“This is a car,” she said in her Spanish accent.

“Nooo, this is a land boat.”

“It is a 1966 Dodge Dart convertible. It’s in pristine condition, your grandfather took excellent care of it. It’s a classic.”

I sagged. “Grandma, I sold my Honda for this. This gets like seven miles to the gallon.”

“So? Where are you going? You’ve been here two weeks and you’re just now asking for it.”

She had a point. Still.

I hadn’t wanted to make the two-thousand-mile road trip with Pooter and when I’d mentioned shipping my Honda to California, Grandma said to get rid of it because she had something I could use. It sounded like a good idea at the time. No car payment. I just thought she was going to give me an old Toyota or something reasonable, not the Dart.

“This doesn’t even have AC,” I said.

“You open the air vent down at your feet for ventilation,” she said. “It’s on the passenger side, it gets a nice breeze. And it’s pretty. It’ll get men to talk to you.”

I made a face. “Ewww, I don’t want men to talk to me.”

“Well, you should. If you don’t use it your vagina will shrivel up.”

I laughed. “No it won’t.”

I was going to google this though.

“Here.” She shoved the keys into my hand. “It’s an automatic. It’s been sitting for a few months. You should probably start it up and take it around the block a couple times.”

I let out a long breath. I guess I could just drive it until I got something else. It was free.

“Your mother loves this car,” she said. “Drove it all through high school and college.”

I perked up. “Really?”

That could be a plus actually. Something she might remember. Maybe I could take her around the block with me.

Grandma patted me on the back. “If it breaks down, just open the hood. The men will come. Maybe you should do that even if it doesn’t break down.”

She turned and made her way up the driveway to the house in her robe and slippers. “Take care of your mother,” she called. “I’m taking a shower.”

“You got it,” I mumbled.

When she vanished up the front steps, I sighed and tipped my head back.

Pooter was in the windowsill in my apartment above the garage, looking down at me.

I was the only one not living in the main house. I had a little unit. Just a bedroom, small bathroom, and a cute balcony I could sit on, nestled among the overgrown lemon and orange trees.

I could have taken a room in the house, God knows there were enough of them, but Jeneva said she didn’t want “randos coming in and out at all hours.” Like I had any randos.

Mentally I was still in the spaceship with Xavier.

I hadn’t heard from him in two weeks. He texted the day after I’d gotten here to ask about Pooter’s bowel movements. I don’t know what I expected, but that was somehow exactly it.

I *did* tell him to forget me. I could still be disappointed that he did it though.

It was just as well.

I was never going back to Minnesota. I’d probably never even see him again. He was too attractive for me anyway. It was probably a red flag. I should just stick with medium-ugly men like I’m used to.

God, *why* had I said yes to that date? I was still kicking myself.

It was like setting your range to international on a dating website when you know damn well you can't make it work with some hot Italian in Milan.

I dragged myself to my new land tank and got in.

It looked a little like the *Thelma & Louise* car. Long, silver trim. It had powder-blue vinyl seats that would be two thousand degrees when the sun hit them. Crank windows. No alarm, no auto start. It did have a radio. Someone had upgraded it at some point—with a tape player. I pushed the eject button and a cassette popped out. *Lisa's Mix Tape* was scrawled on the label in blue pen. I smiled a little. Mom. I put it back and closed it.

I opened the center console. A half-empty ancient bottle of Sunflowers by Elizabeth Arden was rolling around on its side next to an equally gross bottle of coconut sunblock. There were maps and a Thomas Guide in the glove box. No drink holder. The car didn't have a damn drink holder. I scoffed and slammed the compartment closed and turned the key. The car quivered to life, sputtering like an old man waking up. It struggled for a moment, then rumbled into a steady, healthy purr. I could already feel the heat of the V-8 engine coming from the dash and warming my legs.

It was going to be hot. It was going to be loud. It smelled like oil and gasoline.

*Free, Samantha.*

I'd give it one week. If I hated it, I was heading to a dealership.

I backed into the driveway and lowered the white canvas top. Push button. At least there was that.

I parked it by the porch and went in to get Mom.

She was in her usual chair in the living room.

Dad worked during the day, so the rest of us watched her while he was gone. It was mostly Grandma on the day shift, but I'd set up my laptop and worked from the recliner next to Mom when Grandma needed to run an errand or take a nap. I'd tried bringing Mom up to my apartment once, but she got too distracted by Pooter. She kept asking whose cat it was. I'd tell her, she'd forget, and a minute later she'd ask again. She did this ten, twenty times before I got frustrated and took her back to the living room.

"Mom?" I said, coming in the front door slowly. "What do you think of taking a car ride?" I asked. "I put the top down on the convertible. We can go get Frappuccinos."

She looked at me confused. “What?”

“Coffee.”

Jeneva told me to explain everything I’m going to do before I do it, so I walked her through the steps.

“First we’ll get our shoes on, then we’ll go outside and drive around a bit. Then we’ll stop and get a latte. Come on.”

She didn’t move.

I crossed the room and helped her up. “You need some time outside. It’ll be fun,” I said, walking her to the door.

She let me put her shoes on, and I got her out to the porch.

Then she saw the Dart. She *lit* up.

It was the first sign of life I’d seen in her since I got here. I could barely believe it.

The dementia and the medications she was on made her flat. She spoke in monotones like someone drugged, but the second she saw the Dodge she came alive.

“The car!” She beamed.

I smiled. “Yeah. You remember it?”

“Of course, it’s my car.”

I watched her for a moment. The pure joy on her usually expressionless face.

I wondered if the dementia felt like walking through a gray version of the world. And then all of a sudden a bright blue car from your youth appears and you know something again. You remember, and it’s the only thing in color.

Right now my world was also a little gray. The last time I saw color was that night in the escape room.

The promise of something can be so vibrant. And everything feels so dull after it’s gone.

Mom let go of my arm and went down the stairs ahead of me—and got into the driver’s side.

“Oh, Mom? I need to drive—”

She slammed the door.

*Shit.*

Shit, shit, shit. The keys were in it and the engine was running.

I jiggled the handle to the driver’s door. It was locked. I tried pulling up

the lock but it was flush to the door.

“Mom, I have to drive. You can’t drive anymore.”

“Don’t be silly. I drive all the time.” Then she put the car in reverse and started backing toward the street.

*Full panic.*

“Stop!”

She kept going.

“Mom...” I was jogging next to the door trampling the flowerbeds.

“Mom!”

Nothing.

“We have to put the top up! It’s going to rain!”

Please stop, *please*.

“Mom! RAIN!” I shouted.

She slammed on the brakes. I have no idea why she did it, if she heard me and understood or if it was some deeply ingrained reflex to protect her old car from weather, but she stopped.

The back of the Dart was already halfway in the street. I was panting.

She looked confused for a moment, like she didn’t know where she was. She probably didn’t.

She peered blankly around the cab of the car, then put it in park. I dove across her lap and pulled the key from the ignition.

I slumped on the curb, gasping for air. Holy *hell* that could have been bad. I was having a heart attack.

Where would she have gone? Would she have just driven off and crashed somewhere? Backed straight out into the house across the street? I was shaking.

I’d have to lock up the keys. I could never let this happen again.

I wondered what kind of things Jeneva had seen like this. Is this why there was a lock on the medicine cabinet? Child dials on the oven? I thought it was for the boys when they were smaller, but now...

Grandma always had candles burning. My whole life there’d been a Virgin Mary candle on the stove. There was no candle now, I realized. Was this because of Mom?

It was.

She was dangerous. Obviously dangerous. And I was just oblivious in general. What had I almost done?

I had no idea what she was capable of. If I took her driving, would she jump from the vehicle while it was moving? Get scared and grab the wheel? I mean, at best we should be in something with a roof and child safety locks.

She could never ride in this car again. That part of her life was over.

She would never feel the wind in her hair with the top down, see the open sky while her music played in the car she grew up in.

I don't think I'd realized how small Mom's world had gotten in my absence. How bad this really was.

I licked my lips. "Mom, let's go inside and get some lunch, okay?"

She let me take her out of the car. She never even asked what happened to the plans.

She didn't remember we'd made them.



I was shaken up for the rest of the day after my near accident with Mom. I had vowed that tomorrow would be better, but the next morning at 6:00 a.m. the door to my room swung open and a tall backlit figure stood in the frame. "You're in my room, bitch."

I groaned. *Tristan.*

"Get out," I said, punching my pillow under my head and putting my back to him.

"Uh, this is *my* apartment."

"You haven't lived here for two years."

I heard him drop his duffel bag. "Samantha, I'm too fucking hungover for this. Give me back my bed."

I rolled over to glare at my little brother. "Does this look like your stuff to you?"

He had his arms crossed. "Uh yeah, it does. That's my headboard."

"I kept the bed. The rest of the furniture is mine—What are you even doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in Banff or something?"

"I'm home." He scowled around at my stuff. "Aren't you supposed to be on a frozen lake somewhere?"

"Ha *ha*."



He sighed and stalked across the room. “Move over.”

He pushed me to the edge of the mattress and got under my comforter. He smelled like cotton candy vape.

“Your shoes better be off,” I grumbled.

Tristan was twenty-four, our parents’ youngest, and a pain in everyone’s ass. He was usually walking the earth somewhere, planting trees for the forest service or guiding white water rafting trips in Colorado or something equally random that kept him out of our hair.

He shifted dramatically next to me and the bed jostled like he was jumping on a trampoline.

“Ugh, why are you even home?” I moaned.

“Not for you.”

Pooter came down from her cat tree and climbed the bed, purring.

“What the hell is that?” my brother asked, sitting up.

“My cat.”

“The asshole one?”

“Yes, the asshole one. And thanks for not donating, cheap ass.”

“Like you needed it? By the time I saw it, you were a millionaire.”

He picked up Pooter and hovered her over his face. She hung there, paws dangling, completely chill as always.

He made a dismissive noise. “Mid.”

“Did you just call my cat *mid*?”

He plopped Pooter at the end of the bed and leaned on his elbow to look at me. “So I hear you got locked in a UFO with some hot vet.”

“Oh, so you *do* check the group chat.” I stared at the ceiling. “He lives in Minnesota. I’ll probably never see him again.”

“Why? I flew to Monett, Missouri, like seven times once for this guy I met on Hinge.”

I lolled my head to look at him. “Wasn’t that the bartender who got your name tattooed on his calf?”

“No. That was Ned. In Nashville.”

“Ahh. Right. Nashville Ned. How could I forget.”

He pursed his lips. “I missed your stupid face.”

“I missed *your* stupid face.”

Then he lifted his leg and let out a long, squeaky fart. I bolted up and turned on the light. “Oh my God!”

“I told you to get out.”

I hit him with a pillow. “Disgusting! Go sleep in the house. I’m serious.”

He got up and smirked at me. “I want you to know that I’ve done unspeakable things on that mattress. *Unspeakable*.”

I threw the pillow at him and he dodged it.

He grabbed his duffel bag and paused dramatically in the doorway. “I *will* get my room back.”

“If you come in here again, I’m killing you and burying you under federally protected florals.”

“Your vet boyfriend probably looks like Lord Farquaad.”

“He looks like the High Lord of the Night Court and you could *never*,” I snapped.

“Hag.”

“Pick me.”

He gasped. Then he pulled something from his bag. “I brought you peanut brittle from that place you like in Washington. I hope you choke on it.”

“I won’t, just to piss you off.”

He held the box of candy by the corner, dropped it on the floor, slammed the door, and left.

I rolled my eyes and fell back in the bed. I couldn’t go to sleep after that.

I googled homeware stores and *Is it illegal to burn a mattress in your yard*. Then I fed Pooter, put on slippers, grabbed my shattered peanut brittle, and crossed to the house in my pajamas, eating the candy straight from the box.

When I got in, Tristan was sitting at the kitchen counter with Jeneva’s boys while Grandma made everyone eggs. My brother looked at me and raised a slow middle finger and I stuck my tongue out before biting into a piece of my brittle and taking a seat at the counter.

“How long are you here?” Grandma asked him, standing over the stove.

“I don’t know. As long as I feel like, I guess. By the way, Sam’s in my room, you need to tell her to leave.”

Grandma laughed. “Well if it isn’t Zanzibar himself asking me for a favor.” She turned to look at him. “Request *denied*.”

“But, Grandma—”

“Nope. You put us through hell. I haven’t forgiven you yet.”

I looked back and forth between them. “Zanzibar?”

Grandma turned off the burner. “You don’t want to know.”

I looked at my brother. “Is it your consequences consequencing?” I asked, sucking air through my teeth.

“Shut up,” Tristan said. “So which room am I supposed to be in, then?”

Grandma plated eggs. “Well, there’s one left upstairs. You’ll have to share a bathroom with the boys. Oh, the game room is open in the basement —”

He gasped. “Yaaaaas. I want the game room.”

I gave him a look. “That’s a community space.”

“So? She just said I could have it.”

“Grandma!”

“It’s empty, Sam. It’s not doing anything for anyone,” Grandma said.

The space was a large windowless room in the bowels of the basement where Grandma used to play *Dungeons & Dragons* back in the day. She’d painted the walls in the eighties with an epic orange dragon fresco that we all loved. To be fair we hadn’t used the game room in forever, but the wine cellar was in there.

“How are we supposed to get wine bottles if he’s living there?” I asked.

“You can ask me and if I want to, I just *might* let you have one,” he said, smirking.

I looked at Grandma and she shrugged.

I rolled my eyes.

Grandma served the boys eggs.

Jeneva came around the corner in her robe. She stopped when she saw our brother. “You’re here.”

“You’re so observant,” he quipped.

“I’m surprised you have the balls to show your face in this house again after Easter,” she said.

“Whatever.” He shoveled eggs in his mouth.

I raised an eyebrow. “What happened at Easter?”

“He programmed Alexa to play ‘Zanzibar’ by Billy Joel every time someone said his name,” she said, grabbing a coffee cup from the cabinet. “It took a week to figure out why it was doing it. We’re all traumatized.”

“That’ll teach you to talk shit about me when I’m not in the room,” he said, smiling sweetly. Then he looked at me. “You can have my old

apartment I guess, but I want my bed back.”

“Fine. Good. Keeps me from having to call a hazmat team to come get it.”

Mom’s voice came sharply from down the hall. “I have work!”

“No, the office is closed today,” Dad said, calmly.

“It’s not! It’s Monday! Let go of me!”

I knew Dad was hugging her, trying to settle her, and she was struggling to break free. I knew because this back-and-forth happened every single morning since I got here.

Mom couldn’t remember that she didn’t work anymore. She just knew that it was the morning and she went to work in the morning. The truth confused her, so Dad always told her the same thing.

“It’s Presidents’ Day,” Dad said, from the other room.

It wasn’t. It was Groundhog Day. Not really, but basically.

There was some undistinguishable muttering, the rise of Mom’s voice asking a question, Dad reassuring her that there was no job to go to, Mom relaxing, him letting her go—then my parents came into the kitchen for breakfast. “Good morning,” Dad sang.

Then Mom saw Tristan. Her whole expression changed. “Tristan!”

“Hi, Mommy!” He jumped off his stool and hugged her and I watched her face over his shoulder, lit and happy.

Color in a gray world.

The lump bolted to my throat and I had to look at the collection of green blown glass on the windowsill over the sink to keep from sobbing.

I didn’t care that she remembered him. I was glad she did. I cared that she didn’t remember *me*.

What about me made me less permanent? Why did *I* fade to gray when everyone else was bright?

Dad came up behind me and gave my shoulders a squeeze like he knew what I was feeling. Maybe he did.

“So I was thinking we could all have a discussion about house rules,” Dad said, helping Mom onto the stool next to me.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jeneva said, pouring herself a coffee. “We need to figure out a cleaning situation. Especially now,” she said, eyeing our brother. “We need to delegate meals too,” Jeneva said. “Groceries, all that stuff. Grandma can’t be doing all the cooking.”

“I don’t cook,” Tristan said.

“Yeah, we know, you’re useless,” Jeneva said. “You can buy dinner then. And not crap either. I’m not eating pizza twice a week because you suck.”

He feigned being offended and Jeneva batted her eyes at him.

“So no fast food?” Tristan asked.

“No.”

“What about El Pollo Loco?” he said, pursing his lips like he knew he had her.

“I could be agreeable to El Pollo Loco,” she said.

“Same,” Dad said.

“Me too,” I said reluctantly. “I like their beans.”

Grandma bobbed her head. “I’m fine with their food. Braden, Holden, do you like El Pollo Loco?”

My nephews nodded.

Mom did not voice an opinion and nobody asked her for one. Now *she* was gray.

“Mom? What do you think of El Pollo Loco?” I asked.

She gazed at me.

“Chicken,” I said. “For dinner.”

“Oh. I like chicken.”

I smiled and nodded. “Good. Then El Pollo Loco is on the approved list.”

She smiled a little. “That’s settled then.”

The corner of my lip twitched up.

Dad put a bib on her. He buttoned the back and then kissed the side of her head and went to get her a coffee. I studied her sitting there.

We spent a lot of time at my grandmother’s house as kids. We practically lived here in the summer. The room above the garage used to be the company office before they had to go bigger and rent a space. Mom would drop us off to stay with Grandma and Grandpa and Mom would sit right where she sat now to have coffee with her parents before work. She’d be perfect. Polished and made up.

I always thought Mom was the most beautiful woman in the world. I couldn’t wait to grow up and wear red lipstick and high-heeled shoes like she did—that was actually my nightmare now, but still.

Now she was void of color. Pale, washed out. Her hair hadn't been dyed in probably a year. It was like you could see the moment she lost agency over herself by the amount of growth between the faded chestnut brown she liked to color it and the gray that had come in since.

"I want to do Mom's makeup every morning," I said.

Everyone stopped and looked at me.

Grandma blinked. "She doesn't need it..."

"She does," I said, looking at the faces peering back at me. "I'll take it off at night. I think she deserves to look like she'd want to. Or like she would if she could. And I want to dye her hair too. Back to the color she used to do it."

Jeneva sucked air through her teeth. "There's no way she can go to a salon, Sam."

"I'll do it here."

"I can do it," Tristan said.

"You're going to dye Mom's hair?" Jeneva said, skeptical.

"Uh, I have a cosmetology license?" Tristan said, like this was common knowledge.

"When did you get a—" I shook my head. "You know what, it doesn't matter. You do the hair."

Dad was nodding. "I bet she'd like that."

I put my hand on her wrist. "Mom? What do you think about getting your hair done? Good idea?"

She seemed to mull it over. "Good idea."

I smiled. "Okay. We'll do it today."

We spent the next half hour going over the family schedule.

Grandma would make breakfast every day. She liked doing it and she was a morning person, so it worked. We'd all pitch in for groceries, split four ways between the siblings and Dad. Jeneva took dinner on Mondays and Wednesdays, Tristan took Tuesday and Fridays, I took Thursday and Saturday and Dad took Sunday. We could swap days if we needed to.

It was a nice setup. The whole thing.

We all paid rent here, but it was a fraction of what we'd pay in the real world. The neighborhood was nice, and the place was more than big enough to fit us all.

It was what everyone needed.

Jeneva needed help with the boys. She was a single mom now. Tristan got to save money, I got to be with my family when my family needed me, Dad needed help with Mom, and Grandma needed help with the house.

She *really* needed help with the house.

My grandparents had bought it in 1975. Five bedrooms, five bathrooms, not counting the apartment over the garage. Three stories, a sunroom on the third floor that overlooked the yard, mature fruit trees, a pond.

And now it was deteriorating. Grandma didn't have the funds or the people to maintain it.

It reminded me of Miss Havisham's mansion in *Great Expectations*. A wealthy estate, frozen in time and crumbling.

There were remnants of some forgotten party still set up in the backyard. Tables and chairs and dusty catering pans, abandoned and left to rust. The carcass of a petrified broken piñata, still hanging from the limb of the big avocado tree, indistinguishable from whatever it used to be shaped like.

I loved this house, but I hated seeing what it had become. It was gray, like Mom's world. And so ridiculously full of linoleum.

Maybe everyone being here would change that. The capable adults breathing life back into it like CPR.

"What do you guys think about doing some remodeling?" I asked.

Dad put his coffee to his lips. "The house does need it."

"I agree," my sister said.

Tristan nodded. "No offense, Grandma, but this place is giving 1962."

Grandma slid onto a stool. "If you all want to do it, go ahead. I'm too old to deal with it. But how are you going to pay for it, though? I don't exactly have money laying around."

We all looked at each other.

"We could take out a home equity loan," Dad said.

"Split the payments four ways?" Jeneva asked.

Tristan gave a dismissive shrug. "Fine."

"I'm good with it," I said.

Grandma nodded. "Well, I'm leaving the house to you kids. Whatever you put into it, you get back when you sell it—"

"I don't want to sell it," I said.

"Me either," Jeneva said. "I want the boys to grow up here, like I did."

We looked at our brother. He shrugged again. "I like having a place to

crash.”

Grandma sipped her coffee. “Well, then whatever you put into it, you get to enjoy then. But it won’t be cheap.”

“It never is,” Dad said.

“We need to figure out a good time,” Jeneva said. “It’s going to be disruptive.”

“We’ll discuss,” Dad said, looking at his watch. “I have to get to work.” He stood and kissed Mom on the cheek.

My phone vibrated on the kitchen counter. I picked it up and looked at it. I did *not* expect what I saw.

It was Xavier.

“Oh my God...” I breathed.

Dad paused next to Mom.

Jeneva eyed me. “What?”

“It’s *him*.”

Tristan made a dramatic gasp.

“Who’s him?” Grandma asked.

“The hot vet guy from the UFO,” Tristan said.

“The one who gave her the hoodie she wears twenty-four seven,” Jeneva said.

“I don’t wear it twenty-four seven!” I said, literally wearing it.

“Answer it!” Tristan snapped.

I cleared my throat and hit the button. “Xavier...” I said, as calmly as possible.

“Hello.”

His warm voice felt like I was being wrapped in fleece.

“To what do I owe this phone call?” I asked, scurrying out of the kitchen to the living room. “Pooter’s poops are fine. Her butt hole too. Unless you’re calling for something else.”

“I’d like to come see you,” he said without preamble.

I stopped dead in the living room. “You want to come see me?”

“Yes.”

I blinked. “*Why?*”

A pause. “I can come this weekend. Or the one after that,” he said. “Whatever works for you.”

My heart was pounding. “*Why?*” I asked again.



He was quiet on the other end. “Because I need to be in the same room as you,” he said. “Preferably one with a door that unlocks.”

I had to move the phone away from my mouth like he could see my goofy grin.

“Okay,” I said. “This weekend could work.”

“Okay.”

There was a smile in there.

“And bring me my lava lamp,” I said.

“Of course. I’ll text you with my flight time.”

We hung up.

I was smiling so big my face hurt.

“Giiiiirl...” Tristan said from behind me.

I turned around. Everyone was standing in the dining room. Even Mom.

I put my hand on my hip. “How long were you there?”

“Long enough to hear you’ve got a penis flying in from Minnesota—” Tristan said.

“The boys!” Jeneva punched his shoulder, but they were both laughing.

I crossed my arms. “He is not a—You know what? Stay out of my business.”

“No,” my brother said.

“No,” Jeneva parroted him. Then Grandma, the boys, and Dad and Mom all said, “No.” Mom was probably just repeating what we were saying, but it was so funny the whole room started laughing.

I couldn’t help it. I laughed too.

And then I freaked out. He was coming the day after tomorrow.

And also, *why* was he coming? Like, I got the whole *want to be in a room with you* thing. I wanted to be in a room with him too. But what was the point? We were too far away to make anything of it.

I decided just for this weekend I wasn’t going to care.

# 13



## XAVIER

I WAS GOING to see Samantha.

I'd head straight to the airport from work on Saturday and arrive in California by 4:00. Monday I was taking a 6:00 a.m. flight home and going straight from the airport to the clinic. I'd had to cancel all my volunteer shifts and block off most of the day on Monday. My dog was going with Maggie.

I'd booked a cheap hotel near where Samantha said she lived. I didn't want to assume she'd let me stay with her and I didn't ask if I could in case she felt obligated to say yes. I was going to book a car too, but she offered to pick me up. This I *did* agree to because it seemed the most practical. I could always get an Uber if I needed one and I didn't like to lose time with her. I wanted to see her as soon as I got off the plane.

If paying for this trip had taught me anything, it was that this situation would not be sustainable. The best I could hope for was to feel nothing and be let down.

Unfortunately, I was not let down. In fact, I knew I'd messed up the second I saw her.

She was a vision, waiting for me outside the baggage claim, leaning on the door of a classic blue convertible. I accidentally came out a different exit than the one I told her I would, so I saw her before she saw me. When she looked over and our eyes locked, I was done for.

I was going to go broke coming here. I knew it immediately.

"Hey!" She closed the distance between us, and I dropped my duffel bag with a thud and folded around the hug she gave me.

I felt *instantly* content. Like I'd been living with some invisible driving

force to get here, running at a low hum, and suddenly the engine cut off.

“How was your flight?” she whispered, not letting me go.

*Worth it*, I thought.

“Good,” I said, dipping my nose into her hair.

She broke away from me, smiling. “I put the top down for you,” she said.

“This is your car?” I asked, looking past her at it.

“Yeah.” She nodded over her shoulder. “It’s magic. Apparently if you lift the hood, men appear from nowhere and ask you if you need a jump.”

I scoffed.

“I brought you something.” I handed her the bag I’d carried.

She peeked in while I put my things in the trunk. “You brought me cupcakes?” She beamed.

“Nadia Cakes,” I said.

“I was obsessed with them when I lived in Minnesota—thank you! There’s one here too but it’s like an hour away.”

“I got you a Spumoni. Maraschino cherries.”

“And to thank you, I will take you to eat the best burger you’ve ever had in your life.” She set the bag on the seat and then came back around to hug me again.

Content.

SAMANTHA

XAVIER WAS SITTING across from me at a tiny table at In-N-Out, giving me one of his contemplative gazes.

I couldn't *believe* he came.

It felt obvious that he wasn't from here. I couldn't really tell you what it was? But there was something extremely Minnesota about him.

His hair was windblown. I didn't think through the freeway-full sun thing when I put the top down at the airport. I just thought it would be cool at the time. But he looked great anyway, even disheveled.

"How'd you like your burger?" I asked.

"It needed mustard," he said.

"Ha!"

I got one of his sideways smiles.

God, I missed his face.

I picked up my vanilla milkshake while we looked at each other.

"Why don't you follow anyone on Instagram?" he asked.

I lowered my drink. "From the Murkle's account?"

"Yeah."

"You're following it?"

"Of course."

"I'm waiting for the perfect collab," I said.

"You don't have any takers yet?"

"Oh, I have lots of takers. But I'm letting them fight over us, gladiator style. When I first got started, I reached out to all the brands to see if they wanted to do cross-promotion, but we weren't big enough for them yet. Now we are and they're all sliding into my DMs like *heeeey*."

“Aren’t they based in Minnesota?” he asked. “Is that how you ended up there?”

“Yup. I got recruited while I was working on the Wendy’s marketing team. Hey, I thought you did volunteer stuff on the weekends,” I said.

“I do. I canceled it. To be here.”

I gave him a soft smile. Then I sat back in my seat and studied him. The ice-blue eyes, strong jaw, thick eyebrows. “Why are you here, Xavier?”

Contemplative gaze. “I don’t know,” he said. “Why did you let me come?”

“I don’t know either.”

“I like you,” he said.

“I know. I like you too. But I live really far away now.”

“I am aware.”

“So neither of us has any idea what we’re doing. We’re just... doing it,” I said.

“It appears that way.”

“You know this probably isn’t a good idea, right?” I said.

“I’m trying not to think too much about it,” he said.

I picked up my shake again and sucked on the straw while he watched me. “Do you want to go to the beach?” I asked.

“I want to go wherever you want to go.”

Forty-five minutes later we were in Santa Monica.

“There are some things we’re going to do here,” I said as we walked down Ocean Avenue toward the pier. “They’re tourist things and I’m doing them for you.”

He glanced at me. “You don’t like them?”

I shrugged. “I mean, I do? But I’d never do them unless I was doing them with someone from out of town. Like, if you live here you don’t actually come *here*.”

“Where do you go?”

“I don’t know. Restaurants, shows, farmers markets—that kind of stuff.”

I watched him looking around as we navigated the flood of people. He did it like he was assessing the danger. He probably was. The pier was kind of wild these days.

“Have you ever been to California before?” I asked, while we crossed the street to the ramp.

“Never,” he shouted over a guy dressed in a Ronald Regan costume yelling into a microphone. “This is the first time I’m seeing the ocean.”

“Woooooow. Really?”

He pulled me to his other side to put his body between me and a bedraggled man heading toward us, muttering to himself. Then he took my hand, giving everyone the flat, sort of scary expression that was his signature look.

The hand thing made my heart do somersaults, but the protective thing—this was my currency.

I didn’t get to shut my brain off very often. Most women don’t. The constant situational awareness that we have to practice is exhausting. But Xavier made me feel like I could mentally check out. I could just be here bopping around, enjoying being outside and surrounded by these eccentric weirdos and not have to worry about how safe I was because he wouldn’t let anything happen to me.

I couldn’t remember the last time I felt like that with someone. Definitely with my dad, but not really with the men I dated. Not that they made me feel unsafe, but Xavier made me feel like the second I was with him, I entered into his care.

I trusted him.

Also, he’s really tall and he frowns a lot. Not sure anyone would mess with him.

We walked down the pier’s wooden planks, looking at the amusement park rides and vendors offering everything from your name on a grain of rice to caricature drawings, along with lots of Santa Monica merch. An old guy with a tip jar and a shitty amp was singing “My Heart Will Go On.”

“How is your mom?” Xavier asked while we stood at the edge of a crowd watching a man on a unicycle.

I shrugged. “As well as she can be under the circumstances. My stupid brother came home. He’s driving me bonkers.”

“How?”

“Existing?”

We kept walking.

“How are the friends?” I asked.

“Good. Asking about you.”

“And what did you tell them?”

We got to the end of the pier and leaned over the railing between fishermen, looking at the ocean.

“I told them the truth,” he said, turning to me. “That you gave me the most unforgettable night of my life, then told me to forget it.”

“Come on, Eileen, I’m sure you’ve had much more memorable nights than that one,” I said.

“It was my first alien abduction. You always remember your first.”

I laughed and he put an arm around me and we stared out over the water. Seagulls hovered and squawked.

It was a little cold. The sun was shining and it was breezy. It was a beautiful view. Perfect for his first time laying his eyes on the sea.

I couldn’t recall the first time *I* saw the ocean. I’d been too young to remember. The Pacific was just so ingrained, it was a part of my very foundation. And even though I didn’t remember the first time, I had plenty of family memories over the years.

These were the kinds of things that Mom still remembered. Core memories so old, they’d be the last to go.

She was forgetting from the present backward. Her life on rewind, people and places and experiences blurring and vanishing. Maybe at the end all that would be left would be a memory like this one.

Xavier pulled me closer and I leaned my head against him. He was warm and firm and protective. I felt... peace.

A final memory like this one wouldn’t be so bad.

DON'T ROCK IT!"

"I'm not," I said. "It's just swaying from turning."

We were at the top of the Ferris wheel on the Santa Monica Pier. Samantha was clinging to me like a wet cat.

"Why did you want to go if you're scared of heights?" I asked, looking down at her, amused.

"I'm not scared of heights. I'm scared of *falling*. I wanted you to get all the iconic Santa Monica experiences," she said, clutching me.

"You being terrified is an iconic Santa Monica experience?"

"STOP."

I laughed. I didn't like that she was scared, but I very much liked that she was hugging me.

I didn't really know what the rules were going to be when I got here. Would we pick up where we left off in the escape room, or would we feel awkward? But it was immediately like it had been before, like we'd known each other forever. Our twentieth date. Like the UFO had been a time machine that aged our relationship.

I had no idea what I was doing here. It made me feel better that she didn't either.

This was not nothing between us.

I was just taking this visit one second at a time, hoping I'd get some clarity on what would come next, but the only thing getting clearer was that I really, really wanted to kiss her. I'd wanted to do it on the pier when we were watching the guy on the unicycle and again when we were looking at the ocean and I definitely would have kissed her on this Ferris wheel if she



weren't having a panic attack.

We swung higher and the gondola pitched wildly back and forth.

"I can't believe this doesn't scare you," she said.

"For the record, I will never have a good time if *you* aren't having a good time. We should plan activities accordingly."

"Shhhhhhhhh, enjoy your terrifying view."

We swung upward again and she made a little squeak.

I squeezed her. "Think about mustard, it'll all be over soon."

I felt her laugh in my arms and I smiled, peering out over the horizon. Her sacrifice wasn't lost on me. The view really was breathtaking.

This place was a whole new world. I'd never been anywhere like it. I felt plopped down on a TV set, all these landmarks I'd only ever seen in movies. Enormous long-necked palm trees that lined the streets with mountains looming behind them. The smell of brine and french fries and the musty scent of the rotting wood of the boardwalk. The ocean stretching as far as the eye can see.

It made me feel stimulated. Like my sleepy brain, so used to seeing what it already knew, was kicked into high gear to process it all. These memories would be sharp and embedded.

And she would be too.

She already was.

I glanced down at my date, clinging to me for dear life.

I would be jealous if she was clinging to another man. Deeply, deeply bothered by it. And that was something else I needed to unpack because I didn't live here, so she was going to do this with someone else eventually because it couldn't be me.

I hated that it couldn't be me. Which circled me back to what was I even doing here? If I knew this visit was pointless, why had I come? And yet, there was nowhere else I'd rather be, and nothing would have kept me from coming short of her forbidding me to do it. The urge was too strong.

Her fingers curled into my shirt.

"Tell me something," I said. "It'll get your mind off it."

"What do you want to know?" she asked, her eyes squeezed shut.

"Tell me about your family."

"Who do you want me to start with?"

"Jeneva," I said.

“She’s thirty-two, divorced,” she said quickly, like the speed she relayed it would make the distraction work faster. “Her ex-husband has a sex addiction that she found out about ten years into the marriage. He spent their whole savings on cam girls. She got full custody and he left the state and got a job under the table instead of getting therapy and paying child support. This was last year. She’s hilarious, smart, a good mom, an even better cook, and she’s lactose intolerant but will never stop eating ice cream.”

“Tristan?”

She sucked in air as we swept upward again.

“Chronic wanderlust,” she said, her voice a touch too high. “Good at everything he touches, but never sticks to anything he starts. He’s a gifted artist and had a short but epic career as a somewhat famous cake decorator whose creations almost always went viral. You’ve probably seen them. They look like real things around the house and then you cut into them and surprise, it’s cake. He left that job after deciding to follow a boyfriend to Anchorage so they could homestead. He bailed after three months and called us from Punta Cana to tell us he was teaching surfing lessons and could he borrow some money that he never paid back. Left there to work at an outfitter in British Columbia. Now he’s home and he’ll likely vanish in the night for some other adventure and leave a bong water stain on the carpet and an unpaid bill of some sort that we have to pay.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah,” she said, her eyes still closed. “Grandma’s seventy-seven. First generation from Mexico.”

“Oh, do you speak Spanish?”

“A little. Mom was fluent but my dad wasn’t, so I didn’t hear it as much growing up. Mom’s an only child. My grandpa died six years ago. Grandma was a hippie—like, an actual hippie. She met my grandpa at Woodstock.”

“And what did he do?” I asked.

“He owned a palm tree farm.”

“A palm tree farm...”

“Yeah. It’s the family business. My mom, Lisa, ran things after my grandpa retired. They sold the business after Mom started getting bad.”

“Huh. You didn’t want to go into the family trade?”

“No,” she said, looking over the side and retreating back into my chest.

“Trees are pretty boring—lucrative, but boring. A full-grown palm can sell for fifteen thousand to twenty thousand dollars depending on what kind it is. And that doesn’t even include”—she gasped as we went a rung higher—“transport or planting,” she continued out of breath. “Grandpa bought land in the Coachella Valley, back when it was cheap, and he planted a couple thousand of them. Spent his whole life just selling trees. When they bought the house, Grandma turned the backyard into an organic garden. She still doesn’t like food coloring. She keeps a Super Soaker full of Tabasco next to her bed because she doesn’t like guns.”

I chuckled. “And your dad?”

“He’s fifty-five,” she said. “Met my mom after a house party in the Hollywood Hills. Her boyfriend jumped off the roof into the pool and bruised his tailbone. She was pissed because she told him not to do it and I guess it was the last straw or something so she broke up with him and was walking home at four a.m. She snapped the heel off her shoe and my dad drove by and asked her if she needed a ride. He was delivering newspapers. She finished his route with him and they went to Norms for breakfast and the rest is history.”

We came to an extended stop and the swaying settled down a little. Probably letting people off and on. She hesitantly peered over the side again.

“You see that spot there?” She nodded to the beach. “Where it looks like a little tide pool or something?”

“Yes...”

“That’s a riptide.”

I leaned to look. “Really?”

“Yeah. My mom always pointed out how to find them. The waves don’t break at the opening so it looks like a good, calm place to get in, but it’s a trap. It sucks you out.”

“What do you do if you get sucked out?”

“You just let it take you. If you fight it, you die.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because it’s stronger than you are. You’ll get tired and you give up.”

I studied the spot on the shore. We didn’t have riptides in Minnesota. Lakes don’t have them. I was glad she pointed it out.

I looked down at her. Her fingers were buried in my shirt. I couldn’t

believe I was here.

I woke up in Minneapolis today, worked. And now I was on a Ferris wheel, looking at the ocean. With her.

I tucked her under my chin and breathed in the smell of salty sea air and listened to the muffled sound of people a hundred feet below.

They say that you won't remember what someone said, but you'll always remember how they made you feel. I don't think this moment would be the same if it wasn't for how it felt. Ocean or no.

SAMANTHA

WE WERE SITTING on the beach on two Barbie towels we bought at a souvenir shop. We had our shoes off. The sun set an hour ago. We'd done all the things. Took scooters to Venice Beach, got ice cream on the Third Street Promenade, did the pier, shared some calamari at a seafood place, and then walked along the surf.

I liked talking to Xavier. I liked hanging out with him. I liked the contemplative gazes, the little upturned corner of his mouth when I said something funny. I liked how reflective he was. How he didn't speak until he had something thoughtful to say. He was observant.

But mostly I liked that he felt turned toward me. Like I was the only thing interesting in this place full of interesting landmarks and people and things. He never once pulled out his phone for anything other than taking pictures. I told him I loved shells and he spent our walk along the water looking for ocean jewels to hand me like it was his new job. I preferred his ice cream more than mine and he switched with me, he wouldn't take no for an answer. When it got windy on the beach, he wrapped me in his towel.

I felt courted.

It was weird, but there was no other word to describe it. I had obviously never been properly courted before because now that I was, I was giving those other guys some serious side eye. Damn if Xavier wasn't ruining me for all other men while he was here.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. Jeneva messaging me.

"Sorry, I have to get it. She wants to know how to take Mom's makeup off," I said, texting her to tell her where the makeup wipes are.

I'd done Mom's face for the first time this morning. It hadn't come out

great. I needed to find some old photos or something to see how she used to do it because when I finished, she looked like a caricature of herself. When I showed Tristan he'd rolled his eyes and asked me if I'd ever heard of blending. Then he kicked me out of the bathroom and finished it himself. I would have handed him the torch indefinitely if he woke up early enough to take it from me.

I hit send and tucked my phone away.

"Can I ask you a question?" Xavier asked.

"Sure."

"When did you first notice?"

"The dementia?"

"Yes."

I played with the sand in front of me. "Mom's had a lot of concussions. She cheered in high school. She was a flyer. You know, the one they toss in the air?"

"Yeah..."

"She bumped her head a lot. I guess that can cause problems later in life. She had a bad car accident ten years ago and then another one a few years after that. She never recovered from the last one. Her memory was never the same. It just got worse and worse and now..."

I lay back to look at the sky, wrapped in the towel, and he laid down with me. When he took my hand, my heart did a flip.

It flipped every time he touched me. It flipped every time he looked at me with those sharp blue eyes.

I think I was trying to convince myself all this was less than it was. I wasn't falling for him. I wasn't more attracted to him than anyone I'd ever been attracted to in my life. He wasn't perfect, it was just that I remembered him that way and it was coloring how I felt now. Memories were like that, sometimes they bent reality.

Only the reality felt real. This day *was* perfect. All of it. Like a dream.

I closed my eyes and drew the air into my lungs.

I loved the smell of the ocean. I'd forgotten how much. The relentless sound of the waves crashing and the feel of the lumpy sand under a towel. We came here so often as kids, mostly with Mom. We'd go to Subway and get to pick a sandwich to eat when we got here. We'd have bottles of Snapple and sunblock that smelled like coconut and we'd lug our blankets

and beach chairs to the water and just be here all day next to a tiny radio we could barely hear over the surf.

But being here at night was different. Familiar but not. Like being at school on the weekend or the power going out in the grocery store while you shop. Wrong somehow and discomfoting.

I'd never been to the beach at night. Too murderly. But Xavier neutralized the danger of it. Made it feel fun and adventurous and *safe*. There is no way in a million years I'd be out here without him.

Maybe it was just him, or the trauma bond formed in the belly of the UFO, but I was convinced that nothing and nobody would ever make me feel as comforted and protected as being near him. Everything about him calmed me. His tone of voice, his smell, the warmth of his body.

He had imprinted on me.

Years worth of conditioning, set in stone over one night in an escape room.

I wondered if he felt the same way.

"I can't believe you've never gone to the beach before," I said. "It feels like a birthright."

"My parents didn't do that kind of thing. We never went on trips. Or anywhere, really."

I lolled my head to look at him. "What were they like? I mean, I know they sucked. But why?"

He stared back at the sky. It took him a long time to answer.

"My dad was military. Very strict, a disciplinarian and an alcoholic. Mom was detached. There's no other way to put it. She didn't have a single motherly bone in her body. They should never have had kids. To be fair, I don't think they wanted me. They definitely didn't like me." He looked at me. "What's your favorite memory with your mom?" he asked. Probably to change the subject, but I could understand why.

I puffed out my cheeks. "God, so many. This, the beach. Going to swim at her best friend's house when she wasn't home and accidentally setting off the alarm and having to explain it to the cops. Getting these cakes shaped as monster faces from the grocery store? They were buttercream and I'd pick out the perfect one and we'd take them for picnics at Brand Park. Going up to the cabin in Big Bear and making fairy houses in the backyard and getting fresh strawberry pies to take home from this bakery we liked.

Sleeping under her desk at the office on days when I was home sick and eating chicken and stars soup through a straw. Disneyland. Going to Porto's and getting their guava cheese strudels. I could go on and on. Laughing with her about her food." I smiled a little. "She was a terrible cook. Really, really bad. But you know, considering everything else she was good at, it was probably for the best. She would have been too powerful."

He smiled.

"I wish you could have met her," I said, almost to myself.

"I'd like to."

I felt my smile fade. "Even if you do, you never will."

We went quiet, looking at the light saturated sky. No stars. Just the city illumination reflected off the clouds in a foggy gray.

"Do you have any happy memories with your parents?" I asked, looking at him. "Or was it all bad?"

He thought about it. "Mom took me to ride horses sometimes. She had a friend with a stable. Sometimes she'd help me get my chores done before Dad got home and saw it. But that was probably more for her than me. He wasn't exactly nice to her either. But mostly she ignored me. Acted like I was a burden or an inconvenience. The worst part was when she ignored what he did. I didn't have anyone on my side or anyone to protect me."

Huh. I wondered if that's why he was a protector now.

I shifted to my side and propped myself up on my elbow. "What's the Winnie story?" I asked.

He looked back at the sky. "You don't want to hear it."

"You said it was second date stuff. It's our second date."

He made me wait a moment. Then he let out a little resigned breath. "Winnie was my childhood dog. She wasn't fixed. My parents wouldn't spend the money—in fact looking back, I don't think she ever went to the vet. She kept getting pregnant. She'd have a litter and..."

He stopped.

"And what?"

"And he would drown them."

I gaped in horror.

"This happened, four, maybe five times?" he said. "So after the last time I took her and walked her to this vet clinic I'd seen by the grocery store we went to. I remember it was cold. Probably March. It was two, three miles, in



the snow. And when I got there, I begged the woman at the front desk to let me talk to the doctor. I waited a half an hour and when he finally came out, I told him everything. Everything. I told him what would happen to me if my parents knew I was there, I told him I had nothing to give him. I begged him to help me, I was crying. And he did. He took her and he spayed her. He gave her all her shots.” He laughed a little. “He even cleaned her teeth and cut her nails when she was out. He let her recover there, while I told my parents Winnie ran away. She did that a lot. And a week later I came and I got my dog.”

He went quiet.

“She was the only thing that made living in that house tolerable. That man was a hero to me. I wanted to do that. I wanted to be that for someone else’s Winnie. That was my moment of inception.”

My mouth was still open. “How old were you?”

“Twelve? Thirteen?”

“Oh my God...” I breathed. “I don’t know how you’re not a supervillain. And your dad? Seriously, fuck that guy. I hope when he sees the word *doctor* in front of your name he punches holes in his own walls.”

He snorted.

The waves crashed and we lay there, looking at each other. Me wrapped in his towel, and him, holding my hand between our bodies.

He cleared his throat. “So, have you connected with any old friends since you got home?”

“My friends?” I shrugged. “A few. I went to high school here so as soon as I landed they were calling me.”

“Have you hung out with any of them?”

“Yeah, we went to dinner last week.”

“And were the high school friends from dinner the other night all girlfriends?”

I drew my brows down. “What do you mean?”

“Were there any guys there or...?”

“You mean like, ex-boyfriends or something?”

He gave me his expressionless expression.

I sat up on my elbows. “Are you asking me if I’m talking to my exes?”

Poker face.

Oh my God. He was worried about it.

I grinned. “No. I am not talking to my exes,” I said. “What about you? Have you asked out any of your patients’ moms recently?”

He sat up. “No.”

I laughed. “Good.” I shook my head. “That was a terrible transition by the way.”

“What do you mean?” He smiled.

“Just sliding that question in all nonchalantly.”

“I was just curious...”

“Uh-huh. Would you be jealous if I was talking to my exes?”

Mask.

I gasped. “You would! You’re obsessed with me, Xavier.”

He looked down, humor around his eyes. When he looked back up, his gaze had gone a touch serious. “I like it when you say my name.”

I smiled. “Xavier,” I whispered. “Xavier. Xavi—” He leaned forward and kissed me.

I didn’t expect it. I did, but I didn’t.

It took my breath away.

I was hoping I’d hate kissing him. One last-ditch effort at not falling completely head over heels for a man I could not have. But the second his lips touched mine I was a goner. It was everything.

I don’t know how I fell in so deep already. It didn’t make sense. It was too soon, too impractical, too inconvenient. And my heart simply couldn’t care less.

We could have been kissing by a dumpster in an alley. Making out in a Porta Potty, it wouldn’t have mattered. The kiss was all I was afraid it was going to be. It was perfect.

A hand slipped under my jaw and he shifted and lowered me onto the towel, fingers curling around my ear. He parted my lips and his tongue gently brushed mine and all I could think was that he flew two thousand miles to kiss me. And I *liked* it. All of it. The effort. The feel of him half on top of me and the lumps of sand under my back. I liked the way he smelled and how strong and gentle he was pressed into me.

Normally my first time kissing someone I’d be nervous, but there was something so calming about him. Steady. Like he was safe. Predictable. Which was funny because I had no idea what he was going to do. It was sort of like a really experienced trainer calming an anxious horse—and I

probably needed to think a little more on that. He *was* a vet, maybe he really did know how to calm anxious horses? But he hooked the back of my knee and wrapped my leg around his waist and I forgot what Google search I was planning.

“Whaaaaat are we doing?” I breathed.

“I don’t know...” he whispered into my mouth.

But we kept doing it.



Two hours later I unlocked my apartment while he ravaged the side of my neck from behind and his hands wandered up the bottom of my shirt. The bolt clicked and we spilled inside. I didn’t flick on the light. He spun me and pressed me into the closed door.

“I think some of the things we did on that beach were illegal...” he whispered, peeling my shirt off me.

“I liked doing crimes with you.”

He laughed huskily and reached around and unhooked my bra.

We’d had fun in Santa Monica but nothing that included either of us being naked—and that’s not because *I* was being the voice of reason, believe me. He didn’t want to put me in a compromising situation. The whole making out in the sand had been one long edging session and I was officially ready to be compromised.

I pulled him to my lips by the cuff of his shirt.

“Xavier...” I whispered.

“Samantha...” he whispered back, smiling against my mouth.

He was right. The name thing was hot.

“Bed,” I managed. I nodded in the general direction and he lifted me against him by my ass and carried me through the apartment. When he set me down, I crawled across the comforter on my hands and knees and he followed, grabbing me by the hips and pressing into me from behind. He dragged my hair over my shoulder and his lips came down on the side of my neck. “This is an air mattress,” he said.

I had to laugh at the matter-of-fact delivery.

“And?” I panted.

“And what if we break it?” He grinded into me.

“Are you going to take my underwear off? Or do you want to talk about the furniture?”

He flipped me over and glided on top of me, still fully dressed, and crushed his lips to mine.

I could make out with this guy forever. He was really good at it.

He was so careful and deliberate. Like every nibble or caress was being measured to see how it made me respond. He made me feel like kissing me wasn't about him, it was about me. Like he wouldn't like it if *I* didn't like it.

A palm traveled up my chest, over my collarbone, and to my throat. When he had my jaw in his hand, he tipped my head to the side and put his lips to the bare skin of my neck. I could feel his erection through his pants.

“You need to take *everything* off...” I said. “Now.”

He sat back and started unbuttoning his shirt, looking at me like he was going to eat me.

Pooter appeared. She scaled the side of the bed and did quick zoomies between us while he peeled his shirt off. We both laughed as he tossed his shirt over his shoulder. I was about to wiggle out of my pants—I had my thumbs hooked in my waistband—when I heard the hiss of air leaving what had to be a baseball-sized hole somewhere on my mattress. The bed almost immediately started to deflate.

We rode the rapidly flattening balloon down to the floor.

“You have *got* to be kidding me...” he breathed, as the bed folded around us.

This had to be sabotage. Tristan probably.

I collapsed against my pillow and Xavier plopped down next to me in the dwindling puff.

I groaned and dragged a blanket over my body.

He started to laugh.

“Well, you were right,” I said. “We broke it. Ugh, we have no bed now,” I said, my butt hitting the ground.

He leaned over and snuggled up next to me and pulled me into a hug. “We can go to my hotel,” he said, nuzzling me. “I paid for it.”

He started kissing my face. Gentle pecks, like I was some delicate, precious thing. I closed my eyes and let him. I wanted to kiss him back, give *him* the affectionate little pecks. But when I tried, he turned into it and

kissed me on the mouth instead. Two seconds later we were right back in it, right on the floor.

This man made me dissolve. I was cotton candy in his mouth.

This was bad. Bad, bad, *bad*. I needed this too much.

A small part of me hoped the chemistry would be terrible. Something to give me a reason to fall out of like.

There were no reasons. Only reasons to fall in love.

The kissing took on a serious tone and I was about to suggest that we didn't really need a mattress with air in it to continue what we'd started, but something cut into the silence. A long, mournful keening.

I broke away. "Did you hear that?" I asked, out of breath.

He paused to listen.

"Is that a cat?" I asked.

"No. It sounds like a person..."

I froze.

"Oh my God, get up, get up!" I shouted.

I scrambled off my flat mattress and grabbed my clothes. I was dressed and out the door in thirty seconds with Xavier right behind me.

I followed the crying to the blackest part of the backyard and found Mom thrashing and tangled in the decrepit piñata hanging from the avocado tree.

"Mom, oh my God, what are you doing out here?!"

She was barefoot and in her pajamas.

She flailed against the tattered whatever it used to be and I grabbed her arms and tried to keep her from getting more entwined in the rope. "Mom, stop!"

"I got it," Xavier said calmly, coming up next to me with some pruning shears. He cut her loose and she tumbled to the floor. Then she scrambled back to her feet and came at me swinging like I was trying to kill her. "You can't take me! Kidnapper!"

"MOM!"

She didn't recognize me. She had no idea who I was.

She plowed toward me, windmilling her arms and I managed to grab one wrist, but she pulled my earring off with the other hand.

She was completely hysterical. I had never seen terror in someone's eyes until this moment. She was petrified, a cornered animal.

Xavier came up behind her and pinned her arms down in a bear hug. “Hey, shhhhhhhhhhhh. You’re okay, Lisa,” he said. “We got you, you’re out. Shhhhhhhh. It’s okay.”

She struggled against him for a few seconds, her wide eyes darting back and forth. Then I watched her power down.

She panted in his arms, her wild hair stuck to her wet cheeks, and he soothed her while I leaned forward on my knees gasping for breath.

What the *fuck*...

The light in Jeneva’s room flicked on and a window opened.

“Who’s out there?” she shouted.

“It’s me,” I called. “Mom got out.” My voice was shaky.

“*Shit*,” I heard her mutter. The window closed.

I pressed the back of my hand to my earlobe and came away with blood.

Xavier let Mom out of the bear hug and was holding her gently by the elbow. “We’re going to go inside now, okay?” he said softly. She nodded and let him lead her toward the house, still crying and trying to catch her breath. She was limping and when we got close enough to see in the floodlight, I saw her pajamas were torn and her knees were bleeding.

Jeneva burst from the back door. “Oh my God, Mom!”

My sister jogged down the steps and met them, taking Mom’s other elbow.

“How did she get out?” Jeneva said, walking Mom to the house.

We were all so good about locking the door and setting the alarm.

All of us except *Tristan*. My sister seemed to realize the answer to her question the same time I did, I saw it on her face.

I stomped to the outside basement entry, keyed the code into the lock, let myself in, and stormed to Tristan’s room.

“Hey!” I threw the door open.

He bolted up in bed. “What the—”

“You left the back door unlocked and Mom got out, you dipshit!”

He looked confused. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“I mean Mom was in the yard, Tristan. She was out there sundowning, wailing like a ghost on the moors while you fucking slept on CBD gummies.” I grabbed a throw pillow from the floor and chucked it at him.

He knocked it out of the way. “I didn’t leave the fucking door unlocked.”

“Yes, you did. And the least you can do is own up to it.”

“I didn’t do it! I wasn’t even the last one up there!”

“Sure. Right. And thanks for poking a hole in my bed too, asshole. Why did you even come home? You’re just giving us one more person to take care of. Thanks for nothing.”

I watched the words hit him and I slammed the door.

I was furious.

The adrenaline was flooding my system now. I was starting to shake. My ear stung, there was blood on my shirt. By the time I got to the top of the steps, I was pinching tears from my eyes.

What was that? *Who* was that?

She’d been so scared.

What that must have been like for her. Like a living nightmare. Wandering lost through the dark, not knowing where you are, not recognizing the people coming to help you.

I was so grateful Xavier had been there. And I was embarrassed too. I didn’t want him to see this side of us. I didn’t want anyone to see it.

I wanted it to not exist.

Jeneva and Xavier had Mom sitting on a stool in the kitchen when I dragged myself in. Red rivulets were running down her shins, her clothes were dirty, she had avocado leaves in her hair.

“Where’s Dad?” Jeneva said, putting a paper towel under the faucet.

“I don’t know.” I sniffed.

Xavier had a hand on Mom’s arm. He was still keeping her calm. He made eye contact with me and even that brief connection made me feel better too.

“Samantha, why don’t you go find your dad,” he said, calmly.

I nodded, grateful to be told what to do when I was too flustered to think for myself. I turned for upstairs.

Dad wasn’t in their room. He wasn’t in their bathroom either. I popped my head into the boys’ and Grandma’s rooms, all of who were still asleep, thank God.

He wasn’t here and his car was gone.

Where was he?

I jogged back downstairs. Tristan was in the kitchen, hugging his arms around himself and looking wounded. Jeneva had cleaned up Mom’s legs

and Xavier had gloves on now, dabbing her knees with a cotton ball.

“Dad’s not here...” I said.

Everyone looked at me.

“What do you mean?” Jeneva asked.

“He’s not here. His car’s gone. I don’t have my phone—” She didn’t even need me to finish, she was already dialing.

We watched her face while it rang. He didn’t pick up.

“Dad? Where are you? Mom was out in the yard, call me back.” She hung up and looked at me. “Do you think he had an emergency? Why would he leave?”

Mom started crying again.

“It’s okay,” Xavier said, setting down the cotton ball to squeeze her hand. “You’re all right.”

“This was completely avoidable,” I said, giving Tristan a cutting look.

He glared at me. “Just so you know, I didn’t leave the door unlocked.”

“Well then who did?” I snapped.

“I don’t know, maybe Dad, who’s like, wherever the fuck he is?” He cocked his head at me.

I looked at my sister. I didn’t even think of that...

“Also, your raggedy-ass air mattress was flat when I came in to get my headboard. I found the hole and put duct tape on it and filled it back up for you. Not my fault you two humped it into the carpet.”

*Shiiit.*

“Tristan,” I stuttered, “I’m—I’m sorry—”

“No, seriously? Fuck you, Sam. You’re a bitch for that.”

His chin quivered and he spun and went back to the basement.

I closed my eyes and let out a tight breath. How was I supposed to think Dad could’ve left the door unlocked? Tristan was the chronically irresponsible one, and my brother liked to be petty, it only made sense...

I slumped.

Xavier worked on Mom without looking up.

I put my palms to my eyeballs. Then I went to wash my ear. I had to stick a square of toilet paper to the hole to stanch the bleeding and I came out wearing it instead of waiting until the bleeding stopped because I didn’t want to leave Xavier alone with my unpredictable family.

Xavier finished with Mom and put Band-Aids on her scrapes.



“She might be sore,” he said, peeling off his gloves. “Will she take pills?”

Jeneva let out a long breath. “It’s hard.”

“Do you have anything liquid? Children’s Motrin?” he asked.

“For the boys, yeah.”

“Okay, let’s give her that.”

Mom swatted at it when we tried to hand it to her. Absolutely refused to take it.

“Could we mix it into a drink maybe?” I asked.

“She’s not really good about drinking,” Jeneva said. “It’s a struggle every time. She mostly drinks at meals, but only because she’s used to it.”

Xavier stood there with a hand under his chin. “What if we put it in a shot glass?”

We both turned to look at him.

“We all take shots with her, only hers has the medicine in it,” he said. “She might do it as a reflex.”

Jeneva was nodding. “That could work...”

I filled three shot glasses with apple juice from the fridge and put the Motrin in the last one.

We stood in a circle around Mom and handed her the Motrin.

I raised my glass. “To Dad. Who has a lot of explaining to do.”

Jeneva scoffed. We clinked with each other, Mom included, who followed the prompt, and we all threw back our drinks.

It worked. Mom swallowed the whole thing.

“Genius...” I breathed.

“Huzzah!” Mom yelled, holding up her glass. She was smiling.

I looked at her, wearily.

A tiny glimpse of the old her, brought to the surface by the familiar routine of pounding a shot in the kitchen.

Mom used to be really fun. The life of the party. The last one on the dance floor at the wedding, the first one to get up when the live band started playing in a restaurant.

Now these things about her were lost. All we got now were occasional sparks when neurons fired. And it broke my heart every time I saw it and every time I didn’t.

Jeneva took Mom upstairs and put her to sleep, and Xavier and I went

back to my apartment.

I stared at my deflated bed while he closed the door behind us.

He turned me toward him and put my face in his hands. "Let's look at you," he said, gently, brushing my hair back. He took off my bloody toilet paper and studied the hole in my ear. "It's superficial," he said, running a knuckle along my jaw. "It didn't tear all the way through, it'll be healed in a few days."

He leaned down and kissed me softly. "You okay?"

"Not really." I sniffed. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"That." I nodded to the house.

He rubbed my arms.

"I feel so bad about Tristan," I said.

"He'll calm down. Apologize again tomorrow."

Pooter appeared and started scaling Xavier's pant leg. He pulled her off and held her to his chest without ever taking his eyes from my face. She went into instant purring.

I totally knew why Mom had calmed down with him. The gentle, tender steadiness about him. It felt like he was unchangeable. Like this is who he had always been, like he came out of the womb this way, a static flat line, and he would stay that way until the day he died. This kind of person was instantly recognizable, even to someone who recognized nothing.

I couldn't picture this man ever yelling. He was contained and self-regulated.

And *I* was the kind of impulsive asshole who blamed her innocent brother without even bothering to ask the question first.

I bet Xavier would have asked the question.

If he had, and the person had done the bad thing they were suspected of doing, he wouldn't throw a pillow at them. He'd say something like, "That is very disappointing." And it would somehow be worse than if he screamed and cursed at them.

He made me want to be a better human. As it was, I didn't feel like I even deserved the way he was looking at me.

"Where are we going to sleep?" I said, turning from his gaze.

"Let's go to my hotel."

I let out a sigh.

We could sleep in the empty upstairs bedroom. It would be closer. But the hotel would be private. Probably quieter too. It was already almost 1:00 a.m. The boys were up and running around by 8:00. We wouldn't get any sleep.

"Okay. Let me grab some stuff."

Xavier offered to drive since I was still shaking.

There was a drug deal going down in the hotel parking lot when we pulled up. They weren't even trying to hide it.

Xavier looked at the building from the driver's seat. "I don't think the pictures on the website were current."

"What about the pictures on the reviews?"

"I didn't check the reviews. I just took whatever was cheapest on the discount travel site."

I pulled out my phone and googled it.

"Oh my God. This place has one and a half stars." I turned the screen to him. "We're gonna get scabies here."

He frowned. "Let me see if I can get my money back. Come with me, I'm not leaving you in the car."

I followed him in.

I was about a hundred percent sure the Dart would be missing when we came out.

The burly balding guy at the counter wouldn't give him his money back.

We stepped away from the desk to converse.

"What do you want to do?" I whispered.

"We could get a different hotel," he said.

"If we do, I'm paying for it."

He shook his head. "No, I don't want you paying for it. This was my idea to come here, you shouldn't have to pay for anything."

"So you pay on two places in one night? I reject that on principle."

He dragged a hand down his mouth. "We could get another air mattress."

"It's after one a.m. There's not going to be anywhere open."

I let out a sigh. I was exhausted now. The tired had been accelerated by the drama. And it was 3:00 a.m. his time—he looked beat too. He'd worked and flown to California today—yesterday.

"Why don't we just get the key and see what the room looks like," I

said. “You paid for it, might as well. Maybe it’s not that bad?”

He contemplated the idea for a moment. Then I think exhaustion won out. “Okay.”

We asked for a room on the bottom floor so we could park the car right next to the window and hopefully hear if someone messed with it.

He unlocked the room and the door swung in with a creak.

It had cheap 1980s-looking furniture, a generic geometric bedspread in browns and reds, a lamp with no shade, and a Bible on the nightstand. It smelled faintly of cigarettes.

“You check for bedbugs and I’ll check for cameras,” I said.

We shut the door behind us, put on the bolt lock and chain, and put our bags in the bathtub while we divided and conquered.

No hidden cameras and no bedbugs.

We did find three condom wrappers under the bed though. All different brands and sizes. At least we didn’t find the condoms.

The towels were beyond thin and scratchy and the toilet ran. I checked for two-way mirrors. Negative.

He pulled the bedspread back. The sheets looked clean.

“Let’s not use this,” I said, dragging the bedspread off with two fingers and kicking it into a corner. “They don’t get washed. We can ask the guy for more sheets. At least we know those get bleached.”

Xavier left and came back with an armful of sheets and an extra blanket. We put it on the bed and stood on our respective sides looking at it.

“I think this will work,” I said.

“Good.”

He started to get undressed.

This was not a sexy getting undressed, this was an *I’m going to pass out the second I get in this bed* undressing, and he didn’t even need to say it, it was mutually understood.

I’d changed into pajamas before we left, so I got in under the covers while he folded his clothes and set them on the dresser. Then he jumped into gray sweatpants—which momentarily reignited the flames in my loins, but then quickly went out when I remembered that I had a bloody Band-Aid on my ear.

He climbed in and drew me into his arms.

“When I took my shoes off, the carpet felt a little moist,” I whispered.

“There’s questionable white stains on the curtains,” he said.

“There were dead cockroaches on the windowsill.”

“You are very brave,” he whispered.

“It’s not brave if you’re not scared.”

His laugh rumbled against me and he pulled me tighter. We lay there, holding each other in the silence.

“You didn’t remember to forget me,” I said, quietly.

“No,” he said. “I did not.”

I hoped he was getting as much out of all this as me.

He put his nose into my hair and breathed out a contented sigh.

Maybe he was...

XAVIER

MY BODY WAS two hours ahead of hers, so I woke up before she did. The hotel appeared to be criminal free at the moment, as there were two cops eating breakfast burritos in the parking lot, so I left Samantha sleeping in bed to get her coffee in the Dart.

I did not like her driving this car. At *all*.

No airbags, no roll bar, no shoulder strap. No automatic locks or alarm. I checked that the hazards worked—they did—but that’s about all this vehicle had going for it in terms of safety.

She said it was temporary. I hoped it was.

I got her coffee and some roses a man was selling out of a white bucket on the side of the road.

When I got back to the room, she was still sleeping so I left her latte and flowers next to the bed, brushed my teeth, and jumped in the shower. When I got out, she was at the sink.

“Good morning,” she said around her toothbrush.

“Good morning.”

She spit. “Thanks for the gifts. What do you want to do today?”

I was wrapped in a towel and she dropped her eyes to my waist and grinned.

Someone started screaming in the parking lot. A second later we heard the whoop of a police siren.

We both looked at the door and then back at each other, amused.

“Maybe breakfast and then a mattress store?” I said.

She scoffed. “Okay. Then what?”

“What is there?”

She ticked off on her fingers. “Disneyland, La Brea Tar Pits, the LA Zoo —”

“The zoo.”

She smiled. “How did I know you’d say that?”

I loved zoos. Aquariums too. Both were places I didn’t get to go as a kid unless I was going with one of my friends and their family.

I don’t know why I didn’t do these things as an adult. Why I had to wait to be taken. When I thought of activities to fill my time, I thought of volunteering, working longer, going to the gym. Grown-up things. My mind never went naturally to things that I might enjoy. It was like that switch was not available in my brain. Like the loss of it in my childhood was a permanent one and only someone else could get me there.

“Is that fine?” I asked. “We can do something else.”

“I love the zoo. I haven’t been since I was twelve or something. Can we maybe take the boys? They’d like it and my sister doesn’t get much of a break.”

“Of course.”

She rinsed her toothbrush. “Can I make a special request?”

“Sure.”

“I don’t want to tell you what to do with your face, but when you meet the boys, can you smile? Because you are very tall and you frown a lot.”

I scoffed. “Yes. I will make an effort not to scare the children.”

“Thank you.”

Then we just stood there, peering at each other.

She looked beautiful. Rumpled and sleepy. She’d gone to sleep wearing the hoodie I gave her but she’d taken it off and she was in nothing but a maroon tank top now. No bra. Her nipples were pressing against the fabric. I felt a twitch under my towel. Then someone started shouting outside followed by the sounds of shuffling and an electrical zapping noise.

She looked at me with her eyes wide. “Did we just hear someone get tasered?”

“I think we did...”

A male voice went into the Miranda rights directly on the other side of our door.

With the mood officially deflated, she grabbed a towel.

“I’m going to go take a shower,” she said. “How was the water

pressure?”

“Terrible.”

“Perfect.”

I was dressed by the time she came out. She got ready and I took her to eat breakfast at a diner. We’d just ordered. Her cell phone pinged and she checked it. She looked perturbed.

“What?”

“Jeneva,” she said, putting her phone away. “She said Dad came in a little after we left.”

“Where was he?”

She shrugged. “She said she saw his car in the driveway, he snuck back in, she didn’t talk to him.”

She poured creamer into her coffee. She liked the blue vanilla ones. I made a mental note.

“How long have your parents been together?” I asked.

“Thirty-three years. She is the love of his life.”

She looked away from me when she said this, like she needed a moment to recover from it. She peered out the window, watching the traffic on Colorado Street.

“I thought dementia was something that happened to old people,” she said. “There was a laundry list of things that I worried about for my mom. Breast cancer. Arthritis. Really shitty menopause. At no point was dementia on my radar.”

“What’s the prognosis?”

She gave me a one-shoulder shrug. “She can live with it for years. Decades even. It’s not the dementia that kills you—it’s the falls, the infections, the malnutrition. She’s young and her body is strong, so that’s good. She doesn’t have any other health conditions. She wanted to stay at home. That was really important to her.” She paused. “You know what I realized through all this?”

“What?”

She gazed at me. “That there is nothing more beautiful than being a witness to someone’s life. To know them inside and out and be with them through everything, share the same memories. Memories are everything. I want that.”

“A witness to your life?”



“Yeah. I want someone who knows *everything* there is to know about me, and I want to know everything about them. I want to be able to say *one* out-of-context comment to someone and they get what it means and they laugh and it’s just some stupid joke from like eleven years ago that means nothing to anyone else.”

The corner of my lip twitched up. “Like, ‘Come On Eileen’?”

“Yes!” She jabbed a finger at me. “‘Come On Eileen’ is *exactly* it. I want a lifetime of that. I want to be able to talk about my family and they know what I mean without me having to go into the backstory. To just say ‘Tristan’ and they nod and roll their eyes. I want someone who knows all my petty vendettas and they honor them no matter how out of pocket they are.”

“So, mustard stuff.”

She laughed. Then her smile fell a little.

“You can’t fake that kind of thing,” she said, softly. “It’s the result of a parallel life. A shared collection of experiences, like a snowball rolling downhill, getting bigger as it goes. And then you get to a point where you’re so far in, you can never replace that person. Not really. No one else can ever be the same kind of witness because you’ve lived through so much. It really is a once in a lifetime thing.” Her eyes went a little sad. “Can you imagine losing that? One memory at a time?”

I peered at her quietly. “No. I can’t.”

But also, I could. Because I’d lost both my parents, even though they were still here.

There was no one who would witness *my* life from my start to the finish of theirs. And no one to witness my parents’ lives either—except each other, which felt more like a punishment than something poetic.

And the sad thing was, it didn’t have to be this way. They were already feeling my absence. They needed me now, like Samantha’s mom needed her, and I would never answer that call.

Somehow, not having me witness their life felt like a fitting consequence for their actions. Because Samantha was right. There was nothing more precious.

When we got out of breakfast, it was almost eleven. We were driving back to the house to pick up the boys for the zoo. Her car was sweltering.

We had the top up because it was too hot to be in direct sunlight. The V-

8 engine was like a space heater, radiating hot air on our legs under the dash. The vinyl seats were scorching and the whole thing smelled like oil.

“How do you deal without AC?” I asked.

She pulled her hair into a ponytail at the red light. “It’s bad, huh? Grandma said there’s a vent under the dash. It lets air in while you drive?”

I found the vent on the passenger side and opened it up. It was a rudimentary four-inch-by-four-inch square metal box with a metal latch.

“Got it,” I said.

“Ugh, hopefully that helps.” She fanned herself with her hand.

People were staring at the vehicle on both sides of us as we sat at the light, baking in the car’s fumes. The Dart drew a lot of attention. It was a great-looking car, just... impractical.

The light turned green and she pulled forward.

I could feel the air from the vent immediately. It was warm air, but at least it was circulation.

“I’m still figuring this thing out,” she said. “Getting the hang of it though. Last week I learned that when it starts to stall at red lights, you just need to keep giving it gas. When you stop, you gotta keep one foot on the brake and one on the gas and keep feeding it while you idle.”

“It stalls?”

“Only when it’s cold. Once it warms up, it’s good.”

“Does it get cold here?” I asked.

“It got into the sixties last week.”

“A car that stalls from the cold and the cold is only sixty degrees,” I deadpanned.

“She’s old.” She shrugged.

I looked at her gas gauge. “You’re out of gas.”

“No, the gauge is broken.”

I looked between it and her. “How do you know if you’re running low?”

“Hold on, I’ll show you when we get to a red light. Okay, here we go.” She turned the radio down and braked a little harder than necessary as we stopped. “You hear that?” she said.

There was a *glug glug glug* noise as the gas sloshed back and forth in the tank.

I stared at her. “Are you kidding me? This is how you know the car has gas?”

“Yeah, I’m really good at it. I’ve got the glug glugs down to a science.”

“How long are you driving this again?” I asked.

“Until the wheels fall off probably.”

“Why am I worried that’s actually going to happen?”

The light turned green and she pulled forward.

A dried leaf blew up from under the dash.

“At first I hated it,” she said, “but it’s kind of growing on me. It’s so cheap. The gas mileage sucks, but my car insurance is only like fifty bucks a month. And I really don’t go anywhere, so I don’t need anything nicer. There are entire days where I don’t even leave the house. Why spend money on a car that’s just sitting in the driveway?”

“Reliability, safety, comfort...”

She waved me off.

She got onto the freeway and turned the radio up. We wouldn’t be able to talk while we drove, it was too loud with all the windows down. Actually, it was loud even with the windows up. The car rattled. The weather seal wasn’t great either—there was a crack between the canvas top and the windows so it whistled—and the engine was noisy. There was no way this car was watertight. Good thing California didn’t get much rain...

Another leaf blew up from under the dash. Then another one. It twirled around the car in a flurry and got stuck to the front of my shirt.

I was plucking this off me when the warm breeze coming from under the dash suddenly stopped. It was still for two seconds, then like a shift in the air pressure a *deluge* of dried leaves dislodged and blew into the car. It hit the cab like a tornado.

“Oh my God!” she screamed.

The leaves whipped and circled around violently. It was blinding. I covered my face and looked around through gaps in my fingers. “Slow down and pull over,” I said calmly, putting on the hazards. “You’re in the right lane, signal and pull off to the side.”

“Okay, okay—Ah! There’s so many!”

The sound of a horn peeled past us.

“Just slow down, the hazards are on.”

When she slowed down the tornado did too. She pulled over and I leaned out the window to guide her onto the shoulder.

“Don’t get out and don’t get unbuckled,” I said. “Okay, stop.”

She threw the car into park and slumped against the wheel. “What the *fuck* was that?” she said, looking at me with wide eyes. “This thing must have been parked under a tree or something.”

“Have you ever opened that vent before?”

“No.”

I looked around the car. Leaves everywhere. Leaves in her hair, leaves in *my* hair.

The car *glug* *glugged*.

And then, like some strange cosmic joke, “Come On Eileen” came on the radio. The fiddle intro eked out of the lone speaker and we both looked at each other.

I started to laugh. I couldn’t help it. It wasn’t funny, but it was.

She laughed a little. “Please don’t make fun of me for this,” she said.

“I don’t think I have a choice, unfortunately.”

She dragged leaves from her ponytail and I dug them out from inside my shirt.

“They’re avocado tree leaves,” she said. “It must have been parked in the driveway at some point. Gross.” She looked down at a large leaf on her thigh and froze. “Oh my God! NO! Xavier, take it take it! Ahhhhhh!” She flapped her hands.

I looked at her lap. It was a dead mouse. Flat and petrified, frozen in a toothy death mask. “It’s okay—”

“NOOOOOO! Get it! Oh my God!”

She started dry heaving.

“Samantha—”

“I need antibacterial wipes—” she said. *Retch*. “Hand sanitizer—” *Retch*. “We’re covered in dead mouse dust, I CANNOT—”

I lost it. Completely lost it.

I was laughing so hard when I picked up the stiff rodent by the tail to toss it out the window I could barely do it.

She started rummaging frantically in the center console for wipes, dry heaving and laugh-crying all at the same time.

“It was like a little mouse mummy,” she said, hiccuping.

“The leaves were probably his little mouse bed.”

“STOP!”

She fumbled the wipes. I took the package and pulled out two and

handed them to her, still cracking up. “Just breathe,” I said. “It’s all right.”

“Come On Eileen” hit the chorus.

She was wiping her leg down when a man came out of nowhere and popped into the passenger side window. “Hey, you guys okay? Need a jump?”

Samantha and I blinked at him.

He put a thumb over his shoulder. “I got my cables.”

She made a sound like she was holding in a giggle fit.

“No, thank you,” I said, trying to keep it together. “Just some technical difficulties.”

“Thank you,” she managed. “We’re fine.”

He looked us over. We had leaves in our hair. She had mascara running down her cheeks, we were both sweating. The man took one glance at us and decided he didn’t want to push it and walked back to his truck.

“Where did he even come from?” she whispered.

“I have no idea,” I said, shaking my head.

A leaf fell out of my hair and landed in my lap. She broke into laughter again and so did I.

We sat there on the side of the road, hot. We smelled like oil, covered in leaves and mouse dust and I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I would never forget this moment. That this was a memory sticking to a very new and very small snowball.

And I liked where it was going.

SAMANTHA

WE SPENT THE whole day together.

We went back to my apartment so I could wash the mouse off and feed Pooter. Then we picked up the boys and took them to the zoo. When they realized what Xavier did for a living, they completely lost it. It was like they were getting to see elephants with their own personal veterinary tour guide. He was so good with them. He grabbed us water bottles and lemonade before we knew we needed them and procured snacks for everyone at intervals that felt practiced and intuitive and I realized that Xavier was a natural caretaker. It went beyond handing me a hoodie to wear before a night playing miniature golf or getting me a coffee before I woke up.

He was Airport Dad. The guy who plans everything and drives you there and parks the car and lifts all the heavy bags. Carries the passports and makes sure everyone gets to where they're going and they have what they need. It wasn't just me who got to shut off their brain around him, it was anyone lucky enough to be placed in his care.

My dad was also an airport dad. Maybe that's why I had gravitated toward Xavier. I recognized his spirit.

I loved his spirit. All of it.

I'd been sort of hoping to walk away from these two days and be over him. That something this weekend would give me the ick.

*Nothing* about him gave me the ick. I had the opposite of the ick right now. It was actually a problem.

After the zoo, we dropped the boys off, checked on Pooter, cleaned up, and then went to dinner. Practically closed the place down talking. The tea

light candle on the table burned out an hour before we did. By the time we got back to the hotel, it was almost midnight.

I flopped onto the bed while he bolted the door. He put his wallet on the table and took his shoes off and came to lay next to me. We gazed at each other from our respective pillows. We were exhausted. We'd walked like twenty thousand steps, and both of us were a little sunburned. I was too tired to move and I think he was too.

I had to get him to the airport by 4:30 a.m. The visit was almost over.

He reached out and brushed my hair off my forehead.

"I had a good time," I whispered. "I'm glad you came."

"I had a good time too."

His eyes were bloodshot. I felt bad. It was 2:00 a.m. in Minnesota, I'd run this poor man ragged today, driving him around in my hot, mouse nest car.

"You should go to sleep," I said. "You have a long day tomorrow."

He didn't answer. He just kept looking at me. His contemplative gaze. Those piercing blue irises.

It made my stomach twist in a longing sort of way.

I was going to miss him when he left.

If I'd stayed in Minnesota, we probably would have been a thing, instantly. We would have rolled right out of that UFO into a relationship. I'd be meeting him for lunch at the clinic every day and he'd be asking me to stay over at his place until I just stopped leaving altogether, and Pooter and I moved in. There'd be the pumpkin patch pictures that I'd force him to take at Halloween, ugly sweaters at Thanksgiving, matching pajamas at Christmas. He was a good sport, he'd do it. In fact, I think he was looking for someone he could do things like this with, even if he didn't know it—because he didn't get to be a kid. His parents sucked. He didn't get the goofy family traditions and the framed vacation photos on the mantel. And I think it made him grow into a serious adult who didn't do miniature golf and escape room dates or go to the zoo. And I could see how much it changed him when he did. How he lit up and got looser. He needed the razzmatazz that I brought to the relationship.

And I needed his steadiness.

He was level and capable. Someone you could always depend on, someone who would make you feel safe and loved and taken care of, who

could talk you onto the shoulder of a freeway while you're driving blind and panicking. He could keep you calm in a swaying gondola a hundred feet in the air or a room you can't get out of, someone who would jump into a lake to save your phone.

We were really well matched. Even this early I could tell.

But I didn't stay in Minnesota. And I was never going back.

If we were lucky, Mom had a decade. More. And I wasn't missing a moment of it. I'd missed too much already.

She couldn't make any more memories with me. But *I* could still make memories with *her*. I would be a witness to her life, even though she was done witnessing mine. And it sucked, because it meant this thing between Xavier and me had no future.

"Today was the perfect day," I said, almost to myself. "Minus the dead mouse."

He laughed softly. He held my hand between us. "When can I come back?" he asked.

I let a breath out through my nose and said the hard part out loud. "I don't think you should."

He stared at me a long moment. Then he sat up. "Why?"

I sat up too. "You don't live here," I said.

Silence.

"Can you honestly say that this makes sense?" I said.

"I like you, Samantha—"

"I like you too. I like you so much that I know if we keep doing this, I'm going to set myself up to be miserable. And you'll be miserable too."

He studied me. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No. You didn't. I just think we need to be smart—"

"I don't think I want to."

I licked my lips and looked him in the eye. "Xavier. What is it that you want?" I asked. "Like, in a relationship."

"I want someone who knows what *come on Eileen* means."

"You want a witness to your life. Right? You want a parallel timeline." I gestured between us. "This, you living two thousand miles from here, is not a parallel timeline. You can't witness a life that's taking place in a whole different time zone."

"People do long-distance," he said.



“They do it when there’s an end in sight. They do it when it’s temporary, for school, or the military. They do it until they get to be together. It could be ten years before we get that. *If* we get that. I am *never* coming back to Minnesota. I will *not* leave my mom. And you can’t be here either, you have a business there. You just opened it, right?”

“Two years ago.”

“So it’s probably upside down still, you can’t sell it? You still owe too much money to the bank?”

He went quiet for a moment. “No, I can’t sell it.”

“When could you?” I asked. “In theory, if you wanted to move here, how long? Three years? Five? More?”

His silence confirmed more.

“I think I let you come partly because I was hoping it would give this closure,” I said.

“Me too,” he admitted, quietly.

“But it didn’t though. It made it worse. And it’s going to get harder every time. You can’t be here,” I said. “I can’t be there. And I know that’s all really down the line stuff, but I don’t want to start something that can only end badly. I’m not doing that to the Samantha of two years from now. She would be very mad at me.”

He looked hurt.

Xavier’s mask had come down, the blank slate had fallen away sometime over the last two days. I bet that would have been fun to see. Xavier, thawing. Getting warmer and warmer as time went on and we got to know each other better.

He was very worth knowing.

He deserved a proper witness.

I took his hand. “You need to forget about me. I’m serious. Go home, find a girl there. Don’t call me, don’t text me. It’ll only make it harder for both of us.”

He didn’t try to reason with me again. The facts were the facts. Even if we hated them.

Four hours later I dropped him off at the airport and kissed him goodbye.

SIX WEEKS. THAT'S how long I'd been back from California and how long it had been since I talked to Samantha.

It was September now, my favorite time of year. The leaves were starting to change. Cool enough to be comfortable, warm enough that the trails weren't icy when I went for my runs. I'd gone for a few days to the cabin with my friends last month. I spent time with Jake from State Farm. Tina and Maggie decorated the front desk with autumn leaves and pumpkins, which I always liked. I should be happy.

I was in the worst mood of my life.

I could not stop thinking about her.

I hadn't called or texted her because she had been clear in asking me not to. She was right. There was no point in pursuing a relationship. I'd taken a gamble going to California. I'd hoped it would make the longing better, but it had only made it worse. And now we just needed to stop before it got more complicated. Objectively I knew it was the right course. But I could not get my brain to cooperate.

I was in the office taking a lunch break. I wasn't actually eating, just sitting there with the door closed. I could hear Maggie and Tina laughing at the break table. Normally I'd have the door open and they'd include me in whatever they were talking about, but lately I just didn't feel like it. I didn't feel like anything.

I still had sand in the shoes I wore to the beach.

Yesterday one of the shells that I found for her showed up in the pocket of the pants I wore.

I debated mailing it to her, putting a letter in the package. But then I felt

like a tiny shell wasn't enough of a reason to reach out and bother her, even though I wanted to.

I picked up my phone and went to the Murkle's Mustard Instagram.

I'd been really good about not looking. I knew continuing to engage with her, even if the engagement was one sided and only I knew about it, would only make this harder for me. But my willpower was slowly starting to deteriorate.

I was so miserable I was desperate for anything, even if it was mustard. The last graphic she posted read:

You think mustard is gross? 1 billion people buy mustard every year, so maybe it's you.

I snorted. But the mirth lasted only a second, then I slipped back into a funk.

I wondered what she was doing. Maybe I should text her and ask her about Pooter. That was a good enough reason.

Maybe I should just call her.

Maybe I should just go there...

Perfect. I could look like a stalker. I'm sure she'd love it.

I turned off my phone and dragged my fingers through my hair and squeezed. This was ridiculous. What the hell was wrong with me?

I should get on a dating app. Find someone else. Move on. The thought felt like an effort in futility. For what? To meet women I wouldn't like as much as Samantha? That wasn't fair to anyone.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," I said, gloomily.

Maggie poked her head into the room. "Hey."

"What's up," I said flatly.

"Oh, nothing. Just wanted to check on you. Tina brought you some of her famous tater tot hotdish."

She set the open Tupperware on the desk. It smelled good. It should have made me hungry. It didn't.

"Thank you," I mumbled.

She stood in the door, eyeing me. "You okay, Dr. Rush?"

“Yeah. Fine.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

She waited another moment, like the answer might change. Then she left and shut the door.

I stared at the framed photo over the desk, the one from the grand opening. I’d been so happy that day. This clinic was everything to me. The culmination of years of work, risk, and accomplishment.

And also the reason Samantha wouldn’t consider continuing to see me.

If I were working at somebody else’s practice, moving one day could be on the table. If this thing between us got serious enough, I could just quit and go. But she’d been right when she said the clinic would keep me here. I couldn’t sell it, even if I wanted to.

I was in an insurmountable amount of debt.

The cost of building the space: framing out the exam rooms, installing the kennels and the reception desk, painting, the signage outside, the tiling on the floors—I’d taken out loans to pay for all of it. Every piece of equipment I put into this building, the x-ray machine and operating room, the lab equipment—it all depreciated the second the doors opened, went from new to used the moment Rush Veterinary Hospital turned on the lights. I had \$950,000 in loans on a business that would sell for \$700,000 tops—and that’s assuming I managed to find another vet or corporation who wanted to buy it, which I probably couldn’t.

Opening a clinic wasn’t a short-term investment. It was a large initial monetary commitment that paid off over time. But now? So early in? I’d be hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt if I sold it. I couldn’t even hire someone to replace me unless they were fine making the peanuts that I was currently making.

I’d have to file bankruptcy to leave. I’d lose everything.

So Samantha was right. Trying to have any kind of relationship would only result in a dead end, heartbreak, or ruin.

So why was I still thinking about her?

Because the facts didn’t change the feelings.

I’d been taken by the riptide.

I thought by going to California I’d only put my feet in the water, but I’d gotten all the way in. I’d been sucked out into the open sea and I was

fighting it and fighting it and I was getting tired and I didn't know how much longer I could keep it up.

Maybe I could've been saved if she had told me I wasn't her type, or that she wasn't feeling it—but she *had* been feeling it. She liked me as much as I liked her. It wasn't chemistry getting in the way, it was just logistics.

Really shitty, very legitimate logistics.

I put my palms to my eyes.

I needed to focus. Get back to work, find something else to do. Volunteer more. Make myself so busy, I didn't have time to pine over this woman who probably hadn't thought about *me* in weeks.

Maybe I should go out of town. A long backpacking trip where I wouldn't have internet to look at the Murkle's page. Or a conference. That would be good. Get my mind off this, update some of my certifications.

I opened the laptop and started googling.

I only googled conferences in Southern California.

SAMANTHA

I WAS SITTING with Mom in her bathroom, swiping on her blush.

I leaned back and looked at my work. I was getting really good at this.

She looked more like her old self again. Tristan had dyed and cut her hair. He still wasn't really speaking to me, six weeks later. It didn't matter how many times I apologized—he was still pissed.

He kept putting chorizo in everything he cooked. I hated chorizo. It was the one thing I wouldn't eat. He'd made chorizo ravioli last night. Had to hand make the pasta just to get it in there, that's how committed he was.

I offered Mom the mirror. "What do you think?"

She turned her head this way and that. Then she smiled and said the same thing she said every morning when her makeup was done. "Got my face on for the day."

It's funny how ingrained certain phrases can be. Crutch words and mannerisms.

Mom liked to wave things off and say "That's all right." Or "We can't have it all."

It almost felt like she was all here when she did. But she wasn't. It was just the echo. The remnants. Familiar words at familiar intervals in a conversation. Most of the time they worked in the context, but the truth was she didn't follow most of our back-and-forth now. She could reply to short direct questions that required a yes or no, but she couldn't converse. She couldn't banter or retain anything or understand nuance. I could tell her in simple terms what we were doing. Brushing our hair, coming down for dinner, sitting to watch some TV—and she could comply most of the time. But I couldn't tell her what we were doing later. She wouldn't remember.

I'd have to repeat it when it was happening. Sometimes over and over again.

Even though I knew she couldn't remember or understand, I talked to her while I did her face anyway. I talked to her like I was leaving a voicemail. A message I didn't expect a response to.

I told her about my day. About my job.

I told her about Xavier.

Not that there was much to tell. One date that had ended in a UFO and a two-day weekend that was seared into my brain forever. A very limited cache of memories that I could rehash to Mom as often as I wanted to because it would never get old for her.

It didn't really get old for me either.

I hadn't heard from him since he left.

I mean, that's what I'd asked for.

There was something rebellious inside me, some callback to the romantic comedies I grew up on that wanted him to make some dramatic grand gesture and come back for me. Ridiculous, I know. It wouldn't change anything—he was still in Minnesota.

I was a little proud of myself that I'd made such a mature decision and told him to move on.

Maybe I was the kind of person capable of difficult things now. I should be happy I'd sent away that handsome, smart, sexy, six-foot-something doctor.

I groaned to myself.

Dad came into the bathroom with his gym bag slung over his shoulder. "I'm leaving."

"Okay. When will you be back?"

"At around eleven. I want to try out the pool."

He stopped for a minute and looked at Mom. Something a little broken moved across his face.

"She looks great," he said quietly.

"Thanks." I smiled at her. "We're getting good at this."

He gazed at her another moment. She didn't notice him or look back.

This had to be its own type of hell for him. She was here but she wasn't. She hadn't died so he couldn't stop grieving her or move on. He just had to watch her forget their entire life together. Forget him and forget herself too.

The snowball melting at the bottom of the hill.

When I looked back at the doorway, he was already gone.

Mom started asking for him almost right away.

Dad always took her down to breakfast. The gym thing was new. He'd gotten a nice deal on a membership at a place down the street. It was a good idea, he needed to get out of the house.

Dad's life was as small as Mom's. He went to the office on weekdays, but he always came right home. Then he became a caretaker. Bathing her, making sure she sat on the toilet at regular intervals, feeding her. We all helped and that took the edge off, I think. I think it also helped that all the people he loved were back in the same place. But he needed some time that was just for himself. He needed to sit in a steam room and get back to lifting weights and maybe even meet some friends at the gym. It was good for him.

After I did Mom's makeup, I brought her downstairs for breakfast. We stopped to argue about her going to work, and I told her it was Presidents' Day. She looked like she didn't believe me, but she let me take her to the kitchen anyway. Grandma was waiting with food but Mom skidded to a halt in the doorway. "Where's Dan?" she asked.

"He's out for a bit," Grandma said. "Come sit."

Mom didn't move.

Grandma put a hand on her hip. "Lisa, *breakfast*. I made your favorite."

Mom was wringing her hands and peering around, but she couldn't ever say no to her mother. She went to her seat.

Mom was sensitive to changes in her routine, especially ones that had to do with Dad. She was okay when he was at work because that was normal for her. Dad left at the same time every day and came home at the same time every day. But he was the one who took her down for breakfast, so I guess it was to be expected that she'd sense the shift.

Grandma poured her a coffee.

"I want Dan," Mom said, again.

Grandma put the pot back. "He'll be home soon, sweetie."

"You're lying!" She pushed the stack of napkins on the counter.

I jerked to look at her. "Mom..."

"He wouldn't leave me," she said. "You told him to go!"

"Nobody did that," Grandma said, calmly pouring cream in Mom's cup.



“He’s coming.”

Mom was still breathing heavily, but she nodded, looking unsure. Grandma got her to take some eggs and she settled down.

Once Mom was eating, I opened my laptop. A few minutes later my siblings wandered in. Tristan ignored me and spooned chilaquiles onto his plate while Jeneva poured herself coffee. She leaned on the counter and nodded at my screen. “Why are you on LendingTree?”

“Just asking for a quote,” I said, typing in the email address I found.

“For what?” Grandma asked, running water over her pan.

“For an asshole who likes to drown puppies.”

Grandma made a disgusted sound and Tristan glanced at me.

“Are you serious?” my sister asked. “Who would do that?”

“This guy Xavier told me about. I found his email address online. Took me a few weeks because I had to make sure it was him. He’s about to get a million lender quotes in his inbox for the rest of his life.” I hit send. “He will never know peace again.”

“Gross,” she said. “Give me his info.”

“Why?”

“I’ll sign him up for political texts.”

“Ohhhh, I like that,” I said.

“Send it to me too,” Tristan said, his tone bored. “I’ll get him audited by the IRS.”

I pulled my face back. “How?”

“Don’t worry about it. Do you want him audited or not?”

“Yeah...”

He tore the top off the French bread Grandma had sitting on the counter, hollowed out the middle with his bare hand, stuffed the whole thing with chilaquiles, gave me the finger, and left.

I rolled my eyes and turned back to my sister.

“How long is he going to be like this?” I asked.

“Life?”

The kids ran through the kitchen chasing each other and careened around the corner into the den. “Boys! Slow down!” she shouted.

They ignored her. Jeneva looked wearily at the direction they went.

I needed to help get them out of the house more. She was another one who didn’t get a break. Maybe I’d take them to the aquarium this time,

though it wouldn't be as fun without Xavier.

The boys had been asking about him. He'd made an impression.

He'd made an impression on me too.

I heard a snuffle and I glanced over. Mom had started crying.

I dipped my head. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"I want Dan," she said pitifully.

I put a hand on her arm. "Awwww. He's just at the gym. He'll be home soon."

She shook her head. "No. I want Dan!"

"Mom, he'll be back—"

"NO!" She swatted my hand off her. "You told him to leave! You ran him off!"

"Mom..."

She swiped her plate and mug off the counter.

The room collectively gasped.

"Lisa!" Grandma said. "What is going on?"

Mom clawed at her bib. "Dan! DAN!!!!"

She stood up and started clotheslining everything she could reach. The plate of eggs, the coffee maker, the bowl of fruit, salt and pepper shakers, the hot sauce. I sprang into action before she got to the knives.

"Mom!"

I went behind her and bear-hugged her like Xavier did the night in the yard. She struggled against me, sobbing.

"Get her something!" I shouted. "Don't we have medication for this?"

Tristan ran up the stairs. "What the—"

"HELP!" I said.

Grandma was already digging in the cabinet.

My brother and sister helped me wrestle Mom back into her chair as Grandma put a crushed Ativan into a shot glass and poured orange juice over it.

"Here. Come on, baby, take it," Grandma pleaded.

Mom shook her head, thrashing.

The boys were huddled in the doorway, terrified.

I couldn't believe how strong she was. I was getting tired and I had two other people helping me. She wasn't stopping, just getting more frantic.

I tried to calm her like Xavier did. I whispered in her ear and held her as

tight as I could. She was inconsolable. She wouldn't take the pill, and she was screaming for my dad. We tried for almost ten minutes.

Grandma was panting, Mom was hysterical, the boys were sobbing, my arms were shaking.

"What do we do?" Grandma said.

I looked her in the eye. "You call 911."



By the time we got home from the hospital it was almost two. Dad met us at the ER and we all drove home together.

Mom was staying overnight for observation to make sure she hadn't sprained or hurt anything when she was having her meltdown. Mostly we'd opted to have her stay so we could recover too. Every one of us had been crying. Grandma was so shaken she took the orange juice shot of Ativan she'd poured for Mom and went upstairs to lay down. Dad hadn't spoken one word since the emergency room.

They said this was normal. To be expected even. These emotional outbursts and violent tantrums were just part of the progression.

The progression was terrifying.

I was sore. I think I pulled something in my arm. I had a fat lip. Mom had thrown her head back into my mouth at some point. My adrenaline was so high I hadn't even realized I was hurt until a nurse pointed out that I was bleeding.

I dragged myself to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and took two Advil. I cleaned up my lip and then tipped my head to look at my earlobe, the one Mom yanked an earring out of that night in the yard. It was mostly healed, but I still couldn't get an earring in there.

I was collecting injuries. Physical ones and ones of the heart.

I came out and stared at the aftermath. The kitchen was destroyed. Shattered glass and food everywhere. Eggs on the walls.

We started cleaning the mess without a word to each other. Even Tristan was quiet.

Dad was on his hands and knees cleaning dried hot sauce from the footboard of the bar. He sat back on his heels and stared blankly at the

spatter.

The hospital said we had to give her stronger sedatives. We had to be proactive and dose her when we saw her getting agitated before she was so distraught she was past the point of no return.

And the reason why she was distraught was because Dad had dared to leave for two hours to do something for himself.

My father was trapped in my mother's illness. He was her person.

Every day she woke up and fell in love with him all over again. Every day he woke up living a nightmare. And this is what he got for leaving it, even for an hour.

Dad stared for another long moment at the floor. Then he grabbed one of the buckled corners of the linoleum and started yanking it up.

"What... what are you doing?" I asked.

"Fuck it. Why not?" he said. "It's old, it's ugly, and I don't want to clean it."

Jeneva and Tristan glanced at me.

We'd never started the remodel. We'd gotten the loan but we couldn't agree on the right time to disrupt Mom's environment.

I'd say her environment was good and disrupted already.

"Okay..." I said. "But then we do the countertops too."

"And the stove," Tristan said. "The stove sucks."

"Anything avocado green goes," Jeneva said.

We made eye contact with each other. Dad smiled. Then we demolished the rest of the kitchen.

SAMANTHA

IT'S AMAZING HOW cathartic destroying things can be. The whole family seemed to share my feelings because we took that entire kitchen down to the studs the day we decided on it. I think we had a lot of pent-up frustration to work out.

Then Mom came home two days into the remodel and it was clear that we hadn't thought this through.

We had nowhere to cook. Everything was takeout. We had to be strategic about meals so Mom didn't freak out with the change. We decided the best place to set up would be in the yard. We already had a little gazebo out there, but it was filthy and covered in dead bugs and cobwebs, so we had to clean that out, which took half a day. We power washed it and then Dad said we should just paint it while it was prepped, so we did. It needed new furniture so we ran out and got some. When we were done, it was really nice. Like an old, faded painting that had been restored. A bright spot in ruin. Color in a gray world.

It energized us.

The stress and worry and sorrow about Mom needed channeling and this was the thing we were all going to funnel it into. The family team-building activity we didn't know we needed.

Tristan had called a silent truce, thank God. I think he recognized that if he didn't become a team player effective immediately the kitchen would end up painted a color he hated. He made storyboards with design ideas. Jeneva began researching new appliances and I was in charge of getting contractor bids.

Then we decided we should probably do the formal dining room too

since it was attached to the kitchen and having different colored baseboards didn't make any sense.

Then it was agreed that the bathroom off the kitchen should also be done since it was already in a construction zone.

For the next two weeks the house was like an ant farm. Everyone running around, tasking, moving things. Workers coming in and out, drills and hammering.

Mom was so medicated she barely blinked.

The project got my mind off her. It got my mind off Xavier too. I was too busy to think about him. Much. Which was why it was such a shock when eight weeks after he'd left, he called.

I was standing in a tile store with Tristan, being told all the backsplashes I liked for the kitchen were hideous, when my phone rang. I stood there, staring at my cell, wondering if he'd butt-dialed me.

"Who is it?" Tristan asked, over a booklet of tile samples looking annoyed at the disruption.

"It's *him*."

I didn't have to explain who *him* was in my house.

My brother crossed his arms and nodded at the phone for me to answer it. I swiped the call button.

"Uh, hello?"

"Hi. It's Xavier."

I thought I had been getting over him, and then *immediately* I wasn't. It was literally that fast. Instantaneously back in the throes of it after three words out of his mouth.

I snuck over to a corner and stood in a shower stall display with blue hexagon tile and really nice grout.

"Hey. What's up?" I asked, trying to seem nonchalant.

"I'm attending a veterinary conference in Long Beach," he said. "I was wondering if you wanted to get dinner. As friends," he added.

"A conference?"

"Yeah, it's one of the big ones. Important for my continuing education requirement."

"Huh." I traced between two tiles with my finger. "Well, when are you here?"

"I'm here now actually."

I blinked into the soap dish. “Now? Where?”

“I just checked into the hotel.”

“*The* hotel? The gross one?”

“Yes.”

A pause.

“Xavier, that hotel is nowhere near Long Beach. That’s an hour drive each way, easily.”

“I know. It’s just such a good deal. And I’m used to it already.”

I laughed dryly. “The horror house you know...”

Silence.

“Dinner?” he asked again.

I tipped my head back. “Xavier... I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Why?”

“Because you know why.”

“Are you seeing someone or...”

I shook my head. “No.”

I don’t know why but I sensed relief on the other line.

“It’s just dinner,” he said. “I don’t know anyone here.”

I didn’t answer.

“Come on, Eileen...”

That’s it. He got me. I cracked a smile.

This was a terrible decision. I knew it was. But also, he was here, from two thousand miles away and he was alone, in a city he didn’t know. If I was in a city I didn’t know, I’d want a friend to come hang out with me. How was I going to say no to that?

I let out a breath. “Fine. But this is not a date.”

“Of course not,” he replied.

“I’m serious.”

“I believe you.”

I bit my lip. “What time?” I asked, looking at my watch. It was three.

“Five thirty?”

“Do you know where you want to go?” I asked. “I can find us a restaurant.”

“I’ll find a restaurant,” he said. “And I’ll pick you up. I rented a car.”

“Okay.”

“See you in a few hours,” he said.

“Yeah. See you in a few hours.”

I hung up.

When I turned around, my brother was standing there with his lips pursed. “He’s here for you. I hope you know that.”

I rolled my eyes. “No he’s not. There’s a veterinary thing.”

His face called bullshit.

“He is *not* here for me.”

His face bullshitted harder.

“Fine,” I said, pulling up Google. “Let’s see.” I searched *veterinary conference* and found the website immediately. It was a national annual event and a big one.

I’d be kidding myself if I said I wasn’t slightly disappointed.

I turned the screen to him. “See? Conference.”

“He’s lying.”

“He is *not* lying. Believe me. He hasn’t so much as texted me once since he left, he’s not fake-attending an entire conference in a different state just in the hopes I’ll have dinner with him.”

He looked me up and down. “Fine. But if I’m right you pay for my next tattoo.”

“Ha! No way.”

“Because you know I’m right.”

I pressed my lips into a line. “What do I get if you’re wrong?”

He stood there holding his elbow, deep in dramatic thought. “I’ll clean your little used tissue of a cat’s litter box for a month.”

“Okay, first of all my cat does not look like a used tissue.”

“That cat is barely alive. It would die if it ate a single Flamin’ Hot Cheeto.”

I almost choked on my laugh. I wrestled my face straight.

“You clean it every day,” I said. “And you have to wash it out once a week.”

“Fine.”

“And I’m not paying for some epic, whole leg tattoo thing,” I said. “Nothing bigger than an orange.”

“A grapefruit.”

“Agreed.”

I put my hand out to shake and he looked at it like I was handing him a



mouse trap. “I’ll pass. Let’s go.”

I got home and got ready like I was going on the most important date of my life for my Not A Date dinner. I didn’t know why. I shouldn’t care how I look, but I absolutely did.

*One meal.*

I wasn’t doing anything else with Xavier. No lunch tomorrow, no drinks after the conference, I wasn’t getting roped in.

When he knocked on my door at exactly 5:30 he had flowers and a Porto’s box.

The rope lassoed me.

“Hi...” he said, giving me his warmest, barely there smile.

Good *lord*, he looked fantastic.

He wore a blue button-down shirt that matched his eyes. Is this how they dressed at those veterinary things? Because wow.

I nodded at the box. “What’s this?”

“I brought you the guava cheese strudels you like.”

I blinked at him. “You stopped at Porto’s because I mentioned guava strudels once?”

“Yes.”

“And you brought me flowers?”

“I did.”

“This is not a date,” I said.

“I am aware.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Then why are you bringing me gifts?”

“I brought pastries to Mike’s place last week. Was that a date?”

I gave him a look.

“Should I call him?” he said. “Break the news to him that we’re going out now? Because of the croissants?”

I crossed my arms. “Stop.”

“I brought flowers to Jesse’s mom on Mother’s Day. Was that a date too?”

“STOP.”

Amusement etched the corner of his mouth.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. They’re not date pastries or flowers—I just want to be clear.”

He gave me a head tilt of acknowledgment so I took his Not A Romantic

Gesture gifts and went to the sink to fill a vase with water.

He walked in behind me.

Pooter came running and scaled him, meowing like he was made out of catnip. He picked her up and scratched under her chin. My kitten immediately started purring. Xavier sat with her on my mattress and smiled at her, talking softly to her in that way that hypnotized memory care patients, animals, and social media managers alike.

I stood there looking at him, momentarily dazed.

The sight of this man on my bed made heat drop to my traitorous core. Like, literally how dare my vagina betray me like this. The audacity.

“How is she doing?” he asked, talking to me but looking at my cat.

I snapped out of it. “Great.”

“You got a mattress,” he said, looking up at me.

“Yes,” I said, setting the flowers on my nightstand.

He peered around and smiled at the lava lamp. Then he saw his hoodie draped on my chair and he paused for a moment looking at it before coming back to me and slipping into one of his contemplative gazes.

I gazed back, looking at his mouth because apparently I really was that obvious.

I loved the way he kissed. I missed it. I wished we’d done more of it back when kissing was a thing we were doing.

As if he knew what I was thinking, he kissed Pooter on the head. I had never been so jealous of a kitten.

Ugh, this was *such* a bad idea.

I cleared my throat. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“I got us six thirty reservations at Castaway.”

I blinked at him in surprise. “How? They’re always booked up.”

He set Pooter on the bed and stood. “You’ve been there?”

“Yeah, of course.”

He nodded. “I must have gotten lucky. Maybe a party of two canceled?”

“Huh.” I put a thumb over my shoulder. “Well, we should probably go, then.”

I think he wanted to hug me. I could see it in his eyes, like he was weighing whether to lean in. I grabbed my purse and headed for the door before he could hold me in his warm embrace two feet from a very convenient bed. I was strong, but even I had limits.

He jogged ahead of me in the driveway and opened the car door for me.

I was getting in when I heard a tiny tapping. I looked down to see my brother staring at me through the basement window by the washing machine grinning like a gremlin at my Not A Date opening doors for me. I narrowed my eyes and got in.

My cell phone pinged as we backed out into the street.

**TRISTAN:** I'm making my appointment.

I texted back in all caps. IT'S NOT A DATE.

Xavier glanced at me. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I said, putting my phone away. "Just my brother being annoying."

"He's talking to you again?"

"Yeah. I think I liked it better when he wasn't."

He smiled.

"So how have you been?" he asked, making a right out of the neighborhood.

I shrugged. "Good. We're remodeling the house. Murkle's is coming up with a Dijon so I've been busy with that."

"Really? When does it launch?"

"November."

"I'll have to get some," he said. "I was wondering what to get the guys for Christmas."

I looked out the window so he wouldn't see how big this made me smile.

"Dijon actually makes excellent stocking stuffers," I said. "Did you know that Dijon mustard was created in 1856 by a guy named Jean who lived in Dijon, France? They used to make it with verjuice. I had to google it, it's the green juice of unripe grapes. Now we use white wine instead. So much better."

He didn't reply so I had to look at him. He was grinning.

"What?" I said.

"I've just missed hearing about mustard."

"Ha."

I tucked my hair behind my ear. “So what have you been up to?” I asked.

“Working. Oh, I had a patient I thought you’d like.” He nodded at his cell on the center console. “Open my phone. My password’s 4028.”

I eyed him. “You’re giving me your password?”

He glanced at me. “Yeah. Why not?”

“What if I Venmo myself five thousand dollars?”

“Do you need five thousand dollars?”

“No, that’s just the transfer limit. I’m making a point.” I picked up his phone. “Women need to start robbing men more. You guys act way too invincible.”

He smiled at the windshield.

I keyed in his password. “Okay. What am I looking at?”

“Go to my photos.”

I clicked on the icon and beamed. There was a really cute, frowny brown dog with a missing ear sitting on an exam table.

“That’s Brad,” he said.

“Brad?” I laughed. “I love dogs with human names.”

“Keep going. There’s a Gary in there too.”

I swiped.

His whole photo album was animals. Guinea pigs, cats, birds, even a snake. Some alone. Most he was holding. There were a few where he was in his white lab coat. Very cute. Another one where he was doing surgery. He had on the full doctor regalia. Mask, gloves, scrub cap, and gown, standing over an intubated dog.

I knew he was a doctor. I knew he did surgeries. Like, in theory I knew. But seeing him actually doing it?

It was that moment in the Keira Knightley version of *Pride & Prejudice* where she rolls up to Mr. Darcy’s estate and it’s this enormous mansion and she’s like, *OH, FOR FUCK’S SAKE*.

Seriously, I did not need the reminder of how perfect he was.

He glanced over, looking at me studying the surgery photo. “I was doing a free neuter and spay clinic for the rescue. For fun,” he added.

I sighed. “Of course you were.”

I didn’t care about money or status, that was not what did it for me with men. I liked intelligence and compassion and humanity. All of which

Xavier had. In spades.

I couldn't even look at this. This was going to make me too sad.

I swiped again.

Another of the lab coat pictures. He had a kitten in his pocket. Swiped again.

I recoiled at the next image. "Ewwww, what's that?"

It was a picture of a yellow lacy thing held up by the end of a pencil.

He looked over. "Oh, that's someone's underwear. I pulled it out of a boxer's stomach."

I sucked air through my teeth. "Were they embarrassed when they found out what was in there?"

"Uh, no. They were fighting. Because apparently those weren't the wife's underwear."

I gasped. "Nooo..."

"I had to kick them out. They were screaming in the waiting area."

I laughed. "Is the dog okay?"

"Fine. The wife got him in the divorce."

I shook my head and went back to scrolling.

He looked so happy in the ones with the animals. I knew how rarely he smiled like this. I liked how unguarded it was. Sort of how he was with me.

"I'm surprised you take so many pictures," I said. "You don't seem like a picture kind of guy."

"I'm not. Tina and Maggie take them. The surgery one was for the rescue's website. The rest are photos for the pets' files. These are all new patients."

"Oh, wow, you're so busy. Is that usual?"

"I've been trying to take on as many as I can."

I swiped past a picture of him holding two puppies, one in the crook of each arm. Then I swiped to the next and it was a photo of us.

It was so unexpected, it made me suck in air.

I'd gone back in time to our first date. The selfie that night at Mother Putters, right after we'd destroyed his friends at mini golf. Us cheek to cheek looking triumphant, Mike in the background, holding a putter and making a good-natured pouty face.

The only picture of the two of us.

My eyes went soft.

Almost three months ago. And I remembered every second of that day like it was last night.

He would be my boyfriend right now, in a different universe. One where Mom wasn't sick. In this universe I would have flown to California just for a visit. My mom would know my name. We'd go shopping and eat at restaurants where she'd order her own food and wouldn't need a bib. We'd sit up talking like we used to and I'd tell her about the cute guy I was dating. I'd show her this picture and we'd giggle and she'd say how she couldn't wait to meet him. The family jewelry would be in the jewelry box and not lost somewhere, never to be found again. Then I'd fly home to Minnesota and back to Xavier and we'd get to figure this thing out between us. See if it had legs. See if it had years.

But that wasn't my reality.

I turned his screen off and put his phone back down.

We drove in silence after that. He was busy focusing on the navigation and I was deep in thought. Depressing ones.

I wondered if I'd just gotten lucky that no Tinder notifications had popped up while I was looking at his stuff. No text messages from other women. He had to be dating again, he was like the most eligible bachelor in Minnesota. I mean at least one woman from the yacht who saw him shirtless should have swooped in by now. I know I would have.

I should probably start dating again too.

Two million men in Los Angeles, surely one of them could blot out the memory of Xavier Rush.

Yeah, right.

I scoffed to myself and he looked at me. "What?"

"Nothing. Just thinking about the Dart," I lied.

"What about it?"

I actually did have a funny Dart story, but we were pulling up to the valet.

Castaway was perched in the hills of Burbank with a gorgeous view of the San Fernando Valley and downtown Los Angeles. It had romantic nooks and firepits and a koi pond. It had been there since 1962. I loved eating there. It was the location of a lot of happy memories for me. Grandma and Grandpa's fiftieth wedding anniversary, right before he died. Birthdays and Jeneva's baby shower.

It was weird that Xavier took me here of all places. And fitting too. Because really, if I could, I'd want to go with him to all the places I loved. Try to show him my memories so he could understand them, know what I was talking about when I brought them up, recognize the locations and the people and the things I talked about.

Not that that was going to be much help now.

The hostess seated us inside at a tiny booth against the window. It was perfect. We'd get to see the sun set and the lights of the city twinkle in the distance.

"I hope this is okay," he said as they poured us water. "We could have sat outside, but I didn't want you to be cold. I didn't bring your Barbie towel."

"Horrible planning on your part," I said, studying the menu.

He gave his own menu an amused smirk.

A sommelier came by to offer us a wine list. There was a candle on the table and fresh flowers in a tiny vase and all of a sudden I realized how this place looked.

Everyone here was either celebrating something—or on a date.

I set my menu down. I had been so excited about coming here that I didn't think about how romantic this restaurant was.

Xavier looked up at me and noticed the suspicious glances I was giving the room. "What's wrong?"

"This isn't a date," I said.

"I know..."

"Okay, I just want to be sure that we're on the same page."

"It can't be a date unless both people agree it's a date. It's not exactly something that can happen without your consent."

"Okay... because this place is really nice."

"Yes."

"So why did you want to eat here?"

"For the view," he said.

I studied him warily. "It's expensive."

"It's cheaper than a helicopter."

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm paying for myself," I said.

The humor dropped from his expression. "I think I should pay for dinner. I chose the restaurant—"

“Yeah, and you drove and you’re paying for parking. I’ll pay for my food.”

He opened his mouth to protest and I cut him off. “Spare me the story about how you bought Chris dinner at an expensive romantic scenic restaurant and how that wasn’t a date. I’m paying for myself. That is a hard rule for me. If you can’t agree, we go to Carl’s Jr.”

“Can I pay at Carl’s Jr.?”

“No.”

We were having a small silent standoff when the server came to take our order. I asked for a separate check and it ended the discussion.

He looked somewhat defeated. I decided I wasn’t going to read too much into that. He was a gentleman, he’d picked an expensive restaurant, and so to be polite he wanted to pay. This wasn’t a date, it was just manners.

“So,” I said as the server collected our menus, “what seminars are you doing at the conference?”

“You were going to tell me a story about the Dart?” he said, changing the subject.

“Oh yeah! Oh my God, this is so funny. I was on my way to the pharmacy—Mom’s on a new medication. That’s a whole other story I have to tell you. And when I turned right, the horn honked.”

He arched an eyebrow.

“Yeah. It honked every time I turned right for *two miles*. So embarrassing. It shorted out or something. I had to pull over. I opened the hood and some guy popped up within five seconds and disconnected it for me.”

“So you have no horn,” he deadpanned.

A server delivered my spicy margarita and I shrugged, taking a sip. “I gotta get it fixed.”

He was shaking his head at me. I smiled around my straw.

“I *really* hate you driving that car,” he said.

“The power steering goes out when you run out of gas. Ask me how I know this.”

He gave me a disapproving look and I grinned at him.

“What happened to the glug glug system?” he asked.

“I had the music blasting.” I took another sip. “Couldn’t hear it.”



He looked unamused.

“The drive shaft fell off in the In-N-Out drive-through.”

He rubbed his forehead. “Stop.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re giving me anxiety.”

I laughed and it made him crack a smile.

Then I cleared my throat. “I like the five-o’clock-shadow thing.”

He put a hand to his chin. “I grow it out in the winter. Shave it in the spring. Your hair looks nice. You changed it.”

I touched the ends self-consciously. “Yeah. I let Tristan layer it. I’d be afraid he was going to cut it all off, but he’s too cocky to do anything badly.”

He chuckled.

Then we slipped into silence. The contemplative gaze was back.

The gaze should be illegal.

I could not imagine the scenario in which he would look at someone like this and have it not be romantic. It was way too intimate. It was like he was looking in my soul—and my soul was not above getting naked and streaking across the quad.

I was saved by the salads arriving.

We spent the next three hours talking. We had dinner and dessert and then we moved outside to sit by a firepit overlooking the city.

I told him about Mom, Tristan’s chorizo punishment, and the remodel. He told me about work, and the trip he and his friends took up north. He said they went up to Mike’s stepdad’s cabin a couple of times a year. He told me about Maggie and Tina, his only two employees, and smiled when he described how they’re always feeding him and how good at their jobs they are. He said they’re the backbone of his business and he didn’t know what he’d do without them.

I was glad he was surrounded by good people. He deserved that.

I wished I got to be one of those people.

It was so hard being here with him. Probably because it was so easy.

I liked the way he was always giving me stuff. The cherry and orange garnish from his mocktail because he knew I liked them. The mushrooms off his steak when I commented on how good they looked, his jacket when it started getting too chilly.

I didn't want to wear his jacket. It was date type stuff. But I also didn't want to have to leave because it was too cold to stay. I promised myself this *one* dinner. Then I would probably never see him again for real. I didn't want it to end any sooner than it had to.

He didn't touch me. Not once. But he did look at me.

He always looked at me. He paid attention when I talked and he gazed at me contemplatively when I didn't. And every single time I looked in his eyes, my stomach did flips. My heart rate increased. The urge to get closer tugged at my bones.

If this was a test to see if we could ever just be friends, I was failing.

I could *not* be his friend. I was too attracted to him. Too impressed by him. Too enamored with him.

I had this flicker of a vision of me at his wedding to someone else. Like, maybe we did give the friend thing a go and years had passed and he eventually tells me he's met someone and they get engaged. I debate not going, but then I tell myself that I'm over him and as a friend I should show up. It would be weird if I don't show up. And then I get there and I break down sobbing when I see them together at the altar and end up back at my hotel room alone, drinking vodka straight from the bottle.

No. Xavier could never be just my friend.

But he couldn't be my boyfriend either.

We would only have the UFO.

The restaurant was starting to clear out around us. I looked at my watch.

"We should probably go," I said. "It's getting late."

I couldn't be sure, but I think he looked as disappointed as I felt.

We walked out through the restaurant to the front. He opened the door for me and handed the valet our ticket. Then we went to watch the koi in the pond, looking down on the white-and-orange fish swirling around until our car came. It was weird standing there next to each other, like we had that day on the pier, only without him putting an arm around me.

The ride home was quiet.

When we pulled into the driveway, he parked behind the Dart and walked me up to my door.

This was it. Our last goodbye.

The porch light was on, moths fluttering around the bulb. The air smelled sweet, one of Grandma's flowers blooming somewhere in the

garden.

Xavier stood there with his hands in his pockets. "It was really nice seeing you," he said.

"Yeah. You too. What time does the conference start tomorrow?"

"I think lectures start at eight."

I nodded, looking anywhere but at him, like looking at him would be a language all its own and a conversation I wasn't supposed to be having.

"Do you want to go to breakfast tomorrow?" he asked.

The question made me look up. "How? You have to leave at like six a.m. to make it there by eight."

"I can skip it. We could take the boys somewhere if you want. Or we could do dinner if you already have plans. I could come over Sunday too..."

I pulled my face back. "What do you mean you can skip it?"

"I won't go. Just tell me when I can see you."

I blinked at him. "You came all the way over here to go to that. Why would you *not* go to that?"

Silence.

I gave him a wary look. "Xavier..."

"What?"

"There *is* a conference," I said.

He was quiet for a beat. "Yes, there is."

"It's important for your continued education requirement," I said, repeating what he'd told me.

"Yes."

I paused. "Are you registered for it?"

Silence again.

"No," he said. "No, I'm not."

I stared at him. "Are you kidding me...?" I breathed.

He just peered at me. Those beautiful blue eyes, looking apologetic.

"Xavier!"

"I'm sorry—"

"You flew here for me," I deadpanned. "You came all the way over here under false pretenses in the hope that I would go out with you."

"I had to see you—"

I turned and started unlocking my door.

“Samantha—”

“No. You lied to me,” I said, not turning around. The lock was sticking. “This was a date. The whole fucking time it was a *date*.” I groaned. “Tattoos are so expensive,” I said, almost to myself. I *hate* it when Tristan is right.

My door wasn’t cooperating. A co-conspirator trying to keep me on the porch.

A hand came up from behind me and rested gently under my elbow. “Samantha...”

My heart slammed against my rib cage at the contact. The key stilled in the lock.

He hadn’t touched me since the last time he was here, almost three months ago.

His touch was like kryptonite. I lost the strength to move. Or the will. Or both.

He came up behind me. Closed on me like a wall of *him*. I felt the heat from his body warming the tiny space between us, the piney scent I kept breathing in from his jacket when we sat at the firepit, advancing on me, drifting around me in an invisible caress I wanted to draw into my lungs.

“Please...” he whispered.

His hands slipped around my waist and he drew my back to his chest in a soft hug. So gentle a small breeze could blow him off me—but *I* couldn’t.

His nose dipped into my hair and he breathed in.

I put my forehead to the door and squeezed my eyes shut.

He’d come back for me.

It was so... everything. It was romantic and sweet and what every woman wants—only I knew that even though I wanted him, this was bad. An addiction that would only get stronger and I’d never get enough of him to satisfy me. This was reckless. Completely irrational. We could never work.

So why was I unable to tell him no?

I knew if I asked him to, he’d let me go and leave. All I had to do was say the words.

But I couldn’t. Because I’d used up my words. All the strength and resolve that I’d had for this situation were gone. I gave it all the last time and I had nothing left.

I should never have gone to dinner with him. I should have blocked him, months ago.

But even as I thought that, I knew he would have shown up here anyway. If he was feeling even half of what I felt, he was always going to come back. And would I have been strong enough to not open the door when he did? No. Definitely no.

My thin dress provided absolutely no barrier between his body and mine.

His gentle breathing rose and fell against my bare shoulder blade, blew over my skin in humid currents. It rocked me like a tide, pulling me closer and closer.

If I turned around, I was going to lose myself. There would be no control. At all.

I *wanted* to turn around.

Be face-to-face with him while he held me like this. Maybe stand on my tiptoes and nuzzle his Adam's apple. Kiss the sharp edge of his jaw, the soft corner of his mouth, feel him smile under my lips.

"I missed you," he whispered from behind me. "I can't stop thinking about you. I tried. I really did. And I'm sorry I came here without telling you the truth, but I didn't think you'd see me and I just... I just needed to be in the same room as you."

I let out a puff of air.

"We can't *do* this," I breathed.

"Not seeing you is terrible," he said quietly. "And I don't want to do it anymore."

That's it. I gave up.

I turned around and kissed him.

SHE SPUN IN my arms, her hands slid up my chest, and I got to do the thing I'd been wanting to do since the second she opened the door five hours ago.

I got to kiss her.

All night I'd been in a state of dull panic. Knowing the clock was ticking, knowing she was only giving me this one dinner and that dinner wasn't a date. I'd been trapped between being so happy it was happening and dreading that as soon as it started, it already had an end.

I had to do something. This couldn't be our last time together. Even if the something was pouring everything out and telling her how hard it had been to pretend to forget her, and hoping that was enough, because I could *not* live like this.

I couldn't act like I didn't remember what being with her felt like and that it hadn't changed me.

She didn't think we could have parallel lives. But we were. Even when I couldn't talk to her and she was two thousand miles away, I was next to her. Seeing her tonight didn't even feel like we'd been apart, it felt like we'd been on pause.

And now she was kissing me.

There was a tiny glimmer of a chance. And I felt *instant* peace.

The gnawing discontent of the last two months was finally quiet, and all I could think in this moment of relief was that I was kissing my wife.

I couldn't tell you how I knew this. A pristine realization on a dim porch in the middle of the night. The scent of her perfume bringing up memories of a beach under the moon, the sound of crashing waves, a kitten with fur

that smelled like her, a shitty hotel room or a UFO that was the only place in the world I wanted to be, simply because *she* was in it.

I had friends on their wedding day who still weren't totally sure—and *I* was sure, even this early. I didn't need more information, I didn't need more time. I just *knew*.

And now that I did, the panic was back.

Because even though she was kissing me, she still might not ever let me see her again. If she sent me away, I was going to be condemned to think about her for the rest of my life.

This was what they meant when they talked about the one who got away. She's the woman you never stop remembering, the one who haunts you. The one who stays at the front of your mind even when decades pass.

And I had to figure out how to make this work. I had to.

I didn't have any choice.



Three hours later we were lying naked in her bed, looking at each other. Our bare legs tangled under the blankets. The only light in the room was from the pale glow of the lava lamp on her nightstand. Pooter was curled up at our feet. It was sometime around 2:00 a.m.

I reached out and brushed the hair off her forehead.

"You are in so much trouble," she whispered.

"I like this kind of trouble."

She gave me a mock stern look. "I can't believe you faked a conference."

"I'm beginning to think there's a lot of irrational things I would do for you," I said.

She went quiet. "How is this going to work?"

"I will make it work."

She looked like she didn't believe me.

"I know myself, Xavier. I'm not built for this kind of relationship. I like togetherness. I like to *see* the person I'm seeing."

"We're just going to have to try harder than other couples."

She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. "This is so fucked

up.”

“I know.”

“It’s impossible.”

“I know,” I said. “Believe me, I have turned this over in every way you can imagine. And at the end of it, I just can’t. I can’t not see you. It’s too miserable. I’m just going to have to figure it out. I’ll come as much as I can. I could probably come once a month at least.”

She looked back at me, her eyes sad. “I was miserable too,” she said softly.

My stomach tightened at the admission that she felt the way I did. Probably not *exactly* the way I did, but it was something.

“I thought about you every minute,” I said. “Even when I wasn’t thinking about you, I was.”

We studied each other quietly.

I reached out and touched her earlobe. “How is this?”

“Fine. I still can’t get an earring in it though.”

I rubbed the soft skin gently between my fingers, feeling the small scar. I hated that she had this, but I liked that I knew why. I’d been there for it, knew the story.

Even bad memories are sacred in their own way.

A car alarm chirped outside. Samantha looked over her shoulder. “Did you hear that?”

“Yeah...”

She got up and went to the window wrapped in a blanket and peered through the blinds.

“What is it?” I asked, getting up.

“It’s my dad...”

I leaned down next to her and looked out. A man was in the front seat of a Honda, backing out of the driveway with the headlights off.

“What the hell?” she said. “What time is it?”

I looked at my watch. “Two oh eight.”

She wrinkled her forehead.

“Did you ever find out where he went that night?” I asked.

She let the blinds snap closed. “Sort of.” She looked up at me. “He said he had a toothache and needed to get some Orajel.”

Her brows were furrowed.



“What?”

“I’m just pondering the strange and unusual habits of elder Gen Xers,” she said. “So mysterious. Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“How did it end? With your parents. Like when you went to go live with Jesse?”

“Why are you thinking about that?” I asked.

“Just thinking about my parents a lot lately,” she said. “Curious about yours.”

I went quiet for a moment. This was another story that no one knew but the guys. And again, they only knew because they’d been there.

But I wanted her to know.

I wanted her to know everything about me, the things that shaped me and how I felt about them so she could make a decision about how she felt about me.

“I had a learning disability,” I said. “It was an eye condition called convergence insufficiency. The muscles in my eyes were weak and it made my vision hop around on the page, so I couldn’t read well. It doesn’t show up on a standard eye test, and it’s easy to correct with physical therapy, but my parents didn’t really care to dig any deeper and figure it out. So I struggled all through middle and high school. The only class I did well in was 4-H. I liked the animals. I was in special ed classes at one point, but I couldn’t get caught up. And I would be punished for it. Badly. I was called every name I think you can imagine in this situation. I was called those names instead of my name.”

She stood there, staring at me.

“In eleventh grade, I got my report card. My dad came at me with a belt, like he usually did, saying the things he usually said. Only this time I was taller than him and stronger than him and it didn’t go the way he thought it would.

“I went to Jesse’s house, with a fat lip and a torn shirt and I told his mom and dad everything. And to this day I don’t know what they said to my parents, but they left my house with a suitcase of my clothes and my birth certificate and social security number, and after that, I lived with them. We got my eyes figured out, and I graduated with all As. I put myself through college, then veterinary school. Two years ago I opened my own

office. My parents really didn't think that I would amount to anything. So I have spent the last thirteen years proving them wrong."

She shook her head. "Do you ever hear from them? Or see them?"

"No. Not really. They still live in the same city, but I've never run into them. They do check up on me though. I know that. I see it on Instagram. A few years ago they sent a friend to try and guilt me into talking to them. They're both sick and disabled and they need help, which I will never give them."

"Talk about reaping what you sow," she said.

I thought about Samantha's mom. She was also reaping what she sowed, but in the best way.

She was so loved. She had a family willing to give up everything to take care of her. If Lisa was loved even a little less, Samantha might be in Minnesota with me. But I wouldn't change it. I was glad she had nothing but good memories of her childhood.

"God," she said. "Imagine growing up like that and turning out the way you did. And no wonder you hate people. I'd hate people too if that was my first introduction to them."

She wasn't wrong.

I gazed at her. She looked beautiful. Tired—but beautiful.

"I've never told anyone that story," I said.

"How does it feel now that you have?"

I thought about it. "Lighter," I said.

She wrapped her arms around my neck. "Your days of being treated badly are over. Forever."

I looked at her mouth. "At least they didn't make pasta just to torture me with chorizo."

She rolled her eyes. "My brother will never be the bigger person. He will only be the bigger bitch."

I smiled and leaned over and hovered there for a second before I closed the distance and my lips pressed into hers.

The kiss was slow and easy, but my heart pounded anyway. Something about her just felt *right*. She'd felt right from the very beginning I realized.

Only the logistics were wrong.

I WAS AT work. My dog was sitting with his head in my lap while I sat at the break table in between patients, looking at the bills. I'd been home a week. Samantha and I had talked and texted every day since I'd left. Some nights we talked for hours.

I was *consumed* with how I was going to get back to California. Seeing Samantha had become my singular goal.

I had to figure something out. The catch-22 was that in order to afford to go, I needed to work more, but going meant I had to take time off work.

The last trip to see her had set me back \$1,600. The rental car, the hotel room that I'd barely used, parking at the airport, the flight, the dinner at Castaway.

Even if I only went once a month, stayed with her, didn't rent a car, and didn't take her to do anything, which was not realistic, I was still looking at a minimum of \$500 per trip. And that was a conservative guess. So \$500 a month was \$6,000 a year—and I didn't have \$6,000 lying around. If I did, I should be using it to fix the ancient air conditioner on the roof of the clinic or to upgrade the office laptops or to add extra kennels to the back.

Maybe I needed to raise my rates. Get creative. Start selling items out front? Dog bowls, leashes, collars. Send Maggie and Tina to classes for new specialties like dog training or ultrasounds that we could charge for. But even that would require an initial investment for me to get them their certifications and buy the inventory.

I let out a sigh and closed the laptop.

Maggie and Tina came back from their lunch breaks.

"We got you a burrito," Maggie said, handing me a bag.

“Thanks. Hey, would either of you be interested in stocking retail items?”

Tina shrugged. “I’ll do it. Why? You think we need it?”

“I need to generate more income.”

Maggie took off her sweater and hung it. “You know, we could always get another doctor if you need the clinic to make more money.”

We couldn’t get another doctor. The business couldn’t afford it.

The loan payments for the practice were astronomical.

After I paid my loans every month, the utilities, payroll, and all the rest of the overhead, I got to keep what was left.

Sometimes what was left was less than minimum wage.

While bringing in a second doctor might mean we could take more business, it also meant I’d have to pay them a doctor’s wages. I couldn’t even pay *myself* a doctor’s wages half the time.

I knew the statistics when I got into this. Almost half of all small businesses went under within five years. And most didn’t make a profit for the first few years either. Considering those two things, I was actually doing okay. And it wouldn’t always be like this. Once the practice was paid off and I could keep everything it made, I’d be doing very well for myself—but that wasn’t going to help me now or anytime soon.

That was the trade-off. I could have worked for someone else—I did. After I got licensed, I worked at an already established clinic for a while. The pay was reliable and stable, the benefits were good. But I’d wanted something that was mine. I wanted *my* name on the door.

I wanted my parents to see what I was capable of.

I didn’t mind working hard and living lean. But now I found myself with very few options and even less wiggle room to find the time *or* the money to see Samantha.

“We’re not in a place to take on another doctor right now,” I said, not getting into the details.

“But, we have the demand,” Tina said. “I mean, the phones ring off the —”

“Doctors are expensive.”

My tone shut down the conversation.

They didn’t leave. They hovered. Apparently they weren’t done with me.

“What?” I said, unwrapping my burrito.

“Sooooooo my friend Veronica went to the veterinary conference last weekend,” Tina said. “She said she didn’t see you there.”

“It was a big conference,” I said, dismissively.

“Huh,” Maggie said. “We were kind of thinking maybe you didn’t actually go to the conference at all. That maybe the conference was just a cover story because you’re so into Samantha you had to make an excuse to go see her.”

I raised my eyes to them. They were smiling at me expectantly. I didn’t like telling them about my private life, but I also didn’t want to lie.

“I didn’t go to the conference,” I said. “I went to see her.”

They exchanged a giddy look.

“So you guys are a thing?” Tina said, barely containing her excitement.

I took a bite of my burrito instead of answering. They took my silence for confirmation.

They both squealed.

“I know you don’t like to talk about your personal life, but we are so excited for you!” Maggie said.

“Are you two exclusive?” Tina asked.

“Yes,” I said, taking another bite.

“Did you ask her this or are you just assuming?” Maggie asked.

I chewed and swallowed. “I just know.”

They glanced at each other.

“Um, if you haven’t talked about it, she could be doing anything,” Tina said.

Maggie was nodding.

“Like, how do you know she’s not just ‘seeing you,’” Tina said, putting her fingers in quotes. “Meaning she’s seeing other people too.”

“Are you her boyfriend?” Maggie asked. “Has she called you that?”

I thought back. No. She hadn’t called me that.

“Does she call herself your girlfriend?” Maggie asked.

I couldn’t recall her doing that either.

I stared at them both for a few seconds, then dropped my burrito on the table and went to the office.

Samantha picked up on the second ring. A machine was whirring loudly in the background.

“Hello, Xavier.”

“Hi. What are you doing? What’s that noise?”

“I’m making Mom juice.” The machine shut off.

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Can I... can I ask you a question?”

“Yesss...”

“You’re not seeing anyone else, right? The two of us, we’re exclusive?”

“This is a very weird way to ask me to be your girlfriend.”

I paused. “Will you be my girlfriend?”

“I mean, *yeah*.”

The corner of my mouth twitched up. “Good,” I said. “I’ll call you later.”

“Byeeeeee.”

I hung up and stood there for a moment with my hands on my hips. I was smiling. I wiped it off my face and came back out.

The two women were waiting for me. “Everything good?” Maggie asked, eyeballing me.

“Fine.” I sat again. “And, yes, she’s my girlfriend.”

They lost it. Bouncing around and screaming. One of the dogs started howling in a kennel.

Maybe I did need more staff if *my* boring love life was the highlight of the week.

They finished their celebration and I finished my burrito. Then I went to the office to reply to emails before my next patient came in.

I sat down and stared at the photo of the grand opening for a moment.

I knew where the cut was going to have to come from. I hated it because I knew how much they needed me, but I was going to have to stop doing the volunteer work.

It would free up my Sundays for travel. I could also pick up some shifts at the emergency clinic. The pay was good and they always needed people, especially on the weekends.

I blew a breath out. I just had to work smarter. Not harder—I was already working harder.

My cell phone pinged and I pulled it out. It was Samantha. A picture of her and her mom taking a shot of orange juice.

I smiled.

My *girlfriend*.

The word. It made me so happy. Everything about her made me happy.  
Except where she lived.

That was the one thing I wished I could change.

SAMANTHA

I STOOD WITH my siblings staring down at the giant wet mark on the sofa. The urine stain spanned almost the entire length of the left cushion. I wondered if I could fit the whole thing in the washing machine.

Grandma already had Mom in the shower. I was sort of glad Dad wasn't here for this.

"What happened?" I said, shaking my head. "We just took her to the bathroom."

"The doctors said incontinence would start to become an issue," Jeneva said.

"She was doing so well though. She's never had an accident before."

"Uh, she's fucking high as a kite?" my brother said. "I'd piss myself too."

Jeneva bobbed her head. "He's sort of right about that. Maybe we should take her sedatives down a little?"

I twisted my lips. "Maybe we should. I mean, now that I think back I could tell when she was getting worked up that one day. We could probably get ahead of the outbursts next time."

We all stared at the cushion.

"She's going to need diapers," I said quietly.

"We knew she would," Jeneva said.

We stood there in silence. Another layer of Mom's dignity, stripped. One less thing she had agency over.

"Well, I'm getting her the cute ones," Tristan said. "She's not gonna be in some hideous old lady nappy."

For once I appreciated my brother's defiant energy.



“I’ll get the steam cleaner,” I said.

Tristan scoffed. “You think you’re cleaning that? It’s drenched.”

Jeneva lifted the cushion and winced. “Yup. Straight through.”

I looked back and forth between them. “So what do we do?”

She shrugged. “Get a new sofa? It’s not a bad idea, honestly. This one was so old anyway.”

Tristan crossed his arms. “Well, if we get a new sofa, we need to paint.”

I groaned.

The living room was the only room on the main floor that wasn’t being renovated. It was our last inside place to hang out.

“The carpet is pretty gross too...” Jeneva said.

“I know, but more remodeling?”

“I mean, the sofa’s done. It’s not like we have somewhere to sit,” she mumbled. “We could get it at Dad’s work, he’ll get his discount.”

I took a deep breath and blew it out through my nose. “Fine. Let’s vote on it tonight.”

But I had a feeling I knew what Grandma and Dad were going to say. The house was already chaos, why not just do the rest?

My phone vibrated with a picture.

Xavier. I smiled. I hadn’t seen him now in almost a month. As of right now, we hadn’t set a date for his next visit. He was thinking mid-November, but he was waiting to see if ticket prices went down.

He’d told me about his financial situation. He really did *not* have disposable income. Now that I knew that, it made the donation he gave Pooter all that more generous.

I guess I always thought “doctor” equaled money. I didn’t consider the realities of it, that medical school is expensive and practices cost hundreds of thousands to open and get up and running. He was a small business owner. That was risky and difficult. He was a hard worker—maybe one of the hardest workers I’d ever met. I don’t think he knew how to stop. When he wasn’t working, he was giving his time to rescues.

And now he was giving his time to me.

A long-distance girlfriend probably hadn’t been in his five-year plan. I got the sense he’d intended to put his nose down and grind for a while before he got into something serious.

And now he was in something a little serious. And it wasn’t going to be

easy to navigate.

On one hand I felt bad for derailing his plans. On the other hand, he *had* come here under false pretenses to trick me into going on a date with him, so the guy had this coming.

My phone vibrated again.

“Who’s that?” Jeneva asked, watching me grin at my screen.

“The smoldering veterinarian of my heart,” I said. “My *boyfriend*.”

It was a selfie of him with a floppy-eared baby bunny. He was holding it against his chest.

“Are we dumping this or what?” Tristan said, looking annoyed over by the sofa.

“Sorry,” I said, sending Xavier a heart emoji and then setting my phone down.

My sister and I took one end and Tristan took the other and we carried it out to the curb. While we were walking, something slipped out of the bottom of the sofa and bounced down the driveway. I gasped. “Mom’s ring!” I set my side down and ran to pick it up. I held it, beaming.

“No way,” Jeneva said. “I searched this thing like a thousand times!”

“It must have really been in there. What if there’s more?” I said.

Tristan crossed his arms. “We should probably cut it open. Make sure there’s nothing else.”

And this is how we ended up knifing a pee-soaked sofa on the front lawn.

We didn’t find anything else.

When we were done we put the couch on the curb. Tristan and Jeneva went back in, but I stayed outside, sitting on the porch with Mom’s ring on my thumb, scrolling back through my text messages with Xavier.

I missed him.

I wished I could go to him instead. Give him a break. He’d flown here twice already, I wanted to let him catch up with his bills. But it was hard enough to leave everyone to deal with Mom, and to make them juggle the remodel stuff too just so I could see my boyfriend? I couldn’t do it.

Also, the travel wasn’t exactly in my budget either.

The remodel had gotten bigger than anyone anticipated and it was getting bigger still. At the time we’d all agreed to split it, the loans weren’t a burden. I didn’t have a car payment or any social life. I had the money, so

why not spend it on a place I loved so I could use a dishwasher that wasn't from 1972. But now I didn't have extra to be flying back and forth to Minnesota all the time.

Xavier hadn't been in my five-year plan either.

Dad pulled up. I watched him get out of the car. "Hey," he said. He took a seat next to me and set his messenger bag down.

He looked so tired.

I nudged him. "How you doing, Dad?"

"Fine. Is there a reason the sofa is massacred on the curb?" He looked at me.

"Yeah, about that. Mom had an accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"An accident, accident."

He nodded and peered wearily out at the orange tree next to the driveway.

"There is good news though." I held out my thumb. Dad stared at the wedding ring he put on Mom over three decades ago. He pulled it off my thumb and held it in the palm of his hand.

He studied it for a long time. "She never took this off," he said quietly. "Not ever. Not even to wash dishes."

He stared at it another long moment. Then he closed his fist around it and without another word he got up and walked into the house.

An email pinged on my phone and I sighed. Back to work.

It was from Murkle's. Marked urgent.

It was a notice for an on-site meeting at the corporate office to discuss the Dijon launch. They wanted to fly me to Minnesota. *Next week*. I got up and did a happy dance on the porch.

I had been given a blessing from the benevolent mustard gods.

I couldn't leave my family for some bs reason, but for a mandatory meeting? I didn't have a choice. I *had* to go to Minnesota. And work was going to pay for it!

I got tickets for the following Monday to Thursday. I debated whether to tell Xavier I was coming. I decided not to tell him. It's not like he needed to take time off to see me—it was a work trip so I'd be working when he was, no point—and I wanted to surprise him.

Three whole nights with him. I was beyond excited—right up until I

landed.

I don't think I'd processed how truly far away he was until I stepped outside baggage claim and I realized it was thirty-five degrees outside. I'd lived here for four years, I knew what Minnesota was like in October.

But somehow this place in relation to Xavier had been suspended in my mind. He was summer. *We* were summer.

It was almost jarring to realize he was living in fall.

Xavier was on a different rotation around the sun than I was.

In Southern California you decorate for holidays that take place during seasons you never get. I remembered the first time I saw autumn in Minnesota. The fake orange and red leaves that we'd used on our Thanksgiving table in Glendale were actually on the trees here. Then in the winter the mistletoe and the red berries and the snow. Light green pushing up in the spring, seas of dandelions and white blossoms on the wild pear trees. You earned your flowers in the Midwest. You waited for them for eight months. In California you had lemons in December.

His world would change around him and mine would stay the same. There would be a day two months from now when he'd be wearing a jacket and snow pants in negative ten-degree weather, a full beard, and I'd be in shorts buying cucumbers at a farmers market—that's how far away we were.

How could this *possibly* work?

We were delusional.

We felt doomed all of a sudden.

It was so ridiculous but seeing Minnesota in autumn sent me on an existential spiral the whole Uber ride to his clinic. He was two thousand miles from me.

Two *thousand* miles.

I could drive to Vancouver, Canada, and be in a totally different country and it was still eight hundred miles closer than Xavier was to me at any given moment. And we thought we could make a relationship work? This was unhinged. My boyfriend was living in a whole different universe—an eight-hour trip away door to door—with no possible end in sight.

Tristan called me while I was in my Uber, deep in the throes of my silent panic attack.

"Uh, your skid mark of a cat is out of the garbage you feed her? What

am I supposed to do about that?”

I rubbed my forehead. “I forgot to go to the store. Sorry. Just go buy her some. I’ll pay you back.”

Silence.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, like he was annoyed he had to ask it.

“Nothing.”

“Okay, did he have some bitch there when you got there? Because if he did, I’m enlisting his ass in the navy.”

I scoffed. “You can’t do that.”

“Oh, really? Because my ex is in the middle of the Pacific right now.”

He got a laugh out of me. Also, I was pretty sure he wasn’t kidding.

“No, he didn’t have a girl there,” I said, putting my forehead into my hand. “I’m not even there yet.”

“So what’s your problem, then?”

I let a breath out through my nose. “He’s so far away, Tristan.”

He scoffed. “And? This isn’t 1851. You’re not waiting five months for a handwritten letter coming on a steam train. Get your shit together.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and nodded, even though he couldn’t see me.

I heard the sound of car keys on the other end. “Watch shows together, get a ring light, text him nudes, go see him. It’s not that fucking hard. I’m going to get your cat food,” he said. “Call me if you change your mind about the navy. Bye.” He hung up.

The pep talk did help. A little.

And not a moment too soon because we were almost there. I had the driver pull around the side so Xavier wouldn’t see me getting out of the car.

I got my bag, took a deep breath, and forced myself to walk around the building to the door in the blustering Minnesota air. I saw him the moment I rounded the corner.

He was in the reception area. I could see him through the glass. I stopped to watch him. He was crouched with his back to me, talking to a golden retriever—well, talking to the golden’s dad, but looking at the dog. The blue scrubs. No white coat today.

I could see just enough of his face without him seeing me. His beard was fuller than last time. I liked it, it looked good on him. He was ruffling the dog’s ears and smiling at it.

My heart swelled just *looking* at him.

All worry and doubt I had fell away.

And then I realized. None of the fear and worry I had was because I didn't think it would work. The fear and worry was because I knew it *would*.

I was going to fall in love with this man. I was already halfway there.

And he was going to live where the seasons turned, and I was going to live where they didn't and somehow we'd still have to try to be on a parallel line.

There would be weeks upon weeks of boring gray without him and then two or three days of color.

And that would be what we got.

I could break up with him and suffer. Or I could date him and take what I could. Make memories when I could.

With everything in life, it's what you can live with. It always is. And this was still better than nothing.

Xavier stood, still talking to the man. I watched my boyfriend gesture to an exam room and the man and his dog headed toward it. Then Xavier glanced at me, standing outside his door. There was a split second of blank. The blank I got from Mom. The nothingness. Then a wave of beautiful recognition moved across his face.

I'd taken recognition for granted my whole life. The way it lights someone up, how it can speak to you without a word across a crowded room. That split second of raw reaction when you're seen and *known*. Relief, joy, happiness at locking eyes with someone you were looking for or seeing someone you didn't expect.

I'd never see that on Mom again.

But I'd see *this* moment over and over in my memories for the rest of my life. Xavier holding my gaze through a pane of glass. The grin that spread across his face. The unmasked emotion coming off him because he was as excited to see me as I was to see him. Him bursting through the door, grabbing me, and pulling me into a warm hug that instantly voided the chill in the air

I squeezed my eyes shut and let myself feel it. I wanted to feel how it felt to come home.

So this was going to be my life now. Long droughts without him, with short bursts of *this*.

This was worth it.

SAMANTHA

HE UNLOCKED THE door to his apartment and held it open for me.

“I wish you would have told me you were coming. I would have gotten iced coffee for the fridge.”

He was *still* smiling.

I remembered all the times Mom would come surprise me at grade school with lunch from some fast-food place I liked. I’d be glowing the whole rest of the day. I’d loved when she stepped into my little world. Sit with me at the long lunch table and talk to my friends. After we’d eaten I’d walk her down the hall and show her the artwork I’d done, hanging on the walls. I felt so proud to show her off.

I think it was a little like that for Xavier.

He’d shown me around the employee-only area of the clinic, introduced me formally to Tina and Maggie—who were vibrating, they were so happy to officially meet me. I got the sense from the private knowing glances that the women had given each other that Xavier did *not* grin at work. He’d been grinning the whole time. I’d loved it.

I got to see his office and the break table where he ate his lunches and the photo of the grand opening. I played with Jake.

I’d stood for an extra-long time in front of his framed veterinary license on the wall, studying it. I was so proud of him.

He’d done that. He was *that* smart. That driven. He’d done that without a family at his back, helping him along or propping him up. His friends had been there, but it’s not the same.

Looking around his office, I could see why he wouldn’t walk away from this. He’d worked way too hard for it. I wouldn’t *want* him to give any of



this up or ruin his life by leaving it behind.

Not even for me.

“Where do you want to eat dinner?” he said, taking my luggage to his room.

“I don’t care,” I said, looking around. His apartment was clean, like it had been the first time I was there. Jake from State Farm plopped onto a dog bed next to the sofa that hadn’t been there last time. Still no clown suits. I followed Xavier into his bedroom.

I’d never been in here.

His bed was roughly made, like he’d had only a second to put it together when he’d left. No clothes on the floor. A hoodie I was going to steal and a towel tossed on a chair, but otherwise neat.

He had a shell on his nightstand.

He swiveled my luggage into a corner, then turned around and pulled me into another embrace. He was so happy to see me. I could feel it in his arms, in his energy. It pulsed through him like electricity and it lit me up too.

He leaned down and kissed me, smiling against my mouth. “Go somewhere or delivery?” he whispered.

“Hmmm,” I said, feeling the hard edge of something I liked pressing through his scrubs. “Delivery.”

He dipped his head to kiss me again. We kissed for a long time. We kissed like kissing was the whole point. Like we’d both been thinking about this one thing and now we finally got to do it and all we wanted was to stand here and get really good at it. He was hard and I could feel him against my thigh, but it wasn’t about that yet. It was just about this.

“I was thinking that we could take a bath,” I whispered.

He was unbuttoning my sweater. “We could do that,” he said, against my lips, his voice low.

“I don’t have a bathtub in my apartment,” I said distractedly, running my hands along the inside of the waistband of his pants.

“Uh-huh,” he said, walking me backward to the bed. When the back of my knees hit the mattress I sat and he peeled my sweater off me, then took off his shirt next.

My pulse quickened.

He was standing between my open knees and I was face-to-face with the trail of hair that disappeared into his pants. I followed it down with the tips

of my fingers and I could feel his breathing pick up as I traced the outline of the ridge pressing against the fabric. He stood in front of me like an underwear model, gazing at me from above, his hair shaggy over his eyes. When I leaned forward to glide my tongue along his stomach, he raked fingers into the back of my hair and the hammer in my chest thudded against my rib cage.

I wanted him to eat me alive.

He pushed me back on the bed. I lifted my hips while he slid my pants and underwear down my thighs. Then he climbed onto the bed and pulled me to his mouth.

Xavier liked foreplay, and he was *really* good at it. He liked to get me almost to the finish line and then pull back, make me want to beg—which I was not above doing.

When my legs started to shake, he got up and went to the duffel bag that he'd taken to California and pulled a condom out of it. I watched him roll it on. He never broke eye contact once.

"I'm not gonna walk for a week, am I?" I asked, propped on my elbows, out of breath.

"I'll carry you anywhere you need to go," he said, lowering himself over me. I giggled and he smiled, breathing into the kiss he pressed to my mouth.

"I missed you so much," he whispered.

"I missed you too. My boyfriend." I smiled.

His face lit up at the word. I had wondered if it had the same kind of magic that *girlfriend* had for me. I guess it did.

He slipped fingers between my legs and I arched against him, biting my lip.

"Should I make you wait?" he asked, his voice husky.

"No, you should make me scream."

He grinned and eased himself inside me. I disintegrated on the third thrust.

There was simply no substitute for this. Not the pictures we would send each other or the video calls we would do. There were pheromones at work, bonding us and pulling us in. Making him familiar, turning me on, creating real time changes in my body that he got to touch and taste and feel.

Living apart was going to be so incredibly difficult. I wouldn't be able to hear his breath in my ear or wrap my legs around the sharp angle of his hips

or tangle my fingers through his hair. I couldn't be caged between his arms and anchored under his weight and feel him spill inside me.

I wanted the immersive experience every time. But I'd only get this once in a while. He'd only get this once in a while.

We'd just have to make it count.



Three hours later we were under his covers. His skin smelled like the peach bubble bath I'd brought with me. I was swirling lazy circles with my pruned fingers on his chest.

"Can you come to the cabin?" he asked.

I tipped my head up to look at him. "When?"

"December twenty-eighth through January second."

"Sure. I think I have the PTO."

"I can buy your ticket—"

"No, I'll buy it," I said. "You shouldn't have to pay for everything." I put my cheek to his chest. "Promise me when we're up there we'll bed rot. Just do absolutely nothing just like this," I said.

"I wouldn't call this nothing."

"No, you're right. One of us worked *very* hard tonight."

He chuckled.

I lay there another moment. Then I sighed. "I have to get up and iron my clothes for tomorrow." I started getting out of bed.

"I'll do it," he said, getting up.

"No, you don't have to iron my stuff."

"I want to."

He jumped into gray sweatpants—an activity that should be an Olympic sport. Perfect form. I gave him a ten.

I pulled on my shirt and leggings so I could dig in my luggage. "I'm not used to wearing pants to work," I said, holding up the slacks I got. "I had to go buy something."

He put on a hoodie and went to get the ironing board from his closet.

I gave him my clothes and then wandered out to get something to drink.

"Hey, can you let out Jake?" he called.

“Yup.”

I let the dog out onto the little patio and then headed to the kitchen. “You want water?” I called.

“Sure.”

I grabbed two glasses and went to fill them from the tap. But then I thought maybe he had a Brita or something so I opened his fridge to poke around.

He had a bottle of Murkle’s in the door. He’d tossed the French’s mustard.

My heart melted.

He hadn’t known I was coming. He just had this in a secret show of loyalty. Honoring all my tiny allegiances and petty vendettas.

This was my love language.

I took it out of the fridge and brought it back with me to the room. “I see you’ve been converted,” I said, leaning in the doorway, holding up the yellow bottle.

He looked over. “Have you seen their marketing? How could I not?”

I grinned at him. So handsome. Standing over an ironing board, pressing my shirt—in gray sweatpants no less.

A core memory.

The best moments don’t have to be big to be forever.

My chest got a little tight. This was the guy. This was who I was supposed to be with. I was so sure about it suddenly.

All my best days would be like this. The two of us together.

But most of our days would be spent apart.

XAVIER

THE NEXT MORNING I took her to breakfast at Donna's before we both had to split up to go to work.

Donna's was Mike's mom's café. Mike's younger sister, Janessa, was working.

"Hey!" she said when we came in. Then her face fell the tiniest bit when she saw Samantha. "Oh. Who's your friend?"

"This is my girlfriend, Samantha. Samantha, this is Mike's sister, Janessa."

"Hi." Samantha waved, looking around. "So this is your mom's place? It's so cute."

"Thanks," Janessa said dryly.

She grabbed menus and seated us without another word.

Samantha watched her walk back to the hostess stand. "Did you used to date her or something?"

"Why do you ask?" I said, looking at the specials.

"She seemed a little... not friendly."

I looked up. Then I peered past her to where Janessa stood at the counter taking a phone order. She glanced at me, then turned to give me her back.

I guess she was a little cold.

The truth was Janessa had always flirted with me. I'd never reciprocated.

"No, we never dated," I said.

"Why not?"

"Many reasons."

"Which are?" She waited.

“I’m not interested,” I said. “That would be the main reason. I have a very specific type.”

“Oh yeah? And what’s that?” she said, cocking her head.

I went back to studying my menu. “Well, my dream woman is a glass-half-full kind of person. She fights for what she wants and believes in the humanity of others—and she’s usually right. She makes the most of bad situations, deeply dislikes heights. She’s funny. Smells great. A fan of seashells and mustard, hates chorizo. And she never brings the right jacket.” I raised my eyes to hers.

“Interesting,” she said, looking back at her menu. “My perfect man can speak to animals. He’s very principled. Not a big talker, but is paying more attention than anyone in the room. He became an animal doctor as part of a hero-arc-slash-revenge plot, which is an energy I can get behind. Hates people, loves pets. Wonderful with rambunctious pre-teen kids and frightened memory care patients. *Really* good at sex. He doesn’t like compliments but he’s gonna have to muscle through that one, it’s too important not to bring up.”

I was fighting my smile.

She set her menu down. “Why *don’t* you like compliments?” she asked.

“I just... didn’t get a lot of them growing up,” I said.

“Well, we’ll have to get you used to them. I have a lot of nice things to say about you.”

I gazed at her across the table and she smiled at me.

I would never forget that moment when I saw her through the glass yesterday. Looking out the door and seeing her standing there, holding the handle on her luggage, wearing a sweater with a scarf wrapped around her neck. She didn’t have the right jacket.

The memory of that moment was already tucked away. My brain had wrapped around it, storing it in the place I kept my most special things.

My first kiss. My first love. Seeing my dog Winnie for the first time. Seeing Winnie for the last time.

It was where I kept the day I opened my clinic and how I felt walking in there and knowing it was *mine* and I had done everything my parents always said I wouldn’t.

It’s weird knowing what’s going to be in your end-of-life montage, as it’s happening. But I already knew when my life flashed before my eyes, the

best parts of it were going to be about her.

I was so happy she was here.

I was also tired. And not from being up all night with her either.

I'd started picking up shifts at the ER vet's office on Sundays. Then they offered me the overnight shift on Saturdays too. It was twice the pay. I took it. I was starting graveyards this weekend. I'd do the overnight Saturday, go home, sleep four hours, and then do the noon-to-eight Sunday shift. I was officially working seven days a week. If I counted the volunteering I'd been doing, it wasn't much different from what I was used to. The overnights would be rough, but it was only once a week. And if I could save enough, I could see her more. Maybe even go twice a month, or at the very least have the funds for better flights or nicer things to do when I got there. It was worth it because nothing made me feel as good as this. Nothing.

I loved waking up with her in the morning and that I would get to come home to her tonight. I loved going out to eat and talking about our days and making plans for tomorrow. I loved that she was going to use my shower and my pillow would smell like her hair. Being alone in a room with her.

And I hated that I couldn't have it all the time. I already felt the loss of her leaving and she only just got here.

Janessa wordlessly filled our coffee mugs and left.

I peeled the tops off three vanilla creamers and slid them to Samantha one at a time. Then "Come On Eileen" came on over the café's quiet speakers. We locked eyes and immediately started laughing.

It occurred to me that nobody else in the entire world would get why this was funny. If we'd been having breakfast with friends, they'd think we'd lost it.

This was the parallel life. Some of it anyway.

My smile fell and I focused on drinking my coffee.

"What?" she said, noticing I'd gone silent.

I set my mug down.

"Nothing. I just like being here with you," I said quietly. "This is how it could have been. If you didn't leave."

She looked at the contents of her mug. "I know. I was thinking the same thing." She peered at me. "When I was on my way here, I think it hit me how far away you are. It scared me a little."

I felt my pulse pick up. Like she was about to tell me it was too much

for her.

“You could have a girlfriend who lives here, you know. I’m sure Janessa isn’t always crabby.”

I scoffed.

She put her mug to her lips, smiling.

“I got my tickets for next month,” I said.

“Oh, cool. When?”

“November eighteen through the twentieth.”

She pulled out her phone. “So four weeks from now. Then I won’t see you until I come out for the cabin, six weeks after that. Okay.”

“I booked a red-eye,” I said. “I get there at five thirty Saturday morning. I can get an Uber.”

“No, I want to pick you up,” she said. “I don’t want to miss any time with you. We have to do dinner on the eighteenth with my family though,” she said. “It’s my mom’s birthday.”

“Looking forward to it,” I said.

She gave me a playful look. “You haven’t had enough of my people yet? You haven’t even met Grandma. That’s a whole other experience.”

“I don’t mind.”

I wanted to meet everyone. I should have insisted on it the last time I was there. I wanted to get to know all her family. That way when she talked about them, I knew who they were. I could put faces to names.

“Mom can’t leave the house so we’re all cooking a dish,” she said.

“So chorizo from Tristan?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Probably. He got a new job,” she said, picking up her coffee. “He’s apprenticing at a tattoo shop.”

I arched an eyebrow. “He can do those?”

“Oh, yes. He’s as gifted as he is annoying,” she said, sipping her coffee. “Oh!” she said, lowering her mug. “I wanted to ask you this couple’s question I saw.”

“Okay.”

“If you could be an egg for a year in exchange for a million dollars, but you’d have to find someone to keep you safe during that time and not break you, and if they do break you they get the million, who would you pick?”

“You,” I said without thinking about it.

“Just like that? You’d trust me not to break you for a whole year?”



“Of course. I’ve seen you with Pooter and your mom.”

“I’m going to go so far as to say that if you’re dating someone you wouldn’t trust to not break you as an egg, they’re probably not the one,” she said.

“So you’d pick me?” I asked, smiling.

“Totally,” she said. “We wouldn’t get to talk to each other for a whole year though. That would suck. But the million dollars would be nice.”

It would be nice. It would be the answer to all my problems actually.

If I had a million dollars, I’d pay off the clinic. Then I’d hire another doctor to run it and I’d leave for California so fast my head would spin. I’d open a second practice there, somewhere close to her house. Then I’d have two. And I’d have her.

It’s amazing how easily I knew this. How quickly I’d leave everyone and everything behind for her.

The only thing that would change my plans would be if she wanted to do something different, because the money would be hers too.

“I bet I know what you’d do with the million,” she said.

“What?”

“You’d pay off the clinic. Probably open another one, because it would stick it to your parents if you had two.”

The corner of my lip went up. “I’d open the second one in California.”

She grinned.

“What would you do with the money?” I asked.

“The same thing. Pay off your clinic. I would also like to stick it to your parents.”

“There’s nothing else you’d do with the money?”

“There’s nothing else that would make me happy. There’s no cure for dementia. Even if you have a million dollars.”

“If there was, that’s what I would use the money for,” I said, meaning it.

Her eyes went soft. “I know you would. That’s why I like being alone in rooms with you.”

We talked through breakfast. When it got as late as we dared before both of us missed work, I put her in an Uber. I wanted to drive her to her office, but it was in the opposite direction and I would have been late and she refused to let me. So I kissed her goodbye at the curb and watched her drive off, then I went back inside to pay the bill. Janessa was ringing me up.

“Soooo I’ve been meaning to call you,” she said, swiveling the iPad to the tip screen.

“What about?” I said, hitting the 25 percent option and putting my card back in my wallet.

“The other day your parents were here.”

I froze. “Okay...”

“I just thought you’d want to know. They were with another couple having lunch. Your mom asked about you.”

“What did she want to know?” I asked.

“She asked if you still come in. She told her friends your best friend’s mom owns the place and that you’re a veterinarian. It was sort of braggy actually, kind of pissed me off.”

It pissed me off too.

What was the point in her talking about me? To stake some claim on my successes? To act like she had anything to do with them or that I was somehow the result of *her* parenting when she hadn’t so much as sent me a birthday card in twelve years?

“Thank you for letting me know,” I said.

“Yeah. Xavier? I know how shitty your childhood was. I mean, I know we weren’t close, but I saw enough. I wasn’t nice to her—and I might have served them old coffee the whole time they were here.”

I scoffed. “Thanks.”

“Anytime. You know, you can call me if you ever want to talk, or go get a drink or something.” She looked at me hopefully.

I put my wallet away. “Tell Donna hi,” I said, and I left.

The thing with my parents bothered me all day. There was something unnerving knowing they were lurking in my spaces. Getting more comfortable with adjacency to me. It was one thing to see them watching my stories or to get guilt phone calls from their friends, but it was something else for my parents to be somewhere they could actually bump into me.

I had a humming under my skin that I was so unused to, it took me half the day to even realize what it was. Anxiety. They’d shaken me up enough to make me anxious. The way I used to feel twenty-four-seven living with them, like something bad was going to happen and I didn’t know what and I had to be braced for it.

Back then the sound of the front door opening or a floorboard creaking could send me into a panic. It took *years* to unlearn that response. And now it was back.

I was almost thirty, I was six two. I was not a scared little kid or a lanky teenager, I was a grown man and they were two pathetic excuses for humans. I'd seen people ten times more intimidating than my parents in my line of work and I'd had to call them out for animal abuse or neglect and I had zero problems with that. But something about my parents shrank me. Made me feel five years old. And I hated it.

Later that night Samantha got home ten minutes after I did.

"How was your day?" I asked, kissing her hello.

"Ugh, exhausting. I found out the real reason they wanted everyone in the office," she said, taking off her blazer. "They're merging with Kraft Heinz."

I drew my brows down. "They sold?"

"Yup."

"What does that mean?" I asked, taking her jacket to hang.

"It means they didn't like that we were cornering the organic mustard market. We outsell their organic brands. So they made the family a very good offer that they couldn't refuse."

"And your job?"

She shrugged. "Not changing. They said nothing's really going to change except maybe our benefit package will get a little better."

"Okay. Well that's good."

She pulled her hair into a ponytail. "How about you? How was your day?"

I blew a breath through my nose. "Let's figure out food first. What do you want to eat?"

She wrapped her arms around my neck. "I want to eat whatever you would eat if I wasn't here."

I arched an eyebrow. "So whatever food Maggie and Tina have sent home with me?"

She laughed. "Okay. Your favorite restaurant, then. And can I wear one of your hoodies?"

"You can have anything of mine on your body, anytime."

"Oh, I will absolutely take you up on that."

We drove to Champlin and went to my favorite hole-in-the-wall sushi place, Ginza. I ordered us my favorites: gyoza, the hibachi, and an Old Man & the Sea, and a mango roll. Once we ordered our food, I told her what Janessa had said to me about my parents. I also told her how I was feeling about it.

"I don't know why they still get to me," I said.

"Because they're your first bullies. For some reason you never grow out of the way you feel about the people who hurt you when you were a kid," she said. "I'm still low-key terrified of Shannon Horwedel from the third grade. She made fun of some white shorts my mom had washed with a red shirt and it turned them pink. She called me Pinky the whole rest of the school year and got all the rest of the kids to call me that too. I hate her to this day. I saw her once at the Grove and I did this tuck-and-roll thing behind a bush."

I snorted.

"You have way more reason to hate your parents than I have to hate Shannon," she said, eating some edamame.

"I didn't like how she was throwing around my profession. Like she was taking credit for what I've done with myself," I said.

"Uh, she is," she said. "Narcissists are the fucking worst."

"You think she's a narcissist?"

"Oh, totally. She hasn't spoken a word to you in over a decade but she has zero problems holding up your credentials like a trophy. And you know what's sad? If you weren't what you are, in spite of her, she'd do the opposite. She'd tell everyone what a failure you are and how she didn't raise you to turn out like that."

"She would definitely do that," I mumbled.

"Of course. Because that's the prophecy they foretold. And instead you're this. You win."

Yes. I guess I did.

Still.

Samantha reached across the table and took my hand. "It should give you a bottomless sense of satisfaction to know that they are aware of who and what you are now, Xavier. And no matter how much she wants to brag about you, that's all she'll ever get. She won't get to introduce you to people, or show them pictures of you with them on holidays. The facade

won't hold up. But just know that when it doesn't, she'll probably fabricate some reason for you to be the bad guy, because that's what narcissists do. She'll blame the lack of a relationship on you and say it's something you did so they can be the victim because narcissists love that. But nothing they ever say or do will take away the fact that you are a *doctor*. Okay? They don't matter."

I nodded like I agreed with her. But the truth was, in their own way, they did matter. I wished they didn't. I wished memory was selective and you got to pick and choose what to forget.

My two days with Samantha went by in a blur. Before I knew it I was kissing her goodbye at the airport. Then I spent the next four weeks working myself into the ground to get back to her.

SAMANTHA

GRANDMA SAT ON the new kitchen barstool while we held our breath. She swiveled it left, then right. Then after making dramatic eye contact with all of us, she smiled. “I love it.”

The whole family hooted and cheered. Mom looked around trying to figure out the noise. “What?”

“Grandma approves of the stools,” I said, smiling at her. “It means the kitchen remodel is done, Mom.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well good.”

I hugged her from the side.

The kitchen was beautiful. Bright and clean and *modern*. We were worried Mom would be disoriented by the changes, but the layout was still the same as always, so she didn’t seem to notice.

We’d been waiting on the barstools so we could finally eat at the counter again and they’d just arrived this morning. This family had descended on those Lowe’s boxes.

“I’m thirsty,” Mom said.

Jeneva went to get a glass.

Mom was more talkative now that we’d pulled back on her medications. It felt like her dementia had regressed by a year, even though I knew it hadn’t. She was energetic and expressive again, she asked questions and was a thousand times more alert. Now that we knew what the start of a tantrum looked like, we had been able to get ahead of them so we hadn’t had any more blowups. She was more her. It felt so good to have her back, even in the tiniest way.

Mom’s care was an ever-moving target. What worked one month

wouldn't work the next. The doctors warned us that prescriptions would change, that she would change. She might need more, she might need less or something different. But for right now today was a good day. Right now she was the best version of what was left of herself.

"I'm sooo glad it's over," Jeneva said, opening the new fridge for juice. "I was getting tired of eating in the yard."

"Same," I said, helping Mom onto a stool.

And it was just in time too. Mom's birthday was tomorrow. Xavier was flying in on a red-eye in the morning. I hadn't seen him in a month since I went out for my work trip.

It's funny how time passed now that we were together.

I was always waiting. Waiting for him to be off so he could call. Waiting for him to get a second to text me, waiting for him to watch the reel I sent him two hours ago when he was in surgery.

Waiting for him to come back.

My life felt like it was on pause.

I didn't see movies I wanted to watch so he could see them with me when he got here. I held off on going places because I'd rather go with him so we could experience it together. I didn't take my friends up on dinners because after work was the only time of day my boyfriend and I could talk.

He was working at the emergency vet clinic on weekends to fund his trips to see me. Between that and his regular job, we had only a short window of time to be on the phone. He had to be in bed by 11:00 for work the next day, which was only 9:00 p.m. my time. I didn't log out of work until 5:00, so that gave us four hours, but we both had errands, chores, things that also had to get done around work. And on the weekends, there was no time at all. Saturday he ran right from his clinic to the ER, did an overnight shift, slept five minutes, and then worked the rest of the day Sunday.

I knew it was necessary, but I missed him so much already and this didn't help.

It felt like the insult to the injury. Not only did we have to be separated 99 percent of the time, but to afford to see each other he had to work so much we didn't get enough time to talk either.

But when we did talk? I fell more in love with him every minute.

He was so smart. And so thoughtful. He was a good listener and he was

attentive and he made me laugh.

Also, he liked to send me things. It was really sweet. He sent me a heart dog tag for my key chain with Pooter's name on it. Two days later I got flowers for no reason. He sent me a box of little vanilla-flavored creamers to keep in my apartment. They were shelf stable, which was sweet because I didn't have a fridge. He shipped me cookies and a cat paw wind chime and he made me playlists, which was the cutest thing of all.

It was like he was always thinking about me. A crow, bringing me shiny things.

But really, all I wanted him to bring me was him.



XAVIER

I WAS IN the back room in between patients. I had a favorite at the clinic today. Jafar, an African gray parrot. I knew his family and had grown up with this bird.

He was strutting back and forth across the table, talking to himself. I made a video for Samantha and sent it.

She called me a minute later, laughing. “Is that bird yelling that you touched his ‘no-no spot’?”

“Yes. He’s got an interesting vocabulary.”

Jafar flapped his wings and yelled, “PERVERT!” at the top of his lungs.

“Who taught him that?” she asked, cracking up.

I grinned. “The grandpa. He’s always doing stuff like that.”

I picked him up and put him back in his cage with a peanut while he shrieked “MOTHERFUCKER” at the top of his lungs.

“What are you doing today?” I asked, leaning back on the exam table.

“I’m developing a marketing campaign around the health benefits of mustard.”

“Ahhhh. Smart.”

“Yeah, listen to this.” She cleared her throat. “Mustard contains antioxidants that provide various health benefits including anti-cancer, antibacterial, antiviral, antifungal, anti-inflammatory, and wound-healing properties. What did your ex do for you? Nothing.”

I chuckled.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

“I love it.”

“I have to go,” she said. “I have to make Mom lunch.”

“Okay. I can’t wait to see you.”

“I can’t wait either. When you get here, I want to do this couples challenge thing I saw on TikTok. Will you do it with me?”

“What thing?”

“It’s hard to explain. It’s kind of like the lift from *Dirty Dancing*, but it starts on the floor?”

“Would it make you happy?” I asked.

“Yesssss.”

“Then I will do it.”

“Yay!” I could feel her smile through the phone. “Talk to you later.”

We hung up.

I looked around the back room and let a breath out through my nose. This time tomorrow I’d be with her. This day couldn’t move slower if it tried.

Our relationship changed the laws of physics. Time seemed to stop the closer I got to seeing her. Maybe because I was working so much I was sleeping less? There were more waking hours in my days lately so they felt longer?

And then when I did see her, time flew by.

The three nights she’d been here had gone by in a blink. And then there’d been nothing. Monotony. Until I’d met her, I had no complaints about tedium. Now her existence in my world changed how I felt about everything else.

It was harder to go home when she wasn’t there, now that I knew what her being there was like. It was hard to wake up without her next to me, eat a meal where she wasn’t seated across from me.

When they say that someone can be a light in your life, *this* is what they mean.

And my light was two thousand miles away. I could still feel her from here, but it wasn’t enough. So I worked harder, picked up more shifts. And I was already getting tired.

I knew this pace wasn’t sustainable. I also knew I had to keep it up because not seeing her was not an option. She’d been very clear that she didn’t do long-distance. And I know she’d agreed to it, and she was just as willing to pay to come see me as I was to see her, but money was tight for her too and I’d promised *I* would make it work. So I would.

I got up to go see my next patient. When I opened the door, Maggie was outside, poised to knock.

“Oh, hey. You have a phone call. She says she’s your mom?”

I stared at her. “My mom?”

She shrugged. “That’s what she said.”

I kept my face straight.

“I thought you didn’t talk to her,” Maggie said.

“Why would you think that?” I asked.

“Because you don’t ever talk *about* her? Your parents didn’t come to the grand opening?”

“I’ll take the call in the office,” I said.

I closed the door and dragged a hand through my hair, staring at the blinking hold light. My anxiety flared back with a vengeance.

Why was this making me feel like a kid who was about to get in trouble?

Samantha had been right that my parents don’t matter. There was nothing they could do to hurt me now. But my body remembered. It braced like I was still back there, living in that house.

What did she want? Help? Atonement? Closure? Money?

I had no interest in giving her anything. Frankly, she didn’t deserve the time or attention she was asking for either.

But what if it was important? What if it was a hereditary cancer she wanted me to know about? What if my dad had died and even though we didn’t talk she didn’t want me to find out through the grapevine.

I should answer.

I picked up the phone. “This is—” I paused. Who was I? Was I Xavier? That’s who she knew me as. Or was I Dr. Rush, the person I’d become after her? She was somehow someone intimate to me but also a complete stranger.

I decided Dr. Rush gave me the armor I needed to deal with this call.

“This is Dr. Rush,” I said, giving her my professional tone, like maybe I didn’t know who was on the other line, maybe Maggie hadn’t relayed the message.

“Xavier?”

I was a child again, instantly. A Pavlovian response. I felt four feet tall and ready to wince.

“Are you there?” she asked.

“Yes. What can I do for you?” I said dryly.

“Oh. It’s been a long time,” she said, like I was a friend she’d bumped into at the supermarket.

I didn’t respond.

My silence shifted the energy. I pictured her smoothing her shirt down the way she always did when she was uncomfortable. “I’m sure you’re wondering what this is about,” she continued. “Your dad and I were wondering if you’d like to talk.”

I drew my brows down. “What do you want to discuss?”

“Well, we’d like to see you. See how you’ve been. I understand you have your own practice now.”

I stared at the grand opening picture.

“I know it’s been a long time,” she went on. “I wanted to call you, but —”

“But what?” I said coldly.

She went quiet on the other end.

So she didn’t have anything important to tell me. This was a social call.

Thirteen years. She couldn’t care less about me for thirteen years. I could never do that. I could never abandon my child. I couldn’t even conceive of the story she could give me to justify it.

They never came to my high school graduation, my college graduation, my ribbon cutting. I’d had my friends and sometimes their parents there, of course. But none of *my* family ever came for me. For anything. I’d been alone in this world after being knocked around and belittled and made to feel like I was worthless for the first half of my life. And she wanted to talk? Now?

She cleared her throat. “We were hoping to reconnect. Your dad and I aren’t going to live forever. We’d like to know our grandkids one day. Your wife. Are you married? Dating anyone? What have you been up to?”

When I didn’t respond she went on. “Your dad and I have a new church. He’s stopped drinking, you should know that. He’s been sober for six years.”

“Congratulations,” I said flatly.

Now she paused. “I don’t know why you have to take that tone.”

“Don’t you? I don’t know why I wouldn’t.”

I heard the breath through her nose. The simmer on the other end. My

ability to sense her mood was still completely intact, even over a decade later and on the phone. Only now I didn't care if I poked the bear.

"I was hoping we could have a polite conversation," she said tightly.

"This doesn't sound like an apology to me."

She made an impatient noise. "You know, we weren't all to blame, Xavier. You weren't a saint yourself—"

"I was a *kid*."

"You punched your father in the face! He lost two teeth!"

"He was hitting me with a belt!" I snapped.

"And? We weren't supposed to discipline you? When you were failing every class?"

The laugh I let out was incredulous. "What you put me through was nothing short of abuse."

She huffed on the other line. "Abu—You have *got* to be kidding me. We were strict. My parents were strict, your dad's parents were strict. We had every right to parent you as we saw fit."

"By beating the shit out of me? Calling me stupid? Drowning Winnie's puppies?"

"The puppies—Oh, grow up. It's no different than what you probably do every day at your fancy office. You don't put dogs down?"

"What I do is humane. What I do is mercy. He was a drunken, violent *asshole*," I said carefully. "And you allowed it."

"Oh, so you're going to be the perfect parent? You think the job is easy? You turned out fine. Better than fine from what I can tell."

I gritted my teeth. "No thanks to you. You left me to fend for myself at seventeen."

"So? At six months older than that your dad was already enlisted and living in a foreign country. You obviously didn't want to live by the rules of our household so when you wanted to go run the streets with Jesse, that was fine with us. You wanted to be a grown-up and tell us to go to hell and you did. And frankly the fact that you haven't bothered to reach out to us, knowing that we both have health issues, says a lot about the kind of man you are."

I was shaking too much to speak.

"I knew this was a mistake calling you." I pictured her throwing up her hands. "A waste of my time. I just thought maybe you had changed, but I

see you haven't. I don't need this, I have enough stress in my life, your dad's getting audited, not that you care what happens to us."

The irony.

"You know, if you want the truth," she said. "We always figured you'd end up a janitor, flipping burgers. You did better for yourself than I ever thought you would, and that's probably because you were taught discipline growing up. You're welcome for that. But you have an attitude problem and you always have. I see it in the reviews how you talk to people. And yes, I read them. Keep it up and you'll be out of business before you know it because nobody wants to put up with that. I wouldn't. I'd be surprised if your little clinic is still there this time next year." She tsked. "I'll be praying for you."

Then she hung up on me.

The whole thing lasted less than three minutes. I couldn't even articulate how I felt.

It was like the leaves in Samantha's car. Something had dislodged my parents from my memory and they were swirling around me, everywhere and I couldn't make it stop. I knew I had to deal with them now that they were out, but I didn't have the emotional bandwidth to face the situation. I needed time to reflect and unpack what I was feeling and process the gaslighting I'd just been subjected to and at the same time I didn't even know where to start.

I put my palms to my eyeballs.

Is that really how she remembered that time? That *I* was the bad guy? Or was this just what Samantha said was going to happen? That they'd flip the narrative on me to redirect the blame?

I didn't tend to change my feelings about things. I felt the way I felt and I didn't budge. Mostly because I considered all the angles, made choices in a level state of mind, talked it through with friends. I wasn't reactive, I wasn't prone to dramatics. I settled into a mindset and I stayed there. This revelation that I was the antagonist in their story didn't shift my memory of what actually happened, not an inch. It didn't give me the guilt I think she hoped it would. It just made me angry. It made me dig in. And it made me realize the full extent of the power my parents still had over me, all these years later. It was so much worse than I thought it was.

I couldn't even will my legs to move me so I could get back to what I

had to do today. My knees were knocking together like a scared dog in one of my cages.

My immediate impulse was to call Samantha. Not the guys who'd been there for what happened, the ones who knew my mother. I wanted to talk to Samantha because this whole thing made me feel too vulnerable and I didn't want to be emotionally naked in front of anyone but her.

And that was the moment I knew two things.

The first was that I could never let my parents see me fail. Ever. I could never shutter this business. It would validate everything they thought about me and I wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

And the second was that I was head over heels in love with my girlfriend. And that was worse than I thought it was too.

XAVIER

MY FLIGHT LANDED at 5:30 the next morning. I was a zombie getting off the plane.

I'd picked a middle seat because it was cheapest, so I hadn't slept well on the flight—not that I would have slept well after that phone call.

I was starting to second-guess taking the red-eye. My body ached for sleep, and I was getting a headache. But when I came out and saw Samantha leaning on her car, I forgot any tiredness or discomfort.

She broke into a smile and threw her arms around me.

It's ironic how important things make the world smaller. How a kiss with someone you love can make you feel like you're alone with them, like you're in a snow globe with just the two of you when really you're outside baggage claim at a busy international airport.

I buried my nose in her neck and hugged her like I had spent the last four weeks paddling here on a disintegrating raft and I had collapsed on shore. And the worst part was the raft was going to have to take me home again.

I hadn't told Samantha yet what happened with my mom. It was too much for over the phone, especially knowing I was going to see her soon anyway. I wanted to tell her in person, when I could hug her and touch her and look in her eyes, and for the first time, I really felt how hard it was to not see her every day.

The need was more than just missing her. It was the absence of my person. The inability to hold her and be held. There was no substitute for this. For the feeling of her arms around me.

The thought of getting two days of this and then six weeks of nothing



drained me. It gave me a preemptive emotional exhaustion on top of the real one I was feeling.

She pulled away. "How did you sleep?"

"I didn't."

She put out her bottom lip. "Awwww. Well, let's go home and take a nap."

"I don't want to sleep when I'm here," I said tiredly. "I want to be with you."

"Well, that's very disappointing because I've been dreaming of napping with you under the blankets for *weeks*." She grinned. "Naked."

"Okay. Maybe a short nap."

She laughed and bounced up to kiss me again.

We got into the Dart. "I was searching the car for the missing jewelry and I found a new tape in the carmuda triangle," she said, holding up a cassette. "Want to hear what's on it?"

"The what?"

"The carmuda triangle? The little space between the center console and the seat? I've been listening to all my mom's old tapes. There's some good stuff on there. Songs I haven't heard in years. I thought I'd listened to them all and then I found this. I saved it for you."

She popped it in the tape player.

"I was thinking we could drive with the top down since the sun's not up yet," she said.

"Sure."

It was in the twenties in Minnesota. We'd already had snow. But here it was seventy-two. The air was perfect and the freeway was empty so early on a Saturday. It felt apocalyptic, like we were the last people alive.

Sometimes with her, I did feel like we were the last people alive.

She hit play and Jon Secada came on. I hadn't heard this song in a decade. "Just Another Day Without You." It came out of the lone speaker and she held my hand between us while the wind blew through my hair and we cruised down the freeway.

I think this was the only time driving the Dart wasn't a bad idea. This was the small witching hour that it had been built for. The moment was perfection. A closing scene in a movie where they drive off into the sunrise.

My mind felt shriveled up. I was mentally, physically, and emotionally

exhausted. But at least I was here.  
For now.

SAMANTHA

HE SLEPT FOR almost six hours. I didn't want to wake him up.

He didn't look good. He had dark circles under his eyes. I just wanted to tuck him in and put him to bed.

I wanted to keep him.

I didn't even care that he was unconscious. I was just glad he was here. That I could cuddle up to him and hear him breathing and feel the warmth of his body. Even Pooter seemed to understand it was nap time. She was quiet and curled up next to him like me.

When he finally started to stir, it was almost one in the afternoon.

He rolled over, still half asleep, and saw me. He looked almost surprised, like he didn't remember where he was. Then he grabbed me and pulled me into a sleepy hug that smelled like his laundry detergent and his skin.

"I was dreaming I was at work," he said groggily. "Then I woke up and it was like I teleported. What time is it?" he asked.

"Twelve forty-seven."

He groaned. "You should have woken me up."

"No way."

Pooter climbed over me on a mission to get to my boyfriend now that he was awake. She didn't want me. I picked her up before she made it and dangled her over my face. "Really? When your daddy met you, he wanted to kill you."

Xavier took her from me and laid her on his chest. "Well, to be fair, you didn't have a butthole, sweetie."

I laughed.

He checked her gums while he was petting her. Looked in her ears. It was so cute. Always on.

He handed me back my purring cat, kissed my forehead, and got up. "I'm going to take a quick shower. Then we can go do whatever you want."

I propped myself on my elbows. "We need to get something for Mom's dinner."

"Okay. And I haven't eaten anything since pretzels on the plane. Can we stop somewhere?"

"In-N-Out?"

"Sounds good." He turned for the bathroom.

"Xavier..."

He looked back at me.

"You talked in your sleep," I said.

His brow furrowed. "I did?"

"Yeah." I smiled wryly.

"What did I say?"

"You whispered 'come on Eileen.'"

A grin spread across his face.

"What do you think you wanted me to do?" I asked, tilting my head.

"The same thing I always want you to do. I want you to look at me the way you look at mustard."

I laughed and he gave me one of his rare, dazzling full smiles.

Then he closed the door.

ARE YOU FREAKING kidding me?” Samantha said, staring at me.

I’d just told her about my mother’s call.

We were sitting at In-N-Out. She’d been holding the same french fry for five minutes while I told the story.

She shook her head. “What is up with this entire generation of aging adults who refuse to accept responsibility for themselves? Seriously, what is it? I could never imagine my kid not talking to me for a decade and me not going ‘Hey, maybe it’s me?’”

I snorted.

“And for them to believe they were in the right and to say it with their whole chest like beating the crap out of a child is in *any* way justifiable.” She looked disgusted. “I hope you never at any point bought anything they were selling.”

“I didn’t,” I said.

“No wonder you were so tired when you got here. They probably sucked the energy from your soul.” She ate the fry. “Do you think if they apologized, you would have been open to it?” she asked. “Like, if they came from a genuine place, they understood what they did wrong and they were honestly remorseful for it?”

I thought about it. “I don’t know. That possibility is so far from anything I could ever expect, it’s hard for me to even conceptualize it.”

She studied me. “I think you would have accepted an apology.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you’re reasonable. And I think you want peace. *I’d* want revenge, but you’re a much better person than me.”

“Ha.”

“How hard would it have been to be like, ‘Hey. I was an alcoholic. I did things to you I regret. I’ve worked to change.’? I mean, because he *did* get sober. He *has* changed,” she said. “And your mom clearly knows what an ass he was when he was drinking or she wouldn’t have mentioned it like something he deserves an award for. He’s just not willing to make amends for any of the crap he did while he was drunk.”

“I’m glad he’s sober,” I said. “If only for the sake of the long-suffering servers at the places they like to eat.”

“I can’t *stand* people who are rude to service workers,” she said. “It’s the best litmus test there is. That and putting your cart away at the grocery store.”

“They never put their cart away,” I said.

“Of course they didn’t. Jerks.”

I fiddled with a straw wrapper on the table. “I try to think sometimes about how they got to where they are. Nobody is born like this. I get these animals in my clinic that bite because they’re scared or in pain or they’ve been abused.” I went quiet. “Maybe my parents were some of those things. Maybe it changed them. I would be open to hearing about it if they had the ability to acknowledge it themselves and take some accountability.”

She bobbed her head. “Yeah,” she said. “I think we grow up and we either get harder or we get softer on our parents. We realize how fucked up they actually were or we give them a pass because adulting is hard and now we get it. They’re people and they make mistakes.”

“Did your parents make mistakes?” I asked, looking up at her.

“Oh my God, yeah. One time when we were teenagers, my mom got so mad at how messy the house was, she took a trash bag and started walking around, throwing away our stuff. She threw away my new Vans that I had saved up for. I held a grudge about that day for *years*. But now I sort of get it. She was probably exhausted, overstimulated because we were loud, tired of asking for help. Maybe she had a headache or cramps. I’m not saying she was right to do what she did, but I *do* understand it. And you know what’s funny? Knowing this now doesn’t change the memory, but it changes the way I *feel* about the memory. That’s what apologies and perspective does. It changes how you *feel* about what happened.” She looked me in the eye. “I am so sorry they robbed you of that. You deserve more. You deserve an

apology and for them to admit that they suck.”

I couldn't explain how grateful I was to feel so seen.

It was different from what my friends did for me. They backed me up and supported me, the same as Samantha was doing now. But they based their opinion of me and my parents on what they'd seen with their own eyes. They'd been there. They'd met the monsters of my youth.

But Samantha saw completely through all of it based solely on knowing me alone. She believed me.

And she was right. I would have accepted an apology.

I probably would never have let them fully back into my life. I'd never really trust them. It would take at least a decade to ever rebuild any sort of relationship. But it would have been nice to have what my parents put me through be acknowledged. I knew now that I would never get that. That I'd have to be okay with that. For the most part I already was. It was the phone call that set me back. The leaves still hadn't settled. And right now the part of me that wanted peace was officially smaller than the part that wanted revenge. And I could only punish them one way, by having everything they wished I didn't. By being more than they ever said I would.

Mom thought my clinic would go out of business? It would be there for the next fifty years. I wanted them to have to drive by it every time they went to the store and see *my* name on the building.

Samantha sipped her Coke and I gave her what she liked to call one of my contemplative gazes.

And they would never know *her*. I wished they knew how sad that should make them. How much they were missing.

And kids. They would never know my kids.

“Do you want children?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, setting her drink down. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

“How many?” she asked.

I thought about it. “Two? So they can know what it's like to have a sibling. I didn't get to know that.”

“Ha. You could end up with a Tristan.” She raised her straw to her lips and then lowered it. “What if I didn't want them? Or I couldn't have them?”

“Then we'd have dogs. Cats. Ferrets. Whatever you want.”

She pursed her lips playfully. “Sooo what you're saying is, I stick with

you, and I can have infinity pets.”

“Maybe not *infinity* pets. We have to be able to give them a good quality of life.”

She was nodding sagely. “But like, I could definitely show up with an extra dog or cat now and then and you’d just sigh loudly and ask me what its name is?”

“That is accurate.”

“I think all of our animal babies should be rescues,” she said.

“Agree.”

“Can we have goats?” she asked.

“Sure.”

She grinned. “You really wouldn’t break up with me if I couldn’t get pregnant?”

I laughed a little. “No. Would you break up with me if I couldn’t get you pregnant?”

“Hell no. That’s a big decision though. A lot of guys would leave if their partner couldn’t have kids.”

“I never understood that,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because if you were my wife you would be my world. Everything starts with you and ends with you. Anything else is just the stuff that happens in the middle.”

She peered at me. This time hers was the contemplative gaze.

She cleared her throat. “I’m going to run to the bathroom. Look at my new Murkle’s post while I’m gone, it’s a good one.”

I went to Instagram. A new graphic was up. It was in Christmas colors with text that said:

DM us so you can tell your friends a mustard brand left  
you on read.

I clicked the message box and sent the word *Hey* to a mustard company. I got an instant auto reply:

Thanks for sliding into our DMs. Click the link below and



order a bottle of our mustard with free shipping. Do it.  
You're messaging a mustard brand, it's not like you're  
having a lit Saturday night.

I cracked up.

No, my parents would never know her. They didn't deserve to.



We left In-N-Out and drove to the grocery store. The Dart was baking, as usual. We parked and went in.

"So we split up courses and I drew appetizers," she said, walking into the produce section. "I want to make these jalapeño popper things I saw in a video."

"The fruit is so much better here," I said, looking at the oranges.

"It's not traveling as far. Do you want to have a garden? To go with our menagerie of rescue animals?"

"Sure."

"Do you know how to garden?" she asked.

"Not really," I said, walking behind her. "But I will do whatever you need me to."

"You'll till my fields?"

"I'll plow whatever you want, as vigorously and as often as you'd like."

She cackled.

As she bagged the peppers she needed, I watched her quietly, smiling.

I liked that we were talking about the future. Even if it was just about our fantasy garden and our fantasy pets. And I liked this day. Napping and eating burgers and just going to the grocery store together. It was so mundane, but I wanted the mundane. I craved it.

You think that it's the big memories you should be chasing—and it is in a way. Birthdays and vacations and special occasions. But the small memories are the fabric of your life, the ones so inconsequential that you don't even remember them. You just remember how you felt when you were making them.

I would be content just following her around a grocery store in exchange

for nothing more than the moment that I wouldn't even remember later. I'd just remember it had been a good day and that I'd been happy.

She got what she needed. I paid and I was carrying her bags out to the car. We were almost to our parking space when I happened to glance and see something in the front seat of a beat-up Camry.

A pug. It was panting.

"Uh, is that car not on?" Samantha said, seeing it the same time I had.

I walked around it. No, it wasn't on. The windows were cracked half an inch. It was eighty-five today. I set the bags down and tried the doors, they were locked.

The dog collapsed on the seat.

"Shit," I muttered. "Call 9-1-1," I said.

I ran back to the Dart and grabbed the tire iron from the trunk. When I got back to the Camry, Samantha was on the phone. "Hi, yeah, there's a dog locked in a hot car and my boyfriend's about to break the window. We're in the parking lot at Vons on Glendale Avenue."

I started hitting the window in the back seat.

It shattered in a hailstorm of tinkling glass and I put my hand in and unlocked the passenger side door and dove in.

"I need water," I said, lifting the limp dog out.

A few people had stopped to watch. One of the women ran back to the grocery store.

The dog's tongue hung blue from the side of his mouth. His eyes were open.

I set him down in the shade on a planter and put my ear to his chest. He was alive but barely.

I was calm. Pissed off, but calm. I was always calm in a crisis. I had a lot of experience with it, my whole childhood had been a crisis. I had my parents to thank for that, the one thing they *could* take credit for.

The water arrived and I started pouring it over the dog, trying to get his core body temperature down.

A man pushed through the crowd. "What the fuck? You broke my window?"

I ignored him. I was still working on my patient.

"Yeah, we broke your window," I heard Samantha say. "Your dog was dead in the front seat."

Another woman's voice joined in. "It's ninety today, and you locked this dog in a hot car?"

"I cracked the windows!"

"How about we lock *you* in a hot car with cracked windows?" someone else said.

A police cruiser pulled into the parking lot in my peripheral vision. I kept working.

Someone ran from the store with a second sloshing kitchen bowl of water. I put my ear to the dog's chest again, then checked his gums. My jaw flexed. I took the water and poured it over the animal, paying special attention to the pads of his feet.

There was a kid in the crowd. I wished someone would get him out of here. He didn't need to see this.

The dog twitched. Then he sat up.

I let out a relieved breath and the crowd began to cheer.

I gave the dog a little water while he came back around.

The man was shouting at the cops. "This fucking asshole just broke my window!"

Samantha was already on it. "Uh, excuse me? You're welcome?"

"I saw the whole thing," someone else said. "The dog was overheating. That guy saved him."

The pug was sitting up on his own now. I pulled the bottom of my shirt up to wipe sweat off my brow. "I'm a veterinarian," I said. "This dog was suffering from a heatstroke. It's animal cruelty, it's a crime, and it's legally enforced."

I didn't know what the laws were in California for breaking windows to save animals, but I didn't give a shit.

Apparently I was within my rights because twenty minutes later the officers were writing him a ticket and letting me go.

I was still crouched, monitoring the patient, when the police finished up with the man.

"You need to take him to an emergency vet for fluids," I said to him as the police got back in their cruiser.

He balled his ticket up and threw it. "Fuck you. I'm not spending a dime on him. I got a broken window and a ticket for a five-dollar dog? He can die again for all I care." He looked like he was going to hit me.

I stood slowly to face him. I was a full six inches taller than him and twenty years younger too. I hadn't been in a fight since Dad, but if I was going to break the streak, I didn't mind doing it today.

Samantha stepped in front of me. "You're not gonna take him to the vet?" she said to the man. She pulled her phone out. "Say that again. Tell me how you locked your dog in a hot car on a ninety-degree day, we had to break your window to save him, the cops gave you a citation for animal cruelty, and now you're refusing to take him to the vet for treatment. Tell me again."

The man's face went ruddy.

"Go ahead," she said. "Let's see what your employer thinks of this. I'm about to make you famous. Just to recap, you're a dog abuser. Alllllll these people filmed the whole thing. Your dog basically died and my boyfriend just happens to be a veterinarian who saved him for you and now you won't get your dog treatment."

He looked at her and he looked at me. Then he glanced at the camera and the onlookers still hovering and recording. He decided it wasn't worth it.

"Fuck you." Then he stalked off to his car and left without getting his animal.

When he was out of sight, Samantha put her phone down and turned to me, letting out a breath. "Is this how dogs end up in the witness protection program?"

"This is exactly how dogs end up in the witness protection program," I muttered.

"I've always wanted a pug."

"Well, today's your lucky day."

SAMANTHA

WE WENT TO the vet after the smash-and-pug-grab, and then home.

I was in the kitchen telling Jeneva the story while Xavier monitored the dog in my apartment. Mom's birthday dinner was in less than an hour.

Since I was doing the apps, I had less time than everyone to get my food ready. Jeneva, who managed to land salad, had taken pity on me and was helping. I was making baked jalapeños. They had a cream cheese peanut butter filling and then you topped them with golden raisins and feta. It didn't feel ambitious at the time, but I was still flustered from earlier.

"So he just saved this dog? Right there in the parking lot?" she asked.

"Yup. When he stood up and looked at that guy after he said he wouldn't take him to the vet? Chills," I said, slicing a pepper in half. "The look he gave him? Total Dark Lord."

"He was so good with Mom that one time. And the boys *love* him," my sister said, deseeding the jalapeños I was cutting. "I wish he lived here."

I scoffed. "Same."

I finished filling the poppers and I put them in the oven.

"Where is everyone?" I asked, wiping the counter down.

"Mom's in the sunroom with Grandma. She's got pozole in the slow cooker. I think Dad just got home. He had sides and made them before work. Not sure where Tristan is. He had dessert."

"What did he make?"

"I don't know, he won't tell anyone." She set her knife down. "Hey, Dad left again last night," she said quietly.

I froze with a rag in my hand. "Whaaaat?"

"Yeah," she whispered. "At midnight. I saw him get in the car."

“You think it’s his tooth again?” I asked.

“I don’t think so. What is going on?”

“Dad’s fucking around, that’s what’s going on,” Tristan said from the doorway.

I turned and pinned him with a look. “*What?*”

Jeneva put a hand on her hip. “Dad would never.”

My brother crossed his arms. “Oh no? Sorry, but I know what booty call hours are. And he’s acting shady as fuck.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t even start rumors like that, Tristan. I get that you enjoy the intrigue, but Dad is not a cheater.”

“He leaves at least twice a week,” he said, pursing his lips.

I pulled my face back. “He does?”

“Yeah. I’m in the fucking basement, I see the driveway from the window. You owe me a tattoo by the way.”

I groaned. “I know. Just make the appointment and Venmo request me.”

“I will. Thanks.” He took a handful of the shredded cheese for Jeneva’s salad and left.

My sister paused to shake her head at him as he disappeared back down to his basement lair.

“As if...” she mumbled.

Mom was the love of Dad’s life. They’d been together for over thirty years. Even the *idea* of him cheating was ridiculous.

“Why is he like that?” I whispered.

“Who knows. I literally don’t have the energy for it.”

I heard the back door open. Xavier walked in.

“How’s the dog?” I asked.

“He’s fine. Resting.” He nodded at my sister. “Hi. Nice seeing you again.”

Then he leaned over and gave me a quick kiss. “Do you want help with this?” he asked, nodding at the dishes.

“I would love help, thank you.”

Xavier took over for me while I went down to ask Tristan for access to the wine cellar for a bottle of white to go with the starters. He opened the door, said: “You shall not pass.” And then shut it again.

When the appetizers were done, I sent out the dinner is ready text. I could feel the inhabitants of the house activate.

The boys came first, bursting through the kitchen, chasing each other and yelling. While my sister scolded them for running, Grandma made her way in and smiled when she saw my boyfriend. “Xavier, the penis that flew in from Minnesota. Nice to meet you.” She shuffled to the fridge to get a beer.

Xavier blanched and I leaned into him. “That comment was taken *very* out of context,” I whispered.

“I can’t wait to hear the explanation,” he whispered back, amused.

Dad came in next leading Mom. She stopped in the doorway, noticing the fancy setup. “Is it New Year’s Eve?” she asked.

She looked blankly around the kitchen, no recognition for me or the man who’d patched her up that night—or any of us really. But I’d done her makeup this morning while Xavier was sleeping and Tristan did her hair and Dad dressed her in a pretty red dress. She looked amazing. She looked the closest to her old self that she ever would.

If you didn’t talk to her, if you didn’t already know that the dementia had taken hold, you wouldn’t know just looking at her. Not tonight.

I was glad I had so many memories of her from before so I could superimpose them onto who she was now. It let me pretend, even just for a second, that none of who she was today was real.

I pictured her bursting into animation. Putting her hands over her mouth to smile at the setup. She would comment on the flowers we’d gotten her and make a joke with Dad about the jalapeños not being the hottest thing in the room.

She’d grab her own plate and serve herself and ask Xavier about what he does for a living while she ate without anyone helping her. She’d nod in understanding and ask follow-up questions because she’d remember his answers, telling her own little stories. Then she’d reapply her own lipstick and take pictures with her kids and insist that Xavier scoot into one because she’d know that he wasn’t just some guy.

But the facade could only last a second. The image in my mind blurred as Dad snapped a bib on her. The color faded and she went back to gray.

Dad sat her down and then put a hand out to Xavier. “Hi, I’m Dan. I think you’ve already met my wife, Lisa.”

“Yes, we met a few months ago.” He shook Dad’s hand and looked at Mom. “Good seeing you again,” Xavier said, smiling at her.

She said hello. That's all. And only because it was an ingrained response, not because she was being social or even that she realized she was being introduced to someone. It was just the echo.

I felt the ache in my chest.

"I want to thank you for your help that night," Dad said. "I had to run to the pharmacy and I left the back door unlocked, and well—You know what happened."

"It's no problem."

Tristan appeared right as Jeneva set her salad down.

He completely ignored all of us. He grabbed a mixing bowl and shoveled half the salad into it. Then he took six of the jalapeño poppers and dropped them on top, Salt Baed the bowl with raisins, stabbed the middle of this slop pile with a fork, and plopped onto a stool. "By the way, your boyfriend is in a viral video," he said. Then he started eating.

Xavier and I blinked at each other.

"What?" I said.

Jeneva looked back and forth between us. "What is he talking about?"

"What viral video?" I asked.

Tristan rolled his eyes. "Google is free?"

I picked up my phone.

I had a text from Becca. She'd sent it to me and Xavier in a group chat with a bunch of numbers I didn't have in my phone:

Omg 😏 the comments

There was a link.

"Xavier, check your phone," I said.

I clicked on the attachment and a video with almost one hundred thousand views on it popped up.

It was the parking lot earlier. The caption read, "hot veterinarian saves dog #glendale #animalrescue #thirsttrap."

I let the video play.

It was a total hero montage. Xavier breaking the window and lifting the pug from the car. His arms look great. He's all serious and devastatingly handsome, his jawline like a paid actor.



Then he's got the water and he's doing his cool-down thing—the cameraman was really good, getting all the angles. The dog's coming out of it, I'm in the background on the phone with 911, the cops are pulling up.

It pans to when the asshole guy comes out to yell at us about his window, then back to Xavier, still on his knees. The dog is sitting up now. Xavier is glistening like he's been misted with olive oil, an homage to the volleyball scene from *Top Gun*. He lifts the bottom of his shirt to wipe sweat off his face. You can see his whole stomach in HD. His six-pack abs crunch like an accordion, it's glorious. Then that part of the clip repeats in slow motion.

Oh my God, the person who took this video was *good*. They understood the assignment. The whole thing was a cinematic masterpiece, start to finish.

I went *straight* to the comments.

Why am I jealous of an unconscious pug??

BRB Locking myself in a hot car

How many times did I watch the end? Yes.

I put a hand over my mouth to cover my laugh. Oh, he was gonna haaaate this.

I looked up. He was watching the video. His face had gone flat.

Becca's group chat was pinging with texts. I assumed it was the guys.

WTF Bro 🦴 I see u been doing the crunches I showed u, thank god for me

Holy shit I'm laughing so hard what r u doing in CA ?

Is that Samantha's number? Is the dog ok?

I looked back at my silent date.

“You all right over there?” I asked.

He stared at the phone another moment, then slowly looked up at me. ““I need him in a way that’s a threat to feminism”? What does that even mean?”

I snorted.

Dad looked back and forth between us. “What *does* that mean?”

Jeneva was laughing, watching the clip on her own phone. Actually from the commentary I could hear she wasn’t watching the original video, she was watching a duet of the original, which meant it was officially everywhere.

“Let me see that,” Grandma said, motioning for my cell. I gave her my phone. She took her reading glasses off her head and put them on and squinted at the screen. ““Lowering the volume so my bf doesn’t ask why the same video is playing on repeat.””

I bit the inside of my cheek.

She went for another one. ““I’d army crawl naked through a thousand miles of broken glass just to lick the seat of that man’s workout bench.”” She read on. ““A teardrop just ran down my thigh—””

That’s it. I lost it. *Uncontrollable* laughter.

“Grandma, give me that!” I took my phone back, dying.

Jeneva and Dad were cracking up. Mom was laughing too now, but only because we were.

Xavier was looking at his phone. “They are never going to let me live this down...” he said, totally talking about Jesse, Mike, and Chris.

They weren’t. They seriously weren’t. They were playing this at his funeral. He had no choice but to outlive them all.

I couldn’t stop laughing.

“I’m sorry,” I wheezed. “Hearing my grandma read thirst comments about my boyfriend was not on my bingo card today.”

That got him. He gave me a good-natured if slightly embarrassed chuckle. I mean, it was hilarious, there was no denying it.

My dad slapped his shoulder and gave it a paternal squeeze. “You’re a good sport.”

It took me a solid five minutes to get my shit together.

We finished eating and sang happy birthday to Mom. Dessert was a cake that looked like the coffee maker. It had been sitting on the kitchen counter

the whole time. It was a huge hit, if very confusing for the birthday girl who was already confused as a rule.

We all cleaned up dinner and an hour later, Xavier and I were back in my room. Our little rescue pug was fast asleep and snoring gently.

“Who knew you were going to get so much done on this trip,” I said, flopping onto my bed. “Saved a dog from certain death, your abs got famous, you got a boost for your business.”

“They don’t know where I work,” he said, coming out of the bathroom from checking on the dog.

I propped myself on my elbows. “The strangers of the internet? They do. Believe me, they do. Nobody works faster than horny women. They probably found you hours ago.”

He laughed like he didn’t believe me.

I twisted to grab my phone from the nightstand. I googled his clinic and turned the phone to him and showed him his new Google rating. 5 stars where a 4.7 used to be. About a hundred new reviews, all of them hilarious. I didn’t even need to check to know I was going to find this. I also knew the asshole guy with the pug was probably getting canceled as we speak.

“You’re a sexy hero,” I said. “From a PR standpoint, this whole thing is absolute gold. I pray for this kind of organic mustard engagement every day of my life. You have been blessed by the TikTok gods.”

He blinked at me.

“A VILF is a thing now,” I said, putting my phone away. “That’s because of you. You should be proud of that.”

He shot me a playful look.

“What?” I said.

“Stop.”

“There’s a VILF hashtag.”

“No, there isn’t.”

“Yes, there is,” I said. “I’m following it.”

He tickled me. I shrieked and twisted to get away from him. He grabbed me by the hips and rolled me over onto my back while I squealed.

“I liked VILFs before it was cool!” I said, giggling.

He tickled me harder. I started tickling him back.

We were both laughing. I had tears in my eyes. He had to hold my hands against the mattress to get me to stop. He leaned over me, his heart pressed

to mine, his chest still rumbling.

His hair was shaggy again. It hung down over his forehead and his full smile beamed.

“Are you going to stop?” he asked.

I bit my lip. “Making fun of you or tickling you?”

“Both.”

“I don’t know, I kinda like being pinned here. It’s making me want you in a way that’s a threat to feminism...”

He laughed and let my hands go, caging me between his forearms.

I rubbed my nose to his. “You want my advice? As a social media expert?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Until we as a society are mature enough to see your naked stomach in a slow-motion montage and act with dignity, I think you need to keep those abs put away.”

His eyes dropped to my mouth. “You want me to keep them put away?” he asked, his voice lowering.

“I mean, not in here. Obviously.” I bit my lip. “Unless you need to sleep. You’re carrying the weight of the thirstiest comment section on TikTok. You’re probably tired, I get it.”

He burst into husky laughter. “*Stop.*”

Then he dipped his head to kiss me.

“VILF. So lucky,” I breathed.

He smiled while he hiked my leg up around him and tipped my head back to kiss under my jaw.

“Xavier?”

“Hmmm...”

“Would you still want me if I was a worm?”

He pulled his face back and looked at me, amused. “Am I also a worm?”

“No. Just me.”

He blew a long breath through his nose like he was thinking about this seriously. “Well, if you were a worm, things would change.”

“How?”

“You would want to do worm things. You would have worm needs.”

“So no?”

“So I would take care of you,” he said. “I’d learn everything there is to

know about worms. I'd become a worm expert. I'd put you in a flowerpot. I'd make sure your soil was warm and you were safe. I'd set you on a windowsill—but not too high, so you wouldn't be scared." He started kissing me again. Gentle little pecks around my face. "I wouldn't know if you still understood me, but I'd talk to you anyway." *Kiss*. "I'd play music I know you like and I'd plant flowers for you." *Kiss*. "I'd decorate your pot with seashells. I'd never leave you alone. I'd take you with me everywhere. I'd have your lava lamp and a bottle of Murkle's Mustard where you could see it from your pot—"

"You'd keep buying Murkle's for me?"

"No, I'd buy it because it's the best."

I smiled up at him. His hair, hanging over his eyes.

"I think this is the only right answer," I whispered.

He curled his fingers around my ear and pressed his lips to mine.

This time I didn't stop him with silly questions.

XAVIER

WELL, IF IT isn't the threat to feminism," Jesse said as I walked into Donna's.

Mike and Chris were cracking up. I ignored them and sat down.

I hadn't seen them since I got back from California over a month ago, so they'd been waiting a while to use that joke.

It was Sunday, Christmas Eve, at seven in the morning. I'd just gotten off the graveyard shift at the ER. I was going into the clinic from eight to noon to wrap up a few things before the holiday and then I was running from there to another ER shift from one to nine. Normally I'd get to go home and sleep for a bit, but someone had called out, and covering for them meant I'd get paid time and a half for the holiday. It was too much money to pass up. Every shift was one part of an airline ticket. That's how I lived my life now, in flier miles.

Mike handed me a menu. "Where you been at, man?"

"It's a long story," I mumbled. "I've been working seven days."

"The volunteer stuff?" Chris asked.

I looked at the menu. "No. I've been picking up shifts at the ER."

"For what?" Mike said.

"The money. So I can see Samantha."

I set the menu down and rubbed my eyes.

I was exhausted.

Mike looked me over. "Dude... you look like shit."

"I feel like shit," I admitted.

"How long are you gonna have to keep this up?" Mike asked.

"Forever?" I said.

“Until she moves back?” Jesse said.

“She’s not moving back,” I said.

“So how’s that gonna work?” Chris asked.

“I’m going to see her as much as I can. She’s going to come here when she can.”

Jesse was studying me. “And then what?”

“I don’t know.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

I had never been more tired in my life. Not when I was in veterinary school and working two jobs, never. And I’d never been this happy and miserable simultaneously.

Being this far away from Samantha was brutal. It was like starving, all the time. Getting a taste of something every few weeks and never getting full and then going back to starving again.

We weren’t together for Thanksgiving. I wasn’t with anyone. I worked at the ER for the overtime. I wouldn’t see her for Christmas tomorrow either. But she was coming out the day after that and then we’d get to spend the week at the cabin with everyone, so at least I had that payoff to look forward to. But after that? Who knew. The financial situation wasn’t great. For either of us.

I wasn’t in this alone, we shared the cost of seeing each other. She bought her own ticket for the cabin trip, but that was all she could afford for the next few months. She was paying on a home equity loan for house repairs now and she wasn’t in any better shape to pay for travel than I was—and only I could pick up side jobs and overtime. Her work didn’t offer OT and she took care of her mom. It had to be me to bridge the gap.

“Damn,” Jesse said. “I don’t know how you’re doing it. I’d hate it if I couldn’t see my girl for a month.”

“What day’s Samantha flying in?” Chris asked.

“The twenty-sixth.”

“I hope the weather holds up,” Jesse said. “We’re supposed to get dumped on. They said sixteen inches or something.”

Mike waved him off. “Eh, that’s tomorrow. Should be cleaned up by Tuesday.”

“Glad it’s happening on Christmas,” Jesse said. “So nobody has to drive in it.”

“I have to drive in it,” Chris and I said in unison.

He was a pharmacist, and I had the ER shift. I dreaded the commute tomorrow.

Jesse nodded at me. “Hey, I know you don’t like to talk about it, but I saw your dad the other day.”

I was about to tell him I didn’t care, but he put his hand up.

“Dude’s getting audited.”

I scoffed. “I know. My mom mentioned it.”

Mike pulled his face back. “Diana? When’d you talk to her?”

“She called me. It’s a long story,” I said.

Jesse was grinning. “That fucker is so screwed. Remember how he used to brag that he didn’t ever file his taxes?”

“Karma,” Chris said.

The corner of my lip went up.

“That asshole’s having the year he deserves,” Mike said. “Finally.” He laughed. “Mom said his profile popped up on Facebook and she clicked it just to see, and he was bitching and moaning about junk mail and campaign texts.”

“Imagine not knowing how to unsubscribe,” Jesse said. “Idiot.”

Normally hearing about my parents was the last thing I wanted, but this actually made my day.

I ordered. When Janessa was jotting down what the guys wanted, I opened up Instagram and went to Murkle’s Mustard. I got so little time to do anything these days, I hadn’t seen what Samatha was up to online. She told me a bit about it, but I hadn’t seen her work with my own eyes.

The last Murkle’s post was a graphic with a mustard bottle wrapped in a red bow. It read,

You know what they want for Christmas? Probably not a  
mustard gift basket, but let’s be honest, you’ve had  
worse ideas.

The caption said to check out the link in their bio. It took me to the gift basket on the Murkle’s website with the words SOLD OUT under it.

I smiled. She was so good at this.



She told me they'd had two thousand of these and that the CEO didn't expect to sell them all. She'd had to push him for higher inventory and she'd been right.

I was so proud of her.

She was right when she said once that to do her job you had to "get" people. I couldn't conceive of a world in which I'd be able to convince someone to buy a mustard gift basket.

"You still been lifting, right?" Mike said, handing his sister his menu.

"A little at home. I don't have time for the gym," I said.

"You don't wanna lose those gains," he said.

Ha.

I needed to run a business, make enough to see my girlfriend, *and* somehow maintain my upper body strength. I'd be lucky if I got five hours of sleep a night at this point.

We ate and I had to leave before everyone else to make it to the clinic by opening time. I was in the office checking lab results when Maggie tapped on the door.

"What's up?" I said, not looking over at her.

"There's someone here to see you."

"Who?" I said, talking to my screen.

Tina popped up over her shoulder. "Don't be mad."

I raised my head and looked back and forth between them. "Why would I be mad?"

Maggie licked her lips. "We had an idea."

"A good idea," Tina said quickly.

Usually when these two had a "good idea" it involved something like me dressing up as a giant Chihuahua to hand out candy in the local summer parade.

"I think it's going to be a win-win for everyone," Maggie said. "And we really want you to consider it."

Tina was nodding emphatically.

"What did you do?" I said slowly.

"Just... go meet him," Maggie begged. "Please."

I swiveled to face them. "I'm going to need more information."

"He'll tell you everything," Maggie said. "Just talk to him."

Tina gave me prayer hands.

I looked at the two of them for another long moment. Then I got up and went to see who was waiting for me.

I don't know what I'd been expecting, but the man on the bench by the reception desk was not it. He stood when he saw me, a hat in his hand.

He had to be at *least* eighty.

He wore suspenders and had a head full of wild gray hair and bushy gray eyebrows.

"Dr. Rush?" he said, putting out a hand. "I'm Dr. Hank."

I shook it, still not knowing what was going on.

"I was hoping I could have a moment of your time," he said.

I glanced back at Maggie and Tina. They were peeking around the corner watching us.

I nodded to room three. "Please."

I followed him into the exam room and closed the door.

He sat slowly like his knees hurt and set his hat on the chair next to him.

"You're probably wondering what I'm doing here," he said, after I'd taken my seat. "Did the ladies tell you anything?"

"They did not."

He chuckled a little. "They're a pair." He shook his head. "I'll cut right to it then. I would like to come work for you."

I stared at him.

He put a hand up. "I know, I'm old. Hear me out. I've got fifty-five years of vetting under my belt. I owned my own clinics for most of that. I know how hard those first few years can be and I think I can help."

"I'm sorry—Hank? I've explained this to them, I can't afford another doctor—"

"I'll work for free."

I blinked at him.

"You'll work for free," I said slowly.

"I don't need the money. What I need is people. Socialization. I need something to look forward to every day. Something to get me up and out of bed, keep me moving."

"You can volunteer," I said, shaking my head. "There's plenty of rescues that will take you."

"But they don't have them," he said, pointing at the door. "Before the ladies came to work for you, they worked for me."

I straightened. “Dr. Brekken?”

“That’s me.”

Dr. Hank Brekken. I knew him—of him. He’d retired, sold his practice. I’d hired Maggie and Tina as a pair two months after his clinic shuttered two years ago.

“I just want to work with my people again,” he said. “I want to see my friends. They take care of me—I’m sure you know. They like to feed you.”

I let out a dry laugh. “Yes. They do. Why close the practice if you weren’t ready to retire?” I asked.

He sighed. “Well, the long answer is my business partner was ready to retire. I was slowing down, and it was getting harder to be on my feet that much. My knees aren’t as young as they used to be. The short answer is my wife was dying. Cancer. I wanted to spend as much time with her as I could.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” I said.

He nodded. “She passed away four months ago. I don’t have any kids, and my family’s gone. I’m trying to stay busy. It’s easy to just let yourself go when something like this happens and... well. Anyhow. That’s where I’m at. I ran into Maggie last week and she mentioned you might have something for me. Figured I should give it a shot.”

I studied him. “I don’t feel right not paying you.”

He shrugged. “Pay me enough for the tank of gas to get here, then, if it makes you feel better. But I really don’t need it. My house is paid off, and I’ve got plenty in my savings, more than I’ll ever spend. Heck, I’d pay you. Coming here is cheaper than a gym.”

I let a breath out through my nose. “What kind of schedule are you looking for?”

“Something easy. Every other day maybe, just to give me a chance to recover from the day before. I go to church Sundays, so I’d prefer to be off then, but I could help out in a pinch.”

“So two, three days a week?”

“That would be perfect. And much appreciated.”

I sat back and looked at him. This was the answer to so many of my problems. I could take an extra day off to stay longer in California without having to close the office while I was gone. I could sleep on days I picked up graveyard shifts instead of running from one job to the next. Take a sick

day without canceling on patients, double up the number of animals we could see on the days we both worked... It felt like an act of God that he was sitting here. I still couldn't quit the ER, but at least this would improve my current quality of life.

I couldn't see how I could say no. So I didn't. "Welcome to the team."

We shook on it.

When we went out to tell Maggie and Tina, they started screaming and ran to hug him. Then they started hugging *me*.

My phone rang and saved me. It was Samantha. I wriggled out of the PDA and swiped to answer.

"Hey—"

"Xavier..."

I froze. She was crying. "What's wrong?"

Everyone stopped talking and looked at me.

"It's my grandma. She didn't wake up this morning. She died."

SAMANTHA

I WOULD NEVER remember Christmas Eve the same way again. It would be the day my heart had been broken, probably for as long as I lived. A lifetime of good memories and moments wiped out by one tragic event and rebranded into the day the bad thing happened.

Everything was a blur.

I called Xavier. That was the first thing I did. It felt like sending out a pointless SOS. He couldn't get here. I was shouting into the void like the *Titanic* beeping Morse code into the ether as it sank, even though nobody was going to make it in time to pull survivors from the icy waters.

Dad brought Mom to my apartment to get her out of the chaos. Tristan took the boys to get donuts so they wouldn't see when the coroner showed up. I wish I'd thought of it before he did so I wouldn't have to see it either. They brought her out feet first, wrapped in a blue body bag.

My sister and I answered questions clutching tissues. Neither of us really cried. It was more of a dazed sniffing in between because we had to keep it together enough for the tasks we had to perform.

After her body was gone, we had to clean her room. Jeneva balled up the sheets and the mattress protector and we stuffed it into the washing machine. Then my sister and I called funeral homes. Dad contacted the rest of the family, Tristan brought back donuts and ordered food later, which was probably the only reason any of us actually ate.

Mom kept asking for Grandma.

I had the foresight to preemptively medicate her. Everyone was crying and if Dad going to the gym had set her off, Grandma dying was going to be a thousand times worse. Not that she'd understand what had happened,

but she would know that one of her constants was suddenly not there and that would be enough.

I know I was doing things, but I felt like I wasn't doing anything. It felt like more needed to be done, important time-sensitive tasks, and I couldn't remember it all and everything was taking too long and I was moving too slow.

I fed Pooter. I fed the pug. He pooped on the carpet in my room, probably because nobody let him out. I cleaned that up. I had a headache from crying—or not crying enough and trying to hold it in.

Then somehow it was nighttime. I took two melatonin and then two Advil PMs.

I didn't expect Xavier to come. He said he would. The last thing he told me was "I'm coming." But I hadn't heard from him since I'd called him this morning. My fault, not his—I'd let my phone die, the truest indication of my mental headspace.

Then at 1:08 a.m. Christmas morning I felt a dip on the side of my bed. Suddenly I was wrapped in firm familiar warm arms and for the first time in sixteen hours I was held together enough by someone to completely fall apart.

I utterly lost my shit.

Guttural sobbing into his shirt. The breakdown I should have been having all day, but I'd been too busy adulting to properly lose it.

"Shhhhhhh, it's okay." Xavier smoothed my hair.

I couldn't see him. It was dark in the room and I was buried in his chest, but even with my eyes closed I knew him. I'd know him anywhere. I felt rescued, like help had finally arrived. I didn't have to be strong anymore, I could be a worm and he'd be a worm expert and I could just wiggle down in the dirt and rest my brain. I wanted him to hold me so tight I couldn't breathe.

"Shhhhhh, I'm here," he whispered.

I couldn't even imagine the hoops he had to go through to make this happen. The astronomical cost of the last-minute Christmas airline ticket, covering the ER shift he was already covering for someone else, finding someone to watch Jake, canceling on the guys for the cabin.

My whole body racked with sobs.

She was gone. One minute she was alive, and then she wasn't.

I thought Mom's dementia was cruel. It *was* cruel. It was a long goodbye. But no goodbye was just as bad.



When I woke up at 10:15 the next morning, Xavier wasn't there.

I thought for a second that I had imagined him here, that I'd been delirious with grief and it never happened. But then I saw his duffel bag by the bed and it made me burst back into tears.

I took a shower and put on clean clothes, brushed my hair because I didn't want to be the girl with the rat's nest in front of him. He was pretty much the only reason I was functioning at all.

When I pulled on his hoodie to leave for the house, I saw he'd fed Pooter, changed her water, and cleaned her litter box. The pug was also gone.

I found my dog and my boyfriend in the kitchen serving breakfast to the boys, who were sitting at the counter, feet dangling off barstools.

Xavier had made a whole pan of ham and cheese scrambled eggs. There was a massive stack of buttered toast on the island cut into triangles and a full pot of fresh coffee.

"Hey," he said, setting down the frying pan when he saw me. "I didn't want to wake you up." He came over and hugged me.

When he let me go, I looked around blearily. "Where is everyone?"

"Your dad came down for coffee. He said your mom had a bad night. Your sister is taking a shower. I haven't seen Tristan."

The dog peered up at me from Xavier's feet.

He had been adopted by the boys. They named him Pugsly—very unimaginative, but I'd let it slide. He'd lived in the house for the first week he was here but every time Mom saw him, she asked whose dog it was. Twenty, thirty times a day. It got to the point where we all wanted to tear our hair out. We had to keep the dog in my apartment just to maintain our sanity.

Would she do this with Grandma too? Ask us over and over where she was? Make us tell her again and again that she'd died—or worse, make up a lie so she didn't have to relive it every time she forgot?

I somehow knew this was exactly what would happen.

I was already braced for the emotional and mental drain of dealing with this, every day, probably until Mom couldn't speak anymore. Cruel and unusual punishment for an already heartbreaking situation and the only relief would be when Mom was so far gone she couldn't form the words to ask.

"I have to walk the dog," I said absently.

"I walked him," Xavier said. "Sit."

I nodded and let him put me on a stool. Then he went back to the stove.

"What time are we opening presents?" Holden asked.

"Oh, shit," I breathed, putting my face in my hands. It was Christmas. I completely forgot. I simultaneously remembered and didn't remember the holiday.

"Let's just finish breakfast and see what your mom wants to do," Xavier said.

The boys nodded at him like their messiah had spoken and went back to eating their eggs.

He poured me a coffee—made the way I liked it—set it in front of me, and sat down. "Can I get you to eat?" he asked, taking my hand and covering it with his.

"I don't think I can," I said, my chin quivering.

"If you don't eat, you'll feel worse," he said gently. "Eat a little for me, okay?"

I swallowed down the lump in my throat and nodded.

Xavier assembled half an egg sandwich and set it in front of me. "It's not a lot, but it'll keep your energy up."

I was staring at it, deciding whether I could stomach it, when someone started screaming. Xavier and I locked eyes.

Mom.

I flew off the stool and ran through the house.

Mom was in the living room, clawing at Dad. "Let me go! I have to get groceries!"

Dad was trying to keep her from the front door. "Lisa, we have groceries —"

"NO! I'm going to the store! Let me go, we need food!"

"What happened?!" I shouted.



Dad was holding her wrists. "Lisa! Stop!"

She didn't. She started melting down, thrashing and swinging. It was that day in the kitchen all over again.

Dad folded around her, pinning her arms as she struggled against him, screaming.

Tristan came up behind Xavier and Jeneva ran from upstairs.

"Did you give her the sedative?" I yelled.

"I gave her everything," Dad said, while she shrieked. "She was up all night talking about Vons. I don't know what's wrong with her!"

"Is she hungry?" Xavier asked.

We all paused. Even Mom took a moment to pant.

"If she's talking about groceries, she might want food," Xavier said.

I looked at Dad. Dad looked at Jeneva.

Tristan crossed his arms. "Did you feed her last night?"

I watched the color drain from Dad's face. "I thought you were doing it."

"Why would *I* do it?" Tristan snapped.

"Because you brought dinner!"

Jeneva's face fell. "How could you not feed her?"

"I was dealing with calling the family and the morgue—"

"And *I* was dealing with my *kids*! She's starving!" My sister's voice cracked. "Tristan ordered food!"

"She wasn't asking for dinner?" I asked.

Dad looked stricken. "She was... but she does that. She asks even after we've eaten..."

Mom was crying now. She'd stopped struggling though, like she knew we understood why she was upset. Maybe she did.

"Okay," Xavier said calmly. "It's been a rough twenty-four hours. Let's get her something to eat. Let's get everyone something to eat. Come on. Let's go. Breakfast is on the stove."

He said it in his firm, steady authoritative way and it worked. Everyone gave up the argument and turned like weary travelers for the kitchen, Tristan taking Mom like Dad didn't have the right to touch her.

I stayed back until Xavier and I were the last ones. I stood there, hugging my arms around myself.

"How did you know?" I asked, sniffing. "About the hungry thing."

“My patients are nonverbal. I’m used to figuring out what’s wrong and a lot of times it’s less complicated than you think. I usually start at food and work backwards.”

I huffed a mirthless laugh.

I stood there staring at the Christmas tree in the corner of the living room. All the heirloom family ornaments that Grandma always packed up on January 1, hanging on the tree where she put them. There were piles of presents sitting there. Some were for her. She’d made tamales. It would be the last time we’d eat them.

“We didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye,” I said, quietly. “She was here and then she wasn’t. And now I’m never going to see her again.”

He was looking at me gently.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He put his hands on my arms. “Sorry for what?” he asked.

“Everything? That the cabin trip is canceled, that my family is a hot mess, that you probably had to sell a kidney to get here.”

“I don’t want you thinking about that right now.”

“I should have fed her. I should have taken care of her too.”

“It’s a stressful time. You’re all going to miss things, everyone is. You need to give yourself grace.” He tipped my head up with a hand on my chin. “Do you need anything? What can I do for you?”

His eyes were red. He looked more tired than the last time I saw him, if that were even possible. He’d lost weight too. Maybe muscle? I know he doesn’t have a lot of time to go to the gym these days. But he was here. He was making breakfast for everyone and asking me if I was okay. And the fact that he was here did make me a little okay.

“My head hurts,” I said, rubbing my temple.

“Do you want some Advil?” he asked.

“No. I took some in the middle of the night, I don’t think it’s been long enough—” I froze. “No...” I breathed.

“What?”

A foggy, grief-riddled recollection had just drifted to the surface of my brain. A melatonin-soaked flashback.

I looked up at him in horror.

“Oh God, no. No, no, NO!”

Then I bolted out the front door and ran down the driveway back to my

apartment.

Please. Please let it still be there. *Please* let this be some horrible fever dream that didn't actually happen. I burst into my studio and ran for my bed.

On the nightstand next to the lava lamp was a single Advil PM and a single, lone earbud.

"Nooooooooo!"

"What happened?" Xavier said from behind me.

I turned slowly. "I swallowed my earbud."

He blinked at me. "You *what*?"

"It was dark and I was drugged up on sleep aids and my head hurt so much and I thought it felt a little weird going down but—XAVIER! Stop laughing!"

He was cracking up. My usually very reserved, very contained boyfriend was laughing.

"This isn't funny!" I said, starting to laugh a little too.

"It is the tiniest bit funny," he said.

"Am I going to need surgery?" I looked at him, despondent.

He shook his head. "No, I don't think so."

"How's it going to come out?"

"The way that most things come out."

I groaned pathetically and he gathered me into a hug.

"God, this day is a fucking nightmare," I muttered.

"And now you can't even watch cat videos in surround sound."

I snorted and he squeezed me tighter.

"You will be fine," he said, chuckling.

"You promise?"

"I do."

And with him here I did sort of believe him.

XAVIER

CAN YOU HEAR it?” Samantha asked. She still sounded stuffy from crying.

We were back in her room. It was the end of the night. She was lying in her bed and I had my ear pressed to her stomach. “Come On Eileen” was playing three inches from her belly button.

“I can hear it,” I said.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. The fiddle just started.”

“Oh my God,” she groaned. “My life is a sitcom.”

I pulled her shirt back down and propped myself on my elbow to look at her.

“You’re sure I don’t need to go to the doctor?” she asked.

“I’m very sure. You’ll see your earbud again soon.”

She scoffed.

She seemed a little better. Calmer.

I had over a week until I had to go home. More time than I’d ever spent with her. But I already dreaded leaving. It was hard enough going home knowing I would miss her, but it was even harder to leave knowing she needed me.

It had been a very long day.

Her family had decided Christmas would go on as planned. The funeral home was closed, there wasn’t anything else to do for Grandma at the moment, and the boys wanted to open presents.

I didn’t want them to feel like I was intruding on their holiday, but at the same time, wild horses couldn’t have dragged me away from Samantha in

her state. So I'd made it my job to collect the torn paper and put batteries in things while they opened gifts, so they could just focus on the fun parts. I set a timer on my phone for bathroom reminders for Lisa and let someone know when they went off. I put out snacks and boxes of tissues and I hovered at the edges and stepped in when I was needed and disappeared to wash dishes and clean up when I wasn't. And I was happy to do it, to be any kind of useful to her in any way.

I leaned down and kissed her softly. "Do you want to hear some good news?" I asked.

"Please, yes."

I told her about Hank. When I was done, she shook her head.

"Wow," she said, sitting up on her elbows. "So he's just going to work there for free?"

"That's what he said. I feel guilty letting him do it."

"It sounds like he wants to," she said. "I kind of get it. I think having us around helped Grandma too. People need people. Just pay it forward one day. Go be someone else's fairy godfather when you're a million years old."

"Ha."

"Should I send him a mustard gift basket?" she asked. "Do you think he'd like that?"

"I thought they were sold out."

"Yeah, but the guy from distributions has a crush on me. He'd make one for me if I asked him."

I arched an eyebrow. "The guy from distributions? Should I be worried?"

"When you're a VILF? No."

I snorted.

She put her arms around my neck and hugged me while I rubbed her back. "Should we do Christmas gifts?" she asked, her chin over my shoulder.

"Sure."

She let me go and I reached over for my bag and pulled out the tiny wrapped box. We'd agreed nothing too expensive, that our money should go to travel, but I'd put a lot of thought into this.

I sat up against her headboard while she grabbed my gift out of a drawer.

"Here," she said, climbing back into the bed. "You first."

I tore the snowman paper. It was a framed photo. The photo of us at Mother Putters.

"I sent it to myself from your phone," she said. "Look." She showed me the little plaque at the bottom: Our first date, July first.

I smiled. I loved it.

"I thought you'd want to start collecting memories," she said.

"Thank you," I said, beaming at it.

And she was right. I did want to collect our memories.

Everything I got to do with her was precious to me. I'd never been much for mementos or keepsakes but now all I wanted was to look around me and see evidence of *her*. I wanted to breathe in and smell her, reach out and touch her, open my eyes and see her. Short of living with her nothing would be enough, but the frame was a start.

"Now you," I said.

I gave her the box.

She tucked her legs under her and wiggled off the lid. She gasped. "A seashell necklace?" she said, holding it up by the chain.

"It's one of the ones we found in Santa Monica. It was in my pocket when I got home."

"I love it so much," she said quietly, staring at the shell in her palm. "A memory I can wear. Thank you."

She put it on and looked down at it around her neck for a moment. "Where do you usually spend Christmas?" she asked, gazing at the necklace but talking to me.

"Nowhere. I work."

She looked up and blinked at me. "Every year?"

"Mostly, yeah."

Her brows were furrowed.

"The guys sometimes invite me, but it's a family holiday," I said. "I don't like to feel like I'm intruding."

"So you're just... alone?" she asked.

"I'm always alone."

The look on her face was so bleak I thought she was going to start crying again.

"It's fine, I'm used to it," I said.

"It is not fine. That's not something anyone should get used to." She

shook her head. “You have me now, okay? I’m your family. You spend Christmas with me. Every year, no matter what. Promise me.”

Something about it made my chest ache. Maybe because I really could see it. Decades into the future, Christmases with her, our parallel line. I could see it like it was a memory, not a vision.

I never felt like I belonged anywhere or to anyone.

But I belonged to her.

It was so natural being with her, I wondered if loving her was a contract that I’d signed in a former life. Because it had never been like this for me with anyone else.

I think there are two types of people you fall in love with. The ones who are a good fit. Their lifestyle matches yours, you share the same values and beliefs, you find them attractive and you like spending time with them. It’s good. Great even. You can live your whole life with this person and be madly in love and never want anything different... unless you’ve already met the other type of person you fall in love with.

The One.

The person who was made just for you. And you only ever get the one.

Samantha was my one.

I knew it by how painful it was to see her cry. I knew it by how I was willing to work harder for her than I’d ever worked for anything or anyone including myself. Loving her gave me purpose. It made me feel like I knew what my life was supposed to be about. I felt focused and calm and like a frantic search I hadn’t known I was on was over. This was what I was here to do, this was who I was here to be with, and now my job was to get here and take care of her. And taking care of her family was an extension of that.

From what I understood, Samantha’s grandma did most of her daughter’s daily care. If my experience with aging animals was any indication, Lisa was going to have a hard time with this transition. She’d be off her routine, she wouldn’t deal with the change well, and her condition would probably deteriorate. Accidents would be a lot more frequent. They’d forget to take her to the bathroom, they’d forget to feed her, and both those things would make her more difficult to manage. Nobody was in the right headspace to deal with anything right now. Everything was the last straw. It was clear the family was in no place to take care of the fundamentals at the moment. I got the sense Grandma had done a lot of it

and the wheels of the household were not turning without her. So after I cleaned up breakfast this morning, I started figuring out lunch plans for everyone. Then dinner.

I was going to facilitate whatever was needed. Food, errands, chores. Anything to make her life better, easier, gentler.

I kissed her softly and she closed her eyes.

“How much did it cost for you to get here?” she asked.

“You don’t want to know.”

She looked at me. “Tell me.”

“The only seats left were first class.”

She grimaced.

“There was another cheaper seat on Christmas, but we’re getting snow and I was worried the flight would be canceled and I wouldn’t be able to get here until next week,” I said.

“Xavier...”

“I know,” I said quietly.

It was all gone. Every penny I’d made over the last month working at the ER, plus another hundred and fourteen dollars on top of it. Gone.

I was grateful that the money was there when I’d needed it. Better than putting an emergency visit on a card. But I felt deflated and exhausted knowing that I was back to zero.

She must have seen the weariness on my face. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine.”

“You look really tired.”

“I am really tired,” I admitted.

She studied me. “I feel like this relationship is killing you.”

“Don’t say that—”

“No, I’m serious. You shouldn’t be working seven days a week.”

“I don’t know what else to do,” I said. “It’s difficult and I hate it. But it is what it is.”

We slipped into silence.

“If you had the power to erase every memory you have of me so you didn’t know what you were missing, would you do it?” she asked.

“No, I wouldn’t do it,” I said without even thinking about it.

“Why?”



“Because life wouldn’t be worth living if I didn’t remember you.”

She looked like she didn’t believe me. “But it’s so hard though,” she said.

“Would you erase the memories of your grandma so you wouldn’t feel the way you feel right now?”

“No.”

“Some things are worth remembering, Samantha. No matter how much they hurt.”

I watched her swallow. “I’m glad she got to meet you before she died,” she said. “I’m glad you got to meet her, so when I talk about her, you remember her.”

I was glad too.

She peered up at me and put a hand on my cheek. “Look at this beard. My winter boy.” The corners of her mouth fell. “I feel like I’m seeing your life in slides,” she said, her voice a little sad. “I see you and it’s a five-o’clock shadow. Then it’s a goatee. Then it’s a full beard. And I’m not there for any of it. It just jumps ahead weeks and months and you’re different every time I see you.”

“Do you want me to shave it?”

“No. I want you to be with me all the time. I want to see you so much, I don’t notice the little changes.” She peered at me. “You are my favorite person. Did you know that?”

The words hit me unexpectedly, but I kept my face flat the way I always did.

“You’re my favorite person too,” I said quietly.

“Even when I’m trying to compliment you, you turn it back on me. You are a wonderful human, Xavier. I hope you know that. I hope you hear me when I say it. You are so selfless. Hard working. Generous. Gentle. You’re smart and patient. And I saw everything you did for us today. We all did.”

The words filled me up. For once I let them.

“You make me want to be that way. You make me want to be everything,” I said. “Funny enough to make you laugh, successful enough to take care of you. Sexy enough that you can’t keep your hands off me.”

“Well, you are definitely that.”

I took a deep breath.

“Normally I wouldn’t believe anything nice someone said to me,” I said

quietly. “But it must be true or I wouldn’t have you.”

She was looking at me the way she looked at mustard. And I vowed that I would be the kind of man who deserved that for the rest of my life.

SAMANTHA

WE WERE AT the dinner after the funeral. It was January 2. Xavier had been here nine days.

After a lot of back and forth, we decided to wait until after the holidays for Grandma's service. Her brother couldn't get here on such short notice. The extra time gave us a chance to pull together a really nice event. We'd had a digital photo collage, and all the out-of-town cousins were able to make it. Tristan dressed her in her favorite pink pantsuit. It was about as perfect of a send-off as we could hope for.

*I was a mess. For a hundred different reasons.*

Grandma was gone. Xavier was leaving.

The only thing that had held me together this past week was iced coffee, Xavier, and dry shampoo. I didn't know what state I'd be in if he weren't here, but I was about to find out because his flight home was tonight.

He had been the backbone of my family the last nine days.

I think a lot of the same principles of taking care of animals transferred to taking care of grieving people because he was really good at it. His strategy mostly involved feeding everyone and being Xavier. His calm, steady presence defused more blowups than I could count. He had this way of redirecting people when they were anxious or testy, the human equivalent of throwing a tennis ball and giving out treats.

He left bowls of trail mix and cheese platters out in the kitchen at all times. Made sure there were three meals planned. He signed for flower deliveries, vacuumed, emptied the dishwasher, watered Grandma's plants, fed the pets, took the boys out while the rest of us went back and forth to the funeral home to make arrangements. He took care of Mom a few times,

who amazingly enough let him. He was even a pallbearer. It was Dad, Tristan, my great-uncle, and my boyfriend.

Xavier had folded into this family seamlessly over the last few days. Some fucked trauma bond experience that was way less fun than being locked in a UFO but equally as effective. My whole family was in love with him.

So was I.

And now he was going to go back to Minnesota, and I probably wouldn't see him again until February. Maybe even March. I couldn't go to him, not right now. For one, I was broke. I didn't really have travel money to begin with, because of the remodel loan we'd all been paying on. But now there was the funeral too.

Tristan, Jeneva, Dad, and I split the burial cost, a couple thousand dollars each that I had to put on a card. Even worse, in the chaos I'd forgotten to cancel my roundtrip flight to Minnesota for the cabin trip I never got to go on, which meant I no-showed. I wouldn't get a dime back for my ticket so I was out nine hundred dollars there too. That one hurt. Airline tickets were our everything right now and to lose one was heartbreaking.

Besides the financial reasons I couldn't make it to Minnesota, there was the more pressing one: Mom.

I had no idea what we were going to do once Dad went back to work tomorrow. Grandma and I were Mom's daytime caregivers, but I worked Monday through Friday so I'd always been more of a backup than anything. It was going to be an adjustment. A big adjustment.

Mom was doing okay, but I had a feeling it was because we were all home for the holidays, and Xavier was bridging a gap that Grandma left. When he was gone, he would leave a void in this family and I couldn't even think about it because it scared me too much to do it.

I wanted to beg him not to go. And it was more than just needing my person during a hard time, or the things he did for my family.

I wanted him to live here. To stay. I wanted him to be with me all the time. I wanted the parallel life, here, like it had been the last nine days.

But I would never, *ever* ask him for it.

I knew how much he had to lose, literally and figuratively. His clinic, his credit—his entire life's work. There was really nothing in the middle. It was

an all-or-nothing situation and I couldn't imagine how he could ever justify leaving that behind.

If you made a spreadsheet and you listed all the pros and cons, there would be a laundry list of reasons for him to stay in Minnesota and a tiny two-line list for California that said "weather" and "Samantha" on it.

Actually, I don't even know if the weather would be a sell for him—he liked seasons.

So just me.

And even I was practical enough to know that didn't make sense.

Knowing that we would never have more than this—and knowing that we should—was so hard to accept.

The funeral dinner reception was a buffet at Luigi's. People were starting to say their goodbyes on their way out of the restaurant. I was sitting at the table in my black dress when Xavier came back over from the bathroom holding his duffel bag. He'd changed into the clothes he was going to wear on the flight home. He was leaving straight from here.

The boys darted around the room chasing each other. Xavier made eye contact with Braden and shook a single finger and both boys stopped and sat like normal human beings.

"It's like a Jedi mind trick," I said, taking off my heels under the table.

He scoffed.

"Oh, I almost forgot." He dug in his pocket. "I found this under the washbasin in the laundry room this morning. It's been in my suit all day, I almost left with it." He handed me a bracelet.

I held it in front of me in complete disbelief.

It was Grandma's. The one she gave Mom on her twenty-fifth birthday. The one Mom had lost.

"There was a white bucket full of dryer balls," he said. "I was washing Pooter's bed for you. It was in there."

"I can't believe you found this," I breathed. "We tore the house apart. Literally."

"The bucket looked like it had been there a long time. I bet no one checked it. It was probably one of those things you get blind to," he said.

Tristan walked in from the bathroom.

"Look!" I said, showing it to him.

He pursed his lips. "Where was it?" he asked, his tone bored, like this

precious family heirloom hadn't been lost to us forever for over a year.

"The laundry room."

"Cool. Why does Mom look like a French whore?"

I gasped. "Tristan!"

He crossed his arms. "Have you seen her?"

"Yes, I've seen her, I did her makeup as always, she looks fine."

"You sure about that?"

I let out an exasperated sigh and like the universe intended to prove his point, Mom turned around from where she was sitting with her cousin Debbie at the end of the long table. I almost choked on my spit. Mom was contoured within an inch of her life. Dark, almost black-red lipstick and a smokey eye. Debbie had her makeup strewn out on the table and she was putting on yet more blush—and Dad was just sitting there, letting it happen.

I started digging in my purse for makeup wipes. I would be glad when all this was over. It made me remember how much my extended family annoyed me.

Xavier looked at his phone. "My Uber's almost here."

I froze with my hands in my bag. "I thought I was driving you."

"You should stay with your family. You'd only get an extra half an hour with me."

"But I *wanted* the half an hour."

He sat down and scooted in to put his lips to my ear. "I don't think your sister is doing well. I think your family needs you to stay and get them home."

I looked over at Jeneva. She was staring at a wall with red eyes while my uncle Roman on Dad's side was talking to the side of her face. She looked mentally checked out. As checked out as Dad was. And probably a little drunk too.

Xavier was right. I should stay with them. But I hated losing even thirty minutes.

"I already said goodbye to everyone." Xavier nodded to the door. "Walk me out front?"

I took a steadying breath. Then I handed my purse to my brother. "Here. Find the wipes, save our mother."

I slipped my heels back on and walked with Xavier through the restaurant. I felt like I was walking him to the plank. Neither of us wanted

him to go.

It was dark outside. The freeway hummed somewhere off in the distance.

While we stood in front of the entrance he dug in his pocket. "Here."

"What's this?"

"New earbuds."

I gave him a look. "Xavier..."

"You need them. I already programmed them to your phone. Please don't eat them."

I snorted. "Thank you."

"Of course. I made you a playlist."

I smiled. "You did?"

"Yeah. I'll text you the link."

"How many times is 'Come On Eileen' on there?" I asked.

"Not even once."

I laughed tiredly and wrapped my arms around him and let him hold me.

"I'll do everything I can to get here in February," he whispered. "I'll work overnights every weekend if I have to."

I pulled away to look at him. "Xavier, no. Please take care of yourself."

"Me getting back here *is* me taking care of myself."

We peered at each other. Me, begging him with my eyes not to leave and him giving me his contemplative gaze.

"What are you thinking about when you look at me like that?" I asked.

"Lots of things," he said quietly.

"Like?"

He regarded me with those crystal-blue eyes. "I'm thinking that I'm in love with you."

The words were so unexpected, I lost my breath.

"Xavier..."

"You don't have to say it back. I just didn't want to lie."

"But... but you've always looked at me like that," I said.

"I know. I've always loved you," he said simply. "I think I couldn't forget you because I remember you from a different lifetime. And I loved you then too."

I had to clutch a hand over my heart.

His Uber drove up behind him. He leaned down and gave me a kiss.

When he pulled away I peered up at him. "I love you too."

He held my gaze for a long moment, something pained on his face. Then he let me go and left me. Again.

Love or no, it was still just my name on that list.



XAVIER

LEAVING WAS DIFFERENT today. Standing on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant kissing her goodbye felt like having a panic attack.

My soul took root every time I came there. It dug down and anchored me and I'd stayed so long this time I'd had to tear myself in half to leave. Being two thousand miles away was unnatural. It went against every instinct I had.

She needed me. I loved her and she needed me.

But I couldn't take another day away. Hank had already covered for me so I could stay for the funeral. He couldn't do two days in a row. I hadn't even given him a walk-through of the clinic before I left. I'd just run out of there when Samantha called about her grandmother. We'd been closed the week after Christmas—I'd planned to go to the cabin, but I ended up in California instead. Now I had to get back. So I picked the latest flight I could find to give me as much time with Samantha and I left.

I had no choice but to go home.

Correction. To go to Minnesota.

Because home was where *she* was. Minnesota was just where I worked now. Even with the guys there, it felt like a place I was tethered to by obligation.

For all the effort it took to get to where I was in life, to have the things I had—my own clinic, a staff, people who relied on me, the giant middle finger all this sent to my parents—a very real part of me wished I'd never done any of it because the things I owned now owned me. I could never walk away from it now without it ruining my life.

Even though going back to it without her felt like the same thing.

SAMANTHA

WE CAME INTO the house in our black suits and black dresses in black moods. No color today for anyone. Not even gray.

"I can't wait to go to bed," I said, pulling off my heels.

"Pajamas," Jeneva said to the boys. They ran up the stairs. "I'm down for a glass of wine if anyone wants to join me."

"You may have a bottle from the cellar," Tristan said. "One."

I scoffed. "So benevolent. I have work tomorrow, but I'll eat ice cream."

Tristan was already heading for the basement.

"Get the Hales Vineyard Merlot!" Jeneva called after him.

Dad took Mom upstairs to put her to sleep. I went to let out Pugsly and feed Pooter. I changed into Xavier's hoodie trying not to get more depressed than I already was that he was gone. I came back to find everyone in the kitchen. Someone had put out one of Xavier's charcuterie boards. Tristan was eating a stack of cheese slices with a single piece of salami in the middle. My sister was already drinking a glass of red wine in her sweats. She'd set the strawberry ice cream out for me. Dad had a whiskey.

"It was a nice service," I said, grabbing a bowl.

Everyone mumbled agreement.

Dad took a swallow of his old-fashioned, the ice clinking in the glass. "There's something I need to talk to you about," he said. "I don't really know how to say this. I'm too tired for tact."

We all looked at him.

"Your grandmother had a heart condition."

Jeneva and I glanced at each other.

“Did the autopsy come back?” Jeneva asked.

“No,” Dad said. “She told me. Months ago.”

We all stared at him.

“She needed a surgery. An aortic valve replacement. She’d been aware of it for a while, it was progressive, her doctors were monitoring it, she was just starting to have issues. It’s probably what caused her to pass.”

I abandoned the ice cream and sat gingerly on a barstool. “Why wouldn’t she tell us?”

“Because she wasn’t planning on fixing it,” he said. “She didn’t want you pushing her to try.”

“Why wouldn’t she fix it?” Jeneva asked.

“It was a major surgery. They needed to crack open her chest. Months of recovery and physical therapy—if she even made it out at all. I think she thought she had more time and she didn’t want us to have to take care of her. We were already spread too thin.”

Tristan’s eyes were fixed on the floor, still holding his cheese.

“And you just... didn’t tell us,” Jeneva said, looking stricken.

“She asked me not to,” he said.

“So what?! She’s gone now, maybe we could have convinced her!” she said.

“I honored her request,” he said in an *end of discussion* tone. Then Dad dragged a hand down his mouth. “I think it’s time to consider a memory care facility for your mother.”

The entire room jerked to attention.

“What?” I said.

“Wha—We promised her she would stay at home,” Jeneva said.

Dad looked weary. “I know. I know what we promised her. But the situation has changed. Her condition has changed. And I can’t do this anymore.”

“And why is that?” Tristan snapped.

Dad looked at him with bloodshot eyes. “I’m worn out. I don’t know how much I have left. You have no idea the level of care she requires.”

“Don’t I? We fucking live here—”

“Yeah?” Dad said. “Are you up with her in the middle of the night when she’s sundowning until three a.m.? Are you showering her? Dressing her? Are you changing her diapers?”

Tristan pressed his lips into a line.

Dad shook his head. “You think putting some makeup on her and dyeing her hair is the extent of what she needs right now? Your grandmother and I had been doing the bulk of the heavy lifting here for the last six months. She’s gone. Your mother’s care is complex and evolving, and I’m *tired*.”

I licked my lips. “Okay. I can understand that. But I think there’s some things we can do before we go full assisted living—”

“Like what?” he said, looking at me. “The adult day centers? Driving her there and back once a day when she tries to jump out of moving cars? Home health aides? I’ve looked into it. Her social security will only cover a fraction of the cost and we’ve already tapped into every program we qualify for. We’ll come out of pocket for the rest of it. You know how much it is to have someone come here? Twenty-five to forty dollars an *hour*. Do you know how many hours are in a day? It would cost us three hundred dollars just to cover me for one full night’s sleep. It’s cheaper to put her in a facility than it is to pay for her to stay at home. Your grandmother and I talked about this at great length. It was her idea. And I think she was right.”

“Her idea?” Tristan said. “How convenient that we can’t ask her.”

Dad blinked at him. “What exactly do you think is my angle here, Tristan? Your grandmother was dying. She knew what this was going to look like when she was gone. A core part of your mother’s care team is no longer here. We don’t even have someone to watch her while everyone is at work.”

“I can,” I said. “I work from home—”

He started laughing. A mirthless, worn-out laugh. “Good luck.” He shook his head. “She’s restless, emotional, and she’s living in a haunted house. She can’t remember that her mom is dead. This place reminds her that she’s missing. Every day she’s going to ask about her. Every hour. Sometimes every minute. Are you ready for that? In the middle of a conference call? In the middle of a project? Her wringing her hands and working up to a meltdown while you’re here alone from nine to five?”

He waited for me to reply. I didn’t.

He looked at each of us. “Her condition is progressing. It’s moving beyond what we can handle. It just is. And it’s not even about us. Do you think your mother wants to hurt you when she has a blowup? For you to have bruises and scars from holding her down? Do you think she wants her

children seeing the things you will see? Wiping her? Changing her diapers? She would want dignity. She would want us to have quality of life.”

My chin quivered. “But we promised...”

“Those places are like six thousand dollars a month,” Tristan said. “Just so you know.”

Jeneva looked up at him in shock. “Are you serious?”

“Yup.”

“How do people do this?” she breathed. “I mean, it’s taking all four of us just to afford the basics for her—”

“They become wards of the state,” Tristan said. “That’s how they afford it. And then they end up in the same kind of place Dad wants to send her only shittier.”

“I wouldn’t take her to a place like that,” Dad said. “We would find somewhere nice. And yes, they’re expensive. But the cost of keeping her at home is going to end up higher if we bring in help.”

“No,” Jeneva said, shaking her head. “I won’t do it. I won’t put her into a nursing home.”

Dad nodded. “Okay. So tonight is your night to sleep with her.” He got up. “Let me know if you still feel the same way in the morning.”

“Okay, just wait,” I said. “Wait. I hear you. It’s been harder than we knew, you’ve been shouldering this stuff alone, you’re getting burned out. Let’s try different meds. Stronger sleeping pills—”

“That I can’t get her to take half the time?” Dad said.

“Let’s do it at dinner,” I said. “When she’s already used to drinking something. Maybe we just put her to bed earlier. We didn’t know it was like this, Dad. You didn’t tell us.”

Dad went quiet.

“How about if we start helping with showers?” Jeneva said. “Everyone but Tristan. We can alternate nights.”

“And maybe we do get some help during the day,” I said. “Someone to help with toileting. We could do a shorter shift so it’s only ten to three or something, not as expensive. Just Monday through Friday while I’m trying to work.”

“If I have to change a diaper, I have to change a diaper,” Jeneva said. “Right?” She looked at me.

I nodded.

Jeneva peered at each of us. “We have to make it work here. We have to make it work with the four of us. It’s what she wanted and I can’t afford to chip in for more care.”

“We agreed to split it,” Tristan said. “That was the deal.”

“Yeah? Well I have kids, Tristan. I’m a single mom and I don’t get a dime of child support. I’m already paying on the remodel—” She buried her face in her hands and let out a shuddering breath. “God, why did we do that? What were we *thinking*? I have to put these boys through college,” she said, so quietly we could barely hear her.

“When it comes time for the boys to go to college, we’ll figure it out,” I said. “Nobody’s going to leave them behind. Nobody is leaving *anyone* behind.”

My sister didn’t look up, but she nodded.

Dad was staring at his glass. “I just don’t see this working. I think we’re putting a Band-Aid on a knife wound.”

“She wanted to stay with us,” Tristan said. “It’s the only reason why I’m fucking here.”

“What she wanted was to be *remembered*,” Dad said. “She didn’t want to be left somewhere and forgotten. We’d never do that. We’d go see her every day, we’d take her home for the weekends and holidays. And when we’d see her we’d get to do what we’re supposed to be doing, enjoying her, not resenting her.”

“Wow. Tell us how you really feel.” Tristan crossed his arms. “Why don’t we talk about what this is actually about.”

Jeneva made a frustrated noise. “Tristan, knock it off. Dad is not cheating.”

Tristan scoffed. “Oh no? For someone who cares so much about sleep, he sure disappears a lot between the hours of midnight to two.”

“What I do to relieve stress is none of your business,” Dad said, his voice a warning.

“It is if you’re trying to dump her in some nursing home so you can go fuck around,” Tristan said.

The three of us looked at Dad.

“Your mother is beyond understanding *anything* that happens in this house *or* this marriage,” Dad said, carefully.

“So you’re admitting it,” Tristan said.

Dad stared at him, his face more haggard and weary than I'd ever seen it. Or maybe it had been this way for a while, and unlike the slides I see of Xavier, it had happened before my eyes and I'd gotten used to it.

"I love my wife. I always will. There are days I'd rather be *dead* than have to live through the things happening to her," Dad said. "Her body might still be here, but she is *gone* and she has been for a very long time. I am a full-time caregiver to someone who barely knows my name. I will *not* apologize for what I have to do to make it so I can wake up in the morning to the reality I'm forced to endure. My life is a permanent, intolerable unhappiness. And I pray you never know what that's like."

He put a hand on his whiskey. "You three talk about it. Give me your answer tomorrow. I'll do whatever you decide."

He threw back the rest of his drink and left.

Tristan glared after him. Then he turned on us. "You guys are seriously fucking okay with this?"

"Tristan, stop," I said wearily.

"No. He's not even trying to hide it now!"

"And why should he?" My sister's tone caught me by surprise. "Dad has a right to happiness, Tristan."

"Not if it means he's fucking cheating!"

She set her wineglass on the counter with a clink. "So Dad goes on dates. Who gives a shit? Not Mom. All Mom knows is that he's *here*. In the grand scheme of everything that's going on is this really the hill you want to die on?"

"He's trying to put her in a home!"

"Dad's being forced to make decisions that *none* of us could *ever* comprehend," she said. "He has to think about what's right for her, what's right for us, what's right for his grandkids. And everything he said was true. Her care is complicated. We're all making sacrifices and nobody's making more than him. If you want to be pissed about something, be pissed that our grandmother had a terminal illness and we didn't get to know about it until two weeks after she's dead."

"Stop," I said.

My brother's chin quivered. He looked like he was about to burst into tears or storm out or both.

He chose both.

He swiped the Merlot from the counter, flipped Jeneva off, and left.



XAVIER

IT WAS 11:00 a.m. the day after the funeral. I was on the phone with Samantha in the clinic helping Maggie with a blood draw on a very lethargic senior dog, back in Minnesota where it was minus eighteen outside.

Samantha had just gotten me caught up.

“I’m too exhausted to even know how I feel about it,” she said. “I think my brain needs to pick and choose its battles right now.”

“Let’s start with the nursing home,” I said. “What did everyone decide?”

“We’re going to try the part-time home care and sleeping pill thing we talked about. I’m gonna make calls today to the doctor and an agency to see what’s available.”

“I think that’s a good start,” I said.

“Yeah.” She went quiet. “I hate it when Tristan is right. It’s like he’s some deranged Gen Z prophet.”

“What else has he been right about?”

“That you’re totally obsessed with me and faked a veterinary conference to take me on a date.”

I paused. “Maybe he *is* a prophet.”

She laughed tiredly.

We finished the blood draw and I gave the dog a pat.

“I’m kind of nervous about today,” she said. “This is the first time I’ve ever been home alone with Mom. I mean, I’ve been alone with her while Grandma took a nap or something, but it’s just me.”

“When in doubt, put food out,” I said, lifting the dog into the kennel.

“I can’t believe how much that actually works,” she said.

I latched the cage. “Everyone and everything is better fed.” I leaned on the counter. “How do you feel about your dad dating?” I asked.

“I don’t know. If you would have asked me six months ago, I would have told you he should burn in hell. But now? I’m beyond judging how anyone deals with any of this.”

She sighed. “I have to go. I have a conference call with Murkle’s at nine to discuss second quarter plans—I’m doing a new campaign with twenty-five mustard recipes. The slogan is ‘use Murkle’s unless you want it to suck.’”

I chuckled at it and looked at my watch. “Call me when you get your lunch break,” I said.

“I will. I miss you.”

I smiled. “I miss you too.”

“It’s seventy-one here today,” she said.

“Now you’re just rubbing it in.”

She laughed and hung up.

I took out my earbud and looked around the back room, already feeling the dip in mood I got when I hang up with her.

I usually didn’t mind being alone, but after almost two weeks with Samantha and her family, my threshold for companionship had changed.

I hated that I would go home to an empty apartment tonight. That I would eat dinner alone, make food for no one. Sleep in an empty bed. Not being with her and her family was wrong and distressing.

I felt a homing response in her direction. A constant pull to the west. It got stronger every time I went there.

I wondered what would come of that. How much I would suffer six months from now, a year from now, two, not being there.

I tried not to think about it. There was nothing I could do to change it. But the dread of it existed in my peripherals every minute of every day. It was coming, and I knew it.

The old dog whimpered in his kennel.

I crouched to scratch his ears through the bars.

He had people who loved him. He didn’t want to be here any more than I did. He wanted to be home with his family. I felt the same way.

We were both in cages. Only I’d made mine.

Someone knocked on the doorframe. I looked up to see Hank shuffling

in.

“Hi!” he said. “Maggie’s having me fill out some paperwork for my file. I don’t think I’ve had an employee file in, well, half a century.”

I laughed a little and stood. I hadn’t seen him since the day he came to ask for a job.

“How was California?” he asked.

“Good.”

“Better weather than here, I’ll tell you that much,” he said, taking off his jacket. “Sometimes I think I’m bonkers staying here in the winter instead of hunkering down in Florida like everyone else my age.” He hung his coat and put hands on his hips. “What you have going on today?”

“Nothing. Lethargic senior. I think he’s got Lyme disease. Two Dalmatians here for the day for vaccinations and a Lab that ate a Christmas bulb.”

“How you treating it?” he asked.

“The bulb? Just observing.”

“Take an x-ray—if the bulb is intact, make him puke it up. It’s a Lab—it’s probably intact. They don’t chew, they inhale. If it’s broken, then give him cream-soaked bread balls.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Do what?”

“They roll through the intestines, grab up all the glass. How much does he weigh?”

“Sixty-five?”

“’Bout seven or eight balls should do it. Have the owners keep an eye out for tarry stools and he’s good to go home.”

“Really...”

“Oh yeah. You won’t have any problem getting him to eat the balls either, he is a Lab.”

I scoffed.

“Thank you. I’ll try it,” I said.

He smiled at me. “Well, I better get to it,” he said, turning for the office.

One of the Dalmatians made a pitiful wailing noise from his cage. Hank stopped and nodded to the two dogs in side-by-side kennels. “Brothers?”

“Yeah.”

“Any reason why they’re not in the same cage? Diarrhea? Contagious? Aggressive?”

“No. I like to keep patients separated,” I said. “Safer.”

It’s how I had been trained.

“They’ll be happier together,” he said. “Less stressed, better outcomes. Bonded pairs suffer apart.”

I nodded slowly. Yes. Yes, they do.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out to check it. Samantha. “Excuse me,” I said, answering it. “Hey, I thought you had a conference call?”

“Xavier...”

Her voice immediately put me on alert. “What happened?”

“I just got fired.”



“Slow down, tell me what happened,” I said.

She was inconsolable.

“They said they were consolidating marketing teams,” she said, hiccuping. “That they were going to stick with the Heinz staff because it’s bigger. They already changed the log-in info. They fired my assistant too. It was like a three-minute Zoom and it’s all over, four years with them like nothing!”

“Did they give you a severance?” I asked.

“Three months. And I get to pay a million dollars for COBRA to keep my health benefits. I can’t even afford it.”

I was pacing. “You’re going to be okay. You’ll find something else—”

“I don’t *want* something else. I want my job.” She broke down.

It took everything in me not to walk out of the clinic and go straight to the airport right then and there. But I couldn’t. I’d wiped my savings on the last visit. I *just* got back.

I could hear Lisa in the background. She was asking where her mom was.

“She’s at the store,” Samantha said, crying.

“Listen, you can’t be upset in front of her,” I said gently. “You’ll get her upset and it’ll make everything worse. You’re there alone, and you don’t want her having a meltdown.”

I could picture Samantha nodding.

“Here’s what you’re going to do,” I said. “You’re going to put headphones in. You’re going to take your mom and go to the backyard.”

“The backyard?” She sniffed.

“Yes. It’s nice outside there. Seventy-one, somebody told me.”

She let out a laugh-sob.

“Put Lisa in the gazebo. Make a short playlist, something calming, both earbuds in. You’re not going to look at your phone, you’re not going to check email. You’re going to look around and you’re going to see all the things you’re always too busy to see. Check the plants for fruit. Pick some flowers, feed the fish in the pond, take a leaf from the lemon tree and break it in half and smell it. Walk the whole yard. Can you do that?”

“I can’t think of songs,” she said pitifully.

“Do you want me to pick them?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll make another playlist and I’ll send you the link. Stay on the phone with me while I do it.”

When I was going through my music, Lisa asked again where her mom was. Samantha answered. A moment later Lisa asked again. Samantha answered again. And again. And again.

I could feel Samantha eroding on the other end of the line. Telling her mom the grocery store lie with a little more hysteria around the edges every time.

Lisa had asked for her mom when I was there too, but not like this. Everyone had been home, the boys were running around, she had her husband—it was distracting. With just Samantha there and the house empty the way it usually was during the week, she was noticing her mom missing.

It was only 9:15 in California. Nobody would be home to take over until at least five. Even if I were in the car on the way to the airport now, I couldn’t get there faster than that.

I had never felt so helpless. The distance had never felt so big.

Samantha had just lost her grandmother, she hadn’t rebounded yet, she wasn’t okay, and now this.

“There,” I said, finishing the compilation. “I sent it. Both earbuds.”

“But I won’t be able to hear Mom—”

“You need to de-escalate yourself before you can do anything for her.

Okay? You put the oxygen mask on yourself first. She's used to the yard, she'll be okay in the gazebo."

She sniffed. "All right."

She hung up with me.

I texted the family group chat, minus Samantha and told them what happened, asking if anyone could get home early. Tristan said he could. He wasn't exactly gentle, but his direct delivery had a way of bringing his sister back from a nosedive, so this might actually be the best-case scenario.

Then I ordered her favorite iced coffee to be delivered to the house.

I went to Murkle's on Instagram. The last graphic was a retro-looking picture of a smiling couple holding corn dogs with a yellow mustard squiggle on them. The text read, "This could be us but you only like ketchup." The last thing she posted.

I unfollowed the page.

And that was it. That was all I could do. I couldn't hold her. I couldn't help her.

We were a bonded pair, separated by cages two thousand miles apart.

SAMANTHA

THREE MONTHS. THAT'S how long Grandma had been dead. That's how long since I'd been laid off.

It was also how long it had been since I'd seen Xavier.

He'd tried to come in February. He had the flight booked and everything. But a pipe burst at the clinic two days before his trip. It flooded two of the exam rooms and the bathroom and he'd had to close the office for a week to mitigate the water damage.

He had insurance but it didn't cover flooding or paying his staff while they were closed. He'd had to put payroll and the repairs on cards and then work graveyards at the ER just to pay them off before the interest kicked in. It took him two months to financially recover from that.

He was finally going to come this weekend, but now he was sick. Hank came in for him and Xavier went to urgent care, where he found out he'd been working eighty hours a week with a severe sinus infection.

Hank was covering for him going on two days now. Xavier hated that because Hank couldn't be on his knees that much, but he was too sick to go in—which knowing my boyfriend spoke to how bad it truly was. Xavier would probably come to work on hospice, he didn't shirk his responsibilities for anything.

I was also sick.

Physically I was fine. *Mentally* I was unwell.

Since I lost my job it didn't make sense to hire the home aide for Mom. Now *I* was the home aide.

My days were monotonous. I couldn't leave. I couldn't take her anywhere. Not even for a quick drive for a coffee or a walk or to sit in a

park. I washed her, dressed her, changed her diapers when she had an accident. I fed her with a spoon and wiped her mouth and did listless orange juice shots with her in the kitchen. I hung out alone all day with someone who couldn't talk to me, who couldn't remember my name. Who looked like my mom, but didn't know her, couldn't remember her, had never seen her a day in her life.

Mom asked about Grandma constantly. For the last three months, seven days a week, eight hours a day I told a story about Grandma being at Vons half a dozen times in a single afternoon.

I stopped doing her makeup. No point. It just gave me one more thing to do at the end of the night when I had to take it off. Her roots were growing out again. Nobody had time to do the little things for her anymore. Or we had time, but we just didn't have the energy. None of us did. We were all too sad.

My family was a mess.

Tristan wasn't talking to Dad. This made Jeneva mad, so she wasn't talking to Tristan, which was an interesting position to take considering she also wasn't speaking to Dad over the Grandma thing. Dad seemed to be avoiding both of them. He looked even more worn out than usual and I was so depressed I just wanted to be alone whenever I could so I could do the only thing that actually brought me happiness, which was talking to my boyfriend, who worked so much he never had time.

I missed Mom. I missed Grandma. And I missed the person I was three and a half months ago too.

Last Year Sam was shiny and hopeful and making mustard jokes. The me of today was a worm. And my worm expert never came to see me.

I tried to see the bright side of this thing with Xavier. I'd never get tired of my boyfriend being around. I'd always have something to look forward to. The sex would always be great because by the time we saw each other we were famished.

That's it. That's all I could come up with for the bright side.

It was like dating a ghost.

I was attached to someone invisible. I didn't have someone to help carry groceries in from the car, or to put the clothes in the dryer when I forget, or to go with me to get drinks on a random Tuesday when I was stressed and tired from taking care of Mom and I needed a beer.



He would run himself into the ground trying to be here. He'd show up so exhausted from the effort of affording his two-thousand-mile commute that he'd sleep half the time he was with me. And I'd let him, because at least he was sleeping where I could reach out and touch him instead of him sleeping in Minnesota, where the entire time he'd go dark and radio silent and I'd wait on my end of the country for him to wake up and exist for me again.

I just wanted us to be a boring, regular old couple who napped and folded laundry together, who argued about whose turn it was to take out the trash. I wanted the luxury of mundane cohabitation.

I wanted to get sick of him.

I wanted to see him so much, his bad habits exasperated me. I wanted to be so tired of his shit, I looked forward to him going out on his boys' weekends just so I could get some alone time, and then once he's gone, I'd miss him so much I can't stand it and I'm miserable the whole time because he's my best friend.

But I would never get that much of him. Ever. Not even close.

This was it. This was the only way this relationship would ever be. And it was better than nothing, but somehow worse than anything because of what it cost us to keep it going. It didn't even surprise me that he got sick. I don't know how he didn't get sick sooner the way he ran himself into the ground.

I wanted to go visit him. Go for a weekend. But now that I was unemployed I a thousand percent couldn't afford to drop the money on an airline ticket, especially now that I was reaching the end of my severance payments.

I'd looked for another job. Had half a dozen interviews, but nothing was Murkle's. No one wanted to pay me what I was worth—or they did, but the product sucked so bad not even *I* could sell it.

The only salvation for either of us was for me to get a job. If I got one that paid enough, Xavier could quit all his side hustles and I could pay for travel and then maybe both of us would be happier. He kept telling me something would turn up, to not force it, to just wait for the right opportunity to come, but waiting was killing me. I felt like I was fading.

Every night when Dad came home, I tapped out immediately. Handed Mom over and left to bed rot in my apartment and wait for Xavier to call me in between his two jobs.

I used to feel bad that Dad came home from work to more work. But now that I took care of Mom full-time, I realized his nine-to-five was his break. I couldn't even pee with the door closed when it was just the two of us. I would *love* to have a nine-to-five and then come home and do a few easy hours of hanging out with Mom while the house is full of other helpers before she goes to bed. Or tries to. Dad said she was getting up in the middle of the night again. That the sleeping pills weren't working anymore. He was tired, I was tired. Everyone was tense.

We weren't a team.

Missing Xavier, grieving Grandma, and taking care of Mom. That was my life.

There was no color in my world. Only the promise of color for visits with Xavier that never seemed to materialize.

I was living now in nothing but gray.

SAMANTHA

MY DOOR FLEW open.

“Get up,” Tristan said.

I groaned into my pillow. “Be so freaking for real right now, Tristan. WHY. It’s Saturday.”

“I don’t give a shit. Move.”

I pushed up my eye mask to glare at him, standing in my doorway. “It’s one of my only days I don’t have to watch Mom!”

“Get *up*. I’m your fairy godfather. I’m granting you a wish.”

“Tristan, I don’t have the energy for this.”

He yanked my blankets off.

I shot up. “What is your problem?!”

“I’m sick of your face. I’m sick of your mopey attitude. I bought you a ticket to go see your boyfriend.”

I blinked at him. “You... you bought me a ticket? For when?”

“Now. The flight leaves at nine.”

The speed at which I moved off that bed would have impressed professional track stars. I tore around my room throwing clothing suitable for the arctic tundra into my bag. “When do I come back?”

“Tuesday.”

“Who’s watching Mom?” I asked, jumping to get my minus twenty-five-degree snow boots off the top shelf in the closet.

“All of us. Hurry up, you’ll miss your flight and that will seriously piss me off.”

I’d get to see Xavier today.

I felt like I’d just been zinged back to life. Shocked alive, wound up, and

set north.

I took a quick shower, brushed my teeth, dumped my makeup into my purse to do on the plane, and we left.

Xavier didn't pick up when I called. It was 8:00 a.m. in Minnesota. He was probably knocked out from NyQuil or pure exhaustion or a mixture of both. Let it be a surprise then when I showed up to take care of him.

I'd compartmentalized the repressed guilt and despair of not being there while he was sick because there was nothing I could do about it and now the relief of knowing I was going to see him in a few hours made me want to burst into tears.

I was going to kiss every inch of his fevered face. I was going to make him soup and watch him sleep and hand him his antibiotics with a cup of hot tea with honey and lemon.

I'd needed this so badly.

I smiled the whole way there.

When the plane landed in Minnesota, all my delayed texts came through. He was up now. There were several from him asking where I was. I called while we taxied.

"Hey, where are you?" he asked. He still sounded terrible.

"You won't believe it if I tell you..." I bit my lip.

He paused. "Where?"

"Minnesota. About forty-five minutes from being at your house. The plane is taxiing. Tristan bought me a ticket and they're covering for me with Mom until Tuesday."

I beamed, waiting for the excited reply.

What I got was silence.

"Samantha..."

My face fell at the tone.

"I'm at your apartment. I'm sitting on your bed."

SAMANTHA

I HAD NOTHING left in my tank. Nothing. I went from a hundred to zero, instantly.

He was in California and I was in Minnesota. A fucked-up Shakespearean tragedy.

He wanted to look at flights to see who could get to who faster. He could get home to Minnesota by eight, I wouldn't be able to get to him in California until tomorrow.

I didn't care. I wanted him to stay put because he was too sick to travel more than he already had—but he absolutely refused to lose the time with me. We argued about it for twenty minutes and then he told me he was already in the Uber on the way to the airport. So three hours after he'd landed at LAX, he was heading back, sick, in LA traffic to get a flight home.

Of all the things that had happened the last few months, this was somehow the thing that broke me.

I felt like our relationship was cursed, like we'd angered some god who was jealous of our love and vowed never to let us be in the same room at the same time ever again.

I cried the whole way to his apartment and when I got there, I cried harder.

Not because he wasn't there, or because I was probably clinically depressed, but because it was clear how sick he'd been and how completely and utterly alone he was.

His trash was overflowing with empty medicine boxes, his bed was unmade, his laundry was piled up. Xavier didn't live like this. He was neat

and clean and very much had his shit together.

He needed me and I hadn't been here.

I would *never* be here.

I sat on the edge of his bed and sobbed.

I know it was ridiculous, but there was a very real part of me that wanted to let him go. If he was free, he could find someone else. Someone who could be here for him and take care of him. Janessa maybe. They could get married and Mike would be his brother-in-law and everything would be perfect. He deserved more than what our relationship could give him.

But I couldn't do it.

I couldn't break up with him. I loved him too much to leave him, and I loved my mom too much to leave her. There was no solution to any of it. We just had to live with it.

And Xavier had to live with it alone. It crushed me.

I don't think I'd truly grasped what it was like to not have family until he told me on Christmas that he usually didn't spend the holiday with anyone.

The way that information tore my heart into pieces was compounded now by seeing how he was living.

It wasn't me dating a ghost. It was him. *He* was in love with someone invisible.

I rallied myself and started cleaning, driven only by the thought of him coming home after his four-thousand-mile round trip to a dirty apartment. I stripped his bed, bleached his shower, Lysoled, washed his dishes, vacuumed. Threw open the blinds, did his laundry, ordered groceries to make him food when he got here.

There was a manic energy to my work. Like if I could just get all this done before he got home, it would be okay. It would somehow make up for the fact that he had been sick and vulnerable and alone because he picked me to be in love with, the girl from a different hemisphere.

But I knew no matter how clean I got his grout, none of this would ever be okay.

It was the one thing I wished I could forget.

I HAD OFFICIALLY pushed my body past its limits.

I'd used what little I had to get to California and then I somehow managed to turn around and get back. By the time I was walking up to my apartment, I felt like my legs were going to give out. Then she opened the door, dragged me inside, and threw her arms around me and I could have done this whole nightmare of a round trip a hundred times over if this was waiting for me at the end.

I was so happy to see her, tears squeezed from my eyes.

"You're so pale," she whispered.

"I'm a Minnesotan."

She did a little laugh-cry and pulled away to look at me. I could tell by the splotches around her eyes that she'd been crying before I got here.

"I'm sorry," I said, putting a palm to her cheek. "I should have told you I was coming. I wanted to surprise you."

"Why were you even out? You're sick, you look half dead."

"I'm not contagious."

"That's not the point, Xavier. You need to rest."

"I can't rest unless I'm with you."

I swayed a little. I wasn't feeling well. My body ached, and my ears still hadn't popped from the flights. I didn't feel like myself. I felt drunk, even though I wasn't. I chose to chalk it up to exhaustion and cold medicine.

She was studying me with beautiful worried brown eyes.

I wondered if I was hallucinating that she was here. I'd been wanting to be alone in a room with her for so long that maybe my brain had finally cracked and I created her myself out of pure imagination.

She put a hand to my forehead. The touch felt real enough.

“You’re hot.” She frowned.

“Am I?”

“I think you have a fever. Get in bed. Let’s go.”

I looked around while she led me to my room. She’d cleaned.

“I’m sorry I left it a mess,” I said.

“Stop.”

She sat me on the end of the mattress and started taking off my boots. I grabbed her and pulled her down on top of me.

“Just for a minute,” I whispered, holding her. “Let me hug you. Please.”

She let out a breath and I wrapped around her. I needed to feel her like a weighted blanket. I wanted the pressure like proof she was with me and not just some figment of my fevered imagination. I tried to breathe in her hair but I couldn’t smell her, I was too stuffed up.

She’s right, I shouldn’t have been on a plane, but I couldn’t justify taking four days off work that weren’t days with her. I would go out of my mind alone here without her. I went out of my mind anywhere without her but at least at work I was distracted.

The last three months had felt like a punishment. Like I was bailing water out of a sinking ship with a spoon. No matter how much I worked, no matter what I did, I couldn’t get back to her. And then I finally went and she’s not even there. Both of us desperate to be together and none of it was working.

She pulled away to look down at me, her hair around us like a curtain. Her eyes were bloodshot. Mine probably were too.

I was so tired.

“Xavier, you’re really hot,” she said.

“Just lay down with me...”

“No. I think you need medicine.”

I closed my eyes. I wanted to sleep. I felt like I didn’t even have the energy to get all the way onto the bed. My chest was tight. I was wheezing a little.

“Can you get me the pulse oximeter,” I managed. “Small black box. To check oxygen levels. In the medicine cabinet.”

“Okay.” She got up and brought it to me with the thermometer, looking worried. I slipped the pulse ox on my finger while she took my temperature.



My oxygen was at 85 and I had a fever of 103.

"I need to go the hospital," I said, trying to get up.

"Oh my God, *what?*"

I coughed and my ribs yelped. "My oxygen is low. It's fine, it's probably pneumonia—"

"Xavier!" She was running around the room, grabbing me a hoodie, pulling a charger out of the wall. She helped me up, slinging her purse over her shoulder.

"They're just going to give me some oxygen," I said, holding on to her arm. "Maybe an IV. I'll be fine."

She wrangled me to the door. I tried to take the keys. "I'll drive."

"You are not driving, Xavier!"

"I know where the hospital is—"

"So does Google!"

I swayed into the wall.

She looked at me, panicked. "Should I call an ambulance?"

"No, no. I can make it." I didn't actually know if that was true.

My body was giving out. I could feel it. Not in a dying way, in a *it had had enough of the abuse and neglect I'd subjected it to* kind of way and it was going to make me take the break I needed whether I wanted it or not.

And all I could think was that now we had to go to the ER instead of cuddling in bed or eating something together or doing literally anything else.

I felt defeated. Like my own body had betrayed me. It was probably the other way around.

An hour later they admitted me. Double pneumonia.

I had my own room. They'd started me on an antibiotic drip, steroids, and they'd given me a breathing treatment. I was going to be here at least until tomorrow.

Samantha was holding my hand.

"I am literally so pissed at you right now," she said, shaking her head at me from the chair next to my hospital bed. "I cannot believe you got on two planes like this."

"You can't be mad at a guy with a cannula," I said tiredly.

She snorted.

"You should have let me drive," I said.

She rubbed her forehead. "Xavier..."

"I don't get to do things for you," I said. "I want to do things for you when you're here."

"You think you should be driving yourself to the ER? That's what you want to do for me?" She gave me a look. "You *can* do one thing for me," she said.

"Anything."

"You can break up with me."

I scoffed. "No."

She sat back in her chair. "I thought you'd say that."

"Why are you thinking about that?" I asked.

"Because this sucks for you and I don't know why you'd want it?"

"I love you. That's why I want it."

She let out a puff of air.

"I love you too," she said. "But this is ridiculous."

"I don't care."

"You can't keep living like this, Xavier. I don't want you working like you have been anymore, okay? Please promise me."

"Then I won't be able to come see you as much—"

"Then don't come see me as much. I'd rather know you're here and healthy than working yourself sick. And I don't like that you had to give up the rescue stuff. I don't like any of it. If you're not going to have a life with me in California I want you to have a life *here*. I want you to have time to see your friends and go to the gym and sleep. Things that keep you sane and healthy. Maybe we'll just have to be okay with quality instead of quantity. Maybe we see each other less, but then when we do, we're not in the ER."

"I'm fine—"

"No, you're *not*. And neither am I."

She peered at me, her red eyes sad. "I promised you on our first date that I'd always tell you if things aren't okay," she said. "They're not."

I swallowed. "Are you unhappy?"

She threw up her hands. "Of course I'm unhappy. I'm watching my mom vanish before my eyes, my family is falling apart, I don't get a break, I don't have a job, I don't have my person. Those small moments when I have time for me or time for something, anything, that isn't Mom, you're not there. I can't call you when I'm having a particularly shitty day and say

hey, take me for margaritas. Or hey, it's Wednesday, let's get wings. We already don't get to make memories and when we do, they're like *this*."

"It won't always be this way," I said.

"Yes, it will," she said. "Because nothing about our situation is going to change."

I wished the tightness in my chest was just the fluid in my lungs, but it wasn't.

"I can't have you killing yourself for this relationship," she said quietly. "I already feel guilty that I'm not strong enough to leave you for your own good."

My heart rate on the monitor was jumping.

"I don't want to break up," I said. "Don't even talk about that."

"I don't want to break up either, but—"

"But nothing. That's not the solution. I will *never* be happier without you."

She drew in a shaky breath. "Neither will I."

We looked at each other. Another silent standoff. And I didn't even know for what because we both wanted the same thing.

She climbed into my bed. The mattress was small, but I wrapped an arm around her and she nuzzled up to me and I felt more healed from this contact than anything they were putting into my IV.

"I will never leave you," she whispered. "I just wish this wasn't so hard."

I squeezed my eyes shut. She put a hand on my chest and I covered it with my palm.

"I love our fantasy life," she said softly. "The one where we have goats and a garden and we can wake up together and be a witness to each other's lives. And maybe we have kids and they're playing in the yard and we get unlimited memories. We just get to open our eyes and make them, every day."

I couldn't respond to this. If I did, I was going to cry. She lay there with her ear pressed to my breaking heart for a long time before she spoke again.

"You know how when you see a movie or read a book you really like, and you haven't seen it in a few years and you start to lose the details?" she said quietly. "You forget some of the great lines or the subplots, the names of side characters? After a while all you remember are the main characters,

the broad strokes, the big things. And you can't even remember how those happened, just that they did. When someone asks you to tell them about it, all you can recall is it's a Western or a drama or an action flick."

"Yeah," I said.

"I'd like to look back on my life and remember every single thing. But if I don't, I hope I remember that it was a love story. And that the love story was about you."

I couldn't muscle down the lump in my throat this time. I was too tired and too sick and I missed her too much even though she was still here. Tears slid silently down the sides of my face.

I had never done anything harder than this in my life. I doubted I ever would.

Sometimes the challenges we face either break us or they make us stronger.

And sometimes they do both.

XAVIER

WE SPENT ALMOST her whole visit in the hospital. I got out Monday. On Tuesday she went back to California and I went back to work. I wasn't ready. I was still weak, but my fever was gone and the antibiotics had finally kicked in and I couldn't bring myself to go home. She wouldn't be there. There would only be the thing that she left in her absence instead. The void. And I had no intention of spending time with it.

I dropped Samantha off at the airport, then dragged myself to the clinic.

When I walked in, I stood there in the doorway unnoticed for a moment. Temporarily invisible. It felt like a scene out of an alternate universe. My practice. My staff. Even my dog who had been staying with Maggie while I was too sick to take care of him—but a different doctor. Hank was in his scrubs and lab coat, shuffling out of an exam room with my tablet in his hand.

It felt like I was looking at myself fifty years into the future. No wife. Just a lonely old man, still walking the halls of this place that I'd begun to resent.

Hank didn't resent it. It was salvation for him. For me it felt like a life sentence. I loved this place and I hated it in equal measure.

Jake from State Farm spotted me first and bounded over to greet me.

"Oh, well hello there," Hank said, looking up. "I didn't expect to see you back so soon."

"I wanted to give you a break," I said, crouching to pet my dog.

He waved me off. "Eh, I'm fine. Getting my second wind actually. I think the extra days did me some good, greased up the old joints."

I nodded. I was glad he wasn't burning out at least. I didn't know what I

would have done without him these last few months.

Hank was a phenomenal doctor. The feedback from patients was all positive, Maggie and Tina were happy—I got to spend time in the hospital without worrying about the practice.

But more than that, he seemed to be a genuinely good man. And in my opinion most people weren't.

It occurred to me that Hank was here for the same reason I was today. To escape what wasn't at home. I was glad this place could be that for him. That he was getting as much out of this arrangement as I was.

He nodded over his shoulder. "Join me for lunch? You caught me between patients. The ladies made lasagna."

"We used the Italian sausage you like, Dr. Rush," Tina said, leaning over the front desk. "We were going to bring some over after work."

"Thanks," I said. "And yes, I'll join you." He gave me a pleased smile and I followed him to the back.

"I was glad to hear you were out of the hospital," he said, washing his hands.

"Yeah. I'm doing much better."

"Good. Don't be in a hurry to come back. I can do a few more days." He took a seat at the break table where there was a foil covered pan on a warming tray.

"I don't want you to be sore," I said, heading to the fridge. "Drink?"

"Anything without caffeine."

I grabbed Sprites. Hank had served himself and was taking a bite of the lasagna when I came back and sat.

"Mmmmm, delicious," he said, closing his eyes. "I think I wouldn't even be eating if it wasn't for this job."

I scoffed. "Same."

"I never was much of a cook," he said, cutting the pasta with the side of his fork. "And even if I was, don't think I could bring myself to be in the kitchen or sit at the table. The house is too empty. Feels like a void there."

"I get that too," I said.

I served myself a small piece. My appetite was low. Either from residual illness or the depression that I felt creeping in now that she was gone.

I sat there, poking at my food. I could feel Hank watching me.

"Can I ask, what all is going on with you?"

“Nothing,” I said. “I just got sick.”

He harrumphed. “I think you got heartsick is what you got.”

“Ha.” He was probably right.

“Why doesn’t she move here?” he asked. “That girlfriend you’ve got.”

“She can’t. She’s the primary caregiver for her mom.”

“Can her mom move with her?”

I shook my head. “No. Definitely not.”

“Hmmm. And why don’t you move there?”

“I can’t. The business is...” I stopped. “I just can’t.”

“It seems profitable—”

“It is. It’s just not enough. I can’t sell it yet. Couldn’t pay my replacement. If I’m not here to run it, I have to close it. I’d lose everything.”

He chuckled a little. “Well, you might lose a lot, but not everything.”

“I’d go bankrupt—”

“And?” He looked amused. “You know how many failed clinics I had? Two to be exact. One that the city decided to do road work in front of for eight months. Made my patients walk two blocks in sub-degree weather just to get to the door. Put me right out of business. Then another one with a bad deal with a partner. Shuttered after eleven years, had to start all over again from scratch. These things happen. At the end of the day, you’re still a doctor, whether you have this building or not.” He took another bite.

“It’s not just that,” I said.

He chewed and swallowed. “It never is. I’m gonna tell you something. I hope you don’t mind some sage advice from an old man.” He looked me in the eye. “I would trade everything for one more day with my wife. *Everything*. If you love that girl even half as much as I loved my Claire, you will pack your bags and leave yesterday.” He nodded at the back room. “None of this matters. None of it. It’s just stuff. You can build another clinic somewhere else, but that? What you have with her? *That* is not easy to find. The universe doesn’t just hand out true love. And I know that’s what this is because I see you’re willing to kill yourself over it. So if you have that, if you’re one of the lucky ones, why in God’s green earth would you give it up?”

“My credit—”

“Yup. That’s gonna be rough for a while, but it won’t stop you from getting a good job somewhere. These are excuses. Is it pride? Or maybe you

don't love the girl enough. I might be jumping to conclusions on that, if I am, I apologize, feel free to ignore me."

But I did. I loved the girl enough.

It wasn't really any one thing. It was all the things.

There was the showing up with nothing to offer her. No job, no savings, bankrupt and penniless. Letting Maggie and Tina down, them having to find a new job after they'd believed in me. Having to disassemble everything I'd spent years working toward, watching my clinic sell at auction for parts.

All of that was enough.

But to know my parents would be laughing? Rejoicing in it? The last insult to this injury. I couldn't stomach that most of all.

I put my head into my hands.

Hank studied me. "This might come out of left field, but do you talk to your parents?" he asked.

I shook my head slowly. "No."

"Why not?"

"It's hard to explain," I said, sitting up.

"Huh. I figured as much."

He set his fork down.

"Did you know my clinic used to be over on Main?" he asked, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

"No. I didn't know that."

"Yeah. That was the business with the bad partner. The one that went under. Used to be New Hope Veterinary back then."

Something about the name was familiar, but I couldn't place it.

"I met this young man there," he said. "Long time ago. Probably seventeen, eighteen years now. I thought about him for over a decade. Never stopped really. He came in with this collie mix, I'll never forget her name. Winnie."

I froze.

"That's you, isn't it?" he asked. "I wasn't sure at first, took me a few weeks to settle on it. It was the eyes I remembered. You got taller, got the beard, but the eyes didn't change."

My heart was pounding.

"You came in with that dog and I helped her," he said. "Shit parents if I remember correctly. And now here you are." He shook his head. "I've never



been much for believing in fate, but I gotta tell you, this one makes the argument. Or maybe it's karma. Good people attracting other good people. The ladies working for you because you're a good doctor, and then coming to get me because they knew this would be a safe place for me when I needed it. Anyway. No matter how I ended up here, I think it was because I was supposed to see how you turned out." He smiled. "And look at you. Look at everything you did."

I was speechless. I couldn't even believe it.

I didn't recognize him, didn't remember the name. But now that I knew, my brain released an ancient memory and filled in the parts I forgot.

It was him. Older, grayer, more slumped—but him.

"I... I became a vet because of you," I breathed.

"And a fine one at that." He leaned forward to look me in the eye. "The people who raise us have a hold on us. I still think about the things my parents did and didn't do—we're built that way, you know. We're supposed to care what they think, it's a survival instinct. But parents are human and not all humans should have children. Sometimes you just get bad ones. I never got to be a parent. Wanted to, but it wasn't in the cards for us. But nothing to do about that now. I think I would have been good at being a dad, in my opinion. And on that note, for what it's worth, I want you to know that *I* am proud of you. You're a good man. You did well. And I don't know the whole situation—maybe you're stalling because of everything you said. Or maybe you're stalling for them. You have something to prove. They're waiting to see you fail and you want them to wait forever. But she's also waiting forever. And so are you. You need to think about that."

He pushed up on his knees and stood. "All I've got left are memories. You still have a chance to make them. I'll be disappointed if you don't."

He smiled at me a moment. Then he cleared his empty plate, tipped his head, and made his way out.

SAMANTHA

I WAS LYING in my bed staring at the ceiling when the first knock came at the door.

I didn't get up. "Come in, it's open," I muttered.

Jeneva peeked her head around the corner. "I brought a bottle of wine," she said, holding it up.

"Nice."

"I had to go buy it," she said, closing the door behind her. "Heaven forbid anyone actually be allowed into the wine cellar to drink what we already own." She walked over and handed me a wineglass, then pulled the cork out while Pooter and Pugsly did their best to trip her.

I sat up and rubbed my forehead as she poured.

"I'm not letting this breathe," I said.

"That kind of day?"

"That kind of year," I mumbled. "I made snacks," I said, nodding at the cheese and meat board.

She poured herself a glass and took the chair across from me. "I'm so glad you texted me to hang out. I feel like I haven't even seen you. How was Minnesota?"

I scoffed but didn't answer. I'd been back a week. I missed him, I left too early, he was still sick when I went home. I was sad and generally feeling sorry for myself and feeling even sorrier for him.

"Minnesota was fine," I lied.

"When's he coming to see you?"

"He's not. At least not for a while."

Now he had hospital bills to pay.

The bad news and bad luck just kept coming. I didn't even bother to get up from the hits anymore, I just lay down and let them pelt me.

She looked at me with pity. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It's okay. I'm used to it."

There was a second knock at the door. I got up to get it. This time it was Dad. I knew this because I asked him to come five minutes after the time I gave Jeneva. "Hey," I said, letting him in.

He saw my sister and stopped in the doorway. "Oh, hello."

She blinked at him. "Hi. Where's Mom?"

"In the living room with the boys," he said.

"Wine?" I asked.

Dad didn't move from the door like he wasn't sure if he should come in. "Sure. Is this a family meeting?"

"It is," I said, handing him my glass. "Close the door and find a spot. Tristan will be here in a second."

Jeneva eyed me. "Uh, he will?"

"He will," I said.

I watched her stiffen. "Why didn't you tell us you wanted to have a meeting?" she asked.

"Because I needed to make sure everyone came."

"What is this about?" Dad asked.

I sat on the end of the bed and was thinking about what I was going to say to keep them from leaving the room, but I didn't have to because Tristan showed up. He didn't knock, as usual. My door flung open and he stood dramatically in the frame while he registered that everyone was here. Once he'd taken it all in, he crossed his arms. "Is this why Mom is watching anime with the two crotch goblins?"

"Oh God," Jeneva said, getting up. "He's already starting. I'm sorry, I can't—"

"Sit. Please," I said. Dad and Tristan were still standing. "You too."

They looked at each other like they were contemplating leaving, but in the end curiosity must have won out. They sat.

I don't think they would have shown up if it hadn't been for the intervention-style way I'd chosen to do this, but I didn't really have any choice. We didn't share meals anymore, half the people in this house weren't even speaking and honestly, I was beyond caring if they liked how

I'd done this. It needed to be done.

"I called you all here today to tell you I got a job offer," I said.

Jeneva pulled her face back. "Oh. Well, that's good news, right?"

"It is." I nodded. "It's with Frito-Lay. It's remote. It pays more than Murkle's and the benefits are better. They're going to let me make Frito dog paw jokes."

"Congratulations," Dad said.

"Thank you. If I take this job, I think we should put Mom in the memory care facility."

The room instantly hushed.

"Right now I'm doing the bulk of her care," I said. "We'd need to hire full-time help during the day. Dad says Mom's still not sleeping at night and we'd need to hire full-time help for then too. I looked into it. Dad was right, it's less expensive to put her in a home than it is to try and keep her here."

Jeneva sat up. "But—"

"No," I said, cutting her off. "Because whatever you're about to say is going to be based on us, her care team, cooperating. And this family hasn't been a team in a while."

All three of them averted their eyes.

I looked at each of them. "Can I ask you all something? What do you want for Mom? In an ideal world, if money and time weren't an obstacle, what would you want?"

Dad was staring at the floor.

"I'd want her to stay home with us," Jeneva said quietly.

It was a long moment before Tristan replied. "Stay home," he said.

Dad was nodding at the carpet. "Home."

I nodded. "Okay," I said. "So we all want the same thing. We're capable of having what we want—if we work together. But none of you will pull your heads out of your asses long enough to get it done."

I looked at my brother. "You know what sucks? You go to bed every night at two or three o'clock in the morning. Not *once* have you offered to be the one to stay up with Mom so Dad can sleep."

He pressed his lips into a line. "Why would I—"

"Zip it," I said. "I mean it. I love you. I appreciate you. I'm beyond thankful for the ticket to see Xavier. You can be incredibly generous and perceptive when you want to be, but this thing with Dad is *not* it. As

someone who's been taking care of Mom full-time for the last three months, the burnout is real. The isolation is real." I looked him in the eye. "I understand Dad now so much more than I did that night after the funeral," I said. "Loneliness in a relationship is the deepest loneliness of all. Dad shouldn't have had to sneak out, he should have been able to come to us and say, 'Hey, I need a life. I need a break. I'm a human being and I need human interaction, physical touch'—no matter what that looks like for him. Before it got to the point where he was so done, the nursing home was starting to look like the best option."

I turned to my dad. "*You* need to better communicate with us. I know you're Airport Dad, and you want to do all the planning and get us there and carry all the baggage, but you *can't*. We're adults. We can handle everything you can handle. We should have known about Grandma. We should have known how close to a breaking point you were. And Jeneva..." I looked at my sister. "You need to let things go." I held gazes with each of them. "We all want the same thing. We want to keep our promises to Mom. We want her here, with us. But she would *never* have wanted to be here if she knew it meant us sacrificing our mental health and happiness to make it happen, and she definitely wouldn't have wanted it if it meant this family was going to lose each other over it."

I let them sit in the silence for a long moment.

"I have a proposition," I said. "I am willing to decline the job offer. I will continue to stay home with Mom so she can stay home with us—but on two conditions. The first one is that the three of you cover my portion of the rent and loan payment. I can take on freelance jobs to pay the rest of my bills. If I stay home, it'll be a fraction of the cost of a facility or hiring a professional to be here. We get to keep our promise, at least for a while because I can't guarantee that this is going to be a long-term fix. We very well might get to a point where it's no longer the right thing for her or us to keep her here. I personally don't think we're there yet. I think we should take this one month at a time and see how it goes."

I paused.

"The second condition is that you all consider if this is something that you're actually capable of. Because if we're not willing to work together, it's not going to work at all. We should just put her where it's easier on us and easier on her because watching you all bicker and ignore each other

isn't what she asked us for either. So you tell me what it's going to be. I'm willing to do my part. The rest of it's on you."

I let the words linger in the air.

Jeneva sat there clutching her wineglass with both hands, staring at someplace past me on the wall. Dad's eyes were fixed on the carpet. Tristan was hugging his arms around himself while Pooter purred and rubbed against his legs.

"I don't like that you're fucking around," he said to Dad quietly.

It wasn't an attack. He was trying to talk about it.

It was a long moment before Dad replied. "Sometimes the way we love someone changes with the seasons of our lives," Dad said. "Sometimes love and commitment looks like caring for the person you're married to by feeding them and putting on their pajamas and brushing their teeth. I will love your mother until the day I die. I will whisper her name with my last breath." He choked on the words and I had to swallow a lump in my throat. "I'm not looking to replace her. I could never replace her. I just need something in my life that isn't... this." He raised his eyes to Tristan's. "There is no bad guy here, Tristan," he said, his voice thick. "I know it would make it easier if there was, but there's not."

My brother looked like he was going to cry. "I just always thought you two had true love," he whispered.

"They do," Jeneva said, her eyes tearing up.

"I believe that too," I said quietly.

Dad put his face in his hands.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Jeneva said. "And, Tristan, I'm sorry to you too."

Tristan nodded. "So am I."

Dad sat back in his chair and wiped under his eyes. "I still don't think I could have told you about Grandma. I wish I could have, but I couldn't. She told me in confidence. But I should have convinced her to tell you herself. At the bare minimum, I should have done more to make her feel like she wouldn't have been a burden if she was someone else we had to take care of —"

"That's not your fault, Dad," Jeneva said. "I shouldn't have made you feel like it was. I'm just..." She trailed off. "I'm so angry. About everything." Her chin quivered. "And it's not even about you, it's just *everything*."

“Everything fucking sucks,” Tristan said.

I nodded. “It really does.”

“Finally, something we can agree on,” Dad said.

We all laughed a little. Then we slipped back into silence.

“Life is so hard,” I said quietly.

“I don’t even remember a time when it wasn’t,” Jeneva said.

Dad nodded absently. “Maybe we need to work on that. Make things easier on each other. Make happy memories again.”

Another thing we could agree on.

I sniffed and grabbed a tissue from the box on my nightstand. “Does anyone want pizza?”

“Oh God, yes,” Jeneva said.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s order some pizzas. Let’s go check on Mom. And then let’s talk through what this is going to look like.”

Dad leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. “I love all of you. In case I haven’t said it lately. Or said it enough.”

I smiled. “We know, Dad. We haven’t forgotten.”

SAMANTHA

*Three Months Later*

DID YOU SEE the post?” I grinned.

“I did,” Xavier said. “He’s got two hundred applications.”

I did a little jumpy thing in the living room.

In addition to the freelancing I did in my spare time, I’d been writing all the animal bios for the rescue Xavier volunteered at for the last three months. About every third or fourth one went viral.

This week was a bio for a tabby named Apple Bottom Jeans—my name choice. I called him the guy your mom always warned you about: toxic, controlling, unemployed, and watching you at 3:00 a.m. with night vision. Comes with boots with the fur.

“The traffic crashed the website,” he said.

I gasped. “Really?”

“Really.”

“I don’t know if I should be proud or feel bad for the IT guy.”

He chuckled. “You’re doing for animal rescue what you did for mustard. You should be proud. Even if you are a menace to the server.”

I smiled. I was having so much fun. I loved bending the internet to my will, it was my favorite pastime.

Things were good. I felt fulfilled. More than I thought I would. And for the first time in a long time, I was me again. The me I remembered.

I started doing Mom’s makeup again. Tristan went back to dyeing her hair. I painted her nails and dressed her in pretty tops. I took a tip from



Xavier and got her headphones so she could listen to music. She *loved* music. I made her playlists of all the songs on the tapes in the Dart and she listened for hours. It calmed her down.

I found ways to put color in her gray world again. I found ways to put it in mine too. Even if the color wasn't Xavier.

I hadn't seen him in three months, since the trip we spent in the hospital. And we had no plans to be alone in a room together any time soon.

I missed him terribly. I always did.

It was our one-year anniversary today. Well, one year since we met. We counted it though because we both agreed it was over for both of us the second I called him an asshole.

"I wish I could see you today," I said, my smile fading a little at the edges.

"Soon."

"There's a four-day weekend coming up in a few weeks and Jeneva said she can watch Mom for me. I think I'll try and get tickets then," I said.

"Okay. You're getting flowers later."

I perked up again. "Am I? You're getting special pictures later."

"Am I?" he said, a smile in his voice. "I like those."

I smiled down at the carpet.

"Do you remember the first time you saw me?" I asked.

"Of course. I remember every single thing about it."

"Me too," I said. "I remember when you came into the room—it felt like a shift in the air pressure. You had on dark blue scrubs and your hair was sort of messy. No beard. You looked so serious. You saw the kitten in my shirt and you had absolutely zero reaction to it, just a complete mask."

"Oh, I reacted to it," he said. "My heart was pounding, I was nervous. I thought you were so beautiful, and it made me self-conscious."

"What if I hadn't come back into the clinic?" I asked. "What if I'd just moved to California and you never saw me again?"

"I would have thought about you for the rest of my life. Even after only a few minutes. You would have haunted me forever. You're not someone you forget."

I smiled softly.

"I have something else for you," he said. "I made you an anniversary playlist."

“Awwww, you did?”

“Can you go out in the yard?” he asked. “Put your headphones in? Listen to it?”

I glanced at Mom on the sofa. “Sure. I’ll take Mom outside. We’re due for a little sunshine before dinner anyway,” I said.

“Okay. I have to get going. I love you,” he said.

“I love you.”

He sent me the link and then hung up.

He did the playlist thing a lot. We’d learned to be creative. There were ways we could connect, even if they weren’t in person like I preferred. We watched shows together at the same time, we video called. He actually had time for that now that he wasn’t working a thousand hours a week.

I did the math. I got to see him about twenty days a year.

I’d been to summer camps longer than that.

It was fine. It wasn’t what I really wanted. It never would be. But it was enough because at least it was something.

I was getting Mom’s shoes on when my sister came home.

“Oh hey, I was just about to text you,” she said, hanging her purse on the hook by the door. “Dad’s bringing Italian for dinner. Tristan wants to know what wine you want him to bring up.”

“Hmmm. Maybe a red blend?”

“Okay. Maybe I’ll tell him to pick two. Oh, and Dad’s going out tomorrow, just so you know,” she said, pulling off her boots. “Tristan said he’d take Mom.”

I smiled to myself.

My brother had really stepped up. They all had, but especially him. The come-to-Jesus moment did what I’d hoped it would. He didn’t give Dad any more shit. We’d moved Mom into Grandma’s old room so Dad could go to sleep before she did. Tristan was third shift now. He covered Mom from after dinner to bedtime seven days a week. Jeneva and Dad did weekends and I got the two days off.

I couldn’t tell you if it would work forever, but it was working for now. We were a team again.

We were a *family* again.

Jeneva looked at her watch. “Want me to take Mom?”

“No, I was taking her out to the yard. Xavier sent me an anniversary

playlist he wants me to hear.”

She looked at me softly. “Oh, I forgot that’s today. I’m sorry you can’t see him.”

“Yeah.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know how you do it being separated all the time. I could never.”

I scoffed to myself. My life was full of nevers.

A mom who would never say my name again. Jewelry still lost that I’d never find. A boyfriend who I’d never get the chance to get sick of.

I led Mom to the yard and put her in the gazebo and put my earphones in.

I didn’t look at the songs first. I liked to just hear the playlist the way he meant for me to experience it, one after the other without knowing what was coming. Sort of like life.

I did what I always did. I walked around the yard, picked kumquats and peeled the skins and ate them. I stood on the edge of the pond and looked at the koi while “Harvest Moon” played in my ears. And I thought about him. About us and all our nevers.

About the life we’d never have together. The marriage that we agreed we wanted but would make no sense with our circumstances. The family we couldn’t start, the menagerie of animals we’d never adopt because I didn’t want them without him here. The nights alone, the sound of his voice through a Bluetooth speaker while dogs bark in the kennels behind him, the fading scent of his body on a hoodie I’d taken. His beard growing in and getting shaved with the ebb and flow of the seasons we’d spend apart. Finding something unimportant that he’s accidentally left behind. A ChapStick on my nightstand, a receipt for gas bought two thousand miles away. Kisses at the airport, those precious whispers in the dark when he’s finally here and I can feel the press of his lips or the tickle of his breath on my mouth. The luxury of seeing him brushing his teeth in my bathroom or the hard outline at the front of his pants while he’s watching me change into my pajamas. Sand under a towel, waves crashing in the moonlight, a nibble to my lip, contemplative gazes across a cheap fast-food table.

All of it worth it.

All of it memories I would *never* trade for anything, even though our future together is impossible. Because even though it isn’t possible, it

doesn't mean it isn't perfect.

Sometimes never is enough.

Someone tapped my shoulder. I jumped and pulled out my earbud and turned to face a hovering bouquet of roses.

At first I thought maybe my flowers got delivered and Jeneva had run them out to the yard for me. But then they lowered. Xavier was standing there on the other side.

I almost broke in half right then and there.

I threw myself into his arms.

"You're here..." I gasped.

He held me so tight I could barely breathe.

"Surprise," he said into my hair.

I did a little laugh-cry.

"I thought we agreed not to do any more surprise visits after the last time," I said.

"Did we?" he whispered.

All I could do was laugh and hold him harder.

This was the best anniversary gift I could ever ask for. Him. His smell, the feel of his body pressed into mine, the rumble of his chest when he speaks. A gift.

I pulled away and kissed him. He put the flowers down to kiss me back properly.

When he was done he pulled away and studied me. "I missed you so much," he whispered, rubbing a thumb on my cheek.

I know we saw each other on video calls and we sent pictures, but he looked so much better in person. Rested, like a normal human being who didn't work eighty hours a week. He'd shaved his beard for the spring. He looked the way he did when I met him.

Another slide, jumping ahead.

I would always experience him like this. Long waits and big changes. A reminder that every time I saw him, I was remembering the time before and how he'd become different in the distance between visits.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I said, wiping under my eyes. "It would have given me something to look forward to."

"Because the look on your face gave *me* something to look forward to," he said.

“Yeah, but—”

I stopped and stared at something happening in the gazebo. Mom was on her knees, laughing. Petting a dog? But it wasn't Pugsly...

I squinted. “Is that... *Jake*?” I said, blinking over his shoulder. I looked up at him. “You flew your dog in?” I asked. “Maggie couldn't watch him?”

“She could, but it wouldn't make any sense for a one-way trip.”

It took me a moment. The words had to swirl around my brain for a second before I heard them in the right order.

“What do you mean one-way trip?” I said carefully.

He smiled. Then he stepped aside.

His SUV was parked in the driveway behind him.

I stared at it, my heart pounding. “No... Xavier, please don't play with me.”

“I'm not,” he said.

“You didn't...”

“Yes. I did.”

I looked up at him. “But... your practice!”

“I don't care,” he said, shaking his head. “I don't care about any of it. I'm tired of waiting forever.”

I smacked a hand over my mouth. “Xavier, it's too much,” I breathed. “You had to give up too much. This had to be the hardest thing you've ever done—”

“No. Being without you is the hardest thing I've ever done, and I'm sorry I put you through it. I should have ended up here sooner, but I had to come to it on my own.”

Tears started to sting my eyes. “What made you?”

“Hank,” he said. “He made me think about it. About what was keeping me there. At the end of the day it wasn't the business. It was them. I didn't want my parents to see me fail, and really that's exactly what I was doing anyway. I was failing myself trying to prove that I measure up to people I don't give a shit about. And for what? Pride? The last word? I don't care what they think or what they say or the narrative they run with when there's a for lease sign on the door. It doesn't matter. I'm going to forget them. It's what they deserve.”

“But your friends—”

“They helped me pack. They're happy for me. Couldn't get me out of

there fast enough.”

I laughed, wiping under my eyes.

“I did what I could to mitigate the damage,” he said. “I waited until my lease was up on my apartment. I sold all my furniture. Hank is going to keep working three days a week until Maggie and Tina can find new jobs and my patients can find new vets. And then I’ll liquidate what I can and...” He stopped to give me the contemplative gaze I’d missed so much. “I want to stop living one flight to California at a time. I want to wake up every day and be alone in a room with you. I want to witness your life and have you witness mine. I want a parallel line and the fantasy world we talked about to be real. I want us to make memories.”

I studied him and he tucked my hair behind my ear.

“I have nothing, Samantha. I don’t even have a job. I’m about to be several hundred thousand dollars in debt, I’m broke. All I have is my veterinary license, and I’m not even licensed in California yet—”

“Xavier...”

He looked at me like maybe I was going to send him home.

“This is a very weird way to ask me to marry you.”

I watched the smile spread across his face.

“Will you?” he asked, his voice a little thick.

I nodded. “A thousand times yes.”

He let out a relieved laugh and I jumped into his arms.

He was here. He was *always* going to be here. I would get to wake up with him and fall asleep in the same bed and get wings on a random Wednesday and collect animals together. Whatever we wanted. We could make it up as we go.

Mom was standing in the door of the gazebo watching us. She was beaming from ear to ear. She knew. Something ingrained that told her she was seeing true love. Her heart remembering even though her brain had forgotten. She didn’t know who I was or who he was. But she still knew what love was.

Maybe that’s the last thing we forget. Or we never forget it at all. Not really. We lose the words to say it. We lose the ability to show it. But we never lose the ability to feel it or recognize it when we see it.

Love is the brightest color in a gray world.

## EPILOGUE



## SAMANTHA

### *Eleven Months Later*

DAD AND TRISTAN on either side of her, they're the strongest," I said, talking to my family in the driveway. "Jeneva, you're in the front seat, I'll drive."

It was Mother's Day.

We'd talked a lot about how to celebrate today, and in the end we'd universally agreed to my idea.

A ride in the Dart. Top down, one of Mom's tapes in the tape player. A scarf around her hair, a little dab of coconut sunblock on her face.

I wanted to help her relive some of her favorite memories. We wouldn't know how much of it she'd actually absorb. Her dementia had progressed over the last year. She was harder to reach, more confused. The car ride might scare her, she might try to jump out, Dad and Tristan might need to hold her on to the seat. But we agreed to try it. If it worked, the payout would be worth it.

Xavier came out of the house and jogged down the steps. "Hey."

"What did they say?" I asked.

"They want to come with me to work."

I laughed. "You offered to take the boys anywhere while we're gone and they want to go to the clinic," I deadpanned.

Jeneva shook her head. "I think they'd live there if they could. They love Uncle Z."

My husband looked at his watch. "What time will you be back?"

"An hour maybe? Depends," I said.

“Okay. Whose night is it for dinner again?” he asked.

“It’s mine,” Dad said. “I’m making spicy coconut chicken.”

“Need anything from the store while I’m out?” Xavier asked, over my shoulder.

“I’ll text you,” Dad said.

“All right.” Xavier leaned in and kissed me. “Drive safe.”

I smiled against his mouth. “I will.”

“If it breaks down again, call me.”

“If it breaks down, I’m opening the hood. It’ll be faster.”

He snorted.

“Are we going?” Tristan said impatiently.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, we’re going.” I looked back to my husband. “Tristan,” I said under my breath—and Xavier knew exactly what I meant.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too.”

He grinned and kissed me again.

Almost two years together now. Contrary to what I’d wished for, I never did get tired of him. I don’t think I ever would.

We got Mom in the car. Dad and Tristan sat on either side of her. I popped in the tape, backed out of the driveway, and off we went with Xavier waving from the porch.

I started slow. Just around the block in case we needed to abort the mission, but Mom was sitting quietly, looking at the houses, so I left the neighborhood. We drove past her old high school. Took her up to Brand Park and we got out and walked her through the grass and set a blanket up under a tree. It was the first time she’d been out like this in almost two years. She was too unpredictable, but with the four of us we could handle it.

The four of us could handle anything, I learned. The five of us. Because Xavier was a part of this family now too.

I wouldn’t lie and say that it had been all easy sailing. It hadn’t. Mom’s moods ebbed and flowed. We were always pivoting, dealing with whatever the next thing was. She ended up in the ER again a few months ago after a severe UTI. She was delirious and it was extremely scary. Then she had a fall in the shower and took Dad down with her. He’d wrenched his back and it was a month before he could do any of the heavy lifting with her again. But she was still home. We didn’t know if that would always be what was



best or safest for her, but for now it was.

My phone pinged and I checked it. It was from Xavier, a picture of the boys in the back of the clinic, both grinning and holding kittens. I showed it to my sister.

“I swear they’re going to end up veterinarians,” she said.

“Good,” Dad said. “Family business.”

I smiled. It was entirely possible.

Something remarkable had happened after Xavier left Minnesota. The clinic there didn’t close. It opened six days a week instead.

Hank had some retired colleagues who were bored and liked the idea of getting out of the house once in a while to hang out with their friends, with the added bonus of bailing a young veterinarian out of financial ruin. They took turns working shifts. Same arrangement as Hank.

The practice kept running.

It wasn’t a forever fix, but it was long enough and substantial enough to keep the business in the black and his credit score high so he could get a loan to open a second location in California. So now he had two buildings with his name on them in not one but two different states.

I hoped his parents’ eyes bled every time they googled him.

The plan was to try to keep the Minnesota location going for a few years until the loans for the business were down to what Xavier could get for it if he sold it or until he could afford to hire a doctor to run it. Either way, what Hank had done had changed our lives, even though Hank insists that Xavier changed his. Hank had changed our lives a few times, actually, starting when my husband was just a boy. Hank was a ripple in the ocean of our love story. If it hadn’t been for him, Xavier would never have become an animal doctor and he and I would have never met.

Xavier might never have come here.

Hank was an honorary grandfather now, a part of our family. We flew out every few months to see him and check on the clinic and visit Becca and the guys.

Hank stood in as father of the groom at the wedding. And he looked so proud.

After an hour we packed up the blanket and left the park. Mom was doing so well, we decided to stop at Grandma’s favorite panaderia for Mexican sweet bread like Grandma would have asked us to had she been

here.

Mom didn't ask about her much anymore. Every once in a while, but not like before. She was forgetting. The memories were smearing. For once I was glad they were.

She didn't need to know her parents were both gone. Mom was the only one who got to exist in a world where that never happened, where Grandma was just out of sight and not lost to us forever.

All Mom knew was that she was loved. Her son put her to bed at night and her husband woke her up every morning and took her down to breakfast with her grandkids and her daughters and a son-in-law she met for the first time every day when he made her eggs.

She had witnesses to her life—and love. She was surrounded by love. And there's nothing more beautiful.

We took the freeway home. The weather was cool and the sun was setting. We kept the top down. I put in another of Mom's mix tapes and turned up the volume and we cruised the freeway to Alanis Morissette's "Hand in My Pocket" She was singing about how everything's gonna be quite all right. One hand in my pocket, the other one smoking a cigarette.

A cigarette...

Didn't these old cars have ashtrays?

I'd explored every inch of the Dart, but I didn't smoke so it never even occurred to me to look. I found an almost secret compartment by the steering wheel, flush to the dash, right under a push button cigarette lighter. I flipped it open expecting ancient cigarette filters or old pennies.

I found the missing jewelry instead.

I gawked between the road in front of me and the treasure trove sparkling from the tray.

Jeneva glanced over and did a double take. Then Tristan leaned between the seats and saw what we were looking at and tapped Dad. His eyes went wide in the rearview mirror.

Jeneva reached in and started pulling it all out.

Rings, bracelets, locket, earrings—it was all of it. Every last missing piece.

We looked at each other and I slapped a hand over my mouth and started to laugh.

I beamed and looked in the rearview mirror at Mom. Tristan on one side

of her, Dad on the other. Dad was holding her hand. And my mother sat there in full color with her eyes closed, the wind in her hair, smiling.

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## XAVIER'S ANNIVERSARY PLAYLIST FOR SAMANTHA

“Harvest Moon,” Neil Young  
“Stop Feeling,” The Aces  
“Water Underground,” Real Estate  
“Remember When,” Wallows  
“Warm Blood,” Flor  
“Everywhere,” Fleetwood Mac  
“It Might Be You,” Steven Bishop  
“Amsterdam,” Gregory Alan Isakov  
“Stars,” Sam Airey  
“Studio 6,” Matt Maltese  
“She Won’t Go Away,” Faye Webster  
“Loveless,” Lo Moon  
“Come On Eileen,” Dexys Midnight Runners

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Abby Jimenez** is a #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of laugh-out-loud, pull-at-your-heartstrings romantic fiction. Her novels have sold millions of copies and been translated into twenty-eight languages. Some of her favorite highlights include a *Good Morning America* Book Club pick, a Book of the Month Book of the Year award, and the Minnesota Book Award.

Before her writing career, Abby was in the national spotlight as a *Cupcake Wars* champion and founder of Nadia Cakes bakery, which has since gone on to win numerous Food Network competitions and amass an international following. She lives near Minneapolis with her husband, three daughters, and four dogs—all TikTok famous in their own right. Abby loves romance novels, coffee, doglets, and not leaving the house.

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