



The

Blind Date

WALL STREET JOURNAL & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAUREN
LANDISH

THE BLIND DATE

LAUREN LANDISH

Edited by

VALORIE CLIFTON

Edited by

STACI ETHERIDGE

Copyright © 2021 by Lauren Landish

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

CONTENTS

Also by Lauren Landish

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Epilogue

Excerpt: Rough Love - Tannen Boys Book 1

About the Author

ALSO BY LAUREN LANDISH

Big Fat Fake Series:

[My Big Fat Fake Wedding](#) || [My Big Fat Fake Engagement](#) || [My Big Fat Fake Honeymoon](#)

Standalones:

[Drop Dead Gorgeous](#) || [The Dare](#)

Bennett Boys Ranch:

[Buck Wild](#) || [Riding Hard](#) || [Racing Hearts](#)

The Tannen Boys:

[Rough Love](#) || [Rough Edge](#) || [Rough Country](#)

Dirty Fairy Tales:

[Beauty and the Billionaire](#) || [Not So Prince Charming](#) || [Happily Never After](#)

Get Dirty:

[Dirty Talk](#) || [Dirty Laundry](#) || [Dirty Deeds](#) || [Dirty Secrets](#)

CHAPTER 1

RILEY

“*H*ey, Sunshiners!” I say to my phone, holding it at arm’s length in my right hand while my left hand is under my chin, fingers out and wiggling in what I affectionately dubbed the ‘Sunshine Salute’. It’s my way of sending my followers some Rays of Sunshine, and I do it at the start of every video because who wouldn’t want a little extra brightness in their day?

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?” I ask, doing a slow twirl to give everyone a quick view. Spring has sprung in Briar Rose, and the days of rain have made every flower bloom full and lush. The sun hits them to create a dazzling array of colors everywhere you look. “Mother Nature is truly an artist, isn’t she? Makes me feel . . .”

I pause dramatically, my smile lifting another inch before I look directly into the camera, “*Everything*. Because joy is right here in front of you, if only you take the time to see it. What’s bringing you joy today? Tell me in the comments so we can enjoy it together.”

I see a flower that’s fallen off its stem to the dirt below and focus my camera on the blooming plant and then the loose, wilting pink flower. Some people would only appreciate the larger plant, but I pick up the slightly crumpled flower, making sure to show my yellow-painted nails in the frame, and then place it behind my ear. I give one more smiling wave to the camera, tilting my head to highlight the bloom with sunlight. “It doesn’t have to be perfect to be appreciated. It’s all good enough if it makes you smile. You’re good enough to make others smile.”

I give another wiggle and click off, still grinning widely as I double-check the video before posting it to my Instagram timeline. By the time I tuck my phone back into my bag, it will have already been shared across multiple platforms, gotten hundreds of likes, and have comments listing out what brings my followers joy today.

I love them. Not just the little hearts and compliments about my fresh manicure. I mean, I love all my followers, the people who let me lead the life I enjoy. Without them, I couldn't get ad revenue from my daily videos and photos, and I couldn't get companies to hire me for sponsored posts. So it's to their credit that I'm able to do what I do. But it's more than that too. They let me into their hearts, trusting that I'll bring a bit of my special brand of Riley Sunshine to every day. It's a responsibility I take seriously, not because it's my trademark but because it's who I truly am.

"Are you done yet?" a faux-bored voice sighs out next to me. My eyes lift from the phone screen, and I stick my tongue out at my best friend, Arielle Daniels. She does it right back like we're six instead of twenty-six.

"Ladies, ladies . . ." Eli Taylor, the third of our motley group of musketeers, scolds. He holds his hands out, one toward each of us as though we're going to throw down. To be clear, we're not. The only thing Arielle and I will fight over is the last garlic knot when we order pizza. Or the last egg roll. Or donut. Okay, food. We'll fight over food, but who wouldn't?

"I think we need to continue heading to our lunch date, post haste, before we have bigger problems." He leans toward me, talking behind his hand as though Arielle can't hear him. "You know how she gets when she's hangry. I estimate ten minutes before she starts stealing ice cream from babies." He lifts his chin toward an adorable toddler with chocolate smeared across his face and a cringing mother standing by with a wet wipe.

I look from Eli to Arielle, who's rolling her eyes. I answer with an eye roll of my own to be safe because I can see that Eli is right. Arielle's scanning the street like a hot dog cart might pop up out of nowhere. Luckily, our favorite burrito place, which was our destination to start with, is right ahead and undeniably safer for our bellies than dirty-water-soaked meat sticks. Or half-eaten, stolen ice cream.

“Ten minutes? I’m leaning more toward seven-point-five, five if Miguel is cooking fresh carne asada.”

Arielle’s stomach growls loudly, and she slaps her palms over her belly as Eli and I laugh. “Come on,” Eli says, leading the charge toward the best burritos in Briar Rose. Miguel’s place doesn’t even have a name. It’s just a window in the side of a building with some picnic tables scattered outside. If you know it’s there, you’re lucky. If not, well, you’re missing out.

We order and sit, claiming one end of a table for ourselves. We attract attention no matter what we do. I’m Riley Sunshine—not famous, exactly, but more well-known than the average social media influencer, and my style is rather in-your-face sunny with my trademark yellow knee socks, white Doc Martens, and a halo of blonde waves held back with big yellow sunglasses. Eli is gorgeous, to put it lightly. He’s six feet tall, broad-shouldered, tanned, and dresses like a Ralph Lauren ad. Today, he’s wearing a slim-tapered navy Italian suit and chestnut brown loafers with no socks. He’s every preppy-lover’s dream come true. And Arielle is a stunner with dark hair pulled back in a carefree ponytail, thick, dark lashes, and red lips. Her work scrubs do nothing to hide her luscious curves.

We look as though we would have absolutely nothing in common. A business guy, a no-nonsense medical field worker, and a flower child who never grew up. But we couldn’t be closer.

Years ago, we met at the mall, of all places, each of us holding down jobs at various stores there. We’d walk in at opening, out at closing, eat in the food court, and over time, the head nods of recognition became our own little world of friendship. Ultimately, we created a group called “The Crew” comprised of us musketeers plus a few others we met at the mall. But today, it’s only the three of us for lunch.

As we tuck into our burritos, Eli drops a bomb. “I had a date on Friday.” It’s not that Eli’s dating is a surprise. It’d be more of a shocker if he *hadn’t* gone on a date, but Arielle’s right brow lifts the tiniest millimeter.

Eli’s more than good looks. In fact, he’s very smart, one of those types of people who knows a little bit about everything. It makes every time we meet up a fun time, because Eli’s interests are always unpredictable. He can talk at

length about everything from photography to politics to the *Police Academy* movies, and often without ever quite explaining why he's doing so or where he gleaned the varied knowledge.

But he's usually careful to not throw out too much dating detail in front of Arielle. They've had a super-casual, friends with benefits situation off and on for years. They're 'off' right now, neither of them having an itch to scratch, but their dating lives aren't something we usually discuss together.

"He or she?" I ask, thinking maybe that has something to do with the hook Eli's dangling, and Eli laughs. That's another thing about Eli. He's all about 'hearts, not parts' and dates based on connection, not genitalia. His conversations about sex can be very eye opening, and I've learned quite a few things from Eli.

"She," Eli says matter-of-factly.

A thousand questions go through my head, each wanting to jump off my tongue at once. But Arielle is glaring fiercely at Eli, though he is blissfully oblivious. He's usually not tight-lipped with me, but he seems to have said his piece, and Arielle has nothing to say for a change. I decide that I really don't need to know details right this second, especially if it's going to hurt Arielle. I would never do that, though I'll definitely ask her what's up with the reaction later.

Instead, I decide to steer the conversation in a different direction. "And the bank?"

It's part of Eli's charm and intelligence, his ability to be so multi-faceted and yet achieve so much so quickly. At twenty-five years old, he's a branch manager with Metro Savings & Loan despite not having an MBA. Or at least not having one yet, but he's working on it online.

"Making million-dollar moves," Eli says with a shrug. "I mean, it's a bank, babe. Trust me, unless someone shows up with a shotgun, which I hope I never see" —he pauses to kiss two fingers and hold them to the sky in either a prayer or a wish— "it's pretty much the same thing on a daily basis. Check this, sign this, balance that. But you've been making a few million-dollar moves of your own. Or more precisely, half a million follower moves." He gives me a polite golf clap and a warm smile.

Still amazed, I shake my hands and kick my feet, stomping my boots on the green grass beneath the picnic table. I'll never be a cheerleader, but it's my best cheery celebration because it's true. When I started my path of becoming an influencer, I had a series of signposts that I wanted to achieve. A thousand, then ten thousand, a hundred thousand . . . now a half-million followers.

"Thanks," I reply, taking a bite of my burrito to keep from squealing loudly. "Mmmph, these are so good!"

Eli cuts his burrito with a knife and fork as he nods in agreement. I'd give him shit for it, but I can only guess at how much his shirt cost, and I know that when he's in non-work clothes, he's the first to snatch up a slice of pizza and shove the whole thing in his mouth with zero cares about manners, so I'll let this slide.

"So, what're you going to do to celebrate?" he asks.

"Well, first off, the next time we get The Crew together, it's all on me," I assure him. Arielle raises her hand like we're in elementary school, and I add, "And I need to do a thank-you post for my followers—"

Arielle is done being ignored and slaps her palm to the table, making our water bottles jump. "I know!" she exclaims, getting both Eli's and my attention. "You need to date."

"Date?" I repeat dumbly. "I date."

"No, you don't," Arielle argues.

Eli sends a look Arielle's way, quietly communicating something, and then, a bit softer, asks, "How long has it been?"

"Fine. Too long," I admit, smiling that they care enough to have even noticed. It has been a while, but I've been so busy. "Not that I'm complaining."

"That's no surprise. You never complain about anything," Arielle declares.

"But I've been really focused on building the Sunshiner brand."

"And it's paid off," Arielle tells me, softening her approach now too. "You deserve to do something for yourself. Not your followers. Get a little joy for

you,” she adds, letting me know that she was paying attention as I filmed my video this morning.

“Or even a little dicking if that’s all you need,” Eli suggests.

The idea has definite merit. The dating, not the dicking. Well, maybe both if I’m being honest with myself, and I try to always be. “That could prove to be a little harder now . . .”

Eli laughs. “You mean there might be a bunch of horny ass dudes out there who’ll see you as a sugar mama? Or a notch in their bedpost?”

I nod, eyes widening at Eli’s way of putting it.

“Pssh . . . you’re overthinking it, girl! Just have some fun. Don’t worry about getting too serious.” He would be the one to suggest that.

Arielle drops her hand at the wrist. “Leave it to me. I have an idea and a plan. I’ll arrange everything for Friday night happy hour?”

Eli and I look at each other. When Arielle concocts a plan, we’re best to go along with it. “Sure. My place?” I offer.

Plan made, we gather up our trash and drop it in the nearest can. “Back to the grindstone?” I joke since none of us have jobs that feel like drudgery work. “I need to script my gratitude post.”

Eli points off to our right at the fountain in the park. “*Orrr*,” he draws out, “how about I take a picture for you and then you can wax poetic as much as you want? You need to mix up the videos and photos, Riley.”

I laugh. “Like you’d know?” But he does have a point. I think I’m going to have a lot of words about this milestone, and I try to limit my videos to around a minute because those get the most interaction, so a photo with a long caption that could be clipped and quoted would be a good compromise. “Okay, let’s do it. You mind doing the honors?”

Eli bows graciously. “It’d be my privilege.”

We head over to the fountain, and I try a variety of poses, but Arielle clucks her tongue and takes over as photo director, though I’ve done this for myself hundreds of times. “Hop up on the edge of the fountain. It’ll make a better

color contrast.”

I look around for anyone who might have a problem with that, but no one is paying us any attention. Trusting Arielle, I climb up on the wide concrete edge of the fountain which is used by a lot of people for sitting and enjoying the park. Turning to the side, I use the fountain edge as a balance beam and stick one leg out behind me, straightening my back, concentrating on balancing myself on one foot and giving my best smile. It’s what I like to call the ‘contemporary flirty pose’, something I saw on the cover of a romance book and have since added to my standard poses. In my mind, it says ‘I’m sexy, but that’s not *all* I am’, a bit ballerina meets fairy with a dash of legs-for-days and peach booty.

Garbed in a white sundress and my boots, with the sun shining on my face, I probably damn near look like a flower girl at a wedding, but it’s just me. I like being sunny and happy, and that’s what I want to share with the world.

“How’s this?” I ask, my voice strained as I try to balance myself. I hear my phone click, click, clicking away for shot after shot. Still smiling, I say through my teeth, “You keep this up and I’m going to be in the water!”

I start to get crazy looks from people as they walk by, and I hear a few laughs and even some guy calling out as he passes by on his bicycle, “I got an extra leg you can stand on, baby!”

Forget him. I’m too happy to pay the heckler any mind, and someone else calls out, “Work it, work it!” I choose to focus on that voice, letting it add to the chorus of positivity in my head, reminding me of what this photo will be used for.

I wobble back and forth on one leg. “Got it?” I beg.

Eli grumbles something about ‘working for a crazy chick’ to Arielle, and I call out, “I heard that!” Eli arches his blond brow in response and aims the phone at me. “Do not move,” he orders, and then he counts down from three and says, “Smile!”

At that exact moment, the fountain starts up behind me, surprising me and causing a huge gust of wind. Time slows, clicking by with every frame Eli is still taking, and I fight valiantly but lose my balance. My dress flies up to my

chest, my mouth and eyes go wide in shock, and several onlookers let out scandalized gasps.

No, no, no! Oh, my God! No! I think to myself as I struggle to control my dress, hoping a cop isn't lurking somewhere in the park, waiting to give me a citation for indecent exposure. *Thank God I wore the granny panties that came in my new sponsor's monthly box today! They're the only thing hiding my ass from the people behind me and my vajayjay from the camera!*

I drop my pose and any semblance of decency to fight with my dress, trying to push it down against the wind while balancing two-footed now on the too-narrow fountain edge. Eventually, I get the fabric locked between my thighs in the front and can hold the back down with my hands. Arielle runs over, holding a hand out, trying not to laugh.

“Need help getting down?”

I shake my head, not willing to let go of the back of my white skirt, which feels wet from the fountain's mist. Great, now that I've gotten it down over my ass, it's probably gone sheer from the moisture. I hop down to laughter and applause, and deciding, like Jane Eyre, that I'd rather be happy than dignified, I bow dramatically.

“Thank you, thank you.”

“Damn!” Eli says in awe, scanning through the photos on the screen. “Would you look at that?”

Now that the show is over, I can also hear some whispering pearl-clutchers nearby, but I ignore them to rush over to see the photo. At my side, Arielle whistles.

I look Marilyn Monroe-esque, my hands trying to push down my billowing dress with the water arcing up behind me. Surprisingly, it doesn't look awkward but instead classy, old-school sexy, and pretty. In the background, the bright spring sky, the water, and the trees of the park make it look almost like a postcard.

The more I stare at it, the more I like it.

It strikes the perfect tone, quirky and fun! The perfect photo to post, too, because it's so spontaneous and kooky.

"I love it!" I breathe in awe at my luck of getting such an awesome shot. "I'm going to have to frame this!"

Eli nods and adds, "Maybe the whole series." He scans left a few shots, and I watch the progression of my posed shot, the shock of the water coming on, a picture with my panties on full display, me fighting with my skirt, and then the iconic Marilyn pose. The last shot is one of me giving in to the craziness and smiling widely as I laugh out loud, my eyes closed and my face lifted to the sun.

He's right, the whole series is . . . me. Riley Sunshine. And also, really me, Riley Watson.

"Congratulations, honeychops." Eli has the worst terms of endearment, but this one makes me chuckle.

I grin, touching the screen to zoom in on my smile. The post is already writing itself in my head. Something about inspiring people, their giving my life a purpose, and appreciation for what we've built together. And most of all? Excitement over what the future holds.

Arielle hugs my shoulders. "I can see that you're already working in your head, and I've got to get back to work myself. But we're on for Friday." She points to me and then Eli, not asking us but telling us. After we nod our agreement, she makes quick strides down the street to get back to the nursing home where she works.

Eli watches her every step.

"What's up with that?" I ask, not needing to be any more specific than that because it's obvious where his mind is.

"Just thinking we're not kids anymore," he says contemplatively.

"You sound like you want to settle down," I answer quietly, making a big leap about his thoughts.

“I’m not searching for it, but if it happens, it happens,” Eli says. “I’ve got a *mortgage*, for God’s sake. Who the hell thought I was a good bet for a six-figure loan?” He presses a hand to his chest over his hundred-dollar dress shirt, his gold watch glinting in the sun.

I grin. “Uh, your boss? You’ve come a long way, baby.”

“Maybe that’s what you need too?”

“A mortgage?” I ask, lifting an eyebrow. “No, thanks. One of my goals is to buy my first house ‘cash on the barrel’, as Daddy says. I’m fine with apartment life until then.”

“I won’t even go into *that* with you,” Eli says, forgoing the lecture on smart financials to stay on track with his current advice train. “But what I mean is, you’re not just the happy girl on Instagram anymore. You’re a legit business. You’re a brand, Riley Sunshine. And maybe what you need isn’t Mr. Right Now, but Mr. Right.” It seems he’s turning around from his earlier declaration that dick is all I need.

That’s a lot of pressure, especially considering I only just decided that *maybe* I could start dating. I choose to deflect, giving myself time to think on that later. “And did you find Mr. or Miss Right this past weekend? Or the weekend before that?” I ask pointedly, and Eli shakes his head.

“Nope . . . but damn if it wasn’t fun. Do you know how good a big ol’ eight-inch . . .” He grins big and broad, the eternally inappropriate jokester holding his hands out wide, but I see his eyes tick down the street after Arielle before landing back on me.

“Lemme stop you right there. I don’t need the details right now, especially since we’re in public.”

Eli looks around and agrees. “Point taken,” he says, ignoring that I’d flashed my panties to the people around us moments ago. But he wags his brows and adds, “You know you’re already imagining it anyway.”

I swat at his shoulder, grinning. “Well, now I am.”

He feigns pain at my wimpy slap, holding a hand over his shoulder. “Watch it, tiger. No need to get all feisty on my account.” He *rawrs* and scratches at

the air like a giant cat.

“You’re a sweetheart, Eli, you know that?” I say genuinely. He flips between light-hearted and insightful, giving me just enough to think on but also letting me have time to marinate the seeds he plants.

Eli laughs and slings an arm around my shoulder. “You know it, honeychops. I’m sweet, and you’re sunshine. Now you just need to find your other half.”

“If he’s out there.”

Eli nods, and we start heading out of the park. “You know, maybe instead of looking for more sunshine, you need a Yin to your Yang.”

“Gloomy? Negative Nicky?”

“I was thinking more moonlight to your sunlight, you know?”

I nudge Eli in the ribs. “You’re a wise man.”

“Hell, I know that. Life would be much, much better if the whole world just listened to me. Financial security and sexual satisfaction, all rolled up in one sexy as fuck package.” His cockiness and jokes cover his true desire to help.

“Maybe. But if you’re sweet and I’m sunshine, what does that make Arielle?” I ask, tiptoeing back into deeper waters curiously.

“Great question, Miss Sunshine. That is definitely a great question.” Eli shakes his head as though he can rattle an answer out of the cobwebs lurking in the corners of his mind. But Eli is way too neat and tidy for any dust or dirt—in his mind or his life. He examines every corner, every possibility and opportunity before committing. Whether it’s a mortgage, a mutual fund, a second date, or . . . more.

“See you Friday night?” I offer.

“You know it. I’ll bring the wine, as always.” Eli has much better taste in wine than either me or Arielle, who would happily pop a twisty straw in a box of Franzia and sip it like an adult Capri Sun, so wine is his self-given assignment.

“I’ll make sure I’ve got clean wine glasses and a charcuterie board for us to nibble on.”

Eli blinks slowly, surprised. “Listen to you, fancy-pants. Did you say charcuterie?”

I laugh. “You wouldn’t be impressed if you knew I had to mentally say shark-cuter-ie in my head before I say it aloud. Same as Wed-nes-day every time I have to spell it.”

His laugh is slow and deep as he shakes his head. “Finding you a Mr. Right might be harder than I thought, but I’ll trust that Arielle has a plan. She always does.”

CHAPTER 2

NOAH

“*Y*ou know what your problem is, Noah?” my best friend and colleague, River Watson, asks me as I check over my appearance in the mirror on the wall of my office. “You’re too damn uptight.”

Running my fingers through my hair, I straighten my suit coat for the third time before evening out the cufflinks of my dress shirt and shifting my tie. “You’re just now figuring that out? That might make your problem an utter lack of observation.”

Quirking my brow, I turn to appraise River, who’s perched on the corner of my desk and eying me with a critical smirk. Like me, he’s dressed smoothly in dress pants and a tie, though minus the suit coat, his golden blond hair perfectly styled. He chuckles dismissively. “You and I both know that’s not true. I see everything, know everything.” His tone goes hollow and ominous.

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

There’s nothing. River and I have been best friends for years at this point. We’ve seen each other at our best and our worst.

“That the Red Queen is never going to let you gain too much power,” River supplies readily, “no matter how hard you work. She’s not ready to go anywhere and is not the type to share.”

Shit. He knows how to hit below the belt. Not to my balls, but to my weakest point—my ambition.

He's speaking of the CEO of Life Corp, Elisa Montgomery. Or 'Lady Elisa', as most of her employees call her, a nickname that definitely fits her royal demeanor.

A woman of extreme intelligence, she's headed Life Corp for the better part of a decade, and for good reason. She's a shrewd leader with exceptional judgment who surrounds herself with impeccable talent. I definitely count her among my mentors.

To say she rules Life Corp with an iron fist is an understatement, and it's known to everyone that she does so in a paradoxical manner. On one hand, she loves to see her employees work together to inspire creativity and innovation. She's generous almost to a fault with her reward when someone or some team comes up with a new idea.

On the other hand, if you piss her off or threaten her 'tribe', she's scarier than a queen of Westeros. Then it's not business, it's a blood sport, and she's not leaving the sands of that particular arena until she stands victorious.

Most of Life Corp's competitors have learned to compete with us politely because of it. Because if you don't? Lady Elisa will buy you out, absorb your company, and leave you on the nearest street corner. She'll warn you once, then crush you like a fly.

Arguing over who's right or wrong about a situation has been a consistent back and forth between River and me, stretching back to our early days. It's what makes us great friends and even better people. I push hard on something, and Riv always pushes back. We challenge each other to be greater and recognize that together, we're both more than we'd be alone.

It was during our sophomore year in college, forced together as partners by proximity in the small Modern Business Technology classroom, that we came up with an idea that has changed both of our lives. *Friendzone*, a social media app.

What began as an assignment to create a profitable product or service, research it, and attempt to see it through to fruition really seemed possible with us both working on it with full focus. We did everything we could, crowdfunding to get capital to outsource what we couldn't do ourselves and learning what to do and not to do along the way.

We had dreams of it being an instant hit, taking off like a rocket, with us becoming self-made millionaires before the ink dried on our diplomas. The truth isn't nearly as impressive, but what Friendzone did do was get the attention of Lady Elisa. Though we weren't competitors, and we thankfully didn't get squished like a bug, Elisa worked us like the newbie businessmen we were, buying Friendzone from us for a reasonable price and offering both River and me jobs at Life Corp.

Not being my own boss chafes sometimes, but I realize that I have a lot to learn, and getting first-hand business experience at Lady Elisa's side is worth the time I have to put in paying my dues.

Especially when she agreed to foster and fund our latest app idea, *BlindDate*. River and I have been busting ass on it for over a year, and we went live a month ago. And now, it's time to face the music and get Elisa's take on the success or failure of our launch.

"Just remember," Riv says as we leave my office, "you're good enough, you're smart enough, and dammit, people *like* you." His hyper-earnest tone is annoying in a smile-inducing way, but I fight it and instead snort derisively because he's not exactly correct.

I'm a bit of a pessimist, someone who doesn't expect the zombie apocalypse, but at the same time, I've got a bugout bag ready in my SUV . . . just in case.

And if anyone knows how hard I am on myself, it's River. No matter what I do, it's not enough. If we hit expectations, we should've exceeded them. If I succeed, I could've done it sooner, better, somehow more. I'm capable of it if I put one hundred and ten percent in. Admittedly, I'm hard on the people around me too, expecting just as much from them.

Detail-oriented, focused, driven, hard-edged. These are traits you want in a boss or employee, but not necessarily in a friend.

We take the elevator all the way to the top floor where there are only two suites, the boardroom and Lady Elisa's office. I mentally plan for the day this suite will be mine. I'll change the carpet and chairs and move the desk so that I have the window at my back instead of my side the way Elisa prefers.

But that day is a long way off from where I currently am.

“Hey, Tina, Gina,” Riv greets Lady Elisa’s two executive assistants. Yes, two. One personal, one professional, equally smart and Pitbull-tough, and both at Elisa’s beck and call twenty-four, seven.

Gina brushes her dark hair behind her ear and her olive skin blushes at Riv’s simple greeting, and I have to roll my eyes. She’s way out of his league but doesn’t seem to realize that.

“Lady Elisa’s ready for you,” Tina says crisply, motioning us in. She’s Elisa’s work assistant and keeps her schedule tight and on time.

We enter Lady Elisa’s inner office, and no matter how many times I’m in here, I’m impressed and inspired again by what I find. Floor to ceiling windows that look out over Briar Rose, lush rugs underfoot, and a large desk that greets you as you enter.

But somehow, even though the office is large enough to dwarf even the largest of people, it’s impossible not to have my eyes drawn to Lady Elisa. She’s not in her desk chair, the tall wing-backed perch sometimes jokingly and quietly called her throne, but instead at the more casual, comfortable working table she uses when she wants her people to be comfortable.

It’s a good sign, but my nerves don’t relax in the slightest.

“Noah, River, good to see you,” Elisa says, gesturing to two seats at the eight-person conference table. “Have a seat. Tina will be in shortly with some coffee.”

“Thank you,” I reply. I don’t need coffee this late in the day, but I’m damn sure not going to say no. I’ll sip it politely and gratefully and then work out a bit extra to get the caffeine out of my system so I can sleep tonight.

River is a bit bolder, though. “Water for me, please.”

I want to slap him stupid. Or *stupider*. But Elisa doesn’t miss a beat, pressing a button and calling out to Tina, “Two coffees, one water, please.”

“Great. Now, let’s get to business. We’re obviously here to discuss your latest project, BlindDate. Dazzle me with the numbers,” Lady Elisa orders, sitting down in her chair.

She has faith in us, in the app, which means a lot, but these figures aren't quite the razzle-dazzle I want them to be. They never are. I reach into my coat and take out the thumb drive I saved all my data on and plug it into the computer integrated into the table as River talks.

"We've made a good launch." River starts on a good note. I get the computer up, and River continues. "As you see here, we're currently in the top ten among social media apps in various app stores, which is a benchmark goal of the project."

I flip to the next slide. "However, we're not seeing the number of downloads we'd hoped for."

That's an understatement. I was hoping at this point to have five million or more people signed up, and we're at one-tenth of that. Not that half a million is something to sneeze at, but it's not going to set the dating world on fire the way I'd hoped.

"Hmm . . . okay, let's review," Lady Elisa says. "Noah, walk me through your thought processes on this and remind me where we are. It's an evolution of your Friendzone app, correct?"

I appreciate that she remembers that much. Life Corp has multiple apps in the online store, some focused on finding love like BlindDate, but others focused on self-care, meditation, health, food, friends, and more. That Elisa has even a basic idea of what BlindDate is about is a relief and a compliment I don't take lightly.

I take over the presentation from River, wanting to get the phrasing just right, the way I practiced it when we pitched this idea. "Exactly. When River and I developed Friendzone, one of the things we wished we could have done better was the interest matching system. Friendzone uses a pretty basic system that's highly dependent on the user inputting their information accurately and truthfully."

"And yet people don't always answer accurately or honestly," Lady Elisa says. "Not a big deal if they're looking for someone to be bowling buddies with, but it's perhaps a larger issue for a love connection." She laughs lightly at the non-joke, and we chuckle along as expected. "So, what did you do?"

“We included a one hundred-question survey that is fed into a highly advanced algorithm to ensure good matches,” River answers.

“What makes it helpful is that the survey is judging psychologies and personalities even without the user’s awareness,” I add. “We worked with a team of psychologists to make it as comprehensive as possible.”

Lady Elisa whistles. “Excellent. So, the questionnaire and algorithm are what sets BlindDate apart from the rest of the field, making it different than Match, Tinder, Grindr, etcetera, which have been around a long time. That’s what we need to push as the number-one sales point. Make users want that high-percentage match number.” She makes a fist, lightly hitting the table to emphasize the great idea as if it’s not exactly what we’ve been doing with our ad campaign. Point made, she moves on. “And then what happens once that match is made?”

“Every other app out there talks about love, but the very first thing people see is a photo. Lust, not love. And our research showed that even for people who were supposedly looking for love, they’d click yes or no within ten seconds based primarily on the profile picture. BlindDate gets rid of the profile picture. Instead, using the survey, the AI searches through the database and finds you matches that you can scroll through at your leisure. But since you have to take a few moments and actually read someone’s information, you have to get to know them. And we encourage the users to talk before meeting. We want them to get to know one another.”

“That weeds out the superficial hookup seekers,” River adds, “and studies show that attractiveness is rated higher when a person has an emotional connection to someone already established.” Elisa’s eyes glaze over, and I glare at River. He takes a big breath and tries again. “The funny guy becomes cuter because he can make his girl laugh, and the shy woman is more attractive once she shows how sweet and kind she is.”

At that, Elisa nods. “I do like a man who can make me laugh.” Elisa Montgomery has been single since her husband died twenty years ago, and judging by the utter lack of lines on her face, she hasn’t laughed since.

Maybe she should do the BlindDate questionnaire? I think to myself, never dreaming of suggesting it aloud. “Exactly,” I say instead. “We’ll continue

working on increasing memberships, tweaking the AI so matches are even more accurate now that we have a larger sampling, and ensuring that no bugs arise with widespread usage.” I’m making promises to Elisa that I’ve already made to myself a dozen times—*more, better, push, succeed.*

Lady Elisa gives me a supportive look. “Noah, the app’s making money and growing. I’m satisfied with the current launch.”

Satisfied? That’s not nearly enough, not remotely the description I want from Elisa.

“All in all, good job. Let’s talk about it next month. In the meantime, please excuse me. I have a lunch meeting, and if I’m not out the door in thirty seconds, Tina will be nipping at my heels,” she says good-naturedly.

It’s a polite but clear dismissal, and Riv and I retreat, resisting the urge as I always do to bow at the door as I depart.

Back in River’s office, I jump in with the plan for our next steps.

“So, we need to go over these numbers again, figure out how to get more people to join,” I tell him as Riv sits down at his desk, leaning back and propping his feet on its surface.

He’s chill, fine even after that clusterfuck of a meeting. Too fine, in my opinion, and I let him know that by knocking his feet to the floor. His chair wobbles back and forth, but like a Weeble, he doesn’t fall over, unfortunately. “Chill out. The numbers are good. Lady Elisa was fine with them. Take the win.”

“That wasn’t a win!” River doesn’t get it, my need to compete and to win. My need to succeed.

He didn’t come from where I came from, and while he knows the facts, he doesn’t understand the reality of my past. I don’t think anyone who hasn’t lived through it can.

“Dude, hitting target is literally the definition of a win,” Riv counters. “Just because you wanted to be bigger than Zuckerberg at this point doesn’t mean it’s reasonable. And not everyone has to live up to your crazy-high expectations.”

“Go fuck yourself,” I growl, and Riv reaches down, cupping himself and pretending to jack off.

“Like this? That’s the only kind of action you’re getting these days.” Once he speaks the insult, his look becomes thoughtful. “Maybe that’s the problem. Hit Tinder and get laid, and then you’ll feel better about what we’re doing here with BD.”

I shake my head as I sigh and throw my hands in the air. “Pussy’s not the solution to every problem.”

Riv snorts, pointing an accusing finger my way. “You didn’t even believe that as it was coming off your tongue.”

“I don’t need to get laid. It hasn’t been that long. Now can we focus on what to do?” But trying to get him to focus on something other than my sex life right now is impossible. It’d be easier to take a pb-and-j sandwich from a rabid, starving raccoon.

He hits me with question after question, all coming down to one thing. *Exactly how long?* I don’t answer, throwing back statistics about the problem at hand, and finally, he begrudgingly gives in, though I know he’ll bring it up again the next chance he gets.

“Fine, what do you propose we do to make the already-good numbers live up to your magical, mythical, and might I mention, self-set, goals?” River asks.

“Glad you finally asked,” I say with a lifted brow. “I was thinking. We did a bunch of market research with the beta version, right?”

“Yeah . . . why?” Riv asks, a little worried. For all the shit I give him, he’s fucking brilliant and knows what I’m going to say already. He just enjoys poking at me to rile me up.

“We need to do live testing too,” I tell him. “Sign up anonymously, go through like we’re regular users and get the full experience. Is the questionnaire too long, too invasive or confusing, and is it asking the right questions? How do the matches feel? What do the profiles look like? The whole thing except the contact and dating part.”

“Damn, Goldilocks. A bit of a choosy beggar, aren’t you? Coming in and insulting someone else’s porridge?” River teases. “You know the psychologists did all that. The coders too. And it’s all been tested repeatedly.”

“I know, but there’s got to be something to improve. It’s not perfect. It never is. We need to find where those improvements can be made. You never know, maybe the bears would’ve been thankful that Goldilocks tweaked their porridge recipe. A spoonful of sugar here, a pat of butter there, ten more seconds on the stovetop, and . . . voila!” I kiss my fingertips and then spread them wide in a chef’s kiss move.

“Fine. But we can do all that tomorrow. It’s time to get out of here. Whoo-hoo!” River pumps his fist, miming pulling the quitting-time horn. “You want to come over for a beer, watch the game?”

“No, I think I’ll stay back awhile, look at the numbers a bit tonight. I’ll let you know in the morning if I find anything specific.”

“Sure. ‘Awhile’, you say,” he says disbelievingly, but he has a point. I work late more often than not. “You’re going to look those figures over at least ten times before you stumble out of here. Let me know if you solve this imaginary problem you’re creating.”

River grabs his wallet from his desk drawer, locks it back up, and then holds the door open for me.

“Goodnight,” I tell him, already two steps toward my office.

“It will be for me. Not sure that’s the case for you, man.”

Back in my own office, I’ve already forgotten about River’s assessment. He’s good at what he does and works hard, but that doesn’t mean I can float along the way he’s comfortable doing. I flash back to the meeting with Lady Elisa today. I want those meetings to be full of rave reviews and shocked awe at my success and for Elisa to have no choice but to reward me with more responsibilities and opportunities.

I pull up the app store on my phone, knowing that most users will choose the mobile option over the computer version of BlindDate. I download the app, using a fresh and anonymous email account on my profile and my middle

name as my username. I've already got a profile from the beta version, and I want this experience to be exactly what a new-to-the-app user would have, so I become 'Mark D.'

All right, one hundred questions . . . let's do this. It's easier to answer the questions honestly, so ironically, 'Mark D.' and 'Noah Daniels' have a lot in common, and in less than an hour, I'm done.

I make some notes on the experience, both positive and negative. And now, I wait and see what the AI has in store for me to evaluate the next phase.

CHAPTER 3

RILEY

“Oh, God. I can’t believe you just suggested that,” I whine, taking a gulp of my wine. It really is as good as Eli promised, but I can’t take the time to enjoy it when Arielle is throwing out craziness the way she is. “No way, no how. I am not online dating.”

I look to Eli for support, but he takes a proper sip of his wine and side-eyes Arielle. I get the feeling they’ve already discussed this. Discussed . . . me.

It’s barely a quarter past eight o’clock on a Friday night. I should be out painting the town red. Or yellow, in my case, I suppose. But instead, I’m perfectly happy where I am—at home in my apartment, wearing oversized yellow joggers and a white crop top with a smiling-faced, pink-cheeked sun on the left breast, my two besties sitting on my couch while I sit cross-legged on a pillow with the sweetest, cutest dog in the history of the canine species in my lap.

“Raffy, tell Auntie Arielle she’s crazy, totally loony toons, and that your mama is not going to date some random dude from the internet.” I hold Raffy’s fuzzy, fluffy head up, moving his chin to make it look like he’s talking while I do my best to throw my voice despite the fact that I have zero ventriloquism skills. “*Rrruf, no interweb, hoomans. Much weird, no normal. Extra cronchy.*”

Arielle raises one brow sharply, glaring at me. “Are you seriously implying that you are normal right now?”

I don't answer. Instead, I studiously avoid her gaze, choosing to look around my apartment. Eli might be disappointed in me for not buying a house, but I love this place. It's a completely white backdrop for all my favorite things—yellow pillows, poster prints of inspirational quotes, fluffy blankets in white and yellow gingham checks, and all sorts of sun trinkets I've bought or my followers have sent me.

Arielle snaps her fingers, demanding my attention. "You said you were ready. Remember the five hundred thousand followers?"

Eli pipes up, "Five hundred and one thousand now."

"You"—I meet his eyes with no problem— "are no longer my best friend. Get out, but leave the wine." I snuggle my wine glass to my chest protectively as though he'll snatch it from me.

Eli stands, and at first, I think he's actually going to leave despite the fact that I was obviously joking. But instead of heading for the door, he reaches to the far side of the charcuterie board for a small sausage.

Holding it up lengthwise between his thumb and index finger, he suggests, "If this is the only sausage you're getting, and we all know it is, you should listen to Arielle. She's got your best interests at heart, and you know that too."

I'm not one to pout, but I consider letting my lip pop out anyway to see if it'd get me out of this mess. I said I'd date, but I was thinking more along the lines of meeting a cute guy at the farmer's market.

But when Raffy, that disloyal salt and pepper miniature Schnauzer of mine, hops out of my lap to make a run for the snack and Eli pops the whole baby sausage in his mouth and starts chewing, I realize that maybe he's right. Maybe they're both right.

Raffy runs around the coffee table with a case of the zoomies, hoping that his display will warrant one of us giving him a treat. If anything, I'd like to give him a chill pill. "Raffy! Sit!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Arielle sighs. "Raffy, here, boy!" The sausage in her hand gets my dog's attention, and he sits, pretty as a picture, at Arielle's feet. "Tell your momma it's fine. Everyone does it . . . online dating, I mean. Tell

her. Speak!”

Raffy barks for Arielle and she feeds him the yummy treat.

“See, even Raffy agrees.”

I know when I’ve been beaten. And truth be told, I’m intrigued. I get asked out, but I never know if it’s because I’m me or because I’m Riley Sunshine. And I quit counting the number of weird private messages I got ages ago. Maybe this is a way to date?

“There’s still the whole ‘Riley Sunshine’ problem,” I tell them, wiggling my fingers under my chin in my salute. I swear I don’t usually talk about myself in the third-person, and my online persona is truly me, but it’s me amped up a bit. I mean, nobody wants to see me with a crazy bedhead, stained T-shirts from my college days, and crying over Buffy’s having to decide between Angel or Spike as if I don’t know what happens from watching the reruns multiple times from beginning to series’ end.

“You think I didn’t think of that?” Arielle challenges. Eli smirks, and I wonder what she’s got up her sleeve. “Do you even talk to River?”

“Huh?” I say dumbly. I mean, Arielle obviously knows who my brother is, and I talk about him whenever a story comes up that needs to be shared, but what is she talking about?

“BlindDate,” she informs me. “Our brothers’ dating app?”

Oh, that.

Briar Rose is one of those small, big towns. Everyone doesn’t know everyone, and there are no lemonade stands on the sidewalks or anything like that. But it also doesn’t take Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon to connect someone to someone else. At most, it’d take two or three. For example, Arielle and me, and our brothers.

Arielle and I met at the mall with The Crew. Our brothers met in school. Neither particularly remarkable in and of itself, but a bit of a ‘small world’ coincidence. Still, we don’t hang out or anything. River’s great and all, but he’s a bit protective of me, even though I don’t need it, especially with Arielle at my side. And Arielle and her brother, Noah, are too alike to get

along for more than a few minutes, though they love each other fiercely. That's how they do everything—bold, brash, and bossy.

“BlindDate,” I repeat, connecting the dots in Arielle's plan. “The dating app with no photos? That works for me to stay anonymous, but what if Freddy Krueger shows up?”

Arielle giggles. “Can't say that isn't a possibility, but would you really walk away if he was ugly but at the same time was extra-sweet? You know what they say, it's what's on the inside that counts.”

“Now you're making me sound like an asshole,” I joke. “Fine, walk me through it,” I tell her, admitting defeat because I know when I've lost.

Raffy hears one of the few words he knows—walk—and goes crazy, jumping around and howling. He runs toward the door, looking at his leash hanging from a hook on the wall as if he needs to show me where it is. Then he runs back to me, nudging at my knee and barking directly at me. *You said it, now get up and let's goooo! Walk, walk, walk, we're going on a walk.*

“Raffy, I didn't mean us, you silly dog. I was talking to Auntie Arielle.” I grab ahold of him, pulling him into my lap and rubbing his belly in apology. Within a few seconds, his mind has gone blank, his tongue lolling out in belly rub bliss. If only humans were that easy, the world would be a better place. “Crisis averted, but let's get this over with.”

“There's the spirit,” Eli says dryly.

“Okay, let's see here . . .” Arielle picks up my tablet from the table beside her. “First you. We'll make a trash email account and give you an anonymous name. Preferences on that? You're going to have explain it if you actually meet someone.”

I think for a moment. “Rachel.” It's my mother's name and popped into my head as similar enough to Riley that I can explain it away. Arielle clicks around a bit on the tablet.

“We'll input all the information you want the robot matchmaker to know, physical attributes, your likes, hobbies and dislikes, and then what you want in your ideal man.”

"Robot matchmaker?" I say beneath furrowed brows.

"Artificial intelligence, algorithm, robot matchmaker . . . same things." Arielle waves a hand dismissively.

"And this robot does what with all this information?" I really need to ask River about his work more often.

"Matches you up with possible contenders. Just make sure to bring your I.D. to meet your guy so authorities can identify your body when your date ends up going south," Arielle jokes.

"Arielle!" I protest, waving my glass at her and dangerously coming close to sloshing wine out on the tablet. "We're not even two minutes in and you're already giving me cold feet!"

"She's kidding. Relax!" Eli tells me. "Besides, if you do connect with someone and want to meet them, make the first meeting at a public place like a bookstore or coffee shop before going on an official date for obvious safety reasons. And no dicking on the first date. Not because it's slutty but because you don't want some dude knowing where you live, and you definitely don't want to go to his place and end up in his dungeon of pain and pleasure. I should know. There was this one time—"

"Not helping," Arielle says out of the side of her mouth, and Eli shrugs, going back in for another sausage and following it up with a slice of cheese.

I sit back, processing everything. As skeptical as I am, I can't really find any downsides to at least trying this thing out. I mean, sure, it might match me up with Freddy Krueger and ruin my dreams for the foreseeable future or a cult leader who wants me to join him in some *Stepford Wives* situation. But on the other hand, I could meet Mr. Right. Or Mr. Right Now.

The biggest downside I can think of is the potential time I could end up wasting. And it's not like I don't waste time flipping through other people's silly dance videos, cute dog memes, and style vlogs from countries I've never been to. So what's a few more wasted minutes?

If that happens, I'll just delete the app and forget about it and move on. There's a tiny part of me, the part that yearns for romance, that at least wants to give it a try to see what pans out.

“Okay!” I say finally, feeling a little thrill of hope. *“Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more!”*

Arielle smiles, and before I can change my mind, she loads the sign-up form on the tablet screen.

We go through the next few steps, filling out my age, height, eye color, my favorite hobbies, and likes and dislikes, until we get to the real important stuff.

“Okay, how would you like him to look physically?” she asks, looking up at me.

“Hmm,” I say, raising my eyes to the ceiling. “You know me, I love a tall man. I guess at least six feet?”

Eli laughs, drawing both Arielle’s and my attention. “Every guy from five-nine on says they’re six feet because women have this height obsession, like five-eleven is so much shorter than six feet even. We all know it’s only because you think dick size is related to height. Newsflash, that’s not always true. I’ve seen dudes who are five-five in boots with dicks the size of my arm, and big, burly six-five guys who wish they were as big as that sausage.” He lifts his chin toward the last tiny sausage on the charcuterie board, making Arielle and me frown.

“Is there an option for dick size in addition to height?” I ask quickly.

“Is there an option for cup size?” Eli challenges.

“I’d answer. I’m fine if some guy prefers the itty bitty titty committee or the big rack pack.” Truthfully, I don’t fall into either of those categories but rather, somewhere in the middle with a perky C-cup. And honestly, I’m not screening for monster dicks. I like my insides the way they are, thank you very much, and don’t need them ruined by some huge appendage.

“Focus, people. And what else—takes care of himself? Doesn’t need to be Adonis or anything, but healthy. Agree?” Arielle continues. “Blond or brunet?”

“Brunet.” I don’t know what it is, but I’ve always liked dark-haired men. Might be because I’m blonde and so is my entire family, so I naturally want

something different.

“Light eyes or dark eyes?”

“Either or.”

“Left or right-handed?”

“What kind of question is that?” I demand, chuckling. “Do people have strong preferences on that?”

Arielle shrugs but lifts her brows expectantly.

“It doesn’t matter.”

I have to say there’s something strange about listing off attributes as check marks, as if the person is a fast-food menu item. I can’t think of anything more humiliating for a guy to know there’s some chick on the other side saying, “Can I have a tall, dark, and handsome stud with a big cock, please?”

At the same time, I’m sort of digging being able to do it, so call me crazy.

“All right, now we’re at the good stuff,” Eli says, looking over Arielle’s shoulder. “What qualities do you want in your potential man?”

“I want—”

At that moment, Raffy goes crazy barking up at me as if saying, *You don’t need a new man, Momma, I’m all the man you’ll ever need!*

“Raffy, will you hush?” I scold him, though I’m smiling at his silly antics as he licks my face. He smells like sausage, and I think I know where those disappeared to, and it’s not Eli’s stomach as I thought. “Momma’s trying to think!”

“Oh, he just wants snuggles,” Arielle says, handing me the tablet as she scoops Raffy up. In two seconds, she has him inverted and in her arms like a baby, her right hand rubbing his belly.

Raffy’s in heaven, and honestly, Arielle looks really good playing dog momma. She’d make a great real momma when the time’s right, but for now, I’m just glad I can think. Though I do notice that Eli is staring pretty directly at Arielle with Raffy in her arms too. It feels intrusive to see the longing in

his eyes, so I drop my eyes to the tablet.

“What do I want . . . hmm,” I murmur. It strikes me then that I’ve never been asked that before, nor have I ever given it much thought beyond a couple of ideas of what I thought a good man should be.

For the first time, I’m asking myself, *What do I want in a man?*

“Intelligent, caring,” I say, my voice picking up conviction as I start checking off boxes on the screen. “Someone who knows how to listen to a woman and respect her opinion and admit when he’s wrong. But I also want someone who will tell me when I’m not right, too. He *has* to have a job. I’m no sugar momma. And he should be driven and know where he’s going in life.”

“Damn, girl,” Arielle breathes, breaking the silence and spell, “you just described Prince Charming. I’m not trying to throw acid in your apple juice, but I don’t think a man like that exists, though I think Eli comes pretty damn close.”

Eli flinches as if electricity shot through him with Arielle’s words.

Her comment only serves to remind me how unlikely it is to think I’ll find a worthy relationship from this, so I shouldn’t get my hopes up.

The interface is really easy. The survey’s usually picking from a list of four to eight options with a few ranked choice questions. The questions are actually really funny, too. Like *Rank these superhero movies from most likely to watch on a date to least likely: Batman Begins, Avengers, Wonder Woman, Kick-Ass, Black Panther.*

I’m not sure what sort of insight into my personality and psychology that’s supposed to answer, but I answer to the best of my ability. I move on, continuing down the list, finding some questions that seem silly and some that make me really think deeply, until finally, I finish. “And . . . done!”

I follow the last few prompts, agreeing to let the Robot Matchmaker work its magic, and then a heart appears on the screen. It fills up with red pixels and then flashes back empty, filling up again. “This is better than the spinning circle of rainbow death, but the empty heart is a bit of a gut-freeze every time. Maybe I’ll tell River that?” As soon as I say it, I know I won’t because then I’d be admitting that I tried his app. Not that there’s anything wrong

with it, but still, it's not the kind of thing you share with your big brother.

Suddenly, the tablet goes apeshit, dinging like a pan of popcorn. Looking, I realize it's all 'matches' from guys it's paired me with. I'm sifting through their profiles when there is one that's so ridiculous.

"Check this one out," I tell Arielle while Eli refills our wine glasses. "*Kevin H: Roses are red, violets are blue, baby that ass makes a part of me want to get to know the inside of you.*"

"Uhm . . . no," Arielle says. "That's disgusting and stupid. I mean, he hasn't even seen your ass. What if it's pancake flat and saggy?" She slides a cracker through the artichoke dip and stuffs the whole thing in her mouth. Rolling her eyes, she moans, "God, this is better than sex."

I glance toward the kitchen, but Eli seems to have not heard. Something tells me he'd take it as a personal affront and tell Arielle 'challenge accepted', but that's just a guess. I dip a cracker in the dip myself and chew thoughtfully. I honestly wouldn't know since it's been so long, but the snack is delicious.

Over our next round of wine and snacking, we go through more of the matches. "Who's the guy there with the high match? Let's check him out!"

I open up the profile for *MarkD 2176*. Obviously, he's not using his full name either, which is a plus in my book.

"Whooo, look at that," Arielle says as she reads along with me. "Six foot three—"

"Means jack shit," Eli interrupts.

"Dark hair, hard worker, detail-oriented, loyal, ambitious," Arielle continues as though Eli never said a word.

"Is this a resumé or a dating profile?" Eli says grumpily.

"What's your deal? I thought you wanted me to date?" I ask him.

"I do. The idea of some robot matchmaker being better at it than fate just seems . . ." He seems like he's searching for a word but doesn't find it and ends with a shrug instead. "But you should do it. You deserve the best, Riley."

“Thanks, Eli,” I tell him, realizing that *my* using the app might not be his issue.

“Are you going to message this guy?” Arielle asks, pointing at Mark’s profile.

“I . . . I don’t know,” I tell her nervously. “I mean—”

“*Ehhnt*,” she says like she’s a game show buzzer. “Wrong answer. Either you do it, or I snatch the tablet and send him a message telling him you need some D.”

“Oh, hell no,” I protest, cradling the tablet to my chest. “I’ll send him something, I promise. But I need to think about it, okay?”

Arielle gets up, threatening as she air-types, “*Dear Mark, I like it rough, dirty, and with no lube. I want you to spank me and fill me with cum until it leaks out like a cream pie. Are you into that? Wanna be my dark fantasy come true?*”

I gasp. Eli chokes on his fancy wine.

“I think I can do better than that,” I tell Arielle.

“I doubt it,” Eli whispers under his breath. Louder, he says, “Come on, Raffy, let’s get your nightly walk in too. Your back teeth must be floating.”

Raffy, always ready for a walk, yips and follows Eli, who I’m pretty sure needs a moment to recover and get his dick to go down.

Arielle gathers up our glasses, telling me, “Have something by the time I load the dishwasher.”

I sit back, looking at Mark’s profile . . . and with trembling fingers, I start to type out my message because anything will be better than what Arielle threatened to send.

CHAPTER 4

NOAH

I stayed late at the office last night, but that doesn't mean I can slack off this morning. The fact that it's Saturday? That only means I can work at home in comfortable clothes, but otherwise, the day starts the same.

Six a.m. alarm, thirty-minute run on the treadmill, shower and shave, and dark roast Columbian coffee. Luckily, the coffee Elisa gave me helped me through the late night, but it burned off long ago at this point and I'm ready for another hit so I can power through my day.

I sigh in bliss as the bitter heat washes through me, letting my eyes slip closed for a moment of enjoyment, and then they pop open. I don't need a mirror to know that my jaw is set, my eyes bright and my brain focused.

I'm ready to do this.

By seven fifteen, I'm sitting on my couch, hunched over the glass coffee table and peering at my laptop. I have a desk I could work at, and I often do, but giving in to jeans and the couch is my version of relaxation. Besides, I chose the gray-fabric cushions specifically for their cloud-like fluffiness, a luxury we could never afford at home, so I might as well enjoy them while I check my emails.

The data analyst I messaged last night, requesting a specific subset of statistics, responded early this morning. A kindred spirit, it seems. I spend a few minutes looking over the figures, staring at the numbers as if they'll begin speaking aloud, telling me how to tweak them here and improve them

there.

That doesn't happen, unfortunately, so I decide to move on to my own research project—the experience of BlindDate. I pick up my phone and open the app.

Damn! My inbox has unread messages that number in the double digits. I pause and let that sink in . . . for research.

Does that feel overwhelming or promising?

I wouldn't admit it to anyone else, but my lips tilt up, which means I must be pleased with it on some level. It's probably only because it proves that BlindDate works, like a proud dad when their kid makes the winning touchdown. That number is proof of concept. A success in and of itself.

I click on the heart icon with an envelope overlaid that denotes my inbox and hold my breath.

First, there's Toni, who says she'd love to show me a good time if I just contact her at this off-site website. I report that profile to the app admins and delete the message, moving on.

That's a piss-poor start, but the next one is better.

Bethany writes that she never does this, and she hopes I don't think her too forward, but she couldn't help but reach out when she saw our high-percentage match of eighty-two. That is good, so I click into her profile and look around. She's a librarian with a master's degree, working on a doctorate, who teaches undergraduate library science.

That's a lot of . . . books. Not that I'm a cretin, but I don't exactly have a TBR stack on the nightstand either. Other than some inspirational autobiographies of businesspeople I admire, I couldn't name the last thing I read strictly for pleasure.

I try to imagine what the AI saw in our answers to match us up. I guess that she's detail-oriented, driven, and ambitious. There's a quote in her profile, but I don't recognize it. A Google search tells me I've never heard of the book either.

Hmm, I picture going on a date with Bethany The Librarian—an author appearance where some bow-tied old man reads from a thick tome, the audience nodding along and clapping politely before fawning over the man, asking for autographs and quoting lines verbatim. Bethany probably has a bun and wears glasses, turtlenecks, and sensible shoes. I bet she talks about the classics in reverent tones and sneers at the mass-produced drivel on the current bestseller lists.

Okay, that's harsh, especially considering all I'm going by is her career and one quote.

I make a note to allow members to personalize their profiles more to show their individual personalities. Every little bit helps as people make decisions on whether to reach out to a match.

Despite the high match, I send Bethany a simple note thanking her for the message but letting her down gently. Since I really only signed up to run research, I don't feel guilty, but my conscience requires me to be upfront and not leave her dangling on a hook, wondering about my response. Or the lack thereof.

I scan through several other messages and ultimately end up using some version of the same polite ghost message for those as well. But then one a few lines down catches my attention.

Rachel. There's a red heart next to her name, denoting a perfect match.

That's an Easter egg we added into the coding, deciding any match with over ninety percent compatibility should be noted. For the user, to celebrate and create excitement and urgency. For us, to track the AI's accuracy.

Clicking into the message, I'm curious about her already. Who is she and what is it that makes the AI think we're such a good fit? *Maybe she's a stone-cold workaholic with a never-ending need to improve*, I think wryly.

I'm quickly struck by two things. One, our percent match is . . . astronomical. A ninety-six percent match?

Is that even possible? Maybe there was a glitch? Or fate using BlindDate to match two souls?

But then I read her message and laugh.

Rachel: Hi, Mark! Ninety-six percent match? I don't believe it. Did you hack this app so you'd get matches with everyone or something? If so, my props to your techy skills. LOL (and also . . . a polite clap so you don't hack my credit history). If you're not a midnight hacker, I might be scared because 96% is a lot of pressure to live up to, and while I'm pretty spectacular, I absolutely leave breadcrumbs on the counter every time I cook and snore when I lie on my left side. If perfect is what you're looking for, keep on scrolling. If real might be your deal, message me back?

Glitch, definitely a mistake.

There are smiley face emojis sprinkled throughout the message and she actually typed 'LOL'. There is no way I'm a ninety-six percent match with this woman.

Without even meaning to, I click into her profile. I want to see how wackadoodle she is, like are we talking 'aliens are real and live among us' or a 'prevent war with good vibes and kale smoothies' sort? Or worse, is she a boil your bunny type of crazy? If I can figure it out, maybe that'll help the coders decipher what went wrong in the AI matching algorithm.

What I find isn't crazy, though.

The list of likes and dislikes sounds reasonable. Doesn't everyone loathe toast crumbs in their butter but love the sound of birds chirping? Well, I mean I guess I do. I can't recall that I've sat around and listened to birds specifically, but the idea of birdsong is . . . pleasant enough, I suppose. And also, that's two times already that she's mentioned breadcrumbs. Is she that messy? Or does she have an Italian-level love of bread?

Her hobbies are photography, volunteering, and making the world a better place. That's a bit scary, if I'm honest. I could argue that I'm trying to make the world a better place by creating a way for people to meet and find their soulmate, but I suspect Rachel means something much different. Is she protesting nuclear war on weekends or volunteering at food banks? Either way, it feels comparatively grander than app creation.

But still not crazy.

What are you looking for? I scroll down to this section of the profile, interested to see what she filled in. *I'd like to have a real connection with someone, deeper than appearances or preconceived notions. Someone serious enough to share their true self with me but fun enough to enjoy the gift of the 86,400 seconds we get each day.*

Wow. That's both profound and exciting. She's not who I expected to find on the app, and definitely not who I expected the AI to match me with. She seems bright and witty, brave and altruistic.

But I didn't come here for this. I'm only doing research to improve the app, not actually date anyone. With a resigned sigh, I click back into her message, pasting my thanks-but-no-thanks message. I pause, my finger over the *Send* button.

You don't have time for this, Noah. Eye on the prize. BlindDate. Making it better.

I imagine walking into Elisa's office next month with better numbers, higher usages, and improved stats. And I click *Send*.

A moment later, a green dot appears beside her name. Rachel is on the app right now, likely reading my message. A knot forms in my stomach, and I stare at the screen, wondering if she'll message back.

R: Was it the snoring? It was the snoring, wasn't it? I thought that might be TMI for a first contact. LOL No worries, Mark. Have a great day filled with sunshine and awesome-sauce. I hope you find your perfect match.

The knot tightens, my brows knitting together. Why is her agreement with my dismissal so . . . ? Ugh. I don't even know how to describe what I'm feeling, I just know I don't like it. I stare at the words 'perfect match' through narrowed eyes.

Ninety-six percent is ridiculously high. What if the AI got it right? I could be passing over my soulmate. Not that I believe in those, but I don't necessarily *not* believe, either. I haven't given it much thought one way or the other because I've been too busy chasing goals and dreams of my own, with FriendZone and now BlindDate.

But meeting Rachel might be a good thing. If she is my perfect match, all the work of weeding out has been done for me by the AI and I can go into the relationship with some hint of success. If she's not my perfect match and the AI messed up, I need to know that to improve BlindDate. It's a win-win.

Before I can second-guess myself again, I type out another message.

Me: Is it too late to change my mind? Got a little overwhelmed with responses this morning and I think the 96% got to me. I'm sorry. Can we start over?

I hit *Send* before I can tweak and rewrite the message. It's the truth, as ugly as it might be and as weak as it paints me.

R: Truthfully, I was terrified of sending that message last night. I almost threw up my wine, cheese, and chocolate dinner. I don't know if that menu makes me sound fancy or pitiful, but at least I kept it down because I was so busy yesterday, it was all I ate. Anyway, we can absolutely try again. And no pressure on the 96% unless you snore. That's a deal-breaker for me. Only one diesel-powered chainsaw allowed in my bed at a time. PS—how many responses did you get?

I laugh. Out of my flip-flopping back and forth like a fish out of water, which might be a little too close to home considering my lack of a dating life, my overwhelming response is what she keys on to?

Me: Thirty-two! Unless you count the one that was looking for fans for her private page. If so, thirty-one. Are you competitive? Want to compare numbers?

R: Dangerous question, mister. <wink emoji> You win. I only had nineteen messages, but at least three of them were guys offering to be my sugar daddy and buy me clothes and cars. So maybe that's worth something in the comparison? LOL

She makes me laugh again, something I rarely do but have done at least three times this morning from her words on my phone screen. I do not like the idea of men messaging offers to be sugar daddies on BlindDate. That's not what it's for, but it's not against the terms of service and might be exactly what someone is looking for. Still, I make a note to check into that along with the

other things I've written down for review.

Me: I'll let you have that win. So, what brought you to BlindDate?

R: Honestly? My friend talked me into it because I'd like to find someone who's interested in more than surface things. That's really appealing to me. What about you?

I feel like that might be code for 'I have a great personality but look like I was hit with the ugly stick a few too many times,' and a shock of nerves worms through me. But this is exactly why River and I made BlindDate, so people could get to know each other and then meet without letting appearances be the sum total of the first impression. Maybe Rachel's sense of humor will make her seem like a ten even if she's more of a six? That's the theory I sold Elisa, and I do believe it. It's just interesting to test my dedication to the idea on myself.

M: Well, I guess the same things. I mean, we probably should start with some of the superficial things, of course, but I'm looking for more than that.

I wait nervously, surprised at that. But she quickly replies.

R: Superficial stuff? Okay, I'll go first . . .

I wait for her to ask for a physical description as the three tiny dots appear, but what comes across is different from what I expect. Which is already an 'as usual' situation with Rachel.

R: Are you married? Kids? Not a deal-breaker. Well, the kids aren't unless you're a deadbeat dad. But being married is a 'no-go, do not pass go, do not collect \$200, go straight to jail and stew in your affair' situation.

Me: Tell me how you really feel. LOL, no kids, not married, now or ever. You?

Oh, fuck. I typed LOL back. She's already rubbing off on me. But for some reason, I smile as I think it. And I make a note to add some info options to the app. We have marital status listed, but some specific questions in the survey would ensure that people with strong preferences one way or another don't get matched up with someone incompatible.

R: *No exes stalking about and no kids. Yet. I love 'em, drooly bits and all, but ideally, I want to be settled before having one. A partner who's onboard with Team Us, you know?*

Me: *I like that—Team Us. So, if you're not changing diapers, what are you doing? Like, what do you do for a living?*

R: *I work online. I love it and the flexibility it gives me. I can work anywhere, anytime. If an idea strikes, I can sit down on a park bench, log in, and work away. Or if I need to take a day or two off, I can. What about you?*

I notice she doesn't say exactly what she does, which might be a waving red flag to some people, but I can understand her reticence. Especially these days when people can easily be looked up online. And I don't get the feeling that she's hiding anything, more that she's cautious. Plus, I'm reluctant to share my work too.

Me: *I'm an executive here in Briar Rose, currently working from my couch because they think I'm a workaholic if I show up at the office on Saturdays.*

Might as well rip that Band-Aid off because it's the truth, and if she's put off by my work habits, we can stop this before it goes any further.

R: *I'm sitting on my couch, laptop beside me to work and phone in my hand to message you. We might be two peas in a pod, after all. Ninety-six percent? I see you.*

Guess my overachiever status doesn't bother her. I'm glad because I find I'm enjoying the back-and-forth banter and don't want it to end. We keep chatting, and soon, time means nothing to me. For the first time in years, I'm having a conversation with someone and I'm not thinking about the hundred other things on my agenda. I'm totally focused on Rachel, smiling when she says something funny or quirky, my eyebrows rising when she says something insightful.

I had faith in the AI before, but it was in a nondescript, intangible way. Now, it's real and almost magical. I'm going to owe the psychologists and coders a big thank you, maybe even a cookie basket and a raise. Having long ago forgotten about my laptop, I doodle 'cookie' on my notepad over and over with one hand. In the other, I hold my phone so I can see Rachel's messages

immediately as they come across.

R: Okay, so basics aside, I've got some important questions for you. These are the real make-it-or-break-it deals, so think carefully about your answers. You ready?

Me: I don't think so, but hit me.

R: What's your stance on the great hot dog dilemma? Sandwich or not?

M: IMHO, not. You don't put chili or ketchup on a sandwich. But I'm willing to reach out to my sandwich-believing brethren and enjoy a good hotdog for the deliciousness it is.

R: Disagree. By your standard, chili burgers or cheeseburgers with ketchup aren't sandwiches, but they most definitely are. Agree to disagree, as long as we can eat them all. Calzones?

M: Pies, like a Hostess fruit pie when we were kids. But I can see the sandwich angle if it's the right size. What's your stance on tacos?

R: Tacos are that line in the sand for me. 'Sand' like sandwiches . . . get it? LOL But for real, if you don't like tacos, then I'm going to have to wish you a good day and recommend that you seek professional culinary and psychological help. Whether they're classified as sandwiches or not doesn't matter as long as they get in my belly.

I laugh. This girl is amazing.

M: You seem a little food obsessed. Should I be worried? LOL But I'll agree that tacos are outside the lines of any classification scale. Soft chicken tacos, some good nachos, and churros for dessert? That's a meal that'll leave me warm and happy inside and out.

R: Maybe we can make that happen sometime?

I double-blink, realizing what she's asking. She's delicately tippy-toeing into a 'can we meet' scenario. Nerves and excitement shoot through me in equal measure, which is surprising given that not too long ago, I wasn't even thinking of dating. Still, even with work and BlindDate plans looming, I type out the truth.

M: I think I'd like that.

I'm tempted to ask about her looks, to steer this conversation toward a real meet-up, but part of me wants to wait a bit since that's the whole idea River and I built BlindDate on—depth over superficiality. Though now that it's real, it's harder to stick to than I thought it'd be. I make a note of that for possible app improvement too as my mind wanders . . .

Is she cute and curled up on a couch with a kitten, or a gamer babe texting me between rounds of *Call of Duty*? Or maybe she's shy, the computer geek who's a Sys Admin who works out of her house?

None of them seem quite right, but before I can ask a question that'd give me a better visual, Rachel messages me.

R: Oopsie! My alarm reminded me that I have to be somewhere at noon, and if I'm not out the door in ten minutes, I'll be late. I'm not even dressed yet!

M: Not dressed?

R: Not like that. I'm still in my pajamas. I'll let you imagine that until we talk again, though I'll give you a hint. My PJs involve knee socks. Suuuper sexy, right?

Two images fight for prominence in my mind. In one, Rachel is adorable in knee socks and a long shirt that hits the tops of her thighs. In the other, she's got on wool socks pulled up high, baggy flannel pants, and an oversized T-shirt. Both imaginary Rachels quirk a brow at me, saying, 'Whatcha think?'

M: I think I have a new fascination with knee socks. Can we talk later tonight?

It's the first time I'm putting it on the line. She messaged me first and then she gave me a second chance when I auto-replied. I only hope I've done enough to earn another conversation with her because this one has been the highlight of my day. Hell, who am I kidding? It's been the highlight of my week, or maybe month.

R: Talk to you tonight, Mark.

M: Have a good day.

R: (Smile emoji, sunshine emoji)

Rachel logs off, and I plug my phone in to charge. Standing up, I feel the smile on my face, realizing I've been talking to Rachel for nearly three hours. I stretch my arms overhead but stop, having to adjust myself.

Wow. I never thought talking about calzones and tacos would have me half-hard in my pants, but I am. Maybe it's the thought of Rachel in her pajamas . . . that must be it.

"Knee socks," I murmur to myself. "Who knew?"

I feel another twitch in my jeans. If I'm not careful, I'm going to be pitching a tent while I make lunch. All over someone I haven't even met yet. *Thanks, BlindDate!* I think, giving myself a pat on the back for a job well done as I pull out some chicken and greens to make a salad.

CHAPTER 5

RILEY

One of the things I love most about being ‘Riley Sunshine’ is that I have the chance and the time to help out. I can ‘spread the Sunshine’, as I like to put it. Sometimes, I volunteer at an animal shelter, which makes Raffy so jealous when I get home that he’ll literally turn his back on me, and I have to apologize by squeezing shots of canned whipped cream straight into his mouth. Sometimes, I go to the hospital where I get to play games with the kids in the children’s ward.

But one of my favorite ways to spread the Sunshine is to spend the afternoon with Arielle at work.

How the tall caramel-skinned sass machine, who spent her time at the Briar Rose Mall telling off customers and somehow not getting fired, became a healthcare provider is still beyond me. Back in the day, she was the sort who had very little patience for foolishness and more than once threw it right back at a customer if they came in with a ‘the customer is always right’ attitude.

But now, she spends all day dealing with people at the end of their lives. And no matter how many times they snip and snap at her, lashing out in pain or boredom or from dementia, rarely, if ever, does she snap back. Oh, she still has plenty of sass, but it’s the kind of funny bite that has her patients taking their medications, getting out bed for physical therapy, and eating two more nibbles of dinner before digging into their pudding. All without argument.

She’s like a people whisperer.

I'm both sorry and thankful to admit that she's used that feisty 'oh, no, you didn't' tone with me too, keeping my sweetness and naivete protected, even from myself.

But her talent with people is one of the reasons I like to volunteer at the retirement center and nursing home where Arielle works. I get to see her in action and spend time with residents doing what I can to help them feel appreciated, respected, and loved.

Which is what I'm doing now, with Viktor. He's in his seventies and has lived here since his wife died five years ago. His children felt like their homes weren't safe for his limited mobility since he uses a cane, but I think they were mostly unprepared to handle his unlimited mind. Because, though he likes to feign being a daft old guy, he's sharp as a tack and beats me every time we play checkers, swearing it's the game that keeps him mentally sharper than the 'Jell-O pudding heads sitting around watching *Ellen* all damn day.' I'd say he's on to something because he's already on his way to beating me . . . again.

"When are you going to let me teach you chess?" Viktor complains as he slides a piece. "You keep coming in and are a pretty decent checkers player now, but you refuse to learn chess. Why's that, missy?" I don't miss the sly back pat as he takes credit for making me a better player.

"Sorry, Viktor, but I know you'd just mop the board with me. My ego can't take it," I tease back, moving. I actually do know the basics of chess, but I've seen Viktor hustle people. He draws them in, looking to all the world like a slightly befuddled old man with a cloud of white hair around his head, big glasses, and a sunburned nose regardless of the time of year. Ten minutes later . . . you owe him money and your brownie on Friday at dinner. And brownies in here are like honey buns in prison. Pure gold.

"You still pouting over last week?" Viktor asks, sliding another piece into position. He thinks I don't notice that he's setting me up for a triple jump, but I see it. I've just got to figure out how to stop him while he's distracting me from studying the board. "I told you, when my gout gets flaring up, I'm going to sit down."

I chuckle, shaking my head as I counter with my own move that stops his play. This time. “Viktor, you plunked your stool walker or whatever it is they call that contraption right in the middle of the hallway. On a blind corner.” His cane is one of those fancy ones that has a fold-up stool attached to it so he can sit when he needs to and lean on it as he walks. It’s a mobility aid, but he manages to make it seem like the ultimate in swagger when he struts around with the cane and then plops down to sit like a king surveying his domain, one leg crossed over the other and managing to not fall from the precarious balancing act.

“My gout don’t know it’s a blind corner. You’re the one who fell on her tuchus,” Viktor replies matter-of-factly, and I laugh. He’s ornery, he gives zero fucks . . . there’s a reason I like him. “If you hadn’t had on those heavy boots, your legs wouldn’t’ve been splayed up to the heavens. Ahh!” He throws his voice high, mimicking the sound I made when I fell, and spreads his arms up wide in a V the way my legs were. Thankfully, I’d had on jeans that day or Viktor would’ve gotten more than a close-up of the soles of my boots. “Damn shame you like those ugly things.” He leans to the side, glaring at my Docs like they personally offended him.

“Be nice or I’ll let Riley introduce you to one up close and personal,” Arielle warns with an evil smile, coming up to the table to stand beside Viktor. She places her arm around him, resting her palm on his shoulder. It’s affectionate, but I know she’s also checking his breathing to see if he’s struggling or breathing too slow or fast. “How’s he treating you, Riley?”

“Let’s see . . . grumpy, snarky, a good dose of leering thrown in for good measure . . . all in all, a good day with Viktor,” I joke good-naturedly.

Viktor laughs but mumbles under his breath, “I don’t leer.”

“What? You do too!” I might as well be arguing with a brick wall for all the good it’ll do me, and I really don’t mind Viktor’s flirty ways because he’s as harmless as can be. He’s lonely and sweet and makes all the female residents feel like they’ve still got it going on despite the fact that they’re no longer young and beautiful the way they once were.

“I only leer because you two are like a candy shop, look but don’t touch!” Viktor whines, fighting to hide his smile. “Just one little touch, that’s all!” He

wiggles his fingers toward Arielle but stays far enough back that we all know he's not really going to touch her. He's just messing with her because this is what they do for fun. And sport.

"You touch, and you'll wake up tomorrow with mittens duct taped to your hands," Arielle mock threatens. "Then what are you going to do? Besides, Riley here needs someone her own age."

"Arielle!" I protest as Viktor guffaws loud enough to wake Mrs. Johnson in the corner.

"Sorry, Mrs. Johnson. Jeopardy's not on for another hour," Arielle tells the frowning woman who nods her chin once and drifts back off to sleep. As though the interaction never happened, Arielle turns back to Viktor and me. "What? It's true, and you know it," Arielle says, grabbing a chair and sitting down. Looking at Viktor, she confides, "Riley hasn't had a date in so long, Mrs. Johnson could still remember it!"

Viktor frowns. "That's a long time, missy. Mrs. Johnson don't remember much past the Reagan days."

"I wasn't even alive during the Reagan days!" I hiss.

Viktor cocks his bushy white brows at me, offering, "You know, Riley, I might not be as young as I once was, but if you want, I'll be your boyfriend. You too, Arielle. I know your dance card isn't full because you hang out with us old folks all the time. When was the last time you took a day off?"

"Oh, please, Viktor, you know I can't leave you for even a day." He starts to preen, but she finishes with, "You don't behave for any of the other staff." Viktor smirks, and I suspect that's the absolute truth. Arielle's willing to play along with Viktor, though, and teases, "What could you do for us? Seriously."

"You know, I wasn't always the epitome of a silver fox you see seated before you today," Viktor says, leaning back in his chair to puff out his bony chest. His flannel plaid shirt still hangs loosely on his thin frame. "Back in my prime in the eighties, I'd have been able to leave you both more than satisfied on my waterbed! It was all about the motion of the ocean." He mimes a wave with his gnarled hand.

Arielle taps me on the shoulder to make sure I'm paying attention as she delivers her big blow. "Wow, Viktor!" she says with fake wide, innocent eyes, "I didn't know they had water beds back in the eighteen eighties!"

"Ooh, elder abuse!" Viktor rasps, clutching a hand to his chest and grinning. "See what I have to put up with, Riley? Oliver Twist had it better than I do! Oh, the humanity!"

"I'm sure you give as good as you get, Viktor," I tell him, and Viktor grins. "Maybe give more than you get, too."

"Get me a couple of Viagra, and I'll definitely give it," Viktor says before narrowing his eyes at Arielle. "This girl won't let me have any . . . stupid doctor's orders."

"Viktor, you try sneaking Viagra in here again and I really will tape your mittens on!" Arielle says with just enough seriousness to let Viktor know she isn't quite joking. "You know what it'll do to your heart, and though I'll deny having said it, I happen to like having you around here!"

"Ah, you're no fun," Viktor says, but he's smiling at the compliment. Getting back to the game, he picks up one of his checkers and hops three of my pieces. "And that, I believe, is how it's done. King me, Riley."

I look at the board, and I'm pretty sure that in all that discussion, he slid a piece on me. Still, I king his piece, losing a few minutes later when he traps my last piece with a nifty little snare maneuver. "Sharp as ever," I tell him, offering a good sportsmanlike handshake. "Rematch next week, Viktor?"

"Ah, giving me a reason to live another week, I see," Viktor says dramatically, standing up and reaching for his walker. "And what a reason too. See you next week, Sunshine."

Viktor turns and slowly makes his way toward the outdoor patio and the warm sunshine there while Arielle and I watch him go, chuckling. "Can you believe him?" I ask when he's out of earshot. "Old enough to be our grandfather, and he's still trying to hit on us!"

"Men," Arielle says sagely. "Once puberty kicks in, they've got two things on their minds. Food and sex. Both of which you could use some more of. Speaking of, have you checked the app today? Your hook get any fishies?"

She gets up as she asks, putting her finger in her cheek and pulling herself toward the kitchen. I grin and follow her.

“Maybe . . .” I tease out.

“Oh, this I’ve got to hear. But we work while we talk around here, so help me with this rice pudding. I’ll scoop, you top with raisins. Five each. So help me, if you put too many or too few, there will be rioting in the dining room and I’ll have to tranq them.” She’s kidding. I think.

We wash up, put on gloves, and Arielle grabs an ice cream scoop. Plopping a serving of white mush from the big, steaming pot on the stove into a dish, she sets it in front of me and I carefully place five raisins on top.

“Talk and work. Tell me about your DMs,” Arielle demands, never missing a beat with her scooping.

“I had a lot of messages, actually, but the one we looked at last night—the ninety-six percent match that I messaged?” I’m explaining like Arielle forgot overnight despite her near-perfect memory and her nodding like a bobblehead. “He messaged me back.”

“Yeah!” she yells. “That’s good, right? I mean he’s not creepy or anything?” The worry on her face tells me that she really is concerned about that.

“If you thought there might be creeps on there, why did you tell me to do it?” I sputter.

She shrugs. “There are creeps everywhere, Riley. What are you gonna do? Never date because the dude from the produce section might be a serial cheater? Because he might also be a loyal, faithful, monogamous guy who wants to treat you like a queen. Same with the guy from an app. Possibly awful, potentially amazing.”

“Fine,” I agree, knowing she’s right.

“So, which is he? Mark, right?”

“Yeah, Mark. I think he might be amazing. Or at least he seemed like it for the three hours we talked this morning.”

I drop that tidbit, knowing that like a grenade, it'll detonate in three, two, one . . .

“What?!” Arielle screeches, stopping her multi-tasking to stare at me. “Lead with that next time, bitch. Start with ‘hello, Arielle’ and then follow up with ‘I talked to a man online for three hours and might finally get laid’ next.”

“Arielle! It wasn't like that,” I argue. “We weren't sexting. It's not Tinder, that's the point! We talked about. . . stuff.”

“What sort of stuff? Give me the play by play so I can make sure you're not getting catfished.” Arielle's insistence is written clear as day in the set of her lips and the focus in her eyes. She might've gone back to scooping rice pudding, but her full attention is on me, and she'll go Mama Bear in a heartbeat if she thinks her cub—that'd be me—needs protecting.

Slowly, it all pours out.

I tell her about Mark's first brush-off, and she scoffs, singing an off-skew version of Ariana Grande's song, “No, thank you. Next.” The song is complete with a stop-right-there palm, a turned away face, and an aggrieved huff.

“It was okay. He immediately messaged me again, apologizing and asking for a second chance. And when we really started talking, it was like we had this connection.” My explanation seems to soften her by degrees, especially the part where he apologized.

Arielle hums along as I tell her about the rest of our conversation, asking questions here and there.

“He really didn't ask you for a picture or even what you look like?”

“Nope. I kinda wanted to ask him, but since he didn't and it's kind of the point of the app, it just didn't seem right.” I shrug, though now that Arielle's brought it up again, I'm massively curious about what Mark looks like. “Do you think I should ask him tonight? But if I ask him, he's going to ask me, and it's not like I can send him a picture. It's too risky. He might know I'm Riley Sunshine.” I talk myself into and out of that idea in a mere split second.

“I think you’re right,” Arielle says. “Talk to him again and see where it leads. Maybe nowhere, and then it won’t matter. And if the next few conversations go well, you can meet in person and explain the fake name and fame.”

Fake name. I’d kinda forgotten that part. Mark started short-handing Rachel for the letter ‘R’, and I’d read it as Riley automatically. There will definitely be some things to discuss if we do meet up, but not yet.

For now, I’m enjoying being Rachel—a regular, everyday nobody who might’ve met someone special. And I don’t want to let that go yet.

"But make sure you let me or Eli know if you decide to meet this guy. We need date, time, and place info in case you go missing. We want the cops to know where to start looking for your body.”

“Arielle! That’s awful. And scary,” I tell her.

She shrugs carelessly, as though police hunting for my missing body is no big deal, just another normal Tuesday. “And safe. You haven’t dated in a while, Riley. The world is different now, especially when you’re someone like you. Be safe with your body and your heart, but that doesn’t mean hiding away. I like that you’re taking risks and getting out there in the game. It’s about time, and you deserve it.”

“What about you?” I question carefully. She and Eli have been weird lately, and I wonder if they’re moving back in to an ‘on’ phase for some friends-with-benefits action. But they’ve done that countless times and it’s never been awkward like it has been lately.

“Oh, I’m so busy these days working extra shifts because we’re short-handed around here, so when I get an evening off, I want to eat and sleep so I can repeat it all the next day.”

“Nobody special filling your bed then?” I pry.

“Nope. No one special. Just me and my buzzy buddy, and most of the time, I’m too lazy to even manage that.”

Arielle starts moving faster to finish the puddings. If there’s one thing she’s not, it’s lazy. Something’s rotten in Denmark, but if she’s not ready to talk about it, I’ll respect that. For now. But mentally, I set a timer to gently push

for more info because while she's the protector of the group, I'm the cheerleader. And if she needs a pep talk to ditch someone who's not treating her well or to balls-up and speak her mind to someone who's caught her eye, I'm damn good at those.

“All right, let's get some damn rice puddings done. If we miss the three o'clock snack time, it turns into *Dawn of the Almost Dead* out there!” Arielle warns as she lines a serving cart with the raisin-bedazzled rice puddings. One of the raisins falls to the floor as we move them, and Arielle curses. “Shit. Grab me another one. I can't risk the fallout of only four.”

I laugh and add one more piece of wrinkly fruit to the shortened bowl. “Who knew raisins were such serious business?” I tease.

“Everything around here is serious business,” Arielle retorts.

CHAPTER 6

NOAH

R: Happy Tuesday!

I glance at the timestamp and feel my lips spread in a smile. Rachel sent this twenty minutes ago when I was in the shower. Then again, that's what we've done for the past three days. We have a long, drawn-out conversation that's mostly punctuated with ten- and fifteen-minute gaps for the whole day before we text each other to sleep.

I can't help but notice that I've been smiling a lot more these last few days too. So much so that people at work noticed yesterday. I heard two people in the break room joking that it was weird and scary for me to be happy, musing about what might make an uptight asshole like me smile. Their best guess seemed to be that I am either on drugs or I've finally gone off the deep end and am going to show up at work next week with my hair dyed green and in clown makeup. But the truth is much more mundane. It's her. Rachel. Every time my phone vibrates, I can't wait to see what she says.

M: Good morning. You're up early. I hope you slept well?

R: I did. At least until my dog licked my face, waking me up at six AM. Men!

M: I don't blame him. I'm sure I'd do the same in his place . . . maybe with less tongue. Or maybe not? ;)

Fuck, is this who I've become? I smile, I use emojis, and I flirt via texts. Ironically, though I would've given River a hard time if he were doing this, it feels natural with Rachel. An easy progression of our conversations from

bare-boned, get to know you questions to casual chats and flirty double-entendres.

R: I'm sure your wake-up call would've been preferable. As it was, Raffy was demanding a walk so he could pee. Which wouldn't have been so bad except that he saw a squirrel and lunged at it, nearly climbing the single tree on the whole block and barking so loudly that it scared me to death. I almost wet my pants! And then my first-floor neighbor glared at me through the blinds despite my mouthed apology and friendly wave. The nerve! LOL

M: I'm picturing this now and laughing. With you, I promise. Not at you. Were you at least wearing something other than pajamas this time?

R: You already know I wasn't! I'm out there in the dark, wearing slippers, shorts, and a sweatshirt that's seen better days with bedhead bad enough to scare away any would-be attacker, holding a leash and pepper spray on my lanyard with all my jangling keys. You think maybe that's why my neighbor was so freaked?

M: Perhaps.

R: Shoot, you're right. Maybe I'll leave an apology muffin at their door later. Is blueberry or chocolate chip more of an 'I promise not to wake you up before dawn again' flavor?

M: Hmm, good question. I think chocolate chip. Blueberry has more of a 'get well soon' vibe. All those fruit vitamins.

R: You're right. Adding that to my to-do list for the day. How about you?

M: Off to work, and now I'm wanting a muffin for breakfast. I'll probably go with cranberry-orange. A little tart, a little sweet. Like you.

R: <heart eye emoji> Talk soon. Think of me with every bite of that muffin.

I can't message her again until nearly ten o'clock, but that's okay. Rachel and I do this often, with our longer gaps almost serving as changes of subject.

M: That muffin was delicious. Mid-morning coffee fix next. How do you take yours? I'll make mine a Rachel.

R: Aww. I like mine light and sweet, like melted ice cream. Four sugars and cream.

M: Uh, maybe I'll stick with plain black, bitter and hot.

R: Fair enough, more sugar and cream for me!

M: How's the morning work coming along?

R: Slow . . . need to come up with a good quote for perseverance. Got any suggestions? Nothing I'm finding is hitting the right note.

M: Atticus- 'She was powerful not because she wasn't scared but because she went on so strongly despite the fear.'

R: Whoa. That's . . . wow. It's perfect. And here I was expecting you to pull something by Vince Lombardi or something out of your brain. No offense.

M: None taken. Not to kill the spark, but I didn't have that quote sitting on the front of my brain. I Googled it.

R: I appreciate the honesty! I've been Googling quotes all morning, reading and rejecting, and you just . . . boom, pull the perfect thing outta nowhere. Thanks!

M: What's it for?

Those three dots appear and disappear twice before her next message comes across, and I know she is struggling to answer. We're still being careful, divulging deep, inside information about some things while staying superficial on others. We still haven't talked about what we look like, or our jobs, or anything that would really identify us. I can understand her caution and even appreciate it since I'm hesitant to share my own identity. I'm dreading answering questions about my association with BlindDate since my initial motivation—researching the experience—seems a bit underhanded now that I've 'met' Rachel.

R: A motivational thing for work. Which I should probably get back to. Talk soon?

M: Absolutely. And for the record . . .

M: Football is like life—it requires perseverance, self-denial, hard work, sacrifice, dedication, and respect for authority.

R: What's that?

M: A perseverance quote from Vince Lombardi. Personally, I think the other one sounds more like what you're looking for, but I didn't want to miss out on the opportunity to meet your expectations.

R: You're kinda amazing, you know that?

M: I know. And also, my Google skills are stellar. Top-notch.

R: Goofball.

M: You're pretty amazing too.

I shift back to my afternoon of work, but the truth is my eyes keep drifting to my phone, looking for that green dot to show up next to Rachel's name. How is it that in just three days I've come to look for that little dot so damn much?

By evening, we're messaging nonstop. Chattering about our days in broad terms, talking about favorite television shows while we watch some God-awful semi-reality thing she enjoys, and later . . .

R: It's getting late, but I don't want to stop talking.

M: Are you in bed?

R: Yes?

I wouldn't mind taking things up a notch in intensity, but that question mark tells me everything I need to know about where Rachel's head is on that subject. It's fast, and we're still getting to know each other. So instead of going to a hotter, sexier place, I pivot.

M: Want me to tell you a bedtime story?

R: Oh, my God! Yes!

There are six smiley face emojis after that, so I know she's excited, probably even giddy, about the idea. I smile, trying to think of a good one.

M: Okay, get curled up in bed and dim the light on the phone. If you stop responding, I'll trust that you've gone to sleep, okay?

It's a moment before she responds.

R: Okay! Teeth brushed, bathroom stop for me and Raffy, back in bed, snug as a bug in a rug with Raffy curled up at my feet. All ready!

She paints an adorably sexy picture. Even though I don't know what she looks like, I've been imagining her more and more. The face is always a blur, but I picture her blonde hair atop a curvy figure, her feet kicking in delight every time she sends multiple smiley faces. I wonder if her breasts are full or small, filling or spilling out of my hands. I wonder if she has freckles that I can trace with my tongue. I wonder if she's ticklish. For some reason, I feel certain that she is. I wonder if her heart is as genuine as it seems and her mind as quick because she keeps me on my toes, never knowing what she's going to say. As someone who thrives on structure and needs predictability, that should drive me mad, but I somehow find it amusing and refreshing.

M: Once upon a time, there was a boy who lived in a vast kingdom with his mother and sister. The boy's mother worked hard, but times were tough and she often went without so her children would have enough. The siblings saw this and did everything they could to make it easier for their beloved mother, often telling her they weren't hungry so she would have enough dinner herself.

R: That's so sad. And sweet of them both, the kids and the mom, looking out for each other. <heart emoji, crying emoji>

M: But it wasn't all dire straits and meals of cheap rice and beans. The mother was wonderful and would play games with the children every night, even when she was asleep on her feet. Her favorite was hide and seek. Years later, the boy realized it was so the mother could close her eyes for at least thirty seconds while she counted, but at the time, he and his sister didn't know that. They would run and hide, giggling the whole time. You there?

R: Yes. Please go on.

M: One time, the boy hid in the garden next door. It wasn't a fancy garden with vegetables but rather an empty lot, overgrown with weeds. The boy

ducked down in the grass, curling up as small as he could so he wouldn't be found. Soon, he heard his sister helping his mother, both of them trying to find him. He shrank back even deeper into the garden, his back against the fence. Still as he could be, the only thing he moved were his eyes. That's how he saw . . . it. Awake?

R: OMG! Yes! What did he see?!

M: You're supposed to be relaxing, going to sleep. Maybe this isn't working?

R: It's working. It's totally working. Now tell me what the boy saw! Please!

Another smile takes my lips. I touch that word—please—in her message. It's not begging. More of a demand, honestly. But I can sense her desire to know me, talk to me. Not some hotshot executive, not some rags to riches story, not the grumpy workaholic. Just me.

That's why I'm sharing this story with her, though I meant to keep it light and easy. But this? It's important, it's where I came from, and I think she knows that too and wants every tidbit she can get from me the same way I'd love to know how she became who she is. What makes someone grow into an adult and still have this exuberant spirit that finds so much joy in life like Rachel does? I want to know, and so I continue my story.

M: The boy saw a brown paper bag lying in the grass. It was crumpled up like someone had thrown their empty lunch sack away, but it was stuck on the fence. Something about the way it didn't move made the boy think there was something inside. He never told anyone this, but in that moment, he hoped it was food. He was hungry. He was getting older and hungrier all the time, but he would never take food from his mother's mouth. Desperate as he was, he told himself that if there was a sandwich inside that bag . . . if it didn't look too bad, he'd eat it and never tell a soul.

R: <criying emoji, sandwich emoji, sandwich emoji, sandwich emoji>

M: But there wasn't a sandwich in the bag.

I pause, knowing she's awake because she just sent me the emoji message but wanting to get this next part right. It was the moment that everything changed. Everything. Not in an instant, there was still hard work to be done, but it'd taken the edge off my family's situation.

R: Mark?

The name, not mine but of this other man I've become, is what gives me the strength to tell the rest.

M: I'm here. Just making up the next part of the story.

R: Okay, take your time.

I'm not making up anything. I think she knows that too but is giving me the time and space to decide what I want to divulge.

M: So the boy slowly reaches out and picks up the bag, hugging it to his chest. He can tell right away that there's not a sandwich inside. It's too light for that. But he looks inside and can't believe his eyes. It's a roll of bills wrapped up in a rubber band. Money. More money than he'd ever seen in his life.

R: What did he do?

M: He jumped out of his hiding spot and ran for his mom, yelling the whole way. His mom thought something was wrong at first, checking him over for injury, but when he showed her the roll of green money, her eyes opened wide in hope for a split second before they crinkled with a frown. She asked where the boy got it, and he showed her, asking if they could keep it. But the mom said no, it wasn't theirs, and someone would be very sad that they'd lost their money because it might be their life savings. The boy didn't understand and argued, 'finders keepers', but the mom reminded him of the second part of that cliché, 'losers weepers', and said she wouldn't want to be the reason someone less fortunate was crying. You there?

R: <crying emoji> Yes. That's beautiful and must've been so difficult for the mom and the boy.

M: The mom took the boy and the money to the police department. The boy didn't understand it all, but if no one claimed it, after a time, it would be his. At first, the boy asked every day if someone had claimed the money, and he planned what he would spend it on. Toys, candy, a coat for his mom. Silly things and things they needed. It was months later, so long that the boy had stopped asking about the money. He'd given up all hope when the phone rang. It was the police. No one had claimed the money and it was his. The

mom took the boy to the police department, and he signed his name carefully to the form, and the man behind the desk handed him an envelope. Inside, the money was laid out flat, wrapped in a band, and was still more money than he'd ever seen. The mom told him that having a lot of money was a gift and a responsibility, asking him what he wanted to spend it on. What do you think he bought?

R: Toys? Please tell me he bought his mom a coat!

I remember back to that moment, holding that thick stack of green paper in my hands. I had no concept of amounts or what anything cost, but it'd felt like a wish come true.

M: The boy bought his mom and sister dinner that night at their favorite restaurant, the diner on the corner. They only ate there occasionally and always shared two meals between the three of them, the mom only picking at a pancake to make sure the kids got enough to eat. But that night, they all had their own plates of pancakes and bacon. The mom called it a splurge, and it'd felt like one, his belly full as he went to bed for the first time in a long time. He lay there for a while before getting out of bed to talk to his mom. "How can I make this money change things so that we have enough to eat every night and never have to worry about money again?" he asked. The mom cried at first, but then they talked it over. There were many different ways they could use the money.

R: That's so smart and brave of the boy! <criying emoji, smile emoji>

M: Eventually, the boy gave the money to the mom to go to school herself. It didn't make things easier at first. In fact, it got even tougher. She couldn't play hide and seek anymore because she was doing homework. But she reminded her kids every night that she was going to change things for them with the gift the boy had given her. And she did. It took six months, but the mom got a certificate and started working a better job. And then all three of them had enough for dinner every night, the mom had a coat, and they never worried about the rent. The boy learned that education, working hard from the ground up, and never forgetting where you came from is the key to doing better and being better. He learned that from his mom, a better lesson than magically-appearing money could've ever taught.

R: That's so beautiful. Such a touching story. That boy is a perfect example of love, giving everything to someone who'd given everything for him. Can I ask . . . are you the boy?

I stare at the question for a long time, wanting to tell the truth and wanting to lie in equal measure. I feel splayed open in a way I never have before. I started the story thinking it'd be a quick and silly story about the time I found a bunch of money and ate so many pancakes that I made myself sick, but it'd taken a very different tone as I remembered. I not only haven't shared that story with anyone else, but I also don't think I've ever thought of it the way I did tonight. The vulnerability is uncomfortable, making my chest itchy and achy. If I'd had to speak those words, I wouldn't have been able to, but typing them seemed less difficult. Until now. Until Rachel wants me to claim them as something so utterly personal.

M: No, just a bedtime story to get you sleepy. Are you ready to go to bed now?

Yeah, I'm pussing out, which pisses me off too. But being angry at myself for sharing too much is easier than proclaiming myself some pitiful loser who was willing to eat a filthy sandwich from someone else's trash.

R: Oh. Well, it's still a beautiful story. I am tired. I think I'll go to sleep now. I'll talk to you in the morning?

M: Absolutely. Sweet dreams, think of me.

R: I definitely will. My fingers will probably be typing in their sleep. LOL

I'm glad Rachel didn't seem disappointed when I said the story wasn't mine. Or maybe she didn't believe me? Either way, I hope things aren't awkward now.

I drift off to sleep, dreaming of a blonde beauty curled around her phone, typing out messages to me with a sweet smile on her face. It's still a blur, but it's starting to feel clearer.

M: GOOD MORNING, GORGEOUS!

R: Good morning! Not feeling too gorgeous this morning, I'm afraid. My hair is a mess, like I might have actual rats nesting in these tangles, and my breath could kill a rhino.

I laugh at the picture she paints, but before I can respond, she sends another message.

R: Oopsie! I meant . . . Good morning, handsome! Hopefully, that didn't send you running for the hills. I promise I own a hairbrush and toothbrush and I'm not afraid to use them.

M: A toothbrush? What's that?

I'm joking. Teasing her. Who am I? Telling deep, dark secret stories, smiling at my phone like a maniac, and telling silly jokes. River wouldn't believe it. Hell, I don't believe it, but here I am. And I'm relieved that things aren't weird or awkward after last night's story time. Rachel's picking up our messaging today the same way we have the last several days, casual and flirty and fun.

R: Oh, no! Please tell me you're kidding and have all your teeth! Is that why you're on BlindDate? Because you're a toothless, fire-breathing rhino-killer? <fingers crossed emoji>

M: Maybe. Maybe not. Sounds like you're not ready to know for sure yet.

Fuck, we're dancing closer to the edge of making this real. A few days ago, I would've said no way. But now, I think I do want to meet Rachel. It's risky, a huge risk if I'm honest, because I'm enjoying our conversations and there's always the chance that meeting in person might ruin all this. Especially when I explain my name and my reason for being on the app in the first place. She might ghost me, and I can't say I won't deserve it. But fuck, I really want to know what she looks like, see if the vision in my mind is accurate. I want to trace her lips and taste her smile, feel her laughter wash over my skin. I bet it feels like a bubble bath.

R: I might be. If you promise to brush your teeth.

M: Tough negotiator. I could do that. Once. For you.

R: Aww, such a softie.

M: I'm really not. Most people think I'm an asshole. They're right.

R: I doubt that. You're too funny and sweet to be an a\$\$hole.

I bark out laughing at her censoring the word asshole. I haven't cursed too much in our back-and-forths, but now that I see it this clearly, I realize that she hasn't cursed at all. Something about that seems so adorable.

M: You'll see. I've got to run so I'm not late for work. Talk soon?

R: Yeppers! Go be a big, bad a\$\$hole to the people at work. LOL

I WORK ALL DAY, ALTERNATELY SCOWLING AT STATISTICS AND SMILING AT MY phone as Rachel and I message back and forth. I stay away from the coffee pot, not wanting to hear any more gossip about my odd smile. Rachel doesn't think it's weird. She thinks I'm funny and sweet. She's wrong, but it still feels good that she thinks that.

By Wednesday evening, we're messaging in between dinner and home routines again. I'm not telling her a bedtime story tonight. That's for sure.

R: What's on the agenda this evening?

M: I've got a pre-cooked dinner to heat up. Exciting stuff, right? What about you?

R: I need to choose a dress for a work thing I'm doing later this month. Pick a color—blue or gray?

I still don't know what she does, same as I haven't told her what I do, so I'm careful not to ask questions I don't want to answer myself.

M: Blue. It'll look good with your blonde hair.

R: Thanks!

M: What are you wearing now? Already in your pajamas?

R: No. Still in loungewear. Best part of being your own boss is setting the dress code. LOL What're you wearing?

M: Sweats and a T-shirt. Nothing exciting over here either.

R: Would those by chance be gray sweatpants?

M: Are you spying on me? How'd you know?

R: Men always wear gray sweats because they know the ladies like them.

M: Is that so? Why are gray sweatpants such a beloved item?

R: <eggplant emoji>

I nearly choke on my tongue. This is definitely new territory that we've explored, and I'm suddenly desperate to see where this leads. My cock thickens in my sweats, unleashed from underwear since I'm home alone.

I try to decide how to respond. Rachel doesn't seem the type to jump right into sexting, and I don't know how well I'd do with it either, but I'm damn willing to try.

M: And now my shirt's off and my sweats are feeling a bit tighter.

R: <blushing emoji> I'm not wearing a bra and my nipples are so hard you can see them though my shirt.

I groan as I picture that.

M: Will you take your shirt off for me?

I'm playing with fire. Hot, dangerous, molten fire that might ignite everything I've been building with Rachel and decimate it into ash with a few keystrokes. Or . . . It might take us to a whole new level.

R: I can't believe I'm doing this, but I did it. Is your shirt really off?

M: Yes. I wish you were here so I could kiss you, cup your breasts in my hands, and feel you against my skin.

R: That sounds good.

I breathe deep and slow, my hand clenched in a tight fist just to keep from jerking myself off. It still takes me two tries to type without any spelling errors.

M: Pretend your hands are mine. Trace them over your skin.

M: Squeeze your breasts, pluck your nipples.

M: Are you doing it?

M: Rachel?

Fuck, did I read this all wrong? She's not responding.

R: I'm here. I'm . . . doing what you said. It feels good, but I wish it were you.

M: Fuck, R. Touch yourself for me. Slide your hand into your panties and touch yourself. Imagine it's my fingers and touch yourself.

R: Are you doing it too? Touching yourself.

I am now. I shove my pants down in the front, leaning back on the couch to stroke my length. I have to squeeze just below the head to keep myself from coming too soon because I'm on edge just thinking of Rachel touching herself to my words.

M: Fuck, yes. I'm imagining how gorgeous you look as I stroke myself. I'm already close just from picturing you.

R: Me too. Keep . . . going.

I'm not sure if she means my words or stroking myself or both. Though I have to type one-handed with my left hand, I make it work.

M: Are you wet? Rub that wetness onto your clit. Do you like circles or tapping?

R: Uh . . . circles.

M: Do it then. Circle your clit, dip down into yourself and then rub your clit some more.

M: Tell me when you're close. I want to come with you.

R: Are you close?

M: I'm holding onto the edge. Waiting on you, baby.

I thrust into my fist, my toes curling against the rug as I fight off the impending orgasm, trying to wait for her.

R: I'm . . . jskdjfoihoiwhehpw.

I take that as her fingers clenching against her phone as the orgasm washes through her, and I jack myself fast and hard, letting go of the tight rein on myself. Cum spurts out of my cock, covering my hand as my abs clench tight.

M: Baby? You good?

M: Still there?

R: I am. Did you?

M: Yeah, I did. I figured the gibberish was your way of saying you were coming.

R: LOL It was. Oh my gosh, I can't believe I did that! <blushing emoji>

M: It's okay. I've never done that either. I'm glad we did, though. You?

R: Uhm . . . yeah. Except now I'm sitting here messy. I guess you are too? Meet you back in five after a quick clean-up?

I laugh, shaking my head. She's so real. Even after saying that she's never done anything like that, she's boldly honest that she needs to wipe her hand and thinks nothing of it that I need to as well.

M: I'm counting the minutes.

Fewer than five minutes later, I'm sitting on my couch with freshly washed hands and a clean dick back in my sweats. Testing the waters, I type . . .

M: Second thoughts?

R: No. But that was pushing the line for me. I . . . I like our chats.

M: That was nowhere near my line. Actually, I'd like to push the line a little bit more myself.

R: How so?

M: I like talking to you. A lot.

R: Ditto here. I'll tell you . . . you've made the past few days good ones.

M: So I was thinking, would you like to meet? I mean, face to face?

The message sits on the screen for a long time, and I stare at it, cursing myself for ruining a good thing. There are so many reasons meeting in person is a bad idea. An awful idea! But then I think of the conversations I've had with Rachel, the way the last few days have felt brighter, and the almost-giddy feeling in my stomach when I see her messages. I think about what we just did and imagine things getting even better if we meet in person.

Or they could go totally awry. Here, in messages, I can control what I say, what impression Rachel has of me. She thinks I'm sweet, for fuck's sake! If we meet in person, she'll know the truth. That I lied about my name and motives, that I'm a workaholic who buries himself in statistics and dollars because I refuse to go back to where I came from, and mostly, that I'm an asshole to everyone but her.

I can't take it anymore.

M: Too soon?

I'm torn between wanting her to say *yes, it's too soon* so we can continue the way we are and *no, it's not too soon* so I can find out more about this woman who's filling my thoughts every day and night.

R: Yes. No. I mean . . . yes, I want to meet and no, it's not too soon.

Holy shit! I was worried for a second there! Immediately, that thought is followed by, *Oh, shit, she wants to meet. What if I don't like her? What if she doesn't like me?*

Deep breath, Noah. I'm sure after this past week, even if there's no romantic spark, we can have a nice time and remain friends. I have to trust the AI on this one.

M: I haven't been this nervous since my first date in high school.

R: Me too! This whole blind date thing is really a trip. But you're unlike anyone I've met before.

M: You don't even know what I look like yet. I could look like Jabba the Hutt for all you know.

R: I seriously doubt you do, but even Jabba must have had some positive qualities. If anything, he had wicked taste in bikinis.

M: You're evil for that one.

R: Have any specific place in mind?

I think furiously. I was so nervous about just asking her that I didn't even think about where and when and how.

M: How about tomorrow afternoon at the Alex Lighthouse bookstore? That way, you've got a big public space for safety.

R: And they've got that kickass cafe. Five thirty?

M: Perfect. I think I'm going to skip story time tonight in favor of a cold shower.

R: I think I'm going to go for a bubble bath before bed. And before you start thinking that sounds sexy, I'll have a charcoal mask on my face, cucumber slices on my eyes, and scrub on my lips. I've got a hot date I want to impress.

M: Guess I'll have to brush my teeth then too. <wink emoji> G'night.

R: G'night.

I take a shower and do a bit more work to calm down my jittery nerves. Still, as I lie down and try and get some sleep, it's thoughts of Rachel and the stirrings she's causing me to feel in my chest, in my brain, and yes, in my still half-hard cock, that are on my mind.

Suddenly, my phone dings . . . it's her.

R: One last goodnight. You've been on my mind while I took my bath. How will I recognize you and you recognize me?

M: I'll wear a blue tie.

R: I'll wear a blue dress since it'll look good with my hair. <wink emoji> See you tomorrow. <lipstick kiss emoji>

CHAPTER 7

RILEY

I'm nowhere near 'big time' as far as influencers go. In fact, sponsored posts make up less than a third of my monthly income. I still have to earn my money the old-fashioned way, driving traffic to my social media and getting percentage kickbacks on views, likes, and shares. But with my followers growing, that could change. More sponsorships—carefully cultivated ones, of course—can add name recognition to an online personality, leading new followers to a page like ants to a cake at a picnic.

Like this makeup from Joroast Cosmetics. All-organic, animal friendly . . . and so luscious and pretty that as I touch up my eyelashes, I feel sexy and feminine, exactly what I want to feel today.

And I need it. Because as excited as I am about meeting Mark for the first time in person, I'm also nervous.

What if I don't meet his expectations?

What if he doesn't meet mine?

What if he's a psycho killer who's going to leave my dead body by the river?

"Well, if that's the case," I tell my reflection as I cap my mascara and go hunting for the right shade of lipstick, "at least I'm going to be one *fabulous* looking corpse. What do you think, Raffy?"

Raffy, who has been perched on my queen-sized bed this whole time, watches me intently, probably wondering what I'm doing. He doesn't even

pick his head up from his fluffy paws, but he knows when a reaction is expected and gives me a half-hearted “Rowf!”

“Thanks, but I would like a few more details than that,” I tease, going over to rub behind his ears. “You think I’m pretty, don’t you, boy?”

Raffy affirms for me that yes, I do look cute and that yes, if I do end up abandoned on the bank of the river, his life’s never going to be the same. Most likely because nobody will baby him the way I do.

“Okay, then let’s finish filming my final look.” I’m pulling some double duty today, using my sponsored make-up to get ready for my date but also filming a ‘get ready with me’ video. I just need a shot of the completed look and I’ll be ready to edit the full video into one seamless video with transitions from phase to phase.

I find the right angle on my halo light and use the Bluetooth remote to set the timer on my phone’s camera. Three, two, one . . . pose and click. I reset it to go again and do another pose. And then a third and fourth. Flipping through them, I decide the third one’s the charm and send it to my laptop.

“Raffy, come here, baby,” I tell him. He glares at me, and with a huff of annoyance, he gets up and hops off the bed to come over. But then he stops to stretch, and I encourage him, “You want to be in a picture with Mama? Of course you do!”

He’s a diva in training, minus the training part, and he loves his fans. Mostly because they send him treats. Scooping him up, I hold him at arm’s length and look into his little face. “You’ll always be my number-one boy, right?”

“Rawf!” That gets a more enthusiastic reaction, and I snuggle him in close.

Grinning, I reset my camera and then use the remote to make my phone beep. The noise gets Raffy’s attention, and he looks directly at the camera, right on cue. I have just enough time to smile and pose myself before Raffy starts squirming. It takes more than three tries, but in the end, I have a good one, me smiling to the camera while Raffy looks adorable in my arms.

I send that one to my laptop too. After Raffy’s approval. “Who’s the best doggy model in the world? That’s right, you are.” I set him down, and he jumps right back on the bed and continues with his half-asleep nap. Only

half-asleep because if I make a move toward the kitchen or crinkle a food wrapper, he'd be at my feet, begging for a bite, in less than a blink.

I finish the video quickly, posting it to my page with all the appropriate hashtags, including Joroast Cosmetics.

Now that that's done, there's no more stalling from nerves or rushing around with excitement. I have just enough time to grab yellow sandals from the back of my closet and slip them on my feet. No socks today, and no Docs, which feels weird, but dressing up for Mark seems like the right thing to do.

I'm also hoping that without my identifiable markers, maybe he won't recognize me right off the bat and I can explain my work and the fake name. Of course, there's always the chance that even if I went into the date in full 'Riley Sunshine' mode, he still might not know who I am. But I can't count on that.

Not when it's this important.

I take a few laps around the apartment, on wood floors and rugs, to be sure I haven't forgotten how to walk in these things. It's been at least a year since I've worn heels.

Nothing would be more embarrassing than falling on my butt just as Mark and I meet because I've forgotten how to walk in heels. I remember falling at the home last week—in my boots, mind you—and make a few more trips from the kitchen down the hallway, using it as a runway. "Okay, I think I'm ready," I tell Raffy.

Raffy assures me that I'm going to be fine, that Mark's not going to be a one-eyed *Phantom of the Opera*, and that even if he is, I've got a big boy who'll give me kisses at home. Or at least that's how I'm choosing to read his yawn and repositioning to lie on his back with his belly exposed. His head is on my pillow, keeping it warm for me.

I give myself one last lookover in the full-length mirror in my bedroom. Hair, blonde and curled. Makeup, on point, literally photo-ready. Blue dress, like I said I'd wear. Yellow heels, yellow nails, and a tiny gold sun necklace at my throat. I'm still me, Riley, just not the full-throttle Riley Sunshine.

I figure that Mark will be in a suit, coming from the office. Knowing that helped guide my dress choice in that it's demure but still has enough of a V-cut in the bodice that it's sexy too. As Eli likes to joke, I could go to the church picnic, but probably not Sunday services. I don't think Eli has ever been to either, so I'm not sure how he'd know.

That reminds me, I'm supposed to let Eli or Arielle know where I'm going when I go out on a date. Safety first. Arielle has still been swamped at work all week, so I send Eli a quick message . . .

Riley: First date with app guy, Mark. Meeting in public at Alex Lighthouse at five thirty. I'll text when I'm home.

Eli: So I should expect your text in the morning? Don't do anything or anyone I wouldn't do.

Riley: <eye roll emoji, kiss emoji>

Eli's instruction leaves me more than enough room to do anything I would want to because I'm not half as crazy as he is.

I grab my purse and look back at my apartment, just in case we do 'happen' to end up here. I'm pleased as always with what I find. Sure, it's not the biggest. It's just a one-bedroom place. But it's in a nice complex in a good part of town, within walking distance of a nice supermarket, and best of all, I don't have to break the budget on a monthly basis for it.

"Wish me luck, Raffy. Don't wait up!" I sing-song as I pull the door closed behind me, checking the lock. As I head to my little yellow Volkswagen bug, with sunshine hubcaps, of course, my brain replays my messages with Mark over and over. I'm looking for red flags I might've missed, but I mostly end up smiling as I remember funny things he's said.

There's something about Mark that tells me he's one of a kind and that where we don't match, we compliment. We fill gaps, as someone once said. I've got gaps, he's got gaps, and together, we've filled gaps.

Now let's see if we want to fill those gaps that haven't been filled properly in a long time.

Riley Ann! I yell at myself. But truthfully, I don't feel embarrassed or ashamed about my naughty thoughts. After last night, I might have to hold myself back from Mark if he's half as amazing as I think he is.

I cross my fingers that it's the case, and I start my car and head to the bookstore, hope blooming the whole way there.

DRIVING TOWARD THE BOOKSTORE, I TRY TO BE PRESENT IN THE MOMENT. Briar Rose is a beautiful town with crape myrtle trees blooming in pinks and whites in the medians, families playing in the park as I pass, and people walking the sidewalks.

It's not small, though. We have a bustling downtown and rail system that'll get you anywhere in town easily.

The sun is shining, there's not a cloud in the blue sky, and I'm on my way to meet Mark.

It doesn't get any better than this right here, enjoying the moment and on the precipice of something possibly great.

Stopping at the Iron Bridge, I decide to skip the radio today and instead tap my phone quickly. "Play audiobook *Baby Daddy*."

"*Playing audiobook file,*" my phone replies, and I have to grin. Voice control's a lot easier than tapping at a screen while I drive, that's for sure. Safer, too. Although my insurance agent would probably have a heart attack if he knew I was driving along while listening to a romance audiobook.

But I've been reading and listening to a lot of romance lately. At first, it was just to live a bit vicariously since my own love life is so nonexistent, but after chatting with Mark for the past week, I've been drawn into the steamier side of romance once again. I even imagine that the voice actor playing the lead in this audiobook is what Mark sounds like.

And as the book gets steamier and hotter, I imagine Mark telling me things like he did last night. Much more explicit things . . . what he wants to do to me, what he wants me to do to him, what we can do together.

Whew! I turn up the air conditioning a notch because with the sunshine beating down through the windows, it's getting hot in here. Yeah, that must be it.

Suddenly, my book stops, and a ringing tone comes over my speakers. "*Mom calling.*"

Ugh. Okay, okay . . . well, that's what I get for having my phone synced with my car's audio system. Mom can interrupt a hot romance with a phone call. Reaching over, I tap the green button on my screen. "Hey, Mom."

"Hi, honey," Mom says, like she starts every phone call since I moved out of the house. "How's my baby girl doing on this beautiful afternoon?"

"Ah, Mom, you mind if I call you back?" I ask as I turn down Vine, a half-mile from the bookstore. "I'm in the car. You know, safety?"

Okay, I do feel a *little* guilty about trying to claim safety when I was just listening to a guy talking about what his mouth and tongue were doing on his lover's body twenty seconds ago . . . but not too guilty. Mothers ruin date moods. It's a universal law. Besides, I don't want to tell her, but I also don't want to lie to her.

"Aw, honey, okay, that's fine," Mom complains before sighing. "You still coming over soon?"

"I sure am," I tell her. "I'm volunteering with Arielle a lot right now, but I'll come over as soon as I can. I'll let you know."

"Good. I can't wait to see you. We can play in the garden."

Oh, no. Mom said 'play', and of course my phone's voice controller's still turned on. And with the nice speakers in my little bug of a car, my phone decides to start playing my book again.

I try to turn it off, but I'm in stop-and-go traffic and can't seem to close it.

"What's that? Is someone with you?" I can hear the interest through every syllable, the hope in her tone.

"Ah . . . just someone next to me, Mom. Their windows are down and they're yelling into their phone, that's all."

“Oh, okay,” Mom says as I scramble to try and turn off the book without rear-ending the pickup truck in front of me.

I manage to hit a button, and thankfully, not the truck because that hitch would destroy my cute car, but it’s not the ‘stop’ button. Instead, I guess I hit the fast forward because my car fills with the sound of . . . oh, sweet Jesus.

“Yes! Yes! Fuck me, fuck me harder!”

“Riley, what is *THAT?!* ” Mom screeches as the blood drains out of my face.

“Ah . . . sound file,” I reply, tapping the phone again, but nothing happens. “I had an . . . audiobook up.”

“She spasms underneath me, her sweet, silken pussy milking my cock of every last drop—” my radio continues, and I groan, my brain going into circuit overload. Why can’t I get this damn audiobook to stop?

Mom is on a roll. “I know you are a grown woman, but your choice of books could use work, Riley!”

Swallowing my pride and feeling my face burn, I grit my teeth. “Turn off *Baby Daddy!*”

The partial silence that fills my car is a relief until Mom sighs heavily, letting me know the call’s still connected.

“Mom, it’s just a—” I start, but she’s not having any of it.

“Riley, I thought I raised you better than that. To be driving while listening to . . . *that,*” she complains. “You could have gotten into an accident! And to think, what would you tell the police? *Oh, I’m sorry, Officer, that I got into an accident. I was too busy listening to porn.*”

It’s not porn. I know that, but there’s no sense in explaining to Mom. And as if that’s bad enough, she’s not done.

“Or worse, what if you were trapped in the car and they had to cut you out? You’d have that smut playing while they’re trying to help you. At least tell me you have on clean underwear?”

What is it with moms and clean underwear? Do they think people go around turning their skivvies inside out to get another day of wear? I certainly don't, and even if I did, would the doctor in the emergency room notice as they cut my clothes from my body? I doubt it. Shoot, I'd probably pee myself if I did get in an accident just from shock and fear. And then no one would know if my pretty, lacy panties were fresh or not. So there, Mom.

But she's right. *Ugh. You win, Mom.* "Mom, I know, I know! It's just a book. Listen, I'm gonna let you go so I can focus on driving in embarrassed silence."

"Okay, but we're not done talking about this," Mom says.

She's wrong on that one. I'm never discussing this horrifying moment with her again. Once was too many times.

"Bye, Mom," I say, not agreeing with her.

"Bye, honey. See you soon."

Mom hangs up, and I sink into the seat, wishing a sinkhole would open in the road beneath me so I could fall even deeper into that. It'd make avoiding that future conversation with my mom that much easier.

Taking advantage of the clear lanes ahead of me, I hurry down the street to the Alex Lighthouse bookstore.

Parking in the lot, I take a moment to breathe deeply, trying to calm my pounding heart. It's not just the embarrassing conversation with Mom but pure fear running through my veins.

Is this going to go okay? Is Mark going to be everything I've built him up to be?

I look into my makeup mirror, and I see scared, wide eyes looking back at me.

Taking a final steadying breath, I get out of my car and walk with determined steps toward the entrance.

The whiff of paper and air conditioning that hits me when I open the door helps. Alex Lighthouse is one of the last of a dying breed of bookstores, what

Barnes & Noble used to be when they were at their peak, but better. There are overstuffed chairs everywhere, half of them filled even at this hour by bookhounds reading a little bit of everything, with quiet music filtering over everything to give the entire space a romantic, hushed importance. It's the sort of place where you could spend an entire day and still feel like you want to come back the next day. This place is special.

Alex Lighthouse has a full cafe up on the second floor. The food's pretty good, and through the big arched windows, there's a great view of Hamilton Park, which is one of the nicest public parks in the city.

In the café, the mood is different. It's more casual, with soft chatter from the tables of people as they sip their coffee. It's perfect for a first date.

I find an empty table and sit down, taking out my phone to message Mark.

R: Hey, I'm here a bit early. Found us a table.

A moment later, Mark replies.

M: Great! I just turned into the parking lot. I'll be inside in 3 min.

I smile. That's so Mark. Not 'in a minute' or 'see you in five', but specific . . . three minutes. I bet I could time him and he'd be spot on.

I wiggle in my chair, smoothing my dress and my hair. Then, just in case, I huff a breath into my palm to make sure it's okay. Minty fresh.

Taking a quick glance around, I see three other women in blue. Uh-oh, how will Mark know which one is me?

I don't get a chance to figure that out because a man comes up the winding staircase, and at first, what I see is a thick shock of nearly jet-black hair, definitely a business cut, with no hair touching the collar of a bright white shirt. He takes another step, and broad shoulders clad in a smoke-gray suit come into place, not so wide that he casts shadows when he walks, but strong and athletic.

I can feel my body start to yearn, and my core starts to yell *yes! yes! yes!* with every beat of my heart.

Another step, and he starts the turn that'll bring him up to the café level, and my mind really, really needs to slow down. Still, it's somewhere for my nervousness to go, and I eagerly anticipate his approach. He hits the landing, and as he turns this direction, I start to get up.

“Mar—”

My knees become unhinged as he comes around a bookshelf and I see who he is. Not Mark.

Noah Daniels. My best friend's brother. Arielle's brother, and River's best friend.

Panicking, I duck my head down reflexively.

What is he doing here?

Oh, no! I can only imagine if Mark shows up right now and Noah sees us. He'll for sure embarrass me and ruin the whole thing. And if he finds out that I used his and River's app, the teasing will be even worse. I'll never live it down! Even though there's nothing wrong with it, it's the sort of button a brother pushes on repeat just to get a rise out of you. And with Noah being his best friend? Button pushing times two.

I keep my head buried, snagging a newspaper from the next table over, and pretend to read. But Noah walks right by me. He does a double-take, and I see the smile fall from his face as he says, “Riley?”

I look up, and I can't help but lift my lip in a sneered response. “Well, hello, Noah. Fancy seeing you here.”

What am I saying? Have I turned into some nineteen-forties Hollywood starlet? At least I can tell Mom that she doesn't have to worry about my being too influenced by my 'porn' book choices. I'm suddenly so strait-laced, I feel like there's a corset squeezing my insides into goo.

Noah doesn't look fazed at all. If anything, he looks amused. “I suppose so. I'm meeting someone.”

“Me too,” I snip back, ruffling my stolen newspaper.

“Does River know?” he asks, one dark brow lifting harshly.

“What I do or don’t do, and who I do it with, is none of my brother’s business,” I tell him primly.

Why does Noah Daniels rub me the wrong way? I don’t even know him except from hearing stories from Arielle and River. We’ve barely met in passing! He came to Mom’s with River once and pissed me off and hurt my feelings with some stupid comments about my ‘sunny personality’.

I can’t put my finger on it, but he makes my skin feel like it’s on inside out and full of cactus barbs. I want to scratch and spit and bite back against everything he says. No one else makes me feel like that. I’m Riley Sunshine, after all, but he makes me feel like Riley Doom-and-Gloom.

His chuckle prickles over me, and I can feel my face flushing. “*Who you do?* I definitely think River would have an opinion on that.”

“You think Arielle cares who you . . . do?” I hadn’t meant it like *that*, but now that he said it, I won’t back away from the challenge of his words.

“Arielle would have an opinion on what I eat for breakfast, how often I shit, and whether I sleep on my right or left side. She would definitely care who I . . . fuck.”

Ooh, he’s upping the ante.

“Fine. They’d care, but not if they don’t know.” The threat is implied, or at least, I hope it is. “Now, if you’ll please excuse me.” I dismiss him, hoping that Mark hasn’t seen me talking to someone else. That’d be a definite faux pas on a first date.

“Sure, sure. Have a good . . . date,” Noah says, stumbling over the word. He looks around and sees a woman sitting at a table alone. He smiles broadly, something I’ve never seen him do. It changes his entire face from harsh and brooding to something brighter, and dare I say . . . happier?

Good for him, I think, though I feel sorry for her.

That’s tacky, Riley, I scold myself, not liking the ugly thought.

I can’t help but watch as Noah makes his way through the maze of tables. He takes a deep breath, his broad shoulders lifting and lowering as he straightens

his back. Almost like he's nervous.

But the great Noah Daniels does not get nervous. I know that much from River. He goes on and on about how stone-cold brilliant Noah is, getting entire boardrooms of people eating out of the palm of his hand with his brains by never leaving a single detail to chance. He's a perfectionist to a dangerously unhealthy level, only leaving the office when River drags him out.

Arielle says Noah was a great big brother growing up, but as she's gotten older, he forgets she's a grown woman who does whatever the hell she wants, whenever she wants to. He's always trying to talk her into getting a better-paying job, investing in mutual funds, and saving for a rainy day. As if he knows what she needs better than she does.

I might be being a bit dramatic, but I don't hold Noah Daniels in high regard. He's not a bad guy, he's just an uptight, grumpy, money-driven one.

Noah comes around to face one of the other women sitting alone. I see his mouth move but can't read what he says. The woman nods, gesturing to the chair, and Noah sits down with a smile.

Of course, his date's already going great. He probably planned it that way.

Meanwhile, Mark said three minutes and it's definitely been at least seven. I hope he's not lost. I really hope he didn't see me talking to Noah and leave. And more than anything, I hope he didn't catch sight of me and bail.

I lick my lips. Nope, not thinking like that. *No negativity. You don't need that vibe for even a moment, Riley. Happy thoughts, positive thoughts.*

Mark will come up the stairs any moment, see you, and it'll be all sunshine and rainbows. A happy, ninety-six percent match. One River and Noah never need to know was assisted by their app.

Time drags, and I start to feel stupid. I mean, I ditched my socks, I ditched my Docs, and I got dressed up, only to apparently get stood up. In front of an audience, no less. Namely, Noah.

I'm about to get up and leave when I see Noah rise from the table with his date. She reaches out to him, and he shakes his head, thunder written on his

face. Guess it's not going so well, after all. His smile has disappeared as if it never was, to be replaced by his usual Grumpasaurus grimace.

Noah sits down at an empty table, fidgeting with his phone. He glances up, and his gaze spears through me, pinning me in place. Those dark eyes dare me to say one word about whatever messy mistake his date was.

I don't feel any joy in that, though, so I offer a small smile of pity and go back to looking around. Should I wait any longer? Should I message Mark?

I know if I don't message him, I'll always wonder what happened, so I pull up my big girl panties—which, again, are clean, Mom!—and message him.

R: Get lost? I'm waiting in the café upstairs.

I watch my phone closely, needing an answer.

M: Me too.

Huh? I scan the room, looking for someone looking for me. Looking for a guy in a blue tie. Looking for someone who looks like their name is Mark, though I don't know what that 'looks' like.

R: Where are you sitting? I got us a table, but I can come to you.

I watch the three dots appear and then . . .

M: Raise your hand, Rachel.

I blink. That would make it easier for Mark to find me, but it seems embarrassing somehow. I glance back at Noah, but he's staring at his phone intently, probably deleting his date's name and number.

Slowly, I raise my hand and scan the room, looking for my dark-haired stranger to make his way to me.

But no one is coming. I look around once more to find Noah's eyes locked on me. For as dark as they are, they seem to shine bright in this light, lit from within by some type of fire. His jaw is tight as he grits his teeth. I watch, rapt, as he stands from the table and covers the space between us in marked strides.

Standing at my table, he growls, "Rachel?"

I see it then. Dark hair, perfectly knotted royal blue tie and suit, works too much, dedicated, and loyal. But Mark is also sweet and kind and *funny*. All things Noah is not.

Or at least not that I've ever seen.

“Noah? Or should I call you Mark? Is this some kind of prank? Did River put you up to this? Or Arielle?” I hiss. “No. This is over the line, *way* over the line. Even for them.”

My voice is getting louder, and I can feel eyes on me. Eyes I don't need. Not as Riley Watson, and definitely not as Riley Sunshine.

Without waiting for a response, I head for the stairs, trying not to run because I know I'll trip and fall in these stupid heels. And wouldn't that be the punchline in whatever joke Noah is trying to pull?

Poor, lonely Riley Sunshine, falling down the stairs after the worst first date in the history of ever.

I make it to my bug, but even the sight of the yellow car that always makes me smile does nothing for me.

Not him. Not Noah Daniels.

CHAPTER 8

NOAH

“*R*achel . . .?” I whisper, watching Riley flee the cafe and head down the stairs.

It hits me harder than a speeding train full of bricks slamming into my gut, stealing my breath. This past week, the girl I’ve been talking to is . . . my best friend’s *sister*?

Riley Watson.

An instant later, another train hits me with the realization that I am so fucked. Royally, epically, massively fucked.

River’s going to kill me. Especially after what we did last night.

But where I should find horror and regret about that, about all of it . . . I don’t feel that at all. I feel . . . the loss of Rachel, this connection with someone who got me, and who I felt like I understood too.

I’m a ninety-six percent match with Riley Watson. I don’t know what to do with that.

I haven’t seen her in years, not since a rather unfortunate event when I was fresh at Life Corp and she was just starting college. Back then, River talked about his sister like she was this flighty, naïve, idealistic innocent. In hindsight, I think he might’ve been worried about her being hurt by the cruel realities of the world, but at the time, I hadn’t realized that.

She was all eternal optimism and the sun'll come out tomorrow, and based on River's frequent eye rolls, I suspected that she might actually break out into song like some Disney princess if given half a chance.

It got under my skin at a really difficult time because I was focusing on work, Mom, and Arielle. The differences in what I saw in Arielle and what River said about his sister were marked. Arielle fought and scrapped for everything she's gotten, right along with Mom and me. She's hard hearted with a tough exterior because she had to be. And it irritated the fuck out of me that Riley, someone Arielle hung out with, had the opportunity to be . . . soft, sweet, and to see the world as a beautiful place when Arielle had never had a chance to do that.

And I took that out on Riley.

Sighing, I get up and try to leave the café with some shred of pride left, but judging by the eyebrow lift the waiter gives me, I don't succeed. I drive back to my apartment, but I don't know what to do with myself.

I settle for a run on my treadmill, hoping it'll help me think. Stripping off my suit, I frown at the blue tie and throw it on the floor. It's my favorite, but I can't imagine wearing it again now. I'll think of *her* every time I see it. Next, I pull on compression boxers to tone down the 'ball bounce'. I've never understood how some men can work out commando. Especially running.

I bet you and Rachel would have a laugh talking about that. Not Rachel. Riley.

I shake my head, knowing it'll never happen. When I hurt Riley, I hurt her deeply, taking out my anger and frustrations on her though she'd done nothing to deserve either.

So I climb onto the machine, tapping at the touchscreen until I've got a running program ready and my television playing highlights from last weekend's UFC event. I start running, alternating between jogs that let me lope along and hard sprints that leave my eyeballs feeling like they're ready to pop out of my skull. Even with my heart hammering hard, my breathing near sucking wind, and the sight of guys beating the shit out of each other, my own self-induced agony won't shut up my brain. Instead, all I can think about is the incident that triggered Riley's anger at me.

“Thanks for having us over, Mrs. Watson,” I greet River’s mom as I come in. I haven’t been here before because River and I always work at his dorm, the library, or random coffee shops with free Wi-Fi and cheap refills. But Arielle has been here several times and seems comfortable, throwing Mrs. Watson a wave and then flopping onto a lounge by the pool.

Arielle is talking to a very cute blonde with her hair in matching messy buns on either side of her head. That must be Riley, I realize, the friend Arielle talks about nonstop.

“Hi, boys, Arielle!” Mrs. Watson says warmly. I appreciate the welcome. “Dad’s inside, River.”

River holds up a finger to me and heads toward the back door, but it swings open and an older version of River steps out. Mr. Watson is a little shorter and narrower than River, but the blond, blue-eyed good looks are unmistakable.

“River! Good to see you, Son!” he calls out, and the two men meet in the middle for a hug. Not some awkward, side crunch of a hug either, but a back-clapping, tight, affectionate hug. “Missed you.”

“Missed you too, Dad,” River says easily.

His dad travels for work, though I don’t remember what he does. But the love between the two is obvious. Mr. Watson misses his family while he’s gone.

“All right, I need the steaks on the grill in ten minutes. I’m going in to make salad and mash the potatoes,” Mrs. Watson says, and Mr. Watson hops his feet together, saluting her.

“Yes ma’am. On it.” He’s smiling at her, eyes bright as he catches her with a soft tap to her butt as she scoots by.

“Dad, we have company,” River complains.

“I know, that’s why I just swatted her. If it were just you kids, I’d have kissed her.” Mr. Watson laughs good-naturedly. Before River can complain more, he offers me his hand. “You must be Noah? I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Yes, sir. Nice to meet you.”

“I’d better get this fire going if I want any mashed potatoes. You boys want to help me?” Mr. Watson asks.

In actuality, he taught River and me how to stack the mesquite briquettes, pour some sort of fancy fire starter stuff over them, and light them. He was friendly and engaging, joking as he blew on the small flames to encourage them to grow as he told us all the hows and whys of fire making and grilling. It was a lesson I’d never had before because we didn’t have a grill. But also, because I didn’t have a dad to teach me those sorts of things.

When the steaks are done, Mr. Watson takes them inside, telling us that he and Mrs. Watson will get everything finished up. River rolls his eyes and tells his dad, “We know you’re only going in there to kiss on Mom.”

Mr. Watson winks and carries the plate of steaks into the house like a caveman taking a saber-toothed tiger back to his cave, strutting with swagger. I see where River gets his own confidence.

River and I sit down at an umbrella-shaded table by our sisters, who are engaged in whatever deep, important discussions eighteen-year-old girls have. If Arielle’s bitching about work again, I might scream. She’s got an asshole regular at the mall restaurant where she works who keeps taking up one of her tables and not leaving her a tip, all the while trying to ask her out.

“You ready for the next chapter?” River asks me, grabbing two cans of beer from the cooler beside us. “At Life Corp?”

I nod, cracking open the beer and taking a sip. “I wish it had been different.”

“How so?” River asks in surprise. “We paid our investors off, made money on the deal, and got sweet jobs. It could’ve been a lot worse. You know how many apps and tech startups fail. You did the research.”

I nod, still not mollified. “I get it. But we failed, River. Sort of, anyway.” I can’t explain it. I’m proud of what we did, but I feel like it wasn’t enough, and I worry we took the easy way out because Life Corp started flashing cash around. Figuratively, of course, because it’s all zeroes on contracts, loans, and bank statements.

“If we failed, we failed upward,” River says, holding up his beer in a toast before taking a sip. “That’s not failure in my book. It’s how success and

legends are made.”

I mull that over, trying to see what River’s saying because he’s not wrong. Not exactly. But as I’m quiet, Arielle and Riley’s conversation comes into focus, grabbing my attention.

“So, I was thinking, why not see what I can do?” Riley’s telling Arielle. “I mean, we’re going to college, so I can use my free time to make a business of it. And who knows, if it takes off, I might not even finish college.”

“Yeah, but . . . social media influencer?” Arielle asks. “Do you really want to become one of those thirst girls who spend all day posing around like a Barbie doll and doctoring up photos?”

“No, I don’t mean that,” Riley says excitedly, shaking her head. “I want to spread a message of hope and inspiration. I want to . . . you know, make people happy. Put some sunshine in their lives. Everyone should have that.”

“Good luck with that,” I growl. I don’t mean to interrupt them, didn’t even mean to say it out loud, but it’s loud enough that Riley and Arielle hear me, and they turn to me. Arielle looks pissed. Riley looks confused.

“What do you mean, Noah?” Riley asks. “The world needs more positivity.”

“Yeah. The world needs a lot of things,” I shoot back. “Do you know how many inspirational assholes there are out there online? A simple Google search will show you a million websites and probably fifty million social media accounts, each of them telling people that the sun’ll come out tomorrow and all that shit.” I hold my hands up, fingers spread wide as I swipe them through the air sarcastically.

“So?” Riley asks, crossing her arms. “They took their shot. Why can’t I?”

I don’t mean to, but all the frustration, the jealousy, the exhaustion . . . all of the feelings inside me seem to bubble up to the surface, spilling all over the Watsons’ backyard.

“Because the world isn’t sunshine and rainbows, Riley. It’s hard work! It’s putting responsibility on your shoulders and dragging the world, kicking and screaming, uphill by sheer willpower. It’s about struggle and sweat and busting your ass!”

Arielle and River are gawking at me, but Riley's not ready to back down. "It's more than that!" she says, stomping her bare foot on the concrete patio. She's sitting up in her lounge now, passionately defending this hair-brained idea she has of dropping out of college to spout nonsense on social media. "There's good in the world, and happiness!"

I snort, shaking my head and looking at River like 'I see what you mean about your sister, man.' "Maybe when you're a pampered princess, it seems that way." I look around the yard pointedly, from the pool to the outdoor kitchen to the house across the yard. Even inside to the two parents. "For the rest of us, it's about squeezing blood from a stone."

"That's enough, Noah," River says, his eyes tight. He puts a hand on my shoulder, and I take a deep breath. "Let's take a walk."

I shake him off, but the interruption lets a small dose of reason into my overworked mind, and I see the tears glittering in Riley's eyes. They stop me, my anger deflating.

Shit. I'm such an asshole. Making some wide-eyed kid with big dreams cry because she has the luxury of dreaming.

With a jagged sigh, I follow River into the garage. He waits for me to follow, closing the door behind us. "River, I was—"

His fist meets my jaw, and I stagger back, seeing stars. That was a sucker punch . . . but then again, I deserved it. My ass hits Mrs. Watson's car, and I barely keep my balance. I look at River, who's still got a fist clenched.

"I know you've got issues. Everyone's got issues. But don't take yours out on my family. Especially not my sister. Understood?" he says, his voice heated but even. He's not the happy-go-lucky best friend right now. He's the protective big brother, and no matter how much shit he talks about his sister, it's not my place to do it. I understand that because I would never stand for anyone talking shit about Arielle. Though she doesn't need my back-up. She'd slice and dice anyone who dares to look at her wrong. Hmm, maybe that's why I'm so worried about that . . . because she hasn't stood her ground yet. But that's a thought train for another trip because River's glaring at me, expecting an answer.

I rub my jaw, nodding. “Understood.”

The incident never came up again, and that was my only visit to the Watsons’ house for a long time. River and I moved past it, our shared experiences with Friendzone and what he knew of my past allowing him to understand. But we stopped discussing our sisters. Or more specifically, other than in passing commentary, River stopped talking about Riley.

My sister also understood where I was coming from, and she forgave me. So most of the news I’ve gotten about Riley has come via Arielle as the two have remained best friends. She told me about Riley’s success, how she proved my predictions of doom wrong.

Truth be told, I’m glad I was wrong.

But I’ve never been able to talk to Riley. I never got a chance to apologize or explain. And now she’s stormed off . . . and I’m going to have to make this right.

I might have another punch to the face coming. From Riley or from River. Or hell, even from Arielle.

But I need to explain what happened back then so I can figure out what happened tonight.

I let that thought flip and flop around in my mind, examining it from every possible angle I can think of and playing out different outcomes. Finally, my run is over, and I step off the treadmill, going for my phone.

M: I’d like to talk. Please?

There’s no reply, and I sigh, setting my phone aside. I sit on the couch, head hanging low, wondering who’s going to call me first? Arielle to chew my head off, or River saying he’s coming over to kick my ass. But as the sun finishes setting and the moon grows in the sky, a worse feeling digs into me.

She’s just . . . ignoring me. I’m not worth the trouble.

Just as I decide to say fuck it and go to bed early, my phone buzzes again, and I see that it’s Rachel . . . or Riley.

R: You don’t seem like the type to say please.

She has no idea how correct she is, but desperate times call for desperate measures. And this is an apology years in the making.

M: What type do I seem like?

R: As Noah or your fake alter-ego?

I can feel the snark biting through the words. It surprises me even though I deserve it.

N: Or maybe they're both me and you don't know me well enough to know the difference. Like how Mark's my middle name . . . Rachel.

R: Is this you apologizing? If so, you really suck at it. And Rachel's my mother's name.

Shit, I forgot about that. I always called her Mrs. Watson.

R: Did River put you up to this? I'll kill him.

I can't help but smile at her ire. Apparently, Riley and River are like Arielle and me, not always copacetic with each other. Still, I doubt he'd do something like that. Maybe when we were younger, but certainly not now.

M: River had nothing to do with it. He doesn't know. And the thought of your killing even an ant is funny. You're too kind.

R: All your own doing, then? You got me good. Bravo, I guess. Congrats on the success of whatever prank you're pulling.

M: Let me explain. It's not a prank.

M: Can we talk about this? Face to face.

R: Fine, you can come over, but the entry fee is tacos. We'll eat and "talk". But you might learn how unkind I am. I'll squash you like a bug, Noah Daniels.

The threat is meant to be scary, to make me shake in my boots. Unfortunately, all it does is make me think of her thighs squeezing my head as she comes under my tongue.

Nope. Stop thinking like that. Apologize and move along. And fix the fucking AI because it's obviously FUBARed.

M: Uhm . . . where do you live? I don't have your address.

A minute later, an address pops up on screen, and I hurry to shower and change. I pull on some jeans and a casual T-shirt, hoping that I can get to my favorite taco stand before it closes.

Luckily, it doesn't take me long to get tacos and drive to Riley's apartment complex. It's nice, near the downtown area, but not *too* close, well-lit, and has covered parking.

I park my SUV and grab the bag of tacos. When I get to Riley's door, I nearly feel sick with the adrenaline in my body. I don't know if it's nervousness, fear, or both.

I knock on her door, hoping that clenching my hand will stop the trembling. I hear a frantic yapping sound and the distinctive sound of dog nails clicking on tile. "Raffy! Sit!" Riley calls from the other side of the door, and that foreign smile creeps across my lips again. Even her forceful command is a sweet-sounding request.

Through the fisheye of the peephole, I can see darkness, and I know Riley's looking at me. "You got the tacos?" her voice calls through the door. "If not, you can turn right around."

I hold up the bag, showing her the logo on the side, and there's a click at the door. A hand reaches through, and suddenly, I'm being pulled through a small opening. "Get in here!"

Part of me wants to joke that normally when a woman grabs me by the shirt like that, it's not for tacos. But I hold my tongue as I take two steps into the tidy apartment.

"Have a seat," Riley says, pointing toward the sofa on the far side of the attached living room as she takes the bag from me. But I'm not so sure. Her dog, perhaps sensing a rival for her attention, bares his teeth, hunching down as he growls at me, fourteen pounds of furry fury.

“Whoa there, little fella,” I tell him, smiling as I hold my hands up and give him my friendliest look. “I promise, I’m a good guy. Or are you always this testy with new people?”

“Don’t mind him, he’s just suspicious,” Riley explains, and I suspect the dog’s not the only one. “Raffy, it’s okay!”

“He’s being protective. That’s a good thing,” I reply as calmly as I can, squatting down. I throw my voice to a higher octave, trying to sound like a nice, safe guy that the dog doesn’t need to worry about. “Hi, Raffy. You want a belly rub?”

That must be one of his magic words because he starts shaking his butt side to side so hard he almost flops over, and I get a little chin tickle in before he drops to the floor, offering his soft belly. I give him the promised scratches.

“You made a friend,” Riley says flatly, and I get to look up at her for the first time.

Maybe I’m actually seeing her for the first time. She’s wearing fluffy yellow socks, shorts, and an oversized T-shirt. She definitely didn’t dress up for me to come over, and for some reason, I like that.

This is the real Riley, not what she puts on her feed. Because I have to admit that while sitting in front of the TV tonight, I looked up Riley and her feed. Riley Sunshine, sunny social media personality, is a very real thing. But not as real as the Riley in front of me right now, the one curled up in the corner of her sofa to get as far away from me as possible, guzzling her beer for some liquid courage and shoving tacos in her mouth at an alarming rate. I suspect it’s to keep her from saying something she’ll regret.

About the only thing that’s the same between the two personas are the yellow socks. Which are fucking sexy as hell, just coming up to the bottom of her calves. I’m a bit of a ‘leg man’, and Riley’s calves are about the sexiest things I’ve seen.

In my jeans, I feel a tingle that reminds me that I really should sit down.

“Cute dog,” I admit as I get up and make my way over to the sofa and sit down at the other end to give her some space. Raffy follows me with his butt still wiggling. “Although you should probably get another if you’re

depending on him to be your security system. I suspect he'd let a robber steal you blind for a cube of cheese."

Riley blinks, then shrugs quietly. "Pretty much."

I reach into the bag of tacos, pulling one out before Riley eats them all. Not that I'd mind. I'd bring her tacos every night if it got me a chance to explain and apologize.

"You didn't come here to talk about my dog."

"You're right. I came here to talk about what happened . . . and our chats."

Riley swallows thickly. "You're part of the development team for BlindDate. Arielle mentioned it when she got me to sign up, but I didn't think you'd be . . . on it."

"Well, I made an account to do some research. I didn't intend to date."

"That makes sense . . ." she says with a small nod.

Thank God that went over fairly easily because I was worried about that part. Hell, I worried about everything at this point, and the lack of control and not knowing what to expect is killing me.

"Why did you respond, then?" Riley asks.

It's a hell of a question, one that I've asked myself a few times over the past week.

The only real answer is the truth. "I don't know, I thought what the hell? Maybe I was secretly hoping I could find someone. And then when you messaged me . . . what you said piqued my interest. And our percentage match, I couldn't ignore it." I look her way, but she's studiously ignoring my gaze, staring so intently at her taco that she could be counting the strands of cheese. "And then we started talking, and it was like finding someone I've been looking for all my life. I woke up every morning wondering what 'Rachel' was doing. Whether she slept well. She added a smile to my face, and she made each day better. I went to sleep dreaming of her . . . of you. I couldn't stop thinking of you."

I wanted to be honest, but damn, that's a level of honesty I didn't think I was ready for.

Riley's eyes lift finally, and she stares at me, her taco momentarily forgotten. Bits of cheese sprinkle out, and from his spot beneath the coffee table, Raffy watches for something to drop, eager for a treat. Slowly, Riley sets her taco down, seeming to collect her thoughts even as she loses more cheese. "That was . . . that was maybe the most romantic thing I've ever heard."

That would be a great compliment if only I hadn't heard the 'I can't believe it came from you' that she was thinking and didn't say at the end. But I'll take the small headway I'm making.

"So, why'd you sign up?" I ask, my heart racing in my chest.

"I was trying to meet someone who likes me for me, not Riley Sunshine. The anonymous part was something I liked." She picks at her taco, tearing the tortilla into small pieces and leaving them in a pile. "I didn't mean that to sound stuck up. I'm not *that* popular."

"No, it doesn't," I tell her, staying honest. "I can see why you'd want anonymity. And I could see some asshole trying to take advantage of you. Of course, you could tell them to fuck off."

Riley laughs. "I can't really tell people that. Nor would I want to. My whole brand is built on niceness, you know? Sunshine and positivity."

The words hang in the air between us.

"I owe you an apology. A long overdue one," I start.

"For what?" she asks, but her cute little feet are fidgeting. She knows what I'm talking about and is trying to play it off. For some reason, it makes me angry that she doesn't just say 'yes, you do owe me an apology because you were an asshole.'

"I said some awful things to you a long time ago, and I never got the chance to tell you how sorry I was. How sorry I am. That is one of my biggest regrets . . . that I lashed out in pain and caused you pain. You didn't deserve that, and honestly, it had nothing to do with you. I'm just sorry."

The apology doesn't seem like enough. I've beaten myself up so many times for that conversation over the years that I don't think I could ever find the words to express how awful it felt to let my anger bubble over that way and burn everything and everyone around me. I'd always been the one to look after my family, the responsible one, and I'd spouted off like a reckless, careless kid. Exactly what I'd accused Riley of being. Except she'd been eighteen and had every excuse to behave the way she did—like an idealistic dreamer. I was older, and I should've been wiser, but my dumb ass had started saying those things and I couldn't stop.

She must see the pain on my face, or hear it in my voice, because she reaches out and covers my hand with hers. A shock of electricity goes through me where our skin touches. Riley doesn't flinch away from it, though, curling her fingers through mine.

“Noah, don't beat yourself up. It was a long time ago. I'll admit that I've thought some pretty awful things about you over the years. A lot of them were born out of that conversation even though River explained what was going on after you ran out of there.”

He did what? I'm suddenly dying to know what he said and how he explained away my utter rudeness. But I don't get the chance to ask because Riley's moving on . . .

“But I'm not still pining away over some mean thing you said years ago. Do you know how many awful things people say to me every day? Your hair looks frizzy today. You look like you're gaining weight. Are you losing too much weight? Are you seriously this happy all the time? Tone down the caffeine, it makes you obnoxious. Too perky at eight am. They go on and on,” she tells me casually, as if those words slide right off her back.

But they have to hurt, right?

“Nice doesn't mean doormat. If you want to do something for you, do it. Anyone with a problem with it can fuck off.” Again, that's my advice about anyone who doesn't support me . . . or Riley. It doesn't escape my notice that that's exactly what she should've told me all those years ago. I deserved to be put in my place back then. It'd just been River who'd done it, not Riley.

Riley's eyes go wide like I'm spouting utter nonsense.

“I’d like to say that’s possible, but it’s a fine line. I accepted that when I started Riley Sunshine.”

“I get that, Riley, I really do. But maybe there’s something more to you than Riley Sunshine. Maybe Riley Watson deserves some happiness . . . ah, fuck, I’m not saying this right.” I run my fingers through my hair, remembering a second too late that they’re covered in taco grease. Great, now my hair is probably an oil slick.

“Do what I do,” Riley says, putting her hands up high in the air. With one brow quirked in confusion, I lift mine too. “Shake it out,” she tells me, wiggling her arms so much that her hands flap around. I wiggle too, but not as hard. “Good, now your head.” She shakes her head back and forth. “And your feet.” She stomps her feet, the thuds muffled by the rug, but Raffy jumps back with a sound of displeasure.

I have no idea what this is, but I do it. I do it all. Arms, head, and feet moving to mimic Riley.

“And a big breath, in through the nose and out through the mouth.” We do the breath together, and then Riley gives me a megawatt smile.

“Brain reset. Now just say what you want to say plainly. Fancy words and explanations don’t matter. Think of it like a rough draft. You don’t even want to know the number of times I have to rewrite my social media posts some days.” The encouragement is pure Riley Sunshine, but I need it right now. I need all the help I can get because I’m about to jump out of an airplane with no parachute and the ground below is sharp rocks.

“I want to continue what we started, Riley. Not only smooth over the miscommunication. I want to keep going. I want to have conversations like we had, and to talk with you and to . . . see where we can go.”

Now who’s the one with pie in the sky, big dreams? That’d definitely be me. But I can’t ignore what I’ve felt the last week, nor what I’m feeling sitting this close to Riley right now.

I can see her considering what I’m saying, and I reach out and lay my hand on top of hers the way she did mine moments ago, lending strength. Her fingers tighten in mine for a moment before she stiffens. “Noah, we can’t.

What would Arielle and River think? They're our siblings and best friends."

It takes me a moment to realize what she's saying, because it is a sort of weird X-shaped situation. Her best friend is my sister, my best friend is her brother. Yeah . . . that's a little weird.

But I don't care. Or more precisely, I'm willing to take the risk.

"You said who you date is none of River's business. So why do they need to find out right away?" I ask. "We can always tell them later if things get serious."

The opposite implication hangs heavily in the air—if this blows up, we'll both pretend it never happened and never breathe a word about it to River and Arielle. But Riley considers it, and I feel my heart lighten as she nods shallowly. "I . . . Noah, I need to think about this."

"Then think," I tell her, stroking her hand with my thumb. "But in the meantime, I should go. Today's been one hell of a day, and we both need to process everything."

Riley nods robotically but walks me to her door. When she reaches for the knob, I say her name quietly. "Riley."

She looks up at me, and I reach out, cupping the back of her head. She doesn't resist me. Instead, she takes a half-step forward, standing on her tiptoes as I slowly lower my head to hers, giving her every chance to stop me. But she doesn't, and our lips meet. It's sweet and hot and everything I've ever dreamed of in a first kiss. I pull her in a little tighter, and she whimpers, falling into me. Her hands grasp at my chest, pulling at me as she opens up to me.

I could push her against the door, pin her body with mine and touch her. I could take her into my arms and carry her to her bedroom, strip her clothes off, and have a night of such intense physical passion that my balls would be drained for a month.

But I don't want a night. I don't want to drain my cock and be done with her. That isn't why I answered her on BlindDate.

I want more.

I deepen the kiss, chasing her tongue with mine and burning my name—Noah—into her mouth, wanting to make sure she knows exactly who’s kissing her. And that I’m the same man who’s been messaging with her.

Me. Noah Mark Daniels.

I’m Riley’s ninety-six percent match. But I find that I don’t even care about the statistics and algorithms anymore. I can feel it, deep in my spirit or soul or whatever it is inside you that tells you that you’ve found someone special. Someone to hold on to.

And I’m not a man who believes in all that mumbo-jumbo soulmate stuff. A week ago, I would’ve laughed and called it a marketing ploy we could capitalize on for BlindDate. But now, all I know is that I can’t imagine not waking up tomorrow and texting Riley good morning first thing, not hearing about her day, not kissing her lips again.

“Think about that too,” I whisper when our lips part. “Because I want to give you this feeling every fucking day. Goodnight, Riley.”

Riley sighs dreamily, and I slide out her door before Raffy can follow me. I keep it together driving home, but by the time my door’s closed, I can’t take it any longer. My brain whirls with the taste of Riley on my lips, the soft natural scent of her skin, the way her shorts clung to her hips. Even the way her oversized T-shirt hinted at the luscious curves underneath without revealing all, letting me feel them when I pulled her to me and her soft breasts pressed against me. Fuck, that was sexy as hell.

I collapse onto the sofa, practically tearing my jeans open as I pull my cock out. Guiltily, I pull up Riley’s Instagram, finding that picture I love the most, her doing almost a Marilyn Monroe like pose on the edge of a fountain. Her right calf is turned in such a way that it looks exactly like the Riley I saw tonight, and I get even harder.

“Oh, yes, Noah,” she whimpers as her thighs fall open and she presents herself to me. I press the head of my cock against her wetness, and we moan in tandem as her warm, slick tightness envelops me.

There’s an instant as her hips touch mine that she gasps, stretched to her limits, but it’s a sexy sound that has her wrapping her legs around my waist.

“Fuck me, Noah,” she begs as I trap her underneath me, my arms caging her pretty face. “Make me yours.”

My hips rise and fall on their own, a thousand sensations pulsing through me with each stroke as she meets me. In her soft whispers, her fingernails on my shoulders, the way she clenches around me, she encourages me to go harder, faster, deeper.

Without saying it, she tells me that I can be totally open with her. That I can find not just rest but strength and acceptance.

That she’ll be the sunshine to my darkness.

“Riley!” I grunt, my eyes rolling up as my cock jerks in my fist, thick ropes of cum spurting up onto my abs.

“Damn,” I gasp. I don’t think I’ve come that hard in a long time, and based on the throbbing sensation in my cock, it’s a little surprised too.

Still panting, I notice that I’m not softening. It’s not a totally unfamiliar sensation, but I have to be horny as fuck for it to happen.

Riley has done that to me.

“Might as well do round two in the shower. Best way to avoid chapped dick . . . that’s no good for anyone.”

I don’t admit, even to the empty room, that I want to be sure I’m in tip-top shape in case Riley makes a decision sooner rather than later.

Are you assuming she’s going to say yes to dating you? my inner voice asks.

Absolutely, I tell myself. No other option is acceptable. I hope.

CHAPTER 9

RILEY

“Oh, someone’s got new toys!” Hazel calls out, nudging the woman next to her excitedly. There’s a whole table full of women in the dining room at the senior center, all waiting for me. Or at least the goodies I’ve brought. And it’s an armload.

It’s another benefit of my deal with Joroast—they send me more products than I could ever possibly use, and I get to share the wealth. I always pick out my favorites and do videos or photos with them, adding in the appropriate hashtags and highlighting all the fabulous features of the new packaging or gorgeous colors. But not every product works for every person, and those are the ones I’ve brought today.

I set down the bags, the bottles making a loud clunk on the table. Peering in the first bag to make sure nothing spilled, I grin excitedly, looking back and forth from the goodies to the ladies. “You ladies are in for a treat today! I’ve got cleansers, treatments, and makeup galore. I don’t know if you’re ready for all this,” I tease.

“We’d better be,” Hazel says. “If we’re not, we’ll probably die before it happens, so let’s get to it.”

My smile fades a bit. I don’t like to think about these people, who’ve all become my friends, dying and not being here for one of our ‘Get Fancy’ days. Hazel notices and pats my hand.

“Don’t you worry that pretty little head about a thing, dear. We’re all fine and well aware of the passage of time. Like now, for example. We need to get this

show on the road or we won't be done in time for dinner. I've got my eyes on a fella and want to look a little extra *fancy*, if you know what I mean?" She gives me a wink, one penciled-in eyebrow dipping saucily with the movement. "Do you have any more of that red lipstick from last month? The one Mildred said made us look like whores walking the street? I think I need some of that today." She shimmies her shoulders, and I blink in surprise. And confusion. Hazel is a sweet, kind grandmother of ten who mostly misses baking cookies for her family. And apparently looking like a streetwalker with Kim Kardashian-like lips.

I look to Arielle, but she's doing her best to hold back giggles. She offers me a shrug of 'Whatcha gonna do' before she goes back to straightening up the hair station's curling irons, hair spray, and curl creams. I once brought a straightener for them to try out, but the ladies all like their hair curled and sprayed to within an inch of its life with mass quantities of Aqua Net that turn their hair into crunchy helmets. They'd be walking, talking tiki torches if someone got too close with a lit cigarette. But I guess that's how they did it in their younger days, and that's what makes them feel beautiful, which is what I'm here to do.

"I want to do up my eyes today," Mabel, one of the other ladies, says. "Do you have any of that eye cream again, Riley, darling?"

"Of course," I tell her as I start to unload everything, laying it on the table like a big buffet of colorful candy. Or eye candy, at least. "Let's have fun, ladies!"

Arielle helps some of the residents who are a little more shy or not as dexterous anymore, and I hang back, answering questions and making recommendations when needed.

"Here's your lipstick, Hazel," I say, handing her the tube ironically labeled *Hot Harlot*. "And your eye cream, Mabel." Thankfully, it's called Hydration Station and not anything too risqué, considering it's a thick, white cream.

Oh, my goodness! What is wrong with me?

That kiss is what's wrong with you!

I touch my lips, which still burn from Noah's kiss. I've never been kissed like that. Like he wanted to possess me, own me, or maybe like he already does but is willing to give me a moment to realize it. The bad thing is . . . I already know it too well. But that doesn't mean anything.

No matter how great the conversations have been.

No matter the connection I felt when we talked about everything and nothing.

No matter the fireworks shooting through my body when he kissed me and made me realize that maybe I've never been properly kissed.

Because he's River's best friend. And Arielle's brother. And Noah Daniels.

I sigh, stepping back to let the ladies play with all the makeup. They're giddy and excited, showing the small palettes to each other and complimenting one another's attempts at eye shadow combinations.

Arielle notices, telling Bertha, "Keep going with the teasing, and I'll be back to help with the hair spray in the back, m'kay?" Bertha does as instructed, expertly teasing her hair into a huge bouffant reminiscent of the sixties.

Coming over to stand next me, Arielle bumps my shoulder. "Hey, girly, don't look so freaked. Hazel's kidding about the whole . . ." She draws her thumb across her neck, closing her eyes and lolling her tongue out. "These women are tough as nails, living through world wars, outliving their husbands, and look." She points around the room. "Still kicking and cackling." On cue, Hazel puckers her now ultra-red lips at Mildred, who scowls. Several women crack up in response, and I can't help but smile . . . a little.

"It's not that," I say aimlessly.

"What's wrong then?"

I kissed your brother!

"Uhm . . . nothing," I reply, blinking. "Sorry. Just stuff on the brain." I swirl my hand around my temple like there's a whirlwind of tumbleweeds tangling up in my brain, mostly so that I don't unconsciously touch my lips again.

“Work stuff? Or did Ninety-Six Percent keep you up late last night?” Arielle prods with a smile.

“What?” I say too quickly. I must look guilty as hell. I’ve never been one to hide my emotions, but the fates must be shining on me today, or the deal I’m considering making with the Devil is already taking effect, because Arielle misreads my expression.

“*Shit*, did he already turn into a toad? Damn it, I thought that had a good shot. I’m sorry, Riley. Maybe you’ll meet someone tonight?”

It takes me a full thirty seconds to realize that she’s put one and one together and decided that my messaging with Mark has already ended poorly. And tonight?

Oh, yeah, The Crew’s outing.

“Maybe,” I say without committing to anything. “It should be fun, at least.”

“Hell yeah, it will be.”

Arielle and I fall into a comfortable silence, and I think about The Crew. Most of us left our jobs at the mall, but we still try to get together frequently. Sometimes, that’s monthly. Other times, it might be several months before we see each other. It all depends on everyone’s schedules now that we’re grown and in different places in our lives.

But tonight’s important . . . so we’re going to make the time.

“I can’t wait,” I assure her. “Oh, looks like Bertha’s ready for you to spray her hair.”

Arielle’s eyes cut to Bertha, and she snaps sharply, “Don’t you dare try to reach back there to spray, woman. You and I both know your shoulder does not do that anymore, and Dr. Mehendle will kill us both if he has to replace that joint *again*.” Arielle softens the truth with a smile, but she’s not kidding around. She takes care of her patients, protecting them from themselves when necessary.

With Arielle helping Bertha, I get back to work helping the other ladies—fetching a color or cream they’d like to try or helping with application if their

hands are shaky or their eyesight is poor.

“I haven’t worn this much shadow since I tried to look like Brigitte Nielsen in the 80s!” Mabel cackles as she finishes her eyes. “Too bad I’m six inches too short!”

“Yeah, the six inches is the problem, not the sixty years,” Hazel deadpans. “I bet Riley could do the look! We’d have to cut that hair, though. And that would be a spit-fire *crime!*”

I know the look they’re talking about and play along, twisting my blonde curls up and holding them on the back of my head out of sight. I hollow my cheeks and do my best don’t-mess-with-me RBF. “Oh, come on,” I joke. “I could pull it off. I’d just need one of those suits she rocked the hell out of. What do you think?” I intone coldly.

It doesn’t work in the slightest, and they all laugh at my piss-poor attempt to be stone-faced and frigid. “Riley, dear, that’s just not your strong suit,” Hazel says kindly.

“And how do you know those moldy oldies?” Mabel asks before waving an arthritic finger.

“Because they’re classics!” Viktor interrupts, coming over with his cane. “Beautiful women, men being men without a single bit of shame . . . about the only thing better was *Predator*. ‘Get to da choppa!’ ”

“Viktor, the only chopper you’re getting to is the Life Flight to the hospital,” Hazel teases, and everyone laughs. I guess Viktor isn’t the beau whose eye she wants to catch.

But Viktor chuckles good-naturedly and gives Hazel a sparkle-eyed look of approval at the zinger.

Wait. Are they . . . flirting? They might be. And the fact that I’m not sure is probably why I need an app to find a date and why even with some magical compatibility calculations, I end up with someone who is so obviously not right for me.

He felt right. He felt very right.

“What brings you over? Would you like Arielle to shellac those wisps on top of your head?”

“Can’t a man just be drawn to beauty?” Viktor replies, mock hurt. He holds his hand over his heart like Hazel’s barb pains him. If he keeps doing that, no one is going to believe him if he has an actual heart attack. He’ll be the boy who cried wolf . . . or the man who cried heart attack, at least. “Why, Mabel looks just like a princess.” He turns his gaze from Hazel to take Mabel’s hand, laying a dry kiss to the back of it and telling her, “May you kiss a frog, dear princess, and I’d bet he’d turn right into Prince Charming for you!”

Viktor *ribbits*, and everyone laughs, Mabel blushing a little. “Viktor, you old flatterer. And you’re no frog. You look quite handsome today.”

“Those pool exercise sessions must be helping,” Viktor says, flexing a skinny, wrinkled arm with no shame. In fact, he leans his cane up against the table and squeezes his own bicep. “Rock hard and ready, I am,” he asserts, though he grabs his cane back pretty quickly.

“Viktor, about the only way you’ll be rock hard is if you get another Viagra,” Arielle warns, “which I’m still on the lookout for!” She points a threatening finger his way, but he throws back a charming smile, first to Arielle and then to all the ladies around the table who are watching him with rapt attention.

“That one’s a little sour about the ‘no fraternizing with patients’ rule. Thinks if she can’t have me, no one can. But what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her, right, ladies?” His grin is full of devilry and delight at poking at Arielle while charming the table full of women. “But for now, the patio’s calling me. The sun’s great for my gout. Which of you ladies would like to join me in getting a little Vitamin D?”

No one stands, and he shrugs. “Can’t blame an old man for trying. You know where to find me if any of you change your mind.”

With that, he shuffles off slowly, whistling a tune.

I shake my head, chuckling lightly. “He is something else.”

“Pish posh,” Hazel says, waving her hand at me. “You and Arielle here would be pretty lucky to get yourselves a good man like Viktor.”

“A good man?” Arielle asks incredulously. “Viktor’s a scoundrel who’s only interested in trying to get in your granny panties!”

“Oh, he puts up a good front like that,” Hazel retorts with a knowing nod, “but we know the type, young lady. Underneath that scruffy surface is a heart of gold.”

“And besides, if he’s only in it for the sex, what’s the problem?” Mabel adds. “Honey, sometimes a little touching and petting’s all I need. I’m an old woman. I don’t want to play nurse to anyone or pick up dirty socks. I did that for fifty years with my Roger, and I loved every single day of it. And yes, when I found his last dirty sock on the floor, I cried my eyes out over it. But after he was gone and I moved in here, I’ll be honest in saying picking up his dirty drawers is one of the things I miss least. Now, if I want to have a little happiness, I’m durn well going to do it.”

Viktor calls back, “Mabel, I am fortunate beyond measure to provide you with a little happiness. The good Lord knows you give it right back.” Apparently, he didn’t make it all the way to patio and is instead sitting on his handy-dandy stool about ten yards away, eavesdropping.

“I think I’ll add an STD screening to everyone’s next physical,” Arielle muses aloud.

Viktor blows Mabel a kiss with his knobby hand, and if Hazel wasn’t swooning like Viktor is talking to her too, it might be romantic. But I guess it works for them. What do I know? Obviously, nothing about love, judging by my failure.

“You two young ’uns will learn one day,” Viktor says. “We’ve all had the great loves of our lives, but there’s no joy in being lonely until we see them again. You gotta take what life gives you—sometimes it’s sugar, sometimes it’s salt. They might look the same, but they feel different and light up different parts of your tongue. Your heart, too.”

Viktor winks, and his wisdom does make sense. Especially given the smiles on everyone’s faces.

My brain flashes back to Noah and our kiss last night. Was it sugar or salt? Or maybe some combination I’ve never considered, like chocolate-dipped

potato chips? Which is apparently a thing because I saw it on a blog challenge and did it for my page as part of a series about ‘trying new things’.

Is that what Noah is?

Not a potato chip covered in chocolate but an experiment in being open to things I’ve never imagined?

The only question is . . .

Do I want more?

I glance at Arielle, who’s got her own contemplative look on her face. Forgive me, Arielle, but . . . yes, I do.

Not of the chips. But of . . . your brother.

“YOU EVER MISS THE FOOD COURT?” ELI ASKS WHEN ARIELLE AND I COME into McGillicutty’s, the Irish tavern that’s taken over as the unofficial meeting place for The Crew. The Mall Rats is what we used to call ourselves, but over the years, as that has become a distant memory for many of us, we became The Crew. Friends by circumstance, family by choice.

Eli looks around the over-themed bar with wait staff wearing green T-shirts and aprons with pins and buttons all over them. The long length of hardwood bar gleams with a mellow internal light but is pock-marked from years of usage, and the chalkboard announcing the weekly specials hasn’t changed in so long I don’t remember the last time it wasn’t Three-Dollar Drafts on Wednesday nights. Too bad today’s special is Saturday Stouts, and I’m not feeling the Guinness love.

“Baby, please,” Loretta says. “The onion rings here kick ass. Way better than anything the food court ever had.”

Six feet two inches tall, Loretta joined The Crew when a second torn ACL made her realize that perhaps playing college basketball wasn’t what she really wanted to do with her life. She worked mall security, putting her intimidating size to good use while finishing her business degree. After she

finished school, she promptly quit the mall gig, but not The Crew, and followed her heart to her true love . . . dogs.

Specifically, grooming. Something about making every dog she meets as absolutely adorable as possible lights up Loretta like there's no tomorrow. She can happily spend her days putting bows on the ears of basset hounds, brushing out Samoyeds, and giving poodles pedicures.

She's damn good at it, too, which is why she's the only groomer allowed to lay hands on my Raffy.

"I'll see your onion rings and raise you a bourbon chicken," Eli counters wistfully.

Loretta scoffs. "Ew, that stuff was nasty. Mostly dark meat—now, don't get me wrong, I love dark meat—but they'd let that chicken dry out under those warming lights all day, then dunk it in more sauce and steam it to make it 'moist' again." She does air quotes with the word 'moist' and then shudders, her face screwed up in distaste.

"Don't ruin it for me. Some days, that's all I have time for, even now," Eli complains with a vehement head shake.

Now that he mentions it, he does look a little tired, which makes me wonder how things are going at the bank. But before I can ask, the last two members of The Crew arrive.

"Hey, honey! How's the jewelry business?" Loretta asks Becky.

"Good," Becky says. She looks happy, and she should be. The youngest member of The Crew, she's also the only one of us who's married. Then again, considering her husband, Simon, is part of The Crew as well, I take a little pride in that.

All of us knew Simon and Becky were into each other. Becky worked part time at the mall because she was in school, all big eyes and a bigger heart.

Simon was several years older and her manager, and they fell for each other pretty hard, even if they were blind to it. It wasn't until Becky graduated and was literally about to move on to the next phase of her life that he finally asked her out.

But we knew from the start.

“I think,” Eli says as he gets up from his chair, “I owe Simon a Guinness. Come on, let’s let them bitch about men for a minute without feeling like we should guard our junk.”

Simon kisses Becky on the temple, and she beams like someone lit her soul on fire. But not some out of control inferno, more like a warm beacon that draws Simon back to her no matter what. They’re adorable.

Noah’s kiss flashes through my mind again. It was definitely not warm-beacon style, but he wasn’t out of control either. I don’t know if Noah could ever be out of control. Everything I know about him—from River, Arielle, and even from our messages when I thought he was Mark—says he’s a skinny hairsbreadth shy of a control freak. But that kiss was an inferno, one he stoked intentionally, built expertly, and let sear my soul.

And as much as I hate to admit it, I liked being under his control. His hand on my head, guiding me where he wanted me. Moving in slow, giving me time to think about what he was about to do. His tongue not forcing inside but teasing to make me hungry for him.

“With them gone,” Loretta says, pulling a dollar out of her pocket and laying it on the table, “Riley, Arielle, Becky . . . it’s game time.”

“Oh, God,” Becky groans even as she grins. “Have you been practicing?”

“Who, me? I don’t need to practice,” Loretta retorts smugly. “Unless you count paper in the wastebasket at work?”

“For you, trashcan shots totally count,” Becky asserts with a laugh, but as we always do, we make our way to the far side of McGillicutty’s where a remnant of a previous marketing attempt as a sports bar remains. The hoop shoot game survived because nothing else fits so well in the narrow nook that’s just big enough for two games side by side.

But it isn’t about the score, or at least not totally. It’s about our time while the guys have their time, forging those bonds that are going to last the rest of our lives.

“So, how’s my baby boy?” Loretta asks as Becky and Arielle take the first pair of games. “You know it’s not a good month unless I get my Raffy snuggles in!”

I laugh. She spoils Raffy every time I bring him by . . . with deep conditioning treatments, *pawdicures*, and beef jerky. Not to mention the scratches, hugs, and petting. But I have to admit Raffy looks great and smells better after a day at Loretta’s doggy salon. Plus, the before and after posts on his IG are some of my most popular posts. It seems everyone loves a glow up, Raffy’s fans included.

“How about I bring him by next Friday?”

“Sure, that’ll work. Not like I’m doing anything exciting, anyway.” Loretta’s usual wit has gone sour and her smile falters.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to assume,” I say quickly, trying to backpedal.

Loretta pats my hand and tsks. “No, baby. It’s not you, and Friday’s fine. I just had a date last weekend that was a shitshow from start to finish.”

I think about telling her that her date couldn’t have been worse than mine. But I guess mine ended better.

“What happened?” I ask carefully, noting that Loretta’s gotten Arielle and Becky’s attention now too.

“A new client brought his Great Dane in for a groom. I was sitting at the front desk to greet him, and we got to talking and then flirting. When he came back to pick up Harold—that’s the Great Dane—he asked me out and I said yes. Mama didn’t raise no fool, so I met him at the restaurant.” Her lips press into a thin line and her eyes roll. “Hmph, I could tell something was wrong as soon as I walked in.”

“He’s married?” Arielle guesses.

Loretta shakes her head. “No, he met me in my work clothes. Scrubs, tennis shoes, hair pulled back, covered in fur. But it was a date, so you know I did it up right. Hair and makeup on point, hot dress, and heels.”

I've seen Loretta done up. She's stunning and makes an impact. Everyone notices when she struts into a room.

"He realized he was out of his league?" Becky asks hopefully.

"Man stood up to greet me blinking like he'd developed a tic, and then he kissed me on the cheek. I sit down thinking I got this fine thing on my hook. So he starts talking about basketball, and you know I was all over that. Wanna talk teams, play history, stats? Loretta's gotchu," she says with a pat of her own chest. "This fool says some smack about the women's NCAA not being as good as the men's, and I was not having that. Nope, told him exactly what I thought about that. He starts talking about his ball days, like college was a minute ago when it definitely was not, and giving me his stats. Like I give a single shit. Turned out he was a forward too, and my stats were better than his." Loretta's glee at that factoid fills her eyes with satisfaction.

"Love it," Arielle says, missing her shot and then not even pretending to play the game anymore in favor of listening to Loretta.

"Final nail in the coffin? Boy tried suggesting that heels and makeup made me look like a drag queen." Arielle is instantly in protective mode, ready to go to war to defend our friend and sputtering in anger, but Loretta smiles evilly and holds up a staying finger. "I handled it. I told him that if he didn't want someone on or above his level—because let's be clear, in my heels, I was taller than him and big boy could not handle that—that was his prerogative. But I don't make myself small for anyone."

"That's right," Becky agrees with her. Surprisingly, she adds, "Besides, height doesn't matter when you're horizontal."

We all gape open-mouthed at her. Did sweet Becky just make a sex joke? She giggles, hiding her blush behind her hands.

"Ooh, girl. You got that right," Loretta laughs, holding up a hand for a high-five. Becky slaps her palm to Loretta's and then turns and sinks her last shot.

"Nothing to it," Becky says. About her joke or the winning shot? Could be either or both, but her bold confidence is fresh. It's cool to see how she's growing before our very eyes from the previous shy, quiet girl into a strong woman who knows herself and isn't afraid to share that knowledge.

Loretta and I play next, and she sweeps the game quickly. I consider it a win that I got a few successful shots that actually swished through the basket because I can't hit the broadside of a barn, but Loretta's score is more than triple what mine is because she's got deadeye aim.

Becky and Loretta play the final knockout game, and now that things are serious, Loretta goes quiet as she concentrates. It's a matter of pride at this point, and she won't risk losing.

In the end, though, Becky has no chance. Loretta goes into Steph Curry mode, draining shot after shot.

"Great game," Loretta tells Becky. Loretta's still undefeated but is always a gracious winner.

Becky smiles and suggests, "Food?"

We all cheer, marching our way back to the table to meet the guys as we hold up Loretta's arm in victory.

"Holding on to the title?" Eli asks Loretta, and she nods. We all sit down around the table, Simon pulling Becky's chair out for her. Again, I think how cute they are and how much I'd like to have someone in my corner like that. It seems Loretta feels the same. I glance from Eli to Arielle, trying to judge what's going on between them these days too, but there don't seem to be any lovey-dovey vibes today.

We order a round of drinks, and when the waitress delivers them, Simon stops us from sipping. "Wait, I'd like to propose a toast." We hold our glasses up high and wait for him to continue. "Here's to years of friendship, of Mall Rats becoming family, and of families growing."

We clink glasses and take sips, but Simon has paused pointedly, a large grin stretching his face and telling us to look through the words for something important. Becky's smiling wide too, and finally, it clicks. "Are you pregnant?" I whisper, afraid to be wrong, but Becky nods excitedly.

"Just a little," Becky says, and we all cheer. I hug her tightly, glad that she's sitting next to me, and I get to show her some love at the awesome news.

Eli scoffs, amused. “There ain’t no such thing as a *little* pregnant. Either you are or you aren’t.” He holds his right hand out wide and then his left, way far apart.

“Then I am,” she concedes. “And there’s more. Simon, tell them the rest.”

At her urging, Simon once again draws our attention. “I also got a promotion to regional manager. I start next month.”

“What?”

“That’s awesome!”

“Way to go, man!”

We all celebrate their good fortunes, truly happy for them. “Thanks, everyone,” Becky says, smiling at Simon, who smiles back at her.

I want that.

I can see that now. I’ve been putting off dating and relationships for years, focusing on my work, and that’s been great, getting me to where I am. But it’s okay to reprioritize and make a little time for dating or more now that I’ve got a steady lifestyle. Even with Arielle pushing me, I wouldn’t have even considered joining the BlindDate app if I weren’t open to the idea.

Noah asked me to think about it, about him. To really give him and us a chance. And seeing Simon and Becky together is making me think long and hard about what I’m willing to risk and what I’m willing to walk away from.

Earlier today, Mabel talked about picking up her husband’s dirty socks for fifty years and how it made her happy and broke her heart when she couldn’t any longer.

Could I be happy picking up Noah’s dirty socks? Is he that kind of guy? Is this that kind of relationship?

I think it could be. We’ll have to figure out the River and Arielle complications eventually, but I do think it’s worth trying.

I don’t overthink it, don’t analyze it to death. That’s not who or what I am. I check my gut once more, focusing on anything that gives me pause, but I

only find fear of getting hurt, and I won't let that stop me. I never have before and won't start now. Fear is what makes great people into so-so people.

So, I pull my phone out while everyone else is talking about Simon's new role and Becky's pregnancy. I open up BlindDate and click into my messages.

R: Okay. I'm in to see where this goes.

In seconds, he responds.

M . . . or Noah: Where are you? Can I come over now?

I smile at his eagerness, letting it soothe over any residual worries.

R: Not tonight. I'm out with friends. But tomorrow around seven?

N: I might die before then, but I guess I can wait the 21 hours, 9 minutes, and 45 seconds.

R: Did you really count that up?

N: 21-9-7 now.

R: <hourglass emoji> See you soon.

“Everything okay?” Loretta asks me, and I realize that I've been smiling at my phone for a few minutes now. I look up, afraid Arielle is going to ask me who I'm messaging with, but she's oblivious to my phone distraction. She and Eli seem to be caught up in a private conversation that's not using words. Instead, they're glaring at each other, lifting their brows, and huffily turning away from one another.

What is it with those two?

“All good,” I tell Loretta, and then a thought occurs to me. “Hey, you should try out this app.”

I tell her about River and Noah's BlindDate app and how you can put in your preferences, including height, and it'll match you up. She says she'll think about it, but she doesn't look convinced. I'm sure she's thinking that if it were all that awesome, I'd be telling her about the amazing man I met.

I did. I just can't tell her. Or anyone else, for that matter. Not yet. Not until I see how things go with Noah.

But the conversation has finally gotten Arielle's attention and she jumps in. "Riley had a ninety-six percent match! You never did say earlier . . . how's that going?"

"Uh . . ." I stammer, no idea how to answer that. "I mean . . . it's good?" My heart is racing. I can feel the nervous sweat starting in my pits, and I'm fidgeting like a toddler who needs to pee.

"Good?" Arielle repeats, not looking convinced.

I can't say more, though my tongue is a moment away from saying, "*He's awesome and he's your brother and I don't know what to do about it!*" To prevent that from happening, I shove a nacho in my mouth, nearly choking on the sharp chip and messy cheese and beef combo topped with hot jalapeños.

My eyes water, tears leaking down my cheeks, and I cough harshly, but I try to nod in answer. It only chokes me up more, and I have to give up in favor of sucking down some water. It's still not enough, and Loretta pops me on the back, which makes me cough again because her taps are more like body slams. But it gives me something to think about other than telling Arielle about Noah . . . and that kiss . . . and how he said *please*.

God, I can picture that text, hear him saying it when he came over. He's not a man who says that, which he confirmed if there were ever any doubt.

I've managed to get the nacho down and drink some water to soothe my throat, but I've been quiet too long, and Arielle, the bestest best friend ever, saves me by drawing the attention away with a joke. "You'll find the right guy, Riley. Some people just can't set aside the clouds to see the sunshine." She holds her hands out wide, gesturing to me and waving jazz hands in an imitation of my Sunshine Salute.

Everyone laughs because I'm the epitome of sunshine, but not everyone is ready for that, especially on a daily basis and in big doses. I've learned that the hard way, and I hope Noah is ready for me.

Funny thing, I don't feel particularly sunny right now. I'm excited about Noah, but I can see a thunderstorm gathering in the distance as Arielle throws

me a wink for saving me. “You okay?” she mouths, and I give her a subtle thumbs-up.

“Thanks,” I whisper.

What have I gotten myself into?

CHAPTER 10

NOAH

Last night, when I saw that I had a message from Riley, my heart had jumped into my throat. For a split second, I was already preparing for the worst, expecting it. But also, hoping I was wrong.

Hope—what an odd emotion, one I haven't known well, but a short time with sunshine beaming down on me, A.K.A. time with Riley, and it damn near bubbled up inside me to overrun any doubts.

She said she's in.

I'd been ready to go her immediately. In fact, I'd already hopped up from the couch and headed to my closet to grab my shoes when she'd said she was out. And then other new emotions had shown up in a blink. I'd nearly gone crazy with worry and jealousy, thinking she might be on another Blind Date until she said she was out with friends.

Five seconds and a few words. That's all it took for this girl to take me from maybe not cocky but confident and turn me into a jealous little panting pile of testosterone-fueled worry. That's what Riley's done to me, and I felt like a damned fool afterward.

Of course, Arielle's told me about their Crew outings, and though I know they're nothing but easy fun with good friends, it was still all I could do to not 'randomly' wander by whatever place they were hanging out. It wouldn't have taken much to figure it out. Hell, I could've texted Arielle and asked where she was, and she probably would've invited me to join them. More than once, she's tried to get me to stop by and hang out with her friends in

order to inject a little levity into my life.

But I stayed away last night, waiting and biding my time. And making plans for tonight because planning is what I do.

The first step was a good morning message, telling Riley that I dreamed of her last night. It's not a ploy, it's the truth.

And then we messaged back and forth a bit, with basic 'what're you doing' type stuff. I purposefully don't ask anything too deep because I don't want to scare her off, not before tonight. Not before she actually gives this a chance.

She sent me a picture of her yellow-painted toenails in answer. I don't know what it is about Riley and her lower body, but this woman's going to turn me into a full-on leg and foot fetishist at this rate, with her cute socks, tiny toes, and curvy calves.

And now, it's time for me to make my next move. They say the stomach is the way to a man's heart. I'm betting that's true for women too. Or at least I hope it is when I knock on Riley's door again, this time with cheesecake and some type of blueberry muffin dog biscuits they sell at the bakery for Raffy. I actually spent as much time trying to decide what to get Raffy as I did picking out the cheesecake.

We didn't talk about what we'd do tonight—go out or stay in? But we need to talk, I know that much, and I've thought about what I want to say, how to plead my case and get more than an 'okay, I'm in' from Riley. She doesn't do anything that simply, and I want her full-throttle, the way she was in our messages, unfiltered and bold. The openness before she realized Mark was me and that we have a history. She might've dismissed that on Friday, but there's got to be something to it because she's all but avoided me in the years since.

Though I suppose River and Arielle don't hang out either, so maybe I'm putting too fine a point on it, giving that old conversation and those insults more weight than I should? But Riley's eyes glittering as she ran from the bookstore flash in my mind, and I know this is going to take more than 'I'm sorry' to get more than 'I'm in.'

I'm going to have to work at gaining Riley's trust, but I'm up to the challenge.

Before I get out of my car, I take a moment to collect my thoughts as I stare at myself in the rearview mirror. I know I look good in a white dress shirt, the top two buttons undone and the sleeves rolled halfway up my forearms, with dark gray slacks. I was going to go with black, but I decided the gray was just a little less funereal.

I also realized that I might need to seriously brighten up my wardrobe if I'm going to spend time with Riley. It works fine at Life Corp, but looking at it now, I realize I spend most days looking like one of the Men in Black.

But more than my outfit, what strikes me is that my eyes are filled with light, almost as if that hope inside me is visible. I always thought that 'eyes are windows to the soul' thing was pure bullshit, but maybe not. Or maybe Riley's already made me more fanciful with her over the top positivity?

When I knock on the door, I hear the same scrabble of toenails on the tile and yapping, and it makes me smile. He might only be fourteen pounds, he might flop over as soon as you say 'belly rub', but Raffy's a damn good alarm system at least.

"Noah?" Riley says through the door, and it opens up a crack.

"Were you expecting someone else? I'm right on time," I joke, but she doesn't smile. "I come bearing gifts," I tell her, holding up the cherry-covered cheesecake enticingly.

Riley's door closes, and I hear the chain slide, and a moment later, she lets me in. She's wearing pale blue jeans with rips along the thighs, a thin yellow tank top, and bare feet, showing off that cute yellow pedicure. I fight the urge to kiss her once more.

Go slow, man. For all her exuberance, she's skittish where you're concerned.

Raffy, remembering me from last time, immediately starts wiggling his nub of a tail, happy to have someone around to spoil him.

"You brought me cheesecake," Riley says bluntly as she takes the container from me and sets it on the kitchen counter. She turns around, and I stand up

from where I've knelt to sneak Raffy one of his blueberry muffin treats. Riley's brows go up when she sees her dog drooling over the crunchy biscuit. "And you're spoiling my dog. Why?"

I square my shoulders. "He's important to you, so he's going to be important to me."

She blinks slowly, a tiny line between her brows growing deeper each time her eyes close and open. "I always have something to say, some positive quote or encouraging words, but . . . I've got nothing."

"I'll take it as a good sign that I've rendered you speechless with my charms." I offer a gentle smile, and slowly, she returns it.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," she blurts. I'm not sure she meant to say it because she clacks her mouth closed, looking horrified.

"What?" I say in shock.

Haven't I made it abundantly clear that I want her? Want this?

"Look, Noah . . . I'm in. I haven't stopped thinking about you since . . ." She swallows, as if steeling her nerves before continuing, "That kiss. I've thought about our messages as Rachel and Mark, our conversation, about Arielle and River . . . I've thought about everything, and I just . . . *Why me?*"

Her big blue eyes look up at me, confusion written in the swirling emotions there.

"Because . . ."

I pause, stopping myself before I can say something easy like 'you're beautiful.' As true as that may be, it's superficial.

I need to be deeper. I need to be honest in the way I was when I thought Riley was 'Rachel', when it was words on a screen and not the sheer physical presence in front of me. And honestly, I am not good at this.

I *hate* not being good at something.

But I man up because I have to. Because she's worth it and I have never backed down from something just because it's hard. I've been thinking about

what I want to say, practicing it in my head, editing and revising it so that it's the best it can be because this conversation might be the most important one I've ever had. I'm ready for this.

Stepping into her, I crowd her space to be close to her, but I keep my hands at my side, not letting myself touch her until I say what I need to say and she understands.

I inject every bit of earnest truth I possess into my words. "Riley, from the first time I read your profile, I felt a connection between us. I was shocked, and at first, I couldn't believe it. Hell, the reason I replied was because I just couldn't believe that some AI had found such a perfect match for me.

"But then we started messaging. And it was like a switch flipped in my brain. I'm proud to say that I love what I do. I like working at Life Corp, and I still have aims for the top of the tower. And for years, I've put Life Corp first, burying myself in my work, thriving there and enjoying every moment of it. But the thrill I've gotten from my work is nothing compared to what happens when my phone dings and I know it's you. My heart races with excitement, and I can't open the message fast enough to see what you've said. Usually, I'd be mad at anything that interrupts my work, but I feel like work interrupts me from talking to you, not the other way around."

I take a deep breath, letting it out in one long whoosh. That was hard to say, even harder to realize, and I know I'll need to do some hours of number crunching later to make it up to myself.

"You haunt me. It guts me that I hurt you when you were just a kid with big dreams and I was so damn jealous I was choking on my own insecurities." I shake my head, focusing on the here and now and the things I can change. "I can't believe how open we were with one another in those messages, when you were Rachel and I was Mark. And that kiss?" I look at her lips, wanting desperately to touch them, taste them, but I haven't earned them yet. "I can't live with myself if I don't at least *try*. We deserve that much. Do you understand?"

She's not smiling. She hasn't smiled once while I've rambled on frantically. She looks shell-shocked, her mouth open in a little 'O' of surprise and her eyebrows high on her forehead. I can even see the whites around her blue

eyes.

I think she might have blown a fuse. Just when I'm about to start checking for signs of a stroke, she nods slowly and clears her throat. "Okay. Okay, wow. That's . . . wow." She fans herself, and I'm still not quite sure she's okay because she's repeating words and she's kinda known for being adept with them.

And then she laughs, loud and bright and happily, and I think my heart finally beats again.

"Oh, my gosh, that was amazing!" she shouts, letting a wiggle worm its way through her body. I think she just let my words wash over and through her. And they worked, or at least, they're *working*.

I smile at how adorable she is. I genuinely smile at her utter joy at being told how much I want her, want this. She believes me, thankfully, because I can honestly say that I don't know if I would be as forgiving of me if she'd said to me what I said to her all those years ago. At some point, I should thank River for covering for me back then so that it didn't fester inside Riley the way it could've. I owe him for that, at least.

"Now what?" Riley says, nearly vibrating with excitement.

"Now, we eat cheesecake to celebrate," I tell her.

"You don't want to go out or something?" she says in surprise.

I shake my head, reaching out and finally touching her, taking her hand in mine. "I'd go anywhere with you any fucking time you want, but let's stay in. I want you all to myself right now, just you and me. Riley and Noah. I have plans for you, though, Sunshine. Tomorrow night."

It's not a question. It's not a demand either. It's a promise.

"Oh? Is that so?" she sasses back, tilting her head and looking up at me through her lashes.

I pull her in tightly, pressing my body against hers and holding her hand behind her, locked at the small of her back. One nod from me has her melting into me.

“And tonight?” she practically purrs.

I point toward the kitchen with my chin and lift the bag of dog treats in my free hand. “Tonight, we eat cheesecake while Raffy snacks like a king.”

He must’ve heard the magic word ‘snack’ because Raffy lets out a sharp bark from his dog bed in the corner. His ears are perked up and his eyes are locked on me.

The little joke and Raffy’s reaction get her to smile, the last bit of what I needed to feel her sunshine flood into my chest. I’ve got a foothold in the door to Riley’s heart . . . and I’m not going to give up until I have the door all the way open.

But I’ll never, ever hurt her. Not again.

Riley grabs the cheesecake while I break up a trio of the small muffin-flavored biscuits for Raffy, who’s wagging his nub and doing circles on command for me in return for a tiny piece of a treat. “Good boy, Raffy. You’re scarfing those down like no one ever feeds you, but I know you’ve probably had at least two bowls of kibble today.”

“Two? More like three,” Riley mutters.

“Let me fill up your water bowl. Those things might be dry,” I tell Raffy as though he can understand me. Actually, he might. He runs right over to his water bowl and knocks at it with his paw like he’s telling me, ‘It’s right here, and make it snappy.’

I help myself to the sink, and Riley gives me a warm look, holding up the cheesecake and a spoon. I notice she only has one, and I have no problems with that. I set Raffy’s now-filled water bowl down, and we take the cheesecake to the couch, settling in closely with the cheesecake in between us.

“So, how’d you know?” Riley asks as I push the spoon through the first bite of cheesecake and offer it to her.

“Know what?” I ask, and Riley’s answer is delayed as she wraps her lips around the bite of cheesecake. Her eyes close, rolling up and her eyelids fluttering as she moans with a sexy, throaty purr that has my cock surging to

full hardness in my pants and my mind thinking of a dozen ways to pull that sound from her again. None of them involve cheesecake.

“Mmm, so good,” she whispers when she opens her eyes. “That I love cheesecake.”

“Who *doesn't* love cheesecake? But consider that noted.” I mime scribbling a note in an imaginary notebook, but the truth is, I basically have one in my mind. I want to know everything about Riley Watson, from the mundane to the extraordinary.

“You like cheesecake too?” she guesses.

I shrug, knowing I need to show this side of me as well. “Growing up, it was . . . a special treat, like once a year for birthdays. And even then . . . let's just say that even if it's not real, I still have a fond place in my heart for the Jell-O No-Bake variety. Especially the Oreo one.”

“Ooh, fancy,” Riley teases, but when she sees my eyes, she leans in. “Promise me something, Noah.”

“What's that?” I ask, leaning in until we're nose to nose. It feels vaguely silly to be this close and not kissing her, but because of that, it makes me smile. Like we're being intimate without anything sexual. It's just closeness and comfort with each other.

“Promise me that when the time's right, you'll tell me all about those times,” Riley says. “I know a bit from Arielle's point of view. I want yours.”

“I promise,” I tell her, and as though she's rewarding me for the risk, she takes the spoon and scoops a chunk of cheesecake, offering it to me. I take the bite, enjoying the sweet, tangy flavor. With my mouth full of heaven, it's easier to tell her, “That bedtime story . . . it was real. It was true. That's when everything changed.”

Nobody knows that story. Not the whole thing the way I told it in those messages. My mom knows some, Arielle knows other parts, but Riley . . . knows everything. From my secret shame to my elation to my mother's sacrifice.

Riley shakes her head. “It didn’t change anything. You were already an amazing person, just a miniature version.” She holds up her finger and thumb an inch apart like I was a tiny leprechaun that found the money. “And your mom was already a hard worker. All of that was already in place. The money was a resource, not a catalyst.”

Fuck, this woman is amazing. I tell her my deepest, darkest shame, and she somehow shines a light on it and makes it seem like I was a golden child. And not in a dismissive way that doesn’t respect what I’ve been through, but rather, in a way that accepts it as formative of who I am. Because she likes me, she likes whatever it took to make me . . . me.

“You were an amazing person back then too,” I tell her, still apologizing for what I said long ago. “And you used your awesomeness to make the world better. For so many. Even me.”

I take the spoon back, and this time, when I feed her the cheesecake, I lean in, kissing her and tasting the creamy sweetness from her own lips. She leans into me too, the cheesecake between us forcing us to become a triangle as our lips and tongues explore each other.

“Mmm . . . that bite was even tastier,” Riley murmurs when our lips part. “How about you try this bite?”

She skips the spoon, plunging two fingers into the cheesecake and holding them up. Before I can take them into my mouth, she rubs her fingers under her jawline. “Hungry?”

Fuck, am I.

I take the container of cheesecake from her, putting it on the small coffee table in front of us, and dive for her.

I pull her to me, my mouth finding the streak of creamy whiteness on her skin and licking her throat to the point of her jaw. Riley moans when I nibble there, and I want to feel that sound vibrate against my chest. I grip her hips, guiding her to climb into my lap. I can feel her heat, and I know she can feel my hardness. I use my hold on her hips to press her tighter against me, and she arches, rubbing herself along my shaft.

The cheesecake is gone from her neck and sucked from her fingers, but her skin is just as sweet, so I continue pressing kisses along her neck and up to her lips. Her mouth tastes like sugar and tart cherries, and I savor every stroke of her tongue against mine.

Riley's hands go to my shoulders as she finds a rhythm of her own, hips stroking up and down tantalizingly. "Fuck, Riley. That feel good? Use me, Sunshine."

She lets out a little cry that gets stuck in her throat at my words, and I think she likes a little dirty talk. Who'd have thought Little Miss Happy Skies and Sunbeams would like that? I can't wait to see what else she likes.

It's been ages since I dry humped through clothes, but as soon as I consider getting less fabric between us, Raffy starts barking.

"Rowf! Rowf! Rowf!" he yaps, and Riley startles to look at her dog, who's glaring at us. Actually, he seems to be glaring . . . at Riley.

"Raffy, you can go to bed if you want to."

She points toward the hallway, but the fluffy cockblocker barks again. Looking around Riley, I stare at Raffy, but apparently, I haven't earned that much cred with him yet. "Come on, man, I brought you blueberry muffin dog biscuits. Help me out?" I plead.

Riley turns sharp eyes on me, but there's a smirk on her lips. "Bribing my dog with biscuits and me with cheesecake?"

I hold up my right hand, hovering it over her left breast even as I pretend to be innocent. "I plead the fifth."

Riley laughs, which seems to make Raffy angry because he hops up on the couch with us, nosing right between us and pushing Riley back. He snuffles against Riley's chest, something I wanted to do myself a minute ago, leaving a trail of wet nose marks on her tank top.

"Raffy, no! Down!"

"Yeah," I grumble, but a second later, I'm wincing when a puppy paw starts digging into my balls. "Oof!"

I recoil, trying to save myself, or at least my boys, and in the skirmish to protect my future children, Riley and Raffy slide out of my lap and to the couch next to me. I cup myself, doing a system check. Luckily, everything seems to be in working order because with the slightest touch of my hand, my cock jerks, wanting to settle between Riley's thighs again. Clothes on or not, either will do.

But nope, the moment's gone. Riley's pulled Raffy to her chest, snuggling the fluffy cockblocker the way I was nuzzling her neck just a minute ago. Meanwhile, Raffy's licking the few scraps of cheesecake I missed off Riley's neck and eyeing me. He barks again, and I swear it sounds like 'ha-ha.'

I'm jealous. I'm jealous as hell of a Schnauzer because I wanted that cheesecake. Every molecule that touched her skin. But Raffy seems to have gotten any residual bits because he's moved on to licking his lips and paws, likely making sure he got all the dog biscuit crumbs too.

"I thought we were buds, man. Not cool," I tell the scruffy guy, but I pet his head as I say it.

Riley laughs and then sighs happily, her eyes sparkling at my conversation with her bodyguard. "It is getting late, I guess. We need to do our bedtime routine."

I arch a brow. "You have a bedtime routine with your dog?"

Riley nods. "Of course. First, he's going to need to tinkle, and he's got a favorite tree that he insists on after dark. Then I wash my face. I wash his face. I put lotion on my face and hands and Raffy's lotion on his paws."

She holds up the dog's paw, which looks . . . like a dog's paw. Black, a little bit of callus, some fur between the pads. Nothing looks particularly special to me, but what do I know?

But to Riley, apparently, it's important. "And then I tuck him in and sing him a lullaby."

I blink, not sure what I just heard. "Sing? A lullaby? Are you serious?"

"It's his favorite," she says, scratching behind Raffy's ears. "I made it up myself."

Well, I always knew she was unique, and I always knew she had some different points of view. Now I see that she's a little crazy too. Then again, it's a cute, sunshiny, good kind of craziness, and I have to smile a little. "Can I hear?"

"Nope," she says immediately. "It's only for Raffy and me."

I thought I was jealous before, but now, I've never been more jealous of a dog in my life. I consider putting on a dog costume so Riley would snuggle me, rub my belly, and sing me to sleep.

Shit, I need to get out of here. Head home to pump some iron, or eat a whole pizza while chugging beer, or maybe hit a late-night cowboy bar and ride the mechanical bull on the way home. Something rough and tough. *Like me*, I think, but I'm wondering if that's true considering I've never been to a single cowboy bar and bedtime snuggles sound infinitely more pleasurable.

"I get it. I know when my time's up. But tomorrow night, get a dog sitter or something, 'kay?"

"I think I can arrange that," she says with a sweet smile. She leans over and gives me a kiss on the cheek. "In fact . . . I already know who to call."

I stand up, and it hurts . . . literally. It physically hurts me to leave. My dick's rock hard, jammed against the fabric of my pants, and my arms feel empty. But my face? My cheeks are aching from smiling so much. I think Riley's sunshine is infecting me.

CHAPTER 11

RILEY

Noah stands in my doorway, grinning as he looks me up and down.
“So, you ready?”

Am I ready . . . that question’s been running around in my head since he walked out the door last night.

It was there when I did my photo shoot earlier today, highlighting my stay-cool water bottle for *#MotivationalMonday*.

It was there while I researched some quotes for possible inclusion in future posts.

It was there as I responded to emails, liked comments, and answered questions on everything from my hair conditioner to what I think happens to our souls after we die. That’d been a hard one, and definitely not my usual wheelhouse, but I’d done my best at explaining that our energy and impact go on beyond our lives, as the legacy we leave behind.

And it was definitely on my mind when I called Loretta, arranging for her to watch Raffy for the night.

At least that part was easy. Loretta said she could work Raffy in for his grooming early and then take him home with her. He loves staying at Loretta’s because she’s got four dogs of her own, so it’s really like a doggy sleepover. And luckily, she’d been so busy when I dropped him off that she hadn’t had time to ask any questions about *why* I might need an overnight dog sitter.

But as to Noah's question . . . am I ready?

Looking at him now, in his slacks and deep blue shirt, I'm reminded of what Eli said to me. That maybe what I need is the moonlight to my sunlight. Well, right now, Noah's definitely giving off romantic moonlit vibes.

Yeah . . . yeah, I'm ready. Tonight's a big deal. An actual date, out in public. Not a 'hang out' session on my couch with some snacks and chatter. No, this is different. This is pre-planned—a big deal to Noah—and we're dressed up to go out where people might see us. People who might know us, either as Riley Sunshine or Mr. BlindDate app, or more importantly, people who might know us as Brother or Sister or Best Friend. Not that I'm expecting to run into River or Arielle.

Oh, wait . . . I forgot.

"No, hang on. I need to do a quick shot of my makeup. I'll use it later for a sponsor ad," I tell Noah.

I scoot over to my photo set-up, expertly getting it ready to go. It feels weird to do this in front of someone, but Noah watches with a soft smile on his face. He's not judging me. If anything, it seems like he's enjoying watching me play to the camera.

I do the few shots I need and then ask, "You want in on this? Not for social media, but just for . . . us?"

Us.

It's a big word for being only two little letters.

Noah lifts an eyebrow but says nothing as he steps into frame. He pulls me in close, but not too close, as we take a trio of shots. "Wait," I tell him before turning around, "another trio. From the back."

"Ah . . . the booty shot," Noah jokes, popping a hip and making me laugh. I wouldn't have thought he'd be funny, and he's not some outrageous clown sort or stupid dad joke type, but he's quietly humorous in his own way. And that's coming out more and more as he feels comfortable with me. I can see it actually happening before my eyes—the uptight, cocky asshole who maybe wasn't as much of an asshole as I thought morphing into a sweet, caring,

funny man who makes me smile.

We take the three and I take a moment to look them over. There's one from the first series that I love. I can't believe how handsome he is behind me, his hands around my waist and smiling.

Then again, I look good in his arms too. My smile's megawatt, and I didn't have to fake it at all. I look . . . happy. And not just Insta-happy, but *really* happy and looking forward to the night. Just the image of us together is powerful.

"Wow . . . they're all keepers," Noah offers. "You make me look good."

He knows he's gorgeous and photogenic, but he's playing it off modestly. I play back the same way. "Definite keepers," I say and then press a quick peck to the corner of his lips.

Noah looks into my eyes, a crooked smile on his lips. "You are something else, Sunshine," he says reverently. But then he straightens his back, and his face goes serious. "We should go."

"What's wrong?" I ask, afraid I did something wrong.

He's pulling me toward the door, but he looks over his shoulder at my question. "If we don't go, you're gonna keep looking at me like that and saying things like that, and I'm going to take you down that hallway, and we'll never get out of here for a date. I aim to woo you, Riley Watson." He uses the word 'woo' like it's an actual thing people say.

"Woo?"

"Yep, all part of my plan," he explains, which isn't really an explanation at all. But I guess with Noah, it sorta is.

A planner, detailed, loyal, a hard worker—all things that make him who he is, and I can't wait to get to know it all.

We go to the door, Noah helping steady me while I slide my tall pink heels on. They match the pink flowers on my yellow dress, but I'd still prefer my Docs and socks. They just hadn't seemed appropriate for a date. On a whim, I stop and click my heels together three times, and Noah pauses. "What was

that for?”

“Guess I’m feeling a little bit like a mix of Dorothy and Cinderella,” I admit. “Click my heels together three times, and Prince Charming appears. Bam!”

Noah chuckles. “Just don’t run out at midnight or turn into a pumpkin.”

I pat my flat belly, “Then you’ll have to quit feeding me so much. Tacos, cheesecake, and I’m assuming we’re going to dinner because if not, I need to go back inside and grab a snack.”

“All part of my plan,” he says dramatically.

Outside, he shows me to our ride, a small SUV. “Before chatting, I would have taken you for a sportscar type. Something that goes fast, rides hard, and tears up the asphalt in strips fifty yards long. But not a family SUV type.”

“It was necessary at the time,” Noah says with a small shrug. “And you’re not totally wrong. There’s a part of me that wants to have some muscle machine that passes low-flying aircraft if it wants to and growls when you punch the accelerator. But this works well. I got it at a good price, it’s a hybrid, and it has the best reviews in its class.”

Noah goes over to the passenger door and opens it for me like a gentleman. I get in, looking up at him as he gives me a smile and closes the door. As he goes around, I take in the interior, impressed with the deep gray and black leather interior. I run my hand over the dash, whistling at the buttery soft feeling. I’ve never cared much about cars, but I know my VW bug reflects who I am and the message I want to send, and I suspect that Noah’s vehicle is the same.

I look over and see that he’s smiling a bit uncertainly. I haven’t seen that look before. I was so used to seeing the cockiness, the utter confidence. This is a different Noah, the Noah I met over chat . . . the Noah I like. The real Noah.

I reach over and give his hand a squeeze. “Makes perfect sense. Sounds like you made a well-thought-out decision.”

Noah frowns lightly, and I tilt my head. “What?”

“Well, I thought I had until this moment. The middle console,” Noah says with an irritated sigh. “I’m not saying I planned to stare at your legs while driving, but . . . well, I can barely see a thing over there.”

“A thing, huh?” I tease, provocatively sliding my hand down my chest and into my lap. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Noah growls but laughs after a second. “You won’t need that, Miss Watson. Trust me.” He takes my hand, holding it on the accursed center console.

Noah pulls out, and as he heads toward the end of the street, I have to smile. I know from Arielle that there was a time the Danielses didn’t have the means to buy something like this. And with Noah’s story about his mom going back to school, I know they struggled for a lot of years while she worked to provide them with a better life.

“Your mom must be proud of you,” I say quietly, knowing this has the potential to be tricky territory.

He’s come a long way from the cocky guy who covered up his lack of funds with a lot of bravado back in the day. Maybe that’s where some of that cockiness came from . . . a shield to protect himself from the cruelty of others and their assumptions.

“She is. Did you know she’s a manager at work now? Runs the whole coding and billing department.” He virtually beams as he talks about his mother’s success.

“What about your dad? Arielle always just said that you were more of a father to her than her sperm donor.” It’s as kind a quote as I can offer. Arielle has said some harsh things about her dad over the years.

“Me?” Noah says, looking surprised. But he doesn’t question it further. It seems more like he puts it away in his mental filing cabinet to take out and analyze later. With a shrug, he offers, “He left when I was a kid. I don’t even know how much Arielle remembers. We never talk about it, you know?”

I don’t know. My parents are still married decades after their vows, but I nod anyway.

Noah pauses, and at the next intersection he takes a right. We steer away from the interstate, and I wonder where he's taking us. "My father walked out on us," Noah says quietly, his eyes fixed straight ahead. "I was nine, and Arielle was six. After Arielle's birth, the stress was bad. He and Mom would fight, usually over money because there was never enough. They tried to keep it away from us, so I don't know all the details. But one Sunday, I woke up and he was gone. Other than an occasional child support check, we haven't heard from him since. Honestly, I'm glad. Even if he was a part of what made me snap at you back then."

"What do you mean?"

Noah makes another turn and accelerates a little. "Arielle had just turned eighteen, and we knew the rare child support payments would stop. They weren't much and never frequent enough to count on, but they helped. So I knew Mom was losing that help, even though Arielle was still in high school, still living at home, and with dreams of college. It had me pissed. It wasn't the whole reason I snapped, but it was part of it."

The admission means a lot, and I feel closer to Noah now than I ever have. "And the rest? You said it was part of it."

Noah glances over and takes a deep breath. "When River and I created Friendzone, I was so sure it was our ticket. That I'd be able to take care of myself, of my family. That Mom would be able to retire and finally not worry, and Arielle could become anything she wanted. Instead, I had a bit of money, but by the time River and I paid off the loans and investors, it wasn't enough to go around the way I'd hoped, and I had to take a corporate job."

"Yet you seem happy with your work now. River definitely does."

Noah nods. "I do love my job. I have good people, good mentors, and yes, a damn good paycheck. But at the time, I was young, dumb, and broke. I was mad that you had this opportunity for school at your feet and planned to just walk away from it when my mom was working two jobs to split the cost of Arielle's school with me. I was pissed that your dad was there, joking around and being all lovey-dovey with your mom, when mine had bailed. I was jealous of you for having the guts to try and make it on your own. But really, it had nothing to do with you. I hated what I saw as my own failure."

“I don’t think you could’ve been a failure if you’d tried. It’s not who you are,” I assure him. “And thank you. For the full truth.”

“I’m still so sorry about what I said,” Noah says, looking over at me quickly before returning his eyes to the road.

I squeeze his hand, wanting to write the end of that chapter and move on to this one forever. “Can we agree that we’ve made our peace about that day? I never held a grudge because River said you were going through some family stuff and that it wasn’t about me. That doesn’t mean I didn’t think you were a rude asshole, but I understand now. Let’s leave the past in the past and see what the future might hold.”

Noah nods, and it feels like the beginning of something new, and that’s exciting. And looking over at Noah, I realize that he feels exactly the same way.

But dredging all of that up is a hell of a way to start a date.

“Where are you taking me, anyway?” I ask, hoping for a lighter topic.

“You’ll see.”

I relax into the seat, trusting that he’s got a plan, plus a back-up plan, and a back-up to the back-up. It’s who he is. Me? I could ride around all night and just stop when something caught my eye. But as my belly growls a little, I think maybe he’s got the better idea this time—a destination in mind with what I’m sure will be good food. Noah wouldn’t have it any other way.

I’m surprised when he parks at Big Mike’s, though. I would’ve thought he’d find it low-class or overly-kitschy as a themed diner that somehow combines everything from the fifties to the eighties. I’ve heard of it online but have never been here before.

I’m excited for my first time to be with Noah.

Walking into Big Mike’s, Noah holds the door for me, and I truly feel like a lady. The way Noah looks at me, I feel sexy and powerful, and as we sit down, I have to smile as he shifts in his seat, probably adjusting himself. “Is there something wrong, Mr. Daniels?”

Noah leans over to take my hand. “No. I was just thinking that your legs look amazing in those heels with your dress swishing as your hips sway when you walk. I was considering whether I could get you to walk around a bit more so I could watch.”

His voice goes rough and deep, and I wonder what else he wants to watch.

That thought makes reality flood in, and it really starts to hit me. He’s one sexy man, and he wants me and isn’t shy about letting me know it.

“Oh, my God . . . I’m on a date with my best friend’s big brother.”

Noah laughs, his eyes full of understanding. “And I’m on a date with my little sister’s best friend,” he reminds me. “Whichever way you want to put it . . . I’m okay with it.”

We both smile in acceptance of the crazy situation we’ve found ourselves in, and I take a moment to actually look around Big Mike’s. In most of the writeups online, it’s been described as a throwback diner. But right now, it looks more like a retro nightclub with food. There’s dim safety lighting around the base of each booth, throwing the neon lighting on the wall into sharp relief and making the whole restaurant look very blue and pink. Even the black and white vinyl floor is washed in the hues of the colorful lighting.

Almost every table is packed, and the dance floor has half a dozen couples out there dancing. Two of the couples are in full-on retro costumes as well, one looking like a pair of bobby soxers from the fifties while the other looks more Studio 54 in the seventies. It’s a multi-generation dance battle showcase out there, poodle-skirted *American Bandstand* versus gold lame jumpsuit-wearing *Soul Train* dancing to Wham!

“Have you ever been here before?” Noah asks, and I shake my head as I lift my brows questioningly. “Me neither. I wasn’t sure I’d like it, but it came highly recommended and was at the top of the list for places to take a date in Briar Rose.”

Delight blooms in my belly. “Did you look up date places?”

I swear on my half-million followers, on my very brand, on my very spirit, that Noah Daniels’s tanned cheeks flush a warm pink. “I don’t date much, and my instincts were to take you somewhere fancy. I know enough to know

that wouldn't impress you, though, and I wanted to do something fun and memorable."

I lay my hand over his where he hasn't let me go, his thumb rubbing circles on my skin tantalizingly. "That's so sweet. Thank you." I pause and see his eyes tick off to the side and then back to me. "Is it driving you crazy in here?"

He sags, leaning forward to huff out, "Fuck, yes!" He shakes his head. "It's so disorganized, like a warehouse of memorabilia with no logical, reasonable storage system. There's eighties lighting, outfits from every decade, sixties photos—" He points to the large, framed poster of Sean Connery as James Bond. "It's . . . a lot. Does that make me uptight?" he asks with a self-deprecating laugh, repeating what I called him before.

I narrow my eyes, studying him and liking the way he squirms as he awaits my judgment. "Nope, not uptight. What it makes you is in desperate need of a view reframing. You look around and see mismatched decades. What if, instead . . . you chose to frame them as iconic moments in Pop Culture? Change the umbrella you're organizing under, and it becomes a celebration of forty years, an explosion of amazing things that represent our past, bringing back happy times. Same things around you, but seen through a different lens."

Noah blinks, and then blinks again, before looking around the room. Nothing in our surroundings has changed, but could my simple words have changed the way he sees them?

"Okay . . . okay, I can kinda see that. A little," he says slowly.

I wink, pleased at his effort. "It doesn't happen overnight, but you can change your mindset a little bit at a time. People can learn to relax or learn to be more dedicated, reprogram their inner voice, and see the world around them through a different set of lenses. That's part of what I do, changing people's day by infusing positivity and appreciation into their lives. A little sunshine," I finish, my passion for what I do making me sound a little crazy.

Luckily, a waiter chooses that moment to walk up, and Noah doesn't have a chance to tell me that I'm naïve about the world. I've heard that one before, from him and from lots of other people. They're the ones I have to work

extra-hard to reach.

“Welcome to Big Mike’s. I’m Wayne, and I’ll be your server. What can I get for you tonight?” the man asks. He’s wearing red and white checkered pants, a white button-up shirt, and black suspenders. His black-framed glasses are bold and have no glass in them.

“Hi, Wayne. We’re first-timers here and want the full Big Mike’s experience, so what do you recommend?” I smile warmly.

Wayne looks from me to Noah. “First-timers? I’m happy to pop your Big Mike’s cherry,” he tells us with a grin so bright I almost don’t catch the naughty reference. I look to Noah, who’s fighting a smile of his own. “If you wanna do it right, I recommend the Double-Decker meal. Two Angus patties, two slices of cheddar, all the fixings, plus a basket of fries to share. Don’t worry, there’s plenty of fries.” He holds his hands out like we might be worried there won’t be enough to eat with everything he listed. “And Cokes to wash it all down.”

I close my menu, and without consulting Noah, I tell Wayne, “That. We’ll take that.”

He nods, scribbling on his notepad. “And save room for a cake shake. Ugh, absolutely To. Die. For.” He holds his hand to his heart and confides with a side eye, “Actually, I’ll probably have a heart attack from how many of those things I suck down, but the chocolate cake-chocolate milkshake is my treat to myself.” He makes an obscene sucking sound, and I laugh. After a heartbeat, Noah laughs too. Wayne’s personality and joy are infectious.

“We’ll take one of those too,” Noah tells him, and Wayne nods. When we’re alone again, Noah tells me, “I don’t think I can possibly eat all that and drink a shake on top too, but out of everything that guy just said, I really want to see you suck that shake down.”

Ooh, flirty, sexy man!

“Oh, well after we eat all that, I’m gonna need a workout. I guess . . . sucking . . . will do it.”

Did I just say that? I laugh at myself, feeling heat rush to my cheeks.

I am such an awful flirter! Truly, completely unskilled, and I make a note to rectify that. It's a skill like any other, and I need to learn, watch some people who are good at it, and practice. Just like I tell people to do.

But Noah doesn't seem to think I'm bad at flirting. In fact, he seems to be staring rather pointedly at my lips. I lick them nervously, and a pleasant tension builds between us as I wonder if we might skip the burger, fries, and shake and just go back to my place. Or his.

But Noah takes a deep breath and settles back against the booth. "Before Wayne came up, you were telling me about your work. Bringing sunshine to people's days. I'll admit I looked you up. You're engaging to watch."

I search for any subtle digs in the compliment but find none. "Thank you. I want to be a bright spot in people's days. Everyone has different experiences, different stresses, but if I can help them find a single moment of thankfulness for the good things, then I'll have succeeded."

"It's like lifestyle sales and advertising," he muses.

"Yeah, but it's not fake. I work hard to be authentic and real. Riley Sunshine is me, just an amped up version of me, if that makes sense?"

He nods. "I can see that. When River and I started FriendZone, we didn't have a clue what we were doing. And we definitely had to do some 'fake it till you make it' stuff."

"I don't mean to make it sound like it's all sunshine and rainbows. There are times when I think I'm going to crash and burn myself," I assure him, revealing a big part of myself that I don't share with many people. "When what you're sharing is yourself, there's a lot of stress. People expect you to have this perfect life even when they say they don't."

"And we know how the Internet loves to tear down the idols they've built up," Noah reflects. "We spend a lot of time at Life Corp worrying about deflecting those. Things are faster online, and one review or comment can go viral and tank an entire project."

"You got that right," I tell him honestly. "People think I have some sort of storybook existence, that all I do is shop, get my hair and nails done, take selfies, and get free stuff. Truth is, I worked hard to get to this point, and I'm

proud of what I've accomplished because I've struggled a lot."

"I don't doubt it." Noah reaches out and puts a hand on my forearm. "Riley, there's no need to defend what you do with me. Really."

I can see that he's still worried about the past, but it's all forgiven. Entirely. I don't preach 'forgive and forget' because that's a one-way ticket to repeat past mistakes. Instead, I think we use those mistakes to learn and grow, and both Noah and I have. He wouldn't be so fast to judge and lash out now, and I would definitely stand up for myself better these days.

"Even now, there are times I wish your brother and I hadn't had to take the escape chute Life Corp offered us. I mean, I like the security and the safety net of being financially sound, for myself and for my family, but it comes with restraints. You never compromised on your vision, and you've got the freedom that comes with being your own boss."

"We do what we're all meant to do, Noah," I tell him, moving my hand to give him a squeeze. This is what I've enjoyed so much about our new relationship, both chatting and now in real life. We're communicating at a level a lot of people never get to, and I love it. "You're a natural leader, a guy who'll light up the corporate world because you get people to follow you. Me? I'm too . . . wild."

Noah laughs, shaking his head. "No, you're just an idealist. Won't settle for second best, that's you."

Once upon a time, Noah Daniels calling me an idealist was an insult in his mind. But I can see the change in his eyes. He means it as a compliment, the ultimate one.

"Thank you," I tell him. "Wait, unless you're calling yourself the best?" I tease.

"Hmm, why can't both be true?" he says smugly.

Before I can banter back, Wayne is back with our food. At least I think it's ours. It might be for his entire section because he's precariously balancing two platters with the biggest burgers I've ever seen in one hand and carrying a basket of fries in the other hand. It's enough food to feed an army for sure.

“Here you go. Two Double-Decker meals.” He sets the plates down on the table, and I have no idea how I’m going to ingest all this. Or even half of it. But the aroma is intoxicating, and I’m sure going to try. “Anything else I can get for you?”

Noah and I lock eyes over the monstrous amount of food and shake our heads. Wayne grins knowingly. “Wait until you taste it. It’s so good, you’ll never be able to stop.” He tilts his head. “Guess that’s true for a lot of things.”

When he walks off, Noah and I burst out in laughter.

“I think I need to write down some of his sayings for future posts.”

“I don’t think Riley Sunshine can say the things Wayne says and get away with it. At least not on video,” Noah tells me heatedly.

And now my burger isn’t the only thing getting juicy. I squirm in my seat, much the way Noah did earlier, and his lips quirk smugly.

“You ass,” I tell him, but there’s no heat in my voice.

“Am I wrong?” he challenges. He knows good and well that I could not say sexy, over the top stuff like that as Riley Sunshine. Hell, I could barely say it as Riley Watson! That sucking comment was out of my wheelhouse and foreign on my tongue.

“Let’s eat,” I tell him instead, letting him have the win.

He doesn’t gloat, though, simply picks up his burger, mess and all, and waits for me to do the same. “Three, two, one . . .”

We both take big bites at the same time and moan in unison.

“Ohmagawf.”

“Dahmn, ’as gud.”

We smile with mouths as full as chipmunks, and Noah doesn’t flinch, even though he has tomato juice running down his chin. That’s completely unlike him, or I’m pretty sure it is, considering everything I know about him, but to my surprise, he goes in for another bite without grabbing his napkin.

I decide I like messy, untamed Noah. Taking me somewhere out of his wheelhouse, sharing things that he'd normally hold close to his chest, trying new things, and not worrying about being perfect is dead sexy.

How is he perfect when he's being regimented and also perfect at being wild? I don't know, but he is sexy both ways.

We eat in comfortable silence for the most part, enjoying the easy company and delicious food. Noah dips a fry in ketchup and holds it up for me so I can eat it from his hand, and he gives me a saucy smirk.

But eventually, we can't eat another bite despite barely making a dent in the food on our plates. I sit back in the booth, patting my belly. "You might have to roll me and my food baby out of here," I joke.

"Happily. Though it might be slow going." He pats his own stomach, which is flat beneath his dress shirt. I felt him underneath me last night, though, and I know there are bumps and ridges of abs under there.

"I think I'm going to skip the cake shake this time," I tell him, and Noah groans.

"Ugh, don't talk about food. No more food. As it is, I'm going to have to run an extra ten miles to work that off. Unless . . ."

His eyes have gone bright, and though I don't know what it is, I know he's been struck with an idea. I can't wait to hear what impulsive thing has struck his fancy because he's living in my world now.

"Let's dance," he says.

I couldn't be more shocked if he'd said he was going to drink that cake shake. Noah Daniels dances? To this?

The music washing over the dance floor is distinctive, with sharp horns and a quick beat.

"You can't be serious, after eating all that?"

"Come on," Noah urges me, reaching out and tugging on my hand. "If not, I'm going to dance with the waitress who's dressed up as Raquel Welch."

Oh, hell no. Despite my stomach feeling about three sizes too big, I heave myself out of the booth and onto the dance floor as I recognize the tune. *Dancing In The Streets*. Noah puts on a show, completely at ease as he moves and grooves. He even copies the costumed dancers, who I've decided must be employees who keep everyone on the floor. They do some sort of twisting move, and even though I worry it might make me puke, I dance along, laughing the whole time.

It's crazy. It's fun. It's amazing.

It's Noah Daniels, dancing wildly to oldies with tomato juice on his shirt, sweat at his temples, and smiling like he never knew life could be this fun.

Other than the tomato juice, I imagine I look the same. Vibrantly happy, full-bellied and having the time of my life.

Another song starts, *Jump On It!* and everyone does the same moves, bumping their hips around in a circle before yee-hawing lasso hands in the air.

"Come on now, shake it!" I urge at one point, and Noah goes full-on cheese mode, throwing his hands up and circling his hips, but instead of a cowboy, it looks more like a stripper. I can't help but cheer and giggle along with his antics.

Wayne rushes by the floor, another handful of plates on a tray, and calls out, "Save some of that for the *Hand Jive*. It's coming up soon."

I freeze, mouth gaping open, and Noah's wide eyes stare back at me. "Did he say a hand job is coming soon?" I whisper.

But Noah hears me, and his eyes fill with heat. I let him pull me in tight, where the clean scent of his fresh sweat is intoxicating.

"I fucking hope so," he growls into my ear. "And more."

The music slows down, and with our bodies touching, I can feel what I'm doing to him. He's thick and large in his slacks, and I realize that my nipples are pearled up too, aching for his touch. Noah sways us, and I follow his lead, my panties soaked from something besides the heat of dancing.

It might as well be only the two of us on that dance floor, with no one else in the room. I think the song changes again, but we stay exactly as we are—swaying slowly and looking into each other’s eyes. Noah dips me, swooping me through the air with a strong hand on my back, and when I come up, he meets me with a gentle kiss. The softness from this man is my undoing.

“Noah.”

I don’t know how to ask for what I want. I don’t even know if I have words for what I want except . . . him. Noah.

He takes my hand and guides me off the floor. At our table, he quickly lays down cash for Wayne and then we’re running for the door.

Outside, the cool night air helps with my overheated body, but my head is still spinning, intoxicated with all things Noah Daniels. When we get to his SUV, he backs me up against it, caging me in with a hand on either side of my hips. I cup his face and lift up encouragingly, wanting his kiss. More than his kiss.

And he obliges. He devours me, right there in the parking lot of Big Mike’s. His tongue claims my mouth, his lips lay a trail along my neck, his hands squeeze and dent the flesh of my hips, and he grinds himself against me. But I’m a willing participant, giving as good as I’m getting. My hands drop from his face to his chest before I wrap my arms around his neck, not letting him put even a tiny inch between us.

So when he guides me back to lie on the hood, I let him. I shouldn’t. We’re in public, and this could be scandalous. But he kisses down my neck to my collarbone, and I forget all reason. My eyes flutter closed, and I hold him to my skin, wanting him to taste me, mark me, take me.

But voices sound out in the dim parking lot, breaking the spell, and I open my eyes. I hiss, “Noah! Noah!” I swat at his shoulder, and he lifts up in confusion.

“Riley?”

Without the pressure of him against me, I lift up and immediately drop down by the front tire. Which puts me right in line with his bulging crotch.

“Uh, whoa!” Noah says, reaching down. “I mean, I’m not necessarily saying no, but . . . I don’t think we should do that in public.” Noah cups himself to block my supposed blowjob attack, but he sounds as if saying no physically hurts him.

“I’m not trying to blow you,” I growl, pointing toward the entrance to Big Mike’s. “Look who just showed up!”

Noah looks to where I’m pointing, his eyes widening in shock. “Arielle?”

“And Eli,” I add. Of all the restaurants in Briar Rose, how did they decide to come here? They’re holding hands and smiling at each other, lost in conversation, but they could’ve easily seen us.

Finally catching on to the problem, Noah ducks down too, headbutting me and almost falling on his butt.

“Ow!” I hiss, rubbing my forehead.

“Sorry,” Noah whispers.

I hear Arielle say something. I can’t quite make it out, but I can hear her laughter and Eli’s answering chuckle. And then they’re at the door and disappear inside.

“What the hell are they doing? Are they on a date?” Noah asks, standing back up.

Arielle and Eli have been casually hooking up for years, nothing serious. But I’ve wondered about them with how they’ve been acting lately. Are they getting more serious? Or is their FWB situation imploding?

Still confused, Noah rambles, “And isn’t Eli into guys?”

“Eli’s into anything with a pulse,” I correct him. “And your sister’s hot. Did you not know that they’re FWBs?”

“Excuse me? FWBs? What the fuck?” Noah growls, looking toward the door of the diner like he’s considering chasing them in there. “How long has that been going on?”

“Quite a while,” I tell him. “You seriously didn’t know?”

Noah's eyes narrow and he shakes his head sharply. "I try to respect her boundaries, but . . ."

"They're fine," I tell him. "Probably fueling up for a night of—"

I cut off my supposition when Noah clenches his jaw.

He glances at me and sighs. "I'm sure you're right. They're fine. Arielle's fine." He sounds like he's trying to convince himself more than anything.

A giggle bubbles up at how dramatic he's being. I mean, Arielle's grown, and it's not like Eli is her first or only partner.

Noah grimaces sheepishly. "I'm being an asshole again, aren't I?"

I hold up my thumb and index finger a solid three inches apart. "Little bit. But you're a big brother, and that's expected in Arielle's case."

With a sigh, he lifts his hands over his head, wiggles them around, and inhales deeply. He's doing what I coached him through, and the idea that it meant enough to him to remember means a lot.

"Okay. Arielle is FWBs with Eli. They're getting food. That's perfectly natural and fine." He sounds like he means it this time, and I grin.

"You know you're the one out on a date with your sister's best friend," I tease, letting my fingers dance up his arm.

"You're right. I am," Noah says huskily. "But I haven't thought of you as 'Arielle's friend' in a while. You're more . . . the woman I want to know everything about."

There's so much depth in his comment that it catches me off guard and has my desire at white-hot levels. Confident, assured, intelligent, and . . . God, he's perfect for me.

"Riley, what is it?" Noah asks, tracing along my cheekbone. "Your eyes went all dreamy."

"I want to thank you, Noah. I . . . this side of you, I never knew it existed," I admit to him. "You're a lot more than I expected. Even after the chats and the cheesecake."

“I did enjoy the cheesecake, though,” Noah teases before getting serious again. “I didn’t realize that you were so . . . fun. No, more than fun, you’re . . . vibrant, infectious energy. You’re an amazing woman.”

Our hands touch, and I realize the magic of what’s occurred. Without the filter of our previous notions and the week of getting to know each other online, we’ve been able to really see each other’s souls.

They say you can travel the world without meeting the one person who’s your best partner. But would I have ever realized that my perfect match was right under my nose all this time? That I was blinded by a bad first impression and couldn’t see the strong, intelligent, soulful man right here in my arms now?

Well, that’s going to stop. I see Noah for who he is, and right now, I don’t want this night to end. We already know each other. I feel like I might know him better than nearly anyone at this point. Same for him with me. I’ve shared things I haven’t told anyone.

“Thank you. You’re amazing too, Noah.” Our eyes lock, our breaths pacing with each other, and fireworks shooting between us. “I think I want to continue where we were before . . . at your place.”

It doesn’t even take him a heartbeat to catch on to what I’m saying. “Are you sure, Riley?” I nod, and he steals my breath, not with a kiss but by opening the door and almost shoving me inside the SUV before running around to the driver’s side.

CHAPTER 12

NOAH

The elevator dings, and my nerves are raw. I never expected to be this unfiltered, unarmored. With anyone. I told Riley about my dad, for fuck's sake, and the only people who know about that are Mom, Arielle, and River. My control is slipping from my fingers, but instead of scrabbling to get it back, I want to let go completely.

She's worth it. She deserves that.

And now, here I am, showing her a part of myself that I don't even think I can put into words. This apartment is both my pride and my biggest guilt. I could live in a cheaper place, freeing up money to send more home to Mom and help Arielle out, but this is what makes me feel like I've made it. Like I won't ever again be that little boy who was hoping for a trash sandwich. And I've seen Mom's eyes when she comes over—the relief that we all survived, her pride that she was able to provide for Arielle and me, and her joy in my success.

It's ridiculous to be nervous about an apartment. I know that. And I've had women here before. But none of them knew me the way Riley does, and that makes all the difference.

I snag my keys and finally get them in the lock, twisting the key and opening the door. "Come on in."

From the moment I hit the lights and we walk in, I know I worried for nothing. Riley looks around with interest, but there's no judgment. She's not impressed by trappings that way. Instead, I think she's enjoying seeing how I

choose to live, what creature comforts I've chosen, and getting to know me in another new way. I feel the weight of nervousness lift off me.

"Wow, I love it," Riley says as she crosses my living room, dropping her purse on my small dining table.

Seeing her here fills the space with a life I hadn't noticed it was missing, like she brings energy with her, sprinkling it in her wake with every step.

"Me too. It's not as cozy as your place, but it's home, you know?"

She beams at the compliment to her apartment. "I like bright colors and suns, and the clean background to let them all shine. But that's not you. This is you. Classic, quality, and maybe a bit showy." She winks with the last bit, and I shrug, not offended.

"Confident, not cocky," I say, agreeing with her. "Look at this." I guide her over to the window on the far left of the living room and place my hands on her upper arms, lining her up just right in the prime spot for the view. "Right there," I say, pointing out the window across the span of sky and buildings. "You can see the logo on the top of Life Corp. It's what let me know this was the one. I can see my future from here."

"It's beautiful," she whispers reverently, understanding why that would be so important for me.

With her back to my chest, part of me wants to jump right back to where we were, push her up against the window, and ravage her.

I want her. Desperately. But I want more than that with Riley.

"Would you like some wine?"

She looks over her shoulder at me, nibbling her lip nervously, and I know I made the right choice.

"Sit down. Let me grab it." I step back from her, feeling the loss of her heat, and head to the kitchen. I can still see her over the island counter as she sits down on the leather couch, crossing her legs demurely.

I pop the cork on a bottle and pour two glasses. Carrying them back to her, I hand her one and sit down beside her.

“Thank you. A toast?” she asks, holding her glass with delicate fingers.

“To pasts that shaped us, presents that fulfill us, and futures that are better than we can dream.” I clink my glass against hers, and we take sips, eyeing each other over the rims.

“Mmm, that’s good—the wine and the toast. I haven’t heard that one.”

I chuckle and shrug. “That’s because I just made it up.”

Her brows jump in surprise. “Really? Quite poetic, Mr. Daniels.”

I bow my head with a smug smirk and Riley grins back. I like that she can see my humor in the cockiness now. It tells me that the past is truly gone to time and she’s here in the now with me. “I try. Tell me, what’s the future you dream of?”

Riley takes another sip, thinking before she answers. “Honestly?” Riley says, and I nod. “I want to help people for as long as I can. I want to make the world a better place, as silly and beauty queen-like as that sounds. And I think I’m doing that. As for how long I can do it or how that takes shape through the years, I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t sound silly at all. You are doing that for so many. You’ve already done it for me, changed me,” I tell her honestly.

Riley blushes but looks pleased. She wiggles happily. “What about you? Got any more brilliant apps in that brain of yours?”

“Not yet. There’s still too much to do with BlindDate, and I hope we can make it the number-one dating app. Especially since it seems to work so well.” I lift a brow her way. “Ninety-six percent.”

She smiles, and I continue, “I’m going to work my ass off on BlindDate, and then we’ll come up with the next thing, and then the next. I plan to work my way to the top, earning it every step of the way. The sky’s the limit.”

“Why stop there? There’s an entire universe beyond that.” She’s serious, not being facetious.

“Well, in case you hadn’t noticed, I’m a planner. So step one can be the sky. Step two can be the universe. I wish I could be a fly by the seat of my pants

type sometimes, like River.” I hate to mention one of the elephants in the room, but it’s pertinent to the conversation. “He’s so adventurous. Someone could say ‘wanna skydive?’ and I’d do it, but I’d still be checking my chute, making alternate safety plans, and confirming the landing zone while River jumped out the plane with nothing but an umbrella to slow him down. But somehow, he makes it work.”

Riley leans forward. “Because of you. He makes you do big things, and you make him do them correctly. You’re a good team. Maybe like us?”

I grin. “We might be a good team too, a little sunshine and a little rain, but I can guarantee you that I’ve never wanted to sip wine from River’s lips the way I want to taste yours right now.”

Riley licks her lips as though she can taste the wine there herself. I take her glass and mine, setting them both down on the coffee table.

I reach out, and Riley meets me halfway, straddling my lap as her lips find mine again. Our kiss is heady, intoxicating, and it’s not because of the wine but the woman I’m kissing. It deepens, our tongues twisting and tasting each other until Riley pushes me back into the cushions. “Noah . . . I need you.”

“I need you too,” I tell her honestly, reaching a hand up to knead a soft breast through her dress, which has slipped up her thighs enticingly. “I want you. But I don’t want to rush this. I want to enjoy it, enjoy us.”

I kiss her again, my thumb finding her nipple through the thin cotton. Riley gasps, arching her head back, and I roll her, pinning her to the couch as I rain kisses on her skin and down to the hollow of her throat.

“Mmm . . . you taste good,” I growl against her throat. “The rest of you?”

Riley reaches down, squeezing my ass through my slacks and pulling my hardness against her thigh. “You . . . can find out,” she gasps as I lean in, nipping her throat again. I pull back just enough to let her sit up, pulling her dress from her shoulders and letting it pool at her waist.

Of course her lingerie’s yellow. But against her creamy skin, it looks golden, and there’s only one word that comes to mind as I look down at her in admiration. “Sunshine.”

Riley reaches up, sliding a shoulder strap down and tugging a cup until one breast tumbles out. I ravenously bury my face between her soft mounds, sliding halfway down the couch before kissing over to a perked up, hard nipple that rasps against my tongue. Needing more and wanting to see if the other breast is just as delicious, I reach beneath her, undoing her bra to remove it and expose her breasts completely. I worship them both, using my hands and mouth.

“Noah . . . oh, yes,” Riley moans. I grin, planning to taste every inch of Riley’s body and bring my name to her lips again and again.

I lift up to give myself some room to work and pull her dress down her legs and off with her help. She lies before me in matching yellow panties and those pink heels, her little yellow toes peeking out.

Using my hand, I urge her thighs apart, and she whimpers as I knead my way up from her knees. Her yellow panties gleam mellowly in the soft light of my living room, and I look up at Riley’s half-closed eyes, her breasts heaving in deep breaths.

I grin at seeing her even wilder than usual, especially when I’ve never felt more in control. I run a fingertip along the lacy edge and feel her shiver in anticipation. A dark spot appears, her arousal and moisture soaking into the fabric. “Is there something you want?” I ask huskily.

Riley nods, lifting her hips just enough to boldly tug the triangle covering her pussy to the side, and I see . . . heaven. “Is there something *you* want?”

As if there’s any doubt.

“Fuck yes.” With almost an animalistic ferocity, I bury my face between her thighs, consuming her with a desire and passion I’ve held back for too long. She’s tangy and sweet, better than the wine and more nourishing than the burgers we ate. Because with every suck, every stroke of my tongue along her lips, I hear her pleasure.

I hear her moans.

I feel . . . enlightened. I feel like my soul’s being transformed with each scoop of my tongue, each tug of her fingers on my hair.

I suck her pussy, kissing her center as my hands clamp on her thighs, holding her open to me. Not that Riley needs encouragement. She's practically yanking my hair out because she's pulling on me so strongly, wanting more. Actually, she's demanding more. I love that she's passionate and powerful, willing to guide me exactly where she wants me while letting me explore every inch of her. I want to know her fully and completely.

But I want to draw this out, to savor her, so I pull back just enough to tease and flutter the tip of my tongue over the jewel of her clit that's glistening at the top of her slit.

She cries out, bucking against my face. "N-Noah!" she softly screams, her eyes fully closed and her face lit with a smile. Since we started dancing—no, longer than that, as far back as when we were messaging and her face was still a blur—I've wanted to see her like this, ultimate joy etched on her face.

She's *my* Riley now. The world be damned. Everyone else can fuck off. She's mine.

Riley's stomach clenches, and I see her arms shaking from being so close to the edge of a big orgasm. I draw it out as long as I can, wanting to watch and relish this moment forever. There's only one 'first orgasm' with a lover, and with Riley, I want ours to be like something neither of us has ever felt before.

I want her to know this isn't a game to me.

I don't just want her pussy.

I want *Riley*.

I tongue her clit with a broad, flat stroke that makes her legs stiffen. She throws her head back, a harsh breathless cry rasping from her panting lungs before she soaks my chin and lips in her sweet juices.

"Wow. Noah," she gasps when she can form words again.

I get up, looking down on her limp body. My shirt's half torn off, and I can feel my cock throbbing in my slacks. With a weakened arm, Riley reaches for my belt, but just before she can touch it, there's a thump at the door.

"Noah!"

I look up in shock, and Riley's eyes widen. We both know that voice.

"What do we do?" Riley whispers.

"I don't know," I whisper back, shrugging.

She eyes me, and I realize this is on me. I'm the one who needs to have a plan and handle this. Riley is counting on me.

"River?" I say hesitantly.

"Yeah! Open up, man! I need to talk to you!"

Oh, fuck. He knows.

Maybe he saw us. Maybe someone saw us and told him. Shit, it doesn't matter how, only that he knows. And he's here.

Hurriedly, Riley scrambles off the couch and grabs her things before scampering toward the back of my apartment. I wipe my face with my shirt sleeve and then pull it off because it's wrinkled as hell and River will know something's up with that.

Fuck.

"Noah, come on, man. This is fucking important!"

I hurry to the door, praying that River doesn't smell his sister's pussy on my breath as I open up, not quite letting him inside. "River? What's up?"

"Hey, man, I just had this great idea for the app," River says, pushing his way inside.

I blink, stunned. "App? Dude, it's nearly eleven at night. And you come to my place to talk about the app?" I'm relieved it's about the app and not Riley, but also . . . seriously?

"Yeah, well . . . I figured you'd be working. You always are," he teases. But then my lack of clothing hits him and his eyes go wide. He whispers urgently, "Holy shit, am I interrupting something?"

I quickly shake my head but still start herding River out the door. "No. Nothing that you need to worry about. Just a long day," I assure him. "But

can we talk tomorrow or Monday about the app? I really need to get a shower.” It’s the best idea I can come up with to explain my half-nakedness and messy hair.

“Yeah . . . nah, that’s cool. Take a shower, and I’ll see you later,” River says, but then he winks outrageously.

Shit. He doesn’t believe me.

“Looks like you’ve got some stuff to take care of, anyway.” He lifts his chin toward the two glasses of wine of the coffee table and the purse on the dining table. “Bye, Noah!” he calls out too loudly, presumably for the benefit of whoever he thinks I have hiding here.

He leaves, and I lock the door after him, bonking my forehead on the doorframe in surprise at what just happened. That could’ve been bad. Really bad.

I will have to have a hard conversation with River at some point, but I’d prefer not to do it half-dressed, with Riley’s juices on my tongue. He deserves more than that. She does too.

I hear the click-clack of Riley’s heels and turn around, hoping to find her strutting in wearing only those pink heels. But she’s dressed once again, her curves covered in her dress.

“Hey, uhm . . . look, I don’t want to leave you high and dry, but . . .” Riley stutters, and I shake my head in understanding. Tonight was magical. Tonight was hotter than I ever would’ve expected. And I pride myself on expecting every possibility and planning accordingly.

But sometimes, a magic spell can be broken. At least temporarily.

“I’ll be okay,” I tell her, and Riley smiles. “So . . . home?”

“Yeah,” she says. She comes up to me, taking my hand. “Noah, about tonight. I don’t regret anything.”

“I don’t either. Except maybe that burger later,” I tease, patting my stomach. “Come on, I’ll take you home.”

“I’d like that.”

I grab a fresh shirt, and after checking that River is really gone, we make our way back to my SUV. The drive to her neighborhood is quiet, but it's not a bad quiet. In fact, Riley keeps looking over at me with soft smiles and our hands have been interlocked the whole trip.

When we pull up to her apartment, I offer to walk her up, but she shakes her head.

"If you walk me up, I'm going to invite you in," she says honestly.

"Would that be a bad thing?" I ask slowly.

"Tonight's been wonderful, but . . ."

"That's all you have to say. Next time?" I offer, and her smile grows.

"Next time," she agrees.

I lean across the console, cursing its existence again, and tilting her chin with my thumb and index finger, I kiss her gently and softly.

She pulls back, her eyes telling me that next time will be soon. Very soon.

"Let me get the door for you," I say, wanting one more chance to hold her.

But she shakes her head and lays a staying hand on my arm. "No. If you get out, I'm going to kiss you again. And I'm going to invite you up. I'm not strong enough to stop us tonight, so I need you to stay here. Let me walk away this time and enjoy our first date for what it's already been."

Her eyes scan mine, then travel down to my lips, and she licks her own. I don't think she even knows she's done it. And her chest is rising and falling rapidly, nearly panting.

She's asking me to stick to her plan. That I can understand.

I nod. Cupping her cheek, I pull her forward and lay one more kiss to her forehead, not trusting myself to take her lips again. "Goodnight, Sunshine."

With one more bright smile, she gets out and walks toward the building. She looks back once and waves, but then she's gone and the date is over.

But Riley and I are just starting.

CHAPTER 13

RILEY

“*R*owf!”

I look down at Raffy, who’s nudging my leg and then sitting back to tilt his head at me.

“What’s up, Raffy? Let me finish this last batch, okay?” I tell him, and his tail wags.

Loretta dropped Raffy back off this morning, and I think she must’ve fed him more food and treats in the one night than he usually gets in a week. He’s been a demanding diva all day, and it’s barely after noon.

I look at the clock. Crap, it’s after noon, which means it’s past time for our normal stroll. Actually, we’re about a half-hour late, and I swear Raffy can tell time. Daylight savings changes are hell on him.

“Okay, buddy, give me a second,” I assure him. “Sorry.”

Raffy trots over to the door, and I take a last glance at what I’m doing. There’s a lot of my work that’s right here on my laptop. Either I’m touching up photos or editing videos, skills I proudly taught myself, or communicating with advertisers and potential sponsors.

But my favorite part of my computer work is the least directly profitable and the most rewarding. It’s responding to the people who comment and reach out to me. Especially my DMs. While I get the occasional dick pic from men who really, really need to learn what an acceptable boundary is, I don’t worry about them.

I message back people who legitimately reach out for help or for advice. It's normally a joy of my day. But today's been . . . distracting.

I posted one of the pictures I took before my date with Noah, just a selfie of me, not one of our couple shots. I wouldn't share Noah that way without his permission or before talking to River and Arielle. But my being all glammed up has triggered a barrage of comments I wasn't expecting.

Ooh, looking fine, Miss Sunshine. Where might you be off to?

Date! Date! Date!

Who's the lucky man that gets to date Riley Sunshine?

The support is sweet, especially the comments on my dress, and I responded to a bunch of the early comments with teasers of my own, like 'having dinner with a friend and felt cute.' I even added a link to the dress in case anyone wanted to buy one of their own. And the Joroast makeup comments were just as kind and complimentary.

And then it started to go a little wonky.

Someone mentioned the dress showing off my ASSETS. And then someone else commented that those 'buns needed a good glazing' and added a hashtag of *#sinnabuns*. That's actually pretty cute, and it started trending pretty quickly with people posting pictures of their own butts looking smackable. I love their body positivity and support that one hundred percent, but the comment on my picture felt skeezy with the gross sexualization of my picture by an account I've never seen before. Especially when the dress is perfectly reasonable, nothing more than a floral body-hugging cotton shift with a scoop neck and a mid-thigh hem.

And then the supposition and comments went way downhill and off-track into remote four-wheeler territory.

The good thing is that the commentary is pushing my views higher and higher, and any comment helps in the algorithms, creating a cycle of views. The not-so-good thing is that it's turning ugly, with people who've never followed me commenting and others thinking they have a clue about my life beyond what I share willingly.

Ever notice she never shows anyone but herself? Can you say narcissistic?

Probably doesn't have anyone. Sits alone in her room, pretending to have this great life, when she's worse off than we are.

That butt is totally photoshopped. Or plastic. Probably both.

Face masks . . . fine. Kale smoothies . . . whatever. But now we're supposed to be all rah-rah for your "date" too. I can't find a fuck to give about your perfect life.

Made her a Starbies drink once. She was a total bitch. Sunshine? Fake AF.

Why do these people even care? I wonder as Raffy searches along the sidewalk for the perfect spot to pee, even though there's only one tree and patch of grass for our building.

Their comments sting.

I shouldn't let them, but they sting a lot, and while walking Raffy helps simply by pulling me away from the toxic environment and comments of the Internet, they still run around in my head like little grains of sand in my boots.

So I try to separate Riley Watson from Riley Sunshine.

What would Riley Sunshine tell someone in this situation to do? Probably to take the high road, stick to being who you are because haters gonna hate no matter what, so you should focus on making yourself happy. I try to breathe that energy in, dismissing the negativity as much as possible.

What should Riley Watson do? I consider deleting the photo. Seems like that'd be the fastest and easiest way to shut down the drama and stop the hurtful lashes to my psyche. But surprisingly, that's not usually how the internet and social media work. At all. That'd likely add fuel to the fire.

The trick is to manage the fire.

Raffy finds his favorite, and only, tree and decides it's time to squat, so I turn my back. I don't know what goes on in his little doggy mind, but he won't squat unless I'm ignoring him. A thousand other people can be walking around, cars driving by, a whole cheering section rooting him on, no

problem. Me? Nope, he's shy.

As I wait for my fur baby to finish his business, my phone rings. I see my mom's name on the screen and my gut drops.

Oh, no! Has she already seen the drama too?

She checks my pages—was my first follower, in fact—and I wouldn't put it past her to start commenting back to rude people, getting into some social media war with AbbaQueen79 on my behalf if she felt it was warranted.

"Hello, Mom."

"Hi, honey . . . are you busy?" Mom asks. "I'm in the garden, and I could really use some help. You said you'd come by soon?" she reminds me. "The weatherman said it might rain tonight, and if I don't get it done, I'm going to have to redo the whole darn thing. Are you . . . working today?"

Well, I guess the good news is . . . Mom doesn't know about the rude comments. Actually, her needing help is good news too. It'll get me away from the screen, out in the sunshine, and working with my hands.

Maybe I can take another picture and post it, pushing the drama-affiliated one further down my feed?

That's not a bad idea.

"Sure, Mom . . . gimme an hour to get a couple of things done?"

"Thanks, honey! See you then!"

I hang up and see that Raffy's finished too. I'd like to bring him along, but if we're actually going to be working, it might not be the best idea. He tends to tear up the garden with his enthusiasm. And he'll probably sleep all day after being spoiled rotten at Loretta's. "Okay, baby . . . looks like Momma's gotta help Grandma. I'm gonna need you to protect the place while I'm gone."

WARM SUN STREAMS THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD OF MY VW BUG, BRIGHT enough that I have my windows down to cut the heat, but just the right

temperature to make going over to Mom's house not so bad.

The beautiful day is already enough to lift my mood a little. Even Riley Sunshine needs a little sunshine sometimes.

And if the weather weren't enough, there was the text from Noah wanting to get together tonight.

My reply was three words. *Where, when, how?*

In other words, absolutely, yes.

He and I have magnetism, and the way he ate me out . . . my thighs were still trembling after he dropped me off at my apartment.

He's so much more than I assumed him to be. So much of his arrogance is hiding a sensitive soul, and just the fact that he's let me see the real him means so much.

Too bad you still haven't seen the one thing you really, really want to see.

Don't remind me. I was nearly naked, with nothing but some translucent lingerie on. The truth is, I've fantasized about what I felt through his pants, and I'm yearning to see it.

I want him in my hands, in my mouth . . . inside me.

But it's more than that too.

He also told me the photo from last night looked gorgeous and asked if I'm okay after the comments today, so I know he's seen them. That was a harder question to answer, so I just sent back a thumbs-up and an eye roll emoji. And really, I am okay. Mostly. I'm used to this and have even been through worse. With as fast as the internet moves, it'll probably blow over in twenty-four hours too.

I hope.

It definitely gives me pause about my decision to date, though, making me think I was right to put it off for so long. It's one thing to put myself out there for public consumption and take the lumps with the loves. It's quite another to ask someone else to do it for you.

I try to imagine Noah and me being at a point that I could post one of the adorable pictures we took together last night. Just a pre-date selfie, me and my guy dressed up for a night on the town. Or dressed down for an evening on the couch, digging into more tacos and sharing cheesecake.

What would River say? What would Arielle say? What would my followers say?

And most importantly, could Noah and I withstand all that?

Because that's the whole point—to not be fake. To be real and show that life can be good without filters and manufactured lies, so that others don't feel the need to negatively judge their own lives either. We all have days of excitement, but they're sprinkled throughout long runs of mundane existence. The trick to finding joy is appreciating the ordinary and the extraordinary equally.

But I can deal with that later and focus on my date with Noah later too. For now, I'm going to help Mom in the garden as a mindful meditation about what's important. Maybe there'll be a lesson I can use in the dirt—something about digging your roots down deep so that when a storm comes through, it doesn't leave you ripped to shreds.

Mom's had the garden since I was a little girl. She started it after reading an article about how delicious homegrown tomatoes and bell peppers were and how growing them yourself would make it fun for your kids to eat their vegetables. I don't know if it increased my vegetable consumption, but Mom found a passion with gardening and never stopped.

I pull up outside the house, looking at it like I always do. It's simply home to me, almost frozen in time like a fading picture in a photo album. But this time, I see more.

I see the symbol of my parents' years of hard work. I see the easy childhood I had, never worrying about where my next meal would come from. I see my mom and dad as a team, even when Dad was traveling for work. I see the gift my upbringing was, and I feel for Noah. Not pity—he doesn't want or need that. But my heart simply beats a little faster for the boy who took on so much responsibility and grew into a man who still needs to be in control to feel safe.

I get out, stretching as I soak in the warm spring sun. I walk through the open garage door and into the shade and grin at the sight of mine and River's old childhood junk packed in boxes along one wall. Mom swears that someday it'll all be at our houses, but I don't believe her. She doesn't keep it for us. She holds onto it all because they're her favorite mementos of our childhood.

"Mom?" I call out. "You here?"

"In the back, honey!" Mom calls. "Grab the bag of seeds, will you? They're on the washer!"

I look, surprised when I see the small bag in question. "Corn?" I ask the empty garage as I pick up the bag and walk through into the backyard.

Things look exactly the same back here, right down to the rope swing hanging from the old pine tree in the corner. I haven't swung in ages, but Mom hasn't taken it down either. Another memento of a good childhood.

Mom's over on the left side of the yard in her garden, and I have to pause at the rush of warm fuzzies and happy memories that wash through me. Mom looks amazing, easily mistaken for a woman twenty years younger than she is, and in this moment, I see her the way she was long ago.

"Hey, honey!" Mom says, dropping her gardening trowel and coming over for a hug. I set the bag down and give Mom a hug. She likes physical affection, even as far back as when I was little and we'd snuggle our way through TV shows.

"Hi, Mom!" I tell her warmly, holding her extra-long. "Have I told you how much I love you and appreciate everything you've done for me recently?"

"Aww, honey. That's so sweet," she says, but then she gets to the point. "What do you want?"

I laugh, letting her go because she's broken the moment. "Nothing. I've just been thinking a lot lately and realizing that you've done so much for River and me. I always knew you had my back, never doubted that for a second, but maybe I didn't appreciate how rare that was. So just . . . thank you."

"Riley, honey," Mom says, tears shining in her eyes. "That's so . . ." Instead of continuing, she just hugs me again, a little tighter this time.

“Oh, I got dirt on you.” Mom tries to brush off my shoulder with the back of her hand, but she only succeeds in getting another smudge on my T-shirt.

“It’s fine, Mom,” I tell her, laughing. “I wore work clothes because I knew we’d be getting dirty in the garden.”

She freezes suddenly, looking me up and down. We’re dressed similarly, in denim shorts and T-shirts, though her shirt has the sleeves cut off. And Mom’s not wearing boots like I am, but rather her gardening Crocs that are easy to hose off at the end of the day.

“Hmm, I didn’t think of that,” she mutters, wiping at her forehead.

My brow furrows. “Think of what?”

“What? Oh, nothing. You want a glass of tea?” she asks suddenly, turning away from me and walking over to the patio table. She has a pitcher of iced tea sitting on a tray and is pouring one for me before I can even catch up with her.

Her frenetic energy worries me. “Mom? Everything okay?”

“Of course, of course.” She hands me the tea, and I take a slow sip, my eyes never leaving her because she’s scanning me from head to toe. She reaches out, messing with my hair . . . or fixing it?

I wave her off. “What are you doing?” I mean for it to sound sharp and no-nonsense, but I choke on the overly sweet tea and lose any and all cred. “And who made this? It’s basically diabetes in a glass!” I sputter around a cough as I thump my chest.

She smiles as though her actions, and her tea, are totally normal, which they are not. “The tea is fine, honey. Maybe you don’t know what *flavor* is.” She tilts her head, one shift away from a neck roll and I know true fear. If Mom can do the whole sassy neck roll correctly, I will know that I’ve surely entered the Twilight Zone. “And I’m just fixing some flyaways in case you want to take some pictures for your page,” she explains as the infamously eerie theme music starts.

Doo-doo-doo-doo . . .

That makes zero sense.

Mom is completely supportive of my work, but she doesn't exactly understand it. And my photo habits are not something she thinks of . . . ever.

"I probably will take some pics, but it'll be close-ups of flowers, playing up the whole garden angle. So my hair and a little dirt won't hurt," I tease.

Mom smiles back, unconvinced.

I set my tea down. "Ready to get to it?"

Mom agrees, and we make our way back over to the garden. Mostly, we're weeding, pulling up some of the junk that always invades Mom's garden area between the end of the fall harvest and her first planting of the spring.

"Where's Dad today?" I ask after a bit.

Mom's brow furrows, and she thinks for a moment. "Today? Malaysia. According to him, it's all insanity and monkey business. Literally, supposedly. Something to do with coconut imports and labor standards. He said I should have joined him since you and River are out of the house now, but I told him there was no way I could put enough sunscreen on for Malaysia. Now if he gets an assignment to Paris or Oslo, we can talk then!"

"You'd love Paris, I'm sure, but Oslo? Better pack a parka."

My dad has traveled for work since before I can remember—here, there, and everywhere. I'm not exactly sure what he does, some sort of consultant about export and import laws and regulations for the United States. But no matter where he was, he always made it home for anything truly important. Like Mom, I realize how special Dad is too.

"I can make anything look good, even a parka," she tells me, striking a pose. Truthfully, she can.

A loud vehicle breaks through the quiet of the small neighborhood, and I wonder who . . . and what . . . that could be.

I stop, listening as the growling diesel engine pulls up out front. Mom looks more than a little eager as she gets up and hurries toward the garage. "Mom? Who's that?"

Before she can answer heavy footsteps tread through the garage and a man calls out. “Mrs. Watson? I got the fertilizer you were asking for and . . . oh, hi.”

A guy walks out into the sunlight, a big bag of what I can only assume is fertilizer over his shoulder. With dark brown hair that’s flopped over one eye, a tight T-shirt that shows off an impressive set of biceps, and a day’s growth of stubble on his lean cheeks, he looks like he just stepped out of an old Fifth Harmony video, right down to the slight translucence of his sweat-soaked shirt making his muscles stand out all the more.

“Honey, this is Kyle,” Mom says with so much false innocence I want to roll my own neck. Or maybe snap hers. I mean, this Kyle’s got a fifty-pound bag on his shoulder, and Mom never uses that much gardening chemicals. Hell, you could fertilize half the neighborhood with that thing. “He’s the new gardener I hired to help with the lawn and getting the garden in this year.”

Mom looks at Kyle like he’s the answer to all her prayers. And I don’t mean the garden of her dreams.

“Mom!” I whisper, pulling her aside. “Does Dad know about your ‘gardening’?”

Mom gives me a puzzled look for a second. “What? Dad doesn’t care about the garden.” At my wide eyes, she realizes what I’m saying. “Honey, did you . . . oh, Riley, you silly girl! Did you think I hired a little eye candy while your father is away?”

I blush, looking down. Did I really just think that? I mean, Mom would never cheat, but looking isn’t buying, as they say. “Well, I mean . . . no. But it could happen, and—”

“Honey, your father is all the man I could ever need,” Mom assures me. She looks over at Kyle, who looks a little confused by our conversation out of his earshot. “I asked him to help, not for me . . . but for you.”

Oh. My. God. She set all of this up just to get me to meet some guy? “Mom! What the actual hell?”

But she’s back to playing hostess with the mostest to Kyle. “Kyle, this is my daughter, Riley.”

He throws me a wave and a smile full of bright, white teeth. I flash a closed-mouth smile in return, not willing to be rude but also not playing Mom's game.

Mom's not giving up, though, pointing to where Kyle can put his load down. "Thanks, Kyle. And after that, if you don't mind, can you start breaking up the dirt? I think we got most of the weeds out, and I'd like to get the seeds in today if we can."

"Sure thing," Kyle says, taking his bag over and picking up Mom's old hoe. "This'll be fun. I don't get to use a good hoe often enough. Like I told you, I do mostly big jobs and they're all power tools. It's like nobody remembers what your hands are for these days."

My mouth falls open, and Mom bumps me with her shoulder. I look over and she's fighting a grin. And totally watching Kyle swing the hoe into the soft dirt and pull it back, shifting the earth around. "He's such a gem. I can't decide if he truly has no idea what he's saying or if he knows but is so good at the dry delivery that it makes you question it. Either way . . ."

"Mom!" I hiss.

"What? I call and you're listening to dirty books while driving down the highway. I met this nice young guy and thought you two might get along. I'm only trying to help."

I groan, feeling a pulsing headache coming on. Mom's run off the deep end this time. With River and me out of the house and Dad going overseas on these work trips, she's had too much time by herself.

It's got to be the only explanation. "One little romance book—*not* porn—and you decide the best option is to pull some nineteenth-century setup and—"

"Don't use that word. He might hear you," Mom shushes me. Louder, she calls, "Kyle, would you like some tea? It's a scorcher, and I wouldn't want you to get dehydrated."

Kyle shrugs, setting his hoe aside, and comes over. "Sure, Mrs. Watson. Thanks."

Mom virtually runs across the yard into the house to get another glass. And leaves me alone with Kyle. What does she think? I'm going to jump him and demand to have his babies while she's in the house?

"I am so sorry about this," I tell him, majorly embarrassed at the obvious set-up. "I had no idea."

"I kinda figured when your mom told me *all* about her single daughter and then offered to pay twice my going rate for some easy day labor," he says with a laugh.

I melt right there. Into the grass, sinking through the layers of dirt to the lava-filled core of the earth and incinerating to ash. Or at least I wish that's what happened so I wouldn't have to stand here like this isn't the most embarrassing thing that's ever happened to me.

"Oh. My. God. I can't . . . I don't . . ." I sputter, lost for words.

"It's okay. If it's any consolation, you're even more beautiful than she said." He beams like that's supposed to make me feel better. Oddly, it doesn't.

Any other time, I think I'd find Kyle attractive, even gorgeous. And objectively, I can say that's true. But there's no spark inside me when I look at him. My sparks are already saved for one man, and it's not Kyle. It's Noah.

"Thanks?" I say awkwardly because how do you handle something like this? There's definitely nothing about this kind of situation in *Miss Manners for the 2000s*. Probably because I never read that, if it even exists.

"Can I ask you a question?" Kyle says. "You look kinda familiar. That's not a line, I swear. But do I know you from somewhere?"

He's searching my face, and suddenly, I'm smoothing down my flyaways too.

No, no, no. This cannot be happening. I can't be recognized as Riley Sunshine when he thinks I'm so desperate and lonely, my own mother is basically paying him to come over on some pseudo-date setup.

The trolls and haters would have a field day with that.

“Must just have one of those faces,” I reply lightly. Or at least I hope it comes off as casual, because inside, I’m freaking out. My heart is racing, my skin feels too small, and the sweat coating my body has gone cold. “Not like I’m ever in a gardening center or have any need for . . . power tools.”

I did not just say that.

Thankfully, it seems Kyle actually is that unwitting about the double meaning of his earlier comment because he simply smiles and nods. “Sure, I just thought . . . Well, never mind. We’d better get back to work, I guess, or Mrs. Watson might fire me for not getting this work done.”

On cue, Mom returns with Kyle’s tea, condensation rivulets running down the glass telling me that she waited to come back out so that Kyle and I could talk. She hands the drink to Kyle as I bite my tongue, literally, to avoid making a scene over this. Mom, of course, looks as happy as can be. “You two getting along?”

“Absolutely. Riley is as beautiful as you said. Maybe more,” Kyle says after a large gulping drink.

“So sweet,” Mom sighs. “Riley, did Kyle tell you that he’s in the National Guard? He drives a tank.”

“No, Mom. Mostly, we were talking about how embarrassing this is,” I tell her flatly.

“Riley!” Mom exclaims. Kyle snickers, saving me from Mom’s wrath. For now.

Not that she’ll kill me. She’s more the type to give ‘I’m so disappointed in you’ speeches. They’re the worst because I hate to disappoint my parents.

“Thanks for the tea, Mrs. Watson.” Kyle hands back the empty glass and turns to get back to work.

Mom frowns at his back and then glares at me. So I grab the corn seeds and ask, “Where should I put these?”

We get to work, Mom continuing to try and play matchmaker as Kyle does all the physical work while she and I do things like scatter handfuls of

fertilizer or use a stick to poke holes for the corn seeds. More than once, though, I still have to bite my tongue as Mom seems to think it's cute to tell every embarrassing story she can about me.

"One year, I had this stunted tomato. I couldn't figure out what was wrong with it. It just wouldn't flower or even stay green," Mom tells Kyle as he uses a sledgehammer to drive stakes into the ground for the netting to keep out the crows. "I couldn't figure out why until I found little Riley here . . . watering the plant."

"Mom!" I protest, flushing deep red. "I was seven!"

"And you wanted to learn how to pee standing up," Mom says with a prim little giggle. "You chose that tomato plant as your target and were determined to figure out a way to do it. So Kyle, this one summer afternoon, I come out to find Riley almost bent over backward, trying to—"

"Mom!" I protest again, cutting her off. "I think Kyle gets the point."

Kyle takes it in stride, shrugging. "We all do things as kids. My brothers and I used to have competitions to see who could pee the furthest. Had a special tape measure and everything," he confides before chuckling, "I think my mom was just glad we were staying hydrated and peeing outside instead of on her bathroom floor."

He's trying to make me feel better. Or maybe he really did have literal peeing contests with his brothers? Either way, I'm still about to kill my mother, and I decide to take control of the conversation.

"Kids," Mom laughs agreeably. "Riley's housebroken now, of course. Now, she does some sort of internet thing I don't quite understand."

The prompt hangs in the air for me to fill in and chatter away with Kyle about what I do and ask what he does the way people do on first dates. But that's *not* what this is.

And I do not want him to associate anything about this interaction with Riley Sunshine, especially when he's already said I look familiar.

"Nothing special. Just some IT work. And you do large-scale gardening, you said?" I put the focus back on Kyle, especially considering there's no telling

what Mom told him about me.

Kyle nods. “Yup. Speaking of, I think I’m about done here.” He leans on the hoe and surveys the garden. We’ve made quick work of it with his help, even with Mom playing matchmaker.

“Oh, yes. I suppose we have. Let me get your money,” Mom tells him, keeping this as awkward as possible. I swear I feel like my mother hired me a date for the afternoon, like an escort service or something!

Gigalos and Gardens, making your weekends hot.

Mom slowly walks to the house and Kyle meets my eyes with a kind smile. “No big deal. I figure one day, one of these ‘meet my daughter’ deals might actually be my future bride.”

Is he for real? Is that how people meet?

Not that I have any room to talk. I met my soulmate on BlindDate, but arranged meet-ups seem different. Though maybe not? It’s another form of a blind date, I suppose.

And good on him for being open to finding love however it comes.

I walk Kyle out front to his truck and Mom regretfully comes out to meet us. “Here you go, Kyle. Maybe you can come help again soon?”

I glare at her, my eyes yelling ‘STOP!’

Kyle shakes his head. “I don’t know, I’m getting pretty busy. A lot of big jobs coming up.” He’s letting my mom down easy.

“Oh. Okay, then,” Mom says glumly. “Well, thank you so much. I never would’ve gotten all that work done in one afternoon without you, Kyle.”

He dips his chin and hops in his truck, loudly driving away down the street. I have one split second of joy that I survived that train wreck before another car comes down the street.

And this one I know.

River parks his classic Beamer and gets out with a smile. “Ladies, are you out here awaiting my arrival?”

He hands Mom a bouquet of flowers, kissing her on the cheek. “No. If you must know, the gardener just left.” Mom throws me a side-eyed look of disappointment. Ugh, not disappointment!

“I think I’ll put these in water,” Mom tells River.

Once she’s in the house, River whispers, “Damn, what’d you do?”

“I didn’t go along with her matchmaking dreams. She hired a guy to come help plant corn in the garden and then called me over to help so we could meet. She’s out of control!”

“Corn? Mom never grows corn!”

I growl, “That’s what you got out of what I said?”

River grins and I realize he’s pushing my buttons. That’s what brothers are good for.

“So, is he a nice guy? I need to vet him if he’s going to be my brother-in-law. It’s in the big brother contract,” River teases, putting an arm around my shoulders.

“Shut up!” I squeal, pushing him off me.

River laughs and leans up against the boxes of memorabilia. I’m betting he has no idea what’s in the boxes with his name, the same way I don’t know what’s in the boxes with mine. More proof that they’re Mom’s memories more than ours.

“You staying for dinner?” River asks.

I shake my head. “I got the gardening call, so you must’ve gotten the dinner call. Besides, I’ve got a date.”

I want to take the words back as soon as they pass my lips. I should not have said that, but I was so distracted with the whole Kyle thing that it slipped out.

River smells blood in the water. Mine.

“A date? Who’s the lucky guy?” he asks, prodding gently and teasing for now. “The gardener?”

Your best friend!

But I can't tell him that. I don't want to tell him that. At least not yet.

"Oh, uh . . . nobody special," I say, hoping it sounds believable.

It must work because River frowns. "Then you shouldn't go out with him. You deserve the best, Riley. The most special."

That's . . . actually really sweet. I wonder if River thinks Noah is special. They're best friends, so River has to see Noah's good qualities.

I think about confiding in him, the words on the tip of my tongue.

It's Noah.

But I don't say it. That's something Noah and I need to discuss and decide together. Especially since I think the big brother vetting might be a little more personal this time than some random guy Mom introduced me to.

"Thanks, River. Can we keep the whole date thing quiet, though? I don't want to get Mom's hopes up," I joke with an eye roll.

"Maybe," he drawls out. "What's in it for me?"

He's kidding. Sort of. "How about when Mom tries to match you up with the new seamstress who's making the living room curtains, I'll help you out too?"

River pales. "Is that really why she asked me to dinner?"

I shrug so I don't have to lie. "Seems to be her MO today, so there's no telling who's gonna show up to your dinner. I'm sure you'll like her, though. She's probably sweet . . . and nice . . . and smart."

River groans. "Those are all code words for ugly, Riley, and you know it."

I hold my hand out. "I've got your back if you've got mine."

He shakes on it, and I tell him goodbye, asking him to tell Mom bye for me too. Yeah, I'm a wimp, but I've got to get ready for my date, so I hustle to my car and nearly peel out before Mom wants to go over how I could've made a love connection with Kyle.

That distracted comment to River about my date is going to come back to bite me in the butt. I know that. But at least for tonight, I got out of there free and clear.

I'm halfway home before I realize that I didn't take a single picture today and won't have anything to post to push that drama-filled photo down in my feed. But I do decide right here and now that I'm not going to read those comments when I get home.

I'm going to get cleaned up and have a lovely evening with Noah. Without Mom's interference, River's interrogation, or my followers' commentary.

Tonight is just for me, Riley Watson.

CHAPTER 14

RILEY

*W*e must be jinxed. It's the only explanation.
Three nights.

Three long, *straight* nights, and still we haven't been able to get what we both want.

I went into our date Sunday evening with every intention of being 'I am Riley, hear me roar' and doing exactly what I've been wanting to do with Noah.

The universe had other plans. Plans that had nothing to do with the dates Noah organized or our growing desperation.

I know he wants me. I can see the hunger burning in his eyes as soon as he sees me when he picks me up. And I can feel it haunting his kisses as he lets me off at the door. He knows I feel the same way.

But the universe keeps stepping in the way, laughing at the irony of trampling all over our best-laid plans.

Laid. That's exactly what I want to be.

On the date after gardening with Mom, I told him about Kyle and my mother's ham-fisted attempt at setting me up. I thought Noah might be upset, but he laughed it off, saying he's glad my mother cares enough about me to mess things up by trying.

And the date was great.

We went to the movies and hid out in the back row, making out like teenagers, kissing quietly and ignoring the on-screen laser blasts, flying superheroes, and major explosions. Then, just as we were leaving, someone rear-ended Noah's SUV, and the mood was ruined while we waited for the cops.

"I want your insurance information!" the woman yells, pounding on Noah's window. "Do you know who I am?"

"Ma'am, you hit me," Noah says calmly as I check to see that the doors on the SUV are locked. This woman's batshit and one breath away from that 'let me speak to your manager' type of entitled. "Please return to your car."

"You don't tell me what to do!" the woman orders.

Thankfully, a security guard showed up a minute later, and the cops soon after that. But the mood was ruined.

Then, we tried staying in the next night . . . only to have Raffy turn into Ralfy when something he ate disagreed with his tummy. By the time we cleaned up the huge puddle of puppy puke, neither of us was feeling particularly sexy. Thankfully, Raffy felt fine later, and the vet said he'd probably just scarfed up something that didn't agree with him.

Last night, we didn't even get *that* far when Noah had to cancel, saying that Lady Elisa had called him while he was on the way to pick me up. There was some sort of emergency at Life Corp with BlindDate. He didn't get back to his place until midnight, even though all he could do was watch a bunch of systems administrators reboot and fight off an incursion from a bunch of hackers or something. Luckily, it worked, and the app is fine. Better than fine with its new security.

But Noah and I are balancing precariously on the edge. Our texts are steamy again, but they're no substitute for the real thing. And while he's naturally risk-averse and I'm image-conscious, I'm about ready to say screw it all and meet him for a quickie in the car on his lunch break.

And that's a bad idea. A really bad one in the day and age of security cameras, phone recordings, and viral videos.

Which is why I've decided to be the captain of my own destiny and carpe the hell out of this diem by taking control of tonight's plans.

I look around my apartment, making sure everything's good. Raffy's staying the night with Loretta, who's giving him the full spa treatment and keeping him overnight in full puppy luxury.

In a total sign of our friendship, she didn't ask why Raffy needed another sleepover so soon, though I'm sure she expects an explanation at some point.

There's a knock at the door, and I give my fisheye a quick glance to see Noah looking sexy as hell in a dark suit, his hair slicked and his shirt partially open. He looks delicious, suave, and powerful, and I know I'm doing the right thing as I unlock the door and open it, keeping myself behind the door.

"I came straight from work," he says, and I know he's ready for tonight too. Even if he doesn't know what I have planned.

"Come in," I tell him, smiling from around the door. "How was your day?"

"Now? Much, much better," Noah says, his eyebrow lifting. "Why are you behind the door?"

"Because of this," I tell him, pushing my door closed and locking it. "You like?"

Noah's jaw drops as he sees me, and a little thrill rushes through my veins. Normally, I carefully curate what I wear, both on my social media feeds and in public, so as to not be 'too sexy'. I'll wear a tank top, but not something with more cleavage than the Grand Canyon. I'll wear shorts, but my cheeks are always fully under wraps.

Not tonight.

Tonight, I greet Noah in nothing but a see-through black bra and the naughtiest panties I own, which admittedly were given to me by a manufacturer who wanted me to post something with them. Never in a million years would I do that, though I suppose I could do a review on them.

They do feel amazing, and watching Noah's reaction is even better.

"Riley, I . . ."

“I don’t want dinner,” I tell him evenly, reaching out and wrapping my fingers through his lapels. “I don’t want wine or cheesecake or a movie or any of that. We’ve been patient. So patient,” I moan.

Noah regains his footing, and his lips twist in a knowing smirk. Confident, cocky, arrogant—I don’t know which it is, and I don’t care. Not now, when we’re way past that. “And now, Sunshine?”

“I want you to pick me up, carry me to the couch, and fuck me all night long.”

I’ve never been so bold in my desire, so hungry for what I want. It feels naughty to use those words, say those things so plainly and demandingly, but I want Noah that much, and as he wraps his arms around me, lifting me into the air, I can see the same hunger in his eyes.

“Are we going to be . . . interrupted?” he asks, his hands cupping my ass as he carries me to the couch. “At least, Raffy-wise?”

“No . . . he’s on a visit,” I assure him. “Phone’s off, computer’s off. Nothing will interrupt us.”

Noah sets me down, letting me slowly slide down his body, and then he sits on the couch in front of me. He takes his phone out, pointedly turning it off and laying it on the table and then pulling his jacket off, tossing it to the chair in the corner.

He looks up at me, and I have never felt sexier—standing over him in barely-there lingerie as I see the effect I’m already having on him. He’s hard as a rock in his pants, and I need it.

“Fuck, I was an idiot back in the day,” Noah says softly, his fingertips dancing up the skin of my leg, drawing goosebumps in their wake. “I never knew.”

“And now you do,” I assure him, climbing into his lap. “Now, we both know.”

Feeling my weight on him, his fingers go tight on my thighs, spreading them wider so he can pull me against him. He grinds his thick ridge along my seam, drawing moans from us both.

As though that let some slight amount of pressure off, Noah goes tender again. “You . . . are beautiful,” he whispers, trailing a finger up my arm and making me shiver. He traces over my collarbone before following the strap of my bra down to my left breast, circling my stiffening nipple.

He leans forward, sucking me through the thin fabric, and I feel my core clench in time to his ministrations. He must feel the pulses too because he firmly pulls me down on his hardness again.

Our eyes meet, saying so much. About the past, this moment, and what the future may hold. Neither of us knows that for sure, and we certainly can’t control it. But what we can do is fully enjoy the present.

“Use me,” Noah demands, unbuttoning his shirt. “No shields, no fronts, no guard. Just you and me. Noah and Riley. I want you. So use me. Take me, however you want. I’m yours, Sunshine.”

My heart races, my core pulsing with want at his words.

He just gave me an offer I can’t refuse.

I can only oblige.

“Thank you,” I finally answer, pushing him back into the corner of the sofa and tugging to help get his shirt off, exposing his hard chest to me. “I need you, Noah.”

From the bulge I feel between his legs, he needs this too. Noah wraps his arms around me, his hands finding my hips and digging his fingers into the soft curves of my ass. It’s like lighting a fuse, and within seconds, I’m grinding against him, my arousal soaking into the soft fabric between us as our lips press together almost painfully. I can’t get enough of him. I need him more than air.

I need . . . more.

I must say it out loud because he responds.

“What . . . what about protection?” Noah grunts out between our kisses. I slide back and off his lap, my gaze filled with lust as I get on my knees to start pulling at his belt. I want to see him, touch him, and taste him.

“I’m clean, on birth control,” I tell him. “You?”

“Clean . . . no birth control,” Noah jokes, but he’s pushing his pants down so roughly that I’m afraid he’s going to pop a seam. Somehow, he manages, and what springs forth is . . . amazing.

I stare at his perfect cock. Unconsciously, my mouth waters, and my nipples ache in my bra. It’s exactly what I need, and I push him back, taking him in my hand. He’s so warm, steel wrapped in silken velvet, and I stroke him almost reverently as I look up into his face.

“We’re going to have to take it slow.”

“If you keep touching me, it’s going to be over fast,” he warns. “I’ve been waiting for this. For you.”

“We both have,” I agree, climbing up from between his legs. I drop my panties to the floor, stepping out of them, and then drop my bra before straddling him again.

Noah’s hands come to my waist, supporting me as I reach between his legs and notch him at my entrance. Planting my hands on the back of the couch, I let myself relax, feeling him stretch me.

“Big. Long time,” I pant as I feel him push into me. “Damn, Noah.”

“If you need to, we can—” Noah says, but I relax my thighs more, sinking onto him and taking away both of our voices as I slowly take him inside me in one long stroke that has my eyelids fluttering and my head falling back. “Riley . . . *fuck.*”

I’ve never been this full before. All I know is pleasure as he completes me, my body electrified and my nerves singing in joy as more and more of him stretches me open. Finally, I can feel his thighs press against my ass, and I realize I’ve taken all of him.

Honestly, I feel like I just accomplished something. Completing a marathon? Pshaw. I just took Noah Daniels’s dick. For his part, Noah looks like he’s in heaven too, and he lets go of my waist to cup my breasts. “You,” he says as he runs his hands over my soft mounds, teasing my nipples, “are amazing.”

He makes me feel beautiful and powerful, and yes, amazing.

I begin rolling my hips, slowly at first to stretch my body out so I can get used to the size of him inside me. I have to breathe deeply, pleasure and fullness and the overwhelming headiness of this entire experience threatening to send me flying apart too soon.

My core clenches in mini spasms, getting me closer and closer to the edge of no return. And then my whole body begins to tremble with the impending climax.

“So sexy,” Noah growls against my skin, his lips replacing his hands on my nipples.

I pick up the pace, planting my hands on his shoulders. I try to look down into his hair, gripping him as unspeakable sensation assaults me. Coming? No. This is more, and I can feel him fighting himself to let me stay in control. “Noah . . . you feel so good,” I pant, squeezing his body.

“Fucking love your pussy,” he moans around my nipple. The dirty talk fuels me, and I speed up, my fingers digging into his shoulders as I rush to the edge of shattering.

“Harder! Please. Fuck me, Noah!”

It’s as though I’ve given him permission to unleash himself, or at least his tight hold on his control. And unrestrained Noah is the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen or felt.

Noah wraps his arms around my lower back, locking me in place against him, and then his hips lift to meet mine with powerful strokes. The hard slaps of our bodies and the thrust of his cock inside me are explosive, and my core quivers. I cry out, clamping tightly around him. I’m swept away as I come, screaming his name and gushing all over his hardness, my body jerking and shaking as Noah holds me securely in his arms.

“I’ve got you . . . I’ve got you,” he promises, but as I come back, I realize something. He hasn’t come . . . yet.

“Noah?” I ask, and Noah grins devilishly.

Noah doesn't say anything, just lifts me in his arms and turns me around. I grab the couch and get on my knees, my pussy open and exposed as Noah gets behind me.

"Fuck," he whispers as he runs a gentle hand down my spine, looking at me spread sexily before him. "I could get used to this."

His thrust is powerful, jolting up my spine as he grabs my hips and fills me again, both of us crying out.

Did I ask for harder moments ago?

I had no idea what I was asking for . . . and I love it. He's not showing me any mercy, and I want it this hard, this deep.

I feel like I'm having an out of body experience, like our jagged-breathed oxygen deprivation—or maybe it's hyperventilation?—is making me hallucinate. I feel Noah in my soul, not just my body.

All I can do is hold on to the couch and push back so he doesn't bury me in the plush couch cushions. I grunt with every thrust, tears leaking from the corners of my eyes because it feels so good to bounce back and forth on his cock.

A sharp jolt rocks me, the sting of Noah's palm on my ass cheek surprising me. But my pussy squeezes tight in response, and Noah has to fight his way in and out of me, my muscles in a state of near lockdown.

"Riley . . . I . . ."

Suddenly, ecstasy blooms, and my whole body blows wide open. I am nothing but pleasure personified. "Yes!" I cry out, and Noah bottoms out deep inside me.

Noah swells, impossibly harder, and growls, "I'm gonna come."

"Fill me up, Noah," I beg.

A deep, sexy sound of utter release passes through his gritted teeth, and I feel him fill me, hot jets of his cum sending me crashing through another barrier and into another orgasm.

The world grays out, and it's okay . . . I have Noah.

I know it.

And he has me.

When sensation comes back, I'm curled in his lap, his arms around me and his hand stroking my hair. I rub my cheek against his chest, sighing happily.

"I never expected this side of you," Noah murmurs. "Are you okay?"

He sounds a little unsure, not about me or us but about what we did. Or more like *how* we did it. I'm not usually that . . . *whatever that was* . . . in bed. But it felt good. It felt right.

Licking my lips, I nod slowly. "Better than okay. I guess even Riley Sunshine has a naughty side."

"Mmm," Noah says with his lips pressed to my temple, "and I have a soft side too. Guess we're both going to learn some new things, aren't we?"

"Learning is how we grow," I whisper.

"Who said that?" Noah asks.

"I did. A Riley Sunshine original," I say with a smile even though he can't see it with my head on his chest.

I feel his chin pass over my head as he shakes his head. "No, a Riley Watson original."

CHAPTER 15

NOAH

*I*n my dream, I'm in heaven. Or paradise. Lying on a fluffy cloud, I've got a beautiful angel in my arms, her head cradled on my chest and a leg thrown over my body. In my dream, she cups my cock, holding my family jewels like they're precious commodities.

I adjust myself, and my angel moves with me, her body turning with mine as we start to cuddle. We're not making love, not yet . . . but we will.

I smile, inhaling the soft natural scent of her hair as it tickles under my nose and—

“Noah! What . . . the . . . fuck!?!?!”

I blink, trying to pull myself out of my dream. My sister's here, staring at me . . . what the fuck? Did I drink too much last night or something? I've never dreamed about—

“Will you please cover up?”

A yapping sound pulls me the rest of the way out of sleep, and I realize two things at the same time.

One, my dream was pretty much reality. Riley is in my arms, and from the warm spots on my skin, I'd say she was lying on me exactly like I thought she was. Even my cock and balls are warm from her hand . . . which leads me to the second thing.

We're buck-ass naked.

In Riley's bed.

On top of the sheet.

With *Arielle* looking at us.

By her heels, Raffy's barking his little fluffy ass off, and Riley sits up, blinking for a moment before reality hits her too, and she snatches the rumpled-up blanket to cover herself. "Arielle! What the hell are you doing here? And why do you have Raffy?"

Arielle spins on a heel, giving us her back a few seconds too late, and I realize that Riley's movement just took the last stitch covering my body, including my rapidly wilting morning wood. I cup myself since that's the only cover I can find with Riley stealing the blanket.

Rolling to my side, I look for clothing, but there's nothing there.

Arielle asks over her shoulder, "Raffy is your concern in this moment?"

Actually, he seems fine, sitting by Arielle's feet and watching Riley with rapt attention. And maybe a little confusion at being replaced in his momma's bed.

"If you must know, Loretta called me because she couldn't get ahold of you. She had an emergency client this morning," Arielle explains.

Riley gets up, grabbing a robe from somewhere and throwing me the blanket.

"An emergency grooming?" I ask, accepting Riley's peace offering for leaving me high and dry when Arielle walked in. Or worse, really . . . hard and naked.

Arielle doesn't dignify my question with a response. "I'm going to wait in the living room now that I know you're not dead in a ditch somewhere," she tells Riley.

"Probably shouldn't sit on the couch," I suggest, and Riley swats at my shoulder, shushing me.

"Not helping."

Arielle makes a sound of disgust and disappears down the hallway. Riley finishes tying her robe and holds her palm out to me. “Stay here for a minute. Let me handle this. I can fix this.” And then she’s gone too, closing the door behind her.

At least Raffy followed Riley out. I don’t want to stand up naked around that dog. I’ve seen how quickly he can move when he sees a treat, and I do not want him mistaking my sausage for one of his. And this blanket is not going to be an easy fix for my nudity. I consider checking Riley’s closet for something else to wear, but her clothes would definitely be too small, and if there are any men’s clothes in there, I do not want to know.

“Too bad I never did toga parties in college,” I tell myself before laughing. It’s a harsh laugh, the kind of laugh someone who’s losing it might make. But considering I just had my baby sister catch me butt-naked in bed with her best friend, I’d say it’s not all that fucking unexpected.

I shake out the blanket as I try to figure out the least embarrassing way to get this thing to go around my body. With a little bit of fiddling and a failed attempt that requires a restart, I’m soon clad from nipple to knee in a yellow toga, which is about as good as it’s going to get.

Now, if I can just remember where the hell my underwear ended up last night. I think maybe they’re still with my pants, which if I remember right, I kicked off when Riley and I switched positions on the couch . . .

Ah, hell. This is not going to be easy.

There’s no screaming when I press my ear to the door, so maybe Arielle’s already left. In which case she’s probably already called River, so I’ve got about a ten-minute head start to get dressed and maybe get to the sporting goods store a half-mile down the road so I can get a mouthpiece before he tries to kill me.

Dental hygiene is important to me.

I chuckle again, knowing that the hilarity is a symptom of my nerves, so I take a deep breath before opening the door. I walk down the short hallway, expecting to find one of three things. Either Arielle and Riley are glaring at each other, one of them is standing over the other’s bloody body, or there’s a

silently crying Riley, ready to blame me for fucking up her life.

Instead, the first sound I hear is Raffy running toward me, and then . . .

“Well, now, he does dress up nicely, I guess,” Arielle says sharply.

Okay, they’re both alive, there are no tears, and they’re looking at . . . me. Which must mean I’m the dead man walking.

I stop, looking at Arielle and Riley sitting together at her small kitchen table. Riley’s wearing a fluffy bathrobe, white with yellow suns on it, that actually looks pretty damn adorable on her, while Arielle looks furious, stirring a cup of coffee as though she’s calculating whether the living room rug will roll around my dead body twice or three times.

“I . . . uh . . . fuck.”

“Yeah, Riley was telling me that’s pretty much what you two did last night,” Arielle snaps, getting up and coming over to poke me in the chest. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Wait.

So she kept her cool the entire time with Riley, adding cream and sugar to a fresh cup of coffee like they were just catching up on the gossip, only to blow up at me the second she lays eyes on me?

“Arielle, I don’t think —”

“No, you don’t.”

Raffy decides now’s the time to jump in on this argument, yipping and barking at my shins. I look to Riley for help, but she lifts an eyebrow, her eyes wide and lips pressed together. Maybe she’s getting a kick out of how ridiculous I look getting cussed out by my baby sister and her fluffy cockblocker while wearing a makeshift blanket toga.

Not that Arielle’s backing down. “Noah, I know you’re not perfect, but I never dreamed you’d be the type to . . . what do you even call this?” she bites out, waving her hands around menacingly. “*Sport-fuck* my best friend?”

That gets to me, and I bend down to get right back in my sister's face. "I'm not here for that!" I growl, staring her down because there is zero chance that I'm going to let Riley hear that shit. Especially since it's completely untrue. "We're not fucking. We're dating."

Arielle freezes, looking back and forth, her finger pointing along with her eyes. "Wait, are you saying you two are . . . dating? For real?"

"That's literally what I said," I tell Arielle again, hoping it sinks in this time and she doesn't keep spouting off insulting shit.

Riley gets up, and the small shrug she gives to Arielle as she comes to my side is like a punch in the gut. I want her to be proud to be with me, but I get that she's nervous.

But I can be proud enough for the both of us.

I pull Riley to my side, placing my hand on her hip possessively, and kiss the top of her head. And then I glare at Arielle, daring her to say one ugly word.

Riley is finding her strength. Not that she ever lost it, but this morning's been weird. I mean, we're standing here half-naked in bed linens with my sister, explaining ourselves, so I can give Riley some slack on needing a second to catch up.

"Yes. For real. He's Mr. Ninety-Six Percent," Riley tells Arielle. "We started talking, not realizing who we were talking to."

Arielle thinks for a moment, then grins, looking at me with newfound realization. "Noah *Mark* Daniels . . ."

"Yeah, was trying to do QA-QC for the app, so I signed up. I didn't . . . well, I didn't expect to meet anyone. Let alone Riley."

"I so need the full story on this," Arielle says, "because I was there that first night. And I remember seeing the way your eyes lit up reading about this hottie named Mark. When you didn't say too much about it afterward, I figured you'd dropped him. But now . . . I'm not walking out the door until I get the details."

“Can it wait until I get my clothes back on?” I ask, gesturing to my toga.
“This is not my best look.”

“No, I think this is something I should’ve known a long time ago,” Arielle says, and I can hear the faintest sense of hurt blooming from our keeping this from her.

“Arielle, I’m commando under here.”

Raffy looks up and barks. “Rowf!”

I cup my cock through the blanket, not trusting it to be enough if Raffy decides he’s hungry. And he’s always hungry. “Can one of you feed the dog too? I don’t trust him not to bite my ass or other important parts.”

Riley rubs at the exposed part of my chest. “I like your important parts.”

“Gag!” Arielle interrupts loudly, drawing our attention to ask again, “So this is for real?”

“Yeah,” I tell Arielle, but I’m looking into Riley’s eyes. “It’s real.”

“WELL, I STILL CAN’T BELIEVE IT,” ARIELLE SAYS A HALF-HOUR LATER AS WE sit around the kitchen table. At least we’re all dressed now. “I mean, Noah . . . charming? Funny? You sure you didn’t hire a social media manager, Bro?”

I take a sip of coffee, trying not to glare. “I am charming and funny.”

There’s a moment of utter stillness and then Arielle laughs. “Now that’s funny.”

But she’s putting the pieces together. “So you messaged *Mark* that night, and you’ve been talking ever since? Dating and going out?”

“About that—” I start, thinking now is the perfect time to ask Arielle about her own dating escapades. She’s giving me a hard time, but she’s no saint either. Though she’s not dating my best friend. Or at least I hope she’s not.

Riley cuts me off, giving me a subtle head shake. "Yes, it's been a few weeks now."

Okay, I guess this isn't the time to ask about Arielle and Eli. But that time will come. Soon.

"Why didn't you say something?" Arielle asks.

"I wasn't sure how you'd take it," Riley admits from the stove, where she's scrambling some eggs. "I mean, guys have bros before hos, and we . . . you know."

"Chicks before dicks," Arielle finishes for Riley. "But that's only if it's casual, fuck-buddy shit. Not *this*."

"Sorry," Riley tells Arielle, and Arielle nods, accepting it. Arielle turns to me, and I offer a chin dip. That's all I'm giving because I'm not sorry. None of this went to plan, but I wouldn't change a thing. Arielle's left brow goes up, and she holds my gaze for a solid three seconds, but finally, she dips her chin too.

We're good.

Arielle knows everything.

"When did you start growing out your landing strip again, Riley?" she asks casually, digging into the plate of eggs Riley sets in front of her like she's talking about the weather.

"Wait . . . what?" I ask, just shocked. I swear Arielle's doing it on purpose, trying to keep me off balance and off guard.

"What, Noah?" Arielle asks with a laugh. "You think I haven't seen this girl's tits and vajayjay before? We held each other's hands the first time we got waxed. Like this, us two."

She crosses her fingers, and I suddenly realize how messy this could get. Arielle's being cool about it right now, but she's giving me a very clear warning.

Pussy before peen, is that a thing?

Even when there's blood involved?

"Oh, one more question," Arielle says around a mouthful of eggs. "When are you going to tell River?" Riley and I are silent, looking at each other uncertainly. Arielle shouts, eggs going everywhere, "Does he already know? Did you tell him before you told me?"

Riley reaches out to Arielle's arm. "No, he doesn't know. God, I wouldn't tell him before you."

Arielle looks to me for confirmation. "I haven't told him yet," I say, shaking my head.

"Shit, you're gonna get murdered, Bro." Arielle sounds a little gleeful about that if you ask me. "If you want my advice, tell him. The sooner, the better. And might I suggest with clothes on and not with Riley's hand on your dick? Personally, I was thankful for that. A little coverage to protect my eyes from seeing your junk. But River? I don't think he'll feel quite the same way."

"You know, she's right," I tell Riley after a moment. "The longer we wait to tell our families about this, the more awkward it's going to be when they find out."

"Exactly," Arielle says, thumping a fist on the table and grinning. "You know, life will be easier for both of you if you just live by this rule, 'Arielle's always right.'"

"You sure we shouldn't expand that to the entire world?" Riley deadpans. "Or is that too much?"

"Nope, not at all," Arielle says easily. "I've already got the folks at the home believing it, and now you two believe it. I'll be a bonafide cult leader before you know it." She looks down at Raffy, who's hovering below the table, hoping for scraps. "What do you think Raffy? Wanna be my mascot?"

"He's my dog," Riley warns.

Arielle grabs a chunk of scrambled egg from my plate and feeds it to an excited Raffy. "Yeah, but he loves me too."

"Hey!" I shout. "Those are mine."

“Yeah? Well, *she* was mine,” Arielle challenges, pointing at Riley.

I think Arielle wins this argument. But I’m certain I’m winning at life . . . with Riley by my side, pants covering my ass, and a good plate of scrambled eggs.

CHAPTER 16

RILEY

I guess it's fitting that Noah and I are doing this on a Sunday.

Sundays are the traditional day for family. Gathered around a table or television, with grills fired up and ovens baking, it's an important way for connections to be forged, built, and strengthened.

So I guess we couldn't have picked a better day than today.

If that's true, though, why are my fingers shaking, my heart racing, and my belly feeling like I swallowed too much soda in one go? I'd burp if I could, but I don't think even a monster belch would help these bubbles in my stomach.

"How're you feeling?" Noah asks softly as he comes up behind me. His hands encircle my waist, and I sink back into him, letting his solidness ground me, but I never stop stirring the mashed potatoes on the stove. The butter, salt, pepper, and cream need to blend evenly because Mom's recipe deserves to be smooth. Never lumpy. Nobody wants lumpy mashed potatoes.

"Anxious and nervous," I whisper back, glancing over my shoulder. "You sure about this?"

This is our big announcement. It shouldn't be that big of a deal, except to one person.

River.

My brother is going to have something to say about Noah and me, but it's time to get everything out in the open. I invited everyone to my place for dinner thinking that crossing that bridge one time is enough. Well, twice, I guess, since we already told Arielle. That hadn't been the plan, though.

Speaking of plans . . . and the planner . . .

Noah nods, cupping my chin. "Damn right, I am. I want everyone to know I'm yours."

He's mine. The words thrill me, and I know that they're true.

He lays a gentle kiss to the corner of my mouth and then moves to my ear. Deep and dark, with layers of meaning, he adds, "And I want everyone to know you're mine." A shiver goes through me, and I can hear the triumphant grin in his voice when he says, "It's going to be fine, Riley. Trust me."

I do. I trust him and our plan to make this as easy as possible. I leaned on his planning skills as we discussed possible reactions from River and our mothers, and then, I reassured him that it'd all be fine. That they'd be happy for us—surprised, of course, but they'd basically throw a parade for our finding that special someone. Because who wouldn't be happy for their family member to fall in love?

Now, though, with the knocks on the door imminent, I'm the uncertain one.

Not of Noah. Or myself. Or us.

But of disappointing my mom and brother. We don't keep things from each other as a rule. We're open and honest with each other, yet I've been hiding something important. *Someone* important.

That's going to hurt them. That's what I'm nervous about.

Well, that and I'm meeting Noah's mom, Natalie, for the first time. Nothing says 'great first impression' like springing a surprise relationship on everyone at once, right?

The knock on the door makes me jump, and Noah spins me in place, meeting my eyes. "Riley, are you sure? We don't have to do this if you're not ready. We can wait."

I put the spoon in the pot so I can cup his cheeks with both hands. “Noah Mark Daniels, I am sure. Of me, of you, and of us. The only thing I’m not sure of is my idiot brother. I love him, but River is not known for his calm, cool head.”

Noah grins. “It’s a good thing I’ve been dealing with him for years then. We got this. And I’ll get the door.” He kisses my nose, and then he’s gone to answer my door.

“Raffy, good job. Let me open the door, boy.” I hear Raffy let out one more bark, but he must move because Noah says, “Hey, Sis, good to see you . . . *this time.*”

“Can I uncover my eyes now?” Arielle answers. “You got clothes on? I do not want to see your dick and balls again.”

“Arielle! You said you didn’t see anything! And yes, get in here before the neighbors hear you.”

There’s a feminine squeal and then a laugh, and I can imagine Noah jerking his sister into the apartment. Little do they know, my neighbors are probably watching out their peepholes and listening through their doors, enjoying the whole show they’re putting on.

“What can I do to help?” Arielle asks, coming in the kitchen. She sets a bag on the counter and starts unloading. “I brought the cheesecake as instructed. Luckily, Noah didn’t smash it when he pulled me inside.” She yells the last bit, a dig at her brother, as she slides the dessert into the fridge.

She slips her arm around my shoulder, side hugging me. “How’re you holding up? Come to your senses yet? I’d be happy to kick him in the ass, or balls, or to the curb. You know I’d do anything for you, Riley.”

I laugh and lean into Arielle. “No, not changing my mind. Just worried about River. I don’t want to blow up their friendship.”

Arielle points her finger in my face, clucking her tongue. “Listen to my words of wisdom, girl. Sex ruins friendships. Love does not.”

“You okay?” I ask gently, concerned that she’s no longer talking about Noah and me.

She waves me off. “Fine. Put me to work.” Her jaw is set as she scans the counter, spying the stack of plates. “I’ll set the table.”

I lose my chance at finding out more about her and Eli because there’s another knock on the door, followed by Raffy’s bark and Noah’s hushing. Several new voices fill the living room, and I drop the spoon into the finished potatoes to go greet my guests.

“Hi, Mom, River,” I tell them. “And you must be Ms. Daniels.”

Natalie Daniels is smaller than I imagined. After hearing about her from Noah and knowing Arielle’s big personality, I guess I expected her to be larger than life somehow, but she stands at Noah’s side, the top of her head even with his chest. Her eyes are just as dark and intelligent, though, and her deep brunette hair is cut in a crisp bob.

“You must be Riley,” she says, shaking my hand. “Please, call me Natalie.”

I make introductions around, mother to mother and River to Natalie. Noah hugs his mom, and I can see the love and closeness between them.

“Mrs. Watson, it’s been a long time. Good to see you again,” Noah tells my mom.

She’s having none of that. She wraps him in a hug. “It’s been entirely too long, and stop that nonsense and call me Rachel. You help me keep River out of trouble, so you and I are a team.” Mom points from Noah to herself before throwing River a side-eye of shade, but the grin she’s fighting says it’s all in jest.

“Of course, Rachel,” Noah answers, cutting his eyes my way at the name. I fight the laugh that tries to bubble up. We both know if things go the way my mother’s going to anticipate, ‘Rachel’ is going to be quickly replaced with ‘Mom’. Although thinking about it, that’s not a bad thing.

“Please, have a seat and let me get everyone a glass of wine.” That’s what we need . . . alcohol to relax everyone before we drop the bomb.

“On it,” Noah says. He grabs the wine bottle from the kitchen counter and opens the cabinet to take out glasses.

Mom follows us into the kitchen. “If we’d been meeting next week, I would’ve had tomatoes to bring you, honey. I’ve got a handful of them that are almost ripe.”

“I’ll come by and get them whenever they’re ready. Can you pull the biscuits out, please?”

I’ve always appreciated the cooking skills my mother taught me growing up. I’ve put them to good use since I got my own apartment. I might not make fancy stuff, no escargot or lobster, but good food is always good. And if some basic roast chicken, mashed potatoes, and biscuits make people happy, then I’m happy to make it.

Mom pulls the buttermilk biscuits, her own famous recipe, from the oven, sniffing deeply. “These look delicious.”

Mom’s compliment means a lot to me. “You want to do a video with me? We can split one as a taste test.”

Mom rolls her eyes but nods. “A quick one, honey.”

Whipping out my phone, I put on my smile and hit *Record*, my fingers already wagging with Mom in the background. “Hey, Sunshiners! Happy Sunday! Just here to give a huge shout out to my mom, who taught me so much.” I look to Mom, my eyes getting a little glassy as I think about all the lessons she’s shared with me. Even the obsession with clean underwear in case of a car wreck. Back to the camera, I say, “Including these *amazing* buttermilk biscuits! Seriously, some good homemade biscuits will brighten any day. Drop a pat of butter or jam, and take some time to enjoy!”

Mom and I tap biscuit halves like we’re toasting, and I tuck my share into my mouth, chewing slowly and savoring the flavor. It might be total food porn, but my reaction’s honest as my eyes close and I moan at the deliciousness. Mouth still full, I say, “Thanks, Mom.”

I give everyone another Sunshine Salute and end the video.

Looking at my phone, I preview the video quickly and laugh. “Mom, you were saluting with me!”

“Of course! I know *what’s up*,” Mom says, smiling as though that’s something ‘fresh’ the kids are saying these days. “I might not understand everything you do, Riley, but I’m your mother and number-one fan. I’m on Team Sunshine no matter what.”

I give Mom a hug, and she pats me on the back. Noah smiles at me, having watched the whole video-making moment.

He holds up two glasses of wine as Mom and I separate. “Oh, thanks, Noah,” Mom says as she takes hers. “Let me help you get some of those.”

Between the three of us, we carry the wine to the living room, handing them out to Arielle, River, and Natalie.

“How’s everything going with the latest version after the hacker issue?” Natalie asks River. She’s obviously well-informed on everything Noah’s up to at work, which makes my heart happy. There’s a difference between a mama’s boy and a boy who loves his mama. Noah is obviously the latter.

“Good, thanks to that guy.” He points to Noah. “Not because he fixed it, of course, but because he went in to oversee the real brains behind the operation. The coders.”

Noah chuckles at the jab. “Well, we know you’re not the brains.”

“No, I’m the pretty one,” River taunts, striking a model pose that admittedly does look GQ-sharp. Not that I’d tell him that.

“Hey, guys, speaking of Blind Date . . .” I say, interrupting their friendly banter.

Noah and I agreed that the initial news should come from me. It might be a bit gender-biased, but also, I’ve got the reputation for being the happy one. This is happy news, and I want people to share in the excitement and joy Noah and I are feeling.

“I asked you all here to make an announcement,” I tell the group, and from his spot River looks surprised. Usually, when I have something to say, he’s already been given a spoiler alert. “Uhm, as you all know, River and Noah have recently launched a new app, BlindDate. And, well . . . I signed up. And . . . I met this wonderful guy. Like, the computer or AI or whatever is in

the app practically superglued us together, we were so close.”

Mom’s jaw drops open, her hands below her chin. Her excitement is palpable.

“Did you meet this guy already?” River asks. “Because I can probably do some background check stuff based on what he put on his profile. If we can’t, the coders can. Right, Noah?”

I take a step forward, getting between River and Noah. “I already met him. I’m already dating him. I already care about him . . . a lot.”

Noah puts a supportive hand on my shoulder, and I lay mine over his. It’s intimate, and the meaning is totally obvious.

All sound stops.

Arielle looks smug since she already knows and is here for moral support and the show. Mom and Natalie both look shocked in a good way, but River . . .

River stands from the couch, slamming his wine glass to the table. “What the fuck?” Noah and I stand resolute, a united front prepared for this. I think.

Well, we have a plan, at least.

For River to be fine. Or shocked. Or angry. Or, in my rainbows-and-sunshine hopes and dreams, for him to be super happy for us. Noah had laughed at that one, saying he hoped I was right, but knew I was gonna be wrong.

It seems Noah was correct because River growls at Noah, “Outside. Now.” Noah gives me a reassuring nod, but I step between them.

“Do not disturb my neighbors with your testosterone-fueled phallometrics!”

River and Noah both turn to me with wide eyes, their argument forgotten for a thin moment while they try to translate my words. I guess they’re too amped up for four syllables at a time.

Arielle helps them out, stage-whispering, “She means dick measuring contest. But she’s too polite to say that in front of Rachel.”

“How about we talk somewhere more private, then?” Noah tells River, the picture of calm, cool, and collected as he gestures down the hall to my

bedroom.

They close the door behind them, and the four of us look at each other for a hot second before speed-tiptoeing down the hall to press our ears to the door. It might not be polite, but none of us are judging the others because we all want to know how this conversation is going to go.

“They’re not going to kill each other, are they?” I ask softly.

“Nah,” Arielle assures me. “It’s an evolutionary thing. Men need to grunt and beat their chests from time to time. Now, the real question is, are they going to whip ’em out? Because if so, I would love to be a fly on the wall in there.”

“Arielle! That’s your brother!” Natalie hisses.

“Mom, I’ve seen Noah’s dick. All too recently, in fact.” Arielle fakes a big, disgusted shudder moving through her body as she looks at me from under raised brows. The mothers catch on quickly.

“You knew about this?” Natalie asks.

“Of course I did. Why does everyone forget that *Arielle knows best, Arielle knows all, Arielle is always right*? It’s like canon. Just accept it.” She waves her hand like a queen talking to her peasants, which might warrant further challenge, but the guys start talking loudly and we tune in to that instead, forgetting Arielle’s potentially overinflated ego. Especially since, to be honest, she’s mostly right.

“What the fuck, Noah?” River demands again.

“We didn’t mean for this to happen, Riv. But it did and I’m not sorry. I’m damn glad, actually.” Noah lets out a sigh, and I hear the springs on my bed creak quietly and assume he’s sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Motherfucker, look at you all comfy in my fucking sister’s bed. You think that’s okay? I noticed you went right to the cabinet for glasses, but I thought . . . *hmm, well, maybe Riley told him where to get them*. And you head right to the bedroom like you’ve been here before. But obviously . . . you have. I can’t believe you, Noah. I trusted you, and you go and fuck my sister?”

River is ranting, his footsteps loud as he paces back and forth across my bedroom. My hopes of the neighbors not hearing all my business are dashed because I know they're hearing this. The walls aren't that thick.

I put my hand on the doorknob to go inside, but my mom stops me. "Let them do this, honey. This is a big deal to their friendship, and in a way, a big deal to yours and Noah's too. Know what I mean?"

I do, but I don't. I want to rush in there and tell them to stop this nonsense. River doesn't get to decide who I date, and Noah doesn't have to prove himself to my brother. But with all three women's eyes on me telling me that Mom's right, I take the glass of wine Natalie is forcing into my hand and down it in one swallow.

"There's my tough girl," Mom says.

And then we're listening again. We've missed something, but Noah seems to be telling River how it all went down.

" . . .only meant to do a system check, but the percentage was so high. Ninety-six percent! And the message made me smile. Me, River . . . I *smiled*. And so we started talking. All day, every day, and I was . . . happy. I don't walk around all fluttery and light, smiles and shit. But talking to her, I did. So we agreed to meet. And Riley showed up."

"And that should've been the end of it right there," River snaps.

"I admit we were upset and confused. We'd both used fake names and didn't know. But I couldn't let her go, not after getting to know her. It worked, man. The AI worked. I would've never, in a million years, thought Riley Sunshine was my match. Would've laughed at the very idea. You know me . . . does that seem like the other half of my workaholic shitshow?" River must shake his head or something because Noah says, "Exactly. Of course not. But she is. I'm *not* fucking your sister."

River growls, and there's a loud rustling followed by a few grunts. I'm worried their argument is getting physical. "I *care* about her, man. I fucking care about her. She makes me happy, and I make her happy. Don't you see?"

Noah doesn't sound happy right now. He sounds miserable, like a connection he's counted on for so long is disintegrating right in his hands. But that can't

happen. I refuse to believe River is that much of an asshole. He won't let Noah's and my being together ruin their friendship. Right?

"Did you fuck with the code?" River demands. "Ninety-six percent? Really?" he adds with a disbelieving scoff.

"The AI? Of course not. I couldn't even if I wanted to, which I didn't. I wasn't looking for this. But Riley is . . . undeniable. You've met your sister, right? Who spends five minutes with her and doesn't think that the world is a better place and magic is possible?"

"But you didn't tell me. Neither of you did. Why?"

"Because she scares the shit out of me, Riv!" Noah explodes, his voice honest even through the wood door. "She scares the shit out of me because after talking for a week, I needed her to get through the day. After seeing her, holding her, getting to know her, I can't imagine life without her." My bed springs squeak again as Noah sits down heavily. "I can't explain it any better than that, man. She's all sunshine and I'm a grumpy asshole, but she's making me better. A better person . . . me! And I see her, beyond the 'happy all the time' front she puts on. I see how she worries for her followers who are struggling. I watch her make all these plans to get everyone else to smile, and I understand how she gives and gives and gives. And I just want to be the man who takes care of her. Not because she needs it but because she deserves it."

Arielle and Mom meet my eyes, which feel red and puffy. I must be crying, but I don't care. What I care about is the feeling in my heart and how I want to tell Noah that he's teaching me too.

"Then why didn't you tell me?" River asks, softer this time. He's hurt, the angry lashing out hiding the sting of being left out of something so important to his best friend and his sister.

"Because we weren't sure at first either. We didn't want to cause all this commotion if it wasn't worth it. But she's worth it. *We're* worth it. And whether you want to admit it or not, *I'm* worth it."

Natalie swallows thickly beside me. She knows how difficult that must've been for Noah to say, and I take her hand comfortingly.

River sighs heavily, and I can imagine him running his fingers through his hair the way he does when he knows he's taken the losing position. Historically, I've only seen him do that with Dad when we were kids—begging to take the car or extend his curfew. But it seems fitting now. We don't need his blessing, but I'd like to have it. Noah's friendship and my relationship with River are important to us both.

“Don't you dare fucking hurt her.” It's his concession, as close to a blessing as we're going to get. And I'll take it!

“If I hurt her, you won't have to do a thing,” Noah says quietly, his voice blurred by the door. “I'd never forgive myself.”

River laughs bitterly. “Goddammit. You know, of all the assholes I know—and let's face it, I know a lot of assholes—nobody's been 'deserving' of my little sister . . . but I guess you're as close as it comes.”

Love through insults, such a guy thing.

“Aw, that's so sweet,” Mom says with a sweet smile. “And we'll know what to talk about over dinner now, won't we?” Mom eyes Natalie, and the light shining in both their eyes should have me running for the door in fear. But I can't leave my guests, especially Noah, to the firing squad. Even if they're only firing questions.

“You know I still get an open shot anytime I want it, right?” River warns as the door opens, and my happiness turns into worry until Noah grins evilly.

“Sure, just not the jewels. I hear your Mom is hoping for grandkids, and you fire more blanks than a *Matrix* movie.”

River's punch is lightning-fast, cracking Noah in the jaw. His head whips back, and I scream in surprise.

But Noah comes back up laughing and then plops on the bed to catch his breath.

“You . . . baiting son of a bitch,” River spits out, pointing at Noah accusingly. “You made me waste it.”

Noah laughs. “I figured you needed to get it out of your system. And that’s your one.”

“I didn’t even punch you that hard,” River growls. “I want a take-back.”

“Felt like that was everything you had,” Noah says, wiggling his jaw with his hand, but he seems totally fine. Which is weird. That’s weird, right? “Arielle punched me harder.”

River shoves Noah in the chest, and Noah lets the momentum carry him back to lie on my bed. From his prone position, he looks over to meet my eyes. His are filled with joy, but I’m sure mine are filled with confusion because guys are weird. “See, Sunshine? I told you everything would be fine. Apparently, I’m sleeping on your side of the bed tonight, though.”

Noah pats the bed like I’m going to join him now, and River throws his hands up. “Food. Now. I have feelings I need to stuff down and deal with later. Where are the biscuits, Mom?”

And with that declaration, River walks through the gathered group of women in the doorway, heading straight to the kitchen. Mom and Natalie give Noah and me a look of understanding before turning to walk down the hall.

Arielle has to get the last word in, though, as always. “Repeat after me, Arielle is always right.”

In unison, we intone flatly, “Arielle is always right.”

“That’s the spirit,” she answers with a smile.

Left alone in my bedroom, I run a finger along Noah’s jaw as he stands up. “Are you okay?”

He shifts his jaw from side to side. “Sure. Not the first or the last time River and I will come to blows. Sometimes, we do our best negotiations that way, and things always end up for the better afterward.”

I blink. “Guys are weird.”

“Yeah, you didn’t know that already?” Noah asks. But his lips are tilted up on the corners, teasing me.

“Let’s get some dinner before River inhales all the biscuits. If you liked my eggs, wait’ll you taste these.”

“I’ll eat your biscuits any time,” Noah says from behind me as we walk down the hall.

“I heard that,” River mumbles around a mouthful of biscuit as he shoves another one into his maw with a challenging look in his eyes.

Mom claps her hands. “Well, now that that’s all done, shall we eat?”

Thankful for the distraction, I grab the chicken from the oven and direct Arielle to get the mashed potatoes. River’s already guarding the plate of biscuits, so Natalie picks up the bottle of wine.

I have one solid minute of everything seeming perfect and fine, with most of the people I love around the table for a nice family dinner. And then Mom pipes up.

“Oh, honey, you should call your dad and let him know you’re dating Noah. I’m sure he’ll be excited. Remember the time zone difference to Malaysia, though. And you know it takes him a long time to arrange his schedule to be home for any important dates . . . like weddings or babies.”

“Mom! We’re dating! Not engaged!” I yell, horrified. We literally just got to the point of making this public to our families, and Mom is practically shoving Noah and me down the aisle and into Lamaze classes.

Mom shrugs casually. “That’s fine, honey. I’m just reminding you . . . in case.” Mom and Natalie meet eyes and share a secret smile that is not at all secret.

Well, we planned for River’s reaction, though that didn’t go to my plan. It seems we should’ve prepared better for our mothers’ reactions too.

CHAPTER 17

NOAH

When we finally get everyone out of Riley's apartment after dinner, we collapse on the couch.

"That went well," I say, running my fingers through Riley's blonde waves to twist one around my finger. It feels like spun silk, golden and soft.

Riley looks up from my chest to stare at me in shock. "'That went well'? Seriously?"

I kiss her nose. "That's what I said, and I stand by it. River could've really freaked out, your mom could've said I wasn't good enough, Arielle might've gotten stuck at work, or my mom might've asked why I invited her to dinner at someone else's home. And Raffy could have gone Cujo on one of them instead of being the cuddle bug he always is. So, that went well," I declare again. "And that cheesecake brought back some good memories."

Riley quiets, shifting to lay her head back on my chest again. "Did you really worry about all that?"

"Hmm," I hum, "not worry. More like consider."

"What else are you 'considering' right now?"

"I'm considering doing the dishes or leaving them for later. I'm considering taking you to the bedroom or staying right here on the couch to fuck you. I'm considering drawing a bath in that tiny tub of yours and seeing if we can both fit in there at the same time." I pause, searching my mind. "Yeah, that's about it. You?"

Riley's cheek lifts against my chest, and I feel her smile though I can't see it. "I'm considering calling my dad. I want this out in the open because you're important to me, Noah. I heard all the things you told River, and I want you to know . . . me too. I want to spend time with you—need it, in fact. I'm happy by nature, but you make me happy by nurture. You feed my soul."

I don't know what comes over her, but she starts making adorably weird Cookie Monster gobbling noises, feigning at nibbling along my chest. "Nom-nom, my cookie. Soul cookie. Nom-nom-nom." Her teeth nip my skin through my shirt, not hurting but letting me feel the pressure.

I bark out a laugh, my chest rumbling as I pull her tight against me. "Soul cookie? See, Sunshine . . . how could I resist that?"

She snuggles into me like a happy kitten. "You're not supposed to."

"Tell you what," I say, smacking her ass sharply. She squeals happily, wiggling around to mock-glare at me. "You call your dad and I'll do the dishes. And then I'll meet you for that bath, we can go to bed, and I'll nom-nom your cookie. Deal?"

Is this what flirting has become? With Riley, it is. Fun and silly and full of smiles. Later, she'll love some dirty talk, but for now, the ridiculousness of it is what makes us both happy.

"Are we negotiating?" Riley teases with a coy lift of her shoulder.

"Nope. Call, bath, bed."

She smiles, and I get up to give her a moment to make her call in private. I can hear her from the kitchen, but I do my best to tune out, letting her have the space to say what she needs to with her dad.

Raffy escorts me to the kitchen, knowing there's a better shot that he'll get a treat from me in the 'food room' than from Riley on the couch. The sink is full of dishes, the remnants of our family dinner stacked neatly. I turn on the hot water, rinsing the plates before loading the dishwasher.

I try not to listen, but I hear Riley say brightly, "Hi, Dad!"

I scrub the pots, pans, and serving platters before drying them and putting them away in the cabinets where they belong. Once everything is cleaned up, I lean against the counter and eye Raffy, who's been watching patiently the whole time. "Fine, you want a biscuit?"

I grab one out of the cookie jar and sit on the floor, my back to the wall. Raffy climbs in my lap, taking the treat daintily and eating messily while I scratch behind his ears.

I don't know how long I sit there with Raffy in my lap, but after a bit, I hear Riley call me. "Noah? Can you come here?"

"Guess that's my cue, Raffy. Wish me luck," I tell the fluffball. He rumbles in displeasure at being disturbed and having his scratches stopped but trails after me to the living room.

Riley is sitting on the couch, her phone propped up on the coffee table in front of her. Pointing at it, she tells me, "Come say hi to my dad. Dad, this is Noah. Noah, this is my dad, Joseph."

I sit down, leaving a small space between my thigh and Riley's, and tell the man on the screen, "Good to see you again, Mr. Watson."

Joseph Watson is a formidable man, even on a small screen. His blond hair has gone grey at the temples and his blue eyes are surrounded by crow's feet, but the width of his shoulders says he'll defend his little girl to the death if need be. I hope it's not needed at all.

"Noah! Good to see you too, though I'm sure I've told you to call me Joseph," he says with a slight lift of his lips.

It's a dominance test, same as any other. I dip my chin respectfully. "Of course, Joseph."

His smile lifts incrementally. "So, Riley tells me you two are dating now? And that River got a little handsy?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle, sir," I say formally.

He chuckles. "River will tell it differently, I'm sure."

“I’m sure by the time he’s done, it’ll sound like he beat the shit out of me, leaving me for dead in a pool of my own blood,” I agree.

“Yeah, he’s good like that. Look, I’ve got a meeting to rush into.” Joseph holds up a finger to someone offscreen. “I’ll just say my piece . . .” His voice goes slow and deadly. “Don’t hurt my little girl or I’ll have to hurt you. And I know people, Son. People with a particular set of skills. They’ll never find your body.” Then he smiles brightly as if that never happened, and I realize he was half-joking with the Liam Neeson reference. “But really? I’ve known you for years, Noah, and you’ve always done right by River, so I wouldn’t expect anything less with Riley.”

“Dad! All the threats and innuendoes are not necessary,” Riley argues.

“Understood, Mr. Watson.”

“You kids behave,” he says. “’Bye, honey. ’Bye, Noah.”

Riley is still rolling her eyes as she tells her dad goodbye, but I understand the protective streak in him. I’ve got one myself . . . for my mom, sister, and now, Riley. “’Bye, Joseph.”

And then the call is disconnected.

“Oh, my gosh, I’m sorry about that. What is it with guys and all the chest beating, *argh-argh-argh* stuff?” Riley complains.

I shrug, unconcerned. “Who we are, Sunshine. Like asking you not to smile. Just can’t be helped. It’s what we do.”

She sighs and reclines on the couch. The bath can wait while I have her at my side once more.

“How’d that go?” I test. The end seemed okay, but I don’t know what Riley had to do or say to get it to that point.

“He was disappointed that he wasn’t here since it was a whole *thing*, but he’s happy for me.”

“What was it like? Having him here sometimes but gone so much?” I ask carefully. This isn’t the first *thing* her father has missed out on.

“I guess I never really knew any other way for it to be,” Riley says, smiling a little. “I mean, I saw what some of my other friends had with their dads around all the time, so there were times I did get a little jealous. Dad missed a few of my firsts. He missed my first steps when he was in Krakow, Mom says. And he missed my first day of school—he was in Kenya. My driver’s license, he was in Seoul.”

“That’s a lot of firsts.”

Riley looks contemplative, remembering years gone by. “Yeah, but you know what I remember most? All the ways that he helped prepare me for those firsts. Like my first day of school . . . he might have been in Kenya, but before he went, he and I went out shopping to buy a special backpack. We went through the whole routine, practiced it—packing my backpack so I wouldn’t forget my lunch, walking to school, and coming home and putting my stuff away. And he was the one who taught me how to *really* drive.”

“Really drive?” I ask, and Riley laughs quietly, nodding. “As in what, *Fast and Furious* style?”

“Actually, you’re not that far off,” Riley says. “He made me promise not to talk about it with Mom, but he would get sent to some scary places for work. Back then, he made it sound like it was silly stuff, people driving on the wrong side of the street or thinking traffic lights were suggestions, so he taught me to drive offensively. In hindsight, he was in dangerous places sometimes.”

“Has your dad ever been in trouble?” I ask, remembering his comment about ‘knowing people’.

“Nope. He mostly works with established partners, ironing out adjustments to deals and stuff like that. But he’s smart, cautious, and knows what’s important—with work and with us at home. He knew that he’d miss some days, so he made sure to turn every day he could with River and me into a celebration.”

“River doesn’t sound as positive,” I admit, thinking back to my conversations with my best friend. “About your dad, I mean.”

“I think River and Dad butted heads more. And River remembers when Dad was home. He didn’t start traveling until after I was born, so I didn’t know any different. But River did, and that was a big change for him. They’re still close. I think River just wishes Dad had been around more.” She shrugs, “But we all know that Dad gave us a hell of a childhood and a good start in life.”

“You got very lucky,” I murmur, and Riley turns to face me, sitting crisscross on the couch beside me.

“Hey, we don’t have to talk about parents if you don’t want to,” she says.

I appreciate that she’s offering me a way out, with no pressure or judgment, but I don’t need it. I place my hand on her knee, absently rubbing circles there. “It was a long time ago, and I’ve dealt with it, mostly pulling myself up by my bootstraps and moving on. I won’t let my dad’s absence be an excuse or a reason for who I am today. I’ve worked hard, I’ve struggled, but I’m successful, and that has nothing to do with him.”

“Is that what life is to you?” Riley asks. “Hard work, struggle, and then . . . what?”

I’m quiet for a moment, thinking about the answer to her question. What do I think life is? What’s been my plan all along?

“I’ve worked hard my whole life, struggling when we had to and struggling when I just *needed* to, if that makes sense. I have something to prove . . . to myself. I guess I figured I’d work hard, do the whole rat race thing, and climb the corporate ladder until I reached some point where I could say ‘I made it’ and then, I’d finally relax. I’d be secure in my success, know that Mom and Arielle are taken care of, and be there for my wife and kids if I have any. Be a better dad than mine ever was.”

“Family is important to you.” Simple words, but not a simple meaning. I would do anything for the people I care about. And now that includes Riley.

“Very. But now, with you in my life, I realize that there’s more to life than just struggle and strife. That I don’t have to wait until some predetermined level of success to enjoy life. That there’s good around every corner, that it can be as simple as having someone curled up on the couch with me while a spoiled schnauzer chomps down on a bone in the corner.”

Riley turns her head to look over at Raffy, who's pretty much in heaven. He's sprawled out on his dog bed, belly to the sky, with a rubberized dog bone in his mouth. His fluffy little paws are holding the toy so he can chew it without dropping it, which he's mostly doing successfully.

"He is such a mess, but he's so cute that even when he's a barking monster, I can't help but love him," Riley tells me as she goes gooey-hearted for her puppy.

I pull her legs over mine, wrapping one arm around her back and laying the other across her thighs to hold her. Riley wraps her arms around my neck and lays her head down. "This is pretty sweet. A definite good part of my day. After today, maybe the best part."

I stay still, letting the weight of her sink into me, grounding me to the moment so I can enjoy every tiny detail of it. I write them all down in my mind, storing them away so I don't forget a single thing—not the smell of her hair, the squeeze of her arms, or the heat of her body pressed to mine.

This is success. This is happy.

After a while where we're both silently enjoying each other's presence, I whisper darkly, "I think I could make the bath be the best part of your day."

Riley giggles, burying her face into my shoulder. But as she shakes her head at my obvious plan, she gets up, letting me lead her down the hall.

"Go get pajamas, and I'll turn the bath on," I tell her, and she disappears into her bedroom.

Will she get sexy lingerie? Or fuzzy sun-printed pants? I have no idea and love the idea of finding out because she's sexy either way.

I take my shirt off and then make quick work of figuring out how to plug the tub, turning the water on as hot as it'll go. I want Riley to be soft, supple, and warm for me. I find a bottle of bubble bath in the cabinet and pour a generous amount into the stream of water and then add a cute yellow rubber ducky I find in the cabinet too.

The only thing missing is Riley.

“Hey, Sunshine, you coming?” I call, crossing the hall to the bedroom.

Riley is standing there, naked and gorgeous with a pair of socks in her hand. “I couldn’t decide what to get, but my feet get cold, so I started here,” she says, holding up the yellow wool knit socks.

“That’s all you need,” I growl, rushing her and taking her in my arms. I meet her mouth, our heads tilted to get more of each other. Tonight has been a lot to deal with, and while we’ve faced it together, we need each other.

I need Riley. Now.

I reach between us, undoing my pants and freeing my cock before I pick her up. My hands support under her ass, and her arms and legs wrap around me as her body welcomes me inside.

“Fuck, Sunshine,” I groan. “How are you already wet for me?”

“Always. Ready. For. You.” She’s bouncing on my cock, each word a hiss of breath as I slam deep.

I can’t believe I’ve gone my whole life without Riley wrapped around my dick and woven through my heart. I was missing so much and didn’t even realize it. But I do now, and I’m not going to take it for granted.

I buck up into her, holding her securely as I pick up the pace. I know I can’t stay in this position for long, but I’ll be damned if I’m not going to make her come and fill her up. We need this. We deserve this.

“You feel so good. I can feel how much your pussy wants me. So fucking tight,” I grunt. My hands squeeze the flesh of her ass, likely leaving fingerprints, and Riley goes crazy. She uses her leverage on my shoulders to lift and lower herself as I push and pull her, and together, we get wilder and rougher.

“Come, Noah. Please. I want it,” she pants.

I want to wait for her, but her body is pulling my orgasm from me, and I can’t hold back. “Now!”

Riley cries out in relief, not from her own orgasm but from mine. I pump deep and hard, filling her as pleasurable static washes through my mind. As I

return to awareness, I realize Riley is sliding down my body a bit.

I turn, tossing her to the bed. She bounces with a squeal and a smile. But I wipe the smile off her face in an instant when I throw her legs into the air, pinning them with one arm to slide my fingers into her slippery pussy. I use my cum, rubbing it on her lips and up to her clit. “Your turn, baby. Come for me, soak me with it.”

Riley shudders as my fingers blur across her whole center, swiping at her clit with each stroke. In seconds, she’s writhing, moaning, and calling my name. “Noah, don’t stop. Don’t stop.”

As if I would.

She goes tense and quiet, a silent scream trying to escape, and then she detonates. Her juices flow over my hand, mixing with mine, and I spread the entirety of us all over her, wanting her messy with the pleasure we’ve made.

“Yesssss,” she hisses.

As the shudders slow, I kiss her shapely calf, nibbling there gently. “Nom-nom-nom.”

Riley opens one eye, her dazed gaze looking at me in surprise. “Did you Cookie Monster me?”

“Soul cookies,” I answer, and she laughs.

I join the laugh but in a whoosh become aware of an odd sound.

“Oh, shit!! The water’s still on!” I yell, scrambling from the bedroom to the bathroom.

The sight that greets me is straight out of a cartoon. The tub is piled high with white bubbles, each piled on another as they climb the tile surround of the tub. Luckily, the overflow valve is keeping up with the amount of water . . . *mostly*.

“Towels!” Riley shouts, opening the cabinet and grabbing them as I turn the water off.

In a total moment of ridiculous comedy, we're both buck naked, on the floor, trying to sop up the water with what I'm guessing are her good towels.

"I'm sorry. I kinda forgot about the bath when I saw you naked," I try to explain.

Riley laughs. "Well, that's a good compliment if ever I've heard one. It's okay. This cleans up, and so will my sheets." Her brows knit, and then she starts laughing again. "Where did you get the ducky?"

I look to where she's pointing and see the yellow rubber duck I found in the cabinet. "Under there, with the bubble bath."

"Oh, that's uh . . ." Riley blushes. "That's Raffy's bath toy."

"He has his own bath toys?" I ask, and Riley's lips twist in humor. Answering my own question, I say, "Of course he does."

With a shrug, I drop the nearly sopping towel I'm using to the floor and call out, "Hey, Raffy, want a bath? It's all ready for . . . you."

And like the spoiled little prince he is, he comes trotting into the bathroom like he knew all along what was happening in here. And that it was entirely for him.

CHAPTER 18

RILEY

“*T*hanks again, Mike,” I tell the diner owner as he stands back, his arms crossed over his big belly.

He’s been very understanding and gracious in letting me have a photo shoot at Big Mike’s. I hadn’t even considered that when Noah and I had our date here, but when a well-known photographer contacted me saying she’d be in the area today and would love to collaborate, I knew the diner was the perfect spot.

“No problem, Miss Sunshine . . . uh, Riley? Yeah, I’m gonna go clean the kitchen or something,” Mike says awkwardly and then disappears.

“Don’t worry about him,” Wayne tells me with a wave of his hand. The helpful waiter offered to come assist with anything I needed today when he found out about the photo shoot. “He doesn’t know how to deal with celebrity.”

I laugh at his comment. “I’m not a celebrity. Just someone trying to make the world a bit brighter.”

“M’kay, Little Miss Sunshine. I see you acting humble, but you’re the biggest *celebrity* I’ve ever waited on, so I’mma need you to own that so I can brag appropriately.” He wags his yellow-painted nails—in solidarity, he told me—to highlight his point.

When I was here before, Wayne had no idea who I was. I doubt he truly does now, either, but when people hear ‘photo shoot’ they go a little crazy. Even

me. I'm a bit starstruck by the photographer whose work I've followed for years.

"Riley?" India, the photographer, says, getting my attention. "Let's get you sitting on the bar, feet on the barstool." She bends down, looking through her camera to check the setup.

There are lights on tripods, and India has an assistant with a reflector board, but earlier, India explained that she mostly wanted to use the restaurant's neon and overhead lights so that the images have that 'authentic diner feeling'. That had sounded perfect to me.

I nod, climbing up ungracefully to the bar top. I strike a few poses, flipping my yellow tulle skirt this way and that and showing off my white T-strap heels and yellow lace bobby socks. It's not quite a pin-up costume, but it's heavily inspired by that vibe while staying true to my brand of sunshine yellow and fresh white. I had to rush ship it to get it here in time for India's visit, but as soon as I put it on, I knew it was absolutely worth it.

"And kick your right leg out," India instructs me. I do that, and then we start truly flowing, neither of us needing direction. It took me a long time to know my best features and how to highlight them. I had to study posing the same way India studied aperture. Together, we work our way all over Big Mike's, taking shot after shot until India's phone dings.

"Oh, shit, that's my alarm. My husband will be here in fifteen minutes so I'm afraid we need to call this a wrap." India smiles, her thick lips glossy and teeth bright white. She could be a model herself with her high cheekbones and striking dark eyes, but she's utterly fabulous behind the camera. "This has been amazing, Riley. Thank you for being my model today!"

I gush back, "Are you kidding? Thank you for being my photographer! I can't wait to see everything."

I climb down from the jukebox where we took our last shots and give India a big hug. "Can I help you clean up or pack?"

She shakes her head. "Oh, no, nobody touches my gear but me. I don't even let my husband touch my babies." She holds her camera to her chest protectively, though she smiles as though she's kidding.

“We’re opening in thirty minutes,” Mike calls through the window to the kitchen.

“They’re done,” Wayne calls back. “We’ll be ready to open in twenty.” He’s been watching the whole thing, offering water here and ideas there. Some of his placements were really great, actually. I don’t think I would’ve thought to do photos in the men’s room, especially since I’d never been in there, but it’d been fun acting like I was doing something sneaky and naughty for the pictures. And the men’s room had a whole row of posters of female icons from decades past, from Marilyn to Tina Louise, Farrah Fawcett to Brooke Shields.

A school bus pulls up outside, and India turns. “There he is, ready to get on the road.”

“The bus?” Wayne asks, looking out the window like a pack of feral school children are going to rush the place demanding chocolate chip pancakes and cream sodas while overwhelming any sense of order there might be.

As if feral kids would be on a school bus anyway.

India nods. “Yeah, we converted the bus to be our home on the road. It’s not fancy, but it’s ours.” To me, she says, “I’ll work on editing while we’re traveling to the next stop, so I’ll send you everything tonight. Do a check-through for approval, and then we can do a coordinated post to release them to the public in a couple of days.”

India waits for me to nod in answer, and I add, “That sounds amazing. Thank you so much, India.”

She gathers all her gear, and too soon, India and her school bus-driving husband are gone.

“Wow,” I breathe in awe. “India Inkspot Photography.”

Wayne pulls up his still-glassless glasses to raise a brow, adding, “Uh, wow . . . Riley Sunshine.”

I laugh and give him a high-five. “Thanks, Wayne. Do you think I could get something to go?”

“Chocolate cake shake?” he suggests. Maybe he remembers that Noah and I didn’t get one when we were here or maybe it’s his standard suggestion, but he’s absolutely right. That’s what I want. I don’t care if it’s not yet eight in the morning. Cake has eggs and milk in it. Those are breakfast foods, right?

I nod, and he snaps his fingers. “Coming right up.”

I sit down at a table, and in minutes, he’s back with a gorgeous, and humongous, shake. I’m no India-caliber photographer, but I’ve got a few tricks of my own, so before Mike opens for the early crowd starting to gather in the parking lot, I stand up in my chair and take a picture of the shake, making sure to get the globs of whipped cream, cute sprinkles, and the ambiance of the diner surrounding the table.

I do a quick edit on the photo and then add a teaser to it . . .

Don’t pinch me . . . I don’t want to wake up from this dream. Today, I had an opportunity I would’ve never imagined, but it happened. To me. Which is proof your dreams can happen for you too. Be open, be adventurous, be resolutely yourself, and amazing things will come your way.

*I can’t wait to share with you. Photos coming soon.
#turningdreamsintoreality*

I post it to my page with a smile on my face that I don’t think will shrink ever again. Today was amazing.

I take a celebratory sip of the shake and blink. *Holy Chocolate!* This is amazing too.

What a day, what a life, I think. I’m a lucky woman.

“HEY, SUNSHINE,” NOAH SAYS AS I OPEN THE DOOR. HE’S HOLDING A sunflower, spinning the single thick stalk gently in his hands. “You didn’t seem like the rose type, but this reminded me of you.” His smile is pure filth even as he says sweet things. I love it—his dirty mouth and the pretty flower.

“Thank you. It’s beautiful,” I tell him, taking the bloom from him. It’s bright yellow and warm brown and reminds me of summer days in the sun.

He follows me into the kitchen where I pull out a tall glass. “I don’t have a vase that’ll fit this, but I think this will work.” I add water and the flower as he watches me. I smile softly at the focused attention. “What?”

“I missed you today,” he answers bluntly. “I was busy at work—running from meeting to meeting, poring over BlindDate stats, and dissecting what it all means with River. But all I wanted to do was call you to see how the photo shoot went this morning.”

“I wanted to call you so much, but I didn’t want to interrupt because I knew you had the meeting with the marketing people this morning.”

We flash matching smiles, both of us wanting to talk but respecting the other’s work. “Just call me next time,” Noah growls, pulling me in for a proper hello kiss. He’s warm and firm against my body, his lips soft and demanding against mine, and I melt into him.

“Hi,” I murmur, blissed out from his kiss. I blink and promise, “Next time, I’ll just call.”

He nods approvingly. “So, how did it go?”

I twirl away from him, spinning through the living room, and Raffy barks, running around with me. I’m celebrating, and he thinks I’ve lost my mind, but Noah laughs. “I take it that’s good?”

“It was amazing!” I sigh happily. “India is going to send me the pictures tonight and they’ll go live in a couple of days.”

“I can’t wait to see them. You looked gorgeous in that skirt and those shoes. Ugh, those heels and little socks? You might have to pull those out later.” He lifts a dark brow lewdly. “Only those . . . and nothing else.”

“That could be arranged,” I promise. “But first, I have a date idea. Caveat—I’ll need to take some pictures of Raffy for social media too, but I think it’ll be fun.”

I know where I want to go. I've been waiting to take Raffy to the Inu Onsen Dog Water Park for weeks, but it's been too cool. Today, though? The weather is perfect.

If Noah will agree to go with me and Raffy. I don't imagine it's his usual type of place to go for fun, but I'm hoping he's willing to be adventurous today too.

"Is this why you told me to bring a swimsuit and flip flops?" Noah looks me up and down approvingly, and I smooth my sundress. It's covering my own swimsuit. "It's nice out, but I looked up the quickest way to get to the beach, and it's at least four hours away."

"You looked up routes to the beach?" I ask, hiding my smile behind my hand. Noah nods slowly, having no idea how adorable that is. All I said was 'swimsuit', and he's already planning out routes, bathroom stops, and looking at Yelp reviews for dinner options. I love that he cares and shows it by planning and researching so we can have a good time.

"We're not going to the beach, are we?"

I smile brightly and shake my head. "Nope, we're going to a dog park. A water doggy park, to be precise. I know you like precision. And I already know where it is, how to get there, where to park, and all the attractions because I looked it all up."

Noah bites his lip, being silly. "Oh, damn, Sunshine . . . speak 'control freak' to me. I love it. What else did you plan?"

I laugh at his antics. He is so funny when he wants to be. "I know what time sunset is so we can get golden hour pics, so let's go. And also, I thought you liked to be the control freak?" I let my voice go sultry, implying so much more than the light words.

"Fuck yeah, I do. Let me change and we can go."

And I swear to the sun itself, as Noah goes down the hall to change out of his work clothes and into his trunks and T-shirt, he is whistling.

Noah Daniels. Whistling.

My heart squeezes in my chest, hugging itself with happiness.

“Ready?” Noah asks a few moments later.

I’ve got Raffy’s stuff all packed in my bag, plus sunscreen and dinner for Noah and me. “Oh, let me get Raffy’s hat and life vest.”

“His what?” Noah asks in surprise as he starts laughing. “Hat? Life vest?”

“Yes,” I tell him with a glare. “Don’t make fun. They’re cute and keep him safe.”

“Raffy, do you want a hat?”

“Rowf!”

“Guess that settles it,” Noah says with a disbelieving shake of his head. I have to laugh as I grab the last two items. Tossing them in my backpack, I slip the straps over my shoulders only to find Noah rubbing Raffy’s belly, being nice to my fur baby. He won’t admit it, of course, but Raffy’s already got him wrapped around a little paw.

And the view today is . . . fantastic. While yes, I prefer Noah looking powerful and sexy in one of his tailored suits, he looks just as good today in board shorts and a tank top, his muscles not hinted at but on clear display for me.

His arms are lean, his muscles outlined under his skin, not bodybuilder veiny but clear and defined. I hope he enjoys what I’ve got on underneath my sundress as much as I’m enjoying looking at him.

“All ready!” I chirp, getting Noah’s attention. I slip my sandals on, and we go down to my VW Bug, since Raffy travels a lot better in there than any other vehicle. Noah holds Raffy in his lap while I drive, still scratching the spoiled puppy’s head.

“Tell me about this place? A dog water park?”

“Yup,” I confirm with a grin. “Doggys need slides too!”

“I have to see this,” Noah says, and a half hour later, the look in his eyes tells me that no matter how well I explained it, he wasn’t expecting what he’s

seeing now.

“See? It was an old kiddie park that wasn’t getting used, and the owner let his own dog run around when no one was here. Then an idea was born. He turned it into a specialty park for dogs and their owners. Three pools, a waterfall, slides for both humans and dogs . . . Inu Onsen’s got something for everyone. Spread out over a few acres, it’s a little smaller than most human-only parks, but for this, it’s perfect.”

“It’s genius from a business perspective,” Noah says approvingly. I bet he’s already done a rough headcount and multiplied by the admission rate we paid for Raffy. Owners are free, but they charge the canine guests.

“Come on, the lockers are over here,” I tell him, having memorized the map. I can speak his language too.

I open the locker, setting the bag down inside to pull out Raffy’s gear. I help him into his life vest despite his wiggled arguments and then Velcro his hat around his chin.

I slip the straps of my sundress down my arms, not intending to be sexy, but I feel the heat of Noah’s eyes on me. He watches as I let the dress drop below my breasts to my waist and then carefully step out of it to stand in my yellow polka-dot, two-piece swimsuit. It’s nothing overly sexy, not a thong or anything that’s more strings than fabric. In fact, it’s more of a hippy-style boy short with a bandeau top. Perfectly acceptable for a public water park.

Noah makes me feel like I’m standing before him nude, though. His eyes skate over my skin, and I swear I can feel the caress of his gaze.

“Raffy . . . I think your momma’s trying to set this place on fire. She’s so hot today,” Noah tells my dog conspiratorially. “I’m going to need to be Johnny on the spot with the sunscreen, making sure I keep her well coated in cream.”

Why does that sound like a promise and threat all at once?

I grin, reaching into my bag and pulling out a bottle of sunscreen. “Already ahead of you.”

Noah practically dives for the bottle, pulling it out of my hand. He squirts a generous amount into his palm and then begins sliding the lotion all over my

skin. It feels naughty and intimate to do this in public where anyone could see, even though Noah's hands aren't dipping anywhere private.

Oops, spoke too soon . . . His fingertip dips just below the waist of my suit, tracing over the small of my back.

"Let me do you," I tell him, taking the lotion back. Two can play this game.

I drizzle the sunscreen directly onto his chest, then squeeze his pecs and firmly spread the lotion over his shoulders. I can feel his heart beating faster beneath my palm.

"Rowf!" Raffy barks, breaking the spell.

"Way to go, Fluffy Cockblocker," Noah says too loudly, and while I should be mortified at the people who look our way, I can only laugh.

We head to what I already know is going to be my favorite spot, a full-on 'beach-style' pool that slopes gradually from toe-deep all the way to swimming depth if you want. It's perfect because Raffy can splash and even go doggy paddling if he wants, but humans can cool off too.

Noah dumps his towel on a lounge chair and immediately runs for the water a little awkwardly. "Be right back!" he calls over his shoulder as I laugh. "Need to cool off! It's a scorcher out here today."

I can see the outline of his hardness, proof of the effect I have on him, and it makes me feel sexier than ever. I might be a lightweight in terms of kink, but I love the happiness being sexy for Noah helps me feel.

I drop down to sit on the lounge chair as Raffy takes off after Noah, thinking this water-running thing is a game for his amusement.

I watch them playing together, Noah squatting in the pool to help Raffy swim back and forth in the cool water. I take a deep breath, grounding myself in the moment—the feel of the sun on my skin, the smell of chlorine and wet dog, the sound of squeaky balls, the sight of Noah and Raffy being so cute, and though sunscreen is a smell, I swear I can taste it on my tongue.

All of it together makes me feel very, very happy. This moment is what it's all about—finding joy in the good and bad. Because let's be honest, no one

likes the smell of wet dog. But if that's the worst thing to happen today, I am beyond fortunate.

Noah spends a good ten minutes in the pool with Raffy, and when he gets out, I have plenty of eye candy watching the water glisten all over his taut stomach and drip down to the waistband of his shorts.

“Are you coming in or is your plan to lie here and torture me the whole time?” Noah asks, not looking tortured at all. In fact, the way his eyes are tracing from my blonde braid over my sun-kissed face, to my breasts and down my hips, and over the length of my legs to my freshly-painted, white with yellow polka-dotted toes, he looks to be enjoying himself immensely.

“Your toes match your suit, but opposite,” Noah tells me.

I wiggle my toes in delight that he noticed. “I’m coming in too. I want to get some pictures of Raffy but didn’t want to interrupt because it seemed like you two were having a moment.”

“We were,” Noah teases. “Isn’t that right? High-five, man.” Noah holds his hand up, and Raffy lifts his paw to pat it.

I get up, taking the waterproof case I’ve stowed my phone in with me. Back in the water, the three of us play, and I take pictures the whole time—of Noah, Raffy, and me.

Some of them I’ll use for social media, but some of them are just for me, like the ones with Noah in them.

“Here, let me take some of you and Raffy,” Noah says, and I hand him my phone.

I dunk down under the water to get my face on the same level as Raffy and puff up my cheeks like a chipmunk. I pull several other silly faces and then a few happy smile ones too. I hold Raffy up out of the water for a few, sit in the shallows with Raffy lying at my side for more, and even guide Raffy to lie on his back and then lie out beside him as though we’ve both fallen asleep in the beautiful, golden sun.

“Perfect. Each and every one,” Noah tells me, giving my phone back. “You want to flip through them to see if you got what you need? I’ll take Raffy

back out for a bit.”

I cannot express how much it means to me that he understands. Most people think I snap a few pictures and poof, done. But it’s more than that. The photo has to be right—lighting, expressions, flattering to both Raffy and me, and expressing the right thing. In this case, utter joy in a beautiful day with doggy friends in the water. Showing the brand on the life vest or hat wouldn’t hurt either, but I don’t have to do that since they’re not sponsors. Yet.

“Thank you,” I tell him before standing on tiptoe to press a kiss to his cheek. “It’ll be fast. Promise.”

“Take your time, Sunshine. Me and the Raffster have some hardcore relaxing to do.”

Noah’s just starting to slosh his way into the pool when I feel a presence and a shadow passes over me. I look up to see a woman standing next to me. “Hello . . . uhm, I know this is weird, but are you Riley Sunshine? And is that Raffy?”

“Yes, can I help you?” I ask, sitting all the way up. The woman’s wearing a floppy sunhat and a one-piece top with shorts that say, ‘I’m here to run around with my dog, not flirt with you, random stranger.’ Something about that reassures me, dog mom to dog mom.

“I’m a fan of yours and I was hoping . . . could I get a picture of you guys with Muggles?”

“Muggles?” I ask, and the woman nods.

Okay, maybe I shouldn’t have been reassured because I think she’s gotten a bit too much sun today.

“My daughter is a huge Harry Potter fan,” the woman says with a laugh. “He’s just over here.”

Oh, her dog’s name is Muggles. That makes much more sense, and who am I to judge with a dog named Raffy?

I look over, expecting to see a little dog the size of Raffy. Instead, what I see is something the size of a small bear, a Newfoundland. “Wow . . . Muggles.”

“It’s so hard as the weather warms up to keep him cool, but since he’s a water breed, we bring him out as often as we can,” the woman explains. “Don’t worry, he really deserves his name.”

“No problem . . . Noah!”

Noah looks over, and when he sees the woman beside me, he’s already moving this way. When I point to Muggles, he scoops Raffy up protectively and comes over to join us even faster. “Hey,” he says questioningly, trying to get a feel for the situation.

“This is Muggles,” I start explaining.

“Beautiful dog.”

“This nice lady—”

“Stephanie.”

“Stephanie wanted to grab a picture of Raffy and me with Muggles. Can you take the picture?”

Noah nods, more relaxed as he takes Stephanie’s phone from her.

A minute later, we’ve got two women and two dogs posing for pictures together. Muggles is a sweetheart, sniffing noses with Raffy before plopping down contentedly in a big fluffball of dark fur.

My favorite picture has to be with me and Stephanie squatting on either side of Muggles with Raffy sitting on the ground between Muggles’ massive front paws, his chin thrust out like he’s full of piss and vinegar.

“Thanks so much,” Stephanie says when Noah hands her phone back. But now that she’s gotten her pictures, it’s like being that close to Noah and all his oozing sex appeal finally registers for Stephanie. “Oh . . . uhm . . . yeah, thanks. So are you two . . . friends? Or like dating or something?”

Noah meets my eyes over Stephanie’s head. I don’t know what to say to that. We’re definitely dating, but this is a follower, not family. We haven’t talked about that yet because going that type of public is a whole different thing. One Noah needs to be prepared for.

He swallows thickly but smiles warmly at Stephanie. “Or something.”

Stephanie looks from Noah to me, though it seems like she has a hard time prying her eyes away from Noah. She makes a sound of surprise when Noah offers a wink. “Oh! I get it! You might not want to say. Silly me, sorry!” She mimes locking her lips and throwing away the key. “Thanks again, Riley. ’Bye, Raffy!”

She pets Raffy one more time, and he rolls over, offering his belly. Stephanie smiles but walks away with Muggles. Raffy sniffs in displeasure at the rebuke.

We go back to our chairs, and Noah looks around as we sit down. I think his headcount of people has changed from potential dollars and cents to possible threats, even though Stephanie was totally polite. “How often does that happen?”

“I think that’s the first time. Certainly the first time with a dog.”

Noah recoils. “That wasn’t a dog. It was a small bear with droopy jowls.”

“But he was so cute,” I argue.

Noah goes quiet, watching the water for a bit. “You know,” he says after a moment, “if you don’t want me on your feed, that’s okay.”

“No!” I protest, sitting up. “I mean . . . that’s a big step. Are you sure you want to do that?”

“Well, our families know at this point. I mean, isn’t it a thing now to be ‘Social Media Official’, capitalized?”

I laugh, rolling my eyes. “Probably for some people. But this is different. We’re not a marketing ploy, and I don’t want to use you like that. At the same time,” I say carefully, “I try to be honest about my life. That’s the deal. I’m not fake. I tell people when there’s a filter or it’s a sponsored thing. I want people to be authentic, and I want to practice what I preach. But that doesn’t have to mean you want to do that. I’ll honor your wishes on that too, of course.”

He’s thoughtful for a moment, scratching Raffy’s belly.

“I want people to know about us, like our families and your followers, I guess. Because they’re important to you too. I want everyone to know you’re mine and I’m yours. I don’t want to be this secret you hide away.”

“Noah, no.” I do not want him to think for a second that I’m hiding him. That’s not what this is. I’m *protecting* him. People can be vicious behind the anonymity of a keyboard. “How about this . . . let’s do a teaser post. You can read the comments and get a feel for how things go, and then you can decide. No pressure either way.”

“A teaser?” Noah repeats.

“I know just the thing. Lie back,” I direct him, and then I snuggle in between Noah’s legs, leaning back against his chest while he puts his head next to mine. Lifting his chin a little, we get a perfect shot of my smiling face and Noah’s smile from the nose down, a sexy bit of scruff on his chin catching a strand of my hair. Just the right amount of tease.

“And . . . caption,” I tell him, typing quickly. *My new favorite sight. Seeing him happy makes me happy.* “And . . . post.”

I put my phone down, turning and giving Noah a soft kiss. “There. It’s official. We can let you see what you’re getting into first. And then if you can take it, we’ll do a full reveal when you’re ready.”

“If I can take it?” Noah asks wryly. “And what does that mean?”

“Trust me, you’ll see. But for now . . . if that isn’t the sunscreen bottle pressed against my butt, I think you need to get in the pool again.”

Noah hums and nuzzles my neck. “I will . . . if you’ll join me. I seriously doubt the pool’s any wetter than you are.”

“I’m definitely getting there,” I admit, and he flashes a cocky smile. “Come on, let’s have some fun. I still want Raffy to try the waterslide.”

“Because of course a doggy water park has a doggy waterslide,” he deadpans.

I giggle and get up. That definitely wasn’t the sunscreen pressed against my butt. “Of course there is. This place is fun for the whole family.”

CHAPTER 19

NOAH

“So, Raffy . . . what do you think?” Riley asks the dog as they come in the door. “Think you can hang out here?” She looks at him like he’s going to turn his nose up, spin in place, and stomp out like some snobby poodle. Truthfully, I wouldn’t put it past him.

But Raffy curiously sniffs around my apartment, his tail wagging. He and I have spent a lot of time together over the past couple of weeks, making me one of the humans he knows well. He knows my smell, and this apartment smells like me. So I guess he’s willing to give it a try.

Riley still looks a little worried. “Are you sure he’s okay on your rug? And what if he gets on your couch?”

“It’s fine. I’m sure,” I assure her, pulling her in for a kiss. “And if he’d rather, I bought him a dog bed. It’s over there” —I point to the fluffy, furry pouf the saleswoman assured me was top-tier for dogs— “next to the toy basket, and his water and food bowl are right there. I think I got the right food. It’s in the cabinet, so you can check it.” I point to the basket and then bowls on the rubberized mat in the kitchen.

I think I did pretty well making my apartment a place where Raffy can feel at home, and the saleswoman who was helping me said my dog was a lucky animal. I’d corrected her that it’s my girlfriend’s dog, and she’d said, ‘Lucky woman then.’ But when I look back at Riley, she’s got tears in her eyes, though she’s trying to hide them with her hands.

“What’s wrong, baby?” I ask, gathering her in my arms.

“You did all this for Raffy?” she mumbles into her fists. I nod, suddenly thinking I might’ve gone overboard. I mean, maybe it’s a lot, but the websites I looked at said new places can be anxiety-producing for animals, and having comfort items can make them settle more easily. That’s all I wanted to do . . . make Raffy feel secure so that Riley would be comfortable here too.

An instant later, she throws her arms around my neck and gives me the sloppiest kiss ever. I love it.

“That’s the sweetest thing ever!”

They’re tears of happiness, salty bits of her joy spilling out of her heart and down her face. I smile, wanting to lick her cheeks to taste that happiness, but I settle for swiping her tears away with a gentle thumb.

Riley goes off in a whirlwind of bliss. “Look, Raffy,” she tells him as she shows him the dog bowls, “these are for you.” Raffy sniffs the bowls, but he must not be hungry. Hopefully, it’s that and not that I bought the wrong food. Riley picks him up and carries him over to the bed, placing him in the middle of the pouf. “This is for you too.” She picks up a squeaky bone and lays it at his feet. He sniffs it once, licks it, and then starts gnawing on it like it wronged him in some way. The more it squeaks, the more he attacks it. The bone is a major hit.

“Tell Noah thank you, Raffy,” Riley tells the dog expectantly.

He looks up from the bone and says, “Thank you.” Well, in Riley’s head he must, because she praises him with pats and loving whispers, but of course, he didn’t say anything because he’s a dog. Not even a bark of appreciation.

But Riley’s appreciation is all I need.

“I know it’s a little early, but are you ready for dinner? I worked straight through today, never stopping for lunch. The last thing I had was my protein smoothie after my run and then copious amounts of coffee all day. I don’t even want to discuss the amount of caffeine running through my veins right now.”

“Sure,” Riley says agreeably, following me into the kitchen. “Why’d you work through lunch? Everything okay?”

We work together in a dance, pulling out the Thai takeout I ordered and putting it on plates to reheat in the microwave.

“Yes and no. River and I have been busting ass, working with the whole team to get the stats up. Downloads and usage aren’t what we hoped they’d be. They’re fine, keeping up with our conservative predictions, but only by the skin of our teeth, and they’re definitely not on the upward trajectory we’d actually hoped for. The plateau is killing us.”

“Meeting expectations is good, though. It means your planning was accurate. If you were way over or under, it’d reflect that you didn’t do your market analysis correctly. And we both know that would never happen,” she teases, knowing me too well. “I mean, I know you want to have higher stats, obviously, but BlindDate is doing well, right?”

“Currently, I’d agree. But there’s a launch period of huge growth followed by stagnation. Standard market introduction excitement. The concern is that if we’re only touching at the numbers with the momentum of the launch, the sustainability won’t be there. And if people aren’t joining every day, existing members leave the app because they don’t get new matches.”

I’m not telling her anything she doesn’t already know. Riley is all too aware of how marketing and social media work, but apps are a different creature, and even a single one-star review can tank a year’s worth of work.

We carry our warmed plates of chicken Pad Thai to the dining table and sit down. Raffy eyes us, hoping to be called over for his own plate of dinner, but this is too spicy for him. He’ll get no table scraps tonight, but I might’ve also bought him a few more blueberry muffin biscuit treats. Just in case I need to bribe him a bit.

“Enjoy the current success. Think back to the day you made those statistical predictions. If Past Noah had been told that you’d hit them right on the money, you would’ve been thrilled. So these numbers are worth celebrating,” Riley says in her sunny, positive way. “As for moving forward, you and River will work it out and get through the growing pains. I have faith in the two of you. Mostly you.” She winks, letting me know that she’s not discounting her brother in any way but is building me up, supporting me, and being a cheerleader for my dreams.

Failure isn't an option to her, not because things don't sometimes work the way you want them to but because if it doesn't happen, it's merely because something else was meant to be.

Everything is an opportunity in Riley Watson's eyes.

I wish I could see the world that way. It's not all fail or succeed, worthy or not now. She is changing me for the better, but it's an ongoing process. I'd like to think I'm having a positive impact on her too, being a place where she can relax and let someone take care of her for a change. I'm good at that. Taking care of people is where I thrive.

"Thank you," I tell her genuinely. With a smirk, I agree, "Especially the 'me' part. Carrying River is getting to be a pain in the ass."

Riley laughs, digging into her plate of noodles. "Ooh, you're in trouble. I'm totally telling him you said that."

"You think he doesn't know?" I joke back, enjoying that we can joke about our siblings now that everything's in the open and our families are on board with us. Not that any argument from them would've changed things, but we love our families, and their support makes this easier for Riley and me.

We finish dinner and put our plates in the dishwasher. Riley wipes down the counter, but I notice she's cleaning the same already-spotless area over and over. I lean back on the cabinet, crossing my arms over my chest.

"What's wrong, Sunshine?" I ask.

She pauses, looking over her shoulder at me. "I'm guessing that if you were busy at work today and getting stuff for Raffy, you didn't look at my page?"

Worry crosses her eyes, a shadow below the light that usually resides there. I don't like it, not one bit. Whatever's on her page, I want to slay the dragon that made the little crinkle between her brows appear.

"No, I didn't have a chance. What happened? Who do I need to kill?" I tease, trying to get a smile from her.

Her lips lift, but it's a ghost of her usual sunniness. "Remember I said we should see if you can take it? And then decide on whether to do a full reveal

of . . . us?”

That pause hurts. I don't know why. I don't know what's going on, but it hurts that Riley seems uncertain about us. No, about me . . . *if I can take it.*

“Yeah, it sounds like I need to see what folks said?”

Riley gets her laptop from her bag and guides me to the couch. I sit down beside her, and she folds her legs, cradling the computer in her lap.

“I just want you to see what the reaction was,” Riley says. “It was something I had to get used to. It takes *a lot* of getting used to.”

Riley pulls up her social media feed and scrolls down a bit. I notice she's made two other posts since our pic at the water park, and I look closer. In both of the newer pics, she doesn't have the slightly pink nose from our time in the sun at the doggy water park. “Did you edit out your sunburn?”

“No.” Riley points out the timing on one post and explains, “You can pre-set a post. It's one of my weekly prep things. I go through and put together at least seven posts that are pre-set to post daily. Usually, they're either the daily affirmations or the sponsored posts since most of them are shot a week or more in advance, so those are pictures from before.”

“Our social media team for BlindDate does stuff like that too, but I leave the details to them. I just want the data.” I lean toward her and peck the tip of her nose. “I like your pink nose. It's cute.”

Riley's cheeks flush, matching her nose a bit, as she pulls up the post of our picture at the dog park. The first thing I see are the hearts. “Wow . . . twenty thousand likes?”

“A high number, but I'm not surprised,” Riley says with a grin as she cups my jaw. It's freshly shaven today, no scruff like in the picture. “But the real deal's in the comments.”

We start reading, and some of them are really positive. I wouldn't expect anything less from Riley's Sunshiners.

Aliceinerrorland- You go, Riley! That's one good lookin' smile! Yours? His? Why not both?

*TonyToniToney- Riley, I know you're in the picture somewhere, but *all* I see is that smile. Whoo, boy.*

BettieLuvsArchie- Damn, someone used his Aquafresh!

“Maybe we should get you a sponsorship with a toothpaste company,” Riley jokes, and I have to snort. Yeah, I guess I do keep my teeth clean, but no more than anyone else, I don't think. Just morning and nightly brushing and flossing like dentists recommend.

And then things get a bit naughty . . .

MollyPops- I'mma lick that jaw, nibble them lips, and suffocate you because I don't hover. If you die, you die. You'll go with that smile . . . guaranteed.

“Look at this one!” I laugh, pointing at one further down.

Lemonade21167- He better have skills with that tongue because I'm going to glaze that grin like a donut!

“Hmm, I wonder what that even means?” I ask innocently.

Riley grins, elbowing me lightly in the ribs. “I think you know exactly what it means, and nobody's *glazing* you but me.”

“Dirty talk some more, baby,” I tease, loving when Riley says things that make her squirm.

But my smile fades as I read the next comment.

HappiBeetz- Faker than The Bachelorette. You pay for him to sleep with you, or is he just for show? #malemodelforhire

“What the fuck?”

We keep reading, and I feel my blood pressure rise. While at least five or six comments in a row might be positive, there's a sprinkling of one here or two there that are jealous, negative, or just plain hateful.

“How do you handle this?” I ask after seeing *bboy13rize64* flat out say if he had Riley between his legs, he'd show her ‘how a real man handles his woman’ and that he'd consider letting me ‘watch and learn’. “Some of these people are plain evil.”

I keep reading as Riley talks, but she's watching me, watching my reactions. This is what she was talking about . . . if I can handle it.

"That's part of it. It hurt for a long time. I'd obsess over the negative ones and let the positive ones wash over me. But now, I just try to ignore the bad ones. Focus on the good."

"That's a very Riley Sunshine thing to say, but this is a lot of assholes or just evil fuckers," I growl, seeing another. I'm not upset at what they're saying about me, but rather at what they're saying about Riley.

Comments on her swimsuit, her hair, her breasts, and her personality. It's annihilation by commentary.

"Who'd say this to anyone in real life?"

"They probably wouldn't," Riley explains with a shrug, "or maybe they would in hopes of getting a reaction. So I don't give them one. I choose to use my voice for good, to spread the sunshine and the positive vibes into the world. I'm not perfect, I know it, but I do my best to stay positive and set that example. And it works." She points at several comments in a row from people saying that Riley made them smile, brightened their day, or even flat-out thanking her for getting them through difficult times. "They make it all worth it. Besides, mean people are lashing out because they're hurt. They need a little sunshine most of all."

"Or they're assholes," I argue. "I know I've been called an asshole, and I even joke about being one myself, but I'm not like that. That's over the line, trying to hurt people for no good goddamn reason."

Riley's lips press together like she's searching for words. "Once upon a time, you lashed out at me."

"Riley."

"No, hear me out. This isn't about the past. We're good, but listen . . . you lashed out because you were hurting, but ultimately, it made you learn something about yourself. You realized what you'd done, became a better person, and yeah, you're still more pessimistic than the average grumpy bear, but you grew from that. What if that comment is that person's a-ha moment?" She points to one of the rude comments about her shallow lifestyle. "I don't

have to react to it, respond to it, or even be involved, but what if just posting it is their turning point where they look at the words on the screen and realize what they've become?"

"But some people are just inherently that way, you know? They're never going to change, don't even want to."

Riley laughs bitterly. "Oh, I know. Some of these people post every single day on my posts, always negative, always trolling. And that's on them, not me. They're responsible for what they put out in the world. But they come back for some reason, and I can only hope that one day, my message of sunshine will sink in."

I'm quiet, thinking through what Riley's saying. I can't imagine being that . . . good. I don't consider myself a bad person at all, but if there's a spectrum of bad to good, Riley's fallen off the good end and floated up into sainthood.

"I didn't end up this way overnight, and I'm not expecting you to understand right now. When I first started, I'd sweat over every post. I thought every word was make or break, that I had to create new content every twenty-four hours, and that everyone had to love me. I spent hours trying to learn the 'secret' but what I've figured out is, there isn't one. People want to see people like them, be inspired, and feel like they're a part of something bigger. They want to find meaning and joy in their typical day, and that's what I help with."

"I remember times like that when River and I were working on FriendZone. All these apps made it look easy, and we knew we had a winning idea, but getting from conception to launch to success, it felt like everyone knew how to do that but us." I think back to those times and mentally compare them to the BlindDate launch, which has been so much better even if it's not perfect. We learned, and we're doing better.

"Exactly. And the progress at first was frustrating." She's talking about her own, but I nod, knowing how hard River and I had it too. "For me, I'd put hours into a photo, staging and taking hundreds of shots and then using just the right filters to try and make myself look my best. Then I'd post and get nothing but slimy guys who wanted nudes or phishers attempting to troll me."

“And now?” Admittedly, I’m still seeing a lot of that in these comments. There are way too many versions of ‘hey, baby’ and ‘let’s collaborate’ for my liking.

“Now, I know that what I do isn’t for everyone. The people who see me, feel my message resonate, those are my people. My Sunshiners. The people who leave vitriol like this” —she points to a comment about her nose, of all things, which is cute and freckled and perfectly fine—“those are not my people. That doesn’t mean I don’t try to change them, but all I can do is keep being me. Maybe they’ll come around, maybe they won’t. But if one person smiles because of something I post or volunteers because they saw me doing it, or even if someone buys a mascara because I did and they find a product they love, it’s all worth it.”

Wow. Looking at her, I realize why Riley Watson was able to make Riley Sunshine a success. Yes, she’s positive. Yes, she’s smart and beautiful and has all the things people can point out and go, ‘She’s got it.’ But what really makes Riley successful is that she’s somehow tough and determined, but at her core, she’s a truly sensitive soul.

“That’s a lot to handle.”

I mean for her. She’s amazing, so much so that I’m basically blinded by her brilliance.

Riley closes her laptop, setting in on the table to take my hands. “Noah, I’m not going to think less of you if you don’t want to do this, go full reveal. I can’t do what you do, that’s for sure. I could never, ever do all the stuff that you do. So you don’t have to be a part of what I do, either. It’s okay.”

She’s giving me an out. Not of this thing between us but of this corner of her life. I’m just not sure I want it. I know how important her posts and being authentic are to her.

She’s right—she would never make it in the corporate world, and I gave up on the entrepreneur life. But this?

I won’t give up on this. I want Riley, all of her, and if that means being a part of Riley Sunshine, so be it.

“I want to tell the whole world about us. I want to shout it from the rooftops and write it in the sky. I want everyone to see the smiles I give you, and even more, the smiles you give me.”

Riley eyes widen in hopeful surprise, and then she gives me one of those bubbly smiles that make her look like the happiest angel in existence. “Think you’re ready?”

“If you are.”

Riley squeals as she climbs into my lap, straddling me and covering me with sweet, soft kisses all over my face. I grin, loving it, but in the instant before her lips meet mine, I have to ask myself . . . am I ready?

I bury that down, instead asking through Riley’s kisses, “Do I get a cool nickname like Riley Sunshine? Noah Sunshine? Or Naughty Nick?”

Riley’s laugh vibrates against my neck. “Mmm, maybe Moonlight Mark? That way you still get a little bit of anonymity.”

“I like that. The moonlight to your sunlight,” I say, letting my hands trace down her back.

“It was Eli’s idea,” she says.

“I’m liking it a lot less now,” I growl, but Riley reaches down to pull my shirt off and I forget what we were talking about as I lose myself in her warm sunshine.

CHAPTER 20

NOAH

The park's beautiful at sunset. Or it will be in a few minutes when the sun hits the horizon line. Right now, I'm standing at the top of a hill surrounded by trees and a playground where kids are getting their last-minute wiggles out before dinner. I'm waiting on Riley as the sun sinks lower and lower in the sky.

She texted and told me she might be late because a friend, Becky, needed help, and I can absolutely understand that. But according to the weather app, sunset will happen in twenty-two minutes, and I don't want us to miss it. Riley said something about 'golden hour' photos, but I don't know if that's an actual sixty-minute hour or more of a description.

It's one of the adjustments that I've been making, what River calls 'unclenching my asshole'. For years, I've lived by a schedule. You tell me to meet at three in the afternoon, I'm walking in the door at two fifty-eight because a minute earlier, I was working. I packed more and more into each day to make damn sure that when the bad times come, I'd have a bulwark against the storm.

Riley does the same, but in a Sunshine way. She packs her day, but not because she's worried about the bad times but to make the joy of the good times last longer. And so, when a pregnant friend needs a bit of help, a bit of sunshine in her life, Riley's right there. Because that's how she packs her day full.

Somehow, she gets it all done, too.

From the bottom of the hill, I see a flash of yellow and gold, a smile coming to my lips automatically. Amazing how much I look forward to the color yellow nowadays.

“Hey, Sunshine,” I greet Riley as she comes up the hill to me, looking beautiful as always in her knee-high yellow socks, white Doc Martens, black skirt, and yellow top. On anyone else, it’d look like a bee costume gone wrong. But on Riley, it looks happy and sexy and like all that I want in life. “How’s Becky?” I ask, taking the duffle bag at her side.

“Just fine,” Riley says, smiling. “She needed a ride to her prenatal appointment because she’s had a bit of nausea and can’t throw up and drive at the same time.”

I make a face because that definitely sounds like something that could be skipped—by me, Becky, or basically anyone.

“Simon’s in training this week, and I was happy to play chauffeur and be there for the emotional support. But Becky’s good and the baby’s fine. I’m late because I insisted on stopping to get Becky the vitamins that the doctor said would be easiest on her belly and best for the jellybean. Who would’ve known they’d be that hard to find? We went to three pharmacies.”

“Jellybean? Is that the official name?” I ask, hoping not. But people have named their babies stranger things.

Riley laughs. “No, just a cute nickname until they find out the gender.”

“Good. And I bet Becky’s got a nine-month supply of those vitamins now, right?” Riley grins, her shrug saying ‘maybe’ and her innocent glance to the side saying ‘you know it.’ “You’re good to your friends.”

“They’re good to me, like Arielle checking on Raffy tonight. And you’re great for waiting on me,” Riley says, snuggling into my chest and looking up at me sweetly.

“Sunset in fifteen,” I remind her, and she jumps, clapping her hands.

“Yes, let me set up.” She takes the bag back from me, dropping it carefully to the grass to dig around. As she sets up a travel-sized expanding tripod, she asks, “How’re you feeling? You still sure about this? And you know you can

change your mind at any time until I hit *Post*. We can do cute pictures and then hoard them like greedy trolls, maybe only showing them to our family if they feed us cake and pie.”

She’s rambling adorably, but her hands are sure and experienced as she gets everything prepped. “Anxious, excited . . . ready,” I tell her honestly. “I’m not all that photogenic, but I want everyone to know I’ve got my very own sunbeam, and she’s all mine.”

“Whatever, Mr. Model. You know you’re hot, so don’t pretend to be modest with all that ‘oh, not me, I’m just like any other guy’ stuff.” Riley throws her voice deep, I think in an imitation of me, except I’d never say that. She’s right, I’m more likely to arrogantly proclaim my good looks and put them to good use.

“Well, the Sunshiners seem to think so.”

It’s taken us a few days to coordinate our schedules, choose the park as the perfect place, and decide what to wear. In the meantime, Riley’s been building up excitement for the big announcement with more teaser photos.

She’s posted my shoulders from behind in sharp black and white contrast, which garnered more than a few ‘carry me, Daddy’ comments, an extreme close-up of my eye that had people arguing over what shade of brown they are. We’d laughed when someone suggested that Riley ask me to be the deciding factor in the battle and I’d simply said ‘brown’. The best teaser photo was the one of her Docs next to my work dress shoes, though. Apparently, there’s a whole lot of people who subscribe to the edict of big feet equaling a big dick, and those comments went wild. I’d made Riley read a bunch of them to me just to hear her say ‘cock’ and ‘dick’ over and over. That had backfired, though, getting me so riled up I only lasted a minute, while she was still laughing at how silly she thought she sounded talking dirty. To be clear, she didn’t sound silly . . . at all.

Even the memory makes me need to shift a bit to readjust in my slacks.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking about, but keep that smirk. You look arrogant and sexy.” I lift one brow, thinking that not too long ago, those words would not have gone together for Riley, but now, for me, they do. I smirk a bit more, turning up the smolder. “Okay, move to your left a bit?”

That'll be the best background. Ready?"

Riley snaps the shot and nods at the screen. "Good. Okay, here we go . . ."

She runs my way, and I open my arms, wrapping them around her waist as she steps into me. She looks up into my eyes, cocking a leg up as she stands on tiptoe. "I'm glad you're in your boots," I murmur as we touch foreheads. "Makes this a lot easier."

Riley smiles and with her 'hidden' hand hits the remote control she uses for taking photos like this. We stay in the frame, taking another set of photos with our lips touching before Riley turns and I hold her from behind, the two of us looking out at the golden sunlight.

"Some goofy ones too?" Riley asks.

I don't answer, just scoop her up and plant her on my back piggyback style. "Just keep the camera snapping."

We play, not posing at all but rather having fun with each other. I honestly have no idea when the camera shutter closes because I'm lost in Riley . . . in her smiles . . . in my own happiness.

But too soon, the sun sets, the kids on the playground go home with their parents, and the trees become blacker shapes against the dark night sky.

Breathless from rolling around in the grass—yes, for a photo, but mostly because I liked the way Riley's hair looked like spun gold against the green grass—we sit on a bench. Scrolling through the pictures, I feel a growing warmth in my chest, in my heart.

Riley looks stunning in each and every one. Her smile is bright as she looks at me, her eyes alight with emotion, her body turned toward mine. That doesn't surprise me at all. Riley is nearly always happy like this. But what I notice is . . .

I look happy in these photos, happy deep down in my soul. There are no harsh lines between my eyes, no scowls, no worries of what I should be doing written on my face.

I look complete. I look completely different—softer, kinder, blissfully lost in Riley.

“What do you think?” Riley asks, chewing her bottom lip. “I like this one best.”

She’s picked perfectly. It’s from our first set of pics, where we’re looking into each other’s eyes, not kissing, but our gaze says everything necessary. The light’s just right, and I see what she meant by a golden hour. Riley looks beautiful, her hair an angel halo from the sun, and the way she’s looking up at me, I feel like the man I want to be.

She makes me feel like there’s more to the world than what I’ve ever thought possible.

I nod agreeably. “You’re the professional, so I’ll go with whichever one you want.”

Riley flips between the one she’s selected and one of the playful shots where she’s on my back, her mouth open in a way that makes her whoop of surprise almost audible from the photo alone.

“Do you like this one?” Riley asks.

“I’m just here to look good, not paid to offer opinions, though I can get you my consultant rate if you’re interested. But as a freebie, why not post both?” I tease in a salesman’s voice.

Riley bumps me with her shoulder and mutters, “Dork.”

I take it as a win, a solid tally mark for me in the funny column.

“We should talk about what we want to say,” Riley says. “This is about both of us.”

She goes quiet, letting me speak first.

This is hard for me. I’ve gotten better at being open with Riley, better at sharing my emotions. Hell, better at being aware that I even *have* emotions. But this is important, something that needs to be perfect because it’s her brand, her business, her life. Letting me into it, to be a public piece of it . . . while a big deal for me, it’s an even bigger deal for Riley.

“I’m not sure on the exact words. I just want everyone to know that you’ve brought so much to my life. I didn’t know I was living in the dark until I felt your sunshine. You make me happier than I ever dreamed and have shown me the possibilities and opportunities of the world are endless if you open your heart to them. You’re beautiful on the outside of course, but on the inside too, where it really matters, and you share that beauty with everyone you meet—authentically, generously, and without judgment. I know that because that’s what you shared with me. And now I feel . . . the warmth of hope . . . the warmth of you.”

Riley stares at me for a long time, not saying anything. My cheeks heat, embarrassed at how much I just exposed. I want to chase the words, swallow them back down, and hide the vulnerability.

Finally, Riley clears her throat. “I love you too.”

I look up to see Riley with tears in her eyes, tears of happiness. I recognize them this time and don’t panic.

But the words feel alien in my ears. I’ve only ever heard it from the women in my family. It’s hard to say back, not because I don’t feel it, I realize, but because I never knew what this feeling was. But it’s apparent in everything I just said, boldly obvious. “I love you,” I whisper, my voice cracking. “Riley Watson . . . I love you.”

Riley smiles, and we lean in, kissing tenderly. I pull back just enough to laugh quietly, tapping her phone. “Now post this,” I urge her. “Tell the world I love you and you love me, because I want to take you home and make love with you so much that I can barely wait. And I’m not fucking you in the park, no matter how much you beg.”

Riley’s eyes flare at the jump from sweet and lovely to sexy and dirty, but she clicks around on her phone quickly. “Done.”

“Not even close, Sunshine,” I tell her, standing up and pulling her up with me. I grab her duffel bag, half expecting her to be checking the response to the post when I turn around, but her eyes are on me.

Going public is a big deal for Riley Sunshine and Moonlight Mark, but for us . . . we just want to go home. Now.

I HATE THAT WE HAVE TO TAKE OUR SEPARATE CARS TO MY PLACE, BUT WE GET there at the same time, and I waste zero time pushing Riley through the door. “I got champagne to celebrate. Want it now or later?” The question is punctuated with kisses along her jaw and down her neck.

Riley’s smile is pure seduction. “Now.”

“Are we still talking about the champagne?” I murmur against her skin.

She giggles, pushing at me gently. I growl at the idea of stopping but leave her to grab the bottle from the fridge.

“Just bring the bottle,” she says from behind me. “We don’t need glasses.”

Fuck, yes. I want to see Riley with her lips wrapped around the green bottle, chugging champagne like a wild woman. Something about her being so unrestrained is sexy as hell.

I set the champagne on the counter and pop the top. I lift the bottle and toast her. “To Riley Watson, my sunshine.”

I take a drink of the champagne and pull her close, kissing her deeply and letting the bubbly alcohol flow into her mouth. Riley startles at first, and some escapes to dribble down our chins, but then she moans and her tongue tangles with mine as we share the drink back and forth, swallowing when we pull back.

“Is that how you plan on drinking the whole bottle?” Riley’s grinning, swiping at her mouth.

I shake my head, catching her hand in mind to suck the sweet drink from her fingertips. “Nope . . . I plan on licking at least a third of this off your body. I wonder if the bubbles will tickle?”

“One way to find out,” Riley answers, taking me by the hand and leading me into the living room.

She pulls at my shirt, and just as eagerly, I help her with the buttons. Within moments, I’m shirtless and she’s stripped to her socks and boots, which take

too damn long right this moment.

“Sit back and tell me if this tickles,” she orders, picking up the bottle from the table to take a long swig.

Riley gets on her knees and, before I know it, has me in her mouth. The sensation of her talented lips and tongue working over my cock while the effervescent champagne tingles on my skin is like nothing I could ever anticipate. I groan, my hands grabbing a double handful of Riley’s hair. “Mmm . . . that’s it,” I encourage her as she bobs up and down on my stiff shaft. “Fuck, I love your mouth. I love all of you.”

She hums, and as she cups my balls and takes more of me into her mouth, her tongue works the underside of my shaft, teasing me from root to tip as her lips keep a champagne-tight seal around me. She’s not going to waste a drop of this.

I push her down further, not hard but enough to let her feel my control and my hand in her hair as I start thrusting up into her pink-lipped mouth. She looks up, her eyes burning with desire, silently asking for more. I pull her hair slightly and thrust myself all the way into her mouth until I can feel her throat muscles gripping and working the head of my shaft as she swallows the champagne.

“Fuck, baby . . . you ready now? Do you want it in your mouth?” I growl as I feel myself swelling, approaching my limit. Riley blinks, trying to nod but unable to do much more than muffle her assent, and I pull back just in time to explode onto her eager tongue. Riley moans deeply, and I realize she’s been finger-fucking herself, her hand half buried in her dripping pussy. She’s not coming, not yet . . . but the sight has another spasm racing down my spine and through my cock.

Finally, she’s drained the last drop from me and pulls off, swallowing and grinning foolishly.

“My turn,” I reply, climbing off the couch and pushing her to the leather surface. “Lie back,” I order, getting on top of her. I lower my lips to hers, tasting the sexy mix she just sucked down before kissing over her neck, licking her skin, and pinning her to the sofa.

“Noah, I need to come,” she whimpers. “I’m already so close.” I chuckle evilly, letting the sound vibrate on her skin, but not where she wants it. “Noah?”

“You come . . . when I say,” I tell her evenly, looking into her eyes, and she nods desperately.

I drizzle a narrow stream of champagne onto her breasts before licking it up, flicking my tongue over each nipple until her back arches with pleasure. I can feel her squirming, trying to grind her pussy against me, but I tease her, keeping my thigh just far enough away that I’m in total control.

“Mmm . . . you’re torturing me,” Riley groans as I lick lower. I pour a generous amount of the champagne onto Riley’s stomach, making her laugh as I lick the fluid out of her ticklish bellybutton.

“You know you love it,” I tell her, pouring the champagne over her pussy. The cool alcohol makes her gasp, but at the same time, she squirms. “Do the bubbles feel good on your sensitive skin? Can you feel them teasing over your clit and lips along with my hot breath?” She wiggles, and I pin her hips down, not letting her fight the overwhelming sensations. “Now I want my taste.”

Riley’s breath hitches as I cover her pussy with my lips, sucking the heady mix that has my cock hardening again. Riley always tastes delicious, but the lightness of the champagne makes her sweeter, and as I lick her deeply, she moans loudly, encouraging my eager exploration.

“Nobody’s . . . ever made me feel the way you do,” Riley pants out as I flick my tongue over her clit.

“Not just tonight,” I promise her. “I’m going to make you feel like this forever.” It’s an honest vow, not just sex talk.

“*Fuck*,” Riley answers. And that’s how I know my good girl is close. Filthy words start to fall from her naughty lips when she’s past the point of no return. I slide two fingers into her, and guided by the clenches of her inner muscles and her cries, I feast on her, licking and sucking until she’s thrashing her head from side to side, unable to think of anything but the feelings I’m giving her. She’s fully in my control, totally trusting me.

Riley's eyes fly open, and she bucks once, hard, before her stomach clenches and she lets out a guttural cry, coming on my tongue and fingers. I nibble at her, keeping my tongue on her clit until she sags back, her hand coming to the back of my hair to yank me off her.

I pull my fingers out, sucking them clean and then kissing my way slowly up her body to capture her mouth again. "Fuck, you're beautiful when you come for me," I tell her, cradling her in my arms. "Always gorgeous, but that moment is mine. Ours."

"My body wants more . . . but I'm sensitive, can't take another stroke of your tongue," Riley says as an aftershock shudders through her body, agreeing. "You're so intense."

"You inspire me," I murmur.

"Got any more tricks up your sleeve? Metaphorically speaking," she asks, running her hands over my bare chest.

I think, and my mind, that devious, delicious pile of jelly between my ears, gets an idea. Picking her up in my arms, I stand up and grab the mostly empty bottle of champagne.

Riley looks down the hallway toward my bedroom, but I head toward the double doors that lead out to my small balcony.

"What are you doing?" Riley asks, her eyes wide in horror. I grin, noting that public sex isn't her thing. Luckily, it's not mine, either. I don't want to share her.

"Turn around," I tell her, setting her down. She sees my treadmill, and her eyes narrow in confusion. I cup her chin, looking into those angelic blue eyes. "Trust me. Put your feet on those side ridges."

"Then what?" she asks, already pressing her ass back to present herself to me. My sweet, good, and sometimes naughty girl.

I shove my champagne-stained pants and shoes the rest of the way off, and once nude, I mount the belt behind her. I take a drink of the champagne, offer her one, which she takes gratefully, and then set the bottle in the cup holder.

Taking her hips in hand, I slide my hard cock deep into her and start the belt nice and slow. With the side supports of the treadmill and her boots still on, she's just the right height for me to fill her up without having to bend my knees too much.

"Now you control the speed."

The whole city lays out before us through the windows of the double door. Even with the light pollution, we can see the stars and the city lights twinkling. It looks magical.

What's more magical is the feeling of her body, of her pussy gripping me as my hips move naturally from walking. She finds a new pace, a bit faster, where I'm jogging slightly. With every bouncing step, an answering ripple rushes through our bodies. The seesawing motion of my own running takes care of the rest, my cock sliding in and out of Riley's welcoming body as she holds onto the handles and pushes back against me as best she can.

"This is crazy," she moans.

"You make me crazy," I answer. Though I'm breathless from the exertion and how good she feels, I pant out, "I'm just glad I jog every morning. I'm going to think of you like this every time now."

Riley moves, and I slip out of her, but it's only so she can adjust. She swings each leg up and over the handrails so that she's hanging in the air, the bars beneath her knees and her chest pressed to the screen in front of her. "Like this," she tells me.

I slam back into her, now able to use my hands to bounce her down onto me as I thrust up with every step. We find a rhythm, her rocking and me running, fighting off the orgasm as long as we can still breathe because it feels so good.

Riley clenches around me and orders, "Faster, please . . . Noah, fast and hard." She pushes the button beneath her, speeding up the treadmill, and I have to sprint, holding onto her and our bodies jolting hard with every step until I can't take it anymore. With a last jump, I plant my feet on each side of the belt and thrust as hard as I can, grunting loudly as my orgasm takes over and I explode deep inside Riley.

Riley whimpers, unable to make words as she comes one more time at the feeling of me filling her up.

We hold still, the belt whirring beneath us, until with a trembling hand, Riley hits the *Stop* button on my treadmill. We try to step off, but both of us are too spent, and we collapse in an exhausted heap on the unmoving belt, our bodies tangled in one another.

Sometime later—maybe a minute, maybe ten—I feel like I can move again. “Come on,” I urge her. “I’ve got a warm shower and a bed with our names on them.”

Riley smiles dreamily and nods. “Sounds perfect.”

Together, we make our way to the bathroom where we stand under the warm spray, letting it do the trick to wash away the champagne residue. And then, dry and naked, we stumble to the bedroom where I pull back the comforter and blanket before curling up with Riley, who lays her head half on my shoulder, half on the pillow as she looks at me.

“That was amazing,” she sighs.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I tease, and she swats at my chest playfully. “I was a bit worried about the treadmill, but I think it worked out.”

I feel Riley’s cheek lift as she smiles at my silliness, and I squeeze her tightly, enjoying that I can make her smile. I’m still not used to being that for someone, but I’m damn glad I am for her. “I love you, Sunshine,” I whisper into her hair.

“I love you, Moonlight,” she whispers back.

“I think we just made a thing. Is that a thing?” I ask.

Riley wiggles happily, and the warmth of our bodies beneath the blankets makes everything feel more intimate. It feels . . . right.

We feel right.

I want this life with Riley—her in my arms each night, Raffy waking me up with his cold nose every morning, and every moment in between.

As we drift off to sleep, neither of us even thinks about the other big thing that happened tonight. The post on Riley Sunshine's page. It seems secondary to everything else—to our saying, 'I love you.'

CHAPTER 21

RILEY

I almost hate to do it, but I have to. I hit submit on the post, knowing that the influx of fresh images is going to push the ones of Noah and me down my page.

I've been reading the comments on our reveal post all morning, and I'd say they're at least ninety percent positive. So many people are happy for me, intrigued by 'Moonlight Mark', and already wondering when they'll hear wedding bells. Like . . .

JuniorMintzzz930- Please tell me that he's got a twin brother, or maybe even 2?

Like I told Noah, the negative comments don't hit me the way they once did. I can understand people being upset or jealous. I've been there myself, watching friends like Becky and Simon fall in love, get married, and start a family while I focused on work. I didn't begrudge them their happiness. I supported it whole-heartedly, but that doesn't mean there wasn't a tiny thought of 'Why not me?' Of course, no one considers that Riley Sunshine might've been lonely. Honestly, not even me.

But I'm not lonely now, that's for sure. And I'm proud of the pictures of Noah and me. Even if they're moving further down my feed after this morning's auto-post of daily inspiration and the photo album from my collaboration with India.

The photos she took at Big Mike's are amazing. Truly, the best images I've ever had taken. I look fresh, fun, and sunny, with a little dash of sexy in them.

I've never seen myself the way India saw me, which is probably half of what makes her such a stellar photographer.

I send a link to Mike so he can see his diner in all its glory, and if he wants to, follow the comments. I tagged the restaurant in the post too, so hopefully, it'll help boost his business. Not that he needs it, judging by the line of people who were waiting to get in by the time India and I left, but publicity is always good.

I pull a few images that are close-ups of my face, highlighting the cat-eye eyeliner and ruby red lipstick I'd gone with for the shoot, and send them to my contact at Joroast. They're tagged in the album too, but I want to make sure they see what their investment in me is netting them.

And though we've talked back and forth a few times since the shoot to go over the photos, I send India another email to thank her for the amazing experience and beautiful work.

All told, this single post has hours and hours of work involved in it before I hit the submission button, and I'm not even the photographer. I know India also has hours of editing work in the photos. Our work might be different, but nothing online is spontaneously recorded and posted anymore. There's so much that goes into it behind the scenes, even when it looks quick and easy.

I spin in my chair, stretching my arms overhead and wiggling them in the air to get some of the tension out. I have a video conference in thirty minutes, and I've been hunched over my computer since eight AM.

Raffy barks, and I eye the clock, deciding I have time to run him downstairs for a potty break before my call.

"Come on, boy. But you'll have to be fast. No sniffing the whole block when we both know exactly where you're going to pee, 'kay?"

Raffy sticks his nose in the air and twitches his mustache as he struts to the door. I choose to take that as his agreement to my negotiation.

Outside, I'm standing by Raffy's tree, my back turned so he'll do his business, when I hear my name.

"Riley! Oh, my gosh! Hey, girl," a female voice calls.

I turn toward the voice but don't see anyone I know. But there's a young woman waving at me wildly. Her black hair is in matching long braids, her dark eyes rimmed in black liner, and her smile is glistening with gloss. I look to her outfit for a clue, but it's some type of uniform, white pants and a white polo shirt. I have no idea who she is.

"Hi," I say hesitantly. "Sorry, do I know you?"

She laughs and shakes her head as though I said something funny. "No, I guess I just feel like I know you. I follow you online."

"Oh! Well . . . hi!" I give her one of my Sunshine Salutes, my fingers wiggling below my chin as I smile warmly. "What's your name?"

"Myra," she answers, saluting me back.

I grin. I guess I never thought about other people doing the silly move that always makes me smile. I wonder if they do it back to their screens when I wave in videos?

"Nice to meet you, Myra. Are you having a good day?"

"I am now," she jokes, looking a little starstruck. Going serious on me, she adds, "Really, though, it's been tough lately, and when I saw you, I felt like it was a sign. The universe is giving me a chance to tell you how much you mean to me." Her tone is earnest, her eyes sincere, and I can't help but feel for her. She's smiling through pain, that much is clear to see. "Yeah, my guy ghosted, left me with a baby and the bills. And I didn't have a job."

"Oh, my gosh, Myra! I'm so sorry!" I hold my hands over my heart as it breaks for her.

"It's okay. I almost tracked that no-good man down and made him sorry he ever met me. But I'm a good woman." She looks to the sky like she's apologizing for even having the mean thought. "So I took your advice instead. *Even in our darkest days, we can find joy, grow happiness, and share sunshine,*" she quotes me. "And it worked!" Her smile is wide and bright, no trace of the difficulties she's been through.

"What happened?" I ask. If I were sitting down, I'd be on the edge of my seat. Since I'm standing on the sidewalk, I'm dancing from foot to foot in

excitement, much like Raffy, who's ready to go inside and get a treat now that he's done with his potty business.

"I'm not good at much, but what I can do is bake. So I decided to spread a little sunshine myself. My baby's six, and he's got some real good teachers, gonna help make something of him. I baked every one of those teachers a little cake to say thank you for all they do for him. They weren't fancy, but they were tasty. And you won't believe it . . ." She pauses dramatically. "One of those teachers has a son who's a baker. She told me that as soon as she took a bite of my cake, she knew it was something special. She wrapped that bit of cake up, took it to her son when school got out, and made him eat it. And he offered me a job! He's training me to be a baker now too!"

Her joy is infectious, her energy buzzing with happiness, and her pride is well-earned.

Happy tears spring to my eyes, pouring down my face even as I smile. "That is amazing, Myra! I am so thrilled for you."

"Me too, Riley. Me too. And all because of you. If I hadn't heard you say 'spread sunshine' over and over, I wouldn't have thought to make cakes for those teachers. I was barely holding my own head above water, to be honest. But I spread the sunshine, and then somebody gave me some of theirs to brighten my whole life." Myra throws her arms out wide.

"Thank you for sharing that. You brought some sunshine to my day too."

Myra laughs like that's the funniest thing she's ever heard. "Me bring Riley Sunshine *herself* some sunshine? Pshaw, you don't need it, girl. You've always had plenty, and you've got even more now. I saw that man of yours. *Fine* piece of . . . cake."

"Yes, he is," I agree. My phone dings, and I look at the time. "Oh, I'm sorry, Myra. I have to go. I have a meeting in five minutes."

"No worries. I need to get to work, anyway. I only took this way because I was a little early and wanted to enjoy the beautiful day. It's like I was meant to run into you," she says with a smile.

She waves goodbye, a regular wave this time, and continues down the sidewalk.

“Raffy, did you hear that? Mama helped Myra, and she’s doing awesome now.” I’m filled with joy for her and for myself because Myra is a perfect example of the power of the work I’m doing.

Spread sunshine.

It seems like a little thing, but it can mean so much and change someone’s life in ways they never expect.

Back inside, I give Raffy a treat, and he promptly lies down, eyeing me because I told him to hurry and then spent several minutes talking to Myra. But I log in to my conference call just in time.

“Hi, Riley!” the woman says as the video connects.

And it’s back to work . . . making the world a better place.

Fifteen minutes later, Sharon wraps up her pitch.

“So, Riley, what do you say?”

I lean back in my chair, taking a moment to consider. “One hundred percent organic beeswax mood candles that are scented with real extracts sound interesting. What exactly are you hoping to achieve from this partnership?”

“Riley Sunshine is the sort of positive, uplifting energy that we’re targeting because we’re certain your audience and ours overlap enough to forge a new relationship,” Sharon says. She’s technically the company’s president, but I suspect they wear many hats at Positive Vibe Candles. “We’d expect three sponsored photos per month for six consecutive months, with the candle being the primary photo focus in at least one of those monthly shots. And you’d have a private link and code to share for your followers.”

Ah, there it is. This is a lesson I learned the hard way early on. Sponsorships aren’t always the easy money they’re cracked up to be, so I have to be smart about the pay structure and expectations, and that’s after extensively vetting the company. Too many businesses want to only send ‘free’ product and expect you to bend over backward for it like they own you, or they’ll pay well but want you to bring in such a ridiculous amount of traffic that you never see a penny of the promised revenue.

“And the private link and code . . . you’ll be tracking those, of course. If the placements are successful, we’re fine. But what’s the follow-through rate at which you’ll be concerned about the sponsorship?”

We talk business in a bit more detail, but I’m not hearing anything alarming. In fact, it all sounds really good as long as the candles are amazing. I won’t promote something I don’t truly believe in because I won’t risk my hard-earned reputation on shady companies or harmful products.

“I need a few samples to evaluate so I can personally see how they burn, their scents, things like that. But other than that, it sounds like we have a basic agreement?”

Sharon, who’s been looking nervous, sighs in happy relief. “Great! Of course. I already have a six-pack ready to ship to you, if you’d like. And I can email the contract today.”

We wrap up the rest of the call, and I sit back, pleased. Positive Vibe isn’t going to be a huge addition to my monthly income, but every bit adds up.

I make myself a note to follow up on the contract, samples, and dates for possible future posts. That bit done, I look at the clock.

“Oh! Gotta go, Raffy.” He doesn’t move from his place on the couch. Usually, he’s excited for his lunchtime walk, but today, he only opens one eye and it’s glaring at me like, ‘Really? We just came in.’ I guess our morning walk was late . . . and long.

“Fine, be a bag of lazy bones. I have lunch plans anyway, so it was going to have to be a short walk,” I tell Raffy, who’s already closed his one open eye again. Not even the words ‘bones’ or ‘walk’ get him to wake up, so he must really be tired.

I decide to head to my lunch date with Eli a little early and enjoy the beautiful day. I’ve already had three big wins as Riley Sunshine this morning, but a bit of actual sunshine would be nice for me, Riley Watson.

I roll the windows down in my Bug and turn the radio up, singing along as I drive toward Eli’s bank.

As I walk in, Eli gives me a wave. “Hey, Cuddle Fluff, you here to rescue me?” Eli asks, coming over to give me a kiss on the cheek.

“Cuddle Fluff? I think I like Honeychops better. Fluff makes me think of the giant marshmallow monster in *Ghostbusters*.”

Eli laughs. “You don’t choose the name. The name chooses you. And that was the Stay Puft marshmallow man. Cuddle Fluff is like a cozy pillow you want to curl up with for a Sunday nap while it rains outside.” He pulls his arms into his chest like he’s snuggling himself, or maybe an imaginary pillow, I guess. “Mmm, mmm, mmm.”

I lift one brow, not believing him for a second.

“Lunch?” he asks, wisely changing the subject.

“I’m buying. What’s your fancy today?”

“Hmm . . .” Eli muses before rubbing his flat belly. “Well, my naughty side says we go down to Sharkey’s for fried chicken-topped pizza. But the good boy in me says let’s get some subs at Malone’s. So . . .”

“Sharkey’s?” I answer wryly.

At the same time, Eli says, “Malone’s it is.”

Eli checks in with the assistant manager, who tells him she’s got the bank covered for the next hour while he heads out. Minutes later, we’re seated at Malone’s, an old-school deli with some of the best pastrami in town.

“So, being a good boy?” I ask Eli as I notice that he’s got a double serving of lean chicken breast on his sub and more vegetables than I’ve seen him eat in an entire month. He shrugs, taking a bite and chewing thoughtfully.

He’s not as sassy as usual, and I set my own BLT and cheese sub down to look at him carefully. “Eli? Is everything okay?”

Eli sighs, looking at his sandwich with disgust as he sets it down. “You didn’t tell me. I had to hear about it from Arielle.”

It is Noah, of course.

I set my sandwich down too. “Well, we sort of told her unexpectedly, you know.”

“Oh trust me, I know. Actually, I got in a bit of trouble for asking too many pointed questions,” Eli says wryly. “I mean, all I asked was what position you two were in, if the goods were hard or soft, a description of sizes and shapes, and there was something else . . .” Eli taps his chin, looking off like he can’t remember, and I wait for the crazy punchline. “Oh, yeah, if I could watch next time.”

“Eli! That’s his sister. And ew . . . no,” I say with a grimace, even though I’m fighting back laughter. He’s not serious. He never is. He just likes to shock people with the outrageous things he says.

“So what I’m hearing is . . . there’s a chance,” he teases.

“Incorrigible,” I tell him, and he grins. “So, other than hating not being the first to know everything, what’s going on with the good boy act and all that healthy stuff? You’re not exactly known for your good choices.”

That’s mild compared to how we usually tease each other, but to my surprise, Eli flinches slightly. “Damn, right in the feels, woman. I’m definitely sticking with Cuddle Fluff now.”

He’s avoiding the question, so I glare at him, not letting him joke his way out of it. Finally, he says, “I’m just trying to cut some spare weight, maybe put on an extra five or ten pounds of muscle. Be even more of a sex machine than I already am.”

“So . . . what, you’ve found some hot young thing you need to keep up with?” I guess.

A crack starts in my heart for my friends. I don’t know what’s been going on with them lately, but I’d hoped they were figuring it out. I guess not if Eli’s already moving on from their most recent FWB moment.

“More like a classic. I’m trying to gear this engine up for a long drive.”

We are definitely not talking about cars. Eli is a lot of things, and I do mean *a lot*, but a car aficionado is not one of them.

“Is that so?” I ask, gleeful. “Why, Eli Taylor, are you done drag racing?”

Eli laughs as I awkwardly stick with his metaphor. “Maybe.”

“And does *she* know this?” I ask, taking a bite of my sandwich.

“Yes, I’ve told her. I’ve . . . let’s just say I’ve surprised myself at some of the things that have come out of my mouth over the past few weeks.” As if afraid of what he’s going to say now, he takes a huge bite of his sandwich, shoving an escaping bit of lettuce into his mouth.

“I see.” I chew thoughtfully. “But you don’t look happy.”

“That’s because I know my past,” Eli admits as he swallows. “I’ve had a lot of fun, done a lot of things. Done a lot of people, too. And I don’t regret it, not one bit of it. Well, there was one time. I’ll spare you the details this time, but it’s a great story. However, it scared the shit out of me. So I got more careful, learned my lesson. I started growing up, I guess you could say. But now, some of that’s coming back to bite me in the ass.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “How?”

“She knows my past too, and she’s got reservations. Like I said, I get it. I change *cars* like some people change socks, and I don’t have a good track record with commitments. She wants to know for sure that I’m not just going through a phase. So while I’ve put myself out there for her, she’s still . . . questioning whether to buy or lease.”

I raise my brows and look at Eli’s sandwich. “And do you think putting on five pounds of horsepower is going to earn her answer?”

“No,” Eli admits grudgingly, “but it gives me something to do to help focus myself. And I have to admit, it’s pretty easy to focus when I’m being a good boy, eating right, lifting hard, and . . . well, being there for her.”

“And that’s all you need to keep doing,” I assure him. “She’s had a lot of men walk out on her, her father being the biggest one. And I’ve known her even longer than you. Time after time, men come in with sweet words and big promises, only to walk out of her life. Hell, even at her job, she forms a friendship with some of these old folks and they pass away on her. She knows loss—she expects it—so she’s careful with her heart, keeping it

hidden behind protective walls and disguised with sassy comebacks.”

He’s quiet, thinking about that for a moment. Quiet, contemplative Eli is an unusual sight, which makes me think there’s a lot of truth to what he’s saying. “She’s trying to push me away, challenging me at every turn to test if I’m gonna bail. But I want to be there for her, Riley. And not just short-term.”

I pat Eli’s hand comfortingly. It’s funny, really. With their history, the shoe’s definitely on the other foot. Eli is typically the one running from any commitment, but it seems that he’s the one chasing now.

“Keep being there, Eli. No matter the test. She notices. That I can promise you.”

Eli nods, and we eat the rest of our sandwiches quietly.

After a bit, he laughs softly. “You realize we went that whole conversation without saying her name?”

“Whose? Voldemort’s?” I ask, and Eli laughs a little louder. “That’s the Eli I know. Look, you want to put some muscle on, do it. But the muscle she’s going to care about the most is the one deep inside your chest, not the ones on your arms. And that muscle’s pretty damn strong already.”

I put my hand over my heart, hoping he can stay the course however long it takes Arielle—I mean, Voldemort—to decide he means it.

Eli nods and wipes his mouth. “Thank you.” A switch flips in his eyes, and he says, “Now, back to our original topic. Exactly how naked were you two when she came in and busted you? Explain everything . . . slowly . . . and in detail.”

He closes his eyes, his fingers at his temples like he’s willing the image to appear in his mind.

I throw my wadded-up napkin at him. “None of your business, pervert!”

“Fine.” He huffs, rolling his eyes. “Can’t you give me something, though? I’m dying here.” He lets his head fall to the side, his tongue lolling out.

“Well, there was the time on the treadmill . . .” I let my voice taper off as Eli perks up, his eyes suddenly bright and locked on me expectantly. “But that’s private,” I finish with a wink, and he groans in disappointment.

“Ugh, I love you, girl, but I hate you. You’re taking away all my fun.”

“I think you’re getting plenty of *fun*. I’m just glad that’s not enough now and that you’re looking for something more,” I tell him proudly. “Do you know the most important part of friends with benefits?”

“The benefits,” he says, hands wide like ‘duh’.

“No, Cuddle Fluff,” I say, using his own nickname against him. “The friends part.”

He smiles, and I know he hears me. But it’s going to take time.

When they figure it out, Arielle and Eli are going to be amazing together. They have a strong foundation of friendship, obviously get each other sexually, and they’re putting in the work to build their relationship properly from the ground up as they change the rules from their previous arrangement.

I just hope it doesn’t take too long because a double date with them would be awesome! I think about telling Noah that tonight but decide maybe I’ll keep that brilliant idea to myself for now. I’m not sure he’s ready to hear more about his sister’s love life when she’s been so close to ours recently. It’d help if she’d quit texting him toga pictures when he least expects it, but I’ll admit, that’s pretty funny. And so like Arielle.

CHAPTER 22

NOAH

“*Noah, Lady Elisa would like to see you in her office,*” Gina says on her end of the line. “*Are you busy right now, or can I tell her to expect you soon?*”

While Lady Elisa doesn't demand us to jump at her every request, I've found it's not a bad idea to do so, especially if you want to stay in her good graces. If she asks if you're busy, you better have a pretty damn good reason to not drop what you're doing and get up there. Like a fire. Or a rabid dog currently chewing on your ankle.

Or maybe a zombie apocalypse . . . but I think Lady Elisa's tough reputation would scare off any undead threats. Whether *Shaun of the Dead* slow style or *World War Z* speedsters, she'd stop them with a stare.

“I'll be up there in two minutes,” I assure Gina. “Thank you.”

Locking my computer, I grab my jacket and head upstairs, where Gina's alone in the front office area. “Hello, Gina. Holding down the fort alone?”

“Something like that,” she says, giving me a smile. It's an unfamiliar gesture, and I realize that until now, she'd smile for River but not for me. Have I been that much of an asshole to everyone? “She's in her office. Go on in.”

Lady Elisa's office, as always, inspires me as I step inside. Motivation, maybe a bit of envy, and an overwhelming sense of awe . . . I'm not sure how to put it all together into words. I just know that I want an office like this someday and that I'll do anything to make it happen. With my nose to the

grindstone for the hard work, a dedication to learning, and even a bit of luck, I feel more confident than ever that I can do it.

Although I still have plans to change the desk placement and get rid of that awful red throne chair. Black leather will suit me better, I decide.

“Noah, I’m glad you could come up so quickly,” Lady Elisa greets me, simultaneously indicating one of the chairs in front of her desk. “Please sit down. I want to have a talk.”

I take one of the chairs, doing my best to stay calm. This isn’t her informal sitting area, which means she wants to talk business. And she’s getting right to it. No small talk or offers of coffee. “Of course. What can I do for you?”

“Talk to me about the latest on BlindDate,” she demands.

I feel like this has all the hallmarks of being a trap. Lady Elisa doesn’t often ask things she doesn’t already know the answer to, and I’m certain with BlindDate being the company’s most recent launch, she’s got her finger on the pulse of the stats. But perhaps she’s checking my assessment?

If so, I’m on solid ground. “Downloads and utilization rates are steady, even showing a small increase. We’ve released an initial update, making the questionnaire more user-friendly and adding in a few additional parameters. The coding team is also working on a way to add profile personalization, letting users . . . for lack of a better term . . . ‘decorate’ their profile to give a better sense of who they are to prospective matches. Virtual stickers, backgrounds, effects, and so on.”

Elisa’s chin rests on the back of one hand as she listens to me, her eyes ticking from me to the computer screen on her desk. I suspect she’s looking at either the spreadsheets of data or the actual BlindDate app. She hums thoughtfully.

“Is there something specific you want to know?” I ask, feeling like I’m missing something even though I answered her question efficiently.

“What have you learned during your time at Life Corp?” Elisa asks directly, her eyes suddenly locked on me, pinning me in place.

I swear my stomach drops through my ass, ruining her fancy chair.

Why does it sound as though this has become a dismissal interview moments before I'm escorted off the property? Are the numbers not what she'd hoped either? They're not bad by any stretch, but 'good enough' never truly is enough. Not for me, and not for Elisa. Is that why River isn't here? If it's a numbers game, that rests solidly on my shoulders. We've always said River's the idea man and I'm the implementation guy. I guess that's coming back to haunt me.

I swallow thickly, thinking quickly about what I want to say. If this is going to be my last chance to work with Lady Elisa, I'm going to be honest and tell her everything.

"You're a mentor to me. In the years that I've been at Life Corp, I've learned by watching how you do things—your driving force and how it determines your process, analysis, and action. More than once, I've overcome a problem or an obstacle simply by applying something I learned from you. Our conversations are nuggets of wisdom that I use every day to make myself a better executive for Life Corp.

"More recently, I've learned that it's not about me and my goal to sit where you are. Or at least, not *only* about that," I tell her quietly.

I'm not ashamed of the workaholic habits I've cultivated because they've gotten me to where I am and my family to where they are. But there's more to life than I ever considered, and that's important too, shaping how I work now and how I see myself working in the future.

"It's about the people around me, about the workers who fill the desks on every floor. It's about everyone from Steve the security guard to Gina and Tina. Because we all have worth, add value, and can offer important insights. We work together as a team to provide the best experience for our end-users, no matter the app."

Elisa nods, a faint look of surprise on her face, though her brows don't lift more than a centimeter. "Can I ask you a personal question, Noah?"

More personal than that? I'm pouring my heart out here!

I nod silently, giving the expected permission.

Elisa leans forward, interlacing her fingers on her desk to stare down her nose at me. “It sounds like that’s a new revelation for you . . . the people around you being important. Would you say that’s true?”

My reputation as a grumpy asshole has never been thrown in my face quite so succinctly.

“Unfortunately, yes. I have tended to keep a select few close—my family, mostly—and leave everyone else on the outside, but I’m growing to trust more.” My brow furrows as the thoughts come to me. “Or more like, I’m starting to see that everyone has important things going on that matter to them too. Growing up, I didn’t have the luxury of thinking of other people that way. It was all I could do to worry about my mom and sister, but now . . . we’re in a better place, I’m in a better place, and it’s time for me to take off those blinders. Does that make sense?”

As I speak, a memory floats through my mind . . .

It’s my birthday . . . one after Dad left but before Mom went back to school.

“Happy birthday, Noah,” Mom says, handing me a box. Arielle is playing at a friend’s house, and it’s just the two of us in our tiny kitchen for now. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here this morning when you got up so I could tell you then, but I had an early shift.”

“I understand, Mom,” I reply, taking the newspaper-wrapped box and looking down at it. It’s been eight months since Dad left, and while he sends a few bucks here and there, it’s never enough and things are rough. Mom’s been working extra shifts trying to cover the gaps while not letting the strain show as she tries to buy food, clothes, water, electricity, and all that.

Maybe Arielle doesn’t notice. But I do.

I’ve been trying to help where I can, being stingy with the peanut butter and jelly when I make lunch to make the jars last longer and skipping the milk in the store-brand macaroni and cheese that we have for dinner.

I take care of Arielle on Saturdays, watching cartoons quietly in the morning and going to the park in the afternoons so Mom can sleep.

And I haven't told Mom that my tennis shoes are too small and my big toes are pressing against the end . . . again. I keep growing, sizing out of my clothes before they wear out. Unlike Mom's jeans, which are getting white at the knees because she wears them to work and at home.

And now . . . I can feel the weight of the box, the heavy thump of what's inside. She noticed. She knew anyway, even though I tried to hide it.

"Open it," Mom says excitedly. She's bouncing around with her hands fisted below her chin like a kid on Christmas who can't wait to see what Santa brought. She's happier about the gift than I am. Especially since my stomach is filled with stones.

I muster a smile and tear through the newspaper to find the shoe box I expected it to be. Opening the lid, I see a nice pair of black and white Nike sneakers. They're not Jordans like the kids at school have, but I know these must've cost Mom her entire paycheck.

"Do you like them?" Mom squeals. "Try them on."

I want to. Desperately.

But looking at the exhaustion at the corners of my mother's eyes, I know that some prices are too high to pay.

"Mom, if you don't mind, I had a different birthday wish," I tell her, handing the box back. "Uhm, if the store would let you take those back, I saw a pair at Walmart with red laces that I love. Could we get those instead?"

Mom blinks, her smile falling, and I can see emotions in her eyes. Anger at her situation that she's in, shame that she's even considering my offer, and sadness that she's failed at hiding her struggles from her son.

A little bit of my childhood dies in that instant, but at the same time, something else grows when I see something else in her eyes.

Pride in the man I'm becoming.

I haven't been that little boy in a very long time. After that, Mom went to school, got a certificate, and we did better. I grew up, went to college, and became successful. But I never moved beyond the fear.

What if that became my life again?

What am I willing to do to prevent that?

How do I protect Mom and Arielle?

“I think that’s very mature of you, Noah. It’s important that we recognize where we’ve come from and how it shapes us but also allow current experiences and conditions to form us into something new. I’ve seen that happening with you recently, which excites me. It shows that you’re aware of your own limitations but willing to bust through them if given the opportunity to be molded into something better.”

Elisa sits back in her chair, and I feel compelled to fill the moment of silence.

“Thank you,” I tell her, truly appreciating the compliment and that she’s noticed the changes in me too. Though I guess I should still worry that maybe I’ve been walking through life with everyone thinking I’m a complete monster, arrogant and narcissistic and unaware of how I was perceived.

“Opportunities are strange things, presenting themselves when you least expect them but requiring you to take advantage of them quickly.”

Elisa is leading me somewhere, but I’m the only one of us blind, with no map or any hint of the destination. The only thing I’m sure of right now is that whatever this is, it doesn’t seem to be a meeting to blindside me with being fired over BlindDate stats. But I can feel the walls of the trap closing in, each of these questions slowly backing me into a corner I didn’t see.

I nod, not sure how to respond without putting my back to the wall.

“I hear you’re in love.”

I blink, surprised. This has been one emotional whiplash of a meeting, that’s for damn sure. “How’d you hear about that?”

I understand that Riley and I went public on her page yesterday, but it’s been less than twenty-four hours, and Elisa Montgomery is more the type to do a morning business page check than a social media check.

“I have my ways,” Lady Elisa tells me slyly. “Specifically, an executive assistant who thinks Riley Sunshine is the hottest new thing. An opinion

shared by my daughter. I took a look. She seems to have a good following in a niche market.”

From a businesswoman like Elisa, that’s high praise.

“And you met her through BlindDate,” Lady Elisa continues. My jaw drops, and she winks. “As I said, I have my ways.”

“I’m beginning to wonder if you’ve got superpowers,” I say uncomfortably.

Talking to my family about Riley is one thing, talking to my boss quite another. And no one outside our circle knows how we met. Though I wouldn’t put it past Elisa to be running her own stats on the app. I’d like to get my hands on those and see what she looks for compared to what I look at. Though figuring out the naming constructs seems to be a bit of an overreach, but there’s no other way she’d know I’m Mark and Riley is Rachel.

Unless River?

No, he wouldn’t. I know that much. I think.

She laughs. “I wish. However, I find the most useful superpower to be courage. Making use of those opportunities I mentioned. Like your situation.”

“Situation?” I parrot.

“What an app like BlindDate needs is a happy ending. Members, prospective and existing, need to know that BlindDate *works*. And your relationship with Riley is a golden example of that. Two people taking a chance on love, using the latest technology and AI to find their perfect match, a meet-cute, and then . . . voila, love and a happily ever after. It’s utterly genius.”

Elisa is excited, creative energy pouring over her red lips as she makes Riley and me sound like the latest Hallmark movie.

“It doesn’t hurt that she’s a social media darling and you’re an executive. I think we could even spin the fact that BlindDate is your creation to show the good faith you put in your own product.”

“Mine and River’s.” I correct the last thing she said because my brain is still digesting everything else, spinning around like a blender that can’t break up ice into manageable pieces, making a harsh whirring sound and threatening to

burn out.

Elisa waves her hand like that's a minor detail. "The rest, Noah. What do you think about the rest?"

My brain still hasn't figured out the reset button, but my gut is screaming at me. If ever there were a time to listen to it, it's now. "I'm sorry, but . . . no," I tell her, shocked at my own balls. "Neither Riley nor I are looking for publicity with this. In fact, that's why we hid our identities at first. And now that we're together, I want things to be pure."

Elisa's lips press together as though she expected me to jump at this idea, no matter the fact that it's absolutely crazy. "Noah, perhaps you misunderstood. I'm not asking you and Riley to be anything other than yourselves. I'm not asking you to fake anything or lie to sell the app. I want you to be as genuine and authentic as you can be. That's what makes this so great."

"I get that. But this is mixing our business and personal lives in a major way. A very public one."

"I'd argue that posting yourself on Riley Sunshine's feed is pretty public," Elisa says flatly. "Especially with the lead-up photos building interest and excitement. Riley seems to know and use subliminal marketing tactics well. I'm only looking to expand that with upfront, honest endorsement." She pauses dramatically, letting her words sink in. "Let the world benefit from your story and renew that hope that there's someone out there for everyone and that maybe, just maybe, they can find that special someone on BlindDate. I would think that's quite in line with Riley Sunshine's message."

The way she says it makes it seem not so crazy. Elisa is so persuasive and intense. And not asking us to lie or fake anything. Maybe it is an opportunity to show BlindDate's possibilities?

"And we'd pay Riley, of course. A sponsorship like this could be very lucrative for her too. I don't know what her current sponsorship endorsement fees are, but I guarantee we'll pay considerably more."

Elisa sits back in her chair and smiles. "As I see it, it's a win all the way around. We can highlight the success of BlindDate, something you've worked on for a long time. Riley gets an assured sponsorship that will

increase her visibility and profitability. And best of all, it's authentic, genuine love that can't be manufactured, which is why everyone will go nuts to support you two and celebrate what you've found. My understanding is that Riley likes to 'spread sunshine', as she says? Well, I'm seeing a total solar eclipse."

Wait, isn't that when the sun is blocked?

Focus on the important things, Noah. And newsflash, it's not science right now. It's business. And Riley.

I'm not sure about everything Elisa has said. And most importantly, this isn't a choice I can make alone. Riley and I need to talk about this . . . a lot.

And I need to gather my wits so that I can have a conversation with Elisa without sounding like a stumbling, stuttering moron.

I take a deep breath and nod. "I need to talk with Riley about this. I've got twenty-five friends online. Riley's the one with over a half-million followers. But . . . I'll talk to her."

"Thank you," Lady Elisa says, obviously thinking she's got this in the bag. "Your story, Riley's story . . . it touches me. And I would love for the world to have the chance at that too. We all deserve love."

Elisa puts her hand over her heart, her smile sweet and gentle. I swear I feel the claws of the trap she's set slam shut around me.

She's good. Really good. And I'm in over my head with her, but I won't be smooth-talked into doing something that won't work for Riley and me.

But maybe it could work? We did find our happily ever after with BlindDate. Why can't others too? Especially if it helps Riley too.

CHAPTER 23

RILEY

“*R*owf!” Raffy barks from beneath my feet.

I click *Save* on the draft I’m working on, a post about a new pair of earrings made from entirely recycled e-waste. You’d never be able to tell by looking at them, but the hoops used to be part of a smartphone. The core of the hoop is aluminum that’s been coated in gold, with twin baubles that look like polished jade but are actually ground up circuit board plastic that’s been recast and then shaped by hand.

The earrings aren’t from a sponsor company but rather an opportunity to support a good cause. Not everyone can get out and volunteer, though I definitely highlight that on my page, but we can all have an impact on bettering the world. Like donating e-waste to a small company who reuses it creatively, supporting them with our purchase power, and encouraging the causes we believe in like recycling.

I’ve got the bulk of the post done, including some statistics and important information, but I want to find or write the perfect quote to use as the tagline to really inspire my Sunshiners.

“I know, Raffy. I’m ready too, but we’re waiting on—” I start before there’s a knock at the door. “Never mind, there’s Noah now. You ready to walk?”

At the familiar word, Raffy goes nuts, running around and barking. I try to get him to calm down while opening the door for Noah. “Hey, come on in. Let me get Raffy’s leash on or he’ll probably make a run for it.”

We don't have any specific plans tonight, having talked about a nice, long walk and dinner but not much else. I like that, though. It's a blend of Noah's need to have the whole evening mapped out and my confidence that something spontaneous will happen and it'll be great.

Will we get takeout or find some hole in the wall diner neither of us has ever been to? Maybe skip dinner entirely and only eat ice cream? As long as we know there will be food of some sort, it's enough of a plan for us both.

Noah comes in, closing the door behind himself and telling Raffy, "You'd better behave, man. You have a cushy gig here . . . good food, daily walks, allowed to get on the couch, and the prettiest mama ever."

"Aw, you're so sweet," I say, standing to greet Noah now that I've got Raffy's leash hooked to his collar. I meet Noah's lips with mine, soft and tender, but suddenly, I fall into him. "Ahh!"

He stumbles too but manages to stay steady on his feet. Looking down, I see that Raffy has run a full circle around us in his excitement, wrapping us in the leash and tying us together.

"Raffy, are you ever going to stop being a fluffy cockblocker?"

"Technically, he was tying us together this time," I say with a flirty twist of my lips.

He might be grumpy about Raffy's interruption, but Noah pats Raffy on the head as he safely untangles our feet. Raffy tries to jump into Noah's arms, but there's no way he could get that high, even with a running leap from the couch.

"Rowf!"

"I'm gonna hold you to that promise later," Noah promises.

I pull on running shoes, noting that Noah must've gone home before coming over because he's in gray sweats, cut off at the knees, a white T-shirt, and running shoes. I haven't seen him in full casual gear too often, but he does seem to have a propensity for gray sweats since I mentioned them. *Sweet, sexy man.*

We get outside, and Raffy immediately beelines for his tree. While Noah and I both turn our backs to give him a bit of privacy, Noah asks, “How was your day?”

“Amazing, actually. The reveal post is getting tons of likes and comments, mostly positive, which I’m sure is because of the ‘male model’ I’m with.” I tease him, and he gives me a *Zoolander* Blue Steel model look, pursing his lips and eyeing me vacantly. I laugh and push at him, but he doesn’t budge.

“And I posted India’s photos, which are blowing up in a major way for us both. The sponsorship meeting about the candles went really well too. They’re sending me the contract and samples to review. But the best part? Well . . . the first best part? I met a woman named Myra right here in this very spot. She told me how she spread sunshine and ended up with a new job at a time when she really needed it.”

My smile stretches my cheeks. I’m still so over the moon excited for Myra.

“She’s a Sunshiner?” he clarifies, and I nod. “That’s great. Inspiring the masses, that’s my girl. And the second-best part?” Noah prompts, reminding me.

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” I tell him as we start to walk down the block. “I had lunch with Eli. It sounds like he and Arielle are going to figure stuff out. It’s just going to take some time. She’s skittish, especially of Eli.”

His lips curl in a snarl. “I’m not sure that’s a good thing. My sister and Eli? I don’t think I’ll ever be okay with that.”

“Arielle’s a big girl, and she’s making Eli work for it,” I say as I pat Noah’s chest soothingly. “It sounds like he’s going to stick around through the obstacle course to get Arielle’s heart, though. Gotta give him credit for that.”

“How about if I give him credit after he sticks around and makes her happy? Till then, I’m reserving judgment and protecting Arielle.”

He sounds like every big brother of a little sister, and the idea makes me laugh a little. “I’m sure she’ll appreciate the restraint before you jump into her love life. It’s progress, at least.”

“Is it concerning that my *not* killing him before he can hurt her is considered progress?” he muses.

I tap my chin like I’m giving it serious thought. He’s not a real risk to Eli and actually does a pretty good job of letting Arielle control her own destiny. Mostly because Arielle would castrate anyone who got into her business without an invitation.

“How about your day? Anything exciting?”

“It was . . . interesting, to say the least. I got called into Lady Elisa’s office.”

“A good call or a bad call?” I ask, holding back the jokes for now because I know how important Elisa is to Noah as the company’s president and also as a role model.

“A good call, I’d say. She started off by asking me about BlindDate and what I’ve learned at Life Corp. It was kind of weird and personal. But then, she brought out the big guns, reminding me why she’s Lady Elisa of Life Corp. Let’s just say it’s no accident.”

I can’t read Noah’s face. He’s not smiling, but he doesn’t look grumpy either. More dazed, I guess.

“What’d she say?” I ask.

“There are always opportunities,” Noah says, sounding like he’s quoting Elisa. “In fact, she offered one to me at the end of the meeting. Well, an opportunity for you, really. She wants to use our story to promote BlindDate.”

I stop in the middle of the sidewalk, feeling shocked by what came out of Noah’s mouth. “She wants to . . . what?”

“She wants to offer you a contract to sponsor and promote BlindDate,” Noah repeats, grinning now. “Well, for *us* to. We can share what we’ve found together with the world. It’ll draw thousands . . . maybe millions of people to the app and to your brand.”

What? Wait . . .

My brain replays his words, assuming I’d misheard.

No, that's exactly what he said. So again . . . what?

A sponsorship with BlindDate, with Life Corp? That could be major, much larger than any partnership I have now. But that comes with goods and bads. I should think about it, but my brain and my gut are already shouting the answer at me, and I've learned to trust my instincts. They've never steered me wrong.

"Noah . . . I don't *want* Life Corp to sponsor me," I tell him, and Noah stops, looking confused.

"You don't?"

I shake my head, taking a deep breath. "No, Noah. I . . . I don't want Life Corp using our story at all. I don't want the world to hear that we met on BlindDate."

"But it's the truth," Noah says tightly. "I was hesitant at first too, but I thought about what Elisa said, and it makes a lot of sense. There are all these people out there looking for a connection. That's what Riley Sunshine offers them, and in a different way, what BlindDate offers too. We can help each other while helping all those people out there."

"You think it'd be good for me, for Riley Sunshine, to have Life Corp use my brand for something like this?" I ask, trying to keep calm and not doing a great job of it. "I've worked too hard to build my reputation to tie it to another company so directly. Especially when I'm a small fish in a Life Corp-sized pond. I'd be completely swallowed up by it. I don't want to be used that way."

"You had no problem using me for your gain," he snaps. "I'm no social media savant, but I knew going on your page—picture after picture, like after like, comment after comment—was a risk. I mean, I was with you when you got recognized at the park. But I still did it. It's your life, and you share it, all of it, with your Sunshiners. And I want to be something you share, not something you hide."

He's pacing back and forth as he speaks, his eyes tracking from me to his shoes to the sky as though he doesn't know where to focus.

“I do want to share you. I mean . . . with the followers. But only if you want to. We don’t have to do that.”

“That ship has already sailed. How many likes, how many comments did you get on the reveal pictures of us, Riley?”

It sounds like an accusation, like I’ve already been found guilty of something in his eyes, but I don’t know of what. We decided to do that together—the pictures, the words, the post. I thought it was special, but it feels tainted now.

“A lot,” I mumble.

“How many?” Noah barks, finally locking his eyes on me.

“Almost one hundred thousand likes, and around eighteen thousand comments,” I answer quietly.

“So you’re not ashamed to use me, to be seen with me. I guess that’s good. Is it just the BlindDate then?” Bitterness does not sound good on him.

Use him? I’m not using him. In fact, I literally told him I didn’t want to do that.

I’m happy because of him, and that’s worth sharing. With my followers, with the world. But not . . . how we met. That’s . . . *embarrassing*.

“Noah, I have this image as Riley Sunshine.” I hiss the name quietly because people are starting to look at us arguing on the sidewalk. “One I’ve worked really hard to build. But if I tell everyone that I was so lonely I had to use a dating app, so scared of being recognized by people and judged a loser that I didn’t want my face out there, what does that make me?”

“I don’t know . . . human? Imperfect? Isn’t that the authentic self you’re always preaching about?” The dig is way below the belt, deep into my soul.

“And that dating app? It’s my heart and soul, something I poured every bit of myself into to create,” he confesses, beating on his chest with every word. “But I guess that’s not good enough for Riley Sunshine, is it? Maybe I’m not good enough for Riley Watson either.”

Noah turns, walking away from me, and I want to run after him.

I don't understand how our walk turned into this, but I want to fix it. But I also don't want to be plastered on billboards as some lonely, desperate woman who had to use an app to get a date.

"Noah!" I call to him, my voice cracking and tears threatening to fall. "Don't you get it?"

Fifty yards away, Noah turns, his face still filled with pain and anger. "I got it!" he yells back. "I get that you *only* want to share the sunshine. But that's not real, Riley."

He turns and starts walking again, and this time, I don't try to stop him. Because my sunshine's gone, replaced with the gray, gloomy rain of tears down my cheeks.

CHAPTER 24

NOAH

*T*he knock at my door doesn't surprise me.
Neither does who's on the other side of it when I open up.

I've been waiting for this. For him.

I take a steadying breath, focusing my mind. And then I clench my jaw and tighten my abs before I open the door just in case he throws a cheap sucker punch with no warning.

River is standing in the hallway, his arms crossed over his chest and feet spread wide, bouncer style. His eyes are ice, and there's a muscle popping in his jaw. He's wearing workout clothes, so either he changed into things he doesn't mind getting stained with my blood or he was at the gym when Riley called him.

He's trying to make himself look as big and scary as possible.

I'm scared of a lot of things. But I'm not scared of him.

"You going to hit me?" I ask River.

"Maybe." He shrugs like he hasn't quite decided what to do, but he's here, and I know how this goes. We've done this before, twice now, over Riley. When we were not much more than kids, at dinner recently, and now tonight. Maybe the third time's the charm and I'll finally quit fucking up.

Doubt it.

“Why maybe?” I feel like pushing my luck. Since storming away from Riley and getting in my car, I’ve been feeling dangerous. Self-destructive. Maybe I want to get hit. Maybe I want to hit River so he doesn’t have a choice. He’ll come back at me, I know he will, and then I can replace all this hurt in my chest with pain in my joints and face. I’ll take bruises and blood over heartache any day.

“Because I want to hear your side of things, and you can’t talk with a broken fucking jaw,” River growls. He pushes past me, not waiting for an invitation, and struts into my apartment.

I can’t fight him now, not when he has his back to me. He sits on my couch, making himself at home. Dammit. I can’t fight him sitting down either.

I’m not going to get the fight I’m spoiling for. At least not yet.

“Sit down. Tell me,” River demands, pointing at the chair.

I want to refuse. If I can’t fight, I want to pace around the room and get this fury and confusion out. At a minimum, I need that.

But I also need to figure out what the hell happened. I didn’t go into that conversation with Riley thinking it was going to turn into some blow-up fight. I expected it to be a good thing for us both. I need to understand, and maybe River can help with that.

River, for better or worse, is my person, the only one who knows the way my head processes and my heart beats. Arielle knows me too, but not like my best friend. I’ve protected her from so much her whole life, and though she’s grown, I can’t start laying my problems at her feet. So River is it for me.

Resigned, I sit in the damn chair. River’s brow lifts in victory.

Running my fingers through my hair, I sigh. “She called you?”

River nods, his eyes tight and his teeth grinding together. “I was working out when she called. Took me fifteen minutes to figure out what the fuck she was trying to say because she was sobbing so hard. Even then, it barely made any sense. Something about her brand, and sponsors, and you and Life Corp? All I got for sure is that you walked away, left her standing on the sidewalk alone.”

It's like a kick in the balls, and my head drops as I start nodding.

Walking away . . . the one thing I promised I'd never do because it's all too familiar.

"Natalie! Get in here," Dad yells as his palm hits the kitchen table. I can't see him from the living room, but I know that thundering boom of anger in his voice and recognize the hollow sound the cheap table makes as it bounces on the tile floor.

And Mom's rushing footsteps? All too familiar.

I know what's coming. We all do—the yelling and screaming, the tears and pleas for understanding.

I gather up Arielle and a couple of toys. "Come on, it's a pretty day. Let's go out front and play."

"I don't want to go outside. I'm hungry," Arielle whines.

I look to the kitchen, knowing that there is nothing in this world that could make me go in there right now. I grab a tiny bag of trail mix from my school backpack instead, glad I didn't eat it yesterday. "Here, you can eat this outside. And if you want, we can sneak the squirrels a few peanuts." It's the only hope I have of getting her out happily.

Arielle accepts the snack and dutifully follows me to the yard. I close the door as quietly as I can, blocking the noise of the fight from Arielle and the neighbors. But I listen. I have to so that I can protect Arielle and Mom if it comes to that.

A few minutes later, I hear what I've been waiting for.

"I'm out of here," Dad shouts.

The garage door whirs open, Dad's car backing out almost before it's up all the way. With a clank of a shifter and a screech of tires, he roars down the street.

I take a deep breath, knowing we're safe for the night.

The memory rocks me, and before I know it, hot, bitter tears are trickling down my cheeks.

“Walked away,” I repeat River’s words. “That’s the one thing I said I’d never do. I swore I’d never be like him.”

“Your dad?” River says, catching up with my mental trip down memory lane.

I nod. “When he left, I was glad. I was relieved. He’d been this huge presence, sucking all the life out of our family. It was hard financially after he was gone. We struggled for food, to keep a roof over our heads. But for the first time, I wasn’t scared.”

Admitting the fear I held inside as a child is hard, even all these years later. I let out a shuddering breath, wiping the tears away and willing them to stop. I won’t cry over him. I didn’t then, and I certainly won’t now.

“Are you scared now?” River asks quietly.

“Fucking terrified. I don’t want to be like him, walking out when things get hard. And I damn sure don’t want people—*don’t want Riley*—to be glad when I walk away.”

River gets up, coming over to sit on the coffee table in front of me. With his knees spread wide and his elbows resting on his thighs, he looks me directly in the eyes.

“The last fucking thing Riley felt when you walked away was glad, or relief, or any of that shit. You’re not him. I don’t even know the fucker and I know that.” River’s reassurance seals over a fracture in my soul. If the person who has known me the longest and knows me best thinks I’m redeemable, there must be some shred of truth to it.

“Thanks, man,” I say, swallowing thickly.

River dips his chin. “Okay, now that we’ve got that out of the way, how about you tell me what the fight was about? Because I still don’t know, and I need to decide whether I’m going to kick your ass or not.” Even as he threatens me, I can see the hint of a smile ghosting across his lips.

I lean back in the chair, staring at the ceiling and replaying everything in my mind. “Honestly, I have no idea,” I say, resigned that whatever it is, it’s my fault.

“Start at the beginning.”

I look at him directly. “I love her. That’s the most important part. And loving Riley comes with . . . sunshine and Sunshine, if you know what I mean.” I do Riley’s cute little salute with my fingers below my chin, and River nods in understanding. “We went public on her page, which I get is a big fucking deal for her. It’s a big fucking deal to me too. People see that stuff, lots of people. People I didn’t even think about . . .”

“Like who?” River prompts, rolling his hand at the wrist in a ‘come on, out with it’ move.

“Elisa. She called me to her office today. It was a weird conversation, but basically, she knows that Riley and I met through BlindDate. And she had a proposal. Elisa wants to sponsor Riley, have her promote BlindDate using our story. We’d all benefit—Riley from the sponsorship, which would make things easier financially, BlindDate from the exposure and proof of concept, and even our members because they’d have hope,” I explain.

“And you agreed to it?” River asks. “Without talking to Riley?”

“Of course not!” I exclaim. “I know I’ve got a reputation for being an asshole, but I’m not stupid. I told Lady Elisa I’d make the offer to Riley. That’s it.”

River looks a little relieved that his best friend isn’t a complete moron. “Okay . . . and then what?”

I shrug. This is where it gets confusing. “I told Riley about it.” I pause, still trying to figure out how things went so wrong. I sit forward, hoping River can tell me. “Okay, so I tell her Elisa wants to be a sponsor, have Riley Sunshine share how we met. The way she shares everything. And at first, Riley said she didn’t want to partner with Life Corp, that she’d be a little fish in a big pond and her whole reputation would be based on BlindDate. She said she didn’t want to be *used* that way.”

River winces, shaking his head. “Ouch.”

“I know, but then I said that she used me for her Riley Sunshine page.”

River’s eyes go wide, and he laughs bitterly. “Damn, man. When you fuck shit up, you do it right.”

“Yeah, and then things got worse,” I say wryly. “What it boils down to is . . . she doesn’t want to be seen as some lonely, desperate loser who has to use a dating app. You know, like the app I poured my heart into designing. I told her that if BlindDate’s not good enough for Riley Sunshine, maybe I’m not good enough for Riley Watson.”

River punches me in the shoulder and growls, but it’s not the fight I was looking for. “Cut that woe-is-me shit out. You’re better than that. Where’s my cocky as hell, arrogant asshole friend? You need to bring a bit of him back.”

I’m surprised. I feel like a complete asshole, though not cocky or arrogant for sure. More like unsure, unworthy.

“I love her, River. And I fucked up. I don’t know how to fix it.”

He rolls his eyes and sighs, not making me feel any better. Hell, maybe making me feel worse. “Look, you offered Riley an opportunity, plain and simple. One you thought she might want, one that might be good for her. All she had to do was say no. Where it went wrong was her putting her feelings of insecurity about her dating life on you, and you walked off. You both fucked up, and you both need to fix it.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” I admit.

“You start with an apology.”

“Sorry, man,” I say instantly.

“Not to me, asshole. To Riley!” He mumbles something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like ‘dumb fuck’. “And she needs to apologize to you, and then you have a conversation.”

He throws his voice deep. “What do you think about this opportunity?” And then higher, “I don’t like it because of this, this, and this.”

Lower again, he finishes, “Okay, I can understand that. Consider this, that, and the other.”

In his own voice, he says, “People who love each other fight. They argue. But they talk through stuff and make decisions together.”

His advice settles over me, sounding right. “How’d you get to be so smart about relationships when you’ve never been in a serious one?” I tease, finally feeling like there might be something to laugh about in all of this.

“My parents are pretty good examples, and I’m smarter than you give me credit for. I know shit,” he brags.

“I never doubted that,” I tell him earnestly, “but you might’ve just proven yourself a bit smarter than I thought.” I hold up my thumb and finger a skinny inch apart. “Does that make me the pretty one now?” I joke.

“Definitely not,” River deadpans. “Look at this.” He draws his hands down his body over his workout clothes. “And look at you.” He scans me from head to toe. I look rough, I know I do. Hair a mess from my fingers, eyes red from tears, and the clothes I wore on my walk with Riley wrinkled worse than if they’d been in the bottom of the laundry hamper.

“All right, so I’m still the smart one. Or at least I will be after I fix this.”

“You’d better,” he tells me sharply, pointing a finger at me.

Breaking the threatening pose, he heads to the kitchen, helping himself to a beer from the fridge. “Though I’m glad I didn’t have to beat the shit out of you tonight. Before Riley called, I’d just hit a new PR on overhead press. My arms are fucking toast.”

“Take that with you. I’m heading back over to Riley’s,” I tell him.

He takes a long drag of the bottle he’s already opened. “Nope. You need to give her a minute to calm down and think. For being all sunshine and shit, she goes nuclear when she detonates. Trust me, a long fuse means a bigger explosion,” he explains. “Me? I’m like little firecrackers going off all the time to keep an even keel.”

“Then at least get me one of those too,” I say, giving in.

I can't run to Riley now, as much as I want to. But I'm going to fix this. Soon.

But for now, we sit down on the couch like two long-time friends to watch a game. It's a repeat, but knowing our team wins is reassuring.

CHAPTER 25

RILEY

“Let’s go, Little Miss Sunshine,” Arielle says wryly.

Eli swats at her arm and hisses, “Too soon. Look at her.”

I feel two pairs of eyes on me. They’re concerned but also judging me and the nest I’ve created on my couch. I’ve been here since Noah left.

I tried, I really did. But standing on the sidewalk, I’d felt exposed and broken, and not being able to rally, I’d run for home with Raffy at my side thinking it was some sort of game. I hadn’t made it far, falling to the couch and curling up to call River. He’d cut me off, nearly hanging up on me. I know he’s angry, but I can’t worry about that right now. So I’d called out an SOS to Arielle. And though the white couch is fresh and the yellow blanket is sunny, I am neither of those things.

“Think we can get her into a different outfit? Jeans and a T-shirt aren’t exactly the standard.”

I glare at Arielle. “I’m not changing clothes. I’m not going.”

“Like hell you’re not. Arielle put out the Bat signal and got everyone rallied on short notice. You always take care of us. It’s our turn to take care of you. What do you need?” Eli prompts.

“Chocolate cake, vodka, and a bath,” I answer drolly. I don’t think he expected me to have an answer, much less that one.

Arielle's eyes narrow. I've seen this face before. It's the one she uses on non-compliant patients when she's about to steamroll over them and get her way. "I can make all three of those happen, but first, you're coming out with us. You need it."

Eli moves to stand at Arielle's shoulder, presenting a united front. He talks to Arielle as if I'm not sitting right here in front of them. "Flip flops would be easiest."

"On it," Arielle answers, and then she disappears down the hall. A moment later, she comes back with the pair of flip flops I wear when I go to get pedicures.

"Ready?" Eli asks . . . Arielle again, not me. She nods, and I shake my head, even though this conversation apparently doesn't involve me.

Eli charges me, dropping his shoulder to my middle and scooping me up from the couch to toss me over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. I guess his workouts are helping after all because he heads for the door with ease.

"No! Eli! Put me down!" I yell, kicking my bare feet.

Arielle uses my own flip-flop to spank my ass. "Hush. You'll thank us later. And everyone's already waiting, so we don't have time to prod your whiny ass into action."

"Waiting where? I don't want to go to McGillicutty's," I argue. Truthfully, I don't want to go anywhere, except maybe to bed to sleep off this headache I have from crying.

Eli carries me to the curb and tosses me in the passenger seat of his car unceremoniously. "Don't tell her. It'll be like a fun surprise," he conspires with Arielle as he buckles my seatbelt.

He closes the door on me, both him and Arielle going around to the driver's side. He opens the back door for Arielle like a gentleman, which pisses me off for no good reason. And then Eli gets in and starts the car.

"I kinda hate you right now. You know that, right?" I ask him snottily. Like actual snot, not like I'm being bitchy. I do wonder if that might have a better effect because Eli is immune to my grossness.

“It’s a thin line between love and hate,” he tells me, though he glances in the rearview mirror. Ugh, I wish they’d get things straightened out between them. They deserve to be happy, even if I never get the chance to be.

Eli drives to the place it all began . . . Briar Rose Mall. But he parks at the line-up of stores that surround the mall’s parking lot. We’ve been here before too. The window fronts and door are black-out tinted, and there’s a large neon sign proclaiming *Karaoke*. When we don’t do Irish pubs and hoops, we’ve been known to drink too much and sing badly here.

“No. Absolutely not,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

Arielle leans forward and pushes the button to release my seatbelt, telling Eli, “Just grab her again.”

My jaw drops in shock. It drops even further when Eli scoops me out of the passenger seat, back over his shoulder, and starts walking toward the door.

“Everything okay?” the lady doing check-ins at the front desk asks as we come in.

“No. They kidnapped me,” I intone flatly from my upside-down vantage point.

“Bad fight with the boyfriend,” Arielle says as if that explains everything.

“Ooh, sing some mad chick songs then. Get that fire out of your belly. You look like an Ariana Grande sort. You got *one less problem without him*,” the front desk lady sings the last part in perfect pitch.

“What if I’m the problem?” I ask as Eli carries me past her.

He must see Simon, Becky, and Loretta because he seems to know where he’s going. I’m not sure because I’m still upside down and the neon lights are messing with my vision. I just know I’m plopped into a booth in a small private room.

“Hey, baby,” Loretta says, scooting in next to me on one side. Arielle and Eli file in after her on my left. Becky and Simon slide in on my right. I’m trapped, which I’m guessing was their intention. “How’re you doing?”

I look at their eyes, full of worry and concern for me. I try to force my lips to lift into something resembling a smile. “I’ll be okay. Thanks for this,” I mutter, waving my hand around, vaguely gesturing to them and the karaoke club.

That’s all the sunshine I have right now, every last drop from the bottom of my well, and I wasted it on niceties.

Becky wraps her arm around my shoulder to give me a hug. “Don’t even start with that shit, Riley. You’ve been here for us through everything. From taking me to prenatal appointments to that time you got Arielle out of jail without her family learning about it. It’s our turn to take care of you now.”

“Ixnay on the ailjay!” Arielle mock complains. “Jeez, don’t you know there are microphones all over this place?”

Everyone laughs except for me. It’s not like Arielle’s a big-time fugitive or something. Just one night when a dumbass tried to get a little too fresh with the wrong girl, Arielle wasn’t going to put up with it and stepped in. There weren’t even charges pressed, but it’s definitely Arielle’s favorite bucket list check when we play ‘Never Have I Ever’ because she’s the only one of us to spend the night in jail.

“Becky’s right,” Loretta says. “You’ve been there for all of us one time or another. Now we get to be here for you. First thing you need is a drink. Second, a song.”

Loretta pushes a button on the tablet in the middle of the table to call a waitress, and she arrives quickly, introducing herself as Maylee before taking our drink orders.

In minutes, I have a large frozen cocktail in front of me. I have no idea what’s in it, but Maylee took one look at me, made sure I had a designated driver, and said she knew just the thing. It tastes like pineapple, but I suspect that’s hiding a heavy-handed dose of alcohol.

I take another sip, wishing it’d kick in already. I could use a little numbness, a little forgetting.

I keep seeing Noah’s face—the hurt, the confusion, and the anger. I take another sip of my drink.

“Who’s up first?” Arielle asks before pulling a die out of her purse. We had it custom made when the Crew was eight people and one of the members, Nikki, worked at the comic book and gaming shop. The special eight-sided die has a set of initials engraved on each side, and as the membership’s changed and dwindled, we’ve blacked out two of the spots.

Arielle tosses the die onto the table, and everyone watches as it tumbles, stopping on ET . . . Eli Taylor.

“Well, now, I guess I’m going to have to flex a little for y’all,” Eli says, picking up one of the microphones. He checks the computer quickly, and in moments, one of his standards starts playing.

It’s Always A Good Time is one of Eli’s best songs, mainly because he’s able to sing both parts with an almost eerie ability to replicate Carly Rae Jepsen’s voice. His *Owl City* needs work, but that’s because he can’t seem to keep the twang out of his voice when he’s singing the male part.

Normally, he’d get everyone bouncing and happy, singing along to the *whoa-oh-oh* parts with him, but tonight, I’m not feeling it, and everyone’s watching me to make sure I’m not going to burst into tears again.

“Good try, Eli, but I think we need something with a little more edge to it,” Arielle says as she plucks the microphone from his hand, skipping the die rolling. “My turn.”

Seconds later, Arielle’s transformed herself into full-on angry Pink as she sings *U + Ur Hand*. The angry girl anthem has Loretta and Becky singing along and Eli making obscene hand gestures. Loretta bumps into me, timing the bumps with the music so that it’s almost forcing me to dance along. It’s movement, at least, and I try to get into it. Arielle leans over the table, holding the microphone out to me. Automatically, I sing into it, “It’s just you and your hand tonight . . .” Becky and Loretta lean in, providing back-up vocals to strengthen my weak attempt. But it feels good.

The song ends, and Eli holds up his hand, joking, “Works for me every time. Efficient, feels good, and never a doubt of a happy ending.”

Arielle, who’s sat back down beside him, elbows Eli in the ribs. “Don’t talk about happy endings.” Her eyes tick to me, and I know she’s not talking

about Eli coming when he jacks off.

Becky claps loudly, drawing the attention her way. “Okay, so Noah sucks. What are we going to do to him?”

“I say we pay him a visit with some lawn clippers,” Loretta muses. “Give his bush a *real* close trim!” She mimes scissors opening and closing with one hand and moving Noah’s dick around with the other, then her eyes go wide and her mouth drops open in a look that says, ‘Oops, did I do that?’ She throws the imaginary chopped off penis over her shoulder and dusts her hands off with an evil smile.

Loretta is only kidding, but all it does is remind me of sex with Noah. The best sex I’ve ever had.

“Can’t do that,” Arielle says, holding up a hand as she picks up her beer with her other hand. “He might be an asshole, but he is my brother. Sort of need his DNA to keep the family tree going or I’ll have to answer to my mom about grandkids someday.”

“Ah, good point.” Loretta sounds disappointed and tries again. “Well, what about his car? We could let the air out of a couple of his tires. What do you say, Arielle? We could go easy on him and deflate them or balls to the wall and slash ’em.”

“Oh, you can slash those tires all you want,” Arielle says easily. “He can afford some new Goodyears.”

“Only three,” Becky pipes up, holding up three fingers. “If you do all four, insurance will cover them. Three, and it’s all on him.”

“Uhm, ladies?” Simon says uneasily. He’s looking at his wife with suspicion. “I don’t want to know why you know that, so how about we just sing some more?”

“Veto,” Arielle sings.

“No fun,” Loretta argues.

Becky laughs and gives her husband a kiss on the cheek. “Don’t worry, honey, we’re just helping Riley feel angry. Just a bit of ‘I am woman, hear

me roar' fantasizing. We're not *actually* going to start playing choppy-choppy anytime soon."

"As long as you boys behave," Arielle warns them, and Eli gulps.

But then Arielle and Eli share a secret smile.

It should make me smile, seeing their playful banter, but I can't feel much more than a bland emptiness as Loretta, Becky, and Arielle pass the microphone around, taking turns and singing.

When it's my turn, I don't have a song. Or the strength to sing, especially after hitting the bottom of the glass on the Break-Up Special, as Maylee told us my drink is called. "Sorry, guys, uh, maybe Eli can have another turn?" I suggest.

"You sure?" Loretta asks. "I mean, you'd feel a hell of a lot better after a round of *Savage*. They've got the edited version in here." She starts flipping through songs on the computer screen, trying to find something I'll sing.

I manage a smile, shaking my head. "Not this time. Maybe later?"

I've basically traded my couch for the booth seat and the distraction of my television for my friends' singing. But it does feel better to be surrounded by them. As long as I don't have to actually participate.

Loretta presses her lips together but hands the microphone to Eli. He sings, and then Simon takes a turn, but once everyone but me has had their shot at the mic, we sit and sip on our drinks, eating the plates of appetizers Maylee brought us.

"Are you drunk enough to tell us what happened yet?" Loretta asks.

I swallow the fried mushroom cap I just popped in my mouth. I've been hoovering them down.

Loretta grunts. "Ow!" She rubs her leg beneath the table, and my guess is that someone kicked her to tell her to be quiet.

But this is what they're here for. Other than to distract me, they want to help. And these are the people I trust. We've been through so much together.

So, as hard as it is, I tell them all about the crazy conversation with Noah and how it turned into a fight, each of them asking questions and making points as I go.

By the end, the alcohol in my second drink has fully kicked in and I'm spilling my guts in a major case of verbal diarrhea. "I feel so . . . empty. I want to go to his place and tell him I'm sorry. I want him to hold me, make me his again. Fill my heart back up with him."

Eli mutters under his breath, "I don't think that's what he's supposed to fill. Maybe you're doing it wrong?"

Arielle puts her hand over his mouth and glares at him.

"I love him, guys. What do I do?" Tears spring to my eyes again, even though I thought I'd cried them all out.

Becky offers me a clean napkin. "Of course you love him. It wouldn't hurt so much if you didn't." I swipe at my eyes and look at her. Her eyes are kind, her words gentle as she asks me, "Did you think this was going to be easy?"

I shake my head. "No. I know relationships take work, but—"

"No *but*," Simon says, interrupting me. "That's the complete sentence. Relationships take work." He takes Becky's hand, and they meet eyes, saying so much with a single look.

Becky smiles sweetly at her husband and then turns back to me, her gaze hardening. I swear she's already got a Mom Look down pat and she's using it on me like I'm a disobedient child acting up in the middle of the Target produce section. "The truth is . . . you and Noah just met, at least for real. And it's only been a short time. You're still learning about each other, for fuck's sake—who you are and who he is. Maybe he overstepped, and maybe you overreacted? But this is either a chance to decide this isn't worth it, in which case, carry on with your pity party, or an opportunity to figure out how to communicate with each other, in which case, you need to get off your butt and apologize."

I blink, caught completely off guard by Becky's assessment of the situation. She sounds so rational, so logical. Is she right? Did I overreact to what Noah said? Am I still overreacting?

I look around the table, meeting each of my friends' eyes. The truth is written there, plain to see.

Arielle dog-piles onto Becky's words. "Babe, you know I love you. We all do. And one of your absolute best traits is your whole sunshiny vibe. It's beautiful and uplifting, and honestly, I wish I could see the world the way you do for even a second. But life can be ugly. It's messy and brutal and painful sometimes. And you don't have to package that up with some inspirational quote and pretend it's okay . . . for us, for your followers, and most importantly, for yourself."

"Those hard times are what make the good times better," Eli says.

"You gotta have rain to go with the sunshine, huh?" I ask ironically, and they all nod.

"He said stupid shit, you said stupid shit. Apologize, fuck, and move on," Loretta summarizes concisely and bluntly.

"Thanks. I think," I tell them. They've given me a lot to think about. Not only about Noah but about myself.

"Oh, now that we figured that out . . . did I tell y'all that I have a date this weekend? Met him on that app you told me about, Riley. We're only an eighty percent match, but I figure that's better than some rando looking for free dog groomings."

"Congratulations!" Becky tells Loretta. "That deserves a celebration. Let's order some more mushrooms since Riley ate them all. Now that my morning sickness is gone, I swear I could eat all day, every day."

Becky laughs at herself, chugging her fifth glass of iced water with lemon. Lots of lemon because that's what the baby likes, she says. Simon smiles, moving the small bowl of lemons closer to Becky and then pushing the call button on the tablet to have Maylee come take our latest order.

Eventually, I do get up and sing a few favorites, including Mom's favorite, *Total Eclipse of the Heart*, which seems appropriate.

It's annoyingly popular, but we finish with a group rendition of *Don't Stop Believing*. And I vow to do just that.

CHAPTER 26

RILEY

Morning comes too soon. Eli and Arielle offered to stay over when they dropped me back home after the night out, but I'd wanted to hide again. I'd had a lot to think about after everything The Crew told me last night. So my brain power is foggy from overthinking and alcohol.

But what's in front of me on my computer screen isn't a nightmare or some figment of my imagination. It's real.

And it's awful.

Like a lot of influencers, I pay for a 'net crawler' service, an automated program that scours the Internet for mentions of 'Riley Sunshine' or my web addresses. Normally, it's a litany of hotlinks back to my own 'grams, tweets, and reposts.

But this morning, I've been greeted with something new, something unexpected. I usually don't show up in the gossip blogs considering I live a life that's pretty public. I don't do drugs, get into barroom brawls, or throw around my influencer status expecting preferential treatment and freebies. And when I've done something embarrassing, more often than not, I end up talking about it myself on my social media.

This time, I didn't post it myself. And it's not something potentially embarrassing but funny, like commentary on my singing that, when assisted by liquid courage, tends to sound like a horny fox screaming for a mate. No, this mention of my name is nothing like that.

It's about me and Noah. Or Moonlight Mark, as he's labeled in the captions. I guess someone saw us arguing on the sidewalk yesterday, and like any regular person of the social media age, they started filming. It only took an hour before I was identified as Riley Sunshine and Noah was identified as Moonlight Mark from our reveal post.

I've watched the video at least ten times now, listening to the hurtful words and flinching at the pained looks on our faces. Seeing myself this way is bad, but seeing Noah like that is worse.

The audio isn't clear for some of it. You can't hear us mention BlindDate, thankfully. But my saying, 'so lonely I had to use a dating app' and 'loser' is unmistakable.

Now the gossip sites are off and running. People have been grinding their way through all of the major dating sites and apps, trying to find my profile. So far, nobody's hit upon BlindDate, and I suppose it's good that I used 'Rachel' and an email that isn't associated with any of my social media feeds. I did my best to delete the profile and scrub any activity, even deleting the messages between Noah and me, and I can only hope that I did it in time.

The story that gets re-posted the most is written by one of the sleazier, lazier gossip bloggers out there, Kitty Warner. Kitty's Litter Blog isn't one of the normal media sites, which at least have a little bit of journalistic integrity. Kitty Warner favors a writing style that's half tabloid hype, half conspiracy theory-level insanity, and all just fact-based enough that suing her is a waste of time.

And she gave me the full Kitty treatment on this one.

Riley Sunshine: Scandalous Video Slays Image

The world of influencers is full of spotty characters at the best of times. Normally, they're Botox and silicone-filled 'models' who use their overly filtered feeds to steer delusional 'fans' into paying for chats, nude photos, or overpriced merch with their pseudo-recognizable taglines.

But few have been so grating, so saccharine sweet, as Riley Sunshine. The self-professed 'spreader of sunshine' has built her brand around being a so-called normal girl, one who wants all her followers to live their best life.

Irritatingly perky with her perpetual yellow knee socks, combat boots, and silly wave, she's garnered half a million followers over the past few years.

But dun-dun-dun, to no one's surprise, things are not all sunshine and rainbows for Riley Sunshine.

Gasp . . . what? But how could that be?

I hear you, Kitty Cats. And I understand your confusion. I too saw the pictures with the hot guy Riley's been flaunting around. She might as well have stamped 'new and improved' on her forehead and added in a caption saying, 'love is out there for us all.'

Ugh . . . excuse me while I puke into my morning Froot Loops.

Don't think me a jealous, catty bitch, though. The issue isn't Miss Perfect finding her Prince Charming. It's not even how she met him.

Oh, you missed that part?

Well, listen to the audio from Riley Sunshine herself saying she met the man of her dreams on a dating app. No big deal, we've all done it except . . .

Did you hear the part where she says people who use dating apps are LOSERS?

Why, Miss Riley Sunshine! I'm appalled, and maybe a little impressed, at your cattiness. But we can't all be privileged princesses who make a living with smiles and so-called 'normal girl stuff' like makeup videos, photo shoots, and volunteering. We have bills to pay and needs to meet—like food, rent, and dick.

So excuse me if I skip over your fake-as-fuck, toxic positivity in favor of some real life. One where I probably haven't washed my hair this week, my lunch consisted of Cheetos straight from the bag, and my dates come via an app where we all know the drill. I'm down to Netflix 'n Chill, and then I've got things to do, so GTFO.

Oh, and hey . . . your fans see who you are now too. Fake, staged, and judgmental of those less 'sunshiny' than you.

Meow.

They're ugly words, both Kitty's and my own, and I've had to take time to process them. While I read and watch the video again, the story's going viral. I guess people love to see others fail, and that's what I've done.

Failed at my dating attempt. Failed at my relationship with Noah. Failed at spreading sunshine. And most importantly, failed at being real, the one thing I pride myself on.

The comments are an utter massacre . . . especially on the pictures of Noah and me. Someone posts a screenshot from the argument, and then someone else adds a caption to the picture that says, *Dating App LOSER*. That comment alone has thousands of likes now.

ItsLuz- Preaching positivity and spreading sunshine? Oops, don't look now, but your ugly is on display. Too late . . . we all see you.

SlothsDoItSlow- Thought you were fake. Now I know. Fake AF.

YoYoYoYourCherona- Toxic Positivity, party of one, please sit down.

ChampionJosh- I'll stretch those lips into a real smile . . . with my dick. DM me.

I lean back, rubbing at my eyes. I've dropped followers in the past twenty-four hours, about twenty-five thousand or so. And while that's a major hit for my business, it's not what's killing me right now.

I mostly just want to talk to Noah, but I can't show up at his work like some stage-five clinger. River called me this morning and told me he talked to Noah last night too and recommended that I hold tight. It'd sounded impossible at the time, but then all this online drama started and it's at least giving me something to focus on. But it's only a matter of time before someone does enough internet sleuthing to put together Moonlight Mark's face with Noah's name, and then it's a short Google search to figure out that he's one of the developers of BlindDate.

This has the potential to destroy his livelihood too.

"Take a deep breath," I remind myself as I see another notification pop up, this one a repost of Kitty's story. "These sorts of things happen."

Unfortunately, it's true. Nobody who gets to a certain level of social media fame can avoid the occasional scandal. I bet, if there'd been Facebook at the time, even Mr. Rogers would have caught some flack.

But this is my first.

I need to decide how I'm going to handle it.

I could fight fire with fire, lash out at Kitty and the mean comments. But that's not who I am, and even the thought of doing it doesn't bring joy but rather a dark, swirling feeling to my gut.

I could ignore it, take the high road, keep doing what I'm doing and being who I am. That doesn't feel right either, though. Arielle accused me of pushing anything non-sunshine down or packaging it up with a layer of rainbows, and ignoring this seems like I'd be doing exactly that. This hurts, and it's okay to feel that.

Which leaves me with addressing it. But how?

My phone rings, but I let it roll to voicemail. It rings again, and I sigh grumpily as I look at it because there are few people I answer the phone for—Mom, River, Noah, Arielle, Eli, Becky, Simon, and Loretta. Anyone else can leave a message or text me. Mostly because I do not need my car's warranty extended and I'm not falling for your computer virus scam.

But I see Arielle's name on the screen. So even though I do not want to talk right now, I answer. "Hey, I can't talk now. Work stuff is—"

Arielle cuts me off. "Answer your Zoom call. Now." The line goes dead as she hangs up.

"What?" I ask, but she's already gone.

A moment later, my computer screen is taken over by a Zoom invitation. I don't want to answer that either, but Arielle has never done this before. What if there's something wrong with her or Eli, or Becky, or . . . one of the residents? I'd never forgive myself if I was so caught up in my own drama that I missed saying good-bye to someone. It hurts that my mind goes there, but it's a sad reality with Arielle's patients.

I click to join the session and Arielle's face pops up, filling my screen. Her face is bare, and her hair is pulled up in a messy bun that says she was still feeling last night's karaoke party this morning too.

"Can you hear me? See me?" Arielle asks, waving at the camera.

"Yeah," I say sullenly. "Can you hear and see me?"

In answer, Arielle steps back from the camera and instead of the break room at the nursing home I expected to see, she's in the activity room with a handful of residents.

"Wow! What will these kids think of next?" Mabel asks.

Viktor whistles and shouts, "Looking good, Riley."

"Uhm, hey, everybody. How're you doing?" I don't know what to say. I don't have time for this when that story is getting shared as we speak and comments are pinging down my feed faster than I can read them.

Hazel barks out, shushing us all instantly. "Quit yer nonsense, girl. We aren't calling about us, we're calling about you."

"Me?"

Arielle leans forward, getting closer to the camera to be heard over the group of seniors as they offer support with various versions of 'we're here for you, Riley.'

"I don't even know how they found out. Not like anyone here is on the 'gram or social media. Hell, they call it 'The Interwebs' and 'The Google'. But news spread like wildfire, and they insisted on talking to you." She looks over her shoulder, saying quieter as if we have any privacy at all, "How're you holding up?"

"I'm okay," I answer instantly.

Arielle's lips press together. I can read the disappointment there. I absolutely just did what she said I do. But is it such a bad thing to focus on the good? Why wallow in bad stuff when there's so much joy to be found, even if it's hard to find it right now?

“You’re okay? My bad then. I guess we can hang up, everyone. Riley’s fine, totally fine. She’ll probably go online later and post something about Joroast. Business as usual, nothing at all out of the ordinary happening today.” Arielle raises a brow in challenge.

I growl, giving in. “Fine. You want the truth? I have no idea what to do! I hurt Noah and need to fix that. I’ve got this scandal going on because I said . . . what I said.” I don’t want to repeat it. I’ve already hurt enough people, Noah and myself included, with my thoughtless words. “And I need to fix that. People are coming out of the woodwork, gleefully dancing through my comments with pot-stirring crap that hurts. And I just want to . . . hide.”

Arielle snaps her fingers and then points at me through the screen. “There you are. It’s about damn time.”

I sag, feeling empty after that outburst.

Viktor pipes up, “Aw, girl, don’t look so sad. That fire you just showed? It shows your strength, and it’s real pretty on you.”

Mabel bumps him with a shoulder. “Not the time to flirt with her, old man.”

Viktor winks at Mabel and then smirks at me. “There is never a wrong time to flirt.”

“How about at a funeral?” Hazel deadpans.

Viktor chuckles. “You’d be surprised how a little bit of pleasure can soften the hurt of grief.”

“Ew,” I say, not sure how the conversation got onto this topic.

“Wasn’t there something you wanted to say that wasn’t grossly inappropriate, Viktor?” Arielle prompts.

Viktor looks at Arielle in confusion for a moment and then recognition dawns on his face. “Yeah, yeah . . . there is. Back in the day, I was a bit of a politician. Betcha didn’t know that, did you?”

Hazel interrupts with a snarky, “Bet you did more than your fair share of shaking hands and kissing babies.”

Viktor frowns at her before continuing to tell me, “Anyway, there’s a lot of mudslinging in politics. I had to put up with a lot. People talking about me, my wife, even my kids . . . like they knew us up close and personal, which they most certainly did not. Sound familiar?”

I nod. “Yeah. What’d you do?”

“My damn job. Those people elected me to take care of the city, and I wasn’t gonna let some mouthy folks stop me from doing it. But I also wasn’t gonna let people say things about my sweet Agnes. Her kind soul didn’t deserve that. Lord knows, she had enough on her plate taking care of me,” he says wistfully. I swear the women are getting teary-eyed too, likely remembering their long-passed spouses.

“I gave ’em hell, I did. They’d write that I was misusing funds, and I’d invite them all to the budget meeting. They insinuated that Agnes was unhappy with a sour man like me, so we’d go on the town and I’d spin her around the dance floor until she was so dizzy, she couldn’t help but grin. They said I was doing a bad job, and I told them to send in their suggestions.”

Hazel pats Viktor’s hand. “That’s actually real nice. I bet Agnes loved that.”

He lays his hand over Hazel’s and offers a small smile that looks sweet, right up until he says, “You aiming to get spun around the floor yourself? That could be arranged, you know. Arielle . . . I think we need to have a dance.”

“Like a prom!” Mabel shouts in excitement. “We can have a ‘Get Fancy’ day and then dance the night away.”

“As long as we’re done by seven PM. That’s my bedtime,” Bertha adds.

Arielle glares at me as the residents get more and more excited, some of them telling stories of their younger days attending dances. Apparently, Mabel was prom queen. Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me.

“You see what you’ve started? A prom? Seriously?” Arielle says on a sigh, but I think it’s all for show. She loves her patients, and if they’re excited to get dressed up and sway back and forth a bit, Arielle is for sure going to make it happen.

I shrug but smile. Just a little one, but it feels good. Like even in the middle of chaos and disaster, there can be something good if you look hard enough. And if you can't see it, you just make it happen yourself.

"I'll help plan everything," I assure Arielle.

"I'm gonna hold you to that," she vows.

That seems to remind Viktor of something else. "Hey, girlie, when's our checkers rematch? I think I could play on Saturday afternoon around two."

He makes it sound like his days are full from sunup to sundown and he's penciling me into his busy schedule.

"Saturday sounds great, Viktor. But let me get this stuff with Noah and this video figured out before we make it a date, 'kay?"

I swear Viktor blushes, but then he remembers himself. "Riley, for a chance at a date with a pretty thing like you, I'll block out my whole calendar this weekend."

Hazel yanks her hand back from Viktor, who was still holding it gently. "We're having breakfast on Sunday, you old rascal!"

"And we're having dinner on Saturday," Mabel says.

"Ladies, ladies . . . there's plenty of Viktor to go around," he tells them both, looking mighty pleased with himself.

Arielle rolls her eyes. "On that note, we'll let you get to work. Let me know if I can do anything."

"I will," I tell her. "Oh, and Arielle . . . thank you. For everything."

She smiles, but as she ends the Zoom call, I hear her telling everyone, "No, we cannot play hopscotch in the yard. I don't care how much fun it was when you were a kid. You'll break a hip!"

I laugh for a second, feeling better than I have since the fight with Noah. How could I have ever doubted how good the world is? I mean, I have so much. I have friends who care for me, who lift me up when I need it. I have nice people like the old folks at Arielle's senior center who share wisdom and

love with me. I have family, and a dog, and all of the things that I wanted when I was a little girl.

And I might still have a boyfriend.

Why should I complain about a gossip blog or even what a few people online have to say? I have my fans, and I care about them.

I do care.

What do I do with that?

I lean back in my chair, thinking and considering. The Crew gave me a lot to mull over. Noah's words hit right to my gut, and even some of the negative comments have value, showing me where I could've done better.

To fix this, I need a plan. I think of calling Noah because planning is his superpower, but Riley Sunshine is my creation, my life. I'm going to do this on my own, I decide.

I take a deep breath, reach my arms up high overhead, and wiggle my whole body. I need to get out the nerves, the fear, and the insecurity because I'm about to do something I've never done before.

I don't check my hair or makeup. I haven't even brushed my teeth, and I'm still wearing the T-shirt and jeans that Eli and Arielle karaoke-napped me in.

But I turn on the ring light on my desk, set up my microphone, and look directly into the camera as I turn it on and hit *Record*.

I start by giving a Sunshine Salute.

"Hello, my Sunshiners! Riley here," I begin before letting my voice become more serious. "First off, this isn't going to be one of my usual videos, but I'd like to talk with everyone about a few things, if you don't mind listening."

I swallow thickly, digging deep for strength.

"A long time ago, I began sharing my life as Riley Sunshine to spread a little joy in the world. I wanted to encourage people to see the good in their everyday lives. Maybe even create some good to share it with others. And we've done that. I want to keep doing that with you. Because you matter to

me, each and every one of you.”

“I read your comments, reply to your messages, and celebrate your joys right along with you. In a lot of ways, you’re my friends because I invite you into my life the way you invite me into yours. I do my best to share things I think will inspire you, or make you laugh, or that you’ll find interesting. But what I haven’t done is something I’ve always prided myself on . . . be real.”

“It’s not that I was hiding anything or faking it. But like a lot of us, I didn’t want to expose my vulnerabilities. Like now . . .” I gesture to myself, seeing how I look in the camera’s eye. “My hair . . . dirty bedhead. I have no makeup on because I’ve cried it all off. My friends dragged me out last night to make me feel better, so I’ve got fried mushroom farts and a hangover from a drink nearly the size of a water pitcher. And I had two of them. That’s the truth.”

I’m on a roll, the words coming easier and faster as I speak from the heart with no filter, no worries over how it’ll be taken, and no pressure to put a positive spin on everything.

“More truth? You see snippets of my day, but a lot of my time is spent sitting at my computer for hours on end with only Raffy to keep me company. I suspect a lot of you can relate to that. It makes meeting people difficult and forging those deep, meaningful personal connections that make a good life into something great even harder. So yes, I used a dating app, and I met someone wonderful. He’s smart and kind, funny and sexy, and all those things I said in my posts. *That is real.*”

I only hope I can still fix things with him. I don’t say that part, not because I’m hiding it but because that’s between Noah and me.

“And the truth is that people who use dating apps often just have a busy life, and you’re optimistic that someone’s out there for you. What can be more Sunshine than that?”

I pause and look directly into the camera. “But I was scared, afraid I wasn’t enough, worried you wouldn’t see me as Riley Sunshine if I admitted that things aren’t always shiny and that sometimes, I’m lonely. I thought you’d see me as less of the Riley Sunshine you expect and everything we’ve built together would disintegrate. Selfishly, I didn’t want that to happen, and

so I wasn't the me I should've been. I said something stupid and hurtful, and I'm sorry for that. To all my Sunshiners, I am sorry. To the people I insulted, I'm sorry."

It won't be enough for some people, no matter what. But a heartfelt apology is all I can offer right now. I have to hope that momentary words plus future actions that show how much I mean it will be enough.

"Someone wise told me that you need some rain to appreciate the sunshine. I guess I thought if I could pretend there was no rain and focus on only the positive, I'd be better off. But I think they were right. So I'm going to celebrate the rain too, jump in the puddles, let it run over me in rivulets that make me look and feel like a drowned rat, and live through it. Because it'll make the sunshine feel that much better. I promise that I will do my best to be honest, real, and authentic with you. I'm going to share the great, the good, and the bad."

"So, what now?" I ask them and myself. "I'm going to keep doing my job—sharing my life with you and hoping that we can share a little sunshine with the world. But first, I have some apologizing to do. I'm new at relationships—like, *Moonlight Mark is the first guy I've ever loved* sort of new—so I'm gonna mess up. But I'm going to learn and do better. He deserves that, and you know what? I do too."

I shrug, plunging ahead. "And so do you. Learn something today—about yourself, about someone else, or about . . . I don't know, weird animal facts or whatever interests you. Maybe it's even this video, learning something about me, that I'm a real person who has a positive outlook but struggles too. I'd love to learn about you, too, the real you, if you'll keep sharing with me."

I give the camera another Sunshine Salute and smile, then click off, and I quickly upload it with the simple caption of *A message to all my Sunshiners. Love, Riley.*

Now I just have one more thing I need to do . . . have that conversation with Noah.

Raffy barks, and I realize I do have other things to do. Like take my doggy for a walk so he can pee.

CHAPTER 27

NOAH

N : *I'm on my way over. Can we talk?*

R: Yes! See you soon.

It was all I could do to not pour my heart out in the text I sent Riley today. It's easier when it's words on a screen somehow. But I don't want or need easy. I want Riley.

I know she's had a shitty twenty-four hours—from our fight to what Arielle tells me was a rough karaoke outing, to the gossipy social media stuff. I hate that I haven't been by her side to help deal with it. Not that she needed me. She made that video post like the badass she is, sunshine and all. But I still want to support her.

And apologize. Because none of this ever would've happened if I'd had a regular conversation with Riley about the opportunity of a BlindDate sponsorship and reacted better when she said no. Those are my responsibilities in this argument. Riley has her own, and I hope she's ready to talk about those too.

Sunshine. Moonlight.

She's the brightness that's burst through my chronic asshole-itis.

But she could reject me and my apology, decide I'm not worth the energy and effort if all I'm going to do is walk away.

No. *Stop*, I tell myself.

Those are not my feelings for Riley talking. Those are my fears from my childhood whispering in my mind, and I need to get beyond them if I'm going to be the man Riley deserves. So I take a deep breath and knock on her door, a little smile coming to my lips when I hear Raffy start barking.

"Raffy, hush!" Riley says on the other side of the door. "I got this!"

Raffy runs away, his nails sounding further and further away, and I wonder if Riley tossed him a snack to give her the space to open up. Probably. Food bribes work best with him.

The door opens, and my heart stops in my chest.

She's so beautiful. So mine. I refuse to accept any other ending to this conversation.

Riley is wearing a blue dress that flares around her mid-thigh, her knee-high yellow socks, and yes, her white Doc Martens boots. There's nothing about her outfit that says 'usual' or 'standard', and I suspect some people might even find it costume like. To me, it screams 'Riley' and all the things that make her uniquely who she is, and that's what makes it so perfect on her.

"You look beautiful," I tell her, my hands itching to hold her and my mouth watering to taste her. It hasn't been long by way of a clock, but so much has happened, I feel like I've missed her with every cell in my body.

"Noah . . ." The longing is laced through the breathiness as she says my name. I think she's missed me too, maybe even been just as paralyzed by fear as I've been. "Thank you. Come in."

She holds the door wider, letting me pass her and enter into the living room.

"Do you want something to drink? I have . . . uhm, water or wine or . . ." Her words trail off like she doesn't know what's in her own refrigerator.

"You don't have to play hostess."

A tiny smile ghosts across her lips as she ducks her gaze to the floor. "I'm nervous," she admits.

"Me too." My own confession brings her eyes to mine. "Let's sit down and talk. I think we both have a lot to say."

We sit on the couch, a chasm yawning wide in the small foot of space between us.

“I’m sorry,” Riley blurts out, surprising me.

I planned to go first. But the change in plans doesn’t bother me the way it once would. I can adapt now. Riley taught me how to do that.

“I’m sorry too,” I say. “I love you.”

“Oh, my God, I love you too!” Riley exclaims. She throws herself at me, arms going around my neck in a tight hug with her head on my shoulder. It’s not heated, not a precursor to make-up sex. It’s simply relief and reassurance that this is real.

My hands wrap around her waist, and I hug her back just as tightly. I need to feel her against me, know that we’re going to repair the damage we’ve both done.

Words fail me, and I just hold her for a long minute until I feel a wet nose pushing against my ankle. I look down to see Raffy nosing at my pants leg. “Rowf!”

“I missed you too. Who’s my good boy?” I ask when Raffy shoves his way between our legs. I pet his head, scratching behind his ears before I tell him, “Let me talk to your mama for a few minutes, okay?”

He licks my hand affectionately, and Riley pets him absently too.

“Can we start over?” I ask when we meet eyes again. Riley nods, letting me speak. I gather my thoughts, all the practiced bits of speech that’ve been rolling through my mind all day. “We have a lot to unpack, but . . . I shouldn’t have sprung the whole BlindDate sponsorship on you like that. When Elisa first mentioned it, my automatic answer was no. I want you to know that.” Riley looks understanding, so I continue.

“But the more she talked about it, the better it sounded. BlindDate has been my focus for a long time now. I’ve put my heart and soul, blood, sweat, and tears into that app, all with the hope that with it, I would make something of myself while also helping people make connections. It means a lot to me. Fuck, until recently, BlindDate has meant everything to me. But I only

wanted you to consider Elisa's offer. I never wanted to pressure you. I know what Riley Sunshine means to you and how hard you've worked to create it from the ground up. It just seemed like the deal might be good for us both, and I got excited."

"I do know how much BlindDate means to you, Noah," Riley says as she takes my hands. "I didn't mean to insult you or your work. I don't think dating apps are for losers or anything awful like that. I should've never thought that, much less said it. It was my insecurity speaking—no, *screaming* at me—inside my heart."

"I shouldn't have walked away. No matter what you said or I said, that is something I said I'd never do. I won't be like my dad, Riley. I promise you that." The vow is weighted with significance, and I press my lips to the back of Riley's hand to seal that promise.

"You're nothing like him. He walked out and kept on walking, leaving behind his responsibilities and commitments without a look back. We had a fight, and even if you walked away for a moment, you're showing up now to do the hardest work of all, to take responsibility, talk through the hard stuff, and forgive me for my mistakes too. You are nothing like your dad, Noah. I don't even know him, but I know that. You are a good man."

"That's one I haven't heard. I think most people see me as a cold, driven, workaholic asshole. Only you see me as good. But you see everything, everyone that way. That's one of the things I love about you."

Riley's lips twist. "I've been doing some thinking on that too. I got so caught up in Riley Sunshine, that image of positivity, that I tried to maintain it at any cost. And the truth is . . . sometimes I'm lonely, or angry, or judgmental, and I shouldn't gloss over that, pretending it doesn't happen in favor of some false reality that doesn't exist."

She squirms like the words are trying to wiggle their way out of her. "My fear overwhelmed me. Fear that you were using me . . . because I've had people try to befriend Riley Sunshine to benefit themselves. Fear that people would judge me for not being perfect. Fear that by needing help, I wasn't good enough to be a positive influence for other people."

“But you burst through that fear. I’ve seen the video of you talking to your followers and read a lot of the comments today. You took on the naysayers and turned the tables on them.”

“You watched the apology video?” she asks uncertainly.

“You did say you’re sorry, but what I watched was a rebirth of Riley Sunshine, a better, more real you. That’s what I saw,” I reassure her.

Her smile is soft, blooming in millimeters until it’s her full-wattage one that blinds me with its beauty. “Thank you,” she whispers.

“Did we do it?” I tease, lighter now that we both seem to have said what’s been weighing on our hearts. “Did we have a conversation about how we fucked up and how we’re going to do better?”

“I think we did,” she says with a quiet giggle. “I want you to know that I’m always going to be positive and perky, with a big dose of sunshine. But I’ll be real about things too. I’ll share with you, not push down anything negative and pretend it doesn’t exist.”

“Good. I want you . . . Riley Watson, not Riley Sunshine. Though she’s pretty hot.” I let my eyes trace down her body, hoping she can feel the weight of my gaze. “And I’m still going to be an asshole who works too much. But I’ll find a balance so you never have to worry where my priorities lie. Because you are my number-one priority, always.”

“I promise to trust you so that even when your fears are at their biggest and you need a minute, I’ll know that you’ll come back to me. And I’ll remind you that you are bigger, stronger, better than the doubts whispering to you.”

Her fingers dance along my thigh, moving higher with every vow so I don’t want to stop. I’ll bare my whole soul, from the ugliest recesses to the shiniest corners, if she’ll keep touching me.

“I promise to let your sunshine warm me, inspire me, and help me see good in the world. I’ll create goodness too, following your example of love, generosity, and joy. I promise to love you, Riley.”

That’s what it all boils down to. We’ve gotten through this, but we’re both going to mess up again. We’re human, and we make mistakes. But the most

important thing I want Riley to always know, down to her soul, is that I love her.

“I love you too, Noah.”

The silence stretches between us, and Riley smiles. “You know, those sounded a lot like vows.”

“Maybe,” I admit, nodding. “I think more people should make promises to each other. Clear ones like goals or mission statements.”

Riley’s brows jump up her forehead and then she laughs. “You were so close, and then had to go call our sweet words *goals? Mission statements?* How romantic.”

I laugh, shrugging as we fall deeper into the couch. “I am who I am.” I gather her into my arms, nuzzling and kissing the sensitive skin of her neck. “You want romance? How about if I take you to your bedroom and make love to you all night?”

“Mmm,” Riley moans. “I have a better idea . . . let’s go to my bedroom and fuck. I want to feel you all over me, inside me. I need you, Noah.” She’s gone quiet, breathy with the naughty words she loves but struggles to say.

Luckily for her, I don’t struggle with them at all.

“I can do that,” I promise her, leading her to the bedroom. I feel like I’m walking on a cloud, and I need her too. The fire inside me is so high that as soon as the door to her bedroom closes, I push her against it, consuming her mouth with a hungry kiss.

I reach for my tie, loosening it and then pulling my clothes off as I tell Riley, “Strip.”

She does as I order, removing her boots and socks before dropping the dress to the floor. She stands boldly before me in a black bra and panty set that has metallic gold suns and silver moons on it. “Did you wear this for me?” I ask huskily, giving my cock a slow stroke.

She nods as I trace the line where the silky material meets her breast with my other hand. “Beautiful, baby. But take it off.”

She reaches behind herself, undoing the bra and dropping it to the floor before shimmying out of the panties, leaving me with the blonde goddess I love with all my heart.

“You truly are beautiful,” I whisper before kissing her deeply. Our tongues mesh, and I press myself into her, feeling her skin against my skin, her breath on my breath.

It’s intoxicating.

With a soul-deep hunger, I lick her skin, tasting the salty sweetness of her sweat and loving the headiness of it. My hands roughly caress her body, my hand finding a breast and kneading the soft flesh until she’s squirming, her nipple hard against my palm.

“Noah,” she whimpers, and I relent, recognizing her need. She’s already on edge, a hair trigger away from falling into a pleasurable abyss, but I don’t want her to go yet. Not when I’ve barely touched her. I pull back, looking into her eyes.

“Turn around,” I growl, guiding her to bend forward over the side of the bed and put her chest to the mattress. I move behind her, memorizing this image—her hair spread wildly on the bed, her long, creamy legs scissoring as she looks for relief and her heart-shaped ass in the air, vulnerable and spread before me.

Fuck, I love this woman.

I bend down, worshipping her legs that drive me crazy. I massage the muscles, scratch along the skin leaving pink lines that disappear too fast, and lay a quick kiss to the seam where her thigh meets her butt. She arches her back to give me better access, wordlessly asking for what she wants.

“Tell me,” I say.

She whines but quickly answers. “Touch me. Please.”

I reach between her legs, finding the wet dampness of her lips, and stroke them, gathering her honey on my hand before licking it clean. “Mmm . . . so sweet.”

“D–Don’t stop,” Riley begs. “I need you so—oh, my God!”

She gasps sharply as I go back to rubbing her pussy, but her entire body jolts when I lower my mouth, kissing the upturned swells of her ass. Guided by her sounds, I nibble, kiss, and lick until my breath warms her tight hole and two of my fingers rest on the entrance to her pussy.

I pause, letting her tell me what she wants, and she pushes back onto my fingers and my mouth, giving me full access to her body. She’s open, vulnerable, and as I pleasure her, Riley finds my rhythm, pushing back to meet me and groaning with every stroke.

“You like that, baby? Like my fingers in your pussy and my tongue in your ass? You feel so good, right there on the edge, about to come for me.”

“Oh, fuck . . . Noah, yes!” she moans, the words adding to her arousal. Her back arches, and I lay my arm over her, keeping the wild bucking of her hips from pushing me away. She fully gives herself over to my control, trusting me to give her pleasure. My fingers pump in and out as my tongue dips inside her over and over.

I don’t hold back, don’t give her any mercy. Once before, I thought about our first time together being something special and memorable, and it definitely was. But this time is too, our first make-up sex. Or hell, maybe it will be like this with Riley every time. Wild, hard, passionate, no filters and no walls, just the two of us accepting each other and finding pleasure in each other’s body the way we’ve found a home in each other’s soul.

Her body spasms, though she tries valiantly to stay still. But she’s too close, too gone to the pleasure and past the point of no return. I move my arm, freeing her to move how she wants, and she instantly starts fucking my fingers back, her ass slapping me in the face as she chases ecstasy.

With a soft cry, Riley comes, my Sunshine shaking and tugging at her sheets to try and keep ahold of herself until her body slumps and her knees spread more, totally relaxed. I pull back and stand behind her, my raging cock hard and throbbing in time to my heartbeat.

Riley feels me and tries to lift herself up, but I urge her back down, cradling her hips at the right angle to let me slide deep inside her tight, still quivering

pussy. Riley groans, her head craning to look back at me as she feels me enter her, inch by inch.

“Noah . . . I love you so much,” she says when I’m comfortably all the way inside her. “I love you.”

“I love you, Riley,” I reply, leaning down to kiss her. Just as our lips touch, I thrust in deeper, bottoming out inside her, and Riley’s gasp catches in our kiss.

“Again.”

I pull back, thrusting deep and hard the way she wants me to. The way we both want it.

She pushes back as best she can, but I pound her vise-like pussy harder and harder, setting a punishing pace. Her bed starts to shake, the headboard clapping against the wall in time to my thrusts. Her neighbors definitely know what we’re doing, but I’m not going to stop.

Now that I have Riley beneath me, I’m not stopping until she’s boneless with satisfaction and the last bits of pain from our argument are healed, that’s for damn sure.

Riley’s moans change, getting deeper and faster as she rises again for another orgasm. I speed up, grabbing the headboard for support. I’m on the edge, my balls tight and aching as her pussy massages my cock, but I need to hold out a little bit longer. For her. I want her to come with me.

I feel her body change, and I know she’s here with me. I thrust one more time as hard as I can, both of us crying out in climax as a great *crack* fills the room and Riley’s bedframe gives up. We tumble to the floor, my cock slipping free to spurt all over her ass and pussy. But I hold her tight, keeping her safe as our out of control bodies come to a rest half on the bed and half on the carpet.

“You are such a sex machine,” I tease with a small laugh, still wheezing as I try to catch my breath.

Riley manages to pop her head up a little and looks at the destroyed bed. Sarcastically, she says, “Oh, yeah, that’s all me, Mr. Jackhammer Cock.”

My eyes widen as I grin evilly. “What did you say?”

Riley blushes hot pink, her chin dipping down, but I saw that tiny grin of pride. I smack her ass, humming happily. “Dirty mouthed girl. Let me get a washcloth because I made a mess of you.”

She wiggles, becoming aware that she’s coated in my cum. “Is it weird that I’m equally grossed out and turned on by that?”

“No, not at all,” I assure her.

I reach for the door, glad that one of us thought to shut Raffy out so he wasn’t giving me the stink eye while I fucked his mom. But I’ve barely turned the knob when I’m knocked back as a frantic Raffy bursts through, barking worriedly.

“Oh, baby!” Riley says, laughing as Raffy checks on her, sniffing her face and whining piteously. “Mama’s okay, I promise. It was good yelling!”

Raffy still looks worried but calmer when I get back, a warm washcloth in my hands. I washed myself in the bathroom, and as Riley scratches Raffy’s head, calming the worried dog, I clean away all traces of what we’ve done from Riley’s skin.

We stand and look at the bed. The mattress leans drunkenly to one side, and suddenly, Riley starts laughing. “You didn’t break my back, but you damn sure broke my bed!”

Hands on my hips, I tell her cockily, “Yeah, I did.” Riley rolls her eyes and laughs, and I take the win. “Should we drag the mattress out to the living room? I think we’re going to have figure out what’s broken on your bed, the frame or the supports or what.”

“Yeah, I think that’s best because we’d roll off if we tried to lie on it like it is now.” Riley holds her hand out, palm flat and at a wonky angle mimicking the bed.

I wiggle the mattress around and manhandle it to a standing position, then slide it toward the living room.

Riley follows me, a silly grin on her face.

“What’re you thinking about?” I ask, dropping the mattress to the floor. It makes a *whump* sound, but I’m sure the neighbors are mostly glad we’re not bed-banging against the wall anymore and will forgive one more loud noise.

“Why isn’t naked moving a thing? Like you hire movers, but naked ones. Magic Mike guys show up and move your furniture around your apartment the way naked maids will come clean,” Riley muses.

I face her fully, not caring that my cock is flaccid now, spent from what we’ve done. Pointing to it, I suggest, “Liability issues. Definitely don’t want to get anything caught in a dresser drawer.”

Riley laughs crazily. “Good point. Though now I’m wondering about the cleaners for the maids too. Definitely don’t want to get bleach anywhere near your business.” She gestures to her pussy.

And I laugh too.

“Come on, Sunshine. Let’s get some rest.”

Soon, we’re snuggled up on the mattress in the floor and Raffy is curled up on the couch, watching over us. I think he thought we were hurt from all the sounds we were making in the bedroom. Poor guy, I should give him a treat for looking out for his mom.

But before I can get up to get him one, sleep overtakes me. Happy with Riley in my arms and exhausted from the wild sex, I sleep deep and well.

CHAPTER 28

NOAH

“Are you sure about this, man?” River asks me. He’s sitting on his desk in front of me, looming a bit, honestly. But considering the conversation started with his making sure I’d fixed things with Riley and wasn’t going to make her cry again, I can understand the posturing.

I told him my plan, the one that’s been rushing through my mind at breakneck speed all morning since I left Riley’s living room mattress to go home and get ready for work. I trust River. He’s been my partner in crime for years and sees things differently than I do, so I appreciate his counsel. Even if I don’t always take it.

“I’m sure. I won’t hurt Riley again,” I tell him. “She’s more important.”

“And if things blow up?” River asks. “What are you going to do?”

“I thought about that,” I answer him honestly, “and the truth is . . . I don’t know. Part of me thinks that maybe I’ve grown enough to take another run at entrepreneurship. But I’ll deal with that if it happens.”

River looks shocked. “You don’t have a plan, with options B, C, and D, and subset one, two, and three?” When I glare at him, he whistles. “Shit, she’s really got you by the balls, doesn’t she?”

“That’s your sister you’re talking about, and my balls,” I remind him.

He clears his throat, looking a little ill at the very idea.

The truth is, I *like* working in a corporate environment. I like having a hierarchy and a system in place. I like wearing a suit and tie to work, riding the elevator to my private office, and looking out over Briar Rose from the large windows. I might not have my own window like Elisa yet, but one day, I will.

More importantly, I like Life Corp. But Life Corp is a job.

Riley is my heart.

“Whatever happens, I’ve got your back,” River says, leaning forward to bump fists with me. “But if things go bad, I call dibs on your chair and your coffee warmer. I think I’ll go put my name on them now, just in case.” He picks up a stack of sticky notes and starts writing his name on them.

I flip him off as I march out of his office. The elevator ride to the top floor is both too long and too short, giving me time to panic but not time to practice my speech.

In Lady Elisa’s office, Tina and Gina are in their normal positions, half assistant, half royal guard.

“I need to see Lady Elisa,” I tell Tina, smiling easily. Inside, my guts are churning, but this is why I talked with River. Tina doesn’t deserve to be put on blast for what I have to say.

“She’s not taking visitors today,” Tina says professionally. “But if you’d like, I can put you on her schedule for a chat. Say, next Tuesday at—”

“Tina, I don’t want to be an asshole,” I interrupt her, putting my hands on her desk and staring at her as I admit to knowing my reputation, “but I need to talk to her *today*. *Now*. I understand that she doesn’t like to be disturbed unexpectedly, but this is important.”

“Important enough to risk your job?” Gina says gravely. “That’s what you’re doing.”

I turn to look at her and nod. “I’m positive.”

“Your funeral. It’s been nice knowing you, Noah.” Tina smiles politely and gets up from her desk, disappearing into Elisa’s office.

Gina is fighting to hide her smirk. “Tina’s being kind. It most definitely has not been nice knowing you.”

I frown, my brows slashing down over my eyes in surprise. I thought I was okay with Gina and Tina. We’re not buddies who go get Friday night drinks at happy hour, but I wouldn’t have thought they’d take glee in my misery.

“Until recently,” Gina finishes. “You’re like a whole different person these days. Got a little sunshine in your life, huh?”

Ah, I have been an asshole. I know that, and it seems that Gina is a Riley Sunshine fan too. Hell, maybe she’s the one who told Elisa about the photo reveal? But it doesn’t matter.

I was who I was, and I am who I am.

But I’m not all watered down. I pass by Gina, prepared to open Elisa’s door and let myself in because Tina’s taking too long. It’s been at least sixty seconds and I’m ready to say what I need to.

Just as I’m reaching for the knob, the door opens, and Tina waves me in before slipping by like she’s running from a zombie horde. I give her a small nod and walk in, closing the door behind me.

Never has Lady Elisa’s office looked so damn big. The room seems to stretch out in front of me, longer than a football field, and at the apex of it is Lady Elisa, looking none too pleased that I’m here.

“Mr. Daniels . . . I’ve had a busy morning, full of interruptions, oddly.” She glares at me accusingly. “And I have work to do.” She keeps reading her screen, a red pen in her hand marking things on the paper in front of her, and I wonder how she’s multitasking. I mean, she’s dealing with thousands of dollars, or sometimes hundreds of thousands, with every signature she signs.

“I’ll keep it quick then,” I tell her, sitting in one of the chairs in front of her desk without invitation. “I appreciate the offer, but the answer is no.”

Elisa looks up from her work, her eyes blank. “I’m going to need a little more,” she prompts.

Seriously? I almost lose the most important thing to me in the entire world, and she's forgotten about it?

"BlindDate. Riley. Our relationship. You can't use it," I continue, tripping over my tongue as my urgency combines with my fear that I'm angering someone I respect. "I know I said it might be a good idea, but it'd hurt Riley, and I won't let her—"

"Mr. Daniels, I do believe you've—"

"Lady Elisa, will you please *let me finish?*" I plead. She recoils as if I just slapped her. But in for a penny, in for a pound. "Your offer was generous, and I completely understand why it would be a good idea . . . for BlindDate and Riley. But the conversation alone nearly cost me everything. And I won't risk losing Riley over a sponsorship. I love her too much. I'm sorry, but I won't."

I take a deep breath, realizing that was one long rant of a monologue that barely made sense. But it's out now, and I shut my mouth for the first time since I entered, looking Lady Elisa in the eye. "Thank you for listening."

Lady Elisa tilts her head, lifting an eyebrow. "Are you finished?"

I think about it and nod. "I guess. I mean, I'd add that I don't want to leave. I like working here. I wish I could keep learning from you. But I love Riley. That's the bottom line."

"I see . . . and apparently, love hasn't made you blind, but it has made you deaf," Lady Elisa says. "And impatient. Because if you'd given me a moment to complete what I was saying before you so pointedly interrupted me, I'd have told you that everything's fine."

"Fine?" I ask, feeling stupefied. "So . . . I'm not fired?"

Lady Elisa looks up at the ceiling as if beseeching the gods for assistance. "What is it about love that makes men unable to listen? Do you store your testosterone in your ear canals or something?" she asks, looking back at me. "Noah, you're not fired. I mean, I'm certainly not happy about your barging in here and going on that rant, but I'll overlook it . . . *this* time. But what confused me during that whole rant is that you're telling me you won't allow Life Corp to use Riley because it hurt her, yada, yada, yada, and yet, the

reason my morning schedule's backed up is because Miss Watson was in here earlier this morning herself. She wanted to discuss the terms of her deal with Life Corp personally, and if my guess is correct, she's down in the legal department going over the specific terms and boilerplate with them right now."

It's my turn to be confused, and I feel like my knees have just turned to jelly. "She's here?"

Lady Elisa smiles evilly. "Ah, so your ears do work." I flush at the dig, which seems to be the correct response because she puts me out of my misery by explaining. "Yes. I was working this morning when she came barging in here much like you did, demanding a few minutes of my time. A few minutes turned into a full hour as we discussed the offer, went over some numbers, and I gave her a quick tour of Life Corp. When we were finished, I dropped her off in legal."

"But I—"

"Noah, go talk to her. Legal department. Understood?"

Her simple command energizes me, and I leap to my feet, almost running to her door. "Thank you."

I hurry out the door and through her outer office. As I pass their desks, Tina and Gina snicker, and I know they must have enjoyed that. I don't care, instead breaking into a full-on run that only pauses at the elevator before running through the legal department looking for Riley.

When I see her, I skid to a stop.

"Riley?"

Riley looks up from the desk where she's talking with Keith Nord, one of the senior contract attorneys. "Noah! I was hoping to have this finished and surprise you. What are you—"

Her question's cut off as I cross Keith's office and pull her to her feet, lifting her in my arms to kiss her hard. Keith, who's been married longer than I've been alive, chuckles. "Nobody gives me one of those for stopping by the office."

“You don’t have to do this,” I tell Riley, ignoring Keith as I set her down. “You don’t have to sign a contract with Life Corp.”

“I’m not,” she says.

Confusion rolls over me like a thundercloud. “What?”

“I wouldn’t sign without you. BlindDate is your baby, and our relationship is our own. This is something we need to discuss together. Mr. Nord is giving me all the information because I planned to tell you over dinner. I thought we could do a little light contract reading before bed. Surprise!”

She makes contract reading sound like the filthiest, nastiest thing we’ve ever done even though her tone is perfectly even. Keith clears his throat uncomfortably.

“We were going over the contract details—sponsorship funds, expectations of name placements in Riley’s videos, and things like that,” Keith explains.

“And I gave her the hard-sell treatment on the tour,” Elisa says from behind me, scaring the shit out of me. How does she move as quiet as a ninja in heels? “Told her all about our charitable donations to the city and our various apps that are environmentally sound and self-improvement driven. I want Riley to know who she’s agreeing to work with and that my goals aren’t dissimilar to hers.”

I blink slowly so my face doesn’t give away my thoughts on that. Riley Watson and Elisa Montgomery couldn’t be more different. Riley is all warm sunshine and joy while Lady Elisa is cold, calculating ambition.

Riley smiles, nodding her head as she shares a look with Elisa.

Hmm. I glance between the two of them, and suddenly, I can see it. Their surface differences are readily apparent. My Riley with her wild blonde curls, and even for today’s corporate meeting, wearing her Docs and knee socks. Elisa has on a power suit, her hair slicked back into a tight bun. But deeper than appearances, they are the same.

Women with dreams of making life better—Riley for her followers, Elisa for Life Corp’s customers. They’re willing to take risks, be bold, and succeed on their own terms.

“How could I not want to sign up with Life Corp after that?” Riley says, the compliment to Elisa woven through the question. “Besides, I’m going to be honest with my followers, as real as I can be. If I only offer a filtered, fake version of me, why would they trust me to help with their real, messy lives? And the truth is . . . I wouldn’t have met you without BlindDate. I’ve negotiated what the sponsorship will look like, and we’re going to do great stuff together. If you want to, Noah.”

“If it affects your decision at all, Mr. Daniels . . . I think your app is groundbreaking. I’m glad to have you and River here. Keep up the good work.”

A compliment from Lady Elisa? My dreams are coming true all over the place today . . . with Riley and with work.

And with that, she spins and heads back upstairs to her throne. Just another day at Life Corp, except it’s like no other day before for me.

It’s a Sunshiny day.

CHAPTER 29

RILEY

“Hello, Sunshiners!” I greet the camera, wiggling my fingers in the Sunshine Salute. Next to me, Noah’s doing the same thing, his fingers looking a bit robotic, but he’s trying. He’s nervous, not used to being the center of attention other than in a boardroom, and then, it’s all about the facts and figures.

This is different. This is about us.

Which is why we’re sitting in my living room, on my couch, with my camera on a tripod on the other side of the coffee table. Yes, I have a ring light, and I cleaned like crazy, but it’s a real-life setup, exactly what I wanted. Elisa offered to hire a production crew with all the bells and whistles for my first Life Corp-sponsored post, but I told her, ‘No, thank you.’ That’s not me, and I’m going to stick with what has worked for Riley Sunshine from the beginning, a peek into my life.

I’m nervous too, honestly. Not because of the camera like Noah. I quit being nervous about that a long time ago, but because this video is one of the most important ones I’ve ever done, and I want to do a good job. For Noah, for BlindDate, for Life Corp.

“Riley Moonshine here where I—”

Noah laughs, nudging me with an elbow. “Uh, baby . . . that’s not your name.”

“Huh?” I replay what I just said in my mind and laugh too. “My brain is running faster than my mouth.”

“Someone really amazing told me this one time . . . big breath, hands up, and wiggle, wiggle, wiggle.” He does the movements as he speaks, his arms and entire body shaking like a bowl of Jell-O in the middle of an earthquake.

I laugh, doing it too until we’re both silly and laughed out, panting for breath.

“Better?” Noah asks.

“Definitely. Let’s do this,” I tell him, excited and with a real smile now.

I hit a couple of buttons on the remote, restarting the video recording.

“Hi, Sunshiners!” I wave, and this time, Noah’s wave is better too. “I’m Riley Sunshine, and this . . .” I look to Noah, letting all my love for him show without filter, “is Moonlight Mark.” Noah smiles at me and then the camera.

“Hi, Sunshiners,” Noah says evenly. He’s relaxed now too, leaned back on the couch with his arm laid out along the back cushions, surrounding me but giving me space to move and talk.

We planned out what we wanted to say, even practiced it a few times for Noah’s comfort, and I’m glad. It let us have some very detailed conversations about what we want to share and what we want to keep private.

Not that we’re hiding anything, but there are some things that are just for us, like no one needs to know that I’m shifting around on the couch, not because I’m overly excited but because I can feel the sting on my ass from where Noah smacked me right before we sat down. He promised me more of that when we’re done, so I’m ready to say the things we agreed on and get back to my bedroom. Maybe we can break my new bed too? Though I did invest in a more robust one, learning my lesson from the thin wood of the last one.

“I want to talk to you about . . . us.” I point a fingernail—yellow painted, of course—from Noah to me. “After my last video, there was a lot of speculation and assumptions were being made, and I want to be completely transparent. About everything. So, here’s the truth . . .”

“We knew each other a long time ago, and well, to be honest, we didn’t like each other much.” I make a face at Noah, scrunching up my nose and mock-glaring at him, but he just lifts one brow, silently and cockily daring me to come at him. I laugh and turn back to the camera. “Flash forward years later, when I joined the BlindDate app and started talking to this guy. We did exactly what BlindDate says to . . . we got to know each other, and he was everything I wanted—kind, funny, interesting. So imagine my surprise when I showed up for my blind date to find this guy.” I point at Noah with my thumb.

“Surprised,” Noah repeats, doing air quotes with one hand. “More like horrified and furious. She stomped out and left me standing there like an asshole.”

I giggle, shrugging innocently. “Well, you can’t say you didn’t deserve it.”

Noah nods and agrees with me. “I totally deserved it. But I chased you down and apologized. With tacos.” To the camera, he says, “Guys, *always* bring tacos.”

I push at his chest with a grin. “Anyway, so that was how we found out that we’d both used fake names. Yes, I’ll let you in on a little secret . . . Mark isn’t really his name. It’s Noah.” I put a finger to my lips, telling the thousands of viewers to keep that tidbit quiet. “But for Riley Sunshine’s sake, we’re going to stick with Mark here because he has a personal life too, and Midnight Noah doesn’t have quite the same punch, right?”

Taking his cue, Noah tells the viewers, “Speaking of my personal life, I’m an app developer—an idea guy with a focus on statistics. The first app I developed was FriendZone. Maybe you’ve heard of it? It’s the precursor to BlindDate. Yes, the app where Riley and I met. It’s my latest project baby, and I’ve put countless hours of work into seeing it come to life. Admittedly, my greatest pride is in knowing just how well it works.” He looks to me, sweetness and happiness in his smile but heat in his eyes. “Without BlindDate, Riley and I wouldn’t have seen past our old assumptions to make the connection we now share.”

“And I want you, all of my Sunshiners, to share in this joy,” I add. “Which is why I’ve signed a deal with Life Corp. I’m endorsing and promoting

BlindDate. You know I only bring you suggestions and recommendations after testing products, sampling goods, and researching the companies. I wasn't trying to vet BlindDate when I signed up. This wasn't a publicity stunt or anything like that."

Yeah, I'm looking at you, Kitty Warner. Take that and put it in your litter box.

"I was searching for someone the way we all are. But having experienced it first-hand, seeing how it works, and learning about Life Corp, I feel good about recommending BlindDate to you." I stare directly into the camera, letting them see the honesty and integrity in my eyes. This isn't a ploy or some scheme I'm promoting because Elisa threw money at me. It's real, and I believe in BlindDate the way I believe in Noah.

"I want all of you to find your Moonlight Mark. Well, not *exactly*. There's only one of him, and he's mine!"

Noah laughs. "You know it, baby." Then he leans in close, quietly growling in my ear, "And you're mine."

I squirm, ready to be done with this video right now. Like *right now*. "Uhm . . . Noah, the microphone probably caught that," I whisper.

He looks back to the camera and shrugs, a cocky smirk on his handsome face.

A little too fast, I give the wrap-up. "So, Sunshiners, that's what's happening. Now you know how we met, that it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows, and I'm happy on a whole different level. Not because I have a man in my life now but because I'm learning and growing as a person and as a partner. If that interests you, check out BlindDate. And stay tuned for more adventures with Riley Sunshine."

"And Moonlight Mark," Noah adds.

We give a closing Sunshine Salute to the camera and freeze for a moment before I click the remote to end the recording.

"Now what?" Noah asks.

"I'll do a rewatch, make sure there's nothing to edit, and send it to the media team at Life Corp for approval. I won't have to do that every time, but for

this first big reveal, they want to preview it.”

“That’s not what I meant, Riley,” he says, deep and dark. “Now what?” he asks again.

I find my inner flirt. “Well, I guess I am rather *thirsty*. Coffee, juice, water?” I ask coyly. “I bet there’s going to be a lot of thirsty women after they see that video.”

“I only care about one woman’s thirst. And I’ve already prepared a straw for you,” Noah says, somehow keeping a straight face as he looks pointedly at the bulge in his pants.

“That was bad,” I answer with a little laugh.

Noah smiles, not offended at all. I like that while we can have amazing, powerfully intense sex, we can also tease and taunt, sweetly making each other happy with our version of humor. Not everyone sees it, but Noah is a funny man.

I trace the upturn of his lips, liking that I do that to him. More than anyone else, and in so many ways, I make him smile. He deserves that.

“Should I get champagne again? To celebrate our video?” I ask, knowing full well that he’ll remember the time I gave him a blow job with a mouthful of liquid bubbles.

He groans, his abdomen caving in as his hips curl up, searching for me. “Just your mouth, Sunshine. Please.”

Oh, I love it when he says please. Turns me to goo, instant putty in his hands.

CHAPTER 30

NOAH

“*I* do believe that’s checkmate, right?” the old guy says, looking down his nose at the chessboard. His brow is furrowed as though he’s uncertain, but I was warned about his ploys.

“You win again, Viktor,” I tell him with a shake of my head. I’m not letting him win. For all his tricks and ‘playing forgetful’, he’s wiped the board with me three games in a row.

“You want a break? We could check on the ladies. See how they’re doing,” he suggests, already standing up and grabbing his cane.

I guess we’re going to check on the ladies. Not that I mind.

When Riley told me about today, inviting me to come along, I’d been unsure. I’m not exactly the guy who volunteers with senior citizens to put on a makeshift prom at four in the afternoon. Or anytime, ever.

But her excitement had been beautiful, and I wouldn’t miss the opportunity to see her happiness for anything. So here I am . . . entertaining Viktor, who’s been way more entertaining to me than vice versa.

I slowly walk inside with Viktor, letting him set the pace.

“Hello, lovey ladies,” he calls out when we find the female residents, Riley, and Arielle sitting around a table covered in Joroast makeup supplies. To one particular woman, Viktor says, “Oh, Mrs. Johnson, your eyes are looking especially beautiful tonight. Maybe I can fit you in my dance card if you’d like a spin around the floor this evening?”

The woman blinks in response, which Viktor takes as a yes. He picks up her hand, kissing the back gently, and then offers her a friendly dip of his chin, tipping an invisible hat. A few steps away, he whispers, "It's good to see her awake. Sleeps most of the time these days."

"Will she be able to dance?" I ask worriedly, "or move the chair around the floor?" I correct, realizing that the old woman is sitting in a wheelchair.

Viktor smiles sorrowfully. "She won't remember the conversation, Son. That's why I said that. She's awake and mostly alert. Might as well give her a moment of joy . . . a compliment, a promise of something to look forward to, a kindness. It's the least I can do for her."

"I'm not always the scoundrel my reputation makes me out to be," he says with a grin that belies his words. I think Viktor likes his reputation, even if it's not all entirely true.

"I told you he lies," Riley says, overhearing Viktor's last words. "And cheats. That's why he always wins at checkers." She's teasing, laughing and joking with the old man who preens at the attention.

"Pretty sure he beat me fair and square," I offer.

Riley leans toward me, and I catch a whiff of something sweet and vanilla. "That's what he wants you to think." Her brows lift and lower conspiratorially.

"Aw, don't tell all my secrets, honey," Viktor scolds Riley, but he's smiling too. He begins making his way around the table, talking to each woman about her hair and makeup like it's the most interesting thing he's ever heard. He's good at making each woman feel special and beautiful.

Riley notices me watching him and bumps me with her shoulder. "Don't be taking notes on the old flirt."

"He seems like a nice guy," I argue.

Her smile is bright and happy, but unshed tears glisten in her eyes. "He is. I'm gonna miss him."

My brows jump together. “Is he not doing well?” I look back over to the man who’s using a cane, but he seems pretty healthy to me.

Riley shrugs. “He is. But it’s reality. That’s why things like this prom are so important. It gives them something fun and different, a new memory to make and enjoy.”

“I think you enjoy it just as much as they do,” I tell her gently, and she nods in agreement.

I want to kiss her, but Arielle’s sharp voice cuts through the air. “No fraternizing.”

I jump, not used to hearing that level of authority in Arielle’s voice, especially not directed at me. She’ll give me shit, but this is her domain, and she reigns with a loving but forceful hand. But I have no doubt that she’d pop me on the back of the head if I don’t listen to her and follow her rules.

“Yes ma’am,” I sass her back, and the ladies all whisper.

“Ooh, he’s done it now.”

“That one ain’t too bright, is he?”

“Get ’im, girl.”

“Viktor, Noah . . . can I get your help in the other room, please?” Arielle asks.

Viktor confidently winks at the tableful of ladies. “She can’t get enough of me, that one.” They titter and giggle like he’s hilarious.

“Oh, shush.”

“She’d eat you alive, Viktor, and pick her teeth with your skinny bones.”

Even that is said as though it’s a compliment. These people are family, insulting each other the way only people who truly care about each other can.

I quickly peck Riley on the cheek, just to be ornery and piss off my sister, and then follow her out to the activity center room.

“Mrs. Watson!” I say, greeting Riley’s mom. “Mom!” I give my mom and Riley’s mom hugs. “How’s everything going?”

“Call me Rachel,” Mrs. Watson says. One day, maybe I’ll be able to, but not today.

Mom gestures to the room around us. They really have done a spectacular job converting the room. There’s a balloon arch in front of a backdrop for pictures, a long table with desserts and treats laid out, and all of the tables have crisp tablecloths with pretty flower arrangements in the center.

“It looks beautiful,” I tell Mom and Mrs. Watson.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Watson replies. “Did you see the table? Natalie made six different kinds of cake, and I made the veggie trays with veggies from my own garden.”

“Wow! It all looks delicious,” I say, noting the pickles, radishes, tomatoes, and broccoli plates. I also see a plate of individual cheesecakes that stands out. “Are those Jell-O No-Bake cheesecakes with Oreos?”

My mom grins, pleased that I noticed. “Of course they are. Nothing but the best for my son.” We share a private look, knowing that to us, those will always be the best. A reminder of times when that was the biggest treat we could possibly, and only occasionally, afford. Even if now we could have fancy, gourmet cheesecake for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, those no-bake ones just hit differently.

“Thanks, Mom.” I clap my hands, looking around again. “Okay, how can I help?”

“You can get over here and climb this ladder,” River says from the corner. “Scaredy cat won’t go up.”

I look over to see River and Eli grinning and goofing off as they hang twinkle lights from the ceiling, which isn’t even that high to begin with.

“I didn’t come dressed to work,” Eli argues reasonably, considering he’s wearing slacks, a button-up with a bowtie, and loafers with no socks. He’s not what I would’ve pictured for Arielle, but if he makes her happy, that’s all that matters to me. Well, and that he treats her right. She deserves only the

best.

I excuse myself to help with the lights, and as I walk off, Viktor converts his cane into sitting mode and lowers himself slowly, already talking about his own senior prom.

I'm elected to climb the ladder and hang the lights as River and Eli feed the strand and pins up to me. "You ready for tonight?" River asks me after looking around to check for any eavesdropping ears.

"I am," I tell him honestly. "I've never been surer of anything. Not even myself, and I'm a cocky bastard," I joke, and River wiggles the ladder in warning.

"Yeehaw," I whoop, holding onto the ladder like it's a bucking bull trying to get me off even though River is barely shifting it, not wanting to actually knock me off but rather knock my ego down a peg or two. "Is everything ready?"

"Yes, everything's set," Eli tells me. He and Arielle, along with River and Mrs. Watson, have been great helps at getting everything set up for tonight.

For the prom, but also for Riley's surprise.

"YOU LOOK GORGEOUS, SUNSHINE," I TELL RILEY A FEW HOURS LATER. She's wearing her white Docs, but her yellow socks are lacy and go up over her knees. With the floaty white dress she's wearing, there's a tiny sliver of pale thigh peeking out that is driving me absolutely crazy.

We sway slowly on the dance floor to an old song I've never heard, surrounded by people. All the residents are here with the staff chaperoning as they watch for any arising health issues, but also, a lot of the patients' family members came to celebrate 'prom' too. It's sweet to see the old ladies get fussed over by their grown kids, telling them how pretty they look and seeing how the younger versions of themselves glow from inside.

"Not so bad yourself," Riley says. A moment later, her eyes leave mine to scan the floor. "Do you think Becky's okay?" She nibbles at her lip. "Maybe

she needs a water or a cookie?”

I follow Riley’s gaze, where Becky is sitting in a chair, absently rubbing her growing belly while she watches her husband, Simon, dance with Loretta. I met the whole Crew earlier when they arrived to support Arielle and Riley with whatever was needed. “I think Simon is taking good care of her, and he will get her anything she needs or wants.”

Riley’s eyes return to me, her chin ducking sheepishly. “I know. I just worry.”

“No, you want everyone to be happy. And that’s beautiful.” I see River waving from the door, catching my attention, and then talking to the videographer who’s filming tonight’s event, pointing her to Riley and me.

Between the photographer taking pictures of everyone and the video, all the attendees should have lovely memories of this prom. I’m sure the residents’ family members will especially appreciate that.

But I know someone else who will too. Riley.

“Speaking of wanting everyone to be happy, that’s what I want . . . for you.” My voice has gone serious, no teasing light or humor. It’s a vow I’ve made to Riley over and over, both aloud and in my own heart. I’ll do anything to make her smile.

“I am happy, Noah.” She meets my eyes, her truth displayed there too.

I lean into her ear and whisper, “I’m not the only man who makes you happy, though.”

She pulls back, brows knit in confusion, and I spin her in place. It takes her a second to see him even though people have intentionally moved out of the way.

“Dad? Dad!” Riley shouts, running for the man in the doorway. He catches her in his arms, her feet swinging a good foot off the ground. Over Riley’s shoulder, Joseph Watson meets my eye, a smile on his face too. “What are you doing here?”

He sets her down, chuckling. “I heard there was a prom here tonight, and you didn’t think I was going to let your mother find a new man, did you?” He looks to Rachel, who’s come up to his side, snuggling in under his arm.

Viktor calls out, “Aw, shucks, I thought I had a good chance with that one.” He’s totally kidding, and everyone laughs.

I look over to Arielle, who’s been helping me plan this. Actually, everyone has been—The Crew, the residents, Mr. and Mrs. Watson, River, and my mom. Everyone but Riley. I give Arielle a nod, and she changes the music over to the song I selected after listening to dozens of them.

Jason Mraz’s *Sunshine Song* comes through the speakers, warm and happy and reminding me of Riley with every word.

Send out your ray of sunshine . . .

That’s what Riley’s done. Sent her sunshine out into the world, and so many people appreciate that. But what I love the most about her is that she shared her sunshine with me, teaching me what is truly important in life. It’s not existence in the present for some future reward. It’s living in each moment because they are all we’re promised.

“Riley,” I say. She’s across the room from me, but she hears me and turns.

I’m down on one knee, an open velvet box in my hand. Her mouth drops open an instant before her hands cover it. Shock and surprise, hope and happiness light her eyes. She takes a slow step my way, then freezes, looking around the room at everyone watching. “Noah?”

“Come here, Sunshine,” I tell her encouragingly, and then she moves again, steadier at first and then almost running to me.

“What are you . . . what’s happening?” she asks. She knows, it’s written all over her face, and those happy tears are pooling in her eyes, making them shine.

“This is a moonstone,” I tell her, indicating the ring I researched and shopped for at three different stores until I found the perfect one, one worthy of my Riley. “You call me your moon, but the only reason I can shine is because you are my sun. You’ve shown me beauty in the world that I never noticed.

You've taught me to feel and think and appreciate the moment. You're my everything . . . my heart, my soul, my life. I want to spend forever loving you, making you smile, and bringing you so much joy that you only cry happy tears. It would make me the happiest man in the world if you would do me the honor of becoming my wife. Riley Watson, will you marry me?"

Her mouth opens and closes in shock, and the moment stretches out even though it's only a short second. From somewhere off to my left, Loretta calls out, "You'd best tell that boy yes before I snatch that ring and marry him myself!"

I smile, the tension broken, and Riley, coming to her senses, answers, "Yes! Yes, I'll marry you!"

I slide the ring onto her finger, and she gasps. "It's gorgeous. I love it."

Standing up, I wrap my arms around her waist. "I love you."

She tries to say it back, but I swallow her words as I take her mouth with a sweet kiss. The room fills with hoots and hollers, everybody celebrating our big moment with us.

I taste Riley's happy tears as they overflow down her cheeks, and when I pull back, I swipe at them gently with my thumbs.

"How did you . . . did everyone . . .?" Riley is looking around us as people raise their glasses of punch to toast us.

"Everything went perfectly to plan," I tell her, and her eyes jump to me.

"You planned all this?" she asks in surprise.

I give her a cocky smirk. "Well, I had help. When I heard about the prom, it seemed perfect. So we all had to work together to organize the event, get it all on video, and get your dad here. I picked him up from the airport this afternoon so we could meet and get to know each other."

"Oh!" Fresh tears fall from Riley's eyes.

"Baby, he might not've seen some of your firsts, but he saw this," I say gently. A bit harder, I tell her, "To be clear, you're only getting engaged once. To me. The end."

She smiles, giggling a bit at my asshole-itis. It still comes out sometimes, but luckily, she thinks it's endearing for the most part.

We dance the night away . . . well, the early evening. Joseph and Rachel Watson impress us all with some moves on the dance floor, showing me exactly what I'd like to have with Riley in thirty or so years. Mom dances with Viktor, which seems to be him leaning on his cane while he guides Mom in gentle spins in front of him, but she's laughing like she's having the time of her life. Simon feeds Becky as much cheesecake as her belly can hold. Loretta sweet talks River into dancing a bit, and as they move by us, I hear her asking about BlindDate. Apparently, she's signed up and has met someone there too, so she's giving River hell about not using his own app.

And Arielle is moving around like a hummingbird, checking on this patient here and that resident there, always working. But this time, she's not alone. I watch as Eli follows her, not like a lost puppy but rather as her support system. While Arielle takes care of other people, he's taking care of her, making sure she's drinking water and getting some food. He even gets her out on the dance floor a time or two. "What do you think of those two?" I ask Riley, gesturing toward Arielle and Eli.

Riley raises her brows. "That depends. Are you going to go all caveman brother on Eli and punch him the way River did you?"

I shake my head. "That was different. I deserved it." Riley hums in disagreement. "I'm not going to hurt Eli. I just want to know that Arielle's okay . . . that she's going to be okay."

"You've taken care of her for a long time," Riley says quietly. "But she can take care of herself, Noah. I think Eli is good for her, stands up to her sass and ball-busting, but he also gives her a safe place to fall, trusting that he'll take care of her. And I think she's good for Eli too, showing him that it's worth the effort to go beyond the superficial and really get to know someone and have faith that they'll understand you even when you don't understand yourself."

I nod, liking that for my sister.

"Plus, it doesn't hurt that they're both switch-hitters. I wonder how they decide who's going to be the top and who's going to be the bottom?" Riley

muses thoughtfully.

“What?” I nearly shriek.

Riley shrugs, her eyes full of secret knowledge. “Arielle’s my best friend, Noah. I know things about her that you will probably never want to know. We’re like this.” She crosses her fingers, showing me how tight Arielle and she are, and I groan.

“Don’t remind me.”

She laughs and shoots Arielle a wink. Arielle looks at me questioningly, but I shake my head. Arielle meets Riley’s eyes and smirks, probably knowing Riley will tell her everything later.

“Think it’s too soon to get out of here?” I ask. “I want to take my fiancée home and fuck her wearing nothing but that ring.”

Riley whimpers quietly. “My dad just got here. I feel like we should hang out.”

I chuckle. “Baby, I already planned that out. We’re meeting your parents and my mom for lunch tomorrow.”

She smiles like that’s the greatest gift ever, despite the ring I placed on her finger tonight. “Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

We take advantage and slip out, although I’m sure everyone notices us. I’m tempted to drive home quickly, but as I look over at Riley, I know I don’t need to.

We’ve got forever.

Instead, I cruise home, taking the full fifteen minutes to hold Riley’s hand and feel my ring on her finger. “That’s a big rock, Miss Watson. Do you like it?”

I’m nervous that she might’ve preferred a more traditional diamond solitaire, but my gut told me that Riley would appreciate something unique. For the first time ever, I went with my gut over my brain. And then I promptly went about sorting through all the possible options, along with each stone’s pros and cons. And that was before shopping for the perfect setting. That ring has

a lot of Riley in it, but it has a lot of me in it too.

Riley smiles at our hands, admiring the ring. “I love it.” She looks up at me and adds, “I love you.”

We get home, and as we come through the door, Raffy looks up from his new dog bed, wags twice, and lies back down. He might be turning into the worst guard dog ever or simply adjusting to his new home. I decide to choose the latter.

“We’ll get dinner in a bit, Raffy. Be a good boy,” I tell him. He watches as I walk Riley down the hall, kissing her as I go. We must have kissed a thousand times by now, maybe more. But I’m never going to have enough. I hunger for her touch, and we shed our clothing in between tasting each other’s kisses, leaving a trail toward the bedroom.

One good thing about the prom event being so early in the evening for the residents’ schedules is that it’s barely after dark, the night sky still a mix of purple and blue. But the moon is already rising high and bright. Through the open curtains, the white light bathes Riley’s skin, making her glowy and glorious.

The woman who has my heart.

The woman who will soon be my wife.

“Come here,” I tell her, guiding her to the window and standing behind her. She looks out over Briar Rose, the evening lights shining below us and the stars twinkling above us. “Out there, you’re an inspiration to so many. You bring sunshine and positivity to their days, reminding them to enjoy every moment.”

Riley nods robotically, her pulse racing in her neck and her breathing going jagged from feeling the heat of my words along her bare skin.

“In here, you are my inspiration. And I intend to enjoy every moment with you . . .” I let my sweet words become dirtier, my voice deeper and rougher. “Sucking your nipples, licking your pussy, filling you with my cock until you come over and over again.”

“What else?” She pants eagerly.

A cocky smirk twists my lips. “Smacking your ass, shoving my cock down your throat, pulling your hair, and pounding into you so you never forget who your perfect match is.”

“Yes, Noah . . . please.” A shudder goes through her body, and other than my breath, I haven’t even touched her yet.

I nudge Riley’s legs apart, kissing the back of her neck and sliding my hand down to cup her. She’s wet, her breath turning into a gasp and her hands planting on the window as I slide a finger through her slippery folds to find the stiff pearl at the top of her cleft.

I stroke her softly, kneading her breast with my other hand and tasting her skin. Riley moans, pressing herself back against my hips as I slide two fingers inside her. “*Fuck.*”

My cock jumps at the word on Riley’s lips, and I have to squeeze at the base of my shaft to keep from coming all over her back. “I will,” I growl softly into her ear. “I promise. But first, I want to watch you come in the moonlight.”

Riley nods wordlessly, her eyes closing as I stroke her pussy, my thumb rubbing her clit to send electricity through her body. I cradle her in my arms, my stiff cock pressed between the soft cheeks of her ass as I focus, not on myself, but on Riley.

Forever Riley.

“I love you,” I whisper, thrusting two fingers inside her. “Open your eyes. Look at our town. Our city. Our home.”

Riley cries out, her eyes flying open as I pump my fingers in and out of her. She’s so beautiful, her skin creamy and pale in the moonlight, her golden hair swept to one side as she looks out the window. I nip at her skin, feeling the warmth of her body as she presses into me, feeling my arousal and the wetness of her pussy running over my fingers.

She’s everything.

Riley’s palms press against the glass, her body quivering on the edge. Her clit throbs against my thumb in time with my own racing heart. I want to take

her, to withdraw my fingers and use my cock . . . but not this time. Not yet.

We have all night.

Instead, I stroke my thumb over her clit again, her stomach clenching and shaking she's so close. "Noah . . . Noah."

"Come for me, Riley," I whisper in her ear, nibbling the soft lobe. "I have you. Forever mine."

Riley cries out sharply, her arms collapsing and her body pressing against the glass. I feel her climax, her hips bucking back and forth against my hand and my cock, shivering at the intensity of what's jolting through her body.

When she sags, I catch her in my arms, holding her close and keeping her safe and protected. "That was beautiful," I whisper, withdrawing my fingers and bringing them to my mouth to taste her cream. "And so are you."

She smiles, recovering quickly. "Thank you."

For the compliment? For the orgasm? I don't know, but I can't care when a second later, Riley spins in place and drops to her knees in front of me. "Put your hands on the glass, Noah."

And then she takes me in her mouth.

"Damn, Sunshine. I love you," I growl, plunging into her throat.

She hums something that sounds like 'I love you too', but I'm gone to the pleasure she's giving me.

I'm glad to have met Riley on that blind date, but I'm even more thankful to have a lifetime to make each other happy and spread a little sunshine.

EPILOGUE

*F*rom The Social Media Feed of Riley Sunshine

-Happy June, Sunshiners! Thank you to all of the people who signed up for BlindDate and name dropped me in the signup box! I hope you all find love!

-Fearless Friday, Sunshiners! Do something bold today. Maybe something as easy as a bright lipstick or something as big as applying for a new job. Tell me you're doing fearlessly and fabulously! What's my bold? I've got wedding planning on my agenda today, and my wedding planner needs a decision. Can you help? Should Moonlight Mark and I go fall traditional, winter wonderland, or an off the wall theme? Did I hear a Big Mike's suggestion from the back row? Drop your suggestions in the comments below!

- "Hey, Sunshiners! Riley Sunshine here, with Moonlight Mark!"

"Hey, Sunshiners! I'm not here as Riley Sunshine's guy, but rather as my Clark Kent alter ego, A.K.A. The App Geek. I want to let you know that I listened to your last comments, and we're moving forward with an updated edition of Friendzone! Using the same AI technology that has made BlindDate so successful, we're launching the revamped Friendzone next month for all of you who may not be looking for love right now but would love to find your gym buddy, fellow football fanatic, quiz bowl team member, or whatever you're looking for!"

- Happy Fourth Of July to my American Sunshiners! On a day we celebrate independence here in the States, what I was reminded of is how

interdependent we all are. None of us stand alone. Look to your left and right and help those around you. If we all do this, not just today, but every day, the whole world would be better off.

I started out my day with family, then went to the nursing home for a cherry pie eating contest. I'm not sure there were any losers. Especially when my friend brought her dogs down to do some animal therapy with the residents.

Check out the pictures of our family having a good old-fashioned barbecue, complete with some of the vegetables from my mother's own garden! Check out pic #3, you'll see how lucky I got in the DNA lottery from Mom! Love my family, love Moonlight Mark, and love Raffy—did you see his flag bandana? Love you guys, too!

- Taking a few days out of these hot August days to soak up some sunshine! Yes, I'm wearing my sunblock. I'm all about that #SPF50Life. Thanks to Joroast Cosmetics for their hydrating lotion for afterward.

- We decided on our honeymoon! Are we going to announce it? Not quite. We love games, and we decided that the first Sunshiner to guess the location is going to win a special gift directly from us! A hint: we're going to get to explore five centuries of shipwrecks, all by scuba diving! The prize? A Pure Vibe candle in coconut thyme scent. (Oops, maybe that's another hint!)

- I really need to give harder clues! Sorry to all those who didn't see my post within the first ten minutes! We're going to randomly pick another five correct answers and those posters will get a prize as well. Love to all the Sunshiners!

- Happy first day of fall, Sunshiners! It's beautiful outside, but I got hit with some bad news today. The chapel where we planned to have the wedding accidentally double-booked. I'll be honest, I cried . . . a lot. But the venue isn't the important part of the wedding. All that matters is the bride and groom speaking from their hearts. That helped me calm down. And then, like so often happens, one door closes and a window opens. Or well, your husband-to-be opens the window for you. He asked his boss, who is an amazing person—CEO, mother, classy, and kick-assy—if we could get married in her back yard. To be clear, her 'yard' is a palatial estate. And she said yes! New venue, new plans to make, but still smiling at the way sunshine

can spread. And best wishes to the bride who's getting married at the chapel. It's stunning, and I hope you have a lovely day too!"

- Hey, Sunshiners! You are amazing people with beautiful, big hearts! Many of you have written to ask how you can celebrate our wedding with us, wanting to send gifts to my P.O. Box. We are so appreciative and grateful, but we truly have everything we could possibly need. If you'd really like to send something, please send canned goods. Yep, you heard me right. Click on your Amazon cart or your local grocery delivery app and send us some canned goods or non-perishable items. We'll be donating them, along with any leftovers from the wedding dinner, to local homeless shelters. Other ways we're helping others with our big day? I ordered cookie favors from an organization that sends one to troops overseas, one for one. For every cookie we buy, a soldier gets one too. And the flowers will go to nursing homes and hospitals after the reception. And though it might take me a minute to let go, even my dress is going to an organization that uses them to make angel baby dresses. Can you think of any other ways we can help spread sunshine? How can you spread a bit yourself?

- Happy Turkey Day! Okay, Sunshiners, time for my honesty check. Yes, I've been doing some extra workouts to look my best for the wedding and the honeymoon. Moonlight Mark's doing the same, even though he's practically perfect as is . . . but he says the same thing about me. Guess that's just how it is. But today is special and we're skipping all that. Because today's about eating . . . and celebrating with family, of course. But make no mistake, I've got my eating pants on and Raffy's eyeing a turkey leg like it's got his name on it. Don't tell him but I might've gotten him his own cute little Cornish hen. Spoiled dog is probably going to sleep until December!

- Today's the day, Sunshiners! Sing it with me . . . dun-dun-dun-duuuuun. It's my Wedding Day.

I promise I'll post pictures later, but I gotta go get married before a certain worried moonlight groom realizes I'm a little bit extra sunny!

- "Hey, Sunshiners! Happy New Year, with an amazing New Year's gift! It seems that our honeymoon in Bermuda did more than give us some killer tans and great memories. We've made a little Sunshiner in here! Talk about amazing, huh?"

- Check this belly out. I swear there's only one future Sunshiner in here. The doctor even confirmed it. But whoo, feeling large and not in charge. But Baby will be here soon.

- Baby Star, meet the Sunshiners. Sunshiners, meet Baby Star, here in her Daddy's arms. No, that's not her real name, but we're keeping that quiet and letting her have her own online secret identity too. Born an amazing nine pounds, seven ounces and as beautiful as her father, I can only hope I'm as good a mother as my mom is.

I love you, Baby. We're going to do amazing things together.

Spread some sunshine, everybody!

I hope you enjoyed the story! If you did, read on for an excerpt of my book [Rough Love](#). If you haven't read this series, you're missing out!

EXCERPT: ROUGH LOVE - TANNEN BOYS BOOK 1

BRUCE

“*F*uck, it’s hot!” I bark to no one as the screen door slams behind me, blocking out at least a portion of the August heat. The sweat rag I’m using to wipe my face down is about as useless as tits on a bull, already soaked through, wrung out, and soaked again.

But as I open my eyes to the coolness of the kitchen, it’s not the heat from outside that stops me in my tracks. It’s the one raised eyebrow and glaring eyes on the face of the otherwise sweet woman in front of me. “Language, son.”

Busted in my own damn house. How’s that even happen? “Uh, hey there, Mama Louise. Didn’t expect to see you over here.”

There’s a question in there somewhere, something along the lines of ‘*what the fuck are you doing in my kitchen?*’ but I don’t dare voice it out loud.

She ain’t my mama, and I damn sure ain’t her son, but as we’ve learned lately, sometimes, family is what you make of it, not what nature gives you. Mama Louise is the woman who has taken us Tannens on as fixer-upper projects. Me and my two brothers, Brody and Bobby, might as well be condemned buildings for all the work we need, but my little sister, Shayanne, seems to be doing okay with Mama Louise’s motherly influence.

Regardless, everyone in town and out of town and the globe over calls this tiny blonde woman who could intimidate the sun itself to bend to her will ‘Mama Louise’. She won’t have it any other way, unless you feel fit to drop

the Louise and just call her Mama, which makes her cheeks pink up in joy. So I don't do it. It doesn't feel right to do that to my own mom, may she rest in peace.

The other eyebrow raises to match its partner and I realize my misstep. "Sorry," I say simply, not really meaning it but willing to say it to keep her happy. It don't take much, and it's no skin off my back, so why not give her the little things? That way, she doesn't dig too hard for the big ones.

Shyanne grins from Mama Louise's side, enjoying seeing me put in my place, but she doesn't dare let those giggles that are shaking her shoulders free or Mama Louise will get after her too. Mama Louise dips her chin once in acknowledgement of my apology and then goes on as if I didn't just perform like some trained seal. Hell, if I'm doing tricks, where's my treat? Shouldn't I get a cookie or something?

I peek over Mama Louise's shoulder, hoping that maybe she *is* actually making cookies, even though I know she's neck deep in helping Shyanne. My sister is a force to be reckoned with, and one day, she's going to grow up to be just like Mama Louise, who keeps a household full of mannerless cowboys from going feral.

Of course, Shyanne helps with that, as do the other Bennett boys' wives. So maybe their work mostly consists of keeping us three Tannen boys in line. That's a full-time job that requires overtime on the regular, so Shay could probably use the backup because she's been doing it way too long on her own, even when she was barely a pipsqueak to us near-grown boys.

"What's next?" I say, giving up on my cookie dreams.

"Shyanne has one more round of deliveries for you today. Think you've got time before dinner?"

Mama Louise eyes the sun, which is sitting midway down the western sky. The ball of fire's position seems to light new urgency in her hands, and she pours the pink-tinted water through a strainer and into a big plastic jug.

They're working on Shyanne's latest creation . . . watermelon agua fresca. I'd teased her last spring that instead of people looking out for the milkman, they were going to be watching out their windows for the watermelon water

woman. Which would be true, except that I swear I'm doing the bulk of her deliveries so she can keep up with the demand. At this point, I'm just glad she's making something of the watermelons we grew in one of the fields out back. It'd seemed like a lot when we started harvesting, but summer's not even two-thirds over and she's damn near used every last one of them in her special concoction of watermelon, lime, and sugar water.

"Yep, I've got time," I assure Mama Louise, starting to pick up the jugs for my first trip to the truck. Shayanne abandons her post to help me carry the load. She's got a spring to her step and as many jugs of pink drink in her tiny hands as I do in my big paws. Shay's a worker, down to the bone.

We step over Murphy, my old dog that doesn't even move as I grumble at him, "Git, Murph."

Instead, he rolls over like I'm going to set down the jugs in favor of belly scratches for him. I'm not a total asshole, though, so I do run my boot over his too-big gut a couple of times before pushing the door open with a hip and then holding it for Shay to come out too.

"Thanks, Bruce!" Shay's voice is bright and bubbly, happier than she's been in so long. Maybe ever. I guess I've got Luke Bennett to thank for that, not that I would ever thank him for fucking my sister's grumpiness out of her. But maybe for loving her, putting a ring on her finger, and showing her a world beyond our little pile of dirt . . .

Not that it's ours anymore.

Nope, thanks for that last knife in the back, Dad. He'd literally forced us to sell the farm when he died with his bad gambling debts, and we'd lucked out that our neighbors, the Bennetts, had wanted the land and had taken our motley crew on as ranch hands and pseudo-family.

The last seven months have been interesting, to say the least, but we're all settled into our roles for the most part. I've even seen Brody smile a time or two, and that's like winning the Mega Powerball Lotto for billions on a random, computer-drawn list of numbers . . . twice in two weeks. In other words, it doesn't happen. Ever.

But it did. I saw it with my own eyes, so maybe I'll pick up a dollar scratch-off while I'm in town and see if my odds are any better than usual. I snort at my own ridiculousness and Shay looks at me questioningly.

"Would you like to share with the class what's got you giggling?"

For the record, I don't giggle. Or chuckle. Or laugh. I smile on occasion, but it damn near cracks my face from lack of use. Well, maybe it's from turning that frown upside down. Hell, maybe Brody's smiled more than me lately. I'll have to consider that later.

"I'm fine, Shay, " I tell her, not answering her question in the slightest, but she lets me put her off. "Need to get going if I'm gonna get back by dinner. What're you and Mama Louise making? Maybe I should just grab a bite at Hank's instead?"

She stomps her booted foot. "You'd better not, Bruce Tannen. Family dinner tonight, no excuses." She purses her lips before tucking the bottom one behind her white teeth. "We've got some *special news*. You'll be there, right?"

I side-eye my little sister, dropping the not-that-heavy jugs onto my tailgate with a boom as if they weigh a ton. Her hair looks the same as always, brown with some streaks of blonde the sun puts there every summer. Her face is bare with a smattering of freckles across her nose and a bit too much sun on her cheeks from being outside every day. Her frayed shorts and watermelon-stained tank top are her usual work gear, and her boots are dusty and worn.

Nothing's out of place and nothing's unusual except for that glint in her eye.

"Are you fucking pregnant, Shayanne?" I grit out. I'm gonna kill Luke Bennett for sticking his dick in my sister. I mean, I know he does, and as much as it guts me, I guess she likes it, because she loves him and shit, but I don't need proof of their fucking walking around and calling me 'Uncle Bruce'. Or would a little Luke-Anne call me 'Uncle Brutal'?

Shit. Neither. Fucking neither is the correct answer.

Like the firecracker she is, Shay doesn't answer the damn question for two long seconds during which I figure out which field of dirt I can bury Luke's body in.

Not soon enough, she breaks and laughter rings out. Well, more like donkey guffaws because there ain't a thing prissy about my sister. But through the hee-haws, I gather that she's laughing at me.

"Oh, my cheesus and crackers, you should'a seen your face, Bruce! Priceless! Shoot, I wish I'd gotten a picture of that!"

I push closer to her, looming over her like only a threatening big brother can, but she's not the least bit scared of me. Probably the only person who isn't in this whole town.

"Shayanne Tannen, are you or are you not pregnant?"

She holds her hand up, admiring the way the sunlight catches her ring. "That's Shayanne Bennett, and you know it. You were there when Luke and I said our vows about loving and honoring and cherishing and obeying each other. Oh, yeah, especially that last one. You know I love when he tells me what to do."

She's being ornery and we both know it. There ain't a soul on this planet who tells my sister what to do. Hell, Luke's probably tried a time or two . . . again, not thinking of him railing my sister . . . and she'd probably still do whatever the fuck she wanted. I grind my teeth together, not sure if I want to strangle her neck or protect another generation of Tannens if she's got one in her belly.

"Shay," I say dangerously low and quiet. It's my line, letting her know that I've had enough.

"Fine, fine. No, party pooper. I'm not pregnant, though that honeymoon was something else. Some. Thing. Else. Whoop, boy. I didn't know reverse cowgirl was so much fun. Why didn't you tell me, big brother?"

I can't headbutt my truck, so I skip the words I can't handle and go for the important one. "You're not pregnant? Then what's the big news?" I say. Or growl. Same difference, mostly.

She boops me on the nose with zero fear for her own life, the only person on Earth who can do that. "Guess you'll have to show back up to find out."

And like that was an answer at all, she spins on her heel and skips, literally skips, back to the house, leaving me feeling like I just ran a marathon when all I did was walk from the kitchen to the driveway.

On second thought, good for Luke. If he can handle all that, good for him. Less for me and my brothers to have to deal with. I try to convince myself that's true and remind myself that I like Luke, that I was the one who knew Shay was sneaking out to go meet him long before anyone else did and even helped her cover her late-night proclivities. It works, a little bit.

I take two more trips back and forth from the kitchen to the truck, stepping over Murphy and listening to Shyanne and Mama Louise chattering away, though about what I have no idea, and for now, I don't care.

That's unlike me. I'm usually the silent sleeper who people somehow forget about, even though I'm the size of a barn and I listen intently to just about everything that goes on. I watch people, I listen to them, and I analyze them. I'm not particularly smart book-wise, but I'm observant, and sometimes, that's even more important.

But right now, I just want to check these deliveries off my to-do list, eat some dinner, and crash into bed.

"Bye, ladies. I'll be back for dinner," I tell them with my last load, and they both toss an easy smile my way.

Shay's happy, and that makes me happy. Way deep down in my heart, beneath all the mud and muck this farm boy is known for these days.

I SLAM THE DOOR OF MY TRUCK, DAMN NEAR PEELING OUT OF THE DRIVEWAY of my last stop. Even though I'm ready to get the hell outta dodge, I glance up at Millicent Jenkinson, who's standing in her doorway waving at me. She's a nice old lady, but I really don't need another grandma trying to set me up with her granddaughter, and she was the third just today. I don't know why they think subjecting their beloved daughters and granddaughters to a bastard like me is a good idea. Maybe they're just desperate and figure beggars can't be choosers. Because nobody's choosing me willingly. Too big,

too gruff, too quiet.

Little do they know, those are my best qualities.

But I'm not a complete asshole, so I toss a two-fingered wave to Mrs. Jenkinson from the steering wheel and drive away without revving my engine. Much.

The Chris Stapleton song on the radio is a good one, not as good as Bobby's, but it'll do for the drive back home. I'm in town but on the far west side from home, and with all the booming growth Great Falls has had the last few years, traffic will be piled up until I reach the city limits. We're still not big by any stretch, but the roads haven't quite caught up yet. This could take a while, but a look at the clock tells me I can still make dinner.

Music and dinner are all that's on my mind as I sit at the stoplight until I see a group of boys running around a field at the park beside me. In the three rounds of green, yellow, red, I haven't even made it to the light's white line, but my heart's already beating just a little too hard.

It looks like a football practice, or what's *supposed* to be one. There are probably twelve boys out there, around eight or nine years old, I'd guess, not that I'm good at judging kids' ages. But they're goofing around with a pigskin, playing more keep-away than running plays.

I remember being that small, just learning the ropes and enjoying every minute of it. Coaches yelling advice, Dad proudly clapping me on the back when I did well, and Mom cheering from the sidelines. We were so little, there weren't even bleachers, just foldable camping chairs the parents would set out to watch us play. It was picturesque and easy, and the bulk of my childhood centers around those happy memories.

I learned a lot on those fields in the early days, lessons that carried me through puberty and later, through high school in ways both good and bad. Football gave me a focus, a drive, and made me who I am. I hope for the same for those random boys.

A sentimental smile crosses my face, two in one day, which is probably a record for me. But it's premature because in the next instant, I see two of the bigger boys tackle one of the smaller guys. He goes down hard, and it was

definitely not a clean hit or a good fall. To add insult to injury, I see one of the tackling boys, a blonde-haired lanky kid, dig a toe into the other kid's side.

Not just dirty but mean.

It shouldn't be like that. Not at that age, not ever. If you're not good enough to earn the win, take the L and do the work to deserve it next time.

I blink, and I'm pulling into the parking lot of the park, marching across the field. "Hey! You! What the hell are you doing?"

Who said that?

Well, *shit*. Guess that was my grumbling voice calling out Mr. Kicks-A-Lot. The kid looks like he's about to piss himself, which would serve him right.

I lean over and set the smaller kid back on his feet. He's got dark hair, which he shoves out of his face revealing big, frosty blue eyes that'll serve him well with the ladies later in life.

"You all right, kid?" His lower lip trembles, and I realize belatedly that it might be partially from the tackle and partially because I'm a scary looking motherfucker. Especially to someone his size.

I bend down, taking a knee and pulling my shoulders in to round them. It's as small and unimposing as I can get. I even smile to soften the fear factor I cause.

"It's okay, you ain't in trouble. But those shits might be."

I throw an arched eyebrow to the other kid, who's standing with his buddy-slash-partner in crime. While my attention was focused on the little guy, Kicks-A-Lot is digging down and finding his attitude, judging by the sneer on his face. He kinda reminds me of Brody in a four-foot-tall sort of way.

Little Guy snuffles once, but it turns into a sort of laugh. "You can't say that." I look at him questioningly. He shakes his head, the laughter blooming a little louder. "You can't say the S word."

I do honestly grin at that. Out of everything that just went down, getting tackled, kicked, and having some random guy step in to save his ass, he's

worried about my language.

Mama Louise would like this kid, I think to myself.

“Uh, sorry. Just wanted to make sure you were all right. Saw what happened, and that’s not all right.” I say the last bit over my shoulder, accompanying it with a glare at Kicks-A-Lot.

Little Guy nods like a bobblehead. “I’m good. Johnathan’s just mad that I can actually create a play, not just go where I’m told like a dog. Woof, woof!”

He smirks at Kicks-A-Lot, I mean Johnathan, like a badass. Little Guy’s got big brass ones, I’ll give him that. Something tells me it’s not because he’s got me for backup, either. If I had to guess, judging by the prepubescent testosterone floating through the air, Little Guy might’ve earned that tackle. Just a little bit.

And don’t that just change the whole situation.

“I’m Bruce. What’s your name?” I ask him, not sure what I plan to do with the information, but it seems like the proper thing to do.

“Cooper, but most folks call me Coop.” He shrugs like he kinda wishes he hadn’t said that part.

Johnathan’s buddy pipes up, “Because you’re a chicken, Coop. Bok, bok, bok.” Several of the kids laugh at that and Coop flushes. No, not Coop, because that ain’t right if they’re nicknaming him to be cruel.

I turn my full attention to the gaggle of boys, stroking my beard like I’m thinking mighty hard about something. “Seems to me that the only chickens here are you bunch. Cooper,” I say his full name with a bit of extra emphasis, “took a hit and got up swinging, verbally, at least. Took the whole lot of you to mob up on one little guy. That don’t seem much like the chicken you’re talking about.”

They look suitably chastised, a couple of them even rubbing their toes in the dirt. But I’m not done. “Besides, you wanna know a secret?”

Twelve sets of eyes look at me with curiosity and I swear a couple of them lean in. I lower my voice like I’m imparting great knowledge, rumbling,

“Chickens are mean as hell. They’ll peck your hands even as you’re feeding them. Yep, mean little things.”

I nod sagely, pointing at some of the rough scars on my working hands. None of them are really from chickens, but these kids don’t know that.

“My brother’s got a whole flock of them, and a rooster too. He’ll wake you up long before the sun even peeks over the horizon, and his girls lay enough eggs that she can feed our whole family breakfast every day. All the while pecking the *sh-stuffing* outta ya.”

I correct my language at the last second, thinking Mama Louise would be proud.

Somewhere from my left, a voice cracks out, “How many eggs is that? You got a big family or a small one?”

I tap my temple, winking. “Smart question, kid. I guess it’s a big family, but mostly because we’re all big guys and big eaters. There’s six of us like me, my sister, two other women, and one of them’s got a baby but she don’t eat much yet, and then Mama Louise. So we get enough eggs for ten people to eat breakfast, I reckon.”

Rattling off the attendance roster of breakfast brings home just how much my life has changed in the last few months, because damned if it doesn’t seem like those folks are something to me. Maybe not family, exactly, not really, but I’d do anything for Mama Louise and most things for the rest of the Bennett boys, which is a far cry from our previous pointless feud that was based on Dad’s whims. I’m glad that’s done and over with, even if it took his passing to make things right.

The same kid whistles. “That is a big family. You say you got brothers the same size as you?”

I can feel those same sets of eyes measuring me, so I go ahead and broaden my shoulders back out but keep my lower profile on my knee. “Well, let’s be real, there’s not a lot of folks as big as me. But my brothers are close enough.”

They laugh like that was funny. I guess it might’ve been. “Hard to believe that once upon a time, I was as small as you guys.” I hold my arms out wide,

showing off my wingspan and the big paws attached to my wrists. “Eat your veggies, work hard, play right, and you can be a big motherfu— I mean, a big guy like me one day.”

The boys start flexing, working their lungs more than their biceps as they hold their breath and try to show off to one another. And to me, I realize with a hint of humor.

From across the field, a voice calls out. “Hey, guys, I’m here.”

I look up to see a thirty-something-looking guy hustling across the field, eyes locked on me. “Who’s that?” I ask the kids.

Cooper says from beside me, “Coach Mike. He’s Evan’s dad.”

There’s the smallest, tiniest hitch beneath the words, something most folks probably wouldn’t even hear. But I do.

When he gets close, I can see his eyes darting from me to the boys, like he’s checking each one of them over and head counting his ducklings while never taking his attention off the interloper. He’s a good dad, I’d bet.

He holds his hand out. “Mike Kauffman, Evan’s dad. And you are?”

I take his hand, careful to walk the fine line of a solid handshake without breaking his hand accidentally. “Bruce Tannen. I was just happening by and saw some roughhousing. Thought a little intervention was warranted.”

I purposefully don’t say any names, feeling like I’ve handled what happened well enough and hoping it made an impression.

Mike looks behind him to the parking lot and then shakes his head. “There’s literally six or seven moms sitting over there in their cars or at the playground with little brothers and sisters, and you’re telling me that you just walked up to the boys and no one said a word to you? Stranger-danger mean nothing these days?”

Seems like he’s asking that of the boys as much as the universe.

I hold my arms out wide, showing I’m no threat. “Look, man, didn’t mean to cause problems. Just saw a dirty tackle, a bad fall, and some overzealous afterplay. Wanted to make sure everyone was all right because there didn’t

seem to be anyone overseeing practice. No worries, I'll leave you to it."

Mike's still watching me carefully, which I can appreciate. At least these kids have proper supervision, though he's got a point that I'm a scary looking bastard for not a single parent to have said a word. We live in a safe town, but nowhere's *that* safe.

I hold a meaty fist out to Cooper, giving the kid a tame half-strength glare. "Watch that mouth."

He bumps my hand with his own, a smirk curling his lips. "I will, but I can back it up, and that's what counts, right?"

He says it like someone's told him that before. I raise a brow, silently telling him to think again.

I offer my fist to Johnathan too, who returns the goodbye with a bit less cockiness. "Words first, then get it out on the field correctly. Head up, shoulders down, feet buzzing, drop into position, and shoot and rip."

He nods like he took a mental note of everything I just said.

I toss a two-finger wave to Mike. "Have a good practice, Coach."

I'm halfway across the field, almost home free to the parking lot to head home for dinner when I hear a voice behind me call out.

"Brutal?"

BRUCE

I turn around automatically, more used to the nickname almost everyone calls me by than the name my mom gave me when I was born. “Yeah?”

Mike’s eyebrows rise up to his hairline, or where it used to be, at least. His hair’s buzzed down, and based on the slight dips above his temples, my bet is he’s disguising an early receding hairline.

“You’re Brutal Tannen?” he asks, and I nod once in confirmation. He claps his hands once before sticking his hand out for another shake like we didn’t already introduce ourselves. “Why didn’t you say so?”

I shake his hand again, though I’m not sure why, and lift and lower one shoulder. “I . . . did?”

He chuckles like I said something funny. “No, you said your name is Bruce, like you’re not known around here for being one of the best football players to ever grace the grass in the whole city. Didn’t you play for State too? Figured you were going pro!”

He recites my history like he has a clue. I thought I was going to get drafted too.

Plans changed.

“What happened?” he pries.

I grit my teeth. It’s been years and I’m over it, but I don’t think it’s ever easy to expose your greatest pain for public consumption, especially to someone you don’t even know.

“Family stuff,” I say coldly, not inviting further discussion.

Mike seems to realize that he’s overstepped and retreats politely. “Yeah, I get it. Family’s everything. Anyway, I was thinking . . . since you’re here, you think you might hang out and help with practice? Like a guest coach or something?”

He looks hopeful, but I don't feed into it. "Nah, sorry. Gotta get home, got dinner waiting."

"Oh, uh . . . yeah. Of course," he stutters, like my refusal was not at all what he was expecting. "I was just hoping you might . . . I mean, you've got a lot more knowledge about football than I do. I'm more of an armchair quarterback, if you know what I mean, but Evan wants to play and I was the only dad who would do it. Kinda got *voluntold* by the wife."

He tapers off, not saying anything bad about his wife, and the smile on his face says he doesn't mind being voluntold for this gig at all. Past him, I can see those same sets of eyes watching our interaction. All except one pair of icy blue ones that are fastidiously studying the laces of the football in his hands. Something about that hits me. This smart-mouthed kid doesn't think for one second that I'm going to do this.

Has he been disappointed before and is protecting himself from useless hopes? Or can he see that I'm not cut out for helping kids figure out the game I know inside and out? Considering I said 'the s-word' within moments of walking up, it's likely the latter. But lack of a filter aside, I could probably help them with football and the most important part of the game, being a team.

I gnaw on that for a quick second, dissecting my reasons and remembering my youth on the field.

Football was everything to me for so long, truly saving me. Mostly from myself. Could one of these boys need that opportunity to? Could I help with that?

Though that's really bigger than what Mike's asking right now, he just wants a couple of hours of my time. That, I can do.

I sigh, testing the words on my tongue. "Yeah, I could hang out for a little bit, I guess. Let me just send a text home."

He smiles heartily. "Of course, thanks! I'll just tell the boys."

He steps away, and I fish my phone out of my back pocket. I remember a moment too late that I promised Shayanne I'd be home for dinner, but I feel like these boys need me more than she does today, especially for some

special announcement she's making that's definitely not that she's pregnant.

Hell, she's probably just gonna tell us all that she and Luke are going on another trip. I don't begrudge her that excitement, but I don't need to be there to hear the blow-by-blow of their itinerary. Especially not the first time because she'll talk about nothing else for days if that's what her news is.

Still, even though I know she'll be fine when I explain why I'm skipping dinner, I decide to not incite Shayanne's wrath by texting her directly. I bypass her and text Brody instead.

Something came up, won't be home for dinner. Tell Shay sorry.

I get back a middle finger emoji so I check that off my responsibility list and head over to the boys, who are all sitting cross-legged and listening intently to Mike, who's singing the praises of my high school glory days.

"All right, Brutal . . . or, uh, Bruce. Which do you prefer? Or Coach B, even?" he asks. I can tell that in his mind, it stands for Brutal and that he really wants to call me that. Like I'm famous or some shit when all I did was crunch a few bodies damn near ten years ago.

"Coach B is fine," I tell him and the boys. Though everyone calls me Brutal, and I answer to it readily, I've never felt right introducing myself that way. The name brings up too many questions when you're a grown ass man who looks like I do. "I think first things first, I need to know everyone's name."

The boys start rattling off their names from their seated positions, and after three, I stop them. "Okay, hold up. Let's start with the proper way to introduce yourself, especially when you're looking to impress. Whether that's a coach, an employer, a girl's dad . . ." The boys giggle a bit and my lips quirk. "Or whoever. So, you stand up. Never introduce yourself to anyone sitting down. Offer a hand and shake firmly, but don't do that stupid squeezey thing where you're trying to break their hand. Look them in the eye and say your name clearly and loud enough to be heard. Like this."

I turn to Mike, dipping my chin to make sure he's on board with being an example for the boys. I hold my hand out and clasp his. "Bruce Tannen. Nice to meet you."

"Mike Kauffman. Good to meet you too."

We both turn back to the boys and I continue the lesson. “Your turn.”

The first boy stands up. “Johnathan Williams. Nice to meet you.” Seems Mr. Kicks-A-Lot is a fast learner, a plus in his column, especially given the good handshake and eye contact he offers me.

Down the row they go.

Evan Kauffman. Joshua Williams, apparently Johnathan’s fraternal twin brother. Killian Bloomdale. Cooper Meyers. Anthony Mondela. Christopher White. Derek Simpson. Liam Holt. Julio Ruiz. Trey Thedwell. Marcus Stacy.

A better-behaved group of young men stands before me than were on this field just a few short minutes ago. “Nice to meet everyone. Great job, guys.” I turn to Mike, moving on. “What did you have planned for practice?”

He shrugs, admitting, “It’s only our second practice, our first active one because the last one was mostly going over rules and dates for the practices and games. I figured we’d run sprints and do a few drills today.”

I nod. It’s a good start. “Sounds good. Can I make a suggestion?”

Mike smiles warmly. “That’s why I asked you to stay. Please do.” He gestures toward the kids who are watching, waiting for any tidbit I can share.

I search my head for the words I’d heard from one of my favorite coaches. I’ve had many over the years, some great, some good, and some just okay.

I drop down to my knee again and address the kids. “What’s the most important thing about a football team?”

“Touchdowns!” Derek shouts, his arms reaching over his head like a referee.

“Winning!” Killian corrects.

There’s a few more suggestions, so I hold my hands up to stop their guesses and give the answer I was looking for. “Teamwork. Football is the only sport in the world where you need eleven people doing eleven different things, but all of them working toward a single goal. If even one of them is off, the whole thing falls apart. You might be the fastest sprinter, the fiercest linebacker, or be able to throw a perfect spiral and hit a target a whole field away, but without the whole team working together, you’ll never win a game,

regardless of what the scoreboard says.”

Tiny bobbleheads all nod as if they’re soaking up the words of wisdom. I say a silent thank you to Coach Stadler for saying them to me when I was not much older than this group and for then teaching me what they meant.

“Let’s do what Coach Mike had planned and run. But with a small tweak. Instead of sprints, we’re going to run as a team. I think three laps around the park should be a good start. This won’t be like the races you do at school or even like the drills you’ll do later where you can show Coach Mike what you’ve got individually. For this, we’ll stay together at a pace slightly faster than the slowest and slightly slower than the fastest. We’ll adjust as needed, but the important thing is . . . no man gets left behind. We cross the finish line together or we’ve already lost. Understood?”

“Yes, Coach B,” they sound out as one.

I nod to Mike, all business. “You up for this?”

He looks surprised, his dad bod already flushing. “Us too?”

“Well, yeah. Team includes the coach. Lead by example.” He looks at my boots and jeans pointedly, making it clear that I’m not dressed for running. I dig my heel into the turf, amused. “I wear boots and jeans in the fields all day, every day. I could run in these for miles if needed.”

Any excuses gone, he shakes his head and chuckles, but he walks over to the gathered boys with me. “All right, this isn’t a ready-set-go type of thing, so I’ll just count us off. We’ll practice this first bit and I’ll call out which foot to run on so we stay together, but the goal is for you to not need me or Coach Mike to set your pace but rather for you to be in tune with the man next to you, on and on down the line. That’s how you become a team. Got it?”

They seem ready to roll, so I call out, “One, two, three . . .” And we’re off, not like speeding bullets but rather like slow-plodding sloths, each kid unwilling to go faster than the one next to him. The lesson is already sticking, but I speed them up a little bit. “Left, left, left, right, left.” It’s not quite military precision, and some of these boys probably aren’t even sure which is right and which is left, but together, we make our way around the park.

The second lap is a bit faster, and I don't have to say a word to keep the boys together. They do it naturally and a warmth fills my chest. The third lap finds us slowing back down a bit, exhaustion starting to hit us. But we cross the fence post of the finish line together and all twelve boys cheer for themselves, high-fives given freely between all of them, even Johnathan and Cooper.

"Great job, guys," Mike says breathlessly. He's got his hands on his knees, not exactly gasping for air but damn close. "Take five, get water, and then we'll regroup for drills."

The boys all run toward their bags, newfound energy from their youth bursting forth.

Mike watches them and then turns one hairy eyeball at me. "Shit, man. I'm in decent shape, lift weights three times a week, but hitting the treadmill ain't nothing compared to running on uneven grass trying to keep up with those pipsqueaks." It's not an insult in the least. Instead, he seems pretty impressed with his team.

One side of my mouth quirks up. "I know. I work my ass off in the fields, but I don't think I've actually run flat-out in way too long. It was good, though, for all of us."

Mike nods his agreement as he puts his hands on his head. "So, drills next? What do you think?"

I squint at the boys. "First practice, you said? You know who's got an arm and who can catch yet?"

"Nah, most of these boys have played flag football before, but not all of them, so there might be a sleeper pro." He grins even as he says it.

"How about we do a couple of tossing drills then? See who can throw for distance, for accuracy, and with any form to speak of. And then reverse and see who can catch an easy toss."

For the next hour, as the sun races across the sky, we do just that. A line of boys throwing to Mike and me and then us throwing to them. After a while, we gather back up in a huddle and Mike tells the boys they did a great job. He gives them a parental look of expectancy and they turn to me as one.

“Thanks, Coach B!”

“Thanks for letting me jump into your practice today, guys. It was a lot of fun. You’re gonna have a great season,” I say honestly. Being back on the field, even if it’s just a bumpy field in a city park, brought back good memories, back when life was simpler, things were easier, and football was the solution to all my nonexistent problems. I don’t mention the behavior that warranted my stopping in the first place, the incident forgiven but not forgotten.

Unprompted, the boys all line up to give me another handshake and do the same with Mike, which makes me feel like my earlier lesson did some good. And then they’re off like the rambunctious kids they are, bags flying onto shoulders, loud shouts, and tumbling feet.

I watch them go, Mike at my side. “You did good today, Brutal. Those boys might not know what a treat they got, but I certainly do. You’re something else.”

I feel heat on my face, and I shake my head. “Once upon a time, maybe.”

Mike scoffs. “And today. Not many would’ve stopped to help Cooper, and even fewer would’ve helped with practice the way you did.”

“That kid’s got a mouth. He might’ve earned a little bit of that. But just a little.” I hold my thumb and finger up an inch apart. “The rest was uncalled for.”

“Agreed. So, about that . . . about practice . . .” Mike pauses, looking at me curiously. “Like I said, I’m here for Evan, but I’m just the best they got out of a nonexistent pile of options. A couple of the boys don’t have dads for various reasons. Killian lives with his grandparents, and the ones with two parents didn’t have anyone else step up to coach.” He chuckles. “Not sure if that says Jamie’s got me whipped or what because here I am.”

He holds his hands out wide and then places them on his hips. “What I’m trying to say is . . . you interested in being an assistant coach? I could sure use the help, and the boys could use the expertise.”

I shake my head no on autopilot, without even thinking it over for a second. “I don’t think so. That ain’t me. I’m no coach.”

Mike's grin and bark of laughter are ones of disbelief. "Pretty sure there are twelve boys who'd disagree with you on that. Think it over. You don't have to answer now. Here's my number." He reaches down to his bag, pulling out a piece of paper and scribbling his information down. I take it, slipping it into my back pocket. It feels heavy with possibility.

Could I? Should I?

"You'd have to pass the background check and be listed on the roster or they won't let you on the sidelines at the games, but we can do that quickly. Plenty of time before the first game. Practices are here on Tuesdays and Thursdays at seven, Saturday mornings at ten, and the first game is several weeks away. We could use you, man. For all of it, any of it, whatever you're willing to volunteer for." He holds his hand out once more and I shake it firmly.

"Thank you, Mike. Truly. I'll think about it."

And I do. All the way home, down the paved asphalt of town, to the dirt of our driveway. I sit in the truck, not getting out and thinking.

I don't hear him coming, but the air is disturbed for a moment before the passenger door opens and Brody climbs in, slamming the door behind him.

"What are we doing?" he says casually. We both know there's nothing casual about his question.

"Thinking," I answer drolly. His quirked eyebrow says that's not enough, not nearly enough. I drum my fingers on the steering wheel. "Helped with a kids' football practice tonight. Coach asked me to come back and help again."

I don't think I could've surprised him more if I'd said I found a goose laying golden eggs and a giant beanstalk in town. "How the fuck did *that* happen?"

I relate the story of seeing the boys getting after Cooper and finish with Mike asking me to help.

Brody rubs at his bottom lip with his thumb, humming to himself. "You're thinking about doing it."

It's not a question. I see a lot, am observant to a fault, but Brody knows us all better than we know ourselves. He knows that football was always mine, my

way of dealing with anything and everything. “You’d be good at it,” he adds.

It’s a rousing stamp of approval from my stoic brother. He might as well be waving pom-poms around and cheering like some shit-bad cheerleader.

“I’m thinking about it,” I concede. It’s all I can give for now. Changing the subject, I tease out how much trouble I’m in. “What was Shay’s big news, and how mad is she that I didn’t show?”

Brody takes his hat off, rolling the brim in his hands and sighing. “Another trip. Fuck, you know I love our sister dearly, would kill for her, but I really don’t need to hear about every single pin she’s sticking on her map. It’s not even a big one! They’re going to south Texas, for fuck’s sake. As for you, she’ll make you pay. No mistaking that.”

He’s right, but I don’t mind. Tonight was interesting and different, and I can take Shay’s punishment with one hand tied behind my back.

Read the full book [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Big Fat Fake Series:

[My Big Fat Fake Wedding](#) || [My Big Fat Fake Engagement](#) || [My Big Fat Fake Honeymoon](#)

Standalones:

[Drop Dead Gorgeous](#) || [The Dare](#)

Bennett Boys Ranch:

[Buck Wild](#) || [Riding Hard](#) || [Racing Hearts](#)

The Tannen Boys:

[Rough Love](#) || [Rough Edge](#) || [Rough Country](#)

Dirty Fairy Tales:

[Beauty and the Billionaire](#) || [Not So Prince Charming](#) || [Happily Never After](#)

Get Dirty:

[Dirty Talk](#) || [Dirty Laundry](#) || [Dirty Deeds](#) || [Dirty Secrets](#)

