

A man in a dark blue tuxedo with a white shirt and black bow tie stands on the left, adjusting his jacket. A woman in a black, long-sleeved, flared dress and black high-heeled shoes stands on the right, with her hand on her hip. The background is a solid, vibrant red.

Drop Dead! Gorgeous

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DROP DEAD GORGEOUS



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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

Epilogue

Excerpt: My Big Fat Fake Wedding

About the Author

ALSO BY LAUREN LANDISH

Big Fat Fake Series:

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

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CHAPTER 1



ZOEY

I pull up to the one-story brick house, noting the property. Out here in Williamson county, there's no fancy area of McMansions, but this is probably as close as it gets. Small homesteads of an acre or two, just enough room for residents to have space to breathe. Definitely different from the mobile homes and fixer-uppers that never get fixed that dot the majority of the county.

I shut off my engine and get out, also noting to myself the four sheriff's department cruisers out front. Must be a slow day to have that big of a gang here.

Calling all crooks, calling all crooks in Williamson County. It's open season on all crime! Everyone's too busy here to care about your speeding or bank robbing! A rich dude croaked. That's more important than your piddly shit!

I go around to the back of my car for my gear bag, noticing there's one deputy out front wrestling with a large reddish-orange dog as he tries to attach a leash to its collar.

"Rusty, stop!" he yells, obviously getting frustrated. "Sit! Heel! Goddammit, chill the fuck out!"

I can't help but grin at the silly antics as the man and cute beast battle for dominance. Obviously, Rusty never went to obedience school, or he just doesn't give a shit what some deputy dawg tells him.

"Looks like he's handing you your ass," I say with a laugh, adjusting my bag on my shoulder so I can lend a hand if need be. "You good? Need another pair of hands?"

Usually, someone getting shown up by a dog that looks like he could be in a dog food commercial would welcome some assistance. Anything to end the shame and limit their chance of becoming a meme. You take help from anyone for that. But not from me, apparently, because the deputy pales as though I'm scarier than the dog and stutters, "Nope, all good, Zoey. You go on inside. I'll keep Rusty over here, away from you."

It sounds like he's protecting Rusty from me, not the other way around. And he's practically falling onto his ass backpedaling from me.

Ugh. Thankfully, my hat covers my eye roll, although I'm pretty sure they could hear it on the other end of the county with as hard as I did it.

Inside the entryway, I take the time to pull on my gloves before passing by Jeff. He's the sheriff, so I've worked several cases with him, but our paths don't cross too often. I give him a head nod, just trying to be professionally friendly, one he nervously and grudgingly returns.

The scene's deeper in the house, and as I make my way toward it, I notice the officer with Jeff, a young, blond, Ken-doll type guy I haven't seen before. As I look for a clear space to put my bag, he whistles softly. "Damn, I'd like a piece of that."

Jeff snorts and schools the rookie. "No, you don't. That's one to stay far, far away from. They call her Drop-Dead Gorgeous, 'cuz she kills 'em and then takes care of the bodies, if you know what I mean."

Jeff makes it sound like I'm some evil witch who burns bodies under the light of every full moon. I can feel the newbie's eyes appraising me, deciding whether I'm worth the risk of my reputation. Honestly, I'm not offended. If anything, Jeff is doing me a favor by directing the newbie away before I have to.

It's for his own good. And for mine too.

I might come in relatively attractive packaging that gets attention, my dark hair silky and shiny even in its functional low bun, my blue eyes sparkling in the interior lighting, and my skin creamy and smooth. I've been compared to Snow White once or twice, but people tend to run for the hills as soon as I open my mouth.

If I even get to a first date, usually blind ones, the initial 'get to know you' phase is inevitably my downfall.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a county coroner."

"Uh, does that mean you play with dead bodies all day?"

“Well, no. But I do work with cadavers.”

“Same difference.”

It's not, at all, but no one ever cares. I'm an investigator, a detective in a way, only all of my cases involve death. I help families find peace after a loved one has passed on, answer the inevitable 'why' questions, and act as the final storyteller for my patients' truths. What I'm not doing is playing dress up with the dead instead of Barbie dolls.

I've gotten used to dates being cut short with an awkward joke about "hope to *not* see you anytime soon." That's fine. I gave up on dating ages ago, anyway. And that's just the half of it. Too long a story to get into while I've got work to do, but let's just say me and Death became best buds a long, long time ago.

I can't help but smile sweetly at the rookie and wave two fingers, though, pretending that I have no idea what Jeff is talking about.

Rookie uncertainly smiles back, and I switch modes in an instant, my smile morphing into a growl as I bite my teeth together with a clack and my fingers turning into claws. Grr! I'm a tiger that'll eat you for breakfast, and not in the morning wood-good way. He recoils quickly, stumbling into the mantel above the fireplace and knocking down a figurine that looks like an old-school tin soldier.

I laugh. That was too easy.

I see Jeff grimace and mutter, "Told you so. She's a bit . . ." He doesn't finish the sentence aloud, instead completing it by circling his finger by his ear to indicate that I'm crazy. "Talks to the stiffs, ya know."

Pfft. As if he doesn't talk to his stiffy too.

Okay, so his is a bit different, but you can't tell me Jeff doesn't talk to his dick every day, because I've heard him tell his daily breakfast donut 'come to Daddy' more times than I can count. And if he's talking to food, he's talking to Mr. Woody, and I'm not unpacking that level of crazy for all the money in the world.

Nope, I'll just keep talking to the dead bodies, filling in their side of the conversations in my mind, and that does not make me crazy.

Weird, I'll admit. But not crazy. I mean, fuck, at least they've usually still got their ears. Except for that one time . . .

Entering the kitchen, I see a guy hunched over the dining table, his breakfast plate of scrambled eggs and toast still sitting in front of him. Actually, make that under him. He's literally nose-down in eggs. The

orange juice glass has been righted, probably to keep it from rolling off the edge, but the spill of liquid is still dripping off the table into his lap, soaking his tie.

Time for ‘work brain’ to take over.

Male. Early fifties. No obvious signs of trauma or foul play. He’s just dead at the dining table, eyes staring unblinkingly and unseeingly at now-cold and congealed eggs.

And they say breakfast is the most important meal of the day.

Okay, enough jokes. Assess, take pictures, and make notes. It’s all old hat, my hands working by habit, snapping pictures from nearly every angle I can think of. The county buys me a new memory card for every case, so I’ve got plenty of room on here for video and photo.

As I work, in my mind I’m talking to Mr. Toast-and-Eggs, just like I do with all my bodies.

“So, how’s your day been?”

“Pretty shitty, to be honest.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I’ll do my best to get you out of here quickly and wipe that OJ off.”

“Not too worried about the OJ being cold. Don’t think shrinkage matters now, but there’s a corner of toast poking me in the cheek.”

“Oh, I can fix that in just a second.”

“No rush. Not like I’ve got anything better to do now.”

Pics and video done, I do more assessing. Toasty was dressed for work, it appears. There’s a slight bulging in his neck veins, possible indications of heart problems. I lift my head to look around for any medications or anything helpful. None, but I’ll check the bathroom cabinet later.

Through the doorway, my eyes land on a woman sitting on the couch. She looks like this could be a house party, sitting cross-legged and calm as can be while people mill around her. She’s wearing jeans and a low-cut V-neck T-shirt, so not a police officer, not one of my crew, so . . . who is she?

Her eyes tick from person to person, silent and watchful. Eventually, they land on me and we lock eyes for a moment. She takes a deep breath and begins to cry . . . instantly loud and dramatic wailing.

Jeff’s rookie sits down beside her, patting her shoulder comfortingly, but she amps up her wailing.

“My Dickie! He’s gone! Nooooo, Dickie Boo!”

I lift an eyebrow. *“Dickie Boo?”*

Jeff, who's followed me in, squats down beside me and the body of the dead guy. "Yeah, DB's name is Richard Horne. His parents must've hated him something fierce before he was even born. And then they made it even worse by nicknaming him Dick." He snorts, covering it with a cough, before explaining, "Dick Horne. Toot, toot, tootle-toot."

Out of professionalism, I don't laugh, but I do agree that this guy's parents weren't winning awards for that one. Maybe some people would find it wrong or rude that we're joking around at a scene, but a macabre sense of humor is shockingly common in our profession. I'm not sure if investigative work attracts morbid people or if our sense of humor is a coping mechanism. Probably both.

"That's the wife, Yvette Horne," Jeff continues, lifting his eyes toward the blubbering woman.

"Hmm." She does seem rather upset right now, but the image of her sitting calmly and watchfully hasn't disappeared from my mind. That didn't seem like shock but more like a high school drama kid realizing they missed their cue and launching in full bore.

But she's not my concern right now. The body of Richard "Dickie" Horne is.

There isn't much else to be learned right now, so I finish my assessment, double-checking my list even though it's an automatic habit after doing this job for so many years. I'm *the* coroner in the county, so literally every body comes through my morgue.

It's a heavy responsibility, one I was taught to take seriously.

"All right, I'm done for now. Let's transport." Jeff nods and waves a hand at the paramedics, who've got a body bag and gurney waiting. If we were a full-service unit, we'd hire specialists, but out here, we all do double-duty. Paramedics sometimes hurry live ones to the hospital, and sometimes, they move my DBs to the morgue. They come close, wearing ponchos and full protective gear because you never know what's going to happen when you move a body. Sometimes it's clean and easy, and sometimes it's . . . not.

And that's all I'll say about that.

I stand up, giving them space. "Take him in. I'll meet you there."

The senior paramedic nods. "Sure thing, Boss."

Outside, the sun is shining and there's not a cloud in the sky. Birds are even chirping. It seems like the sort of day where nothing bad could

happen. But I think Mr. Horne would disagree with that assessment.

Maybe Mrs. Horne too. Her overly dramatic wailing echoes in my ears.

Before I get in my car, I go over to pet Rusty on the head, rewarding him for being calm, cool, and collected now that there's not a stranger in his yard. "Yeah, I didn't like that guy, either," I tell the dog, who's downright purring like a kitten under my palm.

At least *dogs* like me.

CHAPTER 2



BLAKE

Traffic. I *hate* traffic.

More than 38,000 people die in car accidents in the US each year. And yet, people take it in stride while freaking out over a couple of dozen people choking on gummy bears or something similar. I won't be one of them—the car accident victims, not the gummy bear chokers—even though I'm running late. But that's my fault for not expecting an overflow of cars out here on the rural highways surrounding the city.

Are we stuck behind a tractor with a maximum speed of twenty? Or maybe a big truck hauling a double-wide trailer?

I mentally cuss my sister out again, wondering if this crazy idea of hers is truly worth driving all the way out here. But I keep my hands at ten and two, radio on low, and eyes on the cars in front of me, alert for brake lights. I creep along, making barely any discernible progress until . . . finally, the roadway opens up and we start moving.

Pressing down on the gas, I keep my eyes fixed on the Mitsubishi Mirage in front of me, wondering why anyone would drive the number-one most unsafe car on the road. Sure, it's cute and pink like an adult version of a Barbie car, but no way would I put my wife or daughter behind the wheel of a go-kart on a highway filled with Hummers and monster-truck-sized SUVs.

Not that I have a wife or daughter, but the point remains the same. The Mirage doesn't even have the safety features of similarly sized cars in its class.

Unfortunately for me, I'm so distracted by the bright pink monstrosity, my mind running through all the facts and figures about the Mirage, that for the first time in my life, I somehow miss something vital.

I forget the fact that while I might be going a safely legal fifty-five, this is a country highway. A highway with turn-ins.

The dark shape comes out on my right side, and I jam my brakes, but not fast enough. There's just enough time for my heart to jump into my throat before a sick *crunch*, and time slows down.

I've read about this, but time really does seem to stretch into slow motion. I can see my passenger door start to cave inward and can feel my car start to skew sideways. I tell myself to let off the brake, allowing the tires to connect to the asphalt and letting me yank the steering wheel into my slide, trying to regain control.

I feel my seatbelt lock and start to dig into my collarbone, and an instant later, the world goes white as my airbags deploy. My head bounces off the side curtain bag, and my body is jostled around for a moment before I come to a stop.

The bags soften, and I lean back in my seat, groaning. "Shiiiiit."

My engine's still running, by some miracle, and I check that I'm in park before looking around, trying to figure out what happened. We're at an intersection near a gas station, and I look at the other car, a big black sedan.

How the fuck did I miss *that* thing?

A woman is sitting behind the wheel, her eyes wide and her mouth a huge 'O' of shock. Seeing my car, her hands go over her mouth, and I have the odd thought that her hands look delicate, as though her long fingers would be right at home playing the piano.

Her hands drop to her steering wheel, and I can see her mouthing, "No, no, no, no."

I have an instant and strong urge to reassure her that it's okay, even though I haven't any idea whether I'm really okay, she's injured, or if our cars are trashed. Waving my hands, I get her attention, then point to the gas station she's exiting, a questioning look on my face. She must get my meaning, and she jerkily nods her agreement.

I find that I can at least put my car into low gear and limp forward, twisting my steering wheel to counter the list I've developed. Obviously, something's twisted in my frame. She does the same, her sedan making an

ugly squealing, screeching sound as metal rubs against metal somewhere in her engine compartment.

Once parked at the edge of the gas station parking lot, I do a quick self-check. My hands curl and uncurl without pain, and while my neck and shoulders are sore, nothing's grating. I'm gonna need a couple of Advil, a long, hot shower, and maybe a visit to the massage chair in the mall, but I don't think I need a hospital.

I climb out, walking up to the woman's door. "You okay?"

She blinks, staring vacantly at her hands which are now wrapped around the steering wheel with a white-knuckled grip. I knock on the window, and she jumps as though surprised I'm standing here.

She seems to be in shock, or at least on the verge of it.

"Do you need an ambulance? Are you okay?" I'm already pulling my phone out to make the call, but the question seems to wake her from her trance and she reaches down to turn the car off. She opens her door, and I step back to give her room and try again. "Hey, you good?"

"I can't believe I hit you." The insurance representative in my mind automatically stores away that she just admitted fault. But there's an undercurrent of something that sounds like fear in her tone. She's scared shitless over something besides a car accident.

Suddenly, she blinks as if waking from a long sleep, and her eyes go aggressively cold, almost mechanically scanning my body, head to toe and back up again as words pour past her lips at lightning speed. "Oh, my God, are you okay? Broken bones, blood? There's probably internal bleeding, or you might have a concussion. We should call an ambulance."

Her nod makes it seem like she's agreeing with my suggestion on the need for some expert help here, but it's odd that she's overly concerned about me considering I'm standing here just fine and she hasn't moved from the driver seat yet.

"I'm fine," I reassure her, even squatting down in her open door to get to her level, "but I'm not sure you are. Do you hurt anywhere? How's your head?"

She scoffs, waving a hand airily. "I'm fine." But that hand goes to her head, smoothing the dark hair back into her low bun and checking for any tender spots. I watch closely, but as soon as she realizes she has an audience, her hand drops instantly. But the truth is, I'm not checking her for injuries . . . well, not totally.

She's stunning. Even as discombobulated as she is, her creamy skin, coal-black hair, and pale blue eyes all emphasize a face that is truly one of the most perfectly formed faces I've ever seen. She's a model of utter symmetry, that so-called 'golden ratio' that I remember reading about in an article once that tried to scientifically 'explain' beauty.

Seeing it in person, though, I'm struck by the fact that scientists might be able to explain it, but beauty like this can only be beheld to be truly appreciated and understood. And that understanding is far, far beyond the numbers, statistics, and ratios I live and breathe.

"Do you know who you are? Where you are? What happened?" I finally ask, just to have something to say.

She stares at me with an otherworldly vacant look, and I feel it down to my soul, piercing and sharp. "Oh, my God, no. Who am I? Who are you? Are you my husband? Is this one of those candid camera prank shows gone wrong?" She gazes blankly at the steering wheel and whispers to herself, "What happened?"

My guts churn, and I recoil, desperate to help this woman. "*Shit*. Hang on, let me call you an ambulance, ma'am." I fumble my phone, dropping it to the concrete. "Fuck!"

I curse at the same time the woman gasps in horror. "Oh, no! Sorry, sorry. Bad joke. I'm sorry."

"What?" Thankfully, my phone's not broken when I pick it up, but the woman's brows are now knit together and her eyes are clear. She was fucking with me. No matter how beautiful, that's not cool. "Seriously? I thought you'd lost your damn mind!"

She shrugs, her lips twitching at the corners. "That only works if you have one to begin with."

"Huh?"

She's got me spinning, and I haven't decided if it's fun like a tilt-a-whirl or awful like being strapped to a helicopter rotor while it revs up to chopping-off-your-head speed. The verdict is still out.

"Sorry, you looked so earnest," she says finally, smiling a little more. "I couldn't help it. Really, I'm okay. Just horrified and sorry."

"Stop apologizing." I lift a brow, gifting her with a glare my sister calls The Mini Rock, and explain. "Well, you should apologize for the fake amnesia because we're not living in a daytime soap opera and that was just mean. But the accident was just that . . . an accident. The important thing is,

we're okay. Can you get out so we can check the cars?" We do need to do that, but mostly, I want to see if she can stand. Despite her quick-thinking joke, I'm prepped, ready to catch her if she goes down, because I'm still not entirely sure she's as okay as she says.

But she's steady as a rock on her feet, to my relief.

Whoops . . . spoke too soon. She swoons, and I catch her in my arms. "Hey there," I whisper, way too close to her now. But with her this close, I can see that her blue eyes are shot through with streaks of white, her long lashes blink slowly, and there's a small freckle beneath her right eye, not ruining her perfect face but just highlighting her remarkable beauty.

And her lips . . . full, pink pillows that beg to be kissed. Or bitten, as she's doing right now.

"Sorry, sorry," she apologizes again. "My heart is still pumping fast, and I'm full of adrenaline from the fight or flight response. Made me a little lightheaded, but I'm good now."

Despite her words, neither of us makes a move for a long second where I memorize what she feels like in my arms. Sweet curves and strong muscles press against me, and I'm tempted to sweep her into my arms, full princess-mode style. And that is so not my way, usually, but she's activating some possessive protector gene in me.

One I would've said I don't have. I've always been proud of living by my mind and not my testicles. But this woman . . .

Too soon, she pulls away, straightening her back and then her black polo shirt. The embroidery on the chest is gold, a star encircled with *Williamson County*.

Wait . . . gold star, Williamson County . . . sensible shirt and sensible sedan.

Did I get hit by a cop?

From somewhere in her car, a *ding-ding-ding* sounds, and I realize that it's not the first time it's happened while I was holding the woman in my arms. "Were you on your phone?"

The accusation is harsh, and she goes as hard as steel in an instant. "Of course not! That's dangerous. I'm an excellent driver."

"Really? The evidence to the contrary is quite apparent, right in front of us." The damage my question caused is done. *Way to go, Blake. Super smooth, asshole.*

“Let me get my card and my insurance information for you. I have to get to work. DBs don’t wait.”

I have no idea who or what a DB is or why they don’t wait, but business mode I understand. I pull out my card and hand it to her as I take hers, reading it over.

Zoey Walker, Coroner, Williamson County.

Well, that answers that question. Not a cop, but close.

Dealing with the county for accident coverage shouldn’t be too difficult either, thank goodness. They’re not some low-budget, liability-only single office that doesn’t want to pay and tries to weasel out of every red penny.

Mostly, I just enjoy that I know her name now. She seems like a Zoey, beautiful and a bit mischievous.

I take pictures of her car and mine with my phone, and she follows suit after silencing the new round of *ding-ding-dings*. She pops the hood of her car so I can take a picture of the front-end damage, then gets on her phone, I guess to call for a ride.

“That everything, Mr. Hale?” she asks when she’s done. “I need to get going.”

That she used my name at least lets me know she read my business card too, but I hate that she’s trying to get away from me so quickly. I want to hold her again, maybe feed her lunch, even though the gas station is the only thing nearby. And only to make sure she’s okay, of course. Fine, and also to see if she’ll go soft for me again with a hot dog in front of her.

Damn, I’m such an idiot.

As if anyone wants to eat pseudo-food that’s been whirling away on hot rollers for hours on end, getting stale and dry. The lazy fucks didn’t even come out to check on us after the accident, and we’ve been parked in their lot now for at least ten minutes. Still . . . “Blake. You can call me Blake.”

I see her mouth move, as though she’s silently saying my name. I want to taste it on her lips.

But then it’s like a pink haze clears and she robotically says, “I won’t be saying it at all. Call the county offices. They’ll handle the insurance. Goodbye, Mr. Hale.”

Our conversation clearly over, she goes to the back of her car and gets out a large black bag and what looks like a tackle box, obviously tools of her trade. A minute later, another dark sedan pulls up and she gets in, consciously avoiding my gaze as she pulls away from me.

I have the urge to chase after her, but that's ridiculous. Even if I found her stunningly gorgeous and intriguing, with her running hot and then cold, I'm not superpowered.

Besides, thirty seconds after Zoey drives off, a county patrol car pulls up, and I've got other shit to worry about as a deputy gets out, leaning on the hood. "Well now . . . guess I should call for a couple o' wreckers now, shouldn't I?"

No shit, Sherlock.

CHAPTER 3



BLAKE

I watch the first wrecker's tail lights disappear easily, the traffic having cleared. It's not surprising. That's what traffic does—backs up because of a slow-moving tractor or an accident, and then it disappears when there's enough time and space for everyone to move.

Sucks that it cleared just in time to let Zoey drive away from me, though.

With a sigh, I get into the Uber I had to call and slowly pull out of the gas station too, unfortunately going the opposite direction as Zoey.

A few minutes later, we pull up to the address my sister, Amy, gave me. It's nothing more than a corn field among other corn fields. I'd think she was setting me up for one of her pranks, except her car is sitting on the side of the road.

"You sure, dude?" my driver asks, looking around with concern.

"Yeah," I tell him, tapping his tablet to confirm the charges. "Thanks."

I get out and see my sister. For argument's sake, she drives a very sensible white Volvo. Not a pink Barbie car in sight.

But she's already scowling. "You're late, Frosted Blakes. And what's with the fuckin' Uber?"

Ugh, the nickname she gave me when we were kids.

It drives me crazy and there's not a single other person I allow to call me that without dire consequences. Until Amy met and married Fernanda. Since Amy always calls me Frosted Blakes, Fernanda took up the habit, and I respect—and fear—her enough that I let it slide with her too.

"Yeah, had a bit of a holdup on the way here," I reply evenly.

That stops her from putzing with the camera she's tweaking even though there's a cameraman standing right there who is eyeing Amy like she's messing with his baby.

"What happened?"

She knows I have contingency plans for my emergency plans and always leave early in case I'm delayed. But even I couldn't have foreseen Zoey Walker.

"Bit more than a fender bender," I say carefully, knowing that it's like ever-so-politely pulling the pin on a grenade. "Had to call a wrecker."

"What?" she yells, smacking the cameraman for no good reason. He recoils, and I understand. My sister throws chops like a pro wrestler. "Are you okay?"

She comes over and starts turning my face left and then right as she checks me over.

"Still good looking?" I ask with a smile.

She smacks me then too. Somewhere, I think Ric Flair just yelled 'WHOOOOOO!' without knowing why. "Don't get cocky with me, Blake. Are you hurt? What happened? What about the other guy?"

When I don't answer her barrage of questions fast enough, one hand goes to her hip as she growls, "Well?"

I grin. "You look just like Mom when you do that 'I already know what you did, so you might as well confess' face."

Amy growls at the comparison, even though Mom's a good woman who's dealt with more than enough shit from raising Amy and me. "Don't deflect. Spill."

I give in, knowing it's useless to resist. "She pulled out and T-boned my passenger side. We got the cars into the parking lot and exchanged information. She was fine, I'm fine." I make sure to deliver the details as succinctly and dryly as possible, but Amy has known me since the day I was born and knows all my tells. Even the ones I don't know I have, which must be what gives me away because she digs in for more information.

"She? Fine? Information?" They're not questions. They're puzzle pieces she's putting together as the words pass over her lips, and I can already see the completed picture she's going to come up with.

I point a thick finger her way, shaking my head. "Don't go there. It was a traffic accident. I'll deal with the county to get the car fixed and never see her again." Why does a thread of disappointment accompany those words? I

mean, yeah, Zoey is beautiful, but a few minutes of conversation, especially one where she made me think she had amnesia, are not something to be smiling like an idiot about. But I am. With a few minutes of distance, that shit was funny.

“County?”

“She works for Williamson County,” I explain. “Coroner.”

The cameraman must be on my side, thinking Amy is more pitbull than should be humanly possible, because he interrupts phase two of her interrogation. “Amy, *if you care*, your clock’s ticking.”

Buddy, you deserve a Medal of Valor or something for that. It takes balls to interrupt my sister, and yours just got put in jeopardy. But I’m grateful because I don’t have the answers to phase one questions, much less phase two.

“This isn’t over,” she warns me. Instead, she shoves me toward a mustard yellow wing chair that is sitting on the edge of the corn field.

I eye it skeptically. “Amy, why is there a chair that belongs in Grandma’s sitting room out here in the middle of a field?”

“Are you doubting my artistic vision?” she challenges.

The answer is no, unequivocally. The truth is . . . absolutely yes.

Amy is brilliant in her own way. It’s just a very different way from my own analytical smarts, so we don’t often ‘get’ each other, though we can appreciate the other’s talents.

Still, the discordant nature of the fancy furniture and the rustic overgrown weeds is way out of my wheelhouse and seems weird and eccentric, which are two things that do not appeal to the masses. At least, not insurance buying masses.

Especially the ones in this part of the state.

I must give away my thoughts with another one of my tells because Amy crosses her arms, throws a hip out, and looks down her nose at me despite being a foot shorter. “Do not say what you’re thinking or you will be officially uninvited from Sunday brunch.”

Shit, she’s bringing out the big guns.

I grab my chest, wounded. “You wouldn’t. You know how much I look forward to Fernanda’s Sunday brunches.”

That’s the God’s honest truth. If something were to happen to Amy and Fernanda—not that I think it ever would because they’re the real deal—I’d

still end up on Fernanda's doorstep every Sunday. She's an amazing cook and I just couldn't give that up.

Plus, I might like her a teeny bit better than my sister, especially when she's glaring at me like she is now.

"The chair looks fabulous," I say politely, not meaning it in the slightest but not risking losing Fernanda's *chilaquiles*.

Amy pats my chest more than a little too hard. "Thought so. Let's do this, people."

The cameraman and I exchange looks because we're the only other 'people' here.

A few minutes later, I'm sitting in the Grandma chair and Amy is sitting in the dirt by my feet holding a reflector with one hand and a tablet with my prompts in the other, while the cameraman is giving me the 'action' sign.

"Caring for your loved ones is important in life, and though we don't like to talk about it, in death." I pause, staring at the camera earnestly.

"Call me, Blake Hale, today, and together, we can make sure your family knows you care. Smile like you give a shit." I blink, realizing a moment too late that was supposed to be an actual smile, not one of my spoken lines.

"Cut," Amy says as the cameraman quickly hides a grin. "Do I need to explain how this works again?"

The answer is no, so I smile like I was supposed to for the take and say, "Yeah, maybe so."

She offers a long-suffering sigh, like she's Kubrick herself. "You, dear brother, are a statistical genius and a life insurance salesman. And I am . . ."

She draws it out, making it clear I'm supposed to fill in the blank by singing her praises. I do my best.

"A marketing genius, an advertising savant." She waves her hand in a circle expectantly. "The best sister I could ever hope for?"

She points at me, placated for now. "That's right. And you know that my ideas for your previous commercial increased your business . . . by how much?"

"Sixteen percent in sixty days." Those facts I know like the back of my hand.

If smug were a Mrs. Potato Head expression, I basically just plugged it into Amy's face. "So now, you want to reach a new demographic. That needs different strategies. Now, say the lines and smile like the hot chunk of

cuteness you know you are, get all the guys wanting to be you and all the women wanting to screw you, and then you can be a good Boy Scout and take their money for life insurance.”

My face contorts in disgust.

She’s not wrong, but she makes what I do and who I am sound so sleazy. The truth is, I really do help people set up their estates, including their life insurance needs, so they can take care of their families after they die. It’s not scammy in the slightest, and I’m proud of what I do, especially since I’m damn good at it.

“Tick-tock,” the cameraman adds quietly.

Amy narrows her eyes, shutting him up. “Quit wasting time.” She makes it sound like I fucked up on purpose, but it was an honest mistake.

I do the lines again, this time smiling at the close like I’m supposed to.

“That’s a wrap,” Amy says. “Guess we’ll see you on Sunday?”

“You know it.”

I’m almost clear, ready to call another Uber when Amy tells me, “Get in the car.” She points at her white sedan.

“No, thanks. I’m good.” I don’t risk explaining that a thirty-minute drive back to town where I’m a captive audience for her interrogation is against the Geneva Convention’s guidelines on cruel and unusual punishment.

“You really okay, Frosted Blakes? From the accident?” Worry mars her forehead, concern filling her eyes.

I nod, smiling easily to reassure her. “Yeah. I’m good. Just gotta deal with the insurance stuff. Those guys are so fucking annoying.”

Luckily, her answering laugh means I’m off the hook and is enough to get me through a ride home and into my soaker tub. I don’t realize how sore I am until the hot water starts to soak into my bones.

But as I relax, there’s one part getting harder as I think of Zoey Walker.

* * *

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, I’ll have to wait for the paperwork to process before I can fix my car? That’s not how this works.”

The lady on the phone sounds bored and couldn’t possibly care less. “Sorry. Paperwork . . . process . . . blah-blah-blah.”

She might be a woman, but she's trying to mansplain my own industry to me. I've been in insurance for over ten years, and though my focus is life insurance, I'm well-versed on auto insurance too. Package deals and all that shit.

"Fine. I'll make sure you get the paperwork today."

She laughs, a small little chuckle of 'sure, you will, good luck with that', and I press the *End* button on my phone a little too hard. I miss the days of being able to slam a phone down, that last bastion of 'fuck you' to end a wayward call and show the person on the other end of the line exactly what you think of their paperwork nonsense.

Someone should make an app for that.

A few clicks later, I have what I need, the address of the coroner's office in Williamson County. Zoey Walker, while she might be a good driver—snort!—is shit for filing paperwork in a timely manner, and I'm going to call her on it.

In person.

CHAPTER 4



ZOEY

No effin' way. You're not going to do it.

“Uh, yeah, I am. It’s literally my job,” I tell the body on the table. He’s not going to talk back. They never do. Sort of expected that way.

Well, there was that one time I had an old lady wake up on a side table and grumpily ask for a blanket before her ‘tits freeze off . . . again.’ I’d nearly jumped out of my skin and had been so shocked that I hadn’t even asked how her tits had frozen off the first time.

To be clear, I hadn’t been the one to declare her dead and bring her still-alive body to the morgue. But the doctor who did? By the time I got done with him, that nursing home quack was only able to find a job giving flu jabs in the middle of Siberia. Or somewhere where he couldn’t cause any harm.

Oh, sure, ‘she looked pretty passed,’ he’d argued. And yeah, she looked like she was a stiff breeze from coming back to the morgue even as they wheeled her into the nursing home transport van. It was a full-blown *Weekend at Bernie’s* situation, except she was mumbling about impatient nurses wanting to steal her pussy while staring blankly into space. The nursing home staff had patted her on the arm, reassuring her and explaining to me with a long-suffering sigh that ‘no one wants your porcelain cat figurine, Mrs. Jones.’

Still, Dr. Dumbass had to deal with a very pissed off county coroner. Or I guess I’d had to deal with him.

I shudder, returning my attention to the definitely dead man in front of me. I poke him in the shoulder with my gloved hand. Just to be sure, you

know.

Do not fuck up my six-pack. Do you know how hard I had to work for that?

He does actually have six-pack abs, a narrow waist, and muscular legs that go on for days. All topped with golden blond hair, a proud nose, and full lips sandwiched between a manscaped moustache and beard. He looks like a model, like he could be one of those buff guys on a romance novel cover or GQ magazine.

Well, he could've . . . if he were still alive.

“Sorry, Chad ol’ buddy. But we need to know what happened. It’ll give your family some peace. Especially since you seem to be the picture of health.” I imagine he huffs in annoyance, only partially appeased by the compliment. But he quiets down, letting me get to work.

Inside, I chuckle a bit at my own stupid joke. The dead guy quieting down? Most people would think I’d truly lost it if I said that out loud, but my inner conversations are a side effect of long hours spent alone in a cold room as the county coroner.

It’s not a job I ever thought I’d have, to be honest, but it’s fitting in a way.

Drop-Dead Gorgeous.

The words from a few days ago come back to me. Sheriff Jeff isn’t the first and won’t be the last to call me that, but it still stings. Even if it serves my purpose to keep people away from my bad juju.

Shit, I’m not supposed to think about it. I look around for something wood to touch but only see metal instruments. And I don’t want to contaminate myself, either, so I cross my gloved fingers and send up a silent hope that everyone I know stays safe and healthy . . . and alive.

That last one is the most important one considering my history. I don’t just work with death all day. I’ve known it intimately over the years.

First, with my parents. They died in a car accident when I was thirteen, and I’d been taken in by my grandparents. A tragic start for sure, but that’s where things got interesting.

Grandpa had been the coroner for Williamson County for decades, and our dinner conversations were not the sort of light and fluffy things most people talk about over meatloaf. He ruined the *CSI* shows for me, complaining about inaccuracies and teaching me how it should’ve been

done, whether I wanted to hear it or not. I can still hear his lame ‘dad jokes’ . . . *Those procedures . . . could kill a man.*

YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! And then Grandpa would drop his bifocals down his nose, mimicking David Caruso’s stone-cold stare.

In hindsight, I know he was trying to help me, but it was rough going for a while when I wanted to pretend Mom and Dad were just on a long trip and Grandpa had continually talked about death. But by the time I was sixteen and old enough to get a job, I was helping Grandpa out.

Nothing with direct contact, of course. He’d drilled the procedural rules into my head long before. But I’d drive him around, hand him instruments, and discuss his findings.

When he passed, I’d already gone to school, gotten a forensic science degree, and had been Grandpa’s right-hand worker for years. I was the obvious person to take over his role. My appointment as coroner had been uncontested, and I think as long I stay down here in my hidey-hole like a recluse, the county commissioner can just pretend I don’t exist.

That works both ways as far as I’m concerned. The county commissioner’s an idiot who treats budget increases for my office like I’m asking him to lie down on my table for a visit or two. So I ignore him and make sure my paperwork’s clean.

But I’m going to need some help sooner rather than later. This isn’t Grandpa’s day. The county’s twice as large now. That’s more stiffs than even a porn star could handle.

I pick up my scalpel and silently tell Chad ‘sorry’ once more. I’ve got the blade a scant millimeter from his skin when I hear a faint voice groaning, “Help me.”

I freeze, my eyes ticking up to Chad’s chest to look for any sign of movement. I point the scalpel at him and scold, “Don’t you dare, Chad. You are not nearly as entertaining as Mrs. Jones. And once was more than enough of that.”

But Chad’s still. Of course he is, because he’s dead. For real dead, not just with a soft, slow heartbeat that a nursing home doctor didn’t take the time to listen for.

Deciding I imagined things, I press the scalpel to Chad’s abdomen.

“Help meeeee . . .” a disembodied voice moans in a loud whisper. There’s no mistaking it or pretending I imagined *that*.

I look around the room, my heart skipping beats like an off-tempo drummer.

There are no shadowy corners to hide in because I'm not a stupid horror movie chick. The only people here are me and definitely-dead Chad. Even so, a shiver of fear runs down my spine, leaving tingly nerves in its wake.

"Hello?" I call out, holding the scalpel like it's a weapon now instead of an instrument I've used dozens of times. "Is anyone here?"

Suddenly, an ice-cold hand grabs my ankle, sending me off balance. I scream, kick out, and slash at the black shadow crawling out from under the table with the scalpel all at the same time.

My foot makes contact, and the shadow lets out an unmistakably human 'oof'. "Shit, Zoey. I think you broke a damn rib."

I drop the scalpel to the table with a clatter and kick the not-shadow, but a black hoodie-wearing teenage boy. "Jacob! You scared the piss out of me! I could've hurt you! I could've fallen and gotten hurt!" I'm yelling loud enough to wake the dead, scowling murder, and threatening him with my foot again. "You're lucky I didn't slice your carotid or something!"

In response to my potential violence and his own potential death, Jacob is rolling on the floor, laughing his ass off. And people say I'm macabre. But my brother-slash-ward-slash-I'm not sure what to call him is just as dark in his own way, and maybe even weirder.

"Holy fuck, Zoey. You should've seen your face." He mimes the apparent terror I felt a moment ago, his eyes wide and mouth stretched horrifically, seemingly unaware that my adrenaline has quickly morphed to anger. "I got you so damn good!" He licks his finger and then adds a tally mark to an invisible score board. "Winner . . . your boy, Jacob! And the crowd goes wild! Ahhhhh!"

"That's it. Consider yourself evicted," I warn. "Get. The. Fuck. Out!"

He isn't cowed in the least, simply yawning dramatically with one hand covering his mouth and one arm stretching out wide, still lying on the floor. "You wouldn't dare. You love me too much."

I pout, arms crossing over my stomach as I glare at him. I hate that he's right. I would never kick him out. Not after everything he's been through. Everything we've been through.

Jacob is my brother from another mother . . . and father. Well, technically, not my brother at all, but he sorta is. After I went to live with Grandma and Grandpa, they discovered that they liked having some young

life in the house again. When a neighbor mentioned a kid who needed a foster home, Grandpa opened up his home to Jacob before the state could swallow him into their impersonal system.

Back then, I hadn't known how to push people away. My walls weren't up and fortified like they are now, and Jacob had snuck right into my heart. Which honestly terrifies me even more than his pranks and antics. Because though he's not blood, Grandma and Grandpa adopted him, which technically makes him my uncle. But after their death, I'd become his guardian, which makes him my son.

And twisted family tree aside, in truth, he's my brother. Always has been, always will be.

So I give in and soften my glare by degrees.

He rises up, unfolding himself from the floor with at least an apologetic look on his face. He's tall and lean, a leftover of his youth of neglect even after years of good food and care. About the only thing we have in common is our blue eyes—not the color, though they're the same, but the ghosts that lurk there. Where I've dealt with mine by becoming sarcastic and keeping people at arm's length for their own good, Jacob has coped by becoming the life of every party.

He's the quintessential outgoing, playful, fun-loving guy whom everyone flocks to. He's the rebel with a 'fuck the world' grin on his face, and everyone loves him for it.

"I didn't mean to scare you that badly. But shit, you really got me good." He rubs at his rib. Only . . .

"I kicked you on the other side, asshole."

He grins that smile that's gotten him into and out of more trouble than it should've as he switches his hand to the other side. "Yeah, I know. Just checking them all. You got some donkey behind that kick. Hee-haw!"

I can't help but smile at him and he knows it. "What are you doing here, anyway?" My eyes tick to the clock on the wall behind him and then back to Jacob. "Don't you have class in an hour?"

"Yes, Mom," he intones flatly, fully engaged in annoying, sarcastic teenager mode. But I can't help but feel a little happy when he says stuff like that, knowing that he's not used to someone caring about him enough to check up on his whereabouts and doings. He pulls a rolled-up stack of paperwork out of his hoodie's kangaroo pocket. "Need some help with this

before class. I thought you could . . . you know . . . look it over? If you have time?”

The papers crinkle in his large hands as he squeezes them. “Or you know what, never mind. It’s fine. I’ll see you at home later, Zo.”

I step in front of him, blocking him even though he could plow right over me if he chose to. I hold my hand out, sighing. “Let me see.”

He looks at the papers once more before he hands them over. I unroll them, but not before I notice that he’s turning a bit red. He rubs at his neck as he turns away from me. “This guy’s younger than your usual DBs.”

Subject change, party of one.

“Yeah, was about to get started.” I look at the papers to find that it’s an essay assignment. I scan quickly and realize why Jacob is questioning himself. “Grandpa would love this.”

Eyes locked on the unseeing, closed ones of Chad, Jacob asks me, “You think it’s okay?”

I bump him with my shoulder, hitting his bicep because he’s so damn tall I can’t reach his shoulder. “Better than okay. Turn that in and get your A, but more importantly, you should go by the cemetery and read it to Grandpa. He’d get a kick out of your singing his praises and calling him your hero.”

Jacob smiles, not his normal cocky one but a true, sweet smile that touches my heart. I remember how scared and unsure he was when he first came to Grandpa and Grandma’s house. Too quickly, just like the years passing, that smile turns to orneriness. “You think Holly is there today?”

Holly Linzinski is my best friend, by force. Literally.

We met because she works at the local funeral home as a hair and makeup artist, and she came along for a pickup one day. She glommed onto me like the stickiest glue, and I can’t seem to pry her off no matter how many times I’ve tried. She jokes that she has a death wish, so I’m the perfect bestie.

She’s lying. That blonde, cute tomboy with a killer smile is one of the liveliest and most life-loving people I’ve met.

And also, way too much for Jacob to handle, a fact I try to reiterate for the umpteenth time with a finger in his face. “You leave her alone, you hear me? Hell, you wouldn’t know what to do with a woman like that anyway, so it’s best that you don’t get that particular reminder of how young and innocent you still are.”

“Innocent?” He huffs. “Says you. Holly’s a total MILF. Mom I’d like to . . .” Jacob accents each word with a hip thrust that’s half-dance move and half-sexual move.

I scowl bloody murder at my insolent brother, wondering if I’ll have to add him to the bodies currently piling up in the morgue. “Why, you . . .”

For once in my life, the gods must be listening to my prayers because none other than my bestie, Holly herself, walks in behind Jacob right as he says that.

Instant karma.

Either that, or Jacob has seriously pissed off someone up there in the clouds.

“Mom you’d like to *what?*” she asks, her mom voice in full effect. She comes up right behind Jacob, growling in his ear, “I wish a muthafucka would try.”

He whirls in shock, going almost as pale as I am. “Oh! Holly! I didn’t realize . . .”

I laugh, his fear and shock a hell of a lot funnier than mine were earlier when he got me. Holly laughs along with me as she holds up a hand for a high-five.

We smack palms, and Jacob finds his cool guy front, standing up to his full six feet and widening his shoulders. He still looks like the eighteen-year-old kid he is, but he gets points for trying.

“Anything you want, I’m totally down, baby girl.” He throws his voice low, trying to sound like those daddy kink guys on TikTok and failing miserably, mostly because of his baby face. He doesn’t even have to shave more than once a week.

If we were out and some guy approached with that sort of line, Holly would throw her head back and laugh in his face, but because it’s Jacob and she’s kind, she won’t completely destroy him. “Good try, kid, but I heard you right the first time. I just tried to give you a way out by pretending I didn’t. And if I need dick, it’s going to be from someone I don’t have to teach. Ain’t nobody got time for that!” she jokes. “And also, life lesson number 512, when someone says,” she adds a bit of Samuel L Jackson to her tone, “‘wish a muthafucka would,’ it’s never an invitation, no matter how much you’d like it to be.” She punches her palm with her balled-up fist, “I wish. *Smack*. A muthafucka. *Smack*. Would. *Smack*.”

It sounds much more threatening this time, as she intends, and though I know she wouldn't actually strike Jacob, she does hit him where it hurts.

His pride.

Jacob's jaw goes tight, but he smiles through it. Same as always, playing it off. "You miss one hundred percent of the shots you don't take. I'm gonna keep on aiming for this particular basket." He dribbles an invisible ball, jumps, and shoots for the basket . . . Holly. "Swish."

She doesn't encourage him, but it's hard not to appreciate his perseverance. She shakes her head, but her smile is enough for him to call it in his own favor. He grabs his paper from my hand, not caring that I haven't even finished reading it, and heads toward the door.

"Take that by Grandpa, Jacob," I order.

He shrugs on his way out. "Maybe."

"Ah, alone at last," Holly says as Jacob leaves. She plops down in my desk chair, spinning circles with her head thrown back to stare at the fluorescent lights. It makes me dizzy just to watch.

"What're you doing here, Holls?" I ask as I pick my scalpel back up. I can work with her here. She's used to it. I press the blade to Chad's abdomen for the third time, hoping it's the charm. I pause for a split second to make sure nothing else is going to interrupt me, but it's all good this time, so I make my incision.

The chair continues spinning as she says, "Finished work—every last Gertrude and Harold fixed up with nowhere to go—so I thought I'd see if I could talk you into an after-work drink. My babysitter's there 'till seven today."

Holly takes her work seriously, her play even more so. And she likes to drag me along for her escapades. And as much as I'd love to say no, I learned long ago that it's faster to go for the drink, even if I'd rather skip it. The argument alone where she tries to talk me into it will take longer than drinking a glass of wine.

"Sure. One drink." I hold up a gloved finger, and Holly stops her spinning long enough to give a victory dance that involves wiggling her hips in the chair and kicking her legs in the air. Ironically, it makes this 'MILF' look more like a teenager.

"Where you wanna go?" she asks, all sarcasm. There are only two bars close by and only one of those that we go to.

“Guess,” I fire back with sarcasm of my own. I don’t stop working as I ask, “How’s your week been?”

She spins again, adding a sigh. “Good. It’s been slow, which is both good and bad. Dad’s worried about the business side of things, and no matter how many times I tell him that everyone dies eventually, he still keeps crunching numbers and saying creepy things like, ‘We need two more funerals this month to get out of the red,’ which makes him sound like a serial killer. But on the upside, not too stressful . . . all things considered.”

I get what she means. Holly has enough stress in her life. She’s a single mom, she works with her dad in the family business, she’s alone a lot, and she deals with death all day, every day. She is quite the badass, though, keeping a golden outlook on life while taking care of her five-year-old, Olive, who’s really the cutest kid in the county, in my opinion.

Holly goes quiet for a moment, and I glance up to find her smiling at her phone. “You’d better not be DMing some fuckboy. You deserve better than that, Holls.”

She’s slow to tear her eyes from the screen, but when she does, I can tell she’s gearing up for round ninety-four of a fight we’ve had before. “Just because you choose frigidity doesn’t mean the rest of us can’t choose good dick. You make it sound like these guys are taking advantage of me, but trust me, it’s the other way around. I want some adult conversation that isn’t about” —she gestures to Chad’s body where I’m still working— “this, someone to have a drink with when my bestie bails on me, or someone to press my buttons when my battery-powered bedside buddy starts catching feels because we’ve seen each other so many times this week.”

Her smirk lets me know that I’m never gonna win this one. She might hope to meet her soulmate, but she’s okay with meeting a temporary fix too. I shouldn’t judge her considering I don’t meet anyone, ever.

Nor do I have any intention of doing so.

“Fine, text your fuck boy. Does he at least use your thighs like earmuffs?”

I don’t get an answer because the door opens as I finish my question. I turn, expecting to find Alver, the deputy security guard from upstairs. He’s good about asking if I want to order dinner when he orders his own because I always work late.

But it’s not Alver.

It’s . . . Blake Hale.

In my morgue.

“What are you doing here?” I demand, embarrassed because I know he heard what I asked Holly.

His blue eyes are scanning the room, leaving no corner unexamined until he gets to me. Well, more likely to Chad, who’s laid open in front of me. That obviously sets him back because he makes a small choking sound deep in his throat that makes me laugh a bit.

“Feel free to go back out the way you came in if it’s too much for you,” I offer snidely with a shooing wave of my hand.

He stands straighter, stretching to what must be six-two or three, and a muscle in his jaw works. “Not until you do the paperwork.”

“Paperwork?” Holly interjects. “Interesting.”

I pause, realizing this is going to go over like a fart in church when I explain. “I got in a tiny little fender bender, but I’m fine. More importantly, the other guy is fine too.”

I tilt my head toward Blake, inviting him to disagree. Sure, I downplayed the accident, but Blake seems ready to let it slide.

I also look for wood to touch again but still find none. I cross my fingers once more because though Blake Hale had looked good—too good, in fact—after the small accident, he looks even better now.

He’s wearing a button-up shirt, rolled up to show his forearms, and a silver watch and flat-front khakis with a dark brown belt, which could come off as bland business casual. But the fire in his eyes has me feeling warm and tingly in this icebox of a room.

I’m honestly glad he seems so vibrantly alive because I had a nightmare that he dropped dead of an aneurysm after leaving the accident scene. It’d bothered me so much that I actually searched the database to be sure that hadn’t happened.

But with the scowl he’s throwing my way, perhaps my relief was premature because I can see the way his heart is racing by the pulse in his neck beneath that jaw muscle that’s still working double-time.

It’d probably serve me right to have him die right here in front of me in my morgue. God, that story would make the rounds in an instant.

Despite whatever stare down moment Blake and I are having, Holly is having none of it. She not only stops spinning in my chair but leaps from it to come to my side and smack my ass.

“What the ever-loving actual fuck, Zoey? An accident? That is the sort of thing that requires an immediate phone call. Friend Code 101. Are you okay? Really okay?” She scans me from head to toe, looking for anything amiss as she lifts my left arm and then right, scalpel and all.

“I’m fine,” I say reassuringly as I shrug her off. Believing me, she whirls on Blake. “You’re that guy . . . ‘Call me, Blake Hale, today at (555) 917-LIFE.’ Aren’t you?”

“How do you know his number?” The words pop off my tongue before I even realize I’ve thought them.

Holly’s answering smile is pure evil, decadently reveling in whatever plot she’s cooking up. “His commercials, of course. Mr. Hale here is a life insurance guy, and you’re a death dealer.” She holds a hand up to stop the argument she knows is coming. I hate when she calls me that even if I’m the one who said it first during a drunken, tearful breakdown shortly after Grandpa died.

“You two are a match made in heaven if there ever were one. Especially considering the wreck didn’t kill him,” she adds sassily, knowing how touchy I am about my history from that same drunken conversation. Flipping back around as though she’s a tennis ref, she gives me her back and focuses on Blake once again. “I’m Holly, the bestest of the besties. So start talking, what paperwork?”

Blake has the good sense to look confused as hell by whatever he’s walked into. I’m not surprised. Holly has that effect on people. I do too. But the reminder about whatever brought him here draws his focus back to me. “You haven’t done the paperwork on the accident, so the county office is giving me the runaround about the claim. I need it done . . . now.”

I bristle at his bossy tone. “Kinda busy at the moment.” I wave my gloved hands around, gesturing to Chad.

Sorry, man. It’s not usually this crazy here.

All good, this is more interesting than what I’ve got going on now, anyway. If I could, I’d be munching on popcorn right now.

My brow quirks at Chad’s insolence.

Blake still isn’t put off, though. He crosses his arms over his chest, his feet stepped out wide. It’s almost a bar bouncer pose, meant to intimidate, except no one in the history of ever has been intimidating in khaki pants. I don’t think it’s humanly possible. Especially when you’re as attractive as Blake Hale is.

“I’ll wait until you’re done. Then you can do the paperwork.”

I can tell he thinks that’s a negotiation. Now versus when I’m done. “I have plans tonight. I’ll get to it when I get to it.”

A twitch breaks out over his right brow, and I have to fight pulling out a victory dance and singing off-key . . . *get to it when I get to it, and newsflash, that’ll be never.*

Fine, I will do it. If I don’t, the county motor pool manager is going to be on my ass. But I refuse to do it when Blake’s being all Bossy McBosserson, telling me what to do and when to do it. No, thank you. I’ve had plenty of guys—deputies, usually—try to tell me how to do my job as if they have a damn clue.

But I hold my ground and do what I do best, handle my job the way Grandpa taught me. And right now, getting answers for Chad’s family is priority over some paperwork so Blake can get his passenger door fixed.

Holly suddenly holds her phone up, waving it around, and then presses it to her ear. “Oh, no! Is Olive okay?” She pauses for a dramatic moment to be sure we’re listening. “Of course, I can come home right now. Don’t worry, I’ll be there in a flash.” She takes the phone from her ear and puts it in her back pocket. “Sorry, I have to bail on our drinks tonight, Zoey. Olive isn’t feeling well, so I’m heading home to take care of her.”

It would all seem reasonable, if not convenient, except for one small, glaring detail. “Holly, your phone never rang and I could see your damn home screen.”

She shrugs, unconcerned. “Mother’s prerogative to decide to go home for snuggle times. You should consider some snuggle time yourself after you do Blake’s . . . paperwork.”

She does not mean the papers I have to fill out and file with the county secretary. That much is clear by the seductive way she says ‘paperwork’ even though it’s not a sexy word in the slightest. One more look passes between the two of us, and she damn near runs for the door, calling over her shoulder, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

As if there’s a single, solitary thing she would say no to.

Blake is smug as can be as he takes over the chair where Holly was sitting.

Why does everyone just help themselves to my space? This is a morgue, not a Starbucks.

Blake, though, seems to at least be willing to be polite about it. “I’m not trying to piss you off, but I really do need that paperwork done so I can get my car fixed.”

Okay . . . that’s a little bit of progress. “Fine. Suit yourself if you want to wait. This might take a while.”

CHAPTER 5



BLAKE

I hear the dare in her voice, see the challenge in her eyes as she glares at me in her desk chair. I'm not sure what prompts me to do it, but I give myself a good spin like Holly did a moment ago before they realized I'd entered the room.

When Zoey growls a bit, I know good and well exactly why I did it. I like setting her on edge because she makes me feel that way just by turning oxygen into carbon dioxide. Turnabout only seems fair.

The tension works through her, from her surgical cap-covered hair to her bootie-covered feet, her shoulders bunched up, her jaw tight, and her back ramrod straight. In contrast, I slouch comfortably in her chair with my head thrown back against the headrest and give her a lazy smile that clearly says, *challenge accepted*.

"Whatcha doing?" I ask even though I can see exactly what she's doing, gross and disgusting as it may be. I want to keep looking at Zoey, especially when I can look my fill because she's giving me zero fucks, but my stomach revolts. Not at her, but at the way her gloved hands disappear into the body on her table and reappear. I'm trying my hardest to hold onto my man card, but I can feel my palms going clammy where I grip the hand rests.

This isn't a George Romero movie or something. There are no gushing geysers of claret or ropy strings of internal organs being yanked out. This is real, and while it's not as bloody, ironically, that somehow makes it all the more disturbing.

And Zoey's utterly comfortable with it. "Working."

She shows no interest in continuing a conversation, and in fact, doesn't even look up—how is she doing that without hurling all over the place? — but I'm not easily swayed and am definitely no quitter. Especially when I think the payoff will be worth it. And something tells me Zoey Walker is worth a hell of a lot more than a little one-sided conversational work.

So I keep at it.

“County Coroner. That's an unusual field of work. How'd you get into it?” I ask.

Her concentration stays on the man in front of her, and I can't help but feel a bit of jealousy. I know he's dead and all, but damn, I'd like her attention on me. I think feeling the full impact of Zoey's focus would feel like the sun coming out from behind a storm cloud and shining down on me. Or at least, not having my lunch threatening to make a repeat appearance. I guess that's my new bar of excellence.

“My grandpa was the coroner before me. I worked with him, took over when he passed.” Her answer is clipped and robotic, and I realize belatedly that she probably gets asked that regularly, and now I sound like some misogynistic neckbeard when I was just trying to make conversation.

Note to self, her job is probably not safe territory.

For her or my stomach.

“Oh, I'm so sorry.” The apology is automatic, but I am sorry she lost someone close to her. And that I'm stumbling over my tongue because I'm not used to this. People like me . . . women like me.

But Zoey?

She's immune to whatever charms I might have, and it's throwing me for a loop, and it's not one of those fun roller coaster ones where you know that you'll pull back into the unloading zone safe and sound in ninety seconds.

Nope, this is more like pulling G-force loops in an experimental fighter jet with no pilot license. She doesn't acknowledge the apology, squinting at something inside the guy's trunk.

Oh, God, is that an actual kidney? A burp tries to work its way up my throat, and I hold it back, not trusting it. Distract yourself, Blake! Don't puss out!

I decide to go offensive and play a little hardball and also talk to keep things moving in the right direction. And by that, I mean down my esophagus with only air passing over my lips.

“Me?” I prompt, highlighting that it was her turn to ask me a question, but all I get is an answering sigh that fogs up her face shield. “Oh, I got into life insurance after college. Got a decent head for stats” —I tap my temple — “so it seemed fitting.”

“Good for you, Mr. Hale.”

“Blake,” I correct. “What else am I into? Glad you asked,” I say, sounding a bit game-show host-like. That does get the smallest hint of a smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. I’m still counting the small victory. “I work out with my best friend. His name’s Trey. I play co-ed rec soccer for the Silver Sun Pickups . . . have Sunday brunch with my family . . . play barroom trivia with a team at a pub near my apartment . . .” I search my mind, trying to figure out what else I do so I can continue my *All About Blake* TED talk, but that’s pretty much it.

Does that sound shitty?

Should I be volunteering at the animal shelter, cleaning up trash in the neighborhood park, or some other Good Samaritan type deal? Zoey seems like the kind of woman who does stuff like that.

While I have a minor existential crisis about the value of what I’m offering the world at large—newsflash, it’s not stellar and I should probably do something about that—Zoey seems to have gone off on an entirely different mental tangent.

“That’s a lot of people. Friends, teams, family.” Her hands have paused, or at least I assume they have because though they’re inside the open-chested guy, she seems still somehow. Quiet, thoughtful . . . no, that’s not all. She seems . . . sad?

“You have people? Other than Holly, I mean.” I chance a glance toward the door to make sure Holly isn’t loitering around to eavesdrop. “She seems like a lot, so she probably counts for like three people at least.”

That does get the corners of Zoey’s lips to tilt up in an actual smile.

I’d call that a big victory except that her shrug is noncommittal. That shrug of hers is basically the kiss of death, a clear sign that she doesn’t care whether I’m here or not.

But I need to be here—for the paperwork.

And because I haven’t stopped thinking about her since the other day, and surprisingly, those thoughts have not at all been about how she caused thousands of dollars of damage to my car but that her lips were the prettiest shade of pink.

“Holly,” she finally says. “And Jacob.”

Oh, damn! I got an answer!

I hate Jacob instantly.

Whoever the hell he is.

“Who’s Jacob? Husband? Boyfriend? Kid? Dog, right? Tell me he’s your pet labradoodle and put me out of my misery, Zo.” I slap an open palm to my chest over my heart, which has stopped beating as I dramatically wait on pins and needles for her to answer.

Zoey pulls something large and meaty looking out of the body, and I gag aloud before I can stop it this time.

She looks up at the sound, eyes going from me to the *whatever that is*, and no, I absolutely don’t want to know.

I swallow again, not willing to look away now that I’m this close to a break-through with her.

Oh, she doesn’t want to tell me, but she does too. I can sense her reserve, but she’s licking her lips like she can taste the words.

Either that or she’s a secret cannibal and I’ve interrupted her evening dinner.

She sets the organ in a bowl, thankfully out of sight, and gives me the full attention I want. Her eyes are wary, her words slow, but she asks, “Why do you want to know?”

That’s not what I expected her to say.

“Because this is what people do? They meet, they talk, they get to know each other, they go grab a drink, because I haven’t forgotten that’s what Holly said you were doing tonight.”

Her eyes pin me in place as she lets the moment stretch dramatically. I don’t move a muscle, don’t blink, don’t even breathe, though that’s because of the smell of antiseptic and something I’m not going to label in my brain.

“He’s my brother, but I’m his guardian, so kinda my son too.” She says it like she’s expecting that to be a nuclear bomb that sends me running for the hills. But kids aren’t a deal breaker for me. I love kids and would love to have some of my own someday.

In the meantime, I get the biggest kick out of playing with Amy and Fernanda’s son, Miles, who’s five going on fifteen, with all the associated attitude.

“How old is he? My nephew is five, and like me, he loves making new friends. Maybe we can all play soccer some time? Or video games?” I can’t

help the way my voice pitches like I'm talking to an actual kid.

Zoey seems taken aback by my response and dumbly says, "He's eighteen."

"Oh," I say, somewhat disappointed on Miles's behalf. "Well, soccer and video games are probably doable, but maybe not with Miles. Jacob probably isn't into hanging out with little kids."

There's a question in the statement, begging her to correct me, but she looks at me like I grew another head out of my left shoulder.

"You're . . ." I'm ready for her to tell me what I am, but the door opens and a gray-haired, uniformed guy peeks his head in.

"Hey, Zoey, you want anything for dinner?" He doesn't react to the dead body or the random organs in bowls, but when he catches sight of me, I see nerves shoot through him.

Without waiting for Zoey's answer to his first question, he asks another. "Should I be worried? He okay?"

It's a kind question, or it should be. Like that the guard is checking that Zoey is okay with some random guy in her basement office. But there's something about his tone that makes it seem like that's not what he's asking at all.

Zoey catches it too. "Yeah, Alver. He's fine. The full moon isn't until next week, so I'm not looking for sacrifices . . . yet," she says darkly, one brow arching high and one dropping low.

Oh shit, she's got a 'The Rock' look too, and it's nearly as awesome as mine. I'd be imagining babies with wiggly brows if not for Alver's reaction.

He pales, which is saying something considering his skin is a warm brown color, and he pulls at the collar of his shirt, though it's already loose. He even reaches inside and touches the gold cross necklace around his neck.

It's almost like he doesn't get Zoey's sense of humor at all, because that was obviously a joke.

A damn funny one.

I laugh, Zoey is fighting a smile, but Alver is looking more than a little concerned.

Zoey gives in, probably to reassure the guard's nerves. "He's fine, and I don't need dinner tonight. I'm finishing up, and then Mr. Hale and I are grabbing a drink so I can do some paperwork for him."

“Blake,” I correct again, determined to break down that wall she’s keeping between us.

Alver looks from Zoey to me, checking the vibe once more, and then shakes his head. “Your funeral, man.” He backs out of the room, not giving Zoey his back.

When the door closes, I whirl on Zoey. “What the fuck was that?”

Zoey’s eyes roll back in their sockets, and not in the good way. “You’re fine. I won’t really sacrifice you, full moon or not.”

She thinks I’m asking about her? I’m about two heartbeats from going out in the hallway and sacrificing that asshole for giving Zoey shit.

“Not you, Zo. Him. What’s his problem?” I clarify, pointing at the door, where I think Alver is still hanging around like a creeper.

That’ll just make it easier to kick his ass, though.

Hmm, I wonder if he’s got a Taser?

“Alver?” she says, her nose crinkled in a way that would be cute except I’m not sure why she’s confused. “He’s mostly nice.”

“And insinuates that you’re evil incarnate and going to sacrifice me to the full moon?” I accuse. “That doesn’t seem mostly nice to me.”

Her smile breaks through, large and mischievous now. “Technically, that was me.”

“Zoey,” I say in warning. I have no right to come to her defense this way. She’s obviously fine with the way her co-worker acted, but I can’t help but plan a little sacrifice of my own . . . of Alver. Full moon or not.

“Blake.” She mimics my tone with an extra dose of sarcasm. I don’t know how to answer that, both the tone and that she finally used my first name, but I’m probably gaping like a fish on the sandy beach that wishes someone would toss him back out to sea.

She stops what she’s doing . . . no, she’s done, I think. She lays a fresh and clean gloved hand on the body’s shoulder and whispers something. I’m not sure if she’s talking to him or to herself, but she pulls a plastic sheet over him and pushes the table over to a large stainless-steel door, which she opens and disappears behind for a moment.

When she comes back, she’s alone, and I finally relax my firm grip on my stomach’s reflexes. She strips off her gown, cap, and booties, throwing them in a red bag.

Normally, I’d be all in for a striptease, but this one isn’t particularly flirty. In fact, she looks haunted and reluctant. But she bravely comes

closer, sitting on the edge of her desk next to me. “You have people. I don’t. On purpose.” She says it so matter of factly about something that sounds like it hits her deep and sharp.

“They call me Drop-Dead Gorgeous,” she finally says, “or DDG. It’s a nickname.”

For some, I can imagine that might be a compliment. By Zoey’s stilted speech, I can tell it most definitely is not one to her. “A rather cruel one.”

Zoey shakes her head. “Deserved. I . . .” She pauses, pregnant with meaning, and then waves her hands around, gesturing to the room surrounding us. “I deal with death all day. It freaks most people out. *I freak people out.*”

“Not me,” I say reassuringly. I really, really want to put my hand on her knee that’s right there, but I don’t because I think this is the part where she tells me to get lost. “I mean, there’s always a need for a coroner, someone who sees off the dead. That’s rather noble, when you think of it that way. So, drinks?”

She blinks slowly, like she’s trying to figure out my game. But the only thing I’m playing at is getting to know her.

“Paperwork,” she corrects.

“And drinks. Maybe dinner too, because now that you’re not all gross”—I gesture to her hands, clean and pristine, with those graceful fingers that I now realize hold a scalpel with precision, not tickle the ivories— “I think I might be able to actually eat.” I cut the insult with a flirty smile.

“You’re weird,” she says with a small laugh as she examines a loose thread on the tie of her scrub pants.

“Aw, thanks. You too.”

“I’m not sure that was a compliment.”

“It definitely was.”

She doesn’t seem certain and definitely isn’t what I would call excited about this plan, but she tells me, “Hold on just a second and let me change.”

She heads for a different door, and when it opens, I can see that it’s a closet of sorts with a couple of lockers along the back wall.

As she crosses the threshold, she stops and looks back over her shoulder. Licking her lips, she eyes me carefully. Fragile hope is written in every line of tension on her face.

“You can make a run for it while I’m changing clothes if you want. I’ll send the paperwork over tonight either way.”

In response, I plant both feet on the floor and cross my arms over my chest, making it clear that I'm not going anywhere.

She turns away from me, but I catch the smile on her full lips for a split second before she covers it with her fingers as though she's feeling the uptilt of her mouth in confusion.

She's only gone a moment before I look around, trying to figure her out.

She's an enigma wrapped in questions and bow-tied like a present with something equally tempting and terrifying. I see a coffee mug with a picture of Morticia Adams and smile, wondering who gave it to her because it doesn't seem like something Zoey would buy herself. I see a stack of askew file folders, each with different names on the tabs, letting me know that she's good at her job and takes it seriously, but I'd already deduced that.

And last but not least, I see a picture of her and a tall, blonde guy. Based on their ages, I think it's the infamous Jacob. It looks like he's giving her a noogie, roughing up her hair. She looks murderous at first glance, but the glint in her eyes says it's all in jest.

When the door opens, she's wearing jeans, a black tank top, and flat booties. She's pulled her hair down from its bun, and it curls seductively below her breasts.

I whistle in approval before saying, "You look beautiful, Zo."

"Thanks, I think." She seems unaccustomed to getting compliments, but that can't be true.

Unusual occupation aside, she's gorgeous and interesting and funny. Did I mention gorgeous?

"Let's get this over with," she sighs.

"Just the response I want to hear from a date."

"Not a date," she argues formally.

"Paperwork, then. Let's get that part over with so I can discover more about you."

"Your funeral, man," she quotes Alver.

See?

That's some funny shit, I think as I laugh once more.

CHAPTER 6



ZOEY

You ever watch one of those two AM movies where some out-of-towner walks into the local watering hole, there's a record scratch, and all eyes turn to the interloper with suspicion?

That's literally what happens when I walk into the beer barn.

Yes, lower case bs because this place doesn't actually have anything formal like a name or sign. It's just literally a barn in the middle of a field where you can get a beer, hence the beer barn. I don't even know whose land this is, just that the bartender's name is Bubba.

That's probably not his real name either, but it's what we all know him by, so it works. And also, that whole record scratch and eyes on the newbie thing? That'd be me. Except I'm not new, by any stretch.

But I am the local legend. Unfortunately, not in a good way.

"Hey, Zoey. Somebody call you? Might be a wee bit *pree-mah-chure*." Bubba's thick fingers are held a scant inch apart, and the word has three syllables, the way it should, but it's longer than it should be by at least a solid two seconds. "Silas is still breathing."

Bubba points to an old guy at the end of the bar who's eyeballing me through squinted, glassy slits like I'm the Angel of Death come to take him away. "But if you hang out, you might get lucky."

Beside me, Blake stiffens. Not in his pants, though to be honest, I can't tell since I'm not looking at his crotch. But he's not used to this, and it seems like he's about to come to my defense again, the way he did about Alver. It's kinda sweet, in a white knight sort of way. But not needed. I'm

no damsel, and it takes a lot more than Bubba being a smartass to distress me.

I smile like Bubba's being funny and his greeting isn't the exact reason I hate coming in here. Maybe that's where Jacob gets that particular coping mechanism from?

I point at my eyes with V-ed fingers and then to Silas, communicating that I'm watching him. "Should I save you a drawer?"

Silas jerks, spilling his beer over his hand and on the bar, making everyone bust out in laughter at his expense. "That shit ain't funny, Zoey Walker."

I laugh lightly. "It kinda was." Silas wiggles on his barstool like ants are marching their way up and down his spine and into his pants. "Someone walking over your grave, Silas House?"

I don't know why people call me by my full name sometimes—distance, I suppose—but I like to do it back. They take it as though I'm double-checking my list like Santa and marking them off. The question is . . . am I marking them off as *okay* or as *soon to appear in my morgue*?

Everyone seems to think I know. Like I'm some walking, talking Magic Eight Ball that can do a somersault and tell them *signs point to yes or better not tell you now*.

I don't have any more insight than they do, but I gave up on convincing people of that long ago and settled into my role in this small, tight-knit community out here in Williamson County. I'm the outsider, no matter that I mostly grew up here, and the unwanted, no matter that I do what no one else wants to.

"Two beers, please, Bubba," I tell the man who's scooted way down the bar as far away from me as possible. He nods his head toward Silas, eyes questioning. I sigh, knowing the peace it'll bring is worth a lot more than two bucks. "Fine. Three."

Even though I'm doing something nice to make up for the half-glass of beer Silas spilled, which wasn't even my fault, he balks. "Is that a trick? Or some sort of apology before the fact?"

I give Silas my most psychic medium stare, vacantly looking through him rather than at him, and make my voice flat and otherworldly. "Silas House, you need to drink your beer and let someone else drive you home. Do this and you'll live to see another sunrise."

The whole room has gone dead silent, and yes, that's sarcasm. They're definitely quiet as church mice, but if I had to guess, the average heart rate of the room is somewhere around that shock you get when you startle awake in the middle of the night from a bad dream and think there's a demon standing in the corner of the room, so no one's dead. Yet.

"Yes, ma'am. Will do," Silas answers before chugging the fresh beer Bubba sets in front of him. He's still swiping at his mouth with the back of his hand when he asks, "Who can give me a lift?"

On any usual weekday night at shortly after six, he'd have zero takers. These people just got off work and are looking for a night of relaxation and stress relief from a day of hard labor.

But this isn't a usual night. I'm here, so no fewer than six hands shoot up in the air.

"I got you, Silas. I need to get outta here, anyway," Mack says, chugging his own beer. He looks clear-eyed and wary of me as he gives a wide berth to get around me and to the door. That's saying something too since Mack is short for Mack Truck, and to go around me, he has to push a table and four chairs out of the way with his overall-covered ass.

I stay perfectly still, not risking any movement being seen as a threat, until Mack and Silas are out the door, with two more people following them. I keep my face straight and my lips shut, not showing that it affects me at all even though it hurts like ripping open a freshly stitched wound.

Only after nobody moves for a bit do I step forward, Blake following me to a booth in the back. It's the one Bubba asked me to sit at when Holly first started dragging me here. It keeps me out of the line of sight from newcomers, though I'm always the first topic of conversation when someone comes in so I'm not sure it works.

We sit, and I prepare for the questions I know are coming. Or maybe, if he's as smart as he seems, for him to make a run for the door too.

Before we can say anything, one more customer heads out the door. I try to keep track so I can make up the tips Bubba loses when I come in. It seems like the least I can do. But no questions come . . . at least not from Blake, though my brain is firing them off at rapid speed.

Why is he doing this?

How is he sitting there cool as a cucumber and not sprinting toward the door? Does he have zero sense of self-preservation?

Why did I agree to this without Holly to run interference the way she usually does?

Bubba sets two beers on the table and mutters under his breath, “Don’t stay too long, ’kay? Thanks, Zoey.”

Before I can answer, he scurries back behind the bar, holding flat palms up in the air to tell everyone to hold steady, he’s getting rid of me. For his part, Blake still hasn’t said a single word, but he’s scanning the room as though he’s learning everyone’s deepest, darkest secrets just by laying eyes on them.

In a lot of ways, he’s scarier than I am. I’m all reputation, but he’s the one who really is looking at the small gathering with a dead-eye stare like he’s Jason Bourne ready for action. The very idea makes me smile, but I cover it over with a hand so people don’t think I’m even weirder than I am.

Smiling for no reason? Oh, she must be plotting someone’s unfortunate demise. Because there’s no other, possibly normal, reason I would be happy. Uh, Blake learning everyone’s secrets might not be a normal reason, Zoey.

Well, fine. I’ll admit that’s probably true.

Once Blake gives everyone the evil eye, his gaze settles on me and softens.

I steel my guts because here come those questions. But instead, he surprises me with an innocent, almost normal question. “What’s good to eat here?” he asks, as if our entrance was perfectly ordinary and not cause for an explanation. “I’m a burger guy myself.”

My mouth opens, closes, and then opens again, but no sound comes out. How is he so nonchalant about all of this?

Blake rolls on as if I’m not an idiot who can’t answer the simplest question ever. “I think I’ll go for a cheeseburger. Usually a safe choice because bars go through them daily, so the meat doesn’t have a chance to go bad. As long as the kitchen’s clean?”

I manage to find words. “The burgers are good.”

Great answer, Zoey, I scold myself.

I am such a dork.

A confused one, but a dork, nonetheless.

I try again. “Bubba makes the burgers fresh to order, and I’ve never gotten food poisoning. Though there’s a first time for everything, I suppose.”

Blake laughs, and a moment later, though I hate that I added the disclaimer and possible jinx, I laugh too . . . after touching the wood wall to wipe away any bad juju from my words. “And does he have onion rings?”

“Ehhhh . . . I’d recommend the fries.”

“Cool,” Blake says before calling out, his voice echoing across the bar that’s mercifully returned to business as usual, “Hey, Bubba. Can we get two burgers and fries, please?”

Bubba pauses his bar wipe-down to meet Blake’s eyes across the room and take his measure. I already know what Bubba sees. Blake screams ‘city boy’, but there’s an edge to him, an athletic aura that’s far beyond whatever he’s gotten from rec league soccer, and an ease that probably makes people flock to him like seagulls following kids with popcorn.

And Bubba?

He might look like a country bumpkin in a faded T-shirt and overalls, but he’s wily and willing to fight dirty if necessary.

Bubba blinks first. “How you want ’em?”

“Two of however Zo takes them.”

He’s claiming me, whether he means to or not, making him persona non-grata too. My heart flutters and a zing shoots through my core, both of which are really bad omens and my neon flashing signals to get out of here.

For both our own good.

Blake crosses his hands on the table, looking like a lawyer ready to argue his case. “Whatever you’re thinking, stop. It’s a beer, dinner. Not a marriage proposal. After all, we’re getting fries, not rings.”

He smiles at his own joke, and it’s a good one. But I can still feel the blood rush out of my face and know that if it weren’t dim in here, Blake would worry about the degree of paleness I’m currently sporting.

“And paperwork,” I add, bringing us back to the true reason for this meeting. “We should get that out of the way first.” I pull my phone out of my bag, intending to log in to the county website and do the forms I should’ve done days ago.

“No rush,” Blake tells me. His lazy smirk should make it easy to get through the few screens to get started, but I cannot seem to remember my username and password.

Hell, or my own name.

I click at the screen, entering gibberish, unless I changed my username to *asdfjkl;mmmm*, and I’m reasonably sure I didn’t do that in a fugue state

or while sleep-working. It's a real thing—sometimes, I work out details of questionable cases while snoring away in the middle of the night when I'm not limited by rational thinking.

When my phone beeps its displeasure at my holding down the *M* button, Blake's lips lift into a full, white-toothed grin as he slouches, throwing one arm casually along the back of the booth. Humor dances in his eyes as though he's in no rush for me to do the paperwork that he came all the way out to Williamson County to badger me about.

"The smallest bones in the human body are in the middle ear. The ossicles—malleus, incus, and stapes."

My fingers curl into the super-protective, hard plastic case of my phone. It usually keeps it from a fate worse than death, aka a blue screen of inoperability, but though it guards against gravity, I don't think it's strong enough to fight off being squeezed like a toothpaste tube.

Why did I say that?

Normal people, ones not like me, obviously, would ask questions and make small talk, but do I do that? No, I throw out useless factoids because he said he's on a barroom trivia team thirty minutes ago while listing off hobbies and interests.

It's not even conversationally relevant now.

His head tilts to the right the slightest bit and then he volleys back, "The stapes is roughly the size of a grain of rice."

Holy shit! Is he trying to out-trivia me? Or trivia-flirting? Flirtriva? It's like nerd-sexy to the max. He probably knows the answers to random game show questions, but anatomy and physiology? This is my wheelhouse.

"Everyone knows the adult human body has 206 bones." I wait for his nod before continuing, "But did you know infants have almost 300? They slowly ossify and fuse together to get to the 206 everyone learns in school." My words speed up until they're rushing out under the weight of his stare.

My breath hitches when he leans forward and says quietly, "Except when there are 207 bones in a human body."

It takes me a solid heartbeat to figure out that he's making a dirty joke because he says it so utterly seriously that I start singing the bone song to double-check that I haven't miscounted. I want to recoil in disgust or tell him he's shocking and filthy. I want to get up and walk out, leaving him wondering what just happened.

But before I can do any of that, I laugh . . . loud and hard. I cover my mouth with my hand, knowing that I'll draw unwanted attention and gossip from the people at the bar.

"Well, for half of us, at least."

Blake laughs with me, blissfully unaware that anything might be amiss. It's refreshing, something I haven't felt in a long time.

"Does that kind of line usually work for you?" I intend for it to be a small dig, but he shrugs it off, showing no sign of offense.

If anything, his lips twitch as though he's enjoying the battle of words. "Shockingly, yes. Trivia humor might be my smoothest move."

"If that's true, you must be rough as sandpaper."

He scrubs at his cheeks, not making even a slight scratching sound on the smooth skin, as rebuttal. "Wanna check for yourself?"

I'm tempted, but before I can do anything, Bubba sets down burger baskets on the literal edge of the table as if he doesn't want to get any closer to me or Blake and then scurries away quickly.

Blake's eyebrow rises dangerously as he cuts his eyes to follow Bubba's hasty exit. But he pushes one of the baskets my way. The aroma of fresh meat wafts up, and my stomach grumpily reminds me that I didn't eat lunch today, so I ignore whatever eye battle Blake and Bubba have going on this time in favor of digging into my dinner.

"Good?" Blake asks a moment later. I look up as I swallow my fourth bite to find him simply watching me.

I grunt a positive response and take a way-too-big bite that probably makes me look like a carnivorous monster.

Am I trying to scare him off? Maybe a little.

Instead, he picks up his burger and takes an even bigger bite, grinning around the mouthful and then saying, "Good."

A piece of shredded lettuce falls out and he shoves it back in his mouth with a thumb, swiping at a dab of mustard too. It's actually adorable somehow, making him seem less perfect than his carefully styled blond hair and business casual outfit originally suggested.

We eat in companionable silence for a few minutes, and I get the bulk of my burger down. Thank goodness, because we're interrupted by a guy who I'm glad didn't drive Silas home. In other words, a bit drunk and wobbly on his feet. "Hey, Morticia, wanna dance?"

He's chuckling like the idea is ridiculous even though he's the one asking, and I nearly choke. I have a momentary fear that I'm going to need the Heimlich maneuver, but luckily, patting myself hard on the chest does the trick. My throat is still raw and rough-feeling when I ask, "Aren't you afraid I'll make your hands rot where we touch?"

I wiggle my fingers toward his and he jerks them up to his chest protectively. "Or maybe I'll *accidentally* brush against a certain part when we sway and then it'll fall off?"

I make finger quotation marks when I say *accidentally* and lift one brow threateningly. His hands drop from his chest to cup his dick through his jeans.

"Not funny, Morticia."

I'm the proverbial dare, the brush with death his drunk friends have challenged him to risk, but yet I'm the 'not funny' one. Out of the corner of my eye, I see that Blake is watching with interest, seemingly keeping one eye on me and one eye on Drunk Dude, but not in a cross-eyed way. Though he'd probably look cute even with crossed eyes.

Focus, Zoey!

I'm done with this tonight. All I wanted was a quiet evening at home, and barring that, a quick bite and beer with Holly. Somehow, it's turned into a pseudo-date, even though I don't date, and I still haven't done the paperwork for the accident.

I sigh deeply and turn my attention to Drunk Dude. I glare at him for a few seconds, and then out of nowhere, I flinch toward him and bark, "Boo!"

He jumps a foot in the air and backward at the same time like a cat that got spooked by a cucumber. I laugh instantly, not bothering to hide it this time. Screw anyone who thinks I'm up to no good.

But Drunk Dude's jump is less than graceful, and his landing is even worse when he stumbles to get his feet back under himself. He doesn't even get close to making it, his boots slickly fighting for purchase on the dirt floor. He runs in place at an awkward angle like the Roadrunner for a second and then sprawls out on the ground.

As soon as he's down, he's scrambling away from me on his hands and feet like a crab, pushing a chair out of the way. "Leave me alone, Morticia."

One of his buddies grabs Drunk Dude under the arms to help him off the floor and drag him further from me like I'm some great threat, but never fear, he sure keeps mouthing incoherently.

“You came over here, interrupted my dinner, and acted like I’m a middle school cootie dare, but *I’m* the bad guy?” I ask, acid and venom dripping from every word, even though I know the answer already.

All conversation stops, and eyes land on me from all over the room. They’re watching me as though I’m going to shoot Force lightning from my fingertips on demand.

I sigh, still surprised somehow, even though I know better. I wipe my mouth with a paper towel and then wad it up to drop it to the tabletop. “Thank you, Mr. Hale. This was . . . nice,” I hedge. It was, right up until it all went to shit with fly cookies on top. “I’ll be sure to do the paperwork for you tonight. You should hear from the county clerk tomorrow.”

His mouth opens to say something, probably to argue with me because he thinks he should, but I hold up a staying hand. I’ve reached my limit for the night. A woman can only stand being a pariah so much. I walk to the bar quickly, gritting my teeth as people literally back away from me like I’m contagious with the worst possible disease they can imagine, and lay a fifty-dollar bill on the wooden top.

“Sorry, Bubba,” I quietly apologize. Even the money doesn’t entice him to come closer as his butt tries to eat its way through the wall of liquor behind the bar to get further away from me.

With my head held high, I walk out of the beer barn. I force myself to wait for the door to close fully and then I run for my car, not the crashed county vehicle which is of course FUBAR for now. No, I’m driving my personal car, a safe sedan.

I’m pulling out of the grassy field and crossing through the pipe fencing, eyes on the dark fields around me so I don’t see Blake come out after me.

I also don’t hear him shout my name into the black of the night.

At least that’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.

CHAPTER 7



BLAKE

She said it was nice.
Nice?

Zoey thought it was nice that people ran for the door at the sight of her, got spooked enough to think she was threatening them just by breathing the same oxygen, and the bartender tried to run her off.

And she still over tipped him!

Okay, so maybe she played into that a little with the Madame Cleo voice and the jump-scare, but I don't blame her. Nobody, not even a jury of her peers, could blame her for fighting fire with fire.

Hell, I only experienced one little moment of how they treat Zoey and it was all I could do to not stand up in the middle of that bar, tell them all how ridiculous they were being, and take every last one of them on *mano y mano*.

I mean, so what if she's a coroner? She's not the Grim Reaper.

I bit my tongue so hard it nearly split into two, acting like that was all perfectly normal. Acceptable even. I didn't say a single word as I got up and walked out of that barn a few moments after Zoey, only giving Bubba my most disappointed scowl. I had to resist the urge to snatch that fifty off the bar on my way out the door. He sure as fuck didn't deserve it.

I didn't need to hear their excuses and justifications when nothing could make up for that. And I didn't need to get my ass kicked in a bar in the middle of nowhere because something tells me Zoey would blame herself for that too.

And now?

Absolute radio silence for three long days.

My phone hasn't rung, my texts are barren, and though I received an email about the accident, it was from the county clerk, not Zoey. With the accident stuff handled and Zoey making no effort to contact me, that should be the end of it.

But I can't get her out of my mind. The cute quirk of her lip, only on the left side, when she says something she thinks is a little bit weird and wrong, the way she blurted out trivia facts was sexy as fuck, and how even when she had a whole room full of people judging her, she stood her ground, back straight and head held high. I'm truly impressed by her mettle. And disappointed as hell that she hasn't contacted me.

None of this, of course, is helping me right this moment as I run through the park.

"Go, go, go . . . sprint for the finish!" my best friend, Trey, instructs me. He's yelling into the wind, which is the only reason I hear him because he's leaving me in the dust.

Trey's always been a better runner, but I reach deep, looking for a little more juice, a little more oomph. Normally, it works, but this time I'm tapped out, drier than the Sahara. In three strides, all I can see is his back, his legs working smoothly to add distance between us. He crosses our imaginary finish line of the tree at the corner and throws his arms high in victory.

"And the crowd goes wild! Trey, you slay! Trey, you slay!" he cheers for himself in rhymes and some Valley Girl accent he doesn't usually possess. "Trey, will you be my bay-bay!"

I slow down, not willing to kill myself if he's already won our friendly competition for today. Instead, I check my time on my watch, seeing that not only has Zoey destroyed my concentration, but she's also killed my five-mile time, adding nearly six minutes. And a stitch in my side that I try to rub at subtly.

Trey notices, of course, and bounces back to me to finish the last few yards together. "Just call her, asshole," he says easily. Even that irks me, both his advice and that he's not panting the way I am. "Or are you to poo-oooh-oooh-sss—"

"Fuck off," I pant, the most I can manage considering the lack of oxygen my body's feeling right now.

"Don't talk to me in that tone of gasp," Trey growls mockingly. "You know I'm telling the truth."

I can't help it, I slow until I'm barely walking, putting my hands on my head so I can give my lungs room to spread out. "I. Can't. Her. Turn."

Sweat drips into my eye, and I shake my head like a dog, droplets flying everywhere. Trey recoils, wincing. "Fuck, dude! Stop. I don't want your man salt all over me."

I bend forward, putting my hands on my knees, and watch a few drops hit the concrete instead. "What am I gonna do?" I ask sincerely. "Can't get her out of my fucking head."

Trey, who's stretching his calf, stops and puts his hands on his hips. "Not used to seeing you like this."

Trey's right.

Not to brag, though my sister would say I absolutely am and give me a solid dose of shit for it, but I don't usually have to try that hard with women. I'm not the type that runs home with every bar bunny who looks my way by a long shot, but I realize that every serious girlfriend I've ever had approached me. Or we just ran in the same group and conveniently fell into each other, and damn if that didn't make it easier. This sitting around waiting for the phone to ring is exhausting and making me itchy with anxiety.

"You really think I should call? It's not too stalker-ish?"

"Stalker-ish would be calling her ten times a day or standing outside her office with a goddamn boombox over your head playing love songs," Trey chides me while throwing in a decent movie reference joke. "Just don't be creepy. Ask her out on an official date, not an ambush surrounded by dead people." He laughs at his own stupidity, then flatly whispers, "I see dead people."

Since I told him about hunting Zoey down at her place of work, he hasn't quit teasing me. And admittedly, it does sound bad. But it hadn't seemed odd at the time. I'd truly wanted the paperwork done . . . and yeah, to see Zoey again. So if that's where she was, that's where I was going.

"You did that joke already," I remind him. "Got anything new?"

He pounds me in the shoulder, laughing. "It's not fun if you ask to get roasted."

"Sounds like you're talking shit about Zoey, not me. And I don't like it one bit." My mean mug bounces off him, Trey not really giving a fuck.

"Stop selling wolf tickets, Blake," Trey says. "This is all about you. Look . . ." Trey goes quiet for a moment, then looks at me. "Remember

when I first met Serena?”

Of course I do. First time they had a date, I gave him shit with a whole workout of comments working in Kanye’s line ‘my psychic told me she’ll have an ass like Serena.’ Trey was pissed at me at first, but by the end we were having fun with it. “Still say you punched far above your weight. For reasons I haven’t yet deciphered, she took pity on your immature ass.”

And it’s true. But she did, and it’s truly an unsolved mystery how he landed her because he was a drunken frat boy who was nearly flunking out of a party school when he met her. And when he popped the question, she said yes.

Somehow, she saw his potential way down deep under the fuckboy exterior and shaped him right up over the last few years into a responsible adult and good husband. But we both still know that she’s way out of his league and he’s a lucky son of a bitch.

Trey scratches behind his ear and gives me a scrunched eye look as though he’s deciding if I’m ready to hear what he’s about to tell me. “I feel like this Zoey might be your Serena.”

I laugh. “Don’t jump that far ahead just yet. Even if you’re right, you’ll jinx shit and I’m going to be whacking off alone for the next five years or something.”

He shrugs like he believes me, but the gleam in his eye says I haven’t swayed him in the slightest. “Maybe not. But I remember feeling this” —he gestures to me— “desperate.”

Desperate? “I’m not desperate. I’m . . . *interested.*” Shit, that one sounded like a lie even to me.

“Interested is what you were when you realized that your dick could do things besides piss,” Trey jokes. “What you are is more hopeless than a one-legged man in a Kung fu movie.”

“Still got enough to kick your ass.”

Trey leans into the mock threat. “Good, then you should use all that energy and gusto to call her.”

The words hang in the air for long moments as I try to think of a rejoinder. But I don’t have one. Or at least, none that doesn’t make me sound like a desperate loser who’s making up bullshit to deflect from the reality of my situation.

“Fine,” I finally concede. “I’ll think about it.”

He smacks me on the back, hard, knowing that I already decided I was going to call Zoey but needed that extra push to man up. “About damn time. Last sprint. Loser buys breakfast. On your mark, get set . . .”

He doesn’t say go because he’s already running, leaving me in the dust once again.

“Motherfucker . . .” I hiss before I take off too. With the possibility of a phone call with Zoey urging me on, I do manage to catch up, but he still beats me to our cars.

Egg white omelets are on me, I guess. Although the way I’m feeling, I could go for some bacon, too.

* * *

I LOVE MY OFFICE. It’s big enough that I’m not bumping into the walls without rattling around like a marble in a shoebox, and while centrally located, it’s still on a side street that’s not too busy. I was overjoyed when I found this place. It’s luxurious without going overboard, giving off an aura of success, and best of all, it has a coffee shop on the first floor that makes the best brew I’ve ever had.

The only downside is my neighbors. On my right is Meredith, a psychologist who specializes in depressed teens. So on almost a daily basis, there’s a kid who barely grunts if I say hello, and once, one of them actually barked when I said excuse me as we passed in the hall. The parents can be even worse.

And Meredith’s the more normal of my neighbors because on the left is Margaret, a voiceover actress in her sixties who, despite the soundproofing she’s done, I can hear quite clearly through the air vents.

The first time I heard her, I thought she was a phone sex operator. And yeah, I listened closely after that. Like, literally standing on a spare chair with an ear pressed to the vent when I realized she was doing audio for a romance book. I’d been shocked and then intrigued. And hell yeah, I read that book. It was good too.

But I didn’t listen to it because it would’ve been weird to visualize someone like my grandmother talking like that as I listened.

And when she gets jobs for certain kinds of ‘adult animation’, I have to pull my headphones on.

I don't need the nightmares.

Coming in this morning, I see Margaret fumbling with her purse as she tries to juggle her morning coffee. Hurrying over, I offer my free hand. "Hey, Margaret . . . can I help? Need me to hold your rocket fuel?"

Oh, God. I did not just say that, I think, mentally slapping myself. Rockets and rocket fuel probably mean something very different in her line of work. And now I'm blushing, which is not an attractive look on a grown man.

"Vanilla rooibos," Margaret corrects me, handing me the cup, and luckily, blissfully unaware of my embarrassing attempt to eat those words back down. "Coffee's bad for the vocal cords. But thanks."

Today, she's wearing a turtleneck, pearls, a cardigan sweater, and SAS shoes. I don't get it. How can someone at her age sound decades younger and say such filthy things? She looks like she should be offering me a fresh-baked cookie, but I've heard her begging to toss a salad. And I don't mean the kind with iceberg lettuce. Not that cookies and 'salad' are mutually exclusive, but . . . nope, stopping that thought right there.

Margaret gets to her door and I hand her back her tea. "Busy work day today?"

She nods, giving me a grandmotherly smile. "Of course. I've got a new one just waiting for me. So hot it'll blow your socks off."

"Do I want to know?" I joke, half-praying she doesn't tell me and half-curious what she considers 'sock-blowingly hot'. Margaret shakes her head, giggling like a school girl. "Good to know. Thanks. Have a good one."

I unlock my own office and pull on my noise canceling headphones just in case while checking my email. There's nothing new, no new major policy changes I need to make anyone aware of, no lawsuits, and thankfully, nobody died, so I don't have any claims to process.

Overall, a nice, slow start to the day.

Cracking my knuckles, I turn my music off and turn my attention to the one part of my job I don't like, voicemail. I get it, all of my ads include my phone number. And a lot of my clients are older folks who are used to old school communications.

But trying to decipher a garbled, scratchy voice mumbling information into a voicemail is agonizing. Especially when you get the one where someone's information gets half cut off and you're left with '867-5309, Jenny wants—' before getting a click. I remind myself that any calls at all,

even prank ones, mean Amy's marketing brilliance is working, and when the new commercial hits television screens all over the city, I'll have even more calls, emails, and policies to write. More people to help.

I'm just about to play my third message when there's a knock on the door. That's unusual. I'm not expecting anyone. And my office door says I'm not open for another hour, although that doesn't always stop folks.

I get up and open my door, and on the other side is a blonde woman. At a glance, I'd say she's in her early to mid-forties, but I could be off. Her makeup's muted, and her hair's pulled back in a plain ponytail. She's in a low-cut black blouse and slacks, nice looking but not so fancy she's out of place in an office building.

Actually, she looks like the mom of one of Meredith's kids next door, one of the ones who actually wants to help her kid and not just demand Adderall. "Are you looking for Meredith? Her office is next door if you're picking up your kid."

Confusion fills her eyes, but her face doesn't exactly move. "No, I'm looking for Mr. Hale. That you?" She looks at the nameplate on the door with my name prominently displayed.

I blink and step back, welcoming her into my office. "Oh! Yes, sorry. I didn't have any appointments this morning, so I thought you might be lost."

The woman comes in, looking around at my office and nodding to herself almost robotically. "I called the 800 number and they said to come by here to file a claim?"

The black clothes, the blank stare, the lack of appointment all click into focus. She's a recent widow, probably doing her best to get through the turmoil and pain of a recent loss, and if she called the 800 number of the main insurance company, they'd send her to a local agent to complete the claim paperwork and get the initial processes started.

Fuck. This isn't the part of my job I enjoy.

"Of course, I'm so sorry for your loss. Please, have a seat." I direct her to the chair in front of my desk and sit down once again. "Let's start over. I'm Blake Hale. How can I help you today?"

She blinks long, dark, dry lashes, still looking a little spacy on the whole. Unfortunately, I've seen worse. "I'm Yvette Horne. My husband is dead. I want to collect the money from his policy," she says in a cold, flat tone that has the hair at the back of my neck standing up. I wonder if she's in shock because she seems rather emotionless about the whole thing.

“Of course. Again, so sorry for your loss. I will need to ask a few questions so I can start the paperwork,” I warn gently.

This is my least favorite part of this job. Helping people plan for the future and figure out how best to care for their loved ones in case of their death is a positive way to handle the inevitable. But truly dealing with the aftermath is a minefield of painful triggers that have to be delicately handled. And there are always so many people involved that the risks of hitting one of those triggers can be high.

“Yes, of course. Anything you need to get this show on the road.”

Well, okay then. Maybe not all that delicately. I don’t want to take advantage here, but if she’s in all business mode, then I’ll use it. Opening up my company’s secure web portal, I log in and click around a bit and get to the screen I need to start a claim. “Mrs. Horne, your husband’s name, please?”

“Richard Horne, Dick.”

Uh, what? Did she just call her husband a dick? Or did she just call me a dick?

Wait, no . . . that must be his nickname. Richard . . . Dick. I hope so or this might be even more awkward than usual. “Okay. Do you have a policy number, social security number, or his birthdate?” I ask quickly. “So we can pull up the policy.”

She goes on to give me all the answers to the questions I ask, waiting patiently as I fill in every blank on the computer’s form.

But this is like no Q&A I’ve ever done. The longer it goes on, the less Mrs. Horne looks like she’s in shock and more like she’s . . . bored. She keeps looking at her phone, picking at her nails, and once, I think I see her yawn out of the corner of my eye. Then again, I’ve seen all sorts of reactions to death. Insomnia is one of them, and maybe that’s all this is.

“Do you have a copy of the certificate of death?” I ask carefully.

“What?” she replies, as though she’s completely forgotten why she’s even here or what we’re talking about. It’s expected. Everyone handles death differently. Some go numb or sink into depression, others feel relief, and a small fraction even experience a sense of vengeance, depending on the circumstances.

Mrs. Horne appears to feel none of those things. I might as well be asking about her car’s extended warranty for all the interest and care she’s showing. Again, not unseen but definitely unusual.

“The death certificate?” I ask again.

“Oh, yeah, here you go.” She pulls a piece of folded paper from between her boobs and hands it across the desk. I do not want to touch boob paper. There’s bound to be sweat, germs, and funk on it.

But I don’t keep tongs or gloves in my desk, having never needed them before. I take the paper reluctantly and spread it out on the desk, promising myself a nice, long handwash with hot water, loads of soap, and some gel hand cleanser.

I peruse the typed information in the upper fields, making sure that I’ve spelled everything correctly on my own computerized form. Everything’s good, and it’s not until I get to the bottom of the form that my own heart races.

It’s signed by Zoey Walker.

Forgetting all about the boob sweat, I trace the lines of her loopy, tightly knit handwriting and smile, which is completely inappropriate when I’m sitting across from a widow, but the fact that her name has come up again seems like a good omen after my conversation with Trey this morning.

If nothing else, it’ll be a good opener on why I’m calling . . . *funny story, I met someone we have in common today.*

Oh, wait, then she’ll ask who and I’ll have to say ‘a widow who gave me a Zoey Walker autographed death certificate.’ That’s not so much a funny story as a fiery red flag of caution.

Mrs. Horne’s next question ends my mental trip back into Zoey’s life. “Do you need my bank account information too? So you can transfer the money?”

“Uh, excuse me?”

“The money?” Mrs. Horne says. “How do I get the money today?”

My brows knit together. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Horne, but it’s not quite that simple. I’ll file the claim, they’ll do their investigation, and then once it’s ruled in compliance with the terms of the policy, the payment will be made as set forth in the beneficiary section.”

Mrs. Horne’s eyes narrow, and for the first time I see emotion in her face. And it’s not a nice one, either. “You mean I don’t get my money today? I have to wait even longer?”

Damn. So much for the lost and hurting widow. Mrs. Horne’s acting like planting her husband in the ground was planting a money tree. And it’s time

to harvest, dammit. “I’m afraid not. But we’ll do everything we can to process the claim quickly and painlessly.”

“Not quick enough,” she says in a huff, a note of whine entering her voice. “I’ve been waiting forever.”

I glance down at the date of death to see that it’s mere days ago despite the eons Mrs. Horne makes it sound like, but I’m trying to give her the benefit of the doubt. Maybe Dick Horne lived up to his name and was a terrible husband and she counts those suffering years or something. “Of course, loss can make the days seem extraordinarily long. I’ll do my best.”

“Just hurry. Call me when it’s done.”

Do I look like Amazon or something? Next day delivery with a Prime policy? Either way, in Yvette Horne’s mind, the meeting is over. She stands, and I follow, offering her a hand. She shakes like a limp noodle who expects her hand to be kissed, but she’s no queen. Queen Liz *definitely* doesn’t keep letters of knighthood or whatever tucked in her cleavage.

Once she’s gone, I go back to my desk, sitting down and rubbing my forehead. It’s only after I get the third circle done on my temple that I remember where my fingers have been, and I groan.

Well, not everything’s bad. Sure, I’ve got some more paperwork to do, and just out of habit, I’ll give the home office a call. After that, I’ll call Zoey. I can use this paperwork as an excuse for an actual date.

But first a hand wash . . . and a face wash.

CHAPTER 8



ZOEY

The skillet on my stove sings merrily, little pops and crackles as the vegetables and butter I put in there a few minutes ago start to absorb the heat and cook. On my cutting board, I've got the freshly-cooked chicken ready for a slice and dice.

It's all from my subscription box, a mix of regular food and organic farmer's market stuff that costs a pretty penny. But it's an indulgence I love, mainly because now I don't need to go to the grocery store and deal with the odd looks and talk that's not even behind my back anymore.

I just got tired of stopping by the meat section and getting bullshit like *Hey, DDG! A little steak tartare on the menu tonight?* or another witticism, *Killing cows so you don't kill anyone else?*

I sigh, setting my knife down. At this rate, I'm going to be getting my entire life delivered via FedEx, and never talking to anyone at all. There are just too many idiots in the world who think my tragedy is their comedy.

Fine, so I haven't always helped things when I'd replied to the snorting twat-waffle at the grocery store that I craved red meat when Aunt Flo is visiting and asked, with a fake-sweet smile, if he'd ever earned his red wings. I was hungry for fresh sausage that night.

Bitchy? Probably.

Crass? Definitely.

But why should I have to be well-mannered with everyone else when they're not with me? It's not like this sense of fatalistic weirdness just popped up overnight. Oh, hell no, it's been the product of years and years of growth, layer upon layer built up like someone painting the same spot over and over until it's like a little armored onion.

Blake Hale had some good manners and wasn't scared off by your weirdness, my conscience reminds me. He was cute, too.

That's true, but not helpful either. Not when I'm doing my best to not think about the sexy, smart, flirty man who makes me want to forget why I'm doomed to a life alone. Or at least pretend to be someone else for a little while.

I swap my chicken and vegetables in my skillet and brown up the chunks. As usual, I made enough for two, but Jacob is out tonight. I know he'll be back later with the appetite of an eighteen-year-old kid, so I throw the second serving in the refrigerator for him to reheat later and settle in on the couch.

This is my life—PJs at 7pm, dinner for one, watching reality television, and pretending I'd kick ass if I were on *Survivor*. Bear Grylls has nothing on me.

Well, except all the actual outdoor experience and willingness to eat live bugs and drink urine. I'm definitely out for that and would prefer to starve while dying of dehydration.

It's why I learned to fucking cook.

I've only had one bite of chicken and broccoli in white wine sauce and the rehash of last week's episode is still rolling when my phone rings. I glance down in case it's work or Jacob, but it's an unknown number.

Well, it should be because it's not in my contacts, but I know those last four digits. One-four-seven-three . . . it's Blake.

In shock, I sit up straight on the couch even though he can't see me and my heart rate skyrockets in an instant.

"Oh, mah Gawd! Do I answer? Do I decline? What do I do?" I ask the empty room, cream sauce messily dribbling down my chin when I talk with my mouth full.

A car horn sounds outside, almost like a warning from fate, and I take that as a sign to decline the call.

But somehow, as I shuffle my blanket, plate, fork, and phone around, still trying to swallow without choking, I hit the wrong button. "Shit. Shit. No . . . ah, hell," I hiss as the numbers on my screen start counting up. 00:01 . . . 00:02 . . . and I can hear a voice tinnily coming from my speaker. In full freak-out mode, I stare at the phone in horror and do the only thing I can. I hit *End Call*.

Smooth, Zoey. Real smooth.

I tap my forehead with the phone, praying that did not just happen. I didn't accidentally answer and then hang up on Blake, right?

Please, if there's a God up there, let it be that he just butt dialed me by accident.

My phone rings again in my hands, the electronic beep sounding like 'ha, ha, gotcha.' No such luck. I just hung up on him because that's exactly the kind of thing that happens to me—embarrassing, awful, and awkward.

This time, I do manage to hit decline right away. *No, no, no. Why is he calling me?* I filled out the paperwork, so that's a done deal, and after the incident at the beer barn, he should definitely be running for the hills. The ones far, far away from me, like on the other side of the state. Or maybe the next state over.

But yet . . . my phone rings a third time.

He's hardheaded . . . and dammit, that makes him even more attractive to me. So I hit the green button on my screen, bringing the phone up to my ear.

"Uh, hello?" I say hesitantly.

"Zo, you okay?" Blake asks, urgent concern making it all one word.

"Yeah. Fine. Why?" I say, nervously brushing my hair behind my ear because I always let my hair out at home and for some reason, I don't want him to think of me as a mess.

"Why?" Blake repeats on a huffed laugh. "Because it sounded like you were getting attacked and then the call disconnected. And then you didn't answer. I was afraid you were getting mauled by a bear or something!"

I snort out a tiny laugh of disbelief. "A bear? We don't have bears around here."

He sighs in exasperation, and it makes me smile. "I know, but that's not the point. Are you okay?"

He's actually worried about me, a sensation I haven't felt in so long that I relish it like a double rainbow or a four-leaf clover. But where he's calming down, I can feel my entire body thrumming, tuning into his voice.

"I'm good. Just dropped the phone and some of my dinner. Oh, and a pillow." I put my plate of chicken on the table to reach for the pillow and the fork clatters to the table top.

"What was that?" Blake asks, on alert again.

"A fork," I tell him. "I'm a mess, but, uh . . . hi?" My voice is too high, too tight, too unsure. I feel like a teenage girl for some reason.

“Hi, Zoey,” he says, cool, calm, and collected.

And flirty.

His voice is deep, hitting me in all sorts of places that a simple greeting shouldn't be able to do. Despite my best efforts, I'm smiling, even biting my lip a little. “Hi, Mr. Hale.”

I'm not being cute or playing kinky with the mister thing. I've got no 'daddy issues' in this regard at all. To the contrary, I'm trying hard to put some distance between us because I need it desperately before my body gets carried away with ideas like 'maybe this time will be different'. It won't, it never is, and I need to forget the idea that it might be. No dating, no connections.

The more alone I am, the better off everyone is. I can handle the isolation to protect them.

“Blake,” he corrects me again, and I know what he wants. Silence stretches as I debate whether I should give in, but my mouth decides before my brain has a chance to weigh in with a no-fucking-way recommendation.

“Blake,” I concede a bit too softly. I swear his breath wavers, but it's probably just static in the phone connection, right? There's no way he can be into me so quickly, can he?

Still, I can pretend that it was my saying his name that had that effect. It's a dangerous game to play, but as long as it's just between my imagination and my pussy, there's no harm, no foul. I clench my thighs together, wishing for more friction.

“Other than dropping your dinner, what are you doing tonight, Zoey?” Blake asks, more casual now that we've established there are no bears in my living room.

My right brow jumps up of its own volition. I might not date, but I know what late night calls of 'what're you doing?' mean.

“Is this a booty call?” I bite out. “Your Netflix broken, and you need to chill?”

It sounds harsh and bitchy. The truth is, I shift again in my blanket nest, actually considering it. A one and done, scratch that itch situation might be okay. I've never tested it, never even thought about testing it.

But surely, Blake would be okay, as long as I never saw him again?

Or you'd just never know about the zoo-escaped lion that ate him as a midnight snack when he tried to save it . . . here, kitty-kitty-kitty-style. I argue with myself on the odds of a lion on the loose.

“No! No, of course not,” Blake assures me, sounding startled and maybe just a little guilty. “That’s not what I meant.”

I have my doubts that it’s true. At the same time, though, to be thought of that way . . . it’s been a long time, and I’ve got needs too.

“Mr. Life Insurance, what are the odds of death by lion mauling?”

He doesn’t even pause at the turn in conversation. “Uh, in the US or Africa?”

My lips quirk as I try to hold back the laugh I wasn’t expecting. “Do you know the answer either way?”

“Yep. In the US, about one in a billion, and that’s including mountain lions in the calculation. In Africa, odds are about one in two hundred, though that can be lessened by staying out of game reserve areas.”

I can’t help it, I laugh at his utter shit statistics. Still . . . one in a billion?

Is it worth the risk?

Is *he* worth the risk?

Something hot and liquid in my belly says one hundred percent yes.

“Not a booty call, you said? Too bad.” I tsk sadly, promises laced through a follow-up sigh.

“Wait. What?” Blake asks, sounding dizzy. Probably is, the way I’m fucking with his head. “A second ago, I’m pretty sure you were trying to not answer my call, and now you sound like you *want* me to be calling for a hookup?”

I shrug even though he can’t see me. “A woman can change her mind,” I answer airily. He groans, the vibration coming through the phone, into my ear, and shooting straight down to low in my belly again.

Yep, I’m risking a lot here, but damn if I’m not gambling on a sure thing because I have no doubt that one night with Blake would be enough to get me through a long dry spell.

“You’re killing me, Zo. But no, I didn’t call for a booty call.” It sounds like it physically hurts him to say that because he takes a deep breath before continuing, “I called to ask you out.”

“Out?” I squeak in shock. “Like a date?”

Blake chuckles. “No.”

My heart sinks to my toes like gravity just got a super-boost of strength, and then for shits and giggles, someone flips the gravitational pull switch off, making my heart fly up and try to come out my mouth.

“Oh.”

“No, not *like* a date. That’s what we did before—eat dinner, have a drink, get to know each other—but it wasn’t planned the way a date should be. What I want to do is take you out on an actual date. It can look the same—dinner, drinks, conversation—but it’s different because of the intention from the get-go.”

Wow, he’s good.

Dangerously good.

“That sounds . . . awesome,” I say honestly, but before I can get carried away with things I can’t have, I make myself say, “but I can’t.”

“Oh.”

For such a flat sound, it’s painfully sharp to my heart. “I thought we had a good time?”

He sounds so unsure of himself, something I would’ve never thought a good-looking, smart, sweet guy like Blake would feel. It makes him seem a bit more real somehow. And he deserves more than a no.

I sigh heavily, not prepared for this conversation but diving in anyway. “It’s for your own good, not because I don’t want to.”

“Can you explain that, please?”

I don’t know why. I should just tell him that it’s not going to happen. Or that I was joking. Anything other than give him a peek behind my curtain. I haven’t let anyone back there in ages, and while some of the basics have become the basis for folklore around town, nobody other than Jacob knows the whole truth.

But that’s what I suddenly start telling him. The truth, not the overinflated stories.

“When I was eleven, I went to summer camp. One of those sleepaway deals where you make fire with flint rocks, row canoes around the lake, and roast marshmallows over campfires.” I pause, the memories washing over me.

“Sounds fun?” Blake hedges.

“It was. At first. But one night, after the camp counselors went to bed, a bunch of us snuck out into the woods. We were just stupid kids, telling ghost stories and playing spin the bottle. His name was Michael Wilson. It was my first kiss, his too, I think, because we didn’t know what to do. We basically just tried to eat each other’s face. But I didn’t know he . . .”

“He what?” Blake prompts when I don’t continue.

“He was allergic to peanut butter and I’d had a PBJ for dinner. One second, we’re kissing, sloppily getting saliva everywhere because we were horrible kissers. And the next, his lips are swelling up and turning red, and he looks like a Jessica Rabbit caricature. It was awful.”

“Was he okay?” Blake’s voice sounds choked, as if he understands how traumatic that was for younger me.

“Yeah, they gave him an epi shot and took him to the ER. He was fine, came back to camp even. And he got invited the next time everyone snuck out to the woods, but I didn’t.”

“This kid, Michael, needed an epi shot from a peanut butter-infected, sloppy, secret kiss? That was your first kiss?” Blake recaps. “Damn, that sucks.”

Before I can answer, try to explain that I didn’t know about Michael’s allergy because I didn’t even know him or I would’ve never kissed him, Blake busts up in laughter.

I’m stunned into shocked silence. He’s laughing? I almost killed a kid!

“Did anyone else kiss him that summer, or were they all too scared to? Holy shit, I bet the counselors got reamed out for that. Kids sneaking out, unauthorized make-out sessions, and what was probably described as a near-death experience when Michael’s mom heard about her ‘precious boy’s peanut butter exposure’.” His voice pitches high, mimicking this mythical mother, and he’s still laughing, actually laughing harder and rougher with every word as he paints a picture that’s similar to my story but also very different.

“No, it was . . . I almost killed him!” I exclaim, trying to make him understand the seriousness. But suddenly, I can’t help it. I start laughing too. “Oh, my God! I almost killed him with a peanut butter kiss!”

Twisted sense of humor aside, I’m horrified that I’m donkey-braying over some kid’s medical emergency. But mostly, I’m laughing at my own trauma. It was truly horrifying back then, and worse, it was the start of everything that happened after.

But right now? It feels ridiculously silly to put so much into something that happened years ago.

Michael’s okay, I know he is. He’s grown now, came to camp for a few more summers after that one, but he always stayed far, far away from me. *The Killer Kisser*, my first nickname.

After a few more wheezing laughs, Blake manages to hiss out, “So, because Michael is allergic to peanut butter, we can’t go out? What if I promise to take you somewhere where there is no peanut butter and submit a medical report showing that I have no allergies?”

Is he serious? My laughter dries up, but the smile lifting my lips stays right where it is.

“I’m not done, barely getting started. After that, everything was fine . . . for a while. Then, we played dodgeball in PE. I threw the ball, like you’re *supposed* to.”

The scene replays in my mind like a movie I’ve called up more times than I can count. “Overhand, aim at the body, not the head. But I’ve got shitty aim. I hit Andy Mackowitz right in the nose. It broke both his glasses and his nose. He had to wear an eye patch for two weeks and a weird splint on his nose for even longer than that. And when the ball hit him, he stumbled backward, stepping right onto Toby Rodriguez’s ankle. Toby had to sit out the whole football season because of a ligament tear. But the worst part was that Toby’s friend, Drake, tried to catch him. Drake was a little guy, way smaller than Toby, and he went down like timber and his head hit the floor. Concussion. One ball plus me led to a broken nose, broken glasses, a pirate-looking eye patch, a nose splint, whistle-breathing for Andy, ankle surgery, a missed football season, and a concussion.”

“And a partridge in a pear tree,” Blake sings.

Does he not understand how dangerous I am?

I move onto the real scary shit. “Went on two dates with Jordan, a skydiver. His parachute didn’t open and he was in freefall, sure he was going to splat on the ground, for over two minutes. Luckily, one of the other jumpers saved him.”

“Was it you? Did you save him?”

“No! I . . . I couldn’t do it. I went up in the plane, played along like I was going to jump, and I wanted to, but when they opened the plane door and all that wind whipped in . . . no way was I jumping. But he did. And he almost didn’t make it.”

“I’m sensing a theme here,” Blake guesses finally.

“The first time I met you, I almost killed you with my car!” I remind him.

“*Almost* being the operative word. Odds of your killing me, intentionally or accidentally, are exceedingly low. A risk I’m willing to take

to eat dinner with you. Go out with me, Zoey.”

Not a question but still a request. I don’t get it. How can a smart guy like him not see the cause and effect when I lay it out so plainly?

“I can’t. I killed my parents and my grandparents too.”

That has the mic drop effect I expected when he gasps in shock. “What?”

“Not by my hand. I’m not a serial killer. But my parents . . . they were in a car accident while driving to pick me up. It was late at night, and I got scared at a sleepover and called home, begged Mom to come get me. But Dad didn’t want her driving alone so late, so they came together. A drunk driver hit them.”

That’s all I can say about that without crying, so I move on to my next piece of evidence. “I moved in with my grandparents then. My grandma died of sepsis from a burn—”

Blake interrupts. “Was the burn your fault?”

He’s trying to make me feel better, but the truth is bitter. “Yes. We were baking together, and she let me hold the hot pads to take the cookies out of the oven. I lost my grip on the cookie sheet somehow, and it fell, badly burning her arm. She doctored it with cream for days, telling me it was fine and just an accident. Even when she got a fever, I didn’t realize it was related to the burn. Not then. But later, I figured it out.” One last piece of evidence, the hardest one to reveal. “My grandpa was killed by lightning.”

“Unless you’re Thor, wielder of thunder and lightning, you can’t blame yourself for that one, Zo.” Blake’s voice is quiet, hard.

“He was in a field with friends, hanging out to celebrate his birthday. There was rain in the forecast, but nothing major. Nothing that should’ve mattered, and it wasn’t raining anyway,” I recall. “Dry lightning, they called it. Just shoots down out of the sky to the ground, and it hit Grandpa on the way.”

Tears spill over, but I brush them away. I’ve cried rivers—no, oceans—of tears over my parents and grandparents, but all it ever does is give me a headache. It doesn’t bring them back, and it doesn’t lessen my guilt.

“Zoey, I am so sorry, baby,” Blake coos soothingly. “But none of that is your fault. Peanut butter allergies, wayward dodgeballs, clumsy kids, a bad parachute packer—all just bad luck. And your parents? The blame lies with the person who got behind the wheel after they’d been drinking. Your grandma could’ve seen a doctor sooner, and your grandpa’s death sounds

like an act of God. I don't mean that to be rude, it's literally a class of death in the insurance industry."

Really, he explains it all away, each and every horrific thing I've done, with a wave of his hand as though none of it matters. "Is that all you've got? Because I'd like to ask you out again."

"You are . . . something else, Mr. Hale."

This time he doesn't correct me, and though I can't see him through the phone, I get the sense he puffed up with pride at what he's taking as a compliment.

"You too, Miss Walker. Now, as I was saying, would you go out with me?"

I think about it again, wanting to so badly. But a lifetime of fear, of tragedy, of coping mechanisms, and superstitions honed through repeated uses doesn't dissolve instantly.

"No," I say haltingly, "but I will talk on the phone with you a little longer. Even though you apparently have a death wish and a penchant for Black Widow types."

Another one of my nicknames.

He laughs again, and it's a deep, vibrating chuckle that makes my heart thump loudly in my chest. For someone often called a death dealer and surrounded by death all day for my whole life, Blake Hale makes me feel wonderfully, amazingly . . . alive.

"So, now that I've told you my deep, dark past, how about you tell me yours so I don't feel like such a weirdo?" I ask.

And he does, except none of it is the slightest bit deep, dark, or weird.

He's oddly normal, especially for someone who likes me.

He tells me about his awesome parents, who are still married and flirt with each other like they're kids, chasing each other around the house and having tickle fights. He tells me about his sister, Amy, who's married to Fernanda, the best brunch cooker in existence, apparently.

He promises me that he'll take me to brunch sometime so I can agree with him that her skills outweigh those of any chef on television. And he tells me about his dog, Chunky, a mutt that more adopted him than the other way around.

"I'm hesitant to tell you why he's named that, though," Blake says.

"Chunky? Is he overweight?" I guess.

“Well, yes, but it’s not that. It’s that he . . . uh, he likes peanut butter. But only the kind with peanuts in it. If it’s creamy, he will turn his nose up at it, sit down, and refuse to even look at me. Spoiled little shit, which is absolutely a term of affection for my buddy.”

“Peanut. Butter?” I repeat slowly. “Are you serious? Or are you making that up to give me a hard time?”

He doesn’t answer so much as call the dog to him off mic. “Chunky! Come here. Who’s a good boy?”

I can hear snuffles of breathing and picture Blake curled up on the couch with a dog fighting to get closer to him for loving pats. It’s a cute imaginary picture, but it needs details.

“What are you wearing?” The words pop out before I can stop them.

“Gray sweatpants and dog slobber. You?”

There’s a hint of heat on that last bit as he drags the word out low and slow, letting me hear that eyebrow lift of his in his tone.

Oh, shit, did he think I was trying to take this back to a booty call-slash-phone sex situation? I wasn’t. I mean, I’m not.

“I didn’t mean . . . like for sexy talk. I was trying to picture you and Chunky. What color is he?”

“Actually,” Blake says easily, “he’s pretty peanut butter-colored too. It’s a running theme with this guy.” He pauses to give the dog some smacking kisses, making me smile and wish he were kissing me like that. Sweet, quick, noisy kisses, probably on my forehead. I mean, Chunky’s forehead. “And you didn’t answer the question.”

“Oh, uh . . . just an old T-shirt. I was wrapped up in a blanket, watching television when you called.”

“What’re you watching?”

“*Survivor*. They’re doing an obstacle course, jumping over these big sand castle things, running down the beach, and swimming around a buoy out in the water.”

“Sounds exciting,” Blake says around a quiet yawn. “Who’s your favorite contestant?”

I tell him about the young woman who’s playing a killer game, acting helpless and uber-friendly, but in the candid interviews she’s actually really good at reading people and playing to who they expect her to be while building alliances.

“Are you asleep?” I ask suddenly, realizing that he’s humming along with me while I extoll the virtues of a television contestant.

“What? No!” he says. Instead of snappy, it’s fuzzy around the edges.

“You are practically snoring in my ear.”

Blake lets off a roof-rattling fake snore. “You’d know it if I were snoring in your ear.”

The assurance makes me laugh.

“Sorry,” he explains more, “I was up early this morning to run and it might be catching up to me. The spirit is willing and happy to talk to you all night, but my eyeballs seem to have other plans.”

“You run?” I ask, and then answer for myself, “of course, you do.”

“With my friend, I thought I mentioned him. Anyway, he kicked my ass this morning, told me to stop pussing out and call you.”

I don’t think Blake has been weak a single day in his life, but I like that he didn’t take calling me too casually. That someone like him had a bit of nerves about someone like me makes my insides fizzy.

“Well, just know that if you ever see me running, it’s because zombies are chasing me. And I will trip you. I don’t have to be the fastest, just not the slowest. I will drop you like the ‘Drop Dead’ moniker suggests.”

Oh, my God, did I just make a joke about that? Horror blooms, but when Blake chuckles, I realize that maybe it’s okay. Maybe I’m okay. A little.

“Duly noted,” Blake says. “But they wouldn’t find me much of a meal. Not enough brains.”

“I highly doubt that. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you . . . and warn you . . . and try to scare you off . . . oh yeah, and warn you.”

There’s a pause on the other end, and then Blake speaks again, his voice low and intent. “I’m still willing to take my chances with you, Miss Walker.”

I smile at his persistence. “Well, I’m still not willing to go out on a date with you, Mr. Hale.”

I’m getting weaker by the second but fighting to be strong, for both our sakes. His, because if he possesses zero survival instinct or self-preservation, I’ll find it inside myself for him.

And me?

I don’t know if I can handle another loss, another reminder that I’m meant to be alone.

“We’ll see. But I really should go, I guess. My alarm goes off at five for another run. I’m hoping my five-mile time will be better tomorrow because you had me tied up in knots today.”

The accusation gives me all sorts of naughty ideas about knots, mainly ones where I’m folded into one with my knees by my ears.

“Good night, Blake.” I give him his name easily this time after all we’ve shared.

“Good night, Zo,” he says, and I can hear it in his voice. He heard that use of his name. “Sleep well.”

CHAPTER 9



BLAKE

“*B*lake Hale, how can I help you today?” Recognizing the corporate home office number, I answer my phone in my most professional voice, fixing a smile on my face just to be safe. They say you can hear a smile in someone’s voice, after all.

“Hey, Blake, it’s Frederick. How’re you?”

Frederick is the vice-president over claims for the Everlife company and a guy I only speak with occasionally.

He’s nice enough, but there’s something about him that makes me envision a fat cat in a pinstriped suit checking a gold pocket watch when we talk. And I suspect that if you don’t dance to his tune, that niceness goes away very quickly.

“Good. How’re you? The wife and kids?” Small talk, an evil necessity. Honestly, at least two-thirds of my business is exactly that.

But Frederick is used to it and cuts through it quickly. “They’re fine. Look, I’m calling about a pain in my ass that I’m hoping you can help with.”

I don’t suggest that he should probably see a proctologist for that and should definitely not be oversharing with his agents this way, but I think it really hard, hoping he’ll get the message.

“Uh, okay?” I pinch the bridge of my nose, not wanting to hear this.

“I got a call from a client. She was going on and on about her husband dying and how we’re dragging our feet on paying out his policy.”

Relief flows through me as I realize he’s being dramatic and not calling to discuss his prostate. But Frederick isn’t usually the type to exaggerate, so how bad was this client?

“Actually, she was more droning on about the money than the husband. I don’t know, maybe she’s got a house she’s trying to save or something noble like that, but . . .” He lets the word fall off, telling me he doesn’t believe that for a second.

Neither do I. And I’m beginning to get a much clearer picture. Are there cases where people are desperate to cash in a policy to make some grand gesture to save a loved one’s legacy?

Sure.

But they are much more rare than money-grubbing family members who want to take the money and run.

“Let me guess . . . Yvette Horne.”

“Yvette Horne,” Frederick confirms with a bitter chuckle. “She was worth three Alka-Seltzers, you know.”

“She came to see me a few days ago, said corporate sent her to me for the face-to-face. We filled out the claim and it’s in process. I explained that it can take some time.”

Frederick snorts. “Yeah, well, she didn’t get the message because she’s not giving us any. Woman already retained a lawyer and is sending us certified letters threatening her intention to sue if we don’t show some hustle.”

“What?” I exclaim. “And legal didn’t tell them to fuck off?” So much for my professionalism, but Yvette’s threats are way out of bounds given the timeline.

“Lawyers don’t do that, you know,” Frederick says. “They try to be more circumspect than that.” It could be a criticism, but Frederick’s tone is ramping up in frustration too.

“The man just died, and we only filled out the claim days ago,” I protest, repeating what we both already know. “Does she expect me to pull the money out of my ass like a rabbit from a hat? I’m not a magician.”

“No, she’s just trying to light a fire under our asses and get her money sooner rather than later. Which makes me question . . . is it a legit claim?”

I can appreciate his concern, especially when a widow or widower seems to be pulling a fast one. Or trying to, at least. In response, I pull the file folder from the small stack on my desk and flip it open, perusing the claim form I filled out with Ms. Horne’s help.

The next page is the death certificate with Zoey’s loopy handwriting.

“The death certificate is fine, but there’s an exception note. Toxicology reports show unusually elevated metal levels, which is weird, but not enough to be the cause of death. Hmm.” I hum out loud as I think.

“What?” Frederick asks on a chuckle. “Did he live in an old house and lick the paint? Or work in a factory? Or chew on pencils as an afternoon snack?”

“No, no, and pencils are graphite, not lead,” I answer automatically. “Chewing on them can wreck your teeth but not increase metal levels in your blood.”

“You *would* be the one to know that, wouldn’t you?” he says, chuckling harder now. The image of his belly jiggling like a bowl full of jelly comes to my mind.

“The police are still investigating because there’s no clear cause of death, though there were some heart abnormalities too. Until they close the case, we can’t pay out the claim, anyway. Mrs. Horne will have to wait.”

“Too bad it wasn’t a suicide,” Frederick says on a sigh. “No claim payout then.”

That’s true, but callous, even for a joke.

“Pretty sure he didn’t poison himself into a heart attack,” I answer flatly. “It’d be the most unique case for the books if he did.”

“Yeah, I figured. Well, be on alert with this one. I get the feeling this woman is going to be a problem. Maybe check in with the police and coroner so we can get in front of any potential lawsuit?”

Actually, that’s a great idea, and a really good excuse to go see Zoey again in her safe space. At work.

Yeah, I’m going to track her down again, barge into her morgue, and see if I can get her to eat dinner with me again. It might not be an official date the way I want it to be, but I’ll take what I can get.

A guy’s gotta eat, and so does Zoey.

* * *

THE WILLIAMSON COUNTY Sheriff’s Office is quiet when I walk inside. Actually, it’s basically a ghost town with no one in sight. There are six desks with ancient desktop computers, a water cooler between two

windows, and a long table beneath a dry erase board off to the side that seems to be a shared workspace.

“Hello?” I call out.

A door opens on my right, and a blonde, middle-aged man in a tan uniform appears. He swipes at his mustache . . . no, he’s checking his breath. My guess is he was out on a smoke break.

“Sheriff Jeff Barnes, what can I do for you?” he offers. He doesn’t offer a hand, which I honestly appreciate. Instead, he gives me a professional nod.

It’s good, and I return the gesture. “Nice to meet you, Sheriff. I’m Blake Hale from Everlife Insurance. I’d like to talk to you about a claim we’ve had from the beneficiary of Richard Horne.”

Jeff’s lips quirk under his thick mustache, but he reassumes his professional demeanor quickly. “Sure thing. Hale, you said? Come on over here and let me see what I got on ol’ Dickie Boy.”

He sits down at one of the desks and reaches for the single manilla folder in the basket. Opening it, he licks his finger and uses it to point as he scans down the page. “Yeah, Horne died at home, nose down in his breakfast. Autopsy was hinky, so we can’t close the case yet.”

“I saw that in the report too. What’s the investigation of that looking like? Any leads on what might’ve caused the blood abnormalities?”

Jeff sighs as he drops the folder back in the basket. “Nah, we’re waiting on a rerun of the toxicology. Problem is that our local lab is a little slow. Budget, you know. To make sure there was no mistake, we had to ship blood and tissue samples up to the state lab. And they make us look fast.”

“A mistake?” I question. “So you’re not looking into a possible exposure?”

Sheriff Barnes shakes his head, eyeing me like I’m stupid for even asking the question. “No need until the report is confirmed, which it probably won’t be.” He shrugs and leans back in his chair, seeming wholly unconcerned for Mr. Horne’s results, and I get the feeling he really wouldn’t care about Mrs. Horne’s claim.

“Okay, I guess I’ll follow up on that then. I’m going to see the coroner next.”

That gets Barnes’s attention. His feet hit the floor with a thud, and he bolts upright and leans across the desk toward me. “You’re going to see Zoey?”

My eyes narrow. He doesn't seem protective or caring. More so, he seems concerned or even fearful. I don't like it, not after how the folks at the bar treated her.

So it's hard to keep the ice out of my voice as I clip out, "Yes, she's the coroner on file for Mr. Horne."

"Yeah, she would be." He nods, agreeing with himself. "She's . . . well, she's . . ." He seems unsure how to complete that sentence, and I want to give him more than enough rope to hang himself with.

"She's what?" I prompt.

"She's a strange one, our Zoey," he whispers.

"Strange how?" I'm going to make him say it, whatever it is. I want to hear what's truly on his mind so I can decide just how bad, and how widespread, this situation with Zoey is. She said 'everyone' thinks she's cursed, but surely, these people aren't that superstitious?

"Well, she can't help it, working with the dead all the time. She just talks to them a bit, you know?" He nods like that's just fine, normal behavior. "And poor thing has had more than her fair share of bad luck. You'd think she was born on Friday the thirteenth, under a ladder, while a black cat was walkin' by, the way it is. It's bound to make a person a bit . . ." He whirls a thick finger by his temple with a teasing smile that says 'you know what I mean'. "She's all right, you know. Damn good at her job, and mighty pretty to look at. Just an odd bird."

There's a mix of respect and fear in his words, and I decide to swallow down my indignant anger at his assessment of Zoey, who is perfect just the way she is.

How do these people not see how amazing she is? And more importantly, how fast can I see her?

Because I want to wash away all these people's preconceived notions that Zoey has internalized and get her to go out with me again.

* * *

I CAN FEEL the chill of Zoey's world before the door even opens, the fingers of overly air-conditioned air reaching down the hall. Normally, it'd give me shivers, but being this close to seeing her again has me burning, and the

coolness is a welcome reprieve so I don't look like a sweaty nerd on his first date.

I take one last breath to still my excited nerves and push open the door—ready to see her, ready to hear about her day while I watch her red lips form words, and ready to learn more about this woman who is haunting my every thought.

“Zoey?” I call out as I open the door.

She jumps a foot in the air as she whirls. “Shit, you scared me!” she shrieks, but she's already laughing at her overreaction, her palm pressed to her chest where I'm guessing her heart is racing.

I laugh a little too. “We have to stop meeting like this.”

I take three steps across the room to stand directly in front of her, seriously thankful that there's no body on the table and her hands are clean this time.

She seems to be working on the paperwork spread out along the stainless-steel table. Her breath hitches, and I feel a sense of relief that my nearness affects her the same way hers affects me.

The air between us charges with sparkles of electricity, making me even more grateful for the cold air.

“Better meeting like this than a car crash.” I offer a smile, letting her know it's a tease, and her lips quirk, though she doesn't grant me her full smile . . . yet. She's a harder win than that, but I'm up for the challenge.

No doubt about that.

“Valid point, but maybe too soon?” she questions. “Are you here to ask me to dinner again?”

“Yes and no,” I reply, giving her my most charming smile. It's definitely not hard with her. “I had to come out here for work reasons, but I'm hoping you'll take pity on me and accompany me to dinner before I make the long drive back.”

I flash her my best puppy dog eyes and am finally given that smile I've been craving. I saw it fade so completely at dinner the other night and have dreamt of watching her mouth lift in happiness once again.

I bask in it for a quick heartbeat until she asks, “Work?”

Ugh, that.

“Yes, in a small-world twist, I'm here to follow up on someone we have in common. Richard Horne.”

Zoey's brows knit together, a cute little wrinkle between them. "Dick Horne. The nickname that's worse than the given one. Pretty sadistic of his parents, if you ask me." She looks haunted for a moment, as though hearing a line of people calling her *Drop-Dead Gorgeous* in her mind. Refocusing, she asks, "What about him?"

"Well, I had a visit from Yvette Horne, his widow," I explain. "Mr. Horne had a rather large life insurance policy, and the head office has me handling the case. She's putting pressure on us to finalize the payout, but until the case is resolved, we can't do that. Since you're the coroner on file, I wanted to see if you had any insight or information about the toxicology report and cause of death."

Too late, I realize that though Zoey hasn't moved, the scant inches between us have grown, filling with distant professionalism.

"Oh, all my findings are in the report. And the repeat toxicology is expected soon, but no promises on a delivery date." Her tone is clipped and practiced, that of a medical personnel to an outsider.

"Don't do that, Zo," I whisper-growl, dropping all pretenses of professionalism. "Having a case in common is no big deal."

"It is when the case is ongoing," she disagrees. "It could be seen as unprofessional or a conflict of interest."

Judging by the way she won't meet my eyes, even she doesn't believe that.

"Do you have an interest in whether Yvette Horne gets the money?"

Her eyes flash at the question and I nod in agreement. "Exactly. Me neither. We're box checkers. So don't make this into something it's not. Don't let it be an excuse."

"Excuse?" she questions, but her voice has gone quiet and breathy. She knows exactly what I'm talking about, what she's trying to do. She's already tried to push me away because of fear and superstition, and now she's trying to use professionalism to do it too.

But there's no need to deny ourselves.

I lean toward her, feeling her quickening breath warm my chest where her eyes are locked, not willing to lift to meet mine. She places one fingertip against my sternum, pushing me back. I lean into her touch for a split second, wishing for more.

"You feel this. I know you do." I catch her hand in mine, bringing it to my lips to lay a soft kiss to her fingertip. Her focus stays locked on her

finger against my lips. Good. I want her to hear this, see it, feel it. “I understand that you’re scared. But I’m not.”

For such a gentle touch, the kiss feels intimate, a sign of things to come, especially when she slowly traces my lower lip with that fingertip.

But her doubts rise to the surface. If they faded at all.

“That’s because you have all this goodness in you, and happiness around you, and I only have this.” Freeing her hand, she gestures to the morgue and death all around her before dropping her eyes.

I don’t let her do that and lift her chin and eyes to meet mine, cupping her face. “That’s not all you have. You have goodness in you too. Let me show you.”

For a moment, I can see her waver, her eyes searching mine for something.

A joke?

Does she think I’m one of these assholes who tease her incessantly?

Or a curse?

She told me her history, and she’s not responsible for any of it, though she doesn’t believe that. Bad luck, accidents, and a life long-lived . . . those are her true demons.

I lean forward slowly, making my intention clear as my gaze drops to her lips. She licks them in preparation, a sigh of desire escaping. There’s a scant inch between us when she backs away suddenly, her hip bumping into the table behind her, and it rolls away.

It knocks her off balance, and she stumbles, falling with little grace to her butt on the floor. Her legs are askew, her mouth opens in an *O* of surprise, and her hands splay wide behind her. “Oh!” she says, stunned before she reaches for her bruised backside. “Ow!”

“Shit! Let me help you up.” I reach for her hands, pulling her up.

She laughs self-consciously, still rubbing at her right butt cheek. “At least no one died this time.”

I give her a wry look. “Too soon for my car crash joke, but not your death ones?”

The comment gets me a rewarding eye roll.

“Whatever. Come on, I’ll go get the Horne file,” she says, taking a step. But as she does, her left leg doesn’t bear her weight and she cries out, half-collapsing again.

This time, to my slight credit, I catch her. “What’s wrong?”

“My ankle. I think I twisted it.”

I lift her up in my arms and carry her over to the now stopped table, setting her down on top of her paperwork. Right now, she’s more important than whether her patient files get a bit wrinkled.

Kneeling down, I carefully examine her ankle.

She leans forward, putting her hand on my shoulder to stop me. “It’s fine, no big deal . . . ah!”

I accidentally hit a tender spot as I rotate her ankle, and her pain is a sharp jab to my gut too. Before I can apologize, the door swings open behind me and a familiar voice shouts, “What in the hell are you two doing? No, wait, don’t tell me! I don’t want to know. Get your own dinner, Zoey Walker.”

I look over my shoulder to see a frowning Alver covering his eyes with his hand. He virtually runs back through the door before either Zoey or I can explain the seemingly compromising position he caught us in.

I laugh, still on my knees in front of Zoey, and she swats at my shoulder. “It’s not funny! In minutes, the entire gossip grapevine is going to hear the story of how Alver caught me having oral sex on a morgue table, screaming out in ecstasy. And the worst part is, people will actually believe that.”

“Some of that sounds pretty damn good if you ask me. *Maybe* not the morgue table part. That’s not on my bucket list, but I could probably—definitely—be talked into it if it’s on yours?”

She shakes her head, the truth setting in and killing her humor. At least she seems to have forgotten about her ankle, thankfully.

“You want to get out of here?” I ask.

CHAPTER 10



ZOEY

Why did I bring him to my house? This is the worst idea ever. One second, he's asking if I want to get away from the spiraling threat of gossip and the next, I'm riding in his car as I give him directions.

"I could've driven myself home," I argue, stating the same thing for the fourth time.

Just as repetitive, he says, "No need to injure yourself further." Expanding on his shut down, he adds, "Fall injuries account for twelve percent of emergency room visits each year."

"Is that true? Do you really know that off the top of your head?"

In answer, he throws me a charming smile. I'm not sure if he's saying 'of course I know that' or 'I made that shit up', but somehow, both possibilities make me reluctantly smile back at him.

The truth is, I know exactly why I agreed to this. He's gaining ground with his silly arguments that maybe my bad luck isn't all my fault. It's a relieving thought, one I've considered, wished, and hoped for.

But it can't be real. The evidence is too weighted against me, with friends, boyfriends, and family all affected by my bad juju. Just thinking about it makes me discreetly touch the woodgrain trim on the dash of his sensible sedan. Yeah, I know it's wood-veneered plastic, but it's the best I've got right now, so it'll have to do. It's all about believing it works, anyway.

If the threat of imminent death isn't enough to run Blake off, I know something that will. My home.

Everything about Blake screams success, fancy-schmancy, and upper middle-class. Not that there's anything wrong with that. He obviously works for his money, and he's not a prick about having cash. Other than what I assume is between his legs, he's the complete opposite of a prick.

But I expect that pulling up to my single-wide trailer in a trailer park in the country will be enough to finally make him pump the brakes and give me a second look. One that'll make him smarten up and run the way I've been waiting for him to do all along.

A test? Maybe. I prefer to think of it as a kindness he won't fully recognize, but I'll know what I sacrificed to save him.

"Turn here," I say, guiding him into the trailer park lot.

I watch him closely to see the moment he realizes exactly who and what I am. Pretty packaging hiding a death-dealing, stitching-threads-together-to-pay-bills, dark and twisted woman who will never live up to whatever he thinks he sees in me.

That'll be the moment I lose all pretense of pretending this can end differently.

His jaw tightens, the muscle popping in intervals.

Yep, that's me. *Zoey Walker, Trailer Park Princess*. Another of my nicknames. "Sixth on the left, the blue one."

Blake pulls up and parks, and I try to see my home through his eyes.

A long metal rectangle, long ago painted a pale blue, with bright blue shutters and an entrance hidden behind a white screen door that's seen better days. There are three wooden steps up to the front landing, where I placed a plant in an attempt to make it seem welcoming.

My secret?

It's a fake plant because I can't keep a real one alive, and publicly killing plants is the last bit of fuel on the fire I need. Through the window's open blinds, I can see flashing lights that tell me Jacob is home and playing video games.

"Stay there," Blake says as he puts the car in park and runs around the front bumper. He opens my door and scoops me into his arms.

"Put me down, I can walk!" I hiss.

"No." Blunt and inviting zero argument, so of course, I argue.

"Seriously? If Jacob sees me—"

But he's already on the porch, pulling the screen door open. "Key?"

“It’s probably open. Jacob’s inside.” He glares at me disapprovingly and I shrug. “Country courtesy.”

I reach down and open the front door, and Blake half turns, threading me through the doorway with me still in his arms.

I groan in frustration.

If he had the least bit of hope left after the whole trailer park thing, it’s definitely gone after he gets a glimpse of the frat boy party happening in my living room.

Okay, not a *whole* party.

But at least a frat boy hang-out session.

Jacob and his best friend Angelo are flopped back on the couch, headphones on as they yell at each other and whoever is on the other end of their microphones. Their big, dirty tennis shoes are on my secondhand coffee table on either side of an open pizza box old enough that the cheese has congealed and I can see the cut lines on the three slices left.

“Come on, asshole. Get the key and meet me!” Jacob says, holding his game controller up as though that’ll help his on-screen character do what he wants. The movement of the door must catch their attention because I know they can’t hear us. Jacob’s eyes don’t cut away from the action on the screen, his fingers pushing buttons seemingly randomly, just tossing a greeting over his shoulder. “Hey, Zoey!”

But Angelo does look my way. His jaw drops open, and then he mouths, “What the fuck?”

He backhands Jacob, who shoulder checks his friend back. “Get the damn key! What are you doing?” A second later, he growls, “You let me die, asshole!”

When Jacob finally looks to Angelo, he follows Angelo’s eyes and his jaw drops, matching Angelo’s look of confusion at seeing me in some strange man’s arms just inside our front door. “Uh, Zoey?”

I wave, figuring I might as well fucking own this one. “Hey, guys. This is Blake. Blake, this is Jacob and that’s Angelo.”

Blake lifts his chin in greeting because his hands are full of me. “Where’s the bedroom?”

“You are not taking me to bed, Mr. Hale!”

Oh, yeah, I’m back to using his last name because he’s acting like all this is no big deal when it’s a Huge Fucking Deal. He’s in my house, I’m in his arms, and I’m introducing him to my family. Distance is needed.

Blake grunts, his face determined. “Yes, I am.”

“Zoey?” Jacob says, harsher and harder as he stands up, the game forgotten. He’s ready to defend me, which is so sweet of him. Angelo squares up next to Jacob, also ready to battle for my honor.

Before I can explain, Blake does it for me. “Zoey hurt her ankle. It’s not bad, but she needs to rest. You, come help me get her situated in bed. You, get me an ice pack or a bag of frozen veggies, something to keep the swelling down.”

Just like that, the entire vibe changes. The true alpha male has spoken and he’s not threatening my safety, so Jacob and Angelo hop to follow Blake’s order. It’s actually annoying as hell because they never do what I ask them to do, as evidenced by their filthy shoes on my coffee table even though I’ve told them dozens of times that it’s disgusting.

“This way,” Angelo tells Blake, leading the charge toward the back of the single-wide. It’s not like there are lots of options. The living room and kitchen are in the middle with the front door, and the bedrooms are on either end. Even the bedrooms are nearly identical. The only thing that might make mine the ‘master’ bedroom is that mine’s just past the bathroom, which means I don’t have to walk as far if I have to pee in the middle of the night.

Entering, Angelo looks excited as hell to be in my bedroom for the first time and way too happy to follow Blake’s instructions and pull back my blankets and arrange pillows to prop my ankle up.

“Want me to get your pajamas?” Angelo offers.

Blake shoots him a look promising death before I can reply that I’d rather have just about anyone else in the world go through my underwear drawer rather than Angelo, and I can’t hold back the laugh that escapes when Blake grits out, “No. That’s everything.”

Jacob appears with a bag of frozen peas, his eyes bouncing from Blake to Angelo to me. I roll my eyes in answer to his unasked question. If he really wants to know, I’ll explain the silent dick measuring contest later.

“Thanks,” I tell Jacob as Blake takes the peas and gently places them on my ankle. I wince, more at the surprise of cold against my skin than actual pain.

“You good, Zo?” Blake says gently. I nod stoically.

Jacob clears his throat and mumbles, “Hey, Zoey, I think we’ll go over to Angelo’s for the night. Let me know when it’s safe to come home.”

Angelo looks like he's about to argue, but my mouth gets there first. "What? No! You don't have to leave."

Jacob's answering smirk is too knowing for my taste as he gets comfortable with the idea that I've brought someone home, even if it's not like that at all.

"It's a trailer, and I don't want to know what you're up to. I definitely don't want to hear. I'll expect the same courtesy when I get Holly to come home with me."

I groan, letting my head fall back to the headboard with a thunk. "Never. Gonna. Happen. Jacob. And that's not what's happening here." I point to Blake and then to my own chest.

Jacob holds up his hands innocently. "Sure, whatever you say." He doesn't believe me in the slightest. To Blake, he adds, "You good to take care of her? She deserves the best."

He is not talking about my minorly injured ankle.

A tear tries to slide down my cheek . . . at my utter loss of control of this situation, at Jacob's sweet assessment that reassures some doubts I've had about pseudo-parenting him, and even about the pain in my ankle, which is already feeling cold and numb now.

Blake stands straight and offers Jacob a handshake. "She deserves more than the best. I'm not enough, but I'll do everything I can."

Jacob eyes Blake, taking his measure. It's a sight I never thought I'd see, and it brings warmth to my heart. He's a good son-slash-brother-slash-uncle. But mostly, a good friend.

"Good that you know you're not good enough for her, but you'll do for now, I suppose. Zoey deserves a little happiness and bit of let-loose. I ordered pasta from Gia's with our pizza, left it in the microwave for Zoey. Maybe you can warm it up for her?"

A tiny test of fitness. Will you feed her at least?

Blake nods, smiling tightly. "Of course. Thank you."

"There's enough for two," Jacob says by way of a stamp of approval. "Let's go, Angelo."

Angelo shakes his head, arms crossed over his chest. "No way."

He seems more possessive and jealous than I would've expected. He's had a crush on me almost as long as Jacob has had one on Holly. And just like Jacob, Angelo has zero chance with me.

“I’m good here with Blake,” I tell the boys. I’m not sure how I came to be not only agreeing to this but fighting for it. But here we are, me lying in my bed with my foot propped up under a bag of peas that’s probably two years past freshness with three guys looking at me with questions in their eyes.

Jacob grabs Angelo’s arm and shoves him toward the door. Angelo glares back at Blake, then shoots puppy dog eyes my way. He’ll get over it, I’m sure.

Once I hear the front door open and close, the screen door slapping closed too, I roll my eyes. “That went well,” I say sarcastically.

Blake’s right eyebrow arches wryly. “I thought so. Jacob’s not too bad of a kid.”

He moves toward the bed, and I flinch, unsure of his intentions. But he only lifts my head gently until I sit up, and he reaches behind me, propping up the pillow behind my neck before adjusting the pillow under my ankle. That done, he brushes his hands off on his shirt and gives me a look. “Ready for dinner now?”

“You don’t have to do all this,” I say again.

Blake holds up a finger, ignoring my attempt to push him away. “Don’t go anywhere.”

He’s really proud of himself for that one as he leaves me alone in my bed to go back down the short hallway to the kitchen. I can hear him pattering around, opening the microwave and then closing it, then the whir of it fills the trailer. I think he’s humming too.

The man is humming as he heats up my dinner and takes care of me.

What planet is he from?

I’m the caretaker—for Jacob, for my grandparents, for the whole damn county, even if they don’t realize it—but here Blake is, taking care of *me* when he barely even knows me.

Reflexively, I snuggle down into my pillows a bit more, intrigued to see how this goes. A moment later, Blake reappears in the doorway, nearly filling up the whole thing, and holding one of my small mixing bowls heaped full of steaming spaghetti. “There was only one meatball, but there’s plenty of meat sauce.”

“It’s fine,” I say, and he hands it over into my outstretched hands.

The first bite is that amazing level of deliciousness I always think I must’ve imagined. I’d love to say Gia’s culinary talents are wasted on us

out here in the sticks, but her place does well and everyone loves her pizza, so I guess that's enough for Gia. I take another bite and groan, "So good. Thank you."

Grandma would be proud that I remembered some of the manners she taught me. Blake grins in surprise, warming me as much as the spaghetti. "You're welcome."

He disappears for a moment, coming back with his own bowl, and sits down on the bed next to my knee, close but not too close, with both feet on the floor. That's reasonable, right? Respectable even.

So why am I disappointed that he didn't climb right in with me?

No, Zoey. Stop that right now.

Blake takes a cautious bite of his small plate of spaghetti and his eyes widen in surprise. "Damn, that is good!"

"Yeah, we might not have fancy restaurants out here, but Gia's restaurant serves some good food," I reply, probably a bit more sharply than I intended. He shoots me a questioning look with that one brow arching dramatically, and I sigh.

Fine, that was a bit judgy and bitchy when he was making polite conversation, not comparing our country food places to the city's fancy ones. I'm just sensitive because I'm waiting for the trailer park questions.

They always come.

"We'll have to go there sometime."

His response is not what I expected, but also, it somehow is. He's not letting me hide behind defensive barbs and preconceived notions and is instead inserting himself right into my day and my future with no question.

"Maybe," I concede half-heartedly. Gia would probably freak out if I walked through her door but at the same time be so gobsmacked that I was bringing a date, she'd be on the phone with the entire county in minutes.

Blake smiles as though I agreed to a marriage proposal, not a possible future dinner date.

Wait . . . was I just thinking about a date?

Oh, shit. I did just agree to preplanned dinner and drinks. He said that's the benchmark that makes it a real date, and I don't do those. But damn if I'm going to take it back right now.

Still, old habits die hard.

"Are you allergic to anything? Garlic, shellfish, gluten? Penicillin?" I ask desperately, looking for a way out.

Blake shakes his head slowly. “Nope, told you. Nothing at all, not even peanut butter,” he answers, following my train of thought easily and remembering Michael Wilson’s allergic reaction. He sets his plate of half-eaten spaghetti on my nightstand and then takes mine to do the same. “No drug allergies. No sky diving, bungee jumping, or scuba diving. Risky behaviors can increase your life insurance premiums by up to fifty percent.”

His fist dents the bed as he leans over me, and I yearn for actual contact.

Why is safety talk so damn sexy? It makes no sense whatsoever, but the heat building between my thighs disagrees. What’s next? If he quotes actuarial tables, will I have an orgasm?

Ridiculous, but also, currently not outside the realm of possibility.

“I drive one of the safest cars on the market and have never had a speeding ticket. I have an annual physical, and my blood work says I’m one hundred percent healthy. I work out and eat well.” His breath is warm on my lips, a moment of anticipation where I could stop this.

“Have you had a tetanus shot?” I whisper. “Diphtheria? Chicken pox?”

The very corners of his lips quirk, so amused by my worries. “All vaccines are up to date. Including my annual flu shot.”

His palm cups my jaw, his thumb tracing my cheekbone, and I lean into his touch. When was the last time I let someone get this close to me? Not emotionally, but just . . . physically.

Carnally.

It’s been long enough that I don’t remember . . . no, wait. That’s not true.

I did have that one night with that guy at the Medical Examiners and Coroners convention. The one who smelled like formaldehyde even though we’d been there for three days of lectures and demonstrations.

That wasn’t that long ago . . . it was just . . . last year.

Oh, crap, it's been over a year since I've had sex with another person.

“Zoey?” Blake questions, his voice tight and deep, and I realize that he’s waiting for a sign from me. Permission or refusal, but he’s not moving until I give one or the other.

I lick my lips, parting them, and before I can change my mind, I press them to his.

For a single second, I’m in control, my mouth tasting his, my lips pushing against his. And then his hand becomes a way for him to guide me as he kisses me, stealing my breath and then exploring with his tongue.

Time loses all meaning.

Do we kiss for a minute or an hour? I have no idea.

All I know is that every cell in my body wants to touch him, but he seems to be in no hurry whatsoever, perfectly content with kissing.

My nipples are hard pebbles that even this blah polo shirt can't hide, and I'm clenching my thighs to find some relief. My hands grip his shirt, keeping him close, wanting this to go on forever but needing more.

I moan into his kiss, and he stops abruptly, pressing his forehead to mine. I'd think something's wrong, but he's panting desperately and I can see how hungry for me he is.

"Not yet. Not like this."

I am the only other person in the room, but I don't think he's talking to me. Talking to himself isn't a red flag for me, though. I do it all the time and I'm perfectly sane.

Well, mostly. After all, I don't talk to myself but to the dead. Much weirder.

"Not like how?" I ask, wanting to understand his holding back.

"You're injured."

"My ankle's fine."

"Not your ankle, your heart," Blake says softly, his voice trembling with want and internal conflict. "It's been bruised and beat up a bit, but I want you to know that you can trust me so you'll let me in."

I can't help but smile at his romantic notions. "I wasn't looking for you to climb into my heart and make a love nest. A kiss isn't a promise and sex isn't a marriage proposal," I say, repeating his previous words to me. "I was more thinking along the lines of letting you in my body for a few minutes because you seem less freaked out by me than anyone I've met in a long while, and I could *really* use an orgasm that's not self-administered."

He lets out a groan of pain. "I would kill to see that, you know? Maybe literally."

He doesn't mean it. He's too good, too kind, but I like that he's to the point of exaggeration because I get the feeling that he doesn't do that easily or often. He's more dry facts and stats, even if he is a romantic at heart.

"And thanks for the vote of confidence, I think," he says wryly. "But I'm not interested in being brushed off after one night when you get scared again."

I cup his face back, looking into those calm, assured eyes. “*That* scares me.”

He places a gentle kiss to my nose. “I know. That’s why I’m going to leave now. Because if I stay here much longer, looking at your body all stretched out beneath these blankets that I know smell like you, I will not be able to be rational about this. About you.” His eyes trace the lumps and bumps my body make beneath the knit blanket I’ve had for years. “You make me irrational.”

He smiles at the very idea, and I can’t help but reach out and touch the wood nightstand next to me. He notices, his eyebrow lifting. “What was that for?”

I blush at being busted making the nonsensical move, but I tell the truth. “For good luck, because you make me think maybe I could get just a tiny bit of it for a change.”

Blake takes my hand in his, giving my fingers a squeeze. “I don’t believe in luck. I believe in this. I believe that we are shaped by all the things that happen to us, and we wouldn’t have gotten to this moment if anything in our lives had been different. And this moment? I wouldn’t have changed it. Good night, Zoey.”

He folds my fingers in his hand and lays a soft kiss, quick as a heartbeat, to my knuckles. I guess I really am a trailer park princess because I have never felt so feminine, even if it is with condensation from a bag of old peas dripping down my leg and a stupid smile on my face.

Blake gets up and starts to leave, pausing at the door. “I’ll lock the door on my way out.”

His eyes drift over my face and down the lumpy bumps of blanket. I wonder what he’s thinking because he shakes his head ever so slightly and his eyes go a little soft but then crinkle at the corners as they narrow.

Seconds later, he’s gone. I hear the door open and then the screen, and then the doorknob rattles as he checks that it’s locked. I smile at his protectiveness. It’s been a long time since anyone’s taken care of me, maybe not since Grandma passed away, and I’m worried I’m already getting addicted to it.

And that’s dangerous for us both.

CHAPTER 11



BLAKE

The bar is hopping tonight. Not rave style, with drunk people grinding and woo-hooing loudly over even louder music.

But that's not what this place is about. It's dimly lit except for the neon lights projected on the screen at the far end of the room, pitchers of mass-produced tap beer are on special, and the only cheers are the smack talking banter between teams.

"Oh! Too bad, Hale! Maybe next time you'll get a topic you actually know something about! Like maybe the alphabet. What comes after K again?" Cole, a dark-haired, hotshot real estate agent, muses with a thick finger pointing my way and a huge, extra-white smile.

His teammate and business partner, Bryan, gives Cole a high-five and then turns my way to complete the slam Cole set up perfectly. "That'd be L for losers, I believe."

Bryan holds his fingers, shaped in an L to his forehead, signaling that we're losers because we lost one round. I don't want to tell him he looks like an idiot, not yet. We've barely started our trivia competition for the night and I'm already done with Cole and his shit. Usually, I can stand him pretty easily since his insults are juvenile at best, unoriginal at worst.

And really, they're all in good fun, mostly. But I'm distracted tonight. That's why I missed that easy question about the shortest US president.

I know it's James *Madison*—at a whopping 5 foot 4 inches, thank you very much, because any man will tell you that every single inch matters—and not James *Monroe*. But I got tongue-tied, and my attempt at 'Madison' came out sounding like 'Mondilroe'.

At least that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

But does Cole believe that? Of course not. He's a douche waffle who happens to specialize in presidential trivia and delights in giving anyone who misses out on such an 'easy question' a hard time.

What's the capital of Uzbekistan, Cole? Tashkent, but I bet you didn't know that, did ya?

He sucks at geography, thankfully having a weak spot other than his holier-than-thou winner attitude. "We'll get ya next round," Trey tells Cole in my defense before leaning over to clink his beer against mine. Quieter, he says, "You good, man? Not like you to miss an easy one."

I glare at Trey even though I'm mad at myself. "Yeah."

One long sip of beer doesn't make it any truer, though. Looking at the screen for what's ahead, I can already see how the night's going to play out. Round two has Cole's team versus Meg-a-demia, a group of local college professors and teaching assistants.

Cole's team is known as The Estates. They claim their name was chosen because they're mostly high-dollar real estate agents, but we all know it's because they come from old money, estate-style, and like to flaunt it.

But the round two topics are ones the professors will slaughter Cole and his numb nuts partner with, like *Literature of the 1800s* and *The Pop Culture Influence of Pokémon*.

I bet Cole doesn't know a Pikachu from a panini.

And after that, it'll be a loser round with the Estates against . . . us, Anarchy Authority. To be clear, our team name was chosen by Heather, our fearless and sarcastically oppositional leader.

Speaking of the devil, Heather claps her hands to get our attention. I shoot one more withering 'fuck you' look at Cole and he acts like a I blew him a lovey-dovey kiss, excitedly watching it cross the few feet and then 'catching' it before crumbling the nothingness in his hands and dropping it to the floor to squash with his shiny loafers.

For pantomime, it's pretty clear he plans to kill us in the next head-to-head. And also, he has on loafers with no socks. That look hasn't been attractive since Don Johnson was rocking it in *Miami Vice*, no matter what Cole's girlfriend du jour told him.

"Blake," Heather barks, her palm slapping the table.

"Yeah?" I answer back, just as irritated.

“We’re in the middle of a strategy session. If you’d care to abandon your eye-fuck with Cole, you’re welcome to join us.”

“I’m not . . .” I turn to Heather, and her smile of victory tells me that her smack talk got her exactly what she wanted—my attention. “Fine. Strategy?”

Heather nods and immediately swipes her too-long bangs off to the side. They’re green this week, matching her nail polish and eye shadow. “There are hellacious topics still left on the board tonight. I think we’ve got a lock on *Art and Architecture*, *Cars of the 1960s*, and *Musical Genius*.”

She looks around our team, giving assignments based on our specialty knowledge and more general education. “But what I’m worried about are *Serial Killer Stories* and *Reality Star Survivors*. Anybody read up on Jack the Ripper lately? Or watched *The Bachelorette*?” Heather nibbles on her thumb and says hopefully, “Maybe the reality show topic will be about home DIY shows?”

Heather’s an HGTV addict and has renovated her entire house, so if that’s the case, we’re solid.

“I doubt *House Hunters* couples count as reality stars,” Trey says doubtfully, his lips twisted.

Slowly, a tiny idea tries to take shape deep in my mind. Or maybe it’s in my pants, but it’s a good one either way. “I have an idea. Can we call in a sleeper agent?”

“A ringer?” Heather asks. “You know a guy?”

I give a noncommittal shrug, not wanting to tip my hand. “Maybe. Is that allowed?”

Heather closes her eyes, and I can see her eyeballs twitching left to right behind her lids as though she’s reading the rulebook from memory. Trivia night is serious business. “Yes,” she says, holding up a finger, “but only if we don’t max out on team members. Someone will have to ‘*have an emergency*’ and leave so that we can bring in a replacement player.”

She doesn’t dare do air quotes, lest she be seen strategizing for a ringer, but her eyebrows lift and lower twice in rapid succession.

Shawn, who’s really our weakest member, raises his hand. “I volunteer as tribute if you’ve got someone, Blake?”

The whole team’s eyes land on me, and though I know this might have bad idea written all over it, I also know I’m absolutely going to do it. It might be the only way I can see Zoey again.

“I’m on it. If you’ll excuse me.”

“Fuck yeah,” Trey says, even though his forehead’s lined with worry. “Strat-e-gery.”

“Goddammit, Trey, you know I hate made-up words,” Heather says, distracted as I make my quick exit. I just hope that I’m right.

I step into the hallway near the bathrooms to get away from the noise of The Estates arguing that Edgar Allen Poe was the most influential American poet of the 1800s.

I hear a professor correcting Cole, “Just because the only literature you know by name is *The Raven* doesn’t make it the most influential. If we went by that standard, the most influential magazine of the 20th century would be *Playboy*.”

The academics laugh, and I have to admit it’s a good zinger. I sigh, hoping I know what I’m getting myself into . . . and what I’m getting Zoey into too.

I press her contact and the rings sound a bit like Poe’s *Tell-Tale Heart*, nerves and anxiety louder in my head than they should.

“Hello?” Zoey answers.

“Hey, Zoey, I have a bit of an emergency here and I’m wondering if you might be able to help me?” I spit out nervously. God, this could so blow up in my face.

Zoey winds up in an instant, her voice hard and worried. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Shit.

Her first thought is that there’s been a catastrophe of her doing, which was not my intention, but . . .

“Yeah, I’m fine. Can you just come? I’ll send you the address.”

“You promise this isn’t a booty call again?” she asks a bit more warily. “If I get there and your dick is out, I will scream and douse you with pepper spray.”

I chuckle, although my dick does do a little wakeup twinge in my pants. “No, you won’t.”

She sighs, and I know I’ve got her. “No, I probably won’t. Okay, I’m coming.”

“Thanks.” I hang up before she asks any more questions or changes her mind and text her the street address of McKelly’s Tavern.

I can’t help but smile as I return to the table.

Zoey's coming. She's coming here.

Not a date, she's made herself clear on that.

But a chance to see her, and hopefully, get her to help us kick Cole's ass.

"She gonna show?" Trey asks, leaning over to whisper-yell in my ear.

I nod, watching the door with one eye and my watch with the other. "Strat-e-gery." Mostly, I'm talking about the strategic moves I need to make with Zoey, but I'll admit that if she can help us tonight, I certainly won't be mad at a win.

"Yep," Trey confirms. "But it had better pay off because Shawn already bailed."

"I know. She'll show," I promise, hoping I'm right.

Ten minutes later, Meg-a-demia is celebrating their win with toasts and clinking glasses while Cole's Estate groupies are pouting and calling for a rematch. "You were outsmarted, fair and square. Sorry your daddy couldn't buy this win for you, bucko," Professor Adams tells Cole, not sounding or looking sorry in the slightest as he smiles and twirls his mustache.

"Next week, you're going down. But the night's not over." Cole calls back as he turns his sights to Heather, who's ready for him, standing with a hip cocked out to the side and her head tilted in that 'I'm your Huckleberry' way.

"We're ready, Estate Bait," Heather says, hitting Cole where it hurts. He probably spends hours with his therapist each week bemoaning that no one loves him for him but only for his money. If he wasn't a douche waffle, it might be different, but he is, so it's not.

I clear my throat to get Heather's attention,, and when she looks my way, I flash her a weak version of my 'Rock brow' to remind her not to get too carried away because we're not ready . . . yet.

"Potty break and refills first, then we're ready," she says to stall.

"Aww, so scared you're gonna piss yourself?" Cole teases.

"Nope. Need to puke because you make me sick," she retorts. Several people laugh, including Bryan, though he tries to hide it from Cole.

"Fine. This round's on me, next one's on the losers. That'd be you."

His smack talk falls on Heather's back as she heads toward the bathroom, but she does shoot him a middle finger of acknowledgement. Meanwhile, Cole calls out to Don, the bartender, "Three pitchers, please, one for the Meg-a-dicks, one for Chaos Control, and one for us." That'd be

his not-cute nicknames for the professors and us. “Oh, get Bossy Boots a cranberry vodka too.”

Huh, that was actually nice of him to remember that Heather not only doesn't drink beer, but to remember her preferred poison. Maybe there's a bit 'protesting too much' in their banter?

Pretty-boy Cole and rainbow-haired Heather?

I've heard of stranger pairings, but not too many, honestly. Before I can ponder that too much, the door swings open, slamming back against the wall.

Zoey's entrance is just that, an entrance. Spotlit and framed by the door, she looks adorable in pink, fuzzy, skull-printed pajama pants, a yellow tank top, purple Ugg boots, and an oversized black cardigan pulled tight around her.

Her hair is piled on her head and she has glasses on. She's the ultimate in nerd-geek-hot, and I just want to scoop her up again and cuddle and nuzzle her until she's soft for me, and then when she's nice and warm, ravish her like a wild animal.

“Oh, shit.” I see her mouth and immediately make my way toward her. Even now, I can see how wide her eyes are behind the lenses.

“Zo! You're here. Thank fuck.”

“Blake, what's going on?” she asks, looking shell-shocked. She *definitely* was not expecting something social. Still, her eyes scan me, and I know she's looking for some injury or illness, an emergency situation she's the cause of.

“Come here, please. I'll explain,” I say, taking her hand and pulling her toward our table. “How's your ankle?” I ask, noting that she's walking with no obvious sign of pain or difficulty.

She mumbles '*fine*' but stops short because the Anarchists are looking at her like their hope and savior, along with a healthy dose of curiosity over this supposed ringer I've called in at the last moment. “Zo, this is everyone. Everyone, this is Zoey.”

Zoey wiggles two fingers in the tiniest of waves, nerves wafting off her.

“Okay, here's the deal,” I explain before she can freak out and run like a cheetah with a rocket up its ass. “Remember I told you about trivia nights being serious business? We need you.”

“What? Trivia? You said it was an emergency! That you needed help!” she hisses.

“Shh,” I urge, putting my hand over her mouth, “Not so loud.”

Above my hand, her eyes have gone steely cold, but I remove my hand slowly, begging her with puppy dog eyes to hear me out. “It is an emergency. I do need your help. We’re up against our biggest rivals, The Estates.”

“And biggest jerks,” Heather adds, coming up to the table. She sticks her hand out, “Heather. You must be Zoey. Let’s do this.”

Heather doesn’t give Zoey a chance to say yes or no, just assuming she’s on board. “All right! We’re ready.”

“Finally,” Cole sighs with a dramatic eye roll. “Don’t have all fuckin’ night.”

Everyone heads to the far edge of the bar where the team stations are set up, which is just a simple table with a plastic chicken that screams when you squeeze it instead of a buzzer. Trivia nerds, we make jokes about choking our chickens.

Zoey pulls on my hand as we get close. “Blake!”

I turn to face her fully, gripping her hand back. No running, no fear. I’ve got you. “Zo, please?” She sighs reluctantly, but her lips are turning up ever so slightly in the smallest smile. I smile back. “Did I mention that you look beautiful? And we’ve got beer? And the best nachos in existence?”

“You’re buttering me up with compliments, nachos, and beer? That sounds suspiciously like a date, Mr. Hale,” she says, giving me a one-brow lift of her own.

I shake my head, totally playing innocent. “Nope. No preplanning. Still not a date. This is a rescue mission with thank-you-for-saving-my-ass food. C’mon.”

At our table, Heather is gripping the chicken, which is already making a quiet whine sound.

“In this corner, we have The Estates,” the Trivia Master says up front, and a few cheers and more jeers go up in the small crowd. And by crowd, I mean the other three teams because nerd events don’t usually draw in spectators. “And in this corner, Anarchy Authority.”

We cheer for ourselves, Zoey clapping along uncertainly.

A bell rings, and it’s on like Donkey Kong.

Fortunately, we get *Musical Genius*, but Gabe, our go-to music specialist is not so current on his Soundcloud rappers and he misses two consecutive questions.

Heather chokes the chicken for a third time in a row, and Gabe seems more certain of his next answer, calling out, “What is Pentatonix, Alex?”

“My name’s not Alex. It’s Jameson,” the Trivia Master corrects Gabe again.

Heather hits Gabe with the chicken, making it whine loudly, and then she growls at him, “Do not piss off Jameson. He’s the referee, man.”

“Sorry, Boss,” Gabe says. “I’ll be good.”

“Wow,” Zoey says, eyeing Heather in awe. “Girl boss, for sure.”

“Yeah, she’s something,” I agree.

“I want to be her when I grow up,” Zoey adds, and I laugh, pulling her into my side.

I whisper into her ear, “You are all grown up, and perfect just the way you are.”

Before she can argue, I turn my attention back to the competition, but I feel Zoey’s eyes on me for a long moment after that. Hopefully, she’s mulling over my words and starting to believe them herself.

We keep playing, somehow managing to answer enough questions about music, cars, and TV stars correctly that we end up in a tie with The Estates.

Jameson adds some spice to his delivery, “Okay, people, it all comes. Down. To. This. Moment. Estates, are you ready?”

Cole squeezes his chicken. “Anarchy Authority, ready?”

Heather wrings her chicken extra-hard, threatening to strangle Cole with the move, but I don’t think he’d mind her choking his chicken. “Last question for the win . . . what serial killer was the first convicted on the basis of forensic genealogy?”

“Oh!” Zoey exclaims and then quickly covers her mouth with her hands. I look at her eyes, which are bright blue with recognition.

“Choke the chicken, Heather,” I growl, my eyes locked on Zoey’s. *Ca-cawwwwwk!*

“Anarchy Authority?”

All eyes are on Zoey, who looks terrified now.

“It’s okay, just answer,” I whisper.

It takes her a prolonged heartbeat, but she leans forward and says clearly, “Joseph James DeAngelo, a.k.a. The Golden State Killer.”

Every head turns toward Jameson to see if she’s right because we have no idea.

Jameson's smile grows as he checks his answer card. "Correct! The winner of the loser bracket is . . . Anarchy Authority!"

"We won!" I shout, bending down to wrap my arms around Zoey's thighs and lift her high.

She squeals in surprise, her hands going to my shoulders, but I've got her. I won't let anything happen to her, or to me, or to anyone else. Right now, I feel ten feet tall and bulletproof as everyone claps and cheers.

Professor Adams comes over to shake Heather's hand. "Good showing tonight. Never seen people so excited about third place."

He laughs and Heather shrugs. "As long as we're not the losers. Those guys have to buy the drinks."

She says the last part loud enough for Cole to hear and he grimaces. But he holds a hand up to Don and spins a finger through the air to order another round.

"Come on. I promised you some nachos, Ringer." I lead Zoey back to our team's table, where everyone's chatting and congratulating each other on their correct answers. Now that the competition is over, even Cole has toned it down and is talking like a normal human being.

"Great job, Zoey! You can play with us any time," Heather tells her.

"Thanks," Zoey says haltingly. "Though I didn't realize I was playing tonight. I thought I was rushing in for an emergency, hence the running out of the house without getting dressed."

She gestures to her outfit and Heather shrugs. "You should see what I wore for the Halloween Trivia Bash. Girl, you look almost normal compared to *that* outfit."

"What was your outfit?" Zoey asks, and Heather laughs.

"I came as a full-on, ball-busting, leather- and latex-clad dominatrix . . . with a pink tutu," Heather says matter of factly.

"To really paint the picture, you have to know the whole outfit was pink. It was like Pink Panther kink or ballerina BDSM," Trey says. "By the way, welcome, Zoey. I've heard a lot about you. And by that, I mean daily analysis during morning workouts with this one." He tilts his head toward me with a smirk. I'm not mad at being thrown under the bus, though. If anything, he's pitching my case that I'm serious about Zoey for me.

The welcome is echoed around the table, and Zoey looks on, stunned. Absolute acceptance, that's what these people offer. We all come from

different walks of life, have different educations and knowledge, and work different jobs, but at the end of the day, we all accept that we're trivia nerds.

That's enough for us.

Zoey's smile is surer as I pull a chair out for her and she sits down with my people. They could be her people too . . . if she wants. If she trusts that everything will be fine and she won't shower some cursed rain on our lives just by hanging out with us.

I sit down too and lay an arm around the back of her chair, claiming her.

I lean over to whisper in her ear, "Did I tell you that you look beautiful?"

She smiles softly. "Maybe you did."

But that light in her eyes says she knows good and well that I did.

But I'm happy to say it again and again because she does look gorgeous, especially in pajamas. And in scrubs or jeans, and most definitely in nothing, but that's only been in my imagination so far.

"Did I tell you thank you for saving my ass tonight?"

"You definitely did not."

"My mistake. Thank you, Miss Walker, for saving us in this most important battle." I pitch my voice, mimicking a medieval knight and offering a formal bow of my head.

Zoey grins. "Battle? Not exactly the life or death emergency I thought I was walking into."

"No, not life or death. Much more important than that. This was a battle for honor and bragging rights," I declare, still sounding like Sir Lancelot. "Our very reputation as trivia nerds depended on you."

"Well, I guess I'm glad I read that article about using genetic genealogy to narrow down suspects in unsolved case files." Her lip quirks on the left, that tiny tell that means she thinks she's said something off-putting.

"Do you know how sexy that sounds?"

"Unsolved case files?"

"No, that you read," I tell her honestly. "I love a woman who reads—who wants to learn, understand, and experience things beyond whatever life offers. It's sexy. Your mind is sexy."

Zoey tries to hide it, but I see the smile on her pink lips. A full one that I cherish. "Can't say I've heard that one before. Usually, people think my mind is the three Ds—dark, deadly, and dangerous—constantly filled with plans for ungodly acts."

“I’m thinking of some ungodly acts right now,” I tease, rubbing my thumb along her shoulder where her cardigan has dipped down to expose a few inches of bare skin.

“Blake,” she sighs in warning.

Or want?

I lean closer, slowly getting into her space, and she tilts her head, lifting her chin.

Our breath mingles for a split second before becoming one, her lips soft beneath mine. She tastes like possibilities and hope, and I instantly become hard beneath the table.

This woman is driving me insane. I reach up to cup her jaw for more, and she yields to me, giving in to this fire that’s been building.

Finally. While I’m lost in Zoey, I somehow realize that it’s gone quiet around us, and not just in that ‘tuned out everything else’ way, but actual silence.

I smack her lips once more and smile, opening my eyes to find that my friends are all watching raptly. Even Cole is flashing that too-white smile. “Hey, Heather, I got a few questions right too. Don’tcha think I deserve a ‘good job’ too?”

“Good job, Cole,” Heather deadpans. “You have my permission to go spank your monkey.”

The banter between the two of them has taken the attention off Zoey and me, which I’m thankful for because she looks as shell-shocked as I feel.

Trey says, as casual as can be, “Hey, Blake, I forgot to tell you, Serena says hi.”

I glance his way, knowing Serena didn’t say a damn thing because I saw her after our morning jog not twelve hours ago. But the shit-eating grin on his face tells me he said what he said for a reason, to remind me that he thinks Zoey could be my Serena.

Hell, maybe he’s right, but I’ll never know if she won’t at least go out with me. But we can go at the snail pace speed she needs, especially if it leads to kisses like that.

“Serena is Trey’s wife,” I explain to Zoey before giving Trey a meaningful look. “Yeah, man. Tell her hi too.”

Message received, loud and clear, and I’m not arguing anymore. I settle back into my chair, one arm thrown around Zoey, to order us some nachos.

Dinner and drinks, but still not a date.

CHAPTER 12



ZOEY

Work is quiet. Quiet as a tomb, as it were.

I haven't had a call out in two days, which is rare but possible. County policy is that anyone who dies in a hospital or under the care of a doctor doesn't need my services unless foul play is suspected. So no foul play, and nobody dying at home or from traffic accidents is good, for me and county residents, but . . . well, I could really use a distraction right now.

My brain is on a playback loop, showing me Blake's happy smiles at trivia night a few days ago. He's got this light inside him, a purity that shines golden and bright, drawing people to him like a beacon of joy.

But he's not all 'good boy'.

Oh, no, I heard him talking shit with the other teams, dishing it out just as hard as Heather, and that's saying something.

And I noticed how he automatically laid his arm on my chair as soon as we sat down. It made me feel protected, something I'd deny needing or wanting, but in that moment, with a roomful of people looking at me, I welcomed Blake's strength at my side.

My nerves had been screaming, reminding me to not get too close, to not spill the beer pitcher and set off a chain reaction where someone slipped in the liquid, fell, and hit their head, and to definitely not mention what I do for a living so nobody got grossed out and gave me that look of horror.

I hate that wide-eyed, mouth gaping look of disgust.

But I'd also realized that while Blake was tuned in to my jangling nerves and doing that arm-wrap thing for me, he was also doing it for

himself. He was warning off the other guys and ready to defend me if the evening went the way it did at the beer barn.

Yeah, he's good, but he's also this wholesome version of alpha.

And I like it, which is dangerous.

I also liked the good morning texts he's sent me the last two days, and the completely wrong, but somehow funny, memes he sent, one about *iZombie* and one about *Survivor*, accompanied by a note that they made him think of me.

So yeah, my dead, dark heart is threatening to come to life, and that's a bad thing for us both.

Distraction? I need a big one.

As if I conjured it, the requested distraction magically appears. Not in my morgue office but in my email with a happy little alert ding. Seems the state lab finally got around to my blood tests. I open up the results of Richard Horne's second blood tests, reading each line carefully and mentally comparing them to the previous report.

I was expecting them to be different, confirming some sort of contamination in the sample or error in the processing, but these results are nearly identical to the previous ones, with only slight variations that can be accounted for by the use of a different machine.

For all intents and purposes, they're the same. Which means that Richard Horne had oddly high levels of heavy metals in his body when he died. And that's weird, even for me.

"Hmm," I ponder out loud, knowing there's no one to hear me, as I spin in my chair. "What causes heavy metal levels and a heart attack?"

My mind is racing ahead, already contemplating possibilities and dismissing them in rapid-fire succession. I stare at the report until the black numbers blur and my eyes unfocus, which is how Jeff and Alver find me—frozenly staring off into space.

"Zoey?" Jeff says, and I startle, jumping and making a squeaking sound.

"Oh, shit, Jeff. You scared me."

Jeff looks to Alver, who shrugs in answer like he's seen me do weirder things before. Truthfully, he has. Though he hasn't said a single word about catching Blake and me in that oddly questionable position, and I certainly haven't had the guts to explain.

"You didn't hear the door?" Jeff asks.

I look past him as though I've never seen the door before and shake my head. "No . . . I was thinking."

He looks dubious, his mustache twitching as he purses his lips. "That's what we're calling daydreaming now?"

Alver snickers but covers it with a cough, and my spine finds some steel. As if either of them has the right to complain about that. Jeff's the sheriff, and more than once, I've caught him 'pondering' a case in his office. And Alver sometimes likes to 'give something a good think' with his eyes closed and his hands laced over his stomach.

I won't call them on it yet, though. "What's up, Jeff?"

He catches the change in tone and seems almost thankful for the return to a more professional vibe where he doesn't have to pretend to care whether I'm okay or not.

"I wanted to talk to you about something . . . uh . . ." Jeff stumbles over his words and looks to Alver, who recoils at the attention. "I mean, we've received a report about some concerning after-hours activity down here. And I wanted to follow up to make sure you're aware that there are rules, especially where the bodies are concerned—"

"What the hell?" I say a little too loudly, and both men flinch.

Jeff's hand even reflexively reaches for his gun, which is thankfully holstered with the snap in place. Are they shitting me? Alver told on me. He didn't have the guts to talk to me himself and instead went over my head to Jeff.

Wait . . . did Jeff say bodies? What the hell did Alver say he saw?

Oh, God, did he talk to Human Resources?

That sounds official, but the reality is, our HR department is Tricia Adams, and her most heinous power is in spreading gossip faster than a NASCAR winner's race pace.

The whole town's gonna think I'm getting freaky with DBs on the next table. The very idea is disgusting and disrespectful, to me and to the people I try to give a proper, honorable processing.

I turn the full force of my meanest glare to Alver, standing slowly from my chair to my full five-foot-six-inch height in my rubber work clogs. I thought he was a friend, or at least the closest thing I had to one here in the office. After all, no one else bothers to make sure I eat dinner.

But I was mistaken because a friend would've simply asked me before involving the boss. Once Alver is suitably shaking in his boots, I turn my

attention to Jeff, who still looks uncomfortable as hell. In fact, his cheeks are flushed pink and there's a sheen on his forehead even though it's a brisk sixty-eight degrees in the morgue.

I lick my lips once and then, with ice dripping from every word, tell them both, "I am well aware of all the rules that affect me, the DBs, and my morgue. I would never do anything to jeopardize the Williamson County Coroner's Office. I think if you ask Alver further, what he saw was a county employee who was injured on the job being assisted by a citizen. And when presented with that, Alver—who I believe took an oath to serve and protect—ran like a screaming little girl."

Boom . . . mic drop.

If Alver's gonna tell shit on me, I'll throw him under the bus too. Petty? Fine, it is. But I need some damage control here or I'll never be able to show my face at our one and only gas station again. And honestly, my feelings are hurt and I'm lashing out.

Jeff glances over his shoulder to Alver. "That true?"

Alver seems pissy about being called out. *Join the club, happens to me all the time, nearly every damn day.*

"She was sitting on the table, pretty as you please, with that guy on his knees in front of her." He sounds smug as a bug in shit.

"He was checking out my ankle, which I turned," I shout, my cold fury melting into righteous hot anger.

"You cried out!" Alver growls.

"In pain, not ecstasy, numb nuts!" I growl back. "And if you don't know the difference, I feel damn sorry for your wife."

Jeff's lips quirk, threatening to smile despite his attempt to take this whole mess seriously.

"Let's calm down, people." Jeff holds his hands out, one palm to me and one to Alver as though he thinks one of us is going to lunge for the other. Honestly, he probably assumes it'd be me. Of course he does, because I'm . . . me.

To my surprise, Jeff turns his eyes to Alver, though. "Is what Zoey said true? All you saw was her sitting on a table—pretty as you please, I believe you said—and this guy kneeling? No body parts strewn about or anything . . . ahem, *sexual* actually happening?"

I harrumph at the very question, and Alver's brows are drawn down low as though he's surprised this is how this conversation is going.

“I guess, but you know, she’s . . . Zoey. So . . .”

“So, what? I’m some freak who’s having sex in the middle of the morgue?” I yell, not caring if my voice carries through the air vents to the floor upstairs. This is ridiculous. “Honestly, Alver . . . if that’s where your mind goes, that speaks volumes about *you*, not me.”

Jeff clears his throat, probably wishing this were already over. “Okay, I think we’re going to file this under Office Misunderstandings and pretend we never had this conversation. Or at least I’m going to go listen to *Baby Shark* on repeat so I can scrub this whole incident out of my mind. You two can do whatever you need to. I’ve got to get back upstairs and finish paperwork so I can get out of here on time tonight. Martha’s going to have my hide if I’m late again.”

Jeff makes a move toward the door, singing quietly ‘*do-do-do-do-dooo, baby shark*’, and Alver looks between the doorway to freedom and me uncertainly. I know he’s got several hours left on his shift, ones that will have him patrolling the building, which includes checking the morgue for suspicious activity.

I narrow my eyes and bare my teeth in a feral smile, feigning the monster he thinks I am.

Though I keep my threatening glare focused on Alver, I call to Jeff, “Sure thing. I’ve got a bit of work to do too, so I’ll be here for a while.”

Alver swallows thickly, and I lurch his way, not to hurt him but to scare the shit out of him. It works. He jumps again, his feet scrambling beneath him as he tries to run for the door.

“You’re crazy, Zoey Walker.” And with that decree, he passes Jeff and steps slowly out the door backward, as though he’s not the one who just stabbed me in the back.

Once he’s gone, Jeff chuckles. “Don’t be too hard on the old guy, Zoey. He’s trying to stay useful because retirement didn’t sit well with him. Or his wife.”

I shrug, feeling tired already. “Not my problem. He’s the one causing problems.”

Jeff nods, agreeing with me. “Your ankle really okay?”

“Yeah, it wasn’t bad. Propped it up with a little ice for the night and it was good as new in the morning.”

I leave out the part about Blake carrying me to my bedroom. One, it’s none of Jeff’s business, and two, if he hasn’t already heard, I’m not

spreading gossip about myself.

“Good.” Jeff turns to go, easily giving me his back, and I stop him.

“Hey, Jeff, I got the repeat toxicology report on Richard Horne. Was gonna send it up to you, but here you are.” I give him a wry look. “Here’s a copy.” I hand him a printout and his eyes scan it.

“Tell me what I’m looking at,” Jeff finally says. “All this goddamned CSI shit gives me a headache. Give me some old school *Law & Order* any day. *Bum-bummm.*”

“It’s not that complicated,” I assure him “No worse than a ballistics test. But basically, the two are identical. Markers for a heart attack, but the heavy metals levels are unaccounted for. No reason for him to have those.”

“But the heart attack killed him?”

I hedge, not willing to call it open and shut that easily. “That was the final nail in the coffin, so to speak,” I joke, giving Jeff a single eyebrow raise, “but there was definitely something going on before that. Could the two be connected? I could see it, but it’s not like it’s sure-fire.”

“Okay, I’ll file it in old Dick Horne’s casefile.” He flicks the paper at me and turns toward the door again. “Thanks, Zoey. I’ll get out of your hair. Martha’s a’waiting.”

He leaves, and everything’s quiet and cold again.

All of this was definitely a distraction, but Alver’s accusations aren’t helping me forget Blake and that damn smile.

Stay away from him, Zoey Walker, I tell myself over and over. It’s already too dangerous, for him and you. Don’t do anything you’ll regret . . . and you’ll regret it when Blake ends up in another car accident and that one’s your fault too, regardless of whether you’re driving this time.

Sigh, I know I’m right. The frustration is that I’m not the sort of girl who can just get her itches scratched with random, no-emotions dick. If I let Blake in, I’m going to care about him. I’m going to expose him to danger. My danger. But damn if I don’t want a bit of happy, a bit of easy, and maybe, I even want to be proven wrong. If anyone can do that, Blake seems up for the job.

In a fit of impulsivity, I flip myself a metaphorical middle finger and grab another copy of the toxicology report and my purse.

If Jeff can skip out early, I can too.

In the hallway upstairs, I feel eyes on me as I leave and side-eye over my shoulder to the desk where Alver sits. He’s watching me closely but

drops his gaze when he realizes I've caught him.

"Goodbye, Alver. I locked up downstairs so you can stay out of my morgue with that disgustingly filthy mind of yours," I say, pulling a look of shocked horror. His jaw drops, mouth gaping, and that's before he realizes that Tricia is sitting at her desk, listening intently to every word.

No telling what gossipy lies Alver told her, but at least I've planted the seed that it's not me who's the sicko, but Alver. I even add a little hint of a limp to my walk as I exit the building to really sell the story. Outside, I take a big breath and then laugh wildly, loudly and uninhibited, with zero cares about who might be watching me lose it.

Fuck, that felt good.

I have spent so long pussy-footing around, trying to help everyone else be comfortable and safe, that I have nearly bitten my tongue in half.

But no longer. I feel free.

Maybe not of the curse that haunts me, but at least of the gossip and glares having such a deep impact.

* * *

THIS IS A BAD IDEA. It'd seemed like a great one thirty minutes ago when I stomped—I mean, *limped*—out of my morgue and got in my car. And even on the drive here, I was sure I'm doing the right thing. Or at least doing *something*.

But now, sitting in the parking lot outside the office of Blake Hale, Insurance Specialist for Everlife, I'm having second thoughts. And third, fourth, and fifth ones too. It doesn't help that his office looks nice, the two-story professional building wrapped in white stucco and green-tinged one-way glass, with a pretty copper archway over the main entrance and beautiful landscaping.

Looking up Blake's work address hadn't prepared me for this. And yes, I'm showing up to his office unannounced, something I would usually never do, but he's done it twice now, so turnabout is fair play.

You want to see him in his element.

I do, curious about what a Blake Hale space looks like. Is it generic, full of abstract art that won't offend and seats that don't invite lingering?

Or deeply personal, with family photos and mementos?

Curiosity killed the cat, my conscience warns. *Then I'm not the cat, he is*, I answer myself, repeating the reminder that I shouldn't get too close . . . for Blake's protection.

My phone dings in the cupholder, and I pick it up, half praying for a DB that I'll have to go handle so I can leave.

Nope, it's Blake. *I can see you sitting in the car. You coming in or what?*

"No," I gasp, pulling the phone to my chest so I can pretend I didn't read what I just read.

It doesn't work.

Especially when I look up and see Blake standing in an open second-floor window. Even at this angle, I can see that he's got on slacks, a button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and a smirk of a smile that says 'gotcha'.

I text back, *I haven't decided yet, and you're rushing me.*

Blake looks at his hand, then to me again. *What're the pros and cons?*

Straight to the point comparison. I like it.

Pros—I have information for you. I want to see you because I had a shitty day. You look good in that shirt.

I hit send before I can delete all that because I really should've left it at bullet point one. Blake though laughs happily and types back quickly.

You know I'm a sucker for new info, you tease. I'm sorry you had a shitty day, but full confession, I like that you came to see me to make it less shitty. I look good in everything.

I can't help it, the cockiness in the last sentence makes me grin. It's just so Blake. No pressure to sway me to come in, no 'you're being silly' comments. He's just making me smile, letting me know I'm safe without going over the top on it.

I swallow and type again. *Cons—I hate that I came here after thinking about your smile almost all day. I don't want anything to happen to you. I'm scared.*

Blake's smile dims, and he looks out at me with a more serious look before replying. *I'm not-scared enough for the both of us. Now come up before I have to go down there and carry you up to my office.*

I look up, and he's serious. His hands are on his window frame, not quite leaning out of the window but clearly focused on me. He looks like he's contemplating simply walking through the glass to get to me, which is both sinfully sexy and scary.

“You’re on the second floor!” I yell, but he can’t hear me. Still, he waves me in, and I can see the doubt, the uncertainty of whether I’m actually going to get out of the car.

Am I?

He’s not-scared enough for the both of us. It’d take a lot of not-scared to balance out the fear I’m feeling.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the toxicology report and make my decision. Not for the reason I should—my own burgeoning hope or Blake’s obvious interest—but for Richard Horne. I open the door and go inside, taking the escalator upstairs, where I see Blake already waiting for me at the doorway to his office.

“Well played,” I tease as he smiles. “I thought you’d have to carry me up real stairs. But an escalator? Well played, Mr. Hale, very well played.”

“Hey,” he says, coming toward me as though we didn’t just have an entire text conversation just to get me out of the car, as though that’s perfectly normal. “I try.” There’s a spark in his eye, and I wonder if he’s remembering carrying me into my house the way I am. Casual as can be, he says, “You’re the best surprise I’ve had all day. To be fair, you’re the only surprise I’ve had, unless you count the chocolate chips in my cookie at lunch turning out to be raisins.”

“You don’t like raisins?” I ask, numbly following his conversational option that doesn’t include my being oddly reluctant to come in moments ago.

Blake smiles, shaking his head. “More about anticipation than liking. Raisins are fine, but not when I’m expecting ooey, gooey, melty chocolate and instead get chewy, wrinkled, dried fruit.”

He feigns a shudder, and I can’t help but feel at ease, which I’m guessing was his intention because while he’s talked, he’s managed to lead me into his suite, closing the door behind us. It’s nice, more of an overgrown one-man office than a real suite, but on one wall I see a discreet doorway that probably leads to a closet or bathroom of some sort.

Before I can get too carried away, I shove the report his way, noting with embarrassment that I’ve wrinkled it from clutching it so tightly in my hand.

“What’s this?” Blake asks, taking it from me, then answers himself, “Oh, the second report.” He scans over it and then looks back to me. “Can

you explain this, please? I mean, I see the notations for out of normal range levels, but can I get a hint?"

I blink, stunned at his utter focus when my brain is foggy with his nearness. "What do you know about heavy metal levels?" I blurt.

"Lead or Metallica?" Blake jokes before growing serious. He closes his eyes for a second, and I can see him searching his own mental file cabinet. He stays that way for a good ten seconds, but when he opens them again, his blue orbs lock on me instantly. "Certain occupations preclude insurance because of exposure rates. Other than occupational or environmental hazards, high levels are rare. Right?"

I smile. "Yes. In the old days, of course, you had lead paint, but that hasn't been a thing for most folks in a long time. And Richard Horne, while he did die of a heart attack, his heavy metal levels are crazy high. Not just lead, either, but several levels. For no discernible reason."

"What did Sheriff Barnes say?" he asks.

I flop into the chair in front of his desk, uninvited. "Nothing. He heard 'heart attack' and that I can't prove the two are connected and basically said 'case closed'."

"But you don't think so," Blake summarizes, sitting down in the chair next to me.

I sigh, my eyes rolling up to stare at the ceiling. "This is gonna sound crazy, but I just have this feeling there's more to it. For example, lead poisoning in adults can cause high blood pressure. And high blood pressure is a precursor for heart attack. Arsenic and mercury can also lead to heart problems."

"Or maybe he just ate too many donuts or cheeseburgers?" Blake suggests. But he shrinks when I cut my eyes his way. "Or you cross-link a heavy metal level and heart attack, and get—"

"And you could end up face down in your breakfast," I finish. "It's wonky, I know. No reason in particular to link it all, other than my Spidey senses."

"That doesn't sound crazy at all."

I glance at him to see if he's making fun of me, but he's looking at me earnestly, no teasing light in his eyes. "You are probably the only person who would tell me that."

"But you know I'm right. You call it Spidey senses, I call it intuitive intelligence. Long story short, if your gut says something's up, it is."

What're you thinking?"

I'm silent, letting my brain sort through ideas and possibilities. Blake doesn't interrupt me. He sits there quietly and patiently, letting me work inside my head. Most people don't do that. They fill any lulls with awkward conversation, making me unable to concentrate when I need to, but he seems perfectly content with watching me think without needing an explanation of what I'm doing.

Eventually, I come back to the here and now, having been on a trip through the encyclopedia in my mind. "There's no obvious answer to the heavy metal levels in Horne's blood. By all accounts, he was a healthy guy with no risk factors."

Blake looks down at the paper again and hums. "Okay then, healthy guy drops dead of a heart attack with odd blood levels. His job, his lifestyle, nothing would expose him to high levels of heavy metals. What are we missing?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm here," I confess. Asking for help, or admitting that I need it, is not something I do. Yet here I sit.

"I'm biased by my own experience with life insurance claims and immediately jump to foul play, especially with how the widow is acting."

That gets my attention. "What do you mean? At the scene, she was calm, almost numb." I tilt my head, remembering "No . . . no, it was more than that, if that makes sense. She was just watching, and then, when she saw me looking at her, she went hysterical. Like wailing dramatics, all for show."

"When she came to see me, she was almost annoyed by the whole process," Blake says. "Like she had a car salesman waiting on the check or something. Definitely not the grieving widow. My exact thought was that her inner theme song was, *heyyy, must be the mon-ayyy!* and I believe that even more after she went full-throttle and started threatening lawsuits to get the money faster."

My eyes nearly bug out of my head. "People do that?"

Blake shrugs, unconcerned. "Yeah. I won't say it happens a lot, but it's not my first time seeing it."

We stare at each other for a long moment and I whisper what I think we're both thinking, "Suspicious, at best."

Blake raises one brow and adds dramatically, "Murder, at worst."

I laugh, smacking gently at his arm. “I wouldn’t jump that far ahead. We don’t have anything to back that up.”

“The facts, ma’am,” he deadpans. “Just the facts.”

Pointing at the paper in his hand, I agree. “Exactly.”

“So, now what?”

The question makes me stop. I’d love to say this is where Jeff takes over, but I’ve never had a case that was actual suspicious foul play before. I’ve dealt with too many car accidents and two suicides that were clear even without my work. Other than that, I proclaim death and do autopsies so families can get some closure, but it’s always been a pretty straightforward case.

There was a hunting accident once where we needed to be sure it was an actual accident, but again, my part was relatively simple. I pointed out where the bullet entered, the bullet lodged, and left the rest to the detectives. A member of the team, but not the driving force. That’s always Jeff.

I suspect that if there were a clear murder, Sheriff Barnes wouldn’t even call me, he’d call the State Police. We’re just too country out here in Williamson County for that.

“You know anything about investigation?” I ask hopefully.

Blake shakes his head slowly but then grins. “Nope, but I bet two smart people like us know a lot about *research*.”

He’s right. I’ve written dozens of research papers, read hundreds, and I keep current on everything I can get my hands on in the forensic sciences. It’s not the same as what the sheriff does, but it’s a start.

“Let’s do it.”

Blake gets up to grab his laptop, setting it on the edge of his desk in front of me. “So let’s start over. What could cause Ol’ Dick to have these metals in these quantities?”

His question leaves me fluttery. Not because it’s all that unique. I’ve been asking myself the same thing. But once again, he’s letting me be the lead. Most folks in the department are so ready to get out of my presence that they don’t ask me anything other than ‘where’s the written report?’ before laying tracks for the nearest door.

He looks at me expectantly, waiting patiently for my input, and right in the middle of my chest, I feel another flutter.

Which reminds me . . .

“I think we need to leave out the heart attack as a symptom for our initial inquiries because it’s an acute event. More like the signpost, but not the road. The metal levels are indicative of a longer, chronic condition. Maybe if we can figure out how it started—”

“We can figure out how it ended,” he finishes. “Makes sense.”

I click into a browser and begin searching out possibilities. I know most of them, but there have to be some that I haven’t crossed off yet.

Blake watches me, reading over my shoulder as I jump from website to website. We discuss dozens of possibilities and discount them all.

Hours later, or so it seems, we’ve reached a dead end.

“So the oddest thing is the presence of this particular combination of heavy metals. Typically, exposure is to one metal, but Dick’s insides have basically been doused in everything—lead, mercury, and arsenic.”

“Arsenic?” Blake repeats. “That’s been used as a poison for centuries. Before it was traceable, it was known as ‘inheritance powder’ because it was commonly used by beneficiaries if dear old Dad wasn’t dying fast enough. Slip him a mickey and boom, you’ve got the keys to the kingdom. Is that what Mrs. Horne’s trying to do?”

He’s talking about murder for money, and all I hear is his pulling out historical trivia like a boss. A very sexy, smart boss. I stumble over my factual response, trying to let the heat his intelligence ignites die down. “Doubtful. We’ve all got some arsenic in our bodies. A lethal dose, though . . . definitely unusual. Arsenic is easily and routinely screened for now, so it’s a pretty stupid murder weapon.”

“Yvette Horne doesn’t strike me as the intelligent sort,” Blake retorts with a smile. It’s so distracting, so easy and light. I want to smile like that, as though the world isn’t a cruel place where things get ripped away from you as soon as you get attached to them.

Focus, Zoey. Think about Richard Horne, lying face down in his morning breakfast with juice puddled in his lap.

That image is enough to bring me back to our research. “True, but we can’t discount the other two metals.” Blake nods, and we go back to clicking and reading, reading and clicking.

Sometime later, I have no idea if it’s been minutes or hours, Blake puts his hand over mine to stop my mouse scrolling.

I glance up at him and have to blink away the dryness in my eyes from staring at the screen. “What?”

“C’mon. We might not get the answer tonight, but I need to feed you.”

My brows knit together, confused. “I’m not hungry. And what if the answer is in the next paragraph? Or on the next website?”

“Then that paragraph and website will be there tomorrow,” Blake reminds me. “And what if it’s not? Plus, your stomach’s been growling for the last fifteen minutes.”

I slap my hands over my belly, feeling heat flush my cheeks. “Sorry, I didn’t notice.”

“I know. And you looked so cute, lips moving along as you read and light sparkling in your eyes as you considered every word. I couldn’t bear to stop you. But I need to get home to Chunky too.”

“Oh!” I exclaim. “Sorry! I’ll let you go. I just . . .” I trail off, standing and scrambling to grab my purse and the toxicology report printout. “I lost track of time. I’ll let you get home. Sorry.”

I try to hand the paper to Blake, and he tilts his head, eyeing me with a questioning look as he takes my hand instead of the printout.

“Zoey.” His voice is firm and quiet, stopping me in an instant.

Even my brain shuts up and tunes in to Blake. “Yes?”

“I’m not telling you to go. I’m saying ‘let’s go’. The both of us.”

There’s no question mark in what he’s saying, but the question is in his eyes. Along with his desire. “Oh.”

Apparently, that’s all I can say, but he doesn’t need any more. He closes his laptop and puts it in a bag, which he throws over his shoulder.

“Let’s go,” he tells me. No questions at all this time.

I consider arguing, once again trying to save his ass if he’s not inclined to do it for himself, but then he turns, and when confronted with that ass in slim-fitting business slacks, all I can do is follow him out the door like he’s the Pied Piper.

Hopefully, not to either of our deaths.

CHAPTER 13



BLAKE

For the third time, I glance up into my rearview mirror, but Zoey's right there, just as she's been since we pulled out of my office's lot. She's following me, and I count it as a major victory.

I know I must seem like the most boring person to the world as I pull up in front of my little white house, a newer construction I bought partly because I know the builder and their safety record. But as she parks and takes that first step up my concrete walkway, I feel like I just won the Super Bowl.

"Now, don't judge," I tell her as I pause, my key in the deadbolt. "You know, how I live."

"What? Do you live like a frat boy with just a black leather couch and a big screen set up on boxes?" Zoey teases.

I feign offense as I peek in the window too high on the door for her to see in, as if I'm surveying the damage. "How'd you know?" But at her horrified expression, I can't help but laugh. "Not anymore, but once upon a time . . ." I shake my head sadly, putting a hand to my chest in faux mourning. "Those were the days."

Zoey pushes on my chest, scolding and flirting at the same time. Does she even know that she's doing that? She pulls me in and pushes me away, verbally and physically, at every turn.

But fuck if I don't enjoy it.

"I meant Chunky. I told you he adopted me, and that's true, but it hasn't been long, and his *diet* isn't working as fast as I'd hoped." I whisper the word 'diet' knowing that Chunky hates the very idea of it.

“Diet?” Zoey echoes at normal volume.

“Shh, he’ll hear you and get a complex. He’s very sensitive.”

Zoey’s smile is full-wattage with humor. “Your dog, who is named Chunky, supposedly because of peanut butter, is on a diet and sensitive about it?”

“Down seven pounds in six months,” I report proudly.

She seems as ready as she’s gonna be, so I open the door and am almost immediately knocked to my ass by Chunky, who Superman leaps at me joyfully, all four of his doggy feet a solid twenty-four inches off the floor.

Used to this flying canine greeting, I drop to one knee to catch him in my arms and turn my face away so his messy, sloppy kisses hit my cheek and not my mouth because he’s a French kisser if given the opportunity. “Who’s a good boy? That’s right, you are, Chunka-Chunka-Burning-Love. You’re my good boy,” I tell my squirming, slobbery dog as I scratch and pet him all over.

Just as fast as the greeting started, it’s over, and he hops from my arms to run out into the yard. Squatting to pee—I know, he should hike a leg, but I’m working with him where he’s at—Chunky finally notices that it’s not just him and me, and he gives Zoey an interested and hopeful look.

“No,” I tell him, pointing a finger his way, “she won’t feed you either. I’m all you’ve got, man.” I stare at Chunky, knowing he won’t get my words, but when I cross my arms over my chest, he gets the point. If he had hair, I swear he’d flip it as he turns to dismissively strut away and sniff around the fenced-in front yard. I just shake my head. “Drama king.”

Looking over my shoulder, I finally have a chance to look at Zoey, who is grinning like a loon behind her fisted hand, which is doing absolutely no good at hiding her amusement.

“I said ‘don’t judge!’,” I mock-growl.

She laughs out loud now. “No, you said not to judge Chunky. I’m not. He’s adorable, and yeah, chunky as a well-fed tick. But I’m totally judging you.” She points a finger my way, smiling. “Because that was freaking adorable. You most definitely are a dog person, Mr. Hale.”

I give her a shrug of concession. She’s got me nailed. “Of course, I am. Cats are weird. All the attitude and shenanigans.” I curl my hands into claws and give my best cat impersonation. “*Hisssss.*”

Zoey laughs and leans to get away from my pretend cat scratches, but I catch her in my arms.

Time stops and our eyes lock.

She licks her lips, and I'm *this close* to kissing her when Chunky, that four-legged cockblocker, comes barreling past us back into the house, loudly demanding his dinner now that he's done checking the yard for squirrely intruders.

I set Zoey back right on her feet, feeling every inch of her body separate from mine and hating it.

Seeing Chunky sitting by his food bowl, with one paw inside the dish making it stand up vertically to show how empty it is, she clears her throat. "Ahem, guess that's your cue."

I sigh, knowing I spoil my damn dog. "Chunky, you're getting nothing but kibble tonight, man," I threaten, knowing I'll give him the specially prescribed diet food I buy at the vet's office, same as always. "Come on in."

I focus on putting Chunky's food in his bowl, stirring it around with his special fork, and acting like I'm putting seasoning and spices in it. I even pop it in the microwave for a second and push the buttons, but don't actually turn it on because it'll spark the metal bowl.

"Ooh, this is gonna be so good, Chunkster," I tell him, and he pants in excitement, his tail thumping against the floor. I swear, if this dog could control the TV, he'd watch Food Network all day while I was gone. Okay, fine . . . I do sometimes turn it on for him. He likes it!

"Are you pretending to heat up his food?" Zoey asks, and when I look over, she's got that big smile stretching her lips again.

"Yeah, he's picky." I don't offer any more explanation because I know I already seem a bit crazy, and it's saying something when a 'crazy' recognizes you as one of their own.

Not that Zoey's crazy. Or that I am.

But . . . yeah, we might be. A little. Isn't everyone?

I set Chunky's bowl down, and he digs in, slurping and snorting every bit of it down in minutes. Honestly, he might actually inhale some of it. Hopefully, he'll soon learn that no one's going to take his food away and he can slow down and enjoy it. But today is not that day.

"Good job. Go clean your face." This is the one trick I'm thrilled to have taught him, not because it's all that showy and flashy but because it's useful.

Chunky goes over to a hook on the cabinet, bites down on the towel hanging there, and then throws it to the floor. He then wipes his face, and

any wayward dog food, picks up the towel, and carries it off to the laundry room to drop it by the washing machine. “Oh, yeah, who’s a pretty boy now, all fed and cleaned up?”

Chunky sits and pants again, almost smiling as if he knows I’m talking to him. Meanwhile, I wash my hands, avoiding Zoey’s eyes. She’s watching the whole scene unfold seemingly comfortably, which surprises me. I figured she’d be freaking out six ways to Sunday just being in my house. It’s a big step for her. One she sees as risky even if I have no intention of rushing her into something she’s not ready for.

Even if it kills me and my dick, which is damn near rock hard and standing at attention now that I see Zoey in my place.

“Beer?” I offer, opening the fridge and grabbing two.

“Sure,” she answers.

I can hear the tension in her voice. Oh, so maybe not as comfortable as she seems? She hides it well . . . too well, as though she’s had to hide herself for too long, too many times. She takes the beer and swallows a healthy mouthful, nearly guzzling it as though she needs some liquid courage.

“Zo, breathe. We’re just here to feed Chunky, look up more heavy metal stuff, and hopefully get to know each other a bit more. I already told you, no sex until we go on a date, so you’re totally safe here.”

I teasingly hold my hands out to her, beer and all, as though she’s the one about to attack me for a dick ride.

A laugh blurts out of her, along with her second sip of beer, spraying me. “Oh, God! Sorry!”

Her blue eyes have gone as wide as saucers and her skin porcelain pale, except for the rising pink on her cheeks. I chuckle, wiping at my shirt with my free hand and then letting her do it when she reaches forward to brush the already-soaked-in liquid from my chest. “Sorry, sorry.”

“It’s fine. Just breathe,” I repeat gently, as though talking to a cornered animal about to go wild and hurt themselves thrashing to get free, maybe reminding myself to get some oxygen too because the feel of her hands on my chest is better than I imagined.

And I’ve imagined . . . a lot.

She freezes and looks up to meet my eyes, words tumbling over each other, “No, you don’t understand. I’m not freaking out. I’m turned on. I’m thinking about sniffing your bed pillows like a weirdo, contemplating if it’d

be better for you to bend me over the island or the couch, and my ovaries are basically exploding—*pew, pew, pew*—like fireworks because you're so good with Chunky that I can imagine you as the one of those dads who'd play tea party with your daughter. And all of that is making me hot and nervous . . . and . . . and . . . I should stop talking now."

Her eyes drop along with her chin, and she locks her gaze on the button centered on my sternum. I stand there in the middle of my kitchen, dumbfounded and slack-jawed. And then it hits me all at once.

Heat, lust, fire, need . . . desire.

Everything I've been tamping down around Zoey, trying to control so I don't scare her off, ignites in an inferno.

I set my beer down at the same time I back her into the counter and take her lips, claiming her deeply. This is not a kiss, not a gentle get-to-know-you peck, but a fuck-I've-missed-you soul searing joining.

How have I even missed kissing her? I've only done it twice before, but I feel like I've missed it my whole life. Unconsciously, I take her beer bottle and set it down too, and her arms go around my neck to hold me as if I'm going any damn where but right here. "Mmm, shit, Zo."

Her breath mingles with mine, and her voice quavers. "I know, me too."

I growl, loving that even if she's skittish emotionally, she's physically affected by me. I honestly wasn't sure if I was seeing things that weren't there just because I wanted them to be.

The kiss goes on forever, neither of us willing to come up for air as our hands explore. I feel her nails score across my shoulders and arch into her touch, letting my hands drop from her jaw . . . to her sides, teasing along the sides of her tits, to her hips.

I grab her ass, pulling her against me, and she gasps when she feels the thick hardness of my cock. I use my grip to lift her, spinning her around to settle her on the island. "Couch is too far away," I grunt, still kissing her because I never want to stop.

I feel her smile against my lips, and she whispers, "That's what I decided too."

I lick a long line up the tendon of her neck, pausing to lay a gentle kiss over her racing pulse so I can feel the proof of her excitement.

"Zo, I promised you . . . no sex until we go on a date, but let me make you feel good?" My dick riots in my pants, throbbing in disagreement with my 'no sex' statement.

Tension shoots through her body as she pulls back to look at me. “What?” Confusion curls her brows. “Isn’t that the opposite of what most guys want?”

“I’m not most guys.” I kiss her parted lips. “You’re not most girls.” I tweak her nipple through her top and bra. “We’re us. And I know as well as you do that if I give in to this moment and slide inside you, it’ll be amazing. Life-changing, I predict.” I grind my cock against her core, feeling her heat, and we both groan. I cup her jaw, forcing her hazy eyes back to mine, which are clear with the intention I feel down to my soul. “But I won’t risk your running.”

She makes a sound of disappointment and frustration, and though my own body echoes it, I’m strong enough to stand resolute as long as I’m standing between her thighs.

“How do you know I’m not already running?” she breathes. But her hand is gripping at my hair, her hips are bucking against mine, and her breath is ragged.

“You are . . . *running toward me*,” I say at the same time I pull the hem of her scrub top over her head.

I don’t let her argue, not now when I’m seeing the most gorgeous pair of tits I’ve ever seen for the first time. She’s wearing a plain black cotton bra, intended for function, not seduction.

But her tits swell up in the cups, pale, lush mounds I want to squeeze and taste.

“Damn, Zo. So pretty,” I tell her, cupping her so that both of my hands are full. She arches, and I mold her flesh with my hands, teasing over the raised nipples I can feel beneath the fabric. I lay a path of kisses along the edge of her bra as my hands sneak around to her back to unclasp it, and Zoey shrugs her shoulders to help remove it.

As the bra drops to the island, I finally fill in the blanks I’ve imagined, the slope of her breasts as they fall naturally, the tawny color of her nipples against her pale flesh, and as I bend down to taste her, the salty sweetness of her skin.

“Mmm.” She moans as I twirl my tongue in a circle around the hard nub, copying the move with my thumb on the other breast. I suck and lick, nibble and tweak, taking my time as I learn what she likes and enjoying every little sound she makes.

My hands find their way to her thighs, squeezing the strong muscles as I move higher toward her core. She spreads wider to give me room to work, and at the clear sign of permission, I untie her pants to slip my hand inside. Her panties feel like plain cotton too, no fancy lace or high-cut sexiness.

But the idea that she's as unprepared for this as I am is incredibly hot. I did not go to work this morning thinking I'd end up with Zoey Walker moaning and grinding on my kitchen island, but here we are. I cup her mound, shuddering at the wetness I find soaked through the cotton at her center.

Though I'd love to taste it, I school myself to go slow and enjoy, keeping the finish line in sight.

Zoey Walker, she's my finish line. I can feel it. Romantic whimsy? Maybe. But it feels like a real possibility. And I've definitely been called worse things than romantic.

So I slow down, kissing her even though she's panting for breath and unable to kiss back, and rubbing her entire pussy through the cotton until she's begging for more, needing me to focus on her clit. Only then do I slip my hand beneath the cotton to her bare pussy.

"So wet, so hot, Zo," I murmur in awe, and she cries out as I circle the spot where she needs me. I dip into her entrance, spreading her juices up to her clit once again, and she spasms with sensitivity. I do it again, even slower, as I suck her nipple back into my mouth. I guide her to lie back, and she drops to her elbows, her head falling back and tits arched high.

I lick circles along her flesh, mimicking them over her clit. My kitchen island is now the altar where I worship her, and I'll never make dinner again without remembering this moment—how gorgeous Zoey looks when she lets go, the sounds she makes as she gets closer and closer to coming, and finally, how fulfilled I feel that she's letting me this close to her.

For a woman not easy to know, I feel like a lucky sonofabitch.

"Oh, God, I'm coming," she says in a voice a solid octave higher than her usual tone. I don't speed up or slow down. I keep at her exactly the same—sucking her tit, circling her clit—and enjoy every bit of her spasms and shudders as she bucks and whimpers.

She sighs as she floats back to earth, her eyes blinking unseeingly as she sags to the island top. My fingers glance over her flesh, loving her silky slickness, and though I'm sad to no longer touch her, I need to taste. I bring my fingers to my mouth to lick and suck them clean. That gets her

attention, and her eyes go bright and clear as she watches through a half-lidded gaze.

“Your turn?” she says on rough vocal cords.

I look at her mouth, wanting to feel her lips surround my cock, and let my eyes draw down her half-dressed body.

“Not yet,” I tell her. My cock swells against my zipper, and even though they’re not denim, my slacks are uncomfortable as hell right now.

Zoey sits up quickly, confusion swirling in her blue eyes. “What?” She grabs at her top, pulling it in front of her as though she can hide from me, and I realize she thinks I’m rejecting her.

“Zoey,” I say firmly, grabbing her into a hug that pins her arms to her side and brings her eyes to me. I can see the redness staining her cheeks, different from the pink flush she wore a moment ago. “I want you. Don’t doubt that. I’ll be jacking off the literal instant you walk out the door tonight as I replay what we just did.”

“Oh. Then why not . . . you know?” she lifts her chin, trying to gesture to my dick, but it’s pressed up against her and I’m not ready to let her go yet.

“I’m trying really hard to be a gentleman here.”

“A gentleman,” she repeats as if it’s a word she’s never heard before, or maybe even another language.

“Yeah, but don’t get too excited. It’s all part of my evil plan to get you to agree to a date.”

She blinks like an owl, and then her lips lift in increments until she’s got a full bloom of a smile. “That again?”

“Always.”

Somehow, that makes it all okay. She settles, and I hand her the bra that fell to the floor at some point. But before I give it to her, I stare pointedly at her chest for a second. “What are you doing?” she questions in amusement.

“Memorizing for later usage. Your tits are my entire spank bank right now until I get to see more.”

That might be a little too truthful, but thankfully, she laughs and arches a bit more to show off, even shimmying her shoulders a bit.

I groan and palm my cock through my slacks. “Are you trying to kill me, Zo? I have zero blood flow in my brain right now, and it’s my best feature.”

“Your *best* feature?” she teases, acting dubious. I hold the straps of her bra out, sadly letting her put her breasts away in her bra and then shirt.

“Hey! You’ve seen my brain in action. Why do you think I invited you to trivia night if not to show off my mental flex?” I flex my biceps, showing them off a bit too because I’m a man who knows how to work my angles.

“I believe your exact words were to ‘save your ass’.”

“Yeah, maybe that backfired on me a bit because you did save us and probably think the rest of us are dumbasses.”

She leans forward, kissing the tip of my nose. “I wouldn’t go that far. We just all have areas of specialty.”

Now that’s exactly why I want her so much. Beauty, brains, and heart? Fuck me, she’s perfect. “Speaking of specialties, let me make us some dinner. You’re probably hungry after my last skill demonstration.”

I give her my eyebrow, daring her to disagree, and she laughs. “You cook?”

“Well, I’ll say yes because I figure if I heat it,” I say humbly as I take another step back to try and think of what there is to eat around here, “whether in the microwave, oven, or stovetop, I cooked it. If it’s edible, all the better.”

Zoey hops down, nodding. “Fair point.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” I say as I open the refrigerator door to show her the plastic bins of prepared food stacked inside. “Like I said, I heat it.”

“Are those frozen dinners?” she asks, aghast.

“I’ll have you know these are made by the finest chefs, specially designed to maximize my macros, and delivered to my front door so I don’t eat takeout crap. You feeling chicken and broccoli or chicken and green beans?”

“Is that really all you have?” Horror twists her lips.

“Gotta keep my shape or Trey leaves my ass behind,” I tell her, patting my flat stomach. After a moment, I drag out, “Fine, you can have my turkey and sweet potatoes, but know that I’m sacrificing a lot. Sweet potatoes are the one carb I eat regularly.”

“But you ate spaghetti?” she reminds me.

I give her a look that says she’s totally missing the point. “You think I would pass up a chance to eat dinner with you? I’d eat Jeff Probst-delivered caterpillars on wood bark if it meant eating with you.”

“Ew,” she says, her nose crinkled cutely. “Fine, chicken and green beans. I won’t take your sweet potato joy from you.”

I pull the two trays out and pop the first one in the microwave. “I’d give you all my sweet potatoes, Miss Walker.”

* * *

IT’S FUNNY, eating dinner *after* the intense orgasm I gave Zoey, but at the same time nothing could be more normal for us. We heat up our dinners and find our way to the couch. We don’t even pull up anything on my TV but instead get back to researching heavy metals.

Richard Horne, if you’re up there somewhere, listening in . . . I’m so sorry you died, but please know that something good is coming of it, I think as I tap at my keyboard. And also, what’s the deal with the heavy metals? Can I get a hint?

Hmm, maybe Zoey’s talking to dead people is wearing off on me too. I grin, and Zoey looks over. “What is it?”

“Just mentally thinking you’re rubbing off on me,” I admit. “I was just talking in my head to ol’ Dick Horne.”

“Ah,” Zoey says, and I feel her warm a bit more. She gets it. If it works, it works.

“What about his medical records? Do you have those to compare to? That would tell us if the metal exposure was recent or a long time ago,” I ask.

Zoey shakes her head. “No. I don’t get that info because it could create bias. Unless the investigating sheriff wants my input on it. I bet Jeff didn’t even request it.”

“I can,” I assure her.

“Uh, there’re these little things called privacy laws,” Zoey says, and I chuckle. “What?”

“Life insurance, Zoey. When you sign up, you agree to a full waiver that your insurance company gets any and all medical records that would be relevant to your coverage, benefits, and claims.”

“Ah,” she says, seeing the reasoning behind it. “Okay, so if we can get those records, I can compare. That would let us know *when* we’re looking for something, even if we don’t know *what* we’re looking for yet.”

“I’ll do that tomorrow and see if I can put a rush order on it so we can get some answers before the Widow Horne gets her panties in a bunch again.”

With a plan in place, I can see Zoey psyching herself up to leave. That’s why she came here, after all. The rest was unplanned and spontaneous, and *awesome*.

“I guess I should go?” It’s a question, showing her hand that she’s not as interested in running as she thinks she is.

“Or you could stay?” I offer, knowing she won’t.

“I can’t. I should get home . . . to Jacob, I mean,” she says, stumbling to find an excuse. Even though I’m pretty sure her . . . family member, I guess . . . would totally understand.

“I understand. I’ve got to be up at sunrise anyway. Running with Trey,” I reply. It’s a weak excuse, honestly. I would skip every run, every morning for the rest of my life if it meant waking up with Zoey in my bed, and Trey would absolutely agree that it’s a good trade-off. He’d give me shit for going lazy and soft too, but he’d understand.

But there’s a time to let pressure build and a time to let it off. And right now, Zoey needs to have that safety valve. She stands, and I stand with her, taking her hand in mine. I trace a line on the back of it with my thumb.

“Tonight was . . .” I search for a word that will describe it while not scaring the shit out of her but come up empty. *Gorgeous, powerful, best of my life, and I haven’t even been inside her yet . . .* yeah, those have RUN written all over them for this woman.

“Incredible,” she offers, and I nod. It’s good enough.

“Definitely.” I smile, and she gives me a soft, sweet one back. “I’ll text you in the morning and then later, after I see what visiting the doctor nets us.”

She nods and looks up at me. I bend slowly to kiss her once more. It’s deep and hungry, the fire building easily, and I could take her again. I want her . . . on my fingers, on my tongue, and eventually, on my cock.

But too soon, she pulls back from me, her hands crinkling my shirt.

“I should go.”

I nod and walk her to the door. I manage to give her one more sweet peck and whisper, “Till tomorrow.”

She leaves and I watch her walk down to her car before I shut the door, and true to my word, I whirl and lean up against the wood. I should wait

until she's actually pulled away, but I can't hold back any longer. My cock's already in my hand and I'm jerking furiously as I remember what she felt like . . . sounded like . . . tasted like.

It only takes a few strokes, and I come on my hand, grunting out her name to the empty room. I'm still rock-hard, could go again and again with my thoughts of Zoey, but as I sag against the door, I hear quiet footsteps on the walk out front and then a car door.

She came back.

She listened.

She heard me.

I should be embarrassed or afraid it'll scare her off.

Instead, I think I'm a little closer to breaking down her walls, and I give myself one more stroke.

CHAPTER 14



ZOEY

I look at my phone, still not quite believing what I'm seeing. He texted me. I don't know why I thought he might not when he said he would.

Isn't that what guys do? Get a little and then ghost?

Holly says it is. She says it's step five of her 'F system'. Find, Flirt, Fun, Fuck, Fantom.

She doesn't let an inconsequential thing like proper spelling stop her.

But Blake didn't exactly get much, not until I was standing on the other side of the door, listening like a creeper. I'd tiptoed back up when I saw his door close, just to see if he was being honest. And he definitely was.

I hope he didn't hear me sneaking away.

That would be mortifying.

I am in so far over my head that I don't even know what to think, and that's just about this whole Blake situation. Add in a mystery that the professional in me doesn't like leaving unanswered, despite what Jeff thinks, and I'm mentally flittering around like a firefly on crack. I need someone to talk me down, bring me back to Earth and reality.

Still in bed, and definitely *not* staring at Blake's *good morning, beautiful* text, I call the one person I know will tell me the truth, whether I want to hear it or not.

"Hello?" Holly's frantic voice answers. "Hang on." She pulls the phone away, but only slightly, to yell, "If you're out of bed, knock on the wall three times." I assume she's talking to Olive because I've heard this test before. I'm quiet while I wait for Holly to listen for the answering knocks. "Love you too, honey. Now get a move on. We're out the door in thirty

minutes.” Coming back to the phone, and me, Holly says, “Sorry. What’s up?”

I’m having second thoughts about making this call, but she’s the lesser of two evils. The worse option being Jacob’s graphic, too-personal interrogation. Although having a male opinion might provide insight about what’s running through Blake’s mind, but really, it’s his penis I’m thinking more about. And I can’t have adult relationship conversations with Jacob about my own sex life, though I’ve had the condom talk with him multiple times and unquestioningly restock the bathroom when I see the stock getting low.

“Can I stop by this morning to talk for a second?” I ask nervously.

“Uh, yeah. Of course. What’s wrong? Need me to kill someone and burn the body?” she asks, probably joking but also possibly serious. “Good morning, baby girl.”

She doesn’t even pause to breathe, and I can hear her rummaging around, probably making Olive’s breakfast. At least, I’m pretty sure that last part was for Olive. I only answer the questions that were directed at me. “No murder or body disposal needed. But I saw Blake again last night.”

“What?” she screeches, and then in her sweet mom voice, she says, “Eat that quick while Mommy talks to Aunt Zo-Zo, ’kay?”

More shuffling, and then Holly excitedly orders, “Spill it fast before I climb through this phone and pull it out of you.”

Even through the phone, I can feel her buzzing. Maybe Jacob would’ve been better? But the idea of telling Jacob that Blake got me off on his kitchen island is enough to make me cringe. Holly is definitely the better choice.

I dive in, telling her, “I took him paperwork on the Richard Horne case and we ate dinner at his place.”

There, I did it.

I told her the bare bones of what happened, which should be more than enough for her to remember my curse, and now she can remind me to be careful. That’s what I want her to do . . . right?

Instead, Holly sighs in relief and a touch of giddiness. “Oh, thank God! I thought you were about to say you slept with him and he ghosted in the middle of the night.”

“Uh, that happens?” I ask, shocked. I know step five, but in the middle of the night? Damn.

Her laugh is bitter, and the tender side of me wonders if Holly's experienced that. "Yeah, that happens. Sometimes not-dating is a good thing, Zoey."

"Sorry?" I say lamely. Ouch . . . Holly's weariness with the dating scene is obvious, and not knowing when she was hurt that way makes me feel like an ass.

Holly blows a short raspberry, dismissing my apology and moving on. "Okay, I feel like there's a lot to unpack here, and I want to hear every juicy detail, especially the stuff you're not saying. So here's what we're gonna do . . . I'm going to make sure Olive hasn't smeared jelly all over the kitchen table, and we'll get ready. I'll drop her to school and head to work. Meet me at the funeral home, and we can talk while I get Mrs. Cochran processed. Okay?"

A discussion about my sex life near a dead body. Not that unusual to me. "Thanks, Holly."

I hang up and flop back against my pillow to stare at the ceiling. I start to replay last night, but Holly is going to grill me, forcing me to spill every glorious-slash-dangerous detail, so I might as well wait for her insight.

Fuck knows, I don't have a clue beyond *avoid connections*, and while my brain tells me that's still mission priority, there are other parts of me arguing that fact and making some headway. I set my phone back on the nightstand, pressing my fingertips to the wood for a long moment.

Don't let him get hurt.

I get up and shower, pulling on work scrubs and smoothing my hair back into its usual bun, making sure the baby hairs aren't sticking up like crazy. Next, I brew a pot of coffee, leaving half for Jacob so that he can caffeinate when he gets up for school. He had a late class last night and an early class this morning—his not-favorite combination.

But hopefully, he'll learn from his mistake and register for classes sooner next semester so he can get a better schedule and not have to take the leftover openings. A pseudo-guardian can dream.

Getting to the funeral home, I let myself into the back door, knowing my way around from experience. A few times I've helped Holly with transport, just to be nice and to get her out of my morgue.

Opening the door to the prep room, I find Holly wearing a large, clear plastic apron and black gloves. It's not that different from what I wear for an autopsy, except her stuff is washable instead of disposable.

Who I assume to be Mrs. Cochran is on the table in front of her with curls half-done and ready to be teased into a hairstyle based on the picture propped up on Holly's table.

"Hey, girl," Holly says, not even looking up from her work.

"Hi," I tell Holly. "Hello, Mrs. Cochran," I tell the body. "Sorry to hear about . . . well, you know, your dying and all."

No worries, dear. I had a good, long life. Could you tell this one to make sure my lipstick isn't too red? She said something about making me look lively and I'm afraid that's code for 'harlot'.

I smile to myself and ask Holly, "What're you planning for the makeup?"

Holly tilts her head, looking from Mrs. Cochran's pale face to the picture. "Probably a rosy pink."

"That'd look nice," I agree, thankful I don't have to share my imaginary conversation about too-red lips.

"So . . ." Holly prompts. Guess small talk's over.

"Yeah, I told you, I saw Blake again last night." I plop onto Holly's stool, putting my feet on the bar around the bottom and resting my forearms on her work table. There's nothing sterile, just makeup, hairspray, and dry shampoo, which I pick up to stare at as if it's some new genius invention, not something I own three cans of myself. "Wait, did I tell you I saw him before too?"

Holly releases a long, slow breath of 'I'm gonna kill you, bitch' and sets her teasing brush down. "You did not. Start at the beginning and catch me all up . . . from when I forced you to go for drinks with this guy and Bubba fucked everything up."

I need to do this, even though I want to keep it all to myself like a greedy little whore. Memories I can take out and examine when I'm old and gray like Mrs. Cochran after a lifetime of being alone.

Poor dear, Mrs. Cochran tsks.

But if I don't tell Holly everything, she might not understand just how dangerous the situation has become and give me the advice I need. I steel my spine and tell her everything . . . from the morning texts to the emergency call for trivia help, the encouragement without pressure to come inside at his office, our evening of Scooby Gang research, and finishing with our kitchen island activities.

As embarrassing as it is, I even tell her that part.

“Hols, I never even got my shoes off, much less my pants, and with two fingers, this man rocked my world in ways I’ll be dreaming about forever.”

My eyes lose focus as my mind disappears back to last night and how good Blake made me feel. Yes, with his hand and mouth, but also with his mind, his words.

“Fuck, I need my world rocked like that.” Holly sighs wistfully. Meeting my eyes, she smiles. “I’ve never seen you like this.”

“I know, and that’s the problem! I never have a hard time keeping everyone at bay. Except for you, of course,” I accuse with a pointed finger and eye roll. “But you’re a crazy bitch.”

“Of course.” She preens as though that were high praise.

“And now Blake,” I groan. “What am I going to do?”

This is the part where she reminds me of my history—of everyone I’ve lost, of my bad luck, all the stupid accidents and improbable happenstances in the lives of the people I care about. This is when she reminds me of my fate, my destiny to be alone for everyone else’s good, and tells me that it’s selfish to risk someone’s life because I’m lonely and Blake makes me wish for things I can’t have, even telling me that he doesn’t believe in luck and is willing to risk it . . . risk me. I need her to remind me because I’m forgetting. Not the losses, of course, but the sharpness of the pain. With it being so long ago, softened by time, it’s starting to seem worth the gamble.

Blake seems worth it.

“What makes this guy different?” Holly asks carefully.

That’s not what I expected her to say at all. My head falls back, and I stare at the fluorescent light overhead. “Everything? He quotes me statistics and silly trivia. He’s so damn smart, and that’s sexy as fuck. But at the same time, he’s got this sweet, romantic, believes-in-happily-ever-afters heart. I don’t know what to do with that!” I spin the stool around, already feeling dizzy at my whiplash thoughts, and then stop facing Holly. “He makes me want to believe too,” I confess shamefully, “but we both know how dangerous that is.”

“Is it?” Holly challenges me with a fierce look.

“Ugh. Holly, you know everything that’s happened. I told you when I tried to shoo you off.”

“Exactly. And I didn’t let it scare me away, so maybe this Blake Hale guy has some big brass balls that clang like mine do” —she hits her thighs over the apron, framing her nonexistent testicles— “and isn’t scared off by

some tragic backstory you've created as a way to protect your *fragile, wittle, hurt heart*." Holly pats her heart and pouts with puppy dog eyes.

"Ouch," I deadpan, but that does really sting.

"Zoey," Holly continues, giving me 'the look', "buckle up, babe. Sister Holly is about to lay some truth on you, and you ain't gonna like it one bit, but you need to hear me loud and clear. You ready?"

"Honestly, no."

Holly nods once, firmly. "Don't matter, because here it comes. Back to the beginning . . . that Michael kid, the peanut butter allergy one? He should've known to ask about exposures, been his own advocate or something. Or the parents should've known better than to send their hyper-allergic ass of a kid off to sleepaway camp. Yes, it was a bad smooch. All people's first kisses suck even if they don't want to admit it, and yours was admittedly the worst of the worst. But that wasn't your fault because you were a kid playing a game, not asking for full disclosure and STD tests before smooching." She pauses and holds up a finger, her tone going from smackdown to educational. "FYI, you need to do that these days. Get him tested. If Blake acts put off by it, or God help him, refuses to wear a condom, you get yourself right up and see yourself out the door. If he can't have an adult conversation about bodily functions, run. He'll be a selfish lover, guaranteed."

I blink, still overwhelmed by the change in direction of this conversation. "Uhm . . ."

Holly switches back into all-business, burning my bridges down like a townspeople with a torch. "And Jordan? Babe, that guy was a lazy asshole who didn't check his own ass for cleanliness, much less his chute for functionality. I'm just glad you didn't jump that day too, because who knows if he checked your chute. You could've plunged to your death because he was too busy playing video games to perform actual life-saving procedures."

My jaw drops open at the awful things she's saying about Jordan. "He could've died, Hols."

"But did he die?" she repeats. "No." Gentler, she continues, "Losing your parents was awful, honey. I know that, and there ain't no blunting it. But it wasn't your fault. Your grandparents, either." She lets that sink in for a painfully long moment and then puts the exclamation point on the end of

her argument. “You know what people have in common? Every single person on the planet? They die.”

She gestures to Mrs. Cochran, who agrees with her.

She’s right, dear. I wasn’t a saint, but the one thing I did right in my whole life was love my Walter. I’m glad that whatever days we had together, we made the most of them.

To Holly, I lift one brow and deadpan, “So touching, very sensitive.”

“Shut up, you know what I mean. Just . . . go out with him, see what happens, get your wet ass pussy licked.”

“Holly!”

She shrugs, smirking. “No shame in my game. Sometimes I date for dinner conversation, sometimes because a guy seems like he has real potential, and sometimes, just because I wanna throw my head back and howl at the moon as many different ways as I can.”

Maybe she’s got a point? She is basically saying the same things Blake said, so maybe they’re not crazy or brave? What if I’m a big, old scaredy cat, hiding my fear behind walls of protection layered with warning label stickers, but the truth is, I’m not dangerous?

I’m . . . *risk averse*.

I can’t help but smile to myself at the Blake-ish label.

“Zoey, I haven’t said anything in a long time, mostly because I didn’t think you were ready to hear it, but also, there’s no one around here worthy of your awesomeness, anyway.” She rolls her eyes, but I can tell she’s talking about the people of Williamson County and their judgy ways, not about me.

“Thanks, I guess.”

“But this is the first time I’ve seen you fighting your own defenses, wanting more for yourself. And that alone tells me all I need to know about Blake Hale. Take a shot. What’ve you got to lose?” I give her an arched brow glare and she presses her lips together and cringes. “Sorry. Poor word choice. But you know what I mean.”

“I do. Thanks, Hols,” I tell her softly. Have I really stumbled upon a *real* best friend, despite my best efforts? What the fuck, Fate?

“Anytime. And anyway, it’s about time you get your ass in gear. God knows there are no good ones left out here in the county, or at least not ones with all their teeth, jobs, and looking for an insta-family.” Holly laughs, but I don’t think she’s joking.

“You’ll find him. He’s out there. Maybe try hitting him with your car? It’s working for me,” I tease.

Holly huffs out a loud laugh of surprise. “I’ve created a monster. And I’m not hitting any of these losers’ trucks with my car.” She gestures outside, including everyone in our little area. “They’d probably run right over my little car, anyway.”

“True, there are an inordinate number of jacked-up trucks out here. What’s up with that?”

“Dick replacement therapy,” Holly says wisely. I guess she’d know better than I would. “Help me get Mrs. Cochran’s blouse on before you head to work.”

I look down at Mrs. Cochran, noting that while Holly has been life coaching me through a crisis, she has, in fact, made the woman on the table look as though she’s sleeping peacefully.

Right down to her rosy *red* lipstick.

“She looks great, Hols. Love the lipstick. It really goes with the blouse.” And it does. Mrs. Cochran might’ve never worn red lipstick when she was alive, but it looks good on her with the navy blue and red floral top her family selected.

I grab gloves and pick up one side of the cut blouse while Holly picks up the other, sliding them on Mrs. Cochran’s slim arms and tucking the open edges under her shoulders and behind her neck.

Holly closes the buttons and then gives me a serious look. “Promise me something, Zo.”

“Anything,” I say, matching her serious tone.

“When I die, do not let my dad prep my body. There are things he doesn’t need to know.”

I break a smile, knowing that her conservative father would be mortified to see Holly’s tattoos and the belly-button piercing she keeps hidden. “And for the love of fuck, do not bury me in a bra. The last thing I want to do is spend all my haunting years digging at my underwire.” She wiggles around as though her torso is being poked with a cattle prod.

I do laugh at that. “You’d rather be the floppy phantom?”

“Of course. That’s some scary stuff right there. I’ll knock you out with these babies.” She shimmies her shoulders and her boobs shake, even in their current bra containment. I have to admit, Holly doesn’t just have ‘girls’ but full grown-ass women.

“I got it—no bra, and I’ll do the prep. But you’re not dying anytime soon.”

It’s a demand of the universe, one I hope it respects because I need Holly in my life. And Olive. They’ve been worth the risk for sure, and so has Jacob.

Maybe Blake will be too?

CHAPTER 15



ZOEY

“*I*’ve got something for you,” Blake’s voice sing-songs from behind me.

Oh, I bet you do, I answer in my head before spinning in my chair to see him standing in my doorway. He’s wearing gray slacks, a pale blue button-up that’s loose at the collar and rolled up his forearms, and a black belt that perfectly matches his black shoes. He looks sexy, smart, and powerful.

Aloud, I say, “I wasn’t expecting you.”

I can feel the smile stretching my lips and the warmth in my chest blooming. Truer words have never been spoken, and after my conversation with Holly this morning, I’m feeling . . . open.

Open-minded, open to possibilities, and maybe even open to the future.

Blake helps himself to leaning back on my desk, one foot crossed over the other. “I think I’ve been expecting you my whole life.”

“Damn,” I whisper, awestruck. “You just . . . everything.”

Blake grins, loving that he’s blown me away. “Wanna see what I brought you?”

I lift my brow flirtatiously, having a pretty good idea what he’s referring to. “I don’t think here is the best place for that,” I say slowly, not sure I care at this point. Especially considering Alver already spread that gossip far and wide. If I’m going to get judged for it, I might as well do it, right?

But Blake chuckles, playfully amused. “Dirty girl, I like where your mind is, but I meant this.” He holds up a thick file folder I hadn’t even noticed he had in his hand.

“Oh,” I say, slightly crestfallen. “What’s that?”

He lays the folder down on my desk and opens it, telling me casually, as if it's no big deal, "Richard Horne's complete medical history."

"What? That was fast," I exclaim, all but forgetting my sexy thoughts of a moment ago when presented with new information.

I open the folder and scan the cover sheet, noting the consistency of appointments, basic lab information, and doctor recommendations. Flipping the sheet, I note his latest lab results. Unfortunately, it was a basic profile, nothing that would give me heavy metal blood levels.

"Richard Horne was a very loyal medical patient," Blake tells me, and I do glance up at that, questioning him with narrowed eyes. "Same doctor for over a decade. All I had to do was show up, hand the receptionist Horne's waiver, and she copied it for me happily. Even got to talk to the doctor—"

"Dr. Yu?" I ask, checking the names on the form.

Blake nods. "Nice guy. Said he'd been Dick's doctor for years and he was the picture of health until about six months ago. There's a visit summary in there, a couple of sheets back."

I start digging to find it, impressed with how neat the file is. I've reviewed some medical records that needed a handwriting analyst and translator to know what the hell was being said.

Not Dr. Yu. His handwriting is almost mechanically precise, and most of the file is computer forms. Finding the sheet I need, I review the data, seeing Yu's notes and the lab results from that appointment while I listen to Blake.

"So Horne said he'd been taking care of himself, even going for walks with their new puppy and taking vitamins, but he felt tired?" I summarize.

"Yeah, that mean anything to you with what you see there?" Blake asks.

I scan the labs again. "Dr. Yu didn't check for heavy metals then. There would've been no reason to when a middle-age man complains of tiredness. That's like a 'join the club' thing. But he checked his blood levels—no anemia—and his thyroid, which was fine. Testosterone level was within normal ranges. I'm not a doctor, but it looks like there were no findings that would specifically cause exhaustion. Dr. Yu recommended that Horne . . . *continue walking and vitamins regimen, decrease red meat, and add leafy, green vegetables to daily diet, and prescribed eight hours of sleep each night,*" I quote from the file. "And he recommended a follow-up in three months. Did Horne go for that?" I flip back, pausing after two sheets. "Here it is . . . hmm."

I read through Dr. Yu's report from that visit, going over everything as closely as I can.

"What?" Blake asks.

"Horne wasn't only complaining of tiredness. He also said he was getting heartburn all the time, especially in the morning, and had started drinking mint tea instead of coffee because even decaf upset his stomach. But that didn't work either, so his wife was making him green smoothies for breakfast. Look." I point to a line in Dr. Yu's notes and read aloud, "*patient jokes that the smoothies are the equivalent of drinking a cow's cud, but if they're good for him, he'll do it.*"

Something niggles in the back of my mind, but I can't put my finger on what bothers me about that line.

"It looks like they did repeat blood work, but Dr. Yu told him to keep up the healthier diet and sleep. I bet that was when the heavy metals had started really affecting him. Early poisoning symptoms would've been tiredness, nausea, foggy headedness, tingling in hands and feet, and blood pressure changes. But . . ."

I stare at the page for a long time, silent as my brain works through the information. Blake doesn't say a word, quietly propped up on my desk and letting me think.

"Something about that bugs me," I whisper to no one, reading and rereading the bit about gross smoothies for breakfast. I mean, nobody really likes green smoothies, do they? Except for real back to the Earth hippies, who I think get their pleasure from doing 'something right' rather than the actual smoothie itself. They taste like grass and dirt in liquid form.

Not exactly appetizing. Liquid . . . smoothie . . . "Oh, shit!" I hiss, looking up to meet Blake's eyes.

I can tell he's been watching me, perfectly content to let me do my thing, and something about that is so intense. It makes me feel seen, valuable, worthy of his attention.

"What'd you figure out?" he asks, certain that I've made some grand discovery.

"The green smoothies for breakfast. When I went to Horne's house for the initial callout, he died in his breakfast. Literally face down in his plate." Blake's brows lift an inch in anticipation. "His plate of fried eggs, bacon, buttered toast. With a glass of orange juice that spilled everywhere, including into his lap. No smoothie to be seen."

“So maybe he had a different breakfast that day?” Blake hypothesizes.

I shake my head, sure even though I wasn't there. “No way would someone who was complaining of heartburn drink orange juice and have all that fat first thing in the morning. It'd be a recipe for disaster.”

We're silent for a moment, eyes locked on one another as our brains swirl with possibilities.

“Maybe it was,” Blake finally says. “Wouldn't be the first time someone said ‘fuck it’ to a healthy diet and ate what they wanted to. Unless you're getting at something else,” he finishes as he sees my dubious look.

“What if the heavy metal was in the green smoothie?” I whisper and then cover my mouth with my hands, surprised at my boldness. That's a big accusation to make, especially with no proof. But it sits right in my gut. I lower my hands an inch, still not sure I should say what I'm thinking. If anyone knows firsthand what unfounded gossip and embellished stories can do to a person, it's me. And yet . . . “That nasty grass taste . . . you could hide a lot of shit in there without the drinker noticing.”

Blake hums, scraping a hand over his smooth jaw. He looks at the file, but I feel like he's seeing through it, not actually looking at the information it contains. “That wouldn't be out of the norm either. I definitely felt like Yvette Horne was in it for the money already, but that's a level-up from money hungry to murder for money. What do you think?”

My mouth twists as I chew on my lip, considering. “Like I said, she was weird at the scene, silent and still, but when she saw me looking at her, she went into full-blown wailing wife mode. It felt . . . fake and forced. But appearances can be deceiving, I know that,” I add, feeling like we're already deeming Mrs. Horne guilty the same way everyone marks me as weird and *Drop-Dead Gorgeous*.

God, I hate that nickname.

Blake frowns. “I think this is an entirely different situation, Zo.”

I shrug, not wanting to argue about it, especially when I don't want to remind Blake what people say about me, what they think about me, when I'm hopping on the Holly Band Wagon and considering hopping on Blake like a disco stick. “What do you think we should do now? Talk to Jeff?”

“Maybe. I got the feeling Sheriff Barnes is done with this case. You?”

I nod. “Yeah, me too. But this is new information. We need to share it.”

Blake sighs. “Let's call him.”

I get on my phone, and two rings later, Jeff answers. “Hey, Zoey, what’s up?”

“Hi Jeff. I got some information I felt like I should share with you.”

“It’s not about Alver, is it? What the hell has he done now?” he groans. I can almost picture him rubbing his forehead and pinching his temples.

“No, nothing about him,” I answer. “I haven’t given him another thought.”

“Good,” Jeff says firmly. “In that case, what’s up?”

He sounds relieved, and I realize how much Sheriff Jeff Barnes has on his shoulders, even if he makes carrying his load look easy. He’s responsible for the whole county, the deputies, the county courthouse, policies and procedures, and his family too. “It’s about Richard Horne.”

His sigh is heavy with disappointment. “Zoey, let the man die in peace, for God’s sake. We should all be so lucky to die at home, peacefully in our morning meal. Only thing better would be in your sleep.” He sounds more resigned than morbid, a man in touch with his own mortality.

“I know, Jeff, but the insurance company rep, Blake Hale, got Horne’s medical records, and he’d been complaining about tiredness and heartburn. He wouldn’t—” My words are rushed out, trying to present the facts as quickly as possible, but it’s not fast enough.

“Did he die of a heart attack? Yes or no?” Jeff asks finally.

“It’s not that simple,” I try to argue. “If the heavy metals led to—”

“Yes or no.” It’s not a question this time, it’s a demand for me to choose one way or the other.

“Yes.”

“Case closed. Now go on and get out of here at a reasonable hour tonight, Zoey. There’s no need for you to be working all hours of the night down there by yourself.”

His fatherly advice glances off my back, which is riled up with his dismissal of the information I shared.

“Sure.”

I hang up the phone and Blake frowns. “That’s it?”

“The county coroner can keep a file open,” I admit, “and leave a cause of death as unknown. But it’s not something to do without a good reason. This is a small county, not a big one where the ME is a whole separate department. Jeff’s going to want this file closed ASAP. He sure as hell isn’t going to help us.”

Blake nods but looks determined. “Looks like we’ve got some investigating to do on our own.”

* * *

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, we’re driving in Blake’s car. The sun’s almost down, and even though we’re not speeding or anything, I feel like I’m hurtling uncontrollably into madness. “Tell me again how you talked me into this? I’m not Nancy Drew!”

Blake grins, all sure, calm, and collected, which irritates me. “Of course, you’re not. You’re Velma. Smart, sexy, and I bet you’d look fucking awesome in knee socks and nothing else.” His eyes scan down my body quickly before safely returning to the road, but it feels like he’s creating that very image in his mind.

“Oh,” I say, coming up short on a reply for that. What was I arguing about again? I’ve totally forgotten, lost in the sparkle in Blake’s eyes. And oh, God, when he lays his hand on my thigh and squeezes, I reach out and touch the wood-veneer again, closing my eyes as I whisper, “Don’t let him die before we have sex. Please, God.”

Blake chuckles. “Did you just pray for sex?”

I crack one eye open to glare at him. “No. I *wished*. It’s totally different.”

He nods his head with a cocky smirk. “If you say so. But now I wonder what you look like in a Catholic schoolgirl’s uniform.”

The joke calms me some and I ask again, for the tenth time, “Are you sure this is a good idea? What if she recognizes your car? Or you? Or me? *Shit*, I’m going to be *Stalker Barbie* next, aren’t I?”

Okay, maybe not calm, but slightly less hysterical.

“Yvette Horne has never seen my car. And even if she saw us driving by, there’s nothing that says two people can’t drive down the road together. It’s only suspicious if you make it suspicious.”

I nod, singing a TikTok song under my breath, “*Don’t be suspicious . . . don’t be suspicious . . .*”

I guess it doesn’t work because Blake squeezes my thigh again, ordering me, “Relax. Breathe. We’re just two people out for a drive.”

“A drive. Just a drive. I can do that.” I nod, but my back is still ramrod straight until Blake turns that squeezing into a massage, working his way up my thigh and back down to my knee. Up and down he goes, over and over, and of their own volition, my legs spread a little more as my breathing ratchets up. The next pass, he pauses high on my thigh, his pinkie teasing at my core. Even through the layers, it feels amazing, bringing all my focus to a singular point between my legs.

Oh, God, he’s ‘jilling’ me off in the passenger seat of his car . . . and I fucking *love* it.

“We’re almost there,” Blake whispers huskily, and I am.

So close.

I hum in agreement, biting my lip. “Mmmhmm.” Yes . . . just a few more strokes . . .

“I meant to Horne’s house,” Blake says, a smile in his voice. I whimper, swallowing back my desire and forcing my eyes, which I didn’t even realize had closed, to open to find us driving down a smooth, well-paved, two-lane road in Williamson County.

It’s Horne’s subdivision, twenty or so houses, each with an acre or two between them and the neighbor. But they’re set up close to the street, with fenced-in front yards and large expanses of back yards. Last time I was here, the street had been dotted with cars.

Now, it’s empty and quiet.

The orgasm, which had been close enough to taste, retreats, at least temporarily. “That one,” I say, pointing at the Horne house. It looks much the same as the last time I was here, a cute ranch-style house with nothing on the exterior giving a hint to the death inside.

“Duck!” Blake snaps, grabbing behind my neck and shoving me toward his crotch.

“What?” I snap right back, squirming against his hold.

But all it does is rub my cheek up against his cock. His very thick, very *hard* cock. I freeze when I feel it jump. “Blake?”

He doesn’t take his eyes from the road, I can see that much as I look out of the corner of my eye, but his thumb gently caresses my cheek.

“Just stay down for a second. There’s someone coming out of the house.”

I feel the car slow down and don’t dare to breathe.

What if we get caught? What if Yvette Horne is coming out of the house right now, sees Blake, and waves him down?

What if she asks what the hell I'm doing face-down in his lap?

Fuck, the gossip grapevine is going to go haywire again . . . first with Alver's tale of morgue table oral sexing and now, road head.

"What's happening?" I whisper, as though Yvette might hear me.

"It's a guy. Blond hair, muscled, late thirties, mustache. He's taking out the trash," Blake tells me.

If anyone saw him, they'd probably think he's singing along to the radio, right? I can work with that. "Who is it?"

"I don't know." The 'duh' is implied.

"Well, neither do I since I can't see and all," I hiss. Then, just to torture him a little, I run my nose along the length of the bulge I can see filling his slacks.

"Oh, fuck, Zoey." It's half-warning to stop, half-plea to not. I do it again, adding in a caress against my cheek.

"Tell me what you see."

Blake moves the car left and right, probably to make it seem as though he's avoiding something in the road, but really just giving himself longer to look at the Horne house in the rearview mirror. "She's coming out too. Yvette. Red dog. Guy . . . leash . . . dog. *Shit.*"

I've unbuckled his belt, too excited by the throbbing I can feel behind his zipper and wanting to feel it without that barrier. "Can I?"

"Fuck yeah. Yeah, Zo. Anything you want."

I hear the creak of his grip on the leather steering wheel, can feel the tension through his body as he forces himself to stay still, and love the feeling of power over him this gives me.

Slowly, I unbutton and unzip his slacks to let them fall open and pull the waistband of his black boxer briefs out and down to free his erection. He's pretty, not that I'd tell him that.

But as pretty as a dick can be, Blake's is—long and thick, with one vein running the length up to the mushroom head that's weeping for me. I stick my tongue out and sample the clear fluid and he moans above me. The encouragement excites me, and I shift in my seat to get a better angle, cursing my seatbelt but not willing to take it off.

He wouldn't let you anyway. Safety first.

Though I've never heard Blake utter those exact words, I can hear him saying them clear as day. They're so like him—a risk taker, but only after calculating all the odds. I have no doubt that if we were on a freeway, not an empty back country road, he would never allow this.

But for now, he's mine.

My own fears of the dangers of driving try to creep up my throat, but I swallow them down, along with Blake's cock, trusting him to keep us safe on the deserted road. He's salty and earthy along my tongue, teasing past my lips into my mouth. He lets out a deep groan that vibrates all the way down to his hips as he flexes to give me more.

"Ah, fuck," he hisses, and then he reaches over me and I hear him put the car in park. "We're safe, no one's around. Please—"

His voice cuts out as I suck him in again, deeper this time. His hand goes to my jaw, fingers wrapped toward my bun, not forcing or guiding me but just feeling me move over him.

Now that we're still, I unclick my seatbelt and move around to get a knee underneath myself, changing the angle I can take him at. This is better, deeper, and I hum with satisfaction when I feel his tip enter my throat. I wish I could tease this out, take him to the edge and drive him crazy, but this is not the time.

Not when we're parked wherever it is we are, with a very real chance of getting caught looming. So I speed up, sucking with hollowed cheeks and using my hand, twirling my tongue over his head. It's not long before he taps my shoulder—such a gentleman—and I nod, doubling down on my efforts. He understands perfectly, and a second later, I taste his release.

Spurt after spurt of creamy liquid fills my mouth, and I swallow reflexively, trying to keep from getting any on his fancy slacks. I lick him clean, kissing his crown and then easing his boxer briefs up over his softening cock.

I sit up in my chair, wiping at my lips and smiling like the cat that got the canary.

"Damn, you look good like that," Blake whispers, his eyes hazy but looking at me.

"How? Like I just sucked you off?" I tease, figuring that's every guy's dream.

He blinks slowly and lifts his head from the headrest to shake it. "No . . . well, yes. But I meant . . . happy. You looked that way earlier too,

when you figured out the smoothie thing, and when you got in my car and touched the wood like you always do—”

“I don’t always do it,” I balk. “Only twice.”

He shakes his head, smirking. “Every time you’ve been in my car, your nightstand, my island.” His voice heats at that. “I went around my house, putting coasters and figurines and wood boxes everywhere so you’d always have something to touch for good luck. Because I like that smile.”

He reaches over to trace my lips, but my smile has fallen, shocked that he would do that . . . for me and my weird little habits.

“Thank you.” It’s all I can find to say, too choked up with how much something so seemingly small means to me. In reply, he leans over and kisses me. We kiss deeply, thoroughly, and when he pulls back, I can’t help it. My lips lift again.

“There it is.”

I smile even bigger.

“Where are we?” I finally ask, looking at the world outside Blake’s car.

“Down the street from Horne’s. I saw the for-sale sign and figured I could park in the driveway without being too suspicious.” He shrugs almost shyly. “I couldn’t focus to drive safely anymore, not with your mouth on me.”

A big shot of pride shoots through me.

I, Zoey Walker, did that to him.

“Okay, so you think we can drive back out of the neighborhood the same way? Like we’re just two people who came to look at the house?”

I lean forward to look at the house in question. It’s another ranch-style house with a locked gate next to the driveway we’re parked in, cedar shutters surrounding every window, and an iron-framed glass front door. I couldn’t afford one month at this house if Jacob and I pooled our money for a year.

“Needs work. I don’t think it’s the one,” I joke, feigning sadness as I shake my head.

“I have something else in mind. You up for a little double-oh-seven work?” Blake asks me with a daring smile.

“You can be James Bond.” I point at him, and then myself. “I’m sticking with Velma. *Jinkies!*”

“Hmm, and there goes my idea of your being a ‘Bond girl’,” Blake teases, putting the car in reverse with a shake of his head like my weirdness

amuses him. As we drive down the street, he tells me his grand plan. “I saw Yvette, the guy, and a red dog leave in his truck. But he was taking the trash out as we drove by.”

“Okaaaaay,” I drawl out. “You’re not planning to break into the house while they’re gone, are you?”

Blake’s eyes shoot to me.

“Are you?” I whisper, horrified.

“No.” He shakes his head as if he’s not sure of that answer yet. “But I like that you’re thinking that way, my little daredevil.” I am so not a daredevil in any sense of the word, but it makes me wiggle in my seat that he called me that. “I’m thinking we grab their trash. Perfectly legal, and possibly informative.”

“Trash,” I repeat. My nose crinkles in disgust. “Ew.”

“Just hit the button to open the trunk. I’ll grab the trash,” he informs me dryly.

“Oh, okay then.” I nod agreeably.

“For someone who literally sticks their hands inside people’s bodies, you’re grossed out by trash?” Blake asks, disbelieving.

I shrug. “Everybody’s got their limits.”

He laughs but doesn’t say anything because he’s throwing the car in park and opening the door. I push the button he pointed out, and the trunk swings up behind me, scaring me even though I knew it was going to happen.

“Hurry,” I whisper-yell. Blake’s taking too long. *How long is too long to steal trash?* I don’t know, but this feels like it. People in the houses around us are probably looking out their windows, wondering what in the hell we’re doing and calling Jeff right now.

We’re going to get arrested. I know it.

But then Blake is running to the back of the car with two white bags and I hear a thud as the trunk closes. He hops in, and we take off like felons on the run from The Man. Well, no.

He puts it in drive and goes a respectable thirty miles an hour, easy as you please and acting like sugar wouldn’t melt on his tongue, he’s so sweet. But my heart is racing like we’re going one hundred and twenty around the track at Daytona with high octane in my blood.

“Oh, my God, we did it!” I shout, clapping my hands.

Blake chuckles. “Yeah, *we* did.” The air quotes are heavy on the ‘we’.

“Hey, I hit the button like you said. Fair warning, though, if we got caught, I was absolutely going to say it was all your idea.”

He nods like that’s to be expected. “Open the glovebox for me, would you?” I open it to find a perfectly organized set up with tissues, a tire gauge, the car’s owner manual, and antibacterial wipes. “Hand me a wipe, please?”

I pull out the plastic package, opening the flap on the top, and hand him a wipe, which he uses to clean his hands before putting it in the backseat behind me.

At my confused look, he explains. “Trash can in the back.”

I spin in my seat to see a tiny reusable plastic bag attached to the passenger seatback with a few tissues inside, and now a wet wipe on top. “Of course you have a trash bag in your car.”

“What do you put your trash in?” His eyebrows are curled in confusion as if I just told him people in my neighborhood cut up their trash and eat it for breakfast or something.

“The floorboard, like normal people,” I explain. “And then you clean it all out when you wash the car.”

“The *floorboard*? That’s animalistic,” he declares.

I fight my grin, knowing I’ve tossed a few tissues and fast food wrappers onto my floorboard in my time. “I don’t know if I can date someone who doesn’t use extra fast food napkins as tissues in the car. You might be too fancy for a girl like me.”

He’s too everything for a girl like me. Tissues versus napkins are the least of it.

“I’m totally telling my sister that you said I’m fancy. She thinks I’m still half-Neanderthal. Honestly, she’s not wrong,” he says, throwing a thankfully now-clean hand on my thigh. “But Neanderthals have to be prepared for messes too. Especially after that one episode where Miles got gelato on everything.” He shudders at the memory of the mess.

“Gelato?” I echo incredulously. “I’m twenty-eight years old and I’ve never even had gelato, much less made a mess of it. Ice cream, shakes, malts . . . those I can make a mess with. Which I clean up with a leftover, half-wrinkled napkin from the Dairy Palace like a normal human being. Five-year-olds with gelato . . . *fancy*.”

“Tissues aside, you just said we’re dating.” He’s grinning like I just gave him a free gelato with sprinkles and told him to have at it. “You having second thoughts about turning me down?”

“Second, and third, and bajillionth. Absolutely,” I confess, heavier than his teasing tone.

He cuts his eyes to me for a second, then back to the road, then repeats the move once more before boldly asking, “You’re not just using me for sex, are you?”

“Oh, my God, you can’t say stuff like that!” I squawk insecurely. “What the hell, Mr. Hale!”

“I want to make sure you’re not only after the goods and agreeing to a date because I said no sex until we go out officially.”

How does he say things like that with a straight face?

Because just listening to him say it has me grinning like I’m a middle-schooler, swooning like a love-struck romantic, and squirming like a woman who just swallowed a mouthful and really needs a little release of her own.

It’s harder than I’d like to admit, but I do it anyway. “It’s not just the sex.”

Tension I didn’t realize he was holding releases in his shoulders. “I like you too, Miss Walker. Ya weirdo.”

Somehow, when he says that word, it doesn’t hurt. It’s funny, like we’re being weird together, even though he’s amazingly not only *un-weird* but normal.

* * *

WE GO to my house to look through the trash. Not because it’s a trailer but because it’s closer and I have gloves. I insist on those, and Blake is thankful and agrees easily. “Trash bags are one thing. Actual trash is another.”

That decided, we get to work. I spread out wrapping paper on the kitchen floor because I don’t want to do this outside where there are prying eyes, plus, it’s all I have. Still, I promise myself that I’ll be mopping after this . . . and that I’m going out to buy one of those big blue tarps just in case something like this ever comes up again, as unlikely as that may be.

We open the first bag, and the smell is . . . not too bad. Blake and I look at each other in relief and then with a sigh of resolve, we dig in. We make piles of what we find—possibly useful and totally gross. Mostly, everything

goes into the totally gross pile until we have to make a third pile of ‘what the fuck is that?’

There’s a lot of food trash, including some spoiled chicken lunch meat that makes us both retch. We end up needing to pause to re-bag that container and set it outside on the porch.

Which is when Jacob comes in, pinching his nose, and recoils in disgust. “What in Satan’s taint hole is that smell?”

“Trash,” I answer, looking at a receipt. I’m long used to the smell now. And it’s not remotely as bad as post-mortem body scents.

Jacob isn’t. “I can see that. I guess I meant . . . why?”

I look to Blake as I try to decide how much I want to tell Jacob. Is this some top-secret mission? But I don’t keep things from Jacob. It’s one of the deals we have.

So I tell him the truth. “I had a questionable death. Jeff called the case closed, but I have questions. So I’m getting answers.” I hold my gloved hands out, indicating all the trash in front of me.

“How’d she talk you into this insanity?” Jacob asks Blake as though I can’t hear him.

“I’m sitting right here, you know.”

Jacob shoots me an empty-faced glance and then goes right back to Blake, giving him a chin lift of ‘whatcha got?’

Blake chuckles, probably used to this guy game shit. “This was actually my idea. We figured some stuff out—and when I say *we*, I mean *her*.” He tilts his head my way, and I’m reminded of the ‘we’ I used for the trash. We really have done this together . . . whatever this is. “We’re digging a little deeper, literally, to see what else turns up.”

Jacob stares at the trash for a second and then gives me a meaningful look. Throwing his bag to the couch, he sits down in the floor across from me. “All right, toss me some gloves and tell me what we’re looking for.”

And that’s how me, Jacob, and Blake spend the next hour going through Yvette Horne’s trash, piece by gross piece. Every ball of hair from a hairbrush, empty toothpaste tube, can of Slim Fast, and junk mailer.

“I found something!” Jacob and Blake say at the same time, though Jacob’s is followed with a groan of disgust.

“What?” I say, not sure which way to look and ending up trying to look both ways at once, which doesn’t work and just gives me a headache from my brain rattling back and forth.

“Smoothie mix,” Blake shouts, holding up a plastic container with every green vegetable in existence on the label. “We could have it tested?”

Jacob interrupts, “uhm . . . guys? Didn’t you say this chick’s husband has been dead for days? Weeks?”

“Yes, why?” I answer, turning my attention to him.

“Because I don’t think this is that old?” Jacob holds up a tied-off condom with liquid inside, turning away as he gags out loud. “Ew . . . ugh . . . *cough-cough* . . . sticky love juice load . . . ack . . .”

“Oh, my God . . . oh, my God . . . what do we do with that?” I’m scrambling, rambling, but I manage to get up from the floor, pull my gloves off, and grab a sandwich baggie. “Hang on, you can put it in here like evidence, but let me put on fresh gloves first.”

Instead, Blake takes the baggie from me with his gloved hands and holds it open for Jacob to drop the—*blech*—condom inside.

“Thanks, man. I don’t think I could’ve held that much longer.”

He does look a little pale. “Guess you won’t be going into the family business?” I tease.

Jacob shakes his head vehemently. “Definitely not. But pulling someone’s guts out for examination is way different from holding another man’s fresh spunk.”

Blake nods his head, agreeing sagely. “Rule. Own jizz is fine, other jizz is fucked up.”

“Whatever. Guys, do you know what this means?” I ask them both.

Jacob sits back on his ass, yanking his gloves off. “That I’m done with this?”

“No . . . that there is definitely something hinky going on with Yvette Horne.”

“Hinky?” Blake says around a smile. “Or kinky?”

“I’m embracing the Velma spirit. Stick with me, and no kinky. Poisoned smoothies—*means*. Another guy—*motive*. And they obviously lived together, so that’s *opportunity*.”

I’m excited. Okay, maybe a bit hysterical at having figured this out. I can see why Jeff likes his job. Well, except for the digging in trash part.

Jacob leans over and talks out of the side of his mouth to Blake. “No backsies. She’s yours now.”

I flinch, but Blake beams like he wouldn’t have it any other way. “Working on it,” he tells Jacob, but he’s staring at me like he’s never seen

anything more beautiful. The best part is . . . I don't mean my looks. I feel like Blake sees my insides—my brain and weirdness—and that's what he thinks is stunning. After a long moment, he shows off his sexy brain power too. "The money's another motive. A big one. But we have to prove it. And figure out who's the guy."

He throws a nose-wrinkling look at the baggie with the condom, on the same page as Jacob about it being the most disgusting thing we discovered in the trash.

My vote is for the spoiled chicken, and I touch the floor, even though it's wood-printed vinyl, as I hope I can get the smell out.

Ever.

CHAPTER 16



BLAKE

“*R*oad trip,” I call out as I knock low on Zoey’s door. I did at least call this time, but I didn’t tell her much. Just that I was coming over because I want the full impact of awe when I share what I’ve discovered.

Especially since it took me the better part of three days and I’m pretty proud of myself. If I could pat my own back, I would, but my deltoids are screaming after the workout Trey and I did this morning, and I can’t scratch my nose, much less my own shoulder.

Shit, now my nose itches. I try wiggling it like Sabrina the witch since my shoulder is unwilling to lift my arm. When wiggling doesn’t work, I’m forced to lift my arm incrementally through willpower alone because the muscles are jelly.

I have just enough time to scratch it and then the door opens.

“Come in, come in!” Zoey waves me in, her hand flapping rapidly.

“Excited to see me?”

She shoots me a wry look. “You’re the one hyping what you found and getting me all anxious. Is it good? Is it bad? I don’t know!”

She slicks her hands over her hair, which is in its usual bun, but there are loose strands that give her a haphazard look. It’s sexy as fuck, making me wish she’d take it down, shake her head, and let her black locks fan out over a pillow while I bury myself in her. My eyes slowly take her in, realizing that while she left the workday’s bun, she’s changed clothes for our *not-date*.

Dark jeans hug her thighs tight enough that I know her ass will be equally and sexily outlined, a V-neck T-shirt shows the smallest inch of

cleavage, and booties with the smallest wedge make her lips that much closer to mine.

“You look beautiful.”

She blushes, ducking her chin and eyes from mine, and a tiny zing of anger shoots through me. I hate that she’s unaccustomed to hearing compliments, that no one has told her every morning and night that she’s gorgeous without it being tied up in barbs as a backhanded compliment.

I guess that means I have a lot of praise to catch up on. “Seven hundred and thirty,” I muse.

“Huh?”

Before I answer, I pull her to me for a sweet, small kiss. She might not realize it, but that was me sealing my promise. “The minimum number of times per year you should hear how beautiful you are. Twice a day—morning and night—times three hundred and sixty-five days. Seven hundred thirty-two in leap years.”

She lets out a tiny laugh as she shoots me a look of wry disbelief. “Okay, flatterer, quit stalling. What’s this big breakthrough?”

I let her change the subject to safer territory because we do have somewhere to be. “I’ll explain in the car. Come on, let’s go before it gets too dark.” I jerk my head toward my car and her brow crinkles.

“Where are we going?”

“Get in and you’ll see,” I tell her as I hold my hand wide in invitation.

She sighs around a smile she’s fighting and calls back into the house, “I’m going out for a while. Don’t wait up.”

“I won’t,” Jacob yells from what sounds to be a few feet away. “Sup, Blake?”

Zoey opens the door a bit wider to show Jacob sitting on the couch, headphones on and video game controller in hand. I throw him a two-finger wave and he lifts his chin, eyes making a quick jump to me and then refocusing on the game again. Zoey closes the door and then gives me that full-wattage smile. “Okay, wow me with your genius, Mr. Hale. Whatcha got?”

“First, there’s someone who wants to say hello.” I open the back door to reveal Chunky sitting in the backseat with a specially-made dog seatbelt on.

“Chunky!” Zoey exclaims as her hands cover her mouth and then instantly reverse course to reach out to pet my dog, who’s wiggling

excitedly. “What’re you doing here, sweet boy? Oh, yes, it’s good to see you too!”

Her voice is high and giggly as she bends forward to scratch and pet Chunky. His tongue goes nuts, licking air and licking Zoey’s face. “No kisses, Chunkster. Those’re for me only,” I scold, though it’s with a smile because Zoey shoots me a dagger-filled look.

“I’ll have you know I can kiss anyone I want.” Sassiness looks good on her.

As if he agrees, Chunky’s excitement is too much for his little round body and he leaps toward Zoey. She tries to catch him, but the seatbelt doesn’t let him get far, yanking him back to his seat.

The back and forth movement throws Zoey off balance, her ass hitting the ground before I can catch her.

“Oh, shit, let me help.” I slip my hands under her arms to hike her up. “You okay?” Instead of Zoey, Chunky answers in a whine that draws my attention. “Chunks, you okay, too?”

Luckily, Zoey seems steady on her feet because Chunky has one foot held up to show me that he’s tangled in the seatbelt that is supposed to keep him safe. I get him situated and feel eyes on me. I turn to see Zoey pressing her lips together gleefully. “Good to see where I rate.”

Heat creeps up my neck. “You were standing, at least. This poor guy couldn’t even stand because his footsie was all twisted up. Isn’t that right, big guy?” I’ve gone into a baby voice of my own as I check over Chunky’s perfectly fine leg and foot.

“Pew, pew, pop, fizz . . .” Zoey mutters under her breath.

“What was that?” I press, faintly remembering the last time she said something like that and knowing it led to some good stuff.

“Oh, nothing . . . just my ovaries exploding again. Men and dogs are women’s kryptonite.”

“Well shit, you’re in trouble then because I’m taking you someplace with lots of dogs.”

Her back goes straight and her eyes widen. “You are? Is that a hint or are you trying to throw me off?”

“Guess we’ll see.”

Zoey scratches behind Chunky’s ears, baby talking to my chubby dog, “Do you know where we’re going?”

I see what she means because she looks damn sexy loving on Chunky and I can foresee a future with Zoey holding a swaddled baby and using that same tone. My man-ovaries are exploding too.

“He might. But he won’t tell you. Isn’t that right, Chunkster?”

We get in the car and drive off, Zoey’s faith in me meaning a lot more than words can say.

“Okay, okay . . . now, what are we doing?” Zoey asks. “Seriously, Blake.”

“Well, I did a little social media investigating,” I explain, chuckling when Zoey lifts an eyebrow of her own. “No, not creeping. And not on you. On Yvette Horne.” Zoey’s other eyebrow jumps up to match the first, and I rush to make this sound less sinister. “Her accounts are all public, no private profiles I could find, and thankfully, no Only Fans accounts. That was a rabbit hole I wish I hadn’t gone down. Let’s just say it’s . . . not for the faint of heart.”

“What do you mean?” Zoey asks. “I mean, I know what Only Fans is, but did you find something?”

I shudder at the memory. “Not Yvette’s, but to check and confirm, I had to search around. I had no idea there were so many people wanting to be sugar babies and daddies. So. Many.” Wide-eyed, I look at Zoey and mouth once more, “So. Many.”

Zoey laughs. At me? Or at the idea of sugar relationships? I don’t want to know, so I drive full-steam ahead into what I did find.

“Yvette’s pretty active on Facebook. Lots of check-ins, daily posts, sharing quiz results that apparently mean she’s 96% like Elsa and 78% like avocado toast, and most importantly, I found hundreds of pictures. Some of them with the dog we saw. Or well, the dog *I* saw.” I give her a side-eye, checking to see if she’s thinking about where her head was when I saw the dog, and though she fights the smile, her lips tilt up at the edges.

“Rusty,” Zoey says out of nowhere, but then she explains. “When I went to do the initial exam on Richard Horne, the dog out front was fighting with a deputy. He called the dog ‘Rusty’.”

“Yeah, that’s the dog’s name. So there are pictures of the dog and the same guy I saw leaving Yvette’s house, and she’d tagged a location.”

“A tagged location?” Zoey asks, shaking her head. “Nope, she’s not that smart, is she?”

“Not super-smart,” I agree. “But the guy’s name is Sebastian, and he’s a dog trainer. Apparently, he’s got some deal going with social media, like he’s some wannabe Dog Whisperer or something. Says he can train any dog. And it’s big, I guess. Guy’s got a hundred thousand followers! Did you know dog trainers were that in demand?”

“I can’t imagine why,” Zoey says, turning around to look at Chunky in the back seat. “I only know the most well-behaved, calm, healthy dogs. No needy little sausage rolls that beg for peanut butter.”

Chunky, hearing the word ‘sausage’, squirms wildly, trying to get to Zoey and making me groan. “No, Chunkster, no sausage. Kibble, doctor’s orders . . . kibble!”

Zoey stage-whispers to Chunky, “He is a mean old thing, isn’t he? I’ll see if I can find some peanut butter-flavored dog biscuits that won’t get us in trouble. Would you like that?”

I’m creating a monster. An adorable, sweet, beautiful monster . . . and I’m not talking about Chunky.

“So I basically cyber stalked this Sebastian guy, and based on his videos, figured out that he meets clients at the dog park we’re going to,” I reveal. “I thought we could stop by, maybe set up a conversation. We can’t just confront him and ask about Yvette.”

“Ah, that’s where Chunky comes in, I guess? You’re not just trying to get in my pants.”

“Don’t need Chunky for that,” I boast, and Zoey giggles.

Unaware that’s he’s instrumental in a murder investigation, Chunky lets out a cute growl, and I look in the rear-view mirror to check on him. He’s staring at the back of Zoey’s head with puppy dog eyes, and I think I’ve been replaced in the big guy’s heart. Of course, she did promise him peanut butter-flavored treats, and the way to any guy’s heart is through his stomach.

* * *

CHUNKY GROWLS AGAIN, pulling on his leash as we pass by an oak tree that has a squirrel running around the trunk. Too bad Chunky would never be able to catch it.

The dog park's up ahead, and as soon as we get through the gate, I unhook Chunky, letting him run and make friends with the half-dozen or so dogs that are doing . . . dog stuff. I see three sniffing asses, one hiking his leg, and a few others chasing each other.

But I'm quickly distracted by Zoey. She looks so happy, a smile on her face and the sun shining on her face. She's beautiful.

"You've got some fur on your shirt," I note, wanting to reach up and brush the fuzz off her chest.

Zoey looks down and laughs softly. She brushes off her chest, smirking when she sees where my eyes are still going. "I see how you are."

I shrug, not denying a damn thing. "Yup."

I'm about to say more when, out of the corner of my eye, I see a woman approaching us. Going by the leash in her hand and graphic logo on her T-shirt, she's obviously a 'dog mom.' "Hi, haven't seen you guys around before. I'm Brianna."

"Hi, I'm Blake, and this is Zoey. And that guy over there is Chunky." I point to Chunky, who's in the middle of a pack of playing dogs.

"Friends? Dating? Married?" Brianna asks boldly.

"Uhm, friends?" Zoey offers uncertainly.

"Just friends?" Brianna says, looking incredulous. "I though you two looked cute together. So, are you new to the area?"

"New to this dog park," I reply. "Say, you—"

Before I can casually ask if Brianna knows anything about the social media famous dog trainer who visits this park, she starts yelling. "Boopie! Boopie, no!" Following Brianna's eyes across the park, I see what looks like a schnauzer trying to get his freak on with a labradoodle, except other than the obvious height issue, I'm pretty sure the labradoodle is a boy, too.

"Rainbows in the dog park," Zoey notes as Brianna hurries off with a huff. "Hope that didn't offend her."

"It was funny," I retort. "But . . . friends?"

Zoey stumbles, trying to find words as she grows pinker and pinker. "Just, ahh, you know, to be a couple we . . . well, ah, God, I don't mean that . . . you know, Blake?"

"If you'd go out with me, you could say we're dating," I point out, and Zoey turns even redder. "What is it?"

"Holly says I should go out with you," Zoey says. "Says I should take a chance."

Interesting, but . . . “And you? What do you say?”

I can see her trying to retreat behind her walls as she twists a toe in the grass. “I want to, but . . .”

Nope. No ifs, no buts, no candy or nuts. “Enough said. That you’re even thinking about it says those walls are tumbling down. I can’t wait to see you free and open.”

Zoey goes to protest, but before the doubt can be given words, I pull her to me, kissing her deeply. She kisses me back, her hands going around my neck and drawing me in deep too. The world disappears, and I only faintly hear Brianna come by, chuckling. “Just friends . . . Hmph.”

I smile against her lips and pull back, looking into Zoey’s eyes. She goes to open her mouth to say something, but before she can, one of the other dog parents calls across the park to someone. “Hey Sea-bass!” We both freeze, eyes going wide with hope.

I turn my head to see Sebastian, looking more like a fitness model than a dog trainer in his tight T-shirt and low-slung gray sweat pants. He waves to whoever greeted him and opens the gate.

“Our guy?” Zoey asks, going to look, but I cup her face, looking into her eyes.

“Don’t look.”

“Then how am I going to know where he is?”

I smile, cutting my eyes to the side. “He’s by the gate, petting the pair of Great Pyrs.”

“Great what?” Zoey asks.

I laugh softly. “Think the canine version of a marshmallow . . . huge, fluffy, white.”

“What are we waiting for then?” Zoey asks. “He could be starting a lesson. Let’s go over there.”

“Not yet, too direct,” I reply, stroking a thumb over Zoey’s face and relishing the softness there while still keeping an eye on Sebastian. “Trust the salesman. Some people, you have to ease up on them so you don’t scare them off.”

Zoey snorts. “You’re not clever. I know you’re talking about me.”

I focus everything on her, not smiling this time. “Wasn’t trying to hide it.”

Zoey takes a big, shuddering breath but nods. She hears me. She understands. “So, what’s the plan?”

I let her change the course of conversation, knowing I'm getting dangerously closer to her core and that she needs time to adjust to that. "Watch him."

Zoey takes a half step back, still looking at me. "And then?"

I put an arm around her shoulders, leading Zoey away from Sebastian and toward Chunky, who's now lying on the grass with his legs splayed into the air. Chunky's lucky that Boopie isn't still around. He might end up gettin' more than a friendly sniff like that. "I don't know yet."

Zoey stiffens but keeps walking with me. "What? What do you mean you don't know?"

"I mean I don't know. I'm playing this by ear. You have a plan?" I ask as we reach Chunky, who promptly flops over. Kneeling, I pet his head, rubbing his ears until he licks my hand and runs off.

Zoey watches Chunky but hisses at me, "I just found out about this an hour ago!"

I laugh, knowing Zoey too well. "That means that you've had an hour to obsess over whether he would show and what to do about it. Don't tell me you haven't been thinking about it."

Zoey stops and blinks like an owl realizing for the first time that it can spin its head fully around. "I didn't . . . haven't . . ."

"You really didn't think about it?" I pry, not believing her. But then another idea strikes me. "If not a plan, what were you thinking about, Zoey?" Her cheeks pinken, and based on that alone, I'm pretty sure I know the answer, but I have to hear her say it.

I know it's greedy, but I want to be something she dedicates that sexy mind to figuring out, thinking up imaginary situations and playing them out like movies in her mind, replaying our conversations and kisses, and getting to know me on her own terms by filing my information in her mental filing cabinet. I bet it's one of those giant ones with an antique card catalog behind double brass doors.

Finally, she looks up at me, her eyes screwed up with courage. "You. I was thinking about you."

There's so much she doesn't say, but she doesn't need to say it. Instead, I pull her close again and kiss her tenderly because I need to taste the courage on her lips. "Thank you."

Zoey smiles hazily but then finds her prickly grit and pushes me off. "Don't get all cocky. I was mostly imagining how stupid you'll look when

you get hurt after I warned you, threatened you, and basically begged you to leave me alone for your own good.”

I mock flex, acting nonchalant and macho. “I’m not exactly known for doing things for my own good,” I start, keeping up the machismo act before breaking at her concerned look. “Nah . . . you know me. I get my annual physical, drive the speed limit, eat healthy. Hell, I even put up the basket at the grocery store. I’m a good guy, if I say so myself.”

But staying away from Zoey doesn’t feel good. It feels wrong. I want to be with her, closer to her, inside her in so many ways. I slip my hand around hers, and shoulder to shoulder, we watch Chunky running around.

“I think you’re a good guy too,” Zoey says after a bit, so I know she’s been thinking about us. Her decree sounds promising, but it’s not until she puts her arm around my waist and snuggles into my side that I breathe. I take the win, staying close as we slowly work our way over to Sebastian.

As we approach, I hear Sebastian talking to a man about dog food brands he recommends. “What do you think about Advance Nutrition’s diet dog food?” the man asks, his hand resting on the giant head of a small bear masquerading as a wrinkly-faced gray mastiff-looking thing. “My Princess is on it.”

“That’s a dog?” Zoey asks, and Sebastian looks over at her interruption, grinning instantly when he sees her. He even does a quick head to toe scan before he dips his chin at me in that ‘no offense, dude’ way. I lift my brow an increment before slowly returning the chin dip.

“Oh, this is just a big, sweet baby . . . with really big poops,” he says to Zoey before answering the dog owner’s question. “AN’s pretty good, actually, but there’s a dog version of the 30-day Whole Foods routine . . . if you really want to lean her out.”

Honestly, all I see is the friendly dude from his social media. Not a poisoning murder suspect.

“Hmm, my boy’s on AN too, but I haven’t heard of that 30-day thing,” I comment, joining the conversation just like I do when I’m making a life insurance cold intro. Find something in common and just join in, fostering the connection. “Would that be okay for my other dog?” Zoey looks at me, well aware I only have Chunky, but what I also now have is a plan. “I’ve got an Irish Setter-Golden Retriever girl at home. She’s not overweight like the Chunkster here, but I can’t imagine making two dog dinners, you know? I’m not a short-order cook.”

I'm playing it cool, trying to get him to talk, especially by dropping the exact designer-mix breed dog Yvette has while asking for advice.

Sebastian chuckles nonchalantly. "Yeah, man, I hear that. But the 30-day is good for all dogs. I've got a client, also an Irish Retriever, that's so sweet, but he's willful as hell."

"Another Irish Retriever?" I ask, mock surprised. The mastiff owner quickly thanks Sebastian and leaves, pretending to lead his dog when I'm pretty sure that monster could be hooked to the front of his truck and pull them both home. But I'm focused on Sebastian. "Those are pretty rare. Mine's a shedder, the Retriever side, I guess."

Sebastian agrees, "Yeah, they tend to create a small hair storm. With Rusty, we have to vacuum after him almost every day."

"Oh, don't I know it!" I exclaim. Looking at Zoey, who's catching on, I grin. "How long ago did you make me buy that new robot vacuum, honey?"

"Last month. It was that online sale," Zoey fake-reminds me, joining in. "No way was I using that big vacuum any longer." She bends her elbows, not flexing her toned arms so it seems like she's a weakling.

"I wouldn't know," Sebastian offers with a flex of his own.

I clear my throat. "Shedding aside, I love these guys though. Even if they kill my budget with special food, vacuums, chair legs . . . ugh." I roll my eyes dramatically—for Chunky and Jessie, my imaginary Irish-Retriever.

Sebastian's eyebrows lift, and I see he caught scent of the bait I just laid out. "Chair legs, huh? You know, I offer obedience lessons. I could help you out on that."

"Could you?" Zoey asks, smiling hopefully as though Sebastian were her savior. I know she's playing her part too, but that doesn't stop the growl from trying to rumble in my chest. Especially when she adds, "I mean, last week, Jessie got ahold of my favorite bra, and . . . well, you know."

Sebastian laughs, his eyes flittering to Zoey's chest naturally before coming back to her eyes faster than a single man normally would. "I understand."

"Is it a breed thing?" I ask. "For Irish Retrievers? You know, did the other owner, I dunno, get things eaten?"

Sebastian laughs. "No, nothing like that."

I nod, seeing the opening but knowing it's not *quite* big enough yet. "Well, if you've got a card or something, man, I'd love to check my

schedule at home, see if we can set something up?”

Sebastian’s quick to his pocket, pulling out his wallet and a business card and offering it to me. “Here you go. Email’s best, but that’s just so if I’m with a client, I don’t forget to call back.”

“Thanks,” I tell him, tucking the card in my pocket. “Well, we should get going. Chunkster!”

Chunky comes bounding over, nearly taking me to the ground again, but I manage to clip his leash on. I wave to Sebastian, but he’s already scanning for his next potential clients.

Zoey keeps her cool until we’re at the gate and leaving before elbowing me in the ribs. “What the hell was that?”

I grin, knowing this is one area where my experience far outstrips hers. “Long game. If we’d asked more about Yvette, he would have gotten his guard up. It’s why I kept it to the dog. Now we can find out more about him, and maybe Yvette.”

Zoey thinks, then nods at my logic. “So . . . like a sale.”

“Just like a sale. Some are fast, some are slow, but you take whatever time’s needed.”

Zoey gives me that single eyebrow lift that says she knows what I’m up to. She knows I’m talking about two things at once again. “Smart man.”

“I know,” I say cockily, but I soften the pseudo-arrogance with a smile. “Now, we wait,” I continue as we reach my car and I open the back for Chunky, who promptly hops in. I know he’s going to give Zoey the full-on puppy dog eyes treatment, but safety is always first. “I figure at least a day or two before calling.”

“Why?” Zoey asks, standing in the door I’ve opened for her. “I don’t understand.”

I crowd into her space, loving the way her breath hitches as she looks up at me. “It’s how it’s done. If you really want the biggest sale, you don’t pressure, you don’t push. You draw them to you so that everything’s smooth as butter when the deal’s closed.”

Zoey gives me a questioning look, sure we’re not talking about Sebastian anymore. After a moment where I swear I can see her mind processing—contemplating me, us, and an amalgamation of possibilities—she gets in and I close the door.

We should get going, but I pause, needing a breath myself. Because yeah, she’s my biggest sale. Selling myself to her by making her wonder

how she ever lived without me and ensuring that she never wants to again.

Because this woman? Even after I've been chasing her for weeks, telling her flat out that I want her and want to date her, she's not sure I'm being honest. People have really done a number on her. But I can undo it. I'll keep trying.

CHAPTER 17



ZOEY

We're all born with virtues. Intelligence, kindness, creativity . . . they vary from person to person. Patience is not a virtue I was gifted with.

Waiting for Sebastian for days, waiting for Blake for weeks, waiting for sex for . . . well, let's just say way too long . . . and I'm done with all of it.

I came to Blake's after we left the dog park, ready to research some more, but we haven't found the smoking gun of a possible poison and the proof we need. But if I'm honest with myself, the bigger mystery isn't how Richard Horne died but why in the world a man like Blake Hale wants me.

But he does.

I can feel it as we talk about stupid factoids, play a game we've dubbed 'Did You Know?' that allows us to show off our useless trivia knowledge, consider and reject murderous methodologies Yvette might've used, and simply exist . . . together.

It feels right. I don't trust it, or I don't want to trust it because the one sure thing about trust is that it's always broken, but somehow, Blake makes me . . . believe.

Sitting in Blake's living room, Chunky passed out asleep with his nose in his once-again empty bowl and Blake relaxing beside me with an arm thrown casually over the back of the couch, I make a decision I hope I don't regret. I scan for wood to touch and see the sign I'm looking for.

Blake said he put things all over for me to always have something to fulfill my superstition, and I believed him, but seeing it with my own two eyes is a very different thing. *There* . . . not just the wood coffee table, but

the stack of wood and marble coasters on the end table by the chair. Those weren't there last time I was here. I get up to check the kitchen.

Assuming my destination, Blake says, "Bathroom's the second door on the left."

I'll take the opening, but first . . . In the kitchen, I see new wooden spoons in the utensil canister and a butcher block cutting board set out on the island.

Down the short hall to the bathroom, I quickly pee and wash my hands before staring at myself in the mirror.

"You can do this, Zoey Walker," I whisper to my reflection. I've never been good at pep talks. The best I can usually offer is a hard-edged 'at least no one died this time', but I want to have different expectations.

I want to trust, I want to be a person who believes in silver linings and positivity despite my wealth of experience to the contrary. I shake my head, loosening the hold painful memories have on me, and point at myself in the mirror, firmly telling my reflection, "Holly is fine. Jacob is fine. Blake is fine. It's okay to want this. It's okay to need this. Nothing bad will happen."

I can hear the lie in my own words. I correct myself, searching for truth and not wishes. "You're already too deep in this, in him. Might as well . . ."

It's all I've got, pitiful as it may be. I shrug, my eyes wide and showing the fear I feel inside. The reality is, I'm already involved with Blake, and if my curse is going to strike, there's nothing I can do to stop it now.

"He's not-scared enough for the both of us," I remind myself, having repeated Blake's words so often they've become almost a mantra of hope. While I don't think anyone's going to call me *Pep Talk Queen* anytime soon, they're enough to bolster my hopes. Especially with the cherry-topper of Blake's faith that it'll be okay.

I sigh and close my eyes for a long moment. When I open them, the first thing I see is a tall, skinny wood vase on the counter, tucked in behind two smaller glass ones that hold cotton balls and Q-tips. Looking around, I find several other examples—wood framed art on the wall, a wood-handled brush hanging in the shower, and the wood vanity, of course.

Maybe those were all there before, or maybe Blake sees me, understands me, and doesn't think I'm weird or should change.

Maybe he likes me not despite my weirdness but because of it?

I open the door and should turn right, back to the living room where he's waiting. I go left instead and find myself in the doorway of Blake's

bedroom. The bed is neatly made with a navy and green plaid duvet, white pillows laid out at the head. It's not fussy, just tidy—like the man.

On the nightstand, I see a poseable wooden figure; on the other, a stack of books and a set of small wooden boxes. I feel him behind me before he says anything, and I breathe in strength and exhale fear. His fingers trace down my arm to my hand, which he takes in his. “Zoey?”

The name I've heard hundreds of times, but the question in it is anything but easy. I'm not simple, but he's taken the time to figure out my layers, fighting through the nonsensical labyrinth that is my head, willing to wait for me while somehow simultaneously making me believe in possibilities.

He's given me . . . hope. And for a woman who doesn't have that, it's a precious gift. I let my head fall back to his shoulder, and his hands caress back up my arms, raising gooseflesh in their wake.

“You really put wood everywhere. For me.” No question, just truth.

“I did,” he agrees easily, never conceiving that I might've thought he was lying or exaggerating. But that's what people do.

It's not what Blake Hale does.

It's not who he is.

“There was already a lot in here with the furniture, but I added a few little things by the bed, and in the other rooms. Amy and I went shopping. She helped me pick out things because I can't decorate for shit. My plan was to put wood slices everywhere, but she told me I should be more 'adult' about it.”

As he talks, his hands trace along my skin—arms, neck, and even brushing my down-for-once hair over my shoulder. He follows the touches with small, sweet kisses that bring zings of sensation to my entire body, but it's his words that make my heart race. “You did that for me?”

“Of course,” he whispers before nipping at my earlobe.

My eyes fall closed, and unbidden, the words fall from my lips in a plea. “Ask me. Please.”

He's quiet for a long beat, his hands gripping my hips to control my swaying search for him.

“Are you sure?” he finally says, his voice strangled and rough.

I swallow my doubts, let his certainty wash through me, and nod. He spins me in place so suddenly that my stomach flip flops, or maybe that's the reaction my body has to the raw, bare lust I see in his eyes. He cradles

my cheeks in his hands, locking my gaze with his. “Zoey Walker, will you go out with me, Blake Hale?”

It sounds so serious, like a vow he’s asking me to make to him. Definitely not the booty call type of question I accused him of trying so long ago.

Was that only weeks?

How can that be?

I search his eyes, search my heart for any last arguments, but find only one word.

“Yes,” I breathe before I can stop myself.

He catches the word with a kiss, muttering under his breath. I think I hear him say, “Fina-fucking-lly.”

But I’m not sure because my heartbeat is roaring through my ears, my hands roaming over his body, learning the hills and valleys of his flesh as he ignites me with heated kiss after kiss. His hands release my jaw to tangle into my hair, guiding my head to gain access to my neck.

“We don’t have to wait until after the date, do we?” I beg.

His chuckle vibrates against my skin, tickling me deliciously. “Eager, are we?”

I flush, not sure if he’s making fun of me. He senses the change and pulls back, tipping my chin to bring my eyes up to his burning ones. “Zo, me too. I’ve wanted you since the first time I saw you, scared to death that wreck had hurt you. I’ve been doing everything I can to give you time, holding myself back and jacking off every night to thoughts of you. I’m just so glad that you’re finally here with me. You are, right?”

His every word melts my nerves, his bold honesty turns me on even more, and I forget any logical reason I might have had for refusing us both this pleasure. More importantly, I forget all the illogical reasons. “I am.”

A smile I’ve never seen before takes his lips, one filled with hunger and power. A shiver works its way through my body when he commands, “Lie down, Zo. Let me worship you.”

If this were a movie, Holly and I would laugh and roll our eyes at the cheesy line as she proclaimed guys like that don’t exist in real life. But when Blake says it, I believe him.

I pull my T-shirt over my head, my hair cascading over my shoulders, and his eyes and hands drop to my breasts. He kneads them, thumbs teasing over the hard nipples in a way that makes me arch reflexively. “Jeans.”

He ducks down to lick the breast he's freed from its bra cup prison while I toe off my boots and undo my jeans to shove them down. But I'm not one of those lucky and graceful movie heroine types, and the denim gets stuck mid-thigh. I wiggle my hips desperately, trying to push them down further, but they're not budging.

"Uh, hang on." Mortified, I tap Blake on the top of his head, and he looks up with a question in his eyes. "I'm . . . stuck?"

His smile is huge, amused, and giddy with desire as he grasps my predicament. I watch as his eyes drop down my body and behind me to the bed, and a second too late, I realize that he's measuring the distance.

He pushes, and I tilt backward.

"Ah!" I squeal, but I don't go far—just to the bed with my knees locked together by my own jeans' betrayal. Blake lifts one brow. 'Gotcha', that smug look says, and then he's pulling his own shirt over his head to climb on the bed next to me. His skin against mine is pure decadence, sending little sparks of electricity everywhere we touch.

"Do you have any idea how sexy you look right now? Hair all splayed out, your eyes huge and dark with desire," he asks, running his fingers through my hair, which is probably tangled into a rat's nest. "Cheeks getting pinker by the second," he adds, tracing a cheekbone I can feel heating with his thumb. "Flushing with want . . . bra haphazard, legs askew . . ." He brushes his entire palm and fingers over my breast, down my stomach, and to my hip. He dips down to whisper in my ear, "And the best part?"

My hands clench the duvet beneath me, trying to ground myself because I think I'm floating away into the ether and he hasn't even touched me yet.

Fuck, I need him to touch me.

I'm gonna go off like a bomb with the slightest touch, but right now, I can't be embarrassed about that.

I just want.

I need.

"What? What's the best part?" I choke out.

"I can see how wet you are. You're soaked right through."

Fire flashes through me, but I don't have a chance to react to the words because his hand cups my mound firmly and I feel . . . everything.

"Blake!"

His breath hisses as he inhales through gritted teeth, his fingers moving over me through the fabric. My hips squirm, begging for more, and he

finally dips inside the thin barrier between us. When his finger glances over my clit and down to my entrance, my hips bow upward, trying to fuck myself.

It's not his cock, but I'll take anything.

I feel empty without him.

He slides down the bed to settle between my thighs. I track the movement, and he looks up my body to meet my eyes before pulling my panties down to puddle with my jeans, keeping my legs locked in place. I see his pupils dilate out into black orbs as he appraises my wetness and assesses my core, pulling me apart with his thumbs.

"Pretty," he whispers huskily.

The compliment means that much more that it wasn't said carelessly, but rather, after careful consideration. His nostrils flare, and he licks my clit. My head falls back, my eyes fluttering shut as all thought dissolves into pleasure.

Oh, God . . . so good . . . don't come too fast or he'll stop.

"I won't ever stop now that I've had a taste of you," he growls against me, accenting the promise with a thrust of his fingers inside me.

"Did I say that out loud?" I whisper, horrified but unable to stop. He just licks me again, and I don't know if that's an answer or if he's obsessed with my taste, but he's taking away my ability to form coherent thoughts so I have zero chance to ask for clarification.

I swear he's sucking my brains out of my body, sending flutters through my gut as his tongue flicks my clit over and over. I come suddenly and powerfully, waves of a dark void shattering me into nothing and leaving me panting.

I feel . . . shimmery.

Technically, that's not a feeling, but it's all I can come up with to describe this, like I'm filled with glitter and rainbows, buzzing with champagne, and my bones are liquid.

"What did you do? I think you broke me."

Blake chuckles, and I look down to find him wiping his lips. "I hope not because I'm not close to done with you yet."

I gasp in surprise, but when he stands and I see his cock straining against his pants, newfound energy shoots through me and I kick my jeans and panties off the rest of the way, wanting room for him between my thighs.

And maybe in my heart?

He quickly undoes his button and zipper, and with one smooth *whoosh*, he's nude between my legs, giving his cock a slow stroke. He reaches for the nightstand drawer to grab a condom, and as he slips it on, Holly's advice floats through some responsible part of my brain. "I'm clean."

"Me too." His head notches at my entrance, pausing. "Zoey?"

I blink, trying to make my eyes focus, and realize he's asking permission. One more check that I'm finally okay with this. Not the sex—I've been ready for that for longer than I knew—but for him and this connection we have.

Doubt tries to creep in, cold and dry like a stone in the pit of my gut, and I do my best to slam the door on it, shutting it out. Blake's eyes narrow, his brain working behind their heat.

Finally, he reaches for the nightstand once more. Coming back with the wooden figurine, he holds it between us. I'm confused at first, wondering if maybe he got it for some weird Pinocchio sex thing I'm blissfully unaware of, but then I realize what he's offering me.

I touch the figurine for luck, and he smiles as if it's cute and not weird as hell to do this mid-sex. I can't help but answer his smile with one of my own when he tosses the figurine to the pillow. "Finally."

"Yes," I promise. He thrusts forward, entering me an excruciatingly pleasurable inch at a time, and the word comes out again, stretched out like warm taffy. "Yesssss."

Once settled deep inside me, a shudder rushes through him, releasing a sigh of relief from his lips. I feel it too. Something bigger than him, bigger than me, and like Aristotle said, we're creating something greater than the sum of our parts.

How could I have turned my back on this in fear?

He takes my hands, holding them over my head and looking me straight in the eye. There's no turning away from this, no pretending this is casual. There's no chance this is a booty call. I'm too much work for that. Work he willingly put in, tiptoeing through the minefield of my past and my irrationalities.

"Come back to me, Zo," he says, pulling me out of my mind. "Be here with me. Nowhere else, just here, now."

I am.

Vulnerable and exposed, afraid I'm simultaneously too much and not enough, but Blake simply smiles the smallest, sweetest smile ever. "There you are."

I see him too.

He's confident, bold, a believer in love, but he's also human, and like us all, he has his own weaknesses. Ones he covers with his charm and easygoing nature, but he wants to feel wanted and accepted as much as I do.

As much as anyone does. "I'm here, Blake. With you."

The whisper releases his inner barriers, and with our hands entwined and eyes locked, he finally fucks me. Our hips buck together in a beautiful, frantic tempo, weeks' worth of build-up rising to the surface quickly.

I bend my legs, planting my feet on the bed to give him deeper access. I want him everywhere—in me, on me, around me. His breath goes jagged, and I whine with every powerful stroke until he tenses, on the edge for a magnificent moment where his face scrunches up in pleasurable agony.

With a deep, powerful grunt, he falls off the edge, pulsing inside me. His eyes flutter back open afterward and he looks . . . happy. Actually, he looks downright giddy. "I guess you're not a roll over and fall asleep type?" I tease with a small laugh as he grinds his hips. "Let me guess . . . round two and cuddles?"

Blake releases my hands to trace over my body with his own hands. "Something like that. I'm definitely more the snuggle bug, contemplate the universe type. Or the run a mile type, but you said you don't run, so I guess that's out."

"I'll take door number one, I think," I negotiate around a yawn. "And a nap before round two."

"Deal."

Blake and I rearrange ourselves in his bed, him sitting with two pillows to prop up against the headboard and me lying on my side with my head on his bare chest. It's intimate and cozy, with his hands mindlessly mapping out my skin and my fingers dancing through the small patch of soft hair on his chest.

"I've got an idea," he says, picking up a book off the nightstand. "It's nothing fancy," he warns me, "just a recent best seller."

The cover says it's an Oprah Book Club book, but I've never heard of the title. "You want to read?"

“I thought we could take turns reading to each other?” he says quietly, but I can feel his heart racing beneath my cheek and he’s holding his breath. This sexy man is risking insecurities of his own, hoping that I’ll find the idea appealing, not weird.

“I think that’s the hottest thing anyone’s ever wanted to do with me.”

His laugh bounces me, and his arm wraps around me to keep me in place. “After what we just did? I’ll try to not be utterly gutted that reading is somehow ‘sexier’ than that.”

Oh, shit, I guess that didn’t come out right. “No! That was great, but . . . *reading to me?*” I say the words slow like the awesomeness should be self-explanatory.

I can feel Blake smile. “It’s fine, Zo. I know what you meant.”

“Oh, good. What’s it about?”

Instead of telling me, he reads to me, and though the story is interesting, it’s Blake’s voice that has me hooked. Or more likely, it’s the whole package that makes up Blake Hale.

He’s got me—hook, line, and sinker.

CHAPTER 18



BLAKE

The room is still pitch black when my alarm goes off. I try to be quiet so I don't disturb Zoey, who's sleeping soundly in my bed. The thought echoes through my mind. *Zoey Walker is sleeping in my bed after a night of amazing sex and agreeing to go out with me!*

I feel like a victorious gladiator who slayed the dragons of her ghosts. I grab my phone, shutting the alarm off, and text Trey.

Me: *Won't be there for the morning run today.*

Trey: *You good? Need me to bring you donuts and beer?*

Ah, our college-day cure for everything that ails you, especially hangovers.

But now, the thought of it makes me sick to my stomach, especially when the only hangover I'm sporting is the one resulting from a lovely dose of Zoey.

Me: *No. Zoey slept over.*

He sends back a thumbs-up emoji with a question mark.

Me: *Amazing. Run an extra mile for me.*

That handled, I snuggle back into bed with Zoey in my arms. I can't remember the last time I woke up this happy. Or went to sleep this exhausted.

Zoey mumbles, "What's wrong?"

Of course she thinks that way. "Nothing," I assure her, "just telling Trey he's on his own this morning."

"You're skipping your run?" she mumbles, or I think that's what she says at least, but it sounds like 'yuhskapngwun'.

“You think there’s a single chance in hell that I’m leaving this bed when you’re all soft and toasty warm in my arms?”

She snuggles into me, satisfied with that answer. “I have to go to work later.”

“I know, me too. But not yet.”

I feel her smile against my chest and then her breathing evens out. I stay awake a lot longer than she did, just watching her as the room turns purple with the coming dawn and listening to her occasional soft snores.

Dropping Zoey off at home feels risky because I know what a huge leap into the abyss she made last night. I’d rather hang on, wrap my arms and legs around her like a spider monkey, and keep her in the cocoon of safety I want to surround her with. Not because she needs it, but rather because she deserves a chance to relax and not be constantly on alert for a catastrophe to strike.

But eventually, the time comes, and we both feel it. Fidgeting with her hands in front of her door, she questions, “I’ll talk to you later?”

“Absolutely. You’re stuck with me now, Miss Walker,” I threaten with a wink.

“I think you’ve got that backward, Mr. Hale.”

There’s that smile I search for and want to keep on her face.

“Maybe we’re stuck with each other,” I compromise with an eye roll for extra faux-drama. “I suppose there aren’t too many women who’d be so *desperate* to meet me that they’d hit me with their car, rescue me from trivia night annihilation in their pajamas, and play Sherlock Holmes when it involves digging through actual garbage.”

I know Zoey thinks she’s getting the better deal with me and that I’m somehow getting the raw deal with her. The reality is very different. She’s beautiful, exciting, brilliant, and willing to sacrifice herself for others. I’m just a nerd whose admittedly good looks don’t make up for the fact that I talk trivia and live in a world made of up statistics, not exactly what most folks consider exciting dinner conversation.

Neither of us is perfect, and neither of us is awful.

What we are is . . . perfectly matched.

“I don’t refute any of that. Well, maybe the intentional crash. That really was an accident.”

“Sure,” I tease. I seal our agreement to disagree with a quick kiss. “I know you’ve got to get to work. Me too. But I’ll call you later.”

She smiles and disappears inside. I guess it's the safety lessons I've heard my whole life, the statistics about a home invasion happening once every twenty-six seconds, or more likely, it's that same desire to wrap Zoey up in cotton candy and treat her gently, but I tell her through the door, "Lock up, Zo." I hear the lock turn and only then can I leave.

Halfway to my car, I hear a voice call out, "Hey! Hey, you!"

I track the sound and see two older women sitting in folding camp chairs outside the trailers across the narrow dirt road that separates their plot from Zoey's.

"Yes?"

"Come here."

The woman on the left takes a puff of a cigarette, her eyes narrowed as she watches to see if I'll obey. My mother raised me to respect my elders, and I suppose there's a chance she needs help getting up, so I take measured steps across the road.

"Hello, ladies. What can I help you with today?" I flash my charming smile, ready to talk about the weather or their grandkids, or God forbid, their cats.

"What're you doing with D.D.?" Cigarette Smoker demands.

I blink, "I'm sorry, who?" I look to the other woman, teasing, "Are you Dee Dee?"

She crinkles her wrinkled lips, "Nah. I'm Louise. This here's Thelma. And she means D.D.G." She points toward Zoey's trailer with her whiskered chin.

Anger freezes my blood in my veins. "Zoey," I correct, enunciating the word harshly. "And not that it's any of your business, but I'm dating her."

Twin hums of disappointment sound out of the women's throats as they give each other a pointed look. Thelma, who seems to be the boss of these two, takes a deep inhale of her cigarette and, with the smoke coming out as she speaks, says, "You know what happens to everyone she spends time with, don'tcha? Damn shame is what it is."

She shakes her head as though discussing something sad, but there's a gleam in her eyes that says she's enjoying bearing witness to whatever awfulness she blames on Zoey. "You're too good-looking for a witch like her. Shame to see you in a pine box sooner than the good Lord intended because you got bewitched by her."

She flicks her hand from me to Zoey's trailer, ash falling to the ground at her feet as she threatens me with impending doom.

"Oh, yeah, awful thing what that girl did to her momma and daddy, and then her grandparents. I heard she talks to the bodies down at the morgue," Louise adds, dropping her voice to finish, "and she thinks they talk back to her. Creepy, if I say so myself. Talking to the dead, touching them . . . disgusting."

They nod with sneered faces like they smell something rank, each echoing the sentiments from the other. Before, I let Zoey fight her own battles with Bubba at the beer barn and Alver at work. But she's not here now, and I feel righteous in defending her since I can't allow people to talk badly about someone I care about. Especially when they've done nothing to warrant it and aren't here to stand up for themselves.

I square up and stand tall, letting all charm and kindness fall off my shoulders.

Sorry, Mom. Some people don't deserve manners.

These two busybody biddies certainly don't.

"Here's what I know . . . she's had a rough life, with some painful loss. Ironically, people think losing her family is reason enough to heap more pain on her shoulders. And somehow, though she's surrounded by ugly, small-minded people," I growl, slowly looking them up and down, from their permed hairdos to their worn house dresses and slipper-covered feet until they shift uncomfortably, "She's managed to stay good and kind at her core. More than I can say for most people I've met out here."

Bitter, harsh, hard words . . . I mean every single one.

Thelma harrumphs, not put off by the judgement of some 'city boy'.
"Your funeral."

I'm not going to change their opinions of Zoey, as much as I'd like to. And I might as well throw dynamite on their bonfire, no matter how much I'd like to hand them each a Molotov cocktail to go with their cancer sticks. "Have the day you deserve, ladies."

That's the most pleasant good-bye I can offer, because my middle fingers are itching to fly high and proud. As I walk back to my car, I can hear them talking behind me, making no effort to keep their voices down. "Know what I heard? She takes their nails, the dead folks'. Grinds them down into powder and puts it in her conditioner. That's how she gets her hair that shiny and pretty. T'ain't natural."

That's their problem with Zoey? Jealousy over her hair?

I sigh heavily. "Jesus, people are weird as fuck."

I see the blinds shift in the front window of Zoey's trailer and I know she was watching the whole scene with her neighbors. She's probably freaking out that I'm running for the hills too.

"Bye, sugar snookums! I already miss you!" I call out, smooching the air loudly three times, then add, "Can't wait to see you later!" I'm being loud enough for the whole damn trailer park to hear my over the top, lovey-dovey, corny declarations and make it real crystal clear what I'm doing with Zoey Walker.

As a final declaration, I kiss my fingertips and blow with all my might to send that kiss Zoey's way. I hope she's laughing her ass off, not giving a shit what the neighbors must be thinking. The blinds open again, and I see her uncertain smile, which I answer with a big grin of my own.

Play along and don't worry a bit, Zo. Those grumpy, gossipy women aren't going to scare me away. Not when I finally have you.

* * *

I WAIT the socially acceptable two days to call. Not Zoey.

Hell, I call her by that first afternoon just to hear her voice and pout when she's dealing with a DB and has to work late.

But I do wait to call Sebastian.

Thankfully, he's more than willing to meet me at the dog park again and show me some beginner workouts for Chunky. I'd suggested that instead of obedience training for Irish-Retriever Jessie, since she's not real and Zoey vetoed trying to find a fill-in dog. Probably for the best, anyway, and maybe I can get something useful for Chunky out of this investigation.

We can work a deal if you let me film your big dude for the Tok, ya know, Sebastian messaged me. I'm sure Chunky will get a big head from all the likes because who wouldn't like a peanut butter ball of puppy cuteness?

"Thanks for coming, Sebastian. I could use some help. Well, I'm okay," I joke, patting my own flat belly, "but The Chunkster is looking a little rotund, so some advice to get him into game day shape would be great."

"No worries, man. We can all use a little extra pump time." He holds up an arm, flexing to show me his bicep, which I'm man enough to admit is

impressively large. “That’s how we get the goods,” he adds with a wink, dropping his arm to pump his hips in the air.

Is he for real?

“Yeah.” I laugh awkwardly.

Sebastian gives his bicep an affectionate pat and then flashes a big smile. “I got you, big dude.”

Thankfully, he’s talking to Chunky, not me. “Let me get some filler film of him goofing off.” Sebastian pulls his phone out and starts filming Chunky, who’s sniffing around the grass a few feet away. Completely oblivious to the beginning of his fifteen minutes of fame, Chunky chooses that moment to squat and poop. “Oh, shit! Literally.”

I grab a bag off the leash thrown over my shoulder and clean up while Sebastian huffs out in annoyance and drops his phone to his side.

“Sorry,” I say in surprise, placating Sebastian’s instant mood switch.

Damn, bro. It’s not that serious, just a sixty-second TikTok.

“Take two,” Sebastian shouts. Sebastian is acting like a movie director ordering around a B-list actor in a scene. But Chunky’s no actor, he’s a dog. And while he’s trained, he’s no Lassie or Beethoven. “Good, good,” Sebastian hums. “I’ll do the voice-over later.”

“Oh, okay. So, what do you recommend I try with him?” I’ve got a good veterinarian whose recommendations I trust implicitly, and Chunky is doing well. But that doesn’t mean I won’t take some advice, especially since Sebastian required prepayment for a consult.

Plus, I need to establish some camaraderie before I start asking questions that might raise suspicions. Not sure what detective guide I’m following to decide that, but it seems logical. I can’t exactly ask flat-out if Sebastian knows what happened to Richard Horne and expect him to hang around for the follow-up questions.

“You said he’s doing well on his nutrition? Under doctor’s orders that include adequate protein, carbs, and fat, plus vitamins and minerals?”

Damn, Sebastian flips from vapid influencer to well-spoken and informed like most people change underwear.

“Oh, yeah, prescribed food all the way. He’s down seven pounds in six months and is more active, but we could all do better, you know?” I confide. “I try not to give him treats, but those pretty puppy dog eyes . . . they get me every single time. *Isn’t that right, sweet boy?*”

Sebastian smirks at my baby talk, and I feel like he just swiped my man card right out of my wallet. Thankfully, he doesn't say anything but silently watches Chunky for a moment more. "It's not a treat if it's not good for him, dude."

"Wise words."

"Yeah, you gotta be firm, with your dog and your woman, 'cuz you know what's best for 'em. Amiright?" He nudges me with his elbow and chuckles like that's brilliant advice.

Okay, maybe for Chunky it is, but even I know telling a woman she can't have a piece of chocolate when she wants one is a bad idea.

A really bad idea.

In fact, it seems like a sure-fire way to end up in Zoey's morgue. Rightfully so.

"That what you do?" I'm not agreeing and not disagreeing, doing my best to play it safe. Sebastian looks me up and down, and if there were *any* chance I still had my man card, it's gone in his eyes now. I might as well have pulled it out and handed it over on a fringe-rimmed, rhinestone-bedazzled velvet pillow. Clearing my throat, I summarize, "No treats. Got it."

Sebastian's lips twitch but I can see the pity smile.

"What do you recommend instead . . . maybe for Chunky . . . and me? Nutrition-wise, I mean. Or exercises?"

I'm not flirting, nor am I admitting that Sebastian is more manly than I am, despite the blond, flowing locks, big biceps, flat abs, and testosterone-fueled scruff on his face that makes him look like a modern-day Fabio. Nope, this is all part of my plan to organically bring up the green smoothie Richard Horne was imbibing each day.

"Lean protein and veggies. Those steamer bags of broccoli and carrots are good. Canned chicken and tuna too."

"For me or Chunky? He'd eat anything I put in front of him, but I'd rather have a steak. Or hide the veggies in a smoothie I choke down." I pull a face, playing up my veggie-hating. "Ya feel me?" I aim for his bro-speak tone.

"Totally." He holds up a fist, and I bump it, feeling victorious. "I meant for the big dude. You can stick with the steak for sure. As for the vegetables, there's a smoothie I recommend. Green Extreme Plus—you heard of it?"

“No. It tastes good?”

“Well, no. But it’s good for you.” He shrugs. “And you can put vitamins and shit in it, hold your nose, and chug it like a beer.” He upends an imaginary cold one.

“Sounds disgusting. Where do I get it?” I say with a laugh he echoes. “And what extra shit do I put in it?” I eye him up and down, much the way he did me, but I feign being impressed and add, “Can I put pure lead in it to get pumped?”

That’s as close to the truth as I can tiptoe toward. I can’t exactly ask for heavy metal recommendations.

Sebastian bows up a bit, and I’m afraid he’s gotten suspicious of my questions. There’s a short moment where I’m sure my cover is blown, and I prep for an attack of some sort.

Fuck, let it be verbal and not physical! If this guy punches me, I’m going down like a Charlie Brown Christmas tree under Paul Bunyan’s axe. I’m not that puny, but he’s considerably . . . formidable. Thankfully, it seems to be more of a showoff moment than a beatdown one. “All natural, dude. No ’roids needed.”

Well, shit. That didn’t work.

I carefully try again.

“Come on, you gotta be adding a little something. Mega vitamins? Black market testosterone?” I cajole. “You can tell me. *Puh-lease tell me.*” I hold up my arm, not flexing at all, and wiggle my triceps like it’s a bingo wing.

“Sorry, dude. No secret sauce, but the protein and veggies will help. So will some exercises. Let’s see if we can get you and the chunky dude on a routine that’ll help you both.”

Oh, yeah, Chunky.

That’s how I got him here.

Chunky’s having the time of his life, sniffing every blade of grass in the park and making friends with the handful of other dogs here. “Sure. Sounds great.”

I guess I might as well get some actual advice for Chunky and me, especially if I’m not getting much more information about the possibly poisonous smoothies. At least now I know that the specific brand we found in Yvette’s trash is one Sebastian recommends, which puts him closer to Richard Horne’s death.

Sebastian has Chunky and me doing laps around the dog park, dropping to the grass for push-ups at every corner. Well, I do push-ups while Chunky sits and catches his breath.

“Make sure to start slow. No more than twenty minutes total so Chunky gets used to the increased activity safely,” Sebastian advises.

“Let’s stop there, and I’ll film some activities you can do in place with the big guy. Less impact for you too,” Sebastian says with a wink as though I’m panting like Chunky is. I’m not tired, considering my near daily runs, but I am playing up a little bit.

So I smile as though I’m grateful. I hand Chunky’s leash over to Sebastian when he holds his hand out and stand back as Sebastian becomes the social media guru I saw on his profile.

He holds his phone at arm’s length, talking to the camera. “Hey guys, this is Sebastian, your favorite dog trainer. Today, I’m here with a special guy that’s got a problem we can all understand. A few extra ell-bees to drop . . .”

He goes on to take Chunky and the viewers on a workout regimen that involves a lot of sitting, begging, and lying down and getting up. Thankfully, Chunky does pretty well, even when Sebastian removes the leash so his feet don’t keep getting tangled up in it. “Usually, when training one of my special friends, I’d use a small treat as a reward, but that won’t work for Chunky. So instead, I use a ball as reward, letting him focus and follow it, and only occasionally, get control of it. Once he finds it to be an exciting treat, you can add playing fetch to his daily regimen.”

Sebastian throws the ball, and Chunky goes running after it as expected. The only problem? Chunky doesn’t play fetch, so when he gets to the ball he desperately wanted, he drops to the grass to play with it. Sebastian growls and lowers his phone. “Seriously?”

Wow, bro-dude has left the building again. Sebastian’s easygoing until something messes up his shots. Then he’s a quick-tempered dick. I wonder if that had anything to do with Richard Horne’s death? I might not have found out the poison, but some personality traits might be telling.

“Uh, he doesn’t know fetch. Sorry.”

Sebastian sighs. “It’s fine. I’ll finish another way.” He blinks twice and lifts the phone again, flipping a mental switch to become friendly and smiling. “Guess we’ll have to add teaching Chunky the return part of

fetch.” He laughs and points at Chunky in the frame before rolling his eyes in a charmingly cute ‘whatcha gonna do’ way.

He lowers the phone, and it’s like that never happened, as though that personality didn’t just pop out of him on command. “All right, dude. Think we got it. Anything else?”

“No, I think that’s everything.” I wish there were another angle to ask about the smoothie extras, but without outright accusation, there’s no way.

But there is one other thing . . .

“I’ll let you get on to whatever you have planned for the day. Hot date?” I guess with a gleam in my eye that begs for details even though I’m terrified at what he’s going to say. I prepare to keep my expression neutral.

“Nothing big. Hanging with another client. That one comes with fringe benefits, though, if you know what I mean.” He winks, nudging me with his elbow again.

That is information I can use, especially if he’s talking about Yvette. I smile back, punching him in the shoulder like I’m celebrating with him. “You sly dog. I bet you get all sorts of fringe benefits—clients and followers.”

Sebastian smirks, nodding. “You know it.” But then he leans in closer. “This one’s different, though.”

I pretend to be flabbergasted, whispering urgently. “The Dog Whisperer has a lady? Even with all the ‘gram ladies throwing it your way? Don’t tell me you’re getting locked down, dude?”

“Hell no.” He laughs so hard he snorts. “I got me a Sugar Momma. Blonde cougar who’s hungry for the D.”

He pats his hips as he brags, so certain that I’ll be . . . jealous? And *blonde cougar* could describe Yvette Horne.

Unless Sebastian’s got two clients who fit that profile?

“Good for you,” I say, playing along. “Going to see my girl too. Not a Sugar Momma, but Zoey’s pretty special.”

I drop her name, hoping Sebastian will do the same.

“Sounds like we’re killing it, dude!” Sebastian holds both hands up for high-fives and I slap palms with him. “Hit me up again if the big guy needs another session.”

“Yeah, will do.” Damn it, no name drop.

Sebastian throws me a wave and struts off toward the parking lot. I’m literally watching my chance walk away.

Do something! Anything! What can I do to get more information?

An idea hits me—a stupid and dangerous idea.

“Chunky!” I call at the same time I start jogging toward my dog. He doesn’t move from his spot in the grass, only covering the ball protectively so I don’t take it away. “I don’t want your ball, dumbass. Let’s go!” I clip the leash on his collar, but he doesn’t move. I pull gently, and Chunky lets out a whine of disagreement. “Ride? Wanna go for a ride?”

That’s the magic word, because he hops up and takes off for the gate with fresh energy. I open the car door, but Chunky can’t get in on his own yet, so I pick him up and quickly get him in place with his seatbelt on.

I’m hurrying, but I won’t forego safety.

Pulling out of the parking lot, I take off down the road after Sebastian’s truck. I’d love to say I put the pedal to the medal, but I can’t. However, I do go a reasonable five miles an hour over the speed limit.

There he is!

I see Sebastian’s truck ahead and slow back down.

Don’t get spotted.

I’ve never been more thankful for my nondescript, bland sedan. I follow at a distance, noting that we’re heading out of the city and toward the surrounding areas. In fact, this is the same way I would go to visit Zoey, which supports the idea that Sebastian is heading to Yvette’s again.

As we get further out, traffic disappears and I have to drop back even more, but I see him turn ahead. I’ve been on this road, not too long ago, in fact. Sebastian’s truck turns into Yvette Horne’s neighborhood. It’s small enough that there’s no way I can follow and not be spotted, so I pull over to the side of the road and turn my hazards on.

I take some deep breaths and consider my options. Is there any way I can go down that street and verify where Sebastian went without getting caught?

I can’t walk in because I won’t leave Chunky in the car. I can’t drive in because with the way the neighborhood is, I’ll have to go slow, increasing the odds of being seen.

“Damn it,” I hiss, and Chunky whines in the backseat, his tongue going crazy as he tries to comfort me from afar with his licking kisses. “It’s okay, Chunkster. I’m not mad at you. I’m frustrated because there’s no way to make this happen and I don’t like giving up without succeeding.”

He barks in response, and I cut my eyes to the mirror to see his reflection.

“It’s not a failure,” I argue. “I learned a lot about Sebastian . . . and the smoothies . . . and his relationship with Yvette. I just can’t confirm that’s where he is now, but it’s not likely he has more than one client in that small neighborhood. Right?”

Chunky licks his lips, Scooby Dooing the better part of his snout. I take that as agreement.

“Okay, let’s go see Zoey and tell her what we learned.”

CHAPTER 19



ZOEY

I stare at the stainless-steel table in front of me, covered with wrinkled and pressed paper instead of a dead body. It's honestly more challenging than a body.

Pull it together, Zoey. Examine the edges and put matching ones together like a puzzle. You like puzzles.

God, my pep talks haven't improved in the slightest. It doesn't help that I've been staring at these tiny bits of paper for hours. After Blake, Jacob, and I went through Yvette's trash, I couldn't help but think we might've missed something.

There was just so much of it, and though he was helpful, Jacob was being so dramatic about the gross factor that I didn't feel I'd given it the full breadth of an appropriate examination. So I brought it to work and dug through each stinky, disgusting bit of it again, spreading it out on the tables in the morgue under the bright fluorescent lights.

As it turns out, I was right. We *did* miss something.

This time, I found a handful of torn up paper. It could've been junk mail, an old bill, or even scribbled notes. But as I flattened each tiny piece out, trying to figure out what I'd found, I noticed a logo in the top corner.

A quick internet search told me that it's an internet pharmacy that specializes in folk medicines. And now, I've got most of the paper put together. But there are still a few key pieces that don't fit.

"One at a time, tackle one piece at a time," I tell myself.

"Who are you talking to? There's not even a dead body."

I jump in surprise, used to the quiet and solitude, and find Alver standing in the hallway across from my door. "You scared me!" I exclaim,

adding, “What are you doing down here?”

He might as well be sneering ‘I’m not in your morgue’ like a toddler ‘not touching’ their sibling even though their finger is mere millimeters from contact. Instead, Alver’s face scrunches up and he pinches his nose. “Ugh! What’s that smell? Is that trash?”

I sniff the air, not smelling anything. I’m used to all sorts of smells in my line of work, but trash is different from decomposition so you’d think I could smell that.

But nope . . . nothing. Alver’s probably just being dramatic again.

“I’m working. Can I help you with something?” It’s a clear dismissal, and I think, a solid attempt at avoiding answering his questions.

“Drop-Dead Gorgeous, you are a sick, strange one. I’m getting Sheriff Barnes.”

He turns and runs, or as close as he can get to running, though it’s more of a skedaddle than anything, toward the stairs, looking back over his shoulder as though he expects me to chase him.

Newsflash, this isn’t a horror movie where the cheerleader ends up being the serial killer that lured everyone to the old, abandoned building. Not that I was ever a cheerleader, or that the morgue is abandoned. Oh, and I’m definitely not a serial killer, no matter how much Alver gets on my last nerve. How did I ever think he was a friend?

I can see now that those offers of dinner were probably his way of being nosy and getting fodder for the gossip grapevine. No telling how many rumors I’ve been subjected to that started on his forked tongue. I roll my eyes in annoyance and call out, “Ask him to bring me a coffee, *black as my soul*,” I say in a deep, hollow voice and then add an evil, maniacal laugh. “*Mwah-ha-ha.*”

Is it wrong? Yeah.

Is it funny? Absolutely.

And hell, maybe it will get me a fresh coffee if Jeff’s feeling generous. I planned to call him before the end of the day anyway to share what I found, so this saves me the trouble.

Thanks, Alver! I think with saccharin sweetness and a pleased-with-myself smile. If he’d seen that, he definitely would’ve shat himself.

Oddly, that doesn’t make me feel bad like it once did. I am starting to realize that maybe Holly’s been right all along. People who have problems with me . . . they’re the problems.

It's not me, it never was me.

I move the most recent piece of paper that's driving me crazy around a few more times, turning it clockwise over and over, even flipping it to the other side. It's solid white, after all. There could be any number of places it'd go in this invoice puzzle.

There!

I get it slipped into place and pick up another one. I'm so close I can smell it! Victory, not trash. Still don't smell that.

Turn, turn, turn, flip, turn, turn.

I pull on my magnifying glasses to look at the edge a little closer. On a few pieces, I've been able to tell which side is the front by the tear.

Hmm, it looks like it goes this way. Here? No. Here? No.

Grr. I'm making such good progress, but it's not coming together. With the magnification glasses on, I lean down close to scan the pieces I have left to get into place and one catches my eye.

I pick it up and examine it closely under the light, reading the text printed there.

This is it!

I slot the tiny bit of paper into place and read out the name of what Yvette Horne ordered from the online folk remedy pharmacy. I'm not familiar with it offhand, but through the magic of Google, I will be.

I sense movement beside me and see a blue blob in the doorway out of the corner of my eye. My eyes are fine, but they're used to the magnifying lenses now so my regular vision, even peripherally, is a bit wonky.

"Hey, Jeff," I say, looking up and knowing I must look like Sybill Trelawney, eyes huge behind these glasses.

"Zoey." He sounds tired, frustrated, and maybe a teeny-tiny bit amused way down deep under his gruff exterior.

Way, way down deep.

"Thanks for coming down. Did you bring my coffee?" I ask casually as I set the magnifiers on the table, careful to not mess up my puzzle work.

Nothing to see here, just a regular old visit to Zoey's morgue.

Jeff's brows jump together, a sound of confusion grumbling in his throat. I lift my brow and cut my eyes from Jeff to Alver, who's standing back smugly.

"You used to bring me dinner," I remind him. "Is a coffee now and again too much to ask? Especially when you're creeping around like a

creepy creeper.”

I wiggle my fingers to mimic his stalking about. Okay, so my insults aren't much better than my pep talks judging by the twitches of Jeff's lips and mustache and the confused look on Alver's face.

“Alver, will you get Zoey a coffee, please?” Jeff asks without turning around. It's not really a question at all but an order.

“Make it two, actually. One for me and one for Jeff,” I add.

Alver huffs and spins on his heel for the stairs. When he's gone, I whisper, “You don't have to drink it if you don't want one, but I don't trust him not to poison me or spit it in. Hopefully, if there's a chance it's yours, he won't risk it.”

I look around for wood, holding a finger up to Jeff to step closer to my desk. One touch and crossed fingers, but I still don't feel lucky. I figure I'll have to judge whether or not to actually drink that coffee by the gleam in Alver's eyes when he comes back.

Jeff smiles, shaking his head in amusement. “Okay, Alver came shuffling up to tell me you're spreading trash everywhere, bitching about health codes.” He holds his hands up high, waving them around urgently in what I can only assume is an impression of Alver's presentation. “Hate to say it, Zoey, but he might have something on ya this time.” Jeff swirls his finger in a circle, indicating my tables of what is obviously . . . trash. “Whatcha doing?”

I drag my chair over, warning, “You'll probably want to sit down for this.”

“Oh, shit. That bad?” Jeff says, but he's smiling like I'm being silly as he drops to sit.

“Yeah.” I look at the trash spread out all over my morgue, not seeing the work it's going to take to get it clean to my exacting standards, but rather, the smoking gun I've found. I feel like Blake should be here to present this since we've done so much of it together, but Jeff needs to hear this immediately. “Remember when I told you there were some unanswered questions about the Richard Horne autopsy?”

Jeff narrows his eyes sharply, drawling out, “Yeah . . . and I remember telling you the case was closed. Heart attack.”

My shoulders draw up at the reminder of how far outside the lines I've gone. Usually, I would never. I don't want attention, preferring to hide from

everyone, but I needed to know the truth. I needed to understand for my own professional excellence.

And for Blake. Don't forget that part, my brain whispers.

"I couldn't let it go," I admit.

Jeff sighs as he leans forward to run his hands through his hair. Putting his elbows on his knees and frowning, he orders, "Out with it."

Oh, shit, that's his Sheriff voice, the one reserved for misbehaving DnDs—drunk and disorderlies.

So I get professional right back. "There was something bugging me about the second report. Long story short, Yvette Horne poisoned her husband. Here's the proof of what she bought off the internet to do it." I point at my mostly reassembled puzzle of paper bits, only now noticing the coffee stains and overall wrinkliness that make it a less than impressive smoking gun. "It's a supplement known to have high levels of lead, arsenic, and mercury. Trifecta of poison for when you want to make sure they're *really* dead."

"Mighty serious allegations, Zoey," Jeff says. "I know you can investigate, but you've always kept me in the loop before since I'm the one who would have to snap the cuffs on."

I don't blink under his considerable glare. "I know."

Hands on his thighs, he pushes up to stand. "Okay, then, show me what you got."

I wave him to the prep table where his eagle eyes take in the work I've done. "Here," I point to the logo in the corner. "This is the online pharmacy, and I use the word loosely. They specialize in folk remedies shipped in from overseas, no FDA approvals or safety checks because they're 'supplements'." I do finger quotes, and Jeff's brows drop an inch. "Not medicinal."

Moving lower, I point to the specific item Yvette bought. "I did some research. Independent lab studies have shown this contains measurable amounts of lead, arsenic, and mercury that all exceed the safety levels mandated by the FDA."

As Jeff scans the paper, he hums thoughtfully.

This is it! He's going to tell me good job and go arrest Yvette. Richard Horne will get the justice he deserves.

"What I see is that Yvette Horne ordered something from an online company. No proof she got it, no proof if she used it herself or gave it to

Richard or that damn dog, nothing to show she used enough of it to throw two lab tests out of whack. Hell, she could've ordered for Richard and he could've been dosing himself for all you know. It's all circumstantial. I don't like it," Richard says gently when he sees my jaw getting lower with every word, "but there ain't nothing illegal about buying shit off the internet. If there were, we'd be arresting every Tom, Dick, and Harry buying those penis-enhancing pills that don't work."

"What?" I murmur in surprise.

Clearing his throat, Jeff adds, "Not that I'd know about those pills. I'm just saying . . ."

I shake my head, finding some spine. "Not that! How can this not warrant some investigation, at least?" I hold my hands out wide, framing the paper again, thinking maybe he just didn't *really* see it.

"How did you get this? You left that part out of your story."

He can plainly see the trash laid out across three tables, a mixture of food wrappers, junk mail, used tissue, and more.

"Yvette Horne's trash," I say, quickly continuing, "and there's evidence she was having an affair too. That's motive. Plus the supplement is our means."

I swear, has he never seen a detective movie in his life? I'm laying the whole case out for him on a silver platter!

Okay, a stainless-steel table, but the idea's the same.

"An affair?" Jeff asks. Of course, like everyone out here, he's most interested in the salacious gossip angle.

"Yes! I've got the proof for you. It needs to go out to the lab for testing, but I put it in an evidence bag."

Okay, that might be pushing it, but a baggie from my kitchen was all I had, and I did date and sign it with a Sharpie I found in my junk drawer. I go over to the fridge in the corner. It's the medical-grade one, not my personal one. I wouldn't put a used condom in with my snacks, even if it is sealed in a Ziploc baggie.

"Is that a used condom?" Jeff sputters, jerking back with a grossed-out twist of his lips.

"Oh, don't tell me you've never seen a dirty rubber, Jeff," I chide. "This was collected weeks after Richard Horne was dead, so it can't be his. Yvette was having an affair."

“Put that away.” Jeff waves at the bag, and I set it back in the fridge for safekeeping. That done, he seems to relax a little, but he’s talking to me like I’m a cornered animal about to lash out. “Zoey, I don’t know what you’ve been up to here, and I commend your dedication, but all of it . . . I mean, it’s . . . the case is closed and the man’s already buried—”

“But this is new evidence.” I interrupt. “As county coroner, you know I have the right and the duty to investigate. Said it yourself.”

“Sure, you do,” Jeff says, “but like I said, I have to snap the cuffs, and the DA has to get a conviction. Now what do you know about that part?”

I shrug, knowing I look stupid now. “Not much.”

“Exactly,” Jeff growls. “Zoey, there’s a reason that we turn anything suspicious over to the State for investigation. First off, I ain’t got the budget to have county employees traipsing through someone’s garbage and doing investigations. I have to fight for a budget just to keep your damn fridge on as it is. Second, any arrest we make here gets tried here. And while it’s legal, folks in this part of the state are hypocritical as hell. They’ll have their noses all up in your business, yes. But if someone goes into court saying they found evidence going through the trash? Shit, they’d be all up in arms even before the DA could sit his ass down.”

“Then put the call in to the State,” I declare. “Richard Horne was murdered. I feel it, right here where I should have a cheeseburger right now!” I lay my hands over my gut, knowing he understands instincts.

Jeff taps his temple in response, adding, “Someone really smart told me heart attacks aren’t caused by heavy metals. The State team would only say the same thing.”

He shrugs, and that shrug of dismissal might as well be a slap to my face.

“It might’ve been from something else! She could’ve added another poison too!” I’m reaching for straws. I didn’t expect this at all. I thought I’d find evidence, Jeff would understand, maybe even appreciate it, and justice would be served for the man whose last moments were spent on my table with a story to tell that only I could hear.

“I’m sorry, Zoey. Really, I am. And I’ll look into it. But it has to be by the book, something I can hand off to the State all nice and tidy and wrapped up in a bow. Not . . . garbage spread out on a table.”

The rebuke stings. Especially since I didn’t do it by myself. I did it with Blake, but I guess that doesn’t matter to Jeff. He assumes, like everyone

else, that I'm alone.

"You promise to look into it? Jeff, she really killed him. I swear it."

He nods earnestly. "I will. You have my word on it."

"Do you want this?" I point at the invoice I painstakingly put together.

"Bag it up," he says with a sigh. "Hell, tape the thing together so someone could read it. But if I come back and tell you State ain't taking it, I want all of this shit in a box on a shelf, ignored. Now listen, in the future, if you really do have one of these feelings, come to me, okay? I don't need Alver runnin' into my office playin' tattletale and acting like an old biddy at Bingo Night. You don't want that either." He gives me a pointed look, and I wonder how many people heard Alver's version of the story about my trash-strewn morgue and are upstairs right now discussing whether or not Jeff is reading me the riot act.

"Okay," I say forlornly, all the wind knocked out of my sails.

Already dug down deep in my pity party, Alver's reappearance makes it suck even more.

It's my party and I'll cry if I want to.

He can see by the look on my face that his plan worked. Maybe not the way he wanted it to, but he's swimming in my misery like a pig in slop.

"Here's the coffees, Sheriff. DDG."

Jeff holds out his hands to take them both. "Anything I should know about these, Alver?" he asks directly. Guess Jeff's on the same thought train as I am about the coffees, at least. Alver shakes his head and Jeff's eyes narrow. Moving one to his lips, he sniffs deeply before taking a sip. Smacking his lips, he says, "Seems okay." Then he repeats the move on the other cup, drinking from them both as proof that they're not laced with laxatives or Visine.

"Which one you want?" Jeff asks me.

"Either. Just set it on my desk, please." It doesn't matter because I won't be drinking it anyway. I still don't trust either cup. Jeff sets one down, switches, and then switches back before throwing me a wink.

"You promise?" I ask one more time.

Dipping his head, Jeff vows, "I do. Now clean this mess up."

He added a little spice to that bit, probably for Alver's sake because he smiles triumphantly.

As Jeff turns around to leave, I catch Alver's eye and draw my thumb across my neck with a dark look that threatens murder and mayhem. Alver

squawks and follows Jeff out, quick-stepping to get to his side. With a sigh, I look at my work. Everything I've done, that I knew would be helpful, reduced to . . . trash.

* * *

“HEY, SUGAR SNOOKUMS!” a voice says with barely restrained laughter. I want to be amused by it, but my brain is a big, gray blob of ‘fuck everything’, and I don’t think there’s a thing in existence, not even one of Jacob’s pranks, that could make me smile right now.

Maybe I should install a revolving door in my morgue. With as many interruptions as I’m getting today, it’d make sense. Hell, it’d make moving bodies in and out easier too.

Don’t be grumpy because Jeff pissed on your parade.

I plaster a smile on my face. “Hey, Blake.” I aim for flirty but must miss the mark by a mile because Blake’s smile melts into a frown.

“What’s wrong?” He comes to me, gathering me in his arms with his hands on my hips, and looks deep into my eyes.

The worry is plain to see, no filters or walls, just pure openness and readiness to listen. I want to fall into him and rage out my frustration by yelling and sweeping the whole invoice into the trash.

But I don’t do that.

It’s not who I am.

I’m the calm in a storm, handling whatever shit life throws my way with a shrug of ‘never expected anything different’ and making sure other people don’t feel what I do. But I failed this time, like so many times before. Blake’s going to be disappointed . . . in Jeff, that our work isn’t going to result in a big arrest victory, and mostly, in me.

I can’t hold his intense gaze, so I focus on the tiny line between his brows instead.

“I talked to Sheriff Barnes. He says that I should drop this investigation while in the same breath telling me he’d look into it. Not sure I believe him, though. I think he was just placating me. Even though I figured out how Yvette did it.”

“You did?” Blake’s excitement is palpable, and he doesn’t seem upset about Jeff at all.

At least somebody gets it, how far we were willing to go to figure this out, how hard the research has been, and he'll definitely appreciate how many teeny-tiny pieces of paper I puzzled together.

"Look . . ." I point at the table where the invoice is now taped together. "I went through the trash again because I felt like we might've missed something."

"And I'm guessing we did."

I tell him about fitting the scraps of paper back together, the online pseudo-pharmacy, and the supplement Yvette bought. His eyes narrow as he examines the invoice.

"You did it. This is how she poisoned him." Blake holds the paper up, showing it to me like it holds the importance I thought it held. "You are so fucking brilliant! How long did this take you?" He makes it sound like I cured cancer or figured out how to make chocolate be calorie-free.

"Hours," I lament, "which would've all been worth it if it were useful."

He places a quick, soft kiss to my forehead that soothes me more than I'd admit. "Useful to Jeff or not, it's useful to me."

"Huh?"

Blake shrugs. "I work in insurance, not the law. And our standard is a lot more . . . asshole-ish might be the best word. Let me see what I can do. Because what you found is the truth. And that matters. *Answers matter.*"

I don't think we're talking about Yvette Horne's shopping habits anymore, but rather, my finally agreeing to go on a date.

That 'yes' changed everything.

"They do. Does that mean we're going out tonight? Are you here to sweep me off my feet and whisk me away to dinner?" I cringe at my awesomely bad flirting skills. They're not the best, but hopefully, they're better than my pep talks. And I could use some pity pizza for my pity party. Maybe a pity White Claw too.

"Uh, does whisking you away to your place count?" His sheepish grin begs me to say yes once more. "I went there first, and Jacob offered to watch Chunky so I could hunt you down here. I promised to bring pizza back as payment. It's not the date I promised you yet, but it could be fun?"

Pizza sounds perfect, but . . . "Hunt? Pretty sure I'm the easiest person in the world to find. I go home, go to work, rinse, and repeat," I say, tilting my head left, then right, and then do the same thing again. "I am so ridiculously boring."

“You are the furthest thing from *boring*, Miss Walker,” he says, squeezing me around the middle and shaking me a little bit, which makes me laugh. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

The request startles me but delights me too. He doesn’t coddle me, doesn’t want my intelligence to be invisible. To the contrary, he wants me to feed my brain, my soul, and enjoys that same journey with me.

“Did you know the word ‘coroner’ shares a Latin root with the word ‘crown?’ Because the coroner worked for the crown in most cases in Europe.”

“Fascinating.”

If anyone else told me that after sharing a useless trivia factoid, I’d assume they were being sarcastic or polite. Blake actually means it.

He is fascinated by me, and I’m fascinated by him.

“Tell me something too.”

Blake tilts his head and grins. “How about I tell you over pizza because I had a pretty interesting day myself?”

“Ooh, can’t wait to hear about the exciting happenings in the life insurance world,” I tease.

“Ha-ha,” Blake bites back. “I’ll have you know my informative day was spent at the dog park with Sebastian. And then . . .” He lowers his voice, looking over each shoulder even though we’re totally alone, not even a DB in here right now, “I followed him to Yvette’s. He called her his ‘Sugar Momma’.”

I freeze, sliding more and more puzzle pieces into place. They might not be pieces of paper, but they are parts of this mystery all the same.

And then Blake’s last words process.

“Sugar Momma?” I echo.

Blake’s eyes widen with unshed laughter, and I can feel mine do the same, and then we’re both laughing so hard I have tears streaming down my face.

“Those are *his* words! Along with cougar. And I had to play along with a straight face! You have no idea how hard that was!”

“Rawr,” I growl, putting up a clawed hand.

“Not that kind of cougar, Miss Walker,” Blake jokes with an awful game-show host wink that makes me laugh even harder. “Though I might put those nails to good use . . . after pizza. Let’s go.” My laughter dries up when he catches my hand to press a kiss to the back while giving me a dark

look that promises dirty, sexy things that'll make me forget all about the disappointment of today.

My laughter is the only thing dry, though.

The rest of me?

Hot and wet.

And I don't mean the sheen of sweat on my forehead. Nope, lower than that, definitely way lower.

CHAPTER 20



BLAKE

“**S**he did what?” I blurt, sitting up straight in my chair so fast that the leather creaks beneath me.

Frederick is on the other end of the line, sighing in exasperation. “Check your email. I just sent over the paperwork. I knew this claim would be a pain in my ass. Figured it’d come to this sooner or later. Though I didn’t expect it this soon.”

“No shit,” I reply, not caring to watch my language or stay professional with the big boss. Not when I’ve been named in a lawsuit against Everlife.

Yvette Horne actually did it. Since Sheriff Barnes closed the case on Richard’s death, deeming it due to natural causes, a.k.a. a heart attack over his morning breakfast, Yvette’s beyond ready to get her grubby little hands on the claim payout.

And apparently, she’s done waiting.

I wonder if Barnes’s agreeing to look into the case again, however unofficially, has anything to do with the fire she’s lighting?

“Does she even realize that our standard process is three months? And that’s when cause of death is cut and dry. Something Richard’s most definitely wasn’t.”

“I told the lawyer that, but he kept saying, and I quote, ‘my client is entitled to these benefits, and Everlife is needlessly prolonging the process in an attempt to avoid payout.’ I swear it was like he was reading from a cue card or a teleprompter or something. Maybe he’s new?” He pauses, humming thoughtfully, “Or flipping it around, trying to make it seem like he is so we underestimate him?”

Frederick is twisted enough that he sometimes sees it in others well before anyone else clues in to it. Playing things smart and slick is how he got to the table of big dogs at the corporate office, so I respect his expertise.

“I don’t know,” I tell Frederick as I scan the court filings he emailed me that name Holland Monroe as Yvette’s attorney. “He’s local, but I’ve never heard of him. Want me to ask around?”

“No, we’ve got our legal team on it.” The threat is clear that Frederick expects our corporate team to outgun some local schmuck attorney easily. “Just be ready to testify next week.”

“Next week? How in the hell did she get a hearing that soon?”

Court cases usually take weeks of depositions, hearings, mediation, and getting court dates. Not a week.

“Guess the courts aren’t too busy out there in Hicksville,” he says snidely. “Not enough land disputes and baby daddy drama, I guess.”

“It’s not that bad.” I try to defend Williamson County, but he cuts me off.

“Just keep your paperwork and evidence tight, Blake. We can get a drink afterward and discuss your future in the company.”

I hear the truth. If this case goes well, I’m set. Maybe I’ll even get opportunities for bigger and better contracts that would mean I’m not constantly chasing new clients and business, filming commercials with Amy in corn fields.

If it doesn’t go well, I might as well let the children of the corn take me because I’m as good as dead either way.

“Sure, Frederick. Sounds great.”

* * *

THE PHONE RINGS in my ear for the third time.

Why isn’t Zoey answering my calls?

This isn’t exactly something I can put in a text. I hang up and dial again, but an incoming call interrupts me. It’s a number I don’t know, but something makes me answer it.

“Hello?”

“Blake, it’s Zoey. I’m on Jacob’s phone.”

“Okay. What’s wrong with yours?”

That's a relief because at least she's not avoiding me. I'd started to get worried she was ghosting me, scared once again and retreating into her fears after I did so much to chase her out of them.

"Nothing, but uh . . ." There's a pause, and I can feel her desire to say *something*.

"What, Zoey?"

"Did you get . . . have you seen . . . uhm, how. Was. Your. Day?"

The intentional directness of the question is obvious, and I realize she wants to talk about the same thing I need to talk to her about. But she wants to see if I know anything first.

"Are you talking about Yvette Horne's lawsuit?" I ask.

A whoosh of air releases from her, and relief floods her voice. "Oh, thank God. Yes, and what the hell? And what are we going to do?"

I get the feeling her mind is spinning and she could ramble on and on with more and more questions.

"Nothing," I reply simply.

"Nothing?"

"Well, not about the lawsuit. That's between Yvette and Everlife, but—"

"I can't see you anymore," she blurts out.

"What?" Shock fires through me, hot and cold all at the same time.

"I mean, not until after the court hearing."

Okay, that's a little better, but . . . "Why? That has nothing to do with us."

Us.

I like the sound of that. I'm finally one half of a couple, like Amy and Fernanda or my mom and dad. It feels good.

"It does, though. You're named in the suit with Everlife, and I'm named as a witness. For the claimants."

My heart stops, and I can't help a little bit of anger filling my voice. "What? Why?"

It's a stupid question, but I'm dumbstruck as I realize she's right. In a criminal case, defense and prosecution witnesses being together would be a conflict of interest, but—

"Does that even matter in a civil case?" I'm reaching for straws, but she's worth the risk.

"I don't know! Maybe? Probably? I've never been called to court before, and I can't fuck this up," Zoey says with a sigh. At least this isn't

about her getting scared, but the retreat is the same, reaffirming that being with me holds some danger. Even if it's legal risk, not life or death. "Especially if I want Jeff to look into Richard's death more."

I can't help it, I growl at the idea of spending even a single day without her. "I see."

Zoey sighs miserably again. "It's about our careers. I can't chance anything putting my professional reputation in question. Not when the whole county would love to see me fail. Not that they'd have luck getting anyone else to do what I do."

Bitter doesn't sound good on her, but I wouldn't want her to lose the one thing she's always done with pride.

"I have never been more tempted to break the rules, say fuck it to right and wrong, and do whatever the hell I want. A rebel with a cause . . . you."

At least that gets a warmer chuckle. "Aww, you're sweet. But you're no rebel, Mr. Hale."

"I could be," I argue, knowing she's right.

"I could be too, but it's not who we are. And I like who you are," she tells me, and I can hear how much it scares her to admit that.

"I like who you are too." I sigh in resignation. "Okay, I've been waiting for you for weeks. Hell, longer than that than if you count when I was looking for the mysterious figment of my imagination woman who'd get turned on by my reading Oprah's Book Club books to her. I guess one more week without you won't *kill* me."

"Still too soon," she deadpans about the death joke. "What do we do? I don't want to let you go. Not yet."

That's enough to reassure me. "Get comfy and lie down in bed," I tell Zoey.

"Ooh, what are we doing?"

She sounds excited, and I almost change my mind, but more than phone sex, Zoey needs—hell, I need—something normal, something us.

"I'm going to read you to sleep, Miss Walker."

* * *

ME: *Hey, Jacob. Can you tell Zoey something for me?*

Jacob: *Sure. Keep it clean though. She's my sister-slash-mom and I don't need to hear your dirty porn talk.*

Me: *In the U.K., there was a seal couple, Sija and Babyface. They had too many babies (fire emoji . . . eggplant emoji . . . peach emoji) so they had to be separated. But their keepers didn't want them to be sad (like me), so they set up iPads so the seals could keep in touch. It's called . . . wait for it . . . SealTime. I miss you, Miss Walker.*

Jacob: *Dude, do you really want me to read her all that? Can't you just send a dick pic or something? I won't look. Okay, I will. But I won't laugh. Okay, I'll do that too. But damn . . . that's like a whole book.*

Me: *Just do it. She'll like it.*

Jacob: *If you say so.*

My phone is quiet for a long two minutes while I stare at it, hoping Zoey likes the trivia tidbit and that it makes her feel how much I miss her. Just when I'm getting impatient, my phone finally dings again.

Jacob: *Wtf, man. You made her cry! Seals make her cry? I'll get you for this, asshole.*

Me: *Sorry, not sorry.*

Jacob: *Whatever. Do seals really have . . . eggplant emoji . . . and . . . peach emoji?*

Me: *No. But it was better than saying they were fucking like rabbits.*

Jacob: *Shit. You did send me dirty talk. Worse that it was about cute, little, slippery seals.*

Me: *Good night, Jacob.*

Jacob: *Night, man. She's smiling again, so I think she liked it, but you two are weird as shit.*

I send him a thumbs-up and set my phone down on the nightstand. This is torture. I haven't read a single page in my book since I read with Zoey two nights ago. And the wood figurine I've started to think of as 'hers' is lying on the pillow too. It's no substitute for Zoey, but it's a sweet reminder.

And now, every time I see wood, I get hard because it makes me think of Zoey.

Fuck, I miss her, and this week can't be over fast enough.

* * *

“WHERE’S OUR RINGER?” Heather asks on Saturday at trivia night.

The pain must show on my face, because her eyes, which are topped with red glitter shadow to match her talon red nails tonight, narrow as her whole face pinches in. “Oh, fuck, did you mess it up already? I liked her.”

Cole must overhear Heather’s accusation because he yells, “Can I get Zoey’s number then? Maybe she’d feel up to wiping the floor with you. Trivia-wise, I mean.”

He absolutely doesn’t mean with trivia, though I think he’d enjoy making us lose by any means possible. But his eyes never leave Heather as he asks for another woman’s phone number, and I think jealousy is his true goal.

“We’re fine,” I tell them both. “We’ve got work stuff going on.” That’s as much detail as I can give considering it’s a pending case.

“Mmm-hmm,” Heather hums, her brows going up in disbelief. “Work stuff,” she echoes with the addition of finger quotes. “That’s what I tell guys when I’m giving them the brushoff.”

Her mention of other guys seems to have the effect Cole was looking for with her because his face goes stone-still and he growls, “What other guys?”

I wish they’d get their shit straight and just be together already. At least they could be. I can’t even see Zoey for another few days, and they’re over here fighting what they both so obviously want. Which is exactly what I tell them two hours later after a few too many celebratory rounds of beer that dissolve my filter into tattered nothingness.

“You two should fuck already. Quit dancing around it when we all know you want each other.” I point back and forth from Heather to Cole with my beer glass in hand.

“Shut up, man.” Trey shushes me, punching my shoulder too hard, which he shouldn’t do because he’s sober enough to know his own strength.

Plus, he spilled my beer.

“Hey! We’re all thinking it,” I argue, looking around to the whole trivia group who are mostly smiling.

“Well, thanks for the game tonight, guys. Too bad we’ve got to be going,” Trey tells the table as he hoists me up.

“What? I don’t want to go home yet.” I try to push him off me, but I only succeed in stumbling over my own feet. “Zoey’s not there . . . hiccup . . . so why bother?” I slur.

“You are so fucking gone for her. Worse than I ever was with Serena.”
Trey laughs as he helps me into the passenger seat of his car by shoving me in.

“No way. You were a mess over her. Remember when you wrote her a poem and played the guitar? You don’t even know how to play the guitar!”
I laugh so hard it turns into a cough and my eyes tear up.

“I do play the guitar,” Trey replies grumpily.

“Not well.”

“Maybe,” he admits as he buckles his seatbelt and double-checks mine.
But even drunk, I buckle up. I always buckle up.

“Serena, Serena . . . will you be my queen-a?” I sing loud and off-key.

Trey laughs. “Well, I couldn’t rhyme her name with hyena. I’d have never gotten laid.”

“Facts,” I deadpan, pointing my finger at him. “You’re smart, man. Tell me . . . what am I going to do?”

“It’s two more days, Blake. Not forever. And you’ve been texting the woman every morning and night.”

I shake my head, which is really not a good idea because the lights on the dash swirl with halos. “Not enough.”

“Phone sex?” he suggests, and I consider it for a long moment.

Zoey in her bed, touching herself as I tell her what to do, her voice in my ear telling me what to do as I jack off. But fuck, I’ve been doing that with my own imagination.

“I need to see her.”

“So sneak out and see her,” Trey says as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“We should sneak out!” I say, just now coming up with the most brilliant idea ever.

“Good idea,” Trey says flatly. He doesn’t get how genius I am.

Tomorrow, Zoey and I are sneaking out because I need to see her, listen to her, hold her, taste her.

“Inner voice, Blake. Not your outside voice,” Trey says nonsensically.

Why’s he smiling?

* * *

THE NEXT NIGHT, I don't remember a lot about trivia night. But I do remember my brilliant idea. The moon is now high in the dark sky, thankfully only a crescent that illuminates without making it so bright that any nosy people can see what I'm up to as I sneak into the trailer park. I park almost a half-mile away behind a dumpster and walk the rest of the way too, just to make sure no one can hear my car or see the headlights as I drive in.

Under the cover of darkness, I duck down next to Zoey's trailer when I see light flashing in the living room. That must be Jacob playing video games. I pull my phone out to text him, hissing when the light of the screen blinds me. I lower it down and look around frantically but sense no movement.

Me: *You up?*

The lights keep flashing, glowing a blue-tinted white as I hold my breath and wait impatiently. "No! You bush camping motherfucker!"

I text him again.

Me: *Open the door.*

This time, there's movement, and a few seconds later, the screen door opens slowly, letting out a creak that could wake the dead.

"Blake?" Jacob whispers.

"Shh!" I hiss, coming up the steps and pushing my way inside. "Shut the door!" I order, and though he raises his brows at me for the barked command, he does it.

"What are you doing here?" he asks. "Aren't you and Zo supposed to be staying apart until after court?"

"Yeah, but . . ." I can't explain it—especially not to him, since I barely understand it myself. "I need to see her."

Jacob looks over his shoulder toward Zoey's bedroom. "You know this is against everything she believes. You're asking for the bad luck gods to strike you down with lightning."

"I'm not her grandfather," I tell him gently, knowing he lost the man too.

He smirks, but there's a haunted look in his eyes he's trying to cover. "That was a test to see how much she's told you. See if you know her history."

"I do. Just as importantly, I'd like to think I know her future. If you'll let me by and she doesn't freak out. I brought a coaster so she can touch

wood for luck.”

I reach in my back pocket and hold up one of the new coasters I bought for my living room to show him.

“You brought a *coaster*?” he says, trying to be quiet while he laughs. It’s not working.

“Shh! Yeah, I brought a coaster. That’s not weird. It helps Zo’s nerves if she can touch wood.”

“Oh, *I bet*. On that note,” he says, grabbing his phone from the coffee table, “I’m going to Angelo’s to spend the night.”

“Thanks, man.” I offer a hand, which he shakes firmly.

“I’m going to make a production of it as cover. Then the only thing people will be talking about is little old hellion me. Not Zoey, for a change. But you need to be gone well before sunrise,” he warns. “Thelma and Louise get started on coffee around six, and by eight, they’ll have added a ‘wee dash of warmth’ to it.” He tips an imaginary bottle into his hand and then upends it, mimicking one for the cup and one for the gut. “Whisky.”

“I got the hint. Thanks for the tip.”

“Ready?” he asks, shooting me two thumbs up.

Before I can answer, he stomps to the front door and pushes the screen open so it creaks loudly, then slams the wood door closed behind him. Outside, I hear him yell, “Angelo, I’m gonna whip your skinny ass, man. You left me alone in the Steamy Swamp while running off like a fucking newb for what? To go fishing for a purple SMG!”

He keeps shouting as he gets further away, and I hear someone else grumpily tell him, “Jacob, shut the hell up!”

I smile because his plan seems to have worked. Maybe a little too well because I hear footsteps behind me. I whirl just in time to see Zoey’s face go from ‘I’m going to murder that boy’ to ‘what the hell’ to ‘oh!’

“Blake?” She rubs at her eyes disbelievingly and then realizes what she has on. More importantly, what she doesn’t have on . . . pants. Her sleep shirt barely reaches the tops of her thighs and her feet are covered in slouchy socks.

No ice-cold toes, I think, even though I’d happily warm her up from head to toe right now. Fuck, I’ve missed her. Texting here and there through Jacob hasn’t been nearly enough.

Not for me.

I want to see her expressions as she tells me about her day, gross as it might be. I want to hear the things she's learned, no matter how silly or obscure, because I'm fascinated by what she finds interesting. I want to lick her pulse at her neck when it skyrockets as I touch her body and give her pleasure.

But she's pulling at her shirt uncomfortably.

"Hey, Zo." I keep my voice even and calm, holding my hands out as though she might attack me.

"What are you doing here?" she whispers snappishly. "This is totally against the rules!"

The reminder probably seems warranted, but I'm beyond caring at this point. For her, I truly have become a rebel who will throw caution to the wind and break rules if they don't suit me.

I cross the room in three strides, backing her up against the wood-paneled wall. "I missed you." And then, just in case she's had any backslide and gotten unsure about us, I remind her why everything about us works with a kiss.

My lips meld over hers as I breathe her in. She freezes beneath me for a moment in which my heart stutters, afraid something has changed. But then she goes liquid, letting me invade. I explore her mouth with my tongue and suck at hers enticingly when she explores mine in return.

I pull at her shirt, perhaps a bit too roughly because I feel the thin cotton give way to my desire. Zoey doesn't object, just pulls me toward the narrow length of counter in the kitchen, the two of us twisting and turning, almost dancing, until I have her right where we need to be.

She hops up, her delectable ass perched on the edge as I pull myself out, already rock hard and aching. I grip my cock tightly at the base, my free hand reaching for my wallet, but Zoey stops me.

"Now, please. I'm safe."

I grip her jaw, forcing her unfocused eyes to mine. "Zo?" I need her to be sure. I've been inside her, know the heaven she holds, but if I feel her with nothing between us, there will be no going back for either of us. Ever.

There's already no going back, my mind whispers. That's true, but this is a very precise, specific showing of that, and she has to understand what she's offering if I'm going to take her raw.

She twists her head in my hand, kissing the pad of my thumb before swirling her tongue there. "Yes." The word is as clear as her eyes suddenly

are. She knows. She understands.

My thumb still in her mouth, I lean into her, crowding her until I pin her shoulders against the upper cabinets and her head falls back to the fake wood with a soft thud. I take my thumb back, pulling her panties to the side to rub her own saliva over her clit before gathering her juices to spread them over her pussy as well.

She writhes, her body arching into my touch as I trace my hands roughly up her body to cup her breasts. She pulls the torn sleep shirt up and off, her hair falling freely over her shoulders, to give me better access. I'm not willing to let go of her for long enough to remove my own shirt, so I just shove the hem over my head. Zoey's hands immediately cover my chest, her short nails digging into my muscles.

For once, I let go of my safe side. I thrust, both of us gasping as my cock slides deep into her. What's better than heaven? I have a ridiculously vast vocabulary but don't have words to describe *this*. Whatever it is, I'm feeling beyond-heaven right now. I grunt as I grind inside her, needing to feel every inch of her silky, wet walls grip me.

"Fuck, I need you," I growl, pulling back and slamming home again. Zoey's hands move to my biceps, gripping me tightly in encouragement. Her every stuttered gasp is music to my ears.

"Yes . . . I . . . you . . ." She moans between each driving stroke, but her words float away too.

There's no more space for words, for thoughts, for feelings. There's no time in between panting breaths and hard slaps of our bodies.

Despite all of our combined intelligence, we're animals, primal beings at our core, and we hungrily unleash on each other. I claim her with every hammering plunge, and she returns in force, mashing her lips against mine, combining our breaths. Her noises get higher pitched, almost keening, and I feel myself swell, trembling on the edge.

Sensing my impending orgasm, she bites my lower lip sharply. The pain pulls me back for a thrust, then a second, and a third as her legs lock around my back to pull me in tightly. With a final hard stroke, I explode deep inside her, my cock pulsing and both of us crying out as hard, knee-quaking orgasms rip through us simultaneously.

I lay my head against hers, panting with exertion as she holds me, her breath coming in shuddering hitches. "Blake."

“You’re mine,” I pant, unable to stop my words. “No rule can change that. I’ll break them all, time after time, no matter the consequences. You’re mine, Zoey Walker.”

She smiles, not the big grin she always makes me work for but a small, sweet one that says I’m inside her in more ways than one. With my cock still buried, I wrap my arms around her hips and lift her up, her legs squeezing my waist as I turn toward her bedroom. “Where are you going?”

“You think I’m done with you? I haven’t seen you in days. I’m taking you to bed to do *everything* you deserve,” I promise her. “And more, if you’ll let me.” I flash her a charming smile before letting it turn lecherous as I bounce her once on my already-hardening cock to make sure she knows exactly what she’s getting herself into.

Zoey whoops out a laugh and holds me tighter. “Does that include a new sleep shirt?”

“Absolutely not. No clothes for you or me, Miss Walker. That way, I can slip right back inside you when we wake up. Hell, I might just sleep all tucked up inside, warm and cozy.”

* * *

AFTER ROUND TWO, or maybe it’s three, we lay in Zoey’s bed. It’s lumpier than mine, but I like that it makes her melt into me, her head on my shoulder and her leg thrown over mine. But we don’t sleep. We don’t even pretend we’re going to, leaving the lamp on so we can see each other. I’ve missed just seeing her.

Instead of sleep, we talk all night, about everything we’ve missed in the last few days and nothing of consequence, until the elephant in the room tap dances its way to the center and forces us to acknowledge it.

“What do you think is going to happen tomorrow?” she asks around four in the morning. “Well, technically today, I guess.” I can hear the worry making her voice tight, and I press a soft kiss to her forehead.

“We’ll tell the truth and then the judge will decide. That’s all there is to it. Maybe they’ll even settle beforehand? Two-thirds of cases do, before they even reach a courtroom.”

“Of course, *you* would know that,” she says with a smile, but then it frays a bit as she adds, “I don’t think Yvette is the settling type.”

I agree with Zoey. “Yvette’s looking for the biggest payout and is willing to do anything to get it.” I remember the look in Yvette’s eyes when she came to my office—flat, cold, unfeeling. I don’t like the idea of Yvette being in the same room as Zoey.

If anything goes wrong, from a smoke detector going off to a herd of invading chickens, Zoey’s going to blame herself, believing her curse is striking again.

But I really do think Yvette will do anything for this money. She already killed for it, and that makes her dangerous. Much more so than I thought when we started this Scooby Doo investigation.

But I swallow that down, not wanting to scare Zoey any more than she already seems to be.

“So, what do we do?”

“Nothing.” Zoey looks up at me in surprise so I repeat myself. “Nothing. We’re box checkers, remember? We tell the truth and let the judge do his job.” That’s my new mantra. I only hope it’s enough. “That’s all we can do.”

Zoey is so quiet, I can almost hear her mind playing out scenarios and stressing over them. I squeeze her and run my hand along her arm soothingly. “Can we let that stay in the future and enjoy what’s left of tonight? I’ve been dreaming of holding you like this.”

“Me too,” she confesses quietly. “I was afraid you’d forget about me with a whole week apart. Or decide I was too much work.”

That’s enough for me to pull her up to straddle my hips. I cup her face, pinning her with my gaze. “You and me, Zo. I’m okay, you’re okay, we’re okay. I promise.”

It’s a bit self-help-ish as far as speeches go, but Zoey’s eyes drift closed and she takes a big breath, as though she can inhale my calm reassurance and use it to soothe her own worries.

“You wanna take my coaster—a little reminder of my wood—to court in your purse?” I ask with a teasing smile even though I’m dead serious. “Nobody will even know.”

Zoey looks at the circle of wood and marble that’s sitting on her nightstand where I dropped it with my phone. Her cheeks blush slightly, but her lips tilt up the slightest bit. “Can I?”

“It’s yours, Zo.”

She bends forward, planting a kiss on my lips that I feel to my toes and everywhere in between.

“What was that for?”

“For being you and for not making me feel like I’m weird.”

“You’re not weird. You’re perfect. Gross body exploration aside.” I stick my tongue out in disgust, and she laughs, breaking the somber mood.

“Did you know . . . stomach acid can dissolve razor blades?”

I chuckle, enjoying the pleasurable way she bounces on my hips. “I actually did know that. Stomach acid has a pH of 1.5-3.5, plenty acidic to dissolve steel.”

“Ugh, why is it so sexy that you know that?” Zoey groans, but she’s looking at me with fire and desire in her eyes again.

I grin, reaching around to cup her ass and giving it a squeeze. We’ve got time for one more quickie before I have to go.

“Just lucky, I guess.”

CHAPTER 21



ZOEY

“This is freaking me out,” I tell Jeff the next morning.

The courtroom is only two floors up from my basement office, but it feels like a world away even though it’s not fancy. Stackable chairs lined out in three rows, linoleum floors from the 70s, and a trio of wood desks up front for the attorneys and judge shouldn’t be intimidating.

But I have never had to testify and certainly haven’t had to do it in a professional capacity in my short career. I don’t even know if Grandpa ever testified. I wish I could ask him.

But there’s a first time for everything, and like too many firsts, I’ll do it alone.

“It’s no big deal,” Jeff says while sipping his coffee. He’s the picture of morning chill, seemingly not caring at all that he’s in court instead of working at his desk downstairs.

“How many times have you done this? Testify,” I clarify.

“Dozens, I guess. Usually drunks who wanna proclaim their sobriety. These made that happen a lot less frequently, though,” he says, tapping the body cam on his vest with an evil smirk.

“Why are you geared up?” I tug at the blouse I found at the back of my closet and wiggle in my chair, slicking my damp palms down my black pants-covered thighs.

I’m second-guessing my attire.

Okay, more like sixth guessing, but I didn’t have a lot of options. Either way, I’m definitely not as comfortable as I would’ve been in scrubs and

clogs. Maybe I should've worn those so I'd look the part of a coroner like Jeff looks like a sheriff?

Do scrubs or business casual better portray that I'm someone you can trust about autopsies?

"Figure this'll be quick, and I'm working a speed trap out on highway 14 later. Shh." He holds a finger to his lips.

"Who would I tell?" I ask with a small laugh. "No one talks to me anyway, and I'm only going downstairs after court, but I hope you get the bad guys." Speeders aren't really all that bad in the big scheme of things, but I appreciate Jeff keeping our county roads safe. "What about the other investigation?"

He is doing something, right? He said he would, but he could've been giving me lip service so I'd leave well enough alone.

Jeff frowns, going quiet for a moment. His eyes scan the room, and I wonder what he sees. Does he plan exit strategies or store away details in case he needs accurate recall later?

I only see a place where I'm going to be the center of attention for the minutes I have to testify. I reach in my purse, under the guise of checking that my phone is on silent, but I actually touch the coaster from Blake that I stashed there.

I'm not sure what luck I'm hoping for . . . me testifying or Jeff investigating, or both . . . but a tiny bit of luck seals over the fissure in my nerves. Finally, Jeff leans toward me, his voice deep and low to say, "Remember, you're here for your expert opinion. Keep it short and sweet, just the facts."

"But I *know* a lot more than that report shows. The judge should have all the information to make a decision." My intrinsic sense of right and wrong knows that for sure.

Jeff sighs and takes a deep drink of coffee. "You and I are here to answer the questions asked of us, nothing more and nothing less. If you tell more than that, you'll put Yvette on notice and my investigation will go nowhere, I can promise you that."

"But she might get the claim settlement."

Jeff looks at me from the corner of his eye. "So?"

"What do you mean, so? It's not right."

"Money's not my concern, yours either. The law is."

I let that sink in, mulling over my own human nature that doesn't want Yvette to get something that isn't rightfully hers and mixing it with my responsibilities as a coroner and representative of Williamson County.

In the end, it's neither of those things that help me find steady ground. It's Richard Horne, face down in his breakfast with orange juice in his lap. It's not a bad way to go, but it wasn't his time. And time is too precious. No one deserves to have theirs cut short.

A few minutes later, Jeff and I watch with interest as Yvette Horne and her attorney come in. The lawyer is definitely not from around here. He looks too 'city' to be from Williamson County, and besides, everyone knows everyone out here and I've never seen this guy.

He's someone I'd remember too, not just because of the slicked-back hair, navy suit, and purple tie, but because there's something about him that screams 'ambulance chaser'.

Or maybe I think that because he's sitting with Yvette, who's dressed demurely in a black, knee-length dress and heels and dabbing at her bone-dry eyes with a tissue. When she sees that the judges' table is empty, I hear her quiet 'oh' as she drops the act and merely stands stock-still at the attorney's side.

"Thanks for coming. I'm Holland Monroe, Mrs. Horne's attorney." He holds out a hand to Jeff, who shakes it, and then to me, and I do the same. "Should be an open and shut case today. We'll have you out of here as quick as possible."

He smiles congenially as though he truly believes that. Or if he doesn't, he puts on a good act, but that's probably a skill all good lawyers have.

A side door opens and Judge Hopkins comes in. "Mornin'," he greets us. With a more important person in the room, Mr. Monroe forgets us and escorts Yvette to one of the tables to sit.

"Mornin', Mike," Jeff tells the judge, holding up his cup of coffee to return the greeting. As he sits down at his own table, I see the instant Judge Mike Hopkins, a serious, take-no-bullshit guy who scares me to my core, realizes I'm in his courtroom. It's not that he's a bad guy. Quite the opposite, actually, but he's who handled the guardianship paperwork when I adopted Jacob, and he'd, quite literally, held my family in his hands.

But his eyes widen ever so slightly and his lips part, and though he might've let Jacob and me be a family, Judge Hopkins believes at least a little bit of the gossip he's heard about me.

I could see it then and I can see it in every line on his face now.

“Zoey Walker, long time no see,” he says, and I’m pretty sure that if he’d never seen me again, it still would’ve been too soon.

“Judge Hopkins, it has been a while. Jacob’s all grown now, going to school in town.”

“Good, good.” He nods, thankful to be done with the small talk. At least with me. He claps his hands and looks around. “So, where are these insurance guys? They playing at being fashionably late?”

I follow his glance to the clock on the wall that says 10:02. He’s right, that isn’t the way things are done around Williamson County. I look to Jeff with a raised eyebrow that he answers with a shrug as though he couldn’t care less.

He simply takes another sip of coffee, letting out a loud sigh of contentment.

As if Jeff’s sigh is their cue, the door behind me opens and we turn as one to see the Everlife team arrive. ‘Fashionably late’ is definitely saying something about this crew. Blake looks sexy and smart, in a black suit, grey tie, and glasses I’ve never seen him wear before.

But the other three men with him are on an entirely different level. I’ve never seen ‘walking money’ until right this moment. If someone told me the older gentleman was wearing a five-thousand-dollar suit, I’d believe it without hesitation. The suit is obviously custom tailored, accented with a large-faced watch and a red power tie.

A younger guy trails behind in a navy suit, eyes locked on the man who’s obviously an Everlife big wig.

And leading the group is a well-dressed man with a briefcase. He takes the first chair at the table, the older man sitting beside him.

Blake and the young guy sit in the stacking chairs, though the young guy looks less than excited about the worn seat.

Don’t worry, a little dirt never hurt. Except maybe your dry cleaning bill.

“Your Honor, my name is Raymond Walsh, attorney on retainer for Everlife Insurance. Please forgive our delay this morning. We were unsure what floor your courtroom was on.” Mr. Walsh gives the room a look of repressed condescension, his face impassive but the impression clear enough. “May I present my client? Mr. Frederick Neilhouse, representing Everlife Insurance.”

“Mr. Walsh, Mr. Neilhouse, let’s get started,” Judge Hopkins says crisply. At second glance, either he’s got something in his left eye or it’s starting to twitch. Probably not a good sign for Everlife. Judge Hopkins might know his courtroom isn’t exactly on par with what’s up at the capital in Superior Court . . . but that doesn’t mean he’s to be disrespected.

I try to catch Blake’s attention to warn him to have his guy chill out with the fancy-schmancy talk and snobby looks, but he’s staring solidly at the back of Mr. Neilhouse’s head. Frederick, that’s what the attorney said his name is.

Pssst! Blake! Your lawyer’s coming off like an arrogant asshole tourist. Oh, and also, you left your toast on the counter this morning. Don’t worry, I ate it. Can we get lunch later? Or maybe tonight can be our dinner date . . . finally. Yeah, I know it’s only finally because I’m a big, scaredy cat, but I’m ready. I think. I hope. I know I’m definitely ready to do that thing you did last night with your fingers again.

I can feel my lips stretching into a smile as I have an entire conversation with Blake in my head, and I have to cover it with my hand and force a tiny cough. Even then, he doesn’t so much as blink in response.

“Before we begin, let me make this clear,” Judge Hopkins says. “This isn’t a trial, it’s a hearing. As such, while I’m going to be a bit more relaxed with certain rules, I won’t allow this to degenerate into some TV show. So both sides, save your grandstanding for some other case when there’s a jury and someone who hasn’t been on both sides of where you’re sitting now. Understand?”

Everyone’s quite clear, and the judge nods. “Mr. Monroe, the floor’s yours.”

At Judge Hopkins’s direction, Mr. Monroe stands to give an opening statement. He does a really good job of making Yvette Horne sound like a grieving widow whose pain at losing her husband is being worsened by Everlife twisting the knife to leave her destitute.

Yvette plays the part, dabbing at her eyes again now that she has an audience. I think she even squeezes out a few actual tears, though I don’t see anything resembling sadness in her eyes. If anything, she looks bored at having to sit through the proceedings. Especially when Mr. Walsh does his opening statement, dryly discussing industry standards and contract timelines.

Mr. Monroe calls Yvette to the stand, which is really just the chair sitting next to Judge Hopkins's table.

The judge swears Yvette in himself, and then Mr. Monroe begins questioning her. By the time he's done with her, I could actually believe that Yvette Horne loved her husband, especially when she talks about how much they loved their surrogate child, Rusty the dog.

"I've always wanted a dog, since we were never able to have children. But Dickie said we'd know when the time was right, and boy, did we. I saw Rusty on a website, biggest boy in the litter, and I knew that was our baby. Dickie loved that dog too. I'm glad I've got him now because he's my only comfort in the empty house . . . the empty bed at night. That's when it's hardest, you know?" Yvette trails off, sniffing and wiping at her eyes.

"Do you need a moment to compose yourself, dear?" Judge Hopkins asks gently.

Yvette shakes her head. "No, thank you. I'd rather get this over with, you know. It hurts" —she holds her palm against her chest over her heart—"but better to rip it off like a Band-Aid."

"Brave soul," Mr. Monroe murmurs.

I must make some sound of disbelief because Jeff bumps his knee against mine, and when I look over, his eyes are screaming at me to 'shut up' and 'stick to what we talked about'.

"Fine," I mouth back, and he looks back to the front of the room just in time for Mr. Monroe to call him to the stand.

"In the interest of Mrs. Horne, I won't ask you to get too detailed, Sheriff Barnes, but is it safe to say Mr. Horne is dead?" Mr. Monroe asks.

Jeff crooks one eyebrow as though that's the stupidest question he's ever heard, but true to his word, he answers only what was asked. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Yes."

"Good," Monroe says, and Jeff's mouth pinches.

"Mr. Horne probably didn't think so," Jeff interrupts.

Oh, so you do more than sit there and robotically answer, Jeff.

Judge Hopkins snorts, amused. "Good one, Jeff."

Mr. Monroe has the good grace to look at least slightly chagrined, but he recovers quickly, holding up a piece of paper. "This is the Sheriff's Department report on Mr. Horne's death, correct?"

He hands it to Jeff, who looks it over. "Yes."

“Can you read the cause of death?”

“Myocardial infarction.”

“Now, based on this report, did you close the investigation into Mr. Horne’s death?” Monroe asks. “Wrapped it all up?”

I sit up a little straighter. Jeff promised me he’d look into what we’ve found. My heart sinks when Jeff says clear and strong, “Yes, I closed the case when we received this report.”

But Jeff is looking past Mr. Monroe, straight to me. I replay what he said and realize that he’s answering exactly what’s asked, not showing his hand. He’s sticking to his plan and reminding me to do the same. I give him the smallest nod of recognition.

“No further questions.”

Mr. Walsh stands and tells the judge, “We have no questions for Sheriff Barnes at this time.”

I’m next. In what seems like a haze, I find myself sitting next to Judge Hopkins’s desk, my hands twisting in my lap as I look at Blake. Finally, his eyes are on me, but they’re empty, no sign of what we were doing mere hours ago. And his teeth are clenched, making his jawline look extra sharp.

What’s wrong, Blake?

I was expecting to maintain professionalism today, show that there’s been no conflict of interest if needed, but the cold shoulder stings more than it should. My brain knows it’s all business, but my heart doesn’t give a shit and is in panic mode, pounding away a drum rhythm of fuck, fuck, fuck.

Mr. Monroe’s questions are softball lob easy, basically reiterating what Jeff already said.

Yes, I’m sure Mr. Horne is dead. How? Because I performed an autopsy on him, so if he were alive, I definitely would’ve noticed. So would he.

But this time, Mr. Walsh has questions for me.

“Miss Walker, can you explain this report?” He hands me a piece of paper, Richard Horne’s lab results. I look to Jeff, whose eyes narrow.

Carefully and thoughtfully, I answer, “That’s a standard blood panel. Whenever there’s an autopsy, I perform one.”

“Why?”

“Protocol,” I answer. But Mr. Monroe stares at me silently, and I feel compelled to add more. “Because even in the case of extreme injury, such as a car accident, there could be internal reasons. Such as alcohol, medications, things like that. It’s standard practice to check everything.”

“And myocardial infarctions?”

I nod. “Yes. Bloodwork can be very important in such cases.”

“And these abnormal levels?” He points to the heavy metal results and my racing heart stalls out.

“They show Mr. Horne had high levels of lead, arsenic, and mercury at the time of his death. Results were confirmed by a repeated examination by the State labs.”

“Hmm, interesting,” Mr. Walsh hums, taking the paper back and looking at it carefully.

I think I know where he’s going with this, but I’m still unsure. I know what I do feel, which is under the microscope, frozen and not sure if that was a question or not. I wish I had Blake’s coaster in my hand, but since it’s in my purse back at my seat, I place my fingertips along the edge of Judge Hopkins’s desk. I run my fingers back and forth the smallest inch, as casually as I can.

Nothing weird to see here, no luck needed. Just answering some easy questions.

“Did you figure out what caused the high levels?”

Okay, maybe not so easy. I swallow. The truth is yes, I did. What I can prove is a totally different story.

“While indeed interesting, the high levels were deemed to have no relevance to Mr. Horne’s heart attack.”

“But did you figure out what caused the high levels?” he asks again.

Jeff’s speech is in my ear—all circumstantial, no proof, what if Yvette didn’t feed it to Richard?

“No, I did not.” It hurts me to say that, but it is the truth. I don’t *know*, I suspect. Two very different things. And I need more proof before I state my suspicions in a courtroom.

“I see. No further questions at this time.” I walk back to my seat next to Jeff, but my eyes are on Blake the whole way there. *Is he disappointed? Does he understand why? Why is he still avoiding eye contact with me? Is it just about playing strangers?*

Mr. Monroe rests his case, and Mr. Walsh stands for his turn. “I’d like to call Blake Hale, please.”

Blake walks to the judge’s desk and sits down. He looks comfortable, calm and collected—the opposite of me, considering my pits are still sweaty with nerves—and sexy with those glasses!

A sexy nerd of my very own! Maybe he can leave those on for the date . . . and later.

“Mr. Hale, you heard Miss Walker discussing the abnormal lab levels,” Mr. Monroe says. “Were you aware of these?”

“Yes, I discussed them with Sheriff Barnes and Miss Walker previously when I received the autopsy report and repeat lab results.”

“And do you know what caused them?”

No, no, no, no! I plead telepathically to Blake, begging him with my eyes as hard as I can . . . *don't say it!*

“I suspect I might,” he says evenly.

No!

Now she'll know we're on to her. Any advantage Jeff would have in his investigation is going to be blown to smithereens. Without having enough for a search warrant, any evidence Yvette might've left will be destroyed by the end of the day for sure.

“And what do you believe caused Mr. Horne's high heavy metal levels?”

Blake clears his throat and looks back sure and clear. “A supplement purchased off the internet by Yvette Horne. I suspect the supplements were added to Mr. Horne's morning smoothies.”

“Those are very serious allegations. Do you have any proof?” Mr. Walsh is obviously already well aware of Blake's big reveal but is feigning shock surprisingly well while laying out a verbal pathway that might as well be lit up like the yellow brick road leading right to Yvette. Mr. Walsh is even standing directly in front of Yvette, calling Judge Hopkins's attention to her as Blake explains.

“I have an invoice from an online pharmacy for the supplement, purchased by Yvette Horne and delivered to the Hornes' home. And Mr. Horne's medical records show that he was making a concentrated effort to be healthier, even mentioning the green smoothies his wife made him every morning for breakfast. Along with their disgusting taste and resulting heartburn.”

Yvette makes an exaggerated, huffing sound of displeasure. “Hmph. Why, I never . . .” and Mr. Monroe bumps her with his shoulder.

She quiets instantly, but when she turns to listen to her attorney, I can see the fury burning in her eyes and the sneer on her red lips as he whispers

to her urgently. I look to Jeff, but he seems particularly busy burning holes through Blake with his trademark sheriff glare.

Mr. Walsh takes a carefully measured step back from Yvette as though she's a dangerous murderer who might go off at any moment.

"How did you come to be in possession of this invoice, Mr. Hale?"

Oh, shit. This is bad, so bad.

I reach in my purse for the coaster, hoping to rub some worry away, but instead it goes clattering to the floor, loudly interrupting and getting everyone's attention. They're all looking directly at me, exactly what I didn't want, as I scramble to pick up the coaster from the floor.

"Sorry! Just dropped something. Pardon me."

As I sit up, Blake makes true eye contact with me for the first time since he entered the courtroom, and I see something flash in the depths of his blue eyes behind the frames, but it's gone too fast for me to label it.

But there was *something*.

"Zoey, you good?" Judge Hopkins asks.

"Yes, Your Honor," I say, trying to sink into my chair, through the floor, and right back downstairs to my morgue where it's safe and quiet. And no one looks at me.

Mr. Walsh seems frustrated at having his dramatic reveal interrupted, but he makes sure to remind everyone exactly where he was.

"How did you get this invoice?"

Jeff goes stock-still beside me, knowing full well that he saw that very invoice on my table days ago.

Blake licks his lips before slowly and clearly saying, "I got it out of Yvette Horne's trash a few days after her husband's death."

Even Judge Hopkins looks disgusted by that, and he didn't smell it. He blurts, "You dug through her trash?"

Blake nods. "I did. I also found a container of the green smoothie mix Mr. Horne told his doctor he was drinking, as seen in the medical records from Dr. Yu."

Mr. Walsh drops a piece of paper with a green highlighted section off to Judge Hopkins's desk. Meanwhile, Mr. Monroe is flipping through papers in front of him, scribbling back and forth on a notepad with Yvette. She writes something I can't see and underlines it three times, pointing at it with the pen.

"Uh, no questions at this time, Judge."

“Very well, I’d like to call Miss Walker back to the stand,” Mr. Walsh says.

What? Do I have to go up there again?

Judging by the way every pair of eyes in the room turn to me, I guess so.

“Oh, uh . . . yeah. Be calm, Zoey. Breathe.” I’m talking to myself, but not quietly enough, because Mr. Walsh is watching me with hungry eyes. Not like he wants to actually eat me, cannibalistically or sexually, but rather like he’s looking forward to verbally fileting me the instant I sit down.

“Your oath to tell the truth still stands, Zoey,” Judge Hopkins tells me, and I nod robotically.

Mr. Walsh sets the invoice that I painstakingly pieced together in front of me. “Miss Walker, you testified the heavy metal levels were of no consideration since Mr. Horne died of a myocardial infarction. If he was, in fact, being systematically poisoned, could that have played a factor in his death?”

I replay his exact question back in my mind, remembering Jeff’s advice to answer only what is specifically asked. Nothing more, nothing less. “Heavy metal poisoning does not directly cause a heart attack.”

Mr. Monroe’s lips quirk as though he won both the battle and the war, but I’m not done answering. If I have to answer these questions, I will do so precisely and to the best of my ability, so that both legally and morally, I can look at myself in the mirror without cringing.

“But the results of heavy metal poisoning could indirectly contribute due to the damage that it causes throughout the body.” It’s as close as I can get to saying “you’re damn right” without actually saying it.

“I see,” Mr. Walsh gloats. “So, with this new information, would you consider Mr. Horne’s heart attack an open and shut case with no need for further investigation?”

There’s only one way to answer that question . . . with the absolute truth that I’ve known since the beginning. “No.”

Judge Hopkins excuses me from the witness seat, and Jeff barely glances at me as I return to sit beside him.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

He lifts his shoulder noncommittally, not saying anything, but I can feel a lecture coming on full-force and I’m not looking forward to it.

The law's supposed to be one team. And I just made Jeff look like Rosco P. Coltrane up here. He's not going to like that. What damage have I done? *For Yvette Horne and some money that I don't even care about? No, if I wreck my job over this, it will be for Richard Horne. So his truth is known.*

Mr. Walsh calls Mr. Neilhouse up next. "I'll keep this brief. Mr. Horne's life insurance contract . . . it states that Everlife has reasonable time to pay out a contract once a death claim has been made, correct?"

"Yes, the contract also defines reasonable time as three months from the date of claim. In this case, Mrs. Horne filed the claim six weeks ago, so we are well within our contracted timeframe," Mr. Neilhouse answers dryly.

"I see. And does today's information, particularly Miss Walker's statement that further investigation is warranted, affect the three-month timeline?"

"Yes, it does. For a claim to be filed, the death must be of natural causes, or if there are questionable circumstances, those concerns must be addressed first. Seeing as there are remaining concerns, the current claim would be null and void until those have been handled by law enforcement. If Mr. Horne's death were then deemed acceptable, Everlife's three-month window would then begin with the filing of the updated claim."

"Acceptable death?" Mr. Walsh asks with a furrowed brow. "Could you explain that?"

Neilhouse adjusts his glasses, nodding.

"Mr. Horne's life insurance policy has exemption clauses for various reasons, including suicide or foul play by a beneficiary. Standard industry terms for this level of contract. In those situations, there would be no claim payout of any kind."

Mr. Walsh spins, giving Mr. Monroe a triumphant look before sitting down.

Judge Hopkins looks at Monroe and says, "I'm sure you have questions."

"Yes," Mr. Monroe answers as he stands. "Mr. Neilhouse, so what I'm hearing is that it benefits Everlife to *find* a way to make a death questionable to avoid payment."

Mr. Neilhouse chuckles, unbothered by the accusation. "Obviously, we would prefer to not pay claims if they're fraudulent in some way."

But Mr. Monroe is gathering steam. “Fraudulent in some way?” he repeats with the added twist of bitter sarcasm. “And if the claim is valid, you attempt to undermine it by whatever means necessary—including having employees like Blake Hale dig through trash, question doctors, and harass law enforcement and coroners. Using *any* means to not pay a rightful claim.”

Mr. Monroe spreads his hands wide, as though Everlife is in the habit of refuting claims this way.

Jeff sighs, and when I look to him, he meets my gaze with sad eyes.

“Sorry, Zoey,” he whispers.

“What?” I murmur in confusion.

Why is he apologizing? What is he sorry for?

Jeff’s eyes go hard and flinty as he turns away from me, giving Blake the full power of his laser focus. Blake doesn’t look my way, but his chin lifts an extra inch and the muscle in his jaw is working furiously. Too slowly, new puzzle pieces begin to slide into place, parts of a much larger puzzle I didn’t even see. Too focused on the invoice, too focused on Yvette Horne, that I didn’t even see it until now.

By any means?

Like coming to see me in the morgue about a case . . . questioning the autopsy report and labs . . . investigating to find an explanation that would lead to enough doubts to deny the claim?

Could that be what Blake has been doing all along?

That first time he came to the morgue about Yvette Horne’s case, it was Holly who pushed him into going for drinks.

Not him. Maybe he saw an opportunity and took it? A chance to use me and get a little something extra out of it too. Holly says guys will lie, cheat, and steal to get laid, so what if Blake did lie?

Manipulate me to get what he wanted with a bonus. He’s probably been laughing the whole time at how superstitious, lonely, and pathetic I am.

Drop-Dead Gorgeous?

Trailer Park Princess?

Black Widow?

The hurt of the names I’ve heard hundreds of times is nothing compared to whatever Blake probably calls me in his head. *Pity Fuck Roulette?*

With my history, Blake has to be afraid that he’s tempting fate by spending time with me.

It'd serve him right. I hope he pays.

Malicious thoughts flood me, my eyes burning hot.

I don't even know what I'm doing, but somehow, the coaster I'm still holding clatters to the floor once again, and I bolt for the door, knocking over a chair as I go.

"Zoey?" Judge Hopkins calls from his desk, but I don't stop. I have to get out of here.

I am such a fool. I knew better, knew not to hope and dream. But this time, it's not the person I care about who's been cut down by the cruelty of fate.

This time . . . it's me.

Or perhaps the irony is that when I finally put myself first, started to care for myself instead of everyone else, and believed that maybe I was worth the risk, I'm the one hurt worst of all.

Out the door of the courtroom, I run down the stairs and then down another flight to my basement hidey hole. The frigid room is still warmer than the ice that's running through my veins, freezing my heart back into a solid, impenetrable fortress.

"Zoey?" a deep voice says from the door.

I wipe at my eyes furiously, not wanting to be seen as weak, even though I'm falling apart. "Yes?"

"You want me to kill him?" Jeff asks deadpan.

Or maybe he's serious? I'm not sure.

But wait . . .

"What?"

Jeff rolls his eyes. "Blake Hale. As soon as I saw that damn invoice, I knew you'd been playing Nancy Drew with him as your Hardy Boy. If I'd known he was sniffing around, I would've run him off."

He says it as though that would be a kindness, and I suppose it would've been because then I wouldn't have ruined the potential case or gotten my heart broken.

Again.

"You've got your quirks, Zoey, but you don't deserve the shit that's happened to you, least of all, this. Just blink twice and I'll take care of things."

A fresh burst of tears pours out of my soul, but with them comes a tiny laugh that makes snot bubble from my nose. I grab a tissue and try to wipe

it all away, every last bit of snot, tears, and pain.

“It’s okay. I knew better. I shouldn’t have thought it would be any different.” He pats my shoulder awkwardly, and as sad as it is, it’s the closest thing I’ve had to parental comfort in so long that I lean into it. “I’m sorry I messed up the case.”

“Pshaw. Don’t worry about that none. If Yvette killed him, she ain’t getting her money, and like I told you, today was about money, not law. I can still investigate. You might be surprised to learn this, Zoey, but I’m not half-bad at figuring stuff out myself, so if there’s a way to do it legally, I will.”

“You promise?”

“I promised Richard Horne, same as I do every person in the county, to serve and protect. I couldn’t protect him, but I can make sure he’s served proper justice.”

“Thanks, Jeff.”

“Now, you’d best get out of here. I’m betting that Hale fellow is gonna be down here as soon as Mike bangs his gavel and that you’d rather be gone when he gets here. You can go see Martha if you want. She’ll fix you up. Probably have you eating cookies in fifteen minutes. She’s got this new recipe she’s playing with, some oatmeal raisin thing with zucchini in it. Oh, don’t tell her I know about the zucchini because she thinks she’s sneaking me some green vegetables, but the truth is, I’m the one sneaking extra cookies.”

He’s right.

About Martha, but more importantly, that I don’t want to see Blake.

Not now, not ever. I’m afraid I’d be inclined to call down hellfire and fury, beg the universe to do to him what it’s done to me. And I don’t want that on my shoulders.

So I take Jeff’s advice and leave but forego Martha’s, running to Holly’s to hide. But now I really want to drown my sorrows in some cookies.

CHAPTER 22



BLAKE

I'm listening to Frederick, getting more and more frustrated as he and Mr. Monroe make Everlife sound like nothing more than a scam.

That's not who we are, not who I am. I'm damn proud of what I do and the sense of peace I give my clients while they're living, and their families after their death.

But we also don't rush through claims willy-nilly because someone is in a hurry, and we certainly don't pay out benefits when there's a reasonable question of cause of death.

My blood is boiling, and I desperately want to look at Zoey to commiserate, but I can't do anything that could highlight our connection. Especially after everything we've done the last week to prevent any accusation of conflict of interest.

When Zoey runs out of the courtroom, I get up to follow her, but Frederick's assistant, Mason, glares at me with the smallest shake of his head. So I sink back into my chair even though my heart is in the hallway with Zoey.

What's wrong? Did Sheriff Barnes do or say something to upset her and that's why he ran out after her?

The urge to gather Zoey in my arms battles with a desire to tell Jeff, and everyone else in Zoey's life, to sit on their thumbs and take a good, long, dry spin. They deserve to get fucked for the way they treat her, carelessly taking shots at her fragile heart.

But Mr. Monroe is still taking aim at Frederick, and this case is anyone's guess right now. "Just how far would Everlife, you, and Mr. Hale

go to not pay a widow what is rightfully hers?”

Frederick is utterly calm, nearly unflappable. “A rightful claim? We would pay without question, and with our utmost sympathies. Once due process had been completed.” Frederick’s no-nonsense style only adds sharp validity to his next words as he stares Mr. Monroe down. “However, a problematic claim by a widow, where there is a question that perhaps she sped up the policy holder’s demise to get access to the funds and is attempting to sue her way into a quick payout before due process has even been completed? We would exhaust every avenue legally owed Everlife under the policy contract itself to ensure that criminal matters are not rewarded with civil luxury.”

Damn, Frederick. He’s not holding any punches, flat-out calling Yvette a money-grubbing murderer.

We have a lot of questions, even more concerns, but I don’t have full evidence of all that . . . yet. But it’s hard to mitigate those kinds of charges once they’re put out there, especially when the law and the policy contract are on our side, not Yvette Horne’s.

Judge Hopkins looks thoughtful while Mr. Monroe and Mr. Walsh give closing statements, but he makes up his mind quickly.

“I’m ready to rule. In the motion by Yvette Horne against Everlife Insurance, I find for . . .” I hold my breath, even though I know what the outcome should be.

But things work differently out here in Williamson County, and at the end of the day, Yvette Horne is one of their own. Hell, for all I know, she has coffee with Judge Hopkins every Saturday morning.

Judge Hopkins puts us all out of our misery. “The defendant, Everlife Insurance.”

I finally exhale, my lungs thankful for the reprieve. But while I’m breathing again in relief, Yvette Horne is inhaling sharply and loudly in shock. “What?”

She sounds defeated, and actual real tears slip down her cheeks. For the first time, I believe she’s actually feeling loss. Not the loss of her husband, but of the money.

Judge Hopkins narrows his eyes at Yvette, and I see no friendliness there, so my worries on that front were obviously not needed. “Mrs. Horne, once your husband’s death has been fully investigated and cause of death has been fully determined, I’m certain Everlife Insurance will be able to

process your claim appropriately. I know time feels like it is not on your side, especially when you've had such a great loss." He lifts his eyebrows as he dips his chin in challenge, and I'm pretty sure Judge Hopkins has a solid read on Yvette Horne's true intentions. "The truth always comes out, and those who should pay, will."

Judge Hopkins turns his attention to Frederick, but all the heat and accusation has melted from his expression.

"This is not over," Yvette snaps as she rises. Pushing past her lawyer, her heels click on the floor as she stomps her way out of the courtroom.

Judge Hopkins adjourns court, and Frederick shakes Mr. Walsh's hand. To Mason and me, he says, "Well done, gentlemen. Let's get a bite before I head back to the office."

A business lunch with Frederick is something that should excite me, and any other time, it would. Especially after a win like this morning's case. But all I can think of is tracking Zoey down, and going back to the city, having lunch, and getting Frederick and Mason out of my hair means that it'll be hours before I can see what's wrong with Zoey.

Unfortunately, Frederick's idea wasn't a question, and I find myself walking down the stairs toward the front door of the Williamson County offices. I look around, hoping to see Zoey, or even Sheriff Barnes so I can step away for a minute and give him a piece of my mind. But we don't pass anyone, and even the front desk, where Alver usually sits as the building's guardian, is vacant.

Mason drives us back to town with Frederick and me sitting in the back seat.

"Where would you recommend for a good steak and a nice scotch?" Frederick asks.

I have no idea. A bar? I have multiple recommendations, and some of them don't even have trivia nights.

A place to grab a quick bite that'll leave me with leftovers for tomorrow and not kill my macros?

Sure, I've got those too.

But fancy, white tablecloth places for business deals on Frederick's level? Nope, not my area of expertise.

"Sure, let me see if I can get us a reservation," I tell him.

On my phone, I click into a review app and filter restaurant options by steakhouse and three-dollar signs to get the expensive ones a man like

Frederick would expect. A few more clicks and I have a table reserved for thirty minutes from now. Which is good, because we're a bit out of town.

Before I put my phone down, I take advantage of the fact that Frederick is distracted by his own device and send a text to Zoey.

You okay? I'm doing lunch with Frederick and then I'll call you.

I wait a minute to see if she responds, but nothing comes back. She's probably busy after taking the whole morning for court. I just hope she stood her ground with Sheriff Barnes about whatever pissed her off. If not, I'll comfort her and kill him.

"Reservations made," I tell Frederick and then give Mason the address. We head over there . . . and lunch drones on for hours. More precisely, Frederick does.

Our steaks are gone, so delicious I ate every bite despite knowing it'll make me sluggish as hell for tomorrow's run, and my second scotch is watered down to the point of being undrinkable after I sipped the first as slowly as possible.

Frederick swallows his scotch easily, imparting wisdom from his years in a role similar to mine—"in the trenches", he calls it—all the way up to sitting in a leather, button-tufted, VP chair.

Mason is rapt at attention, listening to every word from Frederick's mouth as though he can absorb them and put them to instant use. Admittedly, Frederick is a brilliant man with a wealth of experience, and I respect what he's accomplished. Any other time, a one on one with him would be a highlight of my career, an opportunity to learn and even show off a bit.

Today, all I want is for him to shut up, get in the back seat of his car, and let Mason drive him home. He'll probably either be passed out for a power nap or back to working within minutes of pulling out of the restaurant lot, and at the same time, I'll be well on my way back to Williamson County to find Zoey.

Finally, Frederick gives his corporate card to the waiter to pay the bill and I'm on the cusp of freedom.

"We can drop you by your office?" Frederick offers.

"Thanks, but I don't mind taking an Uber. I know you have a long drive back," I say as if that's the reason I'm trying to ditch him.

"Appreciate the understanding," Frederick replies as he offers his hand. "You did good work this morning, Blake. Really showed how dedicated you

are to your clients and any claims. Everlife appreciates that. I appreciate that.”

“Thank you. That means a lot,” I reply honestly. “I take my client’s trust seriously, while ensuring that Everlife’s interests are protected. Integrity on all sides is what allows us, as an industry, to thrive.”

Damn, I should write that down for my next commercial with Amy. Though maybe I won’t have to hustle for more clients if Frederick stays true to his word and sends some corporate accounts my way.

Frederick beams, his smile a little sloppy but pure. “Well said.” The compliment comes with a pointed finger to my chest. “You’re a good man. Exactly what Everlife needs.”

I’d be floating on cloud nine, except that Frederick follows up the lovey-dovey fest with a hiccup that he doesn’t quite contain. Ignoring it, he leans in to whisper on scotch-scented breath, “Keep on top of the sheriff and that coroner out here. Make sure there are no shortcuts taken, because I’m sure this wasn’t the last we’ve heard of Yvette Horne. She’s a conniving one.”

“Sure. Will do.” I’m more than happy to stay on top of Zoey, and behind her, and beneath her, and any other position she’d like to try.

As for Sheriff Barnes, I will follow up to make sure he investigates further because I think Frederick is right. Yvette Horne methodically poisoned her husband for the money, and I don’t think she’s going to take a judge’s ruling as the final say on funds she feels entitled to.

Mason opens the back door for Frederick, making sure he’s in the car and buckled up before he shuts the door. “Drive safe,” I tell him, and he laughs.

“Always do.”

Finally free, I message for a ride and then text Zoey again.

Hey! I’m coming back out to see you. Should I meet you at work or home?

I don’t wait for a response, figuring I can check it when I get closer to her. Not while driving, of course, because texting while driving leads to 1.6 million car crashes each year and I would never be that irresponsible, but while pulled over safely.

The Uber driver drops me off to my office, and I don’t even go inside. I move from the Uber straight to my own car, hurrying as quickly as I can to get back to Zoey.

I buckle up, check my mirrors and surroundings the way I always do, and make the drive to Williamson County for the second time in a row today. I head to the morgue first, seeing as it's late afternoon and Zoey's a bit of a workaholic.

She's probably elbows deep in the belly of a fresh body, with their guts being weighed on scales as she talks to the nonresponsive person about their family.

Or the weather.

Or last week's *Survivor* episode.

The idea that once would've made my stomach churn and turn, and threaten to give back my steak, doesn't so much as make me blink now. It's simply what she does and who she is. A brilliant mind, passionate about her work and about giving her DBs the respect they deserve.

Once safely parked, I check my phone. Zoey hasn't responded—not to my latest text and not to the one from this morning either.

Shit, I hope she's okay. This morning was rough, but it turned out okay. Yvette didn't get the money. That's what matters.

Inside, I head downstairs to Zoey's morgue.

"Hey, sugar snookums!" I yell, laughing a bit at the nickname that started as a joke to irritate Thelma and Louise but now makes me smile. But I don't find Zoey. Instead, I find Sheriff Barnes sitting at Zoey's desk with a file folder open in front of him, papers spread out along the desk's surface. "Oh, hey, Sheriff. You looking into Yvette Horne? I can pass along what I have if it'd be helpful?"

One thing at a time. I'll make sure he handles the investigation properly, and then I'll kill him for whatever he did to piss off Zoey.

His eyes narrow and he swipes a hand over his mouth, smoothing his moustache down. "What the hell are you doing here?" he growls.

Whew, guess he doesn't know about me and Zoey if he's surprised to see me here. Good to know we hid it that well because it felt like everyone in the courtroom had to feel the tension between Zoey and me, had to know that I was sitting there with the smell of her still in my nose, the feel of her on my lips, and the desire to have her again in my heart and pants.

But the subterfuge isn't needed anymore.

Any conflict of interest isn't going to matter by the time this investigation is done because we're going to prove beyond any reasonable

doubt that Yvette Horne killed Richard, and any claim as beneficiary is going to be moot at that point.

“I’m here to see Zoey.”

For some reason, the five words ignite volcanoes in the sheriff’s eyes, and he stands, pushing the chair from beneath him forcefully. It rolls haywire before crashing into a table and toppling over loudly. Shoulders wide and hands clenched at his side, he snarls, “Haven’t you done enough to that poor girl?”

Uhm, what?

I didn’t do anything. He did.

Which I was trying to not mention until I handled the professional side of things first. But if he’s ready to rumble, he can bring it on. The sheriff might be barrel-chested and armed, but he’s old, beer-bellied, and probably—hopefully—not going to shoot me.

I send up a quick thanks for all the cardio Trey has made me do because I might need it in the next few seconds if I’m throwing down with Barnes.

“What did you say?” I sneer harshly as I wiggle my arms to loosen up a bit because I don’t want to pull a muscle with my first punch.

“Leave Zoey alone. You’ve done more than enough, asshole. I’m tempted to toss you in her refrigerator myself, ‘*forget*’ about you for a few days until your outsides are as frosty as your insides, and then let her cut your dick off as a trophy.”

“That is . . . graphic,” I admit begrudgingly, and though Sheriff Barnes’s lips lift, it’s not a smile. It’s feral and predatory. But why is he mad at me?

Higher logic takes over, my brain overriding my fight or flight instincts. “Before you try that—and to be clear, it would be nothing more than an attempt before I kick your ass—”

Sheriff Barnes takes a step closer, and I hold my palms up, hoping to freeze him in place before he can toss me in the refrigerator.

“Before *that* . . . exactly why are you trying to kill me? This is supposed to be my big moment of kicking your ass for whatever you did to hurt Zoey so badly that she ran out of the courtroom.”

“Kick *my* ass? That’s funny as hell, kid.” Sheriff Barnes laughs. And then, as though it never happened, he sobers. “What *I* did? To Zoey? I didn’t do a thing to that poor girl. You did . . . using her like that. Shameful is what it is.”

He pokes a finger in my chest, much like Frederick did not too long ago, but where Frederick's had been a gentle prodding, the sheriff's poke makes my arm flinch reflexively.

Shit, did he hit a pressure point or something? I rub at the spot and work my shoulder back and forth a couple of times.

"Use Zoey?"

What in the hell? I'm not some selfish asshole. And I didn't even know she'd told anyone about us since that was the whole point of hiding our relationship. And what did she tell Sheriff Barnes?

"Look, I'm not a kiss and tell sort, but rest assured, I wasn't 'using' Zoey. I made sure she came . . . multiple times, and she was . . . into it."

That might be the weirdest thing I've ever told another man. Even Trey and I don't talk like that, sharing that degree of personal stuff, which is why I damn near stumble over the words as I try to say them.

I don't see the punch coming, not a single tell is telegraphed. My jaw just explodes in fire, and I stagger, looking for purchase on the slick floor.

"You son of a bitch!" Sheriff Barnes shouts. "That's not what I'm talking about and you know it."

He's stalking toward me, winding up for a round two I can't let him start. I throw an uppercut to his gut, and though he huffs at the contact, it doesn't stop him. What does is my answering shout, "Then what the hell are you talking about? What did you do to Zoey?"

"You keep saying that. Why do you think I did something to her?"

I glare at him, panting. "Because she ran out of the courtroom this morning and you were the only one sitting next to her. What did you say to her? Did you call her one of those hurtful names? *Drop-Dead Gorgeous*? Or *Black Widow*? Or something worse? Do you know how much that guts her? This whole county just shits on her, treating her like a pariah, when she hasn't done anything wrong. She never did anything wrong!"

We're scuffling, arms flailing as we push off one another, neither one of us making any headway. He gives me a big shove, creating a gap between us that we fill with panting breaths. "She ran out because of you, you stupid idiot."

I'm struck dumb and forget all about the fight, dropping my guard and standing defenseless. "Me? What did I do?"

"You used her for this whole Everlife case. I know she put that invoice together and gave it to you."

“Then you know why I didn’t say that. I was protecting her.”

Sheriff Barnes snorts disbelievingly. “Sure, and it just conveniently proved your whole theory so Everlife didn’t have pay out.”

“We didn’t pay out because it’s not a valid claim and you haven’t done your due diligence in investigating when Zoey told you it wasn’t open and shut from the get-go. You ignored her, and we did what we had to do to find the truth!”

Our accusations twist around us like barbed wire, digging into our tough guy exteriors to the soft underbellies we both hide and pulling us to a middle ground that seemed impossibly unreachable just moments ago.

“You really weren’t using her?” Barnes finally says.

I shake my head, looking him in the eye. “You didn’t say something to hurt her?”

“I treat her like my own daughter. Though my daughter is always asking for money and wanting me to take her to the mall. Zoey wants to be left alone, so I do that as much as I can and make sure no one else messes with her.”

“I’m just trying to get underneath all those layers of defenses and get her to go out with me, something she finally agreed to, and then this whole court thing blew up.”

We eye each other carefully, hearing the different ways we try to protect the same woman.

“Well, shit,” I say.

“Ain’t that the truth,” he answers with a chuckle. “Your . . . what’d you call her . . . sugar snookums? She ain’t here, and she’s pretty mad at you, so when you find her, your best bet is to be on your knees, groveling for forgiveness.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”

He shakes his head, laughing. “Hell, boy. I’ve been married a long time, and let me give you a hint I learned from my Martha . . . what you did or didn’t do don’t matter a lick. Apologize long and hard, and then, when she’s cooled down, maybe you can have a little chit-chat and explain things. But to start? Groveling’s the way to go.”

That’s the second round of advice I’ve gotten today from men I respect.

Frederick’s, I can put to use tomorrow when I go back to work. Sheriff Barnes’s?

I plan to put his into action immediately . . . as soon as I find Zoey.

CHAPTER 23



ZOEY

“Say that again,” Holly orders as she slams a mixing bowl on the counter. “And get the M&M’s out of my secret stash.”

I open the fridge and shuffle the bag of wilted spinach to the side to reach into the back recesses of the vegetable drawer to get the hidden bag of candy Holly requested. I drop it next to her, and as she mixes the ingredients she’s added to the bowl, I tell her about court today.

“I didn’t see it. Was absolutely, stupidly, blindly, dumbstruck by Blake Hale,” I tell her morosely.

Her mixing gets aggressive, and I’m pretty sure there was some shell added with the egg she just cracked on the bowl’s edge. “You’re sure? Absolutely certain? Because I’m going to kill him, so I need you to be positive.”

She threatens me with the dripping spoon and an evil glare promising bloodshed—maybe mine, probably Blake’s.

“You’re not going to kill him,” I tell her, even though the idea that both Holly and Jeff independently put forth holds some merit. Not for real, but an imaginary bus running over an imaginary Blake sounds pretty fucking justified. Or maybe he could be pecked to death by razor-beaked chickens while being held down by barbed wire? Something slow and painful and memorably humiliating so that it makes it onto one of those ‘How They Died’ shows and he becomes a trivia tidbit people laugh at. “Don’t kill him, but yeah, I’m sure. Jeff realized it before I did.”

That holds weight for both of us since Jeff is a pretty steady and solid sort, known for his level head. That’s how he became Sheriff of Williamson County.

“Break it down for me, step by step,” Holly instructs, and I find myself giving her the replay of the entirety of testimony.

“Blake didn’t mention that I helped him dig in the trash, put together the invoice puzzle, or did the research on what it meant. He held it up like he’d done it all himself.” I groan and steal a handful of candy, shoveling the whole bunch in my mouth at once. Chewing open-mouthed, I keep telling Holly, “That might’ve been okay, like maybe he was covering for us the way we talked about? But then Mr. Neilhouse basically agreed that Everlife would do anything to not pay a claim. It started to come together then.”

“What makes you think that,” she asks, swinging the spoon left, “includes this whole thing between you and Blake?” She swings the spoon right, a glob of dough flying to the counter.

Rolling my eyes, I huff out, “Duh. It’s me, Hols. Blake was using me so they wouldn’t have to pay out this big claim, and like a sucker, I fell right into the trap. I knew better, I fucking knew better, but I let myself get carried away. By him, by hope.” Pain burns fresh in my chest again, and I shake my head, feeling dumb for not seeing it, for not questioning Blake’s intentions when almost every time we saw each other, it was about this investigation.

That’s not true. This morning didn’t feel like that, my heart tries to argue, remembering the needy growls and heady conversation. *Facts are facts,* my brain tells my heart. However I thought things were this morning, I’ve since learned differently.

“So, did Yvette really kill Richard?” Holly asks.

“It doesn’t matter. I mean, it matters to Everlife and Blake,” I snipe, “and it definitely mattered to Richard Horne. But that’s the point. If Everlife hadn’t needed me to change the autopsy ruling, Blake would’ve never spent a minute with me. It was all for show. Like you said men do, he was using me, for professional gain and sex.”

I fidget, sorting out the spilled M&Ms into piles by color, and Holly is quiet as she takes the candy from me to add them to the dough.

Once mixed, she scoops it out onto cookie sheets and slides the cookies in the oven to bake.

“Mommy, can I lick the bowl?” Olive begs, dancing her way into the kitchen in a purple tutu and high-top tennis shoes that light up with every step. She was probably listening from the living room, ready to strike when the time was right.

“How about the spoon?” Holly negotiates as she scoops up a little bit of the leftover dough. She’s strict but reasonable. Except I kinda wanted that dough for myself.

“You can get salmonella from that,” I warn.

Olive looks at the spoon in confusion and then shrugs. “I like salmon.”

“Not salmon, sal-mon-nell-a. It’s a bacteria.”

“We need bacteria to make the things we eat *divest* in our tummies,” she gravely informs me as she licks the other side of the spoon. “Mrs. Thompson said so.”

“Di-gest,” I correct. “And yes, but those are good bacteria. Raw eggs and flour can have bad bacteria.”

Holly tilts her head, somehow managing to roll her eyes while staring right at me. “Has anyone really died from eating raw cookie dough?”

“Probably somewhere, sometime.” I eye the bowl warily, but I can’t lie to this kid. “I don’t have exact statistics.” The very idea of life and death statistics makes the gash in my heart yawn wide open, bleeding fresh and hot again. “Give me that.” I grab the bowl and slide my fingers through the dough, gathering a bit for myself.

“Oh, no! You’re gonna get salmon ‘acteria, Aunt Zo-Zo,” Olive shouts, but she immediately bursts out in laughter at her own silliness.

I try to smile, but my lips just won’t, not even for Olive. Not now. Tears burn, and I turn away so Olive won’t see, grabbing a kitchen towel to swipe at my eyes.

“Hey, honey, go wash up, okay?” Holly tells her daughter.

“Okay, Momma.”

Olive runs to the bathroom, more energy in her little pinkie toe than I have in my entire body right now as I sag. Putting on a brave face for Olive for just those few moments exhausted me, reminding me of the innocence I once had.

But that was so long ago.

Not just before Blake, but before my grandparents, my parents. Before I had any idea what loss or betrayal felt like, before I knew fate was cruel and the world harsh.

“I don’t know, Zo. I feel like I might’ve infected you with some of my bitterness.” Holly returns to our conversation as though the interruption from Olive never happened, a mom skill I don’t have so it takes me a second longer to mentally turn back around to where we were with Blake

using me. “Don’t get me wrong, there aren’t many good ones out there, and Lord knows, I haven’t found one, but just because I haven’t, doesn’t mean you didn’t. What if—”

My mouth opens to argue and she shoves M&Ms into it to shush me. Effective tactic.

“As I was saying, what if he came to see you because of the case, because that makes sense, and then was knocked out by how awesome you are?” Even with a mouthful, I smile wryly at her absurdity. She keeps adding ridiculousness to her version of events. “And since you’re not exactly the friendly sort,” she says, giving me a pointed glare, “Blake used the only ‘in’ he had to spend time with you. Falling for you, and through the magic of his dick, getting you to fall for him.”

I wish, with every fiber of my being, that were true. But . . .

“This isn’t some movie where the hot guy falls for the basement weirdo, Hols.”

“Don’t call yourself that!” she chastises.

I shrug, licking a bit of chocolate off the back of one of my teeth. “It’s true. And we both know it. I own it, mostly proudly. But who I am, what I do, the things I’ve been through, don’t exactly lend toward a happily ever after.”

I’ve lived with that truth for a long time, had it hidden deep inside behind locked doors and solid walls, but those have all been shattered, and after Blake, with my defenses all but gone, it hurts to spell it out so bluntly.

Holly’s eyes go red and glittery, but she growls, “I’m going to kill him.” Even she knows I’m right, no matter how much she wishes it weren’t true. “If anyone can figure out a way to do it without getting caught, it’s us.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me enticingly.

“I don’t want to kill him, Holly. I want to pretend it never happened so I don’t feel stupid, sad, and mad all at the same time.”

“You are not stupid. You’re kind and sweet. Sad and mad, I can help with. You need pizza rolls, cookies, and wine. Go claim the prime spot on the couch.”

I wish I had the strength to argue, but shitty food and a shittier movie sounds like the perfect way to wallow in my misery, so I don’t bother.

In the living room, I get my favorite blanket, the extra-fluffy one I gave Holly for Christmas two years ago, and curl up in the corner of her sectional couch with three huge pillows to make a nest of heartache.

I hear Holly get Olive set up with a one-millionth playing of *Frozen* and then she sits down next to me on the couch, a tray of steaming pizza rolls and cookies between us. I hit play on *Legally Blonde*, the movie we watch every time one of us has a breakup. Except it's always Holly. It's never been me.

Until now.

I bite into a too-hot pizza roll, wanting the burning pain of the liquid fire in my mouth. It's nothing compared to the agonizing hurt in my heart. And I don't mean the heartburn the shitty food is going to give me.

* * *

IT'S LATE when I leave Holly's, or it seems like it because Olive went to bed hours ago, but she's only five with a bedtime of eight thirty. Since I'm a little older, it's hours until sleep has any chance of taking me into its slumberous relief, and I can't imagine going home and reliving my humiliation again by telling Jacob what happened today.

So I go to the only other place that brings me any solace.

Work.

I'll lose myself in the cold morgue, spend some focused time on paperwork, concentrate on deep cleaning every inch of every surface, and time will hopefully fly by.

Or maybe I'll get lucky and get a call! Scraping up body parts from a car accident would definitely distract me.

Wishing someone death so you have the distraction of a DB isn't exactly professional.

I sigh, telling my inner responsible self to shut the fuck up. I'll take anything that pushes Blake and his betrayal from the forefront of my mind. I turn the light on in the morgue and step into the closet area to change into scrubs. The frigidness of the room doesn't even register anymore, especially when my insides are solid ice.

Stoically, I begin sorting and organizing the files on my desk. I stay pretty caught up and am naturally neat and tidy, so it doesn't take nearly long enough to get my workspace in tip-top shape.

With a sigh, I look around for something else to tackle. After a short internal debate, I decide the refrigerator could use a good mopping. I drag

the mop bucket in from the hallway closet, filling it with hot water and bleach from the sink in the corner, and then push it into the even colder space.

Back and forth, I push the mop in even, straight lines across the floor, letting the punishing work build up a sweat at my brow despite the room's temperature. Wringing out the mop for another swish over the floor, I hear something in the morgue just outside the refrigerator.

"Alver? I don't need or want dinner," I say, poking my head out with an evil glare already fixed in place. He's the last person I want to deal with tonight, especially given that he probably heard about my running out of court this morning and will gloat in my pain before disappearing to spread it around the gossip grapevine with malicious glee.

But Alver's not in the morgue.

No one is. I look around but see nothing amiss.

Back in the refrigerator, I mop and think—a dangerous combination.

As mad as I am at Blake, I can't let go of Richard Horne. Like Jeff, I feel a responsibility to tell my DBs' stories because they deserve to share their truth. But I don't know what else there is to discover or how to investigate, especially since Yvette is now on alert and the clock is against Jeff.

We found the poisonous supplement, but it's not enough. We know how Yvette likely gave it to Richard, but it's not a smoking gun because like Jeff said, Horne could have been taking the supplements himself, unaware of the damage he was doing.

I hope Jeff really is as good at investigating as he says he is because I'm at a dead-end.

I hear the unmistakable sound of a desk drawer opening and closing in the morgue and growl at the interruption.

"Alver. Get the fuck out of my morgue," I shout, but when I peek out, there's no one there again. I think I'm losing my mind for a moment and look around in confusion. Realization dawns and I sigh. "Jacob, I've had a really shitty day and I'm not in the mood for one of your pranks."

I half expect him to pop out and say 'gotcha' when I jump, but nothing happens. "It's not funny tonight." Still nothing. "Fine, but I'm not playing these games. I've got work to do, so I'll see you at home later."

I inject as much mom-tone to my voice as I can, channeling Holly's non-sense manner. Unlike Olive, Jacob doesn't readily fall into line.

Understandable since Olive's five and Jacob's eighteen, but I'm too exhausted to deal with him tonight. I spin on my heel and disappear into the refrigerator once more, hoping Jacob will slink away. I'll apologize for my bitchy mood later, but for now, all I can manage is mopping and thinking.

I do three more passes, making it all the way to the door of the refrigerator when the hair on the back of my neck stands up and gooseflesh that has nothing to do with the cool room breaks out over my skin.

Before I can turn around to scold Jacob for scaring the shit out of me again, a train crashes into my skull. Sharp pain explodes in my head, stealing my vision and turning everything black with colorful sparkles.

I stumble, or I think I do, but my brain isn't working any better than my feet. The floor is cold and wet against my cheek, unforgiving beneath my body. From far away, I hear a furious voice snarl, "You should've let it go. This is all your fault."

Was that real or in my head?

I'm not sure, and it seems less important as I sink into the darkness.

CHAPTER 24



BLAKE

I leave the morgue after talking to Jeff, rushing straight to Zoey's trailer. Like she said, if she's not at work, she's home, and vice versa. Sliding into the dirt driveway, I run up the stairs and bang on the door.

"Zoey? Let me in."

No answer.

My heart climbs up in my throat, and I hit the door harder, using the side of my fist to make it louder. The door shakes in its frame. "C'mon, Zo. This is all one big misunderstanding."

No answer.

I peek in the window, begging. "Please, Zoey. Let's talk about this."

"Quit your bellowing, boy!" Thelma yells louder than I am as she leans out her front door. "She ain't there, anyway."

I look at Zoey's door again, then back to Thelma, trying to make sense of what she's saying, no matter how illogical. "What do you mean she's not here? Where is she?"

Thelma takes a long drag off her cigarette, her eyes narrowing as she inhales. Lifting her bony shoulder, she says, "How would I know?"

I want to shake her, rattle whatever information her nosiness might've earned out of her brain because I need it now. I have to find Zoey and set her straight because she has things all wrong.

Exponentially wrong.

"Thelma," I warn harshly. "Where is she?"

Thelma balks, softer than I've seen her, but waves her cigarette around. "I told you . . . I don't know. Haven't seen her since she left this morning.

All dressed up, though I don't know where she was going." She takes another drag. "Maybe she had another fellow?"

I growl, knowing Thelma is trying to rile me up and I'm letting her get to me.

But I don't have any other option.

"What about Jacob? You seen him?"

"He's got late school tonight. Boy takes some night classes since he can't get up like a normal person in the mornin'."

For someone who doesn't know much, she sure knows a lot. Except where my Zoey is. "Thanks."

I climb back in my car and text Jacob.

You talked to Zoey?

Jacob replies quickly. *No. Why?*

We had a misunderstanding. I'm trying to find her.

Jacob's reply is just as fast. *You check work? Home?*

I grip my phone and roll my eyes skyward to pray for patience. *Yes. Where else would she go?*

Holly's. The funeral home or her house.

He sends me the address for Holly's house while I look up the funeral home. *Thanks. If you hear from her, let me know.*

Jacob sends me back a thumbs-up.

Based on the addresses, I decide to check the funeral home first, but as I drive up, the building is dark and I quickly dismiss it. Further on, Holly's house is a small one-story with a chain-link fence around the swing set in the yard.

I park haphazardly, hop the fence, and run to the door, trying to restrain myself from banging on it as hard as I'm compelled to do. It's late and Holly's daughter is probably asleep, but the longer it takes me to find Zoey, the faster and harder my heart is beating.

How could she have thought I was using her?

How could she dismiss everything we've been through and done together that easily?

My knock is slightly less booming, but still frantic.

Holly opens the door holding a fleece robe tightly around her waist, her eyes wide. Until she sees me, and then they narrow sharply.

"What the fuck do you want?" she snarls. If eyes could shoot laser beams, I'd be a pile of ash on her front stoop.

I hold up my hands peacefully when she takes a lunging step toward me. “Wait! Whatever Zoey told you . . . she’s got it all wrong.”

Holly punches my hands as though we’re sparring, combining a right jab and left cross that would make Trey proud. Not listening to me in the slightest, Holly’s still on the warpath.

“Thanks for coming over. It’ll make killing you that much easier. Keep it down, though, because if you wake up my daughter, I’ll bring you back to life just to kill you again.”

The threat should be ridiculous, but with the way Holly’s eyes are flashing, I believe her. “Okay, you can kill me later. But is Zoey here first?”

That’s enough to stop Holly in her tracks and she looks at me in confusion. “No, she left here hours ago. Said she was going home.”

Shaking my head, I inform her, “She’s not there. I just came from there. Work before that. Where else would she go? I’ve got to talk to her.”

My frantic worry breaks through Holly’s anger like nothing else could and she hears what I’m saying. I can’t find Zoey. “Nowhere else. It’s not like she’d go to the beer barn without being forced. Maybe you missed her at home or work?”

The idea that Zoey and I are going around in circles is oddly symbolic. I feel like we’ve been doing that for longer than just tonight. She’s the center of everything, and I’m chasing her, always chasing.

I promise to keep running after her, more than Trey has ever made me run before, until nothing could possibly make Zoey question this thing between us.

“I’ll go back to the morgue and see.”

“Tell her to call me once you find her, or I’ll worry. I want to hear it from her mouth.”

I don’t tell her that I plan to have Zoey’s mouth busy from the instant I see her to the instant she falls asleep in my arms after we make up. I don’t consider the possibility that we don’t make up.

Once I explain, Zoey will understand. She has to.

* * *

THE MORGUE IS EMPTY, and instead of my heart racing, it freezes in my chest. I’ve been everywhere. Where could she be? Home, work, home,

work. Those are the only places she goes. She said so herself.

I pull out my phone to call Zoey again. I've been messaging her all evening with no response, but I don't know what to do now, where to go next. I push her number in my contacts list and wait. But I hear a subtle buzz. I scan her desk, moving a piece of paper, and find her abandoned phone on the desktop with eleven missed calls from me, and now one from Holly too.

There are also a couple of texts from Jacob warning Zoey that I'm looking for her.

He must've sent those from school.

What the hell? She wouldn't leave without her phone. Maybe she's here somewhere, hopefully just running to the bathroom and not hiding from me.

But as I stand in the cold room, suspicion worms its way through me and I look around a bit more. The refrigerator door is cracked open.

"Zo?" I say, pulling the door wide. Inside, I see an overturned mop bucket. I bend down to touch the mess of bleachy water to find it's cooled to refrigerator temperature.

It's been here a while, way longer than it would've taken her to get something to clean it up if she'd accidentally spilled.

Something is wrong. She is here, her phone tells me that, but she's not *here*.

"Zoey!" I shout, but only my voice echoes back to me without an answer from her.

My gut drops, and with wild eyes, I scan the refrigerator, even though the space is small enough that I'd see her if she were in here, and then the morgue, looking under the tables.

In the hallway, I shout again, "Zoey!"

There are a couple of doors, but they're both locked, and I run for the stairs as an inexplicable panic begins to fill my veins. Halfway up the stairs, Alver rounds the corner of the landing and shuffles to a stop.

"What are you yelling for? Ain't no need for all that racket," he says grumpily.

I grab him by his shirt, lifting his frail body to push him against the wall. "What did you do to her? Where's Zoey?"

His eyes are frantic, looking left and right for a way out as he blusters, "What're you talking about, asshole? Put me down!"

From scant inches away, I snarl, "Where. Is. She?"

Realizing the only way out of this situation is to answer the fucking question, he finds the ability to focus. “I don’t know,” he says, trying to shrug. “Haven’t seen DDG since early this afternoon. She’s not here, thank the good Lord for small miracles.”

“She is. Or was. Her phone’s on her desk and the mop bucket is spilled in the fridge.”

Alver’s mouth gapes dumbly. “Huh? Well, I don’t know. I ain’t seen her.”

I drop him to his feet, not caring if he catches himself. Because the fucked-up thing is, I believe him.

“Where’s Sheriff Barnes?” I bark.

“Gone for the night. It’s late,” he informs me as if I don’t know exactly how late at night it is. “Zoey’s probably skulking about somewhere. Or over at the funeral home with her weird friend.” Now that I don’t have him pressed up against the wall, Alver is feeling brave again.

“Call Barnes. Now.”

“I am not waking up the sheriff because you lost your little girlfriend,” he says dismissively. “Hell, you should be thanking your lucky stars you ain’t dead yet from hanging out with that one.”

I loom over him, backing him into the wall again. “Call Barnes. Tell him Zoey is missing.”

An impossibly long ten minutes later, Sheriff Barnes comes stomping into the morgue. His hair is disheveled, his untucked shirt is buttoned crookedly, and his face is thunderous.

“What the hell is going on here?”

Alver tries to answer, “This asshole came in here threatening me, demanding—”

But Sheriff Barnes isn’t looking at Alver. He’s looking at me, so I speak right over Alver’s blustering explanation.

“Zoey’s missing. I’ve been trying to track her down since we talked. She’s not home, not at Holly’s, not at the funeral home, and not with Jacob. Her phone is here and the mop bucket is spilled in the refrigerator. I think there was a struggle.” I swallow thickly. “I think somebody took her, Sheriff.”

“Took her? Who?”

My mind’s been whirling on that for the whole ten minutes since Alver made that call, and I can only come up with one answer. “Yvette Horne.”

Alver snorts out derisively. “That pretty little thing? She wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

If only he knew what that ‘pretty little thing’ was capable of. I am, and so is Sheriff Barnes. Yvette Horne killed her husband and Zoey prevented her from getting the money she felt entitled to. “When Yvette left court today, she said, ‘This isn’t over.’ I thought it was an empty threat, but now . . .”

Barnes’s jaw clenches, his own keen mind processing through the information he’s been presented with. He steps around me to look in the refrigerator himself. I looked over every inch. There’s nothing else to find unless Zoey has magically appeared from an alternative universe since I last looked in there.

Unfortunately, that hasn’t happened, and Sheriff Barnes reaches for the radio at his shoulder.

“This is Sheriff Jeff Barnes. I need every officer in Williamson County to report for duty STAT. We have a missing person.” He pauses, the next words hard for him to say and harder for me to hear. “Zoey Walker is missing, foul play is suspected. I repeat, All Points Bulletin for Zoey Walker. We need to find her, boys. Someone took one of our own. Over.”

He releases the button, and there’s a moment of static before someone replies, “This is Smith. On it, Sheriff.”

Another voice says, “Parker here. We’ll find her, sir.”

He blinks, though I don’t think a man like him cries—at least not in the middle of an investigation—and pushes the button again, “Kenny?”

“Yes, Sheriff?”

“I need you to go by Yvette Horne’s house. She’s our number-one suspect and you’re closest. Be careful, son. Over.”

“Yes, sir.”

Silence descends for a moment as the chill of the room seeps into my bones. Zoey is really missing.

“Barnes?”

It’s only one word, but he hears everything I have tied up in it. . . my plea for help, my promise to do whatever it takes to get Zoey back, and most of all, my prayers that she is unharmed.

“I know, kid. Come upstairs and let me show you how a real investigation is done.”

CHAPTER 25



ZOEY

A disgusting smell assails my nostrils, and that's saying something because I have smelled some rank stuff before. Decomposition has its own aroma, unlike no other. Thankfully, what I smell now isn't that, but rather . . . ammonia.

Stale and sharp . . . urine.

My nose crinkles, and I try breathing through my mouth instead, an old trick Grandpa taught me when I first started working by his side. My eyes flutter as I try to blink, but it's just as dark as before when I manage to force them open. I'm lying down and can feel that I'm enclosed.

My first thought is that I've been buried alive, and I panic, my heart beating out of my chest as I thrash and flail, screaming in terror. My foot kicks something solid and metal, and I cry out, pulling my knee to my chest sharply.

"Ow!" It hurts like a bitch, tears instantly sprouting, but it does stop my panic attack enough that my surroundings start to take shape. Mostly, the hum of road noise comes to me.

I'm in . . . a trunk?

What happened?

I try to remember. There was court . . . and Holly's . . . and the morgue. I was mopping. Is that why I'm wet?

Or is the urine my own?

No, not mine because now that I'm thinking about it, I could really pee, but this doesn't seem to be the time nor place.

Think, Zoey. Mopping and then what? How did I go from the morgue to a trunk?

In a flash, I remember . . . something. A feeling of not being alone, yelling at Jacob.

But it wasn't Jacob. I know that.

Who was it?

A sharp pain lances through my skull as I try to remember, and I hiss.

Okay, breathe, Zoey. If you can't go back, figure out what's happening now.

Blindly, I feel around—stinky carpet, hard metal framing, a few wires.

Wait, what's that?

Behind my leg, I feel something big and squishy. I twist and bend, trying to get my hand down to grab it.

“C'mon, Zoey. Stretch like you've never stretched before. Pretend you're at yoga . . .” *Grunt.* “Or one of those bendy people who can do a backbend without cracking a bone.”

The pep talk still sucks, but as I flick my fingers against what I can now feel is nylon, I finally get a grip on it and pull it up. It's a . . . bag?

“Please let there be a weapon inside,” I pray as I find the zipper. Inside the bag, I don't find the metal of a gun or the plastic of a Taser, but rather fabric, wet and smelly with a new layer of stink that adds to the urine grossness still surrounding me despite becoming accustomed to it.

“Ugh,” I groan, wiping the wetness on my scrub pants. Not finding anything I can weaponize, I tune in to what's happening outside the car.

Road noise . . . a speed bump or . . . *Wait. That was a railroad track.*

Immediately afterward, we swerve left.

I close my eyes to trace the railroad line through Williamson County.

What if you're not in Williamson County anymore?

The thought sends ice through my body, raising goosebumps along my arms. It's entirely possible I'm somewhere well beyond county lines because I have no idea how long I was unconscious.

But I have to believe that railroad is the one I'm familiar with because the alternative is too terrifying.

Okay, Zoey. Think. Railroad track crossing and then a left swerve.

It hits me . . . a pothole. At the Cameron Oaks crossing, there's a huge pothole that's been there for years. People who live out here in Williamson County know that and swerve without giving it a second thought.

Good job, Zo. Now you know where you are and that it's a local driving. What else?

With an idea of where I am, I can close my eyes and visualize the road. We turn right on Redbud, go straight for a bit, and then another right on Laverne.

Wait, no. Not Laverne, I think it was Mayfield Lane.

What's out here?

Before I can remember, we're bumping along the road, and I bounce around the trunk wildly.

I cover my head with my hands for protection, letting my elbows and knees take the brunt of the impacts as I hit the unforgiving metal again and again.

"Aw . . . ugh . . . ow!"

The car stops suddenly, and I roll forward and then back at the abruptness. Quieting, I listen for any clue. I hear a loud creak and then a clang. I know that sound, any country person does . . . it's a gate swinging open, the chain and lock jangling against the metal of the pole fence. The car door slams and I'm moving again.

I remember advice I heard once, from where I don't know, that said 'don't let them take you to a secondary location'. It's way too late for that, so what's my next option?

Fight like hell, Zoey. Whatever happens, when that trunk opens, you need to be ready to fight and run.

I swallow down the bile that threatens to come up at the idea of what I might be fighting against and running from and take slow, deep breaths to oxygenate my blood for both fight and flight. I take a firm grip on the bag because while it doesn't have any traditional weapons, it's all I have, and I wait.

The car stops once more, and I freeze, listening for steps to come around to the trunk.

Ready? Three, two, one . . . nothing happens and I don't move. Just when I think I've been forgotten, the lid opens, swinging up. It's still dark, but with my eyes adjusted to the inside of the trunk, I can see the moonlit silhouette of my kidnapper. They're smaller than I expected somehow, my fear making them seem larger than life in my mind.

A veritable Sasquatch of horror, but this shadow is basically my size or even smaller. I throw the bag with a yell of fury, scrambling out of the trunk as quickly as I can.

I push past the shadow and run, screaming as loud as I can, “Help! Help! *Help!*”

I know I only have moments before the kidnapper is hot on my heels. What I’m not expecting is the voice that yells, “Get her!”

That’s got to be the kidnapper, but who is she talking to? She? Yes, definitely a woman. Heavy footsteps come up behind me, faster than I could hope to escape, but I try to dodge and zig zag. Loud breath steams on my neck, and I know my chance at flight is gone.

I spin suddenly, planting one foot and bringing up the other knee toward my pursuer. I’m hoping to hit gut, or maybe a good ball shot that would drop him to his knees. What I find is a wall of iron-hardened muscle that hurts my knee more than the other way around.

I am rewarded with a deep, guttural grunt, though. “Fuck. Be still so I don’t have to hurt you.”

I must be really losing it because I snort, a derisive laugh coming out of my nose instead of my mouth.

He doesn’t want to hurt me after kidnapping me and bouncing my unconscious body around in the trunk?

“Fuck you, fucker!” Not an original or creative statement, but at least I’m loud, though I’m not sure there’s anyone to hear me. But hopefully, my voice will carry over the fields far enough away that someone will hear. I take a big inhale to scream again, but it’s forced out of me when I’m tackled to the ground. “*Oof.*”

A heavy mass sits firmly on my back, and I squirm and wiggle, kicking and clawing to get away. “Damn it! Quit moving, bro!”

Bro? I’m obviously not a bro.

My arms are wrenched behind my back, my wrists clasped tight in one large, strong hand, and I’m yanked unceremoniously to my feet. “Come on.”

I’m jerkily marched back toward the car, losing any ground I made with my attempt at running. When we get back, I see who I threw the bag at, because the car headlights are beaming right on her like spotlights. “Yvette.”

She seems put off by my lack of surprise, or maybe I’m just too shocked to sound that way. “Well, who’d you expect? The Queen of England?”

Definitely not. Yvette Horne is no queen.

Since this morning, she's changed clothes and apparently lost her ever-loving mind. Her hair is no longer subdued into an updo but rather down and frizzy. Her demure dress has been replaced with sweats and a tank top, and her earlier fury has given way to utter madness.

I shrug against my captor. "I wasn't expecting you because I wasn't expecting to get kidnapped."

"Good one," I hear from behind me, and I jerk my head, trying to look over my shoulder at the man holding me hostage.

"Sebastian?"

He looks at me and then Yvette, then back to me, his brows getting lower and lower in confusion. "Hey! How's Chunky doing with the exercises?"

"Uhm . . ." How in the hell am I supposed to answer that when he's got both my wrists gripped in one of his big, paw-sized hands?

Luckily, or maybe unluckily—I'm not sure which yet—Yvette answers for me with a shout. "Enough!"

Sebastian's hands tighten uncomfortably, and I wince, hissing in pain. "Oh, sorry."

His apology is unexpected and even more confusing than his questions about Chunky. And I'm not in the mood to be confused anymore. It's wearing on my last nerve, especially after the day I've had.

"Look, I've had a really shitty day. So how about you tell me what the plan is here and let's see if we can work something out that'll get me home, in a bubble bath, with an extra-large glass of wine? Deal?" I offer with an exasperated sigh.

Yvette's eyes bulge wide, nearly bugging out of their sockets. "You've had a bad day? You've. Had. A. Bad. Day?" she repeats herself, getting up in my face. "I lost everything! And it's all your fault!" she screeches.

Her hands are gesturing so wildly, I'm ninety-nine percent sure she's going to slap me, either accidentally or intentionally.

It seems I've hit a nerve.

Sebastian pushes me toward the car, and I stumble away from him, catching myself on sore wrists to keep from face-planting on the hood. He gathers Yvette in his arms instead, rubbing his palm over her hair as she buries her face in his wide chest. "It's okay, Vettie. Calm down."

Never in the history of time has a woman calmed down by being told to calm down. In fact, those words usually have the opposite effect. But

Sebastian must have some magic, either in his words or in the gentle touch of his hand, because Yvette does settle. I'm guessing it's his voice because I've felt his hand on my wrists and there was *nothing* gentle about it.

But I'm not done poking and prodding at Yvette's wound, not when it seems to put her off-balance and that's the only hope I can see at getting away. "My fault? I had nothing to do with your poisoning your husband, psycho."

Yvette lunges at me, her clawed nails scraping down my arm, leaving lines of red in their wake. "Psycho? I'll show you psycho!"

Sebastian catches Yvette around her waist, pulling her back to put some space between us. "Ladies, ladies . . ." Standing between us, he holds a hand out toward each of us as though he's stopping a barroom catfight. This man must be either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid. I'm leaning toward the latter. Smiling congenially, he acts like this is no big deal. "Let's all take a deep breath and calm down."

I am not Yvette, and his words have the expected and well-documented effect on me.

"Calm down?" I jeer. "I've been kidnapped and taken to the middle of nowhere. Know this . . . I'm not going down without a fight. You might kill me, but I will make you bleed in the process." I spit out the words, covering my fear with venom and promises of painful retribution.

Inside, I'm panicking, the realization that I'm going to die hitting full force.

I'm so sorry, Jacob. I know I promised I'd be there for you, forever and always. I'm sorry I lied.

Flashes of a younger Jacob, crying openly at Grandma's funeral and then hiding his tears at Grandpa's funeral because he felt the need to appear grown despite being a teenager, fill my mind. He'd finally given in late one night when a bad storm scared us both, the lightning bringing Grandpa's death back with a vengeance. Jacob had curled into my shoulder like the child he was, crying until dry sobs racked his bigger-than-me body.

I hope someone is there to hold him this time.

He's eighteen and so responsible, but really, he's a young man who's lost so much. As much as I have . . . parents, family, Grandma and Grandpa.

And now, he's going to lose me too.

Tears fill my eyes, burning hot and acidic. I wipe them away angrily, hating that they make me seem weak on the heels of my powerful 'I will

kill you' speech.

Sebastian's eyes ping-pong from me to Yvette, back and forth. "Kill? Nobody is going to die. That's not what this is about. Tell her."

His eyes land on Yvette, who's still eyeing me like she'd be quite happy if I dropped dead right here and now.

"Vettie?" Sebastian warns when she doesn't agree.

Begrudgingly, she huffs out, "Whatever."

"Good," he says soothingly. "How about we talk things out like adults?"

"Adults do not kidnap people, Sebastian," I growl, bristling against his placating tone while I'm contemplating my mortality.

He turns hard eyes on me. "I'm trying to help here. Work with me."

It's an order, blunt and clipped. Any sense of kindness dissipated, both in his words and his eyes, which are cold now, freezing me in place. Yvette, I feel confident I can handle. I've got size, age, and desperation on her. Sebastian, he could turn me into a puddle of Zoey goo easily, probably without breaking a sweat.

Sweat . . . ew, that's what that the bag of wet, smelly clothes was in the trunk. His workout clothes.

Absently, I wipe my hands on my scrubs again.

"Okay," Sebastian says, taking my silence as agreement. "Vettie, tell Zoey what you want," he prompts, playing the mediator.

I swallow down the questions I want to ask, trying to pick up any clue I can in the hope that it'll help me get away safely. Because I don't believe for a second that they don't intend to kill me. It's the second rule of kidnapping, just after don't go to a secondary location . . . if you see the kidnappers' faces, they can't let you go.

And here I am in the middle of nowhere at a secondary location, not only able to see Yvette and Sebastian's faces, but I know who they are. Hell, I've been in Yvette's trash and likely have Sebastian's junk in my work refrigerator.

Ugh! It was gross when I didn't know whose it was, but with a definite name and face of where it came from . . . extra yuck!

Yvette smiles at Sebastian sweetly. "Okay, babe." To me, she drops the smile to say, "You need to rule Dickie's death from natural causes. Fill out whatever paperwork you need to so this whole thing is cleared up."

I gape, eyes and mouth wide open in shock.

Is she for real? All this cloak and dagger kidnapping to get me to change some paperwork?

“Sure. I can do that,” I tell her.

She beams at Sebastian, and he pats her head like she’s a child. “See, Vettie. I told you it’d all work out.”

“Just one teensy-weensy problem,” I interrupt, garnering both their attention. “No one’s going to believe it. Not even for a split second. Everyone knows you killed Richard, Yvette. And by now, you’re likely the number-one suspect in my disappearance. If I show up and change the paperwork, it’ll be the biggest red flag in the history of red flags.”

Shut the hell up, Zoey! Why the hell are you saying all this? Fucking professional pride?

“But I didn’t kill my Dickie,” Yvette pouts. “Why does everyone keep saying that?” she implores Sebastian as tears spill down her cheeks in trails that leave mascara rivers. “I loved him.”

Sebastian yanks Yvette into his chest again in a forceful hug, and I feel like an unwelcome intruder into a private moment between them. But it’s not like I asked to be here.

“Shh, it’s okay. They just don’t understand. You did everything for Richard for so long, and he didn’t appreciate you. Not like I do. You’re an amazing woman, Vettie.”

Sebastian tilts Yvette’s chin up and kisses her fully. He has to be eating mascara, tears, and probably snot too because Yvette is full-on sobbing, but he keeps on kissing her.

I take a couple of slow steps away, hoping to go unnoticed as I get a head start. But I’m not too far away to miss when Yvette stutters out, “I did everything for Dickie. Took good care of him, even making those awful tasting smoothies you recommended so we could be healthier. I don’t care how good for me you say they are, I’m not drinking those anymore. They said in court that they had dangerous metal in them.”

She sounds shocked at the very thought of heavy metals being in the smoothies.

Wait . . . did she say ‘so we could be healthier’? Was Yvette drinking the smoothies too? That doesn’t make any sense. Why would she drink them if she were using them to poison her husband?

Like the puzzle of the invoice, pieces start to move in my mind, rearranging themselves into a new image. I thought I knew how the puzzle

ended up . . . with Yvette Horne as the murderous poisoner of her husband.

But what if I'm wrong?

What if we're all wrong?

My eyes narrow as the new image comes into focus. One that doesn't have Yvette as a black widow—ugh, the hated nickname stings even as I use it for someone else.

Nor does the picture have Yvette and Sebastian in cahoots, two lovers removing a roadblock to their relationship. No, this latest picture has only one person on the puzzle box.

Sebastian.

"Yvette, you've been drinking the smoothies too?" I clarify before I get too far down this new path of thinking.

She snuffles. "Yeah, they're gross and give me headaches, but they're better than eating three pounds of broccoli a day."

She says that as though someone said it to her and she's quoting them. Perhaps Sebastian?

"Headaches?"

Sebastian gives me a piercing look, and though it physically hurts me to do so, I force my feet to move closer to Yvette and Sebastian. "May I?"

I hold out my hand to Yvette, and though she looks to Sebastian for permission first, she slips her hand into mine. I press on her fingers, feeling the coolness there. "Do you have any numbness or tingling?"

"I guess." She shrugs. "But I'm no spring chicken either. That's what happens when you get older—your joints are always sore, your back argues when you try to hop out of bed, and your belly is a little sensitive."

Headaches? Sore joints? Upset stomach? Numbness and tingling? All signs of heavy metal poisoning.

"Yvette, you're not old by any means. And even if you were, those are not normal signs of aging." I'm baby stepping here, because I think I'm in worse danger than I thought. But so is Yvette, and she has no idea. I need to try a different angle to get more information and to get Yvette to see reason. "I'm sure Sebastian doesn't think you're old. Look at the way he looks at you," I tease like we're girlfriends who've escaped to the bathroom to discuss our cute dates.

Yvette looks up at Sebastian, and he cups her cheek gently, love and affection filling his eyes in an instant. "You don't think I'm old, do you?"

“Of course not, Vettie. I can barely keep up with you, but I’m looking forward to trying my hardest.”

It sounds right—sweet and complimentary, reassuring Yvette that their age gap isn’t a problem. But when she looks back to me with a crushing school girl’s smile, Sebastian’s face goes blank, all adoration simply turning off like a switch.

My gut roils, a stone in the pit of my stomach threatening to come up. But I stay steady and force a smile to my lips, though I can feel it’s twitchy and wavering.

“You two are cute together. I’m sorry about Richard, but at least you have someone.”

Without meaning to, I twist the knife in my own heart, remembering Blake and what I thought we had, only to be proven wrong. Just like Yvette, who thinks she’s found a sweet guy to comfort her after her husband’s death, but the reality is . . . Sebastian killed Richard.

I’m sure of it.

I can feel it instinctually, even if I can’t prove it.

“I do. I’m very lucky to have found Sebastian to help with Rusty. I don’t know what I would’ve done without Sebastian to train my baby boy and help since Dickie passed. I wasn’t looking for anyone, but fate put Sebastian in front of me and wouldn’t let me ignore our connection.”

Yvette snuggles into what she thinks is her soft and cozy safety net when the truth is, Sebastian is the razor-lined threat in Yvette’s life.

“Even though I tried,” she confides.

That is new information, and I latch on to it with fervor.

“You didn’t . . .” I trail off, not sure how to say ‘cheat on your husband’ without sounding judgmental.

Yvette catches my meaning and shakes her head. “No, Sebastian pursued me, but I told him I would never hurt my Dickie. But when Dickie was gone, Sebastian was right there to comfort me.”

“That’s convenient,” I say, giving an inch when what I really want to do is shake Yvette so she sees the miles of scheming Sebastian has been up to.

Sebastian has been quiet, hugging and comforting Yvette but truly keeping her at his side, under his control. Them against me, especially as I pick and prod for details. Now, he tests back, though he’s wearing the façade of a sweet and caring boyfriend and not his true self.

“See? I knew you’d understand why Vettie needs Richard’s death to be from natural causes. A quick and simple change and one signature, and you’ll make her . . . *us* . . . so happy. The way we were meant to be.”

Is he stupid? Or willfully ignoring the obvious? “I can’t. Or well, I can,” I correct myself, “but no one will believe it.”

“You’ll have to make them.” His mask is slipping again, exposing his ugly side, promising an unspoken punishment if I don’t get everyone to believe something so obviously untrue.

Unaware of the change in Sebastian, Yvette coos, “It’ll be fine. At least we can be together.”

He snarls. “The money fucking matters, Yvette.”

She looks like he slapped her, though I don’t think it was his words but rather that he called her by her given name, not the cutesy nickname he’s been using.

“Sebastian?” she questions, sounding small and unsure. For the first time, I see Yvette Horne differently, as a victim herself. Sebastian recommended the smoothies, he added the supplements to poison both Richard and Yvette, and when Richard died, Sebastian slickly stepped right into Yvette’s heart to take advantage of her.

For what? Is it really about the money? I guess people have done worse for less, but Richard’s insurance policy was only for \$100,000.

“Yvette, do you have a life insurance policy too?” I ask quickly.

She answers mindlessly, her eyes never leaving Sebastian, who looks murderous. “Yeah, same as Richard.”

“Who gets the money if you die?”

That’s Sebastian’s proverbial line in the sand. He shoves Yvette back, charging toward me with his finger pointing threateningly, “You shut your fucking mouth.”

I try to back up, but I’m caught against the hood of the car with nowhere to go. I see it coming and flinch, but Sebastian’s backhand across my cheek still surprises me with its force and I see flashing stars again.

From the ground where she fell when he pushed her, Yvette squeaks, “Rusty does. It goes in a trust for my baby.”

The maniac dog that nearly took an officer to the ground? That Irish Retriever stands to inherit \$200,000?

That’s ridiculous and exactly what someone like Yvette Horne would do for the dog she calls her baby.

“And who gets the dog, Yvette? Who inherits Rusty?” I spit through a jaw that’s vibrating with my heartbeat and already swelling.

“Sebastian,” she says in confusion but with slowly dawning realization. “He’s the only one Rusty behaves for, and he takes good care of my baby. Oh!”

Sebastian whirls at Yvette’s exclamation, his face desperate to keep his plan together a bit longer. “Vettie?”

But he’s not fast enough to stop her from finally seeing reality. Yvette, thankfully spryer than she gives herself credit for, leaps onto Sebastian’s back, scratching and clawing. “You killed my Dickie Boo! You monster! How could you?”

CHAPTER 26



BLAKE

Barnes and I crowd around his desk, Alver bringing up the rear. I whirl on Alver, unable to hold back any longer. “You let this happen. You’re supposed to watch the front, patrol the building. Yvette wouldn’t have gotten to Zoey if you’d done your damn job!”

Alver blusters, trying to fight back, but he’s a frail old man. One who not too long ago, I had pressed against the wall. I try not to feel guilty about that, but Zoey missing is an extenuating circumstance to the most extreme degree. “I’m sorry! I had to take a shit!”

Barnes snorts in shock, fighting a school boy chuckle. “You were taking a shit and left the front door unmanned?”

“Not like we’ve got coverage for bathroom breaks or even need it. I know my role is basically a glorified greeter. Might as well go work at the Wal-Mart in town,” he grumbles before adding bitterly, “*Welcome in . . . have a good day.*”

Barnes sighs and plops into his chair. “You’re right. Sorry, Alver.”

“What?” I shout.

“Blake, if you want to keep yelling at the man for taking care of nature’s call, be my guest,” Barnes says. “But you know inside that we’ve all had to drop a deuce while at work. If you want to help me find Zoey, then let’s do that while we still have a chance at finding her alive.”

He knows exactly how to chill the blood in my veins. Dismissing Alver, I growl, “What do you need me to do?”

“Good. Let’s think . . . Yvette is mad about this morning, blames Zoey, so she kidnaps her. Why not you? You’re the money man,” he theorizes.

“I’m also a bit bigger than Zoey,” I remind him. “Not as easy to kidnap. Ransom?” I suggest, figuring if Yvette can’t get money one way, maybe she thought she’d try another.

Barnes shakes his head. “Whole county knows Zoey as *Drop-Dead Gorgeous*, knows about her supposed curse. And they know she’s basically poor. County don’t pay big for the coroner. Hate to say it, but there’s no one who’d pay a ransom for Zoey.”

I would. I’d pay anything for her to be safe and sound, down in her morgue talking to cadavers, even if she’s still mad at me.

That, I could handle. This, I cannot.

Alver makes a spitting noise over his shoulder like just talking about the curse might make him a target. Barnes rolls his eyes in exasperation.

“What are we missing?”

“Don’t matter now. Just need to find her,” Alver adds uselessly as he sits in a nearby chair, crossing one leg over the other like he’s setting up for a long break.

“That’s what we’re trying to do!” I’m losing it again, any semblance of chill, calm, and collected gone like smoke at the thought of what might be happening to Zoey while we’re sitting here doing nothing.

“Not Zoey. Yvette. You both are focusing on the why, supposing this and that. Ain’t important now. If Yvette Horne took Zoey, where’d she take her? People go where they’re familiar when they’re under stress, so there are only so many places Yvette can go. Kenny’s checking the house. Where else?”

Maybe Alver’s years of service did teach him something because that’s actually helpful. Barnes must agree because he clicks around on his computer. “Yvette owns the house with Richard. So that’s all hers now. They’ve got two vehicles, her car and his pickup. Richard’s got a share in a duck blind, but that’s hours away and I’m betting Yvette’s never been there.”

A dead end, hopefully not one that leads to Zoey being just as dead too.

“What about make-out points? Everybody knows where those are,” Alver suggests.

“Where are those?” I ask.

Barnes talks to the radio at his shoulder instead of me. “I need someone to check out Mayfield’s pastures and someone to go up to Overlook Drive.”

The static clears and a voice says, “Unit One’s got Mayfield’s.”

Another voice comes through, “Three’ll take Overlook.”

Barnes nods. “Okay. Familiar places covered. Who is Yvette friendly with? Reckon she’d have help?”

“Sebastian, the dog trainer. That’s who she’s sleeping with.” I pull out my phone and open my TikTok app to show Sebastian’s account. “This is him with my dog, Chunky.”

“You see this dog trainer too?” Barnes asks.

“I did once . . . as part of our investigation,” I explain.

“Yours and Zoey’s, you mean?” Sheriff Barnes looks like the very idea gives him heartburn. I suppose considering where we’re at now, with Zoey missing, I can understand why. My chest hasn’t stopped hurting since I saw that mop bucket lying on its side.

“Yeah, he’s kinda social media famous. But weird . . .”

“Weird, how?” Barnes demands.

I think back to my training session with Sebastian. “He comes off as this charming, gym bro, dude type, but then he’d blink and be furious. A second later, it was like it never happened. He was just weird.”

“And he’s sleeping with Yvette,” Alver summarizes. “I don’t like it.”

Barnes does a bit more computer searching and then reads from the screen. “Sebastian Turner, last known address is in town. Let me call in a drive by for his place, but it’s an apartment. Not much on privacy, not where I’d take a prisoner.”

He picks up his phone and calls the police department in town while that word—prisoner—ricochets around in my head, leaving carnage in its wake. After a short conversation, he hangs up. “They’ll call back when they get an all-clear.”

I look from Barnes to Alver, lost and not sure what to do. I want to run right out the door, go find Zoey, and gather her in my arms, checking every inch of her to make sure she’s okay, then smack her ass as punishment for believing for one second that I might be lying to her or using her. And then kiss it all better, pour myself into her so she never doubts me again.

Doesn’t she feel this?

How can she not feel the power of this?

I pull at my shirt over my heart, trying to ease the fear and pain.

“Let me see that invoice that got everyone all up in arms,” Barnes tells me.

“I thought you didn’t want to see it?”

“That was before Zoey went missing. I don’t give a rat’s ass about the DA’s case or any temper tantrum they might throw when Zoey’s out there and needs my help.”

I dip my chin, my misery and desperation loving his company. I run out to my car and grab a file folder from the passenger seat. Back inside, Barnes looks the pieced-together invoice over carefully.

“This is the online pharmacy Zoey was talking about?” he asks, pointing to the logo.

“Yeah, and you can see it went to Yvette Horne at her home address,” I add.

“Hmm . . . what about this? Did you two Sherlocks look into this?” Barnes asks.

“What?”

“The billing information. This credit card number—it’s all blocked out except for the last four digits, but this isn’t Yvette’s credit card or debit card. Not Richard’s either.”

“How’d you know that?”

Barnes looks at me like I’m stupider than a box of dumbass. “First thing you do in a questionable death is investigate the spouse. I’ve been through their bank records, investments, credit cards . . . all of it. And that’s not Yvette Horne’s.”

“Then whose is it?” Alver butts in from his perch.

Barnes snatches his phone up once again, dialing numbers and directing Alver. “Call Judge Hopkins. I’m gonna need a court order for this.”

“He’s here this late?” I interrupt to ask.

Alver chuckles. “It’s his wife’s book club night, so he stays out of the house while they talk about Fifty Shades of whatever color they’re doing these days.”

Thankfully, he’s already dialed the phone while he explained and he turns to give me his back while telling Judge Hopkins what’s happening.

Sheriff Barnes says into the phone, “Operator.” After a moment, he sighs and says through gritted teeth, “Customer service agent.” To me, he whispers, “Damn automated phone system. What happened to the days when someone answered the phone?”

I don’t get a chance to explain that if that were still the case, he probably wouldn’t get a live person this late at night anyway, because he

straightens and talks to whoever is on the other end of the line. “I need a supervisor. Now. This is a police matter.”

He licks his lips, ready to tear someone a new asshole if need be to get the information he wants. “This is Sheriff Jeff Barnes of the Williamson County Sheriff’s department. I have an invoice here from your company. I know where it was shipped to, but I need to know who paid for it.” He pauses and then nods even though they can’t see him. “Yeah, I can fax over a court order, but I’ve got a missing county employee that says I need you to tell me that name right now.” His order is stern, not allowing for argument, and even I would give him the information if I had it.

Luckily, the person on the other end of the phone seems to agree. “Thank you. I’ll fax that over shortly.” Barnes slams the phone back to its cradle. “It’s that Turner fellow. He paid for those supplement things.”

“Which means he ordered the supplement in Yvette’s name and had it delivered to her house.” The image of him walking out the front door with Yvette trailing behind him flashes in my mind. “He goes there to see Yvette or the dog. He could’ve ordered it and then gotten it out of the mailbox or off the porch himself.”

Barnes twists his mustache as he thinks. “You think he’s framing Yvette? Or in on it with her?”

Before I can tease apart an opinion, Barnes’s radio goes off. “Sheriff, I’m at Mayfield’s and the gate’s open. Want me to wait for backup or proceed?”

I want to answer, yell at the officer to go inside and save Zoey. The sooner, the better because there’s no telling what could happen in the meantime. Saving her any second of pain or fear, preventing any small amount of risk to her, is worth it.

“Hold steady. Stay quiet and do a recon perimeter check. Report back in five. I’m on my way.” Barnes is already standing and running for the door. He’s faster than I would’ve given him credit for, but I’m right on his heels.

Surprisingly, Alver’s behind me, doing his best to keep up. “Let’s roll, boys.”

Outside, I go for the front seat. “Shotgun!”

Alver pushes me out of the way. “Age before no damn badge. You ain’t sitting in the front seat.”

I don’t want to waste time arguing, so I end up speeding down the street in the backseat of a cop car with the lights flashing and sirens screaming.

Five minutes later, Sheriff Barnes's radio goes off again and a whispering voice says, "Jeff, we got a situation out here. One suspect—male, thirties, six-foot-two or three, two-hundred pounds easy, blond hair, black shirt. He's losing his shit, sir."

"Sebastian," I whisper, and Barnes's eyes shoot to the rearview mirror.

"Zoey?" Barnes says into the radio.

The answering silence is painful, that moment on the edge where you know you're going to fall but are helpless to do anything to fight it.

Please, let her be okay. I'll do anything. I love her and I haven't even taken her on a proper date yet.

My soul gasps like a living, breathing being inside me as the realization dawns, bright and pure.

I love Zoey Walker.

We haven't gotten to know each other the way most people do, but nevertheless, I know her. Inside and out. I know her fears and her dreams, even the ones she tries to hide because she doesn't think she can have them. I know her quirks and superstitions and would willingly, happily live in a damn log cabin if that's what she wanted so that she's surrounded by good-luck wood at all times.

I know her kindness and her heart, so full of love and generosity that she encircles herself with defenses, not for her own protection but for everyone else's. And not despite it all, but because all of that makes up who Zoey Walker is . . . I love her.

Barnes's radio crackles to life again. "Two females—one blonde, one Zoey. They're down on the ground but alive. Zoey looks . . ." He pauses, and I feel the car rear back before jolting forward as Barnes, who was already nearly flying, pushes the speedometer even higher. "How far out are you?"

"Three minutes, tops."

"Roger. Hurry."

"Kid, when we get there, I need you to stay in the car," Barnes tells me, eyes never leaving the road.

"Fuck no," I snarl. "That's my . . ." My what? My girlfriend? No, that's not nearly enough.

My everything? Closer.

"Zoey. My Zoey," I tell him.

His jaw works and his eyes tick back to me. “I hear you, son, but this is a police matter and I can’t be worrying about a civilian out there. Don’t get in the way of my doing what needs to be done to get her back.”

I don’t have a chance to argue because the radio crackles once more. “Can’t wait. Support when you arrive.”

The radio quiets.

“What does that mean?” I demand.

Barnes just pushes his car harder. “Buckle up.”

It’s the only warning I get before Barnes sends us airborne over a railroad track. We crash down to the road right in the middle of a pothole, and he jerks the car, taking a sharp turn. I slide all over the backseat, banging into the doors and trying to hold on to the cage between the seats.

Alver grabs the oh-shit handle and whoops like we’re out for a day of fun off-roading, “*Who!*” At least he warns me before the next turn, shouting, “Another one!”

“Brace yourselves,” Barnes orders, hands going white on the steering wheel at ten and two o’clock. “We’re going through.”

“Through what?” I say from the backseat, unable to see ahead from the odd position I’ve braced myself in.

“Fence!” Alver shouts a split second before metal screams over the hood of the car, tinkling on the glass windshield, and then scrapes down the back.

I don’t look back, though. I’m looking ahead to an open field. In the glow of headlights, Sebastian is wrestling with a uniformed officer, trying to take his gun. Though he’s outweighed by a solid sixty pounds of muscle and outmanned by desperation, the officer is doing his best to hold on to his weapon.

I see Yvette and Zoey, helping each other up from the ground. They’re both limping, wincing with each step as they try to get out of the danger zone.

“Zoey!” I yell, beyond thankful to see her alive but horrified at the swelling bruise on her face and her painful movements.

Barnes brakes hard, the car not even sliding to a complete stop before he throws it in park and is out.

“Freeze, Turner!” His voice is hard, cold as ice, and authoritative as he holds his gun steady, aimed right at Sebastian. Barnes takes slow, careful steps toward Sebastian and the officer, who are still struggling for control.

I'm fighting the door despite knowing it's locked from the outside and I can't get out. But I have to get to Zoey, an overwhelming need to help her giving me strength I don't usually have.

Alver bangs on the glass with a hard fist to get my attention. "Calm down so I can open the damn door without you knocking me down. I ain't as young as I used to be!"

What? Alver's going to let me out?

I still, though every cell in my body is buzzing with energy, ready for release.

True to his word, Alver opens the door, eyeing me hard. "Go get her. Stay out of the way."

I heed his warning, taking a loop around to the right so that I come up on the back side of Yvette's car. Face to face with Zoey, I finally feel the smallest hint of relief.

She's okay, or she will be.

"Zoey!" I hiss, not wanting to draw Sebastian's attention to the women getting away to safety. She's hunched over, her and Yvette holding each other up, but at my voice, her head jerks up in surprise.

"Blake?"

The relief I see in her eyes guts me. I don't want her to ever consider for a second that I wouldn't come for her. No matter what. No matter what dragon she's slaying, or what superstition she's fighting, I'm here for it. Here for her.

"Come on, we need to get you out of here."

She takes two steps and then a loud bang makes us all instinctively duck for cover.

"Shit!" I growl. I rush forward, wrapping my arm around Zoey, who in turn keeps Yvette at her side, and I usher them behind the car, pushing them down to the ground. Carefully, I peek out from behind the taillight as another loud bang echoes through the night.

I hear Alver call out, "Clear."

Barnes yells out, "Zoey?"

"She's here," I answer. "Behind the car."

Barnes runs around the car, skidding to a stop in front of us. "You good? Injured?" he barks at Zoey.

She seems surprised at his intensity but stammers, "Yeah, but we need to get Yvette to the hospital."

“*Shit*,” he snaps, but without missing a beat, Barnes picks up Yvette from the ground, one arm under her knees and one behind her back. I’m impressed by his strength, especially when he covers the ground with wide strides toward his car.

I try to pick up Zoey too, but she shoos me off. “I’ve got it.”

“Zo, you’re limping,” I plead, every wince she makes stabbing me in the heart.

“I’m fine, Blake.”

Fuck, that tone. She’s right beside me, but her voice might as well be echoing from how far away from me she really is, back in her fortress behind defensive walls.

“Lean on me at least.”

She does take that option, though she stubbornly hops toward Barnes’s car. I help her sit down in the back seat with Yvette, wanting to crawl in after her so I can hold her. I’m not ready to let her go yet. Not when she’s mad.

Not when she’s not mine.

Barnes orders Alver, “Get the crew out here and start your paperwork. Good shot, old man. And call the State for their coroner.”

Coroner?

Good shot?

I look back to the field to see the other officer standing guard over a deadly still Sebastian. He’s got his gun out like he thinks Sebastian might be faking it, but there’s a pool of blood growing larger beneath him in the pale grass.

I guess Alver protected Zoey after all, taking the shot to save her. I give him an appreciative look. He might not be Zoey’s biggest fan, and I’m still not his, but he was instrumental in getting us here tonight, just in time to help.

Zoey tries to climb back out of the car. “I can do it.”

But Barnes stops her with a hard look, his jaw popping. “Zoey Walker, you know good and goddamned well you cannot handle the crime scene of a crime you were involved in, and you can’t process the body of the man who kidnapped you.”

Barnes is thunderously angry, honestly sounding like the father of a teenager who’s pushing some known boundaries, but Zoey doesn’t back

down. Like the grown ass adult and professional she is. “Fine. But I want to see every document. And I want to observe the autopsy.”

Barnes dips his chin in agreement, so she pushes one step further. “And I want every test known to man run on Sebastian. I want to know every single potentially toxic thing he’s touched in his entire lifetime.”

“Why?” I question, fear blooming fresh. “Did he give you something?”

“Not me. Yvette,” Zoey answers, looking into the car at the sobbing woman. She drops her voice, kindly adding quietly, “He was poisoning them both for the money. It was all Sebastian, not Yvette. He was manipulating her, playing on her confusion from the metals.”

With that, she sinks into the car, pulling Yvette into her arms and pressing her cheek to the woman’s blonde hair. Barnes shuts the back door, climbing into the front seat, but I can’t . . . not yet.

“Zoey?” I plead.

She sighs. “Not now, Mr. Hale.”

A hot knife slips into my gut, spilling my blood at her feet. Are we back to this, so far gone that she won’t even call me by my name anymore?

If so, I will fucking work to get her back the way I worked to get her the first time, step by step, brick by brick, taking down those walls until I’m back inside her. Because she’s it for me. Zoey Walker is my love, my life, my till death do us part, even if some stupid curse I don’t believe in means my death is imminent.

If it is, I’ll haunt her fucking ass until she joins me in the afterlife because I’m not nearly close to done with her. Her eyes cut my way, and I see the barest sparkle there, the tiniest lift of her lips, and I realize . . . she’s fucking messing with me.

After being terrified she was going to die tonight, after she probably thought the same thing, still in the aftermath with blood pooling and the smell of gunpowder in the air, she’s kidding . . . about us.

About love.

About death.

About forever.

I love her so fucking much.

“Fine, I’ll wait, *Miss Walker*. But soon . . . we’re going to have a little chat, you and me.” I give her my patented eyebrow lift and am rewarded as I watch the questions melt from her, shoulders dropping and a happy sigh escaping.

She's with me.

We do need to talk about this morning, but she's with me.

"One more thing, Zo." I reach in my back pocket and pull out the coaster I grabbed from the courtroom floor this morning and hold it out as an offering. "Thought you might want to hold onto this for luck."

She looks at the coaster then back to me. "I'm already feeling pretty lucky," she says with a small smile, "but I guess you can never have too much luck."

She takes the coaster and tucks it into her chest. Yvette lets out a sob, and finally, I can close the door on them. I climb in the front seat this time, and Barnes gives me a knowing glance. "Thought I told you to stay in the car?"

"Did you? Must've missed that. Did you know human hearing is best in our twenties and decreases by nine percent with each decade of life?"

"Hmph." He backs up, the fence making a loud screech of metal on metal that makes me wince. "Guess your hearing's not that bad after all, is it?"

Zoey pipes up from the back seat with a light laugh. "You made that statistic up."

"Shh, don't tell my secrets or I'll lose my Trivia Master title."

Barnes chuckles at that. "Trivia Master? Why doesn't that surprise me, kid?"

CHAPTER 27



ZOEY

The hospital is ready for us, two stretchers and a team of staff standing outside when Jeff stops by the double doors. A nurse yanks the door open, but Blake pushes him out of the way to get to me.

“Let me help you, Zo.”

As soon as his hand touches me, I feel my heart rate slow. It’s been racing for so long, it’s become my new normal, but with Blake by my side, I feel . . . safe. It’s an odd sensation, one I haven’t felt in a long time.

Maybe since I lost my parents.

“I don’t need a stretcher,” I argue, trying to bypass it and wave them off. “Help Yvette.”

“Protocol, Zoey,” the nurse tells me. “We need to assess you both.”

Realizing that I’m up against the whole lot of them and wanting Yvette to get care quickly, I acquiesce. The nurse tries to help me, but Blake growls at him and takes hold of me himself to ease me onto the stretcher. I groan as I get settled, every ache and pain sharp now that the adrenaline is wearing off, and the sound looks like it physically hurts Blake.

Jeff steps aside and lets another nurse help Yvette from the car and onto her own stretcher. Like a morose parade, we march and roll into the emergency department. I can feel eyes on me as we go down the hallway, and I shrink into the sheets, wishing I were invisible.

Luckily, no one says a word to me. I don’t think I could handle it if they did, and with the fire in Blake’s eyes and fury rolling off him in waves, I think he’d likely end up in a full-on brawl if someone so much as uttered one of those awful nicknames.

In the exam area, they set up Yvette and me side by side, allowing Dr. Pruitt to float between the two of us. Even though I'm stuck in bed, I start demanding tests.

"She's definitely got heavy metal poisoning, but run a full tox screen. Look for anything, everything, and run an EKG on her heart."

The doctor's face remains impassive, but his question shows his true heart, "Anything else, *Doctor Walker*?"

Jeff answers for me, his voice about as kind as a crocodile with a toothache. "Do it. I want Zoey to get copies. Run all of Yvette's treatment by her too."

Dr. Pruitt loses all professionalism. "Are you trying to kill her by getting DDG involved, Jeff?"

"What did you say?" Blake snaps, leaning over me.

But I'm finding my own backbone after all these years. It might be ridiculous to say this, but being kidnapped has finally brought into sharp focus what's most important. And it's not tippy-toeing around assholes who bully me by reminding me of my past with hurtful names. I reach out and touch Blake's arm and immediately, his gaze jerks to me.

He must see the fire rising in my eyes because I can feel his pride as he stands straight, giving me the floor with an evil smile that says 'you're gonna get it and I can't wait to watch!'

"What did you call me?" I demand from Dr. Pruitt.

He has the good graces to look embarrassed, but he still repeats himself, only slightly quieter and less sure, "You know . . . DDG?"

"If you don't know my name, I'm sure you can look at my chart and find it right there in front of your face. If not, as a professional, you could ask. And a little hint, it's embossed in brass on the plate outside my morgue. It's Zoey Walker. Need me to spell it for you? Z-O-E-Y-W-A-L-K-E-R. Learn it, use it. Because never again will I allow someone to reduce me to a name meant to hurt me by keeping me in the past."

Oh, my God, that felt so good to say!

I think that has been twisting and turning in my gut for a long time, gathering steam, finding strength, and through yet another horrible thing that's happened to me, I finally found the power to set it free.

The room has gone silent, all eyes on me, and quite a few dropped jaws. Jeff breaks first. "'Bout damn time, Zoey."

“Right then,” Dr. Pruitt says, “full tox and EKG on Mrs. Horne, and let’s get an X-ray of that cheek, Miss Walker.”

* * *

JACOB COMES into the hospital like the whirlwind he is. I can hear him from the front door all the way to the exam room. “Zoey! Zoey! Where are you?”

“In here,” I yell, not worried about bothering anyone with the noise because the whole department, staff and patients, are gossiping about Yvette and me.

Jacob bounces off the doorframe as he skids into the room, his eyes going wide when he sees me in the bed. Panting for breath, he huffs out, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He looks doubtful, not believing my reassurance. “Really, Jacob. I’m okay.”

Relief washes through him visibly, and suddenly, I see the young teen who came to Grandma and Grandpa with a chip on his shoulder and fear in his veins. He’s grown up so much and is an amazing man now, but deep inside, he’s still that boy who doesn’t want to get left again.

“Come here.” I hold my arms out wide, and he falls into me, hugging me tight.

“Zoey, I thought . . .” he whispers into my hair.

“I know, but I’m okay. We’re okay.”

This time he believes me, and the boyish core disappears to be replaced by the cocky swagger I’m used to. “Did they catch the guy who did this? I’m gonna kill him.”

His bluster is appreciated but unneeded as Blake fills Jacob in with zero finesse. “He’s dead. Alver shot him.”

For someone who’s known death, lives it and breathes it, that should be easy to hear. Death is as much a part of life as . . . life. But I’m having a hard time reconciling the Sebastian who played with the dogs at the dog park, ruffling their fur and baby talking them, with the man who backhanded me and poisoned the Hornes. I think it will take me time, and maybe a little therapy, to make that connection stick.

Jacob is still young, at an age where death doesn’t have that same seriousness to him. “Well, let’s do some zombie voodoo shit and bring that

fucker back to life so I can kill him again. I want to do it myself.”

Blake seems to agree because he fist-bumps Jacob like they’re old bros planning a night out bowling and not a séance-slash-murder party.

“How’s Yvette?” I ask, attempting to bring us back to the here and now, not a deadly fantasy that brings back flashes of Sebastian lying in a pool of blood in the grass where I thought I was going to be the one to die.

Blake, who’s been handling everything like a pro, asks the nurse, who’s been hovering, probably hoping for some fresh gossip. “Any updates on Yvette?”

The nurse startles like he thought we didn’t know he was there. “I’ll check, but I know the doctor said treatment for the heavy metal poisoning was going to take a while.”

Jacob squeezes my hand suddenly, and I pat his back. “Not me. Sebastian was poisoning both Richard and Yvette. I guess he had some master scheme, planned to kill them both and inherit the dog and the money. He just wanted me to change the cause of death.”

Jacob’s brows jump together. Incredulously, he asks, “*That* was the grand plan in kidnapping you? Change the cause of death and presto, magic-o, there’d be no more questions? Like no one would notice or care that you’d been kidnapped?”

I shrug. “He didn’t exactly strike me as a master schemer.”

That’s being overly kind. Sebastian seemed like a nice guy with a get-rich-quick scheme that he just couldn’t let go of, no matter how deep the water got or how quickly he was drowning.

Blake adds, “It took Barnes a single phone call to find out that Sebastian bought the heavy metal-laden supplements with his own credit card. The police already searched his place too, and that’s not all they found.”

“What?” I haven’t heard this part yet. Maybe Blake found out when I closed my eyes for a quick medicine-induced nap that had turned into an hour-long snooze?

Blake tells me and Jacob, “Sebastian had a ‘vision board’ with pictures of Rusty, expensive car catalogs, and fancy house listings. Plus, a whole cabinet of vitamins, smoothies, supplements, and more. They had the medical examiner check them out one by one. She didn’t find anything other than the online supplement . . . at first. But then she noticed something. Sebastian’s patio backed up to the neighbor’s patio, and the

neighbor had a bunch of plants and flowers. Including oleander. Does that mean anything to you?"

Blake's question triggers me to search my mental files for something from my classes or even from trivia tidbits I know, but I come up empty. Shaking my head, I'm excited to learn something new, something that might help me better treat the DBs who pass through my morgue.

"Oleander is majorly poisonous, like one leaf or flower can kill a human in minutes."

"Richard?" I guess.

"Yeah, it's too late to know for sure, but it seems likely," Blake postulates. "I guess Sebastian got impatient when the heavy metal wasn't working fast enough? Either way, Richard's death will be ruled foul play."

I swallow thickly. "I guess Everlife got their way after all."

I know deep down that Blake wasn't using me. I think I always knew that. But there are also so many doubts and insecurities, from a lifetime of loss and bullying, covering that core of knowledge that it's hard to stand confident in it.

Blake's eyes are soft, full of patient kindness as he reassures me. "Zo, I don't care about Everlife's payouts, but Yvette will get the claim money because she didn't kill Richard. The exemptions are suicide and murder by beneficiary."

"Oh." That's good information and will help Yvette deal with her loss, but it's not what's looming at the forefront of my mind and Blake knows it.

"I was doing my job, like you were doing your job, and on the stand, I tried to protect you as much as I could."

"I know," I say softly, my chin dropping when his brow raises. He doesn't believe that I trust him, not yet, but I earned that when I ran out of the courtroom and didn't talk to Blake because I was hurt and mad.

But I will face it head-on now.

I grab his face, bringing him nose to nose with me. "*I know.*"

That gets me one of those sweet smiles, and he kisses me deeply but gently, careful with my cheek that's still sore and probably looks a frightful mess. I kiss him back, telling him with my touch what I've already known.

He's a good man. He's my man, and I'm his.

The tenderness heats, fueled by what we almost lost, until Jacob clears his throat to remind us that he's here. And we're in a hospital. Babies are *delivered* here, not made.

Pulling back reluctantly, Blake whispers against my lips, “I love you, Miss Walker.”

I feel the words as much as I hear them, both resonating into my heart. But . . . “You can’t love me.” Blake growls at my argument, so I quickly finish, “Not yet. We haven’t even been on a *proper date* yet.”

He laughs, and a second later, I do too, matching his joy. We have time . . . time to date, time to love, time to trust.

“I think I fell in love with you one minute after you tried to kill me with your car. If it wasn’t then, it was when you saved my ass by easily winning our trivia competition wearing the cutest pajama pants I’ve ever seen.” He pauses and hums thoughtfully. “Actually, that might’ve been lust, not love, because those pants are sexy as hell on you.”

“The fuzzy skull ones?” I say with a grin, and he nods, pointedly looking down the lumpy, bumpy expanse of the hospital bed where I’m covered by a thin blanket.

“Still here, guys,” Jacob reminds us again. “Think I’ll head home, though. Seems like you’ve got this covered?”

Blake reluctantly tears his eyes away from me to shake Jacob’s hand. “I’ve got her.”

Jacob smiles at Blake before looking at me, all our history together in his eyes. If anyone knows what it’s like to feel alone in the world, it’s Jacob. “It’s about damn time. She’s wearing me out.”

He doesn’t mean a word of it. We’ve taken care of each other for a long time and would continue to do so without hesitation. But adding Blake to our little circle feels good. It feels right. A puzzle piece we were missing, and for the first time, I’m not worried that something awful is going to happen to him just because he’s important to me.

Jacob opens the door and nearly runs smack into Holly, who’s holding Olive’s hand. “Oh,” she gasps.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you. C’mon in, Hols,” Jacob says, suddenly not going anywhere. In fact, he escorts Holly in, giving her an appreciative once-over before taking over with Olive easily. “Hey, Olive, wanna see the new game I got? You try to keep the ice-skating penguins from falling into the icy water. If you’re good, they do pirouettes. If not, they get eaten by seals.” He tickles Olive, mimicking the seals’ *chomp-chomp-chomp* sounds, and she squeals happily.

Holly smiles warmly at Jacob. “Thanks.”

“Of course,” he says with a shrug as he guides the little girl over to a chair in the corner and shows her the game. He thinks it’s no big deal, but I know that happy smile on Olive’s face means a lot to Holly.

I still think Jacob is way too young for Holly, but maybe that’s because I see him as the teen he was when he came to Grandma and Grandpa’s.

But he hasn’t been that kid in a long time. He’s grown into a fine man, mature well beyond his years—other than the pranks he pulls on me, and Holly would be lucky to have a man who appreciates her the way Jacob does.

“Oh, noooo,” Jacob moans, “not the seals! They’re gonna get you!”

Olive wiggles her butt in the chair, turning the phone one way and the other to get away in the game.

“Whew, that was a seal-iously close one,” Jacob deadpans, and Olive beams happily, celebrating her penguin’s escape.

“You’re silly,” Olive tells Jacob.

“I think you mean seal-y,” he says with a smirk.

Oh, God, Holly is done for. Jacob’s got dad jokes.

Holly looks to me with wide eyes and begs, “Tell me what happened.”

I’m not sure if she means all my shit or how she missed the fact that Jacob’s all grown up.

“I think we’re gonna go to the vending machine, see what snacks we can find to get good and sugared up while you two talk. ’Kay, Holly?” Jacob asks, already holding Olive’s hand and stepping toward the door.

He knows that Olive doesn’t need to hear this story, and when Holly nods, he leads the girl out to the hallway, closing the door softly behind them.

“Short version . . . the dog trainer did it. Killed Richard, poisoned Yvette, kidnapped me, and had Yvette all sorts of messed up because the poison was messing with her mind, making her confused and suggestible. He was telling her all these awful things about the insurance, making them out to be the bad guys, and getting that slimy lawyer for her. Really hyping her up about the whole thing. She really thought he had stepped in to comfort her after Richard’s death and had fallen in love with her,” I finish sadly. “But the doctors are treating the poisoning, and she’ll be okay. Me too, no broken bones. Just a bad bruise and a little concussion watch that this guy has already volunteered for.” I cut my eyes to Blake, who’s

watching me closely, probably cataloguing my speech patterns and speed to monitor for any changes.

“Wow,” Holly breathes out, horrified. After a few seconds to process, she blinks and focuses on me again. Pointing from me to Blake, she asks, “And you two?”

“I love him.” I’m answering Holly but looking at Blake. I see sparkles, which might be a concussion concern, but I think it’s the sparkles in his eyes as I say it aloud for the first time. “I love you.”

“I know, Miss Walker. It’s hard not to.” He gives me his single-brow lift with a cocky smirk, and I can’t help but laugh at his weirdness.

Just as weird, I reply, “You think so, Mr. Hale? Did you know most people decide whether they like someone in the first ninety seconds? Want to know what I thought of you after you crashed into my car?” We both know I hit him, but I don’t know that we’ll ever be done teasing about who caused the accident that started this all.

“Nope, because I already know what I thought of you . . . I thought you were gorgeous, smart, and funny. I was already halfway in love with you then.”

“You were not,” I argue halfheartedly.

“I was,” he says, but it’s lost in his kiss as his lips meet mine again. Sweet, soft kisses, almost pecks, but one right after the last as though he wants to sip at me.

I tease along the fullness of his lip with my tongue, and he opens for me, but instantly, he invades my mouth instead, holding my head gently so I don’t move and injure myself. Vaguely, I hear the door open and Jacob say, “Shiii-oot, are they at it again? Come on, I’ll take you ladies for hot chocolate while these lovebirds do *that*.”

Holly must answer, but I’m too lost in Blake to care.

CHAPTER 28



BLAKE

I pull up to Zoey's trailer, actually a little nervous. I washed my sedan today, but I still give the interior a once-over to make sure there's not a speck of dust or dog hair. I climb out and smooth my slacks at my hips, not wanting any creases.

Not tonight.

Not on my first date with Zoey.

Is it odd that we have spent every night since she got out of the hospital a week ago together, and I left her bed just this morning so that she could have the day to get ready for our big date?

Maybe. But this is a big deal.

The first date of many with the woman I love.

"Hey! Hey, you!" I hear from across the way. Thelma and Louise are sitting in their rickety folding chairs, same as they do every night, smoking and talking about God knows what.

"Yes, ladies?" I answer, taking measured steps their way. I dare them to say one harsh word about Zoey. I will skin them alive. Hell, I won't have to . . . Zoey has been calling everyone in town on their shit since she got out of the hospital.

People have been apologizing left and right, telling her 'we didn't know it was hurting you' and 'why didn't you say something sooner?' It pissed me off, but Zoey is choosing to draw a line in the sand—the before and the now. And she's giving everyone, herself included, a fresh start.

But only one, and then she'll tell you right off.

I beamed like a love-drunk fool when she told Bubba that she'd sit anywhere she damn well pleased while we waited for our to-go order two

nights ago at the beer barn, and he'd nodded his agreement before saying, "Yes, ma'am."

"Why're you all dressed up? You taking our Zoey Walker on the town?"

I search through the words for any ill-will and scan their eyes for any malice, but find none. "Yes, we're going to dinner."

Smoke billows from Thelma's mouth as she scolds me. "Well, it's about damn time. That girl needs someone to make sure she's eating and taken care of. Poor child, always taking care of everyone else."

The *tsk* sound she makes seems authentic, like she's always worried about Zoey, but I haven't forgotten our previous conversations, though Zoey would like to. Louise hums, nodding her agreement. "Yes, she is. Sweet girl, that Zoey. So caring and kind."

Seriously? Did body-snatching aliens invade and I missed the news report? How have they gone from smack talking Zoey, thinking she was harvesting DBs' nails as conditioner additives, to calling her 'poor child' and 'sweet girl'?

Guess getting kidnapped has its benefits, I think wryly.

"Yeah, well, I don't want to be late, so good night." I quick step it back to Zoey's, hoping that if body-snatchers have come to Williamson County today, they left my woman alone because she's perfect just the way she is.

* * *

"DID I tell you that you look *gorgeous*?" I ask Zoey, knowing full well that I've told her at least three times already.

But she does. Her black hair is down, long and softly curled, and she's wearing a bit of makeup that makes her blue eyes look sultry and mysterious—though I know she's hiding the leftover bruising, and her little black dress hugs curves that I'm dying to get my hands on.

"Hmm, I can't remember," she teases. "Maybe?" She takes a sip of her wine, trying to hide her pleased smile.

We're sitting at the fancy restaurant Trey recommended as the place he took Serena for their last anniversary, our delicious dinner eaten and a bottle of wine shared between us. But there's one more thing I want to do before we go back to my place tonight.

“I got you something,” I tell Zoey seriously. This isn’t a gift in the dictionary sense of the word. It’s not a token given freely with no expectation of reciprocity. Oh, no, I expect something in return. I expect Zoey to wear my gift every day.

“You did?” Zoey’s eyes light up, and I pull the box out of my jacket pocket and set it on the table. Her breath catches in her throat at the small, black velvet box. “Blake?”

I fidget with the box, nerves shooting through me. Is she going to think this is weird? Or stupid? It’s not the usual gift from a man to a woman, that’s for sure.

But it’s not for a usual woman.

It’s for Zoey.

“It’s not what you think. Don’t freak out on me. It’s only our first date,” I tease. “No wedding rings . . . yet.”

I see Zoey’s relief, her chest lowering as she releases her held breath. God, I could watch her simply breathe all day, her breasts rising and falling hypnotically. She places her hand over mine, and I’m knocked out of my trance, lifting my eyes to hers, which are sparkling with humor.

But I don’t mind being busted looking at her. I want to look at her every day for the rest of my life. And one day soon, I will.

But not on our first date.

Tonight, I want to give her something else. “You are an extraordinary woman, Miss Walker. I see you, I respect you, and I want to know every little quirk in that sexy brain of yours. Whether I understand it or not, if it means something to you, it means everything to me.”

She blinks back tears I wasn’t expecting. “Why are you crying? You haven’t even opened it yet.”

She wipes at her eyes with her napkin. “I don’t know even know what it is, but I already love it. I love you.” Her smile is wavery, trembling at the edges.

“I love you too. Now open it.”

She presses her lips together, but the smile simply returns unbidden. And then she opens the small box and gasps, “Oh! It’s beautiful!” She pulls the necklace out of the box carefully, holding it up to examine it.

“Let me help with that.” I stand to move behind her, and she pulls her hair out of the way so I can slip the necklace around her neck and fasten it securely. The wooden pendant falls high on her chest, dainty and small. “I

thought you could always have something wooden to touch for luck. It's got a small indentation on the back too, so you can rub it like a worry stone when you need a little extra luck. Or when you need to calm down before you kill me for leaving my sweaty socks on the floor again."

I don't do that anymore, won't ever do it again. One word from Zoey about the smell making her think of being in the trunk with Sebastian's workout clothes did something years of my mother's complaining could never do, instantly breaking me of the habit of stripping step by step on the way to the shower after my morning run and leaving my clothes all over the place.

Now, I strip in the laundry room and immediately start the washer.

But Zoey is doing well, so much better than any of us expected. She's back to work at the morgue, telling everyone that she won't let anything stop her from doing what she loves and what her grandpa taught her to do. Alver does regular patrols now, checking the morgue, including the refrigerator, each time.

And Jeff stops by every shift too, keeping an eye on Zoey like only a father can.

Zoey touches the wooden pendant thoughtfully. "Thank you. I love it. But I already feel so lucky. I don't know if I deserve any more."

"You deserve it all, Miss Walker."

"Thank you, Mr. Hale."

We take a car back to my place, and before the front door even closes, we're touching each other in the dark and dancing down the hallway to my bedroom.

"I want to see you with nothing but that necklace on," I growl against her neck. Zoey moans. It doesn't simply sound like a moan of desire but the moan of a starving woman feeling full for the first time in her life. Her period of loneliness is over.

When we reach my bedroom, she steps away to let me unzip her dress and unhook her bra. She shrugs both off, leaving her heavy teardrop shaped breasts bare in the faint light coming in through the window. She's glowing, her alabaster skin catching the moonlight and turning it even more beautiful.

"Your turn," she says, sitting down on the edge of my bed and crossing her legs primly. It's sexy and conflicting at the same time, her proper, ladylike pose contrasting with the erotic naughtiness of her near nudity.

I peel off my suit, tossing it aside for later cleaning to stand before her in just my own underwear, my hard erection straining against the cotton of my boxer briefs. “Better?”

Zoey nods, scooting back to the middle of the bed before lying back. In one smooth movement, she peels her panties down and off before spreading her legs, holding them open and displaying herself for me.

I don’t need any words. I climb onto the bed, my hungry mouth finding the inside of one thigh and then the other as I kiss my way back and forth. I inhale her musk, the heady aroma making my head swirl and my heart hammer in my chest.

I’ll get to do this for the rest of my life.

The thought makes me smile against Zoey’s pussy, and she runs her fingers through my hair, her own smile audible in her happy sigh. That sigh becomes a deep moan as I reach out, licking her with my tongue and exploring her wet folds. I remember what she likes, teasing up and down between her lips for a few strokes before circling her clit and then sucking lightly.

“Blake . . .” Zoey whimpers, her breath coming faster as I let my tongue dance between her lips and to her clit again and again. “Fuck!”

“I will,” I promise her, but I don’t move. Not yet. I want her on my tongue first. She bucks again and her fist tightens in my hair. She lets go of herself, knowing that I’m here, that I’m not going anywhere.

That she can always trust me.

I prove it again and again by giving her everything, drawing her up higher and higher as pleasure jolts up and down her body in racking shudders. Zoey’s legs close, her feet on my back as her thighs close around my head, not to push me away but to keep me where she needs me as I tease and love her pussy until she cries out and comes hard.

When her back relaxes and her thighs unclench, I slide up the bed, pushing my underwear down and taking myself in hand.

We look into each other’s eyes as I slide into her, her pussy still having phantom flutters from the intensity of her orgasm. “You feel so good, squeezing me like that.”

That’s true, but there’s so much more to it. The most blissful experience is being not just buried inside her body but welcomed into her heart. She lifts her head, meeting me for a kiss and bearing down extra tight on my hard shaft.

We're together, two hearts beating as one and two souls fully together.

My hips rise and fall, thrusting deep with each clench of my muscles, but I go slowly, watching for any sign that it's too much for her. Not just emotionally, but physically. Her body is recovered, but I can't help but be gentle with her. Zoey isn't having it that way, though. She pushes her hips against the bed, bucking her hips into mine. "Deeper . . . harder."

I can't deny her, and the power of our joining makes her necklace shake with each thrust. The sight is one that I will always hold dear, a memory of the first time I took my Zoey with no walls, no defenses, just pure and open eyes and hearts and passion we cannot contain.

The world blurs, sweat dripping down my forehead, but I blink it away, unwilling to not see her clearly in this moment. Zoey reaches up with one hand to cup my cheek.

"I love you," Zoey gasps out in between strokes of my cock. "Forever."

"Love you too!" I barely have time to grit the words out before my cock swells and I'm lost to blackness. I throw my head back, my climax coursing through me. I feel myself explode deep into Zoey's tight body, and then her own orgasm comes right behind mine, her walls pulsing around me.

We stay that way, her in my arms and me in her body as we come down, our lips meeting in a soft kiss. Sensing she's falling prey to her desire to sleep after sex, I roll, keeping her impaled on my softening cock.

"Whoo!" she yells with a laugh, but she settles back over me, resting on her knees and sitting up.

Her hair is wild, all the tamed curls released. Her makeup is smeared, the smoky eyes now looking more like smudges. And she's nude, save for the wooden pendent above her breasts which sit proudly on her chest.

With my hands on her hips, I tell her, "You are so gorgeous."

She flinches, a tell so tiny she probably doesn't even know she did it. And my heart breaks for her.

"You really are. Gorgeous." I say it vehemently this time, with all the love, respect, and care I feel for her entwined in the too-important word. "Inside and out."

She's silent for a moment, thinking as she traces her hand over my chest aimlessly. Finally, she quietly says, "Do me a favor? Keep telling me. Take away all the bad feeling of that word and replace it with your love?"

"Gorgeous," I repeat, pulling her down to kiss her again. "Gorgeous." Another kiss.

When she's smiling again, I ask, "So . . . how was our first date? Maybe a one to ten ranking scale, so I can improve for the next one? Keep it statistically comparable, you know."

Zoey laughs at the conversational turn, and I feel her muscles squeeze me. She tilts her head left and right, not giving anything away before saying, "Pretty good. Though I don't have much to compare it to," she teases. "But I hope it's not over yet." Her brow lifts flirtatiously.

"Oh?"

Zoey shakes her head, a cascade of dark hair tickling my face. "I plan on giving you a little time to recover, and then we're going to go one more time before we sleep. Perchance to dream," she adds with a dramatically airy flair.

I smile at the quoted poetry. It's so Zoey. "Did you know Hamlet's soliloquy is one of the most widely known and quoted pieces in modern English? Shakespeare also wrote nearly one-tenth of the most quoted lines in the English language."

"I did not, but somehow, I'm not surprised that you do."

I hum, "I also know the average male my age needs roughly twenty minutes before they're able to go again."

"Is that so?" Zoey says on a smirk, but she grinds her hips against me as she says it. "Oh, maybe you're above average?"

"Good inspiration," I agree, feeling myself harden inside her. Grabbing her hips and pulling her down forcefully, I correct myself. "*Gorgeous inspiration.*"

EPILOGUE



ZOEY

*I*t's brunch, Zoey. No big deal. Smile, eat, and don't say anything weird. You can do this.

I hope that's true because today is most definitely a big deal. I'm meeting Blake's family—the people he loves, the ones who shaped him and who made him believe in happily-ever-afters. I want them to like me, and I want to like them. Blake says they will love me, just like he does, but I'm nervous.

Don't talk about dead bodies. Don't talk about decomposition. In fact, don't talk about work at all.

Yeah, that's probably my best bet. I'll talk about . . . the weather, cute puppy dogs, and rainbows. That's normal people stuff, right?

Hell if I know. I haven't had a regular conversation since . . . I don't know when. I talk to people at work now that they don't give me a hard time anymore, but the other folks in the sheriff's department talk about weird cases, gross calls, and stupid suspects.

Holly talks about her work and shitty guys she's dating, though I think Jacob might be finally wearing her down. He just might have a chance at getting at least a pizza date out of her before long.

And Jacob talks about school, video games, and Holly. That boy is a hundred percent head over heels for her, despite the age difference, his youth, and more. But he's becoming a good man. I mean, anyone who can go to community college and ignore all the pussy there in favor of a single mom? Weird . . . but in a good way.

And Blake and me?

We talk about random, oddball trivia facts along with our talks about our days. Which brings me back to . . . don't talk about work.

I finger the wooden pendant at my throat absently, hoping for some sense of calm.

"Nervous?" Blake asks, seeing my gesture. He takes one hand off the wheel to lay it on my thigh, giving me a reassuring squeeze before returning his hands to ten and two o'clock.

Yeah, I still like to give him a hard time about that fender bender, but he's an excellent driver and it probably was my fault.

Maybe.

But I won't admit that to him. Doesn't matter, anyway.

"A little." That I will admit.

"Do you have any idea how excited they are to meet you? Amy threatened to show up on my doorstep and 'kidnap you her damn self' if I didn't bring you to brunch today."

I bark out a laugh in surprise. Maybe they won't be so bad if Amy is joking about kidnapping me. It's soon, but I can get the twisted humor in the non-threat. "Surprisingly, that does help."

"Where is she?" a female voice shouts from deep in the house as Blake opens the door without knocking. "Move out of the way, Frosted Blakes. Let me at her."

The woman who peeks around Blake for point-oh-two seconds before shoving him out of her way is smaller than I expected. Blake talks about his sister like she's larger than life, but perhaps that's her presence, not her size? Petite, with a pixie haircut that flips out all over her head like cowlicks but which I'm betting takes product and skill to get that effect, and bright eyes that sparkle. I've seen that look . . . on Blake.

"You must be Amy?" I say, holding my hand out properly.

"Pshaw, you can stop with that mess. We're huggers." She proves it a moment later by swallowing me up in her arms like we're long lost friends. I look over Amy's head to Blake, who is smiling widely, but I can see a sheen in his eyes. I think today is just as important to him as it is to me, despite his repeated assertions that it's 'no big deal'.

"I'm so glad to meet you . . . *finally.*" The last bit seems to be a barb thrown at Blake because he chuckles.

"Sorry, Sis. Was kinda busy prepping her for you so she wouldn't run away screaming. You're a lot, you know?"

Amy doesn't look offended in the slightest. In fact, she seems to take it as a compliment. "No excuse. If she can't handle your family, she can't handle you."

"How about being kidnapped and almost dying? Does that excuse count?" I deadpan.

Amy blanches, her buzzing energy freezing in place as she cuts her eyes to me. I wait two long seconds before letting her off the hook, giggling. "Just kidding. Well, I mean I was kidnapped and thought I was gonna die, but that's not why we didn't come yet. I told Blake I wouldn't meet his family until he took me on a proper date. He did last night, so here I am."

It started out sounding humorous, or at least my weird version of a joke, but by the end of my little explanation, I realized how horrible it sounded and started talking faster and faster to get it over with.

Amy blinks and then, with her eyes locked on me, she stage-whispers over her shoulder to Blake, "Oh, *I like her*. I like her a lot. You should lock her down immediately before she realizes that your good looks hide what an absolute dork you are."

I whisper back to her, "It's the dorky parts I like best. I'm a bit of a trivia nerd too."

"No way!" Amy shouts, pushing my shoulder in surprise. "Frosted Blakes is such a weirdo, I never thought another human being existed like him. Robot girlfriend? Maybe. But not an actual woman."

I hold my arms out wide, like 'here I am', and she beams.

"Blake, I'm going to say something I never say. Are you ready? Because it's only happening once."

I'm confused, and a look at Blake doesn't provide any clarity. He looks just as confused as I feel.

Amy takes a big breath of preparation and says clearly, "I was wrong."

"Holy shit!" Blake breathes. "Fernanda! Get in here! You have to hear this!"

Another woman comes in from the back of the house somewhere, carrying a wooden spoon and wearing a polka-dot apron. She's naturally gorgeous, not a stitch of makeup on, her inky black hair down her back but shaved on the sides and tattoos covering her arms and hands.

Blake tells her, "Amy just said she was wrong."

Fernanda's brows, one of which is slit, lift high in shock. "She did not." Fernanda and Blake both eye Amy in disbelief.

Amy throws them both an impish grin. “Too late. I told you I was only going to say it once.”

Fernanda looks to me and I agree, “She did say that.” Quieter, I also share, “But she did say she was wrong too.”

“Ay mi dios! Hell has frozen over!” Fernanda yells, but it seems like good-natured teasing because Amy laughs.

“I can’t help it if I’m always right. It’s just who I am.” Amy adopts a queenly tone, her hand pressed delicately to her chest.

“Oh, God,” Blake moans. “Can we eat so I can get Zoey out of here before the shit gets any deeper?” He mimes high-stepping, lifting his knees up to nearly chest height. I know that has to be uncomfortable because he’s been complaining about his sore abs since yesterday’s workout with Trey.

But to give his sister a hard time? Worth it, I guess.

Fernanda jerks her head toward the kitchen. “*Si, chilaquiles* are ready. Let’s sit down.”

And all my nerves disappear. This is what family is like, I remember. Fun teasing, a shared history, and time spent together doing things that don’t seem major but that create a foundation of love.

I had this with my parents, and with Grandma and Grandpa, and have tried my best to create it with Jacob. Blake has always had it, doesn’t know any different, and honestly, he doesn’t realize how special it is.

But even so, he’s willing and excited to share his family with me, trusting that though my history is sketchy and riddled with bad omens, superstitions, and hard loss, I will only bring good things to his family. Weird things too, but that seems not only accepted but welcomed.

“Hey, Miles, did I tell you about the new game Jacob showed me? It’s got penguins that ice-skate, but if you fall off the ice . . . seals eat you alive. *Chomp-chomp-chomp*,” Blake says as he fills his plate and mine with tortillas covered in green salsa, white cheese, and fried eggs.

“That sounds cool,” Miles says with a snaggle-toothed smile. “Can we play after we eat?”

“Yeah, man. And maybe next time, we can bring Jacob, Holly, and Olive to brunch too. Olive is five like you.”

Miles’s little nose crinkles. “I don’t like playing with girls.”

Blake nods his head like that’s sage advice. “I know. But sometimes, girls are okay. Your moms are pretty cool, and Zoey is too. And Olive . . .

she's badass at keeping the penguins on the ice. She could probably teach you a few things. If you wanted, I mean."

Blake shrugs like he doesn't care one way or the other. Miles looks thoughtful, scanning the table from Amy to Fernanda to me. I lift my brow, giving him a 'whatcha gonna do' look.

Miles shrugs, a perfect imitation of Blake. "I guess that'd be okay. You think Olive likes to slide too? We could play outside after we play penguins."

"Yeah, I'm sure she'd like that," I tell him.

Blake looks at me and his eyes are brighter than a summer sky. "I love you, Miss Walker."

I lean into his shoulder and whisper back, "I love you too, Mr. Hale."

"Ew, gross!" Miles shouts around a mouthful of food.

Blake laughs. "You want to hear something gross? You should hear about the first . . . no, the second time I met Zoey. She was elbows-deep in a human body. A real one."

I freeze, knowing that my primary concern was not talking about work today so I didn't freak anyone out. But Miles looks enamored and Fernanda leans in, her voice intrigued. "Really? That's awesome."

Maybe I have found a new family after all. And I'll do anything to keep them safe. I touch my necklace for luck, but it's out of habit more than superstition. Blake catches me and takes my hand, kissing my fingertips. "Zoey tells it better than I do, but I'll warn you . . . the story makes me look like a desperate ass."

"Tell me everything," Amy demands. "Because I *know* he's a desperate ass."

"Well, it all started when he hit me with his car." I shoot Blake a grin, but he doesn't dare correct me this time, even though we both know I hit him and then tried to scare him off by grossing him out when he came to the morgue.

I'm really glad he didn't give up that easily.

I'm even more thankful that he took the time to show me that I can be Drop-Dead Gorgeous and not have people dropping dead around me all the time.

Death is what I do, life is what he does, but the important thing is that together, we'll make every day we have the best it can be.

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed Zoey and Blake's story. If so, make sure you check out the bonus chapter, available [here](#). Check in with Zoey & Blake and Holly & Jacob in the future!

If you loved Drop Dead Gorgeous, make sure you check out my book [The Dare](#) (standalone) and [My Big Fat Fake Wedding](#) (3 book series)! Read on for an excerpt of My Big Fat Fake Wedding.

EXCERPT: MY BIG FAT FAKE WEDDING



VIOLET—FIVE MONTHS AGO

This can't be happening. He can't be leaving me.
Not now.
Not ever.

My heels click across the hospital floor as I race down the hallway. I'm in such a panic, the words blaring over the PA system hardly register from the blood rushing through my ears in a dull roar.

"Code blue, room four! Code blue, room four!"

I nearly trip over my own feet as I break into a shuffling run, boomeranging for the nearest patient room. I swear my heart is going to explode when I spot the correct door and burst inside to see . . .

"Nana!" I exclaim as I see my grandmother, Angela Russo. She looks up from where she's hovering like a hen over my grandfather. The scowl on her face highlights the parentheses of wrinkles around her lips, making her worry immediately apparent.

My grandfather, Stefano, looks up at me, his unusually pale face widening into a huge smile. But even with the happiness blooming, I can tell he's worn out, aged decades in the short time since I last saw him.

"My beautiful little flower, Violet!" he sings, his Italian accent coming through as he holds his arms out to me. "I knew you would come. Come here so I can give you a kiss!"

"Oh, Papa, I was so scared!" I say, rushing into his arms and collapsing into a ball of relief. "I dropped everything and came as soon as I heard."

Papa looks over at Nana with a triumphant wink of his eye as he rubs my shoulders. "See, Angie? This one loves me the most. Do you see any of our other granddaughters here?"

“That’s because you’ve scared them all away with your crazy stories,” Nana growls, but there’s an undercurrent of affection for the man who is both a thorn in her side and her everything.

Papa laughs and squeezes me with a fierce strength that belies his shrinking frame, raining kisses down upon my forehead. I feel comforted, enveloped in his familiar scent, leather and spicy meats . . . masculine and comforting. For a moment, I forget the direness of the situation as he rocks me back and forth in his arms like I’m a child or the one in need of comfort, though he’s the one in the hospital bed.

But the moment is fleeting as reality slams back into me, and I rise to my feet to ask Nana in a rush of words, “What happened? Is he going to be okay? How long has he been like this?”

“The old fool was working out back in the summer heat after I told him he should take it easy and come inside,” Nana says with a frosty scowl at Papa, but her voice softens as she speaks, revealing how frightened she really is. “I found him lying face down in the dirt.”

“Papa!” I say in admonishment. “You know you’re not supposed to be taking on a heavy workload, doctor’s orders. Why didn’t you listen to Nana?”

Grandpa waves away my worry with a bony hand. “I don’t see what the fuss’s all about. A man has to work, and I’ll do what I need to until the day they put me six feet under. I just tripped and had a little fall, that’s all.” He says it like he believes that to be the truth.

Nana gives me a sour look that says, ‘That’s definitely not what happened.’ “He passed out—” she begins.

“I fell and was getting up before you came squawking like a worried hen, making things worse,” Papa interrupts. “So, I decided to lie back and let you do what you were going to do. You shoulda done the same for me.”

“Nonsense!” Nana snaps. “If I hadn’t found you, who knows what would’ve happened?”

“Nothing.” Papa dismisses Nana with a nonchalant shrug. “I’d be fine, maybe about to pass out from eating some of your overcooked pasta—”

“Why, you old bast—”

“Bah! Hush, woman, you worry too much. I’m more likely to drop dead from all of your hen clucking than I will from a little heat.”

Their bickering is comforting in a twisted way, the camaraderie of being together for decades and knowing which buttons to push to get a rise out of

each other but also which ones are entirely off limits.

He pulls a long cigar out from the side of his bed and offers it to her. “Here. Calm yourself and have a stogie.” The shit-eating grin on his face says he knows he’s poking the bear, and I realize he’s giving her something to focus on besides worrying about him. He’s a slick old fox, I’ll give him that.

Nana snatches the cigar out of his hand, brandishing it as if it’s a weapon. “Have you gone *pazzo*? They don’t even allow smoking in the hospital. And really? A smoke when you’re supposed to be recovering?”

“Sure, why not? I’d rather have a smoke than act like a *pagliaccio*!”

Nana throws her hands up in frustration, the cigar flying from her hands in a perfect arc that ends in the trashcan. If she wasn’t so riled up, I’d give her a round of applause, but as it is, I’m staying out of their battle. For now, at least. “Oh, *fanculo tutto*! You’re impossible!”

“I know.” Grandpa tosses me a mischievous wink meant to lighten the mood. “That’s why you married me. You like the challenge.”

The two continue to bicker as I look on fondly, feeling a sense of relief. Whatever happened to land Papa in the ER hasn’t robbed him of his feistiness, so it couldn’t have been too bad, could it?

It’s a particularly hot summer, and it’s not uncommon for the elderly to overheat when they underestimate the weather. Maybe he’s right and this is all a lot of fuss for nothing. He just needs a slap on the hand to follow the doctor’s and Nana’s orders a bit better, and everything will be fine.

Even as I tell myself that, I know it’s wishful thinking and childish hopes. A girlish desire to deny the mortality of a man who has always seemed larger than life to me. Deep inside, I know he’s no more immortal than the rest of us, but even so, I need to know this isn’t going to happen again. I love him too much to lose him. Especially not now, and if I had my say, not ever.

After being reassured several times by Papa that he’s fine, I excuse myself from the room to let him and Nana bicker themselves out.

In the hall, I run into a man wearing a long white coat and carrying a binder with Papa’s name on the spine. His name tag says *Dr. Lee*, and he has an aura of calm control that seems to relax me immediately.

“Are you Violet?” he asks before I can say anything, giving me a warm smile.

I nod. “I am. How’d you know?”

He grins. “Your grandfather wasn’t concerned in the least about his health and has been talking about you since the moment he came in, telling anyone who’ll listen about his granddaughter. If you didn’t know, he’s quite fond of you.”

I smile. “That definitely sounds like him. Can you tell me what happened? I’m not sure I trust his version of events.”

Dr. Lee’s expression turns solemn and the energy around him shifts, making me instantly nervous. “It appears that, due to the heat and overworking himself, your grandfather’s blood pressure dropped and he lost consciousness.”

“That’s what Nana said. So, if we can keep him from overdoing it, he’s going to be okay.” I say it definitively, like I’m adding tying him to his recliner in the air-conditioned living room to my to-do list.

Dr. Lee tilts his head, his lips pressed together. “Well, as I explained to Angela and Stefano, we’re waiting for tests to come back for a more complete picture, but I don’t need the tests to tell me that his heart isn’t in good shape. It hasn’t been in quite some time.”

Oh, no.

“But he’s stable now . . .” I say, like I’m refuting his medical knowledge with only the power of my hope.

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Violet, but . . .”

The growing look of sorrow and despair in Dr. Lee’s eyes says everything, and I’m forced to grab ahold of a wall rail to keep from falling.

No.

It can’t be.

It just can’t.

My worst nightmare come to life.

“How long does he have?” I ask through the lump in my throat. The words sound surreal, like someone else is saying them.

“At his age, it’s hard to say,” Dr. Lee muses, shrugging his shoulders. “Anything I say is at best an educated guess. Six months? A year, maybe? But he’s a stubborn mule who refuses to follow orders, which complicates things. To be honest, he could go at almost any time if we can’t get his heart to function properly and him to be compliant.”

His words, an awful confirmation of what I feared most, hit me like a sucker punch to the gut, the air leaving my lungs in one forceful gust.

Six months to a year? Or less?

How can Papa, the only father figure I've ever known, the man who practically raised me from a pigtailed toddler to adulthood, the man who could take on anything the world threw at him and live to tell about it . . . have such little time to live?

In that moment, all the should've, could've, and would've's flash in front of my eyes. It's as if everything I expected to experience with Papa has turned into a puddle that's evaporating quicker than I'd ever considered.

But the worst part is, the one thing he's wanted to see the most is likely to never happen, and that looms like a dark umbrella over my breaking heart.

When's my beautiful little flower getting married so I can walk her down the aisle?

To say marriage is a huge tradition in my family is like saying a tsunami is a little wet. An understatement of such magnitude, it's laughable, especially for my grandparents, who look forward to the next generation of weddings with teary smiles and proclamations of the continuation of their legacy with another branch on the family tree.

Hell, most of the women in my family are married off before they're old enough to drink alcohol. In fact, I'm probably the only woman in my family, at age twenty-six, who isn't married with a wagonload of kids.

Due to my busy career, I've been single for as long as I can remember, although I've always dreamed about having this big fairytale wedding. I used to use Nana's curtains as a makeshift veil and Papa would pretend to walk me down the aisle. I want him to do that for real, hold my hand as I greet my husband-to-be, bless us with a marriage as long and happy as his and Nana's has been, and see that I've finally grown into the woman he always told me I could be. Successful, loved, happy.

Now it's never going to happen.

As if sensing my tormented thoughts, Dr. Lee adds, "If there's anything you need to say or anything important left for you to do with your grandfather, I'd do it very soon. Now if you'll excuse me . . ."

Gee, thanks for the guilt trip, Doc.

Whatever else the doctor says fades off into the background as I watch Nana and Papa bicker through the glass window, happier now and blissfully unaware of the countdown looming.

In that moment, denial surges and I clench my fists.

This can't happen. I won't let it.

Six months to a year?

I can make it work.

Suddenly determined, a feeling of resolution washes over me as a plan formulates in my mind.

Don't worry, Papa. I'm going to find myself a husband so you can walk me down the aisle on my wedding day before you leave this earth . . . if it's the last thing I do.

VIOLET

"I still can't believe it!" I squeal, wiggling my fingers and watching my engagement ring flash as the overhead lights reflect on the diamond's faceted surface.

Having already heard this once, or maybe two dozen times, my two best friends sigh but rally with the appropriate oohs and ahhs, even throwing me a bone of another "Congratulations, girl!"

My lifelong bestie, Abigail Andrews, and Archie Hornee, my interior design assistant, are basically saints for putting up with me at this point. "Colin and I are getting married!"

Archie arches one perfectly sculpted eyebrow and presses a palm to his black T-shirt-covered chest, which is most definitely manscaped. Ever the sarcastic ball of sass, he deadpans, "Dear, we know." He continues the performance by pulling a Vanna White, slapping a big fake smile on his face and gesturing widely to the roomful of wedding gowns surrounding us. When he finishes, his face goes right back to his usual blank 'fuck off' mode.

As if we'd be at a wedding dress shop for any other reason. Lord knows, Abigail and Archie aren't looking to get married, and obviously not to each other since Abigail lacks a rather important piece of the perfection that Archie is looking for, a never-ending appreciation of his special brand of hilarious, off-the-cuff, don't-care-about-being-politically-correct, catty-bitchiness.

So nope, not for them, for sure. We're here for me! I can't believe it's really happening.

It's been five months since Papa's diagnosis, and what a busy five months it's been.

Initially, I thought there'd be no way I'd ever get married before his heart gave out. After all, his doctor had painted a grim picture with no happy ending.

But despite the odds, Papa has miraculously held on long enough for me to reconnect with an old high school fling and get engaged after a whirlwind romance where we both said we wanted the whole nine yards—wedding, marriage, kids. Luckily, since Colin and I already had a history, it wasn't starting at ground zero, and instead, we moved quickly after a short get-to-know-you-now phase. He's a really good man, and I think we can be happy together.

Serious relationship, party of two . . . here! I think, adding a shimmy to my ass as I raise my hand, peering at the weighty sparkle resting there again.

But despite my excitement, the rows of gorgeous gowns, and two friends with a sharp eye for fashion, I'm currently trying on what has to be my twentieth wedding dress. Ride or Die Bride, an edgy bridal shop that calls itself the *Number One Bridal Shop for the Modern Badass Chick*, is failing to deliver a dress that is *The One*.

They've got everything from fairy tale princess to woodland nymph to Vegas stripper, mixed in with classic beauties covered in expensive lace and hand-sewn beading. My dress is here, I know it is. But in the three appointments I've made, I haven't found it. Yet.

I need *perfection*.

It has to be. Everything about my wedding has to be perfect in order to do it right for Papa.

"I'm so happy for you!" Abigail declares, rushing forward and pulling me into a fierce hug. A moment later, I feel another set of arms wrap around me, Archie's, and I'm encased in a group hug.

"Hey, guys!" I gasp as I feel my bridal shapewear corset, a marvelous invention that gives me the perfect hourglass figure, squeeze me to within an inch of my life. Any more and I swear it'll crush my ovaries. "I know you're both excited for me, but I can't breathe!"

No one told me trying on wedding dresses and getting the right shape could be this painful. I thought it was come in, try on a few dresses, and after a few twirls and happy tears, be done.

"Shit, sorry!" Abi and Archie exclaim in near unison. As Archie jumps back, Abi tries to loosen my corset but fails as there's too much dress fabric

in the way. “I forgot how tight we had to pull it to get you into this thing.”

“I’d blame it on the pa-pa-pa-pasta!” Archie sings, doing a not half-bad riff on *Blame It* by Jamie Foxx, while measuring my curves through fingers held in a square like he’s a cameraman looking for my good side. His puckered lips and sharp brow remind me of Zoolander, and I’m waiting for him to say something about ‘Blue Steel’, but it doesn’t come.

Still, I can’t help but burst into laughter at his antics then gasp as the corset tightens even further. *Shit, is this damn corset alive?* “Hey!” I rasp, leveling a stern finger Archie’s way and defending the curves I was blessed with through a particularly short and fierce round of puberty. “I’m half Italian. Pasta, pizza, lasagna, and red wine are a way of life for me, okay?”

With zero apology, he traces my shape reflecting in the mirror, which is admittedly a little fuller looking in this unflattering white taffeta ballgown that’s a definite no-go. “No one’s commenting on your curvy figure, love. There damn sure ain’t nothing wrong with a little a junk in the trunk. Just look at Kim Kardashian.” He waits a moment and then adds under his breath, but still loud enough for Abi and me to hear, “Only in America can someone turn an ass and a sex tape into a multi-billion-dollar family empire!”

The next gown is wrong too, and the one after that is even worse.

It’s a sparkly number that somehow makes me look like a constipated fairytale princess. Too New Jersey, if that makes any damn sense, and as a half-Italian, avoiding *any* Jersey Shore comparisons is vital to me.

Which probably means I’ll have to come back another time to try on even more gowns. Abi and Archie might kill me if I make them sit through this again, but I need their help and want someone to celebrate with when I do find *The One*.

Because I will.

Against all odds, I found a husband-to-be, a venue with an opening for our short-notice ceremony and big reception, and I will find a dress that makes me feel special for my big day.

Abi adjusts my bra straps, beaming at my reflection even though she already told me this dress is ridiculous and Archie made a rather harsh comment about my being ready for Wedding Day: 90s Vegas Style with the amount of bling thrown on this thing.

“When do you want to come check out the invitations?” Abi chirps. She co-owns a local specialty floral boutique and is handling all of my flower

arrangements personally. But as my maid of honor, she offered to do the invitations as well.

Shit.

“Oh, yeah, sorry! I’ve been so busy with work and dress hunting, I totally forgot about that! When do you want me to come by the boutique to see them? Colin and I have a breakfast date tomorrow morning to talk about the wedding, so we could rearrange and come by the shop instead. But Archie and I have a job lined up right after—”

“With Bitch-ella, the Ice Queen,” Archie interrupts with a mutter that I can’t really disagree with, but I give him a side-eye that begs him to at least try to be professional about the client.

“So, we’d have to be fast,” I finish.

Abi purses her lips thoughtfully as she places her hands on my hips, moving my body slightly to the side and staring at my shape in the mirror. “No way. You two do a breakfast date, and we can figure out a time when it’s not a rush. Tomorrow’s Friday, so maybe we can do it after work and then grab drinks?”

I nod, ignoring the flutters of butterflies in my stomach. I don’t know why I’m so nervous all of a sudden. I mean, yes, there’s a lot to do and not much time to do it in, but everything’s going to plan, just like I hoped.

Papa.

Colin.

The wedding.

I should be on cloud nine. Yet, these butterflies don’t feel like good, happy flutters. More like a tornado of responsibility, expectations, and nerves.

Abi turns me, eyeing me thoughtfully. “You good? Everything all right, Vi?”

I don’t want to bring down the mood or start examining the questions in my head too closely, so I play pretend, telling myself that slightly cold feet are normal. After all, getting married is a big deal and not one to take lightly.

“I’m fine. It’s just this damn corset!” I say with a grimace, grabbing my sides. “After I meet with Colin tomorrow, everything should be good to go.” I look between the both of them, spreading my arms out to the side and twirling across the showroom stage in my dress one last time. “Final verdict?”

“Not my favorite,” Abi says, shaking her head.

“I agree,” Archie co-signs. “It’s totally giving me *Tangled*, meets the *Little Mermaid*, meets *Cinderella* vibe, but like they all became dancers on the Vegas strip. Emphasis on the strip.”

“Gee, thanks, Arch,” I mutter sourly. But funnily enough, I agree with his assessment, although my terms were a little less . . . animated and crude.

Archie winks at me. “You’re welcome, sweet cheeks.”

“Don’t worry, Vi. We’re going to keep looking and find the perfect dress that’ll knock Colin flat on his ass!” Abigail’s assertion settles me slightly, helping me focus on the issue at hand . . . my dress. If I can just find that, everything else will be smooth sailing.

“Yeah, turn that frown upside down!” Archie adds, pushing at my cheeks with two fingers. He looks deep into my eyes, and I’m expecting some sweet words of wisdom, but I should know better with Archie. “Just think, before you know it, Colin won’t have to bag it up anymore, and you’ll get to feel the *real* thing. How big we talking here?” He holds his fingers a few inches apart, spreading them to indicate a bigger and bigger appendage, but it’s seeing the whites of his eyes growing as I don’t stop him that does me in.

“Oh, God, you’re too much!” I groan, forcing his hand down and chuckling.

Come on, girl. Everything is going to work out. It has to.

* * *

“I’M CALLING OFF THE ENGAGEMENT.”

The words hit me like a freight train, a grenade launched directly into my heart.

When Colin told me he wanted to meet with me this morning, I was under the impression it was to discuss the details of our wedding, plan who we were inviting, what DJ we were going to use, etc.

Never in a million years did I think it would be to dump me.

“Violet?” Colin asks, noticing that I’ve gone completely rigid, my latte frozen inches away from my lips and my half-eaten bagel in front of me.

Colin Radcliffe. My fiancé. *My ex-fiancé*, I correct with a wince. *Fucking rat* is what my mind is yelling loudly.

Dressed in a gray, freshly pressed, tailored suit, Colin's blond hair is styled and parted, and he's gazing at me with expectancy, as if I'm supposed to burst into hysterics, crying and making a scene worthy of Hamlet.

But I'm frozen, thinking WTF?

Why?

And . . . why now?

But wondering the whys won't do me any good. Colin's obviously thought this through and wants to end it all.

Doesn't matter that I just spent weeks trying to find the perfect wedding dress.

Doesn't matter how much I want the fairytale wedding.

Doesn't matter that my Papa won't get to walk me down the aisle. Maybe never.

None of it matters to him.

In a hit that's even more impactful than Colin's words, I realize that none of my thoughts on this betrayal have anything to do with us, our relationship, or our love. *Love?*

Do I even love Colin?

Stupid me thought I'd make it work using a checklist for our compatibility.

Both career-oriented people. Check.

Former lovers. Check.

Both matured and ready to settle down. Check and check.

Boy, was I wrong on that last one.

"Violet?" Colin presses again, this time reaching across the table and placing his hands atop mine.

Suddenly, I feel queasy, and I have to fight back the urge to throw up in his lap.

"I know this has to come as a shock to you, but I'll cover the lost deposit on the wedding hall and every other expense associated with our engagement so you don't have to worry."

Just like I thought, he's already planned his exit strategy, as if our wedding, our marriage, was some business transaction. For him, maybe it was. For me? I don't know, I realize. Maybe this is what the buzzing butterflies have been trying to tell me?

"Why?" I ask simply, battling down the surge of nausea.

Colin licks his lips, lips that I once enjoyed on my neck, on my breasts, on my most sacred of places.

“Violet, you know I adore you, and you’re beautiful, smart, and kind, but . . . I don’t think I’m ready for marriage.” He stares at me again, rubbing my hands as if waiting for the crying hysterics he knows must be coming.

He definitely wants a show, just not too much of one. That perfect balance of greedy hunger for drama, tampered with the knowledge that he doesn’t want to look bad.

That’s why he picked the coffee shop, I realize. Cold and calculated. The Radcliffe way. In public, he knows I’m not going to go fully emotional, batshit crazy or really even make a scene. It’s not my style.

But he does want to see me shatter into a million tiny pieces, and he wants an audience while he does his dirty work.

I’ve been ignoring it, something I could easily do with our quick whirlwind relationship, but I can see it clearly now that he’s serving it up on a platter like a Thanksgiving turkey.

Everything is a façade with him. Image and reputation reign supreme.

I bet he thought I’d fit some corporate wife checkbox. Which would be so hurtful, except that I guess I was doing the same thing with my own checkboxes.

This was doomed from the start.

When I don’t muster even a single teardrop or argument, he continues, “We’re both so young, and hell, we haven’t even had sex in over three weeks.” His tone is accusatory, like it’s my fault we’ve been so tired that sex has seemed like one more thing on the ever-growing to-do list.

He keeps digging at the wound, pouring salt in a steady stream into the bloody mess of our relationship. “We’re both so busy with our jobs. You have that decorating thing you do that you love so much, and it takes up so much of your time, and I’m really busy at Dad’s company, kicking ass and making deals. I . . . I just think we’re at two different crossroads in our lives.”

The decorating thing that I do? Fuck off.

Out of all the things he said, insulting my job pisses me off the most.

And I could argue against so many of his points, letting him know that everything he said was bullshit.

But I’m not going to because, simply put, I don’t have time for this shit.

And I realize . . . I don’t care. Not about Colin.

I'm such an idiot. But it was all for a good reason.

Sorry, Papa. I tried.

"Fine," I say simply, pulling my hands away from his before taking off my engagement ring. "Here. You can take this back, too. I don't want it."

I place the ring on the table and slide it across toward him, resisting the urge to throw it in his face or shove it up his nose, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of an emotional outburst. The huge diamond rock in the center sparkles against the light, catching the eye of several women sitting around us.

I swear some of their heads turn like *The Exorcist* to get a better look as they realize what's happening, their eyes as big as saucers as they gawk at the size of the ring.

One of the women even leans so far forward to get a better look that she jostles her steaming hot coffee, spilling it on her hand. But instead of crying out at what I know has to hurt, she quietly blots at it, blowing cool air across her hand so she doesn't miss a single moment of the Colin and Violet Breakup Show.

"You know," I say as I grab my purse and slide on my Gucci shades, ignoring the commotion of googly-eyed stares and growing whispers from women around us, "It was really good to reconnect after so long, Colin. And we tried to make it work. It didn't. Thanks for everything."

My words are clipped and to the point.

If he's going to break off our engagement like this, I see no reason to drag it out with some long ass monologue that'll amount to nothing in the end, anyway.

Finished, I begin to rise from my chair, but Colin grabs my arm, holding me in place, his jaw slack in surprise.

One of the women watching suddenly decides that's her cue and claps her hands sharply, interrupting our scene with one of her own. "Boy, you'd best let that girl's arm go. You had your moment, and a queen like that is better off without a twat-stain like you."

Several people gasp at her language and volume, but Archie has me corrupted to not even blink at that level of crudeness. Thankful for the support, I look over to her and offer a weak smile of appreciation. For his part, Colin scowls but loosens his grip. Still, he's not done.

"Wait a minute now, Vi. You're not even going to try to talk about this? After all we've been through?" His voice has an almost whine to it,

confirming what I expected.

He wanted me to break down and beg him not to leave me.

In front of a fucking audience.

Like he's some golden goose prize that I would debase myself to possess.

Well, he can kick rocks.

I won't give him the satisfaction of a show.

I shrug nonchalantly. "Nope."

"Look, Vi, I know how much our getting married means to you. I get it, you're pissed and upset. I would be too, but can we please not end things on bad terms? You don't have to act this way—"

"We're *fine*," I say, disengaging my arm from his grasp and rising to my feet. "Besides, you're right. It's probably for the best."

Colin's lips work for several seconds, at a loss for words. Like he can't believe this didn't turn out how he expected, me in a crying puddle at his feet.

He clenches his jaw, showing that he's actually getting angry. "Violet —"

"Bye, Colin."

Ruffled, Colin straightens his collar and clears his throat, trying one last tactic, gesturing at my half-eaten food. "Will you just sit down and finish the bagel, at least?"

Turning away, I toss over my shoulder, just as casually as he tossed away our relationship, "No time. I gotta go to work . . . and do that 'decorating thing'."

My single cheerleader stands up, her arm circling in rally. "That's right, girl. Strut it out of here and own the world." She sneers at Colin, more emotionally invested in this than even I am, and isn't that pitiful?

She's my only supporter, though. Every other woman in here is judging me as unworthy of keeping Colin. All they see is a handsome guy in a suit with a flashy diamond ring . . . back on the market.

I imagine Colin will be collecting numbers by the stacks before he even walks out of the coffee shop.

Well, they can have him.

I get into the cab and far down the block before the tears come. Not for Colin, not for the decimation of our relationship, but for Papa and for the

little girl I once was, and still am to some degree, who wants to make her grandfather happy.

Read the entire book [here](#). Or search My Big Fat Fake Wedding on Amazon.

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