

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEGHAN QUINN

That Swoony Feeling

A
GETTING LUCKY
NOVEL



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Prologue

BRIG

Hands stuffed in my pockets, I look at Reid while nibbling on the corner of my lip. “But—”

“Brig, I swear to God,” Reid says, dragging his hand down his face while we make our way past Jackson Square, toward Café Du Monde. “Do not ask about your penis turning green one more goddamn time. We all looked at it. It’s flesh colored. Any signs of green you might have seen was from the shit lighting in the bathroom. Now, drop it.”

“Yeah, okay,” I sigh, even though I don’t feel convinced.

Something happened last night.

Something terrifying.

Something that has left me shaking in my shoes—*because I don’t wear boots*—wanting to rip my pants down repeatedly to make sure things are still intact.

Two days ago, I turned twenty-one, and to celebrate the youngest Knightly’s freedom to hold a beer in his hand legally, my three brothers took me to New Orleans to party in style. And we did . . . up until last night, when the depths of hell tried to swallow us all whole.

Mom warned us, saying, “Don’t get into any trouble.”

My dad slapped the back of our heads before we left and told us to use our brains.

Even our sister, the oldest and wisest of the Knightly children, stared us in the eyes and told us not to do anything stupid.

And yet, we failed all of them.

Have you ever been to New Orleans? Neither had I, but I'd heard great things about the place. Drinking in the streets and peekaboo boobs on every corner.

Beignets and rice and beans.

Scandalous fun.

Sounded like a great time.

But after doing extensive research before the trip—I like to plan ahead—the one thing I wanted to avoid, the one thing that made me extremely nervous, was the voodoo magic prevalent on the grimy cobblestone streets.

You know what I'm talking about. The dark stuff, the chilling life-altering spells that can change you as a man . . . as a human.

Whispers Black magic . . .

We did a great job avoiding any and all scary things, until last night, when I inadvertently ran smack dab into the palms of evil.

Shocking news: I was drunk. I couldn't tell if I was walking on cobblestone streets last night or lobster rolls—that's how far gone I was—so when I stumbled over a palm reader's table and broke it, I wasn't exactly aware of the severity of my mistake.

She roared with displeasure.

Her eyes tore through me with veritable hatred that shook me to the tip of my dick.

And her gangly fingers rattled while she spoke vehemently.

Terrified out of my wits, I held up my palm while my brothers tossed her twenty bucks and asked her to read it.

I wish I could remember what she said.

The future she spoke of is all a blur at this point. Pretty sure she said something about how incredibly handsome I am and how I outshine my brothers with the curves of my jaw, but I can't be quite sure. The boys deny that part of the story, but they don't deny the stark hatred that spit like venom from the petrifying woman's mouth.

My brothers, of course, didn't make the situation any better by making fun of her predictions. They actually sparked the flame that set the fire. I might be telling this wrong—you know, completely wasted and all—but the moment the palm reader turned an evil shade of hate, I felt every ounce of fun-loving booze seep from the bottom of my feet and out into the streets, sobering me up to the point of understanding.

In a whirlwind of vengeful movements, her arms waved about, the wind swirled around us, trash from the streets danced around my jean-covered legs, and the palm reader's eyes turned yellow—I confirmed that fact with all three brothers this morning.

Indeed, her eyes were yellow.

And then she said something I will never forget . . .

This wretch of a wench cloaked in the devil's garb took our fate into her own hands and punished us with broken love.

Broken.

Love.

If you know me at all, you'd know that would cut deep to my very being.

Then Reid said something about her telling us our dicks were going to fall off or turn green; can't be sure, because I was stunned. Stunned with the notion that my entire life goal of getting married and becoming a doting husband was quickly stripped from my soul and set into blazing embers, never to be seen again.

The miscreant cursed the one thing I strive for as a man . . . that swoony feeling of being wrapped up in a warm, safe relationship with a woman.

And I can't shake it.

No matter what my brothers say, no matter how many times they tell me to drop it, I keep worrying. I keep remembering the whirl of evil that was cast upon us. I keep trying to decode the meaning of it all.

Are we truly cursed?

"There's a table over there," Griffin, my oldest brother, says, making a beeline toward the back corner of the incredibly busy beignet-making icon. We came here for their famous beignets when we first arrived and decided to indulge one more time.

We catch a flight to Port Snow this afternoon and before we get back to our gossip-loving town, I want to set some things straight.

Taking seats, we quickly put in an order for beignets and a café au lait each, and when the waitress leaves, I say, "Can we talk about last night?"

Reid groans and slouches in his chair. He's in a shit mood, and I'm not sure if it's from the phone call he got last night that he's not talking about or if it's because he's hung over. Maybe a combo of both. "Can we not?"

"Aren't you worried?" I ask, looking around at my brothers. I can't possibly be the only one who's concerned here.

But it seems like I might be.

Griffin is texting. His wife, I'm sure.

Rogan is staring at the trifold menu on the table.

And Reid is rubbing his eyes with his palms, looking like he wants to be anywhere but here.

“Uh, hello? Do you guys not remember what happened last night? The whole alarming witch in a cloak thing, waving her dangly bone fingers at us. Table-breaking, palm-reading curses being flung about like beads off a balcony? Ring a bell?”

Griffin sets his phone down and lets out a deep breath. His tone is the even, oldest-brother sensible voice. “We were drunk last night, Brig.”

“Yeah, we were, but it doesn't negate the fact that we all woke up with the same story this morning. She cursed us. You're telling me none of you are concerned?” I glance around to all three pairs of blue eyes, the same blue eyes I share, and none of them are returning the look. Which tells me they're not willing to admit they're just as scared as I am.

I poke Rogan in the side. “Hello, are you listening?”

“Trying not to,” he says, his fingers pressing to his left eye. “Fuck, my head is pounding.” Rogan is my second oldest brother, the quiet and annoyed one. He's had a rough go at life and barely cracks a smile anymore. He's more interested in punishing himself for the decisions he's made in the past than in parting the dark cloud that hangs over his head so he can experience the world. As a retired football player, if pushed too hard, he's been known to fight back. I think I'll pass on leaning on him now.

“Griff.” I turn to the reasonable one in the group. “You saw it all, the way she spouted off that little limerick about broken love. She came up with that out of nowhere. It rhymed and everything. Who does that? Who wishes broken love on unsuspecting tourists? Frankly, it's fucked up.”

The waitress drops off our food and drinks. We give her a mumbled thank you before she takes off to serve another table in the busy outdoor seating area.

Mouth full of beignet and powdered sugar coating his lips, Griffin says, “If she was half the palm reader she said she was, then she would have known that I was already married and this curse she set upon us was flawed. Yeah, was it strange that there was wind whipping around when she raised her arms—”

“The wind was weird,” Rogan says.

“Wind freaked me out,” Reid grumbles while bringing his coffee up to his lips.

“Now you chime in,” I say with an eye roll.

“Can I finish?” Griff asks, sounding annoyed. We all silence ourselves with bites into our beignets. “The wind was a strange coincidence, but I also think she was deranged. There’s no merit to what she said, and I think we would waste time thinking about it anymore than we have. Let’s just enjoy breakfast and then get the hell out of here.”

“Agreed,” Rogan says.

“Yeah,” Reid murmurs.

“But—”

They all shoot me a death glare, and I snap my mouth shut.

I’m outnumbered, and even if I try to press it, they’re not going to change their minds. They’re chalking this experience up to what seems like a drunken *it-was-all-an-illusion-we’ll-soon-forget* night.

But just a quick glance around the table, and I don’t buy it.

Worried brows.

Keeping to themselves.

Shifty eyes.

They’re thinking about it just as much as I am.

Listen to me, to the words I have spoken.

From this day on, your love will be broken.

It isn’t until your minds have matured

That the weight of this curse will forever be cured.

Might not seem like a big deal, but I have a bad feeling our worlds are about to be flipped upside down.

And boy, were our lives flipped.

Griffin lost his wife.

Rogan’s high school sweetheart re-emerged with a vengeance.

Reid’s restaurant, his pride and joy, was stolen from him.

And me . . . well, I haven’t been in a relationship since the fateful day when my taut and beautiful ass tumbled over a palm reader’s table. Just bad luck? That everything good, everything we loved was taken away from us?

No.

It was the curse, but surely things would improve on their own. *Wouldn’t they?*

From this day on, your love will be broken.

Chapter One

BRIG

Four years later . . .

I'm single as fuck.

I'm so single it hurts.

Painfully single.

No one should ever be this agonizingly single, but here I am, Brig Knightly, lonely on another Friday night, not a prospect in sight, using my bare stomach as a plate while I dip pretzels into mustard that's in the middle divot of my abs.

Yup . . . this is my life.

Pathetic.

Deplorable.

Marooned by all the singles who want nothing to do with "the curse."

Knock. Knock.

I dip another pretzel in the mustard and yell, "It's open."

No need to bother getting up to answer; it's probably one of my happy and passionately in love brothers.

Yeah.

Can you believe all three of them are in love and living their best lives, leaving me in the dust of broken love? Yup, four years after the curse and they've all broken it somehow, found the loves of their lives, and are living happily ever after blah, blah blah . . .

Are you thinking, *hey, your brothers found love, isn't it your turn?*

You would think.

But no.

My last attempt at dating led me to being catfished by the local Uber driver—a man. I was made into a mockery and ever since then, I’ve spent every night either at my parents’ house or wallowing in self-pity at my empty and lonely apartment.

Anything to avoid the happy couples.

The thriving couples.

The sexually active couples . . .

“Hey man, what are you . . .” Rogan stops in the entryway of my apartment, his fiancée, Harper, right behind him. “Uh, is there mustard on your stomach?”

“Yup.” I use my finger to scoop some up and then suck it off, sans pretzel. Because . . . why not?

Rogan shuts the door behind them and slowly makes his way to the couch while holding Harper’s hand. Of course they’re touching. Everyone is touching these days.

No one is touching me though.

No one is holding my hand.

No one is checking on *their* unstable brother with me following cautiously behind.

Depression washes over me in a mustard wave and before I can stop myself, I pick up the squeeze bottle I purchased at Franklin’s deli, pop the top open, and bring it to my mouth.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Rogan swoops in and snags the bottle before I can drown myself in yellowy goodness. “Dude, what the hell are you doing?”

“Enjoying myself,” I say, picking up another pretzel and popping it into my mouth. Ugh, it’s not as good without the mustard.

Harper, the beautiful redhead that Rogan fell in love with when they were kids and recently put a ring on, sits across from me, a concerned look in her eyes. Her hand falls to my knee and she says, “Brig, are you okay?”

“Why do you ask? Do I not look okay to you?”

She winces and says, “You kind of look like you’re losing it.”

“I can see why you’d assume that, given the mustard on my stomach, but I’ve never felt better.”

“Why don’t I believe you?” she asks, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Maybe because he’s twirling his finger in his mustard puddle.” Rogan flings my hand to the side. “Stop that, it’s gross.” He picks up a napkin from the table and tosses it at me. “Clean yourself.”

I don’t move. Instead, I blink a few times and then say, “My house, my rules. If I want to twirl my finger in my stomach bowl of mustard, then I will.”

“How can I possibly talk to you about our wedding with you twirling your finger in mustard like that?” Rogan asks, exasperation in his voice.

“Wedding?” I ask. “Do you really think I want to talk about a wedding in my state?” I motion up and down my body. “This is not an attractive look for me, Rogan. Clearly, I’m going through something. Does it seem like I want your love shoved in my face?”

“Maybe you should have started with the news from Mrs. Davenport,” Harper says from the side of her mouth, as if I’m not sitting right in front of her.

“What news?” I ask, perking up.

I look between Rogan and Harper as they share a silent conversation.

“What’s that old bird up to?” I sit up, mustard slowly dripping down my stomach as I pick up my phone and go directly to the Hen Line app on my phone. The Hen Line is a gossip app for Port Snow where the latest and greatest news about our small town is posted. I live and breathe through the app. Well, until *I* was made a mockery of on it by our town’s Uber driver. But it looks like I’m missing out on information now, and that can’t be had.

I scroll through the feed quickly but don’t see anything about Mrs. Davenport, the leading lady of gossip. Old, wrinkly, and feisty, she somehow knows everything about everyone before they even know it.

“I don’t see anything,” I say in a panic. “What did she say? What does she know? Is it about me? If it is, it’s not true. I’m going to state that for the record right now. Whatever gossip is swirling around, it’s not true.” I jab my finger into the couch.

“She said she has incriminating pictures of you eating mustard from your belly button,” Rogan says.

“What? How?” I scan my apartment in a panic. “Does she have cameras?”

“Rogan, that’s not nice.” Harper places her hand on my knee, forcing me to look her in the eye. “There aren’t any pictures of you with mustard on your stomach. Rogan’s being a dick.”

My head whips in his direction, and I watch a huge smile cross his face. “You know I have an image to uphold,” I say through gritted teeth. “People can’t be witness to this disaster.”

“Then clean up, man.” He tosses more napkins at me and I quickly wipe up the remnants of mustard. “Why no bowl?”

“Don’t like dirtying a dish if I don’t have to.” I set the mustard-filled napkins to the side and then sit taller, trying to earn back some dignity while looking between them. “Tell me everything.”

“Can I trust that you keep this to yourself?”

“Not really, but I’ll try,” I answer.

Harper chuckles and says, “At least he’s honest.”

Rogan rubs his hand over his forehead and says, “You can’t tell anyone, at least not for a few days until Mrs. Davenport announces. Can you promise me that?”

“It will be painful, but I’ll give it a valiant effort.”

“Thank you for your sacrifice,” Rogan replies with an eye roll. He glances at Harper quickly, almost as if he’s asking permission. She gives him a brief nod and then he turns back to me. “Mrs. Davenport is putting together a Summer of Love Pen Pal program.”

“What?” I ask, full of intrigue, sitting at the edge of the couch now, feeling life start to pump through my veins again. “Pen pal love?”

He nods. “She was telling me about it this afternoon while we were eating ice cream together. She said she was bored and felt like her time could be spent helping the singles in town connect.”

“I’m listening,” I say, fully facing Rogan now.

“Apparently, she watched *Love is Blind* and was so fascinated by the concept of talking but not seeing each other, so she came up with her own Port Snow version. Since she can’t stick people in pods and keep them there forever, she went with pen pals. She asked me if I thought you would be interested—”

“Hell yeah, I’m interested,” I say, popping off the couch and walking over to where my discarded shirt is. I put it on and then pick up the deodorant from my kitchen table. I swipe under my armpits, cap it off, and then clap my hands together. “When do we get started?”

“Uh, not right now. It’s eight at night.”

“But I’m full of life,” I say, hopping up and down. “This could be it, this could be my shot at love.” I push my hand through my hair. “Think of the

possibilities. Is she pulling singles from Pottsmouth? Because I'm cool with that. More variety, you know? There aren't many single people here in town."

"Not sure on the details. She just asked if you were interested."

"Put me down as a hell yes." I pump my fist. "God, here I was, thinking I was going to die single, and then this just dropped in my lap. What are the odds?"

"Yeah, crazy," Rogan says in a monotone voice while scratching the back of his neck. "So I'll let her know you're in. She'll give you all the details."

"Perfect." I clap my hands loudly and then give the echo of the apartment a good old-fashioned "woop woop" while heading to the kitchen. Mood shifted, I strap on my hostess pants and ask, "Can I delight you two in a drink?"

Harper chuckles and shakes her head. "I'm good, but I'm pretty sure your brother is going to need a beer."

"Yeah, you've got that right."

I grab two beers, crack them open, hop over the back of the couch, and take a seat while handing Rogan his bottle, a local brew from here in Port Snow. Relaxing and feeling more invigorated, I ask, "So, what do you want to discuss about the wedding? Need to use the back of the garage?"

I own an auto shop in town, having spent my younger years fixing up cars. And trust me when I say this isn't your ordinary oil-changing tire shop full of grease and grime. Fuck no. I take pride in my shop. It's clean, it's modern, and the back of the lot is surrounded by trees, the perfect event space. I've rented it out to many weddings in town. The appeal? It's secluded, I have a liquor license, and as a side business, which is included in the event package, I rent out vintage Mustangs to tourists.

It's different—unique—but it's become a wildly popular venue, especially for out-of-towners. It's an easy incentive to keep my building looking pristine at all times, and the extra revenue has allowed me to expand my business to include vintage car rentals for those wanting to tour in style. "Well, we're getting married at Snow Vale Manor for obvious reasons." The old white manor that Rogan renovated is another event space in town, one that holds special meaning for Harper and Rogan. Pretty sure they lost their virginity in that place. "But we were looking around for the perfect rehearsal dinner location and were hoping we could have it behind

the garage,” Harper says, as she twists her hands in her lap, looking nervous.

Not sure why.

“I would be fucking honored,” I say with a smile. “I can plan the whole thing.”

“You know Mom will want to be a part of the planning,” Rogan says, sipping his beer. “She wanted to have it at the house, but I convinced her to ask you since the land is flat in the back and we’re not up against the ocean. You know how Mom gets when she hosts things at the house. I’d rather not stress her out.”

“She turns psychotic, which ignites Dad’s temper, and then for some reason, Jen always steps in with snarky comments about how her four brothers are useless.” I shake my head and sip my beer. “Why does Jen always have to get involved in the hysterics?”

“Older sister always butting in.”

Harper clears her throat. “So that’s a yes?”

“Of course, sis,” I say with a wink. “You didn’t even have to ask. Whatever you need.”

“Thank you,” Harper says, leaning over and pulling me into a hug. From over her shoulder I spot Rogan’s gaze, taking in the hug, a large smile crossing his face.

It’s been a while since I’ve seen that smile. His relationship with Harper has had its dark moments, moments I never thought they’d get through. If I’m happy for any of my brothers finding love, it has to be Rogan. He was the one who’s punished himself the most. The one who’s worked his ass off for the Port Snow empire he has now, and with Harper at his side, he’s finally able to enjoy it.

Harper pulls away and says, “You’re a good brother.”

“The best, and don’t you forget it.” Turning to Rogan I say, “Now tell me more about this pen pal summer of love . . .”

Chapter Two

RUTH

“I’m exhausted,” I say, taking a seat across from my best friend, Rylee.

She sets her computer to the side and props her feet up on the wood coffee table in front of her. Since noon, she’s been tapping away at her computer in her “sex chair,” finishing one of her very steamy romance novels. Her favorite place to write is in my coffee shop, Snow Roast, in one of the big armchairs in the corner, next to the window. She calls it her “sex chair” because she supposedly writes the best sex scenes while sitting in it.

I avoid that chair at all times now.

“When are you going to hire more people?” Rylee brings her almond milk chai to her lips. “You make so much money being the only coffee house in Port Snow, you can afford it.”

“I know,” I say on a sigh. “It just feels weird, hiring someone else. It’s always been family owned and operated.”

Rylee sets her hand on my knee and says lovingly, “I adore you, Ruth, and I loved your parents so much, but you haven’t taken a second to breathe since they passed. They wouldn’t want you working this hard.”

“But they were able to do it on their own,” I say, pulling my bottom lip under my teeth.

“Yes, and they had each other and your aunt Moira and uncle John. They weren’t a one-woman show with a baker. You need to hire help and pursue the things you really want to pursue.”

“And what things are those?” I ask, leaning my head back on the chair next to Rylee’s.

“Well, for one, you can finally open Piccadilly Parlor.”

I shake my head. “There aren’t any storefronts in Port Snow that I can afford. You and I both know that. To make a successful business, it needs to be on Main Street.”

“Talk to Rogan.” She nudges. “I bet he can help you out.”

Is she insane? “I’m not talking to Rogan.”

Just *casually* talk to Rogan Knightly? I can barely form words when any of the Knightly brothers walk into the coffee house, let alone ask one of them for a favor.

“Why . . . because he’s Brig’s brother?” Rylee says with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

“No,” I answer quickly, even though I can feel a blush creep up my cheeks.

Brig Knightly. Enter shameless sigh.

I’ve known *of* him ever since my parents moved us to Port Snow and opened Snow Roast. He caught my attention immediately. The youngest of the Knightlys, he was charming in the hallways of our school. Smart, driven, and handsome. I felt my entire body heat up whenever he came close. But being shy around boys, I never gained the courage to speak to him, and it’s still like that to this day. Me pining after someone I’ll never get to know on a deeper level.

“Ask him out . . . *please*, just ask him out already,” Rylee pleads, knowing the saga that is my crush on Brig Knightly.

“Have you lost your mind?” I ask on a whisper, looking around the shop, even though I know it’s empty. “What have I told you about saying things like that in public?”

“No one’s here, Ruth.” She sighs, exasperated. “And frankly, watching you pine after him from over the counter is starting to give me metaphorical blue balls. I think it’s affecting my sex life with Beck.”

Scoffing, I say, “Pretty sure your triplets are affecting your sex life with Beck, not me.”

“They’re angels,” she says, hand to heart. “But three nights a week is just not enough, and I think it’s because of you.”

Three nights a week. Good grief, if only she knew the last time I had sex . . . hell, if only I knew.

She nudges me with her foot. “I’m serious, Ruth, when are you going to make a move?”

“Never. And if we can talk about something else, I would love that.”

“You never know until you—”

“He doesn’t like me,” I practically shout and then try to calm my accelerated heartbeat. Lowering my voice, I repeat, “He doesn’t like me, Rylee.”

“Why do you say that? Did he tell you he doesn’t like you?”

“No, but isn’t it obvious? The man is desperate for a relationship, has practically dated everyone in town, but has never looked in *my* direction.” I glance to the side, my eyes landing on the stack of clean mugs I need to put away. “He’s not into me, and I’m not about to embarrass myself and ask him out.”

“That’s not true, maybe he’s just—”

The bell above the door rings and Rogan walks in dressed in all black, head to toe, looking handsome as ever, just like every other Knightly man in this town. I admit, Rogan is incredibly attractive, but he’s always been a bit of a mystery to me, maybe a little intimidating too.

He spots me and Rylee in the corner, and once again, I feel my cheeks burn in flames. I know he couldn’t possibly have heard what we were talking about, but the thought that he *did* catch us talking about his youngest brother makes me break out in a thin sweat anyway.

“Hey ladies, hope I’m not interrupting anything,” he says, casually walking toward us.

Oh, not at all, just talking about your brother and my impossible infatuation with him and how he won’t look my way.

“Nope, nothing,” I answer, swallowing hard.

“Nothing at all,” Rylee says slyly. “Come join us, Rogan.”

“Sure,” he says, looking a little apprehensive. He takes a seat on an arm of a chair diagonal from me.

“How’s the wedding planning going?”

“Good.” He nods, hands clasped in front of him. “Trying to keep it small in this town feels next to impossible, but we’re determined.”

“Everyone vying for an invitation?” Rylee asks.

“Yeah, especially since the newspaper keeps saying it’s the party of the century.” He grips the back of his neck in distress. “We don’t even know what we’re doing yet and the town is blowing it up.”

“If I were you, I’d elope,” Rylee says.

“I wish. My parents and Harper’s dad would murder us, plus, we really want to get married at Snow Vale Manor. We can’t think of anywhere else

that would hold more meaning.”

Rylee grips her heart. “Oh that’s right. Your love story would make the perfect romance novel. I might have to pick your brain one day. Friends to lovers, second-chance romance. Ugh, I need it in my life.”

He chuckles and then nods at me. “How are you, Ruth? Plan on participating in the Summer of Love event?”

“Uh.” I look over at Rylee who perks up.

“What’s the Summer of Love?” she asks.

“Mrs. Davenport is putting it on. Basically, you fill out a questionnaire, then she matches up couples, and they write to each other all summer. Pen Pal kind of stuff. She has a mailbox in the post office that’s dedicated specifically for the project, so all letters are anonymous.” Rogan shrugs his shoulders. “Brig’s doing it.”

Oh dear God.

My heart seizes.

“Really?” Rylee drags out, giving me a sly look.

I want to kill her.

Stop looking at me. Stop looking at me.

Don’t give me away . . .

“Hear that? Brig’s doing it.”

Mortification creeps up the back of my neck, stiffening my spine and stealing all words from my mouth in a breathless act of embarrassment.

Face blazing, I clear my throat and stand. “Uh, is there anything I can get you, Rogan?”

“Yeah, I’m actually meeting—”

“What would she have to do to apply?” Rylee asks.

Slightly startled, Rogan turns toward Rylee and says, “I think just fill out the questionnaire and turn it in. Brig already filled his out. I think the deadline is Wednesday.”

“She’s doing it,” Rylee says as I round the counter of the coffee house. “Imagine if you got matched up with Brig.”

Wow!

She’s ripe today.

Just going to throw that out there . . . *in front of his brother.*

“I’m not doing it.” I shake my head, put the mugs away, doing anything to keep myself busy. “I have a lot going on.”

“Just thought I’d mention it,” Rogan says, and I hear him walk toward the counter.

“Yeah, busy,” Rylee says, walking up as well. “She wants to open a new business, just looking for some space . . .”

Oh my God.

“Rylee,” I snap at her, wondering what in the ever-living hell has gotten into my best friend.

“Are you looking for real estate?” Rogan asks, his interest piquing, just as the coffee house door opens.

I glance over Rogan’s shoulder and immediately spot a pair of blue eyes that make me completely and utterly weak in the knees.

Worn blue jeans wrap around long legs and button at his narrow waist. An air of charm floats in with him, clinging to his torso just like the light blue shirt he’s wearing. His gait is one of confidence, as he eats up the space from the door to the counter.

Perfect, flawless skin with a light shade of scruff on his carved jaw.

Brilliantly blue eyes that sparkle with humor.

Soft, supple lips curve into a heart-stopping smile.

Brig Freaking Knightly.

A wave of lust falls over me, capturing my mind in a swirl of need. *Like it does every time.*

If you asked me to pinpoint a moment when I fell for Brig, I wouldn’t be able to tell you. It’s as if over time, he became a staple I looked forward to seeing every day, like’s he’s a necessity in my life.

His charming smile beats straight to my chest as he steps up behind Rogan and clasps his shoulder. Happy as usual, he looks around and says with his New England timbre, “What are we talking about?” When his eyes meet mine, I quickly look away, unable to take the brilliance of his irises, not when I’m in a state of peril.

“Ruth’s new business,” Rogan answers.

“Oh yeah, you got something brewing, Ruthie?” he asks and then chuckles to himself. “No pun intended.”

Rogan rolls his eyes at his brother’s goofiness, but I melt right there in my white, sensible sneakers.

Instead of answering him, I get straight to work on their orders. They don’t even have to put them in anymore.

Plain black coffee for Rogan.

For Brig, dark roast with a shot of blueberry flavoring, two sugars, and a quarter cup of skim milk, because he can't stand the bitter flavor of coffee.

Of course, because of my silence, Rylee says, "Piccadilly Parlor. It's a tea shop with a dine-in section for tea parties and small gatherings."

"Rylee," I warn, but she doesn't care that I'm trying to shoot desperate daggers at her with my eyes.

"She's having a tough time finding space on Main Street though."

"Yeah, there isn't much available," Rogan says, scratching the side of his cheek.

"Hear that? Not much available," I say through clenched teeth, silently telling Rylee to shut the hell up. "So we should just—"

"The shop next to the garage is opening up soon," Brig says, stilling every muscle in my body. "It'll need some renovations but nothing we can't help with."

"Really?" Rogan says. "Mrs. Burberry's selling the sewing shop?"

Brig nods. "Yup, had a long convo about it with her the other day. She was going to contact you but must have gotten distracted. Have you seen the space?" Brig asks me, and I practically swallow my tongue trying to respond.

"Uh . . . I think I went in there once. Don't remember it."

Brig looks at his watch—brown leather strap, fits him perfectly. "You close in fifteen minutes. I can take you down there. I have a key. Mrs. Burberry would probably be thrilled to not have to do anything to sell it."

"That's a great idea," Rylee says . . . *before I can open my mouth*. "I can close up, and Brig can take you to the store to take a look."

"I don't want to bother you. It's fine." I finish up their drinks and set them on the counter. Rogan pulls out a ten from his wallet but doesn't accept change. He never does, so I don't bother trying anymore.

"No bother at all." Brig winks. I feel the leap in my pulse from the small gesture. "Just have to go over a few things with Rogan, and then we can leave."

"That would be great," Rylee says while moving around the counter to start cleaning up. Having helped me far too many nights to count, she gets straight to work without having to ask me what to do.

"Awesome. We'll be over by the fireplace. Let me know when you're ready."

The Knightly boys both walk away and my eyes drift to Brig's backside for a second before I turn away, embarrassment consuming me.

When they're far enough away, I whisper-yell at Rylee, "What the hell was that?"

Pleased with herself, she answers, "That was me digging you out of the rut you've been in."

"Rylee, I'm not ready—"

"Yes, you are, you're just scared," she whispers back. "You're scared of putting your heart on the line and you're scared of putting your idea out there too. What are you going to do? Just stand behind this counter for the rest of your life, never going after anything you want? It's time you take hold of those fears and conquer them."

"That's not your decision to make."

"It is when I see that you're never going to take it." Closing the space between us, she says, "You're lonely, Ruth, and you're living in a safe bubble. It's time you burst out of it and experience what this life you've been granted is really about. You have an opportunity, seize it. And if you're really that scared, you don't have to make any commitments about the space. No one's saying you need to make an offer. Just take a look."

"I have to be alone . . . with *him*."

A sinister smile curves Rylee's lips. "Couldn't think of a better situation to get him to notice you more. Now go in the back and freshen up. You look like a tornado hit you."

"Really?" My eyes widen in horror.

Rylee laughs and shakes her head. "No, but you should fix your hair, it's a little . . . crazy."

I pat at my hair and look to the side where Rogan is listening intently to whatever Brig is saying as he shows him something on his phone. "I don't know. This is way too much for me to process."

Taking me into her arms, Rylee gives me a hug while speaking softly. "Ruth, I love you so much, but it feels like you stopped living when your parents died. And I understand how devastating it was. Losing them together was horrendous, and then taking on their business as well. Extremely difficult. But it's time you start experiencing life again and stop sitting on the sidelines. You have so much more to offer Port Snow than coffee. Make a change and who knows, if love starts to blossom while

you're taking that next step in life, so be it. Maybe you have to step away from the counter to finally be seen."

Tears well in my eyes but I quickly tamp them down, because there's no way I want to be caught crying in front of Brig and Rogan.

Sensing my bubbling emotions, Rylee speaks softly. "Deep breaths, Ruth. This is going to be amazing. I just know it is."

Glad she's so confident, because right about now, all I can think about it how utterly terrifying this is.

Chapter Three

BRIG

“Is your hair always that long?” I ask Ruth, taking in her long blonde locks.

“I mean . . . yeah?” Ruth answers as a question. “I don’t have extensions in or anything if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Nah, I can tell that’s real hair,” I say, feeling really fucking awkward. The girl hasn’t spoken a word since we left the coffee house, and Rylee had to shove her out the door.

Witnessing her resistance didn’t bode well for my confidence.

Now that we’re walking down Main Street together, I don’t think I’ve ever felt more uncomfortable in my life. I’m a pretty easygoing guy, and I can strike up a conversation with anyone about anything. But right now, I feel . . . tongue-tied.

I have no idea what to talk to her about and with every second that passes in silence, my body tenses further into a tangled-up ball of knots.

“Yeah, my hair is real,” she mumbles quietly, and from the corner of my eye, I catch her pulling on the tips, as if checking to make sure it’s still there.

This is going to be brutal.

I don’t know much about Ruth outside of the coffee house.

I don’t think I know anything about her, which is sad because we went to school together and I order coffee from her almost every morning. I know a lot about the people in this town . . . except for Ruth.

That’s sad. I must know something. Think, Brig, think.

Huh . . . she makes one hell of a cup of coffee and coffee cake.

She, uh . . . she says hi with a smile.

She knows how to put on an apron . . .

Jesus, that's pathetic.

Oh wait, I know that her hair is real. I have that going for me.

"So . . . Piccadilly Parlor, huh? Has a nice ring to it. Where did you come up with the idea?"

She keeps her head tilted down as she speaks, and I can barely hear her because she's maintaining a solid two feet between us as we walk down the sidewalk. "My mom."

And . . . that's all she says.

Okay. Not much of a talker.

Oh wait. I think her parents passed away.

They did, I mentally cheer for myself, remembering something about her.

Well, I'm not mentally cheering that her parents passed, but relieved that I know something other than her hair is real and she smiles when she says hi.

"Was it a dream of hers?" I ask, trying to keep my voice soft. Ruth appears to be very skittish and I'm not quite sure why, so I take it easy with her, holding back my normally outlandish self.

"It was."

Nothing else.

That's it.

Wow, okay.

I remember a time when Rogan used to talk to me using one-word answers, during his dark time. Is that what Ruth is facing? A dark time?

"Did you uh, used to—"

"You don't have to try to make conversation with me," she says. "I know this is weird for you. Rylee put this on you and I'm sorry, she never should have—"

"Hey." I stop her, pulling on her arm. The deep brown depths of her gaze shoot to where my hand rests on her heated skin. She practically shivers under the strength of my palm. Maybe touching her wasn't a good idea. I release her arm and shove my hands in my pockets, keeping to myself. "I offered to show you around. Rylee didn't force anything on me. But if you don't want to see the space, I can walk you back to Snow Roast."

Not even coming close to making eye contact with me, she glances toward Main Street where there's a small gathering in front of the deli. Franklin is putting his famous homemade mustard on sale. Lucky for me, I had insider information and scored a few bottles before the actual sale. Staring at the line, her teeth pull on the corner of her mouth. Indecision weighs heavily in her mind, and I wonder if her evasiveness has to do with me or if she's like this with everyone.

Why is she so skittish?

Is it me?

Do I come on too strong?

Is she nervous about this entire venture?

Starting a business in a small town is nerve wracking. I have experience in that department. Maybe that's it.

Going out on a limb, I say, "I remember when I opened up the garage. I was nervous as hell. I knew the town needed the service badly, but I was only twenty when I opened it. I had help from my parents thankfully, but it was still scary. Are you scared, Ruthie?"

She's silent at first, studying the ground as if it has the key to her success carved into it. When she finally answers, she says, "I don't want to keep you much longer than I already have. Let's keep moving forward."

Without waiting for me, she veers to the right where my garage is. Being located a street from Main Street has never negatively affected my business. But I think for Ruthie's tea house, which needs more foot traffic, the location should still be close enough to make for a good storefront.

Silently—not from my lack of trying—we make it to the sewing shop. From my pocket, I pull out my keys and search for the one Mrs. Burberry left with me. Since my apartment is above the garage, she thought it would be helpful if I had a key to keep an eye on things.

When remodeling the storefronts, I made sure the garage didn't look like an automobile shop from the front, but rather a welcoming tourist attraction.

White board and batten line both buildings that connect in the middle. Where my lettering is written in red and displayed in metal above the door, The Sewing Room has a teal awning hanging over the door with a large storefront window in which Mrs. Burberry has always kept mannequins decorated for every season.

After a few tries of wiggling the key around, I unlock the door, flip on a light, and let Ruth in. Mrs. Burberry has already started packing things up and moving them out. Her grandsons came down to help her after she found a store a few towns north that wanted to buy out her inventory.

“I’m surprised Mrs. Burberry’s departure hasn’t been in the newspaper,” I say. “Although, she’s been pretty quiet about it.”

I watch Ruth look around. She’s petite, has slender shoulders, and her hands are clutched together in front of her. She almost seems meek and unsure of herself, which is weird, because when she’s making coffee, bustling around her shop, she’s vibrant. I’ve heard her witty comebacks. But right now, she almost looks like she’s being held hostage by yours truly. *And that’s just weird.* I’ve known Ruth . . . well, *who* Ruth is, for many years. We grew up in the same town together. We’re not strangers. Yet here, an outsider looking in would probably think we are. Was she always this quiet? Introverted?

But observing the way she’s looking at the space, her mind focused on absorbing every last inch, is fascinating. It’s almost as if I can see the wheels spinning in her head.

“You can talk it out, you know,” I say. “Tell me what you see.”

I lean against the wall, my hands behind me, waiting for her to share. Share anything.

But she stays silent, running her hands over the packed boxes, taking in the outdated brass light fixtures and the dusty blue-and-mauve flowered wallpaper.

“It’s different in here without all the shelves.”

I nearly fall to the floor from the sound of her voice carrying through the emptying space. “It’s more open, airy. The wallpaper is an easy fix, and I could change out the flooring, which could take a weekend but be well worth it. There is a fully functioning kitchen in the back. Before Mrs. Burberry turned the space into a sewing shop, it was actually a soup restaurant. Mrs. Burberry never did anything with the kitchen, so it might need some updating, but at least all the bones are there. And the walls are soundproof. One of the worries Mrs. Burberry had when I moved in next door was hearing heavy machinery vibrating the walls, so when I renovated the garage space, I made sure to double down on the soundproofing. With light music on in the background, you won’t even know we’re next door.

And I keep things clean, really clean. You'll never have to worry about junk cars sitting out front. That's not the kind of shop I run."

"I know," she says quietly, peeking up at me for a second, the joy in her deep brown eyes easing some of the awkward tension between us. "When will she be packed up?"

"End of the week I believe, if not sooner. Her grandsons have been helping her. She's moving to be closer to them."

She nods and walks toward the back of the space, and I follow behind. Pausing at the kitchen door, I hear her suck in a sharp breath and then step in closer. "This isn't just a regular kitchen; this is a professional kitchen."

I peek in. "Yeah, I guess so. I know the stove needs to be replaced. Mrs. Burberry mentioned that. But yeah, I guess it's a pretty nice space."

"This is better than what I have at Snow Roast." Her voice fills with more excitement, and I'm starting to feel less tense. "We could move some of the baking over to here; there's so much more space."

"That's a pretty good idea. Give The Lobster Landing some competition."

Her eyes widen and she says, "I would never, I didn't mean—"

I hold up my hand. "I'm only kidding, Ruthie. But I will say this, your coffee cake is fucking amazing."

Fidgeting, she says, "It was my dad's recipe. He got it from his mom and he perfected it by adding apples into the mix. I started adding other fruits as well."

"I noticed." I pat my flat stomach. "Any more of that pear and raspberry coffee cake and I'm going to lose all definition in my abs."

Her eyes fall to my stomach, where she stares for a few beats before she blushes. She looks away, pushing her hair behind her ear. She glides through the room, runs her hand over the walls, examines the ceilings, does everything possible to not look at me again.

"So," I clear my throat. "What do you think?"

"I think I need a second opinion." She glances at me and I raise my hand.

"I can be that second opinion. I think it's a great space. Mrs. Burberry would never screw you over, and I know some people who could help renovate." I take a step forward. "Is this what you envisioned?"

On a deep breath, she takes in the space one more time. "It isn't . . . I think it might be better." She steps out of the kitchen and goes back to the

main room where she leans against the wall and stares out toward the storefront.

“I can see it,” she whispers. “The white shiplap on the walls with the white oak shelving stacked with specialties from England. Teas, baking mixes, and tea ware. Cadbury candies and biscuits. Fancy hats and pristine serving ware. White oak floors, beautiful white dining sets with light teal glasses on the table. Delicate fabric napkins that you’re almost too afraid to use. A tea bar. A biscuit bar. A menu full of tea sandwiches and authentic English scones with clotted cream and jelly . . .”

She sighs and fuck, I’m transfixed. Her voice is sweet, smooth . . . *surprising*. Dreamy and starry-eyed, she carries hope in her being, a promise for her next adventure. I know that feeling. I’ve seen the same look when I’ve woken up and gotten ready in the morning, my face reflecting the same enthusiasm.

From the excitement brimming on the curve of her smile, the happiness in her eyes—glistening, ready to cry from joy—it’s impossible to look away, to give her this moment alone.

“It’s everything my mom would have loved all wrapped up in a darling little store next to an automobile shop.” She chuckles to herself and then as if she remembers I’m here, she clears her throat and says, “Sorry. I got a little carried away.”

“Don’t apologize,” I say, my eyes fixed on hers. Long black lashes, dark irises that almost blend with her pupils. “Don’t ever apologize about a dream.” Joining her against the wall, our shoulders inches apart, I say, “I see it too. And I also see my sweet-loving ass parked at your table during lunchtime enjoying tiny sandwiches with a cup of tea.”

“Peppermint tea,” she says quietly.

“My favorite.” I turn my head and she does too at the exact same time, and something happens in that moment.

As if someone taps me on the shoulder and points an arrow directly over Ruth’s head, lights beaming, horns blaring, sparks flying.

What . . . the . . .

“I should get going,” she says quickly, pushing off the wall. “I should make sure Rylee’s okay.” She’s moving so fast that I stumble over a box to catch up to her.

“Wait,” I call out, but she continues to walk out of the shop while calling over her shoulder.

“Thanks for showing me the space. Have a good night.”

And before I can even make it to the front door, she’s turning back onto Main Street and headed straight to Snow Roast.

What the hell just happened?



THREE MEN and a Witch Group Text Brig: *Just got my Summer of Love pen pal assigned to me. I’m too nervous to look.*

Griffin: *You’re doing that?*

Reid: *Of course he’s doing it. Didn’t you know? He’s trying to break the curse. *Insert eye roll**

Brig: *Hey, the curse is real and all you buffoons know it.*

Reid: *That’s why we’re all spending our nights alone . . .*

Griffin: *Ouch, low blow, Reid. You know he’s going to start crying.*

Rogan: *Harper and I walked in on him using his stomach as a dipping dish for mustard. #RockBottom* **Brig:** *Uhh . . . I was looking for support, not bashing. Where’s the love?*

Reid: *Cursed in New Orleans*

Griffin: *LOL. I snorted.*

Rogan: *Fucking guffawed.*

Reid: *I love a good guffaw.*

Griffin: *Not sure I know what classifies as a guffaw.*

Rogan: *According to Google, a loud and boisterous laugh.*

Griffin: *Oh, then I’ve guffawed.*

Reid: *Total guffawer.*

Rogan: *Guffawing for the win.*

Brig: *Are you done?*

Jen: *Guffaws Love cursed in New Orleans. Classic.*

Brig: *You are no help, JEN.*

Jen: *Am I ever?*

Griffin: *Nope.*

Rogan: *No.*

Reid: *Never.*

Jen: *I rest my case.*

Chapter Four

RUTH

Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

The door whips open and Rylee stands in front of me, robe barely draped over her body, her hair an absolute mess, and her cheeks flushed.

“What the hell—”

“What is this?” I ask, holding up an envelope that was delivered to Snow Roast today.

She shifts on her feet and folds her arms over her chest. “I don’t know, genius. I don’t have X-ray vision.”

Pushing past her and straight into her house, where every walkable surface is covered in toys, I spin around and say, “It’s a match for the Summer of Love program.”

“Who’s here? Is it a murderer?” Beck, Rylee’s husband, asks while stepping down the stairs, wearing nothing but a pair of sweats . . . and holding a pillow in front of his crotch.

Oh Jesus.

“You were concerned it’s a murderer and yet you sent your wife to answer the door?” Rylee asks.

He glances down at his crotch and then back up at her. “I know it can look intimidating, but it’s not much of a weapon, especially when scared. You had a better chance at fighting off death with your feminine claws.”

Rylee looks at me and says, “You’re interrupting our sex party. I’m doing research and we don’t have much time to conduct said research since we have a lot to get through. I need him hard and ready for all of it before the triplets return tomorrow morning.”

“I’m hard and ready now,” Beck says, inching back up the stairs.

“Your penis can wait,” I say over my shoulder and hold up the envelope again. “Rylee, did you fill out an application for me?”

“No, I didn’t, and how dare you accuse me.”

The stairs squeak behind us, and I glance over at Beck who looks incredibly guilty.

I whip back around to Rylee and say, “Did Beck fill it out for you?”

Her lips twist to the side and the stairs squeak again.

“Beck, don’t you dare move.”

He clears his throat. “I’m an innocent bystander.”

“Beck . . .”

He crumbles fast and says, “She promised me a blow job accompanied by her vibrator against my balls . . . I . . . I’m weak, Ruth. Her mouth is amazing.”

“Thank you.” Rylee winks.

“Unbelievable. You had your husband fill out the form thinking you wouldn’t get caught?”

“No, I knew I’d get caught, but I can honestly say I didn’t fill it out. So there.”

I press my hand to my forehead and sink down in one of her chairs, sitting on a Build-A-Bear R2D2, the *beep, beep, boop* it makes muffled by my rear end. “I didn’t want to participate.”

“And you didn’t want to expand your business either, and now look at you. You hired three more employees, and you’re purchasing Mrs. Burberry’s old sewing shop to make a dream come true. All because of me. Your nagging, meddling friend.”

Yes, she might be right when it comes to my business. Last week was monumental for me in expanding the Snow Roast brand. I put out an ad for help at Snow Roast and within the first day, I had fifteen applications, Beck being one them. Now that the triplets are in preschool, it has freed up some time when he’s not working at the gallery. He was the perfect candidate to hire for the morning shift with the occasional night, especially since his main reason for applying was to get out of the house and be social with the town, something he very much enjoys. Easy hire. Rounding out the other two positions, I hired Darcy, a recent empty nester, and Josie, who Ren, Griffin’s girlfriend, recommended. Josie is a recent graduate from high school and is taking online college courses.

I couldn't be happier about the new hires, especially since they all came with welcoming personalities and have proven to be fast learners. We started training three days ago and they already have the drink orders down.

The goal is to have them take care of Snow Roast while I renovate Piccadilly Parlor.

And yes, Rylee gave me the push I needed, even though I didn't think I was ready . . . even though it was merely a dream.

But this . . . Summer of Love, that's stepping over the line of meddling best friend. That's putting my heart on the line, which is terrifying.

"I have too much happening right now, so the last thing I need is to be sucked into some pen pal love thing."

"Have you even opened the letter?"

"No."

The stairs creak again and Beck clears his throat. "Uh, this seems like something you two can talk about amongst yourselves. I'll just, uh, head back upstairs."

"No jerking off," Rylee says, pointing her finger at Beck. "I'm not kidding, this research is vital."

Beck pushes his hand through his hair and says, "Not to be a dick, Ruth, since you're my boss and all, but be quick. *Please.*"

"Yeah, as your boss, I'm erasing this entire interaction from my memory."

"That's probably the best idea." With that, he heads up the stairs, leaving me alone with Rylee, who walks right up to me, snatches the letter from my hand, and opens it.

Her eyes quickly scan the paper and then she looks at me from over the blue paper and smiles. "This is more perfect than I ever expected."

"What?" I ask. "Does it have the name of the person I'm matched with?"

She shakes her head. "No, it's a letter from your pen pal."

"Seriously?" I sit taller. "What does it say?"

She giggles and sits across from me on the coffee table. "This is amazing."

"Rylee . . . who is it?"

"It's part of the rules not to reveal yourself. It's signed by your secret pen pal. But oh my God, does the letter give away who wrote it."

"Is it Walter?"

“The Uber driver?” Rylee shakes her head. “No, so much better.”

Growing frustrated, I snatch the letter from her hand and read it out loud.

“Dear Pen Pal. I want to start this letter by saying I’m really excited to get another shot at finding love. Seems so hard in such a small town.” I glance up at Rylee, my heart skipping a beat while she clasps her hands together. “When I read the write-up Mrs. Davenport provided about you, I knew it was going to be a great match. Business owner, loves spaghetti, and can play a mean game of Battleship. That’s my kind of girl.”

Oh God. I pause and Rylee nudges me with her foot. “Keep reading.”

“But I must ask, do you twirl your spaghetti or do you cut it? This is vital information I need to know because my three brothers . . .”

My words trail off and Rylee squeals, “Oh my God, you were matched with Brig.”

I shake my head, dropping the letter to my lap. “There are other people with three brothers.”

“Yeah, but would they say something like ‘having another shot at love’?”

No . . . no, they wouldn’t. That’s a Brig thing to say. I’ve actually heard him say something very similar to that in the coffee house . . . several times. There’s no denying his need to find love; the whole town knows about it.

The town knows about “the curse.”

They know about Brig’s need to break that curse.

And they know all about Brig’s failed attempts to break it.

“Finish reading it,” Rylee encourages.

I cup my stomach. All the saliva dries in my mouth. “I’m too nauseous.” *This isn’t good. You can’t match pen pals in a small town. There’s no guess work. This is so wrong.*

She snags the letter from my lap, the *blue* letter. Of course, Brig would use special paper to write his pen pal; that should have been clue number one. Clue number two should have been the giddy look on Rylee’s face. Clue number three—and I’m sort of ashamed to admit this—is his handwriting. I would know that handwriting anywhere. It’s cursive—something you don’t see from people our age—and meticulous. I’ve seen his handwriting a few times while he’s hung out and worked at the coffee house. I’ve always admired how he wrote in cursive and—embarrassingly—have wondered what my name would look like scrolled by his hand.

“I’ll read the rest of it,” Rylee announces before clearing her throat. “This is vital information I need to know because my three brothers all cut theirs like barbarians. Hate to admit it, but this could be a make-or-break for our relationship. So let me know . . . twirler or cutter? Sincerely, Your Secret Pen Pal. P.S. I don’t know how to do this, so don’t judge me on this lame letter. I promise I have more game than this.” Rylee clutches the letter to her chest and says, “Oh my God, he’s adorable. I don’t think I could be happier about my decision to meddle. Let’s write him back.”

“What?” I feel my eyes widen. “Are you insane? I’m not writing him back.” I point my finger at her and say, “And you better not write him back either. I’m not kidding, Rylee.”

“How could you not write him back?”

“Uh, easily. Just don’t write anything.”

“And then leave him hanging, wondering if he came on too weird with his spaghetti question? You know that’s going to make him question everything about his dating approach. He’s already sensitive when it comes to dating, so you not writing him back will possibly break him.”

Oh God. She’s right.

My mind quickly falls to Brig. The dejected look on his face, the depressed conversation he’d have with one of his brothers. I’ve overheard many of them.

Dumped after two dates.

Tourists only want sex, never a relationship.

Catfished by the town’s Uber driver.

Time and time again, I’ve heard him pour his heart out about wanting to find true love.

The perfect girl.

His *one and only*.

A girl he can spoil and get lost in.

Would this be another one of those situations? Most likely, but the difference is, I’d be the one causing the pain.

Rylee shakes my knee. “You’ve had a thing for Brig Knightly since middle school.”

“Yeah, and he’s never even noticed me.”

“He calls you ‘Ruthie.’ I think he’s the only one who does that.”

Besides my parents.

“He’s just being nice. You should have been there when we were looking at Mrs. Burberry’s store. It was so awkward. He looked pained to be there with me.”

“Maybe because you only said two words to him.” She shakes me again. “This is your chance, Ruth. This is your chance for him to finally get to know you, and it’s so perfect because you’re going to be work neighbors too. He’s going to be surrounded by you, so he’s bound to notice.”

“He doesn’t see me like that.”

“Or maybe you don’t allow him to see you like that. Ever think of it that way? You’re hiding yourself from him. You hide behind friends, behind the counter, and you never let him get to know you. You’ve lived in the same town for so long, and yet, you’ve maybe had a handful of conversations with the man. You’ve just . . . *observed* from a distance and slowly fallen head over heels in love with him.”

“I’m not in love with him.” *I can’t be.*

She sets the letter on my lap. “Maybe. Maybe not. But you know him *well enough* to know you can’t let his letter go unanswered. He’d be devastated. Is that what you want? To make the man even more paranoid than he is?”

“No,” I say softly, my stomach twisting in knots while doubt and anxiety creep up the back of my neck. “I don’t ever want to make him doubt himself.” I glance up at Rylee, feeling the backs of my eyes tingle with tears. “But . . . what if he doesn’t like me?”

“What if he does and he doesn’t know it yet?” Rylee leans forward taking both my hands in hers. “Wouldn’t you rather find out than just sit back always wondering what if? This is your moment, Ruth. This is your time to make something of everything you’ve ever wanted. Seize it. I know it’s what your parents would have wanted.”

My teeth pull my bottom lip into my mouth while the first wave of tears flash down my cheeks.

“I’m scared.” I wipe away a tear. “It might sound stupid, but I’m really scared. I’m not that kind of girl, who just takes what she wants.”

“I know, sweetie. It’s one of the reasons I love you, because you’re sweet, loving, caring, and you’re always thinking of others first. But now, it’s time to think about you. You can do this, and I’ll hold your hand every step of the way.”

“And what happens when he doesn’t want me?”

“What happens when he does, and you live happily ever after?”

“That’s your author heart speaking.”

She shakes her head, forcing me to look her in the eyes. “That’s your best friend talking.”

From upstairs, Beck calls out, “Is Ruth still here? I’m . . . uh . . . really aroused.”

Rylee and I both snort and chuckle. I stand, keeping Brig’s letter close to my chest while Rylee stands as well.

“Don’t want my husband to die from arousal.” Growing serious, she asks, “Are you going to write him back?”

Even though it’s scary and I’m terrified he might not want me to be his pen pal—something I’d find out the hard way—I slowly nod. “I’ll write him back.”

“Good.” She tips my chin up. “This could be the start of something great, Ruth. Just keep reminding yourself that when doubt starts to creep in. When fear takes hold of your heart and you stumble, just remember: you’ll never develop your dreams into a reality without trying. You have to try first.” Pulling me into a hug, she whispers, “I’m proud of you, Ruth. This might be scary, but deep in my bones, I know there is something between you two, it just hasn’t surfaced yet.” Pulling away, she smiles and calls out to Beck, “Heading up, handsome. Legs spread, hands behind your head.” She winks at me and then takes off toward her stairs.

I quickly let myself out, so I don’t have to be witness to an aroused Beck, legs spread, hands behind his head.

On the walk back to the coffee house, I stuff Brig’s letter in my back pocket and think about what Rylee said.

You’ll never know unless you try.

It’s the same wise advice my dad would have given me if he were still alive. He would have said it about Piccadilly Parlor and he would have said it about Brig too.

A small smile pulls at the corner of my mouth as I consider what my parents would have thought if they knew I was infatuated with the youngest Knightly boy. Fans of the Knightlys, they often asked me if I thought one of them was cute, and I denied it. I denied it so hard, being the shy teenager I was. Pretty sure they would have been thrilled and would have played matchmaker like Rylee and— “Hey Ruthie,” that deep voice I’ve grown to adore says, coming up next to me.

Brig.

Brig, wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, sunglasses blocking his beautiful eyes. I didn't tell Rylee, mind you, she probably knows, but I love when Brig calls me Ruthie. And every time I see him, it feels like the first time—my heart stumbles, my words escape me, and my lungs constrict, squeezing all the air out of them, leaving me breathless, needy, and awkward.

And then my mind quickly goes to his letter in my back pocket. Thank God I folded it, because the blue paper would have been a total giveaway.

"Uh, hey Brig," I say, finding my voice.

"Headed to Snow Roast?"

I nod.

"Awesome, me too." He rubs his stomach. "I could really use some coffee cake right now. Mind if I walk with you?"

My mouth turns into dust as it goes dry. "Sure," I answer, barely squeaking out a response.

Get it together, Ruth. He's just a man.

But a man who smells like absolute heaven.

A man I've pined after for so many years.

A man I've begged and pleaded to look at me just once other than when he's ordering coffee.

But he's here now . . . talking to you.

Rylee's words come floating back to me. *Seize the moment.*

Pushing past the fear that's bubbling up in my stomach, I say, "Thanks for showing me Mrs. Burberry's space. Didn't know if you heard, but I put an offer in."

"I heard," he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. "Rogan told me. We're going to be neighbors." He bumps my shoulder with his and I nearly fall flat on the sidewalk.

The uncontrollable fangirl in me, who has admired Brig for so many years, mentally squeals, "I'm never washing my shoulder . . . ever."

"Yeah." I swallow hard. "Hope you don't mind the sound of construction for a bit."

"Double soundproofing. We're good, Ruthie. But I do have a question."

I raise my head ever so slightly to look at him. The smile playing at his lips causes my entire stomach to somersault in on itself.

"What's that?"

“Do I get neighbor rights?”

“What uh . . . what are neighbor rights?” I ask, a twitch to my nose.

“Free tea sandwiches. Heard those cucumber things on pumpnickel bread are fucking killer.”

I chuckle and catch a lift of Brig’s brows and then his smile grows wider, making him infinitely more attractive. If that’s even possible.

Pushing past the rapid beat of my heart that seems to want to clog up my throat, I say, “Depends. Do I get free oil changes?” Not that I drive my car anywhere.

“Oh, I can arrange that. Not sure it’s an even trade though. I have quite the appetite.”

“We can arrange something to make up for the deficit.” Could my cheeks flame with embarrassment any more? You would think I’m a teenager, talking to a boy for the first time.

“Free labor is always a good trade-off.” He stretches his arms in front of him and folds his hands outwards. “I’m pretty good with a hammer, even if Reid and Rogan would tell you otherwise. I renovated my garage, small parts at a time, but I still made it into the awe-inspiring building it is today.”

“You did all the renovations?” I ask in awe.

“Not completely by myself. The brothers helped from time to time, especially Rogan.”

“It’s nice to have such a big family.” I mean that to come off as a compliment, but it falls flat.

“My family extends to all of Port Snow. Have your pick at any one of the strapping Knightly men; they’ll be there for you.”

I don’t doubt that. Two things the Knightlys are known for is their love for the town and how much they enjoy helping everyone out. They’ve all had a part in boosting the economy, bringing tourism to our quaint neck of the woods, and ensuring everyone is taken care of, whether it’s being a volunteer fireman, installing a new roof for one of the elders, spending Thanksgiving making pot after pot of soup for those who can’t afford a warm meal, or towing people’s cars for free because they’re a little short on cash for the month. They’re all good men.

We reach Snow Roast and Brig opens the door for me. I give him a curt thank you and then head to the counter where Darcy is helping a customer. I toss on my apron and tie it around my waist just as Brig comes up to the counter and smiles again at me.

“Can I get some coffee cake and a blueberry coffee to go, Ruthie?”

I nod. “Sure thing.”

I move around the small space, making his special coffee I know by heart now and putting a large piece of coffee cake in a to-go bag for him. I hand it to him over the counter and he smiles. “Put it on my tab?”

“Always.”

He nods at me. “Have a good day, neighbor. I’ll see you around.”

“Yup, see ya,” I say awkwardly and turn to the next customer, trying to calm my racing heart.

As Mr. Grenaldi orders a mocha with extra chocolate, I look over his shoulder and catch Brig just before he walks out of Snow Roast, holding the door open for a tourist and giving them a gentle smile. With an easy gait to his step, he walks down Main Street toward his shop, and for the first time in five minutes, I can take a deep breath.

“Did you catch that? Extra chocolate,” Mr. Grenaldi says, waving his wrinkled hand in front of my face.

“What? Oh yes, extra chocolate. I got it.” I give him a soft smile and then turn away, my mind elsewhere while I make Mr. Grenaldi’s drink.



***Rylee:** Did you write him back yet?*

***Ruth:** Currently staring at a blank piece of paper.*

***Rylee:** What color is the paper?*

***Ruth:** . . . white.*

***Rylee:** You have to do better than that. Spray it with perfume. Use lipstick and kiss the bottom of it.*

***Ruth:** Does it seem like I’m that girl?*

***Rylee:** No, but you need to do something to fancy it up. Do you have any other paper?*

***Ruth:** I have shopping list paper with a basket of apples in the top left corner.*

***Rylee:** Good God, no.*

***Ruth:** Then I have nothing.*

***Rylee:** Do the lipstick then.*

***Ruth:** I’m not doing the lipstick.*

***Rylee:** Ruuuuuuuuuth, don’t be boring. Have fun with this. Think about it. You can say anything in that letter you want. He has no idea it’s you.*

Show him your true personality, the fun-loving girl others outside of your inner circle don't see.

Ruth: *Just let me do my thing. You already intervened enough.*

Rylee: *At least use a colored pen.*

Ruth: *Go back to arousing your husband.*

Rylee: *I don't think he can get it up for the rest of the night.*

Rylee: *Wait, he told me he can and to not emasculate him.*

Ruth: *You guys are something special. Good night.*

Rylee: *Use the perfume!*

Chapter Five

BRIG

“I got a letter,” I yell, coming through the back entrance of The Lobster Landing, my family-owned business. Established when I was still a sperm in the fruit of my father’s loins, it’s become the tourism headquarters of Port Snow.

Need lobster apparel? We have it.

Looking for fudge? We’re known for it.

Have a craving for a baked good? Come to our bakery case and indulge.

At the end of Main Street, it’s the neighbor to Reid’s new restaurant, Knight and Port, that he runs with his girl, Eve, and his best friend, Eric. It’s one of my favorite places to go for lunch because they have a baked bean sandwich that haunts me in my dreams. It’s all I can think about when I’m within its vicinity.

And because my family is smart, they use a lot of the baked goods from The Lobster Landing at the restaurant to promote crossover.

Standing at the counter, wrapping up cubes of fudge that we sell online—expanding distribution has been one of Griffin’s goals ever since he took over the responsibilities of running The Lobster Landing—Griffin looks up with a quirk in his brow. “A letter?”

Ren, his girlfriend, who is an algebra teacher, steps up next to him and helps wrap fudge. “Is that for the Summer of Love?”

“Yes.” I sit at one of the counter-height stools and put the letter flat on the metal counter. “It was delivered to me today by one of Mrs. Davenport’s minions.”

“How does that work exactly?” Ren asks. “You don’t give each other names, right? How do they know who to deliver it to?”

“There’s a box in the post office just for Summer of Love participants. We each have a number ID and we write it on the envelope. They match up the ID with the person and deliver it. Pretty simple.”

“Wow, that Mrs. Davenport is a clever one,” Griff says. “Too bad there was no Summer of Love when you came to town; we could have written each other love letters.”

“There’s no way you would have done it, not with how stubborn you were. I would have been matched with Jake from Jake’s Cakes. Instead of wrapping fudge on my summer break, I’d be in a food truck, taking crab cake orders next to a hunky man.”

“Are you saying I’m not hunky?” Griffin asks with an offended smile.

“You have relationship flab,” I cut in, knowing damn well Griffin is going to freak out from the comment.

“No, I fucking don’t,” he snaps only to lift his white Lobster Landing shirt and flash his abs. “Right, babe?”

Ren playfully pokes his flat stomach and then shrugs. “I don’t know, I think there might be a light layer of love there.”

“Bullshit.”

Ren and I both laugh, as Griffin mutters displeasure at our company under his breath.

“Are you going to open the letter?” Ren asks, nodding toward the envelope.

“I’m nervous. What if she didn’t like my first letter?”

“If she didn’t like it, she wouldn’t have written back,” Griffin says, unfolding a shipping box and carefully putting tissue paper in it. He’s all about the details.

“He has a point.” Ren helps him with the fudge, neatly stacking it. “Do you have any idea who it might be?”

I shake my head. “Not a clue. The information I got about her wasn’t very specific and when I asked Mrs. Davenport about the match, all she did was smile and say: ‘I’ve been wanting to get you two together for years.’ For . . . years. I mean, that’s a lot of pressure. What if it doesn’t work out?”

“Then it doesn’t work out, and you move on,” Griffin says.

“Easy for you to say.” I gesture toward Ren. “You already found your post-curse love.” I tap the unopened envelope and say, “I don’t think it’s

really fair that I'm the one who is shit out of luck when it comes to breaking the curse. I wasn't the one being a dick. I was actually nice to the old hag. If anyone should still be single, it should be Rogan and Reid. They were the ones that brought on the curse. I was an innocent bystander."

"You broke her table," Griffin points out.

"Not on purpose. It's not like I sought out to break a palm reader's table. I was drunk and fell."

"Still, you're the one she touched."

"What? Do you think direct contact made the curse worse for me? Because I've taken that into consideration when going through all the reasons why I'm still single."

Ren snorts to herself and we both look at her. "Sorry, it's just hard to sit here and listen to you two talk about *the curse* with a straight face."

Shockingly, she doesn't believe in the curse. No one does. I point to my chest. "Am I the only one who knows what happened was real?"

"I think so," Griffin says.

"Bullshit." I call him out. "You believed in it for a while. You're only making fun of it now because you have Ren."

What happened to Griffin is why I believed in the curse. When we left for New Orleans, he was happily married to Claire, his high school sweetheart, and then three days later, after we were verbally assaulted by a haggard witch, Claire passed away suddenly from a heart condition no one was aware of. To say Griffin was devastated is an understatement. He lost his soul mate. *His life*. And we lost a beautiful woman we all loved like a sister. Her sudden death rocked our whole family. And as we mourned, even though we didn't want to consider it, every Knightly man thought about what happened in New Orleans. And we wondered. We wondered just how real it was. And for that reason, Griffin didn't date—ever—until Ren came along and opened his heart again. Although, it took him a long time to give in to being with her. *Loving her*.

"I love you, Griff, but you so believed in the curse; don't even try to pretend."

He shrugs, but Ren and I both know the truth.

"Either way," I say, "I shouldn't be the one still being punished four years later. This is ridiculous."

"Then stop bitching about it and open the damn letter," Griffin says. "The love of your life might have written you a note, but you're so hyped

up on the damn curse that you're forgetting what's important: a girl is showing interest. Take it, man."

Oh damn, he's right.

Then again, Griffin is always right.

He's the annoying older brother who's perfect at everything he does, follows in Dad's footsteps, makes everyone proud, and is reliable as fuck.

It's also why I love him so much.

Turning the envelope over, I tear open the sealed flap and pull out the white piece of paper.

Huh, just white?

I admit that I wish the letter was scrolled across some kind of romantic stationery, but then again, maybe she hasn't had time to get any.

I open the letter and immediately see a pair of red, full lips at the bottom.

"Fuck . . ." I sigh, taking in the lipstick print.

"What?" Ren asks, standing on her toes to see the letter.

I turn it around for them to see how lucky I am. "She kissed it with lipstick at the bottom."

"Would you look at that." Ren smiles. "That's a nice touch, and that also means she's very interested. Someone who didn't like your letter wouldn't have kissed the bottom of it."

"But do you think this means she's . . . loose?" I ask. "I mean, I like a frisky woman, but I also don't want someone who's ready to throw down after one letter. Trust me, I didn't wax poetic or anything. I asked her about spaghetti."

"Wow, you sure know how to get a girl's gears grinding," Griffin says, just as Ren swats him in the stomach.

"Be nice to your brother. Clearly he's a hot mess when it comes to women."

"Hey, no. I'm not a hot mess. Because of me and my romantic ways, all my brothers have significant others right now. Reid especially. He was lost without me when it came to making up with Eve. I'm a goddamn sorcerer of love . . ."

For other people.

"Let me rephrase that." Ren clears her throat. "You're a hot mess when it comes to your own relationships."

"Now that, I'll accept."

Griffin opens another shipping box and says, “Stop stalling and read the letter out loud.”

“Yes, please read it to us,” Ren says, clasping her hands together.

“Okay, but you have to promise you’re not going to tell Reid and Rogan. This is a privilege and I don’t want it to be mocked in our sibling group text.”

“I have better things to do with my life than mock you through text, Brig.” He drops three orange creamsicle fudge squares in the box and adds a Lobster Landing sticker at the top before closing it.

I think we can all agree that’s a fucking lie, but whatever. I’m too excited to care right now.

Clearing my throat, I say, “Dear Secret Pen Pal—”

“Oh God, it’s already too cute,” Ren says.

“Can you refrain from interrupting?” I ask in a teasing tone.

“Sorry, proceed,” she replies with a smile.

“Dear Secret Pen Pal. I’ll be honest, I was quite surprised to receive your letter since I didn’t apply to be in the Summer of Love. My meddling friend filled out an application for me, but I can’t say that I’m not happy about it because I am. I’m very happy she intervened.” I look at both Ren and Griffin and say, “I have butterflies in my stomach.”

Ren clasps her hands together. “Oh my God, I’m dying already. How cute is she? I like how upfront she is.”

“Me too. I like her a lot.”

“You’ve read three sentences,” Griffin says, cutting in. “Why don’t you finish the letter before you start declaring a statement of infatuation?”

He’s cranky.

Sheesh.

Turning back to the letter, I continue, “You see, I’ve been unlucky in love as well, but I think it’s because I haven’t put myself out there. Too scared to get hurt. Too scared to lose someone else in my life. But even though it’s terrifying, I think I’m ready to take that first step to something new. Please excuse me if I’m skittish, or come off as hesitant. It’s not because I’m not interested, it’s because I’m scared. All that I ask is you give me time, we don’t rush this communication, and you get to know me on a deeper level through this anonymity. Then maybe, one day, when the time is right, we could go out on a real date. That’s if . . . you want to ask me out. Sincerely, Your Secret Pen Pal. P.S. I twirl my spaghetti like any other

decent human out there.” I put the letter down and take a deep breath. “Wow.”

“I mean, that was a pretty good first letter,” Griff says, finishing wrapping up a block of fudge. “She’s basically telling you she wasn’t ready to step outside of her comfort zone, but she’s willing to, for you, for this experiment. That’s huge, man.”

“You think?” I ask, feeling my heart rate accelerate, my excitement spiking. “I didn’t write much in my letter to her, but her response makes me wonder if I should take it up a notch.”

“Yes. You need to,” Ren says, helping Griffin hold the package of fudge together and taping it. “It seems like she’s genuinely invested in this program. I mean spaghetti twirling is a good icebreaker, but I think she’s looking for something with more substance.”

I nod, my mind whirling with possibilities. Excitement builds. Ideas are born and I realize . . . this might very well be it.

This might be my true chance at finding the love of my life.

“I think I’ve spent my entire life building to this moment,” I say in all seriousness. “All the Lovemark movies I’ve watched over the years, the books I’ve read, the moments I’ve helped create for my siblings, it’s all been practice for this moment, for when I finally claim a girl of my own. I was made to woo, and damn it, I’m going to fucking woo.” I stand from the stool and fold up the letter. “I’m going to woo this girl so hard.”

“But what if she’s not the girl for you?” Griff asks, playing the devil’s advocate. My dad did the same thing when we were younger.

“Impossible,” I say, because I’m still reeling from what Mrs. Davenport said about us. *I’ve been wanting to get you two together for years.* That has to mean that I’ve known her for years, or we’ve at least run in similar circles for Mrs. Davenport to notice us . . . together. *Doesn’t it?* “I can feel the cosmic activity swirling around me. Just like four years ago when that ghastly hag cursed me with broken love. Yeah, it’s about to be fixed. I need to go back to my place and think up some ideas. The Summer of Love is upon us, and I’ll be damned if this doesn’t work out for me.”

“Go get her,” Ren says as I leave out the back door, with pep in my step.

She wants honesty and substance? Well look out, Secret Pen Pal, things are about to get real.



REID: So . . . Brig thinks he’s going to break the curse this summer.

Griffin: Dude, I told you not to say anything.

Brig: How DARE you, Griffin? I trusted you.

Rogan: What's happening? Is this about the Summer of Love?

Reid: Brig has another chance for love on the line. Let's hope he doesn't fuck it up like the other ones.

Brig: I didn't fuck things up. They just didn't . . . pan out the way I hoped.

Griffin: This seems promising.

Brig: Thank you, Griff.

Reid: Just as promising as that tourist, what was her name . . . Melinda?

Brig: Not even close. It was Yamina. And I didn't fuck that up. She just, well, she didn't like all the love I was giving her.

Reid: You suffocated her and sent her fleeing for Connecticut.

Griffin: Why can't I place Yamina?

Rogan: Pretty sure it was right before he got that blowup doll to practice on.

Brig: THERE WAS NO BLOWUP DOLL. REID WAS DRUNK AND MADE THAT UP.

Reid: Best rumor I've ever spread *chuckles*

Griffin: Now the blowup doll I remember. Went to town on that thing.

Reid: Called her Sam. Short blonde hair, glittery makeup. Claimed she loved to read books and was a mom about town looking for a fling. There was an entire backstory.

Brig: Huh . . . that does sound like me. Maybe I was the one who was drunk.

Griffin: GUFFAW!

Rogan: ^^ Perfect timing.

Reid: Spot on, man.

Jen: My kids play with Sam in the basement, pretending she's the older sister. They're always asking why she won't shut her mouth. Told her that's what happens when you offer your body for pleasure . . . perma-codfish mouth.

Griffin: What?

Rogan: Uhhh . . . that's disturbing.

Reid: Do they make her wear a bra?

Brig: ^^ Curious about the bra thing.

Jen: One of Mom's breastfeeding bras from twenty-five years ago. Some stains.

Griffin: Fuck runs to bathroom

Rogan: I can't unsee that.

Reid: That's why you're a witch, Jen, destroying blowup dolls for all men.

Brig: Am I the only one interested in catching this broad with her shirt off?

Griffin: still in bathroom

Rogan: Dude, you seriously need help.

Reid: ^^ I'll pay for the therapy

Jen: I think our work here is done, Brig. Good luck with love.

Brig: Thanks, Jen. Love you, sis.

Chapter Six

RUTH

“Come on, you stubborn piece of—ohh.”

The plank of wood I’ve been trying to tear up finally succumbs to my “brutal” force and unlatches from the maddening glue of the floor. While final paperwork goes through, Mrs. Burberry told me I could start any renovations I wanted, which was incredibly nice of her given that I don’t own the shop. I’ve spent all day ripping up the old flooring, and I’m only halfway done.

My hands feel raw from using the hammer and crowbar.

My back is aching.

And I’ve broken out in a very unattractive sweat, because the air conditioner is broken, leaving it humid and nasty in the store.

Whoever put this floor in was definitely glue happy—yes, glue, industrial glue, but glue—and it’s made it quite the task to lift up from the concrete.

Pulling back the first piece of flooring, I was surprised to find there was no subfloor, just concrete, which I think has made this so much harder.

With my forearm, I wipe my forehead and sit back on the floor, crowbar on my lap, sweat dripping down my spine.

And here I thought this was going to be the easy task.

“Wow, someone had fun with flooring glue.”

I whip my head to the side to catch Brig standing in the open doorway, hands braced on the doorframe, his beautiful eyes scanning the space. His black shirt is stretched across his chest, pulling at his pecs, and his narrow

waist is accentuated by a pair of dark jeans and brown work boots. He looks so good it makes my heart ache.

He steps into the shop and then steps right back out. “Holy shit, it’s humid in here. Why don’t you have the air conditioning on?”

“Broken,” I answer, wanting to hide my head under a bag. I know I can’t look attractive right now. Beet-red face, hair drenched in perspiration and sticking to the back of my neck, sweat stains on my shirt. Not my best look.

“Broken? Okay, that won’t do.” He holds up his finger and retreats to his shop. I stand, drop the crowbar, remove my work gloves, and try to “fix” my hair and look somewhat presentable. I know it’s a lost cause when I realize I’m wearing a pair of basketball shorts that go past my knees and hang low on my hips and an old black skin-tight tank that’s seen better days.

I need to find more attractive project gear. Dressing this morning, I didn’t even think twice about running into Brig, which was an obvious mistake.

A few seconds later, Brig comes barreling in holding a large AC window unit, taking it to the window near the “register” in the back. He sets it on the already open windowsill, adjusts it to fit, plugs it in, and then flips it on. The machine goes to work and almost instantly, the room starts to cool down.

“There.” He dusts his hands off and shuts the rest of the windows. “That should be better.” He scans the room. “Scare your help away with the heat?”

“Uh, no,” I say, still shocked that he installed an AC unit into the window without breaking a sweat. “Working alone today.”

Brig’s eyes widen and he takes in the floor. “How long have you been working on this?”

“Since this morning,” I answer shyly. “There’s some superhuman glue holding this floor down.”

He goes to an exposed section and rubs his hand over the dried glue and concrete. “I can see that.” Reaching over to my tools, he grabs the hammer and crowbar and says, “This is what you’ve been using?”

“Yeah, why?”

Shaking his head, he tosses the tools to the side, reaches into his pocket, and calls someone. He holds the phone up to his ear and after a few

seconds, says, "Hey Rogan, can I borrow your floor stripper? Yeah, right now. In storage? Awesome. Thanks." He hangs up and nods toward the door. "Come on."

I don't move.

I'm not sure I can even feel my legs at this point.

When Brig notices I'm not right behind him, he looks over his shoulder and says, "Uh, are you coming?"

"Wh-where are we going?"

"To get a floor stripper. It will have these floors up in no time."

"Oh . . . uh, that's okay, I can just use what I have. No need to bother you." I reach down and pick up my crowbar and hammer only to kneel on my aching knees and start hammering at the floors. I can feel Brig's burning gaze on me as I try to make it seem like I don't need help, but after the tenth crack of the hammer, it's stripped from me while Brig takes my arm, helping me to my feet.

"I admire your tenacity, but this will take you forever and leave you aching for days. Come with me."

Keeping his hand wrapped around my forearm, he leads me out the door, shutting it behind us, and guides me straight to his tow truck. Like the gentleman that he is, he opens the door for me, and I awkwardly climb into the tall truck like I'm climbing a ladder. Behind me, I detect a small chuckle before he shuts the door.

Great.

Unlike my horrible display of getting into the truck, Brig hops in with ease and turns on the engine, keys already in the ignition. The rumble of the truck shakes the seat beneath me and without a word, Brig pulls out onto the road.

"You really don't have to do this," I say feeling guilty.

"It's no trouble at all. Wasn't doing anything at the garage, as the boys have it handled. Plus, I don't think I could go back to work knowing you were over there, chipping away at the floor with your crowbar and hammer."

"It was working okay. Taking a bit longer than expected, but it was working."

"Well, with this machine, you'll be done in no time."

Clearing my throat, trying not to stare at him, I say, "Thank you."

"Anytime. We're neighbors now, Ruthie. We help each other out."

“I don’t think I’ll have much to return in the helping-out department. I’m not good with cars at all.”

“You’ve always been really sweet, but I don’t think I’d ever let you near one of my cars.” He chuckles. “I’m sure there’s something you can help me with.” He snaps his finger as if something comes to mind. “I know, you can show me how to make your coffee cake.”

“My coffee cake?”

“Yeah. I, uh . . . want to send some to someone, but it would make more of an impact if I made it.”

Who is this someone?

“That’s uh, a family recipe. How do I know you’re not going to give it to your family to sell at The Lobster Landing?” *Oh God, Ruth. Why the hell did you say that?*

He stops at a stop sign and turns to look at me. “Do you really think I’d do that?”

There’s hurt in his eyes, and I immediately feel bad for accusing him of something I know he’d never do. Knightlys aren’t like that. They support the people around them, they don’t steal from them.

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t know why I said that. I’m just . . . ugh, I’m not good at this.”

“Good at what?” Brig asks, making a right toward Rogan and Harper’s house. I’ve been there a few times for girls’ nights.

“Good at accepting help.”

More like good at accepting help from the guy I can’t stop thinking about. The guy who’s starred in my dreams for the last several years. The guy I just wish would look at me as more than the girl who serves him coffee.

Brig is silent for a moment before he says, “Is it because you’ve been on your own for a while?”

The basic facts of a person’s life in this town are never off the table. It’s no secret everyone knows my parents died, just like it’s no secret the Knightly boys went to New Orleans and came back with a “curse.” Word travels quickly and instead of talking about the weather for small talk, we discuss the latest gossip.

Sharon and her botched nose job.

Peg and her cat addiction.

Jim and his penchant for getting struck by lightning on the beach.

It's fair game when you live in Port Snow, so Brig knowing about my parents is no surprise, especially since we grew up together.

Not wanting to dive too deep into this conversation, I say, "Probably. I'm just used to doing things on my own and taking care of myself so if I seem ungrateful, it's not because I am. It's because accepting help is hard."

"I can understand that," Brig says, turning down Rogan and Harper's long driveway. "But it's okay to give in, to let others help you. That's the beauty of Port Snow; we're one big dysfunctional family."

"Dysfunctional is a great way of putting it."

Brig pulls up to Rogan's shed where he keeps his vast array of construction supplies and moves a few things around. I help him shift some lumber to the side and then he eases out a decently sized machine that looks like a snowblower.

He loads it up on the truck, straps it down, and then we're back in the cab and driving toward Main Street. It feels like a whirlwind mission, but when he's supposed to turn right toward the garage, he turns left.

"Where are you going?" I ask, feeling confused. "Did you forget something?"

He shakes his head. "No, I could really use some ice cream and since we're already driving, figured you wouldn't mind if we stopped at the Freeze Stand for a quick second."

"Oh sure, yeah. Whatever you want."

"You're going to have to get some ice cream too. I don't like to eat alone, Ruthie."

"I like ice cream," I say lamely, only to see him smile in my peripheral vision.

"It would be horrifying if you didn't. What's your favorite thing to get at the Freeze Stand?"

"You'll judge me."

"Probably, since I can be an ice cream snob, but tell me anyway."

I love how easygoing he is. Holding a conversation seems simple for him. Always the social butterfly. The guy everyone wants to be around because he puts a smile on your face.

He puts a smile on my face.

And even though I feel like my lungs seize whenever he's around, I still feel warmth spread through me when he starts talking. His humor is

infectious and his overall teasing personality makes me feel like I belong . . . belong somewhere.

Feeling stiff, I tell myself to loosen up, to have fun, to live in this moment. From the look of it, Brig might inject himself in my everyday life when I'm at Piccadilly Parlor, so I need to seize these opportunities to be close to him.

"Okay, but I warned you . . ."

"Can't be that bad—"

"Blackberry soft serve on a cone dipped in a peanut butter shell."

He pulls into the parking lot of the Freeze Stand, puts the truck in park, and then turns toward me, arm draping over the bench seat, eyes blinking. "What?"

"Blackberry—"

"No, I heard you. I'm just wondering why? Why would you choose that?"

"It tastes like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

Blinks.

"What?" I ask, feeling nervous under his stare. But I also can't hold back my smile at his confused expression. "Don't you like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches?"

"I mean . . . who doesn't?"

"But if we're confessing here, I do prefer peanut butter and Fluff on rye bread, if we're getting specific."

Blinks some more. "On rye bread?"

Chuckling now, I nod. "Yes, have you tried it?"

"No, I have taste buds."

"Apparently not refined ones," I say with a lift of my chin.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, did you just burn me, Ruthie?"

God, I love that he calls me that. I love it so much.

"Possibly."

He pulls the keys from the ignition and says, "Well, this very well might be the start of a great friendship." He opens his door and says, "Come on, I have to try this preposterous ice cream concoction that you love."



"MY BROTHERS ARE NEVER GOING to believe me. Never."

Brig shoves the bottom part of his cone into his mouth and wipes his hands on a napkin, then leans back in the grass and sighs.

Mouth full, he says, “Fuck, that was good.”

Not far behind him on devouring my ice cream, I take another bite, chew, and swallow. “Told you it was good.”

“That was better than good. That was something special. How did you come up with it?”

“My dad,” I say softly. “It was his favorite. He made me get it one day, and I haven’t changed my order since.”

“Your dad was a very smart man,” Brig says, lying down on the grass now, hands behind his head. “I remember your parents working in Snow Roast, seeing them bustling around. My mom always said they were incredibly hard workers and admired them for turning the coffee shop into something special.”

I finish my cone and sit there silently, trying not to get emotional over Brig’s kind words. “They were very proud of what they created.”

“They would be proud of you too, Ruthie. Especially with this new endeavor. I think it’s going to be a great addition to town.”

“You think so?” I ask, feeling slightly self-conscious.

“Yeah, and do you know what I was thinking? We don’t have much of a waiting room at the shop, so we could strike up some sort of deal where my customers get ten percent off any meal while waiting for their car to be fixed, and I can offer the same for you with oil changes or something.”

“Really? You would do that? Send people over to the Parlor?”

“Hell yeah. Means they’re not waiting around, bothering me about when their car will be ready. It would be a good trade-off. And you know . . . if you want to kick over some of those sandwiches in return as well, I’m not going to turn them down.”

“After saving my knees from many more aching hours kneeling on the floor, you can have as many sandwiches as you want.”

“If I knew it was going to be that easy, I would have been over earlier.” He pulls his phone from his pocket and says, “We should probably get back so we can tear up the rest of the floors.”

“You don’t have to help me, Brig. I can probably figure out how to use the machine.”

“I mean this in the nicest way possible, Ruthie, but I don’t think you can handle the strength and power of the floor ripper.”

“Are you saying I’m weak, Brig?” I ask, feeling far more comfortable with him than before.

“No. From your tank top, I can tell you’re really packing heat in those biceps of yours.”

I chuckle. “Don’t let these pencil arms mislead you, there is a lot of strength behind them.”

“Either way, I’ll help you. I’ll tear everything up, and you can remove debris. Trust me, you’re going to want a strapping lad like myself maneuvering the floor ripper around.”



“HUH . . . wasn’t expecting that to happen,” Brig says, scratching the top of his head, staring at the hole in the wall the floor ripper broke through.

“So glad I had a *strapping lad* helping me. Who knows what might have happened,” I deadpan.

“Cheeky,” he says with a grin and then steps forward to examine the damage. “Not going to lie, this will set back your construction timeline. Unless you were looking to have a hole in the wall that connects to my shop. If that’s the case, I did us both a favor.”

“I can see it now, a Dutch door connecting the two spaces with a slot where we can pass sandwiches back and forth.”

“Like a dumbwaiter. Your innovative problem solving is commendable.” He takes out his phone again, presses a few buttons, and then brings it to his ear. “Hey Rogan. Slight problem. Think you can come to Ruthie’s Parlor? Just come here. No, I don’t need a medic.” Huffing, Brig hangs up and then says, “He’s right around the corner.”

“Why is he coming?” I ask. “I think we can dislodge the floor ripper from the wall ourselves.”

“Want him to make sure this isn’t going to hurt your sales contract or anything like that, plus, I don’t want to take the machine back to his place. Lazy like that.” He shrugs and then turns to the rest of the space. “At least we finished the floor. Told you it would be quick.”

There is old flooring piled up in the corner. A dumpster is supposed to arrive tomorrow, and the floor is concrete decorated in old yellow glue. Not much of an improvement, but I know once we get the new white oak floors installed—*sans glue*—it’s going to be gorgeous in here.

“It was quick. Thank you for the help, even though you smashed the floor ripper through the wall.”

“Frankly, I blame you.”

“Me?” I ask, shocked. “How is this my fault? I was stacking the garbage in the corner.”

“Yes, but I was concerned with how you were stacking it.”

“Oh my God, that is the lamest excuse I’ve ever heard.”

“At least it’s an excuse.” He winks and my stomach flips.

The Parlor door opens and Rogan comes in. The temperature of the room feels a thousand times better thanks to the AC unit, so when Rogan steps in, he simply looks confused. Until he sees the hole in the wall.

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters, walking up to us. “Why did you let him handle the machine?” Rogan asks me.

“Uh . . . because he said I couldn’t.”

Rogan pushes his hand through his hair. “Brig, you and I both know you always have a hard time with the floor ripper. This is the third time you’ve lost control of it.”

“What?” I ask, turning to him, arms crossed.

Looking slightly bashful, Brig dips his head and winces. “I was thinking fourth’s time a charm?”

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you borrow it, but I thought maybe you would have been smart enough to let someone else handle it.”

“You know”—Brig looks at me—“I was wrong. You’re not to blame for all of this happening. Rogan is.”

Pressing his fingers to his forehead, Rogan takes a deep breath and says, “I can’t deal with your idiocy right now. Why am I here?”

“Well, to ensure Ruthie won’t be in breach of the contract still in process, and also so you can take the floor ripper home, as we’re done.

“Fucking lazy,” Rogan mutters under his breath as Brig smiles brightly at his brother. I can’t help but love the dynamic between the two of them. The older brother having to take care of the little brother’s mistakes. It’s endearing. “You signed an addendum with Mrs. Burberry that stated you were allowed to make any changes to the space. A hole through the wall would be considered a change, although not a smart one, so you’re fine.”

“Well that’s a relief, isn’t it, Ruthie?” Brig pretends to wipe his forehead. “All right. So, shall we put this in the back of your SUV?”

Rogan grumbles something, pulling the floor ripper from the wall. “I hope you make him fix this. He might not be good with heavy machinery, but he’s one of the best drywallers I know, besides Reid . . . and maybe Griffin.”

“Bullshit, I’m better than Griffin. Reid, maybe not, but Griff for sure,” Brig defends, hands on his hips.

“I’ll make that decision after you fix Ruth’s wall. Now come help me get this into the SUV.”

“Shit, he’s cranky. Maybe he should have some ice cream, huh?” Brig says, playfully elbowing my arm and God, it’s adorable. Everything about him is adorable.

I’m infatuated.

“Yeah, ice cream,” I answer, unsure of what else to say.

“Are you done for the day?”

I nod. “Yeah, I’ll follow you guys out.”

“I didn’t see your car,” Rogan says. “Need a ride home, Ruth?”

“No, it’s really nice out, and I’d prefer the walk.” I watch the boys load up the floor ripper and then Rogan shuts the back door. “Thank you for the help, for letting us borrow the floor ripper, and for . . . putting a hole in my wall I guess.”

“My pleasure,” Brig says and then rubs his hands together. “Okay, I have some planning to do for you know . . .” He gives Rogan a knowing look. “See you tomorrow, Ruthie. I’ll be by with supplies to make everything good as new.”

“Okay, yeah,” I say as he pats Rogan on the shoulder and takes off up his stairs.

I briefly watch him retreat and when I turn back to Rogan, his eyes are watching me, catching me in the act of staring at his brother.

Cheeks flaming, I clear my throat and step to the side. “Uh, thanks for coming over. I appreciate it.”

“Anytime, Ruth.” His eyes study me, and I swear I can feel my body shrink on the spot. “Make sure he pulls his weight around here. He’s a good resource to have, even if he can be an idiot at times. Don’t be afraid to ask him for help.”

“Thanks.” I fidget. Rogan and Brig look the most alike with their carved jaws and broad shoulders, while Reid and Griffin share the same pensive look. They all look quite similar, which is devastating to all single women in Port Snow.

“Okay, I’m going to head home. Sure you don’t want a ride?”

I shake my head. “I’m good. Thanks, Rogan.”

With a curt nod, he hops into his SUV and departs. I take a deep breath and make my trek back to Snow Roast.

RYLEE, HE SENT A PACKAGE.”

“What, really?” Her face lights up as I talk to her through FaceTime. “What the hell did you write in your letter? Did you use the lipstick?”

Shamelessly, I smirk. “I had a weak moment.”

“You harlot.” She claps her hands in excitement. “God, I’m proud of you. What a day? Ice cream with Brig and then a package. You’re practically married.”

“Oh yeah, I can hear the wedding bells,” I say sarcastically. “Keep in mind that he doesn’t know he’s sending it to me.”

“Doesn’t matter. When you texted me earlier that you had ice cream with Brig, I swear I felt all the stars align. It’s happening, Ruth.”

“It was ice cream, Rylee. And I just happened to be with him when he craved some. It’s not like he asked me out.”

“Don’t you read any of my books?” she asks.

“I mean . . . when I have time.”

She presses her hand to her forehead. “You know, that hurts, but I will forgive you. For now. If you had read them, you’d know that often, it’s the slow buildup that creates the best romance. My characters don’t start banging right away. They develop a friendship, a liking for each other, and when they need that every day, that’s when I start to pull out the feelings. That’s when the characters start questioning the twists and turns in their stomachs when the other person steps into the room. They start noticing their scent. They start craving their touch. A quick hug turns into a longer one, where a chin rests on the top of a head. And then the pull starts to happen, this undeniable, crazy pull that brings them together. Breaths catch, hands skim hips, noses touch, and then . . . the kiss.” Rylee sighs, looking off to the side. Hell, I sigh too. What I wouldn’t give for a moment like that with Brig. “It’s the slow burn that’s worth the wait, Ruth. Ride the wave with Brig. It won’t happen overnight, but it will happen. I can feel it in my bones.”

“I’m so awkward around him. My responses are lame, and I’m always questioning everything I say. Ugh. And I was in my basketball shorts and tank top as we hung out today.”

“Oh Ruth, that won’t do.”

“I know.”

“I have a bunch of old jeans that don’t fit me anymore thanks to your coffee cake. I’m going to cut them up, wash them, and bring them to your place tomorrow. You are not allowed to wear anything else but these cut-off jeans while doing renovations.”

“Okay, now you’re becoming the cliché romance author.”

“Cliché works.”

“Fine. What about my awkwardness?”

“Easy.” She smiles. “Take a shot before you go to the Parlor.”

“That’s terrible advice. I’m not showing up with tequila breath.”

“Hmm, yeah, that might be problematic, and then drinking while operating a hammer might not be smart either.” She taps her chin. “Looks like you’re just going to have to loosen up. Don’t think of Brig as the guy you’ve been pining after for years. Think of him as a friend. Build a friendship and once you have that friendship developed, it will be smooth sailing from there. Talk to him like you would talk to Beck.”

“I have a filthy mouth when I talk to Beck.”

“And men appreciate that. Brig is a fun-loving guy and you have the perfect personality to counter him. It’s about time you show it.” She nods at me. “Now open the damn box.”

Knowing she’s right, that I need to treat Brig as a friend, not a hopeful love interest, I take a deep breath and open the reused box that’s taped heavily at the top. My box-cutter slices through the tape and then I lift the flaps. At the top is a letter, which I hold up to Rylee with a crazy grin on my face. She chuckles.

“Dear Secret Pen Pal. I wasn’t sure what this letter exchange was going to be like. To be honest, I wasn’t sure I would get someone I wanted to talk to. After reading your first letter though, I knew there must be something here, brewing between us. Mrs. Davenport put us together for a reason and I want to figure out why. I want to apologize for my first letter. I was nervous, wasn’t quite sure what to say, but your letter back to me was inspiring and real. I want to do the same with you.”

“I barely can breathe,” Rylee says, practically crawling into her phone.

“Same,” I say, trying to calm my screaming pulse. Clearing my throat, I continue. “How about we start with something simple to get to know each other? In the box is one of my favorite things about Port Snow. Not sure if you live here or not, but it’s my hometown and I’ve always loved it, never

wanted to leave. I've spent years walking these streets, looking in every shop window, observing the beautiful architecture that goes into every building to make it unique but also cohesive with the town. So in the box is a small reflection of that. There's also a note with it to explain why I chose this to give to you."

"Oh God, what is it?" Rylee bounces as I try to steady my shaky hands.

I set the letter down, part the blue tissue paper, and the minute I catch sight of what's inside, I nearly break down in tears.

"What is it?" Rylee asks again, bouncing up and down.

Unable to form words, I reach into the box and pull out a small four-by-four sign. Carved into the wood is a picture of Port Snow's harbor.

"Oh . . . my . . . God," Rylee says breathlessly. "Is that one of the carvings your dad did a while back?"

Tears stream down my face as I nod.

Before my dad passed, he started whittling. I remember sitting outside with him, helping sand the pieces of wood he intended to use, talking about everything and nothing. He'd whittle, I'd sand. We'd laugh, have picnics by the ocean, and I'd enjoy watching his strong hands create something so beautiful with a piece of wood and carving tools. He sold them at The Lobster Landing for a while.

"I didn't know they still had any left."

"Me . . . neither," I say on a sob hiccup, bringing the sign to my chest and clutching it tightly.

"Oh, Ruth. Do you want me to come over?"

I shake my head. "No, it's okay. I'm just . . . surprised is all. This is . . ." I glance down at it, passing my hand over the carving. "This means everything to me."

"I know, sweetie. I know it does. What does his note say?"

Almost forgetting there's another note, I pick it up. "There was a local man who made these signs here in Port Snow. My parents have a few hanging around in their house, and I have one or two as well. This one though, I'm giving up to you even though it means a lot to me—so if this doesn't work out, please send it back." Rylee and I both laugh out loud. "What I love about Port Snow is the community. The creative individuals who found a part of this earth and have turned it into something extraordinary. A home. But not just any home, a home full of love, friendships, and comradery. The harbor was one of my favorite places to

visit as a kid, so here is a piece of me that you can have. Hope this wasn't too up front. I'm looking forward to hearing from you. Sincerely, Your Secret Pen Pal."

"Pretty sure I might pass out from the sweetness." Rylee leans back in her chair and lets out a long breath. "That just about destroyed me, so how you're not a puddle of Ruth right now is beyond me."

"Feels like I am." I take another look at the sign and then say, "How am I supposed to act normal tomorrow, after receiving this?"

"Yeah, that didn't make things any easier, but just remember: like first, love second. Be his friend, treat him like a friend, be yourself, and if he doesn't like that side of you, then he's not the man for you. You and I both know your true personality isn't the bashful coffee girl hiding behind a counter. Time to step it up, Ruth. Show Brig who you really are, and that friendship will grow into something more. I know you can do this."

I nod and stare down at the picture. "I can do this."

"Ruth Knightly . . . has such a lovely ring to it."

I roll my eyes and pick up my phone from where it's resting. "I'm going to bed. I'm sure Beck is waiting for you."

"I think he's passed out. Long day with the triplets. Okay, keep me updated with everything."

"I will." I wave goodbye and hang up. Staring down at the sign, I smile, my dad's face coming to the forefront of my mind.

"What do you think, Dad? Is he the one for me? *Should I take this gift as a sign of your approval?*"

Chapter Seven

BRIG

“Good morn—” My words fall short when I catch Ruth standing by the register counter in a pair of miniscule cut-off shorts and a pink tank top. Instead of her hair hanging low by the nape of her neck, it’s piled high on top of her head, and she has a pair of weathered work glasses sitting there too. Work boots top off the outfit and damn, I feel like I’m seeing Ruth for the first time.

She’s . . .

Hell, she’s hot.

When she glances up from the clipboard she’s holding, she smiles, and I catch a sparkle in her dark brown eyes. Huh . . .

“Hey.” She sets the clipboard down and leans against the counter, arms crossed. “Is nine o’clock your usual *show-up-to-work* time?”

Is that sass I’m detecting?

Setting my drywall supplies to the side, I say, “Normally. Why?”

“Ah, you like to sleep in, got it.”

My eyes playfully narrow. “I don’t sleep in. I wake up at six every morning, but it takes work to make a body this perfect.” I motion up and down.

She chuckles. “What do you do, pump yourself up for the day by staring in the mirror and complimenting every square inch of your body?”

“If you must know, I run six miles every morning and then I lift weights, and that’s purely so I can indulge in your coffee cake. So if you want to blame anyone for my late start, it’s you.”

“Ah, always placing the blame on someone besides yourself.” She smiles and turns away.

Who is this Ruth? I don’t think I’ve ever heard her talk so much, let alone tease.

“Which reminds me.” She spins back around and holds out a plate. “Brought some pear and raspberry coffee cake along with some coffee from Snow Roast.”

“Seriously?” I step toward her as she hands me the plate. “Damn it, woman. I swore I wouldn’t have any carbs today,” I say, as I lift a piece of coffee cake off the plate and take a large bite. I moan. Eyes shut, I savor the flavors as they soak my taste buds. “It’s so good.”

When I open my eyes again, I catch her staring at me, head slightly tilted. Quickly looking away, she picks up her own piece and takes a bite. “I might not have run six miles this morning, but I did load up the dumpster with all the flooring.”

What? Without me? Off to the side, I notice the large pile of debris is all cleared out. “Ruth, I could have helped you with that.”

“It’s my project. I can do it. Plus, can’t wait until nine o’clock for help.” She smiles and takes another bite of her coffee cake only to set it down on a napkin and pull out a thermos and two cups. She pours us each a serving of her coffee, and I immediately smell blueberry.

“Did you put blueberry flavoring in this coffee?”

She then pours skim milk and sugar in mine, gives it a stir with a stick, and hands it to me. “After all these years, I’m pretty sure I know how you like your coffee. I wasn’t about to bring something you wouldn’t like, since you’re fixing my hole and all . . .” Her words trail off as her nose scrunches up. “I didn’t mean fixing my hole.” She coughs. “Not like . . . you know, that hole. But my hole.” She shakes her head. “No. Not *my* hole, the shop’s hole. That’s what I’m trying to say. The shop’s hole.” She sighs and makes eye contact with me. A smile plays at my lips the entire time. “Why does it seem like I’m talking about a vagina every time I say hole?”

I nearly spit out my coffee. Instead, it dribbles down my chin in a fit of humor. Thankfully she hands me a napkin before it falls to the floor.

“Were you not thinking vagina?” she asks, biting on the corner of her lip.

What side of the bed did Ruth wake up on this morning? I feel like I’m talking to a completely different person. I’m not complaining, I actually like

it, but whoa. I was not expecting to walk into a ball of feisty wrapped up in tiny denim shorts today.

“I mean, I was, I just wasn’t expecting you to say vagina.”

“It’s just a word.” She shrugs but when she reaches for her coffee, I catch a slight shake in her hand, as if she’s still nervous around me.

“A private-part word,” I add.

She snorts and covers her nose, her eyes wide, making me chuckle even harder. She wipes her nose with a napkin and says, “Private-part word is way worse than saying vagina.”

“No, way. Worse would be saying pussy,” I say, testing Ruth’s limits. If we’re going to be work neighbors, I’d like to see how far I can push her humor. I’m hoping pretty far. I don’t have many female friends, just my brothers’ girlfriends/fiancée. I miss the satisfaction that comes from witty banter with the opposite sex.

To my delighted surprise, Ruth says, “Pussy is for the bedroom only. At least, that’s what Rylee instilled in me.”

Fucking perfect. I can’t contain my smile now.

“Being a romance author, I would think Rylee is an expert in the matter.” I take a sip of my coffee. “What’s her take on penis?”

“Are we really talking about this right now? Over coffee cake and blueberry coffee?”

I shrug and smile over my cup. “Sure.”

For a second she pauses, and I watch her eyes float back and forth over mine, as if she’s trying to decide how far she wants to take this.

Go all the way, Ruthie.

Finally she says, “Penis is everyday vernacular. For example, if you’re talking to mixed company, you would say, ‘oye, my penis just jumped in my pants’ but—”

“What?” I say on a full laugh. “Who do you know that says ‘oye, my penis just jumped in my pants’?”

“I mean . . . people.” She chuckles slightly, her smile larger than I’ve seen before. “No one in particular. Tourists maybe?”

“Ah.” I nod. “Smooth. Classic townie, blaming everything on the tourists.”

“It’s the Port Snow way.” She sets her coffee down and says, “Anyway, back to penis talk.”

“Yes, of course, wouldn’t want to deter that conversation.”

There's a light blush on her cheeks and even though she looks confident, there's a waver in her voice, reminding me that it's Ruth I'm speaking to. It's endearing.

"So penis is for society as we established. Dick is reserved for friends, and cock is saved for the bedroom."

"Ah, yes. I can see that. Actually"—I sip my coffee—"the more I think about it, the more it's true. I don't say dick or cock to my mom, I say penis. But around my brothers, I usually say dick and well, when I'm in the bedroom, which hasn't been a while, I do say cock."

It's been a long time . . .

Why did I just admit that to her?

Then again, from the gossip that floats around, people probably know all about my dry spell.

"From what I can recall, it's been a while for me too, but cock is used heavily in the bedroom." And just like that, she puts me at ease. Look at that, little Ruthie Snow Roast making me feel okay about my slight slip-up.

"Well, this has been a productive ten minutes," I say, shoving the rest of the coffee cake in my mouth. Speaking over the cakey goodness I say, "Should we get to work?"

"I've already put in two hours."

"Then should I get to work?" I ask, brushing my hands off.

"The hole won't fix itself," she says with a teasing lilt.

And I can't help it, I stare at her longer than I probably should, but . . . there's something definitely different about her. I want to say confidence, but then again, she doesn't hide her fidgeting or the waver in her voice very well, so I'm not sure. Whatever it is, I like it. It's like something has woken up inside of her. I'm so used to the shy girl behind the counter serving coffee that to see this side of Ruthie is surprising. *Good* surprising. I've always thought Ruth was sweet, the way she quietly interacts with her customers, picks up after others. *Remembers the way you like your coffee.* But today, she's been downright fun. Naughty.

Whereas Griffin and Rogan live on the more serious side of life, Reid and I have always taken it upon ourselves to be the jokesters, the instigators, and I like to surround myself with people like that. Looks like I've found a new friend, because this Ruth *is* fun. And I like not taking life too seriously.

But to love furiously.

“Do I have something on my face?” she asks.

“Huh?” I blink a few times.

“You were just staring at me. Is there something on my face?”

“Oh, no.” I awkwardly laugh. “Sorry, I was just thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

“You,” I answer honestly, causing her cheeks to redden even more.

“You’re different today. Just a little surprised.”

“Oh . . .” She looks away.

“Not in a bad way,” I say quickly, not wanting her to feel like I’m picking on her.

“But different.”

“Yeah, you’re more . . . lively.”

“Didn’t realize I was dead.” She smirks and hell, it excites me. “I’ll be sure to breathe heavier when you’re around.”

“A solid in through the nose out through the mouth would be appreciated.”

“I’ll work on it.” She steps away from the counter and says, “Do you have materials you need help carrying in here?”

“I can handle it.”

“I would say I trust you to bring in sheetrock by yourself but after what happened yesterday, I think I should help you.”

“Are you saying you don’t trust me?”

“I’m saying you might be a little clumsy, and if I ever want to get these renovations done, you might have to be supervised.”

She walks toward the door and I follow behind her. “You know, that’s something my brothers would say. Have you been hanging out with them?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “But then again, your penchant for being clumsy isn’t a secret here in Port Snow. You’ve spilled your fair share of coffees at Snow Roast.”

“Keeping track, Ruthie?” I ask, holding the door open for her.

“Yeah, of how many mugs you’ve broken over the years.”

“What’s the tally?” We walk over to my tow truck where I have the sheetrock strapped down.

“Eleven.”

I pause. “Bullshit. There is no way I’ve broken eleven of your mugs. I’d remember that.”

“I took pictures of every single one of them. Want the proof?”

No, she didn't.

Did she?

I keep my gaze fixed on her, challenging her, studying her eyes, trying to make her squirm, but instead of looking away like she normally does, she stays connected with me.

And in this moment, I feel something stir, something I wasn't expecting. I can't quite pinpoint exactly what it is, but just like Ruth today, it's different.

Adjusting the collar of my shirt, I ask, "Do you really have proof?"

She slowly nods. "Uh-huh. I haven't added it to your tab yet, but one more hole through my wall and I very well might."

"Ooof. Brutal, Ruthie," I say.

"Hey, I didn't say I was going to add them just yet, just a warning. Your new work neighbor means business."

That she does.



"WHAT DO YOU THINK?" I ask, waiting patiently for my brother's approval.

"Did you . . ." Reid smacks his lips together. "Did you put salt in this?"

"Yes, can you taste it?"

"Oh yeah." Reid, the chef of the family, pushes the bowl of homemade spaghetti sauce away. "Dude, I think you just blew my palate."

"Oh come on, Reid," Eve, his girlfriend and long-time friend says. "It's not . . . ooo wow, that's salty." Her lips pucker, and she pushes the bowl away as well. "I'm sorry, Brig, but that's, wow. That's just a bowl of salt."

"How much did you put in?" Reid asks, gulping down some milk.

"Half a cup." I wince.

"Half a cup?" Reid's eyes nearly pop out of his sockets. "What recipe were you following?"

"Dad's famous sauce recipe. I think I wrote down the ingredients wrong."

"Uh, you definitely did. Jesus, Brig. Don't feed that to anyone else."

"It's not that bad, is it?" I ask, dipping my finger in the bowl and taking a taste. A wave of salt hits me, and I want to die a slow death of too much sodium intake. "Fuck, that was made to poison enemies."

Reid chuckles. "Yeah, know anyone you want to wreak vengeance on? Leave that at their doorstep."

Wooden spoon in hand, I tap my chin and give it a good thought. “Walter. Walter needs to be taught a lesson on who he should catfish.”

“You can’t give that to him,” Eve says, looking horrified as she stares at the sauce. “Walter is really old; one taste of that and he might keel over. You don’t want death by sodium on your hands. I know you, Brig, and that’s not something you’ll ever be able to get over.”

“That’s true. Damn it.” I slap the table with the spoon. “I’ll have to come up with something else to get him back.” I take a seat at my dining room table with them and say, “How much salt should I have put in?”

“A pinch here and there,” Reid says. “According to taste. I mean . . . did you even test this before you fed it to us?”

“No, I was too nervous. I wanted it to be perfect.”

Reid grips his head and leans back, sighing. “Dude, you need to taste test your food. Might help you avoid serving swill like this.”

“Hey now.” My brow pulls together. “This isn’t swill, it’s just—”

“Meant for the salty deep,” Eve says, in a pirate accent that makes both Reid and me laugh out loud.

“I guess so.” I look at the sauce and say, “Should I order pizza?”

“That would be best.”

While grabbing my phone and putting in an order on our town’s pizzeria app, I say, “Have either of you spent much time with Ruth?”

“Ruth from Snow Roast?” Reid asks.

“Yeah.”

“I have,” Eve says. “Why?” A cheerful smile crosses her lips. “Do you *like* her?”

“What? No.” I shake my head, the thought never crossing my mind. “I mean, we’re work neighbors. And I’ve been helping her out with renovations for her new business.”

“Uh-huh,” Reid says crossing his arms over his chest.

“What?” I look between the two of them. “That’s it. Don’t make it into anything it isn’t. Plus, I have a secret pen pal who’s sweeping me off my feet. Remember?”

“Then why ask if we know her?” Eve says, mirroring my brother’s skeptical look.

“Because I helped fix a hole in her wall today and frankly, the entire time I was there, it felt like I was in some alternate dimension. She was so . . . different.”

“Different how?” Reid asks.

“Outgoing, teasing, funny, witty. She gave me shit, and I honestly didn’t think she had a sarcastic bone in her body.”

“What?” Eve asks. “Brig, she has such a quick wit. You never see her one-liners coming. Knocks you off your feet with her zingers. She’s so funny.”

“Yes, exactly. Where did that come from?”

“She’s always been like that,” Eve says. “We went to the same school. Surely you remember her?”

Apparently not.

“She hasn’t always been like that. She’s quiet and hides behind the counter of the coffee shop most of the time. I swear I never see her around town just having fun,” I say.

“Because she’s been putting in a million hours at Snow Roast. She hasn’t hired many extra hands until recently to help her. She hasn’t had a life, just works constantly. And yeah, maybe she’s been quiet behind the counter because whenever you go into Snow Roast, it’s bustling and she probably doesn’t have a second to think about anything else but people’s orders. But she’s funny. Really funny,”

Eve says.

“Huh.”

I think over the day, drawing on the way her lips curved up ever so slightly during our conversations.

The way she gave me sass without a blink of an eye.

The comebacks that kept me on my toes.

The ribbing my brothers usually give me.

It was so . . . I glance at Eve and Reid and they’re both staring at me, huge smiles on their faces.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Reid says, shifting in his chair just as there is a knock on the door.

“That’s not a *nothing* face,” I say, standing and walking to the door. “There’s meaning behind it. Heavy meaning.”

Not expecting the pizza to be that quick, I’m surprised to open the door and find a package on the welcome mat.

It’s from *her* . . .

I swipe the package off the ground, slam the door, and like a bouncing ball of glee, I bound toward the table and set the package down with excitement. I'm ready to burst into a million heart-eye emojis.

"It's from my pen pal," I say, grabbing a box-cutter from my junk drawer, skipping through my apartment.

"Do you know who it is yet?" Eve asks.

"Not a clue. Mrs. Davenport had applications from Port Snow and some surrounding towns." I tear open the box and find a letter on top just like the package I sent. I flash the letter to Eve and Reid and say, "Doesn't she have amazing handwriting? And look." I point to the lips at the bottom. "She kisses the letter."

"When you're alone, do you kiss the letter too? Pretend you're making out with her?" Reid, the sarcastic asshole asks.

"No . . . but I will now," I answer.

But not really. I might be desperate for love, but I have some standards. Maybe I'll just rub the lips on my cheek, that's less creepy.

"Read it out loud," Eve says, leaning on the table now.

Clearing my throat, I stare at the letter and start reading. "Dear Secret Pen Pal, I don't know how to possibly thank you for the gift you sent me. It meant the world to me, more than you will probably ever know."

"What did you send her?" Reid asks.

"You know those wooden signs Mom and Dad used to sell at the Landing? I have a few here because I like them so much. I sent her one of the harbor, explaining how it and Port Snow are important to me."

"One of the wooden signs?" Reid asks, confused.

"Yeah." I point to my living room where I have two hanging side by side. One of The Lobster Landing and one of our family home that our mom commissioned. "Those."

Reid swivels around to take a look. "You mean the signs Ruth's dad used to make?"

"Oh yeah, I guess it was Ruth's dad. I forgot who it was exactly, just knew he was a local guy here. Weird, huh?"

"Yeah . . . weird," Eve says slyly. "Please continue with the letter."

"I will cherish this gift and make sure it hangs someplace where I can always see it. As for Port Snow, it's beautiful, one of my favorite places of all time. The feel, the smell of fudge coming from The Lobster Landing, the gossipy townspeople always eying the tourists and pointing them out. The

town is unique and the views are breathtaking. I know why you love it so much." I lift my head and say, "Does that mean she's from Port Snow?"

"Not necessarily," Reid says.

"I don't know, she seems to know about the tourist situation," Eve says, still with a smirk.

"Everyone knows about the tourists in Port Snow," Reid counters. "That's no surprise."

"Are you being rude to me, Reid Knightly?" Eve asks with a glint in her eye.

Features turning soft, I watch my brother lean in and press a kiss to Eve's cheek while cupping the other. "Never, babe."

Ugh, sickening.

Also . . . sweet.

I'm disgustingly jealous, damn it, which leads me back to the letter.

"Can I read the rest of my letter, please? Without you two interrupting to make out?"

"We weren't making out, but if you want us to, we can." Reid turns toward Eve, mouth open, but she pushes him away and looks over Reid's shoulder.

"Finish the letter. I want to know what's inside the box."

Me too.

"As for me, I love my town, but I also have an overall love of Maine. When I was young, my parents took me on road trips all around the state. We stayed in small cabins, played cards, and enjoyed the local cuisine and local food. One of my favorite places we visited was Damariscotta. We rented a cabin right next to the Damariscotta River, and we spent our time fishing and enjoying a true Maine summer with whoopie pies every night."

"Love whoopie pies," Eve says.

"Me too," I reply and turn the letter over. There's nothing else written so I part the tissue paper and find another letter. When I pull it out of the box, I spot a clear Tupperware container and inside are four whoopie pies. "Oh fuck, there are whoopie pies in here." I pull them out and open the lid. The smell of chocolate and cream ascends into the air, giving me a sense of comfort.

"Those look fucking good," Reid says, scooting closer to the table now.

"What does the letter say?" Eve asks, as she ogles the whoopie pies.

I unfold the letter and immediately see her lips at the bottom. That small gesture does so much to my insides that I take a second before I read. “I couldn’t get to Damariscotta for whoopie pies, so I went with the next best option. I made some. Don’t worry, I didn’t poison them. I feel like that’s something that needs to be stated. I love putting peanut butter cream in the middle, but decided to go the original route with you. I hope you enjoy them. Maybe one day we can share one in person. Until then, think about me when you eat them. Sincerely, Your Secret Pen Pal.”

“Adorable,” Eve says as I slowly set the letter down. “How do you feel about it?”

I sit back in my chair and stare at the container of whoopie pies and the letter, her red lipstick sizzling straight to my heart, causing it to beat faster, heavier.

“I feel . . . romanced,” I answer on a dreamy sigh.

“Oh my God, you’re the cutest.” Eve swats Reid’s arm. “Why can’t you be more like your brother?”

“I romance you,” Reid says. “Do you not remember how I won you back?”

“I don’t think anyone can forget that,” Eve says, and I think back to that day and everything that went horribly wrong, but also so very right. “But look at him, he’s giddy.”

I shrug. “Just chasing that swoony feeling. Sick of being the bridesmaid . . . I want to be the bride.”

“I think that’s how you should start your next letter to your pen pal,” Reid cuts in. “See if she’s willing to share bride role with you.” Such a smart-ass, cocky tone.

“You know what I mean. I can’t remember the last time I was in a serious relationship. All I want is to love someone, spoil them, make them mine. I want to start a family, move out of the apartment above my garage, and buy a house in the woods somewhere where my kids can have the kind of childhood we had. And this”—I point to the whoopie pies and letter—“this might be it. This might be how I finally find love. This girl, my pen pal.” *A girl who makes me whoopie pies as a thank you. Who believes Port Snow is breathtaking.*

“You can buy the house now. We all know you’re loaded,” Reid says with a laugh.

Not loaded, just . . . you know, well-off. Port Snow needed an auto mechanic, so I studied, saved, and purchased, but I also tapped into the tourist market as well. Found my niche. The time and money has paid off.

“I want to buy the house with my girl. I want it to be a joint decision.” Staring off into my apartment, I say, “I want to hold her hand while walking across creaky wooden floors we would repair and talk about what furniture we could see in certain places. I want to experience my first house purchase with someone, not by myself.”

“You’re only twenty-five, Brig,” Eve says. “You have plenty of time to find the right person for you. Stop putting all this pressure on yourself.”

“I know.” I blow out a heavy breath. “It’s painful though, watching my siblings all start their lives and head into that next phase of marriage and babies. I’ve been the one trailing behind my entire life and was hoping I’d have a solid girl by now. I don’t know, is there something wrong with me?”

“Is that a rhetorical question, because I can list—oof.” Eve swats at Reid’s stomach and then addresses me with sweet compassion.

“There is nothing wrong with you, Brig. Finding someone to spend your life with in a small town is hard, especially a tourist town. Hang in there, I have a good feeling about this secret pen pal of yours.”

“Yeah?”

She smiles and nods. “Definitely.”

Chapter Eight

RUTH

“You are totally Brig’s secret pen pal, aren’t you?” Eve says, coming up to Snow Roast’s counter and resting her palms on the coffee-stained wood.

“Shhh—shh,” I say harshly, looking around the shop, empty except for Rylee, who is in the corner tapping away at her computer, oblivious to her surroundings. Beck is in the back, cleaning mugs, and I’m taking care of the night’s receipts. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“There is no one here and if Rylee doesn’t know about your secret pen pal then you’re not a very good friend.”

“She knows,” I whisper for Lord knows what reason. “But that doesn’t mean you need to shout it.”

“I didn’t shout it, just stated it. But it’s true, isn’t it?”

How on earth could she have figured it out? I haven’t told her anything about the Summer of Love. Unless . . .

Oh God. My head snaps up to her. “Does Brig know?”

Casually Eve leans her hip against the counter and shakes her head. “The man is completely clueless. He thinks it’s someone from out of town.”

“Oh . . . really?” I ask, feeling a little let down. Is it too much to ask for him to even consider me as a possible love connection?

I guess he just doesn’t look at me that way.

“Yeah, but the minute I saw the whoopie pies and heard the story of driving around Maine, I knew it was you.”

“Did he tell you all about it?”

“Reid and I were at his place, testing spaghetti sauce he’s trying to perfect. He put half a cup of salt in it.” I cringe. Thank God I wasn’t a taste

tester. Not that he would ask me. “The package arrived when we were there. And I have to say, it was so cute, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen Brig light up like that. It was like he sat on a lightbulb and was shining out of every orifice. He even said something about how he felt like he was being romanced.”

I smile softly, knowing those are exactly the type of words Brig would choose.

He’s a softy through and through, but he also has this masculine side that sweeps me off my feet. I’ve seen him kiss a girl before, and no, I wasn’t being a voyeur, but it was hard not to watch. The way he commanded her body, the grip he had on her waist, the lock he had on her jaw. I wanted to be that girl, to experience his touch firsthand.

And then there’s his personality. So fun-loving, sweet, caring. But funny. God, he’s funny. And his eyes and muscles. Oh my, does he have muscles, not big bulky muscles, but the type of muscles that—

“Uh, Ruth, where did you go?”

“Huh?” My gaze snaps up to Eve. “Uh, just thinking.”

She pokes my arm. “Thinking about Brig?”

“Who’s thinking about Brig?” Beck asks, flinging a towel over his shoulder and joining our conversation. “Oh, who am I kidding? Ruth is totally thinking about Brig.”

“Twenty-four-seven,” Rylee says, walking up to us as well, making it a full-on party. “I don’t know a time when she’s not thinking about the man.”

“Wow.” I fold my arms over my chest. “Aren’t you all fun?”

“We are, thanks.” Beck leans over the counter, snags Rylee by the chin, and plants a kiss on her mouth. “Ready to go home? My parents texted me and said they’re keeping the kids overnight.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

“Things you don’t need to say in front of your boss,” I say. Never in my life have I met two people hornier than Beck and Rylee.

“I’m off the clock. Now you’re just my friend, Ruth, who’s been harboring a crush on the youngest Knightly boy for years.”

“Can you not?” I say with a clenched jaw.

“No one is here but us,” Rylee says.

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t want anyone walking in and overhearing you,” I say, my cheeks flamed. “The man barely knows I exist. I don’t need people cluing him in.”

“Oh, I would counter that statement with this: in fact, he knows who you are,” Eve says with a smirk.

Why is she smiling like that?

“Oooo . . . do you have information?” Rylee asks, turning toward Eve. “You’re dating Reid, who seems like the closest Knightly to Brig.”

“Between Reid and Rogan, but yes, I might have some information.”

“Well, spit it out,” Beck says, leaning one arm on the top of the espresso machine. “I have bedroom plans with my wife.”

“I love bedroom plans,” Rylee says, looking all heart eyes.

“I should ask Reid if he has bedroom plans for us tonight.”

They all turn to me as if asking if I have sexual plans as well. “Oh yes, let me text my vibrator to see what’s on the schedule for tonight. One second.” I reach for my phone as they all laugh. Little do they know . . .

“And that’s exactly what I wanted to talk you about,” Eve says, pulling a questioning look from all of us.

“You want to talk about my vibrator?”

Beck cringes. “Reid not getting the job done?”

Eve grins. “No, Reid is doing a wonderful, wonderful job in the pleasure department.” She looks like she needs someone to hose her down just from that one sentence. Good God, what it must feel like to be in love. *And to be having wonderful, wonderful pleasure* all the time. “I’m talking about her humor. Brig asked Reid and me last night if we knew you well. Reid of course, was as clueless as Brig, but me, on the other hand. I’ve had enough girls nights with you to have seen the comical and ingenious personality you bring to the table.”

“He, uh . . . he spoke about me?” I ask, trying to remain as casual as possible, even though I want to jump up and down screaming with excitement. “What did he say?”

“That you were different.”

“Oh.” My brow creases. “Different.” Same thing he said to me. “That’s . . . I guess that’s good, right?”

“Different is always nice, right, Beck?” Rylee asks.

“Oh yeah, different is great.” He scratches his jaw.

“He also said you were quick-witted and funny and that he’s never seen that side of you.”

Why didn’t she open with that? Different isn’t always a great compliment but quick-witted and funny, now that’s something that’s always

good to hear.

“He said that?” I ask, feeling a little taller.

“Yup. He said he’s only known you as the shy and quiet one, but he saw a new side of you he liked.”

“Liked?” I ask, hope brimming.

“He said liked?” Rylee says, the best friend in her getting just as excited as me.

“Not in a relationship kind of way but you could tell he was definitely —”

The door to the coffee shop opens and all at once, our heads whip around where we find Brig walking past the threshold. Abruptly stopping, he scans all of us, his eyes darting back and forth, unsure.

“Uh, am I interrupting something?”

I can barely hear him over the roar of my heart. If he only knew what we were talking about . . .

“Just talking about you,” Rylee says.

Dear JESUS!

What the hell is wrong with her?

“Really?” Brig asks, closing the space between us.

“No.” Rylee laughs and the tension eases in my chest until . . . “We were discussing vibrators, weren’t we, Ruth?”

Okay, now she’s really dead.

My cheeks flame as hot needles tingle up my spine sending me into a tailspin of embarrassment. I get the whole loosening me up thing, but good grief, is this approach necessary?

“Were you?” Brig rubs his hands together. “I enjoy vibrators. Ever have one pressed against your balls, Beck?”

“I’m married to a romance author. What do you think?”

Brig chuckles and the deep rumbly sound feels like a wave crashing over me, cooling me off but also suffocating. I love that sound. Makes me want to walk up to him, press my face against his chest, and make him laugh again so I can feel the vibrations of his humor.

“True, you’re probably in your own category of kink,” Brig says.

“Are you into kink, Brig?” Rylee asks.

Feeling so uncomfortable—because I know exactly what my friend is doing—I busy myself with receipts, but still keep relatively quiet so I can hear Brig’s answer.

“I mean . . . sure.” I glance at him just as he glances at me. We both look away and another wave of heat rolls up my body. “I like fun and different positions and don’t mind playing with toys, but that’s the extent of it. None of that whipping shit, or tying of the balls. Touch my balls, roll them, put them in your mouth, but they’re not toys to be tied up.”

“I’m right there with you,” Beck says, holding out his hand, and the men high-five.

“What about you, Eve?” Rylee asks, and I have a bad feeling about who she’s going to ask next.

“Reid is a powerhouse in bed. I’ll do anything he wants.”

I catch Brig’s grimace and it pulls a smile out of me. At least I’m not the only one being tortured right now.

“Gross,” Brig says. “I don’t want to know about my brother being a powerhouse in bed. I feel fine just assuming they all have dicks and know how to use them properly.”

“I heard all the Knightlys are good in bed,” Rylee says.

“We’re not too shabby.” Brig dusts off his shoulders and it makes me smile even wider. I struggle to believe Brig’s a “powerhouse” in bed, but I could see him being methodical, a guy who takes his time, draws out each and every orgasm with purpose. And that turns me on even more than some alpha guy flipping me on a bed.

“What about you, Ruth, are you into kink?” And just like that, the smile I was sporting from Brig vanishes as I look over at my friend, who seems entirely too pleased with herself.

“Are you?” Eve asks, feigning interest. Next girls night, these two are going to get some wine tossed down their backs.

“Totally interested in the kink answer,” Beck says, joining in. Okay, he’s fired. *Have fun dealing with your triplets.*

Brig glances around the circle, shrugs and asks, “Well?”

Great.

There are two ways I can handle this situation. I can recoil into *coffee house* Ruth, wave receipts in everyone’s faces, mumbling about having to close up, and sprint to the back. Or, I can act as if Brig wasn’t here and answer the way I would normally answer.

Option one would avoid possible embarrassment.

Option two would give me great reason to once again, reveal more of *me* to Brig . . . with the heavy chance of utter humiliation.

Either way, I'm going to be embarrassed, so I might as well make strides with Brig so he can get to know the true me.

"Am I into kink?" I place the receipts in a zip-up pouch that I tuck under the counter. "Not sure what level of friskiness would qualify as kink. I do know I have a pressing date with my vibrator though, so if you all don't mind, I'm going to take off." I remove my apron and slap it against Beck's chest and say, "Thanks for closing up for me. Can't keep those batteries waiting."

Beck clutches the apron to his chest, looking annoyed but proud.

Rylee's eyes twinkle.

Eve chuckles softly and Brig . . . well . . . he probably has the best reaction of them all.

Mouth agape, hair in hand, eyes wide.

"See ya." Hands shaking, nerves shot—I can't believe I said that—I walk out the door and start heading toward Knight and Port. Even though I live right above the coffee house, I still need some dinner, and I'm not about to make myself something with the meager contents of my pantry upstairs. No, I need a reward.

I need a baked bean sandwich.

"Ruthie, hold up." I hear Brig's voice call out as he catches up to me on the sidewalk. "I came to talk to you."

"Oh?"

He nods, his eyes quickly glancing down my body and then back up. I'm wearing black leggings today and a tight-fitting green T-shirt. It's nothing special, nothing that would catch anyone's eyes. It's comfortable for a day at Snow Roast.

"I, uh, I don't want to keep you from your date." A smile plays at his lips. "But I wanted to know if everything was okay. I didn't, uh, see you at the Parlor today."

"You stopped by?" I ask just as the wind picks up, blowing my hair over my face. I take the ponytail holder from my wrist, flip over, and grip my hair close to my scalp, tying it into a messy bun at the top. When I lift back up, Brig's eyes fall to my hair and I might be crazy, but I swear I catch the smallest of pulls on the corner of his mouth. As if he likes my hair like this. "Brig?"

"Oh yeah, sorry." He chuckles and rubs the back of his neck. "Yeah, I stopped by because I wanted to see what you were working on today and if

you needed any help. I was surprised you weren't there."

"Figured I'd pull some weight at Snow Roast." I nod toward the coffee shop only to see Eve, Rylee, and Beck all pressed up against the window, watching us.

Oh dear God.

Attempting to keep my expression neutral and not appear completely horrified, I shift to the side so Brig's back completely faces Snow Roast. No need for him to find them all gazing at us, idiotic smirks decorating their faces.

"Cool, yeah. Well, I actually . . . wait, aren't you headed back to your place?"

"Going to grab a baked bean sandwich first."

"Hell, that's my favorite." His gaze trails down the street toward Knight and Port. "Would it be weird if I asked to walk with you? You said baked bean sandwich and now it's all I'll be able to think about."

"Um, sure," I say, rubbing both my hands down my pant legs to remove the sweat on my palms. "I have the same sentiment about the sandwich."

Brig leads the way and I walk next to him, feeling nervous and giddy. I've never spent this much time with him. And I'm wondering if it has to do with being work neighbors or that I'm finally showing my true self to him. Either way, I'm excited.

I'm walking with Brig Knightly.

Down Main Street.

Squeals

"When Reid first introduced the baked bean sandwich I thought he was crazy, but then I had a bite . . ." He pats his stomach. "Haven't been able to resist them since. Any mention and I'm practically sprinting to Knight and Port for a bite."

"I'm the same. I didn't even give it a second thought when I saw it on the menu. I knew I had to try it."

"Should have guessed that, given your penchant for odd ice cream flavor combinations."

"Hey, you liked it."

He purposefully bumps my shoulder with his and says, "It was really good. Been craving it since we had it the other day."

"I'm starting to see a trend here, Brig."

“What’s that?” he asks, his voice so easy, so comfortable that I feel myself slowly getting lost in the moment as we make our way down the sidewalks toward the harbor.

“Coffee cake, baked bean sandwich, ice cream . . . I think you’re a foodie.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, it’s why I run six miles every day.”

“Every day?” I ask. “I’m not sure I can run one.”

“Ah, come on, Ruthie, you can run one.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think I’ve ever run for fun in my life.”

“One of those lucky girls then,” he says, glancing at my body. “Good genes.”

A compliment? A week ago, I would have told you that I’d never even been a blip on Brig Knightly’s radar. Yet . . . *compliments*. “More like always on my feet working. Don’t get much of a break to eat during the day.”

“Ah, I can see that.” He wraps his arm around my shoulder and squeezes me in tight to his side, and I barely can contain the rapid patter of my heart trying to break through my chest. “Stick with me, Ruthie. I’ll get you eating every meal, sometimes twice. Nothing wrong with a second lunch.” He laughs and I do too, but it comes out more strained than anything.

“If that’s the case, then I would have to start running.”

“Then start,” he says as we cross the empty street and walk diagonally across the road to the entrance of Knight and Port. “You can run with me in the mornings.”

I snort.

The ugliest snorts of all snorts.

Violent.

Wet.

Ungodly unattractive.

I cover my nose quickly and wipe it with my hand as he holds the door open for me. “What’s so funny about that?”

Marie, the hostess, greets us with a charming smile. “Table for two?”

“Oh, we’re just—”

“Yeah, table for two,” Brig says, and when I look up at him in confusion, he just smiles and says, “We have some things to discuss.”

“Right this way,” Marie says, grabbing two menus, leading us to the back, next to the windows that overlook the ocean. We each take a seat and Marie places the menus in front of us only for Brig to hand them back and say, “We’re here for the baked bean sandwiches.”

Marie chuckles. “Should have known. I’ll put your order in with your server. Any drinks?”

“Water, please,” I say quickly.

“Me too,” Brig adds and then Marie takes off, leaving me alone with Brig, eating dinner together . . . at a restaurant.

How on earth is this real life right now?

Folding his hands together, he looks me dead in the eyes and says, “Run with me.”

“I think you’ve lost it,” I reply, moving the silverware on the table to busy myself with something other than looking Brig in the eyes.

“I haven’t. I think it’s a great idea because if you run with me, then you can be a foodie with me.”

“Oh, I see your motivation.”

“Come on, we’re going to be spending a lot of time together and we’re going to be sharing meals. I don’t want to have to deal with someone who eats two pieces of celery and one raisin as nutrients. I’m going to want to go to Jake’s Cakes and share a plate of waffle fries with you.”

“Um”—I tap my chin—“when did we decide we’ll be spending a lot of time together? I think I missed that memo?”

I might act confused, but good God, there’s a party going on inside me.

He tilts his head looking far too adorable. I wish I could take a picture—him looking at me, the ocean to his side, the natural wood shiplap behind him. It’s a moment I want to be able to look back on, to cherish.

“What do you not understand about being work neighbors? Are you the only person in Port Snow that doesn’t know I’m incredibly needy and clingy?”

A rumble of a laugh comes out of me. “No, I gathered that after seeing you interact with your brothers in Snow Roast so many times.”

“So then you understand that I’m going to be at the Parlor all the time, right?”

“Are you telling me you’re going to be a mooch?”

“Tea sandwiches, Ruthie.” He clenches his fist. “I need tea sandwiches.”

“Do you plan on paying for these tea sandwiches?”

“Of course. With labor. You can’t possibly do the renovations all by yourself. We spoke about this. The garage is slow right now and my guys can handle whatever comes in. Summer rentals are picking up, we’re a smooth operating machine, but you on the other hand, I mean . . . I just had to patch up a hole in the wall for you.”

“A hole you put there.”

“Doesn’t matter how it got there.” He waves his hand. “What matters is that I was there to help, and that’s the kind of help you can’t put a price on.”

“Pretty sure Rogan could give me a quote from one of his guys.”

He sighs and leans on the table. “Ruthie, I think you need to understand something about me. I can dish it, but I can’t take it, so busting my balls is going to break my fragile self-esteem.”

Chuckling, I say, “My mistake, wasn’t aware I was going to have to stroke your ego.”

“It would be appreciated. Thank you.”

Just then, our server brings us our drinks and our baked bean sandwiches. My mouth waters as my eyes fix in on the homemade bun, lightly toasted with slices of apple, bacon, cheese, and beans in the middle.

I know, I know . . . it sounds gross, but I swear it’s heaven on earth.

“Enjoy,” the server says and takes off. Before I can even reach for my napkin, Brig has the sandwich in hand and had already taken a bite. Leaning back in his chair, he quietly moans and savors the flavors while looking out toward the ocean.

“This is what life is about,” he says after swallowing. “Baked bean sandwiches. This is why we were put on this earth, so we can enjoy something like this, something so delicious. Don’t you think, Ruthie?”

I’m still trying to get over the sound of his moan . . .

“Uh, yeah.” I clear my throat. “Love the beans.”

He smirks over his sandwich before taking a bite, and then he looks away.

Love the beans? Come on, Ruth, don’t lose it now.

Just because he moans into a sandwich and looks like he’s having an orgasm doesn’t mean you need to lose your smart wit.

Get it together, woman.

I take another bite, chew, and swallow. “So, you said we have things to discuss. Does this have to do with sharing a wall with you? You don’t have

to worry, there won't be any raucous behavior happening over at the Parlor."

"I don't know. I've heard clotted cream on scones can make people wild. For all I know, your Parlor could easily turn into a brothel."

"You know about clotted cream?"

"Searched the Internet to see what tea parties were all about last night. Wanted to see what the basics were, needed to see if it's something I'd want to take part in."

"And . . ."

"I'll be honest. The term *clotted cream* threw me off. I don't think you ever want to eat anything that has the word 'clotted' in it. But after I saw what it was all about, I felt confident in becoming quickly addicted to a dainty meal served to me on tiered milk glass."

"I do plan on having tiered milk glass. Have you been reading my diary, Brig?" I joke, and his eyes sharpen.

"You have a diary?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm just kidding."

"Damn. I feel like if I got my hands on that, I wouldn't be able to do the noble thing and look away. I would read that so hard and so fast."

And if I did have a diary, I'm pretty sure he'd be in for a world of shock, because there's no doubt in my mind that pages would be filled with his name, my name, and hearts encompassing the both of us.

"Good thing I don't have one then, given your inability to control yourself and your penchant for gossip."

He shrugs. "What can I say, I'm meant for this town. The gossip, the secrets, it gives me life. Do you ever check the Hen Line?"

"Not really."

He slaps the table in disappointment. "Ruthie. You're missing out on so much. This morning, there was news posted about Darla Eagleton getting a mole removed . . . off her left butt cheek." He shakes his head in humor. "That's the spell-binding news I want in my headlines. Butt cheek mole removal. God, that's good stuff." He chuckles to himself and takes another bite of his sandwich.

"Poor Darla—"

"She was the one who posted it."

"Well, then I guess Darla deserves whatever gossip is spread about her mole removal."

“Anyway, we’re getting off topic.” Brig pops one of the homemade chips in his mouth. I’m normally the person who balks at a restaurant giving me “homemade chips” over fries. If I’m going to eat out, I want fries, preferably seasoned and coated fries, you know, the ones with real crunch. But Knight and Port’s homemade chips are so freaking good, it’s hard not to eat a handful at a time. It has something to do with a certain pickle salt they use . . . not quite sure. Whenever you ask Reid, he just shrugs and walks away. He’s not giving up any of his secrets. “We have a few things to discuss.”

“So you’ve said.” I eat some chips and wonder how I’ve been able to survive my life without these before Knight and Port opened.

“Let’s get down to business then.” He picks up his napkin, wipes his mouth, and then takes a sip of his water. “Renovations. I’ll be helping you.”

“Brig—”

He holds up his hand. “I don’t want to hear it. You need to open *this* summer to cash in on the tourist season. You can’t do that alone. I’m not doing anything important right now. I want sandwiches. I’m helping. Simple as that.”

I guess so.

“But in return, you must run with me.”

Run with him? Oh, okay. Suuure. Let me get right on that.

“I would rather do the renovations by myself,” I say.

“It’s not bad, Ruthie. You’ll be surprised how much you’ll like it.”

“Pretty sure I’ll hate it.”

“Either way, you’re running with me. We’ll start small and then work our way up to six miles, maybe ten.”

“Oh, okay.” I chuckle. “Sure, yup. Ten miles.”

“With an attitude like that, I’m going to make you run a marathon.”

“I dare you. Pretty sure I know how that bet will turn out.”

He studies me and for a second, I forget that we’re in a restaurant in the middle of our hometown where anyone could chat about Brig Knightly and Ruth Barber having a meal together. I’m lost in his eyes, the way they study me with such thoughtfulness, with humor, as if he’s trying to figure out his next joke.

“You know, normally I would take that bet, but if I learned anything about you over the last few days it’s that you’re stubborn, and I think it would be a terrible decision on my end.”

I smile at him. “Smart man.”

“But I will demand you run with me. Every day.”

“Every day?” I shake my head. “No way. My deteriorated muscles would never be able to keep up with that.”

“I got you, Ruthie,” he says with a wink. And that’s all it takes. That one shameless wink attached to that reassuring sentence. I’m done. I’ll do anything he says at this point. “I’m not going to let you get hurt. Might help with all the stress you put on yourself with Snow Roast and these new renovations.”

“Why are you being so nice to me?” I can’t help it. This is so surreal.

Immediately his brow furrows and the chip he was about to put in his mouth is set back down on his plate. “Have I ever been mean to you?” It’s an honest question, no malice to it whatsoever. More like general wonderment.

“No,” I answer quickly. “No, not at all.”

“Okay. Good.” He looks off to the side and then says, “You were born and bred here, Ruthie. We take care of each other in Port Snow. I’m just trying to help out . . . be your friend.”

Be my friend.

Those three words stab me like a thousand swords.

Friends.

Is that all we’ll ever be? Just friends?

I wasn’t expecting him to say he wanted to date me or anything like that, but just hearing the friend word feels painful, like there isn’t much hope for a future.

Then again . . . Rylee said friends first, relationship second. The foundation of a *great* relationship. And if I’m honest, that is what I want. I’m still feeling slightly breathless around him, as well . . . he’s Brig, and he’s gorgeous. But maybe, given I’ve waited this long to talk to him like this, spend an easy night with him where I don’t feel so tongue-tied and cringe-worthy, I should feel thankful that at least he’s aware of who I am now. What’s more time as friends in the grand scheme of things? If I’m anything, I’m patient.

He’s offering up the first step. I should take it.

Tacking on a smile, I say, “I would like that. To be friends.”

His eyes sparkle with excitement. “Does that mean free tea sandwiches?”

“You know, Brig, I’m starting to think you really only want sandwiches from me, not friendship.”

“I want both.” He pops a chip in his mouth and smiles while chewing. *Adorable.*



I STARE at the envelope on my nightstand. I told myself I wasn’t opening it until I got ready for bed and found shoes that would work for running. I spent half an hour trying to figure out what pair shouldn’t destroy my legs tomorrow and went with an old pair of Skechers I found in the depths of my closet. Apparently, I need to go shoe shopping. Not just shoe shopping, but workout clothes shopping. The ensemble I have laid out for tomorrow morning is less than flattering, but it’s all I have.

Long red basketball shorts, white tank top, and Sketchers from the 2000s doesn’t scream, “hey look at me, I’m a runner.” It more or less says “what’s working out?”

Alarm clock is set, water bottle is cleaned, and unfortunately, shoes are untied, ready to be slipped on my feet.

When Brig said he wanted to run with me, I didn’t think he was serious at first. I thought maybe he was teasing and nothing would come of it, but when we left the restaurant—after he paid for dinner—he said to meet him in front of Snow Roast at six for our first run. He then took off toward his place, leaving me with a crazy mixture of hope and fear.

Running with Brig . . . oy. I didn’t think this entire thing through. There’s so much unattractiveness that goes into running when you’re not a runner.

The heavy breathing.

The sweating.

The possible tripping.

The smelling . . . oh God, the smelling. I glance toward my bathroom and quickly grab the deodorant. Extra swipes tomorrow, extra swipes everywhere.

EVERYWHERE.

Now that everything is in place and I’m ready for bed, I sink under my covers, plug my phone into its charger, and I pick up the letter.

Blue envelope, blue paper inside.

It’s such a dorky thing, but I truly love how Brig has special paper just for this. Makes me wonder, did he get the paper specifically for the pen pal

program?

I hope so.

Sinking down into my mattress, my nightstand light the only light on in my compact apartment, I unfold the letter, feeling at ease when I see his distinctive writing. I couldn't find a more perfect way to end my night, but with Brig's words tucking me in.

Dear Secret Pen Pal,

I wish I knew who you were, because if I did, I would no doubt run up to you and plant a giant kiss on your lips as a thank you for those whoopie pies. Damn, girl, they were phenomenal. My brother wanted me to ask you for the recipe. I'm not saying you have to hand it over, but you know, if you wanted to help me make one of my brothers beg and plead, it would be appreciated. I love when they have to shower me with compliments to get what they want.

As for Damariscotta, I've never been there, which seems weird since I've lived in Maine my entire life. The family business held us in Port Snow most summers, but then again, I think that's how it was for most Port Snowians, always catering to the tourists. I hope to travel around the Northeast at some point, especially during fall. It's one of my favorite times of the year and not because of the gorgeous trees, but because of the noticeable crispness in the air that you don't get any other time of the year. The smell of dried-up leaves, the crunch of them under your feet, the knowledge that you're at the end of the tourist season and you can get back to your small town and reconnect with the people around you. I love it. What about you? When is your favorite time of the year?

Also, this may sound corny, but thank you for writing back so quickly. I had no clue I'd enjoy corresponding with a new friend so much. It gives me something to look forward to.

Sending Over Hugs (hope that's okay),

YSPP (Your Secret Pen Pal)

God . . .

He's so perfect.

That or I'm just so totally infatuated with him at this point that he can do no wrong.

Well . . . except for make me run.

Chapter Nine

BRIG

“You look like you might want to murder me,” I say, walking up to Ruth, who’s leaning against Snow Roast, arms folded.

Yesterday was weird.

I don’t know how else to describe it, but when I didn’t see Ruth at the Parlor, I felt like I’d scared her away. Call me insecure, but there are times where I come off a little too pushy . . . needy . . . a know-it-all, and when she didn’t show up, I thought maybe I had been all three of those things the day before when fixing her drywall.

Either way, I went to Snow Roast just as it was closing to check in with her.

Never in a million years did I think she would be talking about a date with her vibrator, nor did I consider going to dinner with her. But both of those things happened. When we parted ways last night, it was with a tangle of emotions residing in both of us—me slightly confused, her looking nervous.

I like to consider myself a people person. For the most part, I can read people pretty well. But Ruth is a mystery, an anomaly. Every interaction with her, I think I have her figured out, and then she goes and says something like she has a date with her vibrator, blowing my theories completely out of the water.

There are times where she sounds so damn confident it scares me, and then I catch subtle insecurities here and there that remind me of the girl behind the counter.

And as I walk up to Ruth this morning, decked out in basketball shorts and a tank top with—are those Sketchers?—I realize this is one of those behind-the-counter moments.

“Are you looking at my shoes?” she asks, her voice sounding not quite awake yet.

“Those aren’t running shoes.”

“It’s all I had at last-minute’s notice.”

“You should have told me. You could have borrowed something from my sister, Jen. You guys look like you’re about the same size.”

“Ah, but that would have required a phone number,” she says, pushing off the building and walking up to me.

At least a foot shorter than me, she really is a petite thing. All blonde hair and smooth skin. And in the early morning light reflecting off the harbor, I can see a light hint of whiskey in her normally dark eyes.

“Are you asking me for my number, Ruthie?” I tease.

“I’m asking you to get this hell-on-earth run over with so I can take a shower and eat a cinnamon bun.”

I chuckle. “Do you have fresh cinnamon buns in the shop right now?”

“Yes, and I have two set aside, so let’s move this along.”

“Is one of those for me?”

“I’m not an asshole, so of course one is for you.”

I clutch my chest. “You do care about me.”

“That’s more than I can say about you,” she mutters, folding her arms across her chest.

“Caring about your health is caring about you. Come on, this is to help relax you.” I take her by the shoulders and shake her. “Now, how do you feel about a mile this morning?”

“Dreadful, but let’s get it over with.”

“That’s the spirit,” I say, laughing. “We’ll go at an easy pace, a pace where we can still hold a conversation.” I nod toward the harbor. “Come on.”

Sighing, she saddles up next to me and together we start jogging. In an instant, I realize her *slow* is a walk for me, due to the difference in our strides, which is fine. I don’t want to push her too hard. After this, I’ll hit up the roads again and get in some additional miles on my own.

“So, how was your date last night?” I ask her, trying to take her mind off what we’re doing.

“Date? What date?”

“With your battery-operated friend.”

“Oh.” She laughs. “Uh, pleasurable as usual.”

I know I asked, but I still can’t believe she answered.

This new Ruthie is something else.

“Does he have a name?”

“Marvin.”

I stumble over a crack in the sidewalk and catch my balance quickly.

“Marvin, really?”

“No.” She chuckles. “That was just the first name that came to mind. I don’t have a name for my vibrator. I try to keep emotions out of the relationship, you know? Easier that way.”

Fuck. This girl’s smart mouth.

“Understandable. Mixing that much pleasure with emotions could honestly lead to some weird things, like marrying your vibrator. Talk about fodder for the gossip mill. Darla’s mole removal would be old news.”

“And I really don’t want to take the spotlight away from her.”

“Considerate. A real pioneer for those seeking attention, allowing them to have it selflessly. You should really receive an award.”

“I know. I know. But I stay humble, as there’s more power in that than any award on a dusty shelf.”

“Wise beyond your years, Ruthie.”

“So I’ve been told.”

We turn down Cedar Lane, where I know it will make the perfect mile back to Snow Roast. “So what color is your vibrator?”

“Really invested in this topic, aren’t you?”

“Just taking your mind off running. Go with it.”

“Fair enough. Would it be too cliché if I said pink?”

“Not if it’s true . . . is it?”

“It’s hot pink.”

“If I had a vibrator, I think I’d want it to be green.”

“Why?” She chuckles, and surprisingly, her voice still sounds smooth, not choppy at all. I’m tempted to pick up the pace, but I want her to enjoy this.

“Green is my favorite color.”

“But wouldn’t you want to keep emotions out of your vibrator relationship too?” she asks. “Picking your favorite color might add an

emotional level I don't think you're ready for."

"With me, emotions are always involved. I wear my heart on my sleeve, and damn it, if I want to attach myself to a vibrator, she better be green."

"Your vibrator is a she?"

"Uhh . . . isn't your vibrator a guy?"

"My vibrator is a tool for pleasure. No emotions, remember?"

"Huh, so that would mean hot pink is not your favorite color?"

"Nope." She sucks in a deep breath and I glance over just to make sure she's okay. When she doesn't stop, I keep moving forward. "Red. I love red."

"I never would have pegged you for a red girl before a few days ago, but now that I know you better, I'd say red is very accurate."

"Why do you say that?" she asks. I love how her messy bun is bouncing on the top of her head.

"Because you're what people like to describe as a spitfire, or dare I say, a firecracker."

"What?" She laughs and then coughs for a few seconds.

"Are you okay?"

She nods. "Fine." Once composed, she asks, "How am I a spitfire?"

"Uh . . . you announced to the world yesterday that you were going home to masturbate. Excuse me for being shocked, but I've only known you as the quiet girl serving coffee. I nearly swallowed my tongue and then wanted to ask you at least twenty questions about position and pulse."

"First of all, I didn't announce it to the world." We turn around, halfway done and she's doing great. "I announced it to a few people, three of whom weren't the least bit fazed. Secondly, what do you mean by pulse?"

I laugh out loud, and it's my time to cough for a few seconds. When I've gathered myself, I say, "You know, the pulse of going in and out."

"Oh, yeah. I just, you know, buzz the old golden zone. Not much in-and-out action. That's only on occasion."

I don't want to stop.

But . . .

I pause and she stops too, looking me up and down. "What?"

"I think next time we run, we don't talk about vibrators."

She chuckles and starts up again; I fall in line with her pace. "You're the one who brought it up."

Yeah, and now all I'm going to think about all day is "buzzing the old golden zone."

Fuck.



"DO you really call it the *old golden zone*?"

"Oh my God, Brig, get over it," Ruth says, tearing down a strip of wallpaper.

After we got back to Snow Roast, I was happy to see that not only did Ruth endure our one mile, but she seemed to endure it well. I'm pretty sure she could have gone longer, but the first day I wanted to keep it simple, not blow up her legs so she's wrecked for tomorrow.

We talked about the run. She said she was doing okay and that it wasn't as bad as she thought it was going to be but not to get any ideas about forming her into a runner. Little does she know, that's exactly what I'm trying to do. I'm still not completely sure why though. It's good for her. That's one reason . . . I have friends who could go running with me, but more often than not, I run alone. Especially since my brothers found their other halves. *Am I that lonely that I'd force a new friend to run with me? What gives, Knightly?*

I held the door open for her when we went into Snow Roast, she grabbed us cinnamon buns—not the best post-workout fuel—and we had coffee and talked about the task for the day: ripping down wallpaper.

"But . . . do you?"

"No," she says, exasperated. Turning toward me, she wipes her forehead with the back of her hand. "I don't really talk to myself when masturbating. Do you?"

I think about it. "Uh . . . not out loud. But I'm pretty sure I say things in my head like 'oh yeah' and 'fuck, that feels good'."

"And who are you talking to?" she asks, hand on her hip. She's wearing cut-off shorts again, her work boots, and a red tank top. How many of those tank tops does she have, and how come it's taken until now to see her in them? Wonder if she wore them around Snow Roast and I never noticed because she's always wearing an apron when there. Either way, they look good on her.

"I don't know, my hand?"

"So then you treat your hand like your lover?"

I chuckle. “My hand has been my only lover for a while, so I think some encouragement is a kind gesture. I’m sure you appreciate the heavy work your vibrator does.”

“It’s quick work. And remember, no emotions.”

“Sheesh.” I rip off a piece of wallpaper and toss it to the floor. “Do you allow yourself to feel any emotions?”

She’s mid-rip when she pauses. Just staring at the wall, she doesn’t move, and I feel like I struck a nerve that I didn’t mean to.

“Ruthie, I didn’t—”

“It’s fine.” She clears her throat and tacks on a smile. She finishes the strip she was ripping down and then says, “I’m uh, going to go get a drink. Want anything?”

“Hey,” I say, walking up to her and forcing her to look at me by lifting her chin. Her eyes quickly search mine, almost looking panicked, and I feel her retreat. The bold confidence is whittling away the more I stare at her, the more I hold her chin in my fingers. Resurrecting is the nervous, fidgety girl I know all too well. I’m learning that it’s her shield. Her protection against . . . *showing too much*. I don’t want her to retreat. I want the bold, sassy girl to stay. I don’t want Ruthie to hide how amazing she is. *Funny. Kind*. “I’m sorry if I said something that upset you.”

She lightly shakes her head. “No, it’s fine. I’m just being dumb.” She lets out a deep breath and then puts on the fakest smile I’ve ever seen. “Need anything to drink?” she asks again but in a chipper tone that doesn’t settle well with me.

“No, I need you to not brush me off and talk to me.”

“We don’t need to make a big deal about this, Brig, okay? Let’s just move on.”

“Yeah, I see where you would want to do that, given how it might make things awkward.” I scratch my cheek. “But that’s not how friendships work. The purpose of a friend is so you can confide in them, work through things. So”—I fold my arms over my chest and say—“go ahead, confide.”

“You think it’s that simple?”

“Couldn’t be easier. All you have to do is talk. It’s not like I’m asking you to do it while balancing on a rope forty feet in the air, holding a can of air freshener in one hand and a lady’s razor in the other.”

Her brows pull together. “Why those two things?”

“Can’t be sure.” I chuckle. “First things that came to mind.” I tap the side of my head. “You never can tell what’s going to come out of here.”

“Apparently.” When I don’t budge, she sighs and takes a seat on the ground, moving her hands behind her to prop her torso up. “Well, are you going to join me?”

“Let me grab drinks quickly.” I grab our water bottles from the cooler on the counter then join her on the floor. I rest my back against one of the still wallpapered walls and hand her the drink. “Okay, now tell me why you’re so emotionless.” I say it in a teasing tone, trying to lighten the mood.

Thankfully it works, because she smiles back at me. “Just talk, huh?”

“Yeah, like how you spoke about your vibrator this morning.”

“That was easy. This is much harder.”

“Good thing I’m patient and a good listener, huh?” I wink, and I catch her eyes darting from my mouth to my eyes before she turns away to stare intently at her water bottle.

“And persistent.”

“Get used to it . . . *neighbor*.”

She’s silent for a few more seconds and then says, “Losing my parents was devastating. Unexpected and instant. I lost the two most important people in my life when I wasn’t even close to being ready to understand it. Rather than spending my nights crying myself to sleep, I . . . became numb. It’s helped me survive. Emotions hurt . . . especially when they involve loss and people I love.”

“I can understand that.” *I can’t. I have no clue what that devastation feels like. God, I hope I never do.* “I couldn’t even imagine what it would feel like losing my parents, let alone at such a young age. But you know you can’t walk around the world numb, right, Ruthie?”

She nods. “I know. It’s hard to change though when something works so well, even if it’s an unhealthy habit. I’m trying to open up, to slowly change my way of thinking. It will take time, but I feel like I’ve spent too many years hiding.”

“I’m here if you ever need to talk.”

“I appreciate that,” she says barely sparing me a glance. She brings the water bottle to her lips and takes a large drink, and it makes me wonder. It took Griffin a long time to realize that he’d closed himself off from the world, from his family, from the idea of falling in love again after he lost Claire. As much as Ruth is saying the right words, does she know what it

would take to see the world differently? To not be numb? She's so . . . self-contained. Self-reliant. *Strong*. "Okay, we should get back to work." *Determined*.

"Yes, we should because I have plans for us later." *I didn't. But I do now.*

"Uh, what?"

"Well, we're running tomorrow, right?"

"Depends if I wake up with legs tomorrow."

"They don't disintegrate that fast. It's usually day two that's the worst, and if we run tomorrow, you'll feel better. But I can't have you running in those abominations you called running shoes this morning, because your legs really will fall off if you do."

"Are you saying you're taking me shoe shopping?"

"Yup." I smile. "Pottsmouth has an awesome running store that I go to all the time. I get a great discount now."

"Aren't you fancy," she says, standing up. I do as well. "And you don't have to take me, Brig. I'm sure you're busy. I can go tonight so I don't offend you with my shoes tomorrow."

Her voice is light, but I feel her brushing me off, and I don't like it. "Sorry, can't send you on your own. I want to help you pick out some shoes and we can use my discount. Sorry, Ruthie, you're stuck with me for another night."

"Aren't you afraid you're going to get sick of me?" she asks, going to the wall where she starts running the steamer over the wallpaper.

"Not in the slightest. You keep me on my toes. I don't think it's possible to get sick of you."

I give her a smile and catch a brief touch of crimson to her cheeks before she turns away. Looks like that's a yes.



TEN MINUTES before I'm meeting Ruth at Snow Roast, there's a knock at my door.

I quickly open it to see a messenger on the other side, holding an envelope. "Secret Pen Pal delivery."

"Christ, I could kiss you." I snatch the letter from the high schooler, who probably wants to dig his own grave for volunteering to tote love letters around this summer. "Thanks, pal."

"Sure," he says in a monotone voice and walks off down the hall.

Shutting the door, I run to the living room, jumping onto the couch and landing completely on my back. I tear the envelope open and see a recipe card and a letter with her signature red lips at the bottom.

I'm giddy.

Composing myself, I take a deep breath and read.

Dear Secret Pen Pal,

Because I'm always here to help, I included the recipe for the whoopie pies. I suggest you make your brother work for it. This isn't some regular recipe you find on the Internet. This is from my grandma's kitchen. Heads-up, I left out a secret ingredient, but he doesn't have to know that. It's another thing you'll have over him. He'll never be able to perfect the whoopie pies and you can thank me for that.

Favorite season, huh? Fall is beautiful. I agree with you about the certain crispness in the air, and I do enjoy when it turns into scarf weather, although I'm sure everyone on the Northeast would disagree with me. But fall isn't my favorite season. And if you guessed that winter might be my favorite because of the way the snow clings to the trees, you'd be wrong. Yes, it's pretty, especially after a fresh snowfall, but it's pretty for about a month, then it gets tiresome. Spring, well . . . spring is a hot mess. Melted snow, dirty slush in the parking lots. It's not quite pretty yet but trying to be pretty. Not my favorite, which leaves summer.

Summer reminds me of good memories.

Summer keeps me busy.

Summer helps me forget how lonely I am at times.

The best things happen in summer.

Summer rolls into fall, so at least our two seasons connect. We have that going for us.

Without exposing who you are, tell me your favorite childhood memory.

Can't wait to hear from you.

Hugs Right Back,

YSPP

I feel the smile pulling at my lips.

I feel the lightness in my shoulders.

I feel . . . happy.

Chapter Ten

RUTH

There's something about watching a guy drive a car that's satisfying to me.

Well, not just any guy.

Brig.

I've been trying to keep my eyes trained forward the entire trip to Pottsmouth, but it's been difficult, to say the least. Especially since he thought it would be fun to take out one of the Mustangs that he rents to tourists.

He pulled up to Snow Roast in a bright red 1965 convertible Mustang with matching red interior. Wearing a white T-shirt and black Ray-Bans, he took my breath away. And when he called out to me to get in the car, like some scene in a movie, I swooned hard.

How I went from yearning to talk to Brig about more than coffee orders to actually spending time with him, I have no idea. But here I am, driving up the coast of Maine in a convertible, wearing a simple white sundress and begging the question, *am I dreaming?*

Even though the car is automatic, he has kept one hand on the thin steering wheel and the other on the gear shift. Occasionally when he's looked over at me, I've felt my heart skip a beat.

The sun's shining, casting a warm glow on his bronze skin, his smile's stretched across his face, and his voice hums around me over the whip of the wind.

I've never enjoyed a trip to Pottsmouth as much as I've enjoyed this one.

We drive down Pottsmouth's sprawling Main Street and then turn down a side road, and I sit and watch Brig expertly parallel park. Smooth without any hitches.

When he cuts the engine, he angles toward me and asks, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah," I answer, opening the car door. "Are we close?"

"Just around the corner." He gets out as well and doesn't even bother locking up his car. What's the point when the top is down? He must have a lot of faith in the people of Maine.

We've only really walked down one sidewalk together before today, so I still feel awkward. I desperately want to hold his hand, but that's clearly not where our friendship's at. *What would he do if I reached out and took his hand in mine?* Would he hold it just so I didn't feel awkward? Pull away and ask me what the hell I was doing? Or would he grasp my hand, swing me around and push me up against the brick wall of the building we're walking next to, only to cup my chin and tell me he's been wanting to hold my hand for years?

Daydream much?

"I was just going to ask if you've ever been to Roadrunners but then I remembered your running shoes."

"To be honest, I didn't know there were stores specific to running accessories."

"Oh get ready, once I transform you into a runner, you're going to be coming here all the time."

We turn the corner and it's the first door on the left. Cased in a mostly brick building, a window display greets visitors, showcasing two mannequins in a wooded scene wearing similar running clothes to Brig's. I guess he does frequent this place.

The moment we step in, a bell sounds and a man with deep brown hair and matching beard greets us. "Brig, we haven't seen you in a while. How are you, man?"

"Hey Brock. Good," Brig says, walking up to the guy and giving him one of those one-handed guy hugs with a handshake. "Been busy." He glances around the store. "Looks like you have some new things in."

"A lot actually."

"Well, I'm ready to shop, but first things first." Brig steps to the side and gestures toward me to join them. "This is my friend, Ruth. She just

started running with me. Today was her first run and not to throw her completely under the bus, but the girl showed up in basketball shorts and Sketchers.”

I feel a blush creep up my cheeks, but instead of letting the embarrassment get to me, I say, “Thought I’d make a statement. You know, too cool for real running gear.”

Brock laughs and says, “That’s one way to do it, and one way to guarantee an injury.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“She needs shoes. And then I was going to suggest some spandex to prevent chafing.”

“I didn’t have chafing,” I say, a rise to my chin.

“You didn’t today, but once we start picking up mileage you’re going to wish you wore spandex.”

“He’s right,” Brock says. “And I’m not agreeing with him because this is my store and I’m pushing you to buy stuff. My wife, Evelyn, used to run in those cotton cheerleader shorts, and after a week, she was done and picked up some spandex. Let me get her out here actually, so she can discuss running bras as well.”

“Oh yeah, bras.” Brig looks down at me. “Were you wearing a running bra this morning?”

Okay, now I can feel my cheeks flame. “Umm, no.”

“Did your boobs hurt while running?”

Why do I want to shrivel up into nothing right now?

“My boobs were fine.”

“Are we talking boobs out there already?” A beautiful woman with the tiniest baby bump walks in from the back. Her hair is a gorgeous platinum blonde and she has the brightest green eyes I’ve ever seen. When she spots Brig, she looks so happy to see him. “Knightly, it’s about time you came to visit us. Who’s your friend?”

“Hey Evelyn. This is Ruth. She just started running, we had our first run together this morning. She didn’t wear a running bra.”

Didn’t need to add that to the introduction, but whatever.

Evelyn waves to me and then looks directly at my chest. “What did she wear?”

As if Brig is my translator, he asks, “What kind of bra did you wear?”

Why is this happening?

“Front clasp.”

He nods and turns to Evelyn. “Front clasp. The gift to all men.”

Evelyn props one hand on her lower back and looks at my breasts again. “She wouldn’t have jiggled out of it, she’s on the smaller side of breasts.” At that moment, Brock and Brig join her and stare at my breasts. Brig has his hand to his chin, taking me in.

“A handful it seems,” he says, and I just about die from total humiliation.

“The perfect handful,” Evelyn says. “She has bigger boobs than me, my dream size—not too big, not too small—but definitely runners-bra worthy. Even now with my pregnant boobs, I’d still wear one. I can take her back, get her fitted, and see what would be best.”

“That would be great. We don’t want a nip slip, as that would make headlines in Port Snow. Right, Ruthie?”

Swallowing hard, I nod. “Mrs. Davenport wouldn’t ever let me live it down.”

“Especially if you continue to wear those tank tops. We’re just playing with nipple fire.” He snaps his fingers. “Bra first, shoes second. I’ll be damned if my friend is made a mockery of in town.”

“Great.” Evelyn takes my hand. “Come with me, Ruth.”

“We’ll work on picking out some shoes that would work while you two are doing that,” Brig says, walking with Brock to the wall of shoes, as I’m dragged to the back by Evelyn. *What the hell just happened?*

We go into a dressing room where there’s a measuring tape hanging on a peg and a small bench where I assume you can put your clothes. Evelyn whisks the curtain closed and picks up the tape measure.

“So, how long have you liked Brig?” she asks as she starts moving the tape measure around me.

Uh . . . what?

She must catch the ghostly white pallor of my face, because she chuckles and says, “Don’t worry, it seems like the boy has no clue, and I won’t say anything. Not my place.”

“How . . . why . . .?”

She brings the measuring tape around my breasts and says, “The way you look at him. I noticed it right away, then again, I’m also very perceptive about those sorts of things. So how long?”

I don't even know this woman's last name and she already has me pegged and is running her hands all over my chest.

Do I confide?

When she pauses and waits for me to answer, I figure, probably. Doesn't seem like she's going to drop it.

"Far too long," I say quietly, a hint of shame in my voice.

"Well, that just won't do," she says, pulling away. She gives me a once-over and says, "We're going to get you fitted so when you go running with Brig, he won't be able to do anything but notice you."

"What does that mean?"

"Spandex and a bra will be your new workout gear."

"I don't know. I—"

"Can I tell you something?" Evelyn says, now putting her hand on her stomach, the measuring tape around her neck.

"Uh, sure," I say.

"I've known Brig for a while now and not once has he ever brought a girl here. He might be completely clueless when it comes to relationships, which is odd, given that's all he wants. But bringing you here, adding someone to his sacred running time, that's special. It might not seem like a lot, but knowing how important it is to him to run every morning, this is huge. And I think we should make the most of it, don't you?"

I twist my hands together. "No offense, but I don't even know you. I can't believe I confessed my feelings. I . . . oh God . . . I feel like I might throw up."

Evelyn quickly puts her arm around me and says, "Sorry, I might have come on too strong. I do that sometimes. I, uh, I tend to read people, I have some psychic capabilities that I don't talk about much. The minute I saw you, I just felt this power behind those beautiful eyes of yours. I felt the connection between you two. I have no idea what's in store, but I can tell you this: there's something special happening, so why not encourage it? Especially if it's something you've wanted for a while, right?"

Feeling exhausted from these last few days, I take a seat on the small bench. "I just wish he'd see me, you know? Like he sees other people. It's as if when he looks at me, he only sees me through a pinhole. He doesn't see the entire package, and it's frustrating. Makes me wonder if I'm good enough." I sigh and press my hand against my forehead. "Why am I telling you this?" I chuckle.

“Because it’s weighing heavily on you.” In her pregnant glory, she squats down in front of me and I try to move to the side so she can sit on the bench, but she keeps me in place, her hands on my knees. “Brig is different. Ever since he got back from New Orleans—”

“Oh God, the stupid curse.” I roll my eyes and Evelyn’s grip grows tighter on my knees.

“It might seem ridiculous to you, and I’m not saying they were cursed, but when put in a situation like that, when your inhibitions are heightened because of alcohol, what might not be completely real feels one hundred times more like reality. And then Griffin’s wife died a few days after, which is tough for someone in that situation to comprehend. Brig was one of them. Did you know that’s why he started running? He might brush it off as a joke with his brothers, but he was feeling incredible anxiety every day after Claire passed, and he needed a way to diffuse that. He ran casually before his birthday trip, but he became a serious runner after. He came to us for help, to ease that anxiety. The point is, he’s blinded right now, and he needs someone to help him lower the blinders and see the world he’s been missing out on for the past few years. It’s not that he doesn’t want to see you, Ruth. It’s that he can’t.”

“I . . . I didn’t know,” I say softly, my mind whirling with the info dump she just gave me.

“He doesn’t show it very often. I’m not sure he actually ever talks about the anxiety and fear he’s held on to from New Orleans. His brothers just laugh it off, and everyone else in town gossips about it. It might not have been real, but it still felt real to him. Claire was a sister to him and losing her like that, so abruptly, it did damage to his tenderhearted soul.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?” I ask, completely confused. I thought I was coming to get running shoes, not have a heart-to-heart with a complete stranger.

“Because, like I said, there’s something between you two, I can feel it. But there’s a barrier that needs to be broken down first. It’s not on your end, because there’s something within you that’s . . . turned a corner, and you’re exploring the idea of opening yourself up to love. Despite something in your past, you’re . . . *ready to love*. But Brig isn’t there yet, and he needs help.” She shrugs, and I stand there shocked.

She thinks I’m ready to love? After Brig said I was emotionless . . . But I can see the truth in both statements. I have held myself apart, as Brig

suggested, but since he's entered my everyday life in the last week, I do feel ready to love. So strange. So . . . hopeful. And now I have one of his *friends* ready to dress me in a way that may open Brig's eyes to see me. "I do want to help Brig be happy, Evelyn. He deserves that and more."

"Yes, he does, and if decking you out in eye-catching running gear helps, then that's what we do. Also, the first two outfits are on me. I want to see him happy just as much as you do."

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to. This isn't a ploy to get you to buy things. This is me, as Brig's friend, reaching out. You're special to him. He might not know it, but bringing you here, inviting you into his running world, that means something. Something big. As he tries to figure out why, let's give him a little show. Okay?"

I smile lightly. "Okay."

"Good. Now, let's go find you some outfits."

We pop out of the dressing room and into the front part of the store where Brig spins around and holds up a shoe.

"I found a red one, your favorite color." The look of pride on his face, that smile . . . God, I'm gone.

"Red's your favorite color?" Evelyn asks. "Well, we can easily work with that." She squeezes me tight and takes me to the racks of clothing, and I feel Brig's eyes on me the entire time. When I glance up, he smiles again and then like a goof, gives me a thumbs up.

If what Evelyn said is true, about Brig being blind to possibilities of love around him, then I really should help him open his eyes, show him that it's not that scary to open your heart, to see that he's not going to be alone forever. Not if he gives me a chance.



NIGHT HAS FALLEN over Port Snow, the cast-iron streetlamps are the only light illuminating the sidewalk outside Snow Roast. After I nearly bought out Roadrunners—not really, but felt like it—we stopped by Tanya's Tackle, a tackle and bait shop that also has a side window serving the best lobster rolls in the area. Sounds weird, but if you're from the area, eating lobster rolls from a bait shop doesn't even faze you. We sat in the convertible, played some old school sixties music, and ate our lobster rolls. It was sweet, perfect, and then we drove home, talking about the routes Brig wants to try out with me when I'm ready to start running farther.

After the money I spent at Roadrunners, I'm invested in this running thing now.

Brig puts the car in park and asks, "Do you want me to help you take your bags up to your apartment?"

I shake my head. "No, that's okay. I can handle them. You've truly done enough. And you didn't have to buy my shoes for me, but thank you."

"Of course I did. It was my idea to get you to run, so I wanted to contribute." His hands twist around the steering wheel. "So, tomorrow, same time?"

I open the door to the car and say, "Yeah, that sounds great." From the back seat, I grab my two bags and then step back from the car. "Thanks for taking me, Brig. I appreciate it."

His head tilts to the side, and I catch his eyes roam over me for a brief moment. As if confused, he lightly shakes his head and turns away. "Uh, yeah. Sure. It was fun. I'll see you tomorrow, Ruthie."

"Tomorrow," I say quietly as he pulls away. I don't move immediately. I stare at his taillights, Evelyn's words on repeat in my head.

I have to help him see again.

Tomorrow starts a new day.

I gained confidence being around Brig, and now it's time to help him open his eyes. And hopefully, once they're open, *they'll see me*.



I HAVE NEVER FELT SO EXPOSED in my entire life.

Good God, what would my mother think of me right now?

Standing outside of Snow Roast, I'm wearing a vibrant red pair of spandex shorts that barely reach my upper thighs and a white sports bra with red straps that loop around the side. It was a really cute outfit at the store, but wearing it now, in public, with Brig on his way, I can't help but feel a tiny bit . . . slutty.

Evelyn gave me her number when I was on my way out of the store and she told me to send her a picture this morning. I did just that and told her I was putting a shirt on.

She demanded I didn't, told me I looked great, and assured me that my outfit was the exact wakeup call Brig needed.

The only positive about all of this? The red shoes Brig picked out for me are extremely comfortable and even though I feel exposed, the clothes feel great too. Evelyn fitted me perfectly.

Staring at my new shoes, I hear someone jogging and look up just in time for Brig to spot me.

And it's the perfect reaction. All that worry, all that uneasiness quickly vanishes as he slowly peruses me from my feet all the way to my head.

Surprised, his eyebrows are practically kissing his hairline, and he runs his hand over his mouth as he steps up to me. "Ruthie, wow . . . you look." He clears his throat. "You look great."

Not wanting to make much of the outfit, because I've never been the Carrie Bradshaw type who spins around and shows off what she's wearing, I say, "Thanks." I push off the building and say, "Surprisingly, I'm not really sore this morning. I thought I was going to be—hey, are you okay?" I ask as Brig's eyes are fixed on my chest.

He snaps out of it quickly and says, "Huh, what?"

A small smile creeps over my lips and I decide to tease him. "Why Brig Knightly, are you checking me out?"

"Uhh . . ." He pulls on the back of his neck. "I don't know, was I?"

Chuckling, I say, "You tell me. What was the last thing you were just looking at?"

I catch the lightest shade of pink caress his cheeks. "I think it was your toes."

"My toes are covered by shoes."

"Did I say toes? I meant, uh . . . fingers. Yup, your fingers."

I put both hands on my hips and say, "Brig, you were looking at my boobs."

"Was I?" He tries to laugh it off but fails miserably and drags his hand down his face. "Only because Evelyn was making a big deal about them yesterday. I wanted to know what all the hoopla was about."

"Is that right?"

He nods.

"And what's the conclusion?" I ask, trying to hold back the shake in my hands.

"They're . . . uh . . . nice." His cheeks darken and oh my God, I wish I was alone so I could do a happy dance.

Brig thinks my boobs are nice.

Talk about a great way to start my morning.

"Thanks," I answer, so much excitement in my voice that it comes out squeaky. On a high, not controlling anything that comes out of my mouth, I

say, "I grew them myself."

Ehhh . . .

Brig's head perks up and he grins. "As opposed to someone else growing them? Are there gardeners that mainly focus on the mammary glands that I'm unfamiliar with?"

"Yes. Boob-a-culturalists. Costs decent money, but they produce perky results."

His head falls back as he laughs, his Adam's apple bobs up and down his strong neck, and it's hot. Really hot.

"If only I knew about such an occupation when I was trying to figure out what to do. Instead of fine-tuning old cars, I could have been helping boobs meet their full potential." *And wouldn't Brig have a long waiting list with all the women statewide, wanting the gorgeous man to be their boob-a-culturalist!*

"Missed opportunity." I chuckle and say, "Are we going to stand here all day and talk about boobs or are we going running?"

"I'm game for both."

Rolling my eyes, I start jogging the same way we did yesterday, only for him to fall in line with me. "Just so you know, I think you look great in your new gear. Not sure I mentioned that amidst the checking out of your boobs."

Now it's my time to blush. "Thank you. It already feels better to have the proper shorts on."

"So does this mean you're a solid running partner?"

I glance over at him and say, "Let's see how the first week goes before we become official."

A victorious smile plasters itself across his face. "Deal."



AFTER AN EGG and bacon sandwich and a bottle of water, I parted ways with Brig and went up to my apartment where I found a blue letter had been delivered at my doorstep.

When on earth did he write this? And oh my God, I hope he didn't see it delivered.

I make my way into the apartment, crash on my couch, and open the letter.

I'm hit with the smell of his cologne and it makes me snort with laughter.

Of course he'd start spraying his letters. That's so Brig.
Feeling giddy, I read his beautiful cursive.

Dear Secret Pen Pal,

I feel like you delivered gold with your last letter. That recipe is going to be so clutch when I plan out my week for how to annoy my brother. This will drive him crazy. Thank you.

Funny how you like summer when I want it to end most of the time. Although, I've been enjoying my summer so far. It's been crazy with tourists, yes, but they also support Port Snow and help make it the awesome town it is. The most annoying part of summer is when they crowd Snow Roast. I get it, the coffee cake is amazing, but I need my daily fix. Crowd anywhere else, just not there. Do you feel the same way? I guess I don't know if you're a coffee or tea drinker. I like both. But I'm also a sucker for a pastry of any sort, hence the whole in love with your whoopie pie thing.

Favorite childhood memory, hmm . . .

This might be a little inappropriate, but one of my brothers was KNOWN for hanging out in his room as a teenager, stroking things . . . if you catch my drift. So one day, my other brothers (when our parents were gone, of course) staged a fake fire while he was doing the dirty with his hand. We screamed in the kitchen that there was a fire, had the smoke alarms going off, and waited as our brother came flying down the stairs in his boxers, sporting a boner. The look of mortification is something I will never forget. Easily my favorite memory.

This reminds me, I should probably bring up that moment with my brothers again. It's been a while since I have.

*Sending Hugs,
YSPP*

Chapter Eleven

BRIG

Brig: Remember the time Reid came flying down the stairs in nothing but boxers and a boner?

Griffin: Oh fuck, that was one of my favorite days of all time.

Rogan: Why do I envision the tenting so well?

Reid: Probably because you lesser men admired the tenting.
#DaddyBigCock Griffin: Don't call yourself that.

Rogan: That was douchey.

Brig: Total douche.

Griffin: Then again, wouldn't expect anything less from Reid. He's always been the biggest douche in town.

Rogan: Bigger than Tracker, you think?

Brig: Tracker isn't a douche, he's a player.

Reid: I'm not a douche.

Griffin: Have you ever read the word douche too many times and want to add a KER to it? Like . . . ker-douche.

Rogan: No

Reid: Not once.

Brig: All the time. Ker-douche. Ker-douche. Ker-douche.

Rogan: Why do I say that out loud and think of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang?

Reid: I just said it out loud multiple times and thought the same thing.

Brig: Don't bring Chitty into this. He does not deserve to be compared with a douche.

Jen: Do you know who's a douche? That creepy toy-loving, twinkle-toes king. What a whack job.

Griffin: Never liked the guy.

Rogan: Who did?

Brig: Reid liked him.

Griffin: And that's why Reid is a douche.

Brig: I love it when things come full circle.

Reid: Let me guess . . . makes your nipples hard?

Brig: Not as hard as your dick during the epic Knightly Kitchen Fire.

Griffin: Now it's full circle.

Brig: Old lady dance flossing GIF

Rogan: Monica Gellar bouncing beaded hair off breasts GIF

Griffin: Ron Swanson dancing into office GIF

Jen: SNL Target Lady raising the roof GIF

Reid: Will Smith scratching head while flipping the bird GIF



"HEY MOM," I say, walking into my childhood kitchen and planting a kiss on her cheek. "Smells good." I look over her shoulder into the pot of my dad's famous chili. "Does he know you're touching it?"

"No, and you better not tell him."

Chuckling, I ask, "Where is the old man?"

"Bathroom." I watch as she secretly adds a few more dashes of onion powder into the mix and gives it a stir.

"Does he know you do that?"

"What do you think?" my mom asks, stepping away and acting as if she didn't just toy with my dad's prize-winning chili.

"Do you do that every time?"

She raises a brow and says, "Behind every great man is an even better woman, adding onion powder when the man is too stubborn to admit it's needed."

I let out a barrel of a laugh just as my dad walks into the kitchen. "Brig, how are you?"

"Good, Dad, how are you?"

"Feeling pretty great. Rogan was telling me about all the help you've been offering Ruth from Snow Roast. Awfully kind of you." He wiggles his eyebrows.

“Oh my, is there something going on I don’t know about?” Mom asks just as Rogan and Harper step inside from the deck.

“Nothing’s going on, but we’re friends. She’s my work neighbor and she’s trying to do all the renovations herself. Didn’t feel right knowing she was over there tearing up the floor alone.”

“Oh, you’re talking about Ruth,” Rogan says. “Did Brig tell you he’s running with her every morning? Been at it for a week now, right?”

“She’s stressed. Thought it would help her.”

Joining in, Harper says, “I caught Brig staring at her boobs the other day at Snow Roast after one of their runs.”

“Brig,” my dad says sharply. “We don’t stare at breasts unless they belong to us. I married your mother, therefore I get to stare at her boobs whenever I want. But you need to put a ring on it first.”

“I wasn’t staring at her boobs,” I say, even though I know it’s a lie.

“I have photographic evidence,” Harper says, with a pop of her hip.

“Ugh, fine, I might have been staring, but they were all glistening, and those bras she wears . . . hell, they make her boobs all perky. Anyway, it’s hard not to stare, okay?”

“I don’t have a problem with it,” Rogan says with a smirk.

“That’s because you already have a pair to stare at.” I point to Harper.

“Still can resist.”

“Whatever,” I say like a petulant child, as I grab a can of Sprite from the fridge and head to the table. “Are we going to plan out this rehearsal dinner or what?”

“Not quite yet,” Mom says, leaning against the kitchen counter. “I want to know more about this relationship with Ruth. I always thought you two would be the perfect couple.” *Wait . . . what? Since when—* “I think everyone in town thinks that,” Rogan mutters while taking a seat.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Rogan says while Harper elbows him in the arm.

“Wouldn’t they be cute together?” Mom asks Dad.

He’s busy stirring his chili when he says, “Yeah, sure. They’re wonderful.”

My mom waves at my dad, dismissing him. “Have you asked her out?”

“What? No.” I shake my head. “She’s my friend, Mom. Plus, I’m sort of seeing someone.”

Rogan snorts and Harper elbows him again.

“I *am*.”

“Are you?” Rogan asks. “If you’re seeing someone, tell me what she looks like.”

“Oh yes, do you have a picture?” Mom asks with excitement. “It’s been so long since you’ve dated. I’m glad you’re finally at it again.”

“I don’t have a picture.” I clear my throat. “I don’t technically know who she is.”

“What?” Mom asks as Dad hums about his cornbread being the best cornbread there is. “How do you not know who she is?”

Hating the giant smirk on Rogan’s face—this was his idea anyway—I say, “It’s a program Mrs. Davenport created called the Summer of Love. Basically, people applied, she matched them up, and we send letters to each other. I don’t know who she is, but after a week of letters, I can already feel myself getting captivated by her.”

Insane, I know, but sometimes when you know, you know. I can feel my mind maturing, because I’ll do everything in my power to hold on to this, to nurture it, and make sure I bring this relationship to life. I’ve never felt this before.

And then I’ll be cured.

No one can stop our relationship morphing from letter writing into a true, full-fledged relationship. SPP is my future, thank fuck. There is no way I can fail. No way she won’t be mine.

“What if it’s Walter tricking you again?”

“I asked Mrs. Davenport if the girl was real. She said very much real and that she actually lives here in Port Snow. She said she shouldn’t have told me that, but she was so excited about our match. It gave me relief, knowing she’s a real person and I’m not being tricked.”

“Oh how exciting. I wonder who it could be.” Mom taps her chin. “Maybe Mrs. Farrel’s granddaughter. She moved here for the summer and is considering staying to help out at the gas station.”

“She has a granddaughter?” I ask as Harper and Rogan whisper to each other. I can’t hear what they’re saying, but they’re making a big enough deal to distract me. “Care to share?” I ask.

Harper looks up, guilt laced in her eyes. “Nope.”

Sitting taller in my chair, I say, “Do you know something?”

“No,” she says way too quickly.

“You do know something.” I’m practically out of my seat now. “What do you know, Harper?”

“Nothing.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “And I would appreciate it if you didn’t interrogate me. I’m sensitive with all the wedding planning. The last thing I need is a little brother asking me questions. Now, can we please focus on the rehearsal dinner, the reason we’re here?”

I don’t believe her.

Not one bit.

She’s hiding something, and I’m bound and determined to figure it out.

“Fine, we can get on with the rehearsal dinner, but you’re not off the hook. I’ll be figuring out what you’re hiding from me.”

“Good luck,” Rogan says and pulls out a notebook from his back pocket. “Let’s get on with it.”



“WHAT THE HELL, RUTH?” I say when I walk inside the Parlor and see the walls completely covered in the white paint we picked out yesterday. “I thought I was going to help you.”

She sets down a roller and wipes the back of her hand over her forehead, brushing away some loose hairs. “I got a jump start and then just thought I would do the whole thing. Wasn’t bad.”

“Did you prime?”

She gives me a *get real* look. “Of course I primed.”

“How on earth did you do it all without me?”

“I’m not incapable, Brig.”

“That’s obvious.” I sigh, looking over all her work. “I’m sad.”

“Sad?” she asks, brushing her hands off on her shorts, and that’s when I catch those denim shorts again. Although, her legs are more toned from our morning runs. “Why are you sad, Brig?” She goes over to the register countertop and pulls out a tray of sandwiches from underneath. “Don’t be sad when I have things for you to taste test.”

That’s one way to perk me up.

“Are you serious?” I ask, far too excited.

“Yeah, it’s why I got this done ahead of time. I wanted to surprise you, to spend the rest of the day going over samples of what I’ll be serving. Heard you’re a sucker for pastries.”

“Are you saying there’s more than just sandwiches hidden under the counter?”

“Possibly.” She eyes me playfully. “Are you still sad?”

“Nope.” I shake my head. “Not even a little. You can paint all you want. Give Daddy the goods.”

“Oh my God, please don’t ever call yourself that.” She chuckles and moves to the back room where she brings out two chairs and a folding table.

“What’s this?” I ask, watching as she creates a cute dining set for us. Not speaking a word, she moves back to the counter, pulls out a tablecloth and sets it on the table, followed by a bud vase with a single wildflower in it. Teacups, dainty plates, and a thermos are added to the table next. When she’s done, she looks at her display in appreciation and then back at me.

“Care to join me?”

“Fuck yeah.” I take a seat and try not to knock the table with my legs as I get comfortable.

She takes a seat as well, unveils the sandwiches and starts divvying them up.

After our run, I spent all morning helping my parents with some projects around the house while the boys took care of the garage. At this point, I don’t do much work there unless I want to. I expected to come to the Parlor and paint, not sit across from Ruth and taste test sandwiches, but I’ll tell you right now, I’m not mad about it.

“How do you have time to do it all?”

“Woke up early, did some things before our run.”

“So you’re trying to tell me you’re superwoman?”

“Maybe.” She smirks, glancing at me for a second so I can catch the smile in her eyes.

It’s endearing . . . charming.

There’s something about Ruth that I can’t quite figure out. Something . . . I like. Her naturally blonde hair looks silky soft, the cute slope in her nose highlights a light splattering of freckles under her eyes, and her lips . . . they’re, hell, they’re full and pouty but not on purpose. Just naturally pouty.

Do I . . . hell, do I find my friend attractive?

As she delivers tea to each of our cups, I scan her once again.

She does have great tits; I’ve stared at them enough to know that. Her smile captures me, makes me smile as well. And those eyes of hers. Call me an asshole, but I’ve always been into blue eyes. But brown, deep, sultry brown with thick black lashes, now there is a pair of eyes I could— “Are you listening, Brig?”

“What? Yes. Tea.”

One of her eyebrows rises in question. She doesn't even have to point it out anymore.

“I was admiring your freckles,” I say with a grin.

Caught off guard, probably not expecting that comment, her fingers run over her freckles as she says, “Oh . . . uh, thanks.”

“They suit you.”

“Well, haven't heard that before. I used to get picked on for my freckles.”

I frown. “Who the hell picked on you?”

“Doesn't matter. Let's get to the sandwiches. Now, the circle one is—”

I place my hand on hers and ask again, “Who picked on you?”

“Brig, it was high school. It doesn't matter.”

“Yes, it does.” And then a sick feeling washes over me. “Fuck, was it me?”

“What?” Her eyes widen. “No. Is that . . . is that something you did?”

“No.” I shake my head quickly. “But I was also an idiot back then, still kind of am.”

“It wasn't you.”

“Was it one of my brothers?”

“Brig, let's drop it, okay? Let's just focus on the sandwiches.”

I sit back in my chair and fold my arms across my chest. “Which brother was it? I will slap their balls so hard—”

“It was Tracker,” she says, exasperated.

“My friend, Tracker?”

“Are there more Trackers here in Port Snow?”

“Right.” I take out my phone from my pocket and start typing out a text.

“What are you doing?” she asks in a panic.

“Making things right.”

“No. No need to do that.” I don't listen to her and continue to type. “Brig, I'm serious.” Still typing. “Brig.” She gets up from her chair and comes over to my side, making a swipe for my phone. Just in time, I move it out of her reach, but she doesn't stop. She puts one hand on my shoulder and propels herself forward to reach for the phone, only to tip us both backward in the chair. My legs fly up, hit the table in front of me, scattering the delicious food and charming place settings to the ground.

Glass breaks.

The thermos clatters to the floor.

Sandwiches split open.

It's an utter disaster.

Ruth lands on top of me, her soft breasts landing on my face.

And then she pauses.

The only remaining sound is a tray swirling closer and closer to the floor until it finally falls flat.

"Great view," I say, my voice garbled as I talk against her boobs.

"Oh my God," she says, scrambling to get off me.

I grab her by the waist and settle her down as her knees swing awfully close to my sensitive man area. "Please don't knee me in the balls," I say quickly, so she understands what I'm trying to do.

"What?" She sits up and that's where I find her, straddling my lap, cheeks flushed, hair a little messy and mother of fuck . . .

Hands on her hips.

Pelvises connected.

Heavy breathing . . .

I'm . . . hell, I'm turned on.

I'm turned on and she's sitting on my lap.

Abort, abort. Get her off.

Without even thinking, I toss her to the side where her arms fly out and land directly on the discarded sandwiches as she smears them across the floor.

Hell.

"Shit, Ruthie, I'm sorry."

"That's . . . okay," she says as she struggles to get up.

"Are you okay?" I scramble to help, but I'm slow due to the ache in my groin.

"This was a bad idea. I'm . . . I'm sorry." She sits up and when she turns around, I see sandwich smeared all down her chest. Fuck. "I think I should go wash these off." She stands and starts to walk toward the door when I finally get up from the floor and catch her before she leaves.

"Let me drive you back to your place."

She shakes her head, avoiding all eye contact with me. "It's fine. I can walk."

"Ruth, let me drive you—"

“I said it’s fine, Brig,” she snaps and then takes off quickly down the street toward Main.

Fuck.

Hand in hair, I glance back at the mess of the table.

Broken teacups and plates.

Discarded sandwiches.

Tea spilled all over her new floor.

All because I can’t control the blue balls in my pants.

I feel like a complete jackass.



IT’S BEEN LONG ENOUGH.

I open the door to Snow Roast and go to the counter where Beck is drying off a few mugs.

“What’s up, Brig?”

“Hey, uh, do you know where Ruth is?”

“Went up to her place. Why, what did you do to her?”

“Why do you think I did something to her?” I ask.

“She came in here, told me to close, and then went to her place. There were tears in her eyes.”

“What? Really?” I ask, my gut immediately starting to churn. “Fuck. How do I get up to her apartment?” Not answering, Beck just studies me. “Please,” I beg.

He sighs and nods to the back of the coffee house.

“Thank you,” I say, taking off toward the back where I see a set of stairs. Just like me, she lives above her business, and I take the stairs two at a time into a small hallway with a red door at the end.

I can’t believe she was crying.

The last thing I want to do is make Ruthie cry.

I hurry to the door and knock on it, bouncing on my feet, waiting for her to answer.

Footsteps sound toward the door, locks are undone, and the door parts. Standing in a pair of cotton shorts and another one of her classic tank tops, I notice her eyes are rimmed in red, and her hair is wet from a shower.

“Brig,” she says in surprise, quickly wiping at her eyes. “I, uh, I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I’m sorry,” I say quickly. “I’m sorry I upset you.”

“It’s fine.” She keeps the door mostly closed so only I can see a small sliver of her body.

“It’s not. You’re clearly upset. Beck said you came back from the Parlor upset, and I know it was me who did that. Was it the plates? Were they heirlooms? I swear, I’ll find them and buy you new ones.”

She shakes her head. “No, they weren’t. And I’m just . . . I’m sorry that I made things awkward. I should have never set up that table like that. I was trying to—”

Through the crack in the door, I press my fingers over her mouth to silence her. “Come with me.”

“What?”

I grab her hand that’s holding on to the edge of the door and I say, “Just come with me.”

“Wait, I need shoes.” She’s halfway out the door when she slips on sandals and shuts the door behind her.

Hand in hand, I walk her down the stairs, to the back of the building where my red Mustang is parked.

“You drove here?”

“To get here quicker,” I say, opening the door for her and closing it after she sits down.

In silence, we drive back to the garage and to the Parlor where I park. We both get out of the car and I bring her to the front of her space where I open the door for her, revealing an old wooden table from The Lobster Landing and two wooden chairs—one a faded blue, the other a mustard yellow.

The table is set for tea and instead of sandwiches, I found the pastries she was going to share and set them up on one of my mom’s tiered dessert servers. On plates in front of each place setting is half a baked bean sandwich from Knight and Port.

“Wh-what’s this?” she asks, stepping closer.

“I wanted to make it up to you. I’m sorry that I pushed you with the whole Tracker thing. Had I not done that, I wouldn’t have ruined your display. I didn’t have time to research tea sandwiches so I ran to Knight and Port. We have the pastries to taste test though. That’s if you still want to.”

When I glance at her, there’s a beautiful smile pulling at her lips. She looks up at me and nods. “I would like to taste test still.” And then she steps forward, into my space, wrapping her arms around my waist and pressing

her cheek to my chest. She holds me tight, enveloping me into a comforting warmth that feels so foreign to me.

Fuck . . .

When was the last time I hugged someone who wasn't family? Felt the touch of another human being, even if she's just a friend?

It's been a long time, and I'm not sure if that's why this feels so good, or if there's another reason why Ruth feels amazing in my arms.

I squeeze her back, holding on a little longer than I expect.

She looks up at me, her chin on my chest and she says, "Thank you, Brig. I appreciate it." Her eyes glitter as they connect with mine, her smile's contagious, and those freckles . . . what would happen if I started joining them with my finger?

"Uh yeah, you're welcome," I say awkwardly, realizing my mind is starting to wander into dangerous no-friend zone territory. "Shall we?" I gesture to the table and she nods.

"Is it weird even though we just had baked bean sandwiches, I'm still craving one?"

"Not even in the slightest," I answer, pulling her chair out for her. "When Reid brought the sandwich over, I almost devoured it right then and there but figured that would negate the point of getting one for you and me to share."

"I'm glad you didn't."

Once at the table, I say, "Dig in." There's something to be said about a girl who can appreciate a baked bean sandwich. Usually people balk at it, sneer, but those who truly appreciate it, they are keepers.

"How about we don't let awkward stuff float between us anymore? We just say it like it is," I suggest.

"Are you sure you can handle that? You did state that you can only dish it, not take it." She smirks over her sandwich.

"That's very true, but for the sake of our friendship, I think we should lay it all out there."

"Okay, that seems fair."

"Which means, no running off and crying if I hurt your feelings."

"You didn't hurt my feelings, I was just embarrassed."

"Why?" I ask, taking another bite of my sandwich, nearly done. I should have bought one for each of us. What the hell was I thinking?

"So we're telling the truth?"

“Yup.”

“Okay.” She sets her sandwich down and looks me in the eyes. “I was unintentionally straddling you, you looked horrified, and then shoved me off you. I didn’t mean to end up in that position, but it just happened . . . and I felt like it was disgusting to you.” She shrugs. “Just embarrassing is all.”

Oh Ruth.

I chuckle and shake my head. “Yeah, about that.” I pull on the back of my neck, wishing we weren’t suddenly truthful with each other. “So, I should be the one that’s embarrassed.”

“Why?” she asks, looking adorably confused.

“Well, I was kind of getting . . . turned on.”

Her eyebrows shoot up to her hairline in surprise. “Turned on as in . . .”

“As in boner town was coming in fast, and I didn’t want you thinking I was some creep who gets easily turned on by his friends—which apparently I am.”

“Oh.” She smirks. *Which is really cute.*

“I wasn’t disgusted by you, it was the exact opposite.”

“Okay,” she says and turns back to her sandwich while trying to hold back her smile.

“You were all warm and your thighs were hugging me and those jeans shorts. Come on, you’re killing me with the jeans shorts.”

“Uh-huh,” she says, biting into her sandwich.

“And . . . you know, it’s been a while, so things get excited quickly.”

“Sure, Brig.”

“Stop it with that . . . with those short answers,” I say. “I’m not a creep.”

“I know you’re not a creep. It’s just nice to be appreciated is all.”

“Why do you say that? You mean that line of men I see at Snow Roast every morning is just for coffee? Not your number?”

She snorts and shakes her head. “Can’t tell you the last time I went on a date. Trust me, they’re there for coffee.” She finishes up her sandwich as I think about it.

How come no one has asked Ruth out?

She’s pretty . . . well, more than pretty, she’s beautiful, especially when she’s in the sun and her freckles darken along the bridge of her nose.

She’s kind, caring, a warm person, someone you can rely on.

And funny. Fuck, is she funny. Really fucking funny, has fabulous timing, knowing the precise moment when to tease you.

And determined. She hasn't complained once while running with me but has run every route I've given her. She's held strong, kept up.

She's a catch.

Then again, I didn't know any of that about her until I got to know her. She's reserved when she's working. Maybe people need to see her beyond the coffee counter like I have.

"It looks like you're trying to compute some large numbers in your head over there." She crosses one leg over the other and leans back in her chair while taking a sip of water.

"Just thinking of all your good attributes. You have quite a few."

"Is that so? Like what?"

"Fuck no, I'm not about to sit here and go on about how great you are just to boost your ego. Nice try." I chuckle. "But it is surprising that no one has asked you out."

"Oh, I've been asked out. Just haven't taken any offers."

"What? Why not? If someone asked me out, I'd be all over that."

She's staring down at her lap, but her eyes lift up briefly to mine as she quietly says, "Just waiting for the right person."

The way she's looking at me, shy but confident, it's making my head feel like mush, as if I can't comprehend this conversation. Spinning and twirling, her words don't quite compute, so I can't make sense of it. It feels like all the thoughts in my head are garbled and out of order.

But something does make sense.

Waiting for the right person . . .

"Maybe I should try doing that," I say softly.

"Doing what?" Ruth asks.

"Wait for the right person. Maybe that's been my problem all along. Chasing after something I had no right chasing after."

. . . It isn't until your minds have matured

That the weight of this curse will forever be cured.

Mature mind . . .

Maybe the chase is what's gotten me in trouble, because when I wasn't chasing, it felt like an opportunity fell right in my lap.

My pen pal.

"Are you . . . chasing now?"

I shake my head. “Nah, haven’t found anyone.” Her shoulders sag as she picks up her napkin and starts to tear the ends very slowly. “There is someone I’ve been talking to. And from what I know of her, she’s awesome.” I don’t mention Summer of Love because frankly, I think I might be the only semi-sane person who allowed Mrs. Davenport to match them up with someone. I already have the boner thing going for me with Ruth, so I can’t possibly mention Summer of Love during the same sitting.

“That’s cool,” she sighs and looks to the side where the pastries rest. “Should we taste these?”

“Hell yeah.” I shove the rest of my sandwich into my mouth, ready to get my pastry on. “So who’s asked you out?”

She shakes her head. “No one worth talking about.”

She almost sounds defeated when she answers. Huh, did I say something wrong? She’d tell me if I did, right? That’s what we spoke about, being honest with each other.

“Have you ever been into someone but not known how to approach those feelings?” I ask her as she starts dividing up the pastries onto each of our plates.

Scones.

Mini frosted cakes.

A cinnamon-looking thing that’s twisted in the middle.

Whoopie pies.

I’m in heaven.

“Yes,” she says, looking me square in the eyes.

“You have? Who?” I ask, rubbing my hands together. These pastries look fucking amazing, and I’m about to devour all of them in one bite. “Do I know him? Is it Oliver over at the general store? I swear that guy has a story to tell. A dark horse, that one. I can see the appeal.”

“I’m not telling you.”

“Ah, come on. You have to tell me. Has it been a long crush?”

She clears her throat. “Very long.”

“Oh damn, which means . . . you haven’t done anything about it.”

Shaking her head, she says, “Not until recently.”

“Really?” I can feel excitement bubble up inside me. I love a good fucking love story. Maybe I can help Ruth make a move on this guy, especially if she’s liked him for so long. Then I notice her recoil. “I mean, you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to.”

Okay, was hoping she’d answer that differently.

“Ugh, Ruthie, you’re killing me. You know I like to know everything that’s happening in this town.”

“Yeah, and you have a big mouth too.”

“True, but I would keep your secret.” I clutch my heart. “You’re special to me, and the people who are special to me are the ones who—”

“Aren’t you the one who informs the town of all the things happening with your brothers?”

Mouth agape, I sit a little taller and say, “That’s the brother tax. Being the youngest, it’s my duty to be a nuisance after the torture they put me through growing up. Secrets don’t count with brothers.”

“Yeah, I’m not trusting you.”

“That hurts,” I say playfully. “You’re truly cutting me deep, Ruthie.”

“Pretty sure you’ll survive.” She holds up the whoopie pie, a smile playing on her lips as she says, “You’ll never taste a better one.”

We’ll see about that. I have it on good authority who makes the best whoopie pies ever. Well, I don’t really know the person, but I do know she wears red lipstick and enjoys kissing paper just for me.

“Pretty sure I had the best whoopie pie of my life the other day.” I bring the whoopie pie to my mouth. “But I’ll . . . oh damn, is that peanut butter frosting in the middle?” She nods, her eyes looking eager, her body leaning forward. “It’s really fucking good. Wow, so soft and, the chocolate. Hell . . .” I take another bite. “This is approved. Must have on the menu.” I lick my fingers clean, pulling my lips over my long digits. “You know what’s funny? That girl I’ve been talking to, she likes peanut butter in the middle of her whoopie pies too.”

“Oh, is that right?” Ruth says, her voice taking on a sarcastic tone.

“Yeah, she sent me some the other day, not with peanut butter, but man, they tasted just like this. Ha, what if you know her? That would be funny.”

“What’s her name?”

“Uh,” I awkwardly laugh. “You know, since you’re keeping your secret man to yourself, I’m going to keep my lady to myself as well.”

“That’s fair.” She passes it off as if it’s no big deal.

“Nooo, you’re supposed to beg me to know who this girl is that I’m talking about.”

“Not interested.” She picks up one of the mini cakes and pops it into her mouth.

Also not a response I was expecting. How could she be so casual about this? Isn't she even faintly curious? I know I am. I want to know who this guy is and why the hell she hasn't made a move on him yet.

Instead of fixating on it though, I shove a mini cake in my mouth as well. When the sweet and bold flavors glide over my tongue, I groan in satisfaction. “Goddamn, woman, this is good. You know what?” I shake my head vehemently. “This isn't going to work out.”

“What's not going to work out?” she asks in confusion.

“You being next door.” I pick up another cake and pop it into my mouth like it's popcorn. “I'm going to eat everything, and I'm trying to maintain my physique here.”

“Maybe you should pick up a different workout partner then, someone who isn't just starting.”

“Oh, fuck no.” I point at her. “Nice try, Ruthie, but you're not getting off that easily. Although, given how long it's been since you've been with someone, you might get off easily.”

Her face flattens as she folds her arms over her chest. “At least I don't fall down Arousal Avenue when one of my friends straddles me.”

“For Christ's sake . . . it was an accident.”

She chuckles and holds out her scone. “This is best with jam and clotted cream.” And just like that, her smile is back, her carefree spirit matches mine, and I feel our souls aligned again. And I think I've found my new best friend.



“SO, who's this guy Ruthie's been crushing on for years?” I say, leaning over the counter of Snow Roast while Rylee, Beck, and Ruth clean up for the night.

It's been a few days since the boner incident and every day I've seen Ruth, she's asked if her clothes were too revealing, saying she didn't want to arouse me again.

Fucking smart-ass.

Just so you know, no. I wasn't aroused . . . at least not every day. There's this one sports bra she purchased. It's hot pink and does a shit job of limiting the bounce in her boobs, and from my peripheral vision, all I could see was her bouncing tits. Yeah, it got to me a little.

At least I'm honest about it.

When you have a boobie friend, it's hard not to notice things like that.

Rylee and Beck both pause what they're doing and look at Ruthie. They have that *deer in the headlights* look on their faces.

Just as I suspected. They know who it is. I pull out my wallet and retrieve two white cards with red lettering. I wave them at Rylee and Beck and say, "Two free half pounds of fudge at The Lobster Landing for whoever spills the deets. Lucky for you two, you're married, so only one of you has to be a betraying friend. I choose Rylee, since Beck is an employee and all."

Ignoring me, Rylee turns to Ruth and says, "Uh, you told Brig you've had a crush on someone for years?"

Working on her computer, catching up on some accounting, she says, "Yeah, but I didn't tell him who it was so keep your mouths shut."

"Oh, that's amazing," Rylee says, laughing.

"Shut up, Rylee."

"Ohhh, I can sense some tension. Please, someone misstep and tell me who it is. My guess is Oliver. Am I right? Beck, if it's Oliver, blink twice." He blinks, but I'm not sure if it's to answer my question or not. "Was that a double blink? Dude, you're going to have to be less discreet than that. Slow down for Papa and really make the blinks distinct."

"Beck, go to the back and wrap up anything that needs to be put away," Ruth bellows from the side.

He doesn't even spare me a glance, but instead flings a towel over his shoulder and heads to the back.

"Hey, I was just getting somewhere with him." Turning to Rylee now, I ask, "Is it Oliver?"

"No, it isn't."

"Rylee," Ruth snaps at her friend.

"Do I know him?"

"Oh, you sure do," Rylee says with a mischievous smile.

"Rylee, back. Now," Ruth snaps once again, using her finger to point to where she wants her friend to go.

"No, don't take her away too." Rylee walks to the back, giving me a grimace, and leaves me with Ruth. "Why do you hate me?"

"Why do you care so much who this guy is?"

"Because . . . I . . ."

Why do I care? I mean, I like gossip as much as the next person, but I'm feeling surprisingly persistent at the moment, and I don't think I'd be this persistent with anyone else.

Plus, it's my duty as her friend, I need to know these things. Maybe I can help her. Be a wing man. Help her in making her long-time crush see her. *Because that would be using a mature mind to help my best friend find her soul mate.* Yes!

"Uh . . . because you've been a mystery a lot of the time. Just trying to get to know my friend, my neighbor, because what if I could help you? If I know him, I could put in a good word." Because she's so reserved in Snow Roast. Maybe I need to set up a way for them to meet away from here? That way, she'll be the bright and funny Ruth that I— "No, Brig. I'm good. I don't need your help."

"But years, Ruthie? Pining after someone for years? Doesn't that just make your heart sore?"

She shrugs. "I've had brief moments with him that have held me over. Especially lately. I'm okay with what I can get now. I've waited long enough, so what's a moment more?"

"I wish I had your control. If I was crushing on someone for years, there's no way I could hold back on making a move. I would need to let her know right away." I pound the counter. "*Hey, I like you. Will you go out with me?* What's the worst they can say? No? Then you get your answer and you can move on, but you never know until you try, Ruthie." I stand taller, look over my shoulder and say, "Is it Tracker? You got so weird about him the other—"

"Not Tracker. I can guarantee that. Not him."

"Well, I won't rest until I figure out who it is." I tap the counter and lift off it. "Tomorrow morning?"

"Do I have a choice?" she asks.

"Nope. See you then. Bye, Ruthie."

"Bye, Brig."

I make the walk back to my place, the entire time racking my brain for who I know that might be single in Port Snow that could catch Ruthie's attention. There are only a few guys that come to mind. Hmm, I'll have to dig deeper.

When I reach my place, there's a letter stuck to my door.

It's from her.

Fucking giddy, I pull it off and barely have the door shut before I'm tearing it open.

Dear Secret Pen Pal,

I remember you wondering if I was a tea or a coffee drinker. Is it weird to be both? I find deep comfort in a cup of coffee, the smell of it, the way it warms up my veins from the first sip. It reminds me of my dad.

But tea, tea is something special. It offers me comfort as well but in a different way, a magical way, as if the curtains are parted and my childhood is played out in front of me. Sharing tea with my mom, gabbing over teacakes, and discussing guys I can't stop thinking about.

I have a connection with both, and it would be incredibly difficult to choose one or the other. In fact, it would be impossible, because it would be like choosing between my mom and my dad, and I could never do that. I love them the same. I miss them terribly . . . the same.

But if I had to choose something to go with each drink, I'd go with a regular scone with jam and clotted cream with tea. And for the coffee, well that's easy, coffee cake from Snow Roast.

Sincerely,

YSPP

Huh. I set the letter down.

Funny.

My secret pen pal could be really good friends with Ruth.

Chapter Twelve

RUTH

“Okay, girls, are you ready for this?” Rylee asks, holding a decadent glass of white wine, presently curled up on Harper’s couch. “Ruth told Brig she’s had a crush on a guy for years.”

“What?” Ren, Griffin’s girlfriend asks.

“Are you serious?” Harper, Rogan’s fiancée adds.

“Did you say it was you behind the letters?” Eve, Reid’s girlfriend tacks on.

All three girls are attached to a Knightly—the *holy trinity* I like to refer to them as in my head. They each navigated their way through “the curse” with their men, going through ups and downs, but all coming out victorious. I entertained the hope that could be me too, until I discovered how completely clueless Brig is.

Like . . . beyond clueless.

Everyone says he has blinders on. Yeah, pretty sure his eyes are strapped down by a sleeping mask and black-out goggles.

“No, I didn’t say it was me,” I say, gripping my wine glass and bringing it to my mouth where I take a giant gulp. “I thought maybe he’d connect the dots.”

Eve laughs out loud and shakes her head. “Ruth, the boy is completely clueless.” *Yeah, I get it. Old news.*

“Tell me about it,” I sigh, staring at the charcuterie boards we all attacked. Within ten minutes, they were completely bare. Every month Harper hosts a girls’ night at her place. It’s one of my favorite places to be, because her house is tucked away in the woods and there are windows all around, making you feel like you’re in a treehouse. And it’s comfortable here. Homey. It’s everything I’d want in a house.

“Uh-oh, that doesn’t sound like a happy story. Tell us about it,” Ren says, a transplant from California. She’s quickly made Port Snow her own and she’s been widely welcomed by everyone. It doesn’t hurt that she not only has a sweet personality, but she’s also dating Griffin Knightly, the next town mayor. At least, that’s what we keep joking about. The guy is heavily invested in the town, knows everyone, and I’m pretty sure there isn’t one person who has anything bad to say about him.

I take another large gulp of my wine. “So, I think you all know I’ve matched with Brig in the Summer of Love program.” Even the girls who I didn’t tell nod. Didn’t expect anything less. The Knightlys might be close, but their partners formed a bond and even though they all know, I trust them that the news won’t get to Brig. “The letters we’ve been sending back and forth to each other have been full of pretty bland, random facts, but I’ve been slipping in clues here and there, and I mean *obvious* clues that the person writing the letters is me.”

“Like what?” Harper asks.

“Well, a few days ago, I explained to him about what one drink I like best: tea or coffee. I blatantly wrote exact comments I’ve said while it was just me and Brig, and do you know what he says the next day to me while we’re running? That the girl he’s talking to likes clotted cream on her scones too and we could totally be friends.”

All four girls snort and cover their mouths.

“And then there was the whole whoopie pies thing. I told him in a letter that I like peanut butter filling with my whoopie pies, even sent some, but with regular cream. And when we were testing pastries for the Parlor, I made peanut butter whoopie pies and being the dumbass that he is, he didn’t put two and two together.”

The girls erupt in laughter while I drain the rest of my glass.

“And there are other things here and there, but he’s not picking up on any of it. He’s completely clueless, and Jesus, if I have to hear him ask me one more time who the guy I like is, I might punch him in the balls. And

while he's flailing around on the ground, I would shout, *It's you. The guy I like is you, you clueless fool!*"

I flop back on the couch and look toward the ceiling as everyone laughs. *Is it funny?* Not really. Well, maybe a little. I mean, each attribute he lists that he likes about her is a thing I would think he'd see in me. Yet he doesn't. He still doesn't see me at all. I can't make this night all serious. We need to get it back to . . . alcohol!

"Sheesh, what does a girl have to do to get some attention?" I ask, arm draped over my eyes.

"Maybe you need to, you know, flaunt it more," Ren suggests.

I look over at the algebra teacher and say, "Do you know what's ridiculous about that suggestion? I shouldn't have to expose skin to get a guy's attention. He should be able to see me in a pair of sweatpants and a turtleneck. That being said, if I dressed any sluttier, I'd be naked at this point. The other day, I wore a sports bra and a pair of short running shorts that barely covered my ass while we were installing the moldings, and every two seconds I caught him staring at me. And there was the time where we got tumbled together and he admitted to getting aroused by me sitting on his lap. I mean . . . what the hell else am I supposed to do? Rip my bra off and slap him across the face with one of my tits?"

"I mean, at this point, it might not hurt," Rylee says on a chuckle.

"He said you aroused him?" Eve asks.

"Yes. Ugh, I swear this is what purgatory feels like. And with every letter I send him, I'm so close to just signing it with my name to see what he says."

"Why don't you?" Harper asks.

"Because, I want him . . ." I sigh heavily, "I want him to see me. Not the girl from the letters, who he's clearly falling for, but me, the girl who serves him coffee. The girl he calls Ruthie."

Eve clutches her heart. "Oh God, you're going to make me cry."

"Me too," Ren says.

"He does see you," Harper says. "That's evident in the fact that he's checking you out."

"I see it when we're at the coffee house," Rylee speaks up. "I see the smile on his face when you walk in. I catch the glint in his eyes when he's talking to you. There's something there, Ruth. There really is. I think you need to pull it out of him."

“And how do I do that? I feel like I’ve been trying everything to be visible, and nothing’s happening.”

“That’s not true.” Rylee shakes her head. “Whenever I see you, he’s always around, and before you became work neighbors, when did you ever hang out with Brig?”

“Never,” I say softly.

“Exactly. Give him a break. You came in like a whirlwind and you’re messing with his head most likely, especially since in his mind, he’s talking to someone else.”

“I agree,” Eve says. “He talks about you a lot.”

“He does.” Ren nods. “We had a family dinner at the Knightlys’ and while Griffin and I were out on the deck with Brig, he kept talking about all the things you two have been doing. Running, working on the Parlor, how you like baked bean sandwiches. Afterward, Griffin asked me if you two were dating, because that’s the impression he had. I told him you and Brig were just friends, but Brig’s thinking about you all the time.”

“But he’s friend-zoned me.” I look off to the side. “I thought that was only something girls could do to guys.”

On a laugh, Eve says, “If only that were the case.”

“I think you need to up the flirt factor,” Rylee says, the ever-romantic.

“Oh yes, that’s a good idea,” Harper agrees. “You have the friendship down. Now you need to start flirting.”

“Flirting? Ugh, I’m terrible at that. I’m so awkward.”

“No need to be awkward,” Eve says. “All you have to do is touch him here and there. Give him hugs. Smooth your hand over his brow. Give him short, cute glances. Hold his hand.”

“Hold his hand? I don’t think I have the courage to just reach for his hand.”

“Do you want him?” Eve asks.

I nod. “I do.”

“Then hold his freaking hand, hike up your shirts, and when you have the opportunity, pretend you’re going in for a kiss but pull away quickly, heave that chest, and make him beg for more,” Rylee says.

“Yes,” Eve says raising her glass. The other girls do as well. “To Ruth getting her flirt on and heaving her chest.”

“To Ruth, the newest chest-heaver,” they all say together before downing the rest of their wine as well.

Well, I guess I'm flirting now.
This shouldn't be humiliating at all.



"HAVE FUN THE OTHER NIGHT?" Brig asks, coming into the Parlor wearing a pair of worn jeans and a simple light blue shirt with a few paint stains across the front. We're close to closing on the property and finishing up the renovations, and it's becoming so real. We're installing light fixtures, something I really wanted help with since I'm not good with electrical renovations. The possibility of electrocuting myself or crossing the wrong wires makes me far too nervous . . . even if the power is switched off.

He sets his toolbox on the counter, and I take that moment to do what the girls said I should do: I walk up to him, wrap my arms around his waist, and give him a hug.

At first, I know he's stunned from the way he stiffens beneath my touch, and I almost pull away and apologize. But then I remember what the end goal of all this is—to open Brig's eyes to what's standing directly in front of him. After a few seconds, he wraps his arms around me and squeezes me back.

"Hey you," I say quietly, my mind whirling with uncertainty.

"Hey," he says softly, his hand tracing up and down my back. When I pull away, he still holds on to me, but at a distance. Smiling, he says, "That was a nice greeting. How did I get so lucky?"

Pulling away, I say, "Sorry, next time I'll be sure to kick you in the crotch as a friendly hello."

He chuckles. "Uh, I think I'll stick with the hug." Leaning on the counter, he smiles at me and says, "You look . . . different today."

"Hopefully not a bad different."

"No, a good different. I can't put my finger on it, but I like it. Girls' night help you relax?"

We don't run on the weekends. At least, that was the deal I made with Brig after I started to feel like my legs were running through mud. He agreed to just five days a week with me. On the weekends, he puts in the extra miles to make up for what he's missing on the weekdays.

"Why do you ask? Have I been uptight?"

"No, I mean, maybe a little, but not really. I don't know." He laughs. "Just surprised you hugged me is all."

“Friends hug,” I say casually, even though on the inside, I’m cursing my friends for making me step outside my comfort zone and push boundaries. *Did he actually like it? Or is he being nice?* Also, dropping the friend word, solidifying myself in the friend zone doesn’t feel productive toward my end goal either.

Gah, the girls have me all kinds of flustered this morning.

“Cool, yeah.” He pushes his hand through his hair. “So, show me the different light fixtures you bought.”

Here goes nothing. “They’re in the back,” I say, reaching out and taking his hand in mine. I watch his eyes fall to the connection, but not wanting to make a big deal about it, I don’t hesitate. I pull him to the back where the kitchen just had new appliances installed. I left the fixtures in the back on purpose.

To hold his hand.

To hopefully rattle his bones, wake up his soul.

When we stop in front of the boxes, I let go of his hand and act as casual as possible. “What do you think?”

He glances at me for a second, a load of questions in his beautiful eyes, but he doesn’t ask them. He turns his focus on the fixtures.

Keep moving forward, Ruth. Don’t hesitate.

“I was going to go with the shabby chic look with the white chandeliers but decided to take a left turn toward Joanna Gaines and go with some farmhouse-style fixtures for the perimeter of the room and then stick with the canned lighting in the middle. Think it will work?”

He picks up one of the boxes and examines it. Looks at me again, and then back at the box.

What the hell is going on in his mind?

Then again, he must be thinking the same thing about me.

“I think it’s going to look amazing,” he says. “With the wood shelving coming in and then the board and batten we’re going to install on the back wall, plus the furniture and table settings, it will have old classic charm but with a modern twist. I like it a lot, Ruthie, and I’m pretty sure everyone else will as well.”

“Yeah?” I ask. It’s exciting, thinking about everything we’ve put together so far.

“Yeah, I think so.” He picks up two boxes and says, “Let’s get to work.”



“HEY, can you hold this while I connect the wires?” Brig asks, as he stands on a chair to reach the lighting.

“Yeah, hold on.” I set up a chair right next to him, step up, and realize quite quickly that it’s not a big enough boost for me.

A few inches from me, his eyes travel down my body. I catch the glances at my obvious cleavage. There isn’t much subtlety, but I don’t think he means to be blatant about it. It almost seems like he’s more caught off guard at our position than anything. “Little short for the job, Ruthie,” he says, his voice husky.

“Just a little,” I say, the blaze of his eyes igniting a roar of heat on the back of my neck.

His eyes trained on mine, his body shifts and his arm brushes against my bare shoulder. I watch as he slowly licks his lips. Lazily he says, “Uh, run next door quickly and grab the stepladder we have from one of the guys. They’ll help you find it.”

Legs wobbly from his perusal, I hop off the chair and head next door. There’s no one in sight to help—they’re all under cars—but luckily there’s a stepladder to the right. I maneuver it into the Parlor and shut the door behind me.

I catch him with one hand pushing through his hair as his forehead leans against the wall, as if he’s distressed. When he hears the click of the door, he springs up and looks in my direction. “That was quick.”

“Easy to find.” I unfold the ladder and then climb the rungs, so I’m at the perfect height to hold the new light. My breasts are at eye level for Brig—direct shot. If he turned to the right at any point, he’d be face to face with my cleavage.

Nose to valley.

Motorboating potential.

Call me a hussy, but at this point, with how long I’ve been waiting, I’d take a motorboat from Brig. Anything . . . literally . . . anything.

Unaware of my position, he turns and says, “Grab the . . . uh, whoa.” His nose grazes my breasts and he quickly pulls back. “So-sorry.” He stares at the wall, blinking.

I hold back my chuckle, and I move my finger to his stubbled chin where I rotate his head to look at me, his nose once again grazes my breasts as I say, “Totally fine.”

I watch as his eyes widen. There's a hitch in his breath as he quickly returns his gaze to the wall. "So, uh . . . lights."

Chuckling, I smooth my hand over his and take hold of the light while I grip his shoulder with my other hand, massaging the tension. "Relax, Brig, talk about uptight."

He doesn't relax. He stiffens even more. "My nose grazed your boob."

"So? It's not like you sucked on my nipple. Although, at this point, I wouldn't be opposed to it."

"Wh-what?" he asks, still staring at the wall. I move my hand to his neck and massage the base of it, trying to get him to relax, while also hopefully sending a wave of goosebumps down his arms. His neck slowly moves to the side, giving me better access. "Uh, you said something about your nipple."

Oh my God, he's so cute when he's turned on.

And how do I know he's turned on? Well, his breathing is heavier, there is a wave of goosebumps on his arms, and he can't seem to look at me—for obvious reasons. *But when he did*, lust was clear in his eyes.

"I did. I said you could suck on them if you wanted." Bold, Ruth. Really freaking bold. I flinch, waiting for a response.

"Suck on, huh . . . that feels good . . . nips . . ." His eyes are lazy when he turns to me, his nose once again skimming my breasts, but this time, my nipples are hard. "Oh . . . fuck," he whispers, as if he's having a conversation with himself. "Uh . . . boobs," he says, wavering on his chair, his body falling back. I catch him by the shoulder, pulling him back from falling, only for him to fall face first into my chest.

Oh dear God.

"What's happening?" he asks, muffled, his mouth moving against my cleavage. I quickly release him, pushing him back. His arm flails, until he grips the wall and steadies himself.

Then we stare at each other, him looking up at me in shock, me looking down at him, stunned.

This escalated quickly and not in the best way.

A flush of embarrassment creeps over my skin. Oh God, did I just make him motorboat me? I know there was the subconscious thought, but did I actually make it happen?

Still shaken, he says, "Did you really want me to suck your nipple?"

Recover, Ruth. Recover from this humiliating moment.

Brush it off.

Miscommunication.

No, you weren't trying to make a pass at him with your breasts. Well, I was, but there were boobs in his face, a nipple ready to be sucked . . . and he resisted.

I'm now wondering if I'm like Ginnifer Goodwin in *He's Just Not That Into You*, where Justin Long's character has to spell it out to her character that if the guy she likes is not calling, not reacting to her flirting, to *her*, that he's just not into her. I swallow down the embarrassment. Am I Ginnifer Goodwin?

God, how do I get out of this?

Take the blame. Smiling wildly, I say, "I was making a joke, Brig."

"Huh, oh . . . yeah. A joke." He laughs but it sounds forced. "Joking about nipples, love joking about those little nubs."

Oh my God. He's flustered.

Hell, I'm flustered.

Like two ripe tomatoes, our faces bright red, we don't say a word, just look at each other, trying to decipher where to go from here. What to say. Did things just get exponentially awkward?

I hope not.

Brig grips the back of his neck and sighs loudly. "What the hell was I doing?" He scans the wires and then presses his fingers to his forehead. "Hell, I have no idea what's going on."

Is he talking about the light or what's going on between us?

When he turns back to the light, I have my answer. He fumbles with the wires with no rhyme or reason.

"You were attaching the wires from the wall to the new light."

"Yeah, something like that." He takes a deep breath and rests his head on the wall. "Christ, I can still feel your tit on my nose."

Talk about the perfect icebreaker.

We both chuckle.

Thank God for Brig's fun personality.

"I can still feel the short spurts of breath through your nose. You made my nipples moist."

"Got to say"—he chuckles—"first time a girl has ever said that to me."

"Glad I could be your first."

He nods at my feet. "Maybe you can step down one rung, you know, so I'm not making your boobs moist."

"Sure," I say, scooting down one and extending my hands higher above me to hold the light. "That better?"

He turns toward me again but this time our faces are mere inches from each other. So close that I can feel our breath mix, the beat of our hearts growing closer, in sync with each other. The air thickens between us, electricity bounces off my chest to his, and it's so clear that there's something going on. Something brewing.

Even though I'm the one who put us in this position, I feel a bout of regret creep into the back of my mind because being this close to him, looking him in those penetrating eyes, I feel my resolve start to weaken.

I want him.

Bad.

My body leans into his, itching to be closer, needing to be held.

Do I press my hand to his chest? Steady my wobbling legs? Do I reach out, caress his face like the girls said? Do I pretend to swoon and then accidentally press my lips to his?

Indecision weighs heavily as the tension continues to build. Our eyes search each other, our minds both turning, wondering.

What would he do if I kissed him? If I pulled his head into mine and pressed my lips to his? Would he accept me or turn me away?

I try to tell myself he'd pull me in closer, convince myself of it, but my courage falls flat and just as I start to lean away, his hand falls to my hip, holding me in place.

Did I just sway? Or did he pull me closer?

Either way, he's holding me tightly, our noses almost touching. Our lips mere inches apart.

This could be the opportunity I've wanted for so long.

Seize the moment . . .

Kiss him, Ruth.

Take what you want and kiss him.

"You almost fell," he says softly right before licking his lips.

"Lost balance," I say breathlessly. "Thank you for catching me."

"Of course." His eyes fall to my lips as I wet them with my tongue. "Wouldn't want my girl to fall off my ladder."

"Your . . . girl?" I reply, my heart running a mile a minute.

“Yeah, my best girl. Best friend.”

My face falls, hope for *seizing the moment* plummets to the floor, and once again, I feel like any progress I’ve made for an *us* has been pushed back further and further.

“Wait, is that too soon?” he asks reading my sullen expression.

Trying to regain my composure and act like him putting me in the friend zone once again isn’t absolutely heartbreaking, I say, “You consider me your best friend already?”

“Maybe,” he says, reaching up and tucking a stray hair behind my ear. “I’m always with you. That has to mean something.”

His fingers linger. Maybe all hope isn’t lost?

Baby steps.

Pull down the blinders, even if they keep snapping back up.

“I was thinking the same thing. It must mean something,” I say, using my free hand to snag a finger in his jeans pockets to keep myself close. He takes that moment to turn on the chair so he’s facing me. Feigning being off balance, I bring him a little closer with a tug on his pocket.

Like the gentleman he is, he takes the cue and steadies me by gripping my hip again but this time, he doesn’t move his hand away.

“Should we get best friend bracelets?” he asks with a lazy smile that paints him in such an adorably sexy light that all I want to do is throw my body around his, forget the fixtures, and lie on the floor with him, kissing him whenever and wherever I want.

“Friendship bracelets? I don’t know. That would forever put us in the friend zone,” I say, alluding to more. Frankly, I’m shocked the words came out of my mouth.

And I’m not the only one who’s shocked, because his brows shoot to his hairline followed by a sly curve of his lips. “Not wanting to be permanently in the friend zone?”

Oh God.

Be cool, Ruth.

Casual, fun.

Don’t expose all your feelings and thoughts and possible love for this man.

“Friendship bracelets forever seal the deal of eternal friends. That’s risky. What if when we’re both forty, still no love prospects, and we don’t

want to die alone? If we have friendship bracelets, we'd never be able to marry to ensure we're not alone for life."

"Like a marriage pact."

"Exactly. Friendship bracelets would ruin that."

His thumb grazes my hip, sending a shot of lust straight between my legs. He thought it was easy to turn him on. All it takes is one stroke of the thumb for me. "You know, I've never heard that rule, but the more I think about it, the more I believe it."

"So that's a pass on the friendship bracelets?" I ask, tugging on his jeans.

"That's a pass." He smiles and says, "Does that mean we're making a pact? If we're both single at forty, we get married?"

I shake my head.

"No?" he asks, confused.

"If we're both not married at forty, then we bang first. I have to test the equipment before I commit to it for life."

"Are you saying I might be bad in bed?" His hand slides up my side, and it takes everything in me not to shiver.

Not to cheer.

Not to swoon right here on this ladder.

"Possibly."

"Who's to say *you're* good in bed?" he asks.

Slowly, my hand climbs up his chest, skimming his abs, gliding over his thick pecs. I love the way he takes in a sharp inhale from the pass of my hand. I move up to his neck, my thumb to his chin, and then the bottom of his lip where I tug on it.

When his eyes darken and his mouth slightly parts, I say, "You don't have to worry about me, Brig. I'm *excellent* in bed. Flexible, adventurous, and I love going all night. Plus, I give good head."

He must swallow wrong, because all of a sudden, he starts coughing and turns away. He hops off the chair and digs his hands in his hair, looking up at me in disbelief.

"I, uh . . . I just remembered. I have to make a phone call. Let me go do that. I'll just be . . . yeah. Okay. Yup." He takes off, leaving me with a light fixture in hand and a winning smile on my face.



“GOOD MORNING,” I say, bouncing up and down in the bra I know affects Brig the most.

And as I predicted, his eyes go straight to my chest before quickly pulling away.

Okay, so flaunting my body was my last resort. I’d rather have the guy fall in love with my mind, but that failed and I was quickly placed back in the friend zone. So now, I’m reminding him that hey, his friend has boobs—boobs he likes to stare at.

He finishes closing the space between us and stands next to me awkwardly. Not letting a second go by, I slip my arms around his narrow waist and pull him into a hug, pressing my boobs against his thin shirt. My nipples are hard from a brisk chill in the air this morning, so I hope he can feel that through my shirt.

Yup, I’ve resorted to making my nipples do the heavy work. My brain and my mouth have been tagging him along, but I had to bring in the heavy guns this morning.

The tits.

I feel a little cheap being overly exaggerated with my flirting, but the girls are right: he’s blind.

He’s so blind.

Just the other day I was talking about summer being my favorite season and after we discussed it, he pushed his hand through his hair, chuckled, and said, “Whoa, I feel like I just had this conversation.”

Talk about wanting to shake some sense into him.

Can you see where this is quite infuriating? Do you see what I’m dealing with? What’s a girl to do?

You’re probably thinking if you’re so infuriated, just tell him he’s the guy. Well, yes, now wouldn’t that be easy? But it’s hard when you’ve been pining after a guy for so long and that he keeps talking about this mystery woman that he likes who is technically me but still . . .

Don’t you roll your eyes at me.

Ugh, okay, fine, I’ll admit it.

I’m a coward.

There, happy?

Grow a set of ovaries, Ruth. I hear you, but give me more time, okay? Hang in there with me. Baby steps for me.

The hug with hard nipples is a step in the right direction.

When I pull away from the hug, I pat his chest and say, “You’re quiet this morning.”

“Am I?” he asks, looking confused.

“Hey.” I slip my arm down his, lightly stroking it. “Is everything okay?”

His Adam’s apple bobs.

His eyes float down to mine.

His chest rises faster than before.

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” he says, reaching to the back of his head where he tugs on his hair.

“Are you ready to go, then?” I ask, chuckling.

“Go where? Oh jogging, yeah. Sure.”

“You’re being weird.” I reach up, tussle his hair, and then start jogging.

He doesn’t catch up right away, but I do hear him moving. Once he’s by my side, I bump his shoulder with mine and say, “Think you’re going to talk this morning?”

“Yeah, I’m going to talk.”

“Okay, then tell me about last night.”

“Um, I watched some TV.”

“Wow, riveting. What did you watch?”

He’s so stiff. A bout of panic hits me, wondering if I’ve made him too uncomfortable. but then I remind myself that he reciprocated my hug this morning.

Arms around my shoulders.

Cheek resting on my head.

One hand slowly moving up and down my back.

“I watched *Schitt’s Creek*. Have you seen it?”

“Ew, David,” I say in my best Alexis impersonation.

Brig laughs. “That was pretty spot on.”

“Love that show. I started watching it from the beginning. I’ve always had a crush on Eugene Levy.”

“What?” Brig laughs harder. “I think you’re the only person I’ve ever heard say that.”

“*American Pie*. I don’t know, there was something about him that just made me fall in love.”

“Are you being serious right now?”

“Are you judging me?”

“Maybe.” He winces when I glance at him.

“Okay, so tell me your secret celebrity love.”

“It’s only a secret if you’re ashamed,” he says giving me the side-eye. “Are you ashamed, Ruthie?”

“Never,” I say with confidence. “I love him and I’ll nuzzle his chest if given the opportunity.”

“Things I never thought we’d talk about on our runs.”

I bump his shoulder with mine. “But glad you are, right?”

“Very glad,” he says, and my heart takes off. Not because of the pace we’re running, but because of the way the man next to me smiles genuinely.



“RUTH, HOW ARE YOU?” Griffin Knightly asks when I step into The Lobster Landing.

That smell. Sugary confections, old wood . . . it’s a warm hug I haven’t felt in a while.

The Lobster Landing gives me a sense of home, of being wrapped up in my parents’ arms again. When I was young, my parents took me to The Lobster Landing every other Sunday and let me pick out something sweet from their fudge counter or bakery. Then we’d step outside, sit on the harbor wall, and eat our treats while staring out at the water. Just me and my parents.

I can’t remember the last time I did that with them before they passed. But since it’s my mom’s birthday today, I decided to honor her the way I always honor my parents: hoping they’ll join me in spirit.

“I’m good, Griffin. Thanks.” I step up to the counter and glance over all the cookies in their bakery case.

“What brings you in?”

I give him a small smile. “My mom’s birthday.”

I don’t have to say any more. It isn’t the first time he’s helped me on this date.

“Well then, let’s get you something special.” He uses the tongs to point at different cookies when he says, “S’mores cookies are new, and some have said they’re better than the real thing.”

I chuckle, loving the sweet charm of Brig’s oldest brother.

“Then we have cherry macadamia nut with shavings of coconut; we brought those back for the summer. And the classics.” He points and says, “Peanut butter chocolate chip, your mom’s favorite.”

I lift my head up and say, “PB chocolate chip please, and one of the cherry ones. My dad would have drooled over it. I think it would have reminded him of Hawaii. He always loved it there. They went twice.”

“I hope to take Ren at some point, maybe next summer.” He bags up the cookies.

“Ever think about proposing to her while you’re there?” I ask with hope.

He winks. “Two steps ahead of you, Ruth.” He hands over the bag and says, “On the house. Happy birthday to your mom. She was a beautiful, welcoming soul.”

Emotions climb up my throat as I give him a soft smile. “Thank you, Griffin. That means a lot to me.”

“Anytime, Ruth.” I start to walk away when he calls out, “My brother being good to you?”

I glance over my shoulder. “He’s been extremely helpful.”

He slowly nods and then says, “Has he pulled his head out of his ass and realized how amazing you are yet?”

And just like that, my skin prickles, every hair on my arm standing at attention. I know Ren wouldn’t divulge anything from girls’ night, but Griffin seems to know something . . .

He catches my hesitation and adds, “Ren has said nothing to me, if that’s what you’re worried about. Just observant. Hang in there, Ruth. He’ll figure it out.”

I chew on the side of my lip and turn toward Griffin, holding the bag of cookies with the tips of my fingers. Vulnerability shoots through me as I ask, “Do you ever think he could . . . like me?”

“He already does, just hasn’t realized it yet. Trust me when I say he’s a moron when it comes to this stuff. Don’t worry, he’ll get there.”

“That’s what I keep hearing.”

“That’s because it’s true. And if he doesn’t, my brothers and I will make sure he does.”

My face flames. “Oh please don’t—”

Griffin holds up his hand. “Don’t worry, we’d never do anything obvious, just help him peel his eyes open.”

“Well, don’t peel them too hard.”

He chuckles. “Can’t make any promises. But hey, happy birthday to your mom. Your parents would be very proud of you and everything you’ve done to help build this town.”

Of course, Griffin comes in with his caring, big-brother thoughtfulness. He sends me off in a wave of bubbling emotions. I head out the door and to the left where I run straight into Brig, nose to chest.

“Whoa, hey there.” He takes me by the shoulders and steadies me. “Ruthie girl, I was just looking for you at the Parlor.”

It takes me a few seconds to regain my bearings, but when I do and my eyes meet Brig’s, my throat chokes up and hot tears prickle the backs of my eyes.

Oh God, don’t cry.

“Hey, is everything okay?” Brig asks, lowering so he can be at eye level with me.

And there it is, the dreaded question you should never ask someone when they’re on the brink of an emotional breakdown.

There’s no stopping what happens next. It’s as if our bodies were made to cry when someone asks that question. Pre-engineered to turn into a mess of emotions.

Tears swell in my eyes.

Don’t blink.

Hold it together.

“Ruthie . . .”

I blink. Tears fall and before I can wipe them away, Brig’s pulling me into a hug and holding the back of my head as he moves me to the side of The Lobster Landing.

He strokes the back of my head as he cradles me carefully into his chest, which only makes me lose it even more.

Just like any other emotional breakdown, everything that’s been plaguing me for the last few years comes to a screaming crash in my mind.

The loss of my parents.

My mom’s birthday.

The stress of the Parlor.

Brig’s inability to look past my metaphorical apron.

It all comes flooding out in a crest of tears.

“Shh,” Brig says, cooing closely to my ear, his hands soothing as they float over me. I lean into him, lean my head against his chest, and wrap my arms around his waist. “I got you, Ruthie.”

And he does.

He has everything about me.

My friendship . . . my heart. All he has to do is hold out his hands and I'd shamelessly give him the rights to everything—not even giving a second thought that he could possibly hurt me. Not when I feel it deep in my bones that Brig is the man I'm supposed to be with.

I lift away and wipe at my eyes as he grips my shoulders. He waits for me to speak, concern etched in his soulful eyes.

"I'm sorry." I swipe under my nose. "I didn't—"

"Don't apologize," Brig says. "Don't ever apologize about experiencing emotions." He slides his hand down my arm and links our hands together. My pulse skyrockets into a burst of excitement as he tugs on me. "Come sit with me. Talk."

I nod. There's no way I would skip out on this moment. Cookies in hand, we make our way to the harbor wall where I take a seat, but instead of facing the ocean to watch the waves lap against the harbor rocks, we face each other. I set the bag of cookies between us and take a deep breath.

"It's my mom's birthday today."

"Oh fuck . . . Ruthie." He reaches out and takes my hand in his, scooting closer on the wall so our legs are touching. "I wish I would have known. I wouldn't have let you spend most of the day alone."

"It's okay. I usually spend the day alone anyway."

"You shouldn't have to." His fingers rub over the back of my knuckles. "I'm here now though. What can I do?"

I glance up at his worried brow. The words are on the tip of my tongue, but being this vulnerable, it makes it harder to say. When I go to look away, he catches me by the chin with his finger, forcing me to maintain eye contact.

"What can I do?" he repeats. His usual humorous tilt is completely gone and has been replaced with a serious tone, one that speaks volumes of support, of warmth.

Mustering enough courage, I ask, "Will you share some cookies with me?"

His eyes soften as he nods. "Of course, Ruthie."

"Thank you," I say, squeezing his hand.

"You don't need to thank me. That's what friends are for."

I let the friend-zone comment roll off me as I let go of his hand and open the bag. "When I was young, my parents took me to The Lobster Landing every other Sunday and let me pick out something special. Then

we came to this very spot, watched the water, and enjoyed our treats together as a family. It was calming. Serene. My dad would tell silly knock-knock jokes that weren't funny, but we'd laugh anyway because of how stupid they were. Mom always got a peanut butter chocolate chip cookie and Dad was an avid fan of always trying something different and unique. I floated between the two of them, going with a classic choice or a unique choice. They were my world and I was theirs." I reach into the bag, pull out the cookies, and lay the bag flat on the harbor wall as a plate, setting the cookies down. "Want to split them?"

"If that's what you want," Brig says, bringing his body closer so his inner knees press against the outside of my knees.

"I do." I split both cookies and ask, "Which one do you want to try first?"

"In honor of your mom, let's go with the classic." He picks up both halves and hands me one. He taps the tip of his cookie to mine. "Happy birthday to her."

Tears well in my eyes again as I take a bite of the cookie. "Happy birthday, Mom."

Brig notices the new wave of tears so he moves the cookie bag to the side and closes the space between us while facing us both toward the harbor. He brings his arm around my shoulder and holds me tight.

The waves crash below us, a few birds chirp close by, distant laughter from tourists trailing behind us, but nothing could take me from this moment. Nothing could deter me from realizing that even though I might not have my parents with me right now, in some small way, they brought Brig and me together.

"Thank you," I say quietly. "For being here with me."

He leans in close and places a soft kiss on the top of my head. I feel my heart stutter to a stop, only to start up again when he places one more kiss on my forehead. "Always here for you, Ruthie."

And I can't help think . . . if only that were true.



"ARE you sure you don't want me to stay?" Brig asks, standing outside of Snow Roast.

"I'm positive." I twist my hands together in front of me. We spent the entire afternoon sitting on the harbor wall, talking about my parents. I shared some of my dad's jokes, spoke about how Brig's parents always

wished they had my mom's coffee cake recipe, which I thought was funny, and I even told Brig about how the Parlor was the exact vision my mom had. Then we stopped by Jake's Cakes, grabbed some crab cake sandwiches, shared some waffle fries at one of the picnic tables outside his food truck, and talked some more.

I learned that he loves being the youngest of five kids in his family, because he can get away with a lot. He once caught Harper and Rogan doing it at Snow Vale Manor and never told a soul. He secretly liked Eve, Reid's girlfriend and for a minor second—minor being the key word—he thought he was going to end up with her. That was quickly kicked back into reality when he told Reid he was going to marry his friend. Reid punched him in the arm and told him to think again. Poor middle-schooler Brig.

He learned that I'm allergic to cats. I reminded him that I'm really good at playing basketball and played on the girls' varsity team all four years. And when we were in middle school, I held the record for fastest girl to climb the rope in gym class.

We joked about our PE teacher, Mr. Robicheaux, and how he got so mad when we didn't play proper badminton rules that his face would turn red. Brig then sighed and shook his head, wishing we'd known each other better in school. Asked why we never hung out. Even though we lived in a small town, our circles never collided. He was a popular Knightly. I focused on helping my parents at the coffee house—baking in the back—and played basketball. My days were full.

We shared so much more.

We laughed.

And when I got emotional again, Brig didn't hesitate to pull me into his arms and offer me his strength and compassion.

"Thank you for today, Brig. It meant the world to me."

"Thank you for letting me be a part of it."

He stands only a foot away, hands in his pockets, his face sun-kissed from sitting outside with me all day.

"I forgot to ask you. You were looking for me earlier, what for?"

"I was?" he asks and reaches up to pull on the back of his neck. "Oh wait, yeah. I *was* looking to talk to you. The rehearsal dinner for Harper and Rogan is going to be behind the garage and I was hoping we could possibly use your kitchen for some meal prep. We usually have a caterer for our events, but my mom and dad wanted to make the food. I know you just got

a new oven in so I don't want to mess up anything you have going on, but thought I'd ask."

"Of course. What's mine is yours, Brig."

"Does that mean your vibrator is mine, too?"

I laugh a little harder than expected. "Sure. Want me to get it for you?" I thumb behind me.

He holds up his hand. "I'm tapped out for today, maybe tomorrow though."

"I'll let my vibrator know." I wink and then take a step forward closing the space between us. I loop my arms around him and hug him tight. "Thank you again, Brig."

His hand caresses my back as he squeezes me tight as well. "Anytime. Run with me tomorrow?"

I pull back and nod. "Yeah."

"Going two miles. I think you're ready. You're killing one and a half."

"I think I'm ready too."

"You are." He tips my chin up. "Just don't wear that one bra that makes your tits bounce everywhere. You know the one I'm talking about."

"Why? Is it distracting?" I ask, acting coy.

"You know it is. And ever since the whole nose and boob collision, it's like whenever you're in that bra, my nose needs to sneeze constantly, as if trying to tell me something. So to avoid all sneezing attacks during a run, I beg you to retire that bra from the rotation."

"You poor tortured man." I step away and turn toward my apartment.

"So is that a yes, you're retiring it?"

"You'll just have to wait and see. Good night, Brig."

He sighs heavily. "Good night, Ruthie Girl."

Chapter Thirteen

BRIG

Dear Whoopie Pie,

Figured I should call you something other than Secret Pen Pal. I couldn't think of anything other than Whoopie Pie and for some reason, it feels like it fits so well. Sorry I've missed some nights of sending you a letter. Life got a little crazy, but please don't think it's because I'm not interested or invested in our conversations. I am.

I look forward to your letters. I usually save them for night, even if they're delivered during the day or in the morning. I'll set them on my nightstand so when I tuck in for the night, I can fall asleep to your words.

How are you holding out, being in the thick of summer? Did you catch the wave of tourists this past Saturday? I swear you couldn't move an inch down Main Street without someone's sweaty shoulder touching yours. Sunday was nice though, felt like a breath of fresh air. I know how much the crowds bother you, so I'm hoping you made it out alive.

Did you?

Patiently waiting to find out.

Hugs,

Summer (that's not my name, but figured since I love summer so much, it fits for me)

▬
DEAR SUMMER,

When I finally do meet you, it's going to be weird to not call you Summer. In my head, I picture you as a blonde. Are you . . . blonde? I know we shouldn't be talking descriptions and we should get to know each other

on a deeper level like we have, but every time I read your letters, I picture you as a blonde. Not sure why. Maybe because you have a striking resemblance in personality to my friend.

I will admit, skipping a few days and not hearing from you was a little painful, but I was able to spend Sunday with a good friend, enjoying the harbor and some of the small things I forget to enjoy when living in Port Snow. Like sitting on the harbor wall and listening to the waves crash. Taking a moment to enjoy a cookie from The Lobster Landing. Or walking down the streets at night, enjoying the sounds of crickets in the background while the streetlamps light your path. I felt rejuvenated yesterday and it made me not dislike summer as much.

So rest assured, I'm alive and well.

Which means I need to know . . . are you a blonde?

Hugs,

Whoopie Pie < - - snorted writing that, but I like it.



"GOT an extra pep in your step this morning?" I say to Ruth who is gliding down our route, showing stamina and great power in her legs.

"Feeling good," she says while knocking me in the shoulder. "Even have a healthy breakfast planned for us."

"Healthy? What's this bullshit? I run for food."

"It's overnight oats with chia seeds and kale."

"Uhhh . . . kale in my oatmeal? Are you insane?"

"It's bright green and smells like death, but I think it will give us all the fuel we need to hang shiplap today."

We turn the last corner and head toward Snow Roast. By now, Ruth would normally be slowing down, breathing harder, but it's as if she's traded places with an ultrarunner, because she's picking up the pace.

Keeping up by stretching out my stride, I say, "I prefer my breakfast to smell like death. How did you know?"

"Wild guess." She glances at me and says, "Race you." And then takes off in a sprint.

It takes my brain a few seconds to process what's happening but once it does, I start to sprint . . . only for my eyes to land right on Ruth's retreating rear end.

Firm.

Tight.

Round.

Perfectly framed by black spandex.

Damn, Ruth.

I'm so caught up in watching her ass that I don't turn on the "booster rockets" soon enough. Ruth reaches Snow Roast before me, throws her arms up in the air, and starts chanting for herself.

She looks . . . God, she looks fucking adorable.

Her hair is in two French braids. Her freckles are darker from the summer sun, and her tits . . . well, I'm starting to think there's something wrong with me, because I can't seem to stop staring at them. It's because I'm hard up; that's what I keep telling myself when I catch myself gazing at them. Or wondering what they would look like bare. Or considering how they'd feel in my hand.

Yup . . . hard up, all right.

"You didn't even try," she says pushing my shoulder when I finally make it to her.

"You caught me off guard." With your ass.

"I have to keep you on your toes somehow. Come on." She nods toward Snow Roast. "Let's grab some breakfast."

I don't budge. "I think I'll skip breakfast today. Not really feeling the whole oatmeal and kale combo."

Not saying a word, she takes my hand in hers and walks into Snow Roast where Beck is at the counter. His eyes fall to my hand clasped in Ruth's. He cocks a brow but doesn't say anything.

"Beck, can you hand me the breakfast I prepared for me and Brig?"

"Yeah, sure." He reaches below the counter and sets two plates in front of us, each containing the biggest cinnamon bun I've ever seen.

"Ruthie Girl, I might just kiss you," I say, taking both plates in hand.

"I'd love to see that," Beck says. "Kiss her."

Not even thinking about it, I lean down and place a kiss on her cheek before walking over to our table. "Grab some waters, Ruthie," I call out, my mouth watering. I take a seat and situate myself, ready to eat all the calories I just burned, when I look at Ruth to see where the waters are at.

She's hunkered down next to Beck whispering something to him. He's smiling and laughing. He says something. She pushes his shoulder. He laughs some more. And an odd sensation heats the back of my ears.

Do I detect . . . *jealousy*?

No. There's no way I'm jealous.

Just then, Oliver from the general store walks in. The quiet, brooding man lights up when he sees Ruth and to my surprise, he gives her a high five. She motions up and down her body and I watch him slowly scan her, starting at her legs, up her bare stomach, to her . . . *hey, those are my tits to stare at.*

Wait a second.

No, they're not. They're not my tits . . . but, why do I feel like I've staked a claim on them? She says something that makes him laugh, and I watch in horror as he reaches out and tugs on one of her French braids.

What the shit is that about?

Is he . . . oh fuck, maybe he really is the guy Ruth has been pining after, because from my vantage point, it's easy to see the rosiness of her cheeks and her flirtatious body language.

Unwelcome anger seeps into my veins. My fists grow tight with irritation. Is she really going to flirt like that in front of me?

Of course she is . . . you're friends, you doofus.

What the hell am I thinking?

Yes, we're friends. I shouldn't be getting angry, I should be asking her when the wedding is.

Finally, she departs, giving Oliver a wave, and comes to our table with two glasses of water. She sets them down and says, "What do you think of the overnight oats and kale?"

Her cheeky grin has no effect on my current state of mind. "So, when's the wedding?" I ask, taking a sip of my water.

"What?" she asks, her brow pulling into a thin knot in the middle of her forehead. "What wedding?"

"Your wedding with Oliver." I pick up the cinnamon bun and break off a piece to shove the yummy gooeyness in my mouth.

She looks behind her and then leans closer. "Are you insane? Why would you say that?"

"Uh, I know flirtation when I see it."

"Do you, Brig? Do you really?" she says, her tone entirely too sarcastic for my liking.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Ruth stands and snags her plate. "Brig, you wouldn't know what flirting was if it was a neon sign that slapped you across the face." She pushes her

chair in. “Beck needs help. I’m going to take a shower. Enjoy the bun.”

“Wait,” I say quickly. “Hold on, Ruth. No need to get mad.”

“I’m not mad. Just . . . *God*, I’m so irritated with you.”

“Why? What did I do?” I ask, feeling more confused than ever.

“Try opening your eyes, Brig. That might help.”

Okay, now she’s lost me. “But my eyes are open—”

“Figuratively. Jesus,” she says before stomping off and leaving me wondering what the hell just happened.

Open my eyes?

To what?



DEAR WHOOPIE PIE,

I’m glad you’re still alive and well and made it through the heavy wave of tourists. I was nervous that maybe we’d hear about a local Port Snowian being gobbled up by ravenous tourists after a sugar high from The Lobster Landing.

Very happy that’s not the case.

So you want to know if I’m a blonde. Hmm, I don’t know if I should divulge that kind of pertinent information. Isn’t that going against the rules of this experiment? Then again, is anyone really keeping track?

Taps chin

If I tell you my hair color, you have to give something up too. And I don’t want to know something as simple as eye color or hair color. I want to know something more private, something that would excite me.

How about I tell you my hair color and boob size in exchange for inches?

Yes . . . those inches.

Happy inches, not flaccid. And you better not lie, because I feel like there will be a day when I can confirm this. I have no problem busting out a ruler.

So what is it?

For me: Blonde, 34B.

Your turn.

Hugs (+ Shimmy),

Summer



DEAR SUMMER,

Okay, these letters just took an unexpected left turn, and I'm not mad about it.

Damn, girl, I was not expecting that. You seem so calm, thoughtful, and then you go and ask for my dick length. I laughed so hard while reading your letter in Snow Roast that I grabbed everyone's attention, even Ruth, the shop owner.

Do you know Ruth? She's fucking awesome. < - - Sorry for swearing. But she deserves a swear word. I would say she's closing in on the title as my best friend. Anyway, if you don't know her, you should stop into Snow Roast. I swear you two are sisters and would get along so well.

Anyway, blonde and 34B. Didn't have to do much to get my dick happy to measure for you. I'll be honest, I've always found myself attracted to brunettes. I was obsessed with one of my brother's friends for a hot second who has brown hair, but lately, blonde has been taking up the forefront of my mind.

When do you think we get to meet? Any time soon? My brother's wedding is coming up and I figured maybe after that is over? That way I can dedicate my time to you. What do you say?

As for . . . inches. Attached is an outline of my inches. Getting my dick to lie on the paper when excited was painful, but figured an outline would be better than a statement of inches. This way you can tell what you'd be working with.

Hugs (+ Helicopter—with my Cock)

Whoopie Pie

P.S. A friend told me when in the bedroom, you use the term cock. After your last letter, I feel like we're one toe in the bedroom.



"YOU HAVE to find the studs, Brig."

"No need, I'm right here," I say with a wiggle of my brow.

Ruth rolls her eyes. "Why are you so lame?"

"Why are you so testy today?"

"Excuse me?" she asks, folding her arms over her chest.

I fold my arms as well, standing my ground. "You've been short with me all day. Lighten up."

"Are you really telling me to lighten up?"

"Uh . . . yeah," I say in a tone that doesn't seem to please her. Her eyes have turned into flames and I fear she'll chuck the hammer in her hand right

between my eyes.

“I waited for you all morning to help me with these shelves and when you finally show up, you’re not taking it seriously.”

“Ruth, they’re shelves. We’ll get them up.”

“That’s not the point. After our run, you said you’d be here at nine, but you didn’t show up until eleven. I could have been baking or helping out at Snow Roast. You might have people running your garage, but I still have to do work for Snow Roast, and I can’t waste time waiting around for you.”

“Wow,” I say holding up my hands. “I told you my mom called and asked for some help at The Lobster Landing while Griffin took Ren to the doctor.”

“Well, a phone call would have been nice,” she says, looking away.

“Is this . . . is this all a ruse so you can get my phone number?”

“What? No.”

I take a step forward. “Bullshit.”

She tightens her arms around herself. “It’s not.” She’s still not looking at me, so I close the space between us until there’s nothing but inches separating us.

“You don’t have to start a fight, Ruthie.” I push a stray piece of hair that’s fallen loose from her ponytail behind her ear. “You can just ask.”

“This is not about your number,” she says as I back her up against the wall. Her eyes widen and her hands fall to the wall behind her for support.

“All you have to say is, Brig, can I have your number please?” I draw in an inch closer and set my hands on her hips.

“I don’t want your number. This is about respecting people’s time.”

“Uh-huh.” I smile wickedly. “So why were you tense this morning during our run?”

“I wasn’t tense. I was conserving energy.” She sucks in a sharp breath when my thumbs rub over her hips. I have no idea what I’m currently doing, but the past few days it’s felt next to impossible to be near her and not touch her.

Two days ago, I went into Snow Roast, went around the counter, and pulled her into a hug. She was in the middle of serving someone, but I felt this overwhelming desire to hold her.

Yesterday, when we were walking to the hardware store to pick up some new knobs for the kitchen, as well as a new kitchen faucet, I held her hand

and told her it was windy, and I didn't want her flying away. But in reality, I had this consuming need to hold her hand.

Just like I have this consuming need to touch her right now.

To invade her space.

And she's been feisty lately. Seems like with every passing day she gets more agitated and more irritated. I've tried asking her what's wrong, why she's so short with me, but she doesn't answer. She just moves on to the next thing, the tension building and building.

Well, I'm over it.

"You were tense, just like you're tense now. What's going on with you?"

Her deep chocolate eyes search mine, flitting back and forth, her mouth barely falls open so her tongue can wet her lips.

Entranced, I watch the smooth pink of her tongue run over the plumpness of her lips. Hell, they look good. Glossy, ripe . . . ready.

My thumbs drag over her hipbones, my body heating up, erupting a thrill of need through my spine, igniting my soul, messing with my head. What would she taste like? Would she taste as sweet as I suspect? If I moved in a few more inches, would she push me away?

Would she—

"We're pregnant!"

I shoot off Ruth like a rocket, nearly slamming her through the wall as I bounce a good five feet away from her.

"We weren't doing anything," I say, hands in my hair as I face my oldest brother.

Griffin and Ren both stand in the doorway of the Parlor, holding hands, amused looks on their faces.

I straighten my shirt, trying to fidget with anything I can, feeling like I just got caught doing something I shouldn't be doing, even though I wasn't doing anything wrong. Or maybe I was.

Was I?

I shouldn't have been thinking what my friend's lips taste like, that's for damn sure.

Since no one is saying anything, I speak up again, "I know what you're thinking and no, we weren't doing anything. It might have looked that way, and I might have reacted like we were, but we weren't. Not even close, nope. We were just talking about why Ruth is being so nasty to me lately. A

real wench. Testy. Moody. I told her it's because she wants my phone number, but she denies it. But if we're laying all the cards on the table, and it feels like that's what this moment is all about, showing our cards, I secretly think she's been witchy lately because she might be horny—"

"Brig," Ruth snaps at me.

"Is that not the case?" I ask, wincing when I see the violence spurting from her eyes. Swords swish and swoop from her pupils, actual swords. Pirate swords. Jagged pirate swords, flying at me with such velocity that I metaphorically worry for my penis.

"Uh, maybe we should come back," Ren says, looking between us.

"No, Brig was just leaving." Ruth comes up behind me and starts pushing my back, but I dig my heels in.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"You're leaving." She continues to push, now digging her bony shoulder into my back, trying to gain leverage, but lucky for me, I am a giant compared to her small stature, and I don't move.

"Still not going anywhere." I fold my arms and stubbornly hold my ground. "Is that all you've got, Ruthie?"

She pushes.

I lean against her.

She pushes some more.

I lean even further.

"This is entertaining," Griffin says, watching from the doorway.

"I think we should leave. They seem to be going through something."

"Get . . . out . . . of . . . here," Ruthie grunts behind me.

I examine my nails, acting bored. "Nope."

"Ugh," she growls and to my surprise, gives up and pulls away, only for me to land flat on my ass.

Oomph.

"Oh my ass," I say, rolling to the side and clutching my tailbone. "You broke my ass."

When I catch a glimpse of Ruth, she's just standing over me, arms crossed, looking less than amused. "You're fine," she says, showing zero compassion.

I am fine, but figured I'd try to milk it a little. Looks like she's not in the mood.

“Well, this is a moment I’ll never forget,” Ren says as I stand to my feet and brush off my backside.

Addressing Ruth, I say, “Would it hurt you to show an ounce of compassion? You have been—” I pause, think about why Griffin and Ren are standing in the Parlor, watching us. Slowly turning to them, I ask, “Wait . . . did you say you’re pregnant?”

“We are,” Griffin says, an overjoyed smile on his face. “Ren hasn’t been feeling great lately—”

“And you know how protective he is with me.” Ren rolls her eyes. “That’s why he went to the appointment with me this morning. Thanks for covering for us at The Landing.”

“See,” I say to Ruth, who’s sporting an endearing smile. “I told you I was helping them out.”

“Still, you could have informed me. The town is two feet long, so you could have walked over to let me know,” she snaps back. She then walks up to Ren and Griffin and gives them both a hug. “Congratulations, you guys. I’m very happy for you.”

“Thank you,” Griffin says, pulling Ren into his side. “A little ahead of the plan, but we’re excited.”

I walk up to both of them as well and give them a hug. “This is amazing. Do Mom and Dad know?”

“We just came from telling them and calling Ren’s parents. You were the second to know since you covered my shift,” Griffin says.

“Did Mom want you to propose right then and there?” I ask, forgetting Ren is standing in front of me.

Griffin chuckles and kisses the top of Ren’s head. “Yeah. She subtly mentioned it.”

“I told him he doesn’t have to marry me because we’re having a baby,” Ren cuts in. “Marriage will come.”

I glance at Griffin, who winks, and I have a feeling there’s going to be a proposal in the near future. He better ask me to help him. Proposals are my jam.

“We should head out and tell Rogan.” Griffin points at me. “Don’t tell anyone. I swear to God, Brig, if this reaches the town gossip line, I’m holding you accountable, and I have no problem damaging your manly goods. Got it?”

“Jesus, man. I know how to keep a secret.”

Everyone in the room laughs, even Ruth, who then sneers at me when I glance at her. Okay, that needs to stop.

“Prove it, don’t tell anyone. Got it?”

I hold up my hands in defense. “Got it.”

We say our goodbyes, I give my brother one more hug, and the realization that I’m going to be an uncle hits me harder than expected. Fuck yeah, I can’t wait. I’m going to spoil that baby so hard.

I’m caught up in an uncle fantasy when I catch Ruth putting tools away and packing up.

“Uh, what are you doing?”

“I can’t work with you today.”

She unplugs the drill that was charging and sets it to the side.

“What do you mean you can’t work with me today?”

She straightens and gestures toward the door. “You called me horny in front of your brother.”

“Well . . . aren’t you?”

“That’s none of your business, Brig.”

“It is when I’m your friend, and I know you’ve been crushing on a guy for years now and haven’t done anything about it. He could be the one helping you, not me.”

“I didn’t realize I was inconveniencing you.”

“You’re not.” I blow out a heavy breath, realizing how that sounded. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just . . . why haven’t you gone after this guy?”

She plants her hands on her hips and looks me square in the eyes. “Because, Brig, he’s the biggest, most clueless moron I’ve ever met, and frankly, I don’t have time for him anymore.”

“What? Did you talk to him? Tell him your feelings? Did he reject you?” I pause and wince. “Was it Oliver?”

“I swear to God,” she mumbles, grabs her keys, and blows past me, her shoulder bouncing off mine. “Please, for the love of everything, do not stop by Snow Roast today. I need a break.”

“Are you Ross and Rachel-ing me?” She walks out the door, slamming it. “Ruth?”

The door snaps behind her and I let out a low breath.

Hell, that didn’t go very well. Did she talk to the guy? And if she did, who in their right mind would turn her down?

She’s perfect.

DEAR WHOOPIE PIE,

Attached is a picture of my breasts just for you. And before you get too excited, it's not an actual picture. I just painted them and then stamped them on a piece of paper.

To be honest, I've been dealing with a friend of mine who's been absolutely annoying me with his idiocy. Probably not the warm letter you were looking for, but I'm currently writing this letter drunk, and I can't think of anything poetic to say. Instead, you get a picture of my boobs and a drunken rambling of words.

I know what you're thinking—how has this friend driven me to drink? Well, you see, he's not very intelligent when it comes to seeing something that's right in front of his nose. And having to constantly deal with his inability to connect dots has driven me to the booze.

Normally, I'd handle the situation differently, but the last week has made me lose my mind, so I'm sorry in advance for this letter.

Enjoy the boobs.

Hugs and hell . . . Hugs and Kisses,

Summer

DEAR SUMMER,

Umm . . . your stamped tits made me really fucking hard.

I'm currently drinking as well, thanks to a friend.

She's been fucking grouchy lately. We're working on renovations together and she's stopped showing up now. She's avoided our morning runs, and whenever I go to see her at her job to see what the hell her issue is, she brushes me off.

Women . . . why do you have to be so difficult?

Promise me, if you ever get grouchy with me, just tell me what the hell I did wrong, because this silent treatment is a real killer.

I feel sleepy.

I think I'm calling it. I'm going to snuggle into your tits tonight.

Hugs and So Many Fucking Kisses,

Whoopie Pie

BRIG: *Anyone know why Ruth is mad at me?*

Griffin: **Rolls eyes**

Reid: You're such a fucking idiot.

Rogan: I think everyone in town knows why she's mad at you.

Brig: REALLY? YOU KNOW? Tell me!

Griffin: Walks away

Reid: You're truly hopeless, man.

Rogan: Hell, I'm even mad at you now.

Brig: This is not helpful. You're family, and you're supposed to help me. If you know why she's mad at me, tell me so I can fix this. She barely talks to me. She stopped running with me in the mornings. She won't hang the shelves at the Parlor. She hasn't even been to the Parlor all week. I miss her, and I have no idea how to fix this.

Griffin: You really are an idiot.

Reid: I'm with Rogan. I'm mad at you now too.

Rogan: Dude, you need to get a goddamn clue. Christ, you're exhausting.

Brig: I'm exhausting? points finger You're the ones who are exhausting. BE HELPFUL.

Griffin: There's no use, men.

Reid: Lost cause.

Rogan: I seriously had high hopes for you.

Jen: Oh Brig, I love you, but you really are an idiot.

Brig: SCREAMS

Brig: Flails arms

Brig: Kicks a throw pillow

Griffin: Throw a tantrum, see how that helps.

Reid: My suggestion, open your goddamn eyes.

Rogan: ^^ Yup.

Jen: ^^ Agreed.

Griffin: ^^ Accurate. And while you're opening your eyes, hang the damn shelves for her as a peace offering.

Reid: Excellent idea.

Rogan: I can help you after lunch.

Jen: I can come over too, not to help, just to watch you struggle.

Brig: Rogan, I'll take you up on that. Jen, I love you but stay the fuck away.

Chapter Fourteen

RUTH

“So, word on the street is you’ve been ‘grouchy’ to Brig,” Rylee says, coming up to the counter as I close up. She’s spent the day in her “sex chair” finishing up a manuscript that’s been giving her trouble. Something about not connecting with the characters, not feeling their passion?

Ugh, artists. *Am I right?*

I just finished up today’s tabs, and am ready to call it a day and kick my friend out so I can wallow in a frozen pizza by myself.

“Who did you hear that from?”

“Ren, who heard it from Harper, who heard it from Eve, who heard it from Reid, who heard it directly from Brig in their family group text message.”

“Oh, is that all?” I ask sarcastically.

She sits up on the counter and crosses one leg over the other. “Why are you torturing the boy?”

“Why am I torturing him? Uh, hello, he’s the one who’s driven me to drink. DRINK, Rylee. I swear, I couldn’t be any more obvious at this point.”

“Oh, you could. You could tell him it’s you he’s been writing, and that he’s the one you’ve been pining after.” I bite the corner of my lip. “Ah, but that would put you in the position of putting your heart on the line and you would never do that.”

I shake my head. “I’ve endured too much hurt for a lifetime. I don’t think my heart could take anymore.”

Rylee places her hand on mine and I stare at the connection. “Why do you think he’s going to hurt you?”

“Rylee, if he was interested, he would have made a move by now.”

“You don’t know that.”

I let out a sigh. “In his letters, he’s measuring and offering his dick size, and suggesting that we’re two steps away from the bedroom. *With his pen pal*. Whereas, he refers to me, Ruth, as his friend. He wants *her*, Rylee. Not me. He’s flirting with *her*. He wants to kiss *her*. I’m right in front of him, and if he wanted *me*, he’d take me. Literally . . . He had his nose in my cleavage the other day and fucking looked away. In. My. Boobs. So, don’t tell me I don’t know. If he wanted me, he’d be as upfront as he is with his pen pal. I’m done trying. This fucking hurts, Rylee, and I just can’t keep doing this to myself. He’ll be expecting another letter tomorrow, but I just don’t have it in me anymore. I’m going to talk to Mrs. Davenport, and tell her I’m not interested. It’s time to put an end to it before my heart breaks even more.”

“Ruth, you can’t quit now. You’re so close.”

“No, I’m not.” I shake my head. “Listen to what I’m saying. You’re not there with him, you don’t see it firsthand. There is nothing between us. But he desperately wants the girl he’s writing to, and that’s not me. Not in his eyes.”

“I see the way he looks at you though.”

“I love you, Rylee, but you’re also a romance novelist who has unrealistic expectations when it comes to love and relationships. You live in a fantasy—”

“That’s bullshit, and if you would read my books you’d know that. I write realistic characters. Characters with faults, with cracks and bends in their souls. They’re human. They make mistakes. They say the wrong things at the wrong times. They experience pain, they understand what it takes to earn someone’s love back, and yes, there might always be a happily ever after but isn’t that what life is supposed to be? A happily ever after? Where’s yours, Ruth?”

“Not with Brig, and I think we need to—”

The bell to the shop rings and we both turn to find Brig walking through the door.

Why?

Why does he have the worst timing?

Hands stuffed in his front jeans pockets, he walks toward us looking a little frightened but also excited.

“Hey,” he says softly. “Can I continue to approach the counter or am I going to be yelled at?”

“I’m closing up right now. Rylee was just leaving,” I say, stuffing away all the tabs and packing up.

“I’m not here for coffee.”

I watch Rylee place a hand on Brig’s arm as she says, “Be cautious, she’s still biting.”

He doesn’t pay Rylee any attention, but looks at me, the pleading in his expression piercing the wall I’m trying to build around my heart. His eyes, sad, regretful, almost desperate, are calling out to me and I’m doing everything in my power not to look at him.

“I’ll catch you tomorrow,” Rylee calls out as she takes off, the quickest retreat I think I’ve ever seen from her. The door rings and then shuts, leaving me alone with Brig.

“Listen, I’m tired and hungry and I would really like to—”

“Please come with me,” he says, his voice flat. “Please, Ruth, I really want to show you something.” When I don’t look at him, he lifts my chin and forces my eyes to meet his, and that’s my undoing. My fate is sealed when he says, “Please,” one more time.

I might be irritated with him, but I still can’t resist the man, not when he looks at me like that, like if I don’t say yes, he might not take his next breath. So I take off my apron, hang it up, and round the counter where Brig immediately takes my hand. I snag the keys to the shop, lock up, and then allow myself to be guided down Main Street.

“You said you’re hungry?” Brig asks, quietly walking next to me, our hands linked together.

I’m happy and sad. Happy that I can steal this moment with him, but sad because I know it doesn’t mean anything to him . . . like it means something to me.

“Yeah, but I can eat after we’re done with this.”

“I can order us a pizza and we can—”

“Brig, just show me what you have to show me, okay?”

I feel him tense next to me, and I actually feel bad. I know he's confused, has no idea why I'm acting the way I am, but it really has nothing to do with him and everything to do with the feelings I've been harboring. It's not fair for me to be so mean to him.

"Look, I'm—"

"The rehearsal dinner," he says quickly, not letting me get in another word. "We can still use your kitchen, right?"

"Of course. And hey—"

"Will you join me?"

"Wh-what?" I ask, wondering if I heard him right.

"The rehearsal dinner," he repeats. "I was hoping you'd accompany me to it."

"You want me to go to the rehearsal dinner with you?"

"Yeah." We reach the Parlor and the garage and he turns me toward him, planting us right under a streetlamp. The soft yellow glow casts a globe of light around us as he takes both my hands in his. "I know things have been weird between us lately, and I'm really sorry for whatever I might have done, but I miss you, Ruthie." He looks down at our hands. "I've missed our runs, talking to you, joking with you. And I hate that we've suffered from some distance. It doesn't feel right, and I've felt . . . fuck, I've felt awful since."

Oh God, now I feel really terrible.

He squeezes my hands. "Remember when we said we were going to be honest with each other?"

Please don't ask me to be honest. Please don't make me that vulnerable.

"Yes," I say on a short breath.

"Okay, I'm going to ask you once and if you don't answer, I'll accept that. But, honestly? I'd really like to know. I want to know what I did that made you so angry with me? Because I never want to do it again. I never want to put this space between us again. So please, throw me a bone here, Ruthie, and tell me what I did."

Heat fills the backs of my eyes as tears start to form, tickling my nerves with desperation, with regret. I made him second-guess everything, when I shouldn't have. This wasn't fair to him, not even in the slightest, and I made him worry when this has everything to do with me. Yes, Brig is a clueless idiot, but then again, he wouldn't be clueless if I just told him the truth.

And yet, the truth is scary. The truth could lead to great pain.

The truth could truly put a divide between me and Brig. And even though I put distance between us this past week, I've missed his company. Even if he drove me crazy. Do I really want to lose that?

Not really.

Not at all.

He tugs on my hands. "Please, Ruthie."

Damn him.

Taking a deep breath, willing the tears to disappear, I say, "I, uh . . ."

Tell him the truth.

I can't.

I'm so terrified that he'll reject me. So terrified that he isn't attracted to me in any way.

"I . . ." I look to the side. I know I can't make something up, that I have to tell him some fraction of the truth if I'm going to make him drop the subject tonight. "I found out that the guy I like, well, he sees me more as a friend."

"What? Seriously? How come you didn't tell me?"

Because you're him.

Because you're the one I want.

Because I'm hopelessly, desperately in love with you, and I'm pretty sure you'll never feel the same way about me.

"Embarrassed," I say, choking back a sob. But I can't hold back the tears that stream down my face.

"Hey," he says softly, pulling me into a hug and cupping the back of my head. "There's no need to be embarrassed. You're amazing, Ruthie, and any guy would be fucking lucky to claim you as his girl." More tears. He soothingly rubs my back, quietly trying to calm me. "He's a fucking fool." He pulls me away and whispers, "If it's Oliver, blink twice, and I'll take care of things for you."

I chuckle and shake my head. "It's not Oliver."

"Promise?"

I nod. "Promise."

"Okay, because I was about to fuck up his general store, teach him a lesson." I laugh some more, pulling a grin from him. "That's my girl. That's the sound I like to hear." He kisses the top of my head and says, "I know it's easier said than done, but you don't want to hang on to someone who's not

going to give you the full attention you deserve. And you deserve every ounce of attention, Ruthie.” He cups my cheek. “You’re special.”

Just not special enough for you.

Another tear falls and he swipes it away with his thumb. “Let me take your mind off it. Come to the rehearsal dinner with me. Have fun with me.”

“You just don’t want to be the only single person there,” I tease.

“Maybe, but I also want company. It will be fun, and you can test out my dancing skills for the wedding on Saturday, see if I’m worth meeting out on the dance floor.”

“Hmm, good point.” I tap my chin and let the tension melt away between us. At this point, there’s nothing I can do, not when I have to attend his brother’s wedding this weekend. Might as well get through the happily ever after of another couple and then focus on what the hell I’m going to do with all of these feelings.

Because the line has been drawn. *He’s not into me.* And he’s made it clear what I should do. “. . . *you don’t want to hang on to someone who’s not going to give you the full attention you deserve.*”

So, that actually leaves me no choice after all.

And that makes me feel nauseous and terrified.

It’s time to walk away.

“So, will you . . . attend the rehearsal dinner with me?”

“I guess I can,” I say casually, even though I can feel my nerves bundling into knots in my stomach.

“Fuck . . . yes.” He pulls me into another hug. “Does this mean we’re cool?” He cups my cheek, forcing me to look him in the eyes. “Because I’ve really missed you, Ruthie. You can ask my siblings, they . . . hey, they all said they knew why you were upset. Do they . . . holy shit, do they know who the guy is?”

God, he’s so pretty, but bricks for brains, this one.

Not even going to lie, I say, “Yes, they do. But they’ve been sworn to secrecy. Don’t even try to get it out of them. And the only reason they know is because of their girls.”

“Damn it,” he mutters and then sighs. “Fine, whatever. Don’t tell me. I’m only your best friend.”

“Are you?” I ask, a cock to my brow.

“I better be.”

Looking around, I say, “Do best friends take each other to barely lit corners to ask them to rehearsal dinners?”

“Oh shit, I almost forgot.” He laughs, takes my hand, and leads me to the Parlor door. “I brought you here for a reason.” He unlocks the door—still has a key from Mrs. Burberry I see—and before he opens it, he says, “You need to close your eyes.”

“Brig, if you put another hole in the wall—”

“I didn’t put a hole in the wall, well, maybe I did, but not the kind of hole you’re thinking of.” Guiding me by the shoulders, he walks me into the Parlor and I take in the fresh scent of paint and wood. My heart hammers in my chest as he flips on the lights. “Open your eyes.”

I open my eyes, blink a few times and then . . . oh my God.

“Brig,” I say clutching my hands to my chest. “What . . . how?”

The Parlor, it’s . . . finished.

Freshly polished floors gleam at me, perfectly painted white moldings frame the walls, doorframes, and windows. Shiplap covers the back wall, and on either side of the room, the natural wood shelves with iron piping have been installed . . . just the way I wanted. The register counter is beautifully outlined in shiplap as well, with a butcher’s block counter and stain to match the wooden shelves. The old-fashioned register I found looks ready to be used too.

But the best part of it all? Hanging behind the register is the iron sign I had made for the shop that I’d left in the back. Scrolled in beautiful whimsical cursive it says: *Piccadilly Parlor*.

“I can’t believe you did this.” I walk around the room, running my fingers over the shelves, marveling in how straight and secure they are.

“Rogan helped. He’s grateful you’re allowing us to use the kitchen, so he brought over a few guys and we finished up everything quite quickly. Then Rogan helped me stay to clean everything. The kitchen is all set as well and the bathroom, well, take a look.”

“Brig, you can’t be serious.”

I walk to the bathroom in the back right corner and open the door. It’s a unisex, single-stall bathroom that was once covered in teddy bear wallpaper. We’d stripped it down and redid the floors, but that was about it.

When I walk in and flip the light on, I’m hit with six-foot-tall board and batten all around the walls in a midnight blue. The rest of the walls are a beautiful white. The floors match the main dining space, and the gorgeous

sewing machine vanity that Mrs. Burberry left has been cleaned and repaired. The picture I picked out to hang above the toilet that says: “Wash your hands, you filthy animal” is hanging. I can still hear the deep, throaty laugh from Brig when he read the picture.

“I can’t believe you did this.”

He pops his head in. “Technically, Rogan’s guys did this. They were quick and efficient. I’ve never seen a room transform as fast as I saw this bathroom change. It makes a statement. I like it.”

“I love it,” I say breathlessly, my pulse picking up, rapidly pumping blood through my veins, making me feel dizzy. I grip the wall and stare up at him. “This is . . . this is too much.”

He shakes his head. “This is what Port Snow does. We come together to help one of our own, especially when they might be going through a tough time.”

“Brig, I don’t . . .” Emotion clogs my throat, my heart beats so hard it feels like it’s trying to break my ribcage. I’m so grateful for this man, and all I can think about is how much I love him. How much he means to me.

How much my heart *will* break when I let the dream of us go.

Tears cascade down my cheeks and he draws closer, minimizing the space between us so he can swipe away at my tears.

His proximity brings on a new wave of sensations, as his rich scent hums around us, his gentle touch breaking through my protective barrier, and his voice as soft as his blue-eyed gaze.

“Don’t cry, Ruthie Girl.”

My cheek leans into his touch, my skin igniting from how close he is. The palpable desire I have for him owns my actions, as I move in even closer and press my hand to his chest.

“Thank you,” I say softly, my fingers playing with the cotton of his shirt. “Thank you so much, Brig.”

His hands fall to my hips where he gently holds me in place.

“You’re welcome. I really wanted—”

I don’t know what comes over me and later when you ask, I probably won’t be able to tell you what happened in this moment, but before he can finish his sentence, I stand on my toes, reach my hand behind his head, and bring his mouth to mine.

The moment our lips connect, the heady feel of his masculinity presses against me. *I will never be the same.* Instantly, my life becomes divided by

pre-kiss Ruth and post-kiss Ruth.

Post-kiss Ruth's world has shifted. Colors have changed. Sounds have become clearer. Smells more potent.

That is until I *don't* feel his lips move against mine.

When his hands stiffen on my hips.

When he pulls away.

Oh . . . God.

I snap back, hand to mouth. Mortification envelops me.

"I . . . I'm sorry," I say, stepping back. "Please don't . . . oh God, I'm sorry."

Before he can say a word, I bolt from the Parlor and sprint back to Snow Roast.

What have I done?

Ruth Barber . . . what the hell were you thinking?

I want to crawl into a hole so deep, and when I reach my apartment, I don't bother changing for bed.

I throw off my shoes, slip under the covers, and I cry. I cry myself to sleep, praying that what I just did was a painful dream . . . not humiliating reality.



"ARE YOU OKAY?" Rylee whispers to me as Harper spins around blindfolded, trying to stick an illustrated dick on a cutout of Rogan. Pin the dick on the groom, one of many games we've played so far.

I completely forgot about Harper's bachelorette party until Rylee came barreling up to my apartment, pounding on my door fifteen minutes before it started. Beck clued her in on why I hadn't gone downstairs. She pushed me through the shower without a word, picked out a sundress, helped me put my hair in a tight ballerina bun, and slapped some mascara on me.

We haven't spoken a word until now.

"I might throw up," I say through the side of my mouth.

"Legit throw up?" She turns her head to look me in the eyes.

"Questionable. It's touch and go."

"What happened last night?"

"Not talking about it," I say, feeling my throat choke up. "Not the time nor place."

"After. You and me, your place, we'll go over everything."

"Can't wait," I say sarcastically.

Everyone around us is drunk, well, besides Ren. She claimed DD for the night for obvious reasons. I'm still nursing the same drink from three hours ago. It's lukewarm swill at this point and bringing it even close to my mouth makes my stomach roll.

"Ahhhh," everyone cheers when Harper nails Rogan right where his dick is supposed to go. How fitting. She lifts the bandanna off her head and cheers for herself.

"Do I know my man's penis or what?" she asks as everyone cracks up.

Poor Mrs. Knightly.

I glance over at her and she has a glass of wine in her hand, a smile on her face. Whoever thought inviting the mother of the groom was a good idea, I have no clue, but from the look of it, her eyes are a little heavy. I'm pretty sure that's not her first, second, or third glass of wine.

"Is this almost over?" I whisper to Rylee.

"I think so. That was the last game. Presents were opened. Dick cake was consumed. I think you could slip out soon."

"Thank God." I take a deep breath and say, "I'm going to put my drink in the sink. Want me to take yours?"

"Yeah, that would be great." She hands me her drink and I walk through Harper and Rogan's house to the back where the kitchen is. The boys are over at Griffin's house, doing Lord knows what. It was announced that no strippers would be involved at either party, because neither the bride nor the groom were interested. Rylee was disappointed of course, she wanted Beck to be the main event. Apparently the boy has moves. Salsa-type moves. The amount of times I've heard Rylee talk about the wedding they crashed together—and *how* he moved on the dance floor to the song *Havana*—is obnoxious. She swears, she fell for him in that moment. At least, that's what she claims now.

I empty our drinks in the sink and set the glasses on the counter. When I spin around, I run straight into Mrs. Knightly.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry."

"No need to apologize, I was crowding your space." She sets her drink down and chuckles. "I sent a text to my husband that he needed to come pick me up, as watching my future daughter-in-law carve a replica of Rogan's penis out of a cucumber did me in."

I let out a laugh. "Yeah, I can see how that might induce the consumption of wine."

“Just a little.” She sighs and places her hand on my arm. “I’ve yet to thank you for letting us use the Parlor for the rehearsal dinner tomorrow night. We really appreciate it.”

“Of course. Anything you guys need. Your sons have been quite helpful with renovations. It’s the least I could do.”

“Yes, Brig is quite smitten with you,” Mrs. Knightly says with a mischievous look in her eyes. She leans in and whispers, “He told me about the kiss last night.”

Oh.

Dear.

God.

She must see the mortification in my eyes, because she pats my hand and says, “Don’t worry, he’s sworn me to secrecy. I’m the only one he told. Said he can’t trust his brothers. He also said he asked you to the rehearsal dinner tomorrow night as his date. I always knew you two would be perfect for each other.”

I swallow hard as I try not to pass out from the air being squeezed from my lungs.

“Um . . . I didn’t . . . the kiss . . .” My lip trembles and Mrs. Knightly—although tipsy—notices and takes me by the shoulders. Like the wonderful mom that she is, she moves me past the kitchen to the solarium, where it’s quiet and vacant.

“Sweetie, what’s wrong?”

I shake my head, tears falling rapidly from my eyes. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to cry in front of you.” I take a deep breath and wipe my eyes. “There, I should probably get going. Thank you for your concern, Mrs. Knightly, but I’m okay.”

I start to walk away but she stops me, a serious look crossing her face. “You’re not okay, you’re trying to be brave. No need to be brave around me, sweetheart. Talk to me.”

More tears.

God, why do the Knightlys always want to talk? Why can’t they just let someone wallow in their own pain? At least I know where Brig and Griffin get it from. And Rogan for that matter. Reid seems to be more of the dark horse.

“You know, I don’t think this is a great time—”

“Hush, they’re all drunk in there. They won’t notice. Now tell me, what did my boy do?”

God, this is humiliating.

Biting the side of my cheek, I try to figure out how to say this in a way that doesn’t make me look like a complete loser, but there’s really no way to avoid that.

“I spur-of-the-moment kissed him. He didn’t kiss me back. I know he doesn’t like me. It was stupid, and I’m trying to just . . . get over it.”

“What do you mean he didn’t kiss you back?”

Not really wanting to rehash this.

“He . . . uh . . . just stood there, ramrod straight. You know, Mrs. Knightly, I feel really weird and uncomfortable about this. I don’t want to be rude, but I’m truly embarrassed over the entire thing. I’m trying to move past it. I know Brig asked me to the rehearsal dinner tomorrow, but I don’t think it’s right for me to show up to such a small, intimate event when things are . . . strained. I don’t want there to be any uncomfortable vibes. I know this is asking a lot, but would you tell Brig I won’t be able to go? I’ll be at the wedding though.”

She shakes her head. “I will say no such thing.”

Well, there goes that idea.

“You’re going to that party.”

“Mrs. Knightly, I appreciate—”

“You listen here, Ruth Barber.” She pokes me in the arm. “Your mom and dad raised you to be an independent, strong woman who takes what she wants. I’ve watched you slowly shrink into a wallflower whenever my son is around and frankly, I’m tired of it. You were not raised that way. You were raised to seize every moment presented to you. Do not apologize for the kiss, because that’s exactly what he needed. You should have seen him last night. Star-struck, confused, happy . . . but couldn’t explain to me why. I love my son, but he’s an idiot. You caught him off guard last night, threw him for a loop, but you peeled back a layer. When I asked him what he was going to do about the kiss, he said . . . he wasn’t sure.”

Okay, well, how is that helpful?

“Not to be rude, Mrs. Knightly, but that—”

“And then he gave me a wicked smile.” She boops my nose with her finger. “I’ve seen that smile on my son before, and he’s only ever used it when he was about to do something big.”

“I don’t know. He practically pushed me away. I appreciate you talking to me, but it doesn’t feel right to come tomorrow.”

As only mothers do, she snags me by the chin and looks me square in the eyes. “You are going tomorrow night, *and* you’re going to show up and blow his mind. Do you hear me, Ruth Barber? You are going to blow my son’s mind.”

I bite my bottom lip, rolling it under my teeth.

“I don’t think I have any confidence left.”

“Muster some up. You’re stronger than you think you are. Now, if you don’t show up, then I’ll have to leave my son’s rehearsal dinner to search for you. Is that what you really want? For me to miss my son’s rehearsal dinner? Would you really do that to me?”

Wow, I fear what kind of mom guilt the Knightly kids have endured throughout their entire lives, because right now, she’s throwing down and there isn’t any possibility for me to do anything other than go to dinner tomorrow.

Sighing, I say, “You sure know how to lay down the mom guilt.”

She pretends to dust off her shoulder. “It’s my specialty.” She gently cups my cheek and says, “Hang in there, sweetie. He’s going to figure it out.”

“That’s what everyone keeps saying, but I’m starting to believe he won’t.”

“He needs to figure this out on his own.” She glides her thumb over my cheek. “He might not say it, but he was the most affected by what happened in New Orleans. He’s terrified that the curse is true and has therefore built it up so much in his head that he second-guesses everything. He needs to come about this on his own, work his way past his fears, and he needs some grace. You are the girl to do that. I just know it.” She leans in and gives me a hug. “I’ll see you tomorrow, sweetie.” She smiles softly and walks away, leaving me with what feels like ten tons of indecision resting on my shoulders.

It’s times like these that I really miss my mom. *Her hugs. Her comfort. Her presence.*

What am I supposed to do, Mom?



I THOUGHT I was going to throw up yesterday. Man, was I wrong. This is when I throw up.

Talk about a terrible case of nerves. I can't stop my legs from shaking, my teeth are constantly chattering, and my stomach is rolling as my eyes float around the beautiful backyard space of Brig's garage.

I haven't been back here in a while, but I must say, he's done a spectacular job with it. Surrounded by ponderosa pines and native bushes, stamped concrete takes up almost the entire backyard space. Twinkling bulb lights have been strung across the entire space, creating a dreamlike escape where magical things happen.

"So glad you're here," I hear Mrs. Knightly's voice say, as her hand presses to my back. She leans in and gives me a hug. "You look stunning, Ruth." She then gives me a wink and catches up to her husband, who is getting them both a drink.

Harper and Rogan are holding hands, standing in the middle of the patio, looking blissfully in love while talking to Ren and Griffin. Eve and Reid are helping with the food, making sure everything is set up. Harper's dad is talking with the Knightlys. Jen and her brood of kids are playing board games with Rylee, Beck, and their triplets. There are a few other people I don't quite know milling about, but no Brig.

This was really a bad idea.

I shouldn't be here.

My hands twist in front of me. Insecurities clash through my head. My fight or flight instinct kicks in and before I can even battle out why I should stay, I decide to flee.

I turn around, and make eye contact with Brig.

And oh my God, he looks so freaking handsome. Dressed in a navy suit with a white and blue checkered shirt, his eyes are highlighted by the colors. His hair is ruffled to the side, styled to look sexy messy, and his frame fills out his suit devastatingly.

But it's the smile on his lips that's capturing my attention, that has me transfixed and immobile.

Unbuttoning his suit coat, he walks toward me, swagger in his gait, intensity in his stare.

Unsure how to react, I do nothing but attempt to breathe as evenly as possible, so I don't end up doing something stupid like passing out.

He takes his time closing the distance between us, his eyes traveling up my body, lighting my skin on fire as his gaze sears me. I chose a simple black dress that hugs me close in my torso but flares at my hips. My hair is

pulled back tightly at the nape of my neck, and I put on more makeup than I normally do, adding a softer smoky eye and heavy mascara.

When he finally draws close, his hand lifts to my cheek as he studies my face. I try not to shake from his touch, attempting to calm my chattering teeth. I pray my legs hold me still.

Speaking in a soft voice, he says, “You look beautiful, Ruthie.” His thumb strokes my cheek. “But you covered your freckles.”

I don’t know what to say.

An apology seems weird.

A thank you also doesn’t fit.

So instead, I stare up at him, hoping and praying I didn’t humiliate myself the other day. I haven’t heard from him since, so all I’ve been able to focus on is how he pulled away and the disappointing silence that followed.

Sliding his hand down my arm, he links our hands together, our fingers entwining. “Come with me.”

Quietly, he leads me across the patio. I keep my head down, unsure what people might be thinking, but I see him shake a few hands as we pass by. He brings me around the corner of his shop, to the back opening of the Parlor, and then to my surprise, spins me around and presses me up against the wood siding.

“What—”

Oh God.

Brig is kissing me, behind our businesses, his hands capturing my face, his tongue swiping across my lips.

Am I dreaming? The sensation is far too strong—*far too wonderful*—so it must be reality. But . . . Oh God.

A million butterflies lift off in my stomach, making me feel drunk in lust as my mind whirls with excitement . . . and disbelief.

I’m almost too stunned to react, but he doesn’t pull away, he only presses in farther, and it’s what guides me to do the same. I float my hands up his stomach past his pecs, to the back of his neck where I hold on tight, not letting him go, not wanting this moment to end.

It doesn’t feel real.

My mind is playing tricks on me.

But it’s true, this is really happening.

The earthy sound of his groan as my tongue tangles with his.

The grip of his strong hand on my jaw, tilting my head, granting him better access.

The minty taste of him on my tongue mixed with pure masculinity.

The smell of his leather and spice cologne, intoxicating me, wrecking me from the inside out.

My senses burn for him, to be lit on fire and exposed to the headiness of his soul, the power of his virility.

One of his hands moves to my hip, pinning me so I can't move, meaning I'm gladly forced to stay where I am as he tilts his mouth to the side and swipes his tongue past my lips. I reciprocate the action, tangling, feeling, tasting.

Taking.

Taking everything I've wanted over for years.

Letting this moment soak in, from the grip he has on me, to the way the scruff on his face scrapes across my chin, along my lips, and over my cheeks.

It's burned into my soul.

Injected into the marrow of my bones.

Tattooed on my brain.

A moment I will never forget . . . for the rest of my life.

His lips lightly press against mine and I feel him slowing down, as my hand slides to the spot right above his heart. It's racing, just like mine.

He presses one more kiss to my lips and then pulls away, not too far, staying close, connected.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I'm so fucking sorry."

Sorry? "For the kiss?" I ask.

He nods and once again, my stomach bottoms out. Disappointment laces my heart. *No, please don't let him pull away; please don't let him take back everything I just experienced.*

"Not this kiss." He brings his lips to my forehead where his mouth smooths over the crinkle in my brow. "For the kiss the other day. For not kissing you back and then for not chasing after you when you bolted."

I shake my head. "You don't need to apologize. I was . . . I was—"

"Perfect." He looks me in the eyes now. "You were perfect, Ruthie Girl, and I was the idiot. I guess I was shell-shocked. I thought, I don't know, I thought you were sad about that guy, and I didn't want you to project—"

"It's you," I blurt out before I can stop myself.

“What?” he asks, a cock to his brow, confusion knitting between his eyes.

Oh God.

What have I done? Looks like now or never.

Taking in a deep breath, I say, “The guy.” I swallow hard and look him in the eyes. “The guy I’ve been pining after, it’s . . . you.”

“Wait.” He stands taller, his eyes locked on mine. “You mean, the guy you’ve been talking about, the one who you’ve had a crush on for years, that’s . . . me?” He points at himself completely shocked.

A wave of unease plows through me, threatening tears again. There’s something about telling your crush that you like them that’s both freeing *and* terrifying.

“Yes,” I say, almost so softly that I can’t hear it.

He steps back, pushes his hand through his hair.

“But . . . you said you found out he didn’t like you.”

I look toward the sky, wishing I wasn’t having this conversation right now. “I got the hints that you weren’t into me. I figured I should stop trying to get you to notice me.”

“Notice you.” He laughs sarcastically, hand still driving through his hair. “Are you fucking kidding me, Ruth?” His gaze pins me. “All I’ve done for the last few weeks is notice you. It feels like you came out of nowhere, flipped my world upside down, and made me question everything I ever thought was real. I’ve been confused, excited . . . horny. Those denim shorts, those running bras, your humor, your persistence. It’s been fucking with my head.” He levels with me. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“Because I didn’t think you liked me that way. I didn’t think you could. We’ve known each other for so long, but you’ve never looked at me the way you looked at me tonight. I was terrified you’d reject me if you knew. And I didn’t want to take that risk, so I focused on treasuring the moments I did get. Your friendship. The alternative? Telling you? I would have lost those moments.”

“Hell, Ruthie.” He cuts the distance again and cups my cheek. “I wish I would have known.”

“Why, would you have done something about it?”

“I—”

“Brig, are you back here?”

Brig steps away just as Reid rounds the corner. “There you—oh, sorry. Uh, hey Ruth.”

I feel my cheeks flame as I wave at him. “Hey Reid.” I look between the two of them and realize how awkward this is. “Uh, I’ll go see if Rylee needs help with the triplets.” I start to move when Brig steps in front of me, taking my hand in his.

“What’s up, Reid?” he asks, looking stoic and protective next to me.

Reid’s eyes fall to our connection and a tiny smirk appears. “About to do the toast. Care to join?”

“Yeah, be right there.”

Giving us one last glance, Reid chuckles and then takes off. Turning toward me, Brig lifts my chin and says, “Stay by my side tonight.”

His eyes beg, plead with me, and even though I’d do anything for him at this point, I don’t want to make the rehearsal about us.

I shake my head. “No, Brig.”

“What?” he asks. “Ruth, you can’t—”

I place my hand over his mouth and quiet him. “Tonight’s about Harper and Rogan. I won’t take that away from them and if I go out there, holding your hand, it will draw obvious attention. Plus, I think we should probably talk.”

“Talk? Why does that not sound good?” He sighs. “Listen, Ruth, things are—”

“You don’t need to explain anything, Brig. I get it, okay? Just go enjoy your brother’s wedding festivities. I’m sorry I kissed you the other day. I shouldn’t have done that, and I shouldn’t have confessed that you’re the guy I’ve been crushing on. Poor timing.”

“Don’t fucking apologize,” he says, anger hidden in each word. “Just stop, okay?” He grips his forehead, looking toward the party. “Fuck.” Turning back toward me, he says, “You and me, after the party, we’re talking. Do you understand?”

I’ve never seen Brig like this, so tough, so angry. Unable to process anything other than making sure I don’t see this side of him again, I nod.

“Good.” He places his finger under my chin one more time and brings his lips to mine. It’s a tender, brief kiss, but it packs all the feels, reminding me how I’ve longed for his lips, for his touch. And just as I get comfortable in his kiss, he stops kissing me and walks away. He glances over his shoulder, winks, and then starts off in a jog.

Oh God. That happened. Kisses happened. *Kisses. With. Brig. Happened.*



"CARE TO TELL me what the hell is going on?" Rylee whispers to me, as I color a picture with one of her demon spawns—her name for them, not mine.

"Not here," I say out the side of my mouth.

"That seems to be the theme here." She scoots in closer on the bench we're sharing, our shoulders touching. "Why is Brig staring at you?"

I glance over to where he's talking with Rogan and Harper, beer bottle in hand, eyes trained on me.

"Uh, I might have told him he was the guy I was crushing on."

"What?" Rylee whisper-shouts, her head turned down, the red crayon in her hand furiously scribbling away on the heart picture in front of her. "When the hell did you do that?"

"An hour and a half ago, before the toast."

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph." She scribbles some more, concealing the fact that we are having a heated conversation. "What did he say?"

"Don't really want to rehash it."

"You're going to have to give me something if he's staring at you like that."

"We're meeting up after the party to talk."

"Oh dear God, my legs just clenched. You are so not talking."

"What? Yes, we are. He wants to go over things."

"You are so fucking tonight."

"Wow." I shake my head. "You have truly lost your mind. This isn't a romance book."

"Should be, with the amount of frustration you've put everyone through."

"Hey ladies, can I join you?"

Speak of the devil.

"Oh, I'd absolutely love if you did," Rylee says, as if her night just got a whole lot better. Knowing her, she's about to make my life a living hell.

Brig takes a seat across from us and picks up a green crayon along with one of the coloring pages Harper printed out for all the kids. His hands are broad and far too big for the little crayon pinched between his fingers, as he casually colors in a tree.

“So, what are you girls chatting about?” he asks, a lift of his brow in my direction. Damn him for being so freaking gorgeous.

“You,” Rylee says, not even beating around the bush. Should have seen that coming.

“Figured,” Brig says in a cocky tone. Seems as though the anger has dissipated now and his normal teasing is back. “Did Ruthie tell you I kissed her behind our buildings . . . with tongue?”

“Oh my God, Brig,” I say, whispering.

“No, she did not.” Rylee shoves my shoulder with hers. “It’s about time. This girl has been fantasizing about you for a while.”

I turn to my friend, look her straight in the eyes and say, “I am going to murder you in front of your children.”

“Worth it.” She smiles at me.

Ignoring my attempt to Darth Vader force-choke my friend, Brig says, “I heard a version of that. Imagine my surprise in finding out that tidbit about our friend.”

“You must have been completely shocked.” Rylee clutches her chest. “I think it’s smart talking it out tonight.” She winks at him and repeats slowly, “Talking it out.”

Dear Christ, please send me new friends.

ASAP.

“Are you alluding to sex?” Brig asks.

“Take it as you want.” Rylee shrugs and picks up a purple crayon.

“Is that what Ruth told you was going to happen?”

“No,” I practically shout, then suddenly remember where we are. Leaning over the table, I whisper, “No, I did not say that.”

“Ooof, don’t act so offended, Ruthie Girl.” Brig is sporting the same teasing grin as Rylee.

“I’m not offended. I’m . . . I’m . . .” I grip my forehead and whisper, “I’m frazzled. I wasn’t expecting you to kiss me. I didn’t even want to come tonight, but then your mom—”

“My mom?” Brig asks, his head shooting to the side where Mrs. Knightly is staring at both of us. She holds up her glass of wine and smirks. Brig’s gaze bounces back to me and he asks, “What did she say to you?”

Ohh . . . looks like the tables have turned.

“Things,” I answer.

His eyes sweep over me, darken, and there's an unspoken promise in those blue, questioning irises. He's going to find out what his mom said.

"Well, this party can't end soon enough," Rylee says, standing from the table. "And I'll start the exiting process for everyone." She claps her hands. "Children of mine, clean up, Auntie Ruth needs some private time with a man."

"Can you not?" I ask as Brig sits taller and chuckles to himself.
Glad he finds this amusing.



"I THOUGHT I'd find you in here," Brig says, coming through the front door of the Parlor. "Is the kitchen clean? I want to make sure Reid did a good job."

Standing behind the register counter, I nod. "Everything is good."

"Good." He locks the door behind him and shuts off the lights, leaving only the backlight to the kitchen on, illuminating me from behind.

The evening went as expected: me burning up inside every time I made eye contact with Brig and then avoiding him every chance I got until he finally caught me with Rylee. From there, things went downhill. I was so embarrassed by Rylee's confessions, that I took myself over to the Parlor to clean and pack up leftover food.

And that's where I've been since. I have to say, I'm still in awe. Surrounded by my new venture, I feel so proud. The boys captured the sense of decadence and fun I wanted, with little input from me. But I know now that Brig ensured every placement, every detail was just as I'd designed it. And that means the world to me. As does the man in front of me with a look of resolution and purpose in his eyes.

Determination in his stride, he cuts the space between us and comes up right in front of me, pinning me against the counter, hands on either side of my body.

The air between us seems to shrink as he stares down at me.

Irritation.

Fascination.

Lust . . .

It's all there, swimming in his features.

"You're infuriating, you know that?" he says, his breath tickling my neck as he brings his face close to mine.

"Brig, I really think we should—"

“You’ve done enough talking,” he says, that anger returning. I feel his body tense and then he pushes off the counter, gripping his styled hair. The suit jacket he was wearing is gone, and instead it’s just his button-up shirt tucked into his dress pants. The sleeves are rolled and the top two buttons are undone, giving me a peek of a sprinkling of hair. “You should have told me,” he says, looking me in the eye.

“It wasn’t that easy, Brig.”

“Seems pretty easy. All you had to do was tap me on the shoulder and say, hey, I like you. Lord knows, you’ve had plenty of opportunities.”

“You never would have given me a second look.”

“Bullshit,” he says. “You can’t say that about me. You have no fucking clue how I would have reacted.”

“Are you really mad right now?” I ask, growing irritated.

“Yeah, I am. Do you know how many people at the party knew about you liking me? Almost all of them.”

“Jesus, Brig, what did you do, take a tally?”

“Doesn’t matter what I did. What matters is that you didn’t tell me.”

“Why does it matter so much to you?” I ask, my voice rising. “Do you really think you would have done something about it? I practically propositioned you with my breasts. I held your hand and showed you more affection than ever before. And you didn’t react. That showed me that you weren’t interested in me. So, how can you say that I should have said anything when it was clear you weren’t seeing me as more than a friend? Do you think you would have reacted or done anything differently?”

His eyes sharpen, and before I can take another breath, he’s lifting me up on the counter, spreading my legs, and pressing his body against mine as his hand snakes to the back of my neck.

“I sure as fuck would have done something about it,” he says right before his mouth crashes down on mine.

Need rushes through my bones, weakening my muscles, and softening my resolve. It takes all but two seconds before I give in to the demands of his mouth. I press my hands to his chest, exploring the thick contours of his pecs, the way they slope perfectly with his body, thick and strong.

My thumbs stroke across his hardened nipples, and he groans into my mouth, pulling me flush against him, my center meeting his pelvis.

And, oh God . . .

I lose my breath, gasp against his mouth, his erection sparking something deep within me that's felt darkened for years.

My fingers sift through his hair, pulling, tugging, my voice a distant whisper when I speak. "Brig . . ."

"Fuck," he mumbles against my jaw, moving his lips down to my neck as his hands travel over my torso to my thighs. His large hands span the width of them, his thumbs dragging deliciously toward the center.

Higher

And higher.

Until they are under my skirt, at my hipbone, pressing against the string of my thong. His thumbs loop under, pulling, tugging, indicating his intentions.

Heat envelops me, common sense is thrown out the window, and I lift my hips, using his strong body to help me, and he tugs on my thong, pulling it over my ass and then down my legs. I watch as he bundles it up and sticks it in his back pocket.

When he looks back up at me, our eyes connect—our heated gazes collide—and the air erupts with sexual hunger as he charges forward again. This time, he pushes my legs even farther apart, completely exposing me.

Carnal desire drips off him as his mouth finds mine again, his tongue lashing at mine, his hands gripping my face with such intensity that I have no other option than to succumb to his demands.

His thumbs move my jaw, widening my mouth, making way for his unhinged fervor. Like waves crashing into the harbor rocks, desire beats into my chest, constricting my lungs, causing my mind to float somewhere else, somewhere dreamlike. A place where all you do is feel and listen.

His grunts permeate my ears as his tongue dives and slides against mine.

The air pumps between our bodies, licking against the blaze between my legs.

The shift of his dress pants is like a dozen feathers rubbing along my inner thighs.

Sexual need beats through me like a pulse, seeking release it hasn't felt from a man in a long time.

As if he can sense how ramped up I am, he takes my hands from the back of his head and places them on the counter behind me. Then he kisses my jaw, my chin, my neck . . . my collarbone.

“Oh God,” I whisper. “Brig . . .”

He doesn't answer. He dips lower, rubs my legs with his strong hands, lifts the skirt of my dress, and then he groans.

Eyes heady, he glances at me briefly, as if looking for permission. When I don't stop him, he bends forward and brings his mouth to my inner thigh.

Tears prick the backs of my eyes as my head falls back, my gaze focusing on the ceiling as Brig directs his mouth right to my center.

Mouth falls open.

Legs spread even wider.

A zip of electricity bolts up my spine as Brig's tongue swipes across my swollen clit.

“Oh fuck, Brig.”

“Jesus Christ, I'm hard,” he says, looking up at me. “And you taste so fucking good, Ruthie. Shit. You taste good.”

And then his mouth is back on me, sucking.

His tongue peeks up, flicking.

His breath hums against my clit, warm.

He brings his thumbs to both sides of my pussy and then parts me even wider, only for his tongue to flatten against my clit and pulse.

“Jesus,” I moan. My entire body is on fire. The feeling of falling off the counter threatens the gravity holding me down. My legs shake, nothing to anchor on to. “I can't hold on,” I say, his tongue performing long, languid strokes.

“Wrap your legs around my neck,” he says, while assisting me.

And dear God, never in my life would I have pictured this with Brig Knightly. Getting tongue-fucked by him, on the counter of my business, my legs wrapped around his neck, keeping his head permanently placed against my throbbing pussy.

It's hot.

It's unreal.

It's almost unbearable.

Using Brig as a foothold, I'm able to lean back some more, granting him a different angle. He presses his fingers against me, inserts them, and curves up. My body nearly flies off the counter from the automatic bunching of nerves collecting between my legs.

“Oh God, yes.” I lean back again, my teeth pulling down on my lower lip. “Brig, oh God, I'm going to come.”

Fire blazes through me, collects in my center, and then blasts up my spine, turning my limbs into liquid, euphoric bliss.

His tongue is relentless, as well as his fingers.

He adds one more.

Driving up.

Flicking.

Fucking me.

He's fucking me and it's my undoing.

I cry out, my body thrashing uncontrollably. He presses down on my pubic bone, holding me in place, making it impossible for me to tear away as he continues to draw my orgasm out. Pulse after pulse of pleasure pushes through me like a semi-trailer, hitting me harder than before until I can't take it anymore, until the pleasure is too much and I'm pulling on his hair.

He doesn't move.

Instead, he rotates the other way and I cry out even more. My body is lying flat on the counter now, my arm draped over my eyes, which are tickled with tears.

"Oh . . . fuck," I say through a sob.

His tongue slows down.

His fingers slide out of me.

And when he pulls away, I glance in his direction, watching him place his wet fingers in his mouth. "Upstairs. Now."

Without even a second thought, he tugs on my hand, helps me off the counter, and leads me to his apartment.

I'm pretty sure he's about to break me. *And holy shit, I want that. I want him.*

Chapter Fifteen

BRIG

I can't fucking think straight.

My body's humming, buzzing, ready to explode.

The guy I've been pining after, it's . . . you.

Those words have been on replay since Ruth uttered them.

What the actual fuck?

She's liked me . . . for years? And never once said a goddamn thing. I'm still trying to process that, along with the conversations we shared about this guy, the look in her eyes when she spoke about him, the hesitation toward speaking to him.

It was me.

All fucking me.

"Brig, what are we—"

I slam the door behind me and spin on her. Her eyes widen as I approach. When I reach her, I take her hand in mine and I say, "I'm out of my goddamn mind right now. I don't know if I should fuck you against the wall or punish you for holding out on me." Letting go of her, I push my hands through my hair. "Christ."

I turn away and try to gain control of my emotions, but it's damn near impossible with the taste of her still on my tongue and the smell of her wrapped around me like a warm blanket. I don't think I've ever felt like this, so out of control.

Why didn't I see it? For so long she was Ruth from Snow Roast, the girl who knew my coffee order before I even opened my mouth. And then out

of nowhere, she jumps into my life with both feet, confusing me, twisting me into a ball of knots, and leaving me a panting, needy mess.

The rehearsal dinner was a goddamn nightmare to navigate. I found myself staring at Ruth every chance I got. Watching her every move, the way she fidgeted with her hands, how she licked her lips with a small pass of her tongue, or the way she glanced in my direction, her thick lashes fanning over her mysteriously dark eyes.

Eve caught on, and whenever someone asked why I was staring at Ruth, I told them *because she's been crushing on me for years*. And then I asked if they knew. Of course . . . everyone did. Even my mother.

Not me though.

Nope, I was the fool who didn't know.

And fuck, I don't know how to feel about it. All I know is I got a taste of her and I need more. I need so much more.

I'm about to turn around when her arms wrap around me. Her front to my back. Her lips press a kiss to my back as she pulls my shirt from my pants and then slowly unbuttons my dress shirt.

I stand there, unmoving, my breath hitching with every pass of her fingers.

They tremble.

Her body lightly shakes against mine.

And I hear the sound of her teeth chattering behind me.

She's nervous, but the only reason I don't stop her is because of the way she's lovingly kissing me down my back. And when my shirt is peeled off my skin and dropped to the floor, her lips find my heated, tense back.

Like reading braille, her fingers study every contour of my front, running over my abs, moving up to my pecs where she glides the tips of her fingers over my trimmed chest hair. Her thumbs run over my nipples, causing them to peak against the cool night air, only for her hands to drop down over my abs again, to my dress pants.

Surprisingly, she doesn't hesitate. She releases my belt and then unbuttons my pants. My erection presses against the zipper. Her fingertips graze my hardened length, and I suck in a sharp breath when she unzips my pants, releasing some of the hold on my cock. My pants fall to the ground and she lightly pushes my back so I lean forward. I brace myself against the wall in front of me as I feel her bend down to help me from my shoes,

socks, and pants. Her hands run up my bare legs to the waistband of my black boxer briefs.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, her fingers toying with the elastic, slipping in and out. “I’m sorry I didn’t have enough courage to tell you.”

Christ, when she says it like that . . .

“Ruth—”

“Shh,” she says just as her hand slips into my boxer briefs, gripping my cock.

“Holy . . . fuck,” I say, leaning forward, my head falling to my forearm.

In a smooth motion, she pushes my boxer briefs down my legs and I step out of them, leaving me completely naked and exposed for her eyes. Her fingers trail up the backs of my thighs, over the globe of my ass, and her warm breath tickles my shoulder blades, her hand still clutching the base of my cock.

God. This is what I’ve been denied. My Ruthie’s touch.

“It wasn’t love at first sight for me,” she says quietly and I still, holding my breath so I can try to hear her better over the pounding of my heart. She strokes her hand up and rubs her palm over the tip of my cock. “It was gradual. It was a *hello, Ruthie* here and there. It was the hug you gave me when you found out my parents passed. It was the teasing, the smiles you gave me in the mornings, the winks directed toward me every time you wanted me to play along while you joked with your brothers. It was the little things, Brig.”

Her hand travels down again, to the base. She kicks my legs apart, reaches between them and carefully cups my balls.

A hiss escapes past my lips. Never in my life have I been in this position, grabbed in all the best ways, but from behind, while she confesses her feelings for me. Is it so she doesn’t have to look me in the eyes? Is it easier for her this way?

My guess is yes.

She rolls my balls in her hand while she squeezes my base, tighter and tighter, pushing the blood to the tip. Short jolts of her hand help move that blood faster, causing a dull throb to travel up my cock.

“Christ,” I breathe out heavily, unable to stop myself.

“Those little things,” she says continuing the evil but fantastic torture. “They joined into one. Edges sewed together, moments collided into one

infatuation, putting me at the tail end of yearning and wanting from a distance.”

She releases the base of my cock, causing it to jolt as blood rushes through. The feeling is . . . exquisite, especially when she circles underneath the head with her forefinger and thumb, twisting back and forth, hitting that sensitive spot that never feels the same when I do it myself. I feel my cock grow in her hand, tighten, thrust forward.

Jesus Christ, I’m going to come faster than I want.

Her hands release me and grip my hips. Shaking, she turns me around so I can finally look at her. Her face reads nervous—scared—as she takes one step back, her eyes falling to my length, then she sensually rolls her teeth over the corner of her bottom lip. I’m about to pounce when she reaches behind herself and undoes her dress.

The straps loosen.

The torso slackens.

And then she lets it fall to the floor, exposing her completely.

No bra.

No underwear—stole those.

Just Ruth, in heels, bare and beautiful standing before me.

And fuck, is she gorgeous.

I drag my hand over my mouth, taking her all in, marveling at her breasts, how they have weight to them but aren’t too big. And her dusty-rose nipples peaked and needy. My mouth needs them.

She takes a step forward and presses her hand to my chest. I grip her hips but before I can hold on, she dips and kneels in front of me.

Oh fuck.

Her hands smooth up and down my thighs. My cock bobs in front of her face. Just when I think I can’t take any more, she opens her mouth and takes me in.

Warm heat envelops my erection, pulling me all the way to the back of her throat where she swallows.

“Fu-fuck,” I say, my hand going to her hair. “Fuck, Ruthie.”

She doesn’t let up, despite the feral sounds passing my lips. She bobs up and down, pulling me in so deep my vision starts to blacken. She’s ravenous, hell-bent on making me come in her mouth.

The sensation of her tongue dragging along the sensitive vein on my cock, how she swallows when my tip is buried in her throat, the way her

thumbs rub along the root . . . motherfucker.

I grip her hair, trying to be gentle, but holy shit, my body is spasming, my legs are wobbling, my— Her mouth pops off and my engorged cock thrusts between us as she stands.

“Ruthie,” I say on a gasp. “What—”

She takes my hand and walks me through my apartment to my bed in the corner of the large loft-like space. Stepping out of her heels, she climbs onto the bed and pulls me down with her. She pushes me down on my back and whispers, “I want to feel all of you, Brig. When you come for the first time with me, I want it to be inside me.”

Jesus Christ.

She strokes my cheek. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I was . . . nervous.”

“Stop apologizing,” I growl, pushing her onto her back and moving over her, taking charge.

“But you’re mad at me.”

“I’m not mad,” I say, my turn to explore her body. “I’m frustrated.” I glide my hand over her breast and marvel in the way it fits my palm perfectly. “Frustrated that we could have been doing this a long time ago.”

My cock lies heavily on her thigh as I bring my mouth to her breast, sucking in her nipple.

Beneath me, I feel her legs fall open, parting for me. The tip of my cock grazes her wet heat.

“How turned on are you, Ruthie?”

“I stopped sucking you because I thought I was going to come with you in my mouth.”

Jesus, fuck.

I pause, lift my head, and look at her in awe. Her hand caresses my face, her thumbs stroking my cheek. “These eyes,” she whispers. “They destroy me.”

And just like that, I lose track of everything else around and fall into this moment with the beautiful girl before me.

Lowering again, I glide my tongue over her breasts as her fingers sift through my hair, pulling when I tug on her nipples, smoothing when I lap my tongue around her breasts. We work in harmony as we succumb to each other’s touch.

My hands are frantic.

My mouth can’t get enough.

My breath can't keep up with my pulse.

Passion consumes me, swallows me whole, and takes me into another world where only Ruth and I exist.

She writhes beneath me.

She gasps when I nip at her breasts.

She moans when my mouth finds hers again.

We're tangled together, limbs locking each other down. With every shift of her body, my eager cock slides across her slit, her leg, her smooth skin. It doesn't help calm me down, but revs up my senses, spurring me on, needy for more.

"I need you inside me," she says, her hand snaking between us and gripping my length. She positions me at her entrance and I stop her.

"Fuck, I don't have condoms," I say, realization hitting me like a ton of bricks.

"Birth control," she says, moving me to her center. "Neither of us has had sex in a while. We're good." And then she slips me inside her, and her tight, warm heat pulls me in.

Holy fucking motherfucker.

"Shit, you feel amazing," I say, straddling her body and getting in position as I slowly slide myself inside.

"Brig," she says on a gasp when I slip all the way inside her. Our eyes meet and the shock that was once in them slowly dissipates . . . and is replaced by satisfaction.

"You okay?" I ask, feeling how tight she is around me. Like a goddamn vise.

"Perfect," she all but whispers, as her hand moves to my face and she brings my mouth to hers.

And we kiss.

We kiss for a long fucking time. It's slow, rhythmic. There's no rush about what we want, what we need to feel sated. We're in the moment. We're exploring. My hands on her breasts, moving over her nipples. Her fingers digging into my scalp, driving down my back, over my ass.

Our tongues dance, tangle, never let up, as my hips start a slow rocking motion, in and out of her. She's so fucking tight, it almost feels like I can't breathe as I slide in and out.

"Fuck . . . Ruth. This feels too good."

She spasms around me, clenching my dick. “Oh God, Brig. I’m not going to last.”

Me neither.

It’s embarrassing how quick I’m going to pull the trigger, especially if she keeps spasming around my cock like that.

“Kiss me,” she says, pulling on my head again. “Just kiss me, Brig.”

Taking one of her legs, I drape it over my shoulder, opening her up even wider. Then I lean down on one elbow, bringing my mouth to hers where our lips fuse together . . . and I pump. I pump hard and fast, but our mouths never break apart. She holds me tight to her, and even when she lets out a series of moans, I catch each one in my mouth. When she bites on my lower lip, I grunt against her. When our tongues dance and twist together, I get caught up in the euphoria pumping through my veins.

Intensifying.

Pleasure rips through me. Her moans turn into cries. Her cries turn into gasps. Her gasps become inaudible, as her pussy clenches around my cock and her orgasm pierces through her.

“Brig, yes,” she calls out, riding me hard, pumping her hips.

Shit, it’s too much.

Her sounds. Her sweet scent. The narrow confines of her pussy.

Pleasure builds at the base of my spine. My balls tense, drawing up. My cock swells.

And . . .

“Ah, fuck,” I call out as I come inside her, my hips stilling, my body numbing, my vision blurring.

Spurt after spurt jolts through my cock as we both ride out our orgasms until there’s nothing left.

I collapse on top of her, my face buried against her neck where I press light kisses along her heated skin. Her fingers dance across my back, soothing me after the jolt of pleasure I experienced.

Once I regain my breath, I lift up to look her in the eyes and when I do, I see tears spill over the sides.

“I’m—”

“Don’t apologize,” I say softly this time, kissing away the tears.

I smooth my thumb over her cheek and say, “Spend the night with me?”

She nods, unable to say anything. I press a light kiss across her lips, hop off the bed, and grab a wet washcloth to quickly clean us both up. When

I'm done, I hop back in bed, but pull us under the covers, and bring her close to my chest where she rests her head. She's shaking in my arms; soft whimpers fall from her lips.

"Ruthie Girl, talk to me."

"Ugh, I don't want to cry." She takes in a deep breath. "I just . . . that was . . ."

"Special." I tip her chin up so she's forced to look me in the eyes. "That was special for me."

"It . . . it was?"

I nod. "It was." I kiss the tip of her nose. "Get some sleep, Ruthie. I plan on doing that a few more times tonight."

I kiss her one more time and then hold her tight, my mind a clusterfuck of emotions as I try to navigate what the hell just happened—*how right it felt*—and what I'm going to do about it.

Chapter Sixteen

BRIG

Brig: *Is anyone awake? Please tell me someone's awake. I need to talk. Anyone, is anyone awake? pray hands*

Griffin: *What could be so important at six in the morning, Brig?*

Brig: *You're up!*

Griffin: *Ren has horrible morning sickness, so we've been up for half an hour.*

Reid: *I'm up. Eve snuck over this morning from Harper and Rogan's house. Met me under the deck of Mom and Dad's. We boned.*

Rogan: *I'm up, not because it's my wedding day, but because I thought I heard a bird getting attacked by a lobster under Mom and Dad's deck, but now know it was just my brother fucking his girlfriend.*

Reid: *Shrugs what can I say? She really likes my dick.*

Brig: *Uh, can we please bring it back to me?*

Rogan: *Oh yes, forgot. Even though I'm getting married today, we have to focus on Brig.*

Brig: *Glad you see it that way.*

Griffin: *Does this have anything to do with Ruth?*

Reid: *Ten bucks says they did it last night and he's freaking out.*

Rogan: *Easily.*

Griffin: *Ren called it last night.*

Brig: *Aren't you all a fucking treat?*

Griffin: *Well, is it true?*

Brig: *Yes.*

Reid: *Fucking finally. Christ.*

Rogan: Best wedding gift you could give me. About time you two hooked up.

Griffin: I think the entire town will be grateful for relieving them of the blue balls they've been suffering while watching you and Ruth together.

Brig: When you're done, I need to talk.

Reid: What's there to talk about?

Brig: What do I do?

Griffin: Uh, offer her breakfast, ask her if she'll save a dance for you at the wedding. Pretty simple, bro.

Rogan: The dance thing is a good idea.

Reid: She'll like the dance thing.

Brig: Is that blowing her off?

Griffin: No.

Rogan: Stop overthinking it.

Reid: Grow a pair and take charge.

Brig: This isn't helpful.

Griffin: How is it not helpful? We're telling you what to do.

Brig: By using catch phrases. I need solid advice.

Rogan: Two in the bottle, one in the hole.

Reid: Eggs and baskets, don't put them all in one fridge.

Griffin: Straight from the lobster's mouth.

Jen: Don't throw the condom out with the bath water.

Brig: WHY? WHY DO I TEXT YOU MORONS?



"GOOD MORNING," Ruth's voice comes up behind me as I'm in the middle of making pancakes.

I turn to find her wearing my dress shirt from last night with one button pulling it together in the middle. Her skin is glowing, her hair is ruffled, and even though she's covered up, my shirt is so big on her it flaps open in the middle, flashing me her gorgeous tits.

I grow hard in seconds.

"Good morning," I say on a gulp, taking her all in. She walks up to me tentatively and places her hand on my bare chest only to reach up and place a kiss on my jaw. When she starts to pull away, I snag her around the waist and dip my head toward hers, pushing her lips against mine.

She tastes like mint. She must have brushed her teeth before coming out to the kitchen.

Her body is soft and warm, and she smells like me, like my cologne.

Last night, Christ. We had sex two more times. Once with her riding on top of me, her tits bouncing right above my face, her pussy clenching so damn hard on my cock that I came faster than I care to admit. After that, we were slow, took our time. I explored her body with my mouth, dragging out her orgasm until we both passed out.

And even though I had her three times last night, seeing her right now, in my shirt, freshly fucked, I want her again.

I want her badly.

When she pulls away, I keep my arm around her and remove the pancakes from the griddle, turn it off and face her, while leaning against the counter.

“When do you have to be to your parents’ house?” she asks, flitting her fingers through my chest hair.

I glance over at the clock on the oven and say, “Two hours.”

“Okay.” Seeming shy—which I’ve noticed kicks in when she wants something but doesn’t know how to ask for it—she plays with the buttons on the shirt she’s wearing and says, “Uh, do you want me to go?”

I keep my arm around her waist and say, “I made you breakfast. Do you really think I want you to go?”

“I mean . . . I guess not.”

I tip her chin up. “Why are you acting weird?”

“I’m not trying to act weird. We just haven’t talked about what happened last night, at any point, and we just kept . . . doing it.”

“Yeah, because it felt fucking amazing.” I press a light kiss to her lips. “We have plenty of time to talk, Ruthie. Let’s just enjoy the morning together.”

“I can do that.” She lifts up on her toes and kisses me on the lips one more time. Then she releases me and asks, “What can I help with?”

“Nothing. But you can sit your pretty ass down while I fix a plate for you.” Her cheeks blush and she starts to walk away, when I tug on her arm and spin her into my chest, holding her close. “What’s the blush for?”

“You called me pretty.” She smiles and fuck, it’s adorable.

“Well, you are. Really fucking pretty, especially with your hair all ruffled and while you’re wearing my shirt from last night.”

She presses one more kiss to my lips and then takes off to the table where she sits, crossing one leg over the other. My shirt parts open,

exposing her chest.

“Do you expect me to eat pancakes while you’re dressed like that?” I ask motioning to her exposed breasts.

She glances down and then back up at me. “Figured it’s easier than you trying to muster up some X-ray vision to try to see through my shirt like you have over the past few weeks.” And there’s that sass I’ve missed.

I finish up the plates and take them to the table where I set them down and take a seat across from her. “How do you know I didn’t figure out X-ray vision?”

“Because.” She picks up her fork. “Last night when you saw my boobs, your eyes nearly popped out of your head. If you had X-ray vision, your reaction would have been different.”

“They did not pop out of my head.”

“They did.” She nods. “And then your head lifted up, twisted around while you said Awooga and made air kisses.”

I lean back in my chair and stare her down. “Are you always like this after you get thoroughly fucked?”

A smirk peeks past her lips. “Not sure. I’ve never been thoroughly fucked before.”

The heat in my body spikes, a caveman-like mentality taking over as I think about being the only man that’s truly pleased Ruth.

“Have you orgasmed with other men?”

She shrugs. “Maybe a few times. Nothing that’s blown my mind.”

I take a bite of my pancakes and say, “Are you saying I blew your mind last night?”

She finishes chewing her mouthful and then slices her fork through her pancake for another bite. “You know, Brig, I never thought you would be an after-sex gloater. I’m surprised.”

“I’m not gloating. But if you want me to, I can.” I take a sip of my coffee, clearing my throat. “Last night, you were moaning so loud, I was worried Port Snow was going to think it was the emergency sirens sounding off.”

She sits back in her chair, folds her arms over her chest.

Studies me.

Brings her coffee cup to her lips.

“Now I see why you haven’t had sex in a while. Your morning-after game is lacking.”

“Ooof.” I lean back, hand to my heart. “When you strike, you strike hard.” I chuckle, and so does she.

From over her mug, she keeps eye contact with me, her eyes darkening, the corner of her lips tilting up. “You blew my mind last night, Brig.”

Well . . . hell.

I can’t hold back my smile, no matter how hard I try. “I think it’s safe to say you blew my mind too.”

She looks down at her coffee and quietly says, “I’ve never done it without protection before.” She glances at me.

“Neither have I.” I swallow hard. “I think it’s why I was so . . . quick on the trigger.”

She chuckles. “You weren’t quick on the trigger and were quite the gentleman, letting me come first.”

I push my hand through my hair. “Almost didn’t make it when you were on top of me.”

“You liked that?” she asks, shifting in her chair so the shirt falls off her shoulder, exposing an expanse of skin that is marred with beard burn and . . . hell, I marked her last night.

I stand from my chair and round the small table where I sit on the edge and run my thumb over the bite mark on her collarbone. “Did I hurt you?”

She shakes her head. “No. You made me crazy with need.”

Arousal spikes through my body as my hand travels down her shoulder.

“Seeing you on top of me, writhing, your tits bouncing . . .” I drag my hand over my mouth. “Hell, Ruthie.”

Her hand slides up my leg as she leans forward, the shirt barely even covering her now as it falls off both of her shoulders.

“I loved watching you come undone.” Her hand travels higher. I’m only wearing a pair of sweatpants right now and I’m fucking hard, so she doesn’t have to run her hand over my cock to realize that.

And yet, she still does.

My hands grip the edge of the table. I suck in a hiss when her hand connects with my length. My chest muscles flex with anticipation as her eyes travel up my corded torso.

She licks her lips.

She slowly blinks.

And . . . fuck . . . I need her again.

Not saying anything, she rises from her seat and steps between my legs. With one flick of my hand, I undo the only button securing my shirt on her, and then push it off her body, exposing the soft skin I dragged my tongue all over last night.

I take her breasts in my hands and smooth my palms over her nipples. She sucks in a sharp breath and moves closer. Her hand slides under the waistband of my sweats and connects with my erection.

“You’re so big, Brig.” She glances up at me. “You fill me perfectly.”

Fuck, that’s an understatement. When I moved inside her last night, it felt so goddamn right. It scared me how right it felt.

I push my sweats to the floor and step out of them, releasing my erection.

Holding my hand out, I say, “Want to take a shower?”

Her eyes smolder, her mouth slightly parts, and she nods.

We walk to my bathroom where I flip on the shower and wait for it to get warm. When I turn toward her, I catch her staring at my chest.

“Care to compliment?” I ask.

She chuckles and sighs, resting her hand on my left pec. “Is it weird to say I like your chest hair?”

“No, I like all compliments.” I push her hair behind her ear. “So big dick, great chest hair, what else?”

“You’re ridiculous.” She laughs when I scoop her up and bring her into the shower stall, which I just had redone with marble tiling and multiple showerheads. The warm water sprays across my back and I maneuver her around so she’s soaked in seconds.

“Oh God, that feels good,” she says, lifting her arms up and running them through her wet hair.

And holy . . . fuck.

Water slices over her body, dribbles off her erect nipples, drips down her flat abdomen and between her legs, exactly where I want to be.

I grab the bar of soap off my soap ledge and hand it to her. Then I lean against the tile and say, “Soap me up, Ruthie.”

Smiling slyly, she lathers her hands with the bar, sets it down, and then moves her hands to my body where she grabs my cock right away.

Christ.

Hands behind me, I hold still as she pulls on my cock, alternating hands, applying enough pressure to make me slowly shake beneath her.

“Your hands are fucking perfect,” I say, my head falling to the tile.

Stroking me, she travels one hand underneath my cock, straight to my balls where she lightly plays with them. And when she tugs with both hands at the same time, I nearly fly off the wall.

“Whoa, Ruthie. I—”

She does it again.

“Jesus . . . fuck.” I grip her hips. “Ruthie, you can’t—”

Again.

“Fuh-uck,” I breathe.

One more time, and then she’s moved against the wall, her tits plastered to the tile, my body up against hers.

Speaking into her ear, my chest to her back, I say, “Stop trying to make me come too quickly.”

She chuckles, but not for long as I move my hand down her back, over her crack, and then right between her legs where I find her warm, tight center. I circle her entrance with my index finger, teasing her, taunting her. Her hands slide up the tile to either side of her head, and then her cheek is pressed against the wall. Her breathing grows heavy and her legs spread even wider.

“What do you want?” I ask her, fiery desire burning through my veins.

“You, Brig. Only you,” she says on a moan.

And that’s the fucking truth right there. If I’ve learned anything over the last twenty-four hours, it’s that Ruth’s want for me is genuine. *Wholehearted*. I’ve felt it in her every touch, in her every look.

On her next intake of breath, I press my fingers inside of her. Her hips move with my fingers, seeking relief as I move in and out.

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Spread your legs more.” I reach for the hand shower and put it on the pulse setting. I bring it to the front of her body and let the water beat against her stomach at first. Immediately, she understands my intentions and lifts one of her legs up onto the marble bench, exposing her. “Perfect,” I whisper against her ear, moving the shower head to her pussy. She gasps from the first pulse of water. But then she settles against me, her back to my chest, her hips rocking against my fingers.

“So good,” she says, her wet body sliding against mine. “Yes, Brig.”

I love how vocal she is; makes me harder with every word.

Instead of moving the shower head around, I keep it right on her clit and work my fingers, curving them up, trying to hit that special spot that I know will fire her off.

“I’m going to come,” she says, faster than I expected. “Oh God, Brig . . . oh my God.” Her hand snakes to the back of my neck, gripping me as her body shudders, her climax blasting through her. She rocks against me, her nails bite into my neck, and before I know what’s happening, she has me sitting on the bench, she’s on my lap, facing away from me.

And then she rocks.

My cock is as hard as stone.

She rocks her ass over my erection, her body leaning forward, giving me the perfect view as she grinds against me.

“Ruthie,” I croak. “Need inside you.”

She lifts up, grabs my cock, positions me at her entrance, and then crashes down on me.

“Mother . . . fucker,” I say as her tight heat sheathes me.

She takes my hands in hers and presses them against her breasts then reaches behind her and grips the back of my neck.

I move my head over her shoulder so I get the perfect view of her body, and she rocks up and down. The angle feels unlike anything I’ve experienced, especially the way her pussy grips me. The friction feels that much heavier, more intense.

I roll her nipples between my fingers, pulling on them ever so slightly, just enough to cause her to moan out loud and for her pussy to clench even tighter around my length.

“Ruthie, you’re killing me,” I say as she grinds down on me.

Not skipping a beat, she continues to move up and down on my length, squeezing when she lowers, creating a sensation that drives my orgasm to the brink in a matter of seconds.

“Christ,” I whisper into her ear, pulling on her lobe.

“Yes, more,” she says.

So I nibble down her neck, suck on the curve of her shoulder, and then move back up again. I angle her head so I can reach her lips, and that’s where I dive my tongue into her mouth, seeking desperately.

She groans loader. Her pace picks up. I keep one hand on her breast, massaging, kneading, pinching her nipple.

Together we build the pleasure between us until I can practically taste it. Delicious delirium fills the shower along with steam, and my balls pull in, a laser shot of bliss zipping down my spine.

“Shit, Ruthie, I’m going to—”

I don’t even finish as we both roar together, our hips thrusting against one another, our mouths colliding, the sounds of our orgasms reverberating off the tiled walls. I pulse inside her, pounding out every last drop until we’re completely sated.

Her back leans against my chest, I lean against the wall, and I hold her, still connected.

“Oh my . . . God, Brig.” She chuckles and turns her head, bringing her lips to mine.

I reciprocate the kiss, realizing that . . . yeah . . . *oh my God* is fucking right.



“YOU REALIZE I’m going to have to do the walk of shame down Main Street, don’t you?” Ruth calls from the shower where she’s finishing up. I hopped out in fear that I would try to fuck her again. I know she’s got to be sore, so I don’t want to push her . . . even though she’s the one who initiated shower sex.

Or was that me?

Who knows at this point? Either way, when she started soaping up her hair and rinsing it under the spray, I had to get out.

“I’ll drive you to the back entrance,” I call out.

“That’s okay, you have things to do today.” The shower turns off and the shower door opens. I lean back to catch a peek at her through the open door. When she spots me, she just laughs and shakes her head, then she shimmies her bare breasts at me, and I nearly choke on my own saliva.

“Shit,” I mumble.

“Don’t peek if you can’t keep it together, Knightly.”

She’s right. No peeking. None at all, or I’ll never get out of this apartment and to my parents’ house. Walking over to the bathroom, I slowly shut the door while saying, “We’re going to have to keep this shut until you’re dressed.”

She laughs on the other side and says, “I don’t have clothes in here.”

“Hold on.”

I run to my dresser, my towel wrapped around my waist, and I pull out a shirt and some shorts for her. I shove them through the door and say, “Take these for now. Not sure where your dress is.”

“Do you have lotion?”

“Under the sink and for the love of God, keep the door shut while you lotion your body.”

She chuckles some more, the sound so sweet. The door clicks shut just as my phone buzzes.

I glance around looking for it. Where the hell did I put it?

I glance at my nightstand, don’t see it there, scan my dining table, kitchen . . . desk.

There it is. I reach for it and sit at my desk.

Griffin: *Hey, are you headed over here at some point this morning?*

I type him back quickly.

Brig: *I have forty-five minutes. Chill.*

Griffin: *Just making sure. Normally you’d be here first thing in the morning, jumping up and down, screaming that your brother is getting married.*

I chuckle. That is something I would do.

Brig: *I’ll be there.*

Griffin: *Okay . . . don’t forget to stop by the Landing for the fresh scones.*

Brig: *Got it.*

I set my phone down and lean back in my chair, staring at the papers on my desk. Normally, I would be at my parents’ house, acting like the obnoxious little brother that I am, but Jesus, getting the motivation to leave this apartment feels— My eyes land on a stack of envelopes . . .

Familiar envelopes.

Envelopes that I’ve relied on this summer . . .

Ah, fuck!

Anguish rips through me as I reach out and pick one of the envelopes off the pile and unfold the letter. Familiar red lips caress the bottom of the page, hugs and kisses, a connection so strong, so familiar, it wraps itself around my heart.

My eyes snap toward the bedroom.

Back to the letter.

Holy shit. What the hell have I done?

I press my hand to my forehead, anxiety creeping up the back of my neck.

Summer.

In the whirlwind of Ruth, I forgot about Summer.

I drag my hand over my mouth. Regret and unease push through me, making my skin prickle with dread. Confusion rips through me.

The intimate details we've shared.

The same emotions of feeling lonely and unlucky at love.

I glance toward the bathroom one more time.

I've felt such an intense connection with Summer. Did I allow Ruth's attention, her kisses, her advances, to distract me from Summer? *The girl I've already committed my heart to. The girl I think is the one . . .*

I slump in my chair as my palms start to sweat. How could I do that? I'm not *that* guy, who pursues one girl and has sex with another.

That's not going to break the curse.

I won't be forever cured.

Fuck. No.

Only Summer can do that. What I feel for *her* . . .

What the hell do I do now?

Chapter Seventeen

RUTH

I stare into the mirror, the reflection a completely different person from what I'm used to seeing.

There's a spark in this girl's eyes.

A radiant smile on her face.

A contented glow surrounding her.

He likes me.

He actually likes me.

I bury my face in my hands and silently squeal. I'd have never in a million years thought I'd spend the night in Brig Knightly's arms. Yet here I am, the morning after, coming from shower sex with the glorious man, putting on his clothes so he can drive me back to my place.

Taking a deep breath, I gather myself, put on his shirt—his shirt that smells like him—then slip his shorts on that are far too big, requiring me to roll them at the waist.

I shift my fingers through my hair, give myself one more look in the mirror, and open the bathroom door where I find Brig dressed, sitting on the edge of his bed, head tilted down, hands clasped in front of him. When he glances up, I come face to face with weathered and worried eyes.

Indecision.

Cautiously, I walk toward him and say, "Is everything okay?"

I've known Brig long enough to know when he's lying. When he swallows, his Adam's apple bobs, he looks away . . . so I know he's about to lie to me.

“Everything’s fine. I should, uh, get you back to your place. I have to run to The Lobster Landing to pick up some scones before I go to my parents’ house.”

“Okay, yeah. Let me just—”

“Got your stuff here,” he says, handing me a re-usable grocery bag of my things.

A re-usable grocery bag?

My stuff?

That just feels . . . dirty.

Emotionless.

Cold.

Very unlike the way we left each other in the shower.

What the hell happened while I was getting dressed?

I take the bag, embarrassment staining my cheeks. “Are you sure everything is okay?”

He gives me a fake smile and nods. “Yup.” He pockets his wallet, phone, and grabs his keys. “Let’s get going.” He walks to his front door and holds it open for me. Could he get rid of me any faster? What the hell is going on?

With my pathetic bag dangling from my fingers, I follow him down the steps to his car where we get in silently. The engine roars, purrs under my feet, and without a word, Brig takes off. He drives through the back roads. It takes what feels like seconds to get to my place and when he parks, he doesn’t look at me. He keeps his hands on the wheel, stares out the windshield, and clenches his jaw.

I turn toward him. “If I said or did something wrong back there, please tell me, Brig. I feel like something happened and I don’t know what it is.”

His hands tighten on the steering wheel, but he keeps his gaze forward. “I just think . . .” His lips press together and dread fills me.

Oh no . . .

Please don’t say it.

Please don’t rip my heart out, not right now. Not after the amazing night we had.

“Fuck, I don’t know,” he says.

“You don’t know what?” I ask.

Head bent forward, he shakes his head. “I think we need to just take a second.”

“Take a second?” I ask, my lip trembling.

“Yeah. You know, I wasn’t really expecting to have sex with you last night.”

“And I was?” I’m trying not to get emotional, but my throat is closing tight, and I can feel tears tickling the backs of my eyes. *It was easier when I was numb.*

“I wasn’t implying . . .” He breathes out a heavy breath and pushes his hand through his wet hair. “Look, Ruth . . .”

Ruth.

Not Ruthie.

Just Ruth.

My lip trembles. The joy, the satisfaction I felt only moments ago in Brig’s bathroom, has completely vanished, and in its place forms an empty bank of emotion.

“Last night was—”

“Please don’t say a mistake.” My voice comes out feeble, and I hate that. “Whatever you do, don’t say it was a mistake.”

He grips the steering wheel tighter. “It wasn’t a mistake. I just . . . I need to figure some things out.”

“Figure things out.” I nod. “So you’re not really sure about me . . . about us?”

“I mean . . .” He looks down at his lap, and that’s all the answer I need.

“I see.” I open the car door, grab my bag, and take a step out.

“Ruth, wait.”

Since the top of his convertible is down, I don’t have to bend to talk to him. So, I stare at the man who can’t even look me in the eyes.

“I’ve waited long enough, Brig. Too long.” I sarcastically laugh at myself. “God, I’ve waited far too long, and it’s embarrassing. I should never have attempted to make a move on you. I should have known it was going to end like this.”

Finally, he looks at me. “It isn’t over, Ruth. I just . . . fuck, I need to think about some things.”

“Is this about the curse?” I ask, propping a hand on my hip.

His brow scrunches. “No.”

“Okay, so then it’s me.” I nod and take a deep breath.

“It’s about . . . hell.” He blows out a heavy breath. “I’ve just been talking to that girl and I, fuck, I don’t know. I’m not this guy, the one who

leads someone on . . .”

He’s got to be freaking kidding me with that.

“The girl you’ve been writing letters to?” He nods. “So you’re saying that you’d rather chance it with someone you’ve never met, than attempt something with me?”

“I didn’t say that,” he says in a panic.

“That’s what you’re implying,” I growl out in frustration, unable to hold it back anymore. “What’s it going to take for you to actually see me, Brig? I’ve spent almost every day with you. We run together, eat meals together, renovate together. We even go out for ice cream, hang out at the harbor, hold hands. We’re practically dating and yet, you still don’t see me. It’s as if I’m an empty vessel and you’re filling me up with whatever you need at that moment. A friend, someone to joke with . . . someone to fuck—”

“Hey,” he snaps, turning in his seat. “I would never use you like that.”

“And yet, that’s how it feels.” I take a step back and hold up my *bag of stuff*. “I’m worth so much more than a *bag of stuff*. I’m worth more than how you’re treating me right now, Brig. *My eyes* are open now. And I’m done waiting for you to open yours. And the truth is? I’m sick of throwing myself at you, only to share you with some ideal of a person you have in your head. I’m over it . . . and I’m done.”

I HATE that I was right. I hate that while he was spending time with me, enjoying our time together, his *heart* was never mine. The girl in front of him, who cherished every moment with him. No, his heart was with his fictional girlfriend, who he’d shared intimate secrets with. *And unbeknownst to him, I know them all*. Fuck that.

I spin on my heel, agony clogging my throat as I head to the back door of my apartment. The worst part of those ten feet to escape? They’re eerily silent. The gravel crunching under my shoes is the only sound in the mid-morning air.



“IT IS my honor to present to you for the very first time, Mr. and Mrs. Rogan Knightly.”

The backyard of Snow Vale erupts in cheers and applause as Rogan and Harper hold up their joined hands and then lean in for one more kiss. A happy tear falls down my cheek as I clap for the couple.

Together, looking beyond happy, they make their way down the aisle, Harper in a simple lace A-line dress and Rogan in a handsome navy-blue suit with mustard-yellow tie. They head to the porch of Snow Vale where the photographers start taking pictures.

The rest of the wedding party, which includes Griffin and Ren, Reid and Eve, and Brig and Jen, make their way down the aisle. I keep my eyes turned down, unable to look at Brig. During the ceremony, I made sure not to look at Brig, even though I could feel his eyes on me.

“Cocktail hour will be held on the west side of the house, so please follow our waitstaff,” a caterer says from behind the seats once the wedding party finish walking down the aisle. Luckily, they’re off to take pictures as well.

Job number one at this wedding: celebrate Harper and Rogan.

Job number two: avoid Brig at all costs.

So far, I’ve accomplished both. I figure once I make it through dinner and the cake cutting, I’m good to go. No need to stay and party when I feel like there’s a machete slowly churning over and over in my stomach.

I’ll be surprised if I can eat food at this point.

“That ceremony was so beautiful. Rogan’s vows, they kicked me in my romance-loving heart.” Rylee dots at her eyes with a lavender embroidered handkerchief. “I really need to write a story about their love. High school sweethearts, tragic loss, back in town rekindling. Gah, it’s everything.”

“It was pretty amazing, but not as amazing as ours,” Beck says, wrapping his arm around Rylee’s waist and kissing the side of her cheek. “Time to get you liquored up. Triplets are with your parents, which means Mommy and Daddy are on the loose.” More like Mommy on the loose; Beck doesn’t drink.

No better feeling in the world than feeling like the third wheel of two parents gone wild.

Note the sarcastic tone?

“Play your cards right, Wilder, and you might be on the receiving end of a mind-altering blow job.”

“This is fun,” I mutter, walking behind them.

“Something to say?” Rylee asks over her shoulder.

“Nope.” Drinks, I need drinks.

More like shots.

Or, you know . . . a bottle might work too.

Probably sensing the third wheel behind him, Beck grabs me by the shoulder and pulls me into his chest along with Rylee. “Are we ready to have some fun, girls?”

“Sure,” I say, the lackluster tone in my voice a siren for a questioning friend.

Rylee stops our threesome and turns to me. “Okay, I’ve let you sulk long enough. What’s going on?”

I glance around. Relatives surround us, what feels like the entire town is bustling about, looking for an appetizer or a drink—this is not the place.

“Not here,” I say.

“You know what, why don’t you two go occupy one of those tables by the woods, one of the private ones, and I’ll grab us some food and drinks? How does that sound?” Beck says, ever the doting husband.

“You’re a good man,” Rylee says, squeezing his cheeks and bringing his lips to hers.

“Love you.” He turns to me and asks, “What do you want to drink?”

“Anything with heavy, heavy alcohol.”

“Looking for the ‘please help me forget’ drink. Got it.” Rylee and I work our way through the crowd to the back of the property where there are bistro tables bordering the treeline. They’re far enough apart for privacy from everyone.

After taking a seat, Rylee turns to me, crossing one leg over the other, looking beautiful in a purple one-shoulder dress that does everything for her complexion. “Now, let’s just—”

“I slept with Brig.”

Rylee’s mouth nearly drops to the table as she stares at me, unblinking. “Uh, what?”

“Last night,” I say, twisting my hands in my lap. “After the party, he wanted to talk. He uh . . . gave me oral on the counter of the Parlor, and then took me upstairs to his place, where we did it four more times.”

Rylee braces her hand on the table. “Oh my God, I can barely—”

“And then he semi-ghosted me.”

The smile on Rylee’s face falls. “What do you mean he ghosted you?”

“I guess not ghosted me, but when he dropped me off at my place, he basically said he was confused and doesn’t know what to do. He’s invested in the girl he’s been sending letters to.”

“I am going to freaking scream,” Rylee says barely above a whisper, her brow pinching.

“What did I miss?” Beck asks, setting down drinks and a large plate of delicious appetizers.

Rylee takes her drink from Beck, downs half of it, and then says, “She slept with Brig, and he then pretty much blew her off this morning.”

“What?” Beck fires up, glancing around the venue, probably searching out Brig. “Where is he?”

I reach up and tug on his arm. “Stop. You’re not doing anything at a wedding.”

“I’ll do whatever the hell I want.”

Zero to sixty. The man is humming with anger and even though I appreciate his protective instincts, I don’t want him to do anything that will take away from Harper and Rogan’s wedding.

“Rylee, please take hold of your husband before he does something stupid.”

Standing, Rylee pushes Beck down on her seat and then sits on his lap, looping her arm around his shoulders. His clenched fist rests on her thigh. “How did he blow you off?”

“Honestly, I have no idea what happened. We were having a great morning, we had shower sex—”

“Ugh, he blew you off *after* you had shower sex? That’s messed up. Shower sex is sacred; you just don’t take it and bolt,” Rylee says. “Only special couples get shower sex in my books. What a waste.”

“Anyway,” I drag out. “I got dressed and when I entered his living room, it was as if he’d done a one-eighty. His personality was dulled, he was pensive, and he barely looked at me. I knew. I honestly knew what was coming. When he dropped me off, he said he was confused because he was talking to this other girl and he doesn’t like to lead people on.”

“Wait, aren’t you the other girl?” I nod. “So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is he doesn’t know it’s me, and even though he’s never met this girl, he’d rather risk everything we have for the possibility of finding love with someone else.” I shake my head, emotions clogging my throat. “I’ll never be good enough for him.”

“That’s not true. He’s just—”

“If you say confused or blind or an idiot, I’m going to lose it. Let’s just call it like it is. I’m not memorable. There’s nothing about me that’s worth

taking a risk for.”

“Hey,” Beck says, his face growing stern. “Don’t talk about yourself like that. He likes the girl in the letters, and that’s you.”

“I’ve told him the exact same things in person, and yet, he brushed me off.” I shake my head. “I’m done. I told him I was done. I’m sick of being overlooked. I deserve more than that.”

“I agree,” Rylee says. “You deserve more. Brig is dead to us.”

“I can get on board with that.” Beck holds up his glass of soda. “To Brig being dead to us.”

“May he have chronic hemorrhoids,” Rylee says, holding up her drink as well.

“To forgetting him.” We clink glasses and all take a drink.

This is exactly what friends are for, to wish chronic hemorrhoids on the man who blew you off after sacred shower sex.

Screw him.

I don’t need him.

Dead to me.



“WILL YOU DANCE WITH ME?” Brig’s hand reaches out to me.

Of course.

After making a vow that the man is dead to me, he has to ask me to dance.

I nearly swat it away, but with wedding guests surrounding us, watching the wedding party join together on the dance floor for the first dance with the married couple, I don’t have a choice.

Not saying a word, I take his hand and let him guide me toward the dance floor. We get into position, his hand on my ribcage, the other clasping my hand tight. I glance over his shoulder to spot Rylee. Her eyes are trained on Brig’s back, making a cutting motion across her throat.

At least I have her.

“You look beautiful,” he whispers.

“I do,” I say, feeling the three drinks I had during cocktail hour. “This dress fits me like a glove. My tits that you sucked on last night look amazing, and my thighs you parted several times in your bed are barely covered. Some might say I look hot.”

His grip on me tightens. But he doesn’t say anything.

“Ah, I see. Silent again, just like when I walked away. You’re really good at that, Brig, being silent.”

“Ruthie, I—”

“Call me Ruth. Ruthie is reserved for the people who deserve to be close to me. If you haven’t realized yet, you lost that privilege this morning.”

“Ruth,” he says more sternly. “We need to talk.”

“We don’t. I’m good.” I smile at the people pointing at us as we dance. Whatever. They can say anything they want now.

“I’m fucking confused, okay? I wasn’t expecting to . . . hell, I wasn’t expecting to fall for you.”

I snort laugh so loud that a few guests look to see if I’m okay. “Fall for me? Okay, Brig. Aren’t you in love with someone else?”

“I’m not in love. Just . . . talking.”

“Mm-hmm. Talking. Wow, I can see why you were so hesitant with me,” I say, sarcasm laced in my every word. “*Just talking*. Whoa, what a passionate tryst. Wouldn’t want to give up an actual friendship and admittedly the best sex you’ve ever had for talking. Good thing you were a dick to me this morning after sacred shower sex.”

He’s most likely regretting asking me to dance right now, but I don’t care. He deserves every word. And it seems like alcohol makes Ruth uninhibited. It’s like truth serum.

“Ruth, it’s not as easy as it seems. I have feelings for this person. We talked about intimate stuff.”

“Yes, and we never did, right? We just spoke of shoelace colors and the variety of sneezes a human can experience.”

“Jesus,” he mutters, pulling me closer. “You know damn well we spoke of deeper things than that.”

“And yet, I’m still not good enough for you.”

“I never fucking said that.”

“You didn’t have to,” I say as the music starts to die down. “It shows in how you reacted, in how you treated me, with zero regard for everything we had built together.”

The DJ starts talking about taking our seats for dinner, so I take that opportunity to move past him, but he grabs my arm, halting my retreat. I catch Rylee and Beck, waiting for me at the edge of the dance floor, ready to come to my rescue.

Speaking closely in my ear, he says, “This isn’t over, Ruth. We need to talk.”

“There’s nothing else to say.” I pull away but then turn to him one last time. “Actually, there is one more thing to say. That girl you’ve been talking to? The girl who sent you whoopie pies, the girl who spoke about loving summer because then she doesn’t feel lonely, the girl who sent you a picture of painted boobs? The girl you flirted with and sent intimate outlines to? Yeah, that was me . . . you freaking moron.”

“Wait, what?” Brig says, but I don’t stick around to talk to him. I move off the dance floor, take Rylee’s hand in mine, and we head to our table, where Beck hands me another drink.

Seriously, best friends ever.



“ONE, TWO, THREE.” Harper smashes Rogan square in the face with what looks like chocolate and cherry cake.

Everyone cheers and laughs.

I sip my drink, thankful for the half basket of bread I had during dinner to soak up the alcohol I’ve imbibed.

Brig has approached me multiple times but thanks to my bodyguards, I’ve avoided any confrontation . . . until now.

Someone snags my arm and pulls me off to the side while pictures are being taken of the happy couple with cake on their faces.

“Ruth, we need to talk. Now.”

“Not really feeling like it.” Apparently, that’s not an option, as he pulls me farther off to the side. We moved inside to the ballroom for cake and dancing and now I’m in a hallway, pinned by Brig.

Where are those bodyguards?

When we are far enough away from the party, Brig asks, “You’re Summer?”

“Are you really that dense, Brig? Or should I call you . . . Whoopie Pie?”

“Jesus Christ,” he says, dragging a hand over his face. “Did you purposefully deceive me?”

My eyes shoot open and his words are a sobering slap.

“Excuse me? I wanted nothing to do with the summer program. Rylee filled out everything. The only reason I wrote back was because she pointed out that you’d cry yourself to sleep over someone not answering you about

how they eat their spaghetti.” My words are flying out, mean-spirited. This is not who I am, but frustration and alcohol are colliding at the brink of insanity, and the result isn’t pretty. And to be brutally honest? My heart is shattered. It was broken, so completely broken when I lost my parents. And Brig’s rejection is close to that level of pain. I had a glimpse of a bright and happy future, but one moment in time crushed that. Obliterated that. *And it fucking hurts.*

“Fuck,” he whisper-shouts. “It was you.” Now both hands pull on the back of his neck and his eyes dart at mine. “Were you ever going to fucking tell me? Or were you going to just continue to play both roles?”

“Are you really playing the victim card right now, Brig?”

“I’m trying to fucking understand what’s going on? Christ, Ruth. A month and a half ago you were just the girl handing me coffee—”

“Exactly, Brig. I was *just the girl handing you coffee*. It wasn’t until I practically threw myself at you that you saw me as someone worth spending time with.”

“That’s not fucking fair,” he says, his anger startling. “I spoke to you. I struck up conversations, or at least attempted to. But you never engaged. Even when I took you to see the Parlor for the first time, it was like I was dragging you out against your will. How am I supposed to react when the person I’m trying to have a conversation with doesn’t want to talk to me?”

“I—”

“Hello, you two,” Mrs. Knightly says, coming up to us while placing a kind hand on both of our shoulders. “Whatever’s happening between you, can you maybe wait until tomorrow? You’re starting to draw attention.”

My face blanches and my heart sinks. *People can hear us?* That’s the last thing I wanted. I glance toward the ballroom where I see a few people looking down the hallway.

Crap.

“Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry, Mrs. Knightly,” I say quickly.

“It’s okay. Rogan and Harper haven’t noticed, but thought I’d stop you two before it got out of hand or ended up . . . with your clothes off.”

“Jesus, Mom,” Brig groans, as I feel my face turn bright red.

“Well, there’s a lot of heat over here.”

“I assure you, no heat,” I say, stepping away. “I apologize again. I’m going to say goodbye to Rogan and Harper and then take off.”

“Oh honey, you don’t have to leave,” Mrs. Knightly says.

I glance at Brig. "Yes, I do."

"Ruth. We're not done here," Brig says through clenched teeth.

I give him one last glance and say, "We really are."

And then I leave to find the happy couple. I've stayed long enough, it's time to go wallow in my apartment. It's time to burn some letters that were simply a fantasy.

A dream.

Exciting while it lasted but devastating when I woke up.

Chapter Eighteen

BRIG

Head against the steering wheel of my car, I take a deep breath.
Fuck, I'm hung over.

After Ruth left the wedding, I spent the rest of the night only a few feet away from the open bar, trying to erase the memory of the last twenty-four hours.

Note to self: alcohol erases nothing, just makes you feel worse the next morning.

Griffin and Reid both tried to talk to me last night. Probably because every time I looked up, I saw my mom's eyes locked on me, a disapproving look in her stare. I turned both my brothers down though, told them I was fine, and if they came near me again, I'd start screaming and cause a scene.

Thankfully they know me enough to understand that was *not* an empty threat.

Head still on the steering wheel, I twist just slightly to take in the house I grew up in. Old worn shaker shingles cover the outside, while a bright teal door welcomes visitors into the house. Right against the harbor. I have so many memories from this house that it's comforting just to see it.

But I'm dreading going inside today.

The brunch after the wedding. Just our family and Harper's dad, and yet, I know it's going to be unpleasant, especially because of my mom. I've never seen *that* look shot my way.

I wanted to text Ruth last night. I wanted to ask her to talk, but would you believe it, we NEVER exchanged phone numbers. Ever.

What the hell is that about?

And I was ready to walk over to her place to confront her when Reid and Eve shoved me in their car and took me home. Reid tucked me in bed, patted my face a little too hard for my liking, and then left. The warmth of my comforter and mattress sucked me into an alcohol-induced coma and left me feeling wretched this morning. *Especially from the scent of Ruth all over in my bed.*

Total fucking nightmare swirling between my head and my stomach. I'll be lucky if I can keep anything down this morning.

The only goal for today? Don't puke at the after-wedding brunch.

Retrieving my keys from the ignition, I take one more deep breath and slowly ease my way out of my car, shutting the door behind me.

I forced myself to take a shower this morning to wash off the booze and put something decent on. And when I say decent, I mean a step up from sweatpants. I make my way down the stone walkway that leads to my parents' house, but I pause at the door, hand on the handle.

You can do this. Just keep to yourself and don't draw any attention.

I open the door and the hairs on the back of my neck rise, because instead of laughter and obnoxious bantering, I'm met with complete silence.

Shit . . .

Don't freak out. Maybe they're outside on the deck.

Then again, I would have heard them when I was outside.

Cringing, I step inside, slide my shoes off, and look to the left where I spot my family in the living room, sitting in a half circle. Quiet . . . waiting.

Oh hell.

Jen greets me at the door, a deranged smile on her face. "Brig, you're here."

I glance toward the living room again. "Why are you talking psychotically like that?"

She reaches out and grabs my arm, gripping it securely, leaving me no room to bolt. "Right this way, brother."

Guiding me with more mustard behind her grip than I care for, she sits me on a single chair in front of everyone.

Eve is sitting on Reid's lap. Mom and Dad share the loveseat. Griffin and Ren are next to them, and Harper is sitting on Rogan's lap.

I shift in my seat, rubbing my hands on my pants. "What is this, an intervention?" I ask, trying to inject some humor into the somber room.

“Yes . . . it is,” Mom says, folding her hands together. “Brig, we love you, but we have all come to an agreement.”

“On what?” I ask, my head pounding, the need for a drink overwhelming.

Dad puts his arm around Mom’s shoulder and says, “We agreed that you’re an absolute moron.”

Oh.

Well, what a fucking delightful thing to be told by your family when you feel you’ve been run over by a ten-ton truck.

“Is this about Ruth?” I ask. “Because if it is, I don’t want to talk about it. I have a wicked hangover and I just need some bacon.” I sniff the air. “Is there any bacon cooking? My stomach is rolling and something greasy would really help.”

“This is about you being a moron,” my dad repeats, with more . . . gruff to his voice this time. It’s the seldom-used ill-tempered tone that makes you zip your mouth and listen.

Sweat trickles at my temples. My mouth waters. I hold up a finger and say, “I’m not trying to be a drama queen, but I’m . . . uh . . . really not feeling well.”

“You’re not getting out of this,” Mom says. “This has gone on long enough.”

Stomach rolls.

Oh boy.

More sweat. But now my mouth turns into a gusher.

Griffin lifts his eyebrow.

Reid’s eyes narrow.

Rogan says, “Oh shit, he’s going to—”

I reach for the closest thing next to me, open it wide, and puke out my bad decisions from last night.

“That’s unpleasant,” Dad says.

“Why is his retching so violent?” Reid adds.

“Is he passing a boot out of his throat?” Griffin asks.

“That’s my purse,” Harper, the newlywed, sighs.

Oh fuck.

I convulse more one time and when I think I’m done, I lift my face away to glance at my puke bag and yup . . . that’s a purse.

Shyly, I try to grin at Harper, but all I see is a livid Rogan.

“Uh, were you planning on keeping this?” I ask, holding up the bag. “Aren’t you supposed to get a new purse when you get married? Kind of like a new driver’s license? You know, switch over the last name, switch the purse too?”

“You’ll be buying her a new one,” Rogan says.

“Yup.” I nod. Just as Jen hands me a water and a plate of bacon. She’s an angel—always loved me the most out of all my brothers. “You’ve been sent from above to be my guardian,” I say to her, wanting to rub my clammy cheek against her arm for comfort.

Jen removes the purse from my hands and takes it to the deck, because she’s a good sister. Harper follows closely behind.

“I’m sorry,” I say, reaching out only to pick up a piece of bacon and shove it into my mouth, followed by a large gulp of water.

The room is silent as my family stares at me, watching me take bite after bite of bacon until I feel like I’m okay.

One more swig of water, and I set the plate of bacon on the coffee table.

“So about this whole Ruth thing,” I say. “I think we should all just let me handle it—”

“Yeah, that sounds like a great idea,” Griffin says, sarcasm flooding his voice. “Because from the sounds of it, you’re handling it perfectly. Both of you were angry drunk last night, bickering, and Ruth left crying.”

“She was crying?” I ask, my hands clenching into fists.

“Yes, she was,” Eve answers.

Shit.

I chew on my cheek, thinking back to last night and the ridiculous *and* painful drama.

“Are you really playing the victim card right now, Brig?”

“I was just the girl handing you coffee. It wasn’t until I practically threw myself at you that you realized I was worth spending time with.”

The shock, the confusion . . . the idiotic things I said. Huh . . . maybe I am a moron.

“She was the one writing me letters,” I say, solemnly.

“Good God, Brig,” Mom says. “We know.”

“You know? Did she tell you?”

“We knew way before that,” Rogan says, just as the doorbell rings.

I glance toward the entry. “If that’s Ruth, I will puke in everyone’s purses. I’m not kidding. One bad whiff of something and I’m rearing to go.”

From the back deck, Jen bounds down the hall and opens the door.

“Mrs. Davenport, thank you for coming over this morning.”

Mrs. Davenport? What is she doing here?

“Not a problem at all,” comes Mrs. Davenport’s shaky voice. She walks into the living room and Rogan quickly stands from his seat, offering her a cushioned chair. Mrs. Davenport and Rogan are close, so when she reaches up and pats his cheek, I know it’s a loving gesture within their friendship.

Once seated, she folds her hands in her lap and looks me in the eyes, “Brig Knightly, you’re a moron.”

Jesus.

Leaning back, I toss my hands up and say, “What the hell? You know I’m fucking sensitive, so I can only take the moron comment so much.”

“Don’t swear at Mrs. Davenport,” Dad booms.

“I wasn’t swearing at her. I was swearing to the room.” My dad’s eyes sharpen and my balls shrivel up. “Sorry, won’t happen again.”

Jen sits on the arm of the couch and says, “Brig, we’re all here because we’re worried about you.”

Here it comes, the intervention.

“We were so worried that we teamed up with Mrs. Davenport to help you.”

“Help me?” I ask, looking around, now detecting some guilty faces. “What are you talking about?”

They all look at each other and then Rogan steps up just as Harper returns from the deck. “The Summer of Love program. Uh, that was all a farce.”

“What?” I seethe. “The letters were fake?”

“No.” Rogan shakes his head. “The program was fake. You and Ruth were the only ones participating in it. We designed it specifically for you and Ruth, so you could get to know her better.”

“You set me up?” They all nod. “Every single one of you?” They nod again. “Why?”

“Because you’re a moron,” my dad says, only for my mom to press her hand against his leg.

“Brig, we love you dearly, but this whole curse thing had taken over your life. You’ve been trying so hard to ‘break’ it,” she says, using air quotes, “that you’ve missed the chance at love right in front of you. Ruth has crushed on you for so long. We all knew she’d be perfect for you. Just

enough give and take between you two for a solid friendship that blossoms into a life-long relationship. But you needed a nudge, and we knew if we did it in an offhand way, you'd go for it."

I push my hand through my hair. "I can't believe you deceived me. You all acted like you had no idea what was going on."

"It was for your own good," Rogan says. "You needed a shove in the ass. Ruth's amazing."

"She's beautiful and smart," Griffin adds.

"Funny and outgoing with a caring heart," Mom says.

"Your exact type and you didn't even see it," Reid says with annoyance. "We were sick of watching you look straight through her, hurting her unintentionally, so we did something about it. And then you went and fucked it up."

"Hold on," I say, sitting up now, my mind spinning. "What about the whole Parlor thing? Did you set that up with Mrs. Burberry?"

Griffin chuckles. "That was Rylee's idea actually. She's been a great help in all of this."

"I can't fu—uh, freaking believe this," I say, catching myself. "You had no right butting into my business."

"We did," Harper says. All eyes turn on her. She gazes at me softly. "Brig, I've known you since you were a little boy, and I've cherished watching you grow into the man you are today. Therefore, I also saw the toll the curse took on you. I'm not saying I believe in anything that happened in New Orleans, but I do know it affected you deeply. I watched you lose faith in love. In yourself. I watched you try so hard that you kept missing every chance you had. And I watched you day in and day out, speak to a girl who wanted—*deserved*—your attention, and you didn't even notice her. We might have matched you guys together, but you did the work. You put in the time to get to know her. You built the connection, and you're the one who's letting it slip through your fingers without giving her a fighting chance." She takes a deep breath. "You love her."

My eyes fall to my lap, as I mentally sift through the last few weeks. My time spent with Ruth meshing with the letters. The feelings I felt for the anonymous person clashing with the even stronger feelings I felt for Ruth.

She is smart.

She is funny and outgoing.

She is kind and caring.

But she's sassy. She tells me like it is. She doesn't take my shit.

And she's beautiful. Fuck, is she beautiful. And the way she looked at me the other night when I was thrusting deep inside her, like I was the only man that's ever mattered. How she stroked my hair at night when we were sleeping, the hugs she gave me when I walked into the room followed by the happiest smile I've ever seen . . .

Fuck.

"I love her," I say, looking up at everyone. "I love her so fucking much."

"Brig," my dad chastises, but my mom pats his legs again.

"I think that warranted a swear word." Turning to me, Mom says, "Okay, you love her, now what are you going to do about it?"

I glance at Reid. "She was crying last night?"

"Yeah, dude. She was."

Eve chimes in. "She woke up yesterday morning thinking she was yours, only to realize you weren't ready to commit to her."

"Moron," Dad mutters, shaking his head.

"Well I'm ready now," I state.

"The blinders are off?" Rogan asks.

Some might say . . . the old mind has matured. Damn you, witchy palm reader. Damn you!

I nod. "I'm seeing clearly, possibly for the first time in a long time." Had I not witnessed my brothers find their own happily ever afters, I may not have been able to see this. They found love. And somehow, despite the curse . . . love found me. The blinders *are* off. "Now the question is, how do I show her how much I love her?"

Reid rubs his hands together. "I might have some ideas."

Chapter Nineteen

RUTH

“How are you feeling?” Beck asks, coming up from behind with a load of clean mugs.

“Fine,” I say softly as the front door to Snow Roasts opens. My heart panics as I glance up, spotting a tourist.

It’s been like that all day. Hearing the ring of the bell, dread filling me that it’s Brig or a Knightly or someone who was at the wedding mentioning how they saw Brig and me fighting.

But nothing.

Absolutely nothing, which makes me feel even worse.

Maybe I really didn’t matter.

Maybe I haven’t mattered to anyone.

“You don’t look fine,” Beck says. “You look really sad.”

Because I am sad.

I’m sad that I haven’t heard from Brig since Saturday, even though I said I was moving on.

I’m sad that I haven’t heard from any Knightlys, including Mrs. Knightly, who’d pushed me to find the hidden strength to go after what I wanted. Or even the holy trinity of Knightly significant others, who I thought were my friends.

I’m sad that my heart was broken, irrevocably broken, by a man I thought was my best friend.

“How about we don’t talk about it?”

“Because that’s always the best way to handle things,” Beck says in a sarcastic tone.

Just then, Rylee comes through the door, looking exhausted. When she reaches the counter, she slaps her hand on the wood and says, “I know you’re closed, but please, for the love of God, give me some sort of caffeine. The triplets—”

Beck places a to-go cup in front of her, already anticipating the needs of his wife, and when Rylee looks up at Beck, as if he just gave her the world, the floodgates open, and I start bawling right there, in front of my friends, receipts in my hands.

“Told you. You needed to talk about it,” Beck says as he wraps his arm around my shoulders and brings me into a hug.

“You know, I feel like this is partially my fault,” Rylee says, hopping up on the counter and taking a seat. “If I didn’t agree to fill out the fake application then none of this would have happened.”

“Wait . . . what?” I ask, lifting my head from Beck’s chest. “Fake application?” Rylee’s eyes widen, and she slaps her hand over her mouth.

“Oh no, did I just say that? Damn kids have made me lose my senses.”

“What do you mean, fake?”

She waves her hand at me and takes a sip of her coffee. “It’s really no big deal, but if you want to talk about it, we can.”

“Uh yeah, I’d like to talk about it.”

“Well, you know, funny story. I was approached by the Knightlys when I was at the Landing grabbing more blueberry pancake mix, and they asked me if I would be up to, you know, matching you and Brig together. Clearly, I was more than happy to help. So they told me about this fake Summer of Love program and well, the rest is history.”

“So everyone knew?”

“Looks like everyone wants you and Brig together.”

I scoff. “Yeah, besides the one that matters . . . Brig.”

A sly smile spreads across her face. “I don’t know, I think you might be wrong.” She hops off the counter and says, “Can you help me out with something outside?”

I don’t move. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?” she asks, feigning innocence.

“Like you’re about to trick me again. Like that story you just told me was intentional. As if you came in here ready to spill the beans.”

“Paranoid much?” she asks.

“No, I’m just very weary of my meddling friend.”

“Nothing to be worried about.”

“I don’t believe you,” I say as Beck pulls off my apron. “What are you doing?”

“Just go with her.”

I point at him. “Are you in cahoots with her?”

“She’s my wife, what do you think?”

“Does boss trump wife?” I ask, hoping.

“Sorry.”

“Damn it.” I glance at Rylee, who’s holding out her hand, twiddling her fingers at me. “I don’t trust you,” I say. “And I’m really not in the mood for whatever you have planned.”

“I didn’t plan it, Ruth. But I’m sure glad I had a hand in it.”

Beck pushes me from behind the counter toward Rylee who takes my hand in hers. When we reach the door to Snow Roast, I notice the streetlights are out. What the hell is going on?

We push through the doors to a pitch-black, empty Main Street.

“Uh, what’s happ—”

One single streetlight turns on and illuminates Eve. She’s holding a single piece of paper just as *My Girl* starts playing through the Main Street speakers.

Rylee takes my hand and takes me to Eve, who hands me the piece of paper that I now see is in the shape of a whoopie pie.

My heart stutters.

My breath catches in my throat.

And my knees feel like they’re about to give out.

Oh . . . my . . . God.

“Read it,” Eve says.

Hand shaking, I look down at the familiar cursive and nearly sob.

I thought it was the coffee that brought me into Snow Roast every morning. Truthfully, it was your smile.

I don’t have a second to process, because Rylee is taking me to the next lamp that lights up. *Ren*. With a smile, she hands me the next whoopie pie note.

I thought it was the coffee cake that made me sit down in Snow Roast for the morning. Truthfully, it was hearing you welcome everyone in town warmheartedly that kept me in place.

The next light, Harper hands me a note.

I thought it was your need for a storefront that brought us together. Truthfully, it was your shyness that intrigued me.

Griffin.

I thought it was your lack of tools to pull up old flooring that made me want to help you with the renovations. Truthfully, it was not wanting to see you work alone.

Rogan.

I thought it was your bribery with tea sandwiches that would keep me coming back for more. Truthfully, it was your sassy attitude that brought me to my knees.

Reid.

I thought it was my need to get you to run that made me wake up every morning and jog by your side. Truthfully, it was seeing that fresh morning smile that woke me up (and your perfect tits).

I snort and realize everyone who handed me a note is standing behind me, walking with me, making me feel anything but alone. Tears well in my eyes.

Jen.

I thought going out to dinner with you was to share a baked bean sandwich with someone who truly appreciated it. Truthfully, it was me wanting to get to know this girl who fascinated me.

Mrs. Davenport. Wait. What? Mrs. Davenport?

I thought holding your hand was me being a good friend. Truthfully, it was me desperate to touch you in any way I could.

The tears that were welling now cascade down my cheeks, as I cross the street, spotting Mr. and Mrs. Knightly. That's my undoing. A sob wracks my body. I try to hold it together, but it feels next to impossible as they hand me one of the signs that my dad made. When I look at it, I see the detailed carving of Snow Roast, but I can barely read the note on the back through the blurriness of my eyes.

I thought I was writing letters to a girl I believed was going to be my soul mate. Truthfully, I was falling in love with my best friend, the girl behind the counter at the coffee house.

Another sob escapes me as both Mr. and Mrs. Knightly wrap their arms around me. Leaning in closely, Mrs. Knightly says, "Your mom used to come into The Lobster Landing and say she prayed that one day, you'd find a wonderful boy like one of my sons. It was an honor to hear such beautiful

words from her. I hope my son can live up to your mom's prayers." She kisses the side of my cheek and guides me to the door of the Parlor.

I reach for the handle and when I look over my shoulder, the Knightly clan is all standing behind me along with Beck, Rylee, and Mrs. Davenport.

"You're never alone," Mr. Knightly says. "Never, sweet girl."

I hold back my tears, give them a soft thank you, then open the door to the Parlor, where I'm met with lit candles all along the floor and . . .

Oh.

My.

God.

My hand flies to my mouth as a snort pops out. Standing in the middle of the Parlor is Brig, dressed in a whoopie pie costume, hands and legs sticking out straight from a large foam circle. His head peeks through a cutout hole, and it is positively the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen.

Tears stream down my face while I laugh.

"I told Reid this was a stupid idea," he mutters, struggling to take off the brown foam circle. After a few swear words, he tosses it to the side, leaving him in a plain white T-shirt and a pair of jeans. He pushes his hand through his hair, walks up to me, then gently brushes away my tears. "He made me wear the whoopie pie costume since I made him wear armor and ride in on a horse when apologizing to Eve." I chuckle some more. "I should have known better."

"It was . . . perfect."

Taking a deep breath, he says, "Ruthie Girl, I love you." My lip trembles, my hands shake, and he takes them in his. "After the soul-shattering curse in New Orleans, I honestly thought I'd never find the person for me. I thought I was broken. Date after date went wrong. Every attempt at finding love felt like an impossible feat. Little did I know, my soul mate was standing in front of me every goddamn day, and I was too much of a moron—as my dad likes to say—to realize it. It took a meddling family, a meddling friend, and a meddling town to pull off the blinders and show me what I've been missing." He steps in closer. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry for doubting my feelings for you, for second-guessing them, and for making you feel any less than you are. Because you're perfect, Ruthie Girl. You're perfect for me."

He reaches up and cups my cheek.

Softly he says, “Please tell me I didn’t royally fuck this up, that I still have a fighting chance of proving to you that I’m the man for you.”

He can’t possibly be serious.

“Brig, I—”

“Before you answer,” he says, sounding panicky, “I want you to know, you’re by far the best sex I’ve ever had.” I snort. “You’re the funniest person I know. I’ve missed you these last few days, and I realized very quickly that I need you to constantly test me, tease me, and bring me to my knees. That I love you so goddamn much that it hurts standing in front of you right now, knowing there’s a great possibility that you’ll tell me to fuck off.”

I chuckle some more, shake my head, and drag my hand up his chest to his jaw. He’s adorable. He loves me. He wants my forgiveness.

Forgive, knowing that your man will often mess things up, simply because he's a man. Love, knowing that the man who deserves you will protect your heart and be able to say he's sorry.

I haven’t thought of my mom’s words about love for years. But somehow, she knew I needed to hear them today.

Forgive.

Love.

“I forgive you. And I love you, Brig Knightly. I have for a very long time and I don’t think that will ever change.”

Epilogue

RUTH

“Ruthie, get over here,” Brig says, calling me from where he sits on his bed.

Ever since the grand apology—that’s what the town is calling it—pictures keep miraculously showing up in the town paper. We’ve been plastered all over as the new “it” couple. Brig’s soaking it up, rubbing it in his brothers’ faces. *Man-child. Adorable though.*

I’ve stayed at Brig’s apartment to focus on finalizing the last-minute needs of the Parlor. Brig might have finished the renovations with Rogan, but there was still a lot to do before opening day . . . today.

From the bathroom, I give myself one last look in the mirror and then walk over to him. I chose a yellow sundress for the occasion with brown open-toe sandals. My hair is styled around my shoulders in waves, and I applied extra makeup today, knowing there would be press at the grand opening.

Brig glances up from his phone and his eyes turn to molten lava when he takes me in. It’s one of my favorite things about Brig, now that he freely expresses himself. I love his facial expressions, especially when I walk into a room. He makes me feel like the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen.

“Ruthie . . . hell, you look gorgeous.” He extends his hand to me and I take it, letting him spin me onto his lap where he presses his lips against my neck. “God, you smell amazing.” One of his hands starts to travel up my thigh, but I quickly swat at it.

“What did I tell you? We can’t have sex again, you promised you wouldn’t mess up my hair or makeup before the event.”

“I lied.” He chuckles against me, his mouth travelling to that spot behind my ear. Goosebumps spread over my skin and my eyes close as I allow myself to feel his lips travel over me.

“Brig, I’m serious. We have to go downstairs in a few.”

He groans against my neck and then pulls away. “Fine, but we’re celebrating tonight . . . naked.”

“As if that wasn’t already planned,” I say, winking at him.

“God, I love you.” He presses a quick kiss to my lips and then holds up his phone. “Look what Rogan sent me.”

I glance at the screen and see a two-story house in the woods, with a wraparound porch, *and* access to a lake . . . right at our price point.

“Just came on the market.”

“Oh my God.” I take his phone and flip through the pictures. “Needs some new paint.”

“Carpets need to be replaced,” he says.

“But the views.”

“And the solarium . . . just what you were talking about.”

I look at him, he looks at me, a slow smile pulling on his lips. “We have an appointment to see it tonight.”

“Seriously?” I ask, excitement booming inside me.

“Yeah. I think this could be it.”

My teeth roll over my bottom lip. “Are you sure this is what you want? To buy a house with me?”

“Ruthie, I’ve wanted this more than anything.”

“But we’re not married.”

He winks. “That will come. Don’t you worry.”

My heart trips.

I glance at the phone again. “We’re really going to do this?”

“Couldn’t imagine doing it with anyone else,” he says, kissing me on the cheek and then standing, while carefully setting me on the ground. He pockets his phone and takes my hand on his, bringing it to his mouth where he places a soft kiss across my knuckles. “Ready?”

I nod. “Ready.”

Together we walk down the back stairs of the garage and around to the front of the Parlor where we’re met by a crowd of people, the Knightly clan being the first in line.

Tears well in my eyes as Rylee hands me a large pair of scissors. Beck and Reid roll out a red ribbon and stand in front of the Parlor.

On a deep breath, I stand in front of the ribbon and say, “My mom dreamt of a place in this town where every generation could enjoy a cup of tea together and gab. A place where parents could connect with their children while enjoying simple tea sandwiches in comfortable surroundings. Piccadilly Parlor was her dedication to the relationship we had, and I’m so honored today to be surrounded by family and friends, to finally make my mom’s dream a reality.” I reach out and cut the ribbon just as everyone cheers.

Brig wraps his arm around my waist and kisses me on the cheek while whispering, “I’m so proud of you, Ruthie Girl. So fucking proud.” He presses one more kiss. “And your parents would be too.”

There’s no doubt in my mind that they would.

And as I watch the Knightlys filter into Piccadilly Parlor, I have an overwhelming sense that Mom and Dad are here with me today, guiding me, and connecting me with my new family, sending me into a new pair of arms that will stay by my side forever. And when I look back at my parents’ marriage, that’s what I saw.

Dad’s waiting arms for Mom. Her deep exhaled breath of peace when he enveloped her. His secret smile and kiss on her forehead, as if that hug had made his day. The moment when Mom leaned back in Dad’s arms, looking up at him with a joy I’ve craved. And being the goof he was, he’d often arch her back over his arm and snake kisses up her neck, knowing that she both hated and loved it equally.

I still remember her telling me that the first time Dad did that it made her swoon, something she’d thought only existed in romance novels and movies. But it wasn’t. It was in his arms, in his kisses, in his deep love for her . . . and her only.

Brig says he’s been searching for that swoony feeling for a long time. Little did I know, so have I.

THE END

OR IS IT THE END?

The Knightly brothers are heading back to New Orleans, read their adventure for free [HERE](#)

ALSO, you're not going to have to wait long for my next release. THE SET UP is releasing shortly, a friends to lovers sports romance with ALL THE HEAT. Check out the prologue on the next page.

The Set Up

Prologue

LINCOLN

I've fallen victim to a heinous act.
An act so vile, so downright dirty, that I'm not sure . . .
as a son,
as a member of society,
as a twenty-year-old *man* . . . I will ever recover.
Ever.

I see the concern in your eyes, your hand wandering up your chest to clutch the collar of your sensible cotton shirt, scared to find out the truth.

Brace yourself against something sturdy, because what I'm about to tell you might just knock you back on your ass in horror.

Deep breaths, everyone

I've recently become the pawn of a meddling mom.

Yup, you read that right. A MEDDLING mom.

The bane of a son's existence.

I know what you're wondering . . . what did she do? Make me pick up my socks during summer break?

Eye-rolling

Woe is you

Grow up

You grow up!

Ehh, that was a little harsh. But before you go and put your judgy face on, you need to know the difference between a nagging mom and a

meddling mom.

A nagging mom is one who storms into the living room while you're trying to watch the series finale of *Game of Thrones*, complaining about the dishes in the sink you swore you'd take care of once you found out who took the throne.

Nag, nag, nag—part of the daily routine of the person who birthed you, or in this case, one of two moms who adopted me.

But a meddling mom, oh boy. They're a fresh kind of hell wrapped up in high-waisted leggings and muted tunics. This isn't some everyday mom who texts you GIFs of squirrels playing with a hula hoop. Nope, meddling moms have an agenda.

An agenda that they believe is to benefit their children. But it's really to benefit them . . . and only them.

In this case, my mom's agenda: get Lincoln to fall in love.

I understand it's not a crime for a mother to want her child to fall in love, but let me tell you. When she makes it her mission when you're home from college, it should be classified as a misdemeanor.

That's right, all freaking summer, my mom has made it her duty to set me up with girl after girl she's met in our hometown Kalamazoo, Michigan. I'd like to say I'm exaggerating that she made a list *and* set me up with every eligible girl—one by one—but I'm not.

I saw the Excel spreadsheet on her computer.

Girls who were highlighted in red were a no-go.

Girls in green still had a fighting chance.

Girls in yellow? Apparently I had lukewarm interaction with them but they showed promise.

Why is she so desperate for me to fall head over heels?

Can you believe she's been spending time on the Internet, researching relationship statuses of major league baseball players? Well, she has. *Too much* time. And she said she didn't want me to end up forty, about to retire, with nothing to say for my life other than I was able to throw a ball off a mound.

She also wants a girl to fawn over.

When my mothers were adopting, Mom hoped for a girl, but Mama hoped for a boy. Don't get me wrong, my mom loves me more than anything—hence the meddling and nagging—but she always wanted to do

girly things with me, like have tea parties, get our toenails done, shit like that.

Side note: I've done the pedicure thing with her, and it's not that bad.

But she wants a daughter and apparently, a daughter-in-law is the next best thing.

Which brings me back to my summer of "not love." I wanted nothing to do with these girls and after my mom's eighth attempt to set me up—yes, eight—I told her enough was enough. I was done.

And thankfully she listened . . . until the last Saturday before I left for school.

The evil matriarch in the devil's leggings made her final stab at finding a girl for me.

And I hate to admit it, but she saved a doozy for last.

A fucking titan in black skinny jeans.

A boss of nonchalance.

And a girl who will not only turn my life upside down, but do it while juggling a soccer ball, looking effortlessly gorgeous, and is one hundred percent against relationships. *Of any sort.*

Thanks, Mom.

Thumbs up

Your meddling has made me absolutely miserable.

Pre-Order The Set Up [HERE](#)



Did you love Lincoln? His friends already have their books available to read! Check them out here:

[The Locker Room](#)

[The Dugout](#)

[The Lineup](#)

[The Trade](#)

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(Sassy and sweet romance with an Irish rebel)

[Boss Man Bridegroom](#)

(A romantic comedy intertwined with an office romance)

Port Snow Series

(Small Town Romances)

[That Second Chance](#)

[That Forever Girl](#)

[That Secret Crush](#)

[That Swoony Feeling](#)

The Duets

(Complete Box Set compiling The Blue Line Duet and The Perfect Duet in one place)

[The Duets](#)

The Romance Novelist Chronicles

(Hilarious, laugh out loud romantic comedies)

The Virgin Romance Novelist, The Randy Romance Novelist, and The Parenting Romance Novelist are all combined into one book The Virgin Romance Novelist Chronicles

[The Virgin Romance Novelist Chronicles](#)

[The Virgin Romance Novelist](#)

Co-Written with Sara Ney

(A sexy, smart, heart swooning office romance with the boss)

[Love Sincerely Yours](#)

The Perfect Duet

(A heartfelt romance that will leave you breathless)

[The Left Side of Perfect](#)

[The Right Side of Forever](#)

The Blue Line Duet

(An epic romance with many twists and turns)

[The Upside of Falling](#)

[The Downside of Love](#)

The Dating by Numbers Series

(Adventurous dating series full of laugh out loud moments and very heated scenes)

[Three Blind Dates](#)

[Two Wedding Crashers](#)

[Back in the Game](#)

[One Baby Daddy](#)

The Binghamton Series

(Full of heart, humor, and heat and some HOT CONSTRUCTION WORKERS)

[Co-Wrecker](#)

[My Best Friend's Ex](#)

[Tangled Twosome](#)

[The Other Brother](#)

Standalone Novels

(Full of heart, humor, and heat and some real laugh out loud moments)

[The Mother Road](#)

[Newly Exposed](#)

[Dear Life](#)

The Stroked Series

(HOT sports romance with plenty of humor)

[STROKED](#)

[STROKED LONG](#)

[STROKED HARD](#)

The Jett Girl Series

(Sassy, erotic romance with a gorgeous, protective alpha male)

[Bourbon Sins](#)

[Bourbon Deceit](#)

[Bourbon Kingdom](#)

[Bourbon Truths](#)

The Love and Sports Series

(New Adult, Football sports romance with plenty of twists)

[Fair Catch](#)

[Double Coverage](#)

[Three and Out](#)

The Hot-Lanta Series

(My first series ever. Baseball sports romance with lots of drama!)

[Caught Looking](#)

[Playing the Field](#)

[Warning Track](#)

Hit and Run