

ALI HAZELWOOD

*New York Times Bestselling Author
of *The Love Hypothesis**

Stuck with You



PRAISE FOR
The Love Hypothesis

“Contemporary romance’s unicorn: the elusive marriage of deeply brainy and delightfully escapist. . . . *The Love Hypothesis* has wild commercial appeal, but the quieter secret is that there is a specific audience, made up of all the Olives in the world, who have deeply, ardently waited for this exact book.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Christina
Lauren

“Funny, sexy, and smart. Ali Hazelwood did a terrific job with *The Love Hypothesis*.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Mariana
Zapata

“This tackles one of my favorite tropes—Grumpy meets Sunshine—in a fun and utterly endearing way. . . . I loved the nods toward fandom and romance novels, and I couldn’t put it down. Highly recommended!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Jessica
Clare

“A beautifully written romantic comedy with a heroine you will instantly fall in love with, *The Love Hypothesis* is destined to earn a place on your keeper shelf.”

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“Smart, witty dialogue and a diverse cast of likable secondary characters. . . . A realistic, amusing novel that readers won’t be able to put down.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“With whip-smart and endearing characters, snappy prose, and a quirky take on a favorite trope, Hazelwood convincingly navigates the fraught shoals of academia. . . . This smart, sexy contemporary should delight a wide swath of romance lovers.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Titles by Ali Hazelwood

The Love Hypothesis

LOATHE TO LOVE YOU

Under One Roof

Stuck with You

Below Zero

Stuck with You

Ali Hazelwood

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For Marie, my fave Elizabeth Swann

Chapter 1

Present

My world comes to an end at 10:43 on a Friday night, when the elevator lurches to a stop between the eighth and seventh floor of the building that houses the engineering firm where I work. The ceiling lights flicker. Then go off completely. Then, after a stretch that lasts about five seconds but feels like several decades, come back with the slightly yellower tinge of the emergency bulb.

Crap.

Fun fact: This is actually the second time my world came to an end tonight. The first was less than a minute ago. When the elevator I'm riding stopped on the thirteenth floor, and Erik Nowak, the last person I ever wanted to see, appeared in all his blond, massive, Viking-like glory. He studied me for what felt like too long, took a step inside, and then studied me some more while I avidly inspected the tips of my shoes.

Re-crap.

It's a slightly complicated situation. I work in New York City, and my company, GreenFrame, rents a small office on the eighteenth floor of a Manhattan building. Very small. It has to be very small, because we're a baby firm, still establishing ourselves in a pretty cutthroat market, and we don't always make a ton of money. I guess that's what happens when you value things like sustainability, environmental protection, economic viability and efficiency, renewability rather than depletion, minimization of exposure to potential hazards such as toxic materials, and . . . well, I won't bore you with the Wikipedia entry on green engineering. Suffice it to say, my boss, Gianna (who coincidentally is the only other engineer working full-time at

the firm), founded GreenFrame with the aim of creating great structures that actually make sense within their environment, and is delightfully, crunchily hard-core about it. Unfortunately, that doesn't always pay very well. Or well.

Or at all.

So, yeah. Like I said, a slightly complicated situation, especially when compared with more traditional engineering companies that don't focus as much on conservation and pollution control. Like ProBld. The giant firm where Erik Nowak works. The one that takes up the whole thirteenth floor. And the twelfth. Maybe the eleventh, too? I lost track.

So when the elevator began to slow down around the fourteenth floor, I felt a surge of apprehension, which I naively discarded as mere paranoia. You have nothing to worry about, Sadie, I told myself. ProBld has tons of offices. They're always expanding. Orchestrating "mergers" and eating up smaller firms. Like the Blob. They are truly the corrosive alien amoeboidal entity of the business, which translates to hundreds of people working for them, which in turn means that any one out of those hundreds of people could be calling the elevator. Any one. There's no way it's Erik Nowak.

Yeah. No.

It was Erik Nowak, all right. With his massive, colossal presence. Erik Nowak, who spent the entirety of our five-floor ride staring at me with those ruthless, icy blue eyes of his. Erik Nowak, who's currently looking up at the emergency light with a slight frown.

"The power's out," he says, an obvious statement, with that stupidly deep voice of his. It hasn't changed one whit since the last time we talked. Nor since that string of messages he left on my phone before I blocked his number. The ones that I never bothered answering but also couldn't quite bring myself to delete. The ones I could not stop myself from listening to, over and over.

And over.

It's still a stupid voice. Stupid and insidious, rich and precise and clipped and low, with acoustic properties all its own. "I moved here from Denmark when I was fourteen," he told me at dinner when I asked him about his accent, slight, hard to detect, but definitely there. "My younger brothers got rid of it, but I never managed." His face was as stern as usual, but I could see his mouth soften, a slight uptick on the corner that felt like a smile. "As you can imagine, there was lots of teasing growing up."

After the night we spent together, after all that happened between us, I felt as if I couldn't get the way he pronounced words out of my head. For days I constantly squirmed, turning around because I thought I'd heard him somewhere in my proximity. Thought that maybe he was nearby, even though I was jogging at the park, alone in the office, in line at the grocery store. It just stuck to me, coated the shell of my ears and the inside of my—

"Sadie?" Erik's infamous voice cuts through my thoughts. It has that tone, the one of someone who's repeating himself, and maybe not just for the first time. "Does it?"

"Does . . . what?" I glance up, finding him next to the control panel. In the stark shadows of the emergency light he's still so . . . God. Looking at his handsome face is a mistake. He is a mistake. "I'm sorry, I . . . What did you say?"

"Does your phone work?" he asks again, patient. Kind.

Why is he so kind? He was never supposed to be kind. After what happened between us, I decided to torture myself by asking around about him, and the word *kind* never came up. Not once. One of New York's top engineers, people would often say. Known for being as good at his job as he is surly. No-nonsense, aloof, standoffish. Though he was never any of these things with me. Until he was, of course.

"Um." I fish my phone out of the back pocket of my black tailored pants and press the home button. "No service. But

this is a Faraday cage,” I think out loud, “and the elevator shaft is steel. No RF signal is going to be able to make a loop and . . .” I notice the way Erik is staring at me and abruptly shut up. Right. He’s an engineer, too. He already knows all of this. I clear my throat. “No signal, no.”

Erik nods. “Wi-Fi should work, but it doesn’t. So maybe this is—”

“—a building-wide power outage?”

“Maybe even the whole block.”

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit. Shit.

Erik seems to be reading my mind, because he studies me for a moment and says reassuringly, “It might be for the best. Someone is bound to check the elevators if they know that the power’s gone.” He pauses before adding, “Although it might take a while.” Painfully honest. As usual.

“How long?”

He shrugs. “A few hours?”

A few what? A few hours? In an elevator that is smaller than my already-minuscule bathroom? With Erik Nowak, the broodiest of Scandinavian mountains? Erik Nowak, the man who I . . .

No. No way.

“There must be something we can do,” I say, trying to sound collected. I swear I’m not panicking. No more than a lot.

“Nothing that I can think of.”

“But . . . what do we do now, then?” I ask, hating how whiny my voice is.

Erik lets his messenger bag drop to the floor with a thump. He leans against the wall opposite mine, which should theoretically give me some room to breathe, even though for some physics-defying reason he still feels too close. I watch him slide his phone in the front pocket of his jeans and cross his arms on his chest. His eyes are cold,

unreadable, but there is a faint gleam in them that has a shiver running down my spine.

“Now,” he says, gaze locked with mine, “we wait.”

It’s 10:45 on a Friday night. And for the third time in less than ten minutes, my world crashes to an end.

Chapter 2

Three weeks ago

There are worse things in the world.

There are, without a single doubt, giant heaps of worse things in the world. Wet socks. PMS. The *Star Wars* prequels. Oatmeal raisin cookies that masquerade as chocolate chip, slow Wi-Fi, climate change and income inequality, dandruff, traffic, the finale of *Game of Thrones*, tarantulas, food-scented soap, people who hate soccer, daylight saving time (when it moves one hour ahead, not behind), toxic masculinity, the unjustly short life span of guinea pigs—all of these, just to name a small handful, are truly terrible, dreadful, horrific things. Because such is the way of the universe: it's full of bad, sad, upsetting, unfair, enraging circumstances, and I should know better than to pout like a ten-year-old who's half an inch too short for the roller coaster when Faye tells me from behind the counter of her small coffee shop:

“Sorry, honey, we're all out of croissants.”

To be clear: I don't even want a croissant. Which I know sounds weird (everybody should *always* want a croissant; it's a law of physics, like the Fermi paradox or Einstein's field equation), but the truth is, I would gladly do without *this* specific croissant—if this were a regular Tuesday morning.

Unfortunately, today is pitch day. Which means that I'm meeting with potential future GreenFrame clients. I talk to them, tell them the hundreds of little things I can do to help them manage large-scale sustainable building projects, and hope they'll decide to hire us. It's what I've been doing for about eight months, ever since I finished my Ph.D.: I try to bring in new clients; I try to keep the ones we already have;

I try to ease Gianna's workload, since she just had her first baby—who, incidentally, is three babies. Apparently, triplets do happen. And they're adorable, but they also wake one another up in the middle of the night in a never-ending spiral of sleeplessness and exhaustion. Who would have thought? But back to the clients: GreenFrame has been venturing dangerously close to not-quite-in-the-black territory, and today's pitch meeting is critical to keep the red at bay.

Enter the croissants. And that other little problem I happen to have: I am a little superstitious. Just a tad. Just a little stitious. I have developed a complex system of rituals and apotropaic gestures that need to be performed to ensure that my pitch meetings will go as planned. I have more years of science education than anyone ever needed, and should probably know better than to believe that the color of my socks is in any way predictive of my professional success. But do I?

Nope.

Back in college, it was exactly three braids in my hair for every single soccer game (plus two coats of L'Oréal mascara if we were playing away) and I had to listen to "Dancing Queen" and "My Immortal" before each and every final—strictly in that order. Thank God I managed to graduate on time, because the emotional whiplash was starting to grind at me.

Not that this issue of mine is something I like to admit widely. Mostly just to Mara and Hannah, my supposed best friends. We met during the first year of our Ph.D.'s and have been lumbering together through the tribulations of STEM academia ever since. For the most part, having them in my life has been my one true joy, but there have been less-than-outstanding aspects of it. For instance, the fact that during the four years we lived together they oscillated between staging anti-superstition interventions and pranking me by inviting stray black cats into our apartment

on every Friday the 13th. (We even ended up adopting one for a few months, JimBob, till we noticed that the kitty in the Missing flyers all over the neighborhood suspiciously resembled him; JimBob was, in fact, Mrs. Fluffpuff, and we returned her quietly, in the middle of the night. She's been dearly missed ever since.) Anyway, yes: I have horrible, amazing, superstition-unsupportive BFFs. But we don't live together anymore. We don't even live in the same city: Mara is in D.C. at the EPA, and Hannah has been working for NASA and commuting between Texas and Norway. I can throw salt over my shoulder and frantically look around for wood to knock on to my heart's content.

Why, *why* am I like this? I have no clue. Let's just blame my aggressively Italian mother.

But back to this Tuesday morning: the crux of my problem, you see, is that back in the winter, before my most successful client pitch to date, I got a bit peckish. So I popped into Faye's hole-in-the-wall coffee shop, and instead of just asking for the usual—punishingly black coffee: no sugar, no cream, just the bitter oblivion of darkness—I tacked a croissant on to my order. It was just as good as the coffee (i.e., simultaneously stale and undercooked; taste hovering between starch and salmonella) and, to my eternal dismay, was promptly followed by me bagging the most lucrative contract GreenFrame had seen in its young history.

Gianna was over the moon. And so was I, until my half-Italian brain started forming a million little connections between the croissant from hell and my big professional win. You know where this is going: yes, I now desperately feel that I must eat one of Faye's croissants before every single pitch meeting, otherwise the unthinkable will happen. And no, I have no idea how to react to her kind but definitive, "Sorry, honey, we're all out of croissants."

Did I say that there are worse things in the world? I lied. This is a disaster. My career is over. Are those sirens in the distance?

“I see.” I bite into my lower lip, order it to un-pout itself, and force myself to smile. After all, it’s not Faye’s fault if my mom drilled into my baby neurons that walking under the stairs is a surefire way to a lifetime of despair. I go to therapy for that. Or I will. At some point. “Are you, um, making more?”

She looks at the display case. “I’ve got muffins left. Blueberry. Lemon glaze.”

Oh. That actually sounds good. But. “No croissants, though?”

“And I can make you a bagel. Cinnamon? Blueberry? Plain?”

“Is that a no on the croissants?”

Faye cocks her head with a pleased expression. “You really like my croissants, don’t you?”

Do I? “They’re so, um.” I clutch the strap of my fake-leather messenger bag. “Unique.”

“Well, unfortunately I just gave the last one to Erik over there.” Faye points to her left, toward the very end of the counter, but I barely glance at Erik-over-there—*tall man, broad shoulders, wears suit, boring*—too busy cursing my own timing. I should *not* have spent twenty minutes tickling the majestic beauty of Ozzy’s little guinea pig tush. I am now rightfully paying for my mistakes, and Faye is giving me an assessing stare. “I’ll toast you a bagel. You’re too skinny to skip breakfast. Eat more and you might grow a little taller, too.”

I doubt I’ll manage to finally push past five feet at the ripe old age of twenty-seven, but who’s to say. “Just to recap,” I say, in one last pleading, whiny attempt at salvaging my professional future, “you’re *not* making more croissants today?”

Faye’s eyes narrow. “Honey, you might like my croissants a little *too* much—”

“Here.”

The voice—not Faye’s—is deep and pitched low, coming from somewhere above my head. But I barely pay it any attention because I’m too busy staring at the croissant that has miraculously appeared in front of my eyes. It’s still whole, set on top of a napkin, a few stray flakes of dough slowly crumbling off its top. I’ve had Faye’s croissants before, and I know that what they lack in taste they make up for in size. They are very, very large.

Even when delivered by a very, very large hand.

I blink at it for several seconds, wondering if this is a superstition-induced mirage. Then I slowly turn around to look at the man who deposited the croissant on the counter.

He’s already gone. Half out of the door, and all I get is a brief impression of broad shoulders and light hair.

“What—?” I blink at Faye, pointing at the man. “What . . . ?”

“I guess Erik decided you should have the last croissant.”

“Why?”

She shrugs. “Wouldn’t look a gift croissant in the mouth if I were you.”

Gift croissant.

I shrug myself out of my stupor, toss a five-dollar bill in the tip jar, and run out of the café. “Hey!” I call. The man is about twenty steps ahead of me. Well, twenty steps with my tiny legs. Might be less than five with his own. “Hey, could you wait a . . . ?”

He doesn’t stop, so I clutch my croissant and hurry after him. I channel my best Former Soccer Scholarship Kid self and dodge a lady walking her dog, then her dog, then two teenagers making out on the sidewalk. I catch up right around the corner, when I come to a halt in front of him.

“Hey.” I grin up. And up and up and up. He’s taller than I calculated. And I’m more winded than I’d like. I need to work out more. “Thank you *so* much! You really didn’t have to . . .” I fall silent. For no real reason other than because of how striking he looks. He is just so . . .

Scandinavian, maybe. Viking-like. Norse. Like his ancestors frolicked below the aurora borealis on their way to funding Ikea. He is as big as a yeti, with clear blue eyes and short, pale-blond hair, and I would bet my gift croissant that his name contains one of those cool Nordic letters. The *a* and the *e* smushed together; that weird *o* slashed through the middle; the big *b* that's actually two *s*'s stacked on top of each other. Something that requires a lot of HTML knowledge to be typed.

It takes me by surprise, that's all, and for a moment I'm not sure what to say and just stare up. The strong jaw. The deep-set eyes. The way the angular parts of his face come together into something very, very handsome.

Then I realize that he's staring back, and instantly become self-conscious. I know exactly what he's seeing: the blue button-down I tucked into my chinos; the bangs I really need to trim; the brown, shoulder-length hair I *also* need to trim; and then, of course, the croissant.

The croissant! "Thank you so much!" I smile. "I didn't mean to steal your food."

No reply.

"I could pay you back."

Still no reply. Just that North Germanic, severe stare.

"Or I could buy you a muffin. Or a bagel. I really didn't mean to interfere with your breakfast."

Number of replies: zero. Intensity of stare: many millions. Does he even understand what I'm— Oh.

Ooooh.

"*Thank. You,*" I say, very, very slowly, like when my mom's side of the family, the one that never immigrated to the U.S., attempts to speak Italian with me. "For"—I lift the croissant in front of my face—"this. Thank"—I point at the Viking—"you. You are very"—I tilt my head and scrunch my nose happily—"nice." He stares even longer, pensive. I don't think he got it. "You don't understand, do you?" I murmur to myself dejectedly. "Well, thank you again. You really did me

a solid there.” I lift the croissant one last time, like I’m toasting him. Then I turn around and begin to walk away.

“You’re welcome. Although you’ll find that the croissant leaves much to be desired.”

I whirl back to him. Blondie the Viking is looking at me with an indecipherable expression. “D-did you just speak?”

“I did.”

“In English?”

“I believe so, yes.”

I feel my soul crawl outside my body to astral project itself into the burning flames of hell out of pure, sheer embarrassment. “You . . . you weren’t saying anything. Before.”

He shrugs. His eyes are calm and serious. The span of his shoulders could easily moonlight as a plateau in Eurasia. “You didn’t ask a question.” His grammar is better than mine and I am withering inside.

“I thought . . . It seemed . . . I . . .” I close my eyes, remembering the way I mimicked the word *nice* for him. I think I want to die. I want this to be over. Yes, my time has come. “I am very grateful.”

“You probably won’t be, once you try the croissant.”

“No, I . . .” I wince. “I know it’s not good.”

“You do?” He crosses his arms on his chest and gives me a curious look. He’s wearing a suit, like 99 percent of the men who work on this block. Except that he looks unlike any other man I’ve ever seen. He looks like a corporate version of Thor. Like Platinum Ragnarok. I wish he’d smile at me, instead of just observing me. I’d feel less intimidated. “Could have fooled me.”

“I— The thing is, I don’t really *want* to eat it. I just need it for a . . . for a thing.”

His eyebrow lifts. “A thing?”

“It’s a long story.” I scratch my nose. “Kind of embarrassing, actually.”

“I see.” He presses his lips together and nods thoughtfully. “More or less embarrassing than you assuming I don’t speak English?”

The swift and violent death I was talking about earlier? I need it now. “I am so, so sorry about that. I really didn’t—”

“Watch out.”

I look around to see what he means right as some guy almost runs me over with his skateboard. It’s a close call: between the precious croissant I clearly feel ambivalent about and my bag, I nearly lose my balance, and that’s where Corporate Thor intervenes. He moves way quicker than anyone his size should be able to and slides between me and Skateboard Guy, straightening me with a hand around my biceps.

I glance up at him, nearly out of breath. He’s as towering as a Greenlandic mountain range, pressing me a bit against the window of the corner barbershop, and I think he’s saved my life. My professional life, of course. And now also my *life* life.

Oh shit. “What even *is* this morning?” I mutter to no one.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m clearly on a downward spiral of struggle and mortification, but . . .”

He keeps his eyes and the angles of his handsome, aggressive, unusual face on me. His expression is grave, unsmiling, but for a fraction of a second a thought runs through my head.

He’s amused. He finds me funny.

It’s a fleeting impression. It lingers a brief moment and dissolves the instant he lets go of my biceps. But I don’t think I imagined it. I’m almost sure I didn’t, because of what happens next.

“I think,” he says, his voice more delicious than Faye’s croissants could ever hope to be, “that I’d like to hear that long, embarrassing story of yours.”

Chapter 3

Present

I'm almost positive that the elevator is shrinking.

Nothing dramatic, really. But I estimate that every minute we spend in here, the car gets a couple of millimeters smaller. I've tucked myself into a corner, arms around my legs and forehead on my knees. Last I glanced up, Erik was in the opposite corner, looking fairly relaxed. Mile-long legs stretched out in front of him, sequoia-wide biceps crossed on his chest.

And, of course, the walls are looming over me. Pushing us closer and closer together. I shiver and curse power outages. The walls. Erik.

Myself.

"Are you cold?" he asks.

I lift my head. I'm wearing my usual work outfit of chinos and a nice blouse. Solid, neutral colors. Professional enough to be taken seriously; modest enough to convince the dudes I meet through work that my presence at any given meeting is to assess the efficacy of the biofiltration system design and *not* to provide them with "something cute to look at." Being a woman in engineering can be tons and tons of fun.

Erik, though . . . Erik looks a bit different. He's wearing jeans and a dark, soft sweater that stretches around his chest, and it seems unusual, given that in the past I've only ever seen him in a suit. Then again, I've only ever seen Erik twice before, technically on the same day.

(That is, if one doesn't count the times in the past month that I glimpsed him around the building and promptly turned away to change direction. Which I very much don't.)

Still, I cannot help but wonder if the reason he looks uncharacteristically informal is that earlier today he was

working on-site. Supervising. Consulting. Maybe he was called in to give recommendations on the Milton project, and . . . Yeah. Not going there.

I straighten and square my shoulders. My resentment for Erik Nowak, the feeling I've been cradling in my pocket like a little mouse for the past three weeks, the one I've been feeding bile and scraps, stirs awake. And honestly, it feels nice. Familiar. It reminds me that Erik doesn't *really* care whether I'm cold. I bet he has ulterior motives for asking. Maybe he wants to sell my organs. Or he's planning on establishing a pee corner on my rotting corpse.

"I'm fine," I say.

"You sure? I can give you my sweater."

I briefly picture him taking it off and handing it to me. I've seen him do it before in flesh and blood, which means that I wouldn't even need to get creative. I remember well the way he grabbed the collar and pulled it up over his head, his muscles flexing and contracting, the sudden expanse of pale flesh . . .

He'd hold the shirt out to me, and it'd still be warm. Maybe even smell like his skin, or like his sheets.

Wow. Wow, wow, *wow*. What *was* that? I've been in this elevator for approximately nine minutes and my brain is already developing Swiss cheese-style holes. *Holding on strong, Sadie Grantham. Congrats on your emotional fortitude. Way to be horny for a truly horrible person.*

"No need," I say, shaking my head a little too eagerly. "Are you sure we should just wait?" I ask. "Just—do nothing and wait?"

He nods calmly, clearly broadcasting that it's not hard for him to be a good sport about this situation, that the idea of being stuck with me doesn't bother him one bit, and that, unlike some of us, he's not tempted to bury his face in his hands and cry. Show-off.

"What if we scream?" I ask.

"Scream?"

“Yes—what if we scream? This is a giant building. Someone is bound to hear us, right?”

“At eleven on a Friday night?” His reply is much kinder than my idiotic question deserves. “While the elevator is stuck between floors? *This* elevator?”

I look away because he’s right. Frustratingly right. This cursed elevator we’re on is in the deepest part of the building, next to a hallway no one would walk by at night. A true tragedy, overshadowed only by the fact that it also has the narrowest car I’ve ever seen. Guests and clients rarely use it, which is why it has the advantage of being quicker—and the disadvantage of being small.

As in: minuscule. I knew it was tiny, but there’s nothing like realizing that this might be the place where I die to register *how* tiny. If I stretch my arms, I’ll bump into Erik. If I stretch my legs, I’ll bump into Erik. If I thrash around on the floor like I so desperately want to, I’ll *also* bump into Erik. What a quandary.

“Are you okay?” he asks softly. His eyes look soft, too. A ball of something I cannot quite define knots in my chest.

“Yeah.”

“Here.” He rummages in his bag for a moment. Then holds something out to me. “Have some water.”

I don’t know why I accept his *2019 NYC Amateur Soccer League* water bottle. I don’t know why my fingers brush against his for the briefest of moments. And I don’t know why, as I drink small sips, he studies me with something that resembles concern.

He’s not *really* concerned, because Erik Nowak is just not that kind of guy. The kind of guy he *actually* is? A backstabber. A liar. A sentient human McMansion who values only his own professional success. An F.C. Copenhagen supporter—which, it pleases me to say, is a mediocre soccer team at best. Yes, I said what I said.

“Better?”

“I told you, I’m fine. I’m totally great.”

“You look pale.” His head tilts, as if to observe me better. “Are you claustrophobic?”

“No. I don’t think so.” Am I, though? It would explain a lot. The walls closing in. This greasy, barfy feeling in my stomach. The way I’d love to claw at this place because it’s so small and Erik takes up so much room inside my head and I can smell his soap and I just want to forget everything about him and maybe I thought I had but now *he’s here and it’s all coming back and I—*

“Sadie.” Erik is looking at me like he knows exactly what kind of spiral is currently unfolding in my brain. “Take a deep breath.”

“I know. I am. Taking deep breaths, that is.” Or maybe I wasn’t. Because now, with some air in my lungs, my brain is getting a tad quieter.

“Is it your first time?”

I blink at him. “Breathing?”

He smiles faintly. Like he doesn’t mind that we’re going to die in here. “Being stuck in an elevator.”

“Oh. Yes.” I think about it for a moment. “Wait, is it not yours?”

“Third.”

“*Third?*”

He nods.

“Are you . . . cursed, or something?”

“I see your superstitions are going strong,” he says, clearly teasing, and the idea that he thinks he *knows* me, the fact that after everything that happened he’d feel allowed to *joke* with me . . .

I stiffen.

And judging by his expression, Erik notices. “Sadie—”

“I’m fine,” I interrupt him. “I promise. But could we please just be quiet? For a little bit?” I hate how weak my voice sounds.

I set down the water bottle and hide my face back in my knees. I listen to his sharp exhale, to the tense,

uncomfortable silence that falls between us, and try not to think about the last time I was with him.

When I never wanted to stop talking, not even for a second.

Chapter 4

Three weeks ago

I have my pitch meeting in one hour, a little mountain of gigabytes of files to review, and I'm pretty sure that my interns are currently eighteen floors above, trying to decide whether I abandoned them to join a cult or have been abducted by an urban Sasquatch. But I cannot help staring at Corporate Thor's mouth as he tells me, matter-of-factly:

"Money laundering front."

"No way!"

He shrugs. We are sitting right next to each other on a bench in a pocket park that, as it turns out, is just behind my building. The sun is shining, the birds are chirping, I've spotted at least three butterflies, and yet I remain vaguely intimidated by his size. And his cheekbones. "It's the only possible explanation."

I bite my lip, trying to think it through. "Couldn't Faye just be, you know . . . a really bad baker?"

"She certainly is. Her coffee is also questionable."

"It *is* very reminiscent of brake fluid," I concede.

"I always thought of plasma coolant. Point is, she was here ten years ago, when I started working in that building, and she'll be here long after you and I are gone. Despite that." He points at the croissant I'm still clutching. Honestly, I should just bite the bullet and choke it down. My hand sweat is not going to make it any tastier. "There is no valid entrepreneurial reason for her to still be in business."

I nod thoughtfully. He might have a point. "Aside from money laundering operations and ties to organized crime?"

"Precisely." Okay, his grammar might be perfect, but I'm starting to pick up a vague foreign accent. I want to ask a million and ten questions about it—a wish in direct

competition with my desire to not come across as a weirdo. A lofty goal, as I am, in fact, a weirdo.

“I see your theory. But. Hear me out.” I blow my bangs out of my eyes. Erik’s expression doesn’t move a nanometer, but I know he’s listening. There is something about him, like his attention is something physically tangible, like he’s good at seeing and hearing and *knowing*. “So, remember how I talked about my . . . problem?”

“The magical-thinking one? Where you believe that your professional success relates to the items you ate for breakfast?”

I cannot believe I *admitted* to it. God, he already knows I’m a weirdo. Though, to his credit, he seems to be taking it in stride. “Okay, listen, I know it sounds like I’m foolishly clutching the atavistic remnants of ancient times.”

“Sounds?” His eyebrow lifts.

I might be flushing. “I like to think of it as . . . more of a way to bind myself and celebrate the traditions of my previous successes, you know? And less as establishing an empirical causal connection between the color of my underwear and future events.”

“I see.” The corner of his mouth twitches upward. Just barely, though—still not a smile. Maybe he’s not capable. Maybe he has a debilitating medical condition. Smilopathy: now with its very own ICD-10 code. “So, what’s the lucky color?”

“What?”

“Of underwear.”

“Oh. Um . . . lavender.”

He seems briefly stumped. “Purple?”

“Kind of, yeah.” I forgot that most men can’t name more than five colors. “A little lighter. Between purple and pink. Pastel-like.”

He nods slowly, like he’s trying to picture it. “Cute,” he says, and his tone is as simple and straightforward as it’s been in the last few minutes. There is absolutely no creepy

lasciviousness, as though he's complimenting a flower or a puppy. My heart skips a beat nonetheless.

Would he . . . ? If he saw me wearing my . . . would he still think that . . . ?

Oh my *God*. What is *wrong* with me? This poor man just gave me his *croissant*.

"Anyway," I hasten to add, "maybe there're a lot of people buying good luck croissants, because I'm not alone in my . . . magical thinking—nice way to put it, by the way. For example, my friend Hannah works at NASA, and she says that the engineers there have had whole complex routines involving Planters peanuts and mission launches for the past, like, fifty years. And I'm an engineer. Basically, I'm professionally required to—"

"You're an engineer?" His eyes widen in surprise.

My heart sinks with disappointment. *Oh God. He's one of those. I can't believe he's one of those.*

I scowl and stand from the bench, looking down at him with a frown. "FYI, in the U.S., fifteen percent of the engineering workforce is made up of women. And that number has been steadily increasing, so there is no need to be so shocked that—"

"I'm not."

My frown deepens. "You sure looked like—"

"I'm an engineer myself, and it seemed like a coincidence of sorts." His mouth twitches again. "I thought your magical thinking might be tickled."

"Oh." My cheeks burn. "Oh." Wow. *Am I the Asshole, Reddit? Why, you kind of are, Sadie.* "Sorry, I didn't mean to imply—"

"Where did you study?" he asks, unruffled, pulling at my wrist till I sit again. I end up a little closer to him than I was before, but it's fine. It's okay. *Siri, how many times can I utterly humiliate myself in the span of thirty minutes? Infinite, you say? Thank you, that's what I figured.*

"Um, Caltech. I finished my Ph.D. last year. You?"

“NYU. Got my master’s . . . ten, eleven years ago?”

We stare at each other, me calculating his age, him . . . I don’t know. Maybe he’s calculating, too. He must be six or seven years older than me. Not that it’s in any way relevant. We’re just chatting. We’re going our separate ways in twelve seconds.

“Where do you work?” he asks.

“GreenFrame. You?”

“ProBld.”

I scrunch my nose, instantly recognizing the name—from both the plaques in the lobby of my office building and the New York engineering grapevine. There are lots of firms in this area, and he works at my least favorite. The big jellyfish that keeps expanding by eating the smaller jellyfish. Not that they’re terrible—they’re fine. But they’re old school and don’t focus on sustainability nearly as much as we do. But they do have a solid rep, and some of our potential clients even choose them over us because of that. Which: bleh.

“Did you just make a repulsed face when I mentioned my company?”

“No. No! I mean, yeah. A little. But I didn’t mean it in an offensive way. They just don’t seem to adopt a whole-systems approach to problem-solving when dealing with environmental challenges . . .” His eyes shine. Is he teasing me? Does Corporate Thor *tease*? “I mean, I am now over twenty minutes late for work. Realistically, I’ll probably be fired and end up begging you guys for a job.”

He nods, lips pressed together. “Good. I have an in with the partners.”

“Is that so?”

“I’m sure they’d love to have you on board. To develop a whole-systems approach to problem-solving when dealing with environmental challenges.” I stick out my tongue, which he ignores. “What name should I give when I recommend you?”

“Oh. Sadie Grantham.” I hold out my non-croissant hand. He looks at it for a long moment, and I am suddenly, inexplicably, tsunamingly afraid. Oh my God. What if he won’t take it?

Yeah, Sadie? A wise, mean, pragmatic voice whispers in my ear. *What if a stranger won’t take your hand? How will you deal with the zero-point-zero impact it’ll have on your life?* But the voice is moot, because he does take it, and my heart gallops at how nice his skin feels, solid and a little rough. His hand swallows my fingers, warming my flesh and the cheap, cute rings I put on this morning.

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Grantham.” My breath hitches. My heart melts. I’ve had my Ph.D. for less than a year, so I still relish being called doctor. Especially because no one ever does. “Erik Nowak.”

Well. No one ever does except for Erik Nowak.

Erik Nowak. “Can I ask you something kind of inappropriate?”

He shakes his head, slowly, gravely. “Unfortunately, I am not wearing purple underwear.”

I laugh. “No, it’s . . . when you write your last name, are there cool, fancy letters in it?” I blurt the question out and instantly regret it. I’m not even sure what I’m asking. I’ll just roll with it, I guess?

“It has an *n*. And a *w*. Are they considered fancy?”

Not really. Pretty boring. “Sure.”

He nods. “What about the *k*? It’s my favorite letter.”

“Er, yeah. That’s fancy, too.” Still boring.

“But surely not the *a*?”

“Uh, well, I guess the *a* is . . .”

His mouth is twitching. Again. He’s teasing me. *Again*. I hate him.

“Damn you,” I say without heat.

He’s *almost* smiling. “No umlauts. No diacritics. No Møller. Or Kiærskou. Or Adelsköld. Though I did go to school with them.” I nod, vaguely disappointed. Till he asks:

“Disappointed?” and then I can’t help hiding behind my croissant and laughing. When I’m done he’s *definitely* smiling, and he says, “You should really eat that. Or you’ll lose your client and NASA’s next rocket will explode.”

“Right, yes.” I tear a piece away. Hold it out to him. “Would you like a bite? I don’t mind sharing.”

“Really? You don’t mind sharing my own famously disgusting croissant with me?”

“What can I say?” I grin. “I’m a generous soul.”

He shakes his head. And then adds, as though it just occurred to him, “I know a really good French bistro.”

My entire body perks up. “Oh?”

“They have a bakery, too.”

My body perks up *and* tingles. “Yeah?”

“They make excellent croissants. I go there often.”

The sun is still shining, the birds are still chirping, I’ve now spotted five butterflies, and . . . the noise in the background slowly recedes. I look at Erik, study the way the shade from the trees falls across his face, study him as closely as he’s studying me.

In my life, I’ve been asked out for drinks by enough random acquaintances that I think maybe, just *maybe*, I might know what he’s trying to get at. And in my life, I’ve wanted to say no to drinks with every single one of those random acquaintances, which is why I have learned to prevent the question from even being asked. I am good at broadcasting disinterest and unavailability. Very, very good.

And yet, here I am.

On a New York bench.

Clutching a croissant.

Holding my breath and . . . hoping?

Ask me, I think at him. Because I want to try that French bistro that you know. With you. And talk more about money laundering and a whole-systems approach to environmental engineering and purple underwear that is actually lavender.

Ask me, Erik Nowak. Ask me, ask me, ask me. Ask me.

There are cars in the distance, and people laughing, and emails piling up in my inbox, eighteen floors above us. But my eyes hold Erik's for a long, stretched-out moment, and when he smiles at me, I notice that his eyes are just as blue as the sky.

Chapter 5

Present

According to the plaque above the floor-selection console (which, by the way, does not include an emergency button; I am mentally composing a strongly worded email that will likely never get sent), the elevator has a 1,400-pound capacity. The inside, I'd estimate, is about fifteen square feet, fourteen of which are inconveniently taken up by Erik. (As usual: thank you, Erik.) A stainless steel handrail is installed in the innermost side, and the walls are actually quite pretty, white baked enamel or some similar material that maybe dates the car a bit, but hey, it's better than mirrors. I hate mirrors in elevators, and I'd hate them the most in *this* elevator. They'd make avoiding glimpses of Erik about three times harder than it already is.

On the ceiling, between the two energy-efficient (I hope?) recessed lights that are currently off, I noticed one large metal pane. And that's what I've been staring at for the past minute or so. I am no elevator expert, but I'm almost positive that's the emergency exit.

From my five-foot vantage point, Erik is somewhere between six-three and six-six. Based on that, I approximate that the car is about seven feet tall. Too high for me to reach on my own, and too offset from the wall for me to use the handrail as a climbing point. But. *But*, I am sure that Erik could easily lift me up. I mean, he's done it before. On several occasions, in the span of the twenty-four hours we spent together. Like when we got hungry halfway through the night: he picked me up like I was a four-pound kitten, deposited me on his kitchen counter while I gasped in awe at his beautiful, overfull fridge, and then proceeded to inspect an extensive series of Chinese leftovers before

sharing them with me. Not to mention that *other* time, when we were in his shower and he put one hand under my ass to push me against the wall and . . .

The point is: he could help me reach the panel. I could dislodge it, climb out of the car, and if we're close enough to the upper floor, I might be able to pry the doors open and hoist myself out. At that point, I would be free. Free to go home and feed Ozzy, who's no doubt currently whistling his little heart out like he always does when he hasn't eaten in more than two hours. He'd look at me like I'm a horrible rodent mother, but then he'd begrudgingly accept my carrot stick and snuggle in my lap. And of course, when my phone has reception, I'd call for help so that someone can come take care of Erik. But I wouldn't stick around to see him out, because I've already had plenty of—

“No.”

I startle and look at Erik. He is still in the corner opposite mine, giving me a flat stare. “No, what?”

“It's not going to happen.”

“You don't even know what—”

“You're not going to climb out of the emergency exit.”

I nearly recoil, because despite my magical-thinking tendencies I am aware that mind reading is not really a thing that exists. Then again, I am also aware that this is not the first time Erik seems to know exactly what's going on in my head. He was pretty good at it during our dinner together. And then later, of course. In bed.

But in this house (i.e., my brain) we do not acknowledge that.

“Well,” I say, “you're way bigger and way heavier. So you can't do it.” Plus, I'm not sure I trust him not to leave me here. I've trusted him before and heavily regretted it.

“Neither can you, because I'm not going to let you.”

I frown. “I might be able to reach the exit by myself. In which case you technically don't have to *let* me.”

“If that happens, I’m going to physically prevent you from doing it.”

I hate him. So much. “Listen, what if we’re stuck in here for days? What if me climbing out is our only chance?”

“There is nothing to suggest that the elevator won’t start up again the second the power outage is resolved. We’ve been in here for about thirty minutes, which is nothing, considering that the repair crew is probably working on the grid to fix a block-wide outage. Not to mention how incredibly *dangerous* what you are proposing would be.”

He’s right. I’m being impatient and irrational. Which flusters me. “I—only for me.”

His face turns into stone. “*Only* for you?”

“You’d be safe in here. You’d just need to wait for me to call help, and—”

“You think I would be okay with you putting yourself in danger?” At baseline, Erik is not exactly a warm, convivial guy, but I had no idea he could sound like this. Deceptively calm, but furiously, icily livid. He leans forward as if to better glare at me, and his hand reaches up to close around the handrail, knuckles stretched white. I have a brief vision of him snapping it in two.

His anger, of course, gives me anger FOMO and makes me just as angry. So I lean forward, too. “I don’t see why not.”

“Really, Sadie? You don’t? You don’t fucking see why I wouldn’t be okay letting *you*, out of *all* people—” He looks away abruptly, jaw tense, a muscle ticking in his cheek. His hair, I notice, is shorter than when I touched it. And I think he might have lost a bit of weight. And I cannot, I truly *cannot* bear how handsome he is. “Would you really rather do something that idiotic and reckless than be in here with me for a few more minutes?” he asks, turning back to me, voice icy and calm again.

Of course not, I almost blurt out. I’m not some horror movie not-quite-final girl who follows the DEATH THIS WAY sign only to be flabbergasted when an ax murderer chops off her

leg. I'm usually a responsible, levelheaded person—*usually* being the key word, because right now I'm kind of tempted to run into the loving, ax-wielding bosom of a serial killer. Rationally I know that Erik is right: we won't be stuck in here for long, and someone is bound to come get us. But then I remember how betrayed and disappointed I felt in the days after he did what he did. I remember crying on the phone with Mara. Crying on the phone with Hannah. Crying on the phone with Mara *and* Hannah.

Being here with him seems just as reckless as anything else, honestly. Which is how I find myself shrugging and saying, "Kind of, yeah."

I expect Erik to get angry again. To tell me that I'm being foolish. To make one of those dry jokes of his that made me laugh every time. Instead he takes me by surprise: He looks away guiltily. Then he presses his index and forefinger in his eyes, like he's suddenly, overwhelmingly exhausted, and murmurs quietly, "Fuck, Sadie. I'm sorry."

Chapter 6

Three weeks ago

I have a grand total of zero superstitious rituals centered around dating.

And I promise I'm not saying this to brag. There is a simple reason I haven't convinced myself that I need to chug down a Capri Sun or do seven jumping jacks before going out with someone, which is: I do not date. Ever. I used to, of course. Once upon a time. With Oscar, the Love of My Life.

Like Hannah often points out, it's a little misleading for me to refer to the guy who met another woman at a data science corporate bonding retreat and two weeks later called me in tears to tell me that he was falling for her as the "Love of My Life." And I swear, I do get the irony. But Oscar and I go way back. He gave me my first kiss (with tongue) when we were sophomores in high school. He was my date to the senior prom, the first nonfamily person I went on vacation with, the one whose shoulder I bawled on when he got accepted to his dream school in the Midwest, exactly seven states away from me.

We actually made it work pretty well during four years of long distance for college. And we did get to spend summers together, except when I was on internships, which was . . . well, yes, every summer but junior year, and I had that coding boot camp at UCSB then, so . . . yup, every summer. So maybe there were no summers together, but I did end up with a killer CV, and that was nice. Better, even.

When we graduated college, Oscar was offered a job in Portland, and I *was* going to follow him and find something there, but I got into Caltech's Ph.D. program, which was too good an opportunity to pass up. I really thought we could do

five more years of long distance, because Oscar was a great guy and so, so patient and understanding—till the beginning of my third year. Till the day he FaceTimed me, crying because he'd met someone else and had no choice but to break up with me.

I wept. I stalked his new girlfriend on Instagram. I ate my weight in Talenti gelato (salted caramel truffle, black raspberry vanilla parfait, and, on a particularly shameful night, mango sherbet melted into a pot of Midori sour; I am filled with regrets). I cut my hair short, to what my hairdresser dubbed *the longest bob in the history of bobs*. I couldn't bear to be alone, so I slept in Mara's bed for a week, because Hannah tosses around way too much and I'm pretty sure she changed the sheets twice in the five years we lived together. For about ten days I was utterly, soul-smashingly heartbroken. And then . . .

Then I was more or less fine.

Seriously, considering that Oscar and I had been together for almost a decade, my reaction to being one-sidedly broken up with was nothing short of miraculous. I aced all my classes and my lab work, spent the summer touring Europe by train with Mara and Hannah, and a couple of months later I found myself shocked to realize that I hadn't checked Oscar's girlfriend's Twitter in weeks. *Huh*.

"Could it be that it wasn't real love?" I found myself asking my friends over Midori sours (sans mango sherbet; I had regained my dignity by then).

"I think that there are lots of kinds of love," Hannah said. She was nestled next to me at our favorite booth at Joe's, the grad student bar closest to our apartment. "Maybe yours with Oscar was closer to the sibling variety than to anything resembling a passionate affair between soul mates? And you're still in touch. You know that you still love each other as friends, so your brain knows that there's no need to mourn him."

"But initially I was really, *really* devastated."

“Well, I don’t want to armchair-psychologize you . . .”

“You *totally* want to armchair-psychologize me.”

Hannah smiled, pleased. “Okay, if you insist. I wonder if maybe you were more devastated at the idea of losing your safe harbor—the person who was there for you since you were kids and promised to be there for you forever—than at the idea of losing Oscar himself. Could it be that he was a crutch of sorts?”

“I don’t know.” I poked at my garnish cherry. “I liked being his girlfriend. He was so . . . *there*, you know? And when we were apart I missed him, but not too much. It was . . . easy, I guess.”

“Could it be that it was *too* easy?” Mara asked before stealing my lime.

I’ve been pondering her question ever since.

But there hasn’t been anyone after Oscar. Which means that he still technically retains the title of Love of My Life, even if two months ago I got an invite to his wedding—pretty glaring clue that I’m not the Love of His. I could have gotten out more, I guess, especially in grad school. I could have tried harder. “When one door shuts, another opens,” Hannah and Mara would say. “Now you can date around. You missed out on so many hot dudes in the past few years—remember the guy we met in Tucson? Or the one who always asks you out at conferences? Oh my God, the guy in fluid dynamics who was clearly in love with you? You should hit him up!”

Of course, whenever the topic of my love life comes up, and because dragging is a sacrosanct part of the covenant of friendship, I never hesitate to point out that even though both Hannah and Mara have been mostly single ever since starting grad school, they barely take advantage of their amazing dating opportunities. It usually ends with Mara defensively muttering that she’s busy, and Hannah rebutting that she’s on a break from hooking up with people, because her last two fuck buddies were Can I Jizz in Your

Hair and Human Skull on the Nightstand Girl, and they would put anyone off sex. It usually ends with us collectively deciding that no relationship could ever compete with our jobs, guinea pigs, or . . . Netflix, maybe? If the idea of staring at blueprints is more appealing to me than hitting the club (whatever that even means; what even *is* a club, really?) then maybe I should just hang out with the blueprints. Not that things cannot change, since Mara is now embarrassingly, fantastically in love with her Formerly Asshole Roommate.

Maybe the blueprints and I will common law-tie the knot. Who's to say?

Anyhoo. All of this to say: I haven't really dated a whole lot, which is the sole reason I haven't developed weird, ritualist habits around the process. Or, I *hadn't*. Till right now.

Because I am about fifteen minutes into the night, and I'm thinking that I'll have to keep these black jeans for the rest of my life. The lightweight green sweater I put on? Can't throw it away. Ever. This is now my lucky-date outfit. Because the second we sit down at the bistro, where everything smells delicious and our narrow window table has the cutest little succulent in its center, Erik's phone pings.

"Sorry. I'll mute it." He does, but not before rolling his eyes. Which is such a far cry from his usual stoic, nonplussed vibe, I cannot help but burst into laughter. "Please, do not mock my pain," he deadpans, taking the seat across from mine. I'm not sure how, but I know that he's joking. Maybe I'm developing telepathic powers.

"Work?" I ask.

"I wish." He shakes his head, resigned. "Way more important stuff."

Oh. Maybe he wasn't joking. "Is everything okay?"

"No." He slides his phone in his pocket and leans back in his seat. "My brother texted that my football team just

traded one of our best players. We're never going to win a game again."

I smile into my water. I never really got into American football. It seems kind of boring—a bunch of overgrown dudes standing around in '80s shoulder pads and bashing their heads toward chronic traumatic encephalopathy—but I'm way too soccer mad to judge fans of other sports. Maybe Erik used to play. He's big enough, I guess. "Then they should really invest in lucky underwear."

He gives me a lingering look. "Purple."

"Lavender."

"Right. Yes." He glances away, and I think that this is nice. I'm sitting across from someone who's not Oscar, and I'm not feeling too nervous, or too much weirder than usual. For all that he's a blond steely mountain of muscles, Erik is surprisingly easy to be around.

"What's your team? Giants? Jets?"

He shakes his head. "It's not that kind of football."

I cock my head. "Is it, like, a minor league?"

"No, it's European football. Soccer, you'd call it. But we don't need to talk about—"

I nearly do a spit take. "You follow soccer?"

"An intervention-worthy amount, according to my family and friends. But don't worry, I do have other topics of conversation. Like pastries. Or the practical implementation of smart factory technology. Or . . . that's about it."

"No! No, I—" I don't even know where to start. "I *love* soccer. Like, love *love*. I stay up till ridiculous hours to watch games in Europe. My parents always get me fancy jerseys for my birthday because that's literally my only interest. I went to college on a soccer scholarship."

He frowns. "So did I."

"No way." We stare at each other for a long moment, a million and one words running through the eye contact. *Impossible. Amazing. Really? Really, for real?* "You used to play?"

“I still play. Tuesday nights and weekends, mostly. There are lots of amateur clubs here.”

“I know! On Wednesdays I go to this gym near my place, and . . . Soccer was my first career choice. The engineering Ph.D. was definitely my plan B. I really, *really* wanted to go pro.”

“But?”

“I wasn’t quite good enough.”

He nods. “I’d have loved to go pro, too.”

“What stopped you?”

He chuckles. It sounds like a hug. “I wasn’t *nearly* good enough.”

I laugh. “So, what’s your team and who did they trade?”

“F.C. Copenhagen. And they got rid of—”

“Don’t say Halvorsen.”

He closes his eyes. “Halvorsen.”

I wince. “Yeah, you’re never gonna win another game, not for all the purple underwear in the world. But you weren’t gonna win much *with* him, anyway. You need a better coach, honestly. No offense.”

“Plenty of offense.” He’s glaring.

“You follow women’s soccer, too?” I ask.

He nods. “Proud OL Reign supporter since 2012.”

“Me, too!” I beam. “So you don’t *always* have terrible taste.”

“What’s *your* men’s team?” A cute, charming vertical line has appeared between his brows.

I rest my chin on my hands. “Guess. I’ll give you three tries.”

“Honestly, I can accept any club except for Real Madrid.”

I continue with my chin hands, unperturbed.

“It’s Real Madrid, isn’t it?”

“Yup.”

“Outrageous.”

“You’re just jelly because *we* can afford to buy decent players.”

“Right.” He sighs and hands me one of the menus I never even noticed the waiter dropped off. “I’m going to need food for this conversation. And so will you.”

We spend the rest of the night arguing, and it’s . . . fantastic. The best. I suspect the food is as good as he promised, but I don’t pay very much attention, because Erik has incredibly incorrect opinions on the way Orlando Pride is using Alex Morgan and on the Premier League trajectory of Liverpool, and I must dedicate all my efforts to talking him out of them.

I fail. He stands by his wrong ideas and systematically makes his way through the bread, then an appetizer, then an entrée, like a man who is used to comfortably consuming seven large meals a day. At the end, when our plates are clean and I’m too full to bicker with him over the offside sanctions rules, we both lean back in our chairs and are silent for a moment.

I’m smiling. He’s . . . not smiling, but close, and it makes me smile even more.

I think this might have been the most fun I’ve had in years. Okay, false: I *know* it is.

“How did it go, by the way?” he asks quietly.

“What?”

“Your pitch.”

“Oh. Good, I think.”

“Thanks to Faye’s croissant?”

I grin. “Undoubtedly. And my lavender underwear.”

He lowers his eyes and clears his throat. “Who’s the client?”

“A cooperative. They’re building a rec center based in New Jersey and are shopping around for consultants. It’s a second location for them, so they bought an old grocery store to turn into a gym of sorts. They’re looking for someone who’ll help them design it.”

“You?”

“And my boss, yes. Though two of her kids have been colicky, so for now mostly me.”

“What did you tell them?”

“I talked them through my plans for energy independence, green building standards, smart water management, minimizing off-gas chemicals . . . that stuff. They were going for a green edge, they said.”

“And what are your plans?”

I hesitate. I really don't want to bore Erik, and I've gotten feedback from . . . literally *everyone* that when I start talking about engineering stuff, I go on for way too long. But Erik seems more than a little interested, and even though I blabber about raw materials and federal limits and life-cycle assessment for over ten minutes, his attention never seems to waver. He just nods pensively, like he's filing away the information, and asks lots of clever questions.

“So you got the project?”

I shrug. “They're meeting with someone else tomorrow, so I don't know yet. But they said we're their first choice so far, so I'm optimistic.”

Erik doesn't reply. Instead he just studies me, serious, intent, like I'm a particularly intriguing blueprint. Does it make me uncomfortable? I don't know. It should. I'm out with a guy. For the first time in a million years. And he's staring. Yikes, right? But . . . I kind of don't mind.

Mostly, I'm wondering whether he likes what he sees, which is a bit different. I feel, sometimes, like I've lost the habit to wonder whether I'm pretty in favor of agonizing over other qualities. Do I look professional? Smart? Organized? Someone who should be taken seriously, whatever the hell that means? I generally find the idea of men commenting on my attractiveness, favorably or otherwise, repulsive. But tonight, right now . . . the possibility that Erik might find me beautiful uncurls warmly at the base of my stomach.

And then freezes when I consider that he might be staring for the opposite reason. Could he be staring for the opposite reason? Okay. This is—no. I need to stop with the ruminating. “What are you thinking?” I ask.

He huffs a laugh. “Just wondering something.”

“What?”

He drums his fingers on the table. “Whether you want a job.”

“Oh, I still have one. Despite my efforts this morning, I didn’t actually get fired.”

“I know. And this is very inappropriate, I am aware. But I’d love to poach you.”

“Ah. I . . .” Suddenly, I’m feeling hot and weirdly tingly. “I like my job. It pays okay. And my boss is great.”

“I’ll pay you more. Name a figure.”

“I . . . what?”

“And if there’s anything you don’t enjoy about your current job, I’d be happy to come to an agreement about your duties. I’m very open to negotiating.”

“Wait—*you*?”

“ProBld,” he amends.

I frown. He talks about ProBld like he has a lot of say in their administrative choices, and I wonder if he has a managerial position. It would explain the suit. And the fact that he clearly came to dinner directly from work, even though we met at eight. He’s wearing the same clothes as this morning, albeit without his tie and jacket, and with the sleeves of his button-down rolled up to his forearms. Which look strong and oddly *male*, and I’ve been trying hard not to ogle. I’m about to ask what exactly his job description is, but I get distracted when the waiter brings the check and hands it to Erik. Who readily accepts it.

Is he paying? I guess he’s paying. Should I politely insist that we split? Should I rudely insist that we split? Should I offer to pay for both of us? He did buy the croissant this

morning. How does one dine out with company? I have no clue.

“Thank you,” the waiter says before leaving. “Always nice to see you, Erik.”

“You *do* come here a lot,” I tell him.

He shrugs, slipping his credit card inside the book. Okay. The paying ship has sailed. *Crap*. “With big clients, mostly.”

“So it’s not your default date place?” The question comes out before I can turn the words in my head. Which means that I don’t realize its implications until well after it’s lingering between us. Erik is staring, *again*, and I’m suddenly flustered. “I don’t know if . . . if you don’t . . . I didn’t mean to say that this is a *date*.”

His eyebrow lifts.

“I mean—maybe you just wanted to . . . as friends, and . . .”

The eyebrow lifts higher.

I clear my throat. “I . . . *Is* this a date?” I ask, my voice small, suddenly insecure.

“I don’t know,” he says carefully, after mulling it over for a second.

“Maybe it isn’t. I . . .” *I didn’t want to make it weird. Maybe you just think I’m a nice girl and wanted someone to have dinner with and I totally misread the situation and I’m so, so sorry. It’s just, I think I like you a lot? More than I can remember liking anyone? It’s possible that I projected and—*

The waiter comes to pick up the check, which interrupts my spiraling and gives me a chance to take a deep breath. It’s all good. So maybe it wasn’t a date. It’s fine. It was fun, anyway. Good food. Good soccer talk. I made a friend.

“Can I ask *you* a question?”

I look up from the hand-wringing currently going on in my lap. *Is it whether I’m a needy, dangerous stalker?* “Uh, sure.”

“I don’t know if this is a date,” he says, serious, “but if it isn’t, will you go on one with me?”

I smile so wide, my cheeks nearly hurt.

• • •

The pistachio gelato melts down my cone while I explain why Neuer is a much better goalkeeper than he's made out to be. We walk around Tribeca side by side without touching even once, block after block after block, the night air balmy and the lights fuzzy. My shoes are not new, but I can feel a nasty blister slowly forming on my heel. It doesn't matter, because I don't want to stop.

Neither does Erik, I don't think. Every few words I bend my neck to look up at him, and he is so handsome in his shirtsleeves and slacks, so handsome when he shakes his head at something I said, so handsome when he gestures with his large hands to describe a play, so handsome when he almost smiles and little wrinkles appear at the corners of his eyes, so handsome that sometimes I *feel* it, physically, viscerally. My pulse quickens and I cannot breathe and I'm starting to think about unnerving things. Things like *after*. I listen to him explain why Neuer is an incredibly overrated goalkeeper and laugh, genuinely loving every minute of it.

At the ice cream place, he didn't order anything. Because, he says, "I don't like to eat cold things."

"Wow. That might be the most un-Danish thing I have ever heard."

It must be a sore spot, because his eyes narrow. "Remind me to never introduce you to my brothers."

"Why?"

"Wouldn't want you to form any alliances."

"Ha. So you are a notoriously bad Dane. Do you also hate ABBA?"

He looks briefly confused. Then his expression clears. "They're Swedish."

"What about tulips—do you hate tulips?"

“That would be the Netherlands.”

“Damn.”

“So close, though. Want to try again? Third time’s the charm.”

I glare, licking what’s left of the sticky pistachio off my fingers. He looks at my mouth and then away, down to his feet. I want to ask him what’s wrong, but the owner of the coffee shop on the corner comes out to retrieve his sidewalk sign and I realize something.

It’s late.

Very late. Really late. End-of-the-night late. We’re standing in front of each other on a sidewalk, over twelve hours after meeting for the first time on . . . another sidewalk; Erik probably wants to go home. And I probably want to be with him a little longer.

“What train do you take?” I ask.

“I actually drove.”

I shake my head, disapproving. “Who even drives in New York?”

“People who have to visit construction sites all over the tristate. I’ll take you home,” he offers, and I beam.

“Geniuses. Kind, ride-giving geniuses. Where are you parked?”

He points somewhere behind me and I nod, knowing I should turn around and begin to walk by his side again. But we seem to be a little stuck in this *here* and this *now*. Standing in front of each other. Rooted to the ground.

“I had fun tonight,” I say.

He doesn’t answer.

“Even though we forgot to get croissants at the bistro.”

Still no answer.

“And I am seriously tempted to buy you a life-size cardboard cutout of Neuer and— Erik, are you still doing that thing where you don’t talk because I’m technically not asking you a question?”

He laughs silently and my breath hitches high in my chest. "Where do you live?" he asks softly.

"Farthest reaches of Staten Island," I lie.

It's supposed to be my revenge, but he just says, "Good."

"Good?"

"Good."

I frown. "It's a toll of seventeen dollars, my friend."

He shrugs.

"One-way, Erik."

"It's fine."

"How is it fine?"

He shrugs again. "At least it'll take a while to get there."

My heart skips a beat. And then another. And then they all catch up at once, a mess of overlapping thumps, a small, wild animal caged in my chest, trying to escape.

I have no idea what I'm doing here. Not a clue. But Erik is standing right in front of me, the streetlight a soft glow behind his head, the warm spring breeze blowing softly between us, and something clicks within me.

Yes. Okay.

"Actually," I say, and even though my cheeks are burning, even though I cannot look him in the eye, even though I'm shifting on my toes and contemplating running away, this is the bravest moment of my life. Braver than moving here without Mara and Hannah. Braver than the time I megged that midfielder from the UCLA. Just *brave*. "Actually, if you don't mind, I'd rather skip Staten Island and just go to your place."

He studies me for a long moment, and I wonder if maybe he cannot quite believe what I just said, if his brain is also struggling to catch up, if maybe this feels as extraordinary to him as it does to me. Then he nods once, decided. "Very well," he says.

Before we start to walk, I see his throat bob.

Chapter 7

Present

On paper, I should be pleased.

After weeks of sometimes-murderous, often-mopey, intense rage, I finally told Erik that I'd rather take my chances and fall down an elevator shaft—*Return of the Jedi* Emperor Palpatine style—than spend one more minute with him. I told him, and from the way his lips pressed together, he really hated hearing it. Now his eyes are closed and he's leaning his head back against the wall. Which, given his reserved Nordic genes, is likely the equivalent of a regular person going on his knees and bellowing in pain.

Good. I stare at the line of his jaw and the column of his throat, forbid myself from remembering how fun it was to bite into his scratchy, unshaven skin, and think, a little savagely, *Good*. It's good that he feels bad about what he's done, because what he did *was* bad.

Really, I should be pleased. And I am, except for this heavy, twisted feeling at the bottom of my stomach, which I don't immediately recognize, but has me thinking back to something Mara said to me the evening after my night at Erik's. Hannah's end of the call had gone dark, presumably when a falling icicle severed whatever Internet cable connects Norway to the rest of the world, and it was just the two of us on the line.

"He tried to call me," I said. "And he texted me asking if we could get dinner tonight. Like nothing happened. Like I'm too stupid to realize what he did."

"The fucking audacity." Mara was incensed, her cheeks red with anger, almost as bright as her hair. "Do you want to talk to him?"

"I . . ." I wiped the tears off with the back of my hand. "No. I don't know."

"You could yell at him. Rip him a new asshole. Threaten him with a lawsuit, maybe? Is what he did illegal? If so, Liam's a lawyer. He'll represent you for free."

"Doesn't he do weird tax corporation stuff?"

"Eh. I'm sure the law's the law."

I laughed wetly. "Shouldn't you ask him first?"

"Don't worry, he seems to be physically incapable of saying no to me. Last week he let me hang up wind chimes on the porch. The question is, do you *want* to talk with Erik? Or would you rather forget about him and pretend he never existed?"

"I . . ." I thought about being with him the previous night. And then, later, about discovering what he'd done. *Could* I forget? *Could* I pretend? "I want to talk with the Erik I had dinner with. And breakfast. Before I knew what he was capable of."

Mara nodded, sad. "You could pick up next time he calls. And confront him. Demand an explanation."

"What if he laughs it off as something that I should have expected?"

"It's possible that he's trying to call you to own what he did and apologize," she said, pensive. "But maybe that would be even worse. Because then you'd know that he knew exactly the harm he was doing but went ahead with it anyway."

I think that's exactly it. I think that's why I hated Erik's *I'm sorry*, and why I hate that he hasn't looked at me in several minutes. It makes me wonder if he's aware that he ruined something that could have been great out of greed. And if that's the case, then I didn't imagine it: the night we spent together was as special as I remember, and he still threw it into the garbage chute—*A New Hope* Princess Leia style.

"I saw Denmark won against Germany," I say, because it's preferable to the alternative. The silence, and my very loud

thoughts.

He turns to me and exhales out a laugh. “Really, Sadie?”

“Yeah. Two—no, three nights ago.” I look down at my hand, chipping at what little is left of last week’s nail polish.

“Two-one. So maybe you *did* have a point about Neuer—”

“Really?” he repeats, harsher this time. I ignore him.

“Though, if you remember, when we had ice cream I did concede that his left foot is kind of weak.”

“I do remember,” he says, a little impatient.

God. These nails of mine are just *embarrassing*. “Even then, it probably had more to do with Denmark playing exceptionally well—”

“Sadie.”

“And if you guys can sustain this level of play for a while, then . . .”

There is some rustling from his corner of the elevator. I look up just in time to see Erik squat in front of me, knees brushing against my legs, eyes pale and serious. My heart somersaults. He *does* look thinner. And maybe a bit like he hasn’t been having the best sleep of his life in the past few weeks. His hair gleams golden in the emergency light, and a brief memory resurfaces, of pulling at it when he—

“Sadie.”

What? I want to scream. *What more do you want?* Instead I just look back at him, feeling like the elevator has shrunk again, this time to the pocket between my eyes and his.

“It’s been weeks, and . . .” He shakes his head. “Can we please talk?”

“We are talking.”

“Sadie.”

“I’m saying stuff. And you’re saying stuff.”

“Sadie—”

“Okay, fine: you were right about Neuer. Happy?”

“Not particularly, no.” He looks at me in silence for several seconds. Then he says, calm and earnest: “I’m sorry.”

It's the wrong thing. I feel a surge of anger travel up my spine, bigger even than when I learned about his betrayal. There is a bitter, acid flavor in my mouth when I lean forward and hiss, "I hate you."

He briefly closes his eyes, resigned. "I know."

"How *could* you do that, Erik?"

He swallows. "I had no idea."

I laugh once. "Seriously? How—how *dare* you?"

"I take full responsibility for what happened. It was my fault. I . . . I liked it, Sadie. A lot. So much so that I completely misread your signals and didn't realize that you didn't."

"Well, what you did was—" I stop abruptly. My brain screeches to a halt and finally computes Erik's words. *Liked it? Misread?* What does that even mean? "What signals?"

"That night, I . . ." He bites the inside of his cheek and seems to turn inward. "It was good. I think . . . I must have lost control."

I freeze. Something about this conversation isn't quite right. "When you said you were sorry a minute ago, what were you referring to?"

He blinks twice. "The things I did to you. In my apartment."

"No. No, that's not . . ." My cheeks are hot and my head's spinning. "Erik, why do you think I stopped picking up your calls?"

"Because of the way I had sex with you. I was on you all night. Asked for too much. You didn't enjoy it." Suddenly, he looks as confused as I feel. Like we're both in the middle of a story that doesn't quite make narrative sense. "Sadie. Isn't that the reason?"

His eyes bore into mine. I press my palm against my mouth and slowly shake my head.

Chapter 8

Three weeks ago

We haven't touched all night.

Not at the restaurant. Not in the car. Not even in the elevator up to his Brooklyn Heights apartment, which is larger than mine but doesn't look it because Erik is standing in it. We've been chatting like we did over dinner, which is fun and great and kind of hilarious, but I'm starting to wonder whether when I fooled myself into believing that I was bravely hitting on Erik, he actually thought that I was inviting myself over to play the *FIFA* video game. He's going to say *Come, I want to show you something*. I'll follow him down the hallway jelly-kneed, and once I'm at the end he'll open the door of the Xbox room and I'll quietly die.

I stand in the entrance while Erik locks the door behind me, shifting awkwardly on my feet, contemplating my own mortality and the possibility of making a run for it, when I notice the cat. Perched on Erik's spotless living room table (which appears *not* to be a repository for mail piles and take-out flyers; *huh*). It's orange, round, and glowering at us.

"Hi there." I take a few steps, cautiously holding out my hand. The cat glowers harder. "Aren't you a nice little kitten?"

"He isn't." Erik is taking off his shoes and hanging his jacket behind me. "Nice, that is."

"What's his name?"

"Cat."

"Cat? Like . . . ?"

"Cat," he says, final. I decide not to press him.

"I'm not sure why, but I pegged you for more of a dog person."

"I am."

I turn and give him a puzzled look. "But you have a cat?"

"My brother does."

"Which one?" He has four. All younger. And it's clear from the way he talks about them, often and with that half-gruff, half-amused tone, that they're thick as thieves. My only-child, "Have this coloring book while Mommy and Daddy watch *The West Wing*" self burns with envy.

"Anders. The youngest. He graduated college and is now . . . somewhere. Wales, I believe. Discovering himself." Erik comes to stand next to me. He and Cat glare at each other. "While I temporarily watch his cat."

"What's *temporarily*?"

He presses his lips together. "So far, one year and seven months." I try to keep a straight face, I really do, but I end up smiling into my hand, and Erik's eyes narrow at me. "The beginning of our . . . relationship was rough, but we are slowly starting to come to an agreement," he says, just as Cat jumps off the table and pauses to hiss at Erik on his way to the kitchen. Erik snaps back with something that sounds very harsh and consonant-based, then looks at me again. "Slowly."

"Very slowly."

"Yeah."

"Do you lock your bedroom door at night?"

"Religiously."

"Good."

I smile, he doesn't, and we slip into a lull of not-quite-comfortable silence. I fill it by looking around and pretending that I'm fascinated with the map of Copenhagen that hangs on the wall. Erik does it by standing next to me and asking, "Would you like something to drink? I think I have beer. And . . ." A pause. "Milk, probably."

I laugh softly. "Two percent?"

"Whole. And chocolate," he admits, a little bashful. Which has me chuckling some more, Erik finally smiling, and then .

. . more silence.

We're idling between the entrance and the living room, facing each other, him studying me, me studying him studying me, and something heavy knots in my throat. I'm not sure what's going on. I'm not sure what I expected, but the entire night was so easy, and this is not. "Did I . . . Did I misunderstand?"

He doesn't pretend not to know exactly what I mean. "You didn't." He seems . . . not insecure, but cautious. Like he's a scientist about to mix two very volatile substances together. The product might be great, but he'd better be extra sure. Wear protective equipment. Take time. "I don't want to assume anything."

The knot tightens. "If you have changed your—"

"That's not it."

I bite into my lip. "I was going to say, if you don't want to —"

"It's the opposite, Sadie," he says quietly. "The exact opposite. I need to tread carefully."

Right, then. Okay. I make a split-second decision, my second act of bravery of the evening: I step closer to him, till our feet touch through our socks, and push up to the tips of my toes.

The first thing that hits me is how good he smells. Clean, masculine, warm. All-around delicious. The second: his collarbone is the farthest I can reach, which would be kind of amusing if my ability to breathe weren't shot all of a sudden. If I want this kiss to happen I'll need his cooperation. Or rock-climbing equipment.

"Will you . . ." I laugh helplessly against the collar of his shirt. "Please?"

He won't. He doesn't. Not for the longest time, instead choosing to wrap his hand around my jaw, cup my face, stare down at me. "I think this is it," he murmurs, thumb swiping over my cheekbone, eyes pensive, like he's

processing a momentous piece of information. My pulse races. I'm dizzy.

"I . . . What?"

"This." His eyes are on my lips. "I don't think I'm going anywhere from this."

"I'm not sure I . . ."

He moves so quickly I can barely keep track. His hands close around my waist, lift me up, and a second later I'm sitting on the shelf in the entrance. The height difference between us is much less dramatic and . . .

It's the best kiss of my life. No: it's the best kiss *in the world*. Because of the way he presses a hand into my shoulder blade to arch me into him. Because of the scratch of his stubble against my cheeks. Because it starts slow, just his mouth on mine, and stays like that for a long time. Even when I loop my arms around his neck, even when he leans into me and pushes my thighs open to make space for himself, even when we're flush against each other, my heart beating like a drum against his chest, it's just his lips and mine. Close, brushing, sharing air and warmth. Achingly careful.

And then I open my mouth, and it becomes something else entirely. The soft press of our tongues. His grunt. My moan. It's new, but also right. The scent of him. The way he holds my head in his hand. The delicious, liquid heat spreading in my belly, rising up my nerve endings. Good. It's good, and I'm trembling, and it's really, *really* good.

"If . . ." I start when he comes up for air, but immediately stop when he buries his face in my throat.

"This okay?" he asks before inhaling deeply against my skin, as though my Target body wash is some kind of mind-addling drug.

My "Yeah" is faint, breathless. When he bites my collarbone, I wrap my arms around his shoulders and my legs around his waist, and the pleasure of being so close slices through me like the sharpest blade.

He is hard. I can feel exactly *how* hard. He wants me to feel it, I think, because his hand slides down to my ass and pulls me into him. I squirm, twisting my hips experimentally, and he groans ruggedly into my mouth. “Be good,” he chides, stern, a little rough. He grips me tight, holds me still against him, and I unexpectedly shiver at the command in his words.

It escalates quickly. For me, at least. There is a stretch of seconds, maybe minutes, in which we just kiss and kiss and *kiss*, Erik leaning even closer and me following his lead, liquid heat flooding inside me. And then I start noticing them: the soft groans. The sharp hiss as his cock rubs against my inner thigh. The way his fingers dig hungrily into my hips, the nape of my neck, the small of my back. He alternates between clutching me to himself as tight as he can and avoiding touching me at all, hands white-knuckled against the edge of the shelf as he puts some distance between us. I think he might be trying to slow this down. Pace himself, maybe.

I think he’s not managing to, not very well.

I pull away, and his eyes slowly blink open. They’re glassy, unfocused, a nearly-black blue fixed on my lips. When he tries to lean down for another kiss, I stop him with a hand on his chest. “Bedroom?” I gasp, because he looks like he could just fuck me in hallway, and I’m afraid that I’d gladly let him. “Or if you want . . . here is . . . fine, if you—”

He cups a hand under my ass and carries me all the way down the hallway, like I’m no heavier than his cat. When he flips the light switch on, the bed is huge and unmade, and the room smells so much like him, I have to briefly close my eyes. He sets me on my feet, and I’m about to ask him if this is necessary, if we could please do this in the semi-dark, but he’s already unbuttoning his shirt, eyes fixed on me. My mouth goes dry. On second thought, light’s fine. Probably.

Erik is a mountain. A giant dome of flesh and muscles—not *GQ*-cut, ridiculously defined ones, but solid, oak-tree big,

and I might have gotten absorbed into staring and catastrophically lost track of time because:

“Take off your clothes,” he says, no, *orders*, and I shiver again. There’s something about him. Something commanding. Like his first instinct is to take charge. “Sadie,” he repeats. “Take them off.”

I nod, shrug out of my jeans first, then my sweater. I’m frantically looking for the courage to continue when I hear a low, hoarse, “Not purple.”

I look up. Erik stands in front of me, naked, tall, and big and like . . . like a minor deity from some Norse pantheon, a reserved one who likes to keep to himself but would still get a couple of Baltic Sea islands named after him. He is gloriously unself-conscious about his nudity. I, on the other hand, am apparently too embarrassed to take off my white tank top *or* to glance any lower than his belly button.

Not that he seems to notice. His eyes are glassy again, staring at the way my black panties stretch around my hips like he’d like them burned into his retinas. I am tempted to put my jeans back on. “What?”

“They’re not purple.”

“I don’t . . . Oh. I went home and changed. And . . . is this considered a pitch meeting?” I still should have worn something nicer. Maybe a matching bra. Problem is, if five hours ago someone had told me I’d end up in Erik Nowak’s bedroom by the end of the day, I’d have blamed a fever dream and handed them some Advil. “And it’s not purple, it’s—”

“Lavender,” he says with the bare twitch of a smile, and then I don’t have to think much anymore because one of his thighs slides between mine and he’s walking me backward into his bed. There is a down comforter under my back, and a pretty intimidating erection I *still* cannot bring myself to look at against my stomach, and hundreds of pounds of Danishness above me. Erik is eager, and determined, and clearly experienced. He groans into my neck, then my

sternum, muttering something that could be *fuck*, or *perfect*, or my name. The way he's been thinking about this all day during meetings, *all fucking day*. His hands slide under my top and travel up: soft kneading, more groans and a few soft *fuck, Sadie, fuck*, a light pinch on my nipple and greedy bite through the fabric, and it feels perfect, scary, exhilarating, new, filthy, right, good, wet, embarrassing, exciting, fast—*all* these things, *all* at once.

Then, in the next breath, they all dissolve. Except for one: *scary*.

Erik has hooked his fingers in the elastic of my panties, taken them off. He's kissing down my hip bones, full lips pressed into my abdomen, and I know exactly what he's planning to do, but I cannot stop thinking that he's . . .

He is really *very* big. And his forearm is laid out across my stomach, pinning me to the bed, and I met him—shit, I met this guy *this morning*, and even though I *did* briefly google him to make sure his real name wasn't Max McMurderer, I don't know *anything* about him and he is much larger and stronger than I am *and am I even good at this* and he could do whatever he wanted with me he could make me and I feel hot I feel cold I *cannot breathe and—*

“Stop! Stop stop *stop—*”

Erik stops. Instantly. And I instantly squirm out from underneath him, dragging myself to the headboard, legs drawn up and arms around them. His eyes are on me, once again light blue, once again *seeing*. What is he going to do? What is he—

“Hey,” he says, pulling back on his knees as if to give me even more space. His tone is gentle, like he's approaching skittish, injured wildlife. A good chunk of my panic melts, and . . . Oh my God. What is *wrong* with me? We were having a good time, he was being perfectly fine, and I had to go and be a fucking weirdo.

“I'm sorry. I just . . . I don't know why I'm freaking out. You're just so big, and I barely ever— I'm not used to this.

Sorry.”

“Hey,” Erik says again. His hand reaches out to touch me. Hovers above my knee. Then he seems to think better of it and pulls it back, which makes me want to cry. I ruined this. I ruined it. “It’s okay, Sadie.”

“No. No, it’s not. I . . . I think the problem is that I have only ever done this with my ex, and I . . .”

“I see.” His face turns stony in an impersonal, scary way. “Did he hurt you?”

“No! No, Oscar would *never*. It was good. It’s just he was . . . different. From you.” I laugh nervously. I hope I don’t burst into tears. “Not that it’s bad. I mean, everybody’s different. It’s just that . . .”

He nods, and I think he gets it, because his expression clears up. Which in turn helps me feel a little less anxious. Like I don’t need to be huddled away from him as though he’s a contagious rabid animal. I take a deep breath and scoot back closer, toward the center of the bed.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Why are you sorry?” He seems genuinely puzzled.

“I just didn’t think this would feel . . . scary. I figured I’d be way cooler. Smoother, I guess.”

“Sadie, you . . .” He exhales and reaches for me again. This time he doesn’t stop and pushes back my hair, tucking it behind my ear like he wants to see my face in full. Like he wants me to see *him*. “You don’t have to *be* any way. I didn’t bring you here so you could *perform* for me.”

I swallow against the lump in my throat. “Right. You brought me here because *I* propositioned you, and then—”

“I brought you here because I wanted to *be* with you. I’d have kept on walking around the city till dawn if that was what you wanted. So, here’s the deal: we can spend the night fucking, and I won’t lie, I’d greatly enjoy that, but we could also play Guess Who?, or you could help me give my brother’s cat his flea medication, since it’s a two-, maybe three-person job. Any of the above works.”

I really, really don't want to tear up. Instead I let myself fall back into the bed, my head on his one pillow. "What if I wanted to play the *FIFA* video game?"

"I would ask you to leave."

"Why?"

"Because I do not own any gaming console."

I laugh, a little watery. "I knew you were too good to be true."

"I used to have a Game Boy in the '90s," he offers. "Maybe my dad kept it."

"Partial redemption." We're both smiling now, and my fear of *him* liquefies, like snow in the sun. Only to ice all over again, in another form: fear of *not having him*. "Did I fuck this up?"

"Fuck what up?"

I gesticulate in his direction, then in mine. *Us*, I want to say, but it seems premature. "This . . . this thing."

He lies down next to me, facing me. He purposefully left a few inches between us, but of their own volition, like vines twining around tree trunks, my legs travel across the sheets and tangle loosely with his. This time the contact is not scary, only right and natural. He's still big and different and a little awe-inducing, but he's not on top of me, and I feel more in control. Like I could step away whenever. And I know now that he'd let me. "Maybe I can unfuck it up?" I ask hopefully.

He sighs. "Sadie, I want to tell you something, but I'm afraid you won't like it."

Oh no. "What is it?"

A pause. "You are a brilliant engineer who knows the Premier League stats of the past three decades off the top of your head. Physically, you are the uncanny combination of every single feature I've ever found attractive—no, I will *not* expand on that. And you saved me on your phone as Corporate Thor, even after I gave you my full name."

"I wasn't sure about the spelling and—you *saw* that?"

“Yup.” His hand comes up to cup my cheek. “This is it, Sadie. I don’t think there’s any fucking this up.”

A million hopeful fireworks explode in my head. My heart squeezes in my chest, heavy and sweet. *Okay. Okay.* “So I have not turned you off sex forever?”

He huffs out a laugh. “I doubt me not wanting to have sex with you is something we’ll ever need to worry about, Sadie.”

“Even if I’m bad at it?”

“You’re not.”

“I didn’t think so. I thought I was okay. I mean, average. But maybe—”

“Sadie.” With a hand on my waist he pulls me a little closer. Just enough for his eyes to meet mine and for my entire world to narrow to him. “Let’s take it slowly. We’ll get there,” he tells me, like he knows, he just *knows* that this is the first night of many.

“Are you sure?”

“Strong suspicion. Would you feel better if I put my clothes back on?”

I shake my head, and then, on an impulse, close the distance between us. The other kisses he led, which I loved, but with this one I’m in charge, and it’s exactly what I need. He doesn’t try to deepen it till I do. Doesn’t come closer till I shift toward him. Doesn’t try to touch me till I take his hand and set it on my hip, and even then it’s gentle, fingers skimming up and down my thigh, tracing my rib cage ridge by ridge, my spine knob by knob.

I feel myself relax. Drift away. Expand and contract and forget. Become wet and pliant, a beautiful, delicious heat spreading into my stomach. When my thigh accidentally brushes against Erik’s erection, my breath hitches and he makes a noise, deep and low in the back of his throat.

“Sorry,” he rasps, arranging me so that I’m turned away.

I stop him with a hand on his biceps. “I like this, actually.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. You?”

He exhales. “You have no idea, do you?”

“Of what?”

He doesn’t elaborate. “I’m happy to do this until sunrise.”

“Really?” I let out a laugh. “You’d be happy channeling your best high school self and making out?”

He shrugs. “I’m probably going to come at some point. But I can warn you. You don’t have to be part of it, and there’s a bathroom across the hallway.”

“No! No, I’m—” *dying of embarrassment*. “I’d like to. Be part of it, that is.” I clear my throat. “I think we should try again. What we were doing before I freaked.”

I see it play out on his face: a split second of eagerness, then a mask of bland skepticism. “I think we should wait for that. Take it slow. Go out a few more times until you get used to the fact that I’m . . . *so* big, apparently.”

I flush. “But I was thinking . . . what if I go on top? That way I won’t feel trapped?”

Erik goes still. For a moment, he stops breathing. Then he asks, “Are you sure?” His pupils are dilated.

“I think so. Would you like to?”

“That would be . . .” He swallows. His fingers are gripping my hips like he simply cannot let go. “Yeah. I’d *like* that. If that’s even the word for it.”

I don’t immediately realize the misunderstanding. Maybe because I’m busy, first shifting on the mattress and climbing over his hips, then basking in the fact that I’m on top of him. I do feel much better, this way. *Okay*, I think. *Yes*. I can do this, after all. I love this, actually. I love straddling Erik, looking down at his pale skin, tracing his muscles. I love his eyes on the spots where my nipples push against my top. I love the feeling of my thighs being split wide by his torso, the hairs of his happy trail against my folds. I *can* have sex with him, after all. I *want* to have sex with him. I might *die* if I don’t have sex with him, because right now I want us to be as close as we humanly can.

But then his hands close around my waist, and he shifts me up. And up. And up. Until my knees are pressing into the mattress on each side of his neck, and I remember what exactly he'd been about to do when we stopped. Big light bulb energy. Oh my God. He thinks I want him to—

“Erik, I—”

He starts with a long swipe across my core, parting me with his tongue. I make an embarrassing, animal sound that's half gasp, half whimper, and fall forward, catching myself on the headboard. My core flutters. My entire body shakes, electric.

“Fuck, Sadie,” he says gutturally right before licking into me again, thorough and impatient in a way that redefines the word *enthusiasm*. His tongue plays with my entrance, pushing past squeezing muscles. The thumb of the hand that's not caging my ass comes up to draw circles around my clit. I'm trembling. Spasming. Clenching. All of a sudden I'm *agonizingly* empty.

“Oh my God,” I whisper into the back of my hand. Then I bite it, because if I don't, I will scream. Maybe I'll scream anyway, because he grunts and arches his throat to lick up into me, pressing my pelvis against his mouth, and the noises he makes—the noises *we* make—are wet and filthy and obscene. “Oh my *God*. I—” I'm out of control. My thighs are starting to tremble. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I cannot stop rocking, rubbing myself against his mouth, his nose, and his face, squirming for more contact, more pressure, more friction, wanting to be full—

“You're doing so well, Sadie,” he murmurs into my core, and the words vibrate all the way up my spine. His fingers grip my ass bruisingly tight and he's ruthless, keeping me still, angling me better, letting me know that he knows what I need—for me to let him do his job. Then he starts using his teeth on me, and I break down.

I scream.

“Can’t believe you thought you were bad at this,” he tells me, laughing, and I feel each and every syllable travel through me like a knife. I force myself to breathe deep, to stay upright, to look down at him. And that’s when his eyes meet mine and he starts sucking hard on my clit.

I come so hard, it’s nearly painful. I’ve always been quiet, silent in bed, but the pleasure is like a dam bursting, cutting and searing and so violent, my body has no hope to contain it. I sob and whimper into the back of my hands, powerless, confused. All through my orgasm Erik is there, holding my hips, murmuring praises and groans against my swollen folds, licking at me until it’s just on the other side of too much.

Then his kisses become lighter. Gentle. He turns to suck on the inside of my left thigh, and I wonder if it’s enough to leave a mark. *Erik Nowak was here.* “I’ve been thinking about eating you out all day,” he says against my skin, which is sticky and drenched and—I cannot believe this is happening. I cannot believe this is sex. “All. Fucking. Day.”

Somehow, he seems to know that I’m too boneless to move. He slides me back down his body, and maybe I’m imagining, but I think he’s breathing as heavily as I am, and I think his hands are trembling. I want to investigate, but he wraps his arms around my torso and holds me to his chest till we’re as close and we can be. The racing beat of his heart reverberates through my skin, and this, *this*, this moment couldn’t be any more perfect.

Until he kisses me. And kisses me. He kisses my mouth with the same single-mindedness he used for my core, and as my heartbeat quiets down, as my limbs slowly stop twitching with pleasure, I begin to smile into his lips.

“Erik?”

“Yeah?” His hand curves around my ass.

“Why did you buy it?”

“Buy what?”

“Faye’s croissant. If you knew it was so gross, why did you buy it?”

He smiles into the line of my shoulder. “I’m part of it.”

“Of what?”

“The money laundering scheme.”

I giggle and hug him tighter while it swells inside me, a surge of happiness and adoration and something hazy, something hopeful and young that I cannot quite define yet. His cock twitches against my inner thigh. He shifts me higher to pretend it didn’t happen and pulls me in for another lazy kiss. *Hmm.*

I try to wiggle and reach between us, but he stops my hand by twining his fingers against mine.

“Do you not—?”

“Ignore it,” he says, nuzzling his face against my throat. He bites me, firm, playful, almost distracting. Almost.

“But you—”

“Shhh. It’s fine, Sadie. We should quit while we’re ahead.”

I frown, propping myself up to look at him. “*We’re* not ahead. *I* am ahead. It’s a firm one to nothing.” Probably more like twelve-blending-into-one to nothing. But.

He laughs softly. “Believe me, it did *not* feel like nothing —”

He closes his mouth so abruptly, I can hear his jaw click. Because I’m sliding back, and his erection is nestled against me. First, the curve of my ass. Then, right under my core.

He inhales, harsh. Fingers dig into my waist. “Sadie—”

“I thought you said I could be in charge,” I tease him, rocking on his cock like I did on his mouth. The lips of my core surround his shaft, plump and puffy. We look down at the scene at the same time. The sound he lets out is feral.

“We need to stop,” he grunts out, but his hand splays on my lower back and he presses down to get better friction.

“Why?”

“Because—” The head of his cock hits my swollen clit, a sharp stab of pleasure up my spine. Erik arches up, hugs me

tighter to him, and closes his eyes. “Fuck. Oh, *fuck*,” he slurs. “I’m going to fuck you, am I not?” His breath catches, and we’re almost aligned. Then we *are* aligned, him hard against my entrance, and I bear down because I want to, I want to feel this delicious, immense pressure that will split me at the seams, and it feels good, so good, floodingly, druggingly, overwhelmingly good—

“Condom,” he gasps in my mouth. “If we’re—we need a condom.”

I still. *Shit*. “I—” I try to scramble off him, but Erik holds me right there. He’s still kind of inside me. Just the tip. “Do you . . . Do you have one?”

“I think so. Somewhere.”

Somewhere is right in the drawer of his bedside table, underneath a bottle of allergy pills, a phone charger, and two books in what I presume is Danish. He holds the condom out to me and I accept it without thinking.

The foil is golden. *Trojan*, it says. And underneath: *Magnum*. Which maybe explains a lot.

“Should I . . . ?”

He nods. We’re both flushed and clumsy and out of breath, *and* I have no idea how to put on a condom. But I don’t want to say, *Please, do it yourself, because my school didn’t really do the banana part of sex ed, and my mom put me on birth control on my third date with Oscar*. Erik is staring eagerly at the foil in my hand, like it’s a gift of myrrh for the newborn king, and I think he’s more than a little into the idea of me doing this for him.

I grin. I have a Ph.D. in engineering: if I can build sophisticated machinery, I can figure out how to put on a damn condom. And there’s some trial and error, but Erik doesn’t seem to mind, spellbound by the way my small fingers work on him. When I’m done, his breathing is shorter. More stilted.

“Come back here.” He pulls me down to him.

“I— Do you want to be on top, this time?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? I think I’m okay with—”

“Sadie. I want to fuck you, and I need you to like me fucking you. So you’re on top for now.”

I have no clue what the parameters for the magnum size are, but I do get why he needs it. I’m as relaxed and turned on as I’ve ever been, but it still takes a while to work him in, with small increments and false starts and lots of careful maneuvering. By the time he’s in as far as he’ll go, I’m sweating, and Erik is drenched. He smells delicious, like salt and soap and his immense skin. So I lick the place on his jaw where the drops have been collecting.

“Can you . . . ?” He arches experimentally into me. We both let out a groan.

“What do you want?”

“I want to feel your tits.”

“Oh.” I’d forgotten about my top. I straighten to take it off, which involves some twisting and grinding that has Erik gasping and trying to still my hips again. *They’re not much*, I almost warn him. But I remember something he said earlier. *Uncanny combination of every single feature I’ve ever found attractive.* “Did you mean it? When you said I’m your type, physically?”

His pupils track the progress of my hands, blown wide. “I noticed you.”

“Noticed me?” I undo the clasp of my bra. He twitches inside me. His jaw ticks with restraint.

“In the building. The lobby.” He closes his eyes. Then opens them. “Once in the elevator.”

I take off my bra, feeling stupid to have been worried. He’s staring at my body like it’s somewhere between holy and utterly, deliciously pornographic. “What did you notice?”

“Sadie.” His throat bobs. “A lot.”

“And . . .” I push down on my knees and circle my hips twice, working him a little deeper. A fraction of an inch, but

the friction, the sense of fullness—my eyes roll back in my head. I didn't know anything could be so far inside me and feel so good. Couldn't have imagined. "And what did you think?"

"Oh, *fuck*." A desperate sound comes out of Erik's throat. "This. This, and more." He swallows. "Lots of other things, and—Sadie, you're going to have to give me a minute to adjust or I'm going to—" Erik sounds just as astonished by this as I feel. His eyes are screwed shut, and his hands grip me so hard, and his teeth sink into my shoulder. "Sadie, I'm about to—"

"Don't worry." I pant my smile against his ear, fluttering like I'm about to go under. "You're doing so well, Erik."

I come like an avalanche, and then he does, and when I squeeze my arms around his neck, I don't ever mean to let go.

• • •

In the morning, I watch him shave in front of the mirror just because I can.

He uses a razor that looks like the ones I buy for my legs (i.e., cheapest at the supermarket). If he minds the bleary-eyed girl who had less than two hours of sleep and is currently sitting wrapped in a towel on his bathroom counter, he hides it well. But I'm almost sure he doesn't. Mostly because he's the one who put me here.

"You're so tall," I say, a little tired, a little stupid, leaning back against the mirror.

His mouth twitches. "You aren't."

"I know. That's what I blame the end of my soccer career on."

"Isn't Crystal Dunn pretty short?" he asks, rinsing his razor. He dries his hands on his pajama bottoms, which

hang deliciously low on his hips. “Meghan Klingenberg, too. And—”

“Shut up,” I say mildly, which only amuses him further. He sets down the razor and moves closer, hands slipping inside my towel and coming to rest against the small of my back, warm and instinctive and impossibly familiar. Like it’s something he’s been doing every day for his entire life. Like it’s something he plans to do every day for what’s left of it.

I love this. The way he pulls me into him. The way he grows hard but seems to be content with this not going anywhere. The way his face nuzzles into my throat. I *love* this. But.

“I just think you might be *too* tall,” I say into his clavicle. “I foresee neck problems for both of us.”

“Hmm. We’ll probably need surgery a few years down the line.” His smile travels through my skin. “How’s your insurance?”

“Meh.”

“Mine’s good. You should go on it when . . .” He trails off. Picks up again with, “Have lunch with me today.”

“I don’t usually have lunch,” I tell him. “I’m more of a ‘big breakfast, then forty snacks scattered throughout the day’ kind of person.”

“Have a big breakfast and forty snacks with me, then.”

I laugh. Yes. Yes. Yes. “What’s the closest subway stop?”

“I’ll drive you into work.”

“I need to go home first. Feed Ozzy. Remind him of my unyielding love for him.”

“I’ll drive you home, and then I’ll drive you into work. You can introduce me to the hamster.”

“Guinea pig.”

“Pretty sure they’re the same thing.”

I laugh again, exhausted and drowsy and over the moon, and I cannot help but wonder how different this morning would be if Erik hadn’t been the one to buy Faye’s croissant.

I cannot help but wonder if this is the first day of the rest of my life.

Chapter 9

Present

“I don’t . . . It’s not that . . . It isn’t even . . . If you . . .” I’m sputtering like an idiot, which . . . great. Fantastic. Empowering. I’m a role model for all jilted women in the world.

Erik is still crouching in front of me, like he’s fully planning to see this conversation through. I sit up, straightening against the wall of the elevator, and take a deep breath. Collect myself.

I’m going to speak my mind. I’m going to tell him exactly how much of a dickhead he is. I’m going to unleash three weeks’ worth of shower-crying on him. I’m going to chew him out for ruining pistachio ice cream and orange cats for me. I’m going to *annihilate* him.

But apparently, only after I ask him the stupidest question in the history of stupid questions. “Did you really think the sex wasn’t good?”

Wow, Sadie. Way to let the point of this entire chat fly over your head.

He snorts. “I obviously didn’t.”

“Then why would you say that—”

“Sadie.” He studies me for a moment. “Are you for real?”

I blush. “You’re the one who brought it up.”

“Seriously? You know what—okay. Right. Well.” His throat works. He looks . . . not quite upset, but definitely the most upset I’ve ever seen him. Danish-upset, maybe. “About three weeks ago I’m having my usual, fairly disgusting breakfast, and I meet this really beautiful, amazing woman. I blow off my morning meetings and ignore my phone—my team is *this* close to sending out a search party—because all I can think of is how fun it would be to sit with her on a park

bench covered in bird shit and talk about . . . I don't even know. It doesn't even matter. That's how good it is with her. And because it's apparently my lucky day, I manage to convince her to come out to dinner with me, and she's not only lovely and smart and funny, it also feels like the two of us have more things in common than I thought possible, and . . . well, it's a first for me. I'm no relationship expert, but I recognize how rare this is. How utterly one of a kind. I want to take it slow because the idea of screwing this up terrifies me, but she asks to come over." He exhales a single, bitter laugh.

"I should put on the brakes, but I have zero self-control when it comes to her, so I say yes. We spend a night together, and we fuck, a lot, and yes, Sadie, it's really fucking phenomenal in a life-altering way I never thought I'd need to elaborate on. It's obvious that she doesn't do this often, there's some hiccups, but . . . yeah. You were there. You know." He presses his lips together and looks away. "She falls asleep and I watch her and think, *This is like nothing else. Scary, almost.*

"But then it's morning and she's still there. And when I say good-bye to her she actually runs after me and we're at work, there's people around, we can't really kiss or do anything like that, but she reaches out and takes my hand and squeezes it hard. And I think that maybe I don't need to be scared. It's going to be all right. She's not going anywhere." He turns back to me. His eyes are cold now, dark in the yellow lights. "And then night comes. The following day. The one after. And I don't hear from her. Never again."

I stare at Erik for long moments, absorbing every single word, every little pause, every unspoken meaning. Then I lean forward, and through gritted teeth I say:

"I despise you."

"Why?" He is icily, quietly furious, but I'm not afraid of him. I just want him to hurt. To hurt as much as he hurt me.

“Because you are *a liar.*”

“Am I?”

“Of the worst kind.”

“Right. Of course.” Our faces are about an inch apart. I can smell his scent, and I hate him even more. “And what did I lie about?”

“Come on, Erik. You know exactly what you did.”

“I thought I did, but apparently I don’t. Why don’t you spell it out for me?”

“Sure.” I abruptly pull away, leaning back against the wall and crossing my arms on my chest. “Fine. Let’s talk about how you used me to steal clients from GreenFrame.”

Chapter 10

Two weeks, six days ago

“Did I just see you with Erik Nowak?”

Gianna’s voice startles me out of the semi-comatose state I’ve been in for the past five minutes, which mostly involves staring at the Megan Rapinoe Funko Pop on my desk and . . . mooning.

I feel drugged in a sweet, delicious way. From lack of sleep, I assume. And the fluffy, syrupy waffle Erik bought me at the diner near my apartment. And the hilarious story he told me while sipping his coffee, of how two weeks ago he fell asleep on his couch and woke up to Cat licking his armpit.

I want to text him. I want to call him. I want to take the elevator and go downstairs to smell him. But I’m not going to. I’m not *that* weird. Overtly, at least.

“Glad to see you’re back.” I smile up at Gianna, who’s leaning against my desk. She must have come into my office while I was mooning. “How’s Presley?”

“Better. But now Evan and Riley have some kind of bug that involves a superfun amount of diarrhea. But I saw you in the lobby with a tall guy—was he Erik Nowak?”

“Oh. Um . . .” I think maybe I’m flushing. I don’t really have a reason to—Gianna is cool and very much not the judgmental type—but what happened last night feels so . . . private. And fledgling. I haven’t even told Hannah and Mara (if one doesn’t count the eggplant and heart emojis I sent in response to the seventy How did it go? texts I found this morning on my phone). It feels weird to talk about it with my boss. Though lying about it would be even weirder, right? “Yes. You know him?”

“*That* Erik Nowak? ProBld’s Erik Nowak?”

I cock my head. Are there any others? “Yeah?”

“Are you guys friends?”

“We only just met.”

“So you’re not like, *buddies*.” She seems relieved. “Okay. Good. You were laughing together, so I just wanted to make sure.”

“Why . . . Would it be a problem if we were?”

“Not quite, no. I mean, I wouldn’t dream of telling you who you should and shouldn’t hang out with. But the two of you seemed a bit . . . chummy, and I just wanted to make sure . . . you know.” She waves a hand dismissively. “If you *were* friends and talked regularly, I’d want to remind you to be safe and very, *very* discreet when talking shop with him. But since you’re just casual acquaintances, then—”

“Why would I . . .” I frown, swiveling my chair to better face her. This conversation is very odd, and I’m wondering if I should chug down another coffee before it continues. “What do you mean by *safe* and *discreet*?”

She opens her mouth. Then closes it, looks around to make sure that none of the interns are here, and opens it again. “A while ago ProBld made me an offer. Basically, they wanted to buy GreenFrame and its client portfolio, and sort of incorporate it as a division of their company.”

“Oh.” I blink. Erik didn’t mention it last night. Then again, neither has Gianna, ever. “I had no idea.”

“Well, it was before I hired you. Two, three years ago? Before the kids. And to be honest, it wasn’t the first nor the last offer I got.”

“Right. I knew Innovus offered.”

“And JKC. Yeah. But ProBld was kind of . . . insistent.” She rolls her eyes. “The reason they wanted us on board is that they’re trying really hard to expand in the ecologically sustainable market, but they haven’t had much success luring in really qualified people like . . . well, like you. Since most of them would rather go to more specialized firms. Don’t get me wrong, they’ve been hiring some promising

engineers, but they don't have the expertise they need yet. So they made me a really good offer, I said no, thank you, I would rather be my own boss, and for a few months it looked like everything was going to continue as usual." She pauses. "Then it started."

I shake my head, confused. "What started?"

"A bunch of shitty little things. The worst of which was targeting some of our clients to get them to switch to ProBld. I heard that some of their people were sniffing around our sites, too. Not exactly upstanding stuff."

I stiffen. This sounds . . . bad. Real bad. "Gianna, just to be clear." I take a deep breath. "Last night I went out with Erik for dinner. So we . . . I guess we *are* chummy. But he's great, and he wouldn't do anything like what you mentioned." I say it with more certainty than I should probably feel, given that I first met him exactly twenty-four hours ago. But it's *Erik*. I trust him. "I don't know what the partners and the higher-ups are doing at ProBld, but I'm sure he'd never condone anything like that."

"Well, he *is* a partner."

I blink. "He . . . Excuse me?"

"Erik is one of the partners."

All of a sudden I'm feeling cold. And very, very nauseous. "He is a— What are you talking about?"

"You said you went to dinner with him. Are you telling me he didn't mention that he's one of the founding partners?" She must read the answer on my face, because her expression shifts to something that looks a lot like pity. "He started ProBld right out of school with two of his buddies. And the rest is history."

"I'd love to poach you . . . I'll pay you more. Name a figure . . . I'm very open to negotiating."

"Wait—you?"

"ProBld."

"Does he know you're an engineer?" Gianna is asking.

I clear my throat. “Yes. I told him I worked for GreenFrame.”

“Before or after he asked you out?”

“I . . .” That wasn’t the reason. It wasn’t. Can’t have been. “Before.”

“Oh, Sadie.” Same tone as before—now with more pity. “But you didn’t tell him anything specific about our projects or strategies or clients, right?”

“I . . .” I massage my forehead, which suddenly feels like it’s about a second from exploding. “I don’t think so.”

“Did he ask about anything?”

“No, he . . .”

Yes. Yes, he did.

I can clearly see him, sitting across from me at the restaurant. His almost-smile. His neat, voracious way of eating.

How did it go, by the way? . . . Your pitch.

Who’s the client?

So you got the project?

“Sadie? Are you okay?”

No. No. Nope. “I think . . . I’m afraid I mentioned something. About the Milton project. It came up in conversation, and I . . . I knew he was an engineer so I went into more detail than I should have, and . . .” Gianna covers her eyes with her hand, and I want the floor to swallow me whole. The addled, blissed-out feeling from this morning has dissolved, replaced with dread and a strong desire to puke my waffle all over the floor. “Gianna, I know it seems sketchy, but I don’t think Erik would ever do anything like what you mentioned. We really hit it off last night, and . . .” My voice dies down, which is just as well. I cannot bear to hear myself talking anymore.

He didn’t say he was a partner. Why didn’t he? Why do I feel dizzy?

“I hope you’re right,” Gianna says, even more of that unsettling compassion in her eyes. She pushes away from

my desk, high heels clicking into her office, and doesn't look back.

I feel like I could cry. And I also feel like this is a stupid, nonsensical misunderstanding I'm going to laugh about. I have no idea which one is the right thing to do, so I try to focus on work, but I'm too tired, or preoccupied, or horrified to concentrate. At two P.M. Erik texts me: In meetings until 7. Can I take you out after? and I think about our dinner last night, in a restaurant where he usually brings clients. Am I work to him?

Two minutes later he adds, Or I could cook for you.

And then: Before you ask: no, not herring.

I stare at the messages for a long time, and then I stand to take a look at the copy machine, which has been beeping because of its usual paper jam. I ball up the offending sheet and throw it in the recycling bin, not quite seeing what's in front of me.

I answer emails. I call one architect. I smile at the interns and have them help me with research. I wait for . . . I don't know what I'm waiting for. A sign. For this weird, apocalyptic confusion to dissipate. Come on, Erik didn't go out with me as a cover for some sort of . . . corporate espionage bullshit, or whatever. This is not a John Grisham book, and what I told Gianna stands: my gut tells me that he would never, ever do anything like it. Unfortunately, I'm not positive my gut isn't lying to me. I think it might just want to make out with the most attractive man in the world during the halftime of soccer games.

The copy machine beeps three times, and then three more. Apparently, I fixed absolutely nothing.

At five thirty I hear Gianna's phone ring, and ten minutes later she walks gingerly out of her office, coming to stand in front of my desk. The interns are gone. It's just her and me in the office.

My insides are iced over. My stomach plummets.

“Guess what project we didn’t get,” she says. Her tone is soft. Gentle. To her credit, not a trace of I Told You So. “And guess what other firm they decided to go with.”

I close my eyes. I cannot believe this. I don’t want to believe this.

“The Milton people said they got another pitch today. Similar sustainability. Lower costs, though, since it’s a bigger firm. They asked me if I could match their offer, and I told them I couldn’t.”

My eyes stay closed. I don’t open them for a long, long time. Everything is spinning. I’m just trying to stay still. “I . . . I fucked up,” I say, barely a whisper. I’m crying. Of course I’m crying. I’m fucking stupid and my fucking heart is broken and of fucking course I’m fucking crying.

“You couldn’t have known, Sadie.”

The copy machine beeps again, six times in a row. I nod at Gianna, watch her walk away, and think about broken things, broken things that sometimes cannot be fixed.

Chapter 11

Present

I rack my brain, trying to remember whether during our dinner Erik ever mentioned taking acting classes. I want to say no, and let's be honest, it would seem a tiny bit out of character. And yet, if I didn't know what he did, I could almost buy it. I could almost believe, from the way he's blinking confusedly at me, that he has no idea what I'm talking about.

Nice try.

"Come on, Erik."

His brow furrows. He's still crouching in front of me. "What clients?"

"You can drop it."

"What clients?"

"We both know that—"

"What. Clients."

I press my lips together. "Milton."

He shakes his head, like the name tells him nothing. If I had a knife handy I'd probably stab him. Through the muscles, right into his heart. "The rec center in New Jersey."

It takes a second, but I can see a glimmer of recognition. "The pitch? The one you were at Faye's for?"

"Yup."

"You signed that client, didn't you?"

I clench my jaw. Hard. "Fuck you, Erik."

He huffs impatiently. "Sadie, I'm really lost here, so if you don't give me a little context—"

"I *almost* signed that client. However, when they got a pitch that was almost identical to mine, they decided to go with ProBld. Ring a bell?"

It doesn't. Well, I am *positive* it must. But the acting talent is making a sudden comeback, and Erik really does look like he's completely, utterly confused. His eyes narrow, and I can almost see him try to sift through his memories.

I sigh. "This is . . . just really exhausting, Erik. Gianna told me everything. I know that ProBld tried to buy GreenFrame. I don't know if you went out with me planning to hurt the company, or you took the opportunity once you were presented with it, but I *do* know that you used what I told you at dinner to give a pitch very similar to mine, because the client—*your* client—admitted it to us."

"I didn't."

"Right. Sure."

"I *really* didn't."

"Of course." I roll my eyes.

"No, I'm serious. Are you telling me that the reason you stopped talking to me is that we coincidentally ended up getting one of your clients?"

"Two pitches that similar are *not* a coincidence—"

"They must be. I didn't even know we *had* that client until right now."

"How could you not know what projects are going in the firm *you* own?"

"Because I am *not* a junior employee." I can tell from his tone that he's starting to get frustrated with me. Which is fine because I've been frustrated with him for weeks. "I have a leadership position and manage people who manage people who manage *more* people. We're not GreenFrame, Sadie. I oversee different teams and spend my days in pretty fucking boring meetings with patent attorneys and surveyors and quality assurance managers. Unless it's a high-priority deal or an extremely lucrative project, I might not even be debriefed until it's well on its way. My job is making big-picture decisions and giving guidelines so that —"

He stops and physically recoils. One second he's leaning toward me, the next his back is straight and he's pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. He stays like that for long seconds, eyes closed, and then explodes in a low, heartfelt:

"Fuck."

It's my turn to be confused. "What?"

"Fuck."

"What . . . Why are you doing that?"

He looks at me, not one ounce of his previous exasperation in his expression. "You're right."

"About?"

"It was me. It was my fault you didn't get the client. But not for the reason you think."

"What?"

"The day after we . . ." He runs a tired hand down his face. "That morning I had a meeting with one of the engineering managers I supervise. He told me that he was refining a pitch for a project that had specifically asked for sustainability features. He didn't go into detail and I didn't ask, but since it's not our forte he wanted to know if I had any resources. I sent him an academic article." His throat bobs. "It was the one you wrote."

I'm dizzy. I'm sitting down, but I think I might fall over. "My article? My peer-reviewed article on frameworks for sustainable engineering?"

He nods slowly. Helplessly. "I also sent your thesis out in a company-wide email and highly encouraged all team leaders to read it. Though that was a few days later, after I'd read it myself."

"My thesis?" I must have misheard him. Surely I'm in the thick of a cerebrovascular event. "My *doctoral dissertation*?"

He nods, looking apologetic. I . . . I don't think I'm even mad anymore. Or maybe I am, but it's diluted in the total, utter shock of hearing that . . . "How did you get my thesis? And my paper?"

“The paper was on Google Scholar. For the thesis . . .” He presses his lips together. “I had a librarian from Caltech send me a download link.”

“You had a librarian send you a download link,” I repeat slowly. I’m inhabiting a parallel dimension. Where atoms are made of chaos. “When?”

“The morning after. When I got to my office.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to read it.”

“But . . . why?”

He looks at me like I’m a bit slow. “Because you wrote it.”

Maybe I *am* a bit slow. “So you were trying to . . . figure out GreenFrame’s pitch based on my published work?”

“No.” His tone drops some of the guilt and is back to three parts firm, one part indignant. “I wanted to read what you wrote because I’m interested in the topic, because at dinner it was very obvious that you’re a better engineer than most people at ProBld—including myself—and because about five minutes into my workday I realized that if I wasn’t going to stop thinking about you, I might as well be productive about it. And as I read, I realized that your work is above good, and sharing it with everyone else seemed like a no-brainer. I didn’t think that I was handing your pitch to my entire company, and . . . Fuck. I just didn’t think.” He rubs the back of his hand against his mouth. “It was my fault. It wasn’t on purpose, but I take full responsibility. I’m going to talk with my engineering manager and with the client and . . . I’ll figure this out. We’ll find you a way to make sure you get the credit you deserve.”

I stare at him, stupefied. This is . . . He’s not supposed to be saying any of this. He’s supposed to . . . I don’t know. Double down. Defend his own shitty actions. Make me loathe him even more.

“For the future, we can probably work out an agreement. Something about not pursuing your potential clients. I don’t know, but I’ll talk it through with Gianna.”

Excuse me? “I doubt your partners will ever agree to that.”

“They will when I explain the situation to them,” he says, like it’s a decided matter.

“Sure, because you’re one of them.” My anger is back. Good. Perfect. “*Another* lie from you, by the way.”

This time, he . . . Is he *blushing*? “I didn’t lie.”

“You just omitted. Nice loophole.”

“That’s not it. I . . .” For the first time since I met him, this self-possessed, severe man seems vaguely embarrassed, and I . . . I can’t look away. “I wasn’t sure whether you knew. Most people I meet seem to know already—yes, I know how that sounds. And then over dinner you told me about how different working for a firm was from academic life. How much you missed your friends. I figured me bragging about how I graduated and got to make that transition with *my* friends could wait a couple of days.”

“That sounds really . . .” Believable, actually. Kind of thoughtful, if in an oddly misplaced way? “Sketchy.”

He lets out a laugh. Like I’m being ridiculous. “Sketchy.”

“I just—” I throw up my hands. “Why are we even doing this, Erik? It’s obvious that you had some ulterior motive for asking me out. You even tried to offer me a job!”

“Of course I did, Sadie. I’d do it again. I will right now. Do you want to come work for me? Because that offer stands and—”

“*Stop.*” I raise my palm, put it between us like the most useless wall in the world. “Please, just . . . stop this.”

“Okay.” Erik takes a long, deep breath. When he talks, his voice is calm. “Okay. This is what happened, and interrupt me if I’m wrong: you thought, based on what you were told by someone you trusted, that I slept with you to steal a client and get back at Gianna for not selling, which maybe sounds a little far-fetched, but . . . I get it. It’s where the clues pointed. Is that correct?”

I nod, silent. There is a prickly, heavy pressure behind my eyes.

“Okay,” he continues patiently. “That’s your side of what happened. But I’m asking you to consider mine. Which is that even though I absolutely fucked up by sending your work to my team, I didn’t know about the consequences of it until about five minutes ago. Because I called you, but you never picked up. And when I came upstairs to talk to you, Gianna said that she was sure you didn’t want to see me. And I like to think that I’m not the kind of asshole who would keep calling a woman who asked him not to, so I stopped. But I also wasn’t exactly able to quit thinking about you, which had me desperately looking for the reason you pulled back, to the point that I’ve been replaying what happened between us that night every day—every . . . single . . . day—for the past three weeks.”

“Erik—”

“I’m not exaggerating.” This would be so much easier if his tone were accusatory. But no. He has to sound reasonable and logical and earnest and sincere and I want to scream. “I tore apart every minute, every second of every interaction, and after slicing all of it into pieces, the only conclusion that I could reach was that whatever I did wrong must have happened after you asked me to take you to my place, which only really left what we did there.”

“That’s not—”

“And I’ve been scared, scared like never before, that I’d hurt you.” He lifts his hand. Curves it around my cheek. “That I’d left you in some—*any* kind of pain. That I couldn’t make amends. Which, let me tell you, is no fun when you know in your lizard brain that you’re about five minutes from falling in love with someone.” He closes his eyes. “Maybe past. Can’t really tell.”

They make the floor shift and shake, Erik’s words. They make it fall hard and fast from under my feet, they flood my brain with a blinding flash of light, and they . . . wait.

Wait.

“The power’s back,” I say with a gasp, realizing that the elevator is working again. Erik must have noticed, too, but he doesn’t look surprised, nor does he make a move to shift away from me. He keeps holding my eyes, like he’s waiting for an answer from me, for an acknowledgment of what he’s said, but I can’t, *won’t* give it to him. I turn away from the hand on my face and grab my bag, slipping out of the corner where I wedged myself.

“Sadie.” When the doors open on the first floor, I dart out of the car. Erik is right behind me. “Sadie, can you—”

“Erik!” someone calls from the other side of the lobby, the voice echoing across the marble. There is a small group of people chatting with two men in maintenance uniforms. “You okay?” I’m almost positive (from hate-researching ProBld after our falling-out) that he’s another one of the partners. A late-working bunch, clearly.

“Yeah,” Erik says without moving in their direction.

“Were you stuck in the elevator?”

“In the smaller one.” There is an impatient edge to Erik’s tone. It shifts to something much softer when he turns to me and says, “Sadie, let’s—”

“Was it just the two of you?” the man calls. “Actually, maintenance is trying to make sure that no one from ProBld is still stuck. Can you come here for a second?”

Erik’s “Sure, I’ll be right there” could cut diamonds.

I turn to leave, but his hand closes around my biceps, and I feel his grip travel through every single nerve ending I possess. “Stay here, okay? I just need five minutes to talk to you. Can I have five minutes? Please?” He holds my eyes until I nod.

But once he turns his back to me, I don’t hesitate for even a second. I rub the spot where he just touched me until I can’t feel him anymore, and then I slip out into the warm night air.

Chapter 12

“Wait. Wait wait wait wait wait. Wait wait wait. Wait.” In the center of my Mac’s monitor, Mara holds up both index fingers to command Hannah’s and my attention. Despite the fact that she already had it. “Wait. What you’re saying is that all this time we’ve been doing weekly summoning circles to give this guy disfiguring genital warts and toenail funguses and those giant subcutaneous pimples people get surgically removed on YouTube . . . but he did *not*, in fact, deserve any of it?”

I groan. “No. I don’t know. Yes. Maybe?”

“Related question: how long were you in that elevator?” Hannah asks.

“I’m not sure. One hour? Less? Why?”

She shrugs. “Just wondering if this could be Stockholm syndrome.”

I groan again, letting myself fall back on my bed. Ozzy shuffles over to sniff me, just to make sure that I haven’t turned into a cucumber since the last time he checked. Then he scurries away, disappointed.

“Okay,” Mara says, “let’s backtrack. Is what he told you believable?”

“No. I don’t know. Yes. Maybe?”

“I swear to God, Sadie, if you—”

“Yes.” I straighten up. “Yes, it does make sense. I did detail my framework for sustainability proposals in my published article, and I detailed it even more in my thesis—”

“Which you maybe should have embargoed,” Hannah interjects, playing with her dark hair.

“—which I *definitely* should have embargoed, so it’s possible that someone who read my stuff could have used it to mimic my pitch. Of course, when it comes to actually

doing the work, they won't have the expertise Gianna or I have, but that's a problem for later. I guess that what Erik said *is* . . . conceivable."

"So, no genital funguses?" Mara asks. "I mean, it seems only fair, considering that you *did* publish that article *and* write that thesis to encourage people to adopt your approach."

"Right. Yeah." I close my eyes, wishing for the seventeenth time in the past two hours that I could vanish into nothingness. Maybe since the last time I checked, a portal to another dimension has appeared in my closet. Maybe I can travel to Noconsequencesofmyownactionsland. "I didn't really figure it would be used by my direct competitors."

"I realize that," she says, with a tone that suggests a strong *but*. "*But*, I'm not positive that it's Erik's fault, either."

"And he did apologize," Hannah adds. "Also, the fact that he read your dissertation is kind of cute. How many of the guys I've slept with have read my stuff, do you think?"

"No clue. How many?"

"Well, as you know, I firmly believe that sex and conversation don't mix well, but I'd estimate . . . a solid zero?"

"Sounds about right," Mara says. "Plus, you said he offered to find a way to fix the situation. And that just doesn't seem like something he would do if he didn't care about you."

"Agreed." Hannah nods. "My vote is for no genital pimples."

"Same. I am dissolving the summoning circle as we speak."

"No, wait, no dissolving, I—" I scrub my eyes with the heels of my hands. "Whose side are you guys even on?"

"Yours, Sadie."

"Unlike you," Hannah adds.

“I— What does that even *mean*?”

They exchange a look. I know we’re on a Zoom call and it’s technically impossible for them to exchange a look, but they *are exchanging a damn look*. I can *feel* it. “Well,” Hannah says, “here’s the deal. You meet this guy. And you boink him. And it’s really good boinking—yay. The day after, you find out that he’s a dick, which sends you on a three-week downward curlicue of tears and Talenti gelato that’s about twelve times more intense than the time you broke up with a dude you’d been dating for *years*. But then you find out that it was all a misunderstanding, that things might be fixable, and . . . you leave? You said he wanted to talk more, and it’s obvious that you’re interested in hearing what he’s saying. So why *did* you leave, Sadie?”

I stare at Hannah’s implacable, matter-of-fact, kind eyes, which go very well with her implacable, matter-of-fact, kind voice, and mutter: “I liked it better when you were in Lapland.”

She grins. “I did, too, which is why I’m trying to get back there—but let us return to discussing your *terrible* communication skills.”

“They’re not that bad.”

“Eh. They kind of are,” Mara says.

I glare at Mara, too. I’m an equal-opportunity glarer. “You know what? I will accept that my communication skills are poor, but I refuse to be shamed by someone who’s on the verge of going ring shopping with the dude she once nearly called the cops on because he left a CVS receipt in the dryer.”

“Pfft, they’re not going *ring shopping*.” Hannah waves her hand dismissively. “I bet she’s going to get some kind of family heirloom.”

“Doesn’t he have older brothers?” I ask. “They probably already ran out of heirlooms four weddings ago.”

“Oh yeah. Maybe there will be some shopping. You think he’s going to call us from some D.C. mall’s Claire’s asking us

which ring Mara would prefer?”

“Oh my God, you know what? Last week I read somewhere that Costco sells engagement rings— Oh, hi, Liam.”

Mara’s boyfriend enters the screen and comes to stand right behind her. In the past few weeks he’s become a sort of informal fourth in our calls—an occasional guest star, if you will, who mines for embarrassing grad school stories about Mara and kindly offers to murder our asshole male colleagues when we complain. Considering that our first introduction to him was Mara plotting to booby-trap his bathroom, it’s surprisingly fun to have him around.

“Really, guys?” he asks, all frowny and dark and cross-armed. “Claire’s? *Costco*?”

Hannah and I both gasp. “Costco is *amazing*.”

“Yeah, Liam. What do you have against Costco?”

He shakes his head at us, presses a kiss on the crown of Mara’s head, and exits the frame. I’m a fan, I must say.

“Okay,” Mara says, “going back to your poor communication skills.”

I roll my eyes.

“Are you still angry at Erik?” Hannah asks. “Because you spent weeks being sad, and furious, and sadly furious. Even if you now know that your reasons weren’t as valid, I feel like it would still be hard to let go of that. So maybe that’s the issue here?”

I think about Erik’s hand closing around my arm in the lobby. About the way he kept looking at me when the elevator restarted: focused, intent, like the world could spin twice as fast as normal and he still wouldn’t have cared, not if I were nearby. I don’t let myself recall the words he said, but a memory resurfaces, of us laughing and standing in his kitchen and eating Chinese leftovers, and I don’t push it down. For the first time in weeks, it’s not soaked in resentment and betrayal. Just the achy, poignant sweetness of the night we spent together. Of Erik turning up the thermostat when I said I was cold, then wrapping his large,

warm hands around the soles of my feet. That feeling of being right there, on the brink of something.

I don't think I'm angry, not anymore.

"It's not that," I say.

"Okay. So the problem is that you don't believe him?"

"I . . . No. I do. I don't think Gianna deliberately lied to me, but she didn't have all the facts."

"What is it, then?"

I swallow, trying to prod at the reason my stomach feels leaden, the reason I've been feeling sick with disappointment and fear ever since finding out the truth. And then it hits me. The one thing I have been actively trying not to verbalize hits me just as I say, "It doesn't matter, anyway."

"Why doesn't it matter?"

I close my eyes. Yes. That's it. That's why. "Because I ruined it."

"Ruined it, how?"

Now that I can name it for what it is, the horrible feeling grows, acid and bitter in my throat. "He won't be interested in me. He met me and thought that I was funny, that he had tons of things in common with me, that he really liked me, and then I . . . I acted like a totally irrational, absurd, deranged person and blocked his number and accused him of fucking *corporate espionage* and maybe he wants to set the record straight, maybe he hates the idea of me thinking that he's a horrible person, but there's no way he wants to pick up where we left off and—aaaargh." I bury my face in my hand.

I fucked up. I just . . . I fucked up. And now I have to live with the knowledge of it. I have to go on in a world in which no man will ever compare to Erik Nowak. No man will ever make me laugh, and make my body sing, and make my soul absolutely indignant with his outrageous opinions on Galatasaray—all at once.

"Oh, honey." Mara cocks her head. "You don't know that."

“I do. It’s likely.”

“That’s not the point.” Hannah leans closer to the screen till all I can see are her beautiful face and dark eyes. “Okay, so Erik now knows that you occasionally display an appalling lack of conflict-resolution initiative.”

I groan. “I really wish I had the emotional fortitude to hang up on you.”

“But you don’t. What I’m saying is, maybe Erik will decide that you’ll make for a terrible girlfriend who overreacts and is more trouble than you’re worth. Maybe he’ll decide that he wants to bitch about you on the relationship subreddit. But if you cut him out like you did three weeks ago, you’d just be making this decision *for* him.”

I blink, confused, suddenly remembering why I went into engineering. Logarithmic derivatives are so much easier than this relationship shit. “What do you mean?”

“Sadie, I know you like this guy a lot. I know that if he does decide that he doesn’t want you in his life it’s going to hurt, and that you’re tempted to preemptively pull back to protect yourself. But if you don’t at least give him a chance to choose you, you’ll lose him for sure.”

I nod slowly, trying to think past the hard knot in my throat. Letting the idea—*go for it, just go for it, ask for what you want, be brave*—slowly seep through me. Remembering Erik. Remembering the breeze hanging between us on a park bench, on a deserted sidewalk. The way my stomach fluttered at the feelings it carried. Of *possibilities*. Of *maybe*.

This is my new happy place, Erik murmured into the shell of my ear the second time we had sex that night. And then he pushed my sweaty hair away from my forehead, and I looked up at him and thought, *His eyes are the exact color of the sky when the sun shines*. And I always, *always* loved the sky.

“You’re right,” I say. “You’re so right. I should go to him.”

Hannah smiles. “Well, it’s actually what, one A.M. in New York? I was thinking more of a phone call tomorrow morning.

Around ten.”

“Yes. I should go to him *right now*.”

“That’s the exact opposite of—”

“I gotta go. Love you.”

I hang up and bounce out of bed, looking for a jacket and my phone. I start ordering an Uber, except—shit. I know where Erik lives, but not his address. I run to the door, simultaneously looking for my keys and typing the closest landmark to his apartment that I can recall. How the hell do you spell—

“Sadie?”

I look up. Erik is standing in my open door. Erik, in all his tall, unsmiling, Corporate-Thorship splendor. Wearing the same clothes he had on when I left him plus a light jacket, his hand up in midair and clearly about to knock.

“Are you going somewhere?”

“No. Yes. No. I . . .” I take a step back. Another. Another. Erik stays right where he is and my cheeks burn. Am I hallucinating him? Is he really here in Astoria? In my apartment? I hear a loud thunk, and my keys are on the linoleum floor. I need a nap. I need a seven-year nap.

“Here.” He bends down to pick up the keys, pauses for a second to study my soccer ball key chain, and holds them out to me. “Can I come in for five minutes? Just to talk. If you feel uncomfortable, the hallway’s okay, too—”

“No. No, I . . .” I clear my throat. “You can come in.”

A brief hesitation. Then a nod as he steps in and closes the door behind himself. But he doesn’t move any farther inside, stopping in the entrance and simply saying, “Thank you.”

I was coming to you, I open my mouth to say. I was on my way to tell you many, many confusing things. But the surprise of seeing him here has frozen my bravery, and instead of flooding him with the impassioned speech I would have typed on my Notes app in the Uber, I just stare. Silent.

For fuck’s sake, what is *wrong* with me—

“Here,” he says, holding out a phone. His phone.

Uh? “Why are you giving this to me?”

“Because I want you to look through it. The passcode is 1111.”

I glance at his face. “1111? Are you joking?”

“Yeah, I know. Just ignore it.”

I snort. “You can’t ask me *that*.”

He sighs. “Fine. You are allowed *one* comment.”

“How about one one one one comments—”

“That’s it. Your comment, you used it up. Now—”

“Come on, I have *way* more to—”

“—will you please unlock the phone?”

I pout but do as he says. Mostly out of sheer bewilderment. “Done.”

He nods. “If you click on my email app, you’ll find my work correspondence. Most of those messages are highly confidential, so I’m going to ask you not to read them. But I want you to search for your last name.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because it’s all there. The emails. Me requesting your thesis. Me circulating it to ProBld like an asshole. A couple of instances of me generally discussing your writing. The timeline should confirm what I already told you.” I stare at him. Speechless. Then he continues, and it gets worse. “This is all I can think of, but if there’s anything else I can show you that will help you believe that Gianna misinterpreted things, let me know. I’m happy to leave my phone here. Take however long you want to go through it. If someone calls or texts, ignore them.”

It’s the calm, earnest way he’s looking at me that does it. It snaps what’s left of my terror of being rejected, and I’m abruptly done with whatever fearful bullshit my brain is trying to feed me.

A new knowledge uncurls inside me, and I instantly *know* what to do. I *know* how to do it. And it starts with clutching his phone tight, stepping closer, and sliding it into the

pocket of his jacket. I let my hand linger inside for a second, feeling the warmth from Erik's body. The clean cotton. No lint or candy wrappers or empty ChapStick tubes.

I adore it. I love it. My hand wants to slip inside this pocket on rainy fall afternoons and chilly spring mornings. My hand wants to move in and just *live* here, right next to Erik's.

But for now, there's something else I need to do. Which is holding out my own phone to him. He looks at it skeptically, until I say, "My passcode is 1930."

His mouth twitches. "Year of the first FIFA World Cup?"

I laugh, because . . . yeah. Out of everyone, *he* would know. And then I feel myself starting to cry, because of course, out of everyone in the entire world, *he* would know.

"Unlock it, please," I say between sniffles. Erik is wide-eyed, alarmed by the tears, trying to come closer and to pull me to him, but I don't let him. "Unlock my phone, Erik. Please."

He quickly punches in the numbers. "Done. Sadie, are you —"

"Go to my contacts. Find yours. It's . . . I changed it. To your actual name." *It's hard to sustain high and prolonged levels of hatred at someone who's saved on your phone with a cutesy nickname*, I don't add, but the thought has me chuckling, wet, watery.

"Done." He sounds impatient. "Can I—"

"Okay." I take a deep breath. "Now, please, unblock your number."

A pause. Then: "What?"

"I blocked your number. Because I . . ." I wipe my cheek with the back of my hand, but there're more tears coming. "Because I couldn't bear to . . . Because. But I think you should unblock it." I sniffle again. Loudly. "So if you decided that you don't mind the fact that sometimes I can be a total lunatic, and if you want to give me a call and give the . . . the thing we were doing another chance, then I'd be happy to pick up and—"

I find myself pulled into his body, hugged tight against his chest, and I should probably insist on apologizing properly and offer an in-depth debriefing of everything that has occurred, but I just let myself sink into him. Smell his familiar scent. When he smooths my hair back, I bury my face into his shirt and melt, soaking in the silence and the relief.

“I think I just really suck at one-night stands,” I say, muffled into the soft fabric.

“We didn’t have a one-night stand, Sadie.”

“Okay. I mean, I don’t know. I’ve never . . .”

“I’ve had enough for both, and then some.” He pulls back to look at me, and repeats, “We did *not* have a one-night stand.”

I don’t make the conscious decision to kiss him. It just happens. One second we’re looking at each other, the next we’re not. Erik tastes like himself and a late-spring night in New York. He holds my head in his palm, presses me into him; he groans, bends down to push me into the wall, and licks the inside of my mouth.

“So we’re good?” he asks, coming up for air. I want to nod, but I forget when he bends down for another kiss, just as deep as the one that came before. Then he remembers his question and repeats, “Sadie? Are we good?”

I close my eyes and bite into his bottom lip. It’s soft, and plump, and I remember the patient way he worked between my legs. I remember coming over and over, the pleasure so strong I couldn’t comprehend it—

“Sadie.” He’s not breathing normally. He takes a step back, like he needs a moment to get himself under control. “Are we good? Because if you think *this* is a one-night stand, then—”

“No. I . . .” I reach up to his face. This time, when I bring his mouth down to mine, my kiss is slow and gentle. “No. We’re good.”

“Promise?” he asks against my lips.

I nod. And then, because it seems important: “I promise.”

It’s like flipping a switch. One moment he’s looking at me questioningly, the next our hands are on each other, me unzipping his jeans, him unbuttoning my blouse. There is a heat growing between us, a heat that has us work frenziedly, clumsy and too eager. When I tug down his jeans and briefs his cock springs out, straining and leaking and so hard, it has to hurt. I wrap my hand around him, pump up and down a couple of times, and he groans, a soft, guttural sound. Then he pulls me away, pins my wrist to the wall, and attacks my pants.

His fingers brush under the elastic of my underwear, and when his knuckles graze the damp cloth of my panties it’s all I can do not to spread my legs as far as they’ll go. “Purple,” he rasps out when my slacks are pooled around my ankles. “Finally.”

“Pitch today. Yesterday,” I amend, helping him get rid of my top.

“By the way,” he says, voice scratchy, “last time you left your bra at my place.” He traces the line of the one I have on but doesn’t take it off. Instead, he lowers the lace cups, tucks them under the curve of my breasts. When my exposed nipples harden to points, we both make choked, breathy noises.

“Y-you can keep it.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

His thumb moves back and forth across my nipple. “It’s not exactly in a . . . pristine state.”

I laugh, breathless. “Why? Have you been using it?”

He doesn’t reply. Instead he lifts me up until my legs are wrapped around his hips, pinning me against the wall next to the door even though there’s a bed, a couch, a dozen pieces of furniture just a handful of feet away—and then stops abruptly. “Do you— Are you feeling trapped? Is this—”

“No, it’s good. Perfect. Please, just—”

He hooks his fingers in the crotch of my panties, haphazardly shoves them to the side, and he tries one, two angles that can't possibly work, but then he adjusts me, he tilts me like I'm no larger than a doll, and on the third try he just . . .

Slips inside. The pressure is enormous, stretching and burning and familiar and inexorable and lovely, and all I can think of is how much I missed this, the sharp feeling of something too big that's somehow meant to fit inside me, the way he mutters *sorry, please, more, almost there*.

"I missed you," he breathes against my temple when he's reached a full seat, sounding like he's under great strain. "I only knew you for twenty-four hours, but I've never missed anyone so much."

I moan. An embarrassing, mewling sound that cannot possibly come from my mouth. "For the record." I feel so full, I can barely speak. "I thought the sex was good." It's an understatement. It's as much as I am physically able to say right now.

"Yeah?" He bites me on the flesh between my neck and my shoulder—not hard enough to break my skin, enough to suggest that he's not fully in control. It reminds me of our night together, the way he kept me still for his thrusts, the way he made me feel at once powerful and powerless. "That's good. Because I can't think of anything else." He moves inside me. Once, twice. Once more, a little too forceful, but perfect. My forehead leans against his, and he pants into my mouth. "Three weeks, and I could only think of you."

It lasts less than a dozen thrusts. His mouth is by my ear as he tells me how beautiful I am, how he wants to feel all of me, how he could fuck me every second of every hour of every day. The spasms bloom inside me, drive me mindless, and I cling on to his shoulders as my orgasm explodes through my body, wiping my mind clean. *Erik*, I mouth against his hair. *Erik, Erik, Erik*. He stays still while I ride it

out, a near-silent growl in his throat, the tension in his arms nearly vibrating. Then, when I'm almost done, he asks,

"Should I— Fuck, should I pull out?"

"No," I exhale. "I'm—we're good. Pill."

He comes inside me before I'm done talking, burying the sounds of his pleasure into the skin of my throat.

We stay like that, after. He holds me up, like he knows that I would wobble on my legs if he were to let go of me, and kisses me for long moments. Chaste pecks wherever he can reach, long licks up my sweaty neck, soft hickeys that have me squirming and giggling in his arms. I never, ever want this moment to end. I want to paint it and frame it and hang it on the wall—*this* wall—and treasure it and make a million more and—

"Sadie?" Erik's voice is even deeper than usual. I am happy and pliant and relaxed.

"Yeah?"

"Do you still have your hamster?"

"Guinea pig."

"Same thing. Do you still have it?"

"Yeah." I pause. "Why?"

"Just making sure that a giant rat isn't trying to eat my jeans."

I look down over his shoulder and burst into laughter for the first time in weeks.

Epilogue

One month later

“Okay,” I say, determined. I stare first at my masterpiece and at the remnants of my hard work, and then I repeat, louder, “Okay, I’m ready! Prepare to be blown away!”

Erik appears at the entrance of his kitchen about five seconds later, looking sleepy and relaxed and handsome in his Hanes T-shirt and plaid pajama pants. “You have dough on your nose,” he says, before leaning forward to kiss it away. Then he sits across from me, on the other side of the island.

“Okay. Moment of truth.” I slide a small porcelain plate toward him. On top there is a croissant—the fruit of my many, *many* labors.

So. Many. Labors.

“Looks good.”

“Thank you.” I beam. “Made from scratch.”

“I can tell.” With a small smile, he glances at how three quarters of his kitchen is coated in flour.

“My culinary genius is apparently a bit chaotic. Come on, try it.”

He picks up the croissant in his huge hands and takes a bite. He chews for one, two, three, four, five seconds, and I should probably give him a little more time, but I just can’t wait to ask, “You like it? Is it good?”

He chews some more.

“Amazing? Fantastic? Delicious?”

More chewing.

“Edible?”

The chewing stops. Erik sets the croissant back on the table and swallows once. With noticeable difficulty. Then washes it all down with a sip of coffee.

“Well?” I ask.

“It’s . . .”

“It cannot be *bad*.”

Silence.

“Right?”

He tilts his head, pensive. “Is it possible that you mixed up salt and sugar?”

“No! I . . . Is it worse than Faye’s?” He thinks about it. Which is all the answer I need. “I hate you.”

“There is a bit of a . . . vinegary aftertaste? Did you maybe add that instead of water?”

“What?” I scowl. “I think *you* are the problem. I think you just don’t like croissants.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, maybe it’s me.”

Cat jumps on the island. He gingerly sidesteps our mugs and with a curious expression sniffs Erik’s croissant. “Oh, buddy, no,” Erik whispers. “You don’t want to do that.” Cat takes a delicate lick. Then he turns to me to stare with a horrified, betrayed expression.

Erik doesn’t even *try* not to laugh.

“I hate you.” I close my eyes, quietly planning murder and mayhem and lots of truculent revenge scenarios. I will deface his jerseys. I will pour soy sauce in his chocolate milk. I will hoard the down comforter for the next ten nights. “I hate you,” I repeat. “I hate you so, so much.”

“Nah.” When I open my eyes, Erik’s smile is warm and soft. “I don’t think you do, Sadie.”

Don't miss

Love on the Brain

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“By the way, you can get leprosy from armadillos.”

I peel my nose away from the airplane window and glance at Rocío, my research assistant. “Really?”

“Yep. They got it from humans millennia ago, and now they’re giving it back to us.” She shrugs. “Revenge and cold dishes and all that.”

I scrutinize her beautiful face for hints that she’s lying. Her large dark eyes, heavily rimmed with eyeliner, are inscrutable. Her hair is so Vantablack, it absorbs 99 percent of visible light. Her mouth is full, curved downward in its typical pout.

Nope. I got nothing. “Is this for real?”

“Would I ever lie to you?”

“Last week you swore to me that Stephen King was writing a Winnie-the-Pooh spin-off.” And I believed her. Like I believed that Lady Gaga is a known satanist, or that badminton racquets are made from human bones and intestines. Chaotic goth misanthropy and creepy deadpan sarcasm are her brand, and I should know better than to take her seriously. Problem is, every once in a while she’ll throw in a crazy-sounding story that upon further inspection (i.e., a Google search) is revealed to be true. For instance, did you know that the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was inspired by a true story? Before Rocío, I didn’t. And I slept significantly better.

“Don’t believe me, then.” She shrugs, going back to her grad school admission prep book. “Go pet the leper armadillos and die.”

She’s such a weirdo. I adore her.

“Hey, you sure you’re going to be fine, away from Alex for the next few months?” I feel a little guilty for taking her away from her boyfriend. When I was twenty-two, if someone had asked me to be apart from Tim for months, I’d have walked into the sea. Then again, hindsight has proven beyond doubt that I was a complete idiot, and Rocío seems pretty enthused for the opportunity. She plans to apply to Johns Hopkins’s neuro program in the fall, and the NASA line on her CV won’t hurt. She even hugged me when I invited her to come along—a moment of weakness I’m sure she deeply regrets.

“Fine? Are you kidding?” She looks at me like I’m insane. “Three months in Texas, do you know how many times I’ll get to see La Llorona?”

“La . . . what?”

She rolls her eyes and pops in her AirPods. “You really know *nothing* about famed feminist ghosts.”

I bite back a smile and turn back to the window. In 1905, Dr. Curie decided to invest her Nobel Prize money into hiring her first research assistant. I wonder if she, too, ended up working with a mildly terrifying, Cthulhu-worshipping emo girl. I stare at the clouds until I’m bored, and then I take my phone out of my pocket and connect to the complimentary in-flight Wi-Fi. I glance at Rocío, making sure that she’s not paying attention to me, and angle my screen away.

I’m not a very secretive person, mostly out of laziness: I refuse to take on the cognitive labor of tracking lies and omissions. I do, however, have one secret. One single piece of information that I’ve never shared with anyone—not even my sister. Don’t get me wrong, I trust Reike with my life, but I also know her well enough to picture the scene: she is wearing a flowy sundress and flirting with a Scottish shepherd she met in a trattoria on the Amalfi Coast. They decide to do the shrooms they just purchased from a Belarusian farmer, and mid-trip she accidentally blurts out the one thing she’s been expressly forbidden to repeat: her

twin sister, Bee, runs one of the most popular and controversial accounts on Academic Twitter. The Scottish shepherd's cousin is a closeted men's rights activist who sends me a dead possum in the mail and rats me out to his insane friends, and I get fired.

No, thank you. I love my job (and possums) too much for this.

I created @WhatWouldMarieDo during my first semester of grad school. I was teaching a neuroanatomy class and decided to give my students an anonymous mid-semester survey to ask for honest feedback on how to improve the course. What I got was . . . not that. I was told that my lectures would be more interesting if I delivered them naked. That I should gain some weight, get a boob job, stop dying my hair “unnatural colors,” get rid of my piercings. I was even given a phone number to call if I was “ever in the mood for a ten-inch dick.” (Yeah, right.) The messages were pretty appalling, but what sent me sobbing in a bathroom stall was the reactions of the other students in my cohort—Tim included. They laughed the comments off as harmless pranks and dissuaded me from reporting them to the department chair, telling me that I'd be making a stink about nothing.

They were, of course, all men.

(Seriously: Why *are* men?)

That night I fell asleep crying. The following day, I got up, wondered how many other women in STEM felt as alone as I did, and impulsively downloaded Twitter and made @WhatWouldMarieDo. I slapped on a poorly photoshopped pic of Dr. Curie wearing sunglasses and a one-line bio: *Making the periodic table girlier since 1889 (she/her)*. I just wanted to scream into the void. I honestly didn't think that anyone would even see my first Tweet. But I was wrong.

@WhatWouldMarieDo What would Dr. Curie, first female professor at La Sorbonne, do if one of her students asked her to deliver her lectures

naked?

@198888 She would shorten his half-life.

@annahhh RAT HIM OUT TO PIERRE!!!

@emily89 Put some polonium in his pants and watch his dick shrivel.

@bioworm55 Nuke him NUKE HIM

@lucyinthesea Has this happened to you? God I'm so sorry. Once a student said something about my ass and it was so gross and no one believed me.

Over half a decade later, after a handful of *Chronicle of Higher Education* nods, a *New York Times* article, and about a million followers, WWMD is my happy place. What's best is, I think the same is true for many others. The account has evolved into a therapeutic community of sorts, used by women in STEM to tell their stories, exchange advice, and . . . bitch.

Oh, we bitch. We bitch a lot, and it's glorious.

@BiologySarah Hey, @WhatWouldMarieDo if she weren't given authorship on a project that was originally her idea and that she worked on for over one year? All other authors are men, because *of course* they are.

"Yikes." I scrunch my face and quote-tweet Sarah.

Marie would slip some radium in their coffee. Also, she would consider reporting this to her institution's Office of Research Integrity, making sure to document every step of the process ♥

I hit send, drum my fingers on the armrest, and wait. My answers are not the main attraction of the account, not in the least. The real reason people reach out to WWMD is . . .

Yep. This. I feel my grin widen as the replies start coming in.

@DrAllixx This happened to me, too. I was the only woman and only POC in the author lineup and my name suddenly disappeared during revisions. DM if u want to chat, Sarah.

@AmyBernard I am a member of the Women in Science Association, and we have advice for situations like this on our website (they're sadly common)!

@TheGeologist Going through the same situation rn @BiologySarah. I did report it to ORI and it's still unfolding but I'm happy to talk if you need to vent.

@SteveHarrison Dude, breaking news: you're lying to yourself. Your contributions aren't VALUABLE enough to warrant authorship. Your team did you a favor letting you tag along for a while but if you're not smart enough, you're OUT. Not everything is about being a woman, sometimes you're just A LOSER 🙄

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a community of women trying to mind their own business must be in want of a random man's opinion.

I've long learned that engaging with basement-dwelling STEMLords who come online looking for a fight is never a good idea—the last thing I want is to provide free entertainment for their fragile egos. If they want to blow off some steam, they can buy a gym membership or play third-person-shooter video games. Like normal people.

I make to hide @SteveHarrison's delightful contribution but notice that someone has replied to him.

@Shmacademics Yeah, Marie, sometimes you're just a loser. Steve would know.

I chuckle.

@WhatWouldMarieDo Aw, Steve. Don't be too hard on yourself.

@Shmacademics He is just a boy, standing in front of a girl, asking her to do twice as much work as he ever did in order to prove that she's worthy of becoming a scientist.

@WhatWouldMarieDo Steve, you old romantic.

@SteveHarrison Fuck you. This ridiculous push for women in STEM is ruining STEM. People should get jobs because they're good NOT BECAUSE THEY HAVE VAGINAS. But now people feel like they have to hire women and they get jobs over men who are MORE QUALIFIED. This is the end of STEM AND IT'S WRONG.

@WhatWouldMarieDo I can see you're upset about this, Steve.

@Shmacademics There, there.

Steve blocks both of us, and I chuckle again, drawing a curious glance from Rocío. @Shmacademics is another hugely popular account on Academic Twitter, and by far my favorite. He mostly tweets about how he should be writing, makes fun of elitism and ivory-tower academics, and points out bad or biased science. I was initially a bit distrustful of him—his bio says “he/him,” and we all know how cis men on the internet can be. But he and I ended up forming an alliance of sorts. When the STEMLords take offense at the sheer idea of women in STEM and start pitchforking in my mentions, he helps me ridicule them a little. I'm not sure when we started direct messaging, when I stopped being afraid that he was secretly a retired Gamergater out to doxx me, or when I began considering him a friend. But a handful of years later, here we are, chatting about half a dozen different things a couple of times a week, without having even exchanged real names. Is it weird, knowing that Shmac had lice three times in second grade but not which time zone he lives in? A bit. But it's also liberating. Plus, having opinions online can be very dangerous. The internet is a sea full of creepy, cybercriminal fish, and if Mark

Zuckerberg can cover his laptop webcam with a piece of tape, I reserve the right to keep things painfully anonymous.

The flight attendant offers me a glass of water from a tray. I shake my head, smile, and DM Shmac.

Marie: I think Steve doesn't want to play with us anymore.

Shmac: I think Steve wasn't held enough as a tadpole.

Marie: Lol!

Shmac: How's life?

Marie: Good! Cool new project starting next week. My ticket away from my gross boss **Shmac:** I hope so. Can't believe dude's still around.

Marie: The power of connections. And inertia. What about you?

Shmac: Work's interesting.

Marie: Good interesting?

Shmac: Politicky interesting. So, no.

Marie: I'm afraid to ask. How's the rest?

Shmac: Weird.

Marie: Did your cat poop in your shoe again?

Shmac: No, but I did find a tomato in my boot the other day.

Marie: Send pics next time! What's going on?

Shmac: Nothing, really.

Marie: Oh, come on!

Shmac: How do you even know something's going on?

Marie: Your lack of exclamation points!

Shmac: !!!!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!!

Marie: Shmac.

Shmac: FYI, I'm sighing deeply.

Marie: I bet. Tell me!

Shmac: It's a girl.

Marie: Ooooh! Tell me EVERYTHING!!!!!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!!

Shmac: There isn't much to tell.

Marie: Did you just meet her?

Shmac: No. She's someone I've known for a long time, and now she's back.

Shmac: And she is married.

Marie: To you?

Shmac: Depressingly, no.

Shmac: Sorry—we're restructuring the lab. Gotta go before someone destroys a 5 mil piece of equipment. Talk later.

Marie: Sure, but I'll want to know everything about your affair with a married woman **Shmac:** I wish.

It's nice to know that Shmac is always a click away, especially now that I'm flying into the Wardass's frosty, unwelcoming lap.

I switch to my email app to check if Levi has finally answered the email I sent three days ago. It was just a couple of lines—*Hey, long time no see, I look forward to working together again, would you like to meet to discuss BLINK this weekend?*—but he must have been too busy to reply. Or too full of contempt. Or both.

Ugh.

I lean back against the headrest and close my eyes, wondering how Dr. Curie would deal with Levi Ward. She'd probably hide some radioactive isotopes in his pockets, grab popcorn, and watch nuclear decay work its magic.

Yep, sounds about right.

After a few minutes, I fall asleep. I dream that Levi is part armadillo: his skin glows a faint, sallow green, and he's digging a tomato out of his boot with an expensive piece of equipment. Even with all of that, the weirdest thing about him is that he's finally being nice to me.

• • •

We're put up in small furnished apartments in a lodging facility just outside the Johnson Space Center, only a couple

of minutes from the Sullivan Discovery Building, where we'll be working. I can't believe how short my commute is going to be.

"Bet you'll still manage to be late all the time," Rocío tells me, and I glare at her while unlocking my door. It's not my fault if I've spent a sizable chunk of my formative years in Italy, where time is but a polite suggestion.

The place is considerably nicer than the apartment I rent—maybe because of the raccoon incident, probably because I buy 90 percent of my furniture from the as-is bargain corner at Ikea. It has a balcony, a dishwasher, and—huge improvement on my quality of life—a toilet that flushes 100 percent of the times I push the lever. Truly paradigm shifting. I excitedly open and close every single cupboard (they're all empty; I'm not sure what I expected), take pictures to send Reike and my coworkers, stick my favorite Marie Curie magnet to the fridge (a picture of her holding a beaker that says "I'm pretty rad"), hang my hummingbird feeder on the balcony, and then . . .

It's still only two-thirty p.m. Ugh.

Not that I'm one of those people who hates having free time. I could easily spend five solid hours napping, rewatching an entire season of *The Office* while eating Twizzlers, or moving to step 2 of the couch-to-5K plan I'm still very . . . okay, *sort of* committed to. But I am here! In Houston! Near the Space Center! About to start the coolest project of my life!

It's Friday, and I'm not due to check in until Monday, but I'm brimming with nervous energy. So I text Rocío to ask whether she wants to check out the Space Center with me (*No.*) or to grab dinner together (*I only eat animal carcasses.*).

She's so mean. I love her.

My first impression of Houston is: big. Closely followed by: humid, and then by: humidly big. In Maryland, remnants of snow still cling to the ground, but the Space Center is

already lush and green, a mix of open spaces and large buildings and old NASA aircraft on display. There are families visiting, which reminds me a little of an amusement park. I can't believe I'm going to be seeing rockets on my way to work for the next three months. It sure beats the perv crossing guard who works on the NIH campus.

The Discovery Building is on the outskirts of the center. It's wide, futuristic, and three-storied, with glass walls and a complicated-looking stair system I can't quite figure out. I step inside the marble hall, wondering if my new office will have a window. I'm not used to natural light; the sudden intake of vitamin D might kill me.

"I'm Bee Königswasser." I smile at the receptionist. "I'm starting work here on Monday, and I was wondering if I could take a look around?"

He gives me an apologetic smile. "I can't let you in if you don't have an ID badge. The engineering labs are upstairs—high-security areas."

Right. Yes. The engineering labs. Levi's labs. He's probably up there, hard at work. Engineering. Labbing. Not answering my emails.

"No problem, that's understandable. I'll just—"

"Dr. Königswasser? Bee?"

I turn around. There is a blond young man behind me. He's nonthreateningly handsome, medium height, smiling at me like we're old friends even though he doesn't look familiar. ". . . Hi?"

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I caught your name, and . . . I'm Guy. Guy Kowalsky?"

The name clicks immediately. I break into a grin. "Guy! It's so nice to meet you in person." When I was first notified of BLINK, Guy was my point of contact for logistics questions, and he and I emailed back and forth a few times. He's an astronaut—*an actual astronaut!*—working on BLINK while he's grounded. He seemed so familiar with the project, I initially assumed he'd be my co-lead.

He shakes my hand warmly. “I love your work! I’ve read all your articles—you’ll be such an asset to the project.”

“Likewise. I can’t wait to collaborate.”

If I weren’t dehydrated from the flight, I’d probably tear up. I cannot believe that this man, this nice, pleasant man who has given me more positive interactions in one minute than Dr. Wardass did in one year, could have been my co-lead. I must have pissed off some god. Zeus? Eros? Must be Poseidon. Shouldn’t have peed in the Baltic Sea during my misspent youth.

“Why don’t I show you around? You can come in as my guest.” He nods to the receptionist and gestures at me to follow him.

“I wouldn’t want to take you away from . . . astronauting?”

“I’m between missions. Giving you a tour beats debugging any day.” He shrugs, something boyishly charming about him. We’ll get along great, I already know it.

“Have you lived in Houston long?” I ask as we step into the elevator.

“About eight years. Came to NASA right out of grad school. Applied for the Astronaut Corps, did the training, then a mission.” I do some math in my head. It would put him in his mid-thirties, older than I initially thought. “The past two or so, I worked on BLINK’s precursor. Engineering the structure of the helmet, figuring out the wireless system. But we got to a point where we needed a neurostimulation expert on board.” He gives me a warm smile.

“I cannot wait to see what we cook up together.” I also cannot wait to find out why Levi was given the lead of this project over someone who has been on it for five years. It just seems unfair. To Guy *and* to me.

The elevator doors open, and he points to a quaint-looking café in the corner. “That place over there—amazing sandwiches, worst coffee in the world. You hungry?”

“No, thanks.”

“You sure? It’s on me. The egg sandwiches are almost as good as the coffee is bad.”

“I don’t really eat eggs.”

“Let me guess, a vegan?”

I nod. I try hard to break the stereotypes that plague my people and not use the word “vegan” in my first three meetings with a new acquaintance, but if they’re the ones to mention it, all bets are off.

“I should introduce you to my daughter. She recently announced that she won’t eat animal products anymore.” He sighs. “Last weekend I poured regular milk in her cereal figuring she wouldn’t know the difference. She told me that her legal team will be in touch.”

“How old is she?”

“Just turned six.”

I laugh. “Good luck with that.”

I stopped having meat at seven, when I realized that the delicious *pollo* nuggets my Sicilian grandmother served nearly every day and the cute *galline* grazing about the farm were more . . . connected than I originally suspected. Stunning plot twist, I know. Reike wasn’t nearly as distraught: when I frantically explained that “Pigs have families, too. A mom and a dad and siblings that will miss them,” she just nodded thoughtfully and said, “What you’re saying is, we should eat the whole family?” I went fully vegan a couple of years later. Meanwhile, my sister has made it her life’s goal to eat enough animal products for two. Together we emit one normal person’s carbon footprint.

“The engineering labs are down this hallway,” Guy says. The space is an interesting mix of glass and wood, and I can see inside some of the rooms. “A bit cluttered, and most people are off today—we’re shuffling around equipment and reorganizing the space. We’ve got lots of ongoing projects, but BLINK’s everyone’s favorite child. The other astronauts pop by every once in a while just to ask how much longer it will be until their fancy swag is ready.”

I grin. “For real?”

“Yep.”

Making fancy swag for astronauts is my literal job description. I can add it to my LinkedIn profile. Not that anyone uses LinkedIn.

“The neuroscience labs—your labs—will be on the right. This way there are—” His phone rings. “Sorry—mind if I take it?”

“Not at all.” I smile at his beaver phone case (“Nature’s Engineer”) and look away.

I wonder whether Guy would think I’m lame if I snapped a few pictures of the building for my friends. I decide that I can live with that, but when I take out my phone, I hear a noise from down the hallway. It’s soft and chirpy, and sounds a lot like a . . .

“Meow.”

I glance back at Guy. He’s busy explaining how to put on *Moana* to someone very young, so I decide to investigate. Most of the rooms are deserted, labs full of large, abstruse equipment that looks like it belongs to . . . well. NASA. I hear male voices somewhere in the building, but no sign of the—“Meow.”

I turn around. A few feet away, staring at me with a curious expression, is a beautiful young calico.

“And who might you be?” I slowly hold out my hand. The kitten comes closer, delicately sniffs my fingers, and gives me a welcoming headbutt.

I laugh. “You’re such a sweet girl.” I squat down to scratch her under her chin. She nips my finger, a playful love bite. “Aren’t you the most *purr*-fect little baby? I feel so *fur*-tunate to have met you.”

She gives me a disdainful look and turns away. I think she understands puns.

“Come on, I was just *kitten*.” Another outraged glare. Then she jumps on a nearby cart, piled ceiling-high with boxes

and heavy, precarious-looking equipment. “Where are you going?”

I squint, trying to figure out where she disappeared, and that’s when I realize it. The piece of equipment? The precarious-looking one? It actually *is* precarious. And the cat poked it just enough to dislodge it. And it’s falling on my head.

Right.

About.

Now.

I have less than three seconds to move away. Which is too bad, because my entire body is suddenly made of stone, unresponsive to my brain’s commands. I stand there, terrified, paralyzed, and close my eyes as a jumbled chaos of thoughts twists through my head. *Is the cat okay? Am I going to die? Oh God, I am going to die. Squashed by a tungsten anvil like Wile E. Coyote. I am a twenty-first century Pierre Curie, about to get my skull crushed by a horse-drawn cart. Except that I have no chair in the physics department of the University of Paris to leave to my lovely spouse, Marie. Except that I have barely done a tenth of all the science I meant to do. Except that I wanted so many things and I never oh my God any second now—* Something slams into my body, shoving me aside and into the wall.

Everything is pain.

For a couple of seconds. Then the pain is over, and everything is *noise*: metal clanking as it plunges to the floor, horrified screaming, a shrill “meow” somewhere in the distance, and, closer to my ear . . . someone is panting. Less than an inch from me.

I open my eyes, gasping for breath, and . . .

Green.

All I can see is green. Not dark, like the grass outside; not dull, like the pistachios I had on the plane. This green is light, piercing, intense. Familiar, but hard to place, not unlike— *Eyes*. I’m looking up into the greenest eyes I’ve

ever seen. Eyes that I've seen before. Eyes surrounded by wavy black hair and a face that's angles and sharp edges and full lips, a face that's offensively, imperfectly handsome. A face attached to a large, solid body—a body that is pinning me to the wall, a body made of a broad chest and two thighs that could moonlight as redwoods. Easily. One is slotted between my legs and it's holding me up. Unyielding. This man even smells like a forest—and *that mouth*. That mouth is still breathing heavily on top of me, probably from the effort of whisking me off from under seven hundred pounds of mechanical engineering tools, and — I *know* that mouth.

Levi.

Levi.

I haven't seen Levi Ward in six years. Six blessed, blissful years. And now here he is, pushing me into a wall in the middle of NASA's Space Center, and he looks . . . he looks . . .

“Levi!” someone yells. The clanking goes silent. What was meant to fall has settled on the floor. “Are you okay?”

Levi doesn't move, nor does he look away. His mouth works, and so does his throat. His lips part to say something, but no sound comes out. Instead a hand, at once rushed and gentle, reaches up to cup my face. It's so large, I feel perfectly cradled. Engulfed in green, cozy warmth. I whimper when it leaves my skin, a plaintive, involuntary sound from deep in my throat, but I stop when I realize that it's only shifting to the back of my skull. To the hollow of my collarbone. To my brow, pushing back my hair.

It's a cautious touch. Pressing but delicate. Lingering but urgent. As though he is studying me. Trying to make sure that I'm all in one piece. Memorizing me.

I lift my eyes, and for the first time I notice the deep, unmasked concern in Levi's eyes.

His lips move, and I think that, maybe—is he mouthing my name? Once, and then again? Like it's some kind of prayer?

“Levi? Levi, is she—”

My eyelids fall closed, and everything goes dark.



Photo courtesy of the author

Ali Hazelwood is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Love Hypothesis*, as well as the writer of peer-reviewed articles about brain science, in which no one makes out and the ever after is not always happy. Originally from Italy, she lived in Germany and Japan before moving to the U.S. to pursue a Ph.D. in neuroscience. She recently became a professor, which absolutely terrifies her. When Ali is not at work, she can be found running, eating cake pops, or watching sci-fi movies with her two feline overlords (and her slightly-less-feline husband).

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