

Megan Montgomery

WELL...
THAT WAS
AWKWARD

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CHAPTER 1

I was elbow-deep in vintage cookie cutters and stacks of pink Pyrex casserole dishes when I realized the Three Harpies of the Chesapeake were arguing about me. That is, me as in “the situation in need of remedy.”

My brain throbbed against its confines. If I had to listen to one more comment about my looks, needs, or ought-tos, I was going to close up shop and move somewhere they appreciated outcasts and recluses.

I stood, collecting my dust rag, and heard Mrs. Sylvia Rae Andrews chastise her friend. “I don’t know why you bother, Lorraine. All those tattoos and those clothes with the holes. She’s never going to get a nice man to want her looking like that.” Yep. She was talking about me, alright. No doubt she thought she was whispering, but when deaf old ladies don’t turn their hearing aids on, a whisper becomes a stage voice.

“Hush up, Sylvia Rae,” Lorraine snapped. She needn’t have bothered. I’d heard it all before. In fact, Sylvia Rae repeated her assessment of me nearly every time she came into the shop. I don’t

know if it was due to dementia or some latent passive-aggressive tendencies.

I pretended I was completely engrossed in my task of sorting the rolling pins according to size into giant glass jars until they'd moved on to other gossip. When the coast was clear, I quietly resurfaced from my hiding place between a kitchen hutch and a bureau with a rippled maple veneer. I made a mental note to inject some glue between the pieces of wood and clamp it together tonight. It wasn't too far gone, but nothing was leaving this shop in less than optimal condition. Or as optimal as a two-hundred-year-old piece of wood can be.

I brushed the dust off my hands. I certainly didn't need to feel guilty for performing covert operations in my own shop. Not if it yielded a necessary repair.

I couldn't help but listen in again when Lorraine raised her voice, exasperated with her friend. "You can't expect John to work the high tea fundraiser, Sylvia Rae. It's nothing but old women like us attending."

"You'd think he'd volunteer for everything being that he doesn't have a wife," Sylvia Rae said. Oh, good. They'd found someone else to marry off. Maybe this poor, wifeless guy would divert their attention away from me and my tattoos.

"Just because he goes to Mass doesn't mean he's looking to get married," Lorraine said.

"Now, Lorraine," Phyllis jumped in, "You know that I rarely agree with Sylvia Rae, but this time, she's right. Why else do handsome, single men suddenly start going to Mass every week? And eight o'clock Mass, too? 'Cause they're looking to catch themselves a good Catholic girl who's gonna be a good Catholic wife and raise up some good Catholic babies."

"I never see you in church, Emerson." Sylvia Rae turned back around to me. Delightful.

"I'm not looking for a good Catholic boy," I said, resigning myself to join them as they dispensed their complimentary coffee

from the air pot and settled into a Victorian settee in the center of my shop.

“She’s not even Catholic, you idiot.” Lorraine always had my back.

Sylvia Rae didn’t respond and Lorraine automatically repeated, “I said, SHE’S NOT CATHOLIC. Turn your ears on.” Lorraine shouted into her friend’s ear.

“Alright, alright.” Sylvia twisted the tiny device in her ear canal.

“I knew you didn’t hear me ‘cause I got the last word.” Lorraine was almost as grumpy as me this afternoon. Thankfully—or perhaps not—there were no customers in the store.

In an attempt to lure any and everyone off the street to come in and swipe their cards in my store, Blue Heron Antiques in Solomons Island, Maryland, I’d taken to offering free coffee and pastries to my customers. The pastries were things I tried to recreate after dates with my brilliant blue-eyed boyfriend, Paul Hollywood. Okay, my “dates” were technically Netflix binges of *The Great British Baking Show* during which I pretended to know the correct proportions of a Bakewell tart and drank too many IPAs. And I was alone, except for my mutt, Rousby. But it all yielded some fairly impressive results that brought in:

Precisely. No. Customers.

In fact, my brilliant attempt to ply tourists with deliciousness to boost the store’s business only hindered both my own personal grocery budget and my peace of mind. While the coffee hadn’t exactly attracted customers, it did garner groupies of a different, more octo/nonagenarian distinction, the exact sort that loved to gather daily to gossip about their friends, remark about the placement of vintage luggage stacks on desks, and find potential husbands for single, tattooed, holey-clothed, antiques saleswomen in their early thirties. Too bad only one person around town fit that description.

“You ain’t Catholic?” Mrs. Gordon accused me with a dramatic

flair of her eyebrows. Apparently, I had been pulling the wool over her eyes all these years.

“No, ma’am. Presbyterian. But that’s more of a technicality. Dad’s a lapsed Catholic. Mom’s more of a ‘spiritual’ type of person. She floats through religions with the tides, picking up the stuff that sounds like blessings and leaving anything that sounds like work. The worst was when she was Seventh Day Adventist for a few months, and she threw out all my jeans and forced me to wear dresses. The second worst was when she discovered yoga and we had to stop eating bacon.”

Bacon and jeans. That was my religion. I wanted little to do with any other higher power.

“Girl,” Phyllis intoned. “Why do I always see you at the church helping out at the spaghetti dinners and pancake breakfasts—”

“And bingo,” chimed Sylvia Rae.

“I assumed I never saw you at Mass because you went Friday nights,” finished Phyllis.

“It’s good business to help out the community.” I shrugged. “And...they asked.”

Maybe that wasn’t entirely accurate. Maybe I did feel a bit beholden to Our Lady, Star of the Sea, the church that dominated the horizon on the Chesapeake side of the island. After all, I had been raised hearing its bells tolling the hours and almost everyone I knew worshipped there. Maybe I was a sucker for being needed. Maybe a part of me felt robbed of the experience of not having grown up in the parish that was now in my backyard.

Only a small part, though, because still...bacon and jeans.

“I don’t think you’ll do at all for John then,” Sylvia Rae said.

Phyllis and Lorraine both admonished her with “hush” and “keep your mouth shut,” but I knew they were thinking it too. Sylvia Rae was the only one with the guts to say it aloud.

I didn’t even have to know this John to know that they were wrong. Whatever guy who manipulated and groveled his way through church attendance in order to shop for a “good girl” was

undoubtedly a misogynist, and the problem wasn't that I wouldn't do for him. It's that he wouldn't do for me.

AT FIVE O'CLOCK on the dot, I threw the lock on the front door and turned off the showroom lamps. I was itching to start the restoration of my newest treasure, an eighteenth-century Queen Anne high boy. Mixing up a batch of wood cleanser, I spread it like frosting on the grimier corners and crevices of the cabinet. While I waited for it to eat into the centuries of grime, I found my favorite metal playlist and cranked up the speakers.

I only worked for an hour or so before I couldn't look at another brown corner or brass handle in the dim light. The stale air and the fumes worsened my headache, and my legs ached from crouching down in a squat. More importantly, my best bud and furry-coated business partner, Rousby, had been looking at me with sad, sleepy eyes for the past twenty minutes.

Rousby and I raced home. My stomach complained loudly that I'd missed lunch, so after doing all the usual coming home stuff, like the dawdling around, the dropping of the keys somewhere, the kicking off of the shoes, the feeling of panic that the keys had already been lost, the vague look around a disappointingly dull apartment, there was nothing left to do but eat, make more food, and eat that too. I preheated the oven.

I wasn't one of those cool, cosmopolitan, never-have-any-groceries-in-the-house kind of single girls. I cared way too much about food. I also lived within walking distance from an absurdly awesome grocery store that specialized in foodie delights. We even had a cheesemonger, and yes, Kim and I were on a first name basis. My fridge was always filled with expensive charcuterie, local cheeses, and wild sockeye salmon. Whether or not I ate it before it expired is another tale.

Bacon was something I always had in stock. Not the nitrite-

free, uncured, pastured-pork kind, but the good kind—the old-fashioned, name-you-can-spell, artery-clogging, family-pack kind. Rousby and I were a family, right?

I roasted the strips in the oven until they were caramelized and crispy and made myself a BLT. The nutrients in the tomato and lettuce offset the bacon. Probably not the extra mayo though. And definitely not the soft, chewy, lightly-toasted artisanal sourdough.

Rousby took his bacon on a little plate. Neat.

After eating, I geared up for another session of bake-watching with my British mates. I had the ingredients but probably not the time to attempt a whole Victoria sandwich, but I could probably get the genoise knocked out tonight. Then I could have tiny, elegant pastries ready for the weekend, when the shop was busy. Well, *busier*.

My kitchen was small and newly, albeit beige, renovated. It had ample counter space to hold my stand mixer, and the cake came together in no time. Cakes were easy.

When the final timer went off, Rousby was crossing his legs to go out. I needed to get out too. The sit-down eating, TV-watching, and baking helped me feel more human and less a slave to anxiety over the ever reddening bottom line of my business, but something about the night air seemed electric, and it called to me. I was suddenly desperate to feel the briny sea sprays of the island air on my cheeks.

As I grabbed a few poop bags from the stash of grocery sacks by the front door, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. It was not good.

My hair was wrapped in my old, stained bandana, and my flannel was now mostly white after a run-in with flour in the KitchenAid. I was an enthusiastic baker, not a neat baker. Alas, just about everyone in Solomons had seen, if not commented, on my choice of apparel, and I was taking the damn dog for a walk anyway. They could all chill if they didn't like what they saw.

I gave Rousby his privacy to do his business and studied the

stars. The night was clear, and the air had a biting cruelty that I relished.

I brought a few bags with me, one for the poop and others for my usual “Save the Chesapeake” thing. I tried to do my small part in protecting the environment and pick up the Styrofoam cups, the empty cigarette packs, the beer bottles and aluminum cans, and the debris collected by the wind that’d settled among the sea grasses and shoreline boulders.

It gave a purpose to my walks, and it was my responsibility to keep my world beautiful. I took a shortcut through the playground and waved to two teenage girls on the swings I recognized from around town. They looked at each other and laughed. Passing the ice cream stand that hadn’t yet opened for the season, I stepped up onto the boardwalk that ran the length of the island from north to south.

Everything was peaceful and right in the world.

The velvet sky wasn’t a mere backdrop for the stars, but the crescent moon—was it waxing or waning? I never remembered the difference—was a sliver of diaphanous perfection. Nights like these, filled to the brim with glistening stars, were the ones that made poets and playwrights look up and see the heavens.

Not a soul was on the boardwalk, though I heard a bar or two of Coltrane when the café door opened across the street and, later, the mad thumping of the bass at the restaurant-turned-club on the next block. The world was alive, and I was right where I was supposed to be, somewhere on the outside, floating around its perimeter.

All my life—or at least since my parents decided to retire and float as far away from me and Blue Heron Antiques as their sailboat could carry them—I’ve been in limbo. Equal parts of me were waiting for something, *anything*, to happen and feeling not-good-enough for whatever that might be.

Maybe it’s this place that’s filled me with this almost peaceful melancholy. The Solomons Island that I grew up in isn’t the

Solomons Island of today. Parts will always be familiar: the land, the jetties where the bay meets the river, the restaurants that specialize in foods fried in old oil. But the oystermen and their skipjacks no longer dominated the coastal vistas of the early mornings. There were far more shopping centers and traffic lights than I ever thought I'd see in this formerly unknown corner of the Earth.

Maybe it's that this place is for families. And if I was honest with myself, I no longer had one of those. Mom and Dad are only reachable by satellite phone. My brother is probably getting high in a friend's trailer somewhere. I had seemingly exhausted the dating scene in my county, and my friends had mostly moved away. Some came back, after college and weddings, toting their own young families. I ate their charred hotdogs at their barbeques and dodged the same questions asked of me by the Three Harpies. "When are you going to settle down? Have kids? Be more like us?"

It's not that I wanted to be like them. I wasn't exactly bitter or anything. It's that...oh, Hell...I *needed* them to see the value of my life as it was.

Except that meant I needed to see it for myself first. Shit.

Somehow, I had reached a comfortable precipice. My choices (and my lack of choice) had been driving me to it. Something had to happen. Something had to shake up my staid life and force me to choose, rather than let me float with the tides. I thought I might have even felt it coming, like a cliff I needed to charge right over, paying no mind to the rocks and the sea beneath.

Then I shook my head and realized my life isn't a movie and I'm not a lonely, heartbroken character standing on a beach, looking out to sea with a gorgeous woolen wrap swathed about my shoulders.

Oh, wait.

Fuck. Back to reality.

My bags were almost filled with garbage. Why cretins toss their trash out of the car window instead of unloading at the gas station,

I'd never understand, but I wasn't going to let them spoil the atmosphere of my enchanted spring night. Rousby inched closer to the handrail separating the boardwalk from the river that was lapping gently over the algae-coated rocks below. No doubt he caught the scent of an invisible dead fish and wanted to roll around in its perfume.

Before I could press the brake button on the extra-long extendable leash, he was gone. One hundred pounds of dog had disappeared through the railing, down to the rocks and river scum below.

Shit. "Rousby! Come back here." I jumped forward, tugging on his leash.

It was too late.

His leash was fully extended by now and stuck on a nail between two boards. All the tugging in the world wasn't putting pressure on his collar.

I reached the edge in only a few steps, but that was all the time it took for a water-loving dog to create disaster. I squeezed through the broken handrail, dislodging and unwrapping the tangled cord on my way down. When I got to him, he was diving nose first, again and again, into what must have been an entire school of putrefying rockfish that lay partially submerged in the mud.

"Ew, Rousby. That's disgusting."

He looked at me in shame.

"I don't care," I argued with him. The leash was tangled around his legs, and I had to wrap my arms around him to untwist it. "Now I have to give you a bath when we get home." I smelled my shirt, which had brushed against his red tide-slicked coat. "Blegh. We smell like the Body Farm. You better hope no one's out for a romantic walk in the moonlight or we're going to scare them off."

I struggled to hoist the slimy bastard back up onto the boardwalk and glared into his eyes.

"Don't you do that again." His brown eyes looked so pitiful, I

rubbed his ears. What was a little more dead fish between friends? I already had to burn my clothes. I laughed at Rousby. Maybe this was the distraction I needed to shake off the nostalgia that threatened to make me feel way too sorry for myself.

I locked his leash so that he couldn't wander and made our way over toward the bench. Yes, we stunk. Yes, we both needed long baths when we got home, but I wasn't quite ready to part with such a beautiful night. Besides, we were the only irresponsible ones out this late on a school night. That meant we had free rein to stink it up.

Except for that runner who was making his way toward me on the far end of the boardwalk. I shrugged. He'd probably veer off course before he reached the more deserted end where I sat. I leaned back so that my neck was cradled against the memorial plaque designating the family of Edna B. Harris (1922-2012) the philanthropic benefactors of this splintery wooden bench. I'd known Edna. She was a frequent substitute for my high school teachers. At this moment, I was thankful her family put their money toward this bench and not somewhere she'd be better recognized, like the church bingo hall.

I closed my eyes and considered how fortunate I was to be able to sit here with the dog I loved—as stinky as we were—own my own business, and still have the free time for long walks along the river. I mean, I wouldn't have said no if, perchance, Colin Firth in regency dress dropped to one knee in front of me right now, but barring that, I was damn near blissful and I couldn't imagine anything disrupting my newfound peace.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" I heard from behind me. My eyes popped open. *Oh, shit, where's Rousby? Has he managed to scramble through the bars again?* Rousby sat up from beside my feet. Nope. He was lying down right next to me. I glanced around, looking for who was addressing me. Or, more importantly, *why* he was addressing me.

It was The Runner.

He'd caught up to me. He pulled his earbuds out and draped

them around his neck, and from the sound of it, he was listening to some old school Rage Against the Machine. Okay, so, not Mr. Darcy, but at least we agreed on music. He unzipped a side pocket on his shorts and rummaged around until he produced a soggy, folded, five-dollar bill and handed it to me with an apologetic smile.

“For your troubles,” he said. *Ummmm*. He gestured to the trash bag overflowing with empty cans. The light was beginning to dawn.

“Oh! Thank you!” I shot up from the bench and spun around to face him.

Holy shit, karma! My little moment of gratitude had split open universe and sent a surge of kindness into the air, floating down around our little island like dust motes in a beam of warm sunlight.

I could have jumped into the runner’s arms with *my* appreciation of *his* appreciation, but then I remembered that I generally preferred to avoid human contact (and I smelled like death).

Instead, I gazed up at him. Tall. Strong. Sweaty from running in a t-shirt. Sure. Totally normal. I mean, it was only fifty-five degrees, but I guess he had something to prove.

His eyes were warm and kind, a bit like Rousby’s, and with a similar hint of confusion, but the rest of his face wasn’t what I would describe as warm at all. It was too angular, his jaw too square, his cheekbones too...slashy for warmth. I never looked at a man and thought “handsome” before. It usually took getting to know his personality, his wit, his likes, and especially his musical tastes for me to be attracted to someone. I was attracted to their brains first.

But holy hell, this man was handsome. And he had just gone out of his way to donate to the cause. That alone meant he had a sexy and socially conscious brain.

“Nobody ever notices the things you do, you know, here and there to keep the island free from litter. I try to pick up what I can

on our walks, but there's always more." I was blathering. "It's nice of someone to notice and appreciate it for once. And this..." I gestured with the fiver, "...I will put this in an envelope as soon as I get home to give it to Dee. Every little bit helps, she always says." I carefully refolded the bill and put it in my pocket.

I couldn't help but stare at his beautiful mouth. It was perfect. Wide, expressive, brooding with one side that adorably turned down.

This was it. This was the moment that was coming for me. The one I'd felt in the air. We were fated to meet.

I crossed my eyes to stop from staring and tried to arrange my face into a smile. I'm sure I looked like a psycho instead.

"You're not..." He looked down at my outfit. My bag of cans. His vampire cheeks flamed red, even under the starry heavens. "I'm sorry," he said, backing away. "I think I've made a mistake."

I reached out to him without thinking. I had *never* reached out to a man without thinking. I just needed to reassure him I wasn't nuts.

"No, no, it's okay," I gushed. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about. You thought I..."

He stood still, looking at me with an indiscernible expression. Maybe he was denser than I wanted to believe.

I looked down at Rousby, caked with river mud, my shirt—threadbare from being worn since high school and liberally dusted with flour from my earlier project—and at my aluminum collection.

The scent of fish corpse wafted up from my clothes. Finally, I realized. He didn't want to thank me for cleaning up the trash. He thought I was homeless.

I shivered as the icy spring breeze coming off the river mingled with my embarrassment. My mild spring night had frozen into tundra. Clouds moved in and dark ink censored the brilliance of the stars.

The cold came first, freezing my hands at my sides. When I

remembered to inhale, it came in a gasp. Then, as my cognitive function restarted, gravity kept my feet rooted to the boards. The diagnosis began.

It wasn't as dramatic as my life flashing before my eyes. I mean, of all people, I was definitely the one who would see the humor in the situation. Typically, I'd laugh it off, shrug, and only feel a low-key, secret shame for the next few years. I'd tell Nancy the next day at the shop, "You'll never believe what happened to me last night. A guy thought I was homeless and gave me money. That's a real knee slapper, huh?" Then she'd laugh and say, "I told you to throw away that holey shirt."

Except when I looked down and saw what had pretty much become my daily uniform, albeit more fish-scented, it wasn't as funny. And if I really told Nancy tomorrow, she wouldn't be laughing. Her brow would furrow and she'd say something like, "I'm surprised that was only the first time. No wonder you can't find a man."

It hit me like that time I fell off the monkey bars and got the wind knocked out of me. This whole time, I bemoaned the fact that I haven't been able to find a man. Suddenly, it was clear that I purposely cultivated this bulletproof exterior to keep people away. To stop myself from falling in love with the men who don't love me back and to stop the wrong men from falling in love with me.

Fuck it. The old ladies at my shop were right. No good man would ever want to be with me. I had designed it that way.

I dug the five dollars out of my pocket and slapped it into his chest. Hopefully, it infected him with the scent of disappointment and death. It had done the job for me.

I yanked Rousby's leash and power walked home, jettisoning my bags of trash and The Runner's shouted apologies. Tears stung my eyes from the wind, the salt air, and my humiliation.

I reached the front door and I couldn't find the right key on the chain. My hands shook. My eyes were so blurred with tears, I struggled to make it into my apartment.

My apartment that I owned.

Rousby sank with me to the floor, and I wrapped my arms around his deep chest, hugging him for his warmth and under-standing and fishy odor until everything outside melted away.

Only it didn't melt away. My chest felt tighter and tighter, and when he pulled away, I felt so empty. So embarrassed. So alone. So sick of myself.

My kitchen was wrecked, and I had left my TV on. I didn't care. I didn't bother to look at myself in the bathroom mirror to perhaps ascertain whether or not I did indeed appear like a woman down on her luck.

I was a woman down on her luck.

Not in terms of prosperity, but definitely in terms of—I cringed to think it—romance. God, even the word itself felt wrong coming out of my brain.

I hustled Rousby into the tub. First, I'd give him a makeover. Then, I'd figure out what to do about the mess of my outer hull.

He didn't love the bathtub, but there was no getting away from it. As the organic oatmeal and red tea dog shampoo sudsed under the pulse of warm water from the shower sprayer, the stink from the river floated down the drain. I wished I could wash off the old, tattered me as easily.

When Rousby was towed off and stinking of fresh wet dog, it was my turn to bathe and be my own fairy godmother, waving the wand over my gruff exterior and suddenly emerging a softer, socially appropriate, and altogether elegant, tattooed, powerlifting metalhead.

Okay, perhaps not. But, if anyone could build a life on denial, it was me, and alcohol was my first priority.

I grabbed a beer from the fridge and took a fortifying gulp. This wasn't the time to bemoan my fate. If I realized anything tonight, the "poor me" act I didn't even know I was performing had not exactly worked in my favor. I ripped my shirt off in the middle of my kitchen. Buttons flew across the room. So what if it

was now considered “vintage”? If it was unfit for dog walks, it was unfit for the rest of my life.

My jeans were holey, too long, and disgustingly frayed at the bottom hem. Time for them to go, too, I thought, wriggling them down and setting them free in the kitchen garbage can.

Standing there in the kitchen in my bra, underwear, and thick wool socks, Rousby looked at me like I was crazy. It was the same look The Runner had on his face.

I guzzled my IPA. Those clothes had brought me enough joy. It was time to let them go. Everything had to go.

Ten years ago, I inherited Blue Heron Antiques, transforming it from junk shop to auction darling. Now it was time to transform me.

CHAPTER 2

I woke up hungover when the alarm went off at six a.m. Life felt gross. I rolled off the bed and automatically downed four aspirin and a bottle of water.

Overnight, the kitchen had turned into a graveyard of Hefty bags filled with items I discarded too hastily last night in my drunkenly ill-conceived attempt to distance myself from anything that said “homeless” (i.e., 99% of my wardrobe). The closet purge and a fifth IPA helped me avoid reliving the embarrassment of last night’s Event, leaving three t-shirts and one pair of jeans with which to clothe myself.

In the bathroom, the giant, extremely well-lit mirror rudely presented me with every flaw in my reflection. My scalp ached from my heavy hair being twisted into a bun for so long, and my hair stuck out at odd angles when I pulled the band out. Delicate lace and angry, red underwire marks were imprinted on my breasts after sleeping in my bra.

I needed the heat of the shower to burn away the last of the residue of the night’s encounter, but instead, it regurgitated everything I tried to emotionally swallow. Apparently, I needed more

than alcohol and a clothing purge to change my outlook on life and love. The enthusiastic go-getter of last night was gone, and now, the dread of real change was haunting me.

I thought about The Runner, how the fluidity of his gait was unusual for someone of his size and musculature. He must have spent a great deal of time training. As an athlete, I appreciated the ways a body moved. I barely looked at him and noticed it.

I thought about his good deed. How he stopped to give me whatever money he had on him without a thought. It was such a... nice thing to do. And his eyes. The way they looked at me with such kindness, until that kindness melted away and instead read, "oh, shit. I fucked up."

The worst of it wasn't the embarrassment that ate at me. I'd lurked on the fringes of society long enough to experience my fair share of awkward encounters. And it wasn't even my wardrobe. People were allowed their messy moments.

There was more to the punch to the gut I received last night. It highlighted something that was already starting to nag me from within, my own unspoken—but not unfelt—need to change something about my life.

It also *maybe* hurt the tiniest bit more because I had inexplicably lost my senses and fell a little bit in love with a mysterious and kind stranger, and he saw me as gutter trash. But I wasn't willing to think too hard about that one until...Nope. I'd never think about that again.

I threw on my (only) clothes, a men's white undershirt and jeans, snapped Rousby's leash onto his collar, and stepped into my work boots. I needed to formulate a plan, and that required coffee. All the coffee.

CHESAPEAKE COFFEE LAB had already been open for hours, releasing its intoxicating aromas into the sea salt morning air with

every rotation of the roaster's arm. The owner, Jenn, was at the helm of the espresso machine today, brewing a variety of potions I've only seen in urban centers. She gave me a little wave as I approached the pickup counter. I was a several-times-per-day, didn't-veer-from-my-usual, and paid-my-tab regular. In other words, I was Jenn's best customer. Our salty personalities clicked, and we became fast, albeit introverted, friends—meaning we occasionally texted about business and community events.

"How's everything going, Em?" Jenn asked over the horrific squeal of the milk frother. "Did you get that new piece?"

"Yes, it's wonderful and amazing and I'm in love." Just the mention of my new chest of drawers conjured images of maple-grained, wax-scented perfection.

"Too bad it's a solid hunk of mahogany and not muscle." Jenn winked.

"Maple, but...oh." *No wonder I hadn't been on a date in years.* "Can one of your employees bring five pounds of beans over later today? I'm stopping at Hank's first and don't want to lug it around."

"Morning Fog?"

"You know me well."

"No problem."

It was still too cool outside to watch the tides and do my "serious thinking" at an outside table, but Rousby seemed content on the sidewalk. Jenn left her station to hand deliver my twenty-ounce drip coffee to my window table and, I assumed from the wet rag balled in the fist on her hip, wipe down some already immaculate tables.

"Has she come around to you yet?"

"Enlighten me." I already had my pen poised over my notepad, waiting for a flash of brilliance that would change my life.

"Helen," said Jenn, perching on the back of the seat across from mine. "This benefit thing. She's hoping to get the support of all the small business owners."

“No.” I scowled down at the doodles I was etching into the page. I sighed. “I love the woman dearly, but I can’t keep volunteering to clean up community events for a church I don’t attend.”

“Oh, no. This isn’t for the church. It’s a benefit for the museum. The Bugeye Ball, she’s calling it. She wants us to buy tickets.”

I snorted out an ugly laugh. “That’ll be a no for me. I’m not the Cinderella type.” Fuck, I was a coward. Did I not try to fairy godmother myself only last night? This would have been a great growth opportunity.

Jenn shifted her feet and refolded her rag. “Oh, well.” She shrugged. “I thought a couple of us who didn’t have dates could go in together for a table. I figured you wouldn’t go, but it’d be less...I don’t know, pathetic with you there.”

“Didn’t have dates?”

“I just assumed. Oh, God. I’m sorry. You’re seeing someone? Well, good for you, Em. Just forget what I said.” It all came out in a jumble of words until she stopped and cocked her head. “You know, if you’re seeing someone, you should definitely go to the ball. And the two of you can still sit at my table—”

“I’ll go.” I blurted out the words before I had a chance to reconsider. Anything to stop Jenn’s onslaught of backtracking. Customers began filling the shop again, and she circled back around the counter again before I could explain to her that no, I wasn’t seeing anyone and yes, as usual, it’d just be me. I couldn’t decide which was worse, Jenn’s assumption that I’d go stag because I was apparently entering spinsterhood at age thirty-three, or that I somehow misled her to believe that I was in a relationship. Either way, this seemed like the perfect time to continue my life renovation, kick my ass in gear, and find a date, preferably someone who didn’t think I was homeless. That was another item to add to the list.

Taking a deep breath and staring at a page of swirly lines and morbid stick figures, I got as far as writing “Emerson Broome’s Emergency Life Makeover” at the top of the legal pad. I now had

the added pressure of a time frame in which to re-invent my life. I had a ball to attend, and I had no idea how to find a date.

I'd gone through most of the single men in this *and* the two neighboring counties. That's what happens when you grow up in a rural community. If my idea of a bad date in high school was going crabbing off a ramshackle dock while drinking Natty Boh, news flash: it didn't change after I hit my thirties, no matter if "now you have a boat."

The woman at the next table got a phone call and was smiling into her phone when I had an epiphany. I watched my plan form before my eyes, atom by atom. I began hastily jotting it down before I lost it altogether:

Step 1: Call Mack and ask her what other steps should be involved in my plan.

Step 2: Do whatever Mack tells me to do.

It was a comprehensive plan.

I stared at the unfamiliar green icon with a phone on it, trying to remember the last time I made a personal call. Even though I considered Mackenzie Gordon my closest and longest friend, our relationship pretty much consisted of weekly—scratch that—monthly text messages checking up on one another.

We'd text for the big stuff, too, but it doesn't take long to go from regular "OMG, I have the hottest date tonight" to not even knowing what's relevant to share.

I scratched out "Call" of Step 1 and wrote "text" underneath.

Me: MACK! when are you free?

i need you to check out my ass in some jeans.

in all the jeans.

In the entire mall.

do people still shop at malls?

MACK: Hallelujah, girl! Do you know how long I've been
waiting for this?

ME: ten years?

MACK: What took you so long?

ME: long story
humiliating

MACK: I so wanna help but I haven't had that kind of time
lately.

Between not sleeping because of the baby, and this
investigation, I haven't had time to shave my legs in the past
few months.

ME: Sooo, you're saying you need some "me" time?
And by that you mean Emerson time? Come on.
I'll strap the baby on and share the load.
The non-classified part of the load, anyway.

MACK: Believe me, you can't try on jeans with a baby in a
sling. Ask me how I know.

ME: waiting...

MACK: Jack's head may have hit the dressing room mirror
when I leaned a little too far forward to squeeze in the post-
baby belly.

MACK: Mom guiltig hard over that one.

ME: sorry, friend. I'm sure Jack's fine though, right?

MACK: ...

MACK: still the same size?

ME: have sizes changed in recent years?

Mack sent me an eyeroll emoji and went back to work. Or nursing. Or both. Not only is my girl kicking ass at the FBI headquarters downtown, she recently received a well-deserved, though unfortunately-timed, promotion at the same time her maternity leave ended.

We drifted apart in college, Mack and I, but when she married Lydia, a chorus teacher at the local high school, she moved back to Calvert County, and we rekindled some of our lifelong friendship, as much as we could with adult responsibilities and families—well, family—hers, specifically. But like any good introvert, I let myself become adopted into their clan. Score two for me, since Lydia liked to cook *and* she became an instant bonus friend.

I felt the strange twangs of optimism budding in my soul that, for once, didn't come from the bottom of my coffee cup. Maybe I could delegate the rest of my future via text messages to friends.

Nope. I didn't have enough friends.



FRIDAY MORNINGS WERE for local auctions at the Red Barn. Today, they brought out nothing but recycled pieces that didn't pique my interest the first time they went to auction. I was restless. I needed to get back to refinishing my Queen Anne high boy. To take a mold of the intact finial to send to my carpenter so he could turn me an identical droplet of maple to finalize the restoration. Getting into work mode usually helped elevate my mood, but since being in permanent work mode was part of what led me to my current state bordering nihilism, thoughts of the shop made me feel guilty and rattled my focus.

I strolled through the different dealers' booths before I left. As always, I had to size up my competition. And stall for time.

My phone chimed. It was my number one employee. And my

only employee. And surrogate mother. And the official Queen of the Guilt Complex.

NANCY: Remember you said you'd try to be open to new things?

I swallowed hard. How long could I go before texting her back? Why did I tell her I'd try new things? I liked old things. *Not a good time, Nancy.* I was incredibly busy rearranging misplaced sets of not-so-vintage salt and pepper shakers. Mismatched salt and pepper shakers made me cringe.

ME: was I drunk?

NANCY: Ha. Ha. (not really) You have a date tonight. You're welcome.

I stared at the words, thinking I read them wrong. I nestled the ceramic chicken saltshaker back onto its peppershaker basket.

A jolt of excitement shot through me before my brain immediately answered with the same old fear of change. I gripped tightly onto it, even knowing I needed to let go. Even wanting to let go. The old was too comfortable to part with.

ME: Needless to say, I'm busy.

My life makeover had just begun, and here I was, turning down the very date I said I wanted not an hour before. Something was seriously fucking wrong with me.

NANCY: Bullshit. You promised. CD Café tonight at 8.

UGH! A fancy date.

ME: I have nothing to wear. Literally.

NANCY: You haven't had a single customer today. I've got the shop. You go shopping!

Like hell was I going on a fancy blind date. I couldn't do this. Not yet anyway. It was too fast. It was too much. I didn't have time to go shopping. I wasn't emotionally prepared for extroversion tonight. If I could think of any more excuses, I'd lay those out too. If Nancy wouldn't back out of this arrangement for me, I'd call Carol at the Café and tell her to drop the bomb on the poor creature herself. I'd be standing him up, but at least he wouldn't have to wait long at a candlelit table for two before the owner would let him down easy—and she'd probably comp his bar tab.

A PAIR of angry eyes followed me around the shop the next day as I rearranged the transferware.

"Nancy, can you not?" I begged.

"Not what? I don't know what you mean," she said.

"Not stare at me like that. It's creepy."

Everywhere I walked, her eyes followed, staring daggers at me.

Nope. Not daggers. Ninja stars. Broadswords. Anti-aircraft missiles. Her arsenal was filled with attempts to thwart my peace of mind and scold me with side eye.

Well, I wasn't the one in need of scolding. I told her I was busy. I told her she had no right to make a date for me. She was the one at fault. Not me.

The shop phone rang with a deafening cry.

Then a second time. Nancy shrugged and went back to the books.

Then a third time. Nancy smiled, challenging me. She knew her best revenge was to passive-aggressively make me use a telephone.

I hurled myself over the high desk and lunged for the receiver until her hand casually dropped to pick it up herself.

“Hello? Blue Heron Antiques?” she said, sweetly.

“Bitch,” I said so she could hear. That only made Nancy’s smile widen.

“Yes, we’re located at the southern tip of the county, right off Route 4,” she continued, with more directions.

We had customers today. People who browsed and then actually paid for merchandise. It was a good thing I stood up my date last night. Those Victoria sandwiches weren’t going to assemble themselves. One of those little cakes guilted a customer into purchasing a tchotchke.

After closing early, I took Rousby on a long, slow walk around the island as the sun bronzed the skies and finally faded into bruise-like colors over the naval airfields across the Patuxent. On the way back home, I saw the lights inside Hank’s boathouse. It was late for him to be working. I wondered if his new project was giving him trouble.

There was a box on my front step when we got back.

The note on it read: “We dropped by on our way to dinner. Sorry we missed you. –Mack and Lydia”

My heart lurched at the thought of missing the sight of my friends and their squishy-cheeked Jack-o-lantern.

“P.S. These don’t fit the post-baby belly. Enjoy.”

I lugged the box inside and grabbed the scissors, slicing at the tape. Silk and sparkles tumbled out. More hand-me-downs from Mack, which, knowing her, were unworn. I shook out an emerald green silk camisole with the tags still on it. It was pure Mackenzian to have clothes lying around that had never even been worn. I didn’t know when I’d wear any of these beautiful things, but I loved her all the more for it.

Tears of gratitude welled up behind my lids. She was out there being Superwoman, catching killers, naturally birthing babies, being someone’s wife and looking amazing doing it all, and still

she found the time to go through her closet for an emergency friend makeover.

And I didn't even have the ovaries to go on a blind date, not even to save Nancy hurt feelings or keep a promise. There weren't enough family packs of bacon in the supermarket to keep me from wallowing in my piece-of-shitness.

The green silk was still in my hand as I brought my phone out of my pocket and looked for Nancy's number. I knew she'd be around. It was Sunday. Roast day. I tapped the screen quickly before I could change my mind.

"Emerson? What's wrong?" Nancy answered. "You never call."

"Nancy, I'm sorry. I know I promised you I'd try and I didn't try. I..." My throat hitched.

"Oh, honey." I heard the whoops and laughter in the background dim suddenly, as she stepped outside for some privacy. Nancy and her husband, Sheriff Bill, invited all the off-duty deputies to Sunday dinner to watch whatever sporting event was in season. It was weekly bromance time.

"I know you're scared, Emerson. Change has always been hard for you. And the people in your life have thrown some doozies at you a time or two. But you might as well decide to keep up with everyone else and change along with them."

"Damn, woman. How many times do you need to hear 'You're right' tonight?"

Nancy chuckled. "You want to come watch the game?"

"No thanks. But, Nancy? There is something else you could do for me."

"Yes, Em?"

I paused.

"You could set me up on another blind date."

“BAD LUCK, EM,” Hank reported as I handed him his caramel latte. “You just missed him.”

“Just missed whom?” I asked, tugging at my hem. I wore one of the dresses in Mack’s box. It turned out not to be such a great idea standing out on the docks on a windy day in a short dress. I had to balance both our coffees and Rousby’s leash in one hand during the four-block walk to keep from flashing everyone in Solomons after the first big gust took me unawares.

“My nephew. The one I’ve been telling you about. He’s been working on this boat with me. Says it’s a project he wants us to do together.” He sighed. I took it to mean Hank wasn’t exactly thrilled about the idea of quality time.

The wood strips covering the frame of the small craft were still yellow with fresh sap.

“Yawl,” he said, referring to the skeleton of the boat he was standing in.

“That’s a sailboat, right?” I wasn’t much of a sailor myself, but it was impossible not to pick up a few things as the friend of a master boat builder and the daughter to a mom and a dad who packed the entirety of their lives inside the hull of a boat not much bigger than this and retired in the Keys.

“If she floats,” he said with honest humility. He took a sip of his overly-sweet coffee and I shuddered. The man was the definition of casual cool masculinity. Stoic, calm, resourceful, and hovering perpetually at seventy years old, he was a Paul Newman lookalike with a maximum word budget rivaling Clint Eastwood.

His choice of coffee was the only incongruous feature. But he liked it the way he liked it and that was fine by me. The fact that he wouldn’t be caught ordering it from Jenn from a “fancy-schmancy café” also gave me a reason to check in with him almost daily.

“You can’t have any doubts about that, can you? You could fit a sieve with masts and sail it up the Chesapeake and back.”

“Well.” He dragged the word out. “It’s not her buoyancy so

much as if my building partner's going to crap out on me. He's not one to stick around any place for too long."

Then Hank did a rare thing and...sat.

Right there in the hull of the boat.

On the job.

I racked my brain to remember the last time I saw him take a load off.

"You feeling alright, Hank?"

"You took me to the doctor a few days ago. LDL and HDL's normal."

"Yes, but how do you...you know, *feel*?" I asked. If our days were numbered, I needed time to prepare. I needed *years* to prepare. This wouldn't be like my when parents got out of Dodge. Hank's leaving would be devastating.

"Fine," he said without inflection.

"So you're just resting?"

"I am savoring my hot beverage while it is still hot."

"Okay then. Good." I tried hard to believe him, and we sat sipping our coffee in contented silence.

I had known Hank my whole life. He had been my parent's friend back in the day. I suppose I had adopted him along with Blue Heron Antiques and the rest of the bits and pieces of life my parents left for me to scrounge through. Somewhere during the last decade, he became much more than a family acquaintance. He became more like a friend, then like a grandfather, though I'd never insult him with that overly sentimental garbage. In my busy modern life, Hank was probably the first person I still actively sought for comfort, for advice, and for socializing. He was my go-to.

"How are your people, Em?"

"Mom and Dad are fine, the last I heard."

"And the other one?"

"Justin?" I didn't know where this was coming from. "I dunno. Probably stealing copper wire out of someone's trailer." Hank

nodded almost imperceptibly with a little grunt. No one talked about my brother.

“What about you? You need to spend more time around young people. Forget the cranky old men and dementia patients you pal around with. You’re getting old before your time.”

I laughed until my coffee went down the wrong pipe.

Hank drilled his ice blue eyes right into my skull. He wasn’t laughing.

Shit. Now I was getting it from him too. My belly felt full from too much coffee and judgment.

“I know, Hank,” I said, giving up. “What am I supposed to do about it though?”

If anyone could answer me without bullshit, it would be him. Maybe if someone would give me insight into how, instead of a simple “you need to...”

“It’s easy to tell me to loosen up, to hang around people my age so some dude *might* get around to asking me out *if* we spend enough time together. *I* have to be the one to charm *his* pants off while he’s still checking out the waitress? This isn’t exactly a hub for eligible bachelors. It’s a place where families move because of the good schools.”

“Who said anything about dating?”

“Didn’t you? Nancy did. Mrs. Andrews did. Anyway, it’s not like I’m not out there, like I’m not open to experiences.” *Except for the part where I stood up my blind date last night because I’m afraid of people.* “Anyway, it doesn’t matter how open I am if the experience never comes.”

“What about girlfriends?”

“I’m working on that too.” Yet another source of disappointment in my life. While I was over here, nursing my phone shyness and pretending we were still besties, they were over there somewhere, planning weddings to men I had never met and asking other women to be their bridesmaids.

“There’s my nephew,” Hank said. “Just moved here. Handsome. Employed.”

“Educated?”

“That too.”

“Where does he work?” I sighed. If you didn’t count law enforcement, there were only three choices around here, the nuclear power plant, somewhere in D.C., or—

“Pax River.”

“Ah yes. Techie nerds. I’m especially done with the techie nerds.”

“Did I say he was a techie nerd?”

“You don’t have to. That’s all they do there.” My butt hurt from the chair. I stood, pacing the length of the boat.

“They work in their little contractor cubicles and run cables and think it’s totally cool not to shave their hideously scraggly beards, and they shrivel up their sperm with their laptops on their laps while they watch illegally downloaded porn at night. No thank you.”

“If you say so,” he said, giving me a funny look.

“You don’t understand, Hank,” I whined and hated myself for it. “I’m like bacon to these guys. It’s my downfall in life. I’ve dated so many. They start out promising. They ask me out. They pay attention to the right parts of me. They don’t make the moves when it’s not appropriate. And then they invite me back to their apartments to play World of Warcraft for five hours. And I’m not a gamer. I have tattoos so they assume I don’t need the romance. They assume I’m as geeky as them, and I mean, I am, but I’m not Gamer Geeky. I’m like, Jane Austen Geeky. And let me tell you, Mr. Darcy does not work in IT.”

“I’ve already dropped the subject,” Hank replied.

“Good. Because that’s definitely not what I want.” I pouted. And there I was again, turning down another date that I should be thanking my lucky stars for. But Hank’s nephew? Never in a

million years. That was just asking for an old-man custody battle after we broke up.

“Don’t you have to go in to the shop today?” Hank asked.

“What time is it?” I panicked. “Shit.” Nancy was leaving in twenty minutes. “See ya, Hank.” I whistled for Rousby and we jogged back between the boat slips.

By the time I reached the shop, I was huffing and puffing. I definitely needed to do more cardio if I was winded by a two-minute jog. Rousby took to his bed under the checkout counter while I caught a glimpse of myself in one of the art deco vanity mirrors, shrugging off the long red tangles of seaweed I had for a mane.

Nancy was at the door, arms outstretched inviting me into a crushing hug. “I have something to show you,” she said. “Don’t be mad.”

My eyes narrowed. So that was the reason for the hug. I took a breath and held up my right hand. “I promise to withhold judgment until the end of whatever you’re about to show me. I cannot promise not to be mad.”

She ignored me and flipped through her photos on her phone. Dear God, she was about to show me a guy’s picture. Sure, I gave her the go-ahead, but after I stood up the last one, I thought I’d have at least a month before she found someone else to blind-date me.

Damn, Nancy did not go easy.

“Here it is!” She misjudged the distance between us, and my nose smashed a grease print onto her screen. I backed up and re-focused. To my relief, and only slight disappointment, it wasn’t a picture of a man, but my beautiful Queen Anne chest from the back room.

“Scroll through. I took some shots while you worked.”

I swiped through the images. What started as an ugly, brown monstrosity developed transformed into a handsome, regal antique before my eyes. I didn’t know Nancy was keeping up with

the restoration. I swiped through a few more and saw a series of photos of me at work. It was clear from the images that I'd poured my love out into this item, but I cringed at my image.

"Those are great, Nance. I'm touched that you've captured the process. Why would you think I wouldn't like them?"

"Well, the thing is...I sort of...I wanted to play with that marketing idea I had, you know, the social media strategy? Well, I created us—the store—an account and posted some of the items for sale."

"Nancy, fine," I said, finally unclicking Rousby from his leash. "You didn't ask, but fine. Actually, you did ask and I told you no. I really don't think people shop for antiques online. You have to see them in person. You have to run your hand across the wood grain. You have to open the drawers and smell the decades of treasures people kept inside. Everybody knows that."

I ran my fingers across the front of a beautifully worn oak dresser. The grain was heavily pronounced, and the wood had that kind of softness that only happened after centuries of daily use. I gestured for Nancy to hand me the phone so I could take another look at the photo.

"I doubt anything will come of any of this, so I'm not asking you to remove it. But, look at me!" I looked closer at the phone before thrusting it back to her. "I'm in my homeless person clothes!"

"I don't know what that means, your 'homeless person clothes,' but you're refinishing a piece of furniture, not going to the Kennedy Center." I hadn't told her the story of The Event. I'd save that wretched tale for...never. No one would ever know.

"Just listen," she continued. "I only started the page to see. I thought, like you, that we wouldn't get any followers. I mean, my personal page only has about six followers, and I think all they want is to sell me diet plans. But look, you already have over a thousand followers. And most of them are local. I've had five calls already this morning. Not from city people, but locals. It's not so

hard for people to cross the river. Look at all the yuppies moving in to the county. There's nothing like your store south of Annapolis, and they will come here if they know about it. Now, they do! It's too big to take down now. You'll lose your following. And the likes on that cabinet..." She glanced at the photo again. "378—no—379 and counting."

I needed more coffee for this.

"And you are seriously naïve if you think your generation isn't shopping online for every possible thing. How'd you ever get so far out of touch?"

"Fine. I said 'fine' already. You win. I hope you know what you're doing." I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing how precisely right she was about me being out of touch with my generation.

I saw Mrs. Andrews's head bobble into view as she stopped to check her Aquanet helmet in the shop window as if no one inside could see her. Psh, who was I kidding? She knew there were no customers inside. I turned back to Nancy and chuckled.

"When you told me not to be mad, I automatically assumed you already had another man lined up for me."

"Oh, honey." She waved me off with her hand and gave me a piteous smile. "That was nothing. You have a date this Friday night."

CHAPTER 3

Nothing was riding on this one date, especially since it was a blind date. Statistically speaking, it was unlikely he'd be The One. No one would be, because the concept had been empirically proven to be untrue. I wouldn't marry him, wouldn't date him long-term, and there was no chance I'd ever introduce him to Hank. There should be zero pressure.

But boy, did I feel pressure. I'd built it up too much not to. The 10-1 odds of me *not* liking the date made me queasy. Then I'd have to hurt the guy's feelings and end things. I was no good at endings. I dated a guy I didn't like for a year during college because I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I never let things get that bad again after that, but I also never seemed to get the men I liked and never liked the men that wanted me.

I hadn't had time...No, that wasn't true...I hadn't *made* time to go shopping so I was still working from Mack's box of designer goodies, and I was down to a sequined dress that was short and tight. I looked overly enthusiastic for a date at the café with a scruffy, cargo-shorts-wearing, non-alcoholic-beer-drinking IT guy. That was the caricature I knew I was meeting tonight.

Mack sent me a text designating how to wear the dress. Hair down, beachy waves, smoky eye or red lip—not both—highest heels you own, bonus points for OTK boots. I had to ask her for the definition of “OTK”. It was fashionista for “over the knee,” which I agreed would look amazing. On someone else.

Hair down I could do, but as lovely as “beachy waves” sounded, all the irons I had at my disposal couldn’t help my lack of coordination. My hair would be down and straight-ish, and that would have to do. The humidity would put the wave back in on the walk to the café anyway.

I sipped an amber lager, allowing myself a single, solitary drink to steady my nerves before the date. After that, I’d cut myself off.

Makeup wasn’t an issue. I wore it all the time. Redheads have to know the ins and outs of eyebrow powders and mascaras if they want to appear to have eyes. If I didn’t darken my clear eyelashes, my eyes looked like two turquoise cesspools in a splotchy, white void. I’d look like an alien, not the sensual, strong woman I was portraying tonight.

All that effort for a guy who spends his weekends in Nerdlandia beating faeries and goblins with foam-padded weapons. *Fuck.*

I drained my beer too quickly. Maybe I’d cut myself off after two.

Rousby looked at me with my hair piled on top of my head and wrapped in giant Velcro rollers, one existent eyebrow, and my upper lip framed in red. Because of his innate sense of good timing, he whined and nudged his leash with his nose.

I grabbed my second beer, stepped into my work boots, the closest thing I had to OTK boots, and took Rousby for a quick walk around the block, hoping it was dark enough that no one would see me.

Naturally, Rousby needed more coaxing tonight. And more walking. The farther we got from home, the more nervous I felt. I looked like a ward of the state with my short, shiny dress, muddy,

unlaced Timberlands, Velcro rollers, one eyebrow, one lip, and a beer. My trigger finger itched to cancel. The only thing that kept my finger away from my phone was the thought that somehow, this was it, my last chance.

If I canceled this date, IT guy or not, nothing would stop me from canceling the rest of my dates. At what point did chickening out become giving up for good? I was stumbling dangerously close.

I didn't go as far as the boardwalk. I wasn't that brave. I lurked in the bushes instead. An elderly pair sat on my bench with their heads bent close together. It was Valentine's Day-level sickening. I watched them while Rousby crouched his huge body into that little flea-shaped doggy squat. The couple's lips met. Then separated. Then met again, locking and unlocking. They were full-on making out. Ew. I mean, good for them, but all I could think about was Mrs. Andrews's mothball-scented denture breath.

Thank God Rousby was done. We made a beeline home. I finished my makeup and shook my hair out. Then I fished in my closet for heels. I found one pair at the back that, over the years, had become too high for me to walk in, and another that were too vintage. I settled for a pair of pointy flats. They were new-ish.

As I debated cutting myself off after three beers, my phone chimed with a video call.

"Mack! Thank God! How do I look?"

"It's Lydia, too!" said a sweet voice. "We put Jack to bed in his crib for the first time. I might've cried a little, but we might also get a little sleep tonight."

Lydia was talking over Mack's shoulder. Mack commanded me. "Go to your bathroom mirror and hold the phone out like you're taking a selfie. Stand on your tub."

"Ooh! We wanna see!" Lydia said.

"Is that Rage Against the Machine in the background?" Mack screwed up her face.

“Yep. I’m pre-gaming.” I stepped onto my bathtub ledge to give them the full effect in the mirror.

“Girl, you’re going on a date. Not a protest.”

“Do I look okay or not? But know this: If the answer’s ‘not,’ then I can’t do much about it at this point.”

“That isn’t the dress I gave you, is it?” Mack asked.

“Where the fuck else would I get a sequined dress? Tell me what’s wrong.” My foot slipped off the fiberglass tub, and I gripped the shower curtain rail tighter. Now was not the time to get horrifying news.

Mack smiled at the screen. Then at her wife. Then back at the screen. She was trying to keep her face straight, her teeth covered, but she failed.

“Maaack!”

“It’s a little...tight in some places on you that it wasn’t on me.”

“Like the booty and the boobs.” Lydia laughed. “You look really good though.”

“Shorter too. At least I don’t think it was that short on me.” Mack’s eyebrows furrowed, and her smile died away.

“I remember it being that short on you.” Lydia broke in with a big grin.

“Womenfolk!” I said. “Jack might be in another room tonight, but can you keep the vibrators in the drawer until this call ends?”

“I remember something even shorter on you,” Mack said into the phone but not at all intended for me.

Lydia was rubbing Mack’s neck, and Mack looked like she was in heaven. I needed this call to end.

“Oh my god, Lyd. Mack. Seriously. You’re not even my first tonight. The world is determined to make me a voyeur.”

“What else happened?” Mack asked. Lydia had, thankfully, eased up on the foreplay.

“Ugh.” I jumped down from the rim of the bathtub. “I was taking Rousby for a walk, and when he stopped to poop, I caught two old people making out.”

"It's a sign," said Lydia, a bit slurred. "The universe is telling you something about this date tonight. I have a real good feeling about it, Emerson."

"I don't believe in signs. They were old people making out. You're an old married couple about to get lucky again after a long hiatus."

"What long hiatus?" Mack scrunched up her nose.

"I thought you'd be tired. I've heard a lot of new moms are tired." I tried to explain.

"That's 'cause most new moms got to take care of their baby and the daddy. Different story when it's two mommies," Mack said. Behind her, Lydia was shaking her head and pantomiming exhaustion.

"Can you tell me if I look okay or not? Is this dress too much?"

"You look smoldering, Em," Lydia said, yawning. Her real-life exhaustion was already settling in.

"Maybe wear flats after all," Mack said, "and remember, pupils dilated, flushed cheeks, rise in body temperature, feet pointed toward you, eyebrows raised, lips parted, touches face. All signs of physical attraction."

"I'm supposed to do all those things to show I'm attracted to him?"

"No. Those are the things you watch out for. In case you're wondering whether or not he's into you. They aren't things you consciously do. That's why they're better tells than words, or flirting, or relying on personality," Mack explained.

"Have fun, Em. He's gonna love you." Lydia blew a kiss into the phone.

"You look amazing. I don't remember you having such killer legs. And arms, and ass. Man, I need to get my booty back in the gym."

"Good night, Mack. Thanks for your support. I love you both."

"Love you too, girl."

And then the rest was up to me.

OUTSIDE THE CAFÉ, the lights danced. Couples, friends, and families were laughing at unheard jokes at the window tables. The faint strains of the jazz trio drifted through the walls. It looked magical inside. Carol and George's place always was, but tonight, the ambiance out here among the pea gravel and boxwood hedges was stunning.

I couldn't spot a man dining alone, but I was also ten minutes early. He'd be pulling into the parking lot around back in a few minutes. Arriving early made me look overeager, but I just couldn't lurk around my apartment any longer. The wait was killing me, and I'd feel easier sitting at a table with a view of the bay and a glass of white.

The hostess was probably the only person in the restaurant who didn't know me. As soon as I gave her my name, Carol overheard and brought me in for a huddle.

"You look..." Her eyes swept over my visible expanse of hyper-muscular legs and widened. "Different," she said to my hemline. "You'll certainly keep him happy tonight!"

I fucking hope not. I tugged at the hemline, milking it for all its length. *I knew this dress was a bad idea.*

George burst out of the kitchen and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "Good to see you, Em. You look like trouble. Be sure to keep this new guy on his toes. He's a handsome fellow, but say the word, and I'll start looking for a place to hide the body."

"Thanks, George. How about you seat me so I can get settled before he comes in. If he comes in. I stood up the last one. That probably means it's my turn, universally speaking." *Please, please, universe, let him stand me up.*

"Fraid he beat you to the punch." He laughed. "Gave him our

best table. For you. Corner with the double windows.” George pointed in the direction of the far right.

IT guy was already here.

My heart thumped in my neck, choking me with its insistence. My eyes went a-ooo-ga, and nuclear submarine warning alarms blared in my ears. Every urge screamed for me to turn on my heel and run home to the safety of Rousby, my oven, and my pessimism.

I stared toward the unidentified man, rocking on my feet with the pulse of my heart when band went silent. Polite golf claps from the diners signaled the end of a tune and delivered me from panic just before I broke out in a sweat.

The first chords of “Sweetpea” began. One of my favorite songs. It conjured thoughts of lazy days spent on wide, Southern front porches and calmed my nerves like a breeze. The drummer, my dad’s good friend Larry Mackall, gave me a wink as I walked by him. He’d played it for me. Anonymity be damned. It was good having people on my side.

My date faced away from me so I couldn’t detect much besides his height, tall—yay! happy dance!—and his hair, closely cropped, light brown, and washed—yay again! I crept up to the table, assessing and cataloguing whatever features I could as I approached from behind.

His right hand was loosely wrapped around a crystal low ball with a couple fingers of maple colored alcohol. Dark jeans, shoes that matched his whiskey, AND a linen sport coat. He *dressed up* for me! My cheeks turned to lava and I hadn’t even seen his face. A body that was lean, muscular, and so tall he had to lounge slightly in his chair or else he’d look like he was seated at a kiddie table. Even from the back he was handsome. I couldn’t wait to meet his brain! Maybe not *all* IT guys were so bad.

His fingertips tapped the side of the glass. Then he began absently healing the decorative cuts in the crystal. My heart clenched. Hands were my thing. Besides brains, that is. His were

perfect, with long, elegant fingers that would look just as beautiful stroking the keys of a piano as they would gripping the handle of an axe to chop firewood outside a cabin in the Shenandoah Valley.

A sudden movement in front of me shook me back into reality. I was no longer standing behind him watching the play of his hands and his intimidatingly pressed collar. Instead, I was looking into a pair of walnut colored eyes so warm that I went from melting to curdling when he swiveled in his seat.

He looked down at his watch—his kind would probably call it a timepiece—and back up at me, startled and probably annoyed to find someone staring at his back, though I suspect it happens to him more frequently than he realizes.

When I dropped into the chair opposite him, he looked everywhere else, as though I couldn't *possibly* be the one he was meeting. I almost wanted to apologize.

He quirked his eyebrows in disbelief before glancing back down into his lap.

"I'm Emerson Broome, your date," I said. "Obviously I'm a little bit out of prac—" My nervous giggle died away.

His look morphed from annoyance, to chilly, then a sneer. I remembered where I had seen those eyes before.

They belonged to The Runner.

The Runner who, only the previous week, tried to destroy my soul.

"Oh, no," I said. "Not you. I'm not staying."

As I reached for my bag, Carol came over with a bottle of Ruddy Duck Bitching & Moaning IPA. "Your usual, hun," she said in Baltimorean as she poured the beer from its bottle into a footed glass. I glanced at Satan's messenger sitting across from me, but he didn't notice the beer. Nor did he notice that I have a "usual" and that the owner knew me well enough to bring alcohol immediately upon being seated. He checked his watch again, like I was a ghost and he was still waiting for alternate universe me to show up.

"Carol, I'm sorry, but I don't think this is going to work out. I

have..." *Shit, I should've worked out an escape plan with Mack...* "Rousby wasn't feeling great...in his butt area...when I left... umm..." *Shit, shit, shit. I always sucked at improvising...* "I think I'd better—"

"Oh, no you don't. We pre-ordered you the soufflé," Carol said, glancing between us. "John's waited patiently for you, and you're not going to stand him up again. I'll be right back with your bread."

"Again?" I swiveled back to him. "*You were my last date?*" I asked him, horrified. He nodded once and sipped his whiskey.

"Why would you come back for round two?"

He didn't answer but shifted uncomfortably in his chair and leaned as far from me as possible.

Carol dashed off, no doubt hoping to miss our first fight as a couple.

We were alone. Soul Crusher and Emerson Broome. On a date. Through dessert, too, apparently, and chocolate soufflé took about a million years to make.

He looked at me, resigned, and stopped inching his chair farther and farther away from me like I wouldn't notice.

"John Bergen," he said, more to my beer than to me. He didn't offer his hand or any follow up.

"Pleased to meet you," I hissed. I crossed my arms in front of my chest but quickly dropped them again when I saw what it did to emphasize my cleavage. At least I finally managed to draw his attention. We both stared out the window past our candlelit reflections to the solitary powerboat out on the river.

I don't know how long I was mentally out there in that boat, but when my focus shortened, his reflection was looking at mine, studying me. I let him. When Carol came back with the bread, I thanked her and snapped out of my dream state.

I yanked off a piece of bread and slathered it with butter. He didn't touch the tiny, crusty, baguette, still hot from the oven. Good. He doesn't deserve fresh-baked bread.

“So, I guess...” I threw up my hands. “What do you do?” I asked with a mouthful of heaven. As if I even needed to ask.

“Navy.” He sipped his drink. His voice, what little he offered of it, sounded deep and rich, like the contents of his glass. Of course it would.

“Pax River?” I gulped my beer. A little spilled from the corner of my mouth.

He nodded slowly, pretending not to notice the unladylike drip.

“IT?” I crossed my fingers. It was worth a shot. I had to have a little dignity left.

“Aviation.”

“Drones?” *Please say drones. I know deep down he’s a glorified gamer.*

He waited a beat and met my eyes. “F-35s.”

Shit. Fuck. Double Shit. He’s a fucking fighter pilot. No wonder he’s not into me.

It was just my luck that I was sitting across from the world’s most perfect man. I could have been on a real date with him last week if I had enough gumption to go to dinner with a stranger. But no. He had to meet me while I looked like the ghost of Kurt Cobain and reeked of fish corpse and then I had to go and stand him up. One rough start, we could come back from. Two mistakes sealed the coffin of our relationship. He was too beautiful not to kick myself for it.

“You own an antiques store?” he asked, his attention back to the band.

“How did you know that?”

“Carol may have mentioned it. And George. And Nancy. And Sylvia Rae.”

“Small town,” I apologized. He looked at me, took a deep breath, and relented to a stingy piece of bread.

I gave us a welcome break from having to act civilly and studied the menu like I was going to be tested on it later. Pointless, considering I was going to order my “usual” for dinner, too, but

the thick cardstock shielded me, granting me a momentary reprieve from the obscenity of my nearly-naked chest.

“What do you like?” he asked, his hands delicately circling the glass again.

My mind strayed to his hands rather than the menu. The Devil’s hands, I now knew, but that didn’t stop a slight creepy smile from forming on my lips.

“Emerson?” The way he said my name, drawing out each syllable, with that glint in his eye. He had caught me objectifying his hands.

“Hmmm?”

“What’s good here?” He rephrased the question.

“Everything. But I like the scallops.” Whew. Back on earth.

“Steak it is, then.” He dropped his menu on the empty place setting next to him. The motion wasn’t lost on me. It was effortlessly cool and confident. I was still hunching down to hide as much of my body with the piece of paper, toying with a frayed edge.

“You’re not from here, are you?”

“What gave it away?” he asked, unimpressed.

“Well, since they come from literally ten feet to your left, locals typically order one of the sixteen crab dishes on the menu. *Marylanders* order crab. Or oysters.”

“I’m from Iowa originally.”

“I rest my case.”

We finished the rest of the loaf of bread in silence, only speaking when Carol took our orders. His order, actually, since I wasn’t asked. Another moment of shame. I ate here way too often.

He was one bloody bite into his ribeye when I finally worked up the nerve to ask him my first question. It only took me two more beers that I did not order. Damn, I hope George was comping these free-flowing confidence boosters. I hadn’t planned on paying retail for every bottle in a six pack tonight.

“Why’d you come back?” I asked, shoving a whole scallop into my mouth.

He lowered his fork back to his plate. “Excuse me?” He forgot I was there.

“After I stood you up last time, why did you agree to go on another date with me?”

“I guess I was curious about the woman who stood me up.” He popped the steak into his mouth and chewed with his mouth closed like a good boy. God, why did good manners have to be such a turn-on?

“Why did you agree to the date this time?” he asked after he swallowed. *After* he swallowed, ladies and gentlemen. I was about to swoon, except he ruined life as I knew it and I hated him for it.

“I didn’t know the date was with you.”

“No point in beating around the bush.” He frowned into his refilled whiskey. George had been equally forthcoming with the Glenlivet bottle.

“It’s not like that. No one informed me about you. Your...pilot-ness or your face...I didn’t even know your name. Besides, last week wasn’t good for me.” *I was too busy picking a zillion shards of Emerson off the floor after being humiliated to death.*

“No one told you about my face?” Of course he picked up on that.

“Well, everyone was pushing this date on me because they all think I’m desperate. So I *must* be willing to drink the dregs, you know what I mean? No one said you were going to be handsome. Or educated, or put-together, or any of the other things that make you a catch. On the outside.”

“I’m handsome?” An eyebrow quirked.

“Oh, come on, Top Gun. I’m sure women beg you to get between their legs. You don’t need me telling you that you’re attractive. You’ve probably built your whole meager personality around it.”

He crossed his arms and perched his elbows on the table but didn't say anything. His discomfort read clearly as guilt. He didn't have to provide verbal confirmation.

Carol cleared our plates and left us waiting for our dessert, which meant we could be stuck here for another hour, alternately glaring at and ignoring each other.

He looked at me for what felt like the first time as the final strains of "Stormy Weather" played in the background. "Are you going to put me out of my misery and forgive me for what happened the other night?"

"I don't think so." Maybe if he caught me at the end of "Get Happy," I would have considered it.

"Come on," he said. "It was a mistake. I'm sorry for what I thought, but if you were seeing what I was seeing, you'd have thought the same thing."

I'd had enough of pretending to be polite just to pass the time. He could eat the fucking soufflé alone. I started rooting through my purse, looking for my wallet. It was lucky I had actual cash to throw on the table. Was sixty dollars enough to cover my half? I better make it eighty, no, one hundred. I'd eat ramen for the rest of the month.

"Wait. I didn't mean that." Demon Spawn reached across the table, and those long fingers brushed my arm. He exhaled a long breath.

"It wasn't you. It was your trash," he explained, as if that explained anything.

"Say that again," I threatened.

"It was your bag of trash. I saw you out on the boardwalk collecting cans. There's a big homeless population in Pensacola and Texas. It was something I saw frequently. I didn't think. I did what I always do." He ran his hands through his perfect hair and it stuck out a little.

"You always give money to the homeless?" I doubted that.

He sat back in his chair. “A lot of them are vets. That could have been me.”

Oh, for the love of empathy, this guy was too good to be true.

“You were in the war?”

“Four tours,” he answered quietly. “When is this dessert thing coming?”

“You can’t rush soufflé. It’s an art form.”

“Art is a waste of time.”

“That settles it, then. We’re soul mates, you and I.”

That got his attention. And clearly repulsed him. “You’re joking.”

“Of course I’m joking. Us? Here? This whole date is a joke, I... you know what? No. I give up.” I stood, gathering my purse yet again and placing my napkin on the table. But now that I had his full attention, I couldn’t help but give a big finish and sat right back down.

“By the way, I went to Maryland. Bachelor’s and Master’s. Art History. No, I never intended to teach. I have two nieces and a godson that I spoil rotten whenever I get the chance, even though I don’t often get the chance, and a dog, Rousby, who you’ve met. My favorite flowers are peonies and my favorite band is Iron Maiden—and yes, at 33, I’m proud to be immature enough to have a favorite band.”

My voice was getting higher in increments. I didn’t care that I was getting attention from some of the other patrons.

“When I’m not at work, I enjoy baking and powerlifting, and I do my share to help keep my community clean by picking up litter, hence the bags of trash. And I’m damn sure not going to do it in a sequined dress.”

Mr. Perfect Fighter Pilot looked at me as though I wasn’t the same woman who had just been sitting across from him through dinner. He gave me a final once-over, running his eyes down my shiny silver dress and my tattooed sleeve that ended in a lacy points on the fingers of my left hand. My chest was—well, by God,

it was heaving by then, not from arousal but from anger—and my quads were about to burst through the sequins.

The man had a face built for the World Series of Poker. Besides his mouth, which narrowed into a taut, disapproving line, there was absolutely no change in his expression. No fidgeting. No raised eyebrows. He was simply studying me. His feet were pointed toward the door. Ha! At least I beat him to the escape!

I bent down to look close into his eyes. It wasn't subtle or chill, but I had no fucks left to give.

They were so dark in the dim lights that I couldn't tell if his pupils were dilated, but I'd bet a thousand dollars they were shrunk up as tightly as his asshole.

For a moment, probably out of sheer surprise, he let me do it. He met my gaze openly and raw. It was the most honest moment of the past hour, and it totally killed my high-horse buzz.

He wasn't a bad guy. He was probably a very, very good guy who just wasn't into me. Had I been less abrasive initially and had not stood him up the first time, he probably would have treated me like a new friend. Too bad.

But something—certainly not my speech or creepy eyeball gazing—seemed to kick him into gear. He stood, not intentionally blocking my path, but the size of him made that happen anyway. Maybe because I stood five foot two inches—okay, five foot zero inches. Maybe it was because I stood so close to this man, but I looked up, and up, and up, only for my eyes to linger over his perfectly shaved, perfectly square chin.

"Six three," he said, smiling. Of course the jerk presumed to know exactly what I was thinking.

"Jesus. I've been to air shows. How do you even fit in one of those teeny cockpits?"

"It's a tight squeeze." His mouth was a crooked line that belonged to a gambler in an old Western. His smirk disappeared and coolness brushed the inside of my wrist. The fingers of his perfect hands had reached out and touched the only bare spot on

my left arm, the place that was colored blue-green from blood in need of oxygen, not the black and grey ink of the tattooist's gun. He found the spot that was purely me. Unfiltered, undecorated, and pure.

“Stay. Please,” he whispered.

“Okay,” I consented.

CHAPTER 4

I let Rousby off his leash when we reached the marina, and he took off for Hank's boathouse. He must have caught a whiff of something chaseable. I hoped I wouldn't have to scrub dead fish off his coat again this morning. I jogged around the corner in pursuit.

Hank was hand planing what appeared to be teak as Rousby shot past him and up the rickety stairs to his second story office/apartment. I started after him.

"Let him be, Em," Hank said. "He'll get his fill of pets and come back down."

"Have you got someone up there, Hank?" I waggled my eyebrows. "I didn't know you were seeing anybody. I would have brought two caramel lattes. What's she like?"

Hank didn't take the bait. "Heard you had a rough time last night."

"I don't want to talk about it." My smile vanished.

"That bad, huh?" He laughed and took a swipe at the expensive wood.

"The worst." I sighed. "You know, Hank, I knew going in that this whole set-up wasn't my flavor of chips, but I tried. For Nancy."

I flung myself down into a folding chair. “Oh Hank, it was so awkward—”

“Not a catch, huh?” Hank’s eyes were glued to his work.

“Well, maybe certain parts of him were...no.” I shook my head. “No, he’s definitely a catch. Just not my catch. He’s some kind of juicy, expensive tuna. Meanwhile, I’m over here baiting my crab traps with chicken necks.”

Hank side-eyed me. “I’m not even going to acknowledge the sheer stupidity of that statement.”

“Oh, sorry. I went too far with the fishing analogy? Okay, then. In landlubber terms, he’s too good to be true. It’s not that he’s handsome, although that’s true enough. He was actually really nice. Once we got over the first part of our date and he relaxed, he was interested in my stories, he told me about his job—he’s a super genius—and he treated everyone around him like a friend.”

At one point during the evening, some kid tapped him on the shoulder and asked if he was the one who flew planes, and John’s face just lit up, telling him the names of some of the jets he flew off aircraft carriers and how the ground crew on ships were known as skittles because they wore colorful shirts designating their individual jobs. When the girl’s parents came over and apologized for disturbing his dinner, he was honestly a little self-conscious of his local celebrity.

I shook the dreamy look off my face. “Anyway, he’s too good to be true. Some tall, intelligent, bombshell—the kind of woman who’s still gorgeous and wears a bikini after three kids—that’s whose catch he is. I’m just the troll he had to sit through a completely unpleasant dinner with.”

“And dessert,” said a voice from behind me.

No. *Fuck no*. It couldn’t be him. He couldn’t be here. But there I was, pivoting slowly, ever so slowly, my eyes opening with a groan and...*Holy. Hell*.

The Runner. At my place of refuge.

There he was. All six foot three inches of him. Bent down.

Petting my dog. Shirtless, because of course he was. It was a balmy sixty degrees outside. His abs rippled at my eye level. I blinked and turned away.

I had to remind myself of the attributes I was attracted to. Exquisitely developed deltoids? Pectorals that perched high and proud on his chest? Obliques that led down past the perfectly fitting, slightly too low-slung waist of a scrubby pair of jeans?

Brains. That was it. I winced. He had those too. As a Navy test pilot—a career that could basically be summed up by aeronautical engineering with the precision of a neurosurgeon while simultaneously traveling beyond the speed of sound and is more difficult to attain than NFL player—his brain had to be the most gorgeous part of all. But all that wasn't distracting me from also admiring the training it took to achieve a physique like his. I could almost be thankful that I didn't make a love match with a man who obviously didn't eat carbs.

Incompatible, Em. I told myself to keep my eyes off this non-prize. *Incompatible. Incompatible. Incompatible.*

John Bergen was perfect. I was, *thankfully*, not.

I opened my mouth, intending a civil hello, and he stood up from his crouch, still smiling at Rousby. A full, perfect, white-toothed smile. Leveled right at my own beloved pup.

Wut wer werds?

I forgot how to speak. Maybe *perfect* was my new catnip.

Then he looked at me and his grin faded. Oh, yes. Now I remembered.

"Hello, John." I scowled at him. It was my natural inclination whenever he was around. What was he doing here anyway? This was *my* refuge. Hank was *mine*. "Hank didn't tell me he knew you," I leveled at the old man, who was now concentrating fully on his work.

"We're working on a boat," John explained, his voice rough and quiet from lack of sleep and too much alcohol, I guessed. "Thought it might be a good project for us to do together, now that I'm here."

"No," I said. "Hank told me he's working on this boat with his nephew. That's not you," I informed him.

Hank couldn't possibly be John's uncle. The world couldn't be that cruel.

"Em," Hank cut in. "This is my nephew, John."

"The IT guy?" I asked.

"I don't know what IT is, so I figured I'd let you think what you wanted." I had a feeling Hank knew exactly what he was doing.

What *was* Hank doing? He was my friend and he betrayed me, that betraying betrayer. John jumped into the naked hull of his mini boat and fiddled with some hand tools. I didn't even notice how his back muscles contracted in sinuous harmony when he stretched across to retrieve something from Hank.

"And you," I hurled at John. "May I ask what your intentions are?"

"Regarding?"

"Regarding Hank. You think you can swoop in and save the day, spend some quality time crafting together, act like the prodigal son, when I've been here the whole time fetching his lattes and worrying about his heart?"

"You don't know the moral of the prodigal son, do you?" John smirked.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It's not a lesson about the son who returns but the son who stays. His bitterness and envy cloud his relationship with his father so he's the one who becomes less deserving in the end." He tossed a screwdriver in the air, catching it perfectly on its handle as it spun on its way down.

The smug, self-righteous bastard!

He continued, "Look, I appreciate you being here to take him to the base for his doctor's appointments, but I'm here now."

"I take him to his doctor's appointments. That doesn't change now that some new hotshot is in town, nephew or not. Do you know why? Because you'll leave again. You'll get stationed some-

where else, and we'll never hear from you just like before you arrived."

"Sorry to tell you this, but this is the end of the line for me. It's a permanent assignment. You're stuck with me 'til retirement, which isn't for another fifteen years. I'd get used to me if I were you." He laughed.

"Well, it sure is nice y'all fighting over me. How 'bout both of y'all take me to Andrews. I think the arguing will keep me young."

"Shut, up, Hank," John and I said at the same time. I spun on my heel and called to Rousby, who followed me reluctantly.

"Coffee tomorrow, Hank," I hollered over my shoulder.

"I take mine black," shouted John. I flipped him the bird as I walked away. It was juvenile, but I was basically a ten-year-old.

"DON'T EVEN TELL ME," Nancy said through the door jingle. She deposited her purse and her monogrammed, quilted lunch bag under the desks with her nose scrunched like she smelled a septic tank backup. "That bad?"

"Seriously, Nancy. What were you thinking?" I swiveled in the chair at the front desk but didn't get up. I was sort of digging this new, front-of-house me. I already made calls to the auction house in Bucks County and the curator of one of the local historic mansions who always gets first dibs on any items that fit the house's original era. *Take that, to-do list.*

I still had a buying trip coming up in a few days. I hoped to squeeze one more trip out of the old white moving truck. It wasn't super fun navigating the monstrosity solo through the streets of Baltimore and over the country roads of backwoods Pennsylvania, but I needed new stock. With luck, I could flirt effectively enough to get some nice fellow to help me load my haul into the back, and Baltimore traffic won't be bumper to bumper on the way home.

I sighed. It wasn't going to be pretty. Maybe I'd beg Hank to ride along for company.

"I thought two young, cultured people like yourselves would hit it off," Nancy said. "It was really a no, then?"

"Let's just say he didn't even glance in my general direction before ruling me out as conversation worthy."

"I don't believe that for a minute. John's gregarious, always stepping in to give the old ladies a hand up the steps. Always compliments Father Michael's homily, and that man puts even me to sleep at eight thirty in the morning."

"It's an act. It must be. Mrs. Andrews said it herself, he's trying to catch himself a wife. He didn't want to be seen on a date with me. What if a gorgeous, blonde, Catholic girl walks in and sees us together? It'll ruin his plan."

"Hmm..." Nancy considered. "I don't think that's it, honey. But I'm sorry you had a bad evening."

"That's it? You're dropping the subject? When have you ever dropped a subject? Especially when it concerns my dating life? Especially when you've had a *direct hand* in my dating life?"

"I know when I'm beaten," she said. I wasn't buying that innocent smile of hers. She was making a circuit around the shop, taking stock of what needed to be tended to.

"Did you know he's Hank's nephew?"

"Yes, I think I did hear that," she shouted from somewhere in the back. She came back carrying the tray of dusting supplies. "Hank never mentioned it?"

"That's not the point."

"What is then?"

"I guess it seems like someone close to Hank should be close to me," I thought out loud. "It's a shame we don't get along, is all." I shrugged and pretended not to care any more than that.

"Well, then. Get along," Nancy suggested.

"Ew, no. He's such a..." Disconnected images of his face flashed

in my mind: his square jaw, the dark eyes, that wide, boyish smile when it finally came out.

“He’s such a what?” Nancy said from right behind me.

“A jerk,” I finished.

After closing, we parted ways and headed to our respective homes. Hers about fifteen miles north—a mere eyeblink in our rural county—and back to her County Sherriff husband, house full of alpha males, Capitals games, and sloppy joes. And me, three blocks over, to my best guy Rousby and a much-needed sweat session in the gym.

I didn’t know if it was the impending change of seasons with the final thaw of winter, or perhaps some burgeoning change within me, but Rousby and I bounced along with every step when we headed out on our walk. A warm breeze licked at my bare arms, and a grin spread across my face.



I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN that grin was doomed.

I couldn’t wait for the release of my workout. I wanted to blow out my eardrums with screamy chick metal and pull heavy weight off the floor. Alone. Rousby and I sprinted down the boardwalk and didn’t slow until we hit the gym parking lot.

I should have noticed something was wrong, but I was huffing and puffing too much for anything except my impending heart attack to matter. When I slipped my key in the lock, I realized I didn’t need my key.

There was bass booming through the steel walls. A crack of light squinted out from under the door. What the fuck, man? Someone was here. Damn those CrossFitters and their sense of community. Why did they have to kill my vibe before I even got started?

I swung the door open, and Rousby and I crossed the threshold. Someone was blasting Led Zeppelin, but it wasn’t a CrossFit class.

Thank God, my squat rack and deadlifting platform were free. I dropped my gear and lugged Rousby's blanket close to my station.

I peeled off my t-shirt, leaving me in a sports bra, a tank that read "cardio does not spark joy," and one of my thirty pairs of black leggings. When I bent over to tie my laces, I knew I was no longer alone.

I felt more than heard the usurper as he entered the room.

Of course it was a he.

There were only a few of us outliers who use the facility to train for our non-CrossFit goals: a couple of guys who trained for Strong Man, a handful of other powerlifters and those who trained in a variety of programs for strength, and on weekend mornings, there was a club for people who competed in the Highland games events at local Celtic festivals.

The gym wasn't equipped with enough room to toss a caber, but I imagined the kilt club still trained by squatting and deadlifting like the rest of us. Women were welcomed into this outlier club. But so far, I was the only one who had taken advantage of the lack of peopling in the evenings to train alone, blessedly alone.

I sat facing the wall as I strapped myself into the rest of my riot gear and my tight AF knee sleeves and corseted myself into my new belt.

My workout was old school and uncomplicated. Heavy squat, heavy press, heavy deadlift. I loaded up the bar with a baby weight and eased into my lifting trance, that moment when I was in tune with the hungry, coiled power of every muscle. Energy sprang from my feet to my fingers gripping the knurled steel, steadying the bar in place on my back. That power waited for me to sink down with my ass between my knees and drive it up from my hips.

It was that movement, that dip and drive, when I felt most wholly me. It was feminine and powerful and deadly and wise. It was the me under that rusty bar and those chipped plates that drove everything else I did.

I racked the bar and added more plates.

Honestly, a correctly performed squat is almost like a lap dance. It's all ass and lower back. Exotic dancers could probably squat a lot of weight if they wanted to come train with me. Maybe I'd put up flyers at that "gentleman's club" by the navy base. It'd be nice to have some women to train with.

I set my phone on video and placed it on a nearby bench. This was a mirror free gym, all rough concrete, corrugated metal, and chalk dust. How else was I supposed to correct my form unless I had some kind of image? It wasn't vanity. It was absolutely for training purposes only.

Okay, fine, it was pride too. But I told myself I'd only post it if I beat my PR. After checking for the correct angles, I took a deep breath, ready to get back into the zone.

As I spun around, I propelled myself straight into a grey wall that hadn't been there a moment ago.

"Oof." I bounced backward, knocking my headphones askew.

The wall chuckled. I looked up past beautiful biceps so defined they were square, traps sweeping up from under a t-shirt collar, square jaw, and...

John. Fucking. Bergen.

"What are *you* doing here?" I ripped my headphones off my cheeks. The music blasted out and conflicted with some Viking shit he was playing on the gym's speakers. What happened to Led Zeppelin?

"You didn't strike me as someone who films herself. Don't tell me. You're going to post it on Instagram tonight. No, no. Before you even leave the gym." He laughed.

I stepped around him and pushed him out of my shot. He could make fun of me all he wanted, I still needed the film.

"Yeah, well, how do *you* get better?"

"Fair enough," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. Did he know the gesture made his pecs *and* his biceps bigger? Probably, but damn, it was still...God, it was stifling in this gym today. I forced myself to concentrate on the dead cockroach in the corner.

"I'm just starting my set, so if you don't mind..." I gripped the bar, waiting for him to leave my carefully cultivated area. Something funny crossed his face, and he went away.

Good riddance.

Except not. Because he had pitched his camp right in front of my rack.

My first set was tough to complete while on display in front of my new nemesis. My headphones were irritating and caused sweat to drip down into my ears, my usual focus point was gobbled up by two hundred pounds of man muscle, and my trance wasn't happening.

He loaded plate after plate onto his bar. No one his height should be squatting that much weight. That was competition level, once-in-a-lifetime PR level weight. Holy shit, this guy was strong. I went down and he went down. He came up and I came up. I didn't know if we were racing or competing, or if he was totally oblivious to me and I was the only one engaging in this adolescent idiocy. Yeah, probably the latter.

I couldn't help but stare at the play of his quads as they engaged to perform the same motion as me in the squat rack across from mine. His body was more poetic than most lifters. It was strong but lithe. Somewhere between The Rock and Tom Hiddleston.

I couldn't look anymore. I unloaded the weights, unracked my bar, shifted the holders around to the other side of the post, and reloaded. Now he could look at my stripper's ass while I squatted. It might be a show, but it wasn't one I had to watch anymore.

After squats, I transitioned to overhead press while he grabbed a kettlebell.

"Are you really doing kettlebell swings?" I couldn't help but sneer. It was such a CrossFit thing to do.

"Cardio. You did ask how I fit into a cockpit." He exhaled as the kettlebell reached its apex. I watched it swing back down between his knees and come back up time and time again. Hey, my workout was uncomplicated, but I had a lot of downtime

between sets. I could only pretend to be so interested in gazing at the wall.

We each finished our workouts without further conversation and only the occasional glance in each other's direction. I thought I could beat him out the door when I heard him go into the tiny bathroom, but after packing up my crap and hooking up Rousby, we both reached for the main light switch at the same time.

He threw the switch, swathing our sweaty, still-panting bodies in darkness. Neither of us moved for a few seconds. I caught his eye in the moonlight, and a smile crinkled at its corner. It was not sexy at all.

I locked the door behind us and made for the boardwalk. He sort of dawdled behind, and I hesitated, wondering if I should simply power walk away or linger in uncomfortable politeness. Powerlifting Me evaporated. She had been replaced by awkward, geeky me who didn't know what to say to men.

"Um. Bye," I said, looking back at him. Good start, Geek Me.

"Hey, uh, wait up," he said, catching up in a balletic leap. I wondered if his mom put him in dance when he was a boy. I'm sure he would have made an adorable little boy ballerina.

"I live up this way." I gestured with Rousby's leash.

"I know. Mind if I walk with you a little ways? I'm staying at Hank's tonight." Oh, Heavenly Father, God of Doughnuts and Bacon, he was sleeping two blocks from me? Why had my attraction to personalities abandoned me in my hour of need?

Someone had punched extra stars in the sky tonight. The heavens, I corrected myself. The night was too poetic to be named differently. The temperature was mild, but that old adage about March coming in like a lion ran through my head. There seemed to be zephyrs gusting across the water tonight. This far south on the island, I could almost stretch out my arms and simultaneously dip my fingers in both the river and the bay.

The wind whipped around from every direction, turning my hair into a swirling vortex of exercise-loosened tendrils. The sweat

evaporating off my back chilled me to my bones. I punched my thumbs through the holes in my cozy sweatshirt and pulled the hood over my head.

John seemed immune to the cold. He was probably one of those sons of bitches who never sweated. I got drenched every workout from my neck to my knees. He tarried with me, looking up at the stars and out over the water, taking in the romance of the sea and the rocks and the salt air.

I didn't take my living environment for granted, but watching him enchanted by it all gave me pause to look around, seeing Solomons through his newbie eyes.

"How'd you end up here, John?" I scrunched my face. I hadn't meant to say his name. Calling him by his name was too personal for me to comfortably maintain my frigid distance.

His eyes flickered to me, brows raised. I had surprised him, though he quickly covered the look. He took a few more of those ambling steps, and I realized he was trying to match the pace set by my short stride. He seemed at ease tonight. Probably planning a prank to pull later.

"I'm from everywhere. Military brat. Landed in Iowa. But I've spent my fair share of time here. First, I did a stint here with Hank for a few months when I was young. Then Annapolis. After a few tours on ship, back here for a year for test pilot school." We walked a few more leisurely steps, neither of us in much of a hurry to get out of the cold. Him, because he was probably immune to the chill, me because...well, I had no clue why I wasn't already halfway home at a sprint. More importantly, it wasn't a question I wanted to ask myself.

Anyway, it would probably be rude to stomp away from someone who was headed in the same direction as me.

"But right before you got stationed at Pax River?"

"The USS Ronald Reagan."

"Okay." I rolled my eyes at his inability to maintain the

momentum of a conversation. Which begged the question, why bother walking with me?

“Yokosuka, Japan, by way of Pensacola,” he clarified after seeing my scrunched eyebrows.

“Wow. I’ve always wanted to go to Japan.” I was impressed. “Did you love it? Was it as awesome as I think it is?”

“Probably, though I didn’t get to see it like you would, a tourist. I was on board a ship. An enormous floating village with too many men. When I did get to travel, I was going a thousand knots—a little over a thousand miles per hour,” he looked over at me as an aside, “over the already bombed-out Red Zone.”

“I can imagine the road trip snacks you’d pack for that would be pretty dull,” I said, which earned me the trophy of a sideways smile and a little chuckle. It made me want more. I wanted to tickle him all over to see one full smile.

“I’d like to go back to Japan someday,” he continued.

“Just not to eat the sushi, right?” I teased.

“God, no. Cooked fish is bad enough.”

We skirted around the restaurant that rudely blocked our path on the boardwalk. It was a fantastic location. It was the shame of the island that it served nothing but bland, greasy food.

“So, you want to grab a bite?” he asked. “I always eat here when I’m in town.”

“Another way I can tell you’re an outsider,” I said, turning the corner and opening the door to the private pier.

We skirted our way around the back of the restaurant. This was the side that jutted out over the Patuxent. White plastic tables draped with red and white checked vinyl cloths dotted the outside dining area. It was the only place we could dine with Rousby. Luckily for us, their heaters bloomed with fiery heat, warming the air comfortably enough.

“Well, look at you,” said a jaunty voice behind us. I turned around to make my apologies for not having eaten here in so long when Mary Jane came up to our table and produced two menus

sheathed in thick plastic. Mine had a gummy glob of ketchup over the “catch of the day” entrée description. “I wondered if we’d be seeing you tonight.” MJ hadn’t even registered my presence.

“You want a Heineken, sweetie?” she asked John, who did. “Em?” she turned in my direction.

“Same,” I said over my shoulder as she walked away from the table.

MJ was my long-lost brother’s mother-in-law, my nieces’ grandmother. We got along fine on the girl’s birthdays, baptisms, and occasional Christmases. She didn’t mean anything by ignoring me. It was the John Bergen effect. Women were mesmerized by him.

And yes, I was one of them. I fell under his spell the second he shone his eyes on me. That was before I knew he was performing his good deed of the day, thinking he was providing my next meal, but the spell was there, for a brief, glimmering second. Then the spell broke and all the glittery little orbs floated down around me to be absorbed by the splintered boards beneath my feet.

At least the moment was fleeting and I didn’t continue making a fool of myself like sixty-five-year-old MJ, who was now scooping her breasts up front and center behind John’s chair.

“I thought you were new here,” I accused him. “How do you know MJ?”

“I actually worked here in high school.” He fiddled with his paper napkin ring.

“You lived here in high school? Did we know each other and I somehow completely forgot you?” I looked at him intently, trying to conjure an image of a fifteen-year-old John Bergen. Nope, not even a shorter John Bergen with acne and giant-legged jeans could have bypassed my notice. “No. That couldn’t have happened. I would have remembered you.”

“You would?” he asked, looking up—well, down—at me with big doe eyes.

“Of course! I mean, come on, those eyes of yours?” It slipped

out before I could think to keep it in. “Yes. I would have remembered you. At least your name. It was a small school. It was a small town.” I looked down.

“I remember you,” he said.

“Oh, God.” It was never good when people remembered me from childhood.

“You’re pretty much the same, only...” His lips thinned and he looked toward the water.

“Only what?”

“I thought you were a lesbian.” He tossed the paper napkin ring he had been fiddling with on the table.

“So did everyone else.” I shrugged. I didn’t date in high school. No homecoming games, no prom, nothing. I was too busy with the shop.

“Get something fried if you’re scared.” His chin was tilted down in the direction of his calmly folded hands, but his eyes met mine. A hint of humor reflected back at me. He lounged in his chair, legs stretched out in repose. It was the attitude of a tall, confident man. I envied that in him. I wasn’t a flighty, insecure girl—well, not on the outside—but I had my demons, my moments of doubt.

“Something fried’ is pretty much my only option.”

“Here ya go, hun.” MJ had come out of nowhere with our beer bottles and two frosted mugs we both declined. “Have you had a chance to look at the menu?” She included me in her questioning this time. *Oh, MJ, I don’t blame you.*

“Crabcake and fries,” I ordered, handing back the menu.

“Ribeye, medium rare, broccoli, and baked potato with everything.” He slapped the menu shut and handed it to MJ without looking at her.

“Since when do they have a ribeye?”

He raised his eyebrows. “When’s the last time you’ve eaten here?”

“High school.”

“Since then.” He leaned back and placed a hand behind his

neck, stretching it slowly, first to one shoulder, then the other. Then down. Then up. Then looking at me openly, in détente.

"I still think you should have taken your own advice." I pouted, knowing I'd lost whatever game I started playing. My stomach clenched. It wasn't that he ordered a steak. I didn't care what he ate. It was that he knew something about my town, even if it was something as small as a menu item from a restaurant I hadn't frequented in well over a decade. But he knew it. An outsider. And it shocked me. Somehow, it stole my footing away.

"You can overcook a steak, but it's still steak," he explained.

"Meaning what?" *Were we still talking about food?*

"Meaning, there's not a lot someone can do to steak to render inedible. I'd rather take my chances with one slice of cow than whatever you've got going on in your crab cake. And Skipjack's does not deep fry everything."

"Wait until you see your broccoli," I joked. We sipped our beers in silence. Every so often, Rousby picked his head off the dock and placed it on John's leg. Just to check.

"What makes you think I'm not?" I asked.

He tipped back his bottle and raised his eyebrows with a question. When he brought it down, there was a line of moisture rimming his upper lip.

"A lesbian." I wanted to crawl across the table and lick that drop from his lip.

His head cocked to the side. "Well, for one, the way you're looking at me now like you're thirsty for more than Heineken."

Geek Me panicked. My bottle slipped and clunked against my teeth. Pain shot up my gums and directly into my frontal lobe. As if I needed any more damage to that area of my adolescent brain. MJ arrived with our perfectly-timed food, and the subject wasn't pursued and we ate in silence.

"My parents divorced, and the five of us stayed with Mom. Dad was still in the Navy, transferring all over the globe. By the time I got to high school, I was a little wild. By tenth grade, Mom thought

I needed a stable male influence and sent me to live with Hank for a few months. I went to Catholic school, helped Hank repair other people's boats, and bussed tables here. He kept me busy and I stayed out of trouble. I guess Mom was right."

That was the most he had spoken to me. I was honored to be the recipient of his tale.

"I wish I had known you then," I said. John looked at me and opened his mouth to say something.

The heaters worked like a Patronus charm and blasted away the chill in the air. I enjoyed the time outside, looking across the black river and the twinkling lights of the runways and flight path indicators of the naval base. There were no small craft boats floating this time of night. Crabbers and oystermen left before dawn, and pleasure seekers moored by sunset this time of year.

There were a million tiny moons floating on the peaks of the lazy waves. The sounds of lapping water and Rousby's snoring was hypnotic. I could almost forget I was sitting next to one of the most handsome men I had ever seen. If he retired early, he could probably have a second career as a Hugo Boss model. An aviator styling aviators.

John leaned forward and rested his crossed arms on the table. "You want to let me know what's going on with Hank?"

"Didn't he tell you everything already?" I was still watching the dancing moons. "I don't know much myself. I'm essentially his Uber. I sit in the waiting room while he gets his EKGs and blood tests and ultrasounds. When he comes out, he assures me he's fine."

"I have a hard time believing you never go in with him," he leveled with me. "Hank's always saying how he can't lie to you. I think he tells you more than me. I just want to be in on it." He leaned back again in his chair and ran his fingers through his hair. It seemed too long for the military. Maybe there was a separate rubric for handsome pilots, like how special forces teams could have full beards. "My uncle means a lot to me. I need him to be around for a long time."

“I know what you mean. I’ve known him since I was a kid, when my parents docked at his marina. He’s probably my best friend.” I sighed. “Listen, I know he has a blockage, but the doctor wants to wait and see. I can’t get him into the gym with me, and he rarely comes over for dinner anymore. That’s as far as I know. Do with it what you will.”

That was enough heavy for this conversation. I turned to him and crossed one knee over the other. “Fortunately for both of us, Hank’s a stubborn mule, and the crotchety ones last the longest on this planet. As long as he takes it easier, maybe hires an assistant, he’ll live a long, miserable life.” I took a swig of warm beer. It was bitter going down, but after half the bottle, the tension of the workout and the tweak in my shoulder melted away.

When the plates were cleared, John stepped away for a call and I twiddled on my phone. I had a client ask for help scouring online sources for some replacement pots for his 1970s-era aluminum cookware set, and I found a steal on item number HG55c for only \$6.99. Hell yes, I’ll bid.

That was another free service of my antiques shop that stood in the shadow of Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Church, that city on a hill that never stops hustling for more congregants and volunteers. That reminded me. I told Lorraine I’d help cook giant vats of pasta for the spaghetti supper. It was a part of my self-reinvention effort that I was quickly growing weary of. Be more social. Smile. Dress...better. I didn’t know that there was all that much wrong with me in the first place, but I’d promised myself I’d try. And nicer jeans did make my quads and butt appear rather impressive.

I didn’t notice John hovering behind me, peeking at my screen. “So, this is what you do with your weekday nights? Bid on”—he grabbed the phone from my hand—“Vintage AluWare one-quart saucepan with lid. Good used condition?” He sat still, holding my phone, and as I reached for it, he did that tall boy trick and held it just out of my reach. I gave up. If he was intent on studying my

eBay auction, he could have at it. I bought my personal “special” items from Amazon.

“You know there’s probably levels of lead toxicity in this that will kill you after one meal,” he said, still paging through the photos, I assumed.

“It’s for Jerry Connell.” I finally got the phone back in my hands after he got bored and slid it across the table to me. “And I’m sure everyone who’s eaten the decades-worth of canned green beans this pan has cooked is still alive and well and lead-free.”

“Alive, maybe. ‘Well’ is debatable. Have you seen the statistics on our nation’s health? I bet it’s all from green beans cooked in AluWare one-quart saucepans. Let’s get out of here,” he suggested, rising from his chair.

“We haven’t gotten our check,” I argued, glued to my seat. Rousby was already up on his feet because he was a mutineer.

“I took care of it,” he said, standing a few feet away and looking away. Message sent and received: yes, I paid for your dinner. No, it was not a date.

The dude seriously had nothing to worry about on that front. He was stoically perfect. I was proudly flawed. Neither of us were what we needed or wanted. We were mismatched salt and pepper shakers, two nations with a common ally in Hank.

I gathered my bag and Rousby’s leash, and John gestured for me to lead the way through the labyrinth of doors and docks to the front. As I navigated around a table, I felt him following closely. The tendrils of hair around my neck tickled with his exhale as he briefly reached out, touching my back, guiding me along the path.

He dropped his hand when I stiffened. I was unused to being touched there with a gentle, guiding hand, but the shivers felt wonderful.

“I’m sorry. I should have offered to take his leash for you. Or your bag,” John said from behind. I was trying to exit as quickly as possible and my hip bumped a chair, which toppled over on the uneven planks.

"Thanks, but I'm used to lugging all this stuff."

When we reached the parking lot, I turned to him. "Thank you for the meal. I'm sorry I disparaged the food beforehand."

"No need to apologize. Your warnings were noted and refuted."

"Well, I'll see you around Hank's place sometime, I guess."

"Yes, you will." He was starting in my direction while I walked backwards, inching away from him and his charm. My immunity to him was compromised and I needed to be home now.

I turned around with another "Well, see you," and resumed the short hike home. But he was beside me again.

"We're still headed in the same direction."

"Oh, yep." I nervously laughed. "Feel free to go ahead. You know, short legs and all." I didn't recognize my own voice when it came out in phlegmy spurts. I sounded like a Disney Princess with a smoker's cough.

"I like the company."

We silently walked the rest of the way home. To *my* home. Both of us. He looked over my tiny brick apartment, my skull welcome mat, my urn filled with what would be Black-eyed Susans when they bloomed. He took in everything without saying a word while I stood, shivering, waiting for his appraisal.

"Hank's got an appointment with Dr. Alvarez this Tuesday," he offered, finally. "You know him, right? Think you can make it?"

"You mean you're letting me help? Of course I can make it. You're driving though." My usual caveat.

"Why?"

"You get better gas mileage."

"How do you know that?"

"Trust me."

With an awkward hug, we said goodnight and he disappeared into the blackness. It felt colder on the porch without him.

CHAPTER 5

I showered and settled into bed with a thriller and a cup of chamomile. If adulting was no more difficult than this, I'd be killing it right now. No one excelled at Responsible Evening at Home more than me.

After reading the same paragraph describing blood spatter on a broken set of miniblinds three times and counting, I gave up the fight with my reminiscences and loosened the reins. I let my mind go where it wanted, which was back to dinner and to John. His light touches, the feeling of his eyes on me when I wasn't looking, our companionable stretches of silence, and our new truce. I wondered if he thought about me when I wasn't there. If he felt the teeniest, tiniest thrill like I did just now.

Probably not. He was nice, kind, and had a sense of silliness that squeezed my heart, but he was still a fighter pilot. More accurately, a test pilot of fighter jets. That meant that the odds were virtually 99% that he was a hot shot by nature, AKA a woman-in-every-port type. I'd never known a test pilot who wasn't, and uniforms weren't few and far between around these parts. Girls around here grow up

knowing two things: how to bait crab traps and how to steer clear from the navy pilots. I wasn't about to be fooled into believing John wasn't Maverick from *Top Gun*. And I, certainly the Kelly McGillis type—who, despite the fact that she was old AF and kind of a casting mismatch—was still blonde, ball-busting, and not an adolescent.

I wasn't going to take anyone's breath away, much less Maverick's. Clean cut and professional men didn't find me attractive. Setting aside my tattoos and my wardrobe of stained t-shirts, my hobbies of lifting heavy metal and listening to heavy metal, I had always been a hard bitch to love. I had visible, ugly flaws that I wouldn't dream of disguising. I highlighted them. I flaunted them. I was a bad motherfucker, and I made it clear that nobody could hold me down.

But that was my outside. Honestly, I don't know what came first, the badass attitude or the badass exterior. If I had a therapist, we'd probably talk about how my own insecurities led me to put physical barriers up somehow. I'd insist on my autonomy of style, my stained and holey t-shirts reading the real "I don't give a fuck what anyone thinks about me" attitude. Meanwhile, they can only try to coax me into admitting that I'm scared shitless of being rejected and that is what is robbing me of a life of pastel tweed suits. And love.

On the inside, I was less sure of anything. I was an infuriating, whimpering child, an unsupported three-tiered cake, ready to buckle at the first cut. Now, somehow John had become the slippery sweet jam filling, sliding between my layers, unbalancing my structure.

And he didn't even know it.

My phone chimed with an email from eBay that the AluWare had been purchased. WTF? That item had zero bids and zero watchers, and suddenly, it was purchased? Ugh! I should have jumped on it at dinner. I don't know what I was thinking. Oh wait. John. I was thinking of John. Fat lot of good that did me. Maybe I

should schedule some appointments with a therapist. I can blame my stupid low self-esteem on my parents.

“SET ME UP WITH SOMEONE, NANCE,” I commanded before she even had a chance to set her bags down.

“Good morning to you too,” Nancy quipped.

I ignored her. “I’ll date anyone. Even a cop.” I gestured to her with my pencil as I headed into the back. “I’d prefer it if he’s tall. And he can’t be like, ten years younger than me. And not a control freak.”

“There goes half the department,” she said under her breath.

“And it’d be great if he could bench more than me,” I added finally.

“Do you know what a tall order that is, Em?” Nancy peered at me under her eyebrows. “Anyway, don’t you want to hear my news?”

“Of course, Nancy! I’m sorry. I need to stop thinking so much.”

“About what, may I ask? Or rather, whom?” Nancy asked, scrolling through her phone. She was up to something. She had that devious look in her eye.

“It’s nothing. I’ve got a lot of free time lately and—”

“Just noticing that now, are you?” she chided.

“Oh, come on. What’s your news? Let me chastise you for once.” I bumped her hip with mine and peeked at her phone. I thought she’d be looking at her contacts list for names of potential suitors, but she was on Instagram.

“One second. Here.” She handed me her phone. I saw a photo of a beautiful late Victorian satinwood sideboard with inlaid marquetry. It was eerily similar to the one that currently stood three feet to my right. Shining from the top was a pair of exquisitely tall, brass 1950s lamps—not modern, but designed for those

who liked the throwback aesthetics of earlier styles. The photo had 345 little red hearts. I handed back the phone.

“Great pieces. If only an actual customer would ‘heart’ them and take them home in real life.”

“No, no, not the picture. Read the comments.”

“Looks authentic,” I read. I shrugged. It better be for the price I paid for it.

“Beautiful,’ heart-eyes emoji, red heart, red heart, green heart, more of the same, more of the same...‘Hello, I love your content. I’m a writer for the *Washington Post Style* section and I’d love to do a write-up about your antiques shop. DM me.” I looked up at Nancy, who was grinning like a mustachioed villain plotting to tie me to the railroad tracks.

“Well?” she asked.

“Nancy, no way.” I shook my head. “‘I like your content’? That’s like, Instagram code for ‘this is a ploy to get more followers.’ What’s her name anyway?” I asked, grabbing the phone back from Nancy and looking back at the comment. “Style Crystal? That’s awful. I don’t want anyone named Style Crystal to write about my shop, even if it is her screen name. It sounds like the opposite of someone stylish.”

“The Style section isn’t about fashion, Em,” Nancy said, narrowing her eyes at my pilfered-from-the-donation-bags-still-in-my-kitchen Nirvana-era flannel shirt and baggy jeans, “though it does have some articles about the subject it wouldn’t kill you to read—”

“Ha. Ha.”

“It’s about what to do on the weekend in the DC Metro area. It’s about getting customers.”

“Who won’t buy anything,” I added.

“What’s to buy? You keep this place like a museum. Nothing’s for sale. If you don’t like the look of someone, or you think they’re not going to baby a cabinet like you do, or, God forbid, they use Pledge—”

“You. Can’t. Use. Pledge. On. Antiques,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Your buyers can use anything they like on their own furniture. You seem to forget, Em, that once it leaves your shop, it’s not yours anymore. You don’t get to protect it like it’s your baby on its first day of kindergarten. It doesn’t take away a piece of your soul. You trade it for funds which, in turn, help you purchase your next acquisition.”

To illustrate her point, she dropped her Diet Mountain Dew bottle right onto the unprotected surface of the very sideboard that began this inquest. I gasped and lunged for it, but she picked it up before I could snatch it away.

“Case in point,” she said. “The next time someone wants to paint an old cabinet to make it fit in better with their house, smile and take their money.”

“That bitch wanted to chalk paint ebony inlay. Who does that?”

“And you lost a \$325 sale because you couldn’t pry your fingers off your wooden baby.”

“What does this have to do with Instagram?” I glared at her. Nancy had beaten me and we both knew it.

“I messaged her. And she called me. Her name is Anne Lamont, and she’s coming out in two weeks to do an exclusive on you and Blue Heron Antiques. She thinks you’re the right quirky, unique, badass woman she wants to write about, and she loves what you’ve built this place into. It’s going to be a small piece, but it’ll be printed, not an online exclusive. And in the Sunday Style. If that doesn’t bring in clients, I’m out of ideas.”

“Promise?”

“Not on your life.” She smiled wickedly.

“They’re customers, Nancy, not clients. We’re selling furniture, not brokering insurance deals.”

“Hello! Hellooo!” sang a voice as the bell over the door jingled. A sleek, red mane bobbed into view around a Victorian display cabinet.

“Helen. I’ve been meaning to call. How’s Margaret?” Nancy asked the newcomer—not a customer, like 90% of our foot traffic.

“Still making my life a misery after sixty-two years.” Helen let out an exasperated huff then pumped a cup of coffee from the air pot. “She called me yesterday. Said it was freezing in her room and the nurses wouldn’t let her turn the thermostat higher than eighty-five. Can I check on their qualifications, she asked me. She’s hoping they let one pass through without her CNA and starting a scandal will give her the authority to turn the heat up to ninety.”

“I owe her a visit. Did Father Mike give her ashes last Wednesday?” I zoned out when Nancy started speaking Catholic.

Helen Cartwright was Nancy’s best friend and the head curator of the Calvert Marine Museum a few blocks to the north. She was elegance personified in her black suits, chic flats, and red lipstick. Her roots were always done, she maintained a svelte figure in her mid-sixties, and, besides Nancy, who had a villainous streak, she was kinder and more generous than anyone else I knew. They were two peas in a pod and the Grand Dames of Our Lady Star of the Sea.

I turned to head back to the dungeon. There had to be something back there that needed cleaning.

“Wait a minute, Helen. Emerson? Don’t go far, I have a question for you,” Nancy hollered to me.

“Nancy, I tell you,” Helen said. “When you go, you better wear a bathing suit, it’s so darn hot in there. Between that and the prunes she stuffs everywhere...” She trailed off, shaking her head.

“Prunes?” I asked. Margaret Cartwright had moved into a cute little one bedroom in the assisted living facility after breaking her hip eight years ago. She was ninety years old then and had spent her life badgering her daughter, squawking at townspeople she thought disrespectful—which naturally included everyone under the age of fifty—and showing up unexpectedly to County Commissioner assemblies to bark out her orders. The Old Biddies that frequented my shop worshipped her and kept her in near-

constant company. If it were up to me, Nancy and Helen would both be canonized for dealing with her.

“Yes, prunes,” Helen sighed. “You know those prepackaged prune singles?”

Um. No.

“They’re crack for the nursing home set,” Nancy joked.

“She tucks them into the crevices of her couch, piles them around her nightstand, has tubes of them in every drawer. Wherever she sits, she wants a prune within arm’s reach. Like it’s even going to help, for God’s sake. The woman eats no fiber.”

I needed to get out of here before the bowel habits of a ninety-eight-year-old woman became more explicit.

“So, Em,” Helen said, turning to me. “What are you doing April 27th?”

“Hell if I know. What does my non-church church need cooked or cleaned this time?”

“Very funny.” Helen rolled her cat eyes at me. “Well, your presence is officially requested at a fundraising event for the museum that night.” She handed me a glossy flyer that looked professionally designed.

“Oh, that. Jenn told me. You mean I’m officially requested to purchase a ridiculously overpriced plate of crab imperial and boiled carrots?” I narrowed my eyes at her.

“Exactly. It’s for the museum so I knew you wouldn’t mind.” She was mostly right. I didn’t mind helping the museum. I *did* mind being hustled. “I’m not asking you to purchase a table or anything. Two tickets. That’s all.”

“Why two, exactly?” I wasn’t going to make it easy on her. I was in the mood to be annoying.

“You’ll need to bring a date, of course. It’s formal.” Helen smirked.

“I will if you will.” I turned it back on her. Helen was a confirmed singleton. I’d never known her to be romantically

attached to anyone. Perhaps that was the reason for her slender figure. No husband and kids to cook mashed potatoes for.

"I'll be working, dear."

"Excuses, excuses." I waved her off.

"I gotta run. I'm taping this flyer in your window, Emerson." Helen waved herself off, and after the crinkle of scotch tape, I heard the bell jingle behind her.

"Well, Nancy. Looks like you've got your work cut out for you," I shouted from the back.

THE WEEK DISAPPEARED with its usual pacing, the sleepy Wednesday following the dull Tuesday, then the energizing Thursday and frantic Friday. I only pestered Nancy about finding someone willing to go out with me...well, daily.

"What about Sam? He has a nice name," I asked. She was rearranging baskets of vintage 1940s linens to snap a "candid" photo.

"He has a nice wife too. And a six-year-old son." Nancy tilted the fabric until it hit the light right.

"No kidding. I wasn't invited."

"Wasn't invited to what?" Nancy was distracted by her new InstaMarketing hobby.

"The wedding."

"You didn't go. There's a difference."

"You have a point." That was during my low period, when I never left the house, declined all invitations and phone calls, and didn't care how bedraggled my appearance was. Some would say I was still in that low period.

I would. I would say that.

But I was trying to change. I was making an effort. I was investing in myself. That's what all this date-finding business was about. Granted, Nancy was doing the legwork, but I gave her the go-ahead.

“Jason?” I was determined to have a date this weekend.

“Smith or Blackwell?”

“Whichever one isn’t married?”

“I’ll text him.”

“Which one?”

“Smith is living in sin. Blackwell might have a girlfriend.”

“How do you text but still say ‘living in sin?’”

“You can take the girl out of the church, but you can’t take the Catholic guilt out of the girl. It’s not a judgment thing. Only a description,” she clarified. I was still muddy.

Her phone pinged.

“Last weekend for goose. Sorry,” she read.

“That’s a thrill for my ego if I ever heard it,” I said. I was being stood up for goose hunting. That was a new low. Might as well condemn me to the assisted living place and give me all the prunes now.

“I’m sorry, Em.” Nancy patted my shoulder. “We’ll keep trying. I know someone will want to go to the benefit with you. You are paying for the ticket after all.”

F. M. L.

CHAPTER 6

All was not lost. It just so happened that I found a date for myself Saturday night. My sister-in-law, Melissa, took an extra shift at the hospital. Since Justin was nowhere to be found, she hoped I might want to spend some quality time with the girls.

I did indeed.

After dropping them off at my apartment, Melissa gave them each a kiss and a challenge to “be good for Auntie Em.” When the door shut behind their mom, their faces melted. They looked glum when they said goodbye. After the door closed, they were positively miserable.

There was no time allotted for misery on my itinerary. I planned a patriarchy-smashing night on the town, complete with hot rods, art, cookie dough, and snuggling, and we had to get started immediately.

“Alright, Maddie,” I said to my eldest niece. “Okay, Kay.” I turned to her little sister. “Are we ready for some F-U-N?” I cringed at my lameness.

“It’s not Maddie anymore. It’s Madison,” she informed me. I

was afraid of this. At twelve, she was already deep in her mean girl tribe.

“Why is there trash in your kitchen? Can’t the garbage man take it?” Kayleigh was looking at my giant black sacks of clothes that still took up most of the floor space. Kay was nine. She was still dipping her toes in the mean girl tidal pool.

Luckily, mean girls have never bothered me. That was a perk of being out on the fringe that bordered cool and unapproachable. It was like Exxon off a duck’s back, a little mucky and uncomfortable, but with enough degreaser, it didn’t stick.

“Maddie, you’ll always be Maddie to me. Besides, aren’t you like, the twelfth Madison in your class? Go rogue.” That won me an exaggerated eye roll and an equally exaggerated “Ugh!”

“Kay, It’s not trash. It’s for donation, and I haven’t had time to take it to the resale shop. Now,” I clapped, doing my best Fraulein Maria impression. “Grab your water bottles. Let’s move out.”

“Where are we going?”

As it turned out—nowhere.

I wanted to take them on a walk around the sculpture garden a couple miles north of the island, but:

A. They were closed, and

B. My car was a ’72 Chevelle. Classic muscle, terrible gas mileage, even worse safety restraining devices. Okay, look, I hadn’t gotten around to installing upgrades because I drove so rarely. It didn’t see much need. Also, why tamper with perfection?

What I didn’t count on was today’s children and their sturdy grasp of child safety seat protocols.

“This car has no seat belts,” Kay said from the back bench.

“Kay has to have a booster seat,” Maddie said.

“I’m small for my age,” Kay agreed.

“Is that seriously a deal breaker? It’s two miles away and this car is cast iron. If we hit anyone, we’re going straight through and out the other side. You won’t even notice.”

That won me a Maddie death stare.

“Okay, fine, we’ll be Solomons Island tourists. We’ll walk the boardwalk, check out the restaurants, get a Mai Tai at the Tiki Bar...”

The girls exchanged one of those sisterly glances.

“What? You’re not going to educate me on underage drinking, too?” I challenged.

“Can’t we stay home and watch YouTube?” Maddie whined.

“Absolutely not.” I reluctantly stepped out of my shiny Black Beauty. I had the exterior restored first, because I had priorities. Maybe the girls’ disdain was applicable. The back seats were probably embedded with forty years’ worth of passionate encounters, none of them mine.

“Follow me if you want to live, my ducklings,” I said.

“Where are we going?” Kay asked.

“You are so weird.” Maddie half-heartedly kicked at the rocks in the driveway.

“The playground, girls.”

“Are you kidding me?” Maddie retorted. “I’m wayyy too old for the playground.”

I stopped dead and spun around. “No one. I repeat. No one. Is too old for swings. And actually, you’re the exact right age for the playground, but that’s not the playground I had in mind.”

“Then, what?” Kay asked. Maddie rolled her eyes.

“You’ll see.”

After twelve minutes of walking, they started in again.

“This is soooo far-uhhhhhh!” Maddie had a hilariously bad habit of adding a whiny extra vowel onto the end of her words. She spoke like James Hetfield sang.

“Need. Water.” Kay was zombie-walking on her way to return the One Ring to Mordor.

Kids these days.

“WTF is this place?” Maddie asked when we reached our destination.

“Language, Maddie. Keep it classy. I promised your mom.”

I turned my key and opened the door to darkness. The girls coughed, but not because I had led them into an abandoned crypt, like they were feigning.

A few flickering seconds after flipping on the lights, the Quonset hut was illuminated and the girls groaned.

“Okay. Okay. I knew I had my work cut out for me bringing you two here, but you know what? You’re going to try something new today. You don’t have to like it, but you have to give it 100%.”

“A kid in my class says he does CrossFit,” Kay said, her eyes bulging at the racks, the ropes, and the general rough-on-purpose quality of the gym equipment. “Is that what we’re doing?”

“Not exactly, but some elements are similar,” I said. This was more like the Ground Zero of CrossFit. “Hey, Kay! Great job.” The tiny monkey was already halfway up a vertical rope.

I searched through my music on my phone and found some Otep to blast through the gym’s speakers.

This might not be so bad. At least I had their attention. Kay had moved on to box jumps and was a total frog. Maddie was trailing me, afraid to touch anything.

“I’m setting you up right next to me. I’ll show you the movement. Then you do it and I’ll coach you through it.” I had no real intention of turning her on to the sport of weightlifting, but it’s always good to know your future options.

“*I’m* doing this?” Maddie was appalled. “I can’t do this. I’ll look like a boy.”

“Do I look like a boy?” I asked her.

“No, but you have boobs and stuff,” she informed me.

“One workout does not a bodybuilder make.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means it’s time to squat.”

As soon as I said it, Kay bounced over to the empty rack to my right. She was in the process of adapting the pull up bar for use as her own personal jungle gym, hanging upside down from her

knees when she pointed over my shoulder and asked, "Who's that?"

I turned to look and jumped about a foot in the air. There was a very tall man standing behind me with his arms crossed. The relief I felt at the recognition soon gave way to annoyance, and before I could even say hello to John, my face gave me away.

"Nice to see you too," he said, uncrossing his arms. "Who are these little gym rats?"

"These are my nieces, Kay and Maddie. My dates for the night."

Maddie giggled. "She's teaching us to squat." *Oh, so now...*

"Oh, is she?" He was thoroughly amused. I was not. "You want to know a secret," he whispered as low as he could with my matriarchal-nu-death-rap metal screaming in the background. "Be sure you listen carefully. Your aunt has the best squat in the whole gym." He gave me a knowing look, the meaning of which only he understood. "I've learned a lot from paying very close attention." He didn't smile or wink, but the effect was the same. My cheeks burned red and I had to look away.

"You've seen me here once, John. Kids, he's pulling your leg. But watch me anyway."

"I'll catch up with you before you leave," he said, going his own way to complete his kettlebell swings.

"Oh. My. God. He. Is. Smokin'. Hot." Maddie was already lost in a starry-eyed spell.

"Dude!" I said to Maddie. "Who are your friends? You people talk like this?"

"Like what?" she asked, still in his thrall as he began his horn squats.

"Like you're texting your BFF," I said, standing in front of her to block the totally inappropriate-for-children view of John's exercise shorts stretched tightly across his muscular ass. It might have blocked my own view too. The girl had crazy good taste in men.

"BFF? No one says that anymore. It's 'bae.'"

"Bae as in...?"

“Before anyone else-uhhhhh?????”

Yessss. She did the James Hetfield/Valley Girl thing again. I changed the music to the *Master of Puppets* album.

“Do you want to impress him or not?” I asked her. Kay had long bounded off, and up, and through, and under every piece of equipment and was now swinging a kettlebell with John. It was...absolutely fucking adorable.

Maddie had the smarts to see how far her sister was getting. “I guess so.”

I showed her the first set. My usual analogy to coach the kinesiobiology for the hip drive—a stripper giving a lap dance—yeah, that would neither clarify the movement for her nor win me points with her mom, so I modified toward a more tactile approach.

After her last set, she squatted with the women’s bar across her back and I saw the teeniest shadow of a smile cross her face. I kept my squeal to myself.

That was what I loved about lifting. It’s the world’s best internal confidence booster. You don’t need accolades or likes or hearts. The ability to pick up heavy shit makes you feel like you are crushing your goals, whatever they may be.

John gave her a thumbs up, and that brought out the sunshine in her radiant smile. I’d do anything for that look on her face, especially since she’s had to deal with that shitty hand of an absent, druggie dad in her life.

External accolades were good, too. But the best way to fight the mean girls is to have the confidence to wish them well from afar.

“Why do you listen to this old music, Em?” The “Auntie” prefix was a losing battle. At least she was speaking in more than complaints now.

“Old music?” said John, who had somehow crept behind me. “Metallica? This is only the greatest metal album of all time.”

“No way,” I said. “Not even the greatest Metallica album of all time.” He was delusional.

“And what might that be? Oh wait. Don’t tell me. *The Black Album*,” he teased. At least I think he teased. Nope. Not teasing. He didn’t know who he was playing with.

“*And Justice for All*.” Checkmate.

He laughed. “Come on. You don’t seriously believe that overinflated ego trip.”

“It’s the best for ‘One’ alone,” I argued.

“That’s a great song, but it’s all Lars. For it to be a great album—a full album—you have to get the total effect. And that means *Master of Puppets* wins hands down. Best metal album ever.”

“Not everyone agrees that Metallica is even real metal. You can’t claim a fringe band is the best.”

“Not real metal?! That’s absurd. Metallica crosses over to rock, but their roots? Drop D and double bass. That translates to metal.”

He turned to Maddie, but she was over on the other side of the gym getting coached by Kay in her kettlebell swings. We were so wrapped up in our argument (discussion), we didn’t notice her get bored with us.

So the man was a metalhead. I never would have thought it from an uptight military officer. Not only did he listen to some pretty great music, he could discuss it and know what he was talking about. He was obviously wrong about the Metallica thing, but I couldn’t fault him for toeing the party line.

“You’re a good coach,” he said. “That’s pretty rare.” I waited and waited, but “...for a girl” never came. Bonus points to John.

“I don’t think I broke through the surface. But hey, quality time spent and all that.” I dismissed his compliment. I’d slap myself on the wrist later for that. Learning to say “thank you” was on still my to-do list, somewhere near clothes shopping.

“I mean it,” he insisted. “I’m an instructor. I teach nuanced, complex details that make every bit of difference in life-or-death situations. This isn’t that dissimilar. Teaching is teaching.”

“Except the life-or-death aspect.”

He smiled that wide, bright, squinty-eyed smile that made me

as weak in the knees as a four-hundred-pound squat. “Except for that,” he agreed. “Seriously though, you got a tough, spoiled kid to pay attention long enough to try something new. And from what I could tell, she enjoyed it. That’s hard for the best instructors.”

“She’s not spoiled.” I looked over at her helping her sister with her pull-ups. “She’s been abandoned by her dad—my idiot brother—and she *is* tough. You’re right about that. But I wouldn’t want you to think her attitude is because she’s gotten everything handed to her when it’s quite the opposite.”

“Sounds like you’re a good influence.”

I laughed. “That’s the first time *anyone* has said that to me. I’m the crazy tattooed aunt who takes them on a powerlifting date and tries to drive them around in a car with no seat belts.”

“You didn’t.” He looked at me with real fear.

“I didn’t. Tried to, but they wouldn’t let me. That’s why we’re here. I couldn’t think of anything else that’s fun.”

“I have an idea. But if I show you, you’ll have to let me tag along.”

“Oh, um...that’s okay. I’m sure you have a beautiful date you’re pumping up for now as it is.”

“I wish,” he said with a low, breathy laugh.

“You’re telling me Mr. Hotshot Test Pilot has no date on a Saturday night? I know our singles scene is pretty milquetoast, but it does exist. I’m sure as soon as you walk into the Brass Rail and sing one line of ‘You’ve Lost That Loving Feeling’ on karaoke night, every woman in the bar will offer you a blowjob in the bathroom.”

“Yeah, I’m not really into bathroom blowjobs at this point in my life.”

“What’s a blowjob?” Kay asked.

“Jesus Christ!” I jumped about a foot off the floor.

“Mom says not to say that,” she reprimanded.

“You’re right, sweetie. Please ignore everything you overheard me say. It was not classy of me. And what are we?”

“Classy ladies,” Kay said, skipping away.

“Who were you saying was a good influence again?” I asked John.

“Well, in hindsight—”

“Shut up.” I smacked his arm. His solid granite arm. It was a good thing my post-workout flush hid my blushing cheeks.

I bent over to pick up my bag, put my sneakers on, and collected the girls’ untouched water bottles when John came back with his gear.

“You ready?” he asked.

“For what?”

“The rest of your fun evening. Kid friendly. No blowjobs required.”

“You were serious? Why would you want to hang out with us?” I mean, God, even I didn’t want to hang out with us. I’m pretty sure we were going to head home to watch bad, home-produced YouTube videos.

“I like you.” He faced me squarely, arms at his sides. I tried to keep my face from reacting to what was happening in my heart, but I couldn’t help the corners of my mouth from turning up just a little.

Still, there was a catch. I knew there was. I hope I could learn what it was before I fell for whatever bait was on his hook.

I flicked off the lights and locked us out. The evenings were getting more agreeable with every passing day. I loved this time of year, until it became entirely too hot, and each night was progressively more equatorial than the last.

Most of my good times were reflected in the weather. The first warmish evening, you can leave your coat at home but also go for a stroll without coming home with a sheen of sweat. The apple-scented days of October when you wear a scarf but don’t quite need it. Those were the best. I remember my good weather days like people remember their wedding day.

Given the perfection of the barometric pressure and tempera-

ture, this might become one of those memorable nights. I had great company, my bones felt used and hardy, and I had an adventurous man leading us in an unknown, but family-friendly pursuit. If this is what being married with kids was like, I could see the appeal—once the baby barfing and potty-training days were long gone.

Alas, I was married to my eighteenth-century furniture.

“What year is your car?” John pulled me out of my reverie.

“’72.”

“And no seat belts?”

“There are lap belts, but you know. I’ll probably end up cleanly bisected at the waist if I ever crash.”

“Like the woman in *Beetlejuice*,” he said.

“Exactly. Good reference.” Was it that obvious a Tim Burton movie would gain him bonus points with me?

“What’s *Beetlejuice*?” Kay asked. Maddie wasn’t the question-asking type. That probably made her seem too eager. But she held her ears out for the answers.

“Only Michael Keaton’s best film,” he said to them. *Who was this geek and where had he been all my life?*

“Old people stuff.” Maddie rolled her eyes.

“That’s right. Oldies but goodies,” I said, linking arms with John. I did it more as a gesture of camaraderie, but he stood a little straighter—if that were possible—pinning my arm tightly between his ribs and his biceps of steel. He might have even flexed for a brief, intoxicating second before I wrenched out of his grasp and stepped a little closer to the boardwalk railing in the name of making sure he knew I wasn’t flirting with him.

He inched closer to me, and I buried my hands in my hoodie pocket. The girls practiced cartwheels up ahead. We stopped for a stargazing break, like lovers, but without the touching. Or the loving.

John’s eyes skimmed the water, occasionally glancing up at the sky when the stars winked. I stepped onto the running board of

the railing, leaning over to check the boulders below for any dead bodies that might have washed onto the rocks during the evening.

Like picking up litter, I saw it as my civic duty.

“Emerson.” John said my name softly, as if not to disturb the stars or the incessant shrieks of two children performing their gymnastics routine a few feet away. “Does your name have any special meaning?”

“No.” *Is that an arm down there?* I inched my feet toward the greyish white blob stuck in the crevice to my right.

Nope. Merely the bloated underbelly of a fish, glinting in the moonlight.

“My parents met at college.”

“Well, that explains it,” he teased me.

I didn’t see much point in explaining, since he wasn’t going to be a staple in my life. He was the kind of vague acquaintance that popped up here and there—more here than there lately—but one who never moved past the small talk.

I *needed* to keep him on small talk level.

I sighed. “They went to Emerson. Mom got pregnant, dropped out. Dad finished by the skin of his teeth, and they moved down here to raise hippie dip children and protest the government. They didn’t have much time for picketing after opening their shop. Eventually, they lived their dream and sailed into the sunset, leaving their two very non-hippie children with the care of the shop and each other.”

“And your brother is the girls’ father?” We started walking again. I felt the need to pace for some reason. Oh yeah, I hated talking about my family. That was the reason.

“Justin.” I kept my voice low so Maddie and Kay wouldn’t hear. “He’s five years older and an addict. I know that shouldn’t be the first thing I tell anybody about him, but it describes his personality and why people who don’t know me don’t know I have a brother.”

“I have a sister who struggled with addiction for a long time.

She was in and out of jails, rehabs, twelve-step groups, you name it.”

“Struggled?”

“Struggles, I guess you’d say, since once an addict, always an addict. But she’s been clean now for about seven, eight years, since she got pregnant with her daughter. She’s a great mom. Three kids. Husband. Staunchly Catholic. She’s actually the one who got me to start attending Mass again.”

“Oh yes, to find your good Catholic wife.” I looked at him with only the slightest of eyerolls. “People talk,” I explained.

He laughed. “Yes, they do. Always have, always will.” He got all sheepish and started studying the boards beneath our feet. “I’m not looking for a wife,” he said quietly. My heart broke a tiny bit.

“I’m not opposed to it either. I mean, it’d be kind of nice to share a pizza with someone on Friday nights and have an automatic emergency contact.” He looked at me for a long, deeply endearing moment.

Pizza! I’m in.

“But honestly, now’s not such a good time for me.”

Pizza, you trickster.

“That’s ridiculous. What makes it a bad time if your future spouse crosses your path? You catch her and hold on to her. Make it the right time. After all, you *are* old, according to my nieces. How many more oats do you need sown?”

“Come on.” He let out an exasperated breath. “I don’t know. I just moved here. I have this new career. I’m not flying as much anymore, and I’m still getting used to being grounded,” he said in a rush, like he had to let it all out. “I’m thirty-four. It’s not old. Not *that* old.”

“You were grounded? Is that why you teach?” I asked him gently. I didn’t want to poke into something that seemed like it would be a huge purple and green bruise for someone who spent a career learning how to break the sound barrier.

“Yes. That’s why I’m an instructor. I’m lucky I still get to train

and fly occasionally. I wanted to be around jets since I was a kid, and I still get to be.”

“What was it that did it?”

“Not eating enough carrots.” He smiled at me. It was a sweet and tender joke to make about himself. *Dear Lord, why did Mama not go through a Catholic phase? Maybe I could have been his good Catholic girl.* “My perfect vision isn’t perfect enough anymore.”

“I can’t pretend to know what you feel, but it seems like a bummer. I’m sorry.”

“Eh, I think I made it a bigger thing than it is. I’ve had a long career, and I don’t have to live in Texas or Florida anymore, so I’m good.”

It was lovely, this conversation under the moonlight and all, but I had to ask. “Where are we going?”

“Right up here.” He pointed to the ice cream stand the girls were already in line for. “Isn’t this why we go to the gym?” *Uh! A man after my own heart. Except not really.*

“Can we, John?” asked Kay.

“Pleeeeeeease-uhhhhh?” Holy cow, she even did it when she wasn’t pouting.

“Whatever you girls want.” He looked at me like he was asking if I’d partake. He didn’t know who he was dealing with when it came to food.

We got our ice cream cones—hand dipped, the only ones worth blowing a workout for—and sat under the gazebo to devour them.

“Now what?” I asked John after a lick of vanilla.

“I’m at Hank’s tonight. I thought I’d head over after we finish.”

Maddie sat next to him, swinging her legs. “Can John come over and watch YouTube with us, Em?”

I blanched and quickly took mental inventory of the state of tidiness in my home.

“No, no, that’s okay. Thanks for the invite, though, Maddie,” he said. Damn it. I inventoried too long.

“Please. I’d love for you to hang out with us.” I touched his

fingertips that were on the bench beside me. It seemed to work for other women. Maybe, it would work for...

“Well, I guess it’s still pretty early. I don’t have to rush over to Hank’s.” *YES! It worked. Shit. Why do I care so much? This is unnerving.*

CHAPTER 7

The next three hours consisted of me playing the “When is John Bergen is going to...” game, with “When is John Bergen going to leave?” being the top of the list. The YouTube videos had run their course, our breakfast-for-dinner was consumed, and we were all snuggled up together on the couch like an awkward, fast-forwarded family.

Kay, who chose our flick, passed out in one corner, curled up like an invertebrate. Probably for the best, since *Beetlejuice* was scarier than I remembered. *Oops*. Maddie’s heart eyes turned to sleep eyes and drool pooled on a pillow beside John.

I wedged myself into my favorite corner of the sofa, while John sprawled across the middle, bound by my Lilliputian nieces.

I wanted that, too, but I refrained. At this point, he was staying for life, a captive of the Broome/Bowen women.

I took a sip of my beer and wiggled in my seat to Harry Belafonte.

“Can you?” John asked me to put his beer in his hand. He was pinned. I laughed and danced it just out of his reach. He tried giving me a punitive look but instead, he smoldered. It was the

kind of look that stopped a woman in her tracks or made her run away. I shoved the bottle into his hand and went back to cowering in my corner, wedging myself deeper into the cushions.

He took a long glug of beer. Glug implies something disgusting, accompanied by an even more disgusting belch. His wasn't. His glug was elegant, masculine, perfect. He glanced again around the room. He'd been studying it all night.

"Where are all your antiques?"

"At the shop."

"But you don't have any in your home? I expected obscure metal sculptures on top of Victorian bureaus."

"You expected my home to look like a Tim Burton movie?"

"I guess I did. Besides the couch, there's really...nothing here."

"As much as I'd probably love obscure metal sculptures and Victorian bureaus...well, not so much Victorian as Federal, this place is tiny and it's not my forever home. I don't see much point in decorating."

"I'm just surprised that your home doesn't say anything about you. I'd never know that an interesting, tattooed, art-loving, strong-as-hell-but-fiercely-generous antiques maven lives here."

He touched his bottle to my arm, and the icy droplets jolted me.

"Hey!" I glared at him.

"What do you think?"

"About what?"

He sighed. "What I just said."

"Untrue. All of it. Except the tattoo part. I guess I could put up a print or something." I grabbed his empty bottle from him but avoided his eyes. I knew it wasn't what he meant.

He dropped his gaze to my shoulder, his frozen fingers stretching to trace the lilies on the skull's wreath, then down its spine before resting again on the back on the leather sofa. Inside, I was screaming. I wanted more of those beer-cooled fingertips brushing against all of my skin. I wanted more than his fingertips, I wanted those strong hands kneading my thighs. His soft pink lips

trailing down my belly. I wanted his weight pressing down on me, fueling my heat and making me rise to him. Instead, I wrapped my arms around my knees and looked at him with a careful, guarded look that could in no way implicate my dirty mind.

“I like the tattoo part.” He looked at me sincerely, intimately, but not in a rip-your-clothes-off way, but like he already knew what was underneath my clothes, underneath my skin and sinew and blood and deep into my soul. It flooded me with the heat of a thousand suns.

I had never experienced desire for someone like I did with him, and it had been so long since I seriously dated someone, let alone dated someone I legitimately liked, that I didn’t trust myself with normal, ordinary social cues. I had never been a seductress, but damn, I used to be confident. What the hell happened?

Oh, yeah, that one time when John took one look at you and thought you were homeless.

That’s what happened.

I had almost forgotten that night. This was the same man who had tried to provide me with my next meal because I looked so needy and ragged. It couldn’t be desire in his eyes. It couldn’t be the deep-soul knowing that I was fanaticizing about. It was something else. My desire has always let me down. I couldn’t trust myself to interpret others. I couldn’t even interpret my own lack of self-care.

But there was something more than the whole he-thought-I-was-homeless-thing. I was desperate to blame it on him. On unusual circumstances. But in reality, the circumstances weren’t that unusual. I did lack self-care. I still have the bags of donation clothes in my kitchen, a painful reminder that plucks a discordant string every time I pass them. It’s as though I wanted that reminder of the kind of undesirable person I was.

Well, maybe undesirable was going too far, but definitely stuck in a rut. Even in brand spanking shiny new clothes, I’d never be the kind of woman for John Bergen, so the quicker I could detach

myself from those fantasies, the better. He might have a tattoo fetish, but guys like him marry soccer moms. And I can't even be bothered to install seat belts in my car.

Nope. I'd be married to my shop for the rest of my days. Better learn to be happy about it starting now.

"What are you thinking about? You look like you're solving calculus in your head."

"Work."

He made a face, one that I swore I wouldn't interpret, since I swore off interpreting John Bergen's face. He got that pinched look between the eyes and exhaled, riveting his attention on the credits rolling up screen.

I stood to finish the dishes. The warmth of the running water over my hands jarred me back into place. Here I was, in my dingy little apartment with not a single antique or metal sculpture. It was still my place, even if it didn't have personality. But in a way, the whole issue represented the overwhelming need for something new. Maybe I had been focusing too hard on the externals and, unwilling to change those, I was avoiding any type of change. Maybe what I needed to change were the blank white walls within.

I poured blue dish liquid over the sponge and went to town stress-cleaning the frying pan. Another reason for my Spartan living environment. Stress made me purge, and purge, and purge until nothing was left. Now I was scouring the Teflon off this pan. At least there'd be less free-radical damage to my cells when I cooked egg whites now.

The warm weight of his hand landed on my shoulder. I jumped back, flinging soapy, dirty dishwater across my shirt and John's face.

"Oh my God, you scared me." I had my hand over my heart to quell its panic.

"I thought you heard me say your name." He laughed. I looked over at the couch where the two little girls slept soundly, stretching out after John got up.

“What time are the munchkins being picked up?”

“Melissa gets off at eleven and she’ll be straight here. She was covering a shift change, she said.”

“Should I be here?” he asked, picking my frying pan out of the drying rack and grabbing a towel to dry. “When their mom gets here?”

“Wait. Never mind your question. What are you doing to those pans?”

“Drying them.”

“I forgot people even did that. Now they’ll be spoiled and want to be hand dried all the time.” I went back to my washing, though with decreased force. “Why shouldn’t you be here?”

“I didn’t know if you felt like being questioned tonight.” He shrugged.

“Questioned?” Shit, is he a registered sex offender or something? Surely, he wouldn’t still be in the military then. Maybe that’s why he was grounded. Uh no. This could be bad.

“Yeah, questions about me and you.”

“Oh.” Now I had no idea what he was talking about. “Um. You’re good.” I didn’t know what else to say.

“Good.” He smiled. Wait. What did I say?

“Look,” I explained, “I’m a very literal person. If you want me to follow, you’ll have to explicitly state your meaning.”

He took a patient pause before explaining, “This is your family member coming to your place while you are entertaining a male guest along with her children. It’s only natural for her to want to know if something’s going on between us.”

“Oh...then, I guess, if she asks, which she’ll probably be too tired to care, I’ll tell her that we ran into Hank’s nephew at the gym and he bought us all ice cream.”

“Alright. Good.” He didn’t look convinced. “I guess that’s the truth, then.”

My mind was still circling around the sex offender thing, so nothing else was getting past that wall.

“So, you’re still in the Navy, right?”

“Of course.”

“Can you teach me how to fly?”

“No.”

“Why not?” *Is it because you’re a registered sex offender?* I didn’t know how lightly the Navy might take these things.

“Do you already have two hundred flight hours and know how to fly a T-6, T-38C, H-72, and a H-60?”

“What are those?”

He chuckled. “That would be no, then.” He exhaled and leaned back against counters. “I don’t teach flight. I teach already experienced naval and marine pilots the specific things to look for in the aviation systems and aerodynamics and other technicalities during a test flight of an F-35. And other jets.”

“So...you’re more like the Kelly McGillis character than Iceman, huh?”

“You know, I don’t mean to pat myself on the back, but it tends to impress people when I tell them what I do.”

“You want me to be impressed?”

“Who doesn’t want to impress a beautiful woman?”

I rolled my eyes and gestured to my gym clothes and sweaty hair. “I’d probably be way more impressed if I had any idea what you said.”

He took a breath and put down the dry glass. “When a new plane rolls out of the factory, test pilots fly the jet on an initial run, checking to ensure it’s made properly, and what should be improved or adjusted. I teach them what to look for. Or, more accurately, feel for.”

“That sounds absurdly complex and nuanced.”

“Uh huh.” He looked at me like I was nuts.

“It also sounds dangerous.”

His eyes lowered. *Very dangerous then.*

“Cool. Want another beer?”

“No. I think I’ll head out.” He reached down to grab his gym

bag and hoisted it over his shoulder. "You heard about the benefit at the marine museum? I mean, you know everyone in town, so I assume Helen told you about it."

"Ugh. The Bugeye Ball. Don't remind me."

"Not your thing?" He looked actually surprised, as if fancy gowns and champagne toasts would be considered my thing in any world.

"I'd just as soon clean up after all the real guests left," I said to the floor. When I looked up, I could tell he didn't know how to interpret my negativity. "I'm just not looking forward to my date. I had Nancy set me up."

He nodded slowly and turned away. "Okay, well. Maybe I'll see you there."

"Maybe." He'd already opened the door and practically bolted away from me. He didn't even give me time to chase him out into the night to say goodbye and thank him for the ice cream.

I had to shout a thank you at his back, adding, "And the time you put in with the girls. It's a shame they can't say goodbye. They loved you." He slowed and gave me a wave but barely turned to say goodbye to my face.

"Thanks for the eggs. I'll see you around. Tell Maddie and Kay they can get piggyback rides from me anytime they want." I stayed outside under my awning until the sound of his sneakers on the gravel faded away.

What the hell was that? Did I ruin his night because I wasn't worshipping him for his career? If he was that much of a prima donna, then good riddance.

But he didn't seem like a prima donna. He walked everywhere, worked out alone, attended church alone, ate in restaurants alone, and he hung out with a crazy woman and a couple of wildings tonight. That vibe says down to earth more than anything else. It had to be something else. Something I did.

Social cues, man. Fuck 'em.

I was about to head back in when Melissa's SUV turned in and

blinded me with her supernova headlights. She parked crookedly and jumped down in a huff.

"I'm sorry I'm so late. Denise was late, and the ER was full-moon insane tonight. I had to wait forever for Dr. Milton's orders for freaking Tylenol and fluids for a thirteen-year-old with the flu, and I had to assist Chase, like, a thousand times for migraines and colds and stomach cramps. Nothing fun, even. I mean, it's Calvert County, I'm not expecting GSWs, but give me a little blood at least."

"GSWs?"

"Gunshot wounds."

"That's a real thing? That acronym?"

"In other places it is." Her eyes went wild with true crime obsession.

"Gotcha. Well, cheer up. I was told it's goose season. You're bound to get some bird shot through the shoulder or frostbitten toes, at least."

She laughed, but I could tell she was a little relieved. Melissa was a recovering drama queen. In high school, she had been a gossip and boyfriend-stealer. When she became a nurse and a mom, and especially after making a life dealing with that no-account, addict brother of mine, she limited her desire for drama to cleaning up other people's messes in the ER.

"How were the girls?" she asked, lighting a cigarette and taking a deep drag.

"They practiced their leadership skills quite a bit."

"Something's going on with Maddie lately. God knows I love her, but she's gonna give me hell in a few years." Country girls don't mince words.

"I wonder where she gets it from?" I eyed her suspiciously.

"Yeah, yeah, the apple doesn't fall far and all that shit. Maybe she can hang out with you more often. Your little mouse act might rub off on her."

"What mouse act?"

"You know. How you don't stand up for yourself. Don't go out. Hide the real you. Shit, I'd love it if Maddie did that once in a while."

"I'll have you know I entertained a male guest this evening."

"Who? Hank?"

"Hank's nephew, John. He's a pilot." I added that last bit for its impressiveness.

"Girl. He's hot as fuck. I hope the girls didn't scare him off you."

"You know him too?" How is this man a townie after living here a month?

"He goes to our church. Shows up late. Sits in back. Doesn't go to coffee hour. If he did, I'd have barked up that tree myself. I've been too busy at the hospital for a sex life."

"Hmm." I looked at my boots wobbling over the gravel and started shifting the rocks with my toes. I'd never been particularly proprietary over human beings, but Melissa mentioning "John" and "sex life" made me swallow hot blasts of jealousy.

"Well, he loves your girls, bossy or not. You might have a chance after all."

"I'll leave him for you. No sloppy seconds among friends, right?" I think Melissa's heart was in the right place, but her imagery and the cigarette smoke were turning my stomach into a cauldron of gurgling goo.

Melissa woke her girls gently, and before Maddie remembered how old she was, she hugged and kissed me goodbye.

"I had the best time tonight, Auntie Em," Kay said as she staggered out to her mom's car. I squeezed Melissa and grabbed Rousby's leash for his last walk of the night.

We took our time weaving through the single-lane streets of the neighborhood. I tried to amble, closing my mind off to anything but the coolness of the micro mist and the black of the sky above. I could no longer see the stars, only the light in Hank's window over the boathouse on the docks.

CHAPTER 8

“Either tell me you found me a date for the benefit or kill me now.” My forehead hit the desk, and I rolled my head back and forth, trying to find that sweet spot of pressure. My temples throbbed after tackling some shop housekeeping, and I had completely lost the ability to take any responsibility for myself. Today, I was relinquishing control. I was shockingly in the black, and I couldn’t deal with both singledom *and* QuickBooks.

I had reluctantly accepted defeat on the battlefield of social media marketing, even if it took a lot of deep breathing for me to get there. That’s usually how change happened for me. By default. I resisted until my nails were bloody, desperately scratching to hang on to the very last bit of “normal.” Then, finally, when there was nothing to do but let go, the freefall wasn’t as bad as I feared. But I also knew myself well enough to realize I’d do the same thing with the next big thing.

Nancy fake scowled at me. “I still don’t know why you’re overlooking what’s right there next to you. To everyone else, it seems inevitable.” She stood in front of the microwave, soaking up the gamma rays as she nuked some kind of chicken casserole that

smelled divine and looked like school lunch. I popped another k-cup into the machine.

“And what am I overlooking? Is there a stream of men out there I don’t know about? Besides the boys you’re already fishing from?” I batted my eyelashes at her. “Thank you in advance, by the way.”

“John!” She stabbed the air with her fork.

I kicked my feet out to swivel back to my computer and remove my coffee from the brewer. “Ha. Inevitable if I were the last woman on Earth. And I bet he’d still refuse to re-populate the planet, at least until some long-legged alien walked by.”

“You’re delusional. He’s a great guy. I can’t figure out what you have against him.”

I groaned and swiveled back to face her. It was time I fessed up.

“I don’t have anything against him. I have something against...” I scrunched up my face and rubbed my temples. Vulnerability was hard for me. Admitting my own insecurities was death. “...against *me* with him. It doesn’t feel right. We wouldn’t work together. He’s black and white. I color outside the lines. He’s military, I’m metal. He’s a Michelangelo, I’m a Bosch. He needs a like counterpart. I’ll never be his Officer’s Wife Barbie.”

“Who says he needs or even wants a Barbie doll type? Isn’t that cutting him a little short, not letting him make his own decisions about himself?”

Of course it was cutting him short. The whole idea was that if I beat him to the punch and rejected myself first, I wouldn’t be devastated when he stopped pretending to flirt with me. I shrugged. Nancy didn’t get it. Self-preservation was something you had to intuitively comprehend, and she’d never needed that particular Kevlar.

She softened her tone and moved the stack of paperwork out of the other chair so she could sit next to me. “Anyway, honey.” She paused and swept a lock of hair behind my ear. It was a mother’s gesture, not one my own mother had ever performed, but it was definitely something a movie mom would do. I tensed, but I let her continue. “Why all these ideas about *you* not fitting *him*? What

about *him* fitting *you*? You know, when Bill and I met, we were in high school.”

“Yeah, Nancy, I know you and Bill were high school sweethearts. You found your mate. You guys were perfect for each other. That’s exactly what I mean. You automatically worked.”

She smiled coyly. “We were *friends* in high school. We grew up seven miles from each other. I was a cheerleader. He was a football, baseball, track, you-name-it player. And you’re right. We looked perfect for each other. Everyone said so. We even started to think so ourselves. So he took me to the homecoming dance and to prom and we tried. But we couldn’t make it work.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing at all.” She shrugged. “After graduation, we parted ways. He went to basic training, and I—well, I actually followed your dad to Emerson for a semester—but that’s another story. Neither of us pined over any lost love.” Nancy laughed. The microwave beeped, and she removed the glass container, stirring the steamy bowl of delicious goop.

“You and my dad? How am I just hearing about this now?”

“Nothing ever happened except for a lot of one-sided chemistry he never experienced. And anyway, it only took a few months of following him like a puppy before I realized I was swimming in a new ocean. When he met your mom, she and I became best friends. You’re having coffee for lunch again?” She frowned at my coffee maker as it sputtered out the last of its brew cycle. Eating was the farthest thing from my mind. I was now picturing her with my very shaggy, very Deadhead dad, and the image was ruining the nostalgia of my youth.

“Then Bill had a break after boot camp and came to visit your dad. By then, I was regularly their third wheel. We went to a concert and the diner afterward, and all I could think about was how handsome he looked in his green uniform with his new buzz cut. But I was a total deviant. I was majoring in French literature and smoked pot between classes and term papers.”

This was certainly a different side of Pot Roast Nancy.

“Bill asked me to go to dinner with him his last night in town before packing up for Germany. I was twenty minutes late, but he was a gentleman.” Nancy looked off into the distant corner cobwebs with a smile in her eyes. “We fucked for hours that night.”

I snorted a micro mist of coffee into Mrs. Nancy McCready’s lap.

“It’s okay, honey,” she said, patting my leg all maternal again, “you can handle a grown woman dropping an f-bomb now and again.” Yeah, I could handle it, but did I want to?

I could cover my ears and make it stop, but I had never seen her like this, and it was a little thrilling listening to her sordid past. I was proud that she trusted me enough to share the less-than-immaculate details. The details that implied I wasn’t just a stray kid she picked up and nursed back to health, but worthy of her truth. The details you give a friend.

She blew on her lunch before taking a bite, chewing while she talked. “Bill went to Germany on his first stop to make something of himself in the Army. I dropped out of school and started making pretty good money waitressing at a café in Baltimore.” She shook her head. “Not great money, though.

“But Bill got hurt in an artillery drill. It wasn’t anything that would impact his life, but it was enough to discharge him. When he came home, I was his first stop.”

“So, what? It was love at second sight?” I slurped the hot coffee and turned back to my recently downloaded Instagram app, searching for other dealers and reading their posts. Nancy grabbed the phone out of my hand and slapped it down on a stack of invoices on my desk.

“In the meantime, I had gotten as big as a house. I was eight months pregnant when he walked in the door of the café, screaming at me in front of all the patrons to stay off my feet and why hadn’t anyone told him. He wanted to get married, but I said no. He wanted to come home to raise the baby, but I said no.” She

laughed and shook her head. I guess she remembered the moment with a certain humor or fondness. "I still wasn't going to give up my shot at marrying for love."

I raised an eyebrow at her as I swiveled back from the desk and stood when I heard the bell, which turned out to be someone who walked in and straight back out again. I sat back down with a huff of disappointed breath.

"For the next month, I pushed him away, though it got harder and harder with the baby coming. I knew I needed his help, or someone's help, and his was the easiest help to come by. By the time Jake turned one, I realized I was in love with Bill. We married then, as mismatched as we had become. We married for love and nothing else.

"I went back to junior college and got my degree. I planned to transfer to Maryland afterward and continue on my career path, but I started missing home. I wanted Jake to be raised here with the woods and the bay, with my parents and Bill's mom. So, finally, after four years, we moved back to the county."

"And somehow this relates to John and me, but..." I trailed off.

"Bill changed. I changed. When we were cut from the same cloth, we didn't like each other. Once we grew up and gained different perspectives, we couldn't keep each other's clothes on. It doesn't matter how put together people are. Or how they match each other at first. Love wants differences. Love wants to change us and refine us for each other. Even though I was stubborn and stupid and it took too long for us to find our happiness, it was right there in front of us the whole time. Bill was there, changing with me until I was ready. And by the time we came home, I was happy to support him with his needs."

"That's a good love story." I smiled.

"I don't share it with my church friends too often." She winked.

"But you see why I can't let myself think of John like that?"

"No. I don't."

"Because he's a Bill. He's handsome and kind and fun. I haven't

even seen him in uniform yet and I already want to rip his clothes off.”

“I’m still not seeing a problem.”

“What if I’m not a Nancy?”

“Oh, you’re a Nancy.” She smiled. “That’s exactly why you’re pushing away the man you really like. Because, deep down, you crave true love.” She plopped her dish in the workroom sink and filled it with water.

“I never said I didn’t.”

“Well then, you better stop lying to yourself and John. If you want it and he wants it, let him fall in love with you. I love you. No matter what a grouch he is, Hank lives to see you everyday. The whole town fell in love with this charming, intelligent, fierce woman. You aren’t as tough a sell as you think you are.”



IF BY “INSPIRED,” Nancy meant shopping, then inspiration rained down on me. I had exactly four hours to get my ass to Annapolis, try on every pair of jeans that looked like they might be able to encase my thunder thighs, and purchase an entirely new wardrobe.

I called Mack on my way. I was desperate for my new image to take hold, so I needed air support in the form of dressing room FaceTime.

“I can’t, babe. I’m at the office. But if you’re looking for company, Lydia’s home with Little Man. I’ve been so crazy at work, we don’t get as much quality time together anymore. And I’m not sure if it hasn’t got her in a funk. Do you mind?”

“Of course not! I love her and Jack. Will you let her know I’m picking her up?”

“You still driving that Chevelle?” I practically heard Mack raise her eyebrows.

“Yes. New paint job and all.”

“I’ll call her and tell her you’re coming. But she’s driving. I’m

not putting my wife and son in your old rust bucket. Besides, you don't want to be driving to Annapolis on seven miles a gallon."

"Twelve on the highway. But thank you." Overnight, my car had become a liability. I guess that's what I got for never leaving the island.

Almost as soon as we hung up, I saw a text from Lydia.

"Excited to hang out!!!!" She followed it up with various emojis.

She must have been desperate for some adult time. Well, since she was driving, I'd treat us to dinner afterward. It was the least I could do for Mack's wife.

I'd never spent time alone with Lydia. I reconnected with Mack after they married and became the Gordon-Childs family, but I never really thought of her as anything other than Mack's wife. Lately, Mack seemed to be going a million miles an hour with her career and her fertility, so it was perfect that Lydia and I should become better acquainted. We could be two lost puppies together.

After three exhausting shopping hours, we finally squeezed into a booth at Griffin's, my favorite downtown Annapolis gastro pub. We shared the crab dip—the best in Maryland—and each ordered a burger and a beer. Jack was too small to do anything but gaze wide-eyed out of his car seat.

"That was so much fun," Lydia said after the server left. "We should do it again."

"Yeah, we'll have to vary our stores next time, or the sales people will run, but it actually was fun. That was all you.

"I want to see his eyes when he sees you in that dress."

"Who?"

"John!"

"I'm not wearing it for him." Alas, I couldn't find any jeans I liked, but I went way out on a limb—like the tiny capillary branches at the very very end of the limb where birds can't even perch—and bought a date night dress.

"Yeah, I know. You're wearing it for you. But he'll think it's for him."

“It’s for another date.”

She looked confused. It was one of those moments when you let your guard down around someone for the first time and have a real conversation, but you misstep. I recognized it immediately. It was the first time I witnessed it happen to someone other than me.

“Oh. I assumed since you talked about him most of the time we were in the lingerie section.”

“Um...yeah, we’re friends. I mean, I’m completely smitten with him, but ultimately, we’re not each other’s types.”

“I’m sorry. It sounded like you two hit it off since he met your nieces and everything.”

“That was more of an accident. We ran into each other—”

“—and he stayed with you and two bratty girls for five hours? Not an accident, sweetie. People don’t linger that long unless there is some serious chemistry happening.”

“Well, I don’t want to talk about it. Hey—how about you and Mack go to the benefit and sit at Jenn’s Millennial outcast table with me? Then, no matter what tool I end up bringing as my date, I’ll know I have some good company around.”

She smiled, but her eyes looked down at her baby and she took a sip of her beer. “I’d love that but don’t think Mack will get the time off work.”

“It’s a Saturday night.”

“Well, this is a Sunday night and she isn’t here.”

“True. What’s she working on? Trying to break up some huge drug cartel or terrorist cell?”

She laughed. “She’s just putting in the hours. Doesn’t want people to think that since she had a baby that she’s feeling the pressure to stay home. She thinks that’s what a man would do, even though I told her men at the FBI listen to their wives and come home for dinner occasionally. Mackenzie only comes home long enough to kiss me and the baby and drop off her bags of breast milk she’s pumped at the office.” She held her beer to her

lips without drinking. Her eyes glistened. I didn't know if it was from the alcohol or if she was feeling the yucks.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to unload this on you. I know you're loyal to her."

"I'm loyal to the Gordon-Childses," I said, truthfully. "I might have known her longer—and believe me, I know her well enough to know she always has something to prove to the head honchos—but you married her. That means I don't take sides. I listen. And sometimes, it means I need to kick her ass, but that's not disloyalty, that's longevity. When I've known you for twenty years, I'll do the same to you."

"I'm so glad we're friends now."

"We've been friends, Lyd."

"Yeah, but friends in our own right. You know how sometimes things don't work out as well without the other friend who acts as the glue. I'm glad Mackenzie isn't our glue."

"And I think I might need to drive home."

"This is *not* alcohol talking. I'm not even half finished with my one beer. You just don't know how to accept love. Same thing with John," she teased.

"Yeah, yeah." I drained my beer. "Seriously, though, Lydia. You need to say something to Mack. For both your sakes."

"I know. I'm not ready yet."

"But you're lonely and your heart is breaking. If you don't fight for your family, I will."

"Who's going to fight for you, Em?" she asked, looking straight at me this time.

"I see your raise. And I fold. Let's get out of here. I've got an auction in Pennsylvania tomorrow, and since Hank's coming with me, that means I need to drive the truck through Baltimore during rush hour. Ugh! Dreading!"

"Next time, ask me. I'll skip school."

"Next time, Lydia, my new bae, I'll be asking you for everything. That means 'before anyone else,' by the way."

“Em? I teach high school. You don’t have to translate Internet for me.”

CUE BLIND DATE #2. Second verse, same as the first. A little bit louder and a whole lot worse.

Again, I met my gentleman at the café at seven. The usual jazz combo played, but instead of my favorite song, they sent over nothing by side eye. Carol greeted me with a tight-lipped smile. George didn’t offer a single complementary beverage.

I arrived a few minutes late and took my seat at an empty table in the center of the dining room. The sticky air in the room stifled the laughter and sparks of conversations at the surrounding tables. As soon as I was seated, the flame on the oil candle burned out in a momentary wisp of smoke.

By the time my date, Brayden, arrived—eight minutes late, exclaiming his relief about how “hot” I looked while attempting a hello kiss—I already regretted wasting my new date dress on this basic dude.

There was one perk of the date. There would be no waiting for a soufflé.

“You look like the kind of girl who can down a whole cheeseburger,” Brayden said when I ordered my arugula, pear, and walnut salad with sautéed chevre croutons.

“Thanks.” *I guess.* “I’m just in the mood to eat a little lighter tonight.” I sipped my sparkling water.

“I think you look amazing,” Brayden said to my low neckline.

“I think so, too,” said Powerlifting Me. Bad dates brought out my baddest bitch.

“So.” He pried his eyes off my nipples and reluctantly met my eyes. “I’m a deputy. Moved here from Baltimore County, but since I broke up with the crazy-ass girl I was with, I haven’t seen much action. I’m thinking about moving back to the city.”

“Mmm-hmmm.”

“You ever think about moving to Baltimore?”

“No.”

“Oh man, it’s great. The bar scene, the action on the streets... Lots of drugs lead to lots of arrests and lots of overtime. Good for the paycheck, if you know what I mean.”

“You just told me what you mean.” Now wasn’t the time to get fired up in a tirade against the criminalization of drugs leading to the overpopulation of for-profit prisons. Not to mention the near 100% failure rate of abstinence-based drug rehabs and the negligent ignorance of mental health care in our nation that led to the crisis in the first place.

I sipped my fizzy water and chewed my straw as I stared at the flickering flame of the candle on the next table. John hadn’t been so tactless on our date. We talked about the ecological state of the oysters in the Patuxent and the future of the crabbing industry. He asked me how long I’d been participating in Chesapeake Bay clean-ups and expressed an interest in coming along for the next one.

Beside the fact that the selfish nutsack sitting across from me was personally profiting from the War on Drugs—a very sore, very personal bruise in my flank—he was tactless and unintelligent. I’d already decided it wasn’t worth putting energy into this “date,” even if it meant potentially getting out of a ticket the next time he inevitably pulled me over for speeding. Oh, who was I kidding? He’d probably give his mom a ticket.

“What do you do?” I was surprised he even bothered to ask. Thank God our entrées arrived. Fifteen more minutes, tops, and I could stop pretending his eyes weren’t glued to my chest.

“I own an antiques store.” I took a bite of arugula and pear. It was cool and crisp, the dressing pleasantly bright on edges of my tongue, but I’d lost my appetite. Plus, knowing me, I’d probably drop an olive-oiled leaf straight down my breasts, and it could

cause Brayden to lose control and drop whatever façade of decency he thought was working.

“No shit? That’s cool, I guess.”

“Really?”

“Sure. I mean, antique stores are a little boring. I used to go to them all the time with my nana. I hated it.”

“Sorry.” I wasn’t though.

“Hey, it’s great you own your own business though. I guess you must have gotten a loan out for being a woman or something? You make bank?”

My phone buzzed in my bag at the perfect moment. I excused myself and immediately fished it out of my bag. I didn’t care if it was a text reminder that my birth control prescription was ready for pick-up, I was going to milk this interruption for all it was worth.

The phone kept buzzing. It was a call from Father Michael.

“Hello?” I held up with universal sign for wait a minute to Brayden, who was already digging into his pasta.

“You don’t have to explain. I’ll be right there.” I locked the screen on my phone and tossed it back in to my new, spiked, leather clutch.

“Sorry, Brayden,” I said, blotting dressing off my red lips. “I have to go lend a hand at the church. It’s spaghetti night and there was a mix up with the cleanup crew.”

“That’s a little rude, if you ask me. Can’t you tell ’em you’re on a date?”

“Oooh, sorry. No.” I stood, tossing my napkin on the chair.

“Okay. Alright. It was nice meeting you. Can I give you a call sometime?”

“Absolutely not.”

I practically sprinted away from Brayden and the café, totally unconcerned by the fact that I’d left him with my salad on his bill. I didn’t care if Father Michael asked me to clean the grease traps again. I’d do it with gratitude for his perfectly-timed call. When I

got to the church, a couple old timers were still milling around with Styrofoam cups of coffee. From the smell, it had been brewed hours ago, but I grabbed myself a cup and waved hello.

“Emerson, my dear.” I heard Father Michael’s voice from behind me. “Why, you’re looking absolutely lovely this evening.” The little old man patted my elbow. His eyes shone with love for his congregation. He was exactly who you’d want for a community religious leader. I mean, I didn’t know a thing about the actual religion part, but his wholesomeness and sincerity more than made up for his technological ineptitude, especially when it got me out of a date I wanted to wipe from my memory.

“I didn’t know what to do. I had it in the computer, but I must have hit a button and deleted the list of names tonight. By the time I realized no one was coming in to clean up, I had already sent home all but one of the set-up crew. Nancy suggested I call you. Thank the Lord you were able to help. It was a miracle.”

“Honestly, Father, it was a miracle that you called and saved me from a miserable evening. Nancy, however, has some explaining to do.”

“Well, now. Glad I could reciprocate the help. You’ll find an apron in the kitchen. I don’t want you to spoil your nice clothes.”

I should have swung by my apartment to change, but in my haste to leave Brayden, I didn’t think about the impracticality of scouring burnt-on spaghetti sauce out of ten-gallon vats in a braless, white, boho dress.

I downed my coffee and tossed the cup in the trash. The clang of industrial metal cookware against the stainless steel sink rang throughout the kitchen. Someone was washing dishes. I turned the corner to pluck an apron off the hook and give my regards to whomever I would be sharing clean-up duty with.

“So, they roped you in too, huh?” I said over my shoulder.

“I guess so,” grumbled the dishwasher. My arms paused in the middle of looping a cherry-printed apron over my head.

“John? How’d they get *you* here?”

“Em? What are you—?” He turned around toward the sound of my voice. The sprayer went in the same direction as his head. Water gushed out of the sink, beaded off his rubberized apron, and pooled in his shoes. “Shit.”

“Shhh.” I threw him a towel. “You’re in church.”

“This isn’t church. This is the hall. You can curse in the hall.” He turned the water off and wiped the front of his jeans. “Do you have much experience with this thing?”

“A sink?”

“The sink, the pans, the dishwasher. It’s all so...huge.”

“Sorry, pal. Better you than me. Longer arms.” I shrugged and stepped back into the dining hall to clear the tables of detritus.

After two hours of clearing dishes, laughing more than I’d have liked, packing away leftover food, drinking the wine left in the bottle, mopping the floors, and finding every excuse to touch each other, we were soaked with spaghetti sauce water—so much for my new dress—and wiped out. I hung my apron back on its hook and tied my dress back into place. John followed my lead and did a double take when I took my hair down from a ponytail and shook it loose. It tumbled down my back, covering my bare shoulders.

“You’re beautiful.” He was probably shocked.

“Thank you.” I smirked. It was easier receiving compliments when I looked how I intended to look. It was also easier receiving compliments from a man who said them to my face. “You look nice too.” He was dressed for his task. Jeans, long-sleeved t-shirt, old-school sneakers. Just as effortless and comfortable in his clothing as ever. I stopped admiring the drape of his shirt across his deltoids and flipped the switch, turning off the overhead fluorescents. There was still some light coming from the kitchen and the emergency exits, but it shifted the energy in the room.

“Well.” He looked around the empty hall. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was stalling. “Ready?” He gestured to the door and wiggled a loose key free from his pocket. He looked at the floor when I sashayed passed him. I made a mental note never to

sashay again. We'd been flirting all evening. Somewhere deep in my subconscious, I was hoping he'd make some kind of real move. No more looks and accidental, playful touches, but something tangible and concrete to let me know I wasn't alone in my attraction. Even if he went no farther.

Instead, he followed me out the door and locked it behind us. He turned to face me but still didn't look me in the eye. He was so...earnest. The sexiest quality out there, objectively speaking. Suddenly, I felt bold. It had to be the dress. Or the bralessness. I wanted more of him, to study him and find all the intelligent quirks about his brain. I knew he was special. I just didn't yet know why.

"See you, Emerson. Thanks, again, for saving my sanity."

"It's still early. Do you want to grab a drink?" Okay, I guess I could make a real move, too. Who knew?

His eyes flickered around me, pausing briefly on my breasts, covered only from the chilly breeze by a single gauzy layer that cut down in a deep V. I liked that the dress gave the impression that the tiny strap might just...oops, slip off my shoulder at any moment, exposing me fully. But I was no fool. I double-sided-taped that sucker in place to prevent such an occurrence.

But tape or no tape, I wanted his hands on the small of my back, crushing me to his mouth, gliding over my skin to the sides of my breasts while he teased my hard nipple through the thin cotton.

"I'm meeting up with some of my buddies tonight." He turned slowly and walked toward the parking lot until he seemed to change his mind. "I can give you a lift back to your place, if that's where you're headed."

"Sure." It was something, at least. My apartment was an embarrassingly short walk, almost not worth the trouble of getting into and out of the car, but I hadn't seen his car, and I wanted that glimpse into his dark side that only a person's driving habits can give.

He walked ahead of me toward a shiny black truck. It was new, but nothing special. Your basic, upgraded utility vehicle that every family man drove around here, where you took your own trash to the landfill. It was shockingly normal, especially after expecting a Porsche, which was the Official Car of Naval Aviators.

He unlocked the doors and instinctively went to the passenger side. I was eager to settle into the seats, get a feel for how he drove, how closely he sat to the wheel, where he placed his hands, what music started on his Bluetooth when he turned the engine over. He didn't offer a hand for me to get in but then again, nothing about me screamed "damsel in distress."

The inside of the truck smelled disappointingly new and nothing like him. It was as pristine as I'd expect from him. The trip was over in less than one minute, and he stared straight out the windshield when I jumped down from the cab.

"Thanks for the lift," I said, waving him off.

"Yep." He gave a terse nod and put his truck in gear, backing out as soon as my key entered the lock of my front door. He couldn't wait to get out of my presence. It was a double waste of my new date dress.

Shit. I couldn't even let my guard down inside my own head. Where was Powerlifting Me when I needed her? How in the world were women supposed to have confidence when men ran so hot and cold?

CHAPTER 9

I woke up the next morning to a restored enthusiasm for my trip and a package outside my door. After letting Rousby relieve himself quickly, I opened the box, which contained the mysteriously purchased AluWare pot for Mr. Jennings and a note from John that read, “Just hoping to help you shoulder the burden of the community.” If this was John’s way of being kind, he knew the password to my heart. Unfortunately, I didn’t know if this was kindness, or part of his plan to usurp my place in our community.

I plunked myself down on the brick step, letting Rousby sniff around a little more. I should really plant some flowers out here. The other three apartments in the tiny complex were nicely landscaped, and it added to the coastal charm of the building. Mine had some kind of bush that was half yellow with some kind of blight. It only detracted.

I hopped off the step, taking the box inside with me and tossing it on the kitchen counter. I pulled the kitchen shears out of the knife block and headed back outside.

Using my kitchen scissors, I started snipping off the unhealthy branches of the small shrub. Rousby was obviously impressed. He

nosed around inside the bush until a sneezing fit started. Deciding I could actually take action and do something about this half-diseased plant should have been a no-brainer, but to me, it was a revelation. No, I didn't have the right tools or horticultural experience. I might have actually harmed the now-lopsided plant for all I knew, but at least I tried. I felt better too.

When my thoughts turned back to John, now invigorated by my decisiveness, I made another decision. I could trust the effort he was making. Maybe he wasn't the hotshot I originally thought he was. Maybe he had a rough and bumpy path. Maybe he was just a very decent fellow. They were all possibilities. Even if they were unlikely, who was I to question them? By his own admission he was "hoping to help me shoulder the burden." All I could do was believe him.

I stopped by the shop an hour later to take a quick look around before my buying trip. It was the first time I noticed how thin it had become. Only two weeks, before, Blue Heron customers had to squeeze around tight corners between pieces if they wanted to browse. Now, I noticed the full efforts of Nancy's marketing skills. They were paying off. She had emptied a sizeable portion of my inventory. The timing was perfect since I was determined to load up every nook and cranny with saleable furniture and objets d'art. Hell, I'd even go Mid-Mod if there was nothing else. Whatever fit, whatever my dollars bought, whatever I could bring myself to part with. That was my goal for this buying trip.

As much as the auction itself, I was looking forward to spending quality time with Hank. I still brought him his daily coffees, but I mostly scurried away, not knowing if and when John might be visiting. It took a toll. Hank was the one person I could relax with, knowing he wouldn't bug me the whole time about my love life.

The songbirds tweeted their jaunty little tunes on my walk to Hank's. I hadn't noticed their absence through winter, but it was delightful to have them back. It was a cheerful, quirky melody to

accompany the blue sky and cotton ball clouds, as if the birds were shouting to the Earth and all its inhabitants, “Wake up! Get in the dirt! Reproduce!”

Well, maybe not that last one. Not to me anyway. I wasn’t quite up to the task. Anyway, the birdsongs were lovely.

I carried my usual black coffee and caramel latte, extra whip, but today, we each got two cups apiece—one to get us out of the county, the other to get us through Baltimore. We’d have to stop in PA after that.

The coffee vapors wafted up from the cardboard tray as I walked onto the docks. It mingled with the scent of brackish water and deciduous trees—the Solomons smell.

When I got to the boathouse, the doors were bolted. Rather than walk straight through the wide open bay doors, I had to knock on the little office door. It looked odd being shut up like this, even if he was going away for the day. With the boathouse being so secluded, the airplane hanger-sized garage doors were always kept rolled back.

I knocked on the office door. “Hank, It’s Em. You ready?”

I didn’t hear a thing inside the cavernous belly. I pounded harder.

“Hank? Is everything okay?”

I heard shuffling feet, and the door opened. I was greeted by face-masked, contagion-outbreak-suit-wearing Hank, carrying some kind of sprayer.

“What’s all this?” I asked. “Are you going to be ready to go in a few minutes?”

“Ah, Hell, Em. I knew there was something I was supposed to be doing today. I told Joe I’d do some fiberglass work, and now that I’ve started, I won’t be at a real good place to stop for a few hours.”

“A few hours? Hank, are you kidding me? The auction is at noon.” Ugh! I hated driving alone. I hated loading up the truck

alone. I guess I could skip this auction and hunt and peck item by item through estate sales, but this would have saved so much time.

"I tell ya what," Hank said. "Hang tight here and I'll be back in a minute."

"Alright." I sighed. I committed to the disappointment of staying home. It was a beautiful day. I could fill it with something peaceful. Maybe I'd plant those flowers in front of my door or start a garden. If I never had to buy another tomato again, I'd be a happy woman. I bet I could figure out gardening. How hard could it be to get a plant from the nursery and stick it in a hole in the ground?

I was daydreaming of biting into my big, juicy heirlooms when the door opened again. It wasn't Hank this time though. It was John. In his boxer briefs. The sight was so shocking I could even process what I was seeing. My mind looped the word "tomatoes, tomatoes, tomatoes."

"Tomatoes?" he said.

Fuck. I said it out loud.

"Um. Sorry." I cringed. "I was thinking about how good my tomatoes would taste when you opened the door. Like that." I gestured to his...self as if it explained my sudden lobotomy.

He smiled, the imp, and I blushed harder. Damn my British complexion. "How good would they taste?" He smirked. I did the appropriate thing when I encountered a strong-jawed, ridiculously attractive male and became furious.

"Tell Hank it's fine. I'm going to plant a tomato garden today." I twirled around and stomped off, the coffee tray still in my hand.

"Hey, Em, wait a minute. I thought you needed someone to drive you to the antique auction?"

I kept walking, but my angry march was a casual stroll for him. "I don't need someone to drive me, I wanted company. Hank's company, specifically. But since he can't go, and I don't have an extra hand to load up the truck, I'll go next month."

He brushed my elbow. "Will you stop a second?" I wasn't too

angry to notice it wasn't a command, but a gentle request. It was that gentleness that made me stop.

"I have a garden to plant." Damn, I was a coward.

"What if I go with you to your auction?" He spoke aloud my dream and my dread.

If he went, then *Yay!!! I'd be spending the day with John Bergen.* But if he went, then *Shit. I'd be spending the day with John Bergen.* Not only would I never recover from seeing him in his undies, but that, combined with the particular intimacy that occurs on road trips *and* that he boiled all my insecurities up to the surface, it was too much.

"I...don't think so, John. It's too much to ask. What about your work? Is the US Navy going to court martial me for making you go AWOL?"

"Listen to you speak military." His mouth widened into a flat grin.

"Those are the only terms I know."

"I had PFT testing today. I just got out of the shower. I'm finished until Wednesday afternoon class. I'm all yours." He shrugged.

"And you passed your PFT test? Whatever that is?"

"Physical Fitness Training. Yes." Of course he did. He set the standards.

"Well, then, soldier, let's go."

"Oh my God, you're going to kill me."

"What?"

"I'm Navy. It's sailor."

"Really? Even if you fly? Why not pilot?"

"Because even pilots are stationed on carriers and..." He blew an exasperated breath and gripped the doorknob. "Because that's the way the Navy does it. Give me five minutes. I'll get dressed and grab my bag."

"Oh," I shouted through the closing door. "You won't need to bring anything. We're coming home tonight."

He caught the door with his foot and gave me a look like he wasn't about to take my word for it. "I like to be prepared," he said it diplomatically, but I knew he thought I was nuts.

"Did you learn that in the Navy?"

"Boy Scouts." He winked at me. He *winked*. It was such an old school man thing to do. I don't think anyone has ever winked in coyness at me.

He got his man-sized—read: tiny—overnight (or whatever) bag from Hank's upstairs apartment, and we walked the docks home to my apartment where the little white box truck was gassed up and waiting.

"You want first driving shift?" I flung the keys at him, ready or not. He caught them easily. Men like him always caught the keys without yelping.

"I thought you didn't need anyone to drive you. You just wanted the company."

"I changed my mind."

He chuckled and looked at me sideways. He was having fun with this. For now. I kept my guard up, waiting for him to blow cold again. "I think this whole thing was a ploy to hire yourself a driver."

"Who said anything about hiring? How much are you charging?"

"More than you can afford," he said, turning the key in the ignition. It did not turn over smoothly. I was used to that sound, since I drove a classic car in less-than-mint condition, but John looked at me with worry.

"You packed and ready?"

I laughed. "I told you, we're coming right home. The auction's over at three. We'll eat and head right out. Be home by seven."

But he didn't make a move to shift the truck in reverse. He sat there for a minute, blinking, giving me the chance to make a wiser decision. I almost considered taking his hint. It wouldn't take any time at all to run back to my apartment, grab a toothbrush or

maybe some scanty lingerie, should any opportunities arise. Nah. He was just trying to make me nervous.

Unfortunately, wisdom and foresight have never been my strong suits.

“John, go!” I ordered, laughing at his Boy Scout preparedness.

I WAS NOT LAUGHING LONG.

Holy shit. What was I thinking? That was the question crashing down on me approximately twenty seconds after John started the truck. I told myself to calm down, but that worked almost as well as someone else telling me to calm down.

The more I freaked out about spending alone time with John all day, the harder my heart started to pound. And the harder my heart pounded, the angrier I became with myself. How could I let someone have this effect on me? I wasn't a smitten little girl. Then again, Maddie *was* a smitten little girl, and she didn't seem so flustered because of a guy. She ended her evening sleeping propped against his arm.

But there was the truth of the matter.

I was smitten.

And since forever, when I got smitten, I got flustered, and insecure, and cowardly, and I hated myself for it. I'd love to think I could change, but I had never been as smitten with anybody as I had with John. I wasn't sure if change was possible.

Nevertheless, it would be an incredibly uncomfortable road trip if I clammed up and didn't talk so:

“It's a nice day, huh?” I asked.

Yeah, yeah. Pitiful. But it was a start. A first attempt at prying open my shell.

“There's a front coming in from the north. I think we'll run into it this afternoon.”

I pilfered through my sack and produced two apples, offering

him one and sinking my teeth into the mealy flesh of the other. Figured.

“S’not supposed to rain till seven. We’ll miss the worst of it,” I said around apple chunks.

“If you say so.” He steered with the heel of his hand as he bit into his apple. Men often gave me that infuriating line. It implies, “You’re an idiot, but I don’t care enough to fight about it.” Half of me wanted to smile and nod to my servant. The other half screamed, “Fight me, you asshole!”

Weather not being my forte, and him being a pilot, I deferred. Although he already had deferred to me. Damn it.

His teeth sunk into his apple, not taking a bite but holding it between his jaws as he glanced in the sideview to change lanes, clearing space for cars merging onto Route 4. He was a good driver. Secure, confident, and courteous. He drove fast, but not recklessly, accelerating quickly. I couldn’t live with myself if I was smitten with a dude who cut someone off and then dawdled in front of them. John’s driving was an aphrodisiac.

“Tell me about your childhood,” he said, catching my dreamy half-smile.

Uh, what? Oh. I forgot there were people left in the world who hadn’t witnessed my childhood. Everyone I knew, apart from John, I knew since infancy.

“Same as my adulthood. But with parents. Well, technically, I had parents. Occasionally. Other times, I had Nancy and Bill and more friends my age because they hadn’t all left to make their way in the world.”

John looked over at me without saying anything at first. I watched him from my peripheral vision while I pretend to be focused on the noise barriers separating the highway from those unfortunate residences planted them.

He cleared his throat. “What do you mean? Your parents would leave you alone? As a child? Wasn’t that—?”

“Negligent?”

"I was going to say frightening. For you. But also, yes, very much negligent for them to leave their child by herself."

"It's not that big a deal. They were never abusive or unloving, exactly. They just weren't much of anything." I delivered my line to the windshield, but when I felt his face look at me, I faced him.

The lines between his eyes and a sudden patronizing interest in my welfare made what I said sound worse than it was. I knew he wasn't buying my flippancy.

"Mom and Dad loved sailing, so they went out on the weekends. Sometimes longer. They had the shop, but I had taken over the running of it by tenth grade. I had Justin and a shotgun in the back."

"That sounds...lonely." His eyes didn't leave the road. Maybe he knew I wasn't the type to welcome pity.

"It is," I agreed.

He nodded once.

"It was," I corrected myself, with my danged reddening cheeks.

"Did you ever want to make your own way in the world?"

"What makes you think I haven't?"

"I don't mean that your shop isn't great. I don't know." He changed lanes. He didn't need to. Traffic was light and our exit wasn't for miles. Maybe he needed something to do with his hands. This truck had a manual transmission, but it was far from the cockpit. I thought about his capable hands on the throttle and the stick, fingers flicking switches here and there, constantly adjusting the controls to account for minute changes in weather and torque and velocity and all those aeronautical physics words I had no idea about.

"I think if it were me and I took over the family business, I'd feel stuck. Eventually, I'd resent not being able to do my own thing." I was still imagining this was the cockpit of an F-whatever-number, his face covered by his mask and visor, only his hands open to communicate his character in those incremental, elegant movements.

“Oh, nah. Not me.” He didn’t understand my ties to this place. Not many people did. It was an old-soul thing. I had a kinship with this land that felt as coded into my DNA as my red hair and left-handedness.

I leaned my head back against the headrest and thought for a minute. “When I was in high school, I played in a band.”

“Like marching band?”

“No, like a metal band.”

“What were you called?” he asked, laughing.

“Maven. I played the bass guitar. Badly. I mean, we all sucked, but we thought we were amazing. We were going to leave for California and play grungy, disgusting parties and clubs, like CBGBs in New York.”

“Like when The Ramones played there?”

“Psh, yeah. It’s totally cleaned up now.”

“It probably was by the time you graduated high school, too.” He was right again.

“Can’t you let a girl dream? Anyway, the plan was to get a record deal, but not make any hits. Because we were too cool and obscure to be a sellout, corporate band.”

“Idealistic teenagers.” He got it. I was impressed. I rolled my eyes at my sixteen-year-old self, working in a junk shop after school, dreaming of the West Coast because “things happen there.”

“So, I’m guessing no record deal?”

“The future of Maven was already dimming by the end of junior year. By senior year, we had all signed up for honors and AP courses, and we were too focused on getting into college to get the band together for practice. We breathed out one day, and the band dissolved.”

“Let me guess, everyone is now married with kids and works in a bank.”

“Actually, no. One of us is a professional musician, one stage manages a Broadway production, and one...I think she went to California and is like a professional burlesque dancer or some-

thing. They all did unique things with their lives. I'm the only one who didn't get out."

"But you're happy?" He didn't look at me again. Maybe he thought it was too invasive or personal.

"Well...I don't know," I told the truth. "But that's more to do with being left behind than being stuck."

"What drew you back here? You must have left for college, right?"

"Mmm. Sort of. I only went an hour and a half away. I actually didn't come home often. I said my hellos, ate my Thanksgiving and Christmas meals with the family or Nancy's family, and couldn't wait to be back on campus. It was that way for the three years of my undergrad, then after the first year of my Master's, I came home and there was a new traffic light in Prince Frederick, plus a new strip mall and gas station with national chain fast food restaurants.

"Anywhere else, *anyone* else would have thought, 'Who cares? We finally have a Starbucks.' But I was incensed. I felt betrayed. Someone should have asked my permission to make those changes. I should have somehow been a part of the new development, not to give my consent, but just to be aware."

John stared at me. At my hands, actually. When I felt strongly about something, they had a mind of their own. We didn't talk for several more miles.

"Once, when I was in first grade, my mom picked me up from school," he said. "She had come from a salon appointment and cut off her long hair. All the teachers told her how stylish she looked and how much it suited her, but I couldn't get over the change. I felt like my mom had been replaced with an alien. I didn't talk to her for days, even after she made my favorite dinner."

"You didn't like it?"

"Eh. I guess it was around the time my dad left her the first time. You know how it goes, too much change all at once. Subcon-

sciously, I was afraid she might leave, too. Anyway, it felt catastrophic to me.”

“That’s how it feels. That day, I sat in that Starbucks parking lot and sobbed. There’s a song I love. The lyrics are:

‘There’s houses in the cornfield,
’round a fallin’ down barn.

And the old dirt road was paved.” I smiled over at John.

“Replace ‘cornfield’ with tobacco field and that’s here. I guess, for most, it’s bittersweet nostalgia that haunts this county. For me, it’s just bitter.”

“So are thinking of running for commissioner? Or some kind of planning board?”

“Oh, I don’t want to change things. I only want to be here to see the changes happening. I want to suffer through the changing traffic patterns and mourn every old growth wood that’s razed to make way for another chain restaurant. Calvert has two Walmarts. Did you know that? That’s unnecessary.”

“You are an enigma, Emerson Broome.” John laughed.

“Well, I suppose, if you have to call me something..Um, don’t take the beltway, take 301. Turn right. Exit here, I mean.”

“You sure?”

“Are you really questioning me how to get out of the county? There’s like one way in and one way out.”

“Absolutely not. I would never question your directional skills, ma’am,” he said, taking the exit.

“Ugh! I’m too young for ma’am.”

“Sorry, miss.”

“Much better.” I crossed my legs up on my seat. Sure, it was unsafe, but it was a step up from my car with no seatbelts. I could get used to being a passenger. This was downright luxurious if you ignored the hundreds of coffee spills on the pebbled flooring, the ever-lingering odor of cigarette smoke, and a broken AC. “So, where’s your phone?”

He shifted his weight to the side and shimmied it out of his back pocket.

"0326," he said, without my asking. Ooh, the trustworthiness. It was still warm from his butt when I touched the code and viewed his home screen, searching for a music app or whatever his means of listening to music.

"What do you listen to on road trips?"

"Uh..." It was his turn to blush. "It's sort of a carryover from my childhood."

"Welllll?"

"The Carpenters."

"Um, John? I can't know you anymore."

"It's bad, I know. Unless I'm going to West Virginia. Then it's—"

"—John Denver," we both said.

"How can you not?" I asked.

"Impossible, I know," he agreed.

"Hmmm...I think you'll like this." I opened his app and logged on to my account to play my Official Road Trip Playlist. When the first few tinkling notes of Journey's "Open Arms" began, he smiled.

"Lying beside you, here in your arms-the-dark-I-mean"—I always got those lyrics wrong—"Feeling your heartbeat with mine."

I swooped my arms and crossed my heart in exaggerated movements. Then, I held the "mic" out for him to take over the next phrase.

"Softly you whisper, you're so sincere. How could our love be so blind?" He sang into my fist. I knew he'd know the words.

"I love this song," he said, breaking character.

"Here comes the chorus."

"So now I run to you with open arms."

"Shut up." I laughed, smacking him in the arm. "It's *come*."

"It's what?" He shouted over the music, turning it up.

"I COME to you!" I shouted into his ear just as the chorus died away.

“Icometoyouwithopenarms,” I clarified, suddenly quiet and slinking down in my seat.

I chanced a glance sideways at John, who was shaking his head at me.

The next song was “Anyway You Want It,” my favorite Journey song, but I opted out of singing along this time to avoid future embarrassment, even though this *was* my karaoke song.

We listened and sang along to the greatest hits of Journey, Metallica—even *The Black Album*—Johnny Cash, a string of 80s hair bands, and 90s hip hop singles, and avoided The Carpenters all the way through Maryland and Pennsylvania. By the time we got to the auction—in record time—we were both hoarse from singing stupid loud to old music.

It wasn’t noon yet and the sky was blackening. We bounced into the dusty parking lot of the round barn, where the estate auction was held. This monthly event was the hub of the Mid-Atlantic Antiques Society and frequented by all types of industry people, mostly antiques purveyors, but some civilians as well. It began with the showcase, during which we saw the auction items up close, kicked their tires, looked into their mouths—or, you know, appraised each piece based on how much we think we’d get for it and determined how high we’d go.

I rummaged through local estate sales and garage sales as well, but the majority of my good pieces, the ones with named makers printed somewhere inside, came from the Penn Auction House. This place helped me sprout the wings I needed to fly from my parents’ junk shop to a treasure trove, and I had a soft place in my heart for it.

John followed me through the rows of low boys and high boys, the faux Louis XVI commodes, the matching art deco bedroom vanities and armoires, and sets of dining room tables and chairs.

“So, this is like the Ikea of antiques, huh?” he asked, his eyes wide and overwhelmed by row after row of expert wooden craftsmanship.

"I wouldn't know. I've never been to Ikea."

"Well, it's like this," he gestured to an armoire. "But newer, obviously. And everything's tiny." He placed a palm flat on an end table and wiggled it. The table didn't budge. "Are we going to look at everything?"

"Complaining already? I didn't even ask you to hold my purse."

"You don't carry a purse."

"It's just an expression." I felt my cheeks grow pinker. When I looked at him, he turned away. "How do you know I don't carry a purse?"

"I pay attention." His eyes flicked over to mine for just a second. "I was just wondering what to expect from this delightful trip down Antiques Roadshow." He tossed a desiccated baseball glove in the air and tried to fit it over his hand, but the leather was too old.

"Needs oil," he said, replacing it exactly as he found it.

"I'm looking for something in particular. Something special. I have to hunt and peck through every little thing to find it."

"What is it you're looking for?"

"I'll know it when I see it,"

He raised his eyebrow but wisely did not comment further.

"I wish we'd go back to kitchen tables again," I lamented to John, running my fingers over a solidly crafted early nineteenth-century farmhouse table. "As a society, I mean."

"As opposed to?" he asked.

"Hmm. I don't know," I said, stooping low to duck under the table, checking for any distinguishing marks. "Islands. Everybody needing miles of granite countertops when they don't cook as extensively as previous generations. These people made do. Why can't we?"

I moved to the end of a solid-looking table. "Look at the slight depression in the oak here at the end. It's from decades of kneading bread and chopping vegetables. The woman who owned

this table probably didn't have top of the line anything, but she left this tactile impression for us to glimpse her life."

"I didn't know it was possible to romanticize a table." His words were teasing, but there was something more to his eyes. They were probing, beckoning. He ambled toward me, grazing his fingers along the three-inch thick wood.

"Solid. I see the appeal." He raised an eyebrow. "Know what I think?" he asked, almost whispering it into my ear.

It was a rhetorical question, but I shook my head anyway, recovering from the breath that touched my neck.

"What year is this?" he asked. He glanced around my face. He stood close enough that he couldn't take in all of it at once. My eyes, my freckled cheeks, my nose. When he got to my lips, he didn't linger. His gaze shot straight back to mine.

"Probably late nineteenth, early twentieth American. Hard to date exactly because it's handmade."

"I think a young man built this table for his new bride, who never had a kitchen table of her own. Never had a kitchen of her own. She wasn't sure about him at first, but he surprised her by building this table, solid so that she could knead her bread on it. That's how he won her over."

"Is that so?"

"Mm." He nodded. "Yes, it is. In fact, she was so happy she hopped on the end of it," he said, smacking the slight concavity where our hands were so close they almost touched, "and they conceived their first child right here on this table."

I sprang away from the table as if his story had been God's honest truth, and he laughed at me. For a long, delicious moment as our laughter died away, our eyes didn't shy away from each other. It was our first time experiencing something together, even something as small as a laugh, a look. There was knowing there. We connected in some magical, magnetic way, and I almost forgot to breathe.

I turned, and we continued slowly through the remnants of

lives lived and discarded, touching each piece as if my fingers gleaned insight into their memories through osmosis.

"I guess it's good that I brought you, then," I said to him, "to help me build their stories."

"What's the story of this piece, then?" He pointed to an art deco vanity.

"Ooh, I'm not sure you want to know."

"Try me." He dropped the gauntlet.

I sat at the vanity and pretended to reapply my lipstick in the large round mirror.

"This was where Zelda sat, every night, waiting for her husband to come home, stinking of drink from the club, wondering if this would be the night he'd hit her so hard her skull would crack."

"Oh shit, you went dark," he said, though he didn't seem bothered by it.

I continued in my best femme fatale voice, which was terrible. "Her bags were packed. Her lover was waiting. There was one last thing to do before she left him for good." I opened the drawer to my right and my hand crept inside. "The revolver was there. Loaded. One bullet ready for him. He wasn't going to get away with this anymore. Not from her. Not from no one." I withdrew my gun shaped hand from the drawer and clutched it to my breast.

"She hears a pounding on the door. It opens. She doesn't think. She shoots. The body collapses in a thud." I swiveled around on the non-matching stool. "She screams, then covers her mouth. It's not her husband who is lying there in the pool of blood. It's her lover. All their plans bleeding out right there on the threadbare carpet."

John and I both stared at the bare boards of the barn floor where my "lover" was dying. He looked up at me, eyebrows raised.

"I don't think you should buy this piece," he said.

"Bad vibes," I agreed. He raised his hand to help me off my stool. I surprised myself by taking it.

But as we turned the corner, I saw a hint of blue. My eyes

zeroed in and my steps quickened. There it was. That one piece I was looking for.

It was a simple hutch. The kind that lived in the same kitchens that housed my “conception table.” It was utilitarian and stark, another workhorse piece from the time before modern built-in cabinetry. It was solid hardwood, painted, chipped, and painted again over the decades until it flaked to the perfect robin’s egg, white, and blond wood patina. It was a look that could not be duplicated, no matter how many coats of chalk paint you slathered on.

“Oh, John,” I whispered in reverence. “This is it. This is what I’m bringing home.”

“Sure. Uh, anything else?” He looked around, obviously not seeing the same beauty I did. But then, most people didn’t see beauty until someone else told them it was there.

“I’ll pick up a few more pieces to make the trip worthwhile. But she’s the prize. Isn’t she gorgeous?”

“I’m guessing *she’s* not putting off any murderous, domestic dispute vibes?” he asked, still tentative.

“Nope. Pure family joy.” I opened the upper cabinets. “See this high shelf here? This is where they kept their savings in an old coffee tin. They minded their pennies, eating grits and cheap cuts of meat for years to send their son to Harvard—this was in the days when you could cut back on groceries to pay for college, but then their daughter had an accident, and they had to use the money for her treatments instead.”

“That doesn’t sound so joyous to me.”

“Don’t be a skeptic. I’m not finished,” I hushed. “It all worked out because Timmy was awarded a full football scholarship—one of the first ever. And Susie? She learned to walk again, and her first steps without a cane were down the aisle to marry her doctor, who fell in love with her even though everyone thought she’d be a cripple for the rest of her life.”

“What about Mama and Papa?”

“Oh, they lived to celebrate their sixty-fifth anniversary. Died within days of one another.”

“I’m glad some get their happy endings.”

The auction was starting. I had a few more storied pieces I wanted in my shop, but I wasn’t going to fight hard for them. When they called item number 457, I raised my paddle several times, fighting hard for Mama and Papa’s hutch and got it—I knew I would.

“Congratulations,” John said low into my ear.

“Thanks. Now let’s get out of here.”

“What about your table?” The men were hoisting it on the stage area.

“I don’t need it. I have kitchen tables. Nobody’s buying them. Let’s go,” I whispered. The bidding started, and I didn’t want to mistake my voice for a bid. I turned to duck out when I heard his voice call out, “One hundred fifty.”

“What are you doing?” I whisper-yelled.

Another seller was challenging him.

“Two fifty.” John increased his price.

“John, I don’t need it.”

“Two seventy-five,” said the seller across the aisle.

“But I do,” he said to me. “Three hundred.” He raised his hand.

“These are wholesale prices. You are going to bid yourselves out of a value.”

“I don’t care about value, God damn it,” he hissed with darkened eyes. “I care about that kitchen table.”

I shut my mouth in a frown, glaring at him. The other bidder stopped after three fifty, so the table was coming home in my box truck, along with my hutch, the art deco vanity set with the violent past life—how could I not?—and a few kitchen tools to round out my collections of transferware, rolling pins, and dough bowls.

Everything would fit. That wasn’t the issue. The issue had been him overpaying for the table, as titillating as his story was. But as soon as we got outside, me to go around back to pay for our

purchases, him to bring the truck around, we had an even bigger issue. Those black clouds we saw on the way up here had opened up, unleashing their fury on our heads, the dusty ground quickly transforming into box truck quicksand.

“I SAID IT WOULD BE FINE,” John told-me-so forty minutes later.

“You’re right. I didn’t believe you.” It still seemed like we bent the space-time continuum. Our precious artifacts were loaded up, and we’d be merging onto 301 South in less than half an hour.

“You had enough tarps. We kept everything covered. We didn’t even have an issue pulling out of the muddy lot. We’ll be home in—”

Never was there a more perfect moment for him to be so rudely interrupted by a *Ca-CHUNK, SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!*

Stopping wasn’t our choice. The truck had made that decision for us, but John struggled to pull off the country road. His face blanked and then tightened as he worked the wheel to the right.

I breathed. I blinked. Nothing was wrong. Nothing had gone wrong on this trip. Nothing was *going* to go wrong on this trip. That sound was the probably to do with the already malfunctioning air conditioner. The furniture shifting in the back. Or perhaps we ran over something on the road.

Yes! That had to be it! I hadn’t seen anything on the road, but then I wasn’t driving, and the view from the passenger’s seat wasn’t as clear as John’s.

It would also account for that sickening thud that stopped the truck short as well. John would just hop right out, release the vehicle from the piece of scrap metal or whatever it was we ran over, and we’d be on our way.

He jumped down and stepped back to take a look. I swallowed my denial and creaked open my door a few beats later. The engine wasn’t smoking. Everything looked good in the front. Everything

was still fine. It had to be. Despite the medicine ball in my stomach, whatever it was, AAA could fix it and have us out of here with only a slight delay.

But as I glanced around the truck for John, something looked wrong. The truck was lopsided. The back part, the box, was lower than the cab. It was like seeing a crime scene or a dead body for the first time—or at least how I imagine it would be seeing a crime scene or dead body for the first time. It looked so wrong that my brain couldn't even process how bad it was. Then it occurred to me.

The truck had no back wheels.

John came from around the other side lugging the rear axle out of the road. He looked calm, like driving the wheels off a truck was a typical occurrence for him. Considering the dangerousness of his career, if things had to go wrong, it was better that we were in a land vehicle and not a fighter jet.

Except, for me, it wasn't better. It was too big of a problem and it was solely *my* problem, meaning only my solution would get us out of this mess. Also, I was not known for good solutions.

"I'll call AAA," I said. It was feeble, both my voice and words, but it was my first attempt at a solution.

He chuckled. "I don't think they come out for moving trucks."

"Sure they do. It's the vehicle I'm driving. I'm a member."

"Have at it then." He started typing into his phone. Probably texting his buddies, "You'll never guess what the most incompetent girl did to her truck," or canceling his hot date for the night, but it distracted me from the call I was supposed to be making.

"Hello," I sang when the actual human answered. It couldn't hurt to be super nice-sounding when asking for a favor. A favor that I pay monthly for, but a favor, nonetheless. "My truck broke down and I need a tow." I heard snickering from Mr. Perfect Jet Pilot when I said the phrase "broke down." Well, that's what happened. The wheels broke and the truck was down.

I gave her my member number and learned I had no coverage for this vehicle, because they don't cover vehicles of this type.

"But I'm a member and I'm covered," I pleaded. "What if this was my daily driver? What if my keys were locked inside or I needed gas? Isn't it all the same, no matter the type of vehicle?"

Apparently not. "Okay, thank you." Scratch solution one.

"There's an auto shop a few miles from here," he said, showing me some Yelp page. "Want me to call?"

"Sure." I was already up to my chest in the mire of mini-depression. I was willing to rot on the side of the road here until the turkey buzzards started circling. I was not the person you wanted around during an emergency.

I sat on the embankment next to the road and watched the cigarette butts and broken down McDonald's cups float down the river of road water runoff in the gully. My butt was soaked, and for one jolting second, I cared. Then I didn't.

"What year is it?" John asked me, holding the phone away.

"2019."

"Try again." He raised his brows, waiting.

"Oh. '90."

"'90," he repeated into his phone, followed by lots of *uh-huhs* and *that-would-be-greats*, and a final "Thank you."

I doubted any miracle would take place, but John *was* Catholic. Maybe I could ask him to pray extra hard—

"Fifteen minutes." He hung up his phone. There must be something to Catholicism. The one thing my mom didn't try.

"We'll be out of here in fifteen minutes?" I jumped up, rushing to him with my arms out. Before I knew it, they were around his neck and my lips scratched the stubble already forming on his cheek.

"The tow will be here in fifteen. We'll hitch a ride with them back to the shop, they'll assess the damage..." He looked at me, holding me at arm's length. "Then we'll proceed from there."

"Do you think they'll be able to fix it tonight?"

“Unlikely. It’s almost four now. If they even have an extra axle, they’re not going to stay up all night fixing your truck.”

Holy shit. I hadn’t even thought about what would happen if we couldn’t drive the truck back home tonight. Did we rent a car? Were there any car rentals around here? This was a town of churches, bars, and farriers, all of the above enclosed in aluminum buildings. We’d be lucky to find an Amish family who’d let us bunk in their barn for the night.

Turns out “lucky” for me meant a twenty-minute ride in the cab of a tow truck built for two. I couldn’t wholly complain, though, as I was jostled closer to John with each pothole and his thigh burned hot against mine. It was the closest we had ever been to one another for the longest period of time. I credited my fear of touching a complete stranger for keeping me unselfconsciously right of center on the bench.

John took the lead at the repair shop, my words too inadequate to discuss car failures—and to stick up for myself. I was thankful to have a Maverick in my posse.

When he finished talking to the guy, John found me slunk down in an oil-stained chair near a pungent display of new tires. I remembered the few times I had accompanied my father to Sears to get his car serviced in the days before mechanics thought women and children would ever set foot in a car repair shop. The entire library of reading material consisted of *Popular Mechanics* and *Auto Traders*. For want of literally anything else to amuse myself with, I’d peruse the tire brochures and pick out what I considered to be the best set of tires to put on my future car.

“If I go to hell when I die, I already know it looks like Sears and smells like rubber.”

“If you say so. They think they have the used part a few towns over,” he said to my boneless corpse.

“But?” I sat up, not taking interest as much as ownership. Finally.

“But.” He bent his knees to crouch in front of me. “They’re closing. We can rent a car if you want to get home tonight, or...”

“What do you mean, *or*? Of course we’ll go home tonight,” I was horrified at what his next words might be.

“It’s just that, if we drive home tonight, we’ll have to drive four hours back here tomorrow after it’s fixed. Might as well save eight hours of driving. Is it worth it for a few hours in your own bed?”

“First of all, you’ve never slept in my bed, so you don’t know just how worth it it is. Second...I *absolutely won’t* ask you to do this all over again tomorrow. It’s my own damn fault for trying to squeeze one more trip out of a truck that I knew was on its last legs. I’m not that big of a baby that I can’t take my own punishment.”

He stood from his crouched position and put both his hands on the arms of my chair, leaning over to look me in the eye like he was Paul Hollywood about to judge me on a very difficult bake.

“Okay, then.” He wasn’t the least bit impatient as he laid it out for me. “First of all, as tempting as it is to find out for myself, I’m sure your bed is beyond compare. But it’s still not worth making the same needless road trip twice in two days. Secondly, you didn’t *ask* me to accompany you or stay here with you tonight. I’m *telling* you that I’m along for the ride either way.” His eyes sparkled with his trademarked no-smile smile. “I kind of like this adventure we’re on. Do you really want to waste our time driving an additional eight hours?”

“I guess not?” Warmth blossomed on my chest like blood from a bullet wound. It had been so long since I’d felt cared for, since someone had gone ridiculously far out of their way for me, I didn’t even know what to think or feel. A feeble thank you wouldn’t be enough.

“I’ll look up hotels.” I nodded.

He looked down at his feet. “Well, there’s only one. It’s probably not what you’re used to.”

“Meaning what?” I pictured a quaint, Victorian B&B with

gingerbread porches and an enclosed rose garden. Did he think it was too fancy for the likes of me?

"It's attached to a bar. I think it's the kind more people live in than stay overnight in."

I laughed. "I had to stay in the Surrey Inn once when my brother needed me to bail him out of some fiasco. It wasn't *that* bad. As long as I peed in the woods behind it instead of using what they considered the 'bathroom.'"

"Always up for an adventure?" A smile curved across his lips. "Good." I doubted how *up for adventure* I was. It was more like *resigned to torture* at this point.

I took a deep breath and stretched my legs down from the chair where I was curled in the fetal position. I only had to make one phone call, and my truck might be ready as early as tomorrow. It was simply a matter of spending a single night in a dingy shoebox with the world's most handsome man and only one bed...

I groaned. The thought wasn't even titillating. "John, I'm sorry. This must be a catastrophe for you. Traveling with someone you barely know—"

"It was only four hours—"

"Driving the whole time—"

"I preferred it, remember?—"

"Braving the auction with me—"

"During which I purchased myself a lovely, if somewhat scandalous, kitchen table—"

"Dealing with the truck in the mud, finding a repair shop, a hotel!" My voice rose higher and higher as I named each thing he had done for me today, only now realizing how exactly much he had done. "Let the Pope canonize you now. You are a saint," I said.

He said nothing but clenched his jaw.

"I didn't even let you listen to The Carpenters."

"Now that is unforgivable." He gestured with his eyebrows or else I might not have realized he was teasing. "But I might know a

way you can make it up to me.” He smirked the smirk I’d always wanted from the most handsome man.

“Oh yeah?” I asked suggestively, as if I didn’t know what he meant.

“The bar slash hotel slash only restaurant in town?”

“Yes?”

“It’s karaoke night.”

CHAPTER 10

It wasn't exactly what I'd expected when he wagged his eyebrows at me, but dedicating "Top of the World" to him was at least within my wheelhouse. I also didn't know what I'd hoped for when I ordered that third round of Jameson shots—for the bar. Part of me desired complete oblivion and another part poorly thought of it as a thank you to the town that gave us refuge in our time of need.

I could have used a little oblivion. I had no responsibilities, no one to see me at my worst—unless you count John, which I didn't because we'd have no reason to see each other anymore after we get home. I had but to stumble into my room, remember how to turn a key in a lock, tear off my clothes, and fall flat on my face—ew, scratch that—curl up, fully clothed on top of the bedspread of the roach motel across the parking lot.

Oblivion didn't happen. A \$389 bar tab did. I forgot I'm not that kind of a drinker. I can't stand the taste of alcohol, except the occasional—okay, daily—craft beer, but a beer or two does not a tolerance for whiskey make. I spent the night nursing a Yuengling and giving away my own shots like the complete geek that I am.

My song came up. Finally! We were seated on those vinyl cush-

ioned—at this point I was craving the feel of anything but vinyl on my legs—trapezoid-back, metal, stacking chairs. Ugh, you'd know them if you ever set foot in an American Legion circa 1985. The seats were so narrow, they only fit the behinds of about 35% of their clientele, but the 65% were much better drinkers than me and didn't care.

John and I sat next to the stage. Maybe if I was good enough, the crowd would throw some dollar bills at me, and I could reimburse myself some of that bar tab. At least John would be my knight and defend my honor if one of the bikers took offence to anything I was bound to do.

I was definitely not equipped with the blood alcohol level necessary for karaoke, but as soon as the background opened with those childish organ notes—"Boop, ba-do-doo. Boop, ba-do-doo. Boop-ba-do-doo-dooooo"—I was ashamed, but I was feeling it.

John put his head in his hand. "Ugh! You picked the worst one!" he heckled. He laughed and shook his head, then leaned back, crossed his ankle over his knee, and watched me prance around the parquet floor, singing to the crowd. You couldn't tell me my metal band wouldn't have made it. I was a star.

"Never in a million years would I have guessed you'd be so good at that," John said as I took my seat and took a swig from a new bottle he ordered me while I greeted my fans at the end of my set.

"I know! What a skill, right? Karaoke. Highly valuable. Translates well into..." I thought for a second. "Absolutely nothing." We laughed.

"I don't think that's true. It's lively. Fun. Those are valuable skills, often overlooked."

"Just wait. I think you might be up next. I snuck a glance at the little slips of paper while I was up there."

He frowned. "I didn't fill out a slip."

"But I did. For you. Come on, you'll know it. Everyone knows

it. I'll go up there with you. How else are we going to pass the time in Berkridge, PA?"

His eyes darkened and he leaned in. "I can think of ways." He whispered it close to my ear, and I swear to God his words went through my body and landed between my legs. My lips parted, and I'm pretty sure my eyes turned completely round. Fuck karaoke. I couldn't wait to see the inside of our flea bag room.

"John Bergen," the DJ called into the mic.

"Looks like I'm up." He stood, taking his duty like a soldier—a sailor, excuse me. He held his hand out for me. "Shall we?" His eyes and voice were still deep and intense, like he was ready to caress and worship me like a goddess in this beer and vomit soaked, wood paneled, double-wide bar/hotel/only restaurant in town.

I took his hand.

It was a simple gesture. But what might be simple for other women felt exhilaratingly foreign to me. When a man proffered his arm, his hand, his...whatever, I took it to be a joke and couldn't let myself be the brunt of it. The old me, the Ten Minutes Ago Me, would have waved him away with a smile and stood with my hands firmly on the tabletop, all the while longing for the contact that was being offered freely to me.

Ten Minutes Ago Me was a fucking idiot. John's hand was warm, calloused from barbells and boat building and a life spent in a cockpit. It felt good. He pulled me from my chair into his chest, and we stood, like Liesl and Rolfe in the gazebo, about to kiss. Jesus Christ, I was the biggest dork in the universe.

He laced his fingers through mine and pulled me to the stage. It wasn't romantic. It was more of a "you dragged me here, so you're going to help me through this" hand hold.

I liked the feeling of his clasp on my hand, his pull, his slightly proprietary guardianship of me, but I couldn't figure out how I had suddenly become so worthy of it. More importantly, I couldn't begin to fathom how...*easy* it was to be near him.

I was the world's least confident woman. That was a given. But

here I was, about to lead him through the first verse of Black Dog—the key was high for a normal man—next to, well, more like one foot below, the world’s handsomest, sexiest test pilot. For the first time, my lack of self-confidence melted. That personal barrier that I rigidly maintained thawed. I was just me. And I belonged here at his side.

We belonged together. Not in a love-at-first-sight way. Not in a love-at-all way. But in a way that I was comfortable, considering his desire might be real.

I turned off my need to look away first. I turned down the instinct to jump when he made skin-to-skin contact. I met his eyes fully, regardless of the size of my pupils. I implored myself to touch him somewhere, if only to nuke that ridiculous wall I put up.

The song ended, and he suggested we go to the rooms he checked us into.

Rooms.

Yep. Disappointing.

Other than one truly accidental brush of the elbows, we didn’t touch during our long walk across the parking lot. It was clear our moment had ended. He unlocked my door and ducked inside.

He turned on all the lights, checking the corners, the bathroom, each and every possible niche or lurking place for junkies, cockroaches, and whatever else might tend to hide in the dark corners of a seedy hotel. It turned out not to be the existential wasteland I had been envisioning the whole night. The sheets were pure white and smelled of bleach—a welcome scent in this instance. The bathroom counter had no mysterious spills and only the occasional cigarette burn in the wood-look veneer.

When all was according to John’s standards, i.e., no murderer waiting behind the shower curtain, we began our awkward good nights.

“I know you didn’t bring any extra clothes with you. I have a t-shirt in my bag,” he said.

“That would be great.” I swallowed. “The more layers between

my skin and the bedbugs the better.” I chuckled too loudly. I actually did have something with me. I had a Nordstrom bag from Friday night’s lingerie shopping spree. I had thrown it into the truck when I picked it up from Justin’s friend’s trailer and forgot to bring it all the way into my apartment last night. So I had my choice of bra and panties for tomorrow and a few more silky nothings that I’d save for my own bed.

His bag was completely stocked with every possible overnight essential, including an extra toothbrush.

I sat on the creaky end of the bed—assuming there was a non-creaky end—and considered the amorous potentialities of the situation. John. Me. Alcohol. Stuck in a motel together.

Me, needing his protection...from gum disease. It was the stuff that built the romantic comedy. I felt like Claudette Colbert, but instead of seamed stockings and a sheet separating me from my rival/love interest, I had skinny jeans and a full wall. Not cool.

Scratch that rom com business. This situation had all the romance of a business meeting at a corporate rental car agency, complete with gas station coffee and stale donuts.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Oh, about how I should have hitched up my skirt to flail a ride home.”

“Okay, Claudette.” He laughed. “Who would have brought you back here tomorrow?”

“You know *It Happened One Night*? No way. Men don’t know *It Happened One Night*.”

“My mom’s a big Turner Classic Movies buff. She loads her DVR with all her favorites and makes me watch them whenever I go home. I think she thinks all those silver screen heroes will rub off on me, and I’ll be the second coming of Clark Gable or Cary Grant.”

“Hmm.”

“What’s ‘hmm?’” He was rummaging through his dopp kit.

“She’s not wrong, you know.”

“How so?” he asked, his attention fully diverted to the detection of his extra toothbrush.

“You’re funny, altruistic, you do everything with manners and gentility. You’re certainly as handsome as a Golden Age movie star. I don’t see you as a Clark Gable though.”

“No? Who then?” He stopped pretending this conversation didn’t interest him. Wise, considering I was explicitly and embarrassingly extolling his every virtue.

I kneeled on the bed, gathering my forces, and cupped his chin, drawing it into an imaginary spotlight. There was no such thing in the poorly lit motel room, and instead, I let my fingers scrape along his whiskers. He played along, letting me guide him, his eyes growing blacker as they looked down at me, stoic yet wanting. That perfect and infuriating combination. His mouth retained his usual hint of humor and treachery.

I felt a whisper of fingertips ripple across the silk of my blouse behind me, gliding from my bra line down to my waistline and float away as lightly as they had come. It was an uncertain, maybe unconscious, wish for me to move closer.

I arched my back slightly in response as my lips parted. A breath moved raggedly through me, but I didn’t dare close the gap between us. I needed a much more concrete sign than him touching my blouse. It was silk, for God’s sake. It begged to be touched, on or off me. And he didn’t even press it to my skin.

I cleared my throat. “Bing Crosby. Mixed with Burt Lancaster. With a touch of Jimmy Stewart,” I declared.

I dropped my hand from his chin. I needed a break from the intensity of his nearness.

“Jimmy Stewart?” He questioned. “I don’t know about that.”

“He was a pilot, too. Gave up his film career to fight during the War. He was a highly decorated captain. The bravest of the brave. And, he married once and stayed married his whole life. He even raised her kids from a previous marriage as his own.”

“Sounds very noble.” He rolled his eyes.

“It’s more than that. It’s sexy. It’s...well, for me at least, it’s the hottest thing a man can be. Loyal in love.”

John grimaced and looked away.

That’s what put the nail in his coffin for me. He had the jovial humor, but ultimately, he was not a Jimmy Stewart. I’d already known to be wary of him, no matter how much time he spent with my nieces, no matter his willingness, nay *enthusiasm*, to come on this trip with me and take care of all my misfortunes, he was still a Maverick and I was Oliver Twist—rags and all. His good fortune in the looks, brains, guts, and every other department had brought all the sacrificial virgins of the temple swooning to lay down with him.

Why should he give that up? And why, especially, for me?

I fished into his bag for the toothpaste. I was beyond caring about propriety, and I was absolutely done tiptoeing around him so that he might one day find me irresistible. I wanted my teeth brushed so I could go to bed.

I found two white v-neck t-shirts in there. I pulled one out and held it up.

“Do you mind?” I asked.

He shook his head, confused at my abrupt shift in attitude, or perhaps whatever delusions I had just freed myself from.

I took the teeth cleaning implements to the open sink and brushed my teeth, then went into the tiny, not-entirely-clean shower and toilet room to change into the t-shirt.

When I came out, he was rooted in place, watching me, curiously. I pulled down the corner of one of the two double beds in the room. It was a waste of money to get two rooms, but they were ours now, so...

“So,” he said, finally looking around. Taking the hint that I was going to bed. Alone. Not that he had even made a move to imply he wanted to go to bed with me.

“So,” I repeated.

Apparently he didn’t take the hint.

"I see what you mean about *It Happened One Night*."

"Okay," I said, turning on the TV. Oh good, they had HBO on Demand. I could re-watch *Game of Thrones* for the sixteenth time.

"This could be a very incriminating situation we find ourselves in."

"It could have been," I corrected, pressing play on season 3, episode 9, where I left off at home. He didn't seem thwarted.

"The two of us, forced to spend the night together out of town. You wearing...that."

I supposed my nipples were entirely too exposed for company in his thin white t-shirt. What was I supposed to do? Wear an underwire to bed? Besides, I had given up on him ever thinking of me sexually, romantically, or as anything more than that homeless girl.

"Don't think you can take advantage of me, Johnny, just because we ran out of gas." I humored him in my terrible 1930s accent.

He smiled and sat on the squeaky end of the other bed and quickly became engrossed in the show. I guess he took my joke for an invitation to stay.

"Is this the Red Wedding episode?" he asked.

"Uh huh."

"I don't think I can take this one again," he said, shaking his head.

"Too gory?"

"Too sad. Robb's wife stabbed in the stomach. Him slowly crawling to her as they both clutched to the baby in her belly. No thank you. Once is enough." He stood up and grabbed his bag. "Need anything else?"

I looked at him, surprised that what he remembered most about the famously graphic episode was the love depicted in it. Maybe I had gotten him wrong after all. Or maybe those little tastes of sweetness disguised the sour.

"If I do, I'll knock on the wall between us. I'm sure you'll hear."

He just stayed there. It was awkward. My not caring. Him delaying for fuck-knows-whatever reason. “Well, good night.”

“Night,” I said.

“Um.” He stopped at the door. “Don’t forget the dead bolt.”

“I won’t.”

IT WAS HALFWAY through the episode. Robb Stark was apologizing to that rat bastard Frey, and I was taking turns silently begging Robb to get the hell out of there and trying to let sleep consume me. All to no avail. Robb died anyway, and I had thought too long and hard about John’s black eyes and his wide smile that turned him into a silver screen sex god when he quirked his lips to the side. Or when he was looking down at me with his arm around me.

I sat up in bed. Did I totally fucking miss a hint tonight? Was he flirting with me? Was he begging me for an invitation to stay in my room?

Chalk it up to low self-esteem, failure to recognize social cues, or whatever, I didn’t always understand when someone was flirting or not. With a man who once mistook me for homeless, then acted almost cruelly cold on a single blind date, and *then* he started flirting? Totally fucking oblivious.

I threw back the sheets and stepped into my boots. I didn’t bother knocking on the wall between us. I had to see him. I had to try *a thing*.

I peeked outside and the coast was clear. I grabbed my key, locked the door behind me, and walked the seven steps to his door. I took a deep breath and knocked, pulling his t-shirt down over my ass and suddenly thinking this was a very stupid idea.

But I craved his face. I wanted to feel the stubble of his five o’clock shadow on my cheeks and my breasts and everywhere else. I wanted to see what he wore to bed. I’d seen him without a shirt,

and his shoulders and back and chest were strong and beautiful and something I wanted to see again. I needed to hear his voice. The smooth, low tone that rings through the air to send me diving for his words.

The music from the bar got louder as the door swung open across the parking lot, and three people tumbled down the concrete steps laughing. They saw me standing there, and I waved, grimacing in my lace boy shorts and see-through t-shirt.

I raised my hand to knock again, but there was nothing to knock against. The door opened and John stood, silhouetted against the lamp glow wearing boxer briefs and...

"Glasses." The word escaped my thoughts in a dreamy whisper.

I was transfixed by the sight of his extraordinarily handsome face supporting a pair of thick black frames that only served to heighten his extraordinary handsomeness.

"I was reading." He stepped aside for me to come in.

Holy fuck. He was reading. Peel this t-shirt from my body now. It was going to be embarrassing when he discovered how wet I was.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, glancing into the parking lot and closing the door. He seemed annoyed by my presence. The door closing was more to protect my modesty from the bar crowd than anything else.

"I was wondering if you wanted to take advantage of me," I squeaked.

He took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He was handsome without them, God only knew, but I was a sucker for a man in glasses. And a man who reads. Books. Not ESPN websites.

He lifted my hand and enclosed it within both of his. This was it. This was going to happen. It was going to be amazing. I didn't care if he was loyal. I didn't care if he was going to go after the very next woman he encountered. Potentially, I could go after the very next man I saw, too. It didn't matter. We were going to have

sex. And it was going to be fun. And then it would be over and he'd go away. I was a Millennial-fucking-woman. I could do this. I could absolutely handle a one-night stand. I would never have to see him again after tomorrow.

"Emerson," he said softly. "If I wanted to take advantage of you, I'd have already done it."

But I couldn't handle this.

The bottom dropped out. I didn't even know what bottom. My pelvic floor maybe. Something that should be supporting me was no longer in my body. My legs weakened, like my muscles and ligaments had melted away, and I was nothing but ashy bones, ready to crumple. I slumped onto the bed as torrents of maddeningly embarrassing thoughts clouded my head.

How could I have misinterpreted him so completely? How do people ever recover from this kind of rejection? This wasn't even the first time I experienced such shame as a result of him. See, this is why I can't be vulnerable. What's cute on other people is a bad look for me.

He squatted down in front of me and exhaled loudly. "Oh, fuck. Em. That sounded bad. I didn't mean it like that. I swear to God—"

"You remember the first time we met?" I asked, looking at my boots and trying to cover as much of my body as the t-shirt stretched to allow. "Not dinner. Before that."

"Of course." He stiffened. We hadn't talked about that yet. "How could I ever forget the mistake I made? I'll never forgive myself."

"You thought I was homeless."

"Not really, I—"

I cut him off with a sharp glance.

"Okay, yes. I did. I'm so sorry, Em. I don't know how to make it up to you."

"It was the worst thing that ever happened to me," I said quietly, trying to keep the tears in.

He sighed and stood up.

"Until now," I said. "This feels worse. Catastrophically worse." I

looked up at him, standing so far above me. He looked so broken, I couldn't even hate him like I wanted to.

He slowly eased down next to me on the bed and put his arm around my shoulders. I pulled away, unable to bear his patronizing touch. He dropped his arm, and it was painfully obvious he didn't know what to do. I stood up and started for the door. There was no reason to stay. I needed to get away from him. After tomorrow, I would really, really never see him again.

He made that stupid sound when people laugh at something that couldn't possibly be construed as funny. "You're going to think this is funny, um..."

Oh, great. He was finding the humor already. I shot him a look that could destroy Alderaan. He regrouped and started again.

"You're beautiful," he blurted out. "The most beautiful woman I've ever known."

I wasn't going to allow myself to be taken in by any more of his confusing flattery. My hand felt for the knob, but he met me at the door and his hand enveloped mine.

"If anyone was going to tempt me, it would have been you," he said as if that clarified any of his bullshit.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean," he clenched his hands into fists, "this sounds so stupid. Okay, you know how some Catholics give up chocolate or soda or social media for Lent?"

"Yes?"

"I gave up sex."

"Say that again?"

"I've never been that into the whole church thing, and I thought I'd try it out for the community, and it was Lent. We're supposed to give something up. Something we care about," he rambled. "Anyway, it was a spur of the moment decision I made in church. I wasn't with anyone then and I...thought it would be a lot easier than this."

He ran his hand through his hair and removed his glasses once

more. He looked so uncomfortable, it relieved some of my own discomfort. But I was still leery. Maybe he was making up this crazy story to let me down easy.

“But then I met you and, homeless or not, you are so fucking gorgeous and cool—”

“I am NOT homeless,” I shouted.

“I know, I know,” he pleaded, his hand reaching out toward my waist. He looked so pathetically tortured, I didn’t move when he brushed his hands down my sides, hovering around my hips, grasping the fabric of my shirt in his fists, afraid to touch my body, but inching the hem higher in the struggle.

A smile fought through his tortured expression.

“You have no idea how much I want to touch you. You’re a siren, beckoning me to my doom.”

His mouth clamped into a straight line as a creaky breath escaped his throat. He skimmed his hand up my sides, carefully, wisely avoiding my breast. He traced the line of my biceps, my shoulder, my neck, and tangled in my long hair.

Somehow, he had me caged against the door, holding his body too far away from my own, fighting off this ridiculously childish temptation. Who was I to challenge a man’s vows to God?

Well, maybe I could push a tiny bit. I’d never been a temptress before, and I relished the power. I pressed my body into his, testing the waters. He closed his eyes.

“I don’t think it would be an act of treachery. I’m an antiques dealer. I’m not going to chop your head off like some Biblical praying mantis.”

He groaned. “Don’t say that. It’s been hard enough these past few weeks.”

I grinned my evil temptress grin. “I can tell.” I pushed closer. He pulled back, but his eyes glowed with ferocity behind his black frames.

I moved my hand up to push his glasses away. I was going to

kiss him at the very least, and with my luck, a sharp resin corner would land smack dab in the middle of my cornea.

“No. I can’t see you without them.” He pulled them back down.

“How do you usually see me?”

“Contacts.”

“I thought pilots had to have perfect vision.”

“Yes. That’s why I teach now. I have presbyopia. Old eyes.” He said it quietly, trying but failing to guard a weak spot in his fortress. My heart bruised a little for what seemed like a mournful loss of career. He bore the disappointment so well, I ached for him.

“Do you miss it terribly?”

“My current view is better than all the clouds in the atmosphere.”

The ache blossomed into something more. He gave me a tiny bit of pride and hope. I’d never pined for someone and had my feelings reciprocated. I was boneless and melty, and I knew he was melting too.

“You better watch it or you’re going to make me break my own vow,” I whispered. We remained upright and pushed into the door, applying as much pressure to one another as we dared.

“Which vow is that?” he asked, grazing my jaw with his thumb.

“The vow I made to myself to punish you for the rest of your life for treating me the way you did.”

“And why would you break that?”

“Because I really need you to kiss me.”

John backed away, looking over my face and down between his hands at my body. He was torn. Of course I knew what I was starting, but I didn’t feel guilty.

“It’s just a kiss, John.” My voice broke. “It doesn’t mean we have to—”

He closed his lips over mine, finally drowning out my words. His mouth was still as we adjusted to the closeness of each other. Slowly, he moved down my mouth, coaxing my lower lip between

his as he gently licked and sucked and slid his mouth back to taste more.

I breathed him in. He tasted like cool mint toothpaste and whiskey that was too good to have come from the bar. He must have a secret stash in his bag.

He snuggled closer to me, mistaking my sigh of pleasure for a shiver. He was warming me with his powerful body. Then he dove in. His tongue parted my lips while he smiled against my mouth like I was his delight. He reached down and ran his hands down the backs of my thighs, bringing them up with him and wrapping my legs around his waist.

“That’s better,” he said between little kisses. “I can reach you now.”

I could only nod. Or at least, I thought I nodded. It might have been in my head. I was lost in some kind of alternate reality where my body was paralyzed except for what he was doing with my mouth and his hands on my...Oh God, his fingers found my nipple and played with it through the cotton that I was suddenly desperate to be off me.

“It would be even better on the bed,” I hazarded, stating the obvious. Of course that made him drop his hand from my breast, and I nodded. I could feel the hard tip of his cock between my legs, and I desperately wanted more of it, but things were already happening fast. And no matter what I wanted, it was even sexier for him to keep his sex fast. I respected his boundary, now that I knew why it was there.

I unclenched and hopped down, giving both of us a reprieve from the intensity.

I glanced wistfully at the bed. He followed my eyes.

“I guess I’ll take a rain check?” I said, though I couldn’t begin to imagine how that would work out. The setting would never again be as perfectly pulp. I’d probably never let my guard down as much as tonight, and he’d probably never be quite as open. His eyes were still dark with desire. My eyes traced down the line of his body but

stopped at his clenched fists. His attempt at fortifying himself against me?

I sighed. It was a nice shot. "What are you reading?" I asked in an effort to start rebuilding my wall.

That caught him off guard. He raised his eyebrows and sucked in a breath like he was about to give a speech to his flight crew. Except, in that situation, he probably wasn't semi-naked with a decent-sized bulge itching to protrude from the fly of his boxer briefs.

"Cromwell. *The Archer's Tale*. I've read it before, but it's the only thing I had with me. There doesn't seem to be HBO on this TV."

"You could have watched in my room."

"You seemed kind of anxious for me to leave."

I cocked my head and shrugged. "I guess I was. I...misread the situation. Then I misread the misreading of it," I said. "But you can't blame me. I mean, who would have thought that we'd be entwined under these sheets right here if not for your vow."

"Jesus Christ, I'm not a priest, Em. It's only a few weeks." Then he lowered his voice. "It just happens to be the worst few weeks for it."

"Because?"

"Because...you."

I knew my cheeks had gone scarlet. I bit my lip to hide a schoolgirl smile.

"Has it worked?" I asked.

"Has what worked?"

"Has your vow, promise, Lenten whatever thing brought you any closer to God?"

"It's made me very, very frustrated with God."

I no longer hid my smile. I should have played coy or kept up the vestiges of my temptress act, but that wasn't me.

We stood apart, looking at one another. Looking at the floor. Looking at the bed. Finally, he moved toward me again.

"Good night, Em."

“Good night, John.”

He bent down and brushed his lips against mine. I parted my lips without thinking. I was pretty sure I was going to die. My heart was going to burst with need. I tried to push that need away, but it was too difficult when I was currently being sucked and stroked and—

I moaned. He pulled me against him and inched his hands up my shirt. I relished the scrape of his calloused hands on the tender undersides of my breasts. I pressed myself toward him even harder, pushing him back, back, and down on the bed. He fell onto the hideous polyester floral bedspread, and I climbed on top of him, straddling the only place he was clothed.

“Em.” He smiled. “I don’t even have a condom.”

I sighed and eased up on my torment. I slowly pulled away from his mouth with his lower lip between my teeth.

His lips were red and swollen. His eyes wild and pleading. The tips of his fingers were still absentmindedly circling, pulling, and teasing my nipples. His cock still hard. Harder. In the right place between my legs. I didn’t dare move. Neither of us knew what was supposed to happen next.

I fucking hated his promise with every fiber of my being. And I loved it because it was important to him.

I rose up on my knees, gave him a chaste peck on his cheek, and lowered my feet down to the floor. I grabbed my key from the table by the door as he watched me walk away from him. I turned the deadbolt, and I was about to turn the knob when I remembered something.

“Who am I?”

“Uh, what?” His glasses were askew, and he was pulling himself back together after the maneater that I am had sampled her first course.

“What cinema icon am I?”

“Maureen O’Hara,” he said without a beat. “With a little bit of Jane Russell.”

“Yeah, yeah. Red hair. Big breasts.”

“Not just the hair. She was the most beautiful woman in classic Hollywood. She was strong, courageous, feisty.” He stood and started toward me. “The Jane part, though, that’s the boobs.”

He slipped his hands past the sides of my breasts as he said it. Leaning in for one final kiss—God, we hadn’t even slept together yet, might not ever, and we couldn’t take enough from each other—I locked my arms around his neck, pulling him down tighter and breathing in one last deep breath of John Bergen before returning to the other side of the curtain.

CHAPTER 11

My stupid alarm sounded at seven and I shuddered awake.

My head ached from lack of sleep, and every vertebra creaked and popped as I sat up on the wrong side of what was unsurprisingly a very uncomfortable bed. There was a pile of hideous mustard and avocado nylon bedspread in my lap, but beyond the crack of pure white light streaming in through a tear in the roll-down, plastic curtains, I could hardly see a thing in the room.

I turned on the bedside light and squinted, expecting cockroaches to scatter. Besides a tiny spider building her web between the lampshade and the knotty pine wall, I saw no other entomological subjects.

I bent down over the side of the bed and picked up my socks and boots, slipping them on before my feet could touch the sticky-backed squares of industrial office carpeting and God only knew what microbiome of pestilence was breeding in its shallow depths.

I finger combed my hair and put it up in a messy bun—it was less of a cool girl's lazy style for me and more sheer laziness—and brushed my teeth without toothpaste, hoping John wouldn't kiss me first thing.

After dressing, there wasn't much use in hanging around in the room, so I knocked next door.

After trying three more times with no answer, I plopped down in the lawn chair outside his room and waited.

Was he asleep? It was seven thirteen. That had to be considered oversleeping for a serviceman.

Was he out for a morning run or whatever guys with visible abs do to keep them? He was committed enough, but his miniscule overnight bag wasn't.

My throat closed up thinking of the most terrifying scenario. *Oh no. Did my truck get fixed overnight and he took off with his kitchen table and my new inventory, leaving me stranded in the gravel parking lot of a—*

"Hey," John said, walking toward me with two coffees. I was instantly:

1. Outraged that he didn't tell me where he went, making me think the worst.

Nope. That was a stupid thing to feel. *Don't feel that, Em.*

1. In love. *Scratch that too.* Even I wasn't dumb enough to fall in love over a kiss and coffee.
2. Relieved at the coffee in his hand. Okay, maybe I was a little in love after all. I was a hooker for caffeine.

I reached out for one of the cups.

"Hey, now! Who said this was for you?"

"Oh, sorry, I don't know why I assumed." I was so *not* in love with him anymore.

He changed his tone, looking at my lips. "Good morning, Emerson."

"Good morning, John." *Kiss me. KISS ME!* I pleaded with my

eyes. He didn't kiss me but he did hand me a cup of steaming coffee, which was almost as good.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here when you woke up. I knocked, but you must have been asleep. I was going to text, but I don't have your number."

"You don't have my number?"

"I've always just happened to run into you."

"Happy coincidences," I said.

He looked down at his cup, swirling the contents. "Yeah."

His discomfort wasn't lost on me.

I sighed. Here we'd go again with our awkward dance of stepping on each other's toes, then retreating in shame, then grasping hands again. It was too early for this. I was too uncaffeinated.

I popped the brittle plastic lid off my coffee and sipped tentatively at first, then gulping as quickly as I could stand. My first cup of the day was mostly medicinal.

"Could have called Hank." I looked at John over the rim of my cup.

He laughed. "I didn't think of that. But uh, anyway, the shop is going to call my cell when they're done. Should be early afternoon if all goes well."

"Good." I nodded.

"So—?"

"I think I'll take a walk," I said, taking off before he could follow me. I didn't know what to say and didn't want to care.

"Emerson?" he called after me.

I stopped and looked back. He was looking up at the sky.

"Check out is at eleven."

Great. In a few hours, we'd be kicked out of our slum with no vehicle and no place to go, carrying our ruck sacks—well, in my case, a Nordstrom bag filled with lacy underthings—next to the train tracks like a couple of hobos. My life was currently looping back to some unrecognizable decade of the last century.

I reached the end of the gravel parking lot of the motel/bar

when what I thought were overcast clouds passed their saturation point. I felt the first few heavy drops on my head and into the oily black pool in my cup. Luckily, I made it back to my room before the sponges were fully rung out.

EVENTUALLY, the text came through to John's phone. Eight hours, four thousand dollars, and one panic attack later, I turned the key in my own lock, greeted by a very enthusiastic Rousby and moldy bread on the counter.

"We'll make something else." John shrugged.

"There is nothing else. All I could even think to scrounge was BLTs. Without the L or the T. But we absolutely need the bread. We can't eat bacon smeared with mayo." I mean, *I* probably would, but I couldn't serve that to a guest.

It was nearing nine o'clock, and while I had no intention of inviting John into my apartment after that hideous, extended road trip—seriously, after seeing me at my worst, no, make that second worst—for the past two days, we should be the last people we wanted to hang out with right now.

But I wasn't ready for it to end. And maybe he wasn't either. He followed me in, roughing up Rousby's head and chest like I do.

I could have easily told him that this was the end, buddy. Thanks for the help, now hit the road—or rather, the docks behind my apartment.

But as he was bent over, peering into the fridge, scrounging around in my kitchen for something to make us for dinner, it seemed so natural, his being there. There was no *When Are You Going to Leave* vibe this time. It was intimate in the most delightfully domestic way possible.

Then, in a flash, we were cooking together, and fighting over the dishes turned into a battle with the sprayer faucet. Then I felt myself lifted onto the counter, wrapping my legs around him, my neck arching into his kisses like the night before—

“Em? Did you hear me?”

“Umm.”

His eyes went dark. “I asked if you had any pasta.” Oh, yeah. I snapped out of my fantasy and back to the reality of my crappy apartment with no food in the fridge.

“Left of the sink. Upper cupboard.” His smile widened as he turned away from me.

Shit, did I have a sex-crazed look on my face? Did he know what I was imagining? Was he that good at reading me?

As he reached up, his biceps flexed a little too much for pulling down a tiny box of spaghetti. Yeah, he totally knew what I was thinking.

“Carbonara?” he asked, turning around. I was asking myself a different question. Would it be wicked of me if I tried to seduce him again?

Of course it would. I smiled, looking at the side view of his own adorably contented smile and slightly ruffled hair. He was a good man. A really good man, who fought with me over taking his uncle to the doctor and opened doors for the little old biddies at his church who didn’t deserve his kindness. He was focused and calm and had been there for me yesterday—not only emotionally, but he did the gross heavy-lifting, dealing with all the truck repairs. He didn’t deserve me making it harder on him than it already was, even if he was in my fucking kitchen, familiarizing himself with the terrain and cooking for me. We both knew he was seducing me via playing house.

I’d just have to go back to ignoring the sexual tension. I was already at pro at that. Professional-level self-preservation.

He was in the fridge again, pulling out eggs and bacon, shutting the door with his foot and swinging around to the stove. He ducked underneath to hunt for a pasta pot and finding it, he filled it with water.

“You cook?” I asked.

“A few things.”

"This seems complicated. I've never tried it."

"Trust me, when it comes to cheat meals, I don't play around."

"I gather."

I moved closer to him. I didn't need the bacon frying tutorial, but it gave me a chance to accidentally touch him. "Can I help?"

He stepped back and looked over my shoulder. "I got this. But thanks."

"I'm going to give a little love to Rousby, then. If you don't mind me leaving you alone for a few minutes."

"I think I can defend the castle."

"Okay, boy, I'm coming." I snapped the leash onto his collar.

Rousby barely left the front stoop before urinating on the flowerbed. Nancy had taken care of him during our fiasco, but it was well past her dinnertime. Rousby was calmer after that, and I could use a dose of calm myself, so I treated us to a walk around the block.

We walked slowly. For a full five minutes, I pretended my life was back to its boring and lonely, yet comfortingly predictable status quo. That there was no tall, handsome, funny naval aviator—former or otherwise—currently cooking spaghetti carbonara from scratch in the kitchen of my tiny, bland apartment.

I pretended that I wasn't infatuated with said Dream Man, who couldn't make his mind up about me. I pretended that my life still hadn't shown me what it was missing. And I pretended that I didn't desperately need a shower and a change of clothes.

It hit me as Rousby and I crossed the street, the ridiculousness of my situation. It was like those cheesy Hallmark movies with the bachelor charity auction. Not any old Josh, James, or Jeremy bachelor from the heroine's hometown, but an almost-famous type of bachelor, like a professional hockey player or your local morning show host. "Bid on Hamilton Reed to be your date for an evening. He'll bring you flowers, vacuum your floors, and cook a romantic dinner to eat by candlelight."

And of course, the cinematic illusion was, in order to garner

the high bids, somehow you may be able to reel in the gorgeous, semi-famous, multi-talented dude. Yes, you, the boring, 30-something with the failing business, the closet of Eddie Vedder, and the apartment of a undergraduate student can land yourself the favor of an honest-to-goodness superman.

Maybe that was the question I'd been circling around since I'd known him.

Was John too good for me?

The answer was *empirically*, no. It's not like he was a maharaja and I was an untouchable, burning bodies on the banks of the Ganges. We didn't come from vastly different walks of life. We were equally educated, equally employed, and equally attractive—well, almost.

But I also wasn't ready to go all gung-ho on the idea of a relationship with someone who still seemed transient. Most of me felt that if I didn't let myself get attached, I wouldn't be as hurt when he flew away with the next breeze.

When Rousby and I opened the door, I was greeted with the smell of garlic sizzling in the skillet—is there a better smell in the world?—and Rousby with a can of soft, grain-free mush on the floor.

He didn't smile when we walked in. His eyes caught mine for a second before he turned to add something else into the pan. It was a look of warmth, of desire, of homecoming. It was definitely not the look of a maharaja, high above me on a throne of silk.

I sighed. I was already angry at myself. I knew it. I knew I needed to live in the moment and take every situation at face value. But it was almost as hard as giving up sex for Lent.

"What's our ETA on dinner?" I sidled up next to him and put my hand on his back. Whatever combination of veggies and carbs were in that skillet looked amazing up close. I could have sworn I hadn't been gone longer than five minutes, and he'd whipped up a masterpiece.

“Ten minutes alright? I found some asparagus in your fridge so I threw that in.”

“It hadn’t melted yet?”

“Asparagus melts?”

“Never mind. I’m going to take a shower unless you need me to sous-chef for you.”

“I’m good. Go get clean.” He sent me off with a snap of the kitchen towel he had over his shoulder.

I stood in the scalding stream of water for most of those ten minutes. It felt amazing after the past two days of dealing with mud and dusty antiques and bed bugs and the general grime of travel. I ran a comb through my hair and threw on a t-shirt, undies, and a pair of jammie shorts before throwing open the door to the fully set coffee table—sans candlelight, thank God—a pile of noodles, and luscious egg and bacon sauce at my place setting.

“This looks amazing. I should have dressed for dinner.”

“Do you have wine?”

“Under the sink,” I said, sitting down.

“In its rightful place.” He bent down to uncover my alcohol stash. “Ah. I see.”

“I don’t drink very often, except for beer. That’s why there’s so much. I like a bottle in the store, think I’m going to make a cool cocktail or open a bottle of Zin at home, and I never make the cocktail. If it’s wine, I drink the first glass and forget about the rest of the bottle until it turns to vinegar.”

“I don’t have that problem,” he said flatly.

“Food is another story altogether. Now get over here before I devour my plate as well as yours. This is the most delicious thing I’ve ever eaten.”

“Are you sneaking bites?”

“I’m eating with my eyes. And I can already tell you this is my new favorite food.”

John sat down with the bottle of wine and two glasses he found somewhere in a back cabinet. They were wet, so I assumed he had

to rinse out the dust and cobwebs that lurked in their bowls, but I was too hungry to be embarrassed.

“I like that you didn’t dress for dinner.” He did that smiling thing with his eyes again, and as he pulled taut one corner of his mouth, I sizzled like the butter in his dish.

The pasta was rich, punched with garlic and made complete by the bacon. I was sitting in front of the world’s most gorgeous, multi-talented god among men, eating carbs, with a full glass of pinot noir from a bottle that would be fully drunk tonight. This was real. And it was pure, luxurious hedonism.

After we finished, John automatically rose and reached for my plate.

“No way,” I said, grabbing the plate out of his hand. “You cooked. I clean.”

“I like that arrangement.” He relaxed into the sofa.

I bent down low, overly low, to grab his wine glass, but it gave me the opportunity to maybe, possibly, ever so slightly let my damp hair brush his shoulder. My hair smelled great, like my shampoo that cost as much as my monthly grocery budget to maintain my “natural” red. I flicked it once, enough to arouse the scent. That would be my new M.O. Seduction by shampoo.

I refilled his wine glass and handed it to him. If our fingers touched, he wanted me. If he took it by the stem—

He wanted me!

Then he let out a serious, outrageously garlicy, mood-killing belch. And didn’t even try to disguise it.

“Gross.” *He didn’t want me.*

“I’ll be back in a few minutes.” I loaded up my arms with plates, water glasses, utensils, and the extra Parmesan he put out for us. And yes, I took extra parm on my everything. I hollered over to him unnecessarily across my tiny apartment, “Put something on the TV.”

I should have been clearer.

I could hang with medical dramas—the bloodier the better. I

could get behind pretty much any documentary unless it promoted veganism—I mean, just no. I had my guilty pleasures like everyone else, but they pretty much centered on PBS/BBC detectives. And I wasn't guilty about it. I would also gladly watch every episode of anything airing on HGTV or Food Network, so help me, Alton Brown.

But *this* guy? This 6'3" naval officer, USNA class of 2003, four-deployment test pilot, who built sailboats with his bare hands and deadlifted 550 in his spare time turned on—

"*The Bachelor*?" I asked, still holding our dishes. And it's not like he paused on it for a second before flipping to sports, he legit put down the remote. This was intentional.

"You don't watch *The Bachelor*?"

"I'm trying to maintain as many synapses as possible, thank you," I said, continuing to the sink.

Okay, so he was no longer perfect. He should *be* *The Bachelor*. Not watch *The Bachelor*.

I spun around and stopped short. It finally happened, thank God. My spell was broken. Love was no longer an option.

Not only did he guiltlessly watch the fakest show in history, he was an outright mess when he cooked.

The sink was piled with unrinsed pots and pans. A renaissance fresco of egg yolk and butter sauce adhered to the counter. And I hadn't unloaded the dishwasher before I left yesterday morning.

He could watch *The Bachelor* all he wanted. I'd be here for the entire episode.

I didn't get much chance to grumble, though, because two elegant John hands came into view and grabbed a stack of plates from the dishwasher.

"Where do these go?"

"Up there." I opened the cabinet above him. "What about your show?"

"I paused it."

"Oh. Lest you miss any of the make out sessions."

“Do I recognize snark, Ms. Broome?”

“You absolutely do, Mr. Bergen.”

“Lieutenant Commander Bergen.”

“Oooh, I see,” I said as coyly as I could. “Lieutenant Commander Bergen.”

“Do you?” The way he said it a little hopeful, a lot earnest. It was a combination that made me melt into him.

My hands dropped. He caught the utensil basket before it crashed into the floor, stepping closer, his hand clasped over mine. The metalhead, the fighter pilot, and the dishwasher: a romance scenario to rival tossing coins into the Tivoli fountain.

He leaned in and spread his hand across my hip. His eyes dropped to my lips as I drew in a pleading breath.

From this close, he was a kaleidoscope of facial features that twisted and morphed and doubled back again, a hazy, sandy glow of a face. Two noses, one round brown iris ringed by true black. Crow’s feet and forehead lines from squinting into the sun and generally excelling at masculinity punctuated the face that finally focused into frame.

He arched back with a question on his brow but kept his hold on my waist, his thumbs eagerly searching up and down for more.

“Is it okay if I kiss you?”

His unpretentious, grade-school self-consciousness was so endearing, I beamed bigger and goofier than I ever had in my life. Well, at least bigger and goofier than I had in the last several lack-luster months, but it was horrendous. I was probably frightening him away this very second, so I needed to stop it and kiss him—

His mouth connected with mine, and our teeth clinked in an awkward duel, painfully reminding me I needed to make a dental appointment.

“Ah!” I yelled, clapping my hand over my mouth.

“Shit!” He winced at the same time, running his tongue over his teeth. We stood laughing and re-evaluating each other for a minute before he asked if I’d like a do over.

I did.

He didn't hold me or snuggle in for a sweet kiss this time though. Instead, he bent down until his face was kaleidoscope close again and whispered into my ear, one word, one kiss. "Hold." Kiss. "Still." Kiss. "If." Kiss. "You." Kiss. "Move." Kiss. "An." Kiss. "Inch." Kiss. "I'll." Kiss. "Be." Kiss. "Very." Kiss. "Angry." By the last word, he was hovering over my right nipple. So close. A *little teeny bit lower*, I silently begged. Stillness was impossible. I commanded my muscles to hold the line. My traitorous nipples, however, had a mind of their own and swelled in his direction, begging him in an entirely more persuasive manner than my telepathy.

They did not escape his notice, and when he looked back up, his eyes were blacker than a few minutes before.

He glided his hands over my thighs, reaching below my butt and in one smooth move that made me moan and gasp, and practically weep, he lifted me onto the counter and wrapped my legs around him.

"You can move again," he clarified through kisses placed on my frozen mouth. "I thought you'd probably move in the opposite direction as me and we'd both end up toppled over on the floor."

I laughed and grasped his neck. "That doesn't sound like such a bad idea."

"Are you kidding? Amidst your collection of garbage bags and stray pieces of dog food? There wouldn't be room."

Wait. Room? "Room for what exactly?" I asked, my eyes way too big with excitement.

He looked down and took a deep breath. Then he looked back at my face, studying my makeup-free face with its dark under-eye circles, thin lips, and freckles.

"Emerson," he said. "I like you very much. I *want* you very much. You are beautiful, intelligent, interesting, and you don't like anything or do anything that's not 100% authentically you." He laughed and blushed a little. His soul rose a little too close to the

surface. I knew the feeling. "I think that's about the best kind of someone I can imagine."

I couldn't say anything. I was staring at him, probably giving him simultaneous love eyes and What's-the-catch? eyes. This was my Mr. Darcy dream come true, the I'm too good for you but I love you anyway speech. Said to *me*. Something had to be wrong.

"But," he said.

"Oh God," I said, dropping my head, preparing for the "let's not do something we'll regret" part.

"*But*," he started, over, lifting my chin up so I could see his eyes. His sad smile. "I don't get the feeling you..." he cleared his throat, "...reciprocate any of those feelings."

I waited. I gave him the eyebrow signal to show him I was waiting. And nothing. He was done.

"You don't know I have a major crush on you?" I asked. "That I've wanted you since, well basically, since that night you thought I was collecting cans for spare change. I mean, what woman wouldn't want a man who looks like you *and* stops his run to give money to the homeless? That's the ideal. And on that hideous blind date, you showed up even though I had already stood you up once. That's seriously hot, that level of self-condescension. And even though I was horrified once I realized who you were, my second thought was how beautiful and kind you were. And you dressed up. People don't do that anymore. I love a good throw-back. And..."

His smile stopped me short. Oh holy hell, I could go on and on. I wanted to go on, but his face shone. I no longer needed to prove my case. I needed to experience him.

He kissed me lightly on the lips, still smiling, then pulling back, hovering and brushing lightly, then slowly increasing the pressure. I half breathed, half moaned into his mouth before parting his lips with mine, slowly searching for his tongue.

He didn't kiss. He gave himself to me while he breathed me in. Together, we were speaking a language that only the two of us

shared. He knew this kiss had shattered my doubts and I knew the rawness he was revealing.

His hand whispered along my thighs under the hem of my cotton pajama shorts. "Em?" he asked, kissing my neck.

"Yes?" I squeaked. *Fuck. Anything. Don't stop.*

"That night in the restaurant? Our first date?"

"Our *first* date?" We had no subsequent dates. I wrapped my legs tighter around him, pulling him closer to me, reminding him of his task. The projection that made contact with the valley between my thighs told me he didn't need reminding.

"That dress you wore. I couldn't even think when I first saw you. I think all the blood rushed to my..." I pulled him even tighter, "...where it is now. Fuck," he said, starting to break down, "I'm sorry if that sounds..."

"Disrespectful?"

"Yeah."

"You telling me that makes it respectful."

He pulled back again quickly, searching blindly for my eyes in the heat of the intensity.

"I very much respect you, Emerson Broome."

"I know. I respect you and want to fuck you too, John. Are we finally...? You're not reconsidering your sex fast?"

"Hold on tight." He picked me up easily. Muscle weighs significantly more than fat, so I have extra respect for the man who can lift me with ease, when I weigh a lot more than I look. He swung me around so quickly, my long, wet hair whipped around my head and slapped him in the face. We were really doing this, then. I ducked to kiss him and sweep my locks away from his beautiful, comic book superhero, chiseled face when Rousby started growling.

"Hey, boy, it's okay," I said, wriggling myself down out of John's arms. Sex was one thing. Sex with a man I reeally liked after a very long period of abstinence was another. But ignoring my main squeeze during his time of need would be unforgiveable. Strange

for him to be jealous, though. He loved John. I scratched his ears, but he looked past me, his ears cocked in alertness.

John turned around and wrestled me behind his back before the banging started. Rousby bounded past me off the couch, ran straight by John, and started howling at the fist on the door.

“Em. I know you’re in there, bitch. Open the door,” cried a thready, high pitched voice.

Justin. I scowled. So he was still alive. Of course he’d choose now to show his face.

“What’s going on?” John asked quietly, still staring at the front door as if unbelieving this reality TV event was actually occurring.

Justin had bypassed the door and started in on the kitchen window. I didn’t know what state of sobriety he was in or what illegal substance was coursing through his bloodstream, or even whether in this particular instance, sobriety was a plus or a minus when it came to my security, but it behooved me to not have broken glass strewn all over the kitchen with two barefoot humans and one barefoot canine about.

I sighed and slinked over to the door where Rousby continued to howl-bark.

“You’re not thinking of opening that, are you?” John’s eyes were still wide. Apparently, he wasn’t familiar with this example of pure Southern Maryland White Trashness.

“It’s my brother. He’s harmless. No one even takes him seriously.”

I reluctantly twisted the deadbolt. Not because I was afraid of a confrontation with my brother, addict as he was, but Justin has now screwed up the amazing sex that I was so, so close to having tonight. I was pissed.

Justin barged through the door as the lock clicked back. “What the fuck did you do with it?”

He ran a hand over his buzzed, blond head, and his shirt revealed his sagging waistline. He didn’t even bother to hitch up the pants that drooped low off his hips, making his boxers balloon

out like a pair of pantalets. Damn, he had lost a lot of weight since the last time I saw him. When was that? Three weeks ago? His grease-stained t-shirt hung from skeletal shoulders, and every blood vessel in his arms fought to burst through his skin.

“Nice to see you too,” I said through gritted teeth. The sight of him simultaneously flooded me with rage and made my heart ache. He was my big brother. Well, technically, he still was, but our family tapestry grew more threadbare everyday. Sometimes, when I looked at him, I forgot about his addiction, the time he spent in county for theft of his old boss’s power tools, the three failed rehabs Mom and I paid for. Instead, I went back to him bequeathing me his enviable collection of Hot Wheels, his pride after he taught me every state capital and its postal abbreviation after he learned them in fourth grade, and that time he came to me and not Dad when he first thought he might want to join the Marines and not Sigma Alpha Epsilon.

I was his first visitor at Walter Reed when he came home from Iraq, after a brief layover in Germany to stitch his guts back together when an IED exploded next to him. I read Tom Clancy books to him while he slept because it was the most patriotic thing I could think of. I wanted him to know I was proud of him. Proud of his defiance of our hippie parents, proud of his courage to go over, and proud he came back to me. I wanted the words to remind him he wasn’t blasted with tiny shards of metal scraps without reason. Not that any of it mattered in the end.

I remembered the times I refilled his Percocet prescriptions after he was discharged, thinking I was helping him manage his lingering pain until his life got put back together the way his body had.

But that never happened for us. His life never got put back together. Instead, it got blasted by another bomb. This one more insidious than the first. This one didn’t rip out five inches of colon, it ripped out his soul. Slowly, inch by inch, he was consumed by

the dope fog that darkened his heroism, his goodness, his humanity.

Until only the junkie was left.

“What do you want, Justin?” I asked, empty and drained. His presence sucked my energy dry.

“Where the fuck did you put the dope?” His eyes were red, and he desperately needed a glass of water. He was foaming at the mouth.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I filled a glass from the tap and handed it to him. “Here. Drink this and then leave.”

“Is there a problem?” John asked me. He looked into Justin’s eyes and cocked his head.

“No, my brother was just leaving,” I said, pushing Justin out the door. I wanted to continue this conversation on the front steps instead of in front of my dream man, but Justin wasn’t turning.

I looked at John to reassure him everything was fine, but he was still looking suspiciously at Justin. “John, it’s okay. Let me handle it.”

“Sergeant Broome.” John shook his head. “Sorry, I didn’t...the name just hit me.”

“Yes, sir.” My brother straightened. I stepped back while my worlds collided.

“I haven’t seen you around much. You in trouble?”

“No, sir. Well, yeah, kinda family thing.”

“No shit this is a family thing, brother. If this is about giving you more money, no way. I had to have the truck serviced in Pennsylvania, and I have basically no savings left. I’m not giving away what’s left in my checking account so you can get high. Jesus, Justin, I haven’t even given you money for years, why now?”

“Man, it’s not even like that. I’m sober. I got a couple grams of dope for my friend, and I stashed it in the truck. It ain’t in there since you brought it back. So you must have found it. Where’d you put it?”

“You mean, you knowingly let us drive a truck with heroin

tucked away somewhere? What kind of sick person are you?" My fists clenched at my sides. I wanted to rip out his throat. "John drove. What if we got pulled over? He could have lost his career."

"I didn't know you were taking the truck. I showed up at my trailer, and your car was there and the truck was gone."

"I left a note that I was swapping. It didn't look like anyone had been there for ages. I was thankful I still had a truck to drive."

"Well, I haven't been home much."

"No kidding."

He ran his hands over his head again and sat on the arm of the couch. He was desperate and ashamed. But he didn't look dopesick. And I knew it wasn't because he was clean. That meant whatever hit him now was even worse.

I wouldn't give him money, but I could talk him through his anxiety that was increasingly palpable. And maybe he'd eat a plate of leftover pasta. The boy could use some carbs.

"We didn't find anything." I sighed, so exhausted from this argument.

John had been listening to our family squabble in silence, unsure of his role in what was happening. "How do you two know one another anyway?" I asked.

"Vet group," Justin answered. "I go there sometimes to talk. It helps."

"It does," John seconded. He looked over at me, gauging my expression. He didn't seem embarrassed or ashamed. But maybe he thought I would think lesser of him. Of course I wouldn't. It made me melt into a messy, frothy puddle of ice cream—in my head, of course. It'd be totally rude to make love eyes in front of my deeply hurting brother, junkie or not.

"Okay, well," I cleared my throat and shook my head a little, "Justin. We don't have your drugs, but you're welcome to search the truck again if you give me your extra key, because you're never going to put me in a spot like this again. I could have gone to jail.

What would I have said if I got pulled over and searched? They aren't my drugs? How many people claim that?"

"Fuck, Em," he said, running his hand over his eyes. "I'm out a shitload of money right now, and I was going to drive the truck home. I brought your car back."

"You drove my car?" I blanched. "Did you leave drugs in it too?" I closed my eyes, horrified at his riding dirty in my beloved Chevelle.

"No, no. I swear. I don't have anything to leave. I'm clean." Sometimes he sounded like a preschooler. I wanted it to have a softening effect on me, but it enraged me further, less so at the man himself, and more the fiendish opioid epidemic.

"I told you I'm not paying your bond again," I said as a last, unnecessary jab. Justin was slumping further into the couch with his head in his hands. I was helpless, useless, years past the threshold of any ill-perceived ability to protect my brother from himself. By now, the best I could do was step out of his way as he rolled downhill.

Rousby sidled over to Justin and leaned his old, heavy body against his bony legs. It was sweetly pathetic.

John looked at me, questioning. I shrugged. I didn't know what was going on. He meandered the few steps in my direction and brushed his fingertips against mine when he was close enough. His touch put an ache in my breast but melted my stress. I could breathe freer. My body felt lighter as my mind unburdened.

But his hand dropped. My eyes opened.

"Can we talk?" John asked. I glanced back to Justin, who was nodding out on the couch. Yeah, right. He was clean.

"Follow me." I sighed, grabbing my keys and flashlight and throwing open the front door.

I loved my brother. A little. But if that motherfucker got me arrested because he forgot he hid narcotics in the floorboards of my car, there'd be no end to my wrath.

The doors weren't locked. Figured. I threw the driver's door

open wide and got down on my knees searching the vinyl floor covering, shining the light into any crevices.

“Em? What exactly are you looking for?” John asked, leaning in across the passenger seat.

“I don’t trust him,” I grunted, stuck between the front seat back and the rear door panel.

“I got that far. But Em?”

“Huhmmm? Hang on.” If I moved my head an inch closer to the floor, I’d have a clear enough view under the seat. Hoisting myself onto the front seat, I attacked the back from the middle. I was straddling the center console, one knee on either front seat, with my head dangling near the floor, hair falling down in chunks from its loosening ponytail. My ass was probably in John’s face, but I was on a mission.

“As much as I’m enjoying my view, and your sudden burst of energy, maybe we should...”

“What?” I shouted, twisting my head in an effort to upright myself again. As I turned, my hair caught on the seat track.

“OW!” I dropped the flashlight and clutched my right temple. I turned again and further entangled myself into the sharp metal. Gravity sent my ass in the wrong direction and my head didn’t follow. “I’m stuck,” I said, hovering upside down.

“How can you possibly get stuck?”

“My hair. I need help.”

“Okay, I’m just going to—”

“You can’t push the seat forward, you have to climb over top of me.”

He climbed up onto the passenger seat, kneeling behind me. If I wasn’t freaking out about my scalp becoming a permanent fixture of my car, I would have paid more attention to the heat of his thighs pressed against mine. His long torso easily bent over my back, covering me with his body, while his fingers found my hair and began gently loosening the captured strands.

I couldn’t help but move, still trying to free myself.

“Hold still, I think I’m almost...” I couldn’t hold still. I writhed like a caged animal, unwilling to relinquish my autonomy.

But I wasn’t too ensnared that I couldn’t feel a new part of him growing hot. I wasn’t too ensnared to push back against his firmness.

“Um, John?” I asked.

“It’s been a while. I’m sorry.”

“I think I’m free.” I giggled, tentatively straightening up. I carefully wrapped my freed hair around my fist as I righted myself. John was still pressed against me.

His hands gripped my hips for a moment before disappearing again. I felt the upholstery spring up as he shifted his weight off the seat and out of the car. I gathered my hair and followed him out of the car and into the apartment.

Justin was asleep, or passed out, or something on the couch with Rousby sleeping on the rug underneath him. My heart pounded so hard at the uncertainty, it was rocking my whole body as I stood still. John checked his pulse to make sure he was alive. It was weak but not hold a mirror under his nose to check his breathing weak.

“He’ll be fine. I’ve seen this before. I don’t think we’ll need to call,” he said.

“Who do we even call? I’m so not equipped to deal with this,” I said, ripping off a big chunk of cuticle with my teeth.

“911. They can administer Narcan if it’s an overdose. You might want to have some on hand yourself.”

I stared at John. Fifteen minutes ago, we were in the prelude to a sex scene and now, he was casually discussing overdose. Justin couldn’t be at that level yet, could he? I wasn’t ready for that yet.

“Em?” he asked, worried.

“Yeah, I’m okay. Zoned out.” The world inside this apartment had turned surreal. My brain refused to process pieces of information. I was taking in fractured details. John’s sandy brown hair, the nauseating smell of Justin’s menthols, the bell of Rousby’s vaccina-

tion tags when his head popped up to check on me, the warmth of John's embrace as he wrapped me in his concern.

"Um..." I shook my head a little to jumpstart my thinking. "So, he'll be fine if he sleeps it off?"

"I'm not a doctor. I can't answer that."

"This is it, John. My last straw. God, I didn't even think I had this one final splinter of a straw left, but I did and it's gone. I'll call Mom tomorrow. Maybe she'll figure something out. I'm tired of his putting my sanity in jeopardy. We could have ended up in prison, John."

"We didn't though." He exhaled. "Now let's just focus on finding the right solution for him. I've heard his story. I know what he's been through. I know it's hard to see it this way, after all the bridges he burned with you, but he didn't fail you. The system failed him."

"That's what makes it hard. It may not be entirely his fault, but it still doesn't mean I can trust him. He still did this to his family."

"The options at the VA are better now. Let me see if I can get him into a program."

Justin stirred on the couch, but he appeared to be stable. John didn't say anything but stayed with me at the kitchen counter.

"I'm going to Cunningham's office tomorrow to remove his name from the deed."

"He's still an owner of the shop?"

"I bought him out of the company years ago, but his name is still on the property. It seemed so drastic. A final solution. The last thread that bound us together, not to mention to our childhood and Mom and Dad. I guess I was still holding out hope that he'd get better."

Justin rubbed his eyes and reached out to pet Rousby. "Shit, man. Sorry. I guess I passed out." He stood up and looked like he didn't know where he was.

"I'll give you a ride, Broome. My truck's at Hank's place."

"Thanks, man, uh, Lieutenant Commander."

“John is fine,” he said with a slap on Justin’s back, which I believe was meant more to steer him in the direction of the door than as a friendly gesture.

I walked behind them, and Justin left first, lighting up a cigarette. John turned to me and let the door close his new buddy out.

“Lieutenant Commander does sound impressive,” I cooed.

He put a hand on my waist and looked down with that Jimmy Stewart “aw shucks” smile. Damn that man.

“If by ‘impressive,’ you mean reduced flight hours and more technical reports to check, then you’d be correct,” he deadpanned. “When will I see you again?”

Whoa. We had never done this. Or he hadn’t. Because I would never.

“Are you really asking me that?”

“Emerson.” He laughed, then sobered with a breath. “I know we haven’t talked about this, but I thought it was pretty clear how much I like you.”

“I thought you were holding out for Easter.” Shit. Why did I remind him?

“I’d like to see you. Not fuck you.”

Um.

“I want that, too, eventually,” he clarified. “I think you know how much.”

“Does that surprise you? Wanting me?”

“No. Why does it surprise you?”

Because chiseled, intelligent, kind superheroes don’t typically go for overly muscled, fast-driving, flannel-wearing, metalhead women.

He licked his lower lip and looked at my mouth. Then back up at my eyes.

“And Easter’s in?”

“One more exasperating week.” He sighed.

“And then we’ll...?”

“Have sex?”

My cheeks felt hot. I nodded.

“Then we can start to take our time getting to sex. There’s no need to rush the good bits.”

He breathed into my ear as he slowly brushed my hair away from my neck.

“John, I know I’ve been pressuring you and rushing you. I just wanted to tell you I’m sorry. I’ve never felt an intense attraction for someone as much as I feel for you, and—” I crossed my arms in front of my chest and shrugged. My eyes found their focus on a tiny rust spot on my car, but I wasn’t really seeing that either. “I didn’t mean to belittle your faith. Or your decisions. I don’t have that, but...it’s not okay for me to challenge yours. If I did that, I’m sorry. It’s only because I can’t help myself around you.”

I felt his eyes on me and his measured breaths though he was several steps away from me. He was bracing for something.

“So...?” I asked.

“I’ll see you Monday,” he finally said.

“Monday.” Something was happening Monday. Besides it being the day after Easter.

“Oh, shit, the interview. I completely forgot.”

“What interview?”

“Someone from the *Post* is writing an article about Blue Heron.”

“Congratulations. That’s quite an achievement.” His eyes crinkled at me.

“Well, we don’t know what she’ll write yet.”

“Your brother’s waiting.” He laughed. “See you soon, Em.”

CHAPTER 12

It felt like a million years since I had last seen Hank. I guess when your world pivots and balances on the crucible of love, addiction, and a dozen nitpicky details, one weekend can alter the fabric of time.

Or not.

For the past weekend, I had been so lost in such a lust fog, I had almost forgotten other people existed in my life. Not many others, but a few, and a few that deeply cared for me.

Rousby and I were the first customers in the coffee shop when it opened Monday morning, getting our large to-go cups of caffeine. Jenn looked frazzled, so I settled for a quick wave. Ten minutes later, we were navigating the dry-rotted boards and loose nails of the narrow docks leading to the boathouse.

“Mhmm,” Hank grunted in thanks, teeth clamped over a paintbrush when I handed him his cup.

I let Rousby roam. Surrounded by the smell of low tide, he was in doggie heaven. His lips panted in the sea air with a smile.

I was pretty much in heaven too. I sipped at my coffee. I had almost forgotten how good coffee tasted when it was still hot.

There was no awkward conversation to withdraw from. No debilitating bills to pay. And I wasn't so obsessed with my new romantic interest that I couldn't appreciate this time without him and the awkwardness that accompanied our every encounter.

Not that that stopped me from wondering about him.

"Where's John?"

"Work," Hank said, dipping his brush in some kind of solvent and swiping it on the side panel of an old buy boat used for oyster tonging. I was familiar with the process, since it was the same method I used to strip furniture of decades of wax and fingerprints.

"Do you know what time he'll be home?" I didn't want to ask, but it slipped out.

Hank glared at me, then looked away quickly.

"Not home. Well, not home as in *here*. I don't even know where he lives." I laughed. "Just done. Finished with work."

That was torturous. I should be calm, confident, matter-of-fact. But I wasn't calm or confident. And a physical relationship was anything but a matter of fact for me.

No matter how intimate he and I had been, no matter how much my thighs remembered the shape of his hips, or the desire we'd exchanged during our kisses, and definitely, absolutely in spite of the perma-smile on my face since last night from all our almos, I still didn't know where he lived. He still didn't have my phone number.

The thought sobered my dark roast buzz. How much could I even like a man who knew so little of his life? I didn't know his best friend's name, what his life goals were, or what happened during his deployments. I didn't know the hours he worked, or what food ruts he fell into, or how he took his coffee.

Besides, all of our time spent together was all about me. Doing my shit. Driving my car. Solving my problems.

Dear Lord Above in Bacon-paved Heaven, I was a terrible person.

“Hank, where does John live?” Maybe I could surprise him. Maybe I could bring him a dozen fucking roses, maybe talk about him for once.

“When he’s not babysitting me? On base.”

There went that theory. I didn’t have base access.

“He said he had some errands to run after work. Be back here late. If you’re missing him already, I guess he’ll probably be by your place after he’s finished up. Boy’s missing you too.” Hank looked at me, gauging my reaction.

When I tried, like a grown-up, to hide my blushing smile, he let out his big cackle.

“Ah, the two of you remind of me and my first love.”

“Was she the one you met in school?”

“First grade. I was smitten.” He frowned, continuing with his work.

“What happened?”

“Eh, Vietnam. She wanted kids. I didn’t think I did. Lots of things. Lots of nothing. A modern interpretation might be called ‘poor communication.’”

He dropped the brush into the bucket of solution and cleared his throat but didn’t say anything after that. He didn’t have to. His way of punctuating the language I understood so clearly said it all. “Let that be a lesson to you,” the gesture stated.

Point taken.

I STARTED COUNTING down the days to Easter. It was Maundy Thursday, or so Nancy explained to me. Already this week, I’d been to the gym three times, walked Roubisy around the island close to one hundred times, made puff pastry from scratch, and visited Hank daily in case John might be there. Maybe he’d been in the confession booth all week because I hadn’t caught so much as a whiff of him since last Sunday.

Opening the door to my oven, I stood back a moment so the blast of heat wouldn't melt my face while I pushed in the tray of croissants. In ten minutes, I'd have decadent and flaky pastries *and* a spic and span kitchen. It was a new high point in my domestic life. This whole business of having a potential almost-lover was skyrocketing my productivity levels.

My phone buzzed with a text from an unknown number. "Look outside," it read. I glanced through the peephole as John leaned casually against the column supporting the tiny, useless portico. He quickly figured out that the beam barely supported its own weight, let alone the increased pressure of his body. I chuckled, opening the door, as he straightened his body and gave me a distrustful look, possibly expecting the whole apartment to capsize on us.

"It's been that way for years." I beckoned him inside. "I doubt it's going to collapse tonight."

"I can help you fix it, if you want." He dawdled in the entryway until I took his hand and pulled him into the kitchen. "John, come in." I laughed at his tentativeness, reaching up for a quick, chaste kiss. "I have croissants in the oven."

He smiled against my lips. "I thought you just smelled like butter."

I dropped my hand from the back of his neck so I wouldn't be tempted into tempting him further. He was dressed in dark jeans that hugged his thighs and a thick cable knit sweater. He looked like a younger version of Hank, or what I imagined the Gorton's fisherman wore underneath his yellow hat and rain slicker.

"I hoped you'd let me take you on a date. I'm sorry. I should have told you in advance. I wanted it to be a surprise. We can go another time, if you want." He looked so boyishly hopeful I couldn't dim the huge smile on my face.

"What did you have in mind?"

"An adventure." He shrugged. No big deal.

“The croissants will be out in a few minutes. I can just go and change—”

“You’ll be fine.”

I looked at my jeans and sweatshirt.

“Trust me. Just grab a jacket.”

A few minutes later, we were walking toward Hank’s marina as John removed one hand from his pocket and threaded his fingers through mine. It was a misty, grey day, well suited to life in a nautical town. We slowed and walked single file down one of the narrow docks to the slip at the end.

“Well?” He gestured toward a small wooden sailboat.

The craft was roughly twelve feet long, making it both adorably tiny and scary to think it might actually be used to carry humans over water. Her pine-planked hull was treated with a rich coat of varnish so that it shined gold even through the muck of the late afternoon. Her topsides dipped rather low but curved sharply and elegantly up toward a high bow, almost giving her the look of Viking dragon boat. The main-mast stood proudly, perfectly balanced in the vessel. I wasn’t much of a boat person, but I knew enough to be impressed by the craftsmanship. Hank and John had built her by hand. It was incredible.

“Oh, John.” I looked up, and he was already watching me, waiting for my reaction. “What are you calling her?”

He looked at his boat and laughed. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

I had an idea. “You stay here a minute and think. I’ll be right back.” I was already walking backward to the boathouse. Grabbing a beer out of Hank’s mini fridge—Bud Light would have to do, it was all he had in bottles—I called upstairs for Hank. We were going to make this a proper christening.

Hank followed me out and back down the dock. I stood, ready with the bottle, with two of my favorite people, and I realized how happy I was in this moment, on this blustery day with the scents of my fresh baked croissants and the briny sea air mingling in my

hair. No. Not just happy. Comfortable. With Hank and with John. That was a great deal more fleeting than happiness.

“Have you picked a name yet?”

“I have.”

“Okay,” I breathed. I was going for it. Hank handed me a stick he picked up from the ground along the way. It was supposed to be a branch with leaves to symbolize the return to port, but it would have to do. I placed it on the bow and began.

“I hereby christen this vessel with the name...” I looked at John.

“Freja,” he shrugged.

“Freja!” Hank and I cheered as I raised my hand with the Bud Light bottle ready to smash it against the bow. John lunged at me and grabbed the bottle out of my hand. “Hang on, we need a bag. Can’t have all this broken glass floating around.”

He jogged back to the boathouse. Hank and I looked out over the water. It was almost impossible to distinguish any difference between the sky and the sea. If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought he wore a pleasant expression on his face, almost a smile. Then it was gone. “He plans for you to get in that thing, you know,” he said, gesturing with a nod.

“What? You didn’t tell him about me and boats?”

“He wants you to be proud of him.”

“That’s...endearing. But I am proud. From the safety of land.”

“Look, I know you don’t love boats, but can you just try it for a few minutes? Leave port, spin around, and come right back? Maybe you’ll get your sea legs.” ‘Spinning around’ was the most notable phrase in that sentence. It felt like I already was.

But there was something enticing about it, more so than just seeing John in action. The water beckoned to me, too. “I will,” I said, swallowing to steel my stomach.

John came back with a canvas sack, wrapped it around the bottle, and handed it to me. It broke easier than I would have thought as I thwacked it against Freja’s hull.

John stepped gingerly into the boat and reached for my hand, "Want to see if she floats?"

I handed the bag with the broken glass to Hank and he nodded. "Just focus on the horizon."

Taking John's hand, I had to sit down on the dock and sort of hop in. He caught me in a standing embrace with stars in his eyes. His excitement was contagious, and I couldn't stop from smiling while he got to work raising the main sail and letting out the sheet.

My smile didn't last much longer. I already felt unsteady as I coiled a dockline, and by the time we'd floated away from our tether, I knew this was a mistake.

Then, quickly, another mistake. This time John's. He turned straight into the wind. The sail billowed out suddenly as the boom swung starboard, almost knocking me into the water. He was going into irons.

"Uh, sorry." He reached to stop the boom, but I caught it in time and took up on the main sheet to prevent it from happening again. Instinctively, I grasped the tiller, turning the rudder slightly starboard so we'd catch the wind again and carry on close-hauled. It wouldn't get us anywhere fast, but we wouldn't be stalled out on the choppy water, rocking us into seasickness.

"You sail." John was surprised. Possibly even impressed. I dropped the coiled sheet like it was venomous and relinquished control of the tiller.

"No, I don't."

"It looks to me like you know what you're doing. Which is good because I seem to have forgotten." He blushed. "Seriously, though. This is not like riding a bike. Not for me anyway."

"John Bergen," I scolded. "You can control all those mechanics in a cockpit but an easy little thing like a boat? Tsk tsk."

"We learned at the Academy. I think if I..." He moved the tiller portside again, and the sail luffed. "Nope, that wasn't it, either."

"Oh, my God, here." I grabbed the tiller again and let out the

main sheet so we could catch the wind. We started moving again. "Where are we going anyway?"

"I was just going to take a lap around the island essentially, but you look like you got this. I'll go wherever you feel like taking us."

I hadn't been on the open Chesapeake in a while, so I made a long, slow, Easterly arc to see what little Freja could do. We didn't have a strong wind, but the water was rough nonetheless. Freja sliced through the chop easily. As long as I had control of the tiller, I could focus on something other than the constant, nausea-inducing ups and downs of the crests.

John sat across from me, using his body weight to counterbalance the wind as I was. I was starting to have serious doubts whether or not he had "forgotten how to sail." He looked like he was enjoying some little inside joke playing inside his head.

"What?" I was slightly annoyed at his ruse to get me to participate. Only slightly, though, because I was having maybe just a tiny bit of fun. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I intended this to be a romantic little sailing trip."

"Isn't it?" I grabbed the main sheet. "Ready about." The words came so easily to me, even though I hadn't said them in years.

"Ready." He ducked aside so he wouldn't get hit by the boom.

"Tacking," I said as I released the sheet, and Freja swiftly careened to starboard.

"Nice job."

"You too." I beamed at him.

"You did everything," he volleyed back to me.

"You built her. Anyway, why isn't this romantic? Because I took over as captain? Because we're moving so fast?"

He smiled that wide smile that made the sun come out for me. "I love that you took control."

The look I gave him made it perfectly clear that I knew it was a ruse.

"It's an incredible turn-on watching you sail this boat that I built by hand. I hadn't expected any of this sea goddess-level

expertise. Hank told me you know more than you let on and that if you let yourself let go, you'd actually have fun. But I wasn't expecting the sight of you to be the exact thing I've been missing my whole life."

He moved closer to me, still careful not to upset the balance. He was close enough so that I could see micro-droplets of sea spray dot his eyelashes. I craved his warmth, his arms around me, my legs around his. Then I looked away. I wouldn't be this woman. I wouldn't make him break his word. To God or anyone else.

"It's really fucking sexy watching you take something I made and make it better." He leaned in to kiss me. I closed my eyes, not to participate, just to receive a little bit of that heat. He didn't kiss me. He tasted the salt on my lips, sucking my bottom lip in and biting gently. I loved the way he smiled through his kisses, as though he couldn't really decide to kiss me or make love eyes at me, so he'd do both at once. He didn't smile very often but always when we kissed.

My left hand felt for the thick wooden pole of the tiller. I had lost control, but it was wonderful and...comfortable.

John took the tiller for a while, letting me enjoy the feeling of gliding over the water. I let the cool mist whip through my hair and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, he was still looking at me.

"Did you know the physics of aerodynamics are the same as sailing?"

"How is that possible?"

"The vectors of wind and water operate the same. A sailboat is practically the same as a jet turned vertically. The keel is one wing, and the sail is the other."

I'd never get enough listening to his brain or the sheepish way he downplayed his intelligence, as if he wasn't gifted in that facet.

"What style boat is this?"

He grimaced. "It's based on an old Nordic Oselvar design, which is traditionally a geitboat or rowboat. Viking style hull.

Hank sort of pipped it out, though, giving it the main sail. We were toying with the idea of a jib, but I think it's fine as is."

"She's perfect."

"Thank you."

"Why Freja?"

"Well, come on. She's the goddess of big brown dogs and old furniture. How could I not?"

"She's not. Tell me you're joking."

"Yes, I'm joking. I don't think Norse mythology considered antiques when they were giving gods and goddesses their domains. But she is the goddess of love." His eyes flicked to mine for a second.

My heart grew hot, like his arms and not his words had wrapped me up in this package of desire and care and tenderness and all the good things you're supposed to feel with your person.

All too quickly, we were docked and I tied the line. We didn't say anything on the walk back to my apartment. We didn't hold hands. It wouldn't have been enough tonight.

"John," I said with a voice raspy from the chilled air. "Thank you. That was the most romantic date I could hope to have. I'm sorry if I upset any of your plans."

"Shh, Em." He placed his hands on the sides of my head, forced our eyes and our breath together. He was biting his lip. "*You* are my only plans. I..."

I waited for him to finish. I waited for him to change his mind and come inside and claw off my clothes. I waited for his kiss. "Good night, Em." He smiled, releasing me from his grip and walking off into the teal twilight, kicking at the rocks in my driveway.

CHAPTER 13

“You sold it?” I shrieked.

“You’re welcome.” Nancy shrugged, sipping the latte I brought her.

I stared at the neon orange tag lightly taped to the door of my beloved Queen Anne highboy. “SOLD” written in capitals by Nancy’s hand. I willed the paper to disappear before my eyes.

Acid rose up into my esophagus. I tried to swallow it down, but it only spread the burn into my mouth. It couldn’t be true. I hadn’t had enough time with her yet. I hadn’t memorized her every grain pattern and whorl in her panels. I hadn’t yet dreamed of the graceful arc of her legs.

“For how much?” My voice cracked, and my breath whooshed out of me as though the highboy had fallen on top of me, crushing my chest and pinning me down. Did I even want to know how much? Did it matter to me?

Yes, technically, it mattered a lot. I had bought and restored the piece thinking it would ultimately make or break the shop. But I never expected it to sell. Like everything else in my life, I figured it would become another albatross, dragging my shoulders down

under its weighty wingspan. I wasn't used to making good decisions. It didn't make sense, my desperate clinging to failure. I should be delighted. And yet change was an uncomfortable vacuum.

"Thirteen five." The voice of Sylvia Rae Andrews came from somewhere below and behind me.

"You got a good price," said Mrs. Gordon.

"He didn't even bargain," chimed in Mrs. Wayne.

"Thirteen thousand dollars for a cabinet." Mrs. Andrews scoffed. "City people got too much money."

"These young folks think they got to have the best of everything. And brand new too. Granite counters. Hardwood floors," complained Mrs. Gordon. "I saw a House Hunters with a couple, no kids or nothing, just the two of 'em, wanting three thousand square feet."

"I saw that one too," said Lorraine. "It seemed a little excessive, but what do we know?"

I couldn't take it anymore. I didn't want to see Nancy's stinking face. I ignored her as I passed by the counter where the ladies were clustered, Mrs. Andrews sitting on the seat of her walker with a free coffee—my coffee—in her hand.

"Interview's today, remember?"

"I remember," I grumbled under my breath as I headed into the back room. "I'm calling that customer and telling him the deal's off."

I knew it was childish. I also knew I wouldn't actually call off the sale. I just needed to feel in control somehow. Even if I expressed that control like a toddler. I threw my purse and reusable bag on the floor of my office and frantically searched Spotify for a fitting playlist that would drown out the complaints of one generation against another.

I settled on a throwback playlist that heavily featured Rage Against the Machine—my first true love—but after the first song, it felt wrong. I guess I was reaching a point in my life where a

banjo was more hardcore than a screaming guitar and deliciously toothsome bass. More *change*.

I intended to get started on my new pieces and John's table today. They were in great condition and only required a basic clean-up, but I couldn't get into a groove.

After half an hour, I'd gone through a pack of gum, and my jaw ached from chewing my frustrations. It wasn't the money. I wanted that highboy to go into one of the local historic houses, not some random customer who happened in. Who spent thirteen thousand dollars on a whim anyway? Millennials. That's who.

I opened the door to the storefront, and I heard Nancy talking to a man. Probably selling another treasured piece of antiquity to another undeserving—

"Em," said the voice. I was momentarily blind from the dim lighting, and it took me a moment to realize who it belonged to.

My eyes squinted first at Nancy's smug face until I looked up at her conversation partner.

"John," I breathed his name. Seeing his face unexpectedly like this melted my tension. For a moment, I floated, while the air in the room whisked me closer to him.

Then I realized. He was in uniform. And holy hell, he was the poster child for the US Navy. My eyes skimmed his khaki-covered body and dropped all the way down to his shiny leather shoes.

As uniforms go, it wasn't particularly attractive. Khaki pants. Gold belt buckle. Khaki shirt. Hat under his elbow. But damn, John's body was built for military tailoring. And those ribbons over his pocket. He turned it into something swoon worthy.

Nancy excused herself to the back, leaving us to ourselves. As soon as she was out of earshot, I stepped closer to him. I tugged at his sleeve, wanting to feel the material that could sharpen to that knife's edge. His chest expanded slightly as he ducked his head over mine and breathed in my scent.

I had to clutch the counter to keep myself standing. We had

barely exchanged words. How could my reaction to him be this intense? My body was a traitor. That was it.

I looked up into his beaming face.

"I thought you were busy at work?" I managed to squeak out.

"I missed you," he said, perfectly sincerely.

"Can I...is it alright if I kissed you?" I asked. I didn't know the rules.

"I think we can chance it." He was already a step ahead of me, wrapping his arms around my waist and drawing me closer to him. He pressed me to his chest, my eyes directly facing rows of ribbons, none of which I knew the meanings of but all translated into individual acts of heroism. Many, many acts of individual heroism. He didn't touch his lips to mine. Instead, he lifted my chin and looked into my eyes.

"I thought I missed your lips," he said. It was quiet and reverent. "But now I think I missed your eyes more. The way they take me in." He smiled wickedly. "They destroy me."

I couldn't wait anymore. I snaked my arm up to his collar and pulled his head down to my level. I couldn't reach, even on tiptoes. He had to be amenable to my kisses.

He nipped at my lower lip, smiling against me when my tongue tasted his. He covered me with his body, shifting us so he was pressing me against the counter. This wasn't the kiss I asked for. It was hungry and too eager. It wasn't going to be enough this time either.

"Come home with me?" I asked against his kisses.

He didn't move away. "I have to be back on base."

I tugged at a permanent crease on his sleeve. "Is this what you wear to work?"

"I usually wear a green onesie."

"A onesie?"

"Flight suit."

"I think I'd like to see that." I bit into his lip and pulled gently.

"Will you come by later?"

He groaned in frustration. “Yes,” he whispered as his lips brushed my earlobe.

“Sorry for interrupting.” A woman’s voice broke in to my daydream. “Nancy sent me back here. Anne Lamont. *Washington Post*.” She stepped forward with an outstretched hand. Her eyes flicked from me to John and back to me again, a knowing smile on her face. “You must be Emerson, and you, Lieutenant Commander...?”

“John Bergen.” He smiled warmly, shaking her hand. And that was it. He didn’t clarify what he was doing here, didn’t explain himself and his relationship to me, just gave his name, calmly, casually. For the record.

“He’s on his way out,” I explained for him, ushering him out the way Anne had entered. I turned back to my interviewer. She had a real camera with a wide-angle lens slung over one shoulder. It seemed like overkill when she had a phone in her hand.

“Mind if I take a look around first? Maybe snap a few photos?”

“No problem. I’ll just turn the music off.”

“Don’t do anything on my account. It adds to the realism.” She was already poking into the corners.

Good thing she wanted realness. I couldn’t manage anything but.

“I count three top of the line coffee makers here. Do you work late hours? Early hours?”

“All of the above.”

“Hmm. And the music?” “Forever Still” was currently playing. I abandoned the previous banjo music in favor of obscure woman-fronted death metal.

“Keeps me company, I guess.”

“Seems an odd choice for an antiques store.”

“I’ve got Bela Fleck on out front.”

“And your whole aesthetic? What does it mean?”

“The aesthetic of my shop or the aesthetic of my body? The

former I will gladly discuss. For hours. The latter is not up for discussion. I have no intention to be politicized or fetishized.”

She re-charted her course, softening and dropping her tough journalist act. “I’m sorry. I meant no offense. I thought Nancy told you. The angle I’m going after is how different you are from other people who do what you do, how you’re bringing antiques and business ownership to younger generations. You’re making antiques cool again.”

“Oh God.” I laughed. “You’re going to be so disappointed. I don’t see myself as any different, but...no pressure, I guess.”

Anne smiled and suggested we go somewhere to talk.

“LATER” with John didn’t happen. At least, not until later later. John’s CO had tasked him with the latest batch of reports after his meeting this afternoon at the Pentagon. *The Pentagon!* So I wouldn’t see him that night. Instead of going home, making myself a BLT, and getting super sleepy while waiting for John to get his Easter Monday butt in my bed, I decided to finish a few projects here, unbutton a few more buttons of my flannel, roll up my sleeves, and get dirty.

I took a break to bring Rousby home, grabbed a coffee and a protein shake, and headed back to “the office.” The perks of working three minutes from home.

My palms were thoroughly stained brown from decades of other people’s grunge, and my scalp ached from my heavy bun when I heard a knock on the front door.

Surely a thief or miscreant wouldn’t first knock, would he? The front of house lights were all turned off. I peeked out the door to the showroom and glimpsed a streak of khaki between the flyers posted in the window.

I couldn’t get the lock open fast enough.

"I went to your home first." He smiled. "Rousby answered. I figured you fell asleep, but I thought I'd check here first."

"You're still in uniform," I noted.

"I liked its effect last time," He laughed. "But technically, I'm only allowed to wear it to and from work."

"So that means..." I ran my fingers over the ribbons on his chest.

"I have to take it off," he said through gritted teeth.

His eyes drifted down my body, curiously appraising.

"Sorry." I looked down at my hideously oversized, stained, threadbare plaid button-down and knee-less jeans. Another shameful retrieval from the kitchen garbage bags. At this point, they were my new dresser. "I didn't think you were still coming. I was finishing up a project."

"Never apologize. I like it. Your whole sexy Kurt Cobain look. Which project?" he said, following me into the back room.

"Yours," I said over my shoulder. "And I'm purposefully ignoring the sexy Kurt Cobain comment."

I let him into the back room and played Vanna to his newly acquired, solid oak kitchen table. I had spent the last two hours restoring its original blondish wood grain, and now realized I was as desperate for his approval of the work I had done as I was his kisses on my body.

As he passed through the doors to the back, I held my breath. It was surreal, his being back here. This was my sanctuary, my domain. My church. It was one of those intimidating moments where your worlds collided, like back to school night, when you showed your parents the mess inside your locker, or when your best friend made a pass at you. If any place represented the real me, it was the back room of Blue Heron Antiques. And John was here.

Like Anne had earlier, John took in every detail, silently assessing the mess that was Emerson Broome. Every stain on the concrete, the shelves stuffed with rags and various solvents and

stains, the percolator next to the work sink. Then his eyes settled on his table and my breath caught in my chest.

"Is this it?" he asked.

"Yes. It's exquisite, isn't it? Prettier than when you bought it." I was proud to play doctor to this particular patient. I had lovingly revived its scars and imperfections.

"See this gauge here?" I pointed to a v-shaped wedge cut into one end. John moved closer to look at the detailing. He looked where I instructed, but his body was so close to mine, I felt my cheeks flame from his heat.

I continued my analysis with only the slightest hitch in my voice. "I think a knife must have slipped here. Because of the angle of the cut."

He lifted his eyes to mine and made a guttural sound of affirmation. His hands smoothed over the oak boards that were worn smooth from a century of use.

"Beautiful," he whispered, reaching out to me.

I backed away, suddenly hesitant.

"This depression here is where most of the work was performed." I placed both my hands on a well-worn hollow in the wood. The intimacy of the history of this piece was coursing through me as the fire between the humans who now convened around it.

John moved with me around the corner, but his attention was only on me. I felt him pressing in, already hard in his khakis.

"Do you know why I bought this piece?"

"No," I breathed.

"Because as soon as I saw it, I saw you on it." His words tickled the tendrils that were loosened from the bun on top of my head.

I saw rather than felt his arms encircle me, his palms flat on the smooth oak surface. My hip bones hit the corner and I spun around.

"Emerson," he groaned into my neck. "Do you want this?"

"Uh huh."

“Tell me.”

“I want this.”

“And what is *this*?” he asked.

“I thought I made it perfectly clear in Pennsylvania.”

“That was last week. I’m asking if you want me to fuck you tonight.”

My throat made an involuntary squeak. “Please.”

He lifted me onto the table, onto that same indentation of a century of a woman’s service to her family. Whatever spirit was imbued in the table was coursing through me. I wanted to pledge my body to John.

My breath wouldn’t catch. My heart wouldn’t beat. Nothing would continue until his mouth was on me. Until we were moving together.

Finally, his eyes focused on mine, not in any drunken stupor, but asking a sincere question, sensing my hesitation.

Was I ready? Were we ready for this? Why did it feel so fucking monumental? I had been waiting for this. He had come here for this. Why was I receding like old varnish blasted with a coat of turpentine?

Maybe because I had so many of those mundane questions left unanswered. They were meaningless except as a giant roadblock from my enjoyment of the here and now.

His breath swallowed mine, and my legs tightened around his waist. He was so hard, and I relished the feeling of how turned on he was, a power-mad queen.

“Wait.” I pulled back from his kisses. His lips were swollen and deep pink, slick with my saliva. *What was I going to ask?*

Oh. Yeah.

“Do you want children?”

His lips ceased their exploration. “I brought condoms.”

“No, I mean, ever. Would you ever want children one day?”

“Maybe.”

“What’s your favorite color?”

“Green.” He resumed kissing me, inching his mouth down my neck.

“Movie?”

“*The Searchers*. John Wayne. John Ford.”

“What’s your mom’s name?”

“Marin.” His onslaught of kisses stopped. “Em, what are you doing?”

“I don’t know you that well. And I’m a little ashamed that I let it get this far without asking about these things.”

“You know me better than you think you do. You may not know insignificant details, but you know what I’m like on a road trip, how I handle it when things go south, how important friends and family are to me.” He cupped my chin to direct my gaze to his eyes. “Besides, all that other stuff? It usually gets discussed after people do what I hope we’re about to do.”

He smiled his crooked smile and nipped at my lip.

At once, my shame was eased and my queendom resurfaced. I could hardly stop myself from taking over command of him.

My clit was swollen against a prison of lace and a denim seam. As attracted as I was to the brain of the man who was currently licking the hollow beneath my ear, as much as his kind acts and introspection made me melt, in this moment, I forgot everything else existed but the most primitive. The sword and the sheath. The cup and the athame.

His hands unclasped from the back of my neck, and his thumbs stroked my throat before parting to travel over my shoulders, peeling my flannel down my bare arms.

Kissing down the vine of tattoos on my arm, he reached behind me and unclasped my bra, slipping off the straps underneath my threadbare, stained, and paint-splotched tank.

My nipples were tiny but pert and ready to be sucked. I wore more clothes than he’d previously seen me in, but I felt more naked than I ever had. I relished it.

I leaned back on my hands, my fingertips tracing the grain

pattern of the thick oak. I smiled, looking at the bulge in his suit, knowing he wouldn't be in discomfort for long.

"I think this is my favorite view of you." He raked his eyes up and down my body, then pulled me closer to him and breathed into my ear. "Someday, I'm going to ask you about each one of these tattoos." He traced the border of a lacy pattern across my lower belly. "I'm yours, you know," he whispered the words in my ear.

"Please, John," I begged. "Finish it this time. I don't want to wait any longer."

His eyes flared, and he bent to close his mouth over the tip of my breast and drew my nipple into his mouth through the thin cotton.

"Oh," I sighed, arching my back against him. He lifted the hem of my shirt and ran his hands up my belly and around the delicate skin of the sides of my heavy breasts before circling his thumbs over my nipples. His eyes fluttered closed as he pressed into me with his hips.

His euphoria spurred me further. I ripped my shirt over my head, freeing my nipples completely for whatever he had in mind.

"Em."

"John?" I said with a raised eyebrow.

"You're so beautiful."

"Then fuck me," I said, biting my lip. It was so far out of character for me to talk dirty, but fuck it, the boy needed to get a move on.

He groaned and drew one ripe nipple into his mouth, sucking and teasing it up to its full capacity and licking the erect peak. He was a genius at this. I was ready to come from his kiss.

As he moved on to the next breast, his hands moved down to unclasp my belt. Fucking *finally*. He popped the button and inched the zipper down, tooth by agonizing tooth.

I reached to his chest, running my hand over his ribbons and across to the buttons, but he moved them away.

"No," I complained. I wanted his skin over mine. I wanted my nipples against his chest. I needed to feel the defined musculature that came from his brutal workouts. I needed to run my tongue down his shoulder, to his chest, to his abs, to his cock.

"Slow." He smiled against my mouth.

"John, we can't go any slower."

"Keep it up and I'll keep torturing you." He chuckled. The sound came from deep in his belly but didn't quite escape his mouth, since I was devouring it. "I've been thinking about this since I first saw you. I'm going to take my time making love to you."

Just when I thought I couldn't get more aroused, those words and his desire were kindling to the fire burning down my walls, my pride, and any possible hesitancy I had left. I was his.

Collectively, we worked my jeans down to my heavy, brown leather boots, and he worked everything off together quickly.

His thumb hooked into the light blue lace of my panties, and they stretched easily away from my hip as he pulled them off until I was sitting, open and bared to him, my desire urgent and aching.

He sucked my tongue and bit into my lip as his fingers traced the line of my thigh, up over the lace imprinted on the skin of my hip and rounded belly, lingered on my nipple, and clutched at my neck.

I needed him inside me. I begged for him with my kiss. He answered by lowering me back gently on the table and crouching at my feet. He opened my legs wide, pulling me apart. God, I was so raw and needy as he looked into my face.

"Do you want me to lick you?"

"Yes," I begged.

He trailed his fingers over my belly as his head dipped between my legs and spread me even further apart. He licked slowly, teasing and tasting until finally settling on a rhythm that made me more and more vocal until I cried out.

"John," I groaned, my orgasm coursing through me forever. I

reached for his hand, and his strong elegant fingers entwined with mine. He wore the goofy grin of a man drunk with pleasure and love.

“That was...*Is there anything better?*”

“Not for me.” He pulled me up to sitting and bent down to kiss my mouth. I tasted myself on his tongue and smiled. I had marked him. He was mine.

I reached for his zipper, and this time, he didn't say no. He stood still, letting me tease him out of his uniform. When his flight suit was unzipped and his white undershirt—one that matched mine, only a decade newer and devoid of turpentine splashes—was off, a laugh caught in my throat.

He had that insane build that conveyed strength beyond reason. He was lean but muscular enough that his boxers clung to his quads and ass, but when I hooked a finger into his waistband, I could take a peek inside.

“Oh my God, John. You're exquisite.”

He laughed and unlaced his boots.

“Not your...*penis*, but all of you.”

“My penis?” He laughed, unbuckling his belt. “You mean my cock?”

My cheeks turned red at the word. No. At *him* saying the word.

“Uh-huh.”

“Say it.”

“Your cock.”

“Mmm,” he moaned into my mouth.

I unzipped the rest of the uniform and let it fall. He stepped out of it and stood in his boxers, which barely contained that bulging cock. With every flicker of movement, it wanted to peek through the opening.

“Touch me, Em,” John said in a tortured voice. “Please.”

I dove both hands into his waistband and stroked my way up from the bottom of his balls to the tip of his cock, which already dripped moisture.

“Oh, God.” He rocked into me as his head fell back. He looked down at me and pressed his mouth to mine. Kissing his lips and teasing his cock with soft, easy strokes, I stepped back to the table.

He pulled a condom out of a pocket somewhere on the floor and handed it to me in question.

“Are you asking if I want this?”

He nodded as if words would be too torturous to speak.

I ripped open the foil and smoothed it down his length. John groaned and stepped fully out his boxers.

Lifting my legs, he placed me gently back on the table. We were kissing when he entered me, slowly and carefully. Tears stung at my eyes as he pushed in slowly and fully. I was awed by the fulfillment and connection. He groaned as he inched his way in and back out again, his rhythm so slow, my heightened nerve endings were screaming out in frustration and pleasure. “Em, you’re...I can’t believe I’m touching you. I can’t believe I’m allowed to touch you. Oh, God, you feel amazing.”

He looked down drunkenly, and his thumb circled my clit. I was so full, his cock was pressing against the inside. Now the onslaught came from the outside as well.

“Oh, God, John,” I gasped. “You were wrong when you answered before. This is so much. So. Much. Oh, God.” I came so fast and hard, I was shaking.

But he didn’t stop circling me. Pumping harder and faster, his fingers stroked either side of my clit in unison, wet with my arousal. I needed more.

“Come for me, Em. Again.” And with those words, I exploded, back arched, starbursts in my eyes.

John moaned as he let his orgasm follow mine. He dipped his head low as his breathing returned to normal. I held him fast with my legs, reluctant to release him, or else I’d never be whole again. Our eyes met as he chuckled.

“Holy shit,” he said, exhaling in a huff.

“Holy shit is right.” Still in disbelief.

I'd had three orgasms in approximately five minutes, and I wasn't a vaginal penetration orgasmer. I had fucked John Bergen, and we'd had the world's most amazing sexual encounter on this century-old kitchen table.

My life was complete.

After four more collective orgasms, we managed to get off the kitchen table—which was as sturdy as I'd expected—and get back into our clothes.

John grabbed my portable speaker and looked at me in disbelief.

"I didn't notice before, but what the fuck have we been listening to?"

"It's my work playlist." I laughed at the industrial, Satanic-sounding chants that were issuing from my little Bose. It was all fairly innocuous, but the driving rhythms and power chords sounded a lot scarier than they pretended to be. "Lots of Otep, Cellar Darling, Lacuna Coil. I think this is a band called In This Moment. Chick metal mostly. Keeps me from feeling too lonely when I'm here late at night."

He put the speaker down.

"You hate it. Everyone does."

"I like a lot of those bands. But I think, tonight, a change of soundtrack might be in order, don't you?"

I unlocked my phone and tossed it to him. We'd exchanged musical tastes before, on our trip to Pennsylvania, so I trusted him not to turn on some popular bullshit.

"No R&B."

"Slow jams aren't your jam?"

"I can deal with an occasional jam as long as it has a deep beat, but in general, no."

I groaned with the opening, slow chords of an annoying acoustic guitar.

"Not this either." I vetoed his choice, reaching for my phone. I

didn't know what he picked, but he did that super mature thing and held it over his head, out of my reach. I rolled my eyes.

"Dance with me," he said, his broad hands spanning my waist.

I couldn't resist his direction. His touch. I'd never get enough of it.

I listened closer to the melody, a simple, lilting Spanish guitar. When a man's voice rasped a mournful tune, I conceded a musical victory to him.

He tossed the phone onto the table—our home base—and held his left hand until I clasped it, relishing the warmth and strength of his fingers as they closed around mine. I wasn't a good dancer, but I allowed him to rock me and turn me where he wanted my body to go.

Our dancing, like our sex, was a study in turn taking, each of us sometimes leading and sometimes following but always moving in perfect synchronicity.

"Who is this?" I asked, smiling.

"Mick Flannery."

"I love him." He tucked a sweaty strand of hair behind my ear. "You get me, John. I don't know how, but you get me."

"I hope so." He kissed the top of my head.

"I know I should have asked you before, but do you want to go to the museum benefit with me?"

He stopped swaying. "I thought you had a date?"

"Well, no. I mean, I was going to have a date, but you happened instead. I couldn't bear the thought of looking at anyone else's face across a dinner table."

"I'm going with someone else." He dropped my hands and gave me that "oh, shit" look.

"Well, thanks for saying it like that at least." A laugh, more like a huff, escaped my chest.

"Like what?"

"Like ripping off a Band-Aid."

"I wish you'd asked me sooner, Em. Maybe we can share a table?"

"No, thanks. I don't think I want to watch you and your date the whole evening." I turned away and started sweeping up the sandpaper scraps and tack cloths that I'd tossed under the table.

We were quiet for a minute. A million confusing thoughts swirled around in my head. "Why are you even going? Don't you have better things to do?"

"The director asked me if I'd purchase tickets. I planned to ask you, but you seemed strangely hostile whenever I tried."

Of course Helen asked him to buy tickets. He'd be the feather in her cap if he showed up looking dashing in a well-cut suit. His presence would probably even boost the figures at the silent auction.

"Hostile?" *Who, me?*

"Maybe that wasn't the right word, but I couldn't figure out if you hated my guts or wanted...this." He gestured to the table. "Then you mentioned you already had a date, so I asked someone else."

"Oh," I said quietly, throwing the rags I collected into a Home Depot bucket I used to soak the grime out.

I circled the room, flicking off the work lamps and picking up random bits of detritus from the day's projects, disposing of them in their proper receptacles.

"Hank's probably waiting up, but I can run over and check on him and—"

"No. That's all right. It's Nancy's day off tomorrow, and I'm pretty tired. I'm going to crash when I get home and be back here early."

"Yeah, I've got a class at 0800, too." He glanced up at me. "Eight a.m.," he clarified.

"I'm aware."

"Well..." He fiddled with his hat, loitering. Obviously, he felt some kind of way about this information that had come to light.

“Look, you don’t have to feel guilty for fucking me. It was a mutual attraction and now it’s out of our systems.”

“I don’t.” I couldn’t read his face in the dark, but he lingered on, hat now firmly tucked under his elbow.

“Oh, I see.” I laughed. “I mean, it’s...yeah, it’s 100%, absolutely okay that you didn’t tell me you have another date next weekend before you had sex with me. Sex is totally a casual thing for me too. No big deal.” I shrugged.

“It is a big deal.” He stepped forward and reached out. I was too embarrassed to let him. I grabbed my purse and keys and led the way out the back door. He followed. He had no choice.

“Emerson,” he said to the side of my face as I hunted for the key on the ring.

I ignored him. Or acted like I was ignoring him. In my head, my face was turning redder and redder by the second, and I had to get home before steam was going to start spouting from my nose. The worst of it was I could still feel him inside me, I was still loose from his orgasm, and now, I felt betrayed.

I turned to say something to him, to erupt at him, but I wasn’t ready yet for words. I needed more time to feel. I needed to sit in my anger and seethe. Then I’d have the right ammunition.

I strode down the alley, away from John, away from my beloved shop, and the kitchen table of shame within its walls.

“Emerson, please wait for me.” His long strides met mine in a few paces. Damn him and his elegant limbs. “Let me explain. It’s not what you think. It’s not a date date.”

I whirled around to face him. “Did you ask another woman? Someone young? Beautiful? Unrelated?”

At least he had the decency to look a little guilty. “Technically, I guess, but to—”

“Then it’s absolutely what I think.” I continued walking until I got to my door. I was so angry, hurt, and embarrassed, I didn’t even know which feelings I was feeling at the time. I was pretty sure it was a whole lot of the bad ones.

I managed to get the key in the lock of my front door.

Something about the action felt strange to me. Like a heart arrhythmia. Like when a typical sequence of events is performed out of order. Had I left a light on in the shop? It was pretty dark when we left. I didn't think that was it. I was fumbling for so long with the key ring, had I actually locked the back door? Yes. I know I had. I never leave the door unlocked.

I stared at John like he was a foreign body, not understanding. That niggling feeling of something left undone had momentarily relieved me of my shame. But it came flooding back as soon as soon as I looked at his guilty face.

"Em, I know you don't want to talk anymore tonight, but I don't want to leave things between us like this. Can I take you to dinner tomorrow?"

"I have plans." And I still wouldn't be ready for words.

"Meaning, you intend to come up with plans." He sighed. At least he knew when he was beaten. "I'll see you soon, Em."

No, you won't, John.

CHAPTER 14

I entered the apartment and sagged against the door. Releasing all the oxygen from my lungs in the attempt to ease the tension griping my belly was futile. The knots inside held tight. My eyes stung a bit, and I realized my cheeks were wet. How long had I been crying? Had John seen my tears?

Great. Now on top of being a bad fit, I was weepy. There was nothing worse than a weepy woman, Hank told me. I'd internalized that as a personal motto. Finally, stepping away from the door and dropping my bag and shoes on the mat, I grabbed a beer from the kitchen on the way to the couch.

Rousby rested his head on my knee, eyebrows questioning with all the undeserving empathy only a dog can provide. I wanted to give him the answer, but I didn't even recognize how I felt.

Betrayed? That seemed a little harsh. This wasn't ancient Rome. No. Something smaller. Hurt? Definitely, but still, there seemed to be more complexity rattling around in my ribcage. Angry? I wasn't enough of a narcissist to realize I had very little right to feel anger. I was the one who told him I was definitely on the market—and he didn't have an exclusive.

Couldn't he see that that was my attempt to keep him at arm's length? If he liked me, maybe he could have let me know a little sooner.

That was it.

He *didn't* like me. Not really. What did the Three Harpies say? That I'd never get a good man looking how I look? I wasn't yet ready to concede defeat to that stingy old crone, Mrs. Andrews, but that didn't keep my stomach from turning slightly nauseated by the thought that she might have been right. I was fine for a night, but, ultimately, I wasn't the good Catholic girl he was looking for. I wasn't normal enough, mainstream enough, nor was I the quirky-yet-delightful social charmer that he and I both knew would mirror his own clean-cut image as the wife of an officer and a gentleman.

I knew this going in. I tried to prevent feeling like this, but I'd let my guard down. I'd dismissed my archers and he sieged.

It was possible he didn't even know himself. Maybe I was indeed the temptress, and he had fallen under my spell for a time, only to awaken at the most inopportune moment to realize that we were so wrong for each other.

Rousby padded away to curl back up on his bed. It was too small for him. He looked adorably pathetic squeezing his oversized body onto the undersized fleece mat. We'd tried others, but he remained loyal to the first bed he had as a puppy, the one I bought before I knew he'd grow to one hundred pounds.

My bottle of IPA sat warming on the coffee table as I flipped on the TV. Anything to drown out my inner monologue.

The Bachelor was on, and there was something about a rose ceremony. I tried not to let thoughts of John intrude on my brainless, vapid TV time, but it was impossible.

I didn't even realize I was sleeping until I dreamt about the sirens. There seemed to be alarms everywhere, undulating from near and far and from every direction.

Something big must have happened, I thought from inside my dream.

I woke up when my head slipped off the edge of the couch. A husky “humpf” escaped my throat, but other than that, it was silent. No alarms. No traffic. I didn’t even remember lying down. Sitting up, I rubbed my eyes and returned my beer to the fridge. I searched for my phone in my purse.

Dead. Figures. I plugged it into the kitchen wall.

My shoulders and thighs felt used when I walked into the kitchen to refill my water bottle. *Oh yeah, the sex.*

I needed to get back to sleep before I started thinking.

A *buzz buzz* sound caught my attention. It was too late to text anyone back, so I didn’t even bother looking.

The buzzing continued. Not a text. A call. Probably John calling to bug me. I glanced at the screen.

Unknown.

As soon as I rejected it, I saw the nineteen missed calls. Damn, he was persistent. Good. He could sit in it until tomorrow.

I shut myself in my bedroom.

I AWOKE AWKWARDLY on my back, jeans still on and a brick lodged deep in my belly. I pressed the button on my phone to illuminate the screen and see how much longer I had to sleep before I had to leave for work.

A few more missed calls popped up, but my eyes weren’t yet ready to send their messages to my brain quite yet. A muffled pounding made me sit up.

I lowered my phone and stared at my closed bedroom door. Something was wrong. Rousby was already awake and lifted his head when I opened my bedroom door, listening. Then the pounding began again on my front door.

I hadn't dreamt it then. I opened the door to the night air and John's agitated, heavy breathing.

"Thank God," he huffed out. "We've been calling."

"Who has?"

"Hank, Nancy, me, Sherriff McCready."

"Bill? What's wrong?" Unease had turned to alarm, and dread took root in my chest. The phone in my hand buzzed with another incoming call from Nancy. John nodded and gestured to the phone as if to drive home his point.

"Nancy?"

"Em? Thank God you're alright," she whispered. "Bill! Bill!" she shouted into my ear, forgetting to shield the phone speaker from her hollering. "She's alright...she..." Her voice broke into sob before she muffled the speaker. "Oh, honey," she said once again to me. "It's your store. It...caught fire. The firefighters are trying to contain..."

My arm dropped down, and the phone fell from my hand. I struggled into the first pair of boots I found by the door and sprinted past John, still waiting on the front stoop.

"Em, it's...Hold on."

I didn't hear anything more from him. I rolled my ankle on the gravel in my driveway, faintly registering pain but paid little attention otherwise.

I smelled smoke as soon as I turned the corner. It had an almost cozy quality reminiscent of campfires and fall leaves burning. But it was stronger with every step. Instead of a sweet autumnal tableau, that campfire was my entire reason for existence going up in flames.

I stopped running as I rounded the second corner, approaching the shop from behind—my usual commute turned upside down. The late night was illuminated with an artificial sun coming from floodlights set up in back and in front. The fire department had engaged every truck in its fleet, and the sight of all that red lined up in front of my building stopped me from approaching any

closer. It wasn't a welcome sight in the middle of the night, in front of a meaningful location.

Smoke was curling up into the sky above what *was* my back room while emergency responders were communicating loudly over the hisses and crackles of radios.

How could they understand each other? I couldn't even comprehend words.

I didn't even feel the saliva coating my mouth or the violent twisting of my stomach before I bent to the side and expelled coffee and stomach acid onto the gravel.

I righted myself, trembling a little in the cool night. My thoughts were a vortex of images and senses, none of which paired well. Intuitively, I knew I should move. I should walk closer.

Step.

Step.

Look for Bill. Find out what the fuck is going on. Respond to someone.

I'm here. I'm alive. I'm not in there.

Then I realized the problem.

I was in there, dying.

My work, my savings, my carefully curated life that I'd filled with things that I couldn't let go of were all in there burning. My life was being cremated.

Taking breaths was grueling. I swallowed the bile that lingered in my mouth. My molars wouldn't fit together right when I gritted my teeth. Why did my mouth feel like it belonged to someone else?

Warmth spread over my bare shoulders, and I turned to find John draping a hoodie over me.

"It was all I could find that looked soft," he said quietly.

I continued to consciously breathe. It seemed to be all I was capable of anymore.

"I took Rousby out, and I brought your purse and phone. I didn't know how long you'd have to be gone and, well..." He trailed off. "I'm so sorry, Em."

I walked away from him, not yet ready to accept condolences

for an event that was still taking place. First, I'd have to relearn how to breathe automatically.

Some of the trucks in the front still had their flashers going, steeping my little world in strobing, red chaos. Everywhere I looked was smoke, diamond plating, movement, or more red. The syncopated rush of the firefighters was juxtaposed against onlookers standing like mannequins.

Nancy rushed to my side. Tears spilled from her eyes onto weathered cheeks as she hugged me tightly.

"Honey, you're shaking. Bill," she called over to her husband, who was directing several deputies. "Em's here."

Sherriff Bill walked over to me. He wore khakis and a polo. He had been off duty. His face, typical of a capable and demanding leader, was softened with concern and a sympathy I rarely saw.

"Thank you for coming, Bill. I know you didn't have to—"

"Of course I did, Em. You're our girl."

His words caused my own tears to stream down my face. Bill took me in his arms, holding me and rocking me, while Nancy shushed my sobs.

"Thank God you're okay," Nancy said, rubbing circles on my back. "When we couldn't get in touch with you...I was going crazy. I called John and he said you went home, but...I called you thirty-two times, Emerson Broome." Nancy changed her tone of voice and was now scolding me.

I let go of Bill and turned to face her. Did she have the nerve to yell at me while my business was currently engulfed in flame?

"I didn't intentionally miss your calls. I was asleep."

"With your ringer off, I suppose?" She sniffed.

"Yes. With the ringer off. As usual." I was shaking badly from the cold, and when I stepped closer on my right foot, an ache in my ankle made me wince.

"Oh, my God, Em. Are you all right?" Nancy asked.

"I'm okay. I rolled my ankle a little."

"Let's get you checked out anyway." Bill commandeered the

situation, helping me hobble over to an awaiting ambulance, which thankfully weren't in use. My life might have gone up in smoke, but at least no one was physically hurt. Nancy followed us.

"We won't know the extent of the damage until they're finished, but they contained it early and all the flames have been extinguished," Bill explained.

The EMTs helped me into the back of an ambulance. It was my first time inside one, and being fussed over only heightened my anxiety.

An hour later, I was still in the back of the truck, sitting on a gurney with my right leg elevated, wrapped in a tin foil blanket, and sipping a sweetened cup of Earl Grey produced by John from who knows where. The paramedics told me I was experiencing shock.

No shit.

Bill had been providing regular updates, but none that mattered. The smoke had cleared and the fire had been put out. The water damage was extensive but contained mostly to the back room. The soot, smoke, and water damage would likely render the majority of my inventory unsalvageable. Finally, he put a foot up on the step of the ambulance and asked, "Em, do you have any idea how this could have happened?"

"Of course not. Isn't that the fire department's job? To figure out how fires start?"

"One of the crew mentioned the use of an accelerant."

"Well, yeah. Everything in the shop that isn't kindling is probably an accelerant."

He cleared his throat and looked out at the river. It was a clear night, once the smoke wafted away. The stars were dim at the late hour, but the moon was still bright enough to cast brilliant silver deckles on the rippled water. "How's Justin been lately?"

"Ugh. Who knows? When he seems like he's getting better, I've learned that's a sure sign he's using. When he looks like shit, then I know he's trying to stop, but he gets so sick..."

Bill nodded.

“Wait? Is that why you...?” I asked. “Oh, no. No. That’s impossible.”

“I just asked about him. I wasn’t making accusations. I haven’t seen him around for a while.”

“Then why bring him up now?”

“Em.” He paused. “Jake arrested him for theft recently. He’s had some petty thefts before, and this wasn’t felony either, but the guy he was with has priors. Arson being one of them. If Justin’s hanging around that guy...tell me, he wouldn’t stand to gain anything from this place, would he?”

“Insurance money. I never took his name off the deed to the building.”

“Does he know that?”

That conversation between John and me. Justin must have been more lucid than I thought.

“Yes,” I said. “He knew.”

But he wouldn’t. Would he? For insurance money that probably wouldn’t pay out in time to cover his ass? He was capable of anything when he was hanging around Blanky, the least of which involved burning down my business for drug money.

“I’m going to kill him.”

“And that’s my cue to leave before you make any other incriminating statements.”

“I’d roll my eyes, but my head hurts too bad,” I told Bill.

John’s face replaced Bill’s when he walked off.

“Is your leg any better? You might want to let them give you something stronger than Tylenol.”

“No way. That’s how Justin started. Next thing you know, I’ll be burning the building to the ground.”

“That’s a leap.” He shrugged.

“Justin started the fire.”

“They know that already?”

“I know it. Bill mentioned his dealer/business partner is an

arsonist. And then I remembered our conversation where I mentioned not removing his name from the deed. Damn it. The wheels must have been churning the whole time. Why do I ever trust him? Why do..."

"Em?" John raised his eyebrows. My rant had trailed off.

"The door." I remembered. "I didn't lock the back door. Something didn't feel right about leaving there tonight. I put the key in, but I got distracted and I never actually turned the lock. That's how he..." I jumped off the ambulance, forgetting my swollen ankle, and when my feet hit the pavement, I saw bright lights of pain in front of my eyes.

"Em, please let me get someone."

"I need Bill," I said, ignoring his pleading and hopping in the direction of the organized chaos.

"I'll get him. Please go back to the ambulance."

"I need to tell him now." Every step was tricky, but as long as I strictly limited my range of motion, I was able to walk.

Bill and Nancy were sitting in his Calvert County Sheriff SUV, waiting for the fire department to finish clearing out. Nancy was swaddled in his black nylon jacket, and her head rested against the window. When she saw me, she hurried out of the truck.

"Bill. I didn't lock the door."

"Are you sure? Which door?"

"The little back door. John left the shop with me around eleven, and I was distracted and I forgot to lock it. That's how Justin got in. That's why the lock wasn't jimmied."

Bill looked tired but nodded, looking at the fire chief. "I'll let them know."

A few minutes later, I saw the chief shake his head and gesture toward me. Bill walked back. "They're all done. For tonight. Chief's going to talk to you tomorrow, but there's nothing more that can be done. Sit tight and wait for his to call. You going to the hospital for that ankle?"

"No. I'm sure it'll feel better tomorrow."

"I'm going to send the EMTs off then," Bill stated, back to his typical duty.

When I thought things couldn't get weirder, when I couldn't feel more alone or helpless, here was everyone packing up after my tragedy. One by one, the trucks drove up the road, their loud engines fading behind the slapping of the river on the rocks.

I FIGURED IT OUT, finally, as John curled his body around my back, wiping the tears from my eyes and the hair off my face. The gesture was nice, but I couldn't let myself feel it. He didn't mean anything. This was him being *nice*. It was a hero complex. A need to be needed. Not just by me, but by everyone. That wasn't reason enough to justify having him around.

I wanted a man who would take care of me because he cared about me, not as a disposable stand-in. I wanted to feel this wanted for real. Not to serve a purpose. I wanted a man to love me the way John pretended to when he was around, but love only me.

I flopped over to face the ceiling. When I glanced at John, he was trying to look like he hadn't been dozing off. I had to do this now. The poor guy needed his sleep.

"John?"

"Shh, Em. Everything can wait."

"No. It can't." I twisted out from under his heavy arm and sat up, sighing. "You have to leave."

He rubbed his eyes. They had to be as painful as mine. We had both been around the same amount of smoke. "Em, it's fine. I can stay with you. I feel like someone should."

That was it. *Someone should*. Not that he wanted to stay. Not that he wanted to be my comfort. He was here because it was the right thing to do. If it were happening to anyone else, I'd think his gesture was noble and romantic. But it was happening to me and it felt like he had chosen the short straw.

"No, I mean it. You need to stay at Hank's. This..." I gestured

around the bed, his pants lying next to mine on the ground, the glass of water on his side—fuck *his* side—of the bed, “This...falseness is not what I want right now. I’m not willing to take yours or anyone’s pity now or ever, and if I don’t *White Fang* you now, I’ll end up an even worse version of myself.”

“*White Fang* me?”

“You know, throw rocks at you to get you to hate me so you’ll go away easier.”

“I got the reference,” he said through a still and stony façade. “I don’t get your logic behind it.” His eyes looked sore and tired with more than smoke irritation. It looked almost like disappointment, but this was not the part where I could start to doubt myself.

“I have reasons, but it’s not the right time to explain. Actually, it will never be the right time to explain. Just please, leave. Remove your pilot-y essence from my apartment so I can get on with my life as a spinster. I have a garden to start and orthopedic shoes to buy.”

As I monologued, he had gotten himself put back together and gathered the gear he’d brought over for work tomorrow. I thought about the flight suit with the wing patches and silver bars that must be in that bag, neatly folded. For a moment, I doubted if it was worth giving up seeing him in uniform one more time.

He didn’t give me the chance to reconsider long. He was already out of the bedroom and unplugging his charger from the outlet in the kitchen. I ran after him on tiptoe, my breasts dangling uncomfortably in their braless state. Damn, he didn’t even call my bluff. I’d cement this in my mind, in case I ever looked back on this one day while I drank Ensure and ate prunes with my arches firmly supported, wondering why I never married the hot test pilot.

He turned around when he got to the front door. I was at least a little comforted to catch him glance down at my t-shirt boobs, grateful for some kind of pull on him.

“Emerson, I have no idea what this is about.” He closed his eyes.

Dark shadows pooled underneath. He was as exhausted as me. “I’d stay to fight with you about what’s in our best interest, but honestly, I have to teach eleven pilots how to assess the engineering of the landing gear of the F-35 at 0800 tomorrow, and it’s now...” He looked at his phone, “0400. Four a.m. I want to take a nap.” He sighed, softening his face. “Goodnight, Em. I’ll call you tomorrow.” He kissed the top of my head and was gone.

“Bye, John.” I closed the door softly and heard the quiet click of the latch. I stared at the chipping paint on the panels of the door for several long minutes before slinking down to sit on the filthy mat. Normally, I would care that most of my butt was fused to the gross green carpet square where Rousby and I wiped our feet after walking through garbage, dead fish, and the myriad of disgusting germs that attach themselves to shoe and paw treads. Now I didn’t care.

I heard the birds first. I didn’t know what kind they were. Spinsters were supposed to know things like the names of songbirds by listening to their calls. I should be able to say, “That’s a robin,” or a nightingale, or whatever the hell kind of birds that sing way too fucking cheerily this early in the morning. Especially the morning after my life collapsed. I put “YouTube bird calls” on my mental to-do list and stood up. The sky was an angry, menstrual red fading into ordinary blue. I saw it through my one window in the living room. Below the garish colors bobbed tips of main sails that belonged to boats moored at Hank’s marina.

On a typical day, I’d be waking up to Rousby’s prancing and throwing on some old clothes to head over to the roastery. I’d holler at Rousby not to pull the leash as I juggled Hank’s and my coffees in my arms over the bumpy treads of the marina docks. We’d sit, drinking and not talking, sharing each others’ company with the soundtrack of a lacquer-dipped brush grazing the bow of an old boat with long, slow swishes. Then I’d hurry over to the shop to find Nancy scolding me for not making her sales goals—which should have been my sales goals, but never were.

Hell, I couldn't complain anymore about the customers coming in for Pyrex and leaving with a discounted-by-Nancy colonial treasure. I had no colonial treasures. I had no Pyrex. Oh, who was I kidding, the damn mid-century cookware was probably the only thing that withstood the fire.

I should be calling Nancy and getting Bill on the fire chief's tail about when I could take a look at whatever I had left. Bill said something about an arson investigation, but I already knew it was futile. If arson was in question, the answer was Justin. The delay would kill any hope I had of drying out and cleaning up anything salvageable.

I should be in the gym, pulling and pressing out the anxiety that tightened my muscles. I should be taking Rousby on a long walk down the island and back up. But I didn't want to see anything that reminded me of the burned corpse of Blue Heron Antiques. And my ankle still hurt a bit. I let Rousby relieve himself out the back door, and I did the only the task I was capable of.

I fell back into bed, hiding under the comforter that had become too heavy for the heat of late spring and had quickly absorbed the delightful scent of charred antique store. I didn't fall asleep until my pillow was soggy and smudged from tears and soot.

CHAPTER 15

“Bill says you can get back in there on Tuesday.” My phone buzzed with the text from Nancy. The display was the only light in the room. When I realized I had slept straight through to the night, guilt didn’t even register. Nothing registered except exhaustion and the need to shampoo the smoke out of my hair. God, I wasn’t even in the fire. How could the firefighters stand it? The burned plastic and melted insulation made me queasy.

I showered, stripped my bed, and made it out of my cave in search of food. While the oven was preheating, I panned through my well-wishing, apologetic, and thirty-seven other sweet but otherwise unhelpful texts and voicemails.

“Let me know the clean-up date and I’ll take off. We love you and can’t believe this happened!” –Lydia

“I just heard. How horrible! Let me know what I can do.”
–Helen

Then there was one from John.

“I don’t know if you need some space or need me. I’d like to think it’s the latter.” –John

Then another one.

“Ok. That sounded like I don’t know how strong and capable you are. I assure that I do.” –John

Then another.

“Please call me.” –John

I didn’t feel like answering any of them yet. Especially not John. I knew most would turn into lengthy text battles, and considering I had no more information about the present or—fingers crossed—future state of my shop, I didn’t want to write “IDK anything yet” thirty-seven times.

My BLT dinner—extra mayo on sourdough—fed my soul as well as my stomach and put me on the path back to rights.

Or, at least it gave me the strength to assess the shitstorm that was my life.

1. My shop burned down.

Okay, that wording was a little harsh. There was damage, probably major damage, but as far as I knew, the building still stood and some of my stock might be intact. Insurance would cover the costs of rebuilding and restocking. I just hoped I didn’t have to split the cost with the fuckhead brother who caused it. The future wasn’t so dim. It only meant lots—and lots—of extra elbow grease clearing away the literal carbon footprints.

1. I still needed new clothes.

NO MORE PUTTING off shopping for jeans, and like, cute tops or whatever thirty-three-year-old women were wearing these days. In other words, STOP ADOLESCING AND START ADULTING. Come to think of it, since I was currently unemployed, tomorrow would be a great day to get a fresh start on the new wardrobe. For real this time. Not frilly underpinnings.

1. Come to terms with spinsterhood.

THIS ONE BOTHERED me the most. It was easy to change the outside of a person—barring the fact that I couldn't and wouldn't laser off my tattoos—but it was quite a different thing to reinvent oneself into a cool yet sexless artsy chick. Harder still to give up the desire for companionship of the non-canine sort. Sorry, Rousby. Yes, of course I'd hold out for that dim light in the distance. The one where a kind, handsome, intelligent man moved to the area, fell in love with me, and wanted me to raise his dogs, but John Bergen wasn't likely to happen twice. And he didn't fall in love with me.

So, I guess I had a plan of sorts. It was tentative but hardy. It had steps. Adults call them "actionable steps," a phrase that made me want to puke. One day, I'd wake up and be a better person. Look at me go. Adulting already.

CHAPTER 16

Adulting sucks. Now I remembered why I didn't do it. You'd think if someone could manage to inherit a failing business, turn it into something (almost) profitable, and give it a shot in the arm of respectability, pay her bills on time, and keep vegetables from rotting in her crisper, shopping for "cute tops" would be easy.

It wasn't.

Armed only with Lydia's advice ("You're going to be tempted but stay out of Hot Topic"), which meant nothing to me when she said it but turned out to be the only store in the mall that called to me with their black interior and Megadeth t-shirt in the window, I had to remind myself that my idea of a cute top was probably skewed toward the teen crowd. Lydia did say it was the favorite of her alt-students—meaning fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds.

I did it though. I averted my eyes and strode past the store all the *Stranger Things* kids were flocking into and straight into the Starbucks kiosk. I wasn't cut out for shopping. I didn't know my size besides my imported, industrial strength 32G scaffolding, didn't know what I liked, and didn't know what kind of new me I was supposed to be buying clothes for.

While I was emotionally Forever 21, I preferred to meet clients—and perhaps future investors—with my midriff covered, so that checked one store off the list of potentials. I, or more accurately, my tattooed arms, were given the stink eye at the old lady stores, so that was a no-go too.

An hour later, I was laden with shopping bags filled with hair care products, bath bombs, perfume, new Doc Martens—ahem, I still needed to work—three pairs of buttery soft lounge pants and matching camis, a Build-a-Bear for Kay, and a Sephora gift card for Maddie (major auntie points!). I had purchased absolutely zero respectable outfits, and I was starving and mentally kicking myself for parking far away to get those extra steps in.

“Emerson Broome?” I heard a posh voice float around me from behind, enveloping me in clouds of sophistication. I turned around, and there she stood. Helen Cartwright. My personal superheroine. Always stylish, always effortless in her every project, always kind and sincere. She was who I had long aspired to become. She was my icon of style, grace, elegance, and everything else I hoped to become one day but probably wouldn’t.

“Helen,” I sighed. “Please help me.”

“Absolutely. Let me take some of those.” She reached out to lighten my burden. “You’re absolutely loaded down with goodies. Lots of sales, I imagine?” She was kind enough to avoid looking up and down at my frayed jeans and holey flannel and—did I even brush my hair today? But that was Helen. She always assumed the best.

“No, it’s not that.” I hesitated. “This sounds silly, and I realize you’re probably swamped, but...could you help me...shop?”

Her brow rose, and her head angled back an inch or so. Oh Lord, I had offended my idol. What was I thinking? She was walking through Nordstrom, minding her own beeswax, and I’d imposed myself on her. She was probably in a hurry. She was probably thinking it was absolutely crazy that my shop just burned down, and yet here I was, shopping for—

“How about lunch first?” she suggested, stunning me with her warm smile.

NEVER HAVING DINED with my idol, I resisted the temptation to order exactly the same dishes she did, although the cedar plank salmon and sautéed spinach sounded...healthy. I had the blue cheese and steak panini with fries, extra mayo, and a Sam Adams. I faced the facts right then and there: I was never going to walk in Helen Cartwright’s footsteps.

“So why do you think there’s problem with your style? I’ve always admired your free-spirited, artistic aura.” We’d dispensed with the pleasantries of small talk and the horror show of my store during our first round of drinks, and now she was getting down to business. Did this woman *have* flaws?

“I never thought about it until John mistook me for a person living in a non-traditional home environment.”

“I’m sorry?”

I sighed. “A homeless woman.”

“Oh.” She looked frightened and maybe a little angry.

“It wasn’t his fault. I was more than a little disheveled that night. I had flour in my hair and grease spots on my shirt. I had Rousby, who had a run-in with some corpse fish, and a couple bags of garbage that I like to collect before it ends up polluting the bay, so...”

“You don’t blame him for thinking poorly of you?”

I took a sip of beer. “The thing is, he didn’t think poorly of me. He didn’t judge me for my situation.”

“The situation where you weren’t homeless but instead were a successful businesswoman?”

“If I were, though, he wouldn’t have judged me. I think he’s seen and helped so many homeless vets, he must have known I had a story.”

“But you didn’t have a story.” Helen was probably used to conversing with people who made more sense than me.

“Well, he was nice to me regardless.”

“You didn’t feel the slightest bit—”

“Humiliated? Why do you think I’m here shopping?”

“But that was months ago. I thought you two had been an item all this time. We all did.”

They did? Who was “we”? “We aren’t an item,” I clarified, taking another sip from my bottle and looking around the busy dining room.

Helen reached out and covered my hand with hers. The gesture was so Nancy-like, it brought a sting to my eyes. “I’m sorry if it’s a touchy subject,” she offered, “but if you’re sure this is what you want, we shall polish up that beautiful outside you so you can be free to let that beautiful inner you shine out. And then we’re going to find you a dress for the benefit.”

“The benefit?”

“You’re still going, right? I was counting on you being there to infuse those stodgy old bastards with a dose of counter-culture vitality.” Her eyes narrowed with mischief. Her flattery was appreciated, but the thought of attending a fancy event, signing my name under a golf basket during the silent auction, dancing with no one after what happened yesterday—only yesterday—turned me off the rest of my fries.

“I don’t have a date,” I threw out to her, suspecting it wouldn’t be a good enough excuse for Helen.

“Neither do I.” She shrugged.

“John’s going,” I tried again.

“Then your dress needs to be all the more fabulous.”

“He’s bringing a date. A date date, not like a ‘oh, just joshing, this is actually my sister’ date.”

“Screw John Bergen. He’s adorable but markedly less so if he makes my girl feel this down.”

Her *girl*? Okay, the tears were coming now. My mahogany

veneer was chipping away, and the particle board underneath was showing. I swiped at my cheek, embarrassed at my public display of emotions. We both laughed.

“If you want to know a secret, my ex is going to be there as well,” she said pointedly.

“Your ex? Helen? Who?”

“Well, that part’s still under wraps, but he moved on. Rather rapidly too.” She smiled bitterly. (Oh! That tiny hint of bitchiness only made her more perfect!) “It was a long time ago, and it suppose it worked out for the best.” She brightened her tone. “I only told you to let you know how life can go on, even when nice things don’t work out. Success can continue. Hope can continue. Love, especially, can continue. You’ve had a few setbacks. Feel them. Grovel in them. And then go on. That’s all we can do.”

After a few seconds, I remembered to swallow. I was lost in the spell of wisdom.

“Well. Let’s go shopping,” she said.

CHAPTER 17

“You know, I feel okay,” I tossed a centuries-old IBM into the dumpster.

“Really?” Lydia sniffed, wiping her nose with a rubber glove. She had internalized my plight, and it seemed to be affecting her more than me. She was downright morose.

“Yeah,” I said, perhaps too convincingly, perhaps for Lydia’s sake. “The damage is nowhere near my worst nightmare. I don’t know if I’m entitled to any insurance money, since my bastard brother probably committed arson. *If* I can collect, it should cover the restoration company’s fee to clean out the building and to resupply any damaged stock.” God knew, this office desperately needed a cleansing fire to destroy all the shit that had accumulated here since Reagan’s administration, like a controlled burning in a field.

Speaking of the 80s, I unplugged the melted wire of the percolator from the singed wall behind it, and though I was sorry to toss my “vintage” Braun, I was all “out with the old” today. It felt like that first crisp day of fall, when the trees hadn’t turned yet, but the world seemed infused with a new, clean energy.

Knowing our tendencies toward early-birdness, Mack decided the girls would meet here at the ghost of Blue Heron Antiques at six in the morning to begin inventorying what was destroyed, what was damaged but perhaps repairable, and what, if anything, was fine. When Mack didn't show because she "had a case," I didn't question it despite Lydia's obvious hesitancy around the subject. It was left to Nancy, Lydia, and me to clear the cobwebs, and that suited me fine. The fewer people to witness my downfall, the better.

"Justin didn't do this, Emerson," Nancy said angrily. She was currently stacking cans of stain and shellac against a wall free of fire damage. "I know Bill got your hackles up against your brother, but I know him as well as I know you. He would never hurt you deliberately like this. He knows how much you love the store."

"The problem isn't with Justin. It's not Justin who did this. It's Junkie Justin. Dope stole the real Justin. The Justin who would sacrifice anything rather than hurt the ones he loves. It replaced him with the guy who'd steal and sell anything to get a fix." I bit my cheek to try to stop hot tears from pooling in my eyes.

I tried not to think of the old Justin often. I missed him too much. After a while, I'd want to see him and start to think maybe he'd changed. We'd hug and we'd cry and trade funny stories about Kay and our frustrations over Maddie and I'd think, "Wow. He's being a dad again." Then I'd find another piece of Nana's jewelry missing from the box on my dresser.

"Let's talk about something else, shall we?" I suggested.

"God, yes. I hear enough about drugs at home," Nancy said, relieved.

"How's the pilot guy, Em? Are you still into him? Dating? Whatever you were doing?" asked Lydia.

That was what I got for changing the subject. "Uh, nope. Not anymore." I scowled over at his table that still stood in the middle of the back room, singed but otherwise unscathed, of course.

"Nooo," Lydia wailed. "Mack and I were supposed to be your

baby's godmommies. Now I'll never have a reason to buy that *Top Gun* onesie."

"Oh, I love that movie. Val Kilmer was a little young for me, but he was my celebrity crush for ten years after that volleyball scene," Nancy reminisced.

"He got fat," said Lydia.

"Happens to the best of us," Nancy said.

"I never understood the attraction of the movie, other than cute little baby clothes. The music is cheesy, Tom Cruise is too short, and Goose dies. Why bother?"

"It was before my time. I couldn't tell you," Lydia said. "Although the cheesy music makes for deliciously fun karaoke times. So what happened?"

"In *Top Gun*?" I asked.

"To pilot guy?"

"John," Nancy said. I'd rather keep calling him pilot guy. It felt good dehumanizing him. Like I was moving on. Maybe that would be a key.

"Okay, what happened with John? Was he too alpha? I could see that being an issue with a Navy pilot."

"Surprisingly beta. But like a sexy, confident beta. He was actually super low-key cool and respectful. And I don't think it was an act." *Work and talk, Em. Work and talk. Do not stop and ponder what might have been.*

"Sooo? Did he not give head? Men don't still do that, do they?" Lydia grimaced and glanced over to Nancy, who was trying her damndest not to say a peep.

I blushed. I'd never talked about sex in front of Second-Mom Nancy before. "He did."

"Okaaay, well, was it boring or something? You weren't into him? Because you seemed psyched about it at first," Lydia asked.

"More like, he isn't really into me." I heard Nancy roll her eyes from across the room.

"You are his *person*, Emerson." Nancy turned around and closed

the gap between us. She turned to Lydia. "I keep telling her that, but she won't believe me. Or Hank, or George, or Helen. She thinks we think too highly of her and someone her own generation wouldn't see what we see." She faced me again. "But you're wrong. We don't think highly of you at all. We see you how you are. A kind, generous, loving, smart, beautiful woman who needs to get out of her own head and stop comparing herself to fictional people who don't exist," she shot back at me. "This isn't a movie. This isn't *Top Gun*. It's real life. It's not ludicrous that a Navy test pilot can fall in love with a successful businesswoman!"

Lydia's eyebrows were raised, and Nancy huffed and turned on her heel.

"He invited another woman to the benefit." It was my sticking point. My proof that he wasn't all in with me.

"Did you or did you not tell him you asked me to set you up on a date with another man for the benefit?" Nancy accused.

"Well, yeah. But—"

"No buts. You told him. Was he not supposed to take you at your word? Was he supposed to hound you until you gave in and went with him? Because that sounds a little *alpha* to me."

"When you put it like that..." Shit. I hated it when Nancy was right. Now I had blown it with him. I took his respectfulness to mean he didn't care enough.

When did I get such a fucked-up view of myself? Of what a healthy relationship looked like? Well, that was another box checked in my "no" column. At least I grounded him before he saw the extent of my mental neediness.

"So, can we order a pizza?" Lydia squeaked from behind a mirrored dresser.

"Why don't you go ahead and make the call, Lydia," Nancy said ominously before guiding me to a Victorian settee that now I'd have no choice but to reupholster.

"I hope everyone likes Hawaiian." She shrugged.

Nancy and I sat on the burnt orange crushed velvet. Sure, it

was recovered in the 70s, but it made great Halloween displays during October, so I never have got rid of it for that reason alone. Now, soot-smearred and reeking of creosote and melted poly-velvet, it truly was a heap of junk.

Nancy spread a drop cloth on the seat before perching on the edge, careful not to touch the arms. She would have done the same before the fire. She sighed and took a long look around the room.

“There’s not that much work to be done,” she mused. “The fire seemed mostly contained to the office, and for once, your hoarding capacity proved beneficial, since there was too much junk in there to store anything useful. I have the books stored on the cloud, same with our regular customers’ info, and anyone you work with who isn’t on your cell will be found online. The business records, at least, are safe.”

Nancy only ever saw the books. I saw the potential. I saw the initial need to turn the store around when I inherited it eight years ago, slowly acquiring more and more high-end pieces until it was no longer a junk shop, but a haven of curated antiquities. I began relationships with all the local museums, historic houses, and visitor centers and saw myself as a broker of history, going to any length to connect the perfect piece with its rightful place in an honored home.

I had seen the beauty in a simple slab of oak three hundred years old, planed first by hand, and again through time and use. I had sifted through the “trash” found in old basements and attics, discovering bureaus and beds, chairs and tables that needed a bit of polish, or maybe even a full-fledged restoration before highlighting the piece in my showroom.

I hugged my knees to my chest. It was hard to see the potential now. It was hard to see past the blackened wood, the water rings left by the firefighters’ hoses, the scent of defeat that permeated everything.

Maybe Nancy was right. The damage wasn’t extensive. But it was still too much. I was the perpetual adolescent, unfit to handle

catastrophe, and it showed in my every mannerism and acid-stained t-shirt.

“John’s waiting for you to ask him.”

I picked my head up. That was hard, too, since it was an extra fifty pounds full of tears and regret. It dropped back down.

“Ask him what?”

“To help you.”

“Ugh,” came a phlegmy sound from the back of my throat. It wasn’t like I was waiting to be rescued. Especially not by John, the “nice guy.” “Nancy, that jet is off the carrier.”

“I disagree, but why?”

“He needs a—”

“I know, I know, he needs a nice girl who’ll cook him dinners and have his babies and get fillers when she starts aging, yada, yada, yada,” she scoffed. “He wants you. He told you that.”

“No. It’s not that we look ridiculous together, I promise, Nancy, it’s not. In his world, I’m a placeholder, Nancy. That’s always been my role with these types of guys. They think I’ll be fun until they realize underneath my tattoos, I’m an eighty-year-old woman. They think I’m a bad girl, or a rebel, and ‘Oh, what a change of pace that would be from my previous twenty-five sorority girlfriends.’ They’re great actors. Very compelling. Until they go cold and you find out you’re a placeholder yet again. This one was taking a break from his college sweetheart, that one wanted someone more socially acceptable to marry.”

“Those guys weren’t right for you.”

“No kidding.”

“Because they weren’t John. He’s not like that.”

“But you never know, do you? Not until you get your heart broken. I’m not willing to let that happen with him.”

“Why not with him?”

“Why not?” Shit, let me count the ways. “Because I like him too much. Because he’s Hank’s nephew. Because he’s been enmeshed in the community since day one, and they’ll pick him over me.”

“What makes you think there would come a time to choose sides?”

“When we broke up.”

“Honey, in order for a thing to break, it has to be whole to start with. That means, you can’t leave half of yourself out at the beginning.” She stood up. “You’re sure quick to blame John for your hypothetical non-relationship, but I think you’re the one holding it up.”

Nancy was impossible sometimes with her beer glasses for those she loved. I was lucky to be one of the few at the tippy top of her list, but boy did she push hard to keep us up there.

“I think you’re not showing him your true self, the kind, brave, caring, authentic you that this whole community loves. That way you get the upper hand. You can push him away before he has a chance to push you away.” She stepped away but swiveled back around. “And I’ll have you know, there’s no way we’d choose him over you in a hypothetical break-up, split-the-friends business. We all love you.”

My heart started that ache again that I’d felt a few times with John. I never thought pangs of love were real, but then, all clichés come from somewhere. Probably the solar plexus. And that network of nerves was currently shouting to me, “I am loved.” It felt terrible and wonderful and scary and freeing.

“Em? Come on out here, will you?” Lydia shouted from the showroom.

My heart sunk. With the exception of a few rugs that no one wanted to purchase anyway, the showroom was largely untouched by the fire. Lydia must have discovered something bad. Something the disaster clean-up crew missed a few days before.

“Deep breaths.” Nancy guided me. “The only way out is through. I’ll be right beside you.”

Lydia was standing by the door, and someone was silhouetted outside.

“Go ahead and open it,” I said, relieved that it wasn’t more bad news. “We did order a pizza after all.”

“I think we’re going to need a lot more pizza.” She turned the lock and swung the door open, letting in the hellish light of midday and The Three Harpies enter, carrying mops, pails, and rags.

“Mrs. Gordon? Mrs. Andrews? What do you think you’re doing? Lorraine?” I stepped forward to kiss their crepey cheeks. Seeing their faces in here felt like coming home.

“You don’t think we’d let you refurbish your shop all by yourself. My granddaughter-in-law said she was coming to help you—”

“And I think we’ve drunk enough of your coffee to owe you at least one gigantic favor.” Lorraine finished Mrs. Gordon’s thought. “Even Sylvia Rae here promised to help.”

“I don’t see what the big fuss is about. *Even* Sylvia Rae,” she huffed. “I still have some use in me. Long as that use means I don’t have to reach up above my elbows or down past my hips.”

“I have the perfect job for you, Mrs. Andrews.” I beamed, taking her bucket and clearing a path for her walker to a place where she could sit down and items could be brought for her to polish.

The door chimed again. It was Carol and George, the owners of the café. I almost didn’t place them. I wasn’t used to seeing their faces out of their restaurant. They were the busiest business owners in Solomons.

“Emerson,” Carol chimed in, “Nancy called and told us this was happening. We’re open tonight, but we’re more than happy to lend a hand for a couple hours. Whatever you need from us.” George handed me a basket of blueberry muffins.

Hank was the next to arrive, toolbelt around his waist and carrying boat cleaner, which he thought might be useful for cleaning the grime from the flame retardant. He gave me a wave and bypassed the gathering crowd to head straight through to the back.

“Auntie Em!” I heard a girl’s tinkling voice as soon as the bell rung again. My favorite nieces charged me—yes, Maddie too.

“What do you say, girls?” Melissa, still in her nurse’s scrubs, removed her sunglasses and squashed her children in a hug that was pure mama bear.

“We’re sorry about your shop,” they said in unison.

“We heard the fire trucks,” Kay added.

“They woke us up.” Maddie nodded to her sister, decidedly less annoyed than usual.

“What was it like?” Kay’s eyes went wide. I understood her excitement. A fire was a beautiful and awesome power to watch. Unless it was your stuff getting burned.

“Kayleigh, stop rubbernecking. People could have been hurt,” Melissa scolded before turning to me. “Girl, I’m just off a twelve-hour shift, but I’m officially off for the next three days and I’m still wired. Put me where you need me for the next couple hours until I pass out in a coma.”

I sent Melissa and Maddie in the back to help Hank and promoted Kay to Assistant Polisher under Mrs. Andrews’s command. There was nothing like a precocious nine-year-old to get the grump out of a ninety-year-old widow.

“What’s rubbernecking?” Kay asked me when her mom and sister left.

“Geeking out over accidents on the road.”

“Oh. I do that,” she said glumly.

“Me too,” I admitted. “Human nature.”

Helen showed up an hour later with a sandwich tray and Father Michael, the priest of the Catholic Church that I still did not attend—though I was very familiar with their kitchen from the hours I spent scraping burnt on pancake batter out of their stove and spaghetti sauce from the ceiling. The freaking ceiling!

As usual, Helen put together a jaunty, chic vibe for her cleaning outfit. At sixty, she looked like Grace Kelly in Monaco with her side-tied scarf, boat neck black shirt, and skinny jeans cuffed at the

ankles, showing off a pair of modern flats that emphasized her balletic figure.

Gus, the chef, or rather, the head cook/fry daddy at Skipjacks, showed up with a belly too large for his t-shirt and an industrial-sized pan of still-sizzling mac and cheese. It smelled way better than anything they served in the restaurant, too. Maybe it was time for a promotion for Gus. Or maybe I hadn't eaten since Sunday.

Helen's lips curved into a sneer, and she excused herself when Gus entered the rom. I couldn't imagine she would have disdain or animosity for another person, no matter how unkept or slovenly they are—she liked me, after all. It must be the mac n cheese she took a disliking to. If I had a figure like hers, I'd hide from fatty carbs too.

My shop had become an assembly of the business owners of Solomons. Nancy's one call had become a phone tree, each person dropping their own priorities to rush to my aid. It was beautiful to see so many people working together. We were a patchwork quilt of differing skill sets stitched together with humanity, hard work, and compassion.

It was an outpouring of love. My solar plexus was completely overwhelmed.

I stepped outside to catch my breath for a few minutes. Hank caught up with me. Too many people for him too.

"He's teaching today. Something about wind resistance of rivets, thermodynamic coupling, or flux capacitors." I think Hank got all of those words wrong, but it didn't matter.

"I wasn't going to ask."

"That didn't mean you weren't waiting for him." Hank knew I was. John was the only one missing from this eclectic smorgasbord of my life.

I nodded. "Maybe—I think I blew it with him, Hank. I overthought things. I doubted him. And he finally let me have what I thought I wanted."

“What’s that?”

“He’s leaving me alone.”

Hank didn’t say anything for a moment. Usually during our conversations, we’d listen to the waves lapping against the sides of the boats as the tides went in or out. It was weird talking while landlocked. Maybe that’s why Hank rarely left his boathouse.

“That’s not what you want anymore? Him leaving you alone?”

“I don’t know. I’m only starting to think this through. Consider other angles.”

“What’s to consider? You know you. You want him or you don’t. You tell him one or the other. He does the same. And from what I’ve seen and heard, he’s been smitten with you since he first saw you.”

“Not exactly,” I deadpanned. “You know what happened the first time.”

“The second time.” I felt his patience slipping. I was still a person, and Hank was uncomfortable when things got too people-y. “The first time you opened your mouth, then, which is better than him falling in love at first sight. I had to hear about your dress and your legs and all the shit I never wanted to hear about you that led the man to use all the god damned hot water with his long-ass showers.”

I was mortified. Flattered. But mortified.

“But the day after your date, where you chastised him for not ordering crab, told him off for not acting interested in you, and laid down your likes and dislikes—oh, yes, he told me all of this. He was hooked, Em. He comes from a long line of romantics, and it turns out he’s not immune. My sister, Marin—his mama—married Jim right out of high school. I told her not to tie herself down so early, that she could go to college. But she wanted Jim and only Jim. Didn’t work out in the end, but she only ever loved Jim.”

“What about you? Did the romance gene skip you?” I asked. He’d never told me the full story.

“Nah, I got it. I’ll be damned if it didn’t skip the girl I fell for though.”

“Hank, you never told me the full story.”

“Ah.” He stood still, searching for the sea through the trees. It was his comfort. For a long minute, I waited, silently urging him to continue, too afraid he might climb back into his emotional shell.

“I quit college to go to Vietnam. I knew I didn’t need to, but that’s what I felt I needed to do. Joanie didn’t want me to go. I went. She waited a while but not long enough. I came back—messed up, just like every other grunt—so I didn’t tell her. She was with someone else by then, anyway. I finished school and worked where I could get my mind off the jungle, scraping barnacles off boats. Eventually I bought the marina, but I still scrape barnacles off boats, thinking about Joan and sometimes still the jungle.”

I kept my face passive and cleared my throat from the tension. Hank didn’t want my sympathy or heartbreak. He wanted to relay pertinent information. It was my duty to accept his gift as given.

“I’ve been fine alone. I’ve got good company and good work to keep me busy.”

“What if I’m alone?” I asked. “For the long haul, I mean.”

“You’ll be fine too.”

“I used to think that,” I mused.

“Used to?”

“Before John,” I said it before I even thought it.

“Well, the mac and cheese is gone and so is the sandwich bar.” Jenn ducked her head out of the door. I didn’t even realize her head was in there. “People are getting hungry again. Lydia wants to know if should she order more pizza.” It broke me out of my reverie.

“Uh. Yes, thank you, Jenn.” I shook my head to get back in the restoration game as Sherriff Bill’s SUV pulled up in front.

I waved and he pocketed his keys and gave me a side hug. “Nancy told me to get my butt down here to help and bring as

many boys as possible. I put an APV out for anyone who isn't on shift or getting ready for a shift to come."

"Did you really?"

"No. But Jake'll be here with Micah and probably Josh too, as much as you won't like it." Jake was Bill and Nancy's deputy son, and Micah was the grandkid. Josh was my former high school nemesis who never quite stopped his torture. He made his monthly speeding ticket quotas because of me.

I heard the loud exhaust of a pick-up. "Better order at least twenty pizzas. But, Jenn? Tell Lydia maybe stick with cheese and pepperoni this time?"

I'd probably have to auction off my car to pay the credit card bill for the food. Bill's boys could eat a pizza apiece. But I was still on that grateful high from all the love that was being shown to me.

WITH EIGHTEEN ENERGETIC and capable friends working hard, following my directions for removing water stains, cleaning with various solvents and putting things back in order, the shop was almost ready to open after the electrician finished re-wiring. It still smelled like something very wrong happened here, but the comforting—and possibly noxious—top notes of bleach, linseed oil, and furniture polish softened it.

I stood alone in my now incredibly organized happy place—thank you, Melissa—and breathed in the air that was resettling into something more familiar. I was used to being alone here. My work had a methodology that, by its nature, turned me into a loner, but I never felt alone. It was different now. I felt...lonely. I wanted to share this with someone. With John.

Maybe I was only thinking that because all my company departed so suddenly, leaving a void and a silence. John and I couldn't possibly have been involved enough for his absence to be notable. These had to be leftover feelings. I was high from all the love this afternoon. This was the comedown.

Walking slowly through the rooms, I turned off the surge protectors for the lights on the sales floor. As a final reward of sorts, for all our hard work, we'd lit all the small table and floor lamps after completely rearranging the room to maximize traffic flow and better showcase all the little tchotchkes that customers would pick up while convincing their spouses and partners they absolutely *needed* that Chinese screen or oak Hoosier cabinet. We'd also taken a group photo outside the shop at dusk. The lights glowed from the two windows flanking the door, silhouetting the Blue Heron Antiques sign. Everyone's clothes were splotted from paint and dust and soot.

Today, the town learned firsthand why I didn't try to look nice very often.

The back room was surgically clean, since we'd had to re-drywall a good part of it, re-paint the rest, and move every piece out either onto the floor if it was undamaged or to the landfill if it was. Hank and George and Bill and his boys installed new LED lights that were bright enough to work by. But there, right in the center, was my final project.

I had spent most of the day organizing labor and demonstrating, but I left one piece that I alone had to refinish. No one was allowed to touch it, not even to lift the daisy-print sheet covering it. Now it was nothing but me, the kitchen table, and one lone pizza box remaining on top—Hawaiian with only two slices missing. Figures.

I didn't know if he even wanted to keep it. Probably not. But still, it was his. He purchased it and took the effort to get it down here. It was awful big for a souvenir from rural Pennsylvania, so he must have had a purpose for it. It was also partially ours, so I owed it to him to present it in the best possible condition.

Or he could sell it.

No. It broke my heart to let him do that. I was already selling my car to pay the pizza bill. I could fork over my last thousand for the table. Anyway, it had a film of my DNA. What if it ended up at

a crime scene and I was charged because of the physical evidence? The police would never believe me.

I removed the covering. One edge was sooty and slightly scalded, but there was no water damage. I guess because the wood was so old it was practically petrified.

After two hours sanding, scrubbing, and picking at the surface with dental tools, it was ready. I had spruced it up to look better than ever, while maintaining its distinctive blemishes and burnishing that gave it its storied character.

I hoped this would work. Because I was finally ready.

CHAPTER 18

Lydia was my date for the benefit. I was more than a little peeved with Mack for suggesting I accompany her own wife after she promised they'd go together, but I was glad for the company of my new friend.

For fun, I bought us hellishly ugly, matching wrist corsages. I even detailed the Chevelle before the date. I still had to sell the car. Why not take it out for one last spin looking its best?

As an added benefit, I got to kiss wee Jack when I got to Lyd and Mack's house. Consequently, I woke him up, setting off a cataclysm of wailing infant, lamenting mom second guessing her choice to leave said infant, and Mrs. Gordon's delight in getting to rock him back to sleep again.

That, in turn, lead to freaking-out mom questioning Great Grandma's babysitting techniques and debates over self-soothing versus rocking to sleep until—much to Mrs. Gordon's chagrin—I suggested we let Jack tag along with us. *It couldn't be that arduous keeping track of a three-month-old.* But that meant installing the car seat in Mrs. Gordon's Buick since my car had no restraints and

Mack had taken Lydia's car to D.C. for work. It also meant traveling with a cooler of breast milk and a weekender-sized diaper bag. Besides that, Lydia was looking forward to her fancy-schmancy night on the town and had already started pre-gaming at like, four in the afternoon and was extra-emotional already.

After all that, my ovaries shriveled up. Lesson learned: Never kiss a sleeping baby.

"I appreciate you taking me to the benefit, Emerson. Mack said she'd take me, but she didn't take me. She told you to take me," she said over the roar of the engine when we finally left the driveway.

"She didn't tell me to take you. I wanted you to come with me. You're pretty much my bestie now. I wanted Mack to come, too, but she's working a big case. I don't want to take her talents away from hacking cybercrime." I didn't know what Mack did at the FBI. I just always thought she was a superhero for working there.

"Pssssh. She does some kind of tax analysis for the cases. She doesn't actually work on the actual crime-fighting."

"But then why the long hours? The weekends? Surely if her job was that routine, it could all be done between eight and six, right?"

"You'd think," Lydia said bitterly. Well, shit. I knew Mack hadn't been around lately, but I didn't know about this. I wished I still didn't.

"She has a reason, Lydia. I've known her since third grade, and she's always been the same. Hard-working and diligent, definitely. Lost track of her priorities because of that, maybe. Not neglectful."

"She's avoiding me," Lydia said sadly.

"Not possible. You're her person."

"The baby changed things. We're not the same."

"No shit, you're not the same. Neither one of you will be the same again. But you knew that going in. What the fuck did I just witness back at your house? How could incredibly fucking tense complications like that *not* put pressure on two people?"

"I think there's something else." She sniffed and dabbed at the corners of her eyes.

Had she meant *someone* else? That wasn't possible. Mack was a one-woman woman. She definitely had the one true love gene. Lydia was the Princess Buttercup to Mack's Farm Boy. Or the hot AF lesbian equivalent.

I stopped at a red light and squeezed her hand that was lying limp on the vinyl. She nodded and gave me an "I'm stopping now" laugh.

It looked like we both needed a grand gesture tonight. We were two sad sacks on our way to the event of the season, also known as *not* crabbing and drinking Natty Boh. And since we didn't have "seasons" here in the Chesapeake colonies, this would be talked about for the next five years.

I disparage because I care. We weren't backwoods people. We listened to *Fresh Air* and spent too much at Whole Foods like any bougie population. More telling, there were as many schooners and skipjacks (i.e., very big, very expensive sailboats) in the slips as there were in Annapolis harbor. One of the largest donors of this fete, technically called the Bugeye Ball—named after another type of forty- or fifty-foot sailboat—was the Solomons Yacht Brokerage. *Yachts*. Take that in. We weren't exactly yokels here, but neither did we forget what our culture hailed from. Namely, oysters and crabs.

And yes, some of, shall we say, "Calvert's finest" did have a special place in their hearts for huntin' and fishin'—the neon orange and camo variety, not the tweed-wearing, butler-reloads-the-gun-after-the-lord-shoots-the-grouse style of sporting.

I winced as I handed my keys to a starry-eyed and all-too-eager teenage valet, determined not to lament the fate of my tire treads for the rest of the evening. As it were, we had enough crabs to boil.

Lydia looked columnar and poised to perfection when I opened her door and helped her out of my fabulous polyvinyl front seat. She was the kind of woman who should be transported everywhere in a high-end Tesla, something smart, off-handedly stylish, and environmentally friendly.

I was built for a beefy Chevrolet. Tough on the outside, short and muscular, terrible mileage.

If any woman had a right to be snooty, it would be Lydia of the golden hair and body of a Lladro figurine. But Lydia never flinched to ride with me. She never looked askance at my beggar woman clothes. Never greeted me with anything less than pure warmth.

“Lydia?” I asked as we stood outside the doors, adjusting our gowns and breathing deeply.

“Emerson?”

“I’m sorry things are hard right now, but I’m also selfishly grateful that I’ve been able to get to know you better.” I squeezed her hand again. The gesture was a confidence injection for us both. “Thank you for being here tonight. You’re sending me waves of strength from your perfect posture.” We threw back our heads and laughed the tinkling laughter of women with everlasting trust funds and no pressing concerns.

“You know what, Em?” Lydia took my arm as I escorted her through the door. We stopped at the entrance and took a long look around the room. “I think we’re the hottest bitches in this place and we’re going to slay.”

I turned to her as my mouth dropped open. Then I did something totally uncharacteristic and agreed.

Lydia, of course, had nothing to fake. Her high-necked, low-backed, blush colored gown pooled behind her when she walked. She was a mermaid, floating in a sea of silk and iridescence. She had the natural confidence of someone born beautiful, neither lording it over the little people, nor constantly apologizing. When something delighted her, she reveled in it. She didn’t have to wonder when it would be taken away. She didn’t feel the crippling anxiety that she’d do something to end that joy. When she felt sad, she could simply grieve. She could miss her wife’s company without tormenting herself over the whys and what-did-I-dos.

Me, however, well...I was in a dress. In public. I slipped in unrecognized but not unnoticed by most of the other revelers during the cocktail hour.

My shopping experience with Helen had been my first confidence booster. She spent almost two hours with me trying on every pantsuit at Nordstrom until I laid down arms against the conspiracy of my massive quads. After nearly considering trying on a delicate and breezy floral thingy, Helen brought me one last dress.

It was black to match my car. Long, with a skirt that gently hugged my curves. The sleeves were long too. A v-neck plunged low enough in the center to highlight my cleavage but not too low that I couldn't wear a bra to ensure cleavage happened.

Cue the choir of angels, it was fucking perfect.

I felt elegant. I felt regal. I felt like...Elvira.

There was never another garment that so conceptualized the real me as well as this dress. I was never taking it off. I was going to wear it every day. To work. To the bank. To the grocery store. Okay, no. But I suddenly understood why people liked clothes shopping. It was transcendent.

It turned out merely pretending to have killer confidence can have a morale boosting effect. The dress helped. So did champagne. Together, they got us through cocktail hour, where we mingled amidst the permanent exhibits, taking selfies in front of blown-up, sepia-colored portraits of Solomons' marine history and pretending to row a skiff in our formal wear, which we found somewhere in the just-for-toddlers section.

I was, however, greeted by the woman of the hour. And her top-secret date. Helen said a quick hello and waved over a guy with slicked hair and a cheap tux.

"Oh, Emerson." Helen sighed over me like a mom taking her daughter's prom photos. I ate it up. "You look stunning."

"So do you, Helen. You remember Lydia?"

“Lydia, dear. How’s your little boy?” Of course Helen remembered. That was Helen.

“Teething and little grouchy, but still a sweetheart,” Lydia gushed.

“I can’t wait to meet him. Speaking of meeting men, I have someone I’d like to introduce to you.”

The man ended his conversation and took his place at Helen’s side, grasping her waist in his gigantic paw.

“Gus?” It was the Skipjack’s cook. Greasy Gus, as I always thought of him. I’d never seen him with his hair combed and wearing a shirt that contained his hairy belly, let alone a tuxedo jacket.

“Howya doing, Em? Everything coming along with the shop? Put back to rights?”

Ugh. The shop. Of course he’d bring it up. It wasn’t such a sore subject after the town had come together for my benefit to revamp the building, but I still had the Justin-as-likely-arsonist thing looming in front of me. Tonight, I was hoping to lose myself in the twinkling party ambiance rather than the doom twins of John and Justin.

“Yes. The electrician finished the wiring this morning. Thanks again for your help. And for the mac and cheese.” It wasn’t thanks enough, but I was too thrown by seeing him with Helen to express my gratitude more fully.

Helen must have noticed my curious expression. Lydia, in the meantime, had wandered over to a corner to check her phone.

“Gus and I were married once,” she explained, though the words didn’t compute in my head. “I don’t know if no one remembers or if they’re just very generous in pretending it never happened, but they don’t bring it up much.” Gus bent to kiss her cheek and mingled in a different crowd. The place where the kiss landed turned pink, and Helen pursed her lips to prevent a smile. She was smitten. With Gus. Well, okay then.

Helen touched my elbow and lowered her voice. "It didn't work out then. He hurt me very badly and it ended quickly. I threw myself into schooling first, and then my career, but I guess I never stopped thinking of what might have been." She smiled back at Gus warmly when their eyes met again from the far corners of the room.

"Uh, I...Did he apologize?" I stumbled over my words, trying everything to avoid asking that I really wanted to know. *How the fuck did Greasy Gus land and consequently hurt Perfect Helen?*

"He apologized ages ago. Groveled even. I wasn't ready to accept him back though. We reconnected at your shop. It felt right this time."

Huh.

"I didn't feel like I owed you an explanation for me and Gus, but I wanted you to know. Now I have to ask everyone here tonight to empty their purses some more. Wish me luck." She clinked her champagne glass against mine and slipped easily into her role as curator.

"Em!" Nancy speed walked up to me. She took a moment to catch her breath. "Bill just told me. Arson has been ruled out. I didn't want to say I told you so. I'm just so relieved."

"They're sure?" This threw my guilt for a loop.

"An inspector from Baltimore owed Bill a favor. It was the wiring. It was old knob and tube and ready to blow as any moment. Apparently, it started in the office but got bigger when it hit the gallons of solvents you use."

The office. Of all the places for a fire to start, that was the one I least expected. I didn't even have the computer plugged in. Only that old coffee...Shit.

"Well, I'm just glad Justin's in the clear then," Nancy said. "I'm going to find out where Bill got lost. I'll see you at dinner, honey. By the way, you look beautiful." She kissed my cheek and waved to someone a few feet away.

Lydia returned, slipping her phone into her clutch, and

scrunched her eyebrows at my vacant expression. "Everything okay?"

"The fire started in the office. It wasn't arson. It wasn't Justin. It was...me. And my need to hang on to that stupid old percolator. The coffee wasn't even that good."

"Oh. Well, that's good news, then."

"Yeah," I said, still dazed and lingering on the edge of a triggered memory. "Except now it means I'm even more of a shithead for accusing Justin so readily. God, I need to apologize to him. I'm such a bitch."

"Did you accuse him to his face?"

"Only in my head. I can't find him. He's not answering his phone. No one's seen him. Another reason I thought for sure it was him."

"You'll find him. I'm sure it'll be water under the bridge."

"Maybe."

The fete was dotted with members of the community but largely populated by Washingtonians and Annapolitans, people who regularly wore tuxes and gowns for fundraising purposes. Because of that, Lydia and I managed to avoid too many cheek kisses and darling-you-look-wonderfuls. When the bandleader announced the dinner portion of the evening was about to commence, we found our assigned table numbers and weren't ashamed to be among the first seated.

Guests funneled in through the door, and I halfheartedly greeted Nancy and Bill and Carol and George as they settled themselves at our table. I hadn't seen John at the cocktail hour, but I did spend a fair amount of time looking at the museum exhibits rather than mingling at the bar or debating the merits of the cognac basket versus the artisanal cheese of the month membership at the silent auction. The rest of the time, I spent lurking in corners and ducking quickly around walls. I knew I'd run into him eventually, but why force the inevitable?

My humiliation was imminent, but just in case, I wanted to hold out a little more hope. For what exactly, I didn't know.

I had butterflies in my stomach. Their flutter intensified moment by moment as each couple hovered over the calligraphy seating chart framed in gold before striding to their table. My leg shook under the tablecloth, and no number of deep inhalations was calming my nerves. The butterflies started attacking in earnest now. Evil demon butterflies, they were.

Lydia glanced down at my lap where my hands twisted a white cloth napkin into submission.

"I need to see him, Lyd. I just need to see them together and I'll be fine. It's the waiting that I hate."

"Okay, sweetie," she said.

"I think I need another drink." I stood suddenly and announced entirely too loudly to the entire table. "Anyone else? No? Okay. Here I go." I needed to get up, move, release this frenetic energy that was building pressure inside me.

I walked back to the cocktail hour bar to get a moment to myself. That helped, being alone. I was used to my own company and the absence of the crowd immediately made me sane again.

"Champagne, please," I asked the bartender, who thought he was finally released from the throngs of thirsty socialites.

"Two more of the same," said a man behind me.

I didn't realize anyone was behind me, but as soon as I heard his voice, my eyes closed and I deflated. "Hello, Emerson."

I barely glanced at him as he moved next to me, but it was enough to register the flash of color at his breast, the glint of his shoes. I winced as he placed his arm on the bar next to mine. A black-sleeved arm that differed from the other men in their penguin suits because of the three gold cords and a star embroidered onto his jacket cuff.

"John," I croaked, forgetting to inhale. I turned to face him like the grown, elegant, glam-goth woman I had become (tonight). While the bartender waited for the bubbles to dissipate before

topping off our glasses, I gave a less than elegant gasp that obviously translated into “Holy Fucking Shit.”

The room simultaneously imploded and lengthened like a Hitchcock film. Nothing else existed but a narrow tunnel in which he and I stood. Small and warped. I blinked to readjust my focus.

I laughed.

Of course he wore his uniform. *Of course* he'd have a card up his sleeve tonight. One he knew would dominate my attention. *Of course* he would be the most intensely masculine, craveably beautiful man here. He was courage and intelligence and sex personified.

I looked down his entire length, from his perfectly-in-place sandy brown hair, the gold buttons at his waist, the row of medals on his chest, to the two glasses of champagne in his hands—one for him, one for his date—and felt intense desire—no, *need*—pulse through my body, followed by a kick in the gut by some small yet shifty, hooved animal.

A satisfied smile spread across his mouth as I stared with obvious approval. He took a deep breath and nodded to me, leaving me at the temporary bar station to go back to his date. After a few paces, he swiveled around to me, continuing to walk away backward with his typical easy, elegant grace.

“By the way, Em. You look very nice.” He turned back around with a bigger smile and paced off.

I don't know how long I stared after him. I was paralyzed until his wake settled, and the room became the museum once more.

“Ma'am?” I heard from a distance.

“Ma'am? We're getting ready to take down the bar. Is there anything else I can get you?” the bartender asked.

“Uh, no. Thank you.” I grabbed my glass and took a deep breath, steeling myself to brave dinner with one thousand people and John.

By the time I reentered the dining area—an enchanting blue

room in the museum that featured some sort of long, antique craft with oars suspended above us—the entrée had been served.

“Where have you been?” Lydia asked. “John’s here.” She nodded her head to our left. At least he was seated behind us.

“The bathroom. And I know. I ran into him getting champagne. Do me a favor and unless his date is Mrs. Andrews, let’s not even mention their table.”

Lydia nodded and slipped a teeny bit of crab imperial into her mouth.

“I’m guessing by your reaction it’s not Mrs. Andrews.”

“Mmm, nope.” She avoided my eyes.

“Ugh! Let’s get this over with.” I turned around, and it didn’t take long before my eyes locked on their target. Even if he hadn’t worn his fancy dress uniform, he would have stood out as the handsomest man in the room. Everyone flocked to him. Not only did he have the attention of his table, but a notable gentleman from the table behind his was leaning back precariously in his chair to share in a joke.

John found me, too, though he merely looked down and frowned when our eyes met. Then he mentioned something to his date. I didn’t want to look at her. I didn’t want to automatically despise another woman before I met her. But like my niece, I was a rubbernecker. I had to catch a glimpse of the wreckage, had to envision the carnage. It was inhuman not to be curious.

I immediately wished I hadn’t.

She was pretty, blond, tall, young, and looked nothing like John, so I gathered she wasn’t a sister. I guess a part of me was still holding out hope. She looked light. Breezy. Like she didn’t take convincing or bailing out of troublesome situations. She looked friendly and effortlessly beautiful. An infuriating combination.

I turned back to my table. Lydia was texting furiously, and Nancy and Carol were making small talk. Bill had finished his meal and was beginning to make the rounds. George was at the bar, and Jenn never even showed. My stomach was too knotted to

do more than pick through my Normandy blend veggies. I promised myself I wouldn't care tonight. Nothing he did would affect me, since I was planning for the worst.

But I let myself down. I still held out too much hope that this wouldn't be our final cut-off.

I knew this would happen. That was the worst part. My eyes stung with tears I refused to let fall. I blinked and swallowed until they reabsorbed, or whatever tears did when they knew they weren't welcome. I was so angry with the town for being so convincing about "us" that I gave him a chance against my better judgement.

I was angry at John for being so predictable.

But mostly, I was angry at myself, for falling for it. I'd finally let my guard down. I fell for a guy who was way too mainstream for me, and he found his perfect complement in someone else. Normally it felt good to be right. This was crushing.

Helen's soft voice came over the loudspeaker. "Ladies and gentlemen, if I may have your attention, I'd like to thank you all for attending the Bugeye Ball. Every year, this ball serves as the Calvert Marine Museum's most important fundraiser, and through the proceeds from your donations, we are able to further our impact in the community and raise awareness for Chesapeake Bay conservancy efforts." She continued on, making the necessary groveling speech, which sounded purely grateful and humble coming from Helen.

"Now, we'd like to announce the winners of the silent auction and thank everyone who bid on our prizes." Another museum director replaced Helen to read the names of the winners. I stopped paying attention, since I couldn't afford to bid on any of the gift baskets and gift certificates to L'Auberge Chez Francois and thus retreated inward to my misery yet again.

Lydia had done the same, and except for an occasional glance at Nancy, her eyes barely left her lap.

"How ya doing, Lyd?"

"Not well." She sniffed.

"Was that Mack you've been talking to?"

"She's not coming home tonight. She's staying at her buddy Paul's place so she can be 'back at it first thing in the morning.'" Lydia air quoted. "She can't let a little thing like family interrupt her work."

"I'm sorry. She can be a little obtuse sometimes."

"Is that like, a local thing?" Lydia asked with attitude.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You both don't know a good thing when you see it. You're both courted, wooed, practically begged into relationships by people who obviously love you, and still, you can't trust it, can you?" Lydia's eyes flared and her nostrils breathed fire. I felt the scorching heat inside my ribs, roasting me from the inside out.

"That's not what it was like for me," I said, stunned.

"Okay, maybe I exaggerated, but if Mack's eyes followed me the way John's puppy dog love eyes follow your every move, I'd have her in the last stall in the bathroom right now."

Bill was inches from his seat when Lydia's last statement rang out over the announcer's voice. He jumped up and turned on his heel, looking for anybody to cling to.

Lydia, Nancy, and I looked at each other and burst into fits of laughter. It died away quickly but relieved some of our tension.

Lydia took a sip of my champagne.

"I'm leaving her," she said.

"No, you're not."

"I am."

"No. I'm sorry. I won't let that happen." Yes, I was crossing a major line in dismissing her feelings. I appreciated them. I empathized. I really did. But this line was like police tape around an accident. I *had* to burst through to reach my loved ones on the other side.

"It's not right," I said. "Your thought process, I mean. There is

no Prince Humperdink in this scenario.” I was still at a loss for a lesbian metaphor.

“What?”

I sighed. “Alright, look, you two are like a sandbag, for lack of a more elegant example. They get flopped over, upside down, rolled around. The sand shifts inside. Has to rebalance, find a new center. Sometimes the sand might be 50/50 on each side, sometimes it might be 60/40, even 90/10, depending on its axis and how it’s placed. But 100% of the sand is still inside, shifting around to find a new normal. It will take some time, and lots of talking, maybe, for you two to work out your what your 100% looks like again, but you’ll find a new axis. You’ll get there. You’re still baby wives yet.”

“How did you get so smart about relationships when you smothered your own before it even started?” Lydia asked.

“No fucking clue,” I lamented, taking a sip from our shared glass.

I stood and was about to tell Lydia I was fetching her another glass when I thought I heard my name, following by a roar of applause.

“Emerson Broome?” The announcer said again. I looked around the room as if that would answer the question, but for a couple horrifying moments, I was tormented by everyone’s laser eyes, nods of polite congratulations, and continued applause. I gave a little wave and plunked back down in my chair.

I leaned over to Nancy. “I don’t understand. What did I win? I can’t afford to win a fucking wine basket. I have to sell my car to pay for pizza.”

“Real grateful, Emerson.” Nancy scolded me. “Like I’d let your sell your car.”

“Someone must have written you in, Em.” Lydia grinned.

“Why don’t we have our big winner and our generous gifter start off the evening’s dancing?” Helen said over the microphone, glancing in my direction. “Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to

introduce Lieutenant Commander John ‘Iceberg’ Bergen, US Naval Aviator and Test Pilot Instructor.”

I think there was more applause, but somehow, I had entered a tunnel. Everything was black around me except a pinpoint of light and movement miles away. I heard a freight train barreling toward me from the far end, closer, louder, until it was right here. The only thing that kept me in the banquet room was the scent of the caterer’s brewing coffee.

A hand brushed my shoulder and extended out to me. I slowly turned around to see John standing there. He hadn’t publicly dissed me, at least. That’s what I was expecting. I stood, not quite feeling my legs.

“And our lovely winner of the grand prize, Ms. Emerson Broome, proprietor of Blue Heron Antiques right here on Solomons Island. Ms. Broome has won the highest bid for the Jet Fuel package, featuring a ride in a vintage P-51 Mustang piloted by the unparalleled Lieutenant Commander Bergen,” Helen continued.

Maybe if I closed my eyes, I would forget what was happening to me right now. John would disappear, the hearts on Lydia’s face would return to eyes, everyone would turn back to their coffee and cake.

But as the piano eased into the first chords of “Witchcraft,” I found myself on the center of the parquet floor with John pulling me toward him. My eyes shut tight, refusing this reality and willing myself not to feel anything for the man holding me in his arms.

“Em, look at me.”

My eyes flickered open because I was a sucker.

“It’s me. I’ve got you,” he whispered into my ear. And damn it all to hell, I believed him. My timidity melted away, and I allowed myself to be swayed by the beat of the big band.

“Are you going to introduce me?”

“To whom?” John asked. Locals weren’t the only obtuse ones.

"Your date." His jaw tightened.

"I didn't know if you'd want me to."

"I suppose that's what friends do."

"Are we friends?"

"No." I hadn't thought about it, but there was no way I could maintain my dignity and be friends with John Bergen. "She's very pretty. You look very nice together."

"Thank you," he said with zero inflection. Infuriating.

"So, your call sign...Iceberg? Fitting."

"You think so?" he asked, annoyed with me. I stepped on my dress and tripped over his shoe. He held me tighter, preventing us both from tumbling. We didn't say anything more, but he pulled me closer in minute increments until our bodies were touching. His thumb dipped into my palm and stroked once, then twice, until he breathed out and backed away.

The music swelled into the first chorus, and I glanced around at the other dancers. Gus led Helen onto the floor with an elaborate and surprisingly nimble twirl before grasping her hands protectively. Back then, Gus had done something that hurt Helen. And yet, here they were now, dancing, laughing, and finding meaning in each other's eyes once more. It was startling and wonderful.

And they were definitely not a matching set of salt and pepper shakers.

"John," I breathed, "I'm sorry I pushed you away. I don't think I realized what I was doing." I took a deep breath before plunging off the cliff.

"Forgive me," I commanded. No. That was too forceful.

"Let's start over." I tried again.

"I don't know, Em."

I waited for him to continue with a long list of whys and why nots so that I could start arguing my case. Our case. He didn't continue.

"That's all?" I asked.

"I don't know how much distrust I'm willing to handle."

"I don't distrust you."

"No? Every time I tried to tell you how much I liked you, how beautiful you are, how much your quirks and interests thrilled me, how, to me, you're perfect, you dismissed it. You couldn't believe it. I had to be lying to you because, in your eyes, I should want someone plain, unremarkable, boring. Someone I 'fit better' with. I can't spend a relationship *convincing* a woman I'm serious when I say I love her. That much at least has to be taken with a grain of trust. Otherwise, there's nothing to build on."

"Love?" Tears were welling up again, but this time, I didn't stop them.

"Just an example." He looked away.

The song ended. We parted and I brushed my cheek. I backed away and left John standing alone on the dance floor.

He wasn't alone for more than a few seconds before the crowd swallowed him whole. The dancing portion of the evening had begun, and bitchy, middle-aged women in taffeta ruffles and oversized jewelry that was supposed to look artsy and whimsical were twirling and shimmying and otherwise getting down to some shitty funk song.

God, I hated funk. It was so upbeat, so pedestrian, so much brass and major keys. How entirely, absolutely fitting that one of the lowest moments of my life was scored with "Play That Funky Music White Boy."

I grabbed Lydia on my way out the door. I didn't know where I was headed, except for away. Away from the migraine-inducing music, away from the swirling vortex of revelers, away from John and his lovely new friend, whose name was probably Emily or Chloe or something equally as gamine.

"Let's walk out to the lighthouse. It should be beautiful as the stars come up," Lydia suggested.

We linked arms and cackled like our ancient ancestors at our misfortunes. My heel snagged in the loose hem of my dress and

almost took down my poor, bird-boned friend, and that made us laugh harder. You could take the girl out of the antique store (or music classroom) but, you know the rest.

“There’s no reason we can’t turn this night into a pleasant one. It wasn’t like our hearts weren’t being ripped from our thoracic cavities and washed in bleach...”

I stopped walking midsentence, jerking Lydia back.

“Coffee,” I said.

“Can’t we get more wine?”

“No. The coffeemaker. In the office. I left it on.”

“You don’t think *you* started the fire?”

“I definitely think I triggered it.”

“Oh, Em. I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say.” She didn’t have to say anything. There was nowhere to put the information. Nothing about it mattered except for how wrong I was and how quick to blame my brother for being an arsonist.

A lithe, dark figure strode toward through the glass doors we were about to exit through. She was striking in a black pantsuit—damn, I wanted one of those—and bare, toned arms. Her eyes swept the room, landing on Lydia. A smile spread across her face, lighting up her eyes as she took in the stunning woman next to me. Her wife. Lydia bit her lip, looking at her feet.

“Surprise!” Mack reached for Lydia and clasped her elbows to pull her close for a kiss.

“I thought you had to work.” Lydia wasn’t ready to soften yet.

“Hence, the surprise. Babe. You know I wouldn’t miss this.”

I gave them their privacy and ducked out of the building. The grounds of the museum were beautifully landscaped. A stone path led around the buildings through a sea of crocuses, hyacinths, and budding peony bushes. Night had fallen. This was my favorite time over the Chesapeake. There was still enough light in the sky so the heavens were coolly illuminated, deepening from teal to peacock blue to midnight with each passing moment. The stars punched through that velvet tapestry and twinkled over the masts bobbing

in the bay. The octagonal Drum Point Lighthouse was silhouetted among the docks. The water sparkled in the moonlight.

I perched on a stone plinth, which was, I guessed, an artsy kind of bench or possibly a grave marker and nearly hypnotized myself listening to the gentle slap of the incoming tide.

For all that happened, I wasn't unhappy. I had never been unhappy with my life. That was the odd part about life changes. Periodically, one must adjust to new cycles, whether that means new clothes, a friend settling down and having babies, or suburban sprawl paving your beloved dirt roads.

I never liked change, but change happened.

I couldn't stop it, but I could withstand it.

And yep. In the case of my wardrobe, I could totally benefit from it.

I hugged my elbows as the last warmth of the sun faded. Looking over my shoulder, I could see people laughing, sipping from slim glasses, and touching in the reflections of the windows. I could do this. I could be alone.

I felt someone behind me and looked back, my reverie broken by a human presence. John didn't seem startled to find me out here. He walked closer and around the bench-grave-thing.

"Mind if I sit?" he asked, looking out at the boats.

"Not if you don't mind that I was here first." *Facepalm.*

"It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" He turned to me. I ached from wanting him. I balled my hands into fists to stop from reaching out, wrapping his arms around me, feeling his calloused palms.

"What?" I zoned out.

"I said it's a beautiful night," he repeated, like I was someone's deaf great aunt.

"Oh, yeah." I nodded. This was getting weird. I needed to leave.

"John Bergen," he said, reaching out a hand for me to...what? Shake?

"Um, okay. Emerson Broome." Our hands linked together. We shook twice and then he didn't let go. Instead, he pulled me closer.

He had never worn cologne before. It was subtle and smoky, and I wanted him on his knees in front of me.

"I noticed you earlier. I think we may have danced."

"You dance very well, John Bergen."

"But you ran away." His voice was barely above a whisper, but it tickled my ear.

"I had to." I tried to pull my hand away.

"Why?" He interlocked our fingers. My breath slipped out in a shudder of desire.

"I had to start rebuilding my life. Without you in it." Was that even true? What even were words anymore?

"But we just met." He smirked. Oh God, if he didn't drop this act soon, I was going to straddle him on this granite boulder and my knees would hate me forever. Plus, we'd be arrested.

"John," I begged, pressing my legs together.

He unlocked our fingers and held my face, his eyes close and so dark. "I'm a slow responder, Em. My ability to act quickly in an emotional situation is in direct proportion to my necessity to act quickly in the cockpit. If you hadn't run off, I would have told you this." He squinted his eyes and looked out over the boats.

"I don't want to start over." He breathed the words out with his breath. "I like us now. Obviously, I didn't communicate how much I care for you. I'm not good with the words sometimes, and I guess I'm sort of chickenshit at telling a woman I love her."

"You're the first person in the cockpit of new fighter jets that pull 8Gs. They put *you* in to make sure the factory made the damn plane perfect enough for other pilots to fly it. I don't think it's possible for you to be chickenshit about anything. And if you ever *want* to be a chickenshit, I hereby grant you this life pass at cowardice."

"Emerson?"

"Yes, John?"

"I love you." He didn't move. He didn't have that look of confidence

that I identified with him. He was stripped back and roughhewn. His eyes held a question, an offering plate of hurts he was giving me freely but not without difficulty. Only when I smiled did he crush me to his mouth, fulfilling a desperate need. His lips didn't toy with mine but devoured them, pressing and tasting and stroking my tongue with his. Somehow, I managed to pull away, though it was excruciating.

"Do you have the love gene?" I asked.

"Of course." His eyes only partially glazed over. He knew exactly what I was talking about.

"Me too," I said, pulling him back in for another bone-melting kiss.

"What a minute. Is that all?" He drew back, looking at me skeptically.

"Oh! I love you with all the mitochondria of the one true love gene." I grinned.

"That's more like it. Can I take you home now?"

"Please."

We kissed and groped our way back along the path to say our goodbyes. We were leaving early, but I'd felt all the emotions I could handle for one evening. My body had to feel the rest. Lydia and Mack were dancing, getting a few annoyingly well-intentioned good-for-yous from the crowd around them, but they handled the love with the grace of two people who had recently reaffirmed their relationship. I waved goodbye and gave a silent hurrah to Lydia, hugged Nancy tightly around her shoulders, and turned to leave.

"Wait. Aren't you forgetting something?" I asked John.

"What?"

"Your date."

"I didn't bring a date."

"Then who was that pretty blonde you were sitting with? The one you got champagne for?"

"Kate? She's the wife of my buddy Will, who was sitting on the

other side of her, or did your eyes not pan past any woman in my proximity?"

"You smug bastard. You planned this."

"Nope. Just lucky." He grinned like a teenager and pulled me in for what I thought would be a kiss but turned into a bite on the neck.

Maybe we fit better together than I thought.

CHAPTER 19

My legs straddled the bench, quads tight, ass clenched, back arched as I held a final deep breath, using the energy to assist the press. The bar went up easily for my first day back in the gym after a too-long training lapse.

“That looked easy.” John bent over to kiss the top of my sweaty head after I swung myself into a seated position. He’d finished his last set of kettlebell swings, and his shirt was soaked as well.

“It felt good.” My fingers inched up under his blue Navy t-shirt, and his look told me we’d be naked in about ten minutes. I changed into my sneakers. John had already hooked Rousby’s leash to his collar. Both my men were waiting for me by the side door of the Quonset hut, both smiling like I was giving them life. If life was a fabulous BLT sandwich on sourdough with extra mayo, I very well might. That was also on the post-gym schedule.

I didn’t know if I was more excited for the sex or the bacon, but John’s smile darkened into one of his brooding Mr. Darcy looks, and there was no mistaking my desire.

He held his hand out for me as we walked to my tiny home. My

heart ached a tiny bit at the sweetness of the gesture, at his longing. Of course my natural inclination was to overthink his motives and ruin a good thing, but I'd made the decision to trust him. It would take conscious and continual effort to squelch the nasty thoughts. Hopefully, it would become second nature one day.

We dropped hands and I picked up the pace. He breezed by me.

"Don't even try. There's no way you can beat me," John taunted.

"Only because your legs are longer. If you had a handicap, I'd win," I reasoned.

"Except there is no racing handicap." He walked even faster, his feet gliding over the boardwalk. "Besides, you don't do cardio."

"Do you want me to feed you or not?"

"What's on the menu?" He smirked.

"That depends on whether I win or lose."

"If you think I'll let you win, you're delusional." He jogged ahead of me, shocking Rousby out of his already quick walk. I took off after them, but John was totally right. He was going to win. And did I really want to make myself a sweaty mess again before we got to the apartment?

Yes. Yes I did. I sprinted forward, but John was making it hard by swerving in front of me and holding Rousby out when I tried to pass. He ran slower to tease me. His playfulness was a form of foreplay, I realized. I hadn't seen him this happy. I hadn't seen *me* this happy.

He reached the knob first, but I maintained speed until I body slammed him and we hit the door in a poorly planned attack of competition, lust, and laughter. When we finally managed to get the door open between kissing and locating my keys, I dropped my bag, kicked out of my shoes, and peeled off my soaking shirt.

His came next as we tripped our way through the kitchen and into the bedroom. It didn't go as smoothly as in my head since he was over a foot taller than me. He was gentlemanly enough to oblige me help in undressing him before dropping the rush alto-

gether. He stood Navy straight. His posture was one of his swoony-est qualities.

Slowly, he reached up, clasping my sweat-drenched hair. I laid my head back into his capable hands, groaning with the pleasure of letting go. My eyes fluttered closed and I breathed in the moment.

“Are you ready for tonight?” He looked sincere and ready to come to my rescue if needed, even if all that entailed was a heaping dose of moral support and confidence.

“I am. Everybody needs this. Not just me. I’m not great at being the center of attention, but I’ve gotten more used to it the past three months. And I’m so relieved to be re-opening.”

“You sound like there’s more to that.”

I sighed and sunk onto the bed. “Is it totally stupid of me that I wish Justin could be here?”

“I’d want my siblings with me.” He shrugged.

“Yeah.”

“I promised I wouldn’t say anything, but I think you need to know...your brother’s in a residential treatment program. He’s been there since the night of the fire. It’s geared toward vets and those who experienced combat. But they’re using a new model of addiction treatment that’s more effective for opioid abuse.”

“How did he manage that?”

“He qualified through the VA.”

“John? Did you have something to do with that?”

He nodded. “Sometimes it’s good to have connections.”

“Why didn’t he want me to know?” I wanted to be ecstatic. I wanted to champion Justin and be there for him. On the other hand, we’d been here before and treatment programs rarely worked.

“He wanted to wait until he was a month clean from everything but detox drugs before I told you. I think, sometimes, it’s easier to change when you don’t have an audience.”

“Tell me about it.”

I nodded and thought back to the shop. About what needed to be done before tonight’s grand re-opening, the narrowing window of time in which to accomplish my tasks.

This was the true test of Blue Heron. And of myself.

“If I could come back from the worst thing, re-open, and continue profiting—at least enough to earn a decent income—I might have finally reached adulthood.” I smiled.

He shook his head. “That’s good, because if you hadn’t reached adulthood, I wouldn’t be able to do this.” He pulled me backward and spun us over, holding my exhausted thighs around him. He unhooked my heavily engineered sports bra, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’ll never get used to how beautiful you are. Your breasts are too much. They’re perfect. Your nipples are fucking gorgeous. I don’t know if it’s because they’re yours or if you have the world’s most beautiful nipples.” He stared at me like I stared at impressionist art, trying to glimpse the artist’s process through the brushstrokes. His cock surged between my legs, and I inched forward against him. He groaned. I arched my back, begging him to put my perfect nipples in his hand, his mouth, anywhere he wanted.

“John,” I whispered, putting his hands on me. He looked at my eyes, breaking his hypnotic gaze at my boobs. Slowly, he raised himself up and licked. I exhaled softly. He swirled his tongue around the hard peak, sucking and nipping as he drew his thumb across the other. I cried out from the touch. It electrified my body down to its core. I pressed harder against his cock, rocking slowly until I felt a rush of wet warmth leak from me.

His hand dropped between us, grasping at the fabric of my tight shorts, shoving spandex and cotton panties aside to pinpoint the single place I most needed his hand.

“What do you need?” he asked. I couldn’t speak. I could only dive into his mouth, caressing his tongue the way I wanted my

pussy to be touched. He matched my pattern. My speed. My intensity built. It was too fast. And it was over too soon. My orgasm took me by surprise.

But he didn't stop. He dipped back down to suck a nipple into his mouth, gently rolling the hardness on his tongue. He stroked my clit with long licks of his finger until stars shot out before my eyes. They trailed down from the ceiling as my climax shook my entire body for what seemed like minutes. When the gold dust cleared, I locked eyes with John. Tears streamed down my face as I laughed with embarrassment and incredulity.

"Em?" he asked, laughing with me. "You okay?" He was obviously pleased with himself. He should be.

"Who the fuck cries during orgasm?" I sniffed. I was mortified.

"Hmmm...just you that I know of. But it's the best compliment I can think of." He kissed my nose, smiling. "I'm going to shower. Then I'm going to fuck you until you cry again."

"Can I come with you?"

"That's my plan." He dropped his shorts and underwear, and his cock sprang free. In the past, I was always a little embarrassed when I saw a man completely naked, especially naked and hard. It wasn't that they weren't attractive. It was my old-fashioned, totally uncool modesty. That and they weren't mine. They weren't John. I would turn away from the others, affording them the privacy they didn't ask for.

John made me look longer.

NANCY INSISTED on being the first one at the store for the grand re-opening event on Saturday evening. She wanted to have the lamps lit and the music on to make it special for me, not just our clients. All I had to do was bring the new coffeemaker—like I'd re-open without coffee—and the mini cinnamon scones.

Thanks to Nancy offering to become a full partner, I still had a car, so when five o'clock neared, John and I finally dressed and packed the trunk of the Chevelle with trays of baked goods and a very large Williams-Sonoma bag. I'd splurged on a top of the line drip machine for the back and a single-serve espresso maker for clients. The more expensive the machine, the safer the wiring, right? Yeah...John wasn't buying it either.

"Why don't you park in front?" he suggested when I turned the wheel to park behind the alley.

"I always park in the alley if I drive. Besides, there are going to be too many other cars, I don't want to take up the space."

"Suit yourself." He fiddled with his phone for a second before stepping out of the car with Rousby. "I'll carry in the trays if you want to take a look around, make sure everything is to your liking."

"Nance knows what she's doing," I reassured him. "She's probably gotten everything onto Instagram already." I grabbed a Saran-wrapped cookie platter out of my trunk. John was taking an unusual interest in Nancy's capabilities. He took the tray from my hands.

"Em I think you need to take a walk around front. Nancy has something special for you." He kissed my nose and carried the tray through the back door.

I walked around the old red brick building. The strength of my ankles was tested a few times on the loose chunks of pavement scattered down the alley, but my heels (Yes. *Heels.*) were surprisingly comfortable—shout out to Cole Hahn and his use of Nike Air technology.

When I turned the corner, light glowed from the windows of my store. Everything looked the same, as far as I could tell. Definitely cleaner. I'd have to put up a bulletin board in the back for community events since the store was greatly improved without all the outdated flyers curling around their tape. The glow came

from strings of twinkle lights artfully draped in the window displays and strings of light bulbs hanging outside, welcoming the community.

I nodded in approval. They deserved this. They had come together in droves to restore my home away from home—no. My *real* home. The town made this happen for me, and this was their celebration. It was simple but elegant in the twilight.

The wind shifted across the river, and I rubbed away the goose bumps on my bare arms. A face shone in the window. Nancy unlocked the door and hurried out.

“It’s too cold to be out here this long. You didn’t bring a jacket?” She was huddled against the wind in her cardigan. Her spicy “special occasion” perfume greeted me before her hug. That surprising source of comfort sent my tears over a precipice, and I now risked smearing my mascara.

“I figured the heat from all the bodies in the store...”

“Well? What do you think?” she asked, eagerly.

“Oh, Nancy. It’s perfect. Such a nice touch.”

“Nice touch? That’s it?”

“Beautiful...incandescent,” I amended.

“You haven’t seen the new sign.” She realized, pointing above the door.

“You bought a new...Oh my God! Nancy!” I squealed. John met us outside, and I happy cried in front of him for the second time that day as he wrapped his arms around me to warm me. I looked up again at the ancient and craggy-looking sign hanging from what appeared to be a single hinge on its hanger.

It bore the image of a Blue Heron, a symbol of the Chesapeake Bay, but he was no longer standing in front of a sunset. He was standing in a motherfucking graveyard. The words read:

**BLUE KERON ANTIQUES
FINE FURNITURE
&
DEAD PEOPLE'S STUFF**

We laughed, hugging and crying, and ducked inside to start the coffee.

It was the most metal beginning to the next chapter in my life.

THE END

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To Calvert County, Maryland. This book is my second set in the region and my second love letter to southern Maryland, a place where colonial history doesn't feel so ancient and yet lies in the backyard of Washington DC. Beloved home to all my favorite bends in the roads, hilltop graveyards, clusters of loblolly pines, and cliffside views of the Chesapeake, you will always be first in my heart, no matter how many Wal-Marts you sanction. (Just don't go crazy now.)

Bury me there when I die.

Thanks so much for reading my debut novel!

Please leave a review on Amazon or GoodReads! Every review has a tremendous impact for authors and we love it when you share even a few lines.

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COMING IN 2021

The 1st installment of the upcoming series, *A (Romantic) Comedy of Terrors*

Soula

Death runs in my family.

No. Literally. It's the Smyth family business. We've been ferrying poor souls across the river Styx since, well . . . probably since Charon himself.

Growing up in the back rooms of Smyth Funeral Home in Franklin, Tennessee, I played tag with my brothers in the cemetery next door and used the casket sales room as my personal study hall. It was a given that I'd carry on the trade of death once I grew up.

But I escaped. Sort of.

Don't worry. I didn't go far. Only across town and a step to the left to the Williamson County Morgue. Now, instead of plumping up the dead with salmon-colored embalming fluid, I sifted through stomach contents and dissected the brain to uncover exactly what sent them on their trips across the river.

Nauseated yet?

That's how Detective Waylon Wells felt this morning, the first time he set foot in my morgue. Now he's passed out on the couch in my office and I have to find a way to break the news that he's given himself a concussion. He's going to need supervision for the next few days and he doesn't seem like the type of man who relishes a slow-down.

I have my work cut out for me.

Waylon

Dr. Smyth is the youngest (and for my money, the prettiest) Medical Examiner in Williamson County history, only I didn't know it last night when she was between my legs and just *Soula*.

This morning we met again as our careers crossed paths, and if I wasn't concentrating on not spilling my guts from the nasty fumes of this DOA, it'd be awkward as hell.

Our eyes met over the autopsy table. Ahem. Cough. The autopsy table covered in human remains that were long past . . . recognizable . . .

I opened my mouth to speak. I remember that much. The name *Soula* was on my tongue. Unfortunately, so was the stench (and taste) of putrescine.

Something must have gotten lost because now I'm waking up with a pounding headache on a scratchy tweed, seventies- era couch. *Soula* . . . er, Dr. Smyth is handing me something steaming in a Dolly Parton mug and looking just as beautiful in her light green scrubs as she did naked in my bed last night.

Her expression is clear. She wants nothing more to do with me.

I have my work cut out for me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR







Megan Montgomery writes romance novels for weirdos— always adding an extra protein shot of humor. She and her husband, Johnathon Olavarria co-host Forced Proximity podcast, a weekly romance book and movie club. Listen to it here: <https://www.buzzsprout.com/782786>

Her debut novel, *Well . . . THAT Was Awkward* was inspired by her homesickness for southern Maryland. She now lives halfway across the US on the prairie with her husband, son, and mom.

When she's not writing, reading, lifting weights, or cooking dinners her son won't eat, you'll find her toiling in the garden or brewing potions from her medicinal herbs.

Let's be friends!

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