FIRST-TIME CALLER

AUTHOR OF LOVELIGHT FARMS

B.K. BORISON

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PAN BOOKS

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For the hopeless romantics. And the reluctant ones too.

CHAPTER 1
AIDEN

LOVE IS A LIE.

At least, that's what the sign above the door tells me. It's written in large looping letters. Little hearts dotted along the edges and a lipstick mark in the bottom left corner. It looks like a sign that should be hanging crooked in the hallway of a high school, not boldly declaring the decline of humanity during the morning rush at a coffee shop.

There are streamers too. Red and white and dangling from the hanging baskets by the window. They twist back and forth violently every time someone slips in from the street, relaxing back to their sad, wilted loops as soon as the door shuts again.

I frown at a red balloon with an *X* drawn over it in Sharpie, scratching at the scruff along my jaw as I wait for Jackson to come back to our table. A woman with a satchel the size of a small country smacks into the back of my head and I cross my arms over my chest, kicking my legs out halfway into the aisle to protect my peace. If Jackson doesn't come back soon, I might start eating the saltshaker. I demanded a croissant, two bagels, and a coffee the size of my face as soon as we sat down. Payment for pulling me out of bed at this ungodly hour.

I'm usually too tired from a late-night shift to drag myself from bed any earlier than ten. But Jackson had insisted, and then switched to threats when his insistence didn't work. I'd been too shocked at his language to come up with an appropriate excuse. In our four years of working together at the radio station, I've never heard Jackson raise his voice, let alone threaten bodily harm if I didn't agree to meet him at the tiny bookshop café two blocks from his house.

Be at Skullduggery at eight, he said. *Or I'm coming for you.*

I was so distracted by the underlying threat, I didn't bother to ask what sort of café has a name like Skullduggery. A pirate ship, maybe. Not a café.

Jackson elbows his way through the small crowd jostling for position at

the counter and slides into the seat across from mine, a tray balanced in one hand. He's wearing a gray sweater over a plaid button-up, his sleeves rolled to his forearms. He's polished and put together, not a single hair out of place. I bet he was up at five, done with his workout by six, and making some of his hipster coffee by seven. Meanwhile, I'm wearing a sweatshirt I found draped over the edge of my bed. I'm pretty sure there's pasta sauce on it.

We managed to grab a booth as soon as we got here, though the overstuffed armchairs on the second floor look appealing, surrounded by shelves stacked floor to ceiling with used books. Not only does Skullduggery celebrate the downfall of love; it apparently has a robust collection of literature and the best cruffins in the city. Whatever a cruffin is.

Jackson hands me a cup of coffee, his face eager. "Did you see the sign?"

"You can't exactly miss it." I lift my eyes back to the sign above the door and the decorations floating around it. "The headless cupids are a nice touch."

He unloads the rest of the tray. "They celebrate anti– Valentine's Day every year. I thought you'd like it."

Like feels like a strong word for the demonic cupids dangling from the ceiling. I can't stop staring at the one closest to us. It somehow maintained its head in the massacre and its eyes keep following me. "Do people like . . . whatever this is?"

"I thought it suited your mood." He raises both eyebrows and nudges his glasses up his nose with his knuckles. "You know. Your shitty mood."

When Jackson started at 101.6 LITE FM, he never would have used the word *shitty* in casual conversation. I guess our spending every night together for the past three years has made a lasting impact.

"Subtle," I grumble. I reach for a bagel, then change my mind and go for the croissant instead. "Is that why I'm here? You want to have a conversation about my attitude?"

"What else would this conversation be about?"

"I don't know." I poke at my baked good. "I thought you wanted to get breakfast. Catch up. Do things that friends do."

"It's convenient how you remember we're friends when you're trying to wiggle out of something."

"I'm not wiggling," I mutter, petulant.

"You're absolutely wiggling. And what I wanted was a cruffin, but they sold out an hour ago."

There's a heavy pause. An implication that if we had met at seven thirty like he suggested, he would happily be eating his baked good of choice. I clear my throat and tear my croissant in half. "Apologies for your lost

cruffin."

"Accepted." Jackson snatches the discarded half of my croissant. "Now let's talk about why you sound like your soul is being sucked from your body every night between the hours of six and midnight when you're supposed to be handing out advice on love. My weather reports are suffering because of you."

"Your weather reports are doing just fine," I mumble. I'm pretty sure Jackson's hourly traffic and weather update is the most popular part of our show. "And I don't know what to tell you. I'm fresh out of advice." I'm a glorified answering machine. A sentient blob that listens to people vent. After six years of hosting *Heartstrings*, Baltimore's romance hotline, I've discovered people don't want to be told how to fix their lives or be held accountable. They just want to hear themselves talk and validate their own narcissism.

They also want to complain about their husband not loading the dishwasher correctly for twenty-six minutes and thirty-two seconds.

I sigh. "You're concerned about my attitude affecting the show."

Jackson frowns. Brand-new lines bracket either side of his mouth. I've aged him by ten years with one conversation.

"Oh, we are way past that, buddy. I know it's affecting the show. This conversation is about you, Aiden. A bedrock of that friendship thing you like to allude to but very rarely bring into practice." He pauses and scratches at his jaw. "Maggie also said if everyone kept tiptoeing around you and your delicate feelings, she'd kick your ass herself."

Maggie, our boss at the station, has never been one to mince words. "The truth is revealed." I sigh.

"Aiden." Jackson leans forward, his frown dragging his whole face down. "You called someone a piece of shit in the middle of a live broadcast."

"Because that guy was a piece of shit." I dunk my croissant into my coffee. Some of it sloshes over the edge of my chipped mug to the weathered tabletop. I feel more emotionally connected to that spilled coffee than to any of the people who have called in to the radio station in the last three months. "He compared women to *cattle*, Jack."

Jackson flinches. "I know. But you've had callers like that before." I make a face and he throws up his hands in the universal gesture for *Chill the fuck out*. "I'm not saying he was right. He was a douche-canoe, obviously, but you've always been able to handle people like that, not—" Jackson leans closer, eyes darting over my shoulder to the people crowded around us. He lowers his voice. "Not launch into a very creative and descriptive diatribe about what they should do with their opinions. Maggie has been waiting for a

call from the FCC. The only reason she thinks we might get away with it is because it was after ten p.m. And I interrupted halfway through with an emergency weather update."

Interrupted is a polite way to describe how he burst into the booth, ripped the microphone from in front of me, and started talking about low-pressure systems.

I rub my hand over my jaw. "You said there were storms rolling in. There weren't any storms."

"Because I lied," he whisper-yells. "You made me lie about the *weather*, Aiden."

I try not to laugh. I know how seriously Jackson takes his job. He wanted to work for the National Weather Service but had to drop out of his college program to take on full custody of his little sisters when his mom decided to join a traveling harmonica band. He stuck around for the girls. He said they deserved one permanent thing in their life.

Jackson stares at me. "What's going on with you?"

I keep dipping my croissant into my coffee. I don't know how to stop. "I don't know."

"You've been short-tempered."

"Yes."

"Irritated."

"Yup."

"Snappy and standoffish."

"That seems like an exaggeration, but sure."

Jackson raises both eyebrows as if to say, *You called someone a piece of shit, then hurled your coffee mug across the room like you were competing in an Olympic trial*. "Is something going on with your family?" he asks carefully. "Is your mom—"

"She's good," I interrupt. "She's fine. The cancer is in full remission. Everyone is good." *Good* felt like an impossibility six months ago. *Good* feels like too small a word for the balloon of relief that floats beneath my rib cage every time I think about how close I came to losing my mom. Again. How fucking terrible it was to watch her claw her way through a disease. Again.

I dig my knuckles into my temple and try to erase the image of her small body in a hospital bed, wires hooked up to her arms and a trembling smile on her face.

Everything is fine, Aiden honey. I'm okay.

I shake my head once. The cancer is gone. The doctors are hopeful. The cancer is *gone*. I clear my throat and glance at Jackson. "My mom and dad

are doing a road-trip thing as a celebration. Up the coast. They planned it during her treatment and they're following through."

They keep sending me pictures of themselves in front of various state signs. Beaming on the beach in Delaware, wrapped in parkas. Matching threadbare baseball caps in New York. My mom clutching a bag of gummy worms to her chest in front of a half-bent sign in New Jersey, a knit beanie over the hair that's just started to regrow. Their faces lined with untethered joy.

"And you're upset you're missing out? Is that why you've been a jackass?"

I shake my head. "Nah. I'm happy for them."

"Then what is it?" Jackson asks. "What's going on with you?"

I turn my coffee mug in one full circle. I'm a mess. Just as obstinate as Jackson thinks I am. I don't know how to explain the dread I feel every time I slide into the booth at the station. The thick, heavy feeling that sinks like a stone every time I tap the blinking red button that lets me talk to listeners. It's an ache. An absence. I don't know. If my parents are the picture of joy, then I am the portrait of existential dread. I used to love talking to people. Hearing their stories and sharing mine. It made me feel connected.

But now I'm just . . . exhausted.

"I don't know," I murmur. "I've been—" *Struggling*, I think, afraid to say the word out loud. Afraid to make it real. I've been struggling and I have no idea how to fix it. If it can even be fixed. I think I've—I think it's possible I've fallen out of love with love, burned by one too many lackluster calls. Burned by the shitty circumstances my family's been handed too. It feels like every time I get my hopes up for something good, reality comes out swinging. I don't know how to be a hopeful person anymore.

It's easier not to be.

I tear off a corner of my croissant. "Maybe I should think about doing something else."

A groove appears between Jackson's eyebrows. "You don't believe that."

I shrug. "I don't know, man. Kind of." I drop my elbows to the table. "You've heard Maggie in our staff meetings. Show numbers aren't great. Sponsorship packages are way down. We get half of the callers we used to and every one of them is—"

"Challenging?" Jackson offers.

"Miserable," I say instead. We are a romance hotline with zero romance.

He leans back in his chair. "I know, but . . . Maggie has ideas. She's pitched a ton of new segments that have promise. And she launched the show as a podcast so people can listen whenever they want."

“The podcast has fourteen subscribers,” I tell him. “One of them is my mom.”

He snorts a laugh. “Three of them are my sisters.”

Heartstrings hasn’t pulled in a decent audience for months now. We’re hanging on by the skin of our teeth.

The door to the café bangs open and a brisk wind tunnels through the tables. This close to the harbor, it’s like sitting in the middle of a polar vortex. There’s a chorus of complaints from the people closest to the door, and it slams shut again, the bells jingling their protest. The cupid with the demonic eyes glares at me, swinging back and forth wildly. It’s bow and arrow points right between my eyebrows.

Poetic.

“Radio was never the long-term plan,” I say slowly. “Maybe this is the universe telling me I should move on.”

Jackson reaches across the table and snatches the rest of my croissant. I let him. “You believe in signs from the universe now? The guy who snorted when Maggie suggested he do a bit on horoscopes?”

“Well, horoscopes are ridiculous.”

Jackson rolls his eyes. “Typical Taurus.”

I ignore him. “Something needs to change.”

I think it’s me.

Someone jostles behind me for a place at the counter and their elbow sinks between my shoulder blades. I slip farther in the booth with a grunt. “Have you fulfilled your interrogation requirements for Maggie? Can I go get another croissant now?”

Jackson’s lips flatten into a line. “Sure. I’ll tell her you don’t know what’s going on, you don’t know if you’re going to stick with the show, and you don’t know if you even really like people anymore despite hosting Baltimore’s most popular late-night radio show.”

“Formerly most popular,” I grumble, tilting my half-empty coffee cup back and forth, hoping it might magically refill itself. “I think we rank behind that public broadcasting show now. The one with the cats.”

“*Primetime Pussycats*?”

“That’s the one.”

He looks confused. “It’s actually about cats?”

I give him a look. “What else would it be about, Jack?”

“*Pussycat* is a weird term,” he says defensively. “And they air late at night. Stop looking at me like that.”

I snicker into the last pull of my coffee. The *Primetime Pussycats* play

songs exclusively containing lyrics that make use of the word *cat*. The rest of their airtime is dedicated to litter comparisons and where to find the best catnip in the Baltimore area. It's oddly soothing.

I've seen their metrics. Their numbers are triple what ours are.

I sigh and collapse back in my seat, narrowly avoiding a handbag across the back of my head. It hasn't gotten any less crowded in this tiny shop since we arrived, more people packing in at the counter to escape the heavy clouds rolling in over the water. The loft space at the top of the stairs is crowded too, people settling for spots on the floor, books open in their laps.

"Consider your responsibilities fulfilled," I mutter, watching the sky turn gunmetal outside. February is a dreary month in Baltimore, and I don't think the headless dangling cupids are doing anyone any favors. "I have been properly chastised. Et cetera, et cetera."

"That wasn't the purpose of this conversation."

I know it wasn't, but I feel a lick of embarrassment as if it was. I didn't realize anyone else had noticed my deteriorating enthusiasm, though hurling a coffee mug across the booth in violent frustration isn't exactly subtle.

"I know," I say. Jackson is a friend, and he probably volunteered to check on me because he cares. The *friendship thing*, as he so aptly put it. "I'll try to be better. You're right. Maybe the podcast will do something for us. I'll brainstorm. See if I can come up with any new concepts."

"Maybe try meditation too," he suggests. "I have an app you can try."

He opens his mouth to say something else, but I'm saved from the details of his meditation routine by the sudden and jarring sound of a foghorn. Half the people in the café cringe; the other half cheer. Our table is an even split down the middle.

"What the hell is that?" I yell over the booming sound, my hands clapped over my ears.

"If they have to call someone's name for pickup more than twice, they break out the horn." Jackson continues stirring his tea like nothing out of the ordinary is happening. Like the obnoxious horn thing is a daily occurrence. Maybe it is. "Now that it's quiet, I'm sure the barista will yell the name again."

A blond head appears on the other side of the counter. Her face is twisted in fond exasperation, an extra-large iced coffee in her right hand. She lifts it above her head, narrowly missing a balding man with his nose buried in a paperback.

"Brooks Robinson," she bellows, her voice almost as loud as the foghorn. "I've got a café au lait for Brooks Robinson."

The crowd parts, shuffles, moves. The people hidden in the stacks in the loft peer over the edge. There's a murmur of interest. Brooks Robinson is an important name in Baltimore.

"Do you really think it's him?" Jackson asks. He twists in the booth to get a better look.

"I doubt the greatest third baseman of all time is getting a café au lait on a Tuesday morning at a bookstore that celebrates anti– Valentine's Day."

Jackson shrugs. "You never know."

I fold my arms over my chest. "If it is, let's ask him if he wants to be on Baltimore's formerly most popular late-night radio show."

Jackson turns back to me with a smile. "That's the spirit. With a little positive thinking, we can turn this ship around."

I don't respond. As far as I'm concerned, this ship is already at the bottom of the ocean.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Do you ever wonder what the point of it all is?

CALLER: . . . What?

AIDEN VALENTINE: What's the point of all this? What are we doing? Are we just bumbling around? Hoping for the best?

[pause]

CALLER: I asked if I should bring my girlfriend flowers more often.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Flowers die. Everything dies.

CALLER: I thought this was a romance hotline.

CHAPTER 2
LUCIE

There's something in the hallway.

I keep hearing a scratch or a whisper or . . . something like clothes tumbling in the dryer with the handful of pennies Maya always inexplicably leaves in her pockets. A low scratch and then a dull thud.

I don't know what the hell it is.

I let my book drop to my chest and sit up in bed. Every time I think I've imagined it, I hear it again. But Maya's room is dark and the only other thing on that side of the hallway is the linen closet I've never been able to open more than two inches. We store hand towels in there. Boxes of tissues that we're never able to retrieve. Other small objects that we can wedge through the tiny crack.

Oh god. Is our linen closet haunted? Is there a malevolent spirit who is pissed about my inability to fold a fitted sheet? If this house is haunted, I'll burn the whole place to the ground. Maya and I will move into the coffee shop across the street. Our clothes will smell like everything bagels and too-strong coffee, but we'll be spirit-free.

I slip from the bed and grab my empty tea mug, brandishing it like a weapon. I have no idea what I'll do with it if I'm faced with the vague outline of a Victorian woman floating down my hallway, but it makes me feel in control of the situation. Slightly.

I lean out of my doorway, glancing down the stairs to the front door to make sure that it's still dead-bolted. Golden light from the streetlamp out front filters in through the stained-glass windows on either side of the door, illuminating our small foyer in a kaleidoscope of muted color.

Everything is exactly where it should be. Our shoes are stacked neatly in a line beneath a row of hooks on the wall. My work bag is next to Maya's backpack.

Nothing malevolent and ghostly down there.

I hear the sound again, closer than our maybe-haunted linen closet. I turn

my head sharply toward Maya's room. There's something shoved in the crack between the floor and the door. Navy blue, like the comforter Maya has on her bed. Another sound trips through the wood. Laughter this time. It specifically sounds like the laughter of my twelve-year-old daughter. My twelve-year-old daughter, who should be asleep in her bed with her comforter and not talking or laughing with anyone.

I tiptoe closer to her room and press my ear to her door. We painted it pale pink with sparkly stars when she was eight, but she decided she hated it when she turned eleven. I tried to peel off the stars, but the stubborn ones still cling to the very top edge where neither of us could reach, their faded tips curling up.

"I don't know," I hear Maya say through the door, her voice hushed. "I'm not sure my mom would be happy with that." There's a long pause. "Yeah, I mean. You're right. She's not here now. And we've come this far."

Who is *we*? They've come this far doing *what*? My stomach drops to my toes and panic grabs me by the throat. I'm suddenly faced with every preteen horror story I've ever read on the internet. I reach for the door, reduced to a series of fear-inspired chemical reactions. A Mento dropped into a bottle of soda, something terrifying fizzing up. I fling open the door, floating somewhere above my body in a cloud of anxiety. My mug somehow ends up across the room in the soft, squishy chair Maya likes to read in. I'm pretty sure my heart is with it.

Maya screams at the top of her lungs at my sudden appearance, the blanket she's huddled beneath twisting around her lanky body. She tries to hide her phone beneath it, but I rip the blanket off her and fling it in the same direction as my mug. I am officially more terrifying than the ghost in the linen closet.

"Who are you talking to?" I yell, anxiety clawing at my throat, the sharp edge of fear beneath. I'm channeling approximately zero percent of those gentle parenting books I compulsively checked out of the library when she turned six, but I can't be bothered.

My daughter is whispering on her cell phone in the middle of the night and she's *hiding* it. This is how every *Dateline* episode starts.

Maya hides nothing. Every thought that enters that cute little head of hers, she tells me about. Even when I desperately don't want her to. The only time she has ever lied to me was when she was in the third grade and all her lunch money kept mysteriously disappearing. Apparently, she was buying her entire class soft pretzels. Every day. She called it pretzel party. I told her she had to stop and she wept quietly about it at dinner for close to two weeks.

She's a good kid. A softhearted kid. She does her homework. Helps out around the house. She puts up with my sometimes odd hours and she doesn't have hushed, secretive conversations with strangers in the middle of the night.

I reach for her phone and she tilts it out of reach again, cradling it close to her chest. Moss green eyes—a perfect match for mine—widen in fear.

"No," she whispers. "You can't."

I hear the low tones of a voice on the other end of the phone, lilting up at the end like they've just asked a question. It's someone with a deep voice. A man voice.

A man voice that is talking to my underage child on her cell phone in the middle of the night.

"Maya." I try to breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. "Give me your phone."

Her fingers tighten around the case. "It's not what you think," she whispers.

"You have no idea what I'm thinking right now."

"Yes, I do. You have your *Dateline* face on. You're probably thinking that you should have kept a closer eye on my internet use, but I'm telling you it's not what you think." She brings the phone slowly to her ear without breaking eye contact with me. I feel like we're at the climax of one of those wildly violent movies my dad always had on when I was a kid. The villain has a cute, fluffy dog dangling off the edge of a skyscraper. I don't know if I'm the villain or the dog.

"Give me one second," Maya says to the man voice on the other end of the phone.

My eye twitches. I'm the villain. I am *definitely* the villain and this is my origin story.

"You have no seconds. Give me your phone," I say as calmly as I can manage, which is not calm enough given the flinch Maya darts in my direction. She nods, then shakes her head, then nods again.

"Okay," she mumbles to herself, still nodding. "Moving along a little faster than I'd like, but I can work with this."

"Work with what?" I bark.

"This phone call," Maya says, holding up her phone and shaking it around. The duration of the call is around ten minutes and my heart cartwheels into another panic spiral. She's been talking to someone for *ten minutes* while I've been lying in my bed debating the plausibility of laundry ghosts. "It's for you."

“What?”

“This phone call. It’s for you,” she repeats calmly.

I talk to exactly four people, and one of them is in this room. “Great. Then give me the phone.”

“I just—” She presses her lips together. “Give it a chance, okay? Have an open mind.”

My mind will be plenty open when my head explodes in the middle of this bedroom.

“Give me the phone.”

“Okay.” She shuffles to the edge of her bed and hands it to me. Like a bomb disposal specialist. “Cool. Thanks, Mom. You’re the best.”

“Don’t suck up,” I say through clenched teeth. She gives me a shaky thumbs-up.

I bring the phone to my ear. I’m breathing like a dragon. Or a serial killer. A dragon serial killer. I keep taking deep, panting breaths to try to regulate my heartbeat, but I don’t think it’s working.

“Who—” I lick my dry lips and try to clear the rasp out of my voice. I want to sound powerful. I want to sound terrifying. “Who the hell is this?”

There’s a pause on the other end of the line. I hear a muffled sound. A cough, maybe. Or a laugh.

All my fear crumples into a tiny ball until I am rage personified.

“Did I say something funny?”

“I’m sure you’ll understand my amusement in a second,” the stranger on the other end of the line says. He doesn’t sound surprised enough that the girl he was talking to is suddenly a fire-breathing woman. “Hello. My name is Aiden.”

“Okay, Aiden.” I look at my daughter sitting with her legs tucked beneath her at the very edge of the bed, a blanket with mermaids printed all over it wrapped around her shoulders. I blink and she’s four years old, hair in uneven pigtails and bare feet dangling above the floor. I blink again and she’s a preteen, staring at me with watchful eyes. “Why are you talking to my kid at ten forty-two at night?”

Another pause. “Would you believe that she called me?”

“I don’t care if she called you.” Some of my control slips. “I don’t care if she is secretly Jack Reacher and this is a hostage situation. She is twelve years old.”

Maya claps her hands over her eyes and falls back onto the bed with a huff.

“I don’t like what you’re insinuating,” he says.

“Well, I don’t like what you’re doing.”

“Now, hold on a second. If I could just explain—”

“Do you make a habit of having late-night phone calls with underage girls?”

“I don’t make a habit of *anything* with underage girls,” he sputters.

I am deeply pleased by the break in his voice. Aiden is no longer amused. *Good.*

“I’m not—” He huffs, puffs, and makes a bunch of other frustrated sounds. “I think we should start over.”

“No, thank you. I’ve indulged in enough of this conversation. I’m hanging up now.”

“Wait a second.”

“For what?”

“For an explanation.”

“I’m sure you have an excellent one, but I’m not interested.”

He makes another rumbling sound on the other end of the line. “Ask Maya, then.”

“What?”

“Since you’re unlikely to believe anything I tell you, ask Maya why she’s on the phone with me at ten forty-two at night.”

His voice is low. Rough. Like the storms that come in quick over the harbor and sit there, thunder rumbling, one rolling into another until the sky vibrates in your bones. Or maybe that’s my rage. I don’t know. I narrow my eyes and tilt the phone away from my mouth, covering the microphone with the palm of my hand.

“Did you join a cult?” I ask Maya. He sounds like he’s part of a cult. Or at the very least in charge of a multilevel marketing scheme.

She shakes her head silently.

“Is this a cry for help?”

A smile twitches against her lips and she has the good sense to beat it into submission. “Not for me,” she mumbles.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She means it’s for you,” Aiden interrupts. That voice might work on whatever unsuspecting, innocent soul he’s trying to lure into his essential oil empire, but it’s not going to work on me. “It is a cry for help, but it’s for you. That’s why she called.”

“Help with what?” I snap, annoyed that he apparently heard that.

I am two seconds from hanging up this phone and dropping it down the garbage disposal in the kitchen. My patience is gone. Evaporated. Dust.

Shoved in the tiny linen closet with the hand towels and the matchbox cars Maya tossed in there when she was six years old, never to be seen again.

"I host a radio show," Aiden says calmly. "Maya called in to ask for dating advice."

My hand clenches around the phone. "Dating advice? She's twelve."

"She didn't call for herself. She called for you." He makes a small huff of amusement. "My name is Aiden Valentine and you're live with *Heartstrings*, Baltimore's romance hotline."

AIDEN VALENTINE: Welcome to *Heartstrings*. You're live on the air.

CALLER: Really? Like right now?

AIDEN VALENTINE: Yup. Right this moment.

CALLER: Awesome.

AIDEN VALENTINE: You sound . . . young.

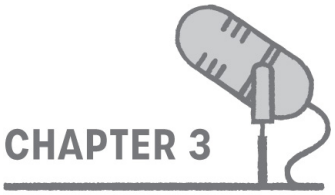
CALLER: Not that young.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Younger than our usual caller.

CALLER: Pretty sure your usual caller is a lady named Charlene who thinks you're a Chinese restaurant.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Fair point. What's your name?

CALLER: Maya, but I'm not calling about me. I'm calling about my mom.



CHAPTER 3
AIDEN

Silence fills the airwaves.

It's a fair reaction. I'm sure Maya's mom didn't expect to walk in on her daughter having a conversation past her bedtime with the host of a public radio show. I don't know if Maya thought she wouldn't get caught or what the plan was, but it's clear her mom was not involved in the decision-making.

I watch the seconds tick by on the large clock we keep above the door.

Twelve seconds of completely dead air and it might be the most compelling programming we've had all year. I glance at the red light on the phone system to make sure the call hasn't dropped. I told Jackson earlier this week I'd make more of an effort to enjoy the show, and this is me . . . making an effort.

Though I'm certainly not forcing my enthusiasm or interest tonight. The first thing Maya said when I took her call was, "Look. My mom might kill me, but it is what it is." What it is, apparently, is a lot of dialogue about her mother's lackluster love life, accusations about a cult, and—I look at the clock—a full minute of silence.

I haven't had this much fun in the booth in months.

The other calls tonight have been our usual dismal fare. One woman called to complain that her husband doesn't appreciate her potato casserole and another caller listed out the inaccuracies he found in a historical romance he picked up by accident at a library sale. One was a misdial for a cab company.

It's been bleak.

I'm content to give Maya's mom as much time as she needs. We certainly don't have anything better to do.

"Lucie? You there?"

There's a muffled sound on the other end of the line like she's pressed her hand up against the phone. "You told him my name?" drifts through my headphones.

Maya told me a lot of things. Her mom's name. The preferred brand of wine her mom drinks when she sits alone on the couch, binge-watching *Deadliest Catch*. The way she cries if some of the crabs get stuck in the pot.

I know a lot about Lucie.

"Yeah," I answer. "She also told me you haven't seriously dated anyone for the entirety of her life. What do you have against dating, Lucie?"

She makes a pained sound somewhere on the other end of the line. "This is a live conversation?"

I nod. "Mm-hmm."

"Right now?"

"That's what this little blinking red light tells me."

"Oh, good." Lucie sounds winded. "I was worried this would be embarrassing."

I grin at my control board. "What do you have to be embarrassed about?"

"You're right. What could possibly be embarrassing about my daughter calling in to a radio station to discuss my love life?"

"Lack of a love life," Maya amends.

There's a pause, a muffled thud of a pillow being tossed across the room, and then bright, bubbling laughter.

A pang of homesickness tugs right under my ribs. I think of my mom with that bag of gummy worms clutched against her chest. The same kind she put in my lunch every day when I was a kid, a handwritten note scribbled on the outside of a brown paper bag.

"Your daughter loves you very much," I try, aware that there's probably a silent but intense conversation happening on the other end of the phone. I want to keep Lucie on the line. I want something different. I'm tired of complaints about casserole. For the first time in a long time, I want to see what happens next.

"And is this what love looks like, Mr. Expert? My daughter covertly calling in to a radio hotline and exposing my secrets?" Lucie asks, a laugh in her voice. Her voice is smooth. Honey in a mug of hot tea. The window cracked open halfway, fresh air rolling in. "Because this feels a lot like public humiliation."

"How about we call it seventy percent love and twenty percent teenage rebellion?"

Lucie laughs and my hand twitches around my coffee mug. "And the other ten percent?"

"Concern," I answer. "Maya told me she's worried you might be lonely. She was hoping I could help."

Lucie goes quiet again. It's heavier this time.

"You think I'm lonely?" she asks, her voice soft at the edges. There's a rustle of fabric, a whispered "Yeah, Mom," and Lucie blows out a breath.

The silence holds.

"How about this?" I glance up at the clock above the door. "We roll to a commercial break and you use the time to decide if you'd like to stay on and talk with me. I'll answer any questions you have and we'll go from there, yeah?"

She hesitates for a beat. "On a scale from one to ten, how embarrassing is this going to be?"

"It depends. Where are you currently?"

"A seven, maybe? Hovering closer to an eight?"

"Inconclusive. You'll have to keep talking to me to find out." I push backward in my chair, swiveling in my seat to mess with the programming software I'm still terrible with, despite having had this job for the better part of six years. "All right, Baltimore. Stick with me. We'll be right back after these messages from our sponsors."

"We will *possibly* be back after these messages from his sponsors," Lucie tacks on, sounding grumpy but resigned.

"One of us will absolutely be back after these messages from our sponsors." I tap a few buttons and roll to the prerecorded ad spots. "Hi," I say, my headphones still connected with Lucie and Maya while an ad for a tree farm spins in the background. "Apologies for the ambush."

"You sound real apologetic," Lucie mutters. A sigh passes from one ear to the other, amplified by my headset. Fortitude and endurance in stereo. "I'm not sure you should be the one apologizing."

"All the same." I smack around blindly behind me, looking for the coffeepot. I find it and top off my mug, sipping noisily at it while I can. "What do you think?"

"About what? Spilling my secrets to a stranger while other strangers listen? It's not looking good, Aiden Valentine."

"What secrets?" Maya quips in the background. There's another thump, lighter this time, and a tired puff of laughter. "Seriously, Mom. It's not a big deal."

"'Not a big deal,' she says, the girl who called in to a radio station to air my dirty laundry."

"Again, I say, *what dirty laundry*?"

"If it makes you feel better," I cut in, "we only have about twelve listeners." I lean back in my chair until the back groans. Everything in this

studio is duct-taped together, holding on for dear life. “One of them is probably my mom.”

“I’m not sure that makes it any better.” Lucie exhales heavily. I wait as she considers her options. “What are your qualifications? Are you a psychologist or something?”

“No.”

“A psychiatrist?”

“Nope.”

“I can never remember the difference between those two,” she muses.

“I think it has something to do with prescribing medication.”

“Interesting.” She could not sound less interested. “So, what are you, then? A shaman? A love guru? Do you read people’s palms?”

This woman. “No. I do not read people’s palms over the radio. I am also not a cult leader.”

“You heard that, huh?”

“It’s incredible what you can hear when someone says something into a speaker.”

Fabric shifts in the background, the rasp of blankets and pillows moving around. I take another sip from my mug and wait.

“So if you’re not any of those things . . . how are you supposed to give me advice?”

I grin. “Oh, now she *wants* the advice.”

“I’m just saying. Hypothetically. If I agreed.”

“It’s pretty simple. You talk and I listen.”

“And you fix it?” She makes a vaguely dismissive sound. “Just like that?”

“There’s nothing to fix, Lucie.” The smile slips from my face until I’m staring down at the chip in the top lip of my coffee mug. I drag my thumb over it. “You’re not a toaster. Or faulty wiring. And I’m not a guru or a psychic or a . . . professional . . . in any sense of the word. I’m just a person. A person who likes talking to other people. Who, occasionally, has mediocre advice to give. You’re safe with me, and with the people listening. I promise. If the conversation ever goes somewhere you don’t want it to, just say the word. We’ll call it a night and you can ban television in your household for the foreseeable future.”

Maya offers a grunt of protest in the background. Lucie snickers.

“But I’m not . . . I’m not trying to fix anything for you, Lucie. I’m just going to listen, yeah? We’ll talk and see what happens.”

“See what happens,” she repeats.

I eyeball the clock. “Yup. We’ll see what happens. But you’ve got about a

minute to make up your mind."

"Please, Mom," Maya whispers in the background. "I think it'll help."

Lucie hums, considering her options. "I guess I could always just hang up the phone."

"You absolutely can," I tell her, though I hope she doesn't. There's a couple of hours left in my shift and I don't want to spend it trying to flick coffee stirrers into the trash can across the room. The booth gets too quiet when it's just me, and the quiet gives me too much room to think.

"Promise you're not a cult leader?" she asks.

"Not at the moment, though I suppose that's a direction I can explore if the radio thing doesn't work out." A mattress ad plays its final jarring notes, something about "comfort cascading to dreams," whatever that means. "It's your choice, Lucie. However you want this to go. But we're about to be back on the air."

"With twelve listeners."

"Likely closer to nine, given the late hour."

"That's a relief."

I grin into the microphone and hit the appropriate buttons. "You ready?"

She sighs. "As ready as I can be, I guess."

Maya gives a whoop in the background and I drag the volume control up, the button jumping like it always does.

"Hey, Baltimore, welcome back. We're on the line with Maya and Lucie. Maya has called in for her mom, hoping for some relationship advice." On the other side of the glass window to the booth, Jackson walks by on his way to the small closet he calls an office. I'm not convinced he needs to be here this late for weather updates, but he likes his routine and I occasionally like the company. I lift a hand in greeting and he waves back, stopping and doing a double take when he gets a look at my face.

"I wouldn't say she called in *for* me," Lucie says, dragging my attention back. Her voice is the oddest combination of smoke and sweet. Like the bite of a good whiskey. "She called *in spite of* me."

I laugh and Jackson goes bug-eyed on the other side of the glass. He presses his face up against it, nose squished to the window, hands cupped around his eyes to get a better look.

What? I mouth, as Maya and Lucie go back and forth about the true reason for the call.

Jackson forces a grin on his face and gestures to it. He looks like a demented clown. The mechanical ones outside the flea market on Broadway, defunct and broken-down, smiles stretched forever wide in chipped red paint.

It's terrifying.

Stop it, I mouth.

He backs slowly away from the window and keeps walking down the hallway, looking over his shoulder every few steps. He runs into the soda machine, corrects himself, then disappears with one last bewildered look.

I frown and adjust my headphones.

"My mom hasn't had a boyfriend in a literal decade," Maya says, voice rushed. It's like she doesn't know how much her mom is going to let her get away with, and she's trying to get it out all at once. "She goes to work and comes home. Sometimes she goes across the street to drink wine with Patty. That's her friend. Patty. Her *only* friend. She never goes *out* out, you know? She's always here."

"Apologies," Lucie says, "for always being in my house. The one I own."

"Mom."

"What?" She laughs. "I thought you liked me here."

"I do," Maya says defensively. "I do like you here. But sometimes I feel bad when I go out with my friends and you're alone."

The laugh disappears from Lucie's voice. "I like my alone time," Lucie says quietly. "You know that."

"Sure, but not, like, *all* of the time."

I drag my palm along my jaw, fingers reaching toward the back of my neck. "And you think a boyfriend would solve that for your mom?"

"I don't know," Maya says. "I think it might make her happy."

"Would it?" I ask Lucie. "Make you happy?"

"Absolutely not," she says without a single ounce of hesitation.

A laugh bursts out of me. "Such passion."

"Let me ask you a question, Mr. Valentine."

"Aiden, please," I murmur. I make sure to drop my voice low, the way I used to when I was in college and trying to do a *radio voice*.

She makes an amused sound. Something between a laugh and a cough. "All right, *Aiden*. Are you single?"

I stare at the wall of the booth, surprised. Lucie keeps pivoting left when I expect her to go right, and I'm jogging somewhere behind her, struggling to catch up. "I am."

"And do you date?"

"Occasionally."

"How do you find it?"

The last date I went on was probably four months ago and ended in a brief but satisfying roll in her sheets. I stopped on my way home from her place

and got a cannoli from the little Italian bakery. I haven't talked to her since.

I find dating, overall, to be a massive waste of time. But this show isn't about me.

"I'm more interested in your thoughts about dating," I deflect.

"Well, I think it sucks."

I laugh and scrub my hand over my head, jostling my headphones. Static bursts in my left ear and I adjust them, pushing the band farther back. "Why does it suck?"

"I hate it. It's like everyone is doing some dance that I never learned the steps to. I'm clueless, and I'm not using that as an excuse. I am genuinely clueless. I don't understand all of the . . . stuff you have to sift through before you can be yourself." She sighs. "It feels like that dream. You know? The one where you're walking down the hallway in only your underwear."

"I don't think that's how dating is supposed to feel."

"Is that your expert opinion?"

"Yeah." I laugh. "Yeah, it is."

"I tried a dating app for two weeks," Lucie confesses. "It was the most embarrassing two weeks of my life."

"For you? Or for your prospective—"

"Victims?" she questions.

"I was going to say 'dates,' but whatever makes you comfortable."

Another thoughtful sound slips out of her as she takes her time to answer. "How do you package yourself to be appealing?" she asks quietly. "That should have been my first sign, I guess. I had so much trouble with the questions, setting up my profile. My friend had to help me with it."

"Patty?"

"Yeah." Lucie laughs. "My one friend, apparently."

"Maybe you don't see yourself clearly."

"Maybe none of us see each other clearly. Not anymore. The whole time I was on that app, I felt like a cartoon version of myself. It felt like—it felt like gamifying my heart, and I didn't like it at all. I'm so glad so many people have found partners that way, but I couldn't ever figure out if I was doing it right. It wasn't for me, and I wish so badly it was. It made me feel like . . . like maybe I wasn't the right type of person."

"For dating?"

Her laugh is sharp this time. Not really a laugh at all. "For any of it. Love, maybe. I don't know."

My lips flatten into a line. "Did you ever go on any dates?"

"Mm-hmm," she hums. "I did. Two, I think. And when I decided the app

wasn't working for me, I tried something else. A friend of a friend who knew a guy set me up. All of them—the dates, that is—they were perfectly fine. Decent. But I don't know. It never felt like something I wanted to keep trying."

"No sparks." I hazard a guess. "It wasn't making a difference for you."

"It made me feel small. Less connected. Like . . . like all of us in this big, bustling world are just bouncing off one another and I don't have anyone who wants to grab on. I didn't feel like myself and I didn't feel like anyone else was being themselves either." She releases a breath, low and trembling. I can feel her snap back to awareness on the other end of the line. "I don't know. None of that makes any sense. I'm rambling."

"No," I say, staring hard at the coffee ring I've left on the desk. She's being honest. More honest than anyone who has ever called in to this show. "No, that makes sense."

How often have I felt like I'm just drifting from one thing to the next? How hard has it been for me to muster enthusiasm for . . . anything? I've been caught in a fog and I can't tug myself out of it.

I've been feeling small. Less connected. I know exactly how she feels.

"So I stopped trying to date. I have so much love in my life, I'm not sure I need any more. I don't want—I don't want to settle for something just to say I have it. That's what I've been telling myself anyway, and here we are." Her laugh is self-deprecating. "I've reached a new level of pathetic. My kid has called in to a radio station because she's worried about me sitting home alone on the couch."

"I don't think that's what she's worried about." I stretch out my legs beneath the desk. "Did she disappear? She's quiet over there."

"She's asleep," Lucie says gently. I sit in my creaky, broken chair and listen to the sounds in between. The ones that scratch out pictures in front of me. Socked feet against a comforter. A car rumbling by. Wind at the windows and a creak of a floorboard.

For a second, I can hear the shape of her smile. A half moon in the dark.

"Do you think you'll try dating again? Now that you know Maya wants you to?"

"I don't know," Lucie says. "It's not up to Maya. Even if she means well, I don't know if I want to crack open that part of myself."

"What do you want?" I ask. "In a perfect world, would you stay on your couch? Watching *Deadliest Catch*?"

"Probably," she says, a smile in her voice. "But maybe . . . maybe there would be someone with me." She pauses and I hold my breath. "Maybe I am

lonely."

It's not the words she says, but how she says them. Quiet. Embarrassed. Like somehow it's her fault she hasn't found what she's looking for yet.

I hum. "I think we're all a little lonely."

"Are you?" she asks right away. "Lonely?"

I tilt my head to the side and twist back and forth in my chair. After Jackson left me at the shop the other morning, I sat at that table for another hour, watching people come and go. I had nowhere else to be and it was nice to be surrounded by chatter and warmth. The bellowing from the barista behind the counter and the smell of coffee and books.

"Yeah," I rasp, staring hard at my cup of coffee. I dig a knuckle into my cheek. "Yeah, I guess sometimes I do get lonely."

My heartbeat thuds in my ears, a little too fast. I scratch roughly at the back of my head and clear my throat. I need to drag this conversation somewhere else. Somewhere that doesn't feel like pressing the tender part of a bruise.

"What would make you want to try again? Dating."

She makes a short huffing sound on the other end of the line. "I don't really want to try."

My smile tumbles headfirst into a rough laugh. I swear, it feels like I've forgotten how to do it. "That's all right," I tell her, still grinning like an idiot alone in the booth. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

"No, that's not what I mean. I don't want to *try*. All I do is try. All day long, I'm trying and I'm so tired. Why can't this be the one thing I don't have to try at? Why can't it be a thing that just . . . happens? I don't want—I don't want to think about what I should say or how I should act or . . . or have talking points in the notes app of my phone for a dinner date at a restaurant that I don't really like. I want to feel something when I connect with someone. I want sparks. The good kind, you know? I want to laugh and mean it. I want goose bumps. I want to wonder what my date is thinking about and hope it might be me. I want . . . I want the magic."

"Magic?" I try to find the part of myself that isn't so damn rattled by every word coming out of this woman's mouth. "You're one of those, huh?"

"One of what?"

"A romantic," I say. "Sparks. Soulmates. Happily ever after. A shiny gold thread tied between two hearts."

She scoffs. "You host a show about romance and you're telling me you're not a romantic?"

"I don't know," I tell her honestly. I think I used to be, but that part of me

feels fractured. Wobbly. Broken down by a thousand and one callers who have fallen out of love. Who never had it in the first place. Love and romance seem like a fairy tale now, something we tell kids to help them sleep better at night. Something we tell ourselves too.

"Well, whatever you are, don't laugh at me about what I am," she grumbles.

I straighten in my seat. "I'm not laughing," I tell her. "I promise. I wouldn't."

She exhales and I relax. I let my gaze drift to the small window at the top of the booth, the one that looks out over Baltimore. Buildings tower like sleeping giants in the dark. Tiny pinpricks of light dance in the harbor. The Natty Boh Tower winks to life on the other end of the city, a warm red glow over the rooftops.

And somewhere out there, Lucie is sitting on her kid's bed. Talking to me.

"It's all right if you think I'm being ridiculous. That's not exactly a new sentiment," she says, voice tired. "When the whole world tells you you're silly for wanting the things you want, you start to believe them. You start to think you're not worth it. That if the things you're waiting for do exist, they're not for someone like you." She sighs, a small, hopeless sound that twists through my headphones. "But what's wrong with being a romantic? I can be a confident, independent woman and still want someone to hold my hand. To ask about my day. It's a good thing to want passion and excitement and care. Attention and affection. I don't want to settle for anything less than that. And I think I've just figured out—I think that's why I've been sitting on my couch. That's why I'm home all the time. Because I'm tired. I'm tired of trying so hard at something that comes so easily for everyone else. I stopped dating because it wasn't working for me and I think I hoped that another option might materialize. Nothing in my life has ever panned out the way I planned for it. And that's okay. But I don't want a relationship to be something I cross off my checklist, or something I do because I feel like I have to. I don't want to be with someone if they're not giving me something I don't already have. I don't want to waste my time on things that don't feel like everything I've always wanted for myself."

"You want a guarantee."

"No," she says quietly. "I want goose bumps. I want to be wanted. All this time and I—I haven't given up. I guess I'm just waiting for it to find me."

I swallow, curl my hand around my mug, and squeeze. "Maybe you should have my job," I finally manage around a throat that feels too tight.

Lucie laughs, bold and bright. I want to yank out the headphone jack and

fill the studio with it.

“Maybe I should,” she says.

I don’t want to let her go yet. I want to hold on to this feeling for a little longer. But then she makes a muffled sound that could be a yawn, and I glance at the clock, surprised when I see how much time has passed. I haven’t played a single song in an hour. None of the commercials either.

“I hope you find what you’re looking for, Lucie. I really do.”

“Yeah.” She sighs. Blankets shift and I imagine somewhere in this sprawling city, Lucie is smiling. For one night, at least, the both of us a little bit less lonely. “I do too.”

LUCIE STONE: Did you flip to commercial again?

AIDEN VALENTINE: Yeah. Last run of the night. Thanks for staying on with me.

LUCIE STONE: Yeah, ah. No problem. Hopefully I didn't say anything too embarrassing.

AIDEN VALENTINE: I don't think you did.

[pause]

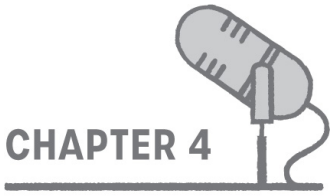
LUCIE STONE: Okay, well. I should be going.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Yeah, yeah. Of course.

LUCIE STONE: Good night, Aiden Valentine.

[dial tone]

AIDEN VALENTINE: Good night, Lucie.



CHAPTER 4
LUCIE

"How long are you going to do this?" I ask carefully, my chin in my hand.

Maya adds a half-bent box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch to her cereal wall, sectioning herself off from me on the other side of the table. The only part of her I can see is the top of her messy bun, an errant curl sticking straight up like a unicorn horn.

"As long as I need to," she explains. A box of Frosted Flakes is stacked on top of the Cinnamon Toast Crunch. It wobbles precariously, but one thin arm reaches out for the napkin holder, and everything stabilizes. I frown. I didn't even know we had this much cereal.

"And why do you feel the need to make a cereal fort every morning?"

"Because you haven't said anything about the radio situation." One pale green eye peeks out from behind the Frosted Mini-Wheats. "And you're scaring me."

"Is that what we're calling it? The radio situation?"

Maya nods wordlessly. It's been a week since our late-night chitchat with Aiden Valentine of *Heartstrings*. After I hung up, I tucked Maya in her bed with her mermaid blanket, flicked on the glowing twinkle lights twisted around her bookshelf, went down to the kitchen, and cried into a half-empty bottle of sauvignon blanc. I took two fortifying gulps, dragged my knuckles across my mouth, and then put it back next to a jar of pasta sauce.

I'm not mad Maya called in to a radio station and exposed my dismal love life to the greater Baltimore area. I'm *embarrassed*. Humiliated. Slightly devastated. I told Aiden way more than I meant to and now I'm having trouble tucking everything back in the place it belongs. I've been walking around all week feeling like the whole city knows my business.

Am I that pathetic? Did Maya truly think my best hope was . . . Aiden Valentine of *Heartstrings*? The guy who laughed when I said I wanted magic in my relationships? Who said the word *romantic* like it was a rare, incurable fungal infection?

I've been holding everything in my heart, unsure how to bring it up and unwilling to figure it out. I know Maya was raised in an unconventional family structure, but I've always done my best to fill in the gaps for her. It's something her father and I agreed on all those years ago.

Is something missing for her? Does she think I'm unhappy with the life we've made for ourselves? Is *she* unhappy with the life we've made for ourselves?

I've been wobbling precariously between bone-deep embarrassment and fear that I'm not doing enough for my kid while simultaneously hoping we'd both forget that call ever happened. I guess that's not going to happen.

I reach for the box of Frosted Flakes and pop it open, unrolling the bag and grabbing a fistful of sugary goodness. My phone buzzes to life on the tabletop with a call from an unknown number. I silence it.

"I owe you an apology, Maya."

It's quiet on the other side of the Mini-Wheats. "What?" she whispers.

"I didn't realize you had feelings about all of"—I shovel the cereal into my mouth, unsure how to categorize the nuclear disaster that is my romantic life—"this," I say, flecks of cereal flying across the table. I swallow it down with a drag of coffee and try again. "If I had known, we could have talked about it."

The Cinnamon Toast Crunch shifts to the side. "I didn't think you'd want to talk about dating," she says quietly.

I frown. "What gave you that idea?"

"The one time I asked if you had plans to date and you said, 'I don't want to talk about it.'" Her lips twist. Another cereal box shifts. "I thought if I signed you up for the show and told Aiden Valentine about your situation, then you could talk to him. He's supposed to be an expert. The ladies in the front office at school are always talking about his sexy voice."

It's good to know my daughter thinks my *situation* can be helped by a sexy voice. I reach for another handful of cereal.

She blinks at me, a hopeful smile on her young face. "And it helped, didn't it? Talking to him?"

I shrug. It didn't *not* help. There was something vaguely cathartic about sharing some of my deepest secrets to a stranger on the phone in the middle of the night. I think sometimes I get so caught up in the roles assigned to me—mother, employee, daughter—that it's easier to shrink down the things that hurt and set them to the side. I never want anyone to worry.

The morning after my talk with Aiden, I drifted through the day in a haze. I felt scrubbed raw, the softest parts of me exposed. Like I stood on my front

stoop with a megaphone and yelled out the secrets I've carved on the inside of my heart. I kept waiting for people to look at me with pity in their eyes. *I heard what you said. I know you're a disaster. You said you're waiting for the right thing, but maybe that thing doesn't exist. Maybe you're the problem.* I expected whispers. Pointing. Laughter. Maybe a coffee tossed in my general direction.

I did not expect the world to spin on, oblivious to my radio debut. Not a single person in my life has said a word, including the shop full of busybodies I've dutifully reported to every day this week. Working as a mechanic isn't an inherently dramatic job, but the three men I work with are worse than a pack of old biddies. I was ready to disappear into the tow truck and never come out again.

Thankfully, I think Aiden Valentine is the only one who bore witness to my heartfelt diatribe on romance. I'm ready to categorize the whole thing as an emotional blip and move on.

If Maya ever stops building her cereal fortresses.

I drag the Cinnamon Toast Crunch to my side of the table and stack it behind Tony the Tiger. "I understand what you were trying to do and I'm . . . I'm thankful for it, I think, but it's something I need to figure out for myself. No more calling radio stations. And no more . . . fabricating grand plans. If you want to talk to me about something, come talk to me. Okay?"

Maya nods, reluctant, still keeping her eyes away from me. She draws a figure eight across the tabletop. "I just don't want you to be lonely, Mom."

The bruise over my heart throbs. I reach across the table and grab her hand, squeezing the same way I did when she was three and I was twenty-one and I didn't have a fucking clue how to do any of it. I still don't know how to do any of it, but I'm trying.

"How can I be lonely when I've got you?" I shake her arm. "And your dad and Mateo. Everyone at the shop. Patty across the street and our not-so-secret wine. I'm not lonely, honey. There's way too many people in our lives for me to be lonely."

Maya squeezes my hand back. "You don't have to be alone to be lonely."

I open my mouth, then shut it again. I squint at her. "Have you been watching *Oprah* reruns with Mateo again?" My ex, Grayson, and his husband, Mateo, have a fascination with early nineties talk shows. Most of the advice I get from them comes in the form of an Oprah proverb.

"No," Maya grumbles.

"When did you get so smart, then?"

"The year was 2022," she says with a sigh, making her voice sound like

one of those nature documentaries. “And a young girl discovered something called the *internet*.”

I roll my eyes. “All right, smart-ass. Clean up this mess and find your shoes. Your dad is supposed to take you to school today.”

Maya rushes to get her stuff together and I stay sitting at the kitchen table, eating directly from the box of Frosted Flakes while having an existential crisis. *You don’t have to be alone to be lonely.* I’ve got all sorts of love in my life, but I’m still yearning for something more. I’ve done a really good job of convincing myself I haven’t been, but Aiden Valentine and *Heartstrings* ripped that little delusion away.

How do I fill that crack? How do I mend it? Dating has never done much for me, but maybe I’ve been doing it wrong. Maybe I’ve been looking in all the wrong places. Maybe I’m tripping over my own insecurities on the way there. Maybe I should try again.

I stopped because it wasn’t working, but what I’ve been doing isn’t working either.

I wish there was a guidebook for this. An instruction manual that could tell me how to take myself apart and put everything back together so I’m good as new. I wish I knew how to make sense of my pieces.

My phone rings and I silence it again, frowning at the number. It’s the same one as before, a contact I don’t recognize with a Baltimore area code. Sometimes if my boss, Dan, is working on a car at the shop and forgot where he put the good wrenches, he’ll call me from the old landline that hangs in the back. But he’s only used it twice, so I’ve never bothered to put the number in my phone.

Maya slides back into the kitchen in her socked feet, a pair of shoes dangling from her fingers. She tosses them against the back door and then starts deconstructing her cereal tower, a lime green pen caught between her teeth.

“Do you have newspaper after school today?”

She nods. “Dad is in the middle of an art piece, so Mateo is picking me up. We’re going to go shopping. I need to start working on my Indiana Jones cosplay.”

“That’s nice. Where are you—”

The rest of my question is interrupted by my back door bursting open. It slams against the wall with a crack, Maya’s shoes flying with it. A tall figure stands in silhouette against the porch.

Maya screams and I immediately throw my cereal box at the intruder. He bats it away with his hand.

"What the hell, Lucie?" the intruder shouts, rubbing at his wrist where the box made contact. "I paint with this hand!"

"*What the hell, Lucie?* " I throw another box at him. "What the hell, *Grayson*!" He kicked his way into my kitchen, and he's yelling about how I'm behaving? He's lucky I didn't lob the ceramic fruit bowl at his head. I press my hand to my chest while Maya wilts into her seat like a flower, deep-breathing with her forehead against the table. "You kicked in my *door*. This isn't *Law & Order*!"

The father of my child steps into the kitchen and closes the door behind him without looking away, a thunderous expression on his face. Broad shoulders, warm eyes. A faded green shirt that says EAT BERTHA'S MUSSELS from the seafood shack down the street he's obsessed with. He looks almost exactly the same as he did when we were sixteen and stupid. Right down to the paint splattered across his forearms, a smudge on the collar of his shirt.

He must have stopped halfway through his session to stomp over here.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me?" he asks, both of his eyebrows rising high on his forehead. Grayson's and Maya's hair falls in exactly the same way. Furious, ferocious curls that can't be tamed no matter the amount of hair product used. When Maya was born, she looked like Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*. She hasn't exactly grown out of it. Neither has Grayson.

"No. I have nothing to tell you." I huff out a breath, trying to get my heart rate to calm down. He keeps staring at me, and I raise both of my eyebrows right back. "What about you? Anything to say? Maybe, *Sorry for putting a dent in your back door*?"

He shakes his head slowly. "No, I don't think I'm going to apologize for that."

"What is it, then? Just wanted to give me a heart attack this morning?" He remains silent. I don't understand the entrance, but Gray has always enjoyed a touch of drama. I think it's the artist in him. His husband, Mateo, says it's his desperate need to heal his inner child. Whatever it is, I don't have the patience for it this morning. He moved out of this house and into the one next door almost a decade ago, but I swear to god, he acts like it's an extension of his own home.

"Are you ready to take Maya?" I gesture toward her limp form, still slumped in her chair. "She was just putting her shoes on. You can go pick those up, by the way, since you're the one who ricocheted them across the room."

Gray doesn't move to retrieve her shoes. I have no idea why he's in my kitchen, ten minutes early, looking like a bat straight out of hell. "Do you

need to borrow my ketchup again?" I ask slowly. "I told you to take the whole bottle."

He shakes his head, still watching me with that wary, weird look. "No, I don't need the ketchup." He props both of his hands on his hips. "What I need are some answers."

"About what?"

"You."

"Me?" I point to my chest. He nods.

"What about me?"

He drags his palm over his face with a slight shake of his head. It's the same look he gives a blank canvas when he has no idea what he wants to do with it. Frustrated. Dumbstruck. I'm inspiring him to new levels of speechlessness today. With a sigh, he kicks out the seat next to me and collapses into it, his hand overlapping mine on the handle of my mug. I try to pull away, but he just holds on tighter.

"You know you can talk to me, right?"

I yank my hand away and bring my mug to my chest. "I talk to you every day of my life, Grayson. You're freaking me out."

Anxiety curls in my gut. The last time he stormed over like this, Mateo had sliced his hand open with a pair of garden shears. I glance over his shoulder and out the back window. The gate that connects our yards is wide open, squeaking back and forth on rusty hinges. "Is Teo okay?"

"Mateo is fine. He's also upset with you, but he's fine."

"Why is he upset with me?"

"Oh shit," Maya whispers. She's still sitting with her forehead pressed to the table, her hands clutching the edge.

"Language," Grayson and I both half-heartedly correct her. Maya slowly props herself up across from us, her face pinched. I'd laugh if I wasn't so damn confused. The kitchen is a mess. One of Maya's shoes is wedged under the oven. There's cereal scattered across the floor like sad, processed confetti, and Grayson is staring at me like I stole his cookies and crushed all his dreams.

Maya's eyes dart to Grayson and hold.

"Dad," she starts. "It's not a big deal."

"I'll talk to you in a second, tiny Machiavelli." His eyes narrow and his jaw tightens. "I can't believe you did this without me," he mutters under his breath.

"Oh shit," I whisper.

Because there's only one thing Grayson would be this pissed about. The

man hates not being included, and if he knows Maya hosted an emotional intervention without him, the very thing he's been trying to do for years, then that can only mean—

He knows. I don't know how he knows, but he knows.

He knows about the radio interview.

"Mm-hmm." He nods as realization slowly slinks its way across my brain. "Now you're catching on." He drops both of his palms on my shoulders, gently shaking me. "Why didn't you tell me you've been having trouble with dating? Me"—he rocks me back and forth again—"the platonic love of your life."

"Gray."

"I've known you since you were three years old and stealing my Sesame Street figurines, and you've been telling me *lies*."

"I haven't told you a single lie. I'm—"

He cuts me off with a swipe of his hand through the air. "I've been trying to talk about this with you for years, Lucie. *Years.* And you decide to tell a stranger on the phone that you're looking for magic?" He blinks owlishly, looking for all the world like I told Aiden Valentine I wanted to meet a man under a bridge for something illicit. "*Magic?* You told me dating gives you indigestion."

That is . . . partially true. But the rest of it—the real reason I don't date, the anxiety that there might not be someone out there for me to fit into the life I've made for myself, that maybe I want too much, that I'm being too whimsical and naive, that it's too late for me—I haven't wanted to talk about that with anyone. Especially Grayson. My oldest friend. The father of my child. My coparent. *The platonic love of my life.* Grayson has never had any trouble being exactly who he is, and he didn't have any trouble finding Mateo. I didn't think he would understand and I didn't want to give him a reason to worry.

So I tucked it all away in a neat little box and buried it until I couldn't feel the sting of it anymore. Not until Aiden Valentine shoved a crowbar in there and wedged it right open.

I push Grayson's hands off my shoulders with a scowl. My stomach is somewhere on the floor with the Frosted Flakes, my heart in my throat.

"You heard it?" I ask.

"I did."

"How?"

"Well, Lucie, I'm not sure if you know this, but when you're on the radio, people can listen to the things you say."

I scowl at him. “Don’t talk to me like I’m stupid. I know how the radio works. But it’s been a week since the broadcast. How did you—*when* did you hear it?”

He leans sideways in his seat and reaches in his back pocket, still frowning at me. He unlocks his phone with a flick of his paint-stained thumb, then scrolls. He scrolls and scrolls some more. Maya’s chair creaks under her and I resist the urge to hightail it up the stairs and bury myself beneath my comforter.

I thought we were in the clear. I thought we were moving on.

Finally, after the longest minute of my life, Grayson tilts his screen so I can see it.

“I think the entire Eastern Seaboard has heard it.” He flicks up with his thumb, and message after message with the same *Heartstrings* logo appears. It’s the broadcast, I realize. Shared over and over and over again on some social media site. “You’ve gone viral.”

I drop my mug to the floor with a *thunk*. It doesn’t crack, but it does tip over, turning the dried cereal on the floor into a soupy mess.

“Oh shit,” Maya and I say in unison.

I dart through the back door of the mechanic shop, my hood over my head and a scarf wrapped around the bottom half of my face. It’s excessive, but I need the comfort of multiple layers right now. I’m back to thinking everyone on the street is judging me, though it’s certainly more likely now than it was a week ago.

The interview went viral. A week later and the interview went *viral*. How? Why? I wasn’t brave enough to read any of the commentary from Grayson’s phone before he snatched it back, tucking it in the pocket of his ratty jeans while I sat at the table in a stupor. He’d given me an ominous *We’ll talk about this later* as he ushered Maya out the door for school, and that was that.

Joke’s on him, though. We absolutely won’t be talking about this later. We won’t be discussing it ever again because I plan on packing all my belongings into the back of my tiny Subaru and driving off into the sunset. I’ll pick Maya up from school and we’ll drive to . . . San Jose. I’m sure there are plenty of cars to fix in San Jose.

“All right there?”

I smack my elbow on the edge of my tool cabinet as I fight with my puffy jacket. “Fine,” I mutter, not bothering to look over at Angelo, already at his

station. I beat my coat into submission and toss it across my rolling chair. I need coffee and a mental reset. I need to go back in time and slap that phone out of my hand. I need the ground to swallow me whole.

I need to pretend like everything is fine.

"You sure?" He tosses a grease-stained towel over his shoulder and peers at me from over the top of his glasses. Angelo has somehow managed to not age at all for the past decade I've worked here, hovering somewhere around sixty-five. He says it's the ouzo his brother ships him from Greece. I think it's all the laughing he does at other people's expense.

The lines by his eyes deepen. "You don't usually look so"—he waves his hand, a quick flick of his wrist—"stressed before nine in the morning."

I also don't usually have my love life a topic of regional conversation, but I suppose we're all trying new things today. I yank my coveralls off my hook with more force than necessary, tearing the tag before shoving my legs in. I loop the sleeves around my waist and tug them into a loose knot.

I need to start working so my mind can disappear. When my hands are busy, everything else seems more manageable. Fixable. My brain takes the back seat and I follow the steps to put everything in exactly the right place.

I lean over the half wall that separates our stations and grab the clipboard with today's assignments. I can hear Harvey somewhere in the front bellowing the wrong lyrics to "Bye Bye Blackbird." Dan's in the office frowning at his computer screen, and Angelo is standing here, distracting me. Everything is exactly where it always is, and I can be too. As soon as I calm down.

Angelo drops his hand onto the middle of the clipboard, obscuring the list. He has a scar across his knuckles. A smudge of grease between his thumb and forefinger. "I'd like your attention, please."

"I can see that," I mutter. I suck in a deep breath to brace myself and then focus on him. He's still watching me carefully from behind his glasses, an unusual seriousness in his blue sky eyes. Angelo always looks as if he's just blown in off the harbor, white hair wild and windswept. I try to find some of my patience beneath my panic. Best to play it cool and all that. "What can I do for you?"

"My mother has a saying."

He stares at me expectantly, waiting for me to engage in this ridiculous conversation. My patience is somewhere in my disaster of a kitchen, along with my dignity. "Okay?"

"She always used to say, 'There is truth in wine and children.' She'd usually say it after my idiot brother spit out something ridiculous at the dinner table, but she'd say it nonetheless. 'Wine and children.'" He snaps his

fingers. “Three times a day, at least.”

“Do you—” My whole face pinches tight in confusion. “Do you need some wine?”

“No,” Angelo answers simply. “It’s before nine in the morning. Don’t be silly.”

Don’t be silly. Okay. I’m the one being silly.

“Listen. I’m having a weird morning. If you could just tell me what you’re tiptoeing toward, that would be great.”

Angelo continues to frown, clearly put out that I’m not hanging on to his every word. The music at the front of the shop swells louder as Harvey elbows his way through the door that leads to the small reception area, his coveralls unzipped to his belly button, a white T-shirt beneath. He’s still serenading an audience of zero, eyes closed as he does a ramshackle waltz to his station.

“It’s his turn for the music today, huh?”

Angelo huffs. “Unfortunately.”

“It’s not so bad.” I slant my eyes away from Harvey using a broomstick as a dance partner. “Certainly better than that garbage you put on every third Thursday.”

His spine straightens. He is indignant. “Country music isn’t garbage.”

“Sure.”

“Tim McGraw is a talented artist.”

“If I hear ‘Don’t Take the Girl’ one more time, I will not be held responsible for my actions.”

Angelo rolls his eyes and crosses his arms over his chest. “Well, you’ll hear it in another week. I can guarantee that,” he snaps. He frowns and flicks his hand in dismissal. “I don’t even want to tell you my story anymore.”

“Oh no,” I say dryly, fighting to keep the grin from climbing my face. “Not that.”

This is good. This is what I needed. A distraction from everything else. I needed Angelo’s stories and Harvey’s warbly singing and Dan smacking at his computer because he forgot how to print something again.

I go back to the clipboard in my hand and try to figure out where I’m supposed to start today. There’s a muffler that needs work on an old Ford Focus. A tune-up on a pretty pink Volkswagen Beetle that all the guys have been ribbing me over. Maybe I’ll start there.

Angelo’s hand appears over the list again.

I sigh and drop my head back with a groan.

“What?”

"'Wine and children,'" he says again, snapping his fingers. "There is truth in children. And I'm glad you listened to yours."

"Maya?"

He gives me a saucy look over his glasses, swinging that damn towel back and forth. "She is your child, yes? I remember attending a birthday party or seven over the years."

"She is. But what are you—"

"LU!" Harvey bellows my name across the garage. The music cuts out and his shoes squeak as he speed-walks across the floor. Dan stands in his office, watching us with interest.

Harvey skids to a stop and grins at me. "Proud of you, kiddo. You spoke your truth."

"Stop calling me kiddo. You're approximately eight months older than me." I press two fingers between my eyebrows and close my eyes as realization hits. "You know."

"Yup!" Harvey says proudly. "Sheila sent me the audio that's all over the place. Said I should take notes about what you were saying. But then I realized that the *you* I was listening to was *actually you* and I almost spit my beer clear across the room. Didn't know you had so many feelings." He claps a meaty hand on my shoulder. "Good for you."

"Wouldn't have killed you to mention the shop!" Dan yells from somewhere near his office. I refuse to open my eyes and look. I'm going to stand here like this for the rest of the day. Time will march forever forward and I'll be here, standing in the middle of the mechanic shop with my eyes closed.

It was easy to be brave when I thought it was Aiden and a handful of random listeners. People I don't know. But apparently it *was* people I know, and now those people know something deeply personal about me. Something I never intended to share with anyone.

My phone starts buzzing in my pocket again and I take it out with a sigh. It's the unknown number again. The fourth time this morning. Feeling curious and more than a little sorry for myself, I shuffle back to the limited privacy of my station. Answering my phone is a solid enough excuse to ignore the way my coworkers are staring at me. It's the lesser of two evils.

"Hello?"

"Hi," a woman says on the other end of the phone, sounding breathless. "Is this Lucie? Lucie Stone?"

Unfortunately. I'd love to be just about anyone else right now.

"It is. Who is this?"

“My name is Maggie and I’m calling from 101.6 LITE FM. I’ve got a proposition for you.”

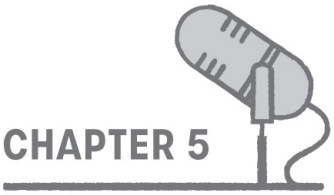
CALLER: What about Lucie?

AIDEN VALENTINE: Lucie?

CALLER: Yeah. The woman who called in with her kid.

CALLER: Has she found anyone to date yet?

AIDEN VALENTINE: I have no idea.



CHAPTER 5
AIDEN

I stand outside the station with my mug of coffee, watching as Jackson tries to pull himself out of his car window. There's a pale pink Volkswagen Beetle parked way too close to his Honda, making it impossible for him to open his door.

And I guess he decided the best way to proceed was to . . . climb through his car window.

"Jackson," I call. "You good?"

He wrestles with his bag and tosses it over his head. It lands with a thud at my feet. His glasses are slightly askew, his face twisted in a furious frown. "I'm trying to get out of my car."

I take a sip from my mug. "Is that what's happening?"

"Yes," he grunts, smacking his elbow on his side mirror. "It would be a lot easier if Delilah Stewart knew how to park."

"Who is Delilah Stewart?"

"The woman who works at the news station."

"That's right." I snap my fingers. "The weather girl."

"The whirlwind of destruction," Jackson spits. He wiggles farther out his window, his knee lying against the horn. We both flinch. "She has no respect for the weather and she keeps parking over the line."

I glance at the ground. The pink bug is, indeed, parked over the line. Crooked. With the back windows still open.

"And there's nowhere else to park?" I glance around the lot we share with the local news station, which is headquartered across the street. There are at least seven spots available, all without pink cars obstructing their doors.

Jackson stops wiggling around and gives me an offended look. It's very hard to take him seriously when one of his legs is still sticking through the window of his car.

"This is my spot."

"Is it?"

“Yes.”

“I don’t see your name on it.”

“I’ve parked here every day for years,” he defends, voice two octaves higher than usual. He drags his body the rest of the way out of his vehicle with a huff.

“You could have climbed out the back,” I offer, tilting my head to the side as he tries to slide his body free from the six inches of space between the vehicles. “Or maybe gone out the passenger side.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Is there a point?”

Jackson finally manages to free himself with one last grunt, bending at the waist and resting the palms of his hands on his knees. He wheezes out a deep breath and then stands, dark blond hair in complete disarray.

I should get to work early more often if this is the sort of entertainment I’m missing.

He points behind him. “She needs to respect the lines. That’s literally why they’re there.”

“The parking lines?”

“Yes. The parking lines.” He jabs his finger in the direction of the cars again. “Someone needs to hold her accountable for her actions. She can’t just flit through life, parking however the hell she wants. There are—”

“Lines. I hear you, buddy. No need to get worked up.”

He grumbles something under his breath.

“What was that?”

He grabs his bag from the ground and slings it over his shoulder. “I said, I think I liked you better when you were the grumpy one.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” I clap him on the shoulder and steer him toward the entrance of the radio station. “I’m still the grumpy one.”

Especially today. Maggie called at nine when my head was still buried under my pillow, screeching about a programming emergency. I can’t think of a single emergency for our radio show, short of that one hot dog commercial we had to take off the air because a guy named Winston kept talking about his wieners.

“You’ve been better lately,” Jackson says.

“With what?”

“Being a grump,” he answers, following me in, rubbing at where his shoulder bounced off the Volkswagen door. “You seemed happier earlier this week in the booth.”

I scratch roughly at the back of my head. “When?”

I know exactly when. When a woman got on the line and said she believed in magic and I thought maybe I could believe in it too.

Jackson raises one eyebrow. “The kid who called in. She asked for a boyfriend for her mom? You were smiling. I thought you were having a brain hemorrhage.”

“I smile.”

“Not like that, you don’t.”

“Whatever.” It doesn’t matter anyway. Whatever boost in morale I got from that call quickly disappeared during my next shift when Sharon from Federal Hill called in to talk about how her husband didn’t notice her new haircut. When I asked what sort of things she noticed about him, she told me she noticed when his paycheck was deposited in their shared account. My happy, optimistic bubble burst and I was dumped right back into the sea of sad, unfortunate love stories.

“Do you have any idea what this meeting is about?”

Jackson adjusts his collar. The scarf he wears every day in the winter is still hanging from the open window of his car, the forgotten remnants of a lost battle.

“I have no idea,” he says. “Maggie seemed pretty passionate though.”

“Passionate, overzealous.” I take a long pull from my coffee mug. “Boldly displaying the vocal capacity of a white bellbird.”

Jackson looks at me out of the corner of his eye. “What’s a white bellbird?”

“It has the loudest birdcall ever recorded.” I duck into the break room halfway down the hall and refill my mug, grabbing a cookie from the middle of the table. One of the maintenance guys has a kid who works for the Berger cookie company, and he leaves boxes in the break room whenever he swings by to fix the toilet that is perpetually leaking in the men’s bathroom.

“It sounds like a human scream,” I say around a mouthful of thick chocolate icing. “The birdcall. Not unlike Margaret on the phone at nine in the morning.”

“Hmm. That feels about right,” he says. I grab another cookie and dunk it into my coffee, shoveling the whole thing right into my mouth. Fuck, I love Berger cookies. The chocolate. The shortbread. It’s hard to be pissed about anything when I have a Berger cookie in my hand.

Jackson tries to grab one and I tug the box closer to me.

“Hey.” He reaches for it with a frown. “Share the cookies.”

I twist myself around, giving him my back. “No. I need them more than you.”

“Why do you need them more than me?” Jackson makes a frustrated sound, still trying to reach around me for the box. “Did you not just watch as I was forced to slither my way out of my car?”

“No one forced you to slither.” I shovel another cookie into my mouth. These cookies are the only thing going right for me and I’m not giving them up. I’m not. “You could have parked in any other spot,” I say, a mouthful of crumbs exploding down the front of my shirt.

“But I always park in that spot.”

“It wouldn’t kill you to break out of your habits every now and again, Jackie.”

“I’d like to break a habit right now and have a cookie.” He punches me once in the side and grabs the box while I double over, spilling coffee down the front of my shirt. I pull the scalding-hot wet material away from my chest as he scarfs down the rest of the box like a goddamned barbarian.

I raise both of my eyebrows, watching in disbelief. “Was that necessary?”

“You did this to yourself.” His cheeks are bulging with cookie. “You wouldn’t share.”

“Because you’re an assh—”

“Children,” a voice snaps from the doorway. Maggie, our station manager and the woman in charge of our paychecks, leans in from the hallway, one perfectly manicured hand bracing herself on the frame of the door. Her hazel eyes slide from Jackson finishing off the box of cookies to me, trying to prevent third-degree burns on my chest. Her eyes narrow. “If you’re done with your little spat, I’d like to see you both in my office.”

She disappears without another word, confident that we’ll trail after her. I yank some paper towels out of the ancient dispenser next to the sink and dab at my chest.

“Maybe she’ll put me out of my misery and cancel the show,” I mutter. My clothing has consumed more caffeine than I have this morning.

Jackson chucks the empty cookie box into the trash. “Or maybe she’s sending you to one of those fancy performer retreats so you learn how to turn that frown upside down. You know. Icebreakers. Team building. All your favorite things.”

I freeze. “She wouldn’t.”

Jackson shrugs. “She might. And you’d deserve it too. I swear to god, you’ve regressed to the emotional aptitude of a high schooler.”

“I’d give high schoolers a little more credit,” I grumble.

Maggie is waiting for us in her cramped but neat office, her hands folded on top of her desk and an expectant look on her face. Our audio engineer,

Eileen, is already tucked into one of the corners, face buried in a tablet, headphones slung around her neck. Her braids are dyed different shades of blue, pulled back in a bun on the top of her head.

"Is Hughie coming?" Jackson asks, making himself comfortable on a chair in the corner opposite Eileen, hugging a red heart-shaped pillow to his chest. Smug bastard is riding the high of chocolate fudge icing.

"He should be along shortly," Maggie replies, watching me like a hawk.

I forgot about Hughie. I'm always forgetting about Hughie. I sometimes forget about Hughie in the middle of a show and then he appears on the other side of the window with a sandwich. I have no idea how long he's been an intern here, or if that's still his official capacity. I'm certainly not going to ask Maggie. Not while she's looking at me like that.

"Sit," Maggie says to me, gesturing to the chair directly in front of her. It's within strangling distance, which makes me nervous.

"Why?" I ask, immediately suspicious. I don't want to be sent to professional development. Icebreakers are my personal form of hell.

She smiles like she can smell my fear. "Because everyone else in this room is sitting, Aiden. Don't be ridiculous."

I sit down in the chair. She doesn't blink.

"You're freaking me out," I whisper.

"I have no idea why. I'm being perfectly normal."

She's being perfectly terrifying. Smooth, shiny hair. Shrewd, all-knowing eyes. Maggie is a force of nature in the body of a petite, well-dressed woman. And it's entirely possible I have somehow pushed her past her breaking point.

"I didn't mean it," I try. "I don't really think you sound like a white bellbird."

A laugh bursts out of Jackson. He quickly tries to cover it with a cough. In the corner, Eileen's lips twitch with a smile.

Maggie's eyebrows tug together in confusion. "A what?"

"Never mind. What's the emergency?"

Eileen tucks her tablet back into her bag with a sigh, a baby blue braid dangling over her left eye. She brushes it back with her hand. "Did someone loop the wiener commercial again?"

"No. No one looped the wiener commercial. It only happened once and it was an honest mistake," Maggie says primly. Jackson snickers again. Maggie ignores him. "Have any of you checked the show's social media accounts this morning?"

"I try not to," Eileen offers. "Ever since that guy spammed us with like forty-seven thousand pictures of his feet."

“God, El.” Jackson tosses the pillow across the room at her. “I forgot about him.”

“How did you forget about him?” She picks up the pillow and tucks it behind her head. “It’s burned into my brain. I have nightmares about it. I might never look at a foot again. I intend to bill the station for my therapy.”

I shudder in my seat. That guy was fucking *gross*. “Is that the emergency? Pictures of feet?”

Maggie massages her fingertips against her temples. “No. There are no pictures of feet and there is no wiener commercial. If you bozos would let me speak, I’ll tell you. We—”

Hughie bursts through the door. “We’ve gone viral, baby!” He lifts his arm and tosses a handful of confetti in the middle of the room. “101.6 LITE FM is back!”

Maggie leans up to high-five Hughie as tiny bits of colored paper float around us. I look around the room, bewildered. Jackson’s glasses are covered in glitter. Eileen looks like she doesn’t know if she wants to stay in the room or bolt from her seat.

I brush some confetti off my arm. “Back from . . . where?”

“From the edge of the hell you dragged us to,” Maggie seethes, all her goodwill melting to reveal the bone-deep exasperation beneath. I know she hasn’t been happy with me, but it is very clear I underestimated how much. “I don’t know what crawled up your ass and died, but you’ve been an absolute nightmare on the air lately. I’ve considered changing the name of *Heartstrings* to *Heartbreak Hotel*.”

I hold up both hands. “I’ve been better, haven’t I?” I glance at Jackson for support. “Jackson gave me a pep talk. I’ve been trying to be better.”

She puffs out a breath and collapses in her chair, more glitter fluttering off her shoulders. She looks like an angry, somewhat violent fairy. “Yeah, you’ve been better,” she reluctantly agrees. She picks up her phone and unlocks it, thumbing across her screen. “And I guess I can’t blame you for the quality of calls we’ve been getting.”

“Thank you. That’s exactly what I told Jackson.”

“Right, well. Regardless of who is to blame”—she scrolls and scrolls some more—”this is exactly the kind of attention we need.”

Jackson leans forward, trying to see her screen. “The show went viral?”

Her eyes flick up to me briefly and then back to her phone. “A segment of the show went viral.”

I don’t like her careful word choice and I don’t like the look on her face. I cup my hand around my jaw and wish I saved a cookie for emotional support

because it feels an awful lot like I'm in trouble. Confetti notwithstanding.

"Which segment—oh." Jackson leans closer, pressing his glasses up his nose. A smile hikes up one corner of his mouth and he lifts his head to stare at me.

I wish I had two emotional support cookies.

"Oh," he says again, more knowing, raising both eyebrows.

I shift in my seat. I left my phone somewhere in my car and everyone is staring at me with varying degrees of amusement. "Was it when I threw the mug? I didn't use any profanity this week." No one says anything. "Did someone remix me to a Celine Dion song again?" Nothing. "I'd love to know what's going on."

"No, it wasn't when you threw the mug. Theatrical as that was." Maggie hands me her phone. "It was your conversation with the girl last week. The girl and her mom."

Lucie, my brain supplies instantly. *Lucie and her honey voice.*

I've been hearing the ghost of her laugh since she hung up with me seven days ago. I blame sleep deprivation and the string of bad callers we've had since, not a single person as compelling or as honest as Lucie was.

It only takes two quick swipes of my thumb to realize that viral might be an understatement. Link after link is posted, the *Heartstrings* logo in a looping red font. I tap one of the audio excerpts and cringe when I hear my voice on the playback.

"That's all right. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

Lucie's response, her voice clear and bright.

"No, that's not what I mean. I don't want to try. *All I do is try. All day long I'm trying, and I'm so tired. Why can't this be the one thing I don't have to try at? Why can't it be a thing that just . . . happens? I don't want—I don't want to think about what I should say or how I should act or . . . or have talking points in the notes app of my phone for a dinner date at a restaurant that I don't really like. I want to feel something when I connect with someone. I want sparks. The good kind, you know? I want to laugh and mean it. I want goose bumps. I want to wonder what my date is thinking about and hope it might be me. I want . . . I want the magic."*

I read the caption that's been paired with it:

Realest thing I've ever heard.

It's been played more than 6.3 million times.

"Holy shit," I whisper.

"Holy shit," Hughie echoes with enthusiasm. Another shower of confetti rains down on us. I scroll through the rest of the comments while glitter slips

down the collar of my sweatshirt.

BRING BACK THE MAGIC. This lady knows what's up.

She's gotta find HER PERSON. Please?? I'm dying here. She deserves the WORLD.

Lucie sounds hot. Is she hot?

This is romantic AF.

Where can I send in my application? They're taking applications, right?

Oh my god, I think I believe in love again.

There must be thousands of them. And not just people from Baltimore. Strangers from all over the world have weighed in on our conversation. Comments about love and what it should feel like. Arguments about the realities of dating. Well-wishes for Lucie and her daughter. People wondering if she'll find her match. Even more people volunteering to be her match.

I swallow hard and hand Maggie her phone. My palms are sweating. There's an itch between my shoulder blades. My brain is spinning in circles. I can't latch on to any thought long enough to examine it.

"This is good, right?" I rub my hands against my thighs. "This is what we want?"

Maggie nods, still giving me a look that's faintly accusatory. "This is good. This is why I hired you six years ago. We need more of *this*."

"All right." I nod. My heart is somewhere in my throat. "I can do that."

Possibly. Maybe. Nothing about the call with Lucie felt like a programming choice, but maybe I can re-create some of it. Maybe we can do a better job with screening calls. Maybe I'll work on some new prompts. Maybe with an influx of new listeners, we can make the show more interactive.

"You absolutely can," Maggie says. "You will."

"Sure."

"I imagine it'll be easier when Lucie joins you in the booth."

I go still. "What?"

I watch as everyone's eyes shift from Maggie to me and back again. We

are the world's most interesting tennis match right now.

Maggie leans back in her chair with a smug look on her face. "I imagine," she says, enunciating each word, "that it will be easier"—she brushes some glitter off the sleeve of her blouse— "when Lucie joins you"—she widens her eyes—"in the booth."

"I heard what you said, I'm just—"

"Which part of that sentence is a problem for you?"

I scratch above my eyebrow. *All of it?* All of it feels like a problem for me. And I have no idea why. "I don't—" I start and stop. I swallow twice. "How—"

"I called her yesterday and asked if she'd be interested in joining the show. Our listeners have skyrocketed since that interview went viral." She holds up her phone. "Most of the comments want her to find her happy ending. I plan for *Heartstrings* to help."

I frown. "How can *Heartstrings* help?"

Maggie looks at me like I'm stupid. Jackson coughs into his fist. Eileen ignores everyone, still scrolling through her phone, head tilted in concentration, completely oblivious to the rest of the room. I have no idea what Hughie is doing behind me.

"Are you not the host of a romance radio show? Do you not think you're capable of helping one woman find the love she deserves?"

"Like a . . ." My hands are sweating again. "Like a *Bachelorette*-type thing?"

"Exactly like that."

The rejection sits heavy on the tip of my tongue. Not because I don't want Lucie in my booth but because it doesn't feel right. Not for what Lucie wants. She said on the phone that she wants magic. That she wants love to find her exactly where she is. I can't imagine that participating in a radio show where dates are lined up like appetizer options at an Applebee's happy hour will be very magical.

I clear my throat and shift in my seat, very aware that I'm on thin ice with Maggie and any disagreement with this plan might encourage her to wedge her stiletto right up my ass. "Did she agree to this?"

"Who?"

"Lucie," I explain, doing my damned best to stitch together every ounce of my patience. "The woman you plan to extort for engagement."

Hughie sucks in a sharp breath through his teeth. Eileen sinks down in her chair. Jackson looks like he wants to climb out the narrow window on the far end of the office.

But Maggie doesn't reach across the desk to throttle me.

She studies me for a long beat, eyes narrowed. Then a smile blooms across her face.

The woman who once hurled an orange down the hallway at me when I told her she had shitty taste in ballpoint pens gives me a wide and toothy grin, her eyes crinkled in delight.

"Fuck," I whisper. "You're terrifying."

She chuckles. "I know."

I subtly try to shift my chair away from her desk. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because you've got a big, squishy heart in there, you grumpy asshole."

"I do not."

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't," I say again. *Christ.* "I just don't want to drag an unwilling woman into some weird love competition. I'd say that's baseline decency."

Maggie rolls her eyes. "Noted. There will be no dragging involved." Her calculating eyes watch me twitch around in my seat. I feel like a bug pinned beneath a microscope. "I think it's sweet you're looking out for Lucie."

"That's not what I'm doing."

"You care."

"I don't."

"You don't want me to take advantage of her."

"Of course not." I huff, frustrated. "I also don't want you to run over a litter of puppies. It doesn't mean I'm going to go out and adopt a dog."

Jackson straightens in his seat. "I actually think a dog might be good for you, man."

I ignore him. "What's the end goal here, Maggie?"

"End goal. Listen to you. You're acting like I'm some Bond villain."

I stare pointedly at her and she tosses her hands in the air. "I am trying to capitalize on our momentum, you walnut. I am trying to channel all of this interest into programming. If you haven't noticed, our numbers haven't been great lately. Orion has been up my ass about acquiring this station and I don't know how much longer I can hold out." She's referring to the mega-giant satellite radio corporation that's been hounding her for the last six months about folding us into their portfolio. We're all in agreement that we want to stay local, though we're quickly losing ground to stand on.

"This is an opportunity to save this show and this station. Not to mention the jobs of everyone in this room." She circles her finger around once. That explains why we're all here, then. Nothing like a good emotional blackmail

from the puppet master herself. “I’m not extorting anyone. I simply asked Lucie if she’d like to join you on the air to explore some of the engagement around your conversation. My hope is that people tune in and stay tuned in.”

That sounds like a fancy way of saying Maggie wants to do a radio version of *The Bachelorette*, but sure.

“And what did Lucie say about all of this?”

“She said she’d think about it.”

I exhale. “Good.”

Thinking implies hesitation. And if this is something that is going to happen whether I’m on board or not, I at least want to know Lucie agreed after careful consideration. She was bullied into that initial conversation, no matter how good Maya’s intentions were. I don’t want her to be bullied into this too.

“But I’m confident she’ll say yes,” Maggie adds.

“How do you figure?” I manage, daydreaming about the cookies I already ate and a shirt that is dry. Confetti-free hair and the blissful silence of my soundproof booth. I’ve been thoroughly outmaneuvered this morning and it’s not even noon.

“You should know this by now, Aiden.” Maggie’s smile is assured. “I always get what I want.”

CALLER: I just think I'm a good candidate, is all I'm saying.

AIDEN VALENTINE: For what?

CALLER: Dating Lucie.

AIDEN VALENTINE: [sighs]

AIDEN VALENTINE: You and the rest of Baltimore.

CALLER: She sounded hot on the phone, you know?

AIDEN VALENTINE: That doesn't explain why you think you're a good candidate.

CALLER: Some women say I have a magical di—

[dial tone]

CHAPTER 6
LUCIE

I don't know what to do," I whine in the empty café, my arms folded on the table, my chin resting on top.

Patty tucks her feet beneath her on her chair, the cork of a wine bottle between her teeth, two coffee mugs on the table in front of her. She texted me around noon with a single question: SOS? I almost cried in relief.

I need wine, cookies, and my best friend. In that order.

"What don't you know?" she asks, peering at the label. The only lights left on in the café are the soft glowing lamps from the bookshelves at the top of the stairs, making everything look dreamy and soft. Except for the cupid decorations she still hasn't taken down from her anti–Valentine's Day celebration. Those hang like tiny sparkly demonic spirits.

Maya is with her dad tonight and I am here, at the shop across the street from my house, wallowing in self-pity and bottom-shelf wine.

I hold out my empty cup. "The radio show thing. I don't know what to do about it."

Patty ignores my glass and tosses her head back with a laugh. Honey blond hair cascades down her back as she laughs and laughs and laughs some more. She was the kid in high school who somehow managed to be friends with everyone. She performed in the spring musical and kicked ass on the soccer field. She was crowned homecoming queen but gave the crown to someone else because it made her ears hurt. She's always been a bundle of chaotic, charismatic energy, and for some reason, she decided to adopt me junior year. She hasn't left my side since.

"Oh my god," she breathes, wiping at the corners of her eyes. Her eyeliner is still perfect, of course. "I almost forgot the purpose of this emergency meeting."

She manages to wrestle control of herself, then bursts out laughing as soon as she looks at me again.

I grab the wine bottle out of her hand. "I'm glad this amuses you."

“It sure as shit does,” she says on another peal of laughter, her palms pressed to her cheeks. Her fingers fan out under her eyes as she watches me pour wine up to the rim. “Only you, Lucie. Only you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean”—she leans across the table and grabs the wine bottle, pouring herself a glass measurably smaller than my own—”this is something that would only happen to you, She of Rotten Luck.”

She raises her mug and I reluctantly clink mine to it with a frown. “Rotten luck feels like an exaggeration.”

Patty takes a long pull from her drink and then holds up a single finger. “You got pregnant the first time you ever had sex.” She flicks up another finger. “You rarely date, and when you do, you somehow manage to find the worst men in the universe.” She wiggles a third finger. “And when your daughter tries to play wingman, your interview goes viral and the entire world decides to weigh in on your love life. Did I miss anything?”

“You forgot to add the part where the radio station wants me to come on the show and continue to talk about my disaster of a love life.” I slurp at my wine mug. “Maggie—the woman who called—she said she wants to help me find my happily ever after.”

Patty rolls her eyes. “She wants listeners. That’s what she wants. And sponsor money, I bet. Oh! I wonder if you’ll get sponsored by a lube company.”

“Patty.”

“What? It’s a natural connection.” She shifts down farther in her chair and nudges me with the toe of her shoe beneath the table. “I bet that would be a happily ever after for you. Lube.”

“I doubt it.”

“They make warming lube. Lube that tastes like piña coladas.”

“Please stop saying *lube*.”

“All right, all right.” She reaches behind her for the plate of cookies that didn’t sell today, dropping them on the table between us. Her mom is a rare-books expert at the Peabody, and her dad owns a food stall at Cross Street Market. She always said opening her own bookshop bakery was a perfect way to honor them both.

I sift through the plate until I find the one with chocolate fudge on top, an old family recipe. There are few problems that can’t be solved with fudge.

“Let’s talk it out, yeah?” Patty grabs a cookie with white frosting. “What makes you want to say no?”

“You mean, besides everyone I know and everyone I don’t know listening

to me talk about the thing I am most insecure about?"

Patty nods and dips her cookie into her wine. She takes a dainty bite and I shiver. She can be absolutely disgusting when she wants to be. "Fair point. But, honey, most people are insecure about their love life. I'm pretty sure that's why your little interview is going bananas on the internet. You're not special."

"Thank you."

She shrugs her shoulders. "You know what I mean. There's got to be some comfort in knowing you're not the only one who feels that way."

I blow out a breath and collapse to my elbow. "You're right. That is kind of nice."

"What else?" Patty asks.

"What else?"

She nods. "Let's keep the positivity train rolling. What else is good about this situation?"

"Well, Maya is thrilled about it." She hopped up and down and clapped her hands together when I told her. Hugged me so tight she almost bruised a rib. She wants so badly for me to be happy, and I want so badly to be the type of parent she's proud of. One she doesn't have to worry about. I draw a smiley face on the condensation of the wine bottle. "She thinks if I do the show, I'll be happier."

"Are you unhappy?"

"I don't think so?" I shrug. "I never thought I was, but—but Maya didn't come up with that idea on her own, right? She must have seen something in me that made her think that."

Patty hums. "Does Grayson have an opinion?"

"Grayson always has an opinion." I smile to myself. "I've been avoiding him until I know where I stand." As much as I can avoid the person I co-parent with who happens to live next door anyway. He's vocal. I don't want him to sway my decision on this.

Patty watches me with careful, quiet eyes. "And where do you stand?"

I finish my coffee mug of wine and extend it across the table for more. Liquid courage, maybe. Or self-medication. I haven't decided yet.

"I wish I knew."

Three cookies and the rest of the wine bottle later, I wave to Patty over my shoulder as I slip out the front door of the café. She salutes me with the

discarded wine cork, then twists the deadlock into place. I step into the cobblestone street, grateful that my house is a short walk down the block.

Night in this part of the city always feels like the hazy edges of a dream. Wooden signs that could have been painted four hundred years ago. Crooked, mismatched stones that are slippery beneath my boots. Weathered lampposts and flickering lanterns. Buildings stacked right on top of each other, slate rooftops kissing at odd angles.

Everything is holding perfectly still and I slow myself to a stop, holding still to match. The cold air bites at my nose and my cheeks, and my brain is fuzzy from wine and too many cookies. The light I left on in my living room beckons me home to my bed and the fluffy comforter I impulse-bought from the Home Shopping Network. Thick socks and a heater that rumbles and groans.

I stand there with one foot on the smooth stone and one foot on the sidewalk, caught halfway, my thoughts spinning loose and hazy. I told Aiden that I'm tired of wasting time on things that don't feel like everything I've ever wanted for myself, but I'm not sure that's true. I don't know what I want for myself. It's all twisted up in the things I think I deserve, then squashed under the things I'm brave enough to reach for. I don't think I've ever thought about any of it long enough to know what I want.

I sigh as I trudge up the steps to my front door. Talking about my feelings live on the air might not be what I want, but maybe it's what I need. Maybe I need to be tugged out of my comfort zone. Maybe it's time for something new.

I pull my phone from my pocket before I can second-guess myself, navigating with clumsy fingers to my email. I pull up the message I got from Maggie immediately after our phone call the other day and type two words:

I'm in.

CALLER: I haven't listened to your show before, but I heard your conversation with that young woman. Lucie. One of my grandkids was listening.

AIDEN VALENTINE: A lot of people have found us that way. Thanks for calling in.

CALLER: I had hoped—well. I thought it might be nice, if she were listening, to say a little something to her.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Of course.

CALLER: I've been with my husband for sixty-five years. Every day isn't a fairy tale. We've worked hard for our relationship. To build it. To maintain it. I've become so many versions of myself and so has he, but we've found a way to fall in love with one another over and over again. Every time.

[pause]

CALLER: But there's magic too. In between the hard work, there are perfect moments where everything lines up exactly right. What else is that, if not the universe telling me I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be? I'm right next to him, holding his hand. [laughter]

CALLER: I wanted to tell Lucie that she's right to believe in it. Her magic. And I hope she finds what she's looking for.

CHAPTER 7
AIDEN

Boston is good? You're enjoying it?"

"Oh, it's lovely, honey." I can hear the smile in my mom's voice, the low murmur of my dad in the background. He says something and she laughs, a light smack against his shirt. If I close my eyes, I can see them exactly. Sitting too close together on a couch by the fireplace, my dad with his arm over her shoulders, tipping her closer for a kiss. "I'm having the best time, Aiden."

I smile at nothing, kicking a loose rock across the parking lot. "You deserve the best time, Mom."

She deserves more than that. With the cards she's been dealt, she deserves only good things from here on out.

"And you?" she asks. "Are you doing okay?"

"Yeah, Ma. I'm always okay," I respond immediately, blowing out a breath and watching it slip away in a little white cloud. It's a habit born of three cancer diagnoses in twenty years. I've never felt like I've been able to be anything other than okay, not while my mom has been the furthest thing from it. Insulating my feelings from my mom so I don't burden her is like breathing at this point. An old habit that I tug on like my favorite sweater. I roll my shoulders back and try not to give her cause to worry. "Getting ready for the show tonight. Snagging some fresh air while I can."

Wandering around the parking lot, ignoring Jackson and Eileen and Maggie and—fucking Hughie with his overly eager thumbs-up every time we pass each other in the hallway. The whole station is treating me like our future is on the line with every broadcast, and while that's probably true, it would be great if I could pretend there was less pressure. An impossibility when Maggie bellows down the hallway about soulmates and true love every ten to fifteen seconds. She started emailing me quotes from *Pride and Prejudice*. I had to set up a spam blocker.

"We've been listening," my mom tells me, and another guitar string of anxiety plucks in the middle of my chest.

I press my fist to it, digging my knuckles into my down jacket. The chain around my neck that I never take off bites into my skin.

"You've been doing so well. Your dad tells me you've gone virile."

I choke on nothing. "I've gone, what?"

"Virile. You know, when the whole internet decides they love you?"

I drop my head back and stare at the cloudless blue sky. Hearing my mom call me virile was not on the bingo card for today. "It's called viral, Mom."

"Whatever it is, we're proud of you." She pauses, and I know what she's going to say before she says it. "Acadia is next week. Do you think—would you like to join us?"

I make myself pause for three seconds before I answer, hoping I sound convincing when I give her my prepackaged refusal. It's easier for me if I spend time with my family in doses. All I do when I'm with them is worry anyway. I'd bring the mood down.

"I can't make it. There's a ton of stuff going on with the show, and the last time I took a vacation, someone played a wiener commercial for twenty-seven minutes straight."

"Oh," she says. She does her best not to sound hurt and I do my best not to notice. "That's all right. I figured I would ask."

"Maybe next time," I offer.

"Of course, honey. You know I'd love to see you whenever you have the time."

It's as close as my mom will ever get to calling me out for how little time I've seemed to have for family adventures over the past couple of years, but it's enough to have guilt tugging at me all the same.

"When you guys get back from this trip, I'll come over," I tell her, desperate to put a Band-Aid on the cracks I hear in her voice. "We'll do the whole slideshow projector thing with pictures. I'll bring popcorn."

My mom laughs. The same way she did when I was a kid with my chin on her shoulder, my arms wrapped loosely around her neck. She always smelled like soap and the pages of a book. Paper and well-loved leather. Stories in the middle of the night.

"You might regret that by the seventeenth leaf picture," she says. "Your dad is in botany heaven."

"When you get back," I promise.

Someone knocks on the window of the studio behind me. I turn and squint. Maggie is pointing at her watch and then at the door, a silent and aggressive command for me to get to the booth. I frown. "I've got to go, Mom. Give me a ring if there's anything you need, yeah?"

“Of course, honey. Have a good show.”

I’d love to have a good show. I’d even settle for a mediocre show, but Maggie has been demanding fireworks. She was right about the rise in interest after the interview with Lucie went viral. Our caller numbers have more than tripled, and none of them have been truck drivers declaring their love for processed gas station snacks and ranking them in order of finger residue consistency. Hosting has been significantly easier. Fun. Enjoyable. Three words I haven’t associated with this job in a very long time.

I pull open the front door and unzip my jacket, stomping the salt off my boots on the faded rug. There’s a woman waiting by the elevators, studying the directory, which still has information for the dentist office that was here previously.

She frowns and leans closer to the glass case, lips moving soundlessly as she reads.

“Need some dental work?”

She jumps and turns, chestnut-colored hair swinging around her shoulders. It’s long, halfway down her back, with bangs that fall into her face. Sometimes people wander in here looking for the news station, confused by the shared parking lot, but she doesn’t look like she’s gearing up for a television appearance. She’s wearing worn jeans and a pair of scuffed black boots. An over-sized mechanic’s coat zipped to the base of her throat.

“Not quite.” She winces, turning halfway to look at the sign again. “I think I might be in the wrong place.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Not a root canal,” she murmurs. She sighs and her shoulders curl inward. “Though that might be preferable.”

I shove my hands in my pockets and wander closer. She’s tall. Probably just an inch or two shorter than I am. Her hands clasp loosely together in front of her, nervously toying with a key ring shaped like a crab. Maggie will kill me for shooting the shit in the lobby while she’s banging on glass windows in the back, but this woman looks like she’s facing a life-or-death decision while reading outdated dentist information.

“Can I—” I clear my throat. “Can I help you?”

The words sound clumsy as they trip out of my mouth, but she doesn’t seem to notice, still staring at the sign.

“With a root canal?” she asks, distracted.

I laugh. “I don’t think you want me in your mouth.”

That statement earns her full attention. She turns to look at me slowly, arching one dark eyebrow. Her eyes are a pale green beneath her bangs.

“I mean—I don’t—I don’t have any dental qualifications. To be in your mouth.”

Christ. How did it get worse? I’ve somehow managed to . . . make it worse. I rock back on my heels and stare at her while she stares back, an amused smile curling at the corners of her mouth.

I silently beg for a conversational assist. For one of the ancient ceiling tiles to give and release some of the equally ancient plumbing on top of my head, dragging me through the floor to the basement.

“Help me out here,” I beg.

“I thought you were supposed to be helping me.”

I scratch once at the back of my neck. “Any chance we can restart this conversation?”

She gestures at me with her hand. A quick flick down and up again. “And stop all of this from happening?” She shakes her head. “No, I don’t think so.”

Her lips twitch into a full smile and she grins at me. *Beautiful*, I think hazily, my brain clearly somewhere on the floor with the dust bunnies and the Slurpee stain Eileen left six months ago. *She’s really fucking beautiful.*

Maggie is going to kill me. I’m surprised she hasn’t barreled out of her office with another armful of oranges, demanding I do my job while pelting me with fruit. I don’t usually cut it so close to showtime, but I feel fundamentally rooted to the spot. Unable to move or . . . string together an appropriate sentence, apparently.

“All right, well.” I clear my throat and look longingly in the direction of the hallway that leads to my booth. There’s a sanctuary down there in the form of soundproof glass. “Best of luck with your dental needs.”

I flinch. I can’t believe I talk to people for a living.

She laughs and my head cocks to the side. That sound is familiar. A wisp of smoke I can’t quite get a hold of. Maybe in another life I was a person who was capable of having a reasonable in-person conversation with a stranger.

“Thank you,” she says. Her forehead crinkles in gently amused confusion. “I think.”

I nod and stare at her for another beat before turning and heading in the direction of the hallway. I’m changing the topic for tonight’s show. *Conversation starters with strangers and why you should avoid innuendos about oral sex. Worst opening lines and how to say with body language that you’re usually more put together than this, but life has thrown you a curveball or seven and you’ve got no idea if your head is screwed on straight.*

Maggie pops up from behind the door like a tiny radio gremlin, hell-bent on ratings glory. She’s glaring at me, because of course she is, but then she

looks over my shoulder and her frown twists its way into a smile. It's the same smile she gave me in her office when she cooked up her Save *Heartstrings* plan.

That smile means nothing good for me.

"You made it," she calls, a portrait of politeness. I think she's trying to channel a Julie Andrews character from 1964. It's unnatural. I'm so fixated on that weird-ass smile on her face that I miss the fact that she's talking to the woman waiting in the lobby. I'm on a two-second time delay, watching everything happen in slow motion. "Thanks for coming on such short notice."

The woman smiles and it's nothing like the smile I earned when I embarrassed myself with sexualized dental comments. It's tight and more than a little anxious. She drags her hands against the front of her jacket and then shoves them in the pockets. Makes a face and pulls them out again, holding one forward for a handshake.

"Thanks for inviting me."

Maggie flutters forward, bypassing her extended hand for a hug instead. My frown deepens. I've never seen Maggie willingly hug anyone. I watch the woman's face carefully to make sure she's not slowly being suffocated or stabbed with a defunct ballpoint pen.

Maggie pulls back. "No pressure. Just like I said on the phone, okay? I figure you can meet everyone today and decide what you want to do from there."

I'm still on my time delay as Maggie drags the woman across the small lobby of our radio station, an almost manic smile on her face. I realize three things in the span of two heartbeats.

1. Her eyes are the exact green of *Hedera canariensis*, the ivy my dad planted in my parents' front yard. He makes me stand with him and examine it every time I go over there, listing off botanic factoids like an encyclopedia.

2. The name patch sewn onto the front of her jacket says *Lu* in short, neat letters.

3. I know where I've heard that laugh before.

CALLER: What does she look like? Lucie.

AIDEN VALENTINE: I have no idea.

CALLER: No idea?

AIDEN VALENTINE: No idea. I've only heard her voice.

CHAPTER 8

LUCIE

I thought people who worked in radio were supposed to be hideous.

That's the saying, isn't it? *A face made for radio.* The implication being that while a person might possess charisma and charm, they do not have the looks for a career in stardom.

It's a stupid saying. And clearly, a saying that has no actual basis in fact or reality, because—

Because Aiden Valentine does not have a face for radio.

He has a face for those cologne ads that come on during the afternoon soap opera run. The ones where the guy is aggressively walking through the hallway of a hotel. Or a desert. Inexplicably rolling around in dirt while yanking his T-shirt off with one hand. Wolves, probably. Moody music. Lightning.

Aiden looks like a brooding Disney prince in a Carhartt hoodie. One who's been shoved around a little bit, maybe. Straight nose. Dark messy hair. A full bottom lip and almond-shaped eyes that might be blue or might be gray. I couldn't tell in the lobby and I can't tell now, though I'm doing my best to figure it out. I keep sneaking looks at him through the window that makes up one wall of the booth he disappeared into quickly after shaking my hand.

I am flabbergasted that there's a man who looks like that just . . . walking around. Talking on the radio.

He could *absolutely* be a cult leader.

"Don't mind him," Maggie says, waving her hand as she moves stuff around her desk to make room for me. The room is microscopic. More of a converted closet than a true workspace. "He's a bit of a mess."

He catches me looking at him through the glass, his dark eyebrows tugging together. Then he adjusts his headphones—the bulky ones that should make him look ridiculous but absolutely do not—and spins in his chair, hunching over the complicated-looking system in front of him.

I'm having trouble lining up the Aiden on the phone with the Aiden in the

booth. I had a picture in my head. Someone older. Wise. Patient. Graying hair at the temples. Glasses on the very tip of his nose. A stack of relationship advice books at his elbow. Possibly sipping some tea while puffing on a pipe.

I didn't think I was talking to a six-foot-something man with perpetual bedhead and a penchant for dentistry innuendo.

I drag my eyes back to Maggie. "I'm sorry." I touch my fingertips to the bridge of my nose and tell myself to get it together. "What were you saying?"

Maggie frowns. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. If you're uncomfortable—"

I wave the thought away. I am uncomfortable, but I imagine anyone in my situation would be. Sometimes a little discomfort is a good thing. A necessary thing. A thing that leads to better things.

Or so I've been told by every self-help podcast I've listened to while wheeling back and forth on a dolly beneath the undercarriage of a car.

Maggie taps her pen against the desk. She doesn't look like she's listened to a self-help podcast in her life. Her hair is perfect, her stylish blouse tucked neatly into perfectly pressed wide-leg pants. She looks like she just stepped off a runway and I look like . . . I just rolled out from beneath the undercarriage of a car.

With my self-help podcasts.

I sigh. "I'm not sure—" I swallow my doubt and try to find the version of myself that is brave, self-assured, and confident. "I'm not sure I'm what your listeners are looking for. I don't have any experience with this sort of thing."

Maggie studies me. "What are my listeners looking for?"

"I have no idea, but I'm fairly certain it's not a twenty-nine-year-old mechanic with self-esteem issues and a preteen who calls in to radio stations to expose their lack of a love life at the drop of a hat."

Her eyebrow arches high on her forehead. God, even her eyebrows are perfect. "Seven point four million people would disagree."

I swallow. "The number went up?" I whisper.

"The number went up," she confirms. "It keeps going up, Lucie." She leans forward until her forearms rest against the desktop. "Aiden has had more callers this week than we've ever had. Even during our golden age when he first joined the station. It's unprecedented and it's because of you."

"Because of me?"

"Yes." She nods. "Because of you."

I chew on my bottom lip briefly. "Are you sure?"

She leans back in her chair. "I'm never wrong."

I believe her. I do. I don't think this woman has ever been wrong in her life. I toy with some of the studs pierced through the cartilage of my ear, a nervous habit I've never been able to shake. "So, ah. What are you looking for? What do you need me to do?"

"I don't want you to do anything." Maggie studies me, eyes assessing. "I want you to be exactly who you are."

I want to ask her, *And who do you think that is?* And then, *Do you mind letting me know?* Because I've got no clue. I'm so used to everyone else defining me, I need the help. *Maya's mom. Lu from the service garage. Damian and Celeste's wayward daughter. The one who got pregnant so young. She had so much promise, didn't she? Whatever happened to her?*

This is what happened to her. She had an emotional breakdown live on the radio and now she's here, sitting in a surprisingly comfortable chair, wondering what happens next.

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"On the phone call, you were honest. You were vulnerable. You said things that a lot of people—" She clamps her mouth shut. Tightens her lips. The stern, bossy look on her face cracks, and I see something soft flash underneath.

"You said things that resonated with a lot of people. Things that other people are afraid to say," she continues slowly. "That's its own sort of magic, isn't it? You and Aiden have good chemistry, and I think together you could help a lot of people. And if you'd like, I want to help you."

"Help me how?"

A slow smile tugs at the corner of her mouth. It looks downright devious when paired with her delicate features. That look could reduce a man to dust. Bring down an empire. Jump to the front of the line at the DMV.

"You've captured the attention of every single person on the Eastern Seaboard. Don't you want to see what's possible for you?"

"In terms of . . ." I let the rest of that sentence dangle.

"In terms of dating," she says bluntly. She flicks a nonexistent piece of lint off the front of her blouse. "You could have your pick of the litter."

I don't want my pick of the litter. The litter sounds terrifying, frankly. I haven't been on an actual, real-life date in two years, and I don't know how to say that without sounding pathetic.

And a part of me, a teeny-tiny sliver of myself, is still waiting. To bump into someone on the street or pick up the wrong coffee order. For the right person at the right time in exactly the right place. To not have to try so damn hard at any of it. It's the romantic in me that Aiden laughed at. And maybe

it's childish or naive or *whatever*, but it's me. I'm allowed to want soft, special things.

Maggie seems to read my mind.

"Maybe this is it," she says quietly. Earnestly. "Maybe this is how love finds you. I know you probably think I'm doing this for the ratings and the audience and the sponsorship, and part of that is true. This is a business. But what if . . . ?" She clasps her hands together so tightly her knuckles turn white, and I know, unequivocally, that this part is honest. This part is true. "What if this is what you've been waiting for? What if it's all a string of choices and moments and events and decisions that have led you to exactly right here? And what if what happens next—what if what happens next is the good part? The part you've been waiting for."

Somewhere in the hallway, a snack machine whirrs. Shoes squeak against linoleum. The tiny clock on the corner of her desk ticks out the seconds. The heater clicks on and then off and then on again.

"Wow," I say, more than a little impressed. "You're very good at your job."

"The best," she says with a grin. "How about I—"

A small man barrels into the room, a stack of paper in his hands. He's breathing like he ran here, deep heaving gasps that end in a wheeze every time.

Maggie glances up with a frown. She doesn't look surprised by the entrance. He looks like the kind of man who often enters the room in a chaotic sweep. "All good, Hughie?"

Hughie hands Maggie the papers he's holding without a word. She looks at the cover and goes ramrod straight. Her eyes flick up to his form, still bent in half. I have no idea what's going on.

"Where did you find this?" she asks.

"Fax machine," he wheezes, a balloon losing air.

"Fax machine," she repeats, eyes narrowed. "He sent it through the fax machine?"

Hughie nods. "When?"

"Just now."

Maggie rockets out of her chair. One of the framed photos on the wall behind her slants at an angle. It's a picture of an older man, laugh lines by his eyes. Both his arms are wrapped tight around a tiny girl who looks like a smaller, messier version of Maggie. She's wearing headphones that are far too big. Her knobby knees crisscross-applesauced on a leather chair pulled up to a desk with a microphone. Toothy smile wide, front teeth missing.

“Lucie, I’m so sorry. I need to check on something quickly.” She yanks a still-panting Hughie behind her by his elbow. “Hang tight for me.”

“Sure. That’s no”—she disappears into the hallway—”problem,” I mutter to myself.

I study the pictures on her wall while I wait. I straighten a shiny microphone-shaped award on the corner of her desk. I count to ten and then ten again, listening for anyone in the hall.

Maggie is clearly not the type of woman who has knickknacks, but she does have seven different colors of Post-it Notes, an impressive array of paper clips, and a giant red novelty button that says STFU in bold white lettering.

I’m examining a letter opener that looks like it doubles as a teeny-tiny dagger when I hear a thump against the window of the studio.

I jump and glance over my shoulder, finding Aiden staring at me expectantly from behind his desk. I forgot he was in there. I also forgot he can see directly into Maggie’s office from his seat and he’s probably been watching me artfully arrange thumbtacks for the last six minutes.

We hold eye contact for several uncomfortable seconds. Did I imagine the sound of something hitting the glass? Isn’t he supposed to be working? Does he want to make another vague innuendo about dental instruments? Does he want to *apologize* for making vague innuendos about dental instruments? It’s hard to tell from twenty feet away with a soundproof glass wall between us.

He tears a sheet of paper from the notepad in front of him, crumples it into a ball, and throws it at the window. It barely makes a sound, then lands on the floor next to what looks like . . . a doughnut-shaped dog toy?

I look back at Aiden. He’s writing on the notepad with his head ducked down. Then he lifts his face, gives me a devastating half smile, and holds up his sign.

COME HERE, it says.

I point at my chest.

His smile twitches wider. *Who else?* that face says. He scribbles on his notepad some more.

COME HERE, PLEASE

The *please* is underlined twice. I stand on shaky legs and pretend he’s not watching me the whole time I wander my way over to the booth. There’s a little glowing red right above the entrance. A faded *Heartstrings* sticker stuck in the middle of the tiny window. I try the handle and the door swings open.

Cold air and stale coffee. Warm flannel. Evergreen with a hint of brown sugar. Everything is buzzing in here, machines and microphones and an old

coffeepot balanced on top of a file cabinet with an EAT BERTHA'S MUSSELS bumper sticker slapped on the side. It makes me smile to see it. A reminder that my city is Aiden's city and we might have something in common after all. Like a love for shellfish that's been cooked in sixteen pounds of butter.

Aiden and his broad shoulders take up the entirety of the desk he's sitting at, his long legs pushed out under the table. He waves me in as he tinkers with something on the audio controls in front of him, sliding one thing up while simultaneously sliding another thing down. It all looks very complicated, but then I remind myself I repair heavy machinery for a living and curiosity tugs me closer.

I've always loved learning how things work. Loved examining all the bits and pieces beneath the surface. When I was a kid, I was always taking things apart just so I could put them together again. The television remote. The toaster. Grayson's Ricochet remote-controlled car. It calmed me down to understand how something worked. I liked knowing that if something broke, I could look at the parts that were left and figure out how to make it whole again.

Much to the disgruntled amusement of my parents.

And Grayson.

Especially after I discovered his Spider-Man collection.

"That was very brave of you," Aiden says, watching me from the corner of his eye, talking to someone on the other end of his headphones. His voice sounds different here. Deeper. More assured. Maybe it's because he's channeling his on-air persona or maybe he's just more comfortable with some warm-up time. Whatever it is, he's more at ease here than he was in the lobby of the station.

Aiden reaches for something and I watch the way his arms flex beneath the sleeves of his hoodie. The graceful way his big hands work at the controls of the audio board. I flush when I realize I'm watching the way his body moves, grateful for the low light and the cramped, crowded room. He picks up a pair of headphones and holds them out to me.

I point to my chest again. He rolls his eyes and leans farther across his desk, nudging my arm with them.

I curl my hand around the headband and his thumb brushes briefly across my knuckles. His eyes are examining some nonexistent point by the far wall, head cocked slightly to the left as he listens. He blinks and his eyes clear, finding mine. He nods at the headset in my hand.

Put them on, he mouths.

I slide them over my ears and hear a woman's voice. I catch her mid-

sentence.

"—and I'm not sure, you know?"

Aiden hums, agreeing with some point I didn't hear.

"I just . . ." The woman's voice trails off and I hear a sigh. Exhaustion and exasperation and frustration too. All wrapped up in one tiny sound. I understand that sigh in my bones. "I don't want to feel like this anymore. And I didn't even realize I was feeling this way until I heard you talking to Lucie. I was nodding in my kitchen with everything she said. I think I just . . . I think I got so used to putting myself and my needs on the back burner that I didn't notice I was doing it anymore."

Aiden is watching me from the other side of the desk. Our eyes catch and hold. "That can happen sometimes," he says.

"It feels silly to have a life-altering realization from someone else's conversation, but I—I'm tired of not getting the things I deserve. I'm tired of settling. I want more."

Something warm flares to life in my chest. I press both of my palms to the outside of my headset like I can contain this woman's voice and tuck it close. Somewhere near my heart.

"She made me brave enough to want that," the woman continues. "I hope she knows. Lucie. I hope she knows how much that means to me. Wherever she is. Thank you for waking me up. Thank you for giving me the hope that there's something better out there for me. It really means the world."

"Well, Lucie." Aiden smiles, his eyes still right on me. I smile back. Tremulous and unsure but hopeful. "Wherever you are. Thank you."

They move on to something else, but I'm not paying attention. I'm too focused on the thrum of my heart in my chest and the buzzy, staticky sound in the back of my head. I did something for someone, and it wasn't fixing their muffler or changing their oil. It wasn't cutting the crusts off a peanut butter sandwich or . . . reading the same book seventeen times in a row. I did something for someone just by—just by being myself. Sharing my fears. Being vulnerable. Exactly like Maggie said.

Aiden taps some other buttons on his board and slips his headphones from his ears. His hair is sticking up on the left side, a red mark on the corner of his jaw from the headset. He nods at me and I pull the headphones from my ears too.

"How did you know she was going to say that?" I ask.

Aiden studies me, his maybe-blue, maybe-gray eyes shadowed in the muted light of the studio. "I paid her in Berger cookies."

My stomach twists. "Did you?"

He shakes his head, a smile hidden behind the fist he brings to his mouth. “No. I don’t know how much you think radio hosts make, but it’s not enough to bribe someone.”

I frown at him. If this was all some big joke—a ploy to get me to take the job and boost their ratings—I’ll walk right out the door and keep walking. I don’t want to be manipulated. Not with anything, but especially not with this. Not with this thing that feels like cracking open my ribs and exploring all the soft parts beneath.

I couldn’t stand it.

He seems to realize how serious I am because he straightens in his seat, the chair creaking beneath his big body. “I’m just messing with you. I didn’t know she was going to say that, but I had a feeling she might.”

“Why?”

“Because every caller we’ve had for the past week has more or less said the same thing.” He scratches his jaw and then yawns, resting his chin in the palm of his hand. In the background, I can hear the faint sound of a jingle. Commercial break, I guess. “I know you’re looking for love and I don’t know if I’m the right person to help you with that. But I think you started something the other night, whether you meant to or not.”

I set the headphones down on the edge of his workstation. “I didn’t mean to do anything. I was just talking to you.”

“And I was just talking to you.” He studies me, his pretty eyes assessing.

“How would it work?” I ask slowly.

He shrugs. “However you want it to. I could be your love boat tour guide, if you wanted.”

I watch his face carefully. “You don’t like that idea.”

He shakes his head and twists back and forth in his seat. “It’s not that.” He fixes me with a look. “I’m going to tell you something, okay? And it stays between us, yeah?”

I nod. It feels like a fair trade, after I’ve already handed him so many of my secrets.

He blows out a breath. I steel myself for some lurid confession.

“I’m struggling with the concept of love,” he finally says, his words slow and measured.

I stare at him. “What does that mean?”

He rubs his hand along his jaw, long fingers fanned out. His gaze jumps from my eyes to the corner of his desk to the screen of his computer, then back again. “I’m not sure it’s real?” he says, like it’s a question. Like he still hasn’t untangled his thoughts on the matter.

I'm skeptical. "You host a show about love, and you don't believe in it?"

"Please lower your voice." He frowns. "It's more complicated than that. I've been struggling with callers. With the stories I've been hearing. When I talked with you the other night, it was the first time that I—" He cuts off abruptly, but holds my eyes with his. I want to know the rest of that sentence *so badly*.

Did he feel even a fraction of what I did?

But he doesn't finish his thought. I watch as he mentally packs it away, whatever it was. "Maybe we can help each other," he continues, his voice controlled. "You can help me keep my job, and I can help you find your magical Prince Charming. Maybe watching you fall in love with someone will give my cold, dead heart some hope."

"You wouldn't—" I swallow around the anxiety making my throat feel tight and force myself to say it. I don't like the flippant way he said *magical Prince Charming*. "You won't make fun of me, right?"

His face collapses. "You think I'd make fun of you?"

I shrug. "I know the show needs ratings. I know we've gone viral. And I know sometimes there's a part to play. You just said you don't believe in love, Aiden. I don't want to be made into a joke and I don't want to be embarrassed."

He clenches his jaw, the sharp line of it jumping once. "It's not that kind of show and I'm not that kind of person. It's not just my job I'm trying to save, all right? You have the unique opportunity to prove this cynic wrong." He looks like he wants to say something else, but the words stick in his throat. He releases a breath and ducks his head, keeping his eyes heavy on me. "I promise, Lucie. This isn't a joke to me."

I nod once. He's telling the truth. I don't know how I know, but I do.

"Okay," I tell him. "I'll think about it."

He rubs his palm along the back of his neck. "Great."

He checks the screen of his computer and tugs his headphones back over his ears, that stubborn piece of hair on the left side of his head still sticking straight up. He drags the controls up and then down and I take that as my cue, backtracking toward the door.

My hand is on the knob when he calls for me, chin tucked against his shoulder. "Lucie?"

I turn to look at him. "Yeah?"

"While you're thinking, if you need someone to talk to"—he taps his finger against the headphone pressed to his left ear—"I'll be listening."

Some of my hesitation cracks, splinters, caves. I bite the inside of my

cheek against my smile. “I’ll be listening too,” I tell him.

The last thing I see before I shut the door to the booth is his face in profile, cast mostly in shadows. Strong lines and sharp angles.

But I do manage to catch the very edge of his smile, glowing blue in the light of his screen.

CALLER: I want to believe in it, you know? That there's something—someone—out there waiting for me. But it can be hard. Sometimes I lose hope.

[pause]

AIDEN VALENTINE: Yeah. Me too.

CHAPTER 9
LUCIE

There's a note taped to my front door when I get home. Three simple words.

Paella.
Attendance mandatory.

I know a threat from Grayson when I see one, though I don't need the reminder. Grayson, Mateo, Maya, and I have dinner every Wednesday night, the weekly gathering for our pieced-together family. When we had Maya as confused and terrified teenagers, Grayson and I made a promise that we'd never do anything alone. We knew our family would look a little different, but we also knew it would always have the most important thing.

Love. Buckets of it.

And so every Wednesday, Gray attempts to cook something elaborate while Mateo bustles around behind him, adding spices and stirring every time his back is turned. It's a system that has somehow worked for the duration of their marriage, while Maya and I sit at the island and snack on slivers of cheese and fresh fruit.

Dinner and a show, Maya always says with a snicker.

I stare mournfully at the couch and the heated blanket Maya got me for Mother's Day and reach into the fridge for the half-consumed bottle of white wine I know Grayson will want. I find a mismatched pair of slippers and trudge my way out the back door, through the garden gate, and up the back porch steps of Gray and Mateo's house. Music and laughter filter through the door and my heart rolls over in my chest. Family. Belonging. *Love.* The only kind I've ever known. The kind I made for myself.

I slide my arm through the back door first, wiggling the wine bottle in the air. Grayson gives a loud *whoop* and I laugh, nudging the door open. Maya jumps off her stool at the counter, rainbow socks slipping across the

hardwood floor as she bounds her way over to me and wraps her arms around my neck. She's almost at my shoulders now, her not-quite-teenage growth spurt turning my baby into a mini adult.

I panic about it most days. Worry about the things to come that will change and grow and reach boundlessly in directions I haven't dreamed of. But right now I hug her close and smell her shampoo and try to appreciate that I at least did some things right in this life to end up here like this.

"Thank god you're back," she mutters in my ear. "Dad is trying to poison us."

Mateo wedges himself between us, greeting me with two quick kisses on both of my cheeks. "He's making paella," he says quietly. "I don't understand why he feels the need to try the most difficult recipe he can get his hands on."

"What was that?" Grayson calls from the stove.

"Nothing," the three of us yell in unison, sounding suspicious as hell. Mateo grabs the wine bottle out of my hand and passes it off to Gray, nudging the salt pot out of reach while he examines the label.

"Is this the bottle you stress-cry with?" Grayson asks.

"It's the bottle *you* wandered over and drank during one of your art benders. That's all that was left." I rub my hands up and down Maya's back. "Was school okay today?"

She beams at me. "School was great. I kicked ass in tech ed. Our teacher messed up when he was changing the oil on the test car, so I got to show the whole class how to do it. I'm leading an underground movement of factual engine repair."

I ruffle her hair. "That's my girl. How did you—"

"Nuh-uh." Grayson waves his spoon in my face, then points at the stool Maya abandoned. Behind him, Mateo quickly adds something green to the massive rice dish on the stove. "No more school talk. No offense, Maya bean, but we have more pressing matters." She rolls her eyes and the spoon flicks back to me. Rice comes with it. "Where have you been?"

I give him a look. "You know exactly where I've been."

"And yet you're trying to talk about oil changes? I want to talk about the radio station."

"You're still mad." I sigh.

"I'm not mad," Grayson fires back immediately, sounding mad. He gestures with his spoon and another clump of rice sails across the kitchen. "I'm disappointed."

Maya *oohs* quietly under her breath.

"Don't use parenting lines on me, Grayson."

“Don’t have heart-to-hearts with people that *are not me*, Lucille.”

We stare at each other. Salsa music plays from the radio near the refrigerator. Maya dutifully resumes her homework at the kitchen island. Sensing the opportunity distraction provides, Mateo pours some chicken broth into the pan.

I don’t want to fight with Grayson. I never want to fight with Grayson. He’s been the one constant in my life. Just because our love didn’t work as a romance doesn’t mean that love disappeared. For a long time, it was just the two of us against the world. He’s used to knowing everything about me. Every thought. Every fear.

And then I unloaded it all on a complete stranger.

“I understand why you’re upset,” I say slowly. Sincerely. “But if you’re going to be mad at someone, be mad at our daughter.”

“Hey!” Maya protests.

Grayson’s lips twitch. “Maya and I have already had a discussion about staging coups around your love life.”

Maya nods seriously. “I’m only permitted to do so in groups from here on out. With sign-off and consultation from the dads.”

“Both dads,” Mateo and Grayson say in unison. I stare at Mateo in shock. He doesn’t usually take sides.

“Judas,” I whisper at him.

He shrugs. “I’ve been encouraging you to date for years.”

Maya gives him a thumbs-up. “Both dads. As agreed. No problem.”

I roll my eyes. “Excellent.”

“Don’t cop a *tone*,” Grayson says, still brandishing his spoon as a weapon. Mateo loops his fingers around his wrist and gently guides the utensil back to the pan. But Grayson is too worked up to pretend to cook. He abandons the stove and strides across the kitchen, eating up the space between us. I’m glad to see he’s changed out of his EAT BERTHA’S MUSSELS tee and replaced it with a cozy sweater, the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. It means he’s probably close to done on his latest project.

He stops approximately six inches away from me and glares, arms crossed over his chest. If he’s trying to be intimidating, he’s falling woefully short.

Behind him, Mateo desperately tries to salvage our dinner.

“I’m going to be mad at you for another three to six months.”

I drag my hand through my hair, suddenly exhausted. “That’s fine. Whatever you want.”

Grayson’s entire face pinches tight. “Don’t you want to know why?”

I fumble blindly for the cheese tray. Only Manchego can save me now. “I

know why. I got ooey-gooey with someone and you weren't there to witness it. I told someone my deep, dark secrets and it wasn't you."

"No."

"No?"

"No," he says again. "I'm mad because you've been struggling and you didn't tell me. That's in direct violation of the pinky promise we made beneath the tire swing, ages four and five, respectively." He uncrosses his arms and plucks the piece of cheese out of my fingers and shoves it into his mouth. He chews aggressively, glaring at me the entire time. "You've been carrying a big hurt around in your heart and I didn't notice."

I soften. "I don't think I knew about the big hurt in my heart," I tell him quietly. "Not until I started talking."

He studies me, features relaxing. "I don't like that you've been feeling this way."

"I don't either." I feel myself smile. "But that's why our genius kid called in to a radio station, yeah?"

"About that. Maya says they want you to join the show. Are you going to?"

I shrug. On the other side of the kitchen, Mateo turns off the stove. Maya slips from her stool and grabs the stack of plates sitting on the edge of the counter. There's comfort in this routine. In the sound of muted music and clinking glasses and the wobbly drawer that holds all the silverware slamming shut. Here, in this home, my loneliness feels farther away. Here, it's easier to pretend I'm okay.

"I think—" I drag my bottom lip between my teeth. I think of the woman on the phone who talked about being brave. About Aiden and his messy hair and his honest eyes. The itch in my hands and the pull in my chest when I stood in the middle of that studio, hearing a whole new set of possibilities through those headphones.

I think you started something the other night, whether you meant to or not.

"I think I'd like to try something different."

After dinner, we move from the kitchen table with the mismatched legs to the world's comfiest sectional couch at the front of the house. Grayson and Mateo and Maya distract me with things that aren't my sudden celebrity, and my brain drifts away from radio shows and romance. Grayson has a newly commissioned piece he's been dragging his feet on. Mateo's obnoxious boss

at his advertising agency has decided to eliminate all the ice from the office break rooms. Maya chatters about her Indiana Jones cosplay that her drama club is doing and I sink into the couch, twisting her hair into braids and undoing them again. It's lovely in a way few things are, warmth spreading through me with every too-loud laugh.

We drink the rest of the bottle of wine and brew a pot of decaf as Maya disappears upstairs to her room, her family duties fulfilled for the evening. She tosses a half-hearted wave over her shoulder with a grumbling promise of Danishes at Skullduggery before school tomorrow.

I tuck my legs beneath me and Mateo leans back against Grayson, his temple tipped to his shoulder. Grayson strokes his palm across his collarbone and presses a quick kiss to the side of his head. It makes me smile.

"So, are they going to send you on dates?" Grayson asks. "Matchmake you?"

"I don't know," I say slowly. "I can't imagine many people want to date me from a snippet of a conversation going viral."

Grayson arches an eyebrow. "You are vastly underestimating the power of the internet."

"And the power of Aiden Valentine," Mateo says around a yawn. His body tenses and then relaxes, his palm smoothing his jet black hair off his forehead. "He has quite the fan club among the receptionists at work."

"Helen?" Grayson asks with a snort. "Isn't she like . . . three hundred and seven years old?"

Mateo smacks his hand against Grayson's chest.

"Tell us about him," Mateo says. "Aiden."

"He's . . ."

Hot, my brain supplies. *Also, kind of a disaster. I'm not entirely confident he knows how to talk to people when he's outside the booth. He hosts a radio show about love, but he doesn't believe in it himself and he wants me to help him remember how. I think. I keep sharing things with him I don't mean to. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not.*

"He's nice," is what I settle on. I take a long sip of my coffee, feeling the warmth of it slide down my throat. I dig my sock-covered toes into the cushion I've burrowed into. "He's really . . ." My mind drifts to the way he took up space in that tiny studio. His messy hair and that line on the side of his face from his headphones. "Nice," I finish after a too-long pause.

Grayson and Mateo exchange a glance.

"What?" I ask. "What's that look about?"

"Nice." Grayson snickers, raising his voice to a higher pitch. "He's really

nice."

I toss my pillow across the room. "What? He is. He's not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"Someone vaguely Mr. Rogers–like? I don't know. But it wasn't . . . *that*."

Grayson and Mateo share another loaded glance. I sometimes forget how annoying they can be when they slip into their couple-y silent conversations. I set my mug to the side and close my eyes, dropping back against the couch with a huff. The cushions shift, the floors creak, and suddenly Aiden's voice is in the living room.

I peek open one eye. Mateo is standing in the entrance of the kitchen with the pocket-sized emergency radio they keep in their junk drawer. He shrugs. "I was curious."

"About *what*?"

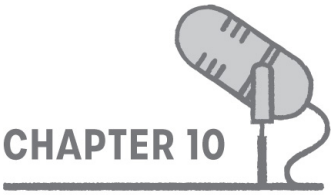
Mateo's smile is sly. "About how nice he is."

I groan and toss my arm over my eyes. On the radio, Aiden's low voice is rumbling along, interrupted by bits of static. Mateo must fuss with the ancient turn dial on the equally ancient radio because there's another burst of static, a few wobbly notes of an old Whitney Houston song, and then Aiden's voice is much clearer. It fills the living room, rough and scratchy.

Coffee over ice. Thunder in the distance.

"—and maybe that's the answer, really. That there is no answer. I don't know if any of us have any idea what we're doing. But we're trying, yeah? We can all be trying together. I like knowing that I've got you on the other end of this thing, listening to me. While I'm here, listening to you." He pauses, an exhale that rattles out from the speaker and settles like smoke in Grayson's living room. *"We had a visitor at the station tonight. I'm not allowed to talk about who that was yet, but I think you'll be interested in hearing from her. I know I am."* I smile against the inside of my arm. Aiden pauses again, longer this time. I sink into the couch and think of him alone at his desk. Shadows and filtered light from his audio controls. His smile right before the door shut. *"I hope you'll stick with us, Baltimore. I can't wait to see what happens next."*

AIDEN VALENTINE: Good night, Baltimore.



CHAPTER 10
AIDEN

"She's doing it?"

I adjust my footing and move my chair into place. It skids backward two inches and I overcorrect, banging into the wall. "She's doing it."

Jackson shifts at the other end of the hallway. He's holding a broomstick as his weapon of choice. I'm armed with the matching dustpan.

"She agreed?" he asks again, tongue stuck between his teeth as he calculates his chances of getting the tennis ball past me and in the trash-can goal. I'm currently undefeated at hallway hockey / soccer / whatever the hell we're doing. Only half of that is a result of my skill. The other half is Jackson's complete lack of hand-eye coordination.

"She agreed," I say, exasperated. This is the twenty-fifth time we've been over this. "She should be here any minute, actually."

Jackson drops the tennis ball on the floor and traps it with the broom. "Do you have a show plan?"

"I always have a show plan."

"Do you have a show plan that accounts for Lucie?"

I sigh and straighten from my hunched-over position, the dustpan in my lap. "Are you attempting to distract me or are these legitimate questions?"

Jackson rockets the tennis ball down the hallway. It hits the back of the trash can with a dull thud. He tosses his arms in the air and does one slow, wobbly, celebratory spin.

I toss the dustpan at his chair and abandon mine.

"Don't be a sore loser!" Jackson calls after me. The wheels squeak on his chair as he pushes himself along, trying to catch up. He's doing a shit job of it, laughing too much to get any momentum. "I was testing a theory."

I have no interest in hearing what that theory might be. I turn down a hallway, cut through the break room, and make for the studio. I need a door that locks and a soundproof window between me and the rest of the world.

But my booth isn't empty, and there's someone sitting in my chair.

Lucie is waiting, toying with the snow globe my dad got me almost five Christmases ago when my mom was unexpectedly admitted to the hospital. He didn't want us to spend the holiday without gifts, so he went down to the tiny shop in the Hopkins lobby and bought whatever he could find in the discount gift shop. We toasted with ice water in paper cups and laughed at my father's horrendous wrapping. It's a good memory, despite the setting. One of my favorites.

I haven't thought of it in years.

Lucie turns the snow globe over and over in her hands, shaking up the tiny white flakes, watching them land on the miniature Baltimore skyline. Her face is relaxed, eyes soft, a smile curling at the edge of her pale pink lips.

I pull the door shut behind me. "Making yourself comfortable?"

She startles and turns quickly, her long hair slipping over her shoulders. "I didn't—" She sets the snow globe back on the corner of my desk. "I wasn't—" She stands and tucks her hair behind her ears, fingertips rubbing at the row of dainty earrings along her lobe. A gesture I've seen her do twice now. "I let myself in. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for," I tell her. I keep my back pressed to the door, my hands loose at my sides. I've never noticed how small this room is before. "This is your booth now too. According to Maggie."

She gives me a tight smile. "Only for a few evenings a week. For a limited run."

I nod. "Or until you get sick of me. Whichever comes first."

She keeps staring at me.

"That was a joke," I offer. I can't read her at all.

"It was very funny."

"That must be why you're laughing so hard." I push off the door.

Her eyes follow me. The barest hint of a smile twitches at her mouth. She fights it though. And it somehow makes me like her even more.

"You're going to tear me apart, aren't you?" I murmur.

"Don't worry, Aiden." Her smile blooms. There's a secret there, somewhere. "You're safe with me."

I sincerely doubt that.

Jackson barrels into the window with his rolling chair, brandishing his broom like a trident and interrupting our staring contest. I see his mouth move but don't hear a word he's saying. Thank god.

His eyes land on Lucie and he waves enthusiastically. She lifts her hand in response, forehead crumpled in confusion.

"Is he using a desk chair as a . . . boat?"

“A traveling mechanism of some sort, yeah.” I sigh. I can’t believe he scored a goal on me. “I’d like to say you get used to this sort of thing, but this place always manages to surprise you.”

“Is he the one who does the weather updates?”

“And traffic. He also likes to make sure I’m taking my vitamins and he’s a shit shot at hallway hockey.” I frown, not sure why I felt the need to add that last part. I backtrack. “He’s a fine shot, actually. One of my best friends.”

Lucie hums and I move into the room and peek at the desk. She’s still staring at Jackson as he wheels his way back to wherever he came from and I’m trying not to notice. I distract myself by going through my preshow ritual. Eileen has already been here to set up; there’s a brand-new microphone in the space next to mine and a blank notepad. Lucie shifts to accommodate me and I catch a whiff of motor oil. Fresh soap and . . . daisies. She gathers all her hair in her hand and twists it over her shoulder, fingers working nimbly as she tugs it into a braid. I’m mesmerized by the graceful and practiced movement. It’s probably something she does a million times a day, but I can’t look away.

She is not what I expected. Not on the phone two weeks ago, not when she visited Maggie earlier in the week, and not now, standing in my studio looking at me like she has no idea why she’s here or what she’s doing.

“Can I . . . help?” she asks. I tilt my head to look at her. She shifts on her feet when our gazes snap together. “I’m not used to sitting on my hands.”

I want her to sit and relax and maybe talk to me some more about the things she wants for herself, but I’m not sure that’s possible with the way she keeps shifting on her feet. Plus, we’ll have plenty of time to do exactly that when we’re locked in this room together for . . . hours.

I tip my head to the empty coffeepot behind me. “Make us some coffee? There’s a bunch of stuff in the break room to choose from. Whatever you want.”

She reaches for the handle of the carafe. “I haven’t been relegated to coffee-making duties in a while.”

Shit. I didn’t even realize. I reach for the pot in her hand, but she tugs it out of reach, a laugh under her breath. My fingertips skim the soft material of the sweater she’s wearing and I drop my hand abruptly, curling it into a fist. There is about three inches of space in this room and there’s nowhere I can move that doesn’t have some part of me pressed up against some part of her.

“Relax,” she says. “I was kidding. Thank you for giving me something to do.”

She slips out the door to the booth and I watch her through the window until I lose sight of her. My chest feels uncomfortably tight, my breath too

short. It's not a new feeling, just one I haven't felt in a while.

Preshow jitters.

The social media fervor around Lucie hasn't died down, and Maggie has been stoking the flames with teasers about a mystery guest. The internet has more or less figured it out; now everyone's waiting to see what happens next.

I'm waiting to see what happens next. I have no idea how Lucie is going to respond on the air. We plan to officially launch "Lucie Looks for Love" tonight, a working title, suggested by Hughie, vehemently protested by me. But I was overruled and here we are. Standing in the middle of a booth that suddenly feels too small, evaluating all the life choices that have led me here. About to do my best to help a woman find something I'm not even sure I believe in. Something that's never been good to me.

Lucie comes back in the room with a carafe full of water and a bag of ground coffee. I stare at the green label.

"Where did you find that?"

"Someone hid it in an old Christmas cookie tin in one of the top cabinets." She stops fiddling with the coffee machine to look at me. "Is that okay?"

"Fine," I say, my voice amused. I'm the one who hid it in one of the top cabinets, in an old Christmas cookie tin. I've had to hide my coffee since the second week I was at the station, when everyone decided to use it as their own. No one's been able to find it for years—not for lack of trying—and Lucie found it in six minutes. "Why were you looking in old Christmas cookie tins?"

"Because I love Christmas cookies." She looks at the half-crumpled bag of coffee. "Should I put it back? You're being weird about it."

I'm being slightly weird about it. "No, it's fine." It's just a bag of coffee. I shuffle some more things around on my desk. There is significantly less space in here with two sets of everything. "Are you feeling good about tonight?"

She blows out a breath. "I'm feeling . . . fine about it. I guess we'll see how it goes."

"You're going to be great," I tell her, fiddling with the audio controls, trying to find a space for it that won't have me driving my elbow into Lucie every time I need to adjust. "Just be yourself."

"That's the problem," she mutters.

I pause my rearranging. She's frowning at the coffee machine, watching as it slowly brews my clandestine French roast, her hands curled in the sleeves of her sweater. She's hesitant. *Nervous.*

"I don't buy it," I tell her.

“Don’t buy what?” she asks, startled. I guess not many people in Lucie’s life call her on her bullshit. Except maybe her daughter.

I reach for my coffee mug and my forearm brushes against hers. She doesn’t flinch away or press into me. She stays exactly where she is. “The night you called, I asked you questions and you gave me answers. You didn’t hesitate. You didn’t waffle. You busted my balls and you charmed half the country while you did it. You know what that tells me?”

“That I’m incredibly trusting with strangers in the middle of the night?”

“It tells me you know exactly who you are, and you know exactly what you want. You’ve just buried it under everything else for so long you’ve forgotten.”

Her face softens, her eyes on mine.

“You know why you’re here, Lucie, and you know what you want. Don’t pretend otherwise. Let’s find your magic, whatever that looks like. This whole place is Team Lucie.”

“Even you?”

“Especially me.” I reach for the other mug and hand it to her. “Now, pour your coffee and put on your headphones. Let’s run some audio tests.”

“You’re too far away from your mic.”

“What?”

“You’re too far away,” I say again. “You sound whispery.”

“I don’t sound whispery.” She yells to overcompensate and the feedback in my headphones makes me wince. “*You* sound whispery,” she accuses, still yelling.

“Okay, now you’re yelling. Just—” I sigh and curl my hand around her mic stand. I tug it closer, then grip the armrest of her chair. I drag her chair toward me until we’re pressed together shoulder to wrist, her outer thigh tucked tight to mine beneath the desk. Her chin tips up as she stares at me with a dumbfounded look, her bangs in her face.

“Did you just manhandle me?”

“I manhandled the chair,” I tell her. “This is better.”

“How is this better?”

I tap the microphone stand in front of her. “Because now the microphone will pick up your normal voice. No more yelling.”

Her eyelashes flutter against her cheeks. This close, I can see the light dusting of freckles across her nose. She does smell like daisies. Fresh flowers

with a sharp bite of metal beneath. She exhales and a whisper of her breath brushes against the hollow of my throat. Beneath the table, she tries to rearrange her legs and knocks my knee with hers.

"No more yelling," she says, her lips moving around the words, which echo through my headphones. Lucie, in high definition. "Noted."

Someone knocks against the window. Lucie turns to look, but my eyes are stuck on her. Specifically, the curve of her ear and the hair tucked behind it. The three tiny studs along her lobe and the way her fingers trace them. One, two, three.

I clear my throat and turn my head.

There is not enough space in this room.

Maggie knocks on the window again and holds up two fingers. I nod and give her a thumbs-up.

"You ready?" I ask Lucie.

"Probably not."

I smile. "That's the spirit. Eileen is doing her thing on the other side of the wall. She's going to count us in over the headphones."

"That she is," Eileen says through our headsets, and Lucie jumps next to me. Her knee drives up into the table and my hand finds her thigh, urging her still. I squeeze gently, letting my thumb trace over the surprisingly soft material. Lucie rattles out a breath and I snatch my hand away, both palms flat on the desk. Together we stare unseeingly at the run of show on the monitor in front of us.

We're off to an excellent start.

"Give 'em hell, kids," Eileen says in our ears. "Counting down from five, four, three, two, one."

The intro music plays and I look for the part of myself that isn't a raging moron. I've never been someone who engages in casual touch, and I'm not going to start with Lucie. I repeat it like a mantra until it sticks. *I will not touch Lucie. I will not touch Lucie.* My shoulders relax and I settle in, doing my best to ignore the heat brushing against my left side. She sucks in a nervous breath and I try to ignore that too.

"Hey, Baltimore. Welcome to *Heartstrings* on 101.6 LITE FM. I'm your host, Aiden Valentine, and I've got a special guest with me tonight. She'll be with us for a while, so give her your best welcome, yeah?"

I nod at Lucie. On the screen behind her, I can see our social media feed picking up steam. The caller log is dark right now, but I imagine it won't be for long.

A smile hooks the corner of her mouth. "Hi, host of *Heartstrings*, Aiden

Valentine." She leans closer to the mic, like she's ducking her head out the tiny window in the back and whispering out over the city. The row homes that line the cobblestone streets of Fells Point and the ones on the hill on the other side of the harbor. The redbrick churches in Little Italy and the high-rises in Harbor East. A whole city on the edge of their seats waiting to see what she says next. Her smile tugs wider. "Hi, Baltimore."

She says the name of the city in the way that all locals do. Slippery sounds that slot themselves into two syllables. *Bawl-mer.*

I smile. "Would you like to introduce yourself to our friends at home?"

Lucie takes a deep breath and lifts one shoulder.

"It's Lucie." Her eyes slant to mine and hold. "I'm hoping you guys might be able to help me out with a problem I've been having."

And the call log lights up like a Christmas tree.

LUCIE STONE: Are those people calling in?

AIDEN VALENTINE: Yup.

LUCIE STONE: To talk to me?

AIDEN VALENTINE: Yup.

LUCIE STONE: Oh, wow. Get ready to be disappointed, Baltimore.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Get ready to be charmed, Baltimore.

CHAPTER 11
AIDEN

MONDAY NIGHT

"What sort of traits do you find attractive in a partner?"

Lucie's face turns bright pink in the glow of the monitors. She goes to scratch at her ear, bumps against her headphones, then knits her fingers together in her lap instead.

"I'm not sure," she says slowly. "I don't know that I've ever thought about it."

"Really?"

She shrugs. "Is that something people keep a list of or something?"

"No." I smile. "But they usually have an idea of what they're looking for."

"Aiden. I'm literally here because I'm garbage at dating. We're going to have to walk before we run."

I laugh. "Okay, fair point. Let's start somewhere easy. Do you have a celebrity crush?"

Her blush intensifies. It's unexpected and cute as hell.

"I don't want to tell you," she mumbles.

"Why not?"

"Because . . ." She sighs, looking anywhere but at me. "I don't want to. Let's start somewhere else."

"Absolutely not."

"What? Why?"

"Because now I'm firmly invested in knowing the answer. We can't move forward until I do."

She rubs her lips together. Crosses her legs and then uncrosses them. She leans forward and mumbles something into the microphone. I don't catch any of it, and I know our listeners haven't either.

"What was that?"

She looks over at me, resigned. "Alan Alda."

A laugh bursts out of me. “What?”

“This is why I didn’t want to tell you.”

I can’t stop laughing. Both at her answer and at the defiant look on her face. “How old is he? Like eighty?”

“He’s eighty-eight and I’m not crushing on him now, obviously.” She pauses. “Nineteen seventy-four Alan Alda. Hawkeye Pierce was a babe.”

“From *M*A*S*H*? The old TV show about the Korean War?”

“Reruns are almost constantly on TV,” she defends herself sullenly.

I laugh some more. I laugh so hard my stomach hurts. I haven’t laughed this hard in ages.

Lucie tries to glare at me, but a smile twitches at the corner of her mouth. “Are you done yet?”

“No. I’ll never be done with this.” I clamp my teeth down on my bottom lip. Another rogue chuckle rumbles out of me. “So I think it’s fair to say you’re attracted to a sense of humor.” I wait a beat. “And geriatric men in military uniforms.”

WEDNESDAY NIGHT

“What do you want to talk about tonight?”

“Not celebrity crushes, that’s for sure.”

“How about ideal date locations?”

She blinks at me, unamused. “Aiden.” She sighs.

“What?”

“I thought I expressed that I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“And I thought I expressed that I’m here to help you figure it out. How are you going to find your dream date if you have no idea what you want to do with them, hmm?”

Lucie’s eyes narrow. Her legs are tucked beneath her on her chair and she’s got both hands curled around her mug of coffee. My coffee, which she managed to find again despite its new hiding place. Steam drifts in tendrils around her face, her hair draped loosely around her shoulders.

“It doesn’t matter,” she grumbles.

A smile tugs at my mouth. “This again.”

“No. I’m not playing coy,” she says. “It shouldn’t matter what we’re doing, should it? I’m not picky about where we go or what we do, I just want to enjoy the time I’m spending with someone.”

I stare at her. She stares back.

“So . . . the Canton Waterfront Park?”

“I like taking walks.”

“It’s February.”

She shrugs. “There are things called coats, Aiden.”

“What about . . .” I try to think of the worst possible date location. “What if someone wanted to take you to a historical reenactment at Fort McHenry?”

She winces. “I’m sure that would be educational.”

“What if they wanted you to wear a bonnet and a petticoat?”

One eyebrow arches. “This is getting specific.”

“What if they wanted you to wave a flag? Sing ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’?”

“Is this a fantasy of yours, Aiden Valentine?”

“No.” Then I think about Lucie in a bonnet, and I walk that statement back mentally. “What about the parking lot of the abandoned Burger King? Would you go on a date there?”

“Am I being murdered?”

“I just want you to admit that there is somewhere you’d like to be taken on a date. You’re allowed to have an opinion.”

She rolls her lips, her forehead creased in thought. Her thumb rubs around the rim of her coffee mug, back and forth. Her eyes dart to me and away again.

“What is it?” I ask.

She shifts. “Nothing.”

“Nah, that’s not a nothing look on your face. You know your answer.”

“No, I—”

“Tell me.”

“I don’t have an answer.”

“Yes, you do. Tell me.”

She ducks her head slightly. “I don’t want you to make fun of me.”

Something twists in my chest. I thought we’d moved past this, but Lucie is still so convinced the things she wants aren’t things worth talking about. Who made her feel so small? Who made her hide pieces of herself? Maya’s dad, maybe? Someone else?

I cross my heart with my index finger. “I won’t. I promise.”

“I’d really like it if . . .” I watch as she scrapes together her bravery. It might be the most incredible thing about her. How she’s always willing to try. “I think it would be nice to have a picnic,” she finally says.

“A picnic,” I repeat.

“Yeah,” she says slowly, still ping-ponging her attention around the studio. “It doesn’t have to be outdoors either. Maybe on the living room floor.

Nothing fancy. Carry-out from a burger place and a fort made out of sheets. Maybe a movie in the background. I don't know. The idea always seemed nice."

"Eating on the floor seems nice?"

She narrows her eyes. "I told you I didn't want you to make fun of me for it."

I hold up my hands. "I'm not. I'm just trying to understand. What do you like most about that idea?"

She goes quiet on her side of the table. She's quiet for so long I almost nudge her for an answer again. But something keeps me still. Maybe it's the look on her face or maybe it's the way she's holding her body a little too tight. Like she's never let herself think of these things before. Like she's never let herself want them.

"I like thinking that I'd be worth the trouble of something like that," she confesses quietly. Her shoulder shrugs up to her ear. "I like thinking that it doesn't need to be fancy to be special. Maybe . . . maybe they'd remember I like fountain soda best or daisies instead of roses. Little things that'd let me know they've been paying attention." Her eyes lift back to mine. That twist in my chest again, sharper this time. "I like that. Thinking that I'm worth paying attention to. Something ordinary made extraordinary by the person you're sharing it with." She looks back down at her half-empty coffee mug. "That's the sort of date I'd want."

FRIDAY NIGHT

"You're kidding."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"I'm really not."

"You did not have blond hair."

"Blond tips," I correct. "During a very unfortunate phase in high school."

Lucie tosses her head back with a cackle. It slices through the room like lightning, and my nails dig half-moons into the palm of my hand. I didn't think I'd want anyone in this booth with me, but it's nice.

I like having the company.

"Do you have pictures?"

"What?"

"Pictures," she asks, still smiling, dragging me back to the conversation I'm supposed to be paying attention to. "I demand photographic evidence."

“Ah, no. All pictures have been burned.”

MONDAY NIGHT

“I don’t want to talk about me tonight,” Lucie tells me somewhere in the middle of the show after a string of apathetic answers. She’s in a contemplative mood tonight. Cookies aren’t helping.

“That’s good,” I tell her breezily, “since this is a segment specifically about you.”

“It’s not about me,” she says.

I raise both eyebrows.

“Okay. It is slightly about me. But I need a pause. Tell me something about you.”

“Me?”

She nods. “Mm-hmm. A deep, dark secret.”

“Just . . . jumping right in there, huh? Right into the deep end.” I swivel back and forth in my chair. My knee taps against hers with every twist to the left. She doesn’t move away and neither do I. I’ve decided a little touching is okay. As long as she doesn’t mind. “If I remember correctly, I tossed a few softball questions in your direction before getting to the good stuff.”

“You still haven’t gotten to the good stuff,” she says, and I believe it. I believe with Lucie, there’s only *good stuff*. “You host the show, don’t you? Sharing your feelings might make you more vulnerable with your listeners.”

I make a face. “I don’t have those.”

“What? Listeners?”

“No. Feelings.”

She gives me a delighted smile. “Oh, you’re one of those, huh?” she says, mocking me.

“One of what?”

“*I don’t have feelings*,” she grunts in a deep voice, several octaves below her normal register. I guess that’s supposed to be me. “*I’m a big man and I don’t need feelings.*”

“You’re incredible at doing impersonations. You should pursue it as a career.”

“Aiden . . .” she drags out my name with a bit of a whine and something sharp settles at the base of my spine. I shift in my chair.

“Do Arnold Schwarzenegger next.” I request, my voice a rough scratch.

“No. Tell me a secret.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

I sigh, eyes drifting to the ceiling. Jackson decorated the booth for my birthday last April and some of the streamers are still stuck up there. Bits of ripped, faded paper hanging on from where I yanked them down. “You want a secret right now?”

“Yes, please.”

“Okay.” I lean closer to the microphone and dip my chin to my chest, playing it up. Her smile blossoms and blooms, her whole face lighting up with it. “I’ve never told anyone this before. Are you ready?”

“This is a safe space, Aiden.”

“My dream job . . .” I hesitate. Lucie leans closer. I almost feel bad for what I’m about to say. “I’ve always wanted to operate those purple dragon boats they have in the harbor.”

She collapses back in her chair with a sigh, disappointed. “Aiden.”

“What?” I laugh. “That’s my secret!”

“That is not the sort of secret I was hoping for.”

“Well”—I push the appropriate buttons on the control panel to send us to a commercial break—”that’s the secret. Baltimore, we’ll be back after these messages from sponsors. Start thinking of your own secrets.”

I switch us to break and tug off my headphones, rubbing the heel of my hand against my ear. Usually during this time, I slip into the break room to see if anyone left any of the good snacks or stretch my legs with a walk around the parking lot, but I’m content to sit in the booth tonight.

Lucie nudges me. “You do that a lot, you know.”

“What?” I pick up my mug, check to see if I have any coffee left, then wheel sideways to refill it. “Confess to wanting to ride a little paddleboat around the Inner Harbor?”

“No.” She rolls her eyes and extends her mug. “Refuse to talk about yourself.”

I fill her mug before I fill mine. “I talk about myself all night long.”

“Not true,” she says. “You talk to people. You have opinions, but you hardly ever talk about yourself.”

“A good conversationalist is someone who knows how to listen.” I take a sip of too-hot coffee and stretch my neck.

She doesn’t like that answer. I can tell by the twist of her lips. I sigh and lean forward to put my mug on the table. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to give me something honest. Something about you.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to know,” she answers simply.

I drum my fingers against the desk. One of her feet is propped up on the chair beneath her, her chin on her knee. She watches me and I watch her, trying to figure out if I want to give in to her request or find a different distraction to hide in.

But I'm tired, and it's the part of the night where secrets don't feel like secrets and the world could be reduced to just this radio booth and I wouldn't notice.

"Sometimes I'll tumble down a wormhole and watch sad movie scenes on YouTube," I say slowly. "Just clips, though. Never the full movie."

"Just clips?" she asks.

I can't remember the last time I watched a movie in its entirety. It feels like a waste of my time. I don't know why. I take another sip of my coffee and hum around the lip of the mug. "Mm-hmm."

She's quiet for a long stretch. "Only the sad parts?"

I shrug.

"Do they make you cry?"

The scene from *Field of Dreams* where his dad shows up in the cornfield certainly does. "Sometimes."

Lucie frowns at me. Her face is so damn expressive. I wonder what it's like to walk around with your heart on your sleeve. Mine is buried so deep in my chest I'm not sure I could find it if I wanted to.

"That's sad, Aiden."

"Is it?"

"Yeah," she says, still looking at me. "That's really sad. It's a weird secret."

"That's why it's a secret, Lucie. It's supposed to be weird."

Her frown turns contemplative. "Do you have any other ones?"

"That one wasn't enough?"

She shakes her head.

"Fine. My name isn't really Aiden Valentine."

She rolls her eyes. "Very funny."

"I'm serious."

"Is it James Bond? Perd Hapley?"

"I wish I had a name as cool as Perd Hapley."

"All right, Aiden-who-apparently-isn't-named-Aiden."

"My first name is Aiden." I take another long sip of coffee. "But my last name is Valen. Valentine is my radio name. Because of the romance thing."

I liked having the differentiation when I first started. Aiden Valen might struggle with believing in good things, but Aiden Valentine never did. Not

until the world beat the optimism out of him.

She blinks at me. “You’re serious.”

I nod. “I told you I was.”

I turn my chair back to my monitor. She stares unseeingly at the coffee machine. I check the countdown and adjust my headphones.

“Are you processing?” I ask.

“You’ve handed me a lot tonight.”

“I understand.” I gesture at her headphones. “Can you process and listen at the same time? We’re about to head back on.”

She nods, but she doesn’t move to put her headset on. I can hear Eileen in my ear counting us down, but Lucie doesn’t. Because she’s still not wearing her headset.

I reach forward and brush my hands beneath her hair, my knuckles ghosting against her neck. My hands must be cold because she shivers, her eyes jumping to mine. They really are the prettiest green. Pale emerald in the center, a dark ring at the edges. Like treasure beneath still waters. I tug her headphones off her neck and push them carefully over her ears, making sure I don’t catch any of the shiny silver hoops looped around her earlobe. I tuck her hair beneath the band and my hand lingers.

“Good?” I ask. My thumb rests at the hollow beneath her ear. I can feel the faintest flutter of her pulse there, steady and sure. She’s looking at me like I’m a puzzle she doesn’t know how to solve.

I know the feeling.

“Yeah,” she says. She gives me a small, tentative smile. An assurance, maybe. Or her own type of secret, I don’t know. All I know is it feels like something different and delicate. Something tremulous. Secrets shared in the middle of the night. Dark pressing in on the windows. A whole city spinning out at our feet.

She reaches up and adjusts her headphones. “Yeah. We’re good, Aiden.”

I let my hand drop, listen to the countdown, and we start again.

LUCIE STONE: You guys, Aiden told me he watches YouTube videos and cries.

AIDEN VALENTINE: [sighs]

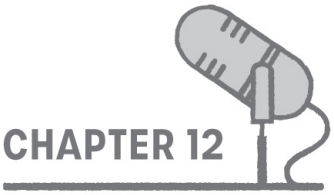
LUCIE STONE: Big, fat tears.

AIDEN VALENTINE: What's the point of a secret if you're going to share it with the world?

LUCIE STONE: [laughter]

AIDEN VALENTINE: It's not funny.

LUCIE STONE: Then why are you smiling?



CHAPTER 12

AIDEN

She's a natural. Poised and funny and sarcastic. Whip-smart and quick on her feet. We've been spending more and more of our time together on the phone lines, and Lucie charms every single one of our callers.

Even the weird ones.

"How tall are you?" asks our current caller, a man with a brusque voice and absolutely zero tact. I wanted to kick him off as soon as he asked her shoe size, but Maggie appeared on the other side of the window with her earbuds in, gesturing wildly to keep it going. I have no idea why, unless she wants to watch my head explode in real time.

"Um." Lucie glances at me and I shrug. She's the boss, as far as I'm concerned. She can play it however she wants. Though I certainly wouldn't be opposed to her ending this call and moving on to the next. He's treating her like she's a fish at the aquarium. Or a fillet at the meat counter. "Five ten and a half?"

"That's tall," he says.

"Is it?" she asks. "I always thought I—"

"What does your face look like?" he cuts her off.

She pauses and blinks, startled. "I don't know," she says slowly. "It's a face."

I tuck my smile in the palm of my hand. Lucie is fine when she forgets she's on a radio show orchestrated to find her a relationship, but as soon as she's faced with a direct question about herself, she becomes stilted and awkward.

And she says I'm the one who has trouble talking about myself.

She notices my look because she turns slightly in her seat, her knee digging into my thigh. "What?" she asks. "What are you laughing about?"

I hold up my hands. "Nothing. I'm not laughing." I pull my mic closer, thoroughly unable to contain my grin. "Don't worry, Baltimore. Lucie does indeed have a face."

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Fine. You tell him what my face looks like.”

“Well, you have a nose.”

She huffs.

“And two ears. Those are nice.”

“There you go,” she says to the guy on the other side of the headphones. The one I forgot existed. “I have nice ears.”

“Long hair,” I continue. I grin at her. “The better to strangle me with.” Her forehead creases in a heavy frown. “And she gets a dimple on her chin when she’s glaring at me.” I laugh.

I curl away to avoid the flick to my arm and keep the other stuff to myself. How her eyes are the prettiest green I’ve ever seen. How the freckles across her nose are a match for the ones dusted over her shoulder—the ones I keep getting a glimpse of every time the collar of her sweater slips. How her laugh is husky and warm and makes her whole body come alive. That it starts somewhere in her belly and twirls ribbons around her, making her fucking glow.

I’m noticing things I shouldn’t be noticing and I’m not as mad about it as I should be.

“None of that is really helpful,” the guy on the other end of our headphones says.

“Then you’re not who she’s looking for.” I roll my eyes and hang up. “We’re going to take a quick music break. Lucie, what do you want to hear?”

She’s relaxed in the chair next to me, her long legs kicked out beneath the desk. She smiles at me and I can’t help but smile back. “‘A Kiss to Build a Dream On,’ by Louis Armstrong, please.”

The smile falls off my face in increments, a sharp crack in the middle of my chest. I’ve heard that song a million times, in a million different hospital rooms. Through chemo treatments and MRI scans and doctor’s visits. Whenever my mom needed to go somewhere else, she chose that song. Every time.

It’s a painful reminder of memories that have always been easier to hide than handle. Disinfectant and sterilizer and the chemical-clean smell of hospitals.

“When Maya was a newborn, she’d cry half the night,” Lucie explains, oblivious to my mental spiral. “I’d try to sing her this song to calm her down, but I was so tired I could never remember the words. I ended up just singing the chorus over and over.” Lucie’s smile dims when she notices the way I’ve gone still. “What’s wrong?”

I shake my head and tug myself away from memories that still feel too sharp, the edges poking at wounds that I never figured out how to heal. “Nothing,” I say. I clear my throat and swivel in my chair to quickly flip through the music library. I’m operating on muscle memory as I pull up the song. “You really are a romantic, huh?”

It’s a barb I haven’t lobbed in her direction since our first night together. She lifts her chin and scowls at me. “You don’t need to say it like it’s a bad thing.”

“I’m not,” I say, knowing that I am. I’m not being kind, but I’m also not in a place where I can make myself stop. I’ve always done better with a buffer around any strong emotion. It’s how I’ve survived. I’ve lost track of that with Lucie.

She’s here to find a date. I need to remember that.

“Louis Armstrong.” I hit the button for the transition harder than I need to. “As requested.”

I don’t bother letting our listeners know we’ll be right back. I start the song and then tug off my headphones so I don’t have to hear the opening notes. They hit the desk with a clatter.

I reach for the coffeepot just so I have something to do with my hands. “Need a fill-up?”

“No, thanks,” she says slowly, hesitant, probably trying to figure out why my mood plummeted as soon as she made her song request. The leather of her chair creaks beneath her as she shifts. “If I have coffee too late, I won’t get to sleep and I have an early shift in the morning.”

I grasp the conversation change with both hands. I need to get back to neutral ground, where I’m not such an asshole. “Is that— are you going to be okay in the morning? Not too tired?”

She shrugs. “I’ll manage. Having a kid and sleep deprivation go hand in hand. And the guys at the shop all know I’m doing this, so . . .” She shrugs again. “It’s been fine so far.”

“The shop?” I can’t believe we’ve been sitting here together every other night for two weeks and I don’t know what she does.

“Mm-hmm. I’m an auto mechanic. Hence the grease.” She wiggles her fingers and I see the smudge of something across her knuckles. “Hazard of the job. I think I’m perpetually grease-stained. I had a guy tell me once it’s off-putting that I have such a burly job.”

“Burly?”

“I think he was trying to say masculine.”

What a fucking idiot. “I hope you kicked him in the nuts.”

She sighs and shrugs her shoulders. That resigned look appears on her face again. Like she was silly for ever expecting anything different. I hate that look.

"I wanted to," she says quietly. "I wish I was brave enough to."

I fill my mug, still feeling buzzy and anxious. "Is your shop local?" I ask, half paying attention.

She nods. "Yeah. Down in Fells. The one with the blue roof?"

I know the place. I pass it all the time. "I think Jackson got his oil changed there once."

"Really?" She smiles and cocks her head to the side. "What sort of car does he drive?"

"A Honda Civic," Jackson answers from the door. I slosh some of my coffee over the rim of the mug. I didn't even hear him come in. "It was the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety's top safety pick for 2022. Superior marks in front crash prevention."

"That's great," Lucie says, amused.

"Isn't it?" Jackson pulls the door shut behind him, ignoring me completely. He has a box of Berger cookies on top of his clipboard. He holds it out to her. "Want a cookie?"

I double down on my bad mood.

He keeps doing this. Appearing out of nowhere when I'm in the booth with Lucie, disregarding his schedule, giving me knowing looks. He's trying to piss me off and I don't know why.

It's working though.

"There's not exactly room in the booth for another person right now," I snark, annoyed with the song and annoyed with Jackson and annoyed with myself for being annoyed. Lucie freezes with her arm extended toward the cookie box and they both turn to look at me. I stare pointedly at Jackson. "Did you need something?"

Jackson raises both of his eyebrows. "Traffic and weather together, man. You know the drill."

I glance at the clock. "Not for another ten minutes."

An amused smile appears on his stupid, smug mouth. He hands Lucie the entire box of cookies. "I usually do it after your music break."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do."

"Should I leave, or"—Lucie nibbles on her cookie, watching us go back

and forth—”do you guys need the room to work this out?”

“No, I’ll leave. I need something to eat anyway.” I push back in my chair. What I really need is space, and I’m not going to find it in this microscopic room with three people crammed into it. I’m out of sorts, twisted up by that song and every painful memory it’s tugged to the surface. I just need a second to collect myself and I’ll be fine. I hand Jackson my headphones. “All yours.”

Jackson gives me a baffled look. “Thank you,” he says. “For allowing me to do my job.”

It takes everything in me to not punch his arm as hard as I can. But this room is full of very expensive equipment and I can afford to replace exactly none of it, so I back out calmly and stalk toward the break room.

I grab a Little Debbie oatmeal pie instead of the cookies Jackson confiscated and break it into tiny pieces, aggressively chewing while watching Jackson and Lucie in the booth, their heads bent together. Are they talking about Honda statistics? I feel like Jackson is the type of guy to have the owner’s manual memorized. She’s a mechanic. She’s probably interested in stuff like that.

“You’re a terrible wingman,” Maggie says, appearing out of nowhere. I jump and almost choke on my tiny oatmeal pie. She slams her fist in the middle of my back, but it doesn’t exactly feel altruistic. “You know you’re supposed to be finding her a boyfriend, right?”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing?”

She studies me. “Is it? You haven’t let her talk to anyone for more than three minutes.”

“Three minutes is our average length of call.”

“You’ve been on the air together for two weeks, Aiden.”

“Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

“You’re cutting our callers short.”

“I’m letting her talk to a bunch of different people. This stuff takes time, Maggie. She’s not going to make a love connection right away. That’s unrealistic.”

“Is it unrealistic? Or do you want it to be unrealistic?” Maggie sets her hands on her hips. She fixes me with a stern look. “Is this going to be a problem for you?”

“What?”

“You know what.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I don’t know what.”

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out the station-issued cell phone. We use it for text message promotions and late-night Door-Dashing.

“I’m not an idiot, Aiden. I know you think this idea is stupid. Beneath you.” I open my mouth to respond, but Maggie points aggressively in the direction of the booth, cutting me off. That’s not what I think at all. “You’re supposed to be helping her find her happily ever after in there. Do I need to remind you that your job, and everyone else’s, depends on it?” She presses the phone into my chest. “So turn that frown upside down and go make some magic for that woman. She deserves it.”

She does deserve it. But her candidates right now aren’t exactly showstoppers. Maggie hits me with the phone again and I flinch. “Why are you trying to shove the bat phone into my chest cavity?” I ask.

“I want you to give it to Lucie.”

“Why?”

Maggie throws up her hands. “Are you going to question every little thing I do?”

Probably. “Why does she need the phone?”

“So she can take text messages from callers without handing out her personal number to a bunch of weirdos who want to know if she has ears,” Maggie says. “I want to give her a chance to get to know the men that interest her. On her own terms.” She fixes me with a fierce glare, waiting for me to object. I wisely keep my mouth shut. “I got the news tonight. We scored a major sponsor. From this moment forward, her segment will be called ‘Lucie’s Road to Love, sponsored by Mr. Tire.’”

I stare at Maggie. “Are you kidding me?”

Maggie doesn’t so much as smile. “What?”

“Is that for real? Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack. Why are you making that face?”

“*Lucie’s Road to Love*? *Mr. Tire*? Why not just slap a Royal Farms sticker on her forehead and call it a day? If she finds love, everyone in the greater Baltimore area can get a free chicken basket.”

Maggie is unamused. “Are you done?”

“Don’t stand there and tell me she deserves *magic* when you’re auctioning her to the highest bidder.”

Something flashes in Maggie’s eyes. Fury with a healthy dose of violent enthusiasm. She looks like she could murder me with her pinky toe and enjoy every second of it. “I’m not auctioning Lucie, you moron. I’m leveraging the situation for our failing station. I’m doing what I have to do because someone gleefully drove us right into the ground.” She slaps the phone into my chest one last time. “Get over yourself and this superiority complex that seemingly cropped up out of nowhere. Give her the phone. Let her talk to people. She

can decide for herself if she wants to explore anything further with them. No more gatekeeping."

She holds the phone to my chest until I reluctantly take it. "That woman is finding her match, Aiden. Whether you're on board with it or not."

AIDEN VALENTINE: The text lines are now open for . . . “Lucie’s Road to Love, sponsored by Mr. Tire.”

LUCIE STONE: [laughter]

AIDEN VALENTINE: That’s enough.

LUCIE STONE: I’m sorry, it’s just—

AIDEN VALENTINE: I know.

LUCIE STONE: Is it weird I’m pleased? I feel like an F1 driver. I’m sponsored by Mr. Tire.

AIDEN VALENTINE: I’m pretty sure your *road to love* is sponsored by Mr. Tire.

LUCIE STONE: Don’t say it like that.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Like what?

LUCIE STONE: Like it’s something gross.

LUCIE STONE: It’s very pure. Poetic, almost.

LUCIE STONE: Come wander down my road to love.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Now you’re the one making it gross.

AIDEN VALENTINE: [sigh]

AIDEN VALENTINE: As a reminder, Baltimore, don’t text weird stuff to the phone. If you text weird stuff, I’ll be the one who answers and I can guarantee you won’t enjoy it. The phone is monitored. Don’t—what?

What’s that look?

LUCIE STONE: You got very intense just then.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Remind me to tell you about the foot pictures.

CHAPTER 13

LUCIE

The phone won't stop buzzing.

Aiden handed it to me last night as soon as he got back in the booth, his face fixed carefully in a blank mask. I don't know what happened to send him from friendly to closed off so quickly, but I know the song had something to do with it.

Maybe he doesn't like jazz? Maybe I said something wrong? I've picked it over in my brain like a misfiring engine, but I can't find the misstep. I can't find the piece that's out of alignment.

It's a good thing I have about seven million text messages to distract me. My road to love is now a highway to hell.

"Are you going to answer those or let it vibrate a hole through my countertop?"

"Undecided," I tell Patty, blindly reaching for another cookie from Maya's plate. She rotates it halfway so I can reach the thumbprint jam ones I like best while she still has access to her avocado toast. A flawless system. "The messages have gotten out of control."

"Were they ever under control?"

"Also undecided."

Maya drums her feet against the bar beneath the counter. She hangs out at the café after school sometimes, when my shift at the shop runs late and Grayson is teaching a class. Patty keeps an eye on her and helps her with her math homework, then sets her loose on the sci-fi section at the top of the stairs.

I used to feel bad about relying on the people around me, but Patty insists she enjoys Maya's company more than mine, so I stopped arguing with her about it.

"Everyone at school says you're doing great," Maya tells me, dropping a gigantic hunk of avocado on her sweater.

I'm not looking for approval from a bunch of hormonal-addled preteens,

but the praise makes me feel warm and cozy all the same. “They do?”

She nods. “Ms. Parker said you and Aiden have good vibes.”

Patty appears on the other side of the counter with my café au lait. “I agree with Ms. Parker. That man has a sexy-ass voice.”

“Patty.”

“Just stating facts.” She looks at Maya. “Do you find anyone sexy yet, or is that a thirteen-year-old thing?”

“Patty,” I say again, a warning in my voice.

Maya shrugs, scooping the avocado off her sweater. “I think books are sexy,” she says very seriously. “No one at school has quite lived up to Aragorn yet.”

God, I love this kid. I lean over and press a smacking kiss to her temple. “I hate to break it to you, kid, but no one ever will.”

Patty holds up a fist in solidarity as she drifts back to the coffee machine. “The truth,” she yells over her shoulder.

Maya’s shoulders slump. “That’s a bummer.”

The phone dances across the countertop again. Maya perks back up. “Can I look?”

I take a sip of my coffee. Maggie told me before I left last night that she’d flag any gross messages. I think she’s hoping that my text message game might be better than my on-air performance. So far, the only messages I’ve received are a series of truly awful pickup lines and another set of inquiries from the guy from last night who wanted to know about my face.

I looked at the messages for ten minutes this morning, got overwhelmed, and then shoved the phone to the bottom of my bag.

“Go for it,” I tell her. “But if you see something weird, I’ll take you in the back and bleach your innocent young brain.”

“Noted,” she says, her eager, grabby hands already thumbing the screen open. “Oh, whoa. You have like a thousand messages.”

Patty appears on the other side of the counter again. “Read the good ones out loud.”

I arch an eyebrow. There are two people not so patiently waiting at the counter for their drinks. “Don’t you have work to do?”

“This is more important.”

“Is it?” I ask.

“Life or death, babes,” Patty says. “They can wait.”

Maya and Patty duck their heads together, scrolling through the phone. I distract myself with more cookies, but my mind wanders right back to last night and whatever the hell I said that upset Aiden.

I thought we were doing okay. I know I was nervous on the show at first, but I thought I settled in easily enough. Maybe he's not used to sharing his space. Maybe I was yelling into the microphone again. He came back to the booth after Jackson's weather update and was a different person. Cold. Abrupt. We spent the last hour on the air fielding phone calls that went on far too long. I think he was trying to avoid talking to me, and I have no idea what I did to upset him.

"Yikes," Patty says. "Is that a picture of a lizard?"

I try to look at the phone screen. "It better be a picture of a lizard," I murmur.

"His name is Bartholomew, apparently." Maya presses her nose to the phone. "Mom, these guys suck."

"I told you."

This is a waste of my time. I'm spinning my wheels with a bunch of faceless, aimless people shooting their shot over text message and it's not going to go anywhere. What's the likelihood that any of this does anything for me? Slim to none, if lizard boy is any indication.

"This guy is interested in what your feet look like."

Gross. "You can delete that one."

"Obviously." Maya scrolls some more. "And this guy said you can stop by his snowball stand whenever you want. Free egg custard. It's in the parking lot of that strip club. The one next to the pit-beef stand."

"That actually sounds promising. You can flag that one. I love blue raspberry."

"Aiden is in here too. He texted you this morning."

I grab the phone out of Maya's hand. "What?"

Patty snickers. "Oh, look. Now she's interested."

I tuck the phone against my chest so she can't see the screen. "Go make your drinks. They're about to stage a coup."

"I'd like to see them try," Patty says, swinging her towel over her shoulder. But she gives in, sauntering her way over to the espresso machine at the front counter, going through the motions of fulfilling orders. "Say hi to Sexy Voice for me," she calls.

Maya bounces in her chair next to me. "What did he say?

I pull the phone away from my chest and glance at the screen.

AIDEN: For the record, this was not my idea.

AIDEN: Hope you're not being bombarded.

My phone has buzzed twice in the time it took me to read those messages. *Bombarded* is an understatement.

"Are you going to text him back?" Maya asks, her cheek pressed against my arm.

"I don't know. I'm supposed to be texting with guys that are interested, right?"

"He wouldn't have texted you if he didn't want to talk to you."

Oh, to have the optimism of a twelve-year-old. I swipe up with my thumb and silence the notifications, then darken the screen. I'll deal with this later. When Patty isn't watching me out of the corner of her eye and Maya isn't bouncing in her seat.

"Pizza for dinner?" I ask, hoping it'll distract her. Hoping it might distract me, too, from this pressure in my chest. The fog in my head and the itchy, scratchy feeling at the base of my spine. I've been shoved out of orbit and I have no idea what needs to slot back into place to make everything feel steady again. The pages of my instruction manual are faded and too hard to read.

Maya grins at me and it's like looking in a mirror that only reflects good things back. My heart grows three sizes in my chest and not for the first time, I think maybe this is the only love I need. The best kind. The kind that won't fade out or burn away. The kind that will stay.

"I am literally always down for pizza," Maya says, looping her arm through mine and tugging. "Especially if you sweeten the deal with cannoli."

I wait until the house is dark and Maya is asleep in her room— actually asleep, without a blanket tucked in the crack beneath her door, having secretive phone calls with equally secretive radio hosts—to pull out the *Heartstrings* phone again. There are about three hundred unread text messages. I read through a couple.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Do u like short kings?

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Meet me at the O's game. I'll be the one in orange.

I don't know how I feel about a date planned two months in advance.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Hoping you can help me find something.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: The key to your heart.

That one makes me snort out loud, snuggling down farther in my bed. If nothing else, this is excellent entertainment.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Hey Lucie. This is probably weird, but I heard you on the radio and it felt like . . . well, it felt like you were talking to me. I've had my share of dating disasters. Maybe we can get back out there together?

UNKNOWN NUMBER: My name would probably be helpful. I'm Elliott. I hope you reach out.

Elliott. Interesting. That was actually . . . not a bad message. I double-tap it with a little red flag and scroll some more.

There are more pickup lines. A couple of messages from listeners sharing their own stories. A heartwarming message from a woman in Tennessee who decided to jump back into dating after my first call with Aiden. A few texts from men who are less than happy with me because their partners are suddenly demanding more from their relationships. An order for Chinese food from a place in Federal Hill. A photo of someone's tea towel collection.

It's lovely and overwhelming and terrifying and not a thing I ever thought I'd be doing. I still don't understand why all these people want to talk to me.

Aiden's message appears again as I scroll. Someone at the station must have programmed his contact into the phone, because he's the only one with his name listed, a little red heart next to it.

AIDEN: Hope you're not being bombarded.

He sent it sometime this morning when I was pretending my phone didn't exist. I bite my thumbnail, considering.

Depends, I write back. How many pictures of a lizard named Bartholomew constitutes a bombardment?

His reply comes back right away, even though I know he's recording for the show. I wonder if he's in the studio or the tiny break room, grabbing more of those cookies he seems to like so much.

AIDEN: I hope it's actually a lizard.

LUCIE: Unfortunately the lizard is just the tip of the iceberg, my

friend.

AIDEN: So we are friends. Interesting.

I grin at my phone in the dark.

LUCIE: Is it? How so?

AIDEN: Thought you might still be plotting my untimely demise.

LUCIE: That wouldn't be very friendly.

AIDEN: No. No, it wouldn't.

LUCIE: Would you prefer a different term? Colleague? Chum?

AIDEN: I'm actually pretty partial to "love guru."

A laugh tumbles out of me. Three dots appear beneath his last message. I imagine him with his head ducked toward his phone hidden beneath his desk, his smile glowing in the light from his monitor. Shades of blue and gray.

On the street below my window, a group of people spill out of the bar on the corner. Music from a passing car pulses and then fades. A ship blows its horn across the water and another answers.

The whole world spins on, and I sit in my bed and wait for a text message.

AIDEN: What's the formal title for "I unknowingly participated in a catfish scheme that resulted in someone being roped into a radio dating show that is now sponsored by Mr. Tire"?

I smile so hard it hurts.

LUCIE: I told you. I like the Mr. Tire thing.

AIDEN: That makes one of us.

I laugh again and it slips into a yawn. I've done more social interaction in the past week than in my lifetime. My eyes are heavy but my chest feels warm, and I cozy down farther in my blankets, letting sleep tug at me. My phone buzzes in my hand.

AIDEN: Hope you're having a good night, Lucie.

I grin at my phone, then type out my message.

LUCIE: You too, Aiden.

"I think you should take this one for a spin," Harvey yells over the sound of the radio. It's Dan's turn to pick the music today, and he almost always chooses Celine Dion. He says he appreciates Canadian performers, but I have never once heard him *appreciate* Drake.

I wheel out from beneath the Range Rover I'm working on and frown at Harvey. He holds up the *Heartstrings* phone in silent explanation. "This Patrick fellow," he says. "I think you should go out with him for your first date."

I have no idea who Patrick is. I've gone back to ignoring the phone since the first message I saw this morning was a picture of someone's chewed-up wad of gum. Just sitting there. On a dining room table. No caption. No message. Just the gum.

People continue to elude me.

"Why are you looking through my phone?"

"You left it on top of your station. I thought you'd like my opinion."

"I don't want your opinion." I wheel back beneath the car. I lie there with my eyes shut and count to ten while the chorus of "It's All Coming Back to Me Now" plays in the background. I have somehow managed to surround myself with people who lack boundaries.

"He seems sincere," Harvey continues. "Look at this. You guys even like the same kind of music!"

I ignore him.

"And he says he wants to take you out to Captain James. That place is fancy, Lu."

That place is a crab shack constructed to look like a ship that's run up on dry land. Maya threw up on the side of it when she was four years old and Grayson made jokes about her getting seasick for two years straight.

I wheel out from beneath the car again. "Put the phone down, Harvey."

"Don't worry. It's not a bother for me."

"I'm so glad it's not a bother for you." I hold out my hand. "Give me the phone."

He slaps it into my hand with a frown. “You’re no fun.”

“I’m plenty of fun.” I tuck my phone in the front pocket of my coveralls and slide back beneath the car. The suspension on this thing is giving me hell. I inspect the wiring. Outside the car, Harvey clears his throat, his boots still in the place I left him. I sigh. “Did you need something else, Harv?”

“When is your first date?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Another pair of beat-up boots joins him. “Isn’t that the whole point?” adds Dan’s voice. “You’re supposed to be finding love. You can’t find love if you never actually go on a date.”

“I’ve only done a couple of shows.”

“Love waits for no one.”

Love has certainly been patient enough for me. Twenty-nine years and the closest I’ve come to romantic love is the way I feel about the armchair in the romance section at Patty’s. “Thank you very much for your insight, man who has been divorced three times.”

There’s a short huffing sound. “Okay, well, there was no need for that.” Dan pauses. “And I’ve been divorced three times *because* I still believe in love, Ms. Romance.”

He also believes the penny slots at the Horseshoe casino are the perfect place to meet women, so . . .

Still. Just because I’m frustrated doesn’t mean I get to be a shithead. “You’re right, Dan. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Apology accepted,” he replies easily. “We’re just trying to help you out. Can’t we be excited for you?”

That’s the problem. Everyone is trying to help. I have ten thousand opinions floating around and the roar of them is making it impossible to hear myself think. I have no idea what feels right, what feels true. All my pieces are scattered across the floor and I can’t think long enough to figure out which one will fit the best.

I push out from beneath the car and stare at them, upside down. Their heads are bent together, arms crossed over their chests.

“I didn’t realize you two had thoughts about this.”

Dan’s dark eyebrows collapse in a heavy line across his brow. “Of course we do, Lu. We love you. We want you to be happy.”

Harvey clasps his hands together across his barrel chest. “We want you to fall in looooooove.” He draws the word out and warbles around it, trying to match up with Celine on the radio. “We listen to your show every night. We even have a text chain about it.”

That's a big deal. It took them roughly three years to get the hang of group messages.

Angelo appears at his side, rubbing his hands on the ratty towel he keeps tossed over his shoulder. "Did you think we didn't care?"

When I first came to Dan for a job almost a decade ago, I was an exhausted mother to a rambunctious toddler. I had a high school diploma, no formal work references . . . and a limited knowledge of how to change the oil of a car. Grayson had just started at the Maryland Institute College of Art on a full scholarship and I—I decided to defer my admission to the University of Maryland to work instead. We needed the money, and Grayson wasn't going to get a second chance at a full ride. I saw a HELP WANTED sign in the window of the garage and stopped in on a whim.

Dan took one look at me sitting in the chair across from his desk with dried vegetable puree on my shirt and gave me a chance. He taught me everything I know about cars and patiently supported me through the hardest time of my life. He's more of a father to me than my own is. Angelo too.

"No. I know you guys care. I just didn't realize you were invested."

All three of them frown. Harvey props his hands on his hips.

"That's insulting, Lu. I'm insulted."

"I'm also insulted," Dan adds.

Angelo narrows his eyes. "Consider the three of us thoroughly insulted."

I bite my cheek against my smile. "I'm sorry. I won't underestimate you guys again."

"You better not. We're in this for the long haul." Harvey holds out his hand right as someone rings the bell in reception. He nods toward the half door. "You go handle that customer and I'll look at your phone. I'll give you my top three choices."

"That doesn't seem like a fair trade." I reluctantly hand him the phone.

"It perfectly fair," Harvey says, nose already pressed to the screen. He was prescribed reading glasses a year ago, but he refuses to wear them. He's also scrolling at an alarming pace. "This is hard work, Lu. You've got the better end of the deal here."

It doesn't feel like the better end of the deal. Especially when I see the man waiting in reception, a fierce frown on his face and both of his arms crossed over his broad chest. He looks like a linebacker. Or a particularly distressed lumberjack.

"You handle historic cars here?" he asks as soon as the door swings shut behind me. No *Hello*. No *How are you?*

"Sometimes," I answer, reaching for patience instead of the frustration

that instantly roars to life. I hate when people don't even bother with pleasantries. I grab an intake form from beneath the counter and snap it to a clipboard. "What are you looking for?"

He's a younger guy. Younger than most of the customers we get in the shop. Dan likes to joke that his client base is primarily people who have lived here for this life and all of their past lives too. But I don't recognize this man. Tall. Short blond hair that fades to a dark, honey bronze at his neck. Not a lick of humor in his stern face. A square, angular jaw and bright blue eyes. He looks like he snaps people like twigs in his spare time. Maybe competes in some sort of underground fighting ring.

"I want to add underglow to my '58 Chevy," he says.

I don't gasp, but it's a close thing. I stop scribbling across the top of the form and stare at him. "You want to add underglow to your vintage Chevy?"

His mouth doesn't so much as twitch. "That's what I said."

"Okay." I drop my pen back in the cup. "No."

His eyebrows jump up. "No?"

Dan will probably murder me, but it's a no. I can't. I refuse to put something as abrasive as underglow on the undercarriage of a vintage Chevy. I won't do it.

"What color were you thinking?"

"Blue," he answers immediately.

"What color is your truck?"

"Red."

I make a distressed sound. God, what an absolute atrocity. I rip the intake form off the top of the clipboard and crumple it into a ball.

"We won't take your car here. I can refer you to another shop in the city, but just so you know, what you're doing is an insult to historic vehicles and you should be deeply ashamed of yourself."

He uncrosses his arms and props one palm against the front desk. "Is that so?"

"Yes." I tell myself to leave it at that, to let it go, but I can't. Maybe Aiden's surly attitude is rubbing off on me, or maybe I've hit my breaking point for the day. I don't know. "A vintage *Chevy*," I continue. "Why do you even care if we service historic vehicles if you're just going to desecrate it with an underglow? A *blue* underglow on a *red* Chevy. You should be reported to some sort of vintage car police. You should—what? What are you smiling at? Is this funny to you?"

"Nah." He rubs his palm across his grin, but it only spreads farther. His whole face changes when he smiles. He looks softer. Younger. Handsome,

even. “Shit, I think I just fell in love.”

I blink at him. “With what?”

“I’ve been looking for somewhere to take my car—my Rosie— for weeks. I’m new to town and you’re the first shop to refuse to put underglow on her. Thanks, by the way.”

I blink some more. “Uh, you’re welcome?”

He nods at the clipboard I tossed on the other side of the desk. “If you wouldn’t mind terribly, I’d love it if you could look after my girl.” At my blank look, he continues. “My truck. She needs some routine maintenance and she’s got a few other aches and pains too. I want you to do it if you have the availability.”

I reach for the clipboard, flustered. I don’t think I’ve ever yelled at anyone before and had them enjoy it. No one’s ever requested me specifically for their car either. “Um, my schedule is booked for the rest of the week and most of next too, but I’m sure we could move some things around.”

“I’ll wait,” he says easily. “You’re worth it.”

He gives me a quick wink and something flutters in my chest. Not quite butterflies, but almost. Something. A flicker.

“Just to be clear, you don’t want the underglow, right?”

He laughs. “Yeah, no. I don’t want to get arrested by the vintage car police.”

I grab a pen and another sheet, biting my bottom lip against my smile. I should probably be insulted he decided to test me, but I’m sort of . . . charmed? I start filling out the form again. “All right. Let’s see when we can fit your girl in.”

Harvey, Angelo, and Dan write their choices in chicken scratch on the back of a grease-stained inventory list for spare parts while I finish the intake on Chevy Guy. Maya adds her thoughts and Mateo makes an Excel spreadsheet that he shares with the whole family as soon as I get home, rating text messages by three scoring criteria and averaging out the number. Patty tells me I should start asking for dick sizes, then walks that back when she theorizes that most men will probably lie about that anyway. Grayson refuses to give his opinion at all, saying it’s my choice and my choice alone. I give him a smacking kiss on the cheek for that while Maya and Mateo boo from the kitchen counter, tossing popcorn at us.

I’m still no closer to a decision by the time I’m sitting next to Aiden again,

a pair of headphones tucked right behind my ears and the good coffee brewing in the pot. I'm staring a hole into the desktop while he sets up for the show, humming under his breath and mumbling about acoustics. There's no lingering sign of the weirdness we parted on last time or acknowledgment of our late-night text messages.

"I think I'm going to pick a date," I tell him abruptly. My voice sounds too loud in the room. It's a good thing I'm not wearing the headphones properly yet. Aiden pauses and looks at me over his shoulder. His profile is cast in shadow, his headphones slung around his neck.

"A date," he repeats.

"Yes."

"A date for what?"

What else would I do with a date? "For . . . dating," I say.

His eyes squint; he looks confused.

"Stop looking at me like that. Isn't that why I'm here?" I gesture around the studio. The faded posters on the wall and the handwritten sign by the clock that says *PLEASE SHUT YOUR MOUTH WHEN YOU'RE TALKING TO ME*. Three guesses as to who put that one up.

"Oh. You made your choice," Aiden clarifies. "Your *Mr. Tire* choice."

"Yes. I have," I say slowly. "I think."

One dark eyebrow rises on his forehead. He's wearing another sweatshirt tonight. A crewneck that's worn at the collar. I can see the glint of a gold chain around his neck, but it's mostly tucked beneath his shirt.

"You think?" he asks.

I nod. "Yes?"

"You sound very convinced."

I straighten my shoulders and flatten my palms against my thighs. Confidence, or the closest I'm able to get to it. "I am. I would like to pick someone for a date tonight."

"So, you haven't picked a specific someone. This is just your plan."

"I'm going to pick someone. Tonight."

He watches me carefully, his blue eyes heavy. They drift along my face. Eyes. Cheeks. Mouth. His gaze lingers there the longest before snapping away. I have no idea what he's thinking. "That's what you want?"

I nod and the headphone band slides forward over my forehead. I push it back and Aiden's mouth tugs up at the right side. A half smile.

Butterflies flutter to life in my chest, but I stomp down on them. Ruthlessly.

"Yeah," I say. "That's what I want."

I want to find a date. I want someone to ease the ache of loneliness pressing down on my chest. I want a connection with someone that feels real, and I can't do that if I keep sitting here in the booth with Aiden, talking to people on the phone. This whole thing is about being brave, taking chances. I've gotten comfortable with Aiden. I need to get out there.

Aiden's jaw tightens, then releases. He's still watching me.

"What?" I ask.

He shakes his head and turns back to his control board. I stare at the back of his neck, the dark hair that's just starting to curl behind his left ear. He pulls his headphones up and it feels like he's just pulled a door closed between us.

"Nothing," he says, tap-tap-tapping his buttons. Pulling his levers. Doing whatever it is he does. "You're right. That's why you're here. Let's find you a date."

AIDEN VALENTINE: Big news, *Heartstrings* listeners. Lucie has picked her first date.

LUCIE STONE: It's not a big deal.

AIDEN VALENTINE: You're right. It's just half of the reason you're on the show.

[pause]

LUCIE STONE: What's the other half?

AIDEN VALENTINE: Hmm?

LUCIE STONE: You said half of the reason I'm on this show is to find a date. What's the other half?

AIDEN VALENTINE: To keep me on my toes.

CHAPTER 14

AIDEN

She picks a guy named Everett. Or Elliott. She told me his name once and I didn't see the need to remember it.

He's some investment banker who works for one of the financial firms with big, fancy offices down on the water. They make plans to meet for a late dinner during one of her shifts at the station, and that's how I find myself alone in the booth on Friday night. It's . . . good. Fine. Lucie's first steps in the wide world of dating.

All systems go.

Excellent.

Two thumbs way up.

Jackson turns sideways in the chair next to me. "You wanna talk about it, buddy?"

"Talk about what?"

He pops a crab chip in his mouth and chews noisily. I was alone until Jackson decided to do a mental wellness check. He's been sitting in Lucie's seat for twenty minutes while I cycle my way through show programming. He told me he's waiting for his weather update, but I know the truth.

"It's cute you're pretending you don't know what I'm talking about." He finishes his last chip and crumples up the bag, tossing it toward the wastebasket. It gets halfway there and then flutters gently to the floor. I'm going to have to pick that up later and it's another brick loose in my Jenga tower of frustration. "Lucie. Her date. Do you want to talk about it?"

"I've been talking about it." All night. It's all listeners want to discuss. Where she's going. What she's wearing. How long the two of them have been texting. I've been fielding the conversation the best I can, but I'm starting to lose my patience. If I say *road to love* one more time, I might throw up.

I'm pretty sure she wouldn't want the entire world speculating about whether or not she's going to kiss someone tonight. I certainly don't want to speculate about it.

Jackson wipes his spice-stained fingers on one of the wet wipes he keeps tucked in his front pocket. “How do you feel about it?”

“About what? Lucie’s date?”

He nods.

“I don’t feel anything about it. Maggie wanted us to be a dating show and Lucie is going on a date. Everything is happening exactly the way it’s supposed to.”

A little faster, maybe, than I thought, but whatever. It’s her choice. All of this is her choice. I’m not going to let anyone bully Lucie into doing anything she doesn’t want to do.

“What do you know about this Elliott guy?” Jackson asks.

“Nothing,” I tell him. We have about three minutes left in this song, then we’ll go straight into ads for another four. Seven blissful minutes of sweet relief. I’d like to use the time to stare unseeingly into the void, but Jackson is hell-bent on having a conversation.

“She didn’t mention him?”

“Nope.” It stings that she never brought him up, but I’m not entitled to know the details of her life. I hit a button harder than I need to. It sticks down on the control board and I have to use a disposable knife left over from someone’s bagel to pop it back up again. “She said they’ve been texting and he seemed normal enough. She thought it was a good place to start.”

Jackson’s eyebrows tug together. “*Normal enough* isn’t exactly a ringing endorsement.”

“What would you like me to do about it?”

She’s here to find a date. Elliott is her date.

Jackson swivels back and forth in his chair, frowning. “I don’t like it.”

“We don’t have to like it,” I grumble.

But I don’t like it either, despite trying my best to feel exactly nothing about the situation. I open my mouth to suggest he retreat to the break room to give me a goddamned break from all his ruminating when Hughie suddenly appears in front of the glass window outside the booth. His shirt is untucked, his hair is sticking up, and he has a panicked look on his round face.

“Why does Hughie look like he’s about to be the first to die in a horror movie?” Jackson asks.

“He always sort of looks like that.” I watch as Hughie gestures wildly, mouthing something through the window. “What’s he saying?”

“I don’t know. Should we—”

I tilt my head to the side. “Let’s wait it out.”

Neither of us moves. Hughie bangs his fist against the glass once and then

points in the direction of the lobby.

"He's showing some urgency," Jackson mutters.

We aren't. We stay in our chairs, watching him as he bustles around the length of the soundproof room. He attempts to push the pull-open door for about thirty seconds, then finally figures it out.

The man is a mess.

He swings into the room, breathing heavily.

I stay exactly where I am. I only have three minutes left in my break. "What's up, Hughie? All good?"

"Uh, nope. Things are not all good." He jerks his thumb over his shoulder. "There's an angry guy up front asking for you."

Jackson lifts himself from his chair with a groan. "The guy who gets mad about the snow? I told him I can't do anything about it. It's not my fault it's been an unseasonably dry winter. I can't summon snow, no matter how much I'd like to."

Hughie shifts on his feet, impatient. It does seem like a masked man is about to leap from the storage closet with a steak knife. "No, it's not the snow guy." He looks at me nervously. "It's someone looking for you. He's threatening to handcuff himself to a radiator if he doesn't get to talk to you."

"Me?"

Hughie nods.

"What does want to talk about?"

"He says it's about Lucie."

I stand so fast my chair rocks back into the table with the coffee machine. The whole thing rattles. "Lucie? What about Lucie?"

"I don't know, but you need to come up here and handle it."

Eileen pokes her head out from her office down the hall, where she does all the real-time audio control. "Someone needs to stay in that booth," she threatens. "We're back on in less than a minute."

I shove Jackson in the chair. "Talk about the weather," I order. "I'll be right back."

I don't bother waiting for an answer. I make my way to the front of the station, my heart somewhere in my throat. Is it Elliott? Did something happen during Lucie's date? I know some of the callers have been upset that she's whipped up a romantic frenzy on the airwaves, encouraging partners to demand more out of their significant others . . . but no one would do anything to her, would they?

Maggie is supposed to vet the guys she goes out with. They're supposed to be normal. Safe.

I slam my palm against the glass door and push through. There's a tall guy standing in the middle of the lobby with his arms crossed over his chest, a furious look on his face. He starts moving as soon as he sees me, a mop of curly hair flopping over his forehead. He looks like he wants to plow his fist through my face. Maybe handcuff me to the radiator.

"You," the stranger seethes, meeting my stride until we're chest to chest. He digs his finger in the middle of my sweatshirt while Hughie flutters around us. I'm a fairly big guy, but so is the stranger. I might have an inch or two on him, but he looks like he could make up for it in sheer willpower alone. He pokes me again, harder this time. "I trusted you to take this seriously. You said you wouldn't make fun of her."

I push his hand away. I have no idea what the hell he's talking about. Make fun of her? Who? Lucie? "What are you—"

"She thought it was a real date, you asshole. Did you set it up? Hope to embarrass her?" He grabs the front of my sweatshirt, his face a thundercloud. "I told her this would be good for her and this whole time you've been playing her."

I don't know what I've been doing with Lucie, but it certainly hasn't been *playing* her. I've been honest with my intentions, doing my best to help. Maybe I'm slightly cynical when it comes to the stuff she wants out of a relationship, but I'm not—I wouldn't do anything to hurt her.

I'm about to say exactly that when the door bursts open behind him and Lucie comes barreling through from the parking lot. She's clinging to a dark wool coat that cuts just below her knees, her hair windswept, her cheeks pink. She's breathing heavily, slipping and sliding in the heels she's wearing. Heels that have a tiny delicate strap around her ankle. A little bow at the clasp. My eyes stick on that inconsequential detail while the mystery man does his best to whip me around like a rag doll.

"Grayson, I swear to god, I am going to detach your spine from your body." She grabs the back of the man's jacket and tries to haul him away from me. He reluctantly takes one step back, but he doesn't let go of my hoodie. The three of us move together like some backward tug-of-war. Lucie slaps at his wrist. "What the *fuck*," she whisper-yells.

His eyebrows jump up his forehead. "You're mad at me?"

"Of course I'm mad at you," she manages through clenched teeth. She slaps at his wrist again and he finally releases me. I smooth my palm over the wrinkled material and clear my throat. Neither of them pays me any attention. "You didn't even let me explain before you torpedoed out of the house."

“You were crying, Lu,” he says quietly. “What did you expect me to do?”

“Maybe not rush out like Rambo and listen to me for a second,” she says back. “You didn’t give me a chance to explain.”

They argue some more, but I’m not listening. I’m looking at Lucie. The evidence is in the puffy redness around her eyes and the soft downward tilt to her lips. I thought her cheeks were red from the wind outside, but now that I’m looking, it’s like she’s been scrubbing her palms there. Trying to wipe away tears.

My body flushes hot. A low buzzing fills the space between my ears.

I wedge myself between them, tilted toward Lucie. “Have you been crying?”

She blinks at me, surprised, her dark eyelashes fluttering against her cheeks. She tries to wave me off, but I step closer, tipping her chin up with my knuckles to get a better look at her face.

Her cheeks are wet, her nose red. I’m feeling more than a little unhinged.

“Who the fuck made you cry?” I snap.

The pieces begin to slot into place. Lucie’s date tonight, this stranger’s insistence that the radio show had something to do with it, the thought that it was all a setup to embarrass her . . .

“Was it Elliott?” I ask. “The guy you went out with. Did he do something?”

She exhales a rattling sound. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. Not if you’ve been crying.”

Lucie gently twists out of my grip, putting space between us. She reaches up and rubs at the studs in her left earlobe and my chest turns over.

She only does that when she’s nervous.

“I’m fine,” she says. “I cry when I’m frustrated. Or when I’m angry.” Her eyes dart to my left and narrow. “Something Grayson knows but decided to disregard when he bulldozed his way in here.”

He shrugs, unconcerned. “I’m not going to apologize.”

“You should,” she says.

“I was defending your honor. I thought this one”—he hitches his thumb at me—”had something to do with it.”

“He didn’t,” Lucie says. Her eyes slide to me and she takes a deep breath. When she exhales, her whole body seems to deflate. “He wouldn’t,” she adds, quieter.

“Fine.” He looks at me out of the corner of his eye and reconsiders. “Okay. Maybe I’m slightly sorry for dragging you across the lobby by your sweatshirt.”

“It’s fine.” I can’t stop looking at Lucie. I don’t give a shit about my sweatshirt. “Can someone please explain what is going on?”

Lucie looks like she’d rather take a dive in the Inner Harbor in her strappy little shoes. She sighs. “I had my date with Elliott tonight. It . . . didn’t go as I had hoped.”

She clasps her hands together in front of her and doesn’t say anything else.

“What does that mean?” My voice is a needle on a record player, skipping and scratching.

Her gaze slides to mine, reluctant. She looks tired, burned-out, like the weight she’s been carrying around has suddenly become too heavy to bear. I want to wrap her in a blanket and make her some of my secret coffee. I want to punch Elliott in the fucking face.

“What the hell is going on?” Maggie skids to a stop behind Hughie, shoving him out of the way. He folds like a wet paper bag. “Why the hell is Jackson talking about the difference between drifting snow and freezing rain? You’re supposed to be in the booth, Aiden.”

She takes in the chaos that is the front lobby. Lucie, in her nice clothes and red-rimmed eyes. Me, probably looking like I’m about to commit a murder. The guy with the hair, who tried to manhandle me into the radiator.

“Who are you?” she asks, tipping her chin at . . . I’ve already forgotten his name.

“Lucie’s baby daddy,” he responds without missing a beat, extending his hand for Maggie to shake. Lucie groans. “Grayson Harris.”

Maggie shakes his hand, face furrowed in concentration. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“He’s an artist,” Lucie answers, resigned. “Also, a giant pain in my ass.”

“That’s it!” Maggie’s whole face lights up. “I have one of your paintings!”

“Which one?”

“It’s small. A canvas of wildflowers in bloom. I got it at an auction for—”

“The Living Classrooms fundraiser, yeah. I did that a year ago.” He nudges Lucie with his elbow. She looks like she wants to sink through the floor. “Small world, isn’t it, Lu?”

“Microscopic,” she responds, voice monotone. “Can we go now or would you like to add destruction of private property to breaking and entering?”

Grayson looks offended. “I didn’t break. I entered. The door was open.”

“Assault then.”

Grayson claps me on the shoulder and shakes me once. “He’s fine.”

Lucie frowns at me. “Sorry about all of this.”

I shake my head. “Don’t worry about it.” I don’t care about canvas

paintings or Hughie still shifting awkwardly in the doorway or why Lucie's baby daddy is rushing to defend her honor in the middle of the night. I only care why Lucie has that look on her face and what happened. "Why don't you come back? Have a coffee."

She shakes her head. "I don't want to be in the booth."

I could not possibly care any less about the show. "You don't need to be in the booth," I murmur, taking half a step closer. My fingertips drift along her elbow. "You're freezing. Warm up for a few minutes."

I'm desperate to keep her here. I can feel it buzzing under my skin, the frantic desire to *fix it*. Whatever it is.

"She doesn't need to be in the booth, but you do," Maggie interrupts. "Jackson's been in there too long. You know what happens when he gets antsy."

He starts nervously talking in weather jargon and no one has any idea what he's saying. I sigh, aggravated. Maggie must be able to tell, because she presses her palm to my shoulder, pushing. "The booth, Aiden," she says again. "Lucie. Grayson. Why don't you two come back to my office? We'll see if we can figure this out."

"Absolutely not," I cut in.

Maggie arches an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"You can't shove me back in the booth," I say, on the verge of losing my fucking mind. I look over at Lucie again. She's staring at the floor, arms curled around herself, eyes puffy. It's breaking my heart. I clench my jaw and look back to Maggie. "Not until I know Lucie is okay."

Grayson makes a considering sound somewhere to the left of me. "I like this one," he murmurs to Lucie. To me, he says, "Apologies for almost punching you in the face."

I wave my hand. I would have punched myself in the face too if I thought I made Lucie cry. "Don't worry about it."

The four of us—five, including Hughie—stand there in the lobby in an awkward standoff. I can feel the impatience rolling off Maggie next to me, but she doesn't push Lucie to explain.

"This is an overreaction," Lucie tries.

"Can't be helped," Grayson says, hands shoved in his pockets. "Might as well spill the beans, Lu."

She gives him a half-hearted glare and then scratches above her eyebrow. She drops her hand to her side with a sigh.

"I'm fine," she says, and everyone in the room makes different sounds of skepticism. "Elliott had a stupid bet with his friends, okay? He thought he

could . . . trick me, I guess. By saying all the right things. He wanted to prove that women who want romance are silly or something. It was all very ridiculous. I left him at the restaurant and came home. He didn't do anything. He made me feel stupid. That's all."

I'm going to kill that slimy piece of shit.

"Maggie," I say slowly, my voice calm despite the rage twisting in my gut. "Don't you have some sort of database for the people who text that phone?"

Grayson looks how I feel, his shoulders hunched to his ears and his mouth twisted in a frown. "An address, perhaps?"

"I have an ice pick in my car," Hughie adds from his spot by the door.

Maggie presses her hand to her chest. "Jesus Christ, Hughie."

"No," Lucie says, her smile a fraction of its usual size. She looks at Hughie, then Grayson, then me. "No," she says again, softer. "It's fine. It's over. I dumped a glass of fancy white wine on his lap so it looked like he peed himself. I would like to move on and never speak of this again."

"You know how you should move on?" Grayson asks, still looking like he'd like to commit a crime but also like he's just been handed his very favorite gift. Lucie is back to looking resigned to her fate.

"I'm sure you're going to tell me, Gray."

He hardly waits for her to finish. "You should go on another date."

"I'm not sure how that will—"

"You need to get back out there. I'm not letting you use this as an excuse to avoid dating for another decade. This guy was an asshole, but we've known for a while that your ability to choose an appropriate date is mediocre, at best."

She stares at him blankly. "Thank you," she deadpans. "Should I take this opportunity to remind you that I chose you as a date once upon a time?"

"I am the exception, of course."

"Of course."

"But don't you worry your pretty little head. I've thought of a solution."

Maggie is watching the conversation carefully, eyes narrowed in concentration. She's formulating her next steps, already four decisions ahead. "What's that?" she asks.

Grayson puffs out his chest and shoots Lucie a wide grin.

"I'm going to pick your next date."

JACKSON CLARK: Freezing rain is when the layer of freezing air is so thin the raindrops don't have enough time to freeze before reaching the ground. Instead, the water freezes on contact with the surface, creating a coating of ice on whatever the raindrops contact. Roads. Sidewalks. It's dangerous stuff—uh, real tricky, tricky stuff. And you should be careful about it because it's so . . . tricky. Not that it's happening tonight. No. No freezing rain tonight. Clear skies all around and . . . [nervous laughter] . . . Aiden will be right back. He stepped away for just a moment. How about I tell you about drifting snow next?

CHAPTER 15
LUCIE

The day has deteriorated into madness.

If you had told me a month ago that I'd be sitting in the corner of a broadcast booth after a failed date where a man tried to humiliate me because of my romantic notions while the father of my child attempts to find me a *new* date, I probably would have given you a polite smile and then pointed you in the direction of the nearest MinuteClinic.

This is not how I expected tonight to go.

I had been tentatively hopeful. A little nervous. Excited.

I certainly didn't expect things to take the turn they did. But I guess that's my love life in a nutshell. *Underwhelmed and dissatisfied.* Print it on my tombstone.

I sink down farther in the beanbag Hughie dragged into the booth from god knows where, a pair of headphones over my ears, a cup of hot chocolate in my hands. I stare at the tiny marshmallows floating in the chocolaty goodness and try to figure out where, exactly, my life derailed.

Two brown boots appear in my field of vision, slightly beat-up with the laces loose.

"Okay?" Aiden asks. I don't respond. Things are decidedly *not* okay. Dismal, maybe. Pathetically sad. I can't believe I ever thought dating apps were the wrong fit for me. I think *dating* is the wrong fit for me.

"Do you think Mr. Tire is mad?" I ask sullenly. I poke at one of my marshmallows.

Aiden sighs and hunches down in front of me. "No. I don't think Mr. Tire is mad."

The backs of his hands brush against my shins and sparks of sensation scatter up my legs. I wish I had time to change before Grayson went full vigilante. I feel stupid in this dress. In these shoes. Like a costume for a character I never agreed to play.

"Lucie." He sighs. He taps his pointer finger against my ankle, then circles

it gently. He squeezes. “I don’t like seeing you sad.”

I don’t like *being* sad. I’ve never liked being sad. I’ve always done my best to see the glass as half-full. Find the silver lining. Even in my worst moments, it’s something I’ve been able to do.

But right now, sitting in the corner of this studio, I just want to mope. I think I’ve put too much of myself into this, shared too many of the things I usually keep hidden. I got my hopes up. All for a shitty guy in cropped chinos and boat shoes without socks.

I should have known as soon as I stepped foot in the restaurant.

He was blond, for god’s sake.

“Lucie,” Aiden says again, voice quiet. A hint of begging. He ducks his head closer to mine and it feels like just the two of us over here. I can smell coffee on his sweatshirt. The cookies he’s always arguing about with Jackson. I want to tip my face into the crook of his neck where the scent of him is probably strongest and hide from the rest of the world. My heart feels beat-up and bruised and I’d like to avoid it all for a little bit.

But I don’t do any of that. I sit in my sad beanbag holding my sad hot chocolate.

“How can I help?” Aiden asks, his body almost curved around mine. Protective.

“I’m fine,” I say. To my horror, my voice wobbles. I clear my throat and try again. “Really. I’m okay.”

His thumb drags up the back of my leg. Down, then up again. More sparks. A glowing warmth that he rubs into my cold skin with his fingertips. “Don’t lie,” he whispers. He swallows hard, gaze tracing my face. He looks so earnest, all the sharp angles of him relaxed into something soft. “Do you need more marshmallows?”

I feel myself smile. “I’m good, thank you.” Over his shoulder, Grayson is settling into my usual seat like a king on his throne. I sigh. “This is going to either be very good or very bad.”

Aiden follows my attention with a frown. “I won’t let it be bad.” He looks back at me. “You’re sure you want to keep doing this? You don’t have to, you know.”

“This?” I ask.

“The show,” he explains. He gestures vaguely above his head. “The dates. All of it.”

“If this is an *I told you so* moment, you have really shitty timing.”

His frown deepens. “It’s not that.”

“I know you think this is stupid,” I whisper. “I know you don’t like it.”

His jaw tightens and relaxes. His throat bobs once. “It’s not that either.”

“You’re not using this as an opportunity to seize back control of your show?”

“Have I lost control of my show?”

“Maybe. This seems like a good opportunity for you to kick me out.” It was meant to be a joke, but my tone isn’t as teasing as I’d like.

Aiden shakes his head. “No, I don’t think I will,” he says simply.

“Okay,” I say.

Good, I think immediately after.

Tonight has been an absolute disaster, but I don’t think I could handle another rejection. Aiden might not believe in love and romance, but he’s never made me feel small. I’ve been burying the parts of myself that crave connection and belonging for years, and I’m afraid if I stop now, I’ll go right back to the way things were. I’m not sure I’ll ever be this brave again.

This show still feels like my very best shot.

I want my happy ending. I deserve it. And wanting it doesn’t make me weak or silly or any of the things Elliott sneered about over a plate of overpriced bruschetta.

Maybe that’s its own sort of bravery. That I’m willing to try again.

Just not tonight.

I nudge Aiden. “You might want to go take the microphone away from Grayson before he gets excited.”

Aiden doesn’t move. “He doesn’t have to go on tonight. You’re still the boss.”

I nod and manage a tight smile. “I’ve already been called a self-important bitch tonight. I don’t think it can get any worse.”

Aiden’s pretty eyes darken and his face settles into a mask of stone. His jaw clicks once. “He said that to you?”

I nod. Elliott said a lot of things.

Everything had started fine. I put on the fancy red dress Mateo pulled out from the back of my closet and the strappy black heels I’m pretty sure I bought for a bachelorette party I never actually went to. I straightened my hair. I let Maya do my makeup. And when I got to the restaurant, Elliott had been waiting at a table by the big window. He kissed my cheek and pulled out my chair. We made easy conversation over drink orders. I thought everything was going well.

But somewhere in between the appetizers and the wait for our entrees, I realized he wasn’t laughing with me but at me. His eyes were too sharp, his smile too smug. He told me he knew he could get me on a date if he just fed

me all the right lines. That women like me were predictable. That I was self-important and unrealistic. That someone who had a kid should be grateful for any attention at all. That I shouldn't be trying to dictate the parameters of anything. That I was damaged goods.

He was a piece of shit, obviously, but his words twisted like thorns the entire way home. How is it possible that out of all the people who have been texting the *Heartstrings* phone, I managed to pick the absolute worst one?

Patty was right. I really do have rotten luck.

Grayson found me angry-crying while trying to open a bottle of wine, and now we're here.

"Aiden," Maggie calls from the table, holding his headphones in her hand. She wiggles them at him. "Are you ready?"

He keeps looking at me. The same steady, studying look he always seems to be giving me. Like I'm an equation he can't figure out. Or a particularly interesting constellation that he's trying to orient himself with.

"What do you think?" he asks, our knees slotted together like puzzle pieces. "You ready? You okay?"

He's always doing that. Asking me. Checking in.

"Yeah. I'm okay."

One dark eyebrow climbs his forehead.

"I am," I tell him again. No one ever has ever fussed over me the way Aiden does. "Promise."

Aiden nods. "All right." He studies me for another beat, his body swaying closer before he tugs himself away. He reaches behind him for the headphones and hands them to me.

"So you can listen," he explains as he gently tucks them over my ears. His thumbs brush the sides of my neck.

"All right," he repeats with a heavy swallow, and then he's back in his chair across the room, slipping his own headphones on and starting the show.

I close my eyes and listen to his voice in my ears. It melts into my bloodstream and slinks through my body, relaxing my shoulders, curling around the place on my ankle where his hand was just a few minutes ago. I listen to the rhythm of his vowels and consonants and the way he says some words fast and others slow and let myself drift to a place where expectations don't exist and my feelings aren't a fragile glass balloon.

An hour later and the show is over for the night. I'm sitting on a wobbly

picnic bench outside the station in front of a blinking red tower that reaches to the sky. I told Grayson I'd meet him back at the house, but my feet carried me to this spot instead of my car.

I sit on the bench and swing my legs back and forth, watching the city sprawled out beneath me. I can see the lights in the harbor from all the way up here. The massive cargo ships that inch their way under the bridge, coming and going from the ship-to-shore cranes that stand sentry at the docks.

Aiden drops into the space next to me with a sigh, his hip pressed to mine. The bench groans and something heavy slips over my shoulders. I think I left my jacket inside, over the back of the beanbag.

"It's cold," he mutters when I touch the edge of the sweatshirt draped over me in silent question. He glances once at my bare legs in the glittering moonlight and then out at the view. His jaw tightens, then releases. "I didn't want you to be cold."

"Thank you."

He hums a low sound and we sit in the silence. My breath forms little white clouds in front of my face and I wrap Aiden's sweatshirt tighter around me. It's the one he was wearing earlier, navy blue with an embroidered *Heartstrings* logo over the left breast.

"Grayson is something," he finally says. "I can see where Maya inherited her . . ."

He hesitates and I fill in the blank. "Scheming?"

Aiden scratches at his jaw. "I was going to say *showmanship*, but yeah. Let's go with that."

I laugh. Grayson's appearance on *Heartstrings* was just as colorful as I thought it would be. He divided his time equally between advocating on my behalf and absolutely eviscerating some of the candidates who were brave enough to call in.

"Do you think Maggie has regrets?"

Aiden shakes his head and leans forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "Not with the amount of people we had listening tonight. She'll be fine." He opens his mouth, then shuts it again, shaking his head.

"What?" I ask gently.

He looks at me over his shoulder. The moonlight paints shadows along the angles of his face. "Back when you first started the show, I thought some of your hesitation with dating might be because of a sordid story with Maya's dad."

I laugh. "Oh, no. Nothing like that. Grayson is my best friend."

“Then why didn’t you two . . . ?” He lets the rest of his sentence drift.

“Stay together?” I ask. He nods. “He offered to marry me when I found out I was pregnant. It was what our parents demanded, but I said no.”

“Why?”

I smile softly. “Because I knew I wasn’t the love story Grayson deserved. Gray and I have spent our entire lives together, but we were never in love. We were kids when I got pregnant. I didn’t want to ruin his chance at finding his big love.”

Aiden watches me, his face unreadable.

“I wanted to have that chance too.” I look down at my hands. “Not that it’s done me a lot of good.”

Aiden drags his hand over his jaw, still looking at me. “Has that been hard for you?”

“What? Grayson and Mateo?” I shake my head. “No. Sometimes I get envious of what they have, but no. I love the family we’ve made. Maya has two great dads, and I have two best friends to make sure I never get too lonely.”

“Were your parents unhappy? That you didn’t get married?”

I nod. “Furious. I haven’t spoken to them in almost twelve years because of it.”

He makes a soft sound. “They don’t know Maya?” he asks.

Something pinches in my chest. “No,” I say, and my voice trembles around the word. I fiddle with the cuff of the sweatshirt Aiden wrapped around my shoulders. “They cut me off when I refused to marry Grayson or agree to an adoption for Maya. I know we were young, but I wanted her. She wasn’t intended, but she never felt like a mistake to me. I don’t begrudge people their choices, but that was mine.” I blow out a breath, watching the cloud rise up, up, up to the sky. I had been so afraid, those early months. Absolutely terrified of what we’d do.

“My parents thought it was a slight against them instead of— instead of a decision that was mine to make. Gray’s parents were the same. They run in the same old-money circles. When we refused to comply with their demands, they just”—I snap my fingers—”pretended like we didn’t exist. Left our things on our respective front porches without so much as a note.” I think about Maya’s face, of doing the same to her, and everything in my body pulls tight. *Never*, I tell myself, a promise I’ve repeated since I first held her squishy, wiggling body in the palms of my hands. *I will never do that to her.* “Anyway. We’re lucky Grayson’s great-aunt Tabitha wanted to stick it to his parents. She kept us on our feet financially until we were able to piece it all

together."

I wonder if my parents ever think of me, of us, of the incredible little girl they're missing out on. Sometimes when it's late and Maya is at Grayson's and I'm standing in the doorway of her room overflowing with books and color and stuffed animals and handwritten notes on torn pieces of paper, I wonder what they've done with my old room. If they've turned it into a Pilates studio for my mom or another office for my dad. If maybe they've just kept it empty. An empty room in a house full of pretty objects where they drift past each other like ghosts.

"They sound like assholes," Aiden says, his voice gruff.

A laugh bursts out of me. "Yeah. They are. Grayson's parents are worse. But he's reconciled with two of his siblings over the years, and Maya is surrounded with a lot of love. That's all that matters to me now."

"Do you think they've heard you?"

I look away from the city and meet Aiden's gaze. His hair is the color of spilled ink out here, the stars a halo around his head. "What?"

"On the radio," he explains. "Do you think they've heard you and Maya?"

"Oh." I haven't thought about it. A yawn cracks my jaw open wide and I shiver, wrapping my sweatshirt blanket tighter around my shoulders. My parents have been out of my life for so long, I've wrenched myself free from considering their responses to things. It was a hard habit to break in the beginning, but it's gotten decidedly easier with time. "They're still local, last I heard. So probably."

Aiden hums. "Doesn't exactly make me want to be nice on the air," he says.

"That's assuming you were ever nice to begin with," I tease. I tip into his side and nudge him with my shoulder. Then I stay there, pressed up against him, because it's cold and his body is warm and this has been one of the longest nights of my life.

I let my temple rest against the curve of his arm. He shifts closer. I blink slowly and watch the lights bob over the water. Like raindrops against the window. Pinpricks of colors that flare and fade.

"Aiden?" I ask after a while, my body deliciously heavy.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think I'll find someone?" I voice the question that's been banging around in my heart for the past decade. "Do you think I'll get my magic?"

He takes a long time to answer. So long my eyes drift shut and everything around me turns fuzzy and heavy. Purple and blue dance behind my closed eyes and I imagine we're floating with the stars, my fingers reaching for their

golden cascading light. Somewhere in the hazy in-between, a hand slips under my hair and gently squeezes the back of my neck. His thumb traces the ridges of my spine, and my whole body gets heavier.

"Nah, Lucie." In my dream, he brushes a kiss against my forehead. "I think you're the magic."

AIDEN VALENTINE: All right, Baltimore. We have a guest in the booth tonight, his name is—

GRAYSON HARRIS: Listen up, lizards. There's a new daddy in town.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Oh, boy.

GRAYSON HARRIS: That's right. Lu has not been getting the respect or attention she deserves, and I'll be taking over her search for Mr. Right.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Temporarily.

GRAYSON HARRIS: We'll see about that. I suggest you buckle up for the ride, folks, because I am discerning.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Let's ease our way into it.

GRAYSON HARRIS: This is me easing.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Noted.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Would you like to describe your relationship with Lucie for the listeners at home?

GRAYSON HARRIS: She's the platonic love of my life. We share a beautiful, devious daughter. I've known Lu since we were three years old. She used to bring me cheese sticks at the ritzy preschool we went to together.

[pause]

GRAYSON HARRIS: She is one of the most important people in my life. She's got questionable taste in music, can't bake cookies to save her life, but has the most generous, kind, beautiful soul. I would commit

terrible, violent crimes on her behalf.

AIDEN VALENTINE: I don’t think you need to—

GRAYSON HARRIS: But I’ll settle for finding her the match she deserves.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Most people don’t have such a positive relationship with their ex.

GRAYSON HARRIS: Most people aren’t Lucie.

CHAPTER 16

LUCIE

I straighten my napkin. Rearrange my silverware. I take a sip of water from the fancy, impractical glass and then put it back in the same spot. My waiter is whispering in the corner with the hostess, but I keep my eyes firmly on the white cloth of the tabletop.

I'm supposed to meet William at seven p.m. That's what the calendar invitation Maggie sent me said. Grayson picked the date and Maggie did all the scheduling, but I've been sitting here for forty-five minutes and no one has shown up.

I slip the *Heartstrings* phone out of my tiny, ineffectual clutch and swipe at the screen.

Duck Duck Goose, the calendar says, 7pm.

I look at the time: 7:48 p.m. blinks back at me.

Another basket of bread appears at the edge of the table, this time with a slab of fancy butter. A little bowl of mixed nuts too.

Great. I've inspired pity nuts.

"Are you sure I can't bring you something from the kitchen?" my waiter asks, his face an embarrassing mix of apprehension and pity. There are only six tables in the restaurant and I feel like there's a spotlight on mine. "Our French onion soup is really good."

I'm sure it is. But I decided around the twenty-minute mark that sitting at an empty table waiting for a date who probably won't show is less pathetic than eating soup at an empty table waiting for a date who probably won't show.

"Can we wait just a few more minutes? Maybe he hit traffic."

We both glance out the window to the cobblestone street. It's empty.

"Sure," the waiter says, nodding. There's a woman behind him, slurping her soup and staring right at me. Her level of focus is unnerving. "I bet there's an accident on the highway," my waiter continues, oblivious to the attention I'm commanding in this tiny establishment. "We can wait. I'll get you another

glass of wine, okay?”

He drifts away from the table and I hold awkward eye contact with the woman who is still slowly eating her soup. She’s wearing a shirt with a bunch of printed cats on it, her hair in a severe bun.

I look down at my phone.

I could text Grayson, but I don’t need him launching another one-man assault against the radio station. He had been so excited tonight, sure that his pick was the right one for me. I don’t want to burst his bubble, and I also don’t want to explain I’ve been stood up.

I scroll some more. My thumb hovers over one of the few names programmed into the phone.

There isn’t a show tonight. I wouldn’t be interrupting him at work. I could shoot him a quick text. Just to confirm I’m at the right place.

Hey, I type out. Hope I’m not bothering you.

His message comes back right away.

AIDEN: Do you need me to call with a fake emergency?

I snort a laugh. The woman with her soup slurps louder.

LUCIE: Not yet. Can you confirm I’m where I’m supposed to be? It’s possible I got the restaurant mixed up.

Three dots appear, then disappear. I nibble on a tiny piece of bread.

AIDEN: Duck Duck Goose, right? The French place in Fells. They have good soup.

AIDEN: Where are you?

I sigh. At Duck Duck Goose.

AIDEN: Alone?

Not if you count the dining room full of people staring mournfully at me, I text back.

No dots appear. I stare at my phone for a long time, tapping at it with my thumb every time the screen goes dark, but Aiden never responds. I don’t know why that’s more disappointing than the empty chair across from me.

I finish my wine and eat all the cashews, then decide it’s probably time to

call it a night. Maya is with Grayson tonight, part of our every-other-week switch off, but I think I'll crash. Maybe I'll crawl into bed with her and wrap my arms around her skinny body and listen to the sound of her breathing. Let my heart slow to match.

"You have all the love you need," I remind myself with a whisper. I slip the napkin off my lap and fold it into a neat square. "You're fine."

My waiter appears at the edge of the table. "Don't worry about the check," he says.

"No, no." I dig into my purse. "I had the wine. And the . . . nuts."

The waiter shakes his head. He's young. Bright red hair. An explosion of freckles across his high cheekbones. "No," he says again. "Please. I—um, I know who you are. I'll cover your bill."

I wince. "That bad, huh?"

"No. Well, yeah. I guess. It's shitty you got stood up. But I don't want to pay for you because I feel sorry for you. It's because— I—this is awkward. I don't usually—" He blows out a breath and toys with the string of the half apron wrapped neatly around his waist.

"I was in a bad relationship," he says quietly. My face must do something alarming because he shakes his head and steps closer to the table, ducking down a little bit. "No, no. It's okay, I'm—I'm mostly okay. Figuring it out. But what I wanted to tell you, what I wanted to say is—" It's like his thoughts are coming too fast to form words, like his bravery might run out before he can say whatever it is he wants to say. "I didn't know it was a bad relationship before I heard your clip, talking about the things you want. I don't think I realized everything I wasn't getting and it was—" He shakes his head once, his lips pressed together. "Thank you," he says again, voice a whisper now. "Just. Thank you."

Pressure nestles behind my eyes and across the bridge of my nose. I don't think I realized that because I was choosing to be brave, other people might decide to be brave too.

"You're welcome," I manage, my voice tight. "You deserve good things."

"Yeah. I'm getting there." He nods. "Okay. So you're—you're good to go." He smiles and claps his hands together. "And fuck that guy."

"Yeah." I laugh with a sniffle. "Fuck that guy."

It's the heels, I decide as I carefully walk down the sidewalk, making sure to dodge loose stones. It's the heels that are bad luck. I've only worn them twice,

and both times have ended in disappointment. Next time, I'll wear flats.

I brush my bangs out of my face. Next time. Do I want to go on another date? I'm not sure. The long-buried romantic in me screams, *Yes!* while the always pragmatic part of me whispers, *Maybe take some time*.

I do know that Grayson is off the date-picking roster. That's for sure.

"Lucie!"

Someone shouts my name from down the street and I almost tumble head over ass into a trash bin. Is it the soup lady? Someone from Duck Duck Goose demanding I pay my bill? Maybe it's my date with an explanation and an arm full of daisies. He's late because he was rescuing a family of ducks or trying to perfect his sourdough starter.

The hopeless romantic in me is ruthless, apparently.

But it's not my date, or the maître d' from the restaurant, or anything remotely reasonable.

It's Aiden, jogging down the sidewalk until he reaches the glow of the streetlight I'm standing in, stupefied. Dark jeans. His beat-up boots. A wool coat I've never seen before with the collar turned up. A white T-shirt underneath that clings to his body.

He stops half a foot away from me, his chest rising and falling. "Hey," he says with a gusting breath. "I was hoping I'd catch you." His eyes quickly skim down my body before flicking back up again. His throat bobs with a heavy swallow. "You look nice."

I glance down at my bare legs and my dainty bad-luck shoes, then back at him, confused. Aiden is . . . here. Running, apparently. With his hair . . . wet?

Maybe I fell down the stairs in my fancy shoes?

"Your hair is wet," I point out dumbly.

His left hand reaches up, touching a spot right above his ear.

"Oh," he says. "Yeah. I took a shower. There was an incident with some penne pasta and a lukewarm beer and . . . You know what? It doesn't matter."

There's a single droplet of water on the column of his neck. I stare at it for a second too long.

"You're here."

He nods, his forehead scrunching. "Yeah."

"You came to the restaurant?"

"I did."

"Why?"

He looks amused now. "The soup is really good."

"Oh." I frown, then look back down the street at the restaurant. "Did you want to go back inside? Get some?"

He shakes his head. “No, Lucie. I don’t want to go back inside for the soup.” He halves the space between us. My stomach swoops and—it’s the wine, probably, that has me feeling this way. All I’ve had to eat is the fancy bread with the fancy butter . . . the cashews . . . and Aiden is here. Inexplicably. “I was thinking I’d take you for a beer. You look like you could use one.”

I narrow my eyes. “Are you implying I look haggard, Aiden?”

He blinks at me. He doesn’t answer the question.

“What, specifically, makes it look like I need a beer?”

Aiden sighs and tilts his head back, staring up at the night sky in exasperation. I stare at the expanse of his throat, the dip between his collarbones, and the gold chain looped around his neck.

“You’re gonna make me work for it, aren’t you?” he murmurs.

“You like it when I make you work for it,” I fire back. Something liquid hot clenches in my belly. “I really don’t have much else going for me tonight.”

He lets his head drop back with a sigh, stepping closer. “Your sad little face makes it look like you need a beer. Happy?”

I frown. “I don’t have a sad face.”

“Is that why you’re frowning?”

“I’m not frowning,” I tell him, still frowning.

“Your sad-girl walk, then,” he says. He turns me around and presses his palm to the small of my back. “You looked like you were marching to the gallows when I was coming down the street.”

“How’d you know it was me?” I ask, letting him guide me to the bar on the corner. The one with flower baskets spilling from the windows. Flame-lit lanterns flickering by the entrance. “There are plenty of sad girls in Baltimore.”

“Ah, Lucie.” Aiden smiles, his fingers fanning out wide against my back. “I’d know you anywhere.”

CELIA BLYTHE: Welcome back to *Primetime Pussycats*, Baltimore's only cat-focused programming. Before the break, Genevieve and I were discussing another Baltimore radio show. Have you guys been tuning in to *Heartstrings*?

GENEVIEVE POWERS: We're obsessed.

CELIA BLYTHE: Obsessed.

GENEVIEVE POWERS: There's definitely something going on between Aiden and Lucie.

CELIA BLYTHE: You think?

GENEVIEVE POWERS: I think.

CELIA BLYTHE: Should we ask Peanut Butter? Peanut Butter, do you think there's something going on between Aiden and Lucie?

PEANUT BUTTER: [faint meowing]

GENEVIEVE POWERS: I told you.

CELIA BLYTHE: You did. You told me.

GENEVIEVE POWERS: Peanut Butter is never wrong.

CELIA BLYTHE: Never.

CHAPTER 17

AIDEN

I take her to a tiny bar right next to the docks with a crooked front stoop and a jukebox in the back corner that plays only one song. The bar is full, but there's a table in the back corner wedged right up against a foggy glass window and the beleaguered jukebox. Lucie studies the musical selections while I grab us two beers and a basket of French fries, her face cast in blues and pinks from the neon lights above the bar.

"It's an interesting choice," she says as I hand her a beer. "To only feature 'Thong Song.'"

She takes a long sip from her glass and sighs happily. A bit of foam clings to her bottom lip. I drop myself down at the table before I can do something stupid like wipe it away.

"Well, it is a classic," I tell the table.

"That's true."

"It used to play *Hairspray* too. But I think someone slammed their glass into it after one too many rounds of 'Good Morning, Baltimore.' It's been playing Sisqó ever since."

She hums in mock sympathy. "A grim fate."

"I don't know. He has been called the Tchaikovsky of our time."

She tips her head back and laughs. It sounds different outside the radio booth. Less contained. Rougher at the edges but better because of it. She settles in her seat and the length of her thigh presses against mine. We don't have the excuse of the close quarters of the booth tonight, and I wonder if she did it on purpose. I don't move away.

"Thank you for this," she says, pushing her bangs out of her face and shifting in her chair. She's wearing more makeup than usual tonight. Her eyes look like they're glowing. "Were you in the area?"

I'm too busy watching her slip out of her coat to answer her question, a soft-looking emerald green dress beneath that's draped over her shoulders. I can see freckles I've never seen before. Right below her collarbone and in the

hollow of her throat. I take another long pull from my beer.

"What?" I ask in a rasp as I pull the bottle away from my mouth.

"You must have been close by when I texted," she says.

"Oh, no. I mean, yeah. I live over here. Up on Fleet." And I hurled my body into the shower as soon as she texted that she was waiting at the restaurant, not bothering to look at the T-shirt I pulled out of the dresser before tugging it over my head.

"It's not a far walk," I add, feeling a rush of embarrassment for the way I rushed over. Lucie is a grown woman and she can handle herself. But all I could think about was the hopeful tremble in her voice when she asked me if she thought she'd find someone, the two of us sitting alone at that picnic table. I clear my throat. "I didn't want you to be alone."

She keeps staring at me, her beer lifted halfway to her mouth.

"What's your deal?" she asks suddenly, after the silence stretches so thick it feels like I'm going to choke on it.

I blink at her. "My deal?"

"Yeah." She takes a heavy gulp from her beer. This time she wipes the foam away with her thumb. "What's up with you?"

"Why does it sound like you're asking what's *wrong* with me?"

"You're a radio host," she says, ignoring me, holding up a single finger in explanation. "Of a late-night romance hotline." She holds up another finger. "You told me you don't believe in love, yet here you are. Helping me find my match. What gives?"

"I wouldn't say I'm helping you find your match. I just bought you a beer." I nudge the basket of French fries closer. "And fries. Did you eat dinner?"

She grabs one of the fries and tosses it in her mouth. She groans when she gets a taste and then immediately grabs two more. "Well?" she asks, reaching for the ketchup from the table behind us.

I grab a fry too. "Well, what?"

"You're a man of contradictions, Aiden Valen."

I shrug. "I like having a paying job."

She rolls her eyes. I laugh.

"What? It's true. I took a job in radio because I needed quick cash in college. I was a dumb kid and thought it would be better than working at the campus cafeteria. My friend needed coverage for a shift and said she'd pay me double if I did it for her."

"And you fell in love? That first shift?"

"I hate to squash the optimist in you, but no. I liked the quick money and I liked that I got a bunch of girls' numbers." I shovel another fry in my mouth

and wiggle my eyebrows. “Apparently I have a nice voice.”

Lucie gives me a sour look.

“Don’t look at me like that. I was in college.”

“That’s not an excuse for being a trollop.”

Another laugh barks out of me. Two of the men at the bar turn to glance at me over their shoulders. I smother my smile into something manageable. “I also liked . . . being someone else. I liked putting my problems away and existing as a new person.”

“Aiden Valentine,” Lucie says. “Instead of Aiden Valen.”

“Exactly. The biggest problem Aiden Valentine had was what song to play next. It was easy for him to be happy. Easy for him to make conversation. Easy to be charming.” He didn’t have a sick mom or a slowly deteriorating GPA or trouble with people. “I liked talking to people. It was purely coincidental I ended up on a show about romance. I liked talking about love until I . . . didn’t, I guess.”

“Why?”

Maybe it’s the low light or maybe it’s the burn of alcohol in my belly or maybe it’s Lucie, but the truth tumbles out of me. “I started to see this common thread with callers. How love could make them miserable. How it could tear them to absolute pieces. And once I saw it, I couldn’t unsee it. I think I started waiting for it. Bracing myself for it. It felt easier that way.”

“Why?” Lucie asks again, her body curving closer into mine.

“Because I saw it with my life too. With my . . . with my dad. My mom got sick,” I rasp, my palms pressing against my cold glass. “She kept getting sick and it tore my dad to absolute pieces every time. And I think that’s when I stopped believing in good things.”

She sucks in a sharp breath and leans closer. “Is she—”

“She’s okay now, but it was—” I drag my thumb up and down the condensation, focusing on it. Trying to hold myself here and not in a memory. “I was a kid the first time she was diagnosed. Three days before my eighth birthday.” I remember there were balloons on the kitchen table when my parents sat me down. A cake that sat in the fridge and was never eaten. “And it was—we all had a hard time with it—but my dad—” My voice cracks at the edges and I swallow around it. “It devastated my dad. My room was right next to their bathroom, and some nights, after my mom fell asleep, I’d hear him through the wall. He’d run a shower to cover the noise, but I could—I could hear him crying.” I could tell in the morning, with his red-rimmed eyes and his drawn face. The way he’d look at my mom when he thought no one was looking at him. Like his heart was being ripped out of his chest. Like

he wouldn't survive it if she didn't.

I keep talking, determined to move the conversation forward. I'm sprinting across a field of conversational land mines, tossing out the most devastating milestones of my life like they're party favors. "He loved her so much, and it was killing him the same way the cancer was killing her. After that I thought it would be easier if I just never—if I didn't let myself feel that."

Lucie makes a soft sound. Her fingers brush over my arm. "Aiden."

I shake my head. "Nah, don't do that. I'm not the one you should feel sorry for." I take another pull from my bottle and force some levity into my voice. "Anyway, I worked in radio for a long time and it was good. And then it wasn't." I attempt to lighten the mood. "I think I heard one too many complaints about mediocre anniversary gifts. It took the shine off romance for me."

Lucie watches me carefully, her chin in her hand. I wait for her to ask more questions about my parents, but she must read the apprehension on my face. I don't talk about them. Not ever. It's how I hold myself together. It's how I keep going.

Her eyes soften.

"You're helping me," she points out. "I have to think you believe in romance a little bit if you're willing to help me."

"Maggie threatened me with bodily harm."

"Is that why you're here tonight? Because Maggie threatened you?"

"No. No, this is my own misplaced sense of chivalry." I force a cough into my fist. "I think I'm coming down with something."

"Liar." Lucie points a slim, accusatory finger at my nose. I grab it and then lower our hands to the table. I am irrationally pleased when she doesn't pull her hand away. "I think you're a closet romantic," she tells me.

"Decent human being," I correct.

"Secret swoony boy," Lucie parrots back.

I snort. She twists her hand under mine and our palms brush together. I trace my thumb over the grease stain on the bridge of her knuckles. "I think if anyone could convince me to believe in it, Lucie, it would be you."

She grins into the top of her IPA, cheeks pink. "By sheer force of will."

I squeeze her hand. "Something like that."

Two beers later and Lucie picks up a laminated menu with a stain that could

be ketchup or could be the leftovers of a bar fight. She took her hand back about an hour ago, before the aforementioned beers, and I've been silently scheming on the other end of the table for ways to get it back.

It's an impulse I don't particularly want to investigate.

Lucie studies the menu with the focus of a NASA physicist. "You know what I need?"

I take a long pull of my beer and wonder if she'd notice if I propped my arm along the back of her chair. What she'd do if I tangled my fingers in her hair. I'm pleasantly buzzed on beer and proximity, the smell of her shampoo and that fucking green dress. "A gin and tonic and two more plates of French fries?"

"Yes," she breathes, drawing out the word until it's six syllables long. She's been eyeballing the drinks at the table next to us with an expression I can only categorize as longing lust. Her eyes narrow. "But also no."

"No?"

"I need to have fun, Aiden. I never have any fun. I am always the least fun person in the room."

"That's not true," I tell her. "We're in the same room three nights a week and I can guarantee I'm less fun than you."

She has the decency not to argue with me. "What do people even do for fun?"

"I've heard rumors of a thing called television."

She frowns at me. "Aiden. I'm being serious."

"So am I."

She shifts in her seat, her knees bumping mine beneath the table, her face open and eager. "Do you remember the first time we talked? When I told you I don't want to try?"

I nod. Sometimes I think I hear her voice twisting through my dreams. Sometimes when I wake up in the morning, I feel like she should be in the space next to me, her laugh ringing in my ears. "I do."

"Well, tonight I don't want to try. I don't want to think about failed dates or the radio show or the . . . or the dillweed who stood me up tonight."

I mouth the word *dillweed* with a smile.

"I want to put money in that jukebox and hear 'Thong Song.' I want French fries and another beer and maybe even a shot. A shot, Aiden! I don't think I've ever done a shot before."

She's picking up steam, her eyes growing wilder with every word. Concern starts to war with my amusement. She's riding a hysterical edge that sounds like she's about to cry.

“Lucie, are you—”

“I’m fine,” she says. She takes another noisy sip of her beer. “I just—while everyone else was having fun, I was mixing formula bottles and falling asleep reading about the very hungry caterpillar. I missed the part of life where you can be an idiot without consequence. I’m—I’m being nostalgic, I think. Or romanticizing. I’m very good at romanticizing.” She presses two fingers between her eyebrows and rubs, then averts her gaze to a TV above the bar that’s airing an old Orioles game from the early nineties. Cal Ripken walks out from the dugout with his hat raised, and the crowd goes wild.

Lucie sighs. “You can ignore me.”

“It’s impossible to ignore you,” I murmur.

“What was that?”

I shake my head. “Nothing.” Her lips are still tilted down at the edges, her shoulders curved in. “You know, if you’re looking for fun”—I give in and stretch my arm out across the back of her chair, my fingertips glancing along her bare shoulder—”they have a Skee-Ball machine in the back.”

She looks at me out of the corner of her eye. “Are you messing with me?”

I shake my head slowly.

A grin splits her face and it’s like I’ve been plugged into the wall. Like the sun’s been tilted in my direction.

“Where?” she asks, already leaning halfway out of her seat to look.

“Food first.” I press her back with two fingers against her shoulder until she’s upright in her seat. “Then Skee-Ball.”

“Aiden?”

“What?” I grunt.

“Have you always been this bad at Skee-Ball?”

“No.” I glare at the giant flashing zero at the top of the machine. The last ball I tossed went in a completely different lane. The one before that left a dent in the scoreboard that’s currently mocking me. “This is a recent development.”

It’s actually a combination of the alcohol and her feet kicked up on the side of the machine, her long legs a smooth line all the way to the hem of her dress. I don’t think I’ve gotten a single ball past the metal gate.

“You’re not very good,” she says, her lips around a straw.

She crosses and recrosses her legs, and a ball bounces from the ramp to the floor. She slips from her perch at the side of the machine to retrieve it and

I stare too long at the way the material of her dress stretches across her thighs when she bends to scoop it from the floor.

I swallow hard and finish my drink in two heavy swallows, averting my eyes to the top of the Skee-Ball machine and the clown face painted there. It's judging me silently with its unblinking eyes.

I'm the clown. Lucie is as off-limits as it gets. She's looking for romance. Happily ever after.

Not a beleaguered radio show host with an attitude problem.

"Here," she says, coming to my side and handing me another ball. She sets her empty drink next to mine and shifts until she's behind me. She wraps one arm around my middle and laces our fingers together.

My stomach drops to the floor.

"Um," I say, confused and too aware of her body pressed against my back. "What's happening right now?"

She huffs and tries to guide my stiff arm in a different position from behind me. "I'm trying to correct your form."

"My form?"

"Yes," she says, sounding frustrated. I can't tell because she's behind me, trying to arrange my body like I'm a puppet on a string. "Your form is bad."

"What do you know about Skee-Ball form?"

She peers around my shoulder. In her heels, her temple is almost pressed to mine. If I leaned forward, I could brush my lips over the bridge of her nose.

The tight grip I usually keep on myself is too loose tonight, undone by half a dozen drinks and *Lucie*. I'm staring too long. Thinking about too many things. Coming up with too many excuses.

"I know a lot about Skee-Ball form, thank you very much." Her palm pats at my side and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep my groan in check. "It's all in the hips."

Christ. "Is it?"

"Yep." She drags her palms down my sides to my waist. They're warm through the thin material of my T-shirt. She urges me forward, her chest pressed to my back, then wraps her arm back around my torso. I can smell her shampoo. The sharp bite of metal that always seems to cling to her. I suck in a sharp breath.

Her face appears over my shoulder again. "Did I pinch you?"

"No." I can feel the press of her between my shoulder blades. At the small of my back. I want to slip my hand behind me and tug her more firmly to me. I want to drag my fingertips up the back of her bare thigh. I shift my feet and

her hand clenches in a fist against the front of my shirt. I close my eyes tight. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

“I’m fine,” I say again. “You were saying? About the hips?”

“Oh.” Her hand presses flat against my abdomen and her nails trace a meandering, distracting path, like she’s trying to map all the dips and contours of my body through touch alone. Heat licks everywhere her palm touches. I grab her hand when her pinky touches the button of my jeans.

“Lucie.”

“Hmm?”

“What are you doing?”

“Oh,” she says again, her forehead dropping to my shoulder. A sigh shudders out of her. “I forgot what I was saying.”

Some of her words slur at the edges and I glance at our abandoned table. Two empty baskets of French fries and a collection of glasses. An empty plate that used to have a burger that she absolutely devoured. A buzzy, far-off part of my brain suggests we’ve had too much to drink, but I can’t make my body move away from hers.

“I think you were trying to show me proper form for Skee-Ball throwing,” I say slowly.

“That’s right.” She hums. She nuzzles into the space between my shoulder blades and makes a happy sound. “You smell good.”

“Thank you.” I squeeze her hand. “You smell good too.”

Two green eyes appear over my shoulder. “I said that out loud?”

“You did.”

“Great.” She sighs. Her palm pats at my stomach. “Okay. Let’s toss some balls.”

I snort. “Yeah. Let’s do that.”

“Be mature, please. This is very serious.”

“Of course.”

She places one of the balls carefully in my hand and wraps my fingers around it, fussing with my thumb and where it’s placed. I try to pin hers with mine in a juvenile attempt at a thumb war, but she evades my clumsy maneuvers, clicking her tongue in disapproval.

“Focus,” she says, and I swear I would if I could. As it is, I can only focus on the places she’s touching me, one of her heeled feet between mine. My imagination is having a field day.

“Okay, so, when you throw the ball, you’re not extending your swing.” She tugs my arm back, then pushes it forward in a wide arc. When we move

forward, her body slides against my back. Goose bumps erupt on my forearms. “Like that. See?”

I move our arms together again. “Like this?”

She nods and her hair brushes against my biceps. “Just like that,” she whispers in my ear. “Give it a try.”

She steps away. I throw the ball. It hits the metal grate again and bounces off the ramp, rolling under one of the booths by the window.

“I think I’m just bad at Skee-Ball,” I murmur.

“Yeah, you’re pretty terrible at it,” she agrees. I turn halfway with an arched eyebrow and she’s grinning at me, smiling so wide her eyes are a fraction of their usual size. A laugh slips out of her the longer I try to look stern, and something inside me cracks open.

“Oh!” she says, her face twisting in eager anticipation. I like this version of Lucie. She’s unburdened by the weight she seems so intent on carrying around. Soft at the edges. Playful. “You know what we should do now?”

“Have some water and get you another burger?”

“I want to dance!” she declares, ignoring me completely. She turns and clicks her way over to the jukebox. She makes a show of studying the selections even though there’s only one song, then holds her hand out to me, palm up.

I slap it with mine, then hold on.

She glares at me.

“What?” I ask, leaning heavily against the machine at her side. I feel like I’m underwater. Everything is dense and slow-moving. Like I’m stuck in a syrupy haze, or maybe just caught in Lucie’s orbit. The orange light from the jukebox makes her look like she’s glowing.

“I need change,” she says.

“I know. That’s why you’re doing the show.”

“No.” She sighs. “Like coins. For the machine. To play music.”

“Oh.” I dig into my pocket and hand her two quarters.

“Thank you,” she says primly.

She drops them into the tiny slot and presses the appropriate buttons, her tongue caught between her teeth. The violin intro starts and a cheer goes up around the bar. She holds out her hand to me again.

“I gave you all my quarters,” I tell her.

“I’m not asking for quarters.”

I slap our hands together again.

“Stop giving me high fives.”

“Can’t help it,” I mumble. She wiggles her fingers and I blink at her.

“What? What are you asking for?”

“I can’t dance to ‘Thong Song’ by myself, Aiden.”

“I bet you can.”

She stomps her foot and I laugh. Next to us, Sisqó is singing about “dumps like a truck, truck, truck.” I feel like maybe I’ve fallen through the floor and entered an alternate universe. I’ve either had too much or not enough to drink for this.

“Aiden,” she says again, slipping closer. “Dance with me. Please.”

“Lucie,” I whisper back. “Don’t make me publicly dance to ‘Thong Song.’”

She twists her hips back and forth to the beat, her bottom lip jutting out. I should not find that as sexy as I do.

“Fine,” I groan, trying not to smile when she gives a happy little cheer, feet marching in place and her arms raised above her head. The hem of her skirt rises two inches. I tug it back down, then clasp my hands behind my back. “I’m just going to sway,” I warn her.

“Swaying is fine,” she agrees quickly. She fists the front of my shirt and drags me into the middle of a two-by-two section of sticky hardwood. The two bearded men who were sitting at the bar earlier are at a high-top table now and they’re no less confused by our antics.

Lucie loops her arms around my neck and smooshes her cheek against my shoulder. After three hazy seconds of consideration, I cup the back of her head and dig my fingers into her hair. We slowly drift back and forth, not at all following the beat of the song. On the other end of our makeshift dance floor, two frat boys in matching candy-colored polos do a drunken line dance.

“You know, for being stood up, tonight actually turned out okay.” Lucie tips her face toward mine and all I see is green, green, green. *Hedera canariensis*, I think blearily, *but prettier*. *The prettiest eyes I’ve ever seen.*

“I think that’s your third gin and tonic talking.”

She huffs. “Is it impossible to think I’d have a good time with you?”

“Very few people would refer to me as *a good time*.”

“I find that hard to believe.” Her gaze drifts lazily across my face.

I can feel my heartbeat in the palms of my hands, the backs of my knees, the hollow of my throat. The place on my neck where Lucie’s fingertips are tracing featherlight patterns. I try to figure out what she’s writing there, then decide I don’t care. As long as she keeps doing it.

I smooth my palm down her spine and tuck her closer. I’m letting myself glide down the slippery slope of affection, content to gather these moments and hold them close for tomorrow, when we haven’t consumed an entire bar

and I need to pretend my eyes don't catch on Lucie every time she enters a room.

I think I have a crush, and that's the last thing I fucking need.

"You're a good dancer," I murmur against her temple.

"This isn't dancing," she replies sleepily.

"Swaying, then. You're a good swayer." She hums back something noncommittal and my hands tighten on her. "I should get you home." I sigh.

"What?" She leans back in the circle of my arms, pouting. I grin at the look on her face. She's so fucking cute.

"No," she whines.

I push her hair back over her shoulder. "Yes. Sadly, 'Thong Song' has come to an end."

It ended about a minute ago, but Lucie didn't notice and I didn't want to point it out.

"Do you have any more quarters?" she asks. I shake my head and her shoulders slump in defeat. "Damn."

"Next time," I tell her, guiding her to the table, making sure to keep my hand on the small of her back. Neither of us is particularly steady, but she has the added complication of death-trap shoes. She wobbles as she collects her things, managing to get only one arm in her coat. She lets the rest of it drape over her shoulder as a yawn twists her mouth. Her fist digs into the curve of her cheek.

She looks adorable. Deliciously disheveled. I stand there in the middle of the bar and stare at her. Coincidentally, I realize I'm fucked. Because it would be one thing if I only enjoyed spending time with Lucie because of how her legs stretch for miles beneath the flimsy material of her skirt, or how her nose scrunches when she laughs, or how she looks at anything and everything with unflagging optimism. But it's all of those things and a bunch of other stuff too. How smart she is. How sharp. How generous and open and lovely and kind. I like all of those things and no single part rises above or sinks below the rest.

I help her slip into her jacket and I pinch the top two buttons closed, fumbling with the too-small closures. My knuckles brush against the curve of her breast and she inhales sharply.

"I'm going to walk you home now," I tell her, my hand slowly moving down the rest of her buttons. I hope that by the time I reach the bottom of these tiny, ineffectual bits of plastic, I'll have cobbled together some common sense.

"Okay," Lucie says, not moving an inch. She angles her face up and her

nose nudges mine.

I release all that common sense like a balloon, watching it float happily away.

"Lucie," I breathe, scrambling for restraint if common sense can't be bothered. She's been drinking. So have I. I can't kiss her, even if the devil on my shoulder is bellowing obscenities, daring me to drop my mouth to hers and see if she tastes as sweet as she sounds. My fingers twitch and I let go of her coat. Unfortunately for me, she stays plastered against my front.

"I'm going to walk you home," I repeat, hoping I might be able to convince one of us.

Her eyes close, lashes spread in a fan across the tops of her cheeks. Her nose brushes against mine again and a shudder works its way over my shoulders, my body trembling. I can smell the gin she's been drinking. The faint trace of whatever perfume she wears.

"Lucie," I whisper. I think I'm begging, but I have no idea what for. To let me go. To drag me closer. I don't know.

Someone bumps into her from behind and she sways on her feet, her hands clenching in the front of my T-shirt. I steady her with my hand on the small of her back, my thumb edging over the curve of her ass.

"Watch it," I snap at the dumbass behind her. Lucie drops her forehead against my chest and slumps against me. I sigh and grab my coat, tossing it over my arm as I gently guide her forward. She wobbles as we weave through the crowd, and as soon as we're on the marble front steps of the bar, I tug her to a stop. She looks at me with heavy, sleepy eyes, a question in the tilt of her head.

I drop to the step in front of her and look at her over my shoulder. "Hop up."

She stares at me. "What?"

"You can't walk on cobblestone in those shoes." I hunch over a little bit more. "Hop up."

"On your back?"

"Yes."

"You'll fall."

"I won't."

She bites her lip and I have to swallow against the groan that rumbles up inside of me. "Lucie. I'm not going to drop you," I promise. "Let's get you home."

"I could walk barefoot," she suggests.

"Yes. Please walk barefoot down the streets of Baltimore in March." I

jerk my head forward. “C’mon. Let’s go.”

“You’re bossy.”

“I certainly can be,” I tell her.

She blinks at me, color rising in her cheeks. I don’t miss the way she shifts on her feet.

“All right,” she finally says. She steps forward and slips her hands over my shoulders. Her belly presses against the middle of my back and her knee hitches at my hip. It’s either the best or the worst idea I’ve ever had. Because I have to grip the smooth skin of her strong thighs when I stand and every step forward has her shifting against me.

She rests her chin on top of my shoulder with a happy sigh as I start down the moonlit street, her arms crossed over my chest. I have the insane urge to guide her hand down the front of my T-shirt. Warm her skin with mine.

“This is nice,” she says.

Is it possible to die from the feel of a woman’s thighs? Maybe. It certainly feels like a possibility right now.

“Yeah,” I agree. “It is.”

COMMENT FROM BALTIMORON78:

Petition for *Heartstrings* to air on Saturdays. I need to know what's going on.

CHAPTER 18

LUCIE

I wake up face down on my couch with a horrendously dry mouth and a headache the size of a small European nation. There's a blanket tucked around my shoulders and socks on my feet and I applaud my drunken self for having enough forethought to get comfortable before passing out in the living room.

Last night comes back to me in flashes. Sitting alone at the restaurant. The woman and her soup. Aiden jogging down the sidewalk, bathed in yellow from the streetlights. A tiny bar with a sticky floor and a jukebox in the corner. Skee-Ball. My arms wrapped around Aiden's neck. His smile tugging, working across his face in increments. A broad palm squeezing against my bare thigh.

I blink open my eyes, startled. The pillow beneath me groans and shifts. I shriek, lose my balance, and tumble to the floor.

Aiden's face appears over the side of the couch, his hair deliciously mussed and his eyes squinting. There's a line on his cheek from where his face was pressed up against my couch cushions and we stare at each other in bleary confusion.

"Lucie?" he asks, scrubbing roughly at the back of his head. His hair sticks up even more and he glances down at his legs, still tangled in the blanket that's a noose around my waist. He blinks slowly. "You okay?"

Okay as I can be after waking up spread across the man who is supposed to be helping me find my one true love.

"M'fine," I squeak, trying to untangle myself from the blanket. I don't remember the part of the evening where I decided to use Aiden as a pillow.

Aiden squints and then blinks some more. He's unfairly adorable when he's sleepy.

"You asked me to stay," he explains, his voice rougher than usual. His hand reaches out and he attempts to help me undo the knot of fleece around my middle. Did I try to strap myself to Aiden in my sleep? Why am I so

tangled? *God.* “And then you manhandled me to the couch. You’re . . . scary strong.”

Embarrassment floods my body, making me prickly and hot. I’m mortified. Whatever is worse than mortified. I know I’m an affectionate drunk. Grayson calls me a *cuddle monster*. I think it’s my body trying to make up for the lack of touch I secretly crave. But it’s never been something I’ve had a problem with until I . . . until I latched myself like a barnacle to Aiden, of all people.

I finally get the blanket out from around me and toss the whole thing in his lap, retreating to the other side of the living room.

I need space. I also need a highly detailed report on what happened last night. What else did I do? What else did I say? I only have fleeting, fuzzy thoughts. A slow dance in the dark. My hands in his hair. An idling curiosity of what his mouth tastes like. My body pressing his down on the couch. My mouth against the hollow of his throat, whispering, *Stay, please, you’re a good pillow*.

His hands in my hair, his voice a low rumble. *Okay.*

“Did I kiss you?” I blurt out. I have a hazy memory of my face close to his, our noses brushing together. I remember wanting to kiss him and then . . . nothing. I don’t remember anything else.

Aiden continues to blink blearily at me, sleep-rumpled and confused. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him in a T-shirt before and I’m distracted by the curve of his shoulder through the thin white material. He rubs his palm against the gold chain around his neck and the muscles in his arms flex and release.

“What?” he asks.

“Did I kiss you?” I ask again, slower this time. Maybe if I pretend to be calm, I’ll start to feel it. Fake it till you make it.

The ghost of a smile flirts with his mouth. I want to fling a pillow at his head.

“No.” He collapses against the back of my couch, his knees tipped wide. One arm stretches to the side while he yawns and I’m pretty sure I make a distressed sound. All that *skin*. All those *muscles*. Whatever fortitude I usually rely on not to notice these things is nowhere to be found. “Good to know you’ve been thinking about it, though,” he says, his hand settling at the back of his neck.

“Aiden,” I admonish. What for, I don’t know. Because he’s right. I have thought about it.

Occasionally. Once or twice.

Seven times, tops.

"Lucie," he says back, a laugh hidden behind his eyes.

"Don't flirt with me," I tell him.

Whatever guards Aiden usually holds around himself are softened in the early morning light spilling through the stained-glass windows at the front of my house. He watches me in amusement. "I've *been* flirting with you."

"Since when?"

"Since I made a vague innuendo about oral surgery, give or take a couple of hours."

"Oh," I say. Then, "Really?"

He nods, another wide yawn pressed against the back of his hand. His body goes tense against my couch and then relaxes. I can't believe I'm staring at Aiden. On my couch. "You've been flirting back," he says.

My forehead creases. "Have I?"

He nods. I think of the light, glowy feeling I get every time I slip into the booth. How I always seem to be looking for him. The thrill I get every time I tease him about his unofficial uniform of sweatshirts and dark denim, or his Post-it Notes, or his horrific taste in music. He played Hoobastank *twice*. I refuse to believe that was a mistake.

I guess I have been flirting with him.

"Should we—should we stop?"

He stares at me, his face unreadable. "Yeah," he says slowly. "We probably should."

"Because we're not compatible," I explain without prompting. "Because I'm looking for a relationship and you're—"

"Not relationship material," he finishes gruffly. It seems like Aiden is more fundamentally opposed to investing in a relationship than being *relationship material*, but fine. He's nursing old wounds. I can't judge him for that.

He scrubs at his face. "It's just a crush. Because we're spending so much time together." He drops his hands to his lap. "It'll fade."

"Yeah," I agree, ignoring the flush of disappointment making my cheeks hot. I look down at my feet. "Yeah," I say again.

"I'll stop if you stop."

I scoff. "That's not how this works."

One dark eyebrow rises on his forehead. He looks like a jungle cat. Some other massive predator. "It's exactly how this works. You stop twisting your hair back in the booth and I—"

"Twisting my *hair*?" I interrupt. "You mean braiding it?"

He nods. “Yeah. Stop braiding your hair in the booth and I’ll stop flirting with you.”

“Aiden, that’s not—” I take a second to collect myself. “That’s not flirting. That’s—I’m just pulling my hair back.”

His hand flexes on my couch cushion. “Stop braiding your hair in the booth and I’ll stop flirting with you,” he says again, a hint of demand in his voice. I swallow and shift.

A fragment of a conversation floats back to me.

You’re bossy.

I certainly can be.

My chest feels tight. I’m aware of every place on my body that this dress doesn’t cover. Ankles, knees, thighs. I’m sure I look like a raccoon that’s been in some sort of street fight over a pizza crust after sleeping on the couch in full makeup, but Aiden is looking at me like I’m a bag of contraband coffee shoved into a cookie tin.

“Lucie,” he starts. “I—”

“Hello, Queen of the Night,” bellows a voice from my kitchen. My eyes slip shut with a frustrated sigh. Grayson. “I’m here for the full debrief. Spare no detail!”

I need a deadlock on my back door. Maybe one of those childproof things underneath the handle so he can’t wiggle his way in. I fantasize about moving to Puerto Rico. In my head, I’m splayed out like a starfish on a lounger with a frozen drink in my hand. I turn my head and there’s a tanned body stretched out next to mine. Dark hair. Stubble. A gold chain around his neck.

I really shouldn’t have had those shots last night.

“There’s no need to yell, Dad.” Maya’s voice floats through the doorway and I resign myself to dying of embarrassment in front of my child.

“I know you’re dying to hear the juice, Maya bean. You don’t need to play it cool when it’s just us. You’re not a teenager yet. You can show enthusiasm. It won’t—*whoa*.”

Grayson skids to a stop in my living room, an apple from my fruit basket in his hand. His eyes ping-pong from me in my short green dress to Aiden sprawled on the couch to me again. His gaze snags on the heap of blanket on Aiden’s lap and a grin starts to climb his stupid face.

“Holy shit,” he whispers.

Maya appears around his arm. She’s wearing a pinch-front fedora and she’s got scruff drawn over her jaw with . . . mascara, I think. My mascara, probably. Her curly hair is pulled back into a severe bun beneath the hat. There’s a whip at her hip. Clearly, I forgot about cosplay day.

Grayson immediately covers her eyes like he's just found me straddling Aiden on the couch.

"Dad." Maya sighs. "You're going to mess up my makeup."

"Grayson," I add. "Don't be weird."

Aiden stands, the blanket bunched in his arms, a question carved into the lines by his eyes. "Um," he says. "Hello?"

He winces and I have to bury my amusement in my fist. At least I'm not suffering alone. Maya tugs at Grayson's hand until she can peek over the top of his fingers. Aiden blinks at her. I watch him catalog the hat, the beard, the whip looped around her belt. A delighted smile appears on his handsome, sleepy face.

"Dr. Jones." He nods.

She beams at him. My heart does something stupid in my chest.

"Are you my mom's date from last night? William?" she asks. Without missing a beat, she adds, "Did you guys have a sleepover?"

"That's not William and it sure does look like they had a sleepover, doesn't it?" Grayson is enjoying this entirely too much. Aiden shifts on his feet, looking surprisingly comfortable despite the circumstances. I thought an inquisition from a twelve-year-old would have him breaking out in hives, but he's just standing there taking it in. In his T-shirt with his . . . arms. His bare arms with the . . . muscles. He must have taken off his shoes last night before I forced him onto the couch because he's wearing two mismatched socks. One is blue and the other is bright red.

It's cute.

"Who are you, then?" Maya asks, her tact left somewhere at her father's house, I guess.

"I'm Aiden," he answers simply. He gives me an inscrutable look I can't begin to decipher before he tosses the blanket on the couch and takes two steps forward. "It's good to finally meet you. Your mom talks about you all the time."

"I recognize your voice," she says slowly. She tips her hat up her forehead, squinting at his face. "You're Aiden Valentine."

He nods. "And you're Maya, orchestrator of grand schemes. Have you considered a future in radio?"

"I'm thinking about archaeology, actually."

Aiden laughs. It's warm and rough. Sleep-worn. "I can see that."

"Yeah," she agrees immediately, bouncing on her toes. She is two seconds away from laying out her entire ten-year plan. Her mouth opens, then snaps shut. Her eyes narrow and dart to me. With her faux scruff, she looks so

much like Grayson that I have to swallow my laugh.

"Wait," she says. "What is Aiden Valentine doing in the living room?"

"Yeah," Grayson echoes. "Excellent question. What is Aiden Valentine doing in the living room?"

Aiden glances at me, hesitant. I shrug. Might as well lean in.

"Would you like to stay for breakfast?" I ask him.

I shuffle upstairs to change into an old sweatshirt and a pair of faded flannel pants, Aiden's eyes lingering on them when I reappear in the kitchen with a bottle of ibuprofen extended in his direction.

"What?" I ask, watching a slow smile work its way across his face. Aiden's smiles are almost always uneven, his bottom lip tugging sharper on the left. It's like his face is unused to the expression, warming up to it the more he does it.

His fingertips brush against mine when he grabs the plastic bottle. I tug my hand back like I've been burned, folding it into the sleeve of my sweatshirt. "What?" I ask again.

"Nothing," he says, shaking his head. He shakes two pills into his palm and tosses them back. I am transfixed by the line of his throat when he swallows. "You look comfortable. It's cute."

I scowl. "I'm not cute."

"You're very cute."

I roll my eyes and retreat to the fridge.

You've been flirting too.

I guess I have.

Aiden finds a seat at the table with Maya and Grayson as I putter around the kitchen, my hangover reduced to a dull ache at the base of my skull and a desperate need for grease. I make pancakes and eggs and enough bacon to feed a small army, a pot of coffee bubbling to life. Their low voices drift around me and the parts of me that slipped out of rotation last night while I sat alone at a restaurant waiting for someone who never showed slowly knit themselves back together. Aiden started the work last night when he called my name down an empty street, and the low conversation at the kitchen table is guiding it forward. This is my home. These are my people. These are the things that matter the most.

I have all the love I need.

"He didn't show?" Grayson asks in outrage, Aiden catching him up with

what I hope is a heavily modified version of last night's events. I lean over his shoulder to drop a plate of bacon in the middle of the table, then slide into the seat next to him.

"He didn't show," I confirm. "Sorry, Gray, but you're no better at picking my dream man than I am."

"Can I try?" Maya asks, tapping Aiden's forearm to get him to hand her the plate with the toast. He does so without her having to verbalize the request, and something plucks once, right beneath my rib cage. "Can I pick your next date, Mom?"

I crunch on a piece of bacon and consider. "I don't think so, kiddo."

"What? Why not?"

"I think you've done enough."

She grumbles something under her breath about *stubborn* and *unfair*. "Who, then?" Her voice is heavy sarcasm. "You?"

Grayson reaches for the jam. "I think your mother has demonstrated that she's awful at picking dates as well."

I sigh. "Maybe it's a family curse. Poor judgment."

Maya sips thoughtfully at her orange juice. "How about Aiden? He could pick your next date."

I choke on my coffee. That's the last thing I want. *It's just a crush* does laps around my hungover-addled brain.

Aiden goes still at the other end of the table. "I don't think I'm qualified," he says slowly.

Maya frowns at him. "Aren't you the host of the show?" He nods slowly. "Then you should pick the next date. That seems to make the most logical sense."

Grayson's eyes dart between us, interested. I want to drive my fork into his leg beneath the table. "Yeah," he agrees. "That seems logical."

"Maybe I don't want to go on any more dates," I offer. "Maybe I'm done with the show."

The table rattles. Aiden winces. "Sorry. I had a . . . cough." I stare blankly at him. He belatedly raises his fist and forces a cough into it. Somewhere to my left, Grayson makes a wheezing sound. Aiden lowers his hand and picks his fork up again. "Are you done with the show?"

I don't want to be. I'd like for one date to work out, at least. But I don't like the idea of Aiden organizing it. The thought makes me slightly nauseous, especially since I woke up with my face in the middle of his T-shirt. He probably still has my nose imprinted on his sternum.

"No." I sigh. "I'm not done with the show. I wouldn't want to disappoint

Mr. Tire."

Aiden gives me one slow blink. He stabs at a piece of pancake with more force than is strictly necessary. "I can pick your next date."

My stomach twists. "You don't have to do that. I'm sure I can find *one* person in the greater Baltimore area who isn't a—"

"Dillweed?" he offers.

I push my fork around my plate. "Yeah. A dillweed. I think I can find someone with, uh, non-dillweed qualities."

"You don't think I can do it?"

I don't know why he sounds so offended.

"I think you can do it. It's not *American Gladiators*, Aiden. Finding me a date shouldn't be that difficult."

Not that my current track record would suggest otherwise.

"Fine. I'm going to pick your next date." He says it like a threat, his jaw tight and eyes flashing. Another piece of pancake bites the dust. "And I'd kick ass at *American Gladiators*. For the record."

I've seen his arms. I'm sure he could.

"Noted," I reply, unclear what we're arguing about.

Grayson claps his hands together with a crack. "It's settled, then. Lucie's Highway to Happiness—"

"Road to Love," I correct wearily.

"—continues chugging along." He ruffles my hair. "I'm so proud of you, my Little Engine That Could."

"Great." Aiden's teeth snap around a piece of bacon, his elbow resting on the table. His body is a lazy curve, slouched in the early morning light.

"Great," I fire back, annoyed for some reason. Maya and Grayson look entirely too pleased with themselves. "Shouldn't you two be off to the cosplay thing?"

"Oh shit." Grayson pushes back from the table and leans across the island for Maya's discarded hat. "Let's go, Maya bean. I'm sure you have a crystal skull to save."

"*Crystal Skull* is the worst one," she moans. She pats the top of my head as she edges past. "Bye, Mom." She tosses a shy wave in Aiden's direction. "Bye, Aiden Valentine."

He smiles, amused. His weird flare of obstinate tension has disappeared. Now he just looks tired. I remember him saying he's not a morning person.

He waves at Maya. "Catch you later, Indy."

She grins and hops out the door. Grayson disappears behind her. The kitchen settles into silence.

“I should head out,” Aiden says slowly, staring at the edge of his plate. I was fine when we woke up, but all of last night’s poor decision-making is catching up with me in flashes of disjointed, hazy memories. I remember begging him to dance to “Thong Song.” Wrapping my body around his at the Skee-Ball ramp. Kicking his sides with my heels while he gave me a piggyback home.

I cringe.

I decide to bury everything in the back of my mind to deal with another time and push back my seat. Aiden does too, stacking some of the dirty dishes and walking them to the sink.

“Sorry for, uh, manhandling you,” I say quietly while he rinses syrup off the cutlery and slots it neatly into the dishwasher. I notice he puts the forks prong-side up, the way god intended. My unfortunate crush gains momentum. “And thanks for keeping me company last night.”

“You don’t need to thank me,” he says. He closes the dishwasher and dries his hands on the towel. The one with a whisk that says WHIP IT REAL GOOD. “You don’t need to apologize either.”

“For the manhandling?”

That half smile again. “I like a woman who can toss me around.”

I bite the inside of my cheek against my answering grin. “I thought we talked about the flirting thing.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” He folds my dish towel into a neat rectangle, then drapes it over the handle of my dishwasher. “I’ll be on my best behavior from here on out.”

We stare at each other across the length of the kitchen. A hazy memory of last night drifts across my mind. Aiden doing up the buttons of my jacket, his knuckles brushing against the curve of my breast through the heavy material. A look of naked hunger on his face, his lips parted.

I don’t think I want him on his best behavior.

Aiden drums his hands against the chair and I snap out of it. “I’ll see you at the station on Monday,” he says, and I like to think I’m not imagining the reluctance in his voice. “I’ll work on finding you that date.”

I nod. This is the plan. This has always been the plan. There’s no reason to be disappointed, but I can’t help but feel like I’m letting something slip out of my grip. I got a taste of the real Aiden last night, and now I want more.

But I can’t. I shouldn’t.

“Yeah,” I say, trying to swallow around the sudden weight in the middle of my throat. “Of course. I’ll be there.”

“All right.” He doesn’t move. “I’ll see you then.”

I nod again. It's a wonder my head doesn't roll right off my shoulders. "Yeah."

"On Monday."

"Mm-hmm."

"Bye." He slips both hands over his hair.

"See ya."

He stands on the other side of my kitchen table and doesn't move an inch. He watches me carefully, brows furrowed, face in stern concentration. His hand squeezes at the back of his neck, the same way he does at the station when he's trying to work through a problem. He blows out a breath and steps backward, the thread looped between us pulled tight.

"I'm leaving now."

"I've heard rumors about that," I say lightly, crossing my arms over my chest.

He cracks a smile. His whole face changes when he smiles. All those hard lines smooth out and he softens into something approachable. He drifts from my kitchen to my living room while sneaking looks at me out of the corner of his eye, and I watch him move around in my space.

"Thanks for breakfast," he says while he's pulling on his boots.

"No problem."

"I'll—I'll see you Monday," he says again.

"Get out of my house," I reply with a laugh while he grabs his coat.

He rolls his eyes at me before he disappears out the front door, and as it snicks shut behind him, I collapse in my chair. I press two fingers to the edge of my smile, my cheeks straining under the pressure of it.

The forgotten *Heartstrings* phone sitting in the middle of the table buzzes with a text.

AIDEN: Bye.

I laugh out loud.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Welcome back to *Heartstrings*, Baltimore. We missed you over the weekend.

LUCIE STONE: We really did. You guys make life more interesting.

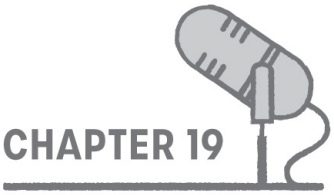
LUCIE STONE: What did you get up to this weekend, Aiden?

AIDEN VALENTINE: Oh, you know. A little bit of this, a little bit of that.

LUCIE STONE: Anything fun?

AIDEN VALENTINE: I had lots of fun. What about you?

LUCIE STONE: You know what? I had some fun too.



CHAPTER 19

AIDEN

This is good.

This is the reminder I needed.

I needed it broken down in black and white. Lucie is here to find a date. Someone who is capable of giving her all the things she deserves. She is not here for piggybacks down the street in the middle of the night, or slow dances in bars, or questionable Skee-Ball lessons from emotionally unavailable men. I told myself I'd never let myself get hurt by love, and I meant it. I'm doing just fine without it.

But Lucie needs to find a date.

So I'm going to find her one.

"Give me your phone," I say to Lucie as soon as we cut for the first commercial break. I'm not in a particularly good mood tonight and I'm blaming the string of uninspiring candidates. I'm supposed to be picking her next date, but everyone who has called in has either been a bumbling idiot or a self-serving asshole. I don't know how I'm going to pick someone short of throwing a dart at the wall and hoping for the best. None of these people are good enough.

She blinks at me, her chin resting on her knees and her arms wrapped around them. "What was that?"

"I need your phone," I say again.

"I heard you, but what's that tone about?"

"I don't have a tone," I grumble.

"I have a twelve-year-old. I know when someone is using a tone." She curls her legs under her. She's wearing jeans tonight. Loose ones with a hole at the top of her thigh. A threadbare T-shirt that I want to slip my hands under.

I woke up this morning still tangled up in my dreams, and all I can remember is groping hands, gasping breaths, and the freckles along Lucie's shoulder. Her laugh curling around me like smoke and her mouth against

mine.

I spent a significant amount of time in my shower.

"Aiden," she snaps. "What do you need my phone for?"

I clear my throat and try to do something with my face that doesn't say, *I dream about you naked now.* "Does it matter?"

"Sort of, yeah."

I grunt and her lips pull into a smirk. She lifts her chin. "Ask me nicely and I'll give it to you."

My brain hears something completely different. Or maybe just the last four words of that sentence on repeat. Our new no-flirting rule is harder than I thought. I twist my head to the side, crack my neck, and try again. "Can I please see your phone?"

She hands me her personal phone. I stare at it blankly. The wallpaper is a picture of her and Maya sharing a giant blob of pink cotton candy at an Orioles game. She has a hat on backward and she's laughing so hard her eyes are squeezed shut. Cotton candy on her nose.

"Not this one." I set it to the side. I tap the screen again as soon as it goes blank so I can see that picture again. "The *Heartstrings* phone."

Her eyes narrow. "Why?"

"I want to see the texts," I explain, exasperated and trying not to show it. "Maybe there's someone in there who will be a good fit."

"Oh." Her face tightens. "No."

"No?"

She tucks her hair neatly behind her ears. It's down tonight. No braid in sight.

"No, there's no one that interests me in the text messages. I've stopped looking at them."

"Have you?"

She nods. "I don't even turn that phone on anymore."

That's a lie. I've heard the phone buzzing periodically throughout tonight's broadcast. I study her face. The careful way she's holding herself. How her eyes keep darting slightly to my left. I don't think there's a person in Baltimore who sucks at lying more than Lucie.

"What are you hiding?"

"Me? I'm not hiding anything." Her fingers inch toward her ear like she wants to rub her thumb against the tiny wrench earring pierced through her cartilage, but she catches herself and snaps her hand back to her lap. "I'm just saying. The text messages don't have any good candidates. It's a waste of your time."

Now I want to see the phone even more. “Lucie.”

“Yes, Aiden?”

“Give me the phone, please.”

“No.”

“Yes.” I swear to god, this woman reduces me to the most stubborn version of myself. I grab the arm of her chair and spin her around until her knees knock into mine. “Hand it over.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and doesn’t move.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

She rolls her eyes. “Okay, *John Wayne*. What are you going to—”

I curl my arm around her waist and tip her forward until she’s off-balance, then lift her up and over my shoulder. My chair squeaks ominously beneath us and Lucie shrieks in my ear. I pluck the station-issued phone from her back pocket like an apple from a tree.

“Aiden,” she gasps. “What?”

I hold her wiggling body against mine and she drives her knee into my stomach. I grunt, readjust my grip, and swipe open her phone.

The first three messages make me roll my eyes.

“Is this guy for real? ‘Do you have a Band-Aid, I just scraped my knees falling for you.’” I delete it on principle. “Ridiculous.”

Lucie relaxes against me with a defeated sigh, her body draped over mine.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you lied about your phone being off, by the way.”

She mumbles something under her breath.

The text messages are just as uninspiring as our callers. Cheap pickup lines. Weird requests. A few kind messages from listeners. It’s the messages farther down, though, that have me seeing red.

“What the *fuck*?” I spit. Lucie makes a half-hearted attempt to detach herself from the front of me, but my arm reflexively clutches at her waist. She settles with her chin on top of my head and her arms curled loose around my shoulders.

“To what are you referring?” she asks calmly.

“You know exactly to what I’m referring.” I scroll some more and it gets worse. “What the hell is this, Lucie? Are people *threatening* you?”

“No, they’re just—”

“You need to shut your mouth,” I recite from the screen of her phone, my voice shaking, *“before someone shuts it for you.”*

“Okay. Maybe mildly threatening. But I don’t even really turn on that phone anymore. Really. Most of them are just—are just comments about

how stupid I sound on the air." She laughs, but it doesn't sound right. It's too high. Too forced. "I guess Elliott has a lot of friends."

The door to the studio swings open and Maggie pokes her frowning face into the room. Lucie is still slung over my shoulder.

"This is an interesting way to spend a commercial break."

Lucie pushes on my chest and I let her go, still scrolling through her phone. She has hundreds of messages in her inbox and half of them are unacceptable. More importantly, all of them are read. She's been looking at this garbage.

"Aiden," Maggie continues. "Do you plan on going back to work tonight?"

I ignore the low-ball attempt at sarcasm and thrust the phone in her face. "I thought you said you set up filters on this thing."

Lucie huffs. "It's not a big deal, Aiden."

"It's a huge fucking deal," I snap back. She flinches and I blow out a breath. "Sorry, I'm—this shouldn't be happening."

Maggie plucks the phone out of my hand. "What are you talking about?"

"The text messages," I explain. "Lucie is being harassed."

I watch Maggie's eyes move back and forth as she swipes through the phone. "Play a song or something," she mutters after a minute. "You've got dead air right now."

I grunt and blindly slam my hand against my control panel. Shania Twain's tinny voice drifts up from my headphones.

"How long has this been going on?" Maggie asks Lucie.

Lucie rubs at her earlobe. "A couple of days," she mumbles.

"Days?" My voice comes out in a shout and she winces again. I rub at my chest with the heel of my hand so hard I feel the bite of metal from the chain around my neck. "You've been getting messages like this for *days*?"

Was it happening at the bar? When she was waiting at that restaurant? Was she sitting there alone, reading them? Lucie briefly meets my gaze, then averts her eyes to the package of Andes mints she brought with her tonight. She slides one free. "I think my comments about baseline effort from romantic partners were inflammatory to some."

"Aiden has said far more inflammatory things," Maggie says, her voice tight. She reads something else on the phone and her eyebrows dip down. "When he called someone an asshat live on the air, for example."

"It was once," I mumble, but she's right. I've said plenty of stupid shit on the air, and no one has ever threatened to *shut my mouth* for me.

Maggie sighs and darkens the phone with a quiet *click*. "Okay, lesson learned. No more texting. I'm sorry you had to deal with that, Lucie."

Lucie shrugs. “I don’t concern myself with the fragile egos of men.” She glances at me. “No offense.”

“None taken.” I’m still having trouble with the rage coursing through my system like a cheap shot of liquor. I’m light-headed with it. “Can we report them somewhere? Send them a glitter bomb or something?” Lucie’s lips twitch with a smile. Some of my anger eases. “People shouldn’t be sending that shit to you.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Maggie says.

“But I—”

“I said I’ll take care of it,” Maggie cuts me off, steel in her voice. “I will take great pleasure in taking care of it. Taking care of it will make my entire month, thank you very much.” She flicks me in the forehead. “Now, go back to your radio show, please. If you’re still angry later, I’ll let you take a baseball bat to the couch someone left in the back parking lot.”

“It’s still there?”

“Yes. The raccoons love it.”

She disappears through the door in a blur of silk and perfectly straight hair, heels clicking against the floor. A chocolate appears in front of my face.

“Candy?” Lucie asks.

I take it and pop it in my mouth. She holds out another.

I take that one too.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I ask once I’m three chocolates deep and the gnawing rage has been shoved into something manageable.

She shrugs. “Because it wasn’t a big deal.” I start to tell her that *yes, actually, it’s a very big deal*, but she slaps her hand across my mouth. Both of my eyebrows shoot up.

“It wasn’t a big deal *to me*,” she says. “This isn’t the first time in my life I’ve received unsolicited comments from men, Aiden. Do you really think, as a female mechanic, this is something I’m unfamiliar with?” She drops her hand. “A lot of men don’t like women working on their cars. But luckily, I don’t hold myself accountable to other people’s impressions of me. I’m fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.” She pops a chocolate mint in her mouth and gives me a smile. I search her face carefully for any traces of hesitation, but there aren’t any. Just bright eyes and pink cheeks and a mouth that makes me borderline stupid. She reaches for her headphones. “We should probably stop playing Shania Twain.”

“Everyone loves Shania Twain.”

“Probably not the same song three times in a row, though,” she reasons.

"Debatable."

I reluctantly drag us back to listener calls. They're better than when we started, but not by much. Everyone either wants to tell Lucie why she's wrong or offer their own sob story. I think we're the most depressing show on the air tonight, and I wonder if— combined with the disaster of her first two dates— Lucie might pull the plug on this whole thing.

Just the thought of sitting in this booth alone again, listening to Charlene order six egg rolls because she *still* hasn't figured out we're not a Chinese restaurant, has me grabbing another chocolate mint. No more Lucie, no more mints. No more scribbled notes on the edge of her notepad, telling me *FIX YOUR FACE*. No more honey voice in my ear. No more daisies and motor oil.

No more half touches that I pretend are an accident.

Once Lucie decides she's done with all this nonsense, I probably won't see her again.

"Aiden seems to have forgotten where he is and what he's doing, so I guess I'll say it." Lucie pokes me with a *Heartstrings*-issued pen and I realize I've been zoning out for seventy-five percent of this broadcast. "Welcome to *Heartstrings*. Thanks for calling in."

She widens her eyes at me. I widen mine back. *What.*

Her head tilts to the side. *Okay?*

I nod. Yes, I'm fine. Except for the feelings I'm not supposed to be feeling and the dreams I'm not supposed to be dreaming and the excuses I'm not supposed to be making. I like Lucie. I like her so much it feels like there's a band around my chest, constricting my breathing when she's not around. I'm entertaining possibilities and that's not—I need to not do that.

Lucie laughs and it yanks me out of my head. The guy on the phone just made some stupid-ass joke and she's lit up like a firecracker.

"That's the worst joke I've ever heard," she says, but she's smiling. She glances at me out of the corner of her eye and her smile falters. I'm always doing that. Making her smile disappear. I frown. "And that's saying a lot, because I'm not sure Aiden even knows how to joke."

"I make jokes," I say. Not often, but it's been known to happen. The guy on the phone—Owen, Oliver, something with an *O*— tells Lucie her laugh is beautiful and I watch her cheeks flush pink.

I'm acting like a sullen child. Hoarding my favorite toy in the corner of the classroom.

"Is there a reason you called in tonight, Otis?" I bark. Lucie gives me a questioning look. I pretend not to see it.

“Uh, Oliver, actually.” There’s an awkward pause and I make no rush to fill it. “And I don’t know. I was listening to you guys on my drive home from work and—I guess I felt like I should. I wanted to talk to Lucie.”

The lines around Lucie’s eyes deepen with her smile. “It was all the Shania Twain, wasn’t it?”

He laughs. “Yeah, you’re right. I heard ‘Man! I Feel Like a Woman!’ four times and thought, ‘God. I need to talk to the woman with that kind of confidence.’”

Lucie laughs again and I make my decision. She’s going on a date with this guy. This guy with the questionable jokes and the affinity for Shania Twain and the name that starts with an *O* that I’ve already forgotten again. He might be an idiot, but he makes her smile. And Lucie deserves someone who will make her smile. Not a grumpy asshole who makes that smile disappear.

I told her I’d find her a date.

This is her date.

“Oswald,” I ask, “what does your week look like?”

AIDEN VALENTINE: Knock, knock.

LUCIE STONE: What?

AIDEN VALENTINE: That’s not how you’re supposed to respond.

LUCIE STONE: Respond to what?

AIDEN VALENTINE: To “knock, knock.”

AIDEN VALENTINE: Knock, knock.

[pause]

LUCIE STONE: What? Why are you staring at me like that?

AIDEN VALENTINE: Knock. Knock. Lucie.

AIDEN VALENTINE: There is someone knocking at the door.

LUCIE STONE: What is happening?

AIDEN VALENTINE: I’m trying to tell a joke.

LUCIE STONE: Are you?

AIDEN VALENTINE: Yes!

LUCIE STONE: A knock-knock joke?

AIDEN VALENTINE: Obviously.

LUCIE STONE: I’m sorry! I wasn’t prepared. Try again.

AIDEN VALENTINE: No.

LUCIE STONE: C’mon. Don’t be shy. I was just surprised.

AIDEN VALENTINE: No.

LUCIE STONE: Is this because I said that you never—

AIDEN VALENTINE: No. Never mind. Forget about it.

CHAPTER 20

LUCIE

Where is this date again?"

"Tagliata," I tell Patty through my speakerphone, turning my steering wheel to the right. "The Italian restaurant over by the water."

Parking in Harbor East is a pain on a good day, even worse when it's raining. I double-check the clock and curse when I realize I'm already five minutes late. And Aiden didn't bother giving me Oliver's number. All I got was a location pin, a time, and the name of the reservation. Nothing else. Not even a *Good luck*. Or the straight-faced emoji he seems so fond of.

I don't know what crawled up Aiden's ass and died this week, but he's hardly said a word to me since he saw those text messages on the *Heartstrings* phone. I've tried to talk to him about it several times, but he's either brushed me off, changed the subject, or ignored me completely.

So, like the mature adult I am, I've started ignoring him back.

When he sent me the information for the date, I didn't even give him a thumbs-up.

So much for our mutual crush. He was right. It faded right away.

"Ooh," Patty singsongs. "That place is fancy."

"Get the rigatoni!" Maya bellows from somewhere in the background. When I left the two of them, they were bundled up on the couch together, only their eyes visible. Harrison Ford was paused on the television and Patty had enough chocolate in her purse to mobilize a small coalition. I'm not sure Maya will ever sleep again.

"I'll get the rigatoni if I ever find a parking spot." I do another lap around the block. If I have to walk from Little Italy, I'm going to look like a drowned rat by the time I get there. "Maya, is there an umbrella in this car that I don't know about?"

"My diorama from science class is still in the trunk. The one we made for the national parks unit."

"No way am I ruining Tiny Yosemite to keep my hair dry. Using gummy

bears to make Half Dome is my crowning achievement as a parent."

Maya snickers. "Dad still whines about it. He made me sign a contract that says I'll never go to you for an art project again."

"Use that hoodie you have in the back seat," Patty interrupts, her voice carefully even.

I scowl out my windshield. "What hoodie?"

"The oversized hoodie I saw in there last week." She pauses. "You know. The one that has *Heartstrings* on the front."

I roll my eyes. "I'm hanging up the phone now."

Patty cackles like a deranged woodland creature. "What? It's a good suggestion. You're just—"

"Bye, Maya. Have lots of fun tonight. I love you to pieces." I hang up the phone before Patty can say anything else. So what if I still have Aiden's sweatshirt in the back seat of my car from the night he wrapped it around my shoulders. So what if I have no intention of returning it. It's comfortable and it smells good. He hasn't asked for it back, and as far as I can tell, he has plenty of sweatshirts. He probably hasn't even noticed it's gone. It's mine now.

By the time I find a parking spot, dart down the sidewalk, and skitter into the restaurant, I'm twelve minutes late and the front of my dress is dotted with rain. I look like I took a spin in a car wash without the car. I used a folded-up copy of the *Baltimore Sun* to shield myself the best I could, and that apparently . . . did not work.

"That's the best work that paper has done in years," a deep voice offers from my left. I look up and see a man leaning against the door by the entrance. Pressed navy suit. Starched white shirt beneath. Collar undone. He's *handsome*. Like a coin that's been shined to perfection or a pretty glass vase sitting up on a shelf.

A dimple flares to life in his left cheek when he offers me a hesitant smile, and I'm struck stupid.

"Lucie?" he asks.

I stand there gaping at him in my damp dress and frizzy hair with a newspaper from two weeks ago clutched in my hand. "Oliver?"

He pushes off the wall and adjusts his jacket, smoothing lines that don't need to be smoothed. "That's me," he says sheepishly. "I was, uh, I was starting to think maybe you might be standing me up."

"The rain." I hitch my thumb over my shoulder. I can't stop staring at his face. It's so *pretty*. "My car."

He steps closer. "The newspaper," he adds.

I glance down at the crumpled paper in my hand. “That too.” We stare at each other in the tiny reception area of the fancy restaurant.

He clears his throat and glances over his shoulder at the rest of the dining room. “Should we—”

“Oh! Yeah. Yes. We should.” I awkwardly hand the wet newspaper to the woman standing behind the hostess stand. “Thank you for . . . taking care of that.”

She holds it between thumb and forefinger and gives me a tight smile. “Your waitress will take you to your table now.”

Oliver’s hand presses gently to the small of my back as we weave through the cozy, candlelit restaurant. The waitress deposits us at a small table in the corner and he pulls out my chair. It feels like I’m caught in a different era. I’ve never had a man pull out a chair for me before.

I tell him so as he settles into the seat across from me.

“You’ve been going out with the wrong people.” He pauses from where he’s flattening a linen napkin across his lap. “I’m also very . . . out of practice. Unfortunately my dating advice comes in the form of Gregory Peck movies.”

I laugh and my shoulders relax. It’s a nice change from the guy who berated me over breadsticks. And the guy who didn’t bother to show up. Or the guy who keeps texting the *Heartstrings* phone, asking for my shoe size. I don’t exactly have a stellar baseline when it comes to dating.

I think of a half smile in the dark. The sharp line of a jaw and scruff against my neck. Goose bumps pebble on my arms and I reach for the menu, holding it in front of my face.

“I’ve heard the rigatoni is good.”

“Yeah,” Oliver agrees. “I’ve been wanting to try this place out.”

We order drinks and argue about appetizers and my nerves settle when Oliver laughs so hard he snorts, some of his fancy wine ending up on his fancy shirt. He’s embarrassed about it, but it’s—it’s good, to know that I’m not alone in all this. That I’m not the only one who can be awkward or silly or slightly out of place.

He’s funny too, with his corny jokes and stories from the charter school he teaches at. He teaches history to a bunch of middle schoolers and apparently social media is the bane of his existence.

“The number of kids who suddenly believe the earth is flat is frankly alarming.”

“My middle schooler doesn’t think the earth is flat, but she does think Taylor Swift invented friendship bracelets.”

He makes a low sound of sympathy. “They know how to make you feel

ancient, don't they?"

It's a good date—an excellent one, really—but my mind keeps drifting. Back to a tiny studio with a chair that squeaks every time I adjust my legs and a broody, temperamental host who's been ignoring me for two days.

What's he doing in the booth right now? Is he thinking about me? Is he happier when I'm not there? Is he counting down the days until this little dating experiment is over so he can have his show back without me interfering?

"You seem distracted," Oliver says over two heaping plates of pasta, after I ask him to repeat himself for the third time.

My cheeks flush hot. "I'm sorry. I'm just—"

"Interested in someone else," he finishes for me, reaching for the wine menu. "Would you like another glass of red or white?"

My stomach drops all the way to my toes. "I'm not—I mean— I don't—" I swallow. "What?"

He smiles softly. "It's all right, Lucie. No hard feelings."

"I'm not interested in someone else. I wouldn't—I wouldn't do that."

He places the wine menu back down. "You've mentioned Aiden at least six times."

"Have I?"

He nods. "And we haven't even ordered dessert yet."

I'm flustered, clinging to the edge of the fancy tablecloth for dear life. "That's—I don't—" I force myself to take a breath and unclench my hands from around the table. I don't know what to do with them, so I settle for folding them in my lap. "I didn't realize I was doing that."

Oliver's face slips into something patiently amused as he sips his water, the light from the candle in the middle of our table flickering across his face. "You didn't realize you were mentioning him, or you didn't realize you have feelings for him?"

I want to crawl under this table and dig to the center of the earth. I want to scale the walls and shimmy through the air vents. "I didn't realize I was talking about him so much," I manage, my mouth numb, the words clumsy. "And I don't have feelings for him."

Oliver arches one eyebrow.

"I don't," I say again.

"Sure," he responds.

"We just work together," I say defensively. And I'm hung up on why he hasn't spoken to me in two days. He was flirting with me in my living room on Sunday, and now he can't even respond to my texts. Also, coincidentally, I

think about him constantly.

I reach for my wineglass, discover it's empty, then place it back. "Are we really having this conversation right now?"

Oliver shifts, his face melting into something earnest. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I just—" He rubs his thumb over his bottom lip and I barely notice. With Aiden, I'd probably notice. "Listen. I need to be honest with you."

I eye him warily. "Okay."

I brace myself for something horrifying. He's a convicted murderer on the run. He doesn't think *Die Hard* is a Christmas movie. He eats his chicken nuggets without sauce.

"There's a reason I'm out of practice," he says slowly. He's watching me carefully, like he's doing some bracing of his own. Air masks dropping from the ceiling. "I have feelings for someone else too. That's how I could spot it so easily. Like recognizes like. I thought I was over it, but I've realized that I'm . . . not."

We stare at each other. The waitress comes by and asks us if we want any dessert, and I tell her we'll take two tiramisu and the gelato sampler.

"I don't know if I should be afraid or relieved," he says as soon as she disappears back into the kitchen. He laughs nervously. "Are you going to scalp me with the spoon?"

"I need sugar to think. Now, let me see if I have this right." I point a finger at him. "You went out on a date with a woman knowing you had feelings for someone else?"

He looks offended. "So did you."

"I don't have feelings for another woman."

"But you sure do say the name Aiden a lot," he fires back.

I blink at him. That is a . . . fair point.

He rests his forearms on the table. "My intentions were good, I promise. I thought I needed a push to get me to move on and I heard your voice on the radio and—I don't know. It seemed like a sign."

A sign. Magic. The universe tugging you in a different direction. I can understand that. Isn't that exactly what I've been hoping for?

"And I think," he says again, gently, "that you are really great. You're funny and smart and spectacularly hot." A disbelieving puff of air bursts out of me and he laughs. "Truly. But I—I think my heart is somewhere else. And I think yours is too."

The waitress drops off our dessert. I immediately drag the tiramisu toward me like it's a life vest and I'm floating in the middle of the Atlantic. I didn't

realize I was being so obvious. Is that why Aiden has been so distant? Did I embarrass myself at the bar? Was I too much? I have a hazy, out-of-focus memory of my hands fisted in his shirt and my mouth tipped to his. He said we didn't kiss, but . . . oh god, did I try? Did he say no? Before I manhandled him to my couch?

"Want to talk about it?" Oliver asks carefully from the other side of the table. I'm doing it again. I'm sitting across from Oliver and thinking about Aiden. Oliver picks up his spoon and scoops out some gelato. I watch him slip it into his mouth and feel . . . absolutely nothing. A vague appreciation for how good-looking he is, but no flips in my stomach. Nothing.

"With you?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Who else? I've been told I'm a good listener, and I don't think our waitress is interested in us."

I glance in the direction of the open kitchen at the back of the restaurant. Our waitress is interested in the cute pastry chef, her hair tied back in bright red pigtails while she holds a piping bag in her hands. Their eyes catch and hold like magnets, even across the expanse of the crowded restaurant. I'm tempted to order more dessert just so she has another excuse to go talk to her.

"I don't know," I say slowly. "Isn't that against the rules?"

"What rules?" His eyebrow jumps up again. "We've already established this date is a bust. No offense." He reaches across the table for his tiny pot of tiramisu. "Might as well go for broke."

I poke around my dessert, considering. It would be nice to talk to someone. To try to untangle some of my crossed wires.

"I'm a completely unbiased sounding board. You can confide in me." He shovels another bite into his mouth and his eyelashes flutter. "Fuck, this is good."

"It really is."

"Incredible. Now tell me what's on your mind and why you think you don't have feelings for this person you definitely have feelings for."

I stab my tiramisu harder than I mean to. "You said you'd be unbiased."

"Unbiased," he agrees. "Not stupid."

At my confused look, he rolls his eyes. "Anyone who's listened to you guys on the radio for longer than thirty seconds can tell there's something going on between you two, Lucie. He called me the wrong name like sixteen times."

I think of Grayson laughing next to me at the breakfast table, the guys in the shop and their lists. Maggie in her office with her knowing looks. Jackson

and his perfectly timed interruptions.

They know. All of them know.

The entire city of Baltimore has been listening to me develop an unrequited crush.

I take another bite of chocolate. “Well, this is embarrassing.”

“It’s really not. It’s lovely, actually. It’s honest in a way most things aren’t.”

“Not if he doesn’t feel the same way,” I grumble.

Oliver makes a soft sound. “He feels the same way.”

I shake my head, images from the other night flickering through my mind like a slow-motion horror movie. Begging him to dance with me in front of the jukebox. Grabbing his T-shirt and pulling hard when he tried to tuck me in on the couch. I *made* him stay. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“I am,” Oliver replies. “You should have heard him when he called me to set up this date. I don’t think he could have said fewer words if he tried. And before he hung up, he told me, ‘Be nice, or I’ll kick your fucking ass.’ That’s a direct quote.”

“That’s just how he is.”

“Sure.”

I tip my head to the side. “If I’ve been so obvious, why did you call in? Why did you want to go on a date with me?”

Oliver’s smile settles into something wistful. “Because I figured if anyone could knock me out of this feeling, it would be you, Lucie. You’re . . . captivating. I think the whole city is in love with you.”

I’ve heard that before. From Aiden. Before one of our shows. I thought he meant it as a joke, but maybe . . .

“I talked about how to change a tire the other night. For twenty minutes.”

“It was charming.”

I huff a breath. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Why did you want to be knocked out of your feelings? Who is this mystery girl that has you all tangled up?”

He winces. “Ah. That’s the tricky part, I guess. It’s my . . . brother’s ex.” I suck in a breath through my teeth and color brushes the tops of his cheeks. “You see the issue.”

“Oh boy.”

“More or less, yeah. I’ve been trying to move on—clearly—but I don’t think I can.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“What can I do when I feel like this?” He lifts his hands and drops them.

Picks up his tiny spoon and spins it around and around. “I didn’t choose it. I don’t particularly want it. Lord knows I could have picked one of the seventy-five million better options for me. But it is what it is. I can’t change how my heart feels. I can’t guide it somewhere else. I suppose I’m going to see it through, for better or worse.”

It sounds like there might be a whole lot of *worse* than better in that situation for Oliver. But I hope he finds what he’s looking for. One of the best parts of this show and the decision to put myself out there is discovering I’m not alone in my loneliness. Not by a long shot.

Affection tugs at me and I lift my tiramisu cup. I clink it with the edge of his.

“Oliver, this might be the strangest date I’ve ever been on.”

A laugh bursts out of him. “For me too.”

“But also one of the best.”

His smile is warm. “Yeah. Me too.”

AIDEN VALENTINE: I hope she has a good time.

JACKSON CLARK: You've said that, like, sixty-seven times tonight.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Well. I hope she's having a good time.

JACKSON CLARK: More energy, bud. More enthusiasm.

CHAPTER 21

AIDEN

I was a freshman in high school the second time my mom was diagnosed with cancer. I had been operating under the foolish impression that because she had it once, she wouldn't have it again.

She was sick. She got better. We were done with it. Forever.

So when she started getting tired again, when the headaches came back, the optimistic part of me thought it was a cold.

But it wasn't a cold, and whatever part of me that was responsible for hope went quiet.

I've always been good at avoiding the things that make me feel like shit. *Content to compartmentalize*, a therapist told me when I was younger. But now all the heavy doors I've locked everything behind are rattling on their hinges. I know I'm acting like an asshole, but I don't know how to stop. It's muscle memory.

The back door to the station opens and Maggie appears at my side.

"It's ten degrees out here." She shivers. "Why are you sitting in the parking lot?"

"I'm standing," I mutter.

She slants a narrow-eyed glare in my direction. "Lucie is here."

I know she is. That's why I'm standing in the back parking lot in ten-degree weather. Because I don't know how to sit in the space next to her and hold myself in my carefully contained boxes.

"You need to get in there," Maggie says, gentler than she's ever been. She nudges my shoulder with hers. "Don't keep her waiting."

"I won't."

Except I already have. In more ways than one.

All I've been able to think about is our night at the bar. I'm *haunted* by it. My hands on her hips, her fingers sifting through the hair at the nape of my neck while we swayed in the middle of a sticky floor. Her hands reaching for me from the couch in the middle of her dark living room, her dress almost

indecently high against her thighs. The happy sigh she made when I slipped socks over her cold feet. How her whole body softened against me in sleep, her nose nudging at the hollow of my throat.

The couch in her living room was lumpy and too small, but it's the best sleep I've had in my fucking life.

It's just a crush. We're spending so much time together. It'll fade.

It's the flimsiest lie I've ever told. I've been trying to course correct ever since.

"Fuck," I breathe up at the sky, turning toward the studio when all I want to do is climb into my Bronco and disappear.

By the time I make it into the booth, Eileen is on the other side of the window holding up two fingers in warning. I nod at her and she turns them toward her eyes, then back at me, the universal gesture for *Get your shit together, asshole*, through a soundproof window.

I give her a thumbs-up.

I would if I could.

Lucie spins in her chair on the other side of the booth. Her hair is in a loose braid over her shoulder tonight and it feels like a personal attack. She's sipping the good coffee that I keep moving but she keeps finding and I can't get a deep enough breath.

"So he does work here," she says quietly, keeping her eyes on the desk. "I was starting to wonder."

"I do," I say, holding myself by the door. I watch as she arranges some pens. Then straightens her headphones. She hasn't put them on yet. She usually waits for me.

What am I going to do with all this information when she's gone? All these tiny data points of Lucie. How she sips her coffee. How she arranges her body in her chair. How she rubs at her ear when she's uncomfortable. Where will it all go when she goes back to her life and I'm still here?

Because she is going to leave. Whether with Oliver or some other person perfectly suited to be the man of her dreams.

She sighs and turns halfway in her chair, looking at me over her shoulder. The last time I saw her she was sprawled across a couch in her living room, in cozy flannel pants and an oversized sweatshirt. I felt like I was on the very edge of something when I left her house that day, and I've spent every hour since trying to walk myself back.

"Your phone has been vibrating," she tells me.

I blink. "What?"

"Your phone. While you were outside. It's been buzzing."

Right on cue, the phone I left next to my microphone lights up with a notification. It buzzes once, then twice more.

"Are you going to answer it?" she asks.

"Oh." I drag my hand through my hair. "No."

"No?"

"I don't need to check it."

"Why not?"

"Because I know who it is." And I don't want to look at seventeen different pictures of leaves right now. I dig the heel of my hand into my chest and rub, trying to get rid of the pressure sitting heavy in the middle of it. It feels like I swallowed a tire swing.

"Oh," she says. She searches my face carefully and then averts her eyes back to the corner of the desk. She frowns at her chocolate mints. "I see," she adds, her voice quiet.

"What do you see?"

She bites her lip and then releases it, tipping her head back to the ceiling. Her braid slips over her shoulder and swings down her back. "You don't owe me an explanation," she says slowly.

"For what?"

"For who you're texting," she says. She nods at my phone. "Someone is clearly trying to get a hold of you."

"Yeah," I agree. "She can be pretty persistent when she wants to be."

Something in her face dims. "Clearly."

I stare at her. My phone buzzes twice more against the cup-holder, rattling the mismatched pens inside.

This is why I stayed in the parking lot for so long. I feel like I'm losing my goddamn mind in this tiny room. I can't think clearly when Lucie is around. "What's going on?" I ask slowly.

"I'm just"—her fingers dance over the piercings in her ear and my throat tightens—"I'm worried about your credit score," she finally says.

"My what?"

"Your credit score. Do you owe someone money, Aiden? Do you have a gambling problem?"

It certainly feels like I have a gambling problem every time I'm around her. I'm constantly pushing all my chips toward the center of the table, no matter what my cards look like.

"I don't owe anyone any money," I say, lost as fuck in this conversation. I grab my phone and swipe at the screen. "Well, that's not true. I owe Jackson seventeen bucks, but I'm hoping he forgets about it. Here. Look."

I hold out my phone to her. She blinks at it.

"What?"

"It's not a collections agency or the Mafia or whatever is going on in that head of yours. Look at my messages."

"No. No, I don't need to."

I reach for her arm, tugging. I uncurl her fingers and drop my phone into her palm. "Take it," I say again. "Look."

Her shoulders collapse in a sigh. "You're allowed to talk to whoever you want," she says, voice losing the sharp edge. "I'm being—I don't know why I had that reaction."

I blink at her, realization rising like a balloon in the middle of my chest. Like recognizes like, and right now Lucie and I are possessed by the same demon.

"Lucie." We're officially late for this broadcast, but I wouldn't rush this conversation for all the Berger cookies in the world. I slip into the seat next to her. "Are you jealous?"

She glares. It's the first time she's looked directly at me since I've come into the room. "No."

Relief is a physical thing loosening my shoulders. I almost collapse against the desk. I don't care how her date with Oliver went last night, because right now she's here with me, worried about who I'm talking to. "You are."

"I'm not. I'm just concerned about—"

"My black-market gambling problem. Yeah, I got it." I duck my head so I can meet her eyes. I swear to god, I could probably power a generator with whatever this feeling is. Fly to the moon. I'm not alone in this feeling. Not by a long shot. "You want to know why I was doing laps around the parking lot?"

Her mouth twists. "You were avoiding me."

I nod. "I didn't want to have time to talk to you before the show. I didn't want to hear about your date. I didn't want to see you light up with another man's name in your mouth," I confess. She sucks in a sharp breath. "If you're jealous, I'm jealous too. Worse, probably."

Her lips part in surprise. I've spent every day since I woke up with her face buried in my chest trying to convince myself I'm no good for Lucie.

But I like Lucie. I like her a lot.

My crush hasn't faded; it's only gotten worse.

My phone buzzes again. I nod at it.

"It's my mom," I explain. "My parents took a road trip up to Acadia National Park and my dad is really into plants. They've been blowing me up

all day."

Lucie's gaze is still stuck on mine. "Plants?"

"Yeah. He picked up gardening as a hobby years ago because—" I swallow. Because my mom couldn't stand the smell of the hospital antiseptic, and lavender was the only thing that helped her sleep. He filled our entire front garden—made gardens in the back too—and would bring her bunches of it, filling vases on every flat surface of the hospital room. He needed something to do with all his restless energy, and gardening was it. "It's evolved into a bit of an obsession for him. They've been sending pictures all day. Take a look."

She glances at my screen and I reach over and swipe. "Oh, wow," she says as soon as the group chat with my parents appears. "You aren't kidding."

I push my chair closer to hers. Our armrests knock together. "Yeah. He's in a mushroom phase."

"I can see that," she mutters, scrolling. There's about sixteen photos of different mushrooms. More of various grasses and ferns. Some close-up shots of a pine tree, dark green needles clustered together. A selfie of my mom and dad in front of a stream, the angle slightly off, my dad's thumb obscuring the top half of the picture. I can see the curve of my mom's smile, practically hear the loud burst of my dad's laugh.

Lucie stops on that photo and brings the phone closer to her face.

"You look like your mom," she says quietly. "Same eyes."

I blow out a breath. "She's a lot nicer than I am."

I busy myself with setting up the audio channels for the show, trying not to let my mind trip back to my least favorite memory. A hospital room crowded with flowers. My mom in a bed with too-white sheets, petals in her hair.

I wish I could talk about my mom without feeling like my chest is caving in, but the worry and the panic are tightly bound with everything else. I still haven't figured out how to tug myself out of it. It's been so long since I've tried to open those doors that I'm afraid I've forgotten how.

But maybe I could try? Lucie tries, even when it's hard.

Maybe I could try.

"She, um—it's a celebration trip." I explain, my heart pounding in my chest. The words feel clumsy on my tongue. I don't know how to talk about it because I've never talked about it. "They planned it during my mom's last round of chemo. The doctors said it would help if she had something to look forward to."

I try to untangle a stubborn cord half-hidden behind one of the monitors,

fumbling with the end of it.

"She's better now?" I can feel Lucie looking at me, but I refuse to meet her eyes. "Your mom?"

I yank on the cord and something beneath the desk jerks. "Yeah. For now. But I try not to—she's had cancer a couple of times."

Lucie's quiet while I finish untangling the cord and loop it around the back of the monitor. If Eileen or Maggie needs a reason for our delayed start, I'm prepared to blame it on this cord. I'm counting to ten in my head, visualizing a sunset over the ocean or sheep over a fence post or whatever it is the hospital-appointed therapist told me to do when the anxiety felt like a noose around my neck.

Content to compartmentalize.

"You didn't want to go?" Lucie finally asks. The frantic race of my heart settles a bit at the sound of her voice.

"Go where?"

"Acadia." She leans back into my space and tucks my phone in the front pocket of my long-sleeved shirt. I stop what I'm doing. "There was a message from your mom. She said she missed you and was hoping you might be able to make it next year." A smile. "I think your dad might be making an annual pilgrimage to the mushrooms."

"I wouldn't be surprised." I straighten my already straight keyboard and flip a page in my notebook. "I wasn't able to make it this year. Too much going on." I hand Lucie her headphones. We are now about six minutes late for the broadcast. I can't believe Maggie hasn't come barreling through the window yet.

"With the station?"

I nod. "Yeah, it's tough to get coverage and Maggie has been on me about ratings." She hasn't actually said anything for three days, but it's a good enough excuse. "The timing wasn't right. I couldn't make It work."

Lucie nods. "Okay."

I settle into the sounds of familiarity, packing away all my buzzy, anxious feelings. I'll turn them over later when I'm alone and not overly aware of Lucie right next to me, slowly unwrapping a tiny chocolate mint.

"It was cute, though," I murmur. When I feel shaky and exposed, it's easy to distract myself with things that feel good. And from the moment I met her and made an inappropriate comment about dental instruments, Lucie has always felt like something good. Like the very best thing.

Lucie looks up, a chocolate held between thumb and forefinger. I tug on my headphones and Eileen bellows, "FINALLY." She starts to count down

from ten.

"What was cute?" Lucie asks.

"When you were jealous."

Lucie rolls her eyes and pops her chocolate in her mouth, a smile curling at the corner of her lips. I want to feel the shape of it against my fingertips. I want to bite the edge of it.

I'm afraid my crush has slipped into an infatuation.

I don't want to fight it anymore. I don't think I can.

"It's cute that's what you think that was," she whispers back.

"Don't bullshit a bullshitter, Lucie Stone."

She's still laughing when the red light above the door flicks on.

I do my best to be professional. We take calls from listeners, I don't hang up on anyone, and I only find two excuses to touch her during the first half of the show. Then someone calls in to ask about her date, and every muscle in my body pulls tight at the reminder that last night, Lucie was out with another man.

"Oh," Lucie says, a wide smile lighting up her face. Something inside me strains under the pressure. "I had a really nice time. Oliver is a great guy."

The listener on the other end of our headphones gasps. "That sounds promising! Are you going to see him again?"

I knock over a pen cup. Lucie glances at me out of the corner of her eye while I collect wayward pens.

"No," she says slowly, trying to tuck her smile away and doing a poor job of it. "No, we decided we weren't right for one another. We're gonna be friends, I think."

The listener on the other end doesn't share my relief. "Well, that sucks."

"That's how it is," I butt in, rude as fuck. "Lucie decides."

"I'm just saying," the caller groans. "If you can't find someone, where's the hope for the rest of us?"

Lucie's face pinches. "I don't think I'm the measuring stick you should be using. My situation isn't exactly ordinary. I think when the right thing comes along, I'll know it."

"So, you're still looking for dates?"

Lucie looks at me from across the desk. "Very cautiously, yes. But I think on my own terms. No more crowdsourcing. 'Lucie's Road to Love' is going private, I think. I'll be making the decisions myself."

“What does that mean?” the caller asks.

Lucie tips her head back and forth in thought. “I don’t think I’m going to look for dates on the air anymore. Sorry, Mr. Tire.”

“Mr. Tire can deal with it,” I murmur.

There are new rules to the game now. I won’t have to sit in this booth and watch Lucie entertain the attention of people who want to take her out, but I do have to live with the knowledge that it could happen at any moment. Lucie’s heart is open in a way that it wasn’t when Maya first called in to the radio show all those weeks ago. She’s just inches away from her happy ending. I know it.

The thought makes me borderline violent. I want to keep her in this booth with me for an undisclosed period of time. I’m possessive of her, apparently. Of her time and her laughter and her smiles that stretch so wide her eyes slip shut.

“I’ll only stick around for as long as Aiden wants me to. I don’t want to step on any toes.” She winces. “And I’m not sure how entertaining I am if you guys aren’t watching the car crash that is my love life.”

Fuck. If she only knew.

“Aiden wants you to,” I say, sounding like a whole idiot. But I don’t care, because her face lights up, a little wiggle in her chair. “No toes being stepped on. I’m sure the listeners appreciate your musical selection more than mine.”

“That’s true,” she says. “And just because the show isn’t setting up dates for me doesn’t mean I won’t be dating.” Her cheeks go pink and she looks down at the table. She grabs a discarded chocolate mint wrapper and starts to fold it into the world’s tiniest paper plane. “I just need to keep my eyes open, I guess. Like the other night.”

I rub at my bottom lip. A green dress drifts lazily across my mind. A jukebox that played only one song. Lucie on my back, her arms draped around my neck.

“The other night?” I ask.

She gives me one slow blink. A dare in the start of her smile. “You know the night I got stood up? When I was leaving the restaurant, I actually ran into someone on the street.”

“Yeah?” I ask, like I didn’t sprint over to Duck Duck Goose the second she texted me. Like I wasn’t sitting on my couch like an asshole, eating the chocolate mints I stole from her side of the desk and pretending not to look at my phone. “You didn’t mention it before.”

“Yeah,” she says, her smile bigger now. It climbs all the way to her eyes. “I think I wanted to keep it to myself for a little bit. We got a drink.”

“A drink with a stranger?” Our elbows bump together at the tiny desk. The room has shrunk in size. Too small for everything that’s tumbling out between us. That wall that was between us is crumbling brick by brick. I try to keep my voice neutral. “That seems suspicious.”

“It wasn’t. It was nice. We had a couple of drinks and I tried to show him how to throw a Skee-Ball, but he was categorically awful at it and I think—” She licks her lips and I am acutely aware of every place we’re touching. The rasp of her breath in my ear through my headphones. “I think that’s what I want.”

“Strange men on the street who are bad at Skee-Ball?”

She shakes her head. “I want to feel it first and think about it second. I want to be in the moment and not worry about what’s coming next. I don’t want to twist myself into circles over the idea of a partner.”

I exhale a short breath. “Then don’t.”

“I won’t.”

“Good.”

She grins at me. I think I’m jealous of the guy I got to be when wanting her was something I was allowed to do. I’m torn between who I am and who I want to be.

“Will you see him again? Your mystery Skee-Ball man?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs, back to her tiny airplane. She creases one of the lines with her thumb and then folds again. “I don’t know if he had a good time. Maybe he doesn’t want to see me again.”

“I’m sure he does.”

Her eyes snap to mine and she folds another tiny wing. “I haven’t heard from him since.”

“Maybe he’s got a good reason,” I rasp. “Maybe he’s trying to figure out some things for himself.”

Maybe he’s trying to hold himself together. Maybe he’s trying to give you everything you want.

She finishes her paper plane and throws it at me. The point digs into the center of my chest then falls to my lap. Bull’s-eye.

“I guess we’ll see,” Lucie says.

“I guess so. In the meantime, see you never, Oswald.”

“Oliver,” Lucie corrects, a reluctant laugh tumbling out of her.

“Whatever.”

We stare at each other. Static fills my ears and my head and my lungs.

“It’s late,” Lucie says. She tilts her head toward the clock without looking away from me. “We should probably wrap up. Do you want to tell the good

people of Baltimore good night, or should I?"

"Good night, good people of Baltimore."

Lucie laughs and the sound vibrates against my bones.

"Lucie." My voice cracks on her name. My heart is pounding like a drum in the center of my chest. "It's always a pleasure to have you in the booth."

She tries to hide her smile in her shoulder, but I see it anyway. "Right back at you."

I wrap up the rest of my sign-off and try to rationalize. I tally the score while a whirlwind whips at the edges of my reason. It's normal to feel affectionate toward Lucie, I tell myself. We've been spending three nights together a week, every week. But affection isn't the thing I'm feeling. It would be easier if it was.

I'm drunk on her smile. Desperate to know more about her. I want to know her favorite pizza toppings. What sort of toothpaste she uses. If her blush disappears once it reaches the top of her chest or if her whole body flushes pink. I'm buying mint chocolates at CVS because I can't quit the craving. I want my hands in her hair and my mouth at her throat. I have fantasies where I bend her over this table. Others where I wrap her in a blanket and feed her toast.

I'm not standing at the edge. I'm all the way over it.

"Show's over," she says, her voice muffled through my headphones. Hers are flat on the desk, set on top of her tiny notepad like they always are. I don't touch them when she's not here because I like the reminder that she's coming back. "Are you going to . . . ?" She gestures at my headset.

I swallow. "I haven't decided yet."

A smile ghosts across her mouth and she reaches between us, tugging them off. Her finger glances over the shell of my ear.

She puts my headphones next to hers.

"Are we going to talk about it?" she asks, one eyebrow raised. She's calling my bluff while I can't stop looking at her mouth.

Eileen left five minutes ago, flicking off the lights in the hallway. The only thing illuminating the room is the glow of my computer screen and the streetlight streaming in through the window. Her face is shadow and light.

We are the only two people in the building.

"I . . . haven't decided that yet either."

"We can't keep doing this, Aiden."

"Doing what?"

"You know what," she breathes. I've seen so many shades of Lucie, but I've only seen this one in glimpses. Heavy eyes. Pink cheeks. This is Lucie

when she *wants*.

I turn in my chair and our legs knock together. I set my palms against her knees to hold her steady. “This isn’t a good idea,” I tell her.

“Why?”

“Because you’re looking for something else.”

Her eyes drag down to my mouth, then flick up again. They’re darker than I’ve ever seen them. *Tortula ruralis.* Moss right after it rains. My thumbs trace the buttery-soft material of her jeans against her thighs without a single thought for the consequence. Her body tilts toward mine.

“I know. But I can’t stop thinking—” She sighs around the rest of that sentence, watching me. “You’ve thought about it too, haven’t you?”

I nod. It feels like my brain has been rewired to only think about it. About her.

She shakes her head slightly. “Maybe—” She bites down around the edge of the word, her jaw clenching tight. Her eyes search mine.

“What?” I ask. My thumbs trace over her knees again. A little higher to a spot that makes her breath hitch. All I need is the flimsiest of excuses, and I’ll have her flat on her back on this table. *Give me a reason*, I want to beg. *Please. Make the choice for me.* “Maybe what?”

She releases a breath. “Maybe we should try.” Her tongue swipes at her bottom lip and my body flushes hot. Spark plugs in my chest, doing something ridiculous. “Just to see,” she adds, leaning into me, eyelashes fluttering when I raise my hand to cup the side of her neck.

I nod. Her skin is so soft. I spread my fingers wide. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Her face tips toward mine. We’re drifting closer, the space between us almost nothing. Our noses bump together and she makes a soft sound. “We’re mature adults, right? This is—”

“—fine.” I finish for her. Maybe if I give in to this pull, it won’t feel so goddamn intense. Like swiping your finger along the icing of a cake. Just a taste to cut the craving.

I press my knuckle to her chin and drag my nose down the length of hers.

“Lucie,” I try one last time, reason wrestling with desire. I don’t want to take anything from her she’s not willing to give. “I’m not what you’re looking for,” I try to remind her.

She hums, dreamy and light. “You might not be what I’m looking for, but you’re what I want. And that’s enough for me. Trust me to decide for myself.”

I curl my other hand around her rib cage. “Tell me to stop,” I whisper.

Her hands fist in my sweatshirt, twisting. “Absolutely not,” she whispers back.

She shifts closer and the corners of our mouths connect and float away. A low sound sticks in the back of my throat. I should scoot back. Put a stop to the flirting and the looking and the touching and the wanting that splinters down my spine and breaks over my skin every time she so much as glances in my direction. I'm nothing but a distraction for Lucie, a sidestep off the path she should be on. Kissing her won't lead to anything good.

But I've never claimed to be all that good to begin with, and I've been on my best behavior for weeks. Lucie's mouth forms the shape of my name and my restraint crumbles, reduced to dust at her feet. I don't want to fight it anymore. I can't.

"Fuck it," I whisper, and I drag her mouth to mine.

CALLER: How can you tell if someone is attracted to you?

LUCIE STONE: Oh! Um. I don't—I'm actually pretty terrible at reading cues. Clearly. That's, uh, why I'm here.

AIDEN VALENTINE: That's not why you're here.

LUCIE STONE: Oh?

AIDEN VALENTINE: You're here because you keep dating—what did you call them?—dillweeds.

LUCIE STONE: [laughter]

LUCIE STONE: That's right. I did say that.

AIDEN VALENTINE: But we're working on it.

LUCIE STONE: Yeah. Yeah, we are.

[pause]

AIDEN VALENTINE: But to answer your question, if someone is attracted to you, they'll look for excuses to touch you. You'll probably catch them staring. Not in—not in a creepy way.

LUCIE STONE: Nice staring?

AIDEN VALENTINE: Fond gazing.

LUCIE STONE: Smizing.

AIDEN VALENTINE: What's that?

LUCIE STONE: You haven't heard of smizing? Smiling with your eyes? Look. Watch me.

AIDEN VALENTINE: I'm watching you. You're not doing anything. That's just your face, Lucie.

LUCIE STONE: I'm *smizing* at you.

CHAPTER 22

LUCIE

Aiden kisses me like he's mad about it.

One second, he's telling me he should stop, and the next, his mouth is on mine, his hand digging in the hair beneath my braid so he can angle me the way he wants. It's bruising, and rough, and absolutely delicious, his mouth working against mine ferociously.

I touch my tongue to his bottom lip and he makes a broken sound, dragging himself away. His eyes are shut tight and his cheeks are pink. The tips of his ears too.

"Tell me to stop," he breathes again, but he's brushing his lips to the corner of my mouth, the curve of my chin. Small, sipping kisses like he's trying to pace himself. Like he doesn't want to take too much.

But I want him to take. I'm giving all of this to him willingly. I want him to have it.

"No," I say, twisting my head to the side and catching his mouth with mine. I make a faint pleading sound and Aiden groans, kissing me like he damn well means it.

Aiden is bossy, I think faintly as his kisses turn rougher. Messier. More desperate. He's holding me like I'm going to disappear under his grip, our armrests knocking together as we slip and slide on our chairs. I grip his sweatshirt in my hands and hold on for dear life, meeting each press of his mouth against mine with enthusiasm.

"Aiden," I whisper, and he grunts another animal sound, his thumb pressing at my jaw until I open for him. He licks into my mouth and my body jolts forward in the ancient chair I'm somehow still sitting in, both of my arms around his neck. One of his hands slips around my side, his palm tucked tight to the small of my back, keeping me arched against him.

But the angle is awkward and the tension coiling low in my belly feels hollow and hot and I can't move the way I need to with Aiden holding me still. I make a frustrated sound and Aiden pulls away, a dazed look with kiss-

bitten lips. He looks at my grumpy face and a smile curls at his mouth, decadent and devious.

There, I think. *There you are.*

"Good?" he asks, knowing I'm not. Knowing I need more. I glare at him and he rumbles out a laugh, ducking his head to press a kiss to the tip of my nose, the curve of my cheek. We're pushing the limits of *Let's just see*, but then he guides my head to the side to press wet, lingering kisses behind my ear and I don't care. I don't care about the specifics or the parameters or what it's going to feel like when I leave this booth. I only care about Aiden and his mouth working down the length of my neck. His palm at the base of my spine pressing insistently. My breasts crushed against his chest.

"C'mere," he mumbles against the hollow of my throat, a half thought, his thumb edging up the back of my sweater. The rest of his fingers follow, his hand like a brand against my bare skin.

I smile into the top of his head. There's nowhere to go. "Where?"

"Here," he says, mouth preoccupied with the line of my collarbone. He tugs at me again, trying to get me to move. "Like this."

I let him guide me from my chair into his, my knee pressed in the two inches of space at his hip. The chair wobbles beneath us and Aiden drops his head back against faded leather, one strong arm wrapped around me to hold me steady. I grip his shoulders and kiss him again, hovering awkwardly with one foot still planted on the ground, leaning sideways.

"Up, Lucie," he orders, and goose bumps scatter across my skin. I comply immediately, swinging my other leg over his lap until I'm draped over him like a blanket. He makes a pleased sound and the ache between my thighs intensifies. "Good," he whispers, and his hand finds the space under my braid again and pulls tight.

Something in me unlocks, unravels, and suddenly I'm ravenous. I kiss him and kiss him and kiss him some more. I suck at a spot beneath his ear, drag my tongue over the rough stubble along his jaw, fist my hands in his dark hair and move him the way *I* want. I feel voracious, out of control. Every errant thought I've had over the past couple of weeks—every sigh and smile and subtle shift of his body next to mine that I've tried not to notice—it's coalesced into this. A cascade of impulsive, decadent decision-making.

Aiden lets me do as I please, only impatient when I spend too long on the soft, warm skin between his shoulder and neck, the collar of his sweatshirt stretched to the side. I trace the chain of his necklace with my tongue and he makes a rough sound, his hand tightening in my hair as he guides my mouth back to his. I feel more drunk right now than I did the night at the bar. Drunk

on him and the way he kisses me.

He tugs on my braid by accident and something liquid hot unfurls low in my belly. My body goes limp against his, my arms draped lazily over his shoulders.

"Aiden," I gasp and his eyes dance in the blue-green light of the dark booth. His head rocks against the chair as he watches me, tongue at the corner of his mouth in silent consideration. I feel him loop the length of my braid around his fist, and when he tugs again, it's slower. Thoughtful.

He's asking a question and my body is giving him the answer.

I suck in a sharp breath and roll my hips down. It's mindless, without consideration for the boundaries we've set for ourselves. My body is pulled too tight and I want more of the heat that's shimmering along my skin in waves. The space between my thighs feels achy and hot and I give in to the pull, rocking against him again. Logic and reason are problems for tomorrow's Lucie. Right now I feel too good to worry about anything.

Aiden's eyes close, eyelashes fanned out against the curve of his flushed cheeks.

"Lucie," he breathes.

"Aiden," I whisper back, circling my hips again. I love when we do this. When he says my name and then I say his. Fond exasperation and gentle amusement in every syllable. A call and response. The chorus to a song I can't get out of my head.

Aiden moans lightly and stills me with his hands. His fingers squeeze, thumbprints at my hips.

"We should stop," he rasps.

I keep kissing his neck. I was right, all those weeks ago. He smells the strongest here. Like coffee and laundry detergent and wintergreen gum. "Should we?"

He hums and mumbles something under his breath. "Yes?" he says, but it sounds like a question. I let myself tuck another kiss against his warm skin. The hand in my hair eases and his palm traces a meandering path down my spine. "Probably?"

"Yeah." I sigh. If I let myself keep going, it's only going to be harder to stop. His heart thunders a mile a minute and I know mine is racing to match. "That should probably be a onetime thing, huh?"

He huffs a laugh. "That felt like several things."

I lean back so I'm perched in his lap, my palms resting on his shoulders. "More than a few," I agree.

"At least fifteen years off my life." He sighs. He rubs my back again and I

let my gaze drift over him. He looks deliciously wrecked. His hair is mussed from my hands and his lips are swollen. My yanking has left the collar of his sweatshirt crooked, the jut of his collarbone visible. I've always thought Aiden was handsome, but he looks beautiful like this. Messy. Undone. Cracked open and torn apart.

I sigh. I wish that kiss made me like him less.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asks.

"Like what?"

He swallows. "Like you're plotting something."

"I'm not plotting anything." I'm just trying to appreciate all of my handiwork for probably the first and last time. Aiden is right. That can't happen again, no matter how good it was. This infatuation I have with Aiden needs to end. He's made it very clear he can't give me what I want, and I'm not in the habit of pushing people. I'm going to believe what he says. I'm not going to beg him to be something he's not.

I won't beg him to want me.

I let my palms drift over his chest, tracing the pattern of letters on his sweatshirt. "Just this once," I say again, but I don't think I mean it. I wait for Aiden to correct me, to suggest something different, but he doesn't.

"Yeah," he agrees. The palm on the small of my back reluctantly retreats from beneath my sweater. "Yeah," he says again, teeth clamped on his bottom lip in a wince.

I laugh. It's nice to know I'm not the only one having trouble with that. I climb off his lap and try not to notice the way he has to adjust himself, but my cheeks burn hot as I collect my things. I hear Aiden do the same on his side of the booth, and it should be awkward, probably, but it's remarkably easy to occupy this space with him. He turns off the machines and buries a yawn in his fist, running a lazy hand through his hair when he catches me watching him.

"Come on," he says. "I'll walk you to your car."

The walk to my Subaru on the other side of the parking lot has never felt quite so long or so short. The blinking red light at the top of the radio tower makes everything look ethereal this late at night, the stars a blanket above us. It's easier to see them out here on the outskirts of the city. Maya would love it.

We stop at my car and stare at it, like it's something that's just dropped out of a black hole and not the thing I've been driving for close to a decade. I don't want this night to end quite yet.

"Our listeners," Aiden starts, voice rough. He looks at me out of the

corner of his eye and then glances back at my car. I can see our wavy, blurry reflection in the driver's window. Our dark heads bent close together and his shoulder bumping mine. He releases a breath. "Our listeners will probably still want to hear about your dates. If you're open to talking about them," he says awkwardly.

It's like the last twenty minutes never happened, and while that's supposed to be what I wanted, something in my chest sinks. I didn't want the reminder of the show tonight. Not after the way he just kissed me.

"Yeah," I agree, fumbling to reconfigure my settings. I shrug, feeling approximately two inches tall. "I can share all the juicy details."

Aiden frowns in the reflection.

I turn to unlock my car but he catches my hand with his. My keys bite into my fingers.

"Lucie," he says, a thin thread of something looping around the sounds of my name. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say."

It's not his fault I feel like I'm being handed a consolation prize. He's been nothing but honest and I'm—I'm tired, I think. For so many reasons. My head and my heart have always had trouble being on the same page, but they feel especially far apart right now.

I give him a smile and try to memorize what he looks like with my kisses burned against his mouth. I press up on my toes and drop one more on his cheek, squeezing his fingers with mine.

"I think you're supposed to say good night."

Mateo is on my couch when I slip through my front door, a book in his hand and an empty tea mug on the coffee table. I'm not expecting him and my keys go flying across the hardwood.

When I bend down to scoop them up, I feel like I have a neon sign on my forehead:

I MADE OUT WITH AIDEN AT THE RADIO STATION.

In smaller letters right beneath:

AND I LIKED IT A LOT.

Sans serif font, size eight in the bottom right corner:

PROBABLY SHOULDN'T DO IT AGAIN, THOUGH.

"I didn't mean to startle you," Mateo says as I slowly straighten. He sets his book next to his empty mug. "Maya wanted to sleep here tonight."

I frown and glance up the stairs. "Is everything okay?"

He nods. "Everything is fine. Grayson is on an art bender and she said the smell of the paint was giving her a headache." He stands from the couch with a yawn. "But between me and you, I think she's been missing you. I caught her trying to keep herself awake with her books."

My heart pinches in my chest. I've been spending too much time at the station. Too much time away. "Thanks for bringing her over."

"Of course." He closes the space between us and squeezes my arm, a knowing look on his face. "And don't start, okay? You deserve to do things for you."

I unwind my scarf from around my neck. "But if Maya's been needing me . . ."

If she's been needing me while I've been making out in radio booths and playing Skee-Ball and getting piggyback rides on the way home from bars from handsome men—

He shakes his head. "She's been missing you, not needing you. You've met all of her needs with unfailing precision for the past twelve years. Now it's time to do something for you." Mateo ducks his head so I have no choice but to meet his warm brown eyes. I've heard Grayson call them *whiskey on the rocks eyes* more than once. It's an apt description. "What she needs is to see her mom prioritizing her own happiness for once. So she can learn to do the same."

"That's"—I have to pause and steady my voice—"that's really nice, Teo."

"It's also really true." He twists his neck back and forth and picks up his book. "I listened to the show tonight. You sounded happy."

I immediately think of Aiden's hand in my braid. The low rasp of his voice while his hands tugged my body closer to his. The creak of his chair and the shape of his smile in the glow of his computer screen.

I press my lips together and examine the warm glowy feeling burning right under my skin. "I am happy," I say slowly, afraid if I acknowledge it too loudly, the feeling might scurry away. "The show has been good for me, I think."

Mateo hums in agreement, fighting a smile. I narrow my eyes.

"Grayson told you about finding Aiden in the living room, didn't he?"

"Of course he did," Mateo says with another yawn. He grins at me

sleepily. “But in my role as favorite co-parent, I’m not going to pry.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll leave that to my better half, who will likely have ten thousand questions when this commissioned piece is done. And that meddling daughter of ours, who was trying to stay up so she could interrogate you.”

I laugh and he stretches with a groan.

“I’m going to head back. You need anything before I go?”

I shake my head and follow him to the back door, leaning against the frame and watching as he trudges through the backyard, through the rusted gate we should probably fix sooner rather than later, and up the stairs of their tiny back porch. He waves again once he’s in their kitchen, and I flick off the lights.

The house settles as I move up the stairs. Sleepy sounds that move like a symphony. A song I know every word to. Floorboards creak beneath my feet and the door of the haunted closet at the end of the hall groans open as the heat kicks on. Warm air rumbles up through the ancient HVAC and wind whistles at the stained-glass window above the door. I poke my head into Maya’s room and I turn mushy and soft at her small but rapidly growing body tangled in the sheets, her arm flung out across the blankets. It’s the same way she’s slept since she was two years old and hardly sleeping at all.

I turn off the string lights crisscrossing her ceiling and she rolls halfway in her bed, a curved lump beneath her blankets.

“Mom?” she calls blearily. I wonder if I’ll ever stop hearing her voice in an echo of a memory, my name called out a thousand times through the dark. Maya then and Maya now.

“It’s me.” I slip through her door and perch on the edge of her bed, rubbing my hand up and down her leg. “You wanted to sleep here tonight?”

“Dad’s painting,” she mumbles into her pillow, not opening her eyes. “Too much Fleetwood Mac happening. And I wanted to see how the show went.”

“You’re very invested in my dating life,” I whisper.

“I’m the mastermind behind it,” she whispers back, slurring her words. She pauses a beat too long. “Obviously I’m invested.”

“Yeah, I guess you are.” I laugh. “The show was good.” What happened after, even better, but that’s not a conversation I’m going to have with my kid. Maya grumbles a nonsensical sound and I grin. “I reluctantly admit I’ve been having a good time.”

“See?” she mumbles, curling up farther beneath her blankets. “I’m a genius.”

“You really are, kiddo.”

I collect the book that's open next to her and mark her page, then place it on her nightstand.

"Aiden's probably happy," she mumbles drowsily.

"About what, honey?"

"Your dates," she says, voice faint, half-asleep and probably dreaming. "Heard you tonight. I bet he's happy he doesn't have to set you up anymore."

"Oh yeah? Why is that?" I scratch my fingers through her hair, untangling the long strands across her pillow. "You think he's tired of me?"

"No," she whisper-slurs, her mouth buried in her pillow. "He likes you."

"Of course he likes me. I keep telling you. I'm very likeable."

"No, he like *likes* you."

"Like *like*, huh?"

"Mm-hmm. The internet says so."

Maya used to sleep-talk all the time when she was a kid. She'd wake up all worked up, telling me tiny blue gremlins were making a colony in the colander beneath the sink. That owl people lived in the shower. This feels like that.

"That's what the internet says?"

"Yup. The great, big, giant world, Mom." She yawns so hard she squeaks. "Everyone is . . . They think you guys are great. Good. They're probably talking about it right now."

"No one is talking right now. They're all asleep." I twist one of her curls around my finger. "Like you should be. Get some rest. You can interrogate me in the morning."

She mumbles something about blueberries and cottage cheese and the predicted life spans of gibbons and I slip out of her room to wander down to mine, my body tired but my mind running a mile a minute.

I know the show has been in distress. And while ratings have been good since I joined, I know Maggie wants more. It seems like a leap and something out of character for Aiden, but he . . . he wouldn't have kissed me for the show, would he?

Lucie from a month ago probably would have let that thought linger, but I've learned a thing or two about standing confidently in my space since I started at *Heartstrings*. I pull my phone from my pocket and type out the number I've memorized. I hit send before I can overthink it.

LUCIE: Are you aware the internet is talking about us?

I drop my phone on the edge of the bed while I change into an oversized

T-shirt and a pair of short black shorts, worn with a hole on the thigh.

My phone buzzes and I force myself to wash my face and brush my teeth before I look at it.

AIDEN: To which US are you referring?

I roll my eyes.

LUCIE: You and me. Aiden Valentine and Lucie Stone.

AIDEN: Yes, I'm aware. Why? Did you see something?

No. Frankly, I'm still too terrified to open any of my social media applications. Blissful oblivion is the name of the game at this point.

I tap my thumbnail against my screen.

LUCIE: What are they saying?

AIDEN: A bunch of stuff.

God, this man. It feels like he's being deliberately obtuse. Two steps forward and then he sprints back, hurling himself into an emotionally destitute bush.

LUCIE: Like what?

AIDEN: Lucie.

LUCIE: Aiden.

AIDEN: I'd prefer if you just ask what you want to ask.

I sigh and crawl into my bed.

LUCIE: Maya said something.

AIDEN: Was it something about a long-lost historical artifact?

LUCIE: I knew you loved the Indiana Jones thing.

AIDEN: Of course I did. It was incredible.

AIDEN: What did she say?

I bite at my bottom lip, thumbs hesitating. I'm being ridiculous.

AIDEN: I'm on the edge of my seat, Lucie.

I blow out a breath and ask the question.

LUCIE: Why did you kiss me tonight?

My phone immediately rings in the palm of my hand. I almost fling it across the room, bury my head beneath my pillow, and pretend I'm asleep.

But I'm working on being a new and improved version of myself, and new Lucie doesn't avoid phone calls no matter how uncomfortable they might be.

I groan and hit answer. "Hello?"

"Are you implying," he asks, in lieu of a greeting, "that I'm willing to whore myself for ratings?"

I flop back down on my bed with a sigh and toss my arm over my eyes. "No."

"Seems that way."

"It's not that way," I grumble, feeling stupid. Nothing about that kiss felt contrived or planned. I know that. "I just—I didn't realize people were talking about us. Like that."

"I wouldn't think too much of it." I hear the sound of fabric rustling in the background. I imagine him in bed, one arm tucked behind his head with his phone pressed to his ear. I wonder what he wears to sleep. If he keeps the chain around his neck. "People like to create narratives around that sort of thing. For about six months when I first started, people thought Jackson and I were hiding an illicit affair."

"Were you?"

"Nah, he's not my type." Sheets rustle again. "I prefer leggy brunettes who steal my coffee."

I bite my lip against my smile. "Aiden."

"Lucie." He singsongs my name, a hint of amusement.

I want to tell him to stop. That he shouldn't. But the words stick in my throat. I like how I feel when I have Aiden's attention on me. I trace the edge of my comforter with my thumb. "So that kiss tonight wasn't an elaborate

plan to keep viewers interested in the show?"

"I don't know how it could be, seeing as how listeners won't ever know it happened." He must adjust his phone because his voice sounds closer. Rougher. "That was for me and you. No one else."

"Good."

"Yeah," he says. "Good." He's quiet for the stretch of several seconds and my eyes flutter closed. I listen to him breathing and picture him in the space next to me. One arm shoved under the pillow, the other heavy on my hip beneath the blankets. Scruff and sleep-warm skin and our legs twisted together.

"Must not have kissed you all that well," he grumbles, making my stomach flip, "if you feel the need to ask me that question."

I wiggle down farther in my bed, feet kicking. "You were fine."

He scoffs. "Fine?"

"Proficient, I'd say."

"Oh, good. That's much better."

I grin up at my ceiling.

Aiden releases a sigh. "I kissed you because I wanted to, Lucie. I've *been* wanting to and I think—I think I got tired of pretending I don't. My crush isn't going anywhere. I think it would be easier for us both if it was, but . . . it's not. That's what I should have told you when I walked you to your car, but I think I left my brain in the studio."

"Me too." I rub my fingertips against my lips. Touch lightly at the edge of my smile. "The crush thing," I explain. "All of it."

"All right." He blows out a breath. "That's settled. Now we can move on to more important matters."

I roll to my side and tuck my legs to my chest, wedging my phone between my ear and my pillow. "Such as?"

"What are you wearing?"

Heat bursts in my cheeks and I bury my laugh in my pillow. "Aiden."

"What? That's a platonic question."

"Is it? Have you ever asked Jackson what he's wearing?"

"All the time, so we can coordinate."

"Okay, then I guess I have to answer."

He hums his agreement. "It would be rude not to."

I glance down at my oversized T-shirt. Some of the stains on it are more than a decade old. This was one of the few shirts I still managed to fit in when I was nine months pregnant with Maya, and I'm too sentimental to get rid of it.

Aiden clears his throat on the other end of the line, impatient. “Edge of my seat, Lucie.”

“I’m wearing an oversized Ravens T-shirt from their 1997 season and a pair of bike shorts.” I lower my voice the way he does when he’s on the air. “The shorts have a hole on the thigh,” I breathe.

He groans. “Socks?” he asks.

“Mm-hmm,” I confirm, wiggling my toes. “Cable-knit.”

He sighs happily and the warmth tightening in my belly presses out until my whole body is suffused with it. Dipped in gold. I want to take it further. Ask him what he’s wearing. Maybe listen to the sound of his breathing change. Rush faster like it did when I was in his lap and my hands were in his hair.

But it feels like another step in the wrong direction with Aiden, and I’m not even sure what we’re doing. I’m excellent at getting my hopes up only to be handed a heavy dose of disappointment down the line.

I skim my fingers over my belly. “It’s time to go now, I think.”

“Yeah,” he says. I can hear his hesitation through the phone. “Yeah, it probably is.”

We hover there, in the uncertain space of more and maybe.

“Good night, Lucie,” he finally says.

“Good night, Aiden.”

I dream of rough laughter and coffee beans hidden in cookie tins, Aiden’s voice in my ear and his firm hands on my hips.

COMMENT FROM MORETHANRATSHERE:

Is it just me, or did the show end a couple minutes earlier than usual tonight?

COMMENT FROM ORIOLESMAGIC28:

It started late too.

CHAPTER 23

AIDEN

Kissing Lucie was a mistake.

Not because I regret it, but because I am fundamentally unable to think about anything else.

I step into the studio and my eyes dart to my chair, remembering the way she rolled her hips on mine. I go to fill up my coffee mug and I taste her on my tongue. I slip on my headphones and I catch a whiff of her perfume. Or whatever it is that makes her smell the way she does. Daisies and something metallic. Fresh air.

Lucie fills up this room like a ghost, and kissing her did not calm the attraction like I had hoped. It poured gasoline all over it and I'm walking around with a wildfire in my chest.

I scrub roughly at my jaw and Maggie pokes her head in through the door. "Okay?" she asks. "Ready for the show?"

I nod, staring hard at my computer screen in front of me, trying not to think about Lucie's mouth on my neck. "Fine," I mumble.

She steps farther into the studio, the door closing behind her. "You sure?"

I grunt. She sighs.

"Forget I asked, then, you grump." She tucks her hair behind her ears and crosses her arms over her chest, leaning back against the doorframe. "I wanted to talk to you about Lucie's exit plan before she gets here."

My hand freezes over my keypad. "Exit plan?"

Maggie nods. "Yeah. She said she was done with the dating experiment, right? She'll probably want to get back to her life at some point."

"Yeah," I say slowly. Maybe it's stupid, but I haven't thought about Lucie's last day. Not once. I stare unseeingly at my computer screen and Maggie snaps her fingers in front of my face.

"What?" I flinch.

Her eyes narrow. "Pull it together."

"I am together."

“More together. Why are you being cagey right now?” She pushes off the doorframe. “Do you want her out of here sooner? Is that what this is?”

I almost laugh in her face. I want the exact opposite. I want Lucie in the chair next to mine. I want her husky laughter and her secret smiles. I don’t want to discuss an exit plan because I don’t want to go back to the way things were. Me, alone in this booth. Struggling to believe in a single thing.

“Ratings are up,” Maggie goes on, oblivious to my mental collapse. “The podcast is charting. I’d like to keep Lucie around for a little bit longer, but people are falling in love with you again. That’s what I was hoping for.”

I blink. “What?”

“It’s like Lucie pressed restart on that storm cloud above your head. I could hear it the first time you talked to her.”

“I—” I don’t know what to say. “I’m feeling a little manipulated here, Mags.”

Maggie shrugs, unrepentant. She pulls a stick of gum out of her pocket and pops it in her mouth. “For the good of the show, my friend.” She gestures at the booth around me. “And look at you. You’re happy to be here. I’ve got retro Aiden back. I haven’t heard you mumbling under your breath once this past month.”

She’s about to. “You could have just told me that was the plan.”

“If I told you that was the plan, you would have dragged your feet the entire time and probably been rude to Lucie. This was a two-for-one special. Lucie gets everything she deserves, and you get less grumpy. Win-win.”

I drag my hand over my face. “But you want an exit plan for her? Even though everything is going to plan?”

Maggie nods. “Every plan has an end. And you were right. She’s not going to find the person she’s looking for over the radio. We’ve given her the tools she needs to succeed. Now it’s time for that cute little bird to fly the nest.” She snaps her gum and her face softens. “I don’t want to take up more of her time. She’s a busy woman, Aiden.”

I nod. “Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

“Plus, that dipshit from Orion has finally backed off.” Something cold and calculating flashes behind her eyes. I never want to be on the wrong side of Maggie, that’s for damn sure. “I’ve sent Cooper West back to the hellhole from whence he came.”

“Who is Cooper West?”

“A spoiled root vegetable that’s been reincarnated as a human. He’s the most arrogant, self-serving man I’ve ever met.”

I blink, confused. “Okay?”

“But it’s fine, because he’s afraid of me now.”

“He should be,” I tell her. “Most reasonable people are.”

Maggie rolls her eyes and slips her phone out of her back pocket. She flicks open her screen and starts to scroll. I’ve been dismissed.

“You’ll talk to her?” she asks, half paying attention. “Figure out how she wants to close out?”

I nod some more. It feels like my head is going to roll right off my shoulders. “Yeah, I’ll talk to her.”

Jackson appears in the doorway behind Maggie, a fierce frown on his face and something . . . brown . . . and wet . . . sliding down the front of his shirt. Maggie takes two steps backward, bumping into the filing cabinet, her phone clattering to the floor.

“What the hell happened to you?” She points at his shirt. “What the hell is that?”

“Delilah Stewart happened to me,” he manages through clenched teeth. His hands are covered and he’s holding them at his sides like a scarecrow. “She’s a danger to society. Aiden, do you have any extra clothes here?”

“I’ve got a couple of T-shirts, yeah.” His left eye is twitching. I reach under my desk for my duffel bag and pull out a faded old EAT BERTHA’S MUSSELS T-shirt I got at a block party a couple of years ago. I drape it carefully around his neck so it doesn’t touch any of . . . whatever that is. “Did she attack you?”

“Her potluck did,” Jackson grumbles. He holds his hands farther away from his body. “Maggie, can you manage the doors for me? I think I’m leaving a trail of chocolate pudding down the hall.”

She snatches up her phone and gives him a wide berth as she slides past him, holding open the door to the booth. “You better not be.”

He sighs. “It really can’t be helped.”

I watch them disappear down the hallway, Maggie becoming increasingly distressed about the carpets. Footsteps sound behind me and Lucie appears at my shoulder, fifteen minutes earlier than usual. I’ve started setting my clock to Lucie, I guess.

She stands next to me and arches an eyebrow at the smears of chocolate pudding along the walls. It looks like the set of a horror movie. “Do I want to know?”

“I’m not even sure I could explain it if you asked.” I lean up against the small square of pudding-free wall outside the booth. Her cheeks are pink from the cold and her hair is down, a soft beanie tugged over her ears. I stare at her and my heart feels like it’s somewhere in my throat. A smile tugs at her

mouth, growing the longer I look at her.

"What?" she asks. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I just like looking at you," I murmur quietly.

Her smile pulls wider and she ducks her face, trying to hide it. But I still see it. I still see her.

"You're early tonight," I point out, doing my best to keep everything in the lines we've established for each other. I had a plan. Not a very good one, apparently, but a plan nonetheless. I would kiss Lucie. I would scratch that itch and move on from this little fixation. But now she's standing in front of me and all I want to do is thread my fingers through hers. Rest my chin on top of her head and wrap both of my arms tight around her shoulders.

I'm still itchy.

The plan did not work.

"I'm early." Lucie looks back up at me, tilting her head to the side. She clamps her teeth down on her bottom lip and I am fixated on the plush pink of her mouth. "Do you want me to . . . I could go make us some coffee?" She glances at the pudding on the walls again with a frown. "Maybe grab some paper towels?"

"No. No, you don't need to go anywhere." I need to ask her about how she wants to leave the show, but I can't find the words. I don't want to. I don't want to think about her leaving. I like her exactly where she is.

I stare at her some more.

She squints her eyes, studying my face. "Are you all right?"

I'm not all right. I'm a mess and I'm not doing what I said I would do. I look in the direction Maggie and Jackson disappeared to and then grip her hand in mine, striding the opposite way. There's a tiny supply closet that Hughie calls his meditation suite right by the entrance. I make my way to it while Lucie hurries to match my strides.

"Aiden, what—" She stumbles and I slow down. She bumps into my back and steadies herself with one arm around my torso. A backward hug.

"What are you doing?" she asks with a puff of laughter, right against the back of my neck.

"I need to talk to you," I tell her, elbowing my way through the door of the closet, dragging her in after me. She lets out a little squeak and tumbles into laughter again as the door swings shut behind us, cloaking us in darkness. I can't really see, but I can feel the curve of her body beneath my hands. I can feel every one of her exhales.

"In the closet?" she asks, a smile in her voice. "You needed to talk to me in the closet?"

I can't believe I ever thought I could kiss her once and not want to kiss her again. My conversation with Maggie has me feeling prickly and urgent. Lucie's time here is moving too fast. I have no guarantee I'll ever see her again when she steps outside those doors.

I press closer, backing her up against the metal shelf that holds printer paper and ink cartridges and a basket of incense for . . . whatever it is that Hughie does in here.

"Yeah, I need to talk to you in a closet. There's not an inch of privacy in this place."

"What do you need privacy for?" she breathes.

I cup my hand around the back of her neck and squeeze. A breath shudders out of her.

"For talking to you," I say.

"This doesn't feel like talking."

"We're having a conversation," I mumble. My fingers squeeze again. "Words are happening."

"Not many of them."

There's a ticking clock hanging over my head. *Exit plan* is scratching like a record player that won't stop skipping. I don't want Lucie to slip through my fingers. It doesn't matter that she's never been mine to hold. I can't stop myself from wanting her.

In my head, I say something coordinated and controlled. I tell her how I feel because I know how I feel and I approach this situation like a mature adult. I set realistic expectations. I keep to the plan.

But in reality, I push the soft poof-ball hat off her head and toss it on one of the shelves behind her. I drop my forehead to hers and say, "If you don't want me to kiss you, tell me now."

"I thought we said we weren't going to do that again," she breathes.

"I'm an idiot," I tell her and she laughs. My nose bumps hers in the dark. "I thought once would be enough."

"It wasn't?"

I shake my head. It only took one second of seeing her in the hallway to realize what a monumentally stupid idea that was.

Lucie grips my sides, her palms pressed flat against my rib cage. "It wasn't enough for me either." She shifts and I wrap my arms around her like I wanted to, my hand moving up her spine in a firm stroke. "We should probably kiss each other some more. Maybe two times will be enough."

"I don't think two times will be enough," I murmur.

"You're right," she breathes. Her mouth hovers right below mine in the

dark. “Let’s make it three times.”

“Lucie.”

“Aiden.” She sighs, a smile at the edge of her voice. The sound rockets down my spine. “It’s okay. You’re not—you’re not misleading me or making me any promises. I’ve spent most of my life doing what everyone else needs, and I want—now I want to do something for me. You’ve been very clear about where you stand and I’m tired of overanalyzing every thought and feeling. I know what this is.”

“What is it?” I’d love to know because I don’t have a damn clue.

Her hands slip lower, resting on my waist. “Do you remember at the bar? When I told you that I never have any fun?” I nod. Her pinky edges up beneath my sweatshirt, cold against my skin. I shiver. “Maybe that’s what this could be. Two people having fun.”

“Fun,” I repeat.

She nods and her nose bumps against mine. “Yeah. That’s what I want.”

We slip tighter against each other, her chest crushed to mine. She breathes in every time I breathe out. Time slows to a crawl. Something sticky and heavy as I consider which path to take. One is significantly more complicated than the other, but it’s also the one that has Lucie.

There’s really not much to consider.

Lucie wants fun.

And I want to give her whatever she wants. I might not be able to give her the fairy tale, but I can give her this. I can give her fun.

“Okay,” I tell her.

“All right.”

“Good.”

“Yeah,” she whispers, hands tugging at my shirt. “Good.”

I smile and find her mouth with mine in the dark. I kiss her soft and sweet and slow and all the things I wasn’t capable of the other night. I swear I’ve never thought about kissing someone as much as I’ve thought about kissing Lucie.

I squeeze the back of her neck and tip her head back, dragging my mouth from hers to press kisses along her neck.

“I meant to ask,” she whispers with a gasping breath when I find a spot near her fluttering pulse that she seems to like. I drag my teeth against it and her nails dig half-moons into my chest through my shirt.

“What?” I mumble against her skin. I never want to leave this spot.

“The other night,” she continues, losing her train of thought when I nip at her neck again. A shiver rocks over her shoulders.

“When I called?”

She nods. “I should have asked what you wear to bed. I was thinking about it and . . .” She gets distracted when I hook two fingers in the collar of her sweater and tug it over her shoulder. I nose lightly at her bra strap and then press a kiss to it. She sighs and rolls her head to the side, giving me more room. “It doesn’t seem fair that you didn’t share,” she finishes lazily.

“It’s not fair how I’ve been unable to think about anything besides tiny shorts with a hole in the thigh.”

She laughs. “I never said my shorts are tiny.”

“Shh,” I whisper. “Don’t ruin my fantasy.”

“I think you need better fantasies.”

I lean forward and catch her mouth with mine again. I suck on her bottom lip, let my teeth nip at it. I like that she was thinking about me in her bed because I was doing the exact same thing three blocks away. I brush another kiss to her mouth and let my hands slip over the curve of her ass. “Did you think about me there? With you?”

She nods, a hitch in her breath. “I did,” she confesses in a whisper. I make a wounded sound and my knee slips between her thighs. The metal shelf behind her rattles. “You were wearing bunny-printed footie pajamas,” she finishes with a breathless laugh.

“I think you need better fantasies,” I echo with a grin.

“I don’t know. It seemed to work out for me just fine.”

She tilts her head so I can reach the spot behind her ear that makes her shiver. I try to shift our bodies so I’m not holding her caged against the shelf, but I only manage to tuck us tighter together. My thigh urges her legs farther apart, more of her weight resting against me, and she moans lightly.

We’re zero to six thousand in this tiny room. I only wanted to talk to her without someone inserting themselves between us, but now we’re rocking together against the metal shelf, my mouth busy sucking bruises against her skin.

“I wondered—” She presses out a sweet sigh and rocks her hips against my thigh, an unconscious motion, an afterthought, chasing the friction. She stops herself with two fists in the back of my shirt.

“No one told you to stop.” I grip her ass and help her move again, a slow, thorough grind against my leg. She shudders in my arms. “Keep talking,” I growl. “Tell me.”

“I wondered how you might touch me. If you were there,” she whispers. In the dark, I can only make out shapes and curves. The smell of her shampoo and the sound of her heavy breathing. “I don’t know. I’m—I’m

probably saying too much."

I shake my head and lick my way back into her mouth, a reward for her honesty.

"It's not too much. I was thinking about you too."

"Yeah?"

I nod.

After our phone call, I lay in bed and watched the streetlights dance across my ceiling, dragging my hands through my hair and imagining her in that damned T-shirt with those damned shorts. My brain found all sorts of creative interpretations.

She rocks against my thigh again, her hands slipping up the back of my shirt, palms pressed tight to my skin. "What would you have done," she asks quietly, "if you had been in my bed?"

Weeks of suppressed thoughts and feelings spin out in a kaleidoscope of ideas, picking up speed with every little sound she makes. If I had been in her bed, we would probably still be there. I drop my face into her neck and squeeze her hips. "You're trouble."

She laughs. "That good, huh?"

"Something like that."

"I don't think anyone has accused me of being *trouble* before," she muses lightly, still working her body against mine.

"Must be just for me, then."

"I like that. I like that it's just for you." She grips my shoulders and rocks harder, a moan caught in the back of her throat. I wish there were lights in here. I want to see what Lucie looks like when she's chasing her own pleasure. It's probably the most selfish she's ever been. I'm so hard in my jeans it hurts.

"I'm—" She laughs a little bit, breathless and winded. "I'm having *so much* fun right now."

I brush my lips against the tip of her ear. "Do you think I could make you come like this?"

Her hips stutter and jump, then grind harder. "To be fair, I think I'm doing most of the work."

I slip my hand beneath her sweater, my thumb tracing the soft skin of her belly. I rest my hand beneath her breasts, waiting, the backs of my fingers barely grazing the material of her bra.

"That's rude of me."

She exhales slowly. "It really is."

I let my thumb trace the heavy curve of her breast. Her skin is so *warm*.

“I should probably help.”

“Yes, please,” she sighs. I tug at the cup of her bra until it’s tucked under the swell of her breast and curl my hand around her. Her nipple is tight and hard against my palm and I rumble out a groan. Every part of her feels good.

She makes another delicious sound and starts to roll her hips, leaning back. I meet her movement with mine and we’re a grinding, panting mess against a shelf full of toilet paper.

“Could you—” She arches her back and I drag my thumb across her nipple, an answer to the rest of that question. She nods, frantic. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s nice.”

I drag my teeth along her jaw. “Nice,” I huff. I trace another wide circle with my thumb. “Nothing I want to do to you is very nice, Lucie.”

“Okay, we’ll use a different word,” she says, breathless. “That’s really—” Her sentence tumbles into a low moan when I pinch her nipple between two fingers.

“It’s really . . . what?” I drop a kiss on the corner of her mouth. “What word should we use?”

I can think of fifteen, right off the top of my head. *Incredible, unbelievable, perfect. Soft. Warm. Too much. Not enough. Fucking overwhelming.*

“Nice,” she says with a laugh that wheezes out of her.

I’ve heard so many sounds out of Lucie these past couple of weeks. Her laughter and her sighs and the small amused huff she makes in the back of her throat when we have a ridiculous caller. The rasp in her voice when she’s tired and the way she licks around the edges of consonants and vowels when she’s saying my name.

I’m an expert on the soundtrack of Lucie, but I think these sounds might be my favorite. The music Lucie makes when she’s chasing her orgasm against my thigh, both of her hands twisted through my hair, her mouth open against my shoulder.

“Aiden,” she breathes, hips moving faster, sloppier, losing her rhythm as her head tips back. I cup the base of her skull so she doesn’t smack it against the shelf behind her and then I fist my fingers in her hair because I can. Because I want to.

Her body goes boneless against me and the knowledge that Lucie likes her hair pulled is a bright flash of heat up the length of my spine.

“Fuck,” she slurs. “*Aiden.*”

“That’s it,” I whisper. “It’s good, isn’t it?”

She nods. “I need—” She flattens her palm over the back of the hand I

still have anchored against her chest and drags it down to the front of her jeans. My thumb rubs over the small metal button and she exhales a shaky breath.

"No," I tell her, pushing my thigh up, urging her to grind harder.

"But—"

"No."

"Maybe a little bit?" she gasps, and I shake my head against hers.

"No," I say again. "I can't."

"You can't?"

"Are you wet, Lucie?" The question bursts out of me, borderline accusing. I'm not being very nice right now. Not nice at all.

She nods and I grunt, taking her response like a sucker punch. "Then, no. I can't touch you a little bit. Because if I feel how wet you are for me, I'm going to fuck you in this closet."

Her smoky laugh curls around the back of my neck. "I don't see the issue."

"I'm not going to fuck you in a closet," I say, more for myself than for her. Because I want to. I want to wedge something under the door handle and undo the tiny button on the front of her jeans and do everything I've been thinking about. Get down on my knees. Turn her around and tug her hips back into me.

I pull my hand out from beneath hers and roll my thumb against her nipple again, rougher than I mean to. My restraint is a house of cards in a windstorm. I'm barely holding it together.

"I'm going to make you come, and we'll figure everything else out later, okay?"

She nods. "Yes, please. That—" She curls both of her arms around my neck. "That's what I want."

"I'll give it to you. I'll give you anything you want."

She shivers against me with a breathy, disbelieving laugh and I hold her tighter, guiding her against my thigh in a long, slow drag. I feel like I'm caught in a dream. Any second Lucie is going to kick me under the desk and I'm going to jolt awake.

But she doesn't and I don't and I move her against me until she's making tiny, bitten-off sounds in the back of her throat, her hands grasping, her thigh brushing against my cock with every roll of her hips. I could probably come just like this. With Lucie's sweet sounds and the barest hint of friction. In the broom closet of the radio station.

"Aiden," she whines, her nose in the hollow of my throat, and yeah. I

could definitely come like this. Her nails scratch at the back of my neck. “Please, please, please.”

I rock her harder, my hand under her shirt rushing to pull down the other side of her bra. I dip my head and press my mouth against her through the thin material of her sweater, teeth scraping against her nipple. I’m almost as frantic as she is, hands shaking, wild, unrestrained noises caught in the back of my throat. I need her to come. I need her to come before I lose the tether I have on myself and yank her jeans down around her knees and bend her over the metal shelf.

She knots her fingers through my hair and I rumble out a low groan. Her body tenses against mine and she goes deathly quiet, nothing but a sharp intake of air.

“That’s it.” I tuck my forehead to hers, watching the way she moves against me. “You’re close, aren’t you?”

She nods, frantic, hands still grabbing at me. I shush her quietly, wedging one hand between her legs, giving her the pressure she needs. I grind the heel of my hand against her until she’s shaking, until her body pulls tight.

“Aiden,” she chokes out, and her teeth sink into my collarbone. I can feel her orgasm rush through her but I wish I could see it too. I wish I could see what color her cheeks turn. If her eyes go lazy and dark.

I still the hand I have pressed between her legs. Her heart is thundering, her breath uneven.

“Good?” I ask.

She nods and then nods some more. “Yeah, uh. Very good. Thank you.” She laughs and it’s the best fucking sound I’ve ever heard. I brush a kiss across her forehead.

“Did not expect that for today,” she mumbles softly. She tugs at my hair and guides my mouth to hers for a gentle kiss. I pull my hand from beneath her shirt and tug on the hem, straightening her the best I can.

“Me neither.”

I feel the curve of her smile. “It seemed premeditated.”

“Nah.” I shake my head, grit my teeth, and put some space between us. Now that I’m not so focused on Lucie, I’m aware of the situation in my pants. I’m so hard I’m throbbing. I swear I can feel it in the base of my spine. I sigh. “I definitely didn’t plan on having a boner at work today.”

Lucie snickers, a hand in the dark reaching out to trace me through thick denim. I make a noise that sounds like a whimper. I cuff her wrist with my fingers and hold her still with a squeeze.

“Not right now,” I grunt. Christ. There’s no scenario where I would not

embarrass myself if Lucie put her hands on me right now.

"That's not very fun."

I lift her hand to my mouth and brush a kiss to her palm. "I'm pretty sure we're late for the broadcast. Maggie is going to start banging on doors any second." I'm surprised she isn't already. But maybe Jackson's pudding situation is more dire than I thought.

"You don't want—"

"Lucie." I stamp a kiss over her lips. "Want isn't the issue. Of course I want. I've *been* wanting. But I need to go sit in a booth with you for a couple of hours, and I won't be able to if we do anything else in this tiny closet." I lean forward and brush another gentle kiss against her mouth. "Maybe we can have more fun later."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," I whisper, feeling unsure. I'm suddenly sixteen again, asking out the girl I've been crushing on. "If you . . . if you want."

Circle yes if you like me too.

My eyes have adjusted enough for me to see the smile she's trying to tuck away. "Yeah," she says quietly. "I want."

"All right." I let myself have one more kiss. Then she sucks at my bottom lip and one more kiss turns into my body pressing hers back into the shelf. She laughs. I groan and tap her ass. "Get back out there."

She tries to wiggle past me and we fumble around the closet. My elbow smacks into the shelf. Lucie steps into a mop bucket and goes sliding two feet to the left. A metal bowl falls to the ground with a loud clang and Lucie laughs, loud and bright and breathless.

I wrench open the door and light spills into the room. Lucie looks an absolute mess. Hair tangled, sweater tugged down over one shoulder, cheeks flushed pink.

"Out," I whisper, and she grins.

I slam the door shut behind her, draping myself back in the dark of the supply closet. I can hear her laughing on the other side. My smile stretches to match.

"Trouble," I mutter to myself, dragging my hand down my face. I don't know if I'm talking about her or me or the painful erection I'm sporting. The way my heart is pounding in my chest.

I'm in so much fucking *trouble*.

LUCIE STONE: I talked to Skee-Ball guy again. He called the other night.

AIDEN VALENTINE: [coughing] Did, um, did he?

LUCIE STONE: He did.

AIDEN VALENTINE: I guess he had a good time, then.

LUCIE STONE: It certainly seems that way.

[pause]

LUCIE STONE: Are you all right?

AIDEN VALENTINE: I'm fine.

LUCIE STONE: Are you sure? You're—

AIDEN VALENTINE: Everything is fine. I'm just—I spilled my coffee. It's fine.

[muffled rattling noise]

AIDEN VALENTINE: Don't look so pleased.

LUCIE STONE: I'm not pleased. I'm amused.

AIDEN VALENTINE: I didn't see my mug there.

LUCIE STONE: It hasn't moved in close to an hour.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Well, I didn't see it. I'm . . . I didn't see it.

CHAPTER 24

LUCIE

My phone buzzes with a text while I'm leaning over the hood of a vintage Chevy. I slip it out of my pocket with grease-stained fingers, a smudge of black across the top of my screen.

AIDEN: I'm sorry, did you say pineapple is your favorite pizza topping?

I snicker. I've been texting with Aiden in between car adjustments and trips to the coffee machine. The conversation has been steered carefully away from any mention of what happened Wednesday night at the station, but it doesn't stop the cascade of hazy, hot memories every time I see his name pop up on my phone.

Believe it, buddy, I type back. You're just looking for a reason to argue with me.

His reply comes through immediately.

AIDEN: Yeah, you're right.

AIDEN: I like it when you get huffy.

I sigh and slip my phone back into my pocket. We went from an impulsive kiss to an explosive moment in the broom closet to flirting over texts. Now that I'm not holding on to any expectations, I'm having fun.

I close the hood of the truck and wipe my hands on the towel tucked through my belt loop. Maybe that was the problem. I had too many plans. Too many expectations. I told Aiden I want magic, but I've been putting qualifications around the idea of it.

Maybe I just needed some fun instead.

"Lu?" Harvey pokes his head into the garage from the reception area.

“You got a minute? Chevy Guy is in the waiting room. Says he wants a status update before he leaves.”

“He’s still here?” I started working on the Chevy about two hours ago. He was the first customer at the service bay this morning, waiting patiently up against the cab of his truck.

Still no underglow, he had assured me. *Just to be clear.*

Harvey nods. “Keeps saying he wants to know if Rosie will make it.”

“I forgot he named her Rosie.” I grab my clipboard off the top of my workstation.

Chevy Guy is waiting in the same place he was last time, propped up against the front desk with his arms crossed over his chest. He’s trimmed his beard since the last time he was here, his broad shoulders hunched beneath a canvas jacket. His jeans are splattered with paint and his work boots make a *thunk, thunk, thunk* as he idly kicks at the reception desk.

I can’t believe he’s waited here this whole time.

Ms. Shirley—a small woman with an affinity for hand-knit sweaters who rides her power scooter to the shop once a month for a tune-up—doesn’t bother looking up from the scarf she’s working on. She schedules her tune-ups for whenever Harvey has a shift and sits in the same chair every time, watching him work through the window.

“The boy won’t sit down,” she mutters. Her needles *click-clack* together. “He’s driving me through the roof.”

“He’s fine, Ms. Shirley. I’m going to talk to him now.”

“Good. Get him out of here.” She peers over the top of her glasses to the window above the desk that looks into the garage. Harvey is crouched down in front of her power scooter, tinkering with the seat. I bet she “lost” the screws again. “He’s ruining my view,” she says.

“Harvey is a married man, Ms. Shirley.”

She shrugs. “No shame in lookin’, hon.”

Chevy Guy’s head snaps up and his mouth pulls tight, blue eyes soft and wide. He looks less intimidating today. More like a sad puppy.

“How bad is it, Doc?”

I flatten my lips against a smile. He clearly loves his car a lot. It’s cute. “I’m not a doctor. I’m a mechanic.”

“You’re my baby’s doctor,” he insists, not a trace of humor on his face. “Break it to me. Is Rosie going to make it?”

“She’s going to make it.”

He breathes a sigh of relief and thrusts both of his hands into his hair.

I grin. “Though she’s going to need a lot of loving. Let me walk you

through my recommendations and you can decide what you want to go with. No underglow."

"No underglow," he agrees. "I'll do everything else, though. Whatever it takes."

"Still." I laugh. I nod toward two seats in the corner and hold up my clipboard. "Let's have a look. Do you want a coffee? You look like you need it."

"You got any liquor? I've been spinning worst-case scenarios out here for hours."

"Coffee is all I've got."

"That'll do." He smiles and crinkles appear on either side of his eyes. "But I'll grab it. You sit."

He goes to the coffee station in the corner while I flip through my notes. His truck has a fairly long to-do list, but not much of it is major outside the fuel pump replacement. His transmission is in decent shape and it looks like the brake system was replaced recently. She's been well tended to, his Rosie.

"Here." He hands me a small paper cup and folds his body into the seat next to mine. "I guessed on how you take your coffee. Sugar seemed like a good idea."

I don't like sugar in my coffee at all, actually, but he was nice enough to get me a cup, so I take it without complaint. I manage to take a sip without wincing and walk him through the repairs. I explain the ones that are needed and the ones that are suggested, careful to note the estimated cost and the general timeline. He listens attentively, his gaze flicking between the sheet and my face.

I finish and hug the clipboard to my chest. "She's in really good shape, overall. Plenty of road left to travel."

Chevy Guy drops his head back in relief. "Thank god. My uncle handed that truck down to me when I turned sixteen. It's been in the family for ages."

"You think they'd kick you out if Rosie went to the big garage in the sky?"

He laughs, a low raspy sound. "Nah. No one to kick me out," he answers easily. "It's just me now. The truck is all I've got left of them." His smile softens into something gentle. "I recognize I've formed an emotional attachment to an inanimate object, but she's important to me."

I pat his forearm. "I understand. She's in good hands, I promise."

He drops his hand over mine and searches my face. "Yeah. She really is." A crease appears in the middle of his forehead and he squints, studying me. "Something about you is familiar. Do I . . . know you from somewhere?"

I pull my hand from his and flip back to the front page of my clipboard. “Have you brought Rosie in before?”

“No, like I said, I’m new to the area. It’s something else. It’s—” He drags his hand over his mouth, considering. “It’s something about your voice. Have you—you haven’t done any jingles, have you?”

“Jingles?” I laugh. “No. Not by choice.”

His mouth twists. “You sound familiar.”

I stand and brush my hands against my thighs. “Just one of those voices, I guess.”

Ms. Shirley makes a *harrumph* sound on the other side of the waiting room. I ignore her.

“I’ll give you a call when Rosie is ready, yeah? Probably a week or two.”

Chevy Guy stands with me. I have to tip my head back to get a good look at his face. I didn’t realize how tall he was when I was behind the desk.

“I look forward to it. Thanks”—his eyes flick down to the name patch on my coveralls and he grins—”Lu.”

He steps out the front door in two gigantic strides, the bell above the door jingling after him.

“Mm-hmm. That irritating man liked you.” Ms. Shirley loops another bit of yarn around her needle. She’s watching the window with interest. Particularly Harvey, lifting her power scooter to get a look at something on the side. His arms strain beneath the sleeves of his white T-shirt, his coveralls looped at the waist. Ms. Shirley makes a happy sound.

I drop my clipboard on the front counter and pour my barely touched coffee in the small sink by the creamer. “He did not.”

“Did too.”

“You just like to gossip.”

“And you, apparently, like to be oblivious.” She twists another loop of mustard-colored yarn around her needle. “Now I know why your daughter intervened in your love life.”

I open my mouth to say something else—that he wasn’t flirting, that flirting means a feeling at the base of my throat like there’s a hand cupped gently around it, eyes that might be blue and might be gray but are always looking right at me—when an air horn splits the conversation down the middle. I groan.

I know what that sound means.

“Best get back there,” Ms. Shirley tells me with a delighted little grin. “Or you’ll forfeit.”

I slam the door to the garage open and drag my feet over to where Harvey,

Angelo, and Dan are standing huddled together. Dan's holding four dried spaghetti noodles in his closed fist.

"All right," he says as I drag myself closer. "Usual rules apply. Shortest stick has to drive the tow."

Everyone at the shop hates driving the tow truck. It's old, it smells faintly like onions from when Harvey let an Italian cold cut sandwich marinate in the glove compartment for two weeks, and the steering wheel sticks. Tows also mean sharing the front seat with a stranger who may or may not think talking on their speaker-phone in close quarters is acceptable.

"But let me remind you," Dan says, shifting on his feet. "Whoever pulls the tow can leave early for the day. Really, this is a benefit to you. You three should be begging for the opportunity."

"It's already the end of the day," I point out. "By the time we tow the car to the shop, everyone else will be gone."

"Yeah," Harvey crosses his arms over his chest. "If it's such a good opportunity, why don't you volunteer to drive the tow?"

"Because I'm the boss," Dan says, scratching at his eyebrow. "I'm indispensable."

Harvey snickers. "I'm gonna remind you of that during the baseball season when you're leaving early to catch the O's." He shakes his head. "Indispensable. You haven't picked up a wrench in sixty-three years, old man."

"Yeah." Angelo digs a bony finger into Dan's chest. "You just don't like talking to people."

"Neither do you!"

This happens every single time we get a tow. The three of them bicker back and forth until it devolves into shoving and name-calling. I don't have the patience for it today. I reach forward and pluck one of the dried spaghetti sticks and then groan immediately.

"Please tell me you made really tiny spaghetti sticks today."

Dan shakes his head. Angelo immediately returns to his workstation. Harvey lets out a whoop.

"While I sympathize with your continued string of horrendous luck, Lu, I am pleased as punch."

I'm about to punch him right in the chest. "Don't be too happy about it. Without me here, you won't have anyone to run interference with you and Ms. Shirley." I toss my dry noodle at his face.

"Looks like I'm not the only one with *horrendous luck*."

Me and my horrendous luck take to the streets.

Driving the tow truck feels like operating a cruise ship, especially along Baltimore's narrow alleyways. The cobblestone streets make my body rattle, the radio is stuck on the smooth jazz channel, and the onion smell is worse than ever. By the time I make it to the intersection where I can see the blinking hazards of a car pulled to the side, I am officially done with the day. I'm not participating in the spaghetti-straw pull ever again. It's biased against me and my god-awful luck.

Next time we'll arm-wrestle. Or play rock paper scissors. Maybe throw a dart at the wall with pictures of our faces.

I yank the truck into park and hop from the driver's side, then promptly almost face-plant into the middle of the street.

Because I know the body leaning up against the back of his car, arms crossed over his chest, hazard lights blinking orange against his silhouette. It's the same body that had me pressed up against a metal shelf, his thigh wedged between my own, his breath hot and heavy in my ear. I'd know that body in my sleep, probably.

"Aiden," I say, and his head snaps up. A devastating smile starts to work its way across his face.

"Lucie," he says back, and I laugh.

ANNOUNCER: Tonight's scheduled programming will be replaced with a live performance from the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. *Heartstrings* will return tomorrow at its usual time.

CHAPTER 25

AIDEN

Lucie slips from the driver's side door of the tow truck in a pair of navy blue coveralls and I have to surreptitiously pinch the inside of my elbow to make sure I'm not in an exhaust-induced daydream. There were definitely some fumes . . . or something . . . when my car decided to go up in smoke. Maybe they altered my brain chemistry. Maybe they tipped me into an alternate reality. I didn't think I had tow truck fantasies, but there's something about Lucie walking toward me in steel-toed boots, a pair of gloves shoved haphazardly in her pocket.

"Of all the side streets in Baltimore," she calls.

"Of all the tow trucks," I shout back, a four-wheeler zooming past us with Usher blaring. When I called the nonemergency number and asked for a tow, I never considered that Lucie's shop might be the one to send a truck. The universal forces I don't believe in must be laughing at me.

She closes the space between us, eyeing my car and then me. "All good?"

I nod. As good as I can be with a car that started puffing out smoke while topping out at ten miles per hour on a crowded side street during the evening rush. Better now that she's here.

She drops a clipboard on the roof of my car and props her hands on her hips. I am thoroughly distracted by the zipper of her coveralls. She's only done it halfway, a gray shirt beneath.

"Aren't you supposed to be at the station?" she asks, and I have to drag my eyes up from that tiny zipper. I want to dip two fingers into the opening of her uniform and tug her to me until we're plastered together knee to neck.

I shake my head and then shake it again when her lips quirk up. "Not tonight. The BSO has a live performance and they stream it across multiple local channels. Maggie opts us in for it every year."

I planned to spend the evening on my couch with a pizza, watching reruns of *The Office* while trying not to text Lucie. But given how the rest of the day has gone, I'm sure that would have lasted all of twenty-two seconds before I

caved.

"Lucky you," Lucie says, and it feels like a taunt. Like a dare dangled between us. Yeah, lucky me. Lucky, heartsick, painfully obsessed me.

"I've been told I'm a lucky guy."

She snorts, her nose scrunching. Her long hair is twisted in a complicated-looking bun and the only thing I want to do is unravel it. I've been reduced to a series of compulsions around this woman. A lightning-strike sensation somewhere in the middle of my chest and in the backs of my knees.

A car lays on the horn as they maneuver around us. I hold up my middle finger without looking.

She tugs at my hand. "Put that away," she says, amused. I shove my hand back in the front of my sweatshirt. She tips her chin up at my still-smoking Bronco. "What's going on with your car?"

"It's not working."

Her smile tugs wider. "Yes, I can see that."

I scratch at my neck, then toy with my thin gold chain. I drop my hand with a sigh. "It made a weird noise and started to get hot, so I pulled over to the side. The engine won't start."

"What was the weird noise?"

"What?"

"The noise," she says, both eyebrows raised. She drags her clipboard closer to her and starts to make notes. I watch her hand scribble over the page, her handwriting a series of neat looping lines. She writes *Aiden Valen* at the top of the page. *Lucie Stone* right next to it under the label *Technician*.

"What did it sound like?" she asks again. "The, uh, the noise?"

She nods.

I make a gurgling clunking sound that's a poor imitation of whatever the hell my car was doing twenty minutes ago. Lucie tries to tuck her face into her arm, but I can still see the way her shoulders shake. I narrow my eyes.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Absolutely not," she says, still writing on her clipboard. *Overheating*, I watch her scribble. *Transmission*. "What do I have to laugh about? If I were laughing at you, I'd probably ask you to make that sound again."

"Do you need me to?"

She lifts her face toward mine with a smile. "Not right now, but maybe later." Another car honks and she rolls her eyes. "I'm going to get you loaded up. Is there anything you need from the car?"

Just the pizza in the front seat I've been attempting to keep hot with the

seat warmer. I duck into the passenger side to retrieve it while Lucie sets to work getting my car hooked to the tow.

There's something about her hands and the heavy machinery, I decide as I wait for her on the sidewalk. The confidence with which she maneuvers around my car. She's quick and efficient, practiced and smooth. She hops back into her tow truck and backs it up to the bumper, one hand braced on the passenger head rest, her neck tilted gracefully toward the back window. I stare at her and remember the way her skin tasted there—the hollow beneath her ear, her fluttering pulse—and I have to shift on my feet and think about Jackson and his pudding disaster to avoid getting overly enthusiastic on a Baltimore side street.

While holding a lukewarm pizza box.

She kneels by the front wheel after securing the towing fork beneath the frame and I tilt my head back to look at the gray sky.

"You worried about your car?" she calls, mistaking my distress for something reasonable.

"Worried about my brain," I mutter. I can't believe I'm getting hard watching her load a tow.

"What was that?"

I drop my chin back to my chest. Lucie is squinting at me from the front wheel well of my car. "Nothing," I call. "It's nothing. I'm fine."

"I'll be done in just a second."

"Take your time."

When she's finished, she meets me on the sidewalk, pink-cheeked with a spot of grease on her nose. I wipe it away with my thumb and she smiles. I feel like I've swallowed an entire swarm of bees. I add it to my list of ridiculous symptoms.

"Come on," she says. "I'll give you a lift back to the shop."

It doesn't feel safe to be in close quarters with Lucie, but I follow her dutifully to the tow and climb into the passenger seat, my pizza balanced on my knees. I clutch at it like a lifeline, harder when she slides into the bench seat next to me and swings the door shut behind her.

She tries to make conversation on the way to the shop, but I'm busy trying to figure out how to exist in the space next to her. I keep thinking I'll have a handle on myself the next time I see her and I never do. I'm reading into inconsequential details, trying to make sense of it all. But nothing about the way I'm feeling makes any sort of sense. I'm not sure it's supposed to.

My brain has been on a loop since I made her come in a supply closet. Her breathing in my ear. Her hips beneath my hands. The smile she gave me

when she disappeared into the hallway. The way she laughed in the booth after. I've never had that before. The after. Getting to watch the blush slowly fade from her cheeks, her gaze climbing to mine and darting away while we sat side by side in the booth and pretended like we didn't just deface station property.

I shift in my seat and the leather squeaks beneath me. I've been texting her every hour, on the hour, in an attempt to keep her mind on me as much as possible. I'm the toddler on the playground, tugging on her pigtails to get a reaction. I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to want more. I don't know what the rules are. I don't know the next steps. I've never cared enough to figure it out.

Lucie stops trying to make small talk somewhere around the third red light and the silence makes everything worse. I try, several times, to think of something appropriate to say, but my mind is a blank slate. The harder I try to reach for something, the farther everything seems to float away.

By the time she pulls into the service bay of a mechanic shop, I have mangled the pizza box beyond repair and she's frowning at her hands on the steering wheel.

"Give me a few minutes and I'll drive you home," she says, the truck still rumbling beneath us. "Just have to get your car off the lift."

"You don't need to do that."

"I do, actually." She laughs, but it's forced. "If I leave your car on the truck, the door won't close."

"No, I meant you don't need to drive me back."

The shop is deserted, the lights low. She must have come to get me at the end of her shift. She probably wants to get home.

Lucie nods, eyes stuck on the steering wheel. "That's fine." Her lips twist down, and if I could punch myself in the face, I would. "You can grab a cab out front. I'll be in touch about your car in the morning."

She swings open her door, but I reach over before she can slip from the seat. I grab the handle and snap it shut again. I hold myself extended across the front of her, my palm braced against the window.

"Lucie."

"What?" She keeps her face tilted away from me. As much as she can, anyway, in three feet of crammed car space.

"Look at me."

"I don't really want to."

I sigh. "Please." I let go of the door to touch my thumb to her chin. "I know I'm not doing this right. Please, Lucie."

Her eyes snap up to mine. Our faces are two inches apart. I can see every shade of green that rings her irises.

"Hi," I breathe, every other thought evaporating from my brain.

Lucie is unamused, her lips in a flat line. "Hello."

"I'm not saying the right things."

"That keeps happening, doesn't it?"

"Because you've got me all twisted up," I confess, hoping she can see the sincerity on my face. Maybe if I show her enough of myself, she can tell me what the hell is happening. How to do better. "I'm a mess, Lucie."

"Because of the closet?"

"Because of a lot of things." The edge of the pizza box digs into my side. The radio spits static. The truck rumbles beneath us and I have, once again, lost control of the situation. "Because of the closet. Because I kissed you and I want to kiss you again. And because I've been sitting over here trying to figure out how to hide the fact that I have a pineapple pizza on my lap, but it feels fairly obvious."

Her eyebrows jump up. She glances at the box in my lap and then back to my face. "You have a pineapple pizza?"

I nod, annoyed with myself. "I do."

"You said pineapple on pizza is disgusting."

"It is."

"Then why do you have it?"

"Because you said it was your favorite," I admit. "And I want your favorite to be my favorite."

Because when the guy behind the counter asked me what I wanted, I said "pineapple" without thinking. Because my brain has been rewired to only think about one thing, apparently, and she's sitting next to me in a tow truck looking a combination of bewildered and bemused. I'm not used to letting myself feel things. I'm not sure I like it.

"Don't look at me like that." I groan. "This is why I was trying to hide it."

"Look at you like what?"

I touch the edge of her smile where she's trying to fight it. Poorly.

"Like that," I tell her. I drop my hand in my lap.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. It's just—" She rubs her fingertips across her lips like she's trying to wipe away her grin. It is absolutely not working. "You are comically distressed about the pineapple pizza."

"Because it's embarrassing."

"It's not." Her smile spreads wider. "It's adorable."

"Please stop calling me adorable."

“Cute,” she adds. I groan and collapse back to my side of the bench seat. She shuffles closer and rests her chin against my shoulder. “You’re still crushing on me.”

I look at her out of the corner of my eye. “Obviously.”

She looks at my face and laughs. “Don’t look so put out about it.” She tries to firm her mouth into a straight line but her lips wobble. “You’re crushing on me and my pineapple pizza,” she singsongs.

I frown at her. “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Sure.”

“I’m just testing a theory.”

“Absolutely.”

“It’s probably disgusting.”

She blinks at me.

“The pizza, I mean. Not—not how I feel about you.”

I could not sound more like a dumbass if I tried. Who is this person? Why can’t I connect my brain and my mouth? I talk to people for a living, but I can’t manage to string a sentence together when I’m alone with Lucie.

I drag my hand through my hair and anchor my palm against the back of my neck, staring at her. “I feel like I should probably stop talking,” I whisper.

Lucie still has her chin against my shoulder. Her eyes are warm and her smile is soft and she has some grease from the truck on the line of her jaw that I must have missed. I’ve been thinking about Lucie in the closet, but I’ve also been thinking about her like this. Quiet. Pleased. Her eyes on me.

“Please don’t. I like it when you talk.” She bites her lip. “Do you want to know a secret?”

I nod, not trusting myself to open my stupid mouth.

“I’m still crushing on you too.”

“Yeah?”

She nods, cheeks pink. “Yeah.” She presses her face into my arm briefly and then tugs herself back to the other side of the truck. I immediately want to tuck her back into my side. “Were you confused about that?” she asks, skeptical. “After everything that happened in the broom closet?”

“You mean when you rode my thigh until you came?”

Her cheeks flush a shade darker. “About that.”

Something hot settles at the base of my spine. “You have my full attention.”

She rolls her eyes at the way my voice drops. “While you were trying to conceal your clandestine pizza, I was clumsily trying to figure out if you had plans tonight.” She licks her bottom lip. “You know. Since you won’t be at

the station."

I stretch my arm out across the back of the seat and toy with a strand of hair that's fallen out of her messy bun. "I was going to watch TV and try to not text you."

She looks down at her lap, trying to smother another grin. Maybe Lucie doesn't make me stupid. Maybe she just makes me honest. Everything sits right at the surface with her, waiting to bubble over. It's . . . good. Strange. But good.

She looks back up at me and considers. "Maybe we could—" She shifts in her seat, watching me. "Maybe we could watch TV together? Maya is at a friend's house tonight for a sleepover and— we could eat your pizza together. If you wanted. You don't have to try not to text me if I'm right next to you."

I can't stop looking at her mouth. "Yeah?"

She nods, drifting closer. "Yeah."

"That sounds good, but can I ask a question?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Why did riding my thigh make you think of pizza?"

"Well." She shrugs, and her arm shifts against mine. We're back to being plastered together on this uncomfortable seat. There's a spring digging into my thigh, but I wouldn't move for a damn thing right now. Not while Lucie is looking at me like that. "Pineapple pizza is borderline orgasmic."

I cup my hand around the back of her head. My thumb traces the long line of her neck. "Is that so?"

"Yeah," she breathes. "It's really good."

"I doubt it, but okay."

"Stop hating on pineapple pizza when you're the one who ordered it."

I grin and drop my forehead to hers. "I reserve the right to withhold my judgment."

"That's fine," she whispers, all breathy and soft. "But don't cry to me when your world is rocked."

Our noses brush together. "Oh, worlds will be rocked. And I don't think anyone will be crying."

"Hopefully." She laughs, and I wish I could wrap myself in the sound. Carry it around with me for whenever I'm feeling hollow and defeated. "I don't even know what we're talking about anymore."

"You said you wanted to come over."

"Right." Her eyes shine. "Can I come over?"

I toy with the tiny metal zipper on the front of her coveralls. I've never made out with anyone in a car before. It suddenly feels like a crucial bucket

list item.

“Yeah.” Our lips brush together and then slide apart. Too brief. Not enough. I abandon her zipper and rest my palm on the stretch of her thigh instead. “Yeah, you should come over.”

“Great.” Lucie leans back, out of my grip, and I watch with dazed, heavy eyes as she switches off the tow truck with a flick of her wrist. The rumbling abruptly cuts off beneath us, and Lucie climbs her way out of the driver’s seat. “I’m going to get you unhooked and then we can go.”

She disappears.

And I’m left sitting in the cab of the truck, staring dumbly at the space where she just was, smiling like an idiot.

COMMENT FROM BALTI-MORON96:

I don’t want to listen to Piano Concerto in F, I want to listen to Aiden flirt with Lucie.

CHAPTER 26

LUCIE

We pull up in front of a tiny row home with a cobalt blue front door and a stained-glass window above it. A ship with its sails unfurled billowing across the water. Three golden numbers painted across to note his address: 612.

"Didn't there used to be an Italian bakery around here?"

"Yeah," he says. "Right next door."

I smile. "I remember. I was obsessed with their cannoli."

"They moved to a new location a couple of blocks over. Probably the best decision they could have made for my wallet." He turns to look at me again, his gaze drifting over my face. "I wonder if—"

"We ever ran into each other?"

"Yeah," he says, eyes searching mine, then shifting to look out the window instead. It's a romantic thought. The two of us drifting past each other without ever realizing it. But I'm starting to define a difference between romance and reality, and I think I like this better. Aiden crammed in the front seat of my Subaru with his knees almost tucked to his chest, a pizza box on his lap. "I'm going to need a second before you come in," he says.

"A second?"

"More like seven minutes." Aiden climbs out of the passenger seat.

"That's oddly specific. Do you need to hide your doll collection?"

He braces one hand against the passenger side door and ducks down. I get a glimpse of gold against the tan skin of his neck, dark hair falling over his left eye.

He smiles at me, more than a little rueful. "I'm going to attempt to shove all of my dirty laundry under the couch and hope you don't notice." He taps the top of the car. "Seven minutes," he says again.

He jogs his way up his front steps and disappears through the front door, a wreath with dried magnolia leaves swinging back and forth with his enthusiasm. The wreath doesn't seem like something Aiden would put up. Maybe his dad gave it to him. He said he liked plants—the pilgrimage for

mushrooms—but I don't know much about Aiden outside the radio station.

I hope to know, though. I hope I get to learn more about Aiden.

Like what's on the end of that necklace I'm always getting glimpses of. Why he gets a faraway look on his face when he plays certain songs at the station. If he still thinks I'm naive for wanting the things I want or if maybe—if maybe he could want them too.

I'm still thinking about it six minutes and twenty-three seconds later when I'm standing on his small front porch, my hand raised to knock. The door swings open before I can, and Aiden appears, hair sticking up in every direction, one of the sleeves of his hunter green T-shirt twisted up. He's slightly out of breath and I watch the rise and fall of his broad chest beneath his T-shirt with enthusiastic interest.

"Hi," I tell his chest, and I suddenly sympathize with the version of Aiden I got earlier.

"Uh-oh," he says. He curls his fingers around my elbow and gently tugs me inside, shutting the door behind me. "That's not a good look. Do you not want the pizza?"

"No. I want the pizza," I murmur, distracted. I unwind my scarf from around my neck and toss it over the hook where his jacket is. I look at our things tangled together for a second too long. "I was just thinking."

"About the dog commercial again? I told you I'd reach out. See if they can record something different."

The other night at the station, I quietly teared up over an ad for the Maryland Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. I sniffled into my coffee cup for ten minutes. Aiden couldn't handle it.

"I don't want you to ask them to record something new. That was very effective. And no. That's not what I was thinking about."

He helps me out of my coat and folds it carefully over the wooden banister. His house is like most other row homes in Baltimore. A small foyer with a staircase to the left. A narrow hallway that leads to a living room. I expect the kitchen is at the back of the house, just like mine. Aiden tucks a knuckle beneath my chin and guides my face to his until I'm looking at him. His eyes are soft. Patient. "You don't have to stay if you don't want to. I can give you your pizza to go."

I shake my head and grip his wrist. "I want to stay. I'm just—" I chew on my bottom lip, considering. I've given Aiden so many of my secrets, and he's hardly handed me any of his. I nod toward his chest. "Your necklace. You always wear it."

He glances down at himself.

I trace over the gold chain at the back of his neck with a single fingertip.

"Oh. Yeah," he says. "I don't like to take it off."

"What is it?"

"It's, ah—" Twin spots of color appear on his sharp cheekbones. "It's a good-luck charm."

I arch an eyebrow. "That's very sentimental for a man who doesn't believe in luck."

"I never said I don't believe in luck."

"You implied it."

"When?"

"Every time we've ever had a conversation." I lower my voice in a pale imitation of his rough register. "*Fate and magic are things we've constructed in our minds so we can feel better about ourselves. The only truth is what we can see, blah, blah, blah.*"

He crosses his arms over his chest and leans against the wall. I am distracted by the stretch of his T-shirt over his bare arms. It really is a crime he wears so many sweatshirts. I haven't spent nearly enough time with his biceps.

A little line appears on the side of his mouth. He's trying to fight his grin and doing a poor job of it. "Is that what I sound like?"

I nod. "Yes." I poke him once in the chest and he quickly grabs my hand before I can pull it away. I crawl my fingers up and slip one beneath his gold chain. It's warm from his skin, the charm at the bottom hidden beneath his shirt. My eyes flick to his and hold. "Can I?"

He nods and I tug at it carefully, my other hand against his ribs. It's almost as close as when we were in the closet, but my mouth isn't on his and his hands are passive at his sides. I frown when I see the empty circle at the bottom of the chain. "It's a key ring."

"Yep."

I was expecting some sort of charm. Maybe a medallion. Grayson's mom had all sorts of saintly pendants around the house when we were growing up. She'd hang them from everything. Picture frames. The pull on the ceiling fan. The sink in the guest bathroom.

But Aiden doesn't have a pendant or a locket. He just has a thin empty key ring looped on a gold chain. The kind you find on a backpack or a house key. Something that holds something else together.

"Not what you expected?" he asks.

I shake my head, examining the small worn-down ring. Some of the metal is faded in spots. Silver instead of gold.

“My mom got it for me at a—at a hospital gift shop,” he tells me, tripping over his words. He plucks the ring out of my fingers and looks at it, thumb smoothing over one of the curves. “It used to have a compass on it, I think? Maybe a boat? I forget. It was something cheap and it fell off fast. Within a day or two.”

“But you kept it?”

“Yeah, I kept it.” He tucks it beneath his shirt again and pats it once. “It’s good luck. When the charm fell off, I shoved it in my jeans pocket and left it there for a . . . long time.”

“Define a long time.”

“Three weeks? I think?”

“Did you forget about it?” He nods. “Were you . . . not doing laundry at this point in your life?”

“I was a teenager. Of course not.”

He was a teenager and his mom was in the hospital with cancer, probably not for the first time. I think of a tall, lanky boy with messy hair, thumb rubbing over a cheap key chain.

I grip his hand with mine and Aiden smiles, something tentative in his face.

“When I had the key ring with me, there was good news. When I didn’t, it was—it was bad news. I left it at home once, and she didn’t—” He shakes his head and looks down at the floor. He swallows twice. I don’t know if he even realizes how hard he’s squeezing my hand. “So I started wearing it around my neck,” he continues. “Haven’t taken it off since.”

I study him carefully. *What was the good news?* I want to ask. *What was the bad news?* I’ve peeled back one corner of the paper Aiden keeps himself wrapped in and I want to tear the rest off. I spread my fingers wide against his side, feeling the steady rise and fall of his breath.

“That’s really sweet.”

His smile tilts to the left, one side of his mouth hitching higher than the other. “You sound surprised.”

“I’m not. You’re a sweet guy.”

He immediately scowls. “Am not.”

I pinch his side and he grips my wrist, tugging me tighter against him. I don’t know if he wants me closer or he wants to keep me from pinching him again. Either way, I like it, and I relax in his grip. Something dark and hungry flashes in his eyes before he tucks it away, somewhere in that filing cabinet mind of his with the rest of his secrets and subdued reactions.

I might not know a lot of the details about Aiden, but I know the broad

strokes. The parts that shine the brightest through the armor he wraps himself in. Despite his protests to the contrary, he is kind. He's thoughtful and disarmingly funny. In a dry, gruff way. He wouldn't have started a romance hotline if he didn't want to hand out hope and comfort. He's rough at the edges sometimes, but he cares. He cares deeply.

He just doesn't know how to share it.

"I'm onto you," I tell him. "You can't hide from me."

His lips quirk up. "I really can't, can I?"

I shake my head. "Nope." I loop both arms around him and squeeze. I rest my chin in the middle of his chest, staring up at him. "What did you do with your seven minutes?"

Aiden's eyes are stuck on my mouth. "What?"

My belly flips. I've always liked the way Aiden looks at me, but it's like the closet unlocked a different part of him. Or gave him permission for something else, I don't know. He's been looking at me like he's at the very edge of his control. Like he'd like nothing more than to press me up against the nearest flat surface.

Sex for me has always been . . . fine. A few fumbling, awkward encounters through the years have convinced me that maybe it's just not something I enjoy. And that's okay. I know what I like and what I don't and I've been able to meet the needs of my body. I manage just fine.

But then I spent fifteen frenzied minutes in a broom closet with Aiden and apparently it's not fine. Because he made me feel things I've only heard about secondhand from Patty during our wine and cookie nights. I've never come that quickly in my life, all without removing a single stitch of clothing.

I haven't stopped thinking about it.

I want to see what else Aiden can make me feel. I want more fun.

A bolt of heat sizzles up my spine. I try to find the thread of our conversation. "Your seven minutes," I repeat, watching with interest as he licks at his bottom lip. "What were you doing in here?"

"Oh, ah." The color on his cheeks burns deeper. He scratches once at his jaw. "It's—well. It feels sort of ridiculous now."

Curiosity has me pressing up on my toes, searching over his shoulder. The only thing I can see from the hallway is the corner of a slate gray couch, his sweatshirt tossed over the arm. "What do you mean?"

He tips his head back and mutters something at the ceiling. I fall back to the flats of my feet and search his face. It's the same look as the one he had in the tow truck, when he reluctantly confessed to ordering a pineapple pizza. A touch of bewilderment at his own actions.

“Now I have to know.”

He releases a sigh. “I’ll show you.”

“If it’s in your basement, I’m not interested.”

Aiden doesn’t move a muscle.

“That was a joke,” I offer. He’s holding himself so still, I need to glance at his chest to make sure he’s still breathing. “Aiden?”

“I’ll show you,” he says again, slower this time, dragging out each word, his voice resigned. He grabs my hand with his and takes two gigantic steps backward. I follow, tapping my fingers across his knuckles. I’m so busy studying the way our hands fit together that I miss it when he stops at the entrance of his living room, my front colliding with his.

He holds me steady with his hand squeezed against mine as we stare at his . . . project.

“I figured we could eat the pizza here,” he says carefully, eyes flicking toward me and away again. He’s acting like he’s just presented me with a pipe bomb, not a . . . poorly constructed fort in the middle of his living room. He nods toward the mess of cushions and haphazardly thrown blankets.

Now I know what he was doing with his seven minutes. He was collecting every spare blanket and a beach towel—if the blue sea turtles are any indication—to create a makeshift tent.

“Like a picnic,” I breathe. I look up at him and grin. “You remember what I said.”

A dark room. Headphones over my ears. A mug of coffee in my hands. Aiden, right next to me, his knee pressed to mine.

I like thinking that I’d be worth the trouble of something like that.

“I remember all the things you’ve said,” he grumbles, voice low, and I’m not sure I was supposed to hear it because he rubs his free hand over his mouth and continues to stare at the fort. Meanwhile I’m practically bursting next to him, champagne bubbles of happiness rising in the center of my chest. I feel like I’m Charlie in the chocolate factory, right after he drinks that bubble juice. I’m about to float through the ceiling.

“It’s a nice fort,” I say, rolling my lips against my smile.

It’s the worst fort I’ve ever seen. One of the cushion walls collapses as we stand in the doorway, the white sheet stretched over the top of it fluttering to the ground.

Aiden sighs. “Don’t lie.”

“No, no. It’s very nice.” I inspect it like I’m standing in the Louvre, both of my hands behind my back. This couch cushion is the *Mona Lisa*. “Is that a fitted sheet?”

“I only had seven minutes. Tone down the judgment.”

“There’s no judgment.” Another cushion falls over. “You were the one who said seven minutes. You could have asked for—I don’t know—fifteen.”

“I’m not sure fifteen minutes would have salvaged the situation.”

I tip my head back and laugh. It bursts out of me in a cackle. With anyone else, I’d probably be self-conscious, but this is Aiden.

I finally manage to gather control of myself, wiping at the tears on my cheeks. Aiden is leaning against the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest, a fond look on his handsome face. Now he’s the curator, and I’m the priceless piece on the wall.

“Want some pizza?” he asks.

I drop my hands from my cheeks and smile at him. “I really, really do.”

Aiden rips down the rest of the sheets and we sit in the middle of the cushions, a lukewarm pizza box in the space between us. He says it’s disgusting, but I think Aiden is probably full of shit, because he goes back for seconds and then thirds, plucking a piece of pineapple from the corner of the cardboard box to drop into his mouth. I stare at the flex of his fingers on his plate and the long line of his neck while he drinks from his glass, and I’m very proud of myself when I wait until the end of the meal to voice the thought that’s been circling since I hopped out of a tow truck and saw him waiting.

“I think you should kiss me,” I tell him, my legs folded under me. He pauses where he’s been scrolling through the TV channels, his body in one long line against the cushions. He angles his head where it’s propped against his fist to get a good look at me.

“Yeah?” he asks.

I nod.

His eyes narrow slightly, but he turns the TV off, tossing the remote to the same corner where all the sheets now reside in a tangled clump on the floor. He pushes himself up with a flex of his left arm and my mouth goes dry.

“We did say later,” he muses conversationally.

“We did,” I agree. I feel myself nodding, doing my best to reduce my smile to something manageable. It’s getting harder and harder to do that with Aiden, and I’m not sure why I keep trying.

I turn the thought over, examine it. I’m so used to reducing myself to feeling things halfway that it’s become second nature. I watch Aiden shift in

front of me to better close the space between us and let myself sink into the warm, soft, gooey feeling in the middle of my chest. I don't need to restrict myself with Aiden.

Because with Aiden, I'm safe. He told me so, the very first night we talked to each other.

I let my smile tumble across my face. Aiden blinks.

"That excited, huh?"

I try to pinch him again, but he grabs my hand and drags it to his mouth, pressing a kiss to my palm. My breath hitches and both of his dark eyebrows arch up.

"Ooh, she's very excited."

"Shut up," I breathe. His mouth is warm and his body feels so big next to mine, the smell of his cologne or body wash or whatever it is that makes his skin smell like coffee and wintergreen stronger in his house and on his couch cushions. I feel like I'm a puddle of hot melty wax in the middle of an Aiden candle.

He presses another slow kiss at the base of my thumb and a shiver rolls its way over my shoulders. He grins into my hand and I imagine myself curling my fingers around the shape of it. Holding on to the rare proof of his happiness.

"You like my mouth on you, Lucie?"

He doesn't wait for me to answer before he drags his mouth to the inside of my wrist, sucking a wet kiss to my pulse point that has my knees knocking together.

"I guess it's—" I have to swallow down my groan when he drags his teeth along the inside of my elbow. "I guess it's good."

Aiden hums and squeezes my hand with his before tugging on it, encouraging me to wrap my arm around his neck. But I don't need much in the way of encouragement, my fingers tangling in his hair while his mouth drops kisses against my neck.

"We can do better than good." Aiden presses his forehead to my shoulder and rocks it there once. One of his hands finds the small of my back, fingers slipping beneath the material of my shirt. His thumb presses into the soft skin at the curve of my hip and my body lurches into his. "You've gotta tell me what you want, okay? I don't want to push you."

"Not pushing me," I mumble, tilting my head to the side, giving him more room to nuzzle. The scruff along his jaw feels fantastic against the hollow of my throat. I hope it leaves a mark. I hope I'll be able to look in the mirror tomorrow and see the shadows of his affection.

Still he lingers in the space of *almost* and *maybe*, half touches instead of the mindless passion of the closet. I curl my fingers in his hair and tug until I can see his face. His eyes are dark and he *looks* like he wants more, but there's still so much I'm unsure about when it comes to the intricacies of *this*. Wanting someone and wanting them to want me back.

I don't want there to be any confusion. I don't want him to hesitate.

"Aiden. I'd like to clarify something."

He blinks at me sleepily, like he's coming out of a haze or a very good dream. I scratch through his hair and his fingers flex against my back.

"Okay," he says, voice pitched low.

"About what I want."

A sound catches in his throat. I watch his Adam's apple bob once. "All right."

I lick at my bottom lip. "I want you to kiss me until I can't breathe." I hesitate and then decide to be fully transparent. Honest. Just like he's always encouraged. "And then I want you to press me down into this very nice couch fort and make me come. More than once, if possible. That's never happened for me before, and I'd like to give it a go."

His eyes are impossibly dark. "Give it a go?"

I nod. "If you don't mind."

LUCIE STONE: Could you hand me that?

AIDEN VALENTINE: What?

LUCIE STONE: The cookie. Just there. Yes, exactly.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Sure.

LUCIE STONE: And some more coffee too, please. [laughter]

AIDEN VALENTINE: No problem.

AIDEN VALENTINE: You've got a whole list of demands tonight, don't you?

LUCIE STONE: I've always been good at asking for what I want.

AIDEN VALENTINE: [throat clearing]

AIDEN VALENTINE: That's, uh. That's important.

LUCIE STONE: I mean. Sometimes. Not always.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Right.

LUCIE STONE: I feel like we should move on to something else.

AIDEN VALENTINE: I think so.

CHAPTER 27

AIDEN

Lucie watches me carefully, her fingers tracing light patterns at the base of my skull. It's distracting, but not as distracting as the words that just came out of her mouth.

"If I don't mind," I repeat.

"Yes." Her other hand cups the side of my face, fingers spread wide against my jaw. "That's what I would like."

"Yeah, I don't mind." I clear my throat and then clear it again. "Okay."

Her eyebrows quirk up. "Okay?"

"Yeah. Okay. Good." Maybe I'll be able to string together a proper sentence in a few minutes, but I certainly can't right now. "Let's—I can do that."

"Yeah?"

I nod and shift the hand I have on her back until my palm is pressed tight to the middle of her spine. "Yeah. Come here."

She laughs as I shift her until she's balanced in my lap, her thighs at my hips and her arms draped over my shoulders. It's almost exactly the same way we were in the closet, except there's no one to interrupt us this time and I can see the way her mouth drops open when she feels how I'm already half-hard beneath her.

I lean up and suck roughly at her bottom lip. She makes a groaning sound that settles somewhere in the pit of my stomach, and I tilt my head so I can kiss her properly.

She melts over my lap, her body loose and relaxed as our mouths work together, her knees tipping wider until we're tucked together from hip to chest. I still can't believe I get to touch her like this. That she wants it. I slip one hand in the back pocket of her jeans to palm her ass and use the other to cup her face, pressing my thumb to her chin so I can drag her mouth open against mine.

I can feel myself getting lost. In the wet heat of her mouth and the smooth

roll of her hips against mine. I flex my fingers against her ass and guide her against me, doing my best to work a series of marks along her neck. I hope the next time she slips into her coveralls at the shop, my bruise is right above her collar. I hope she sees it every time she looks in the mirror. I hope other people see it. I'm possessive of this woman that I don't get to keep.

Two hands fist in my hair. "Aiden," she breathes. "What do *you* want?"

I laugh against her skin.

"When it comes to you, Lucie"—I suck at the dip between her collarbones—"there's not much I don't want."

She tugs at my hair some more and I finally relent, dropping my head against my cushionless couch to watch her face. She traces her thumbs over my cheekbones, across my jaw, and down my neck. Her fingers dance up and down my skin and her eyes follow.

For the first time, I entertain the possibility that Lucie might want me as much as I want her.

Ridiculous as it sounds.

"I don't want it to be just about me." She rocks her hips over me and her eyelashes flutter. I reach up with one hand and untangle the tie she has in her hair, dark brown waves cascading around her shoulders. She smiles at me and rocks her hips again. "I want you to take what you need too."

Take.

That word has every muscle in my body tightening. I certainly want to take where Lucie is concerned. I soften my hands from where they're clenched in her hair and curl my hands around her ribs instead, telling myself to calm down. But breathing consistently in and out feels like a problem and my whole body feels like it's vibrating. Like I'm still in the cab of the tow truck, engine rumbling beneath me until I can feel it in my teeth. *Take, take, take.*

"Kiss me again," I demand, rougher than I'd like. Maybe if she's the one in control, I can loop my hands around some of the urgency making me tremble beneath her. I hold myself still as she drops her mouth to mine, her hair a dark curtain around our faces. I try to cut the fierce ache burning through my chest in fractions, but then she licks her way into my mouth and another strand of my control snaps under the pressure.

"Please," she whispers, somewhere against my throat. I have to suck in a lungful of air through my teeth. "I want—"

"I want it too," I tell her, finally giving in to the relentless pull in the middle of my chest and grabbing a fistful of her hair. I angle her head back, lick a hot stripe up her throat, and suck at her earlobe. She wiggles in my lap

and I push up with my hips.

"The other night, when we were in the closet, you were . . ." She shifts her hips again and I groan out a sound that would be embarrassing if I still possessed the capacity to feel that particular emotion. "It's never been like that for me."

"Like what?" I grip her hips and tip her backward until she's splayed out across the cushions on my floor, both of her arms above her head. She stretches her body like a cat and my mouth goes dry.

"Desperate," she says, a hiccup of a gasp. "Needy. You touched me like you didn't care what I thought and I—I liked it."

I groan. In that closet, I was barely holding myself together. I was rougher with her than I should have been. "Don't tell me that."

"What?"

"Don't tell me you liked it when I bossed you around."

"You did say you were bossy." Her laugh is breathless and I trace the waistband of her jeans until my thumb finds the small metal button. I flick it open and get a glimpse of gray cotton. If she wants me to be bossy, I can do that. I can be anything she wants me to be.

"Take off your pants," I tell her, slipping my hand down the front of her pants and tracing the tiny triangle of material. I can feel how hot she is through the thin material. How wet. I fist my other hand in the waistband and tug, impatience roaring through me. "Lift your hips, Lucie."

She obeys without another word, helping me shimmy the material down her long legs. She's all smooth, pale skin, a bruise on her knee that I drop a quick kiss to before crawling between her thighs.

"Wider," I rasp, tapping at her bare hip. I can't stop looking at the cut of material across her bare skin. The tiny damp spot at the front. "Make room for me."

She tips her knees wider and I drop a kiss to her belly button in reward. She sucks in a sharp breath and I slip my thumbs beneath the thin straps at her hips.

"I want you to watch me, yeah?" I tug her underwear down until it's dangling off one knee, just out of the way enough for me to get where I want. I'm too impatient to arrange her any other way. "Watch me make you come."

Her teeth clamp down on her bottom lip and she gives me a nod, fingers twisting through her hair. I want those hands in mine instead, tugging me the way she likes, guiding me, but there's time for that. With this, I can be patient.

I like it better when I am.

She makes a soft sound when I press a kiss to the inside of her thigh. Another when I drop my mouth to her cunt and lick a hot stripe against her. I tangle my fingers in the material of her underwear and yank her thigh wider, a groan in the back of my throat when her taste explodes across my tongue. She tastes so fucking good. I might stay here all night. See how many times I can make her come with my mouth and fingers. Figure out every way she likes it. Burn myself into her the way she's burned into me. I might not be good at the other stuff, but I can be good at this.

My head dips as I kiss her again, kissing her clit like I would her mouth, long, slow licks that have her legs shaking on either side of my ears. She makes another bitten-off sound and when I glance up her body, her shirt is gone, tossed off to the other side of the room with the sheets and her pants. She's wearing a sturdy, utilitarian-type bra, but I can see the hard points of her nipples through the material. The swell of her tits over the top.

"Fuck," I mumble, reaching down and adjusting myself in my jeans, imagining what we must look like in the middle of my living room floor. Lucie spread out across my couch cushions in just her bra. Me, fully clothed with my mouth working between her legs.

"Touch yourself," I tell her. "Let me watch while I lick you."

Her groan is wild and loud this time, her hands immediately rushing to obey. I expect her to touch herself over the material, but she slips her hands beneath the band instead, her fingers pinching at her nipples beneath the cotton. Her breath explodes out of her in a rush.

"Aiden," she whines.

"That's right." I press my mouth against her again, messier this time. Rougher. Her hips roll into me and I let her set the pace while I work at her with my tongue. I let her take what she needs from me, grinding my hips down into the cushions in a rhythm to match, aching to find relief. Next time, I want her above me. Knees on either side of my head. Pressing me down into the cushions while she rides my face. Or maybe bent over the side of the couch. My hands holding her wide, eating her from behind.

She comes with a groan and I chase her through it, not letting her close her legs, urging them open again, pressing her down in the cushions while I wring every ounce of pleasure from her. A broken sob falls out of her mouth as her orgasm twists into something sharper, heavier, the back of her hand pressed over her eyes, agonized delight etched in the lines of her face.

I press one last gentle kiss to her clit when her tremors ease, then press up on my knees, staring down at her.

Her bra is pushed up above her bare tits, her hair is wild, and her eyes are

shining. She's flushed, chest heaving.

I'm not sure I've ever wanted anyone this much.

I open my belt buckle, slipping the leather through the loops. "I had to touch myself after you left the closet. Did you know that?"

She shakes her head, watching me through heavy eyes. "I didn't—I didn't know that," she breathes. "Did you—"

"I fucked my fist and thought about doing exactly what I'm doing right now." I press my palm to her belly and spread my fingers wide, my thumb dipping to the hollow between her thighs. She's so wet, I have to clench my teeth. *Fuck*, this woman. "I stood in that closet with my hand around my cock and thought about what would have happened if I slipped my hand in your pants like I wanted to. How much you would have let me get away with. I destroyed a fundraising T-shirt. Had to bury it in the bathroom trash can beneath sixteen thousand sheets of paper towels. And it still didn't help."

She wiggles her hips, trying to get me where she wants me. I keep my strokes slow and measured, my other hand working at the fly of my jeans. "What didn't help?"

"I still went back into that booth wanting you. I can't stop." It comes out of me like a confession, like an apology. I'm not sure I'd stop wanting her if I could. I like this feeling too much. Like I'm basking in the sunlight she throws off.

"I can't either." She moans and her fingers circle my wrist. "Aiden. Please. I need more."

"You did say you wanted more than one, didn't you? Didn't you?" I pick up the pace of my thumb against her clit, letting myself be sloppy and rough. I twist my hand and slip one finger, then two inside her. Goose bumps erupt along her skin. "Ask me nicely."

A smile splinters across her face. She drags her arms above her head, stretching herself out for me, giving in to the slow, methodical way I'm working her back up. Her head tilts to the side and she watches me down the length of her body.

"Please, Aiden. Please make me come."

"Fuck," I mumble, my elbow collapsing beneath me and my mouth on hers. I wanted her begging, but I don't think I realized what it would do to me to hear those words slip out of her lush and swollen mouth. I press another finger into her and curl them forward. Her body jolts and then relaxes.

"Good," I tell her, petting her side. "Look at you. You can take it, can't you?"

Lucie wraps her arms around my shoulders and nods. I kiss her until I feel

her start to tremble, her head thrown back over my couch cushions, her thighs hugging my hand. She smiles when she comes this time, her back arched, a whine caught at the base of her throat.

"You're fucking incredible," I mumble into the blush that's spread down her neck, over her heaving chest. I brush a kiss against the strap of her bra. "You want more?"

She nods, hands inching up under the back of my shirt. She tugs at it until I reach with one hand over my shoulder, grabbing at the middle of it. We're a mess of fighting hands and twisting material before she wrenches it over my head and throws it in the same direction as her shirt. She licks her lips as she looks at me, her palms smoothing over my chest. She traces the line of the necklace I never take off and affection wars with the lust roaring through my bloodstream. I told her I wear it for good luck and right now it feels like I'm having the best luck. Like every wish I've never been brave enough to ask for has come true.

"Do you have any condoms?" she asks quietly.

I nod. An unopened box on the bottom shelf of my medicine cabinet that I bought with a carton of mint chocolate chip ice cream at the corner bodega on a whim two days ago.

I slip my hand from between her legs and trail mindless patterns over her belly. My fingers are still wet with her. I can't look away. Lucie shifts her legs and taps my side with her knee. "Do you . . . want to go get them?"

I lean down and suck her nipple into my mouth. Her skin is already starting to bruise from my attention and I want to take a picture. Print it out and frame it. "Hmm?"

Lucie fists one hand in the back of my hair again and yanks until we're nose to nose. *Fuck.* Maybe she's not the only one who likes it bossy.

"Get the condoms." She pecks a kiss against my mouth. "Please."

I roll my way off her and stumble up the steps, Lucie's husky laugh trailing after me. I almost tear the medicine cabinet off the wall in the bathroom, one of the shelves collapsing in my enthusiasm to grab the condom box. Toothpaste and deodorant and an expired bottle of ibuprofen spill out across the floor like a pharmaceutical piñata, but I don't care. I don't care about anything except getting back to Lucie.

Lucie, who is waiting for me in the middle of the couch fort, her bra discarded behind her, all bare skin and messy hair. I stand on the bottom step, struck dumb at the sight of her.

"Fuck," I whisper.

She tucks her hair behind her ears and toys with one of the metal hoops

around her cartilage. “The bra wasn’t especially sexy.” She winces. “I wasn’t —I wasn’t expecting you.”

Same, I want to say. *You came out of nowhere and knocked me flat on my ass.* I know she means *tonight*, but I mean all those weeks ago. When she came roaring on the phone line breathing fire, accusing me of god knows what. I swallow hard and lower the zipper on my jeans, my eyes not moving from her curves. My cock feels like it’s one stiff breeze away from exploding. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted someone so much.

“You look—” I don’t have the words. I push my jeans over my hips until I’m in just my briefs. Her eyes trail down my body like she’s plotting a course and taking notes. “The bra was plenty sexy.”

It was sexy because it was *Lucie*. No frills. Wonderfully authentic.

Plus, it goes nicely with the mechanic / tow truck fantasy I’m slowly piecing together in my mind for the next time I need to defile a fundraiser T-shirt.

“Oh yeah?” A smirk curls at her mouth. “You want me to put it back on?”

I shake my head and drop one knee on the edge of a cushion, prowling over her. I toss the condom box to the side, then grab her hand with mine, tangling our fingers together. “No. Leave it off. I wanna see you.”

She bites at her bottom lip and lets me guide her down against the cushions, blooming like a flower beneath me as she lies back. I trace my knuckles over her cheek, down her neck, across the rise of her full breasts. Her skin almost looks like it’s glowing in the low light of my living room, brushstrokes of pale pink and coral. I’ve imagined this a handful of times—in the shower, alone in my bedroom—but the reality is better. The reality is true.

She exhales a low, shuddering sigh when I brush her nipples, and I’m tempted to linger, but I don’t. I keep going to the swell of her hips and the faint scars on her stomach. Her cute little belly button and the heat between her legs. I caress her thigh and hook my hand beneath her knee, making room for myself between her long legs.

Fuck, these legs. I’ve had about ten thousand indecent thoughts about these legs alone.

“Say something?” she asks, when I spend too much time looking. My eyes snap back to hers. “You’re quiet,” she explains, fingers toying with her earrings again.

I’m speechless is what I am. Trying to figure out if I’m in the middle of a very elaborate dream. I’ve never had anyone look at me the way Lucie does, like the want is tangled up with the comfort and the affection. Hushed

conversations in the middle of the night. Knees tucked together beneath a desktop. Tiny mint wrappers folded into even tinier paper airplanes, aimed right at my heart.

Our ticking clock feels like it exists in another dimension. With Lucie bare beneath me, it's easy enough to bury the fact that she's meant for someone who isn't me. And that I'm supposed to be helping her find that person.

Not fucking her through my living room floor.

"I'm trying to regain motor function," I tell her honestly. *I'm trying to memorize you.*

She laughs and I smile back. I drop my chest to hers and my necklace pools between her breasts. She hooks her fingers in the key ring looped at the bottom and uses it to tug me closer.

"You need mouth to mouth?" she rasps.

I grin into the little divot beside her lips. "Wouldn't hurt." She grabs my jaw when she kisses me, holding me close, licking into my mouth like she never wants to do anything else. She tips her legs wider beneath me until her ankle is hooked around the back of my thigh and her body is wrapped around me like ivy. I can feel her through my underwear, hot and wet and overwhelming. I drag my hips against hers and groan.

"Let me see *you*," she breathes.

I press another lingering kiss to her mouth and then shift to my knees in front of her.

"Go ahead," I tell her, watching with satisfaction as she blinks blearily at me. "Take me out," I manage through a grunt.

The rest of my demands stick like glue to the roof of my mouth. *Touch me*, I want to tell her. *Hold on. Tell me you feel it too.*

She sits up and slips her hands beneath the band at my hips, urging my boxer briefs down. She licks her lips when she sees me and something hot and possessive curls in the middle of my chest. I want to be the only one she looks at like that.

"Well," she says. She lightly touches my hip and brushes her fingers across my stomach, down to where I'm hot and hard. "Well," she says again.

She curls her hand around my cock and squeezes, then gives me one long stroke. It's so good with her. She meets every challenge I toss in her direction, surprises me at every turn. I drop my head back while her hand works at me, my body a tense, trembling mess while I stare at my ceiling. I allow it for three teasing strokes, then catch her wrist with my hand.

She's staring at me with her tongue caught between her teeth, eyes dark.

“You want me?” I ask.

She nods. “Yes.”

“Lean back, then.”

“Like this?” she asks, tipping back to the cushions, spreading her legs wide, and my mouth goes dry. There’s a bruise on the inside of her thigh in the shape of my mouth.

“Yeah,” I grunt. “Like that.”

I loop my fingers around her ankle. Slip my palm up until I can grip her ass and bring her toward me. I drag my cock against her once and her eyelashes flutter. I do it again and we make twin sounds of appreciation.

“Condom,” I grind out from between clenched teeth. “Get a condom. Please.”

“So polite,” she says, fumbling with the box.

My hands squeeze. “I’m about to be really rude, to be honest.”

She tears the wrapper with her teeth and rolls the condom over me.

“I can take it,” she whispers, and I have to think through the starting roster of the Orioles spring training team to keep myself from mindlessly rutting against her. My arms are shaking on either side of her head. I can feel my pulse at the small of my back. “Lucie,” I whisper, wanting the taste of her name on my tongue when I push into her. She hums and rubs her hands against my sides, opening her legs wider.

“Please,” she says, her voice sweeter than honey, and I let go of the last of my control. The final fragmented pieces of my resistance. I’ve been sitting next to her for weeks, hoping, wishing, wanting, and now she’s here, under me and all around me, saying please. I grip her thigh and watch her face as I slot myself against her, my hips pressing forward and rolling back, a little deeper each time. I have to work myself into her and she watches me while I do it.

“Look how well you take me,” I mumble, my voice low. She angles her head down to watch and makes a soft sound when I press all the way inside her, our hips flush together. “Look how good we fit.”

“I’m—” She exhales a sharp breath. “You’re—”

I nod, squeezing my eyes shut. It’s good. It’s so damn good. My scruff rasps against her neck. My fingers press bruises into her thigh. I’m not confident in my ability to move. “I know.”

I try rolling my hips and abruptly stop. Lucie shifts beneath me and I drag my teeth against the delicate skin above her collarbone to try to still her.

“This doesn’t feel rude at all,” she whispers into my ear. Her hand traces a meandering path down my spine, over my ass. She urges me forward. “This

feels very nice, actually."

"Nice." I grunt it like it's a curse, pulling back only to thrust back in hard. She makes a choked sound. A laugh caught halfway. "There's that fucking word again."

"Then show me something else," she murmurs, head digging back into the cushions. The long line of her neck arches back and she looks like something from a painting. Like something in the stars. She rolls her hips against mine, working herself against my cock, and she looks like something from a filthy dream. "Stop holding back. Give me everything."

"Yeah?"

She nods, hair caught beneath her. "Yeah."

I rise to my knees and lift her hips, pressing my fingertips into her soft curves and holding her steady. "Come here," I order, urging her legs to wrap around the small of my back. I thrust into her with a rough, dirty grind. "Make sure you tell me if it's nice."

Except I don't give her a chance to say anything. Because my body has taken over the conversation, Lucie's whimpers and moans and the high-pitched, breathy sigh she makes when she's close filling the air between us until it feels like I'm underwater. Sand in my bones. Lightning under my skin. I work myself against her until my legs shake, one hand cupped around her ass to hold her tight to me and the other pressing low on her belly until she's trembling as much as I am. I reach down with my thumb and curl it against that tender spot between her thighs and she arches against me, her shoulders digging into the cushions and her hips riding mine harder.

"Still nice?" I grind out. My knees are shaking where they dig into the couch cushions.

"So nice," she moans. "The nicest."

I laugh, breathless, and duck my head to suck a bruise between her breasts. "I should make you wait for it," I mumble into her skin. I slow my hips and she whines. "That wouldn't be nice, would it?"

She digs her nails into my arms. "I take it back. You're not nice at all."

I brush a kiss against her neck. Curl my hand around her jaw and catch her mouth with mine. I hold her there with a firm grip, making her watch me as I move against her. "No?"

"No." She shakes her head and her eyes go heavy. "You're really, very, terribly mean." She slips her hand over mine between her legs and encourages me to press harder. My vision goes black at the edges.

I start to jerk my hips into her, losing any semblance of finesse. She watches me through half-lidded eyes as I fuck her down into the floor, my

thumb strumming at the place above where we're joined. Mindless nonsense begins spilling from my mouth. All the places I've thought about having her. How much I hate and love the thin white T-shirts she wears beneath her sweaters at the station. Something completely unhinged about her coveralls and wanting to undo the zipper with my teeth. How much I like her smile. Her laugh. The way she rasps my name. I'm out of control, unfiltered, driven higher with every broken sound she hiccups.

I know it the second before she starts to come. She goes still beneath me, a wordless exhale of my name through cherry-stained lips as her body squeezes around mine. I let myself fall into it—into her—several furious, frantic thrusts and a rough groan tucked against her throat.

I murmur her name when I come, sparks behind my eyes and in the palms of my hands where they're pressed against her skin.

We lie there in the middle of the floor, panting. The couch cushions have separated and we're wedged somewhere in the middle. Lucie drags her nails across my shoulders and I shiver. My legs are completely numb. My mouth is dry.

"You were right," I say, slurring half the sentence.

Lucie drops a kiss to the top of my head. "About what?"

"That was nice."

She snickers and pinches my side.

Pineapple pizza, as it turns out, is delicious.

Especially when consumed at room temperature with a naked Lucie pressed against my side.

Lucie steals a piece of pineapple and shimmies down farther in the blanket nest she's made from discarded sheets. She smells like sex and tomato sauce.

"I knew you liked the pizza," she accuses with her chin propped on her fist. There are several hickeys forming on her neck and I am inordinately pleased about it.

I swallow the gargantuan bite I just took. "The pizza is fine."

"You've had, like, four slices."

Five, but I don't intend to point that out. This is the closest I've ever come to a perfect moment in my life. Lucie with her leg draped over mine, pale skin wrapped in white sheets, confiscating the toppings of my pizza.

"I've worked up an appetite," I tell her. She blushes and I lean forward to

brush my lips against it. Because I can. Because I've spent the past however many weeks telling myself not to. Because I've spent the last decade telling myself not to want anything at all, and Lucie is the first thing I've let myself reach for.

She slips her hand around my neck and squeezes. "I should— I should get going." My stomach twists and I growl in the hollow behind her ear. The only place I want her to get going to is my bedroom at the top of the stairs. I can worry about the consequences later.

"No."

She laughs. "No?"

"I think you should stay," I tell her, two fingers slipping into the front of her sheet toga and tugging.

Her face is shy. Her smile pleased. "You want me to?"

I nod. "Mm-hmm." I tug the sheet down some more until it's crumpled across her lap. I cup my hand around her breast and fill my palm with her. "Do you need me to convince you?"

She slips onto my lap and wraps both arms around my shoulders.

"Only if you're nice about it," she whispers into my ear.

CALLER: How much longer will you be on the show?

LUCIE STONE: Oh. Uh, I'm not sure, actually. It's—I guess it's up to Aiden.

AIDEN VALENTINE: It's not up to me. I've told you. You're the boss.

LUCIE STONE: Aren't you tired of sharing this tiny booth?

AIDEN VALENTINE: No.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Are you tired of sharing this tiny booth?

LUCIE STONE: No.

CALLER: So you're staying?

LUCIE STONE: No, no. I'm not staying. I just don't know when I'm leaving yet.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Well, there's your answer.

CALLER: That was . . . not an answer.

CHAPTER 28

LUCIE

I stare unseeingly at the coffeemaker in my kitchen, contemplating my existence.

I got home twenty minutes ago and haven't done much of anything, moving through my house like the Ghost of Satisfied Sexual Adventures Past. The Ghost of Horny Present? I don't know.

Is *that* what sex is supposed to be like? No wonder Patty is always yelling at me about getting laid. I feel both bone-deep exhaustion and incandescent euphoria. Like I could sleep for ten thousand years and also swim the length of the Chesapeake Bay.

My front door slams open and I hear feet on the stairs, pounding up. Maya shouts a distracted hello, and I'm glad I only gave in to Aiden once this morning. I don't know how I would have explained slinking into the kitchen while my daughter poured Froot Loops at the counter.

As it stands, I comb my fingers through my hair, trying to untangle some of the knots. Aiden bent me over the vanity in his bathroom after our shared shower this morning and threaded his fingers through my hair, angling my head up so I could watch us in the fogged-up mirror. I shiver thinking about it —about the hazy, unfocused outlines of our bodies moving together—a bloom of warmth low in my belly.

I said I wanted fun and Aiden delivered. At least four times, he delivered.

"Hey, Lu. I told Maya to go upstairs and wash her Colonel Mustard mustache off. It was freaking me out the whole drive home. Every time I glanced in the rearview, it was like I had a tiny Danny McBride in the back seat." Grayson pads his way into my kitchen without looking up, studying something on his phone as he beelines for the fridge. "And are you aware that Cindy's mom is an absolute witch? I counted at least six Live, Laugh, Love signs in her hallway. Just the hallway. God knows what those bathrooms contained. Potpourri, I bet, and not the fun kind. I'm worried about the influence she's having on our kid." He grabs a yogurt from the top shelf and

knocks the door closed with his hip. “I think we need to start screening—*oh my god*, you had sex.”

The yogurt drops to the kitchen floor, Blueberry Burst bursting across my hardwood. Grayson looks at me with his eyes blown wide.

“Oh my god,” he breathes. “Oh my *god*.”

“Stop it,” I hiss, listening for Maya upstairs. “Shut up.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Nothing happened,” I try, not convincing in the slightest. “It was just—”

“Don’t you lie to me, Lucille. You’re standing there bowlegged, you’re wearing the same sweatshirt I saw Aiden in two weeks ago, and you’re making a cup of coffee without the cup for the coffee.”

I blink at the coffee machine, spitting out coffee straight onto the countertop. I curse and reach for the closest thing to contain it. A cereal bowl in the shape of a grapefruit.

Grayson points at me. “You had sex with Aiden.”

“I—” I consider lying, then decide it’s not worth the effort. I rub the sleeve of the sweatshirt across my cheek and nod. “Yeah. Yeah, I had sex with Aiden.”

Grayson props his hands on his hips. “And?”

“And what?”

“How was it? Wait, don’t answer that.” He reaches into his back pocket for his phone again, fumbling with it. “I need to text Patty.”

“Patty?”

“Patty,” he says, forehead pinched in concentration as he rapidly types something out. Somewhere above us, Maya is blasting Olivia Rodrigo, singing along at the top of her lungs. It warbles through the floorboards and straight into my brain.

I rub my knuckles across my forehead. “Why are you texting Patty?”

Before I can even finish that sentence, my front door slams open again. Patty comes skidding into the kitchen with a bottle of champagne in one hand and her apron in the other.

It is nine thirty in the morning.

I frown at her. “Did you run here?”

“Obviously.”

“Why?”

“Because Grayson used the code word.”

“What’s the code word?”

“Apricot jam,” Grayson offers, crouched down on the floor, wiping away the exploded yogurt. I look at him, then Patty, then him again.

“What does *apricot jam* mean?”

Patty slams the champagne bottle on the countertop. “It means you had sex, you little trollop. Come on. Give Mama all the details.”

“I’m not—you have an established code word for when I have sex?”

“Among other things,” Grayson mutters under his breath, tossing yogurt-laden paper towels into the trash. He shuffles excitedly over to the fridge again and pulls out a bottle of orange juice. “It was with Aiden,” he tells Patty.

Patty starts twisting at the top of the champagne bottle. “Of course it was with Aiden. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday is a master class in thirst from those two. Half of Baltimore has been waiting with bated breath for them to start banging live on the air.”

“Um. Excuse me?”

Grayson pulls out three glasses from one of the top cabinets and places them in a line. “She has a hickey on her neck.”

“She has *two* hickeys on her neck.”

“I’m standing right here,” I try to interrupt. I have three hickeys on my neck, actually, and one on the inside of my thigh. I flush thinking about that one as they continue to talk like I’m not standing two feet in front of them. I take a careful sip of coffee from my bowl and think of the way Aiden curled around me in his sleep last night. His hand on my bare hip, his other arm wedged beneath his pillow. His body lean and relaxed beneath the blankets. Lines on his cheek from the pillow when his blue-gray eyes cracked open.

The first thing he did when he woke up was smile at me.

Then he rolled me on my stomach, pressed my knees wide, and made me see stars.

I sigh happily into my cereal bowl–coffee mug.

“Look at her *face*,” Patty hisses, shooting her mimosa like it’s a dollar shot at ladies’ night. She slams her glass on the countertop. “Does he have a big dick? He sounds like he has a big dick.”

“*Patty.* There are children in this house.”

“There is *one child* in this house, singing her little heart out to ‘Deja Vu.’ She can’t hear a word we’re saying. And even if she could, I was there when you walked her through the birds and the bees.” She pauses, flicking her eyes up and down my body. “You certainly look like you’ve been ravaged by a big dick.”

I shift on my feet. “Just because Maya is educated and empowered doesn’t mean she needs to hear about her mom and . . . dicks.”

Patty pours herself another mimosa. She adds a minimal amount of

orange juice. “So he did dick you down, huh?” She lifts her glass in a toast. “Go ahead, girl. God, I’m proud of you.”

“You deserved this, Lu.” Grayson clinks his glass against hers. “We’ve been waiting for this moment.”

“You’ve been waiting for me to get . . .” I can’t bring myself to say *dicked down* aloud.

“Well, no. Not exactly that. I’m just happy you’re happy. You look happy.” He pats the stool next to him at the breakfast bar with an expectant look. “Come over here and tell us all about it.”

“No, thank you.”

He raises both eyebrows. “You want to wander down this road with me? You know I can be persistent. I won’t stop until I know all the juicy details.”

I know he won’t. Neither will Patty. The two of them together are about as subtle as a woodchipper. And with no Mateo, I am outmanned and outnumbered. I take another fortifying sip from my coffee bowl, my eyes darting between them.

I set it down primly on the countertop. “I can’t come over there.”

“Why not?”

I twist my hands in the oversized sleeves of the sweatshirt Aiden tugged over my head before I left his house this morning. He kissed my mouth and slapped my ass and I smiled the whole drive home. I clear my throat. “Because standing is easier than sitting at the moment.”

Patty and Grayson gape at me across the kitchen, their glasses raised halfway to their mouths. Then the pair of them burst into loud cackling laughter. Grayson laughs so hard he slips from the stool and onto the floor behind the breakfast bar they’ve set up shop at.

I hide my smile behind my hand.

Maya appears in the doorway of the kitchen, hair wet and Colonel Mustard mustache nowhere to be found. She steps over her dad without missing a beat and walks right into my open arms, slotting into the space that’s always fit her perfectly. I drop my chin on top of her head and squeeze.

“Did you have fun last night?” I ask over the obnoxious squawking on the other side of the kitchen. “Everyone liked your costume?”

Maya nods. “Yeah. The mustache was a hit and I got to be the murderer. Colonel Mustard in the library with the candlestick.” She mimes whacking someone over the head with a deadly instrument. “What’s going on with those two?”

I shrug. “Who knows?”

“It’s okay. I can guess.”

“So can I. They’re drinking champagne before noon. You know it makes your dad giggly.”

“The sweatshirt you’re wearing probably has him giggly too.”

“What’s wrong with the sweatshirt I’m wearing?”

“Well, it’s clearly not yours. The sleeves are too long and it’s man-sized,” Maya points out. She drops her arms out of our hug. “It has a *Heartstrings* logo.”

“I’ve been working there. Maybe I picked it up after a shift.”

“It says *Aiden* under the *Heartstrings* logo.”

Oh shit. It totally does.

Behind Maya, Grayson and Patty dissolve into more laughter. My cheeks flush hot. I’m being put on blast by my twelve-year-old.

“It’s not—we’re just—”

“Is he your boyfriend now?”

“I don’t—” I look to Grayson for help, but all I can see are his legs peeking out from the side of the bar. He’s gone still and I know he’s listening intently for the answer. I look at Maya and sigh. “I don’t know, honey.”

“Why not?” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Wearing his sweatshirt is a big step.”

“Yeah, Lu,” Grayson’s eyes appear on the other side of my countertop. “It means it’s *serious*.”

I resist the urge to flip him off and look back at my daughter. “Is that what it means?”

She nods. “Daisy Wagner only started wearing Luke Sinclair’s football sweatshirt when they were official.”

“Who are Daisy Wagner and Luke Sinclair?”

“High schoolers,” Patty answers, sipping lightly at her champagne. She reaches down and helps Grayson off the floor. When I give her a questioning look, she shrugs. “I’m very tuned in to the local gossip. Maya gives me an update when she does homework at the shop.”

Maya nods like a tiny, all-knowing oracle. “I signed you up for that show because I wanted you to have a boyfriend, Mom. I don’t care about how it happened. You don’t have to hide things from me.”

“Well, thanks for the vote of confidence, kid, but”—I grip her shoulders and steer her closer to me—”I’m not hiding anything from you. Aiden and I are . . . we’re enjoying spending time with each other.” Patty snorts. I ignore her. “I like him a lot, but I think—I think I’ve spent a lot of time caught up in outlining expectations for myself. That first night, when you called in to the station, I said I wanted magic. Do you remember?”

Maya nods. “The whole world remembers, Mom.”

“Well, I think that was a lie.”

Grayson slowly lowers his glass of champagne to the counter-top. “Lu. If you’re changing your mind about what you want to fit into whatever shape Aiden wants you to be in—”

“It’s not that.” When he raises his eyebrows, I straighten my shoulders and tell myself to be brave. “It’s not,” I say again. “I said I didn’t want to try, but I think I’ve been afraid to try. I think I’ve been telling myself I wanted magic and fireworks and something life-altering because it made it easier to withstand the constant disappointment of never—of never being enough.” Grayson opens his mouth to interrupt, but I steamroll over him. “If I told myself I was waiting for something better, it made those puncture wounds feel like paper cuts. I wasn’t missing out. I was waiting for something better. It gave me hope that I’d find my happy ending, you know?”

“Yeah, honey. I know.” Patty’s voice is gentle.

“I’ve been waiting for the perfect thing. The fairy-tale thing. But Aiden’s right.” A smile splits my face, even as pressure builds behind my eyes. “That doesn’t exist. Because it’s different for everyone, isn’t it? Love isn’t—it doesn’t work like that. I don’t want the things I thought I wanted.”

Maya blinks up at me, thoughtful. “What do you want?”

I think of Aiden first thing in the morning, his hair mussed by sleep and his arm around my waist. I think of the tiny desk we share at the station and how he’s slowly made space for me there. I think of my name yelled down a cobblestone alley, Aiden appearing between the streetlamps. A too-crowded breakfast table with a plate of toast handed over without a word. His sad eyes and careful smile, the way he keeps himself hidden away. A voice whispering in the dark, at the very edge of a dream.

I think you’re the magic.

I pick up my coffee bowl. “I don’t want something perfect; I want something honest. Something that can be mine.” I reach for Maya’s hand with mine and she twists our fingers together, squeezing. “I think it’s time I make my own magic, kiddo.”

I get to the station fifteen minutes earlier than usual and find Aiden in the break room, glaring at his contraband-coffee Christmas cookie tin like it’s insulted his family name.

“I hope no one else is stealing your coffee,” I say from the doorway,

shrugging out of my jacket. He fumbles the tin, catching it at the last second, his fingertips pressing dents in the side. I grin. “That’s my job.”

His eyes flick to mine and he smiles my favorite half smile, the lines by his eyes appearing in earnest. We’ve been texting each other most of the day—nonsense about how to fold a fitted sheet, a comment about pineapple pizza paired with ranch dressing (disgusting, thank you), and the benefits of the coffee bowl—but seeing him causes a violent chemical reaction somewhere in the middle of my chest.

I push off the door and busy myself with organizing a stack of discarded napkins so I don’t do something stupid like launch myself at him. Am I allowed to do that? Is that part of the fun?

He clears his throat and sets the tin on the counter behind him without looking. “No one is stealing my coffee.”

“Did it personally offend you?”

“Not yet.” He watches me in amusement as I patiently fold another napkin from Dunkin’ Donuts into my stack. “What are you doing over there?”

“Here?” I ask.

He nods.

“Oh. I’m organizing.”

He takes a step closer and hums, feigning interest in my asinine task. “I’m always saying how we need better-organized paper products in the break room.”

I nod, rolling my lips against my grin. He’s close enough to drag his knuckles over my forearm, and my body breaks into goose bumps beneath my sweater. “A clean break room is a”—I suck in a breath when he leans forward, his nose against my neck—”a prosperous one,” I finish awkwardly.

“Lucie,” Aiden rumbles, his smile tucked between my shoulder and neck. He punctuates my name with a kiss.

I tilt my head back to give him more room.

“Let go of the napkins.”

“Okay,” I say airily, dropping them immediately. They flutter to the ground like recycled-paper snowflakes.

“Good,” he whispers right below my ear, and I fist one hand in the front of his sweatshirt. I was hoping we could talk before our shift, but this is good too. Whatever this is. “Now I’d like to kiss you before I have to sit in a booth with you for three hours thinking about all the noises you made at my house the other night. Is that all right?”

I nod dumbly. “Yes. That is, uh, acceptable.”

I can feel his laugh catch in his chest. The way his ribs expand under the

force of it. “Great. Come here.”

Except he doesn’t let me go anywhere. He cups the back of my head in his big palm and tugs my mouth to his. His kiss is surprisingly sweet. He sucks lightly at my bottom lip and then nips at it with his teeth, teasing me with his tongue before he pulls away. He looks over my shoulder at the open doorway, then slides his eyes back to mine. Something in his expression flickers and he drops his hand from the back of my head.

I catch his fingers with mine before he can pull too far away, though. I told Maya I want to make my own magic, and I think it starts like this. Being brave in the break room, telling Aiden what I’m thinking.

“I missed you,” I tell him quietly, my cheeks flaming beneath the confession. He did all sorts of absurd things to my body the other night, but *this* is what I’m blushing over. I’m a ridiculous human being. “That’s probably not the right thing to say, but I—I missed you.”

Aiden’s quiet, his expression unreadable. My heart fumbles in my chest and I try not to let regret swallow me whole. Too much. Too soon. I still don’t know the rules to this game and—

His thumb touches lightly at my chin, tipping my face to his. His eyes are soft and his smile is devastating and I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him look more beautiful. I press my hand to the middle of his chest, right where his empty key ring rests. Some luck for me, this time.

“If that’s not the right thing to say, then I don’t want the right thing,” he tells me. “I missed you too.” He shifts on his feet and drops his hand. Another covert glance at the door behind me. “How do you—how do you want to play this?”

“Play this?”

He nods. “Yeah. I’m following your lead. Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

I feel like I’m missing part of the equation. I twist one of the earrings I put in this morning. A little red heart Maya got me for my birthday. “Whatever I’m comfortable with?”

Aiden nods again, patient. “We probably should have talked about this sooner, but I was—I was distracted.”

I watch Aiden’s eyes darken, his pupils fat in his blue-gray eyes. It took me four tries to leave his house the other morning, and we definitely weren’t having a conversation when he lifted my hand and sucked some misplaced strawberry jam off my thumb.

I shudder out a sigh.

“Yeah, I guess we didn’t talk about it.” I sway and stare at him. I’d never

had sex on a kitchen table before. That had been . . . new. Aiden licks his bottom lip like he's remembering too and stares back. "Can't we—I don't know. Can't we just play it normal? Be how we usually are with one another?"

I don't want to go through the hoops of pretending, but I don't want to explain it to anyone either. I like that it's just for us right now. Our own little secret. I've never had something to myself before, and I'd like to be greedy with Aiden for a little bit before everyone and their auntie in Baltimore weighs in. We don't have to talk about it on the air, right? It can be something that's ours.

Aiden shoves his hands in his pockets. It looks like he wants to say something, but then he glances at the door again, drags his hand over his jaw, and I watch as he forces it away.

He gives me a half smile. "Sure," he says. "We can do that."

Voices drift from down the hallway. Jackson and Eileen are seemingly arguing about three things at once. They drift closer and I catch: "Old Bay goes on everything, don't be ridiculous," and "I wish you'd use the term *haboob* more often in your weather reports," and finally, "If Mercury isn't in retrograde, then how do you explain Aiden's attitude?"

The last one makes me laugh. Aiden rolls his eyes, but I see the smile he tries to hide as he takes a step back and puts some space between us. Jackson and Eileen tumble into the room, still arguing, and head for the coffeepot in the corner while Aiden bends to collect the napkins I dropped when he kissed me.

Everything is exactly as it always is.

Aiden and Jackson bicker about coffee. Maggie bellows from her office about start times. I slip into my seat next to Aiden in the booth and his body bumps into mine beneath the table. I scoot closer and tuck one of my feet behind his, delighting when he presses both of his feet against mine. Like a hug. We drink coffee and talk to callers and I sneak glances at him out of the corner of my eye until he drops his hand to my knee and drags his thumb against the tear in my jeans. *Be good*, he says without saying anything at all. Then I just stare blankly at my notepad with various doodles on it and try not to breathe too heavily into the microphone. At the end of the show, he walks me to my car and presses a kiss below my ear. Small. Quick. He pairs it with a wink and a squeeze of my hand. A secret. A promise.

It's not until I'm home, bundled up in my blankets, wearing Aiden's sweatshirt like a nightgown, that I think about that look on his face again.

For a second, I could have sworn he looked disappointed.

AIDEN VALENTINE: This next bit is sponsored by Matthew's Pizza. Stop by on Tuesdays for half-price carry-out pies.

AIDEN VALENTINE: I've heard their pineapple is very good.

LUCIE STONE: Oh, so you like pineapple on your pizza now.

AIDEN VALENTINE: I'm coming around to it.

CHAPTER 29

LUCIE

I hum while I do the dishes from our dinner, Maya somewhere behind me hunting down her shoes from wherever she flung them when she got home from school yesterday. The window is cracked, the cookies we made after homework are still warm, and there's a feeling wedged under my rib cage that expands with every breath in and out. Like floating but better. Like a hug just shy of too tight.

Like a sweatshirt that smells faintly of wintergreen draped over my shoulders, a thigh pressed tight to mine.

"I'm a mastermind," Maya says the second I shut off the water, her face pleased and more than a little smug. She looks like Grayson when she makes that face, but I keep that to myself. Apparently twelve-year-olds don't enjoy being compared to their parents, no matter how bold the similarities.

I towel off my hands. "Yes," I agree, and her smile widens into something toothy and crooked. A flash of the youth she's quickly tumbling out of. I grin back. "Would you like to be more specific?"

Maya twirls her finger in my face, poking at the corner of my mouth. "This," she says.

"What?" I laugh, swatting at her hand.

"Also this," she says, poking me once in the middle of my chest. Right where that bubbly, warm feeling lives. "I had high expectations for my plan, but I think I've exceeded them."

Her plan. The show. The manipulation of my love life.

"What is it you were hoping for?"

"Maybe a few dates," she says, slipping into a beaten-up pair of Converse with the backs folded down. I told her I'd buy her the slip-ons, but she insists on mangling her footwear for some inconceivable reason. "Once he was looped in, Dad was hoping for a makeover moment." I make a short, offended sound. "I was excited about a bunch of dudes duking it out for your affections. That part seemed pretty cool. Tier-one goal was to get you to

believe in yourself."

"There are tiers?"

"Tier two was some free meals and a doting public."

I can *feel* the wrinkles forming on my forehead.

"And tier three was bumping uglies." She blinks at me. "What? Don't make that face. It's an important goal."

God help me. "Do you know what that means?"

"I have some ideas."

"From who?"

"I'd rather not say." She shrugs like I'm not having an existential crisis in the middle of my kitchen. "Let's move on. Tier four was a hope but never an expectation."

"Oh yeah?" After tier three, I'm not sure I want to hear it. My brain is stuck on the phrase *bumping uglies*. From the mouths of babes.

"Tier four was falling in love," she tells me, distracted, finding her other shoe beneath the kitchen table. Her body twists as she wiggles it on. "Aiden was a surprise," she mumbles.

My throat feels tight, my stomach somewhere by my toes. I wish I was still doing the dishes, just so I had something to do with my hands. "What do you mean?"

She scratches her nose and starts hunting for her backpack. "I did my research before calling in to his show. He was grumpy most of the time, but he seemed like he'd be willing to help. I thought he could help you find what you deserve, but . . ." She gives me a sly look. "He got invested pretty quick, huh?"

"I don't know. Not that quick."

Maya tips her chin down and gives me a look. "Sure, Mom."

I feel properly chastised. "He was a surprise for me too."

Isn't that how it goes? The most precious, delicate things wedge themselves between the plans you've made for yourself. They wiggle in your arms and wrap their tiny fingers around your thumb after nine months of bone-deep panic. They barge into your kitchen looking for condiments.

They answer a phone call in the middle of the night.

There's a ribbon wrapped around Aiden and me. It's taken me a while to undo the tangles, but I'm tugging on it now.

"I just feel like, all things considered, I deserve some ice cream," Maya adds conversationally.

I roll my eyes, doing my best to subdue my smile. "We had ice cream last night."

"*More* ice cream," she says, slipping on her backpack and straightening the straps. "Three times a week, at least."

"Is that the going rate for those who intervene in their mothers' love lives?"

She nods. "I'll get it in writing. Have my people talk to your people."

"Noted." I muss her hair and turn her gently in the direction of the back door. I can see Grayson waiting on his porch. Mateo is fluttering around the kitchen, probably trying to salvage whatever disaster Gray came up with tonight. "Be good for your dads, kiddo."

She hops down the stairs, backpack bouncing with her. She stops on the last one and turns halfway, her hair tumbling around her shoulders, her face pensive. My heart gives one painful, adoring thud, right in the middle of my chest.

"You tell me all the time you have all the love you need. That you're fit to burst with our family and all the people in it. But I thought, maybe just this once, you could have the love you deserve too." She smiles. "Tier four."

My nose burns. "Maya," I rasp. I have to swallow around the love that's making my throat feel tight. She smiles up at me and I think she knows. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

"Duh, Mom." She laughs. Somewhere on the other side of the fence, I hear Grayson's laugh echo it. Mateo's too. She bounds across the yard, hair flowing behind her in the setting sun. Like a comet streaking across the sky. "Tell Aiden I say hi!"

I hear him before I see him, his low voice rumbling down the hallway of the otherwise silent station. I asked him if he needed a ride tonight—his Bronco is still in the back corner of the shop—but he said Jackson was giving him a lift. Apparently, everyone meets for a staff meeting on the last Wednesday of the month. I guess that's still going on.

I decide to raid the break room for Aiden's latest coffee hiding spot when I hear my name. I pause, shift on my feet, and listen. I hear it again, coming from down the hall. Close to Maggie's office, where the door is wide open. I put the cookie/coffee tin down and consider my options. Eavesdropping is juvenile, but curiosity is a bitch. I'll only listen for a second, I reason. They *did* say my name. Twice.

I creep closer.

"You haven't told her." Maggie sighs. "Aiden. We talked about this a week

ago."

"I know," he says, sounding reluctant. I glance at the glass of the dark booth, a wavy reflection of them in Maggie's office. It's only the two of them, so . . . maybe not a staff meeting, after all. I watch mirror Aiden drag his hand through his hair. Anchor it against the back of his neck. "It hasn't come up."

"It hasn't come up?" Maggie asks dryly.

"No. It hasn't come up."

"When will it come up?" Aiden doesn't answer and Maggie makes another frustrated sound. But when she talks again, her voice is softer. "You can't tell me you want her out of your booth and then boot her off the show without warning. That's not how I want things to run here, Aiden."

My stomach twists. He wants me out of his booth? Off the show? How long has he been talking to Maggie about this? A week? Longer?

Before I stayed the night at his place?

Before the bar?

I force my shoulders to relax. No. I won't jump to conclusions. Aiden has never given me reason not to trust him. I'm not going to start making assumptions from a fragment of a conversation I wasn't supposed to hear.

"You could just ask her," I say as I step into view. Aiden's head snaps in my direction. I give him a tight smile. "I heard she can be very reasonable."

Aiden's throat bobs with a heavy swallow. "Lucie," he says. I wait for him to say something else, but he doesn't. He just stares at me, a faintly panicked look on his face.

Maggie stands from behind her desk. "I'm going to go make some coffee."

She slips out of her office with a squeeze of my arm, her heels clicking down the hall. Aiden and I hold eye contact, his face guarded like he was just caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"She doesn't drink coffee," I finally say, hoping it cracks this weird tension between us.

He nods and stays silent. I can't get a read on him. We've been texting and talking since I saw him two days ago, and everything felt fine, but maybe it's not. Maybe I did something wrong.

I push off the doorframe and collapse in the bean bag in the corner of the room. It makes a light wheezing sound, and Aiden's face shifts into something soft and amused.

"You want me off the show?" I ask.

He shakes his head, keeping his eyes on me. "No."

"Then why did Maggie say—"

“Because.” He rubs his neck again, his thumb digging into the hollow beneath his ear. He blows out a breath and drops his hand. He looks exhausted. His whole body is a ruffled, rumpled slouch in Maggie’s chair. I think his shirt is on inside out. “This was always supposed to be temporary, Lucie. And I’m having trouble with that.”

My forehead scrunches. “You’re having trouble with temporary?”

He nods.

“Maggie said you want me out of the booth,” I say slowly. “That’s what I heard.”

He keeps his eyes steady on me. “She’s mistaken.”

“Oh.”

He leans forward and drops his elbows on his knees, his fingers knit between them. “Maybe in the beginning, that’s how it was. But that’s not how it is anymore.”

Relief is swift and sudden in the middle of my chest. “I hope not.”

He shakes his head. His foot shifts forward until the sides of our boots are pressed together. His eyes are bright like gemstones in the dim light of Maggie’s office, his dark hair messy from the constant press of his fingers. “I’m having trouble letting you go.”

“That’s okay,” I say, my voice a rasp. “I don’t want you to let me go.”

“I should, though.” He looks down at his hands, our boots still pressed together. I want to scratch my fingers through his hair. Ease whatever it is that’s making him so weary. “I should,” he says again, softer this time, like he’s trying to convince himself of the fact.

“We knew the show would be temporary, but other things don’t have to be. I’m leaving *Heartstrings*, Aiden. I’m not leaving—” *You*, I almost say. But a sudden burst of shyness wraps its fingers around my neck and squeezes. I swallow around it. “You’re stuck with me,” I try to joke.

He still doesn’t look at me. Somewhere in the hallway, a door slams. “What do you think?” he asks our feet. “Next week?”

I tap the side of his shoe with mine. “For what?”

He finally meets my eyes and it’s . . . smoke and mirrors again. He’s holding himself away from me, exactly the way we started, and I have no idea why. “Your last show,” he explains.

“Oh.” I rub my lips together. “Yeah. Sure, yeah. That’s fine with me.”

“All right.”

“Okay.”

“Good.” He nods, holding my eyes for another extended moment before he drops them back to our interlocked feet. “That’s . . . good.”

“Aiden,” I whisper, hating whatever this is. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” He reaches for my hands, his thumbs tracing over my knuckles. “I think I got too used to you in the spot next to me. I’ll be fine. Promise.”

I squeeze. “I like the spot next to you.”

He gives me a half smile. “Yeah. Me too.”

Aiden’s melancholy doesn’t disappear when we start the show. In fact, it gets worse. He spaces out several times. He forgets half of his usual intro. He doesn’t transition us to the commercial break smoothly. He just switches the feed and presses his thumb in the middle of his forehead. I knock my knee to his and his arm snaps under the table, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of my thigh like he’s afraid to let me go. Like I might float away.

“Aiden,” I try, my voice low and my hand cupped over the microphone. “Are you all right?”

“M’fine,” he mumbles, but his eyes are still scrunched shut tight. “Just a headache, I think.”

I frown. “Do you need anything?”

He mumbles something under his breath. Jackson appears on the other side of the window with his arms crossed, a concerned look on his face. I shrug at him and his frown deepens.

“Aiden,” I say again. “Can I get you something? Medicine?”

“No.” He pokes at his keyboard without looking at me and waves Jackson off. “I’m all right. Let’s just—let’s finish the show.”

“If you’re sure,” I say slowly.

“I’m sure.”

We’re supposed to go to phone calls after the break, but I try to encourage him to just play music instead. But he’s stubborn, in addition to whatever the hell else is going on, and he turns us over to the phone lines as soon as the last commercial plays.

“Welcome to *Heartstrings*. You have Aiden and Lu—” Aiden stumbles over my name, shooting me a quick, indecipherable look from the corner of his eye. “Lucie here.” He clears his throat. “What can we help you with tonight?”

I’m not convinced we can help anyone with anything tonight. Not with the strange mood Aiden is in. But I unwrap a chocolate mint and place it on the corner of his notepad anyway, doing the same with mine while I hope for the

best. He likes to eat his chocolate after the second caller, like he's rewarding himself for good behavior. I eat mine halfway through the first, too impatient to wait.

The caller on the other side of our headphones clears their throat. "I'm not sure—" He laughs and I recognize the sound of it. I pause with my chocolate and tilt my head to the side, trying to place the familiar sound. "Lucie? From the garage, Lucie?"

I feel Aiden's attention on me. "Yes," I answer slowly. I meet Aiden's narrow-eyed stare and shrug. I have no idea either.

A gusting, pleased breath *whooshes* in my ears. "I knew I recognized you from somewhere," he says, delighted. "It's Colin."

"Oh." I've never met a *Colin* in my life. "Hello."

There's a pause. "You don't remember me."

I wince. "Um, no? Not really. I'm sorry."

Colin sighs and Aiden shifts in his chair next to me. "I thought I made an impression, but that's okay. I'm Rosie's dad. The guy with the Chevy."

A laugh bursts out of me. "Oh, hi! Yes! I remember you. Rosie should be ready any day now. I was going to call."

"Well, now I'm calling you," he says, voice light. "Did you get my flowers?"

The pen Aiden is holding snaps, black ink spilling on his notepad. I frown at him.

"Flowers?" I ask.

"Yeah. Some roses. Same red as Rosie. About a week ago. There should have been a card."

There wasn't. Everyone in the shop unanimously decided to give them to Harvey. He's a bit of a sap when it comes to decorating his workstation.

"Oh, yeah. There were flowers. No card, though." I pause, feeling awkward. "Sorry about that."

"Ah, it's no worries. A beautiful woman deserves beautiful flowers."

"Oh. Um. Thank—thank you." I stammer. My face feels like it's on fire. Aiden is still staring at his notepad, silent. I have no idea what to do with myself. I feel like I'm standing in the middle of the ocean without a life raft, and Aiden is waving from the deck of a ship as he slowly passes by. "Did you want to hear a song, or . . ."

I kick Aiden under the table. He jolts in his seat. "Yeah," he agrees, sullen. "Want to play a tune for Rosie?"

Colin chuckles. "I was hoping I could play a song for Lucie, if that's all right?"

Oh boy. Oh god. I officially want the planet to swallow me whole. I want to become one with the magma within the Earth's crust. I guess Ms. Shirley was right. "Colin, that's really sweet, but—"

"What song?" Aiden asks, cutting me off.

"'Gasoline' by Audioslave. You know? Because Lu is a mechanic?"

"That's lovely," Aiden deadpans. "Sounds like you're an excellent candidate for 'Lucie's Road to Love, sponsored by Mr. Tire.'"

I stare at him, my heart in my throat. I cover my microphone with my hand. "Aiden. What are you doing?"

Colin laughs nervously on the other end of the line. "I mean, yeah. I was sort of hoping she'd be interested."

"She is," Aiden says, and something dark and ugly sinks like a knife between my shoulder blades. I'm not and he knows that. He *knows* it. "Hold tight for me, Colin. We'll get you guys set up after this song."

He stabs the buttons on his keyboard and rips off his headphones before the song can start. I hear a guitar riff and slowly slip my headphones off too.

Silence stretches thick between us. I'm waiting for an explanation that Aiden has no intention of providing.

"I'm interested?" I finally ask, while Aiden continues to try to mop up the spilled ink from his broken pen, his jaw clenched tight and his knee bouncing up and down.

"He seems like a nice guy," Aiden bites out, tossing a heap of wet napkins into the wastebasket. Ink is smeared across his notebook, a deep slash of black.

"So, you decided to sign me up for a date?" I hate how my voice is wobbling. It makes me feel weak. Worse, it makes me feel stupid.

He shrugs his shoulders. "He sent you flowers."

"And?"

"You never told me someone sent you flowers."

Because I didn't think they were for me. No one has ever sent me flowers before. "I didn't—"

"You seem to have common interests," Aiden continues, talking over me. "Things to talk about."

"I mean, car repair is more of a job than an interest, but—"

"He's a good choice for you. The right choice."

I shake my head. "You said I'd be the boss. That I'd get to decide."

Aiden nods, finally meeting my eyes for the first time tonight. But they look wrong. Distant. Guarded. He crosses his arms over his chest and leans back in his chair. "I'm just nudging you in the right direction. Sometimes you

need a nudge."

I flinch. "What are you—" My voice breaks in the middle. "What's happening right now?" I manage on a whisper.

Aiden's eyes fall to my knees. I feel like I've swallowed an entire nest of bees, an anxious buzzing in my throat. I swallow around it, but it gets worse the longer he doesn't answer.

"Aiden." I say his name and his eyes soften. But he still doesn't look at me. "You want me to go out with this guy?"

His hand rises and I notice a faint tremble before he drags his thumb below his bottom lip. He takes his time to answer, and that's a different sort of pain. A crack in the middle of my chest.

"He's good for you," Aiden repeats.

"How'd you gather that?" I ask, the ache slowly twisting itself into something fiery hot. "Got everything you need from a twenty-second phone call? Or were you just hoping to shove me off on the first halfway decent guy who called in?"

Aiden's eyes snap back to mine. "Lucie—"

"Off the show. Out with someone else. Did I do something wrong?" I ask. His weird mood. The conversation that wasn't meant for me to hear. The way he won't tell me what he wants. The way he won't tell me anything. I've had to pull and prod and pry for every little bit I get. I try to bite down around the edges of my frustration, but I can't. I've been more honest with Aiden than with anyone in my life, and he can't return the favor. I thought we were on the same page, but apparently we aren't even in the same library.

"You didn't do anything wrong," he says. Frustration flashes behind his eyes. The first sign of honest emotion I've gotten out of him tonight. "You said this is what you wanted."

"When?"

He tosses his hands up. "Since the very start, this is what you said you wanted. Romance and effort and magic. He's playing a song for you. He brought you flowers."

"I'd hardly consider Audioslave *romantic*, Aiden."

He gives me a withering look. "Don't be cute."

"Then don't be stupid," I immediately fire back.

He scoffs and rolls his eyes. "I'm being pragmatic." He reaches forward and punches another three buttons on his keyboard. "I'm killing myself over here," he mumbles under his breath. "Trying to give you what you want and you—"

"You're giving yourself what you want," I seethe from between clenched

teeth. The urge to curl both of my hands in the front of his shirt and shake him until he understands is all-consuming. “Don’t play stupid. You’re making it easier for you.”

Aiden freezes, half hunched over his programming software. I keep going.

“You are what I want, Aiden. But for some inconceivable reason, you don’t seem to believe me when I say it.”

Aiden blinks at me. “But you said—” He has to take a second to compose himself. “You said you wanted it to be a secret.”

I shake my head. “I never said that.”

“You said you wanted everything to stay exactly the same.”

“I meant seeing you, being with you, talking to you. I meant I didn’t want to talk about what’s going on between us live on the air.”

His face collapses. “You said you wanted fun.”

“You’re the only person I want to have fun with. You’re the only person I want anything with. Maybe this started as fun, but now it’s different. Isn’t it?”

I wait for him to answer. He remains silent. His mouth opens, then snaps shut, then opens again. His forehead collapses in frustration.

“Lucie,” he whispers, my name broken into two stiff syllables. I usually love how he says my name, but right now I don’t like it at all. It’s the start of a sentence I don’t want to hear. “I’m not good for you.”

He says it like a fact, like it’s something he’s known all along. That we were never, ever going to work and I’m the silly girl who believed differently. My stomach rolls and I blink down at my hands.

I’ve been here before. I know this feeling. The sinking realization that my feelings don’t match up. That I’ve felt too much too fast and made assumptions. Misread the situation and projected my own hopes on another person.

But things are different with Aiden. I *know* they are. I haven’t misread anything.

“Bullshit,” I whisper.

I hear the rustle of fabric as Aiden shifts in his seat. “Lucie, listen—”

I lift my chin and ignore the pressure behind my eyes. “I said *bullshit*. What you’re saying is bullshit. I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t—” he starts again, but I don’t let him finish.

“No,” I snap, cutting him off. My voice is calm despite the rattling in my chest, my words slow and precise. “I think you tell yourself you don’t deserve the things you want so it’s easier for you to manage your expectations. It won’t hurt if you don’t care, right? How many lies have you told, Aiden?”

His face is guarded. An animal backed into a corner. “I’m not lying about

this, Lucie. I can't give you what you want."

I shake my head. "I'm the one who decides that. Not you." I roll my chair to the side and pluck out another chocolate, carefully unwrapping it, my heart thundering in my chest. It helps to focus on this menial task and not on the way I'm splintering into pieces. "You don't like your job. You don't believe in love. You're not good for me." I repeat every excuse and sidestep I've heard from him over the last month. "It's easier like this, isn't it?"

His eyes flash. "I wouldn't call this easy."

"But it is. For you, it is. Better end it now before you get in too deep and risk hurting, right? You're so used to distancing yourself from any sort of feeling that you don't even realize you're doing it anymore. You watch clips of movies because you don't want to get invested in a stupid story. You skipped vacation with your parents because it's easier to love them at a distance than up close. You settled for fun with me because it made you feel like there wasn't a risk. But I won't sit here and listen to you diminish what I feel because you're scared of what might happen." His jaw clenches tight as I search his face. I can see it there, in the press of his mouth. He's still afraid—even with me—and that hurts almost as much as everything else. That despite everything, he isn't willing to try.

"I could let myself love you so easily, Aiden," I whisper. My words hit him like a bulldozer. His eyelashes flutter against his cheeks. His hands curl into fists. He sucks in a sharp breath and holds it in his lungs before releasing it again. For a second, I see the boy who looped an empty key ring on a chain and called it a lucky charm. Then his eyes shutter, and he's the man who doesn't believe in anything.

I press my lips together. "I won't be scared away. I know what this is. I can feel it," I say. With every touch, every laugh, every glance he shoots in my direction, I *feel* it. I try to smile, but it falls flat. I'm trying so damn hard not to cry. "I can be brave enough for the both of us. I can make my own magic. You just have to give me a reason to."

His mouth opens and then snaps shut. He looks terrified. His eyes are blown wide, the lines of his body in rigid precision. He really didn't expect me to feel anything other than convenience, and the reality of it makes my chest hurt.

Aiden never stopped believing in love. He forgot how to. He built a fortress around his heart to protect himself and lost the key somewhere along the way.

"Give me a reason to, Aiden."

We stare at each other. I wait for him to say something, but he's silent.

The music player skips to the next song. From my headphones, I hear the tinny, faraway sound of the same Louis Armstrong song I requested our first night together. I almost laugh.

We're ending where we started, I guess.

I start collecting the things I've left on my side of the desk over the past month. My notepad. My candies. A few hair ties. A pale blue Post-it Note with the worst smiley face I've ever seen doodled in the corner. I hesitate, then remember the low rumble of his laugh when he drew it, and grab it with the rest of my stuff. I slip everything in my bag and stand from my chair.

"Lucie. No." Aiden's hand curls around my wrist, holding me still. "Don't go."

I stare hard at his fingers against my skin, how his thumb traces over the delicate vein on the inside of my wrist. I can hear the thread of apprehension in his voice. It's all hinting at what he feels about me, but it's not enough. I need the words. I told myself I wouldn't settle and that applies to this feeling with Aiden too.

"Tonight is my last show. I know you probably feel like I'm punishing you, but I'm—" I press my lips against the tremble vibrating in my bones and compose myself. Brave. I can be brave. "Not wanting me to go isn't the same as wanting me to stay. I want you, Aiden. No one else. You decide what happens next, okay?"

I tug myself out of his hold before I give in to the temptation to make it easier for him. His fingertips trace down the palm of my hand, along the ridges of my knuckles until the last possible second. Like he can't help himself. Like he wants to hold on.

"My feelings aren't going to change," I tell him quietly. "You let me know when you're ready to talk. I'll be"—I swallow, my heart in my throat—"I'll be listening."

AIDEN VALENTINE: Colin? You still there?

COLIN PARKS: Yeah! I'm here.

COLIN PARKS: You left me on hold for like seventeen minutes, man.

AIDEN VALENTINE: I'm, uh, I'm sorry. Something came up.

AIDEN VALENTINE: Lucie had to go.

COLIN PARKS: Oh. That's too bad.

[pause]

COLIN PARKS: Is she coming back?

AIDEN VALENTINE: I don't think so, Colin.

COLIN PARKS: She still wants to go on that date, right?

AIDEN VALENTINE: I think I messed up, Colin.

COLIN PARKS: With the date, or . . .

AIDEN VALENTINE: With everything.

CHAPTER 30

AIDEN

I stay in the booth until everyone is gone.

Jackson spent ten minutes trying to get me to go to a bar with him, and Maggie glared at me through the window with her arms crossed over her chest, mouthing, *Team Lucie*, with her fist thrust in the air. Her face softened when I dug my finger in the middle of my chest and said, *Me too*.

I haven't moved since, watching the lights on the machines around me blink in the dark. If I stay here, I don't have to acknowledge the last couple of hours. If I stay here, I can trick myself into believing that Lucie will walk back through the door. If I stay here, I can keep everything exactly where it's supposed to be.

Contained. Managed. Subdued.

But she doesn't and I don't.

Lucie was right. About everything. I manage my expectations to keep myself from getting hurt. I keep a careful distance from anything that threatens my ambivalence. But Lucie snuck in through the cracks when I wasn't looking and made herself at home in the corners of my heart. She ruined all the plans I made for myself with a smile on her face.

And then I fucked it up.

By saying *nothing*.

By pushing her toward someone else.

I sat in this chair while she held her heart out to me and I couldn't scrape together enough courage to say a damn thing. I'm no better than that asshole who left her at Duck Duck Goose. Or the dipshit who made her cry. I think I'm worse. I told her she was safe with me, and then I broke her heart.

I drag my hand over my face and press my palms against my eyes until I see spots. I just need another second. One more minute and I'll know what to do.

Except a revelation never comes. I'm just as lost as I've always been. I hesitate, then reach for my phone and dial.

He picks up on the second ring.

"Aiden?" His voice is scratchy with sleep, sheets rustling in the background. The sharp click of the lamp next to his bed being turned on. "Are you—is everything okay?"

My eyes cut to the clock above the door. *Fuck.* It's after midnight. I've been sitting here in the dark of the studio longer than I thought.

"I'm sorry," I rasp, embarrassed. "Everything is fine. I'll call you tomorrow."

"No, no. It's all right. I'm awake." I hear a muffled voice in the background. My mom rolls over in bed and asks who is on the phone. Dad shushes her gently and then I hear the squeak of the floorboards in the hallway. The ones I knew to step over when I was a teenager and didn't want to disrupt my mom's fitful sleep.

"I'm here," he says with a sigh, and I imagine him lowering himself down to the bench seat in the bay window on the west side of the house. There's a giant oak right outside the warped glass with branches that scrape against the glass. I used to climb in his lap in the middle of the night in that seat. He'd comb his fingers through my hair and tell me the tree was my protector. That at night, it wrapped its arms around the house and kept us safe.

On the other side of the phone, my dad muffles a yawn. "What is it, son? Having trouble sleeping?"

"I'm still at the station."

"Do you need a ride home?" A rustle of fabric. I imagine him looking for his slippers and smile at nothing.

"No, Dad, I don't need a ride home." Though I don't have a car and Jackson was the one to drive me in today. A problem for future me. *Another* problem for future me. "I'm—" I release a breath. "I could have come on that trip."

It spills out of me in a rush, a curveball from somewhere between my head and my heart. Good to know I can be honest about some things.

"What was that?" my dad asks.

"The trip to Acadia," I tell him. I have to clear my throat. "I could have come. I told Mom I couldn't. Because of work."

"I know you're busy at the station," he says slowly. "But that's okay. Maybe next time. I'm trying to convince your mom to go on another arboretum tour. We can always go back."

"I wasn't busy. I could have found someone to cover my shifts. I didn't even try. I could have—I should have come on the trip."

My breathing is too harsh, my throat too thick. My dad stays silent on the

other end of the phone, giving me the space to work out my knots.

"I know I keep doing this. I . . . make excuses every time you guys invite me somewhere. I skip out of family dinners and I—I don't always answer text messages."

"Aiden—"

"It's easier for me like this. I think I convinced myself that if I loved you guys less—if I loved Mom less—it wouldn't hurt so bad if I had—if I had to lose her." I choke on the words. "So I kept myself apart and hoped it would help."

Three cancer diagnoses in ten years and I couldn't figure out how to deal with it, so I just decided not to. I buried my head in the sand and distanced myself from anything resembling emotional attachment. Like that, it was bearable. Like that, I could still breathe.

"I don't know how you did it," I ramble on. "How you do it. You love her so much and it—" I have to take a second. Press my lips together to stop them from trembling. "I never told you, but I could hear you crying at night. You were breaking apart and I didn't want to break apart too. I was trying to be strong, but I think I just messed everything up."

My dad's deep exhale echoes on the other end of the phone. "Oh, Aiden. My boy."

"It didn't work," I choke out. I dig the knuckles of my left hand into the middle of my forehead. "Or it stopped working if it ever did. I don't know how to fix it."

"What do you need to fix?"

"Me," I grind out. "I need to fix *me*."

This part of myself that relies on distance to function. The part that doesn't want to get too close because the idea of getting attached to someone scares the shit out of me. I let myself get greedy with Lucie, and now I don't know how to shut it off. I tried, but I can't. I *can't*. I don't know how to be the person she needs me to be.

"Aiden." My dad sighs. "You're not broken."

"It feels like it." I rub my chest. "I feel broken."

"I think maybe you're just bruised." Wood creaks in the background and I imagine that tree outside the window wrapping its arms around me. "You were so young when everything happened the first time. Sometimes I worry that we asked too much of you."

I blink at my discarded headphones. The empty space next to me where Lucie is supposed to be. "You didn't ask me for anything."

I remember pleading with him, begging for something. A task, a

checklist. Something for me to channel my energy into. He handed me a shovel and told me to replant the lavender in the backyard. It was the best idea either of us could come up with.

But it didn't help anything. It didn't make my mom better.

"You had to grow up too fast. You spent more time in hospitals than out with your friends. Cancer took so much from your mom, but it took from you too. It's okay that you need to work through that, Aiden."

"How do you do it?" I choke out. "How do you love her when you're scared?"

My dad laughs, a gruff, thick sound. "It was never a choice, Aiden. I was always going to love your mom. And I would never have chosen different, even with everything we've endured together. It makes it better, doesn't it? To know how temporary it all is. To know how special. Love isn't"—he sighs, a deep, rumbling sound—"love isn't always sunshine and daisies. Sometimes it's hospital beds and shaved heads. But I wouldn't trade any of it. Because all of it is with her."

"You're braver than I am."

"Nah. I've just had more practice at it." He pauses, thinking. "I don't think you have anything to fix, Aiden. I think you just have things to work on."

"How?" I whisper.

"Well." I imagine I can hear the shape of his smile. A crooked slash in the moonlight. "Here is what we're gonna do. You and I, we're gonna talk. More than once a month. More than we have been. Preferably not in the middle of the night when your old man is sleeping." He pauses meaningfully and I snort a watery laugh. "You're gonna answer your phone when your mom calls too, and you're going to participate in the group chat. You're gonna come over for Sunday dinner. You're gonna come with us to baseball games. You're gonna go back to therapy and talk to someone. I know you stopped going," he says knowingly. "You're gonna ask for help when you need it and you're gonna learn what it's like to love without being afraid, okay? You'll take your time about it. You'll put in the work."

Something catches my eye on the other side of the desk. I reach forward. It's one of Lucie's tiny paper planes, half-hidden beneath a cluster of wires. The one she made from a chocolate mint wrapper and aimed right at my heart. I drag my thumb over one of the creases. Unfold it until it's flat, then slowly follow the folds until it's whole again.

"And if I mess up?" I ask. "If I do the wrong thing?"

"Then you try again. You keep trying until you find the right thing."

My heart starts to pound in my chest. Right beneath the empty key ring I

haven't taken off since I turned sixteen. A whisper of a conversation floats in the back of my mind.

I don't want the right thing.

Lucie has only ever wanted the real thing.

"What brought all this about?" my dad asks, a hint of amusement in his tired voice. "It wouldn't be a certain woman you tried to set up with someone tonight, would it?"

"You heard that?"

"Oh, my boy. The entire Eastern Seaboard heard that." He pauses. "Not your smartest move."

Yeah, I fucked up. Not just by staying silent but by encouraging her to be with someone who isn't me. I lied to her face and hurt her in the process. I thought I was doing the right thing, but I was just shoving her away to protect myself. She got too close and I panicked. Simple as that.

I was selfish.

I scratch at the back of my head and stretch out my legs. "If I told you it had to do with Lucie, would you launch an inquisition?"

"That would be my right as your father." His voice softens. "This is part of it, Aiden. This is where you try."

I pick up the tiny airplane again. "Okay." I let it fly across the room. "Then, yes. It has to do with her."

My dad hums. "Tell me what happened."

And for the first time in a very long time, I do.

I spend my Saturday deteriorating on my couch in an old pair of sweatpants, a carton of Chinese food on my chest. I spread the cushions out on the floor and watch *Temple of Doom* all the way through, then when the credits start to roll, I start it all over again. Lucie hovers at the edges of my awareness, traces of her body lotion on the cushions I'm starfished across. A hair tie she left in the studio around my wrist.

I wonder what she's doing.

I hope she's thinking about me.

I hope I haven't fucked it up too much.

On Sunday I wake up at an unreasonable hour, slip into my running shoes, and drag my boneless body over to Jackson's house. I collapse on his front steps and stare at two pigeons duking it out over a pizza crust in the middle of the cobblestone street while I wait for him to come out, trying to organize my

sleep-drunk thoughts into something reasonable and productive.

Instead, all I can manage is a gruff "What the hell are you wearing?" as soon as he opens his door.

Jackson hardly spares me a glance. He bends to adjust his socks, then straightens the straps of the . . . backpack thing . . . across his shoulders.

"It's a canteen." He tilts his head and takes a drink from the straw. "So I can hydrate mid-run."

I squint in the morning light. "Water bottles exist, you know."

"So do these portable, hands-free options."

"It looks—"

"Don't finish that sentence, Aiden. I know how you are in the morning. I could probably kick your ass without effort right now."

He gives me an unamused look and finishes his prerun rituals. There's a rainbow sticker on the band of the water bottle backpack thing and I wonder if one of his little sisters put it there, then realize how long it's been since I've asked about his sisters. How long it's been since I've asked about anything in his life.

Lucie isn't the only one I've been an ass to in my quest to bubble-wrap myself. I came over here this morning to make amends. The Aiden Valen apology tour, I guess.

"Why are you darkening my doorstep?" Jackson double-checks that his front door is locked and jogs down his steps. I still haven't managed to lift myself into a vertical position. "I thought you didn't crawl out of your lair until midday."

"You go for a run in the mornings."

"Yes. And? That doesn't explain why you're here."

"I thought I'd join you."

I haven't gone for a run in years, but he doesn't need to know that.

His eyes narrow, suspicious. "You don't run."

I swim at the gym five days a week and I do a pretty regular weight-lifting circuit. I speed-walk around the parking lot at the station when I'm stressed, if that counts. I've been doing a lot of speed-walking lately. "I can keep up."

He studies me for another extended minute in silence, his lips in a firm line. I let him look, hoping he can see the good intentions and not the exhaustion and exasperation.

"All right," he finally says. He doesn't wait for me before he sets off down the street. "Let's go."

Speed-walking, as it turns out, is not the same as running a five-mile loop through the park.

Jackson doesn't take pity on me either, his form and his pace unflinching as I wheeze and struggle behind him. I'm six feet behind him when we loop the pagoda in the middle of the park for the second time, and I trip over a discarded box of Royal Farms chicken, tumbling and rolling off the path.

I don't bother getting up.

I lie on the ground and stare at the swaying branches above me. Jackson appears in my line of vision, his canteen straw in the corner of his mouth and his sweaty hair pushed back over his forehead. He's not even out of breath, the bastard.

He frowns at me and props his hands on his hips. "What are you doing?"

"I tripped over a chicken box," I point in the direction of the five-piece meal that got caught beneath my shoe. "Who just throws a chicken box away like that? On the sidewalk."

He doesn't turn to look. "I'm not talking about the chicken box. What are you doing here? At the park."

"I don't know, man. I've been following you."

God. I can't feel my legs. Or my arms. Sweat slicks down my back. I might never get up again. I'll make my home here on the side of the pedestrian pathway in Patterson Park. Maybe they'll decorate me for Christmas like they decorate the pagoda.

Jackson nudges me with his shoe. "You don't like mornings. You don't like to run. And you don't like to spend time with people, so I'll ask again. What the hell are you doing here?"

"Maybe I need to do more things I don't like," I reply, my voice hoarse from all the unnecessary panting. I lift my arms up and then flop them back to the ground. "Maybe I need to stop acting like an asshole all of the time."

Jackson scratches at the back of his head, still studying me. "You're not an asshole all of the time."

"Most of the time," I correct.

"Some of the time," he amends. He sighs, then extends a hand to help me up. I groan the entire way up as he leverages me to my feet. He brushes a leaf off my shoulder. "What brought on this introspection?"

"Lucie," I say, not bothering to wiggle my way around it. I'm too tired, and I miss her too much. "She cracked me right open, Jackie. I'm trying to be better."

"And this sudden desire for morning exercise? That's you trying to be better?"

I nod. “It is.” I stretch out a cramp in my side. I either need water or my internal organs are exploding. The backpack is suddenly a brilliant idea. “I haven’t been the best of friends to you. This is my apology.” I swallow. “I was also hoping you could help me come up with a plan.”

Jackson reaches out and presses two fingers against the pulse in my neck. I swat his hand away.

“Sorry, I just wanted to check your vitals. You just willingly asked for my help.”

“Trying to be better,” I repeat, teeth clenched. A better person probably wouldn’t sucker punch his best friend in the face. I want to, though, and his face splits into a grin like he knows it.

“You need help with a plan to win Lucie back?”

“Obviously.”

“Good.” He slaps me on the shoulder, turns on his heel, and starts jogging away. “Buy me a cruffin and we’ll talk it through.”

“You and this fucking cruffin,” I mutter.

I watch his retreating back, heave a sigh, then start to limp after him.

UNSENT TEXT MESSAGES FROM AIDEN VALEN TO LUCIE STONE

AIDEN: I keep waiting for you to walk through the door even though I haven't given you a reason to.

AIDEN: Have you had the pineapple pizza from the place on Broadway?

AIDEN: I can't stop thinking about you.

AIDEN: Fuck, Lucie. I think I could let myself love you too.

CHAPTER 31

LUCIE

Did you listen to *Heartstrings* last night?"

It's everyone's favorite question this week, and my answer has remained the same.

"No," I say, not looking away from the repair inventory I'm working on. "I didn't."

Despite my parting promise to Aiden that I'd be listening, I haven't been able to. I don't want to listen to him sound composed and charming while I'm wandering around my house in pajama pants that are on inside out, eating directly from a box of Frosted Flakes like a trash panda.

Colin came in earlier in the week to pick up Rosie, another bouquet of roses tucked under his arm.

"So there's no confusion this time," he had said, hopeful.

My face must have done something vaguely mortifying because his fell, a soft *ah* in understanding.

"Something to do with the radio guy, yeah?" he had guessed.

"Yeah," I agreed softly. Everything to do with the radio guy. The one who hasn't texted me or called. It's been radio silence for a week, and I'm trying not to let that sting.

He's still doing the show, though. Every night. Maya, Grayson, Mateo, and Patty—I know they've all been listening, but they've had the decency to hide it.

Harvey, however, has never claimed to possess an ounce of decency.

He folds his arms over the partition between my station and Angelo's, a toothpick hanging out of his mouth. It was his turn to pick the music today and the soundtrack to *Bridgerton* is currently blasting through the speakers. The string version of "Dancing on My Own" is actually really soothing, if not also deeply depressing. It's a good soundtrack for my current mood.

"Why not?" he asks.

"Why not what?"

“Why aren’t you listening to *Heartstrings*?”

I flick my eyes up to him. “Because I don’t want to.”

As far as I’m aware, no one except for my family and Aiden knows why I’m no longer a guest host on *Heartstrings*. To everyone else, I simply decided to drive off into the sunset of my *road to love*. Some days I can almost convince myself that Aiden and I were an overly vivid daydream. But then I catch myself wondering what he’s doing, and I remember I fell in love with that idiot.

It’s his choice what happens now. The ball is firmly in his court. And I won’t torture myself while I wait.

I’ll just remain painfully optimistic, eating cereal by the fistful and drowning myself in work.

“You should,” Harvey says. At my blank look, he pulls the toothpick out of his mouth and grins at me. “Listen to *Heartstrings*,” he explains.

“No, thank you.”

“Really, Lu.” He widens his eyes. “You should listen.”

I turn back to my inventory sheet. “I’m good.”

“Lucie,” he says. “You need to—”

“Still working on that Audi?” Dan asks, pushing Harvey out of the way. He yanks the clipboard out of my hands and studies it with furrowed brows. “This is for a Toyota.”

I grab the clipboard back. “Correct. The Audi is in the back, ready to go. I’m finishing up the Toyota now.”

There is a short, whispered conversation somewhere above me. I look up and catch the tail end of a slap to the back of Harvey’s head, courtesy of a grease-stained towel.

“What’s wrong?” I set my clipboard to the side. “Was the Toyota for you, Harvey?”

“No, it wasn’t,” Dan answers. He gives Harvey a significant look that I don’t have the time or energy to investigate. Harvey mutters something under his breath that sounds like *just trying to speed things along*, and Dan sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “No one asked you to do that,” he mumbles.

“The Toyota?” I glance between them. “If you need me to reassign the truck, I can—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Dan cuts me off. “I’m worried about you.”

“What? Why?”

Angelo wheels out from beneath the Jeep at his station. “You look like someone stole your galaktoboureko.”

“A galactic what?”

“It is unimportant,” he says, blinking owlishly at me from beneath thick white eyebrows. “You’ve been sad.”

“Yeah,” Harvey adds, sticking out his bottom lip for emphasis. “And when you’re sad, we’re all sad.”

“I’m not sad.” I’m just stuck. Caught in the in-between of wanting and waiting and wishing. Keeping busy keeps my thoughts from drifting, and that’s exactly where I want to be. “You don’t have to worry.”

“The Audi was a six-day fix,” Dan supplies. “You did it in less than twenty-four hours.”

“We had the parts on hand from the Audi that Angelo fixed last winter.” I make a face. “Who quoted him six days?”

“The guys over at the Fed Hill garage.”

“Why are we letting those guys set our standards?” I stand up with a groan and brush my hands against my coveralls. My hand catches on the zipper and I immediately think of Aiden. That day in the tow truck with the pizza box digging into my rib cage. My brain won’t stop with the Aiden Valen Greatest Hits, and the rest of me is struggling to withstand the blows. It feels like tripping over something in a dream. The jolt right before you wake up. I think of Aiden and my whole body goes into free fall only to be snapped back into place by awareness.

I squeeze my eyes shut and exhale a sharp breath. When I open them again, Harvey and Dan are giving me matching concerned looks. Angelo pushes out farther from beneath the car to add his to the mix.

“As my mother likes to say—”

I wave my hand. I do not have the patience to withstand a Greek proverb today. “I’m fine.”

Harvey leans closer. “You look a little green around the gills, Lu.”

“I’m fine,” I say again. I am. I’m *fine*. It’s easy enough to keep moving forward if I break everything into pieces. This car and then the next one. Another after that. I wish I could reach into my chest and tinker with the parts in there like a radiator. Tighten everything up until I’m humming along again.

Angelo joins Harvey and Dan and together the three of them stand in a line of thinly veiled skepticism.

“All right, well”—Dan pushes his cap off his head and drags his fingers through his hair—”I’ve got something for you to do.”

“Good.” I clap my hands. “I’d love something to do.”

He reaches into his back pocket and grabs a set of keys. He tosses them to

me.

"I need you to take Aiden's car over to the station."

I almost throw the keys right back. "What? No. Why?"

Harvey makes a sound that he tries to cover up with a cough. Dan gives him another warning look. "Because it's done, and I told him I'd drop it off."

"You talked to him?" It's another paper cut against my too-soft heart. He's still doing the show. He's taking calls from Dan. Why hasn't he bothered to reach out to *me*?

My unflagging optimism is starting to flag.

"I talked to Maggie," Dan corrects gently, like he knows how important that detail is to me. I release a sharp breath. "He listed the station number on the paperwork as the best way to get a hold of him. She answered the phone. I told her we'd drop the car off there."

I look down at the keys in my hand. He has a crab-claw bottle opener, the metal faded at the top edge from the press of his thumb. I touch mine to it and then sigh.

"And you need me to do it?"

"Angelo's got an appointment coming in."

"And Harvey?"

"Date night with Sheila," Harvey supplies, toothpick back between his teeth. He gives me his best puppy-dog eyes. "Please don't make me late for date night with Sheila."

I blow out a frustrated breath. Sheila is a formidable powerhouse in the body of a five-foot woman who makes the best potato salad I've ever had in my life. The discomfort of seeing Aiden again pales in comparison to the abject horror of disappointing Sheila. I curl my hand around the keys and squeeze until the metal bites into my fist. I look at Dan. "And you? What's your excuse?"

"Don't have one," he says. "I'm gonna follow you, kiddo. Make sure you have a ride home."

I roll my lips together and shift on my feet. I look at the Bronco in the corner, then back to Dan. "You'll be right behind me?"

His eyes soften. "Right behind you."

Dan is full of it.

He is not right behind me. I doubt he even took two steps in the direction of his truck. I pull out of the service bay in Aiden's car, and Dan's Toyota is

nowhere to be seen. I go five miles under the speed limit to give him the chance to catch up, but then a guy on a four-wheeler lays on his horn and I resign myself to my fate.

It's fine. I'll call a Lyft when I get there. I'll hand Aiden his keys, smile like his silence hasn't been the only thing on my mind all week, and be on my way. I can be a mature, reasonable adult.

But it's hard to hold on to my fortitude when I'm sitting in the cab of his Bronco surrounded by him. It smells like him in here. Like being wrapped in his arms. I breathe in the wintergreen gum he keeps in the pocket of his sweatshirts and the fancy coffee he likes so much and breathe out the ache in my chest.

By the time I pull up to the gate in front of the parking lot, my stomach is in knots. I reach for the black security box with the glowing red light and then curse beneath my breath. I don't have my access card. I left it on Maggie's desk along with the rest of my courage, apparently.

I scan Aiden's dash. He doesn't have anything besides a half-crumpled pizza menu and an ancient-looking toll pass wedged in his cup holder. I don't see his key card.

"Of course," I mutter, leaning across the front seat and flipping open his glove compartment. Half the contents come tumbling out. A pair of earbuds and a folded-up piece of paper. The car user's manual. A half-eaten pack of Andes mints. I try to shove everything back inside, but his messy handwriting on the worn paper catches my attention.

Feeling nosy, I reach for it and unfold it across my lap.

Chocolate mints
Daisies
Fountain soda
Coconut ChapStick
Christmas cookies, the shortbread kind
~~Yellow starbursts~~
Pink starbursts
The coffee creamer in the orange bottle

I read it once and then again. It's a list of—it's a list of my favorite things. Things I've mentioned on the show and things I haven't. Things he must have noticed.

The gate to the parking lot swings open and I fumble to fold the paper back up, heart pounding while I shove it back in the glove compartment. I

drive the rest of the way up the hill in a daze. I barely notice Maggie at the entrance, waiting for me with her arms crossed over her chest. I turn off the car as she strides toward me, her shiny heels eating up the pavement between us.

"Where have you been?" Maggie asks as soon as I slip from the driver's side. She shuts the door for me and grabs my elbow, towing me across the parking lot.

"I've been at work?" I try to keep up with her quick pace as she guides us through the front door and across the lobby. "Dan asked me to drop off Aiden's car. What is—what's happening right now?"

I stare longingly at the front door as it slams shut behind us.

"Aiden isn't here," Maggie manages, heels clicking across the floor. "And it's six oh eight."

"Is he—" I hit my shoulder on the door to the hallway as she thrusts us through. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine. Something about a bird and the gutter on his roof—"

"What?"

"—and then he forgot he doesn't have his car and Jackson has been on the air by himself for eight minutes." She checks her watch and flinches. "Ten minutes. I need you to get in there until Aiden arrives."

"What? No. I'm not doing the show anymore."

Maggie pulls us to a stop in front of the booth. Through the glass window, I can see Jackson talking with his hands. His wild, panicked eyes shoot up to me. *Help me*, he mouths.

"He's been talking about volcanic lightning for five minutes.

We live in Maryland, Lucie. There are no volcanoes."

"Oh boy."

"I need you to get in there." Maggie urges me forward, a gentle tap on my back when I know she wants to press her palm between my shoulder blades and shove. I've never seen Maggie ruffled, but she seems ruffled right now. "Please."

"Right now?"

She nods. "Right now. You're the only one who can help us."

God damn it. "What do you want me to talk about? Aiden usually has the show plan."

"You can talk about whatever you want." She pats me again with a little more force. "As long as it's not volcanic lightning."

Jackson lets out a wheezing gasp of relief as soon as I slip through the door, turning in Aiden's chair and beckoning me forward with both hands.

“Lucie is here! Oh, thank god, Lucie is here. Don’t worry, everyone. I won’t bore you with weather phenomena any longer.” His laugh is wild and borderline manic. “Lucie is here.”

“Yeah, I’m here.” I pat his shoulder and slip into the seat next to him. My seat, the one that hasn’t been moved out of the studio even though I haven’t been here for a week. Aiden’s kept my pilfered pen cup out too. The plastic Orioles one I stole from the break room.

It shouldn’t make me feel as good as it does.

I slip on the extra pair of headphones. The sound of the room becomes muffled and I’m anchored in the space. Just me and the city I love, waiting on the other side of the static. Some of my anxiety slips away. “Hello, everyone. It’s been a while.”

Jackson bends forward and rests his forehead against the desk, relief in the curve of his body. “Thanks for helping me out, Lucie.”

I pat his back and smile. “It’s no problem. Hopefully I’m only here for a few minutes before Aiden”—I stumble over his name, then quickly correct myself—”before Aiden gets here. Maggie said something about a bird in his roof gutter?”

Jackson turns his head and squints. “She said what?”

“A bird? She said he had an emergency with a bird stuck in his roof gutter?”

“I don’t know about any birds.” His eyes dart over my head. I turn to look. Maggie goes from gesturing wildly to smiling sedately through the glass. I’m either in the middle of an elaborate prank or the sleep deprivation is getting to me. Jackson clears his throat. “Oh, that’s right. The—the bird problem he’s been having. That’s right.” He pauses and blinks at me. “Should we take some calls?”

There’s something circling around my awareness. Too many people are insisting on too many things. There’s a piece I’m not seeing. Something out of alignment that’s clunking along.

“Sure,” I say, watching him out of the corner of my eye. “That’s fine.”

Jackson murmurs something under his breath and hesitantly presses a button.

“You’re on *Heartstrings* with Lucie and—”

“Oh my god!” a voice screeches on the other end, the decibel level high enough to have me flinching down in my chair. “I’ve been waiting to talk to you for, like, forever! Girl! Where have you been? Why did you leave the show? It was just getting good! I swear, you and Aiden have the best chem—”

The call cuts off abruptly. “Whoops,” Jackson says, hand hovering over the keyboard. “Looks like the call dropped.”

I stare pointedly at his thumb, resting next to the delete button. “It dropped, huh?”

“It dropped,” he repeats. He presses two shaking fingers to his temple, sweeping up to the middle of his forehead. His glasses slip down his nose. “Let’s try another one.”

He taps a button to take another caller and I brace myself for screeching. Instead, I hear a familiar voice drifting through the static.

“Mom?”

I go from slouched to sitting straight in an instant, palms pressed to the headphones over my ears like it’ll drag me closer to her. “Maya?”

“Mom! Hi!”

“Hi,” I say, short and clipped. She’s supposed to be doing her science homework, not calling in to radio stations. “I thought I blocked this number on your phone.”

“Don’t worry. This is a supervised call. Dad is sitting right next to me.” There’s a muffled sound from Grayson in the background and I relax. “Everything is fine. How are you doing?”

“I’m—” I glance at Jackson. He’s turned almost completely around in his chair, his face angled away from mine. Secrets, secrets. “I’m confused.”

“Figured you would be,” she quips. “Lots of weird things happening today, huh?”

Jackson chokes on nothing and turns farther away. The man is not good under pressure.

“You could say that.”

“I think there’s something going on with the planetary alignment. Dad was telling me about it in the car this morning.”

“Sure.” I narrow my eyes. “Must be that. Why are you calling in to the radio station right now?”

“Because I need advice.” She pauses. “I had no idea you’d be there. Wow. What a coincidence.”

“Sure.” I can hear Grayson snickering in the background. “What do you need advice about?”

“A friend of mine. He’s been having some trouble.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“I’ll let him tell you about it in a second, but I want to tell you something first.”

“What’s that?”

“I love you.”

My heart grows three sizes in my chest. “I love you too.”

“Okay, good. Remember that, okay? Keep it in the forefront of your mind. I’m gonna hand you off to my friend now. Bye!”

There’s another burst of static as Maya hands her phone to whoever it is that needs advice. I hear some muffled conversation, the slam of a car door, and boots against asphalt.

My lungs feel tight, my pulse hammering in my chest. My heart knows the sounds of him before my head can catch up.

“Hi,” Aiden says, his voice a rough scratch. Goose bumps erupt on my arms like he’s sitting right next to me. Like our knees are tucked together and there’s a pot of coffee on behind us. Like nothing has changed when everything has. He clears his throat, and I can picture him perfectly, standing with his hand cupped around the back of his neck.

“Long-time listener, first-time caller,” he says over the line. There’s a reluctant grin in his voice. It twists his words up at the edges, just like his smile. “I was hoping you could give me some advice.”

AIDEN VALENTINE: Wish me luck, Baltimore.

CHAPTER 32

LUCIE

Questions immediately race through my mind.

Advice about what? Why are you with Maya? Did you mean to call in to your own radio station? Have you hit your head? Is there a bird in your gutter?

Why haven't you called?

Instead, I settle myself with a deep breath and ask, "How can I help?"

Aiden makes a faint sound on the other side of the phone. Something pleased or relieved. Maybe a combination of both. It's hard to tell when I can't see his face.

"Well," he says. His pause feels like it lasts a lifetime. I wish I brought in the chocolate mints I found in his car. The rumpled-up and well-worn list of things I like, just so I could hold on to some sort of tangible proof that he's thought about me. Finally, Aiden exhales a sharp breath. "This is a romance hotline, right?"

"In theory."

"I have a question about that. About romance."

"Okay . . ." I say slowly.

"What does it feel like when you fall in love?"

"What?" I ask, winded. It's a bucket of ice water over my head. A fist through my papier-mâché heart. Somewhere next to me, Jackson's chair creaks as he turns to me in concern.

"There's this woman," he says. He pauses, reconsiders, and starts again. "Have you ever woken up from a dream with your heart going a million miles an hour and no idea why? Just—just the vague impression of *something*. Like a memory you can't quite get a hold of or—" He huffs out a frustrated breath. "I'm not saying this right," he grumbles.

"Then try again," I tell him.

"I will," he says. "I'm going to."

My galloping heart settles. Hope flares. I asked him to give me a reason and this feels like—this feels like maybe he's giving me one. Or trying to, at

least.

"My entire life," Aiden continues carefully, his voice softer. *Wait*, he's saying. *Listen.* "I've done my best to not feel much of anything. Feeling almost always led to hurting and I didn't want to hurt anymore. So I decided not to. But I think somewhere along the way, that choice became a habit I didn't know how to break. I stopped believing in good things. I stopped believing in anything at all."

I swallow, my throat dry, thinking of a boy with messy hair in a hospital hallway, his fingers clenched tight around an empty key ring. Aiden didn't stop believing in good things. He forgot how to.

"So I'm hoping," he says, and I hear the way his voice wobbles around the word. Hope has always been hard for Aiden. "I'm hoping you can help me."

"With what?"

"Tell me what it feels like to fall in love."

"I'm not sure I'm qualified for that," I manage.

"Actually," he says and I can hear the affection. A thumb at my chin, tipping my face toward his. "You're the only one who is."

"How do you figure?"

"You'll see."

"Okay," I whisper. I decide to trust him. Trust that whatever he's doing won't end up with my heart on the floor. "What are you feeling right now?"

"To start with, I'm eating pineapple pizza."

A laugh bursts out of me so quick and sharp, I ache with it.

"Pineapple pizza is the best. I'm not sure that's something you need to be worried about."

"Who says I was worried about it?" he asks lazily.

"Noted." Another laugh pops out of me like a soap bubble. "What else is going on?"

"I think about her all the time. I wonder what she's doing. I've got this hair tie on my wrist that I stole from her. She doesn't know about it," he adds as an afterthought, and the hope burns brighter. A solar flare in the middle of my chest.

"Do you keep a list of her favorite things in your glove compartment?"

He makes a short, amused sound. "Yeah. Yeah, I do. So I don't forget."

"What else?"

"She does this thing when she laughs . . . it's like she laughs with her whole body. I've never seen anything like it. She holds her hands tight together like she's—like she's holding on to her happiness. Like she's not afraid to grab it." Aiden pauses, his breath gusting over the receiver. In the

background, I hear the crunch of asphalt. He must be pacing, wherever he is. “I want to be the kind of man who deserves that laugh. Who earns it.”

“It’s not about deserving,” I say, my throat tight. “If someone gives you something, you have it. You don’t have to earn it.”

“Hold on,” he says. “I’ve got a few more things.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

“She told me once she doesn’t want to settle anymore and I think that’s what I’ve been doing. My whole life, I’ve intentionally broken everything down because it’s been easier for me to handle. And it’s been the same with her. I’ve been letting myself have sips of her, afraid of what might happen if I let myself go. But I want— I want to kiss her when other people are around. I want to hold her hand. I want to have pancakes at her house on Sunday mornings and I want to help with Indiana Jones costumes. I want her people to be my people too.”

My eyes burn. I blink and a tear spills over, glancing along my cheek. No one has ever wanted the full package before. All of me and all of Maya. The family I’ve cobbled together for myself.

Another tear chases the first, then another.

I want to see him. I *need* to see him.

“What do you think?” he asks, sounding shy and unsure in a way he never has before. Aiden with his heart on his sleeve. *Finally.* “Is this what love feels like?”

I ignore his question. I don’t want to answer it over the phone.

“Where are you?” I ask instead.

He’s standing in the back parking lot with his phone halfway to his ear, watching the back door with quiet, focused eyes. I burst through it like a tornado and his face tumbles into something relieved. Like he wasn’t sure I’d want to see him. Like he was hedging his bets.

I ignore the car in the back corner with a small face pressed up against the passenger window and head straight for him, walking until the tips of my boots are pressed to his and he has to angle his face to hold my gaze. He’s still holding his phone halfway to his ear, even though I hung up on him thirty seconds ago. This part of the conversation is for us. No one else.

“Do you mean it?” I ask.

He nods. “Every word.” He finally drops his phone and slips it in his back pocket. I catch a glimpse of my hair tie on his wrist and my heart stumbles

over itself. “But I might have lied a little bit. I already know the answer to my question.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he says, his eyes amused. He reaches up and traces his fingertips across my cheek, then curls his hand around the back of my neck, his thumb beneath my ear. He holds me steady, nowhere to look except right at him. “I know what falling in love feels like because I’ve been falling in love with you.”

My breath rattles out of me in a *whoosh*. His thumb dances a circuit from the hollow beneath my ear to my cheek again, catching a tear. I guess I haven’t stopped crying.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“What else could it be?” he says, voice hushed. Reverent. Wanting. “I’m sorry about this week. I wanted to take the time to find the right words to say. I wanted to get it right.”

“I don’t need the right words. I just need your words.” I grip his sweatshirt. “Don’t make me wait like that again. Tell me where you are, even if it’s not perfect.”

“Okay,” he says quietly, its own kind of Band-Aid over the wounds we inflicted on each other. A laugh sighs out of him. “You’ve always been so much braver than me.”

“You called in to a radio station.”

“You started it,” he says, voice low. “I figured we should end how we began, yeah?”

I feel my face pinch. “Are we ending?”

A slow smile inches across his face. I watch it start in his eyes and drift down to his lips like the sun setting in the sky, the whole world lit up in gold. “Not even close, Lucie.”

I want to kiss him so bad I feel it like a palm between my shoulder blades. A string from his chest to mine, pulled tight.

“What now?” I warble, shifting closer, digging my nose in the hollow of his throat. He laughs, his big hand cupping the back of my head.

“Well, I’m hoping you love me too.”

“I do.” I sniffle, somewhere in the depths of his sweatshirt. I’m probably getting snot on it, but I don’t care. I never thought I’d be wanted the way Aiden wants me. Never thought I’d be seen and appreciated and adored. But he does. He sees me. He wants me. He *loves* me. “I love you a lot.”

He hums, a vibration in his chest that rumbles into mine. The hand in my hair holds me tighter. “I’ve never let myself feel like this,” he confesses

quietly. “I’m out of practice, but I’m going to work so damn hard at it. I promise.”

“I’ll be right here with you.”

“I know,” he whispers. I slip my hands beneath his sweatshirt, let myself feel the shape of him, and he sighs, dropping his cheek against the top of my head. “I’m gonna love you so good, Lucie.”

I squeeze my eyes shut tight, hoping I can hold on to this moment forever. It’s not perfect. Not even close. There’s something rattling under the raccoon couch. My preteen daughter and both of her dads are staring at us from the car parked in the corner of the lot. An early spring storm is rolling in and my hair is probably doing something ridiculous in the humidity.

But it’s mine. Even in its flaws, this moment is mine.

“Can I kiss you now?” I ask. I tug at him. “Please?”

He doesn’t answer with words. The hand threaded through my hair slips to the nape of my neck, and he grips me there, angling my head back, his mouth slanting down over mine like he’s been waiting for it. Like the whole time he’s been standing out in this parking lot on his phone, he’s been counting down the minutes until he could kiss me again.

I loop my arms around him, trying to drag him closer. I feel desperate, itchy, eager to have him. He changes the angle of our kiss and shushes me with a mumbled “easy” against my mouth right before he kisses me again, licking into my mouth with a hot groan. I settle there against him and let him kiss me the way he needs to, until it’s something slow and deep and wet, both of my palms resting flat against his chest, the pound of his heart a perfect match for mine.

Somewhere behind us, a car lays on its horn. I can hear muffled banging on the window, a cheer from somewhere in the station.

Aiden pulls back, his cheeks pink. He stares down at me with a tender smile, one that grows wider the longer he looks.

“Hi,” he whispers.

“Hey.” I smile back.

“I’m really glad you called. All those weeks ago.”

“Technically I’m not the one who called.”

He rolls his eyes and wraps both of his arms around me. “Either way,” he says.

I smile and drop my forehead in the place between his shoulder and neck. The spot I fit into perfectly.

“I’m glad you answered.” I grin. “Mr. Tire is going to be so happy.”

JACKSON CLARK: All right, Baltimore. She's in the parking lot. We're watching them through the window and they're talking. They're talking. They're talking.

MAGGIE LIN: You don't have to repeat yourself.

JACKSON CLARK: I'm just providing real-time updates—oh my god. They're kissing. There is a kiss happening, people.

MAGGIE LIN: I knew it.

JACKSON CLARK: You did not know it. You thought he hated her. I'm the one who knew it.

MAGGIE LIN: Okay, you knew it.

[pause]

JACKSON CLARK: Wow, they're really going at it, huh? His hands are—

MAGGIE LIN: That's enough.

MAGGIE LIN: Good night, Baltimore.

JACKSON CLARK: Just—wow. That's a public parking lot.

MAGGIE LIN: Good *night*, Baltimore.

MAGGIE LIN: We'll see you next time on *Heartstrings*, Baltimore's romance hotline.

EPILOGUE

AIDEN

How is it so crowded already?" I murmur, the line from Skullduggery stretching all the way down the block and around the corner. I stare at it in dismay from the front stoop of Lucie's house.

"It's always like this when she has cruffins," Maya offers with her chin resting on top of my head, her arms looped over my shoulders. She prefers piggybacks in the mornings, reluctant to put on shoes that aren't dinosaur house slippers. And I'm reluctant to argue with her about anything. A soft spot that Lucie calls a blind spot, with a fond but exasperated roll of her eyes when she meets us on the porch, Maya clinging to me like a koala.

"Don't be jealous," I tell her, knocking her shoulder with mine. "You've gotten piggybacks too."

I remember a frostbitten night in late February, her bare thighs beneath my palms. I wanted her so badly that night it hurt.

Her eyes shine up at me, a secret smile on the curve of her lips. I lean forward and drop a kiss to it. Maya screeches on my back.

"Don't be gross! I'm literally right here."

"Then close your eyes," Lucie mumbles. She pulls back, her eyes darting up to her daughter. "Do you still have the key to the back entrance?"

Maya huffs. "Of course I do. It's cruffin day, Mom. I'm not an idiot." She clicks her heels against my sides. "Onward, noble steed."

I give a halfhearted *neigh* and Lucie's laugh wraps itself around me like ribbons.

This is how our Sundays go.

I wake up next to Lucie draped over me in a bed with too many blankets, her ear resting over my chest and my fingers tangled in her hair. Apparently even in sleep, I'm a possessive bastard. Usually, a lanky body barrels into the room and we go across the street for cruffins. Sometimes Jackson meets us with his sisters and the girls disappear upstairs, chattering about Aragorn and Legolas and whatever else teenagers talk about. And sometimes it's just me

and Lucie, sneaking into the corner booth that Patty always manages to save for us, no matter how crowded it is.

We push our way through the crowd to our usual table and slide into the booth while Maya disappears upstairs, yelling something about dragons over her shoulder. Lucie watches her go with a fond smile, a little wistful at the edges.

I squeeze her thigh beneath the table. Old habits die hard, and all that.

She turns to me and I drop a kiss on the corner of her mouth. Because I want to. Because I can. I spent so long being afraid of this, I never realized how much I was missing.

She tilts her head to the side and offers me her mouth again, lips parted, eyes closed. I sink my fingers into her hair and tuck her farther back in the booth, kissing her slow and hot and wet. Just the way she likes.

Lucie pulls away with a hum, her eyes still closed. I brush my thumb over the light freckles beneath her eyes.

"You want your usual?" she asks.

"Please."

She disappears to the counter while I recline in the seat. It took me an embarrassingly long time to realize that Patty's place is the same place Jackson dragged me to all those months ago. When he gave me a pep talk and told me to get it together. I can't believe I forgot a name like Skullduggery, but I blame the lack of headless cupids for the confusion.

I let the bustle of the café wrap around me like a blanket, waiting for Lucie to come back. Later today, we'll go to my parents' house for dinner. Maya and my dad will slip off to the garden in the backyard for hours and they'll come back in with pink cheeks and mud on their knees. Lucie will help my mom cook something on the stove while I do my best not to ruin a salad, and they'll laugh and whisper and laugh some more. And I'll try not to let my heart beat out of my chest, my life so much fuller than I ever allowed it to be.

Lucie slips back into the booth next to me and I curl my arm around her shoulders.

"Missed you," I murmur into her hair.

She gives me a look that is somehow both exasperated and pleased. "I was gone for three minutes."

"I can miss you in three minutes," I tell her. I nudge her ear with my nose and let my hand on her thigh drift higher. "I can do a lot of things in three minutes."

"Don't I know it." She sighs happily, letting her head drift to my shoulder.

“You’ve become a bit of a sap, Aiden Valen.”

“I guess so.” I look down at the empty table in front of us. Maya will reappear shortly, demanding her cruffin. She and Jackson bonded deeply over their shared love of the baked good. “Order not ready yet?”

Lucie shakes her head. “Too crowded today. Patty is going to call me when it’s ready.”

“How is she going to—”

Patty appears suddenly on the counter at the side of the café. She catapults herself up and grabs one of the heavy wooden beams that anchor either side of the coffee bar, narrowly missing a disheveled-looking guy with headphones over his ears.

“Brooks Robinson,” she bellows, her voice like a foghorn. “I’ve got a café au lait, a coffee, and five cruffins for Brooks Robinson.”

Lucie starts to slide out of the seat next to me. My hand clamps down on her thigh.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

She blinks up at me. “To get our stuff.”

“You’re not Brooks Robinson.”

Her cheeks pinken. “Oh. Well, no. But he is the best third basemen to ever play the game. I like to pay my respects.” She presses a quick kiss to my mouth. “Be right back.”

She slips out of the booth again and I let her, something untwisting beneath my rib cage. All those months ago, I was sitting on the other side of this café and I heard Patty call for Brooks Robinson. Was Lucie here? Did we drift past one another and not even realize? The woman who changed my life—who carefully and quietly patched all my holes and rough spots—she was within reach and I didn’t even know it.

A plate of cruffins appears in front of my face. I take one wordlessly. How long have Lucie and I been orbiting each other? How many chances did I miss before I picked up that phone call in the middle of the night? She said she wanted magic and I thought we found something better. Something real. But apparently there was a little magic, after all. A bunch of breadcrumbs dropped like pennies in a fountain, leading me right to her.

“What’s got this look on your face?” Lucie traces the curve of my cheek, dipping her finger down to tug at my mouth. I nip at her finger and she laughs. “What are you thinking about?”

I curl my hand around her thigh and pull, tugging her against me until our chests are smashed together. I’m thinking about her, about us, about this. About this tiny café across from her house and all the places we almost met.

About the right time, the right place, the right moment. I'm thinking about the way her hand fits in mine, and the way my heart drums out a beat that matches her name. *Lu-cie. Lu-cie. Lu-cie.*

The almosts and the maybes and the what-ifs. The universe lining up for one perfect moment and handing me her.

I got so fucking lucky.

I drag her mouth to mine and press a hard kiss against her lips.

"I'm thinking about you."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I was fourteen years old, I watched *Sleepless in Seattle* for the first time. I remember sitting in my bed during that famous monologue about magic, and all of a sudden, I had tears on my face. Just like Meg Ryan. So much of that movie resonated with my soul, but I think the part that hit me deepest was the sincere love letter to love. *Sleepless in Seattle* isn't just about romantic love. It's about lost love, first love, best-friend love, the love between a parent and their child, and self-love. It's about realizing you deserve better and being strong and brave enough to figure out what that looks like.

That was my goal with writing this book. A love letter to love. And a thank-you to Nora Ephron for inspiring me to be a writer.

As always, there are a number of people who helped make this book possible. My agent, Kim Lionetti, who gives me gentle head pats whenever I need them. My team at Berkley—Kristine, Mary, Kristin, Chelsea, and Anika—who are endlessly enthusiastic and truly bring these stories to life. The team at Pan Macmillan— Kinza, Chloe, and Ana— who are creative and delightful and an absolute honor to work with.

Thank you to my husband, who shows me all sorts of love every day. The universe lined up for one perfect moment and handed me you. I got so fucking lucky.

The universe also handed me an Annie. Someone who knows my brain so intimately, it would be terrifying if it didn't work out so well. My books simply wouldn't exist if I didn't have Annie in my corner helping me untangle the knots while simultaneously screaming at me to write more Jackson.

Thank you to the lovely writers I'm honored to call friends. The ones who hold my hand when the words get scary. Sarah, Chloe, and Hannah. Thank you. And thank you to the ones who cheer me on endlessly, specifically Adri and Katie. I appreciate you more than you know.

I like to save the most important thank-you for last. Thank you to you, reader, for picking up this book. For taking a chance on this story. For believing in love and love stories and the magic they hold. Isn't it a beautiful thing to exist in this community? To slip into love stories over and over again. To believe in the unfailing magic and power of love.

I can't wait to keep sharing stories with you.

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Luka, listen." I lean backward in my chair and fumble for the stack of papers on the file cabinet behind me, cursing under my breath when my fingertips barely glance the corner edge and it goes cascading to the floor in a flurry of white. "Listen, I need you to stop talking about pizza for a second."

There's a pause on the other end of the line. "I was just getting to the good part."

What he means is he was just getting to the part where he talks at length about homemade cheese, and I don't think I can handle him talking about mozzarella with that level of detail right now. As a data analyst, Luka is ridiculously thorough in all things. Especially cheese. I rub at the ache between my eyebrows. "I know you were, I'm sorry, but I've got something else to talk to you about."

"Everything okay?" There's a honk in the background, Luka's muffled curse, and the steady click of his turn signal as he merges into another lane.

"Everything is . . . fine." I peek down at the budget spreadsheets littering my floor and wince. "It's good. Okay, I mean. I just—" The fleeting confidence I entered this conversation with leaves me, and I slouch down in my chair. Every time I've called Luka this week or Luka has called me, I've chickened out. I don't think this time is going to be any different.

"I actually have to go. One of my vendors is calling." I frown at myself in the reflection of my computer screen. I have bags under my eyes, my full bottom lip is bright red from nervous chewing, and my mass of dark hair is twisted up into a bun that looks better suited to a haunted Victorian doll.

I look every bit as rough as the farm's budget sheets.

"One of your vendors is not calling you, but I'll play for now." Luka sounds amused. "Call me when you're done working, okay? We can talk about whatever you've been running circles around all week."

Reflection me frowns deeper. "Maybe."

He laughs. "Talk soon."

I hang up my phone and resist the urge to toss it clear across the room. Luka has a knack for cracking me right open, and I don't want that right now. I don't want it ever, to be honest, afraid of what he'll find when he starts connecting all of his data points.

My phone buzzes in my palm with an incoming text, and I flip it facedown on top of a stack of invoices. It buzzes again, and I pinch the bridge of my nose.

With the farm's finances the way they are, I'm quickly running out of options. I had thought—I guess I thought owning a Christmas tree farm would be romantic.

I had big dreams of a holiday season filled with magic. Kids weaving their way through the trees. Parents stealing kisses over hot chocolate. The stuff Christmas songs are written about. Young couples getting caught beneath the mistletoe. Low-hanging lights and oversized stockings. Wood railings painted red and white. Gingerbread cookies. Peppermint sticks.

And at first, it was great. Our opening season was as magical as it gets.

But since then, it's been one thing after another.

I'm eyeballs deep in debt with a fertilizer supplier who conveniently forgets my shipment every other month. I have an entire pasture of trees that look like something out of a Tim Burton movie, and there is a family of raccoons orchestrating a hostile takeover of my Santa barn. It is, in short, not a magical winter fairyland.

It is a frigid hellscape from which no one can escape, topped with a pretty red bow.

I feel lied to. Not only by every Hallmark movie I've ever seen but also by the previous owner of this land. Hank failed to mention he stopped paying his bills months ago, and as the new owner, I'd inherited his debt. At the time, I thought I had gotten a steal. The land was at a good price, and I had exciting ideas for expansion and marketing. With a little love, this little farm could make a big impact. Now though, I just feel stupid. I feel like I ignored several red flags in my desire to create something special.

I was blinded by the Douglas fir.

But I do have a solution. I'm just not sure the email sitting at the top of my inbox is something I'm willing to explore.

Honestly, at this point, harvesting my own organs sounds less scary.

"Stella."

I jump when Beckett elbows his way into my office, my arm knocking over my coffee, a halfway-dead fern, and a stack of pine tree–scented air fresheners. It all tumbles to the ground on top of my destroyed filing system. I frown at my lead farmer over the mess.

"Beckett." I sigh, and the headache pressing behind my eyes spreads, curls at the base of my skull. The man is physically incapable of entering a room in a normal, understated way. His knees are caked in mud and my frown deepens. He must have been in the south pasture. "What is it now?"

He steps over the pile of plant and cardboard and coffee and folds his large frame into the chair opposite my desk—a horrible, too-small leather

thing I found on the side of the road. I had wanted to reupholster it a rich velvet evergreen, but then the raccoons happened. And then the fencing by the road randomly collapsed twice.

And so there it sits. Horrible cracking brown leather with bits of stuffing spilling out onto the floor. It feels like a metaphor.

Beckett peers at the faded trees decorating the carpet, the cardboard curling up at the edges. One eyebrow shoots straight up his forehead. “Care to explain why you have seventy-five gas station air fresheners in your office?”

Leave it to Beckett to forget an apology and start digging into something personal instead. My phone buzzes again. Three staccato bursts in rapid fire. It’s either Luka’s dissertation on pizza crust consistency or another vendor looking for their late payment.

Beckett’s eyebrow creeps higher. “Or perhaps door number two. Care to explain why you’re ignoring Luka?”

I hate when Beckett is feeling clever. It almost always ends poorly for me. He’s too astute for his own good, despite the dumb farmer act he plays a majority of the time. I bend down and pick up an air freshener, tossing it in the bottom drawer of my desk with all of the rest. A big ol’ mess of tangled strings, stale pine, and unrequited feelings. A single pine tree for every time Luka has been home, starting back when we were twenty-one and stupid. I typically find them a week or two after he’s left—tucked away in some hidden spot. Beneath my snow globe, under my keyboard.

Wedged in my coffee filter.

“I’m not and I don’t,” I mumble. Hard pass on both those options, thank you. “Care to explain what you found out there this morning?”

Beckett slips off his hat and runs his fingers through his dark blond hair, working a smudge or two of dirt in there. His skin is tanned by the sun and from spending his days in the fields, the flannel rolled up to his elbows displaying the color and ink on his forearms. All the women in town are crazy about him, which is probably why he doesn’t go into town.

Also probably why he frowned at me when I suggested a Hot Farmer calendar to boost profits.

I swear, I’d have no financial concerns if he let me take that one to market.

“I don’t understand,” he mutters, thumb rubbing at his jaw. If Cindy Croswell were here right now, she’d drop dead on the spot. She works at the pharmacy and sometimes pretends she’s hard of hearing when Beck comes in, just so he has to lean into her space and yell straight into her ear. I even saw that old bat pretend to stumble into a shelf so Beckett would help her back up. Hopeless.

“These trees are probably the lowest maintenance crop I’ve ever had to support.” There’s a joke in there somewhere, but I frankly don’t have the energy. My lips tilt down until my frown mirrors his. Two sad clowns. “I can’t think of a single reason why the trees in the south pasture look like—like—”

I think of the way the trees growing at the base of the hills curve and bend, the brittle texture of the bark. The limp, sad needles. “Like a darker version of the Charlie Brown Christmas tree?”

“That’s it, yeah.”

Strangely enough, there’s a market for lonely looking Christmas trees. But these don’t fall into that category. These are unsalvageable. I went out the other day, and I swear one of them crumbled when I looked at it. I can’t imagine one of these things sitting in anyone’s home—ironically or not. I pluck at my bottom lip with my thumb and do some quick calculations in my head. There are dozens of trees in that lot.

“Will we be all right without them?” Beckett looks worried and he has every reason to be. It’s another hit we can’t afford to take. He’s the head of farming operations. I know I owe him the truth. That we’re hanging on by the skin of our teeth. But I can’t make the words come out. He took a leap of faith when he left his job at the produce farm to work here with me. I know he’s counting on this being a success. For all of the promises I made him to hold true.

And so far they have, thanks to my savings. I’ve had to scrimp and save and eat ramen more nights than not, but no one who works here has seen a dip in their pay. I’m not willing to sacrifice that.

But that won’t last forever. Something has to give soon.

I glance back at my computer screen, the email at the top of my inbox. “Well,” I say, chewing on my bottom lip. In for a penny, in for a pound, and all that. If Beckett wants us to make it through this next season with the farm in one piece, there is something he can do. I breathe deep and summon the scraps of courage that didn’t abandon me during my call with Luka. “Want to be my boyfriend?”

I’d laugh at the look on his face if I weren’t so serious. He looks like I asked him to go out into the orchards and bury a dead body.

“Is that—” He shifts in his chair, the leather squeaking under his legs. “Stella, I’m not—I don’t really see you—you’re like my—”

When was the last time I heard this man stutter? I honestly can’t think of it. Maybe when Betsy Johnson tried to cop a feel in front of a group of schoolkids during his Arbor Day presentation at the middle school.

“Relax.” I press the toe of my boot into another air freshener and drag it

toward me. “I don’t mean a real boyfriend.”

I’m struggling with dragging the piece of cardboard toward me, so I don’t see the way Beckett’s body goes ramrod straight in the chair. All I see is his leg jumping up and down a mile a minute. I snort. When I look up, his eyes are wide, and he looks like I’ve put a gun to his head. It’s the same thinly veiled apprehension and mortification he wears on his face every time he steps foot in town.

“Stella,” he swallows. “Is this—are you propositioning me?”

“What? Oh my god, Beck—” I can’t help the full-body shudder. I love Beckett, but—*god*. “No! Jesus, is that what you think of me?”

“What do I think? What do *you* think?” His voice has hit a register I have never heard from him before. He gestures wildly with his hand, clearly not knowing what to do with himself. “This is all a little out of left field, Stella!”

“I meant like a fake boyfriend thing!” I shriek, like that was obvious. Like this is a normal thing people request from their very platonic friends. Like my overactive imagination and half a bottle of sauvignon blanc didn’t get me into this mess to begin with. I click to open the email and stare at it mournfully, ignoring the animated confetti that explodes across my screen. I watch it three times in a row and pretend Beckett’s eyes are not currently drilling a hole into the side of my head.

“I did a thing,” I supply, and leave it at that.

“A thing,” he parrots.

I hum in response.

“Do you want to share what that thing is?”

No.

“I—”

As if summoned by sheer force of will, Layla tiptoes her way into my office, a tray of something preceding her around the edge of my door. I smell cinnamon, dried cranberries, and a hint of vanilla.

Zucchini bread.

Like an angel descending from the heavens, she brought zucchini bread. The one thing that always, *always* distracts Beckett.

Beckett makes a noise that is borderline obscene, and I vaguely consider recording it and putting it on OnlyFans. That might bring in some dollars: *Hot Farmer Eats Zucchini.* I chuckle to myself. He reaches for the tray with grabby hands, but Layla smacks his knuckles with a wooden spoon she pulls out of her . . . back pocket, I think? She balances the tray neatly on the edge of my desk. I peer into it and almost weep. She added chocolate chips.

“Made you something, boss lady.”

She nudges it forward with the edge of her spoon and rests her chin prettily in one hand.

While Beckett embodies rugged recluse with all the charm of a paper bag, Layla Dupree brightens any room she walks into with her sweet Southern hospitality and no-nonsense wit. She is striking with her crystal clear hazel eyes and cropped dark hair. She's kind to a fault and makes the best hot chocolate in the tristate area. I snatched her up to manage the dining options at my little tree farm as soon as I tasted one of her chocolate chip cookies at the firehouse bake sale. She's the third member of our humble little trio, and if she's bringing me sweets, she wants something.

Something I probably can't afford.

I shove a slice of bread into my mouth before she can ask, bound and determined to enjoy at least one thing before I have to tell her no.

My phone takes advantage too, buzzing merrily across my desk. Layla blinks at it, exchanges a glance with Beckett, and then looks at me.

"Why are you ignoring Luka?"

"I'm not—" A spray of golden, flaky, delicious crumbs accompany my denial. "I'm not ignoring Luka."

It sounds more like *M'snot snore ukeah.*

Layla hums and pivots. "So, I was thinking," she starts. Bingo. "If I add another stove in the back corner of the kitchen, we could almost double our output. Maybe even start some prepackaged things if people want to take a little basket out into the fields with them."

Beckett crosses his arms as I continue chewing my massive bite. I ignore Layla for now and stare him dead in the eye.

"It's still warm," I tell him.

He groans.

Layla relents and rolls her eyes, plucking a slice off the top and offering it to him.

"If people start leaving trash in the pastures, I'm going to have a problem with that," Beckett grouches. He shoves the whole slice of bread into his mouth and then collapses against the back of the chair in rapture, the leather once again releasing an ominous squeak of defeat. Just like I'm about to.

"I love the idea, but we might need to put a hold on any big purchases right now." I think about the sad little number in my savings account. How I was barely able to cover operational expenses this past quarter.

Layla's face falls, her hand reaching out to mine. She touches my knuckles once. It's a kindness I don't deserve, given that I haven't been completely honest about how bad things are right now. "Are we doing okay?"

“We’re doing”—I search for a word to categorize *hanging on by my fingernails*—”all right.”

Beckett finally swallows his ridiculous bite of food and kicks out a leg. “We were just talking about that, actually. Stella propositioned me.”

“Oh? That’s interesting. Don’t understand how it plays into our operational status though.”

“Yeah, me too. But that’s what I got when I asked her the same question.”

“Do I get to be propositioned too?”

I roll my eyes and choose not to dignify that with a response. Instead, I turn my computer screen around so they both can see the animated confetti in all its glory. Beckett doesn’t so much as blink, but Layla throws both arms up in the air with a high-pitched screech that has me wincing.

“Is that for real?” She grabs the sides of my desktop and leans closer, nose practically pressed up against the screen. “You’re a finalist for that Evelyn St. James thing?”

Beckett eyeballs the zucchini bread as it balances precariously on the edge of my desk, eyes glazed like he’s been drugged. “Aspirin Saint what?”

Layla slaps his hand again without even looking at him. “She’s an influencer.”

Beckett makes a face. “Is that like a political thing?”

“How do you exist in this century? She’s a big deal on social media. She does destination features. Sort of like a mini Travel Channel thing.”

I feel a small burst of pride. She is *the* influencer for destination hospitality. Snagging a feature on her account is equivalent to thousands in ad spend—thousands we have never had the budget for. It would turn our farm into a place people want to visit, not just a stopping point for locals. And the $100,000 cash prize for the winner of her small business sweepstakes would keep us afloat for another year, if not more.

Too bad I lied on my application.

“Where does the propositioning come in?”

“I didn’t—I didn’t proposition Beckett.” I swing my computer screen back around and minimize the email. I drum my fingers against my lips and remember the night that got me into this mess. I had been on the phone with Luka, a little bit dizzy off white wine and the way his eyes crinkled at the corners. He had been making some stupid joke about ham sandwiches and couldn’t stop laughing long enough to get the full thing out. I still don’t know the punch line.

“I said in the application that I own the farm with my boyfriend,” I mumble. Color heats my cheeks. I bet I look as red as one of my barn doors.

"I thought it would be more romantic than *Sad, lonely woman who hasn't been on a date in seventeen months*."

"I hope to god you're having meaningless sex with someone."

"Why do you need a boyfriend to be successful?"

Layla and Beckett speak over each other, though to be fair, Layla makes a much more aggressive effort as she propels herself forward in the chair and yells her statement about my sex life. She collapses back, jaw hinged open, hand pressed dramatically against her chest.

"Holy cannoli, no wonder you are—" She gestures at me with her spoon-wielding hand, and I fight not to blush a deeper shade of red. We're probably hitting crimson territory by now. "The way you are."

I fidget in my chair and press on. I don't have to tell Layla that dating in a small town has its complications, let alone starting a no-strings-attached situation. "She's coming for five days for an in-person interview, and she'll feature us on her social accounts. The boyfriend thing, I don't know. I guess I thought having a boyfriend would make this place seem more romantic. She loves romance stuff."

Beckett sneaks another piece of zucchini bread. He's taking advantage of Layla's continued shock and awe at my celibacy. "Well, that's fucking stupid."

I give him a look. "Thank you, Beckett. Your input is helpful."

"Seriously though"—he breaks his zucchini bread slice in two—"you've made this place amazing. You. On your own. You should be proud of that. Adding a boyfriend doesn't make your story any more or less important."

I blink at him. "Sometimes I forget you have three sisters."

He shrugs. "Just my two cents."

"You sure you don't want to pretend you find me irresistible for a week?"

Layla shakes her head, finally emerging from her trancelike state. "Bad idea. Have you seen him try to lie to anyone? It's horrible. He turns into a monosyllabic fool every time he has to go into town for groceries."

It's true. I've had to pick up his order from the butcher more than once. I'm convinced he became a produce farmer purely so he'd have to make fewer stops at the Save More. Beckett doesn't enjoy people, and he especially doesn't enjoy the overt flirtations from half the town whenever he stops in. Sometimes I feel like Layla and I are the only ones immune to his good looks, probably due to his considerable lack of charm, but I suppose that's what happens when you've seen a man muttering obscenities to trees half the day every day.

And when your heart has been hopelessly occupied with pining over another person for close to a decade. It's hard to notice the charm of anyone

who isn't Luka.

I grab another slice of zucchini bread and begin to nibble, considering my options. My non-Luka-shaped options. I could ask Jesse, the owner of our town's only bar. But he'd likely think it's more than it is, and I don't have the time or energy for a fake breakup for my fake relationship. I could look into escort services, maybe. That's a thing, right? Like, that's why escort services exist? For people to, I don't know, escort others?

I press my fingers under my eyes, forgetting that one hand is still clutching a piece of zucchini bread. There's an obvious answer here. It just—it scares me to death.

"There it is," Beckett mutters, and it takes every fiber of my being not to hurl this bread at his face. "It just hit her."

"I don't know why you're freaking out. It's a simple solution. He'd do it in a heartbeat," says Layla.

I peek through my fingers at Layla. She's smiling a smug little grin. She looks like she should be wearing a monocle and stroking a hairless cat Bond-style. Why I ever thought she was all sweetness is beyond me. She's a spicy little thing.

"Ask Luka."

About the Author

Photo by Marlayna Demond

B.K. BORISON is the author of cosy contemporary romances featuring emotionally vulnerable characters and swoon-worthy settings. When she's not daydreaming about fictional characters doing fictional things, she's at home with her family, more than likely buying books she doesn't have room for.

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PRAISE FOR B.K. BORISON

'I'll never pass up an opportunity to head back to Lovelight Farms. Charlie and Nova are the perfect mix of sweet, funny and sexy. I can confidently say *Business Casual* is Borison's best work – I remain enchanted by everything she writes'

Hannah Grace, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Daydream*

'The Lovelight series is my happy place'

Sarah Adams, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Rule Book*

'*Business Casual* is tender, sexy and utterly charming. The chemistry between Charlie and Nova is palpable, and the blend of tension and vulnerability B.K. Borison deftly spins between them had me flipping breathlessly through each page, even though all I wanted to do was spend forever watching them fall in love. A gorgeous and emotional conclusion to our time at Lovelight Farms'

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'B.K. Borison just gets better and better! *Business Casual* is a magical combination of cosy and heartwarming, yet irresistibly tender and sexy. The result is a soul-satisfying romance that will burrow itself deep into your heart and stay there'

Amy Lea, international bestselling author of *The Catch*

'Sparkling, immersive and cosy AF. The chemistry between grumpy, guarded Nova and sweet, golden-retriever Charlie is positively electric. I love spending time in Inglewild. It's as much fun as watching an episode of *Gilmore Girls*, except no one is an asshole. *Business Casual* is B.K. Borison at her best'

Rosie Danan, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Do Your Worst*

'The butterflies started right from the beginning with these two [in *Business Casual*], but I didn't expect anything less from B.K. Borison. She's a magician with those butterflies'

Penny Reid, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Winston Brothers series

'Charlie and Nova's story was everything I'd hoped for and so much more.

[*Business Casual*] is B.K. Borison's best writing yet and I cannot wait for her many fans to fall in love with Charlie and Nova, too'

Chloe Liese, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Only and Forever*

'Oh, how I love spending time with B.K. Borison's lovable characters in the beyond-charming small town of Inglewild! *Business Casual* is cosy yet high heat and so, so sweet – like toasting marsh-mallows over an autumn bonfire. This is the comfort read my grumpy/sunshine-adoring heart needed'

Sarah Adler, author of *Happy Medium*

'B.K. Borison's writing feels like being wrapped in a blanket – a cosy, sexy and one-of-a-kind blanket. Charlie and Nova [in *Business Casual*] are flirty, funny and, dare I say, my favorite Lovelight couple'

Lyla Sage, author of *Swift and Saddled*

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LOVELIGHT

Lovelight Farms
In the Weeds
Mixed Signals
Business Casual

HEARTSTRINGS

First-Time Caller

First published in the US 2025 by Berkley
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

First published in the UK 2025 by Pan Books

This electronic edition published 2025 by Pan Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
The Smithson, 6 Briset Street, London EC1M 5NR
EU representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd, 1st Floor,
The Liffey Trust Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper,
Dublin 1, D01 YC43
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-0350-2890-0

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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