## Chapter 1

*Two weeks, Sol, it’s only two weeks.* I’d been repeating the words to myself for most of the four-hour drive. *Yeah, two weeks of complete isolation*. *No cell service, no indoor plumbing, and nobody to talk to.* Well, nobody except me, myself, and I, I guess.

The familiar crunch of gravel under my tires has my mind reeling with memories, taking me back to endless summers of swimming in the creek, hiking for miles, and roasting marshmallows by the fire. In truth, the cabin holds a special place in my heart, and although I haven’t been back in several years, I am looking forward to seeing the place again. Even if it is acting as my own, self-prescribed therapy facility.

It has been almost one year since the divorce was finalized, and just about two since I walked in on my husband and his secretary playing doctor in my bed. On my sheets. In my house. To say I was still bitter was an understatement. And although I have worked very hard to appear as though all my pieces are back together, they are, in fact, still in a broken pile on the floor. I cry most nights, alone in my apartment, wondering how I could have been so stupid, so naïve. I agonize over the details, the months leading up to it, the signs I ignored, the things I turned a blind eye to just so I didn’t have to be alone. And now I am alone, hating myself, wondering why I have never been good enough.

And it was a few weeks ago, as I was scrolling through his social media for the one millionth time, that I saw the engagement announcement. I lost my shit. Like, really, truly lost my shit. And after two bottles of wine and a really long look in the mirror, I decided that I had let things get too out of control. I had completely and totally lost all sense of who I was. I hardly recognized the woman staring back at me, with her long, brown, lifeless hair, and the deadness of her once bright blue eyes. To be honest, I avoid the mirror most days, and have a hard time even meeting my own gaze. What have I done? Who have I become? In a million years I never thought I would be the kind of woman who crumbled into pieces over a man. Especially a boring, lifeless, egotistical man like Brian. But here I was, crumbled, and I hadn’t done anything about it. In two fucking years. It was time to change that.

The trees are becoming more and more dense as I drive further and further up the mountain. I spent the morning packing up my things for my two-week spiritual journey to the middle of nowhere, hoping that this getaway would jumpstart some kind of progress towards healing. I need time away from everything. The school year just ended, so I have nothing but free time ahead of me. I need to be somewhere away from social media, away from my sad, pathetic apartment, and away from the pitying looks of my coworkers and family. I need to spend time getting to know myself again. Who am I? What do I want in life? Where am I headed? I have wasted enough time moping around, and it is time to start getting things back under control. The cabin, I think, will be the perfect place to do that.

I put my foot on the brake, slowing down to make sure I don’t miss my turn. I haven’t been up here in so many years, and I have never been the one driving.

A smile tugs at the corner of my lips when I make it around a particularly sharp bend, catching my first glimpse of the place in over ten years. I pull up in front, and step out of the car to stretch. It isn't anything fancy. Just four shanty walls and some windows overlooking the nearby creek. But, it was the only place I could think of to escape to. Some place I had never been to with my husband.

Ex – husband.

Stepping up on the porch and unlocking the front door, I take a deep breath, smiling at the smoky smell of burnt firewood and crunchy leaves. Not one single thing has changed. The same pictures hang on the walls. Old photographs of when we were kids, newspaper clippings of bear sightings, and maps of the area scattered about haphazardly. I can see the hole in the wall that my older brother, Cruz, made when he fell off one of the bunkbeds during one of our wrestling matches. I feel safe here. It feels familiar, and yet also from a completely different lifetime. A lifetime before heartbreak and divorce.

After bringing in my bags and supplies, I take a seat in the rocker in front of the coal stove, trying to remember what my dad had been saying on the phone about lighting it. Although it’s June, the Pennsylvania mountains still get chilly once the sun sets. I jiggle the knob on the right-hand side, producing a screeching sound that definitely doesn’t sound good. I send a silent thank you to the universe that I don’t have any neighbors. Then, I try lifting the lever at the bottom like I’d seen my dad do so many times before, but it doesn’t budge. Puffing my breath to try and get some of my hair out of my face, I grasp the front closure and rip it open, revealing the dark, inner chamber, and simultaneously unleashing a smell so putrid, I’m sure my eyebrows and every single one of my nose hairs have been singed off. By shining a flashlight inside I can see something has died in there, and I quickly shut the door before any more smell can escape. *My god, Sol, what have you gotten yourself into?*

Damage control proves super fruitless. It’s not like the cabin is overflowing with handy dandy air fresheners, and there isn’t much I can do about my complete lack of capability in the coal stove department. Plus, with the sun quickly setting, I’m not sure tackling the dead carcass taking up residence in my cute cabin vacation spot is the best idea. Things are just getting cuter by the minute. So. Cute. *That’s okay, Sol. This is what you’re here for! To be forced to connect with yourself. To have literally nothing to do but reflect on your insides, or whatever****.***

A spark of inspiration hits. I printed off a few pages from a meditation blog I found online before leaving my classroom on the last day of school. Not sure about the morality of using my workplace printer for personal items, but, oh well. Since I knew there would be no internet, and I had originally skimmed the site while three-quarters deep into a bottle of wine, I thought it’d be best to print out some techniques and try them up here surrounded by nature.

After a brief search through my mess of bags and luggage, I find the papers folded up in a side pocket, and spread them out on the table, flashlight in hand. Originally, I had wanted to try this while standing barefoot on the forest floor, but the idea of going outside, alone, in the dark doesn’t sound very enticing at the moment. I scan over the introduction and find step one.

1. *Adjust yourself into an upright, comfortable position and close your eyes.*

“Okay, check.” I murmur, settling in and closing my eyes. A quiet moment passes where I can hear crickets beginning to chirp outside.

Realizing I don’t know what to do next, I open my right eye just a crack in search of step two.

1. *Take three, long deep breaths.*

Perfect, easy*.* Another crack of my eyelid.

1. *Count only your inhales, focusing on your breath, in groups of ten.*

Squaring my shoulders, I begin counting.

*One.* A pause as I exhale. *Two*. Another pause. *Three…I wonder if Brian’s new fiancée meditates. She probably only drinks bubbly water and has an addiction to power walking. That would be* so *like Brian, to find a woman – shit, I’m supposed to be counting.* I take a peek at the steps again.

1. *If you lose count of your breaths, begin again with one.*

*Great, okay, let’s try again. One.* A pause. I smack my arm as a mosquito injects its itchy poison into me. *Two*. *The crickets are so effing loud. What happened to nature being calm and peaceful? Three. Bubbly water is* so *overrated. And expensive. Actually, my summer pay should be hitting my bank account by Thursday. I should plan a beach trip for when I get back. I could go with my mom, but I don’t really feel like fielding any questions on dating again. Uh, four… Why can’t people just leave me alone? Women can be single. Women are strong, beautiful, vivacious creatures who do not need a partner in their life to be complete! I do miss intimacy, though. Knowing someone and feeling connected. Did Brian and I really ever have that? Or did I just pretend we did?*

Oh, for fucks sake.

“This is stupid.” I huff, shoving the papers away from me. My shoulders slump and I lay my head on the table. How am I supposed to survive two fucking weeks of this? Did I think I was going to meditate and color my way through a divorce? A divorce that started two years ago, that I still am not over? Judging by the contents of the pink gym bag closest to me (that had never been used as a gym bag, by the way), yes, I did think seven different adult coloring books were going to miraculously change the state of my mental health. My therapist Joanna will have a lot to say about this whenever I get back to civilization.

Well, I guess I’ll have to attempt to check ‘become Picasso and solve all my problems’ off my list tomorrow. Sleep is my newest goal, which seems pretty achievable. Maybe accomplishing something will kickstart my motivation to piece my life back together. That logic seems sound.

I rummage through even more overnight bags and find something to sleep in. My socked feet make almost no sound as I cross the makeshift living room and cozy into my bunk. All I need is a good night’s rest, and I’ll be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed tomorrow, ready to become one with the earth and engage in color therapy until my fingers fall off! I can do this. I can be the kind of woman who isn’t nauseated at the thought of having to spend time in her own company. I can read books, and journal, and go on hikes. I can take aesthetic photos sipping coffee on my porch in the middle of the woods. I can have beautiful, flowing hair, and a smile that is so carefree it makes you sick! I can do that.

Right?

## Chapter 2

Bright sunshine filters through the window by my bunk and my eyes flutter open. I’m stiff and smothered under four or five afghans that smell like whatever crawled into the fire and died, first rolled around in them for several hours. Sleep never really came. I was cold, and every sound made me think I was about to be murdered. I even thought I heard a car pull into the property on the other side of the creek, but that place has been abandoned for years. I’d been holding in my pee all night because I was too scared to adventure towards the outhouse in the dark, and to top it all off, my flashlight died right after I crawled into bed. My only options were to stare at the dark ceiling and spiral, or stare at the dark walls and spiral. And spiral, I did. Definitely not the healing peace and tranquility I was hoping for.

With a grunt and a huge amount of effort, I stumble out of my afghan cave and beeline for the front door. It’s a fresh, brisk morning with birds chirping in the trees nearby. The filtered sunshine feels nice on my skin as I make my short trek through the dew-soaked grass to the outhouse, grateful to finally empty my bladder. I am going to have to figure out the fire situation, that’s for sure. And I definitely need to head into town for some supplies, specifically some new blankets. I’m trying not to get too discouraged. Night one did not go as planned, but I still have fourteen days ahead of me, surrounded by nothing but trees, water, and sunshine. I can spend hours reading, doing puzzles, hiking, meditating, coloring, and connecting with the woman I’ve gotten so lost from.

I am just about to go back inside to change when I notice smoke billowing from the chimney of the cabin across the way. I immediately feel a little spooked. No one has used or rented that building in all the years I spent coming here. I’m pretty sure the McKenzie’s own it, but they’d long since let it waste away in favor of their big fancy lake house a little further down the mountain. We used to dare each other to look inside the windows. Cruz would always scare me with a story about a woman with no eyes, rocking back and forth in her chair, waiting for little children to come and play with her.

I can’t remember if Dad mentioned any new neighbors when I spoke to him on the phone on my way up here or not.

Deciding to go in and change into something a little less ‘cavewoman who smells like dead carcass chic’ before checking things out, I head back into the cabin where I’m painfully reminded yet again of the issue with the coal stove.

“God, that’s awful.” I mutter under my breath, sifting through my bags, hoping to find some fresh clothing to throw on. I catch a rare sight of myself in the old, cracked mirror hanging above where I left my bags last night. I can’t believe how long my hair has gotten, currently hanging in a limp, messy ponytail resulting from the tossing and turning I did throughout the night. The random strands of gray are subtle, and a not-so-gentle reminder of my life wasting away before my eyes. I don’t mind getting older. I do mind having nothing to show for it.

Digging through my bag produces zero fun, influencer-esque hiking ensembles. I’ve just packed mountains upon mountains of leggings and t-shirts. I can’t remember the last time I rocked anything other than ‘cavewoman chic’, but I’m becoming more and more aware of how much of the dead animal smell had transferred onto me during my not-so-peaceful slumber.

Swapping out my sleep t-shirt and leggings for my day time t-shirt and leggings, I make a mental note to also take a shower at the YMCA whenever I head into town.

Dead leaves and branches crunch under my feet on my way towards the creek. From the bank, the smoke billowing from the chimney of the cabin across the way is even more visible. I tread carefully, stepping on large slippery rocks and holding my arms out for balance. The creek is shallow, dried up from weeks without rain.

Hundreds of moments flicker through my mind. Cruz and I racing boats down the water. Our dad showing us how to build a make-shift dam with items from the woods around us. Mom calling us for dinner, grumbling about having to mop up the puddles we tracked inside. Those memories feel warm. They feel happy. I can’t remember the last time I made a happy memory. My wedding day? My shoulders sag. That seems kind of sad, considering how that turned out.

The old, abandoned cabin is even more dilapidated than I realized. The roof has a sizable chunk taken out of it, and most of the windows are shattered. It’s way darker here, more trees covering overhead, and I’m starting to get a bit creeped out again. *My God, Sol. There’s no wicked* bruja *waiting for you inside, relax.*

Mud squishes under my boots as I circle around to the front door. The porch is still standing, with just a few holes creating something of a minefield leading to the entrance. As nimbly as possible, I maneuver my way across and take a deep breath. As soon as I get cell service again, I’m calling Cruz. What an asshat. Twenty-eight years old and my brother still has me nervous as fuck to be up here.

*Knock, knock, knock,* I rap three times on the old door. Its paint is chipping off pretty badly, but you can still see remnants of the rich blue color it once was. I wait a few minutes but nobody answers the door. Why wouldn’t they answer? Maybe they’re hurt? *Or maybe it’s because she doesn’t have any eyes and can’t make it to the door.* A little shiver runs down my sides. I am so going to murder Cruz.

Around the side of the house, I find a window still holding on to its glass. I wipe away some of the dust, take another attempt at settling my breath, and peer inside. The inside is pretty dirty, but there is a large roaring fire. Seems a little strange that they have a roaring fire going midday in June, but who am I to judge? At least they know how to use their fireplace, unlike me.

Could be burning a dead body…

We’re gonna lock that thought right up.

There’s a backpack sitting on an old plastic folding table with a variety of sneakers and boots piled underneath. Someone is staying here. Here, though, of all places? Why not rent Mackenzie’s nicer place down the way? They take great care of that one and Hugh hasn’t been able to come up since his hip surgery. The place is probably begging for people to rent it.

Maybe the backpack owner is a squatter.

Gonna lock that one up too.

I haven’t thought about the Mackenzie’s in years, especially Hugh. He was a great man, taught my dad a lot about being up in these woods. He also had the biggest smile and the loudest laugh I’ve ever heard. We would roast marshmallows with the Mackenzie’s most weekend nights during the summers. And they had jet skis for the lake, so we spent a lot of time together. I wouldn’t have even known about Hugh’s surgery if my dad hadn’t mentioned it on our phone call yesterday. I’d become so self-consumed in my own wallowing that I hardly know anything about the important people in my life. I shake my head, starting to feel overwhelmed by the mess I’ve made of things.

“Disappointed?” I hear a deep, rich voice, followed by a small chuckle. My whole body jumps and an embarrassingly high-pitched squawk escapes my lips. Comically fast, I whip around, hand over my heart, hoping to God it’s not an old, eyeless witch waiting for me.

My eyes widen. *Damn.**Big wow. Big, big wow.* The man standing in front of me is easily the most attractive person I’ve ever seen in real life. He’s holding a large stack of firewood I’m assuming he just chopped, and I cannot help but stare. He’s tall, his dark hair tousled in a way that feels unrealistically perfect. Especially for having just chopped a bunch of wood. He has thick brows and the beginnings of a strong beard growing over his cut jawline. The muscles in his arms bulge under the weight of the wood he’s carrying, his large hands gripping it tightly. He’s *shirtless*, sweat glistening on his chest.

I genuinely cannot remember the last time I saw a real, live man shirtless.

He’s looking at me expectantly, and I realize I’ve just been standing here gawking at him.

“Uh, sorry, what?” I stammer, growing red in the cheeks.

“In the cabin?” he questions, one eyebrow raised, cocking his head in the direction of the window I was just looking through.

“What?” It’s like my brain is mush.

“I just mean, you were looking inside and shaking your head, I thought you were disappointed in what you saw…” he explains, but I can’t make my brain work or my mouth move.

I’m certainly not disappointed in what I see.

“Never mind, it was a stupid joke.” He laughs awkwardly, walking past me to set the wood down on the porch. The muscles in his back ripple. *Jesús*.

Turning back around, he puts his hand out for me to shake. “I’m Grayson.” Cue dazzling smile.

“Sol,” I say, trying my best to act more normal.

“Like the sun?”

“What?” I’d been staring at his lips move instead of listening to what he was saying.

“Sol…like the sun. In Spanish?” He asks again.

I want to slap myself in the face. “Oh! Yeah, gosh, sorry. Yes, Sol, like the sun.” I say, mortified. What the fuck is wrong with me?

“It suits you.” He smiles again, ruining my train of thought. When I don’t answer, his expression changes. “Are you okay?”

*God, Sol. Pull yourself together. You’re acting like a fucking moron.* “Yes, no, sorry, I’m great. I just wasn’t expecting to see anyone up here.”

“Well that makes two of us.” His smile is so easy. Like he’s never been sad. “When I spoke to Hugh Mackenzie last week he said none of the neighbors have been up in years.”

“You know Hugh?” I don’t recognize him from any of the summers I spent up here.

“Yeah, I, uh, work with his son, Chase. Well, I used to anyway.” He makes a weird face.

“Oh no way! What do you do?” I’m feeling a little less socially inept. His energy is contagious, and I feel myself relaxing a bit. I think.

“I was an engineer. Chase and I worked on a lot of projects together. Had a lot of fun, he’s a great guy.”

Chase, an engineer? I can’t picture the small, mischievous, freckled kid I spent my summers with in any professional setting. “Wow, to be honest, I didn’t know Chase was that smart.” I chuckle, and so does Grayson. It’s a great sound that has me laughing harder. I feel like I haven’t laughed in ages.

“Yeah, he graduated top in his class from Pitt. You would never know it just hanging out with him, though. I mean, I got to see it up close and personal, but outside of work was a whole other story.” He seems lost in thought, maybe in memories of nights spent getting into trouble. Chase always knew how to find the trouble.

“I haven’t seen any of the Mackenzie’s, in, gosh, ten years? At least? Crazy how time flies.” Ten years. I miss the girl who spent her last summer here ten years ago. The girl who laughed. Who smiled. Who ran through the woods without a care in the world.

“Yeah.” Grayson rubs the back of his neck. Maybe he’s also thinking over the last ten years. Caught up in the ‘used to be's’ just like I am.

He drops his hand. He has working man hands. Strong, weathered, probably always a little bit dirty. “Well, I guess I should get back to this fire.”

“Oh, right, yeah, of course!” I take a few steps back towards the creek.

“I would invite you in, but it’s not quite livable in there yet.” There’s that smile again. My stomach clenches at the sight of it.

I force myself to act normal, to giggle. “Oh, no worries!” Okay, that came out insane. Giggling was not the move. “I’m right across the creek if you need anything.” I take a few more steps, not quite ready to leave this man and his many, many muscles.

“Thanks!” He says as he bends down to gather some of the chopped wood from the porch.

I give a small wave and turn back towards the way I came.

The next thing I hear is a loud *thud* as my body slams into the ground. My foot is caught in one of the many potholes on the porch, and I definitely twisted my ankle on the way down. An, ‘*Oof,’* escapes me.

“Shit, are you alright?” Grayson drops the wood back on the porch and rushes to kneel beside me. *Oh sure, I’m great. Definitely not embarrassed. Because I definitely didn’t just eat shit in front of the world’s sexiest lumberjack slash engineer.*

I start to sit up. “Hang on, take it slow. Your foot is still caught in the hole.”

Groaning, I silently pray my face isn’t as beat red as it feels. I’m too cute and quirky for my own good. Eye roll.

Grayson gently touches my ankle. “Does this hurt?” He turns to make eye contact and I melt a little, his green eyes are filled with concern.

“Not really.” I murmur, breaking the connection and looking down at my lap.

He starts to pull my foot out and I stifle a yelp.

“You okay?” He pauses, hands holding my ankle, blasting me with his hot guy smolder again. I nod.

Once my foot is out of the hole, Grayson stands up and holds out one of his strong, weathered hands. I reluctantly grab it and he pulls me up with ease. I can’t even pull my own self up with ease, let alone somebody else.

“I don’t have a first aid kit up here. It’s on my grocery list…”

“Oh, I’m fine! Don’t worry about it. There’s one in my cabin. I’ll be totally fine. Thanks so much for all your help.” I rush the words out, hoping to get out of this situation as quickly as possible so I can be mortified in the peace and comfort of my own, dead animal smelling home. I am now very much in support of leaving all the muscles behind.

“I’ll walk you back –” he starts and I am immediately shaking my head. Absolutely not. That cannot, and will not happen.

“No, no, no. I’ve taken up enough of your time already. I’m totally good. Please, your wood needs you…” I mentally punch myself in the face. *Your wood needs you? Sol, what the actual fuck.*

“If you’re sure…”

“Yes, totally sure. Never been better.” My tone is excessively chipper and I begin to shuffle towards the creek. Unfortunately, my ankle hurts. Like a lot. And I sway a little when I try to put pressure on it.

“Okay, you’re definitely not alright. Let me carry you down to your cabin and I can help you wrap it.” The world’s largest protest is on my lips when suddenly his strong arms slip under me and I am being carried, bridal style, through the woods by a shirtless man with an eight pack. Absolutely, 100% normal.

If I thought I was mortified before, I am triple that now. My face is so, so close to his, because where else can I possibly put it? Do I look at his jaw? Should I turn and look down at his neck? I could just give myself a triple chin and stare down at my stomach? And I am so very, *very* aware that I smell like that dead animal still. There is literally a zero percent chance he doesn’t smell it. Oh my *god*.

Underneath the embarrassment, there is definitely something else. My body is very aware of every single location he is pressed against me. Grayson’s hands are gripping my upper thighs, very close to my ass, and my upper arm. I can feel the way his stomach muscles shift as he walks. I don’t know if it’s impressive or pathetic that I feel tingles everywhere. Especially down *there*.

I decide on looking at his neck, and his Adam’s apple bobs slightly, muscles pulled taught from carrying me. It suddenly occurs to me that I could have slipped on a rock on my way over the creek, hit my head, and this could all be a coma-induced fever dream brought to life by the desperate state of my attention deprived life.

He navigates the creek with annoying ease, and doesn’t even need to set me down to open the door of the cabin. Show off.

“Woah.” He coughs, setting me down on top of the table where all my meditation papers are scattered.

“Yeah, something died in the coal stove.”

He walks over to check it out. “Holy shit, that’s fresh.” He’s laughing, but I’m dying. Inside.

“Where’s the first aid kit?” he asks, stepping back in front of me. I motion towards one of the cabinets and wait for him to grab it. He comes back with an ace bandage and some ibuprofen.

“Thank you” I reach for the bandage, but he pulls it towards him and begins taking my shoe off.

I refuse to look at him. I mean, *come on*. It would just be too much. This big, gorgeous man, *kneeling* at my feet. You’re joking, right? I mean, you have to be joking.

Grayson makes quick work of it, and I try not to notice how gentle he is, how patient and determined. I make no note of all the places his fingertips graze my skin, pay no attention to the way his breath fans over my ankle from being so close. Absolutely none.

“You should stay off of it for a couple hours. I’m going to head into town, grab some ice and some other stuff I need. When I get back we’ll ice your foot and I’ll clean out the coal stove.” He’s packing supplies away and gesturing towards me like he’s going to pick me up again.

“Oh, you don’t have to—” but I’m cut off.

“I’ll set you up on the couch, keep it elevated until I get back.” Scooping me back up into his arms, he sets me on the plaid couch near the coal stove. The trip is short this time, so I don’t have the chance to worry about where to direct my gaze.

How does he smell so good? After chopping wood and carrying me with my stench of carcass rubbing all over him? Why do men always get the best of everything?

“I could, um, bring your coloring books to you?” He’s holding back a smirk and I shoot him a glare. Of course my coloring book bag, (because why wouldn’t I have an entire bag just for coloring books?) is wide open on the floor.

“No, thank you.” I huff, crossing my arms and trying to hold on to any remaining dignity I may have left.

“Okay, I’ll be back. Remember, elevated.” He winks on his way out, and somehow it doesn’t look stupid or cringe-worthy at all. It looks good. Really good.

About thirty seconds goes by in complete silence before I regret choosing my pride over a source of entertainment. Because now I have exactly two options: I can sit here and smell the death reeking from the coal stove, or I can sit here and spiral about how outrageously unfair life is.

I’ll take the first.

## Chapter 3

Swirling my toes in the creek absentmindedly, I turn the page of the book I’m currently immersed in. The water feels surprisingly warm as the sun shines brightly through the trees. I’ve really lucked out with the weather. It’s been three days of sunshine. Three days of not having to light a fire at night, *¡qué suerte!* And three days of sneaking peeks at a sweaty, shirtless, muscle-y Grayson between chapters of my books. The creek gives me an incredible view of the renovations he’s doing. Far enough away that I don’t seem stalker-ish, but close enough that I can see the muscles in his biceps dance. He makes for a nice palette cleanser when I need a break from the plot. And while he did come back with ice for my foot and supplies to clean the coal stove the other day, he has no idea I don’t know how to use it, even now that it's sparkling clean. I’m keeping that little secret tucked tightly away, right between my palms as I pray the warmer weather we’ve been having at night continues so I won’t have to admit his kindness was for nothing.

I gave up on meditation and coloring two days ago and decided to try reading instead. I started with *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed. Cliché, I know, but necessary. I’m on a journey. Day Two brought *Eat, Pray, Love*. Standard. And now, on Day Three of my, ‘read until I’m a fully functioning human being with no trauma’ bender, is when things have started to take a turn.

When digging through my bags this morning (I swear half of my time is spent digging through my bags), ready for my next read, I stumbled across a book that made my stomach do a flip. What was it doing in here? I knew I hadn’t picked it up at the thrift book store I went to before coming to the cabin.

I had gone to stock up for my trip, and the woman at the counter had a million great recommendations, so whatever she suggested I threw in my pile on the counter. I just told her I had some healing to do, and I trusted her opinion. But I didn’t remember grabbing, *Billionaire Bad Boy*…

When I had picked it up and opened the cover with the sexy CEO on it, there was a bright pink sticky note stuck inside. ‘Learning to love ourselves again is a big process. Sometimes, it’s nice to be reminded of parts of ourselves we’ve left unattended for a while…trust me. This one usually does the trick (;’ old-school winky face and all. My cheeks had heated up, and I couldn’t help but feel a little embarrassed. It was that obvious to a complete stranger that I hadn’t had any kind of sexual encounter in, *joder*, almost three years?

Three years. God, that feels really sad. Even though it has only been a little over two years since I walked in on Brian and that woman in my bed. On my nice sheets. Things had started falling apart long before then. He was busier and busier at work, spending more and more time away. We hardly knew each other, let alone had any sort of intimacy going on. Even when things were, ‘good,’ Brian’s idea of a romantic evening was to shove his hand in my pants for ten seconds and then say, “You ready?” Charming, I know. These are the kinds of things I’ve been starting to realize while I lay on my bottom bunk at night and stare blankly at the walls, willing myself not to spiral. Which, I don’t always succeed at. But I’ve been trying to leave the self-loathing out of the equation. Keyword: trying.

It’s still early, and I’m only a chunk of chapters into my new book. I had slipped the cover off and left it inside. It’s silly, I know. But for some reason I felt a little shy. I hadn’t thought of myself as a woman, let alone a desirable woman in, well, forever. And I certainly hadn’t experienced any kind of pleasure in a long time, not even from myself. Maybe the woman from the book store was right. Maybe that was a key ingredient to getting back on my feet. I mean, I’m here now, I might as well try everything?

Movement above catches my eye and I can see Grayson grabbing his ax again. We haven’t spoken since my first morning here aside from a ‘hey’ or a silent wave of acknowledgement. He works from the crack of dawn until the lack of daylight makes it impossible. He’s definitely determined, that’s for sure, and works with a sort of passion, a sort of fury that makes my stomach clench. He’s almost always dirty, in a really sexy kind of way. I even find myself staring at him chug his water bottles. The way his lips wrap around the top, often drinking in such a frenzy that some of the water drips down to his chest… it is *indecent*. His arms raise above his head and he slashes the ax down through the air. The muscles in his back move across his golden skin, and I hear a loud crack as the log splits in two. I’m sure he could probably split me in two, too.

Returning my attention back to my book, I grudgingly pick up where I left off. It’s been an interesting journey reading my first ever spicy book, but it doesn’t even remotely compare to watching Grayson work. Unfortunately, I have to limit my staring bouts, so as to not raise any suspicion. And I have definitely stared about fifteen seconds too long this time around. My eyes scan the page to find where I stopped.

*His eyes find mine from across the conference room table. One of his assistants was droning on and on about the new profit margins we were supposed to be reaching for, but all I could focus on was the way his suit hugged his massive biceps. Biceps I’d like to have pin me down as he rails me from behind. Right here, right now, in front of all these people.*

My eyes grow wide, and I take a quick peek to make sure no one is around. Why would anyone be around? I’m in the middle of the woods that happens to also be in the middle of nowhere.

*His eyes darken, tongue flicking out to moisten his lips. My eyes follow the movement and his chest rumbles, giving me a devilish glare. I have about two seconds to prepare myself before the vibrations begin. Oh, fuck.*

*He sees the way my body tenses and quirks one of his eyebrows. “Everything okay, Ms. Stewart,” he taunts, interrupting his assistant. The vibrations kick up a notch.*

*“Yes, sir,” I say, beginning to fidget. I knew the remote for the vibrating eggs he stuck inside me this morning was in his pocket. He made sure to flash it to me before the start of the meeting.*

My eyebrows have disappeared into my hairline. He put what… where? I squirm a bit in my beach chair turned creek chair.

*If possible, the vibrations get even more intense and I can feel heat pooling in my panties. My shirt feels impossibly tight across my chest, my breasts aching for his touch. That bastard knew what he was doing to me. He slides one muscled arm underneath the table and I watch as he slowly moves it up and down. I almost let out a whimper. He’s touching himself, when all I want is for him to be touching me.*

He’s doing *what?* Where?! I squirm a bit more in my chair, freezing when I come to a realization so outrageous I almost start laughing. I’m... uh… *wet*. Like laughably wet. Now this is just embarrassing.

I slam the book closed and lay my head in my hands. I feel achy, and am mortified when I open my eyes to see my nipples peaked, showing through my shirt. Is this what my life has become? Reading smut and secretly staring at hot, shirtless men? I press my thighs more tightly together and cross my arms over my chest. *Pull yourself together, Sol*.

Grayson is attempting to rip a hunk of tree trunk apart where his ax didn’t quite make it all the way through. A mortifyingly feral moan escapes my lips when he succeeds, ripping the log clean in two.

I shoot up out of my chair and walk as quickly as possible back into the cabin. I feel like a horny teenage boy for crying out loud! The image of the way his biceps were shaking is playing over and over in my head. His strong hands gripping the slit his ax had made…

Okay! Okay. I can fix this. I can get things under control. All I have to do is, well… I have to get off. I mean, that’s normal, right? Women get off all the time. With partners, without partners. There are probably thousands of women around the world getting off right now. *That’s not an odd thought to have.* Not at all.

Women deserve pleasure. I can have pleasure. It’s not totally insane to hide in my dark cabin and touch myself while I think about my super-hot neighbor I’ve been basically stalking.

Am I a peeping Tom? Oh my god, I am totally a peeping Tom! I am objectifying this man who is just trying to work on his cabin. All he wants is to rip apart logs and guzzle his water bottles in peace. He isn’t out there hoping someone will count his abs over and over again, or watch the sweat drip down his stomach to where the hair begins just above the button of his jeans. There’s no secret agenda where his goal is to move in just the right rhythm as he nails porch boards down so that you can imagine it’s actually you his hips are thrusting towards.

I can feel a pulse starting *down there*, my legs rubbing together like they have a mind of their own. I take a deep breath and move towards the couch. I don’t know why I feel so weird. This is natural. Maybe I should read a few more pages of my book? Get in the mood, and out of my head?

I retreat back to the table by the front door where I flung, *Billionaire Bad Boy*, and hold it to my chest as I get back on the couch. Propping my head up on a pillow, I open it back up and resume reading.

*My liquid heat starts to drip down my legs. I can feel it sliding down both thighs as I hold them tighter together, which only increases the pleasure the eggs are giving me. Closing my eyes, I grip the edge of the conference room table trying not to think about how badly I want to come.*

*There’s a dark, gruff moan from across the room and I almost lose it. I jump up from out of my chair, rushing out something incoherent about the bathroom and all but sprint down the hall. I don’t even have time to decide where I’m going when I’m shoved roughly into a dark closet. There’s a hand around my throat and I can smell his familiar cologne.*

*“You didn’t come without permission, did you, my dirty little whore?” His tongue drags along my jaw.*

*“No, sir,” I whisper, pressing my breasts against his chest.*

*His response comes in the form of a growl. “Good girl.”*

My right hand snakes its way down my stomach to the top of the waistband of my leggings. I slip it under, into my underwear and whimper quietly when my fingers reach my swollen clit. I am so wet that you can hear my fingers moving to circle the ball of nerves. *What’s that stupid Vine about the sound of someone stirring mac n’ cheese…Shit, focus, Sol.*

I set the book down across my navel, using my other remaining hand to massage my breasts through my shirt, stopping only to pinch my nipples through the fabric. My hips buck at the contact, and I slide my fingers from my clit down to my opening. First one, then two digits. My breathing hitches and I pinch my nipples again. *Did Brian ever even touch my nipples? I bet his new fiancée has perfect, small, rose colored nipples that she shows off by not wearing a bra sometimes…okay. Thinking about my ex-husband’s fiancée is so not helping.*

My movements slow, leaving me laying on the old, slightly dusty couch with my hand down my pants. I pull my fingers out from inside me, but awkwardly leave them in my underwear, not sure what to do with them now that they’re covered in my…excitement. I feel stupid, and pretty worthless. Did I really think some random book store cashier had the secret freaking code to a happy life? That I could read a hundred pages of a steamy book and I would suddenly like myself again? When was the last time I even liked myself? Have I *ever* liked myself? I certainly didn’t like myself when I was with Brian. I don’t even recognize the person he turned me into.

God, how long am I going to let Brian ruin my whole fucking life? I can’t even attempt to make myself feel good without his stupid fucking bald ass head clouding my vision. Fuck Brian. Fuck his adultery, fuck his limp fucking dick, and fuck the fact that he made me hate myself. He’s taken enough from me. The whole point of coming up here was to let go of all this bullshit. To erase Brian from my memory. To find the pieces of myself that have been lying all over the floor for years, and put them back together. To learn to love myself again. And that’s what I’m going to do, damnit!

Taking a deep breath, I adjust my body to get more comfortable. You know what’s really freaking sexy? A woman who cares enough about herself to do the hard work and heal the shitty ass stuff that happened to her. And that starts now, with giving a shit enough about myself to prove that I deserve to feel good. I deserve to feel sexy. I deserve to feel wanted. I deserve to feel like myself again.

I’m going to switch things up. Dive into a good old-fashioned fantasy. Let my imagination take over.

The inspiration comes to my mind alarmingly fast.

I slide two fingers back inside, picturing strong arms holding me, pinning me down. A scene flashes across my mind, me bent over a large tree trunk, legs spread, juices glistening in the sun. Hands caress my hips, my ass, taking a brief moment to slap the skin there, causing me to yelp. I can be as loud as I want because no one is around for miles…

My two digits move in earnest, thumb gliding up to rub over my clit. I’m panting now, hips moving back and forth, one hand in my pants, the other frantically stimulating my breasts.

A new thought brings me back to the scenario I’ve been dreaming up. A tongue is traveling up my legs, in between my thighs. It lands in the slick, wet heat of my core. I can feel the grit of stubble against my skin. I’m weak in the knees, chasing release as I ride the man’s face. His tongue taking turns shoving inside of me and massaging my clit. I’m begging him to take me, fuck me, rail me, ruin me. I hear the undoing of a belt buckle and let out a desperate, impatient cry.

My skin is hot and my hair is sticking to my neck and to the couch. My fingers are urgent as they pound in and out, my thumb moving faster and faster. The mystery man in my head grabs my hips and slams into me from behind and that’s all it takes for me to lose it. My mouth opens in a silent scream, legs shaking from pleasure. My vision gets blurry as I ride out my first orgasm in years. I’m not going to be sad about that, just proud that I finally made it happen. Finally let myself act on desires I had shoved very far down to try and soften the sting of not being able to act on them.

I turn into a limp pile of bones on the couch, letting a small, satisfied moan leave me. Maybe, *Billionaire Bad Boy,* has magical powers after all? Although, it wasn’t exactly a rich executive I was picturing take me over a log. No, this man was a lot more rugged. More of a lumberjack vibe. Someone who spends all day working with his hands. In the woods. Gee, I wonder where I conjured that up from?

*Knock, knock, knock*.

My body locks up, eyes wide, feeling once again like a horny teenager, now caught in the act. I recover, rolling off the couch and look around frantically. *Where the hell are my towels?* I shuffle around the cabin frantically, hand held up in the air like it’s contaminated with the world’s deadliest poison. Another knock comes from the front door, followed by a, “Sol? You in there?” Oh, *god.* It’s him. It’s Grayson. I mean, who else would it be? Regardless, I can’t face him now! Not after what I’ve done! Oh shit, oh shit, oh *shit*.

“I’m coming!” I yell, and immediately my cheeks are bright red. *I’m coming?! Seriously, Sol?*

I can’t find my towels anywhere so I settle for a pair of dirty leggings, wiping the evidence of my crime on the pant leg before rushing for the front door. I rip it open, a wide, totally natural smile on my face. I’m positive my guilt is written all over me, but Grayson’s responding smile is normal, not at all accusatory.

“Hey! I was going to head into town, grab a shower and some food to cook tonight. My kitchen is finally usable I think. Not so much my shower. Pretty over sponge bathing. Anyway, wanted to see if you needed anything.”

“Oh, no, I’m good, I’m totally fine, completely satisfied over here.” Something very strange happens to my brain every time I try to form a coherent sentence in front of this man. *Completely satisfied over here?! Well, not completely…it would’ve been better had he been involved… Oh my god, Sol, you creep!*

Attempting to seem more normal I add, “I’ll probably drive in tomorrow, so, I’m good.”

“I’m already making the trip, we could carpool? Kill two birds with one stone?”

*Yes, Grayson, that is perfectly logical, and I’d love to go. However, I can’t get into a confined space with you because you just did very, very dirty things to me in my mind.*

Despite my cringey inner monologue and the very loud protests my conscience is yelling at me, I find myself saying, “Sure, sounds great!” Do people still facepalm? Because I think this moment calls for one.

“Awesome, I’m just going to pack up my shower stuff and I’ll meet you back here in my truck in ten.”

“See you in ten!” I put on the most casual tone I can possibly muster, but all I hear is a bunch of squeaking in my own ears.

*Yes, Sol, you know what we should do right now? Carpool and take a shower in the same vicinity as the man you just fantasized about while getting off.*

What could possibly go wrong?

## Chapter 4

I clutch my bag of hygiene items to my chest in a vice-like grip, hoping that if I don’t move a muscle, I won’t blurt out all my sins, turning the cab of Grayson’s truck into a catholic confessional. He, on the other hand, is relaxed, one hand on the steering wheel, one hanging out his open window. A country song croons softly from the radio and I almost lose my mind when I hear Grayson start to quietly hum along.

I know for a fact I am a gross garbage mess. I’ve been here four days without a shower (listen, it's essentially camping, grow up). So explain to me how this man who works so vigorously every day, who doesn’t have a working shower, still looks like a model?

When we finally arrive at the local YMCA, my body aches from clenching it so hard for so long. That’s what she said.

I digress.

A funny feeling trickles over me as I take in the old, slightly rundown building. The memories come racing back here too, some ones that I didn’t realize I even had. Cruz and I as toddlers splashing in the puddles of our mother’s shower run off, rainy days spent in the indoor pool playing Marco Polo. The building hasn’t changed at all, and I can’t help but smile when Grayson and I walk through the doors and it smells the same. A mixture of chlorine and overused gym socks. Sadly, that’s better than the cabin.

We sign in at the front desk and head towards the men’s and women’s locker rooms. As soon as we arrive, an old janitor smelling like cigarette smoke comes out of the door labeled, ‘Men’s.’

“Sorry, folks, the men’s locker room is out of order. You’ll have to both use the women’s,” he grunts, slapping a hand-written sign on the door.

I must have my confusion written all over my face because he adds, “You’re the only ones here, shouldn’t be a problem.” He walks back towards the entrance, a slight limp in his gait.

Okay, no biggie. This isn’t weird. I’ll be just fine.

Grayson holds the door open, gesturing for me to go inside. The room is barely bigger than my cabin, lockers lining the perimeter. I notice that the stall to the far left meant for private changing is missing its door.

Heading through a small hallway towards the shower area that I remember being towards the back somewhere, my stomach drops. There are four showers total, all of them sporting a completely see-through shower curtain.

“Wow, their budget must be enormous.” Grayson jokes from behind my shoulder, breath fanning my neck. I let out a strained chuckle. Why did I have to let him do dirty things to me in my brain? I am having such a hard freaking time being near him, and now we’re trapped in this weird ass women’s locker room with nowhere to hide.

We choose shower stalls next to each other and I lay out the things I’ll need on the tiled floor. Hanging my bag and towel on a hook outside the stall, I take a deep breath, very aware that I’m about to be naked in the same vicinity as the super hot dude I let bang me in my fantasy an hour ago while I touched myself. So casual, so cool.

I take my pants off, crossing my legs slightly, unsuccessfully trying to cover my… goods? No, um, private areas?

*Okay, Sol. You can do this. He’s on the other side of the wall, no big deal. He can’t see anything from over there anyway. Although...neither can you...*

Pulling my shirt over my head and shoving it unceremoniously into my bag, I turn the water on, grateful that it actually comes out hot. I’ve just barely put my face under the stream when I hear Grayson call over from his side of the dividing wall.

“My shower won’t turn on.”

“Did you turn the knob?”

“Gee! Why didn’t I think of that?” he retorts playfully, and I mentally roll my eyes. *Sol, you are so effing dumb sometimes*.

“Har har,” I yell back, and hear him pull back the curtain of his shower. He’s quiet for a few seconds, his feet making little slapping noises as he crosses the tile to the shower catty corner from mine.

“This one won’t turn on either.” A slight awkwardness has crept into his tone. I know why. That only leaves the shower directly across from me. Through my transparent curtain, I’d be able to see everything. And vice versa. Why would they design the showers to all face each other? Especially if their plan was to use clear shower curtains…?

I step back further into my stall as I watch Grayson try the final shower’s nozzle. He has a towel wrapped around his waist, and is determinedly not looking in my direction. Water comes pouring out of the shower head.

“I can just wait until you’re done,” he offers, still staring in the opposite direction. There are soap scum stains on both our curtains, but I can still see pretty clearly.

“No, it’s fine. I won’t peek.” I try to sound cool, calm, and collected. Like someone who is completely at ease when in a crisis. But inside I am wound extremely tight. I am ridiculously naked, pressed up against the far wall of my shower, trying not to stare at Grayson’s back dimples.

He chuckles, “Thanks.” His hands move to remove his towel and I twirl around so fast I get dizzy. *Okay, peeping Tom, keep your eyes to yourself and don’t be weird.* I can do that. I can be normal.

When have I ever proven I can be normal?

In a rush I bend to grab my shampoo, squirting an obscene amount into my hands and rubbing it through my hair as quickly as possible. My need to wash the dead carcass smell off of me suddenly seems way less important than my need to get out of this shower. I rinse it out, adding conditioner now so it can sit and do its magic while I wash the rest of my body. I bend down again to grab my body wash and hear a sharp intake of breath. Standing upright and turning towards the noise, I come face to face with Grayson, making very pointed eye contact through the curtains. He freezes. It is taking all of my strength and willpower to keep my gaze on his face. To not look down.

“Um, sorry, tight muscle... from all the… chopping...” he says lamely, and I nod, briefly losing my battle of only looking at his face as I whip back around. *Oh god, oh god, oh god.* It’s so impressive. And he’s hard. I swear on my life he was hard when I caught a glimpse during my one-eighty spin. That’s totally normal. Has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that I’m naked and he’s definitely watching me. A regular, everyday shower boner. That’s something people get, right? Shower boners? And why the fuck wasn’t he facing the other direction?

He coughs and my body tenses. “I wasn’t, uh, looking or anything...I just had to grab some soap. I swear I didn’t see anything.”

“It’s fine!” I squeak, running my sudsy hands across my body in a frenzy. I risk washing more delicate areas in hopes that he’s turned back around. I consider turning to check, but think better of it.

I basically sprint out of the shower, briefly slipping, but catching myself on the wall before roughly dragging my towel across my body in a race to get dressed before he finishes. His shower. Before he finishes his *shower*. When I hear the water turn off, I beeline for the front entrance, deciding to wait for him on the benches by the parking lot.

He comes out of the doors a few minutes later, hair still wet. God, this would be so much easier if he was ugly. Well, actually it would be a lot creepier, wouldn’t it? Is that rude? Would I have even showered at the same time as him if he was ugly? Oh my god, I am so shallow.

“Ready to go?” he mumbles, looking anywhere but my face.

“Yup!” Manic. So freaking manic. Remember when I said he had a calming presence? Yeah, I take that back. Big time.

The grocery store is another fifteen-minute confessional ride from the YMCA. I choose to stare blankly out the window, trying not to over-analyze what happened in the shower. I mean, it was an accident, right? I heard a noise and it was a natural response to try and figure out where it came from. I didn’t mean to see anything, and he said he was just grabbing his soap. I should feel relieved that he was a gentleman. But, for some reason, all I feel is disappointment. There was a completely naked woman right in front of him and he didn’t even sneak a peek? Am I that undesirable? I’ve been ogling him for days and he hasn’t so much as even looked in my direction. And then I’m on full ass display for him, very literally, and he wasn’t even remotely interested? I’m literally the only pickings around, however slim…

Not that it matters. I’m not here to get wrapped up in another man. I’m here to heal. To grow. To find myself, or whatever other bullshit I’d been spewing. What do I care if he looked at me or not? Men are the farthest thing from my mind these days. I am a beautiful, independent woman who is taking time to figure out my place in the world. And that place certainly isn’t to be stared at in run-down YMCA shower rooms by hot lumberjacks. I am an educator who teaches children. I am a daughter. I am...

Who am I, really?

“Did you have stuff you needed or did you wanna stay in the truck?” Grayson’s words shake me from my spiral, and I’m surprised to find we’re already at the store.

“I’ll come in.”

He grabs a cart and starts walking through the aisles. I follow, grabbing things for the cabin that don’t need to be cooked or refrigerated. I’m feeling dumpy, and can’t wait to get back to my shitty cot and wallow.

When we reach the checkout line, I begin putting things on the belt, trying to keep my stuff separated, but Grayson takes away the little divider and shakes his head. “I’ve got it.”

“I can pay for my own stuff,” I huff, shoving the divider back down a bit more forcefully than necessary.

“I’m sure you can, but I’ve got it,” he argues, grabbing the divider again, this time holding it above his head instead of putting it back.

“Real mature.” Shoving past him, I stick my card into the reader.

“Do not accept that,” Grayson rumbles at the cashier, a young teenage boy watching us like a tennis match.

“My card is perfectly acceptable, thank you very much. This card reader is lucky to have it.” I put in my pin and rip the card out as soon as the screen reads, ‘APPROVED.’ Ah ha! Feminism for the win. Strong, independent, beautiful woman: 1, sexy lumberjack: 0. This feels like a really great metaphorical middle finger to the world. Take that! I may be ugly and unwanted, but at least I can pay for my shit!

I walk ahead of Grayson to the truck, momentarily abandoning my feminist movement as I make him carry all of the bags. When I hear the door unlock, I climb in and lay my head back on the rest. I am miserable. And over what? A stupid, three-day old crush. Because the truth of the matter is, I have value and worth as a single woman. But, there is no amount of lying or denying I can do to myself that will undo the fact that I still want to feel wanted. I want to feel sexy and cherished and loved. I hate always having to feel shitty and alone. I hate how low my standards and self-worth are that I let a man like Brian ruin me. I hate how broken I’ve been ever since. And I hate that I have this undeniable craving for intimacy and connection that can’t be satisfied with scrolling or meditation or coloring or reading.

We drive back in more silence and I am relieved when my shabby, equally undesirable cabin comes into view.

All of our purchases are mixed together in the grocery bags, so Grayson and I start trying to sort through them. “This would’ve been a lot easier if you had just let me keep everything separated,” I huff, shoving things haphazardly from one bag to another.

“I was just trying to do something nice for you.” I’m handed a box of cereal.

“I don’t need you to do anything nice for me.”

“Noted.” He pushes my bags over to my side of the cab. I grab them, looping them up my arms up to the elbow, determined to make one trip and show him who’s boss. The cabin’s front door slams behind me and I hear the truck’s tires crunch over stones as Grayson leaves.

Dropping my arms, I let all of the bags slip off my arms and crash to the floor. I will deal with them later. Right now, all I care about is attempting to suffocate by shoving my face into my pillows.

I lay in my bottom bunk for a long time sulking. After a while, I start sulking even harder when I realize my ‘escape’ has become extraordinarily similar to what being at home looks like. Moping in bed, feeling sorry for myself. All that’s missing is the wine.

At some point, I drift off to sleep, because I find myself waking with a start, the cabin now dark, a sharp banging coming from the door.

“Who is it?” I call, a bit confused and stumbling in the dark on my way towards the noise.

“Grayson.” I hear, and then I’m even more confused. I was such a bitch today, what is he doing here?

I open the door and there he is, dressed in gray sweatpants (kill me) and a white t-shirt. His hair is messy, like he’s been running his hands through it a lot, and he’s holding a bottle of red wine. Ha, ask and you shall receive.

“Hi,” I say, feeling a bit embarrassed. I let my baggage get in the way of someone being really kind to me today. He didn’t have to offer to carpool. He didn’t need to use his gas or attempt to pay for my things.

“Hey,” he tries, looking a bit flustered.

We stand there for a few moments. Neither of us speaking. The same can’t be said for the forest. It’s alive around us, owls hooting, mosquitoes buzzing. The sun has recently set, I can tell, but up here in the mountains, night is already in full swing.

I begin to apologize at the same time that he breaks the quiet.

“Listen, I’m sorry for-”

“Can I make you dinner?” His eyes meet mine and I am now triple the amount of confused as before.

“What?”

“I’d really like to have you over for dinner tonight. You can bring this bottle of wine as a present for the host.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’m good. I have stuff here to eat.” I gesture towards the very obvious groceries scattered on the floor that I never picked up.

He laughs. Did I mention it’s a really nice sound?

“Please?” He tries, and I almost die standing there. Not this incredibly handsome man, standing on my doorstep, begging me to have dinner with him. What in the actual hell is going on?

“I promise I’m fine. I really appreciate it, though.” I move to back up enough to shut the door. I am way too embarrassed by my behavior to accept even more of his kindness.

Before I can get the door closed, though, he makes a desperate, frustrated sound and blurts, “I looked, okay?”

“What?” Pulling the door open again, I step back onto the porch.

“Today. In the showers. I looked. And I’m embarrassed, and I’d really like to make it up to you. So, please Sol, take the bottle of wine, and come have dinner with me.” His words come out in a rush and my stomach does flip flops.

“You looked?”

He hangs his head before nodding. “Yeah, I looked.”

“At me?” I question, feeling like I’ve been transported to a different universe.

“Yes, at you,” he confirms, kicking a rock with his shoe.

“Oh,” is all that comes out.

“I know, believe me, I know I’m a sorry excuse for a man. But I looked. And now, I’d like to make you the filets you were eyeing at the store as an apology. Please.”

I lean against the door frame for support. Huh. I think I’m having an out of body experience.

“Sol?” Grayson’s eyes meet mine and I am a puddle of goo. He has melted everything inside of me and now I am a mess. More of a mess than usual.

“Okay, yeah, just let me get changed and I’ll head right up,” I muster through the haze that has now clouded my brain and he lets out a sigh of relief.

“Awesome. Great. Yeah. Okay, I brought an extra flashlight. I’ll leave it here for you so you can find your way.” He begins to back up, heading towards the creek. “See you soon!” he adds, turning to make his way up the hill. There’s one more glance back at me before he disappears into the shadows of the trees.

Did I just get asked to have dinner with the man of my fantasies?

I make my way back into the cabin, turning on a lantern and looking around at my luggage. What does one wear to an apology dinner with the world’s hottest man? (Am I using the word hot too much???) *He’s just being nice, Sol, don’t get any ideas*. Yes. The sexy lumberjack feels like a shitty person because he checked me out in the showers. No big deal. Normal. Casual. He’d like to apologize. I can handle that. I can totally handle that. Should I get all my squeals and giggles out now? Just to be safe?

How quickly my opinion on being looked at in the showers has changed. Joanna will also have something to say about that. That is, if I ever start telling her things.

After throwing on a flannel and leggings (surprise of the century), I grab Grayson’s bottle of wine and the package of Cosmic Brownies I bought, ready to eat real food and give some apologies of my own. It would be really freaking nice to have a friend while I was up here, and so far, I’m doing a bad job of making one.

I make my way over the creek, juggling the wine, brownies, and flashlight, only flinching once at the sound of a serial killer for sure hiding in the shadows waiting to chop me up into pieces. He definitely finds me undesirable, though, because I make it in one piece, stepping onto Grayson’s now hole-free porch and pausing in front of the door. Deep breath. I am fine, this is fine.

## Chapter 5

I raise my hand to knock on the freshly painted blue door, but Grayson opens it before my knuckles touch the wood.

“Hey, thanks for coming!” His face looks so inviting. I put my hand back down, not wanting to look like a moron fist pumping the air.

“I can’t believe I could pencil you in. I’m insanely busy these days,” I counter, stepping over the threshold and taking in the space. Wow. It’s absolutely gorgeous. Exactly the kind of cozy cabin getaway you would picture in your mind. He’d done all this in four days?

“Is that wine you brought? You shouldn’t have!” he teases, taking the bottle before doing a double take.

“And Cosmic Brownies? Really pulling out the big guns, aren’t you?” He grabs the box in his other hand, making his way to the kitchen area where several pots are steaming.

“Anything to help out a friend.” My tone is dry, but I’m hardly paying attention to our banter, slightly stunned by the work he’s accomplished. I mean, he has real, tangible proof that he’s done something worthwhile since being here. As for me, on the other hand, I’ve had two mood swings just today and I took a three-hour-long depression nap.

“Do you want a glass?”

“Yes, please.” I move to the fluffy couch in front of the fireplace.

He brings two glasses over, handing me one, and taking a sip out of the other. Sinking into the couch, he raises his glass to mine.

“Cheers to friendly neighbors who are really forgiving.” His grin is a bit embarrassed as I clink my cup with his. We’re quiet for a moment, and I immediately start to panic. Why did I think it was a good idea to agree to spend hours alone with this man? What would we even have to talk about? He’s going to think I’m so weird and socially awkward. God, Sol, how do you get yourself into these situations?

I take a really large gulp of my drink.

“I really am sorry about today, Sol. I just –”

“Grayson, it’s totally fine. I was a complete bitch to you today. Let’s call it even,” I interrupt, waving my glass dismissively.

“You weren’t a bit-”

“Grayson. Even.”

“Yeah, alright, okay, even.” We both turn our attention back to the wine.

Silence.

“The place looks amazing.”

He grins appreciatively. “Thanks, it’s definitely got a long way to go.”

“You’ve become quite the lumberjack,” I quip and he lets out a short bark of a laugh but says nothing.

More silence. Another long gulp.

A timer goes off near the stove. *Gracias a Dios.*

“That’ll be the potatoes. Dinner should be done in a few. Just gotta make the salad.”

“Can I help?” I ask, standing up to follow him.

“Yeah, sure, everything you need should be in the fridge.”

Grayson starts mashing potatoes while I dig through the fridge for salad ingredients, grateful for something to do. We work in silence, often brushing against each other trying to grab some utensil or other in the small area between the island and the stove. Every time he touches me my breath stops. It is so obvious how rock-hard his muscles are that I find myself taking more and more sips of wine just to give myself a chance to pull it together. Before I know it, I’ve been through two pours and am working on my third.

“Medium rare okay for your filet?” he checks and I almost jump out of my skin. He’s directly behind me, lips all but touching my ear. I can feel the goosebumps rise up my neck as he reaches around me to grab the pepper grinder. His chest touches my back briefly.

“Yeah, that’s great.” I grab the salad and a bottle of dressing and stumble toward the table, hoping to escape Mr. Sexy’s Kitchen in one piece. He follows with the rest of dinner and another bottle of wine.

“Bon appétit!" He watches me take my first bite. I have zero control over myself when an absolutely obscene moan leaves my lips as I chew. I don’t know if it’s the fact that I’m three glasses of wine in, that I’m all hot and bothered from all the touching in the kitchen, or that I haven’t had real food in four days, but I simply cannot contain the noises I’m making in approval of his cooking. His eyes darken, and his gaze narrows in towards the fork I’m pulling from my lips.

I’m totally imagining it because I’m tipsy and apparently super horny all the time now. Totally. 100% imagining it.

Although, I swear on my life that he watches me take every goddamn bite. He is barely touching his plate, and I feel like my skin is on fire.

I clear my throat and attempt to give small talk another go. “I can’t imagine what more you could do in here, it’s basically a five-star hotel compared to mine.” Success. He picks his fork back up to take a bite.

“The bathroom isn’t done, I only put the plumbing in for the kitchen. I’d rather not have to go to the Y every time I need to shower, ya know?” We both tense at the mention of the Y. I totally lied when I called it even. It’s, like, all I can think about.

“Lucky duck!” I smile to try to ease the tension.

“Oh, you can come up and use it anytime you want. Mi casa es su casa.” I try not to laugh at his Spanish. Why is it always one of three options when someone assumes I speak Spanish? (Which I do, by the way. My mom spoke it to us growing up. She isn’t a native speaker, but she lived in Spain for like two decades and felt strongly about us being bilingual.)

The three options are as follows: a) mi casa es su casa, b) ¿Dónde está la biblioteca?, or c) una cerveza más por favor. Yes, good job, so original. You’re doing great, sweetie.

His face heats. “I mean, we’ll take turns, obviously. I wasn’t saying we would shower together or anything.” His cough is loud as he tries to swallow a huge bite of broccoli.

“Wouldn’t want a repeat of today’s peep show!” The nervous laughter coming out of my mouth is embarrassing, but the red wine in my system argues that it’s, ‘super adorable.’

“Oh, yeah, definitely not.” Another cough.

I fight to keep a frown off my face. So, I *was* right. His little peek earlier was totally circumstantial. It had nothing to do with him finding me attractive. He couldn’t have agreed with me fast enough.

“Right…so I can do the dishes. You cooked, I’ll wash.” This was such a bust. I couldn’t keep a conversation to save my life and it’s so obvious this was a pity invite.

“Absolutely not,” he counters, shaking his head a bit, grabbing our plates and placing them on the counter.

Grayson fills my glass and nods towards the couch. “C’mon, I’ll start a fire.”

It’s like stupid warm out, but okay.

“Actually, I feel like I’ve already taken up enough of your time. I don’t wanna be a bother.” I begin to back up towards my escape. So close. Only two more feet.

“No, c’mon, we haven’t even had the gourmet dessert you brought!”

I feel myself relax a little, at least enough to laugh. He’s smiling, and now I feel like I have whiplash. I feel very, very fuzzy. Suddenly very aware of the red wine I’ve consumed. Or maybe it’s just the intensity of his eyes making my brain fog up. I can tell by their sheen that he’s feeling his wine too.

—

An hour (or four…or ten…or maybe a year?) later I feel loose and free and maybe a little too comfortable. Solid proof can be found in the indecent amount of Cosmic Brownies wrappers littering the floor.

“I have always said that! I’m a huge Disney fan. I know all the words to every song in every movie. But going to Disney World is just several hot days in a row where you stand in lines and maybe, sometimes get on a two-minute ride.” I’m gesturing wildly and definitely talking way too loudly.

Grayson looks around like the Disney police are going to pop out of the woodwork. “I don’t get the hype. I never have. And I know I would probably get crucified for saying this…but all the ‘classic’ rides people hype up…are just old and outdated.”

“The It’s A Small World ride is creepy! It is freaking creepy.”

“One thousand percent. Why is everything on a boat? Why is almost every ride on a boat?”

“I have never met anyone who feels the same way as me on this. I didn’t go until I was an adult, but still. I don’t think that matters.”

“I went as a kid. Changes nothing.” His head is leaning back on the couch, legs sprawled, totally relaxed.

“Going was something I had always wanted to do. Pretty anticlimactic.”

He sits up. “Okay, what’s something you want to do now? That you haven’t done?”

“Okay, um, something I’ve always wanted to do…” I pause to think for a minute, tapping my finger on my chin dramatically. “Get a tattoo,” I say, knocking back my almost empty glass. Grayson reaches over to fill it. That is probably not the best idea but I am too warm and fuzzy to care.

“You don’t have any?” he asks, giving me a once over. I feel every single spot his eyes land on.

“Nope. I have a couple ideas but I haven’t been brave enough.”

“What were the ideas?” I’m taken aback for a second by just how invested he seems in the conversation. Especially a conversation that is about me. It doesn’t seem like something he’s just doing because he’s supposed to, it feels like he is actually interested in what I’m saying.

I don’t realize how personal I find the question until I’m nibbling my lip, thinking about how much I want to share. “I really want a sun…” I hedge. That feels safe.

“Because of your name?” I nod. “Where would you get it?”

“I’ve gone back and forth a million times. I think maybe in between my shoulder blades. Maybe a little higher, closer to my neck.” I rub the spot absentmindedly. “What about you?” I add, laying my head in my hand, propped up by my elbow on the back of the couch.

“Probably a Care Bear.” His grin is goofy. See? It’s not that easy of a question, is it? I send a flat look in his direction as he continues. “I’m serious! Care Bears are very sentimental to me.” I probably shouldn’t roll my eyes when I’m this tipsy. I’m getting kind of dizzy. “When I was younger I used to wear a Care Bear onesie to school every day.” He looks so serious, but he’s got to be messing with me.

He must read the doubt on my face because he adds, “Cross my heart,” as he mimes the motion.

I am now hysterically laughing, tears streaming down my face, shaking my head in disbelief. “There is absolutely no way!” I cackle, feet slapping the couch in emphasis. Dramatic much? Get a hold of yourself, Sol.

“I’m telling you! I wore it every single day,” he insists, running a hand across his stubbled jawline.

“Yeah right! You’re trying to tell me that you, Mr. Big, Strong, and Sexy used to wear a Care Bear onesie to school every single day?”

“I’ll prove it to you!” He jumps up to grab his phone from a nearby side table. After a few moments of scrolling, he shoves it towards my face proudly, our fingers brushing as I grab the phone to get a better look. I lose my shit.

“Oh my god, how old were you? I thought you were talking about elementary school!”

“I dunno, like fifteen? How old are you in eleventh grade?” His shoulders almost reach his ears in a shrug.

“Eleventh grade! You’ve got to be kidding me. Did everyone make fun of you?”

“I wasn’t, sorry, what did you call it? Mr. ‘Big, Strong, and Sexy,’ back then. So, yeah. They did.” He uses air quotes around the title.

“I did not call you big, strong, and… whatever…” My eyes go wide. Did I say that? Oh fuck, I’ve had way too much to drink.

“And sexy, yeah, you did.” He has the biggest shit-eating grin I’ve ever seen plastered across his face.

“Oh, fuck. I’m sorry. Blame it on the wine!” I cry, shoving my glass away and burying my face in my hands.

“Don’t worry, I was thinking way worse in the shower today.” My stomach does backflips. I look up to see his eyes have darkened again. I can’t seem to make myself look away. His gaze travels down to my lips, and as if on instinct, I feel the need to wet them. My tongue runs along my lower lip slowly, and my eyes finally leave his face to focus on his hands gripping the couch. Like he’s trying to restrain himself from touching anything. Or anyone.

Before I can truly begin to overanalyze what’s happening, I feel a buzzing on my leg.

I’m slow to react, fumbling to grab his phone from where I had dropped it. “Your, um, phone is ringing…” I shake my head to try to clear it. Wait a second. “What the hell! You get service up here?” I yell, looking down at his ringing cell phone in my hand. The name Natalie pops up and I throw it in his direction.

“It’s uh, hit or miss.” You can tell he was just as hypnotized by the moment as I was. He tries to laugh, but it dies in his throat. His face falls, and he shoves the phone between the cushions, letting out a big sigh. The evening’s energy pops like a balloon.

“I can, uh, go so you can take that…” I start to look for my shoes.

“No, no, it’s fine. It’s just my wife.” My heart stops. His *what*? Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. *Hijo de puta.* I have been wine drunk, on a couch, with someone else’s husband. I ate a romantic steak dinner with someone else’s husband. I called someone else’s husband sexy! Oh my god, I am no better than that woman Brian had in my bed. *Trampa, trampa, trampa*.

I can feel my face heat about a million degrees, the tears already pooling, ready to drip down my face. Oh fuck. I cannot start crying here. I find my shoes and shove them on as quickly as possible, half stumbling, half running to the door. I just hope I don’t trip on my way back to the cabin. One bruised ankle is injury enough. And I certainly won’t be coming back up here for any medical attention.

“Sol, wait! You don’t have to go.” I can hear him following me out onto the porch. I don’t look back as I call, “Thank you so much for dinner. It was super lovely. Good luck with the renovations!” I’m moving way too quickly, the wine having done a number on my equilibrium, but I just don’t care.

A thought hits me and I stop dead in my tracks. You know what? No. I will not take responsibility for another piece of shit man being a piece of shit. I didn’t fucking know he had a wife. He wasn’t wearing a ring. I wasn’t checking out other naked people while legally bound to another human. I didn’t invite someone over on what very much seemed like a date while I hid out in a cabin in the middle of the woods, ignoring phone calls from my significant other.

I spin around and stomp back towards Grayson on the porch, finger pointed in his direction. “Actually, no. It was really *not* super lovely. I don’t know about you, but I don’t think married people should be looking at other people while they’re naked and then inviting them to candlelit fucking dinners,” I seethe, stabbing my finger into his chest. He barely shows any emotion on his face.

“It’s not like that.”

I lose it. “Yeah, that’s exactly what my ex-husband said two years ago when I found him in my bed with his secretary, so,” I spit, pretty aware that I’m oversharing, but my blood alcohol level is working against me. I make a disgusted noise and turn back towards the creek, heading down the hill as fast as I can without falling face-first into the dirt.

When I reach the cabin, I’m fuming, and I drop my keys like four times before I actually manage to shove them into the hole. Fuck men. Fuck men and their stupid steaks and their ugly ass cabins and their shitty ass fucking morals. Are they seriously all the same? I mean how freaking cliché.

I drop unceremoniously into my bunk, face first, fully clothed, fuming. How dare he put me in that situation? ‘*It’s not like that*.’ So, what? I made the whole thing up? It’s not super weird to watch someone shower and then cook them special steaks because you saw them eyeing them up in the grocery store? Is that a totally platonic thing to do to someone? Am I being ridiculous?

No! He’s not going to gaslight me into thinking this is somehow my doing. I don’t care what he says, if I came to my husband’s and I’s cabin and found him laughing and drinking wine on the couch with some other woman I’d definitely be uncomfortable? Especially if I didn’t know the woman?

I should just drive home tomorrow and admit defeat. I am unhealable. I am a walking train wreck who drags her baggage with her everywhere she goes.

I push back off the bunk and turn on the lantern on the big table, surveying the mess I’ve made in the past four days. With a huge sigh, I bend down and start shoving things into bags. This will all just be a weird detour I watch disappear in my rearview mirror by tomorrow.

## Chapter 6

The sun is just beginning to peek through the leaves of the endless trees when I slam the door shut of my car, effectively squishing in all my bags, and hop into the front seat behind the steering wheel. I all but peel out of the makeshift, gravel driveway and head down the mountain, leaving a cloud of dust in my wake.

Okay, so I only lasted four days out of my self-prescribed two weeks. Big deal? So what? I can get over Brian and my divorce from anywhere. *She says two years later, still crying most nights*. Very much ‘*pendeja’* vibes.

It’s not even Brian that I need to get over anyway. I could give two craps about him. He is literally the equivalent of buying off brand, plain graham crackers. No sugar or cinnamon, just a cardboard-ass personality. Plus, he’s mean. And condescending. I can still picture the way he would roll his eyes every time I talked about something cute my kids did in the classroom. ‘Jesus Christ, Sol, they’re thirteen. Who cares?’

God! There I go again. Spiraling about my cheating ex-husband. So original.

I make a sharp turn about a quarter of the way down the mountain, looking up from the radio dial just in time for my tire to slam into a huge chunk of the road that’s missing. My shoulder collides with the driver’s side door and I hear a loud *bang*. My breath hitches and a stream of curses leave my lips. I slam on the brakes and try to keep from hyperventilating. After a few moments of practicing those stupid breathing exercises from the meditation printouts, I feel calm enough to survey my surroundings. Shoving the gear shift into reverse, I maneuver the wheel every possible direction, trying to get my front tire out of the pothole. Nothing happens. I can just hear my tires spinning, and whatever parts that sit underneath my car, groaning as I grind them against the dirt.

Turning the car off, my head flops back against the headrest. Mother fucker. If I can’t get out of this ditch I am so effed. It’s another fifteen-minute drive down the mountain towards civilization, plus another ten just to get cell service. It would take hours to get to help on foot. My only other option would be to hike back up towards my cabin and find…

A sweeping of headlights makes its way through the cluster of trees ahead, breaking up the early morning dawn. Before I can even begin to feel relieved, a scowl takes up residence on my face. Of freaking course. The truck comes fully into view, slowing down so that its driver’s side window is in line with mine. I keep my eyes straight ahead, refusing to engage or put down my window. Before I know it, I’m dangling by my seatbelt, hanging out my now wide-open car door.

I cry, “What the hell?” at the same time that I hear, “Oh my god, Sol, are you alright?”

My seatbelt is unhooked and I’m drug out of my car, two huge biceps encircling my head. “What are you doing?” I grumble, kicking and flailing to get myself free. Pushing my stray hairs out of my face, I let out a huff.

“Are you okay?” There is worry etched all over Grayson’s face, which, if possible, only serves to enrage me more.

“I’m fine.” I brush past him, now resolved to hiking down the mountain for help.

“Where are you going?” he calls, but I stay silent. I only make it a few more feet before I hear him jogging to catch up.

“Did someone hit you? What happened?” More questions that I don’t answer.

My foot hits a rock, causing me to stumble a bit. Grayson grabs my elbow to steady me and I let out a muffled, closed mouth scream before ripping my arm away from him.

“Can you please just leave me alone?”

“Where are you going?”

“To town.”

“You’re going to walk all the way down the mountain and into town? That’ll take hours!”

“I’ve got nothing but time.”

“Let me just drive you.”

“No thanks.”

“Sol, c’mon. I’ll drive you down to the mechanic and we’ll call a tow truck.”

“*We* will not be doing anything.”

He jogs back in the direction we came and I breathe a sigh of relief. Be gone, foul beast.

Luck is not on my side.

The truck pulls up beside me, passenger side window down. “You don’t have to get in the truck, but I’m going to follow you the whole way. Might just be easier to get in. And faster.”

I flip him the bird and keep walking.

This goes on for about thirty minutes. Grayson turned his radio on around minute three and has been bellowing country music ever since. This guy and his country music.

My foot falls into another hole in the road, causing it to twist in the exact same way as about twenty times before. I’m going to kill someone.

“If I get in will you stop fucking singing?” I grumble.

“Sorry, what?” He turns the music down. Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“Never mind.” I pick up my pace, he matches it. I’m dripping with sweat and gnats are starting to crawl all over my face.

“Turn the fucking music off!” I yell, and to his credit, Grayson slams his hand down on the radio’s power button.

I motion for him to slow down, and yank open the door, climbing in about as gracefully as a drunk toddler. “Drive. No talking.”

“Ma’am yes ma’am.” He salutes me, and I consider ways I can murder him without getting in trouble.

There’s a bouquet of flowers sitting between us and my blood starts to boil. Oh, how nice! Off in the wee hours of the morning buying apology flowers for his freaking *wife*. This man sure loves to apologize! *Hey hunny, sorry I’ve been ignoring your calls, I’ve been acting indecent with an ax, watching women while they shower, and wining and dining them. Hope you don’t mind!*

I was fucking *flattered* that he had looked at me in those YMCA showers. Flattered! What the hell is wrong with me? That isn’t flattering. It’s creepy! I am actually the antithesis to the feminist movement.

I’ve been so desperate for so long for someone to see me as something desirable, sorry, God, some*one* desirable, that I took whatever scraps finally came my way. My self-confidence is abysmal, I know that. I do not think very highly of myself, it’s a problem I’m aware of and that I am attempting to fix. That’s why I came here. To fall in love with myself as a woman. To figure out what I like, what I want, what my future looks like. What are my dreams? Where do I see life taking me?

But instead, I got all tangled up in having a middle school crush again. It’s been so long, and I got so wrapped up in the foreign feelings so fast. The oxytocin from a new attraction getting me high and clouding my judgment.

When love does find me again, I have no interest in being anything like past versions of myself. Versions that accept the bare minimum, thinking that any attention is good attention, that I’m not worth affection or intimacy. I say that with love. I owe a lot to those versions of me. But I am ready to evolve. Or I want to anyway.

The mechanic is, thankfully, open when we arrive. I shove out of the truck, sucking in large breaths of Grayson free air. I mean, we’re literally living in the woods. Why does he smell so good?

There’s an old, balding man behind the counter, decked out in about every piece of clothing possible sporting the logo, *Bob’s Auto* on it.

“Hi! Good morning, I uh…” but Bob isn’t paying me any attention. His face lights up and he claps his hands together.

“Grayson, my boy, so good to see you!” He hobbles around the counter and I hear them do some hand shaking, slapping on the back, and other kinds of man BS behind me.

“Hey, Bob, how are things?” He’s such a charmer, it makes me sick.

“Oh, you know, knees aren’t what they used to be…” Bob groans.

“Well, you let me know. I’d be happy to help you out around here.”

“Aren’t you at McKenzie’s anymore?” Bob exclaims, coming back towards his post behind the register.

Grayson hesitates. “No, no, it was, uh… time for a change.” His entire body language has shifted. He went from jovial to a stiff deer in headlights in one question. But Bob doesn’t seem to notice.

“Well, I might just take you up on that! Now, what can I do ya for?”

“We got a car stuck up on the mountain. Can you tow it?” There he goes again with that *we* shit.

“Sure can, but the tow truck’s booked until Friday.”

My jaw drops. “Friday?” I shriek.

Bob just shrugs his shoulders. “Only tow truck in the county. The state hasn’t been keeping up with the roads these days, got lots and lots of people needing a tow.”

“Thanks, Bob. Put us on the schedule and give me a call when you’re ready.” Grayson’s smile shows all of his pearly white teeth.

I follow Grayson to the truck, mood plummeting by the second. This means I have to stay here for at least three more days.

Grayson maneuvers the truck right back toward where we came from.

I’m wracking my brain between bouts of moping, trying to think if I know anyone willing to drive four hours to come get me, four hours back, and then all over again when my car is ready. I don’t. Well this freaking sucks.

I avoid eye contact and offer zero acknowledgement that Grayson’s even in the car. He can play the hero, saving the damsel in distress all he wants. But I know the truth. With truth comes great power. Thankfully, I consider myself an expert social media stalker. It’s what I was spending almost all of my time doing all alone in my apartment. And mark my words, I’m gonna find Grayson’s wife and tell her everything. It’s what I wish someone would’ve done for me.

Very unfortunately, I have to break the silence. “Stop at my car on the way up so I can grab some things.”

“Yeah, of course. No problem.” Listen, buddy. I wouldn’t have cared if it was going to be a problem. You can kiss my ass. Actually, stay the hell away from my ass! You’ve done enough damage.

Eventually, we make it to the point where my car stabbed me in the back and he parks off to the side.

“Why is all your stuff in your car? Have you still not unpacked?” he questions, heaving a duffel bag into the bed of his truck.

“No, I was leaving this morning.”

“I thought you were staying for two weeks?”

“I changed my mind.”

“Why?”

“Does it matter?” I grunt, hauling myself back in the cab.

Five blood boiling minutes later, he pulls up in front of my cabin. It is infuriating being in the same space as him. It’s like having to sit next to the baby version of Brian.

“Is it because of –”

“Listen, Grayson, I’m just going to grab my stuff and get back in my cabin to hibernate for three days. You can get back to your own business. Take those flowers to your *wife.”* I slam the door shut and fling my things on the porch as fast as I can.

Grayson, to my dismay, joins me, helping me get everything inside. He turns on a lantern “They’re not for her,” he murmurs, and I just stare at him. He brought the freaking flowers inside. Into my cabin. Flowers for his wife. What does he want, to borrow a freaking vase?

“I really don’t care.”

“They’re for you.” He holds them out to me. I am speechless. What does this guy not understand? My bewilderment has got to be written all over my face.

His voice drops low. “I signed divorce papers on my way up here Friday.” A flash of sympathy makes my stomach knot. Shit. “She hasn’t signed them yet, which is why I’ve been ignoring her calls. I didn’t mean to call her my wife, it just slipped. I mean, I guess legally she still is, but we’ve been separated for a while and I don’t care what a piece of paper says at this point.” His words come out gruff. God, I know that feeling. I’m about to be in year two of an official, all parties signed divorce, and I still know that feeling.

“I’m sorry,” I say lamely.

He shakes his head. “No, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you think I was some sleazy guy who doesn’t respect his wife. I’ve made a really bad first impression. First with the showers and now this. That’s why I went out this morning to get you flowers. I want to start over. We’re the only two people up here, and I meant it when I said it’d be nice to have someone to talk to.”

Do I want that? I mean, yeah. It’d be nice to experience companionship. It would be nice to connect with someone who understands what I’m doing up here. Why I’m such a mess. This entire post-divorce chapter of my life has been spent alone. Keeping everything bottled up and pretending things are okay. I think I’ve plowed my way over to the other extreme, throwing every single emotion out in the world before I have full context.

“I know I really freaked out yesterday. It’s just, um…” I take a deep breath. I’d never told anyone the reason for my divorce. Not my friends at the time, not any of my colleagues. Even my parents don’t know the truth. I had only ever told them I was getting a divorce. Never why. “My husband cheated on me. And it did a number on me. I am a complete and total mess. That’s why I came up here…to try and heal, or whatever. So, when I thought you had a wife, I just kinda lost it.” The words do not come easy, but they do feel freeing. At least a little.

“That’s why I came up here, too. To, yeah, I guess try to heal or…whatever.” I give him a small smile. “So… friends? Divorce buddies? Cabin Healer club members?” He holds out a hand for me to shake, and I find myself taking it.

“What about meditation gurus?” I joke.

“How about, *Billionaire Bad Boy* lovers?” he hedges, smirking as I rip my hand from his.

“Oh my god! Did you see the title all the way from your cabin?” I hiss and he laughs, kicking my open duffel towards me with his foot. Right there, on top, in all its glory is, *Billionaire Bad Boy*.

“Hey! I’d be happy to be in a book club with you. I love billionaires as much as the next guy. Are there like sexy secretaries too, or what?” I smack his arm, specifically not paying attention to how big his bicep is when I do it. He tenses, and I watch him try to hide his reaction.

Grayson continues as if nothing happened. “I’m just trying to get a good background so I know what I’m getting myself into.” There’s that million watt smile again. Are we counting how many times we’ve been hypnotized by it? Is this number ninety-nine million?

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’m sure.” I’m trying to seem unaffected, but I’m mortified. “Okay, how about this? We can come up with a checklist. Of all the things we can do to heal and shit. We’ll check them off together. Our book club can be number one. The Divorce Checklist.” He makes a grand gesture with his hands at the title and I give him a funny look. His smile doesn’t falter.

“Really?” I ask. It seems like such a nice thing to do for a stranger.

“Hell yeah! As long as we can also put, ‘install working shower in Grayson’s cabin,’ on there, I’m in.”

I let out an amused breath and start nodding. “Yeah, okay. That sounds good.” I mean, what do I have to lose, right? I’m stuck up here for at least three more days. Might as well make the most of it.

“Oh my god, we’re going to be so healed and shit.”

I roll my eyes. Take a shot every time we say ‘healed and shit.’

He’s really playing it up, but I don’t really mind. I had such a crappy morning that this is a welcome reprieve. “I gotta get some supplies. I’ll pick you up on my way back, okay?” He’s already halfway out the door, running towards his truck. Before I can reply, he’s speeding back down the mountain, giddy as a kid on Christmas morning.

“Oh, don’t worry!” I call, “I’ll just be here!” With no car, no cell service, no other human being for miles and miles. No biggie. I am *so* woodsy. Zombies and ax murderers have nothing on me. Absolutely nothing.

## Chapter 7

We’re sitting at Grayson’s live edge dining room table that I’m pretty sure he cut, sawed, and stained himself. I mean, save some motivation for the rest of us, ya know?

He’s currently reading over the first draft of our Divorce Checklist. It’s not very long, and we had to write it on the back of one of my adult coloring pages in crayon. I feel like that’s kind of on-brand for this anyway.

Pausing and shaking his head, Grayson scribbles something out with his green crayon. “Okay, so far we have: Smutty Book Club, Operation Working Shower, and Sunrise Yoga.”

“It’s a wonder we’re not already healed. I mean, therapists should be calling us and asking us for advice. We could do a Ted Talk.”

His eyes narrow at my sarcasm. “How about going for morning runs?” he tries, and I give him a look so indignant he starts back pedaling at breakneck speed.

“Sorry, sorry. No running. That was stupid.”

“Very.”

“Alright Ms. Know It All, what’s your idea then?” He shoves the list towards me, chucking a purple crayon at my forehead. It lands dead center between my eyes.

I give him a look, which he misses, because he’s laughing so hard. “What about crochet?” I suggest. Now it’s his turn to give me a look.

“I’ve got big hands.” Isn’t *that* the truth of the century. They are big. And manly. And calloused. I wonder how they’d feel running between my –

“I’ve got it!” he yells, getting up to grab a magazine from his couch. Who reads magazines anymore? “What about this?” He slides it over after opening it to the right page. My eyebrows lift.

“A juice cleanse?”

“Yeah, to like, clean out our guts and stuff. Start fresh.”

“Wine is technically a juice, right?” I flip the page.

“No, it says you can’t have alcohol.”

I toss the magazine back in his direction. “Yeah, then no.”

“Okay, what about getting black out drunk? We can spill our deepest, darkest secrets and start fresh that way.” I pause. It’s not a terrible idea. I can’t remember the last time I was ever black out drunk, though. I have to laugh. He’s taking this so seriously and it’s got ‘golden retriever’ vibes written all over it. It’s sweet and goofy and kind. I’d pegged him for this serious, macho, lumberjack dude. Which he definitely is judging by the showroom of a cabin he put together in a matter of days. But, this sillier side of him is a lot of fun. And way, way less intimidating. Plus, I kind of feel like kindred spirits a bit. He hasn’t judged me at all for my chaotic, slightly hysterical freak outs. He’s knee deep in what I’ve been through, what I’m still trudging through. He seems to get it. He’s way more level-headed and mature about it, for sure. Maybe he’ll rub off on me. Or rub on me…*Ew, Sol. Gross.*

“I’ll write that under the ‘maybe’ column,” I say, taking my time to write loopy cursive letters.

“What about puzzles?” I’m about to say no when I remember there are about a hundred puzzles in my cabin from, like, the 1900s. Could be relaxing?

“Okay, yeah, sure.”

“I bought a bunch of surprise activities at the store earlier. I wanna keep those secrets, though.”

His grin is mischievous and I side eye him. “That’s not suspicious at all.”

“They’ll be fun, I promise,” he assures me.

I glance down at the list. “We literally only have reading, yoga, plumbing, puzzles, and drinking on here. No wonder we’re divorced. We suck.” I eye him for a reaction. That may have been way too soon. He literally just signed his divorce papers on Friday. I, however, have been making self-deprecating jokes for almost three decades.

“I don’t know about you, but the first thing I look for in a potential partner is their puzzle completing skills. I mean, imagine if they’re the kind of person who starts in the middle instead of finding the border.”

“I start in the middle.”

He waves his hand in my direction. “Case and point.”

“Rude.” I start tapping my crayon on the table, trying to remember what all the blogs said that I spiral read before coming up here.

“Oh my god, it was so annoying and cliché. When I looked stuff like this up last week to prepare for this supposed spiritual getaway, all the stupid blogs kept saying,” I put on a shrill, mocking voice, “ ‘best way to get over someone is to get under someone new.’ ”

“Okay, how about ‘hook up with a stranger’?” he offers and I stare at him. I don’t know if he realizes it, but his eyes have done that thing where they go all dark again. I shift in my seat, crossing my legs.

“You literally just said this morning that we’re the only two people up here. I don’t know where you think we’re going to find any strangers.”

“Just write it down.” He’s gone serious, his words taking on a command-like quality. It’s a subtle shift, but I feel goosebumps pop up all over my legs. My hand moves across the page, writing the newest addition.

I add a, “yes, sir,” under my breath. Grayson snaps the crayon he’s holding.

“So, uh, where do we start?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

The hand running over his face is making it difficult to focus. So big…

“I guess the shower is the most pressing issue. I am not going back to that gym sock smelling YMCA ever again.”

“I kinda like how it smells!” I protest and he gives me a bored look.

“Whatever, psycho. Let’s go.”

I roll my eyes and grumble, “Sorry, dirty book club, looks like you’ll have to wait your turn.”

—

We’re stuffed into the space Grayson has mapped out for his bathroom, his hand stretched out towards me, a hammer pointed in my direction.

“Where do you want me to put this?” I grab it from him and try not to tempt fate by touching any part of him.

“I want you to use it,” he grunts, fiddling with something under the sink.

“To do what?” I cry, eyebrows high up on my forehead.

“To pull out the old nails in the wall.”

“I was thinking this was going to be a way more ‘you’ thing, than a ‘me’ thing. I was going to take on more of a supporting role.” I twirl the hammer in my fingers and almost drop it. I’ll blame it on being distracted. I’ve got a great view of Grayson’s butt in his jeans. Man does he know how to wear a pair of Levi’s.

He resurfaces, face covered in sweat. I kinda wanna lick it. Is that weird? Oh well. “If you wanna use this shower, you gotta help.”

“That’s blackmail.”

He doesn’t care. He ignores me and nods towards the nails. Oh, whatever. I choose nails at random, using the back of the hammer to rip them out, letting them fall onto the floor. “So… what happened?” I try, tugging on a particularly tough nail.

“With what?” He’s now messing with the area where the shower is supposed to go. Imagine this man soaking wet in a shower with no soap scum covered shower curtain in the way. Yum.

I probably shouldn’t be letting myself have these thoughts. We’re supposed to be friends. I shouldn’t be ogling him. But, it’s kind of fun…I haven’t gotten to do this in years (I’m giving myself whiplash too, don’t worry.) I can keep it casual, platonic even. I can admire without catching unrequited feelings. I’m totally capable of that. That wasn’t me that developed a crush after talking one time for three minutes. I am way cooler than that. Chill. The ‘chill girl’.

“I believe the list says we’re supposed to get blackout drunk before we reveal our deepest darkest secrets.” He sits up on his knees to grab something out of his pocket.

“Oh, c’mon! I told you mine. That’s the first time I’ve ever told someone.” Another nail

drops, bouncing twice before rolling to a stop.

“You’ve never told anyone you’re divorced?” His tone is skeptical.

Insert scoff of annoyance. “Obviously people know I’m divorced, Grayson. I’ve just never told anyone why,” I shrug, adding a foot to the wall for leverage and almost eating it when the nail finally slips out.

“Wait, are you serious? Why?” He’s stopped what he’s doing and turned to face me. I avoid eye contact.

“I’m a private person,” I hedge, taking a surreptitious peek in his direction to make sure he’s gone back to his work. He hasn’t. He’s just giving me a deadpanned look. Damnit, this whole, ‘learning to be vulnerable,’ thing is gonna suck ass.

“I, uh, didn’t want everyone to know.”

“Why, though? Why wouldn’t you let everyone know how shitty he was?” My eyes narrow, lips turning into a frown considering. I’m quiet for a long time and Grayson patiently lets me sort through my thoughts.

“I guess I didn’t really see it that way. The cheating felt like a representation of how shitty I was as a wife; not how shitty he was of a person.” It comes out barely above a whisper, and my cheeks heat. It still feels that way. Logically, I know that’s not true. But deep down, that’s where the insecurity comes from.

“Sol, that guy’s a piece of shit. I’ve never even met him and I know that. Any man who fucks around on their wife is garbage, but a man who fucks around on you? A fucking moron.” This time when he pauses his work to look at me, we make eye contact. I’m almost immediately fidgeting.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I know...” I try to brush it off, but he won’t let me.

“I’m serious, Sol. Any guy who is stupid enough to lose you, of all women, is the dumbest sack of crap in the world.” I can’t tell if he’s just trying to be nice or if he really means it. We haven’t known each other that long, so what does he know about what kind of woman I am?

Although, if you think about it… Grayson’s already said and done more kind, genuine things for me than Brian did in our entire relationship. And I know that about him in five days.

“Okay, we’re supposed to be talking about you, buddy!”

He gives me a victorious grin that almost immediately falls from his face as he clears his throat and goes back to work. “Not much to say. We just didn’t work out.”

He can’t see my knowing smile, but it’s there. “Mine used to be, ‘Yeah, we just grew apart.’ ”

His shoulders sag. “We wanted different things.”

I stay quiet, giving him time. He eventually breaks the silence. “Natalie and I met when I started working with her brother.” My jaw drops. Oh my god. He means, like, *Natalie* Natalie. As in Chase’s older sister Natalie. As in one of my best friends growing up, Natalie. We only ever saw each other in the summer when both our families would come up the mountain, but that was more than ten years of spending every day of summer vacation together. I haven’t spoken to her in years, I just know from social media that she’s a big wig wedding planner now, using her dad’s money to take the wedding industry by storm. Her business is extravagant, encouraging women to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars on their wedding because it will, ‘ensure a happy marriage.’ I may be a little bitter about weddings in general, so take what I say with a grain of salt.

Past that, though, I don’t know much about her anymore. I certainly didn’t pay enough attention to know who she’s married to. Apparently, she’s married to Grayson. The same Grayson I’m currently sharing a six by six space with. How did I not put that together? He knows Hugh, Hugh owns this cabin. He worked with Chase. The caller ID literally said Natalie for crying out loud. Thoughts swirl in my head and I suddenly feel very claustrophobic. I don’t think this is good. I don’t think I should be spending all my time with my old friend’s ex-husband. Actually, her current husband. They’re not even officially divorced yet. *Carajo, carajo, carajo.*

I'm fighting the urge to flee. I feel like all I’ve been doing is fleeing every time I feel an emotion. That’s not how adults communicate though, right? But it is way easier. And less stressful. It’s especially less confrontational. Yeah, I think I’m gonna flee.

Just as I’m about to drop the hammer and run, Grayson continues. “I’m the bad guy in my divorce story.” A humorless laugh leaves his lips. My anxiety triples. Oh god. He totally fucked her over and I am betraying her by being here. What a hypocrite, all that crap about men being garbage or whatever. What was that? Does he still think women should air out their husband’s dirty laundry when they get a divorce? Let the world know just how dirty it is?

“Things started out great. She was the boss’s daughter, it was exciting because it felt forbidden. We got married, I became a part of the family, everything was fine.” He pauses, I can see on his face that he’s working up the courage to continue. Whatever he did must be really bad. I am so screwed. Should I confess to Natalie what I’ve done? I mean, I haven’t really *done* anything, but I’ve definitely *thought* a lot of things.

“It became pretty clear that we didn’t really know anything about each other. Our courtship was based on lust and sneaking around. It was easy to fall right into marriage. I was blinded by the thrill of it all. I knew most of her family already, we lived and worked in the same city, she was always around and her father took me in like a second son. But outside of getting swept up in the drama of it all, we had no foundation. She didn’t want to see it. She wanted to pretend everything was fine. That we were happy and in love. I get it. I really, truly do. But I couldn’t pretend. I was getting bitter, living in a house with someone who bought bananas every week and complained I never ate them.” He shakes his head and adds, “I’m allergic.” Oof. This is clearly still very fresh for him. I’m struggling to see his villainy, though. This actually does sound like the cliché of, ‘It just didn’t work out, we were two different people.’

“How does that make you the bad guy?” I prompt.

He gives me a sad look. “Natalie refused to admit defeat. I tried talking to her, explaining how I felt. I offered to try every therapy or technique in the book. I did everything I could to try and save my marriage. Everything I tried was one-sided. She wasn’t interested. To do any of those things would mean admitting there was a problem in the first place.

She became brutal about getting pregnant. Insistent that this would solve all of the problems I claimed there were. That we would be a ‘proper’ family and everything would be perfect. I was, obviously, very against this idea. I refused. And she hated me for it.” Grayson’s shoulders tense up. His eyes have long glazed over, lost in his story. I haven’t moved, stuck frozen in the doorway of the bathroom. I’m waiting for the hammer to drop, pun unintended. I wish he would spit it out already, tell me what he did so I can justifiably run out of here and never look back. Then I’d never have to admit anything to Natalie and I could get the hell away from here. I’ll walk a million miles if I have to. I’ll sleep in the woods.

“That doesn’t make you a villain, Grayson. You’re allowed to not want kids.” Please, just tell me what you did.

Another dejected sigh. “Eventually, refusing became almost impossible. Natalie is very strong-willed. When she wants something, she gets it. And she wanted me. Or, at least what I could give her. She would corner me, scream at me, guilt trip me, manipulate, hit, kick, slam, shove, you name it. She wouldn’t stop until I gave in. And eventually I did give in. I couldn’t stand the screaming and crying. So, I’d give her what she wanted, making it last as little time as possible, which was really fucking difficult considering I didn’t want to being doing it in the first place.” My stomach turns sour. I shouldn’t have pushed. I should’ve let him be black out drunk for this. I shouldn’t have made him share this at all. What is wrong with me?

“Grayson you don’t have to …” He just shakes his head. All I can hope is that this was as cathartic for him as it had been for me to tell him my story. He’s just kneeling there on the floor while I stare down at him. We both don’t move.

“I was letting her control me, but I’d be damned if I let her ruin a child’s life. She had stopped taking her birth control, but I kept refilling the prescription. I’d crush it up into her drinks behind her back. I didn’t measure, I didn’t even know if it would work crushed up, but I had to do something. Anything. I know that’s horrible, I know it’s a total invasion of her body autonomy. I know I’m a piece of shit. I just didn’t know what to fucking do! Her dad was down my neck at work, her brother was super protective, I couldn’t get a vasectomy, I tried, but they were going to bill the company and Hugh would’ve found out. I didn’t see a way out where I didn’t lose everything.” I feel a tear slip down my cheek and I wipe it away as quickly as possible. His story deserves tears. But I know what it’s like to feel pitied.

I let my body slide down the wall, pulling my knees into myself once my butt hits the floor.

“We definitely have to get black out drunk now.”

## Chapter 8

My shoes stick to the floor of the bar, adhering to years and years of spilled drinks, and an equal amount of years spent not mopping them. The twang of country music playing invites the patrons to the dance floor, regardless of the fact that we’re in the middle of nowhere in Pennsylvania, and not in the south. (What is with my life becoming one big country ho down?)

Everyone is having fun, though. People of all ages, from all walks of life. Heads thrown back in laughter or joy. I’ve been leaning against a high-top nursing my beer just people watching. Statistically speaking, there’s gotta be people who have gone through divorce on that dance floor. And they’re doing just fine!

I knock back the last of my beer. It’s warm and disgusting. Best chase that with something fun!

I head over to the bar where Grayson has already been surrounded by essentially every human that is attracted to men in this place. There’s a part of my brain that twitches at that fact, but I shove it away. No time for ridiculous thoughts about *men*. Tonight is about women! And by 'women' I mean woman, singular, as in…me.

Miraculously, I catch the bartender’s attention and order two shots. I take them one after the other, wincing, maybe even gagging a little, and slamming the glasses back down on the bar top, happy to get them out of my sight as quickly as possible.

*Okay, deep breath, Sol. You can do this. This is a fun, normal, happy thing.*

Squaring my shoulders, I take about two steps towards the dance floor before I immediately retreat and frantically wave the bartender back down. I’m gonna have to be way more drunk to pull this off. In the name of healing, down go two more shots.

—

The room is spinning, lights flashing, and I think I am scream-singing *Before He Cheats* by Carrie Underwood. My arms fly into the air and I shove my fists towards the ceiling, swaying my hips in any direction they want to go.

“CAUSE THE NEXT TIME THAT HE CHEEEEEATS,” I hold the note of the last word until I’m literally gasping for air, “OH YOU KNOW IT WON’T BE ON ME!” There’s a self-satisfied smile on my lips as I make my way back to my little high top, happily grabbing for my mixed drink.

“Woah there, I’m just gonna take this…” My beautiful, incredible mixed drink disappears from my hands. “And replace it with this.” Sparkly green eyes meet mine as Grayson puts a glass of clear liquid in my grasp and I start chugging.

“Oh, ew! This is water. What happened to my booze?” I move to search my pants pockets, making sure I didn’t leave it in one of them.

“Having fun, huh?” I’m momentarily distracted from my search by the gleaming of Grayson’s teeth as he smiles at me.

“Well I *was*,” I puff, smushing my hands over my face to bat the hair away that has stuck to my cheeks.

I notice a pretty brunette woman staring in our direction from the bar. She’s trying to catch Grayson’s attention, making very obvious suggestions with her eyes. I wonder what I can make my eyes say. How about, “Brian, you suck!” I snort a little as I giggle.

“What’s so funny?” The way he’s looking at me makes me wanna do crazy, wild, stupid things.

“Oh, just laughing at all your girlfriends in here. You’ve got a brunette over there very upset you’ve left her by the bar.” I make a pouty face as if to say, ‘Wah, wah, whittle baby.’

“She’s not my girlfriend.” He’s still smiling, and it’s very annoying. Or hot. Or both.

“Yeah, okay, I was being dramatic, it’s a hyperbole or something. I have a master's degree. I know what hyperbole is! Anyway, you should go back, she clearly wants to get to know you. If you know what I mean.” I try to send him my meaning with my new-found eye communication skills.

He just kinda stares at me, face neutral. “She doesn’t wanna get to know me.”

“Oh, Jesus, Grayson! Of course she does! Every goddamn person in this place does. You’ve got them hypnotized with your hotness!”

His eyebrow quirks. “You think I’m hot?” Shit? Meet grin.

“Oh just go already! Go cozy up to your new friend.” I use air quotes when I say friend. I even consider sticking my tongue out in emphasis.

“She doesn’t wanna cozy up to me,” he drawls. Oh my freaking…

“YES SHE FREAKING –”

“She wants to cozy up to *you.*” All my outrage blows out in one long breath. The corner of his mouth turns up.

“*What*?”

“She asked me to come over here and vouch for her. Introduce you, get you to come over and talk to her.”

“Oh, har har, Grayson. Fuck off.” I turn to return to my new home, the dance floor, but Grayson’s hand grabs mine and very annoying tingles shoot up my arm.

“I’m serious, Sol. Look.” We both turn our heads to the brunette. She reminds me of a cross between Ruby Rose and Kristen Stuart. The modern version, not the Twilight version.

We make eye contact. She nods first in my direction, then to the seat next to her.

I feel a hand on my lower back, not so subtly pushing me in her direction. “Have fun!” he sings, his stupid chuckle following me the rest of the way.

“Hi.” Her smile is much different than Grayson’s. It’s dark and confident and…well, sexy. Grayson has a carefree smile; her smile is all danger.

“Hi,” I say, sliding into the seat next to her. God, what am I doing?

“I’m Jade.” Her head cocks to the side, her gaze running down my body. An eruption of goosebumps marks my skin.

“Sol.” I am guessing that this feeling is what people refer to when they say they’re star struck. I feel star struck. I feel hot-girl struck. Is that a thing?

“You from around here?” *Dios,* it’s like she’s staring right into my soul.

“No, I live a few hours away. My family has a cabin up here where we used to spend the summers.” My words sound like I’m forcing them while choking at the same time. She studies me. “Uh, what about you?”

“Local, unfortunately. But don’t hold that against me.” Her eyes flash, sending me a thousand messages at once. Wow, now that’s exceptional eye communication.

“I won’t. As long as you don’t hold my dancing skills against me.” I motion towards the dance floor, very aware that I was just recently gyrating out there for who knows how long.

I earn a laugh. “I thought they were great. You were singing pretty loudly out there too. Sounded personal.”

“Yeah, well. Have some things I’d like to forget.” I look down at the discarded straw wrapper I’ve started to fidget with.

Jade leans in to whisper in my ear. “I’m great at helping people forget.” My eyes find hers and all I feel is fire. Down my neck, across my breasts, between my thighs. She’s so close. Her hand slides down my thigh, then down my arm before lacing her fingers through mine. “Dance with me.” Her voice oozes sex. Absolutely drips with it.

She leads me back out on the dance floor, turning me so my back is to her front. Her arms snake around my waist, settling on my hips before she starts to move slowly behind me. Thank god she’s guiding me, moving me exactly how she wants me, because I think I would fall flat on my face without her. My legs feel like jelly. The hand on my left hip slides forward, slipping into my front pocket. (Yes, an actual pair of women’s pants with front pockets! They’re just leggings…but still!) I think I let out an embarrassing, outrageous whimper.

Her nose trails up my neck, her lips back at my ear. “Are you starting to forget yet?” To breathe? Yes. One hundred percent forgot that one.

I feel the scrape of teeth tug against my earlobe and this time I definitely let out a whimper.

Jade turns me once more, pulling us together, her chest rubbing against my now very hard nipples. She loops my arms around her neck, but not before sliding my hands up her sides, just barely missing her breasts before stopping at her shoulders. We’re swaying again, but the added eye contact has me forgetting my own goddamn last name. I’m pretty sure Carrie Underwood *also* has a song about that…

A hand finds its way just under the hem of my shirt. The other ever so gently grazing my neck, moving up towards my jaw. Her eyes flick down to my lips. *Hostia*. Oh my fucking god. She’s gonna kiss me. Do I want that? Uh, hell yeah I want that.

Just as she starts to move in, my breath held in anticipation, I hear someone clear their throat. We both look in the direction of the interruption and my eyes narrow.

“Sol, we have to go,” Grayson says, his expression hard.

“I’m kinda busy, you can go if you want,” I say dismissively, but he shakes his head almost immediately.

“I can take her home, don’t worry.” I feel Jade squeeze my hip. I suck in a sharp breath.

“No, you fucking can’t. Let’s go,” he barks and I break from Jade’s hold.

“What is wrong with you? We’re good here, just go.” I think I stamp my foot.

“No, let’s go.” Before I can protest I find myself staring at Grayson’s ass, upside down, thrown behind his shoulder.

Hello acid reflux.

I start banging on his back with my fists. He goes rigid before bringing me back down so my legs are wrapped around his waist and he kicks the door of the bar open, stepping out into the night.

“Knock it the fuck off.” His eyes are hard as he yells at me. This is so different than the golden retriever I was sitting across from this morning. I keep my mouth shut, looking anywhere but at his face. He opens the door to his truck, all while still holding me somehow, and sets me onto the seat, reaching over to buckle me in. It’s just a few seconds before he barges into the truck from his side, slamming the door shut and shoving the keys into the ignition. We don’t speak. I don’t even look in his direction. No music. Just silence.

I must’ve fallen asleep on the ride back because I feel myself get lifted back out of the truck and up some steps. A light is turned on and now I’m really confused. My cabin doesn’t have electricity. I open one eye and see Grayson’s infamous fluffy gray couch in front of the fireplace.

“What are we doing here? Take me home,” I groan, attempting to break free of his arms.

“No.”

I turn my face to look at him. “Um, yes.” I go to push him, but his face has me stopping in my tracks.

I’m dropped onto a bed, his bed. Oh god, his bed. What the hell am I doing in Grayson’s bedroom? The drop causes the air to move, allowing the smell of him on his sheets to reach my nose. Damn, that’s nice. A T-shirt falls into my lap. I hold it out in front of me, instantly annoyed.

“What is this?” I say, crumbling it up into a ball.

“Pajamas.” He walks out into the hall.

“I’m not staying here!” I call, but he ignores me.

“Get changed.”

I look at the crumpled-up shirt in front of me. “I can’t!”

“Why not?” he says, walking back into the bedroom in sleep pants and nothing else. Oh Jesus Christ.

“This shirt is too fucking small! What am I supposed to do, put it on one of my thighs? I hope you have like ten more then!” I’m all but yelling.

“It’s not too small.” At this point he’s pretty much resorted to caveman talk.

“Yes the fuck it is! I wear like a 2X in men’s. Your shirts aren’t going to fit me!”

“Yes, they are.” I let out an exasperated sigh, uncrumpling the shirt in search of the tag so I can shove it in his face and make him read it. Math only maths a certain way. And me, plus a large, maybe extra-large t-shirt, doesn’t equal pajamas.

I open my mouth to prove my point when my eyebrows knit together. It’s a 3X. “There’s no fucking way you wear a 3X, Grayson.”

Again, he ignores me, and sets a glass of water and two aspirins on the bedside table. “Take these and go to bed.” He turns to leave, moving to shut the door behind him.

“Where are you going?”

He doesn’t stop, just keeps on walking. “The couch. Goodnight.” Oh now I’m really pissed.

I storm out of the bedroom with a vengeance. “I am absolutely not sleeping here, especially if it means you have to sleep on the couch!” He lays down anyway, pulling a throw blanket over himself, which covers about thirty percent of his hulking body, and closes his eyes.

“Grayson, I’m serious. I’m walking home.” Before I can take a step, I once again find myself in Grayson’s arms, in our apparent favorite position: bridal style. I let out an, “*Oof,”* as he drops me back on the bed.

“For Christ sake!” I start, but he chucks the shirt back at me.

“Change. Now.”

“Right now? Right here? Uh, no. I’m not changing in front of you.”

His eyes get dark. “I’ll turn around.” His words come out like grit through his teeth, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides.

“It doesn’t matter because I’m not sleeping here!” My arms flail out, motioning around me.

“Yes, you are.”

“Fine! Then *I’m* sleeping on the couch.” I start to stomp out to the living room but he blocks my path.

“No.”

“Well then, I guess we’re at a standstill.” His unamused expression does nothing to deter me as I hold his glare with one of my own.

“Fine,” he sighs, and I start to celebrate, once again attempting the trek out of the room.

He puts his hands on my shoulders to stop me.

“What now?” I bite out, and he turns me, giving me a little push back to the bed.

“Get changed and get in bed.” Grayson walks over to the other side of the bed, rips open the comforter, and climbs in. I just stand there staring. “Get changed, Sol. And get in bed.”

“With you?!” I squeak, and he runs a hand over his face.

“Yes. With me. If you’re going to be difficult, then we’ll both sleep in here.” I feel like all the ax murderers in the surrounding woods can probably hear my gulp.

He turns on his side, facing away from me, turns off the lamp next to him, and smashes his head onto his pillow.

I just stand there. I cannot share a freaking bed with somebody’s husband! With this big, strong, handsome, infuriating man.

“I’m about three seconds from tying you to this bed, Sol.” My stomach clenches. *Oh my god, Sol. Now is* not *the time to be picturing him tying you to this bed for…other reasons.*

I furiously strip out of my clothes and into the t-shirt. I start to frown because it doesn’t smell like him, but then I remember he’s annoying and demanding and stupid and I get over it.

Downing the glass of water and two aspirins in one go, I shove myself into the covers, staying as far as possible from Grayson, and lay my head down. I plan to do an impressive amount of moaning and groaning (HEY NOW, not like *that*), but I feel my eyelids grow heavy, and begin to lose consciousness in record time. My dreams star a grumpy lumberjack as always, but this time he speaks. This time he grumbles, “What am I gonna do with you, Sol?”

## Chapter 9

Waking up is a challenge. Both physically and mentally. I would rather wait for a sinkhole to open up and swallow me whole than get out of this bed. This is a nice bed. Speaking of which…I don’t have a nice bed. Whose freaking bed is this?

I fly into a sitting position which turns out to be a really poor choice because now I am really, very dizzy. I try to check out my surroundings, but my eyes are crusted shut and I literally have to peel them apart with my fingers. Taking in the dark wood walls, the sky lights in the ceiling, the set of men’s boots by the barn style door, it hits me. Ah yes, I fucking slept in Grayson’s bed last night. It’s all coming back so wonderfully to me now. And I wish it wasn’t. I wish I had actually blacked out and could forget every single thing that transpired last night. Does this mean I can’t cross it off the checklist? I cannot do that all over again, I’ll lose my mind.

The smell of bacon wafts through the air and the growl in my stomach overrides the fact that I know I probably look like I was hit by a freight train. The tequila freight train. Oh well. I’ll just slip into the bathroom, splash some water on my face, and then go on the hunt for the source of the smell.

It takes all of forty-five seconds and standing in the hollowed-out door frame of the very unfinished bathroom to remind me that I will not be washing away any evidence of my sins this morning. Nope, I’ll be forced to wear them like a huge red letter A.

As stealthily as possible. I move along the wall, FBI agent on *Criminal Minds* style, trying to assess the kitchen situation without Grayson seeing me. I’m not so sure I’m ready to deal with him. Peering around the corner, I’m met with a shirtless Grayson (has he just given up on shirts then?) leaning over the stove. I just don’t understand how he gets his back to look like that. So muscley. It feels like that would be way too much work to maintain. But what the hell do I know?

“I know you’re hiding, Sol.” His tone is gruff, like he hasn’t spoken since he woke up. Wow. I was unprepared for how that would affect me. Especially in the lower belly region.

Apparently, I am not cut out for the spy life. “Hiding? Who’s hiding?” I pad over to the kitchen island.

“Sit.” Great, we’re back to the caveman talk.

I do as I’m told (stupid) and wait in silence as he cooks. I’m not sure if I’m just running on empty after drinking enough tequila to shit out an agave plant last night or so intrigued by this grumpy, growly side of Grayson that I wanna see how this plays out, but I don’t start anything about last night. I just wait patiently. Okay, patiently maybe isn’t the word I would use. But I at least stay quiet.

A very decadent stack of chocolate chip pancakes is placed (or maybe set down with an attitude is a better description) in front of me. I’m suddenly surrounded by butter and syrup and piles and piles of bacon and I know this is what true love must feel like. I never felt about Brian the way I feel as I look at these pancakes.

“You made all this?” I ask, spinning on the barstool to face him as he takes the seat next to me.

“There aren’t exactly a plethora of breakfast places that deliver up here,” he grunts and I feel my face break out into a smile.

“Thank you.”

Grayson watches me for a moment before his expression softens. “Just eat, Sol.” The words come out gentler than before. Progress.

We eat in a somewhat comfortable, but also not really comfortable, silence. Grayson is very much still in a mood and I feel equal parts exasperated and curious. He’s only ever been goofy or genuine around me. He’s been playful and fun. He’s been vulnerable and extremely kind. But he’s never been so demanding. So dark and broody. And while I recognize that it is totally out of left field and not at all acceptable behavior…I also recognize that I am nothing but hormones floating around in a body, because it is kinda freaking hot.

No mood, no matter how broody or hot, can stop me from devouring this food, though. And I think my miniscule amount of energy should be spent focusing on that. Gotta recharge so I can spiral about the events of last night. It’s all about balance.

I take peeks at Grayson from the corner of my eye. It is still very early, and we’re eating a delicious breakfast, but he is so goddamn tense. He’s stabbing his pancakes with so much force you can hear the fork pierce all the way through and scrape the plate every single time. From where I’m standing, I’m the one who should be moody! And you don’t see me decimating my bacon into a million pieces. He literally threw me over his shoulder and made me leave the bar. What the hell is he pissed about? That he pulled a muscle lifting me up? Sounds very much like a ‘you’ problem, pal.

I am, however, pretty impressed when we finish all the food. Every last bite. He is a very good eating partner. Supportive, a team player, never leaves a crumb. Can cook. Check and check!

Before he can protest and get even more demand-y, I pop out of my seat, pause for a second to make sure I don’t throw up, and cart all the dishes to the sink.

“Sol, I’ve got it.” Grayson approaches my right side, towering over me. His scent is so strong this close up.

Focus, girl. I place a hand on his chest stopping his advance. “Contrary to popular belief, even wives whose husbands didn’t want them know how to wash dishes, Grayson.” Was that comment pro or anti-feminist? I was going for pro. Regardless, I think I’m regaining the strength to have an attitude again. God bless chocolate chip pancakes.

“I obviously know you can wash dishes, *Sol*. I just don’t want you to do them.” The emphasis he puts on my name makes me very annoyed. He’s mocking me.

“Get over yourself.” I return to soaping up a sponge and grab the closest plate.

“No.” He reaches around me to turn the water off.

“What is wrong with you?” My eyebrows start to hurt from how fiercely they’re pushed together.

“I don’t want you in my kitchen!”

“You’re being such a baby!”

“I think I’m allowed to decide who gets to be in my kitchen.”

I’m feeling a blossoming rage take over my body. There might even be a little tequila left to spice things up. “You do realize I wouldn’t even be in your kitchen if you hadn’t forced me to sleep here last night, right?”

“I couldn’t leave you at your cabin by yourself, you would’ve fallen into your coal stove or something.”

“Ha! Jokes on you. I don’t even know how to use that thing.”

He’s very angry. “You haven’t been heating your cabin?”

“It’s been warm! It’s June.”

Shaking his head and throwing his arms up he says, “Not up here in the mountains! It’s been like forty degrees at night.”

“Not every night. Like one or two.”

“So, we’re in agreement then? You can’t be trusted to keep yourself safe in your own cabin, and it was best to have you stay here for the night.”

“I’m not a fucking baby deer, Grayson. I’m a fully functioning adult. I’ve survived the last few days, haven’t I?”

He just scoffs and looks away.

“Hey! You’re being rude.” I grab the spray hose from where it’s sitting and give him a little spritz. He goes very still. Like scarily still.

“See? This is why I had to carry you out of the bar last night. You make stupid, immature decisions.” We are still so close. I can feel his breath fanning over my face. And it’s worse now that his chest is rising and falling from how worked up he’s gotten.

“Uh, news flash, I didn’t need to be carried out. I was having a great time and you ruined it!”

“That’s your idea of a good time?” I am beyond bewildered at how absurd he’s being. This is so unlike him. Well, unlike the guy I’ve known for six days anyway. We’ve had our misunderstandings, but he’s never been this grumpy. Demanding. Stormy.

“Was I abducted by aliens and dropped off in an alternate universe or something?! Were you not the guy who pushed me over to Jade last night, encouraging me to introduce myself?” He doesn’t answer. But I’m pretty sure he’s mocking me again in his head. I can’t be sure because his actual face barely moves. But there is some movement. His lips mouth, ‘Jade,’ ever so subtly, but it’s enough to let me know this whole thing totally got under his skin. “You literally pushed me right to her. You told me to, ‘Have fun!’ ” I do a really high-pitched imitation of his voice.

“Yeah, I meant have fun like chat and stuff, not dry hump each other on the dance floor for everyone to see!” My face falls. I can see the instant regret in his eyes. I feel hot and cold at the same time. A mixture of embarrassed and infuriated.

My voice goes very low and very serious. I am trying my best to stay calm. “What I am not going to do is sit here and listen to someone else tell me what is and is not appropriate to do with my own body. I can chat, flirt, kiss, dry hump, and fuck whoever the hell I want, wherever the hell I want and you have absolutely zero right to judge me.” I throw the sponge back into the sink and high tail it back towards the bedroom to get my stuff so I can leave.

I said the words. But I’m feeling anything but confident enough to stand up for myself. I feel gross. Last night was huge for me. Dancing by myself just for the fun of it, going up to a girl at a bar. Those are things that I would’ve never done after my marriage failed. Even before my marriage. And now I feel self-conscious about it despite knowing that’s stupid. Who cares what he thinks?

“Sol, wait, I didn’t mean that. I just…I was just…fuck.” Grayson stands in the doorway of the bedroom, his hands taking turns running through his hair.

“You were just what?” I spit, gathering up my clothes from the floor. It is just now dawning on me that I have been in a T-shirt that just barely covers my ass this whole time. Pantsless in Grayson’s cabin eating his pancakes. I did not mean for that to sound like an innuendo.

He’s silent. I can see his thoughts warring with each other as they play across his face, but I don’t have time to decipher them. This friendship has been way too much drama. This is the opposite of healing, this is falling back into a pattern. Is he a good guy, or is he a bad guy? Good guy. Bad guy. Good guy. Bad guy. It’s exhausting.

When I reach where he’s standing, he reluctantly steps to the side to let me through. I don’t even have any shoes on but I march across the living room anyway and throw open the front door.

“Listen, I’m not sure this friendship is going to work out,” I say, maneuvering my way past the screen door because I don’t have any hands to open it with as they are full with my clothing and shoes.

“Sol, no, wait, I didn’t mean it like that.” He looks crestfallen. That is about zero percent my problem.

“Yes, you did. I hope you have a good time up here. I’ll ride down with the tow truck whenever it finally comes up.” He doesn’t move, he just watches me go. I don’t really care. Yes, it would’ve been nice to have a friend up here. And yes, it would’ve been nice to get to fantasize a little bit in my head while I was here. Feel feelings I haven’t gotten to feel in forever. But that’s not what this trip was supposed to be about. Things are too hot and cold, too dramatic, too up and down. I am worked up almost all of the time around him. Although, if I’m being honest, that is a kind of refreshing, even if incensing, one-eighty to the way I felt with Brian. I was quiet almost all the time with him. Agreeing with whatever he said, trying to be the perfect, silent wife. To earn his love. I never used to be like that. I was like his little robot wife with a downloaded personality he got to choose…

That doesn’t even matter. The two are not comparable. One was my husband and one is just some guy I just met. Yes, I was attracted to him. But, I was attracted to Jade too. It doesn’t mean anything. It doesn’t mean I owe him anything. So we made a stupid checklist together? So what? If he’s going to be moody and demanding, then that’s on him. It’s definitely not hot anymore. I’m not going to stand around getting swept up in his hurricane of emotions. First, he’s mysterious, then he’s sexy, then he’s kind and genuine, then he’s goofy, then he’s supportive, then he’s a caveman, and now he’s misogynistic. That sounds like a whole lot of, ‘DO NOT ENTER,’ metaphorically speaking. Well, I guess in the literal sense as well. Anyway, that’s beside the point.

He needs time. He needs space and he needs to heal just like I do. He needs to figure out who he is outside of his marriage. I will not get in the way of his healing just like I won’t let him get in the way of mine. I know what it’s like to feel rudderless. I am the definition of ‘up the creek without a paddle’. I’m not myself. I haven’t been myself in so long. I don’t even know who ‘myself’ is. And he’s experiencing that too. And it’s best if I just let him. No harm, no foul.

I limp my way over the threshold to my cabin (I only finally stopped to put shoes on after stabbing the bottom of my feet on rocks for like the fifth or sixth time) and survey the severity of the mess I’ve made in the one day it’s been since I found out I’m stuck here and can’t leave like I was planning to. Very symbolic. I’m going to start cleaning. Yes I am. Cleaning is good. Cleaning is therapeutic.

I start with the scattering of clothing I threw around trying to find something to wear to the bar last night. I don’t know why I even looked so hard, we all know all I have are t-shirts and leggings.

The endless bending down and getting up is making me nauseous. It’s definitely from the acid reflux. It is certainly, certifiably, one hundred percent *not* about an argument I may or may not have had with a very annoying nearby resident.

And I can promise you that I am not feeling any type of unsettled about any conversations I may or may not have had this morning.

I will swear on anything you want. No harm, no foul. That is exactly how I feel. Completely. Without a doubt. A *thousand* percent, even.

Do you think the wicked *bruja* haunts people on the mountain who lie? Asking for a friend.

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The next couple days are obviously and predictably very boring. Like psychological break inducing boring. The first day I was very determined to finish the checklist myself, ready to start fresh at square one, be an independent woman, blah, blah, blah (at this point I’m annoying myself. It’s like I’m getting paid every time I say the words healing, divorce, and independent). I had a plan to find my meditation papers, open my coloring pages, read more dirty books, and find myself as the sun rose each morning with my toes squished in the earth, bent over doing downward dog.

Turns out, I hate meditating. Not because it’s boring, but because I either sit and spiral or spend so much mental energy trying not to spiral that I feel like garbage afterward. I didn’t print enough pages to know if you’re supposed to spiral and heal by reliving trauma or if you’re supposed to empty your mind of all thoughts. Which is essentially impossible. It would probably be way more possible if my big, tall, lumberjack of a neighbor wasn’t doing construction twenty-four hours a day but, I digress.

If I do manage not to spiral, all I can focus on are the sounds coming from up the hill. Which lead to very different, stupid, illogical thoughts.

There could even be a third option for how you’re supposed to meditate that I am not even remotely qualified to know or understand after my manic thirty-minute Google search. So that one is a bust.

You can only color so many doodle pages with a big, bold ‘fuck off’ in block letters before you a) get sick of it and b) get arthritis. The yoga has been accompanied by bugs and I feel like that is enough explanation as to why I’ve given it up.

The dirty books have actually been a lot of fun. Apparently, the book store lady slipped a lot more in my pile than I thought. It’s true that my thoughts sometimes drift to a certain someone that they shouldn’t, but for the most part it’s been kind of exciting.

They’re a pretty brutal reminder that my standards for love were completely obliterated over the last eight years. And even before then, they were based on teenage hormones and silly fantasies I’d seen in movies. I know a lot of the books I’m reading now are exaggerated and whatever, but they’re also empowering. I am a woman who deserves pleasure, respect, love, kindness, power, say, consent, and joy. (Affirmations work, right?). I do not deserve to constantly question whether or not my partner even likes me. To have to bait them in hopes they’ll nibble and I can reel in their affection. Sighing as loudly as possible in hopes they ask me what’s wrong. Pretending (or actually), crying in front of them to earn a freaking hug every once in a while. Giving them the silent treatment to see if they even give a shit that I’m upset or that my feelings are hurt (shocker – they didn’t).

That isn’t healthy, and they are coping mechanisms I am not willing to continue. Which means naming my toxic patterns, learning from them, and making sure I don’t enter into the vicious cycle all over again just because I desperately want to be seen. To feel known and cherished. To feel like somebody gets me and wants the world for me. These books, however silly, are showing me examples of things that I haven't gotten to experience. Introducing me to a world I didn’t even know existed. Not to this extent, at least. I think Joanna would be proud of that realization.

I want another chance to love myself and fight for myself. And so even though I hate meditating and have out colored myself, I am going to pursue this new budding confidence, these new boundaries, and just pure fun I’m finding in my books.

My skin is currently sticky with dried sweat and my feet hurt from the very ambitious hike I chose to go on this morning. I was about three seconds from going absolutely nuts sitting in that cabin all day everyday besides my very brief strolls up and down the road in front of the property, so I threw my morals and ethics to the wind and sank as low as deciding to climb a freaking mountain. In the heat. With no cell service and no one around to save me if I get eaten by wolves or trip and fall and break my leg (my serial killer and I are on a break).

And I hate to be that person, because ew, but the view is totally worth it. Maybe I’ve just been staring at the four walls of my cabin for too long, but it really is beautiful. There are trails up the mountain, like the one I took today, that lead to different overlooks where you can see the entire valley below. I had desperately needed to get outside and as far away from any drawing utensil as possible. This turned out to be just the thing I needed. Although, to be honest, I could’ve definitely gone without the hiking, sweating, and bug swatting, but sitting up here with my thoughts somehow feels easier than trying to meditate back down below.

I feel like I can breathe a little easier up here, like I can think more clearly. There’s less pressure. I put a lot of pressure on my cabin to solve all my problems.

I like being in nature. Just in more of a glamping kind of way. Not to be bougie, but because I am the worst at being uncomfortable. That’s what this trip has been. Uncomfortable. Out of my comfort zone. It’s what I had wanted when I decided to come stay, but saying and doing are two different things. I’ve survived more than one whole week, though, which is a pretty huge feat for a millennial. Especially one who has been using doom scrolling as another one of her coping mechanisms.

It has heated up a bit since I got here, and I am happy that I hiked far enough up to be able to see the sun. It’s always filtered through the leaves in the trees by the creek and I’m enjoying getting to see open, blue sky again.

The creek across from my cabin actually leads into the river that carves out the valley under me, and I’ve just been watching the water flow, now moving quickly from recent rain (that was a fun day, I think I started counting floor boards out of sheer desperation), listening to the birds call to one another, and letting my mind drift. If anything, at least I can say my head has been pulled out of my ass. I feel like that’s a good step. I see things around me. I notice people. I feel real emotions. Anger, frustration, lust, joy, boredom. I haven’t felt real emotions, been anything but numb, for years. Even before the divorce I had gone numb just so I didn’t have to face how bland and sad my ‘happy ever after’ was. I say Joanna would be proud of these discoveries, but truth is, she’d probably be proud with quite literally anything I did because I have not opened up one single bit in all the time I’ve been seeing her. I can only imagine the look on her face when I finally tell her a real thought I’ve had.

Even though the night at the bar comes with a sharp pang of anger (sadness?) now, it feels monumental. Not only did I let go of my insecurities long enough to dance by myself in front of a bar full of people, but I was also brave enough (thank you tequila) to flirt! Sure, I didn’t do a whole lot of talking, but I haven’t touched someone or been touched in eons. I’ve never just gone up to a hot girl and let her take me onto the dance floor. I’ve never twirled around, free as a bird, singing at the top of my lungs. I’ve never even done that alone as an adult, let alone in public. And that totally feels like progress.

If you called my parents and told them about the night at the bar they would literally laugh you off the phone. My mom would cackle a, ‘*No me jodas,*’ and my dad would laugh, chuckling something like, ‘That doesn’t sound like Sol.’ Honestly, I don’t even really have any friends you could check with. I used to have friends. Kind of. I’m friendly with some of my colleagues. But anyone I was even remotely close with I’ve lost since marrying Brian and the aftermath of my marriage’s freefall back to Earth with no parachute. I all but disappeared off the side of the planet. I didn’t want to talk, to hang out, to be cheered up, anything. I was too embarrassed. I was convinced that if they found out the real reason Brian and I got a divorce that they would judge me. Make assumptions why he wouldn’t want to be with me anymore. Think less of me.

I wasn’t even the one to ask for a divorce. It is the thing I feel the most shame about. From maybe my whole life. I wasn’t even going to fucking leave him. I was going to try to, ‘work through things.’ It makes me sick to my stomach even to this day. I am forever indebted to the universe, because the fact that his secretary wanted him to leave me is one of the best things that could’ve ever happened. Thank God she threw a hissy fit and forced him to call the lawyers. Who knows where I’d be now…

The sky is changing to a glowing, hot pink in front of me. There are oranges and purples mixed in and watching as the sunset evolves makes me feel larger than life. Like I’m a part of something bigger than living, getting married, getting divorced, and dying alone. Like there is more to life than working and sitting in an apartment drinking wine until you’re tired enough to sleep. I may have bags upon bags of baggage, but I feel awake for the first time in a long time. And I think that means something. Although, I’m not sure this awakening can be one hundred percent credited to coloring and tequila. I’m humble (stupid) enough to admit there’s been an entirely different source that has gotten me fired up, feeling feelings, and sticking up for myself.

## Chapter 10

The construction noises become less and less frequent as the first full week blends into the second. I mean, honestly, what else could he possibly be doing that he hasn’t done already? His truck comes and goes throughout the day. I can see it from my camp chair in the creek when I’m reading my book and I barely feel anything when it happens anymore. Ha, yeah, okay.

I have tried to figure out why he (we all know who ‘he’ is) has affected me so much in such a short amount of time, but I haven’t come up with anything substantial. The only thing I’d maybe consider is the fact that it’s the first time I’ve felt any sort of attraction since the divorce. I am so sick of saying, ‘since the divorce.’ Like my life begins and ends with Brian.

Except…I haven’t been obsessively thinking about Jade and she’s the first person I touched intimately, so…(I use that term loosely, we barely even touched. But for me, it was a Big Deal.)

On one of my morning walks, I noticed my car had finally been towed. Well, either that or one of the serial killers I’ve come to know so well stole it and went to go stalk other people in some other woods. Kinda rude. What ever happened to fidelity? Feels like what we had wasn’t that special, ya know? Apparently our ‘break’ is permanent. Deja vu.

I guess I won’t be hitching a ride with the tow truck after all.

I haven’t heard anything about my car’s status, although I’m not really sure how the hell they’d contact me anyway. I’m also about to officially pass my two-week staycation deadline, but I find I’m not that worried about either of those things. This has slowly been turning into a different kind of peace than when I’m sitting at home wallowing. Sure, my apartment is technically peaceful with literally nothing happening except wine drinking and dead silence, but I don’t *feel* peaceful there. I feel sad and lonely and stupid and numb.

Here, I’m beginning to finally feel…calm. Not numb, but safe to feel and to listen to myself and to get a sense of what I want, what I’m truly like. I have been extremely bored. But I’m starting to adjust to the one on one time I’m getting with the stuff going on in my head. I am discovering new things about myself everyday by just pausing to listen instead of shoving away until all my thoughts bottle up and cause a spiral.

I’m learning that I like to read, that I’m attracted to confidence and want to rebuild my own. I’m realizing I have way more feistiness than I’ve given myself credit for and I wanna show it to the world. I’m finding I actually really like teaching, but I need to make an effort to grow my support system there. That I want to break the lease on my apartment and move closer to a river or lake or pond. I want to call my old friends and tell them I appreciate them even though I never showed it. I think I want to start new hobbies. Dancing, or horseback riding, or cooking. I’m interested in maybe dating. I don’t think I’d want anything serious, I’m not ready. But I’d like to cultivate these newfound desires. I’d like to flirt and talk about life and touch and find out what traits I’m looking for, what warning signs I need to watch out for. I need to do some practice rounds before I get back in the ring fully.

There’s only one issue in my little haven here that’s starting to become a very big problem. I have exclusively been sponge bathing off a rainwater spigot for a week and a half. I am approaching disgusting. I mean, I’m doing the best I can, but still. So, I am unfortunately up at the crack of dawn, in hiking boots, ‘ready’ to walk down the mountain and to the YMCA. It is going to take hours and I haven’t really figured out what I’m going to do after. I mean, what’s the point in showering if you have to hike for five hours afterwards? I’m hoping I can stop by Bob’s on the way, check on my car, and ask for a ride. Not that I’m particularly keen on asking for a ride, but it’s really my only option.

I am attempting to be mentally strong. To control my fatigue and discomfort and keep it in a box in some far-off corner of my brain. I am unsuccessful and I have barely started. I’m just past the point of my usual walking route and my body has decided that we’re done now. Not really how that works. So I push forward, wishing I at least had music to listen to or something. Maybe an inspirational podcast. My plan had been to at least charge my phone in my car every once in a while so I could pull up my playlists or beat a level of Tetris, but, sadly, that didn’t quite work out.

The crunch of tires on gravel breaks me out of the battle happening in my brain. I look over my shoulder to see Grayson’s truck. Because, *of course,* who else would it be? Especially when I am so outrageously gross I can’t even begin to explain. That’s exactly when the universe sends him my way. Why is it that every damn time I’m on a mission trying to get down this mountain, he magically appears?

“Sol?” he queries, brows knit together, as he slows the truck and puts down the passenger side window.

“Hey. You’re up early.” I smile, trying my best to act casual and normal (new one: take a shot every time I say casual or normal) even though I feel itchy and…yeah, star struck. Jade was like a quick high. Grayson is such a slow, warm, burn. He’s always simmering right under my skin. No matter how long it’s been since I’ve seen him. I’ve been getting better at being honest with myself and I can admit I have a crush. These feelings kinda suck, though. Mostly because he kinda sucks.

Okay, I don’t think that’s fair. He’s lost and dealing with something and isn’t the best version of himself right now and that’s okay. But it’s becoming an issue that I’m thinking about him all the time. Most of the sides of him I’ve seen, I really like. Sides that bring out sides of me that I really like. Looking at him now is like getting hit by a bus. Why does he have to be so handsome? Why did he have to show me how fun and kind he is? Why did he have to awaken urges and instincts in me that have been dormant until now? It would’ve been way easier if he had been a turd the whole time.

“Yeah, I needed some things from the town over. What are you doing?”

“Oh, um, just taking a walk, gonna have a picnic.” I say, motioning towards the backpack on my back.

“You need shampoo for a picnic?” He raises a brow. Shit. I look back to see the shampoo I shoved in the side pocket in my rush to get out of the cabin.

“Well, you never know. Hope your travels are safe today!” *Oh god, Sol.* *Could you be any weirder?*

“Sol, are you hiking into town to shower at the Y?” I know my face blanks. I can feel the heat on my cheeks. I don’t get the chance to even try to lie before Grayson says, “Get in the truck.” Yeah, no. That’s not happening. I am so, so gross, and I’m very annoyed to find out that over a week was not enough time for him to get rid of the caveman act.

“I’m fine, don’t worry.”

“Sol. Get. In. The Car.” Listen, I know it’s bad. I know I shouldn’t. But *damn*, the way his voice gets growly and his eyes darken makes me shiver. I feel the goosebumps prickle my skin. So demanding. Which is definitely not what I need! Some alpha male to boss me around. Yes, that would be horrible. Very un-hot. Not at all thrilling or sexy or steamy. Ew, who would want this perfectly sculpted creature in front of me to ravish them? Tell them what to do? Throw them around a little? That would be awful. Can’t think of anything worse.

Okay, if we’re keeping on the honest trend here, yes, my spicy book addiction has infected my brain and completely taken over. Sue me.

“Listen, can this please not be a fight, just this one time? Get in the car and I’ll take you back to my cabin and you can shower.” He sounds tired, maybe exasperated.

Oh no. No, no, no. I am not going back to his cabin to *shower*. I cannot do any naked things in his cabin. Ever.

“I have to go into town anyway to check on my car. It’s no big deal.” I wave him off. I’d also like to find a bookstore, maybe…increase my supply.

“Fine, I’ll drive you into town and then we’ll come back up and then you can shower.” Does he not understand that I am not getting into that truck smelling like this? I’ve never felt more strongly about something.

“Oh, no I –” I barely get a word out before I’m interrupted.

“Goddamnit Sol, get in the fucking car!” Have you seen *The* *Notebook*? You know when Ryan Gosling is yelling at Rachel McAdams, begging her to tell him what she wants? Yuuuuup, yup, yup, yup. What a thing to check off my bucket list in the middle of nowhere having not showered in a week. I had my Ryan Gosling moment. Right here with Grayson. Shit. Wow.

He leans over the cab and opens my door, eyes locking with mine expectantly. Well, here I go, completely ruining my chances of ever checking off the ‘desperately running to each other and kissing in the rain experience’. Because he is never going to interact with me again after my stench fills up his car.

I climb in, storing my backpack at my feet. He starts to drive again and like always, we’re silent. After a few minutes, he rolls down his window to match mine. Oh my god. He can totally smell me. This is mortifying and I want to disappear into thin air right the hell now. I’m so distracted by my humiliation that I don’t notice arriving at Bob’s or the fact that Grayson goes in without me. I’m about to storm in there and give him a piece of my mind when he comes back through the entrance and slides into the truck.

“Uh, what was that?” I cry, incredulous.

He shrugs. “I went in to check on your car like you asked.”

“I didn’t ask you to do anything! I just said I needed to stop there!”

“And we did. All good. Anywhere else?” This man. So confusing. I don’t get him.

“All good? What does that mean? I can get my car back?”

“Oh, no, he said he needs another week. Backorder on parts or something.” I let my head fall forward and bash into the dashboard. “Okay, so anywhere else?” His tone is that of a man who has to deal with someone very exhausting every day.

I do need to go somewhere else: a bookstore. But I know there isn’t one right in town and I will not subject him to my smell longer than necessary. I pause. Is that why he went in there without me? Because he couldn’t stand being in the truck with me anymore? Do I need to change my name and move somewhere very far away?

“I’m good. Just the Y.” His sigh is so full of irritation that I just fling my head up and let it smash into the headrest in defeat. I mean, it can’t really get much worse. Might as well go all out and get an actual shower out of it. Make the best of my ass backward situation.

—

I’m standing in the middle of Grayson’s living room terrified to move, trying not to let my smell get on anything. He comes out of the bathroom and nods his head back in its direction.

“Towels are in there, soap, whatever you need.”

“Thanks.” I still don’t move.

“Are you okay?” I just nod. I’m hoping he’ll leave so I don’t have to panic the whole time I’m showering that there will be an emergency and he’ll need to come in the bathroom and I’ll be naked and will do something horrifying like slip and fall and then he’ll have to pick me up, naked, and take me to his truck, naked, and then my spirit will have to leave my body to save me from the mortification. “It’s better than the Y, I promise.” Oof. Haven’t seen his smile in a while. He’s been so grumpy.

I let out a nervous laugh. “Yeah, I’d probably still be hiking down the hill, not even halfway. And that’s not including the bookstore.”

“Bookstore? Like in Surley?” You can tell by his facial expression he thinks I’m nuts. I probably am nuts.

“Uh, yeah, I’ve been reading so much and I’d like new books. Especially if I’m going to be up here another week.” A grunt of approval (Disapproval? I don’t know.) comes from his chest and he thankfully leaves out the front door. Probably to chop some wood or something. He always finds a way to make unnecessary noise.

The bathroom turned out really nice. Very clean and simple, but it works. Turning the water on, I give myself a pep talk while waiting for it to heat up. You can do this. You can take your clothes off and be naked in Grayson’s shower. That is not weird or scary at all.

I shove the clothes as deep down into my backpack as possible before zipping it up and hoping it’s airtight or something. Is that a thing? Airtight backpacks?

A very embarrassing moan comes out of me when I step into the glorious hot water. I have totally been taking hot showers for granted. Now this is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. To be clean, to actually wash my hair fully, what a luxury. I reach for my soap and realize I accidentally grabbed the lotion instead. (They’re in very similar looking bottles, okay?) A quick look tells me that Grayson has body wash in here I’m going to have to use. Is that weird? I don’t really have a choice.

It is a very big mistake. I haven’t even put any on my skin before the scent makes me lose my mind. My nipples pebble, and my breasts feel heavy. When I finally run my soapy hands over them, I’m fighting a tidal wave of dirty thoughts. Everything feels hypersensitive. I have to clench my teeth just to clean between my legs. It's all bordering on obscene. I’ve gotta get the hell out of here.

After scrubbing everything as quickly as possible and trying to pretend I’m not turned on by something as sad as the smell of soap, I step out of the shower to dry off. I am doing my absolute best to calm the fuck down and be normal. Why do I have to try so damn hard to be a regular, mentally stable human being? Doesn’t matter. This is all leaning towards obsessive at this point.

After taking several deep breaths, I open the door, planning to blurt out a quick, ‘Thank you!’ and be on my way, but I don’t see Grayson anywhere in the living room or kitchen. Maybe he’s outside?

I do a lap around his porch and around where he normally cuts wood, but nothing. It’s then that I notice his truck isn’t here. Um, okay. Weird. He knew I was in here showering. I can’t just leave his place unlocked to go back down to mine...

My mind races trying to come up with a solution that doesn’t make me wanna vomit. I can’t stay here and just awkwardly wait for him and I can’t just leave without saying thank you.

An idea hits when I go back into the cabin and see there’s a thing of bread on the counter in the kitchen. I think that works, right? I’ll make him a quick and easy thank you lunch (with his own food, but, whatever), leave a thank you note, and hope someone doesn’t come up and find his cabin and steal everything. I feel like whatever I come up with I’m going to feel weird about anyway, so I might as well go with the first thing that pops in my head. Save some time.

It’s easy to source the ingredients I need. I even find a box of macaroni and cheese that I pull out. It makes me giggle a little that someone like Grayson would have box mac and cheese.

Oh, shit. My stomach drops. The internal groan right now is very intense. I am so out of food at my cabin. Damnit, why didn’t I remember that when we were in town? *Me cajo en la leche…*

What the hell am I gonna do? I can’t make Grayson take me down again. Maybe I can find some berries in the woods or something? I’ll probably just accidentally poison myself.

I close my eyes and take a breath. I’m just going to have to humble myself and ask for his help. I’ll get enough to last the week that I’ll be here and then we don’t have to interact anymore.

The sandwich sits on a plate next to the stove with a thank you note written on the back of one of the coloring pages I must’ve left here. I leave the macaroni on the burner with the lid on, hoping that’ll keep it warm enough for when he gets home. I’ve done my due diligence and can leave guilt free. I’ll trek back up later when he returns from wherever the hell he is to beg him to take me to the grocery store.

A truck door closing reaches my ears and I panic. He’s not supposed to be home until *after* I leave. We had a very specific agreement in my head about this.

Grayson walks through the door with his arms filled to his shoulders with bags.

“Oh! Jeez, let me help you!” I scramble over to take some of the bags and put them on the island. “Hungry, huh?” I tease, taking in the piles and piles of groceries. His cabinets are pretty full. Not that I was snooping, per se, but circumstantially I saw some things.

“No, these are for you,” he grunts, unloading his arms as well.

I stare at all the stuff. “Grayson, what?” I turn to look at him, which in hindsight was a bad idea because he meets me with those green eyes and I all but melt.

“I’m such an asshole. I’m so sorry, Sol. I wasn’t even thinking. You mentioned the books and it all came together in my head. I knew you didn’t have a car. It’s been days! Weeks! What have you been doing this whole time? Eating fucking leaves? You should've said something. I would’ve taken you to get food.” He shakes his head. “No, I should’ve checked. I should’ve come down and checked and I’m so fucking sorry.” I’m a bit stunned. He is so genuine in this moment. Tortured. You can see it all over his face. He doesn’t owe me anything. It’s my own fault I don’t have a car. Well, it’s the ditch’s fault, but, whatever.

“Grayson –”

“I know. I suck as a human I fucked up and I’m really sorry I told you I was here for you especially because you’re essentially stranded up here and I wasn’t I let you starve and probably have to rinse off in the creek every day I can take this all down to your cabin but I would really really prefer if you agreed to stay here instead.” He spews all of this in one long run-on, all of his words squished together. He hardly takes a breath before he’s done.

“Grayson, I don’t need to –”

“God, you’re right. You shouldn’t have to be anywhere near me. Okay, if it’s alright with you, I’ll move down into your cabin and you can stay here.” His eyes are wild, desperate. So much emotion. What happened to the caveman? The guy who said I was immature and acting too provocatively?

I put my hands on his chest and gently guide him into one of the dining room chairs. I do not notice how broad and warm his chest is. That would be so unlike me and totally inappropriate.

Pulling up a chair of my own, I study his face. “What in the world is going on?”

“I want you to stay here. I want to make this up to you.”

“There’s nothing to make up for.” I mean, there kind of is, the whole bar fiasco for one, but not for leaving me alone when I asked him to. “Grayson, just last week you didn’t want me in your kitchen doing the dishes! You don’t want me to stay here. I’d be doing a lot more than touching the dishes!” I didn’t mean it *that* way, but I can tell by the shift in his expression that he took it that way. The muscle in his jaw twitches. “Not to mention just about everything I do upsets you in some way. And I don’t want to be fighting all the time. And I’m certainly not stealing your cabin and having you move into mine. I’m fine, I promise.” I stand up and look towards the counter. “How much were the groceries? I’ll pay you back.”

I’ve got one bag looped up to my elbow when I feel him cage me in. Both arms on either side of me, leaning on the countertop. Chest flush against my back. My stomach flips.

“You’re not paying me back. And you’re not going back to your cabin.” His lips graze my ear with every word. I have to fight so damn hard not to whimper. I am rigid as a board, body completely tensed up. We’re back to demands. How did we go from Genuine, Sweet, Thoughtful Grayson to Demanding Grayson so quickly?

“Grayson…” It’s a breathy, whispered response. Any more than that and I’d be purring.

“Say you’ll stay.” He’s gripping the counter so hard I can see the muscles in his forearm straining. I know this is my imagination. I know I slipped and fell hiking down the mountain this morning and am about to finally die on the side of the road. And I most definitely, irrevocably, positively know I am imagining the fact that I can feel his dick on my ass.

“Say it.” He’s essentially growling in my ear and it is going straight to my clit. Direct line, no stops.

I must be crazy. I must’ve hit my head. I must have gone loony after being alone in the woods one too many days in a row. I know I’ve suffered brain damage because I hear myself breathe, “Okay.”

## Chapter 11

This is nuts. This is insane. This is the single most outrageous thing I’ve ever agreed to. And I married Brian, so.

I stare at the pile of my stuff sitting just to the right of Grayson’s bedroom closet. I’m sitting in his bed, just staring. I’ve been doing this ever since he left to go get all my things. He insisted, and I can only imagine all of the embarrassing things he found before coming back and dumping everything in a big pile. He probably saw my underwear. He probably saw my *dirty* underwear.

Listen, I only thought I’d be up here for two weeks.

I’m trying to get a hold of myself. I cannot be weird and awkward for the next week. It will make things beyond uncomfortable and as we’ve established, I don’t do ‘uncomfortable’. I’m not sure why I have to pep talk myself so often into being an adult, but I am so inexperienced in all of this. The only person I’ve ever lived with is Brian. I don’t know if you can call this situation ‘living together’ but we’re sharing the same space…what else would you call that?

I’ve especially never ‘lived’ with a man I just met, who I have a totally inappropriate crush on, who’s still kind of married, and who goes all dark and sexy every once in a while, effectively frying my nerves and causing me to become unhinged.

I know what you’re thinking. ‘Sol, you’ve never done that before? I’d done that twice before I turned twenty-five. It’s every woman’s right of passage.’ Funny. Hilarious.

Way before I’m ready, I hear Grayson calling me from the kitchen. Alright. Here I go.

His second call comes a minute or two later because I have not even moved a millimeter, nor said anything in response. The air shifts and I know it means he’s come into the room. He commands a space effortlessly. He’s like a magnet pulling me in. I try not to make eye contact, and just keep focusing on my bags.

“Hey. I was calling you. You okay?” He moves in closer, and at this point I can’t keep pretending I don’t hear or see him.

“Oh, sorry. Must not have heard you.” I’m looking just past his head. In his direction, but not at his eyes.

“I was asking what you were thinking for dinner.” What a normal thing to ask someone. Except when you moved in a few hours ago because your new roommate felt bad for you and took you in as a charity project.

“Oh, I’ll just eat a Pop Tart or something. Don’t worry about me.” I get up and pretend to be looking for something in my stuff.

“Sol, you’re not eating a Pop Tart for dinner. We don’t even have Pop Tarts.” *We*. There is no ‘*we*’. We don’t collectively own things. Literally every single thing here is his except for my dirty underwear.

“I’ll find something later, if you’re hungry you should just do whatever you want.” What is his obsession for cooking for me anyway? I can cook. I love to cook.

No I don’t. I quite literally hate it. I spent years hating it because Brian refused to do any of the cooking. Or cleaning. Or laundry. Or literally anything.

Grayson is standing behind me, towering over me, and I cling to my charade of searching for something like a lifeline.

“What are you looking for?” he asks.

“Oh, um… the book I was reading.”

“Ah, sorry, I left all the books out in the living room. I thought you’d like to read in the chair by the windows.” This time I do turn around, constantly thrown by this man of contradictions.

“Oh. Well, thanks. I’ll just go look for it there.” I can’t look at him and his sincerity or I’m afraid I’ll throw my arms around his neck and do something completely ridiculous like kiss him. I walk by him as fast as possible without full on sprinting. He follows me.

“Okay I’m just gonna make spaghetti then and you can eat when you’re hungry.” He disappears around the corner into the kitchen.

“You don’t have to cook for me!” I call, and then mumble under my breath, “I’ve already stolen your beautiful cabin and ruined your getaway. The least I can do is cook my own meals.” He ignores me.

I find the books stacked on a side table next to a very inviting chaise lounge in front of big, gorgeous windows that look down the hill and to the creek. I can actually just barely see my cabin on the other side.

Taking a seat, I start sifting through the pile, looking for the one I had been reading yesterday. When I shift to get a closer look, my foot hits something that rustles. I look down and find a paper bag. Grayson must’ve accidentally left one of the food bags over here. I’ll just grab it and put it away. See? I can be helpful. I can contribute.

But when I lean down to pick it up, I realize it isn't food. It’s books. Like a shit ton of books. Pulling out the first one on top I see a cute, illustrated cover with a tall dark-haired man looking very grumpy, and a short redhead looking the exact opposite. The first time I saw a book with a cover like this I thought, ‘Oh great! The bookstore lady took pity on me and gave me a nice PG romance.’ I was very, very wrong. You know the saying, ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover?’ That applies here. A lot.

Before I know it, I’ve pulled out like fifteen books. All ranging from dirty rom coms to absolutely filthy erotica with shirtless men on the cover. Where did these come from?

Grayson walks in from the kitchen and finds me on the floor, running my fingers along the spines of the books I found.

“Sol?” he inquires. He always has some level of incredulity in his expressions when he looks at me.

“Where did these come from?” I ask, stacking them into piles based on genre.

“You said you needed books.” He says it so casually. Like his words don’t make me feel like someone reached into my chest and squeezed my heart just enough to make it feel like it might burst.

“But where did you get them?” I look up at him, his gaze is piercing.

“At the bookstore in Surley, before I grabbed the groceries.” He sits down on the chaise, which positions me on the floor between his legs.

“But how did you know what to get?”

His face breaks into a huge, cocky smile. “I told the cashier that you read, *Billionaire Bad Boy* and that was all she needed to know. She went whipping through the stacks and came back with these. A few of them I already had for the, uh, book club we were going to do.” WHY? Why does this man have to be so freaking sweet sometimes? So genuine? It makes me forget all about his misogyny and nonsensical commands. It makes it hard to breathe around him.

I look up at him, lost for words. He just gives me a small smile back.

I clear my throat. “How much was it? Can you just add it to the groceries and tell me what I owe you?” I manage, pretending to fidget with the books again just so I don’t have to look at him anymore.

I should start keeping track of how many times he sighs at me. I bet it’d be over a million in the first hour. “C’mon, seriously!” I say, looking back up at him. He leans down to rest his elbows on his knees, bringing our faces only inches apart.

“Do you like them?” There are no words to describe his tone. It’s raspy and dark and gives me tingles.

“Grayson–”

“Do you like them?” He’s more insistent this time, each word like one bold, distinct staccato.

“Yes, but –”

“Then that’s all that matters.” When he leans forward to get up, our faces are so close that I hold my breath. It’s only for the briefest of moments, but there are butterflies in my stomach all the same.

“Dinner will be ready in five,” he calls over his shoulder.

Is this what a heart attack feels like? How am I going to survive seven straight days of this?

—

I do end up eating spaghetti with Grayson. We eat it on the front porch in the rocking chairs he made (wtf). He lit a citronella candle which is actually keeping the bugs at bay, so I can relax enough to listen to the sounds of the woods as the daylight starts to dwindle.

“Do you miss your kids yet?” he asks around a fork full of noodles. I give him a quizzical look. “Your students, I mean.” Oh. I feel a frown form on my lips. “That night you had dinner here after the YMCA…event, you told me you were a teacher, right?” He looks like he’s questioning his memory now. We did have a lot of red wine that night.

I will not comment on the flip flop my stomach does at the mention of the time I was three feet away from a very naked Grayson. “Yeah, I did.” Huh.

“...okay. So, has the thrill of summer worn off yet? Starting to miss the stuff they did that drove you crazy?” His lips quirk up at the corners.

I let out a soft chuckle. “Not quite. By August I’ll start itching to get back in the classroom. But right now, I am more than happy to get to pee whenever I want and stop to eat for however long I want.” I raise my bowl of pasta in a mock toast.

“To peeing whenever you want!” he laughs, raising his bowl. We clink them together briefly and I find myself giggling a little.

“What’s the craziest thing that’s ever happened in one of your classes?”

“Oh god. I don’t even know where to start.” I rest my head on the back of my chair, suddenly lost in a million memories. Teaching is so hard to describe. You’re an educator, therapist, entertainer, parent, nurse, cruise director, and security guard all in one. Being with kids for eight or more hours a day leaves you with a lot of silly, wonderful, headache-inducing, frustrating, incredible moments all sort of mushed together in your brain.

And I know I’m not supposed to be doing this anymore, but I can’t stop the next thought from surfacing: Brian *never* asked me about teaching. Ever.

“First one that pops in your head. Go.” Grayson sets his empty bowl down on the small table between us that I’m also pretty sure he made. Does anyone else find that a little nutty?

A bark of a laugh sounds from my lips. “Okay, this one time I was out in the hallway watching the students head to their classes, making sure nothing bad was happening, and when I walked back into my room I found one of my students holding a three-foot-long meat stick attempting to fight his best friend with it. I shit you not, the first thing that came out of my mouth was, ‘Put the meat down!’ They immediately started arguing, saying they were just gonna do a quick joust, which I, of course, was strongly against. So, going two for two, I dismissed them back to their seats by saying, ‘No! I do not want you touching his meat!’ ” I cover my face in my hands, half laughing, half cringing.

“No way!” His guffaws echo through the woods.

“I work in a bilingual school and we’re supposed to use the languages interchangeably. So then, out of pure reflex, I repeated myself in Spanish.”

“Sol!” I’m so sorry, I am so enjoying making him laugh like this. I am the worst. I hear how annoying I am. I promise. Blame it on the fact that he bought me food and books. It’s given me amnesia.

“Yes, world’s best teacher. In the flesh.” I point to myself and give a little bow.

“I bet you’re a killer teacher,” he declares, beginning to rock back and forth in his chair.

“What in the world would make you think that?”

“You don’t even bat an eyelash putting me in my place. Zero hesitation.” He gives me a lopsided grin. I roll my eyes. “No, I’m serious. My mom is a teacher. I feel like sometimes…you can just tell.”

I give him an unimpressed look. “Oh, so you can, what, read teacher auras now?” I make quotes with my fingers around, ‘teacher auras.’

“Correct. And I’m right like fifteen percent of the time, so.” He’s playing up his haughtiness. Playful Grayson. I need to start keeping track of the different Graysons and how often they appear.

“Sounds promising,” I quip. “What about you? Missing…whatever it is you do as the kind of engineer you are?” I am living in his house and I’ve never even asked him about his job.

His answering chuckle makes me think he forgives me for not asking before. “Civil engineer…I’m a bit of a cliché.” He gestures around us and back inside.

“Oohhh, so you’re not just magically perfect at building beautiful, rustic, mountain escapes. You have a whole ass degree in it.”

“Oh no, I’m still magically good at it. I’m magically good at a lot of things…”

“Mhhm. Yeah, sure. What’s your favorite thing to build?”

“I’ve worked on a lot of bridges. A ton of buildings in New York. But I like stuff like this way better. Cabins, lake homes, beach homes. Stuff with a little more character than sleek chrome and sharp lines.”

“Well you’ve knocked it out of the park here, that’s for sure.”

“You think so?”

“Duh! It’s beautiful. It’s unique. It’s homey.”

He considers this for a moment. “This didn’t feel like work, though. Therapy maybe, but not work. This kind of stuff is fun.”

“Work should be fun. I have no room to talk because there are plenty of times where my work is anything but fun, but overall I enjoy myself.”

“I’m hoping leaving the company will shake things up for me.”

I turn my head to look at him. “Well, I’ll be hoping that for you too.”

His lips form into a line and he clears his throat. “Thanks, Sol.”

I stand up to stack our bowls and take them into the cabin.

He follows me. “Are we going to fight about the dishes again?”

Racing around me, Grayson beats me to the sink, blocking it off by stretching his arms across the space. “No, because you’re gonna move aside and let me do them.”

“See, that was very teacher-like. I would know.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, move.” I nudge him with my right leg and hip. It essentially does nothing. He doesn’t even seem to notice as he puts on an overly dramatic thinking face, finger tapping his chin.

“Okay, I’ll let you do the dishes as long as you agree to take the bedroom tonight.” He raises his eyebrows in a challenge. I have been very purposely not thinking about the sleeping situation. It had been one thing when I was drunk and slept in his bed, but now?

“Absolutely not. This is your place and I’m just the dirty, starved, and stranded puppy you found on the side of the road and took pity on. Just throw a dog bed on the ground. It’ll be like sleeping at the Radisson.” He is unmoved by my speech. We stare off, sizing each other up. Pick and choose your battles, right?

Unfortunately, I’m currently losing the one against his overly alluring eyes. I can hardly form a single thought when I get stuck in their mesmerizing web. Ya can’t win ‘em all.

I try to make my expression meaner, tougher. He crosses one leg over the other as if to say, ‘I’ll stand there all night if I have to.’

“Fine. I’ll take the bedroom,” I grit and his smug, self-satisfied smile slides right back onto his face.

“Great. I’m gonna go take a shower.” He saunters off, feeling very proud of his win I’m sure. Yeah, we’ll see about that.

—

I’m all cozied up in Grayson’s room ready to get some good ol’ fashion shut eye when I hear the metaphorical bell confirming that I, in fact, won this round.

“Sol! What the fuck is this?” A devious smile graces my lips. Check. Mate.

Grayson comes storming into the bedroom, hands on his hips, looking *oh* so serious. Big tough guy got outsmarted. Poor baby.

“Why is the mattress in the living room?” He’s fuming, it makes his voice do that raspy thing again.

“I agreed to take the bedroom, I did not agree to taking the bed.” I wish I had a picture of my face right now because I’ve gotta be giving one of the best smirks of my sass career to date.

He’s speechless. I can see him battling with a million thoughts at once. A lot of them are probably expletives and he doesn’t know which one to let rip first. His jaw is clenched and I can tell he’s grinding his teeth. Ooh, Angry Grayson. Add that to the list. Actually, one quick edit: Hot Angry Grayson. Because I feel like there’s probably a Serious Angry Grayson, so let’s keep our options open.

“Can you close the door on your way out?” I lean over my makeshift bed on the floor and turn out the light. It’s less badass than I want it to be because I have to reach all the way up to the side table it’s on from the floor, but whatever.

“You are the most infuriating person I know.”

He shoves the door shut right as I call out, “Ditto!”

## Chapter 12

The theme of the day: revenge. Grayson and I have been bickering and messing with each other every chance we’ve gotten. I may have started this war off on a high with the mattress incident, setting the tone for the last twelve hours or so, but man does this lumberjack put up a good fight. So far I’ve had an actual bucket of water dumped on my head from over a door jamb (How did he pull that off?), I had my current book stolen and searched for it forever before Grayson played the most obnoxious game of Hot and Cold with me until I found it in a sandwich bag in the tank of the toilet, and found all my leggings tied together when I tried to pull one out after getting soaked by the bucket. I have a sneaky suspicion he spent the entire night mapping out his attacks. While I, on the other hand, was sleeping. Like a sane person.

Do not worry, though, ye of little faith. I have managed to win several battles of my own despite the lack of preparation time. Teachers thrive with a lack of preparation time.

When he came around the corner looking for his phone earlier, I egged the shit out of him, throwing the contents of an entire carton of eggs at him until it was empty. The look on his face? Priceless. I swapped the dishwasher pod out (that he always preloads because he’s neurotic) for an obscene amount of dish soap so when he came back twenty minutes after turning the thing on, there were bubbles completely flooding the kitchen. Score! And I’m currently sitting on the couch brainstorming my next move, determined to be the champion in all of this.

“Let’s make a bet.” Grayson comes slinking around the corner, an obvious scheme cooking in his brain.

“A bet for what?”

“Ambersia is having their county fair today.” Ambersia is on the opposite side of us compared to where Surley is.

“And…?”

“And I heard they always have a mechanical bull.” My eyes narrow. “And I bet you I can stay on longer than you can.”

Get real. I don’t stand a chance. Have you seen his abs? His biceps? His thighs? His back? I can keep going…

“And what does the winner get?”

“The winner gets to pick a tattoo that the loser has to get.”

I am very panicked but I try to keep my face neutral. “And in the event of a tie?”

He shrugs. “Then the bet is off. Call it even.”

“No way! If there’s a tie we both have to get a tattoo of the other person’s choosing.”

He sizes me up, blatantly writing me off as a non-threat. “Fine. Let’s shake on it.”

—

“Woo! That’s strong.” Manure, everywhere. Anywhere you look, there’s something that shits. This is going to sound really bizarre, but I kinda like the smell. Reminds me of riding in the car with my dad. I think that’s probably weird. Anyway.

“Very.” Grayson heads through the entrance and we follow the natural flow of traffic through the fair. I am so freaking nervous. I don’t care about losing. I’ll get whatever freaking tattoo you want me to get. But I do not wanna get on that freaking bull. I cannot think of anything more embarrassing than getting up there with a crowd of people watching as your whole body jiggles and flops around until you fall into a heap on the mat. What is fun about that? I’m also very hesitant about doing things I’ve never done before. I like to know what’s coming. I like to…well…feel comfortable.

The first row of stalls are all award-winning fruits and vegetables. After a few stops to look at what the vendors claim are, ‘the reddest strawberries on the east coast,’ or, ‘cantaloupes the size of your head,’ or Grayson’s favorite, ‘eggplants like you’ve never seen before’ (\*cue crude joke\*), we are face to face with a pumpkin that is taller than Grayson. “Oh my god, we have to get a picture, come on!” I drag him by the arm and shove him in front of the pumpkin, holding my hand out for his phone. He tries to stand there and look grumpy, but I cross my arms across my chest giving him my best teacher face and he rolls his eyes, standing up tall and smiling. “Perfect!”

“Here, I’ll get one with the two of you together!” An older woman motions for me to hand her the phone and join Grayson by the pumpkin.

“Oh, that’s okay –”

“Come on, Sol. Come get a picture with me so we can put it on our Christmas card!” Has anyone ever told him what an ass he is?

“Oh! That will be so cute, yes, head on over!” This poor, sweet, old woman.

I begrudgingly make my way to where Grayson is standing, stopping a good three feet away from him and grimacing at the camera. “Now, don’t be sour, sweet cheeks. Get real close and show us how much you love each other.”

“We do NOT–”

Grayson pulls me into his arms. “Yeah, sweet cheeks. Come here and show me how much you love me.” He tucks me in close, wrapping his arms around me from behind. If this lady wasn’t right in front of us, I’d punch him. Maybe I should just do it anyway.

Through gritted teeth I fake a smile and say, “I’m literally going to murder you,” under my breath.

“Can’t fucking wait, *baby*.” Oh, he’s really gonna get it now. I am going to hold onto that goddamn bull so tight its head is going to pop off and I’m going to laugh my own head off pretending it's Grayson’s.

He keeps me trapped against him, waiting as our stupid photographer walks over to give Grayson his phone back. Okay, she’s not stupid. I just hate her.

“You two are so cute!” She shows us the most recent photo and I almost puke. We *do* look cute. “Make sure to try the key lime pie, ya hear?” She knows we’re in Pennsylvania, right? Not Kentucky. Pensyltucky.

“Key lime pie is her favorite. Isn’t that right, fuzzy wuzzy?” It *is* actually one of my favorites. He pretends to rub our noses together. “We’ll definitely stop by.”

I slam my foot down onto his and it shocks him enough to release me.

“What’s wrong, snookie poo?” His whole face has been overtaken by the loony grin he’s sporting.

“You look like a dufus.”

“A dufus in love!”

“Okay, goodbye.” Stomping off, I pass by the rest of the vegetable tables and run into a brand-new section of the fair that has my entire mood changing. “Awwwwwwwww!” I’m gushing and climbing up over the low, makeshift fence as soon as the attendant beckons me in. “They’re so cute!”

The moment I sit down, I’m surrounded by baby pigs. They all want cuddles and they all want kisses and this is suddenly the best day of my life. It’s probably twenty full minutes of laughs and squeals and snorts and smiles before I even remember where I am. I‘ve got a particularly tiny piglet sleeping in my lap, petting it and cooing at it, when I finally look up and make eyes with the attendant. He just gives me a thumbs up, not bothered at all that I’ve completely taken up residence in his pig pen. Well! That settles that.

There’s a second little baby climbing up on top of the first to get their nap in when I notice some movement out of the corner of my eye. Grayson is standing there against the fence, face soft, a small smile on his lips. He looks so sweet, so open, that I pat the spot next to me. He only hesitates for a moment before climbing in and sitting down.

I hand him one of the pigs and it snuggles its way right into his arms. “Aren’t they so sweet?”

He watches his piglet for a moment, running a finger along its belly. His eyes lift to meet mine and he answers, “Yeah. Really sweet.” I’m caught up in his stare for a few seconds too long.

Clearing my throat, I return my gaze back to the precious little creature in my arms. The others made a pile in the corner of the pen, and they’re equally as adorable all curled up together. “I would have a pig if I could.”

Grayson answers in a baby voice, talking to me, but directing it at his pig. “Really? You would?” he coos.

Sorry, hi. Ovaries? Knock it off.

“Yeah, I’d love to have a ton of animals.”

“Like what?”

“Mmm. Dogs and cats. I love pigs and horses and cows. I think goats are kind of ugly though, I’m going to be honest.”

He chuckles, “I do too.”

“It’s the eyes!” We say it in unison and I would very much like to pretend that didn’t happen. We cannot afford to have things in common. And we’re already connected through our lackluster opinion of Disney World.

“They’re so freaky.”

I nod. “Very.”

We sit like that for a while longer until the guy tells us he has to feed them.

Grayson stands and offers me a hand. I take it and brush the straw off my butt. “You ready?”

He helps me up the hay barrel and back over the fence and we continue walking through the grounds. There are more animals that I gush over while Grayson waits patiently or loves on them with me. We pass a million fried food stalls. Some selling things I’d never even heard of. Fried snake? No thank you…

“I’ll give you a hundred dollars if you eat that fried snake,” I joke, nudging Grayson in the direction of the order window. He doesn’t even seem phased and steps right up to get in line.

Within ten minutes, I have one hundred less dollars than when I came.

“I cannot believe you did that.”

He chucks his trash into a nearby can. “It tasted like the way hairspray smells.”

My expression turns from disbelief to disgust. “Ew, what? Why?”

“I have no idea, but it’s all I can taste now.”

“We could try and find those key lime pies that lady mentioned.”

He throws an arm around my shoulder. “I knew it, crabby cakes, you love key lime pie.”

“Is there a reason you’re this obnoxious, or…?”

“Tell me I’m right.”

“I will do no such thing.”

He lays his head on mine, rolling it so he’s facing me. “C’mon, Sol, *baby*, tell me.” If he calls me baby one more time I am not responsible for what happens after. I don’t know if I’ll combust or melt or jump his bones or what. But it won’t be pretty.

“I like key lime pie,” I grit, ducking down out of his grasp in an attempt to get him off of me. He’s undeterred and it doesn’t work.

“Sorry, lollipop, can’t hear you. Too many people.” He’s not going to freaking leave me alone.

“Okay! Yes, I like key lime pie.”

“I knew it.” It’s raspy and right at my ear. I barely start to shiver before he pulls away. “Come on, I’ll buy you some since you’re poor now.” I hate him.

The pie ends up being stupid good and I give up any pretense of feigning being coerced when I finish the whole thing in three minutes. Grayson isn’t much better, and it isn’t long until we’ve walked through everything except the carnival style games. I’ve been avoiding it and he knows it.

Approaching our dreaded destination, a knot forms in the pit of my stomach. I am trying to be more carefree. Will it matter in a year if I fall off and a few people laugh? No. But, I’ve only been practicing this for a small amount of time and I’ve yet to actually succeed in feeling it.

The guy currently riding the bull is holding on for dear life. It jerks him around so hard his body snaps in three different directions before he flies off and lands face down on the ground. Wow. What a fun, cool thing to do. I don’t know why everyone doesn’t do this…

Grayson’s hand touches my shoulder. “Hey, we don’t have to do this…I was just messing around earlier.” I look up at him, and take in his concern. It’s nice. He’s being Nice Grayson. For my benefit. But, instead of giving me relief, it just lights a fire under my ass. This is not a difficult thing to do. A difficult thing to do is getting a divorce or moving on from being cheated on or, I don’t know, doing your taxes. It is not doing something fun (albeit nerve wracking) for less than eight seconds. I mean, the pros only have to do eight seconds. And I’m certainly not a pro. How long can it really go on for?

“Hell yeah we do. You’ve got a tattoo to earn.” His smile makes me feel like a million bucks.

“Alright, do you want me to go first?”

I shake my head, “Nope. Ladies first.” I pat him on his forearm condescendingly and then walk right up to the ticket guy before I can chicken out. Annoyingly, Grayson reaches over and pays for the both of us, but I don’t have time to pitch a fit. I am in the zone. I am beauty. I am grace. I am… a badass bull rider? Weird affirmation, but I’ll go with it.

My hands are already sweating which feels unfair. There’s also sweat at my lower back which I’m sure you can see through my shirt. Oh, the fuck, well.

The guy dressed in full rodeo gear (again, Pennsylvania) has me place my foot in one of the stirrups and helps me jump up onto the bull. It kind of hurts when I smack my ass down on its back. Jeez. Loosen up, guy. Get a massage or something. Your shoulders are so tense. \*Laughs at own self’s corny joke\*

I refuse to look up because I don’t want to know how many people are watching and I think knowing my crush is about to see me bust my ass is mortifying enough. Rodeo boy is explaining some things next to me but I don’t catch any of them. I just keep drying my hands on my leggings and taking deep breaths. When he walks away to a big red button with a joint stick controller next to it, I squeeze my legs as hard as I can around this thing's belly. Here goes nothing.

The buzzer sounds and the first buck is jarring, but manageable. I don’t even have time to think let alone look for people’s reactions. I’m just zoned into the bull’s neck, trying my best to anticipate its moves. The bucking goes from zero to sixty extremely quickly. I have absolutely no strategy except to hang on for dear life. By this point, I’m full on hugging this thing, praying I don’t die when I fall off. Maybe if I imagine I’m crushing Brian between my thighs…

*Whack*. I’m on my back, staring at the cloudless sky without having any recollection of how I got there. Dazed, I roll over to my knees and the rodeo man is there to lend a hand but I wave him off and stumble to the gate. Grayson is waiting, a huge smile on his face, arms out, ready to steady me.

“Woah there, cowgirl. Take a second.” His hands grip my upper arms and he watches me. “You killed it.”

“Oh, ha ha ha,” I grumble, swatting him away but almost immediately stumbling over my feet. Is this what a concussion feels like? Grayson grabs me again, leaning me up against the enclosure. “Quit stalling and go get on that thing.”

He takes one last look to make sure I’m not gonna eat it and moves over to the entrance.

“Hang on, how long was I up there for? Please tell me at least two seconds…”

Jumping up on the bull with annoying ease, he grabs the handle and calls, “Six point five, actually.”

“WHAT?” I yelp before I can stop myself. Holy shit, I’m amazing. “Wow, I have this in the bag.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “Don’t get cocky too soon, cowgirl.”

Rodeo boy…man…whatever you wanna call him. I don’t know how old he is. Rodeo man-boy fires things back up and I am more and more angry the longer I watch Grayson so gracefully ride this crazy contraption. He looks like a goddamn professional. I almost want to shut my eyes, but I need to watch him beat me. I need to do that, keep my head held high. Right as he’s going to pass me, the bull gives an extra moody jerk and Grayson flies off. Damn, that does look bad from this perspective. He pops up easily, not even stumbling once.

“Six point five seconds!”

“No effing way!” I shout, giving Grayson a dirty look as he approaches me.

“Rules are rules, mousie.”

“Okay, we’re done with the pet names.”

“We most certainly aren’t, I’m gonna have you tattoo my favorite one on your body.”

Big, agitated growl. Big, stompy steps. Big, dramatic retreat.

“Wow, you’re a sore loser.” He’s goading me.

“I didn’t lose, I tied.”

“Fair.”

A bunch of people are grabbing spots looking towards a big, open field. “What’s going on here?”

“I’m not sure.”

I get closer and see a sign on a stick that’s pushed into the ground. “Oh! No way! Fireworks!” Wait a second… “Holy shit, is it already the 4th of July?”

“Yeah.”

I look back at him, he’s putting his phone back in his pocket. “Yeah? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“To be honest, I didn’t realize. I don’t really look at my phone much, and when I do I guess I just haven’t been looking at the date.”

“I’ve just been counting the days since I got up here. I had no idea.”

“Do you wanna stay and watch them?” He nods towards the grass. I hadn’t noticed how much light we lost. Looks like dusk fell the way it always does, all of a sudden. Why does it always feel like that?

I smile. I don’t know when the last time I watched fireworks was. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

Grayson leads us to a spot in the back, away from the hordes of people and we sit side by side, shoulders touching. “So, what,” I say, “were you like a professional bull rider growing up or something?”

He snorts. “No. But my grandpa did have horses. We spent a lot of time with my grandparents since my mom was a teacher and had the summers off. I would ride a lot, but it’s definitely been a while.”

“That was my dream growing up!” I scooch a bit, turning so my legs are facing him and I can see his face a little better.

“Yeah, I mean, honestly, it was pretty special. I have a lot of great memories from those summers.”

“It’s the same for me coming up here.”

“Even with no plumbing or electric?”

“Oh god, yeah. That was the best part. I loved having to light a bonfire so we could cook hot dogs or roast marshmallows. I can’t tell you how many times my dinner was just marshmallows. My mom would get so pissed, but my dad would always tell her, ‘It’s only one night, *amor*!’ and she would just laugh and roll her eyes even though she knew it was never just one night. We would spend entire days playing in the creek. I never even thought about TV or my Nintendo DS or anything. Not until I got older. Until Cruz got older and didn’t wanna play anymore.”

“Nintendo DS? I bet you only played Nintendogs or something.”

“First of all, lose the prissy attitude, and second of all, absolutely I did. I had almost every single breed of dog before Cruz stepped on my DS one night trying to sneak back in the house through my window.”

“Growing up is weird.”

“Very. I watch it happen at school. Sometimes it makes me sad because I can see all the heartache barreling right towards them and I can’t do anything about it. They’re about to go through exactly what I did and they just have to. It’s a part of the circle of life or something. I can’t do anything to stop it for them.”

“Yeah, but you create a safe space for them to experience it all. To figure themselves out. That’s huge.”

My lips form into a line and I nudge his leg with my foot. “Thank you for saying that.” There are a lot of sides to Grayson, and we play and tease and prank, he’s certainly vexing…but he’s also this.

I almost jump out of my skin when the first firework goes off. Crawling back to my original position, I watch the colors and patterns sparkle through the sky. It’s pretty and mesmerizing and it feels really nice to be a part of something. We’re all just sitting in this field for the sake of looking at something beautiful. Just to be with each other.

It might be the nature of this moment, or my possible concussion, but I lay my head down on Grayson’s shoulder. After a few seconds, his hand moves to rest on my knee, moving his thumb back and forth against it.

We watch in silence, me giving an, ‘*oooh,*’ or an, ‘*ahhhh*,’ every so often. And it’s nice. It’s just really, really nice.

## Chapter 13

“If you think I’m eating that, you’re out of your mind,” I shout from the living room, noticing that Grayson is busy in the kitchen.

“You’re a growing girl, lollipop. Gotta eat up.” I’m sure he’s so impressed with himself for that one.

“Yeah, and I’d like to stay a growing girl. You probably poisoned it.”

He turns around looking like an evil mastermind. “I would never do such a thing. Mwah, ha, ha, ha.”

Goofy Grayson is a real ham. “I’ll pass.”

It is day number two of our battle of wills, both sides still going strong. Listen, I grew up with an older brother. Grayson has nothing on Cruz. I’ve been plotting and scheming my whole life. But, I severely underestimated Competitive Grayson. Not that I’ll tell him that.

We woke up ready to fight, like our temporary period of peace last night at the fireworks never happened. I am, unfortunately, currently trailing by one, Grayson having bested me this morning by switching out the body wash for honey, and by the time I realized it, it was too late. I had to spend thirty minutes trying to rinse it off because there wasn’t any actual soap to help speed things along, and about halfway through, I ran out of hot water.

“You need to eat, we have a long day ahead of us.” I’m pulled up from the couch and I try to dig my feet into the wood but it doesn’t work and he drags me into the dining area easily, plopping me into a chair. There's a burger waiting for me.

“What are you talking about?”

He joins me at the table. “The hike we’re going on. It’s a long one, gotta eat up.”

“I told you before, I’m not going on any hikes. And I’m especially not going on one with you. You’ve probably got plans to tie me to a tree and let wolves attack me.” I actually like going on hikes now, but he doesn’t need to know that.

His eyes sparkle, “You like being tied up, lollipop?” I regret ever going to that fair with him.

“Oh GAG. Of course that’s all you got from that.” I’ve never been tied up before, but I wanna be tied up by him. He can tie me wherever the hell he wants me.

“Is that what they do in your books?”

I hope the look I’m giving him is making him feel like I’m shooting laser beams at his face in an attempt to burn it right off. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Another time. I’m serious, you need to eat.”

“Grayson, I’ve made it perfectly clear –”

“God, you are stubborn. Fine. But don’t come crying to me when your stomach is growling and we’re thirty minutes away from home. Go get dressed. You need a bathing suit.”

Does he just turn his ears off when I talk? I’m not going anywhere with him. “Grayson!”

“Sol.” Goosebumps. He’s baaaaack. Demanding Grayson. He’s giving off the same vibe as when he convinced me to move in with him. “Go get dressed.”

I open my mouth to tell him exactly how I feel about his demands, (no, I was going to lie and say I hate them) but he beats me to it. “Get your ass in the bedroom, put your swimsuit on under clothes that can get dirty, and wear good walking shoes. Now. Before I have to carry you in there and undress you myself.”

Is there science that can explain why the moment he starts bossing me around in that sultry ass voice my brain shuts off and I do whatever he says? Happily. Eagerly. It gets me feeling some type of way.

Like a freaking Sims character doing whatever the hell my creator comes up with, I go do exactly what I’m told.

When I come back out dressed and ‘ready’ to go, he’s waiting for me by the door.

“You ready?”

“About as unenthusiastically as possible, yeah.”

“That’s my girl.” Please don’t call me your girl. I'll melt into a puddle right here on the floor. Especially after just being commanded and getting a glimpse of his dominance. He’s trying to kill me, I know it.

We walk through the trees for a few minutes, and I keep sighing and huffing and puffing as loudly as possible, but he’s been ignoring me.

I give a particularly abrasive grunt and he turns around with his eyebrows raised. “Is that your mating call or what?”

“No, it’s not. I would never waste my mating call on you anyway.”

“Sol, you just make me feel so warm and fuzzy inside. I love living with you.” What a smack ass.

“Where are we going anyway?” I’ve caught up to him and now we’re keeping pace with each other.

“You’ll see when we get there.”

“When you push me off a cliff, you mean.”

“Don’t ruin the surprise, Sol.”

“Is this your thing? You lure women into the woods and cut them up into a million pieces?”

He gives me a dry look. “No, my thing is getting us out and away from the cabin so we don’t end up killing each other.”

“You’re already on my shit list from the pictures at the pumpkin yesterday. I’m totally going to kill you first. You’ll never see it coming.”

His responding laugh is fake and provoking. “What are you going to do? Annoy me to death?”

“It would be better than having an aneurysm from all the freaking hammering and chopping and sawing you do all day.”

“You don’t like my hammering, lollipop?”

I trip over a log that I didn’t see because I was too busy picturing a branch falling and landing on his head. But then I got sad because he’s the most infuriating, sweet, sexy man I’ve ever met and I feel like it would be a shame to waste that with an early grave.

He catches me around the waist before I smash my face into the ground. “Did you drink this morning?”

“Oh yes. A lot. I have to or else I won’t be able to get through the day being around you.”

“Yeah, it must be really difficult having a place to sleep and food to eat and plumbing. I can only imagine what you’re going through.”

“Hey!” I pull on a strap of the bag he’s carrying to make sure he’s listening. “I’ve said thank you like a million times. I can go back to my cabin, I don’t –”

“I was joking, relax.” Sensitive topic, sir.

More walking, and we fall back into silence. The weather is gorgeous, and being under all the trees ensures it never gets too hot. The leaves all look translucent from the light passing through them, and there’s a bit of an overall storybook vibe. I’m about to freak out and slap all the bugs touching me, but outside of that, I feel pretty good. I do wish I was by myself…

No, I don’t. I mean, I do, but I don’t. I just don’t know what to do with myself around Grayson. I’m totally relying on witty remarks and arguing because if I don’t hide behind them I’ll have to deal with the fact that I’m essentially obsessed with him. And because I’m living with him I have to keep it shoved deep, deep down to make sure I don’t freak him out and make a fool of myself.

Grayson breaks the quiet. “Can we just call a cease fire for the rest of the day?”

“Can’t take the heat?”

His fingers brush against mine. “Please?”

Do you want me to combust, orrr…? “Okay, temporary truce.”

He holds out a hand for me to shake. I take it and he pulls me in close to him, so close. “And just so you know… I can take the heat.” He’s gone and walking ahead before I can blink. I can’t move.

I stand frozen for a few seconds, not sure if I’m hallucinating or, I don’t know, having a psychotic break…

“Come on, Sol. We have places to be.”

Oh, I have someplace to be. Hell. I am so going to hell for the fantasies I create in my head starring someone else’s husband.

I jog to catch up even though, ethically speaking, I’m extremely against running of any kind.

“You know I have way shorter legs than you. You need to slow down.”

“Trust me, I’ve noticed.”

“Great, so slow your roll.” I reach out and pull on his wrist, reducing his speed. “Perfect.”

“You’re not a hiker, huh?”

“It’s against my religion.” He gives me a funny look. As always, when he looks at me I’m positive he’s thinking something along the lines of, ‘She is such a nut.’

“I don’t believe in doing uncomfortable things.”

There’s a pause. You can tell he’s trying to be nice and hold back his snippy comment. “That seems like sound logic.”

“Oh, it’s not. At all. It gets me in a lot of trouble. Cue sitting in my apartment for two years because I couldn’t face anyone and didn’t know who I was anymore.”

“You were dealing with a lot.”

I turn towards him, thinking. “You signed your divorce papers and immediately came up here to renovate an abandoned cabin, turning it into something really wonderful. You’re dealing with a lot too, but that doesn’t stop you from living like it did me.”

“It’s just my version of hiding out. I can’t sit still or else my thoughts race, replaying everything. So, I built a cabin.” He grabs the back of his neck and plays with the hair there.

“I drank a lot of wine to shut mine up.”

He laughs. “Don’t worry, I’ve done that too.”

The whine that slips out is a total accident. I am really trying to be nice and stop complaining, but there’s a huge freaking decline ahead of us on the path with a bunch of boulders sticking out. It’s something a ram or a goat would have a lot of fun with. Not a Sol.

“Grayson, you can’t be serious.”

“It’s not as bad as it looks.” He turns to me and offers his hand expectantly. “Trust me.”

“I’m a divorcee who got cheated on. I’m not so good at that these days.”

“Sol, I’ve got you.” Mush. Pile of bones. Heart melted. It's the sincerity. It’s the sincerity and the dominance that have me drowning in him, quietly suffering inside my mind. SOL, HE IS UNAVAILABLE.

La dee dah dee dah. Huh? Sorry…I wasn’t listening.

Turns out, he does have me. He guides us down the rocks, (we’re not even going to think about having to climb up this monstrosity on the way back) holding my hand and telling me where to put my feet. He steadies me by my waist or shoulders, which actually just makes me stumble more because I can’t think when he touches me.

At the bottom he helps me jump down from one last rock and I use a little bit too much force, causing me to stumble right into him. “*Oof.*”

Arms encircle me. “You good?”

“Uh...” Can’t think straight. “Yeah, sorry.” I try to take a step back because I’m feeling very awkward but he doesn’t let go. He just holds me like that for a little. It is everything I want and also my worst nightmare. “Um. Thanks. For your help. I appreciate you not letting me fall to my death or anything.”

His eyes are so serious, so pensive. “I told you, I’ve got you.” He turns then, leading us on, but his hand sneaks back over to hold mine. Yes. This is very normal. We are in the woods. We could get lost from each other. You DO NOT need to make this something it is not. We’ve established he’s a nice guy. He’s doing nice guy things. And you would do well to remember that, missy. \*Wags finger at self\*

I clear my throat. “Uh, how much longer do you think?”

“We’re not far.”

“You know, I’ve never complimented you on how eloquent you are. Sometimes I am blown away by your lyrical prose”.

“You’ve never complimented me, period.”

“I literally complimented the work you did on the cabin twice. Last night and today, just now.”

“Oh, wait. You did call me Mr. Big, Strong, and Sexy one time.” He looks out the side of his eyes deviously.

“I was drunk. I had no idea what I was saying.”

“Drunk words are sober thoughts.”

“Really? Because I was also thinking I should chop off your balls when I thought you were married. Well, you are married. When you weren’t separated, I guess. Anyway, should I have taken that as a sign to do it the next day after my hangover subsided?”

His hand tenses up and he lets mine go. “Just on paper.”

“You know what I mean.” I wave in his direction but I can see he’s gone, retreated into himself.

His next sentence is a bit forced. “Yeah, I guess I wouldn’t want that.”

What happened? How did I mess this up? Fix it, fix it, fix it…uh…

“Have you been to this secret destination a lot?”

He runs a hand down his face and stands a little taller. “I don’t know about a lot, but enough.” Our steps slow as he takes in his surroundings for a moment, clearly finding what he’s looking for and changing our direction.

It only takes a minute or two to figure out where we’re going.

“Oh, I’ve been here! I just didn’t recognize the path coming from your cabin instead of mine. Well, that and it’s been over a decade since the last time I came up.”

We’re down where the creek in front of my cabin eventually turns into a big watering hole. It’s deep enough to actually swim and we used to bring sandwiches and sit on the rocks, jumping in the water in between bites. Ugh. Speaking of sandwiches, I am so freaking hungry. I rest a hand on my stomach thinking about how moronic I am for not eating. Just to prove a stupid point.

Grayson huffs in annoyance, taking his backpack off and crouching over it. Low and freaking behold, he pulls out a sandwich and thrusts it in my direction.

“Did you make this?”

He stands, moving closer to the water and grumbles, “You didn’t eat, so.”

The goofiest of grins takes residence on my face. This is different from Nice Grayson or Genuine Grayson. This is Cute Grayson and I consider his arrival an offensive strike towards me, to which I am utterly defenseless.

I walk up and poke him in the side just to be annoying. “So you *do* like me.”

He rolls his eyes and lifts his shirt off over his head.

Wow. Amazing. All my thoughts have suddenly disappeared. Gone. In the blink of an eye. I’m staring. I know I’m staring. I just don’t know how to *stop* staring.

“Looks like you like *me*, lollipop.” His retort is made worse by him having to lean down to make eye contact. Very much a, ‘Hey, lady, my eyes are up here!’ moment.

“Don’t flatter yourself, I thought you had a bug on your stomach.”

He just shakes his head, laughing to himself, and starts untying his shoes. Whatever. I’m just going to sit on this nice rock over here, hang my feet over the water, and eat my sandwich in peace.

You know what would go great with this sandwich? An eight-pack. And eight-pack of…something. Hmmm.

“Is that your underwear?” I screech, shielding my eyes and choking a little. They’re so tight. Black short shorts. His butt. Omg.

“I couldn’t find my bathing suit. I don’t even know if I packed it.” Oh, he’s packing *something*.

“So, what? I just have to be subjected to this against my will?” I peek between my fingers and find him already waist deep in the water.

“Is it, though?” He cocks his head to the side. “Against your will?”

“Oh, put a sock in it.”

“Only if you do it for me.” His smirk is out of a movie. The best I can come up with is making fun of him by doing the ugliest imitation of his current expression.

“Mature.”

“They let me teach children.” My eyes widen and my eyebrows lift up in mock intrigue. “Can you believe that?”

“Less and less every day.” He’s out in the middle at this point and I’m unfortunately out of sandwich. “Are you coming in?”

“There’s probably alligators in there. No way.”

He swims up to my rock. “Get in, Sol.” Oh, fuck. Here we go.

“Grayson don’t even start –”

“In. Now.” Mentally, I’m screaming in frustration, but my body has betrayed me and is acting all breathless and demure for him.

I stand up and slip my shoes off, reaching for my shorts and sliding them down my legs. Well, I have to kind of peel them down my legs because I had to wear bike shorts so I didn’t get chub rub. “Okay, but don’t freaking watch me, creep.”

“I was already looking at you when you decided to take your pants off.”

“You ordered me into the water, what did you expect me to do?”

“Just get in already.”

Walking along the rocks to the muddy area where you can get in easier, I take my shirt off and put it on a nearby tree branch for later.

“What the fuck are you wearing?”

My head snaps up and I take a few steps into the water. “This, Grayson, is called a bathing suit.” I make my voice sound like I’m talking to a toddler. Also, can we just note it’s a miracle I even brought a bathing suit? T-shirts, leggings, and one random bathing suit. And the other day I found a red lace bra I didn’t even know I had at the very bottom of one of my bags. When I scooped my entire underwear and bra drawer into my luggage, it must’ve been wrapped up with something else. I don’t remember ever buying it, and I certainly don’t remember the last time I wore anything remotely like it.

“That is not a bathing suit.”

I put my hands on my hips. “Then why was it in the bathing suit section?” It wasn’t. I ordered it online years ago in one of my sad attempts to get Brian to notice me. Well, I guess I went to the bathing suit section on the website, so… that probably counts.

“Because it got put back in the wrong place.”

“What exactly do you think this is, then? Enlighten me. I’d love to know.”

“I don’t know…” he shakes his hand in my direction, gesturing to the suit. “A couple of strings put together?” Oh my goodness. He is being so dramatic. It’s a high waisted bikini! And there’s really only two strings that crisscross under the actual top part of the suit and tie in the back.

“I thought you could ‘take the heat’, Grayson.” I slink in the rest of the way until we’re standing in front of each other. I can just barely touch, but his whole chest is out of the water.

He takes a few steps back. “I’m just worried you’re going to get bit by a snake in here or something.”

Immediate screaming. Immediate splashing away.

I’ve just gotten to a place where I can actually get my footing and am about to all out book it (ethics be damned), but I’m pulled back in by the freaking strings that are holding my bathing suit top together. They, obviously, because my life has turned into one big joke since coming up here, untie right as I smack into Grayson’s chest.

Speaking of snakes, he hugs me around my shoulders and his forearms sit just above my boobs. “I was kidding, Sol. There probably aren’t any snakes in here.”

“Probably?! Are you nuts?” I have my hands pressed against my chest so nothing makes an unwanted appearance.

But, as always, I’m fighting for my life out here. Grayson spins me to face him. This leaves me very little choice and I have to wrap my legs around his hips so I don’t freaking drown without the ability to use my hands. I can’t just tread water with no hands. Okay, maybe I could, but it’s hard to think logically right now. And it is particularly *hard* because I can now feel what I was too distracted to notice before. I can feel Grayson underneath me and he’s…excited.

You know the term, ‘morning wood’? Is there a similar phenomenon for getting into bodies of water? I’m assuming that’s a yes, considering the shower incident.

“What are you doing?” ME? What about YOU?

“I was trying to escape!”

“No, what are you doing…?” He looks down to where I’m holding my boobs up.

“Uh, attempting to not give the world a peep show?” When he still looks confused I add, “Grayson, you untied my top.”

His fingers tickle up my back and it inadvertently has me tightening my legs around him. He tries very, very hard to not let his soft intake of breath out, but I hear it. I see it when his lips part. “Damn, I’ve still got it.”

“Cute.” My face reads anything but impressed.

He just laughs at me and wades us towards where it’s shallower. I drop my legs once we’re in a spot where I can comfortably get my feet on the ground.

Circling around me, he murmurs, “Here,” and grabs both strings and puts them back together. “Too tight?” All I’m capable of in this moment is a shake of my head back and forth. “Good.”

As soon as the words are out of his mouth I’m being chucked into the deep end.

Choking on water I scream, “You are such an ass, you know that?”

“Ditto.”

—

“I am not doing that.”

“Sol, live a little!”

“Again, that’s what I’m trying to make sure I do.”

“Swing on the rope!” I look at it nervously. It’s like a hundred years old and I’m just not sure I have that kind of arm strength these days. Does bringing a wine glass up to my lips count as bicep curls? And I’m definitely not sure this frayed ass, old ass rope can hold *my* ass. Or any asses for that matter. I’m not sure it has many asses left in its life.

Grayson smacks the water. “C’mon. One, two, three, go!” I don’t move. His eyes narrow at me. “It’s not gonna break, lollipop.”

Do you think if I can swing out far enough I can fall on him and make him forget the stupid fucking word ‘lollipop’?

“Just because you say it out loud doesn’t mean it’s true.”

“It held me just fine.”

My face says it all.

“Oh, I forgot your goal when you came up here was to be your same, boring self.”

“I’m not going to let you reverse psychology me.” Mmmm. I think I am, actually. I was boring as fuck. I was hiding who I was to be more palatable and that made me constantly second guess myself. I’m still trying to dig down deep enough to rescue who I was before everything happened, but I know for sure that I want the person I’m becoming to be adventurous and brave and lively. If I can ride a mechanical bull, I can probably do this, right? I’m over sitting on the sidelines and hoping one of the players will notice me.

Look at me with the sports reference! So relatable.

“I’ll let you earn your hundred dollars back. You swing, you win.”

Now *that’s* motivation.

Before I can psych myself out I grab the rope, pull it back as far as I can, and jump.

*Splash!*

I hear, “Hell yeah!” when I pop back up.

“When I tell you I was point two seconds away from falling off too soon, I mean it. I need some muscles. You’ve got muscles, how’d you get them?”

I like how open his face is right now. He’s enjoying himself. He’s playing. How often do adults get to play?

“You’re going to hate this answer.”

“It’s going to be so douchey, I know it.”

He winces. “Most of them are just from building stuff.”

“Oh, come on! You’re basically claiming you are just naturally muscley.”

“Have you seen me lift any weights? Did you find any in the house? Am I waking up at five in the morning to do crunches?” He’s floating on his back and trying to spin himself in a circle.

“This is very unbecoming I hope you know. No one likes a bragger.”

He swims closer and splashes water at me. "I’m not bragging! You asked!”

I splash him back. “I wasn’t expecting you to respond like a Hallmark movie character.”

“Like you don’t have anything that comes naturally to you!”

I consider it. What would I say comes naturally to me? “Mmmm. Not that I can think of.”

“You have an incredible knack for annoying the shit out of me.” He’s close enough that I can reach out and dunk him under. He has to cough a bunch of times to clear his lungs when he comes back up. “See what I mean?”

Lost in thoughts, I take a minute to be quiet.

“Dancing.” The light is fading around us. “Not in a ballerina kind of way. But I love to dance. For fun, at a bar or a wedding or a school dance. I hadn’t danced in years before the night we went to that bar. It’s when I feel the most free. My emotions make so much more sense when I’m jumping up and down, screaming a great lyric at the top of my lungs. Takes a little alcohol these days. But it didn’t used to.”

“You were. Free, I mean. Everyone noticed. You could see on their faces how inspired they were by your ability to just let go.” I don’t know how to respond because it’s such a genuine, thoughtful thing to say and that leans dangerously close to vulnerable, for which I am still very much a rookie. (Another sports reference?? I’m on fire!)

(Actually, it’s called deflecting, but, whatever.)

“We should probably get going. I don’t want to be walking in the dark.”

“I thought that was your plan all along, remember? Ditch me in the woods in the dark?”

He walks ahead of me to get out and dry off and I can’t believe I forgot how nice his butt is. Right there. On full display. “There are plenty of horrible things I can do in the light, don’t worry. I won’t let you down.” And his thighs in those briefs? I mean…

He turns around and the look on his face is so freaking smug. “Stop checking me out, Sol.”

I turn away and grab my shoes to hide the heat in my cheeks. “Sorry, who was the one that had a meltdown over two strings in my otherwise very much full coverage bathing suit?”

He stomps off, setting a breakneck pace.

“You can run! But you know I’m right, Shnookums!”

## Chapter 14

“Let’s play twenty questions,” I call, hanging upside down off my reading chair. I am very bored this afternoon and Grayson hasn’t wanted to play or fight or anything all day.

“Why?” He’s been sitting at the dining room table most of the morning typing away on his iPad. By the permanent scowl on his face, I think it’s divorce stuff.

“Because you need to take a break and I am slowly dying of boredom.”

“It’s noon and you woke up at ten.”

I sit up and glare at him over the back of the chair. “Your point?”

“Does that count as one of your questions?”

With a frustrated grumble I heave myself off the chaise and walk over to where Grayson is sitting. I grab his iPad and close the case over the screen. “Sol, I have a lot of shit to do.”

“And it’ll be there in twenty questions, I promise.”

He does not seem charmed by my presence. Maybe he hit his head at the creek yesterday. I know I haven’t been the same since that mechanical bull debacle.

A sigh dramatic enough for a daytime soap opera show fills the space. “Let’s get this over with.”

“I love your enthusiasm, I really think it brings a unique perspective to this relationship.” His face is so flat and unimpressed I almost start laughing, but I feel like he’ll jump ship if I do and I really am freaking bored. “Okay, do you want to start or do you want me to?”

He slides further down in his seat, laying his head back, looking worn out. I know that feeling. Big time. But I’m not going to let him drown in it like I did. “Ladies first, wasn’t it?”

Oooh. A joke! This is good. “It would be my pleasure.” Now what the hell do I ask him? I probably should have thought this through a bit. “Oh! Okay. Which grade was your favorite and why?” Somehow, everything I talk about is school related. I’m just warming up, I’ll get more inventive.

Grayson thinks for a minute, sitting back up and leaning his forearms on the table. “Senior year. It’s when I stopped being ugly.”

“You’ve tried that one before, buddy. You were not ugly. You were just weird. The onesie thing was a very… interesting choice. I think it’s better to be interesting and fun than stereotypically hot.”

“Tell that to my bullies, lollipop”

“Can’t, too busy telling it to mine. I was just as weird, you know. I was the ‘book girl’.”

“You’re still the book girl.”

I smile. “Old habits die hard. Anyway, people thought I was lame and annoying because I chose to read instead of play and my vocabulary was more advanced than theirs. They called me, ‘Miss Know It All.’ ”

Grayson adjusts himself to lean his head on one hand. “You are a ‘know it all.’ ”

I shrug, “That’s because I know a lot about everything. Why would I hide that? You don’t hide your building skills. People don’t have a problem with a man that can build. They do have a problem with a woman who is smarter than them. I spent years pretending I wasn’t smarter than Brian. I’m not ever doing that again.”

“That’s fair. You’re right…” The smirk of victory I give him makes him roll his eyes. “Fell right into that one.”

My foot bumps his under the table. “Okay, your turn.”

“Mmmm. What is the scariest thing that’s ever happened to you?”

Oof. I know the answer right away, but it’s a tough one for me to talk about. I already fessed up the real reason for my divorce and nothing bad happened, so I feel like I should probably keep practicing being open. “When I was twenty, right before I met Brian, Cruz and I were home for Thanksgiving. My mom, Cruz and I were in the living room playing cards and my dad was in the kitchen basting the turkey. I had just slapped down a plus five and was gloating in Cruz’s face when we heard a really intense *boom*.”

The skin under my armpits is getting clammy. “A fire started, and my mom screamed at us, shoved us out of the house. It happened so fast, the flames were huge in what felt like seconds. Luckily, Cruz had his phone in his pocket and called 911. We couldn’t see our parents, we didn’t know what was going on. It felt like decades before the firefighters came, and there was still no sign of my mom or dad. I was completely panicking. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to help. The rescue team did end up getting everyone out safely, and my parents were okay after a few weeks in the hospital. But those twenty minutes, that’s how long they told me it was, where I thought my family was dying… those were probably the worst twenty minutes of my life.”

Sympathy plays across his features. “I’m sorry, Sol. I wasn’t trying to bring up anything traumatic. I should've –”

“No, no. It’s fine. I’ve never told anyone that either. It sucks to have to do, but I think it’s good.”

“Then thank you for telling me.”

I roll my shoulders back a few times. “Okay, let’s switch it up. What is the happiest thing that’s ever happened to you?”

His eyes light up and it’s magical. “Besides signing my divorce papers, when I was in college, freshman year, we took our first two intro engineering classes. One was called *Engineering Practice* and it was all about problem solving and project planning. The professor ran a competition. He gave us a bunch of different scenarios to solve, and whoever was most clever and efficient got to shadow him on one of his current projects.”

“You won?”

Big Grayson smile. “I won. And when I was on the job, I came up with a solution they had been trying to solve for weeks.”

“Brains and brawn!”

I earn a small chuckle. “It wasn’t about proving I was smart enough or anything. It was the feeling I had in that moment. That I had found a real passion. That I was where I was supposed to be.”

“I love that. I’m not sure I’ve experienced that.”

His eyebrows furrow. “What about teaching?”

“I love teaching. And I’m really good at it. I have a lot of fun, and there are times when everything lines up and I think, ‘Man, this is pretty cool.’ But, I don’t think it’s quite the same as what you found in your career. It’s fulfilling, it’s an important part of my life, it’s the only thing that got me through my divorce, but I’m pretty sure my big passions lie outside of my career.”

“Like what?”

“Books, for one. Yes, I read them, but I’d also like to write one. And I feel really drawn to bodies of water. I’d like to travel the world to see more of them. I haven’t had the chance with the way my twenties have gone, but it’s something I think about a lot. Especially with the way my mom talks about how living in Spain changed her life. I crave that feeling. Teaching hasn’t changed my life like that.”

“Sort of whimsical.”

I consider this. “Yeah, an attraction to the whimsical aspects of life.”

“I hope you get out there some day, lollipop.”

A hopeful grin. “Me too.”

He studies me a moment. I get a sense of, I don’t know, pride? Approval? Inspiration?

“Alright, what’s the dumbest thing you’ve ever done?”

A flat look swipes over my face in an instant. “Marry Brian.”

He barks a laugh. “Sorry, that was stupid.” His eyes narrow, considering. “What was your guys’ deal, anyway?”

I blow out a very large, long breath. “Um. So, Brian would come into the bar I worked at through college a lot. His parents own a huge business in Philadelphia and the bar was right across the street. He’s older than me and had already started working for them. The plan was for him to take everything over when his parents retired.” I throw my hands up and shake my head. “Long story short, he was flirty in the beginning. I hadn’t really ever had someone give me that kind of attention, and my parents had a love that I was jealous of. That I thought I’d never get to experience because I was already twenty and hadn’t even dated yet. So when it was dangled in front of me, I lunged for it.

“As soon as we got together, things faded pretty quickly. I was shocked he proposed, and I was so terrified of being alone that I accepted. I convinced myself that things would be different when we were married. Turns out, his parents had been pressuring him to tie the knot. They couldn’t give the company over to an, ‘unreliable bachelor who didn’t take life seriously.’ Someone who hadn’t settled down yet. So, cue the most desperate girl he could find who would do anything just to feel loved. Made things easy. He didn’t have to work hard to persuade me to make things official. He didn’t have to waste time and energy courting me because I was willing to accept the bare minimum.”

“I can’t get over what a waste of space he is.”

“It’s still hard hearing that. Logically, I know better. But as soon as you said it I wanted to blame myself instead.”

“I say we TP his house.”

This makes me snicker, which I’m very appreciative of. “We could put glitter in his air vents in his car. That prank would literally never end.”

He smacks the table and points at me. “YES. That is brilliant. I love that.”

“I may have looked some things up while wine drunk a couple of times.”

“Well, thank you Wine Drunk Sol.”

“Do you regret ever pursuing Natalie?”

He purses his lips. “Hindsight is twenty-twenty. In a lot of ways, I wish I had never met her. It was a marginally hot affair based on the thrill of sneaking around so her brother wouldn’t find out, that led to the worst three years of my life. I know I’m supposed to say that I wouldn’t be where I am today without that experience…but honestly, fuck that. I think I would’ve been just fine never having had to go through any of that.”

“You have a really good heart. You would’ve grown and become the person you are regardless.”

He reaches across the table and touches his finger tips to mine. “That, uh, really means a lot to me. Thanks.” These kinds of moments are absolute poison to my brain. It is too hard not to fall for him when he is so sexy, and so supportive, and so goofy, and so genuine, and gets me so fired up, and does the most personalized, sweet things for me. I am doomed. It’s like a car crash. I am watching myself about to get my heart broken and I can’t do anything about it. It doesn’t work to tell myself he’s married. It does nothing to remind myself that he is unavailable and barely ready for a rebound let alone the things I’m fantasizing about. On one hand, I am delighted to be feeling real moments of joy again. And on the other, I’m extremely hesitant, nervous to enjoy any of this because I know it’ll make going our separate ways that much harder.

His face changes. “Do you wanna make up a dance?”

I just kind of stare at him. Did I hear him correctly? “Grayson, what?”

Such a goofy freaking grin. It’s Golden Retriever Grayson. Now I’m really in for it.

“Do you wanna make up a dance? I’ll let you pick the song.” He must read the confusion all over my face. “Listen, I had sisters growing up. I know my way around a kitchen performance.”

Now I’m laughing. “Cruz would never dance with me. He’d only pretend to be the judge. That was as far as he would go.”

“Laaammeeee-o. No way, I was in it to win it. Give me any choreo, I’ll rock it.”

“Grayson, you can’t be serious!”

He shoots up from the table, iPad long forgotten, and jogs around the cabin for a minute or two. On his return, slightly out of breath, he sets a Bluetooth speaker on the kitchen island with a crisp *smack*. “Alright, come over here.” I don’t move and he is not very happy. “Am I going to have to convince you to be fun every day, lollipop? Or can you just start being that way by yourself?” He’s joking, but….ow.

I roll my lips into my teeth. Am I going to have to give myself a pep talk anytime I do something even remotely out of my comfort zone? Mmm. Seems like it.

With a grunt and a groan and a whole lot of hesitancy, I stand from my chair and join Grayson at the counter. “Okay. I’m here. I’m fun.”

“So fun,” he mutters, scrolling through his Spotify. He turns to me, “Song request?”

My nose crinkles up. “*Before He Cheats?*”

He shakes his head. “You already danced to that one before. Not fair.”

“It’s not a competition…is it?”

He wags his eyebrows at me. “Oh, it’s totally a competition.” The scrolling continues. “Oh, yeah! How about *House Party* by Sam Hunt? You like that one.”

How does he know that? How does he know all these freaking things about me?

I clear my throat. “Um, yeah. I do like that one. That works.”

His head snaps in my direction. “You need to be excited, Sol. The song choice has to knock you off your feet. Give you inspiration.”

“You’re such a goof sometimes. Yes, fine! I’m inspired and so excited.”

You can tell he doesn’t even kind of believe me but he clicks on the song and backs up anyway to listen for a little. “Okay, for the da na na nas in the beginning, we should probably enter from two different sides. Here, you go over there.” I’m shoved to the metaphorical border between the living room and the dining room slash kitchen. “So when we come in I think we should do this.” He’s jumping out, using his hands to hype up the imaginary crowd. “C’mon. You try. Do it right up to here, where I’m standing.” He looks at me, waiting. I’ve probably done this a thousand times. I love dancing. I just said that yesterday. But I haven’t danced sober, for the hell of it, to be silly, since I was a teenager. I’m feeling very awkward.

With about ten percent of Grayson’s pizazz, I meet him in the middle of our ‘stage.’ Very angry eyes stare me down. “Are you even taking this seriously?”

“Of course I am. I am taking this as seriously as you can take two grown adults making up a dance in their kitchen.” Deflecting.

His face falls. There is literally nothing worse than a sad golden retriever puppy.

“Okay. It’s fine. I’ll just get back to the work I need to get done.” The music is paused and the way his shoulders have sagged has me feeling very guilty. He needs a distraction. That's what I came over here to do. He showed me exactly what he needed and I am letting residual insecurity impede supporting him the way he’s supported me.

“Wait, wait, wait. Sorry. I think I just didn’t see it from the right angle.” Unpausing the music, I get back to my starting point and jump out and around as boldly as possible.

There’s a very small smile on his lips. He takes two reluctant steps back towards me. “That was too erratic. It’s more like this.”

—

I am laughing so hard I can’t breathe. Sweat is dripping from essentially every place it can and I am folded up in some insane position on the floor while Grayson tries to do a ‘cool trick’ (his words, not mine) above me.

“You need to stick your leg out further.”

“Grayson!” I puff. “How much further can I possibly put it?”

“I need it out so I can pretend to play Skip It with your foot. You gotta whirl your leg around in a circle.”

I collapse into a pile of mush on the floor, unable to hold myself up anymore. “Are you crazy? I don’t have that kind of…any body part strength. We can switch places and I can do the Skip It.” You can tell he *really* doesn’t like that idea. “You gotta compromise! This isn’t the, ‘Grayson Show,’ it’s the, ‘Sol and Grayson Show.’”

“Mm. Try the ‘Grayson and Lollipop Show.’ Get it right. I’m the lead choreographer. I’ve come up with almost everything we’ve done.”

It takes me fifteen full seconds to stand up. “Um! Excuse me! What about my cool leap sequence?”

He shoos me away. “Yeah, yeah. You’ll get an honorable mention in the program.”

“An honorable mention! I’ll sue you!”

“Don’t worry, me and my lawyer are very close.”

“Yeah, same!”

He turns from his phone and looks at me. We both start cracking up. “They’ve made so much money off of us!” I cry, holding my stomach.

“So much fucking money. Maybe I’ll sue *them* for robbery.”

“Ooh. I’ll be your representation.”

“Perfect. But I’m not paying you.”

“Yes, you are. You’ll give me half of what you win.”

“A quarter.”

“Three quarters! I’ll be the one doing all the work!”

Grayson takes off his shirt and stretches out his shoulders. “Damn, it’s hot in here.” He walks over and messes with the thermostat. (How the hell did he install central air in two weeks while also doing all this other stuff??)

It just got a lot hotter.

He saunters back over and leans on the island. “You’re still messing up the turn. It’s kick one two, spin three four, land five six.”

“No, it’s not. *You’re* the one messing it up. It’s kick one and two, spin three and four *and* five, then land six.”

“That’s not even equal counts.”

“Two counts isn’t long enough to spin!”

“Then how come I’m managing it?”

My hands go to my hips and he relents. “Okay, fine. Let’s just move on. We need to add a slow part. A serious part.”

“There isn’t a slow or serious part in this song.”

His eyes meet mine. “Yeah, I know. I’m going to splice something in. I have an idea.”

I raise an eyebrow and cross my arms over my chest. Did he just use the word *splice*?

He cues up a new song.

*Die A Happy Man* by Thomas Rhett starts playing. Again. When did my life become country?

“I think we can add the bridge and the final chorus. It fits the theme.” He skips ahead to the end and I listen.

*I don't need no vacation, no fancy destination*

*Baby, you're my great escape*

*We could stay at home, listen to the radio*

*Dance around the fireplace*

It continues on, playing the chorus, and I’m shocked. It kind of works. “Oh. Wow. I think that actually could work.”

A smirk. “Pfft. Like there was any doubt.” He backs the song up and motions for me to come closer. I step so we’re about three feet apart. “No, lollipop. Like actually come here.” He grabs a hand and pulls me into his chest.

“Grayson, I am like, so sweaty.”

“Great, same.” He twirls me some, and has us sway together. He’s marking different options, brainstorming, and I’m just his ragdoll to move as he pleases apparently.

After the fifth or sixth run through of the music, Grayson says, “Okay. I just need you to follow me, alright?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Sparkles shine on his teeth as he smiles. “No.”

I take a deep breath and hold my arms out, letting him know I’m his to move around however he wants.

The music plays once more, and Grayson grabs me by the hips, bringing me right up against his front. He places one of my hands on his hip, and interlocks the other with his own, holding them both above us. The remaining hand falls to my lower back.

He moves us in slow, large circles. I cannot look anywhere but his eyes. His expression has turned intense, so freaking sexy. He doesn’t even know he’s doing it. He just screams sex all the time.

After a rotation or two, I’m spun so that my back is to his chest. He lifts one of my arms to wrap around his neck, and splays both of our hands across my stomach. Fingers travel and graze right before he locks the hands that are on my stomach together and spins me out, only to whip me right back in. I’m breathless and panting. There are excruciatingly slow drags of his hands on me. There are dips and grinds and every time he has me face him, I am totally entranced.

The song plays its last few bars, Grayson holding me, bending me back for one final sweep of our bodies. When it’s completely quiet, Grayson leans close to my ear and murmurs, “It should’ve been me dancing with you at the bar. And next time,” he pulls back to make eye contact, “it will be.”

## Chapter 15

“How am I supposed to read with the intolerable amount of noise you make?” I’ve finally caught him in between the extremely shrill electric saw noises coming from his spot around the side of the house every three point five seconds.

His dumb (gorgeous) face comes into view wearing a dangerous smile. “What are you reading, lollipop? Anything good?” I wanna slap the stupid look right off his face. He knows damn well what kind of stuff I’m reading. Which, by the way, I’m not sure I can keep doing in this cabin with the lumberjack never more than twenty feet away from me. It’s torture. And kind of hot.

And we are absolutely not going to talk about the dancing yesterday. Absolutely not. So don’t even ask. It was heat exhaustion, or… I don’t know…a mirage.

“C’mon, Sol, why don’t we have a read aloud. I wanna support your hobbies.” There’s an evil twinkle in his eyes.

I change my voice to sickly sweet. “And how would we do that, Grayson, when you’re back there practicing your singing so loudly? Is that the new style? Electric shrill?” I plaster the fakest smile I can muster on my face.

“Hey. We’re both adults. Why don’t we compromise? I’ll stop sawing for the day if you read to me.” I can tell by his expression that he thinks he has the upper hand. That I’ll chicken out because I’m too shy. Well guess what, pal. I’ve been reading smut for like seventeen days straight and it has emboldened me with a blind, totally uncalled for confidence that I am drinking up like a man coming out of forty days in the desert.

“Okay, so this one is called, *The Orc Ruler*.” I say, showing him the cover like they do in libraries. He plops down onto the edge of the porch, sets his elbows on his knees and props his head up with his hands, feigning rapt attention.

“For context, the king of the orcs has captured a human woman and is keeping her as his bride.”

I open my mouth to begin the excerpt for today’s reading when Grayson interrupts. “What is an orc?”

“A huge, muscly, green or blue…or gray, actually, man but he’s not a normal man he’s…an orc.”

“Wow, that clears that up.”

“Basically a seven-foot-tall, sexy Shrek.” He looks at me like he cannot possibly see how Shrek could be hot. “Oh! And they usually have like a super, and I mean super, huge dick. Or sometimes they have *two* dicks. Or *sometimes* they have one huge dick and an extra part so they can pleasure some other areas of their partner during the ‘act.’ ”

I don’t think either of us were prepared for me to say the word, ‘dick,’ or, ‘pleasure,’ in front of him, but I am damn proud of the panic I’m seeing creep into his features.

I clear my throat dramatically. *“Taragyn stares at me from the bank as I disrobe and step into the heated spring. I can feel his eyes on my back watching as I wade deeper and deeper. When I turn around, his eyes are almost black, completely lust filled, and his erection is all but bursting from his braes*.”

“His what?”

“His pants.” I motion for him to be quiet.

“*He removes first his tunic, then his braes, allowing his thick, pulsing member to spring to attention.”*

“Oh, come *on*!”

“Grayson. You’re being rude. No yelling during story time.”

All I get is an eye roll.

“*His steps are measured, intentional.*

*My back hits the far end of the spring. There’s nowhere I can go. Nowhere to run or hide. His corded, scarred arms barricade me against the edge. One arm on each side of me, trapping me. He leans down and runs his nose up my neck, breathing in deeply.*

*‘Your scent drives me crazy, woman.’ His accent makes the words sound harsh as he murmurs them in my ear. An involuntary shiver moves over me.”*

Grayson pretends to shiver, but stays quiet.

*“There’s a finger running up the side of my hip under the water. It brushes dangerously close to the heat between my thighs. I squeeze them shut as tightly as possible.*

*‘Now that won’t do, little lamb. Open your thighs for your husband.’ His breath fans over my collarbone. I stiffen, and when I do not obey, he leans back to look at my face.*

*I stare back, equally terrified and excited. I can feel his member pressing up against my stomach. It is so hard, so thick. I’ve never felt like this before.*

*‘Open up, woman. Let me show you the pleasure an orc queen receives from her mate.’*

*I still don’t move, feeling inept and shy and very confused. When I meet his gaze, I see a monster. But, I also see a strong, courageous leader. A male who looks at me like he wants to taste me. It sets my skin on fire.*

*My legs are shoved apart, and Taragyn moves to cup my heat. My breath catches in my throat.*

*‘This belongs to me, little lamb. And I am going to lay claim to your sweet cunt, mark it with my scent, so every male in a thirty noch radius will know whose you are.’ ”*

“Is this what gets you going, lollipop? A big, hot Alpha male bossing you around?” He’s deflecting. The way his jaw looks right now, I’d be surprised if his teeth weren’t cracking. I might just have a chance at winning this one yet.

“We won’t be taking questions until the end of today’s session.” He snickers and leans back on his hands. God, he looks so effortlessly sexy. It is so unfair considering my hair has been in some version of a messy bun, slicked back with how greasy it is, for days. I was going to remedy that last night, but Grayson had also messed with the shampoo bottle. Thankfully, I was on high alert after the body wash incident and noticed the tampering before any damage could be done.

*“He moves his knee in between my legs, holding them open while his hand snakes up to take one of my breasts. Taragyn leans down to take it into his mouth and I feel a lightning bolt leading straight to my core. A noise I’ve never made before escapes my lips.*

*‘That’s right woman, I want to hear your pleasure.’*

*He switches his attentions to the other breast and there is suddenly a throbbing between my legs that makes me feel desperate.*

*His mouth travels up my chest, his tongue flicking when he reaches my neck before nipping along my jaw. I am hot everywhere, my skin getting goose pimples despite the warmth of the spring. Taragyn grabs between my thighs again, this time sliding a finger through my folds. His growl is immediate and has my breasts heavy and aching to be touched again. So primal, so demanding.*

*His finger reappears and he shocks me by sliding into his mouth.*

*‘You’re so wet for me, woman. You taste like the finest wine.’ I am mesmerized by the way his lips wrap around his finger, by the way his cock bobs against my stomach, by his finger trailing back down, closer…closer. I gasp. He has a finger inside of me, while he rubs a place that is making me dizzy. There is a pooling of heat low in my belly. He makes slow, firm circles around the spot as he pumps the other in and out of me. His lips latch on my neck and suck. I feel like I am going to combust.*

*‘I want you to come all over my fingers and then you’re going to come all over my cock. Do you understand, little lamb?’ I am struck dumb, I can barely think, barely form sentences around the way his fingers are working me. My core clenches around his fingers when he takes my nipple into his mouth and bites.*

*‘Are you going to come on these fingers?’ he asks again. I’m not sure. I can tell something is going to happen. My whole body is alight. Responding to his touch. I’ve never been touched like this. He adds a second finger, stretching me, all while continuing his circles. I cannot stop the whimpers from breaking free from somewhere deep inside my chest. I throw my arms around his neck, fingers digging into his green skin.*

*He removes one of my arms and pulls it under the water, wrapping my hand around his length. I try to pull away, unsure and insecure. I don’t know how to participate in this. I don’t know how to make him feel the way he’s making me feel. And I can hardly focus on anything besides the building in my belly. But he keeps his hand over mine, slowly moving it up and down.*

*‘Do you feel what you do to me? How hard you make my cock?’ I nod, noting something warm and protruding at the base of it. His fingers curl inside me and my eyes roll to the back of my head.*

*‘Now tell me you’re going to come on my fingers,’ he growls, pinching my nipples and increasing his tempo. I feel panicked. I don’t know what’s happening to my body but it’s making my legs shake and I can’t help but cry out.*

*He pinches the sensitive spot he’s been paying so much attention to and I see stars.*

*‘Say it, woman.’ He nips at my collar bone.*

*‘I’m going to come on your fingers!’ It's a wild admission. Loud and improper, but I can’t help it. His length twitches in my hand. The movement causing me to clench around his fingers again.*

*What would it feel like to have this inside me instead of his talented hands?*

*‘Good fucking woman, come for me.’ His fingers curl once more, and he tweaks his thumb just right and everything explodes. Pleasure wreaks havoc on my body and I cry out his name again and again. I turn to liquid in his arms and when I meet his gaze, I am enraptured by the way he is looking at me.*

*‘That, little lamb, is what my orc queen will feel every day for the rest of her life.’ He holds my chin as he says it, eyes roaming my face and my naked body like I am everything he has been looking for.’* ”

I look up from the book, a little lost in the moment. I got caught up in the scene more than I had initially intended. My breathing is shallow, and I can tell my body has responded by the moisture that has soaked through my underwear. I am supposed to be a fearless warrior in this battle of wills. Looks like I girl bossed a little too hard. Is that a millennial thing to say? Whatever.

When I catch Grayson’s eye, suddenly very aware of what I just did and a little unsure of myself, my heart skips a beat. Heat, fire, lust. It’s all there. I’ve seen it on his face before. This is Sultry Grayson. I’ve only caught glimpses of this Grayson and I’m hypnotized every time I do.

We stare for a few more moments before he stands abruptly, ever so sneakily adjusting the front of his jeans. My eyes narrow. Oh, I totally got him. I totally got myself, too, but it’s way easier for me to hide the *heat* between my thighs than it is for him to hide his... *length*.

My loud, raucous, victorious bark bounces off the trees. Is that what does it for *you* Grayson? Alpha males who command their women?

I am just about to start making fun of him and claim my win when he starts firing his attitude. “Get in the house.” Speaking of commands.

“What?”

“Get in the house.” He’s rigid from head to toe, his eyes boring into me.

“Why?”

“It’s going to rain,” he snarls, stomping up to where I’m sitting and grabbing my chair. He all but flings me out of it.

“Grayson, what the hell!” I look up at the very bright, very cloudless sky.

“Sol. Get in the fucking house.” Before I can even really protest, he disappears around the side of said house and within seconds I hear the freaking saw turn back on.

“I hope you get freaking electrocuted in the ‘rain!’ ” I call, flipping my chair over in annoyance.

—

Sometime later I am spread out in the middle of the living room doing a puzzle (starting with the middle, of course). I’m not sure I’ve done a puzzle in twenty years, but here I am, and when I’ve finally taken a break to look at a clock, I’m surprised to see three hours have gone by.

At least I was able to get lost in something. For several reasons. First, the sawing went on for, like, a really long time after I’d started ignoring Grumpy Grayson. And secondly, I’m trying to pretend I’m not affected by Sultry, Commanding, *or* Grumpy Grayson.

I’m actually starting to have a lot of fun testing out all these new hobbies to help relax and spend time with my thoughts. Well, I have fun in between bouts of Annoying Grayson.

They’re silly, meaningless activities in the grand scheme of things, but I’m finding I don’t mind my own company like I used to. I can sit with my thoughts and not want to self-medicate. I spiral a lot less than I used to. (I’m still the queen of spiraling, don’t worry. I’m nothing if not consistent.) But, I am noticing the shift. Getting away from my apartment, having space from work, having absolutely zero responsibilities. I’m kind of shocked that this mission of mine to come up to the cabin and change my life is sort of working. These are not world-saving hobbies, but they are providing me with clarity I didn’t have before.

And as much as I complain about the never-ending personalities of Grayson I experience daily, I actually think it’s good for me. I cannot explain to you how numb I was for two whole years. Four years, maybe. Eight?

I’d been playing with this idea in my mind since the week and a half I spent alone after the bar. Yes, it’s frustrating, and yes, it’s expediting my going gray, but it’s also exciting and confusing and new and entertaining. I thought this relationship was too dramatic. And my god, Grayson is freaking dramatic. But, it’s shaken me out of my stupor. It’s connected me back to my emotions. Happy, all the way to infuriated. I am happy. I’m *happier*. I am also fucked. I am very, very fucked with the amount of attraction I feel towards my roommate who has been very clear about acting out of obligation of his moral code because without him I’d be stranded, dirty, and starving, and who is also still married.

I stand up to stretch, my shirt riding up my stomach, and turn towards the front door when I hear the prophetic and infamous sound of Grayson’s work boots stomping around. His eyes go straight to my exposed skin.

Listen, I know I’ve emphasized, like really driven home, the fact that my self-esteem is in the garbage and I have essentially hated myself for most, if not all, of my twenties. Plus the fact that I had a really hard time not feeling wanted and desired, which really messed with my mental health and the way I view my worth.

BUT, and this is a huge ‘but,’ I am not, will not, refuse to be ashamed of my body. I feel worthless as a potential partner. I felt worthless as a wife. I was made to feel like who I am as a human being isn’t attractive or worth being with, BUT, I spent years hating my body, and I crawled tooth and freaking nail out of that hole a long time ago. If I am proud of one thing, it is the work I did to unlearn societal bullshit that was force fed down my throat. For some reason, those things are separate to me. I felt ugly to *Brian* which made me feel like shit because he was my husband and was supposed to think I was beautiful. But I didn’t *feel* ugly. Like overall, in general. I know I’m not ugly. Nobody is freaking ugly (except him). And now that I think about it, why the hell didn’t I have that perspective for literally every other part of who I am and my personality? My worthiness as a wife? Where in the trauma hole did those things separate?

I say all this to explain this next thought: look all you want, lumberjack. I take up space. I’m going to keep taking up space as I exist on this planet. And he should feel so privileged to even be allowed anywhere near my space. He’s actually manhandled me and carried me around a startling amount of times for the duration of time in which we’ve known each other. And he hasn’t groveled at my feet *once* for allowing him the opportunity. Just another thing to add to my Reasons to Be Mad at Grayson For list.

And number one on that list? The bar. Number two? The bossiness. Well, can that be on two lists at once or do I have to choose? Because it also meets the qualifications to be on my Reasons I Find Grayson Smokin’ Hot list. Although, I’d phrase it differently on that list. I’d label it, ‘alpha vibes.’ I think that would actually take the number one spot if it was on the second list. So, I feel like fair is fair and it should go on the Hot one. Which means I need a different number two for the Mad list. How about…forcing me to live here?

Honestly, this is a huge upgrade. What about…never letting me do the dishes?

Don’t say anything. I heard it as soon as I thought it. Who in their right mind would be mad about not having to do dishes? I guess I’ll put all the pranks down. Seems kind of lame. Maybe calling me, ‘lollipop?’ Oh well. I’ll think of something, I’m sure. He does about three hundred infuriating things a day.

“All done sawing your boner off?” I run my tongue across my teeth trying to keep a straight face. There is nothing less funny than laughing at your own joke during delivery. It’s all about the delivery.

“Finished getting yourself off reading Shrek porn?” he bites back. That’s not bad, actually. Seven out of ten for content, four out of ten for delivery. He was too pissed at my comment to really pack the right punch.

“Well, someone’s gotta do it. Might as well be me.” Cocky Sol. I likey. “Besides, I do it the best anyways…”

My satisfaction (apart from Shrek) comes from the fact that I see him pause washing his hands to grip the sink. How far can I take this? I need to keep myself in the lead of our imaginary competition and for some reason, this is eating him alive. It’s almost too easy.

I saunter over to the kitchen

“Oh, you know what. Can I borrow your phone? Jade gave me her number before we got onto the dance floor (no she didn’t) the other night. Maybe I’ll call her up and let her have a go at it…” He is so tense. Knuckles white, breathing labored. How is talking about bedroom stuff his kryptonite? Of all things to panic about for a man who looks the way he does…

In a burst of bravery, I slink my fingers into his back, right pocket and pull his phone out. The lock screen on his phone lights up and my eyebrows knit together. His wallpaper is a picture of me laughing while all those baby pigs tried to get a kiss from me.

I don’t have any time to ask him about it. His response is immediate and everything I could ever hope and dream for. The danger in his eyes. It’s enough to make a girl pass out. In a good way.

I take off towards the bedroom before he can say anything, hoping I’ll be able to shut the door and lock it in time. Do barn doors lock? I hope so.

I slide it shut as quickly as possible, but, alas, there’s no lock. I look around in a tizzy trying to find a place to hide. There’s nowhere. In an act of pure panic, I slip his phone down the front of my leggings just before the barn door crashes open.

I whip around and soak up the gleam in his eyes, the rise and fall of his chest. He is a predator with eyes on his prey, on the hunt, stalking towards me. I take one step back for every step he takes forward. It’s when I hit the edge of the bed that I know I’m in deep shit.

I’m pushed back onto the comforter and before I can even attempt to scurry away, Grayson’s large frame is towering over me. One arm on each side of me holding himself up just enough to not be touching, but only enough that every time I take a breath, we do end up touching.

“Where’s my phone, lollipop?” His tone drips promise. Of what? I’m not sure.

“I need it,” I breathe, making sure not to break eye contact. His sigh of annoyance fans across my face.

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do. I have to call Jade. I have needs.” Okay, I probably didn’t need to add that last part but the experience of watching his eyes darken this close up can count as my next five birthday gifts.

“You are not calling Jade.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

“What are you, my dad?” His jaw clenches. “Oh, sorry, I meant *daddy*.”

WHO IS SHE? This Sol brought to you by sheer fucking balls, no tequila involved. Competitive Sol is out to annihilate. Or is it Feisty Sol? Horny Sol? Been Reading Smut While Lusting After My Neighbor for Weeks Sol? Who’s to say?

“I’ll go searching if I have to.” He moves to support himself on his forearms. Our faces now millimeters apart. So close I can see my reflection in his pupils. I look…I look ready to be dicked down, I’m just going to be honest.

“Be my guest.”

He shifts again (I’m going to die here on this bed) so his body falls to the right, still resting on mine, but freeing up his left hand. That fucking left hand. You’ve really done it this time, Sol.

His fingers travel from my knee towards my hip. They’re barely touching me, but it feels like he’s electrocuting me everywhere they graze. When they reach their destination, he moves to wrap his hand around my waist to my back, sliding it open-palmed under my shirt and towards my bra. He ever so gently slips a finger underneath the band. When he comes up empty, his torturous touch heads downwards. This would all be enough to give me a heart attack, but the eye contact is making this so much more intense.

He reaches the top of my leggings and my stomach clenches as I feel him dip under the elastic, getting extremely close to my ass. He shouldn’t even really be able to reach where he’s at, but I’ve completely arched into his body. He’s playing me like a fiddle.

Once again, he comes up empty. I’m finding it hard to focus on one thing. His eyes, his fingers, or his fucking erection pressing into the side of me he’s laying against. That’s like three days in a row, isn’t it? What am I going to explain this one away as? A bedroom boner? No shit people get boners in bedrooms.

My thighs clench together. I am positively squirming under him.

I arch even harder when his touch sneaks under the front of my shirt and dances over my stomach up towards my chest. He lets one finger trace just around my right breast, under my collarbone, and down through the space of my cleavage. I think I’m sweating. Everywhere. It’s hard to tell when my blood has turned into fire and I’m slowly burning from the inside out.

He pauses when he gets to the bottom of my bra, toying with the fabric that connects the two cups. Pulling on it. Letting it snap back into place. I jolt, heat pools between my legs. He hasn’t looked away from me once. Am I breathing?

“Where is it, Sol?” Words. Thoughts. Sentences. Uh…

“You can have it when I’m done.”

“That’s not going to work.” He finally breaks eye contact to run his nose along my jaw.

As soon as his fingers start moving again I can barely see straight. My nipples are so hard they’re painful and my stomach is so filled with butterflies I might throw up.

Down they go. The closer they get, the more my pussy throbs. He passes the top of my pants and I almost exhale a sigh of relief until I feel him continue his search from the outside. First up the inside of my thigh, then across where the phone is. The only thing that stands between Grayson touching between my legs is a thin layer of fabric, his phone, and my underwear. That feels like virtually nothing.

“What’s this, Sol?” Why does he have to say my name like that? It should be considered nuclear warfare.

His nose moves from my jaw to just below my ear.

I have to at least try to put up a fight, even if it’s a losing battle. “That’s called a pussy, Grayson. I guess you don’t have much experience with them…”

He growls. He fucking growls in my ear and I know I pass away. I know I am dead. I know it.

“Should we test that theory?” Now I’m really starting to panic. He’s lifting the front of my leggings up so he can get inside. If I’m not already dead, I definitely am now.

He grasps the top of his phone and starts dragging it up so slowly it’s giving me goosebumps. He looks down at the motion of his hand and it causes even more warmth to flood my already *very* wet core. Which he is extremely close to. Oh my god, can he feel it?

When it finally slides all the way out, he reaches behind him to return it back to his pocket. “Found it,” he murmurs into my neck before rolling off of me and standing up from the bed.

I let out a long, shaky breath. Holy shit. Hooooly shit. I need a minute. I need nine thousand minutes.

“Looks like you’ve got a bigger problem than what you started with,” he smirks.

“Looks like you’re gonna have to start the saw back up.” I’m impressed I can even form coherent sentences let alone sick burns.

His gaze travels down my body and I force myself not to move. To pretend I’m unaffected by him. I’m sure that’ll show him. It’ll definitely erase the fact that I was just putty in his hands.

I peel myself off the bed and swing myself around the opening of the barn doors.

“That’s okay,” I call. “I’ll just take the truck and meet her at the bar!” Logically that doesn’t make any sense, but isn’t Grayson on me in a minute, pushing me up against the hallway wall outside his room.

“You’re not going anywhere, and you’re especially not going anywhere with her.”

“What is your problem with her?”

“I don’t have a problem.”

I motion towards our current position with my eyes. “Really? Because it sure seems like you do.”

“Well, I don’t.” He pushes off of me and goes to get the car keys and blow them up I’m sure. Maybe he can saw them into pieces while he’s out there dealing with his hard on.

“Mhhm. So how do you explain hauling me out of the bar right when she was about to kiss me?”

He whips around, murderous. “She was not going to fucking kiss you.”

“Uh, she definitely was. I was there.”

“She probably sucks at kissing.” I raise an eyebrow. He sounds like a petulant child.

“What do you care if I mess around with a bad kisser?”

“I don’t.”

I huff in frustration, crossing to where he’s standing, getting in his face. Well, as best I can with the height difference. “You very obviously do and I wanna know why!” He glares at me, but I don’t back down. “Tell me,” I push. He stays silent. “I feel like I have the right to know why you go completely psycho when I mention that night.”

I’m right in his face. He clenches his jaw and crosses his arms across his chest. Now I’m just flat out yelling. “So, let me get this straight. You’re going to force me to live with you, but act like I’m the most pathetic thing on the planet who can’t get her own food, or shower, or possibly be the girl someone goes up to at a bar?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to! You scream it with every goddamn thing you do!”

More silence. “Right. And you’re gonna pull that little stunt in the bedroom. What was that exactly? ‘Aw, I’m gonna fuck with the poor divorced girl whose own husband didn’t want her. He’d rather have sex with his secretary, and I’m gonna make sure she never gets to erase those memories for as long as she lives.’ Real nice, Grayson. That’s not shitty at all! The first time someone is interested in me in two fucking years and you made sure to put me right back in my place. Right where I belong in single, lonely, Loserville –”

“I was fucking jealous!” he roars. The ferocity in which he says it stuns me in place. He’s seething and looking at me like he just admitted something he wasn’t supposed to.

“*What*?” There’s panic in his eyes. He’s backpedaling. “Of what, Grayson?” I am so confused by him. He’s quiet for a few seconds.

“Of you,” he says, shutting down completely.

“Of me?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

He moves around me and walks to the front door. “Because she wasn’t into me. She was into you.” He’s pretty much mumbling, and it’s made even worse because he’s also leaving out the door at the same time.

“You were jealous because she didn’t want you? Every freaking person in that bar wanted you!” I can’t even have his measly scraps? (Jade was not measly, it’s metaphorical).

“Yup.” And that’s all I get before he closes the door behind him. I hear the truck start up a few seconds later. What the hell was that?

Also, I guess we *are* going to talk about the dancing yesterday. ‘*It should’ve been me dancing with you at that bar*.’ What? So that I couldn’t dance with Jade? To stick it to her? That if she didn’t want him, she couldn’t want anybody? That doesn’t make any sense.

I’m going to request an effing manual that tells me exactly how to navigate these freaking mood swings Grayson has. Because I spend like ninety percent of my time trying to figure him the hell out.

I think I need a drink. Or ten.

—

Later that night, I’m lying on the couch trying to fall asleep, replaying the evening’s events over and over in my head. (I told you, once a spiraler, always a spiraler.)

Grayson will be pissed I’m not in the bed, but oh well. He’s pissed about everything anyway.

I am so overwhelmed and frustrated and confused. I don’t understand him. As soon as I think I do, he does a one-eighty and completely throws me off balance. It’s dizzying.

And to top it all off, I let somebody’s husband put their hand in my pants.

## Chapter 16

By the time I wake up the next morning I feel about zero percent rested and Grayson has already left for what I’m assuming is the day. I heard him come back in last night, but he was gone before I got up.

Brushing my teeth, I try to think of things I can do today to occupy my time and avoid quiet down time that’ll encourage spiraling. I mean, how the heck am I expected not to spiral about this? I read erotica out loud to the hottest person I’ve ever met (still not sure what magical confidence fairy came over me), and then he spent the night getting me more turned on than I’ve ever been, just so I could have a meltdown in front of him while he proves once again that he’s got a bad attitude and is sporting the same outdated software of himself as I am. OS WeHaVeNoIdEaWhAtWeArEdOiNg.0001.03.04.

Reading might do the trick, but I cannot read anything that will even remotely get me hot and bothered. Puzzling is quiet. Meditation is quiet. Coloring is quiet. Hiking is quiet. Yoga is quiet. Cooking is quiet.

I could go turn on Grayson’s saw. That is the opposite of quiet.

And do what? Shred all of his things?

…that’s actually not such a bad idea.

I could scream at the top of my lungs for seven hours. I could get all the pots and pans out and bang them together until I get a headache. I could put a bunch of raw meat out on the ground outside and roll around in it while I wait for a bear to come rip me to shreds. I imagine that wouldn’t be a very quiet activity. Although the waiting around might be too much downtime.

With all these fancy renovations, Grayson couldn’t install a freaking TV? Or, I dunno, Wi-Fi?

Even if he did have Wi-Fi, I have absolutely no idea where my phone is. And that’s a whole other rabbit hole anyway.

At this point I’m just pacing, wearing a hole in the floor. This is not good. I’m going to go crazy in here.

On the seventh rotation I notice a set of keys hanging on the hook. Bingo! That means whatever Grayson is doing is on foot, and his truck is here! Trucks have music. Trucks go places. I am totally stealing Grayson’s truck and getting out of here for the day.

I feel like I’m doing something bad (maybe I am) while I speed dress and grab my wallet, rushing to get outside.

The coast is clear when I shut the front door, so I dash across the tree roots as fast as possible, ripping open the driver’s side door and climbing in. I stick the key in the ignition and the radio starts blasting. Yes, yes, yes. Perfect.

I fiddle with the knobs until something I like comes on and put the truck in reverse. I feel invincible, like I’ve pulled off a heist or stolen the Declaration of Independence.

With the windows down and the music blasting I am just about as happy as happy can be. I sing, I watch the trees go by, I play the drums on the steering wheel. Wow, freedom really does taste so good.

Once in town, I slow down a little in hopes of people watching. Maybe I’ll drive to the Walmart like thirty minutes past Surley and find some things to do for when I get back.

There is an old couple outside gardening. The man is on his knees digging something up while the woman is holding a new thing of flowers. Now that is stinkin’ cute.

There’s a twenty-four-hour bar on the corner that I’ve never been to. And that has nothing to do with my dad scaring us off as kids and everything to do with never wanting to find out what happens in a twenty-four-hour bar. Two men are bickering outside smoking cigarettes. I get the impression they’re having two totally different conversations.

Just as I’m about to loop around to be nosy and drive through where the mayor and his wife live, I notice someone walking down their front steps. Now what do we have hereeee. Looks like trouble and I am so in. Ask and you mother freaking shall receive. The one good thing about small towns. My manifestation powers have been off the charts.

“Jade?” I question, rolling the passenger side window down and pulling off to the side of the road in front of the house she’s leaving. She puts her hand up to shield her eyes to see better in the bright sun.

“Sol?” She’s surprised, but a good kind of surprise. I can see it in the feline grin beginning to pull at her lips. This day is really shaping up.

She jogs up to the window and leans on her forearms against it.

“Hey, gorgeous,” she smiles and I feel funny in my stomach. The last time I saw her I was very drunk and running off of liquid courage. It’s a little scarier sober and in the daylight.

“Hey yourself.”

“What are you up to?”

“Just driving around. I was going stir crazy up on the mountain.”

“Want company?” Do I want company? As in company that is actually excited to see me or be around me and doesn’t get mad at me every forty-five seconds? Uh, yeah!

“Climb in.”

—

“Sorry, you’re telling me that was the first time you’ve ever been asked to dance at a bar?”

“It’s the first time anyone has even come up to me at a bar, let alone ask me to dance.” She pauses her sandwich halfway to her mouth.

“C’mon, stop fucking with me.” She hits my shoulder with hers.

“I’m serious!”

She gives me a doubtful look. “Sol, that doesn’t make any sense. You’re hot as fuck. And the way you were so free on that dance floor? Sexy.” I just kind of stare at her. I feel like I’ve swapped lives with some other person who gets complimented and flirted with on the regular. Is this what normal people experience?

She just says what she thinks and isn’t the least bit shy about it. Damn, I wanna be her when I grow up.

“I haven’t really been like that in a long time. I’m still really not.”

“Like what?”

“Carefree, in love with life. Dancing for the hell of it. Not caring if anyone sees.” She studies me and I pick pieces of the bread from my sandwich apart. We picked up hoagies at a place Jade raved about and then came down here to the reservoir. It’s really beautiful. I haven’t been since I was little.

Looking out in front of me I notice there’s a family of otters playing in the water. I watch them and let out a long breath. “That’s why I came up here. To figure out who I am.”

“Honestly, I probably should have gotten out of here a long time ago. So, I commend you for being brave enough to do it.” I narrow my eyes in thought. Jade? Of all women? Thinking *I’m* brave?

“You’re like the most badass person I know,” I laugh and she smiles.

“You’ve gotta be tough to be into women living around here. The people here are not exactly what I would call accepting.” I hate people. “I wanted to move. To get away. I still do. But every time I get close, I freeze and cancel my plans.” I can understand that.

This is the most unsure I’ve seen her.

“I stayed in a marriage for four years with a balding accountant who thought the clit was a myth. So, I get it.” I look over at her out of the corner of my eye, grinning.

She huffs out a laugh and turns towards me. “I definitely do not think the clit is a myth. I’m a huge, huge fan, actually. A devout believer.” Man, she has mastered saying things with her eyes without having to say them out loud. They’re so smoky. Her voice so silky. She’s leaning in again. Her lips are just about to touch mine when we both jump.

Her phone starts ringing, the sound breaking us apart.

“Shit, sorry. One sec.” She pulls it out from her pocket and starts laughing. “Oh my god, it’s Grayson.” Her laugh is full on boisterous. “MAN, he knows how to cuntblock.” She adds between gasps for air.

“It’s *who?!*”

“Grayson. That guy you came to the bar with.”

“You have his number?”

“Yeah, I gave him mine so he could give it to you. He said you didn’t get service up here.”

“I don’t…”

“Should I answer it?”

“No!” Is he freaking serious? “Send it to voicemail. I have an idea.” He deserves this after what he did last night. The pouting over not getting his way at the bar and the subsequent revenge he took over it. Well, look who's sitting here with the prize now. (You get a middle finger, and you get a middle finger…)

There’s a gleam in her eye as she presses the red button. “Whatever it is, I’m down.”

“If he’s so worried about where I am, we better let him know…should we send him a little picture maybe? I feel like that’s way more heartfelt than a phone call.” With one eyebrow raised, I watch as she smiles knowingly and opens her camera app. She switches it so that we’re using the front lens.

Jade leans back in, and this time I close the distance, holding her jaw with my fingers. Damn she has nice lips. Her tongue drags across my bottom lip, asking for entrance, nipping. I open to let her in, she tastes like the orange soda she’s been drinking. Her fingers twine into the hair at the nape of my neck, pulling so my head falls back and I gasp. She takes advantage of the opportunity and kisses down my neck. Her phone drops in the grass as she slowly lays me down on my back, climbing over top of me. Our lips meet again, tongues taking turns exploring, massaging, testing the waters. She pulls back to look down at me, hunger in her eyes.

“Your lips are even better than I was imagining.”

“Ditto.” I frown, transported to the last time I said that to someone. I take her in, towering over me and I am getting flashbacks of a very different, larger, masculine body on mine, making me absolutely desperate for him. Fuck.

She notices the shift. The way my body tenses.

“You good?” Her eyes are inquisitive.

“Yeah, I, um, let’s just send that text,” I say, moving to sit back up. She nods, grabs her phone, and pulls up her photo app. She took a couple. I’m mesmerized for a second. That’s me? Just giving into a desire? I look…radiant.

“That one.” I point to the one where she’s pulling on my bottom lip with her teeth, a dizzy smile lighting up my face.

“Okay, what do you want me to say?”

“Hmmm…”

“Can’t talk now. Kinda busy?”

I snicker, that’s good. “That’s perfect.” I watch as she hits send and takes a moment to watch the otters.

“What’s the deal between you and him?”

“No deal. Just forced in the same proximity.” She eyes me like that doesn’t make any sense. I let out a long, exasperated breath. “We have cabins across from each other. Mine doesn’t have electricity or plumbing. Not a big deal, I came here to get away from everything. But, like two weeks ago, my car broke down halfway down the mountain, and so I’m kinda screwed if I wanna, ya know, eat. So he’s taken pity on me and let me stay at his place while I wait for my car to be done.”

“You’re staying at his place?”

“Yeah.” I shrug. No biggie.

“Oh boy.”

My eyebrows push together. “Why, ‘oh boy?’ ”

“That sounds like trouble waiting to happen.”

“There’s no trouble, we pretty much ignore each other.” (Not true.)

“That’s impossible.”

“Why would that be impossible? It’s what’s happening.”

“He has a thing for you!”

“Who has a thing for me?” My eyebrows have disappeared into my hairline.

“Grayson!”

I stare at her for a moment. Face completely blank…and then start belly laughing, the noise scaring away the otters. “Oh my god. That’s a good one. Hot and funny. You’re the whole package.” I have to wipe tears from my eyes.

“Wow, you are so oblivious.” Her tone is teasing, but there’s truth in her eyes.

“I assure you, I’m not. It’s not like that.”

“Ah, famous last words.”

“No, no. It’s not one of those ‘secretly has feelings blah blah blah things’. Yes, I think he’s very good looking, but he thinks I am the opposite of attractive. He thinks I’m the worst. He thinks I’m pathetic and helpless. It’s more of a, ‘found a nasty, mangy mutt in a mud puddle and took pity on it and now you’re stuck with it and don’t want it touching any of your stuff’ kind of thing. ”

“Sol, he carried you out of a bar because you were about to kiss someone else.”

“Yeah, because he was pissed you weren’t into him.”

Now it’s her turn to collapse into hysterics. “Oh my god, you’re so fucking pretty but you’re so goddamn dumb.”

“Um. Rude.”

“Sol, he wasn’t into me. His eyes never left you. The whole night.”

“Because he feels the need to babysit me. He considers me a threat to my own safety.” She’s silent, shaking her head. “Why would he introduce us then, if he is *sooo* into me and super jealous?”

“Do you think I understand how the male brain works? Hell no. One of the many reasons I’m into pretty much anyone who isn’t a cisgendered man.”

“Lucky you.”

She chuckles. “He’s got it bad. And by the looks of it, so do you.” Her and her damn eyes that feel like they split me open and let the whole world see my deepest darkest secrets.

“Agree to disagree.” It’s mostly to myself, but she scoffs playfully at me anyway, standing up and reaching out a hand.

“C’mon, drop me off at my house, I have a feeling your babysitter is gonna ground you for life.”

—

I’ve been sitting in the truck, keys out, headlights off for what I’m assuming has been a pretty long time. As much as I am proud of my brand new, super fragile confidence, I am not at all equipped to deal with the consequences of the things I do when taken over by it.

I stole a truck. I stole Grayson’s truck. And then when he was probably pissed, because, you know, I stole his truck, and worried, because, you know, I don’t have a phone and he thinks I’m a baby duckling who needs its mama, I send him a picture of me making out with the girl we were fighting over last night. There can’t possibly be any negative repercussions for those things, right?

I definitely don’t want to face any of the accusations Jade made. And I am certainly not ready to talk about the fact that I had a really gorgeous girl kissing me and all I could think about was Grayson. That feels like a bigger crime than all the others combined. A crime against smart, sensible, logical people all across the planet.

But the sun is fading, and I have yet to shake the ‘I’m going to get killed out here’ thoughts I get when I’m in the woods at night. I need to go inside. I need to be an adult. The only real thing I did that wasn’t okay was take his truck without asking. And maybe losing my cool and getting weird last night. The rest I just feel goes against my own ethics. And that’s for me to deal with at a later date. One fire at a time.

With a deep, steadying breath that doesn’t help even the tiniest bit, I jump out of the truck and run to the cabin. (Someone could be trying to get me!)

When I open the door, I don’t see Grayson right away (big relief) and go to hang his keys back up where they go. The keys jingle on their hook and I look into the kitchen to see if there’s some cleaning I can do. Butter him up, right? Actually, that will probably do the opposite of buttering him up. He hates when I clean. What is the opposite of buttering up? Buttering down? I don’t like that.

A weird warmth squeezes my heart as a big ol’ helping of guilt drops into my stomach. There’s a sticky note on the microwave. ‘*Heat for 3 minutes*. *Sorry about…everything.*’ I am a horrible person. I am a yucky, yucky person. It would’ve been fine if I had just taken the truck to blow off some steam. It probably would’ve been fine if I had just answered Jade’s phone and let him know I was okay. But the picture? I’m a bitch.

I check what’s inside and internally groan. Maybe externally too.

It’s croquetas. My mom used to make them all the time growing up because it reminded her of her time in Spain. I mentioned how much I missed them during one of our random talks that just kind of happen as a result of living with each other. He would’ve had to go out and buy special ingredients to make these. He would’ve had to look it up and study someone doing it in a video. God! Why does he have to do shit like this? He is single handedly the kindest, sweetest, most thoughtful and ridiculous, short tempered, irrational man I’ve ever had the pleasure (displeasure?) of meeting!

I let my head bang into the door of the microwave while I silently hope lightning will strike me so I don’t have to figure out any of these feelings or understand any of the events in the last twenty-four hours. In the last two weeks, honestly.

Time to do my walk of shame.

The barn door is just barely cracked when I reach the bedroom. I slide it open a tiny bit to find Grayson sleeping on the right side of the bed, hair tousled, pajama pants hung low on his hips. No matter what other stuff I’m going to pretend didn’t happen or doesn’t exist, I cannot deny the pull I feel towards him. Whether it’s to bicker or fight or laugh or talk or get under his skin or just be quiet together.

He looks so peaceful. Nothing like how he looks when he’s dealing with me.

I watch for a few more moments. To me it feels sweet, but to someone else it might be creepy, so I move to close the door back up and set myself up on the couch.

Just before it’s all the way shut I hear, “Sol?” Damnit. So close.

Sliding the door back open enough to lean against the side, I whisper, “Hi.”

He yawns and sits up a little, holding himself up on one arm. Unfortunately, he looks like a Calvin Klein model. “Are you just getting back?” He rubs a hand down his face, sleepy, and groggy, and cute, and all freaking precious.

“Mm. I was back a while ago but I was hiding out in the truck.” The corner of my lips turns up.

He gives me a soft chuckle. “Did you see my note?” Just rip my heart out, it would be so much easier.

I frown, embarrassed and ashamed. “Yes. Thank you.” An even quieter whisper. He pats the spot next to him on the bed. Oh. Yeah, I’m not so sure about that. Accountability is not really my thing and I do not want to have a grown-up talk about this. Like, at all. I should, but I don’t wanna.

I pad over anyway, climbing up and leaning against the headboard with my feet crossed.

“Can we talk?” he asks. I look over at him. His face is open, calm. I nod. “I’m sorry about last night. I got carried away and that wasn’t fair to you. That’s why I left this morning. I didn't know how to be in the same space as you.”

“I’m the one who pushed. And pushed…and pushed. I put the phone in my leggings.” My head lays back, eyes focused on the ceiling.

“I shouldn’t have freaked out over you wanting to text Jade.” He says it through his teeth, clearly not quite onboard with this part of the apology.

“What is your freaking deal with her?”

“I told you already.”

“So, you were willing to humiliate me over a girl not liking you?”

“It’s got a lot to do with a girl not liking me. But I wasn’t trying to humiliate you.”

“Then what do you call last night?” I glance back down at him, he’s rubbing his jaw and I can tell he’s getting frustrated again, like he doesn’t know how much he wants to say.

“I don’t know.” Mature. I don’t want to have this conversation any more than he does, but you gotta giddy on up there, cowboy. I wait him out.

More silence.

“To be clear, I’m already very well aware of my shortcomings and I don’t need you reminding me of them. I am trying to move on. And that’s really difficult to do when you block me every opportunity I get. You don’t have to remind me of what I’m not getting. What I’ve never gotten. I haven’t forgotten. I know exactly where my lane is.”

“That’s not it at all.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“You’re making it sound like I was making fun of you.”

“You were. You were reminding the lonely girl that she’s going to stay lonely. That she’s never going to get to move on. You were teasing me. Showing me how desperate I am for affection.”

“I don’t mean this in a shitty way, but I really think you’re projecting here.” Oh, here we go. Psychologist Grayson takes the stage.

Now *I’m* grunting through a clenched jaw. “Mm.”

“None of the things I did last night were about, what, teaching you a lesson? I don’t think you belong in Loserville, Sol. I don’t want you to be lonely. I don’t think you’re desperate.”

“If you don’t want me to be lonely, why were you so adamant that I don’t see Jade ever again?” Ah, the infamous Grayson silence. When he has to answer any direct question…surprise! He doesn’t. “I’m not sure why I even came in here. You won’t have a real conversation with me anyway. I keep getting swept up in these ridiculously sweet, thoughtful gestures that somehow hypnotize me into forgetting how you’ve treated me. I came in here feeling guilty. Because you made me my freaking favorite childhood food. I felt guilty even though you made me feel pathetic last night.” He lets his elbow slide from underneath him, falling back onto his pillow. “For the record. Jade doesn’t make me feel pathetic.” I move to stand up.

“You’re blaming me for the fact that you feel embarrassed about how you felt last night with me.”

I do feel embarrassed by how easily he had me begging for his touch. “It doesn’t matter. Last night can’t happen again.” I turn and walk towards the door.

“Why not, Sol? Say it.” He gets out of bed, closing the distance between us.

“Because you turned me into my worst nightmare last night.” Hurt flashes across his features. It’s very clear he wasn’t expecting me to say that.

“What?” His voice sounds pained.

“You are married. You are somebody’s husband. I let somebody’s husband slip his hand into my pants. I am no better than the woman I found in my bed with *my* husband.”

His face falls and he takes a step back. I’ve hurt him with what I’ve said.

Yeah, well. The truth hurts.

## Chapter 17

The cool water trickles over my bare feet, splashes over algae covered rocks, and pools in random deep spots. It’s chilly, but I like it. Chilly is good. Chilly keeps me present, keeps me from having a panic attack.

I snuck out this morning and came down to the creek in front of my cabin. I probably should have just slept in there last night, but, you know, woods at night, etcetera, etcetera.

This living arrangement isn’t going to work out. I was right about this acquaintanceship the first time. The hot and the cold is too much. I thought it was helping me feel alive, which, I guess it was. But I’m feeling alive enough and I’m not interested in pining after someone who not only doesn’t want me, but someone who I couldn’t have even if I wanted to. And someone who is shitty one minute and then lures me back in the next. I think that’s the textbook definition of manipulation.

I just don’t see another solution. My car won’t be ready for another two days. I could stay in my cabin for them, but I’d have to borrow food from Grayson and then I’d have to go crawling back to get a ride into town anyway. I’m just going to have to do my best to keep my distance. It probably would’ve all been perfectly fine had Monday night not happened. I had fun with the pranks, I was invigorated by the bickering, I was enjoying being secretly turned on by his dominance, and I really loved feeling seen. He’d done so many kind things that were specific to me. Not generally nice things. Things that were tailored to be kind to *me*.

I know I started the whole thing Monday night. I was trying to one up him in our back and forth. I was trying to get under his skin. Prove I could mess with him a little. Get in his head. It was meant to be playful. But what happened in his bed was mean. It doesn’t matter how much I enjoyed it in the moment. I’d never been explored like that. So slow, so sensual, so seductive. There was no rush, there was no expectation, no hope of reciprocity guiding his actions. But it was all to laugh at me. To get back at me for the bar. To prove how much I yearned, ached for intimacy. And then to shove in my face that he was going to make sure I wasn’t going to get it. All over a temper tantrum he was throwing because he didn’t get his way and one girl out of four hundred wasn’t into him. Way uncalled for.

I wonder what Joanna would say about this inner monologue?

I flip the page in my book, having had to resort to one of my tamer, PG rated options. Smutty is too raw for me right now. (I heard it, don’t worry. Very self-aware.) I’m surprised I’m not totally natured out by now, but the peace and serenity it brings as I sit here and read still feels fresh.

The crunch of sticks makes my head snap up in the direction of sound. I narrow my eyes. Well, there goes my serenity.

Grayson stomps down the hill and splashes right through the water to stand in front of me.

“Oh my god, dude. Give it a rest. I just wanna sit here and read my book.” He grabs the book and chucks it behind him.

“What the fuck, Grayson!” At least it landed in the dirt and not in the creek.

“I am not somebody’s fucking husband,” he rumbles and I just stare at him like a deer in headlights.

“I am a human fucking being. I am an individual. When someone asks you, ‘Hey, who are you?’ do you say, ‘Oh hey, I’m an ex-wife!’?”

This is Angry Grayson. Not Hot Angry Grayson. Just Angry. And while I’m glad we anticipated the distinction, I’m heartbroken we had to meet this version of him.

“No! You don’t. I signed the goddamn papers, Sol. I fought with every atom in my body to get away from her. I sacrificed every single thing I had worked for to get away from her. I don’t give a shit that in a file somewhere there’s a document that states we got married.” He takes a break to breathe. His chest is rising and falling so viciously.

“Grayson, I–”

“You know, I thought you of all people would understand that.” He laughs. It’s not a fun, carefree laugh. It’s humorless and short and mad.

I absolutely should have understood that. I, of course, understand that.

“I know it was a big trigger for you. I get that. But I am not somebody’s husband. I’m the man who stood up for myself when it was dangerous to do so. I’m the man who came up here to pick up the broken pieces of my life and figure out what the hell I’m going to do now. And I’m the man who wanted to make sure you had a safe place to stay with the things you needed. The man who sees you. Who pays attention. Who notices. That’s who I am.”

Shit.

I can feel my heart throughout my entire body.

There are no words, there…I don’t…fuck.

He turns around and starts climbing back up the hill. I’m in a daze. I don’t have thoughts.

“Let’s go, Sol,” he calls over his shoulder. I can’t move. How am I supposed to move after that? I don’t deserve to move, I don’t deserve to follow him back to the cabin he welcomed me into.

He’s grumpy, I’m insecure around him, we know how to pick at each other and we know things about each other that no one else knows. Which gives us a lot of power to hurt each other if we wanted to. And that can be really scary and overwhelming. But no one can deny he’s been good to me. I’m gutted to admit he might’ve been right. Maybe I was projecting…

I take a lot out on him that isn’t his to carry. The absolute extremes my mind goes to around this man. If anyone is hot and cold…it might be me? Maybe it’s just both of us and we’re always at opposite sides of the scale…

“Sol. Let’s. Go.” He turns around. His glare has me springing into action, throwing my shoes back on and hurrying to catch up. He trudges forward, and I have to jog just to keep pace.

When we get back to the cabin, I’m thrown off when he keeps walking.

“Where are we–”

“Do not talk to me right now, Sol.”

This feels a little bit like he’s going to murder me, but feels a lotta bit like there are sparklers going off inside my chest.

We don’t walk far. We really only stop a few minutes from the cabin, but Grayson starts climbing over a rock outcropping and I try to keep my trepidation to myself. But, of course, because he’s Grayson, he turns around and offers me a hand, helping me through the rocks and leading me through a cave of some sort. I must be squeezing his hand pretty tightly as we travel through the dark because he starts rubbing his thumb over where our fingers are connected to comfort me. It’s working.

I don’t even know if he realizes he’s doing it.

A golden light comes into view and we spill out into a meadow covered in wildflowers. Has this been hidden here this whole time?

“What is this place?” I ask, forgetting his no talking rule completely.

“I found it yesterday when I was out all morning.” I expect to stop and take in our surroundings, but we don’t. Grayson treks on, and when we do finally stop, my whole body freezes and then catches on fire and then freezes again.

Not five feet in front of us is a hot spring. I can see the steam rising up even in the warm weather. Grayson drops my hand. I turn to look at him, to try to read him, to try to find even a morsel of what he’s thinking. What we’re doing here.

The way he meets my curiosity has butterflies swarming in my stomach. He is looking at me like everything I ever possibly imagined when reading my books and then some. When the heroine describes that moment. The heat, the lust, the passion, the desire, the promise. He’s shown me teasers of this before. But they feel like mild sneak peaks compared to this.

“*Disrobe*, Sol.” I can’t swallow. My whole mouth has gone completely dry. Oh shit, oh shit, oh *shit*. I know he sees the panic on my face. He is unrelenting. He just waits there, arms crossed over his chest, slowly burning me with his gaze.

I cannot possibly do this. This is, I mean, this is a fever dream. There is no way this is real.

“Sol,” he croons, stepping closer, “now.”

I think I’m going to start hyperventilating.

With shaky hands I slip my t-shirt over my head. I’m rewarded with his approving eyes and it wakes up a bit of the confidence I’ve been cultivating. He is zeroed in on my breasts. Like he’s ready to devour them.

I know you’re not going to believe me when I say this, but the universe saved my fucking ass with this one. I am so out of clean clothes. I am down to the last dregs of what I brought. I’m talking ratty, holey t-shirts and ripped leggings. And in a strike of pure luck, pure dumb freaking luck, all I had left was that lacy red bra I found the other day to wear. I don’t know why I packed it, I don’t remember packing it, I’m not even sure how I owned it in the first place (I certainly haven’t had much use for it…). All I know is I owe my life to this bra. I will name my first child after this bra.

My fingers hook under the waistband of my leggings and pull down slowly. I’m not quite sure how people make this look sexy, but I’m out here fighting for my life and I’ll be damned if I don’t give it my best shot.

Before I step out of them, I slip off my sneakers and bend down to get rid of my socks. I’m standing in front of the lumberjack of my dreams in just a bra and ugly ass underwear. And he is feasting on the sight of me.

“All of it, Sol. I want everything off.” I’m back in a trance. Still in a trance. I don’t know that I will ever get out of this trance.

I follow his commands like a robot programmed to only listen to him.

I want to cover up. I feel the urge to hide, but I fight it. Modesty is a made-up concept. I can stand here and consensually show my body to this man. This is beautiful and natural and I will not hide from that.

He doesn’t speak, just nods towards the spring.

I *can* feel his eyes watching me from behind. Every fucking step I feel them. The book got that part right.

I have to sit to lower myself into the steaming water and I don’t look back until I reach the other side and turn to face him. He’s undoing the buttons of his shirt. Damn, I’ve never been more appreciative of his cliché button up flannels.

When he reaches the last one he lets the shirt fall open and starts undoing his belt. He is making me look like a total amateur (I am) undressing the way he is. Watching him undress feels like sex. And no one is even touching me.

Before I can prepare myself, he pulls his jeans and boxers down at the same time, and discards his flannel behind him on the ground.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuuuuckkk. This will come as zero surprise, but in my very little experience, I’ve never seen anyone this big. This thick. I don’t remember ever seeing a dick and thinking, ’Damn that looks good,’ but I am definitely thinking that now. I want that in every place I can take it.

He joins me in the spring, wading over to barricade me against the edge, back pressed up against the dirt, his arms closing me in. He keeps his body just out of reach. I am a whore for this position. I am trapped. I am ensnared in his web and I will gladly let him eat me. I will go willingly.

His nose trails from the outside of my shoulder, ever so slowly across to my collarbone, and up my neck. He pauses at my ear. I feel his teeth sink into the skin of my earlobe. Quick. Barely. But my body jolts anyway.

“You drive me crazy, Sol,” he whispers and I get goosebumps on every inch of my skin.

His right arm leaves the side of the spring and dips under the water. I feel him glide one finger from my knee to my hip, pausing to draw lazy circles there, each rotation getting closer and closer to my, ‘*heat.*’ I inhale a sharp breath. I am wound so tight, my stomach clenched, my thighs pressed together.

“You know the next part, Sol. I know you do.” His lips haven’t left their spot at my ear.

I do. Of course I do. How could I forget? This scene is burned into my memory.

I relax my legs, letting my thighs separate. His groan of approval tickles my ear.

The lazy circles he’s drawing continue, only now they have new territory to explore. They tickle the inside of my right thigh and then he switches arms, pulling the left under the water and placing the right back where it came from. He repeats the same journey from the knee, to the circles, to the tickle on the inside of the thigh on the left side of my body. He moves his fingers up to the valley where my thigh meets my pussy and I whimper. He is so close, but he doesn’t stop. His fingers morph into his whole hand sliding up my stomach and grabbing my breast.

This time, I gasp. “Grayson!”

“God these fucking tits are all I’ve been thinking about for weeks now.” He moves to place open mouth kisses along my jaw while massaging my breast, stopping only to pinch my nipple. It goes hard under his fingers.

Grayson adjusts so he can press up against me fully, finally allowing me to feel how hard he is against my stomach.

I’m all breathy gasps and quiet moans.

His fingers leave to grab a handful of my hip and I’m mid huff of protest when his mouth descends on where his fingers had been, licking, sucking, biting. I’m gripping his shoulders, nails digging in, body arching into his touch.

“That’s it, lollipop, show me how much you like it.” He glances up from my chest and the sight of him making eye contact, sucking and licking my tits? Unreal.

I wrap my legs around his waist when I feel his right hand take my other breast in his hand, making sure to tweak and twist and pinch that nipple too. “Oh god.”

With the new position, the base of his cock rubs against my core, teasing just outside where I want him.

“Tell me how wet you are for me, Sol.” He bites and licks and kisses his way up my chest to my jaw.

“So wet. So, so wet.”

“*How* wet, lollipop?” His right hand is getting closer and closer to where I desperately need it, his left still gripping my waist, holding me in place against him.

“Dripping,” I moan, throwing my head back, skin crawling in anticipation. I should be horrified right now. I should be freaking out. I don’t do discomfort or new things. But I don’t have a single brain cell to dedicate to those kinds of feelings. All I can feel is heat.

Grayson grabs my chin and forces me to look at him. Faces inches apart.

“Good fucking girl.” His mouth opens, taking in a shuttered breath as his fingers slip between my lips, moving up and down agonizingly slow, making sure to never quite touch my clit. He dips one finger, then two inside me. My legs tighten around him and my nails dig harder into his back.

“So tight. So goddamn tight.”

The noises he’s coaxing out of me are downright feral.

As quickly as I was filled, I’m suddenly empty. I want to scream. But then I watch Grayson bring his fingers up between our faces. He paints my slickness across my lips and uses his thumb to push down on my chin, opening my mouth.

“Suck. Taste how fucking sweet you are.” I do, I lick up his fingers, hollowing out my cheeks and suck up and down. His dick twitches against my stomach. This is the most erotic thing I’ve ever been a part of.

He pulls his fingers out of my mouth with a *pop*. We’re both breathing heavily, watching each other. My hand is removed from his shoulder and pulled under the water. He uses my hand to cup me, keeping it in place with his own.

“Slide your fingers into this tight fucking cunt, lollipop. I want you to feel how tight you are, I want you to understand what’s been keeping me up at night jerking my cock. Coming to the thought of how tight I’ve dreamt this pussy is.” I am going to combust. I have never done any of these things but I am so goddamn hypnotized by him that I have no choice but to follow his demands. I couldn’t deny him even if I wanted to. My body answers to him.

As soon as I get them inside myself he pulls my hand back up. He’s torturing me. Only giving me the teeniest, tiniest taste of what he’s capable of. What he’s got planned.

“My turn.” His eyes are so bright, so determined, so satisfied. He sucks my fingers into his mouth, licking them clean. When he’s done, he leans his forehead against mine, giving a pained, frenzied moan that fans across my face.

“So much better than I imagined. You taste so good. You taste perfect.” I feel drunk. I’m drunk off his touch, I’m drunk off his dirty freaking mouth, I’m drunk off the way he looks at me.

Grayson takes both hands and grips my ass, grinding me against him. Adjusting himself so my core glides up and down his dick, soaking it.

“Fuck, Sol. This pussy feels so good on my cock.” He’s moving just right, just enough to send shocks of pleasure through me.

“Grayson, please,” I beg, bucking my hips against him.

“Tell me what you want.” He spreads my ass wider in his hands.

“I need you to touch me,” I whine, slipping my arms around his neck, pulling myself as close as I can get.

“Tell me where, lollipop.” I’m so pissed that this stupid fucking nickname he’s latched on to is turning me on even more.

His hips roll lazily into me. It’s torment. It’s painful having him this close, playing with me, without actually touching where I need him to.

“I need your fingers.”

“Tell me where.” A bite to my jaw, my neck, the juncture where my neck meets my shoulder, my breast.

“My pussy!” I cry, squirming in his arms, trying to move any way I can to feel him where I need him.

“How do you ask, lollipop?” Oh my god, he’s infuriating. He’s going to kill me.

“Please, Grayson! Put your fucking fingers in my pussy. Touch me. Grind on my clit. Anything, *please*.”

“You’re so perfect, Sol. Begging for me. Desperate for my fingers. Such a good girl.”

This time I scream, this time I cry out as loud as I can. His fingers slam inside me, his thumb finds my clit and starts moving in small, purposeful circles and I am a mess. I am using my legs around his waist to fuck myself on his fingers. To force him to put more pressure on my clit.

“That’s right, lollipop. Use me. Show me how you like it.” He’s sucking on my neck, shifting to add a bite or a lick every so often.

I can’t think, I can’t breathe, I can’t anything. He’s a fucking magician. A master at work. He’s got me racing towards an orgasm. Every movement, every flick, every curl of his fingers, perfection. Tingles everywhere. Heat building. Head spinning.

“Grayson, fuck, I’m gonna –”

“Come for me. Come all over these fingers. I wanna feel you soak them. I wanna feel this pussy squeeze them, crush them.” A breath. More building. More magical finger work. “Come for me, Sol. Show me how good I make you feel.”

Electrified. Every nerve ending in my body goes off at once as I get absolutely destroyed by my orgasm. My hands slide into Grayson’s hair, pulling on it as hard as I can. My sob fills the space around us. I’m keening, mewling, flat out screaming for him. Moaning his name again and again and again until the aftershocks stop. I draw in a huge breath and collapse against him, face buried into his neck.

“God you’re fucking beautiful. You are so goddamn beautiful when you come.” He murmurs praise after praise in my ear.

We’re quiet for a few moments, catching our breath. I lift my head up to meet his eyes. Wanting. Asking for permission.

“Not this time, lollipop. This time was all about you.” Out of everything he’s said to me, that might be the sexiest thing. No one has ever said that to me. The only reason Brian paid any attention to me was to try to make it less obvious that all he cared about was getting off.

He holds my face in one hand, thumb rubbing gently against my jaw, tracing over my lips. “Listen to me.” He waits until he has my full attention, until my eyes are on him. “I’m not somebody’s husband. I’m the man who got so hard seeing you bend over for me that I had to jerk off in that YMCA shower after you left the room. I’m the man who saw red when someone else touched you in the bar. The man who couldn’t fucking resist, couldn’t hold back anymore. Who had to feel you. Who chased you into his bed so he could finally touch you. And I’m the man who made you come all over my fingers. And I’ll do it again, and again, and again. I’ll have you drenched for me. Bent over every fucking surface. I’m gonna fill that sweet, sweet pussy with my cock and have you screaming. That’s a promise.”

On my tombstone I’d like you to write, ‘Died from a heart attack after hearing the sexiest fucking speech of her life.’

## Chapter 18

Wrapped in a towel and nothing else, I watch Grayson come out of his closet in short black boxers and almost have an orgasm right then and there.

I don’t know what to do with myself. I don’t know how I am supposed to act now. How do you treat the man who delivered you the most erotic, provocative experience of your life on a silver platter? Do you thank him? Do you die of shame from screaming his name at the top of your lungs? Do you get him a present? Do you ignore him forever because how can you ever look him in the eyes again after sucking your own cum off his fingers?

He doesn’t seem to be having the same panicked breakdown in his head.

He walks up to me, a soft smile playing on his lips. He had me take a shower when we got back. He wanted to come in with me and help me get cleaned up, but I couldn’t possibly survive that.

I needed to panic in the safety of my own head, without any extremely perceptive men watching every expression on my face, no matter how small. I needed to spiral and hyperventilate and repeat every single second in that spring over and over until I was even more wet than when I got in the shower. I needed a… what did she call it…, ‘a human moment.’ (Chef’s kiss to you if you know the reference without having to look it up.)

Grayson sets another black t-shirt and black boxers on the bed before pulling me closer by the top of my towel. He unwraps it, letting it drop to the floor. With the boxers in hand, he motions for me to step into them, and gently drags them up my legs. I feel like I should close my eyes. The intimacy of this is making me clench up. It is beautiful and sweet and swoon worthy and horrifically embarrassing. I just rode his fingers like a cowgirl but somehow this feels worse. Deeper.

Hmm. Pun intended.

I am still fighting my avoidance of vulnerability. And this feels very, very vulnerable.

With the boxers set snuggly on my hips, (I know this is not the freaking size that he wears, where the hell are all these magic clothes perfectly in my size coming from?) he moves to put the shirt over my head (and this time I’m delighted to find it *does* smell like him), tugging at the bottom, using the movement to force me to step forward and stand in between his legs as he sits on the edge of the bed. He places his hands on the outside of my thighs and rubs soft, sweet patterns over them.

Do you think they made him somewhere in a lab? Like mixed in all the ingredients that people who are attracted to men around the world would sell their soul to find in a man? Who funded it? Should I send *them* a thank you card?

“I like you in my shirts, lollipop,” he murmurs against my stomach, leaning in to rest his forehead on me.

“Speaking of, I am very out of clothes. I don’t have anything clean to wear. Can we go into town maybe? So I can wash them at a laundromat?” Nice deflection, Sol. Ignore his panty dropping comments and talk about chores.

“I washed all your stuff and put it away in the dresser.” He tilts his head up to look at me. Sir, I’m gonna need you to back up. This is a fire hazard.

My eyebrows knit together and I frown. Do you think I got a concussion that first day when I fell on Grayson’s landmine porch and slipped into a coma? I know I bring it up a lot, but I cannot explain how fantastical this all seems.

I hadn’t even noticed. That feels really ungrateful or spoiled or something. I had just been shoving the dirty clothes in one of my bags and never looking at them again, so I never realized.

He just smiles and continues his rubbing.

“You didn’t have to do that.” Even I can hear the nerves in my voice. I don’t know what to do with my hands, they're just hanging limply at my sides.

“I know.”

Silence. I’m sure he’s probably thinking about how natural and peaceful this silence is, but I am not feeling peaceful. I am stressed. I am making a very big deal out of…the unknown I guess. I do not feel very ‘go with the flow’. I feel on edge and like I’m supposed to be the lead in a show that I don’t know the lines for. Like I never received a script.

“Stop.” He looks back up at me through his lashes and my frown deepens. Oh shit, are my limp arms annoying him? Brushing up against his hands too much? I hold them out a little further from my sides. It’s awkward, but I’m no longer touching him.

He pulls me by my thighs even closer, forcing me to straddle his lap. His arms wrap around my waist and rest against my back.

“You’re overthinking,” he hums, moving his hands up and down soothingly.

“How can you tell?”

“I know what your face looks like when you are.” Grayson reaches up to place my arms around his neck. I keep quiet.

“Talk to me, what’s buzzing around in there?” Speaking of vulnerability! Why is healing so up and down? One minute I’m on top of a mountain reading smut aloud and coming in a hot spring, or standing up for myself in long winded rants that include a lot of really hard truths that are difficult to say. And the next I’m second guessing everything I do and feeling insecure, like a nuisance, like a bother and the brunt of the joke. The way I’ve felt since putting my clothes back on and returning to the cabin is exactly how I used to feel around Brian. I have regressed right back to the meek, scared girl worried that if she said or did the wrong thing, that her husband would push her away even more than he already had. That if she followed his lead, she’d never have to feel rejected by putting herself out there. If I could anticipate his moods, his wants and needs, he would finally see me. Want me. Love me. We all know how that turned out.

Damnit. I can’t tell if I’m paying Joanna too much, or too little.

I swallow, trying to encourage the spit to come back to my dry mouth.

He waits me out. He is so good at that. So patient. Excellent wait time. That’s one of my weaknesses in teaching.

“Can I give the ‘some of the truth but mostly surface level answer’? Or do I have to do the whole deep dive?” His hands pause their travels to squeeze my hips. Ugh. I knew he was gonna say that.

“I am panicking,” I huff, looking behind him. Around him. He chuckles, caressing my jaw with just enough pressure to adjust my face to make me look at him. More wait time.

Big deep breath, and blow it out. “I am having a hard time holding on to the woman I’ve been nurturing since coming up here. I’m finding that I’m regressing back into old habits.”

“Like what?”

Should this feel like I’m stabbing my own eyes with a fork? Talking about the divorce is one thing. I felt stupid and embarrassed because I thought the divorce reflected poorly on me and not Brian. Grayson was the first person I admitted that to. He was the first person I had even told the reason for my divorce to. That was hard, but I did it. I told him about the fire. Those are things that happened to me. That I went through.

This feels worse. This isn’t just me feeling sorry for myself, either. This is me having to admit just how pathetic I’d become in my marriage. How much of myself I let die. How I made myself small so Brian could feel big, hoping that would make him like me.

I know I should phrase this more positively but I don’t have it in me.

His face is open, calm, attentive. He wants to know. He genuinely wants to know what’s happening in my head. I can see it in his eyes, in the way he’s touching and soothing me. He’s not just asking to be polite. Grayson is mindful of me and my needs just about all of the time.

“Um,” I have to take a second to clear my throat, “when I was married to Brian, I was an empty shell, a ghost of who I was. I would minify myself, dim my personality. I would keep my thoughts and my opinions to myself. I would anticipate his every move to make sure I didn’t do anything that would make him hate me more. I thought if I dulled who I was, if I didn’t bring up my wants or needs, that he would find me palatable enough to want. I was very desperate for love and connection. I thought if I let him take the lead, I would never have to feel rejected. Crushing myself like that turned me into a version of myself I didn’t like. I was sad and depressed and let myself get so pitiful that I was begging for a man’s attention. I was simultaneously disgusted and embarrassed with how bad I had let things get. I lost my spark, I lost the ability to think for myself. I just wasted away and let him control whether or not I felt happy.” I have to pause. I can tell I’m going to start crying and I’m trying to fight it. I was not planning on saying that much. He did not ask for that much. I could’ve simplified it, I could’ve been more vague.

A stupid, useless tear slips down my cheek. He moves to gently wipe it away almost immediately. I expect him to change the subject. To nod and move on. I’ve said enough and that was way more emotional than he bargained for.

“And tell me how that’s manifesting here with me. Am I doing things that are causing these reactions?” I kind of want to scream in a very spit flying, unhinged, sort of nutty way. What do you *mean*??? You’re telling me he’s gorgeous, he has a dirty mouth that rivals the *fictional* men in my books, he’s thoughtful, he’s kind, he’s dominant, he’s so freaking sweet, *and* he’s emotionally intelligent and wants to hold himself accountable? Fuck all the way off.

“No, no, it’s nothing you’ve done at all. You’ve been…I am constantly shocked by you.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s the things you do so quietly. The steaks. The books, the groceries, the sandwich, the croquetas, the key lime pie, the dance to one of my favorite songs, the laundry, the listening. You…you give a shit about me, I guess?”

“And that’s shocking?”

“Yeah,” I whisper, “it is.”

“Tell me how you’re losing yourself.” The way he’s holding me, listening to me… I thought this was something people wrote in fairytales and that it was purely fiction. Like making a movie about living on Pluto or having magical powers. A cool thing a lot of people would wanna do, but can’t, because it’s made up. It was imagined.

“I am feeling the urge to make myself smaller, to do whatever I can to make sure you don’t stop liking being around me. To only interact with you when you very directly, very obviously initiate contact.”

“When have you ever cared about what you said and did in front of me? Sol, half the time you’re waving your hands in the air yelling at me and trying to kick me out of my own house.” I can see the humor on his face. He’s not laughing at me, he’s just amused.

“I –”

“And I haven’t gone anywhere,” he says, interrupting me, pushing my wet hair behind my ear. “I’m still here, Sol. I want you to say and do and act exactly how you want to. Based on your wants and needs and comfort level.”

“Bu–”

Oh, he’s not done. “I do not ever want you to adjust yourself to fit into what you think I want. To dim who you are because you’re afraid of how I’ll react.”

“That’s kind of terrifying you know,” I respond, some sarcasm slipping its way in.

He laughs. “Yeah, it is kind of terrifying. But we’re going to do it anyway.” Hmmm. Am I capable of that, Old Sol? ‘No.’ New Sol? ‘Hell yeah!’

New Sol wins it.

… maybe

“Let me make you food.” He places a kiss against my collarbone.

“You’re always making me food,” I laugh.

“Well, let me make you some more.”

—

“How is it?” He asks from his rocking chair on the porch.

“Orgasmic as always,” I reply, shoving more burger into my mouth. He made more because I didn’t get to try them the other day.

He gives me a knowing, heated grin.

“Oh, shut up!” I laugh, rolling my eyes and throwing a fry at him. Not just any fry. A hand-cut-and-fried-himself fry.

“Do you wanna start sunrise yoga tomorrow?”

“Where did that come from?”

“I was just thinking about that first week and the checklist.”

“What do we have left? Sunrise yoga and…puzzles? Hook up with a stranger?” He gives me a very dry, very unimpressed look. “You’re not a stranger.” I wink and his glare intensifies. “Oh wait! I kind of hooked up with Jade (no I didn’t) does that count? I only saw her those two times…” I’m all cheek. I know I am pushing his buttons and I’m sorry, I love it. I’m addicted to it.

“Sol…” His threat follows me into the cabin, punctuated by the screen door slamming shut. I’m chuckling to myself before I’m gasping. Pressed up against the countertop from behind.

“Do I need to remind you who this pussy belongs to?” God, his mouth. The words that come out of it. The bites and licks and kisses that come from it.

His hands have slid to shove my thighs apart and grab between them. Jesus.

We both freeze. There’s a car coming up the driveway. I can hear the tires on the stones.

I turn my head to see what Grayson thinks. “Who the hell could that be?” He just shakes his head and walks to the windows overlooking the porch.

“Fuck.” He locks the door and leans up against it, eyes closed, hands over his head.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s Natalie.” Oh, that is not good. That is not good at all.

“What do we do?”

His expression is pained when he looks at me. “I don’t know. She already knows I’m here, I can’t just pretend I’m not. Even if I could fake being out on a hike, she’s gonna wait. She drove all the way up here.”

“We could at least take a walk, buy some more time, come up with a plan?”

“She’s already too close, she would see us leave.” I peek through the window and whip back as fast as I can. I’m trying to think, but my brain is mush. I know he doesn’t want to see her. She’s awful to him. He’s made such a beautiful place for himself up here, she shouldn’t taint that. But how can I possibly keep her out? And at some level, they do kind of have to talk in hopes of her signing the papers…

“I’m going to have to talk to her.”

“Grayson, I don’t –”

“I don’t have a choice, Sol.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

He studies me. “No. But I don’t want you getting dragged into her bullshit either.”

“I don’t care about that, I just wanna support you.”

His eyes soften. “Will you just wait in the bedroom? I’ll try and get rid of her as soon as possible.”

“Okay,” I nod, “good luck. If you need anything, I’m just a few feet away.” He gives me a half smile and I turn to give him his space.

If Brian showed up here right now I’d be horrified. Mortified. I would freeze. I know I would. I am growing, but that is for big, hundred-year-old sycamore people, not baby dandelion people. Eventually I’ll spread my roots, let my seeds fly in the wind and find new places to grow. But not today. I’m not ready for that yet. And I doubt Grayson is ready for that either.

I have to make the decision on whether or not I try my best to be as far away as possible and block my hearing or if I want to make sure I hear everything. I would normally feel like that’s a huge invasion of privacy, but because of what Grayson told me about Natalie…it might be a good idea to have someone listening. I’ll just sit by the door, keep an ear out for anything that sounds like it's escalating to a weird place, and that’s it.

I definitely hear when the door opens and she comes in. Their voices are just a muffled sound coming from that direction. That’s even better, some privacy and I’ll only be listening if she starts yelling or something.

Although, she didn’t just yell. She’d cry and manipulate and guilt trip and shove. I wouldn’t hear any of those things if she did them quietly enough.

I feel very unprepared for something like this. And, like, what is my role here? Sassy roommate? Girl who saw stars because of him this morning?

I slide the door to Grayson’s bedroom open as slowly and quietly as possible. I can’t see them, but I can hear them now.

Natalie scoffs and cackles, “Oh, good one, Grayson. Always playing the victim.”

“Natalie, I’m just asking that you go back home.”

“My family owns this cabin. I am home!” Her voice is so shrill.

“Just go back to New York. We can talk later.”

There’s a sound like a heel clicking on the floor and I tense. “I am not leaving here until you take all of this back and give me what I want.”

“I already signed the papers, Nat, let’s just move on.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass if you’ve signed the papers. I said my vows. I’m not breaking that. I am your wife and you owe me a family!” There’s more clicking. I’m assuming she’s getting closer to him.

“I know you want a family, but I’m not going to be a part of it.” I have so much respect for how he’s communicating. As we’ve seen, I’m not very delicate in expressing my thoughts.

I just can’t understand how such a good man married someone like her. Well… I guess I can understand because the same thing happened to me in reverse.

“Like hell you aren’t! You’re going to take me in your bedroom and you’re going to fuck me and you’re going to come inside me. And we’ll do it over and over until I have a positive pregnancy test in my hand.” She is vicious and nasty and I feel sick listening to her. It is so much worse hearing it in person. And it was already vomit inducing hearing Grayson talk about it.

“I’m asking you to please leave, Natalie.” My heart is simultaneously in my throat and squeezing with sympathy.

There’s another noise. A chair scrapes along the hardwood floors and there’s a smack. From the sound of the chain clinking against the hallway lamp, I think somebody got pushed up against the wall there, shaking the table it sits on.

“You’re going to put a baby in me, Grayson, or I’m going to absolutely ruin you. The pharmacy called about my birth control prescription. Said I needed a new script. I told them I had stopped taking it months ago, and do you know what they said?” I close my eyes, stomach in knots. This is so bad. Jesus, he doesn't deserve this.

He doesn’t answer, but I hear him grunt. I mean, I definitely have to go out there, right?

“They said, ‘Really? Because your husband’s been picking it up every month.’ What did you do, Grayson? WHAT DID YOU FUCKING DO?” I don’t know that I’ve ever heard someone scream like that. Furious, wild, crazed.

I have to do something.

“He was picking it up for me,” I stammer, stumbling out into the hallway. Both of their heads turn towards me as I barely catch myself before falling face first into the floor.

“Sol?” Natalie asks, confusion written all over her face.

“Hi, Natalie.” I give a very awkward wave. Why did I do that?

“Sol…” I refuse to make eye contact with Grayson. I know what I’ll see, but I’m going to do this anyway.

“What are you doing here? Are you staying in your cabin for the summer? Gosh, it’s been so long…” Her body language shifts startlingly fast. She’s in ‘damage control’ mode. ‘Keep up with appearances’ mode.

“No, I’m actually staying in *this* cabin for the summer.” Her eyebrows shoot up.

“Sol.” He’s more insistent this time. I ignore him. I’m just happy she has backed away from him and given him enough space that I feel a little less panicked. The immediate threat has subsided slightly.

“I thought Grayson had come up here to stay for the summer?” The smile on her face is forced and so stiff it looks like she cemented it there.

“He did.”

“Okay, so…”

“*We’re* staying here this summer, Natalie. Together.” Big deep breath. Fuck. I can do this. For Grayson. He has shown me this kind of kindness, and I can return the favor. He deserves someone in his corner.

“We’ve been together. For months. That’s why he was filling the birth control prescription. I couldn’t get a script and we were taking precautions.”

“Sol! Absolutely not!” There’s so much grief on his face. He would never put me in this position. He’s going to feel so guilty.

I would do it again, though. To save him.

I hold up a hand in Grayson’s direction. “It’s fine, babe. Cat’s out of the bag.”

I am getting daggers shot at me from both sides. Natalie’s are depraved, ferocious. But Grayson’s are just agonized.

“You’ve been cheating on me?” She rounds on Grayson and I give him a very stern, very pointed look. He’s quiet for a long time before releasing a breath. “Yeah.”

“Oh my god, isn’t this rich! My useless, impotent, sorry excuse for a man husband has been cheating on me with the sad, pathetic girl who always wanted to be me and have the things I did. Congratulations, Sol. Your dreams have finally come true. You can fucking have him.” She spits in my direction. Grayson’s reaction is immediate.

I lunge forward, stepping in front of him. Putting a hand on his thigh behind me.

“Do not talk about her like that,” he fumes. I can feel how hard his breathing is against my back.

“Oh, I’m going to talk about her a lot. I’m going straight to our lawyer and letting him know all about this. You’re not gonna get a penny. Absolutely nothing. I’m keeping the house, the cars, I’m keeping it all.” They stare off with me very uncomfortably right between them.

“I’ll email and let him know I’ll update my signatures electronically.”

She does not like that response. At all. She raises her hand as if to slap him and I shove my chest into hers on pure instinct. So fast, without consciously deciding to. With enough force that she steps back a few feet.

“It’s time to go, Natalie.” I nod towards the door.

“Who the hell do you think you are telling me to get out of my own cabin?” She screeches.

“Listen. I’ve already called the cops (no I didn’t), they’re on their way. So, unless you want to be charged for a domestic dispute, then I suggest you leave now. Clean and easy.” I steel myself, ready to do the unthinkable. “Wouldn’t want your clients catching wind of this, now would we? ‘Natalie McKenzie, the woman at the top of the wedding industry’s corporate ladder. Divorced. Cheated on. How is she supposed to advise people in their wedding planning if she can’t even keep a husband?’ I can see it now. Every tabloid across the city. Sounds like you’re about to lose a lot of daddy’s money.”

Jesus, that hurt. My face is smug, strong, but it is just a mask. I feel sick. I said those things because I knew I didn’t have a choice. Because I needed Grayson safe and away from this woman. I knew exactly how to hit where it hurts. I just had to repeat the sad, self-deprecating affirmations I’ve said to myself about a million times.

I am not proud of what I did, but I do stand by what I did.

“Oh, I’m so going to wring you dry. I’ll take pleasure in watching you burn. Hopefully, your little girlfriend doesn’t catch on fire from standing too close.” She’s completely ignoring me, spitting venom at Grayson, but she thankfully turns on her ridiculously high heels for the middle of the woods and leaves out the front door. I hear her car door a few moments later.

With a quick twist I lock the front door and turn to lean against it. My hands find my face and I close my eyes behind them. Holy shit. The adrenaline is all out sprinting out of my body. The fear of what I did prickling against my neck. How quickly bravado abandons us.

I did the right thing. I know I did.

“Sol, why did you –”

My hands slip from my face and I hold up one finger asking him to wait a second.

“I think we should go get milkshakes.”

## Chapter 19

“Here you go, darlings. Fresh baked banana bread. Made it myself.” The woman serving us is delightfully charming. She has had a huge, warm smile on her face every time she’s been to the table. We put in milkshake orders a few minutes ago. With a side of fries to share, obviously.

“Oh my gosh this looks so good!” I gush. “But I actually think we’re okay.” Her expression makes me think she’s never had anyone send her bread back before.

“Are you sure? It’ll just be going cold in the back.”

I put the biggest, most sincere smile on my face to try to avoid insulting her. “I’m so sorry it’s just that he’s allergic.” I shrug and her eyes go wide.

“To nuts? I have some without nuts!”

I shake my head, “No, to bananas.” I sigh and hike my thumb in his direction in a big, ‘This guy, amirite?’

“Oh, what a shame!” She clicks her tongue, “Your milkshakes will be ready in just a few.” She bustles away, stopping at another table to fill their coffee.

“She is so cute!” I say, turning back towards Grayson. He has such a funny look on his face.

I’m just glad to see any emotion on his face. He’d been completely silent on the way here, face completely blank, fingers tapping on the steering wheel every so often. We had to drive forty-five silent minutes outside of town to find a place that was open past eight o’clock. Martha’s Diner saves the day.

“What?” I laugh, eyeing him, raising an eyebrow.

“You didn’t have to send the banana bread back.”

“Of course I did. What are you even talking about?”

“It’s not like fish or peanuts, I’m not gonna die right here at the table.” I just shrug, but his gaze doesn’t leave mine.

“Grayson, I’d rather never eat another banana in my entire life than eat one in front of you while you can’t enjoy it.” More emotion. Sparking in the eyes this time. This is good. Now we’re getting somewhere.

To be very clear, I’d be fine if he was silent for the next ten years. If the roles were reversed and I had just gone through that with Brian while Grayson not only watched, but had to get involved and lie for me? Yeah, I’m not sure I’d be surfacing from under my covers for a short eternity.

“Sol, you can’t–”

“You are so cliché it hurts. Mint chocolate chip milkshake? Do you drink your toothpaste at night too?” I say, cutting him off. It’s not time yet. And he’s too in his head to see anything clearly anyway.

He lowers his eyes at me, but I stare right back, refusing to back down. There’s a very exasperated diva sigh before he says, “Some of us have taste, lollipop.”

“I cannot believe you’re still hanging on to that pet name in the death grip you are. And I’m pretty sure I’m the one who fought for the french fries, so everything you say from here on out has no foundation.”

“Why would I have thought to order fries with ice cream?”

“Watch your mouth, lumberjack! Don’t be disrespectful. The art of sweet and salty is not to be defamed by the likes of you!”

“Are you like this because you didn’t talk to anyone for two years or because you teach children for a living?”

“Both. Anyway, there is no better combo than milkshakes and fries. It is the cream of the crop.”

“I don’t think it’s that amazing. It’s way overhyped.” The shock, the outrage, is palpable.

“Excuse me, what?” I shriek, flabbergasted and offended.

“Something weird happens to you after nine pm. It’s like your brain clocks out, not willing to work one extra minute than it’s scheduled for.”

“Also because I teach children for a living,” I grin. I do feel a little delirious. It feels like I lived forty lifetimes today. I am coming down off an adrenaline high and am forcing my one million thoughts into the corners of my mind and it's exhausting. It’s making me weird. Can’t control a spiral *and* my bizarre, goofy, intrusive thoughts. Gotta pick one.

“Do you see yourself staying at your district for your entire career?”

Martha shows up with a flamboyant twirl and sets our shakes and fries in front of us.

“Amazing! Thank you.” She waves me away and scampers off back to the counter. I take a nice long sip. Oh yes, just what the doctor ordered. I may be moaning a little. Grayson doesn’t miss it. He never misses anything.

“I feel like this answer is going to be a little biased considering my life’s current status…but I’m open. I like my district a lot. I love my kids and I love using both of the languages. But I’m feeling a pretty big push to start completely fresh. New apartment, new job, new everything. I know it’s kind of extreme, but I think I’ve hit the extreme point.”

“Like taking an abandoned cabin and renovating it in two weeks?”

“Exactly like that, yeah. I’m assuming you’re not going back to work with Hugh?” I definitely don’t think he’s such a great man anymore.

“Yeah, that’s a big no. I had been putting money aside for years, for obvious reasons. I have some time to think, but I also feel pretty open.”

“Okay, dream situation. There are zero factors negatively affecting your decision. What would you do?” I’m momentarily distracted by the way his lips wrap around the straw of his milkshake. The way I can see the muscle in his jaw jump and his throat swallow.

“Damn. I don’t know if I’ve ever really asked myself that question.” He bites a fry in thought.

“Me either.”

“Okay, then we both have to answer.”

“Deal.”

We stay quiet, thinking.

“Ooh!” I exclaim, waving a fry in emphasis, “If there were absolutely no boundaries, I would move to somewhere like Costa Rica and live right on the beach. My house would be a living part of the jungle and I would pay a shit ton of money for a famous scientist to magically keep the bugs off my property. I would want a way to control the humidity and temperature too. It’s really freaking humid down there.” I slap my hand down on the table, so impressed with myself.

“Oh, we’re going like, dream-dream scenario.”

“Uh…duh!”

“Okay, for my crazy one I’d build a huge lake house from scratch. I’d buy the entire lake; all of the property would be mine. No visitors, no renters, nothing. And I would also build custom houses all along the shore for my kids and their families. And we’d have bonfires and picnics and play games every summer for the whole summer. And in the winter, I’d enjoy the peace and quiet and build a bunch of cool shit just for the hell of it.” The joy that lights up his face… he is so handsome.

My straw makes the infamous bubbling sound letting me know I’ve gotten to the bottom. “That doesn’t sound all that crazy,” I say softly. He shrugs.

“So, you want kids, then?” I prod, taking one last fry and popping it in my mouth.

“Yeah, I do. You?”

I grin and nod, “Totally.”

He’s finally making full eye contact. Baby steps. “How many?”

“Maybe two? I’m open to more, but past two becomes, like, truly your entire life. It’s much more difficult to balance anything else outside of parenting. I wouldn’t want just one, though. I loved growing up with a sibling when I wasn’t hating growing up with a sibling.”

“We were three, my two sisters and I. Three is tough because there’s always a middle. And I know my parents had a rough go of it. But it’s all I know and I think there’s something special about it.”

“Who is the middle?”

He smirks. “You’re looking at him.”

“I actually don’t think I would’ve guessed that. You give me more of a bossy older brother type of vibe.”

“Well, I was. To one of them. My older sister Sawyer was the queen of us both, though.”

“I love her already,” I tease.

“She’s a spitfire. You’d like her. Fit right in.”

“Wow, she could be my first friend.”

“No, no, no, no. You two are not allowed to be friends. You would team up against me and I would be absolutely powerless.”

I wave my hand in the air. “Uh, exactly. It’ll be amazing.”

“You aren’t close with any of your coworkers?”

“Not really. We’re friendly. And trauma bonded. But I pushed everyone away during my marriage and especially through the divorce. If anyone got to know me, they would’ve realized how bad things were and I wasn’t ready to hear it.”

“Things got really rough with me and Chase. If I hadn’t before, I’ve definitely lost that relationship now.”

My lips form a small frown. “That sucks. It freaking sucks.”

“All done here, my dears?” I don’t know how Martha does it. So jolly. Like the diner version of Mrs. Claus.

“Yes! Everything we wanted and more, thank you so much!” She sets the check in the middle of the table and I pretty much slam chest-first onto the surface attempting to dive for it. I’m too slow. Grayson shoots his hand out lightning quick and holds his prize above his head.

“Are you always this sickeningly sweet to servers?” he asks, standing up and stretching. His shirt pulls up and reveals part of his stomach and the hair leading beneath his jeans. I didn’t get *any* opportunity to explore his body earlier. That is *so* unfair. And terrifying.

“Yupp,” my lips make a popping sound at the end, “I waitressed for ten years. It ain’t for the weak of heart.”

We walk to the register and Grayson pays. Turning, he hands me a ten-dollar bill. “Will you put this on the table while I sign?” I give him a look.

“Fine, I’ll go do it.”

I shake my head, holding my hand out and curling my fingers in quickly a couple times. “Cough it up, *señor*.” I wave the ten he gave me in his face.

He raises his eyebrows at me, incredulous. My stare is unimpressed and he wisely relents, stacking another ten in my hand. “That’s more like it.”

We’re walking back to the truck when he says, “Our bill was only eleven dollars.”

“Are you trying to woo me with that statement or was that a snide cheap date comment…?” He chuckles. It’s nice to hear it. I’m glad he could have an hour or two to take a second before having to dive into the deep shit we’re in.

“You made me tip twenty dollars on an eleven-dollar check.”

“I’m just not seeing what the problem is.” The way he’s shaking his head shows how ridiculously insane he finds me.

“There isn’t one, I guess.” We hop into the cab of the truck and I am delighted when he turns the radio on. It’s country, *shocker*, but I’ll take it. If he’s putting on music, that’s a good sign.

“She was wonderful and prompt and baked us fresh bread that we sent away.”

“You didn’t have to–”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, Grayson. We get it. It doesn't matter regardless. We would’ve tipped her twenty even if she dumped food on us and made us cry.” It’s like when he looks at me he sees a cute, fuzzy, absolutely psychotic kitten missing an ear and maybe even an eye.

“Ma’am yes ma’am.”

I settle into my seat a little better, ready for the forty-five-minute drive ahead.

The music changes and a big grin spreads on my face. “Oh, *yes*! I think we know this one!” I cry, yanking the volume dial all the way up. It’s our song. The one we made a dance to. I know Grayson is going to roll his eyes. Most real country fans don’t like Sam Hunt. But man, I can’t help but dance when this one comes on. Time to pull out my scream singing again.

“YOU’RE ON THE COUCH, BLOWIN’ UP MY PHONE. YOU DON’T WANNA COME OUT, BUT YOU DON’T WANNA BE ALONEEEE.” I’ve never claimed to be a professional musician, a singer, a dancer, anything. That’s not going to stop me though. “YOU AIN’T GOTTA LEAVE THE HOUSE TO HAVE A GOOD TIME IMMA BRING THE GOOD TIME HOME TO YOU!” Gosh, I haven’t gotten to do this in so long. The night at the bar was the first time I even *felt* like singing at all, let alone letting loose and singing at the top of my lungs.

“WE’LL HAVE A –” Yes! Yes, yes, yes. Grayson’s voice joins mine and I couldn’t be happier. “ – HOUSE PARTY WE DON’T NEED NOBODY.”

We take turns laughing and singing. Miming some of the dance moves we came up with for different parts. God it feels good. After the night we had. After the last five years we’ve had. Ten?

When I let my angry hornet’s nest of thoughts back into the front of my brain, I’ll pitch a fit about how Natalie ruined one of the best mornings I’ve had…ever.

I’m having such a good time that I almost don’t notice Grayson taking a turn we aren’t supposed to.

“What are we–”

“I wanna show you someplace,” he says, rolling down his window and resting his elbow on it.

Well, alrighty then.

Have we moved past the whole ‘probably gonna kill me in the woods’ thing after this morning?

At the top of a steep dirt road we pull into a large, flat, grassy area. He backs the truck so the bed is facing over the edge of whatever we’re on.

He unbuckles his seat belt. “Come on.”

I follow him out and we stand at the edge looking over it. “Wow,” I whisper. Looking out from the mountain is one kind of beauty. Natural beauty. But from this hill, you can see all the towns lit up with their golden twinkling street lights, lights on front doors welcoming people home, lights coming from inside the houses as people wind down for the evening.

“This is beautiful,” I say, turning to look at him. He’s all eyes. There’s admiration and wonder. There’s also heat and desire. This man. He could probably teach me how to do my taxes on paper, the old-fashioned way, and I’d *still* be turned on by him.

“Get in the bed of the truck, Sol.” Dominant Grayson. Score.

“What about the –” he walks back a step or two and opens the tailgate.

“In. Now.” There are some pillows and blankets set up inside. My eyes narrow. I just read a spicy book scene that started exactly like this.

With my head held high, I strut past him and climb in (this part is definitely awkward, I can only imagine what I look like hauling my ass into this thing), and crawl across the space, leaning my back against the side that connects to the cab. I can still see the lights from here. But who the hell is looking at the lights when you have Grayson prowling on his hands and knees towards you?

He stops when he’s hovering above my legs. With a very devilish grin he looks up at me through those dark lashes and starts to slide a hand up my thigh and to the waistband of my pants. He pulls it out, letting it snap against me. My breathing is already erratic.

“You wanna be my mistress, lollipop? I’ll eat this cunt out exactly how my mistress deserves.” Whimpers are already falling from my lips. He gets me in a tizzy so freaking quickly.

Before I know what’s happening, he stands up on his knees and rips my leggings and underwear down around my ankles.

“Shit,” I whisper, but he ignores me. He’s very focused on what he’s doing. A one-track mind.

Lips starting at my ankles as he pulls my bottoms off all the way. Lips kissing the inside of my knees. Lips barely touching as he drags his tongue all the way up my inner thigh. He yanks me down so I’m on my back, taking a second to prop two pillows up under my head.

“Lift your shirt up.” I do, revealing my sports bra. He scoffs, annoyed. “The fact that you hide these gorgeous fucking tits inside these goddamn sports bras is a crime against humanity. Take it off. Take it all off.” His eyes rake over my body as I get rid of everything. When I’m finished, he nods in approval, sinking back down to settle himself between my thighs. I can’t help it, I try to clench them together as best I can with him laying in between them.

“Sol,” he warns.

I squirm, unable to open for him.

When I don’t move, he reaches up and pinches my nipple. “Open your legs so I can taste what’s mine.” My whine is pained, frustrated. I want him to make me feel how he did this morning, but I’m all in my head.

He buries his face as far as my thighs will let him, hands prepped to push me wide open for him.

“Grayson, I can’t, I’ve never –”

He goes very still. His gaze is murderous when he pulls it up yet again.

“Say it,” he growls. I do not want to have to admit this.

“I’ve never…no one’s ever...”

“No one has ever *what*?” So serious, so angry.

“No one’s ever gone down on me before.”

He’s enraged. He slithers up my body, getting as close to my face as he can. Grabbing my chin, he jerks it towards him roughly. “Say it again.”

UGH. “I don’t want to say it again! We don’t need to hear how undesirable –” His hand moves in a flash, gripping the hair at the nape of my neck and pulling hard. My entire neck is exposed to him. He leans over further so our noses touch.

“I almost feel sorry for them,” he starts, twisting my head to the side so he can lick up the column of my neck to my ear. “The men who were so fucking pathetic, idiotic, feeble, that they didn’t worship this pussy. That they didn’t fall down at your feet begging to pleasure you. I *almost* feel bad for their sad, miserable lives.” Another tug of my hair so he can bite up the front of my neck. “But then I remember that because of their asininity, I am going to be the first man to devour your cunt…” He shifts me so his lips graze mine when he says, “and the last.”

In a blur, my thighs are wrenched apart and I am breathless when I feel Grayson take my pussy lips and push them away from each other. He just sits there, staring for so long that I start to get insecure. Does he not like what he sees?

When he breaks from his trance and looks up at me, all thoughts of self-doubt go flying out the window. He looks like a man that’s been starved and is about to enjoy his favorite meal.

“Grab your tits,” he demands, getting back on his stomach before my wide-open legs.

My hands take a breast each.

“Bounce them for me, lollipop.” I can feel his breath on my core, but he’s still looking up at me, watching me bounce my tits up and down.

“Play with your nipples for me, gorgeous. Pinch them.” Again, I’ve never done any of this before. Certainly not with someone. But something comes over me when he orders me around like this.

I moan softly as I squeeze my breasts, slipping my nipples between my thumb and pointer finger, pinching.

“Harder.” My chest rises and falls and I gasp every time I pinch or twist.

Grayson slaps the inside of my thigh by his cheek and I jolt up, feeling like I put my finger in a socket.

“I said harder.”

I pinch even harder, crying out each time.

I hear his chuckle. I *feel* his chuckle against me. “My smokin’ fucking hot mistress. Absolutely soaked for me.” I’m having a hard time seeing straight as he continues watching me. Like he’s a scientist observing one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

“Every time you pinch yourself, your pussy gushes.” *Jesus*. “Rub your clit, lollipop” The noises he has me making. I should be embarrassed. I should be worried about someone hearing us. But I cannot seem to freaking care.

I let go of one of my nipples in favor of my clit, beginning with small circles. My finger brushes against Grayson’s nose with each movement. He runs his tongue up the finger I’m using to tease myself. It never actually touches anywhere but my finger and it drives me certifiably insane.

“Grayson, oh my god.” I don’t know if I’m praising or begging or what.

“You’re doing such a good job, beautiful. Showing me how you like it. I want to memorize you. I want to know exactly how to make you feel good.” He doesn’t need any goddamn help from me, that’s for sure. He lights my body up, perfectly turning me into a screaming puddle on the floor with ease. He is an expert. I cannot imagine his skills could possibly improve.

“Grayson, please!” I beg, taking both hands and threading them into his hair, trying to shove his face against me. He resists.

“Naughty fucking girl. Does my mistress want me to go down on her pussy?” I’m very enthusiastically nodding. He bites right where my thigh meets my core.

“Beg me for it, Sol. Beg me to make you come all over my face. Beg me to suffocate in your cunt. Beg me.” Okay, that is *definitely* reminiscent of something I read in one of my books the other day.

“Grayson, *please*. I need you.” He doesn’t move, he continues to remain in place, despite how savagely I’m pulling on his hair.

“Need me to do what, lollipop?”

Feral growls of frustration erupt from my chest. “Eat me out! God, Grayson, put your fucking mouth on me. I wanna come on your face. I need to.”

A switch goes off. Like thunder booming, Grayson shoves my thighs open even more and goes absolutely wild. His tongue flattens and he runs it over my clit again and again. His arms wrap around my legs and lift. With the new angle, he starts his lick between my cheeks, dangerously close to my asshole and moves all the way back up to my clit. He does it over and over. Until I’m dizzy. Until I’m thrashing above him.

Eventually, he drops me back down and pulls back a little. I’m completely caught up in him. Couldn’t look away if I tried.

Making eye contact, he spits on me, quick to rub it in. Someone please call the police. This man is a criminal. This has to be illegal.

His face goes right back in, licking, sucking, peppering in the slightest of nips. I arch up when he pushes his tongue inside of me. In and out, like he’s stuck on repeat. His thumb flicks my clit before rubbing practiced, perfect patterns. He has me bowing, bucking, moaning under him. I am so close.

“Grayson, I–” before I can even finish my sentence Grayson disappears from between my legs and lays down beside me. It takes me a few seconds to catch up, having been so close to the edge. I look over at him, my cum glistening all over his face. Damn. That’s something I didn’t realize I needed to see in this lifetime. Check. Check, check, and check.

“Let’s go, lollipop.” He tugs me onto his lap. I look down at him, still fully clothed, and remember my plan to finally get to explore him and his body. I trail my fingers across his chest but he catches them.

“Nuh, nuh, no. Such a naughty girl tonight.” My thighs squeeze around him. “You don’t wanna be called lollipop anymore? You like me calling you a naughty girl instead?” He pulls my fingers up to kiss them.

Mmmmmm...yes. “I wanna touch you,” I breathe.

His eyes light up. “Not before you come.”

“I was about to! But then you moved!”

“Sit on my face.” Oh. Yeah, no. We’re not…no, um…

“Grab the roof of the truck and sit on my fucking face, Sol. Now.” He’s actually going to suffocate if I do that. He had control before, this he will actually die from.

I crawl up and position myself over his face, grabbing onto the roof for support. His hands grip my hips almost enough to hurt. With about as much hesitation as possible, I slowly lower myself so that I am hovering over his mouth. Careful not to put my full weight on him. I’m hot as fuck but two hundred and fifty pounds is two hundred and fifty pounds. Doesn’t matter how attractive I am, I could still crush him by accident. He’d crush me if he sat on my face.

His irritation booms, making itself known, under me. “Look at me,” he commands, and I peer down at him, having to lean forward a little to see past my stomach.

“I am going to absolutely destroy this cunt. You are going to sit on my face. Sit on my face, Sol. Not hover above it. Sit on my goddamn face and ride it until you’re screaming. Do you understand?”

I nod, he squeezes my hips harder, until it does actually hurt. “Yes! Yes. Yes. I understand.”

“Good.” With his unrelenting grasp on my waist he slams me down onto him, immediately going to work on me. I don’t even know what to focus on. His tongue, his lips, his teeth, his hands slipping around to my backside, ever so stealthily pulling my cheeks apart.

“Grayson…” I try to pull off of him but he uses his grip on my ass to hold me in place. His tongue resumes its mission slipping in and out of me. Grayson presses on my ass and then pulls back until I’m grinding on his face. When I get into the right tempo he raises his thumb to my mouth, shoving it in, having me suck it. As soon as he’s satisfied he brings it back down and slips it between my cheeks, pressing against my asshole.

“Grayson!” But he doesn’t stop. His tongue picks up its pace, the way I’m riding him has his nose hitting my clit just right, his thumb is teasing my other hole, and every so often his free hand slaps my ass, quick to rub away the sting. My legs start to shake underneath me. The way my hips are grinding gets sloppier.

He slaps my ass one final time in a very clear order to come. And I do.

My hands make banging sounds on the roof, my tits press up against the glass of the back window, my head is thrown back in pure ecstasy. I am wailing over top of him. Strings and strings of curse words and gasps and praises. His name falls off my lips a million times.

“Oh my god, Grayson, you feel so good.” After my body has come down, the pulsing subsiding, Grayson maneuvers us so we’re laying on our sides facing each other. He pulls me close, his fingers drawing on my skin. Up and down my side.

“Tell me again,” he whispers.

“You feel so good.”

“Tell me.” He nudges my neck with his nose.

“Your mouth feels so fucking good. You make me come so hard. Your fingers are magic. No one has ever made me feel this way.” He rips his face out from the crook of my neck. Eyes dark, intense.

“Say it again.”

“You feel so–” His fingers pause, slipping behind so he can slap my ass. Hard. I yelp.

“Say it again, Sol.” I’m trying to read his face…*oh*.

“No one has ever made me feel this way before.”

“Make you feel how?” He’s running his lips across my jaw. Down my neck. Back up.

“Good.” Another slap.

“God! No one has ever made me feel electric and needy and crazed like you do.” He starts massaging where he slapped. When he realizes I’m done speaking, he squeezes my ass twice, biting into my shoulder. *Venga.* “No one has ever fingered me the way you do. No one has thrown me around like you do. No one has ever made me come. Ever. Especially not the way you do.”

He buries his face in my neck, muffling his pained groan. “Sol, please. *Please* tell me you’re joking.” I barely move my head, ever so subtly shaking it back and forth.

I’m flipped again, onto my back, Grayson covering me with his body. “Who the hell are these morons? I wanna meet them. I have some words I wanna exchange.”

“There’s only, um, just the one…”

“Total?”

I nod.

He falls between my breasts and stays there. He’s motionless until he eventually starts nuzzling the skin he’s buried in.

“Sol, your husband never gave you an orgasm?”

“Can you stop saying it like that? Believe me, I’ve thought worse about myself than you could ever dream of saying.”

He’s in my face instantly. “I am fucking furious, Sol. I am so angry. I wanna punch a goddamn wall. No, I wanna punch Brian in his weak ass face. I am angry for you, I am angry at him. I am pissed beyond belief. You deserve orgasms. You deserve a million fucking orgasms. I am going to give you a million. Fucking. Orgasms.”

“Grayson, it’s fine…”

“It is the opposite of fine. It is a tragedy that this pussy went untouched, untasted for this long.” His hand grips me to reiterate his point. “People should have been lining up, begging, pleading, dreaming of being lucky enough to get to taste you. You should have been experiencing this kind of pleasure every day.”

I don’t know how to respond to that. How do you freaking respond to any of the things he says? They’re killing me softly. They’re destroying me.

“It’s okay, I–”

“Sol. Your sorry excuse for a husband may have been stupid enough to lose the sexiest goddamn woman on this earth, but I won’t be. I get to be the guy who gave you your first orgasm. Who was the first to taste your sweet, sweet pussy. I’ll be the first to eat your ass, to take it. The first to make you come six…seven…eight times in one night. The first to tie you up. The first to use toys with you. I’ll take all the firsts. I’ll covet them like fucking treasure, Sol. It’ll be the honor of a lifetime.”

I don’t know what to do besides hide my face in his neck. He twists so he’s holding me tight against his chest, playing with my hair, whispering things like, ‘You’re so beautiful,’ and, ‘You’re perfect,’ and, ‘You feel so soft.’

It could be minutes, hours, days that pass before Grayson places a kiss on the side of my head and says, “You ready to go?”

I nod, and he helps me get dressed.

Once inside the truck he grabs my hand and holds it on his thigh. We’re quiet for a while. I am so blissed out and trying to figure out how I possibly ended up here. How this is what my life has turned into.

“We need to talk about earlier, Sol.”

“Tomorrow, Grayson.”

He nods and whispers, “Okay. Tomorrow.”

## Chapter 20

“Can I at least get a cup of coffee first?”

“No, sit.” Grayson is sitting at the dining room table looking like he’s about to hold a conference room meeting. Ooh. Ode to, *Billionaire Bad Boy*. \*Wags eyebrows\*

I take the seat adjacent to him and fold my hands together. You want business, I’ll give you business. “Good morning Mr. Stoker, I appreciate you penciling me in so early. I know normal people like to get up, stretch, have a cup of coffee, but not us business people! We take life by the horns. Early bird gets the worm. You sleep in, you sleep on opportunity. Business deals. Money. Wagers. All those hours before eight am, wasted. I appreciate a like-minded individual. I have a good feeling about our new working relationship.”

He is very disinterested in my role playing. Role playing is one term… could also be described as deflecting. Potato, potahto.

“Why are you so intent on not talking about this?”

“Because I really don’t think it’s a big deal.”

“It’s a huge deal, Sol.”

I study his face. He really believes that. “It’s not, Grayson.”

His fist comes down on the table. “You told Natalie the birth control was for you!”

“Sorry, did you see another option where you didn’t get sued or worse?”

“But now you’re wrapped up in this. I would’ve never, in a million years, have wanted that for you.”

Protective Grayson. Exasperated Grayson. Maybe even A Little Scared Grayson, I’m not sure. “You needed help, I helped.”

“That was a huge sacrifice!”

“You’ve done a thousand nice things for me, Grayson. I can do one for you.”

“This is very different from buying you books, Sol. You’ll have to talk to my lawyer and confirm the affair. You’ll have to keep lying and covering for me until this all finally settles. How long did your divorce take again?” A while. It took a while, and that was without any dispute. Brian was happy to get rid of me as fast as he could. Even still, it was a long, arduous process.

“I don’t mind doing that.” I know he’s all out begging me to understand. And I do. I know what I did.

“How can you say that so easily? If she comes after you I’ll never forgive myself.”

“I made a choice. I understood what it entailed. I understand the nature of my decision.”

“You blurted it out! You almost fell face first, stammering to get something out. There’s no way you had time to think this through. I’ll tell my lawyer the truth and deal with the consequences. I fucked up, I’m not letting you suffer in any way for this.”

I stand up and lean over the table towards him.

“She wins that way! The birth control detail is a scapegoat. A way to erase every nasty, horrible thing she did to you. Outside of this situation, the birth control issue, morally, it’s really fucked up. But to me, this is the classic, ‘Is the boy who steals bread for his family a thief?’ scenario. You did what you had to do. On the surface, it was wrong. Like really wrong. But it saved you. It saved a future child. It was in the purest of intentions, straight survival mode. You weren’t trying to ruin her life or vindictively take something away from her. And they’re not going to see any of that. All they’re going to see is the guy who stole his wife’s right to her own body. And so, yeah. You *are* going to let me run with the story I came up with.”

His face is desperate, he’s so upset. There’s guilt all over it. “This is single-handedly the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me. But I cannot let you. I will not let you hurt so I can hurt less.”

“I don’t see it that way. A couple of people are going to think someone cheated on their wife with me. Big deal.” My throat has gone a bit dry and my voice cracks a little. “It’s not the end of the world.”

Grayson stands to match my stance, leaning across the table towards me. “But it’s a huge deal in *your* world. I know how hard it was for you to blurt that out yesterday. I know it’s been swirling in your head ever since. I know you smashed your moral compass for me. This went against every single thing you believe in. This is your big thing. The hill you will die on. And you threw it in the trash for me. You hurt yourself for me. You had to put a pause on who you are to save me.”

“Grayson –”

“I don’t know how to explain this properly. The fact that you did that? It makes me sick to my stomach. It makes me nauseous and ashamed and disgusted.”

My heart drops in my stomach. I start to back away. “Oh, um…I’m... I’m sorry. I’ll fix it. I’ll do whatever you want.” I don’t get very far before he’s holding my face in his hands, now standing in front of me.

“Let me finish please.” He tucks some hair behind my ear. “It makes me disgusted with *myself* that I didn’t speak up. That I didn’t fight harder to stop you from doing it. But mixed in with those emotions is a completely different feeling. You did this big, difficult thing for *me*. This amazing woman I’m holding chose to stand up for me. Me! Of all people. No matter how agonizing it was to do. You pushed all of it away. Your trauma, your hurt, your pain, your past. For me. I don’t know how to possibly describe how cared for that makes me feel. I don’t know how to justify these conflicting feelings.”

“I’m not going to let you ruin your life, Grayson. We’re going to stick with the affair story.”

“Sol…”

“Sometimes you have to do difficult things for the people who were there for you when you needed it most.”

“But –”

“And I’d do it again.” He takes a deep breath and puts our foreheads together. “It’s okay, Grayson.” He gently rolls his head back and forth against mine but stays quiet. “Let’s just drink some coffee and take this a step at a time.”

Eventually he nods, guiding me into a chair and heading for the coffee machine.

“Oh, *shit*. Grayson, wait!” Too late. The whole thing erupts and sprays coffee everywhere. All over Grayson, the cabinets, the floor. He stands there stunned. I’m quick to hurry over, trying to find a towel.

“I’m so sorry! I rigged it before I knew we were going to have this big emotional conversation this morning!” He looks at me and stares. He’s going to lose it.

But then, he surprises me and throws his head back in laughter. Big, deep belly laughs. I can’t help it, I start laughing too. It’s ridiculous and so inappropriate, but I do it anyway. Until we both can’t catch a breath.

He reaches over and grabs my wrist, pulling me close again. His thumb finds my bottom lip and gently rubs it back and forth.

“Thank you,” he whispers. “I know that doesn’t even begin to cover it, but –”

“You’re welcome.” I’m wrapped up in his arms, hands rubbing his back, and his head rests on top of mine. I like this. I think I like this too much. I like it more than someone who is just hooking up with someone else should. I’m positive I’m just his rebound. A stepping stone to moving on and heading into the rest of his life. I knew that going in. Based on the status of his life right now. And the fact that I just so happened to be here. There was literally no other option. It’s a forced proximity thing.

And yet, here I am. Catching feelings. Real feelings. Nothing like my silly crush.

—

Back on the living room floor, I sit in front of the puzzle I had started the other day. The middle chunk is looking good, and I need a few specific purple pieces to keep things going.

Grayson is insisting we finish more of the very short, very lackluster checklist we made. He just left a few seconds ago to change into comfier pants, and I take advantage of that time and move to start organizing the pieces I haven’t placed yet.

In a big sweeping motion, I try to mix them up a bit, give me some new perspective. But they don’t move. Damn, can humidity cause puzzle pieces to stick to the floor? See? This is why we need fancy scientists to fix stuff like this.

I try using my nail to peel the one closest to me up and it doesn’t budge. What the hell? I try another, and another. On the fourth one I can see a clear, hardened substance spilling out from under the piece.

“Grayson!”

He appears right at that moment, using his gray sweatpants as an assault, meant to temporarily blind me so he can strike.

He grins, folding himself onto the floor in front of me. “You called, lollipop?”

“Why won’t the puzzle pieces move?”

“Have you tried picking them up?

“HaVe yOu tRiEd PiCkInG tHeM uP?” I mock. “Of course I tried picking them up!”

“And that didn’t work?”

“No!” I cry.

His eyes twinkle. “Hmm. This is a mystery.”

“What did you do?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

“I know you did something! Is this about the coffee? How did you even find time to do this that fast?”

“No, it is not about the coffee. I am a very busy man, I can assure you, I did not do this today.”

My eyes narrow, “*Today*?”

“Correct.”

“And what about yesterday?”

“Nope.”

“And Tuesday?” His eyes sparkle, his lips trying to hide a smile. “How am I supposed to remember that far back?”

“Why don’t you try real hard for me?”

His answering smirk has me recrossing my legs. “Hmmm…Tuesday. I remember having to deal with a very annoying woman who read dirty things to me and stole my phone. I may also remember needing glue for something. Ummm. Yeah, no. I got nothing. Sorry.”

“You glued three hundred puzzle pieces to your brand-new hardwood floors for a prank?!”

He shrugs. “I plead the fifth.”

“There’s something not quite right in that big ass head up there,” I say, getting up and making sure to hip check him ‘by accident’.

“Rude. Where are you going?”

“I dunno! I guess I’ll just go stare at the wall and maybe blink a few times since you ruined the only other thing I could spend my time doing!”

“I can think of quite a few other things you could do…” He leans back on his hands, looking at me upside down.

“Nice try, buddy. You don’t get rewarded for this kind of behavior!”

He crawls over to me and stops, kneeling at my feet. “What if I beg?”

What a tempting offer. How am I supposed to resist this? “Mmmm. Still a no.” He creeps up my body, and I place a hand on his chest to keep him at arm’s length. “You’re very cute when you’re doing something bad.”

He grasps my hand in both of his, pulling my fingers up to his mouth. Kissing each one separately. “There are a lot of bad things I could do.”

“Mhhm. I’m sure.”

“Have I not proven myself to you? Do you need another example?” One fingertip slips into his mouth. “Because I *thought* that was you fucking my face and screaming my name last night. But I guess I could be mistaken…”

“No, it was me. Nothing to write home about, though.”

His eyes narrow and blacken. They become cloudy. “I guess I’ll have to try a little harder then…”

I shrug. “You can try.” He moves to get closer but I keep him away.

“I can really only pencil you in this evening. I have some errands to run this afternoon.”

“Errands?”

“Mhhm. Gotta go to the craft store. My roommate owes me a new hobby.”

He kisses his way up the arm that’s holding him back. “And that’s your only availability?” Gulp. He is so damn sexy.

“Yupp.”

“I’ll take it. Put my name down.”

—

“What do you think, cross stitch or friendship bracelet making?” I hold up the two separate starter kits.

He gives me a flat look, “You wanna make friendship bracelets all day?”

“Yeah,” I sing, trying to be as enthusiastically obnoxious as possible. “And I *was* gonna make you one but you can kiss that goodbye right with your attitude.”

Grayson saunters over, slowly circling to stand behind me. His breath feathers across my cheek. “Is that we are, lollipop? Friends?” There are hands teasing the hemline of my shirt.

“The best,” I breathe, and I’m rewarded with a deep, sultry chuckle that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“Mm. Thanks for clarifying.” A pause. “And, just out of curiosity, what kind of bracelet would you make for the man who owns your pussy?” His tongue glides across my skin for the briefest of moments.

“Uh. A… uh, special one?”

“Hmm.” He steps away, grabbing both craft kits and throwing them on the shelf.

“Grayson, what –”

“Come on. We have business in a different aisle.”

—

Every color paint imaginable is spread out across the dining room table. We started the day here and now we’re going to end it here, apparently. Full circle or whatever.

We’ve got brushes of every shape and size. Sponges, those cute little art palettes, canvases. You name it, we’ve got it. I walked away from the register before the cashier announced the total. I don’t even wanna know how much he spent. And I willingly let him pay this time. He owed me something to do.

Grayson is in the kitchen pouring us some wine and I am going to be on my very best behavior. Me plus alcohol plus Grayson equals dramaaa.

I pull a bunch of different paints close to my side of the table and pour a little bit of each in the little dips of the palette. Grayson places a glass of white wine next to me and pulls my hair back out of my face, leaving his hands on my shoulders and gently massaging. “Mmm. That’s nice.”

“What are you going to paint?”

“I don’t know yet. Something simple. Test out my eighth-grade level art skills.” I feel his chest move as he laughs against my back. “Do you know what you’re going to paint?”

“Yes ma’am.”

I lean my head back into his stomach, looking up at him. “What is it?”

“It’s a surprise. Can’t rush art.” Eye roll.

“Whatever you say.” There are a few quiet minutes where I test out colors, mixing some together to create different shades and pulling different brushes out of their packages to see which ones I want to use. Grayson stays behind me, quietly massaging me, rubbing me, kneading in spots he must notice are more tense than others.

He lets me create in silence. I would say peace, but having his hands on me isn’t *quite* peaceful. Invigorating, maybe.

I’m adding black to the trunk of the tree I’ve painted when I ask, “Are you going to start yours or what?”

“Not yet.”

The leaves are almost entirely filled in when he stops touching me. “Are you finally ready to start?”

“Yeah.”

I scoot my chair over a little to give him room. He doesn’t sit.

“Stand up and turn around.” It’s amazing how as soon as he turns commanding like this my entire body lights up.

“What are you –”

“I have an appointment, remember? Stand. And face me.” Was he really waiting until exactly five o’clock?

I follow his directions, taking him in. His strong arms, the way the muscles in his neck move, how much taller than me he is. The incredible deep green eyes, the set of his jaw and the scruff that has grown back since he shaved his beard down. His thick, bulking thighs. The lips I haven’t gotten to taste yet. Talk about art.

His hands find the bottom of my shirt and lift, throwing it over his shoulder.

I almost laugh at his insolence. He’s pissed about the sports bra. “They’re all I have, you know.”

“Then don’t wear anything.” Easy for you to say.

My pants and underwear come off next, ensuring I, once again, am the first to be naked.

“Lay back on the table.” He reads my expression immediately. “I made it myself, Sol. It’s not going to collapse under you.”

“Okay, okay, just checking. Wouldn’t wanna ruin your hard work,” I mumble, hopping up on the table and scooching back. As soon as my back hits the surface I’m pulled slowly by my ankles until my ass is at the edge and my legs are open, dangling off the end.

“I built this table with this exact moment in mind. I planned all the wild things I was going to do to you on this thing and knew it was going to have to be sturdy. Real fucking sturdy.” He peels his shirt off over his head (Yes! I might finally be able to touch him!) and lets it fall to the floor at his feet. I try reaching for him but, again, he shakes his head (damnit).

“I need my canvas to be very, very still. Can you do that for me?” I move my head up and down, never letting my eyes leave his. I have a front row seat to see the hottest man alive. I don’t want to miss a single thing. I will pout about how unfair he’s being later.

“Good girl. How about ‘good girl’ instead of ‘lollipop’, hmm? How does that sound?” He lowers his chest towards me, reaching over to grab the nearest paint. I hear the squeeze of the bottle, the clink of picking up a brush, and then I’m panting, focused on the cold, wet liquid Grayson is using to tickle up my side.

He’s focused, completely engrossed in his work. I imagine this is what real artists look like as they create each day.

The brush travels over the swell of my breasts and in between them. It circles my belly button and grazes my hips. It is so soft, so gentle that I am slowly losing my mind. It’s just enough to have me tensing, lifting my body. It’s so overstimulating it almost hurts. It’s getting me soaked between my legs.

“I need you to be still, lollipop.”

I whimper my frustration, my plea, my desire.

Grayson abandons the brush and pulls my palette toward him, setting it on my stomach. His fingers dip into the colors, and leave streaks across my skin. On the inside of my thigh, right behind my ear, underneath me on my lower back. Each touch isn’t enough. It’s a cruel tease meant to send me spiraling into another universe, I’m sure. I have to grip the edge of the table to keep from crying out.

He, on the other hand, is giddy, delighted even, watching me squirm. He’s hard as a rock, his dick straining against his pants. All from torturing me.

I’m flipped over to lay on my stomach, smearing wet paint all over his beautiful, custom wood table. From what I can tell, he pours enough paint to cover his entire hand before grabbing my ass. The sound of satisfaction he makes has my pussy clenching, clit throbbing. He does it again, this time smacking down on the other cheek.

“So beautiful,” he whispers as his fingers continue to travel. He gets so close to every single place I want him, and then moves on way too soon.

The massaging is resumed, this time trailing all across my back, up my legs, paying special attention to my ass. It feels so good and so infuriating at the same time. I want his hands all over me, but I also want his hands in very specific places.

I get a random bout of déjà vu, and before I let it fade away, I take a second to think. I just read a sexy paint scene in a book a few days ago. It was almost nothing like this, because, hello, the things Grayson does to me are hotter than anything I’ve ever read, or seen, or obviously experienced. But this cannot be a coincidence. First the hot spring, then the truck bed, and now this?

I run out of time to contemplate. “Stand up.” Bolt of electricity straight to my clit.

My feet touch the floor and I’m about to lift my chest when Grayson reaches out and positions me with my hands on the edge, my legs apart, and my ass in the air.

I look over my shoulder and see him scan over my body, like he’s trying to memorize every dip, every splash of paint.

“You are the perfect fucking canvas. An absolute masterpiece. I’d put you in a museum, but then other people would get to see you. I’m the only one who gets to witness this.” There’s a pause. “Do not move.”

I hear his footsteps recede and the rush of the water from the kitchen sink reaches my ears. In no time, he’s back behind me with freshly washed hands, wrecking me with his words. “I am the only one that gets to drink you in. To see your ass in the air, my handprints on it, begging me to take it. To feed off it.”

He kneels down between my legs and spreads my ass cheeks open. Hot, wet, and slippery, his tongue licks between them, teasing, tasting, driving me mad.

“Grayson, what are you doing?” I gasp, nervous, tense, turned on.

“I’m eating this juicy fucking ass and then I’m gonna have your pussy for dessert.”

Grayson never does anything halfway, that’s for goddamn sure. His mouth is everywhere, his tongue lapping wherever he can reach. I feel his fingers joining the party and teasing my hole. On a reflex, I go still, rigid.

I’m punished by a slap on my ass. “Relax for me, Sol.”

How the hell am I supposed to do that when –

Oh, that helps. That really, really helps. I’m turned right into liquid above him when he starts leisurely playing with my clit. Sliding his finger through my heat, teasing my core.

He resumes his licking and sucking as soon as he feels the tension leave my body. I feel like a live wire, the pleasure in my pussy enhancing the new kind of pleasure in my ass.

“Finger yourself. Rub your clit like a good girl.” His fingers take one last dip inside before moving back to where his mouth is forcing wild moans out of my mouth. He rubs my cum around my asshole and spreads my cheeks wide again.

My clit is pulsing and I cry out when I touch it, feeling sensitive and wrung out and drunk on lust.

I hear it before I feel it. Grayson grabs both cheeks roughly and spits between them. Fucking hell.

He dives back in with his mouth, and his fingers play with my hole, pressing against it, slipping just a notch or two inside. I don’t know which way is up. My movements to pleasure myself are sloppy and irregular. I keep bucking against him, moaning and crying. Jumping every time his touch switches tactics.

Laying on his back between my legs he pulls me down onto his face. I hold the table for support, too crazed to feel any shame or hesitation. My hips start grinding against him, and I choke on a moan turned scream when one finger pushes into my asshole and two other fingers plunge into my pussy.

“Grayson! Holy shit. I’m so full.” He doesn’t answer, he can’t. I’m full on fucking his face, letting him finger me anywhere he can.

The only way to describe the sound that I make as I come all over him is guttural. A tear slips down my face as I howl out my pleasure, slowing the pace of my hips until I’m still, barely holding myself up by the table.

Fingers slip out of me and hands find their way to my hips, lifting and lowering me to straddle his waist.

He is ecstatic. He is euphoric. He is glowing. Literally and figuratively.

My arms drop, slapping on to his torso. “Fuck.”

Grayson’s grin gets bigger. He’s giving me a full, toothy smile. “Look at you. So fucking breath taking. Covered in my art and falling apart from my finger is your ass,” he comments, one hand now rubbing my knee.

I’m still trying to catch my breath. I can feel sweat pooling on my forehead, on the small of my back.

“You were right, by the way,” he finds my eyes. “We should do crafts more often.”

## Chapter 21

Hands glide a cloth all over my body, washing away the evidence of what we just did. Grayson takes his time soaping me up, pausing to grab my breasts or my ass. To lick a nipple or my neck. He is thankfully very naked in the shower with me, and his dick grazes my skin every time he moves.

He settles himself behind me, cock pressed up against my ass, and brings his hands around to grab my breasts. My head lays back on his shoulder.

“Thanks for fitting me into your schedule tonight, by the way,” he murmurs over my skin, squeezing my breasts and gently tweaking my nipples.

I laugh against him. “I’ll make sure to relay the message to my assistant.”

We stand like that, letting the hot water wash over us, Grayson’s hands never stopping their strokes along my chest.

It’s easy, it’s comfortable. It feels nice to be held like this.

He starts kissing where my neck meets my shoulder. Sucking and biting and tasting. God, he is talented. Who taught him all this?

Nope. Nope, nope, nope. Not going down that road.

“Your lips, Grayson,” I moan, moving my head to give him better access. His answering grunt tells me he won’t be stopping his advances to talk.

“I wanna touch you,” I whisper, and he pauses, turning my head so he can see me. If this is his big, grand rebound, he should get to feel good too.

“You don’t owe me anything, Sol. I like making you feel good. I want to make you feel good.” Someone should be recording this. Just so there’s proof that the perfect man does actually exist.

I turn in his arms and press my lips to his shoulder. “Let me make you feel good.”

We lock eyes as I unhurriedly kiss my way down his chest, down his stomach, until I’m on my knees in front of him. I have no idea what I’m doing. I have essentially zero experience. But I have read a shit ton of blow job scenes and that’s gotta count for something, right? It’s all about the confidence. And Grayson skyrockets my budding confidence.

My hands rub up and down his thighs and I lightly bite the two sides of his ‘V’. His groan of pleasure has my thighs squeezing together.

I grip his thighs and look up at him through my lashes.

He reaches a hand down to caress my cheeks, my jaw, my lips. “The sight of you on your knees for me is the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever had the privilege of seeing.”

My tongue flicks out, sweeping over his head, teasing, testing. His cock jumps and his hand slams into the slide of the shower, keeping himself upright. I open just enough to let the tip slip into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it, and then letting it fall out. “Look at your pretty lips, lollipop. Wrap them around my thick cock. Let me feel them.”

My tongue flattens out and I let it glide up and down the bottom of his shaft. He sucks in a breath through his teeth and bangs his hand against the wall again. “Fuck, Sol.”

One hand slips up to grip him at his base and I slap his dick against my tongue a few times. His entire body jolts with every slap. This is addicting. The power I feel taking over every cell in my body is going to my head.

With a few very gentle squeezes of his balls, I kiss up one side of his length and then the other. His free hand digs his fingers into my hair. “Baby, you’re playing with me.” *Baby*.

I hum out a chuckle against his cock, turning to nip his inner thigh, and his grip tightens in my hair. “What do you want, Grayson?” Another look up at him. God, he’s perfect. His eyes are wild.

“I want you to choke on this cock, Sol.” Tingles. My nipples tighten so much it’s painful. Slickness pools between my legs.

Excruciatingly slow, maintaining eye contact, I bring his dick up to my lips. I make a grand show of opening them, sliding my tongue across them, pulling my bottom one in between my teeth. He’s trembling, I can feel his thigh shaking.

I grip harder at his base and I take his cock back into my mouth, not stopping until he hits the back of my throat and I gag. “Oh my god.” His breathing is labored.

I take my time. Sliding him in and out, pausing to kiss and lick and swirl. By the sounds he’s making, his patience is running thin. “What’s wrong, Grayson?” I’m toying with him. I know exactly what’s wrong.

His eyes are half lidded, swarmed with desire. “I need you to swallow my cock, Sol.”

A wicked smirk forms on my lips. “Sir yes sir.”

His eyes roll to the back of his head when I suck him into my mouth again. This time I hollow out my cheeks and time my movements with my hand, using both to jerk him off.

“Such a good fucking girl, Sol. Taking my cock. You suck so goddamn good, baby.”

I open my throat enough to let him hit the back of it over and over, gagging, tears starting to leak down my face. “That’s it, baby, choke on it.” His hand in my hair starts to move my head up and down his dick, showing me the speed he needs. I grab his balls in my free hand and I watch the muscles in his stomach clench. “Fuck, baby. I’m about to come. I’m gonna paint these tits with it. Make a mess of you all over again.” I keep my pace until Grayson lifts me up by the hair on the nape of my neck so my chest is ready for him. His cum jets out, all over my breasts, dripping down my nipples and onto my stomach. He pants above me for a few seconds before bringing me up so we’re face to face. His eyes refuse to leave my chest as he drags a finger through his cum, swirling it around my nipples, dragging it up my neck and into my mouth. I bite and I’m rewarded with a deep, dark growl.

Grayson pulls me close, wrapping his arms around me. “That was fucking incredible, Sol. You are so goddamn sexy. Such a perfect mouth. Such gorgeous eyes looking up at me. You took me so good, baby.” I’m breathless and exhilarated and proud. His praise is something I never thought I’d be into, but it changes everything. I’ve learned so much about my own sexuality, let alone sex in general, in the last two days. It’s empowering even if his words don’t actually mean anything. They’re just sweet nothings. Well…hot as hell nothings. But the ‘nothings’ part doesn’t change. It’s just bedroom talk, I know that. But I’m going to soak it in all the same, and try not to let it sink in too close to my heart.

“I like having your cock in my mouth.”

And somehow, I find myself screaming against the shower wall while Grayson makes me orgasm. Twice.

—

The sound of barely contained anger has me waking with a start. I roll over and let my eyes adjust to the sunshine, trying to listen. Grayson’s voice carries from somewhere in the cabin, tight and agitated. I can’t hear what exactly he’s saying but I can tell he’s not happy with how the conversation is going.

Sitting up, I stretch, adjusting Grayson’s t-shirt to cover my bottom and decide to seek him out, see if he needs any help.

We slept in bed together, just like the night before. I offered to sleep on the couch. Both times. But Grayson was annoyed I even brought it up. Both times.

Can you blame me, though? Hooking up with him is hot as hell. It is dynamite. I’ve never, ever gotten to feel the way he makes my body feel. But it’s not just pleasure I’m experiencing. I feel cared for and cherished and important. I’ve also never gotten to feel any of those things, and they’re conspiring with my heart, helping it grow big, sharp claws so I can latch onto Grayson and never let go.

This is casual. He wants and needs casual, but I can’t keep it casual. There are so many strings attached for me. Especially because he’s so genuine. Yes, he’s sexy, and yes, he gives me mind blowing orgasms. But he also listens and remembers and does the most considerate, sweet things. I wish he wasn’t so good. He’s a really good man. It would be so much easier if it was just messing around. If he was more selfish and closed off. I don’t know what I’m going to do, especially when he inevitably ends it.

So yes, I tried to sleep on the couch. To seem less interested than I am. Put some distance between us. Act more casual. He wasn’t having any of it. But he has no idea how much harder that’s making all of this. It may just be who he is and he can’t help but act like this or it might just be what he needs to set the mood, but it’s way too close to what I associate with love. With a real relationship. With connection and intimacy and a future together. This is what I would want…forever, really. And I can’t have it, so I don’t know what else I’m supposed to do to protect myself.

“And there’s legitimately no other way this can be done?” he grits, catching me walking out and giving me a tight smile. He nods his head towards the breakfast he made me. SEE? This is what I’m talking about! He’s clearly dealing with something and STILL took the time to think about me. Just be sucky! Please!

“Fine. Yeah, okay. Yes. Three o’clock. Got it. Yeah, see you then.” He throws his phone onto the kitchen counter and then leans over it, his back to me, for the entire time it takes me to finish eating.

Getting up, I place my dishes in the sink and cautiously walk over to him. “Grayson?”

He looks up at me like he forgot I was here. Like he forgot where he was. “Uh, yeah, hi. Sorry. Good morning.” He leans in and places a kiss on my temple. Don’t worry. It has not gone unnoticed that he’s never kissed me on the lips. A clear boundary he’s setting. Casual.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” His eyes lose focus for a minute. “Well, no. Not really. My lawyer just called.”

“That was quick.”

He barks a humorless laugh. “Yeah, well. When you’re as rich as Natalie…well, Hugh, people drop what they’re doing to help you.”

“How bad?”

“I have to go to New York. Sit down with my lawyer. Her lawyer found my separate bank account. They wanna include that in the marital assets. The original paperwork already gave her everything except the money in that account and this cabin. Hugh had ‘gifted’ it to us for the wedding. I talked a lot about wanting to fix it up when we first started dating. I wanted to have a home up here. Natalie hated the idea, so we never came up. I’m sure it’s in her name anyway, though. I thought giving her essentially everything would help make the process as smooth as possible. But she doesn’t stop until she has it all. Never has. So I have to drive six hours to figure out how to not lose every single thing I have.”

“I’m so sorry.” I don’t know if I should touch him or hold him or what. I *want* to do those things, but I don’t know if it’s appropriate for the nature of our relationship. The only times we’ve touched for comfort and not pleasure were initiated by him. Feels too risky. I don’t wanna seem too clingy.

“It is what it is.” He pushes off the counter and starts looking around the house.

“When do you have to leave?”

A bag drops onto the floor in the hallway. “Now.” *Now*? How am I supposed to figure out an alternative arrangement in ten seconds?

“Oh! Um, okay. I can pack my stuff and head back to my cabin for a few days. I’d have to steal some food from you, but I’ll pay you back.” I scramble to get into the bedroom but don’t get very far.

Grayson drops one of my bags onto the hallway floor along with a stack of my things.

“Oh, wow. Thanks, sorry, I’ll just grab this and be on my way.”

“What are you talking about?” he asks, popping into the bathroom and coming out with both of our toothbrushes.

“I, sorry, oh…I didn’t mean…of course I can stay here and watch your cabin. Sorry, wow. I just didn’t want to impose or anything.” I bend down and start shoving my things into a bag anyway in case he changes his mind. “Or maybe on your way we could stop by Bob’s and I can get my car and then you won’t have to deal with me anyway and can focus on your stuff. He said today, right? Friday?”

Grayson is standing above me, face completely blank. I get back up with my bag all zipped up. “He called this morning. It’s not ready.” His tone is so flat. I’m bothering him. Shit.

“Oh, no biggie. Hanging in my cabin is perfectly fine and I’ll make sure to keep an eye out for anything happening up here. I can come check on it once a day or something...”

“You’re doing it again,” he states, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Doing what?”

“Making yourself small for me.”

“No, I’m –”

“You do this a lot.”

“I mean, yes, I know I have a history of this but I’m not doing that here. I’m trying to be respectful. I’ve been getting better…”

He reaches up to rub his jaw. “Of course you’ve been getting better, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“It sounds like what you’re saying. You just said I do it a lot.”

“I’m saying that right now you’re making yourself small for me and I hate it. I told you I want to know what you want. I want you to act on your needs and desires.”

“I am. I have been.” No, I have not. That’s scary and leads to rejection and embarrassment. I’ve almost exclusively been taking his lead. Even after I told him I have a habit of doing this, I still have been waiting for him to initiate. The BJ yesterday was an add on to something he had already started.

“No, you’re not, Sol. You’re pretending to be cavalier and unaffected. Skirting around me to make sure you’re not bothering me or getting too close or revealing how you actually feel.”

“Wow. Okay Dr. Stoker, is that your official diagnosis? What medicines do you suggest to fix me?”

He throws his head back for a second, holding the bridge of his nose with his fingers. I’m holding my bag in a death grip. “You told me you struggle with this. I get it. But I’m watching you do it with me and I’m trying to support you. You’re baiting me. You offered to sleep on the couch two nights in a row. After I had my tongue in your pussy. Of course we were going to sleep in the same bed, Sol.”

“How would I have known that? I don’t know how you like to navigate these kinds of things!”

“Okay but how do *you* like to navigate ‘these kinds of things’?

I’ve never done something like this! Even if I did know, I wouldn’t say it. Huffing out a breath I answer, “I don’t see how that’s relevant. I’m trying to make sure I don’t impose on your space.”

“Sol, I spend my entire day trying to make sure there’s no space between us. Or as little as possible. But every time I get us there, you pull back immediately.”

“Did my therapist put you up to this? Did you two whisper behind my back about how emotionally stunted I am? Because you sound like she wrote you a script to memorize. To finally get Sol to realize how broken she is.” My hands wave around sarcastically.

“C’mon, Sol. That’s not what I mean.”

“I know what my faults are, Grayson. That’s why, I, I don’t know, communicated them to you ahead of time. In hopes you would, crazy concept, be understanding when they inevitably came up…” I’m backed in a corner and I need to lash out. I need to get away from the vulnerability necessary for this conversation. “It doesn’t matter what you mean and it doesn’t matter if you think I’m baiting. There’s nothing to bait. This is casual. The end.” I feel myself retreat into my body, close myself off.

He laughs and it’s miserable. “If you expect me to believe that then we don’t know each other as well as I thought we did.”

“We *don’t* know each other, Grayson! You can’t know someone in three weeks. I’m just the random girl you started hooking up with because there was literally no one else around.” I haven’t retreated enough to take the bite out of my words.

“Of course I fucking know you, Sol. I know your deepest, darkest fears and regrets. I know what you look like in the morning. I know what you look like when you come. I know what you look like when you're about to give me the reaming out of a lifetime and I know the exact moment you’re going to storm off. I can tell immediately when the book you’re reading turns into a sexy scene. I know all about your career and your dreams. I know what makes you sad and I know that talking about your students makes you so happy. I know that even though you need a little push sometimes, you love to dance and be silly. You love animals. You are brave and courageous and so fucking smart. I can read your thoughts right off your face. I know when your initial reaction to something is to shy away, and I see the battle you have with yourself play across your face. I know before you even do it what you’ve decided. I know when your passion to start living your life wins, and when your insecurities have reared their ugly, totally bogus heads. I know your milkshake order. I know your t-shirt size and made sure you had shirts here in case you needed them, secretly hoping you’d need them because you spent the night. I know how you like your coffee and your pancakes and your eggs and your steak and the fact that your pasta can’t be too oily because you don’t like when the oil separates from the cream. I could go on and on and on, Sol.”

“Well that’s just –”

He steps closer to me. “Tell me what you want.”

“What?” I can smell him all around me.

“Tell me, in this situation, exactly what you actually want to happen.”

I…can’t. I cannot say to him that I want to kiss his face off for saying all those things. That I want to go to New York and support him. I told him yesterday that we were going to do this together, but that felt a lot more general and safe to say in comparison to, ‘Hey, I want to force you to be in a car with me for six hours and have me up in your space while you deal with a really stressful, personal thing because I am so smitten with you that the thought of not seeing you for a few days is making me itchy.’ And I definitely can’t say, ‘I wanna be there with you. I wanna do stressful, personal things with you. Not just hook up.’ Not when I know he doesn’t want the same thing. That’s just setting myself up for embarrassment. What’s the point?

Supporting him with the Natalie situation can be played off as something friends do for each other. Wanting to sleep in his bed every night and wrap myself up in him whenever I want is not something friends do.

I’m quiet for too long.

“Exactly. You can’t. You won’t.”

My hands fly up and he takes a step back. “What if you don’t want the same thing?!”

“That’s a part of living! You have to go after what you want or you lose yourself in what other people want.” Ouch. He’s not finished. “Do you want me to back off? Do you even want to be doing what we’re doing? Because I will, if that’s what you want. I don’t want to keep doing this if you're only doing it because I want to.”

I’m frozen. I’m spiraling. Of *course* I want to keep doing this. I love doing this. But I can’t tell him that. I want more than he’s looking for.

“Okay, Sol. Fine by me.” He’s assumed my answer from my continued silence. “Grab your bag, let’s go.”

“I can walk down to my cabin it’s –”

“Say ‘fine’ one more time.” His tone has me shutting my mouth. “You’re not going back to your cabin.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re coming with me to New York. I’m not leaving you up here by yourself without a car or a phone.”

“Grayson –”

“Get in the truck, Sol.”

I’m feeling about five too many things and I don’t want to have a panic attack in the truck.

“I’ll meet you out there in a second. I just need to grab something.” He grunts in response and I don’t slide down the wall until I hear the door close.

I put my head in my hands, massaging my temples and then through my hair, attempting to ground myself.

Okay. It’s okay. There are things that are still very difficult for me and they cannot be fixed in the span of three weeks. It would be impossible to get over that many years of trauma in this timeframe. I’m not sure you ever ‘get over’ trauma. But I do think there are things that can be done to ease the pain. To allow healthy functioning. This is a trauma response. Joanna is always saying that, right? Every time I push a new person away she says that. That I’m keeping people at a distance so they can’t hurt me. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Tell me something I don’t know. I’m paying hundreds of dollars a month for someone to confirm how pitiful I am.

Yeah…okay. I hear it. I hear the way I’m talking about myself. When I get back home I think it’s time I start taking therapy a little more seriously. The negative self-talk and insecurity are at an all-time high. They almost entirely disappear when Grayson is worshiping my body. But as soon as it’s over, everything creeps right back in.

I started therapy two years ago when I caught Brian cheating at the request of my parents. They didn’t know the nature of the breakup, but they could tell how it was affecting me.

I’ve shown up every week without fail. But I fudge my responses to keep things surface level and seemingly all fine and dandy. I don’t know if Joanna ever really believes my BS, but she’s been extremely patient with me anyway.

I took the first step in coming up here. That’s huge. It’s not feeling huge right now, but Joanna says I have to tell myself the exact opposite of what my brain is screaming at me. And right now, it’s screaming, ‘Sol, you’re so fucking inept that you can’t reach out and put your hand on the man who has been so unbelievably good to you? You can’t woman up and tell someone you like being with them? Seriously? You’re just going to ruin everything over being scared and pathetic and insecure?’

How have I lived this long being as scared of life as I am? Seems like something you should focus on when you run away from all your problems to a cabin in the middle of the woods pretending it’s to find yourself when really, it’s probably an act of cowardice because you can’t face what a mess you made of your life.

I’m babbling and joking and being self-deprecating because if I don’t… Well, we don’t need to go there. Bottle it up. Screw the cap on.

With a few deep breaths and a hundred failed affirmations from those stupid sheets I printed out, I pick myself up off the floor and drag my bag out to the truck.

At least I didn’t start crying, right?

I walk by the driver’s side where Grayson is already behind the wheel and squat down, ready to heave my bag into the bed. Before I get the chance to give my best tennis grunt, I hear an irritated click of a tongue as a door opens and hands grip the handle of my bag.

“I’ve got it, just get in.” God, I am the worst. I *am* pathetic. Grayson needed comfort and validation and I couldn’t give it to him. Even though he’s given it to me. And somehow, he’s still out here taking care of me.

—

The next six hours are excruciating. No one makes a single freaking sound. Grayson doesn’t even cough or sneeze or anything. No music, no tapping. Literally nothing to break the tension. I don’t know what’s worse, the deafening silence or the deafening screaming in my head.

As you can imagine, six hours is an extremely long time to be stuck in an environment perfect for a good spiral. Joanna can suck my ass. This is very much me pulling the same bull shit I always do. I may have been originally having a trauma response, but I have now sat in a truck for *six goddamn hours* without saying a single thing. I know I am in the wrong. I know I pulled away and lashed out and did what I have a history of doing. I have been begging myself to open my stupid fucking mouth and just say something.

But I haven’t. Every second that passed made it that much more difficult to bring it up. After five minutes I thought, ‘Okaaaayyyy and talk. Go… now!’ That didn’t work. After ten minutes I said to myself, ‘Okay, just spit it out. Anything is better than this silence. You can’t screw it up.’ That also did not work. By four hours in, I was berating myself for being so broken and sad that I was literally choking on my own fear of rejection. I have actually made someone else feel rejected in an attempt to ensure I wouldn’t have to feel rejected. Great healing, Sol. Very nice work.

We *finally* pull into a parking lot of the hotel I assume we’re staying at and I send a thank you to every religious and non-religious deity that exists. If I had to spend one more minute in that car I would’ve disintegrated into the seat.

Grayson heads inside without looking back and I scamper after him trying to catch up. He’s already speaking with the front desk person when I arrive.

“Okay I have one room for two ready for the Stoker party.” Her customer service smile is pretty impressive.

“Thanks.” Grayson moves to take the key card.

“Oh… I can, uh, stay in my own room.” There’s no way he wants to share the same space as me after this morning. That would be very like Grayson to suffer in silence just so he didn’t have to hurt my feelings and ask me to stay somewhere else.

The look on Grayson’s face makes my stomach sink and then fill with what feels like a million creepy crawlers. I don’t know how to describe the sound of disappointment and hurt he makes, but it hits me right in the chest. “Don’t know why I’m surprised.” He shakes his head and disappears onto one of the elevators.

Vatner reservation, party of one. We’ve booked you the Loser’s suite and it comes with free self-loathing!

## Chapter 22

Turning my phone on after three weeks of not having it is really weird.

I plugged it in when I first got to my room and had to wait for it to charge. From the twenty-five missed calls, I probably should’ve remembered to update my parents on my change of plans. Although, weirdly, they’re all from the first two weeks I was here. They stopped calling after that. I was supposed to come home after two weeks. What did they do, assume I was dead?

“Oh, *now* you want to call your mother? *¿Qué pasó?* Because I know you must’ve been trapped in a well and on the verge of death. There’s no other possible reason you wouldn’t call home,” is the first thing I hear when I make my first phone call in weeks.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, hunny!”

They’ve got me on speaker phone. “Hi, Dad.”

“How are you doing sweetie? How’s the cabin?”

“It’s…it’s good. It’s been good.”

“That’s great! We’ve been worried about you.”

“Yeah, my car broke down and I had to extend my stay longer than I expected. And you know I don’t get service up here.” Best if they think I just went far enough away from the mountain to have a few bars of service. A joy ride. Not to, you know, New York. With a strange man I just met. Who is incredibly handsome and kind and makes me come until I see stars. And who I’ve also completely pushed away because I am still letting Brian ruin my life.

I *know* my flaws. I just feel paralyzed in the moment, unable to do anything about them.

“Oh, we know, sweetheart. Grayson called to fill us in.” My eyes narrow. Excuse me?

“Right, yeah. I’ve just been dealing with so much,” I stammer, trying to stay present in the conversation. He did *what*?

They keep blabbering, “He’s so nice! We’re so glad you made a friend up there. God knows you need one…”

“Oh, sorry, about to lose service again, talk to you soon!” CLICK. I wish phones still clicked when you hung up. Or snapped shut or something. I can’t even slam it back down on the receiver. It is so unsatisfying to go to angrily end a phone call and nothing happens.

I scream my frustration out into a pillow.

What do you *mean* Grayson called them? How did he even get their number?

I don’t know if I should be pissed or impressed or flattered. I think I’m all three.

I wanna scream. I wanna yell. I wanna pitch a fit. I wanna start a fight. I wanna give all of these freaking emotions some place to go that isn’t bouncing around my body, bubbling up inside me. And I especially want them to direct their attention anywhere other than me.

I’m going to get drunk. No. I’m not. It’s too early.

I’m going to go buy a super hot outfit and *then* get drunk. Yes. This sounds like a great, healthy coping mechanism. The best. Go big or go home. Because if I get drunk and flirt with random bar people that’ll show Brian that I’ve moved on with my life. The logic is so sound.

Maybe I should spend my life savings and order an Uber home. Or find a kickboxing class. Or just kick box someone in the street. That’s edgy and cool.

Decisions, decisions.

—

Surprise! I’m drunk at a bar in a really hot outfit. Please don’t ask me how I went from insecure all day to dancing my ass off at this bar, totally feeling myself. They’re two different concepts. Meaningless dancing fueled by alcohol? Easy. Catching feelings and having to deal with the inevitable heartbreak? NO THANKS.

Man do I love to dance. Why don’t I ever dance? I’m going to dance every night for the rest of my life. My calf muscles are gonna be hard as rocks. Hell yeah, go rocks!

I take another sip of my drink as I do my thing on the dance floor. I’ve spent half the night movin’ and groovin’ free as a bird, and the other half dancing with the other people boogieing out here. It’s been magical and I am having a blast.

Sorry, did you say something? What? I have emotions to deal with? Sorry! Can’t hear you over the music. \*Gestures towards speakers with thumb\*.

I think I’m going to finally get a tattoo. Wow. That’s brilliant. I’m going to get a tattoo to remember this feeling forever.

Just then, one of the guys I’ve been dancing with on and off sidles over to me. He’s been a lot of fun. He hasn’t gotten weird and tried to like, stick his hands down my pants or anything. He’s just happy to dance and enjoy the evening.

He grabs my hips and pulls me close, my arms automatically wrap around his neck. This is the first time he’s initiated actual contact. Before, we were just dancing in the same space, scream singing in unison every once in a while.

When he spins us around, I set my cup on a random table, not trusting myself not to spill it all over him. The pop music playing keeps things light and we sing the best parts every once in a while. Eventually, a song comes on where we need to switch positions a bit. To match the energy. The vibe, ya know? I totally understand vibes. I am not a twenty-eight-year-old divorcee that had her head up her ass until three weeks ago, I am young and hip and alluring. I am the epitome of chill. I am zen and happy. Have I said cool yet?

I turn in his arms, sliding my ass back and forth against him. It’s easy. No emotions involved. No attachments. Just a man and a woman enjoying each other’s company temporarily.

There’s another song change and this time I’m twirled into someone else’s arms. I slam into their chest with a quiet, “*Oof*.” I look up to find out whose hands are sliding down dangerously close to my backside and my breath catches in my throat.

“What are you doing here?” I snap once I recover, but he just yanks me closer by my ass cheeks, forcing me to put my hands on his chest to steady myself. “Grayson, I’m serious what do you think you’re –”

He uses his hands to wrap my arms around his neck before letting his travel back down to their original position. “I told you that the next time you were dancing at a bar, it was going to be in my arms.” *God*, even when I’m drunk and pissed and ashamed and annoyed he *still* drives me absolutely wild. Even with just his words. Sometimes with just one look.

“I’m not dancing with you, you freaking called my parents and –”

He leans in close, sending shock waves down my spine when he says, “Enough, Sol. Just dance with me.” UGH. Me and my body are NOT on speaking terms. Betraying me like this. Turning into Jell-O under his gaze. I can hardly breathe as he moves me exactly the way he wants me. Spinning me and pulling me close, just to turn me back out again. His hands are *everywhere*. They grip my waist, they graze my ass, they tease under my breasts, and his lips are no better! Kissing my exposed shoulder, my back, my neck, my jaw. PLEASE. Can he just fucking kiss me? Really kiss me? On the lips? Just this once?

But he doesn’t. He never does.

One song turns into two, then three, then five. I don’t know if I’m more drunk off tequila or him. Every goddamn thing about him.

He stops and his hand touches my lower back, guiding me, “Let’s go.”

A protest sits impatiently on my tongue, but I’m too busy trying to put one foot in front of the other and not make a fool of myself. I think I underestimated how much he was having to hold me up as we danced.

He notices, and slips his arm around my waist, steadying me, walking us outside. “And what if I wasn’t ready to go? Did you even think to ask what I wanted to do?”

“You were ready to go.”

“How do you know? You don’t know me.” He does. He’s proven it in beautiful poetic detail that he does. It was the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me. And we are NOT talking about that right now.

“You could barely stand, Sol. It was time to go.”

“I’m just gonna go back out after you leave.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Ooohh, what are you gonna do? Call my parents and tattle on me again?”

He lets out an annoyed sigh. That’s funny. Not sure why *he’s* annoyed.

“I just called them to let them know you were alright. Not to tattle on you.”

“And what if I didn’t want them to know anything?”

He stops in front of our hotel. “I’m sorry if I overstepped. I knew you weren’t ready to call them and I was trying to help you avoid any backlash when you got home. I was just trying to be nice.”

“Ooooof *course* you were. Grayson and his endless freaking kindness and his perfect freaking everything. Meanwhile, Sol over here personifies actual fucking garbage every day of her life.”

He doesn’t respond, he just simply puts his arm back where it was and leads me towards the elevators. I don’t even bother asking how he knew which floor to press. Or what bar I was at. Or how he got my parents number. I don’t care anymore.

We stop outside my room while I dig around to find my key to get in. I stumble over my own feet and Grayson steadies me. Leaning me against the wall.

“Can I?” He gestures towards my clutch, asking permission to look inside.

“I don’t know why you’re even asking. You’re just going to do whatever the hell you want anyway.”

He fishes the key out, but keeps it in his hand.

“Sol, I wasn’t trying to –”

My arms fly up in rage, right in his face. And before I get to blow out any of the furious things I was going to say to him I see him flinch. He flinches and moves his hands up to block me, to defend himself.

I go extremely still, eyes wide, horrified. I watched the fear flash across his face. He hid it well, but I saw it.

He thought I was going to hit him. Oh my god. I have treated him so freaking badly that he didn’t trust me enough not to hit him. After everything he told me about his past. After everything I witnessed. I’m going to throw up.

I snatch the card out of his hands and shove it into the door as quickly as possible. The sound it makes when I slam it shut behind me bounces off the walls, especially the tiles on the bathroom floor as I fling myself in front of the toilet.

And I do throw up. A lot. But I know this isn’t from the tequila.

—

The buzzing going off next to my face has me groaning and slapping my hand around trying to find my phone so I can throw it out the window.

My hand locks around the rubber case and just as I’m about to chuck it, I see the name on the screen.

“Cruz?” I yawn, answering his FaceTime.

“I heard you were back in the land of Wi-Fi and plumbing.” He’s walking down a busy city sidewalk, sunglasses on and AirPods in his ears.

“Mom and Dad?”

He chuckles. “Yeah. They were worried after they talked to you on the phone and you, ‘lost connection.’ ”

“Great, even more people to tattle on me.”

“Are you in a hotel room? Couldn’t handle the wilderness?” He’s stopped, waiting at a crosswalk.

“Yeah, I’m in New York, long story.”

“What?!” he exclaims. “Why didn’t you tell me? Let’s grab lunch.” I squint my eyes at him. What is he being so chipper and nice for?

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, how’s one o’clock?” I blind myself checking the time on my phone. It’s eleven thirty.

“Um. Yeah, okay, sure.” Maybe I’m still drunk. Cruz and I haven’t seen each other in years.

“I’ll send a car. Text me your address.” Great. Everyone knows I’m a carless loser. Awesome.

Slowly, I roll myself out of bed and trudge to the bathroom. I turn the water on in the shower and turn to face the mirror to see how much damage has been done.

As soon as I see the smudged makeup all over my face I lean down on the counter, head hanging between my shoulders. Fuck.

Really? Again? I can’t just black out *one* time and forget every stupid, idiotic thing I did the night before?

I barely register getting in the shower or getting dressed and leaving the hotel. All I can think about is Grayson flinching last night. It’s playing over and over in my head. I scared him. I put him in a position where he felt afraid of me.

—

“Wow, you look like shit.” Cruz is already sitting at our table when I walk in.

Nothing like brotherly love, am I right?

“Gee, thanks. Love you too.”

He laughs and gives me a once over. “What happened to you?”

“Tequila.” That and hurting someone I really freaking care about. I think it’s worse that he’s still been taking care of me. I hurt him. I disappointed him. And he hasn’t lashed out or anything.

“Brutal.” He takes a roll and butters it. “What are you doing up here?”

“A friend of mine needed some help with divorce stuff.” ‘*Is that what we are, Sol? Friends?’*

He wiggles his eyebrows. “Oooh. Are you the divorce expert now? A bunch of other sad, lonely people come to you for advice and stuff?”

I think if literally anyone else said that to me I would burst into tears. “As a matter of fact, asshat, Mom and Dad sent me up here to fix your sorry ass’s love life.”

If looks could kill. “I’m building a career.”

“Oh, Mr. Business Man is building a business career. No time for peasants like friends or family.”

“Says the girl who locked herself in an apartment for two years checking Brian’s Instagram every three minutes.”

“At least I had a husband!”

His guffaws attract the attention of other customers. “Oh yeah, Sol. I’m real jealous of your marriage with Brian. Are you sure he even knew your name?”

“Do you think Zella will remember yours when she gets married next year?”

“Fuck off, Sol.”

At this point, we’re like one step under screaming at each other. “I know you’ve been pining after her for years.” He slams his menu closed and lets it fall on the table, causing his bread plate to clank against his silverware. “What’s her fiancé’s name again? Hubert…?”

The name has to force itself through his gritted teeth. “Elmer…”

I can’t help it, I start hysterically laughing. “Oh my god! Imagine losing out to a guy named *Elmer*!” I lean back and grab my stomach, laughing so hard it hurts.

When I look back down, I can see Cruz biting his lip. And as soon as we make eye contact, we both burst into hysterics.

It takes a few minutes for us to actually settle down, because each time one of us gets close, we look at each other and start laughing all over again.

Nothing like brotherly love.

“I’ve missed you, you know? I smile. “Sorry I went offline for so long.”

“Nah. I should’ve been there for you. I just didn’t know how to handle how sad you were.”

My lips form the beginning of a frown, “Me either.”

“Plus, after Henley…I just kind of…lost it.”

“I know. I should’ve been there.”

“You were dealing with shit.”

I shrug. “So were you.”

I don’t know if it’s because I’m still drunk or because I literally have no other friends to talk to, but after we order, I tell him everything. Well, not *everything*. He’s still my brother. Gross. But it’s pretty all encompassing. Starting with revealing the real reason I got a divorce and ending with the flinch.

“Why are you telling me all this?” he says in between forkfuls of his pasta.

“Uh, because I thought you’d give me advice or something!”

“I don’t know what the fuck you should do. You said it yourself, I’m just as emotionally unavailable as you are. I push people away too. I’m not afraid to put myself out there, but I am afraid of commitment.”

“Okay but I thought I was getting better. I was really trying. It felt like I was making progress! I was the one who had my head on straight in the beginning. Giving Grayson and I space when I sensed danger.”

“Turns out you’re the danger. You’ve been the danger all along.”

“Fuck, Cruz.” I mean, he’s right. Every single time I stormed off or stopped talking to Grayson it was over my own baggage. And it was never actually an issue. I thought he was cheating on his wife. He wasn’t. I thought he was cockblocking me and being an ass. He was. But in a hot way. In a protective way. I thought he was making fun of how desperate and single I am. He wasn’t. He was attracted to me. Or, at least, I was the only person available to be attracted to. I thought he was attacking me. He wasn’t. He was trying to communicate and hold me accountable. (I take constructive criticism *really* well.)

Besides being a protective, demanding douche (sweetheart) sometimes, he hasn’t done anything wrong to me. And we all know I don’t mind the demands one freaking bit. All he asked me to stop doing was masking what I want in favor of whatever everybody else wants.

He didn’t write me off when I stormed off the first time. Or the second. Or the third…

He actually took care of me in like, a million different ways. No matter how much I was yelling or ranting at him. My ankle, the dinner, the checklist, my car, the books, the food, the cabin. I mean, the list goes on and on. Not to mention how absolutely adored he’s made me feel. And so what if it’s temporary? That’s not a reason to lash out at him. He’s allowed to want temporary. And I dropped my clothes in that meadow knowing he is in the predicament he’s in.

My feelings are mine to face and I’m hurting a really great guy because I can’t express myself. I’m too fucking afraid to tell him where I stand. Because a sad, lonely part of me would rather cling to this situationship than tell him how I feel and risk him not wanting to lead me on and breaking it off early. Let’s just face it. We all know Grayson is the kind of gentleman that would break things off so that I don’t get the wrong idea and get myself hurt. Well, too late, buddy.

“Ugh. I fucked up, Cruz.”

“Yeah, well, welcome to the club.” He raises his glass, pretending to clink it with mine and throws the rest back, draining it.

Not exactly a club I want to be a part of.

## Chapter 23

Putzing around my hotel room, folding this, moving that, sitting down, standing up, walking to the mirror, walking to the window, I chew on my lip trying to figure out what the hell to do.

I am scared to show Grayson that I am not being intimate with him just because he wants to. I am scared because, statistically speaking, that can or will eventually lead to rejection. I know that he has communicated that this is what he wants and needs from me, but we’re up against a decade of shying away from stuff like this. It’s obvious I need to do something. I’m aware this is on me. I’ve just never allowed myself to be in this position.

I am amazed at how comfortable he makes me feel. I am shocked that I willingly and eagerly did dirty things with him. He emboldens me, gives me power and the chance to build my confidence. The way he cares for me when we’re together like that is truly wonderful. It’s getting me in deep, deep shit, but it is so goddamn wonderful.

All of that comfort and confidence flushes right down the drain when I think about initiating and putting myself out there for him. I can bloom for him because I am one hundred percent sure that’s what he wants. The moment his eyes change, I have no worries. I am simply excited and turned on and giggly.

And I *know* that it would take one singular breath of courage before he would devour me. That the second I shift in his direction he’d be on me in a heartbeat. He’s shown me that. Logically, I know that. But every time I think about it, my brain just yells, ‘Those were flukes! He was bored and lonely! He’ll get sick of you. He’s way out of your league! You have no business asking that man to bed! If he does say yes, it’s because he’s trying to spare your feelings! Because he feels too bad to say no.’

How do I get rid of those thoughts?

*Buzz buzz*.

The only people who would be texting me are my parents. Or *maybe* Cruz. But I just saw him, and I just talked to them.

It takes me a minute to figure out where I put my phone. I moved it in my putzing like seven different times. Thankfully the reminder vibrate goes off and I hear it coming from the drawer of the bedside table.

Whipping it out, I frown.

***Grayson: Hey***

I forgot I even had Grayson’s number. He gave it to me before we left in case we got separated. Why is he texting me? I’ve been horrible. And now a coward.

***Sol: Is everything okay?***

Immediate typing dots.

***Grayson: How are you?***

Is he seriously texting me to ask how *I’m* doing? I should be texting him that!

***Sol: I’m okay. You?***

***Grayson: Rough day.***

I should see if he wants to talk about it. I should ask him to meet up and let him vent. I should support him. I’d rather rip every single hair out of my body one by one than face him right now. But, I probably should.

More typing dots.

I wait, but nothing comes. Shit. Okay. Ummmm.

***Sol: Do you wanna talk about it? We can —***

*\*Knock, knock, knock\**

I freeze, then unfreeze to do a quick survey to make sure I’m wearing pants, and then freeze again. It’s either a stranger trying to kill me or Grayson. I don’t know which one I’d rather it be…

“Sol? You in there?” Goddamnit.

“One sec!”

I am sure I resemble a street cat who gets into fights for a living, but I don’t have time to fix that.

Opening the door, I paste a smile on my face, attempting to trick both Grayson and myself into thinking that everything is hunky dory.

His eyes soften with what I would describe as relief before darkening as they travel right down to my chest. I’m not wearing a bra, and I watch the realization light up his face.

He clears his throat and shakes his head, bringing his gaze back up to meet mine. “Hey. Uh. Shit. I don’t even know how to ask this.” His hand is wringing the back of his neck nervously. I’m immediately in a panic, because that’s how my brain works.

“What’s up?” That sounded casual, right?

He gives a subtle groan into the side of the door jamb before gritting his teeth and standing up straight. “My lawyer needs to talk to us both together.”

Oh. That’s way better than the extremes I was imagining.

My whole body relaxes. “Oh, okay. No problem. What time?”

He relaxes too. His features are soft and warm, if not looking a little guilty. I just want to slip myself right into his arms and bury my face in his chest. For him. For me. He feels like…

Yeah, I’m not going to say that. I am not going to say he feels like anything. Especially not *home*.

He shakes his head. “Forget it. No, I’m sorry I even asked. I’m going to go and set things straight. I’m not dragging you into this. I should’ve never come up here. It was selfish. Sorry I interrupted your day.” His hurried, dejected steps take him all the way down the hall and around the corner.

I may not be able to physically comfort him because it feels too intimate. Or do anything that would show how much I’ve fallen for him, like tell him I want to be interrupted by him all day every day. For forever. But I can do friend things for him. And I’m going to that lawyer’s office.

—

Wow. New York is fucking expensive.

I silently cry inside my head when I type in Grayson’s lawyer’s address into Uber and see how much it’s going to cost to get there.

That’s one of those things that comes from living with someone who you spend all of your time with and who is going through what you’re going through. I know his lawyer’s name. I remember because we were laughing about how ridiculous his last name is. Beekahkdian. Sometimes I’m no better than the middle schoolers I teach.

Between the traffic, the price, and the nerves, I want to rate this ride a zero out of five stars, but unfortunately, Uber doesn’t have an option to rate *them,* just the driver. And my driver was perfectly lovely and amazing.

I am bouncing in my seat feeling very anxious and overwhelmed. I don’t want to miss it. I don’t even know what time it’s at. But it took some time getting out of the hotel because a) I was a hot mess and b) I had to figure out how to make my ratty t-shirt wardrobe work for business casual. I’m actually kind of impressed with myself for pulling it off. Going out to buy a hot outfit wasn’t one hundred percent a bad idea. Just mostly. Especially because of what it led to.

Thankfully we get close enough that I can just get out and walk the rest of the way.

With a frantic, “Thank you!” thrown over my shoulder, I power walk (trip and stumble and roll my ankles) to the building I need and burst inside. It is extremely sophisticated. Very elite. Very high class. Your voice would probably echo in the space because there’s really nothing to absorb the sound. My lawyer’s office is essentially a janitor’s closet that I think he also lives in.

I look around, suddenly feeling way less confident in my magic outfit abilities.

There’s no time for second guessing, so I march up to the front desk and attempt a business woman, bad ass smile. “Hi. I have an appointment with Mr. Beekahkdian.”

The secretary nods and starts typing. “Name?” he asks, never glancing up from the screen.

Mmm. Do I give him my name or Grayson’s? “Um. My presence was requested for a meeting with his client Grayson Stoker.”

“Name?” There isn’t much life in his eyes.

“Sol Vatner.”

Silence. I’m sweating. Why am I sweating? I was literally invited to come here. *You’ve got this, Sol*.

“Someone will be waiting for you on floor number nine to escort you to the conference room. Elevators are just around the corner to your left.”

“Oh! Uh. Okay. Great. Thanks!” I’m feeling a bit manic and it’s clear by the secretary’s face that I look it too.

In the elevator, I take the time to pull myself together. I need to go into work mode. Into ‘I don’t have any problems I have a job to do’ mode. I’m very good at that.

I step out onto the dark, shining, hardwood floors and am greeted by a small blonde woman who is shorter than me, even wearing her heels.

“Ms. Vatner? Welcome.”

“Yes. Um. Hi.”

She smiles and motions with her hand that we should start walking. “You’re the first to arrive. Everyone should be in momentarily. Mr. Beekahkdian is very strict about starting on time.”

I follow her around the office until she stops at a large, imposing door. Everything in this building makes me feel so out of place. Like I’m a woman who was raised by wolves trying to fit into a white-collar society.

“Can I get you a coffee or a tea?”

“Oh, just water. Thank you.” I normally would never ask for anything. Another post-waitressing thing I do. But my mouth is so dry and I am supposed to be faking having my life together. If I can do it at work, I can do it here. For Grayson.

The door opens again and I turn to say, “Thank y–” but I stop abruptly. It’s not the nice lady coming back with my water. It’s Natalie. Fuck.

Her face turns deathly sour, nose turned up like I reek and am burning her nose hairs off.

She click-clacks over to the other side of the table with her lawyer, staring me down like she’s ready to pounce. To rip my throat out with her teeth.

I did *not* know this meeting was with more than Grayson and his lawyer, but what a fun surprise! I love when life is lively, unexpected. I am thrilled by the unknown and spontaneity. Never a dull moment, just how I like it.

Fuck.

“Hi, Natalie.” She just stares. Yeah, okay. If I was across from Brian’s secretary? Would I answer her? Actually…probably because I can’t help but be nice in social situations like that. Because before a month ago, I was a huge pushover and did whatever the hell everyone else wanted.

Okay, I’m still doing that, but you get the picture.

I let out a huge breath I didn’t realize I was holding when the blonde woman walks in with my water at the same time as Grayson and Mr. Beekahkian. I need to stop thinking his name. It’s too much. I’m going to do something horrifying like cackle.

My body relaxes when Grayson takes a seat next to me. We share a look. I hear every single word. Neither of our faces give anything away, but I catch everything. Equal parts so grateful he could burst and equal parts so mortified and disgusted with himself that he doesn’t know what to do. I hope my smile says, ‘I’m here for you.’

“Good afternoon. Thank you for agreeing to meet on such short notice.” Mr. B Kahk acknowledges everyone in the room. No. B Kahk is so much worse. I have to stifle a giggle in my hand, feigning a cough.

Somehow, this pisses Natalie off even more.

“We’re looking to wrap things up as quickly as possible. Mrs. Stoker has a very busy schedule and we are sure that Mr. Stoker and…” Natalie’s lawyer pauses, waving his hand in my direction.

“Vatner. Ms. Vatner,” Grayson answers for me. I am trying very hard not to let my cheeks heat. To stare this man down and let him know he can’t intimidate me. He totally can. But I’m going to pretend he can’t. I have zero business being here. But only I get to say that. Not Mr. Stuffy Gross Mustache Guy.

“Right. I’m sure Mr. Stoker and Ms. Vatner have other engagements as well.” Oof. The use of the term engagement here puts such an awkward tension in the air.

“Indeed. The new paperwork we wrote up gives Mrs. Stoker fifty percent of the funds in Mr. Stoker’s personal bank account. This is in addition to the previous terms that awarded Mrs. Stoker all of the marital assets, barring a cabin gifted to Mr. and Mrs. Stoker for their wedding in Pennsylvania. We just need your client’s signature and we can put this matter to rest.”

Are you kidding me? Even I got fifty percent in my divorce. Grayson is getting nothing! What the hell is he thinking?

“The cabin has been in my family for generations. He is not getting it.” God, her voice makes me want to punch a wall.

“Equitable division of marital assets is a law-based practice. What we’re offering is already more than a court would award you.” Mr. B’s face never changes. He is hard and closed off. It seems as though that’s his only setting.

“My client has suffered extreme emotional distress. The sanctity of marriage is a pillar in her life, it is what drives her career. We are prepared to sue if necessary.”

My blood is boiling. Where is the justice in our justice system?

Grayson sighs and rolls his shoulders a few times. “Just give her–”

“Sorry, so what? He’s supposed to be homeless and poor after this?”

Natalie and Grayson respond simultaneously. Natalie spits, “Shut your whore mouth,” and Grayson murmurs, “It’s okay, Sol. I’m okay.” His fingers brush my knee under the table. They immediately tense as soon as he registers what Natalie said. I watch him gear up to explode.

I interrupt before he can do any damage. “It’s literally the law that things need to be split fairly.”

“Fair doesn’t mean equal.” Natalie’s lawyer gives me a patronizing glare.

I hold up my hand in his direction. “Yeah, I’m aware, guy. I’ve been through a divorce. He’s entitled to what’s fair.”

“He cheated on me with *you* and illegally gave my prescriptions to a person they weren’t prescribed to, consequently forfeiting any bargaining power.” She is so smug. Where the hell does she get off? Is this what all rich people are like?

My eyes narrow. “And you beat the shit out of him, so…what does that do to your bargaining power, exactly?”

The room goes very still. Stagnant. It’s like the air has been sucked out.

A beat.

Then, everyone starts talking at once. Natalie is the loudest, screeching, “Excuse me?” at the top of her lungs. Her lawyer is puffing up his chest rumbling a bunch of nonsense while Mr. B tries to engage with Grayson, but Grayson only has eyes for me. I can feel him burning a hole in the side of my face. Still, I don’t look at him.

“I said,” I call above the voices. Shockingly, everyone quiets (thank you ‘teacher voice’). “You beat the shit out of him. So, what does that do to your bargaining power, exactly? Infidelity and domestic abuse. How do they compare? I’m only familiar with the infidelity, not the abuse.” I direct my last question to the two lawyers at the head of the table.

“Those are hearsay accusations and you cannot –”

Grayson’s lawyer interrupts. “They’re comparable. Some courts consider them the same category. That infidelity is a kind of abuse, or can lead to abuse. A judge would be extremely interested.” This guy’s face may never move, but he’s good. He knows how to play the game. He doesn’t have any proof that what I’m saying is true, and yet he plays the game like a pro.

“Mrs. Stoker is the one who has suffered in this marriage. We will not stand for such grossly inappropriate accusations.”

“I have pictures, Natalie (NO I freaking don’t???). He had bruises all over, every time I saw him. Scratches up and down his arms. His back. And those were just the visible injuries…You forced –”

“I’ll sign.” She says it so quickly I almost don’t understand her.

Her lawyer starts back pedaling immediately. “Mrs. Stoker isn’t in the right state of mind. She is being forced to sit across her husband’s mistress while –”

“I’ll sign the papers,” she insists, eyes never leaving mine.

“And an NDA. An NDA stating you cannot talk about the reason for the divorce without legal repercussion.”

“Now wait just one –” I almost feel sorry for Mr. Mustache. But there is no better legal representation than a woman scorned. I’ve been through every brutal second of this process, and defending Lumberjack over here means everything to me.

“Fine. Give me the papers.”

—

My heart beat is in my ears, kind of making it feel like I’m on an airplane. I am experiencing the most jarring and dramatic adrenaline crash of my lifetime. Holy shit. Holy *shit.* This is so much crazier than when I stood up to Natalie in the cabin the other day.

She signed the papers. They just have to show up in court and hand the papers in and Grayson is officially divorced. And I supported him in that. At least I can say I did something good for the person who has shown me what real kindness is. What healthy relationships look like. Even if I don’t have the guts to do anything else. I’m hoping this will at least let him know I really, truly cared. In so many more ways than one.

We’re sitting in the truck, facing our hotel. Neither of us have spoken. Not on the car ride over, not since just sitting here, staring, lost in our own thoughts. I think we’re both in shock. This trip has had so many ups and downs. I did not see a single thing that happened this weekend coming. Except maybe my parent’s reaction when I called them. And I’m sure Grayson doesn’t even know what to do right now. I knew exactly how my divorce was going to pan out and I still felt untethered once things were official.

I want to reach out and touch him. To hold his hand or rub his arm. Those things would have been warm and friendly last week. Now, I’m terrified they’ll rat me out. They’ll symbolize how much more this is for me than a hookup. Grayson is naturally affectionate. I think he needs it in all of this, it’s an important part of this rebound. I have given him zero affection. It hasn’t been my normal from the start, and if I started doing it now, he’d know. And he’d cut things off.

I know I said that shouldn’t affect me. I know he wants me to act exactly how I’m feeling. It’s just so much fucking harder to make myself do it.

He clears his throat. Oh no. No, no, no. We can’t do sentimental. We cannot do big, deep feelings. I can’t survive it. I’m already hanging by a thread and when he cuts it, I am going to spiral all the way back down to heartbreak. “Sol, I do–”

A smile. A hand on the truck door handle. “Don’t worry about it. Consider it my ‘thank you’ for how welcoming you’ve been.” I have to shove myself out the door as quickly as possible because the look of hurt on his face is enough to eat me alive.

I don’t stop speed walking until my back is leaning up against the inside of my hotel room door. My chest rises and falls. I can’t keep pace with how much oxygen I need.

Just another example of Coward Sol, who lets fear ruin her life.

## Chapter 24

Throwing my bag on the floor next to the door, I beeline for the couch and plop myself down haphazardly, bouncing off the cushions a few times before sinking in and grabbing a pillow to hide my face under.

I let another six-hour trip go by in silence. I was embarrassed and didn’t know how to bring up any of the million things I needed to apologize for. We didn’t talk about dancing at the bar. We didn’t talk about what happened after. We didn’t talk about the conference room. And we didn’t talk about the suffocating elephant in the room: my baggage.

The really scary part is he was the first person I wanted to tell about my parents’ shitty phone call and my lunch with Cruz. I had been wishing all night that he was there with me at the bar. I wanted to laugh with him about the drama I overheard when we were checking out this morning. But I didn’t tell him and I never invited him. Didn’t call or even text.

“Are you hungry?” His voice sounds defeated. Stop being nice to me! *Please*! It’s killing me. I’m being crushed to death by equal parts guilt and feelings for him. I can’t take it.

The best I can muster is a non-committal grumble from under the pillow. He leaves it at that.

He ‘leaves it at that’ for days. He pretty much went right to bed when we got back Sunday night, and both Monday and Tuesday he spent working outside most of the day. He’s not ignoring me, but he’s not initiating any contact. And he is still doing heartbreakingly thoughtful little things to look after me. He brought the pillow I sleep on in his bed out to the couch for me in one of the very brief moments I managed to peel myself off it and go to the bathroom. He’s set out a cup of coffee for me in the microwave every morning. He went to the store and got more of my body wash I had run out of (although that’s partially his fault). He hasn’t said a single word to me unless we’re passing each other in the same space, and yet I feel like I am covered in his words. Every time I notice something he did. I don’t know how I’m possibly supposed to bring any of the things up that I need to bring up when I’ve let days and days go by. Does it even matter what I have to say at this point? The damage is done.

My eyes refocus and I realize I haven’t been paying attention to anything I just read. I try again, eyes doing their best to stay absorbed into the story. I flip to the next page and attempt to do the same but something catches my eye. Why is this page dog eared? Well, I can understand why it’s dog eared. The two main characters are about to finally get together. I can totally imagine wanting to revisit this next scene for future…endeavors. But why would one of my books already have marked pages? This is the first time I’m reading this one…

I quickly scan the next few pages and my cheeks heat. No fucking way. No *way*.

*He takes his time lathering up her skin, leaving lingering touches everywhere he goes. Kisses pepper across her shoulders and up her neck. They fall into a blissful silence, Kai reaching up to massage Lucy’s breasts. Not to suggest anything. Just to hold her.*

There is no way.

I rush off to the reading nook and heave the books I’ve read into my lap. Book after book after book. Dog eared. And every single marker is for a spicy scene. Throwing a few aside (of course he went back to the creek and fetched my book we left there) I reach for one in particular. Yupp. There’s a corner flipped down on the first page of a scene in the back of a station wagon. Not a truck, but I guess you have to work with what you’ve got…

That one is tossed aside as I sort through the mess in front of me. Ah ha! Just what I was looking for. Exactly as I suspected. When I open to the right page, I see the beginning of the paint scene. And we all know where he got the inspiration for the hot spring…

Scrambling to my feet, I grab the current book I’m on and dash outside. The bang of the screen door makes it a pretty dramatic entrance onto the porch. Grayson is sitting in one of the rocking chairs, facing me, scrolling his phone. He looks up, clearly a little surprised that I’ve sought him out.

“Hi,” I say, a bit out of breath, a little awkward now that I’m actually standing in front of him.

He sets his phone down on the side table at his…side… and crosses one foot over his knee. “Hi.” I stand there without saying anything for, like, ten seconds too long.

“Do you wanna sit?” He gestures towards the companion chair.

“Um, no…well, I mean yes, but –” I stop and shake my head a little bit, organizing my thoughts. “Where did you buy these books?” My hand raises the one I brought out in the air.

“In that bookstore in Surley. The one you told me about.”

“But, um, that’s not a used book store, right?”

His eyebrows tilt up and his face reads, ‘What the hell is wrong with her?’ “No. It isn’t. Why do you ask?”

Why do I ask? Uh, shit. “I’m trying to uh…go green, recycle, yeah… all that stuff.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. I bought them new. We can donate them somewhere once you're finished with them.” He gets up and puts his phone in his pocket, moving around me to go back inside. I’m still staring at the place he was just occupying.

“You read them, didn’t you?” I hear the door swing shut. Damnit. I waited too long, he’s already inside.

You can imagine the shriek that comes out of me when I feel his lips at my ear. “Every. Page.”

I lick my lips, too scared to turn around. Too scared of the millions of inappropriate things I want to do to him. Some dirty, some not. Of the feeling in my chest. He’ll know. He’ll take one look at me and know I’ve gone off the deep end. That I like him too much.

“What…what are the markers for?” I don’t know why I ask. I already know the answer. Maybe I just need to hear him say it. Hear it come from his lips.

“They’re the scenes that made your face go dark. Greedy. They’re the ones you were reading when I got to watch the change ripple across your features. They’re the ones you read that let me know you were getting wet right in front of me. That your nipples were pebbling while I was sitting right there to witness it. They’re the ones I memorized so I could give you the experience in real life.” He backs away and goes back into the cabin.

I feel his absence like a bucket of ice-cold water being thrown on me.

I think I might pass out.

—

I hear it, okay? I hear it loud and clear. The absolute uproar of people around the world screaming, “WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING? IF YOU DON’T CONFESS YOUR LOVE TO THAT MAN RIGHT NOW, THEN I WILL. HE LEARNED SMUTTY SCENES FOR YOU, YOU BIG STUPID.”

He learned smutty scenes for me. Among a whole other laundry list of things that I’ve recounted a million times and yet still somehow have done nothing about. Each one a rose petal he’s left at my feet. One after another, even while I stomp all over the ones he placed before them.

This man deserves the world. And he definitely deserves some freaking effort from me. Imagine if the roles were reversed and he only showed any type of interest when I came on to him and did all of the seducing. Excuse me while I fall over in laughter. I would’ve never freaking gone near him again. After the first or second time? I would feel like shit. I would think he was a) only going along with it because he felt like he owed me rent for letting him stay with me, b) only going along with it because he didn’t know how or felt uncomfortable saying no, c) he didn’t want to hurt my feelings by saying no, or d) he figured, ‘Eh, why not? We’re both up here. Might as well enjoy myself if it's being offered.’

I have to fix this. No matter the outcome, he shouldn’t have to feel like that. Even if he wants nothing to do with me anymore, he shouldn’t have to think back and remember his time up here like that. He should know he was desired. Both sexually and as a person.

I’m sitting on his bed trying to give myself a pep talk. I’ve never done anything like this before. Drunk or sober. The blow job was contextual and I was curious and wanted to make him feel good too. I didn’t start anything, I just eagerly participated, walking along the path he had already paved. And that was after me getting pleasured on *three* separate occasions without me showing him I was attracted to him and that I wanted to make him feel like he was making me feel.

I’m just going to pretend I’m an actress in the production of my life. I’m going to act like I’m confident and sexy and seductive even if I don’t even remotely feel that way. Doesn’t matter. I do feel strongly that Grayson deserves actual recognition and reciprocation for the way he’s loved on me this month. No matter how this turns out, I owe him that. Not in a weird exchange of goods type of way, but because I respect him and care about him and I have not shown him that.

Okay. Here we go. You can do this. People do this all the time. There are probably millions of people doing this exact thing around the world. *It’s a weird thought this time too, Sol*.

I sift through the drawers of my things trying to salvage my least unappealing sports bra and underwear. In a very sad turn of events, I lost the red lace bra somewhere on the way back from the meadow and haven’t been able to find it since.

Oh my god. Stick the knife into my chest a little freaking harder. I don’t think I’ve learned my lesson.

He bought me freaking lingerie. Like hot, fun lingerie. He hated my sports bras because I hid behind them and so he bought me lingerie. CAN SOMEBODY PLEASE CHECK IF MY HEART IS STILL BEATING? Because I think I’m about to pass away from how freaking wonderful he is and how freaking awful I am. Okay. That’s it. We’re doing this.

I walk out in his robe with a little surprise underneath and find him in the living room doing something on his iPad.

“Whatcha doing?” I purr. He doesn’t look up, he’s right in the middle of typing something, but after a few seconds he lifts his eyes to me and says, “I’m just job…,” the sentence hangs on his tongue. He’s too busy taking me in to finish it. I haven’t even shown him anything sexy yet, but I know the sight of me in his robe wakes up Possessive Grayson. “...hunting.”

“Anything good?” I ask, swaying my hips as I approach him, just enough that he can’t help but shift his gaze towards them. I ever so gently take the iPad out of his hands and throw it to the other side of the couch, taking advantage of the new vacancy on his lap. Both knees settle themselves on either side of his thighs, and I lower myself so that my bottom rests on top of them. The position causes the lower half of his robe to split open, and he’s transfixed on the portion of my legs that it reveals.

“Grayson,” I prompt as I tilt his chin up so he’s looking at me.

“Um, yeah…I –”

“The jobs, anything good?”

“Um…maybe…there might be…” I lose him again. It’s totally my fault and it’s a huge confidence booster, but I do lose him. I’ve started trailing a finger up and down his jaw, just barely touching.

“Might be what, Grayson?” And with the strength of a thousand suns that I am somehow stealing from, I take that same finger and suck on it for a few seconds before wiping the spit on his bottom lip, dragging it down far enough that I can see his bottom teeth.

To be honest, I’m not sure he’s breathing.

“Might be some…prospects.” The last word comes out as no more than a breath. I let the left shoulder of the rope slip off. You can see the black lacy strap of the bra I chose, and I can tell that he recognizes it. That he knows.

With both hands I glide the top half of the robe off and let it pool around my waist. He throws his head back, squeezing his eyes shut, gritting a thousand curse words out under his breath before pulling it back up to study me like a goddamn work of art. His fingers twitch next to where my knees are, and I have to use them to pin his hands in place. “Fucking hell,” he whispers, a vein in his neck is popping out.

“Is that what you do when you’re not reading my books?” I ask, leaning in close, so close that his lips part in anticipation before I pull back. He is so responsive to everything I do. I feel like the freaking Queen or something. His dick jumps under my ass. “How’d you choose the shower scene? I haven’t read that far yet.” I tease just under where his sleeves end on his biceps.

“I read too far. I wasn’t…I wasn’t expecting your uh…little rewrite.” I don’t know how *little* anything was in that rewrite.

My right hand slides over his shoulder and up his neck. I tangle my fingers in his hair and use my grip to pull his head to the side, putting his ear right under my mouth. “How’d you know I’d like it? That it would be dog ear worthy…” I feel his arms strain against my knees. He wants to touch. To feel.

I am surviving out here by the skin of my freaking teeth. I am running on pure balls and made up sex scenes I’ve read in books. That and the need to make him know how much I appreciate him. How much I like his touch. The way he has me desperate for him…

And all we’ve been doing is recreating book scenes anyway, right? I’ve got plenty of reference material stored in my brain.

I’ve still got his face turned away from me, and I let my tongue dart out, moving along his ear for just a moment. “You like the sentimental stuff. You want spice with romance. You prefer the scenes where the main character gets dicked down *and* feels adored. Cherished. It’s your favorite combo.” I almost break my character. I almost melt like an ice cream cone all over his lap. He knows me better than I think I know myself.

*Don’t get distracted, Sol.*

I tug his head back so he’s looking up at me again and use my other hand to play with his neck. To trace nonsensical patterns, drag my nails down it, maybe give it a little squeeze a few times. “And what about you, Grayson? What’s your favorite kind of scene?”

I can feel him swallow under my grasp. “The same. But from the opposite perspective. I like control, I like to own. But I get off on giving pleasure, on making you sob out my name. I like knowing I’m the one making you feel that way. And then I wanna take care of you and hold you and make sure you know how beautiful you are.” Him saying things like that is going to make me blow my goddamn cover. Holy shit. And the fact that he references me instead of the character? Yeah, I’m doomed.

The hand on his neck drags my nails down to his chest, over his stomach and stops at the bottom of his shirt. “Mm. So which was your favorite? That you read?” I tease the skin just above his jeans. I’m so tempted to start grinding on his dick. He’s so hard under me.

He clenches his teeth and his hips lift in frustration. “The beach.”

“Oooh. I liked that one. But how would you do it? You always do them so much better. Walk me through it.” I push his shirt up and let myself roam his body, massaging and gently scratching. He leans his head back again to try and collect himself.

“I, uh –” His head rolls and he hisses when my nails work down his abdomen and then switch to light tickles along the edge of his pants.

“I’d uh, be watching you watch the sunset. And I’d watch as your eyes glisten over, happy, relaxed. And I would turn your face towards mine, taking your lips, kissing you until I have to come up for air. I’d want you in my lap, breathless, begging for me to take you. To make you feel good.” He chokes trying to start his next sentence, watching me slip the robe off all the way. He is barely holding on to his restraint. His arms are fighting against my legs so hard I have to bear down, rubbing very sensitive areas on his cock, just to keep them in place.

“Keep going.”

I pull my arms out of both of my straps and take a moment to grab my breasts. His eyes are anguished, all but popping out of their sockets. “God, those tits, Sol…”

Grayson lunges like he’s going to suck one of my nipples and I lean back a little, never stopping my massaging.

“Grayson,” I warn.

“We’d…we’d have to go somewhere more private, and I’d wrap your legs around my waist, kissing and sucking where I can reach until we get to our personal pool.” Making eye contact, I pinch my nipples through the fabric and whine a little at how sensitive they are. “Jesus Christ.” His curses have me soaking through the panties he bought me.

I encourage him to continue with a very purposeful grind of my pussy against the front of his jeans. The sound that comes out of his mouth is desperate. “Okay, okay, okay. Uh. I’d dip us into the water, pushing you up against the side of the pool, loosening the strings of your bathing suit and letting it fall off into the water. Fuck, your tits look so good when they’re wet. So sexy.”

Leaning over him I press his face into my breasts, having him sink down between them, and then pulling away enough to brush each nipple over his mouth once or twice. “You almost got to recreate that in that creek we swam in, didn’t you?”

His lips move against my chest. “I was so fucking hard seeing you in that bikini. I didn’t know how to get out of the water without you seeing everything.”

“It didn’t matter. I felt it when you grabbed me so I wouldn’t get out over the snake comment.”

When I move away he growls in frustration. “*Please*, Sol, you’re killing me.”

I just shake my head, “You have to finish the story.”

His answering groan sends shivers up my spine. “Before I did anything else, I’d lift you up out of the pool and have you sit on the edge. And I’d spread your legs and eat your pretty fucking pussy until you begged me to stop, until you were trapping my head between your thighs from how hard you came.” My eyelids flutter and I move to cup myself, grinding against him again. Friction. I need friction. Shit, I cannot lose sight of the end goal here.

“And then what?”

“And then I’d pull you back in and slam you down on my cock. Fuck, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself. I’d suck your tits and massage your clit and stick fingers in both your ass and your mouth so you were fucking full with me. So that I was in every goddamn part of your body. Because it’s mine. Because I own it and I’m the only one who knows how to please it.”

I’m rubbing two fingers over my clit. I cannot fucking help it. Grayson’s eyes are locked in, never once looking away from me playing with myself.

“And then we’d both come a lot. The end.” He says it so fast I almost miss it, and I really almost miss the way he tries to flip us around and have me sit down on his face. I flit away just in time. His body melts off the couch and plops onto the floor in defeat.

“Thanks for the story time.” I wink as I slink back to the bedroom.

There’s a loud, booming, ‘FUCK,’ that comes from the living room.

See? I know how to fake that I know how to drive a man crazy with lust.

And this is only my first attempt at pursuing Grayson the way I should’ve been all along. I think this is going to be a lot of fun.

I make sure to moan as loud as I can when I make myself come in his bed, alone.

## Chapter 25

I didn’t get to see his face when he woke up with the panties I came in last night on his chest. But I heard it. Boy, did I hear it.

I barely slept and was up early trying to distract myself with anything I could possibly think of. I mean, I spent an hour reorganizing the freaking fridge. First by size, and then I took it all out and did it by color. Still not sold on the color coding. UGH. I just have so much nervous energy coursing through me.

I’ve been dancing away from his touch ever since he woke up. It’s been cat and mouse all day long and it doesn’t help that I’ve been traipsing around the cabin in his robe again. I’m on constant high alert, which is doing nothing for my anxiety. And, I’m pretty much edging myself just as much as I’m edging him. I need to get better at making sure these plots only affect him because I’m dying out here by my own hand. Down in the trenches. Okay, sorry. I’m in a weird place. Last night was so hot and empowering, but according to my nerves, it’s like it never happened and I have to start back at zero to get that confidence back.

Some of his attempts to trap me are obvious, and some catch me off guard. But I successfully recover each time, escaping just at the last second. He’s furious and that has me glowing. Recharging my confidence.

We’re currently in one of the lulls. He’s been pretending to do something else every once in a while in an attempt to get me to lower my guard. Men are so very predictable. It’s fine, he’s been tortured enough for one day. And the real reason I spent the day running from him is because I needed to work up the courage to do what I’m about to do.

I lower myself down on the couch, sitting with my back to the arm, exactly how I was the first time we had dinner together and talked all night. He stops editing the résumé he was pretending to review and turns to match my position, hunger so obvious in his eyes it makes me feel absolutely feral. Carnal.

I may be poking the bear a bit… I did a little quick change before I came to put him out of his misery, sporting a cut off t-shirt that covers almost nothing, and strappy, see through underwear. Don’t come for me, he’s the one that bought them.

“It’s my turn to tell a story,” I start, letting my leg stretch out and rest against his. He lays his hand on my ankle, rubbing it. Same ankle he helped me with the first day I met him. His small smile lets me know he’s listening.

“Do you remember the first day we met?”

He chuckles, but his gaze is very distracted. “When you were snooping around my cabin?

“Yeah.” I smile.

He nods, eyes traveling up my legs. “I remember.”

“I could barely think straight. I remember thinking that you were hands down the sexiest man I had ever seen in real life or in movies.” His expression goes serious. He wasn’t expecting me to say that. I’ve never said anything like this to him and I’m going to fix that.

“I was tripping over my words and saying the most ridiculous things because all I could focus on were your eyes and the way your muscles rippled with every. single. thing. you did.”

He opens his mouth but I hold a finger up. “And then I fell and you carried me back to my cabin and I didn’t know where to look. We were so close and you smelled so good. I just wanted to close the distance and lick up your jaw, lick anywhere you’d let me.”

His grip on my ankle tightens and he starts rubbing up and down my leg, getting as high up as our current position allows. “And when you got on your knees to wrap my ankle? I almost died. I almost passed away right there. This big, strong, sexy lumberjack knelt at my feet. It was too much to even attempt to process.”

I take a moment to study him, give him a sultry smirk. “I watched you for days. Chopping wood and hammering and drinking so goddamn indecently out of those freaking water bottles.”

His eyebrows raise up and I laugh a little. “I had just started reading smut and I didn’t know what to do with myself. I never, ever thought of myself as sexual or sexy or anything. And those books had me feeling things I hadn’t felt in… maybe forever. And one day I realized how my body was responding to them, and you were up there slowly tearing me apart, and I ran back to my cabin so I could touch myself thinking about you just to make the ache go away.” He bites his lip and his free hand is clenched so hard his knuckles are no longer the same color as his skin.

“What did you think about?” His voice is pitched low, gravelly, it’s like I can feel it caressing up my body.

“Mmm. I thought about you bending me over one of the tree stumps you needed to chop. Spreading my legs and letting my arousal drip down my thighs.” I squeal when he rips me down by my ankles and gets over top of me.

“What else, Sol?” He’s grinding into me in slow, languid rolls of his body.

“I…I thought about screaming your name into the open air of the woods while you split me in two like you were splitting all that fucking wood every day.”

There’s a wicked gleam to his eyes. “What did I do to you?”

“You slammed into me from behind, over and over again until I came all over your magic fucking cock.”

“Is that how you like it, baby? From behind?” I have very unfortunately (not so unfortunate, actually, I am living the dream) lost control of this situation. But I think it’s the thought that counts. I started this. And he may be in control of it now, but I’m going to keep up my efforts as best as I can.

“Yes,” I breathe.

Climbing off of me, Grayson lifts me off the couch and places me in front of the arm rest. He puts a hand in between my shoulder blades and bends me down so my chest is on the couch cushion. I have to wriggle around a little to get situated so my stomach isn’t being crushed.

His hands run up and down my back, under my shirt, along my sides. There’s a quick, sharp smack on my ass and I buck against the couch.

“How did you touch yourself?” He’s back to grinding into me, this time against my ass. His pace is excruciating and the way his dick is brushing my underwear tells me exactly how much he wants to rip both our bottoms off.

“I massaged my tits and twisted my nipples.”

“Do it.” Yes, yes, yes. Did I name him Dominant, Commanding, or Demanding Grayson? Doesn’t matter, you get the point.

I obey, playing with my breasts from outside my shirt. My legs start to jostle around, feeling impatient.

“And what else, baby?” With my face pressed directly into the couch I groan into the fabric. Something snaps in me when he calls me that.

His fingers are playing with the straps of my underwear, dipping under them, snapping them against me. “I fucked my fingers and rubbed my wetness over my clit.”

Another slap on my ass. “How hard did you come?”

“So hard my legs were shaking. And the second I came?”

“What happened?”

“You knocked on my door and I had to sit in a truck with you, knowing what I did, still soaking wet with my cum, and pretend like nothing happened when all I could do was think about how bad I wanted to do it again, but this time with *your* fingers.”

*Riiiiiiip*. My underwear falls in pieces onto the floor and Grayson’s face is between my legs in a heartbeat. The abruptness has me yelping, turning into a needy pile of nerves above him.

In between licks he surfaces to say, “Such a naughty fucking girl. Sitting in your sweet fucking juices when you knew they were mine to taste.” His mouth is relentless, licking me from front to back, slipping his tongue in and out, sucking my clit. His fingers tease and play and pinch.

“Grayson!”

“What, baby? Tell me what’s going on.”

“Stop playing with me, I need you to make me come.”

“Oh, you’re going to come, Sol. You’re going to come on my tongue and then you’re going to come on my cock.” He renews his efforts, focusing where I need him, and pushing fingers into both my pussy and my ass. Another thing I never knew I needed until he introduced it to me.

It’s seconds before I feel the build, his tongue a master at what it does. He knows exactly what I need, how to touch me, how fast to go, how much pressure.

“Grayson, oh my god! Yes, yes, yes, yes!”

His scruff scratches the inside of my thighs and he hums something, causing vibrations in the best places. I can’t move enough to ride his face, I don’t have enough leverage because he’s got me shoved up on my tiptoes.

This time I do understand him when he yells, “Come for me, Sol. Let me feel you clench around my fingers. Give me a taste of what you’ll feel like on my cock.”

Sounds you’d hear on a porno set fly out of my mouth. “Fuck, Grayson!

He licks my clit for a few more seconds and then pulls his head back, replacing his tongue with his thumb.

“C’mon, baby. Give it to me. Tell me who makes you feel like this.”

I explode, yelling, “You do!” over and over until I turn into mush bent over the couch.

“Whose pussy just ate my fingers up as it came?”

“Yours.”

“Whose asshole tightened around me?”

“Yours, Grayson! Yours, yours, yours.”

He leans over me, right up to my ear. “And whose cock is about to pound into you until you’re sobbing.”

My voice is pretty much already a sob when I answer, “Yours.”

He flips me, pulling me up to face him by my shirt. The faith he has in this thin, cut-up t-shirt is ballsy. I cannot believe it doesn’t rip right off of me. “Get me ready for you, Sol. Spit on my dick.” He pushes his pants down just enough to free himself from the confines of his sweatpants and drags his fist up and down it, once…twice. I’m mesmerized.

Dropping to my knees, I pull his pants down a little more and suck him right into my mouth. He roars above me, grabbing my hair and pulling. “Fucking hell, baby!”

I take my time licking up the sides and sucking his head into my mouth. I can feel how impatient he is by the way his entire body is tense, straining.

Deciding to take pity on him, I grab the base and look up to meet his eyes. There’s more than lust in them, and we’re not going to talk about that. He has a habit of getting carried away and caught up in the moment. It doesn’t mean anything.

Keeping eye contact, I let spit fall from my lips and land on him before I use my hand to rub it up and down. I spit two more times, slowly gliding my hand over him, massaging it in.

He loses it.

I find myself back where I had been, bent over the couch with him hovering over me, slipping his hands underneath to squeeze my tits, paying much needed attention to my nipples. “I have been thinking about having my cock inside you since the first day I met you. And I’ve been imagining taking you from behind since the day you bent over for me in the shower and I saw how goddamn perfect you were. How bouncy this ass was. How irresistible your cunt looked. I’ve been fucking dreaming about you for a month, Sol.”

“I peeked too, you know. That day at the Y. I’ve been thinking about your huge fucking cock ever since.” His grip on my tits will leave bruises, I’m sure of it. I hope it does.

He stands back up, adjusting me by my hips and I can’t help but slap the couch and grit my teeth when I feel him drag his dick up and down my lips. Spreading my slickness with his head.

“Are you –”

I’m already nodding. “Yes, clean and on birth control.” I shake my ass ardently, needing him to get inside me already.

“I’m clean too. I had to do a screening when I was trying to get the vasectomy.” He runs a hand across my ass. “Can I have you bare, baby?”

“*God*, yes, Grayson! Please, just take me. Fuck me, please, please, please.” His hand leaves my ass and he grabs himself again, resuming his torture of me, sliding his dick up and down, around my clit, teasing my entrance.

“Grayson…” I warn, trying to push back on him. His hands on my waist keep me in place.

“What’s wrong, baby? What do you need?”

“You! I need you.”

“I’m yours. Tell me what you want.” I’m going to scream and cry and pass out from how badly I want him and how badly his words affect me. *I’m yours*.

“Grayson, god! You know what I want.”

“Beg me for it.” Every time he hits my clit my eyes roll back into my head.

“I am! Grayson put your fucking dick inside me. Fill me with your cock. Fuck me. Use me. Slam into me. NOW.” He smacks one cheek, then the other, so sharp that I whimper.

“Spread your legs, Sol.” His voice is all danger. Sex and danger and promise.

Once I’ve opened wider for him, I feel him line himself up against me and before I can start begging again, he slams me down on his unbelievably thick length and I am wailing into the couch. We both give a version of, “AH, FUCK!” once he’s fully seated.

“Grayson, shit. You’re so big.” He is. I definitely won’t be able to walk tomorrow. I’ve never been stretched like this. If we hadn’t at least messed around the last week, I’d be in serious trouble.

His hand grips my hair and pulls, bringing me up enough that I can put my hands on the cushions for leverage. He flicks his wrist to wrap my hair around his fist one time, and then a second. The way he’s manhandling me has me arched for him, tits out, ass up, head flung back towards him.

He lets me breathe, whispering and growling out a slew of praises every few seconds. “Baby, you are so goddamn tight.” “You have me in a fucking death grip.” “You're dripping all over me.” “So sexy. So perfect.” “Such a good girl, taking all of me.” “God, I love seeing my cock fill you up.”

Eventually, he moves ever so slightly, out barely an inch, and back in. We both shutter.

“Are you okay, baby?” He rubs soothing circles across my back with his free hand.

I nod, “You’re just so big, Grayson. I haven’t…I never really –”

He cuts me off, “Oh, believe me, Sol. It is all I can think about. The fact that you’ve never had anything like me inside you. That you’ve never come on anyone else’s dick. It is making me so fucking stiff I can’t breathe. It’s taking everything in me not to blow right now. Just from stretching you.” He pulls out again, pushing back in gently. “Scooch back for me.” He guides me back a few steps so my arms are now holding me up on the arm rest. “You’re being such a good girl. Doing exactly what I say.”

His hips take him out and in, still only an inch or so, in a steady tempo and he reaches around to rub my clit.

I try for a, ‘Grayson!’ but all that comes out is a hiss. I have no idea if he can even understand me.

“Relax for me, baby.” My head is pulled back further so he can kiss along my shoulder and his attention on my clit becomes more focused. The pacing of his hips increases and he starts pulling out a little more each time.

“Shit, shit, shit. *Hijo de –*”

“You’re doing so good. So fucking good.”

We move like this for maybe a minute when I am shocked as another orgasm rips through me. I wasn’t expecting it. There are too many sensations to focus on at once.

He uses the opportunity to push in harder. “Sol, goddamn. Your body makes me feel so good. Clenching around my dick this hard. That’s just the first, baby. You’re going to give me another one.” The prospect of that has me crying desperate sounds into the room. I don’t think I can survive another one.

I’m given a temporary reprieve when he leaves my clit and grabs on to an ass cheek. His thrusts get harder still, picking up their tempo even more.

“Grayson, I can’t, I can’t take anymore.”

“You can. And you will. You’re going to bounce on this dick until you orgasm again and then I’m going to fill this pussy with my cum and watch it leak out of you.” *Jesús.*

The hand holding my hair releases me, only to snake around and grab my throat. He pulls me towards him so my back is up against his chest.

“Put your leg up on the couch.” It’s high, but I get it up there and the way it changes things has more cries coming out of me.

Grayson tightens his grasp on my throat. “That’s it, baby, one more.” He is full out pounding into me now, the slap of our skin echoing around the room. Each thrust hits a spot inside me that makes my vision a little blurry.

Another tightening around my throat, the return of his fingers on my clit and I am exploding again.

“Fuck! Grayson, oh my fucking gooood.”

“That’s it Sol, milk my cock.” He rams into me a few more, sloppy, frenzied times. The hand on my throat holds me steady as I shake from wave after wave of pleasure. “Fuck, baby, I’m going to come.”   
 “Yes, yes, yes. Fill me. Please, Grayson.”

With a final moan that will be imprinted on my brain for the rest of my goddamn life, he bottoms out and trembles against me, giving me everything. It’s warm and thick and he empties so much that it does start leaking out and running down my legs.

He pulls out to watch it. I can feel him drag his fingers through the mix of our cum and curse under his breath. When he’s had his fill, he pulls me back against him. His fingers slip into my mouth and he whispers, “Taste how good we are together.” I lick him clean and he nuzzles into my neck. “So fucking perfect.”

We stand like that, catching our breath for a minute before he walks us to the bathroom, arms draped around me, chest pressed right up to my back. It makes it very difficult to move, but I like how close he is.

He helps me clean up and then he wipes the mess we made off himself. We walk the same ridiculous way into the bedroom where he gathers me up and cuddles into me on the bed.

My bones are bendy and the way he’s soothing me and kissing different places is making me feel warm. Serious warm. Feelings warm. Attached warm.

“There’s more to the story,” I murmur into his neck.

“Oh yeah?” By his tone I can tell he thinks it’s going to lead to round two.

I snort. “Just listen, please.” Just blurt it out, girl. You had a plan, follow it. He’s worth telling difficult things to. “I had so much fun with you the night we had dinner together. I was a live wire, jumpy and nervous because I was so attracted to you.”

“Why didn’t you –”

“And when you started getting possessive and dominant? It turned me on like a freaking light. You woke up wants and needs and desires I had shoved far, far away. I had to, because they were never going to be met. Until you.” I avert my gaze, burying my face deeper into his chest. That one was a little too vulnerable. But the story just gets harder to tell from here and I told myself I’d do this.

“The night on the bed, with the phone? That was the sexiest night I ever had up until that point. And I got insecure and scared because it made absolutely no sense that a man like you would want to touch me like that. In my head there was no way it was real and so I invented a reason that made more sense.”

“Sol –”

“The way you’ve treated my body? Grayson, I don’t even have words. It has felt so fantastical. So far from reality that I haven’t known how to process any of it. I had done exactly zero of the things we’ve been doing before I met you. It’s been a complete one-eighty from the first twenty-eight years of my life. Going from one extreme to the other like that? I had whiplash.” Deep breath. You got this. “I kept distance between us because I knew it couldn’t possibly be the same for you. I knew we were from completely separate universes, that things had to stay casual. I was so aware that you had just signed divorce papers and that you were forced to be in the same space as me and that things just kind of happened. That it felt good to have a rebound. ”

“Wait a second, Sol –”

“Let me finish.”

“But –”

“Grayson, please.” He leans back against his pillow, dragging me with him, clearly unhappy. “And instead of just enjoying it while it lasted, I locked up. I didn’t want to do anything to ruin things and I thought if I waited for you to initiate that it was a sure-fire way to make sure you were into it. I was terrified to start things because I wouldn’t know how to handle the rejection. But that’s my baggage to deal with. So, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I couldn’t express that to you. That I wanted you and that I’m attracted to you. I’m sorry I didn’t share with you how much this all changed me until now. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Are you finished?”

God, my heart is beating so fast. That is more truth than I think I’ve ever spoken and it’s not even the deep stuff yet. “Yes.”

He adjusts himself so we’re laying face to face. I do not want to be looking at his face for this. I’m good. I’ll pass.

I put my chin to my chest and look down between us, but he just guides me back up.

“I need you to look at me when I say this.” Oh fuck. Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck. Okay. I am a big girl. I can do hard things. I can face his rejection and I can try to not let it ruin me. Mm. I don’t know about that one. But, he is allowed to feel and want whatever it is that he feels and wants and I cannot lash out at him for that.

“This was not a forced proximity situation for me. This *is* not a forced proximity situation for me.”

I turn my head, horrified that he’s going to lie to protect my feelings. “Oh, Grayson you don’t have to –”

He grabs my face and holds me where he wants me, noses touching. “Sol. This was not a forced proximity situation for me. I was sucked in from the moment I met you. Carrying you down the hill the first day? I was trying not to lose my goddamn mind. The first time you got pissed and yelled at me? I was done for. Why do you think I worked on the cabin all damn day and night? I was trying to stop thinking about you. I told you in the spring how attracted I was to you. How you drove me crazy.”

“I know but those were all circumstantial examples. Where we were the only two people around. I understand that those interactions turned you on, I just also know that you wouldn’t have been interested in me if it was a different situation and we just met on the street or something. Or if there were other options up here.”

“You are so freaking beautiful, but you’re acting so fucking silly right now.” I’ve heard that one before.

“I’m just being realistic, Grayson. I know how things work. I’m just trying to tell you I understand the true nature of this and that I won’t push any of your boundaries. And that I will do better about showing you that I like hooking up with you.”

“How many people were trying to flirt with me at the bar? The one we went to up here?”

I roll my eyes, “Please don’t remind me…”

He bumps his knee into me, pushing me. “How many?”

“I don’t know…like a hundred?”

“And who did I go home with that night?”

“Grayson –”

He nudges me again, “Who?”

“Me.” I mumble under my breath.

“And who slept in my bed? In my shirt? My *boxers*.”

Long pause, begrudging admission. “Me.”

“Exactly. Sol, I live in New York. I have a million friends who could’ve set me up with someone if I had wanted, or needed, a rebound. But I didn’t text any of them. I sat in my hotel room missing you. The way you moan my name. The way you come apart in my arms, on my tongue, on my fingers.”

“Okay, sure. Yes, fine. I believe you.”

I’m very aware he’s not buying that.

Grayson runs his fingers through the ends of my hair and holds me close. “There’s more. There’s more that you’re holding back. That you’re not telling me.”

I slam my head into my chest. “Could you like, pause knowing me so well?”

He laughs and places a kiss on the top of my hair. “No, sorry.”

There is more. Obviously, there’s more. There are two big ‘mores’. The first is an extremely important ‘more’ that I’ve been too chicken to bring up. And the other one of those ‘mores’ is a lot more terrifying and could ruin everything. I can give him the first one. It’s not everything, but it is way overdue.

Deep breath. Okay.

I sit up, pulling the covers with me. This isn’t really a ‘tits out’ kind of conversation.

“I owe you a very serious apology.”

He sits up too, “Sol, for what? There’s nothing to apologize for. I know you were scared to initiate, it’s okay. I just needed some confirmation that you actually wanted this and I wasn’t forcing you into anything.”

I shake my head, “No, not that. Um. Fuck.” I whisper the last part. Get it together. This isn’t about you. I grab one of his hands. “Grayson, I am so incredibly sorry about what happened at the hotel. It was so beyond uncalled for and inappropriate. I did not mean to make you uncomfortable or feel unsafe. I wasn’t thinking. I wasn’t considering how my actions could affect you. I, of course, had absolutely zero intention of hitting you. But, I know it could seem like that in the moment and I am so sorry.”

“Sol, hey, you don’t have to –”

I squeeze his hand. “That wasn’t the only time. I have been so selfish and I brushed off certain reactions of yours as just weird idiosyncrasies or something. You told me your story and I value that more than I can possibly express. And I didn’t respect the risk you took, the bravery you showed in sharing things with me. And I am horrified by that. Ever since the night at the hotel I’ve been going through our interactions and I know I fucked up a lot. I keep replaying the night you carried me out of the bar when I was banging on your back. You tensed up and had to ask me to stop. That is not okay. And I’m really sorry, Grayson. It will not, under any circumstances, happen again.” I make sure to meet his eyes when I say the last line even though it makes me feel nauseous. It doesn’t matter how being vulnerable makes me feel. I hurt him and he is so freaking important to me.

It’s then that I notice the tear slip down his cheek. Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.

I climb into his lap and hold his face. “Hey, no, I’m so sorry, I wasn’t trying to make you upset.” My fingers catch his tears before I pull him into my chest, setting my chin on top of his head. I feel him start to play with the ends of my hair again. I just hold him like that, rocking a little. He’s not crying, really, just taking a minute.

When he pulls back, he wipes his face and grabs my thighs. “Sorry,” he clears his throat, “Um. It’s just…she *actually* hit me. Like to hurt me…and she never, um…no one’s ever apologized to me for it.” He pauses, closes his eyes for a second or two. “I know you weren’t trying to hurt me, Sol. And it means a lot that you…that you even care enough to say something even when you really didn’t have to. She…I didn’t get that.”

I push his hair back a few times. “She should have. You deserve an apology. She was wrong. She was gross. She is a sorry excuse for a person.” He looks away but I pull his face back to me. My throat is getting less and less tight from anxiety the more I speak. “I am sorry she did those things. All of them. You are easily the most kind, good, genuine person I’ve ever met. But even if you weren’t, you still wouldn’t have deserved being treated like that. I need you to know what a fucking moron Natalie was to lose you. Because you are worth so much more than that and I am in awe of you and your heart and your strength.” He watches me, his lip trembling a little. I want to kiss him. *God*, do I want to kiss him. But I don’t. I want to respect the line he’s drawn.

“Thank you,” he whispers, laying us back down and burying his face back into my chest.

We fall asleep like that.

## Chapter 26

“How is your skin so fucking soft?” His breath against my spine causes tingles throughout my body. Arms loop around me, hands roam. “How did you get so perfect?” Lips kiss up and down the column of my spine and I hum, stretching a little. “Good morning, Sol.”

The sun is shining through the windows and I can hear birds chirping.

A smile pulls at my lips. “Good morning, Grayson.”

He pushes me onto my stomach, climbing over top of me, straddling my naked bottom. His hands massage and tickle. They taunt and lightly scratch. “I love waking up to you.” His hands grip each cheek, kneading the muscles there.

*Fuck*. I am begging you. Anyone who is listening. You have to get him to stop saying stuff like that. Stuff that makes me feel warm and fuzzy and *loved*.

I almost ignore it and move on. But I am supposed to be saying and doing what I want. I still can’t say everything. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to. But giving up is not an option. If I’m going to admit to the feelings I have, then I have to act on them or I’m just doing exactly what I was doing in my marriage.

“I’m pretty partial to it myself.” His dick sits against one ass cheek, hard and twitching.

“Then let’s make sure we do it a lot.” His lips start back up, peppering kisses across my back. A whine sounds from my chest. “I have some apologies to give too,” he whispers against my skin. I am simply a pile of goosebumps at this point.

We roll over so I am laying on my back and he is hovering over me. He motions for me to sit up, and when I do, he stacks my pillows up behind my back. I settle back in and more pillows are dragged over. “Lift your hips.” As soon as I do, he puts them underneath me.

Grayson settles between my legs, chin resting on his arms across my stomach. His fingers never leave my skin. “I want to apologize.”

Reaching down to touch his jaw I shake my head and say, “I cannot possibly imagine what you have to be sorry for. You’ve been so good to me.”

His smile is everything to me. “First, I want to apologize for the way I acted in the first bar we went to. You had every right to dance with whoever you wanted. To kiss whoever you wanted. I was jealous and I acted on instinct.”

Some of his hair flops down onto his forehead. “I was jealous, too, you know,” I start. “Every single person in that bar wanted you. Was flirting with you. I hated every second of it.”

His fingers follow the curve of my breasts. “I should have just told you. I definitely should have told you when you asked me about it.”

“It’s okay, Grayson. I’m really happy with the result.”

He puffs out a laugh. “Me too.” His body moves to hover over mine again. The kisses return with a vengeance, covering as much skin as possible as they work back up my body. They’re so soft. So gentle. So not on my lips.

“I’m sorry I took my frustration out on you before we left for New York.” One hand grasps my breast and teases my nipple.

It’s impossible not to gasp and writhe under him. My words have very little sound to them. “You were right about what you said. And I was too insecure to hear you. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Mm.” He sucks the place where my shoulder and neck meet into his mouth. He pulls harder and harder until he lets go, a devious, devastatingly handsome look on his face. “I want to mark every single inch of this body. Make sure everyone knows it’s mine.” After kissing his way across, he repeats the action on the other side. Is my heart still beating?

“I knew you were having a hard time with it, though. And I wanted to communicate about it a lot differently. I was upset and worried and I didn’t handle things properly.”

Dipping lower, his mouth sucks the top of my breast inside, tonguing and biting and sucking until blood vessels burst. Another survey of his work. This time accompanied with a hungry growl.

Lips moving further still, Grayson settles back between my legs and watches me for a moment. He lights me up like a Christmas Tree. I glow under his gaze. He looks at me with so much emotion.

His fingers give him space to bring his face to my core. He’s not hurried or frenzied this time. He makes slow, languid passes through my slickness. He spends lazy, long minutes playing with my clit. “Grayson…” I sound breathy and anguished and I’m feeling so much. I feel so, so much. Physically, mentally, spiritually. All of it.

“Tell me, baby.” It’s not a command. It’s sweet and loving and has me dripping and wrapping my legs around him. This is a completely different turned on than when we’ve explored each other before.

“How do you make me feel so good?”

“I was made to make you feel good, Sol. I’ll always make you feel good.” *God*.

He doesn’t change pace, he doesn’t get impatient or disinterested. He stays down there kissing and licking like he’s never done anything more riveting. It is such a slow, burning build. He’s ever so sneakily twisting me up and up and up in knots.

*Words. He deserves praises and compliments too. He showers you with affection. Get it together.* “You feel amazing, Grayson. I’m so close.”

His determined moan vibrates against me.

The lead up is torture. His tongue takes me higher and higher, never stopping, never even dipping inside. His fingers stay where they are, drawing across my skin.

“*Grayson*! You are so sexy. So goddamn sexy. The way you own my body is so, so sexy.” One more press of my clit with his tongue and I burn. His tongue continues at the sloth’s pace he’s set. The orgasm gradually burns hotter and hotter until my entire body is shaking and even then, it doesn’t stop. It goes on and on, the pleasure so overwhelming and so exponential, compounding over and over, resulting in me thrashing in the bed having no clue what planet I’m on. This is not a quick, intense explosion. This is a volcanic eruption, the lava spilling over the sides and crawling like a snail towards the earth.

“You are so sweet, Sol. I’ll never get enough of you.”

It doesn’t stop, his tongue keeps me going through wave after wave, now to the point where I am screaming. “It’s too much! Holy shit, it’s too much!”

“You deserve the world, baby. You deserve life changing orgasms and I told you I was going to give them to you.”

It’s then that he slips his fingers inside me and curls. I buck off the pillows and start crying. It’s too much. It’s too good. I can feel the tears slipping down my cheeks.

He lifts his head all the way, letting his fingers unravel me further. “So beautiful, baby. So fucking beautiful.”

I finally, *finally* come back down and close my eyes. His lips make it all the way up my body and move across my jaw.

I don’t have even ten seconds before I feel him push into me, inch by inch, until he’s fully seated. “Hooooooly shit.” Fuck, fuck, fuck. Breathing. That’s a thing.

Just like when he ate me out, his thrusts are slow, tantalizing. Face to face like this is an entirely different experience. His eyes never leave mine. He looks at me with so much adoration. I feel the burn coming back already.

I’m trying to concentrate enough to make sure I feel him. Kiss on him. Touch him. My lips press wherever they can reach. The same is true for my hands. We’re sharing the same air. There is just us. Only us.

“One more apology,” he whispers, nuzzling against me, scraping his teeth, squeezing my sides. His hips touch mine again and again and again.

“Grayson, *god*, there’s no…nothing you ne…ed to –” I give up. I can’t speak. I can’t do anything besides stare into his eyes and drown in his thrusts. His brutally soft thrusts.

“I want to apologize for not chasing you down and making sure you knew how much it meant to me that you not only showed up at my lawyer’s office, but defended me like that. So fucking fierce. So brave. So incredible. It was the sexiest, kindest, most badass thing I’ve ever seen. I owed you a huge fucking ‘thank you’ and I didn’t give it. I was hurt and confused and I didn’t think you wanted anything to do with me.” I’m shaking my head, but I can’t form words. “Sol, I’m so sorry. You were amazing in there, and I cannot possibly explain how much it meant to me. How much it *means* to me. You saved me that day. I didn’t deserve it. I didn’t earn it. But you cared enough to do it anyway.”

I shake my head more firmly, tightening my legs around his waist, slamming my head deeper into the pillows. Holy fuck I’m seeing stars. He keeps hitting the same spot and it is driving me wild. “Absolutely not. You…fuck. You–” My eyes roll back into my head. “You *did* deserve it. You –” I moan so loud, so long that Grayson accidentally starts pumping into me faster.

That causes another deranged moan. “You absolutely deserved it!”

I just barely get my words out before I am swallowed by another achingly slow orgasm. It devours me and I start sobbing again. “Look at how fucking pretty you are, Sol. You are the most terrifyingly incredible woman I’ve ever met. And you’re mine. Fuck. You are so mine, Sol.” He stills inside me, filling me with his cum, gasping against my neck, and I’m suddenly in another universe. I think I lose consciousness.

—

I’m in the last few seconds of a dream. I can tell I’m about to wake up, but am still too groggy to get there. All I hear is, “I am so goddamn in love with you,” before I lose my grasp on it, gradually coming to. My whole body feels like Jell-O and I am completely wrapped up in a strong, naked body.

“Mmmm,” I moan, attempting to get my eyes open. When I do, I’m rewarded with the sight of the most gorgeous creature on this planet.

“Hi, beautiful.” Grayson’s lips are turned up, his hand holding my cheek, thumb stroking.

“Mmmmm.” I snuggle closer and I feel him more than I hear him chuckle against me.

“How are you feeling?” He runs his hand down my back.

“Like melted ice cream.”

“What flavor?”

“Lava.”

He moves again with his laugh. “What?”

“It was like lava.”

“What was?”

“The way you made me come.” I could stay right here forever.

“Fuck, Sol.” He grabs a handful of my ass. “Let me feel that filthy mouth on my cock.”

I slide one hand down his stomach and his eyes go liquid. I’m almost to my destination when he gives a huge sigh and grabs my hand.

“*OH* my god! Is there a reason you never let me do *anything* to you?”

His smirk should annoy me but it just makes me wet. “Well, at first it was so I could show you how serious I was about making you feel good. That I didn’t want anything besides your cum on me. But this time it’s because we have to get going.”

I groan in frustration. “We live in the middle of the woods! Where the hell do we have to ‘get going’ to?”

His next sentence has my heart in my throat.

“We have tattoo appointments.”

—

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuuuuccckkk. Shit. Shit. Shiiiit. *Me cajo en todo. Joder.*

Okay. Here’s the deal. I trust Grayson. I really, truly do. That scares the absolute shit out of me, but I am not worried about the tattoo he’s going to give me. I know he’s got me.

It’s me. I’m the problem. This situation is literally a direct representation of the predicament I’m in. Do I hand the tattoo artist the funny design? Or the heartfelt design? Do I give him a fun memory of his time here? Or do I show him how much he means to me? How well I know him. How I want to spend life getting to know him.

I am petrified to cross that line, having to hope that he’ll catch me. (Joanna says that’s why they call it *falling* in love.) But outside of my own hesitation, I have a really big worry. A huge construction sign blinking, ‘TURN BACK BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE.’

He hasn’t kissed me.

I don’t know why. I can only assume it’s because he wants to keep things casual. He is about the LEAST casual sexual partner in the entire universe, but I can’t come up with any other reasons he wouldn’t do it. He is literally willing to call me his. To tell me we should wake up together every day. And yet he won’t kiss me. The only possible reason I can conjure up is that he misses the romance of being in a relationship and needs it as part of hooking up. Of rebounding and getting back in the saddle or whatever. Maybe he’s just reclaiming sex. He had no control in his sex life with Natalie. Maybe he just needs this.

But he cannot possibly be surprised that he has me feeling the way he does. He is giving off relationship vibes. It is way past lust. Like way, *way* past lust. I think for him I was there, he was lonely, he wanted connection, and he found it. He got caught up in having something he was craving for so long, and got carried away. I don’t think he’s faking his actions or words. I just think he’s caught up in the moment. He’s been that way before. He doesn’t realize how deep this is getting. He’s just enjoying feeling wanted in the right way again. We were married people. It’s hard to bump down to no-strings-attached. Old habits die hard. I get it.

The whole point of coming up here, though, was to take control back of my own life. To start actually living. I have practiced a lot of that. And Grayson has been there every step of the way. My biggest obstacle is putting myself out there. If I’m going to live, I need to live my truth. Even if it means getting rejected. If you never try, you never live. You just cower in fear.

—

Grayson and I walk out of the tattoo shop bandaged up and ready to go. Neither of us have seen the design or the final project. Grayson wants to do a big reveal. All I know is that I have a tattoo just under the crease of my elbow on the inside of my forearm and that he also has a tattoo in the same place. That was another one of his stipulations. We had to get them in the same place. It was cute. And it worked great with what I ended up choosing.

“How’d it feel, baby?” I freeze, but Grayson just swings into his truck and starts the engine up. *Baby*. He’s never called me that outside of sex. Well, he did at the fair to be annoying, but he didn’t mean it then. He means it now. Maybe there’s a class I can sign him up for that explains the difference between casually hooking up and dating???

I recover as quickly as possible, climbing up into the truck and buckling my seatbelt. “It wasn’t too bad, actually. You were a great distraction.” And he was. He talked to me the whole time, making sure I was okay. He made about a million suggestive comments thinking he was being subtle and using innuendos, but everyone knew exactly what was going on, to the point where my tattoo artist giggled and said, ‘Damn, girl. He’s head over heels for you. You are one lucky gal.’ Yeah. Well.

His grin is wicked. “Should we have sex in the parking lot? Let them know how serious I was?” He crawls towards me over the seat.

I push his shoulder. I have to use a lot of force because he’s so big. “Mmm. I don’t think so, pal.” I blink. “Oh, shit, sorry. I was just playing around, I wasn’t thinking! I told you it would never happen again, fuck.”

He grabs my hand and kisses my knuckles. “You’re good, Sol. It’s only if there’s already a heated argument happening and it’s a huge movement towards me. I trust you. You can touch me playfully however you want. The flinches have gone down a lot in the last month.” There is no fucking way I am supposed to be able to sit in this small space with him looking at me like that, saying these heartfelt things and not want to kiss him! To be with him! To marry him for crying out loud!

I give him a smile and nod my head. “Okay.”

Repositioning himself behind the wheel, Grayson backs out of the parking lot. “You ready for our reveal spot?”

“I have no idea what to expect. You could’ve taken this in a million different directions.”

“I like to have the element of surprise.”

“Well, you have it.” I’m feeling antsy and nervous. I have no idea if he’s even going to like the tattoo I designed for him. Can you imagine? If he hated it? He’d never say it, but I can read him so well now. I’d know. His reaction will decide whether I know him like I think I do or not.

It’s not a very long drive. Grayson laughs and jokes and sings. I fake every single one of my reactions, attempting to seem normal. He sees right through me. He always does. But he doesn’t push.

We pull up to what looks like a few abandoned train cars on rusted railroad tracks. I’m still taking in my surroundings when Grayson opens my door and offers his hand to help me down. I take it and he doesn’t let go, he simply leads the way, rubbing up and down my thumb.

“What are we doing here?” It seems like a weird place to reveal tattoos.

He doesn’t answer, he just gives my hand a light squeeze and continues forward.

The cars have been separated, no longer connected by the couplings they were built with, and we walk through two of them, revealing a patio with gazebo lights and waiters bustling around.

“What is this?” Still, he doesn’t answer, he just walks us to the host stand and gives his name.

“Welcome Mr. Stoker.” A man around the age of my dad smiles and grabs a menu. “And Ms. Vatner, the pleasure is ours.” He grabs a second menu and motions for us to follow him. We walk down the line until we reach the last train car. There are steps leading up to one of the original doors on either end. Each car has huge windows looking over the mountains, but they’re all tinted, and I haven’t been able to catch a single glimpse of what they look like inside.

Our host climbs the steps and ushers us in. My eyes are wide. I’m speechless. It’s so beautiful in here. A table for two is set with a perfect view of the landscape outside. There are fairy lights and flowers and hanging plants and candles all over. It’s been done so well. Sophisticated even. So many tiny details.

“Wow.”

Grayson lets go of my hand and moves to hold my chair out for me. I sit, scooching my chair in and forget my nerves completely when he moves his chair closer to me before sitting down.

“Our chefs have prepared two different four course journeys for you this evening. They suggest ordering a journey in its entirety, but you are free to mix and match as you please. I will return shortly with your requested bottle of wine. Water is already served, and there is a pitcher behind you for refills.”

“Thank you so much…”

“Charles.”

“Thank you so much, Charles.”

Charles bows and leaves Grayson and I alone.

My head swivels to face him. I’m surprised to find he looks a little nervous and keeps running his hands up and down his pants. “What in the world is this?” I ask, big smile on my face as my eyes roam the room again. I am severely underdressed, but that’s a given.

“It’s called the Train Stop. They refurbished a bunch of old train cars and offer dinner service on Friday and Saturday night.”

“Only Friday and Saturdays?”

“Yeah, it’s like stupid hard to get a table.”

“But you got one?”

He’s all teeth. “But I got one.”

“You’re cute, you know.” I can’t believe I just said that.

It felt kind of good, honestly.

He grabs my hand and brings it to rest on his thigh. “You’re cuter.”

Charles is back with (at this point, are we even surprised?) my all-time favorite bottle of wine. I had it in Spain with my mom one of the times we went and have thought about it ever since. It was the ending to a perfect day. And it stuck with me.

I give Grayson a look and he just smiles harder. I’m positive I’m going to find a switch on him someday. A plug that proves he’s a robot made specifically to be perfect for me. What a cruel world.

I glance down at my menu while Charles opens the bottle. Ooooooh. This looks so fun. The second option is more seafood based and I’m not a huge fan. Makes the choice easy, and thank god, because that could’ve been a crazy hard decision based on the kinds of options I’m seeing. I’ve never even heard of some of these ingredients, let alone the combinations they’ve come up with.

“Would you like to sample the selection first, Mr. Stoker?”

He shakes his head and leans towards me. “It’s Ms. Vatner’s favorite wine. She should be the taster.” Smoldering. His eyes are smoldering and I am melting and we’re about to have a serious problem on our hands.

He watches me sip the wine like a hawk. Eyes narrow in on every movement my lips make. I’m temporarily distracted until the taste registers.

“Oh my god! It’s exactly right.” I think I’m about to cry. *Jesus Christ, Sol. Get it together.*

“Excellent.” Our glasses are filled and I desperately try to control my emotions. I can feel Grayson’s attention on me.

“Have we made decisions on our meals?” Charles sets the wine bottle down on a nearby end table.

I clear my throat. “Yes. I’ll go with option one, thank you so much.”

“Wonderful.”

He switches his attention to Grayson and he looks like a fucking Hollywood actor as he says, “Same.”

As soon as Charles leaves, Grayson turns towards me and pulls my chair closer to him so I’m in between his legs.

“Talk to me, baby. What’s wrong?” THAT. That is what’s wrong! What’s wrong is he does these outrageously considerate things for me but wants to keep things casual! THIS IS NOT CASUAL. I’m sorry. It just isn’t! He had my favorite wine imported! I know for a goddamn fact that this random, incredibly lovely restaurant that is only open two nights a week did not have this wine in their selection! I’m willing to bet one million dollars on it.

How am I supposed to answer him? There aren’t words. There are, but they’re dangerous and we have an entire four courses ahead of us. “This is just so nice, Grayson. Thank you for bringing me here.”

He puts our foreheads together (kill me). “No. Thank you for agreeing to come with me.”

“To be fair, I was lassoed in. I had no idea I was signing myself up to be wined and dined in the coolest, most marvelous restaurant I’ve ever been to in a T-shirt and leggings after just having sweat through a tattoo for two hours.”

“But you trusted me enough to do all of those things. And that means everything to me.”

I just. Please just assume that for the remainder of the evening I will be one millimeter away from my heart bursting, okay? I can’t keep trying to describe it. I’m doing a shit job at it anyway. I’m sinking. And I’m sinking fast. Free fall. Out of the airplane. No parachute.

“You agreed to get my tattoo, too. That was pretty ballsy.” Steer it back to playful, light territory. At this point, the situation is dire and I need to find land. Solid ground.

“I’m a pretty ballsy guy.” He kisses down my cheek to my jaw. Hi. Um. We’re kissing (he’s kissing on me) in public. In a public place. Like outside of the cabin. He’s calling me baby and kissing on me with other people around. Where anybody could see. Well, the windows are tinted, but still!

“Oh, good one, Casanova. You’re not starting up the obscene innuendos again. I think we’ve all had our fill.”

His mouth moves back towards my ear. “Have you had your fill, Sol? Have you been filled enough?” I’m going to hyperventilate. Teeth nip at my earlobe before it’s sucked into his mouth. “I can think of a couple more ways you can be filled, baby.”

The moan that comes out is an accident. I am trying so effing hard to tread water here and I am failing.

His lips are slinking down my neck when Charles comes back with our appetizers. I jump, positive Grayson will want me to move away from him, especially in front of an actual person.

I thought wrong. Grayson doesn’t even hesitate. Doesn’t pause for a single second when Charles comes in and sets the plates down. It’s only when he’s finished kissing his way down that he lifts his head up and smiles. His entire face is hazy, like he’s just as drunk off of me as I am off him. “Thank you, Charles. This looks delicious.”

He hasn’t even seen the food. He’s just eating me up with his eyes.

As soon as Charles makes his exit I tsk, “You need to behave yourself,” as I turn towards the plate in front of me. (I am not even kind of mad, I'm just trying to, you know, survive.)

He’s not having that. “I will spread you out on this fucking table right now if I have to.” HELP. “The only meal I need is the one between your legs.” He scoots back and sits up straight, adjusting himself. “I will behave, though. Because I want tonight to be special.”

Hello operator? Can you connect me to the FBI? I think I’ve finally found their guy…

The food turns out to be mouth wateringly good. Both Grayson and I demolish our plates. All four of them. We talk all through dinner. We joke and tease. He makes me so fucking happy.

And he does behave. If you call rubbing me from the outside of my leggings through every single course ‘behaving’. You would never know it looking at his face. He kept conversation, he asked me the perfect questions, he was on top of it every time Charles came in (his fingers remained firmly in place, however). Between the food, the wine, and him I think I’ve hit delusional.

“Ten out of ten, would recommend?”

I’d gotten lost in his touch. Again. “Uh. Yes. Ten out of ten, would recommend.”

“Are you ready?”

Oh. I push my chair out. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Where are you going?” He pulls me to him, maneuvering me so that I’m straddling his lap. Yes, I would be pretty embarrassed if someone walked in. But I know Grayson isn’t going to let me get off and secretly I think I’m totally into it. Even the part where someone walks in.

“I thought you asked if I was ready to go.”

He pushes his head in between my breasts and shakes his head back and forth. Resurfacing he says, “No. Are you ready for the reveals?”

Butterflies. Creepy crawlies. Just flat out vomit. I am so fucking nervous. Wow that came back like a freaking wrecking ball.

“How are we doing this?”

Grayson rubs up and down my thighs. “I think one at a time.”

“What if you hate it?”

He chuckles. “I’m not going to hate it, Sol.”

“Not to my face! I know you. You’re going to pretend to love it forever. Just so you don’t hurt my feelings.”

He puts more pressure on my thighs, pulsing his hands twice. When I don’t look back up at him, he takes his hand and grabs my chin. “Sol. Look at me.” I do. And I am terrified of what I see. It’s the way he looks at me. It is everything I’ve ever wanted and more. And I’m sure it’s the way I look at him. But somehow only *one* of us actually means it outside of this moment in time where we’re both up here in our bubble in the mountains away from real life. “I promise you. I’m not going to hate it.” I just sit there. “Have I ever lied to you?”

“Uh. Yes, now that you mention it!”

He gives me a lopsided grin. “Walked right into that one. I mean about something serious. Important. Something I didn’t later come clean about because when you asked me for the truth it hadn’t been the right time to share with you.”

I purse my lips. “No.”

“Okay, then I’m going to take this bandage off and I’m going to prove to you that I’m telling the truth. Yeah?” I just shrug ready to throw up. “Here, sit in front of me so I can see it better.” My groan is not at all under my breath like I intend for it to be. “What do you want me to do, keep it on forever?”

“Would you please?”

“You’re cheating. I’d do anything you ask me. Except this.”

I throw my hands up and let them slap down onto my thighs. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

He’s dazzling in this lighting. He’s dazzling all of the time.

Grayson pulls the tape off and my stomach lurches. On his arm is a black line tattoo depicting a big lake with mountains behind it. There’s the silhouette of a man standing on its shore, watching the sunrise. It’s done really simplistically, all in single passes besides the silhouette. We only had two hours. But I think the overall message is pretty clear. It’s the first time I’m seeing the final product too, and I’m really happy with how the artist portrayed my vision.

Grayson is dead silent, staring down at his arm. His view is upside down, obviously, and I hope it doesn’t look like a bunch of scribbles from his standpoint. Okay. I have survived worse than someone not liking my idea for a drawing. Although, this particular drawing is etched into his skin forever, but, uh… same concept.

I can’t help but fidget. My legs are bouncing, my hands are wrapping and unwrapping around themselves. The suspense is horrific.

He stands abruptly, moving towards the windows where there’s a lot of natural light shining through. He twists his arm back and forth, studying the spot where I marked him for the rest of his life. I could probably afford for him to get laser removal done. I’ll figure it out.

“Come here,” he rumbles and I stand on instinct, even though I’d rather do anything but go and face him.

When I’m close enough, he pulls me in by a few of my fingers and ensures we make eye contact. I want to look away, but it’s like I’m his prisoner. I am captivated by his gaze. His eyes are sparkling even though they’re also an inferno. I’ve gotten really good at reading eye communication being around this man. This tall, sexy, sweet, funny, scheming, lumberjack. I feel stripped bare by him. I feel hypnotized. I think an entire army could attack right now and I’d have no idea. I wouldn’t hear a thing. All I can focus on is the look he’s giving me.

“You gave me a lake tattoo,” he murmurs, staring right into my freaking soul, still playing with my fingers as they hang between us. “You gave me a lake tattoo with a man watching the sunrise above the mountains just like my dream.” Okay. At least he can tell what the hell it is. “A man watching the sunrise. The *sol*-rise. Because I said I loved waking up with you.” I am going to pass away from shame. He is so effing perceptive. You cannot get anything past him. Ever. That was supposed to be extremely subtle. A throw away. ‘Aw, cute, the sun is rising in this lake tattoo’. The *lake* tattoo. Not the freaking sunrise tattoo. That was supposed to be for me. In case all of this goes to shit. That he’d have a teeny tiny part of me with him.

I can’t move, I can’t speak, I can't breathe, I can't do anything.

“Take your bandage off.” I can’t. This was supposed to be a funny freaking bet. How the hell did it become this vulnerable?? This personal?? This intense??

“Baby.” I know I make a face. I can’t help it. There’s pain written all over me. He’s decimating me with the ‘babys’. “Show me your tattoo.”

His fingers start to move up towards the gauze, picking at the edges. He doesn’t take it off. He waits for me. But he loosens the tape up that’s surrounding it.

Alright. I showered in front of the hottest stranger I ever met. I went to his house and had dinner with him even though trying to make conversation with someone I didn’t know after not talking to anyone for two years was more like punishment than a fun time. (It ended up being a lovely time.) I stayed in a cabin by myself with no electricity or plumbing or almost anything to occupy my time. I learned to be okay in my own quiet. I rode a mechanical bull. I jumped into a watering hole, clinging to a tattered-to-pieces rope. I shared my deepest, darkest secrets. I read book porn out loud to my crush. I admitted how attracted I am to the man in front of me. I made really difficult apologies.

I have done a lot of things outside my comfort zone this month.

And I can do this.

Reaching down, I pull the tape off completely before lifting the bandage. Grayson’s fingers stay, holding my elbow, and I look down at his gift to me.

The tears start falling immediately.

## Chapter 27

It’s an eclipse. Not necessarily a scientifically correct one. But it’s an eclipse where the sun is outshining everything else in space behind it. Everything is in shadow compared to the sun. Compared to *me*. The sun is absolutely radiant. You can tell. Even in the simple design. It’s at its brightest. Its strongest.

I let the tears fall for a second. Grayson just rubs my skin and presses a kiss to my forehead.

That sets me off.

I rip my hand out of his grasp and start angrily swiping at my tears. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” I sound a little crazy. I can admit that. I feel a little crazy.

His face is flabbergasted. “What do you mean?” The panic has set in. You can see it everywhere in his body. He thinks I hate it.

“You can’t do stuff like this, Grayson!” I back up a little before I throw my hands in the air just to be safe. I am feeling big things but I don’t want him to think I’m coming at him.

“Like what?” He takes a step towards me but I hold my hand up.

“You cannot keep doing all these incredibly sweet, thoughtful, intimate things to me!”

“Why not?” He is so confused. And kind of angry.

“Because you’re putting a nail in my freaking coffin with each one!”

“*What*?”

“I can’t fucking take it anymore!”

He closes the distance and puts his hands on either side of my face. “Sol. What the hell is going on?”

I’m pretty much clawing at his hands so I can get away. “Why are you doing this? Why are you torturing me like this?”

“Torturing you? Baby, what are y–”

“DON’T” I yell. “Do not fucking call me baby and tell me you want to wake up every day with me and that I’m yours and that you’re going to be the first and last person to make me come. Do not say things like that to me.”

“And why the hell not?” Frustration is winning over his confusion.

“It’s not fair to me, Grayson!”

“Sol, I have no idea what you’re talking about! Can you please come here and explain what is going on?” UGH. Why does he have to be so perfect and level headed???? I want to scream. I want to fight. I want to freak out and stomp around and…I don’t know. Other stuff.

More angry swiping at my tears.

“Baby, please just –”

“WHY HAVEN’T YOU KISSED ME?” I roar. My chest is puffing in and out. I’ve lost it. I’ve gone off the deep end here.

“Sol, I’ve kissed every inch of your body!”

“*Grayson*.”

His entire demeanor shifts with my tone. I watch his shoulders sag and hear him whisper, “Fuck,” to the floor.

Crossing my arms, I lean against one of the windows waiting. He doesn’t speak.

“So that’s it, then? We don’t speak truths to each other anymore?” I am a mother fucking hypocrite, but I already told you, I’ve gone off the deep end. More silence. “Okay, Grayson.”

I need to get out of here. I need to take a breath. I need a minute.

Taking the steps as quickly as possible I walk through to the opposite side of the cars from the patio. I don’t want to walk through a restaurant full of people after I’ve been crying, and getting back to the parking lot will be easier this way.

I end up just leaning my forehead on the passenger side window waiting for Grayson. This is how this relationship goes. We’re literally stuck with each other. And so I know I just have to sit in a truck with him until we get home. I need to calm down first. He does not have to kiss me. He is allowed to not want that. But if he doesn’t want to kiss me, then he can’t do all the other stuff. I just can’t take it. It’s too much.

After ten minutes or so, I hear the doors to the truck unlock and I climb inside. Grayson joins me and pulls out. “Sorry. I had to wait for the check.”

“It’s fine.” He better have tipped, like, fifty percent.

We don’t talk for the rest of the ride. And that’s fine too. I’m not thinking completely clearly anyway. Right now, I feel pretty stable, but it’s all of his reactions that make me insane. I’ve fallen too hard. And everything he does just makes it worse.

I’m pretty used to riding in this truck in the quiet, and it stays like that until we pull into our driveway. *Our* driveway. It isn’t *our* anything.

I start my march towards the door, trying to brainstorm somewhere I can hide out for a minute. I’m probably just going to have to take a shower.

“Sol.” The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Like always. “Come here.” I turn towards him, watching him walk to the side of the cabin. “Now.”

I follow him as best I can, trying to make sure I don’t trip over something in the dark. The porch light comes on when we step onto it, passing the rocking chairs to turn the corner.

He’s standing in front of one of the windows. I think it’s actually the window where we first met. “Grayson, I can’t talk right now, I –”

He pushes me up against the window, pressing himself into me. “That’s fine.” There is zero time to make sense of his response before he threads his fingers into the hair at the nape of my neck and crushes his lips down onto mine. My entire body responds. Instantaneously. I’ve virtually glued myself to his body.

Grayson pulls back, taking me in, and then leans back in to place one…two…three soft kisses on my lips before saying, “I wanted to kiss you right here, just like this, that very first day we met. When I saw you looking in my window.”

“Grayson –”

“Come on.” He takes my hand and leads us to the start of the hill leading down to my cabin. I’m lifted up into his arms bridal style and before I know it he’s got his lips back on mine, holding me close. This time it’s only once before he speaks. “I wanted to kiss you every single second I carried you down this hill. It’s all I could think about.”

There’s absolutely no chance for me to think or process or even breathe, let alone respond.

He puts me down and sends me stumbling towards the truck. I feel the door handle dig into my lower back.

“I’ve wanted to kiss you every single time you’ve gotten into this truck. I wanted to kiss you for all three hundred sixty minutes we drove to New York. And I wanted to kiss you for all three hundred back. I wanted to kiss you with your cum all over my face after messing around in the back of the bed. I wanted to see your lips glisten with it.” Once he’s done, I’m crushed under his body, gasping against his lips ready to go absolutely insane.

Not one single breath to take in this moment.

We stop on the porch again, right in front of the door. “I wanted to kiss your pain away when you fell and twisted your ankle. I wanted to kiss you every time I made you laugh in these rocking chairs. I wanted to kiss you until we both passed out while you read your dirty book to me. I wanted to kiss you when you realized I’d secretly been reading your books so I could recreate them with you. I’ve spent every waking moment trying not to kiss you.”

Grayson grabs my face, one hand on my cheek, the other teasing my throat. His lips descend on mine so slowly. The anticipation enough to have me trying to break through his hold and close the distance. When they do finally touch it feels like getting your favorite dessert from your favorite place.

He drags me right into the cabin. Not a second is wasted as he storms into the kitchen, lifting me up on the island facing the stove. His kiss is dizzying. It’s strong and demanding even without having opened our mouths to each other yet. He breaks the embrace to pepper kisses on both sides of my jaw before bringing us together again. This kiss is just as demanding. And so is the third. “I wanted to kiss you when you walked into this kitchen and wanted to help me cook dinner. I wanted to lay you back on this island and eat *you* for dinner. I wanted to kiss every inch of your body. *Including* your lips. I wanted to kiss you by the sink when we fought over doing the dishes. I wanted to kiss you when the coffee maker exploded. And I wanted to kiss you when I found you in here making me mac and cheese.”

I think I’ve lost all of my brain cells. I think they’ve imploded.

I’m swept off the counter and whisked away into the living room. There is no beginning or end to either of our bodies. We fall tangled up in each other on the couch. Grayson takes my shirt off and kisses his way up my stomach, pausing at my chest. “See? It didn’t matter that you were at that restaurant in a T-shirt and leggings. All that matters is that you were wearing my lingerie underneath.”

The kisses resume their journey up my neck and across my jaw before stopping a breath away from my mouth. “I was going to kiss you right here before my phone rang the first night you came over.” He slips his hand into his back pocket and taps the screen, showing me the pig picture I saw by accident. “I wanted to kiss you for a full year watching you cuddle these baby pigs. You looked so fucking radiant. You were so sweet. They loved you.”

He swipes the screen and a new picture pops up. My heart is melting. “I wanted to dip you in my arms and kiss you over and over and over while that old lady took our picture in front of the pumpkin. I wanted her to catch that moment. I almost fucking did it. I figured I could pretend like it was to mess with you. To keep up with the charade. You would’ve killed me, but it would’ve been worth it. I would’ve gotten to taste you, however briefly, before you lost your shit.”

*Damn*.

“I wanted to kiss you when you came marching out here demanding I sleep in the bed. I so desperately thought you were going to finally kiss me when you came out here in my robe. And I wanted to kiss you so fucking badly before, during, and after I fucked you over this couch.”

I’m somehow still taken by surprise when he brings our mouths together. His tongue snakes out to run along my bottom lip, his teeth catching it and pulling. I suck in a breath, throwing my hands around his neck and he licks across my lips using my gasp to get deeper access to me. We both moan at the same time, lips molded to each other’s, tongues dancing. He taste like the wine we drank and it is fucking perfect. We make out until I’m panting. I rip at his shirt until he takes it off, only pausing our kiss to throw it over his head.

“Grayson, *fuck*.”

He kisses one corner of my mouth and then the other. “Let’s go.” *What*? How can he possibly get off this couch right now? He reads me like a book and smiles. “Don’t worry, baby. I’m not done with you yet.”

Disappearing around the corner, I find Grayson in the bathroom. As soon as I step inside he’s stripping me out of my leggings and underwear and then he sheds his own. He backs me into the shower and traps me against the far wall. One of his hands reaches behind him and starts the water. It’s got to be freezing but he blocks it all from hitting me until it warms up.

As soon as it’s hot enough, we meet under the spray and collide. More tongue, more bites, more pulling. I suck his bottom lip into my mouth and am rewarded with an incredible growl. So amazingly carnal. It goes straight to my core.

Grayson’s hands run along my entire body before grabbing both of my breasts and playing with my nipples. “I wanted to kiss you up against the wall in the showers at the YMCA. I wanted to kiss you watching you rip nails out of the wood while I built this shower. I wanted to kiss you after I told you everything. I wanted to kiss you so fucking badly holding you in here, cleaning my paint off of you. And all I could fucking think about when I saw you in that bikini was how desperately I needed to kiss you. I wanted to kiss you when you swung into the water to show you how proud I was of you. I wanted to kiss you until our bodies fucking boiled in the hot spring.”

The water shuts off abruptly and we stumble out into the dining room, soaking wet.

Taking me by the hands, Grayson twirls me out and then back in, tipping my chin up so we’re face to face. “I wanted to kiss you the night we went to the bar. I wanted to twirl you around and kiss you until we were both breathless. I wanted to kiss you when we made that ridiculous dance together. I wanted to kiss you just for the fact that you played along. To cheer me up. That you noticed how stressed I was and came to support me.

“I wanted to kiss you in the bar in New York. Fuck. You looked so goddamn sexy on the dance floor. So beautiful. So free. I watched you for hours before I cut in. You had me completely transfixed.” I feel one million things right now and I do not have the brain capacity to understand a single one of them. This kiss is fierce. It’s deep and wanting. He takes both of my ass cheeks into his big, strong hands. “Your lips are like a fucking drug, Sol.”

I miss the entire transition to the table in the dining room. I don’t know if I am still reeling from the things his mouth is doing or completely high off of him, but it’s a shock when I feel the cold table top hit my butt.

He kisses me so hard I fall to my back, completely lost in him. All I know is that I can feel him in every cell of my body. His hands, his lips, his teeth, his tongue. They’re everywhere. I’m given a momentary reprieve to catch my breath as he travels over my body. Stopping everywhere and anywhere he wants. He stays away from between my legs, though. I don’t know if that’s a good or a bad thing.

“I wanted to kiss you the second I watched your fork slide into your mouth with my steak on it. I wanted to kiss you everywhere on your body sitting here making the checklist with you. I almost did. I almost lost all my self-control. I was going to crawl across the table just to get to you. You were so fucking funny that day. I wanted you so badly.” I genuinely think I’m about to come and he hasn’t even touched the important places.

“I wanted to kiss you when you came out to talk about the divorce situation. I wanted to smear red paint all over my face and blue on yours. And then I wanted to kiss you until your entire body was purple.”

“Grayson, Jesus *Christ*.”

He gets right up in my face. “I have wanted to kiss you every single time you’ve said my name. It sounds so goddamn perfect coming from these fucking lips.” Another searing kiss.

When he brings me back up he has to steady me.

As soon as I’m not wobbling anymore, we’re on our way to the table with the lamp on it before the hallway leading to the bathroom and the bedroom. “I wanted to kiss you fucking senseless watching you stand up for me. Watching you so stupidly, lovingly put me before you and your morals. I wanted to kiss you in the conference room. I wanted to get on my fucking knees and kiss every single place you wanted me to for however long you told me. Sol, I’ll never be able to tell you how fucking much that meant to me. I’ll never be able to thank you enough. Not in an entire lifetime. But I’ll try anyway.” I moan. Every. Single. Time. Every time he closes the distance. Every time he sneaks his way inside. Every time he takes a pause and ever so gently feathers a kiss against my lips.

Grayson keeps his mouth on mine, holding my jaw as he walks us back into the bedroom. I am completely at his mercy. My only option is to trust he’ll get me there safely, because there’s no way in hell I’m going to pull away from him.

He lays me down so softly on the bed, getting on top of me, never unlocking our lips. We stay like that for a long time. He moves slower. Deeper. Becomes more sensual. It’s a totally different kiss. It isn’t needy. It’s ravenous. Not in a sloppy, frantic kind of way. In a determined way, like he’s savoring every single stroke of our tongues. Every breath. Every gasp. Every second.

I’m not sure how long we kiss like that, letting every wall, every defense lower. Tasting each other. Drinking each other in. Broken wide open for one another.

When we do eventually stop, we barely move apart. Our foreheads come together, our touches never still, we just keep close, connecting every place we can. “I wanted to kiss you as soon as I saw you in my shirt and boxers. I wanted to kiss you and tell you that I made sure I had clothing in your size because I was so enamored by you. Because I wanted you in my bed, waking up in my arms. I wanted to kiss every place I let my fingers drag looking for my phone. I wanted to kiss you right out of your towel after the first time you came on my fingers. I wanted to kiss you every single time you let me touch you. I wanted to kiss you when you told me how attracted you were to me. I wanted to fucking drown in you when you apologized for the night at the hotel.

“I wanted to kiss you until you understood that the way I feel about you has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that we happened to be living in the same space. That we just happened to be the only two people up here. I wanted to kiss you until you realized that I would’ve been yours the second I saw you. No matter where that first time was. It wouldn’t have mattered if it was in the middle of a sea of a million goddamn women. It would’ve been you. It was always supposed to be you.”

I’m pretty sure I’m crying. It’s hard to tell because I think I’m having an out of body experience and also, I can barely think past the things he’s saying and the places he’s touching. I am barely, *barely* coherent enough to let the words into my brain, let alone register how they make me feel.

His lips find mine again. My head is swimming.

With my hand on his chest, I push him back a little. He doesn’t budge but he gets the idea and creates some distance. “What’s wrong, baby?” He’s all worry. Attention. Protection.

The best I can do is hold up a finger while I roll away from him onto my back, letting myself come down from out of the clouds. He waits for me. Patient probably isn’t the right word because he’s absolutely itching to smush our bodies back together, but he stays put, which I absolutely adore about him.

It takes me a while before I can breathe normally and follow a complete train of thought. I focus on my inhales until my head feels less fuzzy. A few manic laughs slip out, and I wait for the chuckles to subside. Okay. Alright. I wiggle my toes and move my legs, focusing on each body part until I reach my head. Grounded. I need to get grounded.

I lay massaging my eyebrows for a few minutes, until it hurts from the repetitive motion. Okay. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Turning towards Grayson I almost start laughing again at his bewilderment. So bemused, and yet he stayed quiet the whole time. I need to be present for this next part and I needed a second to get there.

He understands my intention almost immediately as I crawl over to him. He lets me straddle him. A little switch up. He always gets to woo me like this. Now it’s my turn.

Rubbing my hands up and down his chest I watch him devour me. Every inch of me. He’s all smoke and smolder and googly eyes. “Why didn’t you?”

“Why didn’t I what?”

“Why didn’t you kiss me? Any of those times. Any of the times you wanted to.” I watch his eyes close. His body tense. I watch his eyebrows knit together and I see his teeth come out to worry on his bottom lip. His breathing is different. Everything about him has changed. “Grayson?” My fingers stroke his cheek.

A very deep sigh leaves his gorgeous chest and he sits up against the headboard. I stay in his lap and now we’re eye level.

He doesn’t speak. He just looks at me like he’s trying to memorize me. His hands hold me firmly. Strong enough that I get the sense he’s worried about me leaving.

So, this is it, isn’t it? The moment he lets me down easy. The moment he tells me he didn’t kiss me because he didn’t think I could handle it. That I would make more out of it than it is. Okay. I knew this was coming. It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.

His mouth turns into a flat line for a second or two. Then he shakes his head and speaks. “I didn’t, uh, kiss you because I didn’t think –”

“It’s okay, Grayson. You don’t have to. You didn’t want me getting the wrong idea. I get it.” I try to put some space between us, but he holds on tighter.

“That’s not why, Sol. Fuck.” I can’t believe how nervous he seems. Like he’s anticipating the worst. “At first, I didn’t kiss you because I didn’t want to scare you off. I was crazy about you extremely quickly and I think that scared me as much as it would’ve scared you. And then…” Big breath. He’s acting like he’s about to walk the plank. “I could tell this wasn’t the same for you as it was for me.”

“That’s what I’m saying, I understand you wanted to keep things casual. You don’t have to do all this.”

He lets his head fall against my chest. It’s quiet, all I can hear is our breathing. “That’s not it,” he murmurs across my skin.

I wait, rubbing soothing circles along his back.

“I couldn’t kiss you,” he whispers. His face is still nuzzled into me and I try to bring him back up so I can see his face, but he doesn’t move.

“Grayson. Hey. Look at me.”

He slowly shakes his head back and forth, kissing each step of the way. “I was following your lead. I had tried over and over again to show you how much I cared about you. How serious I was about you. How badly I wanted you. I put feeler after feeler out, and they all came back empty.”

“What do you mean? I love being intimate with you.”

His lips press down on my skin for a very long time. “You only admitted that yesterday, Sol. I thought you were just having fun. That I was here and that it was convenient.”

My hands gently pull on his hair. “Grayson, *please* look at me.” I watch his shoulders move with his breath. His grip tightens one more time as he lifts his head up. He looks devastated. “Why do you look so sad? I *am* having fun with you. But not just because it’s convenient.”

“This is more than fun for me, Sol.”

Validation. Okay, he needs validation. I can do that. “Oh! Sorry. I didn’t elaborate. I’m having so much fun with you. You make me feel so good and I really like being around you.” Those are safe things to say, right?

His head tips back and his hands fall to his sides. I actually feel really empty without them on my body.

His eyes come back to mine and all I see is defeat. “No, Sol. I didn’t kiss you because I didn’t know how to kiss you without getting my heart broken. I had decided that I’d rather have you on your terms than not have you at all. But I couldn’t kiss you. I knew if I kissed you that it would absolutely crush me when you walked away.”

I blink a few times. Sorry. Uh. Sorry…*what*? I don’t think my brain has come fully back online yet.

“Do you know when I wanted to kiss you the most?” I manage to shake my head. “Right now.” A breath. “When I tell you how goddamn in love with you I am.”

Every single thought escapes from my mind. There is just empty space. Completely silent until, ‘*so goddamn in love with you,*’ starts playing over and over and over. On a loop. I’m frozen.

I watch him say goodbye to me with his eyes. It is seeping from every pore, it’s all across his face. He genuinely thinks this is where things end. This man *genuinely* thinks I somehow survived a month in his presence without falling for him.

“I one hundred percent respect you not wanting to continue things. But I had to tell you. I needed you to know. I don’t know –”

My lips come crashing down over his. My hands thread in his hair and I hold him to me. I make him open for me. I put every single breath I have left into kissing him. It takes him a second to react. And then he’s cementing me to his body. Holding so tight I can feel my lungs fighting to expand. His head moves back. He wants to say something, but I grip him so fiercely my fingers hurt. I do my absolute best to put every single thing I’m feeling into kissing him. I lick and suck and bite and mold us together.

It’s only when I feel like I’ve communicated what I needed to communicate with my lips that I pull back. His eyes are wild, flooded with anguish. “Sol…I don’t –” I silence him with another kiss. “Sol...” And another.

This time when he tries to speak, I start talking over top of him. “I know you too, Grayson.” He’s trying to read my mind. He wants to crawl right inside and hear what I’m thinking. “I know you know me better than anyone. I know you are a giver. I know that having the wrong screw gun pisses you off. I know that building things helps your mind go quiet. I know you love to cook and have control issues when it comes to cleaning the kitchen.” I give him a little smirk with a wink. “I also know it’s not really about cleaning the kitchen. That it’s about you wanting to take care of me. I know you secretly *hate* mac and cheese but make it because you know I love it. I know that you would rather be in nature than your big fancy office. I know your hopes. I know your dreams. I know your fears and your regrets. Your pain.

“I know you are the bravest person I’ve ever met and that you did the impossible to save a future child’s life. I know that you put people before yourself. I know what your face looks like when it’s jealous. When you're hungry for me. When you think I am the absolute craziest person you’ve ever met. I can feel the air shift. I know exactly when Dominant Grayson comes out. I know so many versions of you and what each one likes and dislikes. I know Commanding Grayson, Goofy Grayson, Hot Angry Grayson, just plain Angry Grayson, Cute Grayson, Golden Retriever Grayson, Sad Grayson, Closed Off Grayson, Turned On Grayson, Determined Grayson, Sleepy Grayson. I know In Love Grayson.”

My fingers play with the ends of his hair at the base of his neck. Our noses touch and I smile, big enough that it pulls at the creases of my mouth. “I know you have my entire heart.”

Grayson pulls back enough to be able to see me. All of me. “I was doomed from the start. I never stood a freaking chance. Coming up here, I reconnected with a lot of versions of *myself*  I had grown apart from. I also got to meet a lot of new versions of myself. I got to meet In Love Sol. I can’t believe you didn’t recognize her. Because holy shit she is so in love with you. So fucking in love.”

We’re on each other instantly, collapsing onto the bed, completely lost to the moment. The feeling. The passion.

Between every pause Grayson whispers words in my ear or across my chest or over my stomach. I’m wrapped up in his admissions, surrounded by them, protected by them. “Absolutely head over heels for you, Sol.” “So fucking lucky I found you.” “I have never, ever felt this way before.” “You are my sun, Sol. My whole fucking sun.” “I love you, baby.” “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

“I love you too.”

## Chapter 28

The steam fogging up the bathroom mirror makes it impossible to do anything with my hair, so I just throw it up in another ponytail even though I know letting it dry like that makes it feel like there’s more grease than I started with.

The clothes I set out have mysteriously disappeared, replaced with an influencer worthy matching pink workout ensemble. No underwear. Gee, I wonder who the culprit could be?

After yanking the sports bra and cropped leggings (why is it so much harder to get dressed when you’re a little damp?) up my body, I scamper off to the front porch.

“I thought you hated sports bras?” I say, slipping out of the door and standing with my hands on my hips in front of Grayson. Damn, he’s so hot.

His eyes travel from my toes to my head. “I made an exception. Fuck, you are so stunning.”

Three days. Three whole days spent loving each other. Openly. Without reservation. This weekend passed in an absolute blur. All I know is that I spent every second feeling giddy.

“Come sit.” His smile has my stomach in knots, like it always does. Does this feeling fade? Because I really, really hope not.

I plop down into the rocker beside him and push myself back and forth with my toes. “What are you working on?” I ask as he sets his iPad next to him.

“More work stuff. I’m gonna have to drive up to New York again next week for the final hearing. Figured I could probably meet with some people while I’m there. Put some feelers out.”

New York. Huh. Yeah. New York is pretty far from where I live. Where I work.

There are some pretty big unknowns in all of this. And we’ve been kind of…busy and haven’t had the chance to talk about anything… futuristic? I don’t know if I’m jumping the gun or just struggling to be present in this moment. To enjoy and soak in where we are now. Who we are now. But talking about signing new contracts three hours away from each other feels pretty scary. And distant. And difficult.

I clear my throat and paste a smile on my face. “Kill two birds with one stone.”

“There’s a restaurant in the city I’d like to take you to while we’re there.”

I bat my eyelashes dramatically, holding my clasped hands over my heart. “Are you asking me on a date?”

His eyes sparkle. “If you’re good.”

And just like that I’m sucked right back into him. All my worries and threats of spiraling flying out the window.

“Do you think this will fade? That I’ll stop feeling like this?”

He weaves our fingers together. “Like what?”

“Elated? Like I have a squeal building inside me all day? Like I’m melting every time I look at you?”

“I can’t imagine not feeling the way I do when I look at you. I’ll never get enough of you, Sol. Sure, the newness will fade. The anticipation and excitement of what the other will do next. But that’ll just morph into something stronger. Deeper.”

“I’m freaking out a little.”

Our hands lift up together and he kisses my knuckles. “Tell me, baby. What’s going on?”

“This feels too good to be true.”

“Mm,” he hums, a knowing smile on his lips.

“I think I’m a little scared.”

Grayson reaches over and pulls the elastic band out of my hair. The wet locks fall to my shoulders and he takes a strand to start twirling around his fingers. “I would never, ever hurt you, Sol. I know better than anyone how fake that sounds. Someone stood in front of us, in front of our entire family and said they would take care of us. They lied. I know. But I have meant every single word I’ve said to you.”

So freaking handsome. So genuine. So sweet. So perfect.

“I’m not scared about that. I trust you. I know you.”

He tugs a little on the end of my hair. “Then what is it?”

“It’s me. It’s me I don’t trust. I’m scared that I finally caught glimpses of who I am and I immediately got wrapped up in another man.”

He considers this. I expect him to be offended. Well, I don’t expect Grayson to be offended, he’s not like that at all. I just have baggage that tries to make me feel like he is going to be offended. I should probably keep a list of things to dump on Joanna.

“Does it feel the same? As it did with your ex-husband?”

Mmmmm. “I mean… I *am* completely consumed by you.” In a really wonderful, beautiful way. I was consumed by Brian in a much different way. But consumed all the same.

“If we were to go our separate ways what would happen?”

“I’d be really freaking sad. Like devastated.”

Grayson leans over into the space between us. I meet him halfway and he presses two reassuring kisses on my mouth. “And after some time had passed? What would happen then?”

“I don’t really understand the question.”

There’s a quiet moment where he collects his thoughts. “Has our time together hurt you in any way? Has it damaged your confidence or how you see yourself?”

I give him an incredulous look. “No! It’s done the exact opposite.”

Another kiss. He lingers, interested in more, but pulls back, trying to refocus. “Okay, so if we broke up,” *(Are we dating???)*, “would you have to come out to a cabin in the middle of nowhere and find yourself? Have you lost any part of yourself since we started being together? Since we met each other?”

“No…”

“Have you changed who you are? Are you sacrificing yourself? Your needs and wants to make me happy?”

“No. I don’t have to.”

“And why’s that?”

My eyes narrow at him, lips pursed. “I mean…I don’t know?”

“Because I am so in love with exactly who you are. I want to spend every day of forever being your number one fan, Sol. Supporting who you are, rooting for you. There’s nothing I want to change, there’s nothing you need to do to earn my love. You have it. Freely and very enthusiastically given. If you change, I want it to be your choice, based on your journey in life. And I want to be right there, watching you grow and evolve. And I want to grow with you. Separately, differently, but completely intertwined.

“So, from where I’m standing, it’s a different kind of consumption. You are consumed by how happy you are, by how much you enjoy us. Not by the desperation of needing to be loved and not being left all alone.”

I think my lips are going to fall off if I get to spend forever with this man. Because I cannot freaking contain myself.

We kiss again, slowly growing needier. Our position is not helping things, reaching over arm rests, and Grayson growls with impatience.

“Get in the grass.” Tingles.

I raise my eyebrows at him, but he just stares me down, raising my blood pressure.

Lifting from my chair, I walk barefoot to a patch of soft grass in the space in front of the cabin where there aren’t any tree roots.

“There are only two things left on our checklist.” The way he moves towards me is so effing sexy. Primal.

“Oh yeah?”

“Mhhm.” His head moves up and down slowly. “Sunrise yoga and the surprises I promised you that I bought the day we made the list.”

“It’s not sunrise.”

“We never get out of bed in time. I find myself having breakfast in bed until noon every day.” \*Nervous laughter\* Yeah. Uh. He does do that. He does that *very* well.

“I’ve noticed. You’re very lazy…” I tease.

He has me wrapped up and picked up off the ground before I know it, spinning me in a circle, making me shriek. He’s right at my ear. “That’s funny. I don’t remember you complaining this morning after I had my *fifth* helping.” Haaaaaaa. Ha. Ha. Yes. Um. Yeeesss. Um. Yes. Yupp. That was…yes.

“You’re a growing boy, Grayson.”

He squeezes me harder, adjusting me so I can see just how much he’s grown. Fuck me.

I’m placed back on the ground facing the woods. Grayson stays behind me, his breath tickling my neck. “We’re going to start with Mountain Pose, of course.” He moves my body so that my legs are shoulder width apart. I’m not sure he had to do that by sliding his hands up my inner thighs, knuckles brushing the fabric covering my pussy, before pushing my thighs apart. But what do I know?

“Inhale,” he breathes, his arms gliding down mine. He grabs my wrists and pushes my hands upwards. Tall, reaching for the sky. “Exhale.” Gripping my hips and guiding them down, he steadies me. “Chair pose.” I barely hear him because he’s smoothing his hands all over my ass, playing with the waistband, following the seams.

My body relaxes into his, letting him hold me up, while slow, unbearable fingers grip the front of my legs, positioning me, lingering in places they shouldn’t. He glides all the way back up my arms and brings them down to stretch out on either side of me. Lips kiss from my wrist to my shoulder. “Warrior Two.”

His kisses continue across my back and opposite shoulder. “Back to Mountain, baby.” Jesus. Um. Yes. Okay. Legs shoulder width apart. “Arms up.” I raise my arms back above my head. Grayson sneaks his hands around me, grabbing each breast, massaging them through the fabric of my top.

“And what exactly is this pose called?” I press my ass against the front of his pants needing to feel him.

“Sun Salutation.” *Damn* that was quick.

“Your wit turns me on.”

“Your tit turns me on.”

I snort. “Okay, that one was bad.”

He belly laughs, which causes me to laugh too.

My laughter is cut off mid breath when he pinches both my nipples as hard as he can. “*Fuck*, Grayson.”

“Bend at the waist, Sol.”

We’re about to have a threesome with my acid reflux.

I bend, pretty sure I know what he’s looking for. I’m holding myself up by my hands and feet in a poor, poor imitation of –

“Downward-Facing Dog. You are such a naughty fucking girl. Ass in the air for me where anyone could see.”

“We should probably look up the Sanskrit for these and their translations,” I gasp, all the blood rushing to my head. “I feel like it’s probably pretty inappropriate if we don’t.”

“Oh, what we’re about to do is going to be *very* inappropriate, *lollipop*.”

Grayson begins peeling my pants off, inch by inch. He takes his time, kissing every part of skin he reveals. Once my entire ass is out, he bites down on one cheek sharply enough that birds fly off when I scream. His actions repeat on the opposite cheek before he licks and soothes the sore skin. “So fucking juicy, baby.”

My arms are shaking, but he just continues dragging my pants down until they’re pooled at my ankles. “Step.” I lift my right leg and then my left so he can slip the fabric off my feet. “Get on your knees.” Oh thank fuck. I can’t believe I even lasted that long without collapsing. “Such a good listener.”

As soon as my blood isn’t making my head throb, the way the rest of my body feels rushes back to the forefront of my mind. I am *aching* for him. My nipples are hard, my ass burns, and the open air feels cool against the wetness drenching between my legs. “I will never get over how fucking wet you get, baby.” One finger slides through and smears my arousal across the back of my thigh. “Who makes you wet like this?”

“You!” He flicks my clit and it fucking stings. “You do, Grayson! You’re the only one who gets me wet.”

Another finger slips between my lips, pulling back out to paint my cum over my lower back. “And who gets to taste you like this?”

“You do.” I lurch forward, reeling from the slap he gives me between my ass and my hip. “Only you! It’s just you.” Another slap, now on my other side. Fuck. “You, *mi cielo.* You. You. You. You’re the only one who gets to taste me. Your mouth is the only mouth I want. Ever.”

“Good girl.” Soft, gentle kisses chase the sting away.

I’m pulled by my hands and I cry out, absolutely shocked, and almost smash my face into the ground before Grayson locks my arms behind me and whips me into a kneeling position in front of him, my back cemented to his chest. One of his hands holds my wrists together in a death grip, the other snakes around my neck to my throat. “Tell me you’re consumed by me.”

“I’m consumed by you.” He tightens his hold, fingers ever so slightly digging into the sides of my neck. “I am drowning in you, Grayson. I am completely consumed, you’re in every cell of my body.” His fingers relax.

“Do not move your hands.” I nod, but feel my airways get cut off in a quick pulse of his hand.

“Yes, sir.”

“God, you’re so fucking gorgeous.” Now that he’s not holding my hands together, Grayson slaps the top of my thigh. “Open.” I do. I spread my knees as far as I can and am rewarded with delicious rubs over my clit.

“Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.”

I’m rocking back and forth, following his fingers, moving just right, adjusting each time he plunges them inside, drags them up to my ass, or lets them settle in on my clit. “That’s it, baby. Work yourself up.”

Using my arousal as lubrication, Grayson pushes his thumb into my asshole after teasing the rim. His hand closes on my throat and he has two fingers inside my pussy, using the knuckle of a third to get me off. The lack of oxygen has me panicked and so goddamn horny. I feel fuzzy and electric at the same time.

“My naughty, naughty girl. Come all over me so I can take you inside and soak my dick with it, fucking you until you can’t walk anymore.”

Oxygen floods back into my lungs and I’m a goner. Grayson holds me to him with an arm across my chest while I collapse against him, moaning and cursing, eyes rolling, my release causing me to grind on his hand as long as I can stand it. I only still when I’m so sensitive that it’s painful.

“I need to show this greedy cunt what it’s missing.” I can barely stand, but Grayson is full steam ahead. He takes my sports bra off, leaving it somewhere with my pants and taps my ass a few times, ushering me into the cabin.

I get through the door first and turn around, breathless, taking him in. “Take off your shirt.”

He doesn’t speak. He just does what I ask, his eyes darkening, liquifying.

“Now your pants.” I am a sucker for his tight little black boxers. They drive me crazy. Yesterday he didn’t even make it to the couch after his shower before I was pouncing on him.

“Are you hard for me, *cielo*?” His jaw goes slack. He is always ravishing me. Throwing me around. Telling me what to do. And I am absolutely obsessed with it. But I think maybe it’s my turn to play…

He nods, gripping himself through his briefs.

I close the distance between us, stilling his hand. “I’m sorry. Are you touching what’s mine?” His hand slowly falls to his side and I replace it with my own, grabbing him with more force than usual. He chokes, bending over, head bumping into mine. Oh, this kind of power is going to turn me into a mother fucking monster. His lips are close enough for me to lean in and bite, pulling his bottom lip out a little too far and letting it fall back. Hands fly to my hips as he grunts. “I asked you if you’re hard for me, *cielo*.”

He pants for a second before saying, “Yes. Yes, baby. Yes. Yes. Yes. I’m hard for you.”

“How hard?” I already know the answer, I can feel him straining against my palm. But I am positively delighted watching him get a taste of his own medicine.

“So hard.” I adjust my hold to include his balls, flexing my fingers, threatening. “FUCK, Sol. I’m fucking rigid for you. All I can think about is how good that velvety fucking pussy is going to feel eating up my cock.”

I drop to my knees, biting the band of his boxers and pulling. I use my other hand to help me get them down his thighs. “My dirty girl came out to play.” He teases a finger over my lips. I bite that too.

“Who gets to suck this thick cock, Grayson?” The only explanation I have for my behavior is being in love and that fact that I’ve been fucked delusional the last three days. The last two weeks.

“You do, baby. Only you.” He strokes my hair so freaking lovingly.

“And why’s that?” My mouth is wide open, tongue out waiting for him, but I keep a hand on each of his thighs so he can’t quite reach me.

He is so frustrated and it’s giving me life. I am soaring.

“Because you suck it so good…” he pauses to trace my lips. “Just like a lollipop.”

“Like this?” I’m all innocence and wide eyes as I let him slide his length across my tongue, all the way to the back. But I never shut my mouth. I just push him in and out, only coating the underside with my spit.

I’m pretty sure he’s drooling. I let my teeth scrape across his shaft. He jolts and curses. “Yes. Like that. And like this.” He grabs the back of my head in one hand, my jaw in the other and has me deepthroat him. I pull him out immediately, sinking my teeth into the side of his hip. “*Jesus*, Sol.” Squeezing his balls for good measure, I stand and raise an eyebrow.

“Get on the kitchen island.”

“What?”

“If you can’t behave then you have to be punished. Go. Now.” I motion with my head and watch him walk over, hopping up onto the counter with grace. I grab a dining room chair and lean it up against the side of the island. “Lay with your hands underneath you.”

“Baby-”

“Now.” I step up onto the chair so I can crawl up to meet him. “Pretend this is sexy.” Listen, I can’t lug my ass up on top of this thing. Are you nuts? I’m still struggling from the Downward-Facing Dog.

“I don’t have to pretend.”

Positioning myself between his legs I give him another bite. Watching his body writhe under me will be burned into my brain forever. “Do. Not. Touch. Do you understand?”

“But I want to –”

My teeth scrape from his pecs to his ‘V’. “Do you understand?”

“Okay, okay. Yes. I understand.” Another bite. “Yes, baby! I understand.”

Flicking my tongue over his tip, I continue our conversation. “Now as I was saying. Why am I the only one who gets to have your fat cock in my mouth?” One, two, three more flicks.

“Shit. Because you suck so goo –”

My nails scrape from just under his armpits down all the way to his waist on both sides. “Why am I the only one who gets to do this?” I swallow him whole, bobbing up and down until his teeth are clenched and his arms start to slip out from under him. “Ah, ah, ah. Arms.” His chest rumbles with exasperation, but he relents.

Moving a bit further south, I suck one of his balls into my mouth. His entire body lifts off the counter and he groans when I put a little too much pressure. “I’m *still* waiting, Grayson.”

“I don’t – because you’re mine! Because you are my heart. Because I’d rather die than have anyone else on their knees in front of me where you belong. Because I love you. I am so in love with you.”

“Good boy,” I smirk, and take him fully. Adding a hand at the base and hollowing out my cheeks.

I hear, “Fuck. I did not think I’d like that as much as I did,” in between his moans. “Sol, baby, fuck. You gotta…I’m gonna…”

His dick slowly falls from my mouth. “What’s wrong, *cielo*?”

Grayson lifts up, reaching out to grab me. “I need to fuck you.”

Sitting up, resting on my knees, I shake my head back and forth with my eyebrows raised, a very pointed glare directed his way. He falls back and slaps his hands over his eyes before dragging them down his face. I take hold of his base again, hard. All of the air leaves his lungs.

“Grayson…so misbehaved today…” His eyes are zeroed in on me.

“I need to fuck you,” he insists.

“You haven’t earned it.”

“Fine. I need to make you come three times and *then* I need to fuck you.” My hand closes in harder. “Tell me what you want, Sol! I’ll do anything.”

“I was going to let you come in my pussy. I wanted to feel you drip down my legs…but now…I don’t know…” Spit leaves my lips and lands on the head of his dick. I have never seen him this desperate. This feral. I am basking in it.

Leaning down, I lick each side of his shaft, cupping his balls and rolling them between my fingers lightly.

“I’m going to come all over those beautiful fucking lips if you’re not careful. I wanna come in your pussy, baby. *Please*.”

“What? These lips?” At first, it’s just the tip, locked inside, tongue swirling over it again and again. After a couple of seconds, I let more of him fill my mouth, making sure to glide up and down as slowly as humanly possible. And when I get down to the bottom, using a little teeth? He loses it.

“Sol, you need to get on your back on top of this island right fucking now before I blow right down your throat, making you swallow every last drop.”

I pull off him with a loud smack of my lips and his cock bounces onto his stomach. “And if I don’t?”

His breathing is erratic and he’s having trouble thinking straight. If it wasn’t so sexy, it’d be cute.

I never get my answer because I somehow end up face towards the ceiling, laying on the counter, Grayson pulling me towards the edge so he can stand in between my legs.

I hear one of the kitchen drawers open and close, a buzzing sound making my skin feel hot. “Grayson, what are you – hoooooolllly fuck!” My body turns into mush in front of him, squirming and seizing up as he drags a vibrator up and down my slit.

“Your cunt is so pretty, Sol. So fucking pretty.” He reaches for my hand and brings it down between my legs, wrapping it around the toy. “Make yourself feel good, baby.”

The drawer opens and closes again, but I hardly notice because all I can focus on is the heat climbing and climbing up my body. The vibrations are doing crazy, crazy things to me. “Play with your nipples.” It’s too much. It’s way too much, but I don’t stop. I’m lost in the sensation.

My eyes fly open. “Grayson, what–” He presses my hand down more firmly, causing the vibrator to get more intense on my clit. He spits and puts two fingers inside me, dragging my juices out.

There’s a new sensation added to the mix. I seize up. Oh my god!

I hear him growl in appreciation. “Look at how fucking perfect your asshole looks filled with my toys. Fuck, baby. I love seeing you filled like this.”

There is no time to decide if I like the feeling or not. Grayson pulls me closer and slams into me. My scream can probably be heard all the way in town. “GRAYSON! Oh my fucking god. You’re fucking insane.”

He looks at me with a gleam in his eye. “I’m crazy about you, that’s for sure.”

His thrusts are brutal and they jostle both of the toys in a way that has me in a serious panic that I’m going to pass out. My blood feels like TV static and I cannot fucking breathe.

My hand has fallen off my breast in favor of trying to hang on to the counter. I am just barely keeping the vibrator held in the right place. “I get so hard watching your tits bounce, Sol. Your perfect pink nipples always so hard and calling out to me.” The force in which he pinches them has me crying out again and again. The more I buck off the counter, the more he pounds into me and the deeper the toy in my asshole gets. I’m definitely going to pass out.

One hand stays on my breast, massaging and tweaking and playing, and the other slides up to shove three fingers in my mouth. “FUCK. So fucking perfect, baby. Completely filled under me. Every fucking hole. You’ve got my fingers down your gorgeous fucking throat. Your cunt is milking my cock, holding it like a vice. And I’ve got my toy,” he abandons my breast and grabs the toy in my ass, swirling it in circles, making me dizzy, “in your tight little asshole.”

He kisses my stomach, in between my breasts, and on the side of my mouth against his fingers, causing me to gag on him. “That’s right baby, choke on my fingers. Feel how good I fill you. Come knowing that this body is mine and that I’m going to fill it every day for the rest of your life.”

I sob and scream and moan against his fingers, tears streaming down my face. I come so hard it hurts and I am absolutely hysterical as he continues thrusting, as he traps the vibrator against my clit. “You are the sexiest, most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. And I love you so fucking much. I didn’t have a fucking clue what love was until I met you.”

He’s unrelenting, overstimulating me and pounding into me. He feels so good. Too good. Way too good. “I’m taking one more, baby. Be a good girl and come for me again.”

I’m thrashing my head back and forth under his fingers but he just sticks them down further to keep me in place. I lose my vision for a second or two when he switches the speed on the toy at my clit to go faster, his thrusts become crazed and I slap my hands on the island when he starts fucking me with the toy in my ass. In and out. In and –

Every single muscle in my body contracts. Every hair on my body stands up. Every hole I have spasms and clenches up and I can’t even scream. Can’t even sob. I am a prisoner in my own body, getting absolutely destroyed by the pleasure Grayson is causing. By the pain he’s causing. Pulse after pulse after pulse.

He chucks the vibrator on the floor and reaches under to grip my ass cheeks, using them to impale me on his dick one more time before he’s roaring above me. He moans so long I feel a mini orgasm sweep over me.

I watch him as he pulls out and becomes transfixed watching between my legs. I can’t move. I can’t push myself up on my elbows to see him better. I just take in the hunger, the possession dancing in his eyes. When he’s finally had his fill, his gaze sets me on fire, all the way up my body until he meets my eyes. “There are no words to describe how I feel about you.” His arms encircle me and bring me to his chest. I am limp against him. I can’t even be sure I’m breathing. I genuinely can’t tell if my lungs are working or not.

His mouth moves over me, so gentle. Every touch feels like a zap. I am so wrung out.

He kisses me long and slow. He kisses me until I forget what year it is. Until I am whimpering against his lips.

Pulling away he whispers, “You are a dream come true, Sol. You are more than I could have ever imagined. I have no fucking clue what I did to deserve you, but I’ll spend every day of the rest of my life trying to earn it. I love you. I love you so fucking much it hurts. I can barely breathe around you. I’m yours. And you’re fucking mine, baby.”

My blinks are getting very heavy. “I think you killed me.”

## Chapter 29

“Back up, Jack! The last time I let you touch me you nearly killed me.”

It’s a beautiful, breezy, lazy Wednesday and I have the windows open in front of my reading nook. My book has magically found its way to the floor and Grayson so conveniently is standing right in front of me, ready to sub in. (Sports! Go team!)

“Listen! We had to check the last two things off our list. What did you want me to do?”

“Sorry, your ‘surprises’ were sex toys?” He nods very enthusiastically. “That you bought on the fifth day of knowing me?”

A goofy, lopsided grin and a big ol’ helping of adorable. “Yupp. They were a, *Billionaire Bad Boy* reference. The store didn’t have any vibrating eggs. I bought the shirts then, too. And I started wearing them after the bar because I knew you were sad they didn’t smell like me.”

“Riiiiight. So, you’re telling me that you noticed the face I made when I very subtly sniffed the shirt you gave me as you laid on the *opposite* side of the bed *behind* me…but you had *no* idea I was in love with you?”

“I wasn’t behind you.”

“I’m pretty sure you were.”

“You were drunk, your memory doesn’t count here.”

“Oh my gosh, get out of here.”

“I wanna snuggle.” The look on his face tells me he wants to do way more than snuggle.

“Absolutely not. We can’t both fit on here anyway. Give me my book back.”

Golden Retriever Grayson. Big puppy dog eyes. “Pleeeaasseee, baby. Let me cuddle you.”

I’m hoping my glare shows him how serious I am. Except I’m not serious and am about to break.

“I swear I’ll be quiet. You can sit and read and I’ll just hold you.”

“Hold my tits, you mean.”

He pretends to be shocked and offended. “I would never! Sol, get your head out of the gutter.” My eyes narrow as I watch him get closer and closer, trying to sneak his way in behind me. He bends down to grab my book and offers it to me on an imaginary silver platter. “Your reading material, my lady.” His wink is panty melting.

“Thank you, you’re dismissed.”

“Noooo.” Grayson drops to his knees and buries his head between, you guessed it, my tits. “I don’t wanna be dismissed, I wanna be invited into your chair.” God, he’s so fucking cute. “I’ll even read to you if you want. I really liked reading circle last time…” His teeth graze my nipple through my T-shirt.

I push him by his forehead and put on my ‘teacher face’. “See that? Can’t be trusted. Out. Get out of my space.”

He clings to my thighs and pouts his lips. “No, no. Give me another chance. I had a temporary moment of weakness! How can you expect a man to *not* want to suck your nipples? They’re so perfect,” he groans.

The drama he’s putting on is making me laugh. “You’re locked out for fifteen minutes. You can try again later.”

“FIFTEEN MINUTES!” He’s up on his feet in a heartbeat. “I am not waiting fifteen minutes to hold you.”

“Um, yes, you –”

No. He’s not.

Scooped up. Taken to the couch. Laid between two strong, muscular legs. Head on chest.

I know, I’m really suffering.

Grayson’s arms circle around me, one holding me across my stomach, one trailing up and down my arm. His lips press to the side of my head and he wraps one leg around mine. “Okay, sorry. You were saying?”

“That I hate you.” The words are barely out before I’m shrieking, trying to escape.

“Do you want to try that again?” His tickles are merciless and I don’t even have the chance to speak because I can’t catch my breath. I have to dig my nails into his hands to get him to slow down enough so that I can answer him.

“I love you! I love you. Okay? I love you.”

“Good, because you squirming around like that was getting me hard.”

“That must be very difficult for you.”

“Nah. It’s not too bad. You’ll just get on your knees for me later and fix the issue.”

“*Grayson*.” I shove my elbow back into his side.

He chuckles, bringing me back to his chest and resituating us so he’s touching what feels like every inch of my body. “Yes. Okay. I’m behaving. You read. I’ll be the perfect, silent gentleman.”

“You didn’t bring my book!”

His fingers trail under the hem of my shirt. “Whoops. Well, it’s too late now. We’re already snuggling. Can’t move for at least fifteen minutes.”

I put on my best Grayson voice and yell, “FIFTEEN MINUTES.”

We’re both giggling like little kids, but it feels really freaking nice.

“I can probably count on one hand how many times I’ve laughed outside the classroom in the last five years or so.”

“My cheeks actually hurt for the first few days you stayed here because I was smiling so much.”

“Come on!”

“I swear! I considered icing my face after the fair, the watering hole, *and* our dance recital.”

“Even though I know you’re lying, that makes me really, really happy.”

“You make me happy.” Another kiss on my temple.

I hum and close my eyes, rubbing patterns on his arms. We’re quiet for a while. I never thought I would experience this. This calm. This peace. This love. Even though Grayson played a huge part in it, I’m pretty proud of the last four and a half weeks. He’s right. If we went our separate ways, I would have to mourn the loss of him. But I would walk away a full human. Well, most of my heart would be missing, but I’d be able to live. I wouldn’t waste away in a dark apartment. I’d be able to pick myself up by my bootstraps, or whatever.

“Are you my boyfriend?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “I’m your fuck buddy roommate that you’re in love with.”

I huff in amusement. “Oh, riiiight. Yeah, sorry. I forgot.”

His teeth graze my earlobe before he whispers, “Do you wanna be my girlfriend, Sol?”

“Do I get to keep the ‘benefits’ from ‘friends with benefits’?”

Kisses trail down my neck. “You actually get upgraded, with an opportunity for a promotion.”

“Do go on.” His hands are back on the prowl, rubbing and teasing and gripping.

“Girlfriend status would normally unlock the Move-In package. But since you were given that particular perk in advance, we’re prepared to offer you the Buy A House Together package instead.” Butterflies erupt in my stomach and I feel like I need to pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming. He can’t be serious? He’s gotta just be messing around. Being sweet.

“Is that so?” It comes out raspy because a) I want him to be serious and that terrifies me, but it also terrifies me that he might be just playing and b) his hands have found their way under my shirt and over my breasts.

“Mhhm.” Teeth skim my jaw. “And once you’ve unlocked the House package, a whole world of possible promotions opens up.”

I can’t believe I can keep up with this ruse at this point. This reminds me of the night with the phone. “Well, I really should have all the details so that I can make an informed decision…”

“The natural first promotion is obviously to Fiancée status.”

“*Grayson*,” I gasp at both his words and the fact that his fingers have slipped into my underwear and have found my clit.

“There are two choices for after Fiancée status. It doesn’t *really* matter which one you choose first because they both end up leading to the same end goal.”

One hand slides my underwear down, the other sneaks a finger inside me. I’m still moaning as I say, “And those are…?”

Grayson switches up our position so that I’m in his lap, facing him, knees on either side of his thighs. I’ve lost the fill of his finger, but he moves his hands in between us and gets his thumb back where I need it.

It’s a minute before he answers me because he’s too busy kissing along my chest. “Wife status,” he murmurs, his lips making their way higher up. He pauses, bringing our faces together and cupping my cheek with his free hand.

“Or?” I often feel like I’ve died or am dreaming or have gotten a concussion or have gone insane around this man. He makes me feel like this in so many ways. But *this*. This takes the cake, I think. If I haven’t been dead or dreaming or concussed for all the times before, I am definitely, *positively* one of those three now. I have to be.

He kisses me stupid, hand abandoning between my legs to hold me as closely to him as possible. “Mom status.”

We’re going to have to take this issue higher up. Hi? Supreme Court? Mr. President? *Elon Musk*????? Something must be done! This guy is out of control! He has given me forty heart attacks, taken my breath three thousand times, fucked me so hard my soul left my body more times than I can count, and NOW he’s bursting my goddamn ovaries! What are we going to do about this?!

I can feel my eyes prick with tears, fingers nestling into his hair. I just watch him. I can’t look away. “Grayson,” I whisper, running my fingers through his locks again and again.

He captures my lips once more. We stay in this embrace, holding each other, kissing, nuzzling.

“Other options include: Abuela status, Best Friend status, and Puzzle Partner status. There’s a bonus gift of a Test Dummy for All the Sexy Scenes You Read husband starter pack, we offer personal yoga instructors, forever dance partners, a permanent milkshake date…The list goes on and on...”

I’m laughing through how choked up I am.

His face gets very serious, his fingers brushing a few pieces of hair out of my face before kissing me once…and then again…and then again. “I am *not* sorry to inform you that we’ve discontinued the Divorced status option. Non-negotiable.” It’s my turn to sport a big, goofy grin. “Now, if you sign today, you can lock into Girlfriend status for the low, low price of letting me fuck you with one of our toys while I fuck your mouth.”

From lumberjack to goddamn sex addict.

“Deal.”

He’s ready to jump my bones immediately, but I put my hand on his chest.

“Wait. Wait a second.”

He looks absolutely crestfallen. “Tell me, baby. Because I have positions to fold you into.” Devious. Devilish. Dangerous.

“Are you serious about all this?” Best I just ask, right? We don’t do ‘beating around the bush’ anymore. Even if asking exactly what I’m thinking even though it could lead to rejection still feels like eating glass.

“As a heart attack.” I can see it in his eyes. All over his face.

“Grayson. We both had to crawl tooth and nail out of failed marriages. How can you talk so casually about this? Aren’t you scared to death?”

He shakes his head. “Nope. You’re it for me, Sol. I knew it the moment I saw you.”

“I feel the same way about you, but…”

“Listen,” he kisses my jaw, “You can take your promotion whenever you’re ready. We have all the time in the world. Just know, “ a quick nip, “that if it was up to me, I’d promote you tomorrow.”

*What*?

“You’d get engaged tomorrow? After a month of knowing each other?”

“Correct.” His fingers are itching to get back inside my underwear.

“And that doesn’t terrify you?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Grayson!”

He stops his teases and wandering hands and interlocks our fingers together between us. “Yes, baby. It’s scary. It’s scary how much I love you. It’s scary to try and do this again. To get remarried. But that’s just because I’m scared of losing you. And every step we take towards marriage and kids and old age is one more nail in *my* coffin if I do lose you. But there is no one I’d rather jump into the unknown with. It’s you, Sol. Only you.”

“You’re looking at jobs in New York. My teaching certification is in Pennsylvania.”

What a wicked expression. “I’m looking in Philadelphia too. I have three interviews there.”

“*What*?!”

“It doesn’t matter where we are, Sol. I’d like to start fresh. I’d also like to introduce you to my city. Whatever gets me you is what I want.”

“I mean, I definitely want a fresh start…”

“Then we pick somewhere in the middle. Or overseas. Or on the moon for all I care. We can move just outside of Disney World and ride It’s A Small World every day, twice a day. I just want to do it with you.”

“And the cabin?” I ask, trying so hard to connect all this with reality. He’s being sincere, it’s just hard for me to accept my life can be like this.

“I’ll put your name on it when it gets signed over to me next week.”

My shoulders move with my chuckle. “I just meant you’re going to keep it, right?”

“*We’re* going to keep it, yeah. It’s where I fell in love with you.” Kiss.

“Where is your plug?”

Sweet, adorable confusion. “My what?”

“Where do you charge at night? Do you get up when I’m sleeping?”

“What are you saying, crazy?”

“You have to be a robot, Grayson. There is just no way you’re real.”

“Then you’re some AI generated computer girlfriend because, ditto.” He moves me so he can get up. “Are you hungry?”

“Always.”

He laughs and I follow him to the kitchen. “What do you want?” My groan is enough to have him back pedaling. “Okay, okay, okay. I’ll figure it out.” The fridge swallows him up as he sorts through ingredients. “You know,” he calls, “you can’t make me decide every single time.”

“That was in our Girlfriend status upgrade contract, so, yes, I can.”

“Sneaky, sneaky girl.”

“Oh, hey,” I say, grabbing some plates out of the cabinet. “Have you heard from Bob about my car?”

“Uhhhhhh. Um. Yeah. I, uh…think so.”

My eyebrows raise. Suspicious much? “What do you mean you, ‘think so?’ ”

“I think he might’ve called, I can't remember.”

“You can’t remember?”

“Well, I actually think we might’ve talked in person, I don’t know.” He has his back to me and won’t turn around. He is literally side stepping back to the fridge so he doesn’t show his profile.

“When did you talk to him in person?”

“Mmm. I don’t really remember. All the days blur together.”

“Grayson Blaine Stoker, what is going on?” He turns around so slowly you can barely tell he’s moving. There’s guilt written all over his face. “What did you do?”

“The last time I talked to him it was in person.”

“Again… when?”

“It could’ve been the day you were going to hike to the Y. Maybe? Who knows?”

“Mmmmm, you do, actually. You’re the one that knows.”

I’ve never seen Grayson fidget like this before. But he’s very nervous. “Well, then, yeah. The last time I talked to him was the day you moved in with me, the day you were going to hike into town.”

“Two and a half weeks ago? When he said he was waiting on parts?”

He’s half shaking his head yes and half shaking his head no. “Mmmm. Kind of.”

“Kind of?”

“Yes.”

I tap my fingers against the counter. Why is he pretending to be so aloof?

“What does that mean, Grayson?”

“Like…that’s not *technically* what he said…” At this point he’s looking anywhere but me. It would be cute if he wasn’t being so annoying.

“So, what did he say? Word for word. Verbatim. In English.”

His teeth shred his bottom lip for a minute. Big, dejected sigh. “Uh. Verbatim? He said…” another pause, “He said something like, ‘Grayson! How’re you doing? Still liking it up here?’ ’’

“Oh my god! And *then* what? Skip to the car talk.”

He blows a very long breath out of his lips. “So, if I can remember correctly I think he maybe said, ‘Car’s all set. Cash or card?’ ”

I do a double take. “Sorry, uh, what did you say?”

“He said your car was done…”

“Two and a half weeks ago?”

“Yes.”

“So, you lied about it?”

Pregnant pause. “...yes.”

I’m sure the face I’m making is absolutely dumbfounded. “Why?”

He mumbles his first answer and I can’t hear a word he says. I stare at him expectantly.

“Because I didn’t want you to leave yet.”

My eyebrows knit together and I deflate a little, walking over to slide my arms around his waist. “You didn’t want me to leave yet?”

“No.” I feel him wrap me up and pull me into him.

“Why?”

“Because you weren’t in love with me yet.”

My head rears back. “You knew you were in love all the way back then?”

His smile is gorgeous. “Not quite. But I wanted the chance to fall.”

THIS MAN. “When did you know?”

He doesn’t even hesitate. “The diner.”

“Really?”

Nodding, he kisses between my brows. “When you sent the banana bread away and then made me tip twice our bill.”

I’m laughing. “Oh my god.”

“When did you know?” He squeezes me a little in his arms.

I didn’t realize I knew the answer to this. But as soon as he asks, it pops right into my head. “The day I stole your truck and ended up running into Jade.” He growls under his breath and I pat his chest. “Down boy. We sent you that picture and–”

“You looked so fucking hot in that picture. I have it saved but I cropped her out of it.”

“You are…insane. And really, really cute. Okay! *Anyway*, I locked up almost immediately because all I could think about was you. She knew too, actually. I tried to deny it, but I think deep down, I understood.”

“Fuck. I wanna take you to bed.”

“Mm. One of the many upgrades you get from Boyfriend status.”

“Uh. Two things. One, I already had that upgrade. And two, you may have chosen the Girlfriend status package, but I’m personally promoting up to Fiancé.”

“That is not how that works!”

He shrugs. “I already have the ring. I’ll just wear it on my pinky finger until you’re ready.”

Grayson shimmies out from under me and leaves me standing with my mouth wide open, absolutely gobsmacked.

“Come on, Sol!” he calls. “You still owe your payment for your upgrade. Positions, remember?”

I think that book store lady was right. Learning how to love yourself *is* a big process. And it *has* been really freaking nice being reminded of parts of myself I had left unattended for a while. \*Insert old-school winky face\*.

## Chapter 30

“I don’t wanna gooooo,” I moan into the sheets, burying my face underneath the pillows.

“I know, baby, but we gotta get a move on.”

“Who says? Come back to bed.”

The mattress dips and lips descend on my shoulder. “Be careful what you wish for. If I get back in here, we might never get out.”

I twist so I can meet his mouth with mine in a sleepy, drugging kiss. “That sounds like exactly what I’m looking for.”

His groan gives me goosebumps before he rips his lips away from mine. “God, this fucking mouth of yours.” Fingers grip my jaw and Grayson tries his best to sound like he’s laying down the law. “Enough with your sexy siren call. We have to go!”

“I just read a book about a siren actually…She found a shipwrecked sailor all alone on a beach…”

“Baby! You’re not playing fair.” He says the words, but his lips fall back onto mine and his body melds into me.

This is my favorite place to be. Squished underneath this perfect, warm, protective body, while feeling his perfect, warm, protective lips all over me.

I’m suddenly ice cold as he jumps out of bed and takes a few steps back. “You are my goddamn kryptonite and you know it. Take pity on me. We have to go.”

“And just think…I put the vibrating rose on the charger last night…”

I know I’m torturing him, but his face is so goddamn cute and I am completely addicted to the sounds he makes when he’s making me feel good.

“Sol! *Baby*. Fuck! Out. Now.”

Oooooh.

“Or what?” My grin is mischievous, feline in nature.

His eyes go dark and stormy. “Oh I am spanking the shit out of your ass when we get back.”

“That’s a pretty long time from now…”

“And I’m going to hate every second of it. But we don’t have a choice.”

I deflate into the mattress. I know. I *know* we have to go. It’s just making me feel panicky.

My legs swing over the side of the bed and I begrudgingly push myself up, walking towards the barn doors where Grayson waits for me.

“Why can’t we just stay up here forever?” I whine, throwing my hands out and slapping them back down on my thighs. I catch Grayson watching the way it makes my tits bounce.

“I can’t have this conversation with you until you put clothes on.”

Devious. What an opening he’s given me. “Why? Are you feeling distracted…” My fingers trail up his chest and he catches my hand before I can get any higher.

“I’m about to tie you up if you don’t start grabbing your stuff.”

“Are you going to tie me to the bed? Or how about one of the logs outside so you can rail–”

My back slams against the wall, legs wrapping around Grayson’s waist as he kisses me so hard I forget to breathe.

“You are dangerous.” He bites my neck and I gasp, holding on for dear life as he moves us back to the bed and tosses me on to it.

Grayson disappears for a few moments before crawling up my body, his tongue dragging the entire way.

“Hey! Wait a–”

Before I know it, he’s got my shorts up over my hips and has dropped a shirt on my chest.

“Dressed. Now.”

My growl of frustration makes him chuckle all the way out into the hallway.

I can admit defeat (not really).

I pull the shirt on and stretch, making my way out of the bedroom and into the bathroom.

*Damn*. The difference is glaringly obvious. I have color to my cheeks. My eyes are hopeful, playful, vibrant. My hair is a curly, crazy mess. I know this woman. I *like* this woman. The woman I find looking back at me in the mirror. She’s changed. She’s different than when I last saw her.

I test out a smile and watch in wonder as it transforms my face. As it sits so perfectly, so naturally on my features. I don’t have the words. I don’t know how to put this summer into words. The growth, the love, the peace. How do I ever express how much it changed me?

I don’t want to leave. I don’t want to go back to my dark, sad apartment. I’m so fucking scared that that old version of me who never smiled is still there waiting for me. I’m scared that this was all some crazy dream and that my perfect little bubble is about to pop. I don’t want any of this to end. Not the loving myself, not the confidence, not the excitement for what’s to come, not the relationship with the most incredible man on this planet.

This is the first time in my life where my future is completely open. At least in my adult life, anyway. This is the first time I can see opportunity after opportunity waiting for me. I thought I had chosen my fate. That I had settled and was going to be stuck with Brian for the rest of my life just so I wouldn’t have to be alone. Then, I thought I was going to rot away in my apartment for the rest of my life. I don’t feel that way anymore. I have choice. I have power. I have true love. For myself and for Grayson. That changes everything. I can’t let things go back to the way they were. I won’t.

“Truck’s all loaded up. I left some stuff up here because I know we’ll be back a lot.” Grayson’s handsome face joins mine in the mirror, arms wrapping around me from behind. “Damn, we look really fucking good together,” he smirks and I roll my eyes, even if I can’t help but laugh.

“You know what? We do.” My smile gets bigger and I watch his eyes go all gooey on me.

“Happiness looks good on you, lollipop.”

“Mmmm, ditto.”

We stay like that for a few moments before I sigh. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Grayson spins me and holds my face in his hands. “It’s not forever. We have to get everything settled at home before the school year starts.”

“We don’t even know where ‘home’ is!” My words come out a little funny because he’s squeezing my cheeks together.

“My home is wherever you are, baby. You know that. Doesn’t matter where. All that matters is that I have you.”

“Ditto.”

I never get over how blindingly perfect his smile is.

“Come on, we’ve got a long drive ahead of us. I wanna make it back to Philly before it’s dark.”

I groan and lean my head against his chest. I almost forgot. “Four hours by myself in the traitor I call my car?!”

“I’ll pull in right after you. I’ll be counting down the seconds.” He kisses my forehead and ushers us out into the living room and towards the door. “And then I’ll make you come on every single surface your apartment has to offer.”

I push him away with a shake of my head as I survey the cabin. It looks so empty without all of our junk scattered about. The fire isn’t on and the blankets have been put away from on the couch. There’s no food on the counters or books stacked up high.

I owe so much to this place. To my cabin, too. To these woods. To this mountain.

“I can’t wait to take our kids up here some day.”

Turning my head, I lock eyes with the lumberjack who flipped my world upside down. “Better here than Disney World.”

His laugh warms my insides as he takes my hand and leads me out the door. “We’ll probably take them there too. Give ‘em a chance to form their own opinion.”

I scoff under my breath but otherwise stay quiet on our trek to my car.

“I’m gonna tailgate the shit out of you,” Grayson murmurs against my lips before opening my door and helping me in.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

He waits for me to back out of the makeshift driveway before turning his truck on. I can see him bobbing his head to music in my rearview mirror, the cabin perfectly backdropped behind him.

Maybe I will sit down and finally write a book. To try to find the words to describe this feeling.

Maybe I’ll tell the story of a woman who came to hide out in the middle of nowhere, of the abandoned cabin across the way that turned into her favorite place in the entire world, and the grumpy lumberjack who stole her away and changed everything.

A snort escapes as I make the sharp turn that leads to the rest of my life.

So much for not doing naked things in that cabin.

The End

## Epilogue

Grayson is proposing tonight.

I love him to death, but he is about as subtle as an elephant these days. He used to be so sneaky. Quietly loving me and meeting my needs in secret. But now? This man has zero chill. He loves so, so loudly. He has been trying to lure me into marrying him for months, always taunting me, trying to use how badly I want to see the ring he chose against me.

He hasn’t officially proposed, though. And I have a very strong suspicion it’s happening tonight. Especially since he asked me to dress up for dinner in our own kitchen.

That’s why I’ve been up to a little sneaking around myself. And if all goes well, I think he’s going to absolutely lose it. All I’ve been able to think about is the look on his face when he realizes what I’ve done.

“Are you ready, baby?” Grayson pops his head into our bedroom just as I’m putting my last earring in. When I turn to meet his gaze, I start melting. He is positively molten standing there looking at me from the doorway. “You are not wearing that,” he purrs, stalking into the room towards me.

“And why’s that?” I tease, doing a little spin.

His grip on my hips causes little shocks in my stomach, waking up the butterflies.

With his lips pressing up my neck he growls, “Because I’ll never be able to keep my hands off you.”

“Then don’t.” Throwing my hands around his neck, I pull him in so I can kiss the lips of the lumberjack that still takes up my every waking thought. He cannot get enough, deepening the kiss to the point where I know clothing is about to come off.

His groan comes out pained, devastated even. “I have to.” He looks me up and down. “FUCK. I have to. I have to keep my hands to myself. We have things to do tonight. Even if you look so goddamn gorgeous that it might kill me. Fuck, baby, this dress…” Hands start sliding. “DAMNIT. No. No touching, Sol!”

“What did I do?!”

He waves in my direction like it’s obvious. “Uh, look the fuck like that! That’s what you did. It’s cruel. It’s going to be teasing me all night.”

“You poor thing,” I coo, walking out of the bedroom and pausing in the hallway to wait for Grayson. I really ended up loving this apartment. We’ve made a home in this apartment. There is a mixture of both of us in here and it brings me a lot of peace.

“I’m going to miss this apartment when we move,” I frown, pouting my lips.

Grayson comes up behind me and leans his head on my shoulder. “I know, me too. But when we find the perfect house, it’ll all be worth it.”

Mr. Fancy Engineer scored the job of a lifetime in Philly and we’ve been here ever since. It’s time, though. To start looking for a house. We want pets and babies and things that you need a full house and a yard for. And I love the cabin, but it isn’t the right place to live permanently. Plus, it only has one bedroom.

“Oh, wait. Stay here. Don’t move.” Grayson is off in a flash, running around like a chicken with its head cut off. When he comes back, totally out of breath, he hands me a bottle of wine and a package of Cosmic Brownies. My smile is very, very big. “Okay. Take these and bring them as a gift to your super sexy, incredibly hot, amazing host, got it?” I nod. “Alright now go outside and ring the doorbell.”

I am giggling inside my head at how effing cute he is while I head down the long hallway that leads to our front door. Once I slip out, I take a couple breaths. I don’t even have words. I thought ruining the surprise would dampen this moment a little bit, but I feel explosive. I’m ready to burst with joy.

*Ding dong*.

Grayson opens the door and he takes my freaking breath away. He managed to get into the rest of his forest green suit that hugs every effing inch of him and it is doing really strong things to me. “I brought wine!”

I’m ushered back into the apartment and guided towards our kitchen. He is so nervous he hasn’t said a word and my heart is so full it’s going to burst.

“Grayson,” I whisper, taking in the makeover he gave our kitchen. It looks almost exactly like our car from the Train Stop. Bringing the wine bottle up so I can read the label, I am so ridiculously happy to see what I thought I might. It’s *my* wine. “How did you find this?”

“Same way as last time. Come on.”

He pulls my chair out across from where he always sits and kisses me on the temple before going over to the stove for a minute or two. When he comes back he has two plates filled with steak, mashed potatoes, and broccoli. “Medium rare is okay, yeah?” He winks and I pretty much crumble to pieces.

We decided that the first night we hung out at the cabin is what we consider our first date. There was some heated discussion, and we toyed around with our other options, the diner being one we were really stuck on. It was between that and the Cosmic Brownie night. Even though Grayson realized he loved me at the diner, that first night in the cabin was the start of it all and it ended up being the best choice. And although we’ve recreated the shower scene….many times, it wasn’t quite the same vibe.

“Sounds perfect.”

Dinner is much different than it normally is. Usually we’re laughing, talking, stopping mid-bite to pounce on each other…

But tonight is much quieter. Grayson is so stinking nervous I don’t think he’s taken one bite. Which is pretty much exactly what happened the first time we did this.

I know he’s waiting on me to be done eating so he can do whatever it is he’s about to do that has him so wound up. He is so excited and yet he just waits there patiently because he wants me to be able to eat. What a love.

“Man, I had such a huge lunch I’m already kind of full. Should we pack this up and eat it as a midnight snack?” He’s always been very good at reading me, and I can see the flash of understanding and then the gleam of gratefulness take over his eyes.

“I’d love that. I’ll wrap everything up later.” His face makes me wanna just squeeze it until it pops. Do you know that feeling? “Do you wanna go into the living room?”

“I wanna be wherever you are.” My answering smile has his shoulders relaxing a little. I walk over to him and pull him in by his tie. “Hey,” I say, pressing my lips to his, “I love you.” More tension leaves his body.

“I love you *más*.” Grabbing my hand and leading me to the living room, Grayson plops me down on the couch, grabs something from a nearby drawer, and then sits opposite of me, both of us facing towards each other. I’m not sure my smile is ever going to go away tonight.

“Okay. I have a new book scene for us to read.” I think he’s sweating.

I try to make my face as comforting as possible, rubbing my foot against his leg. “Ooh la la. Very exciting.”

He hands me a couple of printed out pages stapled together. “You be the first person, I’ll be the second. Oh, and you also have to be the narrator person.”

“I’ll try my best.”

Big, deep breath. “You start.”

I clear my throat dramatically and read, “*Sol and Grayson abandon their uneaten food and head to the couch with their trusty package of Cosmic Brownies.*” Said package falls into my lap. “Not the trusty package! Prop guy, you are on fire tonight.” This at least makes the corners of his mouth turn up. “Okay, I think it’s you.”

His voice comes out a little squeaky and he has to swallow a few times. “*Blah, blah, blah, Disney World is kind of lame, way overhyped.*”

“This is really eloquent writing, *cielo*.”

His knee nudges into mine, “Just read.”

“*Sol blushes and almost faints. ‘Oh my gosh! I’ve never met anyone who feels the same way as me about this!’ In her head, she is already planning her and Grayson’s wedding.’* Is that how that happened?”

Cheeky. We’re getting somewhere.

“ ‘*I know. We’re totally soulmates and we should kiss right now. But first, look at this picture of me wearing a onesie in the eleventh grade. That’s sure to win you over and definitely not make you think I’m a loser.’* ”

Grayson hands me his phone with the picture pulled up. “ ‘*Oh my gosh!’* Why do I say ‘oh my gosh’ so much in this?” He motions with his hands to move it along. “Okay. Sorry. ‘*Oh my gosh! We definitely should!*’ *Grayson and Sol lean in for their first kiss*.”

Both of us adjust ourselves on the couch so that we’re face to face. I move in to kiss him, but he stops me. “You have a line.” His eyes sparkle.

I look down at my script and chuckle. “*Just as Sol and Grayson are about to share their first life-altering kiss, Grayson’s phone starts ringing.*”

Grayson turns around and does something behind his back as he says, “Your line still.”

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry!” I tease. “*Grayson’s phone starts ringing*,” his real phone that he places in my lap starts ringing on my thigh, “*and Sol looks down to see who it is*.”

I look down and turn his phone over just as he reads, “ ‘*Oh, sorry…it’s my wife*.’ ” Staring at his phone in my hand I have to take a second before locking eyes with him. It’s *my* name on the screen. My contact picture is still of me surrounded by all the pigs. He called himself from my phone. I wanna kiss him and love him and do dirty things to him, but as soon as I try to make a move, he raises a hand to stop me. “Your line, baby. Pay attention,” he smirks.

I moan and find my place in the script. “*Grayson pulls a piece of paper out of his back pocket*.”

“ ‘*I wrote this checklist for us to do. You should read it.*’ ”

A folded piece of paper is offered to me and I take it before continuing, “*Sol opens the list and begins to read*,” I do as it says and my eyes get watery almost immediately. I have to pause just to get the next words out. “ ‘*Number one: Get engaged. Number two: Get married. Number three: Have kids. And number four: Grow old together.’* ” I’d be surprised if he heard a single freaking word of that because I am ugly crying. Big time ugly crying.

Grayson gets down on one knee in front of the couch, pulling my legs to either side of him. “Sol. I am so goddamn in love with you. You are an absolute dream come true. I didn’t think I was going to get to have a happy marriage, or even a happy life. You changed all of that. So beautifully. You are the most incredible person I’ve ever met. So fucking perfect. And I’m in awe of your brilliance and strength.” He kisses the top of my left hand. “Lollipop, –” he smiles so big and I see my entire future in that smile.

“Oh my god,” I cry.

“ – will you start a new checklist with me?” I’m nodding vigorously. “God, you’re perfect. Okay, good. Then I’d like to check off the first one tonight, if you don’t mind…” He kisses my hand again before bringing out a ring from his pocket. It is, of course, absolutely perfect. It’s obvious even through the water works happening down my face. “Baby, will you marry me?”

“*Yes!*”

“Yes?”

I jump up from the couch and throw myself at him. “Yes! Yes, yes, yes, yes. A thousand times yes!” He’s laughing through our kiss and I’m crying all over him. “I love you. I love you so fucking much, Grayson.”

“Love doesn’t even begin to cover it, baby.”

We kiss until my lips are raw and Grayson is at his breaking point, ready to rip this dress right off me. I hold up a finger and I watch the tantrum wind up inside him. “I have to show you something.”

“I would love nothing more than to see it…after I make love to you on every surface of this house.”

I shake my head. “No, it has to be now.”

I’m pretty sure his throat is going to be sore from how hard he whines.

—

“Okay, this is it.” Grayson pulls the truck up the dirt road, double checking the GPS. From where we’re sitting you can’t see anything except grass.

“Yeah, it is. Come on.” My smile is all plotting and scheming.

“Sol, what are we doing here?”

“Come and see,” I tease, leading the way.

We crest a small incline and pause at the top.

“Wow.” He blows out a breath. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, I really like it here.”

He looks at me inquisitively. He’s never been here, and I never go anywhere without him.

“It’s really peaceful here. Sometimes I like to just come here and sit.” *(No I don’t.)*

We stare out along the lake as dusk falls. I had wanted to do this at sunrise, but there is no way I’m waiting until tomorrow to show him. Not after the night we’ve had.

“Do you like it?”

Grayson wraps an arm around my shoulder, bringing me close. “I love it. When have you been up here?” His cute little eyebrows are pulled together, so confused.

“I told you, I come up here and sit. Come over here, I’ll show you.” I drag him closer to the shore in a large opening between a scattering of trees. “When I sit down here, I picture the house you’re gonna build me right in front of the lake.” He hums and I set off before he can ask any questions. I pull him down the left bank. “And when I sit here I try to imagine our kids and what they’ll look like and who they’ll marry. What their kids will look like.” My finger lifts and points across to the opposite shore and I lean into him. “I do the same thing over there.”

“Mm. I like that.”

My cheeks hurt from keeping the surprise in this long.

“There’s a great spot for pigs and cows down that way.” Another point. His eyes follow my finger. My other hand comes up to rub his tattoo. The one just under the inside of his elbow.

“Anyway, we should get back...”

Grayson raises his eyebrows like I’m crazy. “We drove all the way here. You don’t want to stay awhile?”

Oh my god, I can’t take it one second longer! “Yeah, I’d like to stay forever.”

He studies me. He’s always had a special expression just for me, to let me know how insane he finds me. “It’s really nice here, yeah.”

“So, you like it?”

He chuckles, “Sol, what is going on? I told you I love it.”

“Good,” I’m all teeth, “Because we *do* get to stay here forever.”

“What do you mean?”

Leaning up to kiss him, I snake my arms around his waist. “I bought it.”

“Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack. We already had everything set up to buy a house…I just… shifted the direction a little. In secret. For months. And you’re a big, rich engineer, so…”

His lips crash down onto mine and he spins me around and around. When my feet touch back on the ground I whisper, “You forgot to put this on the checklist.”

The End