

DARK AND STORMY

FLAMBÉ SERIES: BOOK SEVEN

ELLE BERLIN

Dark and Stormy
Flambé Series Book 7
By Elle Berlin
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ABOUT THE BOOK

When chef Arie's ex comes to town, she's caught in a love triangle between her bartender boyfriend and the London chef who left years ago.

ARIE:

My business partner left, and I'm stuck running Flambé by myself. I'm horrible at it – because I'm a chef, not a restaurant manager. My solution: invite famous chef Xander Carlisle to come help. He's my ex, but I'm sure my boyfriend Connor won't mind. I don't have feelings for Xander anymore. *Do I?*

CONNOR:

Who the hell is Xander Carlisle? And why hasn't Arie told me about him? I want to trust my girlfriend, but everyone says Xander was *the one* and he even inspired the restaurant we

ABOUT THE BOOK

work in. Well, Xander can fly across an ocean, but I'm not giving up Arie without a fight.

XANDER:

Just because Arie is asking for business help doesn't mean she wants to rekindle our old flame. Besides, she's not single. I've always been a gentleman, and I respect Arie too much to act on feelings I've had since culinary school. Which means pretending to date the cute writer I've just met on the plane is a brilliant idea. What could go wrong?

NOVA:

My agent will drop me if I don't come up with a *commercial* book idea, and fast! Preferably romance – which is not my genre. But when the literary gods drop a hot British man into the seat next to me on the ride to Hawaii, I hatch a plan. Fake-dating Xander is perfect research for my new story, and there's no way I'd fall for him like a silly heroine in a bestselling book. Because that's *fiction*, and in real life he's in love with someone else.



Dark and Storm is a spicy, standalone, love triangle, fake dating romantic comedy and the seventh book in the Flambé series.

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***Download your free copy of *Dirty Martini*
and read about the hot night that started it
all ...***

Something—or *someone*—had to inspire hot-headed chef Arie Noel to open the sexiest restaurant in Waikiki. That someone is Xander Carlisle.

Romantic, gorgeous, and the trendiest new chef in London, Xander is American girl catnip. But to Arie, he’s just an old friend from culinary school; he’s *definitely not* “the one who got away.” Even though she’s spent hours fantasizing about how he might crème her brûlée.

When Xander invites Arie to cook for him, she doesn’t want to admit that she just got fired. She can’t seem to work in anyone’s kitchen—especially a *man’s* kitchen—without turning it into a

flaming temple of mayhem. Arie desperately wants to impress her friend, but his flirty glances hint that more is on the line than her cooking reputation.

Tonight might inspire something they've both been avoiding since college ... and it starts with the perfect dessert.

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XOXO,

Elle Berlin

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is a romantic comedy, but please be advised that it is not a sweet, closed-door romance. This book has mature content including explicitly described sexual content and use of swear words.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

- Multiple open-door sex scenes
- Explicitly described sex scenes
- Use of swear words

Please do not read this book if you are uncomfortable with any of the items listed above.

ARIE

I love my boyfriend, Connor.

No, I *really* love my boyfriend. There's no question. Especially when what he's doing right now with his tongue is outright sinful. My pretty pink kitty is mewling in pleasure, and I'm so close to coming, I think I need to invent a new dessert in his honor.

Perhaps a pink Chantilly tart under a trembling pile of whipped cream.

Or a cherry crème brûlée with a champagne glaze.

Or ripe peaches drizzled in—

“Oh God! Oh don't stop!”

This man's tongue is Heaven! That is, if Heaven is a hedonistic pleasure den where every orgasm this man conjures from between my legs is more intense than the one before it.

You'd think after two years together the passion would dull, but—

“I love to devour your forbidden fruit,” he growls, before pumping his tongue mercifully against my core, causing me to

buck and come wildly against his face. “Fuck, Arie, I’ve wanted this for so long.”

“What are you talking about?” I gasp. “You get to fuck me every—” I grab his hair and lift my hips into his assault. My 3-inch heels drop to the floor and I push my feet against the table I’m spread upon. “Every—” His hands clutch my ass, supporting me as I convulse on his tongue. “Oh God! Oh God!”

Connor’s hair is longer than I’m used to. Curlier. I hadn’t noticed he was growing it out, but I like that it gives me more to grab as my orgasm pounds through my lady parts.

“You like it when I nibble on your biscuit, don’t you?” Connor teases with a British twang.

“Say less,” I gasp, dragging myself against his lips. “I don’t need British role playing, I’m already com—” My thighs stiffen with heat and his big hands spread me wider against the table top as if he’s strapping down a wild animal.

Which I am. Connor always turns me feral.

“I thought you liked my accent?” he says.

“You don’t have an accent,” I reply, starting to wind down from my high. I snag his head by the hair and look down my naked body to him, not sure what he’s playing at with this accent game.

Only—

It’s not Connor’s wet smile gazing back at me.

It’s not Connor between my legs at all.

ARIE

“**W**hat?” I take a second look between my legs and a new prickle of heat shoots through me as I realize who’s there instead of Connor.

It’s Xander Carlisle.

Xander—who is *not* my boyfriend.

Xander—who’s my friend from college that now lives in London.

Xander—who I haven’t seen in almost three years. Who—last time I saw him—was exactly in this position, tongue-deep in my peach after I fed him a brûléed dessert that was deliberately meant to get him in this position.

Yes, I’ve slept with Xander before. We had one night that was the culmination of years of not giving in to each other. And I haven’t thought about him since—definitely not since Connor came into my life. And yet, here he is with a front row seat to the peach farm. Xander’s smile deepens at my realization, delighting in how my traitor of a body aches to come again at the knowledge that he’s the one pinning me to this table.

“What the—?!” I swear, my body jackknifing in pleasure

under his smiling mouth. This isn't happening! Am I drunk? Did I just cheat on my boyfriend?

I look around frantically.

Large table.

Picture window with a view of the Waikiki bay.

The smell of delicious food wafting in from far away.

Are we at my restaurant, Flambé?

I shake my head and the haze in my eyes starts to clear. No, we're in a hotel suite. One that's chic and modern—the Atlantis. It must be.

There's something green on the floor. It's my dress—my kelly green wiggle dress—the same one I wore the night Xander and I hooked up. In fact, this feels *exactly* like the night I quit my job and Xander made me promise I'd open my own restaurant. But that was before Flambé. Hell, it's the night that inspired Flambé.

Xander's powerful hands push me open and his mouth descends.

"Xander, what are you—!" I cry out, because his tongue feels too sinful, too intense, too naughty and inappropriate. I shouldn't want his mouth on my cunt, but it feels hotter and more wild than when Connor does it. Which is impossible, because Connor is a god in the bedroom. "We can't do this!" I cry out as pleasure mounts between my thighs.

My mouth says one thing, but my body wants to submit.

"I can't fuck you, Xander!"

"I'm already fucking you, Arie," Xander growls, his tongue lashing me where I'm swollen.

"I have a boyfriend," I defend. "I'm in a relationship!"

"And yet, I'm the one you're fantasizing about this morning."

"Fantasizing? Morning?" I look out the window of the hotel room. It's dark. But the second I register that information,

Xander's moved me off the table and flipped me onto all fours on the floor. Facing the window now, the Waikiki bay sparkles as he pulls my naked ass toward his hips.

"Connor told me you like it rough," he says, snagging my red hair and pulling my head back with a wicked yank of his fist.

My traitorous body creams at how hot it is.

"Connor told you what?" I gasp, trying to make sense of this. My body is treacherously eager to see exactly what Xander means by *rough*. Xander doesn't fuck like a heathen. He was perfect and sweet during our one night together. But the position he has me in now, *this* is the position Connor's fucked me in the second time Connor and I met—before he worked at Flambé, before I fell in love with him. It was back when I thought I could keep things casual and forgettable with Connor—just sex.

Is that what this is? Just sex?

Hot, brutal sex when my heart still belongs to—?

Oh fuck, Xander's cock is at my entrance! And double fuck, my pussy is sucking on his tip like a greedy heathen.

"You don't think I'd fuck you without Connor's permission," Xander growls.

"What? Connor gave you permission to—"

Xander thrusts.

Oh god, I'm coming on his cock!

ARIE

I gasp and sit up.

Sunlight is everywhere and I'm sweating bullets.

I'm not on my hands and knees anymore, instead I'm sitting in a bed—my bed, made of emerald green sheets and gold accents. Not a table top. Not the Atlantis suite's floor.

I'm naked and gasping—because something in my subconscious is still rattling around in my brain. I just came. Only—I didn't, not physically, not really—it was in my head.

It was a dream.

Thank fucking God!

An arm is wrapped around my waist: a thick, muscled arm, attached to a naked man. My heart starts to ratchet again. I grab the man's shoulder and push him back, a groan crawling up his throat as he rolls on his back.

“What the fuck, Arie?”

“Connor?”

I blink and look at the man next to me. He's sprawled in my emerald sheets looking like a Fae Prince in a swath of

enchanted moss. It's my boyfriend—made of muscle and brawn, blinking at me like I've lost a few screws.

"Who else would I be?" he asks, frowning.

I look around quickly to ground myself in my surroundings: poster bed, silver walls, a bookshelf covered in a thousand curios. I'm home. I'm in my bed. I'm with the man I love. And all that Xander bullshit was—

A dream.

A hot, visceral dream that's got me sweating.

"Sorry," I rub my face. "I had a dream, and it was—" I trail off. I'm definitely not telling Connor about the weirdness my subconscious was dredging up from some forgotten swamp.

"Was it hot?" Connor asks, rolling his naked body against my sweating skin. "Damn," he hisses when his hand covers my pert breast, my nipples hard as candies and aching for his mouth. "You *did* have a dirty dream," he praises, thrumming my sensitive buds.

I'm so turned on, I can't hide the whimper that drops from my mouth.

He growls into my shoulder blade. "What exactly did I do to you in this dream?" Connor asks, digging his teeth into my skin with a hungry wickedness.

My body aches. It wasn't Connor doing it to me, it was Xander and—

It's *not* something I'm going to tell him about!

Connor wraps his arms around me from the side, the fingers of one hand swirling over my overly sensitive breasts, while the other traces down my stomach heading south. Oh man! My body is confused. It's Connor who's touching me, inching his fingers between my thighs and caressing my honey-soaked prize. Yet, my mind flashes to Xander's talented hands holding me open.

“Fuck, you’re wet,” Connor praises, slashing his fingers through my soaked folds. “This was definitely a hot dream.”

His fingers tease, threatening to dip inside me. I groan, my mind thinking about that single thrust in the dream that made me come. Clearly, my body is out of whack. I burn hot, but not that hot. It was just a dream, and I’m obviously thrown off by the stress at the restaurant. Simon left for Los Angeles a month ago to open our second Flambé location, and I’ve been overworked.

“It was nothing,” I say to Connor, wondering if I should pretend the dream was about him and work off my stress in the real world with my actual boyfriend.

“Nothing, huh?” Connor scolds, thrusting a finger inside me in retaliation. I buck, wildly turned on and needing to be fucked. “This dream was about someone else, wasn’t it?” Connor accuses, pumping his fingers inside me hotly.

I’m so thrown off by his assault and the fact that my mind is flashing between a sexy brit and my boyfriend, that I’m not sure I say anything intelligible in response. “Uh, it was ... uh ...”

I feel Connor’s lips split against my shoulder blade, indicating a naughty grin. “It *was* about someone else!” he exclaims, calling my bluff and rubbing his thumb over my clit as punishment. I’m puddy in his arms.

I’m about to deny what he’s said, when Connor grabs my hips and flips me over on the bed, putting me onto my hands and knees. It’s the exact same position Xander put me in in the dream, except I’m on the bed instead of the floor.

“It was only a dream!” I manage, but it’s the wrong thing to say, because it only makes Connor grope me more intensely.

“Who was it?” Connor demands, and I feel his hard cock press against my ass.

God, he has no idea how close this was to the dream. I pant

and say nothing, mewling as he notches his tip in my entrance. I turn to liquid, remembering how my cunt salivated for Xander, and how it only took one thrust to—

“Is it someone I know?” Connor growls. “Because I’m going to make you forget he exists.”

Connor grips my hips so hard I know he won’t be gentle, and I’m so turned on I almost push back and take him myself, needing to be fucked for real now.

“It—it was someone else,” I admit, not sure if I’m delirious enough to say Xander’s name to him. We haven’t talked about Xander. He’s an omission, someone from the past I never needed to tell Connor about.

“Tell me his name,” Connor growls, pumping shallowly into my cunt. Connor loves to do this, to torture me and make me beg.

“Will you fuck me harder?” I ask, looking back at how Connor is positioned behind me like a primal god ready to strike. Connor’s not the jealous type, but he smirks like he might reward me if I’m honest and give him a name. “Fine,” I hiss, biting my lip. “It was Sebastian James.”

Connor’s fingers tighten possessively on my hips at the lie I’ve given him.

“Who?”

“He’s an actor,” I explain. “He’s on Desmond’s show.”

That part’s true. Sebastian James is on that naughty TV show with my sister’s boyfriend Desmond who’s the star.

“He’s the other dude on Billionaire Heat?” Connor asks, his fingers digging punishingly into my sides. God, it feels amazing.

“Yes,” I confirm. “He’s Desmond’s co-star. He’s the one who plays British, but isn’t.” That seems like a detail I shouldn’t add, but Xander’s dirty words, dripping in his British accent have me aching for my boyfriend to impale me.

“That actor guy gets you hot?” Connor demands.

Not exactly. Sure, Sebastian James is good-looking. If I was the person I used to be before I met Connor, I’d happily take the television star to bed. I’d visit my twin sister Esme in Los Angeles and demand she take me to the set of her boyfriend’s livelihood. If I was the man-eater I was before Connor, I’d easily seduce Sebastian James to the dark side. And yet, it’s the British accent and the man who inspired more desserts at Flambé than I’d like to admit that’s got me fantasizing *he’s* the one behind me right now, instead of my boyfriend.

My subconscious is fucked up.

“I like the accent,” I admit.

“I’ll bet you do,” Connor growls, thrusting into me like Xander did in the dream.

I cry out, but I don’t come automatically—because this is real life. A part of me revels in the fact that I was probably just imagining Connor doing exactly what he’s doing right now—pounding into me like he’s Thor and his hammer’s his cock. My brain was just getting its wires crossed in the dream by putting Xander’s face on something that’s clearly my boyfriend’s area of expertise.

“God, I love it when you punish me,” I praise as Connor starts to fuck, and maybe there’s a hint of jealousy and possession in his onslaught. He’s harsher and more demanding than normal, but all it does is make me quiver with each punishing thrust.

“You realize you’re only one Kevin Bacon degree away from this Sebastian guy,” Connor grunts out as his thighs slap against my ass. “Your sister invites you to LA and you’re bound to meet him.”

“Are you threatened by that,” I tease. “Or do you want a threesome.”

“You’re mine,” Connor snarls, fucking me harder.

“You sure I’m not pretending he’s the one inside me right now?” I tease.

Connor grabs my hair and fists it, using it for leverage. I gasp, because Xander did the exact same thing in the dream and suddenly my mind is flashing between them. Connor fucking me. Xander fucking me. Both punishing me with their impressive dicks. But that’s why it was a dream—it was subconscious. Xander is too sweet to fuck me like this—savage and punishing; only Connor dares to push me to my limits.

That might also be why Xander scares me. We may have had only one night together, but it wasn’t a primal fuck-fest. It was more.

“Are you thinking about him right now?” Connor demands, each pound of his hips smacking his thighs against my ass.

“Maybe.”

“In this dream, does Mr. Actor know your body the way I do? Does he know what gets you hot and makes you come? Or is he just acting?”

Connor pulls me back against his chest so I’m sitting on his cock as he continues to fuck me from below. One of his hands goes to my throat and the other to my clit, because he knows exactly how to push me over the edge.

I detonate, crying out my boyfriend’s name in a rasping scream.

“Connor! Connor! Oh god—!”

Connor comes with me and it’s loud and beautiful, the two of us falling into my sheets in a sweaty heap only moments later.

“That’s what I thought,” Connor whispers in my ear, triumphant that he’s whipped all memory of the TV star from my mind. But when he untangles himself and heads for the

bathroom, the image of Xander wrapped in these sheets infiltrates my mind.

As much as I love my boyfriend, a hot dream about Xander isn't nothing. I don't know why, but a hot dream about Xander feels like so much more.

ARIE

The leaning tower of paperwork sitting on Simon's desk is tall enough to make me day drink.

I'm standing in Simon's empty office trying to decide if I should puke or take the day off. The office is empty of Simon, but not empty of the paper monstrosity that mocks me with bills, order forms, and vendor information. Half of those papers wear big ugly overdue stamps that feel like my parents grounding me for being irresponsible. Simon made it clear when he left for Los Angeles that I'd need to hire someone to do his job.

Obviously.

There's no way I'm getting through that stack before I bleed out from paper cuts.

But Simon wants *me* to hire someone? Me? I specialize in braising meringue and knowing the exact temperature to temper chocolate. I don't know anything about hiring a second Nerds-R-Us accountant extraordinaire.

Of course, I asked Simon to help me hire someone before he left. But I made such a mess with him and his new girlfriend

Kendall that he basically gave me the middle finger and told me to sit and spin. And now he's gone. As much as I'd like to day drink myself into oblivion, I can't just ignore that leaning tower of irresponsibility. I actually have to *do* his job until another business savvy accountant walks into my life.

"Arie?"

I turn to find Olivia standing in the doorway. She's the black-haired goddess who's one of my managers along with manning the hostess desk. She's been kind enough to pick up some of my slack over the last few weeks. She's actually Olivia Voss now, having married Connor's older brother. And bless her for not quitting her job here at Flambé the second that ring was on her finger. Her sugar-husband Ned makes a pretty penny as a lawyer and she could easily spend her days painting (her true passion) rather than hanging out at my restaurant.

"Did you make last week's produce order?" Olivia asks. "The prep-cooks seem to be out of stone fruits and berries for tonight's dinner service."

"Last week's—?" My eyes flick to the tower on Simon's desk, along with the multi-page to-do list he printed out and left me that outlined his weekly duties. I remember looking at it once, before I determined it was a jumble of cryptic code like in one of those Indiana Jones treasure hunt movies. I proceeded to do what I do best—cook—and I never touched it again. Obviously, I can't read it without the help of a hot archeologist who preferably is a young Harrison Ford doppelganger. "I, uh, may have forgotten to, uh ..."

Olivia glances at the mountain of paperwork and frowns. It's a look that says *I wish Simon was here. He wasn't a royal fuck up who can't even order lettuce.*

"I can go to the farmers market," I say quickly. "Can you have the prep-cooks make me a list?"

"Yes," Olivia says weakly, "but—"

“But nothing,” I interrupt. “I’ve got this. Get me a list.”

“Buuuut,” Olivia pushes on, her voice rising, “you’ll also need to stop at restaurant supply, the bank for petty cash, and there’s a lady from the Oahu Circular who keeps calling about an expired credit card. She’s threatening to pull our ads for the next three months if she doesn’t hear from you.”

“Right, of course,” I bluster, feeling dizzy. I haven’t looked at my email or checked my phone messages in three days. Simon had everything forwarded to me—because he’s organized and responsible—but he forgot that I’m notoriously bad about checking any of those things. That was Simon’s job, and he had it covered. I, on the other hand, can cover the perfect steak with a smoke bath so the tang of the wood infuses into the fat. There wasn’t a class on emails and accounting in culinary school.

I pull out my phone to see a tiny icon mocking me with 15 new voicemails. Great. My stomach knots in a tangle of spaghetti that’s being squished by an ogre. I don’t dare look at how many unread emails I have.

Is it hot in here? Did someone say Connor was pouring vodka shots at 10 am? Maybe that’s a new policy I should implement.

“And you’ve got two candidates waiting to be interviewed,” Olivia adds, pointing toward the front of the restaurant.

“Interviewed?”

“To be the new Simon.”

“Now?” I look around the disaster that is Simon’s office. “Aren’t those this afternoon?”

“It’s two thirty,” Olivia says. “They’ve been waiting for over an hour.”

“Two thirty?!” I look at Olivia in shock. “That means the farmers market is closed and—” I grab one of the papers off Simon’s stack and start fanning myself, but my gentle ninja-like

gestures are really grotesque hot-dog fingers of clumsiness, causing the tower to erupt all over the floor.

I let out a strangled sound, not sure if I'm going to scream, or cry, or just light everything on fire. Actually, fire sounds good. Fire is the perfect way to get rid of all these papers!

"I'll get Connor," Olivia says sheepishly, holding her hands up like she knows I'm about to go full dragon.

"I don't need Connor," I snap, but she's gone before I get the words out. That's been the entire staff's mantra the last few weeks—I'll get Connor—as if I can't function without him! Do they all really need a Greek-god's worth of muscle and gorgeousness as a buffer? Yes, Connor helps me to calm down, but I'm not *that* bad.

No, of course not, you're just bad enough that your best friend/business partner needs to be an ocean away in Los Angeles!

I growl and grab Simon's to-do list from under the atomic-bomb explosion of papers. I turn on my four-inch stilettos and march toward the front of the restaurant. Out the corner of my eye, I see Olivia at the bar talking to Connor. They both glance at me warily as I storm past, but I ignore them and strut up to the two interviewees waiting near the entrance. One is a young girl who barely looks nineteen, and the other is a man in his fifties who I could easily mistake for a sack of potatoes.

"Hi, I'm Arie, owner of the restaurant." I say briskly, tossing my red hair over my shoulder. "I'm sorry for the wait. If both of you could come with me."

I spin again and strut back toward Simon's office, hearing them both grab their things and run to follow me.

"It's very nice to meet you, Ms. Noel," the female interviewee says. "I'm a huge fan of your culinary expertise."

I grit my teeth at her brown-nosing, but I do my best to give her a tight smile, which she takes as permission to continue to

gush at my accomplishments: successful business, featured in national cooking magazines, making the Atlantis resort a must-stay destination. Ha! Little does she know that Simon's the glue that keeps this business together and she's a poor substitute of a band-aid.

I walk the candidates into Simon's office where the papers are still strewn everywhere. They both look at the mess wide-eyed as I motion for them to take a seat, the female interviewee playing hop scotch as she attempts to cross the room without stepping on anything.

"As you can see," I say, motioning to the floor. "Flambé is in desperate need of someone who doesn't spend her days in the kitchen covered in vodka and gravy." I point to myself. "My business partner is in Los Angeles, and your job would be, well, this." I strut over to them and hold up Simon's to-do list. I split the tome in half (yes, it's that long) and give them each a stack of papers.

I'm greeted with bug eyes and blank stares. Little Miss Brown Noser at least starts to look through the document, whereas her potato-sack competitor looks like I just served him a prison sentence.

"I'll give you five minutes to look that over, and when I come back, you can each tell me what your plan would be. Got it? Great!" I wave my cell phone at them and I walk toward the door. "I've got to call a lady about a declined credit card and make sure we actually have food to serve at dinner tonight."

I don't do either of those things. The second I'm out of sight, I walk outside to the back patio and grip the railing. Before me is the sparkling Waikiki bay, looking shiny blue and perfect. It's paradise. It's Hawaii. It's the million-dollar view that Simon knew how to sweet talk the Atlantis resort into risking on a restaurant run by him and me.

Now run just by—

I take several breaths of air in an attempt to calm my raging brain. I may also scream. I'm told screaming is healthy: get out your emotions, right? Don't bottle them up to explode.

A second later, both Connor and Olivia are walking out of Flambé's back door to check on me.

"I'm fine," I hiss at them. "I didn't jump if that's what you're worried about."

Connor's eyebrows raise in alarm, his gaze telling me *that wasn't even close to funny*.

"I'll tell the waitstaff and cooks that all fruit-dishes are off the menu tonight," Olivia says. "And I'll go to restaurant supply and the bank myself."

I nod a *thank you*. Olivia squeezes Connor's arm in solidarity before leaving me alone with my boyfriend.

"You're not okay," Connor says, walking up to me and wrapping me in a giant bear hug. I sigh into his chest and revel in the weight of his arms and the smell of alcohol on his skin.

"Do you think if I call Simon and grovel, he'll get on a plane and come back to fix the mess I've made?" I ask sheepishly, not liking the idea of begging.

"Nope," Connor replies, stroking my hair. "You're a big girl and you can fix this on your own. Simon deliberately left a mess for you to stew in."

"And you think I deserve that?" I ask, to which his arms hug me tighter.

"I love you," he says instead, which means he's on Simon's side.

"Fine," I say, pulling away from his arms. "Big girl, big panties, big mess I have to fix all on my own. Got it."

"We're all here to help, Arie," Connor says as I brush past him and fling open the back door. "Except Simon," he clarifies. "Simon needs space."

"Got it!" I repeat, feeling the dragon's heat percolating at

the back of my neck. No bailing me out of my mess. I have to do it all by myself. No problem! Connor says something else that I don't hear, because I'm already stalking away toward Simon's office. "Okay, what have we got, minions?" I say in a huff, addressing my two interviewees.

Only, the room is empty.

Both candidates have left.

Of course, they have. And if they were still here, I'm sure they would've walked out at that minion comment. Because who wants to work for a diva chef turned wrecking ball?

Nobody.

Not even my best friend, Simon.

ARIE

I dig my feet into the sand in front of the Atlantis resort and text my sister.

Arie: I've got about thirty minutes before dinner service, and if you don't talk me off the ledge, I might burn Flambé down tonight.

My twin sister Esme is the peacemaker. She's known me longer than anyone (obviously, we shared a womb). She'll know what to do.

Esme: Hello, drama queen. It's nice to hear from you.

I grumble at her response. Why is everyone making fun of me about this?

Arie: I'm serious. I'm not dealing with Simon's absence very well. In fact, I'm not dealing at all.

Esme: *Haven't you hired someone to replace him?*

Arie: *Everyone runs out of the interview. I'm that scary.*

Esme: *You are intimidating.*

Arie: *It's the heels. Nobody likes a tall woman.*

Esme: *Well ... you're nicknamed the dragon for a reason.*

I insert a GIF of a dragon burning down a village. Seems appropriate.

Esme: *Have you asked Connor or Olivia to do the interviews instead?*

Arie: *I've thought about it. I just ...*

I dig my feet deeper into the sand, not liking the idea of letting someone else make such an important decision.

Esme: *You're just a control freak.*

I insert a GIF of a nail being pummeled by a hammer.

Arie: *We all have our vices.*

Esme: *Hmmmm, I thought that was Connor's unreasonably talented male appendage.*

Arie: *Just say cock.*

Arie: *Or dick.*

Arie: *Or is that what you say to Desmond when you're in bed? Ream me with your male appendage!*

No response.

Arie: *I'm sorry, do you say "Ream me with your UNREASONABLY TALENTED male appendage?"*

Esme: *Desmond's an actor. He's unreasonably talented in many regards.*

Arie: *Ha ha.*

Esme: *Appendages aside, Connor used to be a lawyer. I'm sure he can interview someone.*

Arie: *It's not that I don't trust Connor's judgment, or Olivia's, or anyone else's. I just want to make sure it's the right person.*

Esme: *And the right person is whoever can withstand dragon fire?*

I send her another GIF of a dragon spewing liquid gold. I get her point. I just don't like it.

Esme: *I get it. It's hard to replace your best friend. You and Simon just ... worked.*

Arie: *Until, we didn't.*

Esme: *Yes, you did turn into a royal witch because you were afraid of losing your best friend. And guess what, you did.*

Arie: *You're supposed to be talking me off the ledge, not pushing me onto it.*

Esme: *You were never very delicate with me when it came to my past with Jeremy. The truth hurts. I'm your sister, I'm supposed to tell you the truth. Just like you did with me.*

Arie: *Fair.*

Arie: *I just need someone who understands restaurants and what I'm trying to do with this one. Flambé isn't your run-of-the-mill tourist trap. I need someone passionate about food. Someone who will get behind the experience I'm creating.*

Esme: *You need an accountant, not someone like Xander.*

Arie: *Déjà vu! It's so weird you brought him up. I just had this crazy dream about Xander.*

Esme: *A dream where you turned into a dragon and burnt your first love to a crisp like all those GIFs you've been sending me?*

Arie: *No. It was a sex dream.*

Esme: *Oh shit.*

Arie: *And it was hot. It was like Xander and Connor mixed together, where Xander was doing all the hot dirty stuff Connor does, only it was Xander's cock I was on.*

Arie: *Sorry, Xander's male appendage. I don't want you to think I was fucking a chicken.*

Esme: **eye roll emoji**

Arie: *Actually, I keep thinking that dream means something. And you just brought him up too. Should I contact Xander?*

Esme: *And tell him you had a sex dream about him? Um, no.*

Arie: *No, you dimwit. Contact him about Simon's job.*

Esme: *Hello! Xander owns his own restaurant in London.*

Arie: *I mean temporarily. He could help me hire someone who gets it. Someone I can trust.*

Esme: *I repeat, he has his own restaurant and his own life.*

Arie: *Yes, but it'd be great to have a fresh perspective. Xander could also look at the whole operation—the food, the décor, the marketing—not just the backend financial side. He'd make sure I'm not missing anything.*

Esme: *This is a bad idea.*

Arie: *Yes, I know he has his own restaurant (you broken record). That's why I'd trust his opinion. Plus, he actually inspired Flambé, and he's never seen it.*

Esme: *Are you listening to yourself?*

Arie: *He needs to see it.*

Esme: *Arie!*

Arie: *What?*

Esme: *Yes, he inspired Flambé—which was the result of you two hooking up!*

Arie: *It's a sexy restaurant.*

Esme: *And you just had a sex dream about him.*

Arie: *Which is obviously a sign.*

Esme: *You're in a relationship!*

Arie: *A completely solid, good relationship.*

Esme: *You don't invite the man you slept with to help you fix your restaurant, especially not after having a sex dream about him.*

Arie: *Or I do, because that's the fucked up way my subconscious works. Sex and Xander is really just code for he'll help me with Flambé. I was in a bind before and Xander came in and helped me figure out my next move, which was to build this restaurant. Now it's happening again. Simple.*

Esme: *That's horrible logic. Don't you get it? You're playing with fire when it comes to Xander.*

I laugh out loud, because suddenly this all seems so obvious that I can't believe I didn't think of it before.

Arie: *I love to play with fire. I built an entire restaurant around it.*

Esme: *That's not what I'm talking about.*

Arie: *Flambé can deal with a little fire.*

Esme: *I'm talking about your relationship. You and Connor.*

Arie: *We're fine. And this idea is brilliant! Thank you, Esme!*

Esme: *Does Connor even know who Xander is?*

I stare at the text as a worm wiggles in my gut. I'm sure I've told Connor about Xander before, haven't I? I mean, I've definitely mentioned my old friend from culinary school who runs a restaurant in London. Right?

Esme: *I'll take your silence as a NO.*

Arie: *Connor has a past too. We both slept with other people before we knew each other.*

Esme: *But Xander's not one of your random hook ups.*

Arie: *He's also NOT my boyfriend.*

Esme: *No, he's the one who would've been your boyfriend if you lived in the same country.*

Arie: *But we DON'T live in the same country.*

Esme: *Until you invite him to Hawaii ...*

Arie: *Temporarily!*

Esme: *You should probably talk to Connor about it, before you do anything rash.*

Arie: *Me? Do something rash?*

Esme: *Yes. You.*

Esme sends me the same GIF of a dragon that I sent her earlier.

Arie: *I see your point, oh mighty, truth-sayer-you. But remember Xander and I did NOTHING in college when he was in a relationship. We know how to be around each other and not fuck.*

Esme: *I hope so.*

Arie: *I can be a professional, and so can he. And I love Connor.*

Esme: *I know you love Connor. Which is why I don't want you to mess this up.*

Arie: *Geeesh! Have a little faith in me.*

Esme: *Okay. But you also need to remember who you are.*

She throws that second dragon GIF back at me.

Esme: *For the record, I think you should have Connor hire someone and leave Xander in London.*

Arie: *But you're not me.*

Esme: *And you're not going to listen.*

Arie: *I'm going to listen to my gut, because it's my gut that knows how to cook, and turn up the heat, and get me out of a sticky situation.*

Esme: *Well, let Simon be a warning.*

Arie: *Meaning?*

Esme: *Were you listening to your gut when you were giving Simon a hard time about Kendall? It's not as hard as you think to lose someone you love.*

That hits a little too close to home. I'm in this crappy situation because I pushed Simon too far, expecting him to take my side. But he chose love. He chose the girl.

Arie: *This is completely different.*

XANDER

I walk through the main parlour of my restaurant The Carlisle and feel at ease amongst the dark wainscoting and old English furniture. A classy tufted couch is as exotic as I get, my preferences leaning to the comfort of straight lines, dark wood, and a single candle at the center of a table setting. I reject the flashy modern vibe that's taken over so many London restaurants: flower walls, neon signs, murals that become selfie stations. I understand the importance of marketing and gaining a social media following, but I'd rather make me and my food the center of attention, rather than create an experience that's all about *getting the right angles*. Maybe I'm just a curmudgeon who romanticizes 19th century smoke rooms and a time when gentlemen dressed up and had conversations over the perfect siff of brandy.

Or I'm bored.

I nod to my regulars as I walk past their tables, heading toward the kitchen and knowing exactly what will meet me when I get there: perfectly plated dishes, a kitchen that runs like a well-oiled machine, a series of spoons for me to taste-test.

There was a thrill the first few years I ran this restaurant, when I was challenging myself to create something that was mine and working the long hours to perfect it. Now it's just the long hours and the comfort and ... a sense that something's missing.

My mobile buzzes in my pocket for the umpteenth time as I walk into the kitchen and am met with the choir of my employees saying, *Good Evening, Chef!* I do my rounds, checking the stations, tasting the evening's sauces, and trying to ignore the social media app that's blowing up with comments congratulating my ex, Charlotte, on today's wedding.

I shouldn't care. Charlotte and I broke up years ago.

I should be leaving a friendly comment, like everyone else, that says I'm properly chuffed at the news. Which I am. She should be happy. It's just hard to know you gave a girl a ring and she kept it long enough to go nick half a dozen cannolis behind your back.

I was in love. She wasn't.

But it's been *years*, so I'm the one being a complete sod in this situation. Still, it stings knowing she chose someone else's ring to wear for forever.

"Are you surviving wedding-mageddon?"

I look up to see my restaurant manager and good friend, Sully, walking into the kitchen wearing a tweed vest and pressed slacks. His hair is cropped and swooped like David Beckham's as he holds his phone in my direction. The screen glows with a picture of Charlotte being dipped by her new husband in a tropical location.

"I knew Charlotte's family was rich, but this is—!" Sully swipes through several images, making a face at how excessive it is: an expensive lobster reception, couple photos in a turquoise lagoon, close-ups of fancy clothes and jewelry, and her and her husband looking deliriously happy. It feels more like an influencer campaign than an actual wedding. Except

the smile. Her smile is real. I know that from being the one she used to look at like that.

“I was surviving it by ignoring the notifications buzzing in my pocket and not looking at the pictures,” I say, pushing past Sully and heading toward the smoke lounge that’s adjacent the dining room.

“Bollocks, I’m an arse,” Sully says, dropping his phone from my view and traipsing behind me. “Sorry, I thought that was why you were late.”

I’m not late. I own the restaurant. I can show up whenever I want. Of course, he’s right, I usually keep to my schedule.

“I thought you were wallowing in a self-pity death scroll,” Sully says ominously.

“We broke up years ago,” I defend, to which Sully nods like a doll with a broken spring.

“Right, right, I know. It’s just that you’re still single, and she’s—” Sully looks at his mobile. “Riding a sea turtle in her wedding dress. That can’t be real? Can it?”

He flips the phone to me again, flashing a picture of Charlotte sitting on the back of the shelled animal like a princess. I pick up a decanter from the cart in the smoking lounge and pour myself a drink.

“I don’t think riding a sea creature is going to make me any less single,” I say dryly, tossing back the drink.

“Right, of course.” Sully frowns. “Well, we could go out on the lash tonight,” he nods to my brandy glass, “rather than puffering about here. Nothing mends heartache like a pub crawl.”

“Don’t you have a job,” I motion to the restaurant that’s just starting dinner service.

“You don’t think I *actually* manage anything around here, do you?” Sully shakes his head like he’s had me fooled for years before pouring himself his own drink. “Plus, you look like you

need more *managing* than this finely-tuned opus behind me. You do realize The Carlisle runs beautifully even when you're not here."

"I *am* The Carlisle," I shoot back, not liking the idea of being obsolete in my own creation. "It's my name. My restaurant."

"And yet, you're sulking in the back room, hiding among the brandy sifters and the 300-year-old wall paper."

"That's a replica," I say, pointing to the walls. "And I wasn't hiding and sulking until you showed me your damn mobile!"

Sully lifts his drink to his lips, not acknowledging that outburst. "You need a vacation."

"To a tropical island where I can sit on the back of sea turtles and pretend I'm in love."

"I don't think she's pretending."

"I don't either," I grumble.

"I'm just saying, everything is under control here. There's plenty of room for you to ..." Sully flicks his fingers against the air like the secret to heartache is to frolic with the fairies and find Narnia. Not that my heart aches, it's just ...

"Are you telling me to get lost?" I ask, indignantly pouring myself a second drink.

Sully shrugs. "Or go out and have a shag. Look through those photos, polish off that brandy, and go out and remember you're the man who built The Carlisle. Your name might be on the door, but I haven't seen you excited about anything in ... well, a while, if I'm honest. And you pay me to be honest."

"I pay you to be honest about the quality of the waitstaff and whether the cooks are cutting out early from their shifts."

"It's okay to be upset about it," Sully says, waving his phone and ignoring what I've said. "Charlotte's the only woman you dedicated your heart to, other than this restaurant. It's normal to go through a blue period."

“I’m not a series of Picasso paintings,” I grumble.

“No, but your current mood matches the melancholy of Picasso’s blue obsession.”

“Paint was expensive,” I correct. “Picasso was poor, he wasn’t depressed.”

“*Was* poor,” Sully emphasizes. “I believe he became a true womanizer when his palette expanded. And I remember a certain restaurant owner who used to be a randy bugger happy to be taste-testing all about town.”

“You calling me old?”

“Maybe just broken,” Sully corrects.

“I think that’s worse.”

“It’s not,” Sully defends. “Broken things can be fixed. Old things get put in museums and turned into replicas for men with stodgy taste.” Sully motions to the wallpaper as evidence.

I scowl at him, but my phone in my pocket is blowing up.

“How the hell do you turn off notifications on this damn thing,” I growl, pulling out my mobile as Sully points at the device like it’s evidence I might be falling into the *old* category even though I’m in my thirties.

But when I click on my phone, it’s not the social media app that’s lighting it up, it’s a text message thread that’s been started.

Arie: Xander! How’s my favorite friend from across the pond?

Arie: Wonderful, I hope.

Arie: Question, how do you feel about a wee vacation in Hawaii?

I sit up straight, a jolt of adrenaline shooting through my system. “Oh shit.”

Sully shakes his head. "I'll give you ten minutes to death scroll, then I'll confiscate your phone." He points to my device, thinking I've pulled up Charlotte's photos. "I suggest skipping the post titled Pre-Honeymoon Bliss."

"No, it's not ..." I mumble.

Arie: I need your help.

The skin on the back of my neck prickles as if I've actually clicked on Charlotte's honeymoon photos only to discover they're a naked internet porno. What is it about Arie Noel that makes me immediately sweat?

Arie: I need your help, desperately.

Images of the one night we spent at the Atlantis Resort flip through my head: Arie the bombshell redhead, the two of us cooking, her offering me forbidden fruit, me tasting the most delicious fruit between her legs.

"You clicked on the pre-honeymoon post, didn't you?" Sully asks, reacting to my expression.

"Where is Charlotte's wedding?" I ask. "It's not in Hawaii, is it?"

"Oh, bugger," Sully gripes. "You're going to crash the honeymoon, aren't you? You realize the *Does anyone object to this union* objections are supposed to happen *at* the wedding. Not after. They're married."

"Yes, but did they get married *in* Hawaii?" I repeat.

"I don't, uh ..." Sully looks at his phone and scrunches up his face. "No, actually. That's Tahiti."

"Good."

"Good?" Sully frowns, not following. "I mean, yes, good."

Don't go to Tahiti to crash your ex-fiancé's honeymoon. Go to Hawaii instead and ...?" He looks at me for an answer.

"You told me to go on a vacation."

Sully's eyes narrow. "That was rhetorical. But uh, I suppose if you're feeling literal, I'd suggest something along the lines of visiting your Mum and Pop in the English countryside. Less milage. More tea."

"Except you told me to go out for a shag."

"Right, Mum and Pop are not ideal for that," Sully concedes. "But why exactly do you need to get on a plane?"

I look at the text message from Arie and smile. If there's one woman in the world that I've got an Achilles heel for, it's Arie Noel.

"I need a ticket to Hawaii. I'm going to go see an old friend."

Sully's eyebrows are as high as Big Ben, contorting into a distinctly un-gentlemanly expression. I ignore it and stand up, handing him my half-finished drink.

"You can hold down the fort for me while I'm gone, right?" I ask, surprised by the spring in my step.

"Because you're going to Hawaii?"

"I'm going home to pack," I clarify.

"For Hawaii?"

"Yup."

"Not Tahiti, but Hawaii? This isn't a ruse to make me think you're doing something healthy when you're really about to sabotage a honeymoon?"

"Who's the person who helped me get over Charlotte in the first place, Sully?"

Sully tilts his head to the side like a labradoodle. "The American?"

I nod.

“The sex-pot with the circus restaurant?” Sully’s eyes go wider.

“That’s the one.”

“She wants to see you?” He points at my phone.

I smile, but then I school my features and give him a nonchalant shrug. “She needs some help.”

“And by *help*, she means *die in your lap*?” Sully asks.

“You don’t have to use Shakespearean euphemisms,” I laugh. “But *die in your lap* would be a good name for one of her naughty desserts, if you know what I mean.”

“I do remember you saying something about the American’s ability to turn chocolate and fruit into ... biblical experiences.”

“That she can,” I agree, a zip of excitement jolting through me. “And I can’t wait to see what she’s got in store for me.”

CONNOR

“Do you know what this is about?” Finn asks me, running a hand through his golden hair as he leans against the front of my bar. He nods toward the swarm of employees that fill Flambé’s main dining room, fellow waitresses and waiters like himself.

“Are some of us about to get fired?” Finn’s long-haired partner in crime (and love— he’s in a throuple these days), Archer asks, shimmying up next to Finn, but directing his question at me.

“I may sleep with the boss,” I say, “but that doesn’t mean I know everything she does.”

“You know ninety-five percent of the things she does,” Archer counters.

“I’m sure it’s ninety-nine percent,” comes the voice of Olivia, who walks behind the bar and pours herself a sparkling water. “He’s a Voss,” she continues. “If he’s anything like his older brother, nothing gets by him and he’s holding out on all of us.”

“You give my brother too much credit,” I counter. “Plus,

you're a Voss now." I grab the water gun and spray my sister-in-law.

"Oh my gosh!" she squeals.

"Maybe you're the one who knows everything about Arie," I parry, "seeing that you're her new best friend since Esme left."

"I can't replace a twin," Olivia throws back, grabbing an ice cube and chucking it at me.

I snatch it out of the air and playfully toss it right back. "That doesn't mean you don't know all her deep dark girly secrets. I know how to make the woman come, you know what to say to her when she cries on your shoulder."

"Is that what this is?" Finn asks. "Is our boss going to cry in front of us?"

"She's been stressed," I hiss.

"Yeah, you definitely know more than you're letting on," Archer concludes from that comment. "A stressed-out dragon that's been crying ..." Archer nods to my girlfriend who walks into the center of the room and claps her hands to get everyone's attention. "This is definitely not a happy-go-lucky-trust-circle kind of meeting."

"I actually think I saw Arie cry the other day," Finn admits, turning to me with concerned eyes. "I know Simon leaving has been stressful but—"

"What?" Olivia jumps in. "You don't like me making your schedule instead of Simon?" She points for Finn to give me a break and focus on the boss, but the moment he turns away, Olivia shoots me a concerned look that asks *Was Arie crying?*

I shrug. Olivia's seen as many of Arie's mood swings as I have lately. The dragon definitely has a light trigger switch these days. Olivia shuffles up next to me and asks under her breath. "Are you okay? Has she been taking out her anger on you?"

“Make-up sex is the best sex, Olivia. You haven’t learned that yet?” I deflect, because yeah, Arie’s been a tough pill to swallow over the last few weeks.

“Ned and I don’t fight,” Olivia tosses back.

“Yet,” I warn her. “Marriage isn’t just roses and blow jobs.”

“Lectures my very single brother-in-law,” she retorts.

“You don’t think dating Arie is like being married to her?” I ask.

“Put a ring on it and we’ll talk.”

“Is that one of Arie’s deep dark secrets?” I ask mockingly. “Do you two have pillow fights and she gushes about the giant rock my brother gave you?”

Olivia lifts up her hand and makes the diamond on her finger sparkle. “I do love glitter,” she admits.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

“Can I get everyone’s attention?” Arie calls out, pulling a chair out from one of the tables and stepping up on it (in four-inch polka-dot heels, I might add). My dragon has class. “First, thank you all for coming in, especially those of you who have the day off. Connor is at the bar and he’ll be happy to make complimentary drinks for those of you who don’t have to work later.”

“News to me,” I mumble under my breath, grabbing myself a paring knife and a bunch of limes to start halving before I’m slammed with requests.

“Don’t you love it when Arie offers you up for extra work,” Olivia teases, shoulder bumping me.

“I mean, it’s nice for those with the day off,” I admit.

“Isn’t today *your* day off?” Olivia asks.

I shrug. It is.

“Can I get a vodka soda,” Archer asks, smirking at me behind his long black hair.

“Listen to whatever the meeting’s about first, dip wad,” I sass back at him, to which he just gives me a big smile.

“I know things have been a little rocky since Simon left,” Arie continues. I notice her flinch as a ripple of murmurs go through the crowd. *A little rocky* is an understatement, but Arie lifts her chin and keeps going. “The good news is things are going well with our second location in LA, and Simon’s going to be sending us updates as the project progresses.”

I don’t know if that’s true. I hope it is. I hope Simon’s at least sharing with Arie his business progress, even if she has to pick up the slack here.

“But the reason I called you here today was to tell you—”

“How good angry dragon sex is with Connor?” Archer calls out, having obviously heard my conversation with Olivia. I spray him in the back of the head with the spritzer. “Ahhh! What?!”

“Sorry,” I yell to Arie. “Dipshit here needed a shower.”

Arie glares at us a second. “As I was saying ...” She plasters on a smile and turns back to her employees. “Simon will be away for a while, but I’m glad to announce I have a replacement for him.”

She does? My eyes flick to my girlfriend standing on the chair. I didn’t know she’d interviewed anyone else, much less made a hire.

“It’s a temporary placement,” she continues, “and a little unusual. But this is Flambé, how often do I play by the *normal* rules anyway?” A whistle rips through the crowd. Everyone who works here knows it’s not your normal restaurant.

“Did you know about this?” Olivia whispers, seeming just as surprised as me. I shake my head *no*.

“I’m excited to announce that one of London’s most famous and revered chefs is coming to Flambé!” Arie announces. “Not only is he going to help with all the elements that Simon was in

charge of, as well as train a more permanent replacement, he's also going to give Flambé a full-restaurant audit. That means menu, recipes, systems, customer service, table-side pyrotechnics, décor, all of it! He's coming to share his expertise and help us to take this location to the next level!"

Arie's excited, but the crowd in front of her isn't quite sure what to make of this. Are we all about to be evaluated? And who is this famous chef from London? Both Finn and Archer look back at me like they aren't sure how to take the news. I try to shake it off with an *I'm not the boss* shrug, but they don't like that reaction.

"Oh shit, she didn't ..." Olivia says under her breath, making my stomach churn. I'm not sure Olivia even realizes she said it out loud.

"She didn't what?" I ask pointedly, and Olivia gives me a haunted look that doesn't make my stomach settle.

"Nothing," Olivia quickly covers. "I'm sure I'm wrong."

"Wrong about what?"

"This isn't a test," Arie says loudly, reacting to the murmurs of her staff. "Nobody is getting fired and we're not making any sweeping changes. We're just getting a second opinion from someone who's an icon in the restaurant world. This is an incredible opportunity for *all of us* to learn and grow."

"Who is this chef?" asks one of the staff members up front.

"Right, of course, sorry," Arie blusters, actually blushing for a second. "It's Xander Carlisle, who runs The Carlisle in London. Some of you may have seen him as a judge on the third season of Chef Wars."

"Oh, the hot British judge," I hear one of the female waitresses say, followed by a bustle of chatter.

He's really good.

Why would he come here? He's like a celebrity.

Wow, this is an amazing opportunity!

Do you think Simon knows he's getting replaced with a hot chef from across the pond?

"How do you know Chef Carlisle?" someone asks, which is a great question. This seems completely out of the blue. We need someone to do Simon's job, not a system overhaul.

"Actually, Xander is a friend of mine from culinary school," Arie says. "It's been amazing to see him become successful over the years, and I really hope we can make him proud with what we've accomplished here. And the extra exciting news is he cleared his schedule and you'll all get to meet him later this week!"

The energy in the room has changed from confused to excited, but I can't stop looking at Olivia, whose face is pale.

"Why do you look like you just swallowed a dragon egg?" I ask, but Olivia continues to look at me all ghostly and wide-eyed. "You're freaking me out, Liv."

"Arie didn't tell you about this?" she asks quietly, even though she already knows the answer to this question. I shake my head. "But you're okay with it?"

I frown at her. "Why shouldn't I be okay with it?"

"It's Xander."

I stare at her confused.

"Carlisle." She says his last name like that should mean something.

"And ...?" I raise my shoulders in confusion.

"Do you know who Xander is?"

"I know what Arie just told us," I say, motioning to my girlfriend who's stepped down from the chair and is talking animatedly with those around her. "A friend from school, owner of some hot-shot restaurant in London, former reality TV show judge, and Simon's temporary replacement."

"That's it?"

"What else is there?"

“Double shit,” Olivia hisses, making the hairs on my arms bristle.

“Now you’re really freaking me out. What do you know that I don’t?” I demand.

“An old friend from college,” Olivia says with an edge of intention, implying I should read into that statement. When I frown at her she shakes her head. “You realize Arie had a life before you.”

“And?”

“And someone had to inspire this place.” Olivia motions to the restaurant around us with its seductive décor and low lighting.

“Are you talking about an ex?” I ask. “He’s just a friend from culinary school.”

“Uh ...” Olivia stares at me like she can’t believe I don’t know this. “Connor, he’s *the* ex.”

“What? How do you even know that? I’ve been around longer than you have, Liv. I was Arie’s first hire at Flambé.”

“Yeah, but you don’t have a vagina.”

“Meaning?”

“Girls talk.”

“And she talks about her ex?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Technically, they weren’t a couple.”

“So, he’s a friend,” I conclude.

“No, he’s the one who got away,” Olivia corrects. “The one she reconnected with after college, but you know, he lives in London.”

“Right, and an ocean between them is too much for Arie’s libido,” I spar.

“Yes,” Olivia agrees. “Except ...” she motions to where Arie just gave her announcement. “Now he’s coming to Hawaii.”

My eyes narrow. I get her point and I don’t like it. “Have you ever met this guy?”

“No,” Olivia admits, but she shrugs like there’s a legend she’s heard about him, and if I haven’t noticed the female staff seems pretty excited about him coming to work here.

“Has anyone met this guy, other than my girlfriend?” I inquire.

“Esme and Simon know him,” Olivia divulges. “You know, from before, from when they were all in college.”

“College,” I echo. “So this guy is ancient history.”

“Except, he flew to Hawaii before Flambé existed and they slept together,” Olivia reveals.

My shoulders knot at that information. College is one thing, but a few years ago before Flambé? That’s more recent than I’d like it to be.

“The way Esme and Arie tell it, Xander inspired Arie to open this restaurant: food and sex, that’s what Xander and Arie were all about.”

Fuck.

“You know,” Olivia back pedals, realizing she’s said too much. “You should ask Esme and Simon about it. They actually know him. Maybe it *is* ancient history. All that was before you, Con.” Oliva starts backing away, her face blushing with the fact that she’s said far more than she should have. “And hey, maybe they *are* just friends now.”

But it’s obvious, even she doesn’t believe that.

CONNOR

After I'm done making cocktails for all the Flambé employees, I go and look for Arie. If this Xander guy really is an ex-boyfriend then she damn well should've talked to me about it. Sure, it's for the business, and maybe this chef is exactly what Flambé needs while Simon is in LA, but I deserve more than to be blindsided at a staff meeting.

The problem is ... I can't find her.

I've searched the restaurant twice and every time I ask someone if they've seen her, she's supposedly somewhere I've already looked. After my fourth round, I go out to the patio and round the building until I find a secluded nook on the rooftop. I pull out my phone and start to text.

Connor: Arie, where are you? I've searched the restaurant four times.

Nothing. No response.

No three little dots.

Radio silence.

Connor: *I need to talk to you. Call me. Or find me when you get back to Flambé.*

I consider saying something flirty or cute, but I'm suddenly in a foul mood. Instead, I pull up a new text message thread and dash off a text to the two fools who have flown the coop to the mainland: Simon and Esme. They've at least met this Xander guy.

Connor: *Who the hell is Xander Carlisle?*

Three dots start cycling next to Esme's name. At least Arie's twin isn't going to leave me high and dry. But then Simon beats her to the punch.

Simon: *Oh, fuck.*

I almost throw my phone off the side of the building.

Connor: *Not the reaction I wanted.*

Esme: *How do you know about Xander Carlisle? Wait, did Arie tell you about the dream?*

Connor: *I'm sorry? WHAT dream?*

Simon: *Seriously, Esme?*

Connor: *WHAT dream? Do you know about this, Simon?*

Simon: *I have no clue. I just know Esme has foot-in-mouth disease, even over text.*

Connor: *Start talking, Esme!*

Esme: *It's nothing. Never mind.*

Connor: *Never mind, my ass! Is Arie having dreams about this Xander dude?*

Esme: *He's not a dude. He's a fine, upstanding British chap.*

Connor: *Why is this British DUDE a secret that everyone is keeping from me?*

Esme: *The dream was a secret. Not his existence.*

Simon: *Xander's not a secret. He's more of an omission. I don't know anything about the dream.*

An omission? I ball up my fists.

Connor: *If you two were here, I'd be torturing you both with a crème brûlée torch!*

Simon: *I'm glad we're in LA.*

Connor: *WHY are you omitting this dude?*

Esme: *How do you even know about Xander?*

Connor: *Don't answer a question with a question.*

Esme: *Arie loves you.*

Connor: *Still not an answer. Why is today the first time I've ever heard about him?*

Simon: *Because Xander is trouble.*

Connor: *What kind of trouble?*

Esmé: *The "I'm having hot dreams about my ex" kind of trouble.*

Connor: *Olivia said, he wasn't an ex. Just a hook-up.*

Esmé: *Technically, that's true.*

Simon: *But he's more than just a hook-up. He's THE hook up.*

Connor: *I thought I was THE hook up!*

Simon: *You are. But we're talking about before you.*

Esmé: *Basically, if Xander didn't live in London, there probably wouldn't be a you.*

Simon: *Esmé! What's wrong with you? Why would you say that?*

I sit down on one of the metal boxes that line the rooftop, the Hawaiian sun bearing down on me like a giant magnifying glass frying an ant.

Connor: *Now I'm freaking out.*

Simon: *Xander and Arie are ancient history.*

Connor: *Then why is he coming to Flambé to do YOUR job, Simon?*

Simon: *What?*

Connor: *Arie's flying him in to be your temporary replacement. She just had a big staff meeting where she told all of us.*

Esme: *So, that's how you know about him.*

Connor: *Surprise. Surprise.*

Esme: *But she talked to you about it first, right?*

Connor: *If she talked to me about it, why would I be asking you who the fuck he is?*

Esme: *That's not good.*

Connor: *I feel like I've been punched in the balls.*

Simon: *Arie's not the best communicator.*

Connor: *Says the guy who's moved to a new city from said lack of communication.*

Simon: *True. But in Arie's defense, hiring Xander might not be an awful idea. Xander's an excellent businessman and an even better chef.*

Connor: *So, he's everything I'm not.*

Esme: *Just don't look at his social media videos and you'll be fine.*

Connor: *Why?*

Esme: *Just don't.*

Connor: *You realize I'm absolutely going to look at them now.*

Esme: *I said don't.*

Connor: *You don't know how men work.*

Simon: *Esme! Stop bringing up things he'd never know about —dreams, social media, desserts!*

Connor: *What desserts?*

Simon: *Shit.*

Connor: *Desserts?*

Esme: *There may be one or two desserts on the menu named after Xander.*

Simon: *Esme!*

Esme: *You mentioned the desserts. Not me!*

Connor: *You two better start telling me something that's not going to make me murder you two ... or him.*

I stand up and start stalking toward the back entrance. I clearly need to see a dessert menu.

Simon: Xander is a positive presence for Arie. They took all their classes together in culinary school. He knows what sets her off. He knows what calms her down. He knows how to inspire her to be her best self. Ultimately, he'll help her to stop freaking out about the biz side of things and get everything back on track.

Connor: That was supposed to make me feel better? He knows my girlfriend better than I do? He can do things I can't?

Simon: In a friendly way.

Connor: You've met Arie. She doesn't blow off steam in a FRIENDLY way.

Simon: True. But Xander and Arie never slept together in college. He was in a committed, long-distance relationship. He figured out how to get her through exams and finals without sex.

Connor: Esme, is that true?

Esme: That Xander has a special spell he can cast over Arie?

Simon: Esme!

Esme: What? It's true, they do have a connection that's not about sex. It's about food.

I walk through the back hallways up to the hostess desk, snagging myself a menu. I flip to the dessert section.

Connor: *Food = sex to Arie.*

Esmé: *I know that. I just ... I'm having a hard time helping you see the good side of this. I'm just programmed to see the doomsday scenarios.*

Connor: *You're a hopeless romantic! How is doomsday in your vocabulary?*

Esmé: *Exactly! Arie ending up with her hot one-night-stand isn't romantic.*

Connor: *Thank you!*

Esmé: *No, YOU'RE the hot one-night stand, remember?*

Connor: *What?*

Esmé: *But if Arie ended up with "the one who got away," the one who flew to Hawaii to profess his feelings, allowing them one magical night before he left again, and now he's about to come back into her life ... that's the romantic story.*

Connor: *I'm never speaking to you again.*

Esmé: *That's why I said, doomsday! Just romantic doomsday.*

Simon: *Only Esmé could turn something so romantic into a tragedy.*

Connor: *I'm glad you're both in LA. I hate you both right now.*

Simon: *Don't hate the messenger.*

Connor: *I hate you for leaving and putting me in this situation.*

Simon: *Arie brought that on herself.*

I grumble. He has a point. She did create her own mess.

Esme: *Need I remind you, Arie loves you, Connor.*

Connor: *Not in your unrequited long-lost-love-from-the-past scenario.*

Esme: *But she's in a relationship with YOU.*

Connor: *Right now.*

I slide into one of the secluded booths and flip open the menu to the dessert section. And because it's Flambé, that section is several pages long.

Esme: *Arie's in the only real relationship she's ever had—with you. You're the one!*

Connor: *Says the romantic twin. You know your sister doesn't believe in fate and "the one."*

Simon: *Maybe, but you're still it. You're the only real thing she's ever had. You've been here for her. Xander is just a fantasy.*

Connor: *Right! The fantasy she's having sex dreams about and has inspired desserts like Mouthwatering Velvet Cream Puffs or Mama's Dirty Crème Brûlée. That fantasy is coming to her doorstep!*

Esme: *I didn't say they were sex dreams. And those aren't the desserts he inspired.*

Connor: *Were they NOT sex dreams?*

Three dots show up next to Esme's name: typing, disappearing, typing and disappearing again.

Connor: *Exactly.*

Simon: *If your relationship with Arie is solid, then none of this Xander business matters.*

Connor: *Because Arie is rational when she's stressed out.*

Simon: *She has her moments.*

Connor: *Let's not forget you're in LA because of one of her rational moments.*

Simon: *Touché.*

Esme: *Are you afraid your relationship isn't solid?*

Connor: *I wasn't. But then Olivia flipped out and you told me my girl's having sex dreams about the British asshole she might still have a thing for. The asshole who's flying here – right now!*

Simon: *Remember their relationship is platonic. He's coming to help with the restaurant.*

Connor: *Did you ever sleep with Arie, Simon?*

Simon: *Of course not.*

Connor: *Right. So your friendship is platonic. His is ...*

I flip through the menu again.

Connor: *He's inspiring Cherries Jubilee and Forbidden Fruits.*

Esme: *Ok, yes. He did inspire one of those. But that was long before you, and he's really nice.*

Connor: *Is that supposed to make me feel better? Are Xander and I going to be best friends?*

Simon: *Put the dessert menu down and talk to Arie about it.*

Esme: *She loves you ...*

Connor: *That ellipses at the end of your sentence (...) that's NOT ominous at all. Thanks.*

Simon: *When does he arrive?*

Connor: *Later this—*

But I don't finish my text. I don't even send it. Arie walks through the front doors and I'm on my feet. I storm up to her and grab her elbow, not liking the thunder of emotion that barrels through me.

"We need to talk, right now!" I snap, holding up the dessert menu. "You're going to start telling me everything about ex-boyfriend sex dreams and forbidden fruit!"

Arie's eyes widen in alarm.

"Oh shit," she says.

"Oh shit is right."

ARIE

My tiny one-window office with its three-hundred tiny trinkets of curio-couture feels suffocating the second I shut the door and turn to my boyfriend to explain. Trust me, nobody needs a stuffed jackalope staring at them with its glass eyes and fake antlers when they're trying to self-rationalize a sex dream as a legitimate sign to invite an ex to help with their business.

"Obviously, I should've talked to you about this," I say sheepishly, walking over to the jackalope and turning those beady eyes toward the wall.

"You think?"

"What exactly do you know?"

"What *should* I know, Arie?" Connor snaps, crossing his arms over his chest.

I look at the dessert menu he's carried into my office and try to parse exactly what he said a moment ago. *Sex dreams and dessert*, right? How the hell does he know about either of those?

Oh, right. There's only one person I told about the dream.

“Esme can be an alarmist,” I defend. “I don’t know what exactly she told you, but—”

“Stop.” Connor drops the menu on my desk next to another pile of papers that I’d prefer to shred than read. “This isn’t about what Esme, or Simon, or Olivia told me—”

“Shit, you talked to a lot of people about this!”

“I looked for *you* for half an hour after your big announcement,” he snaps back, “because the only person I should be talking to about it, is *you*.”

I nod, knowing he’s right. “Okay, obviously I acted before thinking,” I admit, walking past him to sit on the tufted love seat at the back of my office. “Where do you want me to begin?”

“How about, who is Xander *to you*? There seems to be lots of myths and legends.”

He motions to the dessert menu, then the restaurant.

“Okay, that’s fair,” I nod. “He’s, uh—well, what I said in the staff meeting is true. We went to college together and he’s a famous chef now.”

“Not his resume,” Connor says in a low tone. “Who is he to *you*.”

“I’m getting there,” I stall, rubbing the back of my neck nervously. “We went to school together, we were close. As friends, I mean. He had a girlfriend. And yes, he’s someone I care about—*cared* about—who I respect and—”

“And who you slept with.”

“Yes,” I nod again, trying to gauge the frustration in Connor’s eyes. “We had one night, here.” I point to the resort below me, but realize it looks like I’m talking about Flambé. “I mean at the Atlantis, before this restaurant. Look, Connor,” I start playing with my red hair, twisting it in my grip. “I slept with a lot of people before I knew you. I’m not going to justify—”

“I don’t care about that,” he interrupts. “I care about the one guy who supposedly inspired this restaurant, who you named desserts after, who you never told me existed, who you had a sex dream about, and then invited to fly across the world to work with us.”

I stare at the floor. It sounds bad when he puts it that way.

“Yes, I had feelings for him,” I admit. “Yes, I hoped he and I would’ve been more. But we weren’t. Not in college and not after our one night together. We have separate lives. We live in separate countries that are on opposite ends of the Earth.”

“But he’s coming here.” Connor points to the floor.

“Temporarily,” I remind him. “To help with the business.”

“That sounds like it should be easy to swallow,” he snips. “But it’s not so easy when you just had a sex dream about him.” Connor’s eyes narrow like he’s suddenly putting pieces together in his head. “Fuck, that was the other day when you told me you dreamt about that actor, the one with the British accent. That was about Xander, wasn’t it?”

I open my mouth to protest, but he’s right, it was.

“That was only a few days ago!” Connor snaps. “*That’s* what made you act without thinking?”

“That and all the things piling up here which I haven’t a clue how to manage!” I gripe, motioning to my desk of papers. “Look, you know I’m impulsive and passionate. I make decisions from my gut. And I know a sex dream sounds bad, but it wasn’t about that. It was about the fact that I’m drowning here and Xander knows how to handle these things. So what if my subconscious wrapped up that message in a dream? He’s my friend! And he was willing to drop everything and get on a plane to help—because that’s what *good friends* do.”

“You’ve got me, you’ve got Olivia, you’ve got *all of us* here to help you.”

“And I’m still drowning,” I confess.

Connor's eyes pain at that comment, his shoulders starting to slump.

"I love you, Connor," I profess. "Please, you have to know that. But you also can't fix everything in my life for me."

"But *he* can?"

"That's not what I meant."

"I don't like it."

"Xander knows how to run a restaurant better than anyone I know," I defend. "Better than Simon. Better than you. Better than me. I swear that this was a business decision! I did this because, left alone to my own devices, I *will* sink this ship." I stare at him hard, so he hears it, so he lets that sink in. "You all make jokes about the dragon flying off the handle. And I know I ride hot. I know I'm stubborn. But Simon was a big reality check." My bottom lip starts to tremble as emotion rises in my throat. "Don't you realize I'm scared shitless that *I'm* the one who's going to ruin this business? The one that employs you and Olivia and everyone else I care about? I love this restaurant too much, and I won't let it go down without fighting for it. So yes, I made an impulsive decision and reached out to *my friend* who is a tried and tested restaurant guru. And yes, I slept with him years ago. And yes, he's the one who made me promise to open Flambé in the first place. But he went back to London, Connor, and you showed up in my life. And I love you so damn much, that it physically hurts sometimes." Connor seems to soften at that comment. "So please, trust me when I say this isn't an old flame I'm trying to rekindle. I promise you it isn't. I asked Xander to come here to make sure I don't burn down the castle."

I take a gasping breath, my body trembling with that admission. And Connor—because he's fucking perfect—comes over and wraps his arms around me and kisses my forehead.

What would I ever do without him?

CONNOR

“**T**his guy is a genius,” my friend Mason says, pointing at the social media video playing on my phone.

I’m sitting at the bar of the Gin n’ Lava, a tiki dive that Mason owns, which is famous for its kitschy atmosphere and dirty drink names. Trust me, common names like Sex on the Beach or a Screaming Orgasm are just the tip of the ... well, Mason definitely wouldn’t say iceberg, if you catch my drift. Case in point, Mason’s standing behind the bar and currently wearing his signature look: a Hawaiian shirt adorned with a pattern that’s particularly phallic. Today it’s bunches of bananas that *aren’t* actually bananas.

My brother Ned sits next to me in a suit, having come from work, a frown on his face as he watches Mason swipe to the next video of Xander Carlisle cooking on the social media feed.

Esme told me not to look at his social media, but of course I did.

I know now, why I shouldn’t have.

“Oh man, watch this one!” Mason gushes, as the British chef’s video smash-cuts between cooking steps. That sounds

innocent, except there's an overtly sexual way to how Chef Carlisle preps and cooks ingredients. He's in a darkly lit kitchen, slapping a slab of raw meat, or kneading a round of soft dough, pulling buns apart like he might spread a female. Then he sticks his finger in to a dripping sauce and licks it off, flicking his tongue in the process. Basically, he's making every cooking step look like a sex act.

"That's the asshole Arie invited to come help us at Flam-bé," I say, as Mason swipes to the next one. I've told Mason and Ned the situation, but now they're trapped in the scroll of videos featuring Arie's *college buddy* drizzling honey over the food like it's a woman's body, licking said honey off his wrist, before he pops a bottle of champagne and whisks the honey and bubbly into a frothing white substance that splashes all over everything.

"These are brilliant!" Mason gushes.

"Not what I want to hear right now!" I grumble.

"Understandable," Mason agrees. "But you can't deny this is awesome content. He's like the male version of Arie. Flam-bé should totally start making videos like this. Can you imagine Arie licking—"

"Really?" I snap, leveling Mason with an *I'm going to castrate you* glare. "Your hot take is that my girlfriend should make sexy food videos like her ex? Hey, good news, he's also coming to town. Maybe the two of them should make some of these videos together!"

"Geez!" Mason tosses me back my phone. "Hostile much?"

"You should've put a ring on it," my brother Ned says, motioning to his left hand like it's a trophy.

"Seriously?" I stare at the two of them dumbfounded, but Ned just wiggles his ring-finger at me like I missed this lesson in kindergarten. "You don't think marriages break up?" I toss at

my brother indignantly. “Good thing you’re not a divorce lawyer.”

“Ned and Olivia are solid,” Mason defends.

“And let me guess, so are you and Naomi?” I lash out. Mason shrugs like it goes without saying, so I flip the phone to the next video and point it at him. “What if this was Naomi’s ex? Huh? Are you telling me you’re not threatened at all?”

Mason frowns. He’s been through the ex thing already. “I’m not going to deny that the ex issue is real,” he admits. “If I caught Naomi watching Sam making sexy doctor videos like this, yeah, I’d ...” He frowns, letting my reality sink in. “Right, so, what you’re really asking is if we can help you hide a body?”

“Not funny,” Ned harumphs. “I’m leaving if I’m about to witness the two of you plan a murder.”

“That’s your best advice?” I chide my married brother. “Don’t tell our murder plan to our lawyer?”

“Of course, I’d be sworn to secrecy: attorney-client privilege,” Ned offers in solidarity.

“Not if you’re an accomplice,” I quip.

“Hence my previous comment,” Ned says, taking a measured sip of his whiskey, which has been served neat: the way he likes everything in his life.

“Do you two realize that I’m Arie’s entire relationship experience?” I continue. “I’m the only actual relationship she’s ever had.”

“Great,” Ned concludes. “Then you don’t need to worry about this guy. He was obviously a blip on the radar.”

“No, he’s the mythical unicorn that got away,” I counter. “Seriously, what if this British dude shows up and Arie realizes *he’s* what she really wants, and I was just ... practice?”

Ned and Mason stare at me—silent—which is the opposite of encouraging.

“Fuck!” I hiss. “Nobody has any faith in us.”

“I warned you that Arie was a red flag,” Ned says in his holier-than-thou tone. “You didn’t listen.”

“And the dragon *can* be unpredictable,” Mason adds.

“Not helping,” I grumble, grabbing Ned’s whiskey and downing half.

“Then be the better choice,” Ned states, pushing his whiskey back toward me when I put it down as if it’s now contaminated.

“Are you saying, I’m not *currently* the better choice?”

“I’m saying make *sure* you are,” Ned replies.

“Or,” Mason adds, bending forward with mischief in his eyes, “be the *only* choice! I have an empty keg in the storage closet we could put body parts in.”

My brother gives Mason a searing look. “Be the *better* choice.”

“Hey, if that bread-licking toff was after Olivia,” Mason counters, “you’d be cleaning the hardware store out of hacksaws. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Is this guy even interested in Arie anymore?” Ned asks, trying to salvage the conversation. “You say he inspired the restaurant you work at, but has he visited since it opened?”

“No,” I admit.

“That’s good.” Ned nods. “Maybe you’re being a pussy for nothing. How much research have you done? Does this guy have a girlfriend? A fiancé? Did you actually look through his social media before you freaked out at him eating a peach covered in honey?”

“Imagine it was Olivia’s peach,” I snap.

“Stop talking about my wife like that!” he growls.

“This is his restaurant account,” I say, pointing to the next video that Mason’s watching. “I didn’t find a personal one.”

“I should rip off these ideas,” Mason says, tapping on the phone. “Only, with tiki drinks and about a hundred times

raunchier. I mean, imagine how good it would be with the Dill-Doh Cocktail?”

I scowl at Mason, who’s obviously going to be Chef Carlisle’s new best friend.

“Let’s not forget that Arie has a boyfriend,” Ned says, nudging me. “Maybe this guy is a gentleman. Brits are known for being polite. Maybe he’ll respect the fact that she’s your girl now.”

“Maybe,” I grumble.

But somehow, even if he is polite—unlike what he’s doing to that unmarinated chicken with his olive-oil slathered hands—what’s bothering me is what Arie will think when she sees him again. She assured me this was about the business, but even if Xander is a god-damned gentleman when he arrives, that doesn’t mean she won’t suddenly start to double think what she has. And what if I’m not enough?

“What I need is a plan,” I state, thwacking Ned’s abandoned glass on the bar top for emphasis. “Pipe dreams”—I point at Ned—“and murder mysteries”—I point at Mason— “aside, there has to be a real, concrete way to handle this that doesn’t end with me broken hearted and working in Ned’s mailroom.”

“We don’t have a mailroom,” Ned replies, taking that comment too literally.

“Plus, you’re a pussy when you cry,” Mason adds, pointing at me. “All of Ned’s mail would be ruined with you Niagara Falls-ing all over it.”

“I don’t have a mailroom!”

“I don’t cry!”

Mason refills the whiskey glass.

“You realize this is all very simple,” Mason says, nodding to the amber liquid he just poured. “Alcohol.”

“I don’t want to drink away my problems, asshole,” I snip.

“Not for you.” Mason gives me a scowl, before nodding to

my phone. “For Chef Slaps-His-Chicken. Look, you can get Ned to concoct you an elaborate scheme, or you can go simple and reliable.”

“Alcohol?” I stare at my friend, unimpressed.

“You get him drunk and let him tell you all his secrets.” Mason makes a flourish like he’s waving a magic wand. “It’s a bartender’s oldest trick.”

“He’s not going to tell me shit!” I point out.

“Maybe.” Mason nods. “You do hold the keys to the dragon lair. But you could get Chef Licks-His-Honey to meet his new #1 fan.” Mason points at himself. “I can go undercover. Liquor him up. Even British jerks can’t resist the Long Island Orgy when it’s on the house.”

“How many liquors are in that drink?” Ned asks, his tone implying it might be illegal.

“Enough to loosen a man’s tongue and make you come,” Mason sasses back. “I give Chef Finger-in-the-Pudding a free sampling of the Lava’s goods, and Ned, he’ll be sucking your cock before the night’s over.”

That’s an image.

“I will refrain from helping,” Ned says with a curt frown.

“Watch the Chef’s video with the banana and you might feel differently,” Mason laughs, to which Ned doubles down on his glower.

“This might have merit,” I admit.

“Ned getting a little tickly-wickly from a dude instead of Olivia?” Mason asks. “Or entrapping your enemy with neon-colored rum?”

“Rum,” Ned and I say in unison.

Even though Mason is the Kitsch-King-of-Bad-Ideas, this one is surprisingly tempting. Especially, because I know Mason will honestly gush over Xander’s social media with a hurricane of flattery like he’d be happy to give the Brit a blowjob himself.

Mason (and his drinks) come on strong, but they're also the perfect trojan horse. When flattery comes with an alcohol-filled pineapple, say aloha to telling a stranger all your secrets.

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XOXO,

Elle Berlin

NOVA

I'm sitting in a sea of notes scribbled on napkins, tourist brochures, and notebooks trying to organize them before I transcribe them into my laptop. Only, the airplane tray table in front of me is practically nonexistent and I have to yoga-squish my body against the window to give myself enough space to type a single word.

And we haven't even taken off yet.

In my head, I pray to the over-continental flight gods that whoever's seated next to me is petite, because airplane engineers don't seem to make seats wide enough for normal sized human beings, much less for someone who's—

My phone rings and several of my notes fall onto the empty seat next to me and the floor as I riffle through them in search of my device. My agent said she'd call me before I take off and—yup, there's Cici Blackburn's name flashing at me on the screen in neon.

"Cici, hello!" I say quickly, trying to pick up my confetti of notes that have littered the floor. "I'm on the plane right now,

but we're still boarding. I have a few minutes to talk. Did you get the first chapter of the new book?"

"I did," Cici says, in her normal cryptic monotone. She's not a sweet and fluffy agent who will act as my personal cheerleader. Instead, she has an impeccable eye for story and an even keener aptitude for the business. Unfortunately, that often makes her read as cold. My first chapter could be the best thing she's read in her life, but it wouldn't sound like it from her tone.

"And?" I pry, stuffing London brochures and notes into the seatback pocket.

"And we have a problem," Cici says stiffly, her comment shooting an arrow up my spine.

"It's just a first draft," I say quickly. "I'll be typing up my research notes from this trip on the flight home, the next draft will—"

"It's not a lack of research that's the problem," Cici cuts me off. "Your novel research is always very thorough."

"Thank you, I appreciate—"

"When I told you to go to London, it wasn't to spend all your time in museums cataloging facts," Cici says dryly, making my skin prickle at the literal stack of museum brochures in front of me covered in notes. "We all have the internet."

"Yes, but standing inside the Tower of London is not the same as watching a YouTube video about it," I defend, having spent the last week immersed in London's history for this book.

"You have a beautiful way with language, Nova," my agent compliments, but I know it's a preemptive courtesy before the real bomb she's about to drop. "I signed you because you can tear my heart out with a beautiful line about something as mundane as a crack in a crumbling castle's wall. No one is questioning your ability to write something literary."

I cringe at the word *literary*. It's become a dirty word in our conversations lately.

“But—”

And there it is, the inevitable *but*.

“Going to London was about finding a *sellable* story—”

My neck starts to tighten.

“A story that has romance and passion and will play to what the market wants.”

Her words grate against my skin like sandpaper: literary, sellable, the market. A year ago, when my third novel tanked, Cici informed me that it was time to shake things up. It was time to worry less about the perfect phrasing and more about moving copies off the shelf. It was every writer’s nightmare conversation that boiled down to: nobody reads literature anymore; everyone wants to be entertained. Write me a trashy romance, or a high-stakes thriller, or if you must do an un-godly amount of research, then write a bio about a serial killer. Basically, forget the last three books that didn’t pay-out their advances, and become a completely different writer.

Sell your soul to The Man for a fist full of cash.

Someone shoves their carry-on into the compartment above me and starts moving into the seat at my right. I turn to the window to keep this conversation private.

“I think this new project has potential,” I defend. “It’s only a first chapter, we haven’t gotten to—”

“Scrap this project and start again,” Cici says definitively. “I know you. You’ve already fallen in love with the history. For goodness’ sake, Nova, only three pages into your first chapter and you’ve got a sweeping multiple-page passage describing the rocks used to pave a street! Beautiful writing as always, but you’re putting me to sleep. I want sex, or murder, or betrayal! Hook me with a saucy lie, or try your hand at comedy; *anything* to reel in your reader with more than the flint n’ steel color of cobblestones in the rain.”

“It’s a metaphor for—”

“Something beautiful and complicated, I’m sure,” Cici interrupts again. “Need I remind you that America has a fourth-grade reading level? Readers are going to tune out the second you say *ballasts and mortar*. That is, unless your ballasts are metaphors for something deviant and sexy. Cell phones and social media has changed the publishing game, Nova. Attention spans are short. Thirty years ago you would’ve been a literary superstar, but today it won’t sell. And frankly, I can’t keep you on as a client if you don’t write me a book that does.”

There it is. The truth we’ve been dancing around for months.

A fist closes around my heart because my books are too beautiful, too literary, too ... everything I love: which is difficult to sell. I feared this was coming. It wasn’t enough that my bank account has already made my financial failure painfully obvious, forcing me to work two online teaching jobs to pay the rent. But now, my agent is ready to bail on me as well.

“Nova? Do you understand what I’m saying to you?” Cici’s tone rises in emphasis.

SMACK! An elbow rams into my shoulder, shooting pain through my arm as if the universe felt I needed physical pain to match Cici’s ultimatum.

“Oh poppy-cock, I’m sorry!” a male voice next to me apologizes. I look up in a daze to see the retreating elbow is attached to a way-too-good-looking man taking the seat beside me. For a second, I think I’m dreaming, because he’s too nicely dressed, looking like he walked out of a Dicken’s novel. Only, it’s the 21st century updated version: waistcoat, button-up, slacks, a shock of wavy brown hair, and intense dark eyes to match.

“It’s um—okay,” I mumble to the man, who apologizes with his way-too-pretty eyes as he plucks up my notes and places them gingerly on my laptop.

“Good,” Cici says on the phone, thinking I’m talking to her.

“I knew you’d understand. It’s not personal. It’s business. One month, Nova. Something new. And I suggest you watch videos on social media to see what’s stealing everyone’s attention. I need you to tap into that.”

“Wait? D-did you say one month?” I ask into the phone.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” the good-looking man asks, sitting down and taking up the middle seat. He’s the opposite of petite. He’s all broad shoulders and muscles and nice smelling cologne. And his British accent makes me want to pull out my recording app and have him talk to me for hours, creating the perfect distraction to lull me into a forget-this-crappy-day coma.

“Yes, it’s a short turnaround,” Cici admits.

“For a finished book? A *new* book? Not the one I’ve been researching, but—” I scrunch up several notes in my fist. I’ve only been in London a week, but I’ve been researching this novel for months.

“Five chapters and a solid outline will suffice,” Cici replies. “And yes, a new book. Think tropey romance: enemies-to-lovers or alien kidnapping smut.”

“Alien kidnapping smut?!”

The man next to me squints at that comment, causing my neck to blush.

“Yup,” Cici declares. “They’re flying off the shelves.”

“You want me to write—” Only, I lower my voice as the man beside me looks over my mayhem of notes and laptop, probably thinking I write trashy erotica and this is his lucky plane flight.

“Anything in the romance world would be good,” Cici clarifies. “It’s a multi-million-dollar industry. Except, I forbid you from writing anything historical unless there’s copious amounts of bodice ripping. I know how you love to research. I don’t want

historical accuracy, Nova. I want tension, stakes, heat! And I want it in a month. Or I drop you. Got it?"

My mouth hangs open. I want to negotiate, but it's clear this is not a debate. I write something trashy and marketable, or else? My writer's heart feels like it's been put through a blender and fed to half a dozen social media influencers—all of whose hot take is that I'm literary and completely unreadable.

"Good! Have a great flight, Nova," Cici concludes at my silence, her voice punctuated by the line going dead.

"Personally, I'm into Sasquatch smut," comes the British voice to my right, and I turn to see Mr. Twenty-first-century-Darcy smiling flirtatiously. Only, he follows it with, "but alien kidnapping sounds like it could be fun."

And of course, in my semi-shocked state, with a gorgeous man making a joke about supernatural smut, I say the most eloquent thing I can think of.

"I'm so fucked!"

XANDER

Arie has a boyfriend.

I stare at the social media screen as I board my non-stop flight from London to Hawaii. Of course, she has a boyfriend. She's Arie. She's gorgeous, brilliant, charismatic. Not to mention the sexiest damn chef in America. In the picture in my feed, the beautiful redhead clings to the back of a shirtless hunk, the two of them laughing in the Hawaiian surf like *happily ever after* has this exact picture printed next to it in the dictionary.

Charlotte is married.

Arie's in a relationship.

And I'm getting on a plane to fly across the world ... why exactly?

I shove my carry-on in the overhead compartment and toss myself into the middle seat that I've been assigned, only the seats are way too narrow and I slip, practically falling into the person sitting in the window seat.

"Oh poppy-cock!" I exclaim, completely embarrassed. "I'm sorry!"

The young woman in blue glasses looks at me with a pained look like her day just got worse due to my presence, not to mention I practically body-checked her into the window.

“It’s um—okay,” she mumbles in an American accent, quickly turning back to her phone.

I attempt to sit down, but there are papers everywhere, on my seat, on the floor. They obviously belong to this woman, because there are several more on her tray table.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I ask, gingerly putting the papers on her laptop and taking my seat. She recoils as if I’m taking up too much space, and part of me thinks I should take that as a sign to get off the plane. Especially when a new photo flashes on my screen of Arie and her boyfriend sharing a kiss that’s a little too hot for the internet. Not that I should talk, my social media manager has had me filming cooking videos the last two months that look like I’m primed and ready for—

“Alien kidnapping smut?!”

I turn to the woman next to me, surprised. Did she just say —? Only, she blushes and turns her shoulder to me, whispering into her phone. Private conversation.

I take in the scene before me: papers, laptop, studious glasses, messy bun atop her head, mumbling something about books over the phone. She must be a writer and possibly a writer of rather saucy material.

What can I say—*sex sells*. That’s what my social media manager told me when he pitched the idea for the new videos. And he was right. Our engagement and views have been up significantly since he started pushing them out. But frankly, they feel like the kind of marketing Arie should do for Flambé, rather than something for The Carlisle (which was doing just fine without the videos). I should probably suggest Arie make videos of her own when we do this audit.

Arie would make a killing with suggestive cooking videos:

honey, chocolate, devious food set on fire. It makes me smile. I miss Arie. I miss her fearlessness and her brashness when it comes to food and sex. She has no qualms about saying what she wants, how she wants it, and damn whoever she embarrasses in the process.

It inspires me to turn to the American next to me, who's put down her phone, and try to lighten the mood. I channel Arie and say, "Personally, I'm into Sasquatch smut, but alien kidnapping sounds like it could be fun."

The woman looks at me in shock.

Brilliant, now I'm the bugger who's made a pass at her before we take off for a fourteen-hour flight.

"I'm so fucked!" she says.

Oh crap! Not only did I almost elbow her in the head, but now I've got her trapped next to the window as I suggest alien porn is my thing.

"Oh bollocks!" I bluster, raising my hands in an attempt to not seem like a creep. "That was a poor attempt at a joke. I'm sure you write very sophisticated and classy smut."

Her blue eyes widen. "I don't write smut!" she hisses. Yup, I should definitely get off the plane. "Not even sophisticated and classy—" She stops herself, shaking her head and balling up the notes. "Hell, I'd probably make more money if I did," she grumbles. "It's what sells and what my agent wants. Heck, maybe I should book a flight to the Pacific Northwest and go Sasquatch hunting." She looks at me and swears again. "I'm sorry, none of this is your problem. And my things are all over your—"

She slaps her laptop shut and starts collecting notes, plucking them from between our seats and reaching awkwardly to the floor beside my leg.

"No, it's fine," I say, leaning forward. "I can get—"

SMACK!

Our heads crack together as we both reach for the papers on the floor and a song of obscenities spill from both of our mouths.

“Shit!”

“Fuck!”

“Sorry!”

“Bollocks!”

“This day is the worst!”

“I swear, I’m not trying to be an arse.”

We both sit up, rubbing our respective heads, and I can’t help it—

I burst out laughing.

My head throbs, but I honestly couldn’t make more of an arse of myself if I tried. And by some magic, it cuts the tension. A smile breaks across the woman’s full lips and a laugh jingles up to meet it. It’s half a snort, and down-right adorable, her smile teeming with embarrassment and sweetness as we both give in to the flush of laughter.

It’s the first time I get a good look at her. She wears a cozy sweater that’s oversized and way too warm for summer. It looks like something her grandmother made in a different century. The sweater lops to one side, exposing a bare shoulder and a lacy strap. I shouldn’t look at it as long as I do, but my eyes can’t help but trace the skin up to the golden chain at her slender neck. There’s a bookish beauty to her with her chestnut hair flopped in a bun and the corner of her eyes crinkling in laughter behind those blue tortoise-shell glasses she’s wearing.

Definitely American. Probably coming from somewhere cold, like Colorado, where she spends her days wrapped in that sweater sipping coffee and penning saucy stories next to a fire. I smile to myself, imagining her in that sweater and nothing else, her long legs crossed beneath her as the fire crackles with warmth. I *shouldn’t* think about that laptop balanced on her

naked kneecap, or a cup of coffee cradled in her hands as my fingers press into the arch of her bare feet and start massaging.

I laugh and push the image away. That's a past life with Charlotte: fire, feet, and a cold London night.

"I'm Xander," I say, offering her a hand to shake and hoping she won't call for the flight attendant and demand to be reseated.

"Nova," she replies, taking my hand and squeezing it firmly.

"I promise, I wasn't trying to be a creep," I plead.

"And I promise, I don't write alien porn," she replies, with the same adamant tone.

I laugh and nod. "Noted." I release my grip, and we both settle into our seats. "Nova, that's a beautiful name. The birth of a new star, flashing with brightness in the sky."

She laughs. "That's a good line; I'd almost be tempted to steal it. But no, a nova only gives off the *illusion* of being a new star. It's really a star that already exists that sucks the energy of another nearby star when it's in its white dwarf phase: gravity, hydrogen—" She makes a motion like a star exploding. "The nova flares up, but then, it fades just as quickly. Basically, I'm the celestial version of a vampire."

"I see, you write vampire smut then?" I tease. "But with an alien kidnapping angle?" She grants me a laugh. "Or maybe," I nod to the rather scientific definition she just gave me, "you're actually a scientist."

"Vampire smut was closer to the truth," she admits. "I wrote an article about novas once."

"For a journal I might be familiar with?"

"Not unless you attended Jefferson High School in the states."

"Mmmm," I nod. "Very prestigious publication."

“I thought it was so clever to write an article about what I was named after.”

“Very meta of you,” I quip.

She smiles. “I’m glad someone gets it. Of course, the article was only a hit with the science nerds. I should’ve taken that as a sign to avoid pretty metaphors and literary dreams and stick to what people actually want to read: the gossip section.”

I nod in agreement. “Splashy tabloids and naughty scandals.”

“Basically,” she grumbles, stuffing all her notes and papers into the seatback pocket in front of her. “And what about you?”

“Me?” I sit up straight. “Oh, you mean, what do I do when I’m not reading alien smut?” I eye her for a reaction, and she gives me a wry smile of appreciation. “Well, I suppose, I tend to futz around in the kitchen.”

“You’re a stay-at-home dad?” she teases, and I bust up laughing.

“I’m missing the wife and kid for that esteemed profession, but telling other chefs what to do occasionally looks a lot like babysitting.”

“You run a restaurant?”

“I do.”

“And what’s your specialty? Bangers and mash or fish and chips?”

I bite my lip at the deliberate insult of English cooking. “I dabble in more than malt vinegar and onion gravy.”

“And I dabble in more than Sasquatch smut,” she returns, and I take her meaning. My opening remarks were an obvious dig at her profession.

“Fair enough,” I concede. “What do you actually write?”

“Literary fiction.” She pulls a book site up on her mobile and shows me a cover.

“*Leviathan of Iron* by N. A. Wolfe,” I read, looking at the picture of a factory from the industrial revolution. “Ominous.”

“I wish,” Nova replies. “Most people think it’s sci-fi until they see the cover. It’s about a time when humanity was forced into an age of creativity and invention: internal combustion, anesthetics, Portland cement.”

“Cement?”

Nova’s eyes darken with annoyance. “It’s more interesting than you’d think.”

“And your publisher didn’t like the name Nova?” I point to the fact that she’s used her initials as her author name.

“N.A. is neutral,” she explains. “You can’t tell if I’m a man or a woman. There’s a stigma in publishing that women get smaller deals and that men won’t buy a book with a woman’s name on it.”

“Is that true?” I ask, intrigued. “Did the book do better because you were incognito?”

“No,” she admits, putting her phone away like she doesn’t want to look at the cover for another second. “Not enough serial murder by Sasquatches to make a blip on the radar. Just heart-breaking insights about the human condition. But who wants that?”

“It was probably the chapter about cement,” I tease. “Plus, life’s full of enough heartbreak without you pointing out our glaring insignificance.”

“Mmmm,” she agrees, then nods to my phone. “Is that what’s in Hawaii?”

I look down to see my social media feed is still on display and it’s currently showing off a smiling picture of Arie near some palm trees.

“Yes,” I admit, but then scroll to show Nova the next few images of Arie and her boyfriend. “Seems you’re good at pointing out heartbreak just as much as our significance.”

“Old girlfriend?”

“Not exactly.”

“But heartbreak none the less?”

“Old friend that needs my help,” I reveal, but shake my head at my own foolishness. “I’m the toff who was stupid enough to buy a plane ticket before looking through her social media feed to see if she was still single. I accidentally elbowed you in the head when I found this.”

“I’m a little less upset about you almost maiming me now.”

“That’s kind.”

“So why are you still going?”

“Other than the locked doors and change in cabin pressure,” I motion to the flight attendant that’s securing the entrance door. “We *are* friends and she needs help with her restaurant.”

Before I know it, we’re in the air and I’ve rattled off an entire sob-story about how Arie and I reconnected after my ex Charlotte and I broke up, but that the timing wasn’t right. I’m like a pot of tea pouring out his entire contents: Charlotte’s wedding, feeling bored at my job, a plea of help from the girl who was maybe *the one* but—I wave my phone at Nova—isn’t actually single.

“You’re quite the romantic, aren’t you?” Nova accuses, her tone revealing exactly why she doesn’t write romance novels.

“Because I’m flying across the world for a girl that’s not available?” Nova nods, and I can’t tell if she’s impressed or disgusted. “Start taking notes. I’m sure there’s an epic story in there somewhere that your smut-hungry agent would love.”

“Ha ha,” she sasses back, rolling her eyes like my wounded heart is too sappy for her, and her deft literary talents are best saved for cement. “But in all seriousness, what are you going to do? Are you going to get off this plane and fly back home, or actually help her with her business?”

“Of course, I’m going to help her,” I insist. “I know a thing or two about food and restaurants. It’s the least I can do.”

“But what about all those *feelings*?” She makes a swoopy gesture with her finger like I’m a big tied up knot.

“I’m going to pretend I don’t have them,” I admit. “I’m going to be a gentleman.”

“Really?” She eyes me skeptically. “You’re not going to go in and make some grand spectacle?”

“Because my life is cheesy rom-com?” I toss back. “Is that how you’d write the stunning piece of literature that is my life? I see even the literary goddess of cement is not immune to the whims of Hollywood’s ideas about romance and men.”

A smile creeps up her cheek, and she nods, conceding that point. “No grand spectacle,” she agrees. “Fine. But you’re not going to tell her how you feel?”

“Absolutely not,” I assert.

“But why?”

I look at Nova and sigh. “You’re far too invested in my personal drama for a stranger I’ve just met.”

“Blame it on being a writer,” she quips. “Real-life dramas are the seeds of my profession. Plus, you’ve already blown the stoic no-emotions British stereotype out of the water, so don’t try to play that card. You clearly care for Arie, as a friend and more, so why not tell her?”

I shake my head and think back to culinary school, to all the classes and flirting and almosts that never happened between me and Arie. They never happened because *I* was in a relationship.

“Because when I was in a relationship, she respected that boundary,” I explain. “When I was with Charlotte, Arie never tried anything. Sure, we flirted and joked, but there was a line we didn’t cross. It’s about respect.”

“It sounds like you’re in love with her.”

“Doesn’t matter if I am,” I say. “She’s with someone else. Period. I don’t break up other people’s relationships. Call it chivalry.”

“Or cowardice.”

My eyes cut to Nova and she shrugs. A ping of angst pricks at the back of my neck at her comment. She raises her eyebrows in challenge, not backing down from that punch. “Fine, if that’s what you want to call it,” I reply, rolling my shoulders in an attempt to release the knot she just twisted into them.

“That’s it?” she challenges. “You’re going to lie down and let the other man win?”

“Yes,” I say, digging into my satchel for some headphones, tired of this conversation.

Nova harumphs next to me, disappointed. “See, this is why I don’t write romance. It’s bullshit. In real life, men don’t fight for who they love.”

“I live in London,” I point out. “Arie and me, we were doomed before it ever started.”

“Because you got your heart broken by the last girl you dated long distance,” Nova throws back, twisting the metaphorical knife in my side. “It’s easier to decide it won’t work before you give it a chance. Keeps you from getting hurt.”

“Who’s the romantic now?” I jibe.

She shoots daggers at me with her eyes.

“Look, you might have a point,” I admit. “But did you ever consider that keeping a good friend might be more important? Sometimes you can love people in different ways in your life. I don’t want to be the guy who breaks up a relationship that might be really important to her. It would make me feel like a dick and that would ruin what she and I had in the first place. Scared heart or not, the kind thing to do is show up as a friend and *be* a friend. A non-threatening friend. In fact, it would be

best if I was unavailable too and then it wouldn't even be an issue."

"You're too nice," Nova says, and this time I actually think that's respect instead of judgement. "But I like the idea of you being a friend. It's non-threatening. It goes against the drama. It's kind."

"I'm a boring book, Nova."

"Not true," she shakes her head. "You're a more complicated one." She looks at me with searching eyes, like something in her brain is churning—a story, an idea. "Too bad heart-breaking insights about the human condition are boring as hell." She flips up her phone and flashes the latest trending app. "Gotta find a sellable story in this inconsequential glut."

"I'd suggest starting with kitten videos. Warm and fuzzy, always makes me smile."

She shakes her head, but with a wry smile she adds, "You *would* suggest I write furry smut."

NOVA

We're about an hour from landing and I've watched more social media book-tok-insta-who-zee-whats-it videos than is humanly suggested. There's got to be some science on the negative effects of a cross-continental flight's worth of fifteen-second videos on the brain. I'll be surprised if I can find my passport, much less be able to tell customs my birthday.

Of course, the plethora of airplane cocktails might also skew that scientific data. On the upside, the alcohol caused Xander and I to capsize in laughter when we fell down the spicy book rabbit hole. Those readers are a #smutslut craze of hilariousness. They also seem to be avid readers, devouring books nightly like story-starved krakens with a book in each tentacle (two books if the newest hockey romances have hit the shelves). Not that I like the idea of telling Cici she's right, but there's definitely a voracious audience here. And they seem to love every cliché trope under the sun. Not that a trope can't feel fresh and honest in the hands of the right author ... it's just the whole idea grates against my *look for the truth* literary mantra.

But maybe that's the point: to see past the uncomfortable truths inside humanity and escape the existential anxieties of life for a story that's fun and predictable. I guess I can see the appeal in that.

And watching all these videos about tropes has got me thinking ... about a book idea, but also, about Xander.

I nudge him with my elbow and he turns to me with a familiarity that can only be achieved by giggling over 300 #smutslut videos while in a small enclosed space. Does Xander giggle? Yes! But it's only half as cute as when he half-drunkenly says something adorably British in response to a video.

Is she talking about a bloke's goolies? (Turns out those are testicles).

What's a toff to do when being stalker knobbed is all the rage? (Stalker smut is popular).

Why are all these women obsessed with hockey men? They can't seriously be buffin' it for hours? (Buffin ... as in 'in the buff').

I'd play a little slap n' tickle with that one. She's a right toddy. Not that you aren't a toddy yourself, Nova. The librarian glasses alone are enough to make a chump have it off. (Thank you? I think).

"Tell me you found another bit of gold from that fit bonnie who does her book reviews in a dinosaur costume!" Xander says, leaning in close and far too excited.

"What's your obsession with her?"

"This app seems to be all about finding your book kinks," Xander replies. "Some are into mafia, others are into monsters." He smiles with a buzzed grin. "Mine is pretty dinosaurs with excellent thruppenny bits."

"Thruppenny-what?" I scrunch up my face. "You know what, I don't want to know! And no, I've put the apps down. My brain is officially a Slurpee."

“The tiny bottles don’t help,” Xander nods to the collection of empties tucked in his seatback pocket.

“Actually, I was thinking about your situation.”

“The one where I’m feeling a little randy about dinosaurs?”

“No,” I laugh. “The one with the pretty redhead you’re denying you have feelings for, and who, in less than an hour, is probably picking you up from the airport with her handsome boyfriend in tow.”

“Way to kill my buzz, Nova,” Xander chastises, plucking an empty bottle from the seatback and tipping his head back to see if he can salvage any last dregs.

“I had an idea to help make things a little easier,” I begin.

“I know you’re a writer,” Xander jumps in, “and you can probably come up with nineteen elaborate plots to knock off the boyfriend, but I’m not interested. I’ve promised myself I’m not going to muddle things up. Arie deserves her happy ending.”

“Good, because that’s what I wanted to help you with.”

“What?” He scrunches up his face, the five-o-clock shadow on his chin making him even more dashing. “I was looking forward to your creative ideas for hiding a body.”

“Ha ha,” I sass back. “I’ll tell you them if this first idea turns sour. I was thinking something a little more *feasible*.”

“This first idea”—his eyes narrow at me suspiciously—“which is?”

I hand him my phone and press play on a video.

He frowns. “That’s not hot dinosaur girl,” he complains.

“Just watch it!”

He gives me a grumpy side-eye before focusing on the stack of romance books that are being shown on the screen with colorful cartoon covers. “I’m not following,” he says, but then I see him read the caption on the video. “Wait—” He clicks on the video to make it stop and turns the phone to me.

The caption reads: *My favorite fake dating books.*

“Are you saying—?” His eyes get intense as his brain starts to wrap around what I’m suggesting.

“Look, I live in Hawaii,” I say to him. “It’s altogether possible you said yes to helping your friend with her restaurant as an *excuse* to follow your *new girlfriend* back to paradise.” He points a finger at me and raises an eyebrow. “What? I’m not your type? Your redheaded bombshell wouldn’t believe you’d actually date me?”

“No, it’s not that.” He shakes his head. “She’d believe it, but ... you’re pulling my leg, right?”

“You said yourself, this whole trip would be easier if you weren’t available. You want to be the non-threatening friend? Well, nothing says that more than: *I’m madly in love with this other girl I came to Hawaii to be with.*”

“Huh. You have a point,” Xander admits, parsing what I’ve said with a cute scrunch between his eyebrows that I want to pinch. “But, why?”

“Because it’s the perfect cover. And completely natural to your character. You admitted to having a fear of long-distance relationships after what happened with Charlotte.” He winces but doesn’t say anything. “So, if you were actually serious about someone, you’d absolutely follow them to where they live to see if it has legs.”

“You definitely have legs,” Xander jokes.

“It’s an idiom.”

“Your American expressions are ridiculous.”

“Says the man who likes dinosaur thrumm-penny bits!”

“Thrupenny,” he corrects with a sly smile hitching his lip. “And you still haven’t answered my question. *Why* would you want to do this? I see how it could get me out of a sticky situation, but what do *you* get out of it?”

“Isn’t that obvious?” I say, giving him an incredulous stare.

“I’m handsome,” Xander jokes, “but sitting next to me on an airplane for thirteen hours is bound to break the infatuation.”

“Actually, that would’ve been the drooling and snoring,” I point to his travel pillow with an incriminating stain.

“I do not!” he exclaims, pushing the pillow under his seat.

“I’m not infatuated with you, Xander,” I say, pointing to my phone and the stack of books the reader is showing on a loop. “I need a story.”

“Oh,” his eyes light up, finally getting it. “A marketable story,” he points to the video, “that your agent will actually like.”

“Precisely.”

“So, you want to fake-date me as research?”

“I’ll change everyone’s name,” I promise. “Protect the innocent.”

“You can’t just make a story up? You have to ... live it?”

I stare at him. “I believe in authenticity, Xan.” He narrows his eyes at me at the shortening of his name. “If we’re fake dating, I need to have cute pet names for you.”

“If you call me pookey-wooky, I’m leaving.”

“Would you prefer thruppenny bits?”

“You’re the one who has thruppenny bits,” Xander says, nodding to my chest.

“Oh.” I blush. “The hot dinosaurs ... right!” Xander shrugs. He’s not going to apologize for ogling the dinosaur-lady’s tits, and instinctually I cross my arms over my own chest. “Look, if I have to write a fluffy rom-com to keep my agent, then at least I’m going to do it right. Research. Find the real heart in the story. Do it justice.”

“Spoken like a true writer.”

“And I’ve only got a month to make it good—at least good

enough to not be dropped like it's hot. That's another idiom, by the way."

"I thought it was a dance move," Xander grins.

"You watch too many rap videos."

"I'm British," Xander retorts, dropping his smile to make it look like he's too sophisticated for Snoop Dog.

"Right, so you drink tea while you watch your rap videos."

Xander gives me a half-smile like that might be closer to the truth. "You're serious," he asks, dropping the act. "You really want to pretend to be my girlfriend?"

"It seems like a win-win," I reply. "Unless you've decided to tell Arie how you feel instead."

"That's not happening."

"So are you in?"

Xander peers down at me over his nose with a guarded stare. "You realize everyone falls in love in those books. The fake relationship turns into a real one."

"Which is why I'll obviously have to take some artistic license."

"No falling in love?" he teases.

"You're good looking, Xander, don't get me wrong," I say, plainly. "But I already heard your story about the one who got away. Your heart's already taken."

"It sounds like your book is going to end as a tragedy."

"Knowing me," I say honestly, because writing a rom-com is probably a fool's errand, "that's probably true."

XANDER

Nova and I are past customs and I'm pulling her bag off the luggage carousel when it hits me what a *bad* idea this fake dating scheme is. Am I really going to lie to Arie about this? Isn't that a recipe for disaster?

"Jesus, what is in this bag?" I grumble, dropping the definitely-over-the-weight-limit bag at Nova's feet.

"Research," Nova mumbles, her toothbrush hanging out of her mouth. She just came back from the bathroom, insisting that clean teeth after a fourteen-hour flight is the key to kicking jet lag in the spine. "Not that I need all the books I bought in London," she adds, nudging the side of her bag with a strappy sandal.

Standing up, Nova's only a frolic taller than a garden gnome with the top of her head barely coming up to my shoulder. Heck, the bag I just picked up might actually weigh more than she does. Her attire is also an oxymoron: that cozy Colorado sweater is on top, but beneath it are shorts and Hawaiian flipflops and blue painted toenails that match her

glasses. There's even a strip of blue hair on the side of her head that was facing the window the whole time we were talking.

This girl's full of surprises.

"It would've been nice of my agent to ax this project *before* I charged all these books, that flight, and the entire last week of expenses on my credit card," she continues. "At least, I got a fake-boyfriend out of it." She bops me on the shoulder with her toothbrush.

"Yeah, about that," I say, pulling my bag off the carousel. "I don't know if that's such a good plan."

"Because you don't like lying and it feels disingenuous?" Nova asks, spinning her bag on its wheels and nodding to the escalator that leads to the arrivals level.

"Pretty much," I say, trailing behind her as she trots toward the escalator.

"But you're okay with lying to her about how you feel," Nova points out, spearing me with a look that's a little hard to take seriously with her waving her toothbrush around like she just got it from Olivander's in *Harry Potter*.

"Because I'm a gentleman," I reply. "And I promised myself I won't get between her and her boyfriend."

"Exactly. A little white lie to spare her feelings," Nova nods, stepping on the moving staircase. "That's all this fake-relationship is, too. A tiny yarn to grease the I'm-not-threatening wheels."

"It's a little more than a white lie."

"Fine. Then tell her how you feel instead and stop trying to pick the moral high ground. Lying is lying."

"That's not the same."

"Isn't it?"

"Look, I'm not good at ... not being me."

"So, be you." She frowns, not understanding the problem.

"But we're not—" I make a hand motion between us.

“Together? Don’t worry, we can make that stuff up.” Nova shoots me a mischievous smile. “That’s why you’ve got me, *the writer*. It’s my job to make stuff up.”

“It just feels—”

“Is that her?” Nova asks, nodding to the corridor that’s come into view as the escalator descends. “Ruby red hair, polka dot dress?”

It’s crowded, but Arie’s the type of woman who stands out. It takes a second, but I find her half way down the corridor looking through the crowd. She hasn’t seen us yet, and I notice she’s not alone. There’s a good-looking fellow next to her in a t-shirt and jeans.

“Um, yeah, that’s Arie,” I admit, my palms starting to sweat. Suddenly, I regret that I didn’t brush my teeth in the bathroom the way Nova did.

“She’s pretty,” Nova says, with a hint of awe in her tone.

“Yes, she is,” I agree.

Arie’s the kind of woman that’s hard to ignore: 50s pinup dress, all curves and sass, devil red hair. I unbutton the top of my shirt to get some air, because the truth is, I’ve seen Arie naked and suddenly the image of our time together is racing through my head.

“Okay, hold this,” Nova says, shoving her toothbrush into my hand.

“What?”

“Gotta make a good first impression,” she says, lifting her oversized sweater above her head, revealing a skimpy white tank-top underneath with lace trim. I shouldn’t look at Nova’s strawberry creams, but I do, because it’s hard not to. Without the sweater on, that tank top ... well, it leaves little to the imagination. Nova looks like an Only Fans sexy librarian who’s about to teach you the Dewey Decimal system, only the card catalog is hidden in her ample cleavage.

We reach the bottom of the escalator and Nova snatches the toothbrush out of my hand, moving out of the flow of people to bend forward—yes, in that tiny tank top—so she can shove the toothbrush and sweater into her roller bag.

“The sweater was fine,” I rasp out, because it feels like she’s about to skip through the airport in skimpy pajamas.

She looks up and I must be gawking, because a blush dots her cheeks. She looks down quickly to see the ample show she’s flashing, her skin turning an even brighter color at the realization.

“Flattered, Xan,” she says, standing upright, before she pulls her hair out of its bun.

Long brown locks fall over Nova’s shoulders, with that one strip of blue hair hidden somewhere under her cascading mane. She transforms right in front of me from the giggling, bookish girl watching social media videos next to me on the plane into a gorgeous sexpot that frankly puts Dinosaur hottie to shame ... and well, gives Arie a run for her money as well.

“Xander, you’re going to have to wipe that look off your face,” Nova scolds, stepping up to me and undoing the second button on my shirt.

“Huh? What?” I bluster.

Nova smiles. If she was wearing lipstick, I swear, I’d be hard right now in the middle of the airport, wishing I could do a hundred things to her I shouldn’t.

“You’re going to have to pretend you’ve seen the girls before.”

“The girls—?”

“My thruppenny bits?” Nova looks down, and I follow her gaze to—oh right! Bollocks. She’s talking about her—

“Oh fuck, I’m sorry! I—um—”

“Thought I was an ogre under that sweater?” Nova teases.

“No, of course not, I just—” Over her shoulder I see a flash of red walking our direction.

“You didn’t think writers had breasts?”

“No, of course you have—” I look down again, which I shouldn’t, because Nova’s thruppenny bits are fit as fuck. I shake myself and try to get a grip. “She’s coming over,” I announce, nodding to the red hair that’s approaching.

“Good,” Nova says, looking over her shoulder quickly to gauge the situation. “Pull yourself together, Xan. You need to act like we’ve actually had sex before.”

“What?”

“Girlfriend,” she points at herself, to remind me to get with the program.

“Right, I was saying I don’t like that idea, and we should—”

But Nova grabs the front of my shirt and pulls me down to her level, and before I register what she’s doing—

Nova kisses me!

XANDER

Nova's mouth actually hits mine and my brain goes fuzzy. Or, you know, my blood drains to more base places where one's apt to make questionable choices. Her mouth tastes of minty toothpaste and stale airplane coffee, but it's the little moans against my mouth and the way she presses those tits against my chest that does me in. Because fuck, some other piece of me takes over.

My hands find their way around her and into her hair. Gripping those wild tresses, I tilt her head to find the right angle before I sweep my tongue across her lips and—there's that little moan again, you bookish devil—she opens her mouth and meets my tongue with her own teasing. What did she say on the plane about nova's stealing energy from other stars? That name is apt, because I'm damn-well weak in the knees right now—which I'd like to blame on jet lag, except, my chest is thrumming and all of my senses are awakening.

"Xander bloody Carlisle," comes a voice to our left, "stop tongue-fucking this girl and introduce me before I get jealous."

That's Arie.

Nova pulls away at Arie's crass intrusion, her cheeks flushed under those blue glasses as she looks up at me stunned. I'm not sure if that's the kiss or Arie that's earned me such a ravished look of confusion, but it makes me smile in a way I haven't in a long time.

"Sorry, I didn't know we had an audience," I say, standing upright and turning to my friend. I keep an arm at Nova's back, because I was just caught kissing her, so I better keep up appearances. Only, that skimpy tank top is, well, skimpy, barely covering the contours of Nova's shoulder blades.

Nova visibly shivers, which Arie catches like a hawk, and I'm sure my old friend is about to call me out on this charade, when Nova rolls her shoulders back, thrusts her thruppenny bits forward, and offers Arie her hand.

"You must be Arie!" Nova trills in a chipper voice that makes Arie blanch.

"I must be," Arie says cautiously, barely taking Nova's hand.

"I've heard so much about you," Nova blusters, making up for Arie's lackluster shake by wrapping both her hands around Arie's vigorously.

"Have you?" Arie's eyes snap to me. This is a surprise she wasn't expecting.

"Yes, uh, let me introduce you. This is Nova," I say, pulling Nova's hands off Arie. "She's, uh—"

Moment of truth.

I either go with this charade or I admit I just met Nova fourteen hours ago and I'm the type of bloke who makes out with a complete stranger in an airport terminal.

"I'm his girlfriend," Nova fills in my silence and slides her claiming arm around my waist.

"Is that so?" Arie's measured eyes flick between us suspiciously.

“Great to meet you, Nova,” a male voice interjects, and all of our attentions turn to the man standing at Arie’s side.

The boyfriend.

“I’m Connor,” he says with a broad smile, sliding his arm around Arie in a similarly claiming gesture. “I’m the boyfriend of the potty-mouth who just interrupted your welcome to Hawaii kiss. She can be a bit abrasive sometimes.”

“You don’t have to explain me,” Arie snips, but he doesn’t flinch, as if he’s used to Arie’s sass and knows exactly how to handle it.

Connor’s the man I saw in Arie’s social media photos, only he’s bigger and more impressive in person. He’s also wearing a shirt, instead of parading around half-naked with a bikini-clad Arie draped over his person.

“Nice to meet you, Connor,” Nova says pleasantly. “How long have you and Arie been together?”

“Ever since she opened Flambé and hired me to work in the restaurant,” he answers.

“You work at the restaurant?” I ask, not realizing they work together. Obviously, Arie’s restaurant has employees, but she’s sleeping with one?

“Yeah,” Connor confirms, squinting at me. “You didn’t know that?”

“No,” I admit.

“Arie didn’t tell you about me?” His gaze cuts to his girlfriend.

“I mean—uh,” I look to Arie, afraid I’ve said the wrong thing. “It’s been a while. Arie and I haven’t really caught up.”

“Obviously,” Arie chimes in, motioning to Nova. “You didn’t say anything about bringing a guest.”

“Right, that’s—” I swallow hard, not sure how to spin this.

“I live in Hawaii,” Nova interjects, and both Arie and Connor turn to her in confusion. “You see, I’ve been in London

for several months researching a book,” she explains. That’s part lie and part truth, but I suppose it’s the safest way to go about it. “Xander and I met while I was doing my research, and ...” She does a flirty flip of her head like she’s embarrassed about how smitten she is. “And well, I kept extending my stay, because ... things started to get serious.” Those flirty eyes flick to me. She’s good at this. “And like kismet, you called, Arie.” She motions to Arie like she could be her new best friend. “You needed help with your restaurant and that turned out to be the perfect opportunity for Xander to come to Hawaii and see *my side* of the world.” Nova looks at me, batting her lashes like she’s completely head over heels and hoping this trip might seal the deal on whatever love affair we’re having.

Arie’s eyebrows raise. “So, this is new,” she points between me and Nova like she’s assessing how much of what Nova said is bullshit.

“New is relative,” Nova jumps in, turning to me and attempting to wrap her arms around my neck, only she’s short and it comes off completely awkward. Covering, Nova slides a hand under the collar of my shirt, pressing her hot fingers to my collarbone. “It feels like we’ve been together forever, doesn’t it, baby?”

Baby? Not sure I’m a fan of that.

“Um, yeah,” I mumble, not giving an Oscar-worthy performance like Nova.

“Sometimes things just feel like they fit right from the beginning,” Connor adds with a wink, leaning forward to take Nova’s suitcase. “Can I help you with your luggage?”

“What a gentleman,” Nova croons. “And I thought British men had the monopoly on chivalry.” She removes her hand from my neck, giving me a disappointed stare.

“I’m not a camel,” I grumble, nodding to my own carry-on, satchel, and checked bag.

“And yet, she’s a princess,” Arie pretends to joke, only there’s an edge to her tone as her boyfriend rolls Nova’s bag toward the exit. “So, is *your girlfriend* staying with you at the Atlantis?”

“Oh no,” Nova jumps in, threading her free hand around my elbow as we follow Connor. “He’s staying with me.”

“I am?”

Nova’s fingers squeeze my arm sharply. “Of course you are, baby!”

I stare at Nova. We didn’t talk about this. We didn’t talk about any of the logistics.

“Right, but Arie’s restaurant is *at* the Atlantis,” I explain, realizing this is suddenly getting complicated. “Did we even figure out how far your place is from the Atlantis? I didn’t rent a car, and—”

Nova steps in front of me, stopping me in my tracks. And more skillfully this time, she wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me down to her level. “You think I’m leaving you all alone in that hotel room at night?” She moves in like she might kiss me again, but instead she rubs our noses together like it’s an intimate gesture we share all the time, except her faux-flirtiness is matched by her fingers digging into my neck: *get with the program fake-boyfriend!*

“Of course, I’m staying at Nova’s,” I say weakly.

“Of course,” Arie echoes.

“Well, the least we can do,” Connor chimes in, “is drive you to Nova’s house.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” Nova interjects. “My car is here in the lot.”

Connor frowns, doing a double take at that comment. “In the lot? You’ve paid to have your car parked here ... for months?”

Nova’s face colors, because that little slip-up doesn’t fit

with her researching-in-London-and-falling-for-me lie she told them only moments ago.

“Oh no, of course not,” Nova answers with a laugh. “That would be ridiculous. I had, um, a friend—” She points at the lot, stalling. “A friend, who uh, who had a flight yesterday. She borrowed my car and parked it in the lot overnight, because she knew I was coming in today ...”

It’s a weak lie. But feasible, I guess.

“Right,” Connor says, but I’m not sure if he bought it.

“So, I guess we didn’t need to meet you at the airport,” Arie says, eyeing the two of us with her spidey senses on high alert.

“No, uh, I guess not,” I laugh, trying to make this not seem awkward. “I’m sorry. Nova and I didn’t, uh—”

We didn’t know each other fourteen hours ago when I was texting Arie my flight information.

“Jet lag, excitement,” Nova chimes, letting go of me to grab her luggage from Connor. “I’m obviously a little nervous about *bringing Xander home*.” She laughs like she’s extra flighty. “I obviously talked to my friend about the car, but neglected to tell my boyfriend ...” She boinks herself on the head to imply she’s an airhead.

“And to think,” Arie says, turning to me with a wrinkled brow, “I invited you to help me with the restaurant because you’re so *organized*.”

Shit. Arie has a point. I *am* the man who triple-checks his hotel reservation and has three back-up plans on speed dial.

“Oh no, *he’s* organized,” Nova quips. “*I’m* not. Xan will make a detailed list of ingredients he needs for a dish he’s cooking, while I’m more of a *can you substitute ketchup for spaghetti sauce* kind of girl.”

Arie gives Nova a disgusted look, because you one-hundred-percent cannot substitute ketchup in that scenario.

“She’s kidding,” I laugh. “I’d never let her put ketchup on pasta.”

Arie eyes me like she can’t believe I’d entertain the idea of being in the same room as someone who’d suggest such blasphemy, much less date her.

“Though who knows what’s in my refrigerator after being gone so long,” Nova adds, digging herself in deeper. “We’re playing Russian roulette with dinner tonight!”

“Right,” Arie says, eyeing me like I’ve been taken hostage. “You remember where that farmer’s market I took you to is, right?”

She’s talking about the last time I was in Hawaii, when Arie and I got ingredients before cooking together at my suite at the Atlantis. The night when she and I ... Arie’s eyes lock with mine, and suddenly all I’m thinking about is us: the sinful food she made, the way she tasted with peach nectar on her skin, the fact that it was the hottest night of my life and we unleashed years of unspoken desire in an evening of sin.

“I, uh—I remember the market,” I say, coughing to break from the intensity of Arie’s eyes. “But I can’t say I remember how to get there.”

“Then I’ll have to take you there again,” Arie says, making me cough even harder.

Is she implying—? I look from her to Connor to Nova. She doesn’t mean—?

“You know how I love to cook,” Arie says, wrapping an arm around Connor that has me downright confused. She’s in a relationship, obviously, but cooking together at the Atlantis hotel is what inspired me to taste more than her peach cobbler.

Maybe it’s good that I stay with Nova.

“You look a little pale, man,” Connor says. “Did they feed you on the plane?”

Everyone needs to stop talking about food, because talking

about food has me thinking about when I was holding open Arie's legs and demanding she watch as I made her come with my feasting.

This woman just *affects* me.

"Jet lag," I rasp out. "I need to sleep."

"At my place," Nova insists, as if she caught that my conversation with Arie was more charged than innocent.

"Right, of course," I agree, flopping an arm around Nova's shoulders. "I'm sorry for the airport mix up," I say to Arie and her boyfriend. "But I'll see you tomorrow at 9 pm, so I can get my first experience of Flambé."

Arie's eyes narrow. "Remembered that little detail," she says, referring to when she emailed me to arrive at her restaurant. I haven't seen Flambé in person or eaten at it, and Arie told me she wants me to *have the experience* of being a guest, before I analyze anything. "And please," Arie adds, with a viper's sweetness hitching her tone, "bring Nova along. Flambé is always better with a date."

My mouth dries at that comment.

Flambé is supposed to be sexy—really fucking sexy. And somehow being served by Arie with Nova at my side seems like a dangerous recipe.

CONNOR

“I don’t like her,” Arie says, as I pull out of the Honolulu airport and head back toward Waikiki.

“You met Nova for five minutes,” I reply, maneuvering through traffic.

“And five minutes is all I need,” Arie defends. “Plus, she’s completely wrong for Xander.”

“Why? Because she’s short and he’s like six-eleven?” I joke.

Xander *is* tall. Taller than I want him to be. It’s hard to intimidate your girlfriend’s ex when he’s as tall as Big Ben. Of course, thinking about that phallic clock has me wondering if *other things* on this Brit are more impressive than previously considered.

“Because she just *is*,” Arie insists. “Call it female intuition.”

“You know, Kendall was short and dating an important man in your life,” I point out, earning me a disgruntled frown. Kendall’s the reason Arie turned into the uber-dragon and ran Simon out of town. Arie said a lot of NOT nice things about Kendall and burned a bridge.

“They weren’t dating yet,” Arie corrects. “Kendall was Ned

and Olivia's wedding planner and she was supposed to keep things professional!"

"The way you kept things professional with me when I started working at Flambé?" I chide, earning me an even darker glare from the dragon. "I think you have a problem with short women who date your male friends."

"I don't have a problem with the fact that she's short," Arie corrects.

"Just that she's female?" I ask, already knowing the answer to that question. "So are Simon and Xander supposed to be single and celibate the rest of their lives because you're jealous?"

"I'm not jealous!" Arie snaps. "I just know she's not what Xander needs. I mean, did you hear him? He was ready to stay at the Atlantis like he'd planned, but she was Little Miss Pushy about him staying with her."

"She's his girlfriend," I remind her, which was a welcome surprise. What I don't like is Arie questioning it without giving them a chance. Maybe they're in love. I *hope* they're in love. "Of course Nova wants him to stay with her," I defend. "It's hard to fuck when you're in different locations."

Arie harumphs, crossing her arms like she hates the idea of them fornicating at all.

"They obviously fuck, Arie. He came to Hawaii to see her and—"

"He came to Hawaii to help me!" Arie snips, and that rubs me the wrong way.

"He's still going to help you," I clip out, annoyed now. "And in the meantime, he's allowed to determine if things with his *girlfriend* are serious."

"They're not."

"You haven't talked to Xander in years. Hell, you didn't even tell *me* he existed."

“That’s different. Complicated.”

“Telling your *current* boyfriend about your *ex*-boyfriend isn’t complicated.”

“He isn’t my ex. You’re twisting my words,” Arie defends. “And the fact that I don’t have Xander on speed dial doesn’t mean I don’t *know* him. There are quintessential things I understand about Xander that—”

“Are just like the things you knew about your best friend Simon who now lives in a different state as a result of your meddling?” I interrupt. “This is starting to sound a whole lot like what happened with Kendall.”

“This is nothing like—”

“You need to watch yourself!” I cut her off, peeling off the main road and turning down several small streets. “You’re not out of hot water with Simon and Kendall, and you just invited Xander to fly here from London to help bail you out of the mess you made last time you didn’t like who your friend was interested in.”

Arie is quiet, not liking the truth I’m putting down.

“So don’t give me the *this is different* line,” I lecture, pulling down an abandoned alley. “Otherwise you’re going to lose another friend for meddling in his relationship when you have no business getting in the middle of it.”

“Where the hell are you going?” Arie snips, motioning to the tiny alley we’re in that dead-ends in three hundred feet. “This isn’t even a throughway. Flambé is ten streets in the other direction. Do you need me to pull up a damn map?”

She’s deflecting. She heard what I said and she knows it’s a problem, but she’d rather point out my lack of direction.

I throw the car in park and turn to her. “Promise me, right now, that you’re not going to say a single nasty thing to Nova.”

“Why would I promise that?”

“Because *I’m* still pissed at you for how you treated Simon and Kendall.”

Her eyes cut to me—stung.

I’m on her side. I’m *always* on her side, and she knows that. But she’s also aware that she fucked things up with her best friend, and I’m not going to enable her into thinking she didn’t go full dragon.

“When the first thing out of your mouth,” I continue, “when you met Xander’s girlfriend was that you don’t like her—you’d better believe I’m feeling a little PTSD about the last time you let your jealousy take over.” I shake my head, trying to keep my anger in check. “Only, you never slept with Simon! Which *isn’t* the case with Xander.” I point out the back window towards the airport, raising my eyebrows in accusation.

Arie’s whole body tenses, realizing my point.

“This isn’t about—!” She looks at me exasperated. “I don’t—I mean, it was just once—” She catches herself again, still trying to find the words. “I didn’t know you then.”

“You didn’t even tell Xander I work at the restaurant.”

“It didn’t come up,” she defends.

“Did you tell him you have a boyfriend?” I ask

“I don’t know,” she hastily blurts out. “I mean, how would he not know? We’ve been together for multiple years.”

“That’s not the same as *telling him*.”

“You said it yourself, Xander and I don’t talk much,” she declares, looking out the window and pointing toward the dead end. “Why the hell are we in this abandoned alley? There isn’t even an exit.”

In front of us are stacked pallets and trash.

“I know that,” I snap, unhooking my seat belt and hers as well. “I’m reminding my girlfriend that she’s *my fucking girlfriend!*”

“What?”

But I reach into her seat and drag her over to my side of the car and into my lap.

“Connor? What are you—?”

I move her so her legs are on either side of my hips, straddling me, before I push her polka dot dress up to her waist, exposing her thong to me.

“Jesus, Connor are—?”

I grab the piece of fabric by the band at her hip and yank angrily. Her thong snaps, making her yelp at my aggression. But if I know anything about Arie, it’s that she burns fast and she burns hot, and she loves it when I tear her panties off.

I don’t wait for her to say anything, instead I swipe my thumb across her exposed slit.

“Oh fuck,” she hisses, her hips bucking at my thumb’s trespass, making me smile at how my aggression already has her wet. Arie looks over my shoulder to see if anyone’s coming up the alley.

“It’s a dead end,” I growl, plowing my thumb back through her folds and making her jackknife forward. Her open mouth gasps at my cheek, her fingernails digging into my shoulders for stability as I tease her enflamed pussy. Only, I don’t want her stable. I want her out of control and coming on my hand.

I thrust my fingers inside her and she cries out. It’s a fucking song to my ear, one I want to hear her sing so loud people come down this ally to see what’s happening.

“You like that?” I sass, increasing my pace as I add my thumb against her clit. “You want to fuck your boyfriend or tell me how much you hate Nova?”

Arie is gasping, because I know exactly how to take her from zero to a hundred.

“I want your cock,” Arie pants, her hips starting to match the pulse of my wrist.

“Not in this car,” I taunt, slapping her ass with my other

hand and loving how her pussy clamps down in pleasure. “There isn’t enough room in this car to punish you properly. And I’m not letting you ride me.”

“I can make it work,” Arie moans, cupping my erection hotly before reaching for my zipper.

“Nope, you don’t get to ride,” I chastise, batting her hand away and pushing her against the steering wheel by her sternum. My hand is placed right between her breasts, her body bent against the wheel in an arch, the fingers of my other hand still flicking inside her.

She looks down at where my fingers pump and smiles before undulating her hips. “You don’t tell the dragon not to ride!” She moves wickedly, her hips rolling as her inner muscles clamp down over my fingertips and she takes control. It’s hot as sin to watch her use my hand as her own personal dildo, moving to her own rhythm as she impales herself. “Of course, I’d come harder if I was on your cock,” she gasps, working herself up.

“You’re not getting my cock inside this car,” I jeer.

“No?” she angles her hips, grinding her clit against my knuckle and gasping as her thighs quiver. “What if I made you a different offer?”

“You’re about to cream on my hand, naughty girl,” I sass. “I think the current offer is pretty spectacular.”

“Except, you’re wrong,” she moans against my ear, pitching forward to kiss me with her mouth open and wicked. I thrust and pluck her swollen clit, hooking my fingers to find that spot that’s going to push her over the edge.

Only, she drags her lips off mine and the door next to me opens.

“What are you—?” I start, but Arie’s a ninja. Not only has she slipped my fingers out of her body, but she’s slid out of the

car and is now standing to my left in the alley. “Seriously? What are you doing?”

“Making you a better offer,” she says breathlessly, walking around to the front of the car to look at me through the windshield. Then, like a god-damned vixen, she clutches the hem of her skirt and lifts her entire dress up over her shoulders.

I look over my shoulder quickly, because she’s wearing nothing but her bra and heels in the middle of the afternoon, and this may be a dead end, but it’s still public.

Arie gives me a vicious smile, before turning around and sliding her perfect ass up the hood. She leans back like she might start sunbathing nude, except she turns her head to look at me through the windshield, crooking her finger and taunting me to come hither.

I try not to give in, but when she lifts her knees and kicks off her heels, planting her bare feet on either side of the hood—legs open—I’ve got no willpower left. I’m unzipping my pants and out the door, rounding the hood as Arie smiles at me triumphantly and whispers, “I’m ready to be punished.”

Fuck. I’ll never be able to resist this vixen.

I’m fisting my cock with one hand, while the other grabs her ankle and yanks her down to the edge of the hood. “You love begging for my cock, don’t you?” I sass, pushing her thighs further open.

“Almost as much as you like giving it to me,” she sasses back, and damn if she isn’t spread on my hood in the full sunlight with her pussy glistening.

She knows I’m going to give it to her.

“You’re going to get us arrested,” I hiss, positioning my cock. Her eyes flare, ready to point out that it wouldn’t be the first time for me, so I beat her to the punch, sinking into her tight cunt and making her gasp. I don’t know if it’s the angle, or

that she's on my hood, or the fact that I feel fucking huge—but my cock throbs and jerks like it's ready to blow.

I grit my teeth and refuse to waste this moment, pounding into her hard and fast.

"Oh fuck, Connor!" Arie grovels, her pussy tightening around my assault. "You feel amazing!"

She writhes, pinned under me on the hood, slapping the metal with her palms.

"God, I love your cock!"

My back starts to sweat from the sun beating down as I piston in and out. Arie's writhing and gasping, and it's how I know without a doubt that she belongs to me. Because she can't help herself from stripping out of her clothes and propositioning me on my hood, then clenching that hot pussy around my cock like I'm her own personal god.

Arie is mine.

And as she comes around my cock, I say as much, pounding into her with each syllable.

"You—"

"—are—"

"—fuck—ing—"

"—mine!"

"You hear me, Arie?"

She nods and gasps and cries out in agreement, because we fit together and are perfect. And I'm never going to let her forget it.

XANDER

“**M**aybe we should make rules about kissing,” I say to Nova as she parks her small Fiat in the lot of a strip mall.

“Rules like you should brush your teeth before doing it?” Nova asks, giving me a smirk, indicating our airport kiss wasn’t as magical as my jet-lagged brain might’ve considered.

“Sorry about that,” I mumble, peering out the windshield. In front of us is a turquoise blue storefront, framed between two palm trees and with a large picture window. Hanging from strings is a magical display of open books flying from one pane of glass to the other with their pages flapping like a flock of birds migrating. “You live in a bookstore?”

“Ha! How cliché would that be?” Nova laughs, getting out of her car. “Failed author lives in bookshop, dies among stacks and nobody notices.”

“Well, that got dark fast,” I quip, following her into the shop. The book-birds continue to fly inside the bookstore, hanging above the shelves from the ceiling which is also draped

in a jungle of plants like we've walked into a secret garden of moss and paperbacks. "Wow, this place is cool."

"Isn't it," Nova gushes, twirling like a tiny fairy among the lush green and gold décor. "I need to grab a little research before we go to my place."

"Research?" Nova bee-lines it to a section near the back with colorful book spines and blue velvet chairs. "Don't you have a suitcase of books in the car that weighs more than you?"

"That book idea is dead," Nova reminds me, having explained the whole situation with her agent during the flight. "I need to get in the head space of—" she reaches up and starts pulling books off the top shelf, causing her to get on her tippy toes. The stretch also lifts that tiny tank top and shows off more of her stomach than she probably realizes. And if I was an upstanding English bloke, I wouldn't be looking. I blame it on the jet lag that I am.

"Do you need help with that?" I offer, reaching up, but she's already filled her arms and snuck under me like a hobbit with a cheese stash. "What are those?"

I peer over her shoulder and recognize several of them from our book-video-bonanza on the plane. They're romance novels. They're also ones with obvious titles like *Faking It with the Prince* and *The Fake Dating Fiasco*.

"Seriously?" I ask. "What do you need these for?"

"You said it yourself," she tosses back. "We need rules—like for kissing." She holds up a title that says *I Faked a Kiss and I Liked It*.

"And you think these books are going to tell you how much tongue to put in my mouth?"

"Mmmm," Nova gives me a flirty look over her blue glasses. "Somebody I know sure enjoys taking control with it."

A blush warms my cheeks. Obviously, I got carried away. "Well, that's the whole point of rules. You're the one who snog-

attacked me in an airport. I wasn't sure I was on board with this charade and then you were popping your top off and—"

"Keep my clothes on? Is that one of your rules?" Nova interrupts, walking up to me in that too-tight-tank-top with the saunter of a deadly cat.

"Yes! Obviously," I say, feeling my cheeks heat even more.

"Well, that kiss and this top," she motions to her front bits, "made your red-headed beauty super jealous. Trust me, she wanted to tear my head off." Nova drops a stack of books into my hands and I barely catch them.

"That's the opposite of what I want!"

"Is it?" Nova challenges, returning to the shelf to retrieve more books. "Making your ex jealous is pretty much a given in the fake-dating scenario." She flashes another book title at me—*Jealous in Paradise*—which seems too prophetic considering the palm trees and the balmy Hawaiian air outside.

I try to ignore Nova's comment about jealousy, but now I'm double guessing Arie's reaction, and the fact that she did mention the farmer's market. The farmer's market that led to cooking that led to—

I shake myself.

"Tasteful kissing, Nova," I say, trying to get us back on track, "and tasteful—" I motion to her front bits that are squished beneath the new stack of books she's got snug against them.

"You're definitely a tits guy, aren't you?" Nova teases, a smile hitching her cheek as she nods for me to follow her to the counter where she can purchase her stack of *Field Guides to Fake Dating*.

"You realize these are all cockamamie," I say, nodding to the colorful books in my arms, their illustrated covers full of cute couples and flirty glances.

"You're preaching to the choir," Nova agrees, dropping her

stack on the counter. “But I can’t write one of these ridiculous examples of female fantasy if I don’t know what the tropes are.”

“Is tasteful kissing and modest attire a trope?” I ask as she pays for her books and the clerk fills up several turquoise bags with her loot.

“You can read them, too,” she nods for me to take the bags from the clerk, “if you need first-hand fake-boyfriend tips.”

“I know how to be a boyfriend,” I grumble, though that might be a bit of a fib. I haven’t dated anyone seriously since Charlotte and my relationship muscles are out of shape. I just focused on my restaurant and made it the best of the best. Which is all I have to do where Arie’s concerned too. Focus on the restaurant.

“Good,” Nova quips, skipping toward the exit. “Because you’re probably going to flip out when I tell you that I sleep naked.”

“Wait—what?!”

My tiny, ground-level apartment with its floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and fenced-in patio is my personal safe haven. There just happens to be an inordinately tall, British man standing in my living room taking up all the breathing room.

“Your apartment is, uh—” Xander looks around cautiously, his arms folded over his chest like his giant limbs might break something.

“Hobbit-sized,” I offer, wheeling my luggage into the center of the room.

“Small, yes,” he agrees, before motioning to the bookshelves. “I was going to say very bookstore couture.”

“Author own books,” I grunt in my best cave-woman voice. “Author advances small, royalties non-existent, thus apartment small.”

“That new stack of books isn’t small,” Xander chastises, pointing at the fake-dating tower that’s taking up residence on my coffee table.

“Fine! I’m a cliché who’d rather buy books than eat,” I say,

maneuvering my luggage around my tiny love seat as I head toward the bedroom.

“Yeah, that’s changing.”

“Really?” I spin on my heels to look at him. “You plan on changing me, fake-boyfriend?”

“No,” Xander says, with a steely grimace that’s actually pretty hot. “But in case you forgot, I’m a chef.”

“Oh, right.” I look away, attempting to swallow my previous I’m-woman-don’t-change-me bravado. “A good one, too. I guess.”

“You didn’t look up me or my restaurant on the internet before you invited me to live with you in your tiny book nest?” Xander chides.

“That would’ve been a smart move,” I agree, pulling out my phone and opening up his restaurant’s profile. “Are you a stalker or a serial killer, Xander? I bet you’re good with knives.”

Looking at my feed, The Carlisle seems classy and very British. It’s the kind of place I’d expect James Bond to hang out in with its upscale decor and masculine accents. I click on a video and up pops the last thing I expect.

“Holy shit!” I exclaim, almost dropping my phone. “Is that you cooking without any clothes on?”

“What?” Xander makes a face, but I’m entranced by the man in the video who’s got a James Bond worthy six pack and is slapping and cutting meat, then squeezing gravy out of a baster in a way that’s—

“What are you doing with that baster?”

“Oh, bollocks!” Xander swears, suddenly remembering he made a video in the nude—or at least shirtless. He’s standing behind a counter in the video, implying he’s not wearing anything below. “Don’t watch those! That’s a PR stunt.”

“I mean, if you want to cook in my kitchen like this” —I

flash him the video—"I could be persuaded to actually purchase ingredients."

"That's not me," he grumbles.

"It's not?" I swipe to the next video. "Cause it looks a whole lot like you, except with less clothing on."

"Obviously, I made the videos," he admits with an awkward hand gesture. "But I'm not—"

"And you requested *I* wear modest clothing!" I raise an eyebrow at him. "What are you doing in these videos? Auditioning for the next skin-a-max show—chef edition? Wait, did you just spray your chest with lime juice?"

"That's for publicity," he grumbles. "And it wasn't my idea. It was a stupid—Look, obviously, I don't cook *naked*."

"But maybe my fake-boyfriend does," I tease. "Or at least, that's what I can tell Arie."

Xander closes his eyes like this day went from bad to worse. "If it makes you feel better," I offer, "you can tell Arie I write my books in the nude, too. I tap, tap, tap out each brilliant word with my thruppenny bits on full view." A tiny smile creeps up the side of Xander's face. "You're imagining it now, aren't you?"

He opens one eye and shrugs, which shoots a trill of heat to the base of my stomach.

Okay, wow. He is.

"Um, alright," I blush. "How about I don't watch any more of these," I hold up my phone and swipe his video away, "and you go back to demanding modesty rules."

He shrugs again, re-closing his eyes like he's savoring the image I just told him to banish.

"Right. Well, as you get cozy with that image," I continue, "why don't I drop the next bomb on you while you're in a good mood."

That one eye pops open again.

I point to my bedroom. Then, I point to my living room.

“I’m single, short, and have a modest bank account,” I say, motioning to the love seat that sits next to the coffee table. The Nova-sized seat that happens to be way too small for British Captain America.

“You don’t have a couch,” he observes.

“And we have a winner,” I say, pretending to ring an imaginary bell. “But I do have a bed that will—probably—fit two humans.”

“Probably?”

“If you haven’t noticed, you are *very* tall.”

“I can sleep on the floor.”

“You can,” I agree, stomping on the cheap laminate wood beneath me. “But you probably won’t want to.”

“Show me the bed,” he says, walking past me to the door I’ve just started opening.

The bedroom looks a lot like the living room with bookshelves covering all semblance of walls. Strings of café lights hang from the ceiling instead of an overhead light, and the double bed is tucked next to the window with half a dozen colorful pillows on top of it.

Xander doesn’t say anything. He just stares at the bed like it might catch on fire if he just keeps glaring at it. After a long beat, he turns to me.

“Tiny bed *and* you sleep in the nude. Is that the situation?” he asks.

“That was a joke,” I say sheepishly. “The nude part, of course. The bed is ... well, what it is.”

“Fine,” he snips out, “but we’re buying food. I’m not staying here if I can’t cook anything.”

“Deal,” I agree. “All the food and ingredients you need, plus tasteful clothes, and tasteful kissing.” I count them off on my fingers, agreeing to the rules.

“And you need a sexy dress.”

“I’m sorry?” I balk. “Was that part of the tasteful clothes discussion?”

Xander shrugs, looking at the bed like it might void all the rules. “I’m guessing you’ve never been to Flambé before,” he says, and I shake my head. “Well, it’s fancy. X-Magazine called it the sexiest restaurant in Hawaii, and a rock star in Rolling Stone declared it the place you take—and I quote—*the person you want to fuck.*”

“And that’s ... Arie’s restaurant?” I ask, my throat drying up.

“It is,” Xander nods. “We’re having dinner there tomorrow night. So, do you own something that—” He motions with his hand to my body, implying I need an outfit that will show off what I’ve got to show off.

“What about *poor author* don’t you understand?” I ask. Sure, I’ve got dresses. But I don’t have I’ll-seduce-you dresses.

“Then tomorrow we’re getting you one.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Dress shopping, tomorrow,” he nods. “Because right now, I’m going to pass out on your tiny bed.”

“Jet lag?”

He nods and starts unbuckling his belt, making my eyebrows shoot up.

“Nova,” he tisk-tisks. “You’ve got to pretend we’ve had sex before, remember?” He throws my words back at me as he backs into my bedroom, removing his shoes, then his socks, then his waistcoat—damn, what is it about British men wearing fine-ass attire? Or in this case, removing it. The second he starts unbuttoning his shirt, I turn toward the bathroom.

“I’m taking a shower,” I announce. “Sleep well.”

I zip in the opposite direction, not looking back until I’m safely out of view with the bathroom door firmly locked.

What the hell was I thinking? Fake-dating a stranger? Inviting him into my house? My bed? A *hot*, British stranger

who has me salivating for beef brisket and gravy! I turn on the shower and strip out of my airplane clothes, feeling sweaty and unkempt. I made a joke about sleeping nude, but he was the one actually removing clothes. How far did he actually go? Am I going to tiptoe into my bedroom and find him unwrapped like it's Boxing Day?

I step into the shower and moan. The warm water cascades over my naked skin like a weighted blanket. And I know I shouldn't think about it, because it just makes things complicated, but I find myself remembering his hands in my hair and the commanding way he took control with that kiss. It was convincing, as if he almost wanted me instead of his red-headed friend.

Almost.

CONNOR

It's morning and I need to gather the troops, so I pull out my phone and text Ned and Mason.

Connor: *I need reinforcements.*

Ned: *It's morning and the weekend. Go back to bed.*

Connor: *Not now. Tonight.*

Connor: *I need you, too, Mason.*

Mason: *I'm balls deep in my girl.*

Connor: *Liar. You wouldn't text back if you were with Naomi.*

Mason: *Maybe it's a new kink we have.*

Connor: *Hi, Naomi! *waving emoji* *eggplant emoji* Can you come on Mason's dick so I can have his attention?*

Ned: *I'm turning off my phone if you mention Mason's dick again.*

Connor: *There have been developments in the Xander department.*

Mason: *He didn't get on the plane and you've nothing to worry about?*

Connor: *I wish. No, he brought a girlfriend.*

Mason: *To Hawaii? Like it's a vacation?*

Connor: *No, she actually lives in Hawaii.*

Mason: *?????????????*

Ned: *So there's no problem. He's taken. Arie's taken. No issue. Thank you for waking me up on my one day to sleep in.*

Connor: *Like you sleep in. You were up two hours ago working out.*

Mason: *And by working out, he means boning your wife.*

Ned: *I told you to stop making sex jokes about Olivia!*

Mason: *And you thought I'd listen?*

Connor: *He has a point.*

Mason: *How about this: I'll stop with the sex jokes after you let me have a threesome with Naomi and Olivia.*

Ned: *I retract all previous statements about not being interested in murder.*

Connor: *I need you both at Flambé tonight.*

Mason: *So we can murder Xander? Even though he has a girlfriend now?*

Connor: *No, dipshit! Xander and his girlfriend are coming to the restaurant tonight, but I have to work the bar.*

Mason: *And I don't have a job running my own bar on a Saturday night?*

Connor: *Need I remind you the "ply them with alcohol" plan was yours.*

Ned: *He has a girlfriend. I think all previous plans are null and void.*

Connor: *The relationship is new. I don't know if it's serious. Which is why I need boots on the ground—first-hand intel. Arie plans to pull out all the stops tonight and I'll be slammed. I won't be able to spy on them. Bring Naomi and Olivia and I'll sit all of you together.*

Ned: *Olivia works there too, you know.*

Connor: *I'll give her the night off. Or I'll convince Arie that Olivia should talk her up by sitting at their table.*

Ned: *And what intel are you looking for?*

Connor: *Is that a yes?*

Ned: *I can tell you the outcome right now—He has a girlfriend! There's nothing to worry about.*

Connor: *You'd never make that assumption in the courtroom. You'd get hard evidence to back it up.*

Ned: *This isn't a court case.*

Connor: *No, it's my future happiness. Hello! If the tables were turned, you know I'd be helping both of you. No questions asked.*

Mason: *Fine. I'll rework the schedule at the Lava tonight.*

Connor: *Thank you. At least one of you is loyal.*

Ned: *I think you're being irrational.*

Connor: *And I think you're being an asshole! Do I need to get Olivia to handcuff you and drag you to Flambé again?*

Mason: *That's definitely Ned's kink. Hey, did you ever use those fuzzy handcuffs I gave you as a wedding present?*

Connor: *Off topic, Mason!*

Mason: **GIF of a Muppet in BDSM leather**

Ned: *That's disturbing. I'm never using them again.*

Mason: *So you did use them!*

Connor: *Focus! The reservation is at nine. I'm reserving a table for the six of you. That includes you and your wife, Ned.*

Ned: *I didn't agree to this.*

Connor: *Be there.*

Ned: *Or?*

Connor: **GIF of a giant Blue Hawaiian drink**

Ned: *That's low.*

Connor: *Desperate times. Desperate measures.*

Mason: *Can I go back to fucking my girlfriend now?*

Connor: *Like you stopped in the first place.*

Mason: **Winky-face emoji**

Connor: *And wear something nice! No naughty Hawaiian t-shirts, Mason.*

Mason: *I can't hear you. Naomi is orgasming too loudly.*

Connor: *I'll text Naomi and make sure you don't dress up like a clown.*

Mason: *She's not going to answer. She's coming on my cock too hard.*

Connor: *That's the beauty of a text, dipshit. She'll get it after she's done with your dick.*

Mason: *Naomi will never be done with my dick.*

Connor: *Well, I would've said the same thing about Arie and my equipment—but here's Xander, making me question everything.*

Mason: *Ouch. Point taken. I'll see you at nine.*

Connor: *Ned?*

Ned: *I tuned out the second we started talking about Mason's dick again.*

Connor: *I'm counting on you tonight. Nobody reads a witness like you can.*

Ned: *Then maybe I'll charge you for my services.*

Connor: *I only pay in Blue Hawaiians.*

Ned: *Fuck off.*

Connor: *Love you, too, bro! See you this evening.*

NOVA

The dress I'm wearing is expensive.

Not to mention H-O-T.

It definitely fits the *sexy* adjective Xander demanded. In fact, it's borderline take-me-home-to-fuck worthy. Which is why I'm standing in the dressing room and not walking out to show Xander.

"Is everything alright in there?" Xander's muffled voice comes through the door.

"Just another minute," I call back, scanning myself in the mirror.

Wasn't it enough to wake up with him in my bed with his bare leg pressing against my thigh? I'd felt paralyzed (and turned on) with him at my side. Xander doesn't sleep naked—thank goodness! And glory to the powers that be, we were both jet-lagged enough that we slept like tranquilized race horses, because boxers and a t-shirt are pretty intimate. Especially when those boxers were scrunched up his thigh and showing off the type of muscular legs one dreams about wrapping—

I can't have *those kinds* of thoughts about Xander! Much

less walk into Flambé looking like someone painted this dress on my naked canvass.

Only, my writer brain starts tingling.

I read one and a half fake-dating books this morning while Xander slept late (yes, I had to extricate myself from my bedroom like a ninja to not wake the sexy giant). And part of the rom-com formula is to push the envelope and do exactly what would make the fake-dating couple uncomfortable.

And boy, would I feel uncomfortable wearing this dress in public.

But then, so would Xander.

Thus, rom-com gold.

“I’m not coming out,” I announce, and I hear Xander’s feet shuffle next to the door.

“Why? Does it not fit?”

“It’s not that,” I say, looking again at all the skin and curves on display. Am I really going to do this? I snap the tag off the dress and reach under the door. I guess, I am. “Take this and pay for it.”

Xander takes the ticket from me. “This is the one?”

“One-hundred percent,” I reply.

“Come out and let me see it.”

“Nope.”

“Nova?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“I’m British. I hate surprises.”

“Just trust me on this,” I reply, unzipping the dress and stepping out of it. “This fits your criteria perfectly.”

“How do you know? Let me in and—” Xander jiggles the handle and I slap my hand against the door.

“Hello, naked!”

That makes him retreat with an embarrassed mumble.

“Look, you asked for sexy,” I tell him. “And trust me, this

dress will absolutely make Arie think we're going home to fuck."

Silence.

Shit. Maybe, that was a little much. But the dress is *a lot*.

"Xander?"

"And you're comfortable wearing it?"

No.

Cici better love this damn book. A hot dress isn't exactly starve-yourself-for-this-Oscar-bait-role, but I'm nothing if not dedicated to writing something with authenticity, even if it means I have to sacrifice my dignity.

"I'd like to see it first," Xander says, but a smirk curls my lip.

"Too bad," I sass. "Cliché rom-com rule #1: impress the guy with the sexiest dress he's ever seen you in." That *is* a cliché. I literally read it *twice* this morning. "And for maximum impact, I'm going to wait until Arie's in the room for the big unveiling."

"You think that's wise?"

"It will make your reaction more authentic. And last I checked, you're a chef, not a thespian."

"True," he admits. There's a silence and then some under-his-breath cursing. "Damn this dress is expensive."

"Yes," I agree. "But the more I look like something you want to devour, the less threatening you will be to Connor. If you want to put a price on that, you're literally holding it in your hand."

"Whose cock-up idea was this fake-dating thing again?"

"Cock-up means something else in our country," I tease, biting back my laughter as Xander grumbles. "Oh," I add, "and we need to get shoes."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm short. You're tall. It'll finish off the look."

"I think you're extorting me."

"I can wear my flip-flops if you prefer, but they might ruin

the effect.” More swearing. “You’re the one who demanded sexy,” I remind him. “And it’s not like I’m going to be wearing this outfit again. This dress isn’t exactly what one wears to the library.”

“Fine. I’ll pay for it,” he grumps. “I’ll send in the shopkeeper with a box.”

“You won’t regret it.”

“Famous last words.”

I look at the dress on the hanger as he stomps out of the dressing room and a nervous flutter unleashes in my gut.

Famous last words is an understatement.

XANDER

I arrive at our reservation ten minutes early per Nova's request. She's arriving *fashionably* late, as if lateness could ever be in fashion. But she insisted she make an entrance and I better make sure Arie's there for it.

I smooth out my suit as the elevator doors open to the top of the Atlantis Resort, and I'm immediately transported back to the afternoon Arie and I snuck up here and discovered there was an abandoned restaurant on the roof. That was before she opened Flambé. It was the seed that inspired the restaurant I see before me, back when I was reassessing if she and I even had a chance. I hadn't been sure I could lay down the ghost of Charlotte and go after the woman I'd fantasized about all through college.

It's night, and the rooftop has transformed from that sun-lit day when Arie and I were up here together. Now, a chic patio glitters before me, strung with lights and evocative flower displays. The name of the restaurant glows on the side of the building with flames flickering at the edges of the metal letters.

Arie's signature has become fire and it suits her well. I can't

imagine a hotter night than the one she and I shared years ago, and I know her food is going to be even more inspired.

I walk into the foyer and am caressed with the scent of brûléed spice and sugar. It's downright moan-worthy. Of course, I don't indulge in such an outward indiscretion. The décor emphasizes the aroma, immediately enveloping me in darkness with pockets of candlelight. There are large photos of flowers on the wall, all blooming provocatively in contrast to the subtle hints of gold in the wallpaper that catch the twinkling spectacle of flames dancing in the dining room beyond the hostess. I'm about to walk into a night circus where waiters juggle fire and wicked delights lurk in the shadows.

"Carlisle," I say to the hostess, who gives me a sultry red-lipped smile like she's the big bad wolf and I'm the innocent who ought to be wearing a cape. All the patrons lingering in the entrance are dressed to impress: open-back dresses, shiny heels, suitcoats and slacks that are saved for special occasions. I'm glad we got Nova a dress. Not to say she wouldn't be cute in a librarian's outfit—especially with those blue glasses—but Arie's world is a demon's playground. And you'd better dress the part if you want to be served like royalty.

Arie's brand is impressive. It's no wonder she's done so well in her first few years of running this restaurant.

"Hold on one moment, Mr. Carlisle," the hostess says. "The owner wants to seat you personally."

"I told her business as usual," I reply, not needing special treatment. Though being seated by Arie does make Nova's request for her presence easier to fulfill.

"This *is* business as usual," the hostess insists. "VIPs are always sat by senior management."

"I told Arie to treat me like a normal person," I reply, but the hostess gives me another sultry look, eyeing me seductively before she goes to get my friend. I wonder if Arie trains them to

do that—the naughty glances—implying there’s *more* on the menu than moan-worthy food and flaming cocktails.

It doesn’t take long before the hostess is back, carrying a tray with two flaming champagne glasses, my friend walking behind her with a commanding swagger. I cough, then try to cover, because Arie looks incredible. Her crimson hair is down in flowing waves and she wears a sparkly dress that’s covered in sequins. She glitters like a succubus with scales, oozing dangerous wickedness.

A puff of sparklers and fire ignite in the dining room beyond as if Arie’s entrance requires flamethrowers and pyrotechnics. I’m glad Nova’s not here to see it, because I don’t know if those flames are rehearsed or not, but I’d hate for Nova to feel like her planned entrance isn’t up to snuff.

I can’t stop the smile that fills my face. Arie’s a damn vision.

“I assume you’re not cooking tonight,” I remark, looking Arie up and down as she takes the two champagne flutes from the hostess and hands one to me.

“You assume wrong, Carlisle,” Arie says, surveying me through the dancing flame. “I always cook in couture. The food just tastes better when the chef wears something that makes her feel like a goddess.”

“I don’t remember that cooking lesson in school,” I tease, loving the comfortable banter we fall into. It reminds me of all the laughter in our days of massacring recipes and making fun of Chef Ence’s obsession with turnips.

“Don’t you?” Arie’s voice gets sultry and low. “I’ve watched those new social media videos for The Carlisle. It looks like you know exactly how your attire affects your food—or lack thereof.” Her eyes smolder behind the flames, and maybe it’s the drinks that are only inches from my face, but I’m sweating. Arie’s gaze is devilish, and I can’t shake the feeling that she’s

daring me to mention that we've seen each other without a thread on our bodies.

"Do you make comments like that to all the VIPs you seat?" I ask, and Arie makes a show of blowing out the flame on my champagne glass, shooting smokey breath over my face as she holds the other glass to her left.

"Sells more cocktails this way," she says. "You should drink that, by the way. Enjoy the sensation of icy champagne sizzling against the burning rim, then sliding down your throat like the perfect sin."

"You always had a flair for theatrics," I compliment, taking a sip, and indeed, the contrast is devilish—cold and hot, meeting with a sizzle on the palate. It's not just taste, but sensation—tingling over my whole tongue.

"Some things never change," Arie says darkly, and I can't help but think about the past, and how food connects us, how it's part of the way we talk to one another. It's our language.

"Well, your overture is impressive," I compliment, and Arie's eyes shoot over my shoulder.

"You didn't bring the girlfriend?" Arie holds up the second glass like it's about to go to waste.

"She's on her way," I explain.

"Likes to keep you waiting, does she?" Arie blows on the flame, but doesn't extinguish it. Instead, it's a measured move that skillfully makes the flames dance like a witch doing a parlour trick. But then her eyes suddenly widen, her gaze shifting and the pallor of her skin drains of color. "Speak of the devil," she practically hisses.

I turn. It's a good thing Arie blew out the flame on my glass because I almost drop it.

Every eye in the entryway turns to stare as Nova parts the crowd. If Arie's a succubus, then Nova's the Queen of the Underworld. Her dress slicks to her body like a snake skin,

the fabric half black and half transparent, showing off her flesh beneath it. A black band of satin coils tightly around her body like a thick ribbon, strategically covering her so she's not indecent. But it still shows off plenty of cleavage ... and hip ... and stomach ... and thigh. Suddenly, my trousers feel tight.

I asked for sexy, and by gracious, Nova *understood* the assignment. In fact, she's blatantly asking for extra credit. I swear, if she turns around, there's going to be bum cleavage on display. And the more I look at the dress, the more I realize she can't be wearing anything under it—otherwise I'd see her undergarments.

My mouth goes dry and a predatorial piece of me wants to grab her hips and demand an explanation for leaving the house without her knickers on. But I'm still lost in the whole look: the four-inch heels that make her legs long as a gazelle's, the fact that she's not wearing her glasses, the brown hair that's in long waves. And she's done something smokey with her eye make-up that makes her seem ... well, *different* than the woman I met on the airplane.

Our eyes catch and there's approval in her gaze. I must be wearing the exact look she'd hoped I would. Undone? Lost? In a daze? Fuck! *That's* my fake girlfriend?

Crash!

A glass smashes at my feet and I jolt back as the champagne ignites like gasoline.

"Oh my God!" Nova swears, jumping away from the small fire.

"It's nothing to worry about," Arie announces, her voice cutting in as she literally steps into the fire in front of us. Her sequin dress glitters as she stomps on the flames with her heeled shoe, the flames licking her ankles. It's Arie's glass that's been dropped—or smashed—and I'm not sure if it was deliber-

ate. In fact, the patrons around us also seem unsure if this is part of the show or a rogue accident.

From somewhere in the dark, Arie pulls out a tiny fire extinguisher and shoots the white substance at the ground, causing gasps as patrons stumble out of the way.

“You never know what will catch on fire here,” Arie says calmly, making it seem like this is part of the experience. “There are fire extinguishers at every table, and all of our staff is trained in fire management. If anything gets too hot”—her eyes flick to me—“or you’re accidentally caught off guard, please remember, you’re in the hands of professionals.”

Nova looks at me on the opposite side of the extinguished fire, her eyebrow raised in question: *Is Arie deliberately stealing my spotlight?* My shoulder’s sag. She definitely is. Arie’s always been competitive.

“Please, this way,” Arie says, motioning to me and Nova, but deliberately taking my elbow to escort us. There’s an unmistakable edge to Arie’s demeanor at my fake-girlfriend’s arrival.

“Was that on purpose?” I whisper to Arie, trying to keep my voice discreet.

“I don’t do anything I don’t mean to,” Arie replies cryptically, squeezing my arm as she leads us into the main dining room. It’s packed with people and fiery cocktails, all reflecting in a spectacular picture window that overlooks the ocean. This really is an incredible location. “Oh, and I hope you don’t mind, but you have some additional guests at your table this evening.”

“Additional guests?”

“I intended to give you and your girlfriend a private booth—for the *true* Flambé experience ...” Arie’s fingers dance up my shoulder. “But Connor invited some of his friends.”

“Connor—?” I frown. Why would—?

“You know, my boyfriend,” Arie says coolly, eyeing me to

see if I've forgotten that she had one. Somehow this is starting to feel like *more* than my first introduction to Flambé. "Connor is working," Arie adds, motioning to the bar that overlooks the main room, where I see the man from the airport igniting a row of martini glasses one after the other. *Foosh! Foosh! Foosh!*

"I don't understand," I say, crinkling my brow. "If Connor's working, why are his friends—"

"It turns out my boyfriend is jealous," Arie says with a flourish, turning to Nova who's trailing behind us. "It seems he's threatened by the fact that I've seen Xander naked." Nova's eyes darken, which garners a malicious smile from Arie's lip. "And since Connor can't sit with you two himself, he thought you needed chaperones."

"That's ridiculous!" I stare at her incredulously.

"Is he normally jealous?" Nova's voice cuts in. Her words are followed by her hand taking my arm as she nudges Arie to the side and interjects herself between me and my friend. "Do you have a lot of ex-boyfriends lurking about?"

Arie regards Nova like a spider that's crawled onto the center of her cake. "Well hopefully, they'll get one look at you in that dress and realize Connor has nothing to worry about," Arie says *too sweetly*. "Please be sure to charm them with your love story."

"You aren't kidding about his friends?" I grumble. "Doesn't Connor realize I'm here to *help* this restaurant, not dual for your honor!"

Arie's eyes flair. "We Americans do love a cock fight."

"There's nothing to worry about," Nova interjects with a wide smile of her own. "Arie's already seen both your cocks and decided which one she's taking home." I'm impressed by the *back off my man* glare that Nova levels at Arie, and for a second, I think I see respect flicker through Arie's gaze. Though it sounds like my cock is the one that takes second place.

“Connor’s the one you need to convince,” Arie says with that same fake sweetness.

“No convincing needed by us,” Nova corrects. “He’s *your* boyfriend.”

Arie doesn’t budge, her blue eyes glittering at Nova like a hawk assessing a threat. “A little jealousy is healthy in a relationship,” Arie coos. “Not to mention how hot it makes the sex. Connor’s a beast when he needs to prove I should be happily-ever-after-ing on his cock as we ride off into the sunset.”

Almost ironically, a clap of thunder echoes through the restaurant. Glassware clinks at the sudden shudder and several patrons gasp. A second later, rain drops from the sky, pelting the picture window. A stampede of sound ricochets through the dining room, but Arie and Nova don’t budge.

“Monsoon season,” Arie says without moving. “Tropical storms can be quite invigorating. Especially when you’re on top of the world where the wind is unforgiving.”

Outside the string lights sway violently and fiery drinks are being extinguished in the deluge. All the well-dressed patrons on the patio rush toward the entrance.

“Do you need to—” I motion to the chaos outside, but Arie nods to several employees who are already helping customers. Ignoring the pound of rain, Arie strides up to a table under the picture window. Rain pelts the glass behind the U-shaped booth where two couples already sit.

“May I introduce,” Arie begins, “Connor’s brother Ned. And don’t worry, that resting bitch face is permanent, it has nothing to do with you.” She motions to the man in the suit, who indeed is frowning at this exact moment. “But he becomes tolerable when you meet his wife, Olivia, who is positively perfect.”

A pretty, dark-haired woman rolls her eyes at Arie and waves to us. “Nice to meet you, Xander.”

“And here we have,” Arie turns our attention to the second couple, “my least favorite person on the planet, Mason Haas.” She motions to the underdressed fellow who’s wearing a dark-colored Hawaiian shirt. “And his brain-washed girlfriend, Naomi, that I’m still waiting to dump his ass.”

“Charming as ever, Arie,” Mason says, lifting his clenched fist and proceeding to turn an imaginary crank that lifts his middle finger in her direction. Obviously, they don’t like each other.

“And this—” Arie turns to me and Nova, and I’m terrified of how she’s going to introduce us after those glowing introductions, “is Xander and Nova.”

I wait for her to say something sassy like I’m hung like an ox and Nova’s a mistake I should scrape off my boot. But she stays surprisingly silent. I’m about to fill the awkwardness when the guy in the Hawaiian shirt says, “Well, I’d fuck her.” He motions to Nova. “Look at that dress. Is that something you lent her, Arie, from *Sluts Unlimited*?”

“Jesus, Mason!” Connor’s brother hisses.

“What? Look at it!” Mason gestures to Nova again, and his girlfriend grabs his hand and traps it under the table.

“Please take that as a compliment,” Mason’s blond girlfriend says. “Mason takes a second to get used to. But I swear, that’s his way of saying you look very nice this evening.”

“If *very nice* means we should invite Xander and Nova over for an orgy later tonight,” Mason quips.

“Really?” Naomi sasses back. “You’d let me sleep with that dashing British man?”

“No,” Mason asserts. “He’d obviously *watch* while I’m sandwiched between the two of you.”

“Is this all part of the Flambé experience?” I ask, turning to Arie who’s visibly annoyed by Mason.

“It’s not,” she says stiffly, turning to Olivia and Ned.

“Mason’s only allowed to be here because Connor promised me that you two would keep him in check.”

Ned bursts out laughing. “Your boyfriend lied to you. If there was a way to control Mason Haas, I’m pretty sure we would’ve discovered it years ago.”

“You’re the lawyer,” Arie sasses back. “A restraining order comes to mind.”

“It’s called free speech, Dragon,” Mason says to Arie. “It’s protected by the constitution.”

“I’m going to kill Connor,” Arie hisses. “In fact”—she grabs my arm—“I’m going to seat you two somewhere else.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Ned’s wife Olivia jumps in. “He’s not that bad, please just have them sit down and Connor will bring over the cocktails. We all just need a drink.”

“You think a drink is going to tame Mason?” Arie shoots back.

“I think all your free tables are being taken up by the guests that were on the patio,” Olivia points to the steady stream of wet customers being reseated.

“She’s right,” I say, nodding to Olivia. “This place is overflowing. You should hire someone like her to help manage your dining room.”

“Actually, I already work here,” Olivia says.

“Oh?” I look at her surprised. “What do you do?”

“She’s one of our managers,” Arie says dryly.

“Oh,” I laugh. “Well, brilliant.” I move my hand to Nova’s hip and inch her toward Olivia’s side of the booth. “Let’s have a seat, shall we.”

Nova obliges and we scoot in beside Olivia and Ned.

“What? You afraid I’ll get handsy?” Mason jokes as we sit on the opposite side of the table, and honestly, I wouldn’t put it past him. He’s taken more than one leering look at Nova in her dress.

“Put your hand back on my thigh, and shut up,” Naomi says, and Mason looks at her with a goofy smile like she *gets him*.

“I’ll send over your server with the appetizers and drinks in a moment,” Arie announces, nodding to our table before beelining it straight to the bar, where I’m guessing Connor’s about to get a piece of her mind.

The second Arie’s gone, Mason turns to me and Nova with a wild grin. “So ... tell us about the first time you two fucked! For me and this Viking goddess”—he motions to Naomi—“it was in her red monster truck after Ned and Olivia’s wedding.”

I stare at him slack-jawed.

“Come on,” Mason encourages, and I hear Ned curse under his breath. “How’d you two start dogging?”

Piss! This is going to be a shit night.

CONNOR

“It’s fake,” Mason says, strolling up to the bar to give me an update on the Xander and Nova situation. They’ve been here two hours and are currently waiting for dessert.

“What are you talking about?” I look past Mason to their booth by the picture window, that Hawaiian monsoon still going strong.

“It’s not a real relationship,” Mason explains, tapping on the counter for me to give him a drink, which I oblige willingly.

“How would you know that?”

“I know,” he states, like he’s a mind reader on a tv show. “I was in a fake relationship, myself. There are signs.”

I narrow my eyes at Mason. That’s true. He and Naomi did fake date as a way to make her ex-boyfriend jealous at a wedding they were attending. Remembering that fact makes my stomach knot exponentially. Maybe Mason can see something I can’t. And if Xander’s trying to make Arie jealous—I look at the dress Nova’s been wearing all night—then yup, that

plan is definitely working, if only because she's stealing Arie's limelight.

"What signs?" I ask for clarification. "Be specific."

"I've got you worried now," Mason grins behind the drink I just made him.

"Evidence," I snap. I used to be a lawyer like Ned. I take nothing at face value, and Mason talks a lot of shit.

"When they touch, it's awkward," Mason replies, turning to nod to the couple. "It's polite. Controlled. Then one of them over compensates, realizing they haven't been touchy feely for a bit, and the other one totally flinches."

I watch them, waiting to see if what he says is true.

"There—" Mason points, and I growl at him to put down his hand.

"Subtle, man."

"Did you see it? When she touched his neck. He totally did one of those shiver things."

I did not see it. We aren't that close to the table, plus it doesn't sound convincing. "Maybe he's ticklish," I counter.

"And maybe I don't like Naomi sitting on my dick." He gives me a *when pigs fly* smirk. "But we both know that's bullshit."

"It's a new relationship," I defend. "Maybe they haven't found a rhythm yet."

"Or maybe they've never fucked."

"How would you even know that?"

"How? You want me to show you?"

"I'm terrified to know how you'd show me," I admit, "but I need concrete evidence, Mason, and your shiver testimony is weak."

"There are also discrepancies in their story," Mason adds. "Small things. Details. Like how long Nova was in London, and confusion about how many dates they've been on."

“That doesn’t prove they’ve never been intimate.”

“No, *that* requires a demonstration,” he says, pushing off the table and motioning for me to follow him.

“Promise me you’re not about to make a scene,” I grumble, begrudgingly moving out from behind the bar.

“Not a *big* scene,” Mason assures me, which means I’m probably going to be giving out free drinks for the rest of the night. “Also, those story discrepancies were another example,” Mason clarifies. “Try it yourself. Ask them something they *should* know about each other. Something simple: Where was your first kiss? What’s Nova’s favorite dish at Xander’s restaurant?”

“That’s not going to prove anything,” I scoff. “I repeat: *it’s new.*”

“Yeah,” Mason agrees, maneuvering through the dining room toward their table. “It’s so new they don’t know *anything* about each other. Nova likes to babble, but trust me, it’s all a diversion. She’s actually really good at not answering the question and diverting the conversation.”

I look at my friend in surprise. That’s a rather astute observation for the guy I told to *not* wear a Hawaiian shirt tonight, and is strutting in front of me in one that sports the ghost Slimer from the Ghostbuster’s franchise riding a surfboard. At least he went for his obsession with 80s movies instead of his preferred x-rated wardrobe.

“Follow my lead when I get over there,” Mason instructs, “and pay attention to their body language. It’s not the answer they give to my question that’s going to give them away. It’s the hesitation.”

“What are you going to ask?”

“Nothing I wouldn’t ask any stranger.”

Great. Mason’s usually worse with people he doesn’t know.

It's the whole I'll-never-see-them-again scenario that brings out the true raunch in him.

"I'm starting to regret asking for evidence," I grumble. "Please remember that Xander is going to be here for a while and you'll see him again."

Mason grins. "Trust me, if these two have actually fucked, then this won't be embarrassing."

"I think you're overselling yourself, Mason."

"And they're faking it, but you're all eating it up," Mason insists. "Now remember, watch the hesitation."

Mason strolls up to the table with a wicked grin.

"That means trouble," Naomi says, pointing at Mason's joker face.

"Not as much trouble as you're going to be in later when I'm eating your pussy," Mason retorts, causing Naomi to roll her eyes at how predictable that comment was.

I focus on Xander and Nova. They sit shoulder to shoulder on the right side of the booth, leaning in close, but noticeably not handsy. It's polite (because they're in public). It's nothing that would imply they aren't a real couple.

"Let's play a game," Mason announces, sliding into the left side of the booth next to Naomi. "A drinking game—as couples."

Xander and Nova glance at each other hesitantly. Mason said to look for hesitation, but when you've just met Mason, awkward glances come with the territory. That hesitation is no smoking gun. I can even see the trepidation in Ned and Olivia at Mason's suggestion. We've all learned to regard him with caution.

"It's simple," Mason continues. "I ask a question, I count to three, then each couple answers simultaneously when I point to them. If you give the same answer, you win the round. If you give opposing answers, you drink!"

I raise my eyebrows. That's not a half bad idea for a game, actually.

"Should I get Arie," I ask, feeling awkward as I stand above them at the end of the booth.

"Nah," Mason waves me off. "You can be the judge. Plus, we'll need you to get more shots when these four crash and burn."

My eyes flick to Xander and Nova, who look decidedly pale.

"First question," Mason announces. "I'll keep it simple: favorite dessert. Let's start with the newlyweds." He points at Ned and Olivia. "Three, two—"

They don't even need the countdown, both saying *tarts* before Mason gets to one. Then the two of them dissolve into giggles. Even *Ned* freaking giggles! Which means Hell has frozen over with how stupid in love he is with Olivia.

"Nova and Xander." Mason points at them. "Three, two—"

They stare at each other like they haven't a clue.

"—one, go!"

Nothing.

They're both wide eyes and awkwardness with blushing cheeks.

"Um, ice cream?" Nova says, eyeing Xander questioningly. Xander doesn't even make a guess. Yup, they have no clue.

"Drink!" I say, realizing Mason might have a point. The two of them hide behind their glasses as they sip their punishment.

"Okay babe," Mason turns to Naomi. "Favorite dessert."

"I'll count down," I say, still eyeing Xander and Nova who give each other sheepish eyes. "Three, two, one—go!"

"Cock," Mason and Naomi say in unison. Then, Mason clarifies with "Well, you sucking my cock."

Nova and Xander balk, looking at each other with embar-

rassment at his answer. Of course, that only means they're not used to Mason, not that Xander's never had Nova on her knees in front of him.

"Next question," Mason announces. "And I'm taking off the kid gloves: favorite sexual position."

"Whose?" Ned interjects diplomatically. He hates Mason's games, but he also likes to win. It's a lawyer thing. Even a stupid game like this one pulls out his inner Napoleon. "My favorite position or hers?"

Mason points to me. "You pick."

"Hers," I say quickly, noting how Xander looks sharply at Nova in hopes that she might give him a signal. But her eyes widen like she hasn't a clue what to telepathically tell him.

"I'll count down," I continue, taking over. "Mason, Naomi. Her favorite position. Three, two, one—"

"Reverse cowgirl," they say in unison. Only, I'm watching Nova and Xander, their faces getting gradually more panicked.

"Ned and Olivia," I point to them in the center. "Three, two, one—"

"Tarts," they say together, once again laughing.

"Wait? Tarts?" Xander frowns with confusion. "How is that a sexual position?"

"Ask Arie about it sometime," Olivia says with a devious smile. "Or this one." She points at me accusingly. "They're the instigators."

Xander raises his eyebrows in my direction. "This is a sexy restaurant," I reply. "All the desserts are inspirational."

Xander's face darkens. I wonder if he knows Arie named something on the dessert menu after him. Which one, I'm still trying to figure out.

I point at Xander and Nova, not giving them anymore information about Olivia and Ned's tart-giggling. "Last couple. Her favorite position." I nod to Nova. "Three—"

Nova's hand digs into Xander's bicep.

"Two—"

They look at each other with panicked eyes.

"One—"

Their faces blush red.

Mason's right. They're the embodiment of hesitation. They have no intimate knowledge of each other.

"Go."

Silence.

Not just hesitation, but terrified stares at each other that are so awkward it makes me feel like an asshole for playing this game. Nova picks up her martini glass, raises it to me, then drinks. They aren't even going to try and guess.

Mason called it. They've never had sex.

Xander looks like he lost a bet, and badly. Sheepishly, following his *girlfriend's* lead, he drinks as well.

"For the record," Nova says, her voice shaking slightly as she puts her drink down. "We're waiting."

Her eyes flick to me sharply, and there's something in them that's angry, like this stupid middle-school game we're playing only reveals me and my friend's shitty character.

"And we're not waiting because I'm religious, or need to be married, or any of the judgmental things you're all thinking," Nova continues, but then her voice trembles and trails off, and she looks around the table like she's desperately trying to keep her composure when surrounded by wolves. "You know what, it's none of your business. Excuse me." She moves to stand up, scooting herself out of the booth.

"Fuck," Xander says under his breath, trailing after her as she bee-lines it to the front of the restaurant, leaving us standing awkwardly with our tails between our legs.

"Do you think she's a virgin like Kendall?" Mason asks, and Naomi snaps at him to *shut up*.

Well, Mason was right. They haven't had sex. But it looks like there's a reason for it.

One that's private.

We definitely pushed this too far.

I storm out into the rain.

I shouldn't be this upset, but I also didn't know this evening would be met with an onslaught of juvenile games. Who talks about such intimate details at a dinner party? Especially with someone they barely know? It's disrespectful.

The rain is a muggy avalanche that coats me and this fabulous dress to the bone, slicking my hair to my head and stripping me bare. This dress literally couldn't be any tighter, but somehow the pouring water makes me feel naked. Or maybe it was all of those damn questions about our sex life!

Our *imaginary* sex life, I remind myself. But what if we really were waiting? What if I needed to take things slow?

I wipe my dripping hair out of my face and head for the elevator. Of course, this isn't real, and it doesn't matter. And yet, it's triggering as hell.

"Nova, wait!"

Xander dashes out of the restaurant into the rain, soaking his suit as he chases after me. Fuck. This was such a stupid,

knee-jerk reaction. I really should've pretended I liked some reverse-tart-doggy-style bullshit that would've made them all laugh. Not run into the rain and reinforce that *Is she a virgin?* comment I heard as I was running away.

For the record, I'm *not* a virgin. But I'm also not lambasting my sexual prowess in a restaurant where every drink, and taste, and smell is designed to turn you on—while I sit *with strangers!*

“Hey?” Xander catches up to me. “Are you okay? What was that?”

I try to laugh, and cover up the blatant overreaction I'm having. “Nothing,” I lie, looking up at Xander who's too damn tall, and too damn sexy, even soaking wet. I toss him a fake smile to reassure him, but he doesn't buy it.

“That wasn't nothing,” he says, nodding to our drenched attire and the fact that we're still being lambasted by rain.

“Right,” I balk. “I mean—” His brows pinch in, those brown eyes looking at me sweetly. If I knew him better, I might think he genuinely cares about why I ran out of this restaurant. But this is fake, and my real hangups aren't anything we need to discuss.

I look around quickly, trying to stall. Behind him, the wind jangles the café lights on the patio, tossing them like bright onions in a sea of wet darkness. Noticing a dry spot with an overhang, I grab Xander's arm and move us away from the elevator and around the side of the restaurant. It's out of view of the picture window where Connor and all his friends can leer at us.

“Nova? What's going on?” Xander rakes his hand through his wet hair and stares at me like I'm the opposite of the brave vixen who kissed him in the airport. He looks at me like I'm someone else, some broken vulnerable girl who ran out of a restaurant.

I hate that look.

I swallow the lump in my throat and toss on a smile, thrusting my chest forward in this ridiculous dress. “I’m fine,” I say quickly. “I’m not broken, don’t look at me like that.” I point toward the restaurant. “That was all part of the ruse.” I toss my wet hair over my shoulders. “They were being assholes,” I deflect. “Obviously, they’re not going to stop asking about our damn sex life, so I gave them a reason not to ask anymore.”

Xander’s eyes narrow, unconvinced. “That was all for show?”

“Of course it was!” I lie. “Yes, maybe it was a little overdramatic”—I motion to the rain—“but that’s how these stories go, right? The character has some sort of wound from the past and it causes them to act out. Be brash.” Xander tilts his head to the side, still assessing if that’s bullshit or not. “We can decide what the *mysterious reason* I stormed out is later,” I add. “Let them stew on it for now. Right? Maybe I’m a virgin like they suggested or—”

“Are you a virgin?” Xander asks cautiously.

“No!” I glare at him. “Of course not. That was all for show,” I repeat. “Please, don’t take it seriously.”

“It seemed ... real,” he offers tentatively, and I hate how transparent I am.

“I took some acting classes back when I was in university,” I say. That is true, though I wasn’t as good as my supposed *performance* would suggest. “As an author you have to get inside your character’s head,” I explain. “One of my advisors told me to take acting classes to help me do that. I’m a better writer as a result, and I must’ve picked up a few acting skills.”

Xander doesn’t respond, carefully watching my face instead. Shit. I shouldn’t like the fact that he wants to call *bullshit*. His look is so genuine that some stupid part of me almost wants to tell him.

“Did something happen to you in the past?” He asks carefully, and I force out a laugh.

“Missionary,” I say, and Xander looks at me confused. “It’s my favorite sexual position,” I deflect. “Sure, it might be boring for this crowd,” I motion to the restaurant again, “but it’s personal. I like looking at the person I’m having sex with.”

That’s true. I like the connection. I *need* the connection. I don’t like getting naked without it.

Xander’s brow furrows, not sure why I’m telling him this information.

“I’m not broken,” I repeat. “Whatever story you’re making up in your head right now ... whatever made you ask those questions ... it’s not me.”

“Okay,” he says softly, like he’s trying to believe me, but this part of my performance is less convincing.

“God, you’re such a good guy,” I say, reaching up and touching his cheek. He flinches, but lets me. “You’re genuinely trying to be a sweetheart right now,” I praise, and the truth is, it’s sweet as hell. It’s the kind of thing that would make me fall for him if this was real. “But please, it’s an act. Arie’s friends are ...” I shake my head. How do I put this politely?

“American assholes?” Xander offers.

I laugh, thankful at how his joke cuts the tension. “As opposed to *British* assholes?” I ask.

“Oh, those are a whole other breed,” Xander agrees. “Technically they’re British *arseholes*.” He emphasizes the alternate phrasing. “Scallywags who wear bowties and gawk at ladies thruppenny bits.” Xander’s gaze flicks to my dress for a second and I blush.

“British *arsehole*,” I scold.

He smiles, accepting the insult. “You *do* look phenomenal in that dress,” he admits. “And you’re right, Arie is jealous. So is Connor. This is a downright mess.”

“Hey,” I step forward and take his elbow. “Remember why you came here—to help your friend.”

He shakes his head, like he isn’t sure he wants to help his friend anymore.

“Yes, *that* was all bullshit,” I agree, meaning Connor’s friends. “But you’ve barely even sat down with Arie and caught up, much less really looked at her restaurant. I’m sure all this posturing will blow off when you actually start helping and cooking and all the things Arie invited you across the globe to come fix.”

“I’m not Mr. Wunderkind,” Xander chastises.

“No, you’re a good friend,” I emphasize, “and we all need more of those in our lives.”

He smiles, gazing at me like he might wish I was his girlfriend. I shake it off. Who doesn’t like compliments?

“Plus, I can’t wait to see you cook,” I add, and his smile turns mischievous.

“Hmmm,” He hums mysteriously, his eyes starting to twinkle. “That might change your feeling on missionary.”

“What?” I gape at him. “Food can do that?”

“My food can.”

“How?” I spear him with an incredulous look. “Are you telling me you actually *do* cook naked like in those social media videos?”

He laughs from deep in his throat and it’s sexy as hell. “No,” he admits. “Cooking is more personal. More connection.”

I narrow my eyes at him, not liking the warmth that spreads through my stomach and inches below. How the hell can he make cooking sound so ... erotic? Heck, he’s not even cooking—he’s just talking about it!

He smiles again, and lifts my chin with his thumb, gazing into my eyes with a sorcerer’s amusement. I can’t tell if he’s tickled by the spell he just cast on me with those few words

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about cooking, or if he's back to searching for the truth under my lies.

But either way, I like it.

ARIE

I'm sitting in Simon's office in a sea of receipts with two laptops open to spreadsheets that may as well be in mandarin. I need to stop thinking about this as *Simon's* office. He and Kendall moved to LA to open the new restaurant. And even though he didn't give me an *I'll never come back to Hawaii* ultimatum, I have a feeling he's going to put down roots.

I'm going to have to hire someone to replace my best friend!
I miss Simon.

And I don't just miss him because he would know what to do with the mad-scientist-laboratory of paper that I've redecorated his office with. He'd be able to talk me through what to do about Xander and Connor. He'd tell me when to take the night off. He'd give me a hug and then pretend it never happened because I'm not the sentimental-type who needs that.

I toss a receipt at one of the laptops in frustration. I obviously love Connor, but Xander being here is ... confusing. He brings up all my insecurities—about this restaurant (which the blizzard of receipts around me confirms is a weakness),

about my relationship (which I can't even parse yet, it just feels like a niggling fish flip-flopping in my gut and screaming indecision), and my ability to keep my friends (cause I clearly drive them to cities across oceans). Heck, even Xander left me to go back to London after our amazing night together. Sure, I hadn't created Flambé yet, and I'd never give that up, but ...

But what?

What exactly is messing with my head so much when it comes to that sexy Brit?

A knock raps on the door to Simon's office—I mean Simon's-yet-to-be-hired-replacement's office—and I look up to see Xander leaning against the open door frame. He's wearing suspenders and a button-up shirt and looking gallantly European. What is it about Londoners and their ability to look *nice* all the time? It's like they don't own a pair of jeans or a t-shirt. Instead, they're raised on slacks and perfectly rolled sleeves and fabrics like wool and tweed. Or at least, Xander's wardrobe is.

"Hey," I say, waving him in, happy he leaves the door open as he enters. What am I? A teenager afraid her parents might walk by? Though I have to admit, I don't want Connor to walk by right now. I haven't had a moment alone with Xander since he arrived.

"I see why you called me," Xander quips, motioning to my witch's circle made of receipts instead of salt.

"And you're not even an accountant," I joke. "I'm so lost, I'm just happy to have someone around who knows what an industrial dosa plate is." I hold up the receipt for the kitchen appliance we had to replace a month ago.

"Well, I *do* know how to read a spreadsheet," Xander says, sitting down on the floor next to me. "But what you really need are systems and employees who do this for you."

"I had that," I admit. "It was wrapped up in one nerdy-Clark-Kent package that now lives in Los Angeles."

"If the system falls apart without one person, it's not a good system," Xander criticizes, implying there may have been something wrong with how Simon built this part of our restaurant.

"I never thought he'd leave," I admit out loud. "Heck, Simon probably never thought he'd leave either. So the real problem in the system is ..."

Me.

I don't say that part out loud.

"You and Simon were always close," Xander muses, moving past my silence like the polite Brit he is. "I remember being jealous of your relationship with him in college."

"Jealous?" I stare at him surprised. "Of Simon?"

"He was your rock."

"My rock?" I give Xander a frown. "I always thought *you* were my rock in college."

"Oh no," Xander shakes his head. "I was the one you turned to when your grades were going south, or you didn't understand a cooking technique, or you needed a drinking buddy."

I shake my head. "You're making my point for me."

"Simon was different," Xander corrects. "He was always around. Supportive. Fun. You wouldn't do anything important without running it past him. He'd tell you when you were being brilliant, and he'd warn you when your shenanigans would get you expelled. You *listened* to him."

I frown at Xander, processing what he's said. He's right. Simon was all those things.

"Plus, you never slept with Simon," Xander adds.

"I never slept with *you* in college either!" I point out.

"Yeah, but you wanted to," Xander says with a wink and I feel my cheeks heat. I'm about to say that he was just as much

to blame for all that tension, but then he adds, “The person you want to sleep with can’t be your rock. Not unless you’re 100 percent committed to that person.”

There’s a sadness to his voice that I can’t parse, like a missing ingredient you can’t put your finger on.

“You had Charlotte,” I say softly, not wanting to bring her up. We both know she’s the real reason we never got together in college. Xander’s heart belonged to someone else.

“Yeah, I did,” he agrees, that sadness still coating his tone. “And now I have Nova.”

He looks up, smiling weakly as if he knows his new girlfriend’s existence sits between us just like Charlotte’s phantom did. Would we be different if he and Nova weren’t together? Would Xander’s presence in Hawaii feel like the last time, when we were both so eager to fall into each other’s arms?

Xander laughs nervously. “I was trying to make a point about Simon,” he presses. “He was an incredible friend. What happened?”

I swallow hard, not wanting to admit the truth. “Classic Arie being a bitch,” I laugh, trying to distance myself from this conversation with a joke.

“No, really?” Xander presses. “He was your rock.”

My cheeks flame, I’m not good at lying to Xander. He’s too good at reading me. “I got jealous,” I admit.

“You have a boyfriend,” Xander points out.

“Not like that.” I shake my head. “When Ned and Olivia got married it was here at the restaurant, and there was a wedding planner, Kendall, and she ...” I pick up a receipt and start folding it nervously. “She had all these plans for the wedding, and you know me, I like to be in control, so ...” I make a gesture to summarize that things got messy. “And worse,” I add quietly, “I didn’t want her dating my rock.”

Xander’s eyebrows shoot up. “Shit, Arie, you didn’t?”

“I did,” I admit, leaning back onto the floor and causing the receipts to flutter. “Actually, I did *worse* than whatever you’re thinking, and Simon chose her.”

“Of course, he did.”

My eyes cut to Xander, not liking that statement. *Of course, he did?* Am I really that easy to cast aside?

“Simon said he needed space—from me,” I explain. “So he’s opening a second Flambé location in Los Angeles.” I frown at the ceiling fan, where the blades circle slowly, making me wonder if I went back in time if I’d do things differently. Would I lay off Kendall and be less of a bitch. “Simon didn’t leave the business,” I clarify. “He just left ... me.”

Xander’s hand squeezes my shoulder. It’s warm and makes me wonder if I went back in time if I’d do things differently with him, too. Would I let him leave Hawaii after our one night? Would I follow him to London and not create Flambé in the first place ... not know Connor.

“Simon will forgive you,” Xander says. “Maybe not right away, but eventually. You’re hard to stay away from.”

I roll my head and he’s peering down at me with a genuine smile; it makes something sad pinch in my chest.

“You stayed away,” I say softly, avoiding his gaze by futzing with my hair. It’s a stupid comment. He had his own restaurant to run. I had one to build. And at the time, I was happy to let Simon and my sister keep me on task, rather than fantasize about the life I didn’t choose in London.

Xander’s hand touches my chin, turning me to face him. “I didn’t dare—” his voice cuts out and his eyes flicker with emotion, shooting cold through my skin. “You had to build this,” he says finally, not breaking eye contact. “You had to create your *own* restaurant. Your passion and your heart are rolled up in this. You would’ve resented me if I took you away from it.”

His thumb brushes the side of my mouth so softly I shiver. Is he saying he wanted to come back to Hawaii? Is he saying he forced himself to stay in London so I wouldn't be distracted from Flambé?

I sit up. "Xander?"

There's a wobble at the edge of his lip. He holds my gaze, his hand still on my cheek. Is he saying—?

"No one *wants* to stay away from you, Arie," he whispers, his tone full of regret. "But the timing with us has always been shit."

A lump lodges in my throat. Xander *wanted* to come back to Hawaii? He wanted to come for me? Would he have—?

I have a thousand questions, but he drops his hand, smiles weakly and stands up. The spell between us breaks and his motion causes a dozen receipts to flutter in his wake.

"I spoke to Olivia when I arrived," Xander says, coughing to clear his throat and change the subject. "The smart one who's married to your boyfriend's brother. The one who's your manager."

I'm still on the floor with my heart hammering in my ears, still trying to parse what he said about not wanting to stay away.

"She explained to me that Simon tutored her on the financials of her painting business," Xander continues, leaning over to pick up one of my open laptops. "And he showed her several of Flambé's spreadsheets as examples. He explained to her how they worked. I think we can put Olivia in charge of the ledger, organizing these receipts, at least temporarily, until we hire someone with an accounting degree."

We?

He's talking just like Simon did, like he has a stake in the business and he's invested in what happens to it. Xander knows

this restaurant is my heart and he won't let me flush it down the toilet. He *wants* to take care of it—of me.

“That will get you out of this office,” Xander says, turning and offering me a hand to help me get up off the floor. “Then you can give me a tour of the rest of the business, the kitchen, the staff—how everything works. We'll use that to make a list of what you're missing—particularly employees that can do the jobs you're drowning in.”

I tentatively reach up to take his fingers.

“Cooking is what you do best, Arie,” he says confidently, his grip wrapping around palm. “We need to get you back in the kitchen as fast as we can.”

Xander lifts me like a feather, like it takes no effort to pull me out of this hole. His firm grip is comforting and promising.

Promising he'll never drop me.

NOVA

I'm at my favorite coffee shop, sitting across from my best friend Hailey. She wears an *I'm a Swiftie* t-shirt, a ripped jean skirt, turquoise tights, and her hair is in two French braids. She's crushing the I'm-in-my-late-20s-but-I-still-dress-like-a-teenager vibe in the most authentic and unapologetic way. I've known Hailey for eight years (ever since I moved to Hawaii and I found her on a message board looking for a critique partner for her fantasy novel). She wore that Taylor Swift shirt back then, and I'm certain she's taking it to her grave.

Currently, Hailey's double-fisting a pumpkin-spice latte in one hand (yes, it's summer and we live in Hawaii, but to Hailey pumpkin spice is always in season) and her cell phone in the other (adorned with a pastel power-puff girls cellphone case, because her #downwiththepatriarchy attitude must be balanced out by a love of animated cartoons). Oh, and her eyes are bugging out like I've swallowed a typewriter because she's watching one of Xander's cooking videos.

"You met this guy on the plane?" Hailey squeaks. "And

you're telling me he's sleeping in your bed, he kissed you in the arrivals wing, and you're complaining?"

"I kissed him," I clarify. "And only to create the illusion that this fake relationship is real. The bed conundrum is because I'm poor. None of that honey-licking innuendo you're watching is happening in actual life."

"But it could be, right?" Hailey asks, her eyes still glued to the screen.

"He's in love with Arie, the owner of Flambé," I explain again. "He's a chef. She's a chef. There's probably some kitchen-crossed-lovers pun you could be making right now."

"*Penne* for your thoughts?" Hailey tosses out, unable to resist my bait. The girl loves puns. "I hear this chef hottie has *supper* powers."

"Exactly," I laugh.

"I'm sending *olive* my prayers to this Arie lady," Hailey continues. "I'd hate for her to *pasta* away and leave all the *penne*-tration to my girl Nova."

"Be *knife*," I toss back at her with a laugh.

"Good one!" Hailey exclaims.

"Let's remember, I'm doing this for my book." I give Hailey my best *don't get any ideas* look. "It's for research. So I can authentically write a cheesy rom-com without making myself sick. And you need to stop watching those videos like your life depended on it." I point at the phone that's stolen her attention again.

"If dating him is for research and *authenticity*," Hailey looks up with a smirk, "then you should definitely sleep with him."

My face drops. What the heck! What's with everyone's obsession with me sleeping with Xander?

"Before you give me that face," Hailey says quickly, holding up a hand to placate me. Only, she's still holding her phone and

an image of a shirtless Xander flashes at me, his eyes seducing the camera as he licks frosting from a spatula.

That should *not* make my stomach squirm!

Or my thighs ache.

“I should not give you the face that’s currently *on* my face?” I point at myself. “That one?”

“I know you don’t *do* casual sex anymore,” Hailey replies, putting her phone down, but still gesturing wildly with her latte. “But I know *you*. And the one thing in the world of Nova Ashlynn Wolfe that trumps her *I like to go slow* card is her obsession for research. Particularly for a book!”

“I’m not sleeping with Xander for research!”

“You flew to London to *first-hand experience* the *je ne sais quoi* of fifteen British museums for research,” Hailey points out. “You could’ve used the internet!”

“It was twelve museums,” I correct. “And that book is dead.”

“Exactly!” Hailey swoops her latte in my direction, yet manages to avoid splashing a tidal wave of coffee onto my shirt. “You spent thousands of dollars to be able to *authentically* describe the smell of English furniture. Yet, you won’t put out for *penne* action with—and these are your words—the *hottest man you’ve met in ages*?”

“I’ve had sex before,” I defend. “I know how the mechanics work. Some things I can make up and not research.”

“Can you though?” Hailey jokes, flashing me a new video that includes a papaya and Xander’s tongue. “Personally, I’d need to *experience this* so I could find the perfect words to make my readers squirm.”

“You write about dragons,” I throw back.

“You don’t think I’d *ride a dragon* if they were real and the opportunity presented itself?”

“I see what you did there,” I deadpan, then point to the video. “I’ll buy you a papaya.”

“Hey, you’re the one who was dropping tropes on me earlier,” Hailey defends, proceeding to quote me. “Only one bed. Forced proximity. You know rom-com books these days are full of boning, right?”

I give her my best evil eye. “I’ve literally read five of them back-to-back,” I growl.

“And have any of them written sex scenes with the beauty and authenticity that *you* will?” Hails tosses at me. Hailey has read all three of my published books, plus the ones that never made it past the development stages. And sometimes it feels like she knows my writing better than I do. I love language and poetry and finding truth in a phrase. I’m a snob about making sure a scene (even a sex scene) is important to the story and fully motivated. I don’t have to admit to her that I’ve been picking apart the books I’ve been reading—including the spicy scenes—because she knows I have. And while we’re on the topic, nobody needs to use a violent word like *impale* when writing about love making!

“You realize Xander is a real human being,” I say in my defense.

“Whom you’ve kissed.”

“Fake-kissed!”

“Then fake-sleep-with-him if you need to make that distinction.”

“Standing in a British museum—for research—is not the same as standing naked in front of a stranger!” I insist, to which Hailey shrugs in disagreement. “Why are you pushing this?”

Hailey puts her latte down and quiets. “You know why,” she says softly, and that ripple of nerves I felt at Flambé, when Mason was interrogating me and Xander about favorite positions, rears its ugly head.

Of course I know why Hailey is pushing this. I just don't like it.

"You promised this year you'd put *him* behind you," Hailey says kindly, emphasizing the word *him* like he's Voldemort whose name can't be spoken out loud. Which we've agreed is how we will address him. "And, yes, you can change your mind," Hailey continues. "You can *always* change your mind, but back in January you had your New Year's resolution locked and loaded and ready to go."

"Most people never fulfill their New Year's resolutions," I contend.

"You aren't most people." Hailey takes a sip of her latte. "In fact, you're the only person I know who fulfills her New Year's resolutions with a vengeance. And this year you said you were moving on from *he who shall not be named*: dating, hook-ups, *sleeping with someone*."

"Or maybe this is the year I'll turn out to be like everyone else who forgets their resolution on January second," I toss back.

"It's August."

"Exactly!"

"It's been over seven months and the only person you've gone on a date with or kissed is a stranger you met on an airplane."

Our eyes catch and I understand the point she's making. I pride myself on accomplishments, on following through and getting things done. When I'm drafting a new book, I have a daily word count that I always hit and productivity trackers that are color coded. My ruthless ambition is *why* I made this a resolution in the first place, because proclaiming that I should start dating again—saying it out loud to my best friend—would force me to be more proactive.

The problem is this year's resolution is a *real one*. A hard

one. It's not simple like going to the gym every day or writing my next novel. It means I actually have to put myself out there again.

"Hey," Hailey's voice softens. "Swiftly and I love you, okay?" She motions to her shirt, often talking about Taylor as if she's our invisible third musketeer. "We haven't seen you excited about a guy in ... a while. That's all I'm trying to point out. Fate has dropped a gorgeous, British man into your bed—quite literally—whom you've already kissed and have to pretend is your boyfriend. It seems like the perfect opportunity might present itself."

"He's in love with someone else," I remind her. "Even if I liked him—which I'm not saying I do—I can't sleep with someone whose heart is taken."

I give Hailey a *you know why* look. Not getting involved with people who are unavailable is a personal rule. A rule that Hailey knows exists as a result of *he who shall not be named*—who I got involved with way too quickly and who turned out to be *married!* Xander may not have a ring on his finger, but if his heart belongs to someone else, I'm not going near him.

"This is not Na—" Hailey starts, but I cut her off with my *die-if-you-say-his-name* laser gaze. "Your hot chef is a different person," Hailey says instead. "And he doesn't want to get involved with the woman he has feelings for because she has a boyfriend. He's respecting the same rule you are," Hailey explains. "And even if he didn't, Mr. Hottie-chef-body is going to be leaving Hawaii with a broken heart."

"Which is another great point," I emphasize. "He's going to be *leaving* Hawaii. And you said it yourself earlier, I don't do casual sex."

"Right now," Hailey replies, returning my glare with her own *I-know-you-better* stare. "That's a self-imposed *rule*," she says, using air quotes as she says the word. "You used to have

plenty of casual sex before your last casual affair became serious and *he who shall not be named* neglected to share the fact that he'd made vows to someone else."

"I should've been more careful," I defend. "I shouldn't have rushed into his bed."

"*He* shouldn't have done any of it," Hailey says.

That's true. I know it's true, but it doesn't change the fact that I felt like a fool and I rushed into something that was covered in red flags.

"How about this," Hailey initiates, changing her tone. "How about we agree that you don't do casual sex"—the air quotes are out again—"yet. You're the queen of growth mindset." Hailey points at me. "You've told me countless times that *you can learn to do anything*." Hailey loves to throw my own words back at me—twisted of course, like they are right now. It's probably a writer thing. "Plus, you're the one who made the resolution to play the field and get laid before Christmas."

"That was back when I had twelve months ahead of me," I remind her.

"Well, how long is he staying? It's only August."

Crap. I didn't think to ask him that question. Xander said he was here to help Arie with her restaurant, but he never said how long that would be.

"I think you made that resolution," Hailey continues, "because part of you wants to go back to the carefree sex-loving girl you were before ass-wad cheated on his wife."

"I can't seriously do what you're suggesting," I repeat. "I'm not going to *use* him."

Hailey's eyebrow raises: *Bullshit!* "But you'll use him to get a story for your book," she points out. "Or are you telling me that kiss and the sexy dress were all out of the genuine goodness of your heart? Oh, and what exactly was this list for again?" Hailey taps on my notebook that's sitting on the table.

Inside is a list of fake-dating tropes that I've been compiling from my research, which I suggested I might try out on Xander. Hailey's *Bullshit* eyebrow raises even higher. "Uh-huh, you're not using him at all."

"There's innocent kissing," I say, trying to create a distinction, "and then there's serious—"

"Penne in the pasta fucking?" Hailey asks crassly, making me regret baiting her with puns earlier. "Because guys never have casual sex, right? It has to be serious?" Hailey's voice is mocking me now. "Not even if said casual sex might actually be healthy—for both of you! It could help him get over the unavailable chef and you the married asshole who—"

"Point taken!" I cut her off.

Hailey frowns. She doesn't like it when I shut down about *he who shall not be named*. But it's embarrassing, and shameful, and I hurt a person I didn't even know. Hailey would go full Brené Brown on me if I said that out loud, pointing out that shame and vulnerability should be shouted from the highest tower. Ironically, she's probably also about to play the Brené Brown card on me for my silence. I wouldn't put it past her to quote the vulnerability and shame researcher in telling me that my silence only gives *him* the power he wanted in the first place. And that not talking about it continues to give him power over me, even though it happened almost two years ago.

Of course, no New Year's resolutions or silly fake-dating scenario is going to change the truth that I'm still terrified to take a risk. I fall fast for people when I shouldn't. I dole out trust like it's pennies and am the epitome of gullible. It's easier to turn that part of me off. That way nobody gets hurt.

Hailey can see me shutting down, so she changes her tone. "I'm just saying have fun—light, innocent fun," she explains. "There's a time when you wouldn't have been anti-romance novel and would've embraced the idea of filthy remarks and

innocent kisses and drizzling Xander in honey as you two make a mess. Even if you don't want to honestly *live* it: that's all rom-com research gold."

A smile hitches my cheek, glad to see we're back in my comfort zone of research. "Cici better love this new book," I joke.

"She will," Hailey encourages. "As long as you don't spend half a page describing the way his hair blows in the breeze."

"I'd never do that!"

Hailey raises an incriminating eyebrow at me. "Your second book, first act, when you introduced the brother. There was an extraordinarily long passage about hair styles that I cannot believe your editor didn't make you cut."

I roll my eyes at her. See—she knows my writing better than anyone.

And she may have a point. I used to be fun. I used to love dating. In fact, all the flirty banter that comes out between me and Xander *has* been refreshing. And she's right, it doesn't have to be real. I can just fake it with him for a while to get my head back on straight.

To remember who I once was.

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CONNOR

“**T**his is quite the list,” I say to Arie, who’s in Flambé’s kitchen meticulously dipping marshmallow cream puffs into a vat of Valrhona raspberry coating. The fig-sized treats look like the tops of that cathedral in Russia, the one that feels like it belongs in Candyland. Arie doesn’t acknowledge me, instead she focuses all her attention on the perfect swirl as she pulls the treat out of the raspberry bath. It’s impressive how she twists her wrist to make the candy drip into a pointed tip. The woman has hands steady enough to be a surgeon.

I look at the list in my hand. It’s full of daily, weekly, and monthly tasks that the restaurant needs to accomplish to run smoothly. It’s accompanied with names delegating who will be in charge of each item. Arie and Xander have spent the last week inspecting everything in the restaurant from kitchen schedules to inventory to the paper the menus are printed on. For all of Arie’s *I’d-rather-burn-these-receipts-with-dragon-fire-than-deal-with-them* flightiness, Xander has managed to make her focus on all the things she’s let slide since Simon left.

That knowledge squeezes my chest with a pinch I don't want to acknowledge. *I* was trying to help her with all of these tasks, but was cut down at every attempt. Yet Mr. Tweed-and-Suspenders walks in with his British accent and knowledge of entremets (that's a fancy French-style layered cake) and sansho peppers (a hot new Japanese berry that all the chefs in London are obsessed with) and suddenly Arie's keen on everything Xander suggests.

I shouldn't be upset. It's good for the business. This list is amazing, and it's exactly what we've been lacking. But I still don't like that *he's* the one that can miraculously get my girlfriend to show up, step up, and stop avoiding all the things she didn't want to deal with.

"I have some suggestions for the list," I say, causing Arie's impeccable hand to tremble and the raspberry-marshmallow puff in her hands to drop back into the vat.

"God damnit!" she hisses, moving quickly to grab a ladle and fish out the now ruined pastry. "Connor, this really isn't a good time."

"You told me to go over this list and give you some feedback," I persist. "And I don't think Ashton should be in charge of half of the bar stock, because he doesn't have the attention to detail that I bring to the job."

"Well that's the problem," Arie says, lifting the mangled puff out of the raspberry liquid like it's a tiny body she's dragged from a swamp. "Ashton's second bartender. He has to know how to do inventory and stock the bar in case you're not around."

In case I'm not around? What does that mean?

"Why wouldn't I be around?" I ask. "Is there something you're planning with Ashton that I should be aware of?" Or more accurately, something she's planning with Xander that would kick me to the curb?

Arie looks at me for the first time since I walked into the kitchen, her red lips curled into a frown. “What’s wrong with you?” she asks, holding that raspberry covered puff in her ladle, the smooshed carcass in a bath of red. “Xander has made it very clear to me that we don’t have back up plans and contingencies at this restaurant. Simon jumped ship and we all started drowning.”

No, *she* started drowning. The rest of us still showed up and did our jobs.

“So you need a contingency plan in case I jump ship?” I ask, irritated now.

“Yes!” Arie snaps back. “Shit happens, Connor. Shit I don’t like. And if you’re the only one who knows how to run that bar and suddenly you’re gone, then I’m left with a big mess like with Simon. Ashton needs to know what you do.”

“He knows how to make every drink in this restaurant,” I growl.

“Good!” she barks. “But you said it yourself, he isn’t great with the inventory. Which means you need to train him better. Did you get to the page about a new training regimen?”

I didn’t. I was fixated on what I saw on page one.

“We should have a backup for Ashton, too,” Arie continues. “There should be at least three people who can do every job, just in case.”

That doesn’t sound like Arie. She’s not a planner. I can tell she’s mimicking something Xander must’ve said to her.

“Just in case I leave, huh?” I ask, the list rolled in my fist.

Arie stares at me, her face a mix of frustration and something else I can’t put my finger on. The raspberry at the bottom of her spoon drips on the floor, creating tiny red splashes that look like evidence after a murder.

“What is up your ass right now?” she says after a long

moment. “You’ve been lecturing me on getting my shit together, I finally do, and—”

“I haven’t been lecturing you on anything!” I snap. I’ve been trying really hard not to admonish anything she’s been doing lately and give her space instead.

“Fine, you’ve been looking at me with those judgmental eyes all month!”

“Judgmental what?”

“You’re doing it right now,” she grumbles, tossing the ladle in the metal sink with a loud *clang!* “You’ve been doing it ever since I screwed up with Simon. It’s like you can’t forgive me for the things I said to Kendall. And worse, you’ve started gloating now that things are falling apart without Simon here to fix them.”

“I haven’t been gloating about anything,” I gripe. “I’ve been giving you space and being supportive and—”

“You took his side!”

“You said some shitty things,” I defend. “You were in the wrong and you knew it. And that has nothing to do with how this restaurant is run.”

“Well, you’re only upset about that list,” she points to the papers in my fist, “because I made it with Xander.”

“No.” I point the list at her. “I like most of what’s on here. What I don’t like is you talking about what happens when I don’t work here anymore.”

“I have to have a backup plan, Connor!”

“For when you decide you don’t need me?”

Her mouth drops open like she can’t believe I just said that. “Jesus Christ! Are you serious right now?”

“You’re the one spending all your time with Britain’s hottest chef and telling me I need to train employees for when *I don’t work here anymore.*”

“Connor, I’m not—” She grinds her teeth, frustrated. “Is this about that stupid sex dream I had about Xander?”

“There’s no way bringing that up is going to help your case,” I grumble.

“It was a stupid dream!” she defends. “He’s just a friend. And if you hadn’t noticed, he’s helping!” She points at the list in my hand.

“Yeah, but does everything fall apart again when he goes back to London?” I snap.

Only, that comment hits her harder than I expect. Her face darkens and a wash of hurt ripples through her. *That’s* what she’s afraid of. That she can’t hack it, and I’m not here to help, but to point out that she isn’t cut out for it.

“That came out wrong,” I say quickly, trying to apologize, but she shakes her head and starts walking out of the kitchen. I snag her arm. “Arie—”

“Don’t!” she hisses. “You’re right, I need space right now. So piss off.”

She struts out of the kitchen in a huff, and I turn to the sink to see red splattered all over the aluminum. I’ve always felt like I knew how much to push Arie and when to back off, but all my instincts are out of whack, and it feels like everything I say lately turns out wrong.

I've spent the day at my favorite coffee shop working on my new book idea. I've hashed out half of an outline and a shitty first chapter. Thank you Ernest Hemingway for coining the phrase "The first draft of anything is shit!" and making space for all us writers to have the mental freedom to not feel guilty when our first drafts are flaming piles of poo emojis.

I finally called my agent Cici and gave her some hints about the new book. Primarily, I said I'm working on a rom-com, then threw out a bunch of romance clichés: hot British man, fake dating, only one bed. She ate it up, and for the first time, Cici may have actually sounded excited (which is saying a lot for the Queen of Monotone).

The problem is I felt sick telling her what I was working on. Not because I can't do this book justice, or that the genre is a problem—I've actually started to enjoy all the fake-dating books I've been reading. What turned my stomach is that I don't even recognize myself anymore. I used to be this fearless literary adventurer who dated who she wanted and wasn't

afraid to commit to a story. When did I become an abstinent prude who's fake-dating her way into the happily-ever-after genre?

When did I start being so afraid?

I walk into my apartment and am about to put my laptop case on the coffee table when my senses are assaulted by the smell of meat sizzling in soy sauce.

I moan, because damn it smells good!

"What is that?" I say, practically salivating, turning to see my own private chef at the stovetop wearing my *I'd rather be reading* apron. In one hand, Xander is stirring whatever sizzling goodness is on the skillet, and in the other hand he's holding up an open book and reading.

"It's honey Sichuan pork and sweet potato dumplings," Xander says, not looking up from the book, lost in whatever it's saying.

"British, good looking, cooks, and reads," I say, listing off Xander's irresistible features. "Tell me you also like to clean and I might keep you forever."

"Sorry," Xander says, looking up from his book with a cheeky smile. "We British are notoriously polite, but cleaning and personal hygiene tend to make us downright cranky."

"Haberdashery!" I swear. "And you were so close to being perfect."

"A haberdashery is a place that sells men's clothing," Xander says, lifting a flirty eyebrow at me. "It's not a swear word."

"Well, daber-hashery, there you go ruining all my fun." I put my laptop down and swoop in next to him to peek at the pork sizzling in a pan of juices that smells like heaven. "Don't you know that writers are famous for making up their own words: John Milton, Lewis Carroll, and the immeasurable Dr. Seuss."

“Oh yes, that sneaky American with a *doctorate* in rhyming and Truffula trees,” Xander says smiling.

“You know your Seuss,” I compliment.

“Indeed, I’m well versed in Sneeches and Butter Battles.”

“Well, I’m sure Dr. Seuss is better than whatever English hack you’re reading right now,” I tease, snatching the book out of his hand. Only the joke’s on me, because when I flip to the cover, the author is none other than N.A. Wolfe.

“The esteemed Doctor is better at rhyming, I’ll admit,” Xander says, when I realize he’s reading one of *my* books. “But this author is better than you give her credit.”

“Why are you reading this?” I ask, astonished.

“There are about ten copies of it on that shelf over there,” Xander points, “so there really wasn’t much for selection.”

I pinch him in the side and he laughs. “Because there are only those ten books in this house?” I chide. My house is full of bookshelves and books, choosing mine was a conscious decision. I squint at him trying to assess his motives, not sure if I’m flattered or terrified that he’s another literary-book hater among the masses. “How far did you get?” I turn to the book to see if he’s bookmarked it. Of course, I tore it from his hands so there’s nothing indicating what chapter he’s on.

“I got far enough to see why you’re pissed at your agent,” he says, reaching to the stovetop to turn down the heat.

“What does that mean?”

He proceeds to plate the pork, sprinkling cilantro and red onions over the top like confetti. “I mean, your writing is good,” he compliments. “No, it’s better than good. It’s beautiful.”

I stare at him slack jawed. “You’re full of shit!”

He laughs, his cheeks turning rosy as apples at my outburst. “You’re not used to getting compliments about your writing, are you?”

He adds gorgeous purple dumplings to the plate that are

jewel-toned and look like something magical that Alice in Wonderland would eat. He sprinkles them with chives and adds a tiny dish of sesame dipping sauce.

“Those look like they belong in a Dr. Seuss book,” I say, pointing to the dumplings. “How did you create that color?”

“It’s umami powder,” he explains. “Grab the wine.” Xander nods to the empty glasses and bottle sitting next to the stove, which I snatch up before following him out to the patio. He puts the food on a small table he’s set with a table cloth, silverware, and flickering candles.

“What is this?” I ask, suddenly suspicious. “This looks a whole lot like a date, except we’re fake and there’s nobody here to pretend for.”

“I like to cook,” Xander says simply, pulling out my chair. “I like things to look nice and for my food to be presented in the best way possible.”

“Wine? Candlelight?” I point out, not taking a seat.

“I own a high-end restaurant,” he replies, taking the wine and glasses from me. “Wine and candlelight are staples. Now sit down and stop questioning my intentions. If I wanted to get into your pants, I would’ve done it when we were sleeping side-by-side in your tiny bed.”

“Fair point,” I concede, sitting down gingerly. “But you’re the type of man who would definitely use food to seduce someone.”

Xander smiles and doesn’t protest, making me unsure of his intentions, or if he’s simply not going to fight me on that point. He hands me a glass of wine instead, pouring one for himself as well.

“I think we should both agree that your agent is a nutter,” he says, sticking his whole nose in the opening of the wine glass and inhaling deeply.

“A nutter?” I stick my nose in my glass, pretending I know

how to sniff it. My palate is better attuned for coffee than fine wine.

“You know, an imbecile.”

“Oh,” I say into the glass, because my nose is halfway up the damn thing anyway. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you need to write more novels like the one I was reading,” he insists, swirling his wine then sniffing it again. “You shouldn’t be writing some rom-com for the market.”

“The book you were reading didn’t sell out its advance,” I point out. “That means the publisher lost money on it and my next book deal was harder to get.”

“But people read that book, didn’t they?” he presses, finally moving the wine glass to his lips. “It had to have impacted someone. Touched them.”

“There have been a few people who’ve sent me nice letters,” I admit.

“Exactly!” He points out, excited, only he doesn’t take a sip of his wine, instead he moves it back and forth in a circular motion.

“Yeah, but nice letters don’t pay the rent,” I defend, forgetting the whole sniffing, swirling, wine charade he’s performing and proceeding to take a gulp. The wine is soft and buttery and better than most wines I’ve had before. “Not to mention, writing another literary book will definitely lose me my agent.”

“Maybe you have the wrong agent.”

“A different agent isn’t going to change the market or the fact that people want to be entertained by ten-second videos on the internet than read something that challenges them.”

“That doesn’t mean you should give up.”

“Maybe not,” I concede, “but I’m tired of getting my heart broken by the business. For once, I’d like something to be easy.”

“Anything worth doing isn’t easy.”

“Oh yeah?” I narrow my eyes at him over my wine glass.

“It’s hard to take advice from someone who has a successful business doing what he loves.”

“That wasn’t easy,” he retorts.

“Maybe not, but did you have three failed restaurants before The Carlisle that you’re not telling me about?”

“No,” he bows his head taking my point. He puts his wine glass down, still not having taken a sip, and looks at me thoughtfully. “All I was trying to say is that you’re a beautiful writer, Nova. Yes, we live in an entertainment-focused culture—heck, those ridiculous videos my social media manager told me to make are a prime example. But that doesn’t mean what you have to say isn’t valuable. Maybe challenging us is what we need more of in this society.”

Our eyes catch and he looks so damn serious with those endless brown eyes that something in my chest starts to flutter. Nobody’s said anything that nice about my writing in a long time, I’d almost forgotten that I could write anything that might matter.

“Thank you,” I say quietly, my neck heating. “That’s really kind of you to say.”

“It’s not kind,” Xander says. “It’s the truth.” And his eyes burrow into mine with such conviction, I want to believe him.

XANDER

Sleeping in this tiny bed next to Nova is torture.

I've been in Hawaii a couple weeks, and you'd think I'd have adjusted to the floral smell of her sheets, the way too soft mattress, and the fact that she flip-flops back and forth all night like a dying fish. I've developed some rather spiffy contortionist skills to keep myself from pressing up against her inappropriately, which happens more frequently than I'd like to admit. She may be small, but that doesn't change the fact that when she thrashes about, stealing covers, and flopping herself over, she still takes up most of the bed.

Usually, I can jam myself partway into the nook by the window, but not when she stretches and twists and presses all those perfect curves against my chest. And maybe I don't exactly want to push her away, because it's been a while since I've had a woman next to me. And Nova's nice, and beautiful, and, in the moments she calms down and actually sleeps, I get lost in the rise and fall of her breathing. Sometimes, I can see the blue strip of her hair, coiled by her neck, and I want to nuzzle in close and smell her scent. Other times, I'm just a

royal arse, imagining myself pushing her onto her back, wrapping her legs around my hips, and waking her up with the position she said was her favorite.

Missionary with Nova suddenly seems really hot.

And then there's the fact that her jim-jams are a joke. Remember her jest about sleeping in the nude? Well, those flimsy shorts and lacy top hardly constitute as clothing. So yes, in the dark, with her body cast in moonlight, I've been less than a gentleman. I wasn't kidding when I said her thruppenny bits were very nice, and lying next to her, I'm desperate to slide my hands under that poor excuse for pajamas and lick her like she's made of soft frosting.

I don't touch her, of course. I *imagine* being an arse. I don't actually do it.

So yeah, torture.

Nova moans and twists, doing one of her signature full-body flips, and I raise my arm and push myself back against the window frame. But all she does is take advantage of the space, rolling toward me and pressing her stomach against my abdomen. Her breasts almost fall out of that top, and I can't deny I'm getting aroused as she snuggles in close and wraps her arm around my back.

She smells like sesame oil from our dinner with a hint of wine on her breath, and if we were actually together, I'd cup her face and kiss her so hotly she'd be removing her clothes on her own volition.

And now I'm thinking about her naked—

Climbing on top of me—

Pushing down my boxers and—

I'm fully hard.

I don't move. My hand is above my head, our fronts are in tandem, and my cock is thickening against her thigh. We had a nice night: eating food, talking about books, drinking wine until

our tongues were red. It turns out Nova is easy to be around. She's comfortable and fun. And if circumstances were different, I'd totally date her. Which is exactly what my body thinks is happening, eager to seal the deal after what would've been a wonderful date, if it had actually been a date.

Which it wasn't.

Fuck, if she wakes up right now, she's going to think I'm a pervert who makes moves on women in their sleep. And worse, she's been sleeping in this bed with me for days while I've been creeping.

This is bad.

I need to figure out how to get out of this bed before she wakes up with my erection saying *Hi-de-ho!* on her leg. But there's literally no way to move without disturbing her. The arm above my head starts to ache, but when I attempt to scoot toward the foot of the bed, she snuggles in closer and lifts her leg, draping it over my hip.

Oh no—oh wow! The bulge in my shorts is now pressed against the warm space between her legs. And all my insane brain can think about is dropping my hands to her ass and grinding that kitty against me until she's so wet she's begging.

Brain! We are *not* having sex. I know our physical positions say otherwise, but it's not happening.

It's not happening!

It's not happening!

It's not happening!

But what *is* happening is there's no way to get out of this position without waking her up. So I decide to softly drape my arm over her side and pretend to be asleep. And for several minutes, that works. I close my eyes and take in the smell of her hair and settle into how perfectly we fit together. This is nice. I forgot how much I like sleeping with another woman—just sleeping—our bodies tangled in a knot.

But then she stirs.

Her head jerks with that stir of disorientation, her vice-like grip on my body slightly loosening. I keep my eyes closed and don't move, pretending to be asleep, hoping she won't feel how indecently I'm pressed between her legs.

She shuffles slightly, moving her head in small motions to get her bearings. "Fuck, how did I—" she whispers to herself, thinking this is her fault. Then she stops moving, and I feel her breath on my face, a stillness watching me. It goes on so long, I wonder if she's closed her eyes, but there's no way I'm opening mine in case she's still staring. But then she lifts her arm from my back and I feel her knuckles brush against my cheek. It's a slow and deliberate move, the caress so delicate, I almost moan. This is my moment to flinch, to pretend to wake up and fake being surprised we're tangled. But her hand feels too good, like a lover's hand exploring. A finger brushes over my cheekbone, then the corner of my lip, and if she's not careful it's going to tickle and I'm going to let the truth slip.

"If only ..." I hear her whisper, the pillow of her breath rolling over my mouth. Then she rolls in the opposite direction with the stealth of a cat, untangling her leg and arm from me and turning to the other side of the bed. I bite back a groan at the loss of contact, cool air sliding in between us and making me desperate to hook my hand over her stomach and pull her back against me.

But I don't. My hand naturally falls into the space between us, and even though my cock isn't a gentleman right now, I am. I continue to pretend I'm fast asleep. But the truth is I'm wide awake: aware of her every breath, her every twitch, her soft movements as she falls back to sleep.

So yeah, like I said, torture.

XANDER

I'm staying in Hawaii, so it's completely natural to find myself at the beach.

Mason's girlfriend Naomi manages a beach house, and it turns out that when it's not being rented, Arie's friends descend upon it like vultures. We've been working hard creating new systems at Flambé and making enough progress that Arie decided we needed a mid-week vacation. Arie insisted Nova and I join them at the beach house, which is why I'm currently standing in the sand on a Wednesday afternoon, staring out at the turquoise waters of paradise.

There's just one problem.

I didn't bring a bathing suit.

Not only did I not bring one to the beach, but I didn't bring one to Hawaii. I wasn't thinking about beaches and vacationing when I was in London packing. My wardrobe consists of slacks, waistcoats, and nice shoes. I didn't even own a pair of shorts. Which I'm now realizing is a huge oversight.

"Hey you guys!" Naomi yells from the ocean, waving at me and Nova. She and Olivia are waist-deep in the water, both of

them wearing sparkly bikinis. “Go put on your suits and jump in the water! The house is open.”

“Spoiler alert,” Nova whispers to me, “I don’t own a disco-ball bikini. I didn’t realize there was a dress code.”

“If you have a bathing suit at all, you’re ahead of me,” I reply, rolling up one of my long sleeves and wondering if I can manage to hide in the shade for the rest of the day.

“Are you planning on skinny dipping?” Nova teases, her cheeks blushing red under her blue glasses at that suggestion.

“Yes, we modest British men, who live and die for fog, prefer swimming naked,” I say dryly, giving her a frown.

“Wait, are we skinny dipping already?” Comes the voice of Mason, who’s traipsing down the path from the beach house with a six-pack of beer in his hand.

“No,” I gripe, not wanting him to get any hair-brained ideas. I’m learning to watch what I say in front of Mason, lest I want my words to be minced into sexual innuendo. “You wouldn’t happen to have a spare swimsuit, would you?”

I regret that the second it’s out of my mouth, because Mason steps onto the beach wearing nothing but a tiny speedo with large yellow bananas printed on it.

“Forgot your trunks?” Mason asks with a wicked gleam to his eye. “You Europeans love speedos, right?” He motions to his banana-clad lower half and my eyes start to bug out of my head. “Course you do!”

“You’re thinking of the French,” I grumble.

“Go up to the house,” Mason instructs. “Tell Connor you want to see my eggplant collection.”

“Excuse me?”

Mason laughs. “You know, the emoji that represents a giant dong?”

“I know what the emoji means,” I gripe. “I’m not going to ask Connor to show me your collection.”

“Half my suits have eggplants on ‘em,” Mason laughs, like that should be obvious. “Connor knows what closet they’re in.” He pulls two beers off the plastic rings and tosses them at me and Nova. Instinctually, I raise my hands to block my face, bracing for impact, but somehow Nova catches both cans, saving me from a bloody nose.

“I’m not sure this beach party was a good idea,” I whisper to Nova.

“Let’s go change,” she says, putting both unopened beers in the sand and turning me up the path by my elbow.

“I’m not wearing an eggplant speedo!”

“And I’m not wearing a disco ball,” Nova agrees. “Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll find something more modest.”

“I’ll just wear my slacks and stay in the house,” I pout.

“Not a chance!” Nova pinches my ribs. “You’re not leaving me alone with these vultures.”

Fair.

“Plus, I’ve got a list of rom-com antics for us,” she says, stepping up to the sun porch. “Some of which require water and bathing suits.”

“Rom-com antics?” I take a step back and tilt my head to the side.

“I finished my stack of books this morning,” she says proudly. “And you and I have a show to put on.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s all innocent,” Nova assures me, opening the screen door and walking in the house.

“Like that kiss at the airport?” I grumble.

Her eyes flash with a flair of heat, and suddenly I hope her interpretation of innocent is less strict than mine. I shouldn’t be thinking about how I gripped her brown hair and the wicked way our mouths fit together.

Nova turns, stopping in the doorway to give me a mischie-

vous smile. Her hands land on my chest and she angles toward me. Voices can be heard in the beach house behind her—noticing our arrival—and I think Nova’s about to repeat our airport performance, but all she does is pepper a tiny kiss on the tip of my nose.

“Just follow my lead today, okay?” She gives me a bunny kiss by rubbing our noses together. “If anything becomes *too much* just let me know.”

What wouldn’t be too much is her going back to writing literary books, which she’s damn good at, and ditching the rom-com antics. Only, her breath on my lips makes me want to tilt my head and kiss her properly, wrap my arms around her and wring out her lungs until she’s all breathy and moaning. But that’s the opposite of taking her lead. A twitch of recognition flits through Nova’s gaze, as if she knows exactly what I’m thinking, but she shrugs it off, threading my fingers through hers and pulling me into the living room. It’s not so much a living room as an *everything* room, with an open layout where the kitchen, dining, and living spaces have no walls and all flow into one.

“Connor!” Nova sing-songs, skipping up to the kitchen island with me in tow. “Mason says you know where to find the eggplant stash.”

“The what?” Connor comes to an abrupt halt, cocktail shaker in hand, frozen mid-shake. He stares at us like we just asked him to whip out his white whale and see who’s worthy of Captain Ahab’s hunting ship. Arie is behind the island next to him, pouring a balsamic glaze over a tray of tomatoes and basil that looks drool-worthy. Her eyes cut to us with similar confusion.

“Eggplants,” Nova repeats chipperly. “Mason said you’d know what I’m talking about.”

“Are you cooking for us tonight, Xander?” Arie asks,

hitching an eyebrow in my direction. It's paired with a wry smile that causes my neck to heat unnecessarily. I prepared eggplant the night Arie and I cooked in my suite at the Atlantis, and the whole time, I made jokes about how good my eggplant would taste in her mouth.

God, did it.

"Oh my goodness, yes!" Nova claps her hands in excitement, unaware of the private conversation Arie and I are having. "You have to cook for us, Xan! His food is amazing," she gloats, as if she's forgotten Arie and I both went to culinary school.

"Yes, we could cook together," Arie suggests, still pouring her balsamic glaze and pretending that comment is innocent. Or maybe it *is* innocent. Arie and I cooking together doesn't have to be sexually charged. We cooked together all the time in college. It was only that *one night* when it was more.

The tension in the air is palpable, and Connor looks between me and his girlfriend like he wants to punch me in the dick. The last thing he wants is me getting messy in the kitchen with his girl, and I don't blame him.

"Extra bathing suits?" Nova interrupts. "Mason said there's a closet somewhere, yes? Bathing suits covered in eggplant emojis." She points at me like that's my desired fashion. "Mr. Waistcoat-and-Slacks over here didn't realize Hawaii has beaches."

I almost protest, but the roll of laughter that rumbles out of Connor's chest suddenly puts me on edge. "Oh man!" Connor bellows. "You don't have a suit and you have to wear one of Mason's? Oh, this is going to be precious!"

"Precious?" My eyebrows shoot up.

"This way," he motions, putting the shaker down and continuing to laugh. Nova moves to come with us, but Connor stops her in her tracks. "Oh no, you have to wait for the big

reveal,” he chuckles. “Oh man, my day just got a thousand times better!”

“Because you’re going to laugh at everything I try on?” I grumble indignantly. To which Connor nods without hesitation.

“Oh God, you have no idea what Mason owns,” Connor snorts, motioning me down the hallway after him.

“I saw what he was wearing on the beach,” I assert, though that truth doesn’t make me feel any better.

“That banana suit is tame for Mason,” Connor roars, gasping for air as he continues to double over in laughter. “You’ll never forget to bring your bathing suit again!”

I look to Nova and she gives me a sheepish shrug. What have I gotten myself into? Eggplant emoji swimsuits can’t be that bad. Can they? Connor is just blowing this out of proportion to scare me ... right? But when I follow him into the second bedroom and he pulls out *the collection*, I realize I’m dead wrong.

I nearly spit out my beer when Xander walks down to the beach in his borrowed bathing suit.

I'm sitting on a lounge chair with a book and all the other girls are in the water. Arie and her friends look like supermodels. Olivia and Naomi are the sparkle twins, meanwhile Arie wears a red and white polka dot bikini that hardly keeps her boobs in. Honestly, they all should be modeling for a pin up calendar. There's also a fourth girl named Becca who's joined us. I haven't figured out if she's dating the long-haired fellow she came with (I think his name is Archer) or if she's actually interested in the man with golden curls who keeps flirting with her in the water. But she's just as exotic, covered in flower tattoos and a tiny black bikini you hardly notice because it blends in with all her ink, making her look like a naked tattooed princess.

They're all Amazon-goddesses: long legs, nice tits, perfect proportions. Every single one of them belongs on the cover of a magazine, while I'm the odd-girl out, who'd get a writing byline

and never have a photo in the publication. My personal brand of short and curvy belongs somewhere else.

But I still wouldn't want to be Xander right now.

A heckle of whistles zip through the air as Connor presents Xander in his borrowed bathing suit. Arie throws her head back in a massive cackle like a genie who's tricked him out of his final wish, and everyone else in the water points and giggles.

"This was the only option that wasn't a speedo," Xander explains, his face bright as a tomato. He attempts to adjust his very short shorts, which only ends up showing off more leg. Connor must've given him one of Mason's t-shirts, because he's wearing one that says *The Gin n' Lava*.

Nevertheless, all of our eyes are on Xander's crotch. Positioned front and center is a giant cartoon chicken, illustrated in white and red. In one wing, the rooster holds up a drink, and printed in large letters on the waistband is the text *SUCK ON MY COCKtail*.

Mason cheers when he sees Xander and bounds over to the Brit with his hand held high, ready for an epic high five. But Xander leaves him hanging.

"Come on, man!" Mason complains. "Your cock may be hanging out, but you look terrific!"

Xander looks down in alarm, but realizes Mason means the printed chicken. Defeated, Xander walks over to me and flops down onto the sand at my side.

"This was the *best* option?" I tease.

"You have no idea," Xander grumbles.

"I can only imagine."

"Trust me, you don't want to. Mason has a sick sense of humor."

"An illustrated chicken seems harmless," I tease.

"Because chickens and eggplants were the *least* raunchy options."

“You’ll have to tell me the other options later,” I joke, raising and lowering my eyebrows suggestively. “So I can put it in my book.”

Xander gives his head a terse shake. “There are some things you don’t need in your subconscious.”

I laugh at his apparent traumatization. “Okay well, let’s at least take off your shirt.”

“Pardon me?” Xander’s eyes narrow.

“If you want everyone to stop looking at your *rooster*,” I say deliberately, “then take off the shirt and give them something else to indulge in.”

“Are you objectifying me, Nova Wolfe?”

“Only for the sake of literature,” I toss back, nodding to the fake-dating book I just put down. “Plus, rom-com rule number two is to slather the semi-naked hot British man in sunblock.”

“You’re calling this literature now?” Xander chides, nudging the book. “I thought you were a scholarly snob.”

“Literature in the broadest sense,” I specify. “In the same way a Taco Bell might call their food *cuisine*.”

“Disgusting fast food trash,” Xander corrects.

“And yet it sells millions of dollars in crappy tacos,” I point out. “Now off with the shirt.”

“Nobody needs to see my pasty white British chest,” he grumbles.

“You can’t hide all day,” I sass back. “Now off with it, before your pasty-ness turns lobster red. Sunblock, skin, let’s do this.”

“And why is putting sunblock on me a literary trope?” he asks, begrudgingly removing his shirt.

I hear his question, but I’m distracted, because in front of me is Xander’s back, full of thick powerful muscles, all woven together in the perfect human specimen. Pasty-white or not, he’s magnificent. In fact, I’m glad I can’t see his chest, because

just the sight of his muscular shoulders has me salivating. I'd turn into a blushing pumpkin like Cinderella's carriage at midnight if he turned around and flashed me with all that bare gorgeousness. Yes, I've seen Xander's chest on those social media videos, but in my defense, he's only three inches tall on my phone. It's a whole different experience for him to be life-size and physically in front of me ... waiting for me to slather him in lotion.

Oh Mamma Mia! This is *exactly* why putting sunblock on the hot hunk is a rom-com trope. It forces the heroine to rub her hands all over the love interest: skin to skin.

"Putting sunblock on your back will show everyone I'm comfortable touching you," I cough out, my tongue dry as crushed aspirin.

Because *I am* comfortable touching him. This is fake, and all that glorious skin isn't making my stomach flip-flop like a swarm of beached fish.

"That's why it's a trope," I add. "Plus, after the conversation at Flambé the other week, it's probably good for everyone to see I can put my hands all over you." I squirt white lotion into my palm, which makes me think of something else entirely. *Brain! What is wrong with you?* "Unless, you object."

"No," he says quietly. "You're probably right. And if you don't do it, Arie will undoubtedly volunteer, and that—" Xander doesn't finish his sentence. Instead, his head turns in the direction of the redhead, who's splashing in the water with her friends, his voice heavy with longing. He wants *her* to touch him instead. Because who wouldn't want that gorgeous woman crouched over them with those pin-up worthy tits barely held in by strings.

And he's in love with her.

I slap my hand onto his back. Xander grunts, his attention snapping back to me as I lather his muscular shoulder. My

fingers dig into the tissue of his thick neck and he moans. It seems I'm massaging him more than I'm applying lotion, but tropes-be-damned, his warm, thick muscles feel incredible. They're hard and pliable as I work my way over his shoulders and down the sinews of his back.

Tiny moans of encouragement escape Xanders lips, shooting jolts of electricity up my limbs. He's impressive: broad, expansive. And my mouth is so dry I end up coughing through my words when I ask him to lift his arm so I can do the side of his ribs. Fingers glide—up, down, side to side—over his flank, down his spine. I coat him in the scent of coconut and close my eyes to savor the details of the sensation. It's been a long time since I've touched anyone, and my hands are needy from lack.

"I think you got it," Xander says softly, and I pull my hands away at my over indulgence, having made at least three passes across his flank.

He takes the lotion and mumbles something about doing his own front. That's a good idea, because I can't look at him directly and run my hands over his body. Not without blurting out something ridiculous like touching him is the most sexually charged thing I've done in ages.

We aren't real, but my fingers don't know that. They're tingling from the contact.

The buzz in my skin makes me realize Hailey has a point: I need to stop avoiding intimacy. My own self-imposed drought literally has me aching from putting suntan lotion on a stranger's back. And it's not just my hands that are eager.

"I should do you," Xander says, and I flinch.

"What?"

He should do *what* exactly?

"Your back," he says, turning to face me with his hands full of lotion. Only, his sunscreen-slicked chest is on full display, and I'm captured like a moth to a flame. He's a shining full

moon I want to fly to, and so beautiful I'm probably drooling. Xander's a chef, not an athlete, but sweet-potatoes if he isn't cut like one.

"You must work out," I say stupidly, and he laughs.

"I don't have many hobbies other than cooking."

"I approve of this hobby," I let slip, my face heating when our eyes catch and he lets a flirty smile curl his lips. "Sorry!" I blush. "I'm definitely objectifying you now. But in my defense, this"—I motion to his muscled chest—"will make for excellent book content."

"Will it now?"

"Men in rom-coms are unnaturally attractive," I continue, digging my grave even deeper.

"Unnaturally, you say?"

I stare at him blank-faced. *What the hell is coming out of my mouth? Why yes, Xander, I'll happily spend several pages in my book describing the unparalleled glory of your chest.*

"It's a book. It's fantasy," I say weakly, twisting around to show him my back, and pulling the cover-up I'm wearing up over my head. But pinch me, the zing of the fabric sliding off my skin is a rude awakening.

I'm turned on.

There's no other way to spin it. My breasts feel heavy and my nipples press harshly against the tiny cups of this bikini. My suit is blue. I chose it because it matches my glasses, but pulling off my cover-up felt exactly like undressing, making the silly desire to be cute and match completely irrelevant. I'm basically wearing the equivalent of a bra and underpants. Yup, I'm sitting here in strings and scraps, with tons of skin on display!

Skin I *want* him touching.

God! I didn't know I was going to need some personal pre-game time downtown to help me get through this afternoon.

Not that I have any private space at home anyway, not with Xander in my bed, and bathing in my shower, and—

Stop thinking about him naked!

I hug my knees to my chest and prepare for hands to cover my skin. It's just suntan lotion! It's nothing.

It's a fake relationship!

But my body shivers when his large hands find my shoulder and slide lotion across my nape.

"Is this okay?" Xander asks softly, feeling my reaction, and I pretend to laugh.

"Yes, of course," I rasp out. "Go ahead."

Please touch me with your big, gorgeous, chef hands like I'm one of those ingredients in your videos that you knead and slap like you're a BDSM chef.

I bite my lip as his hands slide across my shoulder blades and down. I don't allow myself to moan as the blanket of his fingers rub the lotion into my skin, making me imagine I'm bread dough that his powerful fingers are tenderizing.

He spreads the lotion.

His thumbs dig into my lower back.

His broad fingers fan out, wide enough to cup my waist, and—

Rom-coms be damned, because I'm thinking about those skillful hands pushing me forward and lifting my ass, opening my knees as he positions himself—

Hailey's right. It's been too long since I got laid! Maybe a casual fling is exactly what I need. Xander will leave for London soon enough, so it doesn't have to mean anything. And I can help him out by distracting him from Arie. His goal was to be a gentleman for her, but that doesn't mean he has to be a gentleman with *me*.

And what I'm imagining right now is pure savagery.

"I think I got it," Xander says, pulling his lotion-slick fingers

from my skin, reminding me of how naked I am, not to mention the throbbing between my legs.

I stand up and turn toward the water. “Let’s go swimming!” I announce, heading for the ocean. I don’t stop until I’m up to my waist and all the heat and evidence of what Xander has done to me is erased by the ocean’s waves.

I hear him splashing into the surf behind me, and I’m thankful my lower half has been doused, because he swoops me up and dunks me underwater. He laughs as I scream and gasp for air, scrambling in his arms as he tickles.

“I’m going to kill you!” I proclaim, twisting to get the upper hand and tossing myself against him with all my weight. I manage to dunk him, but he doesn’t let go of me when he goes under, dragging me down by my waist.

His arms are a cage, trapping and holding, and warm, despite the water’s cold. He clamps me so intensely, I’d moan—but we’re under water, so it’s nothing but bubbles in our swarm. I struggle and pinch, his hands raking across my back and hips, trying to keep his grip.

I burst above the surface, just in time to be knocked over by a large wave, but of course Xander’s there to catch me.

“Glasses!” I yell, suddenly realizing they’re no longer on my face. We both dive under the surface in search of them, but everything’s dark and murky. I come up for air several times, then dive back down.

“Found them!” Xander’s muffled voice says, causing me to surface. Waist deep in the water, I push dripping hair out of my face and turn to his hulking figure. I extend my hand for my glasses, everything before me blurry without them.

“Are they broken?” I ask, when Xander doesn’t put them in my hand.

“Nova, uh ...” His voice trails off, and after a moment of

silence, glasses press into my palm. They feel intact as far as I can tell.

“You don’t have to apologize,” I say quickly, lifting the glasses to my face. “I’m the idiot who walked into the ocean wearing them.” Water spots cover the lenses, but through them I see Xan’s face is no longer full of playful flirtation. “Xan?” My voice cracks at his unabashed gaze—his eyes dark and full of lust—shooting heat straight between my legs. Suddenly, I’m achy and hot and my nipples feel hard as rocks.

“Nova you’re—” Xander’s eyes shift down and he motions with his hand.

Which is when I look down and understand.

My bikini top is missing!

XANDER

“**O**h shit!” Nova hisses, dunking herself under the water and dropping down until she’s up to her neck. She wraps her arms over her chest and continues to swear. She had no clue her top fell off in the surf and she was standing there long enough for me to get a hot naked eyeful.

Nova’s breasts are perfect. They’re the perfect handful of weighty and round, with delicious pink gumdrops for nipples that I want to swim over there and suck into my mouth.

“Fuck!” That’s Nova swearing again, probably because I’ve forgotten all my English manners and am gawking. Not to mention, I’m bloody hard. Not that she can see my erection, it’s under water, defying the cold and the fact that Arie and her friends are only yards away.

Nova stares at me, completely flushed, her mouth open and her eyes astonished. She knows I just saw her thruppenny bits, and I’m the asshole who’s just standing here like a pervert hoping she’ll stand up and give me a second showing. My excuse is that I’m male and my brain can’t register anything

other than: gorgeous fucking tits, gorgeous tits I want in my mouth, gorgeous tits my—

“Can you see my top?” Nova squeaks, and my asshole brain thinks, *stand up and show me them again and I’ll show you how my cock’s giving you a standing ovation.*

“What?” I ask hoarsely as she motions to the water.

“My bikini top,” she clarifies. “Is it near you? In the water?”

Right. Of course, she wants to cover up. However, for the record, Nova’s the type of woman who *should* lounge around naked.

Wrong time brain! Wrong woman! You aren’t actually dating her, and you were never supposed to see her bits and bobs—though they do bob quite beautifully in the water. I turn away quickly and pretend to look for the top half of her suit, even though I’m really telling my dick to knock it off. I grab my junk through this stupid bathing suit in hopes that I can wrestle this epic boner down. But gripping my dick is the wrong decision, because he only thinks it’s go time.

Blimey! This isn’t happening.

I search the water’s surface for anything floating, then I dive under to see if the blue fabric is in the sand. Nada. Nova’s topless and the only article of clothing I have to offer her is the ridiculous cock bathing suit that’s hardly covering the steel rod beneath it.

I shake my head and swear, turning to Nova empty handed. “I think it’s gone,” I admit. “I could ask the others to help but—”

Nova shakes her head fervently, peeking over her bare shoulder at Arie and her friends who don’t seem to have noticed. The last thing she wants is them involved.

“Okay, uh ...” she looks around frantically. “Maybe you can go to the shore and get me a towel?”

“Of course,” I say without thinking, turning toward the

shore. But then I stop in my tracks. The gentlemanly thing would be to get her a towel, except—

“Xander?”

“Getting you a towel is a brilliant idea,” I admit. “Tiny problem though—”

Actually, *not* so tiny!

I laugh and turn back to Nova. “I can’t *exactly* get out of the water right now.”

“You’re not the one who’s topless!” she points out.

“I know that, but—”

“But what?”

I grind my teeth, exasperated. “The gentleman would hope the lady will take this as a compliment, but—” I take a deep breath, because there’s no kind way to say this. “I’m male, and a moment ago you were—shall we say—a mermaid without her seashells. And my, uh, Dickery Dock is rather hard up.”

Nova’s eyes go wide. “You have an erection right now?!”

I shrug. “You’ve got very nice thruppenny bits.”

“What?!” Nova splashes water at me, not realizing she’s lifting her bits out of the water in the process and now my knob is really throbbing.

“Polite warning, Love,” I say, pointing in her direction. “Splashing turns into flashing.”

She immediately wraps her arms over her chest. “Oh my God! This is so embarrassing!”

“It’s definitely not ideal,” I agree. “But here’s what I’m thinking: we hang out here for the next five to ten minutes, talk about *really unsexy* things until Captain Willy gets the hint, and then I’ll get you a towel.”

“Incoming!” yells a voice from behind Nova. She jolts to the left just in time to avoid being pelted by a beach ball. Yelping, she swims in my direction. I snag the ball and toss it back to Connor and Mason who are both swimming toward us.

“Let’s play dodge ball!” Connor calls out, a second beach ball in his hand that he pelts at his own girlfriend, splashing her wildly.

“We’re good,” I call out. “No thanks! You can play without us.”

“Yeah, right,” Mason denies, chucking another ball in our direction. I pound it with my fist when it soars at us, sending it back to them.

“Please don’t let them see me,” Nova squeaks, and I realize she’s swum behind me and is using me as a shield. “That towel would be really nice right now.”

“I hear you,” I confirm, but another ball comes soaring in our direction. Nova yelps, grabbing onto my back and pressing her naked tits against me. And *bullocks-your-uncle*, if that doesn’t make the Captain salute with attention. “Nova, that’s *not* helping!”

“They’ll see me!”

I toss the ball up and punch it like a serve, shooting it as far as I can over Mason and Connor’s heads. Connor turns to swim after it, but Mason keeps heading in our direction.

“Nova,” I hiss. “I’m not going to get any less hard with you gripping me like that!”

Her hands clutch my shoulders and her soft body rubs up and down my back with the toss of the ocean.

“Mason’s coming closer,” Nova complains in my ear. “The last thing I want is *him* seeing me half-naked!”

Mason holds another beach ball in hand, his arm cocked back and ready to strike. But he doesn’t release it, trudging closer with each splashing step. Nova’s fingernails dig into my biceps, and those diamond-hard nipples scrape across my shoulder blades.

“Okay, fuck it,” I say. “This is going to be embarrassing for both of us.”

“What?”

I turn in the water, dislodging her momentarily so we’re facing each other. Then I swoop forward and scoop her up before she can say anything. “Wrap your arms around my neck and your legs around my hips.”

“What?”

“I’m picking you up. Now, do it, Nova.”

A second later, her tiny body has latched onto my torso like a koala bear to the trunk of a tree. She’s light, being so small, but the press of her tits against my chest has my cock thinking all sorts of other things are about to happen.

“Forgive me for this part,” I say, reaching between us and flipping up my cock so it’s sandwiched between our stomachs. She gasps when she realizes what I’ve done. Or maybe it’s the fact that I’m hard as stone, but she pulls back to look at me in surprise, a flash of heat fleeting through her eyes. “Did you think I was kidding about that?”

She shakes her head, but keeps looking at me with those bedroom eyes like Mason isn’t charging up on us with a beach ball locked and loaded.

“I’m going to walk us to shore,” I explain. “Just hold tight.”

Her legs tighten around my waist, and the Captain thinks we’re about to start a very different game. I’m not going to lie, the feeling of Nova topless in my arms isn’t something I’m going to forget. But right now, there’s a beach towel on the shore with her name on it.

“Turn left!” Nova says, her eyes jutting over my shoulder with the command. I swivel just in time for Mason’s attack to smack Nova in the back. She yelps, but it’s a beach ball, so I assume it doesn’t hurt.

“Got you!” Mason gloats, laughing hysterically. Nova shakes her head and reaches for the ball. It’s floating inches

away from us on the surface, but when she stretches for it, she rakes her tits across my chest.

“Nova!” I inhale sharply.

She abandons the ball and turns back to me with her own strangled inhale, the brush of our bodies unleashing a whimper from her throat.

“Forget the game,” I hiss, trapping her against me with one hand at her back and the other under her thighs. I attempt to move us toward the shore, but it’s hard to walk with my cock throbbing between our bodies.

“Sorry,” Nova whispers, a flushed look of desire clouding her face.

“Don’t look at me like that either!” I scold, and she looks away, her body tensing like I’ve rejected her. This situation is ridiculous. We both know it, but I still find myself consoling her. “Trust me, if no one was around this would all play out very differently.”

She stifles another whimper and her thighs squeeze around my waist.

Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.

Except, it’s the truth. If there was no Arie and her friends, I wouldn’t be hesitating on making a move. Nova’s gorgeous, and funny, and clearly makes my cock thicken like she’s the last woman on the planet.

The water’s only at my knees now, and Nova’s fully plastered against me—the perfect size to carry anywhere I want. Several whistles come from the water behind us, and someone yells “Get a room!” My cock twitches, wishing that’s exactly what we were doing, but Nova is surprisingly quiet.

“Are you okay?” I ask, shuffling onto the shore as sand cakes itself onto my ankles.

“Mmmm-hmm,” her muffled voice says against my neck,

her arms and legs squeezing tighter at the fact that everyone's watching.

"Are you lying?" I double check.

"I'm about as okay as I can be ... considering," she says.

"Well, at least everyone knows I'm not afraid to touch you, and you're not afraid to touch me," I joke, reaching the beach chair with our things. "Feel free to put this in your book."

She laughs, and her carefree chuckle becomes a ray of sunlight in my chest. I could listen to her laugh all day.

"Not *everything* has to go in the book," she tosses back.

"No? You don't want to spend several pages describing the shape of my—"

"Xander!" Her arms and legs squeeze like a vice. "This is incredibly embarrassing!"

I laugh. That's the truth.

"You can put your legs down, we're next to your towel."

"Oh," she peeks over her shoulder at the chair beside us. "Okay, I'll just—" She drops one leg, then the next, her every movement shooting heat through my abdomen.

"Careful," I hiss.

"Right, I—"

She drops down, but my cock is still sandwiched between us, and because she's short my throbbing member is now pressed just above her belly, close to her tits. I tilt my head back and look at the sun, letting the brightness burn into my eyes for a moment before closing my eyes. This way, even if I'm tempted to look down the sun will have blinded me from seeing her topless. Topless with my cock aching to be out and laid right between her—

"Grab your towel," I instruct. "And mine too. I'll just keep my eyes—" I point to the sky. At this point, I don't even know if it matters. She knows exactly how big my cock is and I've seen her tits. Fuck, it would only be fair if she stepped back and took

a nice long look at me full mast as the Captain tries to burst out of this ridiculous swimsuit.

I feel the pressure of her step back, and a second later a towel is thrust into my hand. With my eyes still closed I wrap it quickly around my waist.

“Tell me when I can look,” I say, waiting for her instruction, but my request is met with a laugh. “What?”

“I have to say,” Nova says, with a bit of humor filling her tone. “Considering the situation, that bathing suit is kind of perfect.”

I open my eyes, and Nova’s got her towel wrapped around her chest. A less than innocent gaze is peering up at me from behind those blue glasses, matched by two bright red apples coloring her cheeks from that comment. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think she wanted to do exactly what this ridiculous swimsuit says on the waistband and *SUCK MY COCKtail*.

ARIE

“Get over here, you British show off,” I yell to Xander as I finish arranging the plethora of food and ingredients on the kitchen island.

“Me?” Xander looks up from the couch where he’s lounging with Nova and chatting with my friends. He seems to be in an in-depth conversation with Ned who showed up late to our little mid-week shindig. I guess lawyers can’t take days off, or at least Connor’s brother doesn’t seem to understand the concept.

The sun is on the horizon and the snacks on the coffee table are almost gone, which means it’s time to cook!

“I’m getting tips on how to grill the perfect steak,” Ned complains, as I crook my finger at Xander to get him to join me.

“Three minutes on each side, Edwin,” I snip, using his full name. “But you already knew that.”

“We’re talking wood planks and infused flavor,” Ned replies dryly.

“Which you could’ve asked me about a thousand times,” I

point out. “Mr. Carlisle and I have the same culinary degree, but if you think the fact that I own tits makes it hard to ask me a question about *meat*, then you’re the chauvinist.”

“It’s the lecture that comes with the lesson that I don’t want,” Ned says, rolling his eyes in my direction.

“What do you need?” Xander asks, getting up and walking into the kitchen.

“Only what you do best.” I shoot him a sexy smile and gesture to the display in front of me. “Inspiration.”

“You don’t have this menu already planned?” There’s a flirty quirk to his tone, because he knows what I’m going to say before I say it.

“We haven’t cooked together in ages,” I reply. “I thought we’d improvise.” I snag a blueberry and toss it at him. Without missing a beat he catches it in his mouth like we’ve choreographed the stunt, and I’m rewarded with a smile as Xander grabs an apron and ties it around himself.

“Okay, I see shellfish, legumes, tropical fruits,” he starts, inventorying ingredients available to him. “Do we have any allergies in the house?”

“This is all family safe,” I say, motioning to my core group of friends who are chatting in the living room. This *is* my family, my Flambé family: Connor, Olivia, Ned, Naomi, Mason, Becca, Archer, and Finn. Only, it’s missing the two people I have always been closest to—my sister Esme and Simon, both of whom now live in Los Angeles. “I know what everyone can and can’t eat,” I declare. “And Mason’s the only one I’d poison deliberately, but Naomi wouldn’t forgive me, so ...”

Xander laughs, already picking up ingredients.

“What about your girl?” I ask, nodding to Nova. “Or shall we play Russian roulette with her possible allergens?”

“You haven’t decided if you like her yet, have you?” Xander chides.

“I barely know her,” I toss back lightly, biting my tongue before saying he barely knows her, too. “The jury’s still out,” I add, walking up to him and lowering my voice. “And you’ve yet to tell me if *you’re* as smitten with her as she seems to be with you.”

“It’s new,” he says noncommittally, picking up the shrimp. “Nova,” he calls out. “Do you have any allergies?” He holds up the crustaceans in question and her eyes flick suspiciously between me and Xander, those blue glasses unable to hide her trepidation.

“No,” she calls back. “I love shrimp.”

“Noted,” he says with a wink, turning to the sink and immediately starting to remove the shells.

“It’s new *and* she lives in Hawaii,” I say quietly to Xan, grabbing some garlic and starting to chop it beside him. “I thought you didn’t do long distance relationships after Charlotte.”

He stiffens. “I don’t.”

“So what is this?” I pry, only two big arms suddenly circle my waist.

“You don’t know what your girlfriend’s allergic to?” Connor asks, hugging me from behind. Xander’s gaze cuts over my shoulder as Connor nuzzles his head against my neck.

“I’m holding a knife,” I warn my boyfriend, but he just kisses me on the cheek. I’m still annoyed at him for how he behaved the other day with Xander’s list. But Connor was right about one thing, I needed to take a day off, and I’m glad we’re all here at the beach relaxing.

“Do you know everything Arie’s allergic to?” Xander asks him with a shrug, returning his attention to the shrimp he’s shucking, rather than watch Connor nibble my ear.

“I know she’s allergic to not having my cock in her mouth,” Connor says crassly, causing me to elbow him in the ribs. “What?!” he laughs, as I push him off of me. “That’s a true statement.”

“We’re cooking.” I hold up my knife that’s streaming with garlic juice, then I point to the group that’s wandering out to the patio to watch the sunset. “You’re being distracting.”

“Because I brought up my cock and you can’t think about anything else now,” he teases, not caring about the knife. He maneuvers around it and pulls me into a sloppy kiss, proceeding to gyrate his pelvis against my hip.

“Now you’re being *really* distracting.” I push Connor off again, and angle the knife in his direction. “I love you, but you know better than to get between the dragon and her meal.” Connor’s eyes flick to Xander suspiciously. “Two cooks in the kitchen are plenty.”

I motion with the knife for him to head outside.

“I’m going to make you pay for this little stunt later,” Connor threatens, nodding to the knife with a mischievous grin. “And everyone in this house is going to hear you screaming.”

My belly heats at the possibility. We haven’t had make-up sex after our little tiff the other day, and frankly, it’s probably why I’ve been bent out of shape the last few days.

“Well, if you let us cook first,” I say smoothly, “then I might have enough energy for your escapades.”

“Oh, you’d better,” he growls, dodging my knife to give my ass a squeeze. I yelp, flushing as he struts toward the patio. Normally, I love Connor acting like I’m the ice cream he wants to devour, especially in front of other people. But with Xander here, I’m suddenly uncomfortable, and I’m not sure why. It’s not like I was celibate in college. Xander knows I was hooking

up with other men back then. But I never brought them home to hang out with my friends.

In fact, I've never been around Xander while I had a boyfriend. It shouldn't be weird, but having him at Flambé has me feeling *off*. He's so good at running a restaurant. All the complicated pieces seem to fall into place, as if he sees the big picture and knows what steps to take before any issues arrive on my plate. And it makes me think about that comment in my office, when he mentioned he *deliberately* stayed away from Hawaii—from me—so I could open my restaurant. Did he see the big picture then, too? Did he know I had to create Flambé before he and I could ever have a chance at—

I shake myself. I can't think about that right now.

Or ever.

I'm with Connor!

"Sorry," I turn to Xander to apologize. "Connor's obviously still feeling a little threatened by the British elephant in the room." I nudge him in the shoulder, but it doesn't have the same buddy-buddy feeling from school.

"Connor knows that's ancient history, right?" Xander asks, pulling out a colander to rinse the shrimp.

Ancient? It was only three years ago. "Of course," I say quickly, throwing a pan on the stove along with some butter.

"Plus, I'm with Nova," he adds.

"Who's new," I can't help from repeating. I turn up the heat on the stove to get the butter to melt.

"Arie?" Xan moves next to the stove. "Does Connor have a reason to be jealous?"

I roll my neck and don't look at him, a tick in my muscles tightening. "Of course not. Connor and I *aren't* new. We're very serious."

We are. Except, only a minute ago I was wondering if Xander returning to London after our fling was part of the

natural progression of things, that it needed to happen so I could focus on my first love—cooking—before I considered how he might fit into my world.

“And you love him,” Xander adds.

“Of course, I love him,” I snap, tossing the garlic into the pan. I do. I’ve never loved anyone as much as I love Connor. And yet, I don’t know why I have to keep telling that to myself.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I defend. “It’s serious. I love him. Aren’t you listening?”

Xander reaches over me and takes the pan of butter and garlic off the burner. “No, what are you cooking?”

“Garlic for the shrimp!”

“Shrimp takes two minutes to cook,” Xander says, the crook between his eyebrows turning cross. “It’s the last thing we make.”

I stare at the pan he’s holding where golden butter is sizzling the garlic into perfect glistening shards. He’s right. What *am* I doing? You never make the shrimp first.

“Sorry!” I hiss, taking the skillet from his hands and dumping it in the sink. I turn on the water and all the butter and garlic hisses with steam as the cold water hits the pan’s surface. “Connor has obviously ...” I make a motion toward the patio, frustrated by this whole interaction.

“He’s obviously distracted you with his glorious knob,” Xander says with a joking tone, trying to lighten the moment and referencing Connor’s joke about wanting to make me scream. “I don’t know how you two work together at the same restaurant when he’s packing that monstrous, hung-like-a-horse, piece of man—”

“Oh my gosh! Stop!” I laugh, tossing another blueberry at him. “Yes, he’s impressive, but—” Am I really talking to Xander about Connor’s *knob*? Chatting with my twin, Esme, about my

boyfriend's manhood—of course! But Xander? “You don't need to write bad poetry about it.”

“Nova's a writer, I could hire her to write you an outstanding poem,” he jokes.

“You're going to ask your girlfriend to write a sonnet about my boyfriend's penis?” I glare at him.

“In iambic pentameter and everything,” Xander says, going all in. He's trying to make this comfortable, and I know that. Sex has never been a topic we avoided before, but somehow it feels different when I'm in a relationship.

“You realize,” I say with a naughty grin, “that Connor would probably have to show Nova his cock in order for her to write something accurate.”

“She's a creative girl,” Xander says with a cheeky smile. “You'd be surprised what she can make up. And the whole point of a sonnet isn't that it's truthful, so much as it *immortalizes* the essence of the subject.”

“Immortalizes the essence?” I laugh.

“Actually,” a third voice interjects, and both me and Xander turn to see blue glasses looking at us. “Shakespeare invented over thirty new names for penis in his cannon.” Nova's obviously been eavesdropping, proceeding to list several of Shakespeare's contributions. “Instrument, little jewel, pillicock.”

“Pillicock?” I ask, trying not to bristle at her writerly tone. “So from now on, I can say Shakespeare invented the word cock? Is that what you're telling me?”

“No.” Nova pushes those glasses further up her nose. “The word cock comes from the male chicken.”

“Which was on your swimsuit earlier,” I say to Xander, who blushes.

“Can we cook?” Xander asks, the pink on his face deepening, perhaps feeling just as awkward as me that his girlfriend

has brought Shakespeare and word etymology into the conversation. Of course, Connor would love that subject, comparing his vocabulary to his cock is one of his favorite pastimes: Which is bigger? His manhood or this extremely obscure word from the sixteenth century.

“Yes, we should cook,” I agree with Xander. “However, I murdered the garlic.”

“We can improvise with burnt garlic,” Xander returns, picking up a pineapple and tossing it in my direction. I catch the fruit and look at him with a suspicious eyebrow.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Chef Ruth’s class, second year?” He doesn’t miss a beat. “Tell me you’ve got teriyaki.”

“Chef Carlisle,” I mock. “This is Hawaii. I’ve got soy sauce, sake, and mirin. I can make my own teriyaki with my eyes closed.”

“You also need sugar,” Xander adds and I can’t help but smile at his need to point out I forgot an ingredient. Which, of course, I didn’t.

“You think I have mirin, but I don’t have sugar?” I sass. “What the hell have you been cooking in England? Now, move out of my way. I need to get my spices and elixirs from my car.”

“You carry spices and sauces in your car?” Nova asks, still paying attention to us.

I look at Xander and raise an eyebrow. “You haven’t shown her your secret stash?”

“I didn’t bring it on the plane, if that’s what you’re asking,” Xander says, that knowing smile creeping up his cheek.

“Secret stash?” Nova asks again.

“You two *are* new,” I say quietly to Xander, washing my hands before I turn to Nova with a wink. “Any chef worth their salt always carries the essentials: knives, spices, sauces, occasionally the dishes no one else has. Next time you see Connor,

ask him how many knives I carry around with me daily, and you'll get the idea."

Nova stares at me wide-eyed as I walk past her toward the door that leads to my car in the driveway. As the screen slaps shut behind me, I'm pretty sure I hear Nova say, "Xan, is she a serial killer?"

NOVA

Watching Arie and Xander cook is like watching two dancers on stage. They're magnificent and intimidating. There's a choreography in the kitchen that they both know from muscle memory—how long to hover over a pot, how to swoop out of the other's way, when to chop the garnish, pirouette, and plate.

I'm not the only one watching this ballet of vegetables and juggling utensils. Connor's also lingering on the sunporch with a clear view of Xander and Arie through the windows. It's dark outside now, but the light in the kitchen illuminates their dance perfectly.

"Does this bother you?" I ask Connor, leaning against the window next to him and nodding toward our significant others. Connor regards me carefully, a weird frown on his face that I can't read. "When they cook together," I motion to the chefs again. "They look like a pair of figure skaters twirling effortlessly around each other."

Connor doesn't reply, searching my face for a clue I'm obviously not giving him. Then he finally mutters, "Huh.

You really like him, don't you?" He squints at me like it's weird to see Xander's girl actually has a thing for her boyfriend.

"What? Of course, I do," I reply, smoothing down the blue sundress I put on after our swimsuit debacle. Have I been giving off the impression that we're not a couple?

"No, I mean, you—" But Connor catches himself, like he wants to say more, but now isn't the right moment.

"I know Xander and I haven't been together for as long as you and Arie," I defend. "But that doesn't mean we aren't—" I stumble on my words. What am I trying to say? That we aren't real? That we aren't serious? That we aren't madly in love? It's all a show, so it doesn't matter if I lie and say all of those things, but somehow it all gets caught in my throat.

"Hey, I get it," Connor says kindly. "You're really into him."

I don't like how that comes out. It sounds like he's saying, *Xander's not into you, and you're oblivious, Kid*. I bite back the instinct to lash out and tell him that's because Xander's hung up on Arie, the woman he's currently choreographing a gold medal-worthy routine with in the kitchen.

"And yes," Connor adds, motioning to them. "It *does* bother me. At Flambé, Arie's the head chef. She's in charge and everyone else falls in line. But she's not like that with him."

Through the window Arie starts laughing, throwing her head back at something Xander's said. It shoots a pang of jealousy up my spine.

"At Flambé there's a pecking order," Connor continues. "You don't get in the way of the dragon. You don't pull a pan out of her hand or suggest she use more sugar. You pay attention and make sure you're ready with a *yes chef* on the tip of your tongue."

Arie and Xander have dissolved into giggles and are now chucking food at one another like this is the food-fight portion

of the rom-com and they're about to slip on a mound of Jell-O and end up on top of each other on the floor.

"What's happening in there is different," Connor admits. "They're equals. Heck, I'm starting to think she actually looks up to him. Xander opened his restaurant first. He was successful first. He was on reality television."

"He was on TV?"

Connor frowns at me like I should know that. As his girlfriend, I obviously should. "You're a writer," Connor says. "Do your research. The relationship might be new, but figure out who you invited to Hawaii, girl."

That hits hard. I *am* the girl who does her research, but clearly I've been researching the wrong thing. Forget story beats and book tropes, who the hell is my fake-boyfriend?

"Now I feel stupid," I admit. "You've barely met Xander and you're schooling me on his accomplishments."

"Know your enemy and know yourself," Connor quotes, "and you can fight a hundred battles without disaster."

"Sun Tzu," I reply. Connor lifts his eyebrows, impressed.

"You've read *The Art of War*," he compliments.

"I'm clearly better at reading literature than internet stalking my own boyfriend," I admit, to which he laughs. I should ask Xander about his past—his TV appearances, his ex-girlfriends, how many siblings he has.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Connor pries, removing his attention from Arie and Xander's giggle fest to focus on me.

"Um ..." I mumble, immediately nibbling my fingernail nervously. "Maybe."

"It's about what you said the other night at Flambé."

Great. He wants to talk about how I ran out of the restaurant like an idiot after Mason started playing his stupid *What's your favorite sex position* game.

“The way I see it,” Connor continues, noting my tension and not backing off, “is you and I are allies.”

Allies? I frown, not following.

“It’s simple, Wolfe—”

“You know my last name?”

“You think I didn’t look *you* up?” Connor replies with a look of disdain. “I used to be a lawyer like my brother. I do my research.”

Really? Connor was a lawyer? Why does this evening feel like it’s about to unravel in front of me? Are they going to cross examine me until I’m spilling the beans about our fake arrangement?

“Look Nova,” Connor’s voice softens. “We’re on the same side. Neither of us wants to see *that* happen.” He points through the window where Arie and Xander are laughing and cooking like they’re the ones in a relationship. Another pang of jealousy strips through me, which I have no right to, but it’s still there.

“You’re right,” I agree. I shouldn’t, because this is fake. If Xander wants to tell Arie how he feels, he should. Shouldn’t he?

“So, the personal question,” Connor brings up again. “Why are you two waiting?”

“Oh.” I swallow hard.

Sex. That’s his question.

If Xander and I have been together for as long as we’ve implied, why haven’t I taken a spin on Xander’s greatest ride?

Because it’s fake.

Because I don’t get involved with men who are emotionally taken.

“Are you asking if I’m a virgin?” I reply delicately. “Because I’m not.”

“That eliminates one of a hundred reasons it could be,” Connor replies, not backing off. Geez, he really was a lawyer.

“It’s personal,” I reply tersely. “I’ll barely talk with my best friend about this. I’m not about to open up to my rival’s boyfriend.”

Rival? Damn. That came out harsh. But as I look to the kitchen, the woman in skinny jeans and a cropped polka-dot top starts to feel more like a nemesis than a friend.

“That’s fine,” Connor says, not pushing it. “But maybe you should start talking to *him* about it.” He motions to Xander in the kitchen. “Men are sexual creatures. And I don’t mean that to pressure you. I’m not telling you to do something you don’t want to. I’m just saying that if you seal the deal, then that”—he points at the obvious flirting—“might actually stop, and we’ll both get what we want.”

Is he serious? I thought telling everyone we were waiting would take sex off the table. But now Connor wants to make it a challenge?

“I, uh, I hear you ...” I mumble, and Connor nods, indicating I don’t have to say more.

“Just talk to your boyfriend about it,” he encourages. “I see the way you look at him. *You* want this to be more, but he’s still on the fence.”

That’s because Xander’s not mine, and what he wants is Connor’s.

“Look,” Connor continues, “if I’m being an asshole who’s a hundred percent out of line, then so be it. But I don’t want to lose the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” He nods toward Arie, then gives me a friendly squeeze on the shoulder. “Just think about it.”

The next thing I know, Connor’s walking into the kitchen saying something crass about stealing his girlfriend back before

Xander and Arie start making out on the counter. Xander's eyes flick to me through the window, and I smile weakly. I should go in there and berate them too, but I don't know if that's what he wants. I just watched the two of them cook for an hour and a half and it's the happiest I've seen him since we landed on this tropical island.

Maybe Xander and Arie *are* meant to be together, and I'm reading too much into the pent-up lust I saw in Xander's eyes when we were on the beach earlier. Maybe this fake-dating suggestion was a horrible idea and we should fake-break up as soon as possible. Especially when the jealousy raging through my skin feels like it's real, and I'm clearly delusional.

Or maybe Connor's right, and I really do like Xander.

But what am I supposed to do about that?

CONNOR

Arie's ass looks like a frosted cake. It's almost midnight when Arie struts across our bedroom at the beach house wearing a vintage silk pajama set. She's just come out of the adjoining bathroom and the shorts she's wearing are covered in 1950s frill. The ruffles look like frosting and I want to bite that tasty rump.

I'm still grumpy at her for flirting with Xander while they were cooking, not to mention the awkward conversation we had the other day involving me mysteriously leaving the restaurant—which I'll never do, unless Arie decides she's done with me.

She's trying to get my attention with that outfit—as an apology, or to get us to work this out through sex—but the silky top above those frilly shorts is cut like a bra. A bra with no support, because the bottom rounds of her breasts are peeking out from under the loose band that's edged in a flapper's fringe, and you'd better believe my cock is paying attention. Arie has the best tits on the planet and the amount of under-boob she's flashing is down-right begging for me to slide that pathetic excuse for pajamas off her body.

I smack Arie on the ass as she struts by, making her yelp and her tits bounce. Hands down, Arie is the most beautiful woman in Hawaii, and I'm the lucky chump who gets to spend every day with her. Well, as long as Mr. London doesn't steal her away with his culinary equipment. I know Arie keeps telling me that Xander's just a friend and he's here to help with the business, but watching the two of them cook together was like watching the Ghost from Christmas Future show me a clip of what's to come when Arie decides she and I are done.

So, I'd better remind her why *I'm* the one in her bed.

"Are you trying to make a point in that outfit?" I tease, sitting down on the bed in nothing but my boxers. Arie eyes the treasure in my shorts that's eager to get out, well aware of what her tits bobbing-about does to me.

"This ol' thing?" Arie preens, playing with the fringe near the bottom of her breasts. "Actually, it's new," she confesses. "Becca shared some of her favorite online retailers, and when I saw this"—her eyes flash with fire—"I thought you might enjoy it."

"It's not bad," I say, pretending it has no effect on me, but Arie's eyes shoot to where I'm almost full mast.

"Interesting." She struts over and plants a hand on my chest, pushing me back so I'm lying on the bed. "You're not a fan?" she asks, crawling over me and straddling my hips. "I think someone begs to differ."

She lowers her frill-covered ass onto that *someone* and swirls provocatively. Oh, she's fun to rile up! I move to cup her tits, but she grabs my hands and pins them above my head, stretching her perfect body over me.

"Calling this outfit *not bad* means no touching," Arie scolds, then she rocks her hips, dragging her vintage silk across my thickness.

I groan, loving the way she strokes me without using her

hands. Even with two layers of fabric between us I can already feel how excited she is. My dragon runs so hot.

“No touching with my hands, right?” I ask, looking at her tits precariously dangling above my face and only half covered by that vintage lace. I lift up and lick the exposed bottom of one of her breasts, then catch the fringe with my teeth and yank the fabric upward. I latch onto her nipple, biting the delicious bud and sucking on it like a barbarian.

“Connor!” she gasps my name and I continue my assault, lavishing and nibbling that gorgeous breast. I hook my feet onto the edge of the bed and lift my hips, grinding my cock against her open legs. She whimpers hotly, meeting the swell of my pelvis and matching my rhythm, dragging her silk-covered pussy against my shaft.

“If you want my cock out, sweetheart, you’re going to have to use your hands,” I taunt, twisting quickly to grab her wrists. She thought she had me pinned, but now I’m the one holding her in this position and she can’t pull away, even if she wanted. Arie shudders at the reverse in power, and I reward her with my tongue flicking across her perfect tit.

“So, you’re going to let me dry hump you until I come?” Arie counters between her gasps, and I use my teeth to pull at the second cup of her pajamas, exposing her second gorgeous tit. Both breasts hang in my face, edged in dangling fringe, the band of silk pushed up to her collar bone. Time for feasting!

“I’m going to worship your tits until everyone in this house can hear you begging for my cock,” I threaten, latching on to the second breast and holding her wrists tighter as I nip and ravage.

“Oh fuck, that feels good!” Arie curses, her eyes rolling back into her head as I rake my teeth over her nipple. She lowers into my assault, her other breast rocking against my cheek with the pitch of our bodies. She knows I can make her

come like this, especially with the hedonistic way she's angled her hips so she can scrape her clit against my ridge. I keep bringing her close to the edge, then I pull my mouth away and marvel at her swollen tits. I blow softly on the wet that mars her nipples and she moans, begging for me to take her over the cliff.

"Arie, Arie, Arie," I tease. "You're only coming on my cock tonight, so you'd better figure out how you're getting our clothes off." I grip her wrists tighter and she croons wildly.

She tries to pull her hands back, but I don't let her, relishing in the way she writhes and wriggles on top of me. Only, that does nothing to remove our clothes.

"You're infuriating," she grumbles, attacking me with a searing kiss, hoping it will cause me to loosen my grip. But I kiss her back with as much fury and heat, holding onto her wrists more tightly.

Arie burns hot, and damn does she get impatient. She's been this way ever since our first night together when we didn't know each other's names. But I knew I'd never forget her after that first night, and I'm never letting her go without a fight.

"I need your cock," she growls, starting to seethe.

"Then get creative, baby." I give her my cockiest smile, and she glares at me with the promise of a thousand fires. Bring it on. Make me burn.

Arie starts to use her legs, rubbing her thighs and pelvis against my boxers. It manages to drag them down an inch, enough to see the root of my cock pressing against the waist band.

"Fuck, you're so close, babe," I taunt, turned on even more by the sight of the top of my shaft among all those vintage ruffles. "You're so wet. Those shorts are ruined."

She whimpers and takes a moment to pleasure herself by dragging her enflamed pussy against my ridge. Her sensitive

flesh may be covered in ruffles, but that doesn't change how wickedly she's dry humping me, turning into a wild animal.

"I know you're needy, baby," I growl in her ear, "but imagine how good it's going to feel when we're both bare and you're riding me so hard you can't breathe?"

"I need my hands," she growls, biting at my neck.

"Then get my cock out and I'll give you them."

Her eyes flare with renewed energy. She pushes forward, arching her back and moving her knees higher up the bed to straddle the sides of my chest. For a second, I think she's going to sit on my face with all that vintage lace, but instead, she uses her feet to scratch at my hips with her toes. Damn, my girl gets creative when she needs to.

One of her toes catches the waistband and she laughs in victory, pushing them down to the middle of my thighs. It's enough for my cock to leap out, eager to give her a reward.

"Clever girl," I growl in appreciation, and she looks down at me with eyes so black I know I'm the one who's going to be blowing his load in a moment.

"Hands!" she snaps, and I let go of her wrists. "Oh thank God!" She moans like that alone will push her to orgasm.

She pushes her shorts down her ass and contorts her body to push the satin over her knees, then she's scrambling down my body. There's no warning. There never is when Arie's this hot. She turns pure dragon who needs to fuck.

She plunges down on my cock and I'm the one seeing stars—because holy god, the connection is pure heat! And it's so intense, I'm almost coming.

"God yes!" she cries out. "Connor! I fucking love your cock!"

Her hips lift and plunge at blistering speed, because Arie rides cock like she's driving into battle as a glory-bound viking. Her wild cries echo through the house, her pleasure erupting as

she pumps on my shaft. She's fucking glorious. And I hold on as long as I can, watching the pure beauty that is Arie fucking me into another dimension.

And as we start to come, we're so damn loud, I know everyone in the house can hear us.

XANDER

“Is that—?” Nova sits up on the bed wide-eyed and turns toward the beach house wall. Her face starts to flush at the emanating sounds.

I nod. A series of wails echo through the wall and they’re unmistakable. Arie and Connor are having sex.

Really *loud* sex.

Nova’s eyes get wider behind her blue glasses as the moans start to increase. “That can’t be real!” she whispers. If she’s trying to be polite, it’s ridiculous because the orchestra of groans behind the wall are mounting in a crescendo.

“You think they’re faking it?” I ask, sitting on the opposite side of the bed in my undershirt and boxers. As if on cue, Arie’s voice screeches through the wall.

“God yes! Connor! I fucking love your cock!” Arie’s muffled cry shudders through our room. She isn’t a quiet woman. I know that from experience, but I’m not about to tell Nova that.

“Does he have a magical penis?” Nova quips, spearing me with a *that has to be fake* look.

“Maybe he does,” I say with a shrug. Arie’s a sexual woman. In college, she always needed someone who could satisfy her in bed and—

“Oh god! Oh yes!”

And that seems to be happening.

“How thin are these walls?” Nova shakes her head in astonishment. “It’s like they’re in the room!”

“Mmmmmmm! Mmmmmmm!”

Only, that moan isn’t Arie and Connor.

Nova and I snap our heads in the opposite direction—to the wall on the other side of our bed. “No way!” Nova ridicules.

“Harder you bad boy!” comes the new voice through the opposite wall.

Nova’s eyes snap to me and her mouth drops open. “That’s not—?” She points. “Who’s in that room?”

“Um ... Mason?” I offer, unsure which rooms in the beach house were taken by whom.

“Naomi and Mason?” Nova asks, pointing again. “And they’re also—?”

Nova grabs a pillow and wraps it over her head to muffle the moans that are inundating us from both directions. But then she tosses it off with a grumpy huff.

“That doesn’t help!” she grumbles. “What the heck is happening right now? Did you know this was going to be the orgy house?”

I start laughing. “Well, it’s not an orgy until they knock on our door and ask us to join.”

“They’re not going to do that, are they?” Nova’s face is so pale, I think she’s about to lose her shit. “Xander, who are these people?”

Wails of pleasure mount and I can’t help from laughing. How can I not? It’s downright ridiculous. And what else am I supposed to do? Pretend it’s not happening? A series of compli-

ments about male members echo through the walls and I think Naomi starts singing in a high soprano.

“Those are some rave reviews,” I joke.

“Oh. My. God!” Nova starts to laugh as well, covering her red face. “Is this really happening?”

I nod, wiping tears of laughter from my cheeks. “Do you think Olivia and Ned are going to join in?”

“He seems like a stick in the mud,” Nova characterizes.

“Except for the tarts thing.”

“Wait, you know what the tarts mean?”

“Connor let it slip,” I admit. “I guess it’s a bit of an urban legend around Flambé that Arie’s tarts can get even the grumpiest of lawyers to taste the frosting.”

Nova scrunches up her face, not sure what that means, and I’m definitely not going to explain it to her. Another round of screams fills the bedroom.

“Are they monkeys?” Nova laughs, causing a crazy idea to fill my head.

“Hey, maybe *we* should monkey around.” I gesture to the walls and the echoing orgasms. Nova’s face drops, but I shake my hands quickly. “No, no, I mean, maybe we should fake it.”

“Oh.” Relief washes over her, but then a smile hooks her lip. “You mean like in the movie *When Harry Met Sally*?”

I nod in agreement, crawling onto the bed and lying down beside her. “Why not?” I shrug. “They don’t seem to care if we can hear them. We might as well get a laugh out of it.” I reach both my hands behind me and grab the head board—*Bang! Bang!* I smack it against the wall. Nova’s eyes bug out behind those glasses as she mouths *Are you serious?*

I nod and motion for her to lie down beside me. She flops on top of the comforter and covers her face, clearly embarrassed to be considering this.

“Mmmmmm,” I moan loudly, and Nova erupts in giggles, slapping me on the elbow.

“That was awful!”

“Mmmmmm, oooh-ga, ooooooh!” I laugh, trying to sound like a monkey.

“That’s horrible,” she chastises. “That doesn’t sound real at all!”

“Oh yeah? You can do better?” I challenge.

“Oh, I will!” She pulls her glasses off and puts them on the night stand, flopping back and closing her eyes like an actress preparing for her close up. She starts out low, letting out a quiet moan that nobody in the other rooms can hear. Only, *I* hear it, and damn if it isn’t soft and breathy. She follows with another whimper from her throat and it sounds so real, blood shoots straight to my cock. There’s a third moan—and I’m getting aroused again. It doesn’t help that Nova’s wearing that lacy sleep-top without a bra on underneath, allowing me to see the perky shape of her breasts. Plus, her tiny sleep shorts hide nothing, showing off her legs. I grab one of the extra pillows and cover my lower half, because if she keeps making noises like that, I’m going to have a problem.

“Mmmmmmm! Oh baby,” I moan, only I do it loud and awkwardly and as fake as I can, hoping it will break us out of the tension that’s currently shooting blood to my tiny captain. Nova laughs, stopping the sexy noises she was making.

“You’re awful at this!” she laughs. “Mmmm, ooohhh, Xander!” she mocks, and I’m glad her moans are full of sarcasm instead of the realistic stuff she was doing a moment ago.

“Oh Nova, you’re so hot!” I bang the head board again. “Oh god, I love your thruppenny bits!”

That earns me a smack on the chest. “You and your obsession with thruppenny bits!”

“I like thruppenny bits,” I defend.

“You would never say *I love your thruppenny bits* if we were actually having sex!”

I snag her wrist and laugh, going all in. “Oh Nova! Oh yes! Get on my beef bayonet and bounce!”

“Your beef bayonet?!” Nova squeals, trying to smack me away from her, but I’ve trapped her hand.

“It’s so beefy, I know!”

“You’re so gross!”

“Are you saying—” I turn to her with a mischievous grin and raise my voice. “Nova, do you want my thick, juicy beef bayonet? Do you want me to impale you with it again and again?”

“Oh my god, stop!” she launches herself on top of me and starts to tickle. But I’m much better at this game, tickling her back. She squeals and laughs, slapping at my roaming hands.

“You’re an animal, Nova!” I call out. “Ride me like a bucking rhino.”

“A rhino?” she jabs me in the ribs. “You have a big pointy horn down there because—ouch!”

I cringe, because she’s right, that doesn’t sound very enjoyable. But I’ve said it now, and I’m not backing down. “Ride the rhino, Nova! Oh yeah, pound your glorious body down on me like pound cake!”

“Pound cake?” She slaps at me again.

“I’m a chef!”

“As a British man, you should go for the clichés like spotted dick.”

“I like spotted dick,” I defend. “It’s a very good pastry.”

“And now you sound like a gay man with a venereal disease.”

“You brought up spotted dick.”

“You said beef bayonet!” She gives me a look of horror before attacking me with tickles again. She’s small and squirm-

ing, striking like a scorpion on top of me. All it does is make me laugh so loud that everyone in the other rooms must know we're making fun of them now.

"Hey," I say, snagging Nova's wrists. "Maybe we should have a pillow fight and start exploding feathers all over the room like this is an American comedy film."

"In our knickers, right?" she sasses back, fighting against my grip. "Nobody does that in real life, Xander."

"No?" I let go of one hand and grab the pillow at my hip, smacking her across the side of her body. She squeals and goes down.

Point for Xander!

Nova grabs the pillow and attempts to hit me back, but I'm faster. I snag her waist and yank her back, rolling on top of her so she's pinned beneath my weight.

"Trust me, you're not going anywhere!" I tease.

"Then I'll trick you with my feminine wiles," Nova retaliates, trying to straggle out from under me, but with no avail.

"Are these your feminine wiles?" I nod to her squirming and get a death look. "Of course, I have your kryptonite right here. All I have to say are the words beef bayonet to you." I laugh as she winces. "Beef bayonet! Beef bayonet!"

"That's the worst phrase in human history!"

"Beef bayonet! Beef—"

Only, I stop my silly attack, because Nova's looking up at me—panting and flushed and trying to catch her breath—and she looks so damned gorgeous I can't breathe. Her hair is splayed over the sheet. Her chest heaves. Her lips part. She smells amazing, like roses and book pages and a hint of gin.

I shouldn't be memorizing the way she feels under me. Good. Too good. Her small, curvy body is pressed against me in all the right places—including my god-forsaken cock, which is

sandwiched between us for the second time today and there's no way she doesn't feel it!

She must be horrified. She must think I'm a pervert that should be rinsed and tossed out faster than you can say British toff.

"Nova, I, uh—" I mumble out, attempting to push myself up by my arms. "I didn't mean to—"

But Nova's hand slips behind my neck and she pulls me down against her lips.

How can I not kiss him?

We're in a bed together and all of Xander's glorious weight is pressing on top of me. His hands were all over my body tickling. His wavy hair is a tousled mess. And when Xander looked down at me with those beautiful brown eyes—lust pummeled through me like the flood gates have burst open.

Not to mention, he's hard.

His beef—Nope! I'm not going to use the BB word. His cock is pressed against my stomach for the *second time* today, and there's no denying that our bodies react to each other in *that way*.

So, I kiss him.

How can I not kiss him?

I anchor my hand on his neck and pull him lower until my lips brush across his, a real moan escaping with my breath. He's hesitant, breathing against my mouth and not kissing me back, when the words "Bloody hell," mumble from his throat and he crushes me.

This is why people call them *crushes*, because when you finally crash together it feels like everything is imploding.

He's not pretending anymore. Xander's kissing me for real, and it shoots electricity through my body. I'm warm and light-headed and not sure if I can parse the fact that no one is here to witness this, which means he *wants* to kiss me back. Which means this *is* something.

Xander's tongue sears over the seam of my lips, and God, this man is good at kissing! I open my mouth like an eager pup, lost in the delicate, yet firm, way his tongue takes charge.

What kind of idiots have I been kissing? Is this a European thing? Did the French invent kissing and everyone in the European Union get a lesson?

Xander's elbows flank each side of my head and the weight of him on top of me is salacious. All I want is to moan and beg to have hours of this: the perfect pressure, the delicate softness, the riot of butterflies erupting over my skin.

"Mmmmmmm," I moan against his lips as his wicked fingers tangle into my hair and start to massage my head. It turns my brain off and I bask in the sensation. Xander cups and kneads and kisses, nipping my lower lip and teasing me into a cloud of delirium. "Did they teach you this at culinary school?" I moan in compliment.

"Did they teach me how to taste properly?" he whispers back, a smile cresting over his mouth. "I'm very thorough, Nova. A true chef tastes *everything*."

I whimper. Everything? I'm terrified and excited by what's implied in that statement.

Xander goes back to sucking my lower lip and I melt into his embrace, the stubble on his chin scraping as hungry kisses growl out of both of us.

If he needs to taste everything, then I have research to do, too. A good writer uses all the senses. Xander tastes like

pineapple and gin from dinner. And he smells like sunblock and Hawaiian humidity and a dash of something that's full man. I can't look at him because my eyes are closed, but I can remember him shirtless this afternoon and all those powerful muscles glistening. Sound is a muffle, a buzz in my head, punctuated by delicious growls of eagerness. And my hands are greedy for their chance to slide under his shirt and skim those strong muscles. Xander digs his fingers into my skull and I return the favor, scraping my short nails over his flesh. He kisses me harder and my whole body ignites with tingles: pressure and heat and gasping. A recipe for burning me alive.

His hips rock and I whimper at the throb between my legs. He's so big on top of me, and I don't just mean his hardness against my belly. I mean all of him—his weight, and breadth, and tallness—smothering me into these sheets and making me forget all the reasons I ever wanted to take things slow. Xander is an elixir I want to swallow into my soul. I want him to unleash this lustful woman under my skin.

He bites my lip hotly and pulls back, probably to remove his shirt, but I don't let him. I dig my nails into his shoulder blades and cling to him. He growls at the pain (or my need), but all I know is I don't want to let him go. I don't want him to look down and realize I'm not Arie.

I *want* him to keep kissing me like the world is at the back of my throat.

As if he understands, Xander wraps his arms around me and rolls us, moving onto his back with me on top of him. I whimper at how the new position drops my knees to either side of his hips and my core into his lap where I straddle him.

"Xan—" I mewl, but he devours me in another blistering kiss and drags his big hands down my ribs. Before I know it, his fingers span out to cover my ass and—these pajama shorts are way too thin! It feels like his hands are burning right through

them. And if that wasn't hot enough, the pressure of his hands grinds me wickedly against his erection.

I'm no longer kissing him.

I'm gasping hedonistically against his mouth.

Xan smiles at the pudgy I've become in his hands. I'm the bread in one of those social media videos that he's kneading. I don't have words, I simply have moans and whimpers and feeble attempts at kissing.

"Oh my God, you feel amazing," I praise, barely able to give words breath. I'm not screaming the way Arie and Naomi did, but my core is throbbing, and my pajama shorts are soaked. It's embarrassing how wet I am, which he has to feel through the fabric. Are we actually doing this? Is Xander owning my own body with such control that I can't get enough of the way he kneads and moans and drags me across his length?

Hailey was right. I *need* a hot night of casual sex. I need to remind my body that it can be worked up like this.

"Can I take this off?" Xander asks softly, his hands sliding to my tank top and dragging the fabric up my back. "You have no idea how badly I want to see your tits again."

A bawdy moan escapes from my lips, and I'm so startled by it that I pull back to look at him. His brown eyes are blazing with lust, and the need pulsing through my core is matched by my nipples turning to iron. I don't know if I can handle him looking at me like this, much less peeling off my shirt and touching my—

"You're so fucking beautiful," he whispers, lifting up to nibble on my lip as his hands slide over my ribs and under my breasts. His thumbs tease the sides of my tits, his hands so big his fingers fan out over my sides, engulfing me.

His thumbs tease with mesmerizing softness, and I don't know if I moan or beg, but I say yes, and Xander slides the tank top up over my breasts. He groans when the fabric releases

them, peeling the tank off and discarding it on the floor. He gazes hotly at my pink nipples, only inches from his lips, and my body tightens as his eyes devour me like I'm a chocolate-dipped cherry.

"Gorgeous," he raves about my thruppenny bits. Then he shifts us again, sitting up so we're both upright with me still astride him. The weight of my tits are suddenly in his hands, caressed and cupped and fondled with tender perfection. I'm so aroused, I feel every stroke of his thumbs as if his fingers are softly opening my cunt.

"Your tits are perfect," he praises, and I nearly collapse when he puts one nipple in his mouth.

"Xan—!"

He licks and sucks, and I'm overwhelmed with how wicked he is, at how the sweet chef has turned into a devil.

"Xan, I—!"

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and clutch his hair as waves of heat zip through me. He's licking me with fire. He's enflaming embers inside my skin. My nipples are flint he's sparking and igniting.

Suddenly, I understand the screams that were coming through the walls, because something else is starting to take over and I want to bray like an animal. My hips gyrate and my core is on fire, and every tug on my nipples heightens my desire.

I want to fuck Xander.

No, I'm *going* to fuck Xander.

I'm ready to remove our shorts and pull out his cock and tell him he can take me any way he wants—flip me over or pin me against the headboard, take me fast and hard, or slow and wicked. I'm so gone, I don't even care how it's done. Hell, he can even fuck me while I'm still wearing these drenched pajama bottoms. My hand reaches between us to find his bare cock has already unleashed itself from the opening in his

boxers. We both gasp at the contact. He's engorged and impressive, filling my hand as I stroke him. And God, my pussy aches for me to impale myself on his thick, juicy—

Beef bayonet?

I laugh.

In the middle of being completely worked up, with his cock in my hand—I freaking laugh.

Xander pulls back from my tits and concern fills his face.

“Oh God, I'm so sorry,” I say quickly, dropping his cock. “That wasn't about your—” His eyes widen. “Go back to what you were doing. Your mouth is amazing.”

“What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing,” I move my hands up his ribs, which only causes my aching tits to hover closer to his lips. “I swear it's—”

But another laugh rips through me again.

What is wrong with me?

“Nova?” Xander pulls back, looking at me in concern, and suddenly, I feel naked.

“Xan, it's the stupidest thing,” I admit, because I've already broken the moment. “This is going to sound awful, but ... beef bayonet.”

“What?”

“You were—” I motion to my chest. “And I was so turned on that I started thinking about us actually—” *tearing the rest of our clothes off*. But I don't say that because it sounds childish in my head. “And then I had you in my hand, but all I could think about was earlier when you yelled about your thick, juicy beef bayonet, and—”

Another giggle escapes me.

“Seriously?” Xander frowns.

“You're the one who said it,” I complain, “and—” I motion below to where his thick log is nuzzled against my soaked pajama bottoms. “It definitely *is* thick and juicy.”

I laugh again.

“What is wrong with you?” Xander pushes me off him, the moment completely gone. “I was making a joke earlier.”

“I know!” I agree. “But I can’t stop thinking about it!” I giggle, rolling to my side of the bed and snagging a sheet. I pull the white fabric over my front. “I didn’t mean to kill the moment. But it was such a vivid image, like the rhino horn, and—”

“Oh, I get it!” Xander grabs a pillow and covers his erection, shuffling underneath it with his hands. I’m guessing to hide himself back in his boxers, which suddenly draws attention to the fact that I’m topless and he’s hard and—

I swallow and look at him. “Were we actually”—I point between us—“about to have sex?”

It’s a stupid question, because the answer obviously is *yes*. But the real question is the one underneath it. This is a fake relationship. We’re not supposed to have sex, and if we did, what the hell would that make us?

“Are you asking if you were about to impale yourself on my beef bayonet?” Xander asks, making a joke of it. Only, his eyes harden on me as he adds, “Highly likely.”

It makes me laugh. Not the fact that I was so turned on I wanted to ride him, but the fact that he said *the phrase* again.

“You need to stop saying that!” I bellow. “It kills everything!”

“Oh, I realized that,” Xander grumbles.

“How in the world did you come up with such a ridiculous phrase? I know you’re a chef, but beef bayonet? Is that a recipe you serve at your restaurant?”

“It might become one,” Xander shoots back. “And for the record, my beef bayonet is pissed off you’re not bouncing on it right now.”

My eyes shoot to the pillow he’s clutching over his lower

half. I want to say something sassy, but my body is aching. We *were* about to have sex. Hot, passionate, I-don't-want-to-think-about-it-I-just-want-to-get-lost-in-it sex.

And the last time I did that—it was with a married man.

“That’s probably not a good idea,” I say honestly. “We got a little carried away.”

“Did we?”

“I’m not saying I wasn’t turned on,” I deflect, which is evidenced by the fact that my shorts are freaking *ruined*. “But this is for show.” I motion between us again. “And you’re in love with the woman in the next room.”

I motion to the wall, behind which Arie and Connor are surprisingly quiet. In fact, the whole house is quiet now. A streak of fear inches up my neck, because what started as a joke may have turned into Arie and her friends *actually* hearing us almost have sex!

My silence causes Xander to look at the wall. “Do you think they heard?”

“Probably,” I admit, my face heating with embarrassment. The walls are freaking thin, and the second Xander took off my top I have no clue what kind of noises I was making. “Look, we fooled around,” I say. “And we can play that off as—exactly that. They all think we’re a couple and even if I said that thing about taking things slow—”

“Which was obviously a lie,” Xander says, nodding to the rumpled sheet covering my breasts. God, he thinks I’m some floosy that hooks up with strangers I meet in airports. That twists my brain in all the wrong directions.

“Point is, it isn’t weird if they heard anything,” I assert. “It’s not weird for a couple to explore other options than intercourse. Healthy couples get physical.” I point to each wall, where everyone else in this house had no problem orgasming.

Only, Xander’s looking at the wall above our headboard,

where it was Arie's cries of pleasure that we heard. Where the woman he's in love with was having sex with another man.

"Fuck," he whispers under his breath, looking from the wall, to me, to the pillow over his midsection.

No one needs to say it, because we both know what's going on. Xander almost hooked up with me because he's pissed about what was happening in the other room. Because he's heartbroken. Because I'm the easy choice that was in his bed.

"Sorry, Nova, I really shouldn't have—" he begins, but then he gets up and heads for the bathroom, still holding his pillow over his front. "I'm going to need a minute."

The bathroom door clicks shut with surgical precision as if what happened between us is clinical and emotionless and should be treated as such. Xander and I almost had sex, but that doesn't mean feelings were involved. No one should feel bad about that closed door and this empty room and the lack of oxygen in it.

Only, I wanted him. I was ravenous. And now something inside me has woken up, something lustful and needy that isn't going to want to listen to reason. He's in love with another woman, but I want him anyway.

CONNOR

It's six AM and Nova is sitting on the patio watching the sun rise over the ocean. The beach house is quiet and nobody's awake except for Nova, who is fully dressed in a t-shirt and jeans (not wearing pajamas), who is sitting on the patio *without* her boyfriend, who is confirming everything I'm starting to suspect about this situation (that Mason seemed to know after one conversation).

"I come bearing coffee," I say, sauntering outside and holding up two steaming cups in my hands. Nova gives me the once over. I'm barefoot, shirtless, and only wearing my flannel pajama pants. *I'm* not fully dressed and ready to bolt out of here like Lady Obvious is.

"I thought everyone was asleep," she says, not taking the coffee.

"They are," I confirm, sitting on the patio chair beside her and putting the coffees on the table between us. "You're an extra cream and sugar girl, aren't you?"

Nova frowns, eyeing the coffee suspiciously. "How could you possibly know that?"

“I mix drinks for a living,” I explain. “It’s my job to read people and give them what they want. We don’t have an espresso machine, otherwise I’d have brought you a latte, but with the extra sugar still added.”

Amusement ticks on her cheek. She picks up the coffee and takes a drink. “Damn, that’s good,” She compliments. “Did you grind fresh beans?”

“Always,” I confirm, taking a sip of my own. It’s black. That’s the only way to drink coffee in my opinion; you’ve got to taste the roast. I use the moment to watch Nova and she doesn’t like it, squirming in her seat uncomfortably. “So, why aren’t you naked in bed with your boyfriend?”

Nova spits out her drink.

“Excuse me?” She turns to me pale-faced with coffee dribbling down her lip. I tap my chin and she wipes the spittle with the back of her hand.

“Is it because it’s fake?” I ask. If Nova had more coffee in her mouth, she’d spit it out again.

“What?!” she scrambles. “What are you talking about?”

“You and Xander,” I clarify. “It’s a ruse. You aren’t actually together.”

“That’s not true. We’re together!” she defends.

I shake my head and lean in. “Well, I think you got together a little last night,” I say, pausing to let my implication set in. I heard them through the walls. At first they were making fun of us, and then, it changed. Their *noises* changed. And that only means one thing: S. E. X.

“But,” I continue, “you’re not in a *real* relationship.”

Nova’s skin turns scarlet. Her eyes dart to me, to her cup of coffee, to the ocean and back. She’s like a witness on the stand who’s not good at lying. She’s not sure if she should admit to the naughty escapades she got up to last night, or defend her stance

that she and Xander are in an actual relationship. Which they're not.

"I told you to have sex," I continue. "And you *almost* did, which is a step in the right direction, but—"

"How do you know we didn't—?"

"Because you didn't finish," I state, watching Nova's face flush a deeper shade of pomegranate.

"Maybe I never finish," she tosses back.

"Is that what you're afraid of and why you like to take things slow?" I give her a smirk. "Well, take things slow *other* than last night, of course."

"That's none of your business," she snaps.

"Maybe not," I agree. "But what *is* my business is why you and Xander are playing this boyfriend-girlfriend ruse. It doesn't add up. What do either of you gain from it?"

"It's not a ru—!"

"It is," I press. "Only *you* want it to be real—as displayed by last night's snog sesh."

"Snog-what?"

"It's British for hooking up," I reply. "That was a British chef you were moaning over last night." She looks to the water, a new flush inching up her neck. She's replaying the heat of their escapades in her mind—I'd bet money on it. "Good, think about it," I encourage. "I *want* you two to be together. *You* want the two of you to be together. That's a win-win. Problem is, you're faking it. Why?"

She turns back to me and bites her lip. She may not be good at lying, but she also doesn't want to rat out her fake boyfriend.

"Nova, I meant what I said last night," I continue, softening my tone and lifting up my coffee. "We're allies. We want the same thing. We're on the same side." I take a sip. "But what you want isn't going to happen as long as it continues to be fake."

“Why do you think it’s fake?” Her lip trembles with that question.

“You’re fully dressed at six AM, ready to bail,” I point out.

“Maybe I have somewhere to be,” she says weakly.

“Yeah, it’s back in your bedroom sucking your boyfriend’s cock.”

“Not everything’s sex, Connor,” she defends. “Plus, you’re not in *your* bedroom getting your—” She motions to my flannel pants with her hands.

“You’re right,” I admit. “And that’s because my girlfriend is confused with Xander coming back into her life and it’s messing with her head.”

“More like it’s messing with *your* head,” Nova shoots back.

“Which one, sweetheart,” I say with a smirk. She rolls her eyes and takes another sip of her coffee, eyeing me warily. “Your story is messy,” I continue. “The one you’ve made up about you and Xander. It works on the surface, but there are too many inconsistencies.”

“That doesn’t prove anything.”

“I don’t have to prove it. In fact, I’m not even telling you to stop with the ruse.” Her eyes cut to me with that comment. Yup, it’s totally fake. “What I’m telling you is we should work together to make it real. Because I see the way you look at him. And I heard how close you two were last night.”

“Sleeping together doesn’t make something real,” she defends. I nod and laugh. I’ve had enough one-night stands in my life to know the truth in that statement. Heck, Arie and I even started that way, one night of hot, unforgettable passion. But we both knew it was more than that, and fate pushed us together.

“You’re right,” I concede again. “For a lot of people sex doesn’t make a relationship real. But you’re not a lot of people,

are you, Nova?" Her lips purse together. "You like to take things slow."

"Maybe that was a lie," she snips, only now she's changing her story. Classic lying witness.

"Or maybe the fact that you're in a relationship is a lie," I counter. "My point is, last night messed with your head, and now you're out here avoiding your fake-boyfriend, dressed and ready to bail, trying to figure out if last night was real."

"It wasn't," she says with more emotion than she realizes. That's the most honest thing she's said since I sat down. "Xander's in love with Arie," she admits, and that comment's a spear in both our sides.

She looks up quickly, realizing she's given up the game.

"Oh fuck," she hisses.

"Hey," I put my coffee down and raise my hands to seem less threatening. "You're not telling me anything I didn't already suspect. Well—"

I bite my tongue. I didn't know the L-word was involved. I knew the relationship was fake, that part I'd gotten to the bottom of. But if Xander's in love with my girlfriend, then why the ruse at all?

"He's trying to be a gentleman," Nova says, reading my mind. "That's why."

I scrunch up my face. "A gentleman?"

"Back when Arie and Xander were in college, Xander was dating Charlotte," Nova continues. "And Arie never made a move. She respected his relationship even though there were feelings between them. He's trying to do the same: be a good friend."

I sit back, unsure if I should hate Xander for being in love with my girl, or respect him for not telling her.

"We"—Nova motions to herself and Xander in the beach house— "were supposed to make him non-threatening. That's

why. It's supposed to last long enough for him to help out with the restaurant and go back to London. But now ..."

She rubs her face with her hands, an exhaustion emanating from her limbs. Suddenly, I understand why she's out here, ready to run from this situation. They almost hooked up. Nova has actual feelings for Xander—but he has feelings for someone else, and even if he didn't, soon enough, he'll be headed back to London.

This is lose-lose for Nova. No matter what, her heart gets broken.

"Nope," I say sternly, sitting up. "That's not going to happen."

"What's not going to happen?" she asks confused.

"You're not giving up," I coach. "You're not bailing on this fake-relationship."

"It's getting complicated," she points out. "I don't even know what I feel, and there's no way a fake—"

"Nope!" I say again. "We're getting you the guy, goddammit!"

"Who are you?" Nova frowns, but I stand up, suddenly invigorated.

"We're turning this fake relationship into a real one."

"Uh, I don't think—"

"I'm going to help you win over Xander."

"That's crazy."

"No, it isn't." I move in front of her like she's a client I need to convince I'm in her corner. "You have feelings for him, and I don't want him anywhere near Arie. We're going to convince Xander he wants you instead."

"I don't want to be second," she says quietly. "I've done that before and it's not ..." she trails off. "I'm not going to be anything other than his rebound, and that's not fair to me."

"Then we'll make you more than that." I clap my hands

together as my brain starts whirring. “We’ll convince him that you’re the better choice; that *you’re the one.*”

Nova frowns. “I don’t know ...”

“Yes, you do.” A smile curls over my face. “Tell me why—actually, scratch that—think to yourself, why you like to take things slow.” Her brow furrows at me, but I can tell I have her attention. “Really think about it. Now ask yourself why that was different last night with Xander.” She looks away, turning inward, and I know I’ve got her. “There’s something different about him that made you break out of your cycle. Something important. And you want to give him a shot.”

She doesn’t look at me. She stares at the ocean and the bit of yellow that glows at the horizon. The sun peeks over the edge of the earth like a faraway dream, its streaks of light marring the sky with possibility.

Possibility. That’s what I need to convince them both to believe: the possibility that together they might be the real thing.

CONNOR

“**W**e’re changing the score,” I say, pulling up a stool at the Gin n’ Lava. My brother Ned is to my right, nursing a water, and Mason’s got his arms crossed behind the bar.

“You’ve got fifteen minutes before I have to go back to work,” Ned grumbles. “I don’t like being called down here in the middle of the day. Not to mention, I hung out with you both last night. You couldn’t bring up whatever this is then?”

“Nope. A lot of things can change in twenty-four hours,” I reply. “And your firm is only a few blocks away.”

“Clock’s ticking.” Ned taps his watch.

“Did that orgy at the beach house put you out?” I tease.

“You were all very loud,” Ned gripes, pointing at both of us.

“My girl don’t know how to be quiet,” Mason brags. “Oh wait, were you upset Olivia might’ve wanted to join in? Is that why your panties are in a bunch this afternoon?”

“Mention my wife again and I’ll throw water in your face,” Ned threatens, picking up his glass like he might do it. Ned’s

don't talk about my wife bit just keeps escalating, and Mason never knows when to shut up.

"Olivia is always welcome to knock on our door," Mason starts, "and—"

"You're cutting into my time," I cut him off. "Ned is going to walk out on me when fifteen minutes is up."

"I am," he confirms. "And it's thirteen minutes and forty-three seconds."

"Fine. Here's the deal: we're changing the game with Xander and Nova," I announce, "and I need both of you on board."

"There's a game at all?" Ned frowns.

"Duh!" Mason scoffs. "It's to prove that Xander and Nova aren't a real couple. I don't have a law degree like you two chumps, but I know that."

"But we're not doing that anymore," I explain.

"Wait, what?" Mason's eyes cut to me.

"They're not a real couple, that's a fact," I say. "But—"

"No, it's hearsay," Ned jumps in. "You don't have any proof that—"

"Nova confessed."

"What?" Both Ned and Mason say in unison. Finally, I've got their attention.

"This morning, before you all got up, Nova and I had a little heart-to-heart."

"You coerced a witness?" Ned shakes his head.

"She isn't a witness." I roll my eyes at him. "But the truth came out."

"Did you waterboard her?" Mason asks, and Ned throws his wet napkin at him.

"That's torture, you idiot."

"Right," Mason agrees, tossing the napkin back at my brother. "He said he got the truth."

“By having a *conversation* with her,” I rag, “like a normal human.”

“I’m normal,” Mason throws back. Ned points at Mason’s phallic Hawaiian shirt as evidence. “Hey, I’m more normal than you two Wunderkinds. I’m just a dude that owns a bar.”

“Ten minutes,” Ned says, ignoring Mason.

“Here’s the deal,” I launch in. “Nova admitted the relationship is fake. Their plan was to make Xander seem non-threatening. Xander wants to be a gentleman and bow out of this race.”

“Bow out?” Ned catches, sitting up straighter. “That means he still has feelings.”

“He does,” I confirm, not liking that fact.

“Douche,” Mason adds. “So we’re back to plan A—find a shovel?”

“No.” I shake my head at him. “Yes, he has feelings for Arie, *but* he might also have feelings for Nova.”

“You said it was fake,” Ned states.

“It is. But Xander and Nova almost hooked up last night.”

“She told you that?” Ned frowns.

“She didn’t have to,” I counter. “My room was next to her room.”

“You could hear anything last night?” Ned asks, pointing to me and Mason. “Really? Over yourself and Mr. My-Girl-Doesn’t-Know-How-To-Be-Quiet?”

“Nova also confirmed it,” I add, not needing to get into semantics. “But here’s the kicker—Nova has feelings for Xander.”

“I see where this is headed ...” Ned muses, catching on.

“It’s headed toward all of us having an epic orgy the next time we’re at the beach house!” Mason exclaims.

“You wish.” Ned picks up his water and throws it in Mason’s face.

“What the hell, man!”

“That’s for what you were about to say about my wife!”

“But I didn’t!” Mason grabs a towel from the counter to wipe himself off.

“But you were thinking it.”

“Last I knew, you couldn’t prosecute someone for an idea,” Mason huffs.

“If we were in a courtroom, that’d be true,” Ned concedes. “But we’re not. And you’ve definitely set precedent.”

“That’s true,” I agree. “You love bringing up Olivia.”

“Fine! If we’re not having an orgy with your wife —” Mason gives Ned a pointed look. “You threw the water already, man. I’m not holding back.” Mason turns to me. “Then what the hell are you talking about that’s more interesting than Olivia coming on my cock?”

Ned shoots up, and I have to grab my brother by the elbow to keep him from crawling over the bar. “He’s kidding! Sit down. Mason would never do anything to mess things up with Naomi. He’s just trying to piss you off.”

“Truth.” Mason points at me.

“What I’m trying to say,” I emphasize, holding Ned down on his seat by his shoulders, “is that the new plan is to help Nova and Xander get together—for real. And ideally, Arie never has to know anything about it.”

“You mean let them fake-date until it’s real dating?” Ned asks.

“Exactly!” I point at Mason. “Which means no more raunchy questions and trying to trip them up. In fact, the only ones who get to know this are the three of us and Nova.”

“She agreed to this?” Ned raises a skeptical eyebrow.

“She’s into him,” I remind. “And we’re about to become her wing men, the best ones she’s ever had.”

“Because if Xander falls for Nova, then he’s going to stop having feelings for Arie,” Ned outlines.

“Bingo.” I hold up my fingers like two guns and pretend to shoot them at him.

“Huh,” Ned grunts. “That’s not a half-bad idea.”

“Thank you.”

“You’ve just got one problem,” Ned adds.

“Which is?”

Ned looks at his watch. “Oh look at that, time’s up.”

“Seriously?” I frown at him, and he gives me his *I never show weakness* glare.

“Next time, call me,” Ned says, grabbing his jacket. “This conversation could’ve happened over the phone.”

“But it was so much more fun to throw water in my face, now wasn’t it?” Mason jeers.

Ned hitches up an eyebrow and points at him with a sneer. “Actually, yes.”

“So what’s the one problem,” I ask, as my brother starts walking to the exit.

“Arie,” he says plainly.

I stare at him. “What do you mean, Arie?”

“You saw what she did to Kendall and Simon,” Ned points out.

“I already gave her a lecture about that. She doesn’t know it’s fake, and I told her to back off.”

“That might be true.” Ned nods. “But Simon was just her friend. Xander is different. If Arie has any unsettled feelings about Xander, well ...”

He doesn’t have to finish his sentence. The sentiment is clear: Arie’s the wild card in all of this. If she wants to tear Xander and Nova apart, she will. And if she does, it’s because she loves him.

“**X**ander and I almost slept together,” I tell Hailey, before hiding behind my Dole whip ice cream and taking a bite.

“What?!” Hailey drops the surfboard magnet in her hand and turns to me stunned.

We’re in the middle of the Aloha Stadium Swap Meet which is full of touristy junk like carved tiki totems, shell beads, and sarongs. I’d never buy anything here, but Hailey loves it. She’s always looking for the perfect Hawaiian treasure to add to her collection. Previous wonders include a ukulele hand painted with a sunset, a defective dashboard hula girl with three arms, and a flip-flop necklace made out of abalone shell. Why Hailey loves these, I don’t know. Most of the time, we just walk around and chat.

“Define *almost*,” Hailey demands, grabbing my arm and pulling me away from the treasure hunt to the shade of a palm tree. “Almost ... as in you were both naked and you were interrupted by a tsunami? Or you just kissed again and it’s been so

long for you that you've forgotten that kissing is not a home run?"

"Somewhere between kissing and tsunamis," I answer, popping another bite of pineapple goodness into my mouth. Hailey frowns. That's not the gossip she wanted. "What? You're the one insulting me with your options," I defend.

Hailey digs her finger into my pineapple ice cream and swipes herself a swoop of my whip.

"Hey!" I snap. "Those grubby fingers have been touching all kinds of swap meet trinkets!"

"And were you touching his meat? Or do I have to keep poking fingers into your ice cream?" Hailey tosses back. "Oh wait! Was he poking fingers in *your* ice cream?" She waggles her eyebrows in a display that looks like she should be in a horror film. "Did he *scoop* you up on a *sundae* and do *un-constitutional* things to your body?"

I roll my eyes at her puns.

"There was no ice cream involved, but yes, I was mostly naked," I confess. "And I did touch his meat." I point my spoon at her quickly. "No meat puns! No wiener, bratwurst, hotdog mayhem!"

Hailey steals my spoon from me. "*Salami* get this straight," she smiles, way too proud of herself for that one. "He was so *barba-cute* you got naked ... But what? You guys forget the *condiment*?"

"Okay, that was a good one," I admit.

"Thank you," Hailey beams. "But what? No glove no love?"

"We didn't get to the condom part," I explain. "Because I started laughing and completely killed the moment."

"What were you laughing at?" Hailey asks, stealing another bite of my Dole whip. "Oh wait," she gasps. "Was he small? Oh my gosh, all that British hotness and he's packing a Tequilla worm?" She wiggles her pinky finger.

“He’s not—” I swat her hand away and steal my spoon back. “He’s perfectly fine in the—

“*Sausage* department?” Hailey offers with a howl.

“Oh my gosh, I don’t know why I tell you anything.” I turn and start walking down the aisle lined with tents of trinkets.

“Okay, okay!” Hailey races after me. “I’m sorry. It’s just been a while since I’ve gotten to tease you about a guy.”

“Which is why you shouldn’t scare me off,” I point out.

“Point taken,” Hailey concedes. “But seriously, why did you laugh during the deed? Or maybe I should ask how you got close enough to having sex in the first place.”

I take a deep breath and explain everything: putting sunblock on him, the topless incident in the water, the symphony of orgasms coming through the walls, our big *When Harry Met Sally* moment that became something more, until ... beef bayonet!

“That’s huge!” Hailey says after I finish. “And I don’t mean his man meat. I mean, this is a big deal for you.”

“It is,” I agree, stopping to look at some jewelry at a booth.

“So what’s different about Xander?” Hailey asks. “You’ve been *No Boys Allowed* downtown for a while now, so—?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I just stopped thinking about this turning into another *he who shall not be named* incident and lust took over.”

“Bow-chick-a-wow-wow!” Hailey sings, doing a bouncy dance thing with her shoulders.

“I think I like him,” I add, my face heating.

“You don’t have to like him to beef his bayonet!” Hailey does a combo eyebrows and shoulders move that pretty much should be banished from the planet, but I can’t stop laughing.

“Connor wants to help me convince Xander that he likes me too,” I say, moving on to the next tent that’s full of everything you can carve out of a coconut: monkeys, a lady in a

bikini, a football. I pick up the football one and show it to my friend, and her eyes light up.

“Hello beautiful,” Hailey says, taking it from my hand and inspecting the shoelaces glued on top of the ball. “Wait?” She points at me. “Connor wants to help? Arie’s boyfriend?” Her eyes narrow. “How is that possible? He thinks you and Xander are already dating.”

“Here’s the thing ...” I turn to the coconuts to avoid her stare. “He figured out it’s fake. I may be a good writer, but in real life, when you’re under the scrutiny of a guy who used to be a lawyer—”

“Connor used to be a lawyer?”

“I know.” I nod in agreement at how bizarre that sounds. “And his brother still is one. Point is, I have to do research to write a character that’s full of witty comebacks. In real life, I’m a bumbling fool who can’t hide anything.”

“So Arie and Connor know?”

“Connor knows,” I correct. “Arie doesn’t. And Xander doesn’t know that Connor knows.”

“And Connor wants to help?” Hailey asks, before walking up to the booth’s vendor and asking how much the coconut football is.

“He says it’s win-win,” I explain. “Neither of us wants to see Xander and Arie get together, so if we join forces—”

“You’ll be able to prove to Xander you’re the one he’s been wishing for all along.” Hailey brightens. “I love this plan. I’m going to call it Operation Beef Bayonet!”

“Oh god! Please don’t. That’s what ruined the moment in the first place.”

Hailey hands money to the vendor for her carved coconut, then turns to me with mischievous eyes. “When do I get to meet Connor? He and I need to strategize!”

My eyes go wide. “That’s not necessary, Hails!”
“Oh, and even better—when do I get to meet Xander?”

XANDER

Nova's best friend Hailey has an apartment that looks like something out of a horror museum. She's a collector of all things pop-culture, weird, or terrifying: rainbow-haired troll dolls, Middle Earth swords, Elvis cups, glass eyes, and yellow rubber ducks. The second you think there's a theme to her collection something new and bizarre shows up—like the coconut carved into a football that was found this afternoon.

"It's so nice to meet you, Mr. Carlisle," Hailey says, gripping my hand far too tightly. "Can I call you Xander?"

"Of course," I say, thrown off by her exuberance. "It's lovely to meet my girlfriend's—"

"Xan my man," Hailey interrupts, leaning in. A giant photo of Taylor Swift is on her t-shirt making it look like the pop-star is staring at me with the same intensity. "I know it's fake. You don't have to pretend. Nova tells me everything!"

My eyes shoot to Nova, who gives me a shrug.

"Your secret's safe with me," Hailey adds, leading us past

her shelves of knickknacks into a living room. “I won’t tell anyone—beef bayonets included!”

I turn to Nova in surprise and she’s beet red. How much did she tell her friend? She and I haven’t even talked about last night yet, but somehow Hailey knows *all the details*.

“You told her?” I whisper as Nova and I follow her friend into the next room. My fake girlfriend blushes behind her blue glasses.

“The Beefy B incident may have come up,” she admits.

“My knob came up in your casual conversations?”

“I needed to talk to someone about last night,” she defends.

“Why?”

“Because contrary to what you might believe,” she catches my eye and there’s a sharp vulnerability in it, “I don’t normally do what happened last night.”

“Yes, well, neither do I,” I admit.

Nova stops in our tracks and stares at me, ready to call *bullshit*.

“I may have been on TV and own a fancy restaurant,” I say quietly. “But I’m not a British Giglio, hooking up with every woman I meet.”

A muscle ticks in the side of Nova’s cheek. “No, of course not,” she says. “Because you’re in love with Arie.”

She moves to catch up with her friend, leaving my stomach in an unsettling knot. Nova said the same thing last night: *You’re in love with Arie*. Implying what happened between us was a fluke: hormones and lust. It didn’t mean anything. And I wish it was that simple. I wish I could convince myself *this is fake*, but my hands on Nova’s body last night was the opposite. My mouth on her mouth, my hands on—

Bloody hell! Sleeping in her bed tonight is going to be a nightmare. How am I supposed to ignore the fact that my mouth and hands want to finish what we started?

Of course, none of that would be fair to Nova. Whatever I feel about Arie still exists, and giving into my lust for Nova is a mistake. I missed something important with Arie, as if she understands me in a way that no one else can—because she’s a chef, probably, and our passions are the same.

“I considered cooking,” Hailey says, breaking into my thoughts and recapturing my attention. Hailey stands beside a table that’s been set with plates and silverware for three: a matching set covered in Disney Princesses and pink. “But I’d embarrass myself in front of the maestro”—she motions to me—“so I thought you could teach us to cook instead.”

“Oh uh ...” I stutter. “My specialties are foie gras and Beef Wellington,” I stutter. “I doubt you have ingredients for—”

“Beef bayonet?” Hailey laughs.

“Wow!” My neck heats. “How many times are you going to bring that up?”

“As many times as it takes to get this one”—Hailey wraps an arm around her friend—“to stop turning scarlet and get the deed done!”

“Oh my god, I’m going to kill you!” Nova yelps, horrified.

“Nah, you love me,” Hailey replies, pulling Nova into a headlock like they’re still ten. It makes me wonder if they grew up together, especially when the two giggle and squirm. It’s actually quite adorable.

“You two have been mates a long time, haven’t you?” I comment when they finally pull apart.

“Eight years,” Hailey answers with a hiccup.

“Wait? Not since childhood?” I motion to their mini wrestling match.

“I’m a child at heart,” Hailey says, nodding to her collection of salt and pepper shakers which look like animal figurines lined up for Noah’s ark.

“Yes, you are,” I concede. “Okay, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll

make dinner if you promise to never utter the words *beef bayonet* ever again.”

“Okay, but—” Hailey bargains. “That doesn’t mean *sausage spear* or *meat mallet* are off the table, does it? Especially, considering the copious amount of cow that’s sitting in my refrigerator right now.”

“You specifically bought beef so you could make fun of me?” Hailey smiles wickedly, and I turn to Nova, pointing at her conspirator. “This is your best friend?”

“She’s not subtle,” Nova admits. “But she’s loyal and will always have my back.”

“You call all the meat jokes having your back?”

Nova and Hailey exchange a smile. “I do.”

“Okay, wonder-chef,” Hailey says with a clap of her hands. “Let’s see what you’re made of.”

Two hours later, Hailey’s Disney Princess plates are covered in long beef spears that I deliberately made to look like tallywackers. If we’re going to make it a thing, then I’m not backing away from the challenge.

“Wow,” Hailey says, picking up one of the meaty spears. “This sure looks like a—”

“Nope!” I interrupt. “You promised not to say it for the rest of the evening. A deal is a deal.”

“Instead, you’re going to make us *eat* it?” Nova lifts the beef skewer to her mouth as if I don’t realize what I’ve done.

“Oh yes,” I agree, a sneaky smile lighting up my face. “There’s even a tzatziki sauce you can dip it in.” I point to the white cucumber dip on each of their plates. “Trust me, it’s going to be the best thing you’ve ever tasted.”

Nova and Hailey stare at me wide-eyed, and I can’t help but wonder how Arie would deal with this situation. She’d probably turn it into something lewd by dipping the tip into the sauce and licking it off perversely. Nova, however,

proceeds to grab her knife and begin chopping her beef into tiny pieces.

“Ouch!” I voice at her intense knife skills.

“Oh, but it tastes soooooo delicious,” Nova sasses, and maybe I deserve that.

XANDER

I spent the rest of the evening at Hailey's house laughing and being told every incriminating story about Nova that Hailey could think of. It turns out my fake girlfriend has shoplifted tampons, has an irrational fear of jellyfish, and an unhealthy obsession with smelling old books to the point that she looks like an addict who's huffing them.

It's late now, and I'm back at Nova's apartment lying in her bed in the dark. I'm in my pajamas and pressed against the wall with the window, watching the shadows of the room and listening to each of Nova's movements in the bathroom.

Faucet.

Teeth brushing.

Shuffling feet.

I can't get the images from last night out of my mind: Nova in my lap, topless, her undulating hips, her gorgeous tits brushing against my mouth. Every moan she made was magic. Every gasp, as she dragged herself along my length, was sin. My lips sucking on those gumdrop nipples, making her breath hitch.

In a few minutes, she's going to be in *this* bed. This *tiny* bed that she loves to sprawl out in. My body wants to work her into the same state she was in last night—naked in my lap, desperate for a ride. My cock starts to harden, imagining Nova blissed out and riding my dick, wearing nothing but those blue glasses and a pink flush on her skin.

The bedroom door creaks open and I flip onto my stomach to keep my cock from announcing its excitement. Nova shuffles through the dark, and my eyes have adjusted enough to make out the white top and shorts she's wearing. The same outfit as last night, but a clean pair.

Nova sits on the bed and the mattress depresses, pitching my body toward her. I force myself to keep my distance, because last night was a fluke and she's not interested. She puts her glasses on the night stand, plugs in her phone, lifts her brown hair up and ties it into a bun. I watch each movement, trying to keep my breath steady, and not betray the fact that I want to wrap my arms around her and kiss her neck.

Sleeping in this bed together was hard before, when we hadn't crossed any lines, but now, it seems impossible.

"Are you asleep?" Nova asks, lifting the sheet and sliding her legs under it before lying down with her back to me. I could pretend I don't hear her, pretend I'm asleep like I have so many times before. But I'd rather pull her back against me and start nibbling, slide my fingers under that top and tease her thrupenny bits until she's gasping again.

"I'm awake," I admit, and I feel her body stiffen.

Is she thinking about last night, too? Is she wondering how long we'll last in this bed?

Her neck is an ivory slice of elegance, illuminated by the window behind me, long and tempting. It would be easy to bend forward and drag my lips across her nape—but if I do that, this gets complicated. More complicated than it already is.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask, my breath ghosting across the fine hairs at the top of her neck. “Or—” her breath deepens and I can’t stop myself from asking. “Or do you want me to touch you?”

She inhales sharply.

It’s a wicked sound that goes straight to my cock.

Tension knots in her neck, and I can tell she didn’t expect me to say that. She was probably going to avoid the repercussions of last night and pretend it didn’t happen. But I can’t forget.

“The image of you in my lap is burned into my brain,” I whisper, moving closer to hover my lips over her neck. “Last night wasn’t for show. There was no one else there to see us. I wanted you.” I ghost my lips across her nape, relishing the way she shivers. “You wanted me.”

I press my mouth against the column of her throat and a ruddy sound rumbles from under her skin—not a gasp or a moan. Her body pitches, arching back towards me, and I slide a hand over her hip.

“Tell me to stop,” I dare her, inching my hand under her tank top and over her stomach. Her flesh is silky and warm, her breath hitching in that eager way that drives me insane. There’s a delicateness to Nova that makes me ravenous. It’s like she’s surprised by her desire for me, yet greedy to be pushed to her limits.

I slide my hand higher, until my fingers graze the under-swelling of her breasts. She lets out a breathy moan, giving my fingers permission to dance over her sensitive swells, teasing the soft tips until her nipples harden under my naughty swirling.

“You’re so responsive, Nova,” I pant against her neck.

“It’s been—” she whimpers hotly, arching into my touch. “A—a long time for me. I don’t ...” Her voice trails off and she bites her lip, moaning as I roll her nipples between my fingertips.

“You were right before,” I breathe into her ear. “I am a tits man, and yours are fucking perfect.” I cup her fully and she lets out a croak of pleasure, burying her face in her pillow as I massage her delicious weight.

I’m not delicate. I want her to feel every clutch and pinch as I push her shirt up and expose her thruppenny bits to the moonlight’s kiss.

“Tell me to stop,” I challenge.

She mewes and writhes, pressing her tits against my palms.

“Tell me you’re not turned on,” I taunt, sliding my hand up to her throat, then back down over her tits.

“Xander,” she breathes out my name, a prayer on her lips. Eyes closed. Mouth open. Body reacting to every glide of my hand—over her stomach, across her breasts, clutching her throat and around again.

“I’m turned on,” I growl in her ear, tilting my hips so my lower half brushes against her ass. She shudders when she feels the ridge of my cock. “Touching you—” I tease my fingers over her nipples again. “Fuck, Nova, you make me so hard. I’m not going to stop until I make you come.”

A strangled intake of breath wicks against the pillow, followed by the hiss of her swearing. She’s as turned on as I am, and telling her what I want to do to her is only making her more excited.

“This is going to get messy,” she manages to grind out.

“I’m a chef. I like messes.”

I tweak her nipples and am rewarded with a bawdy gasp.

She grabs my hand and pushes it down her stomach and under the waistband of her pajama shorts. “Like this,” she moans, tracing my hand over where she’s warm and bare. “No sex.”

She’s so wet that I could climb between her thighs and drive into her right now. God, do I want to. But she’s asked for

my fingers right now, so I shift us so we're spooning and my cock is nuzzled hotly against her ass.

"Oh damn!" she gasps.

"No sex," I remind her, before savagely pushing her shorts down to her ankles. Her legs feel like silk, and I can't help but drag my hands over them brutishly, before hooking her leg over my knee, lifting it, and opening her up.

I look down her body to see her wickedly spread for me, her tits trembling and her pussy glistening. Fuck, she's gorgeous.

"No sex, Nova," I taunt, plowing my fingers through her soaked pussy and giving her what she wants.

"Oh god!" she cries out my name.

"Not even if you beg for it." I circle her clit and revel in how her hips buck and her ass drags over where I'm thick. "No cock for you tonight." I thrust my fingers inside her and she clamps down around me, ravenous.

"Xan! Oh—!" The noises she makes aren't words, shaken from her throat as she trembles in my arms.

"Fuck, you're tight!" I compliment, watching her pump wickedly on my digits, taking control and finding her own rhythm. She's absolutely mesmerizing, her abdomen rippling as she rolls her body. My view is incredible as I slip my fingers out of her cunt, tease my slick fingers over her clit, then thrust back into where she's wet.

I can't wait until it's my cock.

That won't be tonight, but watching my fingers fuck her perfect pussy, I know how incredible it's going to be when her heat is sucking me deep. Fuck, I'm close to coming just thinking about it.

"Do you want to come on my fingers?" I ask, scraping my teeth along the side of her throat and continuing to pump my fingers at a wicked rhythm. "Or can I taste-test your cunt?" Her pussy clamps wickedly around me at that comment. Kitty

wants my tongue. “Mmmmmm,” I hum at her reaction. “I take taste-testing very seriously, Nova.”

“How does everything sound dirtier with that British accent?” Nova gasps, delirious with how close she already is from my finger’s thrusting.

“I want to feast on your forbidden fruit,” I growl in her ear. “Drink your taste. Suck on your glistening lips. Lick you from one—”

“Oh god! Do it already,” Nova interrupts, panting with need. She pulls my hand from between her legs and maneuvers onto her back with her thighs spread. “Put your money where your mouth is, chef. Eat me!”

I don’t think there are two sexier words in the English language.

I drop down the bed and kneel between Nova’s thighs, lowering my face closer and closer to her wicked dessert. She’s burnished with heat, and so damn eager, my cock is throbbing to push inside her.

I slide my hands under her ass and drag my lips down the inside of her thigh. She gasps as I tease the inner seam at the top of her leg where she tastes of salt and skin. Her pussy trembles before me, my lips nibbling the edge of her pink folds without tasting her rich center. She moans and creams, her body begging for me to devour her like a hot caramel.

My mouth waters as I move to her second leg and repeat the process. I’m torturing her and myself as I taste the wild bouquet of her skin without eating the main dish she’s offering.

I want to put ice cream on Nova’s pussy and lick off every drop, suck on her clit, suck on her folds, suck on—suddenly I understand the story I was told about tarts. How tarts could be Ned and Olivia’s favorite sexual position and dessert.

“How turned on are you now?” I ask Nova, hovering my lips over her pink treat. She croons in need, deliciously empty,

and I smile wickedly. “Are you so far gone you’re ready to beg for my thick cock?” I tease. “Are you rethinking your previous declaration and want me plowing into your thirsty cunt?”

She makes an exasperated sound that I could interpret as a *yes*. But instead—

I cover her pussy with my mouth like a barbarian.

“Xander!”

I suck her glazed peach deep between my lips, hollowing my cheeks and making her gasp. My tongue leaves no surface untouched, plowing and licking and pumping my tongue deep into her happy valley. I flick and thrust and eat her so thoroughly she’s going to have two red palm prints permanently tattooed on her ass. Yes, that’s how intensely I’m gripping and pumping her against my face.

“Xander! Oh God! What are—? Oh—oh—!”

I scrape my teeth against her folds and push her wider open. My own cock is mercilessly hard, wishing for its turn. But the pain I feel only makes me more ravenous, turning my attention to her clit and thrusting two of my fingers into her depths.

Her body starts to quiver, muscles clenching as her pussy locks down on my thrusting knuckles. I suck on the sugar of her clit, and tease my pinky toward the puckered star behind her rippling cunt. She tastes saltier when she’s about to come, and my pinky only brushes over the sensitive skin of her back entrance when she detonates.

“Xander! Fucking! Oh my God!” Nova yells, letting go entirely and surrendering to my assault. I don’t stop eating her, or fucking her with my fingers, or teasing her with my pinky. Her orgasm shatters against my face, tearing unholy words out of her mouth that I’ve unearthed. I don’t know if she comes this hard normally, but I love every naughty, barbaric, incredible second of it.

Nova comes like an exploding star, and I don’t care if that’s

a cliché. She's loud and powerful and wailing, without any care of who she obliterates.

She's a force of nature.

When the aftershocks subside and the rippling wanes in her thighs, I pull back and look at the dessert I've devoured. It's flushed a wicked shade of pink, and when I kiss her pussy softly she flinches, still deliciously sensitive.

"That was—" Nova gasps, trying to find air. "That was—"

"What happens when a chef decides you're the most heavenly thing he's eaten in a long while," I offer with a smirk.

She nods in appreciation, covered in sweat, beads of our exertion on her abdomen. Her tits are flushed a dusty red, and if I wasn't a gentleman, I'd crawl up her body, pull my cock out, and watch her eyes dilate as I showed her just how much of me she can take.

Our eyes catch, and her eyes tremble as realization ripples through her gaze, aware I want to fuck her right now—sweet or brutal, however she'd allow it.

"Ask me," I say softly, "and I'll give you everything."

Nova's tongue jets out over her lips and a strangled pant follows it. She's not sure she could handle *everything*.

"I—I—" she stutters, her eyes turning dark. She wants to say yes. Her eyes flick down to my shorts, where there's no doubting the size of the erection that's waiting for her. Nova's chest heaves, her legs still open, unconsciously inviting me between them. I reach into my boxers and wrap my hand around my cock, grunting at the contact.

She lets out another heady sound, her eyes dropping to where I'm fisting myself.

I push my boxers down, letting my cock spring out, and her mouth opens like an invitation. Suddenly, there are two sets of lips waiting for me to plunge between them, and I don't know how long I can hold out.

“Oh wow,” Nova rasps out, completely taken. “You’re beautiful.”

“Ask me,” I repeat, pulling a long stroke down my length.

The sound she makes is pure sin. It’s so raw and needy that she’s trembling. But then something else unleashes through her gaze—a pinch of regret?—and suddenly her knees snap shut and she’s sliding off the bed.

“I need to take a shower,” Nova says quickly, tearing the tank top that’s been bunched at her chin off her body.

She’s naked in the center of the room, and it makes me want to grab her by the hips, lift her up and impale her against the door she’s reaching for.

“That was—” she begins, looking at me on her bed, my cock hard as iron in my hand.

She bites her lip, and for a second I think she might launch herself on top of me. But she opens the door instead and disappears into the darkness of the next room.

A second later, I hear the shower blast like an angry siren sounding the alarm.

I know she enjoyed herself, but suddenly she’s pissed off. And now she’s in the bathroom washing off every inch of her I made come alive.

And I don’t know why.

NOVA

I'm curled up on the love seat in my living room and am attempting to sleep. *Attempting* being the operative word since it's past midnight, my leg has started to cramp, and my hair is still wet from my shower.

I should stop being a coward and sneak back into the bedroom and lie down next to Xander. But after what we just did ... I can't.

Not to say it wasn't nice. It was waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay better than nice. Never underestimate a chef who wants to *eat*.

But what are we doing? It would've been smart to say *no* the second he asked to touch me. Xander's heart belongs to someone else and messing around with me ... well, it isn't fair to anyone.

My bedroom door *creeks*, followed by footsteps and floorboards shifting. I pull the throw blanket tighter around my body (because I'm naked under it). Yup, I'm the wuss who wouldn't go back in *my* bedroom after her shower to get clean clothes.

I close my eyes and pretend I'm asleep, listening to hear if Xander heads into the bathroom or the kitchen.

He does neither.

Whoosh-whoosh. His bare feet pad across the floor in my direction, and I smell the musky scent of what we did in the bedroom wafting off his skin as he takes a seat on the floor near me.

"I know you're not asleep," he says, calling me out on the fact that I haven't opened my eyes.

Knowing the jig is up, I open them to find Xander is closer than I expect. He's sitting cross-legged in front of the love seat where I'm curled like a croissant. Without my glasses on, everything is soft, but I'm nearsighted, so I can make out some of his detail. Moonlight lingers into the room from the patio door, highlighting his messy hair and the stubble that lines his jaw. Stubble that scraped against my thighs and drove me wild.

"What are you doing out here?" he asks softly.

"Nothing," I lie, snuggling into my blanket. He's wearing his t-shirt and shorts, and I'm helplessly vulnerable under this old thing. "I thought I'd sleep out here."

"You barely fit on that." He nods to the loveseat I'm squished in.

"I'm short," I reply, noncommittally. "Curl me up like a cat and it's perfect."

He frowns in the dark, not buying it. "You're upset," he alleges, not shying away from the obvious.

I bite my lip. I *am* upset, but the reason I'm upset isn't fair to him. I enjoyed what we just did, and I'm the one who initiated what happened yesterday—and tonight, I didn't stop him.

"Talk to me," he whispers.

"Xan," I say softly, surprised by the wobble in my own breath. "Obviously we're attracted to each other. And what we just did was—" *Hot! Amazing. The kind of mind-bending oral*

that's going to haunt me for life. “—it was fun,” I settle on. “We obviously have chemistry. And you’re very talented in the—uh, mouth, tongue, eat—” *What am I saying?* “You were there. You know what you did to me.”

I hide my face in the blanket, my neck heating.

“I’m not fishing for compliments,” Xander says calmly. “I’m concerned. You’re curled up out here like I did something wrong.”

My behavior is a red flag, isn’t it?

I just couldn’t crawl back into that bed with him still in it. Not naked. Not with my sheets smelling like sex. Not with the possibility that he was still hard under those blankets. Even if all he wanted was to wrap his arms around me and snuggle, I wouldn’t be able to stop wondering if it *meant something* to him, or if he was just trying to be polite. After all, he prides himself on being a gentleman, and the gentlemanly thing *isn’t* to lick and bolt.

My problem is I *want* it to mean something—but of course it doesn’t.

I’ve been that naive woman who fooled herself into thinking a man involved with another woman would choose me. But I’m smarter now. Or I should be. A smarter Nova wouldn’t have let him touch her at all.

“I shouldn’t have crossed that line with—” Xan begins, but I snake my arm out of the blanket and catch his cheek.

“Xan, you haven’t done anything wrong.” I rub my thumb against his stubble. “You haven’t done anything to me that I wasn’t ravenous for, okay?” He tilts his head into my touch, still frowning. That doesn’t explain what I’m doing out here.

“I still don’t know if you were serious when you said you like taking things slow,” Xander says. “Maybe you meant that and I just—?”

“It’s not like that,” I insist, removing my hand from his

face and sitting up. “Look, I used to have plenty of hot, fast nights in my life. Okay? I’m not ashamed of what we did, and I don’t want you to get the impression that it wasn’t awesome.”

“You used to?” he asks, catching that detail.

I sigh. “I guess I’ve been on a *take it slow* streak. I wasn’t lying when I said it’s been a while for me.”

“What’s a while?”

“Over a year,” I admit. “Maybe closer to two.”

It’s dark and my vision is hazy, but I can still see the astonishment on his face. He wasn’t expecting that long of a hiatus, and now his silence sits like a ten-ton weight, squeezing the air out from between us. Two years *is* a long time. Sure, I made a New Year’s resolution with Hailey to get myself out there again, but *he who shall not be named* really did a number on me.

“What changed?” Xan asks softly, and I’m not sure if he means why I’m not that carefree girl anymore, or why I decided to end my celibacy streak and hook up with him.

I take a deep breath. Xander deserves an explanation.

“Two years ago,” I begin, “I was involved with someone ...” Xan leans in, his eyes soft and kind. “And it started out fast and hot like ...” I motion to the bedroom. “It was wonderful. A whirlwind. And I fell for him.” I laugh nervously. It’s embarrassing how quickly I let go of my heart. “And I thought he felt the same way, but ...”

I look past Xan’s shoulder, avoiding his eyes. I don’t want to see if he looks guilty, or ashamed that he’s led me on. He asked for permission to touch me, and I gave him it. I wanted to give in to what Xan was offering.

“But it turned out,” I continue, “that he was married.”

The word *married* feels like swallowing a hot coal when I say that out loud. It’s a truth I don’t like to admit, one that

threatens to burn a hole through my esophagus so I'll never be able to speak it again.

"I didn't know he was married," I explain, clutching my blanket to my collarbone, overly aware of my nakedness beneath the fabric. My knee pokes out where the throw opens, the synthetic blend itching against my skin. "I should've ended things when I found out," I admit, a lump twisting in my throat. "But I didn't."

I didn't.

I was foolish, and hopeful, and arrogant, and I—

A raw laugh spills from my lips. "I thought he would—"

Choose me over his wife. *That's* how naive I was.

My lip trembles and I can't say those words out loud: Me over his wife! The possibility seems so stupid now. The truth is so obvious, it's embarrassing.

"I was so smitten," I manage, my words coming out like whisps, the frail scribblings of a first draft I want to erase the second I've said them. "I got caught up in the fun and excitement, the whirlwind, and I fooled myself into thinking I was what he needed."

The other woman is never what anyone needs. She's the thorn, the knife, the choice that makes everyone bleed.

"He was having issues with his wife," I continue, "and I stupidly thought *I* could be the answer. That *I* was what he wanted." Tears prick at the back of my eyes. "He went back to her, of course."

I laugh. I have to, because the only other option is to sob. The noises that come out of my throat are raw, filling the air with a grotesqueness that eats every inch of space and silence I have left.

I look at Xan, because there's nowhere left to move. His face is beautiful and stoic, listening and processing, even

though the pinch between his eyebrows is crinkled with trouble.

“I know you’re not married, Xan,” I say quietly, bringing this back to us. “But you *are* emotionally unavailable. Arie may have a boyfriend, but you still have feelings for her. I know you and my married man aren’t the same, but I can’t help but think we’re doing something we shouldn’t. I don’t know if you’re trying to distract yourself with me, or convince yourself you’re not in love with her anymore, or if I’m just something fun to have on the side, but—”

“Nova,” he says my name with so much emotion it feels like a crack opens in the center of my chest and I can’t breathe. But he doesn’t follow my name with anything else, and the silence reminds me so much of all the unsaid promises that *he who shall not be named* left like time bombs for me to throw at myself.

“I can’t hook up with you,” I assert, finding my confidence, “and watch you fawn over Arie in the next moment. I’ve been the other woman and—”

“Nova, Jesus.” He shakes his head. “Why did you kiss me yesterday?” His gaze is a bullet, accusing. “Why didn’t you tell me not to touch you?”

His words cut and I feel myself unravelling.

Because I *wanted* him to touch me, but I was also stupid enough to want it to mean something. This is the reason I created the *take things slow* rule in the first place. I rush in. I rushed into inviting him to be my fake boyfriend, and into kissing him, and into letting us be intimate. I get drunk on the excitement and the adrenaline.

But I’m not the only one.

“Why did *you* touch me?” I reply. “You’re the one whose heart belongs to someone else.”

“Because I like you, Nova,” he admits, and some stupid part of me brightens.

“I like you, too,” I whisper, but this conversation feels like another false promise. “But you *love* her. And you *know* you love her.”

Xander slumps back. His silhouette far away in the dark.

The difference with *he who shall not be named* is that he never admitted to loving his wife. It was a promise blazed in gold and wrapped around his finger, but he never talked about that love. He kept promising me he’d leave her, I just needed to wait a little longer, let him get his affairs in order. Ha! I was the affair.

But with Xander, I already know he’s heartbroken. “We both knew better,” I say softly. “Which is why I’m out here and not climbing back into bed with you. We’re supposed to be fake, Xan, but if I go back in that bedroom it won’t be fake anymore. I’ll want *everything* with you. I’ve already learned this lesson, and I’m trying desperately not to be the weak woman I was before.”

“You’re not weak,” he whispers. “You’re smart, and sexy, and—”

“I don’t need flattery,” I assert. “I *am* weak, and you saying nice things only chips away my resolve. Trust me, it’s already paper thin.”

“Fuck. I’m sorry, Nova.” Xander lifts his hands and rubs his face. It’s an exhausted gesture, filled with surrender. It wasn’t my intention to make him feel guilty, and my instinct is to wrap my arms around him and tell him everything’s fine. Only that’s the same instinct that caused me to stay with *he who shall not be named* for so long.

“It’s late,” I reply. “We’re tired. Why don’t you go back into the—”

“No, I’ll sleep out here,” Xan asserts.

“You’re too tall,” I protest. “Too big for this chair. I’m fine here, really.”

“It’s your house. I’m the one who should—”

“Xan, please,” I sigh. “You’re my guest. I’m the one who invited you to stay here. I’m the one whose idea it was to pretend to date. Please use the bed, and tomorrow we can figure out what to do about this arrangement. Okay?”

Xander regards me with sadness in his eyes—regret even—before he stands up and shuffles back to the bedroom.

That final look stings more than I’d like to admit.

But the truth is he and I *can’t* be anything. We should pretend our hook-up (along with that mind-blowing orgasm) didn’t happen. The one I’m *not* going to tell Hailey about, because as bitter as this pill is to swallow, if I’d actually taken things slow, I wouldn’t be the mess. And Hailey will just try to convince me otherwise.

NOVA

When I wake up the next morning my apartment is empty.

I check the bedroom, only to find the bed is made, and both Xander and his suitcases are nowhere to be found.

Instead, he left a note.

Nova,

I'm checking into the Atlantis hotel.

Thank you for everything. You've gone above and beyond, and you've done far more than I should've ever asked. The last thing I want is to be a burden, and I'm sorry.

You ARE smart and beautiful, Nova. Don't let a daft prick like me ever let you think you don't deserve EVERYTHING. You do. But you're right, I can't give you that.

Hopefully still your friend,

Xander

ARIE

My red heels clap against the modern tile of the Atlantis lobby as I strut toward the elevator. Xander and I have several interviews this morning for Simon's position, and I've dressed to impress: black pencil skirt, a polka dot top, and a stylish blazer (who knew I'd ever own such a thing?). I pull off rockabilly punk-professional very well, if I do say so myself.

I turn the corner to the elevator bank and the last thing I expect to see is Xander pulling his suitcases into the elevator.

"Xan?" I pick up my pace and catch his elevator before the doors shut. He looks up and a streak of surprise shoots through his expression. "Hey!" I motion to his luggage. "What's all this?"

Red creeps up his neck like he's been caught. Is he checking in?

"Trouble in Paradise?" I ask, trying to keep my voice light. He has his suitcases. Of course there's trouble if he's checking into the Atlantis.

"Uh ... something like that," Xan admits, avoiding my eyes

as he presses his floor number. “I didn’t think you got in this early.”

“We have the first of three interviews in an hour,” I remind him, and he looks at his watch, then swears under his breath.

“Right,” he confirms. “I knew that.”

A silence settles between us and I want to ask a hundred questions: What happened with Nova? Why are you checking into the hotel? Did you two break up? Did *he* break up with her? Or was it the other way around?

I don’t ask any of those. I want to, but Connor keeps reminding me that I have a problem putting my nose in places it doesn’t belong. If Xander wants to talk to me about what’s going on, he will. Patience, Arie. You already surprised him by showing up on the elevator. The last thing he wants is a twenty-questions marathon.

The elevator dings and the doors open to Xander’s floor.

“Would you, uh, like any help?” I offer, putting my hand on the door to keep it open. “Or should I see you at Flambé in an hour?”

Xander’s eyes are exhausted. It looks like he hasn’t slept. In fact, his normal joy and exuberance is gone, like he hasn’t got the energy to pull those suitcases down the hall. It reminds me of when he learned Charlotte was cheating on him and his world came crashing down.

Speaking of Charlotte, didn’t she just get married? I saw it on social media, and Xander hasn’t brought that up once. Does he know that she got hitched? Was he dating Nova as a distraction? I start to ask, but Xander jumps in before I can say anything.

“I’m fine,” he says firmly. “Thank you, though. I’ll see you in an hour.”

I frown, not liking how he’s closing down.

“Hey,” I reach out and touch his elbow. “I can reschedule the interviews, if you need the day off or ...”

He gives me a fake smile, putting a hand over mine. “Thank you, but we need to hire Simon’s replacement as soon as possible. Please give me a few minutes to get settled, then I’ll be right up.”

There’s that word again: *we*.

We need to hire Simon’s replacement.

It unleashes a flutter of butterflies in my stomach and for a second I wonder if I’m turning into a romantic pile of goop like I’m my sister. Why is it that Xander’s the only man who can make me feel like a nervous cliché? Not even Connor gave me butterflies when we first started dating.

“Of course,” I say, stepping back so he can roll his suitcases off the elevator. “If you need anything, to talk, or—”

His eyes hit me with vacant exhaustion, too tired to hide the fact that something’s wrong. But under it, there’s a flicker of numbness that scares me. Xander has always been full of life, with an exuberance for cooking and food and living that makes him irresistible.

But right now, he’s broken.

“You know I’m here for you, if you need *anything*,” I insist. He nods noncommittally like saying that feels like I’m pushing him. “I’ll see you in an hour.”

I pull my hand away from the door and the silver walls of the elevator close shut. I hit the button for the rooftop, leaving Xander all alone in the hallway below.

He and Nova must’ve broken up. That’s the only thing that makes sense with his suitcases and sad expression marring his face. Part of me wants to gloat and tell him it’s for the best. Nova isn’t right for him and I know it. But a different part of me is ashamed I think that at all. He looked truly devastated. If

he's in love with Nova—like he was with Charlotte—then he's heartbroken. And the best thing I can do is give him space.

I don't say anything about what I saw in the elevator when Xander shows up for the interviews. He walks in showered, fresh, and ready for the day. We don't play it off like I didn't see him in the elevator this morning: no charming smiles or British quips about *cheeri-oh mornings*. Instead, he nods, acknowledging that I know something's wrong, but doesn't talk about it.

I hand him the resumes of the applicants and keep things professional, even though my instinct is to hug him. (Of course, that would be for me and not for him). I never thought the instinct to comfort would be selfish, but somehow I know the last thing he wants right now is the woman he slept with the last time he was in Hawaii to touch him.

"Should we do the interviews in the dining room or an office?" I ask, trying to keep my focus. "I was thinking one of the large booths by the window would be nice."

I walk into the sunshine at the center of the dining room, enjoying the warmth. Outside, blue sky fills the horizon, and below, Waikiki is already awake. The bustle of the boardwalk is already covered in people. In contrast, both offices are enclosed and dark. Even with the lights on, there's a moodiness to my office, and right now, Simon's feels like an emotional escape room I'm not clever enough to figure out. It's enough to stomach the confusing butterflies in my gut, the heartbreak in Xan's eyes, and the fact that I'm interviewing a stranger to replace my best friend.

I need sunshine—so much sunshine it fills all those dark spaces.

"This booth would be great," Xander says, nodding to a

large one by the window. But then he eyes the bar, where Connor works, as if he's waiting for my boyfriend to show up at any minute. Connor doesn't come into the restaurant till this afternoon, yet Xander's wandering eyes make it feel like he's a ghost sitting by the bar as an unspoken, judgmental chaperone.

"He doesn't come in till three," I say, addressing Xander's gaze. "Unless you want me to invite him to help with the interviews."

"Connor manages more of this restaurant than you realize," Xander says, taking a seat in the booth. "I'm surprised you didn't do the interviews together before calling me to come help."

That comment digs into my side like an unruly splinter, one I've been picking at that's turned sore and red. Does Connor do more work around here than I give him credit for? Should I have left Xander in London and done all of this with Connor instead?

"Having all three of us and one interviewee seems like too many," I deflect.

"I meant before I got here," Xan repeats.

"I don't need Connor for everything," I defend.

"All I meant was he's a lawyer, and he—"

"Was," I interrupt. "Connor isn't a lawyer anymore. He chose this instead."

Xander eyes me like he knows there's more to that story, and there is, but Connor's past isn't mine to tell him.

"I just meant he's capable enough for these interviews."

My eyes narrow. Why is Xander bringing this up? Does he think it was foolish of me to invite him here to help me with the restaurant? What he doesn't acknowledge is I was drowning before he showed up, and Connor *was* here then.

"I'm *glad* you're here, Xan," I say pointedly, sitting down next to him. "You've already helped immensely. Fresh eyes are

good for any business, and you know better than anyone what my weaknesses are.”

That feels too raw, and for a second, I start to wonder if Connor is one of them. If I give him too much power, or too much freedom, or—I don’t know. Is it a bad idea to work with the person you’re supposed to love? Is that why Xander and I never happened? Because we both knew we could never run a restaurant together? Heck, I couldn’t run a restaurant with my best friend. Am I delusional about trying to do it with someone I’m in a relationship with?

“What are you thinking right now?” Xander asks. Kindness and curiosity flickers in his dark eyes. “We all have weaknesses —” His gaze narrows, unsure of what I meant by my comment a moment ago.

I consider telling him, then contemplate doing something worse, like asking him why we didn’t make things work after our night together the last time. The fact that he’s staying at the Atlantis again has me replaying what we did in his room, and my self-centered brain thinks his return to the Atlantis means something.

Maybe my weakness is Xander. Maybe it always has been.

Only that’s selfish. Xander just broke up with Nova—or had a fight, whatever would cause him to pack up his suitcases. His head is somewhere else, and the last thing he’s thinking about is me.

But that’s not what his eyes are saying. His gaze is heavy with a hundred things we’ve left unspoken, and I can’t help but wonder if we unconsciously put obstacles between us—Charlotte, living on separate continents, Connor, Nova—because we’re afraid of what we’d be if we gave *us* a shot.

“Did you and Nova break up?” I ask, not letting it alone.

A shadow flits through his eyes and he looks out the

window. “We, uh ...” He starts shuffling through the resumes nervously. “We ...”

He turns to me and his gaze is torn. There are things he wants to say, but doesn’t. He’s so used to never saying any of those things—we both are. There are emotional land mines that we’re still dancing around like when we were in college and the bomb was Charlotte.

“Were you in love with Nova?” I ask. “Or—” I correct, “*are* you in love with her? I guess, *still*, if—”

If what? If they’re still together? Maybe they are. Maybe I’m misreading everything.

Xander reaches over and takes my hand, cradling it in his own. It’s so delicate it shoots goosebumps up my arms. “I’m not in love with her, Arie.”

His eyes hit mine, and something lodges in my throat. Something I’m afraid of and I don’t want to admit. It isn’t a declaration, but something *real* sits between us.

Do you ever get over your first love?

Maybe not.

And the scary truth is Connor isn’t my first love.

Xander is.

NOVA

My phone is blowing up. I'm sitting on my patio with my laptop, responding to my online students' most recent assignment, when my phone illuminates for the fourth time with the same unknown number. Except, it isn't unknown, because he texted five times before he decided to call.

It's Connor.

And honestly, I'm not ready for this conversation.

Connor: *This is Connor.*

Connor: *WTF happened between our talk and this morning?*

Connor: *Why is your BOYFRIEND checked into the Atlantis hotel?*

Connor: *Did you know THIS HOTEL is where they slept together the first time?*

Connor: *I'm calling you.*

I don't answer the phone. I don't want to talk about how I took Connor's damn advice and almost slept with Xander and that didn't do anything but drive us apart.

Or *I* drove us apart, because I can't start something with someone who's emotionally involved with someone else. Of course, I didn't expect Xander to pack up and walk out. I thought we'd wake up and go back to pretending and—

And what?

Pretending is all this ever was.

After the sixth phone call, I finally cave and answer the damn thing.

"Connor, I'm working," I hiss into the phone. "You need to piss off."

"You're a writer. You can write whenever you want to," he replies.

I hate the implication of that. Just because I work from home, doesn't mean I'm not working as many hours as everyone else with a nine-to-five day job.

"Actually, I also teach online classes," I correct him. "And I'm trying to—"

"Is it remote?" Connor interrupts. "Are you on video right now in front of your students?"

"Well, no, but—"

"But nothing!" he growls. "This is an emergency. I'm coming to you. Where do you live?"

"An emergency? What happened?" I sit up. "Is someone hurt?"

"No," Connor scoffs like I'm being ridiculous. "We have to figure out how to fix the fact that Xander is staying at the Atlantis."

"That's not an emergency."

“I’m sorry, but the last thing I want is to let my girlfriend work late with your boyfriend and have them stumble into his Atlantis suite *that’s only an elevator ride away.*”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” I assert.

“He’s definitely not going to be with that attitude,” Connor grumbles. “Now text me your address. We’re going to fix this.”

“Maybe I don’t—”

“Nova, I’m not taking no for an answer. You decided to get involved, so you’re involved now. Even if you had some insane change of heart about Xander in the last twenty-four hours, you’re still going to help me make sure he doesn’t steal my girl. Got it?”

He hangs up.

I stare at my phone, at a loss for words. What the hell was that?

Connor: *ADDRESS*

Connor: *Now Nova!*

Against my better judgement, I actually send it to him.

CONNOR

I stare at the note Xander left Nova this morning.

I'm sitting in Nova's tiny apartment with the note in my hand after she spent the last twenty minutes explaining to me what happened last night. The note is a discouraging piece of evidence. I can see why Nova wants to give up, but *I'm* not giving in that easily.

I don't care if Xander told Nova he still has feelings for Arie. His actions say otherwise. Xander's not going to mess around with Nova if he's actually in love with Arie. And if he is, then he's an asshole, and I'm *really* keeping him away from my girl.

"As you can see," Nova says, nodding to the note in my hands, "Xander and I aren't happening."

"You're reading this wrong," I say, standing up and walking over to where she leans against her bookshelf. "You think this is a goodbye note, but you're not seeing what it really says."

"I'm a writer," Nova huffs, putting a righteous hand on her hip. "I know how to read into subtext."

I repeat: "You're reading *this* wrong."

“What about *I can’t give you what you want* am I misreading?” Nova snips, pointing to the part of his note that says as much.

Almost.

And that almost is everything.

“Actually, he said: *And you’re right, I can’t give you that,*” I quote, spearing her with my best *I’m about to teach you a lesson* lawyer’s glare. “You rejected him. You told him what you *think* you want, and he’s giving you it. That doesn’t mean he wanted to leave.”

“Yes, it does. It means he actually listened to my story about —” she catches herself, not wanting to rehash what she’s already told me about the married man she was involved with. “Xander left because he still has feelings for Arie, and he’s being honest about the fact that he’s not available.”

“Wrong.” I state again, matching her haughty posture with my own. “Xander *is* available. He’s not married. There are no vows involved. He’s one-hundred-percent single.”

“He’s not *emotionally* available,” Nova specifies, “because he’s not over your girlfriend.”

“And yet,” I pick up the note, “let me quote again: *You*”—I point at Nova—“*are smart and beautiful. Don’t let a daft prick like me ever let you think you don’t deserve EVERYTHING. You do.* Please tell me you’re not missing the subtext in that.”

“Xander’s British. He’s being polite,” Nova explains.

“No,” I assert. “Being British doesn’t change the fact that he’s still a dude. A dude who’s *into you!* Which he’s blatantly saying in this letter, and he told you physically last night when you two—” I motion to her bedroom. She blushes, only proving she’s trying to hide her own feelings. “You can claim he’s emotionally unavailable all you want, but the truth of the matter is he *has feelings* for you also.”

I don’t like adding *also* to that comment. But the compli-

cated fact is, Xander's confused about *both* Arie and Nova. Only, I'm going to make sure he unravels it the *right* way—in which he realizes the *correct choice* is the woman standing in front of me. I just have to convince Nova to stop being so damn stubborn.

“Do you get it yet?” I ask. “You're not out of the equation yet. Not unless you take yourself out. *Hopefully still your friend* means Xander doesn't *want* you out of his life. You laid down a bunch of rules and he left because he thinks that's what you want. He's trying to do his best by you—because he *cares* about you.”

“Because he doesn't want to hurt me!”

“Exactly!” I throw up my hands. “He doesn't want to hurt you. And you told him touching you and being around you will hurt you. So, of course he left.”

“Then why are you trying to convince me there's still hope?” she snaps.

“Because *you're* the one who's not emotionally available,” I point out. “Not him.”

“Excuse me?” Her arms cross over her chest, and I work with enough women to know that means she's getting defensive and closing herself off to this conversation.

“Nova,” I step back and walk across the room, sitting down on her love seat so I seem less threatening. “I'm not denying that Xander has residual feelings about Arie. But it's been three years since they got together and they've barely talked in that time. Whatever you think Xander is feeling, it's all in his head. It's not based on them actually interacting. You can claim he's not emotionally available because the last guy you were involved with was an asshole who didn't do right by you. But that's *you* pushing him away, not the other way around.”

“Xander said he's in love with Arie,” Nova blurts out.

She stares at me, her eyes bugging out, frustration written

all over her face. She expects me to cave at that comment: Xander's in love with Arie. If I'd heard it at any other time, I might've believed her, but the evidence is right in front of me.

"I don't doubt, that at some point, he was," I reply calmly. "But Xander had the option to be with Arie before she ever created Flambé, and he didn't take it. He chose to go back to London. And Arie didn't chase after him."

"Maybe he realized he made a mistake."

"Maybe he did," I concede. "Maybe he flew all the way out here to see if he could rekindle something between them."

"Hello!" Nova raises her arms. "Isn't that what I've been saying this whole time?"

"Except, he didn't expect to meet you," I reply. "And Nova, *you've* changed everything."

"You're delusional," she scoffs.

"Nope, I'm a romantic," I throw back with a widening smile. "If you don't remember, I do my research. And all the evidence suggests that Xander is *not* a player. Which means, what happened between you guys the last two nights isn't a fluke. He's into you. And if *you* decided to be emotionally available, you might be surprised at what might happen."

"What might happen?!" She glares at me. "You mean, I fall for a guy who's going to move back to London anyway? Xander doesn't *do* long distance relationships, remember? Charlotte ruined that for him."

I smile, because at least she's being honest now.

"Well, maybe that's the real problem," I say. "You can blame his crush on Arie, but she's never leaving Hawaii. I know chefs, and I know my girl. She's never leaving her restaurant. And I'd put money on the fact that he never leaves his either."

"So why bother!" Nova snips. "Why put my heart out there if he's leaving anyway?"

"Because you're the real wild card here, Nova." Her eyes

narrow at that comment, but I push forward. “You can write from anywhere in the world. You can teach online from anywhere. You don’t have a brick-and-mortar store. You’re mobile.”

“Wow!” she scoffs. “You are making some huge assumptions.”

“Sure,” I shrug. “But imagine being an entire continent away from Arie with the man who wants to choose you anyway.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Leaving this morning doesn’t mean he chose Arie.”

“Um, that’s exactly what it means.”

“No, it means he doesn’t want to hurt you, so he’s testing out plan B.”

“Which is why you’re here anyway,” she snaps. “All you really care about is making sure he doesn’t steal your girlfriend.”

“You’re damn right,” I snap back. “I’ve been nothing but transparent on that fact.”

“And your solution is to convince me to move to London?! You’re ridiculous!”

“Of course, it’s easier for you to stay here, Nova,” I state plainly. “You never have to risk anything by staying emotionally unavailable and continuing to live this life.” I motion to her tiny apartment covered in books. “Go ahead and write stories about other people who dare to love and never risk your own heart. Never take a leap. Keep blaming the dude you basically call Voldemort, because it’s easier to have a villain to hide behind in your own story.”

“I’ve already had my heart broken!” Nova snaps. “I took that leap before, and he didn’t choose me.”

“You took a bad bet, Nova, because you stuck around even when you knew he was married,” I point out. “And you can

continue to project that mistake onto every potential relationship that shows up in your life. Or you can read that note from Xander again and realize he already wants to choose you, if you're willing to let him in."

Nova stares at me, her body rigid, her eyes glistening with emotion. I know she's not mad at me, she's mad at herself. She's mad she let herself fall for a married man. Mad she let him drag things out when he should've stepped up and ended things like a man. Mad that she's let the pain of what he did hang over her like a cloud.

"Nova," I say softly, "we make choices every day that keep us trapped in our misery or let us out. It's good that you told Xander about your past relationship. That's something he needs to know. But it's also up to you to show him your past isn't in control."

"What if you're wrong?" Nova's voice comes out hoarse, all her fears wrapped up in that single sentence. "What if you're setting us both up to get our hearts broken? And I mean *your* heart, Connor."

I nod, hearing what she's said. "I'm not giving up without a fight." I stand up. "If my heart's getting broken, it's not happening without me fighting tooth and nail to keep the woman I love. And if I lose Arie, then that's on me. But if I have any say in this, Xander's going back to London *without* my girlfriend. And it's up to you to decide if he's taking you instead."

I walk toward the door.

"Nine PM at Flambé tonight," I say. "You know the plan." We went over it earlier when I first arrived. "This only works if you show up. But it's your life, Nova, your choice. I'll figure out something else if you decide you're done. But if you're not, I'll see you this evening."

"How can you be so confident your hair-brained idea will work?" Nova asks.

“I’m not,” I admit. “But I learned a long time ago, if it’s scary, it’s worth doing. And putting your heart on the line for love is always the right decision.”

“Even if you lose everything?”

“Nova, you don’t know me very well.” I hold the door open and turn to her before I leave. “But when you lose everything—and I mean your job, your parents, the person who said they love you, and you end up in a jail cell—you discover how strong you really are. And you learn who your real friends are.”

“That sounds awful.”

“But my life is better now,” I point out. “And I know how resilient I am. All I’m trying to say is you already lived through that asshole going back to his wife. Don’t sell yourself short.”

I give her a nod and walk out the door. She’s either going to step up, or she won’t.

And that’s entirely up to her.

ARIE

“**Y**ou want to do what?” I balk at Connor’s suggestion as I pull the gravy I’m cooking off the stove. We’re in the middle of Flambé’s dinner service and Connor wants to play games with Xander and Nova?

“It’s all set up,” Connor insists. “I’ve got Olivia saving a table for them and Finn and Archer are ready to be their waiters when they arrive.”

“We’re already slammed!” I say, pouring the gravy through a sieve and into a new pot to serve. “If you didn’t notice, it’s raining outside. Which means we don’t have an extra table for you to play matchmaker. Plus, you should be manning the bar right now.”

“Ashton’s got the bar covered,” he counters. “He has to know how to do what I do when I’m not here, right?” I know that’s a dig from the list Xander and I made that Connor seemed so bent out of shape about the other day.

“But you *are* here,” I point out.

“Which is why I pre-planned everything for Xander and Nova,” Connor explains, wrapping his arms around my waist

in that infuriating way that makes me melt like ice cream. “I feel bad about ambushing the two of them with my friends the first time they came to Flambé. They deserve a *real* Flambé experience. A romantic experience.”

That comment twists in my gut. I don’t want Xander and Nova all cuddly in my restaurant. “You weren’t here this morning,” I say, pushing Connor’s hands off my waist and moving the empty gravy pot to the sink. “Xander had his suitcases. The last thing he wants is to be set up for some romantic date when he obviously needs space!”

“They didn’t break up,” Connor insists. “They had a fight. I talked to Nova and—”

“Since when do you talk to Nova?” I snap, wiping the excess gravy on my apron.

“We’re friends now—”

“Friends?!” I glare at him. What exactly is going on? I know Connor likes to stick his nose in other people’s business. Honestly, we usually do it together. But befriending Nova? That feels like a scheme, and I don’t like it.

“Yes,” he leans in and gives me a gallant smile. “I’m friends with your friends, now.”

“Nova is *not* my friend,” I emphasize, and to my annoyance Connor wraps his arms around me again.

“She’s dating your friend, which means she’ll be your friend soon enough.” Connor pulls me against him and nuzzles his mouth up to my ear where he starts nipping my earlobe. “And you’re the best kind of friend who’s more than happy to help her ol’ culinary school buddy get back together with his girlfriend.”

“So they did break up,” I challenge, leaning away from his nipping.

“They had a fight,” he repeats, holding on to me tighter. “And *we’re* going to make sure that doesn’t break them up.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because you’re a good person, Arie,” Connor hums in my ear. “And despite your whole jealous dragon act, you want what’s best for your friend.”

“Nova’s not my fr—”

“Xander,” he interrupts. “Xander’s the friend I’m talking about.” Connor pulls back with a frown. “Unless, you’re going to let the same jealousy that ruined things with Simon, do the same with him.”

I glower at that comment. “Simon and Xander are different!”

“Different in the sense that you’re going to help him patch things up with his girlfriend and not be the reason things blow up?” Connor presses.

My eyes narrow. This isn’t about Simon at all. This is about Connor. He wants to see Xander and Nova get back together because if they do, that means he won’t have to worry about what Xander means to me.

The second I think that, I feel sick to my stomach.

What the hell *does* Xander mean to me?

My lack of answer to that question makes me want to run out of this restaurant into the pelting rain and scream until my face turns blue. I’m so confused and bent out of shape when it comes to Xander that I can’t see straight. But I do know the last thing I want is to get Xander and Nova back together, especially when Xander and I were just starting to have some space to breathe, space to see if—

Fuck! Am I really thinking that?

Connor drops his hands from my hips and when our eyes catch, I fear he knows everything I’m thinking.

“Of course, we should get them back together,” I force out, because the last thing I want is to tell my boyfriend I’m thinking about another man.

Which I'm not. Not seriously.

Am I?

"You're right," I say, overcompensating. "We should help them patch up whatever fight they had. That's exactly what we should be doing."

Connor stares at me. He doesn't buy it, causing panic to fist in my gut. *Don't blow the only real relationship you've ever had, Arie! Not tonight.*

"I'm serious," I insist. "I'll even make them something extra special. Unique. Just for them. There's nothing like a night at Flambé to *heat things up*." I throw Connor a flashy smile, not sure who I'm trying to get on board with this idea.

"Good," he says finally, giving me a quick peck on the cheek. There's no grabbing me like normal, or shoving his tongue down my throat and making me melt under the bliss that is his ability to wake every nerve ending in my body.

Instead, Connor nods and stalks out of the kitchen, making it feel like more than Nova's relationship is hanging in the balance.

NOVA

I'm sitting in my car in the Atlantis resort parking lot and it's raining. A lot.

What is it about Flambé and rainstorms that makes them go hand in hand? I know the locals make jokes that if it doesn't rain once a day somewhere on the island you're not in Hawaii, but the torrential downpour pounding against my windshield is intense. I'm not going to get from the parking lot to the lobby without ruining the hair and makeup I spent way too long bothering with.

Connor told me to wear the same dress I put on last time I came to Flambé—the satin swirl that looked like it was painted on my body. And if I'd worn that, the rain probably wouldn't matter, because drenched, it would look just as slicked and tight as ever. Not to mention, I can't wear any undergarments in that dress, so the rain would basically make my nipples perk up like picketers holding up *stare-at-me* signs, and nobody would give my ruined hair and makeup a second glance.

But I didn't wear that dress. I'm tired of competing with Arie and trying to be the flashiest woman in Xander's life.

That's not who I am. And if he's actually interested in *me*, then he'll be just as happy with what I'm wearing, which is a knee-length blue skirt, a white blouse, and a cardigan. And I'm wearing my glasses—no smoke show of makeup, cause that isn't me. Sure, I curled my hair and I'm wearing more lipstick than normal, but I'm not putting on a fake production. Even if everything we've done in public before this moment has been fake, I'm putting a stop to it. If Xander wants me for me, this is who he gets. I don't care that Flambé is fancy-night-out catnip. I feel more comfortable wearing a cardigan on a date than stuffed in a hot dress with no underwear on underneath it.

If this even *is* a date, and not some half-baked idea Connor came up with.

The rain continues to pound with no sign of letting up, so I pull out my umbrella, step out of my car, and brave the onslaught.

I run to the lobby.

Rain and wind whips around me, my umbrella doing little to save me from the diagonal slice of water droplets. In fact, the umbrella inverts with a large gust, mangling the tiny wires into oblivion. I toss the broken umbrella in a trash can and run into the lobby entrance, completely drenched, knowing this is *not* what Connor meant when he said *look your best*. The rain has rendered me the opposite, and I'm literally standing in a puddle of my own making, which should be enough to make me turn around and stalk out of this lobby.

"Ma'am, can I get you a towel?" one of the receptionists asks, eyeing the slipping hazard I've created behind me.

"I'm fine, thank you," I assert, turning toward the elevators on the far side of the lobby. I'll have to run through the rain again on the roof, so why bother. I clomp forward like a drowned rat. I may as well make my worst impression.

Water drools down my legs in the elevator, the metallic hiss

of the box making me shiver from the air conditioning. When I reach the rooftop, the rain hasn't let up. Rather than rush from the elevator to the front of the restaurant, I decide to walk calmly to the patio railing and look out at Waikiki below. It's being ravaged by the storm.

Palm trees whip back and forth.

The ocean rolls with large swells.

The wind snatches up my hair and whips it against my face with a wet slap.

Lightning cracks through the clouds with a furious brightening, and I can't help but smile. It's beautiful and terrifying, and I've half the mind to stand here in the downpour until I'm soaked to my core. Somehow that seems easier than walking into that restaurant and telling Xander I was wrong—that I do want him to touch me, that even though I'm scared, I can be brave enough to trust what's happening between us even if it started out fake.

"What are you doing out here?" Connor runs toward me with a suit jacket over his head. Everyone who works at Flambé wears black, and he looks like an oversized bat swooping to my rescue.

"I'm enjoying the beautiful Hawaiian weather," I say cheekily.

"Get inside!" Connor yells, lifting his suit jacket over my head. "You'll catch your death in this!"

"We aren't in the sixteenth century," I chide. "And that's too little, too late." I point to his jacket. "I was drenched the second I stepped out of my car in the parking lot."

"Would you come inside already!"

"And miss this incredible view?"

Another bolt of lightning cracks across the sky, terrifying enough that I hear people in the restaurant gasping at its magnificence.

“This is the top of the building. It isn’t safe out here,” Connor grumbles, grabbing my elbow and pulling me toward the front entrance.

Inside the restaurant, I come face-to-face with Olivia who’s manning the hostess desk. She gets one look at me in my drowned perfection and her mouth drops wide open.

I’m officially a mess.

“Come with me,” she says quickly, indicating to Connor that she’s taking over. She grabs my arm and drags me toward the back of the restaurant.

“I’m fine, really,” I insist. “It’s just a little water.”

“You’re not going to say that when I get you in front of a mirror,” she replies, dragging me into a small one-person bathroom with turquoise walls.

I balk when she turns me to the mirror.

My mascara is running. My hair is drenched. My cardigan is so wet there’s a pool of water collecting at my feet. I yank off the cardigan and toss it in the sink, wringing it out, but that only reveals the transparency of my white blouse. Every contour of my bra is now visible with the way the fabric is slicked to my skin.

“Take the blouse off,” Olivia instructs, “and put your hair under the hand dryer. I’ll go grab some makeup from my locker and see if Arie has an extra dress in her office.”

“I don’t want Arie’s dress!” I snap, making Olivia flinch. I know she’s just trying to help, but the last thing I want to do is wear *Arie’s* clothes this evening.

“But—” Olivia nods to my soaked outfit.

“I’ll use the hand dryer.” I take off my blouse and hold it under the metal nozzle, pressing the button and releasing a loud whoosh of air. “I don’t need makeup either,” I assert, grabbing a square of toilet paper and using it to wipe the mascara

from under my eyes. “It’s raining. I got wet. If Xander can’t handle that, then this whole evening is moot.”

Olivia watches me cautiously. “Are you sure?”

“It’s Flambé, right?” I say, taking off my glasses so I can dab the rest of my face. “You light everything on fire here. I’m sure I’ll be warm and toasty in no time.”

Olivia’s face turns from cautious to concerned. I must seem like a mad woman.

“Seriously,” I insist. “Go back to whatever you and Connor were planning and I’ll be fine.” I lean over to put my head under the hand dryer, next to my blouse.

“Okay,” Olivia says with a curt nod. “I sat Xander in the main dining room, just off the window. If you can’t find him when you’re done in here, I’ll show you where he is.”

“I’ll find him.” I hit the dryer button again and hot air rushes over my head. If Olivia says anything else, I don’t hear it. A moment later she’s gone.

I stand up, feeling dizzy and catch myself in the mirror again. With my glasses on, I look like a bookish Bellatrix Lestrange from the Harry Potter movies. It’s ironic how fitting it feels to look on the outside how I feel on the inside: jumbled up and terrified.

It’s the perfect beginning to a night that’s going to be a disaster.

NOVA

I find Xander sitting in a booth exactly where Olivia said he would be. He gives me a similar open-mouthed stare as Olivia did when I walk up. He moves to stand, but I lift a hand to stop him.

“Please don’t get up,” I announce, before striking a faux-pose. “This look is brought to you by rain and bathroom hand dryers. Stunning, I know.” He gives me a weak smile as I slide into the U-shaped booth and discard my cardigan on the seat. At least my blouse is no longer wet-T-shirt-contest worthy.

“Did you get my note this morning?” Xander asks tentatively, rubbing that all-too-sexy stubble on his chin.

“I did.” I nod, not sure if I should bring up all the *subtext* Connor insisted was in it. I decide to say nothing at all and let Xander fill up the silence with whatever he wants to say about the note. Instead, he reaches over and pulls out the blue lock of hair from under my wild mane.

“I keep forgetting you have this,” he says, wrapping the blue strands around his finger like a ribbon, reeling his hand closer and closer to me. “You keep surprising me.”

His brown eyes lock with mine and I'm tempted to lay my heart on the line. I want to tell him this isn't fake for me anymore and ask what he told Arie when he checked into the Atlantis this morning. Did he tell her how he feels? Did it change anything?

"Connor made this special," comes the voice of our waiter.

Xander drops his hand from my hair and we look up to see the gold-haired waiter we met at the beach house. I think his name is Finn. He stands before us holding a silver tray with a glass cloche filled with blue smoke. Finn slides the tray onto the table, mesmerizing us with the swirls of indigo and purple that twist under the bell jar like Van Gogh's *Starry Night* painting.

"Connor invented this cocktail for the two of you," Finn announces, producing a pencil-length piece of wire and a lighter from his pocket. He strikes the lighter and the wire bursts to life. It's a sparkler like the ones I'd run around with on the 4th of July as a child. "In honor of tonight's weather," Finn nods to the rain outside before grabbing the top of the cloche, "Connor presents: a Dark and Stormy for the start of your evening."

Finn lifts the glass bell with a flourish and in the same movement drops the sparkler into the drink that was hidden under the smoke. The illusion is beautiful: a sparkle of lightning in a swirl of blue. The smokey "storm clouds" dissipate to reveal a Collins glass that's layered with ginger beer and dark rum, the sparkler illuminating a wedge of lime.

"Appropriate," Xander says with a nod.

"Beautiful," I praise, wafting the smoke in our direction and relishing in the ambrosia of scent that smells surprisingly like rain. "Only one?" I ask, nodding to the single glass with its sparkler burning.

"Storms are best spent cozied up together and sharing,"

Finn says with a wry smile as if he's been coached by Connor to say that. I'm impressed by the attention to detail.

"You go all in at this restaurant," I praise, nodding to Finn as I take the glass from the tray. I inch closer to Xander with the drink, sparks spraying from the top of the glass and pricking my wrist with its tiny embers. "Chefs first." I offer the beverage to Xander. "You're the one with the refined palate."

Xander looks to Finn, but he's disappeared with the tray and cloche like a magician, leaving us alone with our own mini storm and lightning.

Xander's lip hitches with a smile. "I think they're trying to get us back together."

"Did we fake break up?" I ask, inching the Dark and Stormy closer to him. "Is that what you told them when you checked into the Atlantis this morning?"

I don't know what happened this morning. We didn't agree on anything in terms of this charade. For all I know he fessed up and told Arie everything, and Conner isn't the wiser.

Xander eyes me, and suddenly, *this* doesn't feel fake at all. His brow knits with confusion as his gaze says *I left because you asked me to*. Yet, there's a waiver of something else packed into it: *Are we pretending again? Is that all this dinner is to you? Is that all I am?*

I pull the sparkler from the drink, flip it over and douse it in the liquid. I use it as a stirrer to mix the ginger and rum. "Taste it," I say. "Tell me ..."

What you're thinking!

What you want?

Do you want this to be fake or real?

Did you tell Arie how you feel?

Xander picks up the glass, but doesn't take his eyes off me. He leans forward for a sip and his knee brushes against my leg. It tightens a knot in my gut, followed by a flush of warmth in

my skin. A single brush, and my body responds. My body doesn't want this to be fake. And yet, I'm not sure my mind is ready to back that up. What if we're intimate again and I clam up like before? Connor was telling me to be brave, but that doesn't make this any less terrifying.

"Jesus that's good," Xander hisses, looking at the glass in his hand in astonishment. "That's not just ginger beer and rum. There's—" He takes another sip as if Connor's given him a puzzle of ingredients to unravel. "Spiced syrup? Or maybe something infused in the smoke?"

He offers the drink to me and when I try it, I see what he's talking about. There's something *else* in it that sits on the tip of your tongue: spice and smoke and robustness that coats your mouth. A *clap* of thunder rumbles through the restaurant, and I realize that's exactly what it is—the secret ingredient, or the secret experience. The drink *tastes* like thunder. I don't know how, or what the physical ingredients are to create it, but it's bold and thick and rumbles down your throat like sound in your skin.

"It's thunder," I say, pushing the drink back to Xander. "Just close your eyes and taste it again. You'll see what I mean." Xander narrows his eyes. How can a secret ingredient be thunder? "I may not be a chef, but I *am* a writer. And if I had to describe this drink, that's what I'd say. I'd turn it into a gorgeous metaphor about storming emotions or the wildness of nature ... fear maybe."

Xander regards me carefully, unsure if he should be suspicious of the drink or the clouds of metaphors I'm suggesting. But he closes his eyes and brings the drink to his mouth. He licks his lip before tipping the glass, and his Adam's apple presses against his throat as he swallows. A moan rumbles from deep in his chest and I see why they call this restaurant a den of sin. Noises like that are supposed to happen in the bedroom,

and I've heard noises like that from him before. The memory shoots straight to my core, reminding me of the unholy graze of his stubble against my open legs.

"Fuck," Xander swears, and that word is as hot as his mouth was devouring me. "That's impossible."

He means the drink, but I'm lost in the memory of wickedness that moan unleashed. Xander takes another sip, his eyes still shut as he once again coats his lips with the drink.

I want to kiss him.

I want to taste thunder on his tongue, taste him tasting me in the storm.

I school my desire and watch the emotions fleet over his face as he tries to parse the possibility that a drink could also be sound and energy.

"I think *I* want to fuck Connor right now," Xander says after a moment, and I can't help but laugh. Xander looks at me with a quick blush that says *he's not serious*, but he also can't believe how talented Connor is. "I should poach Connor from Arie and get him to work for me. Jesus." He looks at the glass in awe. "Thunder. You hit the nail on the head, Nova. That's extraordinary."

Xander's eyes flick to me once again, full of unkempt adoration. It's a reaction that's residual from the drink, but it still prickles my neck to attention. My skin heats against my damp clothes, my blouse feeling too light. What is it about a man looking at you full of raw emotion—like he can't quite fathom you exist?

"I didn't want you to leave this morning," I brave. "The last couple nights have been ... they made ..." It feels foolish to say they felt important. I'm old enough to know better than to get attached from a hook up. And yet ... "This started out fake," I assert. "But the last two nights, well, things have been getting real between us and ..."

“I know.” Xander nods. “You told me about your ex.”

“I—I got scared.”

“After everything you said about him, I understand why.”

That’s kind. But that isn’t all of it. “Are you telling me you weren’t scared?”

That feels too vulnerable of a question. Or maybe it’s his brown eyes peering into me with all our unspoken questions that makes saying these things out loud feel garish.

Thunder rumbles through the restaurant, causing the nearby silver and glassware to rattle.

The rain drums with sound.

“You—” he whispers, his voice barely audible. “Nova, you terrify me.”

Lightning flashes, brighter than the sparkler that burnt in our drink, and a glimmer of red catches in my peripheral vision. We’re both scared of this? Does that mean it’s real?

“Well, that’s just like Connor, now isn’t it,” comes a loud female voice approaching. “He would make you something flashy in the middle of a rainstorm.”

We both know who it is before looking: red, combative, astonishing. Xander’s eyes flicker with guilt, because *she’s* the real reason he left this morning.

Arie stands at the edge of our booth wearing a gauzy red dress; the scarlet tempest of the storm. Xander’s eyes snap to her. Of course it does, he’s in love with her, and she’s stunning. She’s a chef like him. Her restaurant is a playground of aphrodisiacs and she’s the main attraction.

I thought Finn was our waiter, but Arie’s holding up a serving tray that sizzles with flames. The illusion is devastating; Arie is a woman who holds fire in her hands, and it doesn’t matter what’s on that platter, because Xander wants to be hand fed.

“Arie!” Xander coughs, as if caught with his hand in the

cookie jar, his body angling away from me at the realization of her presence. “You—”

His eyes trace up and down her dress: Siren? Jezabel? Fire dancer?

“I always cook in evening attire,” Arie says with a wink. “Impractical as you may think, it keeps me sharp.”

I don’t know why Connor thought a date at Flambé would be a good idea. He must know his girlfriend looks like this every night. Is he insane? I’m the drowned rat in the shadow of Aphrodite. And it’s not only her beauty that I can’t compete with. She built this restaurant. She’s a dazzling success. She’s got the hutzpah to cook in couture and the confidence to light every dish on fire. I’m a stranger on an airplane with a failed writing career, sitting here in wet clothes and pining over a man who was in love with this goddess before I even met him.

I’m delusional.

I’m even more of a fool for letting Connor convince me to show up for what’s obviously the Arie show.

Winking at Xander again, Arie places the tray on our table. It’s a flank of meat in an iron skillet. The steak is surrounded by jewels of pomegranate and rosemary. A pink juice oozes from the steak as flames dance over the rare flesh, orange and blue engulfing the meat as if the steak is coated in something flammable. It’s beautiful.

“I call this the Dragon’s heart,” Arie says. “My nickname around here is the Dragon and you’re about to eat what sets me on fire. I don’t know if you know this, Nova,” her eyes flick to me, “but Xander’s the one who *insisted* I create this restaurant. He’s the one who told me I had to mix food and lust and fire, and without him, all of this wouldn’t exist. I only make this dish on special occasions for people who matter.”

She may as well say *I love you, Xander*. Except, she’s said it with food instead of words, which is their shared language.

How else can I interpret that speech other than as a brazen claim of the man who sits next to me: the man who's her partner in lust and food and fire.

Arie makes a dramatic hand gesture over the dish, tossing spice onto the meat. With her other hand, she magically pulls out a brûlée torch and lights the spice on fire. An eruption of flames bursts into the air like a dragon coughing up a fireball.

People from the booths around us cheer and gawk, pointing at the bonfire in front of us. The dragon's heart of meat broils in the center of our table like a sacrifice.

If I didn't know Arie—if she wasn't Xander's old friend, his old *lover*—this would be spectacular. No, it *is* spectacular. The problem is Connor isn't standing table-side reading all the *subtext* that his girlfriend is laying down. And it's not subtle.

"And for dessert," Arie continues, "is another personal favorite: the Forbidden Fruit. It's a bare peach that's been poached in a bath of wine and glazed with honey." Her eyes flick to Xander seductively. "In fact, I made it for Xander the first time he came to Hawaii. It's what inspired Flambé."

I sneak a glance at Xander and wish I hadn't.

I don't have to be a writer to know what bare peaches and Forbidden Fruit means. Suddenly, *my* intimate night with Xander doesn't feel special, not in the way that eating Arie's intimate fruit inspired a whole restaurant. Not with how she's tossing her flaming heart on the table and asking him to eat her again.

I'm an idiot.

But sadly, I feel worse for Connor. He loves this woman—and I can see why—except she's playing games. I could take Connor's advice and fight for Xander, stake a claim, tell her it was *my* Forbidden Fruit he was eating yesterday.

But Xander and Arie have history.

It's obvious they *both* have unresolved feelings. And as

much as Xander's comment about me scaring him makes me want to throw my heart in the ring, *I'm* the actual problem. It was my idea to make myself the buffer between these two with my fake dating scheme. I wedged myself between two strangers when I should've minded my own business.

Nothing's going to happen between Xander and me, because Arie will always be in the back of his head.

Xander has to tell Arie how he feels and let the chips fall where they may.

I can't save Connor or Xander from a broken heart.

But I can walk away.

CONNOR

I see Nova walking up to my bar and I know something is wrong.

“Ashton,” I say, turning to my fellow barkeep. “I need to take a break. Can you cover for me?” The blond-haired bartender nods, not even bothering to look up from the drink he’s pouring.

I shoot out from behind the counter and meet Nova halfway. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m leaving,” she says, pushing damp hair out of her face.

“No no no no!” I grab her elbow and move her into the shadows near the hallway. “What do you mean you’re leaving? You just got here. You have to actually drink that Dark and Stormy and let the alcohol make you brave.”

“This isn’t about me being brave,” she replies. “This isn’t even about me being emotionally available like you suggested earlier.”

“Yes, it is.” I shake my head. “Trust me, Xander’s into you and if you—”

“I can’t save you from heartbreak, Connor!”

That shuts me up.

I drop her arm. Nova shakes her head like she's done with Xander, me, everything.

"What? I thought—?"

"Yes, I like him, Connor. But the *last* place we should've come is this restaurant!"

"Flambé is the sexiest establishment on the whole island," I defend.

"Not when your date is in love with the head chef!" she barks out, lifting up her wet sweater and shoving her arms into the sleeves one at a time. "This is Arie's fever dream, and yes, it's gorgeous and provocative, but not when it was inspired by *their* night together."

Shit. She has a point. Flambé's worked magic for everyone I've ever told to come here before, but this *is* a different scenario.

"Okay, okay," I scramble, trying to come up with a way to fix this. "I can get you two a table at the restaurant on the main floor of the resort—"

"You're not listening, Connor. There's no space for me in Xander's life when Arie's in it."

"That's what I'm saying, a different restaurant—" I reach into my pocket and pull out my cell phone. "I'll get a car to take you to this great place that has tables on the beach." Thunder crashes through the restaurant again and my heart starts racing. "Okay, maybe not a beachside, but—"

Nova's hand slaps over my phone. "I'm going home."

"You can't go home! Don't give up without a fight, Nova."

"When I said, there's no space for me in Xander's life when Arie's in it, I didn't mean this restaurant. I meant how they feel about each other!"

They?

"Xander's confused," I sputter, looking to where he's sitting

alone in his booth without the girl who's supposed to be wooing his pants off again, but instead, she's standing in front of me throwing in the towel. "He hasn't given you a real chance to—"

"Connor, you don't get it!" Nova snaps. "Xander's not the only one who's confused!"

"What?"

"You heard me!"

Nova's words feel like a slap and her glare is hot coals, burning into me like a small bullet that will rip out my soul. She can't—?

Arie doesn't—

She wouldn't—

"Go ask your girlfriend what she decided to serve us for dinner," Nova says, "and her plan for dessert. Because there's only one message it sends, and I got it loud and clear."

Nova pushes past me into the space by the bar, strutting purposefully through the restaurant toward the front exit.

"Nova, wait!" I hiss, rushing after her and trying to keep my voice down so I don't make a scene. There's a fist in my gut and I'm starting to panic. This was supposed to work. Get Nova and Xander into a romantic space together and let hormones take over.

Olivia's eyes widen when we pass the hostess desk and she sees Nova rushing out with me trailing after her like an idiot.

"Connor?" Olivia asks as I rush past.

"I'm fixing it," I say quickly, dashing out the front door and into the rain. My suit soaks in two seconds, but there's not much I can do about that. A flash of lightning illuminates Nova's dash for the elevator and I race after her. I almost slip running into the elevator cart, but I manage to slide between the doors before they slam shut.

"Connor! I'm leaving," she repeats, smashing her finger against the lobby button.

“You can’t! You have to give Xander a chance to—”

“Connor, you’re missing the obvious!” she interrupts, turning to me in her sopping clothes as the elevator starts to descend. “Don’t you see what’s wrong with this entire situation? The wrong guy is in this elevator running after me.” She points at my chest. “You’re here and Xander’s up there in that restaurant. Red flag! Game over.”

“He probably didn’t realize you left,” I say desperately.

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better?”

“What did you tell him? That you were going to the bathroom or something, because—”

“Connor!” Nova grabs me by my jacket lapel. “Xander and Arie *both* have residual feelings that they need to figure out. And yes, that sucks for us.” Her eyes go soft behind the water droplets covering her glasses. “That really sucks for you.”

That knot in my gut slams into my throat.

“They’re not—” I rasp out.

“I don’t know what they are, Connor.” Nova answers, smoothing out her hands on my jacket in a comforting gesture. “It’s not up to me to make that decision. It’s up to them.”

I step back, not wanting her touching me. Not even her words.

“Even if Xander’s into me,” she continues, “none of it matters if he’d rather be with her. And maybe Arie won’t choose him, Connor, I don’t know. But I can’t be in the picture until they figure out what they really want.”

“You have to fight for him, Nova!”

“Connor, I’m not the solution to your problem.” Nova’s eyes fill with pity and my fingers curl into balls. “It’s *you* who has to fight for her. You’re the one actually in the relationship. I’m a distraction, nothing more.”

“You *are* more,” I insist.

“Not until they hash out what they’re feeling,” she says

with a shake of her head. “I just confuse things. I just prolong the conversation they need to have.”

“Arie is not in love with him!” I insist.

Because she can’t be.

Because she’s in love with me.

“Then she has to tell him that,” Nova points out. “And she has to start acting like it.”

My heart twists. Arie can be jealous and make rash decisions. When this was with Simon and Kendall, it was about friendship. But repeating those same patterns with Xander, who she’s actually slept with—

“Fuck,” I hiss under my breath. Is Arie unhappy? Is she second guessing *us*?

That isn’t a question—it’s a truth—and I fucking hate it.

She is.

The elevator hits the bottom floor and rattles with a jolt. It dislodges a thousand things inside me, tipping over my world. In front of me, my blurry reflection distorts in the metal pane of the elevator door, stretched and marred like in a fun-house mirror. And then the doors split open, breaking me into two halves until I’m not there anymore at all. It’s as if I’m being erased from this resort, and the restaurant on the rooftop, and from the heart of the woman who runs it.

Nova’s hand squeezes my arm. “She’s confused,” Nova says, talking about Arie. “She hasn’t chosen.”

I put my hand over hers and squeeze back, because that small touch feels like it’s the only thing holding me up. “I’m sorry, Nova,” I manage to say. “I didn’t mean to drag you into this.” “I dragged myself into it,” she says. “But now I’m taking myself out of it.”

She steps out of the elevator and when the doors shut again, I stand in this tiny metal box unsure how all of this happened. I don’t press any buttons, but the cart starts to lift, moving me

upwards even though I'm frozen in place. I can't help but feel that there are energies in motion that I can't do anything about, that there were needs and desires and intentions already moving behind the scenes, pulling strings, things I cannot control, and all I can do is stand back and watch them unfold.

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Elle Berlin

XANDER

She left.

Nova slid a paper napkin over to me before she walked out. Scribbled in blue pen were twelve words; words written in the same color of ink as those robins-egg glasses she wears every day.

Tell Arie how you feel. You'll never be free until you do.

It's similar to my note this morning: a goodbye wrapped up in a pretty bow. Does she mean my heart will be free? Or my conscience? Or will *I* be free, and then we can finally see what's real between me and Nova?

The meat Arie presented us simmers untouched in the center of the iron skillet. The pageantry of flames has gone out, but the earthy smell of meat and rosemary still billows in the silence. I can't blame Nova for leaving after Arie's dramatics. Eat my fleshy heart? Think about my forbidden fruit? That's the opposite of 'come to Hawaii *as a friend* and help me with my restaurant.' Flambé may be Arie's heart, but that's not the

heart she was telling Nova to back off of—and it worked, because Nova left.

I've always admired Arie's electrifying theatrics—the bold flavors, the fearless innuendo, demanding attention, or turning things into a pyrotechnic show. Arie lives a life that's thrilling and uninhibited. Even in our interviews earlier today, Arie wasn't afraid to ask tough questions and be sassy. We even found a candidate that's a great fit, someone who compliments Arie's untraditional sensibilities. But the untouched meat smoking on the table isn't about the restaurant. It's about us. And there's only one move left: show Arie all of my cards.

Rain pummels the large picture window behind me, bleating against the glass and blocking out the rest of Waikiki with swirling winds of darkness. The storm has intensified instead of petering out. I can't even see the bay anymore. It's a black hole with a few precarious strings of patio lights slashing back and forth in the wake of the downpour. The bulbs outside flicker, then one of the strings whips off its anchor and smacks against the window with a loud *crack!* causing the patrons in the booth next to me to cry out.

A second string pulls loose, then a third. *Smack! Crack!* The whole display comes down, followed by all the outside hotel lights going dark. Everything is black for a moment like in an eerie horror film, then lightning flashes, a strobe momentarily illuminating wet tables and shattered bulbs.

Seconds later, the interior lights in the dining room give a similar flicker of warning, and I can tell the storm is bad enough to throw off the power. The moment I think it, the lamps and sconces cut to darkness. Conveniently, Arie's restaurant is themed by fire, so despite the murmurs of alarm from the guests, most of the tables have something burning atop them—a drink, a dessert, a romantic candle.

But the kitchen isn't run by firelight.

I'm up, out of my seat, and headed down the hall, finding the kitchen almost pitch black when I step inside. A few burners hiss with blue flames and voices clamor as pots clang. I search for Arie in the dark, but when I don't see or hear her, I start barking directions.

"Listen up," I yell, getting everyone's attention. "If you have a phone, pull it out and use your flashlight. If you're at a stove, turn it off. Turn off all burners and gas powered equipment, right now! No exceptions. If the power is off, then the vents are off. The last thing we want in here is gas and noxious fumes."

Several burners snap out and I hear the kitchen staff following my directives.

"Xander, is that you?" I hear Arie's voice on the far side of the kitchen. A cell phone turns to illuminate her, held by one of the cooks.

"Yes," I call back. "Have you lost power here before?"

"No," she admits. "We've never had a storm this intense."

"Do you have an evacuation plan?"

"We need to evacuate?"

"I saw the hotel power go out," I explain. "Being on the roof makes you vulnerable. It's better to evacuate and keep everyone safe. Do you have a plan that your employees know how to follow?"

Her silence is enough for me to start barking orders again. "Arie, go to the dining room and get Connor and Olivia. Round up the wait staff and start escorting guests to the elevators. Most people have cell phones, use them. Extinguish all fiery objects in the main room: candles, drinks, brûlée torches. It will be tempting to use them, but the last thing you want is a real fire. Large buildings have backup power for the elevators, so they should work, but stairs can be used as well. Tell all the guests they'll get a voucher to return free of charge. I'll deal with the kitchen. Go!"

“On it,” Arie answers, moving from the cell phone light in a flash of gauzy red, her high heels clomping out of the room.

“Everyone in the kitchen, follow my instructions,” I continue. “Whatever food is out is lost. Don’t worry about it. If you were cooking, carefully dispose of anything hot in an industrial sink. Talk to who’s next to you. Communicate. Nobody gets burnt. If you’re working on something cold, leave it where it is, unless it’s a hazard. The refrigerators and freezers are off limits! Do not open them! If you do, we lose hundreds, maybe thousands of dollars in food from the lost temperature. When your area is safe, head for the elevators with the guests. Don’t bring any personal belongings. Go to the lobby and wait. Understood?”

“Yes, Chef!” an echo of voices return.

“If there’s anything you’re not sure about, call out for me, and I’ll help. Now go.”

“Yes, Chef!”

They get to work. The blue screens and flashlights on people’s phones make it easy to turn off the stoves and get sizzling food secured in safe places. I help several chefs secure pots of boiling gravy without moving them, then instruct the staff to turn off all mechanical equipment—dishwashers, heat pads, mixers. We don’t want anything whirring to life when the power turns on again.

We’re shuffling into the main dining room within ten minutes, and I’m pleased to see it’s a ghost town without a single candle still illuminated. *Good job, Arie.* I check the offices and call out for anyone that’s left. When all is clear, I head outside with the rest.

It’s a mess on the patio: pelting rain, flashing lightning, smacking globe lights rattling against the windows. I’m drenched within seconds and the line for the elevators has

turned into a mob. It's dangerous for everyone to be on the rooftop, especially with the storm getting worse.

"Stairs! Let's go!" I yell, ushering people to the left side of the roof. Guests grumble, not wanting to walk down thirty-two flights, but I can't imagine standing in the rain is more pleasant. "No one becomes a human lightning rod!" I yell back, escorting guests. "Let's move it!"

"Xander, this way!"

I turn to see Arie holding open the door to the stairwell, her red dress slicked against her frame like a bad Halloween costume. I point to her, and the masses head for the stairwell. I rush around the patio, dodging toppled chairs and slashing wires that the wind has pulled free. Seconds later, Arie is in the mess of lightning and rain with me, double-checking for anyone we've missed.

"I'll check the back."

"I'll check the employee nook."

"The patio's empty."

"No one on this side!"

"That's it, we're all clear!"

Crack! The sky illuminates above us with a magnificent bolt of lightning that it feels like the sky is on fire and God is about to part the clouds with his might. The hair on the back of my neck lifts with electricity and I know we need to get out of here. Now!

"This way! Arie!" I reach for her hand and clasp it tightly, running for the stairwell. *Ba-Boom!* crests a blast of thunder, making us duck as if the sound could knock us flat. Our feet splash in large puddles, and I wonder if Arie has flood insurance. This looks bad!

We race to the stairwell and fling the door open, running out of the deluge and gasping for air.

“Holy shit!” Arie pants, pushing a mop of red hair out of her face. “This rain is crazy!”

A dim emergency light hangs in the stairwell, barely illuminating her in dingy shadows. Arie’s evening gown is sopped to her body in globs of red gauze like an abandoned crafting project. Yet somehow, she still looks stunning as she wrings out the fabric, water spilling from the tendrils like an oversaturated sponge. Water splashes on her bare feet, and I realize she must’ve kicked off her heels in the mayhem. Smart move.

I lean against the metal railing to catch my breath, my heart banging from the adrenaline. I’m soaked from head to toe, but at least the stuffy air in the stairwell is humid instead of cold like when it rains in London.

We both look ridiculous, and when our eyes catch, we both start laughing.

“So much for Paradise, huh?” Arie jokes. “We’ve had hurricane warnings before, but they’ve never hit. This wasn’t even announced as a tropical storm. The resort didn’t put out an alert.”

“At least it’s not snow,” I muse, referring to the blizzards I’m used to shutting us down.

“True,” she laughs, wiping dark make-up from under her eyes. She peeks down the stairwell to where the guest’s voices have started to muffle, the masses descending to the lower levels. “Thank you, Xander,” she says, letting out an anxious breath. “The power went out and I panicked. Simon would’ve had a plan. But me? If you weren’t here—”

“It’s fine,” I say, pulling off my waistcoat and wringing it out. “It’s handled. Everyone was evacuated safely. You did great, Arie.”

A crack of thunder booms, causing us to flinch, the sound reverberating down the stairs like a gunshot. It’s followed by alarmed voices several floors below us.

“This would’ve been a mess if you weren’t here,” Arie says softly. “You took charge, Xan. Handled the kitchen. Had my back. It was a blessing you were here tonight.”

“You would’ve figured it out. Connor would’ve—”

“I don’t even know where Connor is,” Arie reveals. “He wasn’t behind the bar.”

“Maybe he got the first wave of guests out,” I propose.

“Maybe.” Arie shakes her head. “But you’re the one who came into the kitchen. I needed help and you were there for me.”

Our eyes catch and the residual shudder of thunder aches in my skin.

“It was nothing,” I say, trying to downplay it. I focus on hooking my waist coat over the railing and start untucking my drenched shirt. “All you need is an emergency plan for the future. I’ll help you make one, then we’ll train the staff.”

“*We will ...*” she breathes out the words as if she’s saying them to herself, but I feel the weight in them.

We. Us. Together we’ll do this.

Lines feel like they’re blurring with the rain. Lines like when we used to stay up all night and study for finals together, and I’d stare at this amazing chef, this amazing woman, and wonder why the hell I was in a relationship with Charlotte.

I’m halfway through unbuttoning my shirt when Arie whispers, “Where’s Nova?”

I look up.

Arie’s biting her lip. There’s so much hiding in that expression, so much weight in the answer to her question. I drop my hands from my buttons and walk to her.

“Nova left earlier,” I confess, “before the power went out.”

“She left?” Arie lifts her chin, vulnerability fleeting.

“That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it?”

Arie's breath intensifies, unsure if she wants to admit to her actions.

"I know it is," I say, stepping closer to her.

The stairwell is muggy and the air is damp. It's just the two of us at the top of this platform, the guests far below, heading to the lobby.

"You don't bring up forbidden fruit if you don't want me to think about our night together," I add, my voice husky with the memory of my mouth on her skin. I look down at Arie, whom I tower above, her expression pale with what's unspoken.

"That night—" she begins, her fingers teasing the sides of my open shirt, a flirting caress, before she grips the fabric and pulls me closer. "Xan," she whispers. "I was in love with you then."

My chest constricts.

She slips one of her damp hands under my shirt and presses her palm against my clammy skin, right above my racing heart. I was in love with her then, too, but I was an idiot and got on a plane. Why did I ever fly away from this woman?

"And now?" I brave, the tempo in my chest intensifying.

"I don't know," she admits.

Her hand is a brand over my heart. She moves closer and I can feel her breath on my chest, soft and ragged, and begging for me to convince her of what she's afraid of.

"Do you—" she whispers. "Do you ever get over your first love?"

That sentence has barely left her lips when I close the space between us. Arie moans as my mouth brushes hers—soft and wicked, reminding me of every sinful thing we did three years ago. Her fingers curl into my chest, and I pull her against me, because I need this.

Need to confess.

Need her to know that she haunts my skin.

Need her to surrender to what we're always fighting—the fact that she and I are *more*.

Arie's never been *just* my friend.

She shudders and kisses me back, the electricity between us immediate. We become the avalanche of rain outside the stairwell door, a torrent of unleashed desire. She gasps as I turn her to the wall and sandwich her wet body between me and the cement. Her mouth opens to deepen the kiss, letting me in, and it causes everything to disappear but this moment. My hand finds its way into her hair and the rain is forgotten because I'm engulfed with heat.

I can't deny the fact that *I always want Arie*.

I wanted her in college.

I wanted her in London.

I want her right now, against this wall in the muggy darkness.

Except—

I *didn't* want her when I was in Nova's bed. And I didn't want her when I was reading Nova's book. Or when Nova and I were laughing at her best friend's house about beef bayonet. In fact, Nova has a way of washing every thought of Arie from my head.

I pull back from my friend's lips, both of us panting in the darkness. Her hand is still on my chest, and lust swims in her eyes as much as I know it's in mine.

Is that all this is? Do I actually *love* Arie, or do I just want Arie because I know she's the easy choice I've always romanticized? Arie is my equal as a chef ... we're comfortable with each other ... we have history together. But am I choosing her because it's easier than braving the fact that Charlotte's married and I'm a single bachelor?

"Wait—" I rasp out. "We—"

I swallow, trying to find words that have never been said. Is

the reason we never became a couple years ago because we both knew deep down this was lust and it's the fact that we don't give into it that makes it seem bigger than it is?

Water splashes against my side—rain and wind swarming into the stairwell. The storm blasts through the open door and lightning flashes on the rooftop. Unlatched, the door has swung wide, smacking violently against the cement next to us, angry as the thunder that chases after it. Only, it's not the squall that's opened the door.

It's Connor.

CONNOR

Xander is leaning over Arie.
No. He's got her pinned against the wall.
My Arie.

There's no space between them. No way to mistake this. They aren't kissing, but that's because I've interrupted them.

Interrupted them.

Her hands are on him. His hand is in her hair. His shirt is open.

Maybe I'm struck by lightning. Maybe heartbreak can be literal—as visceral as ten thousand bolts of pain ripping through your body. Maybe the universe is kind enough to strike me dead right here.

“Connor?”

Arie says my name, but it's weak, echoing through the tiny stairwell like a confession, her tone laced with surprise ... and guilt ... and fear.

I'm not supposed to be here.

I'm not supposed to see this.

Know this.

But unlike Nova and Xander's fake relationship, this is real.

Arie is cheating on me.

ARIE

No no no no no! Connor is not standing there.
He's not. He can't be.
Not after Xander kissed me and—shit!—I kissed
him back.

Panic pierces through me and I know—*I know*—I've made a horrible mistake. A mistake that I can never erase.

"Connor?" my voice is brutally hoarse, because I don't want him to confirm for me that he's actually in this stairwell.

"Are you kidding me?" he grinds out.

We both know this isn't a joke. This is my life going up in smoke.

"Connor," Xander says. "This is my fault—"

"I'm not talking to you!" Connor snaps, pointing an accusing finger at Xander that makes him back up. My hands drop from Xander's shirt, incriminating me, and the look on Connor's face is devastating.

There is nothing worse than that look.

"Oh God, Connor, I didn't—I—" I start, but what am I supposed to say? This *is* what it looks like.

Worse.

Connor is in my face before I say anything else and I want to shrink into the cement. He glares at me, slamming his hand against the wall next to my head, absolutely furious. I flinch away from him, but don't cower. I stand in his anger, because I deserve it.

He stares me down, waiting for me to say something, a vein in his forehead throbbing. But there's nothing to say. Connor saw us, plain as day.

"It's my fault," Xander repeats. "*I kissed her.*"

"I said, I'm not talking to you!" Connor roars at Xander, only he doesn't turn. Every word out of his mouth is spit in my face. Connor's anger is palpable, emanating off of him with trembling vibration.

"Connor, I—I—" My lip starts to quiver. "I lov—"

"Don't you dare say that to me right now!" he growls, angrier than I've ever seen him. His whole body is trembling like the rain is inside him and at any moment he'll explode like a thunder bolt. "Goddamnit!" he swears, making me flinch again. "I can't even look at you right now!"

Connor pushes off the cement, and that crush of hurt shoots through him again, breaking my heart. I reach out, but he storms away, back into the rain.

"Connor?" I call after him, shooting to the doorway, but Xander grabs my arm.

"Let him go," Xander says, as Connor stomps toward the elevator and gets on. "Trust me, there's nothing you can say to him that he'll listen to. Not right now. When I found out about Charlotte, I was inconsolable."

"I'm not Charlotte!" I growl, shaking Xander's arm off of me. I'm pissed at him for kissing me, especially if he knew how it feels to be on the other side of this.

But the truth is scarier: I kissed Xander and got carried away with it. I'm the one I should be pissed at.

"I love him!" I snap at Xander.

"I know," he admits, making my hands tremble with anger.

"Then why did you kiss me?" I demand. If he knew I loved Connor, why would he even try it?

"You didn't push me off, Arie," he replies, reminding me I was complicit. "And at least this way you know for sure."

"What?" I glare at him. "I know *what* for sure?"

Xander motions to the rain and the empty door. "That you'd choose him."

"You didn't have to kiss me to figure that out!"

"Didn't I?"

Tears start running down my face, and every fear inside me starts pouring out. He's right. I've been flirting with Xander since he arrived, giving him plenty of mixed messages. I haven't been able to stop asking myself if I made a mistake when I let Xander leave years ago. I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd missed out on something important, something I'd regret for the rest of my life. But now—

I look out at the sheets of rain slashing against the rooftop like razor blades.

Now, I truly know what regret is.

I just broke the love of my life's heart.

And I've probably lost him.

CONNOR

I call the last person I ever imagine I'd call.

Calling Ned or Mason or even Olivia would make sense, but Simon?

Simon's *Arie's* best friend.

Simon picks up after the third ring, and I'm not sure if I say anything. The rain is still pounding down and my head is spinning. My chest feels like Prometheus who's that cocky bastard who wanted to play with fire and was cursed to have his liver eaten out of his chest every day by a giant vulture. Actually, that would probably hurt less.

"Connor?" Simon's voice echoes through the receiver. "Connor? Are you there? There's a lot of noise. If you're saying anything, I can't—"

"I'm here," I rasp out.

The noise he's talking about is the rain. It surrounds me. Drowns me.

I'm sitting outside the Atlantis resort in the sand. My back is rammed against the concrete of the resort's towel shack and before me is the black torrent of the ocean. Water crashes

against the beach in large, savage waves, digging into the ground and scraping away the shore.

“Connor? Where are you? It sounds like you’re in the middle of a monster truck rally.”

I almost laugh. But I don’t know if I’ll ever laugh again.

“It’s raining,” I manage, the water expelling itself from the sky in violent swaths. “I need you to tell me one thing.”

“Connor, are you okay?”

“I need you to tell me that you’ll forgive her,” I grind out. “I need you to tell me *there’s a way* to forgive her.”

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about. Did something happen?”

“Arie,” I bite out. A flash of lightning zigzags across the sky and terminates somewhere in the middle of the black abyss. The only thing that can swallow electricity like that would be water—an entire ocean of it. “I need you to tell me how you’re going to forgive her.”

Simon is silent and the rain fills my ears with its downpour.

“Simon?” I repeat. “Tell me you’re going to forgive her. That you *can*. You’re her best friend and if you can’t, I—” My voice catches on the fist in my throat. It’s all that holds my sob from erupting like a volcano. “Simon, I’m begging you. I need to know she’s forgivable! So tell me she is and you will. Tell me this shit between you and Arie will blow over and you’re not done with her for good. I need to know that living in LA is temporary and—”

“What’s really going on?” Simon interrupts, and I have to wipe the rain from my eyes. “We’re not talking about me, are we?”

“Fuck,” I hiss, wanting to throw my phone into the ocean and walk in after it. “No, we aren’t,” I admit.

“What did Arie do that you need to forgive her?” Simon asks, his voice surprisingly calm.

All I can see is the two of them in that stairwell, and then—my mind is flooded with all the things they *could've* done if I hadn't walked in.

"Xander," I manage to say. "He's here. So what the fuck do you think happened?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Do I sound like I'm kidding?!"

"Shit."

"They weren't fucking," I clarify. "But they were—"

Air bubbles in my throat, threatening to dislodge all the things I don't want to imagine or give possibility. Because I still love her, and there has to be a way to ... to get past this.

"Tell me she's redeemable," I say again. "Simon, you're the only one who knows what it feels like to be stabbed in the heart like this by Arie. And you've had time to process it. So tell me you've found a way to forgive her, that forgiveness is possible."

"Arie didn't cheat on me," Simon says.

I hate hearing those words out loud.

"But she loves you!" I shoot back. "Like a brother. She didn't say all that shit about Kendall to *deliberately* hurt you."

"Well, that's the problem, isn't it?" Simon replies curtly. "She *did* hurt me, even if she didn't do it deliberately. She didn't stop to think about the consequences. That's become a pattern, Connor. She was my best friend, and I thought her nasty side would never turn on me. But I was wrong."

She *was* his best friend? Past tense.

This is bad. Simon's still angry at Arie and he's had months to process what she did. Which means I'm hopeless.

"When did this happen?" Simon asks.

"Like ten fucking minutes ago, asshole!"

"Shit. Okay. Where are you? Are you at the restaurant?"

"The restaurant's closed," I bark. "The power went out from this fucking storm. We had to evacuate everyone."

“Evacuate? Shit. That’s bad.”

“Not bad enough that my girlfriend didn’t stick her tongue down another man’s throat!”

“Okay, calm down. Let’s not do anything rash,” Simon coaches.

“Why do you think I called you?” I hiss. “You’re supposed to tell me she’s forgivable, so I don’t go swimming in front of the Atlantis during a lightning storm!”

“You’re still at the resort then,” Simon concludes. “I’m calling your brother to come get you.”

“No, you need to tell me you’re going to forgive Arie so I have a sliver of hope.”

“You can’t compare these situations, Connor. Now get off the beach and go into the hotel lobby.”

“Not a chance. We evacuated everyone to the lobby. Most people probably left, but I guarantee you that’s where Arie is. And if I see her right now, I’m going to do shit I regret.”

“Okay, walk to the parking lot and call an Uber,” Simon instructs. “Tell me where you’ll be, and I’ll get your brother to find you.”

“You realize you haven’t given me shit, man.”

“I’m not going to lie to you, Connor. I’m not ready to forgive Arie.”

My heart squeezes. Not only because that truth sucks for me, but I know it would kill Arie. Jesus. Look at me, worrying about her feelings when I’m the one whose heart she just threw in the blender.

“That doesn’t mean she isn’t forgivable,” Simon adds. “It only means *I’m* not ready. In the same way you’re going to have to deal with this in whatever way you think is best.”

“That’s going to include a lot of alcohol,” I growl.

“Then go to the Gin n’ Lava,” Simon suggests. “I’ll give Mason a head’s up.”

“Power’s out,” I remind him. “Might be out in the whole city.”

“Then go home.”

Home is Arie’s apartment. We don’t officially live together, but I’m over there enough that it feels that way.

“Fine. The Gin n’ Lava,” I agree. Even if they’ve evacuated like Flambé, Mason will still be there because he’s one-hundred-percent *I’m going down with the ship* about things like this.

“Good,” Simon states. “I’ll call Ned and Mason.”

“Whatever,” I grumble, standing up and attempting to get the sand off my suit. It’s a fruitless effort because the rain hasn’t stopped.

“And Connor,” Simon adds. “I’m sorry ... about Xander.”

No shit. He’s only freaking here because Simon didn’t hire someone before he left. But I know that’s not what he’s apologizing for, and this isn’t really his fault.

The only one who should be apologizing is Arie.

XANDER

I sip a glass of brandy as I sit in the dark of my Atlantis hotel suite. The power is still out as rain patters against the window. It falls as if the sky will never stop crying.

From my view, I can see that half of the city lights are out, or maybe the power grid collapsed on city lines between Waikiki and Honolulu, but the other half twinkles as if nothing's wrong.

The Atlantis's rooms all look the same. I'm not in the same suite I had last time when Arie spent the night with me, but the sleek furniture and wall art are similar enough to make me remember what we did in my room.

She kissed me back tonight, but she didn't want to.

Or maybe she *had* to kiss me back to realize it's different when you kiss the man you're in love with.

I'm not happy about what happened, but we both needed to know.

I'm not *in love* with Arie. At least, I'm not anymore. And she's definitely not in love with me. We have a familiarity that's comfortable, and a love for cooking, but for some reason we're

always trying to convince ourselves that we're *more* than friends. The truth is, I haven't talked to Arie much since I was in Waikiki three years ago. The last time I was staying at this resort, I swore to myself I'd convince Arie to be mine, no matter what. And yes, we had a wonderful night together, but she didn't come back to London with me—and neither of us complained.

I pull out my phone and start scrolling through my contacts.

I need to deal with the real reason I'm here: the catalyst that made me jump on a plane to see the woman *that got away* in college as if she was my salvation.

I pull up Charlotte's number and hit dial. It'll be morning in London, if she's back from her honeymoon. In fact, I'm not sure she still lives in London.

"Xander?"

Charlotte's voice is like a time capsule, transporting me back to when I was young and I didn't have a restaurant, when I foolishly thought love could conquer anything. Charlotte's voice is soft on the other end of the line, like chamomile tea in the summertime. She really was so proper and British, the type to wear silk scarves and suede boots. The type who'd wait for you to open the door for her like a gentleman, and who knew the precise use of each piece of silverware. In contrast, Arie was shocking and alluring. She was everything Charlotte would never be: wild, irreverent, naughty.

Or maybe, I'd misjudged Charlotte because she fit the prim British mold. I never expected someone so high-class and uppity to take multiple lovers, especially after I'd proposed.

"Xander, is that you?"

It's possible Arie is something I convinced myself I needed after Charlotte left. I'd been so good, the gentleman in college, never giving in to temptation. That's why I came to Hawaii the

first time—to stop fighting the attraction between us. But this second time, when I saw Charlotte online, happy and married, I convinced myself Arie would be the solution. The two of them have always been linked in my subconscious in a way that's not fair to anyone.

"Hi, Charlotte," I say finally, looking at the streaks of water on my window from the rain.

"It's been a while," she whispers, as if I'm a ghost that's slipped into her bedroom unnoticed. "I—I don't know if you've heard, but I—"

"Got married," I finish for her.

"Yes."

"I know." I take a sip of my brandy before adding, "Actually, that's why I called."

"Oh?"

She still can't hide the trepidation in her voice. Ever since we broke up, Charlotte's tiptoed on egg shells around me. I'm the one she wronged, evidence of her indiscretion.

"It's not what you think, Char," I say, knowing she's afraid I'm going to say something mean. "I'm happy you're married."

"You—you are?"

"I am," I insist, and it's true. Charlotte hurt me, but our love faded long ago, and she deserves to move on. "I'm sorry I didn't ring you sooner to say congratulations. I've been distracted."

"Is the restaurant—?"

"No, no, the restaurant is fine. I've been ..." I look at the ocean out the window, inky and dark, full of risky unknowns. "I'm in Hawaii actually, visiting Arie," I admit. "She has this amazing restaurant that's themed around fire. I've been helping her with it."

"Oh, that's ..." Charlotte's voice dips out. "I, uh, I always thought you two would end up together."

Of course, she did. In a corner of my own subconscious, I thought the same.

“We aren’t ... together,” I admit.

We won’t ever end up together. That’s clear after tonight.

“Arie has a boyfriend,” I explain. “He’s a wonderful guy. He’s much better for her.”

That feels good to say out loud. Connor’s been there for Arie in ways I never have. I may know how to run a restaurant, but he has her heart.

“Oh, uh ... that’s um,” Charlotte doesn’t know what to say. Why would I call her to talk about Arie?

“Look, I was calling because I wanted to say—”

“You don’t have to say anything to me, Xander. I know what I did all those years ago, and we aren’t in each other’s lives anymore. There’s no—”

“I forgive you.”

Her voice gets thin. “You don’t have to—I don’t deserve—”

“No, I do,” I insist. “I’ve been holding onto that betrayal for a long time and it makes me sabotage any relationship I have that gets anywhere close to real.”

“I’m so sorry, Xander, I didn’t—”

“Please, just listen,” I interrupt, because making her feel bad is the opposite of what I want. “I know it’s been years, Char, but I lived in another country when you stepped out on me. And I have to take responsibility for the fact that you were all alone in another country *for years*. We’re old enough to know now that we should’ve broken up before I left for college. But I was the asshole who gave you a ring and prolonged our relationship even longer. It wasn’t fair to you.”

“But you never strayed, Xan. I just—”

“But I wasn’t *there* either,” I point out. “And I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I put you in that position.”

And that’s the truth here in Hawaii as well.

Connor has been *here* with Arie and I haven't been. I've been far away, pining, wondering, telling myself some fairytale about fate. But fairytales only exist in our heads—stories we tell ourselves—and the fairytale I've told myself about Arie isn't real.

I never should've come to Hawaii.

"You're right," Charlotte finally says. "You weren't there. But I made you a promise and—"

"I broke that promise first by leaving. I chose my education over you."

"We both knew you were always going to be a chef," she counters.

"Yes, but I never should've asked you to wait for me."

"I was in love with you."

"I was in love with you, too. But that wasn't enough, was it?"

Charlotte's silence speaks for both of us. A relationship requires two people to *be* in each other's lives, not imagining a life when they live somewhere else.

"I forgive you," I repeat. "And I hope you'll forgive me. You deserve to be happy, Charlotte. It sounds like you are."

"I am happy," she reveals. "But Xan ... are *you* happy? Hawaii is far away from home."

"It is," I agree, looking at the storm that's ravaging the island. Perhaps it's time I returned to where I belong.

The Atlantis lobby is finally starting to calm down. Several emergency lights illuminate the modern resort's space, which seems garish and cold when lit this way. Olivia and my staff have been helping guests, getting them taxis and assuring them they can return to the restaurant another evening for free.

If there's even a restaurant left.

I'm being overdramatic. I know that. But it feels desperate.

If Connor leaves, and Simon leaves, and Xander goes back to London, then all I have left is Olivia. And I know Olivia plans to move on in the next year or so to focus on her painting career. Yes, I have a staff. But my friends—*my family*—will all be gone.

I'll be all alone.

I won't be able to cook anything worth its salt with a broken heart. And the idea of putting my passion and energy into drinks and desserts feels like a fool's errand, because I don't see how any of it matters without love. Simon and Connor are both

huge pieces of what I *love* about this restaurant, and I've made both of them hate me.

I spy Olivia on the far side of the lobby talking to the front desk and pointing in my direction. I start walking over, when my phone rings, and I'm surprised by what I see on the glowing blue screen.

Simon is calling.

I hit accept, a knot in my chest tightening. We haven't talked since he left for Los Angeles. It's been nothing more than a few terse emails about the business.

"Simon, hi," I practically whisper. "How are you?"

"You had to evacuate the restaurant?" Simon barrels forward, ignoring my question. His voice is threaded with accusation, and I can't stop the tears that prick at the back of my eyes. Another ball of anger hurled in my direction is more than I can take this evening.

"There's um—a storm," I mumble, turning to a row of empty chairs by the windows and sitting down. "The power went out, but everyone's fine," I say to assuage the fear in his tone. "We're all in the lobby now. Most of the guests have left—with vouchers to return to the restaurant for free, of course. The evacuation was a safety precaution."

Outside, the hotel pool is flooding with rain and several resort employees are busy pumping water, trying fruitlessly to contain the overflow.

"Did you turn off the stoves and electric equipment?" Simon demands, going into boss mode. "The last thing you want is the power to come back on and have no one there to—"

"I wish you were here."

Those words rush out of me like the ravaging storm—raw and upending—but they're answered with Simon's silence on the other end of the phone. I'm sure Xander did all the things

Simon's afraid I forgot, but the truth is I would've forgotten them if Xander wasn't here to take charge.

"You have a plan for everything, Simon," I whisper into his silence. "I've been a mess since you left. I can't run this restaurant by myself."

"Xander's there to help," he points out, and my head feels like it weighs a thousand pounds. The idea of replacing Simon with Xander makes me livid. The idea of replacing *anyone* with Xander makes me want to crawl into a ball and start to sob.

"I don't want Xander here!" I snap.

"Really?" Simon asks. "Because kissing him sends a very different message."

I sit up.

My head buzzes like I've been slapped by that comment. I haven't told anyone about the kiss—not Olivia, not my sister, no one. I came straight to this lobby to deal with the guests.

"How do you know about that?"

"It's true then?" Simon challenges. "You cheated on Connor?"

His words are knives. *You cheated on Connor*. And coming from Simon, they twist with poison, creating an infection that will never heal.

"Did—" Emotion bubbles in my throat. "Did Connor call you?"

"He did," Simon snaps. "And he's fucking wrecked, Arie. I can't believe you did that!"

"It was one kiss," I defend, my voice ragged. "It was in the middle of all this mayhem—the rain, the evacuation, the power outage—it had barely happened when Connor walked in. It was nothing."

"It's not nothing and you know it."

I do.

God, the tremble in my body betrays how much that's true.

“I don’t want Xander here,” I manage to say. “I know that for sure now. I was confused before, but I’m not anymore. Connor’s everything. He’s my person. And I made a horrible, impulsive decision, and—” The tears start. “Oh God, Simon, what am I going to do?”

There’s a long pause. Hot tears stream down my cheeks which are already raw from running back and forth in the rain. I’m exhausted and overwhelmed, and I want to forget this day. Erase it. Start over.

“You’re going to have to learn to live with it, Arie,” Simon says harshly. “Just like you have to learn to run Flambé on your own.”

Knife to heart.

End game.

“Simon—?!”

“You know I care about you, Arie.” Compassion floods Simon’s tone. “But you keep making selfish decisions without thinking about who you’re going to hurt. And you have to stop.”

“Of course. You’re right. I know you’re right.”

“Do you?” Simon barks. “Connor called because he wanted me to tell him how to forgive you. The problem is—I came up empty. I didn’t know what to tell him, Arie.”

My hands start to tremble.

“I couldn’t give him hope, because it turns out I’m still furious at you,” Simon continues. “And I’m even more pissed now that you’ve done this to Connor.”

“You’re right,” I agree.

“You can’t just say you understand and go back to business as usual. You have to start taking actions to change.”

“Okay.” I nod, sniffing back a sob. “I hear you. I’ll take care of Flambé tonight and I’ll give you an update in the morning.”

“I’m not just talking about the business.”

“I know that,” I whisper. “But like you said, Connor’s not going to forgive me overnight.”

There’s another long silence, and I start to wonder if my battery went dead.

“Simon?”

“He loves you, you know,” Simon’s voice crackles through the receiver. “He begged me for a reason to forgive you. But you’re the one who has to prove you’re worth holding on to.”

I nod through my tears, even though Simon can’t see me.

“Simon,” I say quickly. “I’m sorry. I took everything you did at Flambé for granted, and I abused our friendship. I hope you and Kendall are really happy in LA right now, and that everything is going well with the new location.”

Outside, the resort workers keep trying to bail out the pool, but more water falls from the sky in an endless deluge.

“I appreciate that,” Simon says quietly.

“I’ll call you in the morning with an update on the restaurant.” I hesitate, maybe that’s too many phone calls too quickly. “Unless you’d prefer to be updated via email instead.”

“Arie,” Simon says quietly. “You know you can always call me.”

“I can?”

“Of course.”

My throat tightens.

“Look, I’m still pissed,” Simon admits, “but radio silence only deepens the gap between us. I’d prefer it if we started talking again. Even if it’s just about the business.”

“I—I’d like that, too.”

Simon says goodnight and ends the call. Baby steps, right? Simon still needs an ocean between us, but asking me to phone him is a huge win. One I’ll accept gratefully, especially this evening.

I get up and turn to the lobby, only Olivia is steps away

from my chair with a concerned look on her face. She motions to her phone.

“Ned just called,” she says. “I heard what happened. Connor’s with him.”

I nod. I’m glad he’s somewhere safe.

I can’t thank Olivia enough when she wraps her arms around me and my sobs crash over her like the storm that surrounds this building.

At least I still have one friend.

CONNOR

Hangovers suck.

What's worse than the initial pounding in my head is waking up on the floor of the Gin n' Lava next to a pool of blue vomit. The last time I had a Blue Hawaiian, I was barely over 21, and Ned and Mason wanted to show me how to get piss-ass drunk. Only, Ned's the one who puked his guts out that night and swore off partying.

I sit up and rub my face. I'm in Mason's office. Grabbing some tissues from the desk, I clean up my mess, random flashes of last night coming back to me.

The power out.

Mason and Ned liquoring me up in the dark.

Ned busting out the Blue Hawaiians, even though he'd sworn off them for life.

Guzzling the cotton-candy-tasting goo, because Arie kissed Xander.

I grab the trash bucket near me and throw up again, emptying what looks like a Smurf massacre into the bottom of the can.

Arie kissed Xander. Or he kissed her. Frankly, it doesn't matter who kissed who, because it fucking happened. And they both looked like they were enjoying it when I walked in.

Goddamnit!

I clean up the floor and try to roll out the kink in my neck, wondering where the hell Ned and Mason are, if I've been abandoned in Mason's office.

I find them both behind the bar in similar states of disarray: blue drink stains on their shirts and headaches pounding.

"You two got smashed as well?" I ask, offering them the trash can if they need it.

"You didn't want to drink alone," Ned grumbles.

"And you got out the Blue Hawaiians?" I ask my brother in surprise. "I thought that was off-limits forever—to the ends of the earth, till Hell freezes over."

"This was worse," Ned replies. "She broke your heart."

"You never thought Ned would be so sentimental, did you?" Mason asks, leaning against a keg under the bar. He lurches forward, grabbing the trashcan from my grip and dispelling his own Smurf-town of vomit.

We're a mess.

I stumble over to Ned and give him a hand to help him stand up, noticing he's only wearing a blue-stained button-up and shorts—no pants.

"What the hell, man?" I point to his attire.

"I refused to ruin the suit," he says, nodding to his coat and slacks hanging over a bar stool a few feet away.

"Damn, we got drunk."

Ned wraps his arms around me in a hug, which almost makes me wonder if he's still intoxicated. "You're never telling Olivia about this," he says. "Blue Hawaiians stay between us—always."

“Get off me,” I sass, but Ned hugs me harder, because he knows if he’d seen Olivia kiss another man, he’d have drunk so many Blue Hawaiians he’d be in a hospital with his stomach being pumped.

“Power’s back on,” Mason grumbles, washing his mouth out in the sink and pointing to the digital clock behind the bar that blinks 8:30 in the morning.

I pour myself a glass of water and start to gulp. Mason and Ned follow suit, until we’ve drank a gallon of water each, and the two of them have returned to staring at me forlornly.

“Fuck. What am I going to do?” I grumble.

It’s one thing to obliterate the thought of Arie and Xander kissing with alcohol until I’m lying in a pool of blue goo, it’s another to figure out how to face the day knowing that truth.

“Pancakes,” Mason says. “All you can eat pancakes. That’s what we’re going to do.”

“Don’t you have to open in a few hours,” I say, motioning to the Gin n’ Lava.

“Nope,” Mason says. “I own the freaking place. And today, we’re getting pancakes.”

“Not wearing these clothes we aren’t,” Ned interjects, motioning to the three of us adorned with blue stains.

“Well, it’s a good thing I own about fifty Hawaiian shirts,” Mason replies, pointing to his office in the back, where he keeps quite a few changes of clothes stashed.

“I’m not wearing a Hawaiian shirt with dicks on it!” Ned grumbles, to which I laugh.

“Hell yes, you are,” I state. “I’m the asshole who was cheated on, so I make the rules. And we’re *all* getting pancakes while wearing Mason’s shirts.”

Ned glares at me, but he immediately backs off. “You realize that’s the first time I’ve seen you smile since you walked

in last night?” I sober at that comment. “And that’s the only reason I’ll agree to wear one of Mason’s stupid shirts.”

I nod in thanks, managing another tiny laugh.

“Blue Hawaiians and dick shirts to our grave,” I say. Ned and Mason nod in solidarity. “Now let’s get pancakes.”

XANDER

Morning sun shines through the windows of my suite, coating all of the modern furniture in harsh light that feels like a punch in the face. Too much brightness and blue sky, and I'm not even hungover, yet it's needles to my eyes.

Not to mention, my doorbell is ringing.

I squint and throw on my bathrobe, heading for my door and wishing I'd put the *do not disturb* sign on the handle last night.

Ding! Ding! Ding!

"No, thank you," I say, opening the door, but it's not house-keeping on the other side. It's Arie. "Oh, uh, hi."

She looks like hell: leggings, t-shirt, no makeup, no heels. Her hair is frazzled like she slept on last night's wet hair. In fact, I'm not sure she slept at all, possibly having crashed at the restaurant. I think she lives with Connor, and after the way he stormed out when he caught us, I wouldn't be surprised if she didn't want to go home.

“We need to talk,” she says hoarsely, and I step back to let her come in.

“Arie, I should apologize for—”

“I kissed you back, Xander,” she interrupts, shutting the door behind her and walking into the center of the suite. Light eclipses her in brightness and for a moment she almost disappears, becoming one with the halo of the sun. But her words yank me out of such romanticism. “We were both complicit in what happened last night. We both knew it was going to happen—if not last night—eventually.”

I follow her into the living room and sit down on the sofa. “That doesn’t mean I’m not sorry,” I say, rubbing the scruff on my face. “You’ve been this fantasy for me for so long, Arie. I’ve built us into something in my mind that doesn’t exist, and I should’ve stayed in London and been a grownup about it. I told myself it meant more when you called me to help with your restaurant. But the truth is, Connor’s the one who’s been in your life and I haven’t.”

Arie sits on the chair opposite me, her face hollow, the mention of Connor’s dedication to their relationship draining every ounce of her confidence.

“You’re not the only one who was plagued by *what ifs*,” Arie says softly. “I knew I was playing with fire when I invited you here. Esme warned me. She told me not to do it. And I ignored her. I knew you were dangerous and I still made the call. And in another time, in another life, maybe we would’ve—”

“*That’s* the fantasy.” I interrupt. “We both have to stop imagining and projecting. I live in London. You live in Hawaii. And you love Connor. End of story.”

“I do,” she whispers, emotion wracking her face. “I really do love him, Xan.”

I nod. “How can I help? What can I tell him that will—”

“You can’t,” Arie cuts in, leaning forward and sliding a piece of paper across the coffee table toward me. I didn’t even notice she was holding that. “I’m the one who has to fix my relationship with Connor. *This* is what I need from you.”

I pick up the paper. It’s an airplane ticket.

“I *did* need help with the restaurant,” Arie continues, before I have a chance to respond. “And I can’t tell you how much help you’ve been. I have systems now and an accountant to hire. God, if you weren’t there last night when the power went out, I probably would’ve done something stupid and burnt the place down.”

“That’s not true, you—”

“What’s true is I can’t be in control of everything.” Arie shakes her head like she’s ashamed. “There are so many parts of running a restaurant that I don’t know how to do. And last night, I froze when there was an emergency.”

“At least now you know you need a plan.”

“Yes,” she agrees. “And now, I know who I want to make that plan with.” She motions to the airplane ticket. “You have to go, Xan. I can’t fix anything with Connor if you’re here.”

I pick up the ticket, glancing at the departure date. It leaves in a few hours.

“You know, Arie, I’m jealous of your restaurant.”

Arie’s brows scrunch. “What?” She stares at me astonished. “But you’re the one whose restaurant was such a success you were on TV. And The Carlisle is now a London staple. In fact, The Carlisle runs so well, you’re able to leave it for weeks to come help me.”

“It runs so well, I’m obsolete,” I correct. “I’ve been bored out of my mind for months. And worse, there hasn’t been anyone important in my life to share that success with. I can’t explain how hollow that makes me feel.”

Arie’s cheek feathers, gritting her teeth to hold back the

flush of emotion that comes with what I've said. I may have ruined what she has with the most important person in her life. Connor's been with her since the very first day Flambé opened.

"You should be proud of what you've accomplished with Flambé," I praise. "You do something I've never seen any restaurant do in my life. You invent on the fly. You come up with brand new dishes and cocktails all the time. You don't just serve your guests, you listen to them, you're inspired by them, you *create* for them. You may not have every system and detail written up in a fifty-step plan, but you know how to improvise. You're so creative with your food it's truly awe-inspiring. Your restaurant is vibrant and passionate, Arie. It's a living thing that you and your staff give life to every evening. And Connor's a huge part of that."

Her eyes get glassy.

"Of course, I'll go," I say, waving the ticket at her. "But don't think I haven't learned a dozen things from you on this trip. You're not afraid to love, Arie, not just your restaurant, but your staff, and your boyfriend. And I've spent years hiding from it. You've shown me I need to stop being afraid to love again. Charlotte did a number on me, and I used that as an excuse to pine over someone safe that I would never have." I motion to her. "I don't know how long I've used you as an excuse to not get involved with anyone. But I have. And that stops now."

"Never get involved?" Arie gives me a frown. "But what about Nova?"

I shake my head. Time to come clean. "I came to Hawaii for you, Arie. Nova wasn't real. I met her on the flight from London. We concocted the whole fake relationship plan to make it seem like I wasn't a threat to your relationship."

"What?" Arie's mouth hangs open. "You were kissing her when I walked up at the airport. She was a stranger?"

“We had to be convincing.” I shrug. “Honestly, the whole charade did more harm than good. It made you more jealous, and—” I swallow hard thinking about how Nova’s emotions got wrapped up in this too.

I hurt both of them.

“For a moment,” I postulate, “there might’ve been a real spark between me and Nova. But none of this was fair to her. And I refuse to let her be my new substitute for you. She lives in Hawaii. I live in London. As much as I like her, I won’t turn her into a fantasy on the other side of the world so I can avoid actually living. That hurts everyone.”

“Wow, look at us adulting,” Arie says with a tiny laugh. “Taking responsibility for our actions and growing.”

“Maybe,” I laugh, but then my tone sobers. “I’m sorry about Connor.”

She nods, the tendon in her neck pulsing. “Yeah. I’ll figure something out. We love each other. That has to mean something.”

“It does.”

“But it doesn’t mean he’ll forgive me,” she whispers, her fears resurfacing.

“It doesn’t mean he’ll throw it all away, either,” I reply. “Charlotte and I broke up, not really because she cheated, but because she fell out of love. Because we didn’t try hard enough to keep that love when we had it. Cheating was a symptom of what had ended already. But you love Connor, and he loves you. One kiss shouldn’t ruin you two.”

“What if it does?”

“It won’t,” I try to assure her. “Not if you both really want it.”

“What if—”

“What ifs are what got *us* in trouble, Arie,” I point out. “Don’t what-if yourself into making your fears come true. Step

up and show him you're worth the risk. You are. But you have to remind him of it."

"You're a good friend, Xan," Arie says, standing up.

"I'll be a better friend when I'm on the plane headed to London," I reply, walking her to the door. "And hey, if you and Connor ever come to London, look me up. Come to The Carlisle and I'll make you anything you want."

Arie smiles weakly. "What? No free couch for us to sleep on? Cheap, Carlisle," she jokes.

"I heard you and Connor at the beach house," I retort, pointing a finger at her. "I don't want to be evicted for disturbing the peace by my landlord."

"Oh, we heard you and Nova, too," she throws back. "We aren't the only ones who—" But then she stops and frowns. "Wait. If it was fake—" Her eyes flash to me like what I've told her doesn't add up.

"There was a moment when maybe it wasn't going to be fake," I admit. "But I live in London, so it's better this way."

"You actually like Nova?" Arie asks, only this time that question isn't laced with all of our baggage. She's genuinely asking.

I hold up my airplane ticket. "I'm getting on a flight to London."

"That isn't an answer to my question."

I narrow my eyes at her. "Yes, it is."

Arie narrows her eyes, but instead of pressing the subject, she gives me a hug. A friendly hug. A goodbye hug. A hug that closes this chapter between us. And for the first time, I hug Arie without wondering if it means something else. I can finally return to London without wondering *what if*.

I can return to London and start fresh.

ARIE

I stand in Flambé's front entrance. The carpet is ruined. It's waterlogged with half an inch of rain and every step I take creates a loud sopping noise like the undead live under the swamp of the floor.

I do a sweep of the whole restaurant and it's only the front entrance that's flooded. Most of the damage is outside on the patio which looks like a disaster zone: chairs strewn, globe lights broken, debris all over.

I want to call Connor, but I can't. He's the first person I want to tell about everything, but he doesn't want to hear from me right now, especially not about flooding and damage to my restaurant. My second go-to would be Simon, and Xander's on an airplane. I'm the only one left to deal with all of this.

It's *my* problem.

I text all of my staff, informing them that we aren't opening tonight and that everyone should take the night off. I include Conner in the group text, because he is an employee, even if everything else about us is broken.

I start in the kitchen, disposing of the rotten food that's been

left out. Xander did a good job making sure everything was turned off and safe, and when I check the walk-in ice boxes, everything is still cool and there's no spoilage. I move to the front and use a broom to sweep the standing water out of the entrance. Several large puddles line the patio, holding water, so I call resort maintenance to help with the drainage and the damaged carpet.

The afternoon sun is hot when I get to the patio and start cleaning. It may have been a torrent of rain last night, but you'd never know by looking at today's sky. Above me is nothing but blue, cloud-free space, letting the merciless sun through.

I right furniture and move chairs and tables to one side of the rooftop. Then I proceed to sweep up fallen wires and broken glass. At least the restaurant windows are all intact and it's only the string lights that have shattered.

"What are you doing?"

I look up and wipe my sweating brow. Olivia stands near my pile of trash and debris, looking at me like I'm crazy.

"We're not opening tonight," I say. "Didn't you get the text?"

"Of course, I did," Olivia says. "But why are you doing all of this by yourself?" She motions to the chaos of fallen lights and glass.

"There's no one to call," I admit. "I gave Xander a plane ticket and ..." She knows I can't call Connor. My lip starts to tremble, so I go back to sweeping; the patio is far from finished.

"You have other employees," Olivia insists, coming over and grabbing a dust bin for me to collect my pile of glass.

"And they'd all ask why Xander and Connor aren't here," I reply. "It's my mess. My restaurant. I have to fix it."

"You didn't knock the power out," Olivia protests, sweeping up the shards and dumping them into the trash.

"You know what I'm talking about," I say weakly.

Olivia frowns, pity marring her face. “Actually, I have a message from him.”

“You talked to Connor?”

“Not directly, but—” She motions to indicate her husband. “Ned says Connor’s going to stay at the beachside condo for a while,” she explains, talking about Ned’s second apartment near the Waikiki boardwalk. It’s the one Connor stayed at when he first moved to Hawaii, but lately he and Ned have turned it into their man cave when they need a night away from their ball n’ chains. It’s where Connor took me the first night we were together.

Technically, that condo is where he lives—it’s on his W₂ forms and his taxes—even though he’s spent most of his nights at my place for months.

“He needs space,” I say, nodding. “I get that.”

“And he’d like some time off from work,” Olivia adds. That’s the one that punches the lump into my throat. *He wants time off from me.* That’s what this is.

“We’re not opening tonight,” I confirm.

“No, he means a week or ...” She trails off, because she doesn’t really know how long he means. This is all secondhand from Ned. “Don’t shoot the messenger,” she preps, “but I’m supposed to mention that you and Xander made a plan for Ashton if Connor ever left ...”

Fuck.

I turn from Olivia to hide my emotion, walking to the railing and grabbing hold of the metal rail like my life depended on it.

Connor wants to leave? Both the restaurant and me?

Suddenly, that conversation with Connor about contingency plans feels like a knife in the gut. Plans I made *with Xander* in case of emergency, should something happen, like—

Oh God! That must've sounded like Xander and I were planning to get rid of Connor all along.

"Oh shit," I hiss, sucking in air and trying to breathe despite the emotion bubbling up. "Connor must think—" I turn to Olivia in alarm. "I sent Xander back to London. He's on a plane. He's gone. Last night was a mistake," I insist. "Does Connor think I chose Xander over—Oh God! Olivia, I have to call him and explain that's not what this is."

I frantically start checking my pockets. Where the hell is my phone?

"Arie." Olivia is at my side, wrapping her arms around me and pulling me into a hug. "He needs space right now, calling him isn't—"

"But does he think Xander's still here?" I panic. "If he does, space only means he's going to stew, thinking we're—"

"Let *me* text him then," Olivia insists. "I'll tell Connor that Xander is gone, so he doesn't go off the deep end. Alright?"

"Olivia, what if—"

Who knew a kiss could upend your life? I was just starting to get my footing back with Flambé, but if Connor leaves the restaurant and me ... I take another gasping breath.

"I have to fix this, Olivia! Connor's my person. I love him. It was one stupid kiss! He's not going to throw everything we have away over one kiss, is he?"

The look on Olivia's face says she isn't sure.

"Why *did* you kiss Xander, Arie?"

That's the question, isn't it? Why did I kiss him when I already had what I wanted? What the hell did I think was missing?

And how do I prove to Connor that he's enough after kissing another man? How do I prove to Connor that he's everything?

I've been sitting in my apartment, staring at the blank page of my fake-dating manuscript for over an hour.
I haven't written a word.

It's been a week since the rainstorm at Flambé, and a week since Xander texted me that he was getting on a plane to London.

A week ago:

Xander: I told Arie. We kissed. Connor caught us. Arie chose him.

Xander: I'm on a plane to London in 10 minutes. You're a writer, you can imagine the rest. I'm sure it will be close to what really happened.

Xander: I'm sorry to have dragged you into this mess.

Xander: You were wonderful.

While Xander was in the sky:

Nova: *I'm sorry we didn't get to say goodbye.*

Nova: *You were wonderful too.*

15 hours later:

Xander: *I'm also sorry we didn't say goodbye. Arie bought me a plane ticket. There wasn't time.*

Xander: *If you're ever in London again, researching a book, or...*

Xander: *You've got my number.*

I keep replaying that text message conversation in my head and thinking about what Connor said about subtext. We obviously like each other, and Arie's not in the picture anymore, but...

I'm not in the picture either.

Xander's 7281 miles away from me (yes, I Googled it).

I've been tempted to text him during the last week—just to say hi, or share a line I loved in a book I read. He hasn't posted anything new on his social media accounts, and in one desperate, wine-laden evening I found the cooking show he was a judge on so I could see his smile.

I haven't contacted him.

It will only draw out the inevitable.

Instead, I've been focusing on writing my book. The problem, however, is I can't finish the manuscript. I've written three quarters of a sappy, fake-dating rom-com, but there's no way to deny it: the book is about Xander.

And Xander flew back to London without me. There's no HEA (happily ever after) in the real-life version.

That shouldn't matter. Our fake relationship only existed so I could write this book. It's fiction, not real life. I've taken enough creative liberties with the story already that I shouldn't be hung up on the ache in my chest. Heartbreak—that's what Hailey insisted I call it. Even though I blame my most recent emotional outburst in her presence on the vodka and Bailey's that were 98% of the "hot chocolate" I drank.

Plus, I'm officially a crappy writer if I can't cobble together an HEA for this book from all the rom-coms I read in the last month. Oscar Wilde said "*Imitation is the greatest form of flattery.*" So, all I need is to jam this story into someone else's happy ending, and *voilà!*

Ending #1: *The sexy Brit ditches his luggage at the airport to run through the streets of Waikiki in search of his true love. He literally stops traffic when he finds her, takes her in his arms and dips her into an epic embrace. Cue dramatic music as the Hawaiian sunset glows behind them.*

Ending #2: *The book lover's new novel has become an outrageous success. Suddenly, she's famous all over the globe, but her heart is still broken. Lucky for her, the last stop of her book tour is in London. The sexy Brit shows up to her book reading to profess his love: "I'm the man from her book," he proclaims before all of her readers. "I'm the one her heart belongs to!"*

Of course, all of that is so sappy and sugary sweet, I feel like my teeth will fall out completely. I've tried brainstorming three dozen endings: big weddings, grand gestures, family reconciliation. Heck, I even outlined a cliffhanger kiss, wherein the two

are thrust into a mysterious whodunit that feels like I've ditched romance for espionage.

They all feel wrong.

My phone buzzes and Cici's name flashes on the screen. The consolation prize for my broken heart is Cici hasn't dropped me as a client. In fact, she's done the opposite and become a wonder agent.

"Cici, I'm working on it," I say, instead of a greeting. "Endings are the hardest part."

"Great news," Cici chirps, ignoring my comments. It turns out the woman can ditch the monotone when you give her a fictional hot chef to *ooh* and *ahh* over. "I met with three editors and they cannot *wait* to get their hands on your new book. This is going to be a hot property. I smell a book auction!!!"

Or maybe it's the idea of money that gets Cici to sing like a sparrow.

"I'm not even done with the first draft," I contend. I sent Cici what I'd written a week ago and she practically orgasmed over the phone—*Oh my God! Oh my God!*—telling me how much she loves it. *Oh my God, we're going to make so much money, Nova!* And now I'm under the gun to finish the book ASAP.

"I can get these publishing houses to make you an offer with just a rough outline of the end," Cici says. "They already love the premise, and they *adore* the hot chef. Every book editor's dream is a *commercial book* by someone who has the literary chops to give it heft."

I almost call bullshit. That's the first time Cici's said the word *literary* to me without it sounding like she swallowed a cup of vinegar.

"I'm glad people are interested," I say politely instead. This book is fun. Perhaps even good, but it's not the heart-wrenching look at humanity I prefer writing.

“Get excited, Nova. This is going to change your career! This is the kind of debut that gets you a multi-book deal.”

“Debut?”

“Yeah, we’ll have to give you a pen name, so readers don’t pick up your previous books and get confused. A name like Sissy Lovegood or Lindsay—”

“How about Nova?” I say back, annoyed that I can’t keep writing under N. A. Wolfe. “What about Nova Ash?” That’s my real name plus the beginning of my middle name: Ashlynn.

“I love it!” Cici beams. “Plus, that’ll put you at the top of the shelf with an “A” last name. Imagine it: a rainbow of book spines all penned by you!”

An unsettling feeling turns in my gut. Maybe I’m afraid of my career changing. I’ve gotten used to being a nobody. Not that money doesn’t sound great, but am I going to be able to follow up this book with a second one? Much less an entire shelf of them? Half the reason I was able to write this book was because I lived most of it. Will I have to go undercover now and act out all the tropes in my next novels? Find an enemy to fall in love with? Start writing secret admirer letters?

“A shelf of books?” I say hoarsely. “Maybe we should focus on finishing this one.”

“Think big, Nova—Nova Ash! You’re on your way to becoming a household name.”

That sounds terrifying. I’m an introvert. The last thing I want is to be famous. Heck, I should call Xander and ask him for tips on how to deal with fame and still be a down-to-earth good person. He was on TV and managed to stay sane.

My eyes land on my bookcase, on the shelves that house my already published books, the failures of N. A. Wolfe. Am I abandoning them? Am I abandoning the writer I set out to become? Cici continues to rattle off plans for the future, but

I'm no longer listening because there's something sticking out between the spines of my books.

I get up and walk to the bookshelf, finding a piece of paper sandwiched between my second and third novels. When I pull it out, I recognize Xander's handwriting immediately.

Nova,

I stole a copy of each of your books. I hope you'll forgive me, but your writing is just too beautiful to leave on this shelf gathering dust. Never stop writing novels like this, Nova. Even if it feels like I'm your only fan, I'm not. The right people will find your stories and you will change them. Don't ever forget that your words have power.

– Xander

“Nova?” Cici screeches in my ear. “Did you hear me? If you put together some pitches for three more romances, we could negotiate this manuscript into a multi-book deal.”

“Cici, you're getting ahead of yourself.” I exhale heavily. The idea of writing three more romances makes my blood run cold. I haven't even finished this one and part of me wants to finish it as a tragedy. Of course, I'm not going to tell her that the sexy Brit she's decided is America's next book boyfriend is actually real, and in reality, he leaves the girl high and dry. I'm definitely not in the mindset to come up with more romance concepts. “Cici, I'm glad you're excited about this book, but I also have a few stipulations for how we move forward.”

Hailey keeps reminding me that my agent *works for me*, not the other way around.

“Of course,” Cici says, thinking we're on the same page. “I'm your agent. Tell me your demands. I'm here to negotiate the best deal you can imagine.”

“The best deal is relative,” I say cryptically. “And what I want isn’t going to be just about the money.”

There’s a long pause on the other end of the phone.

“Cici? Are you still there?”

“I am,” she says cautiously, inching back toward her lifeless monotone. “What do you want, Nova?”

“It’s simple,” I say, smiling down at Xander’s note. “What I want is an agent who represents both Nova Ash *and* N. A. Wolfe.”

XANDER

When I return to The Carlisle, it's like I was never gone.

Dinner service flows like clockwork.

My chefs cook all my recipes to perfection.

Sully has everything covered from inventory to taxes to payroll. He even starts making jokes that I should retire.

"Famous chef calls it quits in his thirties," Sully says, raising his hands like it's the headline for an upcoming press release. "Goes off to taste-taste the world." He drops his hands and looks at me. "Has a nice ring to it. Don't you think?"

I frown at my friend. Running around the globe—alone—sounds like a death sentence. Plus, I love to cook. I don't want to eat what others have made; I want to invent. Create. Shake things up. Seeing Arie's restaurant has put a thorn in my side, and it's one I can't ignore. Ever since I got on that plane, I can't shrug off the niggling feeling that I've left something important behind.

"Is this about the girl?" Sully asks, noting my lack of enthusiasm.

“No,” I state firmly, walking outside to the front of The Carlisle. “Arie and I are never happening.”

The front of my restaurant is Old English to a T: black lintel, gold lettering, faux glass lanterns, wainscoting. I love The Carlisle, it will always be a part of me, and yet, I feel like I’m outgrowing it.

“I meant the *other* girl,” Sully says, having followed me outside onto the pavement.

“Nova?” Our eyes catch. I told Sully everything when I got back, we got sauced, and it turns out liquor is all it takes to get me to spill my guts.

“The bookish writer with a love for sweaters,” Sully says, revisiting a description I gave him of her. “Sounds like the kind of lass that would love the foggy London weather.”

“She doesn’t live here.”

“True,” Sully agrees. “But if she did ... would you call her up?”

“In a heartbeat,” I admit, my eyes lingering down the lantern-lined street away from my restaurant.

I can imagine Nova wrapped in an oversized scarf, drinking tea in a local bookshop and twirling that strip of blue hair around her finger absentmindedly. Or I can see her writing in a flat with a window that overlooks the river, her small bed messy and her sheets tangled. It’s easy to imagine her here, but it’s also dangerous. I’ve spent too many years of my life indulging in an unattainable fantasy like that, and all it does is leave me alone with an empty heart.

“Nova doesn’t live here,” I say firmly to Sully. “And I refuse to go down that path again. I need someone who lives *here*. I need ... something.”

Sully frowns, because he knows I’m not just talking about companionship. We stare up at the front of The Carlisle. There are two holes in my life and they both have to do with love.

“I can help you create a profile on a dating app,” Sully teases. “As long as you don’t get all pear-shaped, the ladies will snap you right up. But that *other* something ...” Sully nods to the restaurant and sighs deeply.

He knows, that one, I’m going to have to figure out on my own.

CONNOR

It's been a week since I've been to Flambé.
Seven days since I've seen Arie.
Seven days since the kiss.

I don't know what Arie told everyone at the restaurant in my absence, but I've gotten several *WTF* texts from nosy parties—Ashton, Archer, Finn. It seems Arie and Olivia's stories don't line up: Is he sick? Is he going back to being a lawyer with his brother? Did Arie and Connor break up?

That's the question that makes me want to plug in the Play Station again and binge another six hours of *Call of Duty*. Nothing soothes the soul like watching things blow up—or making things blow up.

Arie's texted me twice. Once was to tell me she understands that I need space, and I should reach out to her when I'm ready. And the second was to say she told her sister Esme to leave me alone. Esme has been more of a pain in my side than anyone. She's the hopeless romantic who thinks she can keep telling me all of Arie's admirable qualities and that will fix

everything. In response, I sent Esme a GIF of her TV star boyfriend making out with his costar on the show with the caption: *Imagine this was real and not for television.* That shut her up for a while.

Problem is, Esme's texts were starting to work.

I *do* miss Arie.

And I miss Flambé. I never expected to love a job as much as I love that one. Who thought inventing cocktails for strangers would be my calling? Definitely not me.

But every time I think of my girl, or the restaurant, all I can see is Xander pressed up against her and I start to spiral. I've replayed it in my head too many times to count and there isn't a moment when it doesn't look like she's enjoying it.

What I hate even more is that I'd only just realized Arie was unhappy before I walked in on her in that stairwell. I didn't see it earlier. I didn't have time to fix it before she acted on that unhappiness, and there she was already reaching out for someone else.

How did I get complacent in our relationship? A kiss is one thing, but knowing she was unsure about *us* that she acted on—
Not was—isn't. She *isn't* sure.

And *that's* what has me sitting in my brother's condo in the same dirty clothes morning after morning. Xander may be in London, but he was just the catalyst. Arie wants something more than what I can give her.

"Alright! Sulk show is over!" Ned's voice barks from the entryway as he barrels into the condo and marches up to me. "You had your pity party of one. Time to take a shower and fumigate this condo before it has no resale value."

"Are you selling your condo?" I toss back irreverently. He has a key. He owns the damn place, but barging in still feels like he's stampeding on my privacy.

“I drank Blue Hawaiians *and* wore one of Mason’s penis shirts *in public* to help you nurse your wounds,” Ned grumbles, grabbing my elbow. “The least you can do is shower and get off the furniture.”

“Did you know the first time I slept with Arie, it was in this condo? It was right over there next to the—”

“TMI, thank you!” Ned gripes, dragging me toward the bathroom. “And now I need to gut the place, bleach it, and redecorate!”

“It’s not a crime scene,” I sass back as he moves us into the bathroom and starts the shower.

“As far as I’m concerned, anything that reminds you of her is a problem.”

“I love her, you asshole!”

“I know!” Ned growls back, pushing me into the shower and under the water’s flow.

It’s fucking cold!

I’m still wearing my shirt and pants, but Ned doesn’t care, soaking everything, including my socks.

“I can take a shower myself,” I snarl.

“Obviously, you can’t,” Ned replies, still strong-arming me to stay under the icy flow. I smack my hand toward the temperature dial, but miss by a mile. “I’m not Mom,” Ned growls, “but I’m not above dousing you in soap and making sure you’re not wallowing in your filth.”

“Is that so?” I stop struggling, which throws him off. I use his disorientation to wrap him in a headlock, yanking him forward into the water with me.

“Jesus Christ, Connor!” he yells, letting me go completely. “This is an expensive suit!”

“You don’t take showers with your clothes on?” I sass back. “You had me fooled!” I hold him under the stream for one more

beat before letting him go and watching him scramble to the far side of the bathroom, soaked.

“What is wrong with you?” he snarls, grabbing a towel to dry himself off.

“Me?” I slap the shower head toward the wall, then point to myself: soaked and ridiculous. “You started this.”

Ned glares at me, and for a second, I think I’ve misjudged him, and he’s going to lunge at me—take a swing. I almost want him to, because then I could let all this anger and fury out of me.

“Go ahead!” I taunt. “Hit me. I know you want to.”

Ned starts laughing.

What the fuck?

He laughs so loud it echoes through the bathroom and drowns out the sound of the shower head.

“I’m not going to hit you,” Ned says, throwing the towel at my head. “You stink. The last thing I’m going to do is beat up my little brother when his heart is broken.”

My throat tightens.

I turn my face to the water and lean in, letting the icy cold pelt my skin.

Just fuck.

“That’s right, take the damn shower,” Ned commands. “Then we’re getting out of here.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I gurgle under the spray.

“Wrong. You’re not staying here a second longer.”

I look at him, my eyesight bleary from the water. Is he kicking me out? “Am I about to be homeless?” I sass.

“Fuck off,” Ned grumbles. “If you don’t remember, you once punched *me* over this girl, trying to convince me she was worth it.”

“And what? You’re here to gloat about how I was wrong?”

Ned slaps me with one of his *I’m going to obliterate you if*

you don't shut up glares. "No, Connor. She didn't sleep with him, she kissed him. And unless there's something you're not telling me, I'm here to remind you *you're* the asshole who's supposed to fight for her."

Oh.

ARIE

The sun is setting outside Flambé's picture window, and the gold that ricochets through the dining room makes the entire space glow like the guests are eating in the center of a fireball. It only happens one month of the year, when the angle of the sun is right. But when it does, it's spectacular.

It's also blinding, which is why I'm sure the sun is in my eyes when I think I see Simon standing in Flambé's entrance. There are plenty of guys with horn-rimmed glasses who give off Clark Kent vibes; that doesn't mean they're my estranged best friend. I'm obviously projecting. Simon built this restaurant with me, so it's only natural for me to imagine him in every nook and cranny of it. Especially when I miss him.

I look to the bar, where Ashton has been keeping the cocktails flowing like a superstar. The sun blazes over him, making all the bottles behind him sparkle like diamonds. Archer stands beside Ashton, trying to learn the drink he's making. Ashton's going to need a night off soon, depending on what Connor decides. I need backups for my backups.

I'm surprised I'm not projecting images of Connor behind that bar like I did with Simon a second ago. Connor doesn't own this restaurant, but he's as much a part of it as Simon. And it hurts to think I may never see him behind that bar again.

"Arie, hey!"

I throw on a fake smile and turn to the guest behind me. Only, I nearly burst into tears when I see who it is.

"Simon?" My hand flies to my mouth. I'm dreaming. He's not actually in Hawaii!

"Jesus, don't cry!" Simon says, stepping forward and wrapping me in a hug. "This was supposed to be a surprise, but—"

I hug him so hard he grunts in pain.

"I can't believe it's you," I rasp out, finally letting him go.

"It's not just me," he says, stepping to the side. Standing behind him is his girlfriend, Kendall; the one I said some not so nice things to in the past. Her curly brown hair is up, and she wears her signature yellow: *Go loud or go home* is her fashion mantra.

I don't know what comes over me, but I maul her into a hug as well. "Kendall! It's so good to see you!" I gasp, hugging her even harder than Simon. They come as a package deal now, and hugging her feels like hugging my best friend. Despite all the unsavory things I've said in the past, right now, I'm overjoyed they're both standing in my restaurant.

"Okay, wow," Simon gawks to my left. "I didn't see that coming."

"Um, Arie," Kendall coughs. "I can't breathe. Can you—"

"Sorry!" I let her go and step back, wiping my face.

"How about we—" Simon nods to the back offices, pointing out that we're making a scene in the middle of the dining room and the guests are watching.

"Of course," I laugh. "Everyone!" I raise my voice, addressing the already enamored crowd. "This is Simon, the co-

owner of Flambé, and he's opening a second location in Los Angeles! I'm so happy he's come to visit us in Hawaii that everyone gets free dessert tonight, on the house!"

The crowd cheers, and Simon gives me a *was that necessary* eyebrow.

"Yes, it is," I say to him. "And if you're worried about the bottom line, I'll pay for every dessert we serve tonight out of my pocket."

I grab both of their hands and drag them toward the offices, blabbering on about how happy I am to see them, how gorgeous Kendall looks, and what an amazing surprise this is. "You have no idea how ecstatic I am to see you!"

"We might have a small idea," Simon quips, as we stop in front of the door to his old office. I turn quickly with a cringe in my step.

"Hold up! Promise me you won't freak out when I open this door," I say, lifting a finger in warning.

"I wasn't worried until you said that," Simon frets. "Now I'm terrified to see what's behind it."

"You've been gone awhile," I point out. "And you know me, I'm not—"

"An organization Nazi?" Kendall interrupts, characterizing Simon perfectly.

"She *does* know you, doesn't she?" I praise, tossing her a *thank you* smile.

"We do live together, Arie," Simon deadpans.

"And I'm forever annoying him with three-hundred neon-colored post-its on everything," Kendall says with a laugh, stepping forward to open Simon's old office. She flicks on the lights and gasps. "Holy hot-sauce, Simon! You're never going to complain about another post-it for the rest of your life. Arie, who *are* you?"

We all enter the room, and Simon visibly pales at the

mayhem before him. There are files and papers everywhere. It's the type of hoarder's paradise that will probably send Simon into cardiac arrest.

"Jesus, Arie!" Simon hisses.

"In my defense, this is only half my doing," I say quickly.

"What do you mean, only *half*?"

"I hired your replacement," I state proudly. "Her name is Elise, and she has her own *particular* way of doing things."

"Is she insane?" Simon clips out, clearly overwhelmed by the sight before him.

"No," I defend. "She's thorough."

"You call this thorough?"

"Actually, I do," I continue. "Elise has been going through every scrap of paper and every file. She's got a photographic memory, so even if she can't find the piece of paper you're looking for in its perfectly filed location, she *can* tell you everything that's on it word for word."

"Really?" Simon turns to me, impressed.

"Really," I answer. "Sometimes great things come with *quirks* you learn to live with." I motion to the insanity that Elise has turned *her* new office into. "Now, tell me what the two of you are doing here, because I'm trying really hard not to hug you both into oblivion."

A smile hitches Simon's cheek. I've missed that wry look. I've miss laughing and joking with him. I've missed his annoying quirks, like his need to lecture everyone on organization principles.

"Olivia called," Simon admits. "She told me you hired someone new," he motions to the office, "and it has been brought to my attention that she needs some training."

"You came to train the new you?" Tears prick at the back of my eyes. "I thought you said I had to do this on my own."

He shrugs sheepishly. "I mean, you have, to some degree,"

he admits. “You hired someone, which is the most important part. But I know you haven’t a clue what an accrual is or how to calculate a gross margin.”

“Did you just speak Swahili to me?” I joke.

“Basically,” he agrees. “Plus ...” He turns to Kendall and takes her hand, something unspoken passing between them.

“Oh my god!” I gasp, literally jumping up and down. “Are you two getting married? Is she pregnant? Oh my god! This is amazing!”

“Holy crap,” Simon swears. “Who are you? The Arie I know wouldn’t be excited about either one of those things.”

“Of course, I would,” I defend. “I mean, yes, those things are scary as shit—sorry, Kendall,” I say quickly, remembering she’s not a fan of swearing. “Marriage and tiny humans are scary, but also wonderful. Especially if you love Kendall the way I know you do.”

“How would you know that?” Simon challenges. “We left. You wouldn’t give us the time of day.”

“I know *because* you left,” I emphasize, and the three of us quiet. “You took Kendall with you, which is something you’d only do if you were in love with her for the long run.”

My throat gets tight, suddenly I’m not thinking about them and all the happy milestones ahead. I’m thinking about the man who’s missing from behind my bar.

“I told you she’d come around,” Kendall says, and I frown, not understanding.

“Come around?”

“To the idea of us,” Kendall says, motioning between her and Simon. “And for the record we are neither engaged, nor pregnant.”

“You’re not?” I scrunch up my face, not understanding. “Then why would you fly here? Training an employee can happen over video chat.”

Kendall laughs. “Because best friends are worth keeping,” she says.

I look to Simon, confused. “What?”

Kendall leans over and gives Simon a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll give you two a minute.”

Simon leans against the wall after she’s gone, his face long with all he wants to say. “When Connor called me, it really shook me up,” he admits. “He was so desperate for me to tell him I could forgive you—like he knew it was inevitable. But I couldn’t see past what you’d done in that moment.”

I swallow hard. Truth is hard to choke down.

“But I couldn’t stop thinking about it,” Simon continues. “Not you and Xander, but the fact that Connor expected me to have forgiven you by now. God, that guy’s faith in you is unending.”

My heart sinks. I’ve broken that trust, and after Connor’s week of silence, I’m not sure I’m getting it back.

“But it was when Kendall told me that *she’d* forgiven you that I realized I was the holdout.”

“Kendall’s forgiven me?” I whisper, not sure that’s true.

“Yes.” Simon nods. “Because her heart’s the size of a planet and she believes in seeing the best in people. And trust me, I tried to convince her you didn’t deserve it, but she’s the one who insisted. And then, the other day, she asked me if my anger outweighed how much I missed you—because she could tell, even though I had *her*, and a new business project, and an exciting new city to explore, something was still missing in my life.”

“Me?”

“Yes, Arie.”

My chest squeezes.

“You’ve been my best friend since college,” Simon adds. “I haven’t lived far away from you since we both turned the

drinking age. You've been a staple in my adult life. And yes, I was insanely pissed off at you, but Kendall was right, it doesn't outweigh how much I want you in my life. How much I've missed you."

"You're too good of a friend," I whisper, emotion clogging my throat. "I don't deserve you."

"I even hung out with Esme, thinking *she's the sweet twin*, but it wasn't the same," he admits. "She isn't you. She has your face, but all of her expressions are wrong."

"We *are* different people," I quip.

"That's my point, there's only one you. And I miss how you're irreverent and loud. Or how we used to stay up all night talking and laughing."

"Mostly, that's because this restaurant is open half the night," I point out.

"That's my point," his voice quiets. "I put in crazy hours here because you made it fun."

"What are you saying?" I ask. "I've hired Elise." I motion to her stacks of paper. "And you've already invested a lot in a Los Angeles location, so...?"

"I'm staying in LA," Simon answers. "We're opening a second location. That's happening, and I have to be there to see it through. But I want us to talk, to call, to drop in." He motions to what he and Kendall have just done.

"I'd like that, too." I nod, brushing the wetness from my face again. "I took everything about our friendship *and* our business partnership for granted, Simon. You keep me sane. In fact, when Xander was here—" I cringe at his name, looking away as my chest fills with shame. "When he was here, he reminded me that you were my rock in college. That you were the one I listened to, especially about things that were important. It's no surprise I'm a complete mess without you."

"You *have* made a mess," Simon agrees.

I stare at my feet, dual emotions warring inside me. I'm overjoyed that Simon's here, but one thought about Connor and how I've betrayed him, and I deflate.

"It's a good thing your best friend is here to help you out then, isn't it?" Simon says, his eyes twinkling behind his glasses.

"Are you serious?" I mutter.

"Arie, I don't think it's registered that the *first thing* Connor did after he caught you was call me and *demand* to know how to forgive you." Simon raises his eyebrows. "He *wants* to forgive you."

I frown. That sounds too good to be true.

Simon takes my hand and pulls me into a hug. "Arie, he loves you. We just have to show him he can trust you again."

"We?"

"Yes we." Simon hugs me tighter than when I first saw him in the dining room. "Best friends help each other move mountains."

CONNOR

Ned pulls his BMW into the Atlantis parking lot and my stomach goes queasy. “I’m not ready,” I say quickly. “Turn around, I’m not—”

“Voss’s don’t back down!” Ned pronounces, giving me his lawyer voice as he puts his car in park “Several years ago, you sat in a jail cell waiting for the woman you thought you loved to come bail you out—and she never came. If you can handle that, then you can handle anything.”

“This is different,” I manage, rubbing my sternum. “Arie’s not Zariah.”

“You’re right,” Ned agrees. “Zariah used you and ran away at the first sign of trouble. Arie loves you and made a mistake.”

“Maybe kissing Xander was Arie’s way of also running away,” I posit. She was unhappy. She wouldn’t have even entertained the idea of Xander if she wasn’t.

“Do you actually believe that?”

I frown at him. “Zariah abandoned me, my parents disowned me when I tarnished their good name, and now Arie

kisses another man. You're the lawyer. Tell me the pattern you'd present in court?"

"Fuck," Ned swears under his breath, gripping the steering wheel as he looks out the windshield. Cars surround us in a sea of metal, packed in tight. "Do you know why I married Olivia?"

"Because you knew you'd never do any better," I joke. Ned cuts me an exacerbated look that says *Do you want me to open up douchebag, or do you want the last laugh?* "Because you love her," I say instead. "And she's awesome. I've never seen you so happy."

"All true," Ned agrees, but then he gets quiet. "When dad screwed me over with the firm, all I wanted to do was push Olivia away. If my own father could backstab me, then love was going to do the same."

Ned looks at me in solidarity. He understands exactly what I mean when I say I've been abandoned. Our parents are real pieces of work who cut me out when I got arrested, then cut Ned out for helping me get back on my feet. Ned's the only person I know who's stood by me no matter what.

"I'm not unworthy of love, Connor," Ned says, "and I know that, because Olivia refused to let me cut and run. She chose to love me no matter what. She could see what our parents couldn't—what they probably will never be able to see—which is that I'm enough just as I am. And so are you, Con."

I swallow hard. I want to believe him, and I hear him, I really do, but—

"She kissed someone else, Ned. That's not choosing me no matter what."

"Maybe," Ned concedes. "But she put Xander on a plane less than twenty-four hours after it happened and sent him away. People make mistakes."

"I never thought I'd see the day you'd be arguing on Arie's behalf," I say, remembering how much Ned hated her when we

first got together. He was so sure she'd end up like Zariah, and now I expect him to be gloating.

"Arie is obnoxious and lewd, and way too extravagant for my taste," Ned chides, listing what he considers her less than desirable traits. "But like Olivia did with me, she inspired you to be your best self. She helped you find yourself, when you were flailing. That's not worth throwing away over a kiss. Especially when you haven't even talked to her about it yet."

I grit my teeth.

He's right. I've been avoiding this. When I talked to Nova before this happened, I was all gung-ho *I'm going to fight for my girl*, but the second I saw Arie and Xander together, I retreated into my shell.

I've been a coward.

It's easier to be angry at her than admit I missed something along the way, something that caused her to stray.

But Ned's right. It's time I faced whatever that is.

ARIE

Flames dance atop black candles in golden candlesticks. The flames flicker at the center of a table in Flambé's dining room: a lone table set for two with dark plates, gold flatware, and a black table cloth.

A flower arrangement of purple pincushion flowers sits on the table, made by Archer and Finn's girlfriend Becca. Yes, *both* Archer and Finn are dating her: they're a throuple. I can't keep it together with one guy, which means Becca's an absolute saint to be able to balance two.

All the other tables in the restaurant are empty. I've sent everyone home and the restaurant is closed.

Tonight, is for me.

I sit at the lone table, looking at the vacant seat across from me and waiting for the one person I love more than Flambé. Simon and Kendall helped me set this up. Kendall did the décor and Simon assisted with the menu. Olivia managed the staff, covertly arranging for them to take the night off without spilling the beans to the guest of honor. Ned's supposed to drop him off.

To my left is a tray covered in silver domes. The room is silent. No wind against the picture window. No music lulling in the background. The quietness feels too vast as wax drips from the candles in large black globs, matching the coil of fear in my stomach.

What if this is my future?

A single girl waiting in the dark for absolution that she doesn't deserve.

"Arie?"

My nerves ram into my throat. I bite back my emotion when I hear my name come out of his mouth.

Connor stands on the far side of the dining room in a plain t-shirt and jeans. It makes me feel silly in my dark gown, but I push away that thought and focus on what matters.

He's here.

"Connor," I whisper, standing up. "It's good to see you."

He inches forward, suspicion tightening his handsome face. "Where is everyone? Why is—"

"I gave everyone the night off," I explain. "I—I wanted us to talk *here*." I motion to the restaurant. "Because this is where we started, and—" I don't want to say *if this is where we end, then at least we've come full circle*. I roll my shoulders back to find my confidence. "And maybe, this can be where we start again."

Connor's jaw is tight.

I move around the table and pull out the chair opposite mine. "Please, sit down."

He stares at the romantic set-up and the tray of food to the left, unsure if he's ready to hear my apology. I return to my side and sit, trying to be less threatening.

"You deserve an explanation," I begin, reaching over to lift up the first silver dome. "But sometimes I get my words twisted, so I'm using food to help."

I lift the first item from the tray and slide it carefully onto

his plate. It wobbles, made of red gelatin, the red jelly cut in the shape of a heart.

“Jell-O?” Connor asks, spearing me with a skeptical frown, but it’s enough to entice him to walk up to the table. “You hate Jell-O.”

“I do,” I agree. “It’s cheap and tastes like rubbery fakeness. And my pride would rather I crawl into an early grave than serve something as trite as a Jell-O jiggle in the shape of a heart.”

Connor’s eyes narrow, aware that—for me—this is an uncommon opening gesture. He slides into his chair and sits down. “Is this a metaphor for you swallowing your pride?”

He knows me well.

“It is, and it isn’t,” I answer. “It *is* a metaphor, but that ridiculous see-through heart is me.”

Connor frowns, eyeing the object. The sappy gelatin heart is the last food he’d use to describe who I am, and it warms my heart.

“It’s true, Connor,” I insist. “I’m Jell-O: boring, ordinary, fragile.”

There’s a shake of his head. He disagrees with those characterizations, but I push on with my show, scooping out a dollop of fresh meringue and flopping it atop the wiggling heart.

“I can tell you disagree,” I voice, pulling out a brûlée torch and lighting the meringue on fire. “But the truth is, I do things over the top—play with fire, dye my hair dragon red, create a sexy restaurant—because I don’t want to be Jell-O. I need to prove to myself that I’m more than that: that I’m exotic, important, flammable. If I’m not the center of attention, if everyone doesn’t love and adore me, then I’m reminded that I’m just this wiggly fake thing. I’m nobody. Nothing.”

“Arie—”

I hold up my hand. “Please, let me say this first. Okay?”

He nods, still frowning.

“And then, you came into my life, Connor.” I pull off the next silver dome. “When you didn’t know my name, you called me Wisconsin.” I put a wedge of cheese on his plate. “I got to pretend to be someone else with you, only to realize it was the real me you wanted.” I put a green wedge of quiche next to the cheese. “Spinach and chard are said to reduce anxiety, which is what you did when I had panic attacks opening this restaurant. You were the only person who could talk me down.” I add a wedge of fruit-punch mousse, starting a circle of triangles that all point toward the Jell-O. “You punched your brother defending my honor.”

That earns me a hint of a smile.

I add a wedge of chocolate, covered in a cordial glaze, which I set on fire. “I’ve never been with anyone who ignites me like you do,” I praise. “We are outrageously compatible in the bedroom.” I add a blueberry cheesecake. “You’re loyal.” Then a wedge of dragon fruit with a sprig of rosemary that’s been charred, billowing with smoke. “Because only you know how to tame the dragon.”

I keep adding triangles of food, each one connected to a memory of him and me, until I’ve completely surrounded the Jello-O heart with exotic colors and foods.

“I act out and I make bad choices, because I’m afraid all I am is that piece of Jell-O covered in a slop of meringue,” I whisper, emotion hooking in my throat. “Deep down, I’m scared that’s all that exists under the pageantry. But with you—” I motion to all the colors and details, the sprinkles of sugar, the elaborate garnishes, the smoking elements. “With you, I’m all of this. You make me so much more than I ever imagined, Connor. You make me grow, and stand in my power and face when I’ve been an absolute bitch. And you do it with so much compassion, I don’t deserve it. I’m spoiled to have a man like you love

me. I don't feel worthy of it. But I see you, Connor," I motion to the food again. "I see all that you've done for this relationship. I see everything I've taken for granted."

I take a deep breath to center myself ... this is the hard part.

"So, Xander—" I begin, pausing when I see his muscles tighten. I can profess how amazing Connor is all night long, but my indiscretion is what I have to face. And if I'm halfway worthy of his love, then maybe he'll forgive me. "Why would I kiss another man when I clearly have all this?" My fingers dance over the plate: memories, passion, our life in colorful relief. "Xander is—" my throat closes up; I can't explain this without being honest and Connor's not going to like how it sounds. "Xander is from a time in my life when I was young, when I hadn't had a real relationship, and the only thing I knew about love was that it was forbidden. I did have feelings for Xander in college, but he was taken. He was my forbidden fruit, the person I pined over and cared about and was sure would be the one—if we gave it a chance."

Connor crosses his arms and leans away from me. That's exactly what he fears: that I want Xander to be the one, and time and history will make it inevitable.

"When he showed up to help with the restaurant," I continue, "a lot of those old feelings were stirred up again."

Connor's face hardens.

"But what I didn't realize is that Xander's a fantasy," I push on. "He isn't the one, Connor. He's a projection of a person that doesn't exist. Yes, there's the real person who I went to college with, who loves to cook, and then there's a person I invented in my head. You see, the real Xander isn't in my life anymore. He's a ghost. Me and Xander together is that lump of Jell-O with *nothing* around it, because anything I thought I felt about him wasn't real. It was an insecurity I wanted to fill. It's all projected neurosis."

I rub my face, not sure if this makes sense to Connor. He's listening, but he's barely breathing.

"Flambé was falling apart around me," I confess, "and Xander helped to fix it, but beyond that, there's no substance. He projected onto me, too. He created an imaginary version of me that he desired. *That's* what our kiss made me realize—Xander and I have both built imaginary versions of each other: fantasies."

"Fantasies?" Connor asks, his tone dark.

"They aren't real," I insist.

"But that's the problem, isn't it?" Connor says softly, making my stomach tighten. "That you're imagining anyone—even if it's a projection like you say—other than me. There's something *I* don't give you that makes you look elsewhere."

A weight presses onto my heart like an anvil crushing that stupid lump of Jell-O.

"I'm not enough for you," he whispers, his voice tight. Then he points to the plate. "This is a romantic gesture, Arie, but it doesn't change the fact that even with all this, you don't feel whole."

"That—" My voice catches. "That's not true."

He shakes his head. "If I was enough, you wouldn't have even looked at him. Or projected onto him."

"But it wasn't about you," I say desperately. "It was all of this mess from the past, these *what if* scenarios that had me looking in the wrong direction."

"But you were looking."

"Because Flambé was crumbling around me! And my sister and Simon have both moved to Los Angeles. I've never been successful at anything on my own, Connor. I felt abandoned."

"Abandoned?" His eyebrows raise. "*I* was here, Arie."

The second he says that, the tears start running down my face.

He *was* here, and I did everything I did anyway.

I broke his heart.

“I see,” I whisper, my face dropping into my hands. I lean forward against the table with my elbows. It’s not just the kiss that’s the problem, or a fantasy I projected. It’s the fact that I didn’t turn to him, when I should have.

I wasn’t ever alone.

He was here all along. And like Simon, I took him for granted.

“Oh my god, I’ve ruined this.” My voice is barely a whisper. All my metaphors and slices of food don’t matter. This isn’t about how amazing Connor makes my life. It’s about the fact that I didn’t even turn to him when I was drowning. I didn’t even see there was a life boat right next to me.

I’ve been so self-centered, so focused on my own needs, that I sabotaged the most important thing I had.

“I’m so sorry, Connor,” I sob. “Of course, you’re enough. You’ve been by my side every step of the way and I’m the asshole who—” Emotion cuts into my voice and I have to take several breaths. “*I’m* the one who’s not enough, Con. I don’t deserve you. That’s obvious. I’m the selfish one. I’m the problem. I understand if you can’t forgive me. I understand if you don’t want—”

Me.

This relationship.

Us.

“If this is over,” I rasp out. “Then it’s my own fault.”

And from the look on his face, I’m pretty sure I’ve manifested everything I’m afraid of.

CONNOR

I *f this is over ...*

I hate those words in her mouth.

I hate what they open up as a possibility.

A future without Arie is ...

My throat twists so tight, I don't even know if I can speak right now.

Everything about this moment feels like it will shatter me into a thousand pieces: Arie crying, the chasm between us, the genuinely terrified look on her face. Is this truly something that will break us?

“Arie, I—”

I know she's sorry. I know she regrets everything that's happened. That's plain as day from the expression on her face. But is her simply knowing she messed up going to change anything? Will it affect how she acts in the future? Is awareness enough? I love her, but—

I stand up.

A strangled breath releases from her throat and it nearly

breaks me in half, but I can't look at her right now. I have to do this instead.

I walk away from the table and into the dark. I know this restaurant like it's part of my body. I know it with my eyes closed. I could walk from one side of Flambé to the other completely blindfolded.

I make my way up to the bar that overlooks the dining room. My bar. My home. It's where I've spent thousands of hours over the last two years, doing my passion, laughing, feeling alive, feeling like I had everything: the girl, the job, the friends, love.

I have a family in this restaurant. The family my parents are not.

I reach under the bar and open the safe that's hidden under it, rifling through my personal effects that I keep stashed there. I collect all of my things and take a deep breath.

Is this the choice I want?

Am I really doing this?

I stuff everything in my pockets, except for one thing, which I hold in my fist like my life depended on it. Maybe it does.

In the dark, I walk back to the table where Arie is crying, completely defeated. This has broken her as much as it's broken me.

I sit back down.

She looks up, her eyes haunted as fear strips her gaze, waiting for me to say *it* out loud. To make it official.

I start picking up the wedges she's presented on the plate—tarts, cheese, memories—all the tiny pieces of the life we've made together. I move them onto the table, creating a messy pile, until all that's left is that Jell-O heart covered in burnt meringue. Then I swipe off the meringue, too. The globs of

white stick to my fingers as I add them to the broken pile of food and memories.

“Arie,” I manage, the emotion in my chest matching the fear in her gaze. “Maybe you’re right, maybe you are just Jell-O.”

I look down at the wobbling heart, smeared with bits of white, surrounded by a plate of messy crumbs. She’s a fan of extravagance, and yet, even that has left what matters in shambles. Arie’s jaw tightens. What’s left on the plate is the last thing she wants to be. It’s the last thing she wants *me* to see her as: broken, fragile, sad.

Easy to leave.

“I bought this a while ago,” I whisper, lifting my fist and gripping the contents tightly, before placing the piece of metal on top of the Jell-O. It looks too sad like that, so I lift it up and press it into the gelatin heart so the diamond sits upright.

It’s a ring.

Arie’s face crumples, because now she knows everything she’s thrown away.

“There wasn’t ever a good time,” I manage to say. “Ned was getting married, and I didn’t want to steal his thunder. Then shit hit the fan with Simon and you were so stressed out. And then Xander—” my voice cracks. “There was no way I was giving you a ring with him in town. And now—”

My jaw hardens.

And now.

“Arie, I love you, but—”

I try to swallow the lump in my throat. Her chin trembles and I’ve never seen her so broken. My beautiful Arie sits in front of me stripped bare.

“Arie, I never needed the extravagance.” I motion to the pile of food, all the *extra* she wanted to make herself feel whole. “All I ever wanted was this.”

I point to the wobbling heart on the plate.

Her heart with my ring in it.

“You don’t ever have to be more than this,” I whisper. “If this is all you are, Arie, then that’s perfect. It’s all I ever wanted in the first place. But I need you to promise, that this part is mine.” I push the plate toward her. “That your heart will always be mine—no matter how broken, or scared, or inadequate you think it is. Because I will always want it.”

Arie’s mouth drops open, her chin still wobbling.

“Wait?” She stares at me, confused. “You’re not—?”

“Breaking up with you?”

She nods.

“No, Arie,” I state plainly. “I’m pretty sure I’m doing the opposite.” I pick up the plate this time and slide it on top of hers—the ring right in front of her. “I don’t want to live the rest of my life without you. I want you to be—” I take another deep breath. “But you have to talk to me and let me be there for you. We have to turn toward each other, not away, and if you start fantasizing about anything that doesn’t include me, you have to acknowledge that’s a giant red flag, and talk to *me* about it.”

I push my chair back and stand up, rounding the table to Arie’s side.

“I didn’t fall in love with you, Arie, because you set drinks on fire,” I continue, “or because the restaurant is featured in a magazine, or because you dye your hair bright red. I love you because your vulnerability”—I point to the Jell-O—“makes you passionate. And your passion—be it for me, or for food, or for some crazy flavor combination—makes the world more beautiful.”

I get down on one knee. It’s cheesy, but I really don’t care. I reach over and pull the ring out of the Jell-O.

“Arie, you’ve always been enough for me,” I say, holding out the ring. “And if you actually think I’m enough for you, and you’re willing to do the work to make sure we never take each

other for granted again, then I want to spend the rest of my life by your side. Arie Noel, will you—”

“Yes!” She launches herself into my arms. She’s crying, and laughing, and hugging me so tight it’s like she never wants to let me go. And this is what I wanted: this feeling of being her whole world, of our hearts intertwining, of having to hold.

We fall onto the floor and are kissing. The ring isn’t even on her finger, but all that matters is the two of us are melding into one, undressing, a tangle of limbs and passion. When I’m inside her we slow down enough to look in each other’s eyes and know this is what we both want.

Forever, that’s what.

“You need to put the ring on,” I whisper, and Arie adjusts, letting me slip the ring onto the finger of her left hand.

“I can’t believe you’ve had this for months,” she whispers back, looking at the diamond teary-eyed.

“I was trying to come up with the perfect proposal,” I reply, moving my hips wickedly and devouring her moans as she lies back. She wraps her arms and legs around me as I drive into her, savoring the joy in her eyes. My heart expands, because my teary-eyed and vulnerable girlfriend is the sexiest thing on the planet. “Tell me,” I whisper, leaning down to nip at her jaw. “Do you think you’ll come harder when it’s your fiancé’s cock you’re on?”

“Oh God,” she moans like that’s the biggest turn on. Before I know it, she’s flipping us over and rolling me so she’s on top. And there’s nothing hotter than my fiancé riding me in the middle of her restaurant—except for maybe the next time she does it, when she’s my wife.

NOVA

Hailey and I are sitting on my love sea, howling with laughter. Cici sent me several romance novels that are currently flying off the shelves in hopes that they might inspire my next book deal. Instead, Hailey and I have been reading the spicy parts out loud (using ridiculous voices) and pissing our pants laughing.

“Sir Robert unhooked his trousers and—” Hailey reads, her cheeks apple-red from laughing.

“Unhooked?” I interrupt. “What kind of trousers is he wearing that they have hooks on them?”

“The kind that need extra reinforcements to hold in his ginormous male appendage!” Hailey howls. “Remember Lady Eleanor described her fingers as *not able to touch* the last time her hands were around his—”

“Oh my gosh, right!?” I hold up my forearm and wrap my fingers around a section where they don’t touch, showing Hailey. “That’s got to hurt!”

“Talk about a beef bayonet!” Hailey howls. We double over in laughter even though she’s referenced the word Xander used

for throbbing man parts. Our eyes catch, and Hailey grimaces at the face I'm making. "Too soon?"

"No, it's fine," I say quickly, trying to push off the conversation about the hot Brit who I wrote a BS ending for in my book. *Don't worry about it*, Cici had said. *Your editor will help you write a better one if needed.* I keep shaking my head and telling myself *it's fiction*. It doesn't matter if the HEA is forced or not. People want a happy ending. Give the masses their HEA even if you didn't get one.

"Have you heard anything from him?" Hailey asks, tiptoeing into the subject with a *You don't have to talk about it, even though I want you to tell me everything* look of concern.

I shake my head. "In Xander's defense," I say, "I haven't called or texted him, either."

"Because you're over him?" Hailey asks. "Or because you're afraid of what he'll say?"

"Or what he won't say," I admit. "Or that he might ignore me completely."

"Not possible." Hailey shakes her head. "He was way too into you to ignore you. Plus, he stole your books. He needed three totems to remind himself of your awesomeness."

"And yet, he hasn't contacted me," I point out. "He got on a plane without a goodbye. I'm pretty sure he's moved on."

Hailey frowns. She's the optimist of optimists, but even she can't ignore the cold hard fact that all Xander left me with was a text message. "Maybe it's a British thing," Hailey offers half-heartedly. "They're stereotypically polite and afraid to show emotion. Maybe he's—"

My doorbell rings and we both turn at the sound.

"Maybe he's behind that door right now," Hailey gasps with excitement, leaning into the ridiculousness of her proposition. "Maybe he's flown all the way back here to profess his love."

"Or—" I give her an incredulous look, "—maybe it's my

Door Dash delivery.” I open my mouth in mock excitement, pretending that would be even more exciting.

“You’re a romance author now,” Hailey replies as I head to the door. “You have to at least pretend to believe in true love, otherwise your readers will call bullshit!”

“With the BS ending I wrote for that book, they’re going to call bullshit anyway,” I point out, turning the knob and swinging the door open.

“Holy shit!” I swear, completely blindsided by who is on the other side.

Hailey jolts up. “Is that him? Was I right?”

Hailey wishes. Nope, it’s the complete opposite.

Standing on the other side of my door is Arie Noel.

“Oh damn,” Hailey echoes, when I move to the side to show her who it is. Even though Hailey’s never met Arie, she’s heard enough about her to identify the power redhead standing in my doorway.

“Hi,” Arie says, looking between me and Hailey with cat-like eyes, unsure if we’re dangerous. When we don’t react, she settles on the fact that we’re stunned, and turns to me with a feline smile. “Can we talk?”

“Um...?” After Xander left, I didn’t think I’d see Arie again. “What are you—? Xander’s in London. He left.”

“I know. I bought him the ticket,” she says, looking over my shoulder at my tiny apartment, then to Hailey on the love seat. “Sister? Best friend?” Arie asks, nodding to Hailey. “Do you know about Xander?” she calls out. “Because I can say this in front of you if you do.”

“I know who you are, if that’s what you’re asking,” Hailey replies sharply, her defenses flaring.

“Excellent.” Arie walks into the middle of my apartment like she owns the place. “Then you probably think I’m the evil bitch who ruined everything for your friend, right?”

Hailey's eyes flick to me, trying to gauge how I want her to play this.

"You don't need to look at Nova for confirmation," Arie interjects. "I *am* the evil bitch. And I *did* ruin everything between your friend and Xander."

"Me and Xander weren't real," I assert, shutting the door, though I'm not sure it's smart to trap a black widow in my living room. "We were fake."

"I know that, too," Arie adds, turning to me with a sly smile on her face.

"H-he told you?" I frown.

"We're friends." Arie nods. "He told me before he left."

I swallow hard. Not sure why she's here, or what Xander told her. "Well, if you sent him back to London and you know it was fake," I say, gathering up my courage and walking toward her. "Then what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to fix it," she says proudly, rolling her shoulders back assertively.

"There's nothing to fix," I reply, keeping the love seat between us. But the dragon in my living room cackles loudly.

"He flew back to London to appease me," Arie clarifies. "Not because he doesn't want *you*."

My forehead scrunches. "It was fake," I repeat.

"It wasn't though, was it?" Arie asks, turning to Hailey for confirmation. Hailey looks to me again, not sure how to answer. "Exactly," Arie confirms, using Hailey's expression as evidence. "It wasn't fake." This time her eyes pin me. "Maybe it was at first, but I was at the beach house, Nova. I heard you two through the wall." She points at me and I feel my cheeks burn. "He may have kissed me because of some BS history we both thought meant something, but you're the one he actually wants."

"None of that makes sense," I sputter. "*You're* the girl who

got away. Not me. Xander is never going to have feelings for me when he still has feelings for—”

“He doesn’t!” Arie interrupts. “Trust me, Xander and I will *never* happen. I love Connor.” Arie raises up her hand and flashes a big diamond ring on her finger. “Connor is my forever and Xander knows that.”

“But you two kissed!” I remind her.

“But—” Hailey interjects. “*You* and Xander kissed, too. And *more*, actually.”

Arie smiles at Hailey, happy for an ally. “My point, exactly.”

Suddenly, I’m annoyed. Maybe Xander and I did have a connection. Maybe he’s worked out his confusion over Arie. But none of that matters, because he’s in London. “If you didn’t notice,” I grumble, “you put him on a plane. He left. He didn’t even say good-bye to me, so—”

“Well, he sent you a text,” Hailey betrays.

“Right, he sent me a *you were nice, but I’m leaving* text,” I growl. “And I haven’t heard from him since. So, whatever you’re here to say, Arie—”

“Good,” Arie interrupts, her voice definitive. “You’re still in love with him.”

“What?” I glare at her. “I’m not—”

“Angry he left without saying goodbye?” Arie interjects again. “Brokenhearted that he lives in another country? Thinking about him every second of the day? Wondering *what if?* What if that bitchy redhead hadn’t been in the picture? What if it had just been you and him?”

I frown, not wanting to agree with anything Arie says. She’s the problem. She led Xander on. She was jealous. She went out of her way to stake her claim and—

My eyes flick to her in confusion. Wait a second. Arie *was* jealous of Xander and me. Like *really* jealous. Which means—

There *was* something between us.

“Ah!” Arie says, pointing at the expression on my face. “There it is. You’re finally realizing you and Xander had something.”

“It’s true,” Hailey confirms. “She’s got it bad for him.”

“Hailey!” I growl. “Whose side are you on?”

“Yours. Always,” Hailey confirms. “But if you haven’t noticed, I think Arie’s on your side, too.”

“He lives in London,” I reiterate. “And he doesn’t do long distance relationships. So, I don’t know why”—I motion to Arie, who looks gorgeous in her 50s couture, making me and Hailey look like bookish trolls in comparison—“the Goddess of Flaming Desserts is in my apartment.”

“You’re right, Xander doesn’t do long distance,” Arie confirms. “Charlotte broke his heart. A long distance relationship is going to be a hard *no* for him.”

“We’re going in circles,” I point out.

“Which is why I’m here with a proposition,” Arie says quickly. “Xander may be in London, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t head-over-heels for you. I saw the way he looked at you. It made me green as an avocado.”

“Which is why I don’t trust you,” I defend. “And even if Xander was into me, which is doubtful, he still—”

“Lives in London,” Arie finishes, pulling something out of her bag and waving it at me. “Which is why I got you this.”

She shoves a paper into my hand.

“What is—?”

It’s a plane ticket.

“Non-stop. Hawaii to London,” Arie explains. “When you and Xander showed up in Hawaii, the premise of your fake-relationship was to *see if it was serious*. My proposal is you do exactly that. Go to London and see if it’s serious.”

“What?” I stare at the ticket, completely blindsided.

“You can stay in the United Kingdom with a guest visa for six months,” Arie continues. “Which is why it’s a one-way ticket—for now. I’ll pay for the one to come back, *if* you decide to come back.”

“If?” This woman has clearly lit one too many cakes on fire. “You said six months. Of course, I’m—”

“You’re allowed to stay in Belgium and France for three months each,” Arie interjects. “Both are only two hours from London by train. Ireland and Scotland are further away, but it’s Europe; countries are as far away as states over there. And after 180 days, you can come back to the UK for another six months.”

I shake my head at Arie. What is she talking about? “You’re crazy! I’m not going to country-hop in Europe. I can’t afford to stay in—”

“Which is why I got you a housesitting gig in London,” Arie replies, pulling out another piece of paper and handing it to me.

“What are you talking about?!”

“I know I light food on fire for a living,” Arie says, “which makes me seem eccentric, but this is all very practical. I got you a plane ticket and a place to live for the next three months. At that point, if you and Xander are serious, he’ll ask you to live with him, or you can find something you can afford if you need more space.”

“If we’re serious?” I stare at her, my chest thumping wildly. “I’m barely a blip on his radar. He hasn’t sent me a single message since he left. We are definitely *not* serious.”

“Well,” Hailey interjects again. “He did say to look him up if you were ever in London.”

“Hailey!” I howl. How can she be my best friend and undermine me at every turn?

“You’re right, you’re *not* serious as long as you live here,”

Arie agrees. “But his lack of contact isn’t as malicious as it seems. It’s simple, actually. He doesn’t want to lead you on. In fact, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t want to lead *himself* on by keeping in contact. As long as you live in Hawaii, he’s not going to give himself the space to fantasize about the possibility of you two as a couple.” She gives me a knowing eyebrow. “Trust me, if I’d actually followed Xander to London, my life would be very different than it is right now. But I didn’t. And I’m glad I didn’t, because I met Connor, and he’s the love of my life. But going to London is *your* opportunity to see if things would be different if you lived near each other.”

“Temporarily!” I grind out, but Arie just gives me a sideways smile.

“You’re a writer,” Arie says. “You can write from anywhere.”

“Oh and—” Hailey gasps, sitting up with excitement. “You also have that book you went to London to research in the first place. You could totally work on that while you’re there.”

“Oh my God, Hailey!” I hiss. “Stop kicking my legs out from under me.”

“I’m not!” she defends. “I’m just pointing out that there are worse things in life than a free trip to London. And if the love of your life happens to live there, well—!” She starts clapping excitedly.

“He’s not the love of my life,” I bellow.

“Maybe he’s not,” Arie says, holding her hands up to calm me down. “Or maybe he is.” She gives me another knowing smile. “But you’ll never know if you don’t fly over there and give it a chance. And as Xander’s friend, I’d hate to have messed up what could’ve been a really good thing for him. So, please consider this”—she motions to the plane ticket and the paper outlining the housesitting gig—“my apology. That flight leaves in a week. Think about it.”

She nods to both me and Hailey, before letting herself out of my apartment with the same brashness she let herself in. I stare at the two pieces of paper in my hands, completely blindsided. I'm not actually considering this, am I?

But when I look up at Hailey, she's grinning like I won free tickets to every Taylor Swift concert from now till the end of time, and my heart starts to warm.

"Oh heck, yes," Hailey exclaims, knowing me better than I know myself. She flings herself up from the love seat like a piece of popcorn that's been catapulted across the room. "I'm getting your suitcase!"

NOVA

London fog rolls down the Thames river, coating the city in grey. It reminds me of every cliché mystery novel ever written, and I half expect Sherlock Holmes to turn the corner and address his indomitable Watson. Clichés aside, it's beautiful. Famous bridges are half-swallowed in mist. Autumn leaves dance on the pavement. And I feel at home with every Londoner who walks by in a cozy sweater and boots. My style definitely fits the damp London scene more than it does the heat and humidity of Hawaii.

Maybe Arie has a point. Maybe there is a future for me here if I'm open to it. Of course, that doesn't settle the butterflies in my stomach that flutter around like they're drunk on apple brandy.

The directions on my phone tell me to turn up the next street toward Xander's restaurant. The picturesque lane is full of brick facades and gas lanterns, making me want to believe in happily ever after. Am I that girl now? The one who writes rom-coms and actually flies across the world in hopes that a

romantic gesture will be met with a kiss instead of a *holy shit, I have a stalker* look of terror.

I guess, I am.

The pubs and shops are abustle with late afternoon traffic. Black cabs woosh by and patrons come out of parlors with blocks of cheese wrapped in butcher paper. It's idyllic in a way that doesn't feel real, just like that text Xander sent before he left for the UK that said *You were wonderful*. Hoping that he still has feelings for me seems like a self-delusion, and I can taste my inner *everything ends in tragedy and heartbreak* literary soul trying to regain its dominance.

My stomach tightens when I see his name written in gold letters on the dark lintel across the street—The Carlisle. The outside of his restaurant is masculine and British, falling in line with the historic pubs and restaurants I've already passed. It makes me smile, because it feels quintessentially Xander: tradition, gentlemanly, kind.

I cross the street. My leather boots clack against the stones, and I wonder if I should've dressed up instead of wearing jeans and this cute blouse that's covered in illustrated birds. I pull my blazer tight and walk up to the restaurant, not sure how I should play this. *Surprise! It's that bookish girl you met in America.*

The well-dressed host in the front entrance reminds me of Xander with his tweed suit and British charm, smiling warmly as he welcomes me to the restaurant. "Do you have a reservation, Madam?"

I raise my eyebrow at his proper introduction. "I, uh—I do not," I admit, glancing at the name tag pinned above his pocket. "Sully," I address him by name. "I'm actually looking for—" I glance to the dining room, unsure how to address Xander in his place of business. "Chef Carlisle," I decide upon. "Is he here?"

Sully's eyes narrow and his gaze traces me up and down. Was that improper etiquette? Is it impolite to ask for the chef?

"I'm sorry, Madam," Sully says, his friendly demeanor thinning. "Just because the chef's name is on the restaurant, doesn't mean he's available for"—he eyes me once again—"tourist selfies."

"No, no," I say quickly, "I'm not—"

"I understand that Mr. Carlisle was on television and is very handsome," Sully interrupts. "But he doesn't entertain every American tourist who stops by in hopes of—"

"That's not why I'm here," I blurt out, causing Sully to purse his lips at my intrusion. "I know Xander—I mean, Mr. Carlisle—" I correct, "from Hawaii. He and I—" I stumble over my words, unsure how to explain my relationship to this man's boss. "We, uh—my name is Nova Wolfe. I'm a friend of Mr. Carlisle's." I brush off my already clean blazer. "If you could let him know I'm here, that would be appreciated."

"From Hawaii?" Sully's eyes narrow again. "You don't have red hair."

"That's because I'm not Arie," I blurt out, but then I realize my mistake. If Xander's employee knows about the red-haired vixen from Hawaii, then Arie's the one Xander talks about and misses. Not me.

I'm such an idiot for coming here.

"You know what," I say quickly, trying to save face. "Never mind, I've made a mistake. Thank you for your time."

I turn to the large mahogany doors and push them open.

"He's not here," Sully calls out from behind me, but I try to ignore his brush off and keep walking, turning down the street toward the river.

I'm a fool.

I've obviously read too many romance novels since meeting Xander that I actually thought this trip wouldn't end in humili-

ation. Ha! Turns out HEAs just give you unrealistic expectations, and I didn't even have to see Xander to feel my face burn with shame.

"Ms. Wolfe, wait!"

I ignore the voice and keep walking. I don't need another lesson in public embarrassment. I'm almost to the end of the lane when a hand snags my elbow and swings me around.

"You're that author, aren't you?" Sully says, standing before me and panting.

"I'm sorry I bothered you," I snip, pulling my arm back. "Please forget I showed up. I'm just another stupid American tourist."

"No, you're not. You're the author Xander met in Hawaii," Sully insists. "The one with the cute glasses and a blue strip of color in her hair. The one who wrote the books he can't stop quoting."

What? I frown at him. Is he serious?

"The one named after a star," Sully adds, pointing at me. "The one he—" But then he cuts himself off, lifting a hand to his chin in contemplation. "Xander hasn't been at The Carlisle in weeks."

I shake my head, not understanding.

"Bollocks," Sully swears, before digging out a business card from his pocket. "He'd probably kill me if I didn't give you this."

"If you didn't what?"

Sully pulls a pen from his pocket and scribbles on the business card, then offers it to me.

It's an address.

"Is this—?" I look at Sully in confusion. "Is this Xander's home address?"

"Gracious, no!" Sully gasps. "I've seen enough American

movies featuring single, white, female stalkers, thank you very much. I'd never tell you where he lives!"

"Then what is this?"

"Well, if you *are* her," he says, giving me the once over for the third time, "then you'll want to go there."

"Why?"

"Because if you're a stalker, it's very public," Sully says seriously. "But if you're *her*, then that's where you'll find him."

"I'm not Arie," I repeat, because it sounds like he's confused.

"I know, you're not," he agrees. "You're the one who inspired this." He points to the address again. "He should be there for another hour, so take a cab." Sully nods, a weird smile on his face, before he turns around and jogs back to the restaurant.

Did he just say I inspired something?

I look at the address again and the rock in my gut feels twice as heavy as it did when I arrived. But grand gestures take a little foolishness and a whole lot of hope, so I raise my hand and tell myself I can be this girl.

I hail a cab.

XANDER

If Flambé has taught me anything, it's to stop being afraid of a little whimsy.

The jewel-toned, blue walls are flashier than I'd normally paint a restaurant, but they're the perfect background. The quotes scrawled across the walls in calligraphy gold, however, pop like fancy filigree on a Fabergé egg. What the quotes say and where they're from is what betrays my new penchant for the sentimental.

"The shelves in the second parlor have been painted, Mr. Carlisle," comes the voice of my contractor, who's been outfitting this space with custom built-ins and furniture. I look up from my seat near the window, where I've been filling a notebook with menu ideas: an elevenses Hobbit's feast, a Jane Austen's afternoon tea, Sherlock's mystery meat.

"Wonderful," I say, checking my pocket watch. It's late. "Oh goodness, Mr. Barnet, is that the time? Please, clean up your things and call it an evening."

"Much obliged," Mr. Barnet says politely. "If you're staying on, Mr. Carlisle, the main lights aren't wired yet. But the

lanterns by the front work.” He steps forward and flicks on the fairy-like bulbs that frame the windows. They hang like glowing flowers on magical vines; a fantasy novel come to life. “Those’ll get you through if you’re staying late.”

I nod a thank you. “Not long,” I indicate. “Just a few more minutes to get these ideas out of the old noggin.” I lift up my notebook and Mr. Barnet smiles.

“It’s going to be beautiful when it opens,” he says, shuffling off to get his things. “I’ll let myself out the back.” His voice echoes through the empty space, currently vacant of tables and chairs. I haven’t decided if I want extravagant seats upholstered in gold, or hand painted ones, themed after British classics: ice queens and wardrobes and cotton-tailed rabbits in blue coats.

The warm light from the lanterns makes the metallic quotes on the walls glow, and despite the fog outside, inside it’s magical. Maybe that’s what stories do, they remind you that your imagination isn’t just for dreaming, but for living too.

And maybe it’s the slant of the light, or the all-too-romantic sentimentality that’s been the spring in my step lately, but I swear an apparition is standing outside my soon-to-be new restaurant. An apparition of a star with blue glasses and silky brown hair.

I shake myself, because I’m not allowed to indulge in a fantasy like Nova. She lives on the other side of the world, and even though I’m the fool who created a restaurant that reminds me of her, it was meant to be a reminder to live my life in the here and now.

But the door knob jiggles and a rush of cold autumn wind blows through the main entrance as the apparition steps into the foyer.

“Xander?”

The lanterns cast her in soft light. Whisps of unruly hair frame her crown, and her blue glasses reflect the gold of the

lanterns. Her gaze is burned into my memory as an autumn's pinch of cold colors her cheekbones.

"Nova? Is that actually—?"

"It is," she whispers, a flush of red creeping up her neck to blush her chin. "I, um—hi."

"How are—?"

"Sully told me where to find you," she says quickly.

A smile hooks my lip. This new location is a secret, and we haven't told anybody about it, and yet—Nova's standing in front of me.

"I'm in London for, uh—" A second blush burns over her ears, and my mind scatters, remembering intimate places I've tasted and kissed, where she blushes the most gorgeous shades of red.

Her eyes flick past my shoulder, catching something on the wall, her eyes squinting as her face puckers into an adorable version of confusion and awe.

"Wait." She points, then steps further inside, her eyes fixed on the gold paint that loops in words above my head. "Is that—?"

Her eyes hit me, and I'm sure I'm the one who's now blushing.

"It is," I confirm, turning to see which passage is on the wall behind me. "Oh yes, I believe that quote is from—"

"The end of my third book," Nova says in surprise, her eyes flicking to other quotes beyond the first. "Wait, that one's from my second book," she points. "And that—"

"They all are," I interrupt. "There were too many beautiful lines to stay hidden between your pages, Nova. I just couldn't help myself—"

I quiet. I'm gushing like a school boy. I thought this place would be finished, with all the kinks ironed out and the staff

trained, before I ever saw Nova again. Before she ever saw exactly the effect she had on me.

“What is this place?” Nova asks, her boots clapping against the floor as she ventures through the main room into the next parlour. I tuck my tiny notebook in my pocket and follow her, finding her fingers dancing across the empty shelves of the built-ins Barnett made.

“Those might be wet,” I warn. “Mr. Barnett just finished the final coat of paint.”

“Bookshelves?” She turns to me with curiosity on her face. The second parlour is dark as the sun sets, the lanterns from the front barely lighting her as she looks around. “Is this a—”

The space around us feels even more foolish with her standing in it. I was sure I’d never see her again, much less stand in the unfinished parlour that’s inspired by the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in her apartment. It was a memory I couldn’t shake—a beautiful place where the written word was worshiped, a safe bed with a beautiful woman lying next to me.

I really do have a problem—of fantasizing, projecting. That couldn’t be any more apparent than at this moment as we stand in this shrine to Nova. Obviously, I’ve learned nothing from what happened with Arie. Except, I wanted this to be a real physical space. Not just something I imagined or hoped for, but a physical location that held a memory—the memory of her, yes, but also my ability to remember and still move forward.

She was never supposed to stand in it.

“It—it’s a restaurant,” I try to explain. “The concept is still in progress. It’s the kind of thing you have to build to figure out what it is.”

“A new restaurant with—” her hand runs over the bookshelves again as if this is some bizarre story where I’ve magically trapped a piece of her soul inside the wood and paint.

“This is embarrassing,” I admit. Other people didn’t see it—

not Sully or Barnet, or anyone else who's helped with this venture—because they aren't Nova. It isn't so blatant to them. "You see, The Carlisle, it runs perfectly without me. It seems, I'm obsolete in the restaurant I created that bears my name. It's outgrown me, or vice versa. And—" I look up at the ceiling which is covered in gold starbursts: stars exploding (or stealing energy. How had she described a Super Nova to work?). Goodness, I'm transparent. "Well," I shrug, "I needed something new to put my creative energy into, and—" I gesture to the parlour around us. "I started creating this place."

"Which is a restaurant about ... me?"

Wow. I look crazy.

"Bollocks, Nova, you must think me insane," I apologize. "I swear, I'm not some deranged cock-up." But when I look around at the painted room, words can't hide the undeniable. "Yes, it's inspired by you," I admit, stepping to the threshold between the two rooms and motioning to the quotes. "In my defense, there are too many beautiful quotes in your books. It started with them, but it grew from there. I thought, my guests should be surrounded by actual books." I motion to the shelves beside her. "I decided the ceiling should feel like stars and ideas exploding. One choice led to another, and all I knew was that each choice made me feel vibrant and alive. For the first time in months, I couldn't wait to get up, stand in this space, and create. It wasn't meant to be creepy, Nova, I swear. I just couldn't stop thinking about you and your books and your apartment and the book shop and laughing about videos on social media, it—gosh this is going to sound stupid—but it was like my muse came back, or you're my muse, or just being in this space wakes me up and channels inspiration." I pull out my notebook. "In fact, I had the most inspired idea last week. What if I don't have a fixed menu? What if it changes—like life—it comes and goes with seasons, like love affairs, and precious moments, things

you only momentarily get a taste of. What if each month the menu is inspired by a different book?” I walk up to her and start flipping through pages of my notebook, so she can see what I’m talking about. “I’d probably start with British classics: Tolkien, Shelley, Austen. But with an American author’s words all over the walls, I’d have to branch out. Maybe even choose a living author or have live events. Honestly, I don’t know what this place is yet—a bookstore, an event space, a restaurant? Maybe it’s all of that. I’m not sure. I’m just following the creative flow and trusting time will tell.”

Nova stares at me wide-eyed, her mouth slightly open as she attempts to process me and my sudden exuberance. I’ve been doing this a lot lately, blurting out rushes of unvetted ideas, chatting up strangers, quoting literature like a drunk scholar.

“Gosh, just look at me rattling on,” I apologize, stepping back with my notebook. “I’m sorry, Nova, that was a lot. I’m being a beastly arse! And where are my manners? Please, let me start over.” I stuff my notebook away and brush off my vest. “Nova, hello! What brings you to London? It’s absolutely delightful to see you. You look gorgeous, as always. Are you here on vacation? Or working on a book? Or is this just a quick hop over the pond to—”

“Xander, you’re irrepressibly adorable when you’re nervous,” she quips, her lip quirking into a sideways smile.

“Well, it turns out, when the woman who inspired the restaurant I’m creating is actually standing in front of me *in it*, it’s hard to deny how stark raving mad I truly am.” I rub my chest. “Lost all my marbles. Sauced. I’m sorry you’ve had to witness what not getting over you does to a man. I should definitely be issued a strait jacket as soon as possible.”

That sideways smile blooms into a full-fledged grin. “I think it’s pretty sweet.”

“No, it’s bat-shit crazy, is what it is.”

“Well, you could’ve just called,” she says, walking toward me. “You didn’t have to paint a war of constellations all over your ceiling.”

“You’re a nova,” I say jokingly. “You steal all the energy you can.” She laughs at that. “I didn’t call because I was afraid to reopen something I knew I couldn’t have.”

“And you thought this was a healthier choice?” Nova asks, motioning to the restaurant.

“I did make a previous statement about strait jackets,” I defend. “And after Arie—” Nova tenses at her name, and I remember everything she said about not wanting to get involved with someone whose heart was taken. “You and I had a connection, Nova, I won’t deny that. But there’s no way I was going to call you and lead you on. Arie and I are done. Friends—if time and milage doesn’t fade us into distant acquaintances. And yes,” I motion to the quotes on the walls, “maybe I wasn’t ready to let go of the connection I had with you, not yet. But the one thing I know for sure is distance doesn’t make the heart grow fonder. It spurns resentment.”

Nova nods, nibbling on the edge of her pinky finger, a hint of peacock blue paint marring her palm. “You know,” she says, inching closer to me as I stand between the two rooms. “You haven’t given me a chance to explain why I’m here.”

I shake my head, embarrassment flushing through me again. “I’m so sorry, of course. I haven’t given you a chance to say anything. Nova, please.” I motion for her to take the floor.

She reaches over her hip and flips open a messenger bag. “I came by to give you this.” She pulls out a large, spiral-bound manuscript.

“Is that?”

She turns the cover to me, which says: *Faking It in Paradise* by Nova Ash.

“I sold it to one of the big five American publishers,” she says, handing it to me. I take it reverently, like it’s something holy. “The ending is complete shit. I’m definitely going to rewrite it.”

“Romance readers don’t like an ending with tragedy, huh?” I joke, nodding to the somber quote on the wall from her last book.

She laughs. “They do not,” she admits. “But even a happily ever after has to be authentic, and it turns out, that’s really hard to write when your heart is broken.”

My hands grip the sides of the manuscript.

“When your heart is—” I swallow hard. She’s not talking about—?

Nova slides her hand over mine and the zip of electricity races through my skin like a gunshot.

“You—you live in Hawaii,” I whisper, as she runs that hand up my wrist, then my arm, my entire body waking up.

“Actually,” Nova says softly, “I made a deal with Cici about my career. One book for the money,” she taps the manuscript that suddenly seems like the only thing separating us. “And one book for the art.” She waves her other hand toward the quotes on the wall. “Which means I’ve returned to London to write my next book. It’s actually the book I was researching before I met you on the plane.” Her hand finger-walks up my shoulder to my chin, and I catch a whiff of the paint on her fingertips. “I’m housesitting in a neighborhood called Belgravia.”

“That’s a posh neighborhood,” I interject.

“Yes,” she agrees. “Quite a bit fancier than my bookshelf lined apartment in Hawaii—which I broke my lease on last week, after I moved all my belongings into storage.”

“Boxes of books are very heavy to move,” I say, starting to realize what she’s saying.

“They are,” she agrees. “But it turns out there’s quite a few

muscle-laden employees at Flambé who were paid to move them into storage.”

“Arie helped you?”

“She bought me the ticket and arranged the housesitting gig.”

I furrow my brow. “What exactly are you saying, Ms. Ash?” I lift up the manuscript and point to her new pseudonym.

“I’m saying, I’d like to write a new ending to that book,” she says with a grin. “One where I live in London for the next six months.”

I drop the book and pull her against me, cupping her face. “Ms. Ash,” I practically growl. “I don’t know if you realize this, but I’m already obsessed with one N. A. Wolfe. She might get jealous.” I stroke her cheek, my chest feeling fizzy.

“Yes, N. A. Wolfe has a tendency to turn toward the dramatic,” she says with a laugh. “But here’s the thing about Ms. Ash that might give her an edge.” Nova’s eyes flair with mischievousness. “Ms. Ash writes super-hot sex scenes.” Nova leans in, brushing her lips against my cheek, before lifting them to my ear. “And she prefers to do her research, if you take my meaning.”

“Is that so?” I growl. “If Ms. Ash needs to research my beef bayonet, then Ms. Ash gets what she wants.”

Our mouths crash together—like stars burning up, stealing each other’s energy, or fueling each other up; either way, it feels like being reborn.

NOVA

Xander's bedroom is quintessentially English and old fashioned with wooden furniture and Victorian wallpaper. It's homey and simple, with starched bed linens that are impeccable, folded with the perfect hospital corners. Moonlight casts through the room, dotting the floor with lace shadows from the curtains.

It's hard to imagine myself stretched out on that bed—completely naked—but that is, in fact, what I'm doing.

My boots are on the floor. My bird blouse is draped over a chair. My knickers are hiding somewhere under the bed, having been torn off and kicked away in a torrent of heat and kissing. All that's left are my blue glasses as I lay naked above the covers, bathed in moonlight. My glasses allow me to see the impressive man standing at the base of the bed, unbuttoning his shirt slowly as his eyes trace over every inch of me that's exposed.

It's erotic to watch Xander slowly lose clothes as I lie here achingly bare. The duvet is cold against my back, but the rest of

my skin is feverish. My core burns as he loses his waistcoat, his slacks, then seductively peels his unbuttoned shirt off his shoulders. My eyes feast on his brawn, the taught muscles and thick arms, the sexy V above his boxers and fit legs.

“I believe the last time I saw you wearing this little clothing,” I tease, “was when you were three inches tall on my social media screen.”

“I don’t cook naked,” Xander says gruffly, pushing his boxers down his thighs and showing me his erect prize.

Oh. My. God.

The great British beef bayonet is impressive.

I audibly whimper at the sight of him completely naked, a naughty smile hooking his lip at my unabashed ogling. I think my mouth literally starts watering. I want him in my mouth. I want him between my legs. I want *him*.

“How are you this beautiful?” I ask, sitting up and sliding down to the end of the bed. I place my hot palm against his abs and push him backwards a step, just enough space to drop myself to my knees in front of him.

“Nova, you—”

“If you think I’m going to pass up tasting you, you’re absolutely insane.” I cup him and lift his shaft, spreading my lips around his impressive head.

“Fuck!” he hisses as I slide him deep, looking through my blue glasses at him towering over me. It’s finally us—just him and me. Nothing fake. No performance. No one else to draw his attention away. And I’m going to take everything he’ll give me.

He hits the back of my throat and his mouth drops open, looking down at me like he’s about to blow. I feel him twitch against my tongue, and I pull back, releasing some of my suction on him.

“Nova,” he pants. “I’m not going to last if—”

I clutch his ass and swallow him again, intensifying the suction and hollowing my cheeks, never taking my eyes off his as I tease.

“Oh!” He grabs one of the posts on the bed, then a fist-full of my hair with his other hand. “Your mouth is wicked.”

He pumps his hips softly, sliding himself in and out of my mouth. I can tell by the way he grips my hair that he’s holding back. He wants to let go, but he’s too much of a gentleman to fuck my mouth the way he wants to. I gaze up at him deviously, relaxing my jaw and stroking his balls, inviting him to come down my throat.

He jackknives forward instead and pulls himself out. “Slow down!” He gasps against my shoulder. “Oh God, Nova. Fuck.”

“You swear a lot when your cock’s in my mouth,” I tease.

He growls viciously, and suddenly, I’m on my feet. He’s yanked me up and is kissing me. I moan as our naked bodies connect—heat and need and tingles erupting all over my skin. He kisses me so hotly I want to climb him and wrap my legs around his hips. I want him to fuck me standing up with my back against one of the banister poles of his bed.

Instead, he tosses me back onto the duvet as if I weigh nothing.

Before I have a chance to orient myself, he’s pushed my knees open and is diving between my thighs. He licks the inner skin of my leg, right next to my pussy, but not where I’m aching. My body spasms because he’s so close, and I cry out as if he’s thrust his tongue deep into my cunt.

“To the right,” I direct as he nibbles the edge of my outer lips, deliberately not tasting my pussy. “Xander, please!” I beg, arching my back and lifting my hips off the bed.

Offering.

Aching.

“Fingers,” I plead. “Tongue.”

I’m flooding with anticipation.

“Fuck, you’re wet,” he praises, hovering his lips over my quivering flesh. His big hands slide over the insides of my thighs, opening me wide, as he breathes against my pussy and makes me wait.

“Xander! Oh my God!” I squirm. “Eat me, chef!”

“Calling me chef?” he teases, the heat of his words slicking me. “God, you’re tempting.”

His tongue sears across my slit, parting me hotly and making me gasp. But he continues upward, his tongue hitting my stomach and licking me straight up my abdomen to my tits. His whole body moves with him, his shoulders spreading my legs, his chest dragging across my soaked pussy. He licks up one swell to the peak of my nipple, latching on and sucking hotly.

“Yes, chef!” I grovel, feeling the echo of his teeth and suction deep in my core. He moves to the other breast and I grip his hair, my body humming at his hands and mouth worshiping my tits with a searing devotion.

Then he’s kissing me, his tongue prying open my lips and searing me with a blistering kiss. His body weight descends, no longer crawling up my body but lying on top of me in a drowning wave of skin. I whimper at the illicit pressure of his naked body wringing out my lungs, the silken heat of our skin burning hot as coals.

I wrap my legs around his hips and moan at the way he kisses, unapologetic and greedy. Our bodies rock and sway—as if he’s inside me, except I’m achingly empty—and it’s like he knows that makes me ravenous. I’m so delirious, I could come from the way his hip grazes my clit or the wicked way his cock occasionally drags against where I’m wet.

“Xander!” I croon, digging my nails into his back. “I need you inside me. Please tell me you have a condom. Because if

you don't, I'm going to do something stupid like fuck you without one."

Xander tisk-tisks in my ear. "Impatient girl."

He swirls his hips, and the thickness of his erection rakes over my wetness.

"Please, yes!" I grovel.

"You put my cock in your mouth and almost make me come," Xander growls in a low voice, "then you threaten to take me bare? You better be careful, Ms. Ash, or I'm going to take you up on it."

I push him back by his shoulder. "Get a condom right now, or there's going to be little Nova-Xander babies running around this flat in nine months."

"Babies? Plural?" He laughs, rolling off me and turning to the side table. "That's a terrifying thought." He opens a drawer and finds a condom.

"Terrifying?" I tease as he sheaths himself. "You don't want children, Mr. Carlisle?"

He rolls back on top of me. "You really want to have the kids conversation right now?" He notches his cock in my entrance and I swear I see black.

"Oh fuck! I want to have a thousand babies with you," I grovel, my greedy pussy latching onto his tip and aching for him.

"I think you just want my cock," he teases.

"Yes!" I plead. "Was that not obvious?" I run my hands down his back and squeeze his ass. He's so perfect, it's painful.

Xander looks down at me with a kind smile, and delicately removes my glasses from my face. "I see why you like missionary," he whispers, tucking my glasses safely on his nightstand.

"Because you're in the power position and you get to watch me beg?" I toss at him indignantly.

"No." He shakes his head and strokes my cheek softly. "I

like it because I get to watch your face when I—” His hips rock forward and my mouth drops open.

His cock pushes inside me and I’m gasping, clutching his sides, digging my nails into his hips.

“Xander!”

“Yup, that,” he admits, peering down at me as I fight for breath.

He’s so big. He fills me completely. My heart thunders in my chest. The pressure of his body on top of me and his cock inside me has me overwhelmed with sensation and emotion.

I flew over two oceans to be with this man, and I cannot believe how perfectly we fit. I cannot believe how hard my heart has already fallen. And he must see that in my face, because he smiles and strokes my cheeks and kisses me softly, before saying, “I’m crazy for you too, Nova.” He kisses my nose. “And for the record, yes, I want kids.”

He pulls back wickedly, then thrusts deep.

“Maybe not a *thousand* kids,” he clarifies, “but—”

He thrusts again, and I see stars.

“One or two little ones running around would be nice.”

“I’m never leaving London!” I cry out, meeting his thrusts with my own heat. “You can’t be real.”

“Oh, I’m very real, Nova.” He increases his pace. “I’m done fantasizing about things I can’t have. Instead, I’m going to take everything, and that starts with fucking you perfectly with my very real cock.”

“I love your very real cock,” I compliment. “Please, don’t stop!”

I wrap my arms around his back and hold tightly as he fucks me harder. Fucks me perfectly, just as he said. Fucks me until I’m gasping and orgasming and coming with him in his perfect British apartment in the most romantic city in England.

And when we’re sweaty and sated and wrapped in each

other's arms, Xander kisses my temple and whispers, "Missionary may be your favorite position, Nova, but in ten minutes, I'm going to show you mine."

Oh.

My.

God!

Arie was right. I'm not going to need that return ticket. I'm becoming a Londoner for life.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elle Berlin is the author of steamy contemporary romance novels that will make you laugh out loud.

Elle has a background in screenwriting and design, and is an amateur baker. She's a sucker for romantic comedies—especially ones with lots of kissing and witty banter. A true foodie, Elle will seek out exotic off-menu delicacies and walk the extra block to the bar that has star anise in its cocktails. Inspired by exotic locations, delicious food, and contemporary art, Elle hopes to make the world a little more decadent one sexy book at a time.

When she isn't writing spicy stories, you can find Elle oil painting, reading in her hammock, sipping wine, baking macarons, or rose gardening (even though she has a black thumb and half of her plants end up dead).

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