

Keyifli Okumalar Dileriz

Binlerce kategoride milyonlarca PDF e-kitap, ders kitapları, dergiler ve romanlara platformumuz üzerinden ücretsiz ulaşabilirsiniz.

RESMİ WEB SİTEMİZ

<https://rantey.org>

Yedek ve Duyuru Kanallarımız

Sitemize erişim engeli gelmesi veya adres değişikliği durumunda aşağıdaki kanallardan güncel giriş adresine erişebilirsiniz:

- Telegram: <https://t.me/birkitapbir>
- WhatsApp Kanalımız : <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029VbDHv8uE50Us4lvMoc0Y>

A SWEET ROMCOM

THE VALENTINE'S BET



KRISTINE W. JOY



İletişim Botu:
@cevirigiller_bot

Çeviri Kitapların Olduğu Telegram Kanalımız
<https://t.me/cevirigiller>

Sohbet Grubumuz
<https://t.me/cevirigillersohbet>

Çeviri Yedek Telegram Grubumuz
<https://t.me/+O3tsm8j0C7kxM2Y1>

Kitap İstekleri Kanalımız
<https://t.me/cevirikitapistekleri>

Not:

PDFlerin paylaşımıyla ilgili bir sorunuz yok. Ama lütfen, hiçbir katkınızın olmadığı işlerde, TÜM PDFleri bizimle eş zamanlı paylaşarak emeğimizi hiçe saymayın. Sizin tek tıkla yaptığınız her paylaşım bizim emek harcadığımız saatler/günler demek.

THE VALENTINE'S BET

Kristine W. Joy

Copyright © 2025 by Kristine W. Joy

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

*To the hopeless romantics.
You are seen and you are loved.*

CONTENTS

[1. Chapter One](#)

Amy

[2. Chapter Two](#)

Parker

[3. Chapter Three](#)

Amy

[4. Chapter Four](#)

Parker

[5. Chapter Five](#)

Amy

[6. Chapter Six](#)

Parker

[7. Chapter Seven](#)

Amy

[8. Chapter Eight](#)

Parker

[9. Chapter Nine](#)

Amy

[10. Chapter Ten](#)

Parker

[11. Chapter Eleven](#)

Amy

[12. Chapter Twelve](#)

Parker

[13. Chapter Thirteen](#)

Amy

[14. Chapter Fourteen](#)

Parker

[15. Chapter Fifteen](#)

Amy

[16. Chapter Sixteen](#)

Parker

[17. Chapter Seventeen](#)

Amy

[18. Chapter Eighteen](#)

Parker

[19. Chapter Nineteen](#)

Amy

[20. Chapter Twenty](#)

Parker

[21. Chapter Twenty-One](#)

Amy

[22. Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

Parker

[23. Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

Amy

[24. Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

Parker

[25. Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

Amy

[26. Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

Parker

[27. Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

Amy

[28. Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

Parker

[29. Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

Amy

[30. Epilogue](#)

Amy

[31. Extended Epilogue](#)

Amy

[Also By Kristine W. Joy](#)

[Get Connected](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER one

Amy

Alone ... the day after Christmas.

I stare out the tiny window of my New York City apartment overlooking Central Park. Moving to the Big Apple is a dream come true—I should feel grateful.

And I do.

Mostly.

But the fact that I booked my flight the morning after Christmas has me questioning my life decisions. Because I don't start my new marketing job until Monday, and I have zero friends here in New York. While the whole world is abuzz with the lingering holiday vibes, I'm stuck in my apartment.

Alone.

Mom was right, I should've just stayed in Chicago another day.

I flop back on my bed—which is right in the middle of the living room, kitchen, and dining area. I’m realizing now that I didn’t appreciate the two-bedroom apartment I had back in Chicago nearly enough.

“At least the bathroom is private,” I mumble to myself, staring up at the light overhead. “Ugh.” I groan and roll over, reaching for my phone. While I’m not usually one to wallow in self-pity, I know that if I call my mom, she’ll just remind me of what I already know—that I didn’t have to come back so early—and I’m not really in the mood for that. I only moved into this apartment a week before Christmas. I wanted time to get settled in ... or so I thought.

I scroll through my contacts until I land on Eliza’s name.

My best friend will listen to me.

She always does.

I put the phone to my ear, hoping she’s not too busy with her new husband.

“Hey you,” she greets me, her tone as bright as the Christmas lights still dangling on the little Christmas tree I set up in the corner before I flew home. “How’s New York?”

“It’s, um—” I pause, running my tongue along my lip. “Lonely.”

“Aww, I’m sorry. I’m sure it’ll get better once you get settled and make friends.” She’s always encouraging, but the laughter I hear in the background sends a pang of jealousy through my body. “I can definitely relate to how you’re feeling, though,” she adds. “When I first moved from Chicago to West Falls, I didn’t know a soul apart from Granny.”

“But then you met Nick the *day* you moved there.” I sigh.

“Yeah, but only because he had to rescue me after I fell through that decrepit wooden access ramp, which was pretty much the most embarrassing moment of my life.”

“And then you married him.” I chuckle, twirling some of my chocolate-colored hair between my fingers. “Ugh, you’re so lucky. You have the cutest love story in the entire

universe, and I'm sitting here alone at twenty-nine—having never even *kissed* a guy.” I facepalm myself.

Eliza is pretty much the only person, other than my mom, who knows that I'm *that* freaking lame. And I don't even really have a good reason for it. I've just been *so* focused on building my career that, up until this point, I didn't really make time for dating (or kissing). I guess, in the back of my mind, I always assumed it would just happen for me, that I'd stumble upon Mr. Right in a grocery store or the library or something.

But now that I've officially *made* it—having landed my dream job as a marketing executive for a prestigious firm in the heart of Manhattan—I'm finally ready to start getting serious about finding someone to share my life with.

“You know, you're in that huge city now. You could very well have your first kiss by New Year's Eve,” Eliza says. “You just have to get out there and be bold—we both know you can do that. You're seriously the only person I've ever met who *never* meets a stranger. You're *so* bubbly and outgoing—I think you could probably have a conversation with a wall.”

And I've had plenty, thanks.

“Brick is the best listener,” I quip.

She bursts into laughter. “See, you're hilarious, Amy. There's hope for you.”

I sigh, my eyes drifting to my closet. I completely revamped my wardrobe before moving here, trying to match the NYC look. It's not all that different from Chicago, but it feels that way... And maybe, somehow, new clothes will attract a man.

“Amy, you're gonna be just fine, and you're going to find love. I know it.” Eliza could be on one of those pep talk reels that play on my Instagram feed.

My gaze drops to the floor. “It's just that ... well, I've kinda started to wonder if there's something wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you.” Eliza counters my negativity, which is just as annoying as it is helpful. I know the truth, but *ugh*, something about being all alone the day after Christmas makes me feel like wallowing right now. “You’re one of the best people I know. You just need to suck it up, search the internet, and find something fun to do this evening. Put yourself out there!”

I glance over at the tiny clock hanging on the wall and squint. “But it’s already six-thirty. And I don’t even know where to go.”

“Well, I can tell you one thing. Don’t go into Central Park alone after dark. That’s not a good idea.”

I snort. “We lived in Chicago. I think I can handle myself. I’m not worried about getting mugged. I’ve done my homework. Plus, you know I’ve got that pepper spray on my keychain.”

She laughs. “Maybe you should see if there’s some type of local singles get-together tonight. They used to have meet-ups at the Crooked Lagoon back in Chicago. I know a few people that went to them.”

“Do you really think I could meet *the one* at something like that?”

“Girl, I fell through a rotten ramp and met the one. I think your odds are much higher than mine were. It’s not like you’re going on Tinder or something. Most people who go to those types of events want to find the right person.”

“Or they just want to hook up,” I say, my lips turning downward.

“Maybe,” Eliza hums. “But you can usually spot those people. They’ll make flirty advances and want to leave early.”

“Yeah, okay.” I make a mental note. “I’ll steer clear of men who make any flirty advances or offers to leave early.”

“Maybe just be ... cautious. Not *every* person who flirts or leaves early is a red flag. Some men might be flirting with

you because they genuinely like you—and they might want to leave early if the event runs too late.”

I raise a brow. “This is contradictory.”

“You just have to feel them out,” Eliza says. “You can do it. Just read their body language and whatnot. Of course, I thought I was reading Nick correctly and it was *a//* wrong. He was in love with me while I thought we were just friends.”

“I think deep down you knew,” I reason, my heart fluttering at the thought of finding that kind of love for myself. “And it’s *so* romantic. I wish I had that kind of story.”

“Your story is just beginning! And I bet it’s gonna be epic, considering you just moved to one of the greatest cities ever. You have so many opportunities. Starting now. Go find that singles night! There’s bound to be one,” she says with an audible smile. “There’s plenty of people in the city who probably feel just like you do.”

“True,” I say, putting her on speaker and opening Google. “Do you think I should just try to find the closest one? Or one that looks the most promising?”

“Probably the closest—unless the most promising one isn’t much farther away. Start slow tonight.”

I nod in agreement. “Okay.” I look over the page, scanning the events that are popping up. “*Millionaire Singles Mingle*,” I read aloud, frowning. “I definitely do *not* fit into that category.”

“You could go anyway.” Eliza laughs. “Fake it till you make it, am I right? I bet it would be a real hoot.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll pass. The moment I walk in the door wearing my twenty-dollar sweater, they’d probably make me leave.”

“But maybe you’d catch the eye of a handsome, rich man before they kick you out,” Eliza coos before giggling. “That would be totally wild.”

I perk up. “So should I go?”

“What else is there?”

"Let's see. There's a speed-dating event a couple blocks from me. I mean, it looks like it might be fun. I've never speed-dated before."

"Isn't that where you just switch partners after, like, five minutes of talking? That could be fun—and you'd have a chance to meet a lot of people, too."

"Okay," I say, sitting up. "I'm going. It starts at eight. That's plenty of time for me to get ready."

"Yay! This is gonna be great. And you know how to be New York-pretty."

"I have no idea what that means, but absolutely. Yes. I'll look all business."

"But fun."

"Yeah, business and fun."

Eliza giggles. "You're so cute. But seriously, dress like the hottie you are. I'm literally so excited for you. I can't wait to hear all about it."

"I wish I could just FaceTime you through the whole thing."

"You got this," she encourages. "Go get 'em, Amy. Just be the bright light that you are and show those New York guys what they're missing out on. Oh, and make sure you tell me *everything* after it's over—and please let me know when you make it back to your apartment safe. You know the drill."

"Yes, ma'am," I say, saluting though she can't see. "I'll text you during the event if things get dicey."

"Deal. Take pictures of the place, too. I love the NYC vibe. It's so amazing."

"Okay, okay." I stand to my feet and head for the bathroom. I have no idea what I'm going to wear, but there's bound to be something promising in the pile of new clothes that my mom and I bought the weekend I moved in. "Have a good night and tell Nick and the rest of the fam that I said hi—all that good stuff."

"I will," she chimes. "Love ya."

"Love you, too," I say before hanging up.

Phew. Eliza's right.

I *do* have a lot to offer.

And it's about time I shake off the holiday blues and put myself out there.

A smile spreads across my face as I look in the mirror. Even with all the holiday eating I partook in, my complexion is *on point*. I run my fingers through my dark waves, wondering if I should wash and attempt to tame the beast of curls or work with what I have.

So many decisions.

My stomach flips as I start the shower. A fresh city deserves a fresh me. My cheeks flush as I step under the warm water, imagining what might become of tonight. Maybe I'll be walking out with a second date...

Maybe I'll experience love at first sight.

Wouldn't that be something?

I imagine myself calling up Eliza tomorrow, telling her all about some dreamy, dark-haired, handsome stranger with eyes that see right to my soul. My heart thuds in my chest at the thought of that first kiss...

And all the things that might follow.

Roses, date nights, parties, and movie nights in. I want it all so much I can hardly stand it.

So tonight, I'm going to put my best foot forward and give it my all.

Why not try to get my first kiss by New Year's? What do I have to lose?

I reach for my phone and turn on "Welcome to New York" by Taylor Swift. Her voice fills the bathroom and I sing along, feeling lighter than ever.

Tonight is going to be special.

I just know it.

CHAPTER TWO

Parker

Tonight is going to be a freaking disaster. I just know it.

I let out the most annoyed sigh possible, catching my best friend's gaze.

"It'll be fun," Weston says, rolling his eyes. "You need to get out more, Parker. You can't just sit in your apartment all alone. That's not healthy for you."

"Alright, well, first of all," I begin, taking in a deep breath of freezing New York air and burying my hands deeper into my leather jacket, "I do *not* just sit around in my apartment all alone. And secondly, I don't care about going to these single-mingle shenanigans. There are a lot better ways to spend my time."

"Dude, they're fun. Just admit it. There are so many interesting people in the city, and you never know when

you'll stumble across someone you really hit it off with. You might find some girl in tech and fall head over heels."

"Yeah, okay," I snort, shaking my head. "You know what I usually find at these disastrous events? Girls who just want to hook up—and you know I'm not into that."

"Neither am I, but it's not *that* common. I feel like most of them are looking for someone they connect with." Weston wraps his coat a little tighter around himself, the tip of his nose reddening. "We all crave connection."

I let out a sigh. "Well, I'm here, aren't I? So, let's just get this over with. I have to work tomorrow." A sharp breeze blows as we get closer to Newson's, which is just another hole-in-the-wall dive bar. Don't get me wrong, I actually love the place...

But not on a night like this.

I stiffen as I see just how crowded the place is. We haven't even made it inside and I can *hear* the chatter of the patrons. My eyes drift over the exterior of the building as we reach the door. The brick is painted black, with gaudy Christmas decorations displayed in the windows.

It's a travesty of a place, really.

"Put a smile on your face, Parker. You look like a grown-up emo kid."

"Shut up," I groan as Weston grabs the door handle and holds it open for me. Christmas music plays in the background and the tables are arranged in rows, with women on one side and men on the other.

Why am I doing this to myself?

Oh, that's right. Because I made a drunken promise to Weston in college that I would always be his wingman.

No matter what.

Which he's held me to. Every. Day. Since. Whether I like it or not...

"Dang, there aren't any open chairs next to each other," Weston says, sounding a little disappointed. "Guess we're gonna have to do this one on our own."

"Think I'll just go home." I spin around to face the door, but he stops me, grabbing my forearm.

"Don't be a Scrooge."

"Christmas is over," I grunt before letting out a sigh. "But alright, fine. You owe me for this."

"Yeah, sure. I'll buy you lunch tomorrow or something. Now get a drink and go sit down."

I do exactly as he says, grabbing a beer from the bartender and making my way to one of the empty chairs on the men's side. I've done the speed dating thing with Weston before, and the only positive is that you don't have to be with each date for very long.

"We'll begin in two minutes," the facilitator calls over the microphone.

"Whoo hoo!" a woman shrieks in excitement, and I whip my head in the direction of the sound. My eyes land on a petite brunette dressed in a black sweater and light-wash jeans. Her heart-shaped face is beaming, and the smile beneath her slender nose has me questioning the woman's sanity...

And everyone else seems to be eyeing her in the same way.

As gorgeous as she is, she's acting *way* too excited for this.

"Hi, you can sit here." A voice much closer cuts into my thoughts.

I look down to see a blonde wearing a name tag that says *Brenda* on it.

"Okay, Brenda," I reply, pulling out a chair and taking a seat. I grab the blank name tag on the table and consider writing a fake name but instead write out *Parker* in chunky letters.

The last thing I need is for someone to think I have a decent sense of humor.

My eyes drift back to the woman who's over-the-top psyched, and she must feel my gaze on her because she

suddenly looks *right* at me. *Man, talk about some eyes.* Her baby blues are a light icy shade—and it takes me a hair too long to pull my gaze away.

But I do.

Because despite how stunning she is, I can already tell she's a handful.

"Okay, let's begin," a voice calls over the PA. I turn to see a man in his mid-thirties, looking *thrilled* to be up there. "Usually, we do sixty seconds, but tonight, we're feeling generous. So, each table gets five minutes, and then the men will shift to the left. Women, you get to stay where you're at."

"Let's go!" The overly excited brunette pumps her fist into the air.

I nearly burst into laughter.

Who is this girl?

The buzzer rings, snapping me out of my thoughts—and I have to be courteous, so I turn my attention back to Brenda. "So..."

"So..." she begins, biting her thin lower lip. "I just came tonight because I had nothing better to do, and we get one free drink."

"I get that," I say with a smile. "The free drink is nice."

"Yeah, for sure."

"Yep." I drum my fingers on the table, not really caring that it's starting to feel awkward. That's what these things are: *awkward*.

But man, I can't stop staring at the woman across the room.

She's a good ten spots away, but the way she talks and *looks* at the man at her table tells me everything I need to know. She's *really* into this whole thing, her chin resting on her hands and a gleam in her eye.

She'd probably get along nicely with Weston.

Speaking of, I glance around the room, spotting him waggling his eyebrows at a redhead across the table. She's

blushing and laughing, and I already know that he'll probably get her number.

That's what he does.

And then it never works out past one or two dates.

We eventually fill the silence—by talking about the weather.

"Time's up!"

Thank goodness.

I give Brenda a nod and move to the next chair. She doesn't really pay me any attention, her eyes already fixed on the gruff hipster taking my place. He must be more her type or something. I don't mind, though, because I'm too busy watching the mystery woman on the other side of the room who's seemingly drooling over every man that sits across from her...

And it's just as intriguing as it is painfully hilarious.

I can't wait to get to that one.

After fifty brutal minutes of making my way through a bunch of women, most of them doing the majority of the talking, some just sitting there awkwardly attempting small talk, I'm finally pulling out the chair in front of the woman I've had my eyes on all night...

"I'm Amy." She beams, a bright smile on her face. However, it doesn't exactly reach her eyes.

"Rough night?" I ask, running my fingers through my blond hair. "You don't look nearly as excited as you did when this thing started."

"I just haven't felt a connection with anyone," she admits. "But it only takes one to make a lifetime."

I swallow the chuckle threatening to slip out. "Uh, I guess so."

Honestly, Amy is even prettier up close, with freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose and plump natural lips.

"How's your night going?" she asks. "Have you met anyone special?"

I blink a couple of times. "Um, no. I don't think I've ever met *someone special* at one of these things."

Her brows furrow. "Wait, you've never had any success at these events before? Do you come to them often?"

"I'd prefer *not* to attend these events at all, but my buddy seems to drag me to more of them than I care to admit. I don't think they work."

An intrigued expression flashes across her face. "So, if that's what you *really* think, why don't you just sit with those guys?" Amy gestures to a group of about five guys hovering around the bar instead of partaking in the event.

I give her a thoughtful look. "I guess I didn't think about that. Next time, I'll keep that in mind. Anything to get out of spending five minutes of misery—"

"You're being really negative." She raises a brow. "Why?"

"Are you a therapist?" I ask, folding my arms across my chest and leaning back against the chair.

"No, I work in marketing."

"That makes sense," I quip.

"Excuse me?" Her mouth drops. "Why would you say that?"

"Just your ... overwhelming aura. Are you new to the city? Or just new to these events?"

Amy pauses, and her silence gives her answer away—but I still wait for it.

"I'm new to both," she finally says. "But I think New York is the city of opportunity, and so many cool people live here. I'm bound to connect with one and *finally* get my own love story."

I grimace. "Maybe *you* should see a ther—"

The buzzer cuts me off.

Dang, already?

I push back from my chair, somewhat disappointed.

"I'll find love," she says, looking up at me. "I know I will."

I tap the table. "Well, good luck with that, Amy. This city eats women like you alive. Don't try too hard."

She looks mortified by my comment, but it's the truth. The movies make this place out to be magical, but I've lived here most of my life...

And the city has a way of sucking romanticism right out of a person.

I spend the rest of the evening trying my hardest not to listen to Amy's obnoxious laughter—and the only reason it's obnoxious is because I can tell that it's forced. Whatever joke some dude cracks, no matter how horrible it is, she *still* laughs.

And I don't even know why I'm paying any attention to it right now.



"Well, this was an interesting crowd." Weston chuckles as the event ends. "The lonely come out the day after Christmas."

"No kidding," I snort, my eyes searching the sea of people exiting the building. Some are leaving together—probably to hook up—and others are walking out alone.

Which is exactly what Amy is doing.

"She was interesting." I gesture to her from a good ten feet back, turning to Weston. "But she tried *way* too hard."

Weston tilts his head. "Really? I thought she was nice. She's definitely not *my* type, but she was one of the few women here who offered a genuine conversation. I think she's the kind of person who might actually find love at one of these events. She knew the right questions to ask, and she seemed to be legitimately interested in what I had to say."

"Hmm. I did *not* get that vibe." I shake my head. "She sorta seemed like the type of woman who would marry the first guy who gave her attention."

Weston grimaces. "You're such a jerk. Just because you don't believe in love doesn't mean someone else can't find it. There are plenty of people who have long-lasting, beautiful relationships. You just haven't had the privilege of being around it. My parents have been together for nearly forty years."

"Yeah, and they probably secretly hate each other," I suggest, shrugging my shoulders.

"Like I said, you're a cynic."

I take a deep breath, a mixture of past feelings welling up in my chest. I push them away. "Yeah, I guess I am a cynic."

CHAPTER THREE

Amy

This city is going to eat me alive.

The words bounce around my brain, and I don't even know why. *Parker*, which is what his name tag said, was just some killjoy trying to ruin my night. Sure, he was handsome and had this mysterious, grumpy vibe that worked.

But *clearly*, he's the kind of guy who stomps on people's dreams and laughs about it later.

I let out a sigh as my heels clack along the pavement. Well, I assume they're clacking. I can't really hear anything above the noise of the early morning rush of people. I wrap my arms around myself, weaving through the crowd until I see the office building coming into my view.

My first day.

My stomach flutters with nerves, and I'm seriously hoping that my new coworkers are friendlier than the people I met

at the bar this weekend. I mean, some of the men were nice—but not one of them asked for my number.

In fact, no one even talked to me outside of the five-minute conversations we were forced to have. *Ugh*. I had such high hopes, only to be let down. Which is why I haven't texted Eliza about it yet. I'll just wait until she brings it up.

I push through the revolving door and head for the elevator. I hit the up button and wait alongside about ten other people.

And then we all pile on.

Someone in front of me hits the fourteenth floor, relieving me of the duty. I hide in the corner, which isn't hard, given that I'm only five-foot-three. Well, add a few inches for the heels. But still, these people are *towering* over me.

I breathe in the mixture of cologne and perfume, trying to pick out any scents I recognize. I can't.

The effort makes me smile, though, and soon the elevator chimes on my floor.

"Excuse me," I say politely, squeezing through the eight people still remaining. I recall the route I took for my interview and make my way to the office marked 1404.

"Good morning, Amy," Louise, the receptionist, says as soon as I walk through the door. "You're early. How was the morning commute? Ted was planning to give you some leeway since it can be difficult to navigate the streets first thing."

"It was great, thanks!" I say, keeping a smile on my face. "He said I'd be shadowing a couple of the other marketing execs today?" I glance around at the sea of cubicles.

"Yes, Nellie Ramirez specifically." Louise brushes some of her gray hair out of her face. "I'll send a message to her to come fetch you."

I nod, clutching my bag to my side. I know what I'm doing, and I've climbed the corporate ladder to get this job at one of the most successful marketing firms in the city. However,

despite my breadth of qualified experience, I can't help the nerves in the pit of my stomach.

And I'm blaming my experience at the speed-dating event for it.

Maybe this city really isn't all it's cracked up to be.

"Amy, I'm Nellie," a tall, slender blonde says, catching my attention. The woman could seriously be a model, standing a solid six inches taller than me. "Welcome to the firm."

"Thank you."

"Let me show you your office first, and then we'll get started."

I blink. *My office?* I figured I'd be in a cubicle.

But I don't argue, and the thought of having a real office puts a little pep in my step. I'm at the top of my game. No random guy at a singles event is going to tell me otherwise.

Nellie leads me to a windowed-in office. "This is your space." She pushes open the door, revealing a sleek, modern desk with a white leather chair and a Mac computer. It is *perfect...*

And has an incredible view of the city.

"Will this do for you?"

"Absolutely." My voice is bright. "I love it."

She smiles. "Me, too. I remember when I started here a few years ago. It was such a nice change to have my own space. Cubicles are okay, but this is way better."

"Most definitely," I agree, setting my bag down on the desk. I remove my coat and hang it on the back of the chair, smoothing out my olive-colored blouse and black slacks. "So, what do we do next?"

Nellie laughs, her green eyes twinkling in the natural light. "Well, I'm going to show you our software, introduce you to the team you'll oversee, and then hopefully, we can get lunch in a few hours. Zach and I have been waiting for some help for a while, so it's only right we take you out to lunch."

I beam. "That would be amazing."



The morning goes flawlessly—and when I say that, I mean literally *everything* was perfect. The team I'll oversee seems to be full of bright creatives, and I'll never get tired of my office view. I snap a few pictures and send them to Eliza and my mom when I get a few spare moments.

"So, what do you think so far?" Zach looks at me through his dark-rimmed glasses. He's a solid ten years older than me, but I can already tell he's young at heart.

"I think this is going to be phenomenal," I say with a smile, breathing in the city air as we walk along the street. "It's just what I was needing."

"*You're* exactly what we needed," Nellie adds. "Ted did a great job when he hired you."

I'm beaming ear to ear, and I have no idea what to say other than thanking them profusely. We walk another three blocks making small talk and getting to know each other until we arrive at an Italian café nestled in between a boutique clothing shop and an old candy store. As I step inside, the scent of tomatoey garlic fills my nostrils.

"This is one of our favorite places to eat lunch," Nellie comments as a waiter leads us to a back booth. "It's the best Italian I've ever had—and that's saying something."

"She goes to Italy twice a year," Zach clarifies as he slides in across from the two of us. "She actually invited me and my girlfriend to accompany her this year, but we're saving up to buy a nice place. No vacations for us."

"Oh wow, that's exciting," I say, ignoring that all too familiar pang of jealousy creeping into my chest as I pick up the menu. "Where do you want to live?"

"Upper East Side or maybe Chelsea," he answers, reaching for the water the waiter just placed in front of him.

"I don't know. I recently got a raise, so I'm hoping that'll expand our options."

I nod. "It's definitely expensive here."

"Oh yeah," Nellie mutters, leaning back in the booth. "But it's worth it to live in a place like this. My fiancé and I are planning to move to the suburbs at some point. It's just hard with the commute."

"It's a dilemma." Zach chuckles as he picks up a menu. "And what about you, Amy? Do you have a significant other?" He meets my gaze over the top of the menu.

"No, I don't. I, um, was hoping I'd meet somebody here."

"Ah. Any luck yet?"

"I actually went to a speed-dating event this weekend."

"Oh, fun! How was it?" Nellie asks.

"It wasn't bad, but it wasn't *great*. There were some people there who kinda killed the mood." My mind flashes back to Parker, and I frown.

"Oh yeah, that's probably because it was right after Christmas," Nellie says, pushing some of her blonde hair out of her face. "I think people get a little bitter or angry that they're alone around the holidays. But if it makes you feel any better, I used to go to those events *all* the time when I first moved here. I met a lot of really cool people."

My heart jumps with hope. "You did? Well that's encouraging. I'm hoping I might make some new friends at least."

"I actually met my girlfriend at a singles event," Zach adds, a smile on his face. "We've been together for two years now."

"Are you still planning to propose on New Year's Eve?" Nellie asks him.

"Yep. That's the plan."

"Oh, my goodness," I say, setting my menu down. "Congratulations! That's so exciting."

"Well, it's about time, considering I turn forty next year." He chuckles, and Nellie rolls her eyes. "For the longest time

I thought I was going to end up alone. I was so caught up in my career. But before I knew it, everyone around me started having families of their own, so I decided to finally put myself out there. And I'm glad I did."

"I feel that," I say, my stomach flipping. "I've also been heavily focused on my career and haven't made much time for dating. And while I don't regret it, I'm definitely feeling ready to find my person. Especially since my best friend got married earlier this year. She has the *sweetest* love story. And I can't help but want to experience that too, you know? I've sorta turned into a bit of a hopeless romantic," I admit with a shrug.

"It's okay to be a romantic." Nellie says. "In fact, this city is *full* of romantics."

"That's not what I was told at the speed-dating event."

"Well, you probably just got stuck with some guy who had a chip on his shoulder. There are a lot of people like that in the city, too, and you can't let them ruin it for you." Nellie leans back against the red leather booth and smiles. "I know we just met, but I can already tell you have an infectious personality and you're very charismatic. Don't give up."

"For sure." Zach nods. "You'll find someone. I'd suggest a few events, but it's been so long since I've set foot in one that I don't know which are the most reputable anymore. My recommendation would be to stick to the good areas of the city, and you should be fine."

I nod, suddenly feeling a whole lot better about the dating scene in New York.

It's finally time to order our food, so I opt for the lunch portion of fettuccine Alfredo with a Caesar salad ... and devour it. I don't know if it's the *best* Italian food I've ever had—my hometown of Chicago *is* known for its food—but it's a close second.

"Thanks for getting my lunch," I say as we step back out into the freezing New York air. "I really appreciate it."

“Of course.” Zach smiles. “It’s only right we buy you lunch on your first day.”

“So, have we totally scared you off, or are you going to dive back out into the New York City dating scene?” Nellie asks.

I nod without hesitation. “Oh, I most definitely will. I wasn’t sure I was going to after the not-so-great experience at the speed-dating event ... but I’m not ready to give up. I’d really like to have a date by New Year’s Eve.”

“Then you better get busy.” Zach laughs. “You can do it.”

Yes. Yes, I can.

And as soon as I get off work, I’m going to find another singles event to attend.

CHAPTER FOUR

Parker

“Well, well, well... Look who decided to finally show up.” Mia laughs as I step through the door of the coffee shop. “How nice of you to join us, Parker.”

“Hey now, it’s only been a couple of weeks.” I shrug. “You’re acting like I’ve been MIA for months.”

“You might as well have been,” Weston says, taking a seat beside Mia and John, two of our good friends.

“Oh, shut it,” I snort, pulling out a chair and taking a seat. “I went and visited my mom for Christmas.”

“Does your mom have a new boyfriend yet?” John asks, shooting me an amused look. “Seems like every time we talk, she’s found a new man—that she claims is *the one*.”

“Ha, ha,” I comment, my voice flat. “No. Thankfully she doesn’t. I think she’s finally given up on her pursuit.”

"She has terrible taste in men," Mia says, letting out a sigh. "But her heart is in the right place. She's a romantic. You gotta admire that." She takes a sip of her coffee and shrugs. "I wish I had her courage."

"Uh, I don't." John shoots her a weird look. "Considering we've been together for nearly three years and you're my *fiancée* ... I don't really know how to take that."

She giggles, winking at him. "I'm just messing with you, babe."

Vomit.

"Anyway, my sister got engaged," I say, changing the subject, sort of. "To that guy she met in college."

"Ah, the on-and-off-again guy?" Mia looks intrigued.

"That's the one." I grimace, rubbing the back of my neck as the barista brings us our coffee. "He proposed to her on Christmas morning. I don't know what she sees in him, but for some reason that I still don't understand, she keeps taking the loser back."

"The millionaire loser," Weston points out. "I could probably overlook a few flaws for that kind of bank account."

"That's so shallow." John makes a face. "No wonder you're still single. You're never gonna land a woman with that kind of attitude."

Weston chuckles. "It's just a joke, man."

"Love shouldn't be determined by finances," Mia chimes. "I got with John when he was living in that decrepit apartment in the Bronx—with *six* roommates."

"And it was rat-infested," John adds.

She shudders. "Don't remind me."

I laugh. "I know. I was one of those roommates. It's rough to be a fresh college graduate living on crumbs."

"But look at us now," John says, pushing his dark-rimmed glasses up his nose. "We make quadruple what we started at."

I nod. "With a decent retirement."

"Which is why I think it's about time we set the wedding date." John looks over at Mia, a gaudy smile on his face. "Don't you?"

Her face lights up. "Really?"

"Yeah, and I've been looking at some places on the Upper East Side. With the raise I just got, we could comfortably afford them."

I swear, it looks like Mia is about to pass out from excitement, her blue eyes blazing and cheeks growing red. I block them out, my eyes shifting to the window and out across the dark streets.

"Dude." Weston elbows me. "What's wrong with you tonight?"

"Nothing." I shift my gaze back to him. "Just been a long day, I guess."

"It's your sister, isn't it?"

I shake my head. "Britt's always gotta learn things the hard way. But she never listens to my advice, so I'm not getting involved in her terrible life choices."

"You should see a therapist," he says, his tone flat. I can't tell if he's joking or being serious, but either way, I've seen plenty of therapists over my lifetime with all the divorce and dysfunction in my family. And while I've come a long way, I know I've still got some issues...

"So," Weston continues when I don't reply. "There's another singles event tomorrow night that I signed the two of us up for."

"*Ooh!* Really? What's this one?" Mia exclaims. "Y'all know I used to *love* going to those. As a small-town girl from Texas in the big city, I couldn't figure out how to connect in this place."

"And it's a good thing you went to that one in Soho." John nudges her. "Otherwise, I never would've gotten my five minutes to shoot my shot."

"See." Weston elbows me again. "It *does* work."

I roll my eyes. “These two are an anomaly, and you know that.”

“It was just meant to be.” Mia sighs, looking up at her fiancé. “I knew it the moment we—”

“Okay, that’s enough,” I cut them off. “We’ve heard the story a million times.”

“What’s one more?” John chuckles. “But really, what event did you sign up for this time?”

“It’s the one where you go on four thirty-minute blind dates,” Weston answers, and my insides internally catch on fire with dread.

“You didn’t seriously sign me up, did you?” I groan, running my fingers through my hair. “Those events are the worst. Thirty minutes is *way* too much time to have to spend with someone—*four* someones.”

“Oh, stop being such a turd about it.” Mia waves me off. “One of these days, you’re going to stumble upon the right person, and it’ll all be worth it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t know how you’ve made it this far with such a gloomy, freaking outlook on life,” Mia adds, pursing her red lips.

“I *don’t* have a gloomy outlook on life,” I correct her. “I’m actually really freaking happy with my life, thank you very much. I’m just a realist when it comes to *relationships*, and I don’t want one.”

“But yet you keep going to dating events,” Mia shoots back.

John chuckles. “She’s got a point, you know.”

“That’s only because Weston needs a wingman. Plus, the event organizers work really hard to make sure there’s an even number of people. Which means, if I don’t show up, I’ll make their lives more complicated. I don’t want to do that.”

“Sounds like a convenient excuse to me.” John bursts into laughter.

"I think, deep down," Weston says, "we *all* have the desire to find love. Whether you care to admit it or not."

"Oh boy, here we go," I grumble, leaning back in my chair. "I think this might be my cue to go home."

I'm joking. And honestly, as hard of a time my friends like to give me, I love them. They're like the family that I always wanted—my chosen family.

Unfortunately, my younger sister and I aren't super close, though we do keep in touch more than some. I typically only see her around the holidays, but we check in on each other from time to time. We have a trauma bond, as my therapist would say.

My parents were as toxic as they come, fighting and bickering nonstop throughout my childhood. I'm pretty sure things got thrown, but I was too busy distracting Britt from the noise to know the details. And then, after their messy divorce...

They became serial daters.

There's *nothing* worse than having people constantly coming in and out of your life for the last decade of your childhood.

But my friends, especially Weston, have been there for me through some really dark times. Which is also part of the reason I keep letting him drag me to these silly singles events. I couldn't care less about relationships, but I know *he* does. And he deserves to find love.

"So, how's work?" John's voice snaps me out of my thoughts. "I heard you got promoted recently."

"Yeah! I'm officially a senior software engineer," I answer, smiling for real.

"*Ooh!* Look at you." Mia beams. "I'm happy for you. You work really hard, Parker. You deserve it."

"Thanks."

"And there's nothing like having your best friend as your boss," Weston adds.

"Nothing like getting to boss you around all day," I joke, chuckling.

"Are you doing anything to celebrate your promotion?" Mia asks.

"Well, I've been eyeing some VIP concert tickets to see TM Guy."

"Nothing like seeing a jazz band for fun." John makes a face. "I don't know how or why you do that to yourself."

"It's *soothing*," I reason. "And the last time I checked, you enjoyed it when I took you to that show in Harlem."

"He's not wrong," Mia points out. "I believe your exact words were: '*Your life was forever changed.*'" She laughs, then turns to me. "Who are you going with this time?"

"Uh ... nobody."

"What?" She shakes her head. "You can't go alone!"

"I do a lot of things alone. I really don't mind it." I shrug.

"Yeah, but don't you get tired of that?" Weston jumps in. "It's gotta get old going to things by yourself all the time."

"I've been doing it for most of my life. I guess it's just become normal for me. Besides, I don't really know anyone who appreciates jazz music the way I do. I mean, aside from my dad—he's the one who got me into it. I considered inviting him, but ... you know how he can be."

John frowns. "Didn't he get arrested for picking a fight with another concertgoer the last time you two went?"

"Yeah, and the guy was like twenty years older than him. It was *horrible*."

"Oof, yeah, maybe don't take him," Mia chirps. "Maybe you could find a lady who likes jazz? That would be like your soulmate."

I roll my eyes. "So, we're back on this now, I see."

"No." She giggles. "We're not. I'm just saying that maybe if you found someone who was interested in jazz, then you could go to concerts with them."

John purses his lips. "I disagree. I think he needs to find someone who's the *total* opposite of himself. Whatever the

opposite of jazz is needs to be what his soulmate likes. Parker needs that kind of balance in his life."

"Mmm, sure." Mia nods. "Maybe you're right, but she needs to be the kind of girl who's at least happy to support his love of jazz by going to concerts with him."

"Agreed." John looks at her with a grin. "Great minds."

"Think alike." She winks at him.

Vomit. Vomit. Vomit.

"Anyway," Weston interjects, giving them both a look. "You'll both be happy to know that when I filled out the application for the blind-dating event tomorrow night, I wrote down that Parker likes jazz music. So maybe he'll get matched with someone who also likes jazz music."

"Oh, perfect!" Mia giggles. "I hope you find *the one* at one of these shindigs, Parker. I really do. I think it'd lighten you up a little. Just because your history is explosive with heartache doesn't mean your future has to be."

"And that's why you're a family counselor and I'm not," I say, blocking out the advice. I've seen the devastating effects of bad relationships firsthand, which is exactly why I keep my distance from them.

I'm quite self-aware.

I know I have issues...

I also know how to avoid getting hurt.

"Well, we better get going." Mia looks at John. "I've gotta be at work early in the morning."

"I know, I know," he says. "You never let me forget when you have an early shift at the hospital. I don't want to keep you from your beauty sleep."

"Thank you." She beams, pushing back from the table. "You two have a good night."

"Night, fellas," John says, patting my shoulder as they walk around the other side of the table and head toward the door.

"Night," Weston and I call back to them.

My best friend then turns to me, a grin on his face.
“Tomorrow night will be fun. I guarantee it.”
I grimace. “We’ll see about that.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Amy

“So, *four* men and *thirty* minutes with each one?” Eliza clarifies, flashing me a wicked grin. “That sounds like fun.”

I prop the phone up on the vanity in the bathroom so I can continue FaceTiming her while I finish getting ready. “It’ll be a little more in-depth than the five-minute speed-dating thing. Maybe it’ll give me a chance to connect with someone. Or at least see who I can really mesh with. Plus, I had to fill out a lot about my interests. Supposedly, they’re going to match us accordingly.”

“Oh! That’s just perfect.” She beams, clapping her hands together. “I love that for you. I can’t wait to hear how it goes—and I *expect* you to tell me this time,” Eliza adds with a serious look. “I’m not playing, Amy. You better tell me how it went.”

"Okay, okay," I say sheepishly. "I was just *so* disappointed last time—but like I already told you, my coworkers Zach and Nellie made me feel so much better about it."

"Yeah, there's always going to be a critic, no matter what it is." Eliza gives me a reassuring smile. "I'm really excited for you, you know. You're one of the best people I know, and you deserve your happily ever after."

I blush. "Thanks, friend. You deserved your happily ever after, too, and honestly, I'm *so* glad it wasn't with Devon."

"Me, too." She laughs, shaking her head. "Although, if it weren't for him breaking up with me on the same day I lost my job, I may have never moved to West Falls and met Nick. So, I guess in some ways, I'm grateful for him."

"That's a great way to look at it."

"Yeah! I mean, everything in life happens for a reason. And, of course, hindsight is always twenty-twenty. When I reflect on my relationship with Devon, it feels *so* obvious that we were never going to work. Like, no matter *how* in love I *thought* I was, something just ... felt off. I can't really even put my finger on it. It's just like an instinct or gut feeling. It's easy to be infatuated with someone in the beginning, but once that phase is gone, you have to look at what's left—and that's where the real connection is. It's about seeing the flaws and shortcomings in someone and loving them anyway. People aren't perfect. You've just gotta find someone that you can forgive for not being perfect all the time and love regardless."

"Interesting," I comment. "I guess I have high expectations, then."

"Well, you should! I mean, yes, *everyone* has flaws. It's up to you to make sure their flaws aren't deal breakers."

I nod, though I'm not even sure I know what my deal breakers would be. You'd think at twenty-nine I'd have a better grasp on this whole dating thing, but I've really not put much thought into it up until this point.

I can put together a killer marketing campaign but couldn't even tell you the traits I'm looking for in a future husband.

I should probably figure that out...

"That's good advice, thanks."

"And it's okay to be picky, Amy. I love that you always see the best in everyone; it's a great quality—but it can be a little dangerous, too." Her smile is sheepish, and I shrug.

"You're right. I do tend to see the best in people. But I'd say that's a strong point I have. I can see potential in *anyone*."

"Yeah, just don't *fall* for the potential," Eliza says gently. "Or you may end up wasting eight years of your life like I did..."

Before I can say anything to that, I hear a door open in the background on Eliza's end. Nick steps into the room behind her and kisses the top of her head. He's a handsome, tall, dark-headed guy—and a real catch. He gives me a wave on the screen, and I wave back.

"Hey, Nick," I say.

"Hey, Amy. It's great to see you!"

Eliza turns her head to him. "She's getting ready to go to a singles event tonight. And we're hoping she'll meet some cool people."

"Ah, that's awesome. Well, good luck! And be sure to carry the pepper spray we got you. There are too many weirdos out in the world."

"Yeah, yeah. I got it." I shake my head and then smile. "I'll let you guys go, though. Have a good evening."

"You, too," they both say in unison.

Ugh, to have that kind of chemistry with someone.

I hang up and finish getting ready, opting for a pair of black jeans, booties, and a crimson-colored sweater. It feels edgier than my last look, but I'm hoping it'll catch someone's attention this time. Maybe if I *look* more mysterious, I'll be more appealing.

It's worth a shot.

After I finish perfecting my smokey eye and matching lipstick, I grab my peacoat and head out into the evening,

arriving at the bar *right* on time—just like always. I pride myself on my punctuality.

“Name, please,” the hostess at the front says.

“Amy Gibson,” I answer, my foot tapping anxiously against the tile floor. This bar is a *lot* more upscale than the last, and I suddenly feel underdressed as I note the *hostess* is wearing a black cocktail dress.

I should’ve done more research into this place.

I nervously follow her to a booth and take a seat.

“So, as most of these go, you’ll stay in this seat and then the men will do the moving,” the hostess explains in a tone that tells me she’s tired of repeating herself. “There’s a list of drinks and small plates that you can pick from. You’ll be responsible for your tab unless someone specifically requests to pay for it.”

“Okay, thank you.” My mouth feels dry as she walks away, my heart pounding in my chest.

When is the first guy going to arrive?

I need some water.

Where can I get a water?

Stop freaking out.

Everything is fine.

“Hello,” a deep voice says from above me.

“Hi,” I squeak as a short, somewhat stout blond man takes a seat across from me. The guy’s got a beard for *days* and tattoos that cover every inch of his body. Not *really* my type...

But he might have a great personality.

Never judge a book by its cover.

“So ... you must be Amy,” he says with a sigh, glancing down at the sheet he’s been given.

He looks up at me.

I smile.

He doesn’t.

“That’s me. And who are you?” I ask, really wishing the waiter would show up with some water.

“Garrett.”

"What do you like to do for fun, Garrett?"

"Nothing."

I crinkle my nose just as the waiter *finally* shows up with two glasses of water. "Thank you," I say, breathing a sigh of relief and gulping it down. As the young man walks away, Garrett stares at me with raised brows.

"Do you always flirt like that with wait staff?"

"I'm sorry?" I feel more confused than ever now. "I was just telling him thanks for the water."

"It was a joke," he says, chuckling.

"Right, sorry. I'm just nervous."

"Is it the tattoos?" He once again looks offended.

"Oh my gosh, no," I say quickly. "I don't ... I don't ever judge anyone based on how they look—not that you look bad. You don't look bad. You look great. Well, not like if-I-was-trapped-in-a-dark-alley kind of great, but yeah. Edgy. I like edgy."

Oh my gosh.

I want to *facepalm* myself.

But all he does is raise a brow. "Interesting."

And for the next twenty-five minutes, I mindlessly try to come up with something to say, hoping that somehow, someday, Garrett might still ask for my number. I mean, he seems nice, and I've been told you should never judge anyone based on how a first date goes...

But the moment the bell rings, he leaves.

And doesn't even say good night.

Ugh.

I slump back in my seat just as my phone vibrates. I look down at the screen.

Eliza: *How was the first one?*

Sighing, I text her back.

Me: *Horrible. I think he hates me.*

I don't have a chance to read her reply before I'm joined by man number two, and this time, he smiles when he sits down.

"I'm Chris," he says, extending his hand.

I take it, blushing. "Amy."

Now *this* guy is cute. He's got caramel-colored locks styled in a hipster cut to the side. He looks like a sexy librarian in his glasses and sweater—but one who works out.

Keep it together, Amy.

"So, how was your first date?" he asks, sipping his glass of wine.

"It was rough," I admit. "We got off on the wrong foot, I think."

He chuckles, and it rattles my heart in the best way. "Ah, well, good thing I came in to save the day."

"Absolutely." I grin, feeling all the things a woman should feel—I think. "So, what do you do for a living, Chris?"

"Well, I prefer not to speak about what I do for a living. I think that we too often place judgments on others based on their careers. No need to do that. I want to know who *you* are, Amy."

I blink a few times. Okay, this guy is deep. I like that. "What would you like to know?"

"Well, for starters, what inspires you?"

Uh...

"I suppose I like to take walks and get fresh air."

"That's very shallow." He chuckles. "Not much goin' on up there, is there?" He points to his head. "Where are you from?"

"Chicago," I say curtly.

"Makes sense." He continues to laugh—like something I said is actually funny. "I've heard things about the women from Chicago."

"Really?" I raise my brows. Maybe I shouldn't discount him yet.

"Yeah, they put out," he jokes, or at least, I *think* he's joking. "Are you like most women from Chicago?"

I shake my head. "No."

"Good, I like that." He grins. "But I'd love to put the theory to the test."

"No, thank you."

"Whatever," is all he says before pulling out his phone and opening up Tinder. "It's so hard to find a woman these days who's willing to hook up with no strings attached."

And then for the next twenty minutes, I proceed to listen to Chris vent about the lack of promiscuity from the women in New York.

Oh, and I learn that he still lives in his parents' basement on the Upper West Side.

"Well, if you ever want to have some fun, look me up on Facebook," he says as the bell chimes.

"Sure," I mutter.

I let out a sigh of defeat, not sure what to think of the matches so far.

Chin up. I'm only halfway through the night.

For all I know, the one might be on his way to my table right now.

I nearly squeal with excitement at the thought.

"Oh, you've got to be *kidding* me," a way too familiar voice says, immediately killing all my excitement. "How the heck did we get matched?"

"Wow, great to see you, too, Parker." I glare up at him. "Would you like to talk about the promiscuity level of New York women, too?"

He cringes. "No thanks."

I fold my arms across my chest as he hovers above the chair. "Are you going to at least sit down?"

He sighs. "I guess." The chair legs screech as he drags it back, and I burst into laughter as everyone in the room turns to look at him. He has *no* reaction and sits down, completely unfazed. "What?"

"Nothing." I giggle, shaking my head at him. "How have your dates been going?"

"Horrible, per usual." Parker taps a finger on the table. "But I'm honestly surprised you haven't found your one true love yet."

"I'll find him, but maybe not tonight," I say with a shrug. "Regardless, I'm not giving up. I refuse to become a cynic like *you* are."

"Wow, I'm so inspired." He smirks. "That was a jaw-dropping pep talk, *Amy*." The way he says my name makes my heart flip-flop in my chest—and I'm pretty sure it's out of pure *irritation*.

"One of my coworkers met his fiancée at one of these events." I tip my chin up as if to challenge his negative views.

"Oh yeah? Well, good for them. Someone won the lottery, too, but I'm still not buying a ticket."

"Gosh, are you *always* this negative?"

"Maybe." He takes a sip of water. "But especially when I'm hungry, so I'm ordering food."

My stomach growls at the mention. "I think I will, too."

Parker flags down the waiter and orders nachos. I get mozzarella sticks. Normally, I wouldn't eat something like that in front of a date...

But Parker is no date.

"I wonder why they put us together?" I muse.

Parker shoves a nacho in his mouth. "No idea, but I doubt you like jazz music."

I tilt my head. "I *do* like jazz music, actually."

"Huh. Wouldn't have guessed that."

"Maybe you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, *Parker*."

He chuckles, and then we spend the rest of the date eating our food in silence.

Just as the bell rings, the waiter returns to pick up our empty plates.

"I'll pick up her tab," Parker says as he stands to his feet. "Put it on Parker Harris."

"I can pay for my own food, thanks," I snap, furrowing my brow.

The waiter looks to Parker for an answer.

“Nah, just put it on my tab. *All* of it.” He gives me a sly grin.
“Good luck, Amy. Maybe the fourth time’s a charm? But I wouldn’t bet on it.”

I’m fuming as he walks away.

I’ll show him.

CHAPTER SIX

Parker

Thankfully, woman number four is a no-show for me—as is Weston's. So, we sit together in a booth and order another round of drinks and nachos. Despite this event being *horrible*, the food here is *bomb*.

And what's a second serving of nachos?

"So ... you got paired with *Amy*, huh?" Weston chows down on his tortilla chip covered in cheese and pulled pork. "I still don't see what's so bad about her."

I eye the table she's sitting at with her fourth date. "I don't know," I admit, not sure what makes her so insufferable to me. Right now, she's got her elbows on the table, her chin resting on her hands—just like she was the other night.

It must be her go-to position.

The match she's with—some tall, lanky but sophisticated guy—is chatting her up, and honestly, it appears like they're hitting off...

Good for them.

Except something in the pit of my stomach doesn't like it.

"Why're you staring at her if you don't like her?" Weston's voice is full of amusement. "Dude, you're literally *gawking* at her. You might as well just walk over and interrupt the date to get her number."

"First off, I'm not gawking. Second, *no*," I argue, shaking my head. "It's just ... like a car wreck. You know? You can't look away."

"Right." Weston chuckles. "Whatever you need to tell yourself."

"I don't need to tell myself anything," I grumble under my breath. Weston has been dragging me around the dating scene too much. It's time for me to get a break from it all. "But seriously, can you please quit signing me up for these things?"

"Okay," Weston says, his voice full of defeat. "It's just that, I thought maybe after a few events, I could change your mind about dating—or that you might connect with someone. But maybe that's not gonna happen. I just want to see you happy, Parker. And once I find someone, I'm not going to be able to hang out with you all the time."

"Dude, you're making it out like I'm dependent on you or something." I laugh, finding amusement in the concern written all over his face. "Lighten up—don't worry about me. I'll be fine. And I really hope you *do* find someone and that they make you happy. This stuff just isn't for me." I give him a genuine smile because I *mean* it. I *am* okay. I don't need a romantic partner to be happy. In fact, they'd probably do the opposite for me. Relationships are nothing but heartache.

"Okay." Weston lets out a sigh. "Well, that's good because I got all *three* women's numbers, and I intend to ask all of

them out.”

I cringe. “That’s a sure way to end up with none of them. Can’t you just pick the one that you connected with the most and go with her?”

“I *could*,” he reasons, giving me a thoughtful look. “But then that might ruin my chances with someone else. I mean, what if I go out with the girl I *think* I liked the most, and then it turns out I don’t like her all that much? If I have all three numbers, I have back-ups.”

My brows raise. “I don’t know if that’s messed up or ingenious. But regardless, I think it might be morally gray.”

“Hey, isn’t that what all the ladies are into?” Weston jokes—well, I *think* he’s joking. He pulls out his phone and starts typing away.

“What’re you doing?”

“Texting each of them, letting them know how great of a time I had tonight.”

“Maybe you should wait until after the event is over.” I shake my head. “Otherwise, all their phones will go off at the same time. And for all we know, they might find out.”

“Ah, good point.” Weston looks up at me. “You know, you’re pretty good with relationship advice, considering you’ve never really been in one.”

“I’ve been in *one*,” I admit, frowning.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. The girl from college. She left you for a football player.”

“It was a soccer player, but yeah, same difference.”

“Basically.” Weston’s eyes drift back to his phone.

I take the chance to peer over at Amy, who’s still googly-eyed and focused on the guy across from her. His eyes are focused on her, too, but it’s not the same starry-eyed look. He looks ... thoughtful, and I wonder if he likes the way she crinkles her nose when she laughs—or if her overzealous positivity is grating on his nerves.

But then he *laughs*.

It's a hideous laugh, but it's still a laugh. Amy's face lights up like a kid on Christmas morning. She starts giggling, and I take a deep breath.

Why is this bothering me so much?

It's just because she's so annoying ... right?

But as I sit here, watching her try so desperately to find a connection, I notice the guy across from her pulling out his phone.

I freeze as he slides it across to her.

Amy types something onto the screen and slides it back.

Her date laughs again and motions for Amy's phone—and then I assume he types *his* number into hers.

My stomach knots up.

Guess she found her connection.

I rip my eyes away from them. It doesn't matter what she does. I'm not bitter about it ... Right?

Right.

"I think it's time for me to get out of here," I say, glancing down at my watch. "I have plans tomorrow."

"Plans? With who?" Weston asks, setting his phone down on the table.

"Just that 5k." I chuckle. "Running is never a good time when I'm out late the night before."

Weston eyes me and then looks over at Amy. "You gonna talk to her before you go?"

My lip curls up. "What? Why would I do that?"

"Well, you keep watching her, and sure, maybe you're not into her in a *romantic* way—but you could at least try to be friends with her. She's new to the city. It's helpful to make friends. Plus, you were raised here, so you could really show her around."

I consider it as I slide out of my chair. "I don't think we get along well enough to be friends."

Weston shrugs. "Suit yourself. I'll see ya around."

I nod to him and then make my way toward the door just as the final buzzer rings through the restaurant. I sigh,

stealing one last glance over at Amy. Her date gives her a side hug—which is awkward—and then wanders toward the restroom.

Yeah, that wasn't a real connection.

However, before I can turn away, Amy meets my gaze...

And then comes bounding over.

Oh no...

No, no...

"Parker!" She waves her hand obnoxiously, her jacket draped over her arm. "I have something to tell you!"

"I was actually just leaving."

"Perfect! Me, too." She falls in step beside me as I try to make a beeline for the door. "I *totally* found a connection on my fourth date. Did you?"

"Yep."

Her mouth drops open. "Really? See, I *knew* you'd find someone. You just have to trust the process."

"She didn't show up."

"Oh." Her mouth clamps shut. "Well, still, I think you should keep trying. I mean, I found someone. You might, too."

I stop as we step out onto the crowded street, pulling Amy off to the side. "What makes you think you *actually* found someone tonight? Is it the fact you exchanged numbers?"

She narrows her eyes. "How did you even know that?"

I shrug. "You're pretty loud about things."

Her eyes widen. "Oh, wow. That's so embarrassing."

"It wasn't that loud," I say quickly, feeling guilty for exaggerating. "I was only a table over, so I saw it. But..." I pause, shoving my hands in my pockets. "Getting someone's number doesn't automatically mean that they're *someone* you'll go out with."

She huffs. "Well, he said we would."

"A lot of guys say that."

"Okay, well, I don't know, but you could stand to have a little faith in humanity for once." Amy nudges me. "You need

to cheer up, buttercup."

I raise a brow at her. "I *do* have faith in humanity. I just don't have faith in these kinds of events—or relationships in general. Especially these days. Everything is so shallow."

She lets out a sharp exhale. "Well, I'll prove you wrong. I'm going to find love, Parker. You'll see."

I laugh because her determination is over the top. "Whatever you say, Amy."

"Where do you live?" she asks suddenly, glancing around us.

"I don't typically give out my address to strangers."

"Ha ha." She rolls her eyes. "I was just going to suggest that if you live in the direction of Central Park, we could walk together. It'd be kind of nice not to have to walk alone at this time of night."

"It's only ten," I reason, but then stop myself because she's a single woman living alone in the city. *I should probably make sure she gets home okay.* "I'll walk with you in that direction, though."

"Really? Thank you." She beams, pulling her gloves out of her coat pocket. "I don't mind walking in the dark. I'm from Chicago. But I'm still getting used to the city streets and it can be a little intimidating at times."

I nod, shifting uncomfortably as I catch sight of Weston stepping out. His eyes scan the street and then land on me ... and he smirks as he spots Amy beside me. I shoot back a warning glare and he holds up his hands before turning and heading the opposite way—the actual direction where I live.

"So, what's your favorite thing to do in the city?" Amy asks, grabbing my attention.

"Um." I fall in step beside her. "I don't know, really. I mean, I used to like to go out a lot, but these days I prefer to just hang out at home. I run."

"You run?"

"Yeah, you know, like marathons."

Her eyes rake over me. "You don't look like a runner."

“Wow, okay, well I also lift weights...” I add, growing defensive.

She laughs. “Ah, that makes sense, then. It’s just that you aren’t, like, super *lean*. You have some muscle.” She reaches up and squeezes my bicep.

I laugh, unsure if I’m flattered or just purely amused. “Whatever you say.”

CHAPTER seven

Amy

"This is my building," I tell Parker as we come to a stop just outside the apartment complex. "Thanks for walking me back. I really appreciate it."

"Yeah, for sure," he answers, halfheartedly smiling. "Anytime."

"How far is your place from here?" I ask.

"Um, not far. I'll see ya around."

My phone vibrates in my pocket. A smile stretches across my face as I see Nate's name on the screen. I open the text and my cheeks begin to ache as I grin wider.

Nate: *Coffee tomorrow evening? There's a really great place in SoHo. Let's meet there at seven.*

Beaming, I answer him back, my insides feeling like they might burst with excitement. I accept the date and put my phone back in my pocket.

"I *have* to call Eliza as soon as I get up there," I say, finally looking up.

But when I do...

Parker's gone.

What the heck? Where'd he go?

I spin around to face the other direction, but he's nowhere to be seen.

Maybe he had somewhere to be.

Or maybe he's just bitter that I actually found someone.

Whatever the reason, I'm not about to stand around in the cold for a minute longer. I make my way inside the lobby and head upstairs, not stopping until I reach my floor. I punch the code into the door and push it open, breathing in the jasmine and vanilla scent permeating the air.

I have a date tomorrow.

"Yes!" I shout into the empty space, locking the door behind me. "I did it!"

Maybe I'll finally get my first kiss. Maybe Nate will be the *one*.

Excitedly, I pull back out my phone and dial Eliza.

And it rings.

And rings.

And rings.

"Ugh." I hang up when it reaches her voicemail, knowing that she never checks it. With no one to share my excitement with, I decide to get ready for bed. I take my time gently cleaning my face with a lemon-scented exfoliating scrub before applying a fancy new Korean moisturizer I bought off the TikTok shop. Apparently, once you turn thirty, you have to start taking skincare seriously. And since my birthday is creeping up on me faster than I'd like, I figure I might as well get a head start. Plus, the TikTok influencer was pretty convincing that this cream would make me look twenty again when I'm thirty. So I apply it liberally, massaging it into my skin as if I'm physically turning back time.

Satisfied with my efforts, I brush my teeth, change into my comfiest pajamas, snag my water bottle by the bedside, and crawl under the soft, cool sheets, pulling them up around my chin. I mindlessly scroll on Facebook for a few moments and then find myself in the search bar.

What's Parker's last name again?

I rack my brain, but nothing comes to mind. I go into FBI mode and pull up the bar we visited tonight on Facebook. I click on the page likes and then type his first name into the search bar.

Ugh. There are a lot of Parkers in New York...

But after a few scrolls, I spot a pair of familiar blue-green eyes. I click on the picture and pull up his profile. It's been *years* since he's posted, but still. He's handsome in his profile picture.

I note his job title states software engineer, and when I click on the employer page, I see a big promotion post honoring him.

He's smart.

And very cynical.

Closing out of the app, I set my phone on the nightstand and shut my eyes. For some reason, I start mulling over how my date with Parker went. I don't make it past replaying the first part of our conversation before I drift off to sleep.



"You have a *date* tonight?!" Eliza gasps, her mouth dropping open on the FaceTime screen. "I can't believe it! How exciting!"

"Yeah, I mean, what's more romantic than an evening coffee in SoHo?" I beam, blotting foundation on my face. "I think he might be just the kind of guy I'm looking for. He's super nice, and he asked for my number. He works on Wall Street, too, so he must be intelligent."

"For sure," Eliza agrees. "What does he do for fun?"

“Oh, I’m not sure,” I answer. “He didn’t really talk about anything other than work, but I think that’s okay. It’s great to see a man with so much drive.”

“Of course,” Eliza says. “But does he do anything other than work? I mean, I guess it doesn’t really matter. Nick never did anything other than work and hang out with his mom and Daniel. In retrospect, I guess he was kind of a hermit.”

I burst into a fit of giggles at the same time she does. “There’s nothing wrong with that. You’re kind of a hermit, too.”

“You’re not wrong. So, what does Nate look like? Did you creep on his social media profile? I’d love to see a picture.”

I open my mouth to say something to her but then stop. “No ... I didn’t, actually. But I *did* creep on Parker’s...”

Her eyebrows raise. “Parker? That’s the super cynical guy you ran into that first night, right? What made you look him up? Did you see him again or something?”

“Oh. My. Gosh. I totally forgot to tell you!” I sigh, pausing to blend the blush and highlighter on my cheek. “He was one of my dates at the event. Can you believe that? I had to spend thirty minutes with him—and then he had the audacity to buy my food after torturing me the entire time.”

“Wait ... he bought your food? That’s really sweet.”

“Only so he could rub it in my face.” I roll my eyes. “He walked me back to my apartment, too. I don’t know what to think of him, honestly. I mean, he has these moments where he’s not *completely* insufferable—and it feels like we could *maybe* be friends. He’s just so anti-love ... and ... grumpy.”

“But he paid for your meal and walked you home?” Eliza makes a face. “That sounds like a super nice guy.”

I wave her off. “You wouldn’t say that if you met him. Trust me. Anyway, I did take a peek at his Facebook—which he seemingly hasn’t used in years—and saw that he works as a senior software engineer at some huge tech company.”

“That’s just about as cool as Wall Street.”

"Maybe." I snort, shaking my head and focusing in on my smokey eye. "But he's not my type. I know that much."

"And what *is* your type?"

I pause after dabbing on a little more gray eyeshadow. "Oh, that's easy! *Nate*."

Eliza bursts into a fit of giggles. "Girl, you're hilarious. I seriously hope you have the best time tonight, though. You deserve to have fun and find that connection you've been longing for. I know I say it all the time, but I really mean it."

"I know," I say with a smile. "How're things with Nick?"

"Good as usual," she chirps. "I think we're gonna go sledding tomorrow. There's fresh snow falling outside and I'm pretty stoked about it. I think it'll be a blast."

"You're such a kid at heart. I wish I could find fun in sledding. These days, I think I'd probably break a bone if I tried."

"Oh stop," she chides playfully. "I bet you'd have fun. Besides, once you fall in love, you'll find that the things you didn't like to do before are more fun than you thought."

"I guess I'll see then. I better go, though." I glance down at my smartwatch. "I still have to get dressed and fix my hair."

"Sounds good. Have a great time tonight and let me know how it goes."

We say our goodbyes and I hang up the phone, letting out a sigh.

It's all going to be great.

I finish my makeup, trying not to go too wild with it. I don't want Nate to think I'm high maintenance. But I also don't want him to think that I'm too low maintenance, either. I'm right in between...

Or something like that.

I braid my hair to the side and then grab a beanie since it's cold. I'm going for a more casual look tonight with a pair of light-wash jeans and a green sweater. The goal is to show that I can be uptown or laid back. I grab my leather jacket and purse before heading for the door.

I pull out my phone, double-checking to see if Nate's texted...

He hasn't.

But that's okay. I've heard that some people talk nonstop after meeting for the first time, but I prefer to keep some distance. It gives us more to talk about in person on our date—and my guess is that Nate feels the same.

Which is *amazing*.

I make the trek to SoHo while the sun sets, following the directions on my phone. It's a longer walk than I expected, but I pick up my pace, striding out a little faster than the New Yorkers—which is really saying something.

My lungs burn from the cold air by the time I finally make it to Blue's Coffee Shop, a little hole-in-the-wall place in a residential area.

It's quaint and cute, maybe a hidden gem or something.

I glance down at my watch, seeing that I'm right on time. *Perfect*. I pull the door open and step inside, welcoming the scent of fresh brewed coffee and spices. However, as I look around, I don't see Nate.

In fact, there are only about five people in the entire place, and they're *all* women, so it's not like it's a case of mistaken identity or something. I make my way to a table facing the door and take a seat.

Should I order my coffee now? Or do I wait for him?

I pull out my phone and open the thread containing our three text messages. I quickly type out an 'I'm here' and hit send.

Maybe he's running late—which is no big deal. I just want him to know that I made it here safely.

"What can I get you?" a barista's voice interrupts my thoughts, and I set my phone down.

"Um, well, I'm actually waiting on someone."

"I can go ahead and get your order while you wait," she offers, her bright blue eyes glistening under the fluorescent lights.

"Oh ... sure ... um ... I guess I'll have a caramel macchiato."

"Perfect, I'll get that started for you."

I watch as she heads off toward the barista counter and I'm left sitting and staring at my phone. The phone screen goes dark and I quickly tap on it, lighting the text thread back up.

No reply.

It's fine. He's probably just running late so he's not checking his phone.

I mean, it can be hard to walk and text at the same time.

Drumming my fingers on the table, I consider calling him, but ... is that appropriate? Or is it weird to call someone when they're not here yet? I check my watch. It's officially ten minutes past seven.

Which isn't that late.

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I consider calling Eliza to ask for advice. The last thing I want to do is come across overbearing, especially over ten minutes. Everyone runs late sometimes...

So, I just watch the clock.

And another minute passes.

And another.

And another.

"Here's your macchiato," the barista says, setting my hot cup of coffee down in front of me on a napkin. "Would you like anything else?"

I shake my head. "No thanks."

"Enjoy!" She ducks away, and I find my hope waning. It's now twenty past seven—and Nate hasn't even texted me back. I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about it.

But disappointment is one of the emotions thrumming through my chest.

My eyes bounce between the door and my phone. Two women sitting in the coffee shop get up to leave, and I watch them laughing and chatting.

I wish Eliza lived here.

Or my mom.

I swallow the pang of heartbreak and send my mom a quick text to check in on her—anything to pass the time before Nate shows up. I mean, if he works on Wall Street, maybe he had a big meeting?

But then why wouldn't he tell me he was late or not coming?

Finally, at seven forty-five, the door to the place chimes, and hope swells in my chest. I whip my head up from my phone, taking in the tall, handsome man who just stepped in. He turns to look at me, and I freeze.

Why is he here?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Parker

You've got to be kidding me.

What is she doing on this side of town?

Of all the millions of people who live in the city, I run into *her*.

And then, I make the mistake of staring at Amy a little too long. She looks visibly upset.

I consider just spinning around and bailing. I mean, we don't even really know each other, and it's not like we're friends. But the moment a tear rolls down her cheek, I decide to walk over to her. She may be annoying, and a little over the top, but I do have a heart.

"Why are *you* here?" she asks.

I stop just beside her table. "Wow, okay. Nice to see you, too."

"You're just going to rub it in my face."

“Rub *what* in your face, Amy?” I’m so confused right now, it’s not even funny. “I walked over here because you look upset—don’t villainize me.”

She lets out a sigh and drops her head into her hands. “He stood me up.” Her voice comes out muffled, and I barely make out the words.

“He stood you up? Who?”

“Nate.”

“Is that the guy from the blind date?”

She looks up at me, her eyes still glistening with tears. “Yes.”

Aw, man.

My chest pangs with unwanted sympathy.

No one—not even Amy—deserves to hear *I told you so*.

“Can I sit here?” I gesture to the seat across from her.

“Uh ... I guess.”

“Cool, thanks.” I pull out the chair and sit down across from her.

“Are you not going to say anything about how stupid blind dating is?” she demands, sniffing. “I figured you’d be having a field day right about now.”

I shrug. “I might be a cynic, but I’m not a jerk.”

She rolls her eyes and huffs. “Okay.”

“No, really. That guy is a jerk for not showing up, Amy. Did he say anything to you?”

“I haven’t heard from him since he texted me last night inviting me to coffee. I replied and said I’d come. Then he said, ‘Great.’ But now ... he’s apparently dropped off the face of the earth. I texted him that I was here tonight, and he said *nothing*. I almost called—”

“No, no, no,” I stop her, shaking my head. “Don’t ever call a guy that’s late to the first date. That’s just not a good idea. If a guy stands you up or ghosts you, he’s not worth your time.”

“But he might be sick or something...” Amy says, dabbing her eyes with her sleeves. “I mean, that’s a legitimate

excuse.”

“Uh ... maybe if he’s in the hospital, but I highly doubt he is. What’s his name?” I pull out my phone.

“Nate.”

“What’s his last name?”

She looks down at her phone. “Vincent.”

I open up my Facebook app and type his name into the search bar. I scroll through the profiles until I spot the guy who was sitting across from Amy last night. I click on his profile, and *right there* on his newsfeed is a post from fifteen minutes ago, where he checked in to a club VIP party.

“This is why he didn’t show.” I slide my phone across to her. “According to his Facebook status, he’s currently partying it up at a penthouse in the financial district. So ... there’s your answer. He might need a hospital later, but that’ll be completely irrelevant to you.”

She lets out a sigh. “So he had something else to do tonight. Maybe he’ll text me later to reschedule.”

I blink at her. “You’re kidding me, right? This dude blew you off just to hang out at a club. He’s probably skirt-chasing wannabe models right now.”

“But he seemed so nice...”

“Okay, but just because someone *seems* nice doesn’t mean they *are* nice. Come on, you don’t want to be with a guy who puts going to the club above seeing you.”

She finally nods and then lets out a sigh. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to say sorry. And you definitely shouldn’t have to put up with guys who stand you up. You’re worth more than that. If a guy can’t give you what you want or need out of a relationship, you shouldn’t waste your time on him.”

“Well, I’m almost thirty. I think it’s perfectly fine to see people’s flaws and choose to love them anyway.”

“I hear you, but seriously, Nate isn’t the guy. I promise.”

She picks up her coffee and wrinkles her nose after taking a sip. "Ugh, it's *cold* now."

I raise an eyebrow. "Were you waiting for him to show up before you started drinking your coffee?"

"Yeah. I thought that would be nice. You know, it shows that I'm a courteous person."

I wave toward Genna, who's working tonight. She smiles brightly and trots over.

"Hey, Parker," she greets. "Do you want your usual?"

"Yeah, but make it a decaf," I say and then pause, looking over at Amy. "Also, can you get her another one, please? It got cold."

"Of course!" Genna turns to Amy. "I'm so sorry about that. I'll be sure to make the next one extra hot."

"Oh, it's okay. It's not your fault. It only got cold because I was trying to wait for my date to show up, but ... he never did." She sighs.

"Oh my *gosh*, I'm so sorry..." Genna replies, sympathy written all over her face. "I hate it when that happens. But hey, if it makes you feel better, I can't even count the number of times that I've gotten stood up in this city. It happens to the best of us."

"Thank you," Amy says timidly. "I guess it's nice to know I'm not the exception."

"Oh goodness, no." She laughs. "Before I met my fiancé, my dating history was a *nightmare*. But don't give up. The right one is out there somewhere."

Ugh, she's filling Amy's brain with more of that crap.

"I'm not giving up." Amy's face brightens. "How did you meet your fiancé?"

Oh, no ... NO.

"I met him at the Central Park Singles Mixer." Genna beams, and I nearly facepalm myself. She ranted and raved about how great the event was after she met Derek, who happens to be one of my coworkers—which is why I come to this coffee shop. He bought it two years ago.

And gave his then-girlfriend a job here.

"Ooh..." I can already see the wheels in Amy's head turning.

"It's just a big group of singles who all show up at a central location and that's it. It's nothing special. There's not even any guided talking. You have to be social."

"That's so cool!" Amy explodes, startling me. "That sounds like just what I need. Then, the right guy can just *approach me*. I don't have to do anything. Oh," she coos. "That would be *so* romantic."

I groan, but it's overshadowed by Genna cheering her on. "Girl, it was magical when I met Derek. I was sitting there, sipping my hot chocolate, and he was chatting it up with his friends—Parker was there, actually—and then *bam*. He walked up to me and complimented my wrist tattoo."

"Aww..." All of Amy's sadness has disappeared.

"You should go. They still have mixers twice a month, I believe. You just need to sign up in advance," Genna says quickly, reaching into her pocket and pulling out her phone. "Here, let me send you the link."

"Oh, that would be great! Thank you."

"Sure thing! And how do you know Parker?"

"Oh, we're friends," Amy answers instantly, not even giving me the chance to use a more accurate phrase—like 'mostly strangers'—to describe our relationship.

"Aww. Yeah, Parker here is such a great guy. In fact, Derek's been going on and on about how badly he wants to see him find someone." She talks about me as if I'm not right here. "Other than Weston, he's the only single guy in our big group of friends."

"Oh really?" Amy looks at me as I feel my face heating.

"Yeah, it's true."

"Okay, just found the link," Genna says. "I'll just go ahead and sign you *both* up."

"No—"

"Oh my gosh! That's perfect! We can go together. You know the city so much better than I do." Amy is nearly bouncing up and down in her seat, and before I have any time to object, Genna clicks her phone off.

"All done. You two will have such a blast. The winter events are seriously the most romantic. Everything about New York City is romantic in the winter."

"It just doesn't smell as bad," I comment, letting out a heavy breath. I know it's falling on deaf ears right now.

"Thank you so much for everything," Amy says to her, reaching out and squeezing Genna's forearm. "You've given me hope, which is just what I needed after tonight. Here, let me give you my number so you can text me all the details. When is it?"

"Tomorrow."

"I have plans tomorrow," I say flatly.

She turns to me. "No, you don't. I know for a fact that your only plan was to run that winter 5K. You told Derek that yesterday, so ... no excuses, Parker."

Ugh.

"Come on, just go with me," Amy urges. "Maybe Weston can sign up, too? Then you won't just be stuck with me."

"It has nothing to do with being *stuck* with you," I say, running my fingers through my hair. "It's just that ... I don't really like going to singles events. I told him that I don't want to go to them anymore—and he *finally* agreed to quit signing me up for them."

"Okay, but maybe this is a sign that you shouldn't give up on finding love just yet." Amy shrugs.

"She might be right, you know." Genna eyes me and then leaves to make our coffees.

We sit in silence for a few moments, and I brace for whatever Amy might throw at me this time. She's on another high over the thought of finding love—I can already tell.

Just when I thought I finally got through to her.

Ugh.

"You know..." Her voice trails off as she speaks, her eyes drifting to the window and then back to me. "Thank you for coming over here and talking to me. If you hadn't, I most likely wouldn't have found out about the singles event tomorrow—but also ... I was feeling pretty down. So, thanks."

I nod, though I'm not sure what to say to her. "I don't think you should get your hopes up about the Central Park thing. There's usually a lot of people, and I can't count the number of times I've gone and never talked to anyone."

"Yeah, but you're *you*."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I lean back in my chair, taken aback. "I'm really not that bad."

"No, but I have a good feeling you might put people off with your, um, *love-hating* vibes." She bursts into a fit of laughter afterward, apparently finding herself funny.

And for some reason, I can't help but chuckle along. "I'm a realist."

"It's a fine line," Amy says, grinning.

"What makes you so optimistic, anyway? You act like you've never been burned by love before."

"Well—I ... I haven't, really." Amy's expression turns solemn as she looks down at the table. Her fingers absentmindedly trace the rim of her coffee cup. "And I hate admitting this because it makes me sound so lame. But I've been so focused on my career that I haven't really pursued dating seriously up until this point."

"That's not lame, Amy. It's just a part of your story. At least you don't have a trail of heartbreak behind you like some of us do," I say, surprised at how easily the words slip out.

Amy looks up at me. "Do you have a lot of bad experiences with love?"

I pause, unsure if I want to delve into that territory with someone I barely know. But there's something in her gaze

that tugs at me.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that," I finally answer, running a hand through my hair. "But it's not something I like to dwell on. Let's just say I've learned a few tough lessons along the way."

Amy nods, her eyes reflecting a mixture of curiosity and empathy. "I get that. And I'm sorry you went through that." She takes a sip of her coffee before continuing. "Maybe tomorrow will be a fresh start for both of us. I mean, I know I have a lot to learn ... but I really *am* looking forward to finding a meaningful connection with someone."

"Well, it's not always as easy as romance novels and movies make it seem," I caution, my tone more serious now. "Especially in this city. There are a lot of creeps out there who take advantage of people looking for love. You've gotta be careful."

Wait, am I feeling ... protective?

Amy's face falls slightly at my words, but she quickly recovers with a determined look. "I appreciate the warning, Parker. But I still believe in the goodness of people, and I refuse to let fear or a few bad experiences deter me from finding love. Anyway, I'll be right back," she says, sliding out of the chair. "I just need to run to the restroom."

I nod and watch her as she goes. I mean, if I'm honest, she's hard *not* to watch—but that doesn't mean anything. There are a lot of things that are hard not to watch, like pretty sunsets and the skyline from a penthouse.

"She's really sweet," Genna says as she sets our fresh coffees down on the table.

"She's something," I mutter, ripping my eyes from the hallway. "I'll get these," I add, pulling out my wallet and handing her my card. "Including the one that went cold."

"You know Derek wouldn't make you do that."

"Yeah, well, it's a business. Just let me pay for her coffee—both of them."

She smiles suspiciously. "You're sweet, too, you know..."

“Oh stop.” I shake my head. “It’s never happening with her.”

Genna gives me a smug smile and walks back toward the counter. I let out a sigh, not even realizing that Amy’s sliding back into her seat.

“What was all that about?”

I look up at her and shrug. “Nothing.”

CHAPTER NINE

Amy

Fancy cheese. Check.

Crackers. Check.

Salami. Check.

Chocolate-covered almonds. Check.

I continue through my grocery list, making sure I didn't miss anything.

Lately, I've become a bit obsessed with making charcuterie boards for dinner, which is essentially just an adult version of a Lunchable. It's also a great excuse to stuff my face with all my favorite foods and not feel guilty.

It's been a rough week.

But hey, at least I don't have to worry about cooking for two.

I suppose that's one perk of being single...

Not to mention, these simple piecemeal dinners are convenient to carry—and considering I sold my car before moving here, I pretty much walk everywhere now, so, it helps to keep things light.

Luckily my apartment isn't far from the store—just a few blocks—and my brisk walks through the busy streets of Manhattan are starting to grow on me. The city has a rhythm all of its own, a heartbeat that pulses through the pavement and reverberates in the air. It's chaotic yet strangely comforting being surrounded by a symphony of life—the honking cars, the chatter of pedestrians, the distant sirens—that somehow feels like home.

I make my way through the produce aisle with my grocery basket in hand, snagging a few grapes and strawberries to add some freshness to the board.

And as I turn the corner to head toward the checkout, I spot a man about my age, with an impressive beard and wavy dark hair. He's standing in front of the frozen foods section, staring intently at a pint of ice cream.

He's cute.

Like ... really cute.

His brow furrows in concentration, as if he's trying to decipher the secrets of the universe hidden within the label. I can't help but steal glances at him as I make my way closer and start browsing the ice cream, trying to play it cool.

Our eyes meet briefly, and I feel a blush creep up my cheeks. Quickly looking away, I try to focus on the items in my basket, but my heart is pounding with nervous excitement.

Could this be one of those chance encounters that lead to something more?

I take a deep breath and gather my courage as he finally picks a flavor—mint chocolate chip—and places it in his basket.

"Great choice." I smile at him.

Gotta shoot my shot, right?

"Thanks. It's my girlfriend's favorite flavor," he replies with a sheepish grin, and my heart sinks.

Girlfriend.

Of course.

And *this* is exactly why I should stick with going to singles events...



I wrap my coat tighter around myself, trying to keep the bone-chilling winds at bay as I follow Parker and Weston into Central Park. They're chatting amongst each other, and normally, I would be, too, but all I can think about is *one* thing...

Tomorrow is New Year's Eve.

Tonight *has* to work out for me. It just *has* to.

This is my only shot at finding a date for New Year's or getting my first kiss by then.

The smell of hot chocolate permeates the air as we close in on the large group of people, and surprisingly, a band plays on a small stage off to the side. I soak it all in, hoping and praying that tonight will be the night I meet someone who *won't* stand me up.

"You've been really quiet the whole walk here. Everything good?" Weston asks, looking back at me.

I smile. "Yeah, I'm fine. It's just a little cold tonight."

"You want a hot chocolate?"

"Sure, I'd love one."

"I'll go grab them for us," Parker interjects. He looks sharp in his leather jacket, beanie, and dark wash jeans—and I have to say it's an edgier look than I thought he was capable of pulling off.

"Thank you." I take a deep breath, my stomach feeling a little uneasy. Everyone seems to be talking in little groups,

and no one is even looking at me.

"So," Weston begins, looking over at me. "You and Parker?"

I raise my eyebrows. "What?"

"Are you into him?"

I burst into laughter, some of the tension melting away. "No way. And I'm pretty sure he can't stand me."

"Nah." Weston chuckles. "Regardless of what he tries to say—or even what he thinks—if he's hanging out with you, he doesn't mind you too much. He's a good guy."

Well, he did buy my coffee...

Both of them...

"I have hope for him." I giggle just as he returns, dangerously balancing three cups of hot cocoa.

"Why are you guys laughing at me?" Parker gives us both a wary look as he hands me mine first and then Weston his.

"She was just saying that she actually has hope for you," Weston jokes. "I was shocked. I figured everyone thought you were a lost cause."

"A lost cause when it comes to what?" Parker looks even more confused.

"Love, silly," I chime, meeting his gaze. Something flips in my chest as his eyes hold mine for a split second, but then he looks back at Weston.

"You all really need to get a hobby or something." He then yawns, looking down at his watch. "I don't know how long I'm going to last listening to this crap."

I tune into the cheerful and vibrant acoustic set filling the air. "I don't think it's that bad. It reminds me of my favorite band, The Band Allen." I think of the folksy indie group and smile.

"Really?" Weston's face lights up. "I love The Band Allen. Did you know they're gonna be playing here in the city on Valentine's Day?"

"What?!" I gasp. "Are you serious? I've never seen them in concert before. I *have* to go." I pull out my phone and

Google their tour dates, landing on the Valentine's Day showing.

Holy...

"Yeah, the tickets are crazy expensive. I guess the concert is some kind of private showing—that's why I haven't bought any," Weston grunts from beside me. "I love concerts, but I can't bring myself to spend that kind of money."

"So, you wouldn't want to go with me?" I offer, hoping he'll change his mind.

"Nah, I'm hoping to have a date that evening."

Parker's laugh grabs my attention. "Why's that?"

"Because. Valentine's Day is a cool holiday," Weston reasons, just as his eyes land on a pretty blonde standing a few feet away. "And I'm gonna go find someone to spend it with right now."

Parker raises an eyebrow. "Did none of the three girls you met at the matchmaking event pan out?"

"Nah, man. So now I'm on the hunt for a date for tomorrow's New Year's Eve party. Oh, and Amy." He turns to me. "You're invited. Parker will send you the address. It's a rooftop party. You don't want to miss it."

I smile. "I'll be there." I then turn to Parker. "Will you send me the info?"

He grimaces. "I guess so. What's your number?" I tell him my phone number while he types it in and then immediately sends me an address. "It starts at eight, I think."

"I'll be there," I say, feeling a little relief that I at least won't be stuck at home on New Year's Eve. "Thanks."

"Yeah, for sure. It gets a little wild sometimes, so there's that."

"And you still go?" I tease. "I don't peg you as the party-going type."

"Ha ha," he snorts, but then never has a chance to say anything else as a tall blonde approaches us.

“Parker Harris?” she asks, her bright blue eyes appearing even brighter under her white beanie.

“That’s me.” He smiles as he turns to meet her gaze.

“You don’t know who I am, but I just started working for Energy Tech, and they were raving about you—and how you completely re-engineered their cloud.” She beams, and I can’t help but admire just how pretty she is with her flawless complexion and color-coordinating coat and hat.

And the way Parker is smiling at her is ... *different*.

“Oh yeah? I did some contract work for them a few years back, but it’s good to know they appreciated it.” His voice is cool and even, not anything *close* to the way he’s ever talked to me.

“Yeah, it made such a difference,” the blonde says. “I’m Gretchen.”

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Parker responds, extending his hand and shaking hers. “Really.”

My stomach knots up.

He’s so much smoother than I thought.

“Sorry if I interrupted your conversation.” Gretchen turns to me. “I just *had* to see if it was really the man I thought it was.”

“Oh no, you’re good,” I say quickly, taking a few steps back.

“This is Amy, one of my friends.” Parker shoots me a passing glance, but that’s as far as it gets before he’s focused on Gretchen again.

Maybe blondes are his type or something.

I pull my eyes away from the two of them, who are now deep in a technical conversation about things I don’t understand. I need to find someone to talk to. Weston is chatting it up with a group of *four* women, so I’m on my own.

But it’s fine.

I can do this.

Straightening my shoulders and smoothing out my hair, I step off to the side, making it seem like I'm just standing here all alone listening to the music. I take in the crowd around me, the laughter, the distant sound of a siren passing by. The evening is alive with energy and possibility.

I sip my hot chocolate, letting the warmth spread through me and calm my nerves, and begin swaying to the music. Though, I have to admit, Parker wasn't all that wrong. The more I listen to the band, the more I'm maybe not so into it ... But it makes me look less pathetic if I'm doing something.

I watch the frontman behind the microphone. He looks ... *cold*. The wind whips through his shoulder-length dark hair, and the more I watch, the more I realize he has better hair than I do.

I wonder what conditioner he uses? And would it be weird to ask?

Laughter sounds from behind me, and I turn to see Gretchen and Parker, both of them bright and cheery. And I can't even deny it, I feel ... *jealous*.

Ugh. It's just because I want to find that kind of connection.

Disappointment and defeat funnel into my chest, and all the intrusive thoughts start to creep in. What if there's just something wrong with me? I mean, I'm almost *thirty* and I've never even been kissed.

That's a little weird.

I'm an anomaly.

And *not* a good one.

I feel a tap on my shoulder and spin around, expecting it to be Parker coming to torture me. But as I look up and see a pair of dark brown eyes, I'm taken aback.

"You look lonely," the man says in a deep voice. His dark hair is styled perfectly and a red scarf is delicately wrapped around his neck. "I hate seeing lonely women."

"Well, thanks," I say, my mouth growing dry. This man is *hot*. Like *so dang hot*. "I'm Amy." I extend my hand, trying to

be as smooth as Parker was with Gretchen.

He glances at my hand and then slowly takes it. "You're very official, I see. That's adorable."

I smile, even though I wish he would've given me his name. "I guess I was just taught good manners."

"Yeah? Do you always use good manners, or do you sometimes get a little crazy? You look like the kind of woman who could do both."

I have no idea what the heck he means, but I shrug. "Sure."

"I like that." He flashes a grin, taking a step closer to me. "What do you think of the band?"

"Um, they're okay," I say, sipping my hot chocolate.

"The lead singer is my brother."

My brows shoot up. "Really? That's cool." My eyes shift to mystery man's hair and then back to the lead singer. It makes sense. They both have great hair. It's probably genetics... Which means their *kids* should have great hair...

"Yeah, he's something else. He lived out in Los Angeles for the longest time, trying to make it out there, but then realized it wasn't for him. He lives in my parents' basement on the Upper West Side. So, don't get your hopes up too much."

I laugh. "No worries. I don't think I'm into him."

"No?" He frowns. "Would you be into his brother?"

"Maybe." I feel my cheeks flush with heat. "I don't even know his name."

"Oh, yeah." He bursts into laughter. "I guess that might be good for you to know. I'm Kenny, and my brother up there is David. Not that you really need to know his name, but yeah. Now you do."

"Thanks, Kenny," I say, giggling. "So, what do you do for work?"

"I'm an accountant for a firm in Manhattan. It's not the best job, but I'm working my way up."

"I get that." My eyes drift past him to where Parker and Gretchen are standing, and much to my surprise, I'm met with a hard stare—no, maybe *glare*—from Parker. I look away and back to Kenny.

"So what're your plans for New Year's Eve?" I ask.

"Oh, I don't know. I usually go to a little hole-in-the-wall dive bar on the East Side with my brother and some of our friends. The pickings are slim when it comes to women, but the beer is good—and that's all that matters on New Year's Eve."

I laugh, assuming that he's making a joke. "I suppose so. I'm going to a rooftop party. It's my first year in New York City, so I really want to get a feel for it."

"Have you been with a New Yorker yet?"

"What?" I say, furrowing my brow. "I mean, I've finally started making some friends."

He leans in, his breath tickling my ear. "But have you *been* with a New Yorker yet? They're better than anyone else."

My face grows red. "Oh, no. No, I haven't actually been—" I stop myself, not even wanting to admit to that.

"It's all good." He chuckles. "I can tell you're a shy girl. It's hot. I like that type."

CHAPTER TEN

Parker

“So, what’re your plans for tomorrow evening?” Gretchen asks, but I barely hear her. My eyes are glued on the creep hitting on Amy. I recognize the type. He’s after one thing tonight, and he saw Amy alone...

“I have a party to go to,” I finally answer her absentmindedly. Don’t get me wrong, Gretchen is cute and even nice, but I’m not into her. “You?”

“I don’t know yet,” she says timidly. “But maybe we could exchange numbers? I’d love to pick your brain again.”

Ripping my eyes from Amy’s trainwreck, I finally gaze down at her. “I don’t give my number out. I’m sorry. You can add me on Facebook or something, but I’m not really looking for anything right now.”

“Oh...” Her voice trails off as she glances in Amy’s direction. “I see.”

I have no idea what she might or might not be insinuating, but I don’t even acknowledge it. “It was nice to meet you, though. You seem great, and I have no doubt you’ll find something to do tomorrow evening. But...” I pause to sigh. “It looks like I need to go and rescue my friend from that creep.”

“They look like they’re getting along just fine,” Gretchen reasons, looking confused. “I don’t see why she needs to be rescued.”

“Lots of red flags,” I answer curtly, then down the rest of my hot chocolate. I toss it in the trash and head toward the two of them, where they stand on the edge of the grass. Thank goodness the band is taking a break.

“How about we head back to my pl—”

“Hey,” I interject, wrapping my arm around Amy’s shoulders. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

She looks up at me, confused. “Um...”

“This is my sister—and yeah, she’s single,” I say before Amy can even process what I’m doing. “But you don’t really fit the bill of what she’s into. She prefers men with more class.”

The guy’s jaw ticks. “What are you tryin’ to say? I don’t have class?”

“Parker...” Amy’s eyes grow wide. “What are you—”

“Yeah, that’s *exactly* what I’m trying to say.” I drop my arm from around her and take a step forward, encroaching on the guy’s personal space. “I saw you pick her out and come over here, acting like a predator. She’s *not* going back to your place.”

The guy growls and steps toward me. “Women like a man who knows what he wants.”

“Stop it, Parker.” Amy grabs my arm. “He wasn’t being *that* bad.”

Not THAT bad.

“Yeah, this isn’t worth it,” the guy grunts, backing away from me. “I’ll find someone who actually appreciates the experience I can give them.”

“You’re disgusting. Get out of here,” I snap.

The guy has the audacity to shoot us a wink before disappearing into the crowd. I turn to Amy, fuming.

“I’m going to walk you home now,” I say through gritted teeth. “We need to make sure that weirdo isn’t going to follow you.”

“I don’t want to go home,” Amy argues, folding her arms across her chest like a stubborn kid. “I’m here to find a date for tomorrow evening. I don’t want to be alone on New Year’s. I’m *tired* of being alone—and you just ruined it!”

“Did you seriously think *that* guy was going to be your date?” I exasperate, throwing my hands into the air. “Amy, he was clearly trying to take advantage of you. He just wanted to get laid, and you were a prime target.”

Her expression falls, and I hate that it makes me feel so sympathetic for her. “I—I mean, I thought he might’ve been a *little* overzealous, but it seemed like he was genuinely interested in me.”

I sigh, shutting my eyes for a moment and running my hands over my face. “Amy, he ... he just wasn’t a good guy, okay? He probably thought you were hot, but he clearly didn’t have an interest in who you are as a person. He was trying to take you home within five minutes of talking.”

“Oh.” Her voice is quiet as her eyes fall to her hands. “I guess you’re right.”

“Yeah,” I huff. “So, please let me walk you home. This thing ends in an hour, anyway. Everyone has already kind of paired off.”

“What about Weston?” she asks, looking up and around.

“He’ll be fine,” I snort, gesturing to where he’s standing with a brunette woman looking up at him with googly eyes.

“I don’t know why I have such horrible luck with dating.” Amy starts to walk toward the exit, and I trot to catch up

with her.

"These events aren't all they're cracked up to be, but I think I've said that enough times. So, the truth is, I don't know. Maybe love isn't all that easy to find—or maybe it's not worth all the pain."

She looks up at me. "I really want to find someone."

"Well, maybe you should try another method. Maybe just try to meet someone organically instead of forcing someone's hand."

"But I want a date for New Year's Eve."

"That's in twenty-four hours, Amy. Can't you just go to the party and hang out without having a date?" I lead the way out of the park and she walks closely beside me, her arm every so often brushing mine.

And I'm very aware of it.

For reasons I don't understand.

"You looked like you hit it off with Gretchen," Amy says instead of answering my question. "That was really cute. Did you get her number?"

I hesitate, meeting her gaze for a split second. "No, I didn't. I'm not interested in her like that."

"Right." She rolls her eyes. "You're not interested in anyone."

"Nope. I'm not."

"My birthday is on Valentine's Day," she says randomly, her eyes cast out in front of us as we exit the park and head toward her apartment building. "I'm turning thirty."

"Okay..." I try to read her face, feeling like I'm missing something very important. "You want a birthday party or something?"

"No." She smiles slightly. "Maybe just a boyfriend."

"You've got to be kidding me. Why?"

"Because I just want to find love, okay?" She stops and spins around to face me. "I *want* to find someone who cares about me, and I want a wedding—and kids. I've worked so hard to get where I'm at in my life, and I missed out on

finding someone to share it all with. I'm tired of being alone, Parker."

"I get that, but finding love isn't going to fill a void or something."

She sighs, adjusting her black beanie. "I don't need to fill a void. I just ... I don't know. I guess I just want a boyfriend. I want to share Valentine's Day with someone. It's my favorite holiday, it's my birthday, and I've never gotten to celebrate Valentine's with a significant other before."

"Well, I don't mean to make you feel worse, but ... realistically, I don't think that's gonna happen."

Amy lets out a frustrated groan. "Yeah, you're *not* making me feel any better."

"Okay, okay," I say calmly. "Sorry."

"A lot can happen in two months, Parker. I'm *going* to have a boyfriend by then." Her tone is as defiant as her expression, hardening under the streetlights.

And I can't help myself. "Oh yeah? You wanna bet?"

She narrows her eyes at me. "You're seriously mocking me right now, and it's disgusting."

"Not as disgusting as the guy you were talking to tonight," I say matter-of-factly.

"You know what? *Fine*. Let's bet on it."

"Alright. I bet you can't find a boyfriend in time for Valentine's Day. But if I'm wrong, I'll buy you those Band Allen concert tickets. *Two* of them. One for you, and one for your boyfriend."

"Deal, but you better start saving because those concert tickets are expensive."

I laugh. "Don't hold your breath. I doubt it'll happen."

"Well, I'm *not* giving up on love. Two months is plenty of time to fall in love. You just wait and see."

I purse my lips. "Okay. But if you lose, you have to buy *me* concert tickets to the jazz band I want to see on Valentine's Day."

She immediately agrees. "Okay, perfect. And if you need someone to go with, I'll even torture myself with listening to jazz music for you."

I raise a brow. "But you like jazz music."

"Not with you," she fires back, huffing like a little kid.

I fight not to smile. "Okay, Amy. Whatever you say. Come on."

Her shoulders and chin stay up as she resumes stalking toward her apartment building. "You're going to be sulking when you have to buy me and my *boyfriend* those concert tickets."

"Uh, huh." I laugh, trotting to catch up with her. For a petite little thing, she can really move. "Keep dreaming."

"Thanks, I will. I refuse to let someone like *you* kill all my dreams." She glares at me, folding her arms across her chest. "You're literally so bitter—a fun sponge, really. I don't understand how you have so many friends."

"What an insult," I quip, unable to take her seriously. "I'm really not that bitter. I'm actually quite happy with myself and who I am—I don't need someone else in the picture. I've seen love go wrong too many times. It's not worth the trouble."

She doesn't say anything to that, and we make the rest of the walk to her apartment building in silence. She stops just outside the door, her expression shifting as she glances around.

"What?" I ask, looking around, too.

"I ... Do you ... *ugh*."

"You good?"

"I'm ... um ... do you think that guy might've actually followed us?"

I blink a couple of times and then sigh when I realize I scared her. "Oh ... no, I don't think so." I glance around to be sure, scanning the faces on the street. New York is busy right now and full of tourists who have decided to spend the holidays here.

“Could you ... could you walk me up?” Her question makes my heart flip, and I blame the cold—or something.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, I can walk you up,” I say, giving her a half-smile. “Let’s go.” I grab the door and pull it open for her. She slips through, flashing me a sheepish smile. I follow her to the elevator, feeling guilty for freaking her out.

But also, she needs to understand the risks. There are a lot of creeps in the world, and no, I can’t be sure that the guy she was talking to was a full-blown creep... But he *was* a walking red flag.

“So ... you never told me where you live,” Amy says quietly as we ride the elevator up to her floor. “You said it’s not far from here?”

Only twenty-two blocks away.

“Not far, no,” I reply, dodging the question. If I told her that I lived on the other side of the city, she might think *I’m* the creep for walking her home.

“Do you think you could walk me to the party tomorrow?” she asks as the elevator dings and we step out.

“Uh...” *Talk about way out of the way.* “Sure.”

She leads me to her apartment, stopping to punch in the code. “It’s just a studio apartment. I wasn’t sure what the cost of living would be like, so I wanted to make sure I could afford my rent comfortably.”

That’s ... that’s smart, actually.

“You wanna see inside?” she asks as she opens the door.

My heart is *pounding* in my chest. I glance down at my watch. “Nah, I probably should get home. Maybe some other time,” I say stupidly.

She meets my gaze, her thick lashes and bright baby blues borderline breathtaking under the lights. “Okay, well, I’ll send you the link to my concert tickets.”

Right. The bet.

“And I’ll send you mine. Good night, Amy.” I spin around, and once she shuts the door, I take a deep breath.

Free concert tickets. Cool.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Amy

"I can't believe I made a *bet* with him," I groan into the phone while staring at the light above my bed, which is still off. I slept in, and the sunlight peeking through my blinds is enough to illuminate my room.

Eliza laughs. "Lighten up. You're going to get some awesome concert tickets out of it. I'm jealous. We always said we'd go see them but never had the chance to. Plus, I'm all for you showing him that love exists."

"I don't know if he thinks love doesn't exist or if he's just ... I don't know. I seriously don't understand him at all."

"Well... I actually do, to some degree. When Devon and I broke up, I swore to myself that I wouldn't do it again. Heartbreak is *awful*. Maybe that's why Parker's so hesitant about love... But I think the fact that he shows up to the dating events proves that, deep down, he wants the

connection. Who knows, maybe you'll *both* find a significant other by the time Valentine's Day rolls around."

I ponder the thought. That would really show him—and he'd still have to buy my concert tickets. "Maybe I should try to set him up."

Eliza chuckles. "I don't know about all that. Maybe you should just worry about yourself. It drove me *crazy* when Granny tried to set me up ... even if it worked out in the end."

"True. I just ... I just really want a date for tonight. I was *really* hoping to get that first kiss tonight."

"Then go get one!" Eliza beams. "There's literally nothing stopping you from finding a date tonight. Hit the coffee shop, go for a walk, talk to a handsome stranger—safely—and you know, go get 'em."

I smile, pulling the phone away from my ear and putting her on speaker. "Maybe I can find some sort of event to attend *before* the party. Then, if I meet someone, I'll just ask them to come with me to the party afterward."

"... Okay. But you could also try to find someone a little more organically, you know?"

"Yeah, but that'll take too long," I reason, my brow furrowing. "I've spent nearly thirty years going to coffee shops and the grocery store and have *yet* to be approached by someone. But if I can find an event for singles, at least I'll know everyone is there for the same reason. There's no guesswork. I don't have time for guesswork."

"Well then, you better find something quick."

"Already did," I say with pride, pulling up the directions to a lunchtime singles trivia. "I think this will do just fine."

"Nice. Go get that date! Love you."

"Love you!" I hang up the phone, feeling somewhat renewed. However, as I get ready, pulling on a nice sweater and mom jeans, I start replaying last night with Kenny.

I chew the inside of my cheek, thinking back to his question about if I've been with a New Yorker. I need to be mindful of guys like that. No more creeps.



“So the goal of New Year’s Eve Singles Trivia is to get to know the person you’re paired with,” a woman says over the PA. “You’re going to ask questions about yourself, and the person across from you will try to *guess* the answers. It’s all in good fun, so don’t be mean, and enjoy the drinks!”

I drum my fingers on the table. No one has even taken a seat across from me. I’m seriously sitting alone—and it’s not like there aren’t enough partners to go around. No, in fact, as I look around the brick establishment that reeks of cherry vape, there are actually *tons* of people standing around...

And not a single man has moved to sit in the chair across from me.

Don’t give up.

I keep my breath steady as I glance around, seeing other couples already laughing and asking each other the questions on the cards in the center of the table. *Ugh.*

Maybe I should just give up.

My phone vibrates against the table and my eyes drift downward, expecting a text from my mom, but instead, my brow furrows. *Why is Parker texting me?* I open the message.

Parker: *I’ll be at your apartment tonight at 7:30.*

I’m just about to let him know that’s fine when a voice interrupts my thoughts.

“Can I sit here?”

My eyes flicker up to a handsome, dark-headed stranger with bright blue eyes. “Um, sure,” I say, locking the phone screen and putting it away in my purse hanging on the back of my chair. “I was starting to think this was going to be a waste.”

He chuckles. “I know what you mean. I honestly wasn’t going to come at all today, but then...” His voice trails off as

he meets my gaze. "I just kind of felt like I should."

Heat creeps into my cheeks. "I'm glad you did."

"Me, too." He flashes his pearly whites at me and then extends his hand across the table. "I'm Josh—Josh Banks. Well, technically I'm Dr. Josh Banks, but that's silly to be so formal." He lets out an awkward laugh that makes me feel a little light in the head.

"I'm Amy Gibson, *just* Amy Gibson."

"You don't look like anything that deserves the word *just* in front of it." He removes his peacoat, revealing a nice, cream-colored pullover. "I don't think I'll ever get used to coming to these things," he adds, reaching for one of the cards.

"I just tell myself to keep coming so that maybe soon I won't have to," I say lightly, just as the waitress comes to our table.

"Would you two like anything to drink?"

"I'll have water, please," I say.

"Same." Josh smiles, meeting my gaze. "I don't feel like drinking at noon."

"Me neither. It's a little too early in the day. I like to try to at least make it to happy hour."

He bursts into hearty laughter. "Me, too. So..." He flips the card. "Your question is ... What is *my* favorite color?"

"Hmm..." I purse my lips, taking him in. He is *incredibly* handsome, with a square-set jaw, shadowed with just enough stubble to be considered sexy. And it's *clear* he works out. "I don't know." I take in his casual, yet classy attire. "I feel like your favorite color is probably earthy—maybe green?"

"Wow." His eyes widen. "You nailed it. I love green—particularly earthy shades. I'm not a huge fan of lime green or neon."

"I get that. I guess it's my turn now." I grab one of the cards and read the question. "Okay, so... If *I* could be any animal, what would I be?"

"What a question..." He chuckles. "Um, you look pretty sophisticated, and the dark hair with the bright blue eyes is

absolutely stunning ... so you'd have to be one of those really breathtaking animals."

My face is surely bright red by now. "Okay, you're way too flattering."

"Just being honest." He shrugs. "But let's see ... A horse? That's a strong, graceful animal. I could see that."

"I was going to say a dog, but I think that sounds a lot better." I giggle and reach for the water that the waitress sets in front of me, taking a sip as Josh picks up another card.

"Oh boy, what do *you* think *I* do for a living?"

"Well, I know you're a doctor," I begin, setting down my glass. "And so, I'm going to go based on that... Maybe a Doctor of Medicine... So, I don't know... Surgeon?"

He laughs. "If only. I work for my family's practice as a pediatrician. I don't think I could handle doing surgeries. It was never my thing. I love kids, though."

Oh my gosh. He might seriously be perfect.

"That's amazing."

"What do you do, Amy?" he asks, his eyes focused intently on my face. "You're clearly an intelligent and classy woman."

"I'm a marketing executive," I answer proudly. "I just moved here from Chicago. It's been a big change—and the job is what brought me here."

"That makes sense." He nods. "So you know how to sell things."

"Something like that." I reach for another card. "Okay, let's see what this one says..." My heart flips. "Do you think I'd be a good kisser?"

His brows raise. "Now *that* is a weird question. Almost makes me think we're supposed to try it," he adds with a chuckle. "But yeah, I bet you're a good kisser."

I freeze up, not sure what to say. I don't want to admit that I haven't actually kissed someone. "I guess that's kind of a hard one for me to answer about myself."

"Ah, you're modest. I like that."

“Thank you.” I smile before gesturing to the card pile and then rubbing my hands together. “Your turn.”

“Ah, yes.” He rubs his hands together. “Oh, what do you think my longest relationship was?”

“Um... two years?” I guess, having no idea how to tell just by looking at a person.

“Close. I dated my high school sweetheart for nearly five years before we broke up in college. After that, I never really dated anyone seriously. I was busy with work and all that. Plus, I found myself enjoying keeping things casual with women. I don’t see a need for anything serious right now. I’m only thirty-three.”

I swallow, but don’t let his comment get me down. Besides, love can change a guy’s mind, right? “I see ... so, you’re not wanting to settle down anytime soon?”

He shrugs. “Probably not right now. I like to play the field. There’s nothing wrong with dating around. It keeps relationships exciting.”

I nod, not sure what else to do. I don’t think I agree—but what do I know about relationships, anyway? I haven’t ever been in one.

“Anyway.” He reaches for a card and hands it to me. “Your turn.”

“What do you think my highest level of education is?” I ask, meeting his gaze. He holds it for a few moments, making my head feel light.

“Master’s?”

“No, just bachelor’s. I thought about getting my master’s but never got around to it. I landed a really great job out of college and then worked my way to the top.”

“Ah, I see...” His eyes divert to the card deck. “Well, you gotta set yourself out from the crowd. Finding someone with a bachelor’s degree these days is way too easy. I believe the minimum education someone should have is most definitely a master’s. To have anything less than that is just not educated enough—not in today’s society.”

I swallow hard. *Yikes. He'd probably think my whole family is stupid, then, considering I'm the first one to even have a degree.*

"I see ... well, I've considered going back to school for it quite a few times, so I guess maybe this is my sign to take that seriously."

"That's a great thought," he says, smiling. "Always good to see a woman willing to admit her shortcomings."

Ouch.

But I laugh it off, still taken by the way he looks at me so intently. "Yeah, anyway, what are you doing after this?"

His eyes brighten. "I don't know. What are *you* doing after this?"

"I have a rooftop New Year's Eve party to go to. You're more than welcome to come along with me."

Josh smiles. "Will there be a bunch of uneducated folks there?"

"No, mostly software engineers, business owners—those kinds of people," I say, keeping a smile on my face. There's nothing wrong with Josh wanting to be around people who are academic... right? He's just challenging himself.

"Well then, count me in."

"It's actually just a few blocks from here. I can meet you back here at 7:30 and then we can walk together. I'm not really comfortable giving my address out." I think back to Parker's advice—or, well, his comment about not telling people where he lives.

"Perfect. I'll meet you here tonight."

I nod.

I just hope he shows.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Parker

"I thought you were walking Amy here?" Weston asks, tipping back his beer and taking a swig.

"Nope," I say, taking in the city skyline. We can see the ball from the rooftop and hear the mess of music and chaos from the festivities. "I think she found a date."

"Oh! Good for her ... but you don't look too happy about it." Weston makes a face.

"Oh, I don't care. I just don't wanna lose that bet I told you about."

"The bet over concert tickets, really?"

"Yeah, those Band Allen tickets she wants are freaking expensive. I don't want to be in the hole for twelve hundred bucks."

"You're the one who came up with the bet, though." Weston laughs. "And we both know you can easily afford those tickets..."

"Sure, but it's the principle. I don't make bets I can't win."

"I'm not so sure about this one, man. Amy is very obviously hellbent on finding love."

"Yeah, I guess... But we both know it's not going to happen. She's way too caught up in the finding part. She almost entertained a total *creep* at Central Park. It's painful to watch."

Weston looks past me toward the rooftop entrance. "Speaking of, there she is—and you're right, she's *not* alone."

I whip my head around, taking in the sight of Amy wearing a stunning long-sleeved fitted black dress, her dark hair in curls. I stare at her for a moment too long, unable to pull my gaze from the material clinging to her hips in a way that probably a lot of men would find *very* hot...

Not me, though.

I push the attraction away and switch my attention to the man beside her. He's tall, dark-headed—that seems to be her type—and sporting a nice suit. He's definitely a jerk. I can tell by the way he's casting a judgmental gaze across the crowd.

Or maybe he's just scoping out the place.

I don't know.

I shouldn't even care.

"Can you really *not* stare at her? Like, come on, Parker."

"I wasn't staring," I argue and look at my best friend, who's got an eyebrow raised at me. "I wasn't," I say again.

"Yeah, okay. Well, I'm just saying that you seriously drool over her the moment she walks into a room. It's so obvious."

"I told you, it's not like that. It's just like watching a car wreck, remember?"

He snorts. "Okay. You just keep telling yourself that, but I know good and well what a man looks like when he's *checking a woman out*."

"I'm not doing that." Though I catch myself stealing another glance in Amy's direction, noting how nice she looks in her bootie heels. However, her date's eyes seem to be everywhere but on Amy. He's most definitely checking out the other women, and I can't help but cringe. Horrible manners.

My phone vibrates in my hand and my dad's face fills the screen. As much as I want to decline his call, I don't.

It'll be a decent distraction.

"Hey, Pops," I say, stepping away from the chattering crowd and booming music.

"Hey, Parker. How's your New Year's Eve party?"

"It's fine," I mutter. "Are you partying it up at the house this year?"

"No, no. Your sister invited me to come hang out with her and her fiancé. You know she's getting married, right?"

"Yep."

"You were invited here too, you know."

"Yeah, I know, but I had already made plans to be here tonight."

"Yeah, yeah. It's always somethin' with you, isn't it?" he mumbles, exasperated. "You never wanna hang out with us anymore. Are we not high society enough for you? Is it because you don't want your fancy friends to know that you're just a poor ol' boy from the Bronx?"

Here we go again...

"Dad, it's really got nothing to do with that. I don't care if people know where I grew up."

"Yeah, well, it sure seems like you've been avoiding me lately—and I know you call your mom more than you do me. Probably 'cause she went off with that rich guy from Manhattan—and now they live in the Hamptons."

"They aren't even together anymore," I say flatly. "She lives in Connecticut now. I don't know what you want me to tell you. I had other plans tonight, and I couldn't make it, but I can meet you for lunch next week if you'd like."

"No. I can't afford the places you eat at," he snaps.

I tug at my hair with frustration, trying not to lose it on him. "Okay, well, I don't care where we eat. We can just eat at Jimmy's. I'll take the afternoon off or something."

He scoffs. "Yeah? You think you can actually make time for that? I know it's rough catering to us poor people."

"Oh, c'mon. You know I don't think that."

"Well, my house in the Bronx isn't nearly as fancy as—"

"I've offered to move you and—"

"I don't want your charity," he snaps.

There's no winning.

"Okay. I'll just ... I'll call you next week."

"Alright. Night, kid." With that, he hangs up.

"Love you too, Pops," I mumble, ignoring the pang of hurt in my chest as I shove the phone back into my jacket pocket. All the therapy in the world doesn't take away the sting when my dad gets in a mood. Honestly, the only reason I declined my sister's invitation tonight was because I'd already promised Amy I would walk her to the party...

And then she canceled on me with less than two hours to spare.

I stare out across the skyline, wondering why the heck I ever decided to stay in the city in the first place. I mean, yeah, it's home. Sort of. It's the place I grew up and struggled to make it.

I should've taken that job in Silicon Valley.

But at the time, my dad was going through chemo, and I needed to be there for him. I run my hand along the top of the parapet wall, trying not to think about all the crap in my past I've had to get over.

All the heartbreak.

"Parker," a voice calls from behind me.

Ugh. I just want to be left alone.

But instead, I turn around, putting a smile on my face—and trying to ignore Amy's low-cut dress peeking out of her jacket. She's trying really hard tonight to impress her date...

He's not even paying attention to her like he should.

"This is Josh." She gestures to the guy standing beside her. "He's a pediatrician."

"Wow, cool," I say, extending my hand. "I'm Parker. I'm not a pediatrician."

Josh laughs in an arrogant way, and it grates on my nerves. "Nice to meet you, Parker." He shakes my hand, and I pull it away. "So, what do you do for a living?"

"Uh, I'm a senior software engineer."

"Impressive. Did you grow up in the city?" He looks me over, and I already know he's casting judgment based on my faded jeans and sweater. I didn't feel like dressing to the nines tonight.

"I did."

"Me, too," he says, grinning. "Upper East Side."

"Makes sense," I quip, ignoring the glare Amy's giving me. "I was raised in the West Bronx."

He makes a face. "Wow, really, uh, had to work your way from the ground up to get where you are. Must've been rough growing up out there."

Amy's facial expression shifts as her head tilts. "I didn't know that."

"Yeah." My tone is curt. I don't feel like being friendly.

"Is your dad a druggie?"

Jerk.

"Nope, just poor." I laugh without any humor. "Hard to be a single dad with a couple of kids working a minimum wage job. Life is hard."

"You know"—Josh turns to Amy—"this is exactly why having an education is so important. If Parker's dad would've just taken the time to get an education, he might've had a better shot at providing for his kids. I mean,

it looks like your friend here turned out okay, but who knows where his sibling ended up.”

My jaw ticks. I hold back the urge to punch him right in the face. After all, I *did* get into a lot of fights in school. I know how to throw one.

“That’s a pretty big assumption,” Amy interjects. “And a little uncalled—”

“And that’s why you really should consider furthering your own education,” Josh says, continuing his rant.

“I mean, I suppose I could look into master’s programs over the upcoming week. It just might be hard to balance with my new job. But, anyway...”

Wait... What?

“Why do you need a master’s degree, Amy? You have a great job.”

“Of course, someone like yourself *would* say that.” Josh chuckles.

Okay. This dude is a piece of work.

“What the heck is wrong with you?” I bark, taking a step toward him. “You’re not better than anyone else—and *no*, she doesn’t need to change anything about herself. Besides, I’m pretty sure you’ve been checking out every single other woman in this place since you walked in the door.”

“Wow, is this guy into you or something?” Josh laughs sardonically, turning to Amy. “Chill out, man. I’m just here for fun. We’re just having a good time.”

The expression on Amy’s face tells me everything I need to know.

She didn’t think he was here for fun.

Jeez.

“Why don’t you just freaking leave, man,” I say to him, gesturing to the door.

“Parker,” Amy interjects. “It’s fine...” But it doesn’t *sound* fine when she says it. The disappointment is right there in her eyes—even if she doesn’t realize it herself.

"You know," Josh begins, holding up his hands. "I have other places I can be. You two have fun. This party sucks, anyway."

"Bye," I snap, spinning around and facing the skyline again.

"*Why* did you do that?" Amy exasperates, tugging on my arm. "You just ruined my date, Parker!"

Okay, now I'm mad.

"Are you freaking serious right now? That guy was awful." I try to keep my voice down. "He was checking out other women the entire time. It's disgusting. You're worth more than that, Amy."

She shakes her head, and I swear there are tears in her eyes.

"Look, I'm sorry I ruined your date. But ... you really shouldn't waste your tears on him. If that guy was willing to trash talk me—a total stranger—he'd do the same to you. He was judgmental. And rude. And you were already considering taking on a master's program *just* so you'd keep his interest."

"That's not true..." Her voice trails off. "I mean, maybe ... I don't know."

"You shouldn't have to change anything about yourself to keep a man's attention, Amy. What did you even see in that guy?"

"He seemed nice enough at trivia. Until now. Ugh. It's just that ... well, I—I've never been kissed before. So, I thought if I had a date, maybe it would happen tonight. You know, since it's New Year's Eve."

I sigh, feeling all the sympathy again for her. "Trust me. You don't want *that* guy to be your first kiss."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Amy

"I honestly just *want* a first kiss, and I don't even care who it's from at this point," I find myself admitting—and hating that I'm doing it. Parker seriously just *ruined* my night. Even though I'm realizing Josh had *a lot* of red flags that I missed.

Parker and I stand in silence, looking out over the city, and I try not to feel sad.

My chances of getting my first kiss are over for the night now.

Parker was right—dating in the real world is nothing like romance novels and chick flicks would lead you to believe. A lump forms in my throat, and I stare down at my manicured nails.

Ugh. A good manicure has gone to waste.

“My dad is mad at me,” Parker says, his eyes still focused on the skyline. “He’s upset that I came to this party instead of seeing him and my sister tonight.”

I nod, not sure why he’s telling me this. It’s not exactly relevant to my whole not having been kissed thing ... but okay. “I’m sorry.”

“No need to be sorry. I just figured it might make you feel better to know we *both* aren’t having the night we wanted. But maybe next year will be better.”

“I don’t know...” My voice trails off. “I’m starting to think that I’m *really* terrible at dating.”

“Well, guess you better consider going ahead and buying those jazz tickets.”

“Ha ha,” I say, catching his eye. “So, you grew up in the Bronx?”

“Yeah ... you gonna judge me for it, too?” He eyes me just as a waitress comes by. He grabs a champagne glass from the tray and hands it to me before grabbing one for himself.

“I don’t judge anyone for how they were raised. Neither of my parents got a college degree. They both had to work *all* the time just to afford the cost of living in the suburbs of Chicago. So, I really don’t think it’s fair to say anything about someone’s education, or lack thereof. It’s not like a degree defines who a person is. Their character is what really matters.”

Parker holds my gaze for a moment. “Okay ... so if that’s how you feel, why did you even give that Josh guy the time of day?”

I shrug, running my finger along the rim of the glass. “I don’t know. Sometimes I guess I give people the benefit of the doubt to a fault.”

“Well, at least you’re aware of it.” He chuckles. “It’s pretty painful to watch.”

“You watch me?” I raise a brow at him, giving him a teasing smirk.

"That sounds creepy." He laughs, taking a sip of his drink. "But seriously, you can do so much better than these guys you've been entertaining—and I don't think you realize that."

"I don't think you realize that you're not all that bad when you're not harping on how terrible dating is."

"Wow, thanks for that compliment." He smiles, then shakes his head. "I don't know about you, but I'm kinda over this New Year's Eve party. I'm thinking about going home."

My shoulders slump. "Me, too. I got dressed up for no reason."

"That you did." He eyes me, briefly shifting his gaze over my figure. I shiver, but I'm pretty sure it's just from the cold. "It looks really nice, though."

"Thanks. But surely you're just being nice to me to make up for ruining my date." I poke him in the shoulder, still feeling defeated. "I don't know how I'm going to tell my best friend that it didn't work out for me. She's always rooting for me. She's like my biggest fan."

Parker laughs. "Is she chasing love as hard as you are?"

"Oh goodness, no," I say quickly. "She's got a husband, but before that, she swore off men. She was with this jerk for, like, ever. He didn't want to marry her, but strung her along for eight years. She was ready to give up on love completely, and then she met Nick." I smile. "In the craziest way, too. She literally fell through a wooden access ramp. And he was the firefighter who responded and pulled her out of the hole."

"*Wow.*" Parker bursts into laughter. "How freaking cliché is that? No wonder you're such a romantic."

"Oh stop." I swat his arm. "It's such a cute story. I want something like that."

"So go set your apartment on fire, then," Parker suggests with a shrug. "Maybe one of the firemen who responds will save you and fall in love with you at first sight."

"That's just ridiculous."

“Almost as ridiculous as falling through an access ramp.” His expression shifts, and for the first time since meeting Parker, I actually get the feeling that he’s ... sad.

“Did you ever get your heart broken?” I blurt out, unable to stop myself.

He looks at me, pursing his lips. “Uh ... kind of, I guess. I dated a girl in college who broke up with me—and that stung a little bit.”

“Oh.”

“Most of my heartbreak happened watching other people I loved get *their* hearts broken. I was the product of a broken home...” His eyes fall to his drink. “And I wouldn’t wish what I went through on anyone. My parents together were toxic, and when they finally separated, they both started dating—and the more they dated, the more bitter they became.”

My heart squeezes with a sympathy I never knew I had. “That must’ve been tough to deal with. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He shrugs, looking up from his drink. “A lot of lessons were learned, and I’ve made peace with it. However, the dysfunction still exists in my family.”

I nod, wishing I could hug him or something. “You’ve really done well for yourself.”

“Yeah, you have, too, you know.” He smiles at me. “Don’t ever let some guy make you think you’re not educated enough. That’s insane. Also, if a guy doesn’t spend the entire date paying attention to *you*, kick him to the curb.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you deserve undivided attention.”

“Hmm.” I purse my lips. “I guess I overlook things sometimes.”

“Yeah... Sometimes.”

“Do you think you could walk me home?” I ask, no longer feeling this party. There’s only thirty minutes left until midnight, but I’m just fine with letting the new year begin on my own.

He studies my face for a moment. "Yeah. You don't want to try to make it to midnight?"

I shake my head. "Nah."

"Very well, then. Guess we'll leave now. The crowds can get pretty dodgy after midnight, anyway." He downs the rest of his champagne. I do the same and follow him to the exit.

A mixture of relief and disappointment thrums through me. Part of me is so ready to go home and collapse in bed—and the other part can't shake the disappointment I feel over missing out on my New Year's Eve kiss.

"You know, it's not so bad to lose a bet," Parker says as we step onto the elevator. "The jazz band I want to see is *really* good."

I laugh. "Yeah, well, I still have almost two months to find a boyfriend. I'm not giving up just yet."

"Not even after *Josh*?" Parker looks over at me, a dark brow raised.

"No way," I say. "I might be a little bummed right now about not getting my first kiss, but it'll happen eventually. I'd be letting myself down if I didn't keep trying."

"You're relentless." He chuckles as we reach the ground floor.

We walk side by side as we exit the lobby, heading out into the cold night air. The streets are pretty crowded and everyone buzzes with excitement, prepping for the big countdown.

"I was so excited for tonight," I admit as we start heading back to my apartment. "Like *really* excited."

He nods, eyeing me as we walk. "Yeah..."

I can't deny that his rugged, yet boyish expression is charming in a way that I didn't notice before—and maybe it's just the champagne, but his smile doesn't seem so empty tonight. "It's fine, though. I like sleeping, too."

"You're something else, Amy," he remarks. "I'm convinced there's *nothing* you don't like."

"I don't like pickles."

He makes a face, nearly laughing. "I guess that makes two of us."

"Good," I quip, finding myself giggling. "You know what else I don't like?"

"What's that?"

"Going to the doctor."

We both burst into laughter, and the sound of it lifts my spirits. The streetlights are glowing in the night, illuminating the sidewalk, and I must admit the more I walk, the more I start to appreciate the moment. Maybe I'm not getting my first kiss...

But tonight is still a good night.

Not all hope is lost.

"I'll walk you up," Parker says as we reach the doors out front of my apartment building. However, as he reaches for the handle, we hear a crowd chanting in the distance...

And they're counting down to midnight.

We stop, and I watch the seconds tick down on my watch. I join in with the rest of New York City. "Five, four, three, two, one—"

I look up. Parker's *right* in front of me.

And then he threads his fingers through my hair. Brushes his nose against mine.

I catch my breath...

And then his lips capture mine.

They're hesitant—I'm hesitant—as he lingers there. But as if it's an instinct, I part my lips ever so slightly, my hands landing on his chest. His tongue runs along my bottom lip, and I feel so many things exploding in my chest, warming up my entire body.

I find myself lost in the taste of champagne on his lips and the scent of his cologne. I cling to his jacket as he threads an arm around my waist, pulling me closer to him. Our kiss deepens, and while I don't know what I'm doing, it feels *good*. Parker's thumb brushes my cheek, his touch burning

against my skin as his tongue intertwines with mine. It's intimate, it's passionate, and...

Then he pulls away.

"Happy New Year, Amy." He clears his throat and steps back.

I can still feel him on my lips, and I bite down on my lower one, trying to catch my breath. "Yeah... Yeah. You, too."

"Now you can slow down on your chase," he says, pulling the front door open for me. "You've been kissed once, so the second won't be as big of a deal."

If it's anything like that, it will be.

"Okay..." My voice comes out awkwardly as I step through the doorway, feeling lightheaded as my heart pounds in my chest. I can still feel his hands on my body—and for some reason, I *want* them there again.

Is this what always happens when you kiss someone?

I steal a glance over at Parker, who's quiet as we step onto the elevator. He taps the button for my floor, and I want to say something, but I can't find the words. My mind's too full of images of him touching me like that again...

"Please don't let that kiss make things weird between us," Parker says as the doors slide open. He gestures for me to step out in front of him. "It's just that ... you were really disappointed earlier about missing out on your first kiss, so I was just trying to be a good friend and make it up to you."

"Right," I say, clearing my throat. *But do good friends kiss you like that?* "A kiss on New Year's Eve means good luck, too. So, there's that."

He chuckles, stopping just outside of my apartment door. "Well, I can't say that my kisses are good luck, but hopefully it checked the box on your list."

I laugh and push my hair behind my ear. "I don't have a list."

"Ah, right. Well, that's a little surprising..." he says as I punch in the code and open the door. "Have a good night, Amy."

I turn, meeting his gaze—and still trying to catch my breath. “You, too.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Parker

“Parker, are you listening to me?” My boss, Raymond, a tall, middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair, interrupts my thoughts.

I shift in my seat, tearing my gaze away from the window and refocusing on him. “Sorry about that, boss. Could you repeat what you were saying?”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You seem distracted lately. Is everything alright?”

I quickly nod and offer a reassuring smile. “Everything’s fine.”

“Good, because we have a big project coming up, and I need you on top of your game. As I was saying, a client has asked us to develop an app that tells moviegoers the best

time to take a bathroom break without missing important scenes. I want you to take the lead on its development.”

I nod, struggling to conceal the perplexed expression on my face.

A bathroom break app?

It’s certainly a unique request. And maybe even ridiculous, but who am I to judge?

I diligently scribble down the absurd project specifications. The app is apparently meant to alert you thirty seconds before the perfect “toilet break,” and if you decide to leave the room, it’ll give you a summary of what you missed while you were doing your business.

Because who needs to *actually* watch a movie these days?

But hey, it’s a job, and I’ll give it my all.

As my morning meeting with Raymond comes to a close, my stomach grumbles. I make my way down the fluorescent-lit hallway to the break room, the smell of freshly brewed coffee filling the air as I open the door. I grab a packet of apple cinnamon instant oatmeal from the pantry and pour it into a mug along with some hot water before making my way back to my office, the warm mug cupped in my hands.

The scent of cinnamon is a small comfort as I sit back down at my desk, staring at the flashing cursor on my computer screen. A sobering reminder that I haven’t gotten much of *anything* done today.

I need to be working.

I need to be doing anything other than thinking about what happened between Amy and I *days* ago. I haven’t even talked to her since then.

Which is kind of a jerk move.

But I seriously don’t even know what to say to her.

I mean, I don’t even know why I kissed her.

Why did I kiss her?

I think back on the moment and the way she was just staring at her watch, counting down like she expected something magical to happen as the clock struck midnight...

And I just ... *did* it.

Maybe it was the champagne. Or maybe it was the fact that I ruined her date. I know for a fact that douchebag, Josh, would've kissed her without a second thought—but it was safer for *me* to be the one who did it. I could do it and not take it too far.

I was her first kiss.

And for some reason, that makes me feel some kind of way, which is so stupid. Maybe I *do* need to date around a little bit. Maybe it's just been *that* long since I've kissed someone that it's getting under my skin more than it should.

Then again, the idea of dating sounds awful.

My mind just keeps running back to kissing Amy again—to what I could've done. Like pushing her up against the wall outside of her apartment and letting my mouth travel *well* beyond hers.

This is bad.

This is so bad.

I need to stop this.

The distance between us must've triggered something in my brain. Maybe I just need to see her again, and then I'll be reminded of how insufferable she can be—and how desperate she can be. It's a win-win.

That's what I'll do.

I navigate to Google and go digging for another singles event. After all, I know Amy won't say no to that. She's probably already been to ten of them since New Year's...

Yikes. I don't like that thought.

My eyes land on an ice-skating night. I click over to it and read the details. It's a pretty laid-back event, which is more my style. So, I pull up the link and then text it to Amy.

Me: *Wanna go to this??*

I hit the send button and then set my phone back on my desk, my foot tapping against the floor as I wait for her response.

Granted, she's at work.

Maybe she doesn't check her phone while she's at work...

Jeez, what's wrong with me today?

Rubbing the back of my neck, I navigate to Facebook, typing her name in the search bar. *Amy Gibson. Super common name.*

But there she is.

Her bright baby blues reaching into my chest and tapping on my heart.

No freaking thanks.

I exit out of her profile before I go creeping. I don't want to see anything. It's better to just wait until we're together in person. Otherwise, I might actually start to...

No. I won't fall for her. It's just the kiss messing with my head.

My phone vibrates and I swoop it up, freezing as I read the screen.

Oh no.

I hit the answer. "Hey, Brittany."

"Hey..." Her voice trails off in a way that makes my heart sink.

"Is everything okay, sis?"

"Yeah, no. I don't know."

"Is Dad okay?" I ask immediately, thinking back to the last time she called me at work.

"Yeah, he's fine. Cranky, but you know that's just how he is." She laughs, though there's not even a hint of humor in her voice. "It's Cal."

"Your fiancé." I grimace, leaning back in my chair. "What's wrong with him? Did he get arrested for streaking again?"

"No..." She lets out a sniffle, and I freeze.

"Oh ... he broke it off, didn't he?" I say quietly.

"Yeah, and he didn't even give me a warning—he took back the ring and everything. I don't know why I let myself fall for him over and over. I just ... I want to be *loved so badly*,

Parker. I don't understand." She breaks into sobs, and as much as I want to tell her *I told you so*, I don't.

"It's okay," I say, attempting to comfort her. "He was kind of always a jerk."

"Yeah, well, he wasn't *always*."

I stop myself from arguing. "Okay."

"Can I come stay with you? He wants me out by the end of the day, and I don't have a place secured. I don't want to stay with Dad. He'll just threaten to go beat him up, and sometimes he actually makes good on his threats."

"Oh, I know." I grimace. "You can stay with me. Do you have anything you need to pack from there? Do I need to come and help you? I don't mind."

"I think I can get it all. I seriously *just* moved in. I hadn't even unpacked all the boxes yet." She groans on the other line. "I'm so stupid. I always think he's going to change, and he *never* does. I don't know why I can't tell him no."

"I don't know," I say, not wanting to bring up the trauma from our childhood that she's never really addressed. "But you're gonna be just fine without him, sis. You've got a great job at the firm. What did you do with your apartment? Do you still have your lease?"

"I paid to get out of it, like a true idiot."

"Why didn't *he* pay for it?" I ask through gritted teeth. "He's the one who asked you to move in."

"Not every guy is like you, Parker." Her voice is snippy, but then she sighs. "Sorry."

"It's all good. Did you have a good New Year's with Dad?"

"He spent most of it rattling on and on about you not being there."

"Typical."

"Yeah, I know," she mutters. "Which is another reason why I don't even want to tell him about the breakup yet. He'll freak out. He's been so fixated on you and me both having the family that he wasn't able to give us."

"Yeah..." My phone chimes in my ear and I pull it away to see a text from Amy, excitedly accepting the invitation to go skating. *Great. And now my sister is probably gonna tag along.* "You sure you don't need me to come help you move?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. I'll come over to your apartment this evening."

"Sounds good. I'll see ya then. Love you."

"Love you." She hangs up, and I let out a sigh.

Well, this is gonna be fun.



"So ... Brittany is moving in with you?" Weston gives me a funny look as he slides into the booth across from me at the café for a late lunch.

"Yeah, she's having guy problems."

"It could be worse. She could've actually married him, and then she'd be dealing with a messy divorce—though she would maybe get rich doing it."

"No," I stop him, shaking my head. "I'm sure that guy had prenups on the ready. Cal was not the type to share anything. He even made her pay to break the lease on her apartment when he begged her to move in with him."

Weston makes a disgusted sound. "Yeah, she's better off kicking him to the curb. I'll tell ya that much. Your sister needs better taste in men..."

"Yeah, and to think *you* used to have a crush on her."

He gives me a sheepish smile. "I totally did ... and I seriously thought if I could just catch her attention, it would be over for the both of us. But gosh, I haven't seen her in years. You know, I think I even made her a ring out of a bread tie once."

"That's weird ... and a little disturbing."

"I think I still have it."

"Yeah, point made. Stay away from my sister. You date around too much, anyway. She doesn't need to go falling for

you.”

“She’s a lawyer, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Man, lawyers are hot.” He grabs for his water and gulps it down. “Maybe I still have a crush on her.”

“Please just shut up,” I snap, shuddering. “It’s too weird. Let’s talk about something else. Besides, she’s three years younger than you.”

“So? Age is just a number, and three years is no big deal.”

I glance down at my menu, but nothing sounds appetizing.

Amy is three years younger than me...

And I kissed her.

“So, what happened on New Year’s?” Weston’s voice sounds distant. I’ve been avoiding this question all week from him, and now, since I’m stuck sitting at lunch with him, I’m going to *have* to answer.

“I walked Amy home. Her date was an idiot and ruined the night for her.”

“You mean, *you* ruined the night for her.” Weston gives me a chiding look as I glance up at him. “I would bet money that you had something to do with it.”

“That’s an assumption, and you know what they say about those—”

“I saw you up in her date’s personal space. Everyone did.”

“I told you, he was a jerk. He wasn’t even treating Amy well. He acted like she was dumb. And although she makes some *very* questionable choices when it comes to men, I don’t think she’s stupid by any means.”

“Because you like her.”

“I do not.”

“You do.”

“*Stop.*”

Weston lets out a sigh. “So why did you go through all the trouble of walking her home, then? You never walk girls home.”

"I don't know. She asked me to." I focus my attention on the menu, scanning the sandwich section. I usually get the grilled chicken club, so I guess that's what I'll get. No pickles.

"You kissed her, didn't you?"

"What?" I rip my eyes from the menu. "Why would you even say that?"

He bursts into a fit of laughter. "I was just joking, but based on *that* reaction, you *did*, didn't you?"

"I..." I stop myself from lying to him. My shoulders fall. "Yeah, I did, okay? But only because she spent the majority of the night going on and on about how she'd never been kissed before and was hoping for a New Year's kiss. And since I ruined her date, I figured I should try to fix it."

Weston's mouth is agape. "She's never been kissed?"

"Well, I mean, *now* she has."

"Right, but you were her *first* kiss? That's freakin' cute. Now what? You gonna marry her, too? Based on what I've seen from her, she's probably betting on that now."

"No," I say sharply as the memory of our kiss begins flooding my mind once more. Amy easily could've blown me off, but she didn't. She kissed me back.

And it was the most electrifying kiss I've ever experienced.

But Weston's right. Amy tends to get *really* excited about guys who show her attention. She's eager to settle down.

And the thought of that is terrifying.

Because I don't do relationships.

I try to brush off his comment. "I don't think I'm Amy's type. She much prefers douchebags."

"Well, I mean..."

I shoot him a glare. "Don't even go there. You know I'm not a douchebag. But it doesn't matter. Amy and I are just friends. Nothing more. Besides, I don't have time for a relationship. And Britt is about to move in."

"Yeah, and I bet Britt will have a field day with this new *friend* of yours. Is the bet still on? Or are *you* just gonna be her boyfriend by Valentine's Day?"

I swear I could punch him in the face right now. “Shut up. I’m gonna win the bet. Those tickets are expensive.”

“Not for you.”

I let out a sharp breath. “Will you just drop it? First, you start talking about my sister, and now you’re trying to make something out of nothing between me and Amy. I’m not in the mood for this—not today.”

Weston goes silent for a few moments, and just when I think the conversation is finally over, he grins and says, “So, when are you seeing her again?”

“We’re going ice skating tomorrow evening.”

“I knew it—”

“It’s another hapless singles event. Hopefully, she’ll find someone.”

“Yeah, okay. Are you going, too? Because now I kind of want to go, just to see what happens. Wait ... is Brittany going?”

I eye him, giving my best *I might murder you* look. “I don’t know.”

Weston nods, grabbing his water and taking a long gulp. “Oh, I’m *definitely* going now. I already know it’s gonna be a wild time.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Amy

“Ice skating sounds fun.” Nellie flashes me a bright smile as she leans against the office doorway. “Who are you going with?”

“Oh, it’s actually a singles event,” I answer. “But I’m going with my friend, Parker. He’s the one I told you works in tech. We’re kind of in the middle of a bet—which is a long story, but Parker thinks I can’t find a significant other in time for Valentine’s Day, and I’m convinced we *both* can. So, I’m basically trying to set us up.”

“Ah. Well, if you want some help trying to win the bet, I actually have a single girlfriend I could send along for him. She’s into all that technology stuff. She’s very charismatic,

too. She can pretty much hit it off with just about everyone. I honestly don't know how she's even still single."

I almost tell her no thanks but stop myself. There's really no reason why I should decline. Parker made it clear that the kiss between us didn't mean anything. He was just checking a box.

Which is why I haven't told Eliza about it yet.

"Okay! Give her my number and we can meet up. I think it'll make an impact if I bring someone along for him. It'll blow his mind. And bring me one step closer to winning that bet."

"Then consider it done." She shoots me a wink and steps out of my office.

I stare at my phone once she leaves, trying to figure out *why* the idea of bringing a woman for Parker bothers me so much.

I don't like him like that, and even if I did, he *definitely* doesn't like me ... right?

My eyes drift to the door, and I get up and shut it before pulling out my phone to call Eliza. I need to get my head on straight, and she's the only one who seems to be able to help me through it. However, before I can even call her, my mom's name flashes across the screen.

"Hello?" I answer and head back to my desk chair. I turn to face the skyline, enjoying the view of downtown from my office window. The buildings are alight with the glow of the setting sun, casting a warm hue over everything.

"Hey, I know you're at work ... I just wanted to call and tell you that we miss you. Your dad keeps looking at flights to New York. I think he's getting borderline obsessive with watching the prices. He says the moment a good deal comes through, he's buying tickets."

"Oh boy." I giggle. "Well, I miss you guys, too. I've just been super busy with work and making new friends."

"Oh, that's great, honey. You haven't really told us much about your new friends. What are they like?"

"I guess that's because I'm still trying to get to know them."

"Well, your dad and I have been dying to hear more about your new fancy life up there."

"It's not all that fancy."

"Well, tell me more about these new friends."

"Right, sorry," I mutter, checking the time on my computer. Work will be over in about ten minutes, and then I'll be heading to the ice skating rink. "The one I know the best is Parker."

"Parker," she echoes. "Girl?"

"No."

She pauses. "Guy?"

"Yeah..." I say slowly. "But it's not what you think. We aren't dating or anything like that. I mean, we *did* share a kiss on New Year's, but it was just because, you know, I'd never been kissed, and he felt bad for ruining my date—"

"He ruined your date and then kissed you?"

"Well, it sounds horrible when you say it like that, but he's not that bad. He's just kinda ... grumpy sometimes."

"Are you sure you're just friends?"

"Mom, if you knew him, you'd understand. He was just trying to make me feel better about *not* getting kissed."

"Hmm. That seems a little suspect to me."

"Don't use that phrase." I giggle. "That's so weird."

"What? Why? I heard it used on a TV show your dad and I watched. I thought it was hilarious—and catchy. You know, suspect."

"Okay, seriously. He's not a suspect." I burst into a fit of laughter. "Please stop."

"You know I love you, Amy. And I want you to be happy—and I want you to find love, but can you promise me something?"

I pause, noting the serious tone in her voice. "What's that?"

"You've always been a hopeless romantic, and I love that about you. But promise me you won't ever get so caught up in searching for the big, grand gestures that you miss the little things. Sometimes, love doesn't come in big ways on a white horse. It's not always someone taking your breath away the moment you meet them. Sometimes, love is in the small, everyday things. Sometimes the little things are the most special."

I smile. "Okay, Mom. I promise. But I probably should go. I'm going to a singles ice-skating event tonight."

"Oh ... another one of those?"

"Yeah, but I'm going with a group of friends," I say quickly, knowing she's not the biggest fan of singles events. She watches *way* too many crime documentaries.

"Well, have fun, and please be safe."

"I will. Love you."

We hang up, and I let out a sigh.

Don't overlook the little things. Got it.



I step out of the elevator and into the lobby of my apartment building, searching for Parker. He sent me a text letting me know he'd be waiting for me down here since he has someone with him, which I'm assuming is Weston.

But the moment my eyes land on him, I stop...

Who's that?

I take in the sight of a blonde woman standing beside him. She's got to be nearly six foot, and she's not even wearing heels. Her hair is braided to the side beneath her beanie, and when she turns around to face me, I realize she's ... *gorgeous.*

He has a date...

"Hey." Parker gives me a wave, and I break my eyes away from the woman beside him. My stomach suddenly feels like

it's in my chest.

"Hi," I say, forcing a smile and heading over to them. I suddenly feel *very* short in their presence, but I try to ignore it.

Parker eyes me and then gestures to the woman beside him. "This is Brittany..." He pauses. "My *sister*."

My brows shoot up—and my stomach settles back into its rightful place. Which is a bit silly, considering I *don't* have feelings for Parker.

And I *definitely* wasn't jealous...

"It's super nice to meet you, Brittany." I extend my hand. "I'm Amy."

"Nice to meet you, Amy," Brittany greets me. And *then* I see it. She has his nose, eyes, and lips. "I've heard a lot about you. Well, that's kind of a lie. I really haven't, but Parker acted super nervous on the way over here, and now I know why. You're totally beautiful."

I blush. "Thank you. You're gorgeous."

"Okay, don't make this weird." Parker huffs, rolling onto his heels. "Amy and I are just friends. I told you about our bet." He gives his sister a pointed look.

"Yeah, but *look at her*." Brittany motions to me. "She's freaking cute. Why are you not dating her? You guys would seriously make the cutest kids."

"Remember that conversation we had about thinking before you speak?" Parker snaps at her.

She bursts into laughter. "Oh, come on. Lighten up. It's all in good fun."

"I'm sorry in advance." Parker gives me a weary look. "There's nothing I can do about the comments she makes."

I giggle. "It's all in good fun."

"Ooh ... Now I *really* like her!" Brittany grabs my arm and tugs me toward the door. Parker lets out a groan, following behind us.

"Oh, by the way," I call over my shoulder. "I got you a date for tonight. Well, sort of. A friend of my coworker is coming,

and we're going to meet up with her."

"Great," Parker shoots back at me. "Just what I need."

I can't tell if he's serious or not, but Brittany quickly takes over the conversation, asking me about my family—and then telling me all about her recent breakup and how she's living with Parker now.

She brings out a different side to Parker—it's obvious that he takes care of the people that he loves...

He's a good person.

When we make it to the rink, Brittany and I hunt down skates while Parker gets stuck on a phone call.

"He's not as cold as he comes across, you know," Brittany says as I grab a pair of women's size sevens. "What happened with our parents scarred him for life, but I think when he meets the right girl, he'll change."

"You think?" I glance back at him, now talking to a redheaded woman. I overhear her introduce herself as Louise. My stomach knots up, but I ignore it. For all I know, I might be setting Parker up with the woman who will change it all for him.

"You're the only girl he's ever introduced me to," Brittany adds, catching my attention. "Other than, like, his friends' girlfriends."

"Really?" That catches me by surprise. "I figured he's had lots of girlfriends—or even just friends that are girls."

She shakes her head. "No, not really. Like I said, he's built up this massive wall around himself, and he refuses to give his heart to anyone. He had a girlfriend in college, but she left him because he just wouldn't open up."

I watch as Louise flips her hair over her shoulder and Parker smiles. "Well, maybe *she'll* change it for him."

Brittany whips her head around to look and then laughs. "No way. Parker is just being nice because he doesn't want to hurt her feelings. He'll let her down easy—that's how he does things."

I raise a brow. “He definitely did *not* do that with me. I think he hated me from the moment he saw me.”

She snorts. “Right. Which is why he continues to hang out with you. That makes no sense. But anyway, let’s find some cuties to ice skate with.”

I nod, thankful for a subject change. “Absolutely.”

She threads her arm through mine, and we head toward Parker and Louise. “Here’s your skates, bro.” Brittany holds them out and Parker takes them from her. “Enjoy. We’re going to go find some hotties to keep us warm.”

Louise laughs. “That sounds like my kind of time.”

I smile at her. “I’m Amy.” I force myself to be friendlier than I feel.

“Oh right, you’re the one who texted me all the info. Nice to meet you! Nellie said you’re so much fun to be around. I was planning to text you as soon as I got here, but I saw this guy—and I thought, why not? And you know what’s crazy? *He’s* the reason I came all along!”

“Yeah,” I say, meeting Parker’s gaze, which is trained on me. “Have a nice time.”

“You, too.” Louise beams, looking up at Parker. “I hope you’re good at skating because I’m awful.”

I don’t hang around to hear his answer, using Brittany as a scapegoat. She’s already tugging on her skates and I do the same, following her out onto the ice.

But the moment my foot hits the slippery surface, I *know* this is going to be a long night.

“Easy.” Brittany offers me a hand as we step out. “You just have to breathe. Have you ever ice skated before?”

“Yeah, it’s just been a while.” I give her a sheepish smile and follow her lead, taking off slowly.

And within ten minutes of skating, Brittany is already chatting it up with some blond guy. It’s not surprising, but once again, I’m the odd one out, waiting for Mr. Right to show up.

I sigh, taking in the way the lights glimmer on the ice. Music fills the air, and some people are skating while holding hot chocolate...

Yeah, that's a solid no-go for me.

There's no way I could make that happen and not burn myself.

"Hey," a voice says from beside me. "You look like you could use a hand."

I turn to look up into a pair of soft brown eyes. "I'm doing okay right now, but we'll see."

"It was a terrible pickup line, wasn't it?" He laughs. "I'm Brendon."

"Amy." I take in his nice navy peacoat. He's handsome, with an olive complexion that's to die for. And he looks around my age.

"How's your night going?"

"Um..." I hesitate. "It's fine, I suppose. It's a little cold, though."

"Welcome to New York," he jokes, flashing me a smile. "But really, it *is* cold tonight. You want some hot chocolate? It might warm you up while you skate."

I look up at him, ignoring the worry in my chest. "Sure."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Parker

Louise giggles. “She’s very clumsy.”

I frown, watching Amy shake out her glove that’s now soaked in hot chocolate. She’s clearly not much of a skater, barely managing to keep her forward momentum, and adding the hot cocoa to the mix was not a good idea. Louise finds it amusing—but I don’t.

“So, the two of you are friends?” Louise’s voice still doesn’t pull my gaze from Amy, who’s losing her balance even more as the guy she’s skating with continues on, forcing her to keep up a too-fast pace.

Inconsiderate jerk.

“He didn’t even get her a napkin,” I mutter.

“What?”

I shake my head. “The guy she’s skating with. He didn’t even get her a napkin. He didn’t even stop when she spilled her hot chocolate.”

“Uh ... Okay. I mean, I guess that’s not, like, the *nicest* thing to do, but maybe she told him she didn’t need a napkin. She could just ask him to stop if she needs a break from skating.”

“She’s not gonna do that.”

“Well ... then I guess that’s on her.”

I look over to Louise, opening my mouth to argue—but stop. “Yeah, sorry.”

“It’s all good. You’re just, um, *concerned* about the well-being of your friend... Like *really* concerned. What about your sister?” She gestures to Brittany, skating arm-in-arm with some tall blond dude.

“She’s fine. She can hold her own.” I shrug. “She’s out on a rebound, anyway. Weston will show up before too long, too. He’ll keep an eye on her.” I frown. He better keep *only* an eye on her.

“Hmm.” Louise’s tone is filled with suspicion, and as much as I should be worried about it, I’m not. She’s not my type. But before I can say anything else, her eyes go wide, and her hands fly up to her mouth in a gasp. “Oh my gosh!”

Oh no.

I spin around to see Amy down on the ice, her hot chocolate all over her outfit, and her face contorted in pain. I don’t even bother to say anything to Louise before skating away.

As I get closer, I hear—and see—Amy’s skating partner *laughing*.

Anger boils in my chest as I watch Amy helplessly sitting on the ice, reaching for her ankle.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, nearly shoulder-bumping the guy she’s with—who’s still laughing.

“Dude, she’s fine. She just needs to get up and get moving, and she’ll feel better. She’s just trying to—”

"You can leave now," I cut him off, glaring at him.

His brows furrow and he sizes me up. "Yeah? And who are *you*?"

"He's just my friend," Amy squeaks out, her voice wavering.

"Yeah. Now go find someone else to laugh at before I—"

"*Parker*," Amy warns, emotion palpable in her voice.

"This isn't worth it. Good luck dealing with her," the guy mutters, shaking his head and skating away.

I'm half tempted to pick up the smashed Styrofoam cup and throw it at him, but I know it'd be fruitless. I drop to my knees beside Amy, going for the laces on her skates. "Is it your ankle?"

She looks at me wearily and nods. "Yeah, I just ... I just lost my balance. I'm terrible at ice skating."

I shrug, working the laces off. "Everyone falls." Her ankle's already swelling, and I can't hide my concern. "There's bruising," I comment as I check it and then put her sock back in place. "Let me get you out of these skates and help you up. Then we'll see if you can put any weight on it."

I take her skates off gently, trying not to cause any more pain than necessary. As I help her stand, I notice her wince as she tries to put weight on her injured ankle.

"We need to get you to the ER. I'll order an Uber."

"I'm sure it's fine..."

"It's not fine, Amy." I don't want to argue with her, but it's worth it for her well-being.

Just then, Brittany glides up. "Will you take these back?" I hold out Amy's skates.

"Are you okay?" Brittany takes the skates from me, her eyes on Amy. "That was a hard fall."

Amy shrugs as a rogue tear spills down her cheek. Something in my chest flips at the sight, but I push it away. I mean, no one likes to see a woman cry, right? In one swift motion, I lift Amy off the ground and cradle her in my arms.

“Wh-what are you doing? You can’t skate with me like this...” She hangs on tight, wrapping her arms around my neck like she might suffocate me. But also...

Man, she smells so good.

“It’s a lot faster this way,” I choke out, heading toward the exit.

“He’s good at this,” Brittany informs Amy, hanging out beside us. “You’re in good hands. Also, that guy you were with was a total jerk. I can’t believe he didn’t even try to help you or make sure you were okay.”

“I didn’t tell him my ankle hurt.”

“Your ankle is in bad shape,” I mutter just as Amy’s hair brushes my cheek. My body reacts in all the ways I wish it wouldn’t.

Just think about something else.

“Is that who I think it is?” Brittany’s voice interrupts my thoughts. “It’s ... *Weston.*”

Well, there’s something else to think about.

I set Amy down on the bench, not missing the way her cheeks are flushed. It’s probably just embarrassment, but my heart beats a little harder as her warmth is gone. I take a seat beside her and start ripping off my skates. Brittany returns with our shoes and I drop off the bench, putting a sneaker on Amy’s good foot.

“I’ll have to carry this one.” I hold up the other shoe. I slip into my own shoes when my phone goes off with the alert. “The Uber is here. Let’s go.”

She huffs. “I don’t need to go to the ER.”

“Yeah, you do. If it’s about the money, don’t worry about it. I’ll pay.” I reach down and swoop her up into my arms again.

“Wow, you must work out a lot...” Her blue eyes meet mine as her cheeks once again fill with a crimson hue.

“You’re tiny,” I say, not letting the comment hit my ego.

“What happened?” Weston asks as soon as he makes it to us.

"She fell," I answer, ignoring the look he's giving me. "Keep an eye on my sister."

He salutes me. "Sir, yes, sir."

I roll my eyes but let it go. I have more important things to worry about—like getting Amy to the hospital to make sure she didn't break something. I'm pretty sure it's just a bad sprain, but the silent tears are still flowing as I place her into the backseat of the Uber. I slide in beside her.

"You're coming with me?"

I make a weird face at her. "Uh, yeah. I'm not leaving you in this condition." She goes quiet. I remove my scarf and hand it to her. "If you have any more hot chocolate that needs to be wiped up, you can use this."

"I'm good, thanks," she says timidly, her eyes shifting to the window.

And that's how she stays the entire ride.

And during the two-hour wait in the ER waiting room.

And as we're sitting here, in the exam room, waiting on the doctor.

I can't freaking stand it.

"Are you okay?" I finally ask, looking up at her wearily. It's late—really late. "You haven't said anything since we got in the car."

Amy looks over at me. "I don't know ... I'm just ... embarrassed." Her voice nearly breaks at the admission.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about," I say softly, reaching out and squeezing her hand. She leans back against the hospital bed, shutting her eyes. And for some reason, I don't let go of her hand. I just sit in the incredibly uncomfortable chair like I'm frozen. And for some reason, I *feel* frozen. Her skin is so soft and warm, and the way her chocolate waves are a mess is ... *pretty*. *She* is pretty.

And I'm worried about her.

The knock on the door cuts any chance of conversation short and in walks the doctor, a smile on his face. "Well, the good news is, your ankle isn't broken."

Amy lets out an audible sigh of relief.

"The bad news is, it's a moderate sprain. You took a bad spill, Miss Gibson. You need to stay off that ankle for a while." He peers at the two of us through his thick plastic glasses, his hair shimmering white beneath the lights. "I've gone ahead and ordered you a prescription for pain management. I'm also going to put you in a boot. We'll get you taken care of and out of here."

"Thank you," Amy says, sighing.

Within twenty minutes, we're walking out—well, Amy is limping out, using my arm as support. And I am suddenly *very* aware of her body leaning against me. I flag down a cab and help her in. She scoots her way to the middle of the backseat and gives the driver her address. I sit next to her, leaning back against the headrest.

"I am *so* tired," she mumbles, her eyes closing as she leans her head against my shoulder.

I swallow hard, taking in the freckles that have peeked through her worn-off makeup. I bet she's stunning without makeup.

I force my eyes away and run my hand through my hair.

What's wrong with me tonight?

Maybe it's the fact I knew the hospital employees assumed we were a couple—though they never asked. Maybe it's the fact that I just want to help Amy feel better and seeing her like this tugs at my heartstrings.

I really don't know.

But I'm too tired to keep worrying about it on the drive back or as I help her out of the cab and into the elevator.

"I can take it from here," she says as she limps into the elevator.

But I don't let go, stepping in with her. "We've come this far. Better go all the way."

Her brow furrows, but she doesn't argue. "I'm so sorry I ruined your date." Amy's voice is nearly inaudible as the words come out. "I bet Louise was really disappointed."

I look down at her, but her eyes are on her boot. “You know, Amy...” She finally looks up at me—and I lock onto her gaze. “I think I’d rather spend the night in the ER than go out on another date with Louise.”

She cracks a smile. “Well, that’s kind of mean.”

“Not as mean as laughing when your date falls, sprains her ankle, and drenches herself in hot chocolate.”

Amy grimaces. “You might be right about that.”

“I know I am.” I lead her out and toward her apartment, waiting as she punches in the code.

And then I follow her in.

She eyes me as she flips on the light, revealing her tiny studio apartment. “It’s not much, I know.”

“It’s in an expensive part of town,” I say, smiling at her. “Nothing wrong with it, either.”

“Thanks.”

“Let me help you with that.” I rush toward her as she starts to work her jacket off.

She laughs. “My arms aren’t broken, Parker.”

I glance down at her hot chocolate-stained sweater. “You might wanna change out of that.” And suddenly my mind is full of images that are completely inappropriate. *Oof.*

“Yeah, it’s ruined, I think,” she mutters, ripping it right up and over her head.

Holy...

I look away for a split second but then peek, halfway relieved and halfway disappointed she has on a tank top underneath.

But it’s *much* tighter than her sweater, showing off her curves.

She gives me a funny look. “What?”

I shake my head. “Nothing.” I’m being weird. I clear my throat. “Can I help you at all?”

“Let me just grab some clothes and change.” Amy heads to her dresser and grabs a handful of clothes before disappearing into what I assume is the bathroom.

I take in the studio apartment with more curiosity now that the door is shut, and immediately my eyes fall on the pictures lining the shelf. Moseying over, I get a better look. A couple photos feature her with some blonde woman, who I'm going to assume is a friend. The other three are of her and her parents.

And man, they look... *happy*.

Swallowing hard, I feel a pang of jealousy in my chest. I don't know why. I don't care, but still... The genuine smiles are impossible to brush off.

No wonder she's got such a big idea of love.

Her family looks picture-perfect. She's the spitting image of her mom, although she definitely has her dad's nose. They look like the kind of family you'd see on TV, and as I make it to the last picture, there's a yellow sticky note attached to it.

Be safe in the Big Apple. We're proud of you for chasing your dreams. XO Mom and Dad.

I don't even know what to think about it, but the longing and grief inside the pit of my stomach is as painful as it is annoying.

"You're still here?" The surprise in Amy's voice is enough to rip my eyes away from the note.

"Yeah. You, uh, didn't say whether or not you needed me to help you." I give her a half smile, taking in the sight of Amy in her red flannel pj's with a freshly washed face and hair in a messy bun.

And I *hate* that I like it.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she mumbles, looking past me to the pictures. "I'm kind of stuck in my head right now. I was just trying to figure out the logistics of getting to work with this." She gestures to the boot. "It's going to be a huge hassle."

"Yeah ... you'll also probably have to slow down on attending singles events."

"Ha ha." She narrows her eyes. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

“Uh...”

“You just want me to be *stuck* going to some jazz concert.”

Right, the bet. DUH.

“You know it,” I quip, feeling awkward. “But anyway, you need help getting in bed?”

“I’m not broken.”

“Ah, yeah, you’re right. Just missing a few screws,” I tease, rubbing my jaw. “I’ll get out of your hair and let you get to bed, then. If you want, I can drive you to work so you don’t have to take a cab every day.”

But why am I even offering this? I’d be late to work every freaking day.

She looks perplexed. “Wait, you own a car? I thought most people in this city didn’t own cars...”

“I do. And you’re right. I don’t drive it much. But it does come in handy sometimes.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I think I’ll be okay. Thanks for tonight, though. It would’ve been so hard without you.”

I nod, hung up on what to say as I follow her to the door. “Anytime.”

Amy smiles up at me, and my mind starts giving me the idea to kiss her goodbye. But I ignore it.

“Have a good night, Amy.”

“You, too, Parker.”

And as the door shuts, I let out a *very* heavy breath.

Maybe I just need to get some sleep—and some space.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Amy

"You *sprained* your ankle?!" Eliza's eyes go wide on the other side of the phone. "Why didn't you tell me? Is that why you've been MIA for almost two weeks?"

I stare at the calendar. January 23. I only have three weeks left to find a boyfriend before I'm stuck buying Parker tickets to a stupid jazz concert...

Even though I haven't seen him in a while.

Not since he helped me home after ice skating.

To his credit, he did reach out a lot at first, checking in on me, but then he backed off when I forgot to respond to the hundredth text of him wanting to know how my ankle was.

I hope I didn't hurt his feelings...

"Amy?"

"Yeah, sorry," I say. "I just have a lot on my mind."

"Like what?"

"Um, so ... I never got around to telling you ... But Parker kissed me on New Year's Eve and—"

"OH. MY. GOSH." Eliza's voice booms across my apartment. "So, are you seeing him?!"

I shake my head. "That's the thing ... he only did it because he felt bad after ruining my New Year's Eve date—which you already knew *that* part—but I don't know. I guess when he found out that I was hoping to get my first kiss that night, he wanted to be a good friend and help me check off a box."

"Right..."

"And then when I sprained my ankle, he took me to the ER and didn't leave my side until I got settled in at home—but ever since then ... I don't know. We haven't really talked."

"Do you like him?"

"What?" I stop. "No way. He hates me."

"So, let me get this straight. Parker kisses you, walks you home all the time, pays for things, *and* takes you to the doctor. But you think he *hates* you? Mmm, I don't think so. Amy, it sounds like he *likes* you."

"No. I'm pretty sure he just feels sorry for me." I plop down on my bed, relieved to spend the evening at home. I haven't done much at all while my ankle's been healing up.

It's finally starting to feel better, though.

"Amy, from where I'm sitting, it doesn't sound like that at all. It sounds like there's a lot more going on between you two. People don't go that far out of their way for just *anybody*..."

My cheeks flush at the thought of him *actually* liking me. "I don't know."

Eliza shakes her head on FaceTime, and just as she does, a message pops up across my screen.

Parker: *Lunch tomorrow?*

I stare at the text.

"What is it?" Eliza asks, curiosity filling her expression.

"Parker just texted and asked if I wanna get lunch tomorrow."

"He's asking you on a date!"

"No, he's not," I argue. "I really don't think things between us are like that."

"Come *on*, Amy. I think he has feelings for you. Do you think about him?"

All the time.

"Sometimes," I say carefully, my stomach fluttering as I open his text. "But I also forgot to text him back the other day when I was in a meeting. I don't think people forget to message people back when they like them."

She laughs. "Uh, yeah, they do. You were busy. How was the kiss?"

"Like fireworks on the Fourth of July," I blurt out before I can even think about what I'm saying, so I quickly add, "But I've never been kissed before—or by anyone since—so, who am I to say..."

"You *like* him," she squeals.

I do.

I do like him.

But I don't smile at the thought. In fact, it makes me feel a little ... sad.

"It doesn't really matter if I like him, Eliza. Parker doesn't want a relationship—I mean, we literally have a *bet* going over it. He doesn't want *me* to be with anyone, either."

"Of course, not! That's literally proving my point."

"Okay, but it's not like that," I continue to argue. "He's got a painful past, and I think he's been heartbroken so badly by it that he no longer believes in love—and he's made it very clear to me that people don't change."

"But they do, Amy. They *do* change. I changed after I met Nick."

I sigh. "Maybe. I'm not sure. I think it'd probably be better to just count him out. Besides, I don't want to ruin our friendship. He's one of the only friends I have here in the city

—and I already *know* he'd run if I told him I had any sort of crush on him."

Eliza's quiet for a few moments. "Well, maybe you could just wait it out and see."

"But then I might lose the bet," I reason, facepalming myself. "And like I said, Parker has made it *super* clear that he's not into relationships. He doesn't want one. And it's probably going to take someone *really* special to change his mind."

"You could—"

"Can we just talk about something else? Maybe I should be focusing on finding another event to go to. Because, like I said, even *if* I have a crush on Parker, it'll never go anywhere. I'd much rather try to find a guy who *wants* me—not someone I have to convince to like me."

"You do have a point." Eliza's voice drops. "If he wants you, he'll have to put in the work to get you. I agree with that. I guess I just got excited, you know, because you said the kiss was so good."

I shrug. "Well, I'm not really the best judge. For all I know, every kiss might feel like that."

She laughs. "As much as I hope that's true for you, that was *not* my experience. There are some *terrible* kissers out there. Well, they may not be terrible to the right person ... but they were terrible to me."

I burst into laughter, shaking my head at her. "Ugh, at least you've gotten the opportunity to have those kinds of experiences. I'm jealous."

"Oh girl, don't be. With every past relationship comes a little more experience, but it's not always *good* experience. Sometimes it turns out like *Devon*."

"Ah, yeah, I guess that's true."

I text Parker back, agreeing to join him for lunch. But as I type my response, I can't help but wonder...

Could this be more?

"So, how much longer do you have to wear the boot?" Eliza asks, changing the subject. "That has to be such a pain."

"It is, and because of this stupid thing, I haven't been about to walk to work. Parker offered to drive me to work, but can you imagine if we did that? He'd never get to work on time. I'd never expect that of him."

She grins. "Right back to Parker."

My face heats up. "Oh my gosh, you're right. I'm sorry. But anyway, I just have to wear this thing for a couple more weeks. I should be able to walk normally again in time for Valentine's Day."

"Well, I hope you win the bet," she says.

"Me, too," I chime. "It'd be *so* cool to see The Band Allen live in such an intimate venue. I just hope the tickets don't sell out before then."

"Uh, at those prices, I seriously doubt they will. I looked them up as soon as you told me about it, and I swear, Parker's gotta be *loaded* to agree to a bet like that."

"You know..." I pause. "I actually have no idea about his finances. I don't even know where he lives. He told me his apartment was somewhere near mine, but I have no idea where. But now that you mention it, I'm going to ask him. I'm dying to know."

"Me, too. Maybe he's a secret millionaire or something."

I laugh. "Doubt it."

"You never know," Eliza reasons as I pull back the covers and climb into bed. "Sometimes people can surprise you—in a good way."

"And in a bad way," I grumble, glancing down at my ankle. "The guy I was ice skating with when I sprained my ankle literally *laughed* at me when I fell."

"What a jerk," Eliza mutters. "Guys can be so cruel sometimes. Well, actually, people in general can be cruel. It's an epidemic these days."

"No kidding. Parker almost fought him."

Eliza giggles. "Of course. Did Parker also sweep you off your feet and carry you to the ER like a knight in shining armor?"

I freeze, my mind replaying the way he picked me right up off the ice and held me in his arms. "Actually... He *did*. He carried me like I weighed nothing."

"Oh my gosh, you're kidding." Her eyes go starry. "That is seriously the *sweetest* thing ever. What a good guy. I think Parker has a heart of gold beneath all that tough exterior. I've never met him, but based on everything you've said about him, I just have this strong feeling that he does."

"Yeah, he's not so bad." The words come out awkwardly, and I suddenly realize there's a *lot* more weight to them than I originally thought...

Am I falling for him?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Parker

Where is she?

I drum my fingers on the table at the café, waiting for Amy to show up. Don't get me wrong, she's not late. I'm here fifteen minutes early.

I didn't want her to be waiting for me.

But now my nerves are fried.

Staring at my phone, I look back on our text messages, mostly mundane with funny memes—or me asking her how she's feeling ... including the text that she never responded to. It bothered me at first.

Until I reminded myself that it shouldn't. Because despite how perfectly she fit in my arms when I carried her off the ice, or how naturally stunning she looked fresh-faced in her flannel pajamas, it doesn't change the fact that we're *just* friends.

Besides, she was probably just busy at work. I know she misses messages while she's in the zone.

I do, too.

I rub my jaw and lock my phone screen.

I really need to get these feelings under control.

Because at the end of the day, even if I *did* like Amy, it's not like I can give her the steady, long-term relationship that she's looking for. And the *last* person she needs to get involved with is someone who can't commit. Someone who's afraid to put their heart on the line. Someone like ... me.

But it's okay, because I'm pretty certain I'm destined to be forever alone.

Right?

I look up and spot Amy steadily limping toward the table. She looks just as gorgeous as always, and for all the times I've heard about a person being described as someone who lights up a room...

Yeah, that's Amy.

"Hey," she greets, sliding into the seat across from me. "How's your day been?"

"It's been good. We're working on some new software, but I think it's a waste of time. I hate it when we duplicate a program that's already been made and then try to one-up the original creator."

She nods. "I get that. Happens all the time, though."

"Yeah, for sure. I got you a water," I point to the glass in front of her. "I got here early."

"Thanks." She smiles. "That was sweet of you."

I freeze at the comment.

That was sweet of me?

Since when does she say stuff like that to me?

"Yeah, well, I just didn't want you to be jealous that I already have something to drink," I say stupidly.

She chuckles. "Whatever you say, Parker. I was just thanking you for the water. You don't have to make it

weird.”

“I’m just being a good *friend*. You’re the one being weird.”

She makes a face that causes me to cringe. “What’s up with you today? Are you mad because I forgot to text you back the other day and let you know for the hundredth time that I’m fine? Because I was in the middle of a meeting, and your message popped up on my screen—and I’m not used to you *ever* keeping up with me.”

Whoa, that was loaded.

“No. I don’t care that you didn’t text me back,” I snap, grabbing up my water. “And sorry for caring about your ankle. It’s just that ... you live in the city alone, and you know ... you can’t really get around all that well right now, so I—”

“I don’t need you to worry about—”

“I’m not worried,” I cut her off. “I just wanted to make sure that you were getting to work and wherever else safely.”

“Okay, then,” she quips, her eyes falling to her phone that’s now in her hands. “I guess since I’m half gimpy, you’ll have to accompany me to Matchmakers in Heaven tomorrow night.”

My stomach knots up. “What the heck is that? Do they pair you with a dead person?”

She rolls her eyes. “Jeez, that’s not morbid at all. It’s a matchmaking event that requires attendees to fill out a detailed questionnaire, and then they pair you with someone they think you’ll get along with the best. I was thinking we could do it together.”

“So, you already signed me up?”

“Yeah.” She shrugs. “I’ll text you the link to the questionnaire.”

“But what if they put *us* together?” I blurt out, wishing I hadn’t.

She looks up from her phone just as mine chimes with the notification. “What *if* they do?”

I hold her gaze. "Then, I guess I'll have to actually claim you as my good friend."

Her lips turn downward and she sighs. "What an honor."

Man, and she said I was the one acting weird. She must not be having a great day or something.

"How was work this morning?" I change the subject, ignoring the link she just sent me.

"Um." She pauses. "It was fine. I just have a lot on my mind right now."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." She avoids my gaze, and I can't decide if that's because whatever is on her mind is *my* fault or she just doesn't feel like sharing. No matter the reason, I'm relieved when the waitress interrupts us to take our order.

Amy remains joyful as she speaks with the blonde waitress, and I'm left feeling confused.

Is she happy with everyone but me?

Or did I mess something up when she came in?

Friends or not, *this* is why women are so freaking difficult.

"How's Britt doing?"

"What?"

Amy shakes her head at me. "I was asking about your sister. How is she? She said she'd be staying with you for a while. Is she still living with you?"

"Oh, yeah." I nod. "She's good. She found a place, actually. So she's moving out tomorrow. And as much as I love my sister, I'm ready for her to leave. I've missed having my own space over the past two weeks. She makes a mess of everything."

She pauses. "So, where do you live again?"

"NoHo," I answer, just as my phone vibrates.

Her mouth drops open. "NoHo?! I thought you said you lived near me!"

Oh, shoot. I completely forgot about that.

"I do..."

"No, you don't," she says, exasperated. "That means you went in the complete *opposite* direction that night you walked me home."

I shrug, feeling caught. "I like walking."

She narrows her eyes. "That's it?"

Swallowing hard, I rack my brain. *Why did I walk her home?* "I don't know. I guess I just wanted to make sure you got home safe. You were brand new to New York City and—"

"And you felt sorry for me." Her voice drops. "Gosh, that's so embarrassing."

"I never said that."

"It's fine," Amy mutters, her shoulders slumping for a moment—but then she perks up. "You know, it's exactly three weeks until my birthday ... and Valentine's Day. That's still enough time to win the bet."

I lean back in the booth. "Yeah? Well, I'll tell you right now, I still think you're gonna lose—even with this fancy questionnaire setup you've found."

She laughs. "You can think that all you want, but I'm not giving up."

"I don't expect you to give up." I smile when her eyes light up. The waitress comes by and sets our food down in front of us, and I pluck a French fry up, popping it into my mouth. "So ... are you an only child?"

Amy purses her lips. "Yeah. My parents tried for a baby after me for years, but it never happened."

"Ah, but I bet you're spoiled," I tease, ignoring my phone as it continues to go off. I silence it. It's lunchtime, and there's no reason to take work calls right now.

"Kind of. Maybe in some ways I was," Amy begins, her expression thoughtful as she picks up a fry of her own. "They didn't have a lot of money. It wasn't until I was in high school that my dad got a big promotion. That really changed things for my parents."

"Did his promotion ever make things tense at home?" I don't know why I'm so curious about it, but the pictures ...

they just seem too good to be true.

“Not really. I mean, everyone fights. My parents fought, but I don’t remember what it was about—and they rarely argued in front of me. They’ve been together for almost thirty-seven years.”

My stomach knots up. “That’s a long time to put up with someone.”

“They just kept choosing to love each other.”

“I’m sure there were moments they didn’t.” My words sound more bitter than intended.

But maybe that’s because I’m bitter. Considering my parents were never able to resolve their differences, we’re all still suffering the consequences today.

Amy makes a face. “Maybe. But then they chose to forgive each other. I don’t think it’s all that complicated to make something last. You just have to keep choosing each other, no matter how you feel.”

“Look at you with all that deep advice.” I pick up a chicken strip and take a bite.

She shakes her head. “I don’t really have great advice. I don’t even know what I’m doing when it comes to relationships, obviously. I can’t even find a boyfriend and I’ll be *thirty* in three weeks.”

“Yeah, so? You worry too much about that stuff. Being single isn’t all that bad.”

“Ugh. My parents already had *me* by the age of thirty.”

“So?” I meet her gaze. “My parents were already divorced by the time they were my age—with two kids. In fact, my mom had already been married and divorced *twice*... And you know what, I still have no idea why she put herself through all of it—and continues to do so. It would have been so much easier for everyone involved if she would’ve just stayed single instead of jumping from one failed relationship to another.”

“Maybe she just wants to find the right person.”

“You’ll never find the right person if you’re willing to throw someone away at the first sign of trouble. That’s always been her problem. She always thinks some guy is gonna come along and save her, and sure, it starts out that way, but the moment he messes up—I mean, like forgets something at the store—she’s done. She says she doesn’t have to put up with anything less than perfect.”

Amy nods. “I’m sorry ... it must’ve been rough growing up with that kind of instability.”

“It was. My parents were always fighting about money or custody or something. I never knew if I was coming or going, and I didn’t understand why they couldn’t just get along like other families. Add on the fact that my mom would bring these guys around and try to pass them off as another father figure ... it was just a cycle of disappointment every time they left.”

Amy’s expression is sympathetic as she listens to my words, and for a moment, I feel a pang of vulnerability at having shared such intimate details about my past with her.

“I can’t even imagine how hard that must’ve been for you. But what about your dad? What’s he like?”

I hesitate, carefully choosing my answer. “He’s ... angry. Maybe bitter. I don’t know. He also had his fair share of failed relationships, and he worked a painstaking manual labor job for over a decade. He was working his way up with the goal of moving us out of the neighborhood we lived in, but then he got cancer.”

Amy gasps, her hands flying to her mouth. “Oh my gosh, I’m *so* sorry, Parker.”

“Oh, it’s okay, he’s fine now. He’s been in remission for nearly ten years,” I say, keeping my tone light.

“Oh, good. Okay. Well, it sounds like you and your family have been through a lot...”

“My life certainly wasn’t easy growing up, but I have a solid one now. I finally have the stability that I so desperately needed as a kid.”

She nods, but then stops. "But what about love? Don't you want to love and be loved by someone?"

I shrug. "I *am* loved. I have great friends. I guess I'm just not convinced I need anything more than that. *All* the relationships I've ever witnessed are toxic and end in heartbreak—love never seems to work out. Look at my sister."

"But look at my parents."

I let out a heavy sigh. "Yeah, and that's great for them, and for you. It sounds like they were two really great people who didn't give up on each other. Which is awesome, but rare. I mean, the chances of finding that kind of love are slim."

"But not impossible." Amy grins, wagging her eyebrows. "Tell me there's some part of you that's not a *complete* cynic. Because I'm willing to bet on that sliver of a chance that we'll *both* find the right person."

I grimace. "Yeah, maybe, but there's no way it's happening before Valentine's Day. So, you might as well just plan on accompanying me to that jazz concert. I'll make sure I at least get you a birthday card or something to lessen the blow."

She bursts into a fit of laughter. "Yeah, right. You're gonna be buying those VIP tickets for me and my boyfriend. I know it."

I take a deep breath. "No way."

"Yep." She shoots me a wink that makes my heart stutter. "In fact, why don't we go ahead and fill out that matchmaking questionnaire right now? I dare ya."

"Fine," I mutter, swooping up my phone. I click on the link and start through the questions, carefully answering them to the best of my ability. They're mostly fundamental things like, *Are you religious?* Or, *What are your hobbies?*

And as I type in my answers, glancing over at a smiling Amy, I wonder what she's typing in the blanks.

Is there a chance that *we* will get paired up again? Or will someone else be her “match made in heaven”?

My stomach tightens at the idea of her paired up with someone else. But I push it away.

They'll never put us together.

And for some reason, that makes my heart sink.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Amy

“So, how was your lunch with Parker?” Eliza’s voice in my ear is a comfort as I make my way slowly down the street, headed back to the office.

“It was fine,” I comment, not really sure if that’s the truth or not. Honestly, things felt a little ... *weird*. “Kind of.”

“What do you mean? Did he tell you he likes you?”

I laugh. “Um, no. He made it *very* clear that we’re just friends. But I did find out that he lives in NoHo. Which isn’t anywhere close to my place, and I still can’t make sense of why he walked me home that first night.”

“Aw...”

“Don’t,” I stop her before she can run with the thought. “It’s clear he just felt sorry for me.”

Eliza laughs. “Right.”

I can sense the sarcasm in her voice. "I mean, sure, there are glimpses of a heart beneath all that grump, but he's made it clear over and over that we're just friends." The disappointment in my voice is palpable. And I *feel* surprisingly very disappointed by it. I don't even know why.

I've never looked at Parker as more than just a friend ... right?

I'm more conflicted than before. I wasn't expecting to feel so sad about this.

"Anyway," I say, changing the subject, "I still have a bet to win, so I found a matchmaking event to go to. I filled out this detailed questionnaire, and then a panel places you with who they think is your best match."

"You don't sound excited."

"I am," I reason, though I can't seem to muster much excitement to convince her. "Maybe I'll finally meet the right person there."

"Or maybe you should tell Parker you have feelings for him and see what happens first."

"Eliza," I say firmly. "It's not happening with Parker. I mean, yeah, maybe I have a little crush on him ... but it's probably just because he's the only guy I've ever kissed."

She's quiet for a few moments. "I guess you could be right. I'm sorry for pushing you. It's just that I can tell you like him and don't want you to miss out..."

"I know, but it's just a little crush. I've had plenty of those over the years. It's nothing I can't get over." My fingers run along my bottom lip as I say the words, my mind filling with the memory of our New Year's Eve kiss. "I'll probably meet someone at the matchmaker thing tomorrow night and forget that I ever considered Parker as more than a friend."

"Okay..." She doesn't sound very confident.

And that doesn't make me feel any better.

"It'll be good."

"Yes, it will." Eliza's voice is much brighter now. "I'm sure you'll have a great time, and you're right. You might finally

meet that Valentine's Day boyfriend!"

"Absolutely." I push through the office building door and make my way up to my floor. "But I'm back at work now, so I'll call you later."

"Love you, Amy."

"Love you."

Just before I put the phone back in my purse, I check my messages, surprised to see a new text message. My heart flutters in my chest.

Parker: *Thanks for meeting me for lunch.*

I tilt my head as I read it again, immediately replying and letting him know that I enjoyed it as well. However, it only leaves me feeling more confused.

Maybe we're getting closer.

But ONLY as friends.

That's what I keep telling myself as I walk past the cubicles to my own office. Before I can even shut the door, Nellie waves me down, following me in and closing the door.

"Hey, how was your lunch?"

"It was good," I say, taking off my coat and hanging it on the back of my chair. "I met up with a friend."

"A friend?" She raises her brow. "Is this the same friend that took you to the emergency room?"

I hesitate at the smirk on her face. "Yeah, but *trust me*, we're just friends. He's made that *very* clear."

"Oh, one of *those* guys." She frowns, plopping down in the chair opposite my desk. "I was hung up on one of my guy friends. And, well, now we're not friends anymore."

"Oh?" I jiggle my mouse to wake up my computer and check my inbox for any important emails. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

She laughs, dismissing me. "It's okay. I wasn't the one who ended up heartbroken in the end, surprisingly."

Oh.

"What happened—if you don't mind me asking?"

"It was years ago, I don't mind." She smiles at me, though it doesn't reach her eyes. "I, um, I had this guy friend. I think I realized I had feelings for him a few months into us being friends—maybe even sooner than that." Nellie pauses, picking at her fingernails. "I was *crazy* about him. I thought I was in love with him."

Well, I don't think I'm in love with Parker. It's just a crush.

"All my friends told me that I should tell him. They didn't want me to miss out on something really special."

My stomach flips. "And?"

"And I finally worked up the courage to tell him that I thought I might be in love with him. He responded like a deer in the headlights. He was *shocked*. And then, it got *so* awkward. He told me that he wasn't looking for a relationship, that he didn't see me as anything more than a friend. Things got super weird after that. He started avoiding me. Looking back, I realize he had some major commitment issues."

I inwardly cringe. That sounds *exactly* like something Parker would do. "Was that the end of your friendship?"

"No," she says, laughing softly. "I toughed it out and continued to be his friend—only because I really valued his friendship. But I definitely grieved the romantic relationship I wanted with him. I eventually started dating and met someone ... and *then* he told me he loved me."

"*Oof.*" My eyes widen.

"Yeah. So *that* was the end of our friendship. He took the rejection hard and basically cut me off after that. I suppose it was always the wrong timing for us."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay." She perks up. "The point of the story is that if you have any feelings for this friend of yours and he's made it clear that you two are nothing more than friends, leave it alone. Don't try to make some grand gesture to change his mind. I promise it's not worth the pain."

I nod, feeling the contradiction between Eliza's and Nellie's advice. Everyone has their own experiences they draw from—

and that's *very* apparent.

It's just too bad that I have none of my own to rely on.

"I'm sorry if that's not what you wanted to hear." Nellie shoots me a sympathetic smile. "I just don't want to see you get hurt. A man with potential is just that—potential."

I smile. "Yeah, you're right. I'm actually going to a matchmaking event tomorrow. I had to fill out this long questionnaire, and then a panel will pair me with the person they think I fit best with."

"Oh, that's a *great* idea!" Nellie beams. "I wish I could've participated in something like that when I was out in the dating scene. Get all the serious stuff out of the way upfront so you at least know you're good on paper."

I wonder if Parker and I would be good on paper.

The thought leaves my mind swimming.

Do Parker and I even have anything in common?

I mean, he grew up in New York City in a broken home—and I lived outside of Chicago with parents who loved each other. He's a total grump, and I'm, well—the total opposite.

"Anyway, I hope you have a lot of fun at the event tomorrow night," Nellie says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I catch her eye as she stands to her feet. "Me, too."



I can't sleep.

The conversation I had with Nellie replays in my mind like a broken record.

As hopeful as I am about finding the right person, I'm still a little unsure what exactly the *right person* for me even looks like.

As I lay in the dark, I start to think about the questionnaire I filled out. In it, they asked about my preferences, hobbies, and interests. But ... most of the answers were just surface-level. They didn't dig deep into who I really am or what I'm truly looking for in a partner. Surely a successful and long-

lasting relationship is based on more than shared interests and surface-level compatibility.

The more I toss and turn, the more I realize that I want someone who loves me like my dad loves my mom. He looks at her like she's the only person in the room, like she's his whole world. I want someone who will be my rock. Someone who will stand by me through thick and thin, through all of life's ups and downs. Someone who understands my quirks, who forgives my flaws, and who sees the real me beneath the facade I often put up for the world. Someone who will fiercely respect, protect, defend, and uplift me. Someone who can challenge me to be a better version of myself and encourages me in my pursuits and dreams, just like my dad does for my mom.

Just like Dad does for *me*.

As the first light of dawn creeps through the curtains, I make a decision.

No matter what the matchmaking event brings, I won't settle for anything less than a love that mirrors the one my parents share.



"I look great," I say to myself, standing in front of the full-length mirror in my apartment. The walking boot is only a slight setback, but if someone judges me for that, then I don't want to be with them anyway.

My black skinny jeans hug my hips and thighs, and my black bootie on my other foot evens out the difference in height. My olive-and-cream striped sweater is fluffy, but not so much that someone can't see my figure.

I push my freshly curled hair behind my ears and pop my lips.

And then my phone rings.

I spin around and grab my purse off the bed, assuming it's Eliza calling last minute to wish me good luck. But that's not

who's calling.

"Are you bailing tonight?" I answer, not even bothering to greet Parker.

"No," he says, drawing out the 'o.' "But I *am* waiting for you outside your apartment door. I thought it might freak you out if I just knocked."

"Why?" I laugh, just as a knock sounds. "You're so weird."

"I know. Now let me in."

Still laughing, I hang up and limp toward the door and swing it open. I take in the sight of Parker, his hair freshly smoothed out and his style *edgy*. Black denim and a Ramones T-shirt under a leather jacket.

Jeez. My mouth grows dry as I take him in. *He's hot.* But I shake it off, slapping a smile on my face as I meet his gaze. "You ready?"

He shoves his hands into his pockets. "I think I should be asking *you* that."

"Right." I swallow, grabbing my jacket off the hook by the door. "I think I'm ready. Do I look ready?"

He steps back slightly, his eyes meeting mine before running down the entire length of my body. My insides *quiver* with excitement and my face grows hot.

Are my cheeks red? Oh my gosh, I hope not.

"You look ready to me." His husky voice breaks through my thoughts.

"Great," I choke out, fumbling with my coat.

And just like that, he's now standing right in front of me, his cologne intoxicating as he helps me slide my arms into the holes of my wool peacoat.

"My ankle is injured, not my arms."

Parker chuckles. "Right."

I duck away from him, gesturing to my purse. "Almost forgot my purse."

"I'll grab it for you." He trots over to it, looking over his shoulder. "It'll take you twice as long to limp back over here."

"Ha ha." I roll my eyes as he brings it to me and holds it out. "You know, I'm actually getting pretty fast in this thing."

"Oh yeah? Shall we race, then?" His eyes dance over my face with amusement, and for a moment I catch myself wondering what it would be like if Parker *actually* liked me. I imagine him grabbing my hand, leading me out of the apartment, and taking me out for the night... No dating games required.

I'm torturing myself.

"Let's go." I slip past him, chiding myself for my weak moment. Besides, there's probably some great new guy waiting for me at the event...

Unless I somehow get matched with Parker.

My eyes shift upward as we ride the elevator down, and I start thinking about how surprised he'd be if we're matched. *He'd be pissed, probably.*

"How was your day?" he asks, his eyes more green than blue tonight.

"It was fine," I answer as we step out. He walks slowly beside me and opens the lobby door. "Thanks."

"No problem." He holds out his arm. "Do you need extra support?"

"What?" I make a face.

"Your ankle?" He points to the boot. "I didn't know if it would be helpful..."

"Right..." My voice trails off as I hesitantly slide my arm in his.

I realize we *look* like a couple as we walk down the street. But we're just friends.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Parker

“Okay! Let’s start the pairing process,” a thirty-something hipster in a fedora says over the microphone. My foot taps against the floor as I stand beside Amy, wondering if there’s some crazy chance that we’ll get paired. I mean, we’ve been paired before ... so it *could* happen. And that would mean I could keep her away from douchebags—and win the bet.

Because that’s all this is...

A bet.

“Amy Gibson,” the guy says over the PA. My heart jumps right out of my chest at the sound of her name. My hands start sweating.

What’s wrong with me?

“You’re going to be paired with...” His voice trails off as he fumbles with the paper in his hands. I hold my breath.

“Bradley Tubbs.”

My heart sinks to my stomach as Amy steps forward, not even looking back at me. I’m sure she’s got that same giddy smile on her face that she always does at these events, and I can’t help but size up the guy who steps forward to greet her.

He’s *definitely* her type.

Tall, all business in a suit and tie. His jet-black hair is perfectly styled, and I’m pretty sure I look like a freaking rugrat in comparison. He extends his hand to her, and the two make their way to a table. My eyes follow them. Amy is already laughing at whatever the guy whispered in her ear before she sat down.

It makes me feel sick.

“Parker Harris?” the guy says into the microphone. “You here?”

Oh, shoot.

I step forward, giving him a little wave. “Sorry.”

“You’re with Alice Watson.” He gestures to the petite dark-haired woman. She’s wearing a burgundy dress with Doc Martens. It’s an edgy, kind of cool look... I guess.

She smiles brightly and I do my best to smile back. “Hi. You’re super cute.”

“Thanks,” I say, letting her lead the way to a table. She picks one a couple of rows away from Amy. I take the back seat, which allows me to look *right* at her. I don’t know if that’s a good or bad thing—especially considering she’s already laughing with her date.

“So, your name’s Parker?” My date’s bird-like voice cuts through my thoughts.

“Uh, yeah,” I say, just as someone sets down a couple of waters in front of us. “And you’re Alison?”

She frowns. “Alice.”

“Right, sorry. Like Wonderland. I won’t forget again. It’s just a little bit of an off night for me.”

“Then why did you come?” Her voice is flat, unenthused.

"Because I don't like to miss things I sign up for. I try to be reliable." I look her right in the eye, meeting her hazel irises. She's sizing *me* up, I can feel it. And I don't blame her at all.

"Why do you think we matched?" Her question is thoughtful, not remotely insulting.

"I don't know," I answer. "Why do *you* think we matched?"

"Hmm. You look like a jerk." She laughs. "And I always get matched with guys who look like jerks."

Oh boy.

"Okay, well that's good to know."

"I'm hoping you'll prove me wrong." She nudges me with her foot under the table, and I kind of want to kick her back—but that wouldn't be very nice. My eyes shift over to Amy, who's sipping on a glass of red wine. Her thick lips are curled up in a smile, her entire expression bright with amusement and awe.

Whatever her date is telling her, she's all in.

She's not even looking at me. She's forgotten I exist.

"You're literally being so rude right now," Alison—Alice—Alisomething says to me, her tone sharp. "If you want to just sit and stare at the chick you came in here with, then maybe you should be asking *her* out instead of dragging her along with you to these things. Like *jeez*. I'm so over men being jerks. I bet you've slept with her, haven't you?"

Whoa. Big assumptions.

I turn to her and inhale a deep breath. "I'm gonna be honest with you. This is a waste of time. I don't want to be in a relationship."

She glares at me and swoops up her water glass from the table—and I barely see it coming before it hits. "Screw you."

Oh no, no, NO.

Ice water connects with my face, soaking my T-shirt.

I suck in a sharp breath from the shock.

"Have a good night, *Parker*." She slides off the stool, flips her hair over her shoulder, and storms right out...

And *everyone* is gawking at what just happened.

"Ouch. Guess that date didn't go so well," the guy says over the PA. Everyone laughs.

Well, except for Amy. She's just staring at me, her eyes wide with shock as droplets of water drip from my face to the table. I wipe my face with my sleeve, knowing I somewhat deserved what just happened.

Yeah, I was a jerk.

I don't know what's wrong with me.

But I do know one thing: I need a *stiff* drink to deal with this.

I slide off the stool and wring out my shirt. Everyone has seemingly gone back to conversing with their dates as I weave my way through the dim-lit room.

"Parker." A hand grabs my arm. "What happened?"

I stop, turning toward Amy, who's looking more concerned than anything. I hold her gaze, feeling the eyes of the guy she's with on me. "I was a jerk tonight."

Her brows furrow, her hand still gripping my arm. "Why?"

And I don't have an answer for her.

"Bad night, I think," I finally say, lightening up my voice. "It happens. You know I hate this dating stuff."

"I get that, man," a deep voice cuts in, and I whip my head around to meet her date. "It's way easier to avoid these stupid events... But I think I got pretty lucky tonight." He shoots Amy a wink that makes her blush.

He's shmoozing her.

I open my mouth to say something about it but then clamp it shut. I don't want to get drenched for a second time tonight.

"Let's get some coffee after this?" he offers, eyeing me eyeing him.

"Okay." Amy beams, her focus on him.

And I walk away.

She's into him, so who am I to stand in the way?

I always seem to get in the way. It's time for Amy to make her own decisions. She's never asked for my opinions. She doesn't want them. Obviously.

I slip out of the bar, opting for somewhere else to go. I don't even want to entertain the idea of staying and seeing where things go between Amy and Bradley—or whatever his name is.

I'll just go home.

Except I don't wanna go home.

My head is a wreck right now, and I don't even know why. I got doused with water because I was staring at Amy, and I don't even have an excuse.

I was just ... *curious*.

That's it. That's got to be all it is.

I pull out my phone, scrolling through my contacts until I get to Weston's name. I hit the call button and lean against the brick exterior as I wait for him to pick up.

"Hey man, did you find your match made in heaven?"

"Nope. I screwed up tonight," I say, running my hands through my hair. "Got water thrown in my face."

"Yikes. You must've been acting like a real jerk."

I glance back toward the entrance. "Something like that. What're you up to?"

"I'm actually with Derek at Kerk Dive." He chuckles. "You want to come chill for a while?"

"Yeah, I'll head there." I push off the wall and start the five-block walk.

"You're leaving Amy?"

"Yeah, I don't think she needs me. She already agreed to a coffee date with her match. He seems like a jerk, but she's gotta work that out herself. I can't protect her from it every time."

"I don't think she's ever asked you to."

He's right. And I'm not usually one to meddle in other people's business.

"I'll be there in a few minutes." I hang up and shove the phone back into my pocket. I know I should've paid more attention to Alice tonight...

But I'm always trying to look out for Amy.

I quicken my footsteps, the chill in the air making my wet shirt feel icy against my chest. By the time I make it to the bar, I'm shivering under my coat, and I push through the stale smell of smoke, welcoming the warmth that comes with it.

"Hey, man!" Weston waves at me from the back, sitting next to Derek.

I give them a nod and weave through the crowd to get to them. "Hey."

"We got you a drink." Derek nods to the glass sitting in front of the empty seat. "Weston said you sounded like you needed one."

"Yeah, I definitely do," I grab it and down the liquid, welcoming the burn that comes with it, setting a fire in my stomach.

"Oh boy." Weston eyes me. "You must not be having a good night. That's the only time you can down a drink like that."

"Nah, I'm good." I hand the empty glass to a waitress.

"You want another?"

"Yeah," I say without any hesitation. "And make this one a double, please."

"No problem." She gives me a flirty smile.

I ignore it and turn back to Derek and Weston. "I hate dating."

"Me, too," Weston grumbles. "I keep hoping that I'm going to make something happen one of these days ... never works out."

"What about Brittany?" Derek asks.

I shoot him a glare at the mention of my sister. "That's a hard no."

"Why?"

"Because she's my *sister*. That's just freaking weird."

"He's got a point," Weston says. "I've known her forever, too, and yeah, I think I'll probably *a/ways* have a crush on her... But... I don't know. She's going through things, anyway."

"No kidding," I say with a grunt as the waitress sets my new drink in front of me. I swoop it up, but just sip this time. "I

think I'll be the happiest if I stay a bachelor for the rest of my life."

"You know," Derek begins, stroking the dark stubble on his face, "that sounds great and all, but you say that so often, I'm starting to think it might just be a front."

I snort. "It's not a front."

"Okay." Derek's voice is full of disbelief. "Whatever you say."

My eyes drift around the bar as I try to decipher what's going on with me. I mean, I'm always a little dry, but right now ... I feel ... bitter. My mind flickers to Amy, her eyes starry-eyed and focused on Brad, or whatever his name is.

Am I jealous?

The thought is unwanted. So I push it away.

If I'm jealous of *anything*, it's just her uncanny ability to try over and over again, never letting her previous bad experiences prevent her from going after what she wants.

It's admirable, really.

Yeah, that's probably it.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out, expecting to see a work email or something, but instead, it's a text from Amy.

Amy: *Where'd you go?*

Me: *Out with my friends.*

The three dots pop up on the screen, staying there for what feels like forever. I wait for her reply. Finally, it pops up.

Amy: *Okay, have fun. Going on a coffee date with Brad. <3*

My stomach knots up at the message and I close out of it, not bothering to reply. I don't even know what to say to it, and when I look back up, both of my friends are staring at me.

"What?"

“Nothing,” Weston smirks. “You just look so ... *intense*.”

I shake my head. “Nah. It’s all good. Amy’s just going out with the guy she met tonight.”

“And you’re wishing that guy was you,” Derek deduces.

I laugh. “No way.”

Except ... the words don’t quite sit right in my chest.

CHAPTER TWENTY-one

Amy

“So, you’re into late-night coffee dates, yeah?” Brad chuckles and slides into the opposite side of the booth.

I nod. “I think it’s romantic.” I try to read Brad’s face. He’s got this mysterious edge that I find fascinating—but I also don’t want to run him off with my hopeless romanticism.

“I think it’s sweet that you’re a hopeless romantic.” He picks up his coffee, which just so happens to be nearly the same shade as his hair. “There aren’t many left.”

“Maybe people just don’t want to admit to it,” I suggest, running my finger along the top of my caramel macchiato.

“Ah, that could be true.” Brad gives me a sparkling smile.

Ugh. He’s so freaking handsome.

Suddenly, Parker flashes in my mind at the thought. I push it away. It doesn't matter that Parker might be more handsome than most—or that I can't stop wondering what he's doing... Or if he's okay after being doused by his date.

"Amy?" Brad's voice cuts through my thoughts.

"Yes?" I look up from the creaming soft top of my coffee.

He laughs. "You were zoned out for a minute there. Are you tired? We can get out of here if you're tired."

I shake my head. "Oh no, not at all. I was just wondering how my friend is recovering after that whole scene back at the bar," I admit, obviously leaving out the part about thinking how handsome Parker is.

"Yeah, I overheard a little bit of that conversation," Brad muses, his eyes alight with humor as they stay focused on my face. "I'm pretty sure he got in trouble for checking out another girl."

My brow furrows. "What? That doesn't make much sense. He's always been really respectful of women."

"Obviously not tonight." Brad bursts into laughter. "We all suffer from moments like that—trust me. I can be devoted to someone, but if a hot woman walks by... I'm gonna notice. I'm not suddenly blind just because I'm taken."

I half-smile as my heart sinks. "Oh ... well, maybe that's true."

"Of course, it is. I'm not going to lie to you, Amy. It's better to be upfront than it is to lie." Brad reaches across the table and takes my hand. "But I have to say, it'd be hard to compare anyone to *you*. You're gorgeous."

"Thank you." I blush, letting him hold my hand. It's warm, but my heart isn't racing.

In fact, I'm still stuck on the idea that Parker was rude enough to blatantly check another woman out while with his date...

Not cool.

But it doesn't matter. This isn't about Parker.

“So, where did you grow up?” I ask, pulling my hand away lightly to pick up my hot drink.

“I grew up in Los Angeles,” he answers with a shrug. “I thought I’d never leave, but then I realized I didn’t belong there.”

“I’ve never been.”

“You haven’t?” Brad looks surprised. “Well, I’ll be honest. You’re not missing out on much these days. When I was a kid, I used to think it was really something to be in the same town as so many celebrities ... but that wore off.”

“I take it you’re not into celebrities anymore?” I give him a playful touch on his forearm.

He shakes his head. “Not really. Once I got into the firm my father started and I had to represent those kinds of people in court, I realized they were just like the rest of us—only a lot bigger handfuls. I don’t know.” Brad pauses, giving me a thoughtful look. “I lost my taste for the city, so I moved here instead.”

“Do you still work as a lawyer?”

He nods. “I’m a criminal defense attorney—the most hated of them all.” Brad flashes another one of those smiles at me, and my stomach tightens.

“Sometimes you help people who are innocent,” I reason.

He hesitates and then laughs. “Yeah, that rarely happens. Most of the time, they’re incredibly guilty.”

I frown. “That must be hard, then.”

“I don’t know. It’s just what I do.” He picks up his coffee and takes a long sip, eyeing me over it. “I don’t condone their crimes.”

A giggle slips from my lips. “I didn’t think you did.”

“You had a *very* concerned look on your face,” he says, setting his cup down and smiling. “But I’m no criminal.”

“Good to know.” I laugh. “I haven’t gotten my background check back on you yet.”

“Ha ha.” He shakes his head at me. “You know, though, that’s not a bad idea these days. You’d be surprised at what

people have done in their past. Sometimes they grow out of mischief, but sometimes ... they don't." Something in his voice shifts when he says that, and I find myself on the edge of my seat.

"Do you have personal experience with that?"

He laughs. "Too much. I once dated a woman who stalked me for a few months after we broke up. That was a real ride, but I don't think you look like a stalker."

"No." I giggle. "Definitely not."

"I mean, we all stalk people to some degree on social media these days, though," he points out, the humor returning to his gaze. "I'm not so sure that it's a good thing."

"I agree." I sip more on my coffee, noting that it's losing its warmth. *How long have we been here?* I glance down at my watch. *It's almost midnight.* I look up at Brad, who's watching me. "I probably should head home now. It's getting kind of late."

"Yeah, of course. I'm ready to get out of here, too." He gives me a wink before standing to his feet. "Let me just go pay for the coffees."

I smile and take the moment alone to check my phone. There's one notification from Eliza asking how the date went. I text her back quickly, letting her know that it's *still* going. That's a good sign, right?

It has to be.

I'm pretty sure this is the longest a date has gone without something *major* happening—usually involving Parker.

"You ready?" Brad smiles and offers a hand to help me out of the booth.

"A true gentleman." I smile in return and take his hand. His fingers don't let go of mine as we walk out of the coffee shop, and he holds the door open for me.

He really is a gentleman.

"Lead the way to your place," he says, still flashing me that heart-melting gaze.

"It's super sweet that you want to make sure I get home safe, but..." My voice trails off as I glance down the street. "I don't usually let people know where I live on the first date."

"Ah, smart move." Brad doesn't sound put off at all. "Then I guess we can just go to mine. I'll grab an Uber. It's too far to walk from here."

"Oh ... Um..." I begin, meeting his gaze with uncertainty. However, he must read it the wrong way because before I know it, he presses his lips to mine.

His breath tastes like coffee and his cologne is *suffocating*.
And I don't feel *anything*.

Well, nothing *positive*.

I press my hands against his chest, breaking off the kiss. "Sorry ... I mean, I don't do this kind of thing—definitely not on the first date."

"Technically this is the second date," Brad says through a gritted smile, leaning back down to kiss me again. I back away. I can tell he's offended. His eyes darken as he looks down at me.

"It's really just an extension of the first," I say curtly, pulling out my phone and ordering my *own* Uber home. "I think I'll get a ride home."

His brows shoot up. "Are you *serious* right now? I just bought your coffee, sat there, listened to your spiel about romance—and you're bailing on me? What did I do wrong?"

I look up from my phone, confused. "I don't understand what that's even supposed to mean. I had a nice time." *Well, until that kiss.* "I just don't go home with someone on the first date. I already made that clear."

"But it's technically—"

"I don't go home with someone on the second date, either," I level with him, growing irritated. "I don't go home with someone at *all*. I'm not a one-night stand kind of girl."

"You could've fooled me with how eager you were."

I drop my phone to my side, thankful my ride is only a few minutes away. "What's that supposed to mean?"

“Uh, don’t act like you weren’t just all over me. You *really* made it seem like you wanted—”

“I don’t want anything from you.”

Great, now I’m mad.

Maybe Parker is right. Maybe I *am* bad at love.

“Come on.” He steps toward me, his model-good looks suddenly not all that charming. “You’re beautiful, smart, and you deserve a night of fun. I can give that to you.”

I curl my lip in disgust. “No thanks.” My eyes flicker away from him as a black Tahoe pulls up to the curb.

Get me outta here.

Brad takes one more step toward me. “Don’t leave.”

“I have pepper spray,” I warn.

His features contort in confusion. He lifts his hands. “Never mind. I obviously read this all wrong. I thought we were actually going somewhere.”

I gape at him. “Well, we could’ve had you not been so pushy.” I turn away from him to rip open the Uber door and slide inside.

Jerk.

Letting out a sigh, I watch as Brad storms away, shaking his head. I don’t even know *how* that went as wrong as it did.

Was I really coming across like I wanted to go home with him?

“Rough night?” the driver, a young woman around my age, asks, meeting my gaze in the rearview mirror.

“Something like that,” I mutter, pulling my seatbelt across my body. I already know I have questions for Eliza—like how the heck do I make sure I’m not coming across like a one-night stand kind of girl?

“Men in the city can be real jerks.” She gives me a sympathetic smile and then turns up the radio, some kind of industrial rock filling the car. Frustration thrums through my body as I replay my night with Brad, racking my brains for any red flags I may have missed. His comment about

checking out women while being in a relationship was a little off-putting, but was there anything else? Am I just blind?

Ugh. Maybe he's just a wolf in sheep's clothing.

I lean back against the headrest for the rest of the drive, trying to focus on anything other than Brad. Parker immediately comes straight to mind, and I cringe. He's going to laugh his face off when he finds out that this was another date wasted.

Maybe I will be going to that jazz show, after all.

"Here," the driver chimes as the car comes to a stop. "I hope you have a nice night."

"Thanks," I say, forcing a smile and climbing out into the night air. It's *really* freaking cold, and the moment the icy air hits my lungs, they burn. I trot into the building, slipping through the empty lobby in a rush. Fatigue hits me as I ride the elevator to my floor.

I can't wait to go to bed.

My mind fills with images of my warm flannel sheets, fluffy duvet, and my body pillow tucked around me. It's going to be *heaven* when I get there.

Maybe I don't like late-night coffee dates...

I punch the code into my door, swing it open, and then gasp. "This cannot seriously be happening right now."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Parker

Why is my phone ringing right now?

I rub my eyes and try to get my wits about me, seeing the time reflected on the wall. It's one o'clock in the morning. No one should be calling me.

But still.

It keeps ringing. And ringing.

Letting out a sigh, I reach for my phone and contemplate silencing it as soon as I see *who* is calling. I don't want to know how Amy's date went. She's probably calling to gloat about how *great* Chad—er, Brad—was.

Or maybe something is wrong.

I swipe to answer. "Hi."

Oof. That sounds awkward.

“Hey, um.” She sounds *very* frazzled. “I have kind of an emergency...”

“What happened?” I shoot straight up in bed, suddenly very awake. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she says, though she doesn’t really *sound* okay. “My apartment flooded—and when I say flooded, I mean *really* flooded. Some sort of pipe burst in the floor above me ... I don’t know who else to call.”

“Maintenance is a good start,” I say, relieved that it’s only her apartment and not something much worse.

“I already called maintenance. I ... It’s just ... my stuff is soaked, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do ... or where I’m supposed to go...”

“I’ll be over there in ten minutes. Grab anything that might get ruined. You can stay with me.” The words come out before I realize what I’m saying, and the sigh of relief she lets out means I can’t take it back.

“Oh wow. Thank you *so* much. I would’ve gotten a hotel—”

“No, don’t worry about it. You’ll have to replace what’s ruined, and that’ll cost enough.”

“Well, hopefully my renter’s insurance will cover it...” She sighs again.

“Sure, but those guys can take forever to process claims. You don’t need to be worrying about fronting a hotel bill on top of dealing with everything else.”

“That’s true.”

“I’m on my way over,” I say, slipping into a pair of black sweatpants and grabbing my coat.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m stepping out of the elevator onto her floor and making my way to her apartment. I knock on her door, trying to prepare myself for what’s to come.

And it’s *way* worse than I thought.

“Oh wow...” My voice trails off as Amy swings the door open. “There’s gotta be about six inches of water in here.. What happened?”

"I don't know," she says, holding an overnight bag. "I grabbed what I could. They said they're trying to figure out what's going on. The apartment beside me is flooded, too, but the tenant already left."

I nod, reaching out and taking the bag from her. "Do you need anything else?"

Her shoulders slump as she meets my gaze—and I can already tell there's more going on with her than *just* her apartment. "I'm too tired to get anything else. Can we just go?"

"Yeah, of course." I take her in as she sloshes through the water and takes a step up to join me. "Don't you want some different shoes?"

"They're in the bag. I'll be fine—unless we're walking..." She eyes me warily.

I shake my head. "Nope. My car is parked right outside, actually."

"Thank you," she says softly, her feet making a squishing noise as she steps out into the hallway. "I just want to go to sleep."

I frown. She's not acting like herself. I'm not sure if it's the fact her apartment flooded, that she's tired, or something else entirely. But I can't help myself. "How did your date go tonight?"

She laughs, and I cringe at the tone. "Almost as bad as yours."

"I'm sorry," I mutter, wondering what Brad did to mess it all up.

"Let's just say he wanted a lot more than a coffee." She eyes me as we step onto the elevator, the lull of crappy music filling the air.

"Do I need to go beat him up?" I joke—well, somewhat joke. If she asked me to beat him up, I probably would. Like *right now*.

"No, I don't think he'll bother me again. But ... he did say I came across like someone who wanted more."

I frown. "I don't see that."

"Really?"

"He was probably just being a jerk."

She glances down at her shoes, letting out a sharp breath.

"Can I ask you something—and you not laugh?"

I hesitate, unsure what this question might entail. "Sure."

"When a guy is dating someone, do they still check out other women?"

I nearly choke on air. *What are we, in middle school again?*

"Uh, I mean, I don't think it's very respectful to do something like that, but plenty of men do it."

"You did it."

"What?" My sharp tone grabs her attention.

"Brad said that girl dumped water on you because you were checking out someone else."

Gosh, this conversation is weird tonight. I am not awake enough for this.

"Uh ... No." I rub the back of my neck. "I wasn't *checking someone out*. She just didn't like what I had to say."

"Oh," Amy says, and ends that topic there, thank goodness. I don't know how in the world I'd be able to tell her that my gaze was stuck on *her*.

"If a guy is into you, he won't look around at other women." I keep my tone even as we step out into the lobby, her shoes continuing to make strange squishy noises as we make it to the door. "There are plenty of beautiful people in the world, but a respectful man will keep his eyes on you."

Amy looks up at me, her baby blue eyes lingering long enough to make my heart do something weird in my chest.

"That's romantic, Parker."

I laugh. "No, that's just being a good person, Amy. Come on, let's go home."



“Whoa...” Amy’s mouth drops open the moment she steps inside my place. I should’ve known this would happen.

I shut the door. “It’s just an apartment.”

“It’s *massive*.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I rub the back of my neck as I step around her, letting her stand there and take it all in. Urban art hangs on the walls, and someone might think I had good taste based on the luxurious décor—but actually, I bought it fully furnished.

“Why...”

I look over at Amy, who’s still awe-struck, her lips parted and her wet shoes leaving a dark spot on the rug. “Why, what?”

“I had no idea you were *this* rich.”

Right. That’s what everyone says.

“I do alright.”

“This place must be super expensive.”

“I got a good deal,” I reason.

Amy looks around once more before glancing at her shoes. “Oh jeez, I’m a mess.” Her cheeks go red as she leans over and unzips her boots.

“It’s been a long day for you.” I set her bag down on the light gray bamboo flooring and go take her wet shoes from her. “I’ll set these outside to dry.”

“Outside?”

“Yeah. On the terrace.”

“You have a terrace?”

I hesitate. “Yes.”

Amy blinks a few times, but then goes to strip off her wet socks. “What do you do for work again?”

“I’m a senior software engineer...”

“And you make enough for—”

“I invested in a startup tech company a long time ago,” I answer, filling in the blanks before she asks. “It took off and we sold it. I invested the money I made and now I do very well for myself.”

“Wow.”

Shaking my head, I weave through the sitting room to the terrace door. It’s an incredible skyline view, which is what drew me here in the first place.

I set her shoes outside and return to Amy, who appears to be frozen in place.

“I don’t want to break anything.”

I laugh. “Stop being so weird. Come on.” I grab her hand and pull her away from the entryway. “It’s just another apartment. I’ll show you the guest room.”

“Okay,” she says timidly, her bare feet padding across the floors. “I’m sorry that I bothered you in the middle of the night. That wasn’t very courteous of me.”

“It’s fine. It’s not like you could’ve slept at your place. You don’t know what’s in that water.”

Her eyes widen. “Hopefully nothing.”

“Probably not. It smelled clean, but still, better not to risk it.”

“Right.”

“So, my room is right there.” I point to the master bedroom across from the spare. “If you need anything, you can just attack me or whatever.” I push her bedroom door open, revealing the modestly furnished space. It looks more like a hotel room to me with all the white, but rarely does anyone stay there for it to matter.

“Thank you so much for letting me stay here.” Amy turns to me, her eyes glistening. I can’t decide if she’s about to cry or sneeze, so I just shrug. “I really mean it, though. I know you were so excited to have your own space back after Britt moved out. So, thank you.” She reaches out and squeezes my forearm, lighting up the nerves in my arm like fireworks.

“It’s just what, um, friends do,” I say quickly, though the words come out like I’m talking around a full mouth.

Amy nods as I step into the room and set her bag on the bed. Just when I’m about to leave, she lets out a sigh. “My

date went really well until it went all wrong.”

“That sounds complicated,” I mutter, watching as she heads to her bag. She strips out of her coat, and I catch myself watching her closer than ever.

“He kissed me.”

I bristle at her words—but it must just be the protective friend thing. However, I don’t say anything. My eyes are stuck on her as she pulls her shirt over her head, once again revealing her camisole. At least Brad didn’t get to see *this*.

“It was horrible.”

“Why?” I ask, taking in the curve of her hips as she shuffles through her bag.

Jeez, she’s so...

“He kept pushing for more—and I just ... I didn’t *feel* anything when we kissed.” Amy turns to look at me, and I rip my eyes from below her waistline. “I want to feel sparks when I kiss someone. But even without that, it was just so ... forced.”

“Yeah, probably because he was just trying to take you home. He most likely didn’t care about your feelings. I’m sure there were plenty of red flags.”

She raises a brow at me, folding her arms across her chest in a way that just makes her *that* much more appealing.

“Why do you always assume that I miss red flags?”

“Because I’ve watched you miss them,” I say cautiously, my mind wanting to run somewhere completely different with Amy all of a sudden.

I need to go to bed before I do something stupid...

Like seeing if there’s still a spark between us when we kiss.

“Will you teach me?”

My heart jumps. I could teach her *so* many things—but I push it away.

Stop being gross.

“What do you want me to teach you, Amy?” I ask instead, sounding more indifferent than ever.

“How to spot the red flags. I know that it’s kind of counterproductive with the bet and all, but...” She looks up at me with pleading eyes, her plump lips set in a slight pout.

“Yeah,” I say, taking a step back. “I’ll teach you about red flags. *Tomorrow*. I have to get some sleep.”

Or I’m going to be a freaking red flag.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Amy

"I'm taking you out," Parker says to me as he pops a piece of popcorn into his mouth. "Like, now. So, go get ready."

I raise a brow, still half-asleep in my pajamas and leaning against his granite countertops. "It's only eleven."

"Yeah, it's a lunch date."

I furrow my brow, but as I open my mouth, trying to understand what the heck is happening, he stops me.

"It's a mock date. You said you need help spotting the red flags. I spent a lot of time thinking about how to do that, and I decided I'm gonna take you on a mock date—and treat you the way you *should* be treated." He reaches into his black hoodie pocket. "I also made flashcards."

I giggle. "What for?"

"It's called *Spot the Red Flag*."

"Wow, you really went all out." I shake my head at him. "That's sweet of you."

His facial expression shifts. "I'm just being practical. Plus, I'm tired of seeing you blindly follow any guy who shows you some interest."

"That's rude," I snap, suddenly offended. "I don't *blindly* follow anyone. I mean, I ... I think I could walk away from someone."

"Yeah, once everything goes wrong." Parker scoffs. "Please just let me help you learn how to spot the red flags *before* you go on another coffee date with some creep."

I sigh. "Okay, fine. I'll go get ready."

"You could just wear your pajamas. I kind of dig them."

My face heats up as I glance down at my white silk long-sleeved pajama set. "You're making fun of me."

Parker smirks. "Am I?"

"I don't know." I groan, tilting my head back and stalking toward the spare room. I hear Parker laughing behind me and I can't help but smile, even if he is the most frustrating man I've ever met.

My eyes shift to the bag I packed in one big hurry last night. I sift through the contents, pulling out a pair of black mom jeans and a red sweater. I pull out my Vans as well.

Hopefully, Parker's taking me on a *casual* lunch date.

My heart flutters in my chest as I think about going on a *date* with Parker. All the feelings that I've been trying to forget seem to bubble to the surface. I sigh, pushing my hair out of my eyes.

We're just friends.

I hurriedly get dressed and fix my hair, opting for just a little mascara instead of a full face. Besides, this is just a *mock* date, as Parker said. It's not serious.

I slip out of the bedroom and glance around, wondering where he went. Granted, this apartment is big enough that it wouldn't be hard to slip away.

Parker's bedroom door opens before I can go looking, and out he steps in a pair of dark wash jeans and a black pullover. His dirty blond hair is styled, giving him an edgy vibe with the shadow of stubble on his jaw.

Ugh. He's so handsome.

"You look beautiful," he says.

And my mouth drops open. "What?"

"That's what a guy should tell you," he says quickly, his eyes dropping from mine. "Come on. Let's go. I should be picking you up, but we're starting in the same place, so that makes it a little difficult."

"Why should you be picking me up? I thought men shouldn't know where I live." I try to steady my uneven heartbeat as he offers me his arm—right here in the hallway.

"Yeah, well, assuming you've thoroughly vetted the guy, he should at least *offer* to pick you up. That's what gentlemen do."

I slide my hand around his forearm, trying to ignore the excitement that comes with such a simple move.

Why didn't Brad make me feel any of these feelings?

"I booked us a table at a nice lunch place a few blocks away. I'm happy to drive us there unless you have your boot and would prefer to walk?"

I glance down. "I took the boot off when my apartment flooded and left it there."

"Okay, we should probably drop by and get it. You're not really supposed to be walking without it yet..."

"It's okay. My ankle doesn't hurt *that* badly," I reason. "And trying to find parking in this city is a nightmare. We can just walk."

In truth, my ankle is a little achy, but in the mess of my flooded apartment, I didn't think about grabbing my boot—and I only had to wear it for a little longer, anyway.

It'll be fine.

He sighs. "Fine. I'll just carry you back if it starts hurting."

“No, you won’t.” I burst into a giggle, shaking my head as he leads me to the front door. “Besides, that walking boot was doing more harm than good, I think.”

“Whatever you say, Amy.” Parker hands me my purse, which I set on the counter, and then opens the door. “After you.”

“Thanks,” I say, stepping out into the hallway.

“How did you sleep?”

“Um, good,” I answer as he taps the down button for the elevator. “How did you sleep?”

“Well”—he guides me into the elevator, never letting my arm go—“when I did sleep, I slept well. But I had to help a damsel in distress last night. Her apartment flooded. Poor thing.”

I can’t hold back a giggle, shaking my head at him. “How chivalrous.”

“Why, thank you, Amy.” He shoots me a wink that makes something flutter in my stomach. “That’s sweet of you to say.”

This version of Parker is both hilarious and charming—and I can’t stop smiling.



“Let’s discuss red flags,” Parker begins, setting his fork down.

I nod, having enjoyed my plate of Fettuccine Alfredo and our conversation at the small but chic Italian place. “Okay, let’s do it.”

He pulls out a stack of index cards and eyes me. “The goal is to spot the red flag—and then tell me *why* it’s a red flag.”

“I can do that.”

He chuckles. “Yeah ... we’ll see.” Parker takes a sip of his water and focuses on the first index card. “You’re on a date at an upscale restaurant that he chose. He works on Wall

Street. At the end of the evening, he tells the waitress that you're going to split the bill with him."

"Uh..." My voice trails off as I replay what he just said. "Is the red flag the fact that he didn't ask me where I wanted to eat?"

Parker lets out a sigh. "Try again."

"He works on Wall Street?"

Parker's shoulders fall. "No, it's the fact that he didn't ask about the two of you splitting the bill, he just decided that's what he was going to do. It should've been a discussion—and if he chose a high-end, expensive restaurant, he should've been willing to pay for the whole thing. Honestly, a guy should always pay for the first date. But still, if he's talking about how much money he makes on Wall Street and then decides without your input to split the bill, that's a red flag."

"Hmm." I mull it over, taking another bite of pasta. "I guess that's true."

"Yeah, it is. On to the next." Parker sifts through the index cards and then stops on one. "Okay, how about this one? You're on a walk with your date. He grabs your hand and then tells you that you look great for your age."

"Aw, that's sweet," I say, smiling. "No red flags there."

Parker just stares at me for a moment and then shakes his head. "Yes, there is."

"What's wrong with holding someone's hand and giving them a compliment?"

He sighs. "Amy, the compliment is backhanded. It's equivalent to a guy saying that he's never liked short women, but he thinks *you're* attractive."

"I don't understand. That's a compliment..." However, the more I think about it, the more I see the negative indications. Maybe it would cause me to doubt myself a little...

"You're out on a date and he checks his phone every few minutes, taking multiple calls with no explanation. He tells

you he had a great time and wants to see you again soon.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “Um ... is that another backhanded compliment or something?”

“No, it’s the fact that he was checking his phone over and over.”

“Maybe it was an emergency?” I counter.

“But he didn’t say that, did he? He just kept checking it and taking calls... He should be giving you all of his attention on a date—the whole time. And trust me, if he’s willing to act like that on the first date, it’ll only get worse.”

I let out a groan. “I’m so terrible at this.”

“You are.” Parker chuckles, but when his eyes meet mine, they soften. “But a lot of people overlook red flags. You get caught up in the moment, and you just look right past them. My mom always dated guys with so many red flags. She only focused on the flowers, sweet words, and whatever else they did for her. But the honeymoon phase only lasts so long, and then you’re left with the real person.”

“Dating shouldn’t be this hard,” I mutter, folding my napkin and setting it beside my nearly empty plate. “Why can’t people just be nice to each other?”

“Just because someone has red flags doesn’t mean they aren’t nice. It just means they have problems.”

“Everyone has problems.”

“Yeah...” Parker holds my gaze again and then lets out a soft sigh. “But you should find someone as close to perfect as possible. That’s the kind of guy you deserve, Amy. You’re nearly perfect, yourself.”

My brows shoot up. “Wait what? *You* think that about *me*? I thought you couldn’t stand me when we first met.”

He shrugs. “We didn’t see eye-to-eye. You’re a hopeless romantic, and I’m just ... not. But you know, maybe after Valentine’s Day, you’ll find someone.”

I giggle. “You just want me to go to that jazz concert with you.”

"Ha, no." He shakes his head. "I just don't want to lose the bet ... or pay for your overpriced concert tickets."

I smirk. "They're worth every penny."

"Oh yeah? What's your favorite song?"

"Um..." My voice trails off. "You're going to laugh, but it's a ballad called 'Falling for You When I Didn't Want To'."

He chuckles. "It sounds cheesy."

"It *is* cheesy," I admit, smiling so much that my cheeks hurt. "I think that's probably why I like it so much."

Before we can continue, the waitress reappears with the check. Parker hands her his card, never even giving me the opportunity to ask if we can split it.

As she walks away, he meets my gaze. "What?"

"You didn't ask if I wanted to split the bill."

"We're on a date, Amy. Well, a fake date, but it's still a date. I'm paying for it. And I'm buying your coffee after this, too," he adds. "I know you're into that."

I smile. "So, we're getting coffee as well?"

"Absolutely."

The waitress returns with the receipt and his card, and as he signs for it, I can't help but admire this side of him. Parker's not nearly as closed-off as he was the first time we met, and I swear in the last few days he's become even more handsome ... if that's even possible.

Parker looks up. "What?"

"Nothing," I say softly.

I just hope I can find someone like you.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Parker

“What’s going on with you?” Weston narrows his eyes at me from across the table. “You’re acting weird.”

“Wow, thanks,” I mutter, shaking my head. My eyes fall to my phone as a new text pops up on the screen.

Amy: *I’m going to be late getting home tonight.*

I fight to hold back a smile, and I don’t even know why. Maybe it’s the fact that she calls my apartment home. I guess I find it endearing ... or something.

“Dude,” Weston snaps. “Why are you avoiding my question?”

Oops.

I send her a quick thumbs-up and turn back to Weston. “Sorry. I just got distracted. There’s nothing going on with me.

All is good. My sister found a new place. And now that she's not seeing—"

"I'm not asking about Brittany." There's something in his voice that makes me wonder if he already knew about my sister ... from another source. But I don't push it. "I'm asking about *you*."

"There's not much going on with me. Amy moved in, but other than that—"

"Wait, what?!" Weston nearly comes across the table. "Amy *moved in*? Why? Why would she move in with you? What the... Are you two...?"

I shake my head. "No, we're not together. We're just friends," I force the words out, and the more I have to say them, the more they're starting to not sit right with me.

Maybe I *do* have a little crush. It's hard not to when she looks the way she does in the morning with her messy hair, sleepy eyes, and eccentric pajamas.

"Then why is she living with you?"

"Her apartment flooded. I don't know how long it'll be before they can fix it or move her to another unit. I told her she could stay with me until it all gets sorted. I have plenty of room."

Weston nods, but then shakes his head. "You like her staying with you, don't you?"

"I like having my own space..." I hesitate. "But she did make breakfast this morning. That was pretty cool."

Weston bursts into laughter. "From the moment you laid eyes on her, you were into her. I *knew* it."

My mouth drops open. "Heck no I wasn't."

"Heck yes you were, and you are," my best friend corrects me—well, he thinks he's correcting me. "No matter how self-aware you are about all your problems, you're completely blind."

"Shut up. I'm not blind. Even if I did like her—and I'm not saying I do," I quickly add, "I wouldn't pursue anything with her. I spent an entire afternoon teaching Amy about red flags

... and I *am* one. Considering my upbringing, I'm pretty much a walking red flag—and I still *really* want to win the bet. You know I'm competitive."

Weston is quiet for a few moments. "You're not a walking red flag, Parker."

"Yeah, I am," I argue, growing annoyed. "I know I am. If she went out on a real date with someone like me, whose entire spiel was about how terrible love is, I would tell her to run. That's a big red flag."

Which is all the more reason I need to get these feelings under control. She deserves better than me.

He makes a face. "I guess."

"Yeah, so anyway, what's up with you?" I'm freaking desperate to change the subject. I knew that Amy staying with me might seem a little crazy in the eyes of my friends, but that's only because they think we're an item. Usually, my friends are spot on, but not this time.

"Same as always," Weston says with a sigh, his entire demeanor changing. "I'm starting to think I might be more like Amy than I care to admit. I always try to come across like a player, but man ... I'm tired of the dating scene. I really just want to find someone I click with."

My brows raise. "You're not a player, Wes. It doesn't suit you."

"And being a cranky, loveless goon doesn't suit you, either."

I burst into laughter. "That's rich."

"Yeah..." Weston agrees and then grabs his drink. "Oh, what did Amy think of your place? I bet she was royally shocked when she realized you're a secret billionaire."

I shrug but can't stop smiling. "She was definitely taken by surprise. It was cute."

Weston nearly spits his soda out. "Did you just say *cute*?"

Oh shoot. I did.

"Well yeah, but ... I meant cute like a puppy, you know? She was all wide-eyed and surprised. She probably expected me to live in a dump or something."

Weston leans back against the red booth cushion, studying me for a few moments. I take a second to look around at the mostly empty café. We took a late lunch today, which was a great way to avoid the noon rush.

"I think you're in denial."

I whip my head back around to face him. "No, I'm not. I just admitted that I *might* have a crush on her. But that's it. It's not going anywhere."

Weston's expression is completely blank. "You didn't say anything about having a crush on her until now. But I *knew* it. Dude, just tell her. I bet she likes you, too."

"No," I say sternly. "We're friends, and surprisingly, I don't want to ruin our friendship by throwing in some mixed feelings. I know how love ends, and I don't see the point in potentially messing everything up. I'm not cut out for a serious relationship. Amy wants a happy ending and some incredible love story—like her parents have."

"And there's nothing wrong with that. My parents have been together for over thirty years. Granted, it hasn't always been so happy. They've had some major problems in the past... But..." His voice trails off. "I actually admire them for staying together and working it out."

"Yeah," I mutter, staring at my hands for a few moments and then looking up. "But what if they would've been happier apart?"

Weston gives me a thoughtful look. "Maybe at certain points, they would've been happier with some space. But they're the first to say all the trouble was worth it. And now, they're more in love than ever. So ... I believe them."

I nod. I've heard all these stories before, and maybe indirectly, I've seen them play out—like with his parents—but in my own life and in my family's life, I've never seen a relationship come close to lasting a lifetime.

And I'm still not sure I ever will.

Which is exactly why a *crush* should stay just that...

A crush.



"I wonder what her dinner plans are..." I ask myself aloud as I step into my apartment. My late lunch with Weston didn't leave me dying of hunger or anything, but as I glance at the clock, I figure that, more than likely, Amy *will* be hungry after work. The woman always comes into my apartment on a mission for a snack to tide her over until dinner.

And I highly doubt today will be the exception.

I kick my shoes off, leaving them by the door, and then hang up my coat on the rack. Ever since I spoke with Weston about Amy ... I feel *off*. Ever since I admitted out loud that I *might* have a crush on Amy, the world feels like it's shifted or something.

Doing my best to push the thoughts away, I focus on dinner. I pull out fettuccine—because I know she likes that—and then google how to make Alfredo sauce. It takes some digging, but I just so happen to have all the needed ingredients.

Perfect.

I watch the clock, knowing that she'll be home from work any minute, and move as efficiently as I can. Nerves rattle my chest as I wipe the sweat from my brow.

Why am I so worked up?

I'm just making her dinner.

No, I'm making *my* dinner.

She's just going to eat some of it ... hopefully. That's it. That's all this is. Which becomes harder to convince myself of as I set the dining room table—one I never use—for us. I've just laid out the final plate along with some garlic bread when the apartment chimes and in walks Amy.

"Whoa!" She gives me a strange look. "Are you having a dinner party or something? It smells *amazing* in here."

"Um..." My voice trails off as I take in the sight of her in her tight black dress pants and cream-colored sweater. Her dark

hair is a little disheveled from the wind, but it suits her. Like *really* suits her.

Her brow furrows as she sets her bag down on the entryway table. "Am I not invited or something? You can just tell me. I won't be offended. I get that I'm kind of invading your personal space and all that."

I shake my head, a forced laugh slipping out. "No, it's not that at all. I, uh, I was just making dinner for myself—and I thought you might be hungry, so I set a place for you, too. I know this is the time that you usually make it back..." I feel like I'm rambling, but if I am, Amy pays it no mind.

She smiles. "Aw, thanks." Her eyes light up as she heads to the sink, rolling her sweater up and turning on the water. "I'm *starving*, so this is perfect."

"Cool." I run my fingers through my hair, inwardly cringing at the mess I made while cooking. "You wanna eat now? I just finished cooking, so it's still warm."

"Talk about perfect timing." She dries her hands on the towel and follows me into the dining room. Her footsteps stop behind me and I turn around to see her gaping at me.

"What?"

"I had no idea you had such nice china."

"Uh, they were an Amazon special, but yeah, okay. Thanks." I laugh, pulling out her chair for her.

She eyes me as she sits down. "Is this another mock date or something? I don't think I've ever had a man pull out a chair for me in my life."

I clear my throat. "Yeah ... well, they should. It's just habit, I guess."

Amy pauses, her expression shifting like she's about to challenge that idea, but she relents. "So, how was work today?"

Sitting down across from her, I reach for my water. "It was fine. The usual. Weston and I went out to lunch today."

She nods. "Is he doing well?"

"I suppose so." I chuckle. "He thought the fact that you're living here was pretty funny."

Her head tilts as she twirls her fork in her pasta. "Why's that? Am I a burden or something?" The worry on her face makes my heart sink.

"Oh no," I say quickly. "I wouldn't have invited you to stay if I thought you'd be a burden."

"Right." She frowns. "Because I feel like you might've just done it out of sympathy—just like when you walked me home that night after the singles event."

I carefully consider my response, because I still don't really know the answer as to why I ever walked her home that first time. It's best to avoid the topic altogether. "If I was just being sympathetic, I would've bought you a hotel room."

"Touche." She giggles, taking a bite. "This is *amazing*. It tastes like my mom's homemade sauce."

I laugh. "Well, if your mom uses Google to find her recipes, it might be the same one."

Amy smiles, her baby blue eyes making my chest feel tight. "I don't know if she does, but honestly, it wouldn't surprise me. Thanks for sharing dinner with me."

I nod. "It's kind of nice to not have to eat alone."

Her lips twinge downward for a split second. "Yeah, wouldn't it be nice to share a meal with someone like this every night? It's the little things like this that make me want a relationship." She sighs, brushing her hair from her face. "I think the small moments are the most special."

"I agree," I say without thinking, but then shake my head. "But you still have to wait until after Valentine's Day."

She narrows her eyes at me. "Well, I'll have you know, I *still* think you're going to lose." Her voice takes on an air of confidence that makes me smile.

"Oh yeah? And why's that? You got a date or something?" My chest tightens at the idea, but I ignore it.

She smiles. "As a matter of fact, I have one tomorrow night. Nellie set me up with one of her friends."

I can barely bring myself to swallow my bite of garlic bread.
“Great,” I choke out. “That’s just great.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Amy

Eliza: *Have fun!*

I read her text just before placing my phone in my purse and taking a deep breath. Nellie approached me at work yesterday and asked if she could give my phone number to one of her boyfriend's friends. I agreed...

And now I have a date tonight.

I'm not going to lose this bet.

I nearly laugh to myself as I smooth out the material of my black long sleeve dress. It's fitted without being *too* fitted, and when I paired it with my Vans, it's not *too* dressy, either. My freshly curled hair is flowing in all the right ways, and my red lips are the perfect touch, but...

"Do you think it's too much?" I ask Parker, grabbing his attention from where he's seated on the couch watching television.

He whips his head around, his eyes widening slightly and then returning to normal. "You look ... *great*."

My nose crinkles. "Okay, but do I actually? You're looking at me kinda funny."

He chuckles. "No, I'm not."

"We're just going out for drinks at the Cricket."

"Yeah, and you look fine."

"Okay, but is it too much?" I ask one more time, my hands clasped in front of me. "I don't want to come across like I'm trying too hard."

Parker sits up, pausing his Netflix documentary and angling his body toward me. "Amy," he says, his voice matter of fact. "You look beautiful. If the guy thinks you look like you tried too hard, then you should find someone else." He then pauses and bites down on his lip. "Also ... are you sure you even wanna go out with this guy? You've never even met him—and the first thing he did was ask you out to a bar for drinks."

I tilt my head in confusion. "Is that a red flag or something? He told me that he prefers meeting people in person rather than getting to know them over text messaging. I thought it was sweet."

He sighs. "There's nothing wrong with him saying that."

"Okay, then." I smile. "I haven't forgotten the red flag training, and I'll keep it all in mind. I'll keep you up to date, too."

"You don't have to give me a play by play." He groans, leaning back on the couch with a *plop*.

"Well, I'll at least let you know that I'm alive and well—or if I need you to save me from a disaster."

He's quiet for a few moments, holding my gaze in a way that makes my heart stutter ... again. "Yeah, I'll be there if you need me."

"Thank you," I say, taking one last breath and heading for the apartment door. Innately, my hand lands on his shoulder as I pass by. I pull it away, embarrassed.

He turns to look back at me. "You good?"

I blink, not feeling nearly as excited as I think I should be. "Yeah ... maybe it'll be fun."

He narrows his eyes at me. "Yeah ... maybe."

"See you later."

"See ya," Parker calls over his shoulder. The noise of the TV fills the silence only a moment later, and I step out into the hallway, feeling more conflicted than ever before.

Ugh. Please let this go well.



"I'm Dalton." A tall, blondish-redheaded man extends his hand across the table.

"Amy." I meet his bright green eyes, taking his hand and letting the warmth spread through my fingers. I was ten minutes early, but Dalton was right on time. The dive bar isn't overly crowded, and thankfully, everyone is speaking in low tones, the soft alternative music overshadowing most of their conversations. "It's super nice to meet you in person."

"Likewise." He smiles. "I won't lie, though, I was really nervous about meeting you. That's why I didn't want to just keep texting. I wanted to get this part out of the way."

"I like that," I admit, taking him in as he sits across from me in the booth. He carefully removes his black wool coat, revealing his taut arms through a Henley. He's... *handsome*.

"You're beautiful." Dalton's long drawl catches my attention. It's southern, and I can't deny it adds a little extra charm.

"Thank you," I say. "You're not so bad yourself."

"Good to know." He laughs in a deep tone.

How is this man still single? I'm swooning a little, though the moment I realize that I am, Parker's face comes to mind.

Don't think about him.

Which is a little harder said than done.

It's not like he's even an option.

Because if Parker *wanted* to, he could've asked me on a *real* date. But he's made it clear we're just friends. Not to mention that he doesn't believe in love ...

Which is why I *don't* allow myself to admit that I find Parker's mischievous ways more charming than Dalton's... Yet, here I am, thinking it.

What's wrong with me?

"So, you work with Nellie?" Dalton's voice grabs my attention.

"Yeah, I do." I nod, trying to recount the red flags I'm supposed to be on the lookout for. "What do you do?"

"Well, I used to work in finance," Dalton begins, letting out a sigh. "I'm really good with numbers, but I'm not gonna lie, after doing that for nearly ten years, I got tired of it. So, I recently started working for a veterinary clinic here in the city. I handle all of the office stuff and also get to help with the animals. It's a win-win for me."

I smile. "I admire the courage for a career change. I've always stuck to marketing, and I can't imagine doing anything different, but I don't see anything wrong with changing careers if you're unhappy."

He nods. "I'm glad you agree. One of my last dates only seemed to care about the pay decrease I took—and while yes, there was one, I'm still a partial owner of the finance firm I worked for, so I do pretty well for myself."

"Ah, so you were smart in your investments." I giggle and bat my eyelashes a few times. "I must say ... that's impressive. Which makes sense, considering you worked in finance. It shows you know your stuff."

"And the fact you're so visibly appealing shows you know how to market." He winks at me, and I feel my cheeks grow red.

"You're too kind," I say, reaching for my drink and taking a sip. I spend the rest of the evening laughing and talking with Dalton—and rarely do I think about Parker. Well, I mean, other

than the handful of times I text him and reassure him I'm still alive.

"Can I walk you home?" Dalton offers as we stand to leave. "I've had a really great time getting to know you tonight, and I'd like to see you again—and see that you get home safe."

I question the idea but then agree. I mean, Parker lives there. It's not like anything bad is going to happen to me. "Okay, I'm staying with a friend right now."

"Oh," he says, frowning. "I hope you didn't take that wrong. I wasn't planning on coming up or anything. I ... I like to take things slow."

"I was just letting you know," I say quickly, laughing nervously. "I actually prefer to move slowly myself."

He sighs in relief as he opens the door for me. "Good. I thought I read you right."

I smile warmly. "You did."

Dalton and I make the long walk to Parker's penthouse apartment, laughing and talking about our lives. He grew up in Texas, but his family life is a lot more similar to mine than most.

"I moved to the city for a job—and then I kind of just ... fell in love with it," Dalton admits, reaching out and grabbing my hand. "And not to be too forward, but I happen to be extra glad about that tonight."

I blush, letting him squeeze my fingers. "I'm still getting used to the city, but I think I love it already."

"And the friend you're staying with..." Dalton eyes me. "Is it someone you knew before you moved to the city?"

"No. I met him when I moved here." I choose to leave out the way we met.

Dalton gives me an odd look. "*Him?*" he asks, and realization dawns on me.

"Oh, yeah," I say quickly. "But we're just friends. We actually have a bet going right now about me finding a boyfriend."

He nods *very* slowly. "I see ... and what exactly *is* the bet?" His tone is cautious.

"Well, I bet him that I'd have a boyfriend by Valentine's Day—which is also my birthday—and he bet that I won't. Whoever loses has to buy the other concert tickets. It's silly," I admit. Now that I'm saying it out loud to someone who doesn't know either of us all that well, it does seem kind of wacky. "But it's all in good fun. My apartment flooded recently, so I've been staying with him while it gets sorted out."

"Well, I guess ... I guess that kind of thing happens." Dalton's voice brightens slightly. "You know, I actually have a good friend who's been looking for someone. Is your friend single?"

"Yeah, he is, and we should *totally* set him up," I say, a big grin stretching across my face. "He's such a cynic when it comes to love, but I think he just hasn't met the right person." Something about the last two words causes my stomach to knot up, but I ignore it.

"There's truth in that..." Dalton's voice trails off as we arrive at the front of Parker's apartment building, and I follow his gaze. The street is empty...

Except for *one* person, who's leaning against the side of the building.

What's he doing out here?

"Hiya," Parker greets, pushing off the wall and walking toward us. "I'm Parker."

"You must be Amy's friend," Dalton says, his voice tense. "Were you standing outside to wait for her or...?"

Parker nods and I don't even know how I feel about it. "Yeah, it's cold, and you know, there are some weirdos in the city."

Dalton relaxes. "I get that. Which is exactly why I wanted to walk her home."

"I respect that," Parker says, his voice flat. "I'll take it from here, though."

“Uh...” My voice trails off as I look back at Dalton and then at Parker. “I think I can handle it, Parker. I’ll be up in a minute. I don’t think Dalton is gonna kidnap me or anything.”

Parker’s lip twitches. “Alright. I’ll wait in the lobby.”

“Okay,” I mutter, watching him as he disappears inside. I then turn to Dalton, giving him an apologetic smile. “Sorry about that. I just think he’s convinced that someone might try to hurt me.”

“I understand,” Dalton says, his voice dropping. “At first, I have to admit that it was a little off-putting, but...” He sighs. “I guess it’s good to have friends that look out for you. He’s right about the fact that this city can be dangerous.”

I nod. “I know the drill.”

“I bet you do. You’re from Chicago.” He chuckles, pulling me gently toward him. Nerves shoot through my body as his fingers trace along my jaw, lifting my face to his. “Thank you for tonight, Amy. It was nice.”

I can’t reply before his lips are against mine, pressing gently. I don’t part my lips and he pulls away, smiling down at me.

“I’ll text you tonight and we can set up a second date.”

“That sounds great,” I say, giving him a wave as I step toward the lobby.

“Goodnight, Amy.”

“Night,” I call as he turns and heads back down the street. I smile to myself as I enter the lobby. Tonight was good.

And it’s totally okay that there weren’t sparks on the first date.

Not everyone can kiss like Parker.

And I’m just going to have to get past that.

Because at least there weren’t any red flags.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Parker

The rhythmic pounding of my feet against the pavement is supposed to calm my racing thoughts, but instead, they only seem to be spiraling faster.

I don't like Dalton. And no, I don't have a reason.

Maybe it was seeing him lip-locked with Amy through the lobby windows. Or maybe it's just a gut instinct—though I can't seem to find anything wrong with the guy. He respects Amy and clearly likes her. I mean, he sees her *all* the freaking time.

I turn up the music in my AirPods, hoping that the '90s rock will somehow drown out the noise in my head as I jog through the city streets. The familiar sights and sounds usually bring me peace, but this evening, they only serve to

magnify my unease. I can't shake the feeling that something is off, and it nags at me like an itch I can't scratch.

As I reach the park, I slow my pace and head for my favorite bench overlooking the city skyline. The setting sun casts a warm golden glow over the buildings, but my mind is far from the picturesque scene before me.

Sitting down, I take a deep breath and close my eyes, trying to clear my head. But even in the darkness behind my eyelids, all I can see is Amy's face—the freckles sprinkled across her nose, her soft smile that lights up her eyes, the way she bites her lip when she's nervous. It's maddening how easily she's lodged herself in my thoughts.

I know I have no right to feel this way. Amy and I are friends, nothing more. Though, we've been growing significantly closer since she moved into my place—sharing meals together, getting to know each other's routines and favorite television shows. She even wrangled me into watching *The Golden Bachelor* with her one evening, and now I'm admittedly invested in these sixty- to seventy-year-olds finding love. Which she gets a kick out of teasing me about—considering I don't even really believe in love.

But watching the show makes her happy, which makes *me* happy.

But that's beside the point.

The point is ... Amy is free to date whoever she wants. It's not like I have any claim over her. Plus, she deserves to find someone who truly cares for her, who can give her the kind of love she so wholeheartedly believes in.

With a resigned sigh, I check my watch and decide to make my way back home. Twenty minutes later, I step off the elevator to my penthouse apartment and unlock the front door.

"Hey you," Amy greets as I step through the doorway. She looks stunning as ever in her pencil skirt and blue blouse. It brings out the color in her eyes. "How was your run?"

I manage a smile as I close the door, trying to push aside my earlier feelings as I respond, "It was good, thanks. How was your day?"

"Good! Thanks for asking. Do you want me to make us some dinner tonight?"

"Aren't you going out with Dalton? You've been seeing him almost every day for the past two weeks."

"He has a meeting with his partners tonight," Amy says, a tinge of pride in her voice. The guy is driven, considering he owns an incredibly successful financial firm, but he's also selfless... Because you know, he works at a vet clinic for hardly anything...

Ugh.

"We'll hang out tomorrow," Amy continues. "I'm still in awe that Dalton puts in so much time at the clinic and then turns around and goes to business meetings in the evenings. He literally *never* complains about it."

"That's great and all, but what happens when he has a family?" I ask as I unlace my running shoes. "Wouldn't the fact that he's working all the time get in the way of family time?"

Amy just shrugs. "I mean, he only has meetings every now and then. I don't think it would affect anything in the long run."

"Have you talked about..." My voice trails off because, suddenly, I'm not really sure I want to know.

"Having a family?" Amy finishes, giving me a funny look as she starts pulling ingredients down from the cabinets. "No. We haven't. Well, not about having a family together, at least. He's mentioned that he wants to have a family someday, and I do, too."

"Hmm," I reply, turning to set my running shoes on the rack.

Amy's next question stops me in my tracks. "Do *you* want a family someday, Parker?"

Confliction fills my chest. "Uh..."

"It's okay to just be honest," she urges, giving me a half-hearted smile. "I know you're not into relationships and all that. Obviously, if you stay single, that would make it hard to have a family of your own. I shouldn't have even asked."

"The idea of having a family has always been appealing to me," I admit, shocking myself with my honesty. "I just don't see a way I'll ever have one."

Amy pauses opening the bag of potatoes and frowns at me. "Because you don't think you'll ever find the right person?"

"Yeah, I guess. I'd rather not raise kids in a family of dysfunction like mine. It's not a great way to live."

"But you're not your dad." Her words hit me like a freight train right to the chest.

"I never said that I was," I snap, shaking my head before *finally* setting my shoes down.

Amy immediately recoils. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I just meant..." She sighs, her shoulders falling. "You have such a good grip on the way a relationship should be. I don't see why you couldn't be successful at keeping the love alive once you found the right person, and I think deep down you want—"

"No," I cut her off, feeling stupid and vulnerable. "I don't want to talk about this."

"Because you're going to lose the bet?" She shoots me a clever grin.

Ugh. She never just lets me be irritated.

"No," I reply. "And I haven't lost the bet yet. Dalton isn't your boyfriend."

"How do *you* know?" She raises a brow as I make my way toward her in the kitchen.

"Because if he was, then you'd have been rubbing it in my face and jumping for joy by now. There's no way you'd be able to keep that inside."

She pouts in a way that makes me want to kiss her. "Fair enough. I guess you know me better than I thought."

“Well, you *have* lived here for three weeks.”

“Ugh, I know.” She gives me a sheepish smile. “I’m sorry. I’m probably such a thorn in your side. My landlord told me there aren’t any empty apartments available that they can move me to. I think they’re just going to have to break my lease and I’ll find a new place—but I can definitely move out sooner than later. Just say the word. I don’t want to be in your way.”

“You’re never in my way.”

Her eyes soften toward me as I brush past her, her perfume filling my nostrils. I swear the more she’s around the more *appealing* she becomes.

“You really don’t mind me living here?”

I can’t tell if she’s fishing as she looks up at me, holding my gaze. For a moment, I consider being funny, making a dry joke about it. But I don’t. “I like having you here.” I open the drawer, pull out the potato peeler, and set it on the counter.

Amy falls into silence as she washes the potatoes and I grab the trash can. I can’t tell if she’s gone quiet because I said something that’s bothering her or if she just doesn’t have anything to say. I mean, maybe she doesn’t like staying here but doesn’t want to hurt my feelings.

I distract myself from those thoughts as I grab a potato and start peeling it, watching as Amy gets the steaks ready.

“So, you had a good day at work?” I ask awkwardly, hating the silence between us.

“Yeah,” she says, not looking at me. “It wasn’t bad. I’ve been growing a lot closer to Nellie, which is nice. It’d be nice to have some close girlfriends in the city.”

“Yeah, having friends that are girls would be a little less off-putting to your potential suitors, I suppose.” I chuckle.

“Dalton doesn’t mind our friendship,” she says, eyeing me. “I mean, at first he seemed a little confused, but then once he understood that we’re *just* friends, it didn’t bother him.”

"Even though we met at a speed-dating event?"

Her facial expression shifts.

He doesn't know.

"Amy ... you can't lie to him about how we met."

"I didn't lie to him," she says earnestly. "I just didn't tell him *where* we met. I didn't want him thinking anything has ever happened between us."

But it has.

I kissed her.

And I wouldn't blame Dalton for not being okay with that.

"It could come across like we're more than friends..." she continues at my silence.

"Yeah, I guess that's true. But if he ever brings it up, you should probably tell him the truth. You don't want to start off your relationship with lies."

"I'll tell him if he asks."

"Good," I say, going back to peeling potatoes. "Does he have any lady friends? Maybe it doesn't bother him because he's got close girlfriends of his own."

"Well, he's kind of close with the veterinarian he works for at the clinic. They've known each other for a really long time."

"Ah, I see." I don't know Dalton enough to throw out any kind of meaningful comment. From what I can tell, he seems pretty solid.

"Yeah, in fact, we're going on a double date with her."

"That's fun," I say, trying to sound more enthused than I feel.

"With you."

"What?" I nearly peel the skin right off my finger. "What do you mean, with me?"

"On our first date, he mentioned setting you up. He asked if we'd want to go on a double date tomorrow night, and I said yes, since you told me earlier your schedule was clear." Her eyes widen as she spots my bleeding finger. "Are you

okay?" she asks as she grabs a paper towel and runs it under water.

I take the damp towel and step away when she tries to doctor my finger for me. "I don't want to go on a date, Amy."

"You *always* say that." She huffs. "Just go out with us. It'll be fun."

"I..." My finger hurts like heck as the blood soaks through the thin paper towel. "You know me well enough to know that it never works out for me, either."

"That's only because you don't *let* it work."

"Not true." My words are empty.

"Will you let me help you? Please?" Amy steps toward me, her hands outstretched. "You're bleeding all over the place."

I shake my head, suddenly feeling like a little kid in the presence of a worried mother. "No, I'm fine. I can take care of myself."

"No one said that you couldn't, Parker," she snaps, grabbing for me before I can step away. The warmth of her touch on my wrist stops me in my tracks. I catch my breath as her hair brushes my nose and shut my eyes as her gentle touch skates across my hand.

"Am I going to lose my finger, doc?" I choke out, but the joke doesn't really land.

"I think it looks worse than it actually is." Her voice is soft as she pulls the paper towel away, dabbing at the wound.

My heart is pounding, my mind racing as Amy tends to my finger. I can't help but be hyper-aware of her every move, her touch sending a jolt through me.

"I'll peel the rest of the potatoes," she says, looking up at me.

I catch her gaze and my heart starts to race.

Something about her simple act of care has ignited a spark deep within me. And now, everything in me wants to wrap her up in my arms and kiss her. My mind fills with

images of laying her down and kissing her all over—or maybe just ... holding her.

And it's the first time in my life that I've ever thought about anyone like that.

"I can still peel the potatoes." I manage to break my romantic train of thought as she steps away, leaving me feeling disappointed.

"Well, let me at least get you a bandaid. I don't know about you, but eating bloody mashed potatoes isn't really my thing."

I laugh, shaking my head at her as she digs through the first aid kit she grabs from the pantry. "We just gotta rinse them well before they cook."

"Mmm, not sure that's gonna get rid of the blood-born pathogens."

"Right, so I'm a zombie?"

She bursts into a fit of giggles as she pulls a bandage out and heads toward me again. "No, but you might have cooties."

"Then you must have them, too," I blurt out as she grabs my hand.

Amy stops for a moment, looking up at me only long enough to show the emotion in her eyes. However, she shifts her attention back to my finger before I can decipher them. "Here." Amy rolls my finger and places the bandaid over the cut. "All better, but I have a feeling it's going to be sore."

"It'll be fine," I say, feeling empty again as she steps away from me.

All the sirens are going off in my head.

I know what I'm feeling is *not* okay—especially considering she's seeing someone else.

I really need to get over this crush...

Or whatever it is.

"I'll go on the date."

Amy doesn't look up from the sink. "Great."

CHAPTER TWENTY-seven

Amy

“He’s been acting weird,” I say to Eliza on the phone. I’m sitting on the edge of the bed in what’s become my room at Parker’s place—and we’re supposed to be leaving in ten minutes for the double date with Dalton and Maeve, the vet he works with.

“Yeah, probably because he *likes* you, Amy.” Eliza groans. “It’s so obvious. From the kiss on New Year’s to cooking dinner for you.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s just irritated that I set him up on a double date without asking,” I reason. “But anyway, I think Dalton and I will be official before Valentine’s Day. It’s less than a week away. Like, this is *it*. I can feel it. I’m *finally* gonna have a boyfriend.”

Eliza lets out a sigh that causes me to pause.

"What?" I badger her, my voice growing slightly sharp.
"Do you not like Dalton?"

"It's not that. Dalton does seem great. But I just ... I don't know. I'm not usually one to butt in on people's love lives, but Amy ... I don't feel like you've ever really dealt with the feelings that you have for Parker."

"It was just a harmless crush."

And a mind-blowing kiss that Dalton's pale in comparison to...

But kisses aren't everything.

"Yeah, and now you're *living* with him. I'm not sure you realize this, but you talk *way* more about Parker than you do about Dalton. I can't help but think that shows where your mind is—and your heart too."

"Maybe that's true. But that's probably just because I'm *living* with him. I found a new apartment that I'll be moving into on the twentieth of February, so I'm sure once I don't live with Parker, I won't have nearly as much to say about him." It feels like an excuse more than anything, but still... Parker is my best friend—well, in New York City, at least—and that's why I talk about him.

"Are you ready?" Parker calls from the other side of my door.

"Yeah, just a sec," I call out to him and then lower my voice. "I gotta go, but I'll fill you in later."

"Just one more thing," Eliza says, stopping me from hanging up.

"Yeah?"

"Please try not to get so wrapped up in finding a boyfriend for Valentine's Day that you overlook *real* feelings for someone."

"Um, okay." I shake my head. "Love you."

She sighs. "Love you."



“You look gorgeous tonight,” Dalton says as we arrive at the upscale steakhouse. “Burgundy might be your color.”

“Thank you.” I blush as he kisses me softly on the cheek. I take in the sight of him in his slacks and sweater. “You look phenomenal as well.”

“Oh, this is Maeve.” Dalton gestures to the woman standing quietly beside him. She’s got long, wavy auburn hair, and the freckles splashed across her face only add to her beauty. She’s *gorgeous* and *tall*.

“Hi.” She extends her hand to me and I take it, noticing that her eyes go straight to Parker, who’s standing behind me. “You must be Parker.”

“Nice to meet you.” He gives her a nod. “You look great.”

My stomach knots up as she blushes. Dalton grabs my hand and leads me inside. As I step through the door, I glance back, my eyes locking with Parker’s for a moment. He gives me a half-smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“This is one of my favorite places,” I hear Maeve say from behind me. “I used to come here when I first moved to the city. I’m from Connecticut.”

“Cool,” Parker says in a light tone. “I’ve been here a couple of times before with my sister.”

“Ah, that’s so awesome you have a sister. I have one, too. She lives in Washington D.C. now.”

“Nice.”

A nudge to my side grabs my attention, and I look up to see Dalton giving me a strange look.

He leans in, keeping his voice low. “Are you okay?”

I nod. “Yeah, I’m fine, sorry. It’s just a weird night.”

Dalton doesn’t say anything before turning his attention to the hostess in front of us. They have a short, nice

conversation—all the while, Parker and Maeve are laughing behind me at something that I missed.

And I don't like it.

What's wrong with me?

I've watched Parker interact with plenty of dates. This shouldn't be a big deal. I shake it off, halfway blaming Eliza for bringing up my old crush on the phone...

But is it old?

Or am I still crushing on him?

I blink a few times, trying to get my wits about me. Dalton pulls out my chair and I take a seat, seeing that Parker has done the same for Maeve.

Ugh, she's gorgeous.

"So, what are everyone's plans for Valentine's Day?" Maeve asks once we're all seated, waters have been ordered, and garlic bread is on the table.

"Well, I don't know about you all, but I don't have any plans..." Dalton looks over to me, shooting me a smirk. "Unless you have any ideas."

"She'll probably be accompanying me to a jazz concert," Parker chimes in, his words causing Dalton to frown.

"Why's that?" Dalton levels with him, furrowing his brow.

"The bet," I answer before Parker can give any other explanation. "But that's the same night The Band Allen is playing..."

"Right. But you'll probably be seeing the jazz band." Parker shoots me a look.

"Right," I mutter, using Parker's famous response that I've now adopted.

"Oh, I *love* jazz music!" Maeve beams, interrupting the conversation. "I hope I'm not being too forward, but if Dalton and Amy have plans to see The Band Allen, I'd love to go with you to the jazz concert."

Parker's jaw tenses, but I don't think anyone notices other than me. "Yeah, that'd be cool ... but that would also mean Amy's bailing on me."

“Well, I mean, it *is* Valentine’s Day, man.” Dalton chuckles, shaking his head. “I might want to spend it with my woman.”

I swear something in Parker’s eyes darkens, and for a split second, I think he might come across the table at Dalton ... but he laughs instead. “Isn’t it hard to call someone *your* woman when you’re not officially dating?” His voice holds a hint of challenge—and I do *not* like the look that Dalton just shot back at him.

“I think he was just being nice,” Maeve intervenes, placing her hand on Parker’s forearm. “He’s crazy about Amy.”

“Yeah, I am. I just wanted to take things slow for her.”

I tilt my head. “For me? What do you mean?”

“Well.” Dalton turns to me. “It’s just that ... I knew even before you told me that you don’t have a lot of experience with relationships. And I don’t mean this in a bad way, but you seem to be nervous every time we kiss...”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Parker says before I can say anything else. “She kisses just fine. I happen to think she’s a really good—”

“Excuse me?” Dalton nearly explodes as he turns to me. “You said you were *just friends*. So what, you kiss him, too?”

“No,” I say quickly. “It only happened one time... On New Year’s. And only because I really wanted my first kiss. He only did it because he felt sorry for me.”

“Wow, okay.” Dalton shakes his head, throwing his hands up. “And now what? You *live* with him? That’s a *huge* red flag if I’ve ever seen one.”

“My apartment flooded,” I say, exasperated. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go...”

“Uh, a hotel,” Dalton snaps, pushing back from the table. “You know what, Amy? I was going to ask you to be my girlfriend tonight, but I don’t think this is going to work out.”

“Dalton...” My voice trails off as he shakes his head at me.

“Come on, Maeve. You don’t want to seriously date this guy now, do you?” He looks to her and then back to me.

“He’s a jerk. I should’ve known what was going on when he was standing outside the apartment building waiting for you after our first date.”

The lump in my throat prevents me from saying anything more as Dalton storms out, Maeve hot on his heels and trying to calm him down.

Tears well up in my eyes as I feel the pang of rejection...

And then anger.

“*Why* did you say that?” I demand, my voice shaking. Parker’s head drops. “You *knew* I hadn’t told him yet.”

“He insulted you.”

“He didn’t. And you know what?” I toss my napkin down on the table and stand to my feet. “He was just being honest about the fact I’ve been nervous about kissing him.”

“Where are you going?” Parker asks as I turn away from him.

“It doesn’t matter. Just leave me alone.” I head for the door, shoving my arms into my jacket and batting away my tears.

Parker follows me out of the restaurant and onto the street, but I don’t stop until he wraps his hand around my wrist.

“*What?*” I explode, pulling away.

“Look, I’m sorry, but you—”

“*No,*” I cut him off. “This time, it isn’t about *me*. It’s about *you*.” I let the anger bubble up, honesty brimming on my lips. “You’ve messed things up with every single guy I’ve tried to date—and maybe the first few times were for the best, because those guys were jerks... But Dalton? Seriously? He was a good guy. Clearly, all you care about is this stupid bet!”

“It wasn’t about the bet,” Parker says, his voice flat.

“Oh yeah? Then *what* was it about, Parker? You don’t want me as more than a friend, but you don’t want me with anyone else, either? Is *that* what this is?” Fresh tears stream

down my face, and the realization of my feelings suddenly slams into my heart.

"Amy..." Parker tries to step closer to me.

I shake my head. "Maybe I'm nuts for wanting to find love so badly, but at least I'm not scared of it. I just want to find someone who kisses me every day the way you kissed me on New Year's. And I'm *not* scared to admit..." My voice trails off as I think about my conversations with Eliza and my mom.

"Sometimes, love is in the small, everyday things." I can hear my mom's voice in my head, and my mind begins to replay all the *small* moments that have transpired between Parker and me.

Like the first time he walked me home ... and every time after that.

How he cheered me up after I got stood up. And bought my coffee.

When he took me to the ER after I hurt my ankle.

And rescued me from my flooded apartment.

How he opened up his home to me ... and cooked me dinner.

How he checks in on me to make sure I'm safe.

I shake my head.

No. It can't be true...

"Admit what, Amy?" Parker's voice is thick with emotion. "What is that you're not scared to admit? That you love Dalton? And I messed that up for you?"

I look up at him, and for the first time, I see Parker as a little kid, his eyes full of past hurts and trauma that have left him unwilling to step out of the safe zone he's created for himself. And suddenly, I'm filled with compassion.

I owe it to myself and to him to just be honest.

"No, Parker. I don't love Dalton ... I love *you*."

Parker falls into silence as my confession hangs heavy in the air between us. I wait patiently for him to say

something. Anything. But as he opens his mouth to speak, no words come out.

The bustling city around us fades into the background, leaving only the echo of those three words hovering delicately in the chilly night air.

Silence has never felt so loud.

Parker breaks eye contact and looks down at his shoes. And as the seconds stretch into minutes, my heart sinks lower and lower, until I can barely stand it anymore. The weight of my confession bears down on me, suffocating me with its intensity. Tears stream down my cheeks as the reality of the moment settles in.

Perhaps I've made a huge mistake.

I wipe the moisture from my face. "You know what's crazy is that even *if* you felt something for me, you'd never admit it. You'll *never* realize that love is worth the risk, but I'm glad I was honest—even if it hurts. I don't think we should be friends anymore, Parker." I turn to go, and I know that this time, he won't follow me. "I'll stay with Nellie tonight and come get my stuff while you're at work tomorrow," I call over my shoulder, just in case he's wondering.

However, he doesn't make a sound, and I don't know if it's because the street is full of people and I just don't hear, or if he's really letting me go without even an apology.

It doesn't matter.

It's over now.

I've never really been through a breakup, but I'm certain that it *must* hurt like this. My heart pounds heavily as my chest aches, my stomach tightening into a knot. And the fact that Parker fell into silence when I word-vomited all my feelings only makes it that much more painful...

Eliza would be proud of me, though.

I did the right thing—including not running after Dalton.

It was *never* Dalton for me.

No, I fell in love with Parker.

And now, I'm *really* going to lose the bet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Parker

“What’s wrong with you?” Weston asks me as soon as he steps into my apartment.

“Nothing,” I say, staring at the TV. I don’t even know what’s playing.

“Dude, you’ve been holed up in here for days.”

I shake my head. “I’ve just been working from home for a while.” In truth, I was hoping I’d be here when Amy moved her things ... but she managed to pack all her stuff up while I was at work—making arrangements to work from home. Granted, at the time, I had *no* idea what I was even going to say to her, having been completely blindsided by her confession of love, so maybe it’s for the best.

"You look terrible." Weston steps out in front of the TV, blocking my view. "What's going on? Where's Amy?"

"She's gone."

His eyes widen. "Like, *gone gone* or moved out?"

"She moved out."

"Okay." He narrows his eyes at me before reaching for the remote and turning off my TV. "You're acting like someone died," he says, taking a seat across from me.

"Yeah, well, we're not friends anymore. I still sent her the tickets to the band she wants to see, though."

"Ah, so you lost the bet, then?"

"Nope. I won."

"Okay, I'm *really* freaking confused." Weston lets out a flustered sigh. "What the heck happened? Did you sleep—"

"No." I groan, my head dropping to my hands. "It's not that at all. I—I ruined her freaking date with Dalton because he said something about her being a nervous kisser, so I told him that she's a really good kisser."

"Oh." Weston runs his fingers through his hair. "So, the guy is a jerk."

"No," I reason, lifting my head to meet his eyes. "I am the jerk."

"How?"

"I ran the guy off. It was an accident. But then, Amy and I were arguing about it afterward, and she ended up admitting she's in love with me."

His jaw drops. "What?"

"Yeah..." And that's all I've been able to think about since those three words left her mouth. At first, I was in complete shock—and then I thought maybe I led her on, but then...

Then I realized that I *feel* things for her, too.

But I couldn't bring myself to admit it to her in the moment. Because it felt as if fear itself was gripping me and choking the words in my throat as images of past brokenness and the looming threat of heartbreak surged to the forefront of my mind. I was too scared to face the truth

—too scared of what it could mean for our friendship and for myself.

So when she walked away, I let her go without a fight.

“So...” Weston glances around. “I take it you didn’t say it back and it’s not a happily-ever-after situation...”

“Not even close. I virtually lost my ability to speak.”

“Oh jeez.” He groans. “That never goes over well with women.”

“No ... no, it doesn’t. And considering it’s been days since we’ve spoken, there’s pretty much no chance I’ll ever be able to make things right with her—and I don’t even know where I’d begin.”

“Well, for starters, you could tell her you’re sorry,” Weston says, giving me a look. “I had *no* idea that *she* was falling for you like that, but I *knew* you were.”

I shake my head. “I assumed it was just a silly crush. I didn’t realize that I’d gotten in so deep until now. I feel like I’m going through a horrible breakup, and we never even dated.”

Weston chuckles. “So, you’ve been pounding down the ice cream?”

“Ha ha,” I say, warily glancing toward the kitchen, thinking of the tubs in the trash. “Maybe a little.”

“So, let me get this straight. You ruined her date. Then she told you she loves *you*, and now she’s moved out and gone without another word?”

“Yeah ... I emailed her the tickets to The Band Allen this morning.”

He gives me a look. “Oh boy.”

“What? I thought it was a nice thing to do.”

“Uh, did you say anything else in the email?”

“No, I didn’t. I figured she wouldn’t want to hear it, so I just sent the tickets, because, even though she technically lost the bet, it was all my fault. I’m sure she can find someone to go with her to the concert.”

“For someone who’s always the first to give relationship advice—despite being a total cynic—you’ve got this whole thing *all* wrong.” Weston huffs, leaning back on the loveseat. “And you’ve yet to tell me the most important thing...”

My stomach flips. “What’s that?”

“Do you love *her*?”

I tense my jaw. “It doesn’t matter. Even if I did ... I don’t want to get hurt. I don’t—”

“Parker,” Weston interjects, holding up a hand. “Do you love her?”

I let out a ragged sigh. “Maybe.”

He rolls his eyes. “Okay, so *why* are you not with her? Because from my perspective, *you’re* the only reason you’re not happy right now. You’ve been so caught up in not getting hurt that you’re hurting yourself in the process.”

“You make no sense.”

“Yes, I do,” Weston argues. “That’s your whole problem, Parker. You look at what happened between your mom and dad—and even your sister—and just blindly assume that it’s your destiny, too. But you’ve yet to ever look at yourself. Look at how different you are from them. You’ve worked so hard to get where you are, and you’re genuinely content with your life. You’re not some serial dater, and you’ve never tried to find someone just to fill a void. You are protective and supportive of the people you love. You give more than anyone I’ve ever met. You care for people so genuinely. And you have so much to offer. But the moment something turns romantic, you run. And I get it. I understand why. And I’m not trying to diminish what you’ve been through. But Parker ... you’re *not* your parents.”

“You don’t know that,” my voice breaks.

“I *do*. I do know. Everyone knows that. And you deserve to find love.”

I close my eyes. I know he’s right. I’m *not* my parents. But it doesn’t change the fact that I royally messed up

everything between Amy and me. “I’m the biggest red flag of them all, Wes. I’m not the kind of guy she deserves.”

“We all make mistakes. I’m pretty sure that dating someone while secretly being in love with someone else is a pretty big red flag—and that’s what Amy was doing. I mean, think about it—she *lived* with you while apparently secretly pining for you. I’d never be okay with dating someone who was in that situation. But again, everyone makes mistakes. It doesn’t mean they deserve to be completely written off.”

I nod. “I should’ve taken up for Amy more at dinner—and tried to help Dalton understand that *I’m* the problem, not her.”

“I think maybe you were just so focused on winning the bet—and on *not* falling in love—that you were burying and ignoring your feelings for her. But subconsciously, I can almost guarantee you never wanted things to work out between her and Dalton.”

I snort. “It wasn’t all subconscious.”

“Cool, then go fix it.”

I hesitate. “But ... I don’t know how to do that. I don’t even know where to start.”

Weston raises an eyebrow. “You start by being honest with her. Tell her how you feel. Apologize for messing things up and for not acknowledging your own feelings sooner. You owe her that much, at least.”

“Okay, but then what? We just live happily ever after? I don’t even know *how* to be in love.”

“You learn, Parker. You figure it out as you go. You talk, you listen, you make compromises. You take a chance and let yourself be vulnerable. Love isn’t about having all the answers or being perfect—it’s about being willing to try, to grow, and to be there for each other through all the ups and downs. And let’s not forget, you are one of the most loving people I know. You care for your friends and your family. You put their needs above your own. Heck, you went to how many singles events just to support me?”

“Too many.” I chuckle.

“Exactly. You know what to do. Now go embrace those warm fuzzy feelings and get your girl before it’s too late.”

My girl.

My mind flashes to our mind-blowing kiss on New Year’s Eve. To the way she lights up a room the moment she walks in. The way her eyes sparkle when she talks about her passions and the way her laugh fills me with a warmth I’ve never known. The way she smiles in the morning and the way she rambles about her day—her quirks, her dreams, her fears (or lack thereof). The way she acted like the small cut on my finger was a big deal and how she gently bandaged it up, fussing over me with such care.

Then my brain flashes to how she looked at me when we stepped into the restaurant with Dalton and Maeve....

And the pain on her face when I just couldn’t get the words out after she professed her feelings to me.

I let her walk home alone.

“You can fix this,” Weston says in a reassuring voice. “I know you can.”

I swallow hard, terrified by the thought. “I don’t know how well she’ll take it after everything...”

Weston shrugs. “If you don’t, you’ll regret it. And personally, I think the regret of a love never explored is much more painful than that of a love lost.”

“I think you should be a poet,” I joke. “You have a way with words.”

He shrugs. “Your sister thinks so, too.”

I narrow my eyes. “What?”

“Nothing. Let’s focus on you and Amy right now.”

As much as I want to *not* do that, I relent. I need to fix this ... I just don’t know how.

But I’m determined to figure it out.



Hours later, I'm searching Facebook for Eliza Walters, Amy's best friend from Chicago—er, well, they met in Chicago. Amy told me the story a million times, but the name of the tiny town that Eliza lives in now still escapes me.

Which has made it a bit harder to find her.

I just need to know if Amy found someone to go to the concert with before I reach out to her...

A knock on my door grabs my attention, and I halfway expect Weston to come prancing in again for another pep talk. But whoever's there doesn't let themselves in.

They knock again.

Letting out a sigh, I abandon my spot on the couch and head for the door, peeping through the tiny hole.

You've got to be kidding me.

I almost don't answer but can't bring myself to ignore it. So, I swing the door open, my father's face greeting mine. "Hey, Pops."

"Hey, son. Happy Valentine's Day," he says and steps inside. I can count on one hand the times he's been to my place, and the fact he's here makes me wonder if he needs something.

"You, too," I say, hoping he doesn't notice the bouquet of roses on the table. It's not only Valentine's Day, but it's Amy's birthday, too. And assuming she doesn't already have a date for tonight, I didn't want to go empty-handed. "So, what's up?"

"Well, I was in the neighborhood, so I figured I'd stop by and see what you're up to today. Being single on Valentine's is never fun, so I thought maybe we could..." His voice trails off as his gaze shifts to the kitchen, seeing the flowers and cards—yes, cards plural because I had to cover *two* significant events. "You got plans tonight?"

I bite my lip. "Yeah, I do."

"Really?" He raises his brows. "You got someone special?"

"Uh..." I rub the back of my neck. "More like I *want* to have someone special. I messed it all up, but I'm hoping I can somehow make it up to her."

He nods, giving me a sympathetic smile. "You know, I know how that goes."

Oh no...

I don't want to hear another one of his failed relationship stories. It might scare me right out of reaching out to Amy. Professing my love is *not* something I've ever done.

"After your mom left me—for good reason—I met someone."

Okay, this is new.

"You met someone?" I force myself to engage.

"Yeah, her name was Susie. She was really something special, but I was so scared that it would fail—that *I* would fail—just like what happened with your mom, that I sabotaged the relationship and quickly fell into my old patterns."

"Oh."

"Yeah, it wasn't one of my brightest moments. I've made a whole lot of mistakes in my life, some with more impact than others. And look, I know that the divorce between your mom and I was really hard on you kids, but we had our share of problems. We only ever got married because we got pregnant—don't get me wrong, I'm so grateful for you and your sister, but we were just doing what we thought was right at the time. It was never gonna work between us. We know that now."

I shift uncomfortably. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." He nods. "Your mom and I are just not compatible. Our relationship wasn't good, but ... my relationship with the woman I met after your mom *was*. I regret not chasing her. I *still* think about Susie now, all these years later."

"Why don't you reach out to her?" I reason, my palms starting to sweat. "I mean, I know it's been a long time..."

"Well, I think about it every once in a while, but then again, I've let *a lot* of time pass, and I always come up with excuses not to."

"I'm pretty good at coming up with excuses," I confess, shrugging my shoulders. *Like trying to ensure Amy's not already going to the concert with someone else before even reaching out to her.* "And until now, I didn't even really realize I was making them."

Dad laughs. "Yeah, I know. You got that from me, but I'm pretty sure that's about *all* you got from me. You're cut from a much different cloth. You're a great man, Parker. And I don't want to see you let my mistakes—or your mother's—keep you from finding happiness." I nod slowly, absorbing my father's words as he continues. "I know that I haven't set the best example for you. I let way too many women come in and out of your life over the years while simultaneously harping on how bad love is and how nothing good ever comes from it. But I shouldn't have done that. Because the truth is, I'd go through all the heartbreak over again for you and your sister. Love and family are worth it, son." He claps a hand on my shoulder, his expression sincere.

"I'm starting to realize that now," I admit.

"Good." He smiles. "And I'm sorry that I wasn't a better father to you. I'm sorry that I turned my relationship with you into a competition with your mom. But I hope you know that I am *so* proud of you. Because, despite all the chaos, you somehow managed to rise above it. Our family may be dysfunctional, but I have a good feeling *you* won't be."

"Thanks, Pops. I love you. And I appreciate you coming by today." I give him a tight hug, feeling a rush of emotions.

What's happening to me?

I'm becoming a ball of mush.

He pats me on the back before pulling away. "I love you, son. And hey, don't let this Valentine's Day slip away without at least trying to make things right with this girl. Life's too short for regrets, trust me."

A lump grows in my throat, and it only confirms that my crazy idea for tonight *is* the right thing to do.

Because as I stand here in front of my dad, it hits me...

I *do* know exactly what Amy needs.

And for the first time, I think I can actually give it to her.

I just need to make a few phone calls.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Amy

"I can't believe you talked me into getting ready for the concert," I tell Eliza as I apply the finishing touches to my mascara. "I don't even have anyone to go with—and I still don't understand why Parker sent me the tickets. It's ridiculous. I didn't even win the bet."

"I think he just feels bad," Eliza says.

"Don't take his side!"

Eliza shakes her head. "I'm *not* on his side. I think you nailed it when you said he's scared of love. I'm just saying that you shouldn't let perfectly good concert tickets go to waste—you've wanted to see The Band Allen for years. Plus, it's your birthday! You deserve to go and have a nice time. And hey, you might even find someone while you're there

who can help you get over him, too," she adds, giving me a smile.

"No way," I mutter. "I need a break from dating. I'm not ready to go chasing love again. It didn't work out for me."

She sighs. "Please don't become a cynic."

"I won't," I say, though at the moment, I'm not sure what else to be.

The sound of a knock on Nellie's apartment door catches my attention, and I glance toward it. "That's weird. Nellie's supposed to be gone until tomorrow."

"Well, go see who it is," Eliza urges. "Maybe it's a delivery."

"Did you send me something?" I ask, laughing as I stand to my feet and head for the front door. Nellie's place is about as luxurious as Parker's, but only a third of the size.

I let out a sigh as I lean forward to peer through the peephole.

No way.

"Um..."

"Who is it?" Eliza asks.

"Parker," I whisper.

"Answer it! I'll let you go. Love you."

Before I can say anything else, she hangs up, leaving me to answer the door alone. I smooth out my hair before opening it.

"Hey," Parker says, clearing his throat.

"Hi," I mutter, suddenly feeling thankful I got all dolled up despite having no intentions to *actually* go to the concert. It was just something to do...

"I was hoping we could talk," he says, his voice coming out more nervous than I've ever heard it before. "And I wanted to wish you a happy birthday."

"Thanks," I say, stepping to the side to let him in. "How'd you know where Nellie lives?"

"I have connections," he says awkwardly. "And social media comes in handy sometimes. She said I could come

here.”

“You messaged her?”

“Well, yeah. I wasn’t going to just show up at her apartment without her permission—Nellie’s the one who gave me her address—but anyway, I was wondering if you had someone to go with to your concert tonight.”

I’m tempted to lie and say that I do, but as I hold his gaze, I can’t bring myself to. Even if he doesn’t reciprocate my feelings, I can tell he’s being genuine. “No, I don’t have anyone to go with...”

“Can I take you?”

“Um. Sure...” My voice trails off as I wonder how long he plans to ignore the elephant in the room—the fact that I’m totally in love with him.

“Alright, so let’s go, then?” He gives me a slight smile, and I hate the way it makes my heart melt. He’s dressed edgy tonight in his black jeans and leather jacket...

And it’s *so* attractive.

“But it doesn’t start for another two hours...”

“I know, but I thought we could get there early and grab a bite to eat or something.”

“Okay,” I say without thinking, falling in step beside him as he leads the way, and I try to ignore the pang of heartache.

What am I even doing?

I guess I was just so caught off guard by Parker showing up here that I mindlessly chose the path of least resistance. But now my mind is racing because it feels like we have so many unresolved issues.

Are we really going to ignore everything that happened between us and go back to being friends?

Or ... maybe he’s waiting for me to apologize first?

“Parker,” I begin as we step into the elevator. “I think we should talk...”

He looks down at me. “Yeah, I know, but not yet.”

“What?” I feel myself growing irritated. “Why can’t we talk about it now? I just want to get everything out in the open. I promise I won’t let it ruin the night. I already know how you feel about me.”

“Good, glad that’s out of the way.” He smirks. “Come on. I have a car waiting for us outside.”

I shake my head, trying to push away the heartache. I don’t know if I can do this. Did he miss the part where I told him I couldn’t be friends with him anymore?

Just as my mind starts to spiral again, I spot a black limo parked on the curb.

I stop walking. “What’s this?”

“My apology,” he says as the driver opens the door. “Well, the beginning of it.”

“Oh...” My eyes land on the flowers—red roses, actually. I lose my breath as I slide in and Parker sits beside me.

“I know it’s a short drive, but I figured we’d go all out. Since today is basically a double holiday.” Parker reaches for the flowers and hands me *two* cards. “So, happy birthday *and* happy Valentine’s Day, Amy. I lost the bet.”

I blink. I look over at him, my heart in my throat. “What ... What do you mean?”

“I was an idiot.”

“You technically still won the bet,” I say carefully.

“Open the cards. Start with the birthday one.” He gestures to the light blue envelope.

I swallow hard, setting down the roses and ripping open the card. My eyes fall to the words. My heart thuds in my chest. It’s a plain birthday card, but when I flip it open, I see the words scrawled at the bottom in Parker’s handwriting.

You know what the best part of this day is? YOU.

I laugh, shaking my head. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, clever, huh?”

“Not even,” I tease. I’m not even aware of how close Parker is to me until his cologne fills my nostrils, and I

realize his arm is resting behind me. “Onto the next?” I ask unsteadily.

“Yeah...” His eyes hold mine for a moment. “And whatever happens after you read this, we’re still going to the concert—and we’re still going to have a great time. No matter what.”

I nod, tearing the envelope open as the limo takes off toward the concert venue. I mentally prepare myself for another rejection as I pull out the card. On the front is just a heart. A simple pink heart. There’s no romantic writing, and I try not to let it serve as foreshadowing. Carefully, I flip it open, passing the typewritten *Happy Valentine’s Day* for the handwritten part.

Amy,

I just want to start out by saying I am so sorry... But I’m NOT sorry for all the times I ruined your dates. I’m sorry that I ever let you go on them. I’m sorry I let you walk away when I should’ve stopped you. I knew the moment we met that you were different—you caught my eye that night because of the way you lit up the room. And ever since that night, you can’t walk in a room and not be the only one I notice.

I know now I should’ve chased you instead of pushing you away. I should’ve never stopped kissing you after New Year’s Eve. I should’ve kissed you every single day after that. But in truth, I’m scared of love. I’m scared of losing someone that I love. But you’ve known that all along and somehow still see the best in me. And believe in me. And watching you walk away the other night was more painful than any risk not taken. I’m so sorry, Amy. Will you forgive me?

Also, I want to lose the bet tonight and bet on us instead.

Will you be mine? Really mine. Not just on Valentine’s Day, but every day.

I love you, too.

-Parker

I can't fight the tears as I set the card in my lap, my eyes going to Parker's. "This is a lot," I say, my voice cracking.

"I know, I know," Parker says quickly. "I messed up, Amy..."

"Yeah, but I forgive you." A tear spills down my cheek and he reaches out, thumbing it away.

"Thank you." He smiles and then leans back against the seat. "It's going to be a good night."

"Yeah." I lean back, too. "Because you *totally* lost the bet."

He whips his head toward me. "Yeah?"

I grin up at him. "Yeah, I have a boyfriend. *Finally.*"

"Finally," he echoes.

"And the best part is, it's *you.*"

He smiles, reaching for me. His fingers light a fire against my cheek as he threads them through my hair and brings my lips to his. They're soft, and the sparks fly the moment our mouths meet.

The fireworks are back.

I part my lips, and all the nerves I felt with Dalton aren't there. All I feel is warmth and excitement as our kiss deepens, growing hot and heady. Parker's arm comes down from the back of the seat, wrapping around me and pulling me right into his lap.

My breath hitches as our bodies press close, his hands running down my back. My fingers find his hair, and he groans as I tug on the soft strands. He grips me tighter, his fingers coming in contact with the slip of bare skin showing from my sweater riding up.

He doesn't travel any further from that spot, but his tongue covers every inch of my mouth as I stay pressed to his chest. Finally, when the limo comes to a stop, Parker slows, pulling away. He holds my gaze, our breaths shallow.

"I've been wanting to do that for so long," he says, still holding me to him. "You're intoxicating."

A blush creeps into my cheeks as I slide off his lap. "So are you."

He chuckles just as the limo door swings open. "Alright, let's go see this band of yours."

I break into a smile. "Come on." I grab his hand and nearly drag him out of the limo, tugging him toward the entrance of the intimate venue. "This is going to be so wild."

"Yeah, it is," he says, laughing. "You have no idea."

"What?" I glance over my shoulder, not understanding what in the world he's talking about. We reach the door and a couple of guys open it without checking our tickets. "That's weird," I mutter, eyeing Parker.

And it only gets stranger.

There's no one in the lobby.

"Did they cancel...?" I glance around, but Parker is already pulling me toward the double doors to the small theater.

And it's *empty*.

"Happy Valentine's Day, babe," Parker says, smiling.

"What?" I nearly shriek as The Band Allen starts setting up the stage. "What is this?!" I turn to him.

"I may have paid for a private showing."

My mouth drops open. "So, this is all just for us?"

He shrugs. "Yep. They'll play a second concert at the scheduled time, so it's not like everyone else won't get a chance to see them."

"Happy Birthday, Amy," the frontman says into the microphone. "This whole set is just for you."

I nearly come unglued, grabbing Parker's hand and dragging him down to the front of the theater. "This is so amazing!"

"Oh, it only gets better from here," he says into the microphone. "This first song is dedicated to you, from Parker. Even though this whole concert is for you, he wanted us to make sure we dedicate this first song to you... Apparently, it's important." The band breaks into a piano riff, and I immediately recognize it as my favorite song—the love ballad.

"I can't believe you did this." I turn to Parker, fighting back another round of tears. "This is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me."

"Yeah, I have no idea how I'm supposed to top this next year." He chuckles, grabbing my hand and pulling me against his chest. "But I'll figure something out."

"Next year, huh?" I raise a brow. "I thought you didn't think love could last?"

He smiles down at me. "Oh yeah, I still have my doubts ... about everyone else. But you and me? I think we can go the distance."

"I love you." I cling to him as we sway back and forth.

"I love you, too, Amy," he says, leaning down and resting his head against mine. "And you know what? You're worth every single risk. I'll take them all with you."

"Even skydiving?"

He laughs. "Guess we have next year's Valentine's Day plans figured out."

EPILOGUE

Amy

One year later...

“You’re the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen,” Eliza gushes, adjusting the lace on my wedding gown. I can’t help but feel a surge of gratitude for having her by my side. I couldn’t imagine this moment without her.

A soft pink glow illuminates the room as I gaze at myself in the full-length mirror. The reflection staring back at me is a vision I’ve dreamed of since I was a little girl.

My mermaid gown hugs every curve, the delicate lace cascading down to a sweeping train. A cathedral-length veil

trails behind me, shimmering with tiny crystals that catch the light. I reach up to touch it, hardly able to believe this day has finally arrived.

“Thank you, Eliza,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper, overwhelmed by the moment. “I can’t believe this day is finally here.”

Her eyes glisten with unshed tears as she steps back to admire me. “You deserve all the happiness in the world. And today is just the beginning.”

I take a deep breath, my heart fluttering with a mix of nerves and excitement.

Today, I get to marry the love of my life.

I get to marry the man who’s become my rock. The man who stands by me through thick and thin, through all of life’s ups and downs. The man who understands my quirks, who appreciates my flaws, and who sees the real me beneath the facade I often put up for the world. The man who fiercely respects, protects, defends, and uplifts me. The man who challenges me to be a better version of myself and encourages me in my pursuits and dreams.

I get to marry the man who loves me just like my dad loves my mom.

As I stand here, taking in the moment, the door to the bridal suite swings open, and in walk my parents.

My dad’s eyes well up with tears as he sees me in my wedding gown, a proud smile stretching across his face. “You look absolutely stunning, Amy,” he says, his voice filled with emotion. He crosses the room in a few long strides and wraps me in a warm embrace. “I can’t believe my little girl is getting married today. I couldn’t be prouder of the person you’ve become.”

Tears prick my eyes as I hold onto my dad, feeling his love and pride envelop me. My mom joins in, her eyes sparkling with joy as she looks at me. “Oh, my sweet girl. Your father is right—you’re absolutely radiant.”

I feel a surge of love and gratitude for my parents who have shown me what true love and commitment looks like. Their unwavering support and endless love have shaped me into the person I am today, and I can only hope to have a marriage as strong and loving as theirs.

Mom pulls back slightly, holding out a small box wrapped in shimmering blue paper. "I have something for you," she says softly, placing it in my hands.

I look down at the intricate bow and delicate ribbon, the color reminding me of a clear summer sky, and carefully unwrap the gift. My heart pounds with anticipation.

Inside, nestled on a bed of velvet, lies a stunning sapphire necklace. The deep blue stones glint in the soft light, casting tiny rainbows around the room.

I gasp. "Oh, Mom. It's beautiful."

She smiles warmly. "It's your something blue," she explains. "It belonged to your late grandmother. She gifted it to me on my wedding day, and now I'm honored to pass it down to you."

I carefully lift the necklace from its resting place, feeling the weight of history and love in my hands—my grandparents were married for over sixty years before they passed, and my mom and dad have been married for thirty-eight years and are still going strong. As I fasten it around my neck, the cool stones rest against my skin, a tangible reminder of the strong marriages that have come before mine.

"It's perfect," I murmur, turning to look at myself in the mirror once more.

"You're perfect," she whispers before kissing my cheek. "Parker is a lucky man."

I'm the lucky one.



Parker

"You got this." Dad looks at me and grins. "You look great. How do you feel?"

"I feel like I'm about to throw up," I admit, grabbing my stomach. "You know I don't do these kind of heights."

"Just don't look down." He bursts into laughter as he reaches out, straightening my tux.

"I don't think I'll have that problem. I'll just be looking at her."

"Good plan."

Amy and I are getting married in a penthouse atop Central Park Tower, the tallest residential building in the world and the closest thing to skydiving I could come up with without actually skydiving...

It would be pretty hard to say your vows while strapped to a parachute.

"Is Susie here yet?" I ask, glancing toward the door.

Dad grins. "Yeah, she is. She's hoping she'll be next."

"Of course." I laugh. "You better get on that. She's been waiting long enough."

Dad shakes his head just as Nick—Eliza's husband—and Weston step into the room. "I'll go check on her and let you talk to your friends."

I nod, swallowing the nerves in my chest—which have nothing to do with marrying Amy. With her, I'm all in. I knew the moment I gave in to my feelings that she was the only one for me.

However, getting married at this height in front of a bunch of people?

Yeah, that's nerve-wracking.

"How's Amy?" I ask the two of them, missing the heck out of her. I haven't seen her in two days per her request. It's

tradition or something. And it's killing me.

"She's excited," Nick says, grinning.

"And hoping that you don't throw up from the heights," Weston adds, busting into a fit of laughter. "I know it's bad, but I am kinda hoping you do."

"Ha ha," I say wryly. "I'll be sure to wish the same for you at your wedding."

"Hey now, your sister might not like that."

I make a face. I'm still getting used to the fact he's dating my sister. "I can't believe this is it—Amy's about to become *my wife*."

"I'm so happy for you both." Nick places his hand on my shoulder. I've had the pleasure of getting to know Nick and Eliza over the past year. Amy and I have even traveled to the tiny town of West Falls multiple times to visit them.

She takes her friendships very seriously.

And I love her for it.

"It's time." Dad pokes his head into the room. "Let's get this show on the road."

Five minutes later, I'm standing at the altar waiting for my bride to show up. I watch nervously as the bridesmaids and groomsmen make their way to the front, but all I can think about is the woman I *know* is coming next.

My bride.

I never realized until now that I've been waiting my whole life for this moment.

And it feels so good.

Just as our song begins to play, filling the air with the soft piano introduction, I catch sight of Amy, her arm threaded through her father's. My heart pounds as I take in the sight of her in a lacy long-sleeved mermaid gown. She looks *stunning*.

But then again, she always does.

The lump in my throat thickens as I smile at her, meeting her gaze. I can't hold back my emotions as tears well up in my eyes.

I said I wasn't going to cry.

But it doesn't matter. I'm crying anyway as Amy walks down the aisle. She's going to be my wife before this Valentine's Day is over, and I can't imagine spending this day any other way.

Though it is going to be hard to cover all these celebrations in one day.

Three special occasions.

Hopefully, we won't have a baby born on this day.

Amy smiles as the preacher starts the process of her father handing her over, and I reach for her the very moment I'm allowed to.

"You look gorgeous, baby," I tell her, fighting the urge not to kiss her red lips.

"You look handsome yourself," she says to me, smiling. "I thought you weren't going to cry."

I wipe my eyes on the jacket of my tux. "Yeah, the joke's on me."

She giggles, shaking her head. "I hope it's okay that we're getting married instead of skydiving today."

"We're still a long way up in the air. I think it'll be fine." I chuckle.

The pastor gives us a look as he clears his throat. He makes it through a nice sermon about finding love and cherishing each other, but I can hardly hear him.

All I can do is stare at the beautiful woman in front of me.

My wife.

A few moments later, the pastor gives me the cue to say my vows, and I take a deep breath.

"I've spent a lot of time thinking about all the things I wanted to say, but it always takes me back to the first time we met. I remember observing the way you lit up the room, and I had so many questions—and the truth is, I still don't understand how you can be so positive and carefree all the time. You're always willing to take a risk, and I love that about you."

“I can’t imagine not having you by my side, and the only regret I have is that it took me so long to realize loving you was worth the risk. We’ve had some really great times in the last year, and some that weren’t so great. But no matter what, Amy, I’ll never stop fighting for our love, for you, and for our future kids. I’ll always choose you over anything and everything. I vow to always say sorry, forgive you when you mess up, and take care of you in times that you need it. I vow to always be willing to change and compromise, because true love is worth putting in the work for. I vow to never give up on us.”

Amy nods, tears streaming down her face. “I love you,” she mouths.

“I love you forever,” I say. “Always.”

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Amy

One Year Later

Oh my gosh.

I stare down at the test on the counter, trying to take deep, even breaths. It's been eight months since we started trying, and I was almost about to give up...

"Are you okay in there?" Parker calls from the other side of the door. "You're stressing me out. Is your stomach still bothering you? Did you catch something at work? Do I need to get you some Pedialyte or something?"

I burst into laughter. "No, no, I don't think so."

“Why’re you laughing? You said that Nellie has been sick for a week now. I don’t want you sick that long ... you know what throwing up does to me. It’s not fun cleaning up after *both* of us...”

“Parker, stop,” I say, whipping the bathroom door open. “I’m not going to be throwing up—well, actually, I don’t know. I might.”

He gives me an incredulous look, standing there looking as hot as ever shirtless and in a pair of black sweatpants. “Okay, now you’re really confusing me. What happened? Do you have a fever? The last time you had the flu you did act a little weird...”

“Babe,” I say calmly, and then hold out the test.

His eyes drop to my outstretched hand, his entire body freezing. “What...”

“Just look at it.”

“Holy...” He stares down at it. “I can’t... You’re... We’re...”

“Yeah,” I say, already knowing what he’s trying to get out. “I’m pregnant. *Finally*. We did it.”

“We did it.” He looks up at me. “We *did* it!” Parker throws a fist up into the air and sweeps me up into his arms, planting a kiss on my lips as he spins me around. “Man, we’re gonna have a baby.” He beams as he sets me down on the floor. “What should we do? Which room should be the nursery? Should we move out of the city?”

I laugh, shaking my head. “I think you should start by taking a deep breath. We’ll figure that all out later.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he says, letting out a sharp breath. “It’s just so ... incredible. I was starting to think... That we might have a problem.”

I grin. “We don’t have a problem.”

“We’re great babymakers,” he says, pulling me into another hug. “I have to call my dad and Susie. They’re going to be thrilled.”

“Yeah, I think your dad is going to win the bet.”

He tilts his head back to gaze down at me. “What bet?”

“You didn’t know?” I say, feigning my surprise. “They’ve had a bet going. Your dad thought we would have a baby first, but Susie thought Brittany would. And I’m pretty sure they’re leveraging an Alaskan cruise versus a Caribbean one.”

“They’re so weird.” He crinkles his nose. “Ever since Dad bought in on the mechanic shop, he’s been taking a lot of vacations.”

I shrug. “Whatever floats his boat.”

He laughs. “You float *my* boat.”

I swat him and roll my eyes. “Let’s make another bet.” I grin.

He steps back, narrowing his eyes at me. “What’re we supposed to bet on? Because I can already tell you that I’m going to win.”

“Oh really?” I tease, running my finger down his bare chest.

His eyes darken and he grabs my hand and pulls my lips to his in a hot kiss. “You know what that does to me.”

I giggle as I pull away and kiss his nose. “All this time and I still get to you.” I smile, thinking back to all the time we’ve spent together—and it’s still not enough. I don’t know if I’ll ever have enough of Parker.

“Back to the bet.” Parker raises his brows. “I’m way too interested in this to let anything else get in the way. What’re we betting on?”

“I bet that we’re having a boy,” I say, running my hand over my stomach.

“Ooh, I like this bet. I’ll definitely bet it’s a girl. I think the world could stand to have a few mini-yous.”

“A few?” I question, giving him a look. “Are you trying to say we’re having triplets or something?”

He burst into laughter. “Oh heck no. I don’t think I can handle *three* babies at one time. That’s a lot of poopy diapers.”

I giggle. “You’re too cute.”

He shrugs. "Yeah, yeah. What happens if I win the bet?"

I purse my lips. "Um ... I'll let you buy a motorcycle."

"I don't want a motorcycle anymore. My rebel days are over now. I'm going to be a father."

I roll my eyes. "Okay, then what do you want?"

"Just you." He wiggles his eyebrows. "I always just want you."

"Okay, so are we going to bet on a vacation?"

"Yeah, how about a babymoon? If I win, we're going somewhere cold."

I crinkle my nose. "Fair enough. If I win, we're going to the beach."

"Perfect," Parker murmurs, leaning down and brushing his nose against mine. "It's a really good thing that I like the mountains *and* the beach. I think I'll just be thankful that I'm going with you."

My fingers brush along his jaw, feeling the stubble from a night of no shaving. "I have to say that I love the mountains, too, but I also like the idea of having a little Parker running around."

"Well, a girl might have my sass." Parker chuckles, kissing the top of my head. "And a boy might have your wild ways."

"My wild ways?" I make a face. "I'm *not* wild."

"You did dance on the coffee table after two glasses of wine last month," Parker reasons. "It was quite a show."

"Yeah, well, no more wine for me," I say, reaching up and bopping him on the nose. "Not for a solid nine months, I think."

"I'm okay with that." He smiles, his face full of love as he gazes down at me. My heart grows warm in my chest...

And it stays that way.

Even five months later, when we're sitting around a fire in the Colorado Rockies.

Expecting a girl.



Did you like this book?
Then you'll love [The Friendly Fall](#), featuring Eliza and
Nick. [Read it now.](#)

ALSO BY KRISTINE W. JOY

Standalone RomComs:

[The Friendly Fall](#): Nick and Eliza's small town love story

[Penalty of Love](#): A grumpy/sunshine hockey romcom

Check out the [Brothers of Lucky Seven Ranch Series](#), following four billionaire brothers who find love in a small town.

[Off-Limits Cowboy](#)

[Accidentally My Cowboy](#)

[Meeting at the Altar](#)

[Fake Fiancé at First Sight](#)

**Check out the [My Way to Romance Series](#),
following three best girlfriends as they
each find love.**

[My Forbidden Billionaire](#)

[My Secret Celebrity](#)

[My Marriage Pact](#)

**Check out my other small-town romcom
series, [Lovin' The Pines](#)**

[Faking It With My Ex](#) (Prequel novella)

[Stuck With My Ex's Best Friend](#)

[Falling for My Next Door Neighbor:](#)

[Pining for My Best Friend](#)

GET CONNECTED

I'd love to connect with you!

- Follow me on Instagram [@KristineWJoy](#).
- [Subscribe to my newsletter](#) so we can keep in touch. You'll be the first to hear about new releases and sales. I also frequently send swoony excerpts of my works in progress, life updates, and FREE books.
- Want to be the FIRST to see sneak peeks and excerpts of my newest novels? Join my Facebook Group: [Kristine W. Joy RomCom Readers](#)

- I can also be found on [Facebook](#), [BookBub](#), and [Goodreads](#) @KristineWJoy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Wow, this is officially my fourteenth book. Which is fitting, considering it's got Valentine's Day vibes. But I am still in total disbelief that there are people in the world reading my stories. Even after fourteen books, it never gets old. THANK YOU, dear reader, for picking up this book. If it weren't for you ... I would pretty much just be talking to myself. And as fun as that is, it's a whole lot more fun when I get to share these characters with you. I hope you enjoyed reading *The Valentine's Bet* as much as I enjoyed writing it.

I can do all things through Him who gives me strength. And Lord knows this book required ALL the strength because I was very preggo when I wrote it. But we got through it! Thank you, Jesus! You're a way maker and a miracle worker.

Thank you to my incredible husband, for loving me so well and encouraging me on my author journey.

To my editor, Caitlin. Thank you for your brilliance. You helped me take my characters to the next level. It's been so fun working with you and I have learned so much from you!

To my beta readers, Kaci and Lissa. Thank you for the endless smiles and laughs; the voice memos and post it notes. Ya'll are truly a blessing and I'm so grateful to you both. I couldn't ask for better hype women and friends!

To Deb. Thank you so much for all your thoughtful feedback. You helped elevate this story and saw things nobody else did. I'm so grateful we got to know each other this year!

To Mary. My writing bestie. I am SO grateful for you. We've been doing this journey together since the beginning and I absolutely LOVE our way-too-long phone calls. Thank you for taking the time to read this story and help me cut the boring out of it! hahaha. You are such a blessing and I can't tell you how much your friendship means to me.

To my sweet friend, Caitlin. THANK YOU for beta reading this story for me. You always give me a boost of confidence when I need it most. Not to mention, you're amazing. That is all.

To my ARC team. Thank you for taking the time to read and review my stories. Thank you for sharing in my excitement over my books. Thank you for spreading the word far and wide about my stories. Thank you for your gorgeous social media posts. Thank you for your encouragement, your messages, your support. I can't say thank you enough for everything you do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristine W. Joy is an Amazon Bestselling Author who loves creating sweet and swoony stories full of sizzling chemistry and laugh-out-loud banter. She prefers her coffee iced and her kisses hot. When she's not dreaming up romance novels or writing from a cozy coffee shop in Northern California, she is spending time with her hubby and two young boys. Becoming a published author was a lifelong dream. Becoming a momma was the inspiration to make it a reality.



İletişim Botu:
@cevirigiller_bot

Çeviri Kitapların Olduğu Telegram Kanalımız
<https://t.me/cevirigiller>

Sohbet Grubumuz
<https://t.me/cevirigillersohbet>

Çeviri Yedek Telegram Grubumuz
<https://t.me/+O3tsm8j0C7kxM2Y1>

Kitap İstekleri Kanalımız
<https://t.me/cevirikitapistekleri>

Not:

PDFlerin paylaşımıyla ilgili bir sorunuz yok. Ama lütfen, hiçbir katkınızın olmadığı işlerde, TÜM PDFleri bizimle eş zamanlı paylaşarak emeğimizi hiçe saymayın. Sizin tek tıkla yaptığınız her paylaşım bizim emek harcadığımız saatler/günler demek.