



Grudge

MATCH

THE  MATCHMAKER

MATILDA MARTEL

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Chapter One



“Do not forget we have our book club tonight. We’re still newbies, and I’d like to impress the ladies with a few good insights. Make sure you’ve read chapters 1–20, or you won’t be able to fully participate in the discussion,” my best friend, Ramona, prattles as she buzzes by me, gathering her belongings on her way to work. She’s an executive assistant for some big honcho on Wall Street and work often bleeds into life.

I like to call her my professional best friend because that’s how seriously she takes her responsibilities.

“Twenty chapters? I devoured it last night before bed. It wasn’t even two hundred pages. That will be my first point of contention. Why did they choose such a short book? And why aren’t you done?” I pass her in the hallway, half-dressed, carrying a bowl of cereal. With the day ahead, this soggy mess might be my only meal today.

Ramona stops to fasten her scarf and stares at me with a narrowed gaze. “You know Mr. Nielsen made me work late all week. I’m on chapter 18 and plan to leave a few hours early to read the rest. I refuse to be outdone by Sabrina and her ten-minute soliloquy on how last week’s book changed her life. That was the phoniest thing I’ve ever heard,” she seethes as she buttons her coat.

“How much insight could you have on a book named *Bad Boss*? Besides, you’re always hating on my best friend,” I tease, laughing as I nudge her out the door.

Unamused by my joke, her eyes tighten to a squint, and she pretends to laugh out loud, exaggerating her cackle as she hops off the stoop. Sabrina’s

a lovely girl I know from culinary school whose sweet nature seems too good to be true. Ramona swears she's trying to steal me away. Every Friday she acts like a jealous boyfriend and gets ready for the fight of her life.

If only the men in my life were half as attentive, I wouldn't be utterly single with no hope in sight. I place my empty bowl in the sink and rinse it off, nearly shuddering at the thought of dating again. No, thank you. I have no interest in playing the field. Until I meet a good man, there's not much sense in shaving my legs. I refuse to settle for lemons and spend the next twenty years trying to make lemonade.

I've got far better uses for my time.

This is my last full semester at the International Culinary Academy and the chefs are riding us hard these final months. With good reason. We're vying for internships that could make our careers and there's no place I want more than Paris. The experience would be invaluable and look fantastic on my resume. I dream of working as a private chef and saving enough money to open an authentic French patisserie in my hometown.

It'll take some time to earn that kind of dough—pun intended—but good things come to those who wait.

On my way back to my bedroom, I quickly peek outside, surprised to see snow falling harder than predicted. The weatherman specifically said flurries, not a freaking snow squall. I grimace and wipe the fog from the glass, eyeing the street to see how much buildup has formed. I hate wearing galoshes, and I despise February. After two long months of winter, and the anticipation of spring filling my heart with hope, I'm not only slammed with the worst weather but bombarded with signs of Valentine's Day everywhere I go.

I'm accustomed to this weather. Growing up in Vermont, you learn to deal with Old Man Winter, but city cold and country cold are vastly different. For one, city snow is dirty, and the nonstop concrete makes for one hell of a slip if you don't watch your step. Fortunately, the walk to class is short. Ramona works near Wall Street and the school is a few blocks from the Battery. After a brief stint paying exorbitant prices uptown, we found a cute place near the school and only one metro stop away from her office.

Treading into the school, I shake off my coat and swipe the wet hat from my head. I weave through the crowd surrounding the student lockers and store my belongings. Today's lessons should be a cinch. We're reviewing

the final part of the creative plate presentation and product organization. I can discuss that stuff in my sleep, and according to Ramona, I often do.

“Hey, Elodie!” Sabrina pops out of a classroom and joins me in the hallway, holding her textbook tightly to her chest. “Did you finish the book for tonight?”

I nod, charging into class and grabbing a seat close to the front. Sabrina follows, giggling as she describes the scene where the heroine takes control of the situation and has her way with the hero. Her summary doesn’t do it justice. Our book club doesn’t often agree to such a steamy book, but our group’s Holy Roller was absent last week, and the girls took full advantage.

“I finished late last night. I should have never started that book so late. Once her bully boss apologized, got on his knees, and begged to eat her out, I couldn’t put it down. Where on earth did the author come up with that kind of choreography? That closet seemed tiny,” I whisper and pretend to wipe my brow.

“And the ending! Lord, have mercy! Do you think the author writes from personal experience?” Sabrina asks while turning the pages of her textbook. She finds her spot and slides a pen against the spine to hold it open. “Or do you think she’s blessed with a wild imagination?”

I shake my head and rummage through my purse for a pen. “No, that must be real. You can’t make that stuff up! I bet she’s led an interesting life and now sits back and writes about all her past adventures,” I reply, too naive to know better. I haven’t had an honest-to-God date since my ex-boyfriend Devon invited me to the movies over Thanksgiving break three years ago. Attempting to avoid a scene, that creep thought a packed theater would be the perfect place to tell me he’d met someone else. I wouldn’t have taken it so bad if we didn’t have an audience. My heart was no longer mine to give him. For months, I’d nursed a secret and rather humiliating crush on his older brother, Deacon, who happened to be in town for the holiday, sitting just a row away. I was more upset about his presence than the actual dumping.

I was mortified. I ran out of the theater at full speed to avoid crying in front of a crowd. If he had an ounce of decency, Devon would have followed me to ensure I was okay, but he cut me loose, staying behind to watch the movie’s big action scene. During my pathetic walk home, Deacon drove up beside me and offered me a ride. I said no several times but when

he slowed to crawl, holding up traffic to keep pace with me, I finally gave in. My face burns hot just thinking about it.

If Deacon only knew how I felt about him then. If only he knew how much I think about him now. Every romantic hero I read about has his face. In my dreams, every love story turns into ours.

“Are you and Ramona attending the early dinner before the meeting? I heard some of the girls want to grab a bite at that Mexican restaurant in Tribeca,” Sabrina probes, craning her neck to examine my notes. “Holy crap, you’ve got neat handwriting.”

“It’s a definite yes on the Mexican food,” I reply, twirling my pen before jotting a random thought into my notebook. As much as I hate the upcoming holiday, it’s provided loads of inspiration for my upcoming food presentation exam. “Ramona has starved herself most of the week to create a caloric deficit. She plans to go hog wild with some chicken fajita quesadillas tonight.”

Sabrina laughs, and pulls out her phone, swiping the screen for something to show me. “I don’t think it works that way, but I do the same thing whenever you put me in front of Italian food.” She places her phone in front of me. “These are the presentation dishes I’ve practiced at home. They’re simple to cook and colorful to present. What do you think?”

My eyes focus on the photo before me, narrowing with scrutiny as I try to find fault in her example. It’s impossible. Her creativity is unmatched. My eyes drift from her photo to my pathetic sketch and my heart stings with envy. I could work on this project for years and never wield that level of flair.

No wonder Ramona hates her.

I shake my head, annoyed with myself for being such an envious witch, and try to produce a smile. Sabrina works hard and has even less of a life than me—though that hardly seems possible.

“That looks stunning, Sabrina. I bet you’ll win the Paris internship. You deserve it.” I swallow my pride and admit I’ve been outdone. Sometimes I hate being an adult. I’m not ready to always be the bigger person.

“You’re a sweetheart to say that, but you’ve got me beat on taste. I don’t have the special touch or pizzazz all good chefs need to make it to the top. You’re dripping in it. And that’s what counts.” Sabrina soothes my wounded ego by giving me a compliment I’m unsure I deserve. I have so much room for improvement.

“Don’t be silly. You’re an excellent cook,” I assert with a pat on her back. She’s phenomenal with fusion cuisine and gives me a run for my money with pastries. I credit her for keeping me on my toes. It’s easy to become complacent when everyone gives you nonstop praise and a chef should never stop fine-tuning their skills.

Sabrina’s cheeks pinken, and she offers a humble smile. “That means a lot coming from you. You’re way too hard on yourself, El. The professors love your passion and devotion to your craft. If you want Paris, I’ll bet they give you Paris.” She winks and then pipes down, settling in her seat as the professor enters the room.

“Oh, one more thing,” Sabrina whispers through tight lips, afraid the professor will catch her talking. “What are you and Ramona doing for Valentine’s Day? My friend, Mimi, told me about an interesting get-together with a famous dating expert or matchmaker. She says it’s going to be fun. There aren’t any fees. All you need to do is apply and see if you receive an invitation. I’ll forward the email to you after class.”

I stare, confused, wondering what gave her the impression I would ever attend a hook-up party or seek the services of a matchmaker. I awkwardly smile at Sabrina and reply, “Thanks, but no thanks. I don’t date. But if I did, I wouldn’t want someone else to choose the guy for me. I wouldn’t know what I wanted if he was down on one knee, staring in the face with roses and a ring. There’s no way a stranger would know better than me.” Everything I utter makes sense until I hear my words out loud.

Equally unconvinced by my rejection, Sabrina giggles quietly, shaking her head with disbelief. “That’s the point, dummy. She looks at two people through an unbiased lens and uses her years of experience to make a match. I heard it comes with a big prize. Read the email and let me know tonight. Mimi and I are too curious to let this opportunity pass us by.”

Big prize? I guess there’s no harm in reading an email.

Chapter Two



“Good morning, Deacon! Are you headed back to the office?” Daisy Kent, my boss’s wife, stands by the button panel and holds her finger over the number eighteen, ready to take us to the top floor.

“I am. I need to speak to Lincoln about the Mayfair case before I see my client at 9:00,” I explain, lifting my watch to check the time. It’s my case, but Lincoln Kent is the best divorce lawyer in the city. He’s legendary at nailing cheating husbands to the wall and I need his advice on Drusilla Mayfair’s habitually adulterous husband. I know the bastard is hiding assets, but I’ve failed to locate all of them.

“You’ve got a meeting with Lincoln?” Daisy’s ears prick up and she straightens her posture when the loud ping announces our arrival at the eighteenth floor. She positions herself near the doors, bouncing out when they slide open. Her previously happy expression turns sour as she picks up the pace and tries to beat me to her husband’s door. There is nothing she could possibly need from Lincoln that’s more important than my case. Ever since his second marriage to a woman young enough to be his daughter, Lincoln never arrives at the office any earlier than 8:00. It’s far too early for a bit of afternoon delight, but that’s never stopped them in the past.

I match her steps, my longer legs effortlessly passing her before we turn the corner and reach for his office door. “Would you mind if I speak to him first? My client will be here shortly,” I say, unwilling to surrender my grasp on the knob.

“Will it take long?” Daisy asks nervously as she smooths a lock of hair and curls it behind her ear. Her awkward smile gives her intentions away.

I've overheard rumors that Lincoln is eager to knock her up with baby number two, but that will need to wait until after I've received counsel on my case. I can't leave my client hanging.

"No more than ten minutes, I promise. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important," I answer, quickly losing my patience with both of their libidos.

They have all evening to work on their second baby. There's no reason to flaunt their non-stop sexual satisfaction in everyone's face.

Good God, when did I become such a bitter prick?

Daisy nods before placing a hand on the door. "Do you mind if I pop my head in to say hello and tell him I'll return in ten minutes? He's expecting me," she whispers, pushing the door open and ducking under my arm to barge into her husband's office.

As soon as he sees her, he won't be able to focus on my case. There's no way to compete with a man's wife, especially when she's a beautiful lingerie designer with enough family wealth to dispute any assumptions that she married him for his money.

"Darling! You got here quick." Lincoln's voice rises with unrestrained joy at seeing his wife, and he moves from his desk to meet her halfway. They embrace a few feet from me, oblivious of my presence.

"Why do you wear such nice suits to work? Are you trying to attract every girl in the building?" Daisy flirts as she straightens his tie and gives him a light peck on the cheek. She turns to me, finally making Lincoln aware that I'm idling nearby.

"Oh damn, Deacon. I didn't see you," Lincoln stutters, slightly embarrassed with his public display of affection.

I'm used to it. Everyone in the building has grown accustomed to the nymphomaniacs formally known as Mr. & Mrs. Lincoln Kent.

"He needs ten minutes of your time, sweetheart, and I promised him I'd let him go first," Daisy replies for me, sneaking away before he has a chance to stop her.

I give her a quick nod of appreciation and close the door behind her. My client arrives in five minutes.

Lincoln exhales sharply, visibly annoyed that I've cut into his time with Daisy. He returns to his desk and drops into his chair, his eyes slowly drifting to the clock over my head to keep time. "What's up, Deacon? Don't you see Mrs. Mayfair this morning?" He clears his throat and shifts in his

chair, probably adjusting his erection after spending thirty seconds with his wife.

“I just need your approval to hire a new investigator for her case. I have a feeling her ex-husband paid off the last detective to keep him from uncovering or revealing the entirety of his assets. I’ve asked around, and it’s widely known that Jay Mayfair has offshore accounts and real estate under trusts. This P.I. came back with less than fifty million when I know that bastard is worth billions,” I bark, and my voice trembles angrily. That cheating jerk thinks he’s pulled the wool over our eyes, and I’ll make sure he pays through the nose.

Lincoln’s face twists into a grimace. “Fifty million? That’s absurd. Which detective are you using?” He angles his head, his brows creased with curiosity. “I told you to use Leland Frank. He’s one of the best.”

I run my hand across my face and thread my fingers through my hair. “I’m talking about Leland. And I agree, he is typically one of the best. But after he handed me his flimsy report, I asked another investigator to follow him, and last night, he sent me photos of your man, Leland, dining with Jay Mayfair at some dive in Harlem, seeming confident no one in his social circle would see him there.

“Leland is on the take? I’ve used him for years, and he has a sterling reputation,” Lincoln grumbles, his eyes shifting from side to side, amazed by his own naivete. He prides himself on being an exceptional judge of character and the thought that Leland slipped under his radar visibly astounds him.

“Do you have a suggestion for someone else? If not, I’m going with the less experienced guy who outed Leland. At least I know I can trust him,” I inform him and head to the door, uninterested in waiting for his reply. My client must be here by now, and no doubt, Daisy is buzzing nearby.

“Do what you need to do, Deacon. I trust you implicitly,” he announces confidently, surprising me with high praise. He’s always been a supportive boss, but lately, he’s been laying it on thick.

“Implicitly?” I question his phrasing, then stand aside as Daisy strides past me, swaying her hips provocatively as she heads for her husband’s desk.

They give each other a knowing glance, then lift their gazes to me, smiling suspiciously and making me walk backward toward the door. They look like they’re scheming, and I want no part of it.

“Of course, you’re the best lawyer in the firm,” Lincoln pauses their liason to correct himself. “After me, of course.”

I naturally assumed that was what he meant. I aspire to be as good as him.

“Thank you for the compliment,” I say as I try to escape into the hallway. “I’ll catch up with you after Mrs. Mayfair leaves.” Lincoln and Daisy look eager to get busy and no doubt I’m holding them up.

As I step into the hall on the way back to my office, I hear Lincoln holler at me. “Tell me about it over drinks this afternoon. I have something I’d like to share with you.”

My impatient brain wants to pivot toward his office and demand clarification, but I can hear my client’s nervous voice speaking to the receptionist, and it’s time to get down to business. Besides, it’s just probably another attempt at setting me up. I’ve begged him to give it up, but he’s relentless. That’s why he’s such a good litigator. He’s fantastic at the art of persuasion and never takes no for an answer.

However, this is one case he’s going to lose. I learned long ago that I am not compatible with love and refuse to waste time trying to change something that suits me fine.

Chapter Three



Rule number one for getting ahead in business emphasizes the importance of networking. Rule number two suggests finding a way to get along with your boss.

As an ambitious man, my current situation demands I take my boss up on his offer to join him for drinks. I would much rather go home, change into sweatpants, and watch television, but I can't say no to Lincoln Kent. He's the firm's senior partner and the most well-connected lawyer in the five boroughs.

Much to my chagrin, he's chosen a place on the Upper East Side, just a few blocks from the office. I've never been there before, but I can tell by the name that I'll spend the next hour looking over my shoulder, waiting for someone to point me out as an imposter. I chose a lucrative career, and my success has brought me more money than I ever dreamed of, but that doesn't mean I aspire to join New York's high society.

I grew up in a small town in Vermont and spent weekends helping my grandpa on his farm. Wealth doesn't impress me. Designer labels with astronomical prices and nonsense gossip about rich people I've never met make me cringe. Which is probably why I haven't dated in years. There are way too many pretentious girls in Manhattan and five minutes in their company makes me feel like an oaf.

According to its website, The Boardroom is a sophisticated lounge for businessmen to meet clients and take a brief solace from hectic city life. I roll my eyes, scan the site for directions, and then tap out of the screen. I hate shit like that. That's the crap I'm forced to deal with living in

Manhattan. Everything is an advertisement. Everyone pretends to be something they're not. I hate complaining. The city has been good to me over the years, but it's hard to stomach city dwellers' endless grind, social climbing, and unfriendly nature.

I miss small-town life, but I'm three years into my five-year plan and need to save enough money to start my own practice back home. Maple Ridge needs an experienced lawyer who understands small-town concerns but isn't afraid to go head-to-head with the big-city corporate attorneys trying to rob local folk of their ancestral homes in the name of progress.

Grumbling profanities, I step through the doors and immediately eat my words. It's impressive and has Lincoln Kent written all over it. It's a classic blend of New York art deco and old money aesthetic. At 5:15, the place hasn't had the time to receive the regular crowd and only has a few guests roaming the lounge for a table that fits their party. The host offers to help me locate Lincoln, but I easily spot him sitting alone in a booth by the bar. He lifts his glass of brandy and calls me over, sliding to one side to ensure we're not sitting hit to hip.

"Thanks for joining me, Deacon," Lincoln says, his typically loud voice hushed for the sake of nearby guests having a romantic moment. He lifts his hand to summon a passing server and instructs me to order whatever I want, flashing his American Express black card to start a tab.

"Of course," I reply, then turn to the server and request a medium-priced whiskey, unwilling to take advantage of the situation.

"No, no." Lincoln makes a slashing motion across his neck and interrupts me. "Bring him a glass of The Macallan. I insist." He turns to me with a smile meant to disarm me. "You do good work and make me a lot of money. A glass of quality whiskey is the very least I can do for you."

I nod, uncomfortable with his generosity, but willing to enjoy the sentiment if forced. "Thanks, Lincoln. That's very kind of you. What did you want to talk about? With two days until Valentine's Day, I would think you'd use this time to shop for Daisy."

Lincoln scoffs. "Don't be ridiculous. I don't wait until the last minute to shop for my wife. I take mental notes whenever she mentions something she wants or needs. Of course, she strives to outdo me. Her competitive nature has forced me to continuously step up my game for next time."

I laugh, shifting my weight as the server hands me my drink. Eager to sample it, I bring the glass to my lips and close my eyes, savoring the first

taste and still wondering why I'm here. Lincoln and I don't have a happy-hour type of friendship. I could have updated him at the office if he was dying to know more about the Mayfair case. It wouldn't have taken me more than five minutes.

Hoping to move things along, I raise my forearm, pull back my cuff, and check the time. Lincoln Kent notices everything but overlooks my impatience, continuing to ramble about his perfect life.

"I don't often give advice on a personal level but let me offer you a few words of wisdom. Don't be so focused on your career that you develop blinders, shunning love or relationships as if they're a nuisance or hindrance to success. We're not meant to live for work. Always strive for work to enrich your life. And nothing enhances life more than the love of a good woman." Lincoln frowns, swallowing hard as he changes directions. "Or a good man, if that's your preference."

My eyes nearly shoot out of my head. I choke on my drink, coughing through laughter as I try to keep from spitting the whiskey onto Lincoln's face. He's always been a good sport, but I'd prefer not to look like an idiot in front of my boss. "I'm not gay, Lincoln. I work sixty hours a week and have no time to frequent clubs or wherever people gather to find potential spouses. I know it's commonplace now, but I can't see myself choosing online dating. It feels unromantic and tedious."

I know what I want and there's no way I'll find her on a dating site. The girl I long for is probably sitting pretty in Maple Ridge, surrounded by droves of men dying to drag her down the closest aisle and slide their cheap ring on her delicate finger. She's meant for better things, but until I find my way home with enough money to offer her the life she deserves, I risk losing her for good.

"I have an opportunity for you that only comes around once every five years. According to Daisy, people have been waiting on pins and needles to learn if Madame Colette, affectionately known as the Match Queen, would return this year. I don't know anything about this, but Daisy swears by her talent. She told me two of her lifelong friends met their husbands at one of Colette's Valentine's Day parties. Of course, there's no obligation," Lincoln rambles nonsensically, testing my patience and stunning me with his audacious proposal. He's beginning to sound like my mother.

I take a deep breath and swallow my anger, gritting my teeth as I rasp, "Thanks, but no thanks. I'm not interested in finding someone, Lincoln. I'm

glad you're happily married, but I don't think I'm the marrying kind." It's easier to lie than explain why I'm still carrying a torch for a woman who hates me for being related to the jackass who broke her heart.

I'm thrilled he did. It saved me the trouble of breaking them up in the future. But I sincerely regret any pain he caused her and dream of making it up to her.

"Don't be ridiculous. Every man is the marrying kind. Without love, our hearts shrivel and we die young, mere shells of the men we were meant to be," Lincoln scoffs, ignoring my protest and continuing to offer his sage advice. "I think you should give this event a try. If you come back empty-handed, then so be it. You gave it a shot, and if the best matchmaker in New York couldn't find you a nice girl, then I guess you can tell me I told you so."

I roll my eyes, kicking back the rest of my drink to drown the acid climbing up my throat. There's no way I'll win an argument with the best litigator in town. "I really don't want to waste my time or your money. Those things are silly and an exercise in futility. I'm unsure why my love life, or lack thereof, worries you, but I thank you for your concern." I slide my ass toward the edge of the booth and try to make my escape.

"Take this." Lincoln hands me a pink envelope with my name on it. "It's your invitation. My wife went through a ton of trouble to get you one and did it as a favor to me. Daisy knows I don't want you to leave New York. You're the best lawyer I've met in ages, and I look forward to making you a partner next year. She thinks if you meet the love of your life and settle down, I'll stop worrying about you moving home to Vermont."

"Partner?" I freeze, focusing on that word and blocking out most of the rest. Becoming a partner is one of the few things that could keep me in the city longer than intended, but I never thought it might be possible so soon.

Lincoln shoves the envelope in my sweaty palm to assert his will. "Take it. Daisy says there's even a cash prize involved. What's the harm in giving it a whirl?"

Chapter Four



“I need to apologize in advance. I didn’t get to the last four chapters of this week’s book. My boss kept me late most of the week and cut my reading time in half.” Ramona scoops a large amount of salsa onto a tortilla chip and shoves it in her mouth, hoping to distract the group from noticing her crimson cheeks. She lifts her hand, assuring everyone she hasn’t completed her thought, but that hardly prevents the table from coming alive with chatter.

“The last four chapters! That’s the best part! I hope you’re not expecting us to skip over those scenes!” Mary Portman, a girl from our building who invited us to join the book club late last year, voices her disappointment.

Frustrated babbling follows, shaming Ramona into silence and fueling my protective nature. She hates being the odd girl out and despises being placed on the spot. In the group’s defense, they’re whispering complaints amongst themselves, fearful that Ramona’s failure to complete the assignment will keep us from discussing the entire book. After all, the club has a strict *no-spoilers* rule.

“Settle down, ladies.” I sip my margarita on the rocks, hoping some tequila settles my frazzled nerves. I don’t appreciate people ganging up on Ramona. *That’s my job.* She’ll soon return the favor with gusto. “Ramona’s not asking us to leave out the last chapters. She only wanted to give everyone a heads-up. Besides, Ramona might be living a real-life romance as a very Bad Boss. Soren Nielsen has used every excuse to keep her late this week.” I give Ramona a slight nudge to let her know I’m on her side, utterly oblivious to the look of horror etched on her face.

Two margaritas might be my limit.

“Don’t listen to the lush on my right. Elodie could never handle her liquor, and she definitely doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” Ramona stammers, desperately trying to save face as the vulture circle, demanding details she can’t provide. “We’re colleagues. He’s taken an interest in my career and has been nothing but professional.” She slaps my thigh and gives me her version of the stink-eye. Ramona has never been good with dual-eye coordination.

“Sorry.” I hiccup and loudly slurp my drink, working up the courage to engage in a nasty discussion about the over-the-top sex scene in chapter 12. I know it’s coming. The girls have been whispering about it since we sat down. Unfortunately, I had to throw Ramona under the bus, but I’ll make it up to her later. “He’s hot as sin. I don’t know how you keep your cool around him.”

“How hot?” Sabrina chimes in, but the sound of her voice makes Ramona cringe and clam up.

“He’s a tall, ginger Viking who fills out an Italian suit like Apollo filled out a toga,” I slur, quietly laughing as Ramona grows visibly furious. I love her to death, but she takes herself far too seriously.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry!” I give her a side hug and rest my woozy head on her shoulder. “Ignore me. But don’t sell yourself short. You’re gorgeous and the only one who doesn’t see it. I’m pretty sure Soren Nielsen has noticed.”

Mary places her hand over her heart and releases an exaggerated sigh. She’s always had a flair for the dramatic, but I can tell she’s got something up her sleeve. When I see her eyes shift to Sabrina, sitting on the edge of her seat, the few sober brain cells I have left put two and two together. Despite my revelation, I’m not quick enough to nip it in the bud.

“I’m envious of your friendship, and I’m stunned that neither of you have found love in a city as big as New York. I hope you’re not planning on moving back to Vermont any time soon. I’m confident you will find the love of your life here. And what better way than attending Madame Colette’s event on Valentine’s Day? I’ve got enough invites for all of us, and you’ve got six hours to complete her survey.” Mary reveals her scheme, shoving two crisp invitations in our hands.

Ramona tears open the envelope, devouring the content with ravenous curiosity. “What’s this? What is this? I don’t understand what this means.

Who is Madame Colette? Is she a card reader?" Ramona blurts out question after question, her eyes wide with confusion.

In a bold move, Sabrina jumps into the conversation and tries to explain. "She's the Match Queen! Madame Colette is matchmaker to the stars. She's the one who hooked up Fabrizio Donatello with the singer Mitzy Robbins. Who would have thought an Italian actor who hardly speaks English would do so well with a country singer from Alabama? But Madame Colette was right. They're hopelessly in love and expecting their fourth baby next year. She also matched actors Ewan Rafferty and Bella Swift. And we all know how well that turned out. You go to her website, enter that special code and your information, and she gets you a match for Valentine's Day. All you need to do is go on an all-day date on the fifteenth, and if you like one another, she'll send you to the place of your choice and give you twenty grand. You could pretend to like each other and enjoy the vacay for that kind of money!" She claps to herself and urges the other girls to join in.

"Who are those people?" Ramona turns to me and whispers, requesting clarification instead of announcing her ignorance regarding the current events of popular culture.

Sabrina's announcement provided a much better explanation than she offered me at school, but I'm not sure if any man is worth wasting a whole day on some god-awful twelve-hour date. Or does all-day mean twenty-four hours? That would be a deal-breaker, for sure. "What does 'all day' imply?" I ask for clarification.

"It's from lunch to dinner—about eight hours?" Mary replies, then reaches for her phone, lifting the screen to show me The Match Queen's very pink website. "We have until midnight to enter our information. It's last minute, so we're unlikely to receive a match, but mingling might be fun."

"I'm not interested in this, but thank you for snagging these invitations. I appreciate it—"

Ramona cuts me off mid-sentence and tears the envelope from my tight grasp, almost ripping it in half.

"I'll enter your information if you won't. We're going. If for no other reason than to prove I'm not dipping my pen in the company ink." Ramona scans the text embossed on Madame Colette's expensive card stock, leaning closer to read the fine print.

My brow creases, Mary's head angles with confusion, and Sabrina places her finger on her lips, everyone trying to decipher Ramona's metaphor. Once I make the connection, I roll my eyes and correct her. "I think the guy is the pen, and the woman represents the inkwell. So, unless you have a penis, you're not dipping anything anywhere."

She huffs and sticks out her tongue, mocking me by waving the invite in my face. "Same difference. We're going."

"I have nothing to wear," I declare, hoping it ends the discussion.

"We'll go shopping. Everyone here is going. Right, ladies?" Ramona addresses the table but keeps her eyes focused on me, her sinister grin frightening me into silence.

I feel cornered, but prolonging my protests will only feed her sudden swell of confidence. There's no way in hell I'll enjoy myself, but I pretend to agree to shut the conversation down and get everyone back on why we're here—reviewing smut.

Chapter Five

Deacon

This is the most ridiculous thing I have ever done in my life. Walking into the Ritz Carlton with my invitation clutched tightly in my fist, I feel like a fool. I don't know what possessed me to fill out that form or what supernatural forces convinced me to cancel my Saturday afternoon plans to return home, change into my best suit, and drag my pathetic ass to one of the snootiest hotels in midtown. But the little voice in my head guided me here. I don't know why or where it means to take me, but for once, I thought I should give it a chance and prove my intuition stinks.

The designated ballroom is something out of the Gilded Age. It's ostentatiously over the top, with plush red carpet, baroque molding, and a patterned metallic ceiling. Nine massive chandeliers bathe the dimmed room in twinkling lights that make me feel like I'm walking into a disco until the orchestra in the corner knocks me out of that fantasy with a tune by Glenn Miller.

I've always liked jazz standards. Maybe tonight won't be so terrible after all.

I weave through the crowd of eager men and women, dressed to the nines but unable to socialize due to the six burly men guarding the partition in the room. Madame Colette has yet to appear. At least I don't think she's arrived. I have no idea what she looks like, but I assume she'd make herself known.

A few feet away from me, two stockbrokers argue over a client and then wax nostalgic over last year's bull market. Next to them, a group of frat brothers, far too young to be concerned with finding the perfect match,

make crude jokes about the women streaming into the other side of the ballroom. Uncomfortable with their remarks and afraid someone will lump me in as their friend, I stride to the closest bar and ask the bartender for a martini.

“Do you want it dirty?” The woman behind the bar, dressed in a crisp white dress shirt, black pants, and a tight-fitting vest, asks me a question that doesn’t register in my muddled mind.

“What?” My brows crease as I seek clarification.

“Your martini? Do you want it dirty?” The bartender smiles, batting her eyelashes as she exaggeratedly shakes the cocktail mixer. It’s been so long since I’ve been in the company of a woman outside of the office that I can’t decide if she’s genuinely flirting or simply seeking a generous tip, but it hardly matters.

I’m not here for her or anyone else. The only reason I’m wasting my time is to placate Lincoln, whom I suspect would take personal offense if I rejected his wife’s *fabulous* idea.

“No. I’ll have it dry,” I reply and turn away to scan the ever-growing crowd of lonely hearts, all hoping for a miracle match. I’m only thirty but feel far too jaded to have their optimism. True love comes around once in a lifetime; mine came and went.

Her name is Elodie—beautiful, stunning Elodie Bernard. She was my younger brother’s girlfriend, utterly inappropriate and out of our league. I didn’t know who she was when I saw her standing outside the train station in Burlington the evening before Thanksgiving. Heavy snow delayed my train long enough to catch the crowd boarding their train to Montreal. A girl with dark hair and bright blue eyes caught my attention, and I stopped to admire the way her round ass filled out the tight black leggings highlighting her perfect curves.

My tongue nearly fell out of my mouth when she bent forward to reach for her bright-red backpack. I’m not the type of guy who ogles unsuspecting women, but I made the exception for her. She was such a magnificent sight; I couldn’t bear to look away. Her petite but voluptuous figure made her look like a pinup girl from the 1940s and had me so wholly mesmerized, I stood starstruck, obstructing the path of my fellow travelers trying to weave past me on the platform.

I feared I would never see her again. There were no guarantees that the object of my infatuation was from Burlington or even Vermont. Her train

might have been a connection from another state, or she may have been catching a return train into Canada. The sudden sense of loss for a woman I'd never met turned the next few days into nothing less than agony.

Five days later, on the morning before I returned to law school, I discovered that my dream girl was an eighteen-year-old senior in high school and my brother Devon's girlfriend. It was a catastrophe of astronomical proportions. How could that weasel catch a girl like her? He might be attractive and a phenom in football, but he was nothing but a vessel for raging hormones and two-bit pickup lines.

I wanted to believe she was an airhead. She wasn't. Elodie Bernard blew my mind with her witty banter, intellectual curiosity, and an ass that could stop traffic. Every minute in her company stoked the fire consuming me from within. The first woman who'd ever stolen my heart was slowly breaking it by choosing my brother over me.

That's not true. I didn't give Elodie a choice. She was untouchable and unsuitable. There was nowhere for us to go, and that simple truth drove me to the precipice of madness. My wounded heart, the one that had finally awakened, shattered in my chest.

I'm ashamed to admit I transformed into the worst version of myself.

When my bruised ego and spiteful soul could no longer watch their budding romance, I lashed out and treated them poorly. Fortunately, I liked her too much to be cruel, but I maintained my distance, acting detached and aloof. Like a fool, I messed things up and made her hate me, only to learn my younger brother abandoned her shortly after graduation.

It was too late to swoop in and steal Elodie for good. I'd made myself completely unappealing, and the last time I saw her, working hard at her parents' bakery, she refused to accept my apology, then disappeared into the back for the rest of her shift.

I'm not saying I couldn't have tried harder. The latent stalker in me wanted to camp outside the bakery, her house, or on the hood of her car until she allowed me to explain, but there was no time for that. My new job hastened me back into the city, and my left-brain logic talked me off the ledge.

She deserves privacy and peace. She has no reason to trust anyone with the name LeBlanc.

"I'd like to thank everyone for coming tonight. I'm thrilled to see such beautiful faces eager to find true love and their very own happily ever

afters!” Madame Colette, or the Match Queen, whatever these people call her, finally appears, dressed in an obnoxious amount of pink silk and lace, a flamboyant wig, and far too much lipstick. She looks like she’s about to escort two unsuspecting teenagers to the *Hunger Games*.

All around me, smiling men gather at the front of the stage, craning their necks to search through the crowd of women on our left. The scales are tilted toward the females. They’re all far too pretty for the jokers on my side of the room, and in a perfect world, they should have no trouble meeting a man on their own. But this isn’t a perfect world. Men are idiots who don’t know the first thing about winning a woman’s heart—myself included.

“I’m sorry that not everyone here found a match.” Madame Colette pauses to let the disappointed jeering pass, allowing her to continue speaking.

“Again, I apologize. These things happen, and you’re welcome to come to my next event in December. You may also contact me for a private session. My lucky couples will receive a text message containing very detailed instructions. Follow them to the letter, and you will find your match. Everyone else, please continue to mingle and enjoy the evening. The night is young. Love is in the air, and your perfect match might be right under your nose.” Madame Colette claps her hands as a giant wave of pings chimes through the ballroom.

To my surprise, I feel my pocket vibrate.

Congratulations. I’ve found an exquisite beauty who is marvelously suited to you. Meet your lady in front of the grand piano in the hotel’s mezzanine. She’ll be standing by the large bouquet of red roses displayed on a white column planter. In ten minutes, I’ll send her name to confirm your match. Please don’t keep her waiting. Happy Valentine’s Day, Madame Colette.

I stare at the message, reading then re-reading it until the gravity of the moment sinks in. This has no hope of going anywhere, but I don’t want to keep her waiting. I should never have come. If this poor girl came here believing she’d find true love, ditching her now may destroy her confidence.

Memorizing Madame Colette’s instructions, I tread into the lobby and look for the stairway leading to the mezzanine. I don’t want to appear too eager, but I’d rather not keep her waiting. My mother raised me to be a

gentleman and my lack of enthusiasm has nothing to do with this unsuspecting woman. She could be the most beautiful woman in the world, but she'll never be that to me. I know who I want, and someday soon I'll find the courage to go after it.

As I approach the second floor, my heart jackhammers with anxiety. I plan to kill Lincoln on Monday, but for now I need to face the music. I hold my breath and clench my sweaty fists, searching the vast elegant space for any signs of a grand piano. It's in the far corner of the room and no one is standing near it—not yet.

Just do it. Buy the girl a drink, and try to show her a good time. It's Valentine's Day, and every woman deserves to be treated like a queen.

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Chapter Six



Elodie

Congratulations. I've found a handsome man who is ideally suited to you. Meet your man in front of the grand piano in the hotel's mezzanine. He'll be waiting by the large bouquet of red roses displayed on a white column planter. I'll send you his name in ten minutes to confirm your match. Please don't keep him waiting. Happy Valentine's Day, Madame Colette.

I stare at the message, my eyes focused on the words, *your man*. My man? I've never had a man. I've been with boys, but I don't think I've ever been with a man old enough to buy me a drink.

Of course, that's not something to brag about at the age of twenty-three. I shake my head and rid my bewildered mind of those pathetic thoughts. It's not as if no one has asked me out in five years. Helping run my parents' bakery and then moving to New York for school didn't leave much time for a social life.

Perhaps my disinterest in dating has brought me here. Maybe I was meant to hold out for the right man? I blow out a heavy sigh and think of Deacon LeBlanc, secretly wishing he would appear. I'm too afraid to ask my mother about his relationship status. I suppose it's easier to pretend I don't care, steeling my heart for the inevitable.

Stranger things have happened. Not to me, but in theory.

A thrill runs down my spine as I imagine a tall, swarthy man dressed in a tuxedo and seductively smoking a cigarette. I usually hate smokers, but something about the way the cigarette sits on his full lips makes me overlook the nauseating smell and potential health risks of secondhand smoke. As I approach, he angles his head and extinguishes the butt in a

nearby ashtray, waving away the remaining fumes to prevent me from walking through them.

“Did you get a text message?” Ramona shrieks, swipes the phone out of my hand, shattering my fantasy and bringing me back to earth. “Goddamn it. Am I the only one of us who didn’t get one?” She looks behind us and frowns at the sight of Sabrina smiling from ear to ear. Next to her, Mary stares wide-eyed at her phone, devouring the words with stunned fascination.

“Oh my God, I’m the only one here too difficult to match!” Ramona pouts and leans forward, placing her forehead on my shoulder. “Did they send you a photo? What does he look like?” She cranes her neck to look at my phone screen.

“The message asks me to meet him upstairs in the mezzanine. I think Colette is trying to draw it out. No photo or name. We’re meeting by the grand piano in ten minutes, and only then she’ll send the name to ensure we’re hooking up with the right person.” I lift my wrist to check the time and stuff my phone in my purse. “I better go. Wait for me in the lobby and we’ll go to dinner. Let me say hello, then send this guy on his way.” I might be curious to learn more about him, but I won’t hang Ramona out to dry. This was her idea. Besides, the invite says the actual date will happen tomorrow.

Sisters before misters.

Ramona shakes her head. “I’m following you upstairs and checking him out. You know I have a sixth sense about these things. If I get a respectable, harmless vibe off him, I’ll take a photo of his driver’s license and let you get to know him before your big date tomorrow.” She hitches her arm around my elbow and rushes me toward the elevator.

“Ramona, it’s one floor!” I try to nudge her toward the grand staircase on the other side of the lobby. I’m nearing the ten-minute mark and don’t want to appear rude.

“I know, but my heels are new and freaking killing me.” Ramona charges through the crowd, weaving her way into the first open elevator, and takes me with her. “And stop looking at your watch. Are you so eager to meet him? You’re gorgeous. Whoever it is will thank his lucky stars to be in your company.”

I shrug and smile at the elegantly dressed couples who can easily hear our conversation. Not everyone is part of Madame Colette’s event. There’s

a wedding on the fourth floor and I can tell by their smiles they're getting a kick out of Ramona's pep talk.

"Let me go ahead alone. I don't want my date to think I've brought a chaperone, for crying out loud," I whisper as we exit, scanning the room until I spot a shiny baby grand piano in the far corner of the room. The plush carpet makes walking easy.

"I'll be over there," Ramona answers, pointing to a group of sofas on the opposite side of the room as I sprint ahead, leaving her in my dust. "Scream if he tries anything funny. I have pepper spray in my purse."

I roll my eyes and focus on the roses obscuring my view of a tall man standing near our designated meeting spot. There is something familiar about the back of his head, but there is no way I'll know for sure until he turns around. I hardly know anyone in this city. It would be too much of a coincidence if I've met this man before.

As I approach the piano, my phone buzzes in my purse. I temper my steps and reach for my phone, hoping to put a name to the man before I meet the wrong person and need to endure this awkward moment again.

The man of your dreams is named Deacon LeBlanc. I hope you enjoy your date tomorrow. If you fall head over heels like I know you will, you win an all-expenses-paid trip to the destination of your choice and \$20,000 to make your time there extra special.

I come to an abrupt stop and nearly trip over my heels. "Deacon!" I utter his name much louder than intended and come face to face with the big blue eyes and shocked expression of my heart's only desire, Deacon LeBlanc.

"Elodie? What are you doing in New York?"

Chapter Seven

Deacon

I must be dreaming. Elodie Bernard, the girl of my dreams, stands before me, reading my name with a look of utter shock. I shake my head, hoping the two martinis I drank downstairs weren't spiked with a mind-altering drug that induces hallucinations. There's no way Madame Colette read my two-page questionnaire and uncovered the deepest secrets of my heart.

No one is that good. *Are they?*

To be honest, when the matchmaker's questionnaire prompted me to describe my ideal woman, I depicted Elodie with pinpoint accuracy.

"Deacon?" Elodie exclaims, her phone clutched so firmly in her hand, she looks seconds from crushing it. She doesn't appear nearly as satisfied to see me as I am with her. But why would she be?

"Elodie? What are you doing in New York?" I ask, schooling my features to disguise my thrill to see her. The last I heard, she delayed college to help her parents run Maple Ridge's only bakery. It's been in their family for generations, and shortly before her high school graduation, her mother took ill. She was too good of a daughter to leave her family in dire straits, and put aside her scholarship to Boston University. Most people would not make that kind of sacrifice, but Elodie Bernard is unlike most people. She's better than anyone I've ever known.

"Going to school," Elodie whispers, her gaze fixed on the phone in my hand. "Do you have a message with my name on it?" She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip and waits for me to reply.

I can tell by the look on her face she's hoping this is nothing more than a coincidence and I'm simply a man standing aimlessly in front of a grand piano with a phone in my hand.

I turn my phone to face her and point to her name on the screen. "What are the odds, huh?" It's such a stupid thing to say, but I'm unsure what she expects from me. Does she want me to recuse myself? A woman we've never met in a city of eight million people decided we were the perfect match. That must count for something.

Shouldn't it?

Elodie nods slowly, her eyes drifting from left to right, as if her brain struggles to form words. I've waited years for this moment, which has quickly become painfully awkward. She stares at me, frozen in time, probably calculating the distance between her and the closest exit. Even in her confused state, she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and if she believes I'll let her walk away without a fight, she's sadly mistaken. She can have the trip and the twenty-thousand dollars. I won't insist on some sort of whirlwind romance that might scare her away for good. All I need is a chance. A slow one will do.

"Wait, no." Elodie pouts as she mutters, shaking her head and pouting. She waves her phone in my face, evidence of something she's too distraught to explain. "Did Devon put you up to this? Are you and he playing a cruel joke on me?"

I step forward, holding my hands out in mock surrender as I try to soothe her concerns. "Of course not. My boss's wife gave me an invitation to this thing. I didn't expect to be matched to anyone, least of all you. I didn't even know you were living in the city. I would have reached out to you sooner." I accidentally say the last part out loud and watch her gorgeous features twist with confusion.

"Why would you reach out—" Elodie stops mid-sentence and furrows her brow, seemingly trying to comprehend the information I spilled. "I don't believe you didn't know I was here. There are no secrets in Maple Ridge. Your brother has reached out to me several times to ask for another chance since his last girlfriend dumped him, and your mom asked me to Thanksgiving dinner last year."

"She did? My mom invited you to dinner?" I clench my fists and swallow the anger clogging my throat. Is she trying to get them back together? She couldn't show her face in the town square for weeks after

Devon dumped Elodie. He may have been the high school football hero, but his stock dropped dramatically when he dumped the Apple Cider Festival Queen—the town’s highest honor. I can’t imagine she’d want to endure that kind of shaming again.

“I declined, of course.” Elodie drops her gaze to the floor and takes a deep breath. “This was obviously a big mistake. You don’t want to be matched to me anymore than I do to you, and maybe if we bring this huge error to Madame Colette’s attention, she’ll swap us out with other people.” Her angry voice turns sad and her gaze drops to the floor.

Is it so terrible to be matched to me?

The disappointed look on her face crushes my soul but gives rise to a wave of uncharacteristic optimism. I don’t want to swap. The gods, angels, or whatever is out there has given me the chance of a lifetime, and I would be a world-class idiot to let it slip through my fingers.

“I don’t want to talk to her,” I say, stepping closer and offering my hand. She doesn’t take it but lifts her chin and stares with suspicion. Turning on the little charm I have, I change course. “Let me buy you a drink or dinner. It’s Valentine’s Day, and I’d love to spend it with someone I know. I promise I won’t give you a hard time if you want to end things early.”

Elodie hesitates, then looks over her shoulder, motioning for someone to join us. I turn my head, peeking over Elodie’s head to figure out who is coming our way. My mind is still trying to put a name to her face when her voice clears up my confusion.

“Deacon LeBlanc! Is this a joke? Did stupid Devon put you up to this?” Ramona Smith, Elodie’s bossy, loudmouth best friend, comes charging toward us, shaking her fist like she’s seconds from punching me into next week.

We shared words in the past. When my heartbreak turned me into a raging smartass, and my only outlet was treating Elodie like an intolerable brat, Ramona would swoop in to the rescue. I’m glad Elodie had someone to protect her from my inexcusable vitriol, but now that I’ve turned over a new leaf, I’d rather not have Ramona around.

I hold my hands out and stop her from coming too close. “This isn’t a joke. I’ve explained to Elodie that Madame Colette believed we were a match. Devon’s on the other side of the country. He and I rarely speak.”

That's the truth. My little brother isn't the easiest person to get along with, and I'm sure he'd say the same thing about me.

"Let me see your phones." Ramona swipes the phone from my hand and then reaches for Elodie's. "Holy shit, Madame Colette really botched this. What are you going to do?" She doesn't address her question to me. Leaning closer to Elodie, the pair slip a few feet away and begin whispering, lost in their own world, oblivious of the desperate man standing nearby.

Elodie returns with wide eyes and a shy smile. "There's a nice lounge around the corner called The Velvet Note." She points to the front side of the hotel, unaware she's pointing directly into the park. The Velvet Note isn't in that direction, but there is no sense in pointing that out.

"I know it well. Why don't you both join me for a drink there? If we can make it a half hour without having a brawl, then we can go to dinner. I'm sure you'll feel more comfortable having Ramona's approval before we spend the day together tomorrow. If you'd still like to do that." The last thing I want is company, but I'll endure it for her sake.

Elodie shrugs with indecision. "Will you meet us there in about twenty minutes? I need to run to the ladies' room and check on my friends." She nods, answering her own question before twisting her hips to return to Ramona.

Trust is an essential part of any relationship. But we're not technically there yet, and the lawyer in me tends to favor caution over risk. I place my hand on her shoulder and pass her my business card. "Text the number on the bottom. It's the easiest way to have each other's information."

"Right now?" She stares at the card and taps the number on her screen. Her text appears on my phone, and I'm satisfied it's legit.

"Twenty minutes?" I push my cuff back to look at my watch.

"Twenty minutes."

Chapter Eight



“Please stop looking at the door.” I pinch Ramona’s forearm and cross my legs, uncrossing them moments later when I feel my dress bunch up at my waist. It’s hard to look good sitting on a barstool, but all other seats were taken. Thankfully, Ramona hovered near two dawdlers until her overbearing manner made them rush to pay their bill.

“I don’t want him to believe I’m happy about this situation. Of course, I’m elated beyond words, but this much hope could crash down on my head if it turns out to be a cruel practical joke.” I straighten my posture and bring the martini to my lips, careful not to lean forward like a teenage girl sipping her first daiquiri at a local drinking hole. *I swear, I’ll never outlive that.* “I wouldn’t doubt it if he thinks I’m madly in love with him and engineered this match. My prayers aren’t that effective.

“Are you happy? You’re not as freaked out as you should be?” Ramona asks, swinging her short legs off the stool until she’s able to face me. “And why are you preening? You look dewy and jittery, like a virgin on her wedding night. I know you’re still hanging on to that pesky V-card, but I don’t think you’ll hand it over to Deacon LeBlanc. You dated his kid brother and swore you couldn’t stand him after he called you a brat. Just enjoy the drink and tell him to skedaddle. I have reservations at Julian’s in forty-five minutes. Unless you’d rather spend the rest of the evening with him,” she teases, already three sheets to the wind.

I nod once, scanning the mirror behind the bartender for an unobscured view of the door. Ramona might be my best friend, but I’ve never shared

my feelings for Deacon with her. On the contrary, I behaved like I couldn't stand him rather than confide how his every slight tore my heart in two.

It's been precisely nineteen minutes since we synchronized watches and agreed to meet. I timed it perfectly and assumed he'd beat me here. Now, I feel dumb. What if he stands me up? Oh God! What if he's outside, peering through the window and filming me? He could be on the phone with Devon, sharing a laugh about how I'm still hung up on him after all these years.

"Stop fussing. He wouldn't miss this for the world. I know you think he didn't like you, but I've always had a sneaking suspicion that Deacon gave you attitude because he wanted you for himself," Ramona murmurs through sips of wine. "I bet you a thousand bucks that you'll soon find out he was crushing you all along. Trust your friend. Maybe Madame Colette looked into her little crystal ball and saw something you've tried to pretend wasn't real."

"Pretend what was real? I never liked Devon's older brother. It's practically incestuous." I lie through my teeth. I don't think Deacon knew about my secret crush. It was fleeting and fizzled out after two years. He was a sexy older man of twenty-five who was studying to become a lawyer. He had genuine muscles and was old enough to sport a five o'clock shadow. I couldn't overlook so much hotness in one package. That doesn't mean I wanted to be with him.

Fortunately, his personality stank and whatever mask he wore the first time we met quickly slipped during our second meeting. His sarcasm felt like a stab to my eighteen-year-old heart, but I consoled myself in the knowledge that Deacon LeBlanc was forbidden fruit and falling for my boyfriend's brother wouldn't go over well in a small town like Maple Ridge.

I should go. If Deacon LeBlanc stands me up, the news will travel from here to Vermont and I'll be the laughingstock of Hamilton County. Purely out of principle, I knock back the rest of my fifteen-dollar martini and pull a twenty out of my purse. I tell the bartender and reach for my purse. Maybe I'll look insane, but the alternative is far too painful to consider.

"Where are you going? Deacon is right outside, carrying a bouquet of peonies. How did he know that's your favorite flower?" Ramona nudges me back, forcing me to resettle onto the barstool.

I let my gaze subtly drift to the door and drink in the sight of Deacon LeBlanc bringing me flowers. I'm not sure I've ever received flowers from

anyone outside my family. Stupid Devon thought he took romance to the next level when he bought me a box of chocolates on our only Valentine's Day together, then proceeded to eat the entire thing.

"Forgive my tardiness." Deacon approaches with a playful bow, then offers an enthusiastic smile that puts my anxiety at ease. He plucks one flower out from the bouquet and gives it to Ramona. "I apologize for not bringing you flowers, Ramona. Valentine's Day is almost over and there was only one bouquet left."

Ramona brings the peony to her face and closes her eyes as she inhales the fragrant aroma. Her cheeks turn pink as a silly grin spreads across her face. "Thank you. That's so sweet of you, but your date is with Elodie, not me." She offers Deacon her seat. "I should go and allow you two to catch up. You can have our dinner reservations at Julian's. There's no way you'll find a place to eat that doesn't have a waiting list a mile long." She shoots me an unwelcome wink as my mind spins to discern why she's suddenly so obliging. She's got something up her sleeve.

I've already had one matchmaker tonight. I don't need two.

Deacon shakes his head, refusing to take her seat, then helping her back onto her stool. He stands protectively behind us, keeping the hordes of men squeezing through the narrow aisle from copping any feels. He's not overreacting, or assuming the worst of his brethren. I've already been subjected to a few unsolicited grabs before his arrival.

"Thank you, Ramona. That's incredibly kind of you, but I can't let you leave alone. Elodie and I will take you home before we head to dinner. That's the least we can do." Deacon's gentle voice and thoughtful manners bring a warm feeling to the pit of my stomach. Back home, everyone spoke highly of him. They considered him the sweeter of the two LeBlanc brothers, which I found hard to believe then. He's never exhibited this side to me before.

"He's right, Ramona. You've had a lot to drink tonight, and I won't be able to concentrate on dinner if I'm worried about you." I chime into the conversation, my voice trembling with nerves as I inhale a generous dose of Deacon's cologne. He smells like a man and although I'm inexperienced with them, I'd like to find out more.

I hate leaving her at home on Valentine's evening. It feels so disloyal. But she offered, and the call of the wild is more powerful than I anticipated. I'll find a way to make it up to her later.

“He’s hotter than I remember. The light in the mezzanine did not do this man justice. I’ll bet you’re thrilled,” Ramona shouts in my ear, foolishly under the impression that she’s whispering.

I slink in my seat, as much as that’s possible on a barstool, and bow my head, covering my face with my hand. Mortified, I make a mental note to kill her later.

“Lower your voice. You’re drunk,” I plead.

Ramona isn’t a lush, but all that free liquor did not mesh well with being the only one of us without a match.

She hiccups and looks over her shoulder, smiling as she confronts Deacon. “Did you hear that?”

I know she’s trying to help, but her attempt to rectify her error only worsens it.

“What?” Deacon taps his ear. “I can’t hear anything with this music.” He’s lying. *I know he’s lying.* I saw the look on his face when Ramona pulled away from my ear. His chivalry is commendable, but I fear I’ll spend the next two hours wondering what he heard while stuffing my face with Julian’s Chilean sea bass. “Should we head out?”

I nod and hop off the stool, too embarrassed to take the hand he offers. “Thanks for thinking of Ramona’s well-being. Our place is only a few blocks from Julian’s Restaurant.”

“You live together?” he asks, one eyebrow rising with curiosity. That’s one of the biggest drawbacks of New York—the astronomical rent. If we didn’t live together, I could never afford to live here.

I nod and let him lead me through the crowded lounge. When he places his giant hand on the small of my back, I feel an unfamiliar wave rush through me, like a gust of warm wind soothing me on a cold day.

What would Devon say if he saw me having dinner with his brother?

Do I even care?

Chapter Nine



“**W**hen was the last time you went home?” Deacon places his elbows on the table and leans forward, ensuring I hear his question. So far, so good. We’ve managed to get through drinks and appetizers without an ugly word.

I’m unsure what I expected. We dropped off Ramona, and he saw her inside, ensuring her safety before returning to the car. It was thoughtful but unnecessary. Ramona didn’t want or require door-to-door service, but I appreciate the effort. As we drove away, he informed me Ramona told him to be nice or suffer the consequences.

That sounds like her.

“I was home over Christmas. Were you there too?” I ask, already knowing the answer. I ran into his mother at the grocery store while with my nana, and she told everyone who would listen that neither of her boys were coming home over the holidays.

Mrs. LeBlanc has always been sweet to me. She’s the town’s only dance teacher, and before I dated her son, I had frequented many of her classes. Tango was my favorite.

Deacon shakes his head once as he searches the wine menu for something to drink with dinner. I’m happy with iced tea. I can’t be trusted. As good as he looks under the warm light of the chandeliers, a little more liquid courage might make me admit something I’ll regret. And there are too many fantasies swirling around in my mind to risk it.

“I had an important case play out through the holidays. With only twenty-four hours off, there wasn’t enough time to make the trip. I’ll spend

some time there over the summer. It's been a while, and I miss it," he answers. Then, he calls a nearby server to bring him a glass of cabernet, checking in again to see if I've changed my mind about having wine.

"No, thank you. I'm a bit of a lightweight when it comes to alcohol and have already had more than my limit," I mutter nervously while I butter a roll and stuff half of it into my mouth. It feels strange sitting across from someone I've disliked for so long. Yes, I found Deacon attractive and would sometimes dream of his touch, but that doesn't mean I've forgiven him for past transgressions.

He was unnecessarily rude to a teenage girl who only wanted her boyfriend's brother to like her. Although I was heartbroken when Devon ended things the day before he left for college, a part of me knew it was coming. It took some time to bounce back from his rejection, but I'm happy things didn't go as far as he would have liked. The betrayal would have been bigger. His indifference might have shattered me.

"I don't drink much either," he says unconvincingly while chugging his goblet of wine. "But you make me nervous."

His confession shocks me. "Nervous?" I look from side to side, scanning through happy faces, blissfully dining on Chateaubriand and chocolate souffle, and wonder if he's afraid to be seen with me. We're nobodies. Unless someone takes a photo of a celebrity and catches us in the blurry background, no one would concern themselves with two Vermonters playing dress-up in New York.

"Are you concerned Devon will find out?" I murmur while fidgeting with the napkin on my lap. I don't have any siblings, but if I did, I'm pretty sure I would consider their exes off-limits. "We can take this to go if you like."

Deacon's eyes widen with surprise and his lips fall open. He takes a deep breath and exhales in a breathy sigh, like he's holding back anger he's uncomfortable showing. "I don't give a fuck what Devon thinks. Yes, he's my younger brother and I love him, but truth be told, I don't like him very much. He never deserved you." His hands clench into fists and gather the tablecloth beneath his fingers. "Please, tell me the truth. Do you want to take this go? Are you uncomfortable being here with me?"

I shake my head and place my hand over my racing heart, hoping to catch my breath. "I'm not uncomfortable. Not anymore. Why aren't you? If

I recall correctly, you didn't like me very much. You called me—" I pause to swallow the lump in my throat, but Deacon finishes my sentence.

"I called you a brat." Deacon hangs his head and flattens his hands on the wrinkled tablecloth, trying to smooth it out with his fingers. "Please accept my apology for every rude thing I ever said to you. I was such an asshole, and you didn't deserve any of it."

My eyes flash to his, and a wave of melancholy floods my heart. I'm not sad about what he said. On the contrary, his apology is long overdue. I feel sorry for the young girl I once was, falling desperately in love with an unattainable man and living for every moment I got to be in his presence—only to wind up crying myself to sleep when he sneered in my direction. I never felt the same way about Devon. Sometimes, I think Deacon was the main reason I never had sex with his brother. A part of me felt like I was supposed to save myself for him.

"Then why? I don't understand why you were so mean to me," I whisper, fighting tears that threaten to expose me. I hate my stubborn heart. Why haven't I been able to let this ridiculous dream go? Some things are just not meant to be.

Deacon extends his arm across the table and covers my hand with his. "Please, don't freak out or leave or back out of tomorrow's date because I want to spend time with you."

"What do you mean?" I'm genuinely confused and look to him for clarification.

"I like you, Elodie. I've liked you since the day we met. You have no idea how hard I fell and how deep my heart sank when I realized you and Devon were more than friends. As soon as he saw me eyeballing you, he told our mother I was trying to steal his girlfriend. They made me feel like shit, and I had to convince them and myself that I felt nothing for you. It was childish and rude, but I didn't know what to do or how to stop thinking about you." Deacon's voice breaks as he unburdens his soul across the dinner table.

Typically, such a confession would make things awkward, and I'd have one eye on the door, but this feels different.

"You thought of me?" I blink away tears, then hurriedly wipe them before the tables nearby believe we're in the middle of a breakup.

"Of course I did. I do. You're my Roman Empire. I think of you endlessly." Deacon's blue eyes meet mine, and my heart detonates like

dynamite in my chest.

“But what about Devon?” I pout, checking in once again to see if brotherly love could pose a problem for us in the future. I can’t invest my heart into something this big without some guarantee.

“Fuck Devon. He had his chance and blew it. It’s my turn to make you fall in love with me.”

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Chapter Ten

Deacon

Sundays have always been my happy day. When I was a kid, Sundays were family days. It was the one day of the week when my parents were off work, and my brother and I were free of all athletic obligations. After mass, the four of us would head to the Bull Moose Diner and eat apple cider pancakes with fresh maple syrup. Depending on the season, we'd go hiking, biking, or skiing, spending time outdoors whenever possible.

I broke those Sunday traditions when I moved to New York. Leisure became a luxury that only came once a month, if I was lucky enough to be between exams or cases. So, you can imagine my surprise when Elodie suggested we start today with ice skating in Central Park. I couldn't hide my excitement and agreed before she could finish her sentence. It's been ages since I've skated, and I'm looking forward to getting back on the ice.

As I turn into the parking garage, I spot Elodie stepping out from the 59th Street Metro Station. She looks hotter than the surface of the sun and yet too adorable for words wearing skintight leggings that highlight the perfect shape of her curvaceous ass, Dr. Martens boots, a snug pink turtleneck sweater, and a skullcap with a pom-pom on top. I can't believe I get to spend the day with her. And if I play my cards right, I may spend an entire week with her next month.

There are no ifs. Things will go right today. I don't care what I need to do, say, give, take, or buy. If begging is involved, so be it. I'm taking that girl out of the country and making her mine for good. I didn't think I'd ever say this, but that Match Queen is a fucking genius.

Stuck in line, I stare with lecherous eyes at the sway of her hips and the bounce of her breasts as she stops at a food truck near the corner of 5th Avenue. I want to be with her now. I can't believe I'm ten minutes early, and she's beaten me here. Although I'm not technically tardy, it feels that way when I keep her waiting. Eager to reach her, I turn towards the valet stand and hand them my keys. A man dressed in red gives me a ticket, and I sprint across the street into the park.

"Hello, Beautiful." I lean forward and step into her line of sight to ensure she doesn't mistake me for a creep. "Let me get that for you." I give the barista my card and order a latte.

Elodie smiles and holds the coffee beside her chest, letting the steam warm her gorgeous face. When she lets out an exaggerated shiver, I question whether skating is a good idea. New York's February air has nothing on northern Vermont, but after a few years in New York, she may have become acclimated to warmer weather.

"If you're cold, we can head to that place over there and grab brunch." I point to the blue bistro, taking half of the sidewalk on the other side of Central Park South, and offer her an out, hoping she doesn't decide against it for my sake.

Elodie shakes her head with a sweet smile and walks toward the stairs leading into Central Park. She looks over her shoulder and winks. "I'll warm up on the ice. I still need to show you my moves, Mr. LeBlanc. You may not know this about me, but I'm one of the best skaters in Maple Ridge."

I rush after her, my heart beating wildly as I take two steps at a time, passing her on the way down. Elodie throws her head back, and her mischievous grin transforms into boisterous laughter, filling the air. My heart swells with pride. I made Elodie Bernard laugh. I've wanted to do that for so long—I can't wait to do it again.

"I'm not sure I believe you, little girl. The last I heard, Kendall Campbell held that title," I tease, choosing one of the most obnoxious girls in town as her rival.

Of course, she immediately recognizes the name, scampers forward, and nearly slips on a patch of ice. I wrap my arm around her waist to catch her and pull her close until she steadies her feet.

Elodie angles her head to stare into my face, her blue eyes growing twice their normal size as her mouth falls open in a loud gasp. "Oh my God,

I can't believe you'd compare me to that horrible girl. She bullied me through middle school until my mother called hers and promised to ban them from the bakery if she didn't cut it out."

I hold in laughter as we continue to walk across the small bridge toward the rink. "Did it work?" I assume it did. Elodie can get anyone to do whatever she wants. Five minutes in her presence, and I'm willing to sign over my firstborn in exchange for her heart. Of course, she would be the baby's mother in this scenario, and we'd all live in the same house.

"It certainly did. The Campbells counted on fresh bread from our bakery to run their sandwich shop. Mrs. Campbell sent Kendall to my house with her tail between her legs to beg my forgiveness. My mother made me accept it, but I never forgot the hell she put me through." Elodie sits on an empty bench and unzips her bag. She pulls out a pair of freshly polished white skates and places them beside her feet.

I scoot beside her and offer another couple the rest of our bench. She takes no notice of my need to be near her, and if she hears me sniffing her hair, she's kind enough to ignore it.

"When was the last time you did this?" Elodie asks as she triple-ties her skates and stands to stretch her legs. Her round ass, my greatest weakness, is no more than six inches from my face.

Is this a test? Has she seen me ogling her behind and is now using this opportunity to torture me? Fortunately, she steps away before my trembling hands reach out and ruin the day. I only wish she'll grant me the opportunity to grope her soon.

Elodie glides onto the ice and spins to face me. Her playfulness warms my lovesick heart. All those nights I couldn't sleep, wondering if I'd missed my chance and she'd found love with someone else... this was the side of her I longed to see.

I watch her twirl, making small figure eights on the ice to warm up, enthralled by the sight of her lithe, graceful body and cheeky smile. While I stare, mesmerized, on the verge of drooling, she curls her finger to call me over. "Let's see if you can catch me."

I jump to my feet and practically fly onto the ice. "That's precisely what I came to do."

Chapter Eleven



We've worked up an appetite. I wasn't expecting to spend two hours on the ice, but my competitive nature demanded do-overs every time Deacon caught me. Part of me wanted him to catch me because every time he did, he'd place his beefy hands on my waist and whisk me toward the closest dasher board. I'd hold onto his broad chest, smoothing my hands over his sculpted pecs, and hope to God he didn't think I was making a pass at him.

After the fourth or fifth time, I assumed he caught on because he deliberately flexed and wrapped his massive arms around my chest to hold me steady. I don't know what we were thinking, manhandling one another in front of all those happy families enjoying a Sunday out, but my burgeoning libido and damp panties made me swallow my pride and admit defeat.

"I need food." I sigh and cross my arms over my chest. It was my idea to take the subway. Deacon offered to drive us to the brunch location I have in mind, but I want it to be a surprise. Now, I'm starting to regret my decision. In no world would we arrive faster by car, thanks to Manhattan traffic, but the feel of sweaty bodies pushing against me from all sides is triggering my claustrophobia.

"We're almost at the next stop. How many more to go?" Deacon asks as the violent vibrations of our train approaching the next station push me into his chest, and I bask in the warmth of his soothing arms.

I lift my chin, angling my head far enough to look into his eyes. Our gazes lock, and butterflies take flight in my roiling belly, their wings

fluttering so close to my throat, it feels impossible to speak.

Someone nearby jerks into me through no fault of their own and quickly apologizes. The action pushes me closer to Deacon, and I accidentally feel something stiff jab into my abdomen. He's hard. *Oh my God, I gave Deacon LeBlanc an erection.* My lips part, but the only sound that emerges is a tiny whimper.

The train slows into the station, and the crowd surrounding us moves toward the sliding doors, allowing me to pull away before curiosity and nature make me do something insane. I don't get far.

Deacon leans forward and whispers, "I'm going to kiss you, Elodie. If you don't want my kiss, run away while you can."

My feet remain firmly planted on the floor, and my eyes widen with avarice as Deacon looms closer. Seconds feel like minutes as I wait for the touch of his lips, something I've secretly longed for since I was eighteen.

"Kiss me," I gasp heatedly as my fingers dig into his sweater, and my palms mold against his spectacularly chiseled biceps. When his lips finally crash on mine, my heart stops beating, the world stops spinning, and I feel as if my boots leave the ground. His tongue swipes against my hungry lips, and I become unhinged—hornier than ever in my life. A long-dormant passion ignites, and my skin nearly catches fire. His kiss is perfection. I've wanted it for so long, and it's better than I ever imagined.

"Baby," Deacon growls, pulling me closer as commuters surround us and the train begins to move. "I want to kiss you more—for hours, days, weeks, however long you'll have me. But I should probably feed you first." He smiles, spins me under his arm, and pulls me into his embrace, pressing my back to his chest. His mouth teases my earlobe with tiny kisses that make my head dizzy with lust. "I know you want to surprise me, but I need to know when to move closer to the doors."

"It's next." I sigh, hugging my chest to conceal my rock-hard nipples. "You'll like my surprise. At least, I hope you will."

He chuckles near my ear as he walks us forward, barreling through lesser men until we reach the sliding doors. "As long as I'm with you, I know I'll have a good time."

"Just wait until you know me better, Mr. LeBlanc. I'm a boring girl. You may live to eat those words," I say, trying not to laugh as we dash through the turnstile and rush upstairs onto the street.

"Nonsense. I know you better than you think."

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Chapter Twelve



“Apple cider pancakes?” My brain explodes, and I stare, stunned, at the chalkboard menu outside a tiny café named Polly’s. A small flag of Vermont flies beneath the wooden sign above the door and the man at the host desk is wearing a flannel shirt. Why have I never heard of this place before?

“Are you excited or horrified?” Elodie waves her tiny hand across my face to bring my attention back to her. “We can go somewhere else if you like. I just thought you’d like a taste of home.”

“Not a chance, baby. How the hell do you get in my head so easily?” I roughly pull her into my arms, hold her face and seal my lips to hers. Her kiss tastes like candy. It’s so sweet, my stomach growls, and my taste buds tingle. When I feel her moan vibrate against my tongue, my cock springs back to life. I thought I had it under control after she accidentally rubbed against it on the train, but it refuses to cooperate. I’m not sure if it’ll go down all the way until I make her come with my cock seated tightly inside her.

She smiles and takes my hand, leading me past the long line of young women waiting outside the restaurant. As we head inside, the teenagers at the front holler profanities and accuse us of cutting line. But Elodie quickly puts them in their place.

“We have reservations, toots,” Elodie hisses, rolling her eyes when they start to boo. “Enjoy the cold. Next time use their app. It takes two seconds.” She throws her head back with an exaggerated laugh and tugs me inside.

I love letting her lead. God knows I’d follow her anywhere.

“Hey, Jake. You’ve got me down, don’t you?” A searing hot rush of jealousy stabs my heart as Elodie rises on the balls of her feet to give this guy Jake a hug. He’s a total beefcake with shoulder-length wavy hair and an overgrown beard. If this wasn’t our first date and I wasn’t trying to play it cool, I’d punch him on the side of the head for holding her a few seconds too long.

“You know I always have room for you,” Jake says, smiling from ear to ear as he grabs two menus from under his stand and gestures for us to follow him.

I don’t like him. These pancakes better be out of this world, or we may never return.

“How’s business?” Elodie continues to make small talk with Jake as he leads us to a small booth in the back. Looking around, I notice something odd about their clientele. Almost every patron is a female under forty, and every waiter is a gruff-looking man—bearded, buff, and tattooed, dressed in flannel and tight-fitting jeans.

“Business is good. I know you saw the line outside.” Jake smirks and gives Elodie a high-five.

“This is my friend, Deacon. He’s from my hometown.” Elodie slides into the booth and gives me a wink as I slip into the opposite side. “We’re here for the apple cider pancakes, like real Vermonters.” She lifts the menu and hides the bottom of her face with it. Although I can’t see her mouth, I can tell by her eyes that she’s smiling wide.

“Great to meet you, man.” Jake shakes my hand and leaves us to grab two cups of what Elodie claims is the best coffee in town.

According to Madame Colette, Elodie and I make the perfect match. Elodie may have introduced me as her friend, but that won’t last long. All I need to do is give fate a slight push.

“What’s up with this place?” I ask as I take in the New England ambiance and wonder why so many women are attracted to a place like this. They should put it in the New York Guide for Single Men if such a brochure exists.

Elodie perks up and reclines in her seat, laying her menu on the table. “You mean the girls? Why does a small cafe with a Vermont theme resemble a Taylor Swift concert?” She stops to allow our ruggedly handsome blond server to hand us our coffees.

“Precisely.”

“It’s the servers.” Elodie waves her hand, gesturing to the male models serving their adoring fans plates of Vermont fare. “Romance books are huge with this demographic. Over the last few years, new bookstores dedicated solely to this genre have cropped up all over the city.”

Confused, I continue to stare at her, perplexed beyond comprehension.

“Lumberjacks are huge right now,” she declares, believing she’s enlightened me.

“What does that mean?” I take a sip of the best coffee I’ve had in years and lean forward, wanting to know more. Everything Elodie does is magic. Everything she chooses makes me feel closer to home.

“Sorry. I know I’m not making sense. Ramona and I gave Jake this idea one of the first times we dined here. Women love romance books, and right now, lumberjacks are one of the favorite kinds of heroes. Jake has six brothers, each one hotter than the other.” She pauses when I narrow my gaze and clear my throat. I don’t need to hear her describe another man as hot.

“Get on with it,” I rasp through gritted teeth.

“Yes. Sorry. There’s a bookstore just around the corner and a lot of women pass by hot and bothered from reading multiple excerpts about burly men swinging axes. I suggested Jake dress his brothers up in tight flannel shirts and blue jeans to fit in with the whole Vermont-y mountain man theme. And voilá, the place is a hit. I think I missed my calling in marketing.” Elodie lifts her cup and waits for me to clink mine against it. The smile in my heart reaches my lips and I carefully tap her mug. I’d give anything to do this every morning for the rest of my life.

“You’re quite clever. Maybe too clever for your own good,” I say as I spot our server bringing two stacks of pancakes our way. The aroma makes my mouth water. I’d fall right now if I wasn’t already in love with this little girl.

“Thank you, I’ve always thought so.” Elodie lifts her fork and knife and wiggles her behind in an adorable happy dance. I don’t know how God could have made anyone more perfect for me.

As we dig in, I finally ask her the question that’s been on my mind since last night. “Where would you like to go? According to Madame Colette’s rules, if you and I have a good time, we can choose a location for an all-expenses-paid trip.” I’ve never really gone anywhere between school and work, but I want her to choose the destination. As long as I get to go along

for the ride, she can't pick a wrong place. I'd settle for Disneyworld if it meant a week with Elodie Bernard.

"If it's up to me, I'd love to see Paris. My family is French Canadian and everyone speaks of Paris like it's the promised land. It's also the place I'd like to study under a master pâtissier. Where do you want to go?" She angles her head and her soft gaze meets mine.

"I'll go where you go," I state confidently and shamelessly. I've fallen too hard to pretend I'm not crazy about her.

Elodie licks her lips and then wipes the excess maple syrup from the corner of her mouth. "It's more than a good time. We're supposed to fall in love. If we fall in love and prove her match is a success, she gives us a trip of our choice. I'm not sure I can fall in love so fast. Do you? Don't you think she'd know if we were faking it?"

I nod and reach across the table to wipe the syrup on her chin. If she'd allow me to lick it off, I would. I don't give a damn who sees me. "I'm not faking anything. And I didn't start falling today. I've liked you for a long time. I don't expect you to fall so fast, but I can move things along."

Elodie's blue eyes widen, and her rosy blush covers her cheeks. "How would you do that?" She swallows so hard, I hear an audible gulp.

"I have my ways, sweetheart."

Chapter Thirteen



“Can you believe Sabrina has fallen madly in love with her match, some dude named Stavros who looks like a Greek god’s hotter older brother. He’s forty, ripped, and mouthwateringly sexy. Plus, he’s the only son of Christos Nikolaidis, the billionaire shipping magnate. How does she do it? I told you that girl was a witch,” Ramona rants while she helps me dress for my date. She thinks if she complains about her archnemesis, I’ll stop asking her why she was missing in action when I returned from my first date with Deacon, Valentine’s evening. It’s been three days and she’s been as silent as the grave.

“Were you with Soren?” I ask for the umpteenth time. It’s the only explanation. I’m almost certain I’m her only friend. “Did you take dictation on his rock-hard abs?” I don’t know why she’s being so cagey. We always tell each other everything. Deacon and I only made it to first base, and I told her as soon as I walked through the door.

Ramona gasps out loud. “What do you know about his abs? Have you been checking out his social media?” Her eyes narrow with suspicion as she finishes ironing her dress. She hasn’t said where she’s going tonight, either.

“I don’t know why you’re sneaking around like teenagers. If you and your boss are playing hide the salami, you might as well admit it. I spent two hours going from store to store picking out the perfect pair of panties for my third date with Deacon, my ex-boyfriend’s older brother. Who the hell am I to judge?” I pace in front of our full-length mirror, testing out shoes to go with my dress. Thank goodness I don’t have to worry about the

height of my shoes around Deacon. He's 6'5". I could wear platform stilettos and still look tiny standing next to him.

"I just prefer to keep my private life private. Besides, my tea isn't hot enough to share." Ramona struts into the bathroom to finish dressing, and I finally decide my favorite pair of slingback pumps goes perfectly with the tight black dress I bought on sale. The woman who sold it to me assured me it screams *take me now*, but I've never been good at reading men. Two nights ago, I mistook a smoldering gaze for anger and almost demanded Deacon bring me home. I swear, I don't know what that man sees in me.

"Where is taking you tonight?" Ramona asks as she re-enters the room, discreetly spraying perfume into her cleavage and behind her knees. She must be in love. She'd never risk her career over a fling.

I just hope Soren Nielsen doesn't break her heart.

"He's taking me to a Broadway show. We've got box seats to a musical; I forget which one." I grab my evening bag and take one more look in the mirror. "Will you be here when I get back?"

Ramona's expression tenses as she puts the finishing touches on her makeup. She hesitates, her mind seemingly spinning to conjure a believable lie. After a few minutes, she answers, staring at me through her vanity mirror. "Chances are low, but I'll text you if I won't. Don't worry about me."

That's impossible to ask of me. Of course, I'll worry. We're so new to the dating game that one of us is bound to suffer severe consequences for behaving so naively. And right now, it's anybody's guess which of us will wind up with a broken heart.

"Skank," I tease as I head for the door, wishing she'd tell me if she had sex with Soren. I need pointers. Tips. I'd settle for a veiled anecdote with a few words of direction. Deacon is seven years older than me and as hot as he is, there's no doubt he's experienced. I'd hate to make a terrible first impression.

"Tramp," Ramona responds, always giving as good as she gets.

"It's just a show. I'm not having sex on the third date, for heaven's sake," I holler from the kitchen, trying to convince her as much as myself. It's in my nature to be prepared, but that doesn't mean I'm interested in giving away the milk so soon.

Although I'm not opposed to offering a tiny sample.

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Chapter Fourteen



“Walk with me. Hold me tight. Love me beneath the starlight. Won’t you? Please won’t you love me beneath the starlight,” Elodie sings snippets of her favorite song from tonight’s performance and hums through parts she can’t remember. Tap-dancing as she walks, it’s safe to say she enjoyed our evening.

I still can’t believe I’m walking by her side. Everyone who passes us on the sidewalk believes she is mine, and I want to make that a reality.

I take Elodie’s hand and bring her fingertips to my lips. A shiver runs through her limbs, prickling her skin and turning her cheeks rosy pink. She’s such a breath of fresh air; her warm smile and infectious laughter make the busy world disappear. In a city of eight million, she’s the only person I see.

“Am I embarrassing you?” Elodie asks, placing her delicate hand on my chest. Her fingers brush against the buttons of my shirt and glide down the smooth fabric of my silk tie. Her eyes find mine, and her heated gaze remains locked as she says, “I had a wonderful time tonight. But that’s nothing new. You’re three for three in the date department.”

My heart soars, carried on the wings of endless possibilities. I want to be with Elodie and I’m almost sure she wants to be with me. I didn’t expect to be here so soon, holding Elodie’s hand, on the verge of taking things to the next level. But The Match Queen made this possible. Why would I squander this golden opportunity?

“Let me ask you something, Elodie. And I beg you to answer as honestly as possible.” I suck in a shaky breath to calm the beat of my

thundering heart. Her answer may disappoint me, but it won't knock me out for the count. This is the start of something bigger than us and there's no doubt in my mind that this is meant to be.

Elodie nods and her bright smile disappears. Worry lines form on her brow, and she turns away as if expecting the worst. She sinks her teeth into her trembling bottom lip and whispers, "I'll try."

I close the distance between us and pull her into my embrace, pinning her tiny figure against me. Elodie belongs in my arms, every contour blending seamlessly, as if we were sculpted from the same stone. "I've known since the day we met that we'd find our way to one another, and when we did, nothing would ever come between us again. Nothing describes my feeling for you better than confessing I'm madly in love with you. How do you feel about me?"

Elodie's eyes grow as wide as saucers, tears flooding them as she stands motionless, either stunned or appalled by my revelation. Her fingers clench around my lapels, and she holds on as if that's the only thing keeping her on her feet. "Why didn't you ever say anything? For years, you let me believe you couldn't stand me."

She's right. I never corrected her assumptions because it was easier than facing the truth. But I regretted it every day. "How could I tell you I wanted to be with you? How could I do that to my little brother? I knew you didn't belong with him, but I needed you to figure it out on your own."

Elodie curls her fists tighter around my jacket and pulls me closer, her lips only inches away. "I did figure that out, Deacon. But when I did, you were nowhere to be found." A lone tear spills down her cheek and I wipe it away.

I cup her chin and tilt her face until we're so close I can taste her breath.

"I'm right here, baby. And there is nowhere else in the whole goddamn world that I want to be. I need you, little girl. Whenever you're ready, I want you to give yourself to me, and when you do, I'll never let you forget you're mine." I grunt, and my chest heaves with labored breaths.

"Are you ready?" She crushes her mouth to mine and then lowers her lips to my stubbled jaw, licking and nibbling down my neck.

My knees grow weak with unspent desire. My balls ache for release. If my cock gets any harder, there's a possibility it will rip through my pants.

“Baby, I think you know I’m ready.” I groan, deepening our kiss and molding my greedy hands over the small of her back, sliding them over her plump, curvy behind. My stiff cock digs into her belly and a shuddering moan leaves her lips.

“I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you. For five years, I’ve wished and prayed for it to go away, but it never did. I love you, Deacon. I’ve thought of you endlessly,” Elodie confesses through tears, her lips trembling as each word falls from her lips. “Does that answer your question?”

“It does,” I reply with a smile, happier than I’ve ever been in my life.

* * *

“Do you want to come inside?” Elodie tries to be flirtatious as she nervously toys with her lock. Of course, she means her apartment, but the double entendre is not lost on me.

Every primal desire simmering inside me wants to scream yes to both, but I play it cool and take the keys from her trembling hands.

“Of course I do.” Struggling to contain my elation, I lead her into her small foyer, decorated with photographs of Vermont and a few trinkets from home. I lift a wooden frame containing a picture of Elodie and her parents at her high school graduation. It’s only been five years, but she looks so much younger. I knew she’d only grow more beautiful with each passing year, and I want to be the man who watches her do that. My father always said your life starts making sense when you meet the other half of your soul, and he’s right. I feel like my world has finally fallen into place.

“Would you like a tour?” Elodie clasps her hands and bashfully looks away. “It’s a small place. We could do it in thirty seconds.” She giggles, rocking on her heels, impatiently waiting for someone to make the first move.

I shake my head, licking my lips as my thoughts swirl with every fantasy I’ve ever harbored about this moment. “No, sweetheart. I don’t want a tour. I want you.”

I don’t feel myself moving toward her. It happens so fast that I would need to see a replay in slow motion to believe I pounced on my unsuspecting girl, pinned her against the closest wall, and lifted her onto my

hips. My lips fall on hers with a crash that reverberates into my soul. I kiss her with a desperate need, hungrily and greedily, stealing her breath and punishing her lips with a brutality I don't recognize.

Is this what it feels like to get the one thing you've always wanted? You want to consume it, devouring every ounce until it becomes a part of your DNA.

"Deacon," Elodie whimpers, her chest heaving as she struggles to catch her breath. Her warm body presses into mine, and her back arches as I align our hips and rub my crotch against her inner thigh.

"Baby, I've thought about this moment for so long," I say, then deepen our kiss, ravishing her lips and invading her mouth with my tongue. My hands dig into the delectable mounds of her voluptuous ass, kneading her flesh and crushing her trembling body to mine.

"Me too." Elodie breathes the words and her smoldering gaze melts my heart. While we kiss, my hands travel from her ass to the hem of her dress, quickly gathering the fabric until I'm able to pull it over her head.

"Is Ramona coming back?" I ask, tossing her dress onto the closest sofa. My lovesick eyes focus on the exposed curves of her breasts, and my salivating mouth drops to her tight nipples. Pulling the straps off her shoulders, I cup her supple mounds and lick each rigid peak, devouring her flesh and reveling in her soft moans of ecstasy.

Elodie pulls away with a lusty gaze. "She's gone for the night. And I bolted the door in case she changes her mind."

"You're such a clever girl. But if I recall, you're also a brat," I growl, gritting my teeth as I drop to my knees and hook her bare leg over my shoulder. "Aren't you?"

Elodie's eyes grow wide, and her hands move down, attempting to cover the wet stain on the crotch of her lacy panties. It's too late. I saw it, and I want to see more. With my eyes locked on hers, I shake my head once and clasp her wrists. "Only a brat as big as you could get so wet so fast."

"I've been wet all day. It hasn't stopped since you wished me good morning. I don't know how to make it go away," she says, raking her teeth against her plump bottom lip.

My head dizzies as whatever blood remains in my brain shoots into my painfully stiff shaft. I feel harder, bigger, and stronger than ever before, as if my cock knows it's minutes from sinking into its perfect fit. "I can help you with that, sweetheart. Consider it my job from now on."

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Chapter Fifteen

Deacon

“**W**hat are you doing?” Elodie’s soft cries fill my ears as I lick my way up her inner thighs. The scent of her arousal short-circuits my brain. Dewy drops of her sweet honey glisten on her skin, and my stomach growls louder with each taste.

“You know what I’m doing, my beautiful brat. Your man is going to clean up this wet pussy,” I groan, running my fingers across the drenched gusset of her expensive panties, teasing her with a light touch before sliding my hand beneath the elastic.

She gasps when my fingers sink into her wetness, gliding with ease through her slick folds until I reach her swollen bud. Elodie moans, and her knees buckle. She loses her balance and slides down, but I catch her, hook both knees over my shoulders, and lay her out on the sofa with her pussy in the direct path of my mouth.

“No one has ever done this to me before,” Elodie stammers through labored breaths, then rocks her hips into my face.

My tongue brushes against her clit, licking in tiny circles, lapping and stroking that little bundle of nerves until she throws her head back and screams my name. It’s the sweetest sound I’ve ever heard but only the beginning.

“No one? How could anyone resist?” I drag my tongue through her slit and fuck her tight hole with my tongue, voraciously consuming the sticky honey coating her bare pussy lips. Every lick slowly satisfies my long-unrequited hunger for her. Every sound she emits makes me snarl like a

beast. I suck on her clit, lashing it mercilessly, watching her whimper and buck her hips into my mouth as her thighs vibrate against my ears.

She gazes into my eyes and threads her fingers through my hair, holding me steady and using my head for purchase.

“Deacon, Deacon, Deacon...” Elodie shatters in a deafening cry of ecstasy, moaning, screaming, writhing, and bucking her hips in tiny spasms that almost knock her out of my grasp.

My heart swells with pride. I’ve wanted her for so long that I feared performance anxiety or a lack of practice would make this moment awkward as hell. There hasn’t been anyone else since I fell for Elodie. My friends teased me. My shrink thought I was crazy for holding out. But they didn’t understand this little girl’s hold on my heart.

My dick belongs to Elodie, just like this tiny pussy belongs to me.

“You should know,” Elodie whispers, her voice hoarse from screaming nonstop for the last ten minutes. “I’ve never done anything before. I wanted you,” she groans, holding my head to ensure I listen to every word she says. “And only you, Deacon. I couldn’t stand the thought of anyone else touching me.”

“I don’t want anyone else touching you either, my love. I think I might lose my mind if anyone tries.” I help her to her feet and lift her into my arms, demanding she point me in the direction of her bedroom.

“I just wanted you to know, for the sake of transparency, that this will be my first time,” Elodie murmurs against my throat, turning me rabid as she covers my neck with sensual kisses.

“First time?” It takes a moment to catch on to her implication.

Elodie nods as I place her gently on her bed. “Is that a deal-breaker for you?” She folds her legs and sits on her shins, seductively removing her sheer bra as she speaks. My eyes drift to the sight, mesmerized by the size and perfection of her breasts. “I know I won’t blow your mind this time, but I want you to teach me how to please you.”

My mouth falls open and I stare, frozen, at my beautiful girl. “I don’t give a damn about virginity, and I love that we’ve both waited five years for tonight.”

Her soft lips part, then form a breathtaking smile. “Do you mean...”

“Yeah, baby. I waited for you, too. There hasn’t been anyone since I fell for you. And you’ve already blown my mind. Anything and everything you do pleases me.”

Elodie rises to her knees and offers to help me undress. I step closer, my heart racing like a thoroughbred stallion in the final round of the Kentucky Derby. She makes quick work of my shirt but pauses when she reaches my pants, staring at me for permission to pull out my cock.

“It’s yours, baby. Don’t you want to look at what I’m going to put inside you?” I never thought dirty talk would come so naturally. That’s what Elodie’s done to me. She makes me feel like a fiend, in the best possible way.

Elodie nods, bobbing her head to show her enthusiasm. She doesn’t hesitate and tears through my belt and pants, shoving her tiny hand into my boxers. When she wraps her hand around my cock, I genuinely feel faint.

“It’s so big, Deacon. How do you know all of this will fit?” A slight smile touches her lips as she fists my shaft, pumping it in drawn-out strokes and staring with undisguised fascination.

A wave of lust seizes my senses and obliterates my restraint. I crawl onto the bed and pin Elodie to the mattress. She spreads her legs to make room for my hips, and I stare at every inch of her flesh, utterly enthralled by her body. I trail my fingers between her breasts, tracing her curves, then sliding my hand between her thighs. I tease her, stroking her still-swollen clit, watching her writhe and whimper with every touch.

“I want to be with you, Elodie. I’ll stay here with you if you want to live in New York. If you want to study in Paris, I’ll put on a beret and follow you there. Or if you ever feel the calling to return to Maple Ridge, we’ll go together. It’s you and me against the world, now and forever.” Emotions clog my throat, but as always, Elodie’s soft reply makes everything better.

“I’m yours, Deacon. I don’t care where we are, or what anyone says or thinks. I’m yours.”

“You better believe you are,” I groan, hoist her into my lap, and position my cock at her entrance. Her eyes fly open as the head of my cock stretches her open, sliding into her virgin pussy one powerful stroke.

“Deacon, I want you,” Elodie purrs, her eyes fixed on mine with a drowsy look of lust. “Make me yours, baby.”

Those are the only words I need. I wrap her legs around my hips, roll her onto her back, and thrust into her velvet walls. Her tight pussy clenches

around my shaft, simultaneously threatening to push me out and holding me in place until the slow friction helps her give way.

“Big. So big, baby,” Elodie moans and winds her arms around my neck, clinging to me and trusting me to take care of her.

There’s no other job so important as treating her right, protecting her from harm, and ensuring she always feels like the goddess she was born to be.

I lean in, capturing her lips in a slow, tender kiss, murmuring sweet words, and aiming to divert her attention while my throbbing cock thrusts all the way into her virgin pussy. She gasps with surprise, then wraps her thighs tighter around me, spreading her legs and meeting each plunge halfway.

“I need to make you feel good. Your man needs to know he’s worthy of you.” The words leave me in pants as her slick channel pulls me in deeper. She is so fucking wet with arousal, I easily slide in and out, in and out, stretching her tight walls until I’m buried to the hilt, struggling to keep going when all I want to do is fill this sweet pussy with my cum.

“It’s so good, Deacon. You feel so good.” Elodie rolls her hips and grinds her pussy into my cock, taking all I can give. Her body was made for me. We fit perfectly together. We move together, desperate to connect and seal our lives forever.

“I’m going to come inside you, little girl. I’m going to mark you over and over, filling your pussy, covering your skin with my scent, and making sure you never forget you belong to me,” I grunt, thrusting harder, watching my cock piston in and out of her quivering pussy, dripping with so much arousal, it coats her thighs.

“Yes! Yes! Oh God! Fuck me, Deacon...” Elodie explodes in a fiery climax that steals the air from her lungs. She gasps and clings tightly to me, jerking her hips in rapid-fire convulsions as her cries fill the room. Her body shudders, trembling with aftershocks as her pussy pulses around my shaft, milking me until my thrusting cock fills her to the brim.

We lie beside one another, catching our breath and smiling as we stare at the ceiling. I’ll remember this day always. It’s the day I made Elodie Bernard mine.

Chapter 16

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Epilogue

Two months later



“I can’t believe that’s one of the books I bought you for our honeymoon,” Deacon teases, then fastens his seatbelt before the flight attendant returns and repeats the instructions a third time. He’s not being difficult. He’s just excited about his first vacation in years. Deacon is on a two-month sabbatical from the law firm and only now settling into his temporary life of leisure.

After our secret honeymoon, Deacon will stay in Paris while I study at the French Culinary Academy for my six-week internship. I worried the long time off would affect his job, but his boss, Lincoln, is so pleased we’ve decided to wait two years before moving back to Vermont that he encouraged Deacon’s long vacation.

“Didn’t you read the summaries when you were in the checkout line? It’s romance. What else have you ever seen me read?” I huff, annoyed by his current judgment, though he continually requests private readings before bed.

“That’s not just romance, little girl. It is pure, unadulterated smut. And as long as you read your favorite parts to me, I’ll happily be your porn supplier,” he whispers in my ear, then requests a drink from the attendant, who is finally satisfied he’s complied with TAA regulations.

I wrinkle my nose and hide my book beneath my blanket, keeping it out of Deacon’s reach while I order a glass of wine. We have a seven-hour flight before we land in the city of love. There’s no telling how frisky this

man will be when they dim the cabin lights. I smile and lean into his biceps, blissfully in love and deliriously happy.

We should have taken this trip last month—those were the rules. Fortunately, Madame Colette was so over the moon that our match was a success, she cut us some slack and recommended we use her trip as a honeymoon instead. She's one of the few people who knows we're officially married. Our families believe we're only engaged. That's a drawback to growing up in a small town. No matter how discreet you try to be, everyone is always in your business.

Our mothers are busy planning a July wedding in Maple Ridge, believing it will be the first time we say our vows. Due to our extended stay in Paris, Ramona will be my eyes and ears on the ground, ensuring I don't have twenty bridesmaids or wind up wearing my mother's wedding gown. For heaven's sake, she chose a hat over a veil.

We expected pushback, especially from Deacon's parents, but they surprised us with unbridled elation. Our mothers have been friends since childhood and always dreamed of combining our families. Our wedding has become their only concern since we shared our news last month. Last I checked, the entire town is invited.

The only person who doesn't share our joy is Devon. It's understandable, but we won't let him steal our joy. Deacon broke the news over a late-night phone call and then promptly blocked him after he threatened violence. It's silly. Devon and I were together in high school but were never intimate.

Deacon and I just hope he doesn't make a fool of himself at our wedding. Lincoln Kent, Deacon's boss, has volunteered to hire security, and we may take him up on his offer.

"Tell me again what my bad girl is reading? Is he a billionaire CEO or a billionaire cowboy?" Deacon jokes, tickling my abdomen to snatch away my book. When he goes too far and almost wrinkles the cover, I put an end to his shenanigans.

"If you must know." I clear my throat and do my best to appear like a mature woman discussing classic literature. "It's about a billionaire priest," I say, like it's the most normal thing in the world.

Deacon takes a sip of his drink, his expression suggesting he's searching for the right words. "That doesn't seem possible, baby. They take a vow of poverty."

I blow out an exaggerated breath, shaking my head like he's the one who's off his rocker. "He's a *former* priest, smarty-pants. The protagonist, Galen, was born rich but gave up his wealth to become a priest. Until he sees a girl on the subway and falls madly in love. It's very steamy, so I won't discuss details publicly."

Deacon wags his eyebrows and smirks, leaning his head against mine and kissing my cheek. "Do you still imagine me as the hero?"

I don't know why I confessed such a personal thing. Deacon's head gets bigger and bigger every time I bring home a new book. "Don't I always?"

I've long heard that April in Paris is utterly divine. Songs and poetry are written about it. Movies are made in the height of spring to highlight the pink cherry blossoms and mild weather. Expositions and fairs crop up and bring people into the streets to enjoy life, food, wine, and culture. They're not wrong. It's a feast for the senses.

But it's so much more than iconic landmarks and elegant architecture. As soon as Deacon and I set foot on the cobblestone streets and took in the romantic ambiance of the city of lights, we fell in love all over again. That was the easy part. Truth be told, I fall in love with Deacon every day.

"What do you think this is about?" Deacon stares at a painting, angling his head from side to side as he desperately tries to figure out the meaning of it. It's a modern work, abstract, and, if I were to guess, meant to shock the observer. After spending all day in the Louvre yesterday, where most works of art are straightforward, abstract pieces leave us far less impressed.

"Never mind that. We're here to see Monet's *Waterlilies* on the second floor," I mutter, afraid we'll look as uncouth as I feel. We may live in New York, but deep down, we're small-town folk who sometimes miss the subtleties of life. I take Deacon's hand and lead him through a thin crowd gathering by a marble staircase. Everyone in our group is here to see Monet. That's what this small museum is known for.

"Flowers." Deacon stands at the entrance of the oval-shaped room and states the obvious, attempting to be a comedian.

We've planned to come here for this for weeks. I've kept a high-quality print of Monet's *Waterlilies 1916* since I first moved into my apartment in New York, and Deacon had *Water Lily Pond and Bridge* in his college dormitory. It's one of the many things we have in common.

It's a soulmate thing.

"If you and I are blessed enough to have children," Deacon whispers over my shoulder and encircles me in his arms, "I want to wallpaper one wall in the nursery with this painting here." He points to *Reflection of the Clouds*, one of my favorites from this collection. My heart flutters and leaves me breathless.

Deacon always knows precisely what to say and when to say it. Two months in and I can't imagine my life without him.

"Where are we going?" I follow him through the crowded streets of the 7th Arrondissement, questioning his sense of direction at every turn. This isn't the way to the restaurant we selected for dinner, but I keep silent and allow him to take me to his destination. I trust him implicitly, but just to be sure, I make a mental note of our path, fearing we'll need to backtrack in the end.

"I have a surprise for you," Deacon replies, laughing as we cut through a narrow street into the Champ du Mars. I recognize it immediately. It was the first place we came after arriving in Paris—the Eiffel Tower.

"The tower? We came two days ago," I remind him as we stride toward the base, crowded and bustling with tourists lined into the street, waiting to go to the summit. The closer we get to dusk, the more excitement builds. The tower lights up as soon as the sun sets, giving the city a spectacular show at the top of every hour. I hear the locals hate it, but like many tourists, my heart soars with excitement when it does.

Deacon digs into his pocket, pulls out a sheet of paper, and hands it to me. I unfold it and read the text detailing a private tour of the Eiffel Tower: "We're going to the top, baby. I want to see the city with my best girl."

"Then I guess I better follow you," I say, trying to contain my excitement. As always, Deacon's timing is perfect.

"*Bon soir, Monsieur and Madame LeBlanc.*" An older man with white hair and bright green eyes greets us with a smile. His name is Francois, and he refers to himself as a tower expert. I'm too self-absorbed to act impressed by his credentials. For three days, I've searched for the right time to reveal my secret but repeatedly backed out of every scenario. It isn't an easy thing to say out loud, no matter how much the news is welcomed.

Francois leads us under the base of the wrought iron superstructure, explaining Gustav Eiffel's history and vision in fantastic detail. Deacon, the

eternal history buff, listens intently as we board the private elevator, which takes us to the first landing.

My gorgeous husband and I walk hand in hand and take in the view of the Seine, Arc du Triomphe, and the Hotel Invalides, staring with wide-eyed wonder at the beautiful sites of our home for the next seven weeks. Francois identifies sights and I make a mental note to visit them with Deacon. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, excluding the man beside me.

Our tour continues to the second landing and my anticipation is hardly containable. This may not have been planned, but we didn't exactly take precautions to avoid it.

Deacon will be happy. I know he'll be happy.

Our three-person tour boards the private elevator for the third time, and we arrive at the summit. Deacon leads me to the front of the crowd, squeezing us into a spot over the Trocadero, lit up and congested with tourists, waiting for the tower's light to begin again. We'll get a much different view, standing in the belly of the beast, but that doesn't hamper our enthusiasm.

"Wait for it, sweetheart. It's about to begin." Deacon lifts his watch and shows me we are thirty seconds from the top of the hour. His excitement is palpable, and I'm moments from giving him what could be the most important news of our lives.

Seconds tick, my belly roils, and Deacon's eyes sparkle like a kid on Christmas. When the lights flicker on, he shouts with excitement, and I scream the words that have been on the tip of my tongue since those two pink lines appeared on a test I took the day we flew out of New York. "I'm pregnant!"

Deacon freezes, his blue eyes wider than I've ever seen. "What did you say?"

"I'm pregnant," I whisper, hugging my chest as my anxiety-ridden brain begins to spin with worst-case scenarios. "Are you okay with that?"

Deacon's stunned expression softens as the corners of his mouth twitch into a smile. He sighs, chewing his lip as he roughly pulls me into his embrace. "My love, you continually astonish me. Just when I believe life can't get any better, you exceed expectations."

Thanks for reading!

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Stalk the Author

Matilda is a Texas girl in love with a Philly boy who loves to write dirty books about two people who trip into love and fumble their way into a Filthy, Funny, Happily Ever After.

I live in Austin, with my husband, two crazy Chihuahuas and an even crazier cat. And I spend most of my day writing dirty romance books about older men who fall in love with younger women and make fools of themselves trying to win their hearts.

I like my hero to be successful, sweet, suave, sophisticated and kind--- and then I want him to lose all his composure and game when he meets the heroine. I want him to turn into a bumbling idiot when he spots the girl of his dreams and revert to a teenage boy in a man's body trying to win her.

I like my heroines to be witty, intelligent, and unshakeable---who could do just as well without a man—until the hero convinces her otherwise.

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