



CAN'T ESCAPE LOVE



AVON
IMPULSE

~A RELUCTANT ROYALS NOVELLA~

ALYSSA COLE

"One of the finest writers in the romance genre today."

—*USA Today*

Can't Escape Love

Reluctant Royals

Alyssa Cole



AVONIMPULSE

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Dedication

For Athena.

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Chapter One

Reggie stared at the email she'd just dictated via voice transcription software, wondering whether sleep deprivation had caused her to enter an altered state or someone else had temporarily taken over her body, like in the anime series she'd binged the night before when sleep had yet again refused to come.

The comic book and manga character figurines on the shelves above her desk seemed to look down at her with pity, as if asking, *Oh no, baby, what is you doing?*

Reggie was asking herself the same thing. She was a successful Black woman in online nerd culture, which took stamina and thick skin to say the least. She didn't let anything get in her way—she knocked social media trolls off their bridges like she was the biggest billy goat gruff. When she navigated her wheelchair through crowded conventions, people parted before her like the Red Sea or got the backs of their ankles fucked up. After years of working as an analyst at her parents' real estate investment fund, and being damn good at it, she'd quit to embark on turning her inclusive nerd culture website, GirlsWithGlasses.com, into a full-on media empire.

She didn't shy away from going after what she wanted, because life was too fucking short and full of unpleasant surprises for that, but here she was, nervous about one simple email. There was sweat at her hairline, despite the fact that her tight curls were up in a bun and the air conditioning was set to Hoth to stave off the heat and humidity blanketing the borough of Queens.

Ugh, I hate this.

Asking for something was like revealing a soft underbelly when Reggie prided herself on not being soft. She worked out six days a week, two of those days with her longtime physical therapist, doing everything from boxing to going for strolls at the nearby park with the assistance of a walker. She read every site related to comics, games, movies, and pop

culture she could find, analyzing what they did right and wrong and applying it to her own site. She trawled social media and the internet, looking for interesting posts ranging from every-nerd material to the esoteric, so that she was always providing her followers with unique content. She made sure her site was pleasing and streamlined, accessible to as many readers as possible, and a safe space to geek out; hateful people weren't welcome in her community and were banned with extreme prejudice. This all took a lot of work, which she delegated when appropriate, but she clung fiercely to her desire to never have to *ask* for things.

She lived alone in a two-story house because she'd fallen in love with the beautiful, impractical, old-style Colonial in Flushing when her parents had wanted to flip it; it looked like a tiny castle. Reggie was the kind of woman who thought waiting for a prince or princess to get a castle for her would be a waste of her valuable time, so she'd gotten it for herself.

She was independent, and would cut anyone who implied otherwise, but acknowledged that her independence was linked to her bank account and inherited wealth: cleaners to help manage the chores that her disability made difficult and time-consuming, personal trainers to help maintain her physical health and make sure she stayed on track in physical therapy, a nutritionist to design meal plans that supposedly benefitted her, and doctors who offered the latest medications to help with her ataxia.

She loved GirlsWithGlasses because it was something that she'd built herself, first on a free microblog platform, then a small, self-made site, then as a growing social media empire. She'd done it without her parents' input or even their knowledge, spending long nights building her internet clout and carving social media breaks into her work schedule, until it had become too big to hide. It was the one thing she could point to that was indisputably the result of her hard work, and it was her shrine to the art that had kept her sane and given her joy during and after her recovery. She was really, extremely fucking busy with taking GirlsWithGlasses to the next level and was in the midst of planning their big push for the Anime Con coming up in a few months. She wasn't going to let insomnia ruin everything.

Reggie couldn't slip up now. She needed to do more work, get more likes and follows, make sure every post was fun, interesting, unique, and grammatically correct—she needed to become the best geek site the internet had ever seen, because if she didn't . . . She thought of all the people who

followed her, so excited to have a safe, diverse community where their race, sexual orientation, or disability was respected as a matter of course. She thought of her staff, all from marginalized backgrounds that usually didn't have this opportunity.

She couldn't fail. She needed to sleep or the business she'd spent the last few years building up might come crashing down. She'd beg this guy for his help if she had to, though she'd rather scoot down glass-covered stairs than beg anyone for anything.

But she was desperate, and this was a simple matter of problem solving.

The email was fine, technically. There were no typos—the latest update to the speech recognition drivers and her own proofreading had fixed that—but there was one major problem: despite her stating otherwise, it was creepy.

Dear Mr. Kendoku,

I hope this email finds you well. You may not remember me, but three years ago I used to tune in to your Streamlive.com channel, The Puzzle Zone. We chatted quite a bit over the course of three months, or rather I sent messages in the live stream chat function and you responded.

I'm writing with what I'll admit is an unconventional proposition. I'd like to request approximately ten hours of audio recordings of you speaking. I'm willing to pay a more than reasonable amount for this product, and will have a contract drawn up specifying that it is for my personal (noncreepy) use, protecting you from any unlawful dissemination of said product. I look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,

@26InchRims

There. Nice and formal and businesslike, so there was no reason for him to think she really *needed* his voice, even if she did. But maybe it wasn't the right tone? They'd spent every night together for three months after all—that was longer than any of her relationships had lasted. They'd kind of been friends.

Not enough for him to want to keep in contact, though.

Kakuro Kendoku's email address had been unearthed by Reggie's twin sister, Portia, Jill-of-all-trades and amateur internet detective. Portia, who was off on some kind of Eat, Pray, Swords journey of self-discovery in Scotland, had accidentally found out her boss was the secret love child of a duke using those same skills. Reggie was not in royal watchers fandom, but

even she was intrigued, and the hits to Portia's blog posts on GirlsWithGlasses were a bonus.

Reggie was certain she'd weirded her sister out by asking for anything from her, let alone information on a guy, since they usually didn't talk about dating and personal stuff like some twins did. She'd let Portia think whatever she wanted because the reason she needed Kakuro was embarrassing.

His voice was the only thing that could help her sleep when her insomnia got this bad. She'd discovered that over the course of their short online friendship, a friendship in which neither knew the other's real name, age, or location—their knowledge of each other was limited to what they'd revealed in the privacy of a totally public online live stream. The thing was, it *had* been private, since no one else had ever tuned in.

Whenever she couldn't sleep, she'd revisit the stream's archives; it'd still been up six months ago when she'd had her last battle with a recalcitrant Sandman. But it was gone now, deleted, and though she'd hoped that she wouldn't need his soothing voice for a good long while, she needed her auditory Ambien *now*.

It pissed her off—she shouldn't have to rely on a stranger like this, though he wasn't exactly a stranger at this point. She didn't know what he looked like, had never seen higher than his chin and mouth because his camera had been set up to focus on his hands, creating a kind of reverse Kakashi-sensei situation, but they'd "talked" almost every night after a couple of weeks of her lurking on his stream. She'd stumbled across it while looking for stuff to post on her fledgling website; his voice helped her focus as she worked late at night, searching for content and writing articles, figuring out how to turn her hobby into a hustle.

She had a great memory, but she hadn't really known him then. It was her repeated bedtime listening sessions of his archived videos had led to her inadvertently absorbing things about him and his life. His relationship with his younger brother, who would sometimes walk around in the background of the videos and try to distract him. How often he mentioned his grandmother. His love of crunching on shrimp chips like his mic wasn't picking up the sound, how he'd gone to school for architecture and been in between jobs. He'd also had a really nice mouth, not that it mattered. So he wasn't a stranger, but she'd let herself turn his voice into a necessity, and now she was paying for it.

What if he says no?

She didn't do panic—not since awakening in a hospital unable to move or talk all those years ago. She'd survived a brain virus and rebuilding her motor skills—she knew she could overcome most things life threw her way, so panic was a waste of time. But when insomnia came, it brought along its little friend anxiety, and Reggie needed to snuff them both out, NOW. So of course she had to email Kakuro and offer him money for recordings of his voice, so that she was never put in this position again. Of course, she'd used a years-old online handle and not her real name, which would reveal her business dealings and, eventually, her family wealth.

Problem solving with a side of common sense.

She dropped her head, reached out a hand that was shaking more than usual, and tapped the send button on the touch screen of her laptop.

There, it was done.

She rolled her shoulders to relieve the tension, then switched over to the video recording software on her laptop because there was work to do and it didn't matter if her brain felt like lumpy grits. Her bullet journal list for the day had ten items, and at least five of those things couldn't be put off.

Her own face stared back at her in HD—golden-brown skin, short rust-red kinky coils, large plastic-rimmed glasses that kind of hid the dark circles under her eyes. She wasn't glamorous like Portia, but Reggie was cute. She'd throw a filter on it afterward, anyway.

She pressed Record.

“Hey, Lunettes! Check out what I got in the mail!” She unlocked the wheel brakes on her chair and backed up so that her office was visible and viewers could see the life-size *Reject Squad Ultra* cardboard cutout that she'd received from the show's PR team. “I have not one, but two of these babies, and even though I ship PhilRora hard enough to keep both, I am a magnanimous fangirl. That means one of you can get in on this! Swipe up to enter to win on the site, and don't forget to share on social media!”

She wheeled back to her desk and quickly clipped the video, uploaded it to InstaPhoto, and threw a filter on it before pasting the text she'd typed up earlier and adding a link. She then shared the fact that the video was up over all her other social media sites so that people who didn't follow her on InstaPhoto would head over there.

She'd always been savvy, having grown up at the knee of two successful real estate investors and spent her formative years lurking in the

comments and forums of various fandom sites, but this “being open” stuff still felt unnatural to her. It was something Portia had coached her on, and her twin was pretty damn good at putting her best face forward, even if she was bad at basics like calling Reggie regularly.

She’s improving.

She grabbed her phone to text Portia a reminder about turning in the next “GirlsWithGlasses: Travel” piece, but a text from her sister was already waiting.

Portia: Hey, I’ve been watching those Hot Mess Helper videos you sent. Thanks. I feel a little less . . . messy. Still hot, though. 😊

The videos, designed for people with ADHD, had helped Reggie, too. She’d been pegged by everyone as the *good*, productive, and successful twin, but A LOT of work went into that, work that had nothing to do with physical disability and had everything to do with figuring out how her brain worked best. Reggie hadn’t shared her own struggles with anyone, but she’d thrown the clearly floundering Portia the videos as a lifeline. She was glad to hear they’d helped her sister, who she was more like than anyone suspected.

Portia: Anyway, I’ll be sending my next travel piece in a couple of days. Been a bit overwhelmed here with the whole secret duke thing, and we’re going to have to make sure this drops before tabloids get a hold of this. Are you up for breaking the story on your site?

Reggie: Oooo, I get to scoop the Looking Glass Daily Royal Beat? Good. They published some trash about Naledi, and I’ll enjoy crushing them beneath my wheels. Maybe I’ll start a GirlsWithGlasses royal watcher section just to mess with them. 😊

Portia: Wow, glad you’re on my side.

Reggie: Of course I’m on your side, fool. Wonder Twin powers, remember? 🙌

Portia: 🙌 😊

She was still groggy and irritable, but she was glad that half a lifetime later, she could talk to her sister without things being weird. The smile on her face faded when she scrolled down to the next message, from her mother.

Mom: Hi, baby! Just wanted to say again that we’re so proud of you for taking the next step with your website. We miss you at the office. 😊 Your sister is supposedly going to take your position, but I think we all know how that will turn out.

Reggie's shoulders stiffened. She loved her parents, but the difference in how they treated her and her sister was frustrating. When they'd been younger, it hadn't been so obvious, and Reggie had been able to deflect, or to misbehave to show that she wasn't some golden child. After her illness, it was like they could only see the good things she did—and developed blinders that prevented them from seeing the same for Portia. She knew her parents loved them both, but they didn't really act like it.

Reggie: You asked her to fill the position? I thought you weren't going to do that because it's not remotely what she wants to do in life.

Mom: She doesn't know what she wants. Your father and I think it will give her stability, and she agreed. Though there is this swordbabe guy lined up, so maybe she won't need a job. Is that what they call him online? Swordbabe?

Reggie groaned, both at her mother's mangling of #swordbae and her parental cluelessness. Of course Portia had agreed. She would agree to anything she thought would make her parents happy, even if she ended up flaking out later. Reggie exhaled an annoyed breath, shook her head, and reminded herself that she wasn't going to do this. She'd left her job with her parents because she believed in her website, but also because she needed solid boundaries with them, and she wasn't about to let them get crossed now.

Mom: When I talked to her last week she said he was just her boss and was offended that I suggested she lock that down. Lord knows she wasn't so picky before.

Reggie's fingers were tapping before she could stop herself.

Reggie: Presenting her only choices as a job she doesn't want and won't be good at or hooking up with her boss seems like a great way of supporting her. I'm sure she appreciates it.

Crap. Her sleep irritability and general annoyance at fuckery had overruled her thumbs. She typed her final response quickly.

Reggie: Lots of meetings today! Gotta go, Mom! Love you.

She stuck the phone into the pouch on the side of her chair, taking a minute to breathe and let go of the frustration that clung to her. There was the additional fun fact that her parents' plan for Portia always seemed to involve finding a rich man they could hand her off to, but they never even

asked Reggie if she was seeing anyone. When she'd mentioned dating in the past, they'd not so subtly ask if she was sure the person wasn't "using" her.

Enough.

She wheeled out of her office, passing under framed original art pages from her favorite comic books and wall scrolls from her favorite anime. Her bookshelves and desks were littered with advanced copies of graphic novels, manga, and books that people wanted her to endorse on her site, but the floor was clear thanks to the cleaning service that came in twice weekly.

She pushed open the gate to the platform lift that went down to the first floor, the action a force of habit. There were things to do, whether her brain was ready for the day or not: Pilates core workout, second breakfast, video conference with her editorial staff to plan for the relaunch, site visit to the summer arts camp at the local library she'd created and helped fund two years running—

Her smartwatch chimed as she rolled smoothly across the glistening hardwood floor, and she lifted one hand from a wheel to glance at her wrist.

New Email

Sender: Kendoku, Kakuro

She reached into the side pocket of her chair and pulled out her phone.

Hi @26InchRims,

- a) You were the only person who ever tuned in to my stream—as you well know. Yes, I remember you.
- b) This *is* creepy; however, on a scale of 1 to "guy who snuck pictures of my feet in the pool changing room," it ranks at approximately 3.5.
- c) I'm busy, and not sure I want to do this, but I have questions. Here's my number. Give me a call to figure out the details.

Thanks (unless this is something super weird; then, no thanks),
KK

Reggie stared at her phone before dropping it into her lap. Chances had been high that she'd never hear back from him, given what she'd asked for, but he'd replied in under an hour. And he wanted to talk on the phone.

Her lips twisted to the side as she considered her options.

I don't do phones, she tapped out slowly, then deleted it.

She was already being weird, and refusing to speak to him on the phone would make this even more suspect.

In the months at the rehabilitation center, after she'd been released from the hospital, she'd had to learn to do everything again—*everything*. Even speak. She'd succeeded because she was stubborn as fuck, her therapists had been supportive, and her parents could afford the best rehab money could buy, but even now, there was something in her cadence that people picked up on. She could always mark the moment when the stranger on the other end of the line began to speak to her louder and more slowly, like she needed their help to comprehend things when *they* were the ones with a problem.

Well, if Kakuro was a condescending asshole, she'd deal. Her insomnia had already caused her to make three minor mistakes in the past few days that might have been major if her staffers hadn't caught them—she needed sleep, and he was her last hope.

Her mom had suggested she participate in a sleep study—like lying in a hospital bed with wires and machines hooked up to her was something Reggie would do voluntarily. If she didn't make this phone call, she might have to resort to that.

She sighed and tapped the phone number highlighted in blue in his email. It was a California area code, something she was familiar with from work calls. He was either up super early or hadn't gone to bed yet. Either way, he answered on the second ring.

"Hello?"

Goddamn. God. *Damn*. Reggie was immediately slapped by the one aspect of this she'd been carefully avoiding—his voice wasn't just soothing, it was *sexy*. There'd been a reason she'd tuned in to his live stream that first time, and there'd been a reason she'd gone back almost every night.

As much as she was pretending otherwise in the name of keeping this strictly business, she'd had an internet crush on him. She wouldn't indulge it, of course. She'd secure the vocal recording bag and keep it moving. Reggie wasn't trying to get involved in any emotional shitshows, which

were what the brief relationships she'd been in over the years had always devolved into. Dating came with demands on her time, suggestions on how she live her life, or offers of assistance, like she wasn't a grown-ass woman with a stable income and a high-yield investment portfolio.

Or because she was.

So no, she wasn't looking to upgrade her online crush, but that didn't stop her from noticing that his voice was deep, like *what the fuck even?* deep, with a bass that vibrated through her body and settled in some very specific areas. It made her body go warm and her defenses drop fast as panties during Fleet Week, as her mother's friend Ms. Vanessa had liked to say.

God *damn*.

This phone call had been a terrible idea. She wasn't sure she could take more than "Hello" live and unfiltered.

"Um. Hi," she said. "It me."

There was a weighted pause on Kakuro's end, then, "So you *are* a woman."

Even delivered in the sexiest voice she'd ever heard, that nonquestion question had Reggie ready to fight. In her experiences in nerd culture, there were follow-up challenges that sprouted like weeds in its wake.

If you're really a fan of this comic, name the original publication date and the middle name of the colorist.

Girls don't like anime/superhero movies/comic books, you must be lying to get attention from guys.

"I am, though that's really not okay for you to assume from hearing someone's voice. Why are you asking? Is there a problem with that?"

She reminded herself that while she knew lots of intimate thing about him, he didn't know who she was and had never even seen a photo of her. He didn't know about her website, and had never seemed to care about comics or pop culture during his live streams. He'd been a puzzle nerd through and through, though maybe they tried to gatekeep women out of their circles, too.

"No. Just . . . I'd thought you were. Before. But I never *knew* because—not that it *matters*—just." He sighed. "Sorry. This is why I stick to talking about puzzles. I'll try not to do something like that again."

"Thanks," she said. He didn't seem to be a jerk, which fit with what she remembered of him.

“This whole thing is kind of weird, right?” he asked after a long pause in which she couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“My email?” She fiddled with her phone case, which was a rubbery plastic replica of Aurora’s Sword of Truth that she’d found on eBay and kept her phone safer than the expensive cases she’d tried in the past.

“Yeah, obviously. That was undoubtedly weird.” He was still blunt like she remembered, but Reggie had liked that about him. “I mean us talking after all this time. Or rather, us being able to hear each other instead of you just watching me and typing.”

“It is weird,” Reggie admitted. “For a long time, you were just the faceless guy in my computer, solving puzzles or trying to make them, who sometimes gave me advice about website design and my annoying family.”

He hadn’t been entirely faceless. He’d had that mouth, with a really plump, bitable lower lip, and now that he was on the other end of her phone, she couldn’t help but try to fill in the rest of his face.

“And you were the cat anime avatar who asked interesting questions and gave me advice about things I’d like and *my* annoying family.”

“Did your brother ever pop the question to his girlfriend?” she asked.

“He did, and I’m an uncle now. Did your sister ever stop avoiding you?”

Ah, that bluntness wasn’t so cute when it touched on one of her sore spots. It hit her then how much she’d shared with him. When he’d been a stranger on the internet, she’d told him things she hadn’t told anyone apart from her therapist. “Yeah. She’s abroad right now, but we talk more these days.”

“Good. And that website you were working on?”

He’d been there for the birth of GirlsWithGlasses, too. “Um. It’s chugging along.”

“Cool.”

There was a long pause of the awkward variety and Reggie unlocked the brake on one of her wheels and rolled her chair forward and back in a semicircle. “Okay. So—”

“Why do you want my voice?” he asked, demonstrating that bluntness again.

“Because I’m a sassy sea witch and I’m gonna keep it in a nautilus necklace, then use it to steal your man from right under your nose,” she replied drily.

He laughed in response, and Reggie felt relief loosen her body as her own grin spread across her face. His laugh was goofy as fuck, a rapid-fire trill like an evil cartoon kitten or something. He wasn't a smooth talker—not intentionally at least. He was a big ol' nerd, like her, just one who preferred his cube Rubik's, not Cosmic.

That was what she'd liked about his live stream, apart from his voice—that he was deeply and unashamedly interested in something. She didn't enjoy puzzles much herself—they seemed like a waste of valuable time—but she'd liked listening to him figure them out. He hadn't laughed much when he'd done the videos, though. His mouth, when it'd been visible, had usually been a line of concentration as he worked, and his shoulders had usually been stiff and tense. He'd smiled in response to her messages, but there had been a reserve to those smiles that she didn't hear in his voice now.

None of that was important to her current objective, though.

“Honestly? All your videos got deleted when you shut down your Livestream account. I have no other way to access your voice apart from paying for it, unless you want to give it to me for free.”

He grunted. “The sea witch joke actually answered my question. This does not.”

Reggie pressed her feet into the footrests of her chair and shifted in her seat, the movement one of mental discomfort, not physical. He was right. She wasn't being direct.

“I have insomnia and I need your voice to sleep,” she grumbled, seriously annoyed that he knew this about her. People already saw her as weak, when they weren't busy looking through her, and she hated giving anyone evidence that they were right.

“You're saying my voice makes you sleepy?” he asked, followed by a softer version of his evil kitten laughter. “That's disheartening coming from my only viewer. Geez. I guess I know why you tuned in so faithfully every night, and it wasn't to watch me solve puzzles.”

She chuckled despite her discomfort. His voice wasn't making her sleepy right then—she was feeling other, unexpected side effects of an actual conversation with him. She was a grown-ass woman having tingles in her nethers because of a guy's *voice*. Ridiculous.

“I did watch you solve puzzles.” She remembered that he had nice hands, with long, dexterous fingers and neatly trimmed nails. “Helped you

sometimes, too, in case you've forgotten."

"I haven't," he said, and there was something in his tone that made her whole body perk in attention. "Of course, I haven't."

Reggie was glad that she was wearing her gym clothes because she was starting to sweat. "Good. Look, your voice" She took a deep breath. "Your voice is like the human equivalent of a weighted blanket."

He didn't say anything for a long time, but she heard the clack of fingers on a keyboard before his voice came through the phone speaker. "I was Googling weighted blanket. I guess that's a compliment. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Reggie swallowed. "So. Will you make the recordings?"

"No."

She stiffened against the blow of the unexpected disappointment. The conversation had gone well. He'd laughed at her jokes. He'd seemed friendly—maybe a little more than friendly. What was the issue?

She wasn't a crier, but she felt an uncomfortable burning at her eyes, like when sweat dripped into them during a hard physical therapy session. "Why not?"

"Because I can't control what you would do with those recordings and if I'm rambling for hours I might say something that I don't want accidentally blasted across the internet," he said. "But. I have a counteroffer."

Reggie waited, annoyed when he didn't just get to it. "And that is?"

"I can call you," he said. "Or you can call me, at night before you go to sleep. I'll be up working anyway because I have a project I'm figuring out for my secondary job. You already know I talk out loud while working through things. You can hang with me while I work, just like old times."

Great, I can just secretly record him, she thought.

"And you can't just secretly record me either," he added.

She huffed. "I would never."

"I'll talk until you fall asleep." Another pause. "It wouldn't be much different from what we did years ago, just adapted to a business agreement that works for both of us."

"Right." She was annoyed and considered pushing him on the recording, but didn't want him to end up saying no. "Doing this live is more work for you, though. There's a time difference, and you said you were busy."

Okay, so she pushed a little. It was what she did.

He made a humming noise, one of consideration. "It's not more work. It's more control, and I like being in control."

Honestly. *HONESTLY*. A guy with his voice shouldn't be allowed to just say shit like that out of the blue. It was entirely unfair.

"Fine. I understand that."

"What's your name? I don't want to call you 26 Inch or Miss Rims because it'll sound . . . like a different kind of phone call."

Heat crept up Reggie's neck.

"It's a wheel diameter, not some hentai stuff, okay? And you can call me Reggie," she said. That was safe. She went by Regina at GirlsWithGlasses and its various social media accounts, if not by the site's name itself.

"Reggie."

He repeated the two syllables in a lower register that made her thighs push together. *HONESTLY*.

"My name is Gustave. You can call me Gus."

"Gustave," she said blankly, then shook her head, though he couldn't see the motion. "Oh. *Oh*. That explains the links that popped up when I Googled Kakuro Kendoku. Those are different kinds of puzzles. Gustave."

"Gus. And yeah, that was my nom de puzzle." He sounded entirely too satisfied with himself for that pun. "Rubik's Sudoku would have been too mainstream. I'm a puzzle hipster."

She huffed, but was also smiling. He seemed much more open than during the three months they'd shared their nights online. More relaxed.

"Well, I like your voice, too, Reggie. Send me an email with any additional and we'll start tonight. Bye."

The call disconnected before she could respond, and she dropped the phone into her lap.

Gus was going to call her.

He was going to lull her to sleep.

He liked her voice.

Lord.

Reggie generally didn't enjoy when her plans went sideways, but maybe . . . maybe this wouldn't be so bad. So what if his voice was having unexpected additional side effects? So what if she'd kind-of-maybe lied to herself about her previous interest in him being totally platonic?

He'd agreed to help her sleep, and that was all that mattered.

Though, because Reggie always pushed, even at her own successes, she wondered why he'd given in so easily when she'd thought there would be a fight. She shouldn't care since she'd gotten what she wanted, in a way, but she did wonder—why had he gone along with her weird-ass request?

Chapter Two

Gustave Nguyen often didn't understand why he did what he did. Unlike puzzles, human emotions didn't follow a logical, replicable course from point A to point B. Completing a puzzle, whether one written on paper or one that required manual dexterity, gave him a sense of fulfillment he didn't often feel in his other pursuits, or even at day his job. His emotions were something else entirely—a magic square where the numbers didn't add up, or a Perplexus sphere where his metal ball kept falling off the little plastic track.

He'd once asked his brother, Dave, younger by three years and now married with a kid, about it, as he'd often asked about social niceties that confused him. Gus had wondered if his confusion stemmed from the fact that he was autistic, but Dave thought that most people had no idea what motivated their own behavior—that this confusion was typical. Knowing that didn't stop Gus from dissecting his actions, breaking them down how he broke down the steps of a puzzle. In this case, he didn't have to do too much work—there was no logical reason for him to have accepted Reggie's offer.

He didn't need the money she'd offered in her follow-up email, though it would be nice to send some extra money back home to Bà Nội and his parents. He certainly didn't have the time. But he'd spoken to her on the phone once and had made plans to do so on a regular basis for the next few nights at least.

He'd pushed the thoughts out of his mind when he'd left for work that morning to dig into his latest data architecture project, but thoughts of Reggie had hovered just outside of his daily routine, finally barging back in on his train ride home, crowding him like his fellow commuters on the 7 line. Now he was back in his room at his apartment, which was littered with

paint, wood, cardboard, tools, and puzzle props at various stages of completion, trying to categorize this interest he had in her.

He'd thought about 26InchRims a lot, especially after his last breakup. Dating had always been a minefield for him—most of his previous girlfriends hadn't appreciated when the only thing he could talk about was whatever puzzle he was working on, even those he'd met at game nights and puzzle interest groups. He couldn't blame them, but after his last potential romance had fizzled out, he'd realized only one person had ever listened to him be his completely unvarnished, puzzle-dork self without annoyance or judgment.

And now she'd shown up in his inbox.

Gus leaned back in his office chair and brushed a hand over his thick black hair, feeling it resist as it prepared to spring back into its natural disheveled state. It wouldn't be tamed by anything but the hair product his grandmother mailed to him with the assorted Vietnamese treats in the care packages she sent from California. He lived in Queens, two blocks away from an Asian supermarket and one block away from a beauty supply store, but he didn't tell Bà Nội this. It was how she showed her love, a much more practical display than his mother, who showed hers by sending him rental listings from her local real estate agent. It was his fault they both worried over him more than was necessary for a man in his early thirties. He understood that on some level, especially now that it seemed to them that he was throwing away the possibility of ever attaining a prestigious career to dabble in childish games. How could they tell the difference between a career change and a flame out?

No time for guilt. If you pull this off, they won't worry anymore.

He crunched into a prawn cracker, the salty goodness filling his mouth, and pulled up the files for his most exciting side job yet—a gig that would have been big even for someone with years of experience in the field he was trying to break into. He was designing what had unexpectedly turned out to be *the* most anticipated feature of the upcoming Anime Con: the *Reject Squad Ultra* escape room.

Gus had leapt at the opportunity, which he'd been recommended for by one of his architecture school classmates, before watching a single episode of the show. The content hadn't mattered to him, really. After all, if he pulled it off, he'd make a name for himself in the escape room design world

and his hobby, an outgrowth of his obsession with puzzles and his obsession with design, could become a solid stream of income.

His task was to design a multiroom escape experience based on the romance anime, a take on “Sleeping Beauty” set at a military academy. It had been seen as a longshot, but the show had taken off, and its popularity had exploded since he’d accepted the job. He was confident in his abilities, but he was facing three logistical problems: he knew almost nothing about anime, nothing about *Reject Squad Ultra*, and less than nothing about romance.

Whenever he was solving a hard puzzle, there was a moment where it felt like he’d never find a solution, but there was also usually a corresponding moment where everything clicked into place with blinding clarity. He’d designed several pieces of the escape room, but he was still waiting for the *aha* moment to come, for everything to fall into place. It was a challenge, but Gus excelled at solving complex problems, so he supposed he would figure it out eventually. Unlike his previous escape room designs, completed at his leisure, he didn’t have unlimited time to wait for eventually to happen.

He glanced nervously at the time, and then at the image that topped the show’s video streaming page. The heroine, Aurora, a brown-skinned girl with curly black hair and a big sword, frowned up at Phil, nicknamed Charming, a dark-haired boy in a military uniform who met her anger with a sly smile. Gus had watched all twelve episodes and the supplemental OVA, whatever OVA stood for, and didn’t really get it. Aurora frustrated him because her emotional reactions trended toward over the top anger. Charming was anything but; the character enjoyed picking on Aurora and getting knocked into brick walls with the flat of a sword. Gus wasn’t sure what was romantic about that. The villain, the evil queen Briar Rose, was forgiven in the end without so much as a flesh wound, making all the fighting and drama of the previous episodes seem pointless.

Gus was missing something about this show, something that made people fall in love with the characters and the world . . . something he had to recreate for a true immersive experience.

He released a puff of frustrated air and then checked the time and his email again, looking at the confirmation from Reggie that she would call him that night.

He'd been surprised when her email had shown up in his inbox that morning, for a few reasons. He'd started The Puzzle Zone at his brother's prompting during a low point in his life after having moved back home, because "someone wants to hear you talk about puzzles for hours, and it sure as shit isn't me." Dave hadn't meant it in a bad way—bluntness was a Nguyen brother trait, one that sometimes got them in trouble because lots of people didn't share their affinity for bypassing the sugarcoating.

Dave had set up the Streamlive account and Gus had gone along with it, expecting to jettison his thoughts into the void. He always talked when he worked on puzzles, and he'd figured talking on camera could serve as life skills practice, too. While he had no problem talking to his family members and close friends, his interactions with coworkers and strangers were minimal and sometimes flat out awkward. That was why the zero next to his viewer count hadn't bothered him. It'd been freeing, being able to talk without worrying about whether he was being too weird, too specific, too focused.

On the fifth night of streaming, a notification had popped up.

1 new viewer! 26InchRims just tuned in.

Gus had stammered over his words. He'd started to second-guess what he was saying, like he did in real life. Sweat had broken out in the creases alongside his nose, and then he'd started to get angry. What did this person want? Why were they watching him?

He wasn't vindictive, not really, but when he'd started talking about algebraic puzzles to calm himself down, he'd known there was a nine out of ten chance that the person would disappear from the viewers column.

26InchRims had stayed, and the next morning Gus had an email:

Congrats! Your very first Streamlive follower!

He'd forwarded the email to his brother with an angry face emoji. Dave had responded with a thumbs-up emoji and a brief reply: I told you someone wanted to hear you talk about puzzles. I bet more people do, too!

But no, there had never been any other viewers. Just 26InchRims showing up faithfully every night. Gus didn't acknowledge them at first, but they returned night after night, and a pattern started to play out. He'd talk

without interruption, unsure his one follower was even really paying attention, and then 26InchRims is typing . . . would appear on the screen:

Oh wow, how did you complete the Rubik's Cube so fast? Is there a trick or are you a genius?

So what is the difference between the math puzzle you did last night and this one? They look the same.

This is like a superpower. Although maybe this is more of a villain skill set.

Gus had started to enjoy the prompts and encouragement, had started to respond, to talk about things other than puzzles—like his own life, and what he would do with it. He'd started to think more about what he would say, instead of rambling, and about what 26InchRims would want to talk about. He'd started to get ideas, too, because 26InchRims's comments had been peppered with suggestions for games and logic puzzles, including the one that had changed his life.

Have you ever been to an escape room? I get the feeling you would be great at this.
www.girlswithglasses.com/escape-room-craze

Gus had followed that link down a rabbit hole, and well, now here he was.

It'd been weird, sharing his deepest thoughts with one internet stranger, weird in a way that it wouldn't have been if he'd been talking with hundreds of people tuning in. But it had been nice knowing at least one person in the world found him interesting, and not just because they were bound by familial bonds. He hadn't been in a good place then, and though he hadn't started the stream with the idea that he'd make a friend, or even a difference in his life, having a stranger compliment him and tell him he was smart had made Gus feel supported. His family members told him the same thing, but their assessment of him was biased. Gus could appreciate their motivational speeches, but it was hard to believe that his grandmother, with her cap of gray curls, would *actually* tell him if she thought he was completely hopeless.

He'd started sending out job applications again, landing a position in New York, the only other place he was familiar with besides Oakland. He'd stopped posting on his Streamlive account before his move to Queens, sending a brief "Thanks for staying up with me" message to 26InchRims that had felt like not enough, but more would have seemed presumptuous.

He'd reasoned that whomever they were, they probably followed lots of streamers and would hardly miss his presence.

He'd thought about messaging again when he'd logged in after two years to delete his account after a hacking attempt, but hadn't. And now 26InchRims—Reggie—had reached out. Now he'd be talking to her every night again.

She'd nudged him out of his rut and onto the path of what might be his next career move. Talking her to sleep was the least he could do.

Besides, she was funny. Smart. He'd enjoyed their brief conversation in a way he rarely enjoyed talking to strangers on the phone—so much that he'd made the snap decision that calls would be better than recordings. Because that was how he was—when he was interested in something or someone, he acted without thinking. The same instincts that made him above average in solving puzzles sometimes bit him in the butt when it came to human interactions, but what could go wrong with this?

His phone rang, and he blew out a deep breath before accepting the call and holding the too-big smartphone to his ear.

"Hello, may I speak to Gustave, the puzzlist formerly known as Kakuro Kendoku?"

Gus smiled. He liked her voice. It wasn't high-pitched, which sometimes grated at him like lots of random things people couldn't help, and she spoke with a kind of subtle mischief in her tone that made it seem she was always on the verge of saying something interesting. He'd noticed that certain words were clipped when she spoke, and others had a slight waver, but she'd mentioned a disability a couple of times in the past, as well as her wheel diameter, so he figured it was related to that. It didn't matter anyway, and he personally hated when people asked invasive questions when he was just going about his day.

"This is Gus," he replied, navigating back to the *Reject Squad Ultra* video streaming page on his laptop. He chuckled. "So. The band is back together."

"Oh, we're a band? What's our name?" she asked, voice playful.

"The Night Owl Duet," he replied, then remembered something that she'd messaged him during a live stream. "Neither of us plays instruments or sings, so it's a very loose interpretation of a band."

"How about the Sleepy Time Duet? Night owlism is for the young," Reggie said, laughing. "I'm twenty-eight and my weary bones need rest."

Gus pursed his lips, even though she couldn't see him.

"I don't know what you mean. I'm thirty-two and can stay up until at least 9:30 p.m.," he said, pleased when she giggled. "Ten if I'm feeling really wild."

"Well, hopefully you won't have to be up past your bedtime," she said sleepily.

It was already 10:15 so Gus was a bit confused, but she'd said in her second email that lack of sleep really messed with her head, so maybe she was just babbling.

"I'm kidding. I usually work until around 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. Besides, I wouldn't mind being kept up by you," he said. His cheeks flushed as he realized his words might be taken for innuendo, and that maybe they *were* innuendo. Conversation was flowing easily between them, and he'd forgotten how good it felt. He kind of regretted that they were only talking so that she could go to sleep. "That is, talking to you is better than being kept up by work, which is the usual culprit for me."

"Same. I feel like a kid who got told that if I kept pulling a face it would get stuck like that, and found out my parents were right," she said on a sigh. "I've spent so many nights working late and now I'm being punished with sleep deprivation to teach me a lesson."

"Well, I'm here to remedy that. Ready to, uh, have me bore you to sleep?"

She laughed, but it was an exhausted sound. "I think of it more as soothing me to sleep, but please do. This insomnia has really fu—messed me up."

"Been there." Gus's words stopped flowing for a few seconds because his mind had gone off on a tangent of how intimate that word was. *Soothing*. Lots of other thoughts blossomed from that one, fractal images linked by that core idea that she wanted him to soothe her, and the fact that there were so many ways to do that. His voice, his mouth, his hands . . .

What? Where did that even come from?

"Gus?"

"Oh. Sorry, just queuing something up." He ran his finger in a circle on his laptop's trackpad so that his words were not a lie. He didn't need to have thoughts like this about Reggie. He didn't even know what she looked like; how could he be imagining what it would be like to touch her? "I have to

watch this show to figure some things out for my project. I figured I could just kind of tell you what it's about while I do. Is that okay?"

"Yes." Something about the fatigued anticipation in that one word did something to him. For a moment, he felt put on the spot as he had when 26InchRims had first started lurking on his stream. There was a sudden pressure not to disappoint, to do this right or to fail. He considered hanging up, blocking this number and email address. Then he closed his eyes and focused. This wasn't that serious, plus she seemed to . . . need him. That wasn't something he'd felt in a long time. Being the one who could help.

"Here we go." He pressed PLAY and settled back into his crappy office chair, which matched the other crappy furniture in his apartment. "Okay. So the first episode is starting. This is an anime, by the way, which I don't usually watch."

"Why not?" she asked in that same sleep-rough voice. "Anime is awesome."

"Oh no. You had an anime avatar on Streamlive. Please don't tell me you're an—"

"A super cool and well-rounded lover of all things interesting?" she said sweetly. "Don't worry, I'm not an otaku. I think lots of things are awesome. Comic books. Video games. Dictionaries."

"Puzzles," he added. "You forgot puzzles, the most awesome thing."

She yawned pointedly. "I guess."

Gus grinned. "Whatever. So the theme song ended. The drawing style is kind of . . . hmm, effervescent, I guess? The color palette is my favorite thing about the show. The colors are bright and rich overall, though we're opening on a nighttime battle scene so the colors are muted by shadow. The heroine is protecting a group of children from a dragon with some kind of magic from her sword, but it looks like she's trying to stay awake."

"Dragon? Sword?" He heard the sudden rustling of sheets.

"Yeah. Now we cut to our heroine. She's sitting behind a desk in a classroom staring into the distance, like she's sleeping with her eyes open. Someone waves a hand in front of her face. Then the main guy comes in and looks at her, and there's a flashback of them as children and she smashes him into a tree with a boat paddle, then it's a montage of her smashing him into various walls with various objects as they get older, and then in the present day he says . . ."

“Got some drool on your face, Sleeping Booty’!” Reggie cut in, the fatigue in her voice replaced by pure excitement. “You’re watching *Reject Squad Ultra*!”

“Yes. And you’re supposed to be going to sleep?”

“Sorry. Just.” There was a muffled noise . . . was she screaming into her pillow? “This is my favorite show ever!”

“Favorite show?” Gus paused the video, the frame showing the hero just as he crashed through a classroom window, a smug expression on his face even as he hovered three stories above the ground surrounded by shards of glass.

“EVER. Hashtag PhilRoraWakeMyHeart.”

“Hashtag NotSureWhatThatMeans, but I believe you about being a fan.” She was likely one of the legion of superfans who would travel to Anime Con for the express purpose of trying out his escape room. She was one of the people who would be disappointed if he wasn’t able to understand the essence of this show and get the escape room right.

“Hey.” He planted his feet on the ground and twisted his office chair back and forth with his hips. “I want to renegotiate our contract.”

“Why? Am I talking too much? I know I can be kind of weird about this show, but I can shut up. Just please, don’t hang up.”

Her voice was sharp, almost angry, though her words were pleading. He had the feeling that she was a woman who was used to getting what she wanted—the fact that they were even on this phone call was a testament to that, he supposed.

“I won’t hang up,” he said quickly. He didn’t *want* to hang up, which was weird. “I just realized that I need something from you as much as you need my voice.”

“What’s that?” Now there was no anger or pleading, but suspicion.

“I have a project centered around this show, which is why I’m watching it. I’m trying to understand what people love about it, but I don’t get the appeal.”

“SACRILEGE!”

Gus held the phone away from his ear.

“My bad. I get a bit . . . defensive about things I care about,” she said.

“Understandable.” He pressed the phone to his ear again. “Well. New deal. You teach me why you almost blew out my eardrum over this show, and I’ll do some recordings for you. No charge.”

There was a long pause.

“Wait. You’re going to give me what I originally asked you for, for free, in return for me *shouting my joy* at you about my favorite show in the world?”

“I could do without the shouting, but yes?”

She burst out laughing then, a sound that wasn’t delicate at all but somehow softened her. Her laughter was a disembodied thing, though, because he had no idea what she looked like. He wanted to know, and not just with the slight curiosity from earlier, but with that sudden overwhelming impulse that preceded some of his best ideas—and even more of his worst.

“Let’s do a video chat,” he blurted out, as if that was the logical next step when it was actually just what he wanted to happen. “Tomorrow night. We can watch in real time. I’ll send you the link.”

Another pause. Longer this time, and the hesitation on her part was apparent even to him.

He spun his chair back and forth, looking down at the phone and ready to rescind the suggestion.

“Okay,” she said finally. “It’ll be like a virtual slumber party. Don’t make fun of my bonnet. Or anything else.”

“Bonnet?” he asked, trying not to be offended that she would assume that his making fun of her was a possibility. “Are you Amish? Or is this like, maid cosplay?”

Reggie sighed.

“Many Black women sleep with . . . you know what, you’ll see it tomorrow.” She yawned. Gus immediately Googled *Black women bonnet* and was scrolling the images by the time she continued the conversation. “Can you talk for a little while longer tonight? About something else so I’m not getting all hyped up instead of going to sleep?”

“Sure.” He pulled an old design magazine out from the stack on his desk. “‘The Main Attraction—how to control customer flow in restricted retail space.’”

Retail design class had been one of his favorites at architecture school, and it came in surprisingly handy when planning an escape room. Thinking about how to draw a customer’s eye, how to make them move to certain locations without feeling herded.

“Yessss, this sounds boring as fuck. Give it to me.”

A tremor of awareness went up Gus's spine. He shouldn't be responding to her sleepy voice, to the sound of her nestling deeper into her pillows, or the fairly innocuous phrase "Give it to me." He shouldn't be wondering what she was wearing, if anything, besides a silk sleeping bonnet, chased by that urge to know what she looked like so strong that it lifted the hairs on his arms.

He was being weird, and he needed to be normal since she was going to help him out.

"Um, okay," he said, and then commenced reading the article. When he finished ten minutes later, she was silent on the other end of the phone line.

"Reggie?" he whispered.

Her response was a light snore. Gus flipped the page and read another boring-to-Reggie article, his voice lower and calibrated to avoid accidentally awakening her, before disconnecting the call.

Chapter Three

The morning after their call, Reggie had awoken blinking against the shaft of bright summer sunlight streaming into her bedroom, highlighting the white posts of her canopy bed and Phil and Aurora sparring across the surface of her *Reject Squad Ultra* duvet.

She'd slept more deeply than she had in ages, and had actually felt energized when she'd gripped her bedpost and made the quick transfer from bed to chair. She'd imagined this was what Sunspot felt like after a summer day at the beach, or what Rogue felt like after absorbing some particularly useful powers. She'd been ready to kick the day's ass and clear-headed enough to do it.

The entire day had been like that—she'd forgotten how good it felt to be on her game, to be able to think clearly, to not forget simple steps in promotion or trivia so that guys rolled up in her mentions to question her knowledge. Her team had seemed to pick up on her energy, their group virtual workspace hopping with ideas as they played off one another.

LaToya 🗣️: The ideas are really flowing today!

Reggie: 😊 Hopefully the energy to follow through on them flows, too, lol.

Danni: I'm really excited about the new oral history of nerd-dom column. I'll start trying to set up interviews with people who will be in NYC for Anime Con.

LaToya 🗣️: Reggie, thank you for greenlighting the disability in geek culture podcast.

♥️ I've been thinking about it for a long time but didn't have the platform, or the spoons, to do it before. But now? Mybodyisready.gif!

Reggie: 🙌 Talk to y'all later.

It'd been a great day, and not only because she'd slept.

There had been a . . . fizziness in her brain as she remembered Gus's laugh, and his jokes, and his voice. Reggie's brain often played random sound snippets in loops, and all day at the oddest moments "The band is back together" had popped into her head. She'd never known what it had

meant to Gus—Kakuro Kendoku—when she'd become the one and only Puzzle Zone follower, but she knew what it's meant to her.

He'd kept her company as she'd laid the groundwork of what was now her full-time job. He'd talked to her without condescension or superiority, and she'd felt some kind of connection between them. But then he'd left her a brief message on his page when he'd stopped streaming, with no way to stay in contact. That had been that.

But "the band" . . . that implied a certain closeness, familiarity. Had he seen her as integral to his nights, like she'd seen him?

No. She was reading too much into things. But he'd wanted to talk on the phone and now he wanted to video chat. And his voice was great and all, but him talking to her again . . . them speaking to each other? She hadn't been prepared for how she would react to it. She hadn't realized the depth of their existing connection because she'd downplayed it for so long. And she hadn't expected how much she could possibly look forward to seeing someone's face.

As she prepared for bed, and their video chat, her text alert chimed. She nearly swept everything off her low counter when swooping to reach for the phone, but it wasn't Gus. It was her dad.

Dad: Hey, honey. Me and your mother were talking about how much we miss you at work and we just want you to know that we will be here no matter what happens with this venture. If the site doesn't work out, we can support you. We're so proud of you.

Reggie sighed. She felt ungrateful, but it was fucked how her parents had just spent months complaining about Portia taking an apprenticeship in Scotland—had spent years pointing out Portia's mistakes—but were always quick to remind Reggie they'd be there *no matter what*. Before she'd gotten sick, they'd praised her, but with the underlying expectation that they thought she could always work a little bit harder. Since then . . .

They didn't understand that their constant reassurance was just so damn condescending. She'd been their best analyst, but they'd been so overly effusive about her work that she'd felt like a kindergartener. She'd just left the proverbial nest, but they were already making sure she knew any fall would have a soft landing; meanwhile, they'd always chastised Portia for the various desperate flight patterns she undertook while trying to please them.

Reggie loved her parents, but she would never understand how or why they behaved as they did. Sending Portia to comportment lessons and debutant balls, telling her she needed a good husband, while focusing on Reggie's good grades and always making sure everyone knew who the smart twin was, even if they never said it out loud.

Reggie realized her teeth were clenched hard, and took a deep breath, and focused on loosening her muscles.

Reggie: Thanks! You guys don't have to worry about me, I've planned for possible failure and won't need any assistance. Appreciate it, though! Good night!

She glanced at her father's response.

Dad: That's our girl. Always has a plan in place!

Reggie knew what was left unsaid. *Unlike your sister.*

Those unspoken words hurt. Sometimes she wondered if stuff like that was why Portia had grown so distant. Messed up as it was, that was preferential to her greater fear.

Reggie finished her preparations for bed with frayed nerves, the anticipation she felt slightly tarnished by the way every interaction in her family had to somehow be a competition between her and her sister, which meant they both always lost.

She climbed into bed, reminding herself that she couldn't control other people's behaviors and she shouldn't try, as her therapist had been pounding into her stubborn brain for years. She had more pressing concerns in that moment, like figuring out why she'd finally opened the nine-step skin-care set that Portia had given her, so that her skin was dewy and glowing and her lips were scrubbed smooth and kissable. Or why she'd put on her TARDIS blue camisole top, with its dipping neckline, and matching pajama bottoms when she usually slept in an oversize Tanuki, My Love T-shirt.

She'd drawn the line at her hair, though, slipping on her yellow silk bonnet before getting under the covers and repositioning the snakelike device that wrapped around one of the posts of her bed and held her tablet out in front of her.

It was go time.

Reggie tapped the link to the video conference on the screen, where they would watch the episodes—and each other—in a private virtual

viewing session not so different from how they'd originally met.

Gus N. has entered the meeting popped up on her screen and her stomach flipped.

She didn't care what Gus thought of her. This wasn't a date, it was a barter. But . . .

Her heart began to beat a little bit faster. This *felt* like a date. And first dates with people she hadn't met in person before often had one thing in common for Reggie—the moment when they looked at her disability instead of looking at her. She'd taken control of the world's reaction to her by using a flashy wheelchair, an expensive red sci-fi-inspired design that put Charles Xavier's to shame but was slightly impractical for most first dates. All of her public chairs had elements of flair to them. She'd never met with a guy she had a crush on while in pajamas and without the armor of her badass mobility devices.

She was nervous.

There was the brief pause as the connection between them linked, the little circle spinning on her screen, and she ripped the silk bonnet off and tossed it aside, running her fingers through her curls. The anticipation that she'd suppressed all day bloomed alongside the nervousness in her stomach, winding together like a briar patch. She remembered the last time she'd gone on a roller coaster—years and years ago—the almost overwhelming fear at the top of the ride that was only tolerable because you knew something exhilarating would follow.

Gus's static image shifted into a live video feed and God. Damn.

He was attractive. Really. Fucking. Attractive. There was that familiar square jawline and grapefruit-red mouth, and his plump lower lip. His face was lean and long, with slight hollows that delineated his cheekbones but didn't make him look gaunt. His brown eyes were hooded, gently sloped beneath thick brows, and his skin was golden tan with warm undertones, enhanced by the white sleeveless T-shirt he wore. The T-shirt that revealed toned arms and the shadow of hair beneath his arms.

She licked her lips even though they were moist and exfoliated—it was a reflex to the thirst trap that had just apparated onto her screen. “Hey, Gus.”

In the small square that showed her own face, she could see that her eyes were wide and, wow, this camisole was much more deeply cut than

she'd realized. She didn't have huge breasts, but they were very apparent thanks to the angle of her tablet's camera.

If Gus noticed, it didn't show. His expression didn't change until, finally, his mouth moved. "Hey."

She smiled because it was cool, finally getting to put a face—well, eyes and a nose and hair—with the voice, and he mirrored the action, revealing he also had a dimple in his left cheek. Just one cheek, as if someone had known that asymmetrical features were her catnip.

UNFAIR. COMPLETELY UNFAIR.

"I didn't think about some aspects of this when I suggested a video chat," he said, his brows drawing together. "I won't mind if you turn off the video feed on your end."

A nasty thought crept from the recesses of her mind, a well of doubt that she thought she'd long ago sealed over with the warding spell of her own confidence.

He doesn't want to look at you.

She slapped that thought down, crushing it like a soot sprite.

She was cute and she wouldn't let anyone plant seeds of doubt, especially not her own mind.

"You're the one who suggested video. Is there a problem?" Her brow raised in the video thumbnail.

He inhaled deeply, the hollow of his throat suddenly thrown into relief by shadow. "Well, no, but I'm realizing that maybe I was asking something unreasonable of you. Sleep is a private thing, and maybe you don't want me in your bed, so to speak."

She could see on the HD screen of her tablet that a blush was spreading across his cheeks. His gaze dropped away. Gus was embarrassed.

Gus is maybe having impure thoughts about your boobs.

She wasn't as upset about that as she should have been.

"No, it's fine." She pulled her blanket up over her chest so he could stop blushing. "Thank you for making sure, though."

His eyes lifted back up to the screen and his features softened a bit now that her cleavage was hidden. She'd wear her Tanuki T-shirt next time.

Or she'd buy more camisoles and let the chips fall where they may.

"Will you be hot?" he asked. She could see now that he was glistening, too, and probably not from a shimmer night mask. There was a fine sheen of sweat on his skin. "It's so humid."

“I have central air,” she said, trying not to sound smug and failing.

He smiled, and that dimple she’d seen a hint of deepened. “Show-off.”

Something warm whispered through Reggie’s stomach and she realized that even though her air conditioner was on full blast, she *was* suddenly hot.

“Well, I didn’t *invent* it. It came with the house.”

“You live in a house? Show-off.” He was still grinning and his gaze was still locked on her. He . . . was flirting? “I spent all my savings on avocado toast, so I live in a crappy apartment with a crappy roommate.”

“That sucks.” She shifted in mild discomfort. Even in college she’d had a single because, well because of what it always came down to. Her parents weren’t mega rich, but they were well off enough that certain things weren’t denied to them. “Um, so. *Reject Squad Ultra*? I can give you the basic sales pitch that I give to my follo—friends to convince them to watch, if you want.”

He leaned closer to his monitor, and Reggie could see the back of his computer chair and, not too far behind him, a door framed by white walls with no artwork. His room was maybe a third of the size of her bedroom.

“Go ahead,” he said, his attention totally on her. She could feel his focus, even through the screen.

“Well, it’s about two childhood enemies who end up at the same military high school. When they were younger, she beat him at every competition—and beat him up because they were supposed to get married when they grew up and he annoyed the hell out of her. And now they’re at this school, fighting dragons and minions of the Evil Queen, and they still have this sense of competition, and she hates that she can no longer beat him because she now falls asleep when her adrenaline starts going.”

“Because she’s cursed, right?” he asked. “She can’t beat him anymore because she’s changed.”

Reggie nodded, her hair brushing across her pillowcase and reminding her that she’d probably look like Sonic the Hedgehog tomorrow because she was trying to be cute.

“That’s it exactly,” she said. Her voice was a little raspy from emotion, and she cleared her throat before going on. “That’s—that’s what the show is *really* about. She’s bewitched so she can’t control when she falls asleep, especially in battle, and she can’t protect her people because of that. The real story is her fighting the old expectations she had for herself, and that the world had for her. Plus sisterhood. Plus friendship. Plus kissing.”

She blinked and willed herself not to embarrass herself by crying. She was a fucking rock star at keeping her emotions in check, except when she was talking about her very favorite shows, movies, or comics.

He was looking off to the side, as if thinking, then glanced back at the screen. “I see what went wrong on my first viewing. I was looking at what was happening instead of *why* the characters responded to what was happening in the way they did. Like, when I was a kid, our goldfish died and my brother was really sad and I told him being sad was pointless because everything died.”

“Ouch. Baby Gus was even more blunt, huh?”

“Yeah. And Dave punched me in the arm so hard I got a bruise. I was upset about that—it seemed unfair. A fish dying was logical, but punching your brother for pointing it out was not. But then my mom explained that Dave was sad, and when people are sad they don’t need facts, they need support.”

Reggie tried to imagine her mom saying something similar and failed.

“So then I went and built a casket for the fish using popsicle sticks and gave it to Dave. One of my first designs.”

“Oh my goodness.” Reggie grinned, imagining a tiny Gus with an even tinier casket, holding it up to his brother. “That’s so sweet, in a morbid way.”

“I guess.” He was writing something down on a paper, his mouth forming that familiar line of concentration. “The fish had already been flushed, though. Dave still has the casket.”

“Why do you need to know so much about this show?” she asked suddenly. Analyzing an anime was normal for her line of work, but Gus was an architect or something.

“Actually, this is somewhat related to you,” he said, looking back up at the screen. “You told me about escape rooms three years ago, and I started looking into them. I went to one eventually and solved it pretty easily, and started talking to the people who ran it. I started thinking of what kind of escape room I would make, building props and puzzles in my spare time. I work part-time designing games for home use, and I did a few rooms for a company last year. My next project is building one based on this show.”

“You’re building the escape room for Anime Con,” she said flatly. “And you have no idea what the show is about?”

Her readers had been looking forward to this aspect of the con since it had been announced. She was no fan of being locked in places she couldn't leave of her own accord, but even *she* had planned on taking a pass through it, for the love of PhilRora. This was a big deal, to a lot of people. And the designer apparently had no idea what he was doing.

She patted her curls in annoyance. "Of course they'd hire some guy with no knowledge of the show. *Of course.*"

"Reggie?"

She realized she was muttering aloud.

"Look, I'm not mad at you, but this is so typical. SO. TYPICAL. They just hire some random dude who might have ruined everything if he hadn't coincidentally been friends with the show's biggest fan."

"Wait a minute. Just wait a minute." His brows raised, and he held up a hand. "We're friends?"

"Well. Yeah," she said, voice still rough with aggravation. "I've talked to you on the phone more than once and now we're video chatting. That means we're friends."

That admission pushed her frustration to the back burner. They were friends for more reasons than that, if she counted their nightly conversations on the live stream and his voice lulling her to sleep when she needed it most.

"You're right," he said quietly. "I got so excited about the opportunity to be taken more seriously that I didn't even consider there were people like you who could do a better job."

"I couldn't," Reggie said with a sigh. "I'm great at a lot of things, but not design. I can't build an escape room, but I *can* consult on one."

She was already compiling a list of the ways this could actually work in her favor.

"I can't afford a consultant," Gus said. "I thought we could just watch the show and you could tell me why you think it's cute."

"I don't think it's cute, I think it's brilliant. And also . . . I don't need money. I'm the head of one of the biggest nerd sites on the internet. You can pay me by letting me be an official consultant on the *Reject Squad Ultra* escape room project, but that means we have to make sure that this escape room is perfect. I'm not linking my name to some half-assed project."

She could feel herself sliding away from sleep, into business mode, but this was more important than a good night's rest. Working on the *Reject*

Squad Ultra escape room would be huge for the site. And for her.

“I don—” His words were cut off by a police siren and he shut his mouth, waiting it out. When it had finally passed he shrugged. “Sorry.”

Reggie looked up at the screen. “It’s okay.”

“I don’t do things half-assed. It’s kind of a problem I have.” He wasn’t smiling, and there was no insinuation in his tone, but the look of concentration on his face upped the sexy impact of his words by several factors. She was sure Gus was telling the truth. He probably applied that same concentration to everything he got his hands on, and Reggie wouldn’t mind finding out how those hands would feel on her.

Arrgh, cut it out!

She gathered her scattered thoughts away from the Gus’s-hands-on-her-body fantasy trying to kick into gear. “If that’s true—”

Now *her* words were cut off by sirens. Sirens that sounded exactly the same.

They stared at each other through the screen.

“That was a weird coincidence,” she said. “Sirens in California and here.”

Gus ran a hand through his hair. “I moved to New York a while back. I still have a California cell phone number because my grandma has it memorized and she said she doesn’t want to have to remember a new one.”

Reggie stilled. “Oh.”

“I live in Queens.” He was looking at her oddly, his eyes asking the question his mouth wasn’t.

“I . . . live in Queens,” she said. “Too.”

He was nearby—that was *fucking weird*, but it was also something else that wasn’t at all undesirable. Within the last two days, he’d been a curious email reply, then a disembodied voice over the phone, and then he’d been separated by the buffer of video. Now, in the silence that followed the wail of the siren that had just passed both of them, he was more real somehow. This . . . whatever she’d put into motion by emailing him was more real. He was a man, looking down at her while she was in bed. The way her tablet was angled meant his face was just above hers, as if . . . as if . . .

Maybe you don’t want me in your bed.

Oh man. Gus had seriously reactivated her *he could get it* hormones, and they showed no signs of calming the fuck down. Maybe it was the lack

of sleep. Except she'd slept well the night before. Thanks to Gus and that voice of his.

"Hey," he said, and Reggie realized she'd heard this tone from him twice before—both times he'd been about to change their arrangement. Excitement and anticipation did a nervous twirl through her stomach.

"Hey what?" Her voice was a little sharp.

"Tomorrow is Saturday," he said.

"Yes?" Her heart was starting to beat faster.

"Do you have work?"

"I'm always working," she said.

"Even at night?"

"I am the night," she said, wanting to smack herself for spouting a random Batman quote at him. But her brain was moving in reverse from what she knew was coming because, frankly, she was nervous.

"Okay, The Night. If you're free at any point, we could binge watch the whole series this weekend and figure this out. Together." He rubbed a hand over his cheek. "I really need to get a lock on this project. The con isn't for a few months, but I need to have something solid to show them by . . . two weeks from Monday."

"Two weeks?" Reggie groaned.

"I have it basically figured out," he said. "It's just missing *something* in the overall flow, something that makes it cohesive."

"Fine. Watching the show will take six hours total. And we can spend two hours going over what you have so far. I have some things to do during the day, but maybe we can do five hours Saturday night and five hours Sunday night?"

"Okay," he said, his expression still serious. "My place? Your place? What are you comfortable with?"

Reggie's breath caught. "Wait. You want to watch together?"

His brows lifted. "Yeah. That's what I said."

"I thought you meant together like live stream together. But yeah, that's what we're doing now, why would you suggest it again." She didn't do panic, supposedly, but that was what she felt—mostly because, though Reggie was fairly cynical, she . . . didn't think this was a horrible idea. She knew it was one, agreeing to spend hours with an internet person she'd never met IRL, but she didn't *feel* it was one.

Reggie trusted her instincts—that was the difference between her and her twin. People called her the smart one, but she wasn't. She was the twin who felt something and then didn't tear that feeling apart with doubt. But most of those feelings had to do with business, not pleasure, and her gut was also telling her that if she met up with Gus—Gus of the sexy voice, lush mouth, and dexterous fingers—she might want to do more than talk about *Reject Squad Ultra*, and she'd thought there was nothing she wanted to do more than that.

"We can do that instead," he replied. "Live stream again. Yeah, that makes more sense."

"You can come to my place," she said, her voice a bit breathier than she would have liked.

Though most of her friends were online, scattered around the globe IRL, there'd been a time when Reggie had friends over often to watch movies, play board games, and generally nerd out. Those get togethers had dwindled in the last couple of years. Between her dedication to the site and her friends having kids or moving to more affordable areas, she hadn't sat with someone physically beside her as she watched a show she loved in way too long. She hadn't done much of *anything* besides work. Even when watching shows alone, she was often live-tweeting or taking notes for posts.

Just watching and getting to geek out while Gus was the one taking notes would be a nice change of pace.

"Yeah, my place is good. I'm not going to try to navigate your apartment in my wheelchair," she said firmly. "Bring everything you can related to the project, though. And I'm going to let people know you're coming, and will make your life a living hell if you try anything weird. I'm not mega-rich, but I'm vindictive enough to destroy you and everything you hold dear."

He leaned back in his chair, his desk lamp throwing shadows over his face. "Is this some kind of psychological trick to make me not want to come?"

"No, it's a blatant threat," she said casually.

His smile was almost indiscernible; there was just the barest upturn of his mouth and the slightest indentation at his cheek.

"Good, because if you were trying to scare me away, it *really* had the opposite effect," he said. "I won't do anything weird or weird adjacent, I promise."

She took a deep breath. "I'll text you my address. And you can let me know what you want for dinner."

"Are we having dinner, too?" He was still leaned back in his chair, his gaze on the screen. The question was playful, but he was looking at her like he was concentrating. Like she was a puzzle that he was trying to figure out.

"Of course," she said, indignant. She wouldn't invite someone over and not *feed* them, even if she was saving their ass.

"Maybe we can order the Domino's three for \$9.99," he suggested. "That's easy."

"I'll order pizza," she said. "Real pizza."

"Show-off," he said playfully, his smile widening. "I guess we're not watching tonight. I don't want to start via video and then watch the other episodes in person."

Reggie understood this logic. It was like reading one comic in print and then the next in digital. She'd do it, but only if necessary.

He squinted at the screen in a way that made it clear he was no longer looking at her, and the sound of him clicking his mouse filled the brief silence. "I dug up my old thesis, which is a treasure trove of boring that will put you right to sleep."

"Something even more boring than last night? Give it to me," she said, yawning. When her eyes opened, Gus's cheeks were pink.

She almost pulled the cover more firmly up to her neck.

She didn't.

Chapter Four

Gus wasn't a math genius, but he knew a thing or two about probability. It was important when trying to solve numeric puzzles. He knew that the probability of him living within walking distance of 26InchRims, a.k.a. Reggie, wasn't totally weird if you factored in things like rent prices and popular areas for people in their age range. But it still kind of felt like something more than chance drawing them together.

When his SuperLyft pulled up in front of her house, it was clear that, though they lived relatively close to one another, there was a different kind of distance between them.

The place was basically a mini-castle, especially compared to the decrepit house with aluminum siding where he was renting the cheapest bedroom he could find. He could have afforded better, but cheap rent meant more savings and more leeway with jobs. He was fairly certain his apartment was illegal in some way, but it wasn't a firetrap and he would take what he could get. Reggie's house wasn't huge, but it was impressive, as was the well-maintained yard in front of it. It even had a small turret, covered with green ivy that had wound up from the garden and covered one side of the brick house.

She was turret-in-Queens rich.

He got out of the car, bringing his huge duffel bag of props with him. He almost slammed the door of the car shut, then reached back in and pulled out his grocery bag containing produce from the vegetable market near his house and a jar of his secret weapon.

The street was quiet, apart from the occasional shriek of kids playing inside one of the houses. The afternoon sun beat down on the neighborhood, joining forces with humidity to immediately sap the energy from anyone who dared step outside.

Gus was already wilting as he walked up to the gate surrounding the house and pushed the buzzer on an intercom. He expected to have to state who he was to a butler or something, but the latch to the gate popped open and he walked up a smoothly inclined ramp that started right at the gate to ensure that the angle wasn't too dramatic. Good design, and uncommon because most ramps were crafted with no real thought to the user beyond being serviceable. It also said something to whoever entered, as all design subtly did: Reggie was not the type to make do—she made sure her needs were met in a world that usually didn't.

There was a branch off of the ramp, a concrete path through a garden, curving toward the back of the house under a trellis covered by the brambles of a rosebush. The grass was mowed and neat, but the flowers and other plants were all just a little wild.

The porch was decorated with a rustic American style, with white wicker rocking chairs and low matching tables on the carefully distressed yellow wood floor.

The door swung open and he looked down to see Reggie seated in a bright yellow wheelchair with a plastic bucket seat design.

"Hi." She wore a white T-shirt with a scene from *Reject Squad Ultra* screen printed onto it—Aurora shooting Phil a dirty look—and loose jeans that were rolled to just above her ankles. Her tennis shoes were white flats with a design that was almost indecipherable . . . no, it was the cat from *Reject Squad Ultra*. She was *really* dedicated.

Her face was just as it had appeared on his screen—wide brown eyes behind too-big black-framed glasses, a pert nose, dusky pink lips. She had freckles on her nose and cheeks, just the lightest dusting over her golden-brown skin, and her reddish curls were pulled back into a puff ponytail. This was the person behind the anime cat avatar, who he'd spent months talking to late at night.

This was his friend.

When he'd heard her voice, his next impulse had been wanting to see her face. When he'd seen her face, he'd wanted to see her in person. Now here she was, and yup, he wanted more again. He wanted to trace those freckles with his tongue. He wanted to feel the spring of her curls beneath his hand, to be close enough to count the dozen different colors that made up the vibrant shade. There was no *maybe this is a bad idea* or *let's see how*

this goes. Gus was a man whose decisions, while impulsive, were generally deeply rooted.

He wanted Reggie.

“What are you looking at?” she asked, one side of her mouth pulling into an annoyed grimace. Her hand dropped to the wheel of her chair defensively, as if she might move away from him, and he realized there was a reason people stared at her that was completely unrelated to why he’d been doing it.

“Sorry. It’s just that you’re beautiful,” he clarified. Her eyes went wide. Maybe that hadn’t been the right thing to say instead of “hello.” But it was the truth, and he imagined that lying and saying she wasn’t beautiful wouldn’t work in his favor at this point. Best to change course. He held up the plastic bag. “I brought salad fixings. To go with the pizza?”

“Thanks.” Her furrowed brow showed that she was confused by his directness, his salad offering, or both. “And, um, thanks. Hi. Come in.”

Gus slid off his shoes at the door and took in the way Reggie’s shoulders were slightly tensed as she looked up at him. He was a stranger who had just called her beautiful, and while she was far from weak given the way her sleeves were tight around her biceps, it had to be somewhat disconcerting having him in her house.

“Thank you for inviting me into this sweet, sweet air-conditioning,” he said. “Do you want to eat first and talk about the escape room later? Or go through the ideas I have first and then eat? I’m leaving the game plan entirely up to you.”

“Why don’t you bring that into the kitchen and then give me your plan so far so I can look over it,” she said, her tone a little businesslike. “The pizza got here a few minutes ago and is keeping warm in the oven. You can make the salad and we’ll go over your ideas in the dining room while we eat. Does that work?”

He’d been right—she was a woman used to getting what she wanted, because she was the kind of person who had plans and wasn’t scared to delegate them. Gus liked people like this—there was a difference between being bossy and being clear, and Reggie seemed to be right in the sweet spot.

“Sounds good to me.” He walked beside Reggie, so she didn’t have to look back to keep an eye on him.

The hallway was central in the house, given the placement of the doorway, with one room on each side, leading to a more open area toward the back of the house. One of the doors they passed was closed, but through the other Gus caught a glimpse of several wheelchairs, at least one of which looked like something from a sci-fi movie. He imagined none of them had come cheaply.

“You have a lot of those,” he said.

She glanced up at him, and when she spoke there was a frost in the air that didn’t come from the AC. “The device I depend on to navigate the world? Yes. I have more than one.”

“Do they all have different functions? Or do you just like having different colors?”

“Oracle, lights on.” She wheeled into the room as the lights flipped on, then turned so she was parallel to him. “Right now, I’m sitting in Blanche, my house chair good for lounging around in caftans and eating cheesecake. Casual but still saucy. Over there we have Akira, my power chair for when I want to make a statement, save my friends, or fuck up the status quo all without breaking a sweat. Over there is Optimus Prime, for when I need to travel over rough terrain, which is basically most terrain in the five boroughs when you use a wheelchair because no one gives a fuck about accessibility or maintaining infrastructure. Namor is my beach buddy, with special wheels for moving across sand. That’s Evangelion, my light, stealthy, easily maneuverable chair, and, lastly, Voltron, a specially made Franken-chair that can be configured a few different ways.”

He appreciated that all of these were nerdy references, though he didn’t get them or particularly care because most of his focus was on how cool Reggie was. The way she spoke with easy, confident knowledge—and how she seemed to be daring him to contradict or question her with the raise of a brow.

Gus was a man who enjoyed a challenge, and something told him that Reggie was the best kind of challenge. “Impressive.”

She smiled, a defiant glint in her eye as she caressed the arm of her chair. “Blanche here is 3-D printed. I’ve been beta testing her for a group trying to perfect an affordable chair that can be made to order, since lots of people who need mobility devices can’t afford one good chair let alone an entire fleet.”

“That’s awesome,” he said. “I’ve 3-D printed some small parts for escape room stuff, but I never thought about this application of it.”

She maneuvered around him, heading back out into the hallway.

“Oracle, lights off. And play *Reject Squad Ultra* OST, please.”

“Of course, Reggie,” a robotic voice announced from hidden speakers as they entered the living room. The flute-driven intro of the show’s pop-rock theme song piped into the large room. The walls were a creamy orange that reminded Gus of sherbet, accented by a brown leather sofa set and a few low tables in dark wood.

“Just getting us in the mood,” she said, looking up at him.

A huge painting of Aurora and her nemesis, the Evil Queen Briar Rose, hung above the fireplace, which Gus found odd—both the fact that Reggie had a fireplace and the composition of the painting. It was painted to be a replica of the famous painting of Dido Belle and her cousin. Kind of weird. A cardboard cutout of Aurora and Phil in a tender embrace stood in the corner, next to sliding doors that led to a backyard.

“Why do I feel like I’m already in the *Reject Squad Ultra* escape room?” Gus asked playfully as he handed her the notebook with his plans for the escape room.

“Because I’ve locked all the doors and I’m not letting you leave until you love this show as much as I do,” she said, a slightly maniacal gleam in her eye.

“You said you weren’t an otaku.” Gus followed her through the dining room to the kitchen, done in yellow and ivory to complement the orange of the living room, where she pulled out a cutting board, sharp knife, and salad spinner. She placed them on the one high counter space along the kitchen walls. Everything else was slightly lower to the ground than average, modified to be more accessible from her wheelchair. The design was fantastic—clean lines, open floor space so that she could navigate easily.

“I told you I’m not an otaku. I’ll also turn you into an X-Men, Iron Heart, and Aquicorn Cove stan if given the opportunity. All in due time.” She said this with perfect seriousness and Gus couldn’t help but grin in return.

“Well, I’ll stay without resistance until at least September because I can’t return to my apartment now that I’ve experienced this AC. We can watch and read whatever you want.”

“Exxxcellent.” There was warmth in her eyes as she looked up at him, and Gus’s chest went a little tight. “First, I read your escape room notes and save your ass.”

She moved into the dining room, pulling her chair in on one side of the table and then poring over his notes. Gus got to work chopping and plating up the vegetables in silence. Every time he glanced into the dining room, her expression was unreadable. Did she think it was total garbage?

He’d noticed that her hands shook during their video chat, and had decided on vegetables that could be easily speared. He cut both the carrots and cucumbers flat and slightly thicker than he usually did, and chopped the lettuce into bite-size pieces so there would be no need to struggle with a whole huge leaf, which he hated too.

The vegetables didn’t actually matter because the dressing was the main attraction. Gus enjoyed cooking—a recipe was just another form of puzzle solving after all. Collecting the right ingredients, mixing them at the exact amount to create something delicious instead of disgusting. This salad dressing was his favorite mainly because the results were almost always replicable and the taste was better than anything he’d had in a restaurant.

He looked at her again to find her mouth twisted to the side as she stared into space.

“That bad?”

She glanced up quickly, her gaze distant at first and then focusing on him. “No! It’s good. I just started thinking about something that might be helpful.”

“You know, I realized that you’ve already helped me a lot with this project,” he said, adding the last bit of garnish to the salad. “Because I was going through the links I’d compiled and the most useful ones were from this site called GirlsWithGlasses. And there’s a little anime avatar that looks an awful lot like you but with short hair.”

She grinned, not sheepishly at all. “So you figured out my secret identity?”

“Yup. And I also figured out that this convention will be pretty big for you, too,” he said. “Your site is huge and seems to be growing by the day. How do you even have the time to help me while dealing with your own stuff?”

“I’m actually always moving slightly faster than the speed of light,” she said. “It looks like I’m shaking unless you have the mutant ability to see

things moving this fast. But it also means I can do more than any mere mortal.”

She didn’t look at him, but he could sense that she was attuned to his reaction. Gus didn’t think of the way his brain worked as a disability, but it was classified as one, and he had some idea of what it was like meeting new people and waiting for them to notice that something about him was different.

He carried the large salad bowls to the table, placed his down, and then pulled away a layout schematic that she was looking at. She glared up at him, but then her eyes widened as he placed her bowl down in front of her.

“Mutant powers?” He added a slice from each box of pizza to their respective plates and sat down across from her. “Show-off.”

“I can read minds too.”

“Can you?” He thought about how awkward it would be if she could because he really couldn’t stop thinking about how pretty she was and wondering how her mouth would feel against his, which he shouldn’t be thinking of at all.

“Yes. So watch it.” There was something in her gaze that made him think maybe she did know what he was thinking, and maybe she didn’t mind.

“You didn’t answer how you have time to help me,” he said, trying to get his thoughts back on track.

“I made time because I want my voice recordings.” She narrowed her eyes. “Also, if you mess up the escape room, I’m gonna have to hear from angry fans. And again, I’m not helping. I’m *consulting* and will be given credit for such, which is good for business.”

She looked at him across the table, expression shrewd as if she was going to say something else. She looked down at the salad instead.

“What you have so far is a good start,” she said, then speared a cucumber drenched in dressing and lifted it to her mouth. Her eyes widened as she chewed, then closed as a dreamy smile spread over her face. “This is so good. Oh my god! Where did you get this dressing? Trader Joe’s?”

“I made it.” Gus grinned before taking a bite of his own salad.

“Okay, permission to stay until September granted,” she said. “Your rent can be paid by keeping me in salad dressing every day. Like, literally. I have a huge bathtub, you can submerge me like Wolverine in a Weapon X facility.”

Gus chewed without responding, in part because he had no idea what the latter words meant, in part because his brain was stuck on *bathtub* and *submerge me*. He didn't need to be imagining Reggie's body slick with delicious dressing. His brain wasn't cooperating, though, and the look of pure bliss on her face wasn't helping.

Bathtub.

Naked.

Lick.

Okay, no one had even said anything about licking, but that image popped into his head and his mind seemed reluctant to part with it. Gus picked up a slice of his pizza and shoved almost half of it into his mouth, needing to do something, anything to keep his thoughts from continuing down their current path—even if that meant possible asphyxiation.

"I hope you like artichoke leaves," she said. "My favorite pizza topping."

All he knew about artichokes is that they'd once been considered an aphrodisiac—he'd picked that up in a trivia puzzle game.

"Artichokes are great. And I left a jar of this dressing in your fridge," he said after he'd swallowed the cheesy slice, voice so deep he felt it rasp in his throat.

Her head whipped up and her gaze was warm as she looked at him. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip, and paired with the way she was staring at him, he couldn't tell if she was reacting to the dressing or him. That he wasn't sure made his brain rewind back to that whole licking scenario.

No, he was here to work on a project. Not to think about Reggie's tongue swiping over her lower lip, or his tongue running over her—

"The escape room!" he shouted. She jumped in her seat and he recalibrated his tone. "You think the overall idea is good?"

"Yeah. I think your initial idea of having it be a mission to retrieve information from the traitorous Captain Kelso's camp is good . . ."

"But?"

"But while the puzzles you've incorporated so far are cool, overall they don't match the spirit of the show or the escape room in general. Also, Kelso is a bad guy but he's not important. The evil queen is Aurora's nemesis, so something related to her would have much more emotional impact, especially given the ending of the show." She paused to chew her pizza, her eyes darting back and forth as if she was reading something only

she could see. “Oh, and this escape room is a cooperative game. Many of the people playing it will be taking on the personae of these characters while they play, and the puzzles should match the strengths and weaknesses of the characters on the show and also make the people playing feel a growing sense of community, mirroring the Reject Squad itself.”

Gus was no longer thinking about licking, but only because something much more intense was distracting him.

“Your brain,” he said. His heart was beating fast and he wanted to maybe get down on one knee because that was what he linked with the sudden, overwhelming feeling welling up in him. “You’re a genius.”

“I wouldn’t go that far . . . no, you’re right, I guess I am when it comes to some things,” she said with a shrug. “I’ve spent my entire life ingesting media then discussing why I love it with other fans. And then I turned that into a website, where I had to build trust with thousands of readers, had to really figure out what they wanted and how to give it to them—how to show them that they are just as important to me as the stuff I talked about—and also how to bring some of them together in a safe place. So yeah. You can call me a genius, I won’t fight you on that. *Polymath* sounds good, too.”

Gus just stared at her because even though he was impulsive, he knew he couldn’t always act on things. He needed to take several steps back and try to come at this from a different angle, but his thoughts were like a maze puzzle with every path leading to Reggie. Reggie and her brain and a tub of dressing, which didn’t sound sexy at all but was really working for him in that instance.

Get it together.

She finished the last of her salad. “I have more notes, but let’s watch the first few episodes and then we can see where your head is at.”

He tried very hard not to let his suddenly active imagination take that and run with it.

She pulled the two boxes of pizza toward her and stacked them on her lap before heading down the hall toward what she’d called the TV room. It was exactly that. One side of the small room was taken up with a huge red couch that was basically a king bed with arms. The walls were decorated with what looked like oversize black-and-white comic book pages in red frames at matching intervals.

The wall facing the couch had a HUGE TV hung on it—it appeared to be some kind of projector screen.

“Holy crap,” he said, helping her place the pizza boxes on a long tray table that passed over the couch and could be rolled away and pushed against the wall when not in use.

“This is my second office,” she said as she pulled up to one side of the couch, and he caught a trace of that defensiveness in her tone. “I do a lot of work in here, since watching things is part of my job.”

“It’s awesome,” he said. “And watching stuff is hard. I can’t always manage to sit down and focus. Understanding some things can be even harder, which is why I’m here, I guess.”

She locked the brakes on her chair, gripped the handles, and then pushed herself to a standing position. Her arms shook a bit, but she transferred herself to the couch smoothly, crossing her legs before reaching for the remote resting on the table.

He dropped onto the other side. It was big, but not big enough that he could forget she was beside him. The lights dimmed and he shifted in his seat.

They’d had dinner and were going to binge watch a show, and Gus hadn’t felt uncomfortable at all yet, but he was definitely starting to feel nervous.

“Why’d you name your site GirlsWithGlasses?” he asked to distract himself.

“Because I’m a jerk. Well, that and because when strangers decide to ask what’s ‘wrong’ with me, I tell them that my vision is 20/80,” she said drily, before pushing her glasses pointedly up her nose.

Gus laughed.

“Oh, I have something for you.” She leaned over the side of the couch suddenly, her T-shirt riding up to reveal a swath of brown skin. Gus quickly looked away because his impulsive mind was already wondering how that skin would feel under his palm.

No. She’s a friend.

A friend who was pretty and smart and probably a really good kisser.

When she popped back up after digging in the pouch on the side of her chair, she handed over what at first looked like a broken Rubik’s Cube, but when he took it into the palm of his hand, he realized it was a Rubik’s Snake, kind of like an upscale fidget toy.

“I know it’s not really a puzzle, but I got one in a promotional box and they’re supposed to be fun to just twist into different shapes. I know you

like keeping your hands busy . . .” Her eyes went wide, and she looked down. “You know what I mean. Anyway, if you want it, it’s yours.”

Gus tossed the toy from one hand to another, then began twisting it into a different shape, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. She was thoughtful, even if she tried to pretend she was helping him for purely selfish reasons. “Thanks.”

“Ready?” she asked.

“Let’s do this.”

Chapter Five

Reggie had worried that maybe something like this would happen when she invited Gus over. She was a passionate woman—of course she would be too into the show at episode six to say no when he turned to her with pleading eyes and asked, “Can we keep watching?”

A half-series binge had turned into a full-series marathon fueled by Mountain Dew, a second round of salad and pizza, and a dessert of strawberry cheesecake.

There had been no awkwardness—well, there was, but it was the awkwardness of catching yourself being way too comfortable with someone you didn’t really know.

The awkwardness of wondering whether the person next to you felt your presence like a static shock, even when their eyes were glued to the screen, because you certainly felt theirs.

The awkwardness of Gus having said she was beautiful when he’d walked in, and the words playing over and over in her mind because her brain’s loop feature was intent on making her blush herself to a crisp.

At 2 a.m., the last strains of the show’s closing song were playing and the credits rolled over the final scene, a pan shot of Aurora and Charming holding hands on the battlements of a fort as they looked out over a village, where dragons, orcs, and humans were working to repair all that had been destroyed. The Evil Queen, actually Aurora’s twin sister separated at birth, Briar Rose, stepped up on Aurora’s other side, and they joined hands, too.

Reggie held back her tears—she cried every time, but she didn’t do crying in front of other people. She wiggled her nose and blinked rapidly, trying to withstand the pressure of anime-induced emotion. Beside her, Gus was writing something in his notebook, which he’d been doing all night when not watching the show or talking to Reggie.

“Okay, I think it was really helpful watching the show through the lens of what you said earlier. The first time I watched, I just thought that she was being rude and selfish, but really she was hiding her disappointment about the way her life changed after being hexed, and her anger at how differently everyone treated her because she couldn’t control when she fell asleep.”

“Right.” Reggie’s throat was rough, so she didn’t continue. She wiggled her nose and raised her brows, hoping Gus didn’t look over as she fought her feels.

“And Phil isn’t just some jerk always trying to make her mad who she suddenly falls for. He’s the guy who’s known her forever, and who tries to show her his feelings for her haven’t changed by still bothering her like he did when they were kids.”

“So pure,” Reggie said with a nod and a sniffle.

“The Evil Queen Briar Rose isn’t forgiven too easily. She was just trying to make the world pay for separating her from her sister at birth and sending her away to the evil sorcerer. And the squadron that initially sees Aurora and the other ‘rejects’ as a hindrance learns that everyone has a skill that is helpful, and everyone has a trait that can set them back, but when you put the right people together . . . it’s like a puzzle!”

Reggie glanced at him, at the brightness in his eyes and the huge smile on his face. God, at the beginning of the night she’d told herself that his inability to love the Reject Squad was a good solid reason to not be into him, and now here he was radiating pure, unrestrained fannish glee.

She was so screwed.

“Yeah. It’s finding the pieces that work together. And that’s what you have to do with the escape room. You already have a lot of good ideas, like the dragon bone keys, the egg hatchery, and the barracks. But the final room has to be something really spectacular.”

“I’m working on it,” he said. “I need something that creates the same vibe . . . people should feel as good leaving the escape room as they did watching the credits roll.”

“Exactly!” She couldn’t help it. She reached across the couch and poked him in the arm. “I converted you. You’re totally team PhilRora now, aren’t you?”

“Let’s just say I enjoyed it way more this time,” he said. “Probably because I watched it with you.”

Reggie's yawn had already been building but it chose that moment, as she was deciphering whether Gus *was trying* to say something sweet or just stating a change in viewing conditions, to burst out. She slapped a palm over her mouth, a bit too hard because her hand jerked at the last minute.

"I see my voice is working its magic on you. You should get to bed." He yawned, too. "I can call you from the car if you want me to finish the job once you're under the covers."

She glanced at him as she pulled her hand from her mouth, her lips tingling from her accidental self-own and her cheeks burning from Gus's ability to always find the most arousing way to state something. Being around him apparently turned her into a character from a high school-set anime.

"You're leaving? We still haven't talked about how to specifically integrate this stuff into the escape room," she said and hoped he didn't see her words for what they were—reluctance. "The apartment downstairs is set up for guests, if you want to stay, and then we can have a breakfast meeting."

What? Why hadn't she just let him leave?

"So, a real-life slumber party?" he asked, his voice gravelly.

Reggie swallowed. "I guess we can call it that, though I wasn't planning on us doing facials or anything."

She snapped her mouth shut. She may have still been riding the Mountain Dew high, or maybe it was all the happy-anime-ending endorphins rushing through her veins, but everything they said to each other seemed to be dipped in innuendo sauce and served with a side of 'let's bang' fries.

Gus was looking down at the notepad in his lap, his pen making jerky motions as he doodled. "Do you have anyone who would maybe object to me spending the night with you?"

"One, you're not spending the night with me, you're staying in a separate apartment—if you want. Two, I'm grown," she said. She *was* grown, but she'd still sent his information to her two friends with a "Hanging out with a guy, open in case of fuckery" disclaimer. She'd also added the note that the info should be sent to her sister if anything happened, but hadn't told Portia herself yet because, well, she didn't know how to talk to her about this kind of stuff. "I don't need anyone's permission."

“I mean, do you have a *person* who would *object* to my presence,” he said, looking at her from the corner of his eye. “Like a person you’re dating.”

“Oh.” Reggie’s whole body went hot and her armpits got the jalapeno tingles from nervous sweat.

Sexy. Real sexy.

“No. I don’t have one of those. Do you?”

“Nope.” One word, and his voice was so low that she felt that bass in her own chest. There was emphasis in that word that seemed to say *I’m grown, too, and maybe I’ll demonstrate that to you.*

“There’s air-conditioning. In the apartment.” Reggie was only pushing a little because his staying made more sense, not because she wanted anything to happen. Totally not that.

Gus grinned, his dimple creasing the cheek that faced her. “Cool. I’ll make breakfast for you.”

“You don’t have to pay me back,” she said quickly. “I can make my own breakfast.”

He looked at her full-on, his thick brows arching into a shape that was somehow both arousing and placating.

“I’m sure you can. I want to do it, though.”

“Fine.” She slid to the edge of the couch and maneuvered herself into her chair, glad that her pounding heart and spinning thoughts didn’t tangle her arms up. “I’ll take you to the apartment.”

He walked beside her, the sound of his steps mingling with the sound of her wheels on hardwood in the quiet hallway. They stopped in front of a closed door in the kitchen, which she unlocked with a key that was already in the knob.

“Here we are.” She reached up to flip the light switch, illuminating the stairs that led down to the apartment. She could access it through a ramp in the backyard, or by scooting down the stairs on her butt if she needed to.

“Hmm.” He looked down the stairs dubiously. “I don’t watch a lot of movies, but once my brother forced me to watch one called *Saw*. He said it was about puzzles so I would like it, but it was people getting locked into rooms and tortured.”

Reggie burst out laughing. “Oh em gee, I’m not going to Jigsaw you. The apartment is nice, cleaned once a week, and there are no booby traps.

This door will be locked, but you can leave through the front entrance, the door that leads to the backyard, or any of the windows, I promise.”

Gus was still staring down the stairs. “Actually, now that I think of it, that movie was just a bunch of really macabre escape rooms.”

Reggie frowned. “Don’t get any ideas. The *Reject Squad Ultra* room needs to be wholesome and pure, not pitting attendees against each other in a deadly game of survival.”

He grinned. “Okay, now that we’ve both freaked each other out, I guess we can get ready to go to sleep. I’ll call you in . . . fifteen minutes?”

She hadn’t even thought about their nightly call. Well, she had, but assumed they wouldn’t be doing it since they’d just hung out for hours. She couldn’t say no, of course.

“Make it twenty?” she asked.

“Sure.” Reggie waited until he got to the bottom of the stairs and let himself into the apartment, and then closed and locked the door.

She headed to her bedroom, which was down the hall, and then into her bathtub for a quick shower before getting into her oversize T-shirt and under the blankets.

She was glad that he was a flight away from her, because she needed the breathing room. She was attracted to him, but that was nothing new—as she’d already stated, she was grown. She was no stranger to FWBs that were more B than F and other similar arrangements that didn’t interfere with her life—that didn’t interfere with GirlsWithGlasses. What happened at Comic-Con stayed at Comic-Con, and all that.

This was different because she couldn’t remember the last time the F and B came together in one much too appealing package. No, that wasn’t true. She remembered, and the few times she’d given relationships a shot, they had eventually crossed the line to someone trying to tell her what to do with her future, trying to tell her what to do with her money, or, worse, trying to “fix” her. She didn’t need to worry about Gus’s intentions, or whether one day he’d tell her to stop working so much—or that he wanted to stop working and maybe he could just take care of her, because didn’t she need the help, anyway?

Just the thought of it made her feel like she was thrown into a dark room with a clump of hungry Vashta Nerada.

When her phone rang, she answered quickly, blocking out memories of bad exes and the thought that Gus could one day be among their number.

This was business . . . kind of.

“Hello?” Why was her voice all weird and high-pitched? *Ugh.*

“Hey,” he said. His voice was lower than usual, as if he was trying to balance out her weirdness by increasing the sexy. “Thanks again for letting me stay the night.”

“Well, it wouldn’t make sense for you to leave and then come back in a few hours,” she said.

“I guess not.” He was quiet for a minute. “Tonight was a change of pace for me. I don’t really watch TV shows or movies when I’m by myself, but it’s fun with you.”

He was using the same tone he had during his live stream when turning a puzzle over in his mind . . . or his hands. Working through his own thoughts, out loud.

“Aw, you’re making me blush,” she said, trying to sound like she was joking although her face was, in fact, warm. Her neck was, too, and so was her body, the heat emanating from a blazing warning beacon lit in her belly, signaling that her defenses were under siege. She wasn’t sure she wanted anyone to ride to her aide, though, even if she’d written some wild Strider fanfic back in the day.

“That’s fun for me, too,” Gus said, and she definitely wasn’t imagining the teasing in his voice.

“What is?”

“Making you blush.”

She sucked in a breath as the warning beacon blazed high, though she knew it for what it was—desire. “Damn, Gus. Come on.”

Had he really noticed her flushing? He hadn’t seemed to be watching her particularly closely, but one thing she’d noticed about him during his live stream was that his attention to detail was kind of scary. That had shown in the notes he’d taken for the escape room, too. He had several pages just about the color schemes used on the show. Of course, he’d noticed her getting all hot and bothered. And apparently he’d liked it.

Shit.

“Sorry,” he said. He didn’t sound sorry. “There’s a book on the bedside table down here about investing funds and managing money, which sounds pretty boring. I can read from that.”

She already had her toe dragging along the surface of the warm pool of improper flirting. She dipped both feet in.

“Maybe you should. Because if you say anything else about making me blush, I’m going to have to ask how you’d do that and then I definitely won’t get any sleep.”

He made a sound on the other end of the phone, a sound she was also familiar with. She hadn’t realized while watching in real time while preoccupied with her own work, but after bingeing episodes every time she struggled with insomnia, she’d noticed the little grunt of satisfaction he made when he’d done something right and was figuring out his next move.

God, she had internalized *that* minuscule detail about him. She should’ve known this internet crush ran deeper than she’d wanted to admit when she first had the urge to find him. She should’ve known that some part of her had wanted this—him. Gus, not just his voice. She’d never expected him to live close enough for her fantasy to become a reality, and she’d rationalized each step of this weird-ass reunion until now here they were, teetering on the edge of phone sex that could be real sex because the call was literally coming from inside the house.

“I think the first way I’m going to do that tomorrow,” he finally responded, his voice huskier, “is to make you French toast for breakfast.”

“Um. Okay,” she said. Maybe she’d misread his signals. “French toast is good.”

“You haven’t had *my* French toast,” he said. “I’m going to make it for you for breakfast, and I think you’ll understand after we’re done eating.”

She thought about his salad dressing. It had damn near been an orgasm in her mouth. What could he do with something sweet?

“I’ve had some amazing French toast before so this had better be spectacular.” She paused, thinking about how sometimes she missed obvious things. “Wait, is this like, a euphemism for sex?”

Gus trilled his evil kitten laugh. “No. Though that’d be fun to do with you, too.”

“Gustave! Are you kidding me with this?” Her nipples were hard and her whole body was thrumming; it was completely unfair that he was using his voice like this.

“No. I’m serious.” Again, just stated matter-of-factly, exactly how he’d called her beautiful.

She growled in annoyance at his earnestness. “That was a hypothetical—okay, just read from that book, please. We can talk about this more in the morning.”

“Over French toast?”

She shifted in bed, turning onto her side, and then smiled as excitement gripped her. “Yes.”

“Good.” Gus started reading and only the sheer late hour and the power of his voice dragged her into sleep.

She was turned on and her head was spinning as her eyes fluttered shut—she didn’t think Gus played games outside of actual games, but this was a risk she wasn’t sure she could take. He was already in her ears, and in her head—what would happen if she let him into her heart?

Chapter Six

Gus didn't know if seducing someone with French toast was possible, but he was willing to give it a try. He liked Reggie. He wanted Reggie. He wasn't certain, because he hadn't asked, but it seemed she was at the very least attracted to him, too.

Whether a relationship could work was a matter of chance, it seemed to him. Some women liked the way he looked, and apparently the way he talked. Occasionally, additional variables lined up to push things past liking—lust, loneliness, location. He'd had two serious relationships and several less serious ones; the serious relationships had started with the alignment of variables plus the *certainty* that dropped down onto Gus from the sky, though he'd never been this flattened by it.

He showered and brushed his teeth with the products left in the bathroom for guests, but was wearing the same white T-shirt and jeans he'd had on the day before and his face was rough with short stubble.

When he knocked on the door at the top of the stairs, Reggie called out, "It's unlocked!" He found her in the kitchen, setting out milk, mixing bowls, eggs, and a loaf of challah bread. She was wearing the pajamas she'd had on in their video chat, the intense blue top with a plunging neckline, and Gus almost nodded in approval. Her hair was up in bun on top of her head.

"Good morning," she muttered, not meeting his gaze. She moved past him and began rummaging around in a cabinet, bending forward so that he could see the flex of her back muscles and the stretch of her long neck. She was tense and he was so tempted to rest his hand there and massage away whatever was bothering her, but he'd only met her in person yesterday. They weren't at the stage where he could just touch her, outside of his imagination.

"Good morning," he replied. "Need help with anything?"

“No.” Her response was sharp and might have hurt another person’s feelings, but Dave had often told Gus to fuck off before he’d had his coffee, so this was relatively tame in Gus’s experience of people he cared about waking up on the wrong side of the bed.

He walked over and knelt beside her, and she looked at him from the corner of her eye. “I said I don’t need help with anything.”

“Are you not a morning person?” he asked once he had her attention. “I can quietly make breakfast and not bother you, or I can go. I don’t want to get in your way or make you uncomfortable. Or be your punching bag.”

She sighed.

“Sorry. I’m an anytime-of-day person,” she said. “I just . . .”

She stopped rummaging and leaned back in her chair. Her head dropped back a bit in frustration, her chin pointing upward, and the sunlight coming in through the window made a halo of the curls that had escaped her bun—red, gold, brown, rust, bronze, glowing in yellow summer sun—that Gus found even more distracting than her shirt.

“My sister is in a situation in Scotland,” she said, dropping her chin back down. “She found out the guy she’s apprenticing with and maybe dating is the secret lovechild of a recently deceased duke, and heir to a Scottish dukedom.”

Gus pulled his gaze from her hair to her face, frowning in confusion. There was no smile, no mischief in her eyes. She was serious. “Really? That’s a thing that happens to people?”

“Apparently. She and her friends get into some weird situations, to be honest. Anyway, she was going to announce the duke stuff on my site because she’s been writing a column for me. But we got scooped by some shitty tabloid, and I had to scramble this morning when a reader sent me the link.” She looked distinctly not pleased with that. “Now my sister’s getting dragged into articles about this guy because this is some big scandal, and I have a bad feeling. Portia isn’t like me.”

Portia, her fraternal twin. Like Aurora and Briar Rose. He thought about the painting above the fireplace, and a piece of the puzzle that was Reggie moved into place.

“What do you mean she’s not like you?”

“She’s not tough. I’m like a pineapple, or one of those spiky green fruits.”

“Durian?” She nodded. Gus couldn’t let that stand. “Have you *smelled* durian? You’re no durian.”

“Okay. I’m a pineapple. She’s a . . . pear. She bruises easily, so to speak.”

“Isn’t *she* the one who hurt *you*, though?” he asked. He wasn’t sure he liked this sister of hers, who’d made Reggie feel uncared for in the past—he’d seen bruised pineapples before.

“Yeah, but not on purpose.” She sighed again.

“Does it matter if it was on purpose?”

She shot him a frustrated look. “It’s complicated. But if you Google ‘Duke of Edinburgh love child’ you can see what everyone is saying.”

Gus pulled out his phone and did as she said while she began moving things around in the cabinet again. Several articles that had published in the last few hours popped up, and the top image was a grumpy-looking dude with salt-and-pepper hair and a sword standing next to some kind of alternate universe version of Reggie, in fancy clothes and with way more makeup.

“You’re prettier,” he said.

“Don’t shit talk my sister.” She leaned up from the cabinet, pointing a cast-iron skillet at him in a menacing fashion. Her arm shook, but her grip didn’t budge. “We’ve had our parents comparing us all of our lives. I know you’re trying to be nice but . . . chill with that.”

She placed the skillet in her lap and rolled toward the stove, clearly annoyed.

“Sorry,” he said. “She’s pretty, too, of course, because she looks like you. Kind of. It’s just that I like you better. I should have kept that to myself, though.”

“Gus.” Her voice was softer and her shoulders were shaking with laughter. “Thanks. Come make me breakfast.”

“What is a swordbae?” he asked after glancing at the screen one last time, and was glad he did when Reggie laughed again. It was a bright sound, and a little brash, just like her.

She set the table and began pressing oranges with an electric juicer while he whisked the eggs and cinnamon and sugar, soaked the thickly cut bread, and dropped it into the pan.

“You like coffee, right? You said that before on the live stream.”

“Yup. Dark roast if you’ve got it,” he said.

It wasn't until he was plating up their food and carrying it to the dining room table that he realized how domestic this was. It reminded him of Ông nội and Bà nội, making meals for the family when he was a boy, how they'd each had their roles and worked so well together.

It was a kind of presumptuous comparison given he'd met Reggie in person for the first time the night before. Dave would probably tell him to slow his roll . . . or maybe not. Dave had said *This is like, the woman I'm gonna marry!* after his first date with Melissa, hadn't he? And now they were, indeed, married. Maybe this wasn't typical, but it was within the realm of possibility. He wasn't sure he wanted to marry Reggie given the whole 'just met in person yesterday' thing, but he wanted to spend more time with her. He wanted to make her blush, and not just by making good food for her.

He set the plate down on the table—she sat where she'd been sitting the night before, sipping her coffee from a sleek black thermos. His coffee was in front of the seat he'd had the night before, in a mug with the words *SEE YOU, SPACE COWBOY* superimposed over a silhouette of a dude with big hair.

"Is this a cryptic message?" he asked playfully as he picked up the cup and looked at the words. "Like, 'Get out'?"

"No, it's from this show I liked and it seemed appropriate for you."

"Why?" he asked, noticing how her gaze skated away from him.

"Well, the main character is tall, kind of blunt, and . . . hot." She glanced at her plate and her expression tightened. "You cut my food for me? I can cut my own food."

He flipped a new Reggie puzzle piece—she liked getting what she wanted, but she didn't like anyone assuming she *needed* anything. It didn't take an expert at emotions to figure out the why behind that.

"Force of habit. I cut mine, too," he said, tilting his plate so she could see. "I won't cut yours next time." He wasn't going to let what she'd said before that slide, though. "Are you saying I'm hot?"

"Are you saying there's going to be a next time?" she countered, one thin brow lifted.

"I don't know. That's up to you after you have a taste." He kept his gaze on her, trying not to be unnerving but also really, intensely wanting to look at her face because, *man*, it was a great face. *She* was great.

He tried to push down the excitement building in him; not sexual excitement, but an almost overwhelming happiness that he was there with her. That she'd talked to him about her problems and he'd made her laugh.

She stabbed her fork into a piece of toast. "You're a flirt. I never would've guessed. You were kind of serious during The Puzzle Zone."

He hadn't had much to laugh about back then. He'd felt like a failure, unable to handle the stress of life that everyone else was breezing through. His relationship and career had imploded, and he'd just spun out, ending his careening back at his family's house, where they'd worried over him and made him feel even worse.

"I was going through some things," he said. "The puzzles helped. And so did you."

She kept her eyes on him as she guided the food into her mouth, but they slammed shut as she began to chew.

"Okay. Yeah, we def need there to be a next time," she said.

Gus watched her eat the next bite to make sure she was really enjoying it, and then he tucked into his own plate. After they finished, he refilled their coffee cups and they moved into the living room, where the duffel bag he'd carried with him waited. He pulled out a few miniature prototype clues for the game room as Reggie settled onto the love seat, laying them out on the coffee table next to his notebook.

He sat next to her and began moving the items around, trying to figure out how they could best flow and what was missing.

"You made all of these?" she asked. "This is incredible, and so are the sketches in your notebook. You're an artist."

"I'm not an artist. I'm a planner." He opened the notebook, flipping through pages full of sketches of ideas for the room. He pushed a small folded paper spindle to sit next to a cut paper rosebush. A clay version of the Sword of Truth rested against a small wooden puzzle box he was figuring out how best to use.

"Why not both?" she asked stubbornly and Gus just grinned in return. They settled into their respective work, Reggie tapping away at some high-tech looking version of a laptop table. She was completely focused on the screen, seemed to have forgotten Gus was even there, and he couldn't have been happier. It was so good, to be with someone who focused as intensely as he did, who would understand why he couldn't pull himself away from a game or his design work—within reason of course.

He was sketching the design for the Phil's Shield of Virtue, wondering where to integrate a clue into the swirling Briar's on its surface, when he felt something warm on his face, like sunshine. When he glanced beside him, Reggie was gazing at him, her brown eyes wide behind her glasses. That's where the warmth was coming from. Whatever she was thinking, with her lips slightly parted and her cheeks rosy brown, he could *feel* it.

She quickly looked back down at the keyboard in front of her, blinking rapidly. In profile, he could see how her long lashes brushed against the lenses of her glasses.

He put his pencil into the crease of the sketchbook and closed it.

"Reggie. Can I tell you about part two of my breakfast blush plan?" There hadn't been a part two to the plan, but now there was. As always, he improvised best when it meant overcoming a challenge.

She licked her lips but kept her eyes on the laptop's screen. "Sure."

"It's a kiss," he said. "Can I kiss you?"

Okay, maybe that would have been smoother if he'd put some thought into it, but she was nodding as she turned her head toward him.

His whole body tingled with anticipation as he leaned closer to her. He watched her, not shutting his eyes as he leaned in to bring their mouths closer. She held his gaze, anticipation bright in her eyes until her head jerked to the side during his slow approach. Then she slammed her eyes shut, as if in annoyance, and her body went stiff. She seemed to be trying to hold herself still.

Gus didn't say anything. He slid one hand up her neck, the last three fingers nestling into her curls to cup the base of her skull. His index finger rested behind the shell of her ear and his thumb stroked from her cheek to her temple. His mouth was so close to hers, so close to tasting—

"Wait," she breathed, her eyes fluttering open.

Gus froze.

Her cheek appled against his palm when she smiled, and mischief shone in her eyes—along with determination. "What does this have to do with French toast?"

She rested one hand along his waist, her fingertips grazing his side as she fisted his T-shirt in her hand. Now she was holding him, too, because Reggie wasn't the type to give in to a kiss just because he'd asked. If he held her, sneakily offering support she hadn't asked for, she'd hold him right back.

“Let me show you,” he said, and then he crushed his lips against hers because he knew what the glint in her eyes and her knuckles twisting his shirt meant—she didn’t want him to treat her with some misguided gentleness. She’d told him earlier that she was tough, and though he had some questions about that, he wouldn’t treat her like he thought otherwise. She exhaled hard from the surprise of his change in speed, and then she moaned and, oh man, Gus felt that sound all through his body.

Her tongue slipped into his mouth, bringing with it the taste of cinnamon and sugar and sweet maple syrup, and now Gus closed his eyes, lost in the slick warmth of her and the joy of kissing someone he really, really liked. He’d been wrong in his prediction—she wasn’t a good kisser, she was a great one. She was confident and responsive, returning whatever he gave but gently guiding him to show what she liked.

“Mmm,” he groaned into her mouth, stroking his tongue against hers hard, not to dominate her, but to show her that he understood what she wanted. That he could give it to her. “You taste sweet,” he said against her lips. He brought his other hand up to her face, so that he cradled her head in both his palms as he nipped at her lips and their tongues clashed.

She, of course, grabbed the other side of his shirt, pulling him with her as she leaned back into the soft couch cushion. They kissed like that for a long time, Gus lost in the feel and the taste of her, in the scent of coffee and cinnamon, in the heat of her mouth and her skin. Eventually, he began to stroke his fingertips in feathery motions down her throat, tracing the neckline of that blue camisole that it’d taken all his willpower not to stare down during their video chat.

“Gus,” she gasped, then turned her head to the side so that his mouth landed on her cheek. “Um, maybe we shouldn’t do this? What do you think?”

He pulled away because she’d pressed the Stop button, or at least Pause, on whatever was happening.

“I like you. A lot. I think you like me, too, though maybe not as much yet. Am I wrong?”

Reggie was still holding onto him. She let out a shaky laugh and rested her forehead on his chin, then let her head loll back against the couch again. Gus didn’t know why that made him like her *more*, but it did.

“You’re direct.” This wasn’t said with annoyance as it sometimes was by people he cared about. “I like you, too, though I’m guessing ‘a lot’ has a

different value to each of us.”

“I spent all night wondering what your kiss would taste like mixed with maple syrup. You can use that as a base measurement.”

“Gus.” She blinked at him through fogged up lenses, then pulled her glasses off with one hand and put them on the laptop table. Her lenses already sported nose and cheek prints from when he’d leaned into their kiss, so he was glad for this—he didn’t want anything in his way. He felt that warmth on his face again as she looked up at him, desire in her eyes and vulnerability in the way her teeth worried her bottom lip. “Okay. Maybe we should change this up again. Escape room consulting with benefits?”

In response, Gus followed the impulse to lean down and kiss her, a little more softly this time but with no less intensity. “That works,” he said against her mouth, and she laughed and he laughed, too, which made her laugh more for some reason. Gus liked laughing and kissing; it was something he hadn’t done enough of in life and wanted more of, if it was with Reggie.

He recalled a scene in a cartoon he’d seen, where a flight of stairs had suddenly transformed into a slide beneath the feet of the people walking on it and, instead of fear, everyone had reacted with shocked delight. That was the closest approximation to what he was feeling in that moment—a fast, unstoppable descent that carried him toward the unknown but filled him with joy anyway.

He liked running his hands over her body, outlining her waist and up toward the curve of her breasts. He liked how she held his shoulders, gripping him tightly.

Gus . . . more than liked this. The impulse to take this to the furthest extreme kicked up in him, but he was distracted by Reggie’s amazing mouth, and her hands gliding over his chest and back and biceps. He didn’t know how much longer they kissed for, how many times their mouths brushed or he swallowed her moans, but when they finally came up for air, his sketchbook was on the floor and they were both nearly horizontal on the love seat.

“Shit. I have work to do,” she said, a frown pulling at her kiss-swollen mouth. She reached out, grabbed her glasses, and put them back on. “And it’s almost lunchtime. Can we take a break to work and eat?”

Gus chuckled. “If we’re breaking for work, instead of vice versa, then I like your priorities.”

“As you’ve already established, I’m a genius,” she said. “You have a couple of weeks to get this project into shape plus a full-time job, I work twenty-four hours a day, so if we’re going to have benefits for this brief period, we have to make sure we prioritize them.”

Brief. Period.

Was that what he had agreed to? That *didn’t* work for him, but he fought against the need to make her explain whether or not she saw an end date on this. He might get a response he didn’t want to hear.

“Want some salad?” he asked instead. If she liked him, and his salad dressing enough, maybe after their *brief period*, she would want to extend their benefits.

She gave him that wide smile and a section of the Rubik’s Cube in his chest twisted into alignment. “Yes. I have mac and cheese we can heat up to go with it.”

“Like . . . the blue box?” He pushed himself up into a sitting position. Reggie rolled her eyes playfully as she sat upright too.

“Oh, you poor thing. No, I made this myself. Get ready to have your mind blown.” She scooted to the edge of the couch and transferred herself into Blanche, and Gus followed her back toward the kitchen, ready for whatever she would give him.

Chapter Seven

Reggie could see in retrospect that this entire scheme had been ill-advised, but the following Friday evening as she waited for Gus to arrive, the enormity of it really hit her. Why hadn't she just taken sleeping pills to cure her insomnia, like a normal person? She'd told herself she needed Gus to sleep because her work was slipping, but now instead of insomnia brain she had sex-on-the-brain, which was almost as distracting.

Still, she was mostly back on her game with work, in part because Gus had come over every night after his day job for their strictly timed sessions of work breaks and "play." Meeting her goals without procrastination wasn't so hard when she knew she could be kissing Gus as a reward—it beat using a pomodoro timer.

And tonight? Tonight maybe they would do more than kiss. It was Friday; she was ahead of her goals for the week and he didn't have to go into work the next morning. Maybe he'd spend the night again, instead of going home—in her room instead of the spare apartment.

She balanced the tray with the last of the things they'd need to grill on her lap, hoping no marinade or sauces spilled and stained her cute green dress, and slowly rolled out onto her back deck, where she liked to work when the weather was nice enough. It was a warm evening, but not humid; perfect for grilling, and more so for just getting out of the house.

That was the other thing about Gus—spending time with him, supposedly in the interest of being able to do more work—had made her realize just how much work she was doing. Most of her daily grind took place at home, where her office was tailored to her needs and she didn't have to worry about accessibility, or spilling iced coffee on her laptop because straws were easier to ban than the plastics that actually destroyed the environment. She'd spent all her free time for the past few years building the site of her dreams, and now that she'd quit her day job . . . she

spent *even more* time at it—wooing advertisers, writing content, and managing all the nuts and bolts that kept GirlsWithGlasses going.

She'd forgotten what taking breaks felt like, and not just the kissing kind. Three times that week, she and Gus had gone for a long walk around her neighborhood while brainstorming—something she usually did in short bursts when using her walker with her physical therapist, not just for fun. With Gus, they'd just explored. She'd discovered several cute new shops that had sprung up while she had her nose to her laptop screen, including the one she'd returned to on her own that morning to buy her dress. They'd stopped at a playground a few blocks away, where Gus had shown her his ability to hang upside down on the monkey bars to the delight of the children and the consternation of their parents. They'd tucked their phones into the waterproof satchel on her chair and played in the parks sprinkler area to cool off, coming home soaked but energized. They'd met several of her neighbors, stopping for brief chats, and Reggie was certain everyone assumed they were a couple.

We're not though. Are we?

Two nights ago, he'd brought over a puzzle board game he'd wanted to play that needed a second player, and they'd played four rounds because she refused to concede defeat. He'd stopped the game after her last win, letting her savor the victory and distracting her from her competitiveness with a scorching kiss. Reggie hadn't quite known how to handle that—a lot of guys she knew got all huffy when she bested them and wouldn't allow her even the illusion of winning.

After their walk the night before, they'd watched funny videos that had nothing to do with escape rooms or nerdery. Gus had wrapped his arms around her on the couch when she'd shivered in the air-conditioning, holding her against his heat.

She didn't know what to make of that either, how she never had to ask with him. He knew what she needed—and wanted.

Her stomach went fluttery as she placed the dinner prep onto the counter next to her grill, not from hunger but because from remembering Gus's strong hands. She hadn't been wrong about how dexterous his fingers were, but she could've never predicted the lightning that went through her body at his touch, or the way just a look from him could pin her in place and make her forget the existence of GirlsWithGlasses and even Beyoncé's internet itself. Or the way he made her laugh. Or the fact that he'd taken a

selfie of them after their frolic in the sprinklers and she'd looked at it so often that she saw his face when she blinked.

She was *completely* screwed.

The doorbell rang and she checked the video feed through the app on her phone. Gus stared into the camera with his usual intensity, a slight smile on his face and his white oxford shirt unbuttoned at the neck. He hated dressing up for work, but business casual was a great look for him.

She pressed the intercom widget on the screen.

"*Qui vive?* Human, dragon, or foe of any species?" she asked, the line used by the military school's gate guards in *Reject Squad Ultra*.

"'Tis I, the sexy salad dressing sorcerer," he replied solemnly, which was not a line from the show but worked for her.

She grinned, then tapped the screen to open the gate. A few minutes later, he strolled around the side of the house, his gaze seeking her out. A wide smile spread across his face when he spotted her, not his usual subtle grin, and something in Reggie's chest lit up like Iron Man's arc reactor. This was more than an eagerness to kiss or be kissed—she was genuinely happy that he was just a few feet away from her.

She'd grown used to the sight of Gus, his hair sweat-mussed and spiky from his walk to her door through the summer heat and his gaze warm from the sight of her. He was a part of her life now, one she was kind of infatuated with, like a show with episodes released weekly instead of in one bingeable go. Whenever they were apart, her heart was frantically refreshing to see when the new episode of Hot Puzzle Guy would appear. But this was more serious than a TV show, and Reggie didn't say that about many things.

She froze as the realization of what that glowing feeling in her chest might be.

Fuck.

Had she really fallen into the insta-love trap?

No, because this wasn't insta-anything. Gus had been her friend years ago, unknowingly by her side as she'd built GirlsWithGlasses from nothing. His voice had been the one thing that stood between her and sleep deprivation freak outs in the time since then. This was just an evolution of what they'd had in the live stream chat—evolution didn't always take millions of years.

“Uh. You okay?” He placed his bags on the table, then walked over and kissed her mouth gently as he crouched in front of her chair. He did it with such ease, as if he’d been coming home to her like this forever instead of for a week, more proof that their relationship was moving at Barry Allen speed.

“Yeah.” She shook off the worry that had assailed her, because come on, why should the affection of a gorgeous man who seemed to understand boundaries worry her? “I’m fine. And you’re fine, too. That’s a pun by the way. By *fine* I mean extremely hot.”

She reached out, tugged at his collar, and pulled him close so she could kiss him again, and again, and . . .

“I’m not sure we’ll make it to dinner if we keep this up,” he said a few minutes later, breathing heavily. His hands had slid up her legs, and his big palms now cupped her calves, squeezing and releasing. A dress had been the right choice.

“You’re right. Let’s cook, eat, you can tell me what else needs to be done on the escape room, and then . . .”

“. . . and then?” Gus was extremely interested in what would come later, judging from the intensity of his gaze and the way his teeth rolled his bottom lip.

She let her gaze run down his body and then back up. “We’ll talk about that after dessert.”

He grinned and began checking the settings on the grill.

They cooked chicken breasts and eggplant, and ate it all at the patio table with the sounds of a summer evening in Queens surrounding them: the song of birds that came out at dusk, the bluster of the neighbor dog who warned away every passerby, the shouts of children as they played with their friends who’d been indoors to avoid the heat all day. She’d pulled out a bottle of fancy white wine that Portia had dropped off with some other stuff when she’d left for her apprenticeship, and they each had a glass.

Gus sat beside her at the round glass patio table instead, and he kept touching her as he talked, light caresses of her knee or arm or ear, as if he couldn’t help himself. In the past, those kinds of possessive touches had felt restrictive or infantilizing, but with him it was different. Everything was different with him, and that was kind of terrifying.

He told her about his projects at work as they ate, and she told him about the day’s meeting with the GirlsWithGlasses team. She caught him up

on Portia's exploits with her Swordbae and he didn't say anything rude because he understood that Reggie's sister was important to her. He showed her the latest photos of his nephew, who seemed to have inherited his uncle's love of puzzles judging from his favorite toys.

It was all too freaking normal. She didn't have to awkwardly fumble for what to talk about, or try not to be too nerdy, or, alternatively, try not to get into arguments about whose fandom was better. Occasionally, they didn't talk at all; she brainstormed topics for her website—nerd dating advice? nerd horoscopes?—while he stared off into the distance contemplating whatever interested him in that moment. That felt good, too, not scrambling for conversation or listening to someone talk just to fill the silence.

"Do you ever use that?" Gus asked after one of their quiet moments, tilting his head toward a walker that was against the side of the house.

"Sometimes," she said, trying to keep the bite out of her voice and the dread from forming in the pit of her stomach as she wondered what was going through his mind.

In her previous relationships, there'd always been a moment when whoever she was dating latched on to something that "fixed" her, like the last guy, who'd tried to convince her to use CBD oil, or her first boyfriend, who'd taken her to his church to be *healed*. Reggie had gotten something out of the latter—the trollish teenage joy of standing up from her chair, making the crowd think that they'd witnessed a miracle. She'd felt terrible afterward, and only in part because she'd fooled people who were well-meaning but didn't understand wheelchair users weren't always paralyzed. She'd caught her boyfriend's eye as she stood, thinking he'd be in on her prank, but he'd been as jubilant as the rest of the crowd. She'd broken up with him the next day, and his disbelief that *she* would break up with him had made things even worse.

"I can walk with it, but for me it's not faster or safer than a wheelchair, and it's definitely more tiring."

She chewed morosely, waiting for Gus to ask her to give it a whirl. People *always* asked once they found out it was a possibility. They needed to see her walk, either to confirm that she could or because they would prefer that mobility device over her wheelchair. Either reason sucked. And when they saw her use the walker, her ataxia more apparent as she focused on keeping her balance, there was the inevitable disappointment because *that* wasn't up to their standards either.

"Makes sense that you don't use it much if it's not as safe," Gus said with a shrug. "Do you want dessert now?"

She snapped her gaze to his. "You don't want to see me use it?"

"Should I want to?" He looked from her to the walker and back, lips pursed and brow furrowed at the sharpness in her tone.

"People always ask to see." She didn't know why she was continuing to talk about this. She was starting to get upset, her hands shaking more.

"If you want to show me, you can, but I don't need you to," he said. "You just told me it was tiring and not safe."

That was what she wanted to hear. Exactly what she *needed* to hear.

His response still upset her for some reason.

"Aren't you even curious? About my disability?" Reggie regretted her tendency to push in that moment, but she was already feeling things that were scaring the shit out of her. Better to find out what his deal was now. There had been a week of kissing and touching and he hadn't even asked the question complete strangers felt fine lobbing at her. Was he ignoring it?

"Of course, I am. Because I'm curious about you. I've Googled stuff because it's been a week and I'm already moving way too fast. I didn't want to be nosy." His expression had been neutral, but he frowned in the brief silence after his explanation. "Do you think that not asking means I don't care? Because you haven't asked what's up with me, or my brain."

There was defensiveness and frustration in his voice, and Reggie regretted broaching the topic like this. She wasn't usually so . . . emotive, but her feelings for Gus had her head spinning.

"You have a great brain. I didn't ask about it because my brain isn't typical either, so I haven't had many questions yet." She sighed. "Sorry. I guess I'm kind of freaked out because you seem so, well, not quite perfect, but . . . I don't know. In the past, people I've dated have kind of . . . slowly, or not so slowly, started nudging me on things. Trying to fix me, or something. And I guess I was trying to see if you felt the same as them, behind that almost-perfectness."

He shook his head, his frown disappearing and relief loosening his expression.

"I want to know everything about you, but I'm fine with learning piece by piece because for me this isn't some short-term thing. We have time. Also? I just really like who you are now, even without knowing everything that led up to this." He moved closer to her. "It's the opposite of not caring,

the other end of the spectrum. And I'm definitely not waiting to reveal I'm some jerk who wants to *fix* you. Fix what? I'm the one who'll tell those jerks to go kick rocks, not that you need my help with that."

Reggie's chest went into Tony Stark mode again, a bright blue burst of energy powering up all the possibilities that had been building inside of her.

Gus was looking at her in that puzzle-solving way. "Do you *want* to talk about it?"

"No, not right now. I got meningitis when I was younger. That the basics, and I don't need us to have any kind of emotional *thing* about it."

"Good, because I'm not great at emotional *things*. Adequate, because I've worked on it, but not great. I guess that's something that's useful for you to know, as far as brain stuff goes."

"Look, you're clearly better at it than I am," Reggie said. "Don't sell yourself short."

He smiled, a gentle private smile that let him know she'd pleased him, and then reached for one of the bags he'd carried in and pulled out a box from the Italian bakery down the street. She'd slowed as they passed the store's window on the walk they'd taken the night before, for the briefest moment, but it had already been closed so she'd kept going. She hadn't even broken her conversational stride, but Gus had noticed, and now he'd delivered.

She would never let him say he wasn't good at emotional things again because that was a damn lie. He cared enough to pay attention, and he acted on what he saw. That was more than most people managed.

He made a dramatic showing of lifting the lid, revealing four tarts: lemon meringue, plum, apple, and chocolate pistachio.

"You said you were only bringing veggies," she said playfully.

"I'm full of surprises." He lifted the chocolate pistachio one onto a plate and started cutting it in half. "I bought these because you gave them very cute puppy dog eyes yesterday—"

"I don't do puppy dog eyes," Reggie interrupted.

Gus glanced at her sidelong, contemplating. "Of course not. Anyway, regardless of why I bought them, they'll now be eaten in celebration of you confirming that we're dating."

"What?"

Gus laughed his evil kitten laugh. "You compared me to other people you've dated, meaning you see us as dating, too. You also said I was almost

perfect. And you didn't say no when I said I don't want this to be short-term. That's a perfectly good reason to celebrate."

"You know what?" His directness meant she'd either have to say they weren't dating, or she'd have to admit that they were. She reached out and held his arm as he directed a spoonful of the celebratory tart toward his mouth. "If we're celebrating, I think it would only be fair to give me the first bite."

He blinked a few times. "You want me to feed you?"

She understood his surprise—he'd picked up very quickly on the fact that she didn't like being coddled. She pushed her glasses up her nose with her other hand, and then held his gaze. "Yes. Give it to me."

Gus's skin went warm beneath her hand, and his expression went serious. He guided the spoon toward her mouth, his gaze intense and his eyes dark. She closed her mouth around the spoon, the rich sweetness of the tart melting over her tongue as she licked it from the smooth metal.

Reggie's eyes drifted shut, and she allowed herself to savor the mélange of dark chocolate and bright pistachio as if she was in a food-themed anime. "Mmmm. So good."

She felt his face near hers before she opened her eyes, and her stomach tightened as she imagined his gaze on her. Gus had a way of looking at her that was respectful and also made it 100 percent clear that he was thinking something seriously naughty.

She opened her eyes to look right into his dark brown ones. Yeah, he was thinking something naughty, perhaps even nasty if she was lucky, and his body was tensed as if he was ready to act on it.

"Is there a reason you chose the chocolate tart first?" she asked

His gaze darted down to her mouth and then back up. "You know the answer to that."

She shivered at the twin caresses of his voice in her ears and his breath across her mouth. "Tell me."

"I wanted to see how it tasted on your lips." His voice had gone deeper again, to that level that made her whole body like a sound receptor vibrating from his every word.

"Then what are you waiting for?"

Even though she'd as good as told him to kiss her, she wasn't prepared for the force of his mouth meeting hers. It wasn't painful, because Gus was too skilled for that, but there was something different this time, and his

desire for her hit her like an emotional hadouken. She'd taken all his words over the course of the night and the week in stride because he said them so calmly that it was hard to get worked up about them, but Gus *really liked* her. That was evident the almost desperate swipe of his tongue over her lips, in the desire in his groan when she grabbed hold of his forearms and returned his fervor.

He pulled back and looked at her, breathing hard. "And then?"

She squinted at him, wondering if his kiss had caused her to lose consciousness for a minute and miss part of the conversation because she had no idea what he was referring to. "What?"

"Earlier you said we would talk about 'and then' after dessert." He stretched his hand out and closed the box containing the rest of the tarts.

She took a deep breath. "And then . . . we go to my bedroom, if you want."

He stared at her.

"For sex," she clarified. Her heart was pounding in her ears. "If you want."

"Reggie, have you somehow misinterpreted me kissing you for five nights in a row? Yeah, *I want*. You. I want you."

She'd grown somewhat accustomed to the deep, smooth baritone of his voice, but hearing those three words cranked her *he-could-get-it* meter up to 11.

He made to move toward her and then stood and walked to the door that led inside instead, sliding it open. "Milady?"

Reggie unlocked her brakes and pushed herself through the door with unsteady arms as he gestured her through. Her body was ready, that was for damn sure. Her heart? She'd worry about that later.

Chapter Eight

After each had made a quick bathroom pit stop, Gus followed Reggie into her bedroom, one of the rooms he hadn't seen before. While the rest of the house was clean and tidy, this room was more chaotic, with clothes heaped on a laundry hamper and small piles of books and comics scattered around, though the floor was mostly clear.

"I feel weird asking the cleaners to take care of my bedroom, so a bit of a different vibe in here," she explained sheepishly.

Gus didn't care about the state of her bedroom. The walls were teal, her bedspread was yellow and had Aurora and Phil on it. The wooden posts of her bed were white with gauzy peach fabric strung between them, like something a princess would sleep in. He took that in with one blink, but his focus was on the face that had quickly become his favorite color combination: honey-brown eyes, golden-brown skin tanned from sitting on her deck, and the spray of russet freckles that spread over her nose and cheekbones.

He reached out and ran his thumb over each delicate eyebrow, down the bridge of her nose, over her soft, full lips. Desire tumbled down his spine and he exhaled hard.

"Can I touch you? More?"

She nodded jerkily. She was looking up at him, but he couldn't tell what her expression was conveying—she seemed hesitant now that they were here. There was a little divot between her brows now, and her shoulders were tense.

"Are you sure?" he asked, gently removing his hand. "We don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

"I'm sure." She closed her eyes and sighed before opening them again. Her hands gripped the push rims on her wheels. "I'm just nervous, I guess? I mean, I have to be honest here. I've listened to your voice so many times

over the last couple of years. Do you know how *intimate* that is? I listened so much that I thought I *needed* it. What happens now, when you touch me? When we . . . if we . . .” She licked her lips, a contrast of bright pink gliding over dusky rose. “What if I need that, too?”

Gus wasn’t great at word puzzles, though he could muddle through, and that was essentially what she was presenting him with. What she was saying didn’t make sense if taken at face value. Was she really worried that she would become addicted to sex with him? That seemed unlikely given what she’d told him about her previous dating experiences. He shuffled the clues he’d collected about her over the past week, and landed on the puzzle piece that stated she didn’t like depending on others. She wasn’t worried about needing sex—she was worried about needing *him*.

“Then I’ll give it to you,” he said. “I’ll give you whatever you need. That’s how this works.”

“It’s not that simple.” She looked up into his eyes like she wanted him to refute that, so he did.

“It is that simple.” He crouched in front of her again, resting his palms on his knees so that he wouldn’t touch her. “I want to give you . . . something. Happiness? Pleasure?”

“And what do you get out of it?”

“We already established this, Reggie. I get you.” Gus ran a hand through his hair in slight frustration, not at her, but that maybe he was missing something. “What else would I want?”

She smiled, then sighed. “Look at me. I said I didn’t do emotional *things* and here we are.” She released her grip on Blanche’s push rims, flipped the brakes on, and then rested her hands on his shoulders, stroking her palms over them.

Gus closed his eyes, reveling in the sensation of warmth pressing through the fabric of his shirt. She leaned forward as her hands caressed down his biceps, so that soon her trembling palms were on his forearms and her face was near his.

He waited.

Her lips glanced over one of his eyebrows, smoothed over the jut of his left cheekbone, then settled into the notch just below his earlobe, sending spirals of pleasure radiating out, like a prism of bright color spreading over his skin and pressing down into his body. Her cheek rested against his, and

the scent of her hair cream—vanilla bean, fitting because she was sweet, intense, and invaluable—filled his nose.

“Reggie.” Her breath caught, and he smiled, turning his head slightly so that his nose brushed the curls at her temple and his mouth was angled toward her ear. He reached out his own hands, gliding them up her calves and resting them at the bend of her knees, where the hem of her dress brushed the hairs on his knuckles. “You know what I’ve been thinking about all week?”

“Maybe the same thing I’ve been thinking about?” Her voice was husky, and she was hot to the touch where their skin brushed.

“If it’s my head between your thighs, then yup, it’s the same thing.”

“Oh my god!” She laughed, then leaned back in her wheelchair, eyes wide and cheeks flushed. She shook her head, and then looked down at him like she was an evil queen and he was her minion. “You’re . . . absolutely right. I’ve been thinking about that a lot, and I may or may not have touched myself while I did.”

She arched a brow in challenge.

Gus leaned up and forward on his knees, catching her lush mouth with his before she could say anything else. His cock was already so hard, and he just wanted to taste her. She held him by the front of his shirt as their tongues clashed, and he regretted having worn the button-up instead of a polo for casual Friday. He needed her hands on his body, but he didn’t want to take his hands off her.

He readjusted himself as he moved closer to her, spreading his legs so that her footrests didn’t press into his shins.

“Pull it open,” he said against her lips. “Just rip it.”

She leaned her head back by just an inch but too far for Gus’s liking. “But—”

“I know how to sew buttons back on. Do it.” Then he closed the distance between their lips again, thrusting his tongue into her mouth and sliding his hands up her thighs so both of his thumbs pressed gently into the heat at her juncture. She gasped a muffled curse into his mouth and tugged at his shirt, hard; buttons went flying as she laughed triumphantly, and then her palms finally spread over his chest. He groaned as her index finger brushed his nipple, and she did it again.

He used both of his own hands to spread her thighs, and one of his thumbs found the nub of her clit through the thin cotton of her underwear.

He pressed slowly until her hips lifted slightly from the seat, and then he began to rub. Slow, back-and-forth motions, varying pressure depending on how she gasped and moaned into his mouth. He moved his other hand up and down her thigh, dragging the rough palm over her sensitive skin.

Reggie's mouth ripped away from his on a moan, but she held onto him. She tugged at the lapels of his shirt, sometimes soft, sometimes hard, as if directing him—the hard tugs were growing more frequent. She made a sound that was something like a frustrated squeal and threw her head back.

Gus hadn't thought he could get any harder, but his jeans were painfully tight at the groin. He rocked back onto his heels and looked up at her. "You're so sexy."

Her response was to press her feet against the footrests of her chair and lever her hips forward, so that her ass was along the edge of the seat. Her knees were spread, her dress hiked up, exposing her black underwear.

"Gus." She was a woman used to getting what she wanted, and he was a man who knew what to give her.

He knelt forward again, his hands sliding up and around her thighs to hold her in place as he tugged her a bit closer to the edge of her seat. He stretched the fingers of his right hand out over her mound and then curled them, pulling her underwear to the side to reveal neatly trimmed dark reddish-brown curls and a slick brownish-pink nub between her folds.

He ran his thumb over her one more time, and then he nestled his mouth over her and *licked*.

"Fuck!" One of her hands went to his collar, and the other grabbed an armrest of her chair. "Fuck, Gustave."

Gus swirled his tongue over her, then sucked gently, then sucked not so gently, loving the way she cried out his name, wanting to give her more pleasure. His own desire had overtaken him, so that all he could think of was the scent of her, the taste of her, how she bucked up against his face, and how she would feel clamping around his cock.

"Mmm," he groaned against her clit, and Reggie bucked so sharply that he reached out to press down on her stomach and hold her in place. Her abdominal muscles convulsed under his palm as she ground against his face, riding out her orgasm, and then she collapsed back, breathing heavily.

"Oh my *god*." Her chest rose and fell and then she lolled her head forward to look down at him. Her glasses were askew and her smile was sated. "We're definitely going to have to do that again. But now?"

She gripped his shoulders and slipped her feet from the footrests to the floor, then levered herself to a standing position. He didn't move as she stood over him, bent at the waist; she took two shaky but definitive steps around him to drop into a seated position on her bed.

She shimmied out of the beautiful emerald green dress she wore and tossed it across the room onto the laundry pile, then sat with her arms behind her to support her weight and her chin raised.

"Now you join me on the bed."

Her breasts were encased in some kind of crinkled lacy bra that reminded Gus of the wrapper around a cupcake—taking off that wrapper was his favorite part.

"I can do that." He wiped his sleeve over his mouth before standing and shucking his shirt, jeans, and socks, so that he only wore his tented boxer briefs, then closed the space between them. His mouth connected with hers and she wrapped her arms around him, pulling his weight down onto her as she lay back on the bed. His elbows dug into the mattress on either side of her as he caught his weight, but his body pressed up along hers, skin to skin. He settled between her legs, the length of his cock notching against her slit, and her moans when she circled her hips to rub against him.

"Condoms?" he asked.

"Bedside table."

He leaned away from her to tug the drawer open, accidentally pulling it out of the nightstand completely. He grabbed a condom from a pink organizational tray and dropped the drawer to the floor with a clatter.

"Sorry," he said, returning his mouth to hers.

Her rough exhalations caressed his lips. "Put it on. I want you."

Her words magnified whatever the feeling was in his chest, and then she reached between them to stroke him, first through the fabric of his boxers and then sliding her hand under the elastic waistband to grip his erection. She ran her loosely circled fingers up and down his shaft, her thumb caressing the sensitive spot under the head of his cock as she did so. Her hips rocked up against him, and the desire in her eyes sent an arc of pleasure through him so strong that he bit his lip against the desire to pump into her hand and ride it to completion.

"I want you," she said again, her voice an insistent whisper.

"Don't say that again for a little while," he said hoarsely. "I can only withstand so much."

He stood, shucked his boxers, and carefully rolled on the condom. He crouched between her legs to kiss her thighs and slide off her underwear before crawling into the center of the bed beside her as she clambered back.

“Wait.” He unlatched the hook on the front of her bra with one hand, revealing the perfect, dark brown-tipped mounds of her breasts. He teased her with his thumb and forefinger, and she groaned.

“Gus? I’m trying not to be demanding, but I really need you to fuck me or I seriously might explode.”

He laughed, rolling on top of her and settling between her legs again. “I like it when you’re demanding.”

“Lucky you.” When she kissed him, a soft, sweet contrast to her words, Gus groaned and thrust into her. He sucked in a breath at the almost overwhelming pleasure. The clamp of her inner walls around his cock, the way her eyes slammed shut and she cried out.

“Fuck,” he breathed. “You feel good. You smell good, you taste good, you . . .” Gus couldn’t talk anymore. He lost his words to the sensation running down his spine, squeezing his balls, squeezing his heart. He wouldn’t tell her what he was feeling—he would show her.

He thrust into her hard, not minding the burn in his scalp as she tugged at his hair and the crescents of pleasure-pain that she left in his shoulders as she gripped him. She threw one leg over his hip, spreading herself wider, taking him in deeper, and holding him closer.

Gus buried his face in her neck, the sweat from his brow and her temple pooling where their skin touched, their moans mingling in the air between the four posts of her bed.

“Yes. Yes. *Please.*”

That one word urged him to slide her other leg up around his waist and lean forward so that his thrusts hit her at a new angle. Reggie didn’t like asking for things—if she said please, he would make sure not to disappoint.

He looked down into her wide brown eyes and saw the moment just before her climax hit her, just before her body went taught and her pussy clamped him so tight that he couldn’t hold back anymore.

He tried to say her name as the pleasure walloped him from all sides, but he thought maybe he only emitted a series of grunts. Heat and light and pure ecstasy exploded in him, and somewhere in the back of his mind he knew what he’d seen in Reggie’s eyes—it had turned the last piece of the

Rubik's Cube in his chest, amplifying his orgasm so that he had to clench his teeth against the force of it.

He collapsed on top of her and then rolled them to their sides, pulling her close so he could feel her racing heartbeat against his, just for a moment. She didn't pull away, despite their sweatiness.

"That was . . ." Her leg twitched between his. "Damn, Gus."

She kissed him on the ear, a quick peck because she seemed too jelly-boned and satiated to hold her head up for longer, and he felt like it signaled some new intimacy in their relationship.

He finally opened his eyes, feeling that sunlight-on-his-face sensation again. She was grinning at him, eyes bright, and oh god, he would have to be very careful because that impulsive feeling welled up in him with purpose. It'd only been a week since they'd met in person. He had to take this slow, not get ahead of himself, not dive headlong like she was a newly unwrapped puzzle.

"What?" She kissed him again. "You're staring."

Slow.

Gus opened his mouth and that feeling that had been building in his chest jumped out without his permission. "I love you."

Her brows rose and the warm, lazy, light in her eyes was gone in a blink, replaced by an alert wariness. "Um, what?"

Gus winced and rolled onto his back to stare up at her ceiling. "I mean . . . Crap, I can't lie. I meant what I said. You don't have to respond now, though. I know I'm moving fast."

He expected her to tell him to leave, or for her to pull away, but she moved closer to him. She lay her head on his shoulder and placed her hand on his chest. He could feel the muscles of her face bunch—she was smiling. "I do have to respond, come on. I don't feel comfortable expressing that sentiment, yet. I'm a pineapple, remember? But I do care about you and I want to see where this goes. Is that okay for now?"

Gus exhaled with relief. "Yeah, that's cool. Where's your garbage? I have to get rid of this condom."

She burst out laughing, her face pressing into her arm as she did. She kissed his shoulder then pointed toward a door on the other side of the room. "In the bathroom."

She seemed to be happy, and that made him happy, too. He hoped the sensation in his chest that said they could both be happy, together, was

right.

Chapter Nine

A few weeks. Not very long as far as relationships went, but enough time to create a paradigm shift in Reggie's life. Gus had turned in his initial plans for the Can't Escape Love escape room a week after they'd first had sex, and Reggie had braced herself for him to suddenly decide that she needed to stop focusing on her work and pay attention to him now that his nights had freed up. Instead he came over every other night, pacing himself as he put it, and they ordered in or made dinner together. They talked, laughed, helped each other navigate problems both work related and personal.

When Reggie had to work, though, Gus pulled out work of his own, or something from the pile of manga volumes and graphic novels that she thought he might like, or played puzzle games on his phone.

Every so often she'd get a message from him even though he was sitting beside her, or just downstairs, while she worked in her office. A screenshot of a comic panel he particularly enjoyed, or a link to something he thought she might want to share on her site. He even kept her abreast of what the internet was saying about her sister's Swordbae, who had been getting more and more attention since he'd taken his role as Duke of Edinburgh.

Even though he didn't pressure her, she found herself taking more breaks because she wanted to spend time with him—and because she made herself get her work done instead of procrastinating, and had learned to delegate more to LaToya and Danni, she wasn't behind. Some nights she didn't have to work at all, apart from responding to her Lunettes on social media.

This was not one of those nights. She was busy as hell—so busy that she didn't realize the message alert on her phone had buzzed until several minutes after the fact. She glanced at it to make sure it wasn't her parents, who she'd been avoiding since they were all worked up about Portia possibly bagging herself a member of the peerage, or Portia, who she'd

been feeling anxious about for the past few days since her sister was wearing herself thin getting ready for #swordbae's first official public appearance.

Reggie didn't believe in twin magic or whatever, but she did believe in Spidey sense, and hers was tingling.

The message was from Gus, who'd asked if he could hang in the apartment while she worked when he'd shown up that night.

Gus: Don't come down here

Reggie: I won't, I'm busy with a podcast transcript.

Reggie: Wait. Why can't I?

Gus: Reasons.

Reggie: 😏 Now I want to come down there, jerk.

Gus: 🙄

She put on her oversize headphones and pumped the Afrobeats playlist she used when she really needed to focus, and dove back into the read through.

An hour had gone by, and Reggie had just uploaded the finished transcript when she felt a pair of familiar hands rest on her shoulders and start rubbing. She lifted the giant earphones off her ears, placed them on the desk in front of her and then leaned back, locking her arms around his waist.

"Hi. Are you done using my basement to do crimes, or whatever was going on down there? I hope so because I'm about to . . ."

Her words trailed off when she realized his body was stiff, and when she looked up his face was serious.

"What's wrong?"

"You haven't been online?"

"No. I had my Wi-Fi disconnected until I needed to upload this. I was trying to get it done so I could come hang out with you." She normally wouldn't admit something like that but she was too busy trying to read Gus's face to play it cool. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Has your sister called you? The morning papers just came out in Scotland, and social media is starting to buzz with some news that doesn't seem good. Something happened at the event she went to."

Images of the terrible things that could happen at a crowded event surged into her mind but she didn't freak out. Not yet.

"She apparently got really drunk or something?" Gus clarified. "Which doesn't seem like a big deal, I've seen worse on the train on St. Patrick's

Day, for sure. But there's a whole sleazy tabloid spread."

Reggie's stomach dropped. Portia had stopped drinking. Her sister *had* been nervous, though, and maybe . . .

No.

Portia hadn't said it outright, but Reggie knew her twin, knew how hard she'd been working to help with the whole inheriting a dukedom situation. There was no way Portia would get trashed. Reggie believed that, even if maybe no one else would.

She turned back to the computer, pulling up her social media and, yeah, her notifications were filled with Lunettes asking what had happened with Portia, whose exploits they'd been following on the GirlsWithGlasses travel page. Some had shared links to an article in *The Looking Glass Daily*, with a picture of Portia getting carried out of the event by her boss, passed out. The article provided a helpful rundown of Portia's past deeds, painted in the worst light possible, and speculation on what had occurred at the event.

"Oh shit. No."

She grabbed for her phone, but there were no missed calls or messages. Portia hadn't reached out and her parents were sleeping, given the late hour. She called Portia's number, but the call went straight to voice mail, too.

She opened their text conversation.

Reggie: Are you okay?

Reggie: CALL ME

Reggie: Tell me you're okay

Portia wasn't online and the messages went unread.

She went through social media, methodically searching her sister's accounts and then anything related to her. She hadn't been seen since the night before. Reggie pulled up email on her web browser and sent an email, and then called the number of the armory, which she'd saved in her phone. It was early in Scotland, and it went to voice mail, too.

"Hi. This is Portia's sister. Is she okay? Can someone please tell her to call me, or if she's not okay . . ." She sucked in a breath and left her number. Maybe she could put up a missing person's post on social media, or ask her Scottish Lunettes to storm the armory and—

"Hey."

She looked up at Gus, who she'd almost forgotten was there in the depths of her panic. She said the first thing that came to mind. "She's a

pear.”

Her voice snagged on whatever was blocking up her throat—fear, worry, anger.

“And you’re my pineapple,” he said gently, caressing her cheek. “I doubt Swordbae ditched her, so I’m going to assume he’s taking care of her. I’ll take care of you until we know for sure.”

I’ll take care of you.

Those were the exact last words Reggie had thought she’d ever want to hear from someone she was dating, but coming from Gus, it wrapped her in warmth instead of pricking her anger. She knew he didn’t offer because he thought she couldn’t do it for herself.

“You probably won’t be able to sleep, right?” he asked, and she nodded.

“Okay, I have just the thing for that.” She unlocked the wheels of her chair and Gus pushed her down the hallway to the vertical lift, something he didn’t usually do because Reggie handled it herself. She wrapped her arms around herself and let her head drop back onto his stomach on the short ride down in the elevator, and he caressed her cheek.

“What were you doing in the apartment?” she asked as he pushed her through the living room.

“Oh, I’ll show you later. Tomorrow maybe.” She thought he would wheel her into the bedroom, but he bypassed it and headed to the TV room instead.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He let go of the handles at the slight harshness in her voice. “I thought we could rewatch *Reject Squad Ultra*.”

He had a slight smile on his face, but she could see from the creases around his eyes that he was worried, too—about her. She’d thought that he might take her to bed and kiss her worries away, which would have also been amazing, but this? It turned out Gus knew exactly what she needed.

She wheeled herself the rest of the way to the couch, set the brakes, and then clambered onto it as Gus fiddled with the projector. He crawled onto the couch around her and pulled her close to him, and she relaxed into him.

At some point during the marathon, Reggie fell into a troubled sleep, awaking only when Gus stretched beside her, with her still bundled in his arms.

“What time is it?” she asked, squinting.

“Early. I checked online and apparently Portia left the armory with her friend . . . the princess-to-be?”

“Oh thank god.” Reggie reached for her phone, and her heart leapt when she saw she had text messages and missed calls, but dropped when she brought the phone closer to her face and read that they were all from her parents.

Fuck. They’d heard the news and she’d have to deal with them.

“I have to call my parents,” she said. “Sorry if this gets weird.”

“I want some coffee anyway,” he said. He handed her glasses over before leaving the room.

Her mother picked up on the first ring. “What is she doing? What. Is. She. Doing? She finds a duke—a duke!—and manages to squander this opportunity too?”

“Good morning,” Reggie said cheerfully. “Do you even know if your daughter is alive and unharmed, or are you more worried that she might be single again?”

“Honey, you don’t understand, because you have plans. You don’t need a man to take care of you.”

“Portia doesn’t either.” Reggie was so tired of this shit. “Do you even pay attention to anything besides what you think is best for us? Portia is trying so hard, and all you guys do is smack her down for it. It’s like you want her to fail.”

“Now, I know you’ve always been protective of her—”

“Yeah, because you and dad never were.” She didn’t feel hot, or tearful. This was a cold anger that had compacted over time—the figurative tip of the iceberg. “And stop saying I don’t need a man. Has it ever occurred to you that I want a partner? Or that someone might want me?”

Her mother always had a snappy defense, but there was silence now.

“You know what? Maybe if you and dad didn’t act this way, she would have called us instead one of her friends. I’m tired of it.” She exhaled a sharp breath. “If you don’t have anything supportive to say about my sister, don’t share it with me. And if you can’t imagine me as someone who has interests other than being the successful twin, go take that #1 MOM mug Portia made you and break it. You don’t deserve it.”

She ended the call and sat staring at it in her hand for a long time, the sound of Gus putting coffee mugs on the kitchen counter echoing down the hall. She’d snapped at her parents plenty of times, because if she’d learned

how to push from anyone it was from them, but this was the first time she'd dropped the snark and actually demanded that they reflect on their behavior—they because her mom was most definitely relaying Reggie's words to her father already.

Shit. She wondered if there was some weird stuff going on in space because this weekend was shaping up to be terrible. Her sister was missing and she'd gone off on her mom.

She navigated to InstaPhoto mindlessly, and the first thing in her feed was a pic of Portia wearing a shirt that said "I solemnly swear I'm up to no good" and the caption "Gone fishing."

Portia had managed that cute pic, slightly more infuriating because she'd probably never even watched Harry Potter, and hadn't seen fit to let Reggie know that she was alive and okay?

"You asshole," she muttered at her phone and dropped it back onto the couch.

"Are you talking about your parents or your sister?" Gus asked as he walked in. He flopped back onto the couch beside her, a mug in one hand and her thermos in the other.

Reggie picked up a decorative pillow and pressed her face into it, so her response came out muffled. "Both. But especially my sister."

"Maybe she's embarrassed. What happened to her was, well, embarrassing. She might think you're disappointed in her, or that you'll make fun of her."

She dropped the pillow next to her phone and shot him a look.

"I thought you didn't like her," she said, only because she knew it wasn't true.

"Well, you love her. And I love you. If she's unhappy, it makes you unhappy. This isn't that difficult to understand."

It was the second time he'd said those three words, and she still found herself unable to say them back. She'd never said that to anyone outside of her family, and right now she was so annoyed with her family she wouldn't have been able to say it to any of them.

Besides, it was different with Gus. There were different risks, risks that scared the shit out of her even if they didn't stop her from feeling those words she couldn't say. She didn't like asking for things and saying "I love you"? Wasn't that asking for everything?

She stared at him. She was already well into the “emotional thing” zone because of Portia and her parents. Maybe that’s why she had to squeeze her eyes shut against the almost overwhelming *something* in her chest when she looked at him.

She couldn’t deal with this particular pressure right now, even though it wasn’t coming from him. When she opened her eyes, he was studying her face.

“Reggie—”

“Two sugars?” She reached for her coffee.

“Yeah.”

She told herself that the disappointment in his voice was her imagination.

“Thanks. I’ll order breakfast.” She inched closer to his warmth, draped her leg his. “In a minute.”

“Cool.” He smiled, but it wasn’t a Gus grin. His dimple didn’t even show. He looked down into his mug. “By the way, I was looking at the pictures in the tabloids and Portia’s nail polish color changed. It was pink in the first picture when they showed up at the event and black when Swordbae was carrying her out.”

“You noticed her nail polish color?”

He shrugged. “You didn’t?”

She ran a hand through his hair with her free hand to apologize for poking at something that was a part of him—his attention to detail.

“I doubt they were giving manicures in there, unless all the stories set in old Scottish castles left something out, so . . .” She curled against Gus, trying to remember anything that had come up during her trawling of the internet over the last few years. She didn’t really handle the beauty section of the blog anymore, since she’d handed it off to LaToya.

“She likes fashion stuff, right?” Gus asked. “Maybe it’s supposed to change colors over the course of the night?”

“Wait a minute.” She grabbed her phone again and logged into her work chat, which was conspicuously not active even for a Saturday morning.

Reggie: Toy, did you write something up about color-changing nail polish before?

LaToya ☹️: Hey! Yeah, it was in the Back to School Beauty post last August. Nail polish that changes color if someone has slipped something into your drink.

LaToya ☹️: Oh shit, is that what happened to your sister?

Danni: Will that be good for the baby?

LaToya ☹️: What baby?

Danni: Oh, all the Lunettes are saying she's pregnant. Is that not true?

Reggie: Hey. Watch it.

Danni: Sorry

LaToya 🙄: SORRY

Danni: But seriously, have you not checked the mentions because the speculation is RAMPANT

Reggie: I'll fill you in later

She grimaced, then held out the phone to Gus so he could read the conversation.

"I can't even tell them anything because I don't know. This sucks."

"It does. But she's an adult. She's updated her social media. She's probably licking her wounds. Some people need to do that when they make a mistake." He moved away from her, the sudden movement startling her. "You need more half-and-half. I'll be back soon."

His departure wasn't rude, but it felt so different from his usual behavior that Reggie had felt like Sonic the Hedgehog running into a set of spikes at full speed and losing all of his gold rings.

Something had passed between them, or shifted, or maybe even slipped through her fingers, and she didn't know what to do about it.

You know.

She ignored that. She had to focus on Portia. Gus would understand.

They spent the rest of Saturday pretending neither of them felt the awkwardness that trailed them like Dementors, siphoning the joy that had been a part of their hanging out from the start—their ability to just *be* with one another. Reggie was on edge and guilty because she hadn't said what she felt, and the more time passed, the more her silence in that moment seemed to balloon between them.

On Saturday evening, Gus had suggested that he go back to his apartment if she needed some space, and she'd felt the awful certainty that something was *wrong* with them now. Figuring out what was wrong would require thinking about what had been right, and what she wanted to do about that rightness, and fear pushed that option to the bottom of the list.

He'd stayed in the end, and they'd watched *Akira* because Gus had remembered one of her wheelchairs was named that and pulled it out of her Blue Ray collection. He hadn't liked the cult classic, and for some reason his reaction had seemed like a personal slight against her.

They'd fallen asleep with space between them for the first time.

On Sunday morning, they sat on the back porch having coffee, both staring down at their phones, when Gus held his out towards her. “There. It says she was spotted going into this fancy hotel. Maybe we can try calling?”

Even though there was something off-kilter in their once seemingly harmonious relationship, he was still trying to give her what she needed. Reggie pressed her lips together against the sudden rush of sadness that hit her. What if she couldn’t fix whatever was wrong between them? What if she couldn’t fix her own family either?

“Cool. Thank you.” She pulled up the hotel’s number on her own phone.

“Hello, Walton Hotel. How may I be of service?”

“Hi, I’m looking for . . .” Neither Portia nor Naledi would provide their real names with the press after them. Naledi had once been a commenter and contributor on GirlsWithGlasses, though, and had a nom de plume she used on the site. “HeLa Hoop. Can you please connect my call to her room?”

There was a long pause.

“That’ll be just a moment.”

Another long pause, and Reggie was sure the employee had hung up on her, but then the phone began to ring.

“Hello?” Her sister’s voice was calm, slightly expectant. She sounded fine. Fine, after Reggie had spent the last two days worried sick and pushing her own problems to the side.

“Why haven’t you answered my fucking texts?” Reggie exploded. “You know I hate the phone. Mom and Dad and I were worried sick.”

Her parents had surprisingly not bombarded Reggie with angry texts and calls after her outburst, and had instead been sending worried texts about Portia and getting angrier and angrier about how the tabloids were treating their daughter. They seemed to be trying to be supportive, and Reggie didn’t think it was only because of what she’d said to them. Of course they cared that one of their children had disappeared.

“I’m sorry,” Portia said. “I haven’t turned it on for a couple of days.”

“Well, I get that, but the internet has been going wild.”

“Umm, that’s what I was avoiding.”

“Typical. Stick your head in the sand and everything will just take care of itself, right?” Reggie didn’t mean it, but she was just SO MAD. Why hadn’t Portia called her?

She saw Gus walk back into the house, giving her privacy, from the corner of her eye.

“About that,” her sister said into her ear. “There’s something I have to talk to you about.”

Chapter Ten

Gus had called his brother the day before, while walking to the corner store, and asked him if it was bad that his girlfriend didn't seem to love him back.

"So you're saying she just . . . closed her eyes after the second time you said it?" Dave had asked. "And then changed the subject? Shit, man. I don't know if that's a good sign. Maybe give her some space."

He hadn't needed Dave to tell him that, but he'd hoped he was missing something. When she'd opened her eyes again he hadn't expected her to say "I love you" back. He knew she would feel it when she felt it. But he hadn't expected the distance in her gaze. Just like that, the Rubik's Cube in his chest had been reset, all the colors mixed up again.

Walking back to the house with a pint of half-and-half for their coffee, he'd finally allowed himself to begin to believe what had been bugging him since the night before—that maybe he was wrong about how Reggie felt about him. Maybe they had just fallen into a pattern, and her sister's situation had made the pattern apparent or knocked it out of alignment. Or maybe . . . maybe . . . and Gus *knew* that this particular reaction wasn't logical, but maybe he was jealous.

It was so clear that she cared for her twin sister—as she should—and seeing that distance in her eyes had reminded him that no matter how he felt, she'd initially described their relationship as only lasting a *brief period*. He'd been the one pushing everything ahead, pushing too fast, and he knew Reggie would only let herself be pushed where she wanted to go.

So he'd withdrawn, waiting to see how things went without him leaning into their relationship.

They'd slept with space between them on the bed.

And now she was on the phone with her sister, arguing. She'd argued with her parents, too, because that was something you did with people you

loved sometimes. She'd never argued with him. Even when he'd said he didn't like Akira, she'd shrugged it off instead of debating as she would with any troll online.

She was wiping away tears when he peeked through the back door, and he went back to pacing in the living room, looking at the picture of Aurora and Briar Rose over the fireplace. When he glanced out through the sliding doors a moment later, she looked up, beckoning him out.

She was still talking, and the first thing he heard when he opened the door was, "My friend saw that pic of you being carried out of that party like a bag of potatoes and he noticed something."

Her friend. Her *friend*.

She was looking at him with a tentative smile as she continued talking, as if she hadn't just figuratively knocked over his jar of salad dressing. Was that all he was to her? Gus cherished his friendships, few as they were, but he didn't see her as only a friend.

"Yeah. The guy you found for me? It's a long story. Anywho, he's pretty good about detail stuff . . ."

Gus stopped listening, her words echoing around his mind. It was Portia who had found his email address for Reggie. Because Reggie had needed his voice. He was the one who had pressed for phone calls, and video chats, and meeting up. Reggie had only ever asked for one thing from him—his voice. And then she'd wanted in on a project about her favorite show. She hadn't asked for love. She'd offered him *money*, for God's sake.

Heat flushed through his body—not desire, but shame. This was the problem with some puzzles; sometimes you put the pieces all together and they made a beautiful image, but it wasn't the *correct* image.

And Reggie was the most beautiful to him.

He'd known that he cared more than her, but there was caring more and there was one person thinking about a future and the other describing him to her own twin sister as *my friend*. He'd told her that he'd give her whatever she needed.

She'd never asked for *him*.

"Gus?"

He'd been staring out into the garden, at the roses drooping on their bush in the summer heat. When he looked at her, her phone was in her lap and her eyes were teary, still full of emotion. He felt like he was intruding.

"I should maybe go," he said flatly.

Her expression, an anxious smile, caved at that. “What?”

“I’m sorry. I think . . . I got confused about some things. I’m gonna go.”

“Gus, what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the fact that you describe me as a friend, and that you only contacted me because you wanted my voice,” he said, trying to keep his tone level. He couldn’t be mad. She had never promised him anything but an explanation of *Reject Squad Ultra*.

He’d misread everything.

“I’m just going to get some stuff I left in the apartment and go?” He tried to keep his voice calm. “No worries.”

He was already backing away and into the house. He didn’t want to see that distance in her eyes. He didn’t want to see pity on her face. He didn’t want her to say something to make him feel better because she’d hurt his feelings—it was fine if he’d been wrong, but he didn’t want to think about it ever again.

He trundled down the stairs and into the apartment, which he’d been so excited to show her Friday night. After her sister had gone MIA it had seemed like a bad time. And now? It would just be pathetic.

Gus was figuring out how to move the giant cardboard loom he’d constructed when he heard the back door that led out to where he’d left Reggie sitting open. Of course, she would come investigate. Who would just let some person having a freak-out wander around their house unsupervised? Not Reggie.

“What is going o—oh my GOD!”

He put his hands on his hips, dropped his head down, and sighed deeply.

“Gus?”

He turned his head to look at her, where she was examining a wooden box with tiles that had to be pushed around in the right sequence so that the image of a rose appeared, which would allow the box to be opened.

She glanced around at the new posters he’d hung, at the purple cape for his Charming cosplay that he’d meant to wear when he showed her in draped over a chair, at the scattered vases containing bouquets of roses.

“You made an escape room? For me?” Her voice was higher than usual and she was staring at the box like it was something more substantial than evidence of his inability to get a clue.

“You said you didn’t like real escape rooms,” he muttered, twisting his neck from side to side. “I thought maybe you’d be more comfortable in

your own house, so I brought some of the prototype stuff I'd made over."

She rolled over to where The Sword of Truth, Aurora's giant blue-bladed sword, rested against a steamer trunk. Or rather the replica Gus had constructed out of papier-mâché.

"Holy fuck." She picked it up by the hilt with both hands, testing its weight. "This is amazing! Does it have any secret compartments or anything?"

He didn't understand why she was talking to him like everything was normal, but he went along with it.

"No. That isn't a puzzle. It's just something I made for you."

"Thank you. This has been down here all weekend?" She leaned the sword back against the wall, carefully, and came toward him and the giant cardboard loom he was trying to block with his body. "This is incredible."

Her eye caught on the spindle, wrapped with green yarn, and she pulled it gently. Gus closed his eyes. He heard her gasp when she saw the perfect paper rose that bloomed—spread, really—when the spindle was tugged just right. He'd expected her to take longer to find that. Maybe the design was bad. *Or maybe she was meant to find it.*

He opened his eyes and found her looking down at the rose, spinning the spindle stem between thumb and forefinger.

"I messed up this weekend."

He shrugged. "You were worried about your sister. I get it."

"No." She sighed.

"You weren't worried?"

"I was. About Portia but also about something else. And it was easier to focus on Portia than the something else."

Gus shifted from foot to foot. She looked up at him, eyes sunshine bright.

"I—"

"Don't. Don't say it because I gave you a sword. That isn't why I set this up, or why I was leaving. I misunderstood things and that's okay."

It wasn't okay, not at all, but buying her love with Reject Squad swag didn't feel any better.

"Gustave. You know what? I just had a conversation with my sister that ended a misunderstanding between us that had lasted almost half our lives."

"That's a long time," he said. "Are you okay?"

“I am. And I’m learning that maybe it’s best not to sleep on certain conversations because it’s easier. It’s best not to wait until feelings have been hurt for too long and everything explodes.”

“Too late for that,” he said, running a hand through his hair.

“Your reaction wasn’t an explosion. It was frustration. And confusion. And partly my fault.” She brushed the paper rose across her chin, then sighed. “I’ve had a crush on you for a long time.”

Gus went stiff. “What?”

“Do you know how many times I’ve listened to your old streams? I emailed you to ask for your voice, like some weird sorceress trying to trick you.”

“You had a crush on me?” He was trying to fit this puzzle piece in with all the others he’d scattered when he told her he was leaving and could find no place for it.

“Yes. I was in denial, of course, until I called you. Denial is kind of my jam.” She took a deep breath. “I love you. Not your voice. Not your salad dressing. Not how you make my body feel—okay, I guess in addition to all those things. I love *you*.”

“I’ve never said that to someone not related to me before and I got freaked out. Turns out it’s actually not that hard when you mean it.”

She grinned, and then grinned wider and Gus realized he was just staring at her instead of responding. He dropped down to his knees so her beautiful face was at the same level as his.

“I’m confused. I thought I moved too fast,” he said.

“You did. But I was right there with you, buddy. Every step of the way. I started this whole thing, remember?”

She had. Gus had been thinking of the money, and of how he pushed their relationship forward, but he’d let tunnel vision take over. She’d had her sister find his information. She’d barged back into his life with a weird email and never left it. She let him into her home almost every day, she’d let him into her bed, and she’d as much as told him she loved him back when he first blurted it out.

I don’t feel comfortable expressing that sentiment, yet. That was how she’d responded, and it was different from *I don’t feel the same way, yet*.

“You had a crush on me.” It was a statement now, the confusion replaced with laughter and joy and the satisfaction of a Rubik’s Cube with

the colors all sliding back into alignment firmly in the center of his chest. "And you love me."

He laughed, and she laughed too, resting her forehead against his.

"Right. I thought we could just coast along as we were, that you could just *know* how much I cared without me having to say it. Without me having to be vulnerable because that shit sucks. But I know how much it hurts to assume that someone you love doesn't love you, and I know how hard it is to ask them how they really feel. I won't ever hurt you like that again."

He leaned in to kiss her, bracing his hands on her knees. Just as their lips touched something pricked his finger and he winced.

"You've gotta be kidding me," he said. "I should have used a fake one."

Reggie looked down and burst out laughing when she saw the pointy tip of the spindle pressing into his index finger.

"You're cursed now," she said, throwing her arms around his shoulders.

"I like sleeping," he said with a grin. "That's not too bad a curse."

"Oh, this is much worse," Reggie said. "You get me. And we live happily ever after."

She leaned in and kissed him, and Gus kissed her back, hard and deep and completely forgetting the pain in his finger because he was too busy basking in the warmth of Reggie's love.

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Chapter One

Welcome to the world of One True Prince, where the prince of your dreams might be just around the corner. Are you ready to find true love with a handsome royal? If so, enter your name here, and then the keys to the kingdom are yours! Remember to choose wisely—the royal life isn't all fun and games, and not every prince is who he seems to be!

Nya Jerami returned her obscenely comfortable seat to the upright position, then pushed aside her braids to remove the wireless earplugs from her ears—no amount of relaxing meditation music was going to make her feel better about returning home to Thesolo.

Before leaving to participate in an early childhood development master's program at a university in Manhattan, she'd imagined days spent surrounded by a throng of intrigued peers, and nights being courted by handsome men. She'd had a plan for how things would go: after years of being kept like a caged bird by her father, she would arrive in Manhattan, spread her wings, and soar straight toward her happiness. That was how things happened in the films she had grown up watching, where every timid girl secretly had the heart—and talons—of an eagle.

But in real life, the jostling crowds and tall buildings had made her uneasy, the subway trains had given her motion sickness, and traffic had moved in a wild and frightening way that left her in constant fear of being crushed. She'd sat silently in class, biting back her thoughts, and her peers had barely known she'd existed. Dating had gone no better, a series of uncomfortable and disheartening encounters with creepy men.

The plane bounced over some light turbulence and Nya closed her eyes against an unwelcome thought. Perhaps her father had been right with his constant reminders she should dream smaller, want less—the simple fact was that for Nya, New York had simply been too big.

She'd had plenty of exciting adventures—fighting space pirates, taming a vampire king, being sought after by every senpai in her high school—but those things had taken place in the virtual dating games she played on her phone. In those worlds, she was fearless, always knew the right thing to say, and if one of her dates annoyed her, she could delete him without much guilt.

Now she peered through the window of the private jet of the royal family, the African landscape unrolling beneath her like a familiar but suffocating quilt heralding that her adventure in New York was truly finished. There were no expansion packs available.

Game over.

"We'll be landing in Thesolo in approximately two hours, Miss Jerami," Mariha, the flight attendant, said as she peeked her head into the cabin for the approximately one thousandth time. "You'll be home soon."

"Thank you," Nya said politely, nausea roiling her stomach.

Two hours.

Home.

"Are you all right?" Mariha's face creased with concern, and though Nya should've appreciated it, she hated that expression. People always looked at her like she was a vase perpetually in danger of falling off a shelf. In Thesolo, she had been the finance minister's frail, sickly daughter, too weak to know her own mind. That image had stuck with her well past childhood, and despite having single-handedly rejuvenated the Lek Hemane orphanage school during her tenure as a teacher, people still patted her on the head and spoke to her like her dance of womanhood hadn't been half a lifetime ago.

They'd taken their cues from her father, who'd spent a lifetime explaining to people that Nya needed his guidance. Even his imprisonment hadn't erased the script that he'd written for her.

"Nya has her little job, yes, but she cannot handle too much work. The stress is dangerous for her, and she prefers being at home."

She'd been guilted and wheedled and talked down to until she was a nonplayer character in the role-playing game of her own life.

Home. Two hours.

Her hands went to her stomach, which was busy twisting itself into anxious balloon animals.

“The flight is a bit bumpy,” she said, finally gazing up at Mariha. “Do you have something soothing for the stomach?”

“We have the goddess blend tea, of course. That has many uses,” Mariha said, and then her smile fell as she seemed to remember that Nya’s father had used the same tea as a poison, corrupting nature and tradition for his own ends. Mariha blinked rapidly. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t—Forgive me, Miss Jerami, I wasn’t insinuating! I—”

“It’s all right,” Nya said. Her father had ruined even the pleasure of tea for her. “I prefer ginger ale.”

“Ginger ale. Right away,” Mariha replied, her blinks still transmitting apologies in Morse code. “Wi-Fi service has resumed, by the way.”

With that, she hurried down the aisle, her low heels thumping on the plane’s carpeted floor.

Nya snatched up her phone from the seat beside her, opening her friend messaging app as anxiety feathered over her neck, scrolling back to the conversation just before her flight had taken off.

International Friend Emporium Chat

Ledi: If coming back is too overwhelming, just let me know. I want you here, but I also know that this isn’t going to be easy for you.

Nya: Of course, I’m coming to your wedding! Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll just ignore the people whispering about how I tricked you into being my friend after my father hurt you. Or debating whether I’m a disgraceful daughter who will visit my father in prison or a disgraceful one who won’t.

Portia: Those options don’t seem fun. Let me know if you need help dealing with the attention. Johan can help, too. Ask him for some pointers.

Nya: I know Johan is your friend, but that guy is weird.

Portia: 😊 Aren’t all of us weird?

Ledi: Thabiso and I found a secret dungeon in the palace (don’t ask), and I will gladly jail anyone who upsets you.

Ledi: Just kidding, I’m not a despot. I *will* publicly call them out and embarrass them, though.

Portia: That’s worse than a dungeon, as we all know.

Ledi: Yep. 😊

Nya: I’ll be fine, thank you. Also, please be careful in the dungeon, or at least send us a map so we know where to search if you and Thabiso disappear.

Ledi: We have cell phone reception down there, and we had new locks put on that can always be opened from the inside. I’m not trying to live that “Cask of Amontillado” life.

Portia: Did you look into those therapists I gave you a list of, Nya?

Nya: Gotta go, flight is boarding! 😊

Portia: Okay I can take a hint. 😊 Tell Johan that I brought him a present.

Nya's brow furrowed. She'd missed that last message and nothing else had followed it because Ledi and Portia were together and could speak to one another.

Nya: What do you mean "tell Johan"?

The message went unread—it was before daybreak in Thesolo.

Her phone emitted a ping and she quickly switched apps, a little burst of relief filling her when the load screen for *One True Prince* appeared. OTP was a cute, but immersive, dating simulator game that had developed a cult following—you played the role of new girl at a boarding school full of princes in which one of them was a spy bent on destroying the system of monarchies forever. It was silly fun, but kind of intense: you had to be ready to receive messages at any time, even the middle of the night. Like true love, the game worked on its own schedule; you had to keep up or be rich enough to buy your way out of your mistakes.

She'd romanced all of the princes except for two: Basitho, whom the developers had clearly based on her soon-to-be official cousin-in-law, Thabiso; and Hanjo, a bad-boy prince based on Thabiso's best friend, Johan. She cringed at the idea of romancing even a fictional version of Thabiso, who besides being her cousin's soul mate, was also pretty goofy. As for Hanjo . . .

Johan Maximillian von Braustein was an infamously attractive extrovert, happiest at the center of a party or in front of a camera. He was everything she despised in a man—self-indulgent, spoiled, expecting everything around him to bend to his wishes.

She hated the ease with which Johan moved through the world. She hated that he always seemed so sure of himself. She hated that when Portia had first introduced them, for the briefest moment Nya'd felt *something* as their gazes met, sparking a wild, ridiculous hope. Then, like most people, Johan had quickly looked past her in search of something more interesting.

Hanjo Millianmaxi bon Vaustein was a two-dimensional video game character that was the closest Nya would get to the playboy prince of Liechtienbourg paying her any mind. Not that she wanted him to or anything—she was hate-romancing this character. That was it.

One True Prince, message from: Hanjo

Hello, Nya. I saw that you were having trouble in Advanced Royal History Class. Do you need me to tutor you?

She looked through the available responses.

- A. Why would I want help from a carrot head like you?
- B. How dare you insinuate I need help!
- C. I would love that. I'll bring homemade treats! ♥

She didn't want to insult him outright since romance was her goal, so A was out. B was rude, too, but C was much too close to what people would expect her to say in real life. She hit B, then put the phone down where she could keep an eye on it.

Mariha returned with the ginger ale, hovering as Nya sipped.

"Do you need anything else? Toast? Tums? A heated pad?" Mariha was smiling, but there was still mild panic in her eyes, as if she worried about insulting the new princess's cousin right before the wedding ceremony . . . or raising the legendary Jerami ire.

Nya had her own anxiety to deal with, though, and Mariha's was fraying her already taut nerves. "I believe I'll go lie down."

It was ridiculous for a plane to have a bedroom in the first place, but her body felt heavy with dread, her back was strained from packing up her apartment, and her heart ached at the weight of all her worries. She felt . . . odd, and a voice that sounded like her father whispered, *You are not well, my child. You are frail, like your mother. This is why you must stay home.*

She stood, eager to escape Mariha's nervous attention and the sudden reminder that her body had betrayed her in the past and could do so again.

No. That won't happen now. You're free.

"Lie down?" Mariha tilted her head and drew it back. "Are you quite sure you want to do that?"

There was censure in her tone. In Thesolo, everyone thought Nya couldn't make the simplest decision.

"Why wouldn't I be sure?" Nya asked. "I said I was going to lie down, not parachute from the plane."

Mariha opened her mouth, closed it, then raised a hand awkwardly. "Of course. But—"

Nya held up a hand. "I'm going to the bedroom. Do not disturb me until we are ready to land. Please."

Mariha's confused expression relaxed into raised brows and . . . what was that grin about?

"Oh. Ohhh. Of *course*, Ms. Jerami." The hovering anxiousness was gone now. "If you need any—ah—anything in particular, check the top drawer in the bedside table."

"Wonderful." Nya turned and strode as confidently as she could toward the bedroom as the plane bounced over air currents, walked in, and closed the door behind her.

The room was completely dark.

Where is the light switch?

She slid her palms over the wall beside the door in frustrated panic. She couldn't very well head back out into the cabin and ask for help after her haughty exit. Giving up, she pressed the home button on her cell phone, the dim light from the screen illuminating the edge of the bed.

She shuffled her way toward it and sighed in relief as the soft mattress gave way beneath her palms and her knees. The bed was decadent, as any bed befitting royalty would be, and she allowed her weary body to sink into the swaddling comfort.

Too soft, she thought, then chided herself for her ingratitude.

Now that she was alone in the dark, tears stung at her eyes and her chest felt tight. She would be home, Thesolo home, in less than two hours, and despite all the assurances she'd given to friends and family, she was not prepared.

She thought of how Mariha had said Jerami like the word was a hot coal on her tongue.

It was a venerated surname in the small but powerful African kingdom—Annie and Makalele Jerami, Nya's grandparents, were respected tribal elders. Naledi Smith née Ajoua, born of a Jerami, was the country's prodigal princess-to-be, whose impending marriage was currently the most anticipated event in Thesolo's history.

The name was also reviled in some quarters now because of the man that made Nya's hands tremble with nerves.

Alehk Jerami the traitor. Alehk Jerami the disgrace of Thesolo.

Alehk Jerami, Nya's father.

He'd committed many crimes against the kingdom of Thesolo, as everyone had discovered two years before—blackmail, treason, fraud—but the worst among these had been the shameful act of poisoning his own kin.

Annie and Makalele and Naledi—Ledi, whose parents had fled years before to escape Alehk's threats and died in a land far from their ancestors, leaving their daughter orphaned—had almost lost their lives.

No. Her father had almost taken them.

Unspeakable.

In the aftermath, people spoke of how Alehk harmed everyone closest to him, as if he himself were poison. There were even rumors that his beloved wife hadn't really died in childbirth, though Nya was certain that rumor wasn't true. But his daughter? It seemed that no one thought about mousy little Nya when it came to the crimes of Alehk Jerami, except to pity her or wonder if she'd aided him.

He'd loved her too much to hurt her, everyone thought, but too much love could hurt, too.

Would you leave me, too, Nya? After having taken your mother from me? Answer me, child.

No, Father. I will never leave you.

She sucked in a breath against the panic and pressed her thumbs into the corners of her eyes, as if stopping a leak in a dam. Nya wouldn't cry. She wouldn't, even though she felt more alone than she ever had before. Even though she was certain that being home, which should have made her feel safe, would only make that hollowness inside of her feel even deeper, darker, and more inescapable.

I wish . . . I wish.

The bed suddenly shifted, the tilt of the mattress jarring, and Nya was pulled into a strong, solid embrace. Her nose tickled at the smell of lemon and lavender, citrus and almost abrasive floral, as far from the smell of the eng flower of Thesolo—her father's poison of choice—as she could get. The arms that clamped around her were lean and muscular, and the body it pulled her against was just as fit. The body was warm—so warm and cradling her so perfectly that she relaxed and sighed at how . . . *right* it felt before her fear and common sense kicked in.

She was alone on the plane. But someone was in the bed behind her. *Holding her.* Had her distress been so acute that it had reached Ingoka's ears? Had she conjured this sudden comfort? She knew the folklore of the lesser gods, of those who gave humans what they wanted but always took more than they gave.

No, this is no time for fairy tale silliness.

She tried to tug herself free from the stranger's arm because, be they god or man, something really fucking weird was going on.

The hold tightened. "*Reste bei mir.*"

The sleep-slurred words came out in an exhalation that tickled Nya's ear and made her belly jolt. She pushed at one of the arms from below and the hold loosened as the stranger snorted and began to move. A large hand patted her arm, paused, then pulled away.

"What have we here?" The voice was deep and smooth, a European, judging from the strangely accented English. So definitely not a lesser god of Thesolo, and more likely a human—one who might be dangerous.

She jumped up off the bed, listing a bit as the plane hit dipped and tilted, fumbling with her phone as her hands began to tremble slightly. She was on the plane usually reserved for the royal family of Thesolo. Ledi had made her listen to those true crime podcasts so Nya knew that this could be some depraved assassin.

What kind of assassin snuggles people to death?

Stranger things had happened.

"Who are you and what do you want?" She tried to access the flashlight app, but her thumb was wet from the tears she'd pressed into submission and the fingerprint reader wouldn't work. She pressed the button along the phone's side to take photos instead, no unlocking required, and the bright bursts of the camera's automatic flash revealed the outline of a man stretched out on the bed.

The bed she had just sought out for safety and comfort. A jolt of anger and fear sliced through her as her thumb repetitively pressed the button.

"What do you want?" she asked again, stepping back toward the door.

"Hmm. Biscuits?" The lazy response was punctuated by the sound of shuffling on the sheets. "Biscuits would be *super*. I missed the in-flight meal."

Wait. That voice is familiar. And the language . . .

A light suddenly flicked on, and Nya blinked several times, and then kept on blinking even after her eyes had adjusted. Her ears hadn't lied.

Oh! It's him.

"Oh. It's you." Johan Maximillian von Braustein's thick auburn hair was tousled and unruly, his cheeks slightly flushed as if he'd been dreaming of something naughty. His dress shirt was unbuttoned at the collar and rolled up to his elbows, revealing the reddish hair on his chest and dusting

his forearms. The shocking blue eyes that routinely stared out from the covers of tabloids? Those were bright and clear, even if the rest of him was still half-asleep.

For a second, she was hit with the same ridiculous certainty she'd had the first time she'd met him—that he was appraising her like a man trying to tally how many goats he'd have to trade for the pleasure of making her his, and he was willing to trade them all.

Then he looked away, his features the very picture of boredom. It had been her imagination running away with her again, fooling her into hoping for wide vistas when her actual view was blinkered at best.

He gathered a lump of tangled bedsheet close to him.

“Ledi’s cousin. Naya, is it? I thought you were a pillow,” he said before yawning hugely. Then he glanced at her, as if he’d thoroughly forgotten her presence in the time it had taken him to yawn and was now mildly surprised to find her there. “Well? Do you have biscuits?”

“No.” She realized she was still holding her phone out defensively and lowered her arm. His gaze on her intensified, and Nya felt the English being knocked from her head by the impact of it. “The bed. I want to be in it.”

“I see.” That shocking blue gaze warmed beneath long lashes that drooped as if they’d suddenly grown heavy. “Are you here to seduce me, Naya?”

Nya almost dropped her phone at his audacity. He was so calm, so sure that if she was there it must be to fulfill his needs. Her vocabulary returned, reloaded by her anger. “Seduce you? No! I didn’t even know you were in here!”

He rolled over onto his side, resting his head on the mound of bedding he’d gathered, the better to see her. “I know this trick. ‘Oh, I’m just a timid little thing who wandered into the lair of the big bad wolf.’” He chuckled and patted the mattress. “Very well, then, Naya. Come to bed and I’ll eat you up.”

Goddess. He’d gone from ignoring her at every encounter, to not remembering her name, to accusing her of seduction, to offering . . . THAT as easily as the priestesses handed out garlands at the flower festival. She wasn’t sure what was more intolerable, his assumption or the amusement in his tone. He was wrong about her intentions but, like everyone else, thought the mere idea of Nya taking what she wanted was laughable.

Even the most docile Jerami wouldn't tolerate this disrespect. She gripped the phone and pointed it at him. "I am pulling no tricks. And my name is *Nya*. You might remember that before inviting me to lower myself with a man like you."

"My mistake," he said lightly, seemingly resistant to shaming, then scooted over. "Well, the bed is big enough to fit two, and I wouldn't mind some company right now."

Nya paused, dropping her hand to her side again. There was *something* in his tone . . . but before she could identify it, he glanced at her sidelong.

"I didn't ask before because I was asleep, I suppose, but do you prefer big spoon or little spoon?" He raised his eyebrows suggestively, underlining the fact that to him this was a joke. But to her . . .

Nya had never been held by a man before Johan had, apparently, mistaken her for a pillow. His arms around her had felt good in that moment before reality had set in, when he might have been a figment of her imagination and not a world-famous fuckboy. And now this jerk who had never bothered to learn her name and would likely forget her existence again as soon as the plane landed thought to make light of the most intimate experience she'd had thus far?

Of course. Self-indulgent, spoiled . . . he doesn't know what it's like to be alone. For him, spooning a random woman on a plane is just another Tuesday.

"You can be big spoon if you want," he offered when she didn't respond, and Nya sucked her teeth. He really was as appalling as the tabloids made him out to be.

"I will be the *only* spoon. Get out." Her voice trembled and she swallowed hard against the lump forming in her throat. She could still feel his arms around her, holding her close. The heat of his body and his scent surrounding her. For the first time, she'd known what it felt like to be . . . cared for. And it had been this ridiculous man, who cared for no one but himself. This greedy, wanton playboy with his good looks and smooth words, who expected her to bend to his wishes.

Nya was both embarrassed and furious.

Worse, behind her fury, a small lonely voice in the deepest part of her whispered, *Go to him. Isn't this what you dreamed of?*

Johan sat there looking at her with his confident grin, as if he was in cahoots with her traitorous hidden desires.

Nya was lonely, but she had suffered enough humiliation for one lifetime.

She gestured toward the door. "Get. Out."

"I'm quite comfortable," he said, settling in. "And let's not forget that I was here first, Mademoiselle I Want To Be in Bed."

This teasing was so much worse than all those times he had ignored her in New York City because she'd imagined situations just like this, despite her distaste for him. Situations where he couldn't pretend she didn't exist and was hit with the realization that she existed and she *mattered*—and perhaps even that he wanted no one but her.

Your dreams are too big, girl.

Now he was finally looking right at her and all he saw was a woman to be treated like a joke. That was all anyone would ever see.

Her father had been right.

"I said get out!" Nya had never yelled before. It was strange, how the angry words scraped her throat. How did people do this all the time? No matter. She would shout him to the threshold of Ingoka's abyss if necessary. "You rude, inconsiderate, selfish, arrogant—"

Her words caught on an ugly choking sound and tears spilled down her cheeks, a sudden graceless torrent. She raised her hands to her face.

Apparently I haven't been humiliated enough.

"Ah, scheisse."

She could see the white of Johan's dress shirt and the gray of his pressed slacks through the spaces between her fingers as he moved from the bed and stood before her, but she refused to look up into his face.

"Nya." His voice was gentle now. So, so gentle, wrapping around her like his arms had, which somehow made everything worse.

She shook her head and sniffled against her palm. "I want to be alone." Her voice broke like that of a reedy youth, and she squeezed her eyes shut even harder. She had spent so much of her life never breaking, pretending that everything was all right, and of course it would happen now, in front of *him*.

"Here," he said, and then there was the feel of silky soft material against the back of her hand. "Take it, along with my apology. I've behaved . . . I won't say it was quite out of character, but I know better and shouldn't have spoken to you in that way. I took my bad mood out on you."

“It’s fine. I’m used to that,” she said miserably as she snatched the handkerchief he offered. If her father had prepared her for anything it was that her happiness was always to be at the whim of some man.

She wiped at her face, inhaling the scent of lemon and lavender that had wrapped around her so comfortingly before.

“Used to it?” Johan’s voice was a little sharper now, the lazy, inviting drawl a little more firm. “That doesn’t make it right. I was an ass.”

She blew her nose, barely listening. She knew that men only apologized when you made them question their own idea of themselves. She would assuage him, so he could feel like a good man again and leave her alone. “It’s fine. I accept your apology.”

“Don’t pardon me so easily.” She glanced at him to see that he had one hand on his hip, the other behind his back as he leaned a bit closer to her. “Or pardon me if you want, I suppose, but don’t do it because you’re *used* to dealing with asses.”

“Sorry,” she said automatically. With her father, *sorry* had been a magic word to make unpleasant conversations stop.

“For what?” Johan pressed, and the brazen man had the nerve to sound annoyed with *her*.

Nya didn’t respond. She was annoyed herself—and confused. Johan had insulted her, then comforted her, and now was defending her from himself? Men were exhausting, truly.

She sniffled.

He made a sound of consternation. “I don’t have any more handkerchiefs, but my shirt is quite absorbent if you need a shoulder to cry on. It’s made of the finest cotton.”

“I have my own shoulders, thank you very much,” she said, aware her words didn’t quite make sense. “I’m not going to cry all over some disrespectful man.”

He rolled his eyes. “Come now. You’ve read the tabloids, I’m sure. I’ve been linked to worse bodily fluids than tears.”

“What?” She shouldn’t have asked—she wanted to be rid of him—but this was all so bizarre that she couldn’t suppress her shocked laughter. “Is that gross oversharing supposed to make me feel better?”

“Does it make you feel worse?” He grinned at her, then brushed aside a lock of hair that had fallen in front of his eyes.

She looked at him. “I suppose not.”

“*Gutt.*” His gaze flicked to the door and then back to her. “Do you still want me to leave?”

Nya was aware that he was no longer being flippant—that if she wanted him to *stay*, he would do that, too. Her head spun a bit at how quickly Johan could change the tone of the conversation, like a car shifting gears, but then she shook it. This wasn’t a game. He wasn’t her one true prince. In the end, he was just another tiresome man who wanted something from her.

“No,” she said. “You should go.”

“*Comme tu willst,*” he said softly. “The light switch is on the console on the bedside table, next to the USB port.”

With that he let himself out, taking the bundled-up top sheet with him. She wouldn’t conjecture why, given his whole bodily fluids thing. Instead, she flopped down onto the bed, still somewhat in shock.

Maybe it was for the best she was returning home. She would go back to work at the orphanage school, where the children needed her. She would resume visiting her grandparents, who loved her. She would once again be boring, timid Nya, because that’s who she was anywhere she went and she might as well stop trying to be someone she wasn’t.

Her phone buzzed in her hand.

One True Prince, message from: Hanjo

I like a girl with spirit! I’ll be in the library tomorrow afternoon, and we can pretend it’s a coincidence when you show up and sit beside me.

“Shut up, Hanjo,” she muttered.

She was about to put the phone down when she remembered the camera flash she’d used to figure out who the snuggly stowaway was—she had taken photos of him. She shouldn’t have felt a gnawing curiosity as she navigated to the camera roll—it was kind of creepy having the photos, even if she hadn’t taken them intentionally.

There were several pictures. All were dark with blurry patches of light, except for one that was as clear as if he’d posed for her. She expected his expression to be sly playboy boredom, but his expression was somber as he looked toward the camera. He looked . . . sad?

No, he looks like a man about to bother you for no reason, because that’s what he did, she reminded herself. Then she looked closer.

Was that?

No, it couldn't be.

But it was.

There, poking out from underneath the playboy prince of Liechtenbourg, was the face of a small, ratty, oddly disgruntled-looking teddy bear.

"Oh goddess," she whispered, not quite sure what to feel. He was a very weird man—not because he slept with a teddy bear, but because from everything she knew about him, he was the last man who would. He slept with *models*, and drove fancy cars, and . . .

Well, it didn't matter. She doubted she'd see him, or his angry bear, much after the plane landed anyway. He was the loud, in-the-middle-of-the-action type. She was usually safely holding up a wall, looking at those types in admiring scorn. She'd keep his teddy bear secret safe. She would *not* think about how it was rather cute.

She put her phone down and opened the drawer the flight attendant had told her about, where she found a box of luxurious, aloe-infused tissues—along with condoms, lubricant, and a pair of fuzzy handcuffs.

She remembered the flight attendant's smirk when Nya had insisted on going into the bedroom.

Nya slammed the drawer shut, curled up on the bed, and pulled the pillow over her head. It smelled of eng, but faintly, very faintly, of lemon and lavender.

She sighed.

If Mariha was a gossip, the Nya of the fantasy world would once again be much more interesting than the real one.

Chapter Two

Where is Jo-Jo? In the days leading up to the darkest day in Liechtenbourgian history, the infamous prince is nowhere to be found! Crown Prince Lukas has been seen out and about more than usual, though. With the upcoming referendum dividing the country, is the reserved young prince ready to step into the spotlight?

—*The Liechtenbourg Bugle*

Despite what the tabloids said about his reckless behavior, Johan, aka the Tabloid Prince of Liechtenbourg, aka Bad Boy Jo-Jo, had a rigid sense of control. That no one was aware of this was evidence of that. He showed people what he wanted them to see—what they wanted to see, really—because that was what worked best for him. For his family. For everyone.

He didn't think of himself as manipulative, a word that sounded villainous; he preferred cunning—Machiavellian, maybe, but without the immorality and murder. He made sure no one was hurt by his scheming. No one but himself, but that hurt was negligible compared to others he'd suffered.

So it bothered him, as he stretched out in a plush seat in the main cabin of the private jet, that he'd let his control slip.

He'd told himself he was joking when he'd suggested to Nya that he would eat her up, like a cliché of a pervert. *Scheisse*, he cringed just thinking about it. He'd convinced himself the joke had served a purpose—distraction from an untimely discovery of his sleeping partner, Bulgom Pamplémousse von Bearstein, who was now stowed away with Johan's carry-on. Everyone knew "Prince" Johan cracked scandalous jokes. Everyone thought he *was* one.

But Johan avoided letting his jokes overlap with his desires. And Nya? He desired her.

It was a problem.

He'd only started watching her because, well, her father had almost killed his best friend's fiancée and tried to foment a coup in his best friend's country. Thabiso and Naledi had apparently overlooked her potential role in the matter, explaining that Nya would *never* hurt anyone, but Johan was a bit more cynical. When he'd traveled to New York for charity events or political summits, he'd kept an eye on her and her lovely, shy smile. Her curves, more luscious each time he'd glimpsed her during visits chez Thabiso over the past year and a half. Her quiet amusement with the small things other people didn't pay attention to.

Somewhere along the line, discreetly watching her out of prudence had changed to discreetly lusting after her. He'd thirsted, he'd considered risking it all, and then he'd done what any intelligent person would do—he'd ignored her with a strength matched only by Europe ignoring migrants and America ignoring creeping fascism.

When she'd glance at him, as if considering starting a conversation, he'd spot someone he desperately needed to talk to across the room. When Portia tried to draw her into their jokes, he'd combat roll away. When Thabiso had told him they'd be sharing a flight, Johan snuck into the private jet's bedroom and cowered in the dark.

Control.

But when he'd asked her to come to bed, his joke had been a need beyond his control, and it hadn't been funny. It had been ungentlemanly, rude, and if another man had done the same in his presence Johan would have decked him, or at least embarrassed the hell out of him. He was left feeling a bit disoriented. Bad Boy Jo-Jo was a persona that he used to protect himself and those he loved; he didn't like how easily he had slipped on that mask with Nya, how reflexively he'd reached for crassness and ended up hurting her.

Maybe it was the stress. Or maybe he'd really needed a cuddle right then, and Bulgom Pamplemousse von Bearstein simply hadn't been enough.

It was *that* day. D-day, and not the Normandy one. Death Day.

He grabbed a lock of hair and twisted, the movement a tic he'd never outgrown but had learned to mask with a seductive sweep of his fingers through his carefully tousled mane.

There were few things that upset him—or rather, there were few things he allowed himself to be upset about—but even he couldn't fake cool detachment from something as brutal as this.

Back home, the news would be replaying snippets from his mother's funeral, and ten years wasn't nearly enough time to make reliving that bearable. When, at seventeen, his life had fallen apart—and the adhesive that had joined him to his blended family had been suddenly ripped away—he'd been told that it would hurt less with time. Even then he'd known it was a lie. You couldn't love someone as much as he'd loved his mother—you couldn't be loved by someone as much as he'd been loved by her—and ever stop hurting at their loss. He managed, but he never moved on.

He'd usually spend this day distracting his brother, Lukas, the actual heir to the Liechtenburgian crown, who had been only seven when their mother passed away. Johan had dedicated his life to making sure that Lukas was loved as Johan had been loved and was protected how Johan hadn't been. He'd taught Lukas all the ways to be liked and accepted by his peers, how to be the *right* kind of boy, one who didn't cry and prefer books to people. He'd pushed Lukas from under the constant burden of the spotlight shone by voracious royal watchers, taking it onto himself. But Lukas was seventeen now, old enough to make his own plans, and had decided he wanted to hold a memorial for their mother.

Johan wasn't going to display his pain for public consumption ever again, and he couldn't put on his Bad Boy Jo-Jo act at his mother's memorial, so he'd been relieved when Thabiso's wedding festivities had provided him with an out.

In the plane's bedroom, when he'd awoken with the ragged wound of loss gaping within him and the woman he desired in his arms, that infuriatingly needy part of him had decided to shoot its shot in the worst way possible.

He groaned and sank deeper into his seat.

All for the best. He could certainly avoid her over the next few days, but ignoring her would be next to impossible. Repelling her would have to suffice. She'd lashed out at him in anger, but she'd been ready to forgive him, by the end. He'd watched her for long enough to know that she was too good, too gentle, for a man like him.

He knew what could happen to women like that.

I'll be okay, Jo-Jo. It's just a bit of fatigue. All I need is some vitamin C, ja?

He pulled his tablet from the travel bag he'd stashed in an overhead compartment when he'd boarded, then logged into the spreadsheet he

shared with Greta, the assistant in charge of handling his jet-setting playboy schedule, his official social media presence, his paparazzi herding—and his charitable enterprises.

Johan's mother hadn't been wealthy; that was what had made her and King Linus's love story such irresistible fodder for highbrow journals and tabloids alike. But between the insurance payout for her untimely death, the money she'd arranged to be bequeathed to him since he wasn't entitled to the royal riches, the allowance given to him by Linus, and a fantastic financial advisor, Johan had more assets than he would ever know what to do with.

Some of that went toward his expensive clothing, personal trainers, and top-of-the-line hair care products, but he received many things for free—he was a *trend disseminator*, which was apparently the “manly” term for influencer.

Most of his money was used to fund the growing network of charitable organizations he contributed to and the employees who helped him with the endeavor, like his assistant, Greta. Much of his travel was attending fundraisers for those charities, but when he was on the front page every week for some new possible scandal, those events were usually seen as PR stunts to make up for his misdeeds. And that was how he preferred it.

We do not do good to be praised for it, Jo-Jo, but because one good deed is like a ripple in the water. You have no idea how far one ripple will spread, or who it will reach.

The familiar anger at the unfairness of his mother's passing lunged up in him at the memory of her words, at the reality that her ripples had been stilled forever, but he tamped it down with practiced efficiency.

The charities were something he didn't share with the press, and he'd publicly deny any such schmaltzy sentiment behind his link to them, of course, but his mother's words had never left him. He wasn't trying to make her proud, even if she was looking down on him from somewhere. She didn't—hadn't—believed in kindness for the accolades they would bring, and neither did he. He was making ripples for the same reason Mother had: because the world *needed* ripples—in the absence of her kindness, it needed waves—and he would do what he could to create them.

Quietly.

Cunningly.

He scanned the spreadsheet, scrolling down to rows highlighted in red and reviewing information in the Update columns, typing his responses in white font so that Greta would be able to keep track of them. The European Women's Heart Disease Awareness Fund, the first charity he'd supported, had broken fund-raising records that week. Of course it was, with his mother dominating the news and the awful irony of her death commented on again and again with macabre headlines.

The day before his mother's funeral, Johan had marched into the *Liechtenbourg Bugle's* offices and punched the editor who'd allowed the headline "Queen of Our Hearts Didn't Take Care of Her Own." That had been when Bad Boy Jo-Jo, just a chrysalis of a persona he'd used to fit in at boarding school, had emerged on the front page with flamboyant red wings and a taste for trouble—he'd never left it.

Johan squinted at the screen of his tablet, which needed his attention more than useless memories.

The Liechtenbourg Migrant Health and Home organization, his latest charity interest, had come under attack during debates about the referendum—Milos Arschlocher was the man leading the charge on that, claiming that the royal family was allowing Liechtenbourg to stray from tradition.

Johan tamped out another spurt of anger.

After addressing what he could, he reviewed his dossier on Njaza, the diplomatic visit that he'd arranged to take place after Thabiso's wedding. No Liechtenbourgish official had been to the former colony since Linus's father, decades ago. It hadn't been possible, or rather it hadn't been permitted, until the recent coronation of King Sanyu, and Johan wasn't sure how he would be received. The previous king had banned travelers from Liechtenbourg, with good reason after the Liechtenbourgish rich had squeezed Njaza dry and then left the country in the throes of civil war.

Sanyu, who had been two years ahead of Johan and Thabiso at their elite prep school in the Swiss Alps, had been one of the few who had avoided bullying Johan in those first weeks before he had figured out that the other boys didn't care what he was actually like as long as he would roughhouse, say crass things, and only cry if it was from anger—the only acceptable emotion, it seemed.

The flight attendant walked in carrying a tray that held the kale-carrot-mango protein shake he'd asked her for, and Johan shut down his tablet. As

she placed the drink down, she gave him the conspiratorial look she'd been sporting since he'd left the bedroom.

"Is Ms. Jerami still . . . sleeping?" she asked coyly. When he'd first boarded, the woman had gone into the state of nervous shock that overtook lots of people when they met him, even those accustomed to dealing with VIPs. Johan was a bit of an outlier even amongst royalty. He fell into the category of semi-celebrities people thought they *knew*, and now that he'd seemingly lived up to his reputation, the flight attendant felt comfortable enough to basically ask if he'd worn Nya out.

Johan reminded himself about his big bad wolf line—he was hardly the one to pass judgment on this woman for seeing him exactly how he'd taught people to see him. He modulated his voice to vague disinterest. "I hope so. She looked like she could use the rest."

The attendant raised her brows, and Johan inhaled deeply.

"Nothing happened between us," he said on the exhale, his bluntness only slightly softened by the charm he ratcheted up. "She didn't know I was in there because, as you know, I asked for privacy when I boarded. I'd appreciate if you kept any misunderstanding about that to yourself."

"Oh yes! Of course, Your Highness." She executed a little curtsy, but as she straightened, she winked at him. "My lips are sealed."

Scheisse de merde. By tomorrow there could be all kinds of "mile high club" puns screaming from the front page of the tabloids.

"Nothing happened," he reiterated. He almost added that he wasn't "your highness" either. He was the stepson to the King of Liechtenbourg and half brother to the actual prince; he was Liechtenbourg's literal redheaded step-prince. He'd once printed up cards to hand out to people in a fit of youthful pique, but that had gone over like burned schnitzel with the king.

He sighed, then fluttered his lashes in the flight attendant's direction until he had her full attention. "Mariha—what a beautiful name that is. Now, Mariha, I don't mean to push this, but I must make sure that there are no falsehoods spread about me and the *princess's cousin*. That would be terrible for everyone involved, wouldn't it? If it was discovered royal staff had spread lies that might hurt Ms. Jerami?"

He tried to muster his look of affable pleading underlined with stern threat.

“Right, Your Highness,” Mariha said carefully. “I understand. I’ll go wake Miss Jerami because we’ll be landing soon.”

Her gaze lingered on his, as if they now shared a thrilling secret, and then she strode away. Johan groaned and pressed his head back into the headrest. He was off his game. Even though he’d run away from Liechtenbourg and memorials and memories, he couldn’t escape the general malaise that came with this anniversary every year.

He pulled out his phone and did a quick check-in on Lukas, whom he expected to be in bed given the time difference, but who appeared as ONLINE in their chat app.

Jo: Ça va, petite bruder?

The message was first marked as RECEIVED and then as READ, but no telltale “Baby Bro is typing” appeared as it usually did. After a moment, Lukas’s status switched to OFFLINE.

Johan’s breath went shallow for a moment but he didn’t panic.

There was a perfectly reasonable explanation for his lack of response. Maybe Lukas had noticed he had a message, half-awake, then fallen back to sleep. Or hadn’t actually read Johan’s message, and would respond in the morning. It wasn’t as if his brother, the person he cared about most in the world, would *purposely* avoid him.

He switched to his secret social media handle to check the relentlessly nosy royal watcher accounts that had begun to track Lukas despite Johan’s distracting antics.

The first thing to pop up in his feed was a photo of his brother, looking sad and pale as he stood in front of the memorial to their mother, holding a wreath. His mouth was a grim line, but his posture was straight and his expression steely. He looked every inch the image of a handsome, dutiful future king, surrounded by strangers in dark suits, and it made Johan’s stomach turn. He’d tried so hard to keep Lukas out of the spotlight, but the comments below the image showed his control over that was slipping as well.

@BougieBourger I never noticed but he’s SO HOT. I hope everyone votes YES in the upcoming referendum, but if the NO vote wins and the monarchy is abolished, he can come bunk with me.

@GimmeDatBraustein Oh, the poor leibling. Some woman is going to be a very happy future queen, though, if they make it through. Is it true he’s seeing Princess

Sadie?

Johan frowned. Of course people thought that a picture of a motherless boy in mourning was a great time to conjecture on his dating life. They'd done it to him at the actual bloody funeral.

@crispincakes Jo-Jo didn't show up! But didn't he freak out at his mother's funeral? It's no wonder—

Super.

Johan stopped reading and put his phone away. He hadn't had to suffer the full indignity of social media dissection when his mother had died, and some newspapers had been respectful enough not to publish the photos of his breakdown. He wasn't going to keep reading to see what people trying to revive his trauma would say about it.

He reached through the starched collar of his shirt for the thin, ornate ring on a chain around his neck and took a deep breath. He reminded himself that feelings were useless, unless they belonged to other people and could be protected or used to his benefit—never both.

Maybe Lukas had learned from him, a bit too well. Johan hadn't done much regarding the upcoming referendum because there was influencing as distraction and influencing as politics, and the latter was not his domain. But the always scheming little voice in the back of his mind felt a bit of pride if his brother had known that his appearance would sway people to a yes vote. The voice of his heart, which reasoned that Johan schemed so Lukas wouldn't have to, wasn't quite as amused.

Nya shuffled down the aisle as he was finishing his smoothie and took her seat in the seat across from him. She kept her gaze straight ahead, sphinxlike, and the sun streaming in through the window outlined her profile and her crown of braids in gold. Her burnished silhouette was lovely, and Johan imagined capturing it on a cameo, like the old Liechtenbourger love charms—except he would never have the right to own such an object.

“Hello again, Naya,” he said, with a deferential tilt of his head. The plan was to walk the tightrope of annoying her—within reason—so that she would avoid him over the next few days, but not so much that she *really* hated him.

She turned her head slowly, regally.

“Yes, Jo-Jo?” There was the slightest hint of unruffled derision in her tone as she used the tabloid nickname for him.

He was both affronted and delighted.

Could she possibly understand how much he hated that name? No, but she’d assumed that he wouldn’t be pleased by it. She was soft and gentle, but not all the time, he was learning.

He fought off a smile, and cleared his throat.

“I’m going to apologize again,” he said. “There is nothing humorous about a strange man propositioning a woman trapped on a plane with him, and it’s not my style.”

He looked up at her through his lashes and grinned, a one-two combo he thought would work best on a generally reserved woman like Nya who wasn’t used to being the center of attention. Now she would blush, and stammer, and accept his apology not out of reflex but because he’d charmed her. Then he could go back to ignoring her for both of their own good.

She gazed at him steadily, but didn’t say anything for a long while. Johan’s jaw began to ache from holding his patented smile in place—it usually worked much more quickly than this.

He was off his game, indeed.

Just when the awkwardness was becoming almost intolerable, she tilted her head back and looked down her nose at him.

“Do you mean it? Or are you just trying to make yourself feel better?” Her voice was firm, with no hint of his charm having worked on her.

“Yes. I mean, no. I’m apologizing because I shouldn’t have behaved that way,” he responded, surprised to find himself flustered.

“If you take a moment to think *before* saying offensive things to a woman, and then *don’t* say them, you’ll have nothing to apologize for and she won’t have to make you feel better about it.” She tapped her index finger thoughtfully against her temple as she looked at him, then reached for a magazine on her tray table and pulling it into her lap, ignoring him.

“What?”

“Keep your apology.” She flipped the magazine open.

Oh là. He was losing his touch.

This . . . was not how things were supposed to play out. She was supposed to accept his apology with a shy smile. Maybe a giggle.

“I don’t understand,” he said, more to himself than to her.

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye.

“Weren’t you the one who told me I shouldn’t excuse you?” she asked. That surprising anger that he’d heard before she’d cried crept into her tone. “I get it. It was a joke to you. But I’ve had some time to think and I don’t want your apology or your protection. I want to not be treated like a sex object or a . . . a *sugar bubble* depending on your mood.”

She turned a page decisively.

Oh là là.

Johan tore his gaze from her and tried to wrap his mind around the current situation. Nya—wallflower Nya, barely able to make eye contact Nya—had just soundly put him in his place. For a second time. She was like a feather pillow with a knife hidden in its down, and he kept managing to sit on the pointy end.

He hadn’t expected that response from her at all, which was worry enough in itself, but his reaction was even more troublesome.

He liked it. He *quite* liked it.

Oh là là là là.

He was prepared to sit in silence because he was supposed to be ignoring her, but then he heard a little shuddering sigh emanate from her direction and glanced across the aisle.

Her head was bowed over the magazine but the fingers of one hand tapped the pages nervously. The imperious demeanor she’d sported when putting him in his place had slipped away and she seemed smaller. Sadder.

“Ahem.” He took a moment to recalibrate his idea of her and what she might need to lift her spirits before speaking. She’d laughed a bit at the body fluids bit, though he sensed that she liked being joked with more than raunch. “What exactly is a sugar bubble, so I can avoid treating you like one?”

“Google it,” she said, though the edge of her mouth turned up just a millimeter. So she wasn’t entirely immune to his charms, then? He could work with that. All he needed was the slightest crack and he could ease his way in, turn this situation around.

Okay, maybe he *was* manipulative. But he didn’t like seeing Nya Jerami cry, nor did he like her sighing and troubled across the aisle from him.

He would distract himself from his worries about Lukas by helping her ease her own. That’s all this was.

He picked up his tablet and tapped at the blank screen as he pretended to do a search. “Hmm. ‘Sugar bubble is the name for a beautiful opalescent

form of dark pearl, hollow with a thin shell. It appears delicate but is actually almost indestructible.' Oh, but this sounds like something good, this sugar bubble."

He looked over and saw her shoulders shake a bit, but her head was still down. She lifted a page of her magazine but didn't turn it. She was listening.

"This is interesting, too. 'Many people think the Trojan War was started over Helen of Troy, but this is a common misconception as her nickname was Sugar Bubble. The war was actually over the theft of this rare jewel, but fighting over a woman sounded more macho in the history books.'"

Her head swiveled in his direction, a smile on her face that rivaled the sunlight glowing through the window behind her. There was a repressed amusement in her tone when she spoke. "You're lying."

"*Ouay*." The word came out deep and low because he was flirting, despite his best effort not to.

"This isn't going to make me accept your apology," she said cautiously, but then closed the magazine. "What else does it say?"

Johan worked his bottom lip with his teeth in faux studiousness to suppress his grin.

"Let's see, let's see. Paris stole the famed sugar bubble from Menelaus because the king owed him some money, and Paris really wanted to buy this sweet new chariot—"

Nya's giggle mixed with the ping of the PA system, and then the captain's smooth voice filled the cabin. "We will begin making our descent shortly. Please ensure your seat belts are fastened."

When Johan glanced at Nya, the laughter was gone from her eyes. Her frown may as well have been a blaring siren, impossible for him to ignore.

Merde. Telling stories was one thing, but what he wanted to do now was another.

He'd already insulted her. He was likely the last person she wanted to share anything with. But something in him itched to bring the smile back to her face, or at least to smooth away the frown.

He was used to this urgent need to assist; it was his shameful secret. There couldn't be a distressed person within fifty paces without Johan catching wind of it and that urge to fix it almost overwhelming him. He buried those acts by acting a fool every two weeks or so, and occasionally

showing his ass—literally. He couldn't bury the fact that this desire to help Nya felt different, with roots in something not at all altruistic.

It's nothing more than a courtesy.

He ran a hand through his hair so that a few locks hung before his eyes, giving him a nonthreatening, shaggy-dog appeal.

"Nya?" She looked at him, and he dropped his shoulders forward, smiled sheepishly, and swept the hair away from his eyes, emphasizing that his attention was entirely on her. He waited, saw the moment when her gaze went a little soft, then spoke. "I didn't make a great first impression, but if you need to talk, I don't gossip and you'll rarely see me again after the wedding, if ever. Perfect, as far as confidants go."

She squinted at him as she considered his offer. "*First* impression? I guess you would make for a good confidant since you forget my existence so easily. That was like the eighth time we've met, but I guess I do tend to blend into the background."

Oh, she was wrong about that, but it wasn't his place to correct her. He raised one shoulder, then dropped it. "Yes. I'll probably forget everything as soon as we step off the plane. I'm careless like that."

"I told Portia you were weird," she said, scrunching her face as she regarded him.

"I hope Portia defended my honor," he said, slightly hurt but also oddly pleased. She'd talked about him with her friends—why?

It doesn't matter.

"Of course, she did," Nya said. "And I'm fine. I just have family problems, and returning home means I have to deal with them."

Johan liked to wallow in how frustrating his family was, but none of them had tried to kill anyone or foment a coup, to his knowledge.

She shook her head, as if clearing away bad thoughts. "Are you excited for the wedding?"

"I'm excited for my friend's future," he said, taking her cue to change the subject. He understood complicated families and the aversion to speaking of them, if nothing else. "I don't particularly enjoy weddings, but I think Thabiso's will be good."

Johan loved weddings, but he didn't enjoy them. They were an emotional minefield, and not exactly the best place for a man invested in maintaining an air of aloof disinterest.

She looked at him, and her smile was genuine, though there were still creases of worry around her eyes.

“It will be great. I’m so happy for them, even though I’ve been selfishly focused on my own problems.” She pressed her hands together. “The goddess has truly blessed them. It is no small thing, two people coming together.”

The genuine warmth in her words was somehow transmitted physically to Johan. He felt it in his body, how deeply she cared for their mutual friends. This was just vicarious emotion; he wondered what it would be like to be the recipient of that care himself.

The plane’s descent began in earnest then, and she turned to secure the items on the table in front of her, breaking their eye contact.

Johan held on to his armrests, white knuckled, and not because of the altitude. For the duration of his time in Thesolo, he would stay away from her. He needed to avoid the warmth her kindness kindled in him. He needed to remember that even the brightest flames could be doused in an instant, and he would never be left alone in the darkness again if he could help it.

He turned toward his own window and stared down at the patchwork of green and brown.

Control.

He would only be in Thesolo for a few days. He could hardly get into much trouble in that time, anyway.

About the Author

ALYSSA COLE is an award-winning author of historical, contemporary, and sci-fi romance. Her books have received critical acclaim from *The New York Times*, *Library Journal*, BuzzFeed, *Kirkus*, *Booklist*, *Jezebel*, *Vulture*, Book Riot, *Entertainment Weekly*, and various other outlets. *A Princess in Theory*, book 1 in the Reluctant Royals series, was a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2018. When she's not working, she can usually be found watching anime with her husband or wrangling their menagerie of animals.

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