

A romantic scene featuring a man and a woman in a small boat. The man, with dark hair and a beard, is wearing a light blue button-down shirt and is rowing the boat with a wooden oar. He is looking off to the side with a slight smile. The woman, with long, wavy brown hair, is leaning back against his chest, her arms crossed over his shoulders. She is wearing a purple top and is looking towards the camera with a gentle smile. The background is a lush green forest, and the water in the boat is dark. The overall mood is intimate and romantic.

ALL I WANT SERIES

Trust  
in  
me

LEA COLL

ALL I WANT SERIES

# Trust in me



LEA COLL

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*Also by*  
LEA COLL

*Choose Me*

*Be with Me*

*Burn for Me*

*Trust in Me*

*Stay with Me*

*Take a Chance on Me* (coming May 2020).

*Easy Moves*

To discover other titles by Lea Coll, please visit her [website](#).

This is the only part of my books my children are allowed to read and they do, so I wanted to thank them for being patient while I write one more word, one more sentence, one more paragraph, one more page—whatever I can get away with before they ask me for a snack or to play a game.

## Chapter One



*MEN DON'T CHEAT IN GOOD relationships.* My therapist's words echoed in my head as I jogged down the steps from her office onto the brick-lined sidewalk of the main street in my hometown. If Dr. Hirsch was right, I wasn't even a blip on Jason's radar when he stuck his dick in his student, his intern—the younger woman. And it's not that I'm old—she's that young.

The sun warmed my face as I walked toward Washington College's historic campus. Dr. Hirsch had also insisted the cheating wasn't my fault. Maybe. My first boyfriend in college was a T.A. who cheated with his student, then Jason—the man I was supposed to *marry*—couldn't keep his hands off—or his dick out of—his barely-old-enough-to-drink intern. Along with a few other inconsequential relationships along the way where the man always wandered to someone else, no matter how Dr. Hirsch wanted to frame it, that made the common denominator me.

As I entered Washington College's campus, I was running late as usual. Despite my love for my job, I wasn't happy my boss handed me his role as advisor for the student's paper, *The Elm*. With everything that goes into managing a small-town paper—declining readership numbers, loss of advertisers, and the cost of delivering the paper—I didn't have time for one more thing. I was a jack of all trades, and investigating and writing a story was only one small part the wheel that kept everything going. At least that was an area of my life where I could still trust my judgment, unlike dating where my gut had always been so clearly wrong.

I took a deep breath and shoved the failed-relationship memories back where they belonged as I stopped to admire the cherry blossom trees in full bloom. They would make great images for the website. I took a few photos with my phone until I noticed a large crowd of students on the quad and



heard the sound of a bat striking a ball. Walking closer, the infielder threw the ball at the runner, striking him. A man in a black T-shirt yelled, "Out!"

Catching the attention of one of the students, I said, "I thought you had to tag someone to get them out in baseball."

"This isn't baseball. It's an old game, called Town Ball. It's similar, but there's an extra base and there are no foul balls. Everything is in play. The professors and students play each other every Friday afternoon for fun."

This would be a cute write-up for the student paper. "Is this a new tradition? I don't remember this when I graduated six years ago."

"Yeah, one of the newer history professors started it." She pointed over to Sawyer Hudson, Luke's younger brother. Luke Hudson was the new sheriff and also my friend Emma's fiancé. My eyes slid over his team shirt, which stretched tight over his chest and broad shoulders, and I swallowed. I rarely saw Sawyer outside of his chinos and white button-downs. Who knew the quiet professor had a body?

"Hot, right?" The student laughed at my wide eyes. She wore short tight white shorts showcasing her long toned, tanned legs, topped with a black Zeta sorority shirt tied in a knot at her belly button, and a necklace which dangled teasingly over her ample breasts. "He's been voted unofficially the hottest professor three years running."

"Well, that was until Dr. Mason starting working here," her friend added.

I hadn't seen this Dr. Mason but he'd have to be pretty hot to beat out Sawyer in a hotness contest.

"Oh, yeah," she said.

I tore my eyes from the sight of Sawyer on the field, squatting in the fielding position ready to catch any balls thrown at him. "Hottest professor, huh?" I asked. Who knew? I'd always written Sawyer off as too quiet. He'd graduated the same year as I did from Chestertown High, but his intelligence kept him solidly out of my circle. Being learning challenged, I wasn't in his classes. I closed my eyes at the memory of the embarrassment and shame which followed me through school when I had trouble reading out loud or focusing.

"For sure," she said.

I heard her words, but couldn't process them. A teacher in a relationship with a student ran through my head on endless repeat. My ex-fiancé, Jason, had cheated on me with one of his younger interns shortly after proposing.

It happened two years ago, but the memory of his betrayal caused a pit to form in my stomach. Was Sawyer the same? Was he flattered by the students' attention? This girl was young, beautiful, and confident. Why wouldn't he be interested? But the important question was *why did I care?*

I watched him high-five a fellow player, chuckling, as he lifted his white T-shirt to wipe the sweat from his face, revealing a set of chiseled abs, which made my mouth drop open.

"Rawr! Check out that six pack." The student elbowed her friend. "Did you see that?"

"Uh huh. Man candy every Friday in the quad. Can't miss."

Checking my watch to see it was almost four, the time I needed to be at my meeting, I backed away from the spectacle, trying to circle the crowd to make it to the Gibson Center for the Arts building, not wanting to be late for the first meeting. The crowd around me began to dissipate as the game ended, making my trek across the quad more difficult.

"I'm putting a reminder on my phone to come to the quad every Friday afternoon," one student said, her fingers flying over her phone as she walked in front of me.

With all of the stops and starts, I'd barely even reached the field when someone in the crowd jostled me and I slammed into a very defined back. The person spun around, placing his large hands on my shoulders to steady me. My eyes traveled up from the sweat-soaked T-shirt to amused brown eyes partially hidden behind glasses.

"Sawyer?" I asked, breathlessly. Since when am I breathless around Sawyer?

"Stella? What are you doing on campus?" His low voice sent a shiver through my body.

I breathed in his scent, a combination of sweat, leather, and something musty from working in the historic buildings. I cleared my throat, taking a large step back, causing his hands to drop from my shoulders.

We were total opposites—he was quiet and intelligent—I was loud and said whatever was on my mind. He was analytical and I was flighty.

At Sawyer's raised brows, I knew I'd been quiet for too long. "Oh, I'm the newest advisor for the student paper. My boss didn't want to do it anymore, so one more thing on my plate." I smiled wide to cover my thoughts. I was always expected to be the happy, carefree person. I knew my role and played it well.

Sawyer's eyes widened. "Wow, Stella, that's great."

"Is it so surprising?" I couldn't help asking in a small voice. Of course, someone as smart and accomplished as Sawyer wasn't impressed by me—I was voted the class clown my senior year.

"Not exactly." He coughed into his hand and shifted on his feet.

I took a step to pass him, but his hand closed around my arm, drawing me up short. My breath caught at the contact, and my gaze paused on the long tan fingers circling my arm. "I'm sorry, Stella. I guess it surprised me a little."

I nodded, my lips drawn tight at his honesty.

"I'm sorry. That came out all wrong." He sighed, clearly frustrated with himself causing my heart to clench.

This man was upset that he'd hurt my feelings? When was the last time that had happened?

Then quieter, he said, "I think it's great you're working with the kids on the paper. Being younger, I'm sure they'll relate better to you."

I smiled. "Yeah, that's true." The fact that he'd referred to his students as kids stuck out to me. My mind flashed back to the young co-eds on the quad wearing baby doll-size shirts and tiny shorts.

He smiled, drawing his lip between his teeth, like he was uncomfortable letting loose. "I guess we'll be seeing more of each other now—since you're working on campus."

"Oh yeah, for sure." For sure? I was talking like the students now. Sawyer had reduced me to a simpering sorority girl. "Anyway!" My voice rose an octave as I tried to continue speaking in my best reporter voice, "I need to get to my meeting so I'm not late. It was great seeing you, Sawyer." I glanced pointedly where his hand still gripped my arm firmly.

His face flushed, he dropped my arm. "Right. Sorry about that."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say I wasn't. That he could touch me anytime he wanted to, but I remembered what he said when our group of friends gathered at Logan and Ashley's home for their housewarming party: *"No man, she's too much for me. She's impulsive and loud. I need a nice, quiet—"* I have no idea what else he'd said because I'd fled the party before he saw me.

He'd been clear that night. He saw me as this flighty airhead who didn't take anything seriously. Not that I'd ever seen him for more than what he was, the brother of a friend in my tight circle of friends. I couldn't blame

him. He didn't know me. No one did. But I couldn't get his softly spoken words out of my head. It cut to the core of my insecurities—wishing I could be more like other women—not someone so easily dismissed and discarded.

I managed to walk away without tripping, but I swore I felt his gaze on my back as I continued across the quad, dodging Frisbees. A lightness filled me as I replayed the interaction with him—the first time I'd noticed Sawyer as a man and not an acquaintance—his defined chest and chiseled abs. Who knew sweat looked so good on a man? I'd told him before he was Clark Kent sexy with his glasses before and it was so true.

I trudged up the concrete steps to the historic brick building lined with white columns, sighing as I remembered the sorority girls' words *voted hottest professor three years running*. My ex hadn't turned down his younger student's advance and I'd do well to remember that. Not only had Jason cheated on me with an intern, but my college boyfriend, who was a TA, cheated on me with his student.

Hot nerdy professor types were so not my thing. I liked confident athletic men who knew how to talk to a woman, not blushing and stumbling over words. I couldn't compete against women who were younger, prettier, and petite. I'd proven that time and time again—I was a good time—but I was disposable, replaceable. No one chose me in the end.

I entered the newly remodeled modern meeting room where students sat at long tables facing the front of the room. Glancing at the analog clock hanging on the wall, I realized I was my usual ten minutes late. Sucking in a breath, I vowed to try harder to be on time. Ever since I had been granted probationary admission out of high school to attend Washington College based on my interview and not my test scores I'd worked overtime to prove myself. And I needed this job. I needed to be indispensable in whatever role my boss needed me to fill. I would do it all. Whatever it took.

"I'm sorry I'm late, guys. I was distracted by that ball game in the quad. Town Ball?" At several nods and smiles I continued, "I think it would be a nice write-up featuring the history department. There's a story in every moment if you just observe and listen, which is why I'm always late." I smiled at Professor Weigand who laughed and shook his head. He'd known me since I was a student and had been the advising professor for the paper.

"Being on the paper is the best way to meet people." I winked at the girls when they rolled their eyes at me. "It's the best way to meet men," glancing toward the few men in the room, "women." I waited for the

chuckles to die down before I continued. “When I attended Washington College, I joined the paper freshman year with the goal of meeting every single person on this campus before I graduated, and I did. Everyone knew who I was, people called my name everywhere I went.” Respect filled their faces now.

“They still do, Stella,” Professor Weigand said as he leaned against his desk, feet crossed in front of him.

I smiled. “Push yourself to come up with intriguing stories, interview interesting people. Not the most valuable players, not the most published professors. Do the unexpected. Always take it a step further. Push the boundaries. Defy the rules. Never stop until you have your best story.”

Seeing a few students attention diverted to the door, I turned my head to see Sawyer listening, his hand braced on the doorway. He smiled and nodded before continuing on his way. I stood a little straighter as I turned my attention back to the students. I couldn’t help but think I’d impressed him. I may not be a professor, but I’d held the student’s attention.

I worked on the student paper when I attended Washington. I work in the field and I’m more in tune with online journalism than my boss. I had something to offer these students.

“The incoming editor-in-chief is given the opportunity to intern at the Kent County News during the summer. I did this when I was a senior. It was invaluable experience. I was offered a job after I finished my master’s at St. Mary’s College.” I left out the part where I’d quit my job at the Frederick Post and moved back here after my fiancé cheated on me.

“This is a great networking opportunity for those of you concerned about jobs after graduation. I’m here for you as a resource and a guide. I’m so excited to be your professional advisor. Let’s get to work.”

## Chapter Two



AFTER MY NEWSPAPER MEETING WRAPPED up, I headed to Annie's Wine Bar to meet Ashley, Samantha, and Emma for our regular girls' night. Even though it was still a little cool for spring, we opted for the open air and shade of the bright yellow umbrellas on the patio.

"You're online dating again?" Ashley asked, clapping her hands together. "This will be so much fun!"

"I am, but this time will be different," I said. I'd taken a break from dating the last two years but it was time to get back in the game.

"You mean, you'll show up for the dates?" Ashley laughed, referring to the fact that I tended to forget appointments, dates, what I was just talking about, pretty much everything. I now had a good working system of writing to-do lists to stick on my computer and my notebook. The less forgetful I was, the more seriously people took me, and the more confident I felt.

"Yes. I'm taking it seriously." All of my friends had found significant others in the last year and I was inching toward thirty with no prospects. I'd imposed a hiatus on dating after my last ex cheated on me, but it was time to end it. "Do you know how many dating sites there are now? It's not just Match.com anymore."

"I have no idea. The only one I ever tried was one in college, which catered to students." Emma nabbed a cheese cube from the charcuterie board in the center of the table next to the pitcher of Sangria.

"There are sites specific to height, hair color, interests, income, and career. Match.com and eharmony are a few of the only paid services. Maybe those are for people seriously looking for a relationship?" I continued reading through a review of dating sites. The options were overwhelming and I wasn't sure which one was the right choice. "On Bumble, the girl has to message first and the guys have twenty-four hours to

respond. It says it weeds out the weak guys and has more confident men on the site.”

“Let me see that.” Ashley leaned over my shoulder to read. “It says there’s an abundance of *over-confident* men on that site. Is that what you’re looking for?”

“Yes. I love a confident man. So hot,” I said, getting excited. Maybe this could work. Online dating would allow me to weed through guys that weren’t my type or who weren’t ready to settle down, so I wouldn’t waste my time. I just had to avoid the hook-up sites.

“I don’t know. Maybe that’s why they always cheat on you. You’re dating cocky assholes,” Ashley said.

This is why I didn’t like to talk about my dating life and probably why I didn’t really have one at all. Everyone had an opinion when you’d been dumped so many times. “Mmm,” I said, not taking my eyes off my phone.

Samantha snapped her fingers. “That’s it! You need to date the exact opposite of who you normally date.”

“Yes!” Emma dug through her purse for a legal pad and pen. “Let’s make a list of your exes’ characteristics, so you know what to avoid in the future.”

“I don’t know, guys.” But maybe they were on to something. At my last session with Dr. Hirsch, she’d said, “*Guys who cheat tend to be outgoing, charming; they draw you in, but when you dig deeper, they’re secretive, private, unreliable, and great liars.*”

“I love this idea.” Ashley scooted closer to Emma.

I watched Emma draw a line down the middle of the paper, writing “exes” on one side and “husband” on the other. “Husband? Really?”

“Yeah, isn’t that what you’re looking for?” Emma asked.

“I’d settle for a nice, dependable boyfriend at this point. Who doesn’t stick his dick in the next available female who walks by.”

“You sound bitter.” Ashley’s pen hovered over the exes column waiting for me to tick off characteristics.

That’s because I was, but I needed to rein it in. My friends were used to seeing me happy, which was my only acceptable emotion. How many times had I heard, *the party can start, Stella’s here! Or, wow Stella, you lift me up just by entering the room.* It was flattering but exhausting to be that person for everyone all of the time.

Raising her brow at me, Emma prompted, “Exes?”

“Fine—attractive, athletic, outgoing, lots of friends, successful at his job.”

“And the usual—doesn’t live in his mom’s basement,” Ashley said.

“And for your future boyfriend?” Emma asked.

“For your dating profile you should write down all of the characteristics that are the opposite of who you usually go for,” Samantha said.

Now Samantha sounded like Dr. Hirsch. But could you change who you were attracted to?

Ashley leaned her elbows on the table to get closer to Emma’s list. “I got this. She needs quiet, studious, smart.” She tapped her chin, thinking. “Not super social. Is she supposed to say not attractive and not successful at his job? That would be the opposite.”

“No, everyone wants someone who is successful at their job and attractive. Let’s stick to the other characteristics for now,” Samantha said.

“Then the only other one is nonathletic,” Emma said.

“Guys, I need a big beefy guy at least. I can’t have a man that is shorter or smaller than me.”

“You’re not big, Stella,” Emma said.

“Listen, pipsqueak. You’re five-foot-nothing and I’m five-foot-eight inches with meat on my bones.” I could laugh at that. I wasn’t a weak girl by any means. It hadn’t bothered me until my ex in college had called me a cow and said I needed to lose weight.

Samantha laughed. “You’re curvy. Besides, I’m tall too.”

I just gave her a look. She was tall and slender—the opposite of my body type. She’d never need to worry about outweighing her boyfriend. I poured another glass of Sangria. I needed it for this conversation.

“Men want women with curves,” Ashley said.

“How did we get into this?” I grabbed the legal pad from Emma, ripping the page with the list off before handing the pad back to her. I waved the paper in the air. “I’ll take care of this. I don’t need a list to tell me what I want in a guy.” Yet, I knew my therapist, Dr. Hirsch, would love this idea. Carefully examine my exes’ traits and determine whether those characteristics made them more likely to cheat. Avoid those guys in the future. It was methodical and so not me. I was more of a fly-by-the-seat kind of gal. I fell hard and fast. But when the inevitable happened, I had a hard time picking myself back up again. Maybe it was time for a different approach.



“We’re just trying to help,” Emma said.

I could tell by her tone that my words hurt her so I smiled to soften what I’d said. “You can help by narrowing down the best dating site with me.” I scrolled through the list. “There’s Bumble, Tinder, OkCupid, Coffee Meets Bagel, Clover—”

“So, are guys the bagels? Are we coffee? I’m so confused,” Emma said.

“And Clover? I don’t feel like there’d be hot guys on a site called Clover,” Samantha said. “Are you sure that’s not a ladies’ site?”

“Ohmygod, can you imagine if Stella signed up for the wrong site,” Ashley burst into giggles.

“That’s totally something she would do,” Emma joined in.

I bit my lip so I wouldn’t say anything. I had been the class clown in high school and I had a tendency to do silly things, but I was tired of being the butt of everyone’s jokes.

When the laughter died down, Samantha said, “You’re definitely going to need help.”

Emma snapped her fingers. “This is a perfect topic for *Stella Says*.”

I could interview the students at the college to see which sites they used and which ones they liked. “Good idea. I’ll post the question.” I opened the paper’s social media account and quickly typed in my question.

“You should ask people for their crazy online dating stories. I bet a ton of people would write in,” Ashley said.

“I don’t know if I should hear the horror stories before I sign up,” I said.

“Good point,” Emma said. “This is so exciting. I can’t wait to see if people really send dick pics.”

“Ugh. I hadn’t even thought about that,” I said. My phone dinged with incoming messages. “Look, people are already responding. Match.com and eharmony are for those looking to marry.”

“Which is you.” Ashley motioned for me to continue.

“Chestertown singles is a site for locals who are looking to meet people through group outings.”

“That might be an option for you,” Emma said.

“Someone said they’d tried and liked Plenty of Fish and Bumble,” I said.

“Do you think there will be a lot of local people on there or will you have to expand the area? There’s not an overabundance of single men in Chestertown,” Ashley said.

“That’s true,” I said. The last time I’d tried online dating had been when I was in grad school. There were almost too many options in Baltimore. “This is going to be harder than I thought. There’s a ton of dating sites, not many men, and do I go with my usual type or the opposite?”

Samantha leaned forward and slapped the table, causing all of us to jump. “I’ve got it. The perfect guy for you. He’s smart, studious, quiet, not social, *and* wears sexy glasses.”

“No.” My response was firm and immediate. I knew where she was going with this—Sawyer.

“He’s definitely single. He’s athletic, but we can forgive him for that, because those shoulders—” Samantha continued.

“No, no, and no,” I said, but my mind flashed back to how he looked in his team shirt on the quad. His shoulders were broader than any of his teammates, his biceps bursting from the sleeves.

“Oh my God, someone tell me who you’re talking about,” Ashley said.

“Sawyer Hudson,” Samantha said proudly.

“No.” I felt like a broken record and no one was listening to me.

“Yes! He’s perfect for you, Stella,” Emma said.

My eyes met Ashley’s across the table, and hers were filled with sympathy. She was the only one who knew I’d overheard him that night. “He said he would never date me.”

“That’s right, he did say that.” Samantha shifted in her chair. “But how did you find out? You weren’t there.”

“I overheard him that night. I left before he saw me.” Awkward silence hung over the table. “We’re completely opposite. I’d drive him nuts.”

“Yes, but look at Logan and me. We worked out,” Ashley said.

“That’s different. You’re both smart attorneys, successful in your fields. You’re equals,” I said. But we weren’t. Sawyer was a professor and I had trouble focusing. I couldn’t even process words on a page properly.

“What are you talking about? You both have higher education—you have a master’s degree and he has a doctorate,” Ashley said.

“I can’t even sit still long enough to read a book or watch TV. I’m go, go, go all of the time. I love parties, social events. I’m loud.” I was on a roll, Sawyer’s words spurring me on. We literally had nothing in common. “Name one thing we have in common.”

The table was silent for a minute.

“He said himself—I’m too much for him. He’s clearly not interested.” I’d never been interested either, not until that day on the quad, and that was just physical.

“I’ll admit that was a crap thing for him to say,” Ashley said, “but he tried to backtrack as soon as he said it.”

She’d piqued my interest. Should I have stuck around to hear what he’d said? It didn’t change the fact that on some level what he’d said was true. It wasn’t anything I hadn’t already thought about. Sometimes, my personality was too much for guys. That’s why I went for the overly confident guys.

“But he is attractive and athletic, which is your type,” Samantha said, continuing to bait me. “And I bet he’s confident in a quiet way, different from your exes.”

“Uh huh, and the students he teaches.” I remembered the girls in the quad fawning over him. “Guys can’t resist women coming onto them. Jason couldn’t and I bet there’s no way Sawyer could either.”

“Not everyone is your ex,” Samantha said softly.

“My last two ex-boyfriends—the only serious boyfriends I’ve ever had, cheated on me. My first college boyfriend was a TA who slept with his student, and my fiancé, Jason, cheated on me with his intern.” Even admitting it out loud was painful. Being cheated on exposed the faults in a person.

“Then don’t you think it’s time for a change? Give the nerdy guy a try. What could it hurt?” Samantha asked.

It didn’t escape my notice that it was Samantha pushing hard—the one who was hesitant to give advice. She never wanted to hurt anyone’s feelings and I didn’t know why she was so adamant about this. “He said he wasn’t interested. Plus, he’s Emma’s boyfriend’s younger brother and our friend. If it doesn’t work out it would be uncomfortable.” I didn’t say it, but it would be uncomfortable for me when he inevitably cheated with a student. No one could resist those vibrant co-eds. It was just a matter of time and I wouldn’t be the collateral damage.

Samantha’s forehead wrinkled. “I agree. What he said was hurtful. It’s up to you if you can get past it. But would you consider someone like him?”

“I’ll keep an open mind.” I wasn’t sure what to do. My confidence in choosing a trustworthy guy was blown. If the confident guys cheated on me and the quiet guys thought I was too loud and impulsive, was there a guy out there for me?

## Chapter Three



THE NEXT DAY, I WANDERED Washington College's one-hundred-twenty-acre historic campus trolling for people to talk to about online dating and relationships. I walked the brick paths searching for small groups taking a break between classes to approach. The campus had a second home appeal for me since it had been a reprieve from my home life when I attended.

From my research the night before, I discovered the general consensus was that students were too busy for relationships but not too busy to swipe right on Tinder. In fact, one woman said she got a high every time she did it, and couldn't stop flipping through when she had downtime.

Then the conversation delved into how she swiped solely for looks, height being the most important. But it raised the question if these sites made people too picky. Whatever happened to meeting someone first, getting to know them, and exploring whether you had chemistry? If you rejected someone based on a number or hair color, how would you ever know if that was the one for you?

I stood in the center of the quad looking for my next group of students to approach.

"Hey Stella." Sawyer came to a stop next to me with a book tucked under his arm, looking handsome in a button-down shirt, tie, and suit pants. Another professor-type stood at his side, shorter, slighter in build, with long wavy brown hair, and blue eyes in a button-down shirt, tweed jacket and jeans. "What are you doing on campus this morning?"

I smiled. "I'm actually interviewing students for a Kent County News online article. I'm trying to increase our online presence with younger readers."

"And what better way to do that than by talking to students?" the man next to Sawyer asked.

“Exactly,” I said.

“Stella, this is my colleague, Owen Mason.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said, offering his hand to me.

“Nice to meet you too.” I tilted my head, shaking his hand. “Do I know you? I usually know everyone and I can’t place you.”

“No. I moved here for the job. Professor jobs are tough to come by these days,” Owen said flippantly, but his face was drawn tight.

I got the distinct impression he didn’t like questions about his past. “Really?” You never knew when a conversation would lead to an interesting story, one people couldn’t help but click on and read.

“Yeah, it’s super competitive out there these days, but not everyone wants to live in the middle of nowhere,” Owen said, gesturing around the quad.

My eyes narrowed on him. “Oh, you don’t like it here?” My approval of him lowered at that comment. I was proud and protective of my hometown.

He eyed the women as they passed us. “But the students are the same everywhere.” Then he winked at me.

I looked at Sawyer to gauge his reaction to Owen and I was surprised to find his focus steady on me.

“Let’s just say, if I want to shop at Wal-Mart I don’t want to drive to Delaware to do it,” Owen added.

“Not everyone likes a small town, I guess.” Sawyer chuckled.

“So, what have you found out so far? Any good stories?” Owen asked.

“I find it fascinating that kids don’t date anymore. Weird, right? I always thought college was the time to explore relationships and have fun with the opposite sex.” I chuckled. “Or the same sex, but it’s all swiping these days.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s so much easier. I don’t have to take the time to get to know someone. I can swipe left if they’re not attractive. Such a time saver,” Owen said.

Even though this was what I’d discovered during my research, I was still a little stunned by his comment. Dating had really been reduced to swiping on a phone solely based on physical characteristics. “You never read the profile?” This did not bode well for me.

He laughed. “Tinder doesn’t have much of a profile. It’s a hook-up site. Everyone knows that.” He glanced at his phone. “My next class is in five. Nice meeting you, Stella. Later, Sawyer.”

I watched him walk away. “That guy’s a total douche, huh?”

“If you mean he talks about dating like it’s a sport, then yes.”

“No kidding?”

Sawyer shifted on his feet and gestured with his hand. “It’s so easy for him—the whole meeting and talking to women thing. Of course, he probably deals with a lot more flirting from his students.”

“I thought that was a cliché—students coming on to professors for better grades.” My laugh sounded hollow even to my own ears.

“Unfortunately not. It doesn’t happen to me often but then I’m not Owen. If it happens, I pretend to misunderstand and keep the conversation to class-related questions. Student evaluations are a big part of the tenure process, so there’s a fine line between avoiding advances and keeping the students happy.”

Jason hadn’t worried about crossing any professional lines when he’d cheated on me with his intern. The fact that Sawyer had encountered this issue before and seemingly handled it appropriately impressed me. “So you have to let them down easy or pretend you don’t understand that they’re actually flirting with you?” He couldn’t even be clear that he wasn’t interested because he had to worry the student would submit a negative evaluation. Suddenly very uncomfortable, I wanted to change the subject, so I grabbed onto the other thing he’d said which intrigued me. “You have trouble talking to women?” As much as I personally preferred confident outgoing men, it was sweet Sawyer was shy.

He shifted on his feet and looked away from me. “A little.”

“I could totally help you!” If I hooked Sawyer up with a nice quiet intellectual type then my friends would see he wasn’t the type for me.

He shook his head. “Oh no. I don’t need any help,” he held up his hands, “and I don’t need a dating app.”

“You don’t have to use a dating app. I can help you talk to women in person. I was thinking of trying the online dating thing myself.”

His brow raised. “You think that’s safe?”

I got the impression Sawyer was against the idea of online dating period, regardless of its safety, so I couldn’t resist teasing him. “It’s perfectly safe to swipe on my living room couch.”

“That’s true. But I meant seeing someone you met online in person for the first time.”

“I know the dangers.” People tended to think I was impulsive and reckless but I’d seen the articles about safety in online dating.

“Be careful, Stella.”

“I will.” Something about Sawyer’s words filled me with warmth. It figured I’d notice him only after he had made those comments about me. I couldn’t forget I was too much for him—too loud, too opinionated, too everything. I didn’t fit into a neat box, that was for sure. “You should try it. If you’re talking to women online first, maybe it would be an ice breaker for you?”

“It’s an idea, but I’m not pressed to date right now. I’m focused on getting tenure.”

“Is that difficult?” I had no idea what that entailed.

“I have to submit evidence of my work and service this year to apply. The executive committee will evaluate my involvement with committees on campus, service work in the community, research, student evaluations, presentations, and manuscripts. Once the executive committee approves me then it goes to the history department chair, dean’s office, the provost, and then the president. If one person at any level says no then tenure is denied. I can be asked to leave at that point.”

“Wow. You’d have to leave Chestertown.” Some things were a constant here and Sawyer’s family was one of them. When his parents gave up farming to retire to Florida it was a shock to everyone.

“Since this is the year I apply for tenure I can’t afford to do anything to screw it up. The process is very political. I can’t be seen as an activist or make any comments that reflect badly on the college.” He pointed toward the student center. “Mind if we walk? I’m on my way to grab a coffee.”

“Sure.” The only thing on my schedule today was interviewing college students and dictating my notes and a few articles. My sudden attraction to him had me wanting to learn more about him. “Why do you say you can’t be seen as an activist? I thought colleges were more open than that.” Weren’t students encouraged to speak their mind?

“A colleague works at the University of Baltimore and mentioned at a meeting how the city students would feel uncomfortable if the police department used one of the university’s buildings for trainings. Her concern for the students was seen as political and placed her tenure in jeopardy.”

Would my job cause issues for him then? Would it be okay for him to be seen with a reporter—one who was trolling the campus for news stories?

Even if my stories were tame, would the tenure committee see it that way?

He held the door for me as we walked into the center, which was bustling with chatting students rushing to class or lounging in the overstuffed chairs in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the quad. Sawyer placed his hand on the small of my back, allowing me to walk slightly in front of him, preventing me from being jostled by the passing students. Normally, I'd find that gesture too familiar unless I was at a fancy restaurant with a date, but with Sawyer it felt protective and nice.

At the Shoreman Coffee kiosk, Sawyer stood directly behind me in the long line, a book tucked under his arm, and his legs spread more than shoulder-width apart, protecting me from the students joking and jostling around next to us, waiting for their orders, and the people trying to cross the line to make it through the student center. No one breached the space between us. I was so engrossed in Sawyer's presence, the warmth of his body as he stood so close, and his unique smell, leather and soap, that I almost missed it when he spoke.

"I haven't done anything as interesting as Owen, who published a book on supernatural romance in film."

The line finally moved forward a step as I turned my head to ask, "That's what he wrote about?"

He looked down at me with an amused expression on his face. "What? Did you think we only write about boring stuffy topics?"

"Well, yeah." I gestured at his outfit—neatly knotted necktie, wrinkle-free white button shirt, creased tan dress slacks, dress shoes, and those sexy glasses. "You're a professor."

Sawyer chuckled. "He's not going to get tenure with that gem, but he loves to tell women about it."

I raised my brow at Sawyer in disbelief. "He uses it to pick up women?" Without waiting for an answer, I continued thoughtfully, "I could see that working. It makes him relatable."

"I've seen him talk to enough women to know they eat it up."

Sawyer's gaze was fixed on the barista taking orders when he said this, but he'd seemed irritated earlier on the quad when Owen flippantly talked about women.

A young woman approached us wearing a T-shirt and shorts. "I heard you're doing an article on online dating for the paper?"



“That’s right. It will be posted online,” I said, noting the way she shot curious looks at Sawyer. He didn’t seem to notice.

She pointed at her group of friends lounging outside the student center. “My friend had the craziest experience last week. Would you like to talk to her?”

I looked at Sawyer, reluctant to leave him when we’d been in the middle of a conversation, but I was on campus to explore online dating stories.

He nodded his head toward the woman. “Go ahead. I’ll bring your coffee to you. What did you want?”

“A large coffee with one creamer would be nice.” I reached into my purse to pull out a few dollar bills, but his hand on my wrist stopped me, sending a tingle up my arm.

“I’ll get it.” His gaze was fixed on mine as his hand held my wrist.

“Thanks, Sawyer.”

“No problem.” He released my wrist.

I followed the woman to her friends gathered in chairs placed around a table, laughing, and talking animatedly.

“I’m Fiona by the way,” she said as we walked.

“Stella Lewis. I work for the Kent County News and write the —”

“*Stella Says* column! We love it!”

Pride filled me that someone adored my column. “That’s awesome! I’m so glad you’re enjoying it.” My goal was to make the online portion of the paper something that students and younger residents in the area checked first thing in the morning or at least right after they checked their social media.

“And now we have a story for you.” Fiona stopped and gestured at a young woman with dark hair with one streak of dark purple, wearing cut-off jean shorts, red Converse, and a white tank top, perched on the arm of a chair. “This is Sally, she signed up for Tinder. Go ahead, Sally. This is Stella from the *Stella Says* column.”

Sally held her hand up. “So, let me preface by saying this guy seemed totally normal. We talked for a few weeks. He said he was a December graduate from Salisbury and was looking for a job.”

I dutifully wrote notes as thoughts of Sawyer filled my head. If he wasn’t my type, why did I care what he thought of me? Why had I noticed his touch and his smell? Shaking my head, I tried to focus on Sally.

“Then he took me to the tractor pull, which should have been my first sign that this wasn’t going to work out.” She paused while the others laughed. “He got a phone call and needed to leave in a hurry. It was late so I didn’t think anything of it. Then on the way back to school, he admitted there was a warrant out for his arrest and a cop was on his way to arrest him.” The others shook their heads, having already heard the story. “I was like, ‘take me home ASAP.’ I blocked him from the app as soon as I got home.”

“Background check next time, Sally,” said the young man wearing a fraternity shirt seated in the chair she was perched on. “Check the Maryland Judiciary site for criminal charges.”

“Good idea. Totally should have done that,” Sally agreed. “But I’m telling you, this guy seemed totally normal.”

Sally’s story raised an interesting question. “Do these online dating sites do background checks?” The sites I checked out hadn’t.

“No, I’ve never been checked on any of these sites and I’m on a lot,” another guy offered proudly from his seat on the couch directly across from me.

“What do you do to make sure you’re safe on these dates, Sally?” I was asking for the story but also for myself. Clearly, there were still creeps trolling these sites and I’d need to be careful just like Sawyer cautioned.

“Yeah, Sally what are you doing to protect yourself?” the man seated next to her asked.

She smacked his chest with the back of her hand. “Lay off, Ben. I had no idea this guy was a criminal, okay?” Turning her attention to me, she continued, “I took a picture of his license plate and sent it to Fiona, and I definitely stalked him online first. I didn’t know about this court site I could have checked.”

“I’ll clear these guys for you in the future,” Ben said.

“Okay, Ben,” Sally said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Watching the interplay between Sally and Ben, I’d have guessed he was jealous and she had no clue. How did she not see what was right in front of her? Although, I’d only recently realized that Sawyer was attractive and I’d known him all my life. What made a person notice someone? Was it purely perfect timing or something else?

“It’s good you took precautions,” I said.

A hand touched my shoulder, causing me to look up, as Sawyer said softly, "Hey, didn't want to interrupt but here's your coffee."

"Thanks." I took the cup from him, the pride I felt when Fiona said she loved my column dissipating. Sawyer would think this story was trivial, but I took pride in my job. My boss trusted me to handle the online portion of the paper and he'd given me the advisor role at the college paper.

"I have a class starting in a few minutes, so I'll catch up with you later." He nodded at Sally and the group, who'd stopped talking when he'd approached, and then he walked toward the door.

I watched him walk away noticing how nicely his ass filled out his dress pants. He was attractive in his suits and on the field.

"Do you have time for more stories?" Another woman asked me, leaning forward in her seat, excitement showing in her eyes.

"Of course."

I stayed for another thirty minutes listening to everyone talk and laugh about their experiences until it was time for their next classes. Their stories were entertaining but I wasn't sure how I could use them. Some were too graphic and I didn't think my boss would appreciate me commenting on the amount of dick pics women received on these sites.

My angle was the hook-up culture on campus and how kids didn't want relationships anymore. Or did women want relationships but men didn't? I could add a few lines on safety in online dating: have a safe person you told who you were going with, only meet them in public, never give your address and personal information out unless you were sure the guy was normal. My boss was usually more interested in the salaciousness of a story than safety precautions.

But how did you ever really know if these guys were normal? Or just looking for a hook-up? I wanted to settle down, get married, and have kids. I was sure it would turn off a man to tell him that on the first date, so how did you get that information so you didn't waste time on a guy who didn't want to commit?

I loved kids and I wasn't getting any younger. I needed to get back in the dating game.

## Chapter Four



LATER THAT NIGHT, I RELAXED on my back sun porch, a yellow and white afghan my grandmother had made draped over my legs against the spring chill, feet propped on my wicker ottoman, with my laptop perched on my knees. I sipped a cup of tea as I tried to decide which online dating app would be right for me. The general consensus was Match.com or eharmony were the best options as paid sites and only people serious about relationships were on there.

Taking a deep breath, I filled out the first pop-up question, woman looking for a man, ages twenty-eight to thirty-five? I was twenty-eight and younger men probably weren't ready to settle down. I figured anyone older than thirty-five and not already married was probably anti-commitment.

This was so stressful. What if I made the wrong decision? The next question made me feel better—what kind of a relationship I was looking for? Long-term, of course. Height: five foot eight. I sucked in a sharp breath at the next question: body type. Options were slender, athletic, fit, heavysset, average. I wasn't exactly heavy set, but was I athletic? Not exactly. What option was there for a curvier woman? What should I put? I guessed average was the best answer. Would a guy want an average woman? Average didn't sound that exciting, but hopefully my personality would make up for that. Not every guy felt the same as Sawyer.

I finally clicked on average and flew through the next few questions about prior marriages—none, wanting kids—definitely, smoking—no, and then interests. There were so many options and as I slowly went through the lists I realized I had no hobbies. Not one. I didn't read, watch sports, work out, or binge-watch TV. I occasionally did yoga at the park with my friends, but that wasn't exactly an interest. My life was my job and my friends. Nothing wrong with that, but it made me boring on paper as a potential

mate. And guys would be assessing my picture and these details, if they made it past my picture.

I finally settled on outdoors, playing sports even though my sports weren't mentioned—field hockey and lacrosse. I also had music, and travel since I'd studied abroad in college.

Now for what kind of guy I was interested in. Go with my usual or something different? What would Dr. Hirsch say?

Tabling the question for a minute, I scrolled through my pictures looking for something less professional but where I still looked put together. I had a ton since my picture was taken a lot for newspaper headshots and online profiles. I finally settled on one where I was smiling, hair and make-up done, in a dress. This was me—brightly colored outfits, huge smile, fun.

I chewed on my bottom lip for a minute. Was that the problem? Did guys view me as fun and not as a serious candidate for a girlfriend or wife?

But Dr. Hirsch said cheaters were selfish and immature and it was all about them, not me. Ugh. A headache formed at the base of my skull. Why hadn't I met someone at the coffee shop or during one of the events I covered around town? Wouldn't that be easier? But I'd met most of my past boyfriends in person, so that clearly hadn't worked. Maybe this was my best option. Only time would tell.

All of the people on these online sites probably lied about themselves anyway. Clicking back to the profile set-up on Match, I quickly answered the questions for men: athletic, outdoorsy, educated, funny. I didn't like to sit still for long, so an active guy would be best despite anything my friends had said. Quickly finishing the rest of my profile, I submitted my information. Now all I had to do was wait for people to be matched with me.

After texting Ashley telling her I'd finally signed up for online dating, I opened my laptop to dictate notes from my interviews at the college and wrote a quick post on safety precautions when online dating, asking for others feedback. Then I wrote up a more in-depth article on setting up online profiles, highlighting my own concerns: Were people too concerned about looks? Not considering people because of height or interests? I was guilty of this too. I tried to date men taller than me. Whatever happened to meeting someone in person and getting to know them, finding out their interests organically, seeing if there was a connection? Which was better?

Dr. Hirsch wanted me to make a list of things I wanted to change about myself. I used my phone to dictate it onto my note app. First, I wanted a boyfriend, a husband, and children. So, I needed to get back into the dating game, which I'd done by filling out the online dating profile.

What else did I want to change? I tapped my pen against my lips looking out on my fenced-in back yard and ran my fingers over the blue and green flower pattern on the cushion I'd picked out because, like the bright yellow siding on my home, it made me smile. I had a small home I was proud of owning. I'd slowly decorated it exactly the way I wanted to. Some pieces of furniture I'd acquired from my grandparents and my childhood bedroom, but otherwise I'd bought the matching white wicker furniture in the sunroom, the framed photographs of the town, the waterfront, and the marina, which Lucy, Jack's younger sister had taken. I'd collected sand and seashells from Ocean City and filled a pretty glass lamp, which sat on the small white bookshelf next to my chair.

This was my safe space. No one I didn't want was here. No one could affect my mood. It was just me. As much as I wanted a serious boyfriend and to get married, I knew inviting one into my space would be difficult for me. Growing up, we weren't allowed to invite friends over. Then, when I moved out on my own, it was habit.

Sawyer said I was too loud and impulsive. Was that something I should change? I was naturally a loud person, my family always told me that. But I was also happy and upbeat and people told me they loved that about me. Maybe I just wasn't Sawyer's type? He was only one person. Why did what he thought about me bother me so much?

Shaking my head to get myself out of the funk that thinking about Sawyer's words had put me in, I tried to come up with other things for my list. Why was this so hard? Had I been the person everyone wanted for so long that I had no idea who I was anymore? I became the class clown in high school to make up for the fact that I wasn't smart. In order to change, I needed to be myself. Who was I, if not this shell of a fun, happy girl all of the time?

## Chapter Five



THE NEXT DAY, I PARKED my SUV in a parking lot on campus for my meeting with the newspaper staff. I'd mentioned to Sawyer and Owen that students don't have time for relationships anymore but I'd also discovered colleges offer classes to teach students how to be in a relationship. I thought it would be a good story for the college paper. Was this the case on Washington's campus and if so, to what extent? Was it just a hook-up culture? It fascinated me that people were able to keep their emotions separate from the sex. I'd never been able to.

"Stella!" I heard Sawyer call from behind me. I turned to find him crouched next to a black and silver chrome motorcycle with Yamaha in silver lettering on the side, attaching his black helmet to the bike. He stood, a brown leather messenger bag thrown over his shoulders, the strap laying across his chest.

I was literally speechless. "Is that—is that yours?" I gestured lamely at the bike. There was no place in my mind where I'd ever imagined straight-laced quiet Sawyer rode a motorcycle. What else was he hiding?

His lips twitched. "The bike's mine."

"It's not Luke's?" I could totally see Luke driving a motorcycle.

"It's my grandfather's. It was just sitting in the barn so Luke and I fixed it up." He came to stand next to me. "I live in the professor housing on the edge of campus and the bike is perfect for the short commute and parking here."

He was right; parking on campus was limited.

He stood so close I could smell leather, gas, and the outdoors. I licked my lips, still trying to wrap my mind around how sexy a professor riding a motorcycle was.

"You know, I called your name several times as you walked by."

“You did?” I swear I couldn’t speak in complete sentences. I gestured at my head. “Sorry, I have this story percolating in my head. When that happens I can’t stop thinking of all of the angles, questions, possibilities.”

“Yeah?” he asked, as we started to walk toward the Academic Center building. “Is it a good story?”

“Eh, not by your higher education standards.”

“I’d love to hear whatever has you so engrossed you couldn’t hear me calling your name.”

Studying his face and seeing nothing but genuine interest, I realized whenever we spoke he gave me his undivided attention. He was thoughtful and truly interested in what I had to say. It was very different from the men I’d dated. “I’m considering writing that article about college kids not dating. Did you date in college?” Even though we’d discussed this on the quad when I ran into him the other day I wanted to know more about him.

He considered me for a moment. “I did. I thought that was a big part of college. You know, breaking away from labels placed on you in high school and coming into your own skin—finding yourself, exploring relationships.” We’d stopped in the middle of the quad, facing each other as groups of students brushed past us, headed to class.

“What were you labeled in high school?” I remembered him being quiet, smart, and keeping to himself. But his brother, Luke, was two years older and a jock, so he hung out with that crowd too. I didn’t remember him being picked on.

He looked away from me then. “Oh you know, I was a nerd in high school. I didn’t date much.” Clearing his throat, he continued, “College was eye-opening for me. Women saw me differently.”

Grinning, I tried to picture him in college. “So, you were a ladies’ man?”

Chuckling, he shook his head. “Uh, no. Women expressed interest in me, but I had no idea what I was doing. I was really shy and awkward.”

“You don’t seem shy now.” Our few conversations seemed easy.

“I’m not anymore. In college, I was a tutor, so I was forced to speak to women. Now I speak in front of a roomful of students, so I’ve gotten over a lot of that. I wouldn’t say I’m smooth though.”

I gestured at his outfit. “I don’t know. You’ve got the whole sexy professor thing going on and riding a motorcycle is not hurting your image.”



“You like it?” His voice was low and gravelly.

I did. I liked it a lot, but he’d made it clear he wasn’t interested in me, so I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“You do.” His eyes were intense on mine.

I looked away from him, suddenly uncomfortable with his scrutiny. Nothing good could come from him knowing I found him attractive.

“Do you need to be anywhere? I’m headed to Gibson Center for the newspaper meeting.” I pointed at the building, not ready to say goodbye to him yet.

“Yeah, I have class there starting in a few minutes.”

I nodded as we fell in step next to each other. Glancing at my phone, I noticed I was running a few minutes late again. No matter how hard I tried to be more professional, I was always late. Usually it was because most people knew me and I stopped to talk to them. I justified it because those conversations could be a potential story.

Placing his hands in his pockets, he said, “I was impressed with your talk in front of the newspaper students the other day.”

Warmth spread through me at his compliment. “Thank you.”

“I think it’s great you’re working with the kids.” He held the large heavy door open for me to precede him into the building.

Just as I passed in front of him, a group of students walked out of the building causing me to stumble back into Sawyer’s hard chest.

His other arm came to my hip steadying me, his voice in my hair. “You okay?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said breathlessly, concentrating on the tight grip he had on my hip through the thin knit dress I wore. Could he feel the tiny strap of my thong under his fingers? The thought heated my core. Then I noticed my butt was pressed against his crotch. A little embarrassed to be caught in this position with Sawyer, I moved forward, breaking contact. “Thanks.” I smoothed my hair and took a step inside the building, my face hot.

Trying to remember what we were talking about, I said, “It’s what I love about the paper. I love meeting new people and being part of the community.”

I snuck a glance at Sawyer who walked next to me, his eyes intent on mine, like he was weighing everything I said carefully. “You know, you’re nothing like I thought.”

We slowed to a stop outside the meeting room for the paper. Was he referencing what he'd said at Logan and Ashley's housewarming party? Not sure I wanted to address his less-than-stellar opinion of me, I said, "Maybe you should get to know me better?" His eyes dropped from my eyes to my lips. Realizing my tone was flirty and wanting to break the moment, I said, "I guess I'll see you around."

He smiled and said quietly, "Bye, Stella." It was hard to reconcile this guy with the one who'd said I was too loud and crazy. I was sensitive to those comments because my mother used to say the same thing.

Neil stood at the front of the room, at the dry-erase board, adding names to a list of article topics when I walked in. He smiled, nodding at me. "Look who's here."

"Sorry I'm late," I said, confidently walking to the front of the room. Each time, I felt more comfortable in this role and found I liked it.

"I just assigned some articles to them. Did you have anything to add?"

"I do." I went over my ideas for an article on online dating and relationships in college. The students seemed excited with my ideas, which fueled me. When a few students volunteered to take on my assignment and they moved to work in groups, Neil pulled me aside. "Hey, can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure." We moved over to his desk on the side of the room. "I have an interesting opportunity for you. We'd like to offer a summer journalism course—something young and fresh. The students love you and your energy. Would you be interested in developing a course and teaching it?"

I was speechless for a minute. Growing up with a learning disability, teaching was never an option for me. "But I'm not a teacher. I don't know the first thing about developing a course." I was comfortable in my current job because my dictation program allowed me to write. I wasn't sure if my disability would be an issue with this new opportunity.

"You'd be an adjunct professor, so hired on a part-time basis to teach this one course. The rest of the teachers in the department already have a full schedule, so they can't do it. I think you'd be perfect for this. You could develop the course, teach it once, and decide if it's not for you. It's an elective course for the journalism, editing, and publishing major, recognizing that online media is the future. I thought since you were already introducing online media at the Kent County News, this would be ideal for you."

Excitement built as I thought of developing my own course and teaching it. How amazing would that look on my resume? And I did love working with the students. They listened. They thought what I said was important. I wasn't the learning-challenged student I was in high school. To them, I was a professional. "Okay. I'll do it."

"Great. It will be offered this summer semester. So you'd need to get the course objectives and syllabus to the dean in six weeks."

I started to panic, realizing I'd need to have something done really soon and I had no idea what went into developing a course. "Okay."

"He wants to hear your pitch, your objectives for the course, and a proposed syllabus. I recommended you for the position, but you'll need to prove yourself."

Praise was not something I was used to. My mom had been too engrossed in her health issues and my dad avoided us as much as possible. My sister, Lindsey, was odd in her own way, too wrapped up in herself, ignoring our family issues.

"You're great with the students. They look up to you. Working for a student paper isn't always exciting, but you energize them, motivate them. You do a better job than me, that's for sure."

"Wow. Thanks." I knew I was good at influencing people, at creating excitement for my ideas, but it was still amazing to have my old professor compliment me.

"I'll see you at next week's meeting, okay?"

"Yeah. Sounds good." I walked out of the room with a huge smile on my face, wondering who to tell first. I was bursting with excitement that Neil believed in me, that I'd proved to him I could develop and teach a course. It was not something I'd ever considered doing. I could text Emma or Ashley to tell them the good news, but I had a burning desire to tell Sawyer.

I knew he taught a class in this building, so maybe his office was here too. I stopped at the digital bulletin board inside the front doors to look for his name. Then I walked up the steps to the second floor, hoping to catch him in his office. His office door was closed, so I walked past the classrooms to see if he was teaching. Catching a glimpse of him through an open door teaching at a podium in front of a classroom, I stopped, leaning against the door frame.

He pushed his glasses up his nose as he walked to the board, going through his lecture on the Civil War. I looked around the room to see most of the students listening and taking notes. I wasn't particularly interested in history, but I had to admit his lecture was engaging. He paced back and forth in front of the room, telling the story of the Battle of Gettysburg. He didn't reference any notes and I could see the events unfolding in front of me with his words.

Then an idea formed in my head, I could ask Sawyer to help me with developing the course and maybe I could help him with something in exchange.

When he dismissed the students, I shifted to allow them to file out of the room. I waited for him to answer a student's questions before I moved a few feet into the room. When he said goodbye to the student, he finally saw me. "Did you need something?"

Hesitating, wondering if he would think it was weird I wanted to talk to him first about my news, I said, "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Oh yeah?" he asked. He picked up his texts and papers and slid them into his messenger bag, slinging the strap over his shoulder.

"Neil asked me to develop an online media course for the journalism major to teach this summer."

Sawyer's brow raised. "You're going to develop it and teach?"

Was that respect I saw in his eyes? "Yeah, the other teachers in the department already have a full course-load and Neil recommended me to the dean based on my work at the paper so far. He said I energize the students."

"Congratulations. I think you'd be great at it."

He sounded proud of me. "Thanks." I didn't think it could be better than Neil complimenting me, but a rush of joy flooded my body at Sawyer's praise. "You're great too. I watched your talk today. You make it seem so real; I felt like I was there. And I'm hoping you could help me. Neil said I need to come up with course objectives and a syllabus in six weeks. I've never done anything like this before." I held up my hands. "Before you answer, I'd love to help you out with something too. This would be an even exchange."

He was quiet for so long, I thought he wouldn't answer. Did he think it was a dumb idea? Did he not want to be around me for that length of time? "Nevermind, it was a—"

“Actually, there is something I need help with and I think you’d be perfect.”

He thought I’d be perfect for something? “What is it?”

“I need a date for the Sophie Kerr dinner at the college, where they award the scholarships. The head of the history department sat down with me yesterday to talk about my chances for tenure. He told me I need to make more of an effort to socialize and be known to the members of the committee. If I don’t get tenure, I’d be asked to leave.” His eyes were steady on mine. “You could help me.”

“Me? How could I help? Oh, do you need help finding a date?”

“Not exactly.” He shifted on his feet. “I’d like you to be my date.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. I hadn’t been expecting that.

“I’ve seen the way you talk to people. Socializing is not my thing. And you, you’re—”

Remembering his words, I asked, “I’m the life of the party, right?” That’s what my friends always said and I’d always thought it was a positive, but that was before Sawyer made it seem like a negative. The exact thing he criticized about my personality was what he needed to promote at his job. I didn’t know how to feel about that.

“Well, yeah. You know everyone. Everyone loves you.” Sensing my hesitation, he said, “Please, Stella. I need you. You’re so good with people and I’m hopeless. I always say the wrong thing.”

Did he regret what he’d said about me? Was Samantha right and he’d misspoken? Looking into his eyes, I couldn’t resist. He needed my help and thinking of the course I’d develop, I needed him too. “Okay.”

His face broke out in a smile. “Great. You won’t regret this, Stella.”

Even though his relief was palpable, I was already regretting it. I was attracted to him and now I was going as his fake date to a function at the college. Was this a good idea given what he thought about me? When I was just getting into the dating world again?

His expression hopeful, he said, “Want to meet up tonight? I coach women’s rowing until six but can make dinner afterward if you want to come by my place at seven.”

The excitement I initially felt that he wanted to get started right away dissipated with the reminder he was a coach. “I’d forgotten you coach. I guess that’s where you get those huge shoulders from. And you cook?” He

was smart, attractive, rode a motorcycle, and he cooked? Fake dating this man was not a good idea.

“Yeah, I’m hungry and I live on my own. Cooking is a necessity.”

“Sure, yeah, okay, I can come by tonight.”

“You like seafood?”

“Of course. I grew up on the Eastern Shore.”

“I’ll make seafood linguine then.”

“Sounds good,” I said as we walked out of the classroom. What had I gotten myself into? I was impulsive, but I’d surprised even myself. Why did I feel the need to tell Sawyer about the course? Why did his opinion matter so much to me? I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. And why couldn’t I dismiss him and his words from my mind?

“Let’s exchange numbers since we’ll need to communicate about your course and my event.”

“Sure.” I handed him my phone for him to add his number. The idea that Sawyer was now just a text away from me was exciting.

Handing the phone back to me, he said. “I really appreciate this, Stella.”

“Of course.” The problem was, the more I interacted with Sawyer the more I liked him. Now we’d be working together on my class and I’d be going to dinner as his date. I needed to remember this was work and that nothing could come from it. Until I understood his real opinion of me better I’d be smart to keep my distance.

## Chapter Six



THAT NIGHT, I WENT STRAIGHT from my office to Sawyer's house. He'd texted his address and to come over at 6:30 PM. I wanted to remember it wasn't a date, so I didn't change out of the colorful floral sundress, navy cardigan, and ballet flats I'd worn all day. He lived on the outskirts of campus in the row of homes reserved for professors. I parked on the curb in front of his house, which was a brick Cape Cod with black shuttered windows on the first level and three dormer windows on the top floor. I walked up the sidewalk past the neatly trimmed yard.

The sound of his footsteps approaching the door suddenly made me nervous. I plastered a smile on my face when the door opened. "Sawyer! Hi!" Then I cringed. Was I too loud? How was I going to hang out with this man who thought I was too loud and obnoxious?

"Hey, come on in." His voice was soft.

I stepped inside, smelling garlic and shrimp. He'd changed into a polo shirt and khaki shorts, and had leather flip flops on his feet. He was casual, yet he could have been on a date.

I stood inside a little foyer with his study to my left and a hallway which led to the kitchen.

"What a beautiful desk." It was the centerpiece of his study which was surrounded with wood paneling and built-in shelves.

"Thanks. It was my grandfather's. I grade papers here since it's quieter than at school where our doors are required to be open all of the time we're there."

"That makes sense." Why did my words sound stilted all of a sudden? Was it because we were alone inside his home? I was in his personal space and it was intimate.

"I need to check on the shrimp and the sauce."

I followed him down the hallway past the living room and into the kitchen.

“It smells so good.” I placed my bag down on the stool at the island, then rubbed my hands over my arms, trying to remove the goosebumps that had popped up since I’d entered his space. The kitchen—which featured white cabinets, gray swirl granite countertops, and stainless steel appliances—opened into the dining room, where I was surprised to see a long dark dining room table with antique-looking chairs pushed under the table. Wood beams lined the ceiling, which sloped slightly down to a fireplace. It was cozy.

A large bowl of linguine sat on the island, steam rising off of it, as if he’d just drained the pasta from the pot. He added seafood and a buttery-looking sauce from a pot on the stove into the bowl. Then he used wooden spoons to mix it together. When he was done, he picked up a bottle of wine. “Did you want a glass?”

“Sure.”

He poured a white wine into the glass and handed it to me, his fingers brushing mine sending a shiver down my spine. Maybe we should have met at the campus library or at a coffee shop, anywhere but his home. This felt an awful lot like a date. I took a long sip of the wine.

“Want to sit outside?” he asked, gesturing out the French doors from his kitchen to the backyard. “The garlic bread is still in the oven, so we have a few minutes.”

“Sure.”

He opened the French door for me and I walked past his outstretched arm. My shoulder rubbed along his chest, and my breath caught. I stepped down to a gray paving stone patio where a dark teak rectangle table sat with a long bench and chairs. The patio was flush with the yard, grass continuing beyond his property to the brick buildings of campus. “It’s beautiful here, Sawyer.”

“I’m renting it from the school since it’s convenient.” He pulled a chair out for me to sit on, facing the school. The tall brick buildings never failed to impress me. Again I felt lucky to live in this small historic town. It was beautiful with the cherry blossoms floating to the ground on the wind.

“Thanks.”

He waited for me to sit before he went back inside.



I chewed my lip. This was a bad idea. This dinner was intimate. He was sweet. Every time we touched, I felt it through my whole body, but he wasn't my type and I was pretty sure I wasn't his.

He came back out through the doors with the large bowl of pasta and a dish of sliced garlic bread.

I jumped up. "I can help." I grabbed the plate of bread from him, placing it in the center of the table. He set the linguine next to it.

"I'll get the dishes and silverware."

I followed him in to see if I could help with anything when he stopped and I bumped into his hard back. "Oh sorry."

He turned slowly, and my eyes traveled up his polo shirt, to his eyes, warm and amused on mine.

"We have to stop bumping into each other," Sawyer said.

"Do we?"

His hands went to my shoulders, rubbing a little up and down, warming me. The wine, which had already hit my empty stomach, was causing a light buzzing in my head.

I shook my head to clear it of the stupor I'd gotten into with his proximity and touch. "I need your help with my course." That's why we're here, not to touch, not to feel anything. That's what my online dating app was for—to meet someone serious about meeting a potential wife. I was not supposed to be flirting with the local sexy professor who rode a motorcycle.

"Right." He dropped his hands from my shoulders and turned to grab the shallow soup bowls and the spoons.

Even though I told myself I shouldn't want his touch—I did. "Can I help?"

He pointed over his shoulder. "You can grab the napkins."

"Okay." I clutched the napkins as I followed him back out to the patio, folding a napkin for each of us, placing the fork and knife on them. "All set I think."

Sawyer walked around the perimeter of the patio to light the black iron tiki torches. "It's still early for mosquitoes, but it's getting dark already."

"It is." It was dusk, and the small outdoor lights strung from poles around his yard had started to glow. When he sat down, dishing the linguine first to my plate then to his, I said, "So, do you bring a lot of women here?"

He cleared his throat. "No. I don't date often. And I don't invite dates here for dinner."

“Really?” Was I here only because I wasn’t someone he was interested in?

“I told you. I’m not great with women. In college, I dated women I tutored. I was forced to talk to them. I wasn’t great at approaching women otherwise.”

“Oh, that’s why you need my help.” I took a bite of the still-warm linguine. As soon as I took a bite, the taste of garlic and shrimp filled my mouth. “This is so good. I can’t say I’ve ever had a man make me dinner before.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“The guys I date usually don’t cook.” I kept my eyes on the garlic bread.

“You’re dating the wrong men then,” he said without any hesitation.

That’s what everyone was saying these days. Was Sawyer the type I should be dating? “Yeah, Ashley and Emma suggested searching for a man who is the opposite of my usual type on the dating app.”

He paused his fork halfway to his mouth. “You’re still doing that?”

“Online dating?” I opened the napkin over my lap to avoid his steady gaze.

“Yeah.”

He took a bite of his pasta and I watched his throat work as he swallowed. Even that was sexy.

“I filled out a profile on one of the more serious sites.”

“What do you mean by ‘more serious site?’”

“It’s a paid site, so supposedly only people looking for serious relationships are on there.”

“Is that what you’re looking for—a serious relationship?”

“Well, yeah, I’m getting older and I want to get married and have children.”

“You do?” His brow raised, he took a bite of the pasta from his fork.

“Yeah, why do you seem so surprised?” I placed my fork next to my dish and folded my hands under my chin.

“I don’t know. I’ve always thought of you as—not someone who wanted to settle down, I guess.”

A little upset he’d assumed I wouldn’t want to settle down, I said, “Well, you’re wrong. I love kids and I want to get married before it’s too late for me to have them.”

His hand covered mine which was fisted on the table. I watched as his thumb rubbed over mine, soothing me, sending a tingle up my arm.

The touch was intimate and the warmth that radiated from his hand and his eyes made it difficult to breathe.

“I’m sorry. It was just an assumption I made. I was wrong, obviously.”

I nodded, swallowing hard, as he removed his hand from mine and picked up his fork to continue eating. My now trembling hands smoothed the napkin on my lap. “I get it. People think I’m this fun party girl.”

Taking another bite, he said, “I want to get to know you.” Chewing for a minute, he added, “You know, since you’ll be my date to the scholarship dinner.”

“Right.” For a minute there, I thought he meant something different. That he truly wanted to get to know me. I swallowed down the disappointment I didn’t even understand. When I was with him, I forgot he wasn’t my type, he wasn’t for me, that he didn’t even like me. I needed that reminder. I was his date for the one night and he was helping me develop a course. That was it.

We finished our meal and I helped him clear the table. I loved the sounds of the night, but it was cooler now.

“It’s getting cold.” He closed the French doors. “Want to work in my study?”

“Sure.” I grabbed my bag and followed him to the office I had seen when I came in.

He gestured to the overstuffed leather sofa along the back wall. “Have a seat.”

I sank into the soft leather, opening my bag to pull out a notebook. “I’ve never done this before. I don’t even know where to start.”

Sawyer picked up a stack of papers from his desk, handing them to me. “I printed out some sample outlines for the courses I’ve developed and syllabi to give you an idea.”

Looking through the pages, I couldn’t believe he’d gone through all of this effort for me. “This is great, Sawyer. Thank you.”

He sat down next to me, the length of his leg rubbing against mine. “You’re welcome. I’m happy to help. I’d start jotting down everything you’re doing at the paper, research online media, and find a textbook to base the course on. Reading the textbook will help you prepare the outline for the course. Your personal experience is really important too. You want to

emphasize the fact that you're a practitioner and what you could bring to the course."

I scribbled his ideas down as he talked. "This is great." But I was overwhelmed already. I hadn't even thought about a textbook or the fact that I'd need to read one. I was diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia after seeking help in college. My parents didn't believe in learning disabilities and refused to have me tested. When my grades improved in college I let them believe it was because I tried harder.

"I did a quick search and found some places to start: the emergence of online journalism, the different mediums available, and trends. One thing I think you could add is the struggles a small town paper has and the importance of the online component to keep the paper in business. Isn't that what you're trying to do at your job?"

I was impressed that Sawyer knew my job and the challenges I faced. "It is, and Bob, my boss, is reluctant to get on board." Small town papers struggled with declining readership and advertisers. I wanted to ensure that Kent County News would thrive. The way to do that was younger readers and an online presence.

"Perfect. That's what makes your input unique. You're trying to implement online media. So, you can discuss what you've done, what has worked and what hasn't. Why your boss is reluctant. These kids may not understand that. Online media is so integral to their lives, but your boss didn't grow up with the internet. He's still holding onto print."

My mind raced with everything I could add to the course based on my experience at the Kent County News. The only thing that worried me was how to navigate picking a textbook, actually reading the text, and the other more traditional parts of the course like teaching the history of online media and the trends. I liked to do in-person interviews when I reported on events, and I dictated all of my articles.

I placed my hand on his thigh squeezing for a second. "I can't thank you enough, Sawyer. I wouldn't even have thought about some of these things."

When his eyes drifted down to where my hand still rested on his muscled thigh, I pulled it back like I'd been burned. My face heated. What was I thinking? I jumped up and packed my notebook and pen. "I think I have enough to get started."

He stood while I made my way to his door. "Are you sure? I'm happy to help."

I stopped when I reached the front door. “Yeah, I can text you with any questions.”

“Okay.”

“Thanks for dinner. It was really good.” I opened his door. “I’ll see you around.” When I turned to give him a wave, I snuck a look at his face. He looked a little confused by my abrupt departure, but being with him tonight had been too comfortable. That’s why I’d touched his thigh. No other reason. He was becoming a friend and I was a touchy-feely person. That’s all it was. Or that’s what I told myself.

When I got into my car I looked back at his house. He stood on his front porch watching me. I gave him another wave and a smile before I pulled away. There was no way a man like Sawyer would want me—someone who had difficulty focusing and couldn’t even read all of those books that lined his office.

There was no way I could tell Sawyer that even the thought of reading a textbook was terrifying. I’d need to do my own research into a textbook with an audio option. My parents were clearly ashamed of me and I didn’t want Sawyer to know that part of me. Not when I wanted to earn his respect—for him to see me as an equal.

And I still couldn’t reconcile his words at Logan and Ashley’s party with how he’d offered to help me develop the course. And the way he’d asked me to be his date at an important dinner at the college. Shouldn’t he be worried I’d embarrass him at this dinner? Or had we gotten to know each other better and he didn’t think those things anymore? Constantly wondering what Sawyer thought was giving me a headache. I wished I’d never overheard him. Then I wouldn’t be second-guessing myself around him all of the time.

Honestly, if he’d never said those things, I would be interested in him right now. The dinner we shared at his home had been intimate, and so was the way my body reacted when he touched me. There was definitely something between us, but we were opposites in every way.

When I arrived home, I scrolled through the list of possible matches that had popped up, determined to find someone more suited to me than Sawyer. My shoulders slumped as I continued to search. I’d asked for men who wanted kids someday, who wanted to get married. I thought I’d get serious guys, but these guys didn’t even put any effort into their profile pics. I’d

seen better profile pics on social media than this. Didn't they realize how important presenting yourself in the best light was?

Finally, I found one guy who looked well-groomed in his picture, long blond hair, striking blue eyes, so I searched his profile closer. He looked athletic and he had a confident smile, which was definitely my type. His name was Nate and he lived in Salisbury, a little far away for a relationship, but it might be good if it didn't work out. He was a definite possibility, as he was active. He liked watching sports, camping, fishing, music, and travel. I sent him a quick message to see if he'd respond, asking him if he'd traveled anywhere exciting or if he had a list of places he wanted to go.

I searched for articles about people who'd found their significant others online. I needed to know this would work. I found one article talking about how women used sites for free meals. I scheduled a post for the next morning which included an online survey on the paper's media pages asking people to weigh in on whether a first meet-up with an online date should be dutch or if the man should pay. I needed to keep engagement high on the various sites, to prove to Bob that we could gain traction with young people online and it was worthy of my time. Plus, my work online now served the dual purpose of being research for my course.

I went to bed that night thinking of the warmth of Sawyer's hand on mine, how he'd soothed me, and how I'd felt bereft when he'd moved away. Would I find someone more suited to me online that made me feel the way Sawyer did?

## Chapter Seven



I WALKED TO SPRING STREET where the Kent County News office was located in a historic home next to the post office. I sat in my stuffed cubicle, the walls lined with pictures of my friends, my grandmother, and Post-its with lists of things I needed to do. I couldn't live without notes everywhere. My main to-do list was attached to my laptop, so when I opened it I was reminded of what was important. Today, I needed to interview the women at the Chestertown Garden Association about their plans for spring. They usually hosted a garden tour in town for the residents and tourists and set up a booth at the farmers' market on Sundays.

After checking my email and taking a few phone calls, I realized I was running late to meet with Ms. Gladys, the President of the Chestertown Garden Association, and my grandmother's best friend.

I walked quickly over to her house since she was only a few streets from my office. As soon as I turned down her street, I saw her rocking in a chair on her porch. "Ms. Gladys!" I called out and waved.

"Stella, you're always late," she said as I stepped onto the first riser of her porch. Each stair was lined with pots of overflowing brightly colored flowers, which made me feel happy. Rectangle pots attached to the porch railing were full of flowers and hanging vines. I remembered helping her plant the flowers with my grandmother and Lindsey when I was a child.

Smiling, because I knew she wasn't mad, I said, "I am. I'm sorry. Your flowers are beautiful." I sat down in the rocking chair next to hers. A small table was in between the chairs and held a pitcher of lemonade, two glasses, and a plate of muffins.

"Thank you, dear, and I understand. I know you young people are busy these days."

I took a sip of the lemonade. “Your lemonade reminds me of you and Grandma sitting here on this porch telling stories of growing up here. That’s why I wanted to be a reporter. I love hearing people’s stories.”

“I sure do miss her.”

“I do too.” When I was only thirteen my grandmother found a lump on her leg but waited too long to go to the doctor. By then it was too late to treat the cancer. I put my lemonade down, laid my head back onto the rocking chair back, and closed my eyes. Things had been easier when she was alive. I had someone to talk to about my home life and my mother wasn’t as depressed back then. She still had weeks and months where she was a normal mom, cooking dinner, cleaning the house. But after my grandmother died, things progressively got worse until I felt like I was the caretaker. I inherited the money I used to purchase my home—it was as if she knew I’d need her help one day. “I miss her so much.”

She patted my leg. “I hope you know you can come and talk to me about anything.” She never said as much, but I suspected she knew about my mother. My mom stopped participating in town events years ago and refused any visitors at her house, so no one had seen her in years. Plus, my grandmother might have confided in Ms. Gladys, I supposed.

“I do. Thank you.”

“Have you met a man yet?” she asked, studying my face.

I tensed. “I’m trying. I signed up for online dating.” Then I laughed at myself. “I’m not getting any younger.”

But when I looked into her face, it was serious. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Why can’t you meet someone in person?”

“That hasn’t worked out for me in the past.”

“I can still remember meeting my Joseph in high school for the first time. I was a freshman and he was a senior. Our eyes met across the room and that was it for me. I never looked at another man.”

“Ah, Ms. Gladys. What an amazing story.” This was what I loved about my job. I was working but also building relationships with people in the town at the same time. Sometimes I brought meals or bakery items to some of the residents who couldn’t get out. And I loved to socialize with them—to hear stories about their youth and the town. “That’s what I’m looking for.”

“And you will find it.” She squeezed my leg then picked up the tray of muffins. “Would you like one? I made them with Luke’s blueberries. He



stocks my freezer every year. Such a sweet boy.”

I laughed because Luke wasn’t a boy anymore. “Yes.” I picked one loaded with berries and sprinkled with white sugar on top. I took a big bite. “So good,” I said around my mouthful of muffin.

“You know, Luke and his brother washed my siding for me and painted the shutters.”

“They did?” Now that she’d mentioned it, the white siding of her house was clean and her shutters were a glossy black.

“Luke stops by to check on my from time to time and noticed my siding was moldy and the paint was chipping on the shingles. Is he single?”

“Luke is dating my friend, Emma. She’s an attorney at the public defender’s office.”

“Oh, that’s right. The new girl from the city.”

I laughed. The residents would probably always refer to her as the new girl from the city. Emma had transferred here from Baltimore last year, and it was supposed to be a temporary position. When she met Luke, everything changed. She loved it here and stayed.

“What about his brother, Sawyer? He’s so handsome.”

My heart picked up at the mention of him and I thought of how I’d felt when he touched me the night before, the intimacy of dinner, and how much effort he’d put into helping me with the course. “I think he’s single, but I’m not his type.” I took another large bite of my muffin hoping Ms. Gladys wouldn’t ask any more questions about him.

“Well, how could you possibly know that?”

I finished chewing and took a sip of the lemonade. “I heard him talking to our friends. Emma asked him about me and he said I was too much for him. I’m pretty loud.”

“I don’t know. I can’t see Sawyer saying something like that.”

Irritated now, I said, “He did. I heard him.”

“Maybe it was taken out of context. He’s such a sweet boy.”

He helped me with my course. He’d helped Gladys with her house. “He’s a great guy, just not for me.” And he was most definitely not a boy. I thought back to how I could feel the muscles in his body each time I’d bumped into him. He was hard everywhere.

She hummed under breath, but didn’t respond.

“Now, let’s talk about what the Garden Association is up to this spring.” I brushed the remaining crumbs off my hands and lap and reached for my

recorder.

“Well, we’re gearing up for the big garden tour. We’ll charge for tickets and offer a prize for the best garden.”

I nodded. This was nothing new, but I knew Ms. Gladys liked to tell me as if it was.

“The library wanted us to hold classes in their new garden for the kids.”

“Really? That would be amazing.” It was good for older people to be around young kids, it kept them active. It could make a good story too. “Are you going to do it?”

“I don’t know. It seems like a huge undertaking and I’m not young. How will I corral little children?”

Glancing at her, I realized that she was looking frail. “I can help.”

“I don’t know. Do you think that will be enough?” She thought quietly for a minute. “I know! We’ll ask that young man, Sawyer, to help too. Perfect.” She smiled.

I didn’t argue with her, but I knew what she was up to. She was matchmaking and I wished it were that easy.

“Will you ask him for me, dear?”

“Of course.” I’d need to ask Sawyer for another favor. The last time he wanted a date in return. What would he want this time?

“And none of that texting nonsense. Ask him in person. That’s how you meet a man.”

“Okay, Ms. Gladys.”

She stood then, effectively ending our conversation.

I put my notebook away. “Let me help you with the pitcher and muffins.” I picked up the pitcher and tray of muffins, following her into her home.

“Let me wrap up a few muffins to take to your young man.” She bustled around her bright yellow kitchen, which was dated but cozy, pulling out a basket with a cloth napkin and filling it with muffins. I wondered if I’d painted my kitchen yellow to capture the feeling of happiness I always felt in Ms. Gladys’s kitchen and in her presence?

“And I’ll ask him how they were next time I see him, so you better deliver them right now while they’re fresh.”

I sighed as she covered the muffins with a napkin and handed me the basket. “Yes, Ms. Gladys.”

“And don’t forget to ask him about helping me out with the garden library courses.”

“I will.” She could be exasperating at times with her meddling, but she was sweet and I couldn’t deny her. Now that my grandmother was gone she was the closest thing I had to one.

Then she was shooing me out the door. “Tell Sawyer I said hello and thanks again for everything he did on my house.”

“I will. You take care, Ms. Gladys.” But she’d already closed the door behind me.

Ms. Gladys lived fairly close to campus so I took a right onto Washington Avenue, letting the sun warm my face. I couldn’t believe Ms. Gladys had effectively manipulated me so I’d need to see Sawyer in person to deliver her muffins. Although, if my quickening pulse was any indication, I liked the thought of seeing him again and asking for help.

When I reached campus, it was lunchtime, so groups of students sat on the quad laughing and eating. I walked down the path to Sawyer’s building, passing his friend and fellow professor, Owen, speaking to a few students. One tall woman with long blond hair touched his arm and laughed. It seemed innocent enough but something about the way he looked at her felt off to me. Almost like she was more than a student to him.

Thinking back to Sawyer’s comments about how he had to be careful when he spoke with students, I got the impression that Owen didn’t worry about it. He probably took whatever was offered. Maybe even encouraged it.

I’d almost walked past Sawyer’s office when I heard him call out, “Stella, is that you?”

I stopped, confused as to where I was and what I was doing here. “Um, yeah.” Then I remembered I was supposed to be delivering muffins to him. “These are for you,” I said, shoving the basket into his hands.

“Thanks. Did you make these?” he asked, looking from the basket to me.

“No. Ms. Gladys said to give them to you and to thank you for everything you did with her house.”

“Oh, she didn’t need to make me muffins. She fed us the day we were there.” He smiled, placing the muffins on his desk. “And I’m happy to help.”

“Oh, and she wanted me to ask you something. Can I come in?”

“Of course.” He gestured for me to walk into the room.

I barely noticed when my shoulder brushed his chest as I walked by. I still had an uneasy feeling about watching Owen interact with the female student. I sat and waited for Sawyer to round his desk and have a seat.

“What did she need?”

“The library asked her to conduct some gardening classes for children and she needs help.”

His brow furrowed. “Okay, why does she think I can help? I don’t really have any expertise with gardening.”

Should I tell him this was her way of matchmaking? Seeing Owen with those girls was a good reminder that two of my exes cheated on me with their students. Just then, two young women walked past the office giggling.

“Stella?” Sawyer asked, diverting my attention back to him.

“Oh, she asked me to help and then told me how you helped her with the house. I guess she thought you’d be willing. I think it’s more to keep the kids’ attention and guide them. We wouldn’t be teaching.”

“Okay, as long as it works with my schedule, I’d be happy to help. Volunteering in the community is something I like to do and I can submit it to the tenure committee too.”

“I volunteer at the library to read to the kids during storytime. It’s a lot of fun.” Warmth filled me as I thought of those mornings, interacting with the children, their joy singing and dancing to a song or listening to a book. How sometimes a child would climb into my lap when I was reading. It was worth listening to the audio ahead of time and memorizing the story. With the younger ones, I sometimes made the story up to fit the pictures.

“You do?” His eyes on mine were warm and appraising.

“Yeah, I love kids.” I wasn’t sure why I was telling him this—giving him a glimpse of myself. Maybe I wanted to prove to him that I wasn’t the girl he thought I was. I wasn’t loud or flighty. Or maybe I was those things, but I was so much more. If he’d take a chance and get to know me—the real me. I rubbed my hands together. “Okay, I think that’s all. I’ll let you know about the gardening class.” I stood up and turned to go.

“Stella?”

“Yeah?” I turned back to him. He’d stood with his hands in his pockets, looking uncomfortable, vulnerable.

“About last night—”

“Oh yeah, thanks so much for your help.”

“Of course. I’m always happy to help out a friend.”

My head shot up at that. Was that what we were now—friends?

His warm brown eyes settled on mine. “But you left in a hurry. Was it something I said or did?”

Dr. Hirsch’s words about being authentic, revealing my true feelings filtered through my head, but what could I say? That I’d overheard him talking about me weeks ago? And what would it matter? “No. It was late and I was tired. You were so helpful.” I cringed. Why couldn’t I stop saying that word? “I can’t thank you enough.”

Immediately, I felt guilty. I was covering up what happened and how I felt. I should come clean with him.

“Sure. Did you want to meet up again?”

I couldn’t tell from his expression if he was asking because he enjoyed my company or he felt a duty to help me since I was his date for the dinner. I hoped he’d enjoyed my company as much as I did his. “I need to choose a textbook—”

“I can help with that too.”

The desire to take whatever help he offered with the course was strong, but I didn’t want to admit that I didn’t know to pick a textbook and couldn’t read one. “Oh, I don’t want to keep taking advantage of you.”

“You’re not. I really don’t mind.”

Could I work closely with him and not want more? This was a good opportunity to be true to my feelings, so I said, “Okay. I’d like that.” I started to leave again when Sawyer said, “Have you met up with anyone yet?”

I paused, my hand in the doorway, and turned my head to meet his gaze.

He cleared his throat and shifted on his feet. “You know, through online dating?”

So much had happened this morning, I completely forgot to check to see if that guy had responded to my message. “I had a match and I messaged him. I need to see if he responded.”

“Well, if you decide to meet him, will you please be careful?”

“I will, Sawyer.” It was sweet he was concerned, especially because I’d never had anyone look out for me. Lindsey was oblivious to what was going on in our family. She’d moved to Salisbury after college graduation and hadn’t looked back, even though she lived only a few hours away. My

mother was too wrapped up in her depression and my father was the king of avoidance. It was just me and had been since my grandmother died.

I knew I needed to get out of his office before I said something I couldn't take back, like, 'I like talking to you. I like you being concerned for my safety. I like you.'

So I walked out. Ms. Gladys's attempt at matchmaking was sweet, but misguided. There was no way I was a good match for Sawyer. He needed someone smart, who could keep up with him—another professor, someone his equal, definitely not me.

## Chapter Eight



I CHECKED THE DATING APP when I got back to the office. Nate replied, saying that he liked to travel but didn't have much of an opportunity to do so. He said he hadn't even been outside of Maryland. Yikes. I debated replying at all. My finger hovered over the 'delete match' option. Should I give him another chance? I shivered, thinking of the other men on the profile pics who looked like they didn't even have jobs. And Nate's profile said he was a high school gym teacher. He was good looking and employed. I shouldn't be so picky. I was determined to meet someone and I needed to make a concerted effort.

I decided to respond with my experience studying abroad in grad school. We'd gone to London and I'd had the opportunity to see so many countries on that trip. It was amazing even though I'd spent a decent chunk of my inheritance money on it. My parents never took us anywhere, so that had been my chance to see the world. Feeling better for making an effort, I sent the message.

Searching for a textbook for my course was daunting. So many options came up and I had no idea how to sort through them. I wanted to choose a respected publisher so the dean wouldn't have a reason to turn me down. I shot a quick text to Sawyer.

*Stella: Researching textbook options now. It's so overwhelming.*

Trying not to second guess my decision to reach out to Sawyer and not keep my distance from him, I checked the paper's online media for comments from readers. I'd gotten a huge response to my question on going Dutch versus men paying for online date dinners. The consensus was to go Dutch until you've been on a few dates with the same guy and feel a connection. Or you see the relationship going somewhere. Not to use the

app for free meals. Although there were plenty of responses saying they did just that.

My phone buzzed with an incoming text. *Sawyer: I can help. Can you come over tomorrow night?*

I needed his help but I didn't want a repeat of the intimate dinner the other night. *Stella: I don't want to impose on you. I'll bring take out?*

*Sawyer: Sounds great.*

*Stella: pizza ok?*

There weren't many options in town for take out. It was essentially pizza from Nina's and that was it.

*Sawyer: Perfect.*

A flush spread through my body at that word. I suddenly wanted this to be real. I wanted Sawyer to be the guy I was messaging to get to know better, to ask out on a date. I wanted to be the woman for him. The urge was overwhelming and I didn't know why. Yes, I was physically attracted to Sawyer and he'd been sweet and helpful, but that wasn't enough to start a relationship with someone. You needed mutual respect and we didn't have that. He wanted a nice quiet woman who was smart and not flighty. That was so not me.

*Stella: Great, see you tomorrow. Let me know what toppings you like.*

*Sawyer: I'll eat anything. Get what you want.*

That got me, because every guy I'd dated ordered what he wanted.

A notification on the dating app popped up with a message from Nate. He'd sent a lengthy message talking about how great it was I'd traveled and how he'd love to hear all about my trip over dinner. Was it too soon for that? I thought people messaged for weeks or even months before taking the step to meet. I didn't know what to do.

Glancing at my text message exchange with Sawyer, I typed before I could re-think it: *Stella: This guy wants to meet up on Match. Is it too soon?*

*Sawyer: Didn't you just start messaging him?*

I swallowed hard. *Yes.*

*Sawyer: Then it's probably too soon. You should probably do a background check on him before you meet-up.*

I could at least search his name online, his social media, and a quick case search on the Maryland Judiciary site.

*Yeah, that's probably a good idea. I don't know much about him yet. I couldn't be sure Nate was even his real name.*



*Sawyer: The scholarship dinner is next weekend. It's black-tie.*

I'd need a dress. I was worried about meeting with Sawyer to go over my course, but we still had the dinner to go to where we'd be dressed up. The more I was with him the harder it was to keep my feelings for him friendly. *K- thanks for letting me know.*

*Sawyer: Thanks for helping me out 😊*

An emoji? Who said Sawyer was awkward and not social? *Of course. Don't forget you're helping me too.*

Trying to focus on work, I quickly dictated my notes on Ms. Gladys's plans for the gardening society.

"Stella!" My boss bellowed from his glass-windowed enclosed office.

I made my way through the maze of cubicles and filing cabinets to his doorway.

"You called?" I smiled leaning against the doorframe.

"What is this nonsense on social media?" He turned his computer screen so I could see he'd pulled up the paper's feed with my survey on who should pay on online dates.

"I'm doing an ongoing series on online dating and relationships."

"Why?"

"Bob, look at the number of likes, comments, and shares on that post alone. It's crazy. College kids are taking the time to read our site. They don't have time to date but they have time to do this." I pointed at the screen where it indicated over twenty shares and two hundred likes.

"Total waste of time," he grumbled under his breath. "This isn't news."

I had the same argument with him every few weeks and I was starting to think he'd never come around. "I'm developing a course at the college on the importance of online media. If colleges teach it—"

"You're teaching at the college now?"

"You're the one who wanted me to be the advisor for the student paper. Neil liked me so much he told the dean I should develop this course and teach it this summer."

"As long as it won't interfere with your job here."

"It won't."

He cleared his throat and waved me off. "Get back to it then."

I knew he wouldn't compliment me. He was gruff and only gave negative feedback, as if that would motivate me.

Going back to my desk, I was antsy. I relished going out to events to cover them for the paper. I hated being in the office. Looking at my schedule for the rest of the week, there wasn't much going on around town. The marina was still under construction, farmers' market as usual on Sunday. No elections, no festivals until Memorial Day weekend. Pulling out my phone, I texted Ashley.

*Stella: We need to plan something.*

*Ashley: Hello to you too. Plan what?*

*Stella: Something. Going crazy at the office. Engagement party, birthday party? You got any ideas?*

*Ashley: Bug Emma and Samantha. One of them should have an engagement party. Your birthday is the only one coming up.*

*Stella: That's right. Should we plan my party?*

*Ashley: You're not supposed to plan your own party.*

*Stella: When you're me, you do.* It wasn't like my mom planned parties from her bedroom or my dad even remembered them. If I wanted a celebration I made my own.

*Ashley: This calls for a girls' night.*

*Stella: It does.*

Then a group text popped up on my phone which included Samantha and Emma. We quickly made plans for tonight at Emma's house since Luke was working tonight.

Perfect. I hated sitting still, I hated being alone, and I hated celebrating my birthday by myself. I'd spent too many birthdays by myself as a child. It was one of the reasons I wanted children so badly. I loved them and I knew they'd love me unconditionally. I could fill my house with love and laughter. Everything I didn't have growing up. Now if only I could find a guy serious about the same things.

I tried unsuccessfully to do more research on my course and finally packed up at five to head home and change. As I drove the short distance home I realized both Ashley and Emma had boyfriends and dogs to come home to. At first, having a home of my own had been amazing. There was no one there who could bring my mood down, but lately the quiet was too much. I wanted someone to fill it, to spend my days with, someone to talk to at the end of the day. My mind drifted to my night at Sawyer's. How perfect it had been. Conversation flowed, and the food was good. It was peaceful even when no one spoke. I hadn't felt antsy once.

I went home to change and then drove over to Emma's a little early. When I pulled up to the farmhouse she now shared with Luke, I parked next to her tiny Corolla. Luke's cruiser was gone. I knocked on her door and Hunter started barking his greeting.

The screen door creaked as Emma opened it, holding Hunter by the collar so he wouldn't jump on me. "Hey, you're early."

I scooted past her so she could close the door. I rubbed Hunter's head. "Hey, buddy!" When I stopped petting him, he butted his head into my legs to get my attention as I walked farther into the kitchen. "Hey! I'm trying to walk."

"Want to go outside? I started a fire."

"Sure."

"Did you want a drink? It's watermelon juice and Moscato."

"Yes, please. That sounds great." And it did. I needed a drink after everything going on this week—Ms. Gladys's matchmaking, interactions with Sawyer, and Nate, who wanted to meet in person. It was a lot, even for me.

She poured me a glass, grabbed her own, and led the way through the family room. I stopped to admire new frames on the wall. "These are the cartoons Luke drew for you?"

She stopped, turning back to where I stood. "Yeah." She pointed to the first one. "This is one of the first times we met. I thought he'd given me a traffic ticket but instead he'd drawn this picture on the back." It was a picture of Luke leaning, arms crossed, against his squad car, and Emma in a suit, her arms flailing, as she argued some point. "Then this one he gave me at the Pub, and this one he gave me when he proposed." My eyes skipped to the one with Luke dressed in a tux on one knee where she wore a white dress that could only be a wedding dress. It said—*Will you marry me?*

"These are so sweet, Emma." My heart literally squeezed, it was so romantic.

"Yeah, I debated hanging them up since they're so personal but this is our home now and this is our history."

"It is. I think it's great." I just wish I had the kind of love she'd experienced. Luke had pursued her with these drawings. "You're so lucky."

Emma must have sensed I was sad, because she laid a hand on my arm. "Don't worry. You'll meet someone." We resumed walking out the French

doors to the large deck at the back of the house. “I know your history with guys hasn’t been the best, but that will change.”

We walked down the deck steps to the fire pit area and I sat in one of the Adirondack chairs positioned around the fire. “How can you know that?”

She shook her head as she sat across from me. “I just do. In the past year, I moved here and met Luke. Jack returned to town, and now he’s with Samantha.” Then she laughed. “If Logan and Ashley can love each other after years of fighting I think you can find love too.”

I puffed out a breath. “I don’t know. My history with guys is abysmal.”

I heard a car arrive, the doors slam shut, and a few seconds later laughter and talking trickled out from the open screen door on the deck to us.

“Sounds like Samantha and Ashley are here,” Emma said, getting up to greet them as they came down the deck steps.

“Hey, guys!” I said, once Emma went back upstairs to get more drinks for them.

“So, you called a girls’ night to plan your birthday party?” Ashley asked, sitting next to me.

“Yup. You know it. Should we do a river cruise? Go to Baltimore and do the night club thing? Girls’ night at Secrets in Ocean City?”

Emma snorted as she balanced two glasses and handed them to Ashley and Samantha. “I don’t know. I feel like I’m too old for Secrets.”

“Ugh. Just because you have men doesn’t mean we can’t be fun,” I said, my heart not exactly into the club scene either.

Ashley shot Emma a look. “Just because we don’t want to leave town doesn’t mean we can’t have fun right here.”

Now my friends thought I was crazy, or maybe they always thought that. “That’s true. There’s still the river cruise. What do you think?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Isn’t it a little over the top to plan your own party?” Emma asked.

Ashley laughed. “Stella has always planned her own parties. She rarely even lets me help.” Then she paused, looking at me as if she wanted to ask why, but didn’t.

Now was my opportunity to come clean to my friends like Dr. Hirsch said at our last meeting—*the next time you find yourself covering your true feelings with a smile, a joke, whatever it is you do to divert someone, try and allow yourself to feel those feelings*. Should I? Would they be appalled

at my home life? Would they think less of me? I know Samantha struggled a little with her parents but Emma and Ashley's childhood seemed normal, or at least more normal than mine.

Dr. Hirsch seemed to think my friends would be supportive and that I needed to tell someone. Laughing uncomfortably, I said, "Well, this is my sad story. My mom is and was very depressed. She doesn't come out of her room often. We weren't allowed to have friends over. She forgot to feed us, so definitely didn't remember our birthdays. I know I make a big deal out of birthdays, because if I don't, who will?" I worried Ashley, out of all of my friends, would feel betrayed I'd never confided in her since we'd been friends the longest.

Glancing at my friends' faces, I saw nothing but sympathy.

Ashley's hand squeezed my forearm. "I'm sorry, Stella. I had no idea. I was never invited to your house, but I assumed your mom was a hoarder or something."

I shrugged. "Not a hoarder, just couldn't get out of bed."

"What about your dad?" Ashley asked.

"He worked on the farm and volunteered to help other farmers so he could avoid being home. And you know my sister, Lindsey, she's oblivious to anyone but herself."

"True," Ashley said.

"I'm happy you told us, but I'm wondering why now? I could have been there for you. I'd have invited you over more when we were kids," Ashley said.

It was then that I saw the pain in Ashley's eyes. By not telling her the truth or relying on her, I'd hurt her. "I'm sorry. I never thought I was hurting you by not telling you. I was so consumed with keeping it a secret. All I saw were friends who had normal moms." Who met them when they got home or after work, cooked dinner, came to their activities.

"I knew something was up. I just wish you'd told me sooner." Ashley's voice was flat.

I hoped this wouldn't impact my friendship with Ashley. I needed to be completely up front with her from now on. "And the why now is that I'm seeing a therapist. Dr. Hirsch. I want to date again and I'm so messed up over my exes cheating on me, I needed to fix myself before I got into another relationship."

Ashley brightened at that. “Well, it’s not your fault those men cheated on you.” When I was silent, she continued, “Is Dr. Hirsch helpful?”

“I guess. She says all the right things, but believing her is something else. I’m trying.” I took a sip of my drink. “You know I signed up for online dating and I’m making an effort.”

“Have you met anyone?” Emma asked.

I sighed. “Most of the guys on there don’t even post flattering profile pics. They look like they just rolled out of bed and snapped a picture. It’s not encouraging. Nate seemed well-groomed and had a nice smile.” It was kind of sad that was the criteria. “His profile said he’s a high school gym teacher near Salisbury and he’s interested in travel. So I asked him about that, but he hasn’t been off the Eastern Shore that much.”

“Are you going to meet up with him?” Emma asked.

“He wants to but I just started talking to him. It seems too soon,” I said.

“What else do you know about this guy?” Ashley asked.

“Not much. I’ll keep talking to him until I get a better feel for him.” So far, all I knew was that he had a respectable job, he was my age, and lived somewhat close.

“I have an idea. Let’s go out on Jack’s dad’s boat for your birthday.” Samantha scrolled through her phone. “Your birthday is a Saturday when they have music and dancing at Watkins Park, so we could go to that afterward.”

I sighed, relieved they’d accepted the secret I’d kept from them all of these years and still wanted to be friends. Seeing their reactions now, I knew I should have reached out earlier.

“Yeah, that sounds fun,” Ashley said.

“If Jack wouldn’t mind letting us use the boat,” Emma said.

Samantha started texting. “I’m sure it will be fine. Let me make sure Jack isn’t on call for the fire department that day.” Jack had recently moved back to town to help his dad with the marina, but the marina had since reverted back to the town and his dad retired. Thankfully, Jack was able to find a job as a fire instructor at the fire training facility nearby in Centreville but he was still very active in the town’s volunteer fire department.

Putting her phone down, Samantha ticked off her fingers, “It will be Jack, me, Luke, Emma, Ashley, Logan, Stella and Sawyer?”

My head was shaking no before she’d even finished her sentence. “I see how you did that—listed all of us as a couple.” When was she going to give

it up? “I don’t want him to feel that we’re forced together as a couple because we’re the last two single ones left in the group. We’re already working on my course and Ms. Gladys’s library class together.” I was starting to doubt my ability to resist him.

“I’m sorry. What was that? You’re doing what?” Ashley asked.

“I didn’t tell you?” I asked.

“Uh no, you neglected to tell me you’re working with Sawyer now. When did this happen?”

I told them about the course I was developing and how Sawyer was helping me in exchange for a date to the scholarship dinner. I left out the romantic dinner and my reaction to his touch.

“That’s wonderful, Stella.” Ashley reached over to squeeze my shoulder. “I’m so happy for you.”

A smile playing on Samantha’s lips, she asked, “I’d love to hear how this came about.”

“I needed a favor and I offered to help him out. He’s applying for tenure this year and needs to have a good rapport with everyone on the tenure committee essentially. I’m good with people so he thought I could help him.”

“You’re memorable, that’s for sure. If you’re on his arm, everyone will notice,” Emma said.

“I just hope they remember him and not me.” I had a tendency to be loud and boisterous, especially at parties. I knew some of it was nerves. “I know a lot of people at the college from when I went there and from work. Hopefully, I can pay him back for all of his help.” And not embarrass him.

“So, what are the boundaries for this date?” Ashley smirked.

I shook my head. “I’m helping him make a good impression and it’s not a real date if that’s what you mean.”

“Well, I love this development,” Emma said. “I couldn’t have planned something more perfect if I tried.”

“What? What are you talking about?” I was genuinely confused as to where they were going with this.

“This is just how Logan and I started out. You’re going to a black-tie affair as his date—getting dressed up, drinking. It has all the makings of a romance novel. You’ll accidentally fall into his bed at night—” Ashley said.

“Onto his dick,” Emma added, laughing so hard she almost fell off her chair. When she finally recovered, she said, “Sorry that’s what you would

have said if one of us was in this situation.”

“That’s true.” I wasn’t opposed to seeing more of Sawyer’s body under those tweed jackets, button-down shirts, and dress pants. I just wasn’t sure he felt the same way. When he was close, I was hyperaware of his body and maybe once I’d seen a hint of possible desire for me in his eyes, but I was probably mistaken. Even though he was a big man, it was my luck he was attracted to petite women who were quiet bookworms.

“What are you girls doing out here that’s so funny?” Luke asked.

Ashley snorted as Luke’s heavy footsteps came down the steps from the deck to where we gathered around the fire. “Oh nothing. Stella here has a date with Sawyer.”

“I’m helping a friend out. It’s not a real date.” He’d already told our friends I wasn’t his type. I shivered thinking about what he’d say if he heard rumors about us dating from his brother. I didn’t want the humiliation.

“Hey babe,” Emma said as Luke leaned down to kiss her lightly on the lips. Then he sat in the seat in between Emma and me.

Luke’s eyes settled on mine, his brow raised. “Sawyer, huh?”

I felt the beginning of a tension headache at the back of my head. “No, no, no. He asked me to be his date at the scholarship dinner. He needs my help to make a good impression on the tenure committee. We’re not dating or fake dating or anything else.” I gestured at the girls. “They have very active imaginations.”

Luke didn’t even crack a smile. He leaned back into his chair spreading his legs wide. “Are you interested in Sawyer?”

He was deceptively calm. I felt like this was his good cop routine during an interrogation. I could see Emma smirking next to him. I took a deep breath. “You guys were at Logan and Ashley’s party when he said he wouldn’t date me. *I’m a little too much for him.*” I swung my eyes around at everyone to make my point. “Remember that?”

Luke sat up leaning his elbows onto his thighs. “That doesn’t mean you aren’t interested in him and it doesn’t mean he isn’t a dumb ass. Let me tell you something about Sawyer. He thinks he has to be with a certain kind of woman. And yeah, he sticks to his routine, but it doesn’t mean he’s right.”

I stood up, ready to get some more alcohol because there was not enough in the drink Emma made me. “I’ve made too many mistakes to get involved with someone opposed to dating me. That would be a bad idea.”



“He’s not adamantly opposed to dating you. He thinks he likes a quiet woman but maybe he has no idea what’s good for him. You need to show him how things could be different if he took a chance on you,” Luke said.

Luke’s words made me feel like I had a chance with Sawyer, which was dangerous. Besides, I wanted someone who knew what he wanted. Not someone I had to prove myself to. I wanted a man who was so enamored with me that the idea of cheating would never enter his brain. Why was that so much to ask?

Emma grabbed his hand, pulling it into her lap. “When did you get so smart?”

He leaned over to kiss her, mumbling over her lips. “Definitely after we met.”

“Seriously? It’s girls’ night,” Ashley said.

Taking advantage of their distraction, I walked up the steps with my empty wine glass. I ducked into the bathroom and closed the door softly behind me. I needed a couple minutes. I took a few deep breaths, gripping the counter in front of me, gazing at myself in the mirror. I knew who I was and who I wasn’t. I was loud, and not everyone could handle that. It was fine. I’d find a guy who did want me. And he wouldn’t need to be convinced of it. I stayed there until the tears dissipated.

## Chapter Nine



I PUT THE PIPING HOT box of pizza on the passenger seat and checked for a message from Nate before pulling out of the parking lot. We'd been texting back and forth for a few days. He came from a large family who all still lived in the Salisbury area, he loved his nieces and nephews, and he coached basketball at the school. He seemed nice and he was interested in me, at least on paper. There were no red flags. But he could be talking to others online too. I'd suggested meeting for drinks and had been waiting for his response. I wanted to see if we had chemistry.

I parked on the curb by Sawyer's house and before I'd gotten out of my car, he was standing on the sidewalk in a black Avengers T-shirt and camo cargo shorts.

"Hey. Wanted to get the pizza for you." He opened the passenger side door pulling out the still-warm pizza. "Hawaiian?" he asked, smiling.

"Yeah. Hope you like it. It's my favorite." I walked around my SUV to stand next to him. Sawyer's hair was damp like he'd showered after rowing practice and I could still smell the soap he'd used which gave me visions of him in a hot and steamy shower, naked, with water dripping down his cut body.

He shut the door and gestured for me to precede him up the sidewalk to his porch. "I told you to get what you wanted. I'm not picky."

When we got to the porch, he leaned around me to push open the door, his chest brushing my shoulder as he leaned over. My breath hitched at the contact and his eyes swept over me as he waited for me to walk through the door. I continued into the kitchen placing my bag onto the island.

He placed the pizza box onto the island, popping it open. "Looks good." Pulling down plates, he transferred several slices. "You want to eat outside?"

“Definitely.”

He picked up the plates. “Grab beers or whatever you want from the fridge.”

Opening the fridge, I saw that it was organized and clean. Water bottles, beer bottles, and milk were arranged in neat lines on the top shelf. “Did you want a beer?” I called.

“Yeah, but I can get it.” He was already back in the kitchen, reaching over my head to grab the beer. His smell enveloped me as I basked in the feel of his chest leaning into my body. Was he trying to drive me crazy?

I grabbed a bottle of water, edging away from him, and stepped outside.

“There are a few dark clouds over there.” He pointed over the buildings on campus. “Hopefully, it won’t rain while we eat.”

You could smell the rain, the wind picking up, fluttering the napkins he’d tucked under our plates. I sat down, suddenly uncomfortable—everything Luke and the girls said to me the other night ran through my head. Did Luke tell him? I didn’t know how often they talked.

“How’s your week been?” Sawyer asked.

“Nothing too exciting.” I shrugged, trying to eat a bite of pizza without sauce dribbling down my chin.

“Do you want me to give you money for a dress?”

I swallowed the bite of pizza I was chewing. “What? Why?”

“I’d feel bad if you had to spend money on something for me and it’s black-tie.”

“Don’t worry about it. There’s nothing I love more than dress shopping and I can pay for it.” Even though his offer to pay for my dress was sweet, it felt like something you’d do for someone who was doing you a favor. Not a real date. Or maybe I was overthinking it. “Thank you for offering.” None of my boyfriends ever paid for anything more than dinner or drinks.

He nodded. “No problem. Let me know if you change your mind.” He took a few more bites of his pizza before he spoke again. “How’s the online dating thing going?”

I wiped a napkin over my mouth. “Good. I think I’m ready to meet this guy I’ve been talking to, Nate.”

“Does Nate have a last name? Have you looked him up online?”

I shifted in my seat. “We’ve talked a lot and he seems normal. I double-checked what he’s told me online.” He was listed as a teacher and coach at the school. “No red flags, you know.”

Sawyer's face tightened. "He could still be a serial killer."

"True." I placed my pizza down on my plate, taking a sip of water. "Look, Sawyer. I want a serious boyfriend. I'm putting myself out there, making an effort to get to know someone. Someone who's hopefully as serious as I am about settling down. I know there's risks involved in online dating, but I have to trust my judgment at some point."

He paused with his pizza halfway to his mouth. "What do you mean? Why don't you trust your judgment?"

My eyes shot up to his to see if he was serious. I thought everyone knew my dating history, but maybe not. "I've been cheated on a lot."

"I'm sorry, Stella. I had no idea." His hand closed over mine and he squeezed it for a second before picking up his pizza again.

"It's no biggie." I smiled trying to lighten the mood.

"Don't do that," he said quietly.

"Don't do what?"

"Don't minimize what you went through. It's not funny."

"Hey, it happened to me. I know it's not funny." The interesting thing was, I always laughed off my cheating exes and my friends never called me out on it. I did it to cover the bone-deep hurt that it caused me. It made me feel less than worthless. If it had only happened once I could blow it off as a life experience, but three times? And I'd been engaged to Jason. I wasn't what he wanted after all. I never was.

"I see you laugh at things sometimes, but I think you do it to cover up your true feelings."

Ding ding. How did Sawyer see something that no one else had? My family was oblivious so that didn't surprise me, but my friends? Why did they let me get away with it all of the time? "I do."

"Don't do that with me."

"Why not?" Why did he think he was different if I couldn't show my true self to my family or friends?

"I don't know. It just seems wrong."

I nodded. I still didn't get it, but then nothing about Sawyer had been what I expected. "When every one of your boyfriends cheats on you, it's a blow. I dated Jason during grad school. He was a little older and already working as a physical trainer, so he had interns under him. I suspected something was going on, but then I was paranoid at that point. When he

proposed I relaxed. But not even a month after that, he broke it off because he'd met someone else."

Sawyer winced. "I'm sorry, Stella. That's shitty."

"Yeah." That about summed it up. "I took a break from dating for the past two years."

"You'll find someone." He took a long pull of his beer. "Although, I'm not sure that online dating is the best idea."

"We live in a small town. There are not a lot of single attractive guys who want to settle down. I need to be proactive."

"I get that and I'm not good at meeting people either. I'm not exactly outgoing." He took a large bite of his pizza.

I couldn't get a read on him. Was he offering himself as an interested single guy? No, he'd said he had trouble meeting people. That's all. We ate in silence for a few minutes but I was curious what his story was. "I told you my sad history. So when was the last time you had a girlfriend?"

He used a napkin to wipe his face before he spoke. "I dated one of the professors at Washington, but then she transferred to the University of Baltimore. She wanted to get married but I wasn't ready."

That surprised me. Nothing about Sawyer screamed anti-commitment. "How long did you date?"

"Two years."

"That's a long time. And you didn't want to marry her?" Was he against marriage altogether or was she the wrong person? It was none of my business but I wanted to know more than anything.

"I'm not sure I was ready to marry anyone at twenty-six, but I wasn't that upset when she left. So, I guess there's your answer."

"She wasn't the right one." The fact soothed me because for some reason, Sawyer being anti-marriage really bothered me.

He chuckled. "I don't really believe in all of that nonsense. That there's one right person for everyone."

His response made me uneasy, but at the same time, I didn't have the best experience with relationships either, so I couldn't blame him for feeling that way. "I'm not sure I believe in anything at this point. If this dating thing doesn't work out I plan to start a family on my own."

"It's that important to you?"

"It's the most important thing to me, and I'm not going to settle for just anyone. I have options if I don't meet the right guy."

It wasn't my imagination that I saw respect on his face when I told him my plan. I know he'd said I was impulsive, and I could be—about small things like parties or plans. But when it came to having a family, I had thought about it a lot.

"I think it's great you know what you want and you have a plan to get it."

"Thanks," I said quietly. It was weird. Over the years, I never sought anyone's approval. My family was completely disinterested, so the fact that Sawyer's approval meant something to me was new. "Would it scare you if a woman you dated told you they wanted marriage and kids soon? I'm worried that I'll scare a guy off if I tell him that, but at the same time, I don't want to waste my time on someone who doesn't want the same thing."

He placed the crust of his pizza on his plate, pushing it away from him, and leaned back in his chair, letting it rock as he considered my question. "I don't know. When I was younger, yes, but now I'd appreciate the honesty." A sense of awareness shot through me as his gaze locked onto mine. "There's something sexy about a woman who knows what she wants and goes after it."

I licked my suddenly very dry lips and Sawyer's eyes dropped to catch the movement.

"Are you sure about this guy?" he asked, his voice low.

I blinked at him trying to remember what we were talking about. "What guy?"

"This online guy." He shifted in his seat.

With Sawyer sitting in front of me, Nate didn't seem as attractive as he had before. Nate was a profile picture on a dating site and Sawyer was a presence in my life, helping me, caring about me. Why couldn't he be interested in me?

"Oh, I guess. He seems normal and nice. I figure if I meet him in person I'll know if we have chemistry or not." Sawyer tensed and I knew he worried about my safety but I wanted him to be upset that I was going out with someone else. "I'm not your sister. I'm not someone you should be worried about."

"You're right. You're not my sister." Something akin to frustration flashed in his eyes when he said that but then he quickly stood up to clear

the dishes. Was he frustrated with me or the situation? I really hoped it was the situation.

I finally followed him inside, standing by the island while he rinsed the dishes and placed them into the dishwasher.

When he was done, he turned to me, leaned back on the counter, and crossed his arms over his chest. "I worry about you, that's all."

"Thank you." Up until now, I knew I was physically attracted to Sawyer, but something about his concern got to me. It made my heart clench and it made me want more. I wanted him to want me. With the care he'd treated me with so far, I knew he'd be an amazing boyfriend, despite everything he'd said about not being social. I'd always been attracted to overly confident men, but there was something equally as attractive about a quiet confidence. One that Sawyer exuded just standing there. He didn't need to boast about his muscles or his accomplishments. He proved himself every day through his actions and his words. Could I tell him how much it meant to me? Somehow, I knew this was a safe place. "I haven't had much of that in my life."

"What, concern for your safety?" Sawyer asked, his brows raised.

"Yeah, my parents aren't that involved. I've been pretty much on my own for a while now. I don't have an older brother and my sister never worried about me." I was the youngest but held everything together at home.

He moved around the island, our eyes locked, and I turned to face him, as my heart rate picked up. His hand went to a piece of my hair which hung slightly in my face and hovered there like he wasn't sure we were at the point he could be that familiar. My heart thudded so loudly in my chest, he had to hear it. In a low voice, he said, "Get used to it. Once I let someone in that's what I do. I worry about them." Then he tucked the hair behind my ear, the light touch of his finger on my temple sending a tingle through my whole body.

I knew what I wanted and it wasn't a brotherly figure. All I could do was stand there, staring up at him, hoping he'd erase the inches that separated us, and kiss me. I'd never wanted anything more in my entire life. I swayed toward his body, but he suddenly stepped back and away from me. "You want to work on your course now?"

My hand a little shaky, I touched the hair he'd placed behind my ear, wanting that moment back. "Uh, yeah. Sounds good." What *was* that? Did

he feel the pull that I felt? And if so, would he do anything about it?

I turned, looking for my purse to pull out my laptop and notebook, taking a few deep breaths to calm myself.

“I found a few textbooks that look good,” he said as I followed him to his office. “Let me pull it up on my computer.” He sat in the black leather swivel chair behind his desk, quickly typing in his password.

I walked around his desk and leaned my hip on the corner, my eyes focused on his fingers on his mouse—long, tan, his forearm muscled. I swallowed. Everything about him was attractive.

“Here it is,” he said, glancing over at me.

I inched closer so I could see the computer. He’d pulled up several textbooks. “It’s up to you since you’ll be teaching the course, but these are affordable.”

I hesitated. Should I tell him the real issue with the textbook? Would he look at me differently? “The main thing I want is that the book has a listening option for disabled students.”

“See, you’re already thinking like a professor. Here, have a seat so you can take a look.”

He stood up and stepped back so I could take his seat. Should I let him believe that or tell him the real reason I wanted an audiobook? He’d said he’d let me in and maybe it was time I did the same. “I need it in audio too.” My voice was quiet and I wasn’t sure he’d even heard me at first.

“What?” he’d leaned forward, bracing his hands on the desk, turning his face in my direction.

I cleared my throat suddenly uncomfortable with his undivided attention. “I need the listening option; that’s why I said something.”

“You do?”

What he said next would change everything. Was I ready for him to view me differently? Would he ever see me as his equal if he knew the whole truth? If this disgusted him or made him think less of me then we couldn’t explore this chemistry between us, even if I wanted to. I was done feeling less than because of something beyond my control.

“Yeah, I have a learning disorder—dyslexia. I can’t read long texts, so I need the audio. And I don’t type my articles, I dictate everything.” This was literally my greatest shame in life. No one knew this. I hid it from my parents, my friends, my boss. I was a writer who couldn’t write.

His face was so intense. “Really? I had no idea.”



“I’ve actually never told anyone before.” I licked my suddenly dry lips. “I have ADHD too, so I have a hard time concentrating on things for long periods of time. I wasn’t diagnosed until college because my parents didn’t believe in it.”

He pushed himself off the desk, standing at his full height, looking down on me. “You’re parents didn’t believe in it? What bullshit is that?”

My face felt hot. I’d always been ashamed of their reaction to it. “They didn’t. So I really struggled in school. It was embarrassing. When I was tested for English in college, the proctor pulled me aside and asked if I’d ever been evaluated for a learning disability.”

While I talked, Sawyer crouched down in front of me, placing his hands on my bare knees to turn me in the chair until I faced him.

“That woman changed my life. With the accommodations, I got good grades for the first time in my life. I didn’t feel dumb.”

I felt his hands like a brand on my skin as he kept them there while he talked. “You’re smart, Stella. You’re a reporter and you were asked to develop this course because you impressed Neil. I saw you speak to those newspaper students. You’re inspiring. You volunteer at the library and you help out Ms. Gladys. I’m sure you do a lot more you don’t even talk about. You’re amazing. Don’t let anyone tell you different or make you feel ashamed.”

I was speechless for a minute as I looked into his determined eyes, his shoulders tense, as if what I thought about this was important to him. My own parents were ashamed of my learning disability, which was ironic, considering how little they were involved in my life growing up. The chant went through my head—*Sawyer thought I was smart. Sawyer thought I was amazing.* I was having a hard time reconciling that with how I’d viewed myself over the years. “Thank you, Sawyer.”

“Do you believe me?”

I couldn’t look away from the intensity in his eyes. “I believe you.” Then I shrugged. “I’m a work in progress I guess.”

“Aren’t we all?” He slowly stood up, braced his hands on the desk, and looked over his shoulder at me. “Are you ready to go over these textbooks?”

“Yeah.” I scooted my chair toward the desk again.

As he read and summarized the content in each book, I was struck by how understanding he’d been. He was a teacher, after all, I should have

known he wouldn't look down on me.

But would my parents ever see it this way? My friends? My boss? How could I explain the depth of shame and embarrassment I'd felt? How I'd learned to hide my accommodations, never accept movie dates, or be in any situation where I'd have to sit too long or read. Could I be more open about it? Would others see me like Sawyer did, or would they think it was an excuse?

## Chapter Ten



EVEN WITH THE AC IN my SUV blowing, the sun made me hot and sweaty on the hour and half drive to meet Nate and had a tension headache brewing at the base of my neck. We'd agreed to a coffee date. It was a long drive for me but I wasn't comfortable with him knowing exactly where I lived yet. I parallel parked on the street and tried to fix my make-up in the car, swiping on another coat of mascara and lip gloss before shooting a text to Ashley, telling her who I was with and where I was meeting him. I didn't tell her in advance because I didn't want anyone else questioning whether this was a good idea. It was time to find out if we had chemistry or not.

When I stepped out of the car, I tried to smooth the wrinkles out of my knee-length black floral sundress. I slung my red leather tote over my shoulder and walked toward the Starbucks. If he was awful, it wouldn't be a long date, at least. Squaring my shoulders, I opened the heavy glass door and scanned the room for a tall blond man with blue eyes. According to his profile, he was supposed to be six-foot-two.

As soon as I walked in I heard my name, "Stella?" coming from a man in the waiting area.

There was no way this man was over six feet, he might have had an inch on me and that was it. Shorter than he'd said and stocky, his blond hair was cut close to his head, face free of stubble, and no glasses. I don't know why that bothered me, but I'd gotten used to Sawyer's glasses and his perpetual stubble. It was hot.

I pushed thoughts of Sawyer from my head. I needed to give this guy a fair chance. We'd talked for weeks and I drove all of the way here. Holding out my hand, I asked, "Are you Nate?"

"Yeah, so nice to meet you." He smiled, shaking my hand. His grip was weak and a little sweaty, as if he was nervous. I tried not to hold it against

him, but I liked a firm grip. It was a sign of confidence. But that was what I was attracted to before, wasn't I supposed to be dating someone different?

I dropped his hand, looking around. "Did you order already?"

He smiled sheepishly. "Yeah."

"Okay, I'll get in line then." That was weird. He didn't wait for me to order and clearly only ordered a drink for himself. But that was still better than ordering for me without asking what I wanted. I needed to look on the positive side.

"I'll grab a table," he said, taking his cup off of the counter.

"Thanks." That was nice at least. The line was slow and long. After ten minutes, I finally had my chai iced tea and walked over to the table he'd picked by the window.

I sat down across from him, smiling, and trying to think of a way to start a conversation.

"You didn't order a coffee?" he asked, looking at my cup in confusion.

I glanced at my phone. "I don't like to drink too much caffeine in the afternoon." It kept me up at night.

"I can't stand when people order frou-frou drinks."

This wasn't a good start to the date. He was weirdly opinionated about my drink. "I ordered tea. I hardly think that's a frou-frou drink."

"Okay, if you say so." He pulled out his phone and placed it on the table in front of him.

This guy was already irritating me and now I'd need to compete with his phone.

"Are you looking forward to school being out?" I asked him, trying to start a conversation.

He shrugged. "I teach summer school, so I don't get a break."

Then silence. He made no attempt to start a conversation or ask me any questions. I couldn't help compare it to the times I'd had dinner with Sawyer. It was comfortable and conversation flowed but we didn't have the added pressure of it being a date. "You like living here?"

"Oh, yeah, lived here all my life and went to Salisbury University."

I hadn't moved away for college, but I did for grad school. And I'd studied abroad. Could I hold it against him? I wanted someone who was interested in the world outside of the Eastern Shore, who'd seen and done things, so we'd have interesting things to talk about. But that was probably being too picky. Not everyone had the money to travel or attend an out-of-

state college. Sawyer had lived in Chestertown all of his life, only leaving for grad school and his Ph.D. I needed to stop comparing Nate to Sawyer. I ignored the nagging thought that no one could surpass Sawyer's reaction to my learning disability.

Shaking my head, I tried again. "What do you want to do in the future? You want to stay where you're working? Or travel anywhere fun?"

"I love the idea of traveling, but I can't afford it." His gaze was on the passing pedestrians on the sidewalk, not on me.

It was the perfect opportunity to ask me about my study abroad experience, which I'd mentioned in our emails. But he didn't. Silence fell over the table again as I sipped my chai tea.

"You like your job?" I felt like I was fishing for something, anything, but the silence was driving me crazy.

"Eh, it's working with kids, right? They're crazy in high school and it's a paycheck."

I got that not everyone loved their job all of the time. But didn't he become a teacher for a reason? Weren't you supposed to present your best self on a first date? "I volunteer to read to the kids at storytime at the library. I love kids." I couldn't stop the smile which spread over my face when I thought of the kids' faces while I read to them.

But he didn't say anything.

This was a waste of time. He seemed enthusiastic online about meeting with me, why was he so agitated now? Was I not what he expected? I decided to ask the most important question. I might as well get it out of the way. "Do you want children?"

His eyes shot from the window to me. "You mean, do I want to have children one day?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

His shoulders were tense and I could see a muscle ticking in his jaw. "You're not one of those women who have to have the white picket fence, are you?"

"Um." What was he talking about? It was a yes or no question. His attention was focused on me now, but he seemed agitated. "I'm not sure what you mean?"

"You're not one of those women pushing thirty who are desperate to get married and have kids are you?" He practically sneered toward the end of his question.

I felt myself become very calm and I said slowly, “I don’t think that’s a bad thing. I’d like to get married and have children.”

“Of course you would.”

“On my profile, I clicked the spot about having children, so I thought anyone I was matched with would be serious too.” I wasn’t that disappointed in his answer. It was clear when I walked in he wasn’t interested. It could be anything. He’d met someone else or I wasn’t his type physically.

“I’d like children one day, but I don’t want them today or even tomorrow. I have plenty of time.” Then he leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Okay.” I did not like how this conversation was going. I wanted to leave, but I wasn’t sure if it would be rude.

“I see kids all day at work. The last thing I want is some at home.”

“Okay.”

But he continued despite my terse answer. “All older women want is kids these days.”

I stood up abruptly, my chair almost falling over in my haste. “Yeah, I think we’re done here.” I was not an older woman. I was twenty-eight, for god’s sake. “And you’re not six-foot-two, might want to change that on your profile.”

“What? Are you one of those women who have to have a man over six foot?”

“I like a man to be taller than me. It’s just a personal preference, but if your personality had been good, I would have overlooked it. I don’t like that you lied on your profile. I have a long drive home. Thanks for meeting with me, but I don’t want to see you again.”

“Yeah,” he said snidely.

“Okay, then.” I walked out of the coffee shop, my phone buzzing in my pocket. I pulled it out to see Sawyer’s name lit up, a thrill going through me. When I unlocked the screen and pulled up his message, it said, *I can pick you up at six on Saturday.*

Our date to the scholarship dinner was this Saturday. If Nate was representative of what I’d find on the online dating sites, they were a waste of my time.

I pulled open the door to my SUV and sat inside to message Sawyer.

*Stella: That sounds great ☐ I hope it’s better than my online date.*

I turned on the car not expecting Sawyer to keep messaging, but before I could put it in drive, my phone was buzzing again. Glancing down at my phone propped in my cupholder, it said, *Online date? When was this?*

How much should I tell him when he was already against online dating? *I just met him now. He was shorter than his profile said.* And an asshole, but I didn't text that. Then my phone rang. I pushed the button on my steering wheel and Sawyer's voice filled my car. "Stella?"

"Yeah?" I'd just left a planned date where the guy couldn't hold a conversation or look at me, but Sawyer called me to talk about a failed date.

"You're not still with him?"

"No I left him at the coffee shop. I have to drive home now."

"Where are you?"

"In Salisbury."

"You drove all the way there to meet him? Why wouldn't he meet you somewhere closer to you?"

It would have been more convenient to do that but now that I'd met him I was happy I'd driven. "I didn't want him to know where I lived. I never told him."

"Ah, that's good at least. What happened?"

I pulled out of my parallel parking spot into traffic. "His profile said he was six-foot two, but he was barely taller than me."

"Yeah, so he lied."

"Right? I was really annoyed about that. If he'd had a stellar personality I could have overlooked a shorter guy, but he didn't even have that."

"What did he do?" Instead of disgust in his voice I thought I detected a lightness in his tone. Was he happy my date had gone badly?

"It wasn't what he did. More like what he didn't do. He barely looked at me while we were talking. His attention was on people outside on the sidewalk until I asked if he wanted kids. I wouldn't have asked so soon, but he wasn't asking me any questions to get to know me."

Sawyer grunted.

"Then he got agitated and went off on this rant about how older women all want to get married and have kids."

"What an ass."

"Tell me about it." It was nice to talk about it but I couldn't get over the sinking feeling that it hadn't worked and if he was my option for online dating I was screwed.

“Don’t worry about it. It was one date and he was clearly an asshole.”

“Yeah, but he was the only normal one I’ve found on the site so far.” Sawyer was silent for a minute, so I continued, “I’ve interviewed a lot of people for my online dating articles and so many people said they met their husband on Bumble or Tinder. So I guess I should just keep trying.”

This was only my first attempt. There had to be better guys out there. When I’d asked around there were plenty of happy couples that had met on dating sites. There was no reason it couldn’t work for me too. “The thing was, I thought Match was for people serious about a relationship. I even checked the part about wanting children and marriage, so how did I get matched with someone who didn’t want kids?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never done online dating.”

Right because he was hot and saw young attractive people in his job. Hanging with the women in the garden club was not conducive to meeting someone.

“I’m looking forward to this weekend,” I said, because I was. I loved getting dressed up and going out. Would Sawyer dance with me? Would he act like I was a real date and not someone there just to help him out?

“Me too.” When he said it, surprise came through in his tone.

“You sound surprised.” Was he surprised he was looking forward to it?

“I’m usually nervous for things like this, but I’m actually looking forward to it.”

He didn’t say it was because of me, but I hoped it was. “I got my dress.”

His voice lowered. “What color is it?”

No man I’d ever dated expressed any interest in my outfit even when the occasion was formal. I couldn’t help but be impressed. “It’s red. I hope it fits and looks good. I ordered it online.”

The ride home was more enjoyable with Sawyer’s deep voice filling my SUV. We talked about the upcoming dinner, what to expect, and who’d be there, Sawyer’s family, gossip around town. It was nice. The kind of conversation flow I’d want on a date.

“I have another class starting in five.”

Was it my imagination or did I hear regret in his voice? Was he enjoying this as much as I was? According to the screen in my car, we’d talked for forty-five minutes and it felt like five. “Thanks for keeping me company.”

“Text me when you get back to town.”



Smiling, I said, “I will.” I couldn’t remember a boyfriend or my family ever checking up on me to see if I got home safely. It was a nice feeling.

“Bye, Stella.”

When he clicked off, I realized the yucky feeling from my date was gone and in its place was this warm glow filled with hope about this dinner we were going to this weekend. He said I wasn’t his type, but hadn’t things changed since we’d spent time together? Since I told him I struggled with learning disabilities? Something seemed to click into place for me when he accepted my learning disability. And now he’d cheered me up today. Why was I looking for guys online when Sawyer was already in my life? He had proven himself to be loyal, understanding, and nice.

My practical side reminded me how I wasn’t his type and I didn’t want to get hurt. But the hopeful side was winning out. Suddenly, I couldn’t wait for Saturday night.

## Chapter Eleven



ASHLEY CAME OVER ON SATURDAY night to help with my makeup for the scholarship dinner. As she carefully applied the mascara, she asked, “Have you been spending more time with Sawyer?”

“Yeah he’s been texting me about the course and to schedule a date for our gardening class with Ms. Gladys.” My heart rate kicked up every time I got a message from him. Between the texts and our dinner meetings, it was hard to remember we were just friends helping each other out.

“So, is he picking you up tonight?”

“Yeah.”

She paused, the mascara wand in her hand. “Has any man picked you up here?”

“No. But that’s only because I haven’t dated anyone since I moved back and bought this place.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“Sure.” I’d opened up to Sawyer about my learning disability, my parents, things I hadn’t discussed with my friends.

Ashley brushed the wand over my lashes. “It’s just always seemed like you didn’t like having people in your space, or maybe that was your mom?”

“I think it started with my mom and my trust was so violated with my exes I didn’t want anyone here. But that’s what you do right? A man picks you up for a formal event.”

“Still that’s a big step for you.”

It was, and I wondered if it was because I was starting to trust Sawyer. “I guess it’s easier because it’s not a real date. Sawyer’s a friend I’m helping out. It’s not like I have to worry about him kissing me at the end of the night.” Then why was my heart thumping out of my chest at the thought of him seeing me in this dress?

Ashley shook her head, laughing a little as she put the wand back into the mascara container and placed it on the counter behind her. “You seem a little nervous.”

I wanted Sawyer to see me as an option. Someone he could date. I hoped the fact that I was dressed up, that there would be dinner and dancing would help him see me in a new light. I wasn’t just a friend or someone he was helping, but someone he could be with. That’s what Luke told me—*you need to show him how things could be different if he took a chance on you.* But I wasn’t ready to tell Ashley that yet. “Nope. I’m just excited. I love getting dressed up, dancing, socializing.”

“Poor Sawyer. He has no idea what he’s getting himself into by inviting you tonight.”

Silent for a minute, I said softly, “I hope he does.”

“Yeah?” She asked, turning back to consider me. “You like him, don’t you?”

I chewed my lip, wondering what to tell her. The old me would have laughed her off. I could use the excuse he’d said I wasn’t his type and he certainly wasn’t mine. But that seemed unfair to our friendship. I needed to be honest with her.

“I do.” Then I stood up, walking over to the full-length mirror, which stood in my bedroom. The red dress had a sweetheart bodice with a shoulder strap that started at the center of bodice and split into two straps over my left shoulder. It was fitted at the waist and hips, accentuating my curves, and swirled around my feet. I twirled around. “I don’t look fat in this do I?” I turned to consider my ass.

“No.” Ashley came to stand next to me watching me in the mirror. “You look beautiful. That red dress with your hair,” she touched one red lock before dropping it. “And this neckline really makes your boobs pop. He’s going to die when he sees you.”

“I just hope my boobs don’t pop out of this dress.” I pulled up the cups to cover them a little. That would be a distraction Sawyer would want to avoid tonight. I was supposed to be helping him impress the tenure committee.

“There’s no way he won’t see the beautiful woman that we all see when we look at you.”

“You don’t think I’m too much for him?”

She cringed at the reminder of Sawyer's words. "I can't speak for him, but I think he misspoke. He knows you better now, since you've been hanging out so often. You're sweet, caring, and you mean well. You'd do anything for anybody. Who wouldn't love you?"

"My exes." It was impossible to get that out of my mind. I couldn't help but think I was the problem.

"Enough about them. It's time to stop defining yourself through them. They were stupid. Sawyer is completely different than those other guys."

I nodded, unable to speak. I didn't realize how much I needed her support right now. Sawyer was different, but was I being stupid to think Sawyer would ever see me as a potential girlfriend? Then the doorbell rang.

Ashley squealed. "He's here. I'll get the door on my way out." Then she hugged me gently. "Have fun tonight."

"Thanks." I sat on my bed to strap on my black strappy heels, happy Sawyer was tall enough that I could wear a three-inch heel. I heard the door open and soft murmuring, but that was it. I grabbed my clutch and walked, my heels sounding on the wood floors of the hallway as I walked toward the front door, my heart beating harder with each step. When I reached the kitchen I could see Sawyer in a tux standing by the front door waiting for me. All of the air left my lungs as I took him in. The suit coat stretched tight across his broad shoulders, the white button-down shirt extended beyond the sleeves and I could see black and gold cufflinks. He looked so handsome, especially with those glasses he wore.

"Stella, you look beautiful." In his hands, he held a handful of daisies.

"How did you know I love daisies?" I closed the remaining distance between us and held out my hand for the bouquet.

He cleared his throat. "Ms. Gladys told me."

"Did she offer up that information?" I smiled.

"She did, but it was good advice if it put that smile on your face."

I was really touched. No one had ever brought me flowers before. I'd always agreed when the guy said they were a waste of money and only lasted a few days. Even if Ms. Gladys encouraged him, I loved the gesture. I took the bouquet from him, my hands grazing his, as I took a deep inhale of their scent. "They're beautiful." I looked at him from under my lashes seeing his eyes intent on mine. "You look really handsome in that tux."

The moment was suddenly too intimate. My emotions had to be clear on my face and I wasn't ready for him to know that I liked him—that I wanted

something more with him. Before he could respond, I said, “Let me grab a vase.” As I walked toward the kitchen, Sawyer’s footsteps followed. “Thank you so much for doing this.” He cleared his throat. “You know, being my plus one for this dinner. I really appreciate it.”

“Sure.” Something about the way he’d said that made me feel like he could have added fake date and it would have fit. Like he was reminding me this wasn’t real and the happiness I’d felt seeing him in his tux holding flowers deflated. Why did I always get my hopes up? Tears prickled my eyes as I reached up to grab a glass vase from my cabinet.

“Can I help?” he asked from somewhere behind me.

“No. I’ve got it. Thanks.” I poured water into the vase and took my time arranging the stems so the tears cleared before I faced him again, placing the flowers in the middle of the island. “I forget how much I love fresh flowers until I have them.”

Dr. Hirsch wanted me to show my true feelings but I could only do that if I knew they’d be well-received. I didn’t know where Sawyer’s head was at. I pasted a happy smile on my face. “Ready to go?”

He glanced at the clock over my stove which read five-forty. “We don’t want to be late.”

He held his elbow out for me as I linked mine through his.

“We want to make a good impression.” I felt my mask slip-on. This I could do. I could be his pretend date for the evening. Even if it killed me, but I wouldn’t be doing him any more favors. It was clear I couldn’t be around him and not want him. As soon as I allowed myself to fall for a guy, I fell hard. And there was never anyone to catch me.

He waited for me to lock up and we walked the short distance to his dark gray SUV parked in my driveway. He held the door open for me and as I arranged my skirt around me to sit, he said, “Did I say something wrong?”

“No. Why would you think that?”

He stood, his hand over the top of the door as he watched my face carefully. “I don’t know. You were so happy when you saw me and the flowers. Then it was like you shut down.”

A weight settled on my chest and it was hard to breathe. No one ever noticed that before and I wasn’t sure what to say. Should I lie to him? Probably not, it seemed like he could see through me. But I couldn’t tell

him the truth. That I liked him and wanted it to be a real date. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He was silent for a minute as he considered me. “I want you to be yourself with me.”

“Even if I’m too much or too loud?” I couldn’t help it. How could he say that when he didn’t like the real me?

His brow furrowed. “What?”

“I heard you.” I looked away from him. I couldn’t bear to see his reaction. “At Logan and Ashley’s housewarming party. I had to work but I arrived late. Samantha asked why you wouldn’t consider dating me and you said I was too much for you.” The pain twisted in my chest as I remembered. “I’m impulsive and loud.” The pressure in my chest increased as the silence ticked on. I didn’t know why I even brought it up. Couldn’t I enjoy the evening?

“That was—Stella, you have to know—”

I shook my head, refusing to hear what he had to say. “Let’s go, Sawyer. We don’t want to be late for the dinner. It’s important for your career.”

He finally closed the door. When he came around and settled in his seat, he said, “We’re not done talking about this. I didn’t mean that. I say the wrong thing sometimes. I’ve told you I’m not great at making a good impression or socializing.”

“I’m sure that’s true, but I can’t forget it.” How could I explain that everything he said ate at my own insecurities. I shouldn’t have brought it up—not tonight. I didn’t want this to cloud the evening or his impression of me. This was supposed to be the perfect night. The night he noticed me and realized I was right for him.

He started the car and then held his hand palm up over the console in invitation.

My stomach flipped at the very date-like gesture and I was ready to forgive anything he’d said before.

“Please, Stella—I was an idiot. I didn’t even know you when I said that.”

My hand itched to take his, to feel his warmth, to tell him his words hadn’t sliced me to the core. I slowly placed my hand on his and his fingers interlaced with mine. Nothing had ever felt so comforting.

“Please look at me.”

At his plea my eyes met his and I could see the anguish.

“I’ve gotten to know you better. And you’re giving, kind, you’re an amazing friend, a hard worker. I’m so impressed with you. Are we okay?” Sawyer asked his face so earnest, he squeezed my hand, and a tingle shot through my arm to my chest loosening the tight knot which had formed. I relaxed back into my seat.

His words melted any walls I’d raised the day he’d said it. “Yeah, we’re okay.”

Smiling in relief, he said, “You’re beautiful.”

My lips twitched. “You said that.”

“It’s true and I can’t stop saying it. Every time I look at you, I can’t breathe you’re so beautiful.”

My heart clenched. It was the most wonderful thing anyone had ever said to me. This one man held all the power to hurt me and lift me up with his words. “Thank you,” I answered softly.

He started the SUV and backed down my driveway onto the street. “The dinner is for the Sophie Kerr Prize. Students submit their portfolios in the hope of receiving the scholarship, which is awarded for literary promise.”

“I know. I attended Washington, remember?”

He glanced at me then back at the road. “That’s right.”

I’d never submitted to the award. Despite accommodations I received, I didn’t feel worthy of entering even though several professors encouraged me. I was pretty sure they wanted to award actual writers, not someone who had to dictate everything.

“Dean Strauss will be there, along with President Foster and Provost Daub. Each one of them has to okay my tenure when it goes up the chain. Also, the higher-ups in the history department form the tenure committee.”

“Okay, so we’re focusing on them then. I don’t know the professors in the history department, but I know the others you mentioned. Don’t worry, Sawyer. They already like me.” And they did. I always made a point to talk to people when I came on campus, to get to know them, tell them I went to Washington College and how wonderful the school was.

Sawyer squeezed my hand. “You’re awesome, you know that?”

I wanted more than anything to be what he needed tonight for this dinner. I’d prove to him that I was reliable and dependable. “Thanks.”

When we arrived at the school, Sawyer parked and let go of my hand to come around and let me out. I took his offered hand, carefully getting out of the car so my dress wouldn’t wrinkle or snag.

I started to walk toward the dining hall where well-dressed couples walked arm in arm through the large glass doors, when a tug on my hand pulled me back. I looked up in surprise into his warm brown eyes.

“Thanks for telling me you were there that night. It kills me to think you heard that.”

“It’s okay. You apologized.” And I realized a weight had been lifted off my chest. The thing that held me back from truly considering Sawyer as an option for me had been removed.

As soon as we walked in, I noticed the cafeteria had been completely transformed. Ivory drapes separated the cafeteria kitchen from the room, large round tables were covered in white linens, the basic chairs had been swapped for the wedding style ones, and a band played at the front of the room. The room already had large floor-to-ceiling windows and white columns, which added to the ambiance. “Wow, this is so fancy.” Seeing couples walk around in evening gowns and suits, I was happy I’d dressed appropriately.

Dean Strauss called to me. “Stella! What a pleasant surprise! It’s great to see you.”

I shook his hand then placed a hand on Sawyer’s chest. “I’m here with Sawyer Hudson.”

“I didn’t know you were dating.” Dean Strauss looked pleasantly surprised by the news.

I panicked. We hadn’t discussed what to tell people about us. “It’s new,” I finally settled on. Hopefully, that would satisfy everyone.

“I heard you’re developing a new course in the journalism department?” Dean Strauss asked.

I was proud that Dean Strauss remembered I was involved. “Yes, I am. I look forward to presenting my proposal to you in a few weeks.”

Dean Strauss greeted someone who slapped his shoulder as he walked by, then turned to us. “Well, I can’t wait to see what you come up with.”

“Thanks! I watched one of Sawyer’s classes the other day and it sucked me in. I felt like I was on the battlefield and I don’t even like history.” Thankfully, Dr. Strauss laughed with me. “And he conducts the ball game on the quad every Friday. Living history, right?” I looked to Sawyer to make sure I hadn’t overstepped but he smiled and nodded.

“That’s right. I love seeing the professors involved in the community and volunteering,” Dean Strauss said. “I need to mingle. I’ll see you two



around.”

Dean Strauss patted Sawyer’s shoulder as he walked by, greeting the next couple to walk in the doors.

“You did great. Let’s walk around and talk to people.”

Sawyer groaned next to me. “Do we have to?”

“Isn’t this why you asked me to come?” I glanced up at his annoyed face. He was right to ask me here if his inclination was not to socialize.

His face grew more determined. “No, you’re right. Let’s do this.”

“Stella! It’s so good to see you,” Joan Cassidy, the head of the journalism department and my professor when I attended Washington, said as she hugged me.

“Hi Joan!” When I stepped back from her I laid a hand on Sawyer’s arm. “I’m here with Sawyer tonight. He’s a professor in the history department.” Then I wound my arm around his back to pull him close to me.

“Sawyer, so nice to meet you.” They shook hands and talked about some goings-on at the college.

“I heard you’re developing a journalism course,” Joan said to me, bringing my attention back to her.

“I am.” Most people probably looked to their parents for approval but I’d always sought my professor’s approval.

Joan beamed. “That’s amazing. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you. I wouldn’t have any of this without your encouragement.” I turned to Sawyer to say, “Joan was my professor and pushed me to apply for this scholarship.”

“Did you win?” Sawyer asked.

“Oh, I didn’t even apply,” I said, embarrassed I’d even brought it up.

“I couldn’t convince her,” Joan said.

Sawyer’s shoulder blades tensed under my hand and I knew he wanted to say more but Joan stood there watching us. “Why is that?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t feel like I could compete with everyone else.” Looking at him, I saw the understanding in his eyes. I always felt less than because of my learning disability and when I received accommodations it felt like an unfair advantage. Logically, I knew it wasn’t but it didn’t seem right to enter a writing contest when I couldn’t write.

“It’s hard to convince this girl that she can do anything. I tried,” Joan said.

“What are you talking about? I wouldn’t be standing here if it wasn’t for you. And now I can pass that on to the students at the paper and maybe in my own class this summer,” I said.

“Good luck, Stella. If anyone can do it it’s you,” Joan said. “I’m going to find my seat.”

As she walked away, Sawyer’s arm around my shoulder pulled me closer until I was flush with his side. Then he leaned down and whispered in my ear. “We’ll talk about that later.”

“Okay, big guy. Ready to mingle some more?” I smiled teasingly. I was in my element and I was determined to help him out tonight. I scanned the room for more people to introduce him to. I wanted him to talk to everyone tonight and give them a good impression. “Point out the history professors to me.”

“Let’s go.” He sighed, loosening his hold on me.

We walked around the room and talked to every history professor in attendance and the Provost and President. By the time we sat at the table, I was exhausted. My face hurt from smiling and my toes were pinched in my shoes but we’d accomplished what Sawyer wanted. If they didn’t know before, they knew who Sawyer was now and what he did for the school.

Luckily, dinner was crab cakes or steak, so the food was much better than the usual dining room affair. I sipped a glass of white wine, assessing if there was anyone else in the room we needed to speak to. Sawyer’s arm came to rest on the top of my chair as he leaned in to whisper. “Relax. You already worked your magic.”

I turned to smile at him but paused when realized I was only inches from his mouth. His eyes dropped to my lips and I stopped breathing. Would he kiss me here?

“Hey, Sawyer.” I looked up to see Owen slap his shoulder as he slid into the seat on the other side of Sawyer.

“Hey, you’re late,” Sawyer said, annoyance tinged his voice. “You’re lucky I told the waitstaff to leave you a plate.” Sawyer, who’d been leaning into me all night, whether it was an arm over my chair or whispers in my ear, had moved to sit upright in his chair, resting his elbows on the table as he watched Owen eat.

“Eh, this is only my second year here, I’m not worried about kissing too much ass yet. I have years before I need to apply for tenure.”

“Still, every interaction counts. You don’t want to get a bad reputation,” Sawyer said.

“Yeah. Wow. Steak? They went all out on this at least.” Owen picked up his knife and fork and started cutting into his now cold steak.

I shivered, chilly all of a sudden. Sawyer was annoyed that Owen wasn’t taking this

seriously and I couldn’t blame him. I was focused on the stage as the president walked to the

podium. Since I was also here to cover the event for the paper, I pulled out my phone to record the details for my story.

I tuned out most of it because I’d heard this speech before as I’d attended as a member of the student paper. I used the note app on my phone to remember the prize winner’s name to record in the paper. The winner was a woman who’d written a screenplay. I hoped to have a few minutes to speak with her this evening to discuss her plans for the scholarship money.

Finally, the awards were over and the band kicked it up a notch for dancing. I was practically buzzing with excitement to get out of my chair. I immediately turned to Sawyer. “Do you want to dance?”

“That’s not really my thing.”

He’d said he was uncomfortable in social situations so I’d anticipated this. I stood without listening to his protests. “Come on. You can’t leave a girl hanging here.”

“Okay.” He stood reluctantly taking the hand I held out for him as I led him to the dance floor.

“There’s only one other couple out here.”

I stopped in the middle of the dance floor and turned to him. “And now there are two.” I touched his bicep as his arm went around my waist. I moved our joined hands up. “It’s not like I’m a good dancer. I just like dancing.”

“Oh yeah?” Sawyer said, relaxing and looking down at me.

“Yeah, I love music and moving.”

He moved a piece of hair that had fallen into my face and tucked it behind my ear. “You’re full of surprises.”

I nodded smiling at him. “I do tell everyone that.”

He chuckled. “I like it.” He looked around the room. “You know, everyone here thinks we’re dating.”

“I did tell everyone that, didn’t I? I’m sorry.” I relished in the closeness to his body, his smell, and the feel of his hand in mine. Being around him tonight and acting like his girlfriend was dangerous. I’d held his hand, put my arm around his waist, hugged him, thought about kissing his chin, then his cheek—“I know! We can pretend to date for a few weeks and then if anyone asks, just say you broke up with me.”

He cleared his throat. “I think that’s a good idea.”

My head snapped up from where I was admiring the stubble on his jawline. “I was kidding!” He couldn’t be serious. I’d never survive fake dating this guy. I was struggling to remember that tonight wasn’t reality, much less going on more dates where we’d be forced to touch, kiss, be close.

“Yeah, everyone already thinks we’re dating. The tenure committee will see that I’m settled in Chestertown and won’t leave. You know everyone who’s anyone here and they love you. You want to help me, don’t you?”

“That’s why I’m here,” I hissed, wanting to be mad he was pushing me into extending this, but I couldn’t resist his pleading, the uncertainty in his eyes.

“Then help me for a few weeks longer. I’m not good at this socializing stuff. You’re amazing, Stella. You worked this whole room for me. You totally could have worked in public relations.”

I considered that for a moment. “You’re right. I could totally do that.” My mind raced with the possibilities. “I don’t think there’s a great need for public relations representatives in Chestertown though.” Even though I wasn’t involved in the day-to-day stuff with my mom anymore, I was still reluctant to move too far away. I held out hope that she’d get better.

“You two make the cutest couple,” President Foster said. “The town reporter and the history professor.” She smiled approvingly before her husband spun her away.

Sawyer smirked. “See?” When I didn’t say anything he added, “Just until I submit my tenure application at the end of term.”

That was only four weeks away. Surely, I could pretend to be interested in him and not fall deeper with this guy. “Fine.”

His expression serious, he said, “That means no more online dating. It has to look real.”

I chewed my lip. I wanted to meet someone but would four weeks really make a difference in the online dating world? I wanted a break after my last

disaster of a date anyway. “Okay.”

He squeezed me tighter to him and I sighed, laying my head on his chest. If I was going to be his fake girlfriend I was going to take advantage and feel him up at every opportunity. “So, what kind of girlfriend perks do I get? Dinners?”

“Sure.”

“Walks in the park?”

“Uh huh.”

“Orgasms?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking. It had been over two years for me and I was getting tired of my vibrator. I was mainly joking, but if he said yes, I could be persuaded. I’d never denied being physically attracted to him. I knew with our chemistry the sex would be off the charts. He was quiet and a little shy socially but he was always confident when we were alone. I couldn’t help think of how he’d be in bed.

He didn’t answer.

Had I gone too far? I lifted my head from his chest and pulled back to see his face. “I was totally joking. Obviously there’d be no orgasms. Fake orgasms—yes. Real—no.”

“Stop saying orgasms.” He kept his eyes trained above my head.

I looked at his cheeks which had turned pink. “Are you embarrassed?” It wouldn’t be the first crazy thing I’d said in public that embarrassed someone. Maybe I was talking too loud.

Then he used the hand on my back to pull me tight against him so I could feel his erection. “Sawyer,” I practically groaned shocked I’d had this impact on him. His hand drifted lower until his pinky finger rested over the swell of my ass. If he hadn’t before, he now knew I was bare under this dress.

“Your pretty red lips keep saying that word, your perky breasts are ready to pop out of that dress, and I’m almost positive you aren’t wearing panties.” His hand stroked dangerously lower over my ass. “You’re driving me crazy. So unless you want me to pick you up and carry you out of here to show you how you affect me, stop talking about sex.”

I was speechless probably for the first time ever. He’d noticed my lips, my breasts? My face felt hot knowing he could see straight down my dress since he was looking down on me. And I thought I was the only one who felt this hunger between us. “You would do that?” I whispered.

“What? Carry you out of here?”

“Yeah.” I licked my lips at the thought.

“I would.”

I snickered. “Who knew you were such a dirty talker? I’m always attracted to the confident guys when it’s the shy ones who have all the moves.”

“Don’t tell anyone. I have to keep up the stuffy professor image until I make tenure.”

“Gotcha. My lips are sealed.” Suddenly restless with the feel of his erection against my stomach, I asked, “How far are you willing to take this fake girlfriend thing?”

“We’ll pretend to be together. We’ll tell our friends we’re dating. Make sure we’re seen around campus and at campus events. They don’t like to give tenure to people like Owen who aren’t from here and could leave. They put a lot of money and effort into each professor, so it helps if you’re local and settled.”

I’d do it even if it killed me. Despite my exes cheating on me, I knew without a doubt, fake-dating this guy had the potential to destroy me. There’d be no coming back from it but maybe it was worth it.

## Chapter Twelve



SUNDAY AFTERNOON, I USED THE stone archway entry to the Chestertown Public Library's new garden for our first class with Ms. Gladys. I followed the stone path past the large water fountain and around the rows of flowers until I saw the chalkboard tripod sign which read: Fairy Garden class for girls ages six and over. All girls. I wondered how Sawyer was going to handle that.

Sawyer made a beeline for me, hurrying past the table where Ms. Gladys was lining up small cardboard boxes. "Did you see this was a fairy class?"

I laughed. "No. But it's perfect."

"How's that?"

"I can't wait to see you helping little girls build fairy houses. This is going to be so much fun."

"You're in big trouble for this." But his lips twitched and he didn't look annoyed.

"Hey! I'm helping you out. Aren't you my fake boyfriend?" I allowed my eyes to travel down his biceps bursting out of the sleeves of his aqua polo shirt, his khaki shorts, and sandals. Licking my lips, I said, "Shouldn't we greet each other accordingly?"

"Good morning," he said, low and husky. He cupped the back of my head pulling me into his body for a few seconds, before placing a light kiss on my forehead. "We don't want to give Ms. Gladys a heart attack." Then he winked.

A kiss on the forehead was not what I had in mind but maybe it was for the best. This wasn't the best time to explore Sawyer like I wanted to.

"I knew you two would make the perfect couple," Ms. Gladys said as we stepped away from each other and I tore my eyes from his.

I'd completely forgotten about her initial matchmaking attempt. Now she was going to think this was all her doing. "Oh well, It's new."

She clapped her hands together. "I just knew it. Now help me with these fairy house supplies."

"What are we doing today, Ms. Gladys?" I asked, looking at the twigs, leaves, and rocks, which were strewn over the table.

"The girls are going to make fairy houses and then we'll plant a flower in the pots to take home. If you could organize the materials I gathered into the boxes." She pointed at the cardboard boxes lined up in front of the table. "And that will clear the table so we can set up the flower seeds, soil, and pots for the second activity."

"Everything has to be prince or fairy themed. At least that's what the library director suggested. Or unicorn." She shook her head. "When I was a girl I could appreciate the flowers. I didn't need all of this themed stuff."

I nodded. My mom certainly hadn't bothered with this level of detail, if she did at all.

Just then a few girls with their parents wandered through the gates.

"Are you here for the fairy class?" I asked them.

"Yes," one girl said softly. She wore rainbow-colored glasses, a pink and white striped dress with a blue ribbon tied around her waist, and her blond hair hung to her waist.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Charlotte."

"Nice to meet you, Charlotte." Then I addressed the parents. "We will be forty-five minutes and you can pick them up here." The parents waved as they exited. I asked the other children's names and had them write them on a name tag.

Ms. Gladys directed the girls when I was finished. "Have a seat on the tree stumps over there and we'll get started in a few minutes once everyone arrives."

Sawyer and I worked on setting up the second activity while Ms. Gladys spoke to the girls about seeds, sunlight, water, and how they attract bees and butterflies.

When it was time to organize the group to create the fairy houses, Ms. Gladys said to us, "When the fairy houses are done we'll create a scavenger hunt sheet for others when they visit the garden."



“I have a feeling we’ll be creating the scavenger hunt worksheet,” Sawyer whispered in my ear.

“She did ask for our help.”

“I don’t mind. I think this is great. Good to keep her active and to create an interest in gardening in the kids,” Sawyer said.

That’s exactly what I thought, and I was enjoying this extra time with Sawyer. He was keeping to his word to make our relationship appear real in public. Every time he passed me he’d place a light touch on my hip or shoulder, it was possessive, yet sweet.

When the girls gathered their materials to create fairy houses we walked around, seeing if anyone needed help. While I helped Charlotte find the perfect spot for her fairy house, I watched how adorable Sawyer was as he helped Charlotte’s younger sister, Emma-Lynne, place small sticks for walls and suggest a large leaf as the roof.

My phone buzzed in my pocket but I ignored it. “Why don’t we build your fairy house under this tomato plant? It will get larger and create wonderful shade for your fairies,” I told Charlotte.

“Good idea,” Charlotte said finally placing her bundle of building materials down in the tomato bed.

When my phone buzzed again, I pulled it out to see it was my dad calling. I sighed so loud, I felt Sawyer’s gaze on me. “I’m sorry.” I said to Charlotte, “I have to take this call from my dad. Ask Sawyer for help if you need it.”

I smiled at Sawyer before unlocking my phone and answering it. “Hey, Dad.”

“Stella, where have you been? Your mother needs you.” I wanted to rub my temples to soothe the headache which had formed when I saw it was him calling. It was always the same.

I walked toward the entryway for privacy. I did not want to have this conversation in front of Sawyer or the children. “She doesn’t need me, dad. She’s a grown woman,” I hissed quietly.

“It’s your duty as a daughter to take care of her.”

Outside the garden, I leaned on the stone wall which surrounded the garden, my shoulders hunched as I turned away from the gate to talk in a low voice. “It’s not. I have a job, a life. I can’t help her. Believe me, I’ve tried.” If my dad wasn’t on board to get her professional help then she wouldn’t go along with my suggestions either.

“I can’t do this.” His voice sounded worn down and tired.

My natural inclination was to help because that’s what I used to do, but I needed to maintain my boundaries or I’d get sucked back into their lives. It was healthier for me if I stayed away. “I know. Have you gotten her to a doctor?” This was always the struggle with my parents. Neither would make that step to see a doctor.

“She won’t go. I tried.”

“You did?” This was news to me. Never, in all of the years I’d been dealing with this, had my father ever helped me convince her to see someone. He’d taken her lead when she’d insisted she was just sad and tired. If she could just get enough sleep, she’d feel better. But if he’d changed his mind and was willing to get her help then this time could be different. “Maybe we could meet and talk about our options? And I could talk to Dr. Hirsch about it at my next session. Maybe she would have some resources that would help.” My dad was aware I saw a therapist but he thought it was for issues with my mother not my ex-boyfriends. He had enough on his plate without adding my issues.

He sighed. “Yes, sounds good.”

I turned back to the garden, noticing Sawyer standing in the entryway watching me, concern etched on his face. “Okay, but dad? I have to go. I’m helping Ms. Gladys teach a library class.”

“Okay. Let me know when you can get together.”

“I will. Bye.” I placed the phone back into my pocket, praying Sawyer wouldn’t ask any questions. “Sorry about that. You need help?” I started to brush past him, but he stopped me with a hand on my arm.

“Is everything okay?”

The move brought me flush against his front, concern emanating from his eyes. “Just family stuff. You know how they are.” I shrugged.

His lips were drawn into a straight line but he nodded, letting go of my arm.

I wondered if he’d understand if I told him the truth. Then I immediately rejected that idea. He and Luke had probably had the perfect childhood. What could he understand about a mom so selfish she couldn’t get out of bed? And you couldn’t call her selfish or feel slighted because she had a medically diagnosable condition. It was an impossible situation.

I pasted a smile on as I approached Ms. Gladys.

“I think we’re ready for the potted flowers now,” Ms. Gladys said.

“Okay, I’ll round everyone up.” Being loud came in handy. “Girls, finish up your fairy houses and have a seat at the tables so we can work on the next project.”

I forced myself to help the girls decorate their pots and plant their seeds. My family wasn’t going to ruin this moment and I wasn’t going to let Sawyer see how my dad’s phone call affected me. I helped them gather their pots to take home and cleaned up the mess left behind with the soil and water.

“You think you’ll do more classes?” I asked Ms. Gladys after all of the children had left.

“Definitely. This was full, so we added a few more Sunday afternoons to the calendar. I hope you and Sawyer can make it.”

“Sure.” I needed to prepare my course and meet with my dad to discuss my mother’s health, but I could use a distraction.

“Well, that’s everything, I’m going to go home and have a nice glass of lemonade. You two enjoy your afternoon.”

I almost said we weren’t doing anything. That we weren’t together before I remembered that we were supposed to be dating. “We will. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Sawyer wrapped up the hose he’d used to clean the soil from the pavers and turned the water off. “You ready?”

“For?” What would we do if we were dating? Dinner, movie, and sex before bed? With that thought, the image of him naked, lying on top of me had me swallowing hard. The more time I spent with him the more I wanted something real and tangible.

He grabbed my hand, interlacing our fingers, as he fell in step beside me. “An early dinner, of course. We’re supposed to be dating, remember?”

“Okay.” His large palm felt warm in mine and lightness spread through my body as I allowed myself the delusion that this was my life.

“Want to go to The Fish House? We can sit on the outside deck.”

“Yeah.” It sounded nice. Nicer than my last date. We walked because the waterfront was only a few blocks away. We followed the hostess through the restaurant to the door leading to the back deck, which overlooked the boats and the water.

After we ordered, I looked over the water at the boats coming in for the day. “This was a good idea. It’s beautiful here.”

“Yeah, it’s important that everyone sees us together.” When my eyes shot to his, he added, “You know, so it’s believable.”

“Of course.” It was a great reminder that this wasn’t a date or even two friends eating dinner. It was a show. Well, I was used to putting on a show. “This is so romantic.”

He looked at me in surprise.

“This is for show right?” I asked, my heart rate picking up a little as I confronted him.

He shifted in his chair leaning his elbows on the table. “Well, I think we can be real while we spend time together.”

“Can we?” I didn’t ask what happens when this became too real for one of us.

The hostess placed ice waters with lemon in front of us before leaving without a word.

“I’d like to think so. I like you, Stella.”

As what—a friend? “I’m a lovable person.” I joked. “People can’t help but fall in love with me.”

Sawyer winked. “I’ll have to take my chances.”

I think I stopped breathing when he winked. Was Sawyer flirting? This man who didn’t think he was social or great with women? “I think you’re better with women than you let on.” I felt my face heat and I didn’t want him to notice the effect he had on me, so I diverted my attention to the sugar packets in their dish.

My mind drifted to that phone call with my father and the issues that awaited me. My family life had certainly affected me and I was curious if Sawyer’s personality was a result of his upbringing. “What was it like growing up in the Hudson household?”

“Pretty normal. Luke was the athlete, popular, friends with everyone. I was smart, which surprised my parents. They were farmers—never attended college. It was like they didn’t know what to do with me, but they supported me. When Luke went to college first he paved the way for me. But I liked to stay home reading, tinkering with computers, not socializing like Luke.”

“So, you had a happy childhood?” I tried not to be envious that his childhood issue was being too smart for his parents.

“Yeah, I’d say so. No lingering childhood trauma. How about you?”

I was not ready to tell Sawyer about my mother. Not the reality anyway, but I could tell him a piece of the truth. “I have an older sister, Lindsey,

who's pretty self-absorbed. She moved to Salisbury and we don't hear from her much. My parents keep to themselves, still work the farm."

"What will you do when they can't do it anymore?"

"My father has been managing everything on his own for so long, I hadn't thought about what would happen when he can't do it anymore."

"My parents retired early and moved to Florida."

"Good for them." My mom couldn't even get out of bed much less move across the country to enjoy life in retirement.

Our food arrived and I dug right into the tropical seafood salad, which was delicious. "Can't go wrong with seafood and fruit."

"May I try a shrimp?" he asked, his eyes on my plate.

"Sure." I speared one of the shrimp with my fork and held it to his mouth. I was barely able to breathe as I waited for his lips to surround the fork. I pulled my fork from him and cleared my throat. "It's good, right?"

His eyes darkened from the intimate moment and I couldn't take my gaze from his. Swallowing, he said quietly, "It is."

I felt like something passed between us in that moment. That we both realized there was more than just chemistry between us.

We ate and talked about our friends and whether there would be any weddings soon, as the outside eating area started to fill up with the dinner crowd. When we were done, Sawyer asked for the check. No lingering over dinner or dessert. I made a move to pay for my half of dinner, but Sawyer shook his head.

"I should pay. It's not a real date," I practically hissed.

"No, I pay when we go out. I appreciate the offer, though."

He stood and held his hand out for me when he'd paid the bill and we made our way through the maze of chairs down the deck steps and around the building. "This feels nice."

"It does." It was a beautiful spring evening. A lot of people were out for walks at the waterfront and getting dinner. Tourists would start coming more and more, especially for the Memorial Day Festival. My job would get busier, which was something I always enjoyed. I loved meeting new people.

When we arrived at my car, he backed me up until my back rested against my SUV. Between the dinner and now, this had seemed like a real date, and if it was, I'd wonder if he was going to kiss me. His body from chest to knee pressed against mine. This couldn't just be for show. I almost

whimpered, my hands went around his neck as I pulled him even closer. Was he going to kiss me?

He lowered his face toward mine and I sucked in a sharp breath, but at the last second he kissed my cheek. Then resting his forehead on mine, he said, “Thanks for joining me for dinner.”

I nodded. I couldn’t refuse his invitations despite how crazy it made me knowing it wasn’t leading anywhere. I know Ashley had complained up and down about how charming Logan was for years, but when Sawyer asked me to do something I was powerless to say no.

Our bodies still flush, he moved his forehead from mine, but his hand played with my hair. I wanted to pull his pelvis closer to mine like he had on the dance floor.

“You should come to my sprint race on Tuesday night.”

“Um what?” I was so distracted by his hand in my hair.

“You know I coach rowing.” At my nod, he continued. “We have a sprint race, which is only 2000 meters. It’s a more competitive race because it’s so quick and it’s a good way to introduce you to rowing.”

“Of course.” It sounded like something he’d invite a girlfriend to.

“They’re really good. They won the NCAA championship last year.”

“I know. I cover Washington sports for the paper. Yeah, I can come and do a write-up too.”

He stepped back but I could still feel the heat of his body and his fingers in my hair. “Great. I’ll see you there. It starts at four.”

After we said goodbye, I got into my car, confused. He’d say our relationship wasn’t real, then touch me, and say it was nice. It was really messing with my head. I needed to focus on something else—anything else. Unfortunately, we were in this quasi-fake relationship for a few more weeks. Hopefully, I could make it through without completely falling for the guy. Maybe seeing him as a coach surrounded by beautiful student-athletes would kill my attraction and remind me how powerless men could be against that kind of temptation.

## Chapter Thirteen



“HEY! EXCITED TO SEE SOME men’s rowing?” Ashley asked when she met me on the sidewalk at the end of Lawyer’s Row, the attached one-story buildings housing most of the law offices in town that were directly across the street from the courthouse. She worked at Logan’s dad’s firm where they’d all gone into business together.

I shot her a look. “He coaches the women’s team, not the men’s.” It would be easier on me if he coached the men’s team.

“Oh, that’s right.” She gave me a pinched look and I knew exactly what she was thinking—Sawyer was another man in a supervisory position with younger women.

I changed the subject so she wouldn’t ask me how I felt about him coaching. “The new sign looks great.” The sign on the window had just changed from the raised lettering of Gray & Gray to Gray, Gray & Cook.

Ashley rolled her eyes. “Logan thinks it’s dumb because we’ll be married soon and they’ll need to change it again. But it’s nice to see my name up, and who knows, maybe I’ll keep my maiden name professionally.”

I bit my lip to stop myself from smiling. I could imagine that might cause a few arguments between those two. “Have you guys set a date?” We headed toward the waterfront where the college held rowing and sailing races.

“No, I want to enjoy being engaged first.”

“I can’t believe three of my friends are engaged now.” Soon they’d be getting married, having kids. I’d see them less. But the worst part was that I wanted a family more than anything and I was no closer to finding someone who could be that for me.

“I think Samantha is the one who’ll get married first. She’s talking about getting married at the marina when construction is finished this summer.”

“Nice. That’s perfect for them.” Samantha and Jack reconnected when he returned home to help his dad with the marina. His dad had since retired and the lease for the marina reverted back to the town, but it was still special to Jack and Samantha. The waterfront would make a great location for their wedding.

When we arrived, I spotted Sawyer in khaki pants, a maroon polo with the school’s logo, and boat shoes, with his team surrounding him—tall athletic women with white and maroon ribbons in their hair.

Following my eyes, Ashley said, “For what’s it worth, I don’t think Sawyer would sleep with a student.”

It was so hard for me assume someone was trustworthy when everyone important in my life had let me down—my parents, my sister, and every man I’d ever dated. Why would Sawyer be different? I looked around to make sure no one was listening and spoke quietly, “To be fair, we’re only pretend dating so it doesn’t matter.” So why did my heart clench in my chest when I saw him with these women?

“I thought it was only that one date to the scholarship dinner,” Ashley said as we stood apart from the crowd of parents and students watching the race by the bleachers.

Sawyer said it was important our friends thought we were dating too, but Ashley was my best friend and I had to tell someone. “It went so well, he thought it would be a good idea to have a fake relationship. If the tenure committee sees him settled in town with a local girl they know, then they’ll assume he plans to stay here.” I shrugged. “It’s only for a few more weeks until he sends in his application and they make a decision.”

“Haven’t you guys gotten together for dinner a few times and taught that library class together?”

“Yeah.” We’d had dinner three times, not that I was keeping track.

“So, is all of this fake dating starting to seem real?” She turned to watch my face.

A breath whooshed out of me. “Yeah, it’s a little confusing. But to be fair, he hasn’t made any real moves.” At the scholarship dinner, he’d pressed me against him to feel his erection so I would know the effect I had



on him when we were dancing. But otherwise, he'd only kissed me on the cheek, touched my hair.

"He hasn't kissed you?" Ashley looked surprised. "I was hoping he'd come around with you guys hanging out together so much."

"He only kissed me on the forehead and cheek in front of others so people know we're together." I didn't mention I wanted to kiss him more than anything. One of these times, I was going to make a move if he didn't. It was the only way I'd know if he felt the same way. But the last thing I needed was to make a move and have him pull away, reminding me it wasn't real.

"He's a little shy with people, right?"

"That's what he says. He's not as social as me, but I wouldn't say he's completely socially awkward. Maybe he was in high school."

"Right. So, maybe he's not going to make a clear move. Maybe all of this fake dating is his way of telling you he's into you."

I snorted at that. "I usually fall fast and hard for guys. I'm trying to keep a cool head here."

"I get that. But I don't think Sawyer's a bad choice. I don't think he'll cheat on you. He's a nice guy. He's athletic and built, so he has some of your dating criteria. And you said yourself, he's not shy."

He wasn't. I remembered everything he said to me on the dance floor that day. How he'd noticed my lips, my breasts, and then pulled me in tight to feel his erection. My legs clenched together, trying to relieve the ache the memory caused. He definitely wouldn't be shy in bed.

Then my eyes went to him and a tall blond woman on his team placed her hand on his shoulder and squeezed, smiling at him. I nodded my head toward him. "And that's the other reason we can never get involved."

"Coaches slap asses in football, give hugs in women's gymnastics. It doesn't mean anything."

"With my history, I can't handle dating a guy who's around young women. I just can't."

She was silent for a few minutes. Then she said, "You're never going to find someone to marry if you don't take a risk."

But wasn't that what I was doing with Sawyer—taking a risk? He said himself he was taking a chance with me. "Isn't that what I did when I met Nate for coffee? That was a huge risk."

“Not really. You met to see if you have chemistry. From what you’re telling me, you already have that with Sawyer. You know him. He’s a good guy. Are you going to stand by and let him meet someone else?”

I watched Sawyer. He stood on the shore facing the water, arms crossed in front of him while his team got into their boat and pushed off to the start line. My eyes traveled over his broad shoulders, bulging biceps, and tapered waist. Physically, he was perfect for me and he’d proven to be a really nice guy. But would things change if I admitted I liked him? I tended to fall in love with a man quickly and then I held on for dear life until the guy had enough of me. “He’s a really good friend and I’m afraid that if I make the move, I’ll ruin everything.” Like I always do.

“You aren’t giving him enough credit. He’s nothing like those assholes you used to date. I don’t know all of the details, but the first two guys you dated in college, so they were young and immature.”

I’d dated all athletic types who bragged about their accomplishments. And Sawyer was confident but not overt about it. “Yeah, but Jason, was older than me, had a real job, and still cheated on me with a younger intern.”

“True. But we told you before it might be the kind of guy you’re going for too. The cocky assholes who don’t care about anyone other than themselves. Sawyer isn’t like that. He’s not cocky.”

I sighed. “He does have this quiet confidence that is so sexy.”

She looked at me and laughed. “Oh my God. You have it so bad.”

“I do.” And nothing could come from it. “This fake dating this is slowly going to kill me.”

“I can see that. Let me know when you’re done torturing yourself and want some advice on how to get him.”

“It looks like the race is starting. We need to find a seat.” We made our way to the bleachers as the horn blew over the water and the eight boats were off and running. It was all over in seven or eight minutes, but I’d completely missed the race. Instead, I watched Sawyer jogging along the shoreline yelling encouragement to his team.

“I know nothing about this sport,” Ashley said. “They didn’t have rowing where I went.”

“I follow it enough for the paper to know the women’s rowing team has gone to the NCAA championships the last few years and done well. There are several different teams based on skill level, called first-team varsity

eight, second team, and so on. There are different types of races too. This one is a sprint because of the short distance. Otherwise, they have regattas a few times a year which include more teams and more races.”

“That’s more than I ever wanted to know.”

“The good thing about the paper is that I know a little bit about everything.”

We resumed watching the boat races, but I watched Sawyer and his interaction with the team. I didn’t see him touch any of the team members, but it still made me uneasy, even if I knew logically Sawyer was different than my exes. Once the race was over, I said goodbye to Ashley, who needed to return to the office, and slowly made my way over to Sawyer.

Was it a mistake to come to his races where I’d see him interact with younger women? I felt awkward and out of place now that Ashley was gone. It seemed more like I was here just for him and not to watch the race.

When he finished speaking to one of his team members, he looked up. “Stella, I’m so glad you made it.” Then he closed the distance between us, pulling me to him for a hug. He squeezed me tight and I couldn’t stop myself from nuzzling into his chest and breathing him in.

“This is a nice greeting,” I said, tightening my arms around his waist. “Congrats on a good race. You guys are doing great again this year.”

Sawyer turned to watch team members pull boats out of the water. “I really appreciate having you here. It’s nice having someone to come to things, support me.”

“That’s what a good girlfriend does.” All I wanted to do was be the perfect girlfriend for him. The longing was more acute when I was with Sawyer doing girlfriend things. But in reality, my version of perfect girlfriend pushed guys away. Would Sawyer be different?

“Can you wait for me to finish up here? Then I need return some stuff to the boathouse.” He gestured to the large building with the pitched roof and surrounding deck on the waterfront.

“Oh yeah, sure.” I waited on the boathouse’s large front deck while Sawyer and his team carried each boat to the racks in front of the boathouse for storage. After they secured the boats, the women walked past me into the boathouse, and the blonde who’d touched his arm earlier eyed me curiously. Sawyer met me on the porch.

“This building used to be a warehouse and was purchased by the college in the seventies to use as a boathouse for the new crew team. Then the

Boathouse Trust provided funds to build the pavilion and park.” He shrugged sheepishly at my knowing smile. “I know a lot of useless historical facts, being a history professor.”

“It’s not useless if it’s interesting.” My response earned me a large smile that I hadn’t seen on his face with anyone else. “I love learning about the history of everything in town.”

“Are you ready for a tour?” He gestured for me to enter the large double doors ahead of him.

“Yes. I’ve never been inside.” When I stepped in, I took in the large open room, which appeared to be a lounge. Long leather couches and sectionals were arranged around a flat-screen hung on the wall over a huge fireplace. A kitchen with a long counter lined the far wall.

“This is the team lounge.” Sawyer passed by me and led me down the hall to the rest of the building. Gesturing to my right, he said, “These are the team locker rooms. Both the sailing and rowing teams use these. This is the classroom.” I barely got a chance to glance inside before he walked farther down the hallway where long rectangular windows opened into training rooms.

The first room was filled with rowing machines.

“They look like regular rowing machines but they’re called ergometers. They measure the output of the user’s energy and it’s actually considered a better workout in the winter than what I’m going to show you next.” He opened another door for me. “The tank room is more impressive.”

It was a long narrow room with tanks of water on either side of the stationary boats for the students to simulate rowing in water. “Wow. I never even knew this was here.”

“We use the tank to perfect our sweeping technique when the water is too cold or the weather is too cold or windy to train. The whole facility has been instrumental in recruiting and taking our teams to the next level.” Pride was evident in his voice.

“This is amazing, Sawyer. I had no idea so much went into training.”

“It’s a year-round sport with few actual races—only three in the fall and three in the spring. Most students have never even rowed before they go to college.” Holding the door open for me, he said, “I have to stop in my office for a minute.”

I followed him out of the tank room. The sound of women joking in the lounge area drifted down the hall to us and he closed his office door behind

us.

Sawyer went through some of the paperwork on his desk while I inspected his office with marine décor on the walls, including pictures of past teams, and events. The window overlooked the water. “What a great view.”

“It is.” He stood for a minute, placed his hands in his pockets, and admired the water view. “Are you almost ready to get out of here?”

I hesitated, unsure if I should say anything, but I wanted to ask him a question before I chickened out. “If we’re going to date, don’t you think we should kiss?” He didn’t respond, so I continued, “You know, we should practice before we have to perform in public.”

A slow smile took over his face.

“It’s a good idea, right?” I smiled. Ashley was right. I needed to make the first move. And this wasn’t a move per se, but a push in the right direction.

He rounded the desk without responding, causing the smile to fall off my face. I backed up a step until I was against his desk. Taking my head in both of his hands, his mouth hovered over mine, “I think that’s a great idea.” He slowly lowered his lips as my eyes drifted closed, and then he tilted my head to the angle he wanted and slipped his tongue into my mouth.

My hands went to his chest, where I finally got to feel his hard pecs through his textured shirt. Then I moved my hands up to his neck, fingering the hair there. I went up on tiptoes then, causing my breasts to press into him. My nipples pebbled and when Sawyer’s thigh moved between my legs, I whimpered. I’d worn a dress since I’d walked from work, and the only thing separating us was my satin panties. I could feel the hair from his bare leg on my inner thighs as I squeezed, urging him to put pressure where I needed it the most.

I wanted him to push me back onto his desk, slowly pull my panties down, and spread my legs.

Instead, he slowed down the kiss and pulled away. “Fuck. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to get out of control.”

I leaned against the desk watching him run his fingers through his hair. “I’m not complaining.” Best first kiss ever. I’d never gone from one kiss to wanting someone to lay me out on a desk. I wanted more. He’d started a fire in me which wasn’t going to burn out any time soon.

He paced back and forth in front of me, so I grabbed his arm, forcing him to look at me and step closer between my legs. “Remember, I suggested it.” And I could never regret something like that. I wanted to tell him I liked him and wanted this to be real, but I had no idea where Sawyer’s head was at.

He nodded. “Want to go to dinner?”

I really wanted to stay and talk about this, but I could see he was shutting down. “Okay.”

When we walked through the now-empty lounge area and down the steps outside, his hand brushed my elbow and slid down my arm to lace his fingers with mine, which prompted a full-body shiver. Sawyer’s words and actions were confusing, but when he touched me, nothing had ever felt more real. We spent quality time together, held hands, and we shared hot kisses in his office where I wanted him to spread me over his desk. Things were good—why rock the boat by telling him I wanted more?

## Chapter Fourteen



“MORNING SUNSHINE,” SAWYER SAID WHEN I held my phone up to my ear. It was my birthday and I hadn’t woken up until my phone buzzed.

I’m pretty sure I grunted in response. I could barely function in the morning before coffee.

“I called to wish you a Happy Birthday.”

At his words, my heart sped up. “You did?” I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. My own parents and sister didn’t call to wish me a Happy Birthday.

“Yes. Happy Birthday.”

“That’s literally the sweetest thing anyone’s ever done for me.” My mouth usually had no filter, but it was worse before I was fully awake.

My words were met with silence for a minute and I checked the phone to see if the connection was lost. “Sawyer?”

He finally cleared his throat. “I’m really glad I called, then. Have a good day and I’ll see you this afternoon.” His voice was low and husky and I felt it through my whole body.

“Thank you, Sawyer.” I didn’t want to get off the phone yet, but maybe it was too heavy to tell your fake boyfriend your own family doesn’t call with birthday wishes first thing in the morning.

The thrill of that phone call stayed with me all morning while I drove around town and the surrounding area visiting gardens with the tourists and the garden society. Accompanying the tour was great for getting information and quotes for the paper, but I was dusty and exhausted when it was over. I had just enough time to drive home, shower, and throw on a yellow sundress with sandals to meet my friends. I threw my bathing suit, a towel, and sunscreen into my large tote bag before I was back in my car

driving into town. The girls had taken over the planning of my birthday festivities and I was told to show up at the marina at one.

As I drove down the gravel drive toward the marina and its parking lot, I saw Sawyer resting against his bike wearing a polo shirt, khaki shorts, and boat shoes. My mouth was suddenly very dry. I parked and checked for a bottle of water in my bag, which I forgot. I got out of my car, throwing my bag over my shoulder, and walked toward Sawyer.

I swallowed hard as I approached. “You drove your motorcycle here?”

“Yeah, it’s not far.”

I nodded as he pushed off the motorcycle, his hands cupping my head, and leaned down for a soft kiss. “Hello, birthday girl.”

“Hi,” I said breathlessly. This guy was dreamy—there was no other word for it. ‘Will you be my boyfriend?’ was running through my head on endless repeat, but I refused to ruin my birthday with honesty.

“Are you ready for your birthday party to begin?”

I nodded. He’d straightened but kept his hands in my hair and his chest pressed against mine. His proximity was making me dizzy. I wanted to go up on tiptoes and claim his mouth with mine again, but I wasn’t sure if one of our friends would walk by. And if I kissed him the way I wanted too, no one would think this was fake.

His hand traveled down my shoulder and arm, until he interlaced his fingers with mine. “Let’s go, then.”

A rush went through me as we walked hand in hand down the dock to Jack’s families’ sailboat, named *Lucy*. I saw the girls on the boat already and Luke and Jack standing on the dock next to it. Luke turned to see us, his brows raised. “Well, hello.” He tugged me away from Sawyer and hugged me. “Happy Birthday.”

“Thanks, Luke.” I pulled away and smiled at Jack, wondering what Sawyer had told the guys about our situation. Did they know it was all for show?

“The birthday girl is here,” Ashley’s voice came from below deck.

Jack pulled the boat closer to the dock, so I could step over the lifeline and onto the boat. Ashley pulled me in for a hug. “Happy Birthday! I can’t believe you had to work this morning.”

“Yeah, Bob gives me the night and weekend events usually,” I said.

“Aren’t most events on nights and the weekend?” Ashley asked.



“Yes, but I like to make myself indispensable.” I figure if I do all of the work no one else wants to do, he’ll keep me around. I was able to do my job using the dictation program but if I left I wasn’t sure I’d have the same accommodations.

I hugged Emma and Samantha, and we sat on the benches while the guys got the boat ready to sail.

Samantha opened a container of watermelon triangles she’d cut and set it on the cockpit table. “There’s cans of White Claw Hard Seltzer in the cooler below.”

“I’ll grab a few,” Emma said.

When Emma climbed below and Samantha stepped onto the dock to speak to Jack about the trip, Ashley whispered, “So, walking here hand in hand with Sawyer, huh?”

“We’re pretending, remember?” I asked.

“I thought it was to impress the tenure committee, so why pretend in front of us?” Ashley asked.

“Huh. Good question.” I hadn’t even thought of it like that. My gaze went to Sawyer, who was loosening the lines running from the boat to the dock. When he noticed me, he smiled and winked. Turning my attention to Ashley, I said, “He’s probably being nice to me because it’s my birthday.”

The guys boarded and Jack shouted orders to throw back some lines to the pilings as he steered us away from the dock. “We’ll head out a little and then hoist the sails.”

“Aye Aye Captain,” Luke said, saluting him.

“That’s right,” Jack said. “There’s only one man in charge on this boat —”

“And it’s not the sheriff.” Emma tugged Luke down to the bench beside her.

“There’s music on the waterfront tonight if you want to head there when we get back,” Ashley said to me.

My eyes shot to Sawyer’s, and he seemed to be waiting for a response. “Sure that sounds nice.” I didn’t want to be alone on my birthday. The key was to keep busy so I didn’t have to think about how my parents essentially abandoned me. Ironically, my phone buzzed with an incoming text right then from my dad. *We still need to meet up to talk about your mother.* I’d completely forgotten my promise to him. There was a time when my mother’s issues had consumed my life. That was the main reason I’d moved

out on my own. I needed separation from that. It didn't escape my notice that there were no happy birthday wishes in the text.

I tucked my phone into my bag so I didn't need to hear it buzzing again. I leaned back on the bench enjoying the joking and ribbing of my friends, the sun on my face, and the slight breeze in my hair. My family may have abandoned me, but I had great friends and now something more with Sawyer. Life was good.

Sawyer came to stand in front of me. "Want to sit on the bow?" He gestured toward the front of the boat. Then lower, he said, "It's pretty crowded."

It was tight with eight people in the cockpit and he was making it clear to our friends we were together. "Sure."

He grabbed my hand and led me to the front of the boat. We carefully stepped over the lines until we came to the bow. He sat down first, his feet on the deck of the boat and his knees spread wide. "There isn't a lot of space up here either. Sit in front of me."

I sat carefully between his legs, worried this was a bad idea as he pulled me so that my back rested against his front. He wrapped his arms around my body, his warmth and scent surrounded me. The wind was strong at the front of the boat, blowing my hair.

Sawyer's breath tickled the shell of my ear when he asked softly, "Are you having a good birthday?"

I turned my head slightly my lips inches from his. "I am."

"I'm glad."

I badly wanted to close the distance between our lips but our friends were here and I was sure they were watching everything we did. It was bad enough we were cuddling. I'd hear about this later.

We sat in silence for a while, enjoying the waves crashing against the boat and the wind in our faces until Luke called, "Hey, Sawyer want to steer for awhile?"

"Yeah, sure," he yelled to Luke. Then to me, Sawyer whispered, "We'll continue this later."

I nodded, even though I didn't want to stop whatever was going on between us. I followed him back to the cockpit, catching the knowing stares from the girls. I admired Sawyer standing, legs spread to keep his balance on the rocking boat, his hands confidently gripping the wheel. How had I ever missed how defined his forearms were? My eyes traveled up his biceps

which stretched his polo shirt to his shoulders to find him watching me. He smiled and winked.

I shook my head at him. When had I thought he was shy and awkward around people? Because he wasn't. Not with me anyway. I kept my eyes on the water and other boats after that. I was confident everyone could see through our act and know that what I felt for Sawyer was real.

Sawyer kept his distance the rest of the afternoon but I tried to ignore it as I spent much needed time with the girls. After several hours, and chocolate cupcakes with peanut butter frosting, courtesy of Samantha, we headed back to the docks for dinner. Stepping onto the dock, I could hear the music drifting from the pavilion in the park already.

The staff at the Fish House pushed several tables together for us out on the deck overlooking the water. Sawyer sat next to me, his arm over the back of my chair. "Are you still having a good birthday?"

I smiled. "The best."

"Save a dance for me tonight," Sawyer whispered into my ear as the conversation went on around us at the table.

"Always," I promised, hoping that wasn't too much. The joy of this day and the alcohol in my system made me bold. A tray of hot steaming crabs was dumped unceremoniously in the middle of our red checkered table cloth, diverting my attention from Sawyer. Eating crabs was not romantic, but it was the perfect ending to my birthday.

We got right to work cracking the shells, pulling the guts and yucky stuff out before getting to the white crab meat. "These are totally worth all of the work and cuts from the shells." The Old Bay crab seasoning smelled and tasted wonderful, but stung when the shells inevitably sliced into my fingers.

Sawyer glanced at me. "Definitely."

Just then a shell sliced into my finger and I winced. Sawyer leaned in and sucked my finger into his mouth. My heart stuttered in my chest and I couldn't look away. Then he pulled away, winked and said, "All better."

My finger was better but my heart was in danger of falling for this guy. I quickly glanced around the table but no one seemed to notice our interaction.

When I'd eaten as many crabs as I could, I went to the bathroom to wash my hands.

Sawyer stood waiting for me at the table when I returned. “Ready for that dance?”

“Yes.” I placed my hand in his and we followed our group of friends over to Watkins Park to listen to the music. They hung back as Sawyer pulled me into the crowd to the center and into his arms. “I thought you didn’t like dancing.”

“But you do.” He tilted his head down so that his voice whispered over the shell of my ear, pulling me tight to his body.

Something clicked in my head when he said that. No one other man had ever cared about my preferences. I tended to cater to them, morphing into whatever woman they wanted me to be, and maybe that was the real issue. I couldn’t be myself with these guys, but with Sawyer, I was. He allowed me to be who I was. I felt light-headed and dizzy all of a sudden, my hands clammy, and a chill ran through my body. As I took a few breaths to steady myself, I knew without a doubt that I wanted to tell Sawyer my feelings. Nothing good ever happened unless you took a risk but I wanted to wait until we were alone. “You want to come to dinner at my house one night this week?”

Sawyer pulled back, looking at my face. “Yeah. You need help with your course?”

That stopped me for a second because I hadn’t even been thinking of that. “Yeah, and other things.”

In the meantime, I listened to the slow music pouring off the stage and drifting over the water, the laughter of other couples as they danced around us, and reveled in the feel of Sawyer’s breath on my neck as he held me close, his hands on me. I wasn’t sure I’d ever had a more perfect day or moment. No matter what happened at my house later in the week, I’d always have this.

## Chapter Fifteen



I'D INVITED SAWYER OVER FOR dinner on Thursday night after his rowing practice. I was ready to hand my heart to him because of one amazing birthday. We'd been dating—dinner, sailing, working together, attending rowing races—and any girl would have gotten caught up in the moment. Who could resist a sexy professor who rode a motorcycle and was nice, thoughtful, and sweet? He was too good to be true, which was why he was my fake boyfriend and not my real boyfriend.

But I was ready to ruin everything by revealing myself to him. I looked shakily around my tiny cottage, trying to see it how he would. My grandmother's faded yellow couches sat in the living room, and a tiny television I never watched sat on my old childhood dresser. Built-in shelves lined one whole wall with several pictures of me laughing with my grandmother.

I'd only ever hosted one girls' night here since I had moved in, but I had pride in this home, the one I bought with only my grandmother's help, and filled with her furniture and a few of my touches over the years. I waited in the sunroom looking out over the backyard, my favorite room in the house.

The doorbell rang and I worried it was too soon to tell Sawyer the truth—that all this fake dating seemed real and I wanted more. I checked my appearance in the hall mirror before opening the door.

Sawyer stood in khaki pants and a white button-down shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows, and my eyes caught on his exposed forearms and the hair curling there. They were strong, masculine, and I immediately thought of him bracing himself as he hovered over me. I swallowed, trying to drag my eyes away from his arms to his face.

"Can I come in?" Sawyer asked.

“Oh yeah, sure,” I said, backing up to give him room to enter. But instead of passing me he paused in front of me, leaning down for a soft kiss.

Straightening, he said, “Thank you for inviting me to your home.”

He’d said those words like he knew how important it was for me to invite anyone to my home. Sure, he’d been here to pick me up before, but this was different. Ashley could have mentioned it but I chose to believe that he understood me like no one else. I had to believe that in order to reveal myself to him tonight. I drew in a shaky breath. “You’re welcome.”

I still stood with my hand on the door watching him walk through my living room. He zeroed in on the framed pictures on the bookshelf. “This is your grandmother?”

“Yeah.” I finally closed the front door with a soft click.

“You look so happy here. So free.” Still holding the frame in his hand, he looked at me.

“Yeah, she was fun to be around.”

“Like you.”

“Yeah, I guess she was a lot like me.” I felt a pang she wasn’t here for me to go to for advice anymore. To tell me my parents were idiots and I needed to move away from them. Live my own life one day. She was amazing and I realized for the first time I’d been lost since the day she died. She was my anchor when everything in my life was spiraling out of control. Locking in on Sawyer’s face I suddenly wanted him to be that for me.

He carefully placed the frame on the shelf and pulled me into his side, kissing the top of my head. “Why do I get the impression your grandmother was more of a parent to you than your actual parents?”

“Because she was,” I said softly.

He let it go, but I could tell he had more questions and I was ready to answer anything he asked, if he was receptive to my feelings. I just wasn’t sure where to start.

I slipped from his arms. “I made a chicken green bean casserole.” It was classic and easy. Something my grandmother made all of the time and it reminded me of her. I’d need that reminder tonight.

He followed me into my sunny yellow kitchen with aging white cabinets and appliances. Things were worn and cracked but clean. Checking the timer on the microwave, I pulled the casserole from the oven and placed it on the stove. I gathered plates and silverware to eat at the small iron table in my sunroom. It was the only place I ever ate.

“Can I help?”

“Sure. Take these into the sunroom and set the little table?”

He took the silverware and napkins from me and walked through the sliding glass door to the room. I uncovered the casserole to allow the steam to rise.

“Want me to open the wine?” Sawyer asked.

“Yeah, that would be great.” I dished generous helpings of the casserole onto the dishes and carried them into the sunroom.

I took a seat and Sawyer walked in carrying two wine glasses filled with white wine, placing one in front of me. Then he sat across from me. “Thank you for making me dinner.”

I waved him off. “Like I said, it’s just a basic chicken and green bean casserole—one of my grandmother’s recipes.”

“Well, I eat everything, including the basics, so you’re in luck.”

I smiled, picking up my fork to dig in. I was nervous, unsure of the right moment to tell him the truth. *If* I should tell him the truth. I decided to start with something small and build up to it. “How are things going at school?”

“Good. I have my tenure portfolio ready to submit. Classes are winding down and the students are worried about finals. So I’m getting a lot more office visits.”

“I remember those days.” The panic about taking tests—embarrassment that I’d received special accommodations to take the test in a different room—trying to keep it a secret from the other students.

It was time to stop hiding. We finished the last few bites and I jumped up to clear the dishes. “I have dessert, but I thought we could talk first.”

“Okay, sure.” He sounded tentative and I didn’t blame him. What could I have to talk to him about? We were only fake dating. This wasn’t real. Was I making a huge mistake by telling him everything?

He followed me into the kitchen and I felt his gaze on my back as I finished placing our dishes into the dishwasher. If I was going to tell him about my feelings I needed to tell him more about me, my life, and my family. He needed to understand me before he made a decision about us and our next step. If there would be one.

When I was done, he asked, “So, what did you want to talk about?”

“Everything.” Then I took a deep steadying breath. “Let’s go back into the sunroom.”

We settled onto my couch. I tucked my legs under me and Sawyer leaned back, his arm along the back of the couch as he waited for me to begin. "I told you my parents weren't there for me, but what I haven't told you is that my mom is depressed and doesn't leave her room. It started in middle school and got progressively worse." He remained quiet as if he felt my need to get it all out at once. "My dad avoided the house when she had her episodes and my sister took it as a sign she could run around and do whatever she wanted."

"So everything fell to you."

Relieved he understood, I took a deep breath. I wanted him to understand how important it was that I told him. I wanted him to know everything about me. "You have no idea. I made dinner, cleaned the house, forged her signature on school report cards, lied for her, covered for her." I sighed "I only told Ashley a few weeks ago."

He raised his brows. "I'm glad you trust me enough to tell me."

Did I trust him? Is that why I felt this overwhelming urge to tell him about my past and my feelings?

"Then we started hanging out." Oh God, was I making a mistake? Was he not ready to hear this? Was I ruining everything? "And you asked me to pretend we were dating and somewhere along the way it became real for me."

I was afraid to look at him. I wasn't ready to see his reaction yet. I couldn't handle it if it was pity. Or if he only saw me as a friend or as a means to obtain tenure. I kept my eyes trained on the floor in front of us.

"What are you saying?" He shifted closer to me on the couch.

"I like you," I whispered. Then my voice getting stronger, I finally looked at him. "It's slowly killing me to pretend with you. I want more. I want you."

"Are you sure?" His voice was hesitant as if he didn't trust my words.

I nodded. He was quiet for a moment and then he moved toward me, a hand in my hair, lips on mine, slowly exploring. It was like our other kisses weren't real. This was our first kiss, every sensation heightened, more meaningful. A gentle hand pushed me back until I was laying on the couch and he settled on top of me. As he placed gentle kisses down my neck I reveled in the feel of his weight on me. I widened my legs for him to settle between them, my dress riding up on my hips. My hands went to his head



pulling him back, my eyes frantically searching his face, “Do you feel the same way?”

“What do you think?” His head ducked to claim my mouth again.

I wasn’t sure how I ever thought he was shy. This was a guy who knew what he wanted and went after it. And right now, he wanted me. I hoped it was for more than just this moment, but I would take what I could get.

“Finally,” he murmured against my lips, his erection pressed into my core, causing me to writhe against him. “I’ve wanted you since I saw you speak in front of the student paper—so hot.”

“That long?” I asked between kisses. One of his roaming hands snuck under my dress and cupped my lace-covered breast, pulling a moan from me. The thought that he’d been as into me as I was into him made me desperate to get closer, to feel his naked body against mine.

He pressed kisses down my face and neck until he reached the sensitive area on my neck and I moved to give him more access. He paused and said, “Yes,” before he continued placing light kisses on my neck and I arched him into him.

“Good to know.” I wanted to know why he hadn’t said anything, but my hands had unfettered access to his chest and stomach, so I allowed them to roam under his shirt. “I don’t think you’re as shy as you let on.”

“Who told you I was shy?” He smirked and then concentrated his attention on my breasts, pulling the lace cups of my bra down.

I was lost in the onslaught of sensation—the feel of his cock heavy on my inner thigh, his mouth sucking on one nipple and then the other. Then his fingers slipped under my lace panties, gathering the wetness, circling my clit. Finally, one finger slipped inside. I moaned. “Sawyer!”

“What?”

But I couldn’t answer. I concentrated on the quickly building orgasm inside me. I’d never gotten this hot for a guy so fast. And it had been so long since I’d done this with anyone.

“Come for me.” His voice was rough and gravelly with desire. “Please.”

“Since you asked so nicely,” I quipped, before closing my eyes to revel in the feeling of Sawyer on top of me, two fingers curling inside me as the heel of his hand rubbed my clit. I cried out as the orgasm crashed over me, my body pulsing, trembling in aftershocks. Sawyer brought me back to the present, kissing me.

“You’re so beautiful when you come,” he said softly.

Opening my eyes, he'd shifted off of me, pulling me up with him, and onto my knees.

I reached for the button of his pants, raising my brow in question at him.

"Are you sure?" Sawyer asked.

After what happened on the couch I was more than ready. I stood, holding my hand out, "I want you inside me."

When he grasped my hand, relief coursed through me and I led him down the hall to my bedroom. When I got to the end of my bed, I spun, dropping his hand, to lift my dress over my head, leaving me in my slightly askew lace bra and panty set.

Sawyer stood in front of me, his eyes taking everything in, as I slowly reached behind me to unclip my bra and let it fall down my arms to the floor. The cool air hit my nipples drawing Sawyer's eyes. My thumbs hooked into my panties as I slowly maneuvered them down my legs and kicked them away.

I was a little self-conscious since I knew I wasn't petite, but I didn't see any disgust in his eyes. "Christ, you're beautiful. Every inch of you." His hands came to my shoulders and I slowly unbuttoned his shirt.

His words gave me confidence. "Now your turn," I said huskily.

His mouth crashed down on mine, harder and more desperate this time. I loved that I had this effect on him, making the usually stoic Sawyer lose control.

When I released the last button, I pushed his shirt off his shoulders, then moved to the zipper of his pants. The sound of the zipper lowering and the harsh intake of our breaths were loud to my ears. When his pants and briefs dropped to the ground, he stepped out of them, kicking off his shoes. I fisted his cock and his breath caught. I loved the effect I had on him as I slowly lowered myself to my knees.

"You don't have to—"

"I want to."

He stopped speaking when I licked the head of his cock, and then let my tongue stroke up and down the shaft. When I finally sucked him into my mouth, he groaned. "Fuck, Stella."

I hollowed my cheeks and sucked him hard. I wanted him to come in my mouth. But to my surprise, his hands were on my shoulders pulling me up. "Not yet. I want all of you." He gave me a soft shove and I fell back onto my bed. "Scoot up."

I hesitated. I didn't think I'd ever had a guy stop me from giving him a blow job before. They usually took what I offered. I didn't like to think about the fact that it wasn't always reciprocated.

"Stella, now," he gently prodded, pulling me from my thoughts.

His soft command caused heat to pool in my core again as I scrambled to get into place. His knee on the bed caused the mattress to dip as he slowly crawled over me, hovering over me, kissing me. I arched into him, searching for contact, but he held his cock away from me, as he slowly kissed me.

"Sawyer," I whined, more and more desperate for the feel of him naked on top of me. "Please." He finally lowered himself so that his cock was teasing my core until I was chanting, "Please, please, please."

He cupped my breast, sucking the nipple into his mouth. He was slowly driving me insane.

"Sawyer, I need you inside me, now."

He chuckled. "So demanding."

Only with him. He was the only one who ever drove me this crazy with need. Baring my soul to him about my family and my trust issues had left me raw, emotional. His sweet words and understanding made me want him with a determination I'd never felt before. This was more than lust or desire. I wanted this man inside me, under my skin, a part of me. Which scared me a little because I'd never let anyone in before. Not all the way.

He eased up to grab a condom out of his wallet on the floor. I couldn't take my eyes off of him as he slowly pumped his cock before sheathing it. Then he braced his forearms on either side of my head. "Stella, are you sure?"

"Yes." Never been surer of anything.

He thrust inside me with one movement, causing me to gasp. I thought he'd ease in, but he kept surprising me.

"Yes, yes, harder."

He set a quick pace using long strokes, my hands roaming his hips, and then I squeezed his ass, pulling him tighter to me.

I tilted my hips and the angle caused the feeling to build inside me again. Then he lifted up, sitting back on his heels, and pulled me closer to him, covering my clit with the pad of his thumb. All of my muscles tightened before my hips arched up and I was falling over the edge again. He rode through my tremors until he roared his release. He rested on me for

a moment, chest to chest, so I could feel his heart beating fast, his quick breaths of air on my neck as he came down from his release. My hand went to his head, feeling the softness of his hair at his neck, his skin warm. This was more than I hoped for when I decided to tell him how I felt, but insecurity was bubbling to the surface. Was it too much too soon?

He lifted up, his hands on either side of my shoulders, his mouth hovered over mine. “That was—”

“Intense?” My desire to have him inside me and under my skin scared me. Was I ready to let someone in finally? Had I made a mistake in opening the door for Sawyer?

He kissed me. Then looked into my eyes where I thought I saw a little awe for what we’d just done. “It was.” He lifted off my body completely, taking off the condom, and went into the bathroom to dispose of it.

He emerged with a sexy grin on his face. He settled next to me, pulling me over his chest, rubbing my back. “I didn’t expect that to happen tonight.”

“Neither did I.” But did he regret it? My head rested on his shoulder, so I tipped it back to see his face, but his eyes were already closed and he was drifting off to sleep. I tried to be satisfied with the fact he’d stayed in my bed instead of leaving after we’d been so intimate. But my mind raced with all of the possibilities. That he’d want nothing to do with me after this. That it would ruin our friendship. Could I trust him, not only with my body but my heart?

## Chapter Sixteen



“STELLA,” A LOW VOICE WHISPERED over my ear. Then kisses started down my neck and shoulder and I arched back into a very warm and hard naked body. His hand caressed my shoulder, arm, down to my hip and when my ass made contact with his cock, he lifted my leg a little so he could rub along my slit.

My brain was still fuzzy but my body was quickly catching up. I felt my wetness lubricating his cock and I arched my ass in a silent invitation to enter me, but awareness came crashing into me. “Condom,” I insisted. I’d been cheated on so many times I never went without.

He pulled away from me and I turned to see him rifling through his wallet for one. Sliding the condom down his cock, he moved behind me, cupping my breast.

“Hurry.”

“You’re so impatient.” Then the scruff on his face scraped my shoulder sending a shiver through me. He tweaked my nipple as he drove into me. He couldn’t still be caught up in the moment after last night. This was real. He slowly pumped into me, his hand alternating between my nipple and my clit until I was squirming.

“Touch yourself.”

His quiet command was so hot, my hand drifted down my stomach rubbing myself, feeling his cock sliding into me.

“That’s so fucking hot.”

Between him watching my fingers and him playing with my nipples, I orgasmed within seconds. He pushed me farther onto my side and lowered my leg, allowing his hand to roam my body, slowly working me up again. “You’re so tight in this position.”

I gasped because the angle was hitting my g-spot. Everything was more intense this morning and I wanted to draw it out as I tried to fight the larger orgasm building. He pumped hard a few times, his body tense, his fingers tight on my hips, and I cried out knowing I couldn't last any longer. We both came at the same time with my heart beating like crazy inside my chest.

"Never been like that before." Sawyer kissed my shoulder before pulling out.

"Yeah, no kidding." After we'd each taken a moment in the bathroom to clean up, I wanted to crawl back into bed and have a lazy morning with him.

"I have to get ready for work," he said, regret evident on his face.

I glanced at my alarm clock, which read seven. "I know. I do too." I pulled a T-shirt over my head.

He quickly threw on his clothes, which were still strewn all about the room. Then he stopped in front of me, placed his hands on my shoulders. "Thank you for dinner."

I smiled. "And everything else."

He smiled. "I'll call you later, okay?"

"Sure."

He kissed me softly and left. Once he was gone and I was alone in my bedroom, the sheets pushed to the bottom of the bed and onto the floor, I was able to think clearly for the first time since the night before. With a sinking feeling, I realized he hadn't exactly responded to my declaration that I wanted him. He hadn't said he liked me. Instead, he'd made a physical move. What did it mean for him? Was sex all he wanted? He'd said I was hot. Did we go from fake relationship to friends with benefits?

Checking my phone, which was still in the kitchen, I noticed several messages from my dad wanting to touch base. I'd avoided him for as long as I could. I texted.

*Stella: Do you have time this afternoon to meet?*

Not waiting for a response, I took a shower and got dressed for work. I grabbed a granola bar and a banana for breakfast. Dread curled in my stomach when the text message sounded: *Dad: Come over at 2.*

The last thing I wanted to do was be in my parents' home. Once I crossed that threshold I fell into my old role—the one where everyone depended on me to hold the family together. My dad would guilt me into

doing more to help out my mom, which was enabling her to continue like she was. I'd need to stay strong and not get sucked back into it.

When I arrived at work, Bob was waiting for me by my cubicle. "Good morning," I chirped.

He held up what looked like my proposed article for the garden tour this past weekend. "Stella, we need something more than coverage of farmers' markets, gardening tours, and festivals. We need something to get people reading again."

I sat in my seat and pulled up to my computer. This was an ongoing conversation we had. "That's what I've been doing with the online media. I keep the topics trendy and current—"

"I hardly think online dating is newsworthy." He slapped my work on my desk. "Get something. Hang out at the college. Get something juicier."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask why he didn't drum up something more interesting, but I didn't. I liked my job when he wasn't pressuring me. "You know, this is a small town. Not much happens here. It's not like I can drum up a murder."

He was silent, studying me. "We need more readership. Drama creates interest. Is there a Me Too movement at Washington College? Are sexual assaults on the rise? Hazing at the frats? Are people bribing officials and coaches to get into the school?"

"Got it," I finally said, because what else was there to say? He was my boss and I needed to placate him until he got over whatever mood he was in this morning. I picked up my bag again. "I will hang out at the college and see what I can find." Although I highly doubted anyone was bribing anyone to go to a liberal arts college in Chestertown.

"Good." Then he was gone.

I sighed. Yeah, readership was down, but that was true for every paper, especially in small towns. That's why I focused on the online portion and worked on driving younger people there. Not that he appreciated or even understood the importance of that.

At least I would get to work outside today instead of in the office. I walked to the campus and wandered around the quad and the student center, sipping coffee and hoping I'd overhear something I could use. I finally settled into an overstuffed chair in front of a large window overlooking the quad and pulled out my laptop. I tried to focus on work, but a raised voice caught my attention.

“I heard girls in the Zeta house have a bet going to see who could bang a professor,” a girl said.

My fingers hovered over my keyboard as I waited to hear who they were talking about.

“Why would a professor even bother when they could get fired for hooking up with a student?” another girl asked.

I closed my eyes. This was my constant worry with a guy like Sawyer. They are surrounded by temptation every day and by women who think it’s a challenge to get them into bed.

I could hear the excitement in her voice as she delivered the gossip. Is this the kind of salacious article Bob wanted me to get? Some stupid sex bet at the sorority house? If a professor was involved he would be interested because the professor’s job was on the line and it called into question the Me Too movement and the rise of sexual assaults on campus. It was everything Bob mentioned this morning, but it wasn’t the kind of story I was interested in.

“I don’t know. Are there any hot professors? Because there aren’t any in the biology department.” The group broke out in giggles.

When the laughter died down, the first girl answered, “It’s the history professors they’re after.”

My breath whooshed out of me. I racked my mind trying to remember what the other history professors looked like at the scholarship dinner but couldn’t. That night was a blur of meeting and talking to a ton of people. So these women could be talking about Owen and Sawyer. I vacillated between wanting them to say a name and not wanting to know.

“Maybe I need to add a history course to my schedule next semester,” one girl said.

“They are the hottest professors on campus,” the first girl said.

I tensed. I held myself still so they wouldn’t notice me listening.

“What’s the point though? Didn’t the frats get in trouble last year for betting how many girls they could sleep with and keeping a running tally in their common room?” a girl asked.

“Oh gross. That’s why I never pledged,” one girl said.

“Guys are assholes everywhere,” one girl said who hadn’t spoken before.

Truer words had never been spoken, but I wanted to think Sawyer was different.



“Hey, I’m happy you’re here.”

I stood when I saw it was Sawyer, almost dumping my laptop, which I’d completely forgotten about, onto the floor. We reached for it at the same time. Sawyer chuckled as he placed it safely on the table and then dropped a chaste kiss on my lips.

I could feel the stares of the women behind me who’d gone silent. As much as I loved the public display of affection, especially on campus, this interaction would hurt my chances of overhearing gossip like this again.

I smiled uneasily at Sawyer. I really wanted to believe he’d have nothing to do with a sorority bet and he wouldn’t fall for a student coming on to him. But I’d been wrong before.

“I’m trying to get some work done.” I gestured lamely at the computer, because I didn’t need to be on campus to work. I had an office, but I didn’t want to admit I was hunting a juicy college story. I glanced at the group of women finally and they averted their eyes.

I stepped back from Sawyer, wanting to create distance literally and figuratively, but I knew without a doubt, I’d already fallen for him. Last night, I had opened up in a way I’d never done with anyone and given myself to him. I hadn’t doubted his desire for me and my body. I hadn’t worried about anything other than the feel of his lips and hands on me. I closed my eyes briefly. Why couldn’t that be my reality? Why couldn’t something pure and special be for me?

He smiled warmly, unaffected by the turmoil in my head. “Well, it’s good seeing you this morning. I have a class,” he glanced at his phone, “starting in a few minutes. Call you tonight?”

“Sure.”

He kissed me again quickly before he walked out the doors of the student center and I watched him cross the quad and jog up the steps to the building where he taught.

Sitting back down, I sighed, annoyed that my cover had been blown. I’d just pulled my computer onto my lap when someone cleared their throat next to me. Looking up, I recognized one of the women from the gossiping group. Looking over my shoulder, I saw she was the only one left.

“Can I help you?” Did she know something specific about Sawyer and wanted to tell me since it was clear we were together?

“I saw you kiss Dr. Hudson, and well,” she shrugged and blushed, “I was wondering if you overheard us talking about the bet?”

Honesty was probably better in this situation and maybe she knew something. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear.”

“Yeah, Chrissie is always so loud.”

I assumed she was talking about the bearer of the gossip. I nodded, waiting for her to continue.

“I just thought you should know that the women at that sorority will try and win the bet. They do this every year, daring themselves to do something crazier and crazier. Last year, they broke into the boathouse, stole the boats, and put them everywhere. It was crazy and a little funny, but—”

“This year is different because a professor could be fired for sleeping with a student?” These women thought it was a joke but this was someone’s livelihood, their reputation, not a prank.

She nodded. “I’m not part of that sorority. I just thought you should know it’s not idle gossip. They’ll follow through with it.”

I kept a professional look on my face while inside I was dying. “Great. Thanks for telling me.”

“I’m Laura, by the way.”

I held my hand out. “Stella, nice to meet you. Do you mind giving me your email in case I have any questions? I work for the Kent County News.”

She bit her lip. “I don’t like what they’re doing, but can you keep my name out of it?”

“Sure. You can be an anonymous source.” I plugged her email into my phone and then she left, saying she was late for class. This was exactly the story Bob wanted but at what cost to the professors and students involved? Maybe if I wrote the story I could stop this whole prank from going any further?

Watching students cross campus, I wondered whether Sawyer could resist a sorority girl? He was applying for tenure and a scandal like this could destroy his chances even if he didn’t do anything improper. I remembered Sawyer explaining how talking out of turn or getting political could sway the committee. Then my skeptical side wondered if that’s why he was using me as his pretend girlfriend to cover up something going on with a student. No, he would never do that to me, right? He was sweet and kind. But I’d been burned so many times before. I chewed my bottom lip. I couldn’t trust my instincts. I had to be more cautious with him going forward.

For the first time, I thought I'd found something real and now this. Meeting a man and falling in love was not in the cards for me.

My heart sank. There would always be another woman who'd be better looking than me—less clingy, quieter, smarter. I'd never be enough to hold a guy like Sawyer. I don't know why I thought he would be different—just because he was the opposite of the guys I dated in the past? But I knew I was the problem not these guys. I wasn't enough to keep them from cheating. Isn't that what they always said when I confronted them?

I caught myself before I could feel any more down. I hated feeling depressed. I never wanted to fall into that trap and be like my mother. I'd look at the bright side until I had reason to believe Sawyer was actively involved in something. For all I knew, the women could be targeting Owen.

And from what I knew of Owen, he'd probably jump at the chance to be with his students. I was sure it wasn't even the first time with him. Maybe that's why he was teaching here in this secluded small college? Had he been forced to leave other schools? How many other places had he taught? My reporter brain was flooded with potential questions and the urge to answer them overrode my other worries. I opened my laptop, keying in my pin number, and then started searching for more information on Owen Mason.

Scanning his social media photos, which were public, I saw that he shared a lot of pictures with his students on field trips and adventures with the college. It looked like he taught a canoeing class, which could be opportunistic if he wanted to be closer to the co-eds. I shivered thinking of whether Sawyer was doing the same thing with his Town Ball in the quad every Friday. Then I pulled up his resume on the college's page which indicated he'd worked at George Washington University and Brooklyn College before working at Washington. Why had he worked at three schools when you needed to stay at one school to get tenure? And wasn't that every professor's goal?

How could I find out why he left? An idea started percolating. I'd call and pretend he was getting an award and I needed background information for the presentation. I'd done this kind of thing before and I was pretty good at it. I came across as this happy-go-lucky person, so they probably felt safe giving me information. Whatever the reason, I'd used it to my advantage.

I made some notes for professors in the history department at his last job, Brooklyn College. I'd need to call when I returned to the office.

Checking the time, I jumped up, throwing things in my bag. I was late to meet with my dad.

As I drove, the pit in my stomach, which had formed when I heard about the bet, increased the closer I got to my parents' farm. Maybe my mom was worse than the last time I was home and that's why he wanted me to come, and he was finally trying to get her help. Pulling up behind my dad's beat-up pick-up, which he'd had since I was in high school, I slowly made my way across the gravel driveway and up the aging wooden steps to the porch.

When I had lived here, I remembered things being in better shape. Since I'd left, my dad was so busy dealing with my mom that the barn badly needed painting and the porch was starting to sag. The only thing he managed to maintain were the large amounts of fencing required to keep the cows on the property, since the cows represented their livelihood.

My mom hadn't helped out on the farm in years, so milking the cows and getting eggs from the chicken house twice a day fell to him. He couldn't afford to hire any help.

I felt guilty for leaving them, but my grandmother had told me over and over again I needed my own life. It was my parents' choice to live on a farm, not mine.

Moving out and staying away were the best decisions I'd ever made, so why was I here now? I slowly pulled open the screen door and pushed the creaky solid wood door open so I could enter the kitchen. Dated, it looked exactly as it had when I lived here. Cracked white Formica countertops, black appliances, and random stuff covered every square inch of the counters.

"Hello," I called. Not hearing anyone, I assumed they'd be in their bedroom. When my mom was her worst she wouldn't come out.

"We're upstairs," my dad called.

That meant he was with my mom and she was having one of her episodes. The familiar sadness and hopelessness overcame me as I walked through my childhood home. I was really hoping not to see her today. Whenever I did, I felt the usual pain, that I had never been enough for her to get out of bed and reclaim her life. It was so frustrating to see her lying in bed day after day. It wore on me. I walked up the maroon carpeted stairs and down the dark hallway to their bedroom. I knocked.

"Come in," my dad said.

I slowly turned the knob and pushed the door open, holding my breath. My dad rarely was able to convince my mom to bathe and the windows were shut, so it smelled stuffy. The heavy curtains were drawn shut as usual, and I saw the pale form of my mother in bed, her eyes closed. My dad sat in a chair by her bed. “Hey, thanks for coming.”

“Of course,” I said, edging closer to the bed. “How is she?” Even though she was here, she wasn’t really. She wouldn’t answer if I spoke to her. She was either asleep or staring blankly at the wall. When I was a child I’d get so frustrated with her, I’d yell at her to respond. *Look what I did in school. Why can’t you come see me perform in the play? Why can’t you get out of bed?* And when I was especially angry *Why don’t you care and What is wrong with you?* But nothing ever got to her and I’d since given up on her responding or getting any better.

“Honey, I called you because she needs to see a doctor,” Dad said.

I barely suppressed my eye roll. She’d needed that for fifteen years. He had ignored me in the beginning when it probably could have helped her the most. The times when she was bedridden were shorter back then. She’d have moments in between where she’d live her life.

Looking at my mother now, her hair was short so my father could take care of it easier, and her frame was thin and pale from eating the bare minimum and not getting sunlight. I wondered what undiagnosed health problems she had from her self-imposed state.

“Let’s go to the kitchen and talk.”

I said this, sure even though we could have talked in their bedroom, my mom never responded or let on that she could hear us. She was just gone—checked out from life.

When we reached the kitchen, I stood on the side of the large kitchen table closest to the door, my hand gripping the spoke of a kitchen chair to stop it from shaking. I felt panicky, my heart racing with all of these feelings rushing over me—hopelessness, frustration, defeat. I was ready to leave.

What could we possibly have to talk about? I wasn’t helping out more. I wouldn’t be moving back in. It was time for me to have my own life and family. I couldn’t be responsible for this—for her—anymore. And nothing he said would change my mind. Looking into his eyes, I saw determination for the first time since my mom started her downward spiral.

“I wanted you to know why your mother is like this.”

I huffed. I was so done with this conversation. There was no catalyst, no reason I could ever figure out. “She suffers from major depression. I think that’s obvious.”

“No, that’s true. But depression comes from somewhere, especially when it’s to this degree.”

I’d done a ton of research on depression over the years and I’d discussed it with Dr. Hirsch. “It could be chemical. There doesn’t have to be a specific trauma.” But whatever he’d discovered had prompted him to act and I wanted to know what it was. “What do you think caused it?” I tried to remember if there had been a death in the family or something that could have set my mom on this course.

He cleared his throat and pain crossed his face. He had my rapt attention now. “Before that first episode she’d suffered a miscarriage.”

“What?” I had no idea she was pregnant after me or was even trying.

“It was a surprise but we were both so happy.” A small smile ghosted on his lips as he remembered. “We were ecstatic.” Pain crossed his face. “Then she suffered a miscarriage at fifteen weeks and we were devastated.”

All of the wind rushed out of me. “I’m so sorry.”

He held his hand up. “We knew it was a risk because she was a little older, but you never think it will happen to you. At first, I figured it was normal to have episodes where we’d be sad, not able to eat or get out of bed. I was suffering too. I thought what she was going through was normal.”

He did. That explained why he made himself scarce keeping busy with farm work here and on neighboring farms. My mom went into hiding and my dad kept busy.

“I tried to stay as busy as I could so that I wouldn’t have time to think about it—to grieve. I suggested we try again. The doctor said there was nothing medically preventing us from getting pregnant again. I was desperate to try, but she didn’t want to. Any time I suggested it, she accused me of not loving the child we had been pregnant with.”

I wanted a family so badly myself, I couldn’t imagine losing a child. “She needed time to grieve for that child.”

“And I gave her time, hoping that once she got past her grief she’d want to try again. But she never did. She just spiraled more and more.”

I closed my eyes, feeling guilty for every time I’d been angry at my mother for checking out on us. I was still angry but now I understood at

least. "Thank you for telling me that."

He ran fingers through his hair. "I'd like to get a doctor here to evaluate her. Do you think it's possible?"

"I'm sure it is." I was relieved and hopeful that we were finally going to do something that could help the problem and not cover it up. I could talk to my therapist and see what she suggested. More than anything, I wanted to talk to Sawyer about it, which was a new feeling for me. Sharing this burden with someone else was freeing and comforting. I didn't have to bear this alone. "Let me check some things out and talk to some people."

Dad grimaced. "I don't want anyone to know."

"I know. I'll be discreet."

"Good. Thank you for coming. I know we haven't told you this a lot over the years, but thank you for everything you did to hold this family together when we couldn't."

It felt good to have his admiration, his gratitude, for picking up the pieces when I was still a teenager. "I don't think I was successful. Lindsey was always off doing whatever she wanted and mom still won't get out of bed." And I couldn't reach you at all over those years. It would have been nice to have one parent's support.

"You were a child, Stella. You shouldn't have had to step up at all. This is on me. I wasn't there for you, your mother, or your sister during that time. And it's my biggest regret." We weren't a touchy-feely family necessarily, but I was. I crossed the steps that separated us and wrapped my hands around his waist. He smelled the way he always had, like the farm, my home, and my childhood.

"Thank you for saying that." He squeezed me back and I pulled away. "I have to get back to work, but I'll do some research for you."

He nodded. "Thank you."

I looked away from the tears I saw in his eyes.

I opened the screen door, and walked out onto the porch to see gray clouds moving in with an impending storm. I sighed, feeling drained. My parents had sapped all of my energy with that one meeting. How did they always manage to do that? I had good memories of playing and helping out on the farm until my mom came out of her room less and less. Then the play turned more into work, keeping the farm running, making sure dinner was on the table, making sure my sister wasn't running off with some guy.

I felt relief at my dad's words but also guilty, because I'd been angry and bitter for so many years when there was a good explanation for her depression. Why hadn't he told me sooner? So I could understand. As happy as I was that he'd told me the truth now, I wanted to know earlier—before the bitterness seeped in. But would I have stayed longer knowing what I know now? Would I have halted my education, my career, if so? Maybe he had his reasons. I couldn't regret where I'd ended up.



## Chapter Seventeen



I DROVE TO CAMPUS HOPING to catch Sawyer—to talk to him. I needed his support. It wasn't lost on me that this was the first time I'd sought out a man's support for my issues with my family. My friends knew what was going on so they were a viable option. But I wanted Sawyer's arms around me, his concerned eyes on mine. The realization jarred me a little because I trusted that he'd take care of me.

I parked in the lot nearest his building and made the short walk to his office, hoping to catch him in between classes. I didn't know his schedule yet. Seeing his door ajar, I knocked softly. Then I heard murmuring.

"Just a second," Sawyer's voice rang out.

I stepped back as soon as I realized he was meeting with someone. The sign on his door listed his office hours occurring now. I sat on the bench nearest the door to wait. The voices inside got closer until Sawyer pulled the door open and a slender blond woman stood between him and the doorway.

"Thank you so much, Coach. I really appreciate your help. Writing papers is so difficult for me."

Was she the tall blonde I'd seen on the rowing team? And her tone was flirty. Could she be part of the sorority bet? I couldn't stop myself from watching them and how she touched his arm.

"Let me know if you need another TA or someone to help around here. I'd be happy to," the woman said.

Why would he hire a TA who needed assistance in the class? Usually it went to a grad student majoring in history.

"I have a TA, but thank you, Cindy. I'll see you at practice tonight," Sawyer said.

“Of course.” She stepped back giving him a little wave and walked down the hallway.

I couldn’t help but wonder if his TA was male or female.

Sawyer stepped out. “Are you okay?” He ushered me inside and closed the door behind us. “Did something happen?”

Realizing I still hadn’t spoken yet, my throat swelled with tears at the sight of Sawyer’s concerned face. I had to be strong in front of my mom and dad, but could lean on Sawyer. I squeezed my arms around his back, rested my head on his chest, and allowed the tears to fall. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d actually cried. The release felt cathartic.

“Stella? You’re scaring me. What happened?” He pulled back and tilted my chin to see my face.

I sniffled. I couldn’t believe I was crying in front of Sawyer. I usually kept everything bottled up and acted like everything was fine. For the first time, I realized how exhausting that was.

“What happened? Tell me.”

Right then, I felt as exposed as when I’d stood naked in front of him the night before. I flushed at the memory of his slow perusal of my body with nothing but pure desire and appreciation in his eyes. His acceptance was everything. I hoped he’d be as understanding and accepting when I revealed more about my family.

I took a shaky breath and moved to sit in one of the chairs in front of his desk. “I went to see my parents today.”

Understanding dawned on his face as he leaned on the desk in front of me and nodded to encourage me to continue.

“Nothing has changed, but my dad wants to get a psychologist in to see her.”

Sawyer gave me a sympathetic smile. “Not a bad idea.”

“I don’t know if it will make a difference, but that’s not why I’m upset. My dad told me everything—what triggered her depression.” I wiped the tears from my face. “She’d had a miscarriage. She was understandably depressed and my dad kept himself busy so he wouldn’t have to deal with it. He wanted to try for another baby but she couldn’t get past it. She got worse and worse.” I was quiet for a minute and then said quietly, “If she’d gotten help back then, she wouldn’t be like this now.”

“It’s possible, or you could be in the same position. There’s no way of knowing for sure.”

Sawyer crouched down in front of me, placing his hands on my knees. “Your dad was grieving too, you know? He handled it the best way he knew how. They left you with this burden as a child and that’s not right, but he’s stepping up now.”

He was right. I chewed my lip, staring down at my hands, which he’d taken into his. “What I can’t get over is how you can grieve an unborn child but forget about your living children.” And that’s what was bothering me the most. Tears started flowing down my cheeks and Sawyer’s hand cupped my cheek wiping the tears.

“I don’t know. As much as it hurts I don’t think it was a conscious decision to ignore you or your sister. Your mom couldn’t get past her grief over the baby.”

“I know she has a medical condition.” This was always my struggle. She had a medical reason for her actions so I felt the inevitable guilt over my hurt feelings. “But it still hurts.”

Cradling my face in his hands, he said, “I’d do anything to take this pain away from you, but something tells me you need to feel it before you’re able to move on.”

If I was ever able to move on. Is this why I had so much trouble with men? I picked unavailable men on purpose? In some sick twisted way I was reliving my mother’s rejection over and over again. My head was starting to hurt from the stress and the crying.

Then Sawyer stood, tugging me up with him, and enveloping me in his strong arms. I shoved my face into his chest as the rest of the tears fell. When they finally stopped, he grabbed a water bottle from the small fridge under his window. “Drink.”

I took a large sip of water, then more, not realizing how thirsty I was. “I’m probably dehydrated from all the crying.”

“Sometimes it’s necessary.”

“That’s true, but something tells me you never cry.”

“I don’t have anything heavy in my life right now.” Smiling softly, he said, “Things are pretty great.”

Hope surged in my chest that he was talking about us.

“I don’t like seeing you sad, but I’m happy you came to me. It means a lot that I was able to be here for you—to take care of you.”

I liked it a lot too—probably too much. Laura’s words from earlier today rang through my head. I couldn’t forget about the bet, but now that I

was standing in Sawyer's arms it was hard to believe he'd ever betray me. I hoped I wasn't making a huge mistake.

## Chapter Eighteen



THE NEXT MORNING, I FIRED up my computer as soon as I sat down in my cubicle.

Then Bob was hovering over me. “Have you made any progress on a story?”

I sighed. I was hoping he’d give me more time or forget about it entirely. I should have known he’d never let it go. Once I told him about this story I couldn’t go back. Which was more important—my job or Sawyer’s tenure? I kept hoping there was a way to protect my job and Sawyer.

At the very least, giving Bob something to go on now would give me more time to figure things out. “I have a possibility. The Zeta sorority performs crazy pranks each year, but this year a few of the women made a bet to see who can sleep with a professor.”

He nodded his approval. “Good work. I don’t care much about the pranks, but professors sleeping with students has a nice ring to it.”

“Since when did we become a gossip rag?” I was so disappointed with his reaction. “Shouldn’t we be coming from the angle of protecting the students and not sensationalizing the story?”

“You know what I mean, with the Me Too movement, there’s interest in sexual harassment and assault, especially in supervisor/student relationships. The imbalance of power makes it a bigger story—raises the stakes.” He was thoughtful for a moment. “Something like this could get picked up by larger media outlets.”

Which meant it could be a big story for me too, but was my career worth risking my relationship with Sawyer?

“Keep up the good work. I’d like a printable article in the next day or two. Focus all of your attention on this. I’ll take any of the town events this

week.”

“Okay.” Now I had full permission to spend all of my time on campus investigating the sororities and professors. What was I going to tell Sawyer? I could interview him. He’d mentioned how there was a balance between keeping distance between students and getting positive student evaluations. But could I keep my fears from him? Or would he know that I suspected he was involved?

Despite Bob’s direction to work solely on this new story, the online articles were my sole responsibility. Quickly checking the social media sites, I realized I hadn’t posted anything lately. Not since my disastrous online date. I quickly drafted a post depicting my date and inviting others to share their horror stories. As uncomfortable as my meeting with Nate was, I knew there were worse stories out there. Satisfied I’d generate some interest, I powered off my computer and gathered my things.

I could work and eavesdrop on campus. As I walked to campus, a plan formulated. I’d hang out on campus as much as possible and with Sawyer during rowing practice. Hopefully, I’d get lucky again and overhear or see something important. As paranoid as I was, the likely target had to be Owen. Sawyer said Owen dealt with a lot of flirting from the students. If a sorority girl showed interest, I was sure he’d be all over it. My initial internet search of Owen’s work history hadn’t generated any leads, but I hadn’t investigated deeper. Ducking into a coffee shop, I pulled out my phone and notebook so that I could make some calls.

I dialed a younger female professor in the history department at Brooklyn College, Owen’s most recent job, hoping she’d be willing to talk. “Dr. Howe.”

“Dr. Howe, I’m so happy I was able to catch you. My name is Stella Lewis and I work at Washington College with Owen Mason. We’re planning a little end of the year celebration for the professors and Owen was voted most popular professor by the students.” I worked with the student paper so it wasn’t entirely a lie. And I didn’t say my job title, but I’d found over time that if you gave enough details things like that got lost in the shuffle of a phone call. “I’d love to get more anecdotes about him to add to the awards ceremony. I’m preparing pictures and a little speech on his philanthropy, his research, articles, anything I can find, really. But the whole thing is a surprise so I can’t ask him directly.”

“Oh, okay. I’d be happy to help. A student might walk in with questions though. You called during my open office hours.”

“Oh, of course. I totally understand.” I kept my tone upbeat with a smile on my face.

“What can you tell me about Owen?”

“The students love him, as you already know.”

The question was how much did the students love him?

“He would dress in period pieces to keep his lectures interesting. He liked being involved in other activities on campus too, sporting events. He thrived on mentoring the students. He had an open-door policy twenty-four seven.”

“Interesting. Don’t professors keep office hours to set times?” Who would want to be interrupted all of the time?

“We do. But that was his thing I guess and it worked for him.”

I needed to find out how many TAs he had, female or male, and how closely he worked with them. Should I get the student newspaper on this too? They had access to more gossip and knowledge on campus than I ever could.

“Anything else you can think of?”

“No, we weren’t friends or anything.”

The way she said that made me feel like she had more to say, but wouldn’t in a professional setting. I wished more than anything we were face to face so I could read her body language and facial expressions, but traveling was not a possibility with our limited budget.

“Well, thank you so much for your time. Please contact me if you think of anything that could be useful.” I made sure she had my number and we got off the phone. The next thing I did was send an email to the newspaper staff on campus for a meeting this afternoon.

“Hey!” Ashley plopped into the seat across from me at the tiny table with her coffee. “Are you taking a break too?”

“Hey. I was on my way to campus and then forgot I needed to make a phone call.”

Ashley laughed.

“I know. I’m so scatterbrained.”

“True. Do you have a few? I haven’t seen you since your birthday.”

Was that true? My birthday felt like a lifetime ago. “So much has happened I don’t even know where to start.”

“How about Sawyer?” She wiggled her brows. “I hope that’s why you’ve been MIA lately.”

“Partly. I invited him over for dinner after my birthday and things took off.” Everything he did drew me in more—every touch, every kind word. “Something just clicked and I knew I needed to tell him my feelings had changed.”

“It went well?”

“I told him about my family.”

Ashley leaned onto the table focusing her attention on me. “You did? That’s huge. You must really trust him.”

Did I? I didn’t feel capable of truly trusting anyone. Not with my history. “I told him somewhere along the way it had gone from pretend dating to real for me.” My mind shot back to that moment when I’d laid myself bare. When I’d asked if he felt the same, he’d responded *what do you think?* The only thing I could think about after that was how fast I could remove my clothes and feel him skin to skin. I looked around to see if anyone was nearby and lowered my voice. “It was amazing.”

Ashley paused her coffee cup halfway to her mouth. “Wow. Your face is all dreamy. The sex must have been phenomenal.”

“Amazing, Ashley. So good. You have no idea.” Then I felt heat rise up my face. I was usually forthcoming about my sex life with Ashley because we’d been close forever but wasn’t sure it was a good idea to discuss Sawyer or any specifics. Something about what happened the other night felt special—like speaking about it to anyone else would burst that bubble.

“Oh, I think I have some idea.” She smiled knowingly. “He wasn’t shy in bed?”

I snorted. The idea was laughable and I couldn’t resist sharing this detail with her. “No. He’s a dirty talker and he’s one-hundred percent confident in everything he does. I don’t know why he thought he was nerdy and awkward, because he wasn’t.” Not at all.

“Maybe you bring it out in him.”

“Maybe,” I said, remembering at the dance when he’d referenced my pretty lips, my breasts hanging out of my dress, and my ass. “It’s the quiet ones you have to watch out for.”

Ashley’s phone buzzed then. After checking it, she sighed. “That was Samantha. As much as I love talking about your love life, we need to help plan Samantha and Jack’s engagement party.”



“I didn’t realize they’d scheduled anything.” I’d been so wrapped up in Sawyer and my family, I’d neglected my friends.

“They want to plan it for June. Samantha’s mom is pushing for it. I need to contact Jack’s sister, Lucy, and see if she can come and if she wants to help.” She started scrolling through her contacts.

“I love planning parties. This will be so fun.”

“As long as Samantha’s mom isn’t too involved—she’s already talking about booking the yacht club for the party.”

“Isn’t that a bit much just for the engagement party? Maybe Samantha and Jack want to save their money for the wedding, itself.”

Ashley raised her head from her phone. “I think money was offered.”

It was hard to forget that not all parents were absentee. Samantha dealt with the opposite problem. Her mother was controlling. “Oh, nice. If you provide the money, you get to be involved in planning.”

“Right. Samantha is already stressed out so I want to help out.”

“Of course. Has she picked bridesmaids yet?” Come to think of it, Samantha had texted me last night to get together but I was so worried about the story I completely forgot to respond.

“Unofficially, you, me, Emma, and Lucy.”

“Nice. It will be good to see Lucy again. It’s been so long.” Jack’s younger sister was a few years younger than us, so I remembered her growing up, but we weren’t friends.

“Then Luke, Logan, Sawyer, and Wyatt for the groomsmen. That makes it even.”

“Wyatt Carter?” He was in Lucy’s grade and I’d seen him driving around town in a Maryland Department of Natural Resources truck. “I didn’t realize they were close.”

“Apparently, Luke and Sawyer work closely with him because of their jobs and Wyatt sees Sawyer at the college because Wyatt helps out with the River & Field Campus.”

“Oh that’s right. I do remember them talking about that the last time I saw him. Will it be awkward between Lucy and Wyatt? I think they dated after we graduated.”

“I know. She stayed in the city after college so how serious could it have been?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let me grab a refill on my coffee since we’re gabbing. You want something?”

“Yes, just a coffee.”

Ashley went to stand in line to order and a few minutes later, she handed me the to-go cup. I removed the lid to allow it to cool. “This morning has been so crazy I haven’t even had time to drink any coffee yet.”

“I texted Lucy when I was in line and she said she’s not sure she’ll have time to plan, much less get off work to attend.”

“What? That sucks. Not even on the weekend?”

“Jack said she’s working at a marketing firm with crazy hours. Going to happy hour is a requirement if you want to get raises at this kind of place.”

“Yikes. That sounds awful.” I took a sip of my coffee. “I hope she can come. It’s her brother’s engagement party.”

“Me too. I don’t want Samantha to be stressed about her wedding. What do you have to do this morning?”

“I went into the office, but Bob is on my case about a potential story at the college. He wants something that will bring in readers, and if what I dug up is true, could have potential to be a larger story.”

“Wow. That would be great for you, right?” She took a large sip of her coffee.

I grimaced. “Sawyer might be involved, or at least impacted, if I print a story.”

“What?” She looked up from her drink in surprise. “Tell me more.”

I trusted Ashley. She’d never passed on anything I’d ever told her about a potential story and I needed a friend’s advice. A few people were standing in line but no one was seated next to us, but I still lowered my voice, “I overheard students talking about a sorority bet to sleep with professors.”

“What?” Her eyes widened. “That’s so ridiculous. They’re not serious, are they?”

“That’s what I have to find out. Apparently, the Zetas perform pranks every year, but it’s usually something dumb. Last year, they removed the boats and placed them all the place.

Ashley nodded in understanding. “Just silly pranks.”

“Right, but this year is different.”

Ashley’s finger traced the coffee lid while she thought about it. “If a professor is involved with a student, he could be fired, and isn’t Sawyer applying for tenure this year?”

“Yes, even a hint of a scandal could ruin his chances. And if he had to leave Chestertown to work at a different college he’d be devastated.”

Ashley’s eyes narrowed on me. “Is there something else going on? Are you worried Sawyer will cheat on you?”

I shrugged, not answering her because I *was* worried. That fear was always in the back of my mind no matter who I was dating even though I thought Sawyer was different. And that really scared me. The desire to hold onto him was greater than in any of my other relationships and he hadn’t tried to pull away from me yet.

“Oh, no, have you jumped to stalking already?”

Ashley’s fears weren’t unfounded. When a guy started to pull away, I not only dug in tighter to the relationship, I usually tried to read his messages, emptied his pockets looking for receipts, and I’d been known to follow him around. “Not yet. He’s potentially part of the story though. These women specifically mentioned the younger history professors, which are Sawyer and Owen.”

“Okay, but why would you need to stalk him?”

“I don’t like that term stalking. You make me sound like a crazy person, but Bob wants me on campus to see what else I can find out. You know how sexual assaults on college campus are in the news. The fact that these women are going after professors would make an interesting story.”

“I agree, but they make women look bad.”

“They do. It’s disgusting.” I tried to give those women the benefit of the doubt. They were still young. We’d all done stupid stuff when we were younger, but this affected other people’s careers and relationships.

“Isn’t there a saying about expecting something to happen and then it does? Because that’s what you’re doing with Sawyer and this bet.”

“But when it’s what every man has done, it’s hard to believe any other outcome.”

“Be careful. Sawyer’s a good guy. If you do something that violates his trust, I could see him walking away from you.”

She was right. Following him, checking up on him, would be a huge violation of his trust in me. He wasn’t like the other guys I dated. I needed to give him the benefit of the doubt while making a good faith effort to investigate this story for Bob.

“I can see Sawyer taking it personally and being really hurt.”

“I’ll be careful. I’m not stalking him or following him. I’m just hanging around on campus, talking to the newspaper staff, and going to his rowing practices to observe.”

“Stella!” she slapped my hand. “That’s following him. Why do you need to observe his practices?”

“To make sure those women aren’t targeting him.”

“You can’t control his behavior or his reaction. You have to trust that he won’t return their advances if there are any. You don’t even know if the rumors are true.”

“I know.” But I couldn’t help it. When I get a suspicion that something was going on or could be going on I couldn’t let it go. The doubt took over any logic and I had to find out if it was true. “All I know is that Bob wants a story and he thinks this is it.”

“I get that you have to do your job, but you have to balance your career with how it could affect Sawyer’s job. If he gets caught up in this story it would definitely affect his chances at tenure.”

That was the last thing I wanted to happen. So I’d investigate the hell out of this story and make sure Sawyer wasn’t touched by it.

## Chapter Nineteen



I WANDERED AROUND CAMPUS, STOPPING at the student center and later the library to work on potential articles for the online paper, but I wasn't able to learn anything else about the bet. I walked into the newspaper meeting room at four in the afternoon, eager for help. The fact was, my sources were the students and they were more likely to talk to fellow students than to a reporter.

"Hey, Stella!" the first student said, walking into the room wearing Washington College sweats and her hair in a messy ponytail. She placed her books and bag on the first long table.

"CeeCee right?" I asked.

"Yeah, what's this meeting about anyway?" CeeCee asked.

"I heard about the pranks the sorority houses put on every year and I thought you guys could get more information than I can," I said, getting right to the point.

"Oh, that stupid bet about sleeping with the professors?" She rolled her eyes as she pulled out a seat and sat.

Was I taking this whole thing too seriously? If the students thought it was dumb maybe it wasn't a real thing. I really hoped that was true and I wouldn't need to run any story. "Yes."

"How is it newsworthy?" she asked, as I was reminded of my days as a student reporter when Neil pushed me to find better stories and to think outside the box.

"Does the student paper usually cover sorority row's yearly prank?" I asked.

"We do, but not until after the prank is completed. For instance, we published pictures of the boats on the boathouse's roof last year. We usually don't have advance notice."

“But this year is different?” I sat on the desk in the front of the room as more students filed in.

“Right. That’s why I don’t think they’re serious. I mean, how can they be? I’m sure it’s all talk.” I really hoped she was right. I’d need to convince Bob that it wasn’t real though. “Do you know why they’re doing something different this year?”

“No, I don’t belong to a sorority. They hang out with the other sororities and fraternities for the most part.”

“Are you talking about the bet?” One of the newspaper students, Bryce, leaned against CeeCee’s table.

I was so engrossed in our conversation I hadn’t even noticed he’d been listening. “Yeah. Do you know something about it?”

“My girlfriend belongs to Zeta, and one of the members, Cindy Young, is pressuring the other girls to flirt with the professors, seeing if anyone will take the bait.”

Was there one professor in particular Cindy was targeting, or was it just any of them? I wanted to ask but I was afraid they’d see right through me. Some of the students knew I was dating Sawyer. I didn’t want them to think I wasn’t professional—that I was asking because of that. “I’m sorry. That sounds awful,” I said. Did this qualify as hazing, which would be against school policy? She was breaking probably a bunch of rules doing this, but why? “Why escalate from stupid harmless pranks to something like this?”

Bryce pulled out a chair, scraping it along the floor, dropped his book bag on the floor, and sat with his phone in his hand. “I think Cindy or one of her friends was sleeping with the history professor and he dumped her, or was never really into her. So she’s out for revenge.” He shook his head. “I don’t get it. You break up and move on.”

“Ah.” That made perfect sense, but who was the professor she was with? “That explains why she’s pressuring other students—she thinks she can get him fired.” Was she thinking about how it would be easier to get him fired if he’d slept with multiple students or was she trying to protect herself by not coming forward? What better revenge than ruining a man’s career and livelihood?

“It probably is, but she wants him to pay. Cindy is vindictive and a little crazy honestly,” Bryce said.

“Why isn’t it enough for her to report that she slept with him? Why the bet? Why get girls to come on to him?” The questions were swirling in my

head now.

“Make it look like he was sleeping with more students?” He shrugged, absentmindedly scrolling on his phone. He didn’t seem too concerned about his girlfriend or even the bet. Then he paused, looking up. “Wait, why are we talking about this? Is this the reason you called a meeting?” Annoyance dripped from his tone.

“Yes. If a professor is sleeping with a student or students that’s big news. There’s potential for grade altering, unfair advantages, the whole unequal power relationship. There’s a reason there are rules about professors and students sleeping together.”

“Honestly, I didn’t think they were serious about the bet. I know girls can be mean, but to get a professor fired seems a stretch,” CeeCee added.

“Maybe, it’s not though. Maybe this girl is so angry and hurt she’s out for revenge like Bryce said.” I was just trying to work through everything in my brain, but it could be that she wanted us to pick up this story. That’s why this prank was already making the rounds at the college when most years it was a secret. Cindy wanted this story to go public. But why?

CeeCee shot Bryce an annoyed look. “It’s like she wants to get caught. And who has the most to lose? Not her.”

I couldn’t imagine a woman wanting to draw attention to a man dumping her. It would be humiliating. When my exes dumped me I was embarrassed. I didn’t want it broadcast to everyone. “You could argue she wouldn’t want the notoriety that he dumped her,” I said.

“But what greater revenge is there than to accuse him of taking advantage of her, of multiple students? She saves face, looks like a victim, and he gets fired. He’s gone from the college and she never has to see him again,” CeeCee said.

“You’re right, it’s a win for her,” I agreed

Was I playing right into her hands by running with this story? Even if this was part of some big revenge plot, I should report it if a professor was sleeping with students. I worked for the college as an advisor even if it was voluntary. The college needed to know even if it would tarnish its reputation.

One question niggled in my mind during the whole discussion and I had to know. “Who’s the professor?” My heart raced and I held my breath waiting for someone to answer.

“She was fucking Dr. Mason,” Bryce said not even looking up from his phone.

My whole body relaxed at that. She’d slept with Owen, not Sawyer.

Bryce looked up at us then. “But the bet is to bang any professor, bonus points for the history department.”

Shit. I tried not to panic. Sawyer wouldn’t fall for something like that, right? Not when we were together. He said it was a common occurrence for students to come onto the professors and he’d talked about the fine line he walked not to upset them and get a negative review. That was an interesting angle for my story too. Why should student reviews hold so much weight for tenure? Was the end result encouraging students when they should be discouraging come-ons from students?

“I should have majored in history.” CeeCee sighed. “That department does have the youngest hottest guys.”

“What are we talking about?” another girl, I think her name was Jamie, asked. She sat at the table behind CeeCee and Bryce.

“You know, the sorority bet,” CeeCee turned to tell her.

Jamie laughed and then asked loudly. “Hey, aren’t you dating Dr. Hudson? Is that why you’re so concerned?”

Even though we weren’t hiding it, my face turned red as every single person turned to look at me. This was why I didn’t want to ask that question.

“The question is—how does this chick coerce another girl to sleep with a professor?” CeeCee asked.

I was grateful she took the pressure off of me to defend myself.

“Easy. She’s threatening them,” Bryce said.

“Threatening them with what?” CeeCee asked. “This isn’t high school anymore or even a Mean Girls movie. What could she possibly hold over them?”

“She works in the financial aid and scholarship department. She’s threatening to pull scholarships.” Bryce put down his phone, crossed his arms over his chest, and leaned back in his chair.

“Can she do that?” CeeCee sucked in a breath.

“She’s a devious bitch. My girlfriend has grants so I don’t worry about her, but most of the girls in the sorority have at least partial scholarships to be here,” Bryce said.



That made sense. Washington College was expensive, and it had to offer competitive packages to get people here. But how would a student have that kind of power? Was she bluffing? The only way I'd been able to attend Washington was the need-based scholarship I'd received, which benefited local applicants. I'd need to verify Bryce's claims and talk to Cindy Young.

Then I'd noticed the room had gone quiet and students were watching the door. I turned to find Sawyer leaning against the doorframe.

I tried to smile. Had he heard us talking? Did he know about the bet? Would he know I worried about him cheating? I moved to his side so we wouldn't be overheard. "Hey, we're having a meeting but I could come by your office after if you want?"

He glanced at the clock in the back of the room. "I just wanted to say hi. I have to be at practice in an hour."

Perfect. My original plan was to go to practice and it seemed even more important now. I needed to find out which girls on the rowing team were also in the sorority and which ones might be involved in the bet. "Great. I'll come watch."

"Really? It's pretty boring," he said, but looked pleased.

"Oh, I don't know about that."

He smiled. "Okay, see you then."

"See you later, Dr. Hudson," I said as he walked away.

He smiled over his shoulder in response.

Despite my guilt about the bet and my part in investigating the story, I liked that Sawyer stopped by just to say hi.

"Good idea, Ms. Lewis, you should definitely go to rowing practice," Jamie said.

I turned back to the students with a sinking feeling. Did they think I was going to practice to check up on Sawyer? Could they see those feelings on my face? "Why is that a good idea?"

Jamie laughed. "Because Cindy Young is on the rowing team."

"Of course she is," I couldn't help muttering under my breath. The source of the bet was on Sawyer's team. She'd already slept with a professor and now she was as close as you could get to another one—the one that was mine. They worked out together and they traveled to away games together. Was she the same girl I'd seen outside of his office the other day?

“Alright, let’s get to why I called you in today. A few women in the Zeta sorority have a bet to sleep with professors. I want to know if it’s a sorority prank, or just a few members are involved, I want to know who’s involved, if it’s serious, if anyone has followed through with it, etc.” I felt better laying out a plan but I was still scared of what I’d find out.

“If it’s real, shouldn’t the Kent County News report it before us?” CeeCee asked.

But if the school reported it first, a larger news organization would pick up their story before mine, my name wouldn’t be on the byline, and hopefully Sawyer wouldn’t blame me for any impact to his job. “But you are the voice of the school and I think you should get first crack at this one.”

“That’s awfully nice of you,” Jamie said. “Are you sure you don’t want to rat on your boyfriend because he’s sleeping with a student?”

“Jamie, we don’t know anything yet, so let’s not jump to conclusions.” I should have been telling myself that. Instead, I was having a hard time trusting that Sawyer wouldn’t fall for Cindy’s games. I had a sinking feeling about all of this and I was not looking forward to watching Sawyer interact with Cindy at practice. But at the same time, I had to be there.

## Chapter Twenty



ONCE THE MEETING WAS OVER, I went to the town's waterfront to meet Sawyer. The wind was light over the water and it was the perfect day to watch the long slim boats slice over the water, even though I felt anything but peaceful or serene. Sitting on the metal bleachers while they went through some warm-ups and exercises, I pulled up the team picture on my phone and saw Cindy was the girl who'd come out of Sawyer's office. She was tall, with sandy blond hair, and blue eyes.

I looked up from my phone so I could observe her in action. When Sawyer told them to divide into their respective teams and get into their boats, she placed a hand on his arm. I couldn't hear what they were saying but I could see the inviting smile on her face, and the way her hand squeezed his arm. My heart squeezed in my chest to see someone else touching Sawyer. Then she picked her leg up as if it was injured. Sawyer helped her to sit on the team bench and she stretched her leg out resting it on his thigh. Why wasn't he calling a trainer for her? They didn't practice on campus but surely he wasn't going to be the one assessing her for an injury. Sure enough, his hands probed her calf muscle.

I gripped the metal bleacher to stop myself from getting up and going over there to tell her to stop touching Sawyer. I didn't want to interfere with their practice, but I knew what Cindy was doing. She was flirting, but I needed to stay out of it. If Sawyer fell for it then he didn't deserve me.

I could tell myself that as much as I wanted, but it was hard to believe. I could see he was saying something to her, but couldn't hear what. Cindy reached out to touch his upper arm but Sawyer stood to make a phone call. I hoped it was to call a physical trainer.

Sawyer left Cindy on the bench and went to speak to the team. He pointed out over the water and I assumed he was giving them direction for

practice.

A college van pulled up a few minutes later and a female trainer stepped out with a black bag. She squatted down to speak to Cindy, but I diverted my attention back to Sawyer who watched his team's progress. Finally, the trainer helped Cindy over to the van. Then the trainer spoke to Sawyer and left.

Seeing me, Sawyer walked the distance to where I sat. "You made it."

I tipped my head back to meet his eyes, blocking the sun with my hand. "I told you I would." And it felt great he'd stopped during practice to speak to me.

"It's still a nice surprise. I'm sure you have work to do."

"Oh, I can do it as easily here as anywhere else."

"Want to go for a ride when I'm done?"

"A ride?" My brain jumped to me on top, slowly sinking down on him, as he cupped my breasts. My face flushed.

Sawyer smirked as if he could read my mind. "On my bike." He gestured toward the gravel parking lot where it was parked.

"But I don't have a helmet." And I was wearing a dress.

"I have one in my office."

"Okay." Did he plan to ask me for a ride or did he keep his helmet here for other women?

"Luke has a helmet for Emma. They rode one time but she didn't like it. I brought it with me because I was hoping you'd say yes."

"Oh." He'd planned to give me a ride and specifically brought me a helmet. Then he smiled, but I couldn't forget his hands on Cindy's calf. "Is Cindy going to be okay?" I tried to keep the bite out of my voice but was unsuccessful.

"Yeah, probably just a sore muscle. She'll be fine in a day or two. She said she injured herself at a party last night."

"That happens," I said, remembering my own wild days in college. Getting too drunk and smacking my head on something or falling down the stairs. Maybe she really was injured and I was overreacting. But then why come to practice? Why not go directly to the physical trainer? Unless she wanted Sawyer's hands on her.

"Let me get back to coaching. We should be done in," he checked his phone, "about thirty minutes."

I smiled. "I'll be here." The rest of the practice went smoothly, as far as I could tell. I had no idea what rowing actually involved besides strength training and practicing your sweeps which I assumed was the way they used their oars, including timing, technique, etc. The rowers had to be completely in sync for the boat to move the way they wanted it to in a race. That seemed to be the hardest part. Cindy was gone so I didn't feel the need to watch practice as closely and I could relax.

I checked the paper's social media page to see the numerous posts about online dating horror stories. Someone private messaged me about their experience meeting a man at his house and how he'd had porn on the TV, which made me feel a little sick. It was definitely not something I could print and I was grateful I wasn't online dating anymore.

"Ready to go?" asked Sawyer in a low gravelly voice. I looked up to find him standing there with a helmet in his hand.

"Yes." I stood taking his hand to help me down the bleachers. I'd never ridden before and I didn't think I would have agreed to get on the bike, had I not trusted Sawyer. Looking around, I saw that the team had already secured the boats on racks and was walking up the steps to the boathouse. "I didn't even realize you were done with practice."

"You seemed pretty engrossed in your phone, so I went to my office to grab the extra helmet and lock up."

"I was checking the paper's social media site. I asked for online dating stories and I got a ton of responses." We slowly made our way to the gravel lot, coming to stand next to his black chrome bike. "Honestly, some of the stories were horrifying."

"Are you glad you aren't doing that online dating anymore?" Then he settled the helmet over my hair, tucking my long red curls underneath it as best he could.

"I am." Grinning, I added, "I'm glad you saved me from that." No matter what happens I couldn't regret Sawyer, even though crying in his office the other day and baring myself to him had left me feeling especially vulnerable. The way Sawyer and I were together was not something I'd ever experienced before. I was on the cusp of something new and exciting.

"Are you ready?" he asked, strapping on his own helmet, which only made him look sexier.

"Yeah." Definitely. Even though I'd never done it before I was always up for an adventure. "Where are we riding to?"

“I want to show you something.” Sawyer swung his leg over the bike to get on and held his hand out for me to climb on the back.

“That sounds nice.” And it did. Something pinged in my heart. He wanted to show me something important to him. He might have not answered me directly when I asked how he felt about me the other night but every action he’d taken since seemed like a step forward in a relationship with me.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, very aware of my breasts pressed tightly to his back and my legs gripping his. Then he turned on the bike and the vibrations shot straight through my core. “Hopefully we’re not going too far,” I shouted over the roar of the bike.

His hand covered mine and he shouted over his shoulder. “Why, you don’t like it?”

“I like it a little too much and we’ve haven’t gone anywhere yet.” I winked when he turned his head to look at me so he’d get my meaning.

Chuckling, he removed his hand from mine and gripped the handlebar. My breath caught because I did trust Sawyer with my body, but did I trust him the way I should? My mind went back to Cindy’s hand on his arm and Sawyer’s fingers on her calf and I reminded myself it was purely a coach examining a team member until the trainer could arrive. Nothing more.

He rode through the streets of Chestertown at a leisurely pace. I squeezed my arms around him tighter when he picked up speed driving past the firehouse and out of town. The roads on the Eastern Shore were generally flat and it was nothing but miles of green grass, tall trees, and farms. The wind blew my hair and made the air feel cooler than when I was watching practice in the stands. The experience was exhilarating and I loved that I was experiencing this for the first time with Sawyer.

As beautiful as the scenery was, as amazing the last few days with Sawyer had been, somehow I knew this could be my last quiet moment with Sawyer and I wanted to make it last. I knew this bet could be the beginning of the end of us even if it was a harmless joke.

But the vibrations under me and his proximity made my muscles tense as my thoughts turned to the memory of his hands on my body. I wanted him now and I wanted the distraction from my thoughts, the bet, everything. As if Sawyer sensed my thoughts, he slowly drove down a small beaten path and stopped at a stream. The path was so smooth it was like he’d come here often. When he turned off the bike, I asked, “What is this?”

“A little plot of land our family owns. Since Luke got the farmhouse, I’m going to build a house here when I have a family.”

The land by the road was a flat field and the backyard was the woods and stream. I closed my eyes to envision it. It had everything you’d want if you were building a life, a family, with someone. I wanted to be part of his vision more than anything. I opened my eyes, seeing the light filter through the leaves, the wind rustling the branches. When I stood to get off the bike to explore, Sawyer tugged me until I fell sideways onto the bike in front of him. His feet on either side of the bike to balance us, his hands went to my head as his lips crashed into mine. We kissed until I forgot where we were, the awkwardness of my position on the bike, and the bet.

“Here?” I managed between kisses. I was lost in the reverent way he touched me, the slow exploration of his lips, but I wasn’t sure the woods was the best place to continue this.

“No.” Sawyer looked around. “I didn’t bring a blanket.” Then quieter, “Want to head back?”

I was throbbing with need at this point. “Yes.”

I moved to my original position behind him on the bike before he started it. “It’s beautiful here, Sawyer.” The fact that he showed me this place, which was special, gave me a glimpse of him. I wanted more of these moments, more of this feeling.

“It is. I come here often just to think.”

I could hear his unspoken thoughts. To dream about my future.

“As nice as it is to live close to campus, this is where I want to end up. I just need to make sure I get tenure. I can’t imagine living anywhere else.” And I knew he’d never told anyone else this or brought them to this spot. I knew that in the marrow of my being. What he’d just given me was special. Any story printed by the paper could destroy Sawyer’s dream to build a home here, to live near his family and friends, to make a life.

I wanted him to have his dream. I didn’t want him to leave. Not now. Not when I’d never felt closer to someone even if it scared me.

He revved the engine and drove the bike back to the road and toward town.

He finally pulled into the deserted gravel lot of the boathouse and parked next to my SUV. I stepped off the bike and unstrapped the helmet, letting my hair shake down my back. His eyes darkened watching me. Then

he secured the helmets and grabbed my hand, setting a quick pace toward the boathouse.

He used his keys to open the door and closed and locked it behind us. "No one should come in but let's go to my office just in case."

I followed him past the lounge and down the hallway, not needing to ask what he was talking about, because I knew he was just as affected by that ride as I was. I still felt the vibrations of the bike between my legs. He locked the office door behind us before backing me against the wall, his arms on either side of my head. "I don't think I've ever gotten so worked up on my bike before."

"I guess that depends on how many women you've had on your bike," I said softly. He'd said the helmet was Emma's but I couldn't stop the doubts.

"You. Only you." Then his mouth was on mine, his hands under my dress, dragging it up my legs, over my hips, my side until he was cupping my breasts through the lace bra. Whimpering into his mouth as he pulled the lace down to palm my breast, I felt like something had changed for him. I could see it in his eyes, feel it in his touch. Taking me to his property, revealing his dream to me. He'd let me in. The thought had me shaky and light-headed.

He pulled his lips from mine to pull my dress up and over my head so I was standing in only a black thong and my bra pulled down to expose my breasts. He reached around to unhook the clasp of my bra.

"You're so fucking beautiful like this." He was so open at that moment. I briefly closed my eyes at the raw emotion I saw in his. Then I tugged his shirt over his head and his hands went to my shoulders where he slowly turned me to face the wall. Uncertain, I glanced at him over my shoulder, but his hands smoothed down my arms and over my hands placing them gently on the wall. Then his hands were on my hips maneuvering me until I stood, hands on the wall with my ass sticking out. Then he slowly pulled my thong over my hips and down my legs. I stepped out of them as I heard the zipper on his pants slide down and him shrugging his pants off with his shoes.

I'd never felt more exposed, more vulnerable than I did in this position, until his hand finally touched me where I needed him the most.

"What do you need?" he asked quietly.

I had this burning need to have his cock inside me. "You. I need you." Only you. I'd never been so bold to tell a man exactly what I wanted. But



something about that motorcycle ride, what he'd revealed to me, made me desperate for him. As close as he was, I worried he was already slipping away from me. As he entered me, all I wanted was to enjoy this moment because I wasn't sure if it would be our last.

I squeezed my eyes shut to keep myself in the moment as he thrust into me. His hand circled my clit and I bit my lip to hold off the rapidly building orgasm. I spread my legs more, arching my ass and pushing back into him to meet his thrust for thrust.

I was lost in the sensation of how deep he felt in this position and the slap of his balls against my thighs when he bottomed out inside me. I wanted to grab him and hold him to me, but the orgasm rushed over me before I could. I sagged against the wall as he thrust a few more times, groaning his release as he draped himself over my back. I could feel his rough breaths on my skin and his arm banded around my stomach, holding me up. Every sensation, every emotion was too much. I was overwhelmed with what he'd shared with me, what we'd just experienced.

The moment was so hot and real. He stood, bringing me with him.

I turned to face him. "I didn't know you had that in you," I joked, trying to break the seriousness of what we'd just experienced.

"I'm full of surprises." He stood there naked and beautiful. I allowed my eyes to take him in from his broad shoulders down his tapered waist to his strong muscular legs. "Stella," he said, my name a warning. "If you keep looking at me like that—"

I wanted him to finish that sentence to fulfill the promise in his words, his eyes, but at the same time, I felt this overwhelming desire to run. "I'd better get cleaned up." Then I felt his cum drip from me as a roaring began inside my head. We hadn't used a condom. I had an IUD but I couldn't help wondering if he was clean. If he was safe? Turning my face from his, my heart raced, my breathing sped up, and panic overcame me. I couldn't trust any man I was with. Even if I thought Sawyer was different, I still needed to protect myself.

Sawyer ran his hands through his hair as he seemed to realize what I already had. "Sorry, I forgot a condom. I got caught up in the moment, but I'm clean."

"I am too," I said quietly. "We're exclusive right?" I swallowed hard trying to slow the rising panic.

"Of course." His eyes searched mine.

“Good.” I kept my face blank so he wouldn’t know what I was thinking. Somehow I knew he’d be hurt if he thought I didn’t trust his words. At this point in the relationship, wasn’t I supposed to? I trusted him to keep me safe on the bike, but did I believe him when he said he’d only been with me?

My mind flashed to his hands on Cindy’s leg and her hand squeezing his arm during practice. Why would he want me when he could have her? Feeling self-conscious, I quickly grabbed my clothes from the floor, throwing my dress over my head and slipping my feet into my shoes. “Bathroom?” I asked him.

“Through there.” He gestured to a different door I hadn’t noticed before.

“Nice, I didn’t realize you had a private bathroom.” I smiled to cover up the panic coursing through my body. As soon as the door shut behind me, I closed my eyes, bracing my shaking hands on the sink. I needed to clean up and calm down. I couldn’t let him know my doubts. I needed to be cool. Guys freaked out when you got too serious, too clingy. I could do this. I could be the easy breezy girlfriend he needed. I just needed to act the part, which I could do even though I’d never been successful at it in the past. Repeating the mantra to myself, I cleaned up, washed my hands, and splashed some water on my face.

When I emerged from the bathroom, Sawyer was fully dressed and turned from his position in front of the window with his hands in his pockets. “Everything okay?”

I realized I must have been in the bathroom for a while. “Of course.” Then I gestured over my shoulder. “I should go.” Sawyer raised his brows in surprise, but I wasn’t sure what I should do. I felt too exposed after what we’d shared and I didn’t want him to know how badly forgetting that condom shook me up. How was I so in the moment I forgot to protect myself?

“Oh, okay. I should probably grade some papers tonight anyway.” His concerned eyes were on mine. I knew he was giving me space I needed.

I smiled, my lips pressed tightly together, hoping he wouldn’t see through me. I needed time to process how raw I felt after we’d been so intimate, with nothing between us. And I couldn’t forget about the bet and my involvement in the investigation. If I wanted a man to be honest, I had to be the same and right now, I wasn’t being honest with him. I had to get

out of here before every single thought I was having was broadcast on my face.

He studied me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Oh, absolutely. I’m a little stunned from that awesome sex we just had.” My voice was bright and loud, but my words sounded cheesy even to my own ears. Why did I always sound like an idiot when I was nervous around him?

“Let me walk you out then,” he said taking a few steps to the door.

“I can walk myself out. I’m sure you have some things to do yet.” I wanted—no I needed—space to process what just happened.

“I do need to fill out some paperwork since one of my team members was injured.”

I placed a hand on his chest, going up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “Goodnight Sawyer. I’ll see you later.”

“Night, Stella.” I could feel his eyes on me as I walked out. I couldn’t believe I’d fucked Sawyer without a condom. That required a level of trust I didn’t have with him or anyone. I wasn’t sure what had me running faster—forgetting the condom or the realization that what I just experienced with Sawyer was more than sex.

“Are you fucking Dr. Hudson?” a female voice asked.

I almost tripped down the boathouse steps at the crude words. I looked up to see Cindy Young at the bottom of the steps.

“Well, he’s not my *teacher* so it’s Sawyer to me.” I was aware that my hair probably did look like I’d been fucked against a wall and my dress was surely wrinkled from where it had been thrown on the floor, but I was not going to let this twenty-something girl get the best of me.

“I have to go talk to *Dr.* Hudson about my injury.”

I lowered my voice even though the gravel parking lot was deserted. “Did Dr. Mason dump you? Is that why you have your sights set on Sawyer?”

She laughed but there was no humor in it. “Dr. Mason? I’m not desperate enough to fuck him. He’s way too old.”

I was pretty sure he was only late twenties or early thirties, but I tried not to be offended. “A little upset he dumped you?”

She snorted. “As if. I can have anyone I want.”

And maybe that was the issue. She was so used to getting any *boy* she wanted that when she set her sights on Owen Mason, she was completely

out of her league. He'd been playing women since she was in middle school. Normally, I wouldn't criticize a woman for being dumped, but this girl was after my man and I wouldn't let him go without a fight. I let all of the anger out on Cindy I'd felt for my exes who'd cheated on me and the women they'd cheated on me with. My lips curled in disgust. "I'd be careful if I were you. When word about your bet makes its way to the proper channels on campus you could get in trouble too."

Her face was cool, calm and collected. "What bet?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. What everyone on Sorority Row is talking about." Then I pointed at her. "Stay away from Sawyer Hudson. He's your coach and nothing else." I sounded more confident than I felt and she must have sensed that.

"Are you sure he's yours?" She smiled triumphantly as if she knew all of my darkest fears. That Sawyer wasn't really and truly mine. He was only mine for now or until he got bored of me, which was only a matter of time. The strong walls I'd erected against this girl crumbled at the first suggestion Sawyer would leave me the way all the others had.

"Stay away from him," I repeated.

"You seem awfully worried. What? Afraid he won't be faithful to you?" She inched closer to the boathouse door. Then she called over her shoulder, "If you're so worried, it's probably true." She'd tied her tight white tank top in a knot below her breasts and as she walked up the steps, her Daisy Dukes left nothing to the imagination.

It was then I noticed she was wearing high heels. There was no way she was injured if she was walking in those shoes. Her plan was to get close to Sawyer and seduce him. My feet itched to run after her and jump in front of her to stop her but I didn't. I had to let Sawyer go. If he was going to cheat on me then so be it. He wasn't the man I thought he was if he falls for Cindy after a moment like we just shared.

I kept telling myself that as I slowly made my way to my SUV, dropping my head to the steering wheel. Should I wait to see what time Cindy came out? If she was alone or with him? No, that would look like I was stalking. It went against everything in my being to put my car in reverse and back out of there, but I did it. I checked my rear-view mirror as I drove away, but I never saw anyone leave the boathouse.

It was hard for me to believe he could want me when he could have a twenty-something co-ed who looked that amazing in those shorts. I'd never

looked that good. I'd always been taller, curvier, and louder than most women. Most days it didn't bother me. Only when my boyfriend needed to choose between me and whatever new thing came around. I was never enough for him to stay.

## Chapter Twenty-One



ON THE WAY HOME I called Ashley over the Bluetooth in my car.

“Hello, chicky,” she called loudly.

“Hey.”

“What’s wrong?”

Should I tell her? I’d called my best friend for a reason. I needed her support right now. “I need you. I’m worried Sawyer’s going to cheat on me.” And I almost wouldn’t blame him. I saw how Cindy looked. She was young, thin, with large boobs. Who could resist that? I felt suddenly frumpy in my usual knit dress and flats.

Her loud sigh was clearly audible over the speakers in my SUV and I’d never felt so defeated. Would I ever not worry? “Want to come over?”

“Yes.”

“Drive carefully. I’ll see you in a few.”

“K.” I clicked the hang-up button on my steering wheel.

I pulled into Ashley and Logan’s driveway and knocked on the door. As I waited for her to answer, I was in a full-on self-pity session. I didn’t deserve Sawyer. I didn’t deserve anyone. I drove anyone important to me away—my mother, my father, my sister, every single boyfriend I’d ever had and now Sawyer. I wasn’t capable of trusting anyone.

Ashley opened the door, a glass of wine in her hand, and a sad smile on her face. “Come in, girlfriend. I’ve got you.”

I stepped inside and dropped onto her sofa as she closed the door. Even my friends thought I was pathetic. I shook my head when she offered me a glass of wine. “Where’s Logan?”

“Working late on a jury trial that starts tomorrow.” She sat on an overstuffed chair across from me. “What happened?”

“I left Sawyer,” freshly fucked and smelling of sex, “at the boathouse with Cindy Young.”

Ashley’s face wrinkled. “Who?”

“She’s the one who started the bet on campus to bang the professors. She was dating Owen Mason, the other history professor, he dumped her and now she’s out for revenge.”

Her face relaxed as she finally understood. “Ah, okay. Why is it a problem if you left her alone with Sawyer?”

“She said she was there to talk to Sawyer about her injury, but she went in with her T-shirt tied in a knot below her boobs,” I held my hands out in front of my boobs to indicate her size, “Daisy Dukes, and sky-high stilettos.”

“Well, she clearly didn’t injure her legs if she was walking in stilettos.”

“Exactly. She asked if I was fucking Sawyer and if I was sure he wouldn’t cheat. Then she went back to his office.” Where she was alone with him right now.

“Well, she certainly knew what to say to get to you.”

I didn’t mention that I was spiraling before I ran into Cindy Young. That sex with Sawyer left me raw and I was still reeling from the emotions.

Ashley was silent for a minute as she turned her wine glass in her hands. “You’re going to have to trust in someone. Why can’t it be Sawyer? I can’t think of a better person. There’s always a possibility that someone could cheat, and I know it’s hard for you, but if you want to get married and have a family one day you can’t do it without trust.”

Everything she was saying was right and nothing different than what Dr. Hirsch had already said, but I didn’t know if I could—especially with the image of Cindy smirking as she turned on her heel.

“Speaking of trust, I was thinking about this sorority bet. I think you have to report the relationship between the student and the professor. I’m sure there’s a policy against it.”

“There is.”

“It’s an abuse of power, whether Cindy is an adult or not. This professor controls her grades, writes recommendation letters. There’s a reason schools have rules against this. And who knows if Owen has done this before.”

Relieved I had something else to focus on rather than Cindy being alone with Sawyer, I said, “I called one of the professors in the history department of his old school but she didn’t say anything.” Not that I’d specifically

asked her about it. “Maybe I should follow up with her and a few others at his past schools.”

“But if you write a story, Sawyer could get caught up in it. You said yourself, you think Cindy is trying to lure him into doing something too.”

Any story published referencing a bet to sleep with history professors could potentially affect his career. How could I protect him and still do my job? “So, what should I do?”

“You have to tell Sawyer what you know. Tell him before someone else does and certainly before any story is printed.”

Thinking back to his story about the professor at University of Baltimore who got in trouble for speaking her mind, I said, “Even speculation could ruin his chances at tenure. He’s going to get caught up in this thing whether I want him to or not.”

“I agree. That’s why you have to talk to him.”

Before I spoke with Sawyer, I wanted an alternate story that would remove the focus or impact on Sawyer entirely. I needed to follow up with Owen’s past employers. My gut was telling me Owen wasn’t in Chestertown by choice. The first time I met him he complained about living here. So it was possible he had been forced to leave his last job. If I was right, these colleges kept pushing him from one school to another. It didn’t solve the problem and maybe that was the bigger story. Shouldn’t these professors be blocked from moving to a new school and doing the same thing over and over again?

I didn’t want to write the story without having the whole picture. I needed to know if Owen was a habitual offender. “I have a few more questions I need answered. I think there’s a bigger story here than the bet. And maybe he won’t be as upset if I have that bigger story in hand when I tell him.”

“Don’t wait too long to talk to Sawyer.”

“I won’t.” First, I’d focus on investigating and writing the story. Once it was done, I’d talk to Sawyer. All of these questions about Owen were swirling in my head and I wanted answers. Was there something in Cindy’s background that could help too? Make her seem less credible? I wanted to protect Sawyer. I just hoped he was worthy of my trust and support, however tentative it was.

“I better get working on it.” Glancing at my phone, I saw that it was already eight P.M. When I gave Ashley a hug before leaving, she said,



“Don’t screw this thing up with Sawyer.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Screwing things up was my greatest fear but it was usually completely out of my control. I couldn’t stop Sawyer from wanting me, from choosing me, or from cheating on me. That was on him.

“All you can do is trust in him and what you guys have.”

I nodded because I didn’t know how I felt. I vacillated between wanting to trust him, knowing our relationship was easy, to the worry about the constant temptation paraded in front of him as a professor.

As soon as I got home, I opened my laptop to research Owen’s prior employers and determine which professors would be good to contact. I made a note to call the one I’d spoken to earlier in the week first thing the next morning. Then I logged onto the paper’s network to dictate what I had so far. Bob was going to want a status update and I was sure he’d want it printed as soon as possible, but I wanted the student paper to print it first. Hopefully, it would take the heat off of me.

My phone buzzed and I was happy to see my sister had responded to my plea to come home and help our mother. Dr. Hirsch thought it was important that the whole family meet with her the first time to convince her to get help.

*Lindsey: Do you think this is real? I don’t want to waste my time.*

I couldn’t blame her. We’d hoped in the beginning she’d pull out of it, it was just a phase, but as she got progressively worse we’d lost hope. Lindsey was the first to really give up. When I’d ask her for help or tell her Mom needed us, she’d disagree. That our mother had given up on us, on life, on everything, and there was nothing she could do that would make a difference. It was heartbreaking but true.

*Stella: We’re going to try. I have a therapist willing to work with us and Dad is on board. Dad told me some stuff about why she’s depressed. I get it and I think you will too. Who knows if she wants to get better but let’s try this one time. The odds of recovery are better if the whole family supports her.*

My phone was silent for awhile, so I researched professors sleeping with students at other colleges and the general reasons it was forbidden. It was bad for student-teacher relationships. Some said professors socialized differently with men than women, worried they’d be accused of something improper. It was bad for the department, the school.

I felt sick when I found a flippant article why these affairs were attractive for both parties—the fact it was forbidden, illicit, secret. Another article referred to it as a fantasy that fourteen percent of students admitted to indulging in. Normally, I'd use this as inspiration for an online post to ask other people's opinions. Is it your fantasy to sleep with your professor? Do students sleep with their professors for better grades or the fun of sneaking around? I dictated some notes on a possible online post knowing it would generate a ton of comments and interest especially with a simultaneous article about the bet, but I didn't want to post it yet.

Then I dictated the article on the bet using the headline: *Owen Mason Caught up in a Sorority Bet to Sleep with Students. Is it the First Time?* I saved it to the newspaper's network and shut it down. Finally, I checked my phone to see that I'd missed Lindsey's response.

*Lindsey: Fine. I'll come home for this intervention and to hear what Dad has to say but that's it.*

She was still skeptical and I got that. It wasn't Mom asking for help, it was Dad. Hopefully, when Mom saw the support she had, she'd want to get better. As much as I tried to distance myself from my mom and her situation since I'd graduated and moved out, I was resigned that she wouldn't get better. But the desire to have a mother present in my life would never go away. Maybe if my grandmother was still alive she'd fill that role, but with her gone, and the relationship with my sister strained, my mother was all I had.

As I re-read Lindsey's response my phone buzzed with an incoming text from Sawyer.

*Sawyer: Goodnight. Sweet dreams*

I felt the initial flow of euphoria from the sweet text, then my fingers hovered over the keyboard unsure if this was a sweet goodnight text or a guilt-ridden one because he'd done something with Cindy. In the past, I didn't get over-the-top gifts or more attention when they cheated. It was more of a gradual pulling away that caused me to panic. They'd say I drove them to cheat, being too clingy, but I wasn't sure about that anymore. Dr. Hirsch made it seem like certain self-involved guys did it and it had nothing to do with me. I wanted to believe that so badly. So I'd choose to believe Sawyer was the honest sweet guy he'd always been with me.

*Stella: night!*

With that simple exchange I wanted my relationship with Sawyer to work. I wanted to get past my trust issues. I wanted more amazing birthdays with him by my side, I wanted his support when I tried something new and crazy like developing a college course and teaching it, and I wanted his support when we confronted my mother with Dr. Hirsch. I wanted him to see the good, the bad and the ugly sides of my life. I wanted everything. But did he?

I needed to get this bet investigated and resolved and make sure nothing would touch Sawyer. He had to understand I was protecting him. I needed to find dirt on Owen. If Owen had a habit of sleeping with students, it would draw Bob and readers' attention away from the bet. The real issue would be Owen's bad behavior and why universities kept sweeping it under the rug and shifting the problem to a different school.

I shut my laptop and went to bed, everything turning round in my head making it difficult to sleep. I had this deep-seated nagging feeling that Sawyer wouldn't understand my involvement in the bet or the investigation, despite all of my efforts.

## Chapter Twenty-Two



I UNLOCKED THE OFFICE, MAKING sure to walk around to ensure it was empty for my phone call with Dr. Howe. I didn't know if she would reveal anything but I wanted to be careful. Bob was already pushing for a story. I didn't want him to have any details until it was done. I saved Bob's office for last since it was the only enclosed room at the back of the office. The door was locked and the lights off. I breathed a sigh of relief and made my way to my cubicle.

I picked up my phone and dialed Professor Howe hoping she could give me more than the other day.

"Professor Howe."

"Professor Howe, it's so good to talk to you again. I'm Stella Lewis. I called the other day to get information on Owen Mason." I kept my voice light and happy.

"I remember." Then she was quiet for so long I thought she'd hung up or I'd lost the connection.

"Dr. Howe? Is this a bad time? Because I can call—"

"No, it's not actually. I've been thinking about your call, how popular you said he is with the students, and I feel obligated to tell you what I know."

"Ok." Was this it? Was she going to spill dirt on Owen I could use? I gripped the pen in my hand so hard my knuckles were white. "Dr. Howe? Do you mind if I record the call?"

"That's fine. I know he hasn't worked at Washington College for long, but there's a reason why he's worked at so many schools, and it's not that he loves traveling and seeing new places."

"Oh?" I could barely contain my excitement. This was the break I wanted.

“He sleeps with his students. He sucks them in, makes them feel like he’s into them, and then he cuts them loose.”

Not wanting to interrupt her flow I remained silent but my mind was reeling with thoughts of this being the breakthrough I needed.

“A student approached me and told me how he’d treated her. He seems to go after the vulnerable ones who are desperate for a relationship, a father figure, something. He tells them he’s serious about them, wants to get married, then he dumps them. Someone older could probably handle it better, but these women are younger and more vulnerable.” She fell silent for a minute. “He’s in a position of power. The woman reported him and the school fired him, but unfortunately he just keeps going from school to school doing the same thing.”

Everything she said was second-hand information, so I hoped she’d give me the name of the girl so I could talk to her directly. I needed to speak to the source in order to publish this information.

“Since the last time you called I called the last school he worked with. I called around his department until one of the professors was honest with me. Same thing happened there.”

“So, the schools fire him, but there’s nothing on his record. He’s free to keep doing this somewhere else.” How is that okay? Why are these schools ignoring the larger issue? “Dr. Howe, thank you so much for telling me this. It’s happened here too and I’m afraid it’s about to blow up into a bigger issue. Can I have the name of the woman he did this to at your school so I can speak to her?” Then I held my breath because it was unlikely she’d want to reveal her identity to me even if she didn’t already know I was a reporter.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’d have to talk to her first.”

I needed to be forthcoming with her too. “Listen, I haven’t been completely honest with you. I’m actually a reporter here at the Kent County News and I’m the advisor for Washington College’s student paper.”

I heard her sigh over the phone and I hoped I hadn’t screwed everything up by not being upfront with her the first time I’d called.

“I’m sorry I lied but I wanted to see if he’d done the same thing at his old jobs. The student he slept with here wants revenge and I’m afraid that she’ll take down other innocent professors with her.”

“I understand. I’m not sure this woman will want to talk to you as a reporter.”

“I get that and I can’t run the whole story without her cooperation. I can call the higher-ups in the school but they’re unlikely to talk to me.”

“Any publicity and this will be bad for the schools he worked for. They covered it up.”

“And that’s the larger issue.” These men essentially get away with it and go on to do it at another school. I had to print this story. I just hoped this woman would talk to me. I could promise her anonymity for now, at least until it blew up, because I had a bad feeling it would. But my job was to hunt down the story and print it. What the public did or felt about it was out of my hands. Except this time my story directly affected Sawyer’s reputation. If I could focus the article on Owen’s behavior, maybe I could avoid mentioning the bet at all.

I heard murmuring in the background and then Dr. Howe said, “I’m sorry. I have to go. I’ll talk to her and let you know if she wants to get in touch.”

“Thank you so much Dr. Howe. I really appreciate it.”

She hung up and I pulled up the story I’d started last night. I wondered if Cindy would be willing to talk to me and give me her story. She seemed fairly confident and popular. Was there a reason Owen chose her? If what Dr. Howe said was true Owen chose vulnerable women he could manipulate.

“Stella.”

I jumped, I was so lost in thought. “Oh, Bob. Didn’t know you’d walked in.” A hand on my chest to slow my racing heart, I wondered how much he heard.

“How’s that college bet story coming?”

I needed to verify what Dr. Howe told me before I gave him too many details. “Oh, great. I have a few more people to interview today.”

“I want the draft on my desk today.”

This is what I’d been afraid of. “Oh, I’m not ready yet.” I still wanted to talk to Cindy who would probably be reluctant to talk. Then I was waiting to hear back from Dr. Howe. “I need a few more days.”

“What do you have so far?”

He leaned his shoulder against the wall of my cubicle.

“Well, speaking with students on campus it seems that this woman had a relationship with a professor and now she wants revenge.”

“That’s not new information. Is she sleeping with more than one professor? Now that would be interesting.”

That was the exact angle I wanted to avoid. “I have no evidence of that.”

“Speculation is everything in a story. I thought you knew that.”

I did, but not when the object of speculation was your boyfriend. “I do.”

“I want that story on my desk by the end of the day.”

“Okay.” That was not happening but I’d deal with it later. I waited until he’d walked back to his office and shut the door to panic. What was I going to do? I needed more time. Somehow I had to convince him of that. First, I needed to speak with Cindy. After our exchange the night before I had serious doubts she would.

I packed up my stuff, drove my car to campus and parked, so I could call around to other colleges Owen had worked at in privacy. After leaving messages on several voice mails, I looked up to find Sawyer striding toward me. I couldn’t stop the smile which spread over my face at the sight of him in suit pants and a blue button down shirt rolled up to expose his forearms. I opened the door and got out to greet him.

He stopped in front of me. “Good morning.” He held his hand out for me to grab as he pulled me up and into his arms. “You ran out last night. Is everything okay?”

“Oh yeah, work stress. You know how it is.” My breath caught as my eyes flew to his and I could feel my cheeks heat. Could he see right through me? “Is Cindy Young okay? I saw her stop by to see you last night.” I carefully searched his face for any sign of guilt or deception. The fact that I was the one keeping a secret was not lost on me. But I couldn’t stop myself from worrying.

“Yeah, the trainer thinks it’s a strained calf. A few days of rest are all she needs.”

I carefully studied his face but didn’t see anything akin to guilt or deception on his face. Just a coach talking about his player. “That’s good. Hopefully it won’t affect the team too much.” Should I tell him about the story now? If I wanted a mature trusting relationship with Sawyer, I needed to be honest with him. And if I could interview him about the bet and his interactions with students it would flesh out my story. “Listen, I wanted to —”

“Hey man.” Owen walked up to us then. “Are you ready for the meeting?”

“Yeah,” Sawyer answered. Then to me he said, “We have a departmental meeting this morning.”

“Good luck, if that’s what you say for these things.” There was my opportunity to tell him what was going on and I missed it. “Can we talk later?”

“Sure.” He leaned down to place a light kiss on my lips and then they were walking back toward the Gibson Center building. Touching my lips, I watched him walk away, hoping that wasn’t the last time his lips would be on mine.

There were only two sororities on campus, so I pulled up the map and headed for Cindy Young’s sorority, Zeta Tau Alpha. Its site indicated it was a national sorority which promoted friendship, leadership, learning and apparently, bets to sleep with professors. On the way over I scrolled through their social media feed seeing the positive messages from pledges who said they were initially scared to pledge but happy to be part of the sorority now. Finding their website, it was more of the same. Pictures of women dressed similarly, smiling, and happy, which belied the more sinister things I’d discovered about its members this week.

Hoping Cindy was home, I rang the doorbell. A young woman answered with dark hair pulled in a ponytail. “Oh, hi!” She said when she pulled open the heavy wooden door for me. “Can I help you?”

“I’m here to talk to Cindy Young.”

“Oh, let me get her.” She opened the door wider and gestured for me to take a seat in their living room. “Have a seat.”

Smiling I sat on the antique velvet chair facing a fireplace with a large photograph of the current Zeta members standing in similar pink dresses.

“What are you doing here?” Cindy asked, standing with her arms crossed over a black Zeta T-shirt.

Remembering how she’d reacted last night when I challenged her, I needed to talk to her from a place of friends not enemies. “I wanted to talk to you about the bet.”

“There’s no bet. I already told you.” Irritated, she turned as if to leave, already done with this conversation.

“Look, have a seat. I’m not really interested in the bet.” She paused with her back to me. “I’m interested in Owen Mason and how he treats his



female students.”

Cautiously, she turned to face me, her arms lowered to her sides, her face softened. “What do you mean?”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Hopefully, she’d talk now. “Have a seat.”

She slowly lowered herself into a tall wingback chair by the doorway.

“I talked to a professor at his old school. Apparently, he picks vulnerable students to pursue, makes empty promises of a future, and then dumps them. All while keeping his playboy persona amongst the other professors. Eventually, the school finds out about it and fires him, but he’s always able to move to the next school and start over again.”

Her confused eyes met mine. “I’m not the only one?” she asked softly.

I felt for her. She was young and naïve. Not unlike me when my college boyfriends cheated on me. “No. I haven’t heard back from the other schools yet, but I suspect he’s done this at every school. I’d like to write an article focused on how he’s allowed to continue doing this at new schools.”

She rubbed her arms as if she was chilled. “He definitely pursued me. He made me feel special.” She shook her head laughing. “You know, my dad was never around. Is that why it was so easy for him? Did he seek me out?”

“It sounds like he does pick certain girls. I’m sorry he hurt you.” Cindy was a young woman acting out because she’d trusted someone and he’d hurt her. I shivered from the parallels between us. Both of us from messed-up families, trusting easily, and then getting burned. I wondered if she’d turn out like me—reluctant to trust anyone.

She nodded. “I was so stupid. And the bet was stupid. I was angry. I wanted him to hurt like I did. I wanted to get him fired. It sounds so stupid admitting it out loud.”

“No. You were angry and hurt. I get it.” She definitely went about it the wrong way, but this was why professors shouldn’t be sleeping with students. She’s an adult, but barely. She was no match for Owen.

“I won’t use your name in the article but can I print what happened?” When she didn’t answer, I continued. “I’m still trying to get the woman’s name he did this to at his last school. Maybe you could convince her to talk when I do? I want to stop him from doing this to someone else.”

“If my name isn’t mentioned, I’d like to help.” She was quiet for a minute, her expression open and vulnerable. “This is so not me. I joined a sorority for friendship, a group, a family. Not to tear other people down.”

“It’s okay. I understand.” We talked more about how they met, what Owen said to her to win her over. He told me he was all about one night stands but it was clear from talking to Cindy, that he’d pursued her, made her think she was in a relationship, and then dropped her. “What I don’t understand is why he does this?”

“I don’t know. I thought we had a real relationship, but then he broke up with me so callously. Said he didn’t believe in relationships. It was so confusing, because everything he’d said and done up until that point made me think it was the real deal.”

I nodded. I hadn’t been in the exact situation but I knew what it was like to be blindsided by a guy. To think everything was fine and to have the rug pulled out from under you. “There will be other guys. You’ll recover from this and it will be a learning experience. The best thing to come out of this is to stop Owen Mason from taking advantage of other students.”

“Right.”

For the first time since I’d met Cindy she seemed hopeful. I’d given her a purpose—something better than a bet to sleep with the professors. I didn’t ask her if she had slept with Sawyer or anyone else. I wanted to think she was misguided. That she never intended to sleep with Sawyer, but as always, doubt circled my mind. Right then, I needed her trust. Asking her if she slept with another professor wouldn’t help.

Saying good-bye and promising to keep her advised of my investigation into Owen’s past, I left, checking my phone. There was a message from Dr. Howe, which I listened to walking down the steps of the sorority and across campus to my car. “Stella, the woman agreed to speak with you as long as her name is withheld or changed. If that’s acceptable, you can call me back for her information. Thank you for doing this. I really hope this will stop him from doing this at another school.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as I disconnected and immediately dialed her number to get this woman’s information. Bob wanted this article by the end of the day so I didn’t have any time to waste.

After thanking Dr. Howe for the student’s information, I slipped into my car and immediately called her. “Kendall?”

“Who is this?” she asked, sounding so young over the phone.

“This is Stella Lewis, the reporter from the Kent County Times and the advisor to the student paper at Washington College.” I figured it would be

less intimidating if I mentioned the student paper doing the article. “Dr. Howe gave me your number?”

She sighed. “Right. I didn’t expect you to call so soon.”

“I’m sure you’re reluctant to get involved, but another woman was affected here at Washington College. She wants to stop Dr. Mason from doing this at a different school.”

“I would too,” Kendall said quietly.

I felt my whole body relax. Everything was falling into place. “In order to do that I’m going to print an article describing what he did to you, the woman at Washington, and how these schools fire him but move him along to the next school to do this to someone else. There’s a reason schools have no-fraternization policies between professors and students. Professors are in a position of power. These kinds of relationships ruin the teacher-student dynamic and hurt women at a vulnerable time in their lives.” When they’re just starting out. I tried not to draw the same parallel to my life, but it was tough not to.

“I’d like to help.”

“Can you tell me what happened between you and Dr. Mason?”

She went on to tell a similar tale to Cindy Young’s, except in her case she was raised by her grandparents. Her mom couldn’t care for her. Essentially, Owen sought out women who’d been abandoned by parents and were easily won over. But why? “Do you know why Dr. Mason does this? Did he tell you anything about his history?”

She laughed. “No. I have no idea. It’s one thing to be upfront and say you’re just in it for a good time, but he makes it seem like it’s a relationship, that he wants to get married. He’s an asshole? I don’t know. Look, I want to help but I also want to move on.”

“I get it.” My window for getting information from her had closed. She only wanted to help so much but I was still grateful for the information she gave me. “Before we get off the phone let me give you the woman’s information here so you can talk if you want. No pressure.”

“Sure, I’d like that.”

After I’d recited Cindy’s information, I thanked her, and got off the phone. I wanted to find a third case from the first school Owen had worked at to show a pattern of behavior, but no one returned my calls.

All of a sudden, my phone started buzzing with online notifications. Pulling up the app, I saw that it was in response to the Kent County News

page, but it wasn't my most recent post. Someone had posted a poll: *Would you sleep with your professor because a) it's forbidden, b) it's fun to keep a relationship a secret, or c) in exchange for better grades.* My stomach dropped and my heart was racing. Who'd done this? It certainly wasn't me. I'd only drafted notes on a possible post and I hadn't framed it as a poll like this one was. Normally, I was the only one who used this account but technically the password was available to anyone. So who would have done this? It had to be Bob. He was the one pressuring me.

Hurrying back to the office and parking my car, I burst through the front door, and headed straight for his office. I was so angry I was shaking and I had no idea what I was going to say to him. When I reached his doorway, he was on the phone. I crossed my arms over my chest and bit my lip as I waited. I couldn't go off on him because he was still my boss. I needed this job.

When he got off the phone, he raised his eyebrows at me. "Do you need something?"

"Did you post on the paper's social media page?" I asked, trying to rein in my anger.

"Yeah, aren't you always saying that we need to be more active? I saw that you had drafted something and I liked it so I posted it. It goes well with the accompanying article too."

My stomach dropped. Had he read my notes which were on the network? "What accompanying article?"

"You know, the one on the bet. I took the liberty of interviewing students to see which professors were targeted. Looks like it was the history department."

I took a step into his office unable to keep my panic out of my voice, "You're not printing names, are you? Because we have no proof." If he did, Sawyer's job was on the line, not to mention our relationship.

"No, but I don't see why we can't name the department. I don't know why you're so upset about it. I used your name, so you'll get the credit."

That was the last thing I wanted. I tried to take a few breaths to calm myself. "I don't think that's the big story here. I'm working on something bigger than that."

"What could be bigger than girls betting to sleep with their professors? I told you these kind of stories generate interest and it's like the opposite of the Me Too movement. It's perfect."

“No it’s not. It was a bunch of stupid kids talking. We have no evidence that anything happened.” I still held out hope that was true. “The bigger story is that the professor who’s involved sleeps with his students at every university, is fired, and then re-hired with a clean slate to do it all over again.”

“Stella, no one cares about that. I’m sure professors sleep with their students all the time. The fact that its young women targeting the teachers is the angle that will get picked up. You should be happy. Your name is on the article. You wrote it.”

My heart sank because he was referring to the notes I’d dictated on the original bet idea. I saved it to the network like I always do. He had access to it. “That wasn’t my story. That was just my notes.”

“It was great, Stella. You should be proud. It’s exactly what I was looking for. Don’t waste your time investigating the professor. You should be checking into the background of these sorority girls. Have they made other false claims in their past, do they sleep around? Have they targeted the football team? The baseball team?”

There was no way in hell I was doing that. I would not attack the women who I saw as victims in this case. But that’s what the media did—it attacked the victims. It made for a better story. I didn’t agree with him but he was my boss. It was his decision what to print, not mine. “When is it being published?” Maybe there was still time to get it pulled or at least get my name off the byline.

“It will be in the morning paper. Want to see it?” He waved the printed article at me and I grabbed it.

“Can you change the byline to your name? It’s your article, after all.”

“I don’t know why you’d want to do that. It’s your investigation and work.”

I skimmed his article quickly and when I’d finished, I said, “These are not my words. Please take my name off of it.” Then I ran out of his office, the article clutched in my hand. I had to talk to Sawyer before someone else did. Even if my name was removed, the damage had already been done.

When I reached the sidewalk I almost ran into Ashley. “Hey!”

“Did you post that poll online?” she asked.

If Ashley had already seen it, had our other friends seen it? Had Sawyer? “No. Bob did.”

“There’s a link to the post which takes you to an article about the bet.”

I was so intent on getting to Sawyer what she said almost didn't register. "Wait, what?" I hadn't seen that.

"Yeah, look." She scrolled through her feed until she found it and held it up for me.

"Oh, shit." Even if Bob took my name off the printed article, my name was on this one. The one that would get re-posted and shared.

"Have you talked to Sawyer yet?"

"No."

"Then why did you write it?"

"I didn't. I mean I did, but I didn't print it. I didn't mean for anyone to see my notes. It's complicated. My boss took my notes and wrote the article. It wasn't me. My story was Owen's history of getting fired, not the stupid bet."

"You better talk to Sawyer before someone else does."

"That's where I'm going."

"Good luck."

"Thanks." Then I was rushing down the street to campus for the second time today. I'd run out without my purse. When I saw that article in Bob's hands, all I could think about was getting to Sawyer. Telling him the truth. Hoping he'd believe me.

I practically ran across the quad and up the steps to the Gibson Center and the steps to Sawyer's office. I skidded to a stop outside his door where Sawyer was reading something on his computer. Please don't let it be—

"Stella, I'm surprised you're here." His face was tight with anger and I knew he'd seen it.

"I had to talk to you about something." My shoulders slumped. I was too late.

"Is it this?" Then he turned his screen toward me and the headline read in big black letters *History professors sleeping with sorority girls. All part of a bet.*

I winced even though I'd already seen it. "That's not my story. You have to understand." My words sounded weak and pathetic even to my own ears.

Then he pointed at the byline. "It clearly says Stella Lewis. It's your story."

His face was tight with anger, his eyes closed off. I'd never seen him look at me this way.

“Sawyer, you have to believe me. I didn’t write that story.”

“So these aren’t your words?” His eyes dared me to deny it.

“Well, technically they’re my notes, but I didn’t write an article. I dictated my notes about the bet. I never meant for it to become a printed story. I was researching something bigger than this.”

“What could be bigger than the history professors sleeping with their students?” He slammed his hand down on the desk causing me to jump. “It doesn’t say my name, but it doesn’t have to. How many professors are there? Owen and I will be the first ones accused. I’ve already received calls from the dean and the president. Jesus, Stella. How could you do this to me?”

I’d never seen Sawyer anything other than calm and controlled. “I didn’t. You have to believe me. I was researching Owen’s history, how he’d been fired from other universities for sleeping with his students. I didn’t want to write about the bet.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s out there now. My job is on the line.” He dropped his head into his hands. “I can’t deal with this right now. I have to meet with them and tell them something. You know they won’t believe me. You know how this works.”

“I’m so sorry, Sawyer. I’ll do anything to fix this.” I stepped toward him wanting to touch him, wanting to soothe him, but I hesitated, the distance between us so much greater than his desk.

“Don’t. You’ve done enough. Stay away from me and don’t interfere in my life or my job anymore.” He was silent and then said quieter, “I knew this would happen.”

Then the words he’d used to describe me at Ashley’s barbeque came flooding back to me. Had he lied when he’d said he’d been mistaken about me? Had he always thought I was flighty and impulsive? “What do you mean you knew this would happen?” I asked slowly my eyes narrowing on him.

“I knew you were impulsive, didn’t think things through, but I never thought you’d do something like this. Did you even care for me at all?”

Pain sliced through my chest. I thought he’d seen me and appreciated me for who I was. “Did you care for me?” I asked quietly. How could he think so little of me if he did?

“You need to leave.”

“I care about you, Sawyer, and I came here wanting to fix it. You don’t know the whole story.” Now I wasn’t so sure it was worth fixing. Not if he thought that way about me.

“Everything I need to know is in this article.” His hand slapped down on his monitor.

I turned so he wouldn’t see my tears. I didn’t want him to see how his words had hurt me. I’d worried that he’d cheat on me or my inability to trust would be our demise. I never imagined he still thought of me as impulsive and flighty.

I walked away, because he was the best thing that had ever happened to me and I had completely screwed everything up. If only I’d talked to him before this came out he’d understand. He wouldn’t be saying those words or looking at me in disgust.

I walked slowly down the hall, hoping Sawyer would come out and tell me he’d made a mistake. That his harsh words were spoken out of anger and he didn’t really think I was impulsive. That he wanted to talk to me to hear my side of the story. That he wanted to let me help him, but he didn’t.



## Chapter Twenty-Three



AS I SLOWLY WALKED DOWN the steps from Gibson Center my brain was foggy but I knew I needed to do something to make this right for Sawyer. I had to do something. I needed to call Owen's first employer. It was my only option, but I didn't have my phone. I'd run all the way here with nothing. I needed to get back to the paper before the office was closed for the day because everything was in there—my keys, my purse, my phone, my laptop. And I no longer trusted Bob. I couldn't dictate notes on the network anymore.

I hurried across campus and through town until I came to my office, rushed in, grabbed my stuff and was back out the door. I didn't want to stick around and risk Bob overhearing me and my plan. I wouldn't dig into Cindy's background or slut-shame her like he wanted.

Ducking back into my car, my office for the day, I frantically dialed every number at the first college until I got someone on the phone from the dean's office. I wanted to speak to someone in an official capacity now that the article had hit the papers.

"Hi, I'm Stella Lewis, reporter for the Kent County News."

"What is this in reference to? The dean rarely speaks to reporters," the woman said.

"I'm calling because one of the professors at Washington College worked at your school six years ago. Owen Mason?"

"I'm not allowed to discuss prior employees or their history here."

"I figured that but it's come to my attention that he's been fired from at least one other school for sleeping with his students." I waited to see if she'd respond but when she was quiet, I continued. "There's a report of him doing the same thing here at Washington College. There's an article running tomorrow morning in the paper and I'm writing a follow-up piece on

colleges' practice of covering professors' transgressions and allowing them to move to another school with a glowing recommendation." I had no idea if the recommendations were glowing but I figured the stronger language got my point across.

"I told you we're not allowed to discuss prior employees."

I had no intention of backing down. "I want to talk to the dean or the president because I believe his employers knew this happened, fired him, but allowed him to move to another school where he could continue doing the same thing. Does your college want to go down as one that covered this up? This story has potential to be picked up by the Associated Press."

I was bluffing but I hoped she didn't know that. The woman was quiet for so long I thought she'd hung up. "Hold for Dean Price, please."

I let out a long sigh. I'd gotten past the first hurdle.

"Dean Price, may I help you?" a man asked.

I relayed everything I'd told the first lady to answer the phone. I could practically hear him weighing his options through the phone. The only thing worse than the initial cover-up was continuing to deny any wrongdoing once the story blew up. I knew he'd talk with the right amount of pressure.

"This is going to get picked up by the Associated Press. You can get ahead of this story or wait for it to find you. Your choice." I was coming on strong but I needed this information now if I had any chance of fixing things for Sawyer.

"Can you hold while I pull up Mr. Mason's file? I want to make sure I know the full story."

"Of course." I waited a few minutes, biting my nails.

"Ms. Lewis?"

"Fine. Yes, he was fired for his relationship with a student. Only one came forward. It's common practice to provide them with a recommendation based on their work not the infraction for legal reasons."

"I understand that." It wasn't anything I hadn't already suspected but it still made the school look bad. "Do I have permission to print everything you've told me today?"

"You do but only with my statement."

It wasn't unexpected. Colleges were all about public perception and spinning stories. "Which is?"

"George Washington College deeply regrets any harm caused by Owen Mason. As soon as the inappropriate relationship with his student was

discovered he was terminated. We greatly regret any harm this caused to his future students in not disclosing this information.”

Was that enough? I didn’t think so. I got that schools could be sued by prior employees, but which was worse? Which was more problematic for the school: public outcry, new victims, or a disgruntled employee? I would think the employee was the least of their issues.

Once I finished taking notes and got off the phone with Dean Price, I dictated the new article with the working title: *Colleges Dump their Problematic Professors onto Other Unsuspecting Schools*. I would post a poll just like Bob did, asking what people thought the school should do, with a link to the new article. I had no power to get the article printed, but I could post whatever I wanted online at least. Now the question was when to do it? As soon as possible, or wait until the first article was printed tomorrow? From the paper’s perspective the next day would have the most impact. But what would be best for Sawyer? I knew without a doubt that writing this second article wasn’t enough. I needed to fix things for him. But how?

I looked at the calendar, realizing my appointment with Dean Strauss was the next day for my online media class proposal. I hadn’t worked on it at all lately. I’d need to pull an all-nighter to put everything together and to prepare my presentation. I didn’t want to talk to Sawyer until I had something concrete to show him.

I finally fell asleep at three AM, my syllabus and outline completed. I had recurring dreams where I pleaded for Sawyer to listen to me but he’d refuse and walk away. Over and over again, I watched Sawyer walk away from me.

## Chapter Twenty-Four



I WOKE UP, SHOWERED, AND put on my only suit. I wanted to dress the part. I didn't know how my job would work out at the paper if I couldn't trust Bob. If he would continue to require me to write stories I didn't feel right about or before they were properly researched. The fact that he'd stolen my notes and used my name on the byline really got to me. So this meeting with the dean was more important than ever. I might need a new job very soon.

My phone buzzed frequently with updates on the newspaper's poll Bob posted and well-meaning messages from my friends checking up on me, but nothing from Sawyer. Not that I expected anything. I'd hurt him in the worst way imaginable. I might have cost him his job and there was no coming back from that. All I could do was try and fix it the best I could.

In the end, Sawyer would have to make a decision. I tried not to think about the fact that he might have already made his decision and had no intention of changing it.

I arrived at the office early to post the new poll and added a second question: *Do you think Dean Price's statement from George Washington College is enough? What do you think needs to be done in this situation?* I posted a link to the new article focusing on Owen Mason's history and emailed it to Bob, hoping he'd print it too. I didn't have high hopes. I walked to the campus for my nine-thirty AM meeting with Dean Strauss. When I passed Ms. Gladys's home she was already on the porch. Seeing I still had time before my meeting I stopped to greet her, "Morning Ms. Gladys."

"Stella, what are you doing out walking this early?"

"I have a meeting at the college. Just wanted to clear my head first." I walked up the steps to her porch and sat in the rocking chair next to hers,

remembering the last time I was here. When she told me how Sawyer and Luke had painted her shutters and cleaned her porch for her. How she tried to set us up. However misguided she was, it was a good memory. I wished I could go back to that day and start over. If I'd never overheard Laura's conversation about the bet, none of this would have happened.

"What's wrong?"

I closed my eyes, having a hard time believing everything that had happened in the last few weeks, the last few days. I'd had everything and now I had nothing. I said, "How do you know something's wrong?"

"I'm not sure I've ever seen you without a smile on your face. Whether it's real or manufactured, it's there. Today you look like someone kicked your puppy."

"I don't even have a puppy," I said, finally smiling. It was good to talk to someone else. I couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom I'd felt as soon as I saw that online poll I hadn't written.

"You know what I mean. Tell me."

I relayed everything that had happened between me and Sawyer since the day she had me take him a basket of muffins.

Smiling, she said, "I knew those muffins would do it."

"Yeah, okay."

"I did. You two are perfect for each other and I have every faith that you'll figure this out. You have a good heart. You mean well and Sawyer has to see that."

"Does he?" But I knew he didn't. I was trying to relieve my guilt by attempting to fix the situation. This is what I always did. I planned, I schemed, I made things better so the people around me would like me. I'd seen the devastated look on his face when I left his office yesterday. "I messed up."

Her eyes were sympathetic and shone with years of experience in life and love. "I know it seems like a big deal right now, but you'll move past it. I promise."

"How?"

"Well, you're printing a follow-up article and now you're meeting with the dean."

"Yeah, for my proposed course."

She gave me a pointed look. "You have a meeting with the dean."

"Yeah, so?"

She waited quietly until I'd figured out her meaning.

"Oh." I could use my meeting with Dean Strauss to talk about Sawyer. To fix it. "You're a genius." I hadn't even thought about how I'd have the dean in a room to myself. He could refuse to talk to me but I'd never know unless I tried. And I was pretty good at convincing people of things. I could do this. I had to for Sawyer.

"And before you go. Let me give you a piece of advice."

"Sure." I could use it right now.

"I'm not your mother or your grandmother, but you've always needed a motherly figure. I hope I've been that for you since your grandmother died."

I nodded because she had been. "You have."

"Be yourself. If Sawyer is the right guy for you then that will be enough."

"That's it?" I was hoping for something more groundbreaking than that. Being myself had never worked out for me in the past so I was highly doubtful.

"The most profound things are the simplest sometimes."

"That's true, I guess."

"Don't be what Sawyer needs. Don't be what your parents need. Be you. And everything will fall into place."

"Okay." I wasn't sure I understood, but maybe it would make sense once I had time to think about it. Right now, I needed to speak with Dean Strauss.

Ms. Gladys stood when I did and hugged me. "Good luck."

"Thanks. I need it."

I continued walking toward campus considering the best way to approach Dean Strauss about Sawyer. Start with my course first or the bet? Which was more important? Which would make the most sense? I'd lead with Sawyer in case it was the only opportunity I'd get to speak to the dean. I had to make him listen.

I waited in the sitting room outside the dean's office, feeling a little like I had all those times outside the high school principal's office, where I found myself frequently, since I had been the class clown. I wiped my sweaty hands on my skirt and took deep breaths. I'd come a long way since I'd covered up things with silly antics. I was a professional now. Ms. Gladys's words floated through my head on repeat. *Be yourself.*

“Dean Strauss will see you now.”

“Thank you,” I said to the secretary as I walked past her into the large office.

Dean Strauss rose. “Thank you for meeting with me today, Stella. It’s always a pleasure to see you.”

I shook his outstretched hand. “It is. How are your twins doing? Applying for colleges yet?”

“I can’t believe I have daughters graduating from high school next year. Where has the time gone?” He gestured for me to sit and waited before he sat in his overstuffed chair.

“It sure does fly,” I agreed.

“More so with kids. Now you’re here to wow me with your class proposal.”

I took a deep breath. This was my chance to speak with him and when I was done he might not want to hear about my class proposal. That was a chance I’d have to take in order to help Sawyer. “Actually, I’d like to talk to you about something else first.”

He raised his brows.

“There was a story in the paper this morning about the sorority girls’ bet involving some of your professors.”

“Yes, I saw that. We’re investigating that now. I’m sure you’re aware of our no-fraternization with students policy.”

I shifted, knowing this was a possibility, but I’d hoped the story hadn’t gotten too big yet. “First of all, I’d like to apologize because I did not write that story. I had a different one in mind. And I certainly would have spoken with you or a representative of the college before I printed anything. I researched and found that one of your professors had been fired from his last two jobs for sleeping with his students and I know he’s done it here. The women provided their stories to me but would like to remain anonymous if possible.”

“Okay. You have my attention.” Dean Strauss rested his elbows on his desk leaning forward.

“The angle I’m looking at is how these schools pushed this professor from one school to the next without warning anyone—allowing the professor to continue doing the same thing.”

“It’s certainly troubling. Can you tell me which professor it is? The article mentioned the history department.”

Going out on a limb to save Sawyer, I felt completely out of my element but I'd never been surer that I was doing the right thing. "I can, but only if you promise this won't affect Sawyer Hudson. I think he was unfairly caught up in the bet rumor and he has nothing to do with this."

His elbows rested on the arms of his chair, hands pressed together as he considered my words. "Well, I can't promise anything yet, because we haven't concluded our investigation."

This is what I'd expect from anyone I spoke to at a college, but I'd hoped for something more from the dean since I knew him personally. "I understand that. But I'm telling you now that Sawyer had nothing to do with this. I've spoken to the victim and she dated one professor. She started this bet as a way to get back at the professor for dumping her but she's since come to her senses. She's more interested in preventing this from happening to other students in the future."

"What would you like me to do?" He raised his brows at me.

"Promise me this won't affect Sawyer Hudson's tenure." I knew this was a long shot but I had to ask.

"You know I can't promise that. Tenure has to be approved at every level. The head of the history department, the provost, the president, me. If any one of us says no, then that's it."

"I understand that. But you have pull. They'll listen to you."

"And you know how tenure committees dislike bad publicity. Professors are an extension of the school and any question of impropriety is an issue."

This is what I was afraid of—Sawyer would get sucked into this story no matter what I did to try and protect him. "I think that's a little unfair when Sawyer Hudson didn't do anything."

"That's what you say."

I needed to be tougher with him. My appeal to him as a friend, a colleague, wasn't enough. "Well, I intend to run this story with or without your help. If you want me to add that Washington College is being proactive, that you intend to fire this professor without a good recommendation, and the college is determined to take a strong stance on this issue then I will." The best threat was one against the college's reputation. "My boss is calling this the antithesis of the Me Too movement. Do you want Washington College caught up in something that could go viral?"



Dean Strauss shook his head and looked out the tall window which overlooked the quad. “Fine. Print the article with my statement. I’ll have Alice draft it and email it over today.” Then he looked at me. “This is in exchange for the professor’s name. And I promise I’ll do everything not to have this blow back on Sawyer Hudson. Unless he was involved too, than all bets are off the table.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Understandable, but I’m confident the investigation will not reveal any wrongdoing on Sawyer’s part. I look forward to your statement.”

“Now let’s hear about this online media course.”

I was a little surprised he still wanted to hear about my online course after our discussion. But at the end of the meeting I was the new professor of Washington College’s online media course. It was a trial course for the summer, but still it felt amazing. The best part was that I told the dean I had a learning disability and explained how I’d persevered and how I wanted to help other students fulfill their potential. I think that was what convinced him. The smile on my face fell when I saw Sawyer seated on the couch just outside the dean’s door.

“Sawyer?” My stomach dropped as I looked from Dean Strauss to Sawyer and back again. Why was he here? “Are you here to talk to—”

“Dr. Hudson. Come on in.”

Sawyer walked past me without even looking at me. The high I’d felt a moment before dissipated. Even though things professionally were looking up for me, I didn’t know what would happen with Sawyer’s career. I knew the investigation would reveal that he hadn’t been involved. But was the dean’s promise to protect him from any association or fallout from the article enough? Would Sawyer view my help as a positive or would he think I was meddling in his career again?

I decided to wait outside the building on the steps. He’d have to come this way and he’d have to talk to me. I couldn’t decide what to do about our relationship until I knew what was happening with his job. After thirty minutes of looking up each time the door opened, Sawyer finally walked through the door. His face was closed off and his body tense. I jumped up. “Sawyer.” I stepped in front of him, but he immediately took a step to bypass me. “Wait.” I placed my hand on his arm. “How did it go?”

Sawyer finally looked at me. “How is it your concern?” His voice was quiet and steady.

Sawyer's complete refusal to hear me about or listen to what I had to say was heartbreaking. "I care about you. That's why. I never meant to do anything that would affect your job."

"But you did."

"Sawyer—"

"My job is fine for now. They gave me an additional six months before I can apply for tenure. They want to conduct an investigation and make sure I wasn't involved."

At least his tenure wasn't denied outright. "I can see that. The college is protecting itself."

But his face was still tight, a muscle in his jaw ticked. "The fact is your actions caused my tenure to be delayed." Then he stepped past me and stalked off.

I stood there watching him walk away, my heart splintering into pieces. I'd had everything I ever wanted and now it was gone. I thought it was devastating when men cheated on me in the past, but it was nothing compared to this. I was the reason our relationship had failed. I should have talked to him first. I should have told him what was happening. Instead, a small part of me thought he could have been involved in it or fallen for Cindy's game. In the back of my mind, I wanted to let it play out like all of my relationships in the past. Eventually, they all cheated. I let my history affect my relationship with Sawyer.

Watching him walk away, I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. Now that he wasn't mine, I knew without a doubt I was in love with him. That's why this hurt so much. That's why I'd run from him that evening in the boathouse. I sucked in a breath. I was in love with Sawyer. And it was too late.

## Chapter Twenty-Five



WITHIN A WEEK, OWEN'S PATTERN of sleeping with students, being fired, and moving to the next school had quickly overtaken the news about the bet to sleep with professors. My social media post had been shared so many times it went viral, forcing Bob to print the accompanying article.

I was fielding questions left and right from people wanting more information, who was involved, and how the college intended to deal with it going forward. I was happy there was outrage and skepticism that the school would follow through with its plan to fire Owen and not to provide a good recommendation. But at the same time, I wished the buzz would die down. As long as it was still in the news I knew Sawyer's tenure was in question and another chance with him dwindled.

There was still no word from Sawyer. Thankfully, my friends were coming over to support me. I needed it. The doorbell finally rang and I opened the door to find Emma and Ashley holding bottles of wine. I hugged them and watched Samantha pull her truck into my driveway.

When she approached the door she gave me a sympathetic smile. "I brought reinforcements." She held up the bakery boxes and I took them from her when she reached me.

"Thanks. I could use pastries."

I closed the door behind her and followed her into the kitchen where Emma and Ashley had gathered. Emma pulled down wine glasses while Ashley uncorked a bottle. Emma poured everyone a glass, passing them around.

"Congrats on your post going viral. You're famous," Ashley said.

I took a long sip of wine, hoping to forget everything. "Eh. I'd rather not be famous for something that could derail Sawyer's career."

“Hey, you did the best you could. How could you know Bob would print your article without your permission? He’d never done that before right?” Emma asked.

“True. But I don’t think Sawyer saw it that way.”

Ashley covered my hand with hers. “Don’t worry. As soon as this dies down he’ll talk to you.”

“How can you be so sure?” I asked, but it was Emma’s face I watched since she was engaged to Sawyer’s brother.

Emma’s face was pinched as Ashley spoke. “I don’t know. Sawyer’s pretty upset. He’s quiet and doesn’t like being the center of speculation.”

“Plus his tenure was delayed,” Emma finally said.

“It wasn’t canceled,” I said, but I knew it was still a blow to Sawyer. He’d followed all of the rules and it was my action that potentially screwed his chances at tenure. “It just reinforces everything Sawyer was worried about. I’m too loud, impulsive, too much for him. He just wants a nice quiet woman who won’t make waves.”

“That’s not true,” Samantha said. “Remember when we were at Emma’s house and Luke said Sawyer needed you to show him how good it could be with you. How much he needed someone like you to bring out another side to him?”

“Yeah, but—”

“That’s what you need to do. Show him how you’ve changed his life. How you make him a better person,” Samantha said.

I nodded. “Okay. So, what should I do?”

“We need to drink more before we can figure this one out,” Ashley said.

While the girls drank their wine I tried to think of ways to prove to Sawyer I was good for him. It was a tough one. “I have a platform, you know. I could apologize on the paper’s editorial.”

“That’s what Luke did for me and it worked,” Emma said.

Samantha shook her head. “No, that won’t work with Sawyer. He would hate that. You don’t want to reinforce his worries about how things can be a production with you.”

And she was right. He would. He wouldn’t want our relationship to get caught up in all of this buzz about Owen and the college. He’d want to remain under the radar until it blew over.

For years, I’d believed I needed to hide behind this false persona—this happy go lucky person. But who was I with Sawyer? I was just myself and

it was good between us. I helped him at the scholarship dinner, brought him out of his shell, I supported him. I liked to be the one who helped others, but what if I asked him for his support? What if I asked him to be there when Dr. Hirsch talked to my mother? Would he realize how much I needed him? How much we needed each other? Or would he not want anything to do with me? “Guys, what if I asked him to be there for my family?” I said.

Emma tilted her head. “Explain.”

“Dr. Hirsch wants to speak with my mom with the whole family present to show our support. If we were together I would have asked him to be there.” Would I though? The last time he’d offered, I’d told him I could handle it on my own. “Maybe if I ask him to come and support me, he would see how much he means to me? How much I need him?”

“It’s a long shot, especially when he’s so angry,” Ashley said. “I think you just need to lay everything out there, apologize, and hope he takes you back.”

“I’d do that if he’d listen to me.” I tried twice now and he’d shut me down. He wasn’t ready to talk to me yet and I don’t know if he’d ever be ready. I looked around at my friends’ faces, which were pensive.

Emma finally said, “It’s clear he cares about you. He might even love you. You need to prepare yourself though. He might listen to your apology and walk away.”

“I know, but I have to at least try.”

“Let’s see if we can think of what you can do to get him back,” Ashley said. We moved to the sunroom, lounging on the wicker furniture, drinking wine, and eating the cupcakes Samantha brought, but we couldn’t come up with anything else. And I knew I needed to apologize in person if he would agree to meet with me.

The next morning, I texted Sawyer to ask if I could meet with him at his office to talk about something important. I didn’t want to just show up at his office. I needed to show him I wasn’t impulsive. I could plan things out and be mature.

*Sawyer: I can meet for coffee at 9:30 AM*

*Stella: Okay thanks. coffee shop across from the courthouse?*

*Sawyer: See you then*

I got there early and sat in the back. I didn’t want anyone to witness this conversation. I wanted him to listen to me but I wasn’t sure what to expect. Would he still want to be with me? I wiped my sweaty hands on my knit

black dress and took a few steadying breaths, which didn't help. I didn't order any coffee because my stomach was tied up in knots and I didn't want to feel any more jittery than I already was.

I saw him walk in front of the window to the coffee shop in a suit with a briefcase slung over his shoulder. He opened the door scanning the room until his eyes stopped on mine. His face was unreadable as he came to a stop in front of my table.

I cleared my throat. "Please sit down." Why was I being so stiff and formal? "Can I get you a coffee?"

He sat shaking his head. "No. I need to get back to the office. I'm really busy." His eyes shot to mine then away. "With everything going on."

I was the reason he was going through all of this. Even though Owen pursued Cindy and Cindy started the stupid bet, I'd handled the whole situation poorly. I waited for him to take a seat across from me, his posture stiff as he looked at a point over my shoulder.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet with me. I'm really sorry for everything that happened and my hand in it." I took a deep breath gathering the courage to continue, relieved he was at least listening to me this time. "I overheard women talking about the bet. It was the kind of story my boss was pressuring me to write. I interviewed people, I dug into Owen's past, and I kept notes on the paper's network. Anyone on the paper had access to that but I'd never had any issues in the past."

"I hardly see why how the story came about matters." He fidgeted and I worried he would leave without hearing everything I had to say.

"It matters because I didn't write it. I had no intention of writing it. My boss took my notes and wrote the story under my byline thinking I'd be happy. But I wasn't finished investigating the story I wanted to write—how colleges fire these professors and give them a good recommendation to be hired elsewhere to do the same thing over and over again to a new crop of young women."

Sawyer shook his head. "What Owen did was disgusting."

"It is, and I didn't want you to be caught up in it but since the history department was mentioned I wasn't sure how to avoid it. I thought if I could prove Owen had done this multiple times before and his employers covered it up, that would become the story. Not women making a dumb bet to sleep with professors."

“What I can’t figure out is why didn’t you tell me?” His eyes locked on mine.

If I ever wanted something real with Sawyer I needed to be one-hundred percent upfront with him about everything. “Honestly, I was worried that you were part of it.” I wiped my sweaty hands on my skirt.

“How could you think that?” His face was incredulous and I couldn’t blame him.

“Every one of my exes cheated on me. Two were in supervisory positions over younger women. It’s a hard thing to let go of and then I heard your department was being targeted. Old insecurities got the best of me. How could anyone choose me over a young co-ed?”

He started to speak, but I continued before he could. “I know now I wasn’t being fair to you. You’d done nothing for me not to trust you. And I don’t expect you to answer me now or forgive me. I just wanted to tell you what happened so you understand everything.”

His shoulders relaxed. “It’s a lot to take in.”

I’d have to be patient which was not my strong suit. “We hang out with the same group of friends and I didn’t want things to be awkward.” I shifted in my seat at the lull in the conversation. I wasn’t sure what to say or do.

“How have you been otherwise?” he asked softly, his eyes taking me in.

Not trusting him was unreasonable but I wanted to explain what I was doing to get over it. “Not good.” I laughed bitterly. “I feel awful obviously, about everything that happened. I tried really hard to get over my exes cheating on me. It did a number on my self-confidence. I thought it was my fault that I was attracted to cheaters. So I saw a therapist—Dr. Hirsch. I wanted to get over my trust issues and move on, but clearly it didn’t work.”

“It’s commendable you sought help.” He rested his elbows on the table.

“We also talked about my family and my mother’s depression.” My heart was racing and my voice shaky. “My dad wants to stage an intervention.” I’d never been so openly honest with anyone. I hadn’t even told Ms. Gladys about my mother. “Dr. Hirsch thought it would be best if the whole family could be there, showing our support.” I was quiet for a moment gauging his reaction.

“How do you feel about that?” His face was filled with concern and sympathy.

“Well, my dad has never tried to do something like this so I’m willing to try. My sister agreed to come back for it too.”

“Good.” I saw respect for me in his eyes.

“It’s been so hard the past few years. I’m afraid to go into my family home—afraid I’ll get sucked back into my role as caregiver, keeping the family together—afraid to hope that this time she’ll take the help and get better for her, for us, our family.” I didn’t know why I was telling him all of this. It wasn’t so he’d pity me and take me back. It was because I missed his support.

He sighed and was quiet for so long I thought he wasn’t going to answer. Finally, he said, “I think you’re doing the right thing.”

“Really?”

“I hope it goes well and she gets help. For your sake, if nothing else.”

I nodded, my heart growing cold at his words. He’d sympathized with my family situation, but had he missed me as much as I missed him?

“I still want to be there for you. We were friends first right?” He offered me a tight smile and my stomach dropped. “Listen, I’d better get back to work.” He was already standing and getting ready to leave.

“Thanks for meeting with me,” I said quietly.

“Of course.” He hesitated, standing by the table. “Good luck with your family.”

I said, “Thanks,” but I doubt he could hear my quiet voice. I watched him walk quickly away. I couldn’t stop the tears from sliding down my face. I’d gotten what I wanted but it wasn’t enough. A small part of me hoped he’d say he’d forgiven me and he wanted to try again. I’d told him my side of the story but I wasn’t sure it made a difference. There was nothing else I could do.

And as usual, it was looking more and more like I’d have to stand on my own two feet with my family. I’d sealed my fate when I overheard students talking about the bet. I should have never told Bob about it. This would never have happened.



## Chapter Twenty-Six



A COUPLE WEEKS LATER, THE spring semester was over and I was gearing up to start my first online media course. It was scary and nerve-wracking and I couldn't believe I was doing it. I hadn't even talked to Sawyer about it. It seemed wrong not to share it with him when he'd been instrumental in developing the course. My fingers hovered over his name on my phone wondering if I should reach out to him. In the end, I couldn't do it.

We'd scheduled the intervention with my mom the first Friday Lindsey could come home. I walked into my parents' kitchen where Dr. Hirsch, my dad, and Lindsey already waited.

"Now, I spoke with Eleanor before you came. But I wanted everyone to be together for this. To tell your mother how much you'd like to see her well. How much you'd like to talk to her more. This isn't a rehash of how your life has been worse, but about how much you'd like to see things get better." Dr. Hirsch waited for us to nod before we followed her into the living room.

I was surprised my mom was dressed and looked like she'd taken a shower. She nodded at everyone.

Lindsey went first, saying how much she'd like to tell Mom about her day, her job, who she was dating, just to be a part of her life. My dad told her how he'd like to enjoy life with her, drinking coffee at the kitchen table, watching the sunset on the porch. It was the simple things he wanted after essentially being alone the last fifteen years. It brought tears to my eyes and I'd never felt more alone. I wished more than anything Sawyer was here holding my hand, providing support. Then it was my turn and I didn't know what to say.

I'd gotten so used to being by myself, to not relying on anyone, I wasn't sure what role a mother would play in my life at this point. But then I

thought about my grandmother and Ms. Gladys. How they'd been there for me. Licking my dry lips, I said, "I'd like to get your advice on dating, work. I just want to hear your voice again." Tears were streaming down her face. "I don't want you to feel guilty."

"I don't. You aren't making me feel guilty. Everything you've described is so beautiful. I'd like all of those things. I don't want to feel like this all of the time. Hopeless. Like my life doesn't matter. I want the help. I want all of the things you described." She looked pointedly at each one of us.

I could feel hope bloom in my chest but I tried to temper it. I didn't want to get carried away. I'd let myself hope she'd come out of her depression too many times in the past, only to be disappointed.

Dr. Hirsch took over then, explaining how she'd help my mom get to an inpatient facility tonight and what we'd need to do. Then we said our good-byes. When I hugged my mother, she whispered, "I love you."

I squeezed her hand. "I love you too."

I waited on the porch for Lindsey. She offered me a small smile when she closed the screen door and came to stand next to me. "That was rough."

I smiled. "It was." I was glad we'd done it though. We'd made an effort to get her help. The rest was in her hands.

"I'm glad I came. I hope it helped," she said.

I hugged her then. "I think so. It's good to see you."

"I have to get back home, but let's get together soon, okay?"

"Sure."

"And let me know how it's going here." She pointed over her shoulder at my parents' house.

"Will do." It would be nice to work with my sister for once to bring the family together. Even if my mother never got better, at least my sister and I could have a closer relationship. It was Dr. Hirsch who explained Lindsey reacted differently to my mom's episodes and it wasn't bad. Everyone processes things differently. We said our goodbyes and I got into my car.

I drove home in a daze to find Sawyer's SUV parked in front of my house. He sat on my porch watching me drive up. My heart sped up but I was afraid to hope he was here to try again.

He was in a white button-down shirt, sleeves rolled up his forearms and navy suit pants. My heart ached with the fact that he wasn't mine anymore. If he ever had been. Should I tell him how much I needed him? How much he meant to me? How much I was in love with him?

This was the feeling I'd never felt with those other guys. With them I felt obsessive. This was calm, quiet, easy love. This is what I'd been missing my whole life. And now that I realized it, I'd already lost it. Lost him. If he was here to officially break things off with me or tell me he forgave me but couldn't be with me, how would I get through this knowing this was the man I was supposed to be with? This was the man I loved. And I didn't think I could handle his rejection after the interaction I'd had with my mother.

"Are you okay?" he asked, standing as I approached.

Knowing my face was swollen and red from crying, I said, "Yeah, we had my mom's intervention today."

"I know. That's why I'm here," he said quietly.

My eyes shot up to his. "It is?"

Gone was the animosity I'd seen on his face the last few times we'd spoken.

"Emma told me that it was today."

"Oh." He was here to comfort me as a friend. I couldn't look him in the eye, worried he'd see through me. He'd see every emotion I was feeling on my face. I had to remember I was an obligation to him and nothing more. "I appreciate it." I placed my hand on his arm. "It went well. I think she's going to try to get help and work with Dr. Hirsch. If nothing else, my sister and I bonded and hopefully we'll be closer now."

I wished more than anything his support now was that of a boyfriend. Not some final act of pity or kindness. I wanted everything or nothing. I pulled my keys out of my purse. "Thanks for coming by, but I'll be okay."

"We need to talk."

I wanted that, but right then I was too raw from everything that had happened with my mother. "Sawyer, I'd like that but I can't right now. That was intense." If we talked now I'd tell him everything. How I loved him. How I wanted him here for me all of the time. For the big stuff, the small stuff, everything. He wasn't ready to hear that yet.

He pulled my keys from my hands and unlocked my door. "Let's get some water and sit down." I let him take my hand and pull me to the kitchen where he got two glasses of ice water and carried them into the sunroom.

I took a long sip of the ice-cold water. "What did you want to talk about?"

“Us. I want to talk about us.”

Confused, I asked, “There is no us and I don’t blame you. I screwed up. My story was printed. One I never intended to be printed, but I should have known it could happen. I should never have kept my notes on the network like that.” Not when I was so worried about the fallout for Sawyer.

“How could you have known your boss would take your words, print a story, and use your name?”

“Well—” Wait, what? I was not expecting him to defend me now or ever.

“Yeah, you could have been more careful, but you trusted him not to screw you over. I know you didn’t want me to lose tenure. You’ve done everything to help me in the last few months. You went to the scholarship dinner, helped me socialize. Dean Strauss told me how you talked to him—convinced him to give me another chance.” He took the glass from my hand and placed it on the counter, taking both of my hands in his. “You made me realize how much more there was to life. When you smile at me, the whole world is better and brighter. I was going through the motions before you.”

“Really?” A delicious warmth spread through my body but I was too scared to hope for more.

“I love you, Stella.” My brain stopped when he said those four words. The words I’d never thought I’d hear him say. But he continued talking and I tried to focus on his words. “With everything that happened, you tried to protect me.”

“I did, but—I’m supposed to be the one—”

“No, you’re not. You’ve apologized or you’ve tried to, and I wouldn’t listen. I was too stubborn. I fell back into my old ways—scared of making waves, taking the easy road. But I don’t want to go back to the way I was. I want you in my life. Please, Stella, tell me it’s not too late. That you haven’t moved on. That you love me too.”

I couldn’t stop the sob that broke out when he’d said those words I’d wanted to hear. “I do, Sawyer.”

“Opening up about your family was a gift I don’t think you’ve given anyone. I love you so much for that and everything you’ve trusted me with.”

“I love you too, Sawyer.” I’d moved closer on the couch, my hands on his face. I couldn’t believe he’d just said everything I’d wanted to hear.

After our talk at the coffee shop, I was resigned to things being over between us. I didn't want to hope for more and be disappointed.

"I'll always be there for you." He lowered his head, kissing me with slow sweet kisses. My heart was bursting. I couldn't believe Sawyer was mine.

"All I ask is that you trust in me, trust in us."

"That's easy."

## Epilogue



### *Stella*

I SIPPED A GLASS OF champagne at Samantha and Jack's engagement party. Samantha's parents paid for it to be held at the yacht club's ballroom with floor-to-ceiling windows and a panoramic view of the Chester River. A string quartet played quietly on the edge of the dance floor, and guests gathered around cocktail tables, while waiters in black jackets, pants, and white button-down shirts circled the room with trays of white sangria and hors d'ourves. It was not her style necessarily, but I thought Samantha was trying to keep the peace with her family.

Jack stood in his charcoal gray suit and purple tie in the center of the dance floor and whistled with his fingers in his mouth to bring the crowd to silence. "I'd like to thank everyone for coming tonight and I have something I want to give my bride-to-be."

A chorus of sighs and awws rang through the room as Jack took Samantha's hand and pulled a white box from his pocket. "I'm so excited to marry you, Samantha. Our relationship is even more special because we've known each other since we were kids. I protected you then and I'll continue to protect you from whatever comes our way. I'm so honored that you've agreed to be my wife." Jack stopped for a minute, seemingly to pull himself together. Tears were already falling from Samantha's eyes.

It was amazing that my friends had come this far and were taking the next step to the rest of their lives.

My eyes shot to the doorway where Jack's younger sister, Lucy, had just arrived fashionably late, her caramel-colored hair fell in waves around her shoulders. She wore a wrinkled cobalt-colored silk dress and black cut-out booties, which she must have worn on her drive from Baltimore. As a

graphic designer, I would have expected her to be more put together for her brother's engagement party. Instead she looked stressed and disheveled. Lucy's eyes scanned the room, stopping on Jack and Samantha.

Jack cleared his throat. "I can't wait to marry you."

I turned my eyes back to the soft look on Samantha's face. "Me too, Jack."

"You have an engagement ring, which represents my promise to marry you and love you, but I wanted something to remember the location of our wedding, the heart of our relationship and our hometown—the marina where we spent our summers as children and where we solidified our relationship as adults."

It wasn't lost on me that Lucy and Wyatt had done the same. It was then I noticed that Wyatt had seen Lucy too, his eyes were fixed on her but she hadn't moved.

Jack opened the box slowly and Samantha's hands covered her mouth which had opened in surprise. "Oh, Jack."

Jack pulled a necklace out of the box as Samantha turned so he could place it over her neck. "It's the GPS coordinates for the exact location where we will exchange our vows on the dock."

It was such a sweet gesture and perfect for them, since their relationship started when Jack had come home to help his dad with the marina.

When it was clasped, Samantha turned back to Jack, touching the engraved necklace resting on her collarbone. "Thank you. It's perfect." She went up on tiptoes to kiss him as everyone clapped and cheered at the romantic gesture.

Slowly skirting the already crowded room, Lucy stopped in front of Jack and he pulled her in for a hug. He shot a happy and relieved look at Samantha over Lucy's head and she returned a gentle smile. Lucy stopped in front of Samantha hugging her, then Samantha held her hand with her sparkling ring out to Lucy for inspection.

"Oh look, Lucy made it. Let's go say hello," Ashley said, already walking in their direction. I followed at a slower pace, getting the impression we were intruding on a personal moment.

Jack hugged Lucy, and said, "I'm so glad you could make it."

Lucy's smile faltered when she looked at Wyatt. "Hello, Wyatt. I'm surprised to see you here."

Wyatt watched her as he stood next to Jack, arms crossed over his chest.

“Why is that?” Wyatt’s eyebrow raised in question, standing feet shoulder-width apart, arms crossed over his chest, as if this was his town now and she had no business coming here.

Ignoring his question, she said, “I didn’t know you were even friends with Jack.” Her large blue eyes opened wide, she ran her fingers over her dress as if smoothing the wrinkles.

“There’s a lot you don’t know,” Wyatt said, his voice tight, a muscle ticked in his jaw. “We work together now.”

Jack was high up in the fire department, Luke was the sheriff, and Wyatt worked for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources as a forest ranger, so they did confer together a lot.

The tension was palpable with eyes watching their exchange. I whispered to Ashley, “This is awkward.”

“It is,” Ashley said. “I think their break-up in high school was not amicable.”

Since Jack’s announcement, the crowd had dispersed back to the high tables for drinks and hors d’oeuvres.

“I’m sure you’re headed back to the city as soon as this party is over,” Wyatt said.

Lucy looked at Jack, shifting on her stilettos. “Actually—I’m here for an extended visit.”

All I’d heard about Lucy was that she had some high powered job and didn’t have or make the time to visit home often.

“That’s great,” Jack said. “Will you be able to stay for our wedding at the end of the summer?”

“It’s looking that way,” Lucy said.

Wyatt snorted. “You’re going to stay *here*? The place you couldn’t leave fast enough when we were kids?” Silence fell over the group. “What happened to your big job in the city?”

She chewed her lip as her eyes went back and forth from Jack to Wyatt. She repeated, “I’m here for now.”

“Did you quit?” Jack asked, confused. “As much as I love having you here, I thought this was your dream job.”

She swallowed hard. “It was. Look, it’s no big deal. I don’t want to ruin your party.”

“We’re here to celebrate, not to interrogate Lucy,” Samantha said, diverting attention off of the awkward exchange between Wyatt and Lucy,



by grabbing Jack's hand and pulling him out to the dance floor. "Dance with me, handsome," Samantha said, smiling over her shoulder at Jack.

"Lucy, when did you get here?" Ms. Perry asked, approaching her.

Wyatt hadn't moved his gaze from Lucy even as her mother approached.

"I just did," Lucy said.

"Well, I'm glad you were able to make it. We weren't sure there for awhile," Ms. Perry said.

"Neither was I, but I'm here to stay." Lucy glanced at Wyatt with that last word.

Her forehead wrinkled in confusion, she asked, "And why is that? I thought you'd have to get back to your job as soon as possible. They never let you have time off."

"I don't work there anymore," Lucy said.

"Why ever not? Did you quit?" she asked, mouth tight with disappointment.

Lucy was silent for a long moment before she said, "Not exactly." Her face was filled with shame and embarrassment. "My roommate moved out so I couldn't afford my apartment anymore." She shot a look at Wyatt. "I need a place to stay, but don't worry, I'm headed back to the city as soon as I get a new job." She held her body rigid in front of her mother. It looked like the last thing Lucy wanted was to come home and live with her parents.

I saw a flicker of emotion cross Wyatt's face—a combination of regret, hope, and sadness, before disdain took over.

"Hey, did I miss anything?" Sawyer asked, returning from the restroom and pulling me tight into his side, kissing my forehead.

I smiled brightly at him. "Lucy's here."

"That's great," Sawyer said.

Wyatt brushed past us then, grumbling. "It's really fucking not."

Lucy watched Wyatt's retreating back with a mixture of regret and longing on her face.



*Sawyer*

After the engagement party, I drove Stella to my property. It was hard to believe so many things had changed so quickly. I'd initially thought Stella was loud and flighty. I thought I wanted someone like me—serious, studious, analytical, and a planner. Now that I'd gotten to know her, I knew she was the light to my boring, the spontaneous to my careful planning. She was everything I was not, and she made me a better person for it. I was so glad I gave her a chance.

My biggest regret was telling our friends at Ashley and Logan's housewarming party that Stella wasn't the girl for me. I couldn't have been more wrong. Every morning I woke up with Stella by my side I thanked my lucky stars. And I planned on telling her that today. I wasn't showy but I hoped I had planned something she would remember for the rest of our lives as romantic and thoughtful. It was a tall order.

"Are you okay?" Stella asked as we drove. "You seem nervous."

"Yeah. It's just a big weekend." The best idea I'd ever had was asking Stella to be my date to the scholarship dinner. Then while she danced with me, she suggested we fake date for a while. It was perfect. I could pretend to date her, which took the pressure off of asking her out and dealing with the dating awkwardness I usually suffered from. I was able to slowly get through her defenses and just when I thought I couldn't take it anymore, she'd told me how much she wanted me for real. Best idea ever.

When we passed the turn for campus and continued out of town, Stella asked, "Where are we going?"

"I thought we could go to my property and check out the stars." I smiled over at her, watching her face light up. I remembered how each time our fake relationship had felt a little too real I'd created distance between us by reminding her it was fake. My attraction to her was so intense it had freaked me out at first. Now I never wanted distance between us. I always wanted to see her face bright with happiness.

"That sounds nice." She was quiet for a moment and then said, "I'm so glad the engagement party turned out well, and Lucy was able to come."

Ashley and Samantha had asked her to help plan the engagement party, which Stella enjoyed. Planning parties seemed overwhelming and stressful to me. Why do you need a big ceremony? All I knew was that I wanted to have Stella at my side for whatever came along. Whatever I needed to do to make that happen would be enough.

“I’m a little nervous to officially meet your parents at the wedding as your girlfriend. I mean, I’ve seen them at school functions over the years and talked to them but—”

I’d hoped to introduce her as more than my girlfriend, but one step at a time. Stella knew everyone in town and my mom had been smitten with her in high school. I didn’t tell Stella because I thought it was cute she was nervous about meeting them, but my mom was excited I was dating her. “You shouldn’t be nervous. They know you.”

My parents retired to Florida a few years before, but since summer is miserable there, it didn’t take much to get them to commit to visit and attend the wedding.

“That’s true. It’s not like Emma, who’d met them for the first time when they flew to Florida. I’m sure it will be fun.”

I pulled into the dirt road that ran through my land. Eventually, I’d build a house here. The investigation into Owen Mason’s relationship with Cindy Young had been completed early, and I was cleared of any wrongdoing and granted tenure. Now that I knew I wasn’t going anywhere, I had a plan for my future.

I parked my SUV in the middle of the field where I hoped to start construction on my house. The one I intended to live in with Stella. She wanted a family and I wanted one with her. We got out of the car and I rounded the SUV, pulling Stella to me, my arms going around her, ducking my head so I whispered in her ear, “Stella, my parents already love you.”

“They do?”

“Have you met many people who don’t love you?” I pulled back to see her face because it was the truth. She literally brought sunshine to every person she met. How could she not know this?

“Well, you know I’ve had some bad luck with guys. One man in particular said I was too much for him—”

I growled. “Those guys were idiots. I think we’ve already established that.” My hands sifted her hair through my fingers. “And I’m glad because you’re here now because of them.”

“True,” she finally conceded. “I’m happy we got to know each other better.”

“Me too.” Then I took a deep breath.

“What are we doing here Sawyer? Do you have blankets or something to sit on because we’re not exactly dressed to sit on the ground.” She was

right. We were still dressed for the rehearsal dinner—Stella in a bright floral dress and me in a button-down shirt and suit pants.

When she made a move toward my SUV, I placed a hand on her arm stopping her. I pulled back slightly wanting to see her face when I asked her. “Did you want to move in with me?” Sensing her hesitation, I added, “Or can I move in with you?” I knew how much her house meant to her. “I don’t care about the location as long as I’m with you.”

“Are you sure? That’s a big step.” As confident as Stella was in her life, sometimes insecurity showed up in our relationship. She had never had a healthy relationship before me.

“I’ve never been surer of anything. All I’ve ever wanted is for you to trust in me. Trust that I’m never going to break up with you. Trust that I want to be with you forever.” I cupped her face with both hands watching her eyes fill with tears. “And the only way I can think to prove it to you is,” then I pulled the ring box out of my pocket and dropped to one knee.

“Sawyer! What are you doing?”

As nervous as I was on the drive here, looking up into her wide eyes, tears shining, her hands covering her mouth, I was calmer now, confident this was the right move. “What do you think I’m doing, sweet girl?”

“Asking me to marry you, I hope?” she asked, lowering her hands from her face, smiling wide.

“Can I ask now?”

She gestured for me to continue. “Please continue. I’ve been waiting for this moment for a long time.”

I chuckled. She was one of a kind. “Stella, will you marry me? Will you trust in me? In us? That we can handle whatever will come?”

“Yes, yes, and yes!” Then she cocked her head, and said, “Yes? That was four questions, right? I don’t want to mess this up.”

Then she pulled me up so I was standing. She kissed my face then my mouth. “I love you so much!”

“I love you too.”

She clapped her hands together, excitement in her eyes. “Let’s see the ring.”

I opened the velvet box. “I picked the diamond in the middle, but the two on the sides are your grandmother’s and mine. The band is gold melded together from both of their rings.”

“I love that it means something to both of our families. I’m so happy!”

I placed the ring on her finger. “It looks perfect.” It felt right giving her a ring melding our families together. Hers was still healing, but I planned on being there for her and her family forever.

“It does. I can’t believe you were able to get my grandmother’s ring.”

“Your mom gave it to me.” Stella’s mom spent some time in in-patient care, and was doing better, not great. She was slowly becoming okay with just being okay. Dr. Hirsch said that might be the best we could hope for, but she had seemed happy when I asked for the ring. Maybe a wedding was just the motivation she needed to continue to get her life on track.

“Yeah?”

“She was happy.” A quiet calm happy, not the excited exuberance that Stella portrayed, but it was a start.

“This is the best year. I got my mother back and a boyfriend.”

“A fiancé,” I prompted.

“I can’t believe I get to call you my fiancé!” Then she jumped, expecting me to catch her, her legs wrapped around my waist and her arms around my neck.

I could literally accomplish anything if this woman was happy, and I’d always be there to catch her. I couldn’t remember how I’d lived my life before she filled my days with happiness. Her excitement for life, for a life with me, to build a family together—it was everything I’d ever wanted and I couldn’t believe she’d been right there all along.

Thank you so much for reading *Trust in Me*. I hope you enjoyed reading Stella and Sawyer’s story as much as I enjoyed writing it. [Click here](#) to read the bonus epilogue.

Lucy never thought she’d be back in her hometown and living with her parents. The hardest part is facing everyone she left behind—including Wyatt Carter. She wants a fling but he wants forever. He thinks the two blue lines change everything but he’s wrong. Turn the page to read an excerpt of [\*Stay with Me\*](#).

# Chapter One

## *Lucy*

I stood in the entryway to the Chestertown Yacht Club's ballroom, a large round room with floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing the Chester River, at my older brother's engagement party. Watching the familiar crowd of family and friends interact, I felt like an outsider for the first time since I left seven years ago. I'd drifted away from my family, my friends, everyone. I knew I'd have to face their questions—why was I gone so long and why was I back now?

My eyes traveled the room and came to rest on my brother, Jack, who was surrounded by his tight-knit group of friends, who I barely remembered from high school. His fiancée, Samantha, looked beautiful in a blush-colored dress, strappy silver sandals, and a flush to her cheeks as the guests watched Jack pull a necklace out of a white box.

Samantha's hands covered her mouth. "Oh, Jack."

"This is engraved with the GPS coordinates for the exact location where we will exchange our vows."

When it was clasped, Samantha turned back to Jack touching the silver necklace resting on her collarbone. "Thank you. It's perfect." She went up on tiptoes to kiss him as everyone clapped.

I took a few deep breaths, the most I'd taken since my boss told me they no longer needed me and I could clean out my desk. Apparently, I wasn't creative enough for the department anymore. My roommate, April, said I could take over the lease since she was moving in with her boyfriend, but after two months of searching I had no job or prospects. There was no way I could afford to take over the high rent on our trendy townhome in Federal Hill. Our lease was up at the end of the month anyway, so I gave the landlord our notice, packed my meager belongings, which mainly consisted

of clothes and high heels, into the back of my car, and headed here with the intention of moving back in with my parents until I could find a new job.

The silky cobalt dress I'd worn on the drive was wrinkled but I'd managed to touch up my makeup in the car and brush my hair so it didn't look like I'd sat in a car for three hours in the heat and traffic.

The crowd, which had been watching Jack and Samantha, dispersed so I ran my fingers down the skirt to smooth out the wrinkles and drew in a shaky breath, worried I'd finally have to face everything and everyone I'd left behind.

I approached Samantha to wish her well. "Congratulations!" They'd gotten engaged before Christmas, but I hadn't been home yet to see her ring. She held out her hand for me to inspect. "It's beautiful." I hugged her and whispered, "I'm so glad you're going to be my sister."

"Thank you," she murmured.

I turned to Jack who said, "I'm so glad you could make it." He pulled me in for a hug—one I needed desperately. I relaxed into his embrace trying to remember the last time he'd hugged me. Was it when he left for college? I held onto him for a long time then too, hoping he'd change his mind about leaving. He was the eternal peacemaker in our family and when he left things weren't the same. Back then, I couldn't wait to get away from my family, this small town, and—I pulled back from Jack, seeing *him*. The one I left behind. Wyatt Carter.

This was the first time I'd seen him in seven years. My pulse pounded in my ears as I took in his gray suit, his reddish-brown hair trimmed close to his head on the back and sides, left slightly longer on the top, and scruff bordering on a full beard covering his chin. So different from the unruly curly hair and smooth face he'd kept when we were kids.

My arms hung loosely at my sides as I tried to keep my shoulders back, my face devoid of emotion. But inside, my stomach was churning and my heart was beating out of my chest. He wasn't the reason I left, but he was the reason I'd stayed away. "Wyatt. I'm surprised to see you here."

The fitted suit, his stylish hair, and the jacket straining around his biceps made me swallow hard. He was a man now. So different from the boy I'd walked away from.

"Why is that?" Wyatt's eyebrow raised, standing feet shoulder-width apart, arms crossed over his chest. His voice was deeper and raspier than I

remembered. Everything about his posture and tone screamed that I was the one who didn't belong, even if it was my brother's engagement party.

His light blue eyes, which once looked at me with love and affection, now sparked with irritation. I couldn't blame him. I hadn't expected to see him here either.

"I didn't know you were even friends with Jack." I'd left for college and visited occasionally—enough to keep my parents happy. I'd wanted to escape my family's bickering and the family business which, if I'd stayed, threatened to consume my life. Every time I returned, I couldn't wait to get in my car and head back over the bridge to the city.

I'd been friends with Wyatt since we were kids, but after Jack went to college, he was more. He represented safety and an escape from my family, but it wasn't enough. When I accepted a full ride to college, I thought I'd go without anything or anyone holding me back. I hadn't expected the break-up to be so hard. I'd managed to avoid seeing Wyatt on those visits because I was ashamed of the way I had ended things and I was scared of my reaction if I saw him.

"There's a lot you don't know," Wyatt said, his voice was tight, and a muscle ticked in his jaw. "We work together."

I looked to Jack who watched our exchange, and his eyes were concerned. Why hadn't he warned me Wyatt would be here? I'd dated Wyatt after Jack left for school so maybe he didn't realize how close we'd been. And over the years, I'd never asked about him. I'd pretended he didn't exist. Like there wasn't anything between us but young love. That's what I told myself so I could move on.

But now that he was here, standing in front of me, I knew I hadn't moved on at all. All those emotions were flooding back to me—regret for how I ended it and a crushing feeling of loss. Less than a minute in his presence and it was like no time had passed—nothing had changed. When you're a teenager, you think there's always something better out there. How wrong I'd been.

"I'm sure you're headed back to the city as soon as this party is over," Wyatt said.

A few heads turned to watch our exchange, hearing the barely disguised anger in his voice. My face warmed and I wanted to escape their scrutiny, and Wyatt. My former job was so demanding I'd told Jack I might not attend the pre-wedding events. Then I hadn't wanted to come because I



didn't want to admit I'd failed—that I'd been fired from my dream job and couldn't afford my townhome.

I glanced at Jack, shifting on my heels. "Actually—I'm here for an extended visit."

"That's great," Jack said. "Will you be able to stay for our wedding at the end of the summer?"

I hated that I'd been so absent in Jack's life he didn't expect me to appear at his wedding. With Wyatt's gaze boring into the side of my head, I said, "Of course I'll be there."

Wyatt snorted. "You're going to stay *here*? The place you couldn't leave fast enough when we graduated?" He paused as if to rein in his temper.

My head snapped back to Wyatt who'd always been able to read me, my eyes pleading with him to drop it. "I'm here for now."

"Did something happen with your job?" Jack asked.

It wasn't the time or place, but I didn't want to lie. "I don't work there anymore."

"I thought that was your dream job," Jack said.

"It was my dream," I said softly watching Wyatt's face for any reaction. I found a subtle flash of sympathy and understanding there before the anger settled back in. "Look, I don't want to ruin your party talking about this."

"We're here to celebrate, not to interrogate Lucy," Samantha said, diverting attention from our awkward exchange by grabbing Jack's hand and pulling him out to the dance floor.

My mom headed toward me. She'd been upset when I left home but hopeful that I'd return and help out with the business when I graduated. When I didn't, she was unhappy and never failed to mention her disappointment. One more reason I didn't stay long when I visited, but now I had no choice. "Lucy, when did you get here?"

"I just got here." I rubbed my bare arms to ward off the sudden chill.

"Well, I'm glad you were able to make it. We weren't sure there for a while," Mom said.

"Neither was I, but I'm here to stay." I glanced at Wyatt, annoyed he was still watching our family drama.

Mom's forehead wrinkled in confusion as she asked, "And why is that? I thought you'd have to get back to your job as soon as possible. They never let you have time off."

My dreams were always bigger than this town, my family, even Wyatt. And for a short time, I thought I'd made it until everything came crumbling down. "I don't work there anymore."

"Why ever not? Did you quit?" Mom asked, her face tight with disappointment.

I was not only jobless but homeless too, which was difficult to admit to anyone, much less my mother. I certainly hadn't expected Wyatt's presence during this conversation. "Not exactly. My roommate moved out so I couldn't afford my townhome anymore. I need a place to stay." At her hard look, I continued, "But don't worry I'm headed back to the city as soon as I get a new job."

I had asked every single one of my so-called friends and former co-workers if I could crash on their couch for a bit, but apparently we weren't as close as I thought we were, or I was past the acceptable age for crashing on anyone's couch. I'd only been here for a few minutes and I was already itching to leave.

I'd never dealt with the aftermath of walking away from Wyatt. I thought it would be easy. I thought I'd feel free, but I hadn't. When it didn't get easier, I numbed myself to my feelings for him. He'd said our breakup was final, and it was. It was almost easy to block out that part of my life as I started a new one in college, but now that I was back, the hurt and anger emanating off of Wyatt brought back every feeling I'd ever had for him—affection, protectiveness, and love, first as friends and then later as lovers.

"Lucy's here." I knew that voice anywhere, Stella Lewis, older than me by two years. The man next to her with his arm around her shoulders was Sawyer. All I remembered about him was that he was really smart. Now they appeared to be dating.

"That's great," Sawyer said.

Wyatt's eyes now looked through me and he brushed past Sawyer, grumbling. "It's really fucking not."

To read Lucy and Wyatt's story, one-click [\*Stay with Me\*](#).

## Acknowledgments

I wanted to thank Sam, a professor at University of Baltimore and a friend I met when our daughters had a gymnastics class at the same time. I am so thankful she took the time to explain her job to me, the process for obtaining tenure, and the politics involved. That one conversation shaped the plot for *Trust in Me*, and I'll forever be grateful. I was so impressed with the amount of work professors do to obtain tenure and I hope that came across in Sawyer's story.

To my family, for continuing to support me in this dream.

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I was at a bonfire with friends recently and Kendra expressed how she'd read the first chapter of *Stay with Me*, and she knew already it was going to be good and she couldn't wait to read more. I mentioned how my Aunt Patty had already read and loved it. When one of the women present asked what book we were talking about, I was able to say it's one *I wrote*. I'll never get over how amazing it is to literally be living my dream each day. The one I put on the back burner to go to law school to pursue the more realistic goal of paying my bills.

To all of the bloggers who read, reviewed, and shared my books.

To all of the readers who read and reviewed my books—I appreciate it more than you'll ever know. There's nothing better than connecting with readers. To know that something I wrote resonated with you.

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## About the Author

Lea Coll worked as a trial attorney for over ten years. Now she stays home with her three children, plotting stories while fetching snacks and running them back and forth to activities. She enjoys the freedom of writing romance after years of legal writing.

She currently resides in Maryland with her family.

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