



*When You
Least
Expect It*
a holiday romance

Haley Cass



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4 APRIL

3 MARCH

2 FEBRUARY

1 JANUARY

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ISBN-13: 9781234567890

ISBN-10: 1477123456

Cover design by: Art Painter

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309

Printed in the United States of America

First and foremost, thank you to Regina for being endlessly patient while I obsessed with this for months. To Kate, Elizabeth, Sam, Isadora, and Shelley, this story would be in such worse shape without you all reading it and screaming about it/at me throughout the process of creation. And finally, this wouldn't exist without Monica - because you challenged me that I couldn't write a love story in twenty thousand words and clearly... you were onto something.

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Caroline Parker has never been a believer in Christmas magic.

Growing up, her brother Todd had blown the whole Santa secret wide open so early she couldn't even remember believing in it. They usually had relatives come to stay with them, meaning that Caroline ended up sleeping on an air mattress in her brother, Jared's, room – who still snored to this day. When her grandparents had been alive, they hadn't even been allowed to sleep in or relax, because they had to be in a mad dash to get ready for Christmas morning mass.

That's not to mention that her first girlfriend had broken up with her the day they started Christmas vacation. *Happy holidays.*

And now, as a divorce attorney, she gets to see firsthand how the holidays wreck families. Just like clockwork, divorce rates spike by a third every single year, making it her busiest season. All of the financial stressors and forced time together – tidings of comfort and joy, indeed.

The list goes on and on.

Needless to say, she doesn't expect her life to change on Christmas Eve.

She knows she shouldn't stop for coffee.

But, damn it, she's only just left the office, even though *due to the holiday* she was supposed to have it off. She'd thought she would have all morning to lounge around and relax before being able to leisurely make her way to her parents' house for the annual holiday dinner at five.

And perhaps she has a bad habit of running slightly late – but this year it isn't her fault!

Instead of her relaxed day, she'd been dealing with what was one of the ugliest divorces she's ever had the *pleasure* of litigating. Becoming one of the city's top divorce attorneys didn't happen to people who refused to work during emergency meetings, though, no matter the day.

Really, it was Christmas. So, what did she expect? She'd naively thought that because Amanda had broken up with her – read: cheated on

and left her – two weeks ago, her holiday bad luck for the year was used up. Clearly, she should never underestimate the evils of this time of the year.

She grimaces as her foot is suddenly soaked in a cold, wet puddle that she hadn't noticed from an earlier snowstorm that is now melting – so much for a white Christmas.

“Season's greetings, in-fucking-deed,” she mutters as she shakes her foot out and opens the door to the café, that one last thing going wrong today making the decision for her. Coffee or bust.

Of course, it's decorated to the nines with garlands and Christmas lights and there's *I'll Be Home For Christmas* playing over the speaker. The large specials board is decked out with an admittedly well drawn Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer on the side, making it look like he's speaking the specials aloud.

The gaudy decorations make her grimace.

Still. She didn't even have lunch and, honestly, she's already going to be late for dinner – a cardinal offense to her mom, just her Christmas luck – so, she may as well get herself something to help get through the amount of ribbing she is about to get from her brothers.

It's already starting; she has texts from Jared and Brian informing her that their mother is going to carve *her* rather than the roast when she arrives. Ugh, good lord, she hasn't even considered how many questions and comments she's going to get about her breakup.

If she is going to be carved and interrogated, then she is going to go down fully caffeinated.

“Can I get a –” The rest of her order falls away in surprise as the barista turns around. Ash blonde hair that's tied into a high ponytail swishes over a slim shoulder and a pair of distinctive stone gray eyes meet her own.

The very last place she expects to see Hannah Dalton is serving coffee in a hipster-y café in downtown Boston.

Then again, it isn't like she's thought about Hannah in the last year. Much. Not since she left Wilkens & Granger LLP, given that she'd only known her as her previous coworker's wife and all.

Needless to say, she hadn't kept in touch with Michael Dalton – formally known as her arch nemesis – since he'd beaten her out to become partner. Based on his gender, family connections, and taking most of the credit for the work *she'd* done on a shared case.

But because of their connection through work, she knows exactly what Michael gets paid. And it is far too much for his wife to be working in a coffee shop on Christmas Eve while she has a daughter at home.

None of your business.

Caroline shakes her head when she realizes she's staring. "Uh, sorry. Can I get an extra-large caramel macchiato?" She pauses, thinking about her mom's wrath. "And a large chai latte."

Her mother will soften slightly at that – Tricia Parker has a secret love for chai lattes. She'll say something about how Caroline can't butter her up, but it will be through a smile. And, hopefully, will soften even more at the spa weekend she's going to give her as a Christmas gift.

Being the youngest child *and* the only girl with three brothers still has some perks, even at thirty-four.

Hannah nods and gazes at her for a beat longer than Caroline expects, eyes wide, before she shakes her *own* head – Caroline guesses she isn't the only one surprised by the turn of events. "It'll be nine eighty-five."

Caroline gives her a twenty, before slipping the remainder into the tip cup as Hannah turns to start making her drinks. Which is nice, because it gives her the opportunity to do what she really wants to do – stare unrepentantly.

Hannah's eyebrows furrow slightly in concentration as she performs some sort of barista magic and Caroline's dark eyes watch her closely.

There's a smattering of freckles over the bridge of her button nose, her pink lips pout in thought, and she's wearing a gray button up shirt under her black apron that has the top few buttons undone enough that she could see the outline of her collarbones.

Yep, she hasn't actually seen Hannah in just about a year, since the last Christmas party at W&G, but she is still as gorgeous as ever. Unfairly so, because even the visor emblazoned with *The Bean Dream* on it does nothing to detract from it.

Hannah shakes back her hair and looks at her, catching Caroline staring. She can feel her cheeks heat slightly but *oh well*.

She offers a small smile. "So, how have you been?"

Perfect white teeth dig into a full bottom lip, eyes searching Caroline's. Searching for what, she has no idea but she does wonder, before Hannah dips her gaze back to the macchiato. "As well as can be expected." She rolls her eyes. "No, a little better than that."

It's only in that moment that she remembers: last year's holiday party, right before she'd left W&G. And Michael had been caught with his pants down – literally – with his secretary about halfway through the evening. Shit.

She clears her throat, wondering what exactly she should say about it, even as the divorce attorney in her wondered – what kind of crap settlement had Hannah gotten that left her working here?

“Sorry, I...” Totally forgot what must have been a super humiliating, terrible experience for you?

Hannah waves her hand as she shakes her head. “It's – well. It is what it is.” She blows out a sigh, and the little hairs that have escaped her ponytail to settle around her visor move with it. “How are you doing? You went to another firm, right?”

Whew. “Yeah. McGregor and Associates. After...”

Normally, Caroline is *not* a tongue-tied person, nor is she someone who doesn't finish her sentences. But what she wants to say is *after your son of a bitch husband and/or ex-husband bad mouthed me for years and stole my promotion* and, well, she and Hannah don't exactly have that kind of rapport.

She lets out a relieved breath when her phone rings, even though it's most definitely her mother calling to yell about her tardiness. Saved by the bell.

Perfect timing too, as Hannah swiftly caps both drinks. Both cups, she now notices and wants to roll her eyes at, have fake cartoon Christmas lights on them. Of course. Why wouldn't they? Can't drink coffee out of the normal cup during the holidays.

She holds up her phone, as both excuse and apology. “My mom. I should...”

Hannah doesn't slide her drinks over just yet but she nods. “Yeah, of course! Take it. I'll just – label the drinks real quick.”

Her mom is already talking when she answers and Caroline grimaces. Oh yeah, it is going to be a fun dinner. She cradles the phone under her ear as she reaches to take a drink in each hand.

Merry Christmas, she mouths at Hannah before she waves with a drink in her grip – which looks awkward. But it's too late to stop herself.

It makes Hannah quirk her smile, a nervous looking one though, she thinks, before she offers a little one back.

Weird. So weird.

“I’m here! Sorry, sorry.” She pants as she runs into the dining room, grateful for the perpetually slightly-too-warm temperature of her parents’ house in Mission Hill warding off the chill from outside.

All eyes are on her – two parents, three brothers, two sisters-in-law, four nieces, and two nephews, all seated at two tables stuffed into the small dining room – as she places the chai latte next to her mom and swiftly bends down to kiss her cheek. “Sorry, ma.”

“Auntie Caroline’s finally here! We can eat!” Her youngest nephew, Connor, shouts and she shoots him a playful *shhh*.

“I had to go in for an emergency meeting with a client,” she explains, even though she’d already texted her dad as much hours ago.

“What sort of *emergency meeting* does a divorce lawyer have to get to?” Her brother, Todd, grumbles not-so-quietly, even as his wife, Margot, elbows him.

Apologetic yet light mood easily dropping in the face of her brother’s grumpiness – cops and lawyers were just not made to get along – she keeps a tight smile on her face and pointedly ignores him.

“It took you so long that Melissa claimed your seat at the adult table,” Brian, her oldest brother, informs her with a teasing smile, gesturing to his twelve-year-old daughter sitting next to him.

Melissa sticks her tongue out. “Now *you’re* stuck at the kids table.”

Caroline sticks hers out back and places her macchiato next to the empty setting at said kids table. “Joke’s on you, this is my preferred table.”

She braces her hands lightly on her two nephew’s heads as she settles down between them, squeezing herself into the spot that is definitely not meant for an adult sized person. “Sorry for making you wait. I have gifts that are so going to make up for it,” she promises them with a wink.

Buying forgiveness: one of the perks of being the cool, single aunt.

Five minutes into dinner, her mom clears her throat loudly, pulling Caroline’s attention away from her niece. “Caroline, I have to ask you...”

She leans back from her table, and a fork of mashed potatoes halted as she turns to look at her mom. There’s a smile on her face that tells Caroline she is about to be teased, even before it happens.

Satisfied that she has everyone's attention, her mother lifts her chai latte up. "Who is Hannah and why is her phone number on my drink, asking for me to call her? Is this related to why your girlfriend isn't joining us tonight?"

As everyone breaks out into teasing laughter, the fork slips from Caroline's hands and clatters back to her plate.

What the hell?

As the clock strikes midnight and Christmas Eve officially turns to Christmas, Caroline sits on the couch in her own condo, staring at the cup.

Her mom hadn't been seeing things, as was the first thought she'd had earlier.

Nope, right there on the cup, ten digits are scrawled right underneath *Call me. Please. – Hannah Dalton*

She isn't going to call – nothing good ever comes of something that starts on this particular day and she knows it.

Coincidentally, the first time she ever met Hannah Dalton was at a holiday party.

It was her first Christmas with the firm and she'd walked into the rented venue with more excitement than a company party warranted. But *damn*, was she feeling really fucking happy with herself, after having been scouted by Wilkens & Granger only a year out of law school, after working at a much smaller firm.

It was a typical boys club in the higher up circles, the same as many old school firms still were. But Caroline wasn't daunted by that fact and mostly everyone seemed pretty decent to work with. She'd been actively assured by multiple people that she could bring her "girlfriend or partner or wife" with her to the party.

Not that she had one to bring, given that her girlfriend had broken up with her. A week and a half before Christmas. She scowled – *of course*.

Anyway. It was a good party. W&G pulled out all the catering and decoration stops, holiday music blasting from the speakers. And Caroline

found herself behind the refreshments table, with a deadly combination of not having eaten all day and a serious weakness for cookies.

“Are you enjoying those?” A soft voice asked from her left, surprising her.

Caroline turned quickly and presently choked on the cookie she’d been chewing. The most stunning blonde with gunmetal gray eyes that captivated her on the spot stood a few inches away with a small smile on her lips, as she gestured at the collection of frosted sugar cookies on Caroline’s plate.

She’s a few inches taller than Caroline, in a floor-length pale gold dress that shimmers and makes her seem like she herself is glowing. She’s completely spellbinding, it’s the only word that comes to mind.

After a few moments of embarrassing gaping, she managed to swallow the food in her mouth before she coughed. “I’m – yeah, they’re actually amazing. And this is coming from someone who normally doesn’t love sugar cookies in spite of,” she lowered her voice conspiratorially, “A serious love affair with both sugar and cookies.”

A charming flush worked over the woman’s cheeks. “I won’t tell anyone. But as the person who made them, I’m feeling pretty pleased.”

Staring with what she knew was akin to amazement, she looked from the woman to her plate and back. “You made these? I assumed it was all catered...”

The small smile morphed into a bigger, beaming one and with it, Caroline’s stomach dipped into butterflies. An answering grin tugged at her own lips.

“Most of it is, actually. But I’m on the event council for the firm and I just figured... why not contribute a bit?”

“You’re contributing terrible things to my self-control.”

“I think this time of year is just about when everyone’s self-control takes a dive.” The blonde shot back with a mock-whisper.

A flirty remark was on the tip of her tongue when Michael – who had behaved like a total jackass from day one: going from hitting on her, to barely veiled homophobic comments when she’d told him she was gay, to bitterly fighting her for cases every day since – came walking toward them.

She rolled her eyes, good mood already soured, and prepared to step between this woman and this asshole. Because she was positive there was going to be some sort of snide remark about sexuality or a crude one about the mistletoe, especially based on the angry glare in his eyes.

Without taking his eyes off of her, he stepped up *way too close* to the blonde. “Hannah, *dear*, what are you doing with Caroline?”

The plate almost slipped from her hand in shock. Hannah, aka likely the most beautiful woman she’d ever seen, was married to *Michael Dalton*?

Those mesmerizing eyes widened in surprise at *her* name. “You’re Caroline?”

It shouldn’t matter what Michael Dalton went home to his wife and said about her. But she could only imagine the litany of comments he had behind her back, given what he said to her face. And, damn it, it did bother her.

Her smile turned purposefully icy as she addressed him. “Your wife isn’t allowed to make her own friends?”

“Right. Friends,” he sneered, eyes narrowing as he wrapped an arm around Hannah’s waist, who stepped dutifully against him.

Yikes and *nope*.

A whole slew of comments wanted to come out directed toward him but she held them back, as she typically did. Not worth it.

“Happy holidays,” she instead forced out, rolling her eyes. She figured Michael was the type of person who got annoyed at happy *holidays* vs *Merry Christmas*.

She flicked her eyes to Hannah, who seemed so easy to read only moments ago, and was now giving her a very guarded look. Of course, the universe saw it fit that this physically perfect woman was 1. Married to Michael and 2. Seemed to be not so perfect on the inside. No doubt sharing the same kind of shitty opinions as her husband.

Another small thing to add to her Christmas grievance list: the most gorgeous woman she’s ever felt any sort of instant vibe with, and it turns out she’s married to her nemesis.

Turning to walk away, she tossed the cookies in the trash.

She isn’t going to call, she tells herself again the next morning as she stares at the ceiling while lying in bed.

Hannah... well, she’s seen her more times than she can count over the seven years she and Michael worked together. More parties, different events, the odd day that Hannah was at the office to drop something off.

And while she's never been rude or derisive the way Michael often was, she wasn't friendly, either. Not after that first time, anyway.

There's really no evidence she's seen for her to think anything substantial about Hannah, other than that her libido likes her. And Caroline has never acted solely on the decisions that her libido wanted, knowing that they will often be bad for her heart.

She calls Kris, her best friend since college, to share the news as she gets ready to go to Jared's house.

And Kris, predictably, finds it all both hilarious and shocking. "Mrs. Bitch Office Hottie gave you her number?!"

"I guess it's ex-Mrs. Bitch Office Hottie now," she corrects, clipping her hair back the brown wavy strands falling to her shoulders. As soon as it was going to get.

"I honestly don't know what to say... except, you can't call her." Kris informs her.

"I'm not!" She hesitates, frowning. "But. Why not? I thought that *you* thought my moratorium on dating was stupid?"

Actually, *fucking ridiculous* were the actual words Kris had used when Caroline had seen her a few weeks ago and had told her the news.

"It is stupid, because you are a gorgeous, successful, brilliant woman and thirty-four is too young to give up on love just because you've had a few pitfalls."

"A few pitfalls," she deadpans.

She thinks back over the last ten years – she can't even remember the amount of people she's dated. But out of the three women she's had a relationship with for longer than three months – all less than a year, though – they'd crashed and burned. And typically in ways she never saw coming. Which somehow made it suck even more.

Even Amanda, when dumping her a few weeks ago, did so by unceremoniously telling Caroline she wasn't going to move in with her after all, and had met someone new that she just "connected" with, she'd decided that was it. She needed a break from trying to find someone.

"If you have a moratorium on dating, you're always going to be lonely." Kris acutely points out.

Because, the thing is, as much as she likes to pretend she isn't, as much as she puts on that brave face whenever her mom asks when she's bringing someone home, Caroline *is* lonely. She never thought she would

get to her mid-thirties and suddenly look around to see that two out of three of her brothers are married, all three of them have kids, and all of her friends are at the very least in long term relationships, too.

It's lonely to see what feels like everyone put together this piece of their lives that Caroline wishes she could find the secret ingredient for, herself. To her family, friends, and co-workers, she hides it very well, this yearning to find *it*. But Kris knows better.

"Look, lusting after Hannah as the hot outside and cold on the inside wife of your coworker is one thing. I mean, it's kind of a messed up thing. But it's harmless. Getting entangled in some sort of *thing* with her, the year after her marriage falls apart – and doesn't she have a kid? – is a whole other thing that screams disaster. You never make that disaster move, Caro, because you're too smart for that."

"But – what does she want?" That's the niggling thought she keeps having.

What does *Hannah want*? There's a mystery there, wrapped in the most gorgeous package, and she's never been able to turn away from a mystery.

"To scoop a whole mess onto your plate." Kris succinctly tells her.

And Kris is so often right. So she is definitely probably right about this.

Caroline texts Hannah on New Year's Day.

She can't help it; she's too curious not to. She can't get rid of that ridiculous coffee cup until she does and then saves the number with a nervous-yet-excited swoop in her stomach.

Hannah, clearly, still means terrible things for her self-control.

They meet only three days later, for a Sunday lunch.

She's not as cautious as she should be, as she typically is on a first date. Which, Kris tells her, is a big reason why these dates probably don't work out. But, oh well.

Not that she is even sure this is a date. Because Hannah had been married to a man for ten years and had never really shown interest in

Caroline.

Not that she's even actually sure if she would *want* it to be a date. Okay, yes, she has eyes and a sex drive and is attracted to Hannah. But she also doesn't know much about her beyond that she'd chosen to be married to one of the worst people she's ever met.

She arrives three minutes early – a feat for her, honestly – and Hannah is already there, standing just outside of the bistro Caroline suggested in the Back Bay. She has on dark jeans with a pair of black winter boots, and a heavy winter jacket on top, while most of her hair is hidden under a knit cap, which looks adorable. Both of her hands hold onto the strap of her purse as she looks around cautiously.

Hannah doesn't really settle, even when she sees Caroline. She steadies, though, no more fidgeting as she meets Caroline's gaze head-on and takes a visible deep breath.

Caroline arches an eyebrow, approaching slowly. She feels a questioning smile pull at her lips, even as her mind wanders to the thousands of possibilities she'd come up with about what this is about. "You didn't have to wait out here. I told you the reservation was under my name?"

Hannah flashes a sheepish smile. "You did. Thanks, by the way. This place looks nice..." She trails off, before taking a moment to stare at Caroline, tilting her head slightly. "I'm sorry. I'm nervous. I haven't really, you know, done this before. Obviously."

Caroline's eyebrows fly up on her forehead, her heart tripping in her chest. *Is it a date?* She hasn't let herself really, truly believe that. And previously straight, fresh from divorce women with children aren't typically her chosen dates, either. too much room for potential complication.

And yet, here she is, her hands buried in the pockets of her jacket as excitement zips through her, tingling from her ears to her fingertips. *Don't make any dumb decisions*, she thinks to herself.

"Nothing to be nervous about." She assures Hannah. "We're just having lunch."

They, in fact, are not just having lunch, she realizes as soon as they sit down.

Because as soon as they sit, Hannah places her hands in her lap and looks the epitome of *nervous* before she blurts out, "I'd like you to be my lawyer."

Caroline doesn't know *why* she's surprised. In what other capacity does Hannah even know her? Or expressed interest in getting to know her? They've barely ever talked.

But still, she *is*. And a laugh bubbles out of her throat even as she tries to tightly press her lips together to attempt to stifle it. What an idiot. That tug-of-war she's wrestled with for days about whether or not to get involved in *this*, and *this* was actually no more than... her job.

It's the explanation that makes the most sense, and yet it is the one thing she hadn't thought of.

"I'm sorry." She manages to get out, even though it's not really *funny*. It's just also actually hilarious, because – well, she guesses her moratorium on dating is still a go. As it clearly should be.

Kris is going to be so smug.

Hannah's gaze shutters, though, her shoulders drawing up tight as she defensively wraps her arms around her purse. "I realize we've never really spoken and I'm sure my request is ridiculous, given that we've only met because of Michael, but I *don't* appreciate being mocked."

She stands, nearly knocking the waiter who is coming to pour their water off of his feet. And Caroline's laughter falls away abruptly as she leans forward, shaking her head. "No! Wait, no, Hannah, I wasn't mocking you. At all. I promise. Please. Sit?"

She can see Hannah's jaw clenching and releasing before she stiffly sits in the chair, back ramrod straight.

Caroline waits a few seconds, giving the waiter a grateful smile as he pours their water and walks away. Before she turns to look at Hannah, who still looks like she's debating walking right out of here.

"Hannah, I'm not laughing at you, I swear. I – if anything, I'm laughing at myself." She's been in way more humiliating situations, but she still feels the touch of embarrassment. Drawing a hand through her hair, she can feel her cheeks heat. And then she finds herself snorting out a laugh once more. "I was confused when you gave me your number and then asked me to lunch, because – we don't know each other super well, but. You give a woman your number on a coffee cup, and..."

She sees the moment the dawning hits Hannah, her cheeks blushing furiously and her death grip on her purse, like she was ready to tell Caroline to fuck off at any moment, goes slack. "You thought that I was..." She brings her hand up over her mouth as she stares at Caroline. She can't really

read it all that well – not exactly mortification, which is good in terms of her ego, but definitely on that same wavelength. “I didn’t mean to lead you on or – anything.”

“You didn’t.” She assures. It was merely her own stupidity.

Hannah’s hand slides up her face in a slow movement, so she’s bracing it against her forehead and she looks the most out of sorts Caroline has seen her in the entire time they’ve known one another. She’d go so far as to even call her distressed.

“I didn’t even think about what it would look like. Which is stupid, because I know you’re...” She trails off, staring at Caroline, her eyes running slowly over her face.

She sips her water. “A lesbian. You can say it, it’s not a bad word.”

She has a brief moment where she thinks about Michael’s contempt – though she was never actually sure if it was genuinely about her sexuality or because he was angry that she was better at her job than he was. She sort of suspects it was actually mostly the latter, with influences of him being an entitled, misogynistic ass just reflecting in everything he did. Still. She wonders, leaning back in her seat to look contemplatively at Hannah, if she feels the same way.

But Hannah doesn’t look anything except, now, apologetic, her eyes wide and imploring. “I know it’s not a bad word, I just. I mean. You’re really beautiful and I’m sure you have much better prospects than me. And I’m still married and –”

Caroline needs to end this babbling for both of their sakes, and she bounds forward. “Right! You’re still married. Which,” she clears her throat, rolling her shoulders to put herself more into a work mindset. “I’ll need some details to consider taking you on as a client. How long you’ve been separated and cause for the divorce, for starters.” She can guess, but she needs every detail.

She wishes she had a pen.

“Oh, I have one. Well, a pencil.” Hannah says, which alerts Caroline to the fact that she spoke the words aloud.

Hannah opens her purse and passes Caroline a pencil, also pulling out a notebook and takes a piece of paper out. Caroline raises her eyebrows and accepts the offer. Expedient service. “Thanks.”

Hannah slowly slides her purse down to the floor as she nods, looking like she’s taken this time to gather courage to answer her questions. “We’ve

been separated since last year. At the –” she sets her jaw, the edge of it hard. “When I caught him sleeping with Mindy. That’s mostly the cause.” Her words are thoughtful, before she lets out a deep breath and her shoulders slump forward. “I’ve been unhappy for... a long time.”

She says it in a whisper, an anguished secret clawing its way out of her throat. And Caroline watches closely. This is her job. She’s seen this – and worse – a hundred times over, and she knows how to spot any sort of bullshit.

And Hannah isn’t bullshitting. The raw sadness in her eyes hurts and she can feel the sympathy well up in her own chest. She’s never done well seeing a woman in distress.

Still, Hannah sits upright in her chair, a determined look sliding across her face that Caroline finds herself enjoying.

“If you’ve been separated for a year, why haven’t you filed already?” Once again, she probably knows. But she needs the concrete answer.

Hannah’s eyes hold hers, a little crinkle between her brows as it seems like she battles with herself what to say. Before the words pour out moments later, as if the truth wins out over any debate over how to color her response.

“Because he’s fought me every step of the way. About moving out, about working, about Abbie. And he’s made threats about custody and – he’ll win.” The fear in her tone, in her eyes, is so palpable, Caroline can feel her own stomach clench with it. “Because he is a great lawyer and he’s friends with all of these other big lawyers. I’ve been so stuck, because I don’t have that kind of money or the connections and I just – I want to be done with this. Legally.” She places her palms on the table, leaning forward, as if laying all her cards on the table. “I need a lawyer and I know Michael wouldn’t have had nearly as much contempt for you if you weren’t as good as he is.”

“Better,” she corrects, a sly smile sliding over her face. She doesn’t hate where this is going, and she doesn’t have to be buttered up, but, well, she isn’t going to turn it down. “You aren’t wrong. So, it was just super fortunate that I came into your café and reminded you?”

Hannah bites her lip and shakes her head. “Well, no. I – I’ve wanted to call you a thousand times. I found your number. But I’ve always backed out.”

“I’m flattered.” And, weirdly, she is. Hannah’s met hundreds of lawyers through Michael of the last decade, but here *they* are.

Gray eyes lock onto brown and she’s helpless to look away from the mixture of determination and desperation. “Since I know what Michael makes, I know around what you charge. And I can’t afford it. At all.” Hannah admits, regret all over her tone. “But I’ve been doing research and your fees can come out of –”

Caroline holds up her hand to stop her. “No.”

“No?” Hannah’s crestfallen look is heartbreaking so she pushes on quickly.

“I’ll do it, pro bono.” It’s going to be a long battle, she can already sense it. Michael is going to be pissed when he finds out. In all truthfulness, it’s a mix of that...

And the way Hannah’s face absolutely lights up at the words, relief and sheer joy combining to give her a luminous glow. This is why she does what she does.

Michael’s face – the vein that pops out of his forehead, in particular – is well worth it, though. She tips her courier even more than she normally does for the photographic evidence of him being served.

As with all of her cases, they hit the ground running. By Martin Luther King Jr. Day, she meets up with Hannah, prepared to get a full background.

The Christmas decorations in the café are taken down, leaving a much more casual atmosphere, which Caroline is more than grateful for.

“Thank you, for agreeing to have meetings here.” Hannah swipes her forearm over her forehead and knocks the visor askew, as she places a cup – caramel macchiato, she notices – in front of her. Before she slides in across from her. “I pick up doubles as much as I can while Abbie’s in school, which gives me an hour break in between. And Jo, my boss, she’s really great about me needing some time.”

Caroline reaches across the table and places her hand on Hannah’s, feeling the warm, soft skin flex under her palm. “Hey, you don’t have to thank me.”

She hopes the reassurance she very much wants to convey is on her face. She’s good at this – calming people during what is usually one of the worst experiences of their life – and it’s what’s helped her get a leg up at work in the last decade.

Hannah keeps up with giving her free coffee every time she comes, refusing to accept money because, “Caroline. You’re doing so much for me. The least I can do is buy your drinks.”

As their meetings pick up, she finds that she enjoys The Bean Dream – her order is perfect every single time and so are the sweets. Hannah is good at the job, she observes in the moments of down time. Work meetings are, after all, the one time she is ever running early.

Hannah’s polite to customers with a perfectly polished smile on her face that Caroline is used to seeing being given to lawyers at company parties, but it’s charming regardless of the setting. And, she notes with some small amusement, given the second look Hannah often gets from most men and some women after she helps them, she knows people are coming here for more than just their coffee.

Hannah regards her with an interesting combination of caution and friendliness, always sliding across from her or next to her, depending on the table she chooses. Sometimes, the two times Caroline arrives a few minutes

late, she sees Hannah already seated, two drinks in front of her, drawing in a sketchbook. It was the same one she'd had with her at their lunch, but she'd first mistaken it for a plain notebook.

Because they have to meet in such short periods of time, she is there fairly often – a couple of times a week – but she gets all of the information she needs from Hannah, peeling back the layers of her marriage one by one.

“We met in college – he was in law school while I was in undergrad, studying architecture. And he was charming. He pulled out all of the stops; he flew us to Paris on our three month anniversary, and I... I'd never done anything like that before. I hadn't even ever left the country before. I didn't grow up with all of that money. Then, right before my senior year, I was pregnant and when he proposed *and* asked what I thought about being a stay-at-home mom, I thought it sounded like the lives of people I envied so much.”

And –

“I knew he was cheating; I'm not oblivious. He's, if I had to guess, had affairs for at least six years. We were married for almost ten, and I... I'd be willing to bet in retrospect that he wasn't faithful in the beginning, either. But I've never had it thrown in my face like I did with Mindy.”

And –

“Michael – it's not easy to leave him. I'd thought about it so many times. I came up with all of these plans, but he has a temper. And there aren't a lot of things that scare me that aren't directly related to my daughter, but Michael at his worst... was terrifying.”

And –

“I want Abbie to have everything. Every opportunity I could never have. Including having two parents being there for her. But I just couldn't stay for that, anymore. Not that he ever wanted to spend time with her, anyway.”

Hannah lays it all out for her, over periodic pauses and staring out the window with a far-off look in her eye as she recounts what she refers to as “her mistakes.”

“I'm embarrassed,” she admits, as they watch the snow fall outside of the café, one afternoon in February. Well, as Hannah watches it and Caroline watches her. “I'm mortified to tell you – to tell anyone – about...” The look on her face in the reflection of the window she's staring out of grows hard – shame and bitterness welling up in those gray eyes. “My

mom, before she died, never knew how controlling he was, how –” She breaks off and clears her throat. “I hid it from her as much as I could because I didn’t want her to worry. But she wanted me to leave him, too.”

“And I’m an idiot. An absolute idiot for staying with him for so long. For dropping out of college and giving up a degree I wanted so badly, that I worked so hard for. For letting him make me afraid to think certain thoughts or be who I am or want what I want. For thinking an angry, lying, absent parent would be better for Abbie to see and be let down by every day than for her to see me be strong. I wish I could go back in time, to my twenty-two year old self and shake her –”

The self-loathing in her tone is something Caroline has heard many times before with other clients. It makes her sick every time.

Particularly paired with the mirroring look in Hannah’s eyes, though. As if Hannah is able to perfectly picture herself, looking like she would do anything to be able to go back and just – *change* it all. Wondering why she didn’t.

Their meetings are taking a lot out of her, it’s plain for Caroline to see it after a couple of weeks.

She writes on her legal pad a contract for Hannah. It’s simple.

I, Hannah Shailene Dalton, will not refer to myself as an idiot in the presence of Caroline Amy Parker. I acknowledge that I have nothing to be ashamed about for living my life to the best of my ability.

And she signs her own.

I, Caroline Amy Parker, promise Hannah Shailene Dalton that there is never any judgment regarding her marriage and the choices she made to survive.

Hannah signs hers with a head shake and a reluctant smile, even as her eyes warm to melted silver.

The day after they sign their contracts, Caroline makes a detour to The Bean Dream before she goes to have dinner at her brother, Brian’s.

Well, she doesn’t quite make it *in*, because when she reaches for the door, it opens and someone comes barreling into her.

She knows as soon as the warm bundle of human is against her that it’s Hannah, without even seeing her face. Caroline’s instincts are proven

correct moments later, when she gets a firm grip on Hannah's upper arms, to help stabilize her.

It's snowing again, coming down fairly hard – and the flakes are already sticking to the ground and to Hannah's hair and eyelashes as she looks up at Caroline, blinking in surprise. "Caroline? Are you... we weren't meeting today, were we?"

She watches Caroline closely, even as her hands – mitten covered. Cute – are clutching Caroline's arms back.

"No. I was, well, I have something to give you." She bites her lip, uncertainty slipping through her, because she knows that what she's about to suggest isn't always taken well by her clients. And she doesn't always suggest it, either. Before she pulls it out, she gestures to her car. "Can I give you a ride home? We can talk on the way?"

Hannah is giving her that wary look still. As if she trusts Caroline *sort of*. Caroline quirks her lips in a small smile, even though she is freezing her ass off.

The smile becomes a bit more legitimate when Hannah agrees, still looking nervous as she buckles herself in. "I expected you to drive a Lexus or a Mercedes Benz," Hannah comments softly as Caroline blasts the heat in her RAV4.

Caroline lifts her eyebrow at her in amusement. "Why?"

Hannah clears her throat, shrugging as she gives Caroline the look back. "Like I said – I know how much Michael makes. So I know what you make."

There's a clear assumption in Hannah's voice about Caroline – she expects her to be a different sort of person. Someone more like her husband – that rankles and a frown pulls on Caroline's lips for a moment before she forces herself to let it go.

It's not part of her job to argue with a client's perception of her, unless it genuinely affects the case.

"She's my baby," Caroline offers instead, reaching out to pet the dashboard. "Don't worry, I'll never replace you with a pretentious luxury car," she whispers and won't pretend she doesn't enjoy the small smile on Hannah's lips.

She follows the directions to Hannah's apartment – rather, Hannah's babysitter's apartment – before Hannah sits heavily back against her seat, anxiety written all over her face. "Please tell me you aren't dropping me as

a client.” Her hands clutch tightly at her bag in her lap. “Michael told me he could get to anyone I would hire, and he’s been calling with threats ever since we started this, but I thought you –”

Caroline shoots her a confused look as she parks against the curb, cutting her off before she can spiral any further. “No, I’m not dropping you. Of course not.”

“Then, why...” Hannah trails off, gesturing to Caroline’s very presence, the look on her face the picture of confusion. “This?”

Caroline purses her lips before she sighs and looks out at the dark sky. It’s only six, but given that it’s still winter, it looks like it may as well be the middle of the night. “Okay, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way. And I don’t have to know what you decide at all with the information.” She turns to face Hannah a bit before she reaches into her pocket to pull out a card. “Her name is Annette Hogan, she’s a therapist I’ve referred clients to before, if they... seem like they could benefit from it.”

Hannah’s forehead is scrunched up as she reaches out to take the card. “I – you did this to offer me a therapist?” She looks up at Caroline, seeming so incredulous.

“Well, yeah.” She holds Hannah’s gaze for a beat. “I’ve already called her to ask if she’d be willing to take on a new client if you’re interested. She’ll use Michael’s insurance, if you’re still on that. But I’ve talked about using MassHealth or – whatever your job offers, basically, I have a deal with her to sort out the billing after insurance. So, if you *do* want to see her, just give her a call and let her know you’re my client.” Caroline nods, and is glad it went better than the suggestion of therapy often goes on the first round.

Hannah closes the card between the mittens she’d not taken off in the fifteen minute drive. She stares down at her hands for a long moment before looking back at Caroline in consideration. “Thank you. Really.” Her eyes widen as they catch on the time. “I have to pick up Abbie.”

“Of course.” Caroline sits back in her seat before she leans forward to stop Hannah. “Wait – you said that Michael is still threatening you? About proceeding with the divorce?”

Hannah freezes, her hand on the door. “He... is, yes.”

“Send me a record of the call log and any hard copies of texts. Please.” She tacks on.

“I didn’t want to add to your plate; you’re already doing so much for me, and I can honestly handle whatever Michael wants to say. I’ve done it for years.” Hannah bites her lip, regarding Caroline with a look she can’t decipher. But whatever it is, she can clearly see that there’s a strength in it. “I don’t need you to fight these battles for me. Just the legal ones.” She adds with a ridiculously charming smile.

“The logs are important for the legal part, too.” She informs Hannah, without telling her how *seriously*, it would be her pleasure. “And so is your peace of mind.”

Hannah does what Caroline can only describe as regarding her, for long enough that it should be uncomfortable. But it isn’t and she doesn’t flinch, even as she wonders what Hannah’s looking for.

Okay, so *maybe* she is a bit more invested in this than *all* of her cases. She can admit that to herself by early February.

There’s a certain attachment she has to just about every client she takes on. Sure, some are business as usual – her most wealthy clients, usually, often ones that the firm assigns to her. But for her to come up with her best case, she always finds the angle she needs to fight for them. To feel for them.

But there’s also a wall that her caring has to hit. She can’t let herself get invested on a personal level, or she’ll never keep a clear head.

She’s not in *that* deep – her head is clear. But the facts of the matter are these: she’s never been able to stand Michael Dalton and she can picture every single act of indiscretion, manipulation, and sheer intimidation Hannah describes.

She thinks about the dozens of times she’s seen Hannah after their first meeting, knowing she’d written her off after seeing that she’d been married to Michael. And logically, she knows that she can’t blame herself for not seeing their marriage problems.

But she feels guilty about lumping Hannah in with Michael, taking her aloofness and smiles that never reached her eyes as judgment or coldness. Now that she knows what was really going on beneath that surface, she can see how trapped Hannah had felt. How desperate and alone.

She asks questions because she has to, to know all of the details. But there's also a very real want to know the answer, too.

“Who do you have for support? Family? People who can watch Abbie or act as a character witness?”

Hannah blows out a deep breath, shrugging her shoulders. “Growing up, it was just me and my mom. She’s –” She swallows hard. “She died, almost two years ago. Jo, my boss, she could be a character witness. I don’t have many friends.” She admits, looking, as she often does, guilty and embarrassed. “I was pretty isolated when we were married... Robyn, who watches Abbie most of the time if I’m not home. She’s my best friend, I suppose. And, um, she was our housekeeper. That’s how we met.”

Caroline’s interest is piqued. “And she not only is a character witness for you, but also could potentially be one *against* Michael.” She can only think of the crap the woman who cleaned up after Michael saw. She jots down the information real quick as a reminder for herself.

But when she looks back up, Hannah is shaking her head. “Thirty-two, an unfinished bachelor’s degree, single mother fighting for custody, working as a barista...” She trails off, laughter breaking from her lips. “It’s just so *not* who I thought I would be.”

She laughs again, but it’s hollow and the look in her eyes makes Caroline’s heart *ache* for her.

It’s that feeling that pushes the words out of her mouth. “I know what you mean.”

Hannah’s laughter cuts off and so does that look in her eyes, which is a blessing. Instead, she arches an incredulous eyebrow at Caroline. “Give me a break.” It’s not said in a rude way, but entirely doubtful and sort of dismissive.

Which sort of makes Caroline bristle – because Hannah doesn’t know her. Even though that is part of the job – your clients don’t *know* you and boundaries are a major priority.

But Hannah continues, staring at Caroline skeptically. “I mean.” She sits up straight in her chair, giving Caroline a onceover. “You’re beautiful, you’re young, you have a well-paying career that you’re passionate about –”

It’s not business as usual to share anything about her personal life, she reminds herself. The trick is to always feel relatable to clients without

actually sharing stories of personal relation. It's not really a hard rule for her to follow.

And still, this time, she doesn't stop herself. Or maybe can't stop herself. She doesn't know.

"And I go home every night to have dinner by myself. There's no cute kid at home, thinking I hung the moon, and there's never been someone to stick around long enough to even consider wanting to marry me. Plus, I'm two years older than you."

Hannah's expression shifts to such a doubtful look, as if she can't even fathom that Caroline is telling her the truth. It detracts slightly from the stinging truth of her self-assessment.

"Still..." Hannah trails off, running a long finger over the edge of her now-empty coffee mug. "You have everything ahead of you."

They've been doing this for a month now, in fits and starts, but she has a pretty clear picture of who Hannah is.

Which makes her feel confident as she puts her hand on Hannah's forearm, revealed by the sleeves she often rolls up halfway through her shift. She leans close – closer than she's ever been to her, but she wants Hannah to see how serious she is.

"So do you. *You're* beautiful, *you're* young, and you *will* bounce back from this. You've already done the hard part. Do you think just anyone could walk away from someone who scares them and single-handedly raise a child, while working? Because I've met a lot of families and I can promise you that not just anyone can do what you're doing."

Hannah's eyes search her own as she flips the hand under Caroline's arm up and mirrors her grip. Her fingers wrap around Caroline and hold, before her eyes fall closed.

In a short moment, they fall away though, which is good. Because it's feeling *too* personal, and Caroline clears her throat as she leans back.

When she stops by The Bean Dream on Valentine's Day, she thinks about the irony of the statement she's about to deliver.

It's hard not to, especially when she sees all of the hearts hanging from the ceiling – all of the reds and pinks, pastels and metallics. The specials board is rewritten with some drink orders that she knows are new, especially because she's worked her way through their usual specials in the last month and a half. Hannah's writing, she notices, with the swoops and the little decorative drawings.

She kicks her boots off from the snow that covers the sidewalks before she enters slowly, noting all of the couples on the couches. It's after six – later than she normally ever comes here – and the lights are slightly dimmer, with an acoustic version of some Ed Sheeran song.

Of course.

The counter is blessedly free, though, and she shakes the snowflakes out of her hair as she strides forward as soon as she glimpses Hannah.

She looks – well, Caroline isn't quite sure she's ever met someone that is more “her type” than Hannah Dalton, which has only become more and more apparent in the last few weeks. It always gives her the most pleasant buzz that zips through her and there is a slight chance that might also be a reason she looks forward to their meetings.

A little, innocent shot of serotonin never hurt anyone.

When she approaches the counter, Hannah looks at her in surprise. Before that surprise melts into a smile. “Caroline! I didn't expect you today.”

Her eyes catch on some confetti glitter hearts that she must have brushed up against at some point on the jacket of her shoulder and she brushes them off with a grin. “Well, you know what they say. Where there's cupid, there's a woman who rarely gets past the third date.”

Hannah shakes her head in disapproval, but genuinely chuckles anyway.

“Should I ask if you're the cupid?” She asks, gesturing to Hannah's pink shirt and the assorted love-themed pins that adorn her apron.

Hannah looks down at herself before her cheeks turn pink, the self-consciousness clear. “I... no, it’s the company.”

She laughs. “You look cute.” It slips out, but it’s entirely true.

“Oh.” Her cheeks get even deeper and Caroline kind of loves it, her smile widening. Hannah clears her throat, though, shifting back and forth on her feet. “Is there – did you come for any particular reason?”

Perhaps she is *too* excited to deliver the news. It doesn’t stop her from announcing, “After stalling for as long as possible, Michael has gotten back to me. So, we’re moving forward. Starting with subpoenaing his finances. Happy Valentine’s Day!”

Hannah blinks at her slowly, before a smile – a truly cheerful smile – slides across her face. And the difference between that and the other, fleeting ones that usually make an appearance is so staggering, Caroline feels it tingle in her stomach.

“This is the part that is going to take some time. I’m going to need to review all of his records,” and knowing Michael, he was going to find any way to be shady about it. “We’ll need to get through the financial business and then start into assets, and eventually, the custody agreements. But the ball is rolling.”

Hannah shakes her head, looking like she’s in disbelief, before she leans against the counter, questioning eyes looking up at her. “Not that I mind, but – you came all the way here to tell me in person?”

Caroline freezes, though, because... yeah, she guesses she did. She wanted to see that look on Hannah’s face. “Well, that and I realized I desperately need to try a –” She glances at the specials board again. “White chocolate... whatever that is.”

Hannah laughs, rolling her eyes. “Right.” She eyes Caroline, sobering, before her eyes flick behind her, into the crowded café. “I would ask you to stay for my break, but –”

“Caroline!”

She hasn’t heard the voice in over a year, but she’s familiar with it. And she feels herself smile as she turns just in time to face the child throwing her arms around her waist.

She rests a hand lightly on the back of the blonde head pressed against her stomach and gives her a squeeze around the shoulders for good measure. “Abbie!”

Hannah's daughter – nine-years-old, small for her age, sharp as a tack, and cute as a button, with pale blonde hair pulled into a ponytail and a front tooth missing – grins up at her as she pulls back.

Hannah stares at them and it's pretty clear she is dumbfounded.

Which makes sense. She's made a point, several times, telling Caroline that as much as was possible, she didn't want the divorce to touch Abbie. That she wanted to save any parts involving Abbie having to talk to lawyers for as long as possible.

"Where did you go? I went to dad's office and you weren't in yours anymore when I came to visit," she demands, her hands falling adorably to her hips as she tilts her head back to look up at Caroline.

She bops Abbie on the nose lightly with her finger. "I got a new job, Abbacado."

Hannah holds out her hands, staring between the two of them. "I'm sorry. What is –"

"Caroline's my friend from dad's office! I told you, remember?" Abbie stares at her mom, like *duh*. And Caroline has to hold in a laugh from the interaction.

Hannah shakes her head slowly. "Hon, you told me your friend gave you candy and played the Nintendo Switch with you when you had to go to dad's work. And loaned you those books..." She trails off, switching her questioning gaze to Caroline.

Who isn't sure if she should apologize or not. She raises her hand. "Uh, guilty. *Junie B. Jones*. I have them all for when my nieces and nephews come over."

"I'm reading *Percy Jackson* now," Abbie informs her with pride.

"I always thought her friend from Michael's office was another child who was also stuck at the office for a few hours." Hannah stares at her, her eyes undecipherable. She blinks a few times, before looking at Abbie. "Honey, go back to the table and I'll meet you over there soon."

"Do you want to sit with us?" Abbie asks her immediately and Caroline can't help but smile.

The thing is – Abbie is precocious and chatty and sweet, and would fit perfectly in with Caroline's nieces and nephews. For her entire final year at Wilkens & Granger, she'd worked almost every Saturday, working toward the soon-to-be-open partnership. And almost every Saturday, Abbie would

walk in, trailing Michael, who looked as though he couldn't be more aggrieved about his daughter's presence.

"My mommy has to take my grandma to the hospital on Saturdays. She told my daddy that the least he can do is spend some time with me for once." She looked up at Caroline with smart, sad eyes. *"I wasn't s'posed to hear that but I was listening in."*

Now, after talking to Hannah in the last month, she now knows that those Saturdays were the days Hannah would sit with her mom through chemo and various other appointments and errands.

Michael had spent most every day with his office door shut, leaving Abbie in the outer seating area with a couple of toys with her. Abbie, being a normal freaking kid, eventually wandered into Caroline's office after spotting the candy bowl she had on her desk.

She hesitates to agree to sitting with them – not because she doesn't want to, because she *does*. Surprisingly so. But she glances at Hannah, who still is giving her a *look*, forehead crinkled in thought.

When they lock eyes, Hannah bites her lip. "Maybe Caroline can sit with us another time, Ab. It's Valentine's Day, remember? I'm sure she has a date."

Well, she definitely *doesn't*, but she takes that to mean Hannah doesn't want her here. Which, okay. And *that's* why not to get personally attached, she reminds herself, refusing to feel disappointed. Because clients aren't friends, and that's the way it should be.

But perhaps it's not the way it's destined to be for them.

She thinks as much when she hears her name shouted the following week, spotting Abbie exuberantly waving at her from about twenty feet away, outside of the entrance to the Franklin Park Zoo.

Next to her, of course, is Hannah, who is standing shock-still in what she thinks is surprise.

"Who's that?" Zach, her nephew, asks as she leads them over.

She makes the introductions – Zach is Todd's son and Norah is Jared's daughter, ages eight and ten, respectively. Abbie lights up at the prospect of spending the day with other kids, so the decision to spend the day at the zoo as one group is sort of made beyond their control.

They stroll about twenty feet behind their small gaggle of children and Caroline nods slowly to herself as she buries her hands in her pockets. She loves her nieces and nephews probably too much, because if she had any sense she wouldn't have agreed to take them to the zoo on President's Day, when the weather is only forty degrees.

Hannah is strangely quiet as she walks next to her, which makes her a bit uncomfortable. She hasn't really been this reticent with her before. Then again, she opened up to Caroline as her lawyer. And maybe that's it, she realizes.

"I can tell Zach and Norah we have to get going early, if you want," she offers, breaking the silence that's been between them for the last ten minutes.

Hannah's forehead is crinkled in that intense thought, the one she so often gets that makes her a mystery to read, as she turns to look at Caroline. Before she looks back to Abbie, who is chattering away with a smile.

"No, it's okay." She purses her lips, before she huffs out a breath. "You didn't have to pay for us."

Caroline looks at her, eyebrows furrowing in surprise. She hadn't even thought twice about stepping up to the entrance booth, stating that they had two adults, three kids.

Hannah crosses her arms and impressively manages to look serious even with her hands encased in those mittens. "I'm not – you know the state of my finances, yes. But I don't need your pity and I don't want you assuming that I can't take my daughter to the zoo on my own dime. I don't need anyone to pay our way."

She blinks at her in shock, because she'd just honestly had *no idea*. "Hannah –"

But Hannah is already walking away, her eyes trained on the kids, who have decided it's time to move on.

She hustles to keep up, reaching out to touch Hannah's stiff back through her jacket to get her to look at her. "I didn't mean anything by it. I swear. I was prepared to be paying for four extra tickets today – my other nieces and nephew were supposed to come – so I just, it just came out. I didn't mean anything by it," she repeats.

This is why it's not a good idea to be friends with clients, she reminds herself. Misunderstandings or blurred lines that can easily bring sour notes to an otherwise good relationship.

Hannah looks at her intently. A look she sort of likes, in a way. Like Hannah is trying to puzzle her out, too. And apparently she passes muster, because the agitation melts from her expression. “You didn’t?”

She shakes her head. “And I don’t pity you; I respect you, a lot.”

She’s glad that Hannah seems to be able to tell that she means it, her expression lightening even more as they keep walking. It makes relief trickle through her. She doesn’t want that – Hannah thinking poorly of her. Or worse, thinking that Caroline thinks poorly of *her*.

“You were going to take even more kids to the zoo by yourself on your day off from work?” Her voice is back to normal, a teasing tone there, and Caroline’s shoulders lose her tension. “How many nieces and nephews do you have?”

“Six in total. Zach and his sister, Erin, are my brother, Todd’s. She got invited to an indoor trampoline park today last minute, so...”

“Who can pass that up?” Hannah astutely comments, a knowing look on her face.

“Exactly. And my oldest brother, Brian, has three. Melissa, Carly, and Connor. But they all ended up going to see their grandparents on their mother’s side for February vacation. Norah is Jared’s; I watch her more than anyone else.” Seeing as her brother is a single father who manages a construction site, during school vacations she and her parents pitch in a bit.

Gray eyes watch her with a soft smile pulling at the side of her mouth. It’s one she hasn’t seen before, but judging by the dip low in her stomach – attractive serotonin shot, party of one – she likes it.

“So, you’re Super Aunt.”

Adopting a haughty expression, she tosses her hair over her shoulder. “I mean, you *could* say that.”

Hannah rolls her eyes but pushes her shoulder into Caroline’s. They pause a few feet back, watching Norah and Abbie point and excitedly talk about the lion they’re standing in front of.

Well, she is, but when she sneaks a glance at Hannah, she can see that her speculative eyes are locked on Caroline.

She refuses to fidget, even though she wishes she could read Hannah’s mind to figure out the answers she seems to so often be looking for when she studies her.

Eventually Hannah says, “You’re really not what I expected you to be.”

Eyebrows drawing together as confusion slithers through her, she turns to just give a *look*. What is *that* supposed to mean?

Hannah shakes her head, though, blonde locks gently swaying with the motion. “I just – I was wrong about you, for a really long time. I never...” She breaks off, licking her lips slowly as she seems to weigh her words. “I never thought you were the monster that Michael complained about, but I just expected you to be... but you’re so warm and I was so wrong about you.”

Those eyes are transparent when they search Caroline’s again – apologetic. The raw honesty in Hannah’s voice plants itself firmly deep in Caroline’s chest, taking root as she whispers, “I don’t know where I would be without you.”

“I’m glad to be of service,” she semi-jokes, with the slight discomfort in her stomach at the sheer admiration in Hannah’s eyes. She’s had a similar look from clients before, but it never felt so personal. Maybe because none of them had ever known *her* in any sort of personal capacity.

“Caroline. I mean it.” Hannah’s gloved hand falls to her own, a frown on her face as she rubs it. “Your hands are freezing. Why didn’t you bring gloves? It’s still winter, you know.”

The chiding makes things slide back to normal and she’s glad for it.

She’s even more glad for Abbie’s interruption a moment later. “Mom! Norah said she’s sleeping over at Caroline’s tonight and she said I can, too! Can I?”

Hannah’s gaze falls from her face, but her hands don’t fall from Caroline’s. Her voice is sheer exasperation, “Abbie, the only person that can invite you over to Caroline’s is Caroline.”

“But mom, you said that you have to bring me to Robyn’s super early for when you go to work and now you won’t have to, and –”

“Abigail, that is not how this works.”

“It’s fine.” The words fall from her lips but a moment later she nods with it – it is fine.

Hannah looks at her doubtfully. “You don’t have to say yes –”

“I don’t *have* to do anything. Norah will love it and I have tomorrow off, too. If you want to just pick Abbie up after work, that’s really okay. I don’t mind.”

The offer to watch Abbie comes out before she can truly think about it, but when she does think it over a moment later, she finds that she means it.

What else does she have going on tomorrow?

The dubious expression on Hannah's face doesn't completely melt away, like she's waiting any moment for Caroline to say *gotcha!* She just squeezes her hand still encased by Hannah's and smiles.

Hannah's knock on her door the following day is tentative.

Caroline answers it quickly, having kept tabs of Hannah from her very frequent texts.

There's a clear tightness in Hannah's smile as she peers easily over Caroline's shoulder, clearly looking for Abbie. She'd been nervous at Abbie staying the night, Caroline knows. Especially because when their outing at the zoo had been drawing to a close, Hannah had given Caroline the option to back out of the sleepover twice.

"Abbie's reading in the blanket fort," she informs Hannah, leading her through her condo.

She doesn't miss the way Hannah looks around, taking in Caroline's purchased photographs mixed with her personal ones with her family, of the friend group she's maintained since college, and of her travels.

"How was she?" Hannah asks, her eyes still scanning over everything before they wind up in Caroline's living room.

"She was great. Norah had a lot of fun with someone else her own age for once. Her other girl cousins are either too young for her or there's Melissa, who feels she's too old," Caroline fondly rolls her eyes. "Not that I don't make some fabulous company, if I do say so myself."

As soon as Abbie hears her mom's voice, she comes clambering out of the blanket fort she and Norah had made with Caroline's help, that takes up most of the free space in the living room. "Mom! We had the *best* time. Did you know that Norah goes to my school? She's in fifth grade, though, but we can see each other during recess. Caroline let us bake cookies and she has a thousand pillows for the fort."

Abbie's blonde hair is mussed from having crawled out of the blankets, but her excitement is easily palpable. It makes Caroline smile all over again and it would be impossible to miss the warm grin that takes over Hannah's face. Her smiles at Abbie are entirely real and big and gorgeous, Caroline noted that yesterday.

“I’m glad you had fun, hon. Why don’t you get your bag so we can head home?”

Abbie’s smile falls. “Do we have to leave? Can’t we hang out with Caroline a little more?”

All Hannah has to do is arch her eyebrows before Abbie trudges into the other room to get her things.

Hannah turns to her, drawing a hand through her hair as she looks at her again. That look that she doesn’t seem quite sure what to make of Caroline. “Thanks for having her.”

Caroline waves her hand. “I had fun. Really – maybe more than the girls. The company is nice.”

Hannah’s eyes search hers and she opens her mouth, ready to ask a question, before she closes it again.

But Caroline doesn’t miss it. “What?”

Hannah’s cheeks color, but she shakes her head. “It’s none of my business. I don’t want to pry into your life.”

That’s a good rule of thumb. Caroline ignores it, though. “Come on, Hannah. How much do I know about your life? Go ahead and ask.”

“How come you don’t have any kids? You seem to love your nieces and nephews a lot and you’re good with them. You didn’t want any?”

The question shouldn’t surprise her, given this circumstance. But still it does, and Caroline feels a little pang in her chest.

“God, I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer,” Hannah is quick to assure, her warm hand falling to Caroline’s arm. “Like I said, it’s none of my business.”

Caroline shakes her head, forcing a laugh. “No, it’s fine. It’s – I do love kids. It’s the relationship part that I’m just not so good at, in order to lead into the whole *having a kid with someone* thing.” She shoots Hannah a self-deprecating smile. Yep, she loves admitting her relationship and life failures to the most gorgeous woman in the world.

Hannah’s eyes are big and feel like they’re seeing a lot as she gives Caroline’s arm a small squeeze. “I’m sure that’s not true.”

Abbie runs back into the room and Caroline silently cheers for the kid’s timing. Small victories to save her from putting her foot in her mouth.

She hadn't intended for it to be a regular occurrence, her hanging out with Abbie while Hannah's at work.

It just *happens*.

It starts like this – Caroline is laying on the couch, her head dropped against the back cushion as she contemplates whether she's feeling up to actually making herself dinner when her phone rings.

She's pleasantly surprised to see Hannah's name pop up. And then immediately concerned that something has happened to do with her case when she answers. They haven't spoken much in the last couple of days, since Abbie had spent the night.

"Hannah? Everything okay?"

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry to ask," the distressed tone in Hannah's voice is even more alarming than Caroline had thought it would be, and it has Caroline's stomach clenching as she sits to attention. "Robyn – my friend? Who watches Abbie for me? She, god, I don't know how it happened, but she hurt her leg and I have to take her to the hospital, but I..." She trails off, muttering something that Caroline can't quite make out, even as she can hear frantic movements on the other end of the line.

And even though it's not *good* news, she can feel everything inside of her relax just a bit because – *whew*. Nothing has cropped up in their case and no one is dead or seriously injured.

"It's just, I don't want Abbie waiting at the hospital for so long." Hannah pauses before murmuring to herself. "What am I doing?" She clears her throat. "Actually, never mind. I can try Michael again. I'm sorry I bothered you tonight."

"You aren't bothering me, and I'm on my way."

Caroline is already standing from the couch – she guesses she will be cooking tonight after all.

It turns out, having a babysitter with a broken leg isn't really the ideal situation.

Hannah works a double shift on Mondays and Wednesdays, and picks up the occasional Saturday, if Abbie has other plans.

"What the hell am I going to do?" Hannah asks herself as she paces around Caroline's living room, her hair a mess from the amount of times she'd clearly drawn her hands through it. It's almost midnight and she's only just able to come and pick Abbie up after having helped Robyn back home, cast and all.

“Robyn’s already going to be struggling with her leg, I can’t add onto her plate with Abbie two or three days a week. I can’t have her sitting around the café for hours. I could give up my overtime, but then –” She groans, the short quiet sound laden with stress and worry. “The second I ask Michael for any parenting contributions, he lords it over me. I’m...”

“It just so happens,” she tells Hannah, standing up so she can stand in front of her and make her pause that pacing. “That I have those afternoons free.”

Hannah stares at her indecipherably. Before she shakes her head. “No, I can’t ask you to do that.”

“I offered. And you’d actually be doing me a favor.”

She gets the most incredulous look that she *has* to laugh, even as Hannah deadpans. “Right. I’m sure you have nothing better to do than watch my nine-year-old.”

“I... don’t, really.” She’s almost embarrassed to admit.

“I find that hard to believe.” Hannah twists her fingers together, her stress palpable. Caroline hates that stress sitting on her shoulders, she really does.

Hannah is a good person and she doesn’t deserve to live like this.

“It’s true. I worked so much through my twenties, I only really held on to a few good friends. And only one still lives within a half hour of here – and she’s married, just had a baby. So she’s not really around much anymore.” Embarrassment at admitting the lonely truth of her life forces her to stop talking. “I’d love to have some extra company.”

Hannah still doesn’t seem to quite believe her, even though she looks like she’s breaking. “What about dating?” She asks weakly, as if trying to find a reason, to give Caroline an out.

She can’t help the scoffing laugh that works its way out of her. “Yeah, none of that going on.” She definitely doesn’t want to dwell on that, especially to Hannah, and she refuses to dwell on *that*, either. “I have six excellent babysitting recommendations. I’m great with after school snacks and I can help with homework, except when we delve into science. That’ll have to be all you.” She offers a cheeky smile.

Which makes Hannah laugh. Disbelief covers her face, her laugh, and it’s all charming as she gives Caroline a soft look. It’s endeared, she thinks, and she has no idea the last time anyone has found her endearing of all things.

Hannah takes a deep breath. “Thank you. And I’ll meal prep for you in return.”

She wants to tell Hannah she doesn’t have to do anything for her in return, but she can see that Hannah needs that, she needs to be giving her *something* in return. So she nods. “It’s a plan, then.”

By St. Patrick's Day, it's a routine.

Two days a week, she picks Abbie up from school and they hang out at her place. Her entertainment arsenal – movies, games, books – that she's built up over the last decade from her family is put to good use.

Abbie is smart and remarkably well-adjusted, both of which are traits she attributes to Hannah. And the meals Hannah brings her, anything from lasagna to roasted chicken to chowder, are all incredible.

Caroline *does* have a lot of babysitting experience, but not quite such a frequent schedule. Being the diligent student she's always been, she sits down with Abbie to figure out a routine that works for them in the first week. A snack and homework first, and then they can play. Abbie's content to play video games or watch a movie or read, to entertain herself when Caroline needs to finish up some work.

But she likes to hang out with Abbie. Hanging out with kids, getting to see their particular insights and excitements has always been something that's fun for her.

They go out, mostly on weekends, but sometimes after school – to the aquarium, to the Museum of Science, the Children's Museum – and occasionally her nieces or nephews join them. But Abbie is always thrilled to go anywhere and her enthusiasm is contagious. Her mind is like a sponge and she asks Caroline a thousand questions, several of which she has no idea how to answer without Googling first.

It's *fun* and Caroline feels like it chases away those cobwebs of loneliness that have been making their home in her life for the last few years.

Boundaries, she tells herself, are still somewhat in place. Right.

Her relationship with Hannah also grows.

She comes over to pick up Abbie and often ends up staying for dinner. The first time, she'd lingered in the doorway, looking tired after her double shift. And it had only taken Caroline a moment of enticement with

Hannah's own home cooking having been freshly reheated to lure her inside to relax.

After Abbie regales her with the stories she'd told Caroline earlier, Hannah takes over and talks about the clientele at The Bean Dream.

She learns about the intern who comes in every morning at nine fifteen sharp and is wildly frantic, every single day. The businesswoman who comes in and orders without looking up from her phone, to the point that Hannah doesn't even think she knows what she looks like. The foreman who grumbles about coffee prices. She's invested in the drama between Hannah's boss Jo and her revolving door of suitors.

Hannah deserves something easy for once. A break from the hoops she's been jumping through for years and from the uphill battle she's been shouldering alone for the last year. And Caroline finds that she's happy to co-shoulder.

It's easy and warm and feels a lot like her house is a *home*.

As they stand literally shoulder-to-shoulder to wash dishes after dinner, Hannah admits, "I never thought we would become friends."

And she pauses as she rinses a glass, the term throwing her for a loop. "Is that what we are? Friends?"

Hannah gives her a look like she's absolutely insane. But her voice is gently teasing. "Yes, Caroline, we are." She plucks the glass from Caroline's fingers. "If I were *just anyone*, would you be watching my kid or having dinner with me? Because if you weren't my friend, I wouldn't be trusting you with Abbie or wanting to hear your stories about your work and family."

"You have a point," she concedes with a grin, even though she thinks *I don't really do that with my friends, either*.

But she likes this routine. She likes these nights, the weekend outings. She likes that they are friends.

Sometimes, she thinks, boundaries are overrated.

She wishes she and Hannah hadn't only known each other peripherally for so long.

It feels like so much time wasted, when they could have had this friendship years ago. One where they catch each other's eyes and roll at the

same moments when they hear stupid things when they're out and about, where they read the same books, where they realize they're both history nerds.

It's a subset of common interests Caroline has never had with any other friend – and she hasn't actually *made* new friends in years. The pain of being an adult – and it's nice to feel understood.

Of course, they couldn't have been friends like this before, given the whole Michael aspect of it, but better late than never.

And Caroline is very, very glad it wasn't never.

When she goes to visit Kris, she is making silly faces at her best friend's son as he's sitting on her knees, and her face freezes into one of the expressions when her friend tells her:

“Just... be careful, okay?”

“Careful?” She makes sure that Jason is completely stable on her lap before arching an eyebrow at her friend.

Who just rolls her eyes. “I know you're careful with babies.” She nails her with a knowing look. “I mean be careful about this damn straight woman you're falling for.”

Caroline's mouth falls open, but no words come out for a few long moments as her face heats. “I'm not *falling* for Hannah.”

The knowing look doesn't move at all from Kris's face. “Sure.” Before she relents and shakes her head. “Just, please. I don't want to see you heartbroken. Seeing you the first couple weeks after Amanda broke things off,” a nice way to put it, “was so hard. I don't want you to be going down the same sort of path without any chance of a payoff.”

But Caroline shakes her head, the adamant feeling inside of her is strong. “I'm fine. Everything is normal.”

Kris arches her eyebrows. “Yeah? You're fine? What did you do last night, then? Since it was a Friday – you know, a date night. Not a babysitting night.”

“I told you, I'm taking a break from dating right now. And, I'll have you know, I had dinner with my parents after work.” All the truth.

“And then?”

Well. Fine.

Caroline breaks the eye contact with Kris and instead focuses on Jason, deliberately bouncing him.

So, last night *may* have been a Friday and *yes* it was one of Hannah's days off, so she was under no babysitting obligations.

But *maybe* she'd gone to the movies with Hannah and Abbie after dinner with her parents. She'd promised Abbie that she'd take her to the movies a few weeks prior and, well, Friday evening seemed like as good a time as any.

After she'd paid for the tickets and a large bucket of popcorn for the three of them, Hannah had given her a look. A playful one. "You're spoiling her."

She held up her hands in defense. "I'm spoiling *myself*; I love movie popcorn."

"It's just not the same as it is at home, mom!" Abbie had called over her shoulder as she'd marched forward toward their seats.

Hannah shot her with a look, wordlessly saying *your influence*. But there was a smile playing on her lips, too, an indulgent one that was becoming more and more familiar to her. One that made her feel proud and worthy every time, because it just looked really, really good on Hannah's lips.

"Okay, fine, so what? Spending time with Hannah and Abbie is more fun than spending the night alone." And more fun than spending it with most other people, too, but that wouldn't help her case at the moment.

Kris merely *hmms*, the sound full of warning.

Caroline shakes her head as she goes back to playing with Jason.

She has everything in balance. It's perfectly fine.

Caroline realizes she's a little bit of a liar the following week.

It's Sunday and she shouldn't have been at work at all; she should have been at home, having a relaxing day. Instead, she's spent five hours with a particularly high profile client – perhaps the highest profile she's ever worked with – that is very under wraps, all the while making sure she has all of her ducks in a row, prepared to go to Hannah and Michael's settlement hearing soon.

That is also a particularly trying situation, given that Michael does have more money and connections than God herself and he is dragging his heels as much as he possibly can. He knows exactly what lines he's able to toe and how far he can push things, and it's just a headache.

Regardless, she's just gotten home and receives a text from Hannah stating that she and Abbie have gone to a bakery – a treat for Abbie for having a perfect report card – in Caroline's neck of the woods.

Hannah – 6:09PM

Sorry that you've had a long day :(

We got you a cannoli. We can drop it off real quick?

She's only just changed out of her pantsuit from work and has settled down on the couch with a glass of wine and honestly, nothing sounds better than a visit from Hannah and Abbie tonight.

Caroline – 6:10PM

Idk... you know I don't really like desserts :/

Her condo door flings open only moments later, Abbie having given up knocking several weeks ago. She presents her proudly with a slightly rumpled Mike's Pastry box as Hannah shuts the door and follows her in, waving her phone with Caroline's text still open.

She shakes her head, teasing. "I can't believe you would lie to me."

Their *real quick* visit quickly changes into Abbie asking if they can stay and take advantage of Caroline's subscription to Disney+, because she still hasn't seen *WALL-E*.

Hannah hesitates, still wearing her light jacket as she stands next to the couch, as if Caroline *ever* says no to their company.

Abbie turns those big blue eyes on Caroline. "Please?"

She's already very much powerless to say no to that, plus... she really doesn't want to. She looks up at Hannah. "If you want? I have some more wine." She only realizes a moment later that she's trying to tempt Hannah into it.

And Hannah nods easily, unzipping her jacket as Abbie cheers and makes herself comfortable on the nest of pillows Caroline now keeps in the living room just for her, knowing that she likes to lay on her stomach amidst a pillow palace while watching TV.

She enjoys *WALL-E*; she'd watched it multiple times with Melissa when she'd been younger.

But mostly she finds herself leaning closer into Hannah's warmth as she sits very close next to her on the couch. It's the long day catching up with her, she thinks, and Hannah just feels so *good*.

The length of their bodies align, shoulder to hip, thigh to calf. She's wearing an old Suffolk Law School t-shirt and Hannah a sweater that has her sleeves pushed up to the elbow. She's noticed many times over this isn't just a look she has at the coffee shop, but in general.

The thing about Hannah is that upon first look, she appears delicate. With her fine features and rather naturally soft voice, it's an easy impression.

But Caroline's gaze is focused on Hannah's left hand, that's laying more against Caroline's right thigh than on Hannah's own. She doesn't have delicate hands. They're slightly smaller than her own, but are capable, strong hands, with deft fingers. She's seen them draw deceptively difficult pieces of art for Abbie, effortlessly make complicated coffee orders, execute a perfect French braid, and chop vegetables as if she's a professional chef.

The spot where Hannah's hand falls on her burns through her plaid pajama pants, her thigh tingling with it. Hannah adjusts, tucking her legs up under her, and with the movement her hand *should* fall away. Instead, she settles more against Caroline and her hand falls back to her thigh, rubbing gently before settling again.

But her heart is racing.

It's that little rub that gets her. It isn't anything even mildly inappropriate. It's a way Caroline has been touched before by friends – she's cuddled like this with friends before – but she's never had this exhilaration from it even by half.

Her entire body feels warm now, that tingling feeling spreading all down her spine, through her stomach and chest. It's so strong, this attraction and this *want* that she can hardly catch her breath with it.

Swallowing hard, she turns just enough to see Hannah's face. Which alone sends that burst of butterflies through her stomach. She has the light set to dim, so it's mostly the light from the TV reflecting off of Hannah's face, her expression one of total relaxation.

Total relaxation that is completely and utterly blissfully unaware of the many, many chain reactions going off through Caroline's body.

Until she turns her head and catches Caroline staring, her eyebrows drawing together as she whispers, "You okay? You feel super tense all of the sudden."

"Do I?" A nervous laugh comes out of her throat, the sound unfamiliar to both of them. "I'm – fine. I'm just," she has to pause to clear her throat. "I have a lot of stuff going on at work. Stressed. Just remembered it all."

Hannah's look of questioning melts into one of understanding and sympathy. "You want to talk about it?"

She tilts her head toward the kitchen, eyebrows lifted with the offer.

The last thing she wants to do while being slapped in the face with the recognition of her attraction is to be completely alone with Hannah and struggle to focus on something other than this feeling.

"No, it's okay." She manages to get out with a small smile.

Hannah accepts her words, even as she gives her a sympathetic grin.

The hand on Caroline's thigh starts rubbing again, in soft circles that she is sure Hannah believes are soothing, while her other arm sneaks up around Caroline's neck and her hand kneads at her neck.

Caroline has to remind herself to breathe for the rest of the movie.

She sits in the living room with the lights still dimmed for hours after they leave, running it all over in her mind.

Her attraction to Hannah isn't new, she tells herself, forcefully. Hannah has always been the most physically beautiful woman she's ever met.

It's just now... she *sees* Hannah. She sees her strength, the sheer power and the iron will that is hidden under her soft veneer.

She knows all of the shades of those gray eyes that have always intrigued her. The way they melt when they look at Abbie, the way they turn hard as stone when she's focused. The way they look at her, sometimes with the most intensity she thinks she's ever had focused on her but most of the time – now – with an affection that gives away that she actually enjoys Caroline's company.

It's easier to wake up on the days she knows she's going to see Hannah and she finds herself actively looking for things to do with both of the

Dalton women in her life.

With a sigh, she scrubs her hands over her face and turns, curling up on the couch completely. As she inhales, her eyes involuntarily close at the realization that her head is now resting against the spot on the couch that Hannah had sat in.

She always smells like coffee – *heaven* – and vanilla – *double heaven* – with the slightest undertone of peach, and the scent always lingers for hours after she leaves.

Christ.

She's noticed all of these things – everything about Hannah – without registering how much her attraction has grown, for months.

Laying on her back, she stares at the ceiling.

“Who wouldn't fall for Hannah, at least a little?” She asks the universe.

She's intelligent, she's sweet, she's the perfect combination of soft and hard, and her nose scrunches up in the cutest possible way whenever she laughs. It was inevitable from the beginning that Caroline's feelings would get mixed up in everything.

Perhaps it's not all in perfect balance, perhaps it hasn't been in a little while. But perhaps it's still fine just the same.

V

The settlement hearing with Michael happens the Thursday before Easter and it goes just about as Caroline anticipated.

Depositions done, records scoured, prenup examined – Caroline is ready and she’s briefed Hannah on what is – mostly – going to happen.

Still, she has her hands on her shoulders outside of the conference room, gently rubbing the tense muscles in her shoulders. Hannah is more nervous and fidgety than she’d been when she’d asked Caroline to be her lawyer, which was the only time she’s seen her remotely like this. She hates that look in those eyes and she vows to herself that it *won’t* be there by the end of this divorce.

“It’s going to be a back and forth. You don’t have to say a single word to him. I’ve got this, okay?”

Hannah’s eyes bore into her own and the trust in them makes her feel so certain she *will* live up to earning it.

As she’s predicted, Michael – represented by Morrison Wilkens of Wilkens & Granger himself. *Eye roll* – is contesting many of her terms.

Morrison sits across from her, giving her a look she *knows* is purposefully incredulous, to make his opposing counsel doubt their terms. She knows all of his tricks; she’d learned from him for years.

They go back and forth about regular financial support –

“You’re expecting my client to pay three thousand dollars a month in child support alone? Along with fifteen hundred in alimony? All the while Mrs. Dalton is working full time herself?”

Hannah’s hand falls to her thigh under the table and Caroline knows it’s from surprise. Because Hannah hadn’t *asked* for that money.

But also Hannah’s hand squeezing at her mid-thigh is... well, really distracting. She can’t say she’s ever gone through a settlement hearing with heat on a low simmer in her stomach, but she guesses there’s a first for everything.

Still, it doesn’t throw her off her game.

“Mr. Dalton is responsible for my client not having had a job in her adult life. He wanted her to be a stay at home mother, promising to provide for her.”

“Which, as the record reflects, he *has*. Faithfully, for nearly ten years. In those ten years, has your client ever wanted for anything?”

“She’s wanted for a loving husband and attentive father to her child. *Faithfully* isn’t the word I would have used in your client’s defense.” She aims Michael a look that she hopes shows him at least a fraction of the contempt she has for him inside.

They move on to Michael’s inheritance –

“Your client signed a prenuptial agreement forfeiting any rights to Mr. Dalton’s assets prior to marriage. Frankly, discussing this topic is a waste of all of our time. Honestly, Caroline.”

She knows he’s using her first name in order to impugn her, but refuses to take the bait.

Caroline taps the cap of her pen against her palm, before deliberately pressing it against the folder she has in front of her. “You’d think that, *Morrison* – however. According to Mr. Dalton’s clients’ financial records that I obtained by my own means,” she aims a look at Michael, who is sitting up higher in his chair. And a smile steals over her face. *Gotcha*. “Not all of his accounts were listed on said prenuptial agreement. There’s an investment here that’s since been cashed out by Mr. Dalton and re-housed in a different account. Something he neglected to share with me in his own financial records, an honest mistake I’m *sure*.” She pauses to pull out the information on the account in question. “An account in Singapore that’s worth approximately fifteen million dollars.”

“That’s included in the prenup,” Michael snaps, the vein in his forehead pounding visibly.

She maintains her smile, feeling Hannah squeeze at her thigh again. She wants to look at her, but she forces herself to sit facing forward. “Given that your family’s attorney made quite certain to list all of your families’ investments individually, I’m afraid that this investment was actually not included.”

She slides the copy of the records across the table to Morrison. And the look on his face would likely appear to be unflappable to most anyone else, but she can see by the slightest ticking of his jaw that he is surprised – and pissed off at Michael. Double hit.

It’s a long and draining few hours that eventually ends in talks of custody.

Hannah's grip on her leg is tight as soon as the word is uttered and Caroline slips her hand off of the table to slip a folder back into her briefcase, but mostly does it so that she can place her hand on top of Hannah's to try and soothe her.

It's going to be okay.

She squeezes softly as she speaks. "My client has been the sole provider of emotional stability and support for Abbie for her entire life. She's been the primary – dare I say, only – caregiver for Abbie and has continued to do so, with very little involvement from your client in over a year."

Hannah's hand flips over so that she can lace their fingers together, clinging.

Morrison opens his mouth, but it's Michael who speaks. "I want full custody."

Needless to say, a settlement isn't figured out just then.

She takes Hannah to The Bean Dream and sits with her afterwards, getting her a coffee and encouraging her to drink as her face is ashen, so visibly shaken by his words.

"Full custody?" It's all Hannah's said since they left, as if she can't comprehend the words. "He doesn't – he's never once voluntarily spent a day with Abbie." She draws her hands roughly through her hair, the stress making her movements jagged. "I was afraid he was going to ask for *joint* custody, I..."

She can feel Hannah's distress in her own chest, as if she's absorbing it. She wishes she *could* absorb it.

She scoots her chair closer to Hannah's, sitting close to her, keeping her voice low and soothing. "He's only asking for custody because he's angry."

Hannah whips her head up. "Like *that* makes me feel better?"

Caroline quickly shakes her head. "He's pissed I found out about his account in Singapore – believe me, he tried to hide it pretty well. But it's the ultimate bargaining chip –"

"Why didn't you tell me about that?" Hannah demands. The anger in her tone is intense, sudden, burning, and so is the reflection of it in her gaze.

“And why did you ask for the child support and alimony? I told you that I don’t *want* his money.”

It takes her aback, her eyes widening in surprise, even as a kernel of shame forms in the pit of her stomach. “I – I knew you wouldn’t want me to do it,” she admits quietly. “I knew if I told you, you would tell me no.”

Which is, guiltily, the entire truth. She couldn’t expressly go against a client’s orders in a settlement, but if Hannah didn’t know...

Hannah leans away from her, the distress and fury clear on her face, in her body language. So closed off from Caroline, it stings. “And you decided to do it, anyway. You *knew* it wasn’t what I wanted and yet, you went ahead without even talking to me about it.” She rolls her lips, pursing them, her voice tight. “I’m going through this divorce because I’ve put up with that for ten years, do you understand that? And now, because you made him angry –”

She breaks off, shaking her head, shoulders drawn up tight as she stares out the window for a long moment. Then she stands, the chair jarringly scraping against the floor.

“I have to go get Abbie.”

Caroline shakes her head, quickly, just – she just needs to explain. “She’s coloring Easter eggs at my parent’s house, she’s okay there for another hour –”

Hannah holds up her hand to cut her off and the words fall down her throat at the determination in her gaze. Caroline leaves a tip on the table and they leave their coffees untouched.

The drive to her parents’ house is in tense silence. Caroline glances at Hannah every time she stops at a red light, because there are so many things she wants to *say*, but Hannah doesn’t seem open to hearing any of them.

But Hannah’s never been angry with her and it... it hurts. Guilt eats away at her even as the words to defend her actions keep formulating in her mind in a thousand different ways.

As she drives slowly up the street, her eyes landing on the familiar pale yellow exterior of her childhood home, she takes a deep breath – she can’t let the day end like this. She just needs to make it right, before there’s a real rift between them. Because the thought of that makes her stomach clench in fear.

When she cuts the engine, Hannah’s door is already being pushed open and she quickly reaches out to touch her wrist. Just a light touch, to stop her

from getting out, and by some miracle it works. Even though Hannah's posture is still so tight, it looks like she could break into pieces with how hard she is holding herself together.

"I'm sorry." She feels helpless as the words leave her, but she feels that apology in her *soul*.

Hannah doesn't say anything, but gives her an expectant look.

"I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. I should have, but –"

Hannah shakes her head, a humorless smile on her lips. "Apologies don't count if they're accompanied by a *but*. If I can teach that to Abbie, I'm sure it's something you've learned, too."

Edging closer to desperation for Hannah to just *hear her out*, she nods quickly. "I – okay, I get that, but maybe I could explain and see if you can make an exception this once?"

She waits for a breathless few seconds to see whether or not Hannah slams the car door on her.

Instead, she slowly closes it and stares at Caroline in wait, a stormy expression still on her face.

The tentative edge of relief starts to make an appearance as she rushes to explain.

"I know you don't want Michael's inheritance – but it's only a bargaining chip." She emphasizes, gesticulating wildly. "If he's going to contest this and make us go to trial, he is going to lose half of that money to you. It's a guarantee." She holds up her hand to stop Hannah's insistence that she doesn't want the Dalton money. "He doesn't want that. And I will bet *anything* that he wants to keep that money far more than he wants full – or *joint* – custody."

"You're willing to bet Abbie on it." Hannah's words are flat.

Caroline grimaces, stomach twisting into knots at the way the words sound. "I... didn't think of it like that." She is forced to admit. "But – Hannah, if we go to court for this, there is *no way* he will get full custody. I promise." The strength of that promise burns through her. She would sign it into a blood oath if she had to. She stares at Hannah, willing her to see how serious she is. "I would never let that happen. I wouldn't."

Hannah stares at her, the anger seeming to ebb a little bit but the typical warmth she usually has when looking at Caroline is missing and she feels it. Heavily.

“We know Michael in two different ways, but we both know him. He *is* going to settle this out of court and give you whatever you want for custody to keep that money. We just have to wait until the next settlement. I’ve done this a thousand times, this is why you wanted me,” she reminds her, actually hitting desperation. “Please, just trust me.”

The actual pleading that she can hear in her own words seems to fill the car, along with a stifling silence.

She keeps her eyes on Hannah, anxiety ratcheting up with each moment that Hannah’s steely gaze is on her, measuring.

Finally, she breaks. “I’m trying to.” Her voice is so soft, but Caroline’s heart aches at hearing the words. Hannah plays with the bracelet on her wrist as she bites her lip. “But I’m still upset with you. So, I’m going to get Abbie and go home for the night. You don’t have to watch her Saturday.”

Her tone is resolute and Caroline doesn’t argue, not even to say that she never watches Abbie because she *has* to, but because she wants to.

Everything inside of her feels jumbled up and she watches Hannah knock on her parents’ door from the car before she presses her forehead against the steering wheel.

Her job brought Hannah into her life and the ultimate irony is that doing her job to the best of her ability might be what also ruins everything between them, too.

She’s pretty shocked when she sees Hannah and Abbie on Easter.

She hasn’t seen or heard from them for a few days and she feels their absence viscerally. Like a constant, low ache inside of her that refuses to be soothed.

In all honesty, it feels worse than any breakup she’s ever been through. She doesn’t allow herself to think too hard about that. She builds a cage around it in her mind and leaves it alone.

The last few months have just happened so easily for them that she didn’t think about how lonely it feels without them. Even just a quick message to check in. Or going to grab a drink at The Bean Dream on her lunch break on Friday, as she’s done for weeks.

When Hannah would see her come in and her face would soften into a smile and she would take her ten minute break at the same time.

She's trying to not let herself think about it when she goes inside, only to be immediately reminded.

"Where's your friend?" Her mom asks her as soon as she walks through the door. More like demands from her.

"Huh?" She gestures to the six small Easter baskets filled with candy and a large Tupperware bowl of pasta salad balanced in her hands. "Usually you let me put my stuff down before any interrogation."

"Hannah, your polite friend. I invited her and Abbie to the Easter egg hunt this afternoon. She's a sweet girl, huh?" Her mom smiles, clearly charmed by Abbie – who wouldn't be? Before she lightly swats at Melissa as she bumps into them and then continues onward without saying a word as she's texting.

Immediately, she can feel her heart twist in her chest.

"Oh. Um. I don't think she's coming." She can hear the glumness in her own tone.

She's been pretty fucking glum for a few days, though. The fact that Hannah thought she would use Abbie as a bargaining chip weighs on her, along with wondering if she does trust her, really

It means far more to her than she wants to admit.

Her parents and brothers call her out on her moroseness throughout the morning, which she has had *enough* of by noon.

So, in typical Easter Sunday fashion for her, she ignores them all in favor of hanging out with her nieces and nephews. It's the best part of any holiday, as far as she's concerned.

She's laying on her back in the grass – ignoring her mom's shouts about grass stains because, "I do my own laundry now, mom!" – as she alternates hoisting Connor and Erin, as the youngest of the brood, up into the air with her feet, allowing them to put their arms out like airplanes.

She grabs Erin's hands to balance her as she jiggles her feet, and her niece giggles loudly. "Dear passengers, we're experiencing a bit of turbulence. You'd better hold on for *dear life!*"

She very nearly drops Erin when Hannah appears above her. "I hate to interrupt, but can I steal your aunt for a second?" Hannah's voice is soft and sweet as she talks to Erin.

Caroline lowers her to the ground and promises to join her for the egg hunt soon, before Erin runs off to join her cousins by the swing set. And Caroline gazes up from where she's laying on the ground, stupefied for a

long moment as she stares. The sun is just behind Hannah's head from Caroline's vantage point on the ground, giving her the most ethereal halo, making it seem like her impossibly soft looking blonde locks are glowing.

Quickly, she pushes herself up and brushes herself off, knowing she must look just as surprised as she feels. "What are you doing here?"

Hannah doesn't look like she did the last time she'd seen her. Her body language doesn't scream angry or hurt and for that, Caroline almost melts in relief. Almost, because she's still too anxious.

But Hannah looks anxious herself. "Your mom invited us. And Abbie had so much fun coloring eggs with your nieces and nephews... she doesn't have any cousins, so –" She breaks off and clears her throat. "But I also wanted to see you."

"You did?" *I wanted to see you too*, almost slips out, but she manages to keep it in. What's the point in saying it when she's realized she kind of always wants to see Hannah?

Hannah nods and tangles her hands in front of her, before she pushes out. "I don't ever want Abbie used as a bargaining tool. That's not – she's my daughter. I don't care about *anything* else in this divorce."

Caroline has thought about little else in the last few days, but Hannah doesn't give her a moment to say any of the apologies she's thought of.

"But you weren't wrong. I chose you because I wanted someone who would be able to manipulate and outsmart Michael and that's what you're doing." Hannah takes in a deep breath, before expelling it, the tension leaving her with it. "He would rather eat his own hand than forfeit seven and a half million dollars *and* be in charge of taking care of her full time."

Caroline waits a few seconds to see if that's it, before nodding slowly. "He won't get Abbie," she promises again, her voice low and intense. "If he even moved to go to court, I have more tricks up my sleeve. But he *won't*." She's so sure of it, that Abbie's custody never felt like a gamble to her. She says as much.

Hannah tilts her head up, eyes searching Caroline's. "What about the alimony and child support? I don't want to be dependent on Michael's money at all; it's always been his main source of threatening me. Even when it came to helping pay for my mom's chemo – it was whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, with a smile or..." She trails off, her jaw setting as the memories clearly replay through her mind.

She struggles to bite back the swears that want to escape her, as she can just picture Michael's face and – *ugh*. He deserves to pay, and if the only way to ensure he does is with his actual *money*, then it just feels only fair.

“Okay. Well. I *can* drop that, too, if you want. But it really is only right!” The words burst from her, surprising them both, because she really intended to hold them back.

“I'm not saying you can't or don't give Abbie whatever she needs, because I know you do. But you're working so hard to provide for both of you and you shouldn't have to, when Michael is sitting on six figures a year. That's – that's ridiculous. Abbie should get everything she needs with some extras on top without you having to work double shifts for it.” She bites the inside of her cheek. “The alimony... well, *you* deserve to be able to have everything you need with some extras on top of it, too.”

Her voice softens and it's out of her control. Because Hannah is staring at her with that look again, the one that's full of affection, and she's so relieved to have it back.

The thing that she doesn't say, is that she wants to protect Hannah. That she knows she doesn't *have* to because Hannah can protect herself. But she wants to be able to ensure that she can move on from her terrible marriage from Michael with total freedom, without having to take on the world with any fear about how she's going to provide for herself or her daughter.

Before anything else can slip out, Hannah is stepping closer and pressing her body flush against Caroline's, zero space between them. Her arms wrap tightly around Caroline's shoulders as Caroline's automatically wrap around Hannah's waist.

God, but she smells so good. Her eyes close of their own volition as she breathes her in, the butterflies in her stomach making their appearance at their closeness.

Hannah doesn't let go quickly, either. She *holds* and Caroline can feel the slow but strong beat of her heart. She hopes Hannah can't feel how quickly hers is hammering, but she can't dwell on it when Hannah whispers.

“Thank you, Caroline. I... I would be lost without you, in these last few months. Just, thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” she whispers back, meaning every word. She doesn’t need any sort of thanks for just trying to do what’s right.

“I do.” Hannah’s voice is strong and sure. “I really do.”

Everything feels like it has slotted perfectly back into place, the world turning just the way it should be, the following Monday.

She and Abbie build a giant pillow fort to make up for the fort they hadn’t been able to build on Saturday because of her fight with Hannah. Inside of the fort, she slides a little basket, identical to the ones she’d made for her nieces and nephews the day before, in front of Abbie.

Who regards it with excitement. “For me?”

“I didn’t know I was going to see you yesterday, but of course I made you one.” She pauses, eyes widening. “Er... the Easter Bunny –”

Abbie giggles as she picks out a mini Snickers. “I don’t believe in the Easter Bunny anymore. It’s for babies. I told Erin she’s real, though,” she informs Caroline, her tone grave. “She’s little, still.”

God, she loves this kid.

When Hannah stops over to pick up Abbie, she brings in three frozen trays of food for future meals and pauses in the doorway, staring at the fort and the candy wrappers on Caroline’s floor.

She follows her gaze, hoping that the peace they’d established isn’t going to be fractured after last week as she coughs. “Um... I didn’t let her eat *all* of the candy.”

“Yeah, ’cuz *she* ate it herself!” Abbie shouts as she is retrieving her backpack from the kitchen.

Hannah shakes her head in exasperation, but the look on her face is sheer warmth.

It doesn't occur to her that she's never spent significant time just hanging out with Hannah without Abbie's presence since they've been friends until the week after Mother's Day.

She gets a text from Hannah on a Friday night, asking what she's doing.

Which gives Caroline pause as she leaves the office, eyebrows furrowing as she answers. *Nothing, why?*

Hannah – 6:43PM

Can you come over?

There's a sense of panic inside of her at the message, because – Hannah's never asked her that before? Of course, Caroline knows logically, that there is no real reason for Hannah to ask her to come over when she sees Caroline at least three or four times a week already.

Just because *she* could see *Hannah* every day and not be satisfied doesn't mean that it's the same for her.

Her mind immediately jumps to something being wrong. What else could it be? Did something happen regarding Michael? The divorce? No, she would have heard about it first, most likely. Her heart clenches then in a single strike – Abbie. Something could be wrong with Abbie or Hannah herself.

There's a single-minded drive that gets her to Hannah's apartment in less than twenty minutes.

The door swings open after she knocks on it rather urgently and Hannah stands there, her hands in front of her, intertwined nervously. Gray eyes are surprised as she takes Caroline in. "I didn't know you were coming."

"I was worried, so I – sorry, I guess I forgot to text you back." Caroline's gaze moves over Hannah intently, noting that she looks perfectly fine, physically. God, the relief that hits her at that is insanely soothing. Before she's gripped by a whole other worry. "Is something wrong with Abbie?"

She tries to look over Hannah's shoulder into the apartment, but Hannah shakes her head. "No." Uncertainty edges over her features before she clearly pushes it away. "No," she says, her voice stronger. "Abbie's fine."

It's only then that Caroline remembers, the dawning coming with the clarity of her panic subsiding. "She's with her grandparents."

Right. As they've remained in a stall with the divorce proceedings – only communication happening between herself and Morrison, who has told her in his professional tone that he still needs to talk things over with his client. But on a personal note, she can tell he's really fed up with Michael's shit – Michael's parents have started to contact Hannah directly.

They've only just returned from living in London for the last two years and now that they're back, they wanted to spend a weekend with Abbie.

Hannah worries at her bottom lip and as always, the action steals Caroline's attention. She just has such a perfectly full bottom lip...

Caroline has to tear her eyes away – *stop, stop, stop* – and she looks into Hannah's. They do not reflect the sentiment that *Abbie's fine* at all. Caroline leans against the doorjamb, keeping her voice soft. "Are they not... good grandparents?"

Hannah is staring at her face but Caroline can't put her thumb on exactly what she is thinking about or where she's focusing, before she seems to shake herself out of a stupor. "No, they... well, they love to spoil her rotten and buy her affection." She rolls her eyes. "But I've promised that I won't keep them from Abbie. I don't want that." Her voice is determined, like she needs to convince Caroline.

Caroline gives her an encouraging smile. "I know you don't."

She knows because even if they hadn't discussed it in relation to custody agreements, she knows that Hannah wants what's best for Abbie, including having as many family supports as she can.

Hannah stares at her for a long moment again, before shaking her head slightly and clearing her throat. "God, you came rushing over here and I'm keeping you in the hallway. Come in."

Hannah and Abbie's apartment is small – they have a deal on rent because her friend Robyn's brother is the super – but it's cozy. Caroline usually only gets glimpses in from the hallway because they've never really spent time here. Hannah has pictures up on the walls in the living room, Abbie's art is in the kitchen, and it feels like a family lives here.

Dark eyes are fixed on Hannah, though. Whose hair is up in a ponytail, light tendrils falling out, and in a pair of sweatpants and a tank top, it's the most dressed down she's ever seen Hannah. Her collarbones on display make Caroline swallow hard and pointedly look back up to her eyes. Even with *that* aspect aside, she likes this look. Relaxed.

Only, her face is anything but. Poorly concealed anxiety is written all over her face as she leads Caroline into the kitchen, and it makes her own stomach twist in sympathy.

"I can make you some coffee?"

She's about to start it, clearly trying to give herself a distraction, before Caroline catches her wrist. "Don't worry about making me anything. What's wrong?"

Hannah closes her eyes tightly, before they open again. Worry clearly clouds her vision as she bites her inner-cheek *hard*. "I'm just... it's stupid. It's stupid," she repeats, taking in a deep breath. "But Abbie hasn't been away from me for this long in years. Since the last time her grandparents took her for a weekend. And that was when Michael and I were married. I don't know, there's just something –" Breaking off, she scrubs a hand over her face, her movements jerky with distress, but when she looks back at Caroline, her eyes are wet with the tears she'd been trying to wipe away.

Understanding courses through Caroline and with it, the overwhelming urge to pull Hannah into her and hold her until this fear subsides. With Michael's custody demand still in the air, the absence of Abbie must feel like a very terrifying glimpse of a worst case scenario.

Hannah shakes her head harshly at herself. "I shouldn't have texted you. I shouldn't have made you come all the way here –"

The tears littering her gaze, even as she tries to wipe them away, due Caroline in. Her heart feels like it's being squeezed uncomfortably tight seeing Hannah like this, and she can't bear to just stand there and let her cry.

She draws Hannah to her gently, wrapping an arm around her waist as her other hand strokes up her back. And Hannah melts into her, seeming to trust that Caroline will hold her up, as she pushes her face against Caroline's neck.

"Don't apologize," she murmurs, stroking her hand up and down Hannah's back because *all she wants* is to soothe this anxiety away. Like

there's nothing else that matters remotely as much as this. "I'm glad you texted me, okay?"

"But still," Hannah's words come in a teary whisper. "I'm sure you have something better to do."

Caroline's heart flip-flops intensely in her chest even as she scoffs. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be. How often do I have to tell you?" The certainty in her own voice is unmistakable.

And her hand pauses on its leisurely stroke up Hannah's back, eyes opening wide, terrified she's given herself away. Her stomach drops like a stone, waiting – just waiting – for whatever Hannah's going to say to her.

But Hannah only hugs her tighter for another beat and her eyes fall closed again at the feeling, her heart rate returning to normal. Sort of. A little faster, but with Hannah around that's beyond her control.

Hannah pulls back eventually and runs her hands through her hair, rolling her eyes at herself when she realizes that it was supposed to be up in a ponytail. It's quite possibly the most adorable thing Caroline has ever seen and – yep. She's an entire sucker for this woman.

And because she knows her, knows Hannah well enough that she is going to tell Caroline that she doesn't have to stay here with her, despite the fact that she is feeling lonely and vulnerable, Caroline takes the opportunity to slip off her suit jacket and set it on the back of a chair.

"Let me order us some dinner and watch something adult-like that we aren't allowed to when Abbie's here." It takes her a moment to register what that implies when she says it aloud, her cheeks coloring at it. "I meant a horror movie or – something."

But her slight embarrassment is so incredibly worth the amused smile that actually reaches Hannah's eyes. "What, you *didn't* mean porn?"

Just hearing Hannah say the word porn should be illegal for someone who has an uncontrollable attraction to her. Actually, the ability for her adult self's breath to be stolen by something so simple should be illegal. She didn't even think she reacted so easy to that back when she'd been a teenager.

Still, she rolls her eyes and reaches out to grab Hannah's shoulders. Also a mistake, because they're bare and soft. Clearing her throat and sliding her hands away – lingering a moment too long – she gives a little push. "Come on, let's go."

“I’m just going to go clean myself up,” Hannah gestures to her face with a self-deprecating eyeroll. “I’ll be right back.”

She doesn’t really mean to snoop, really.

But her attention is captivated by the sketch book on the table. She’s seen it, what feels like, a thousand times by now since Hannah routinely has it with her whenever she’s at work. She’d once explained that drawing was an easy way for her to decompress on her breaks, that it had always been something she’d done and she’d minored in art throughout college, too. And that it had especially been a comfort for her to turn to in her marriage.

However, Caroline’s never seen it *open* before and she is so, so interested.

Without really thinking, she’s standing over the sketchbook, looking at the open pages. And what she sees is – well, she hadn’t known what to expect.

But the building designed and sketched on one of the pages is insane. It seems to leap off the page and she reaches out to skim her fingers over the page, subconsciously to just make sure it really *isn’t* some sort of 3D trick.

The drawing that really grabs her, though, is what Hannah was clearly working on most recently. It’s Abbie, the way she looks in the middle of telling an animated story. Hannah definitely only used a pencil – she thinks – but somehow with the details and the shading and *something* about this image that makes Caroline feel like Abbie is about to leap off this page and come to life.

“I brought you a pair of sweatpants.” Hannah’s voice coming back into the kitchen makes her jump, guilt creeping up her spine.

She looks up to see Hannah staring at her, eyes flicking down to the sketchbook. Caroline’s cheeks heat as she quickly steps back. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to invade your privacy, it was open...” She trails off in a weak defense.

But Hannah doesn’t look angry as she walks in, coming to stand right next to Caroline. A little embarrassed with the way she ducks her head. “No, it’s – it’s okay.”

“You’re amazing, Hannah. Both of these are.” She gestures to both pages. “I shouldn’t be surprised about the building, because of the architecture aspect of it all. But I had *no idea* you could draw like this. I mean, you could probably sell portraits.”

Hannah laughs, definitely embarrassed. But also pleased, a flush working over her cheeks as she shakes her head as she keeps her eyes on the drawing of her daughter. “No, I couldn’t. I have other drawings, just of random people sometimes. And they’re – they’re fine. But when I draw Abbie it’s something... else.” She reaches out and traces a light finger over the outline of Abbie’s cheek.

It’s love, Caroline thinks. She’d be willing to bet a large sum that Hannah’s drawings of other people are far better than fine. But it’s the love she has for her daughter that gives utter life to the image, she’s sure of it.

It’s after midnight when she leaves. They watch all three movies in the *Annabelle* franchise because in a kismet surprise twist, she hadn’t known Hannah also loves horror movies. They split Indian takeout and she wears that extra pair of sweatpants from Hannah that do squeeze her hips a bit more than they do Hannah’s, but they’re incredibly soft and comfortable.

She doesn’t think she’s ever had a better Friday night.

Caroline – 12:00PM
What are you doing today?

Hannah – 12:02PM
Just got back from breakfast with Robyn.
So probably meal prepping for the week.
Cleaning. Waiting for Abbie to come home
tomorrow.

Hannah – 12:02PM
I live for the adventure and spontaneity.

Caroline – 12:03PM
If you want some spontaneity, come
outside.

She lives for the look on Hannah’s face when she actually does come outside. The surprise and the bright, excited smile stealing over her face and making her look incredibly luminous in the spring air. The day is perfect for

her plan and Hannah is, too, in a pair of skinny jeans and a green shirt that somehow made her eyes even more intense.

“What are you doing here?”

Caroline parks and locks her RAV4. “We’re going to take the T – far too many destinations to get stopped in traffic today.”

“I have... cooking and cleaning and – I never really have a day off without Abbie to get these things done.” Hannah bites her lip, clearly torn.

Caroline tilts her head and gives her a knowing look. “And you’re going to sit in the empty apartment and feel lonely. Not on my watch.”

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to babysit me. Here I am, taking up all of your time on both a Friday and Saturday night...” She trails off, shaking her head.

“I told you – I don’t do things I don’t want to do. I *want* to be with you, Hannah.” More than she should, really. More than is good for her. More than is wise or safe for her heart.

It’s okay, she tells herself. It’s become her mantra. Caroline has always played things perhaps a little *too* safe when it comes to her heart and this... thing with Hannah may not be safe, but she still feels she has it under control. Mostly.

She’s an adult woman who has had feelings that are unreciprocated in the past. Perhaps it’s always been different than this exact situation, but *it’s okay*.

Hannah joins her with a grin, walking close enough that their shoulders bump.

“Where are we going?”

She doesn’t want to spoil it, but now that it’s happening, she’s feeling a little self-conscious. “Um. I figured we could do a little city-sighting. Sighting architecture in particular. Since you...”

She trails off, entirely doubting her idea. It seemed good in theory, but Caroline doesn’t know anything about architecture, so the places she chose could be a waste of time. And more than that – Hannah has told her on several occasions about how much she’d wanted to get her degree and how she regrets the fact that it had never happened. That it’s one of her biggest regrets in her life.

And now Caroline’s about to rub her face in it?

“We don’t have to,” she says, walking slower. “You’ve... definitely already seen it all –”

But Hannah just stares at her, the mix of excitement and astonishment, pushing away her doubts and making *her* feel some of the giddiness, too. Just seeing it mirrored on Hannah's face was enough to feel it bubbling in her own stomach.

"I have seen it all." Hannah links their arms together, quickly pulling her to the closest subway stop. "Let's go."

They first find themselves looking up at the Boston Public Library – scratch that. Caroline is mostly staring at Hannah, who is staring at the building with a tilt to her head, that look on her face that says she has a thousand thoughts going through her mind, and the most devastatingly beautiful smile on her lips.

She looks at the library just in time to avoid being caught staring.

"I've always loved it here. I mean, the brutalist design of the Johnson Building coupled with the Beaux Arts design of the McKim building?" Hannah sighs. "I mean. So much of Boston is brutalist, but there's some point of beauty in it that is easily overlooked. The Beaux Arts subset is... admittedly preferable, though."

Caroline squints. "I see... the library."

She feels Hannah squeeze her arm in rebuke, the look of offense on her face, her mouth falling open with it, making Caroline laugh. "I'm sorry!"

Hannah huffs out an exasperated breath before she slides her hand down to take Caroline's. Her laughter abruptly cuts off as Hannah's warm fingers wrap around her own and then direct her over different architectural points, explaining what they are.

She does this everywhere they go.

She tells Caroline about the Federalist architecture of the State House, the Gothic churches, the Neoclassical design of the Custom House Tower. It takes a little while, but through the passion in Hannah's words and the sheer knowledge that comes spilling out, she sees them at least somewhat like Hannah does. Somehow, she even manages to make South Station a building that needs to be appreciated for its Beaux Arts opulence instead of just the place Caroline has to go to get on the Amtrak.

"All of these buildings have a story to tell." She says, and it's like there's a whole layer underneath Hannah's surface that's been hidden.

Caroline feels honored that she's able to see it and she stares at Hannah for a beat too long but she can't help it.

They walk to the Museum of Fine Arts as the sun starts to set, the final building of the day. Caroline thinks there is some irony in the fact that they are going to admire the *building* as art but not what's inside.

Not that it bothers her; Hannah explaining architectural art to her is the most interested in art she's ever been.

They're arm in arm – Hannah likes walking like this, she's found out today. It's different than when they go out with Abbie, as she walks between them. Caroline enjoys them both in different ways – when she hears her name.

“Caroline?”

She catches herself grimacing before she turns around and knows Hannah catches it, too. Because standing behind them is Amanda. The same one who'd broken up with her almost six months ago. She almost smushes her face into her palms because *Amanda works at the museum*, but in all honesty, she'd been so wrapped up in Hannah, she hadn't even thought about it.

When she turns slowly, she sees Amanda exactly as she remembers her. Tall and statuesque, like the art she attends to. As always, she's immaculately put together, her perfectly sculpted eyebrows lifting at the way Hannah is still holding onto her arm.

And much to her surprise, she doesn't feel anything at it. Well, none of the hurt that had taken up residence for... months after. There's still a faint sting of anger just at the callous way Amanda had treated her, that she thinks anyone will have after having been cheated on.

But mostly, she thinks about how Amanda had been irritated and dismissive with Caroline's lack of understanding when it came to the art she was passionate about, and how different that was from how she'd spent today with Hannah.

“Amanda. Hi.” She offers, but that's it. Because, hurt feelings or no, what is she supposed to say to the woman who'd cheated on and dumped her?

It's fine, because Amanda is fixated on Hannah, instead. “And who's this?”

“Hannah Dalton,” Hannah supplies for herself, her arm tightening around Caroline's arm. “And you are?”

Amanda's eyes narrow just a bit. “Amanda Soldano.” She flicks her eyes to Caroline and runs them over her slowly in that way she has, which

makes her bristle. “Caroline’s ex.”

“How’s Elaine?” Caroline asks, pointedly. *You know, the woman you left me for.*

Amanda seems to hesitate for a second before what would be an apologetic smile, if only Caroline didn’t know better, slides over her face. “She ended up moving back to Chicago a few months ago.”

“Shame.” Her voice is flat.

Which makes Amanda laugh, in an entirely unsurprising sound. She’d always enjoyed a little barb, a little angry give and take. It was one of Caroline’s least favorite things about her.

“You look good. Give me a call to catch up sometime?”

Okay, well *that* makes her angry, just the utter gall of it. Her mouth falls open as a hundred burning remarks work their way up her throat.

And fall away as Hannah’s hand slides down to intertwine their fingers together. It’s a perfect fit, always, and she looks down just to see Hannah’s small but capable hand wrapped up in hers, holding it tightly.

“It’s kind of rude to ask someone to call when they’re on a date. We have to get going.” Hannah starts steering them away. “Nice meeting you.”

Date throws her, just enough for her to dumbfoundedly let herself be led easily away, almost tripping over her own feet. *Date*. It’s not like any date she’s ever been on in the past yet it’s been ten times better.

For a moment, just a moment, the idea that it actually could be a date plays through her mind. Before she forces herself to *not go there*. Because Hannah is just getting her out of a potentially awkward situation.

She’s never heard Hannah use such a fake tone before, but she finds that she kind of loves it. She also loves the way Amanda is staring after them. Mostly, she loves knowing that Amanda thinks they’re a couple.

“So... that’s your ex,” Hannah states, as she bites her lip and gives Caroline a sidelong look.

And Caroline nods slowly, resolutely pushing *date* out of her mind, blowing out a breath. “One of them.”

“She doesn’t give the impression that she’s very nice.” Hannah’s nose wrinkles as she says it, giving Caroline a confused look.

It looks so much like a face Abbie makes, it’s twice as endearing.

And it only gets stronger as Caroline laughs. “She’s... not.”

“She cheated on you.” Hannah states once again, not a question. Her hand is still clasped around Caroline’s and she doesn’t seem to have any

intention of letting go.

Caroline sighs, the feeling of it relieving pressure in her chest. “Yeah.”

“Well, she’s an idiot.” The raw feeling in Hannah’s words goes right to her heart. Like Hannah hasn’t experienced ten times worse than that herself, and she still has the ability to be so genuinely *caring*.

It amazes her. Hannah amazes her, with her gaze wide and soft as it slides over Caroline’s face in a look so tender it makes her knees feel weak.

“World class mother, best barista in the city, incredible cook, architecture expert, and my personal defender.”

Hannah blushes and Caroline’s never been more charmed by a woman in her entire life. Even as Hannah rolls her eyes. “Yeah, that’s me.”

She shrugs it off, as she does to just about every compliment she receives. Caroline knows that Hannah gets that pleased glow about her, but also the disbelieving one. She knows she still beats herself up for the decisions she’s made years ago. And she gets it, she does. Everyone has their shit to work through.

But mostly, she wishes that Hannah could look in the mirror every day and see that she shines as bright as the moon and has twice the gravitational pull.

They walk slowly back to Hannah’s apartment, forgoing the T in favor of taking advantage of the perfect weather.

Not a date, she tells herself as they approach Hannah’s building. She knows it, obviously, but it’s a reminder for herself not to linger. Like she would if it *were* a date.

Still, her steps slow as they get closer and closer. Then again, so do Hannah’s.

“Thanks for today,” Hannah says, unlinking her arm from Caroline’s and turning to face her.

Caroline clears her throat, shaking her head. “Don’t mention it. Honestly, you did the impossible and made me feel like I actually understood art for once.” She grins. “My mother already likes you, but *now* she’s going to think you’re a miracle worker.”

Hannah snorts. “Hardly.” She takes in a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds as she searches Caroline’s eyes. And there goes her plan to not

linger. It's impossible to excuse herself to leave when Hannah so clearly has something to say to her. "I... I have to tell you something I haven't told anyone."

Beyond her control, Caroline's heart leaps. "Yeah? What's –" She has to clear her throat, making herself *focus*, when Hannah grabs her hands. "What's up?"

Gray eyes, almost translucent in the moonlight and so, so mesmerizing, bore into her own, a nervous excitement apparent in them. "I'm – I didn't want to tell anyone before I knew for sure."

Oh? Caroline finds herself holding her own breath.

"Today meant so much to me, because I..." She lowers her voice and Caroline feels like every single cell in her body is waiting on pins and needles for what's coming. "I'm going back to school."

Caroline's breath leaves her, that anticipation leaving as soon as it arrived. It's replaced with a different kind of thrill entirely, the flutter in her stomach becoming a stronger feeling of admiration. "What?! That's amazing! When did this happen?"

The smile that blossoms over Hannah's face is slow to start, but then blinding. There's a lot in it – anxiety and pride most prevalent. "I applied a few months ago. Just after we started... this." She shakes her head, falling back onto her heels as she lets go of Caroline's hand to pull it through her hair. "It's something I've thought of so many times over the years. I worked so hard when I was younger to get into Northeastern, you know? And knowing that I had just one year left to complete my degree, I just couldn't have it hanging over my head anymore. I want my degree. I want to have a job I love." Her smile turns self-deprecating. "Even if I won't have it until I'm in my mid-thirties."

Caroline squeezes the hand she's still holding, frowning with the tone Hannah uses. "Starting a career you love is great at *any* time and going back to school is – I'm so incredibly proud of you, Hannah."

Hannah squeezes her hand back like it's a lifeline, her grin growing again as she looks down at the sidewalk sheepishly. "Thanks."

"Why didn't you tell me? Or Robyn?"

Hannah sighs, shrugging tightly. "I didn't want to until I knew it was a feasible option. I got in and I have financial aid options, now that I'm separated from Michael, so it really seems like... like it's happening." Her face screws up in thought, the ever-present stress edging back in through

her giddiness. “Of course, this is assuming I can figure out a new schedule for work and for Abbie, which won’t be easy, so maybe I shouldn’t even have told you, yet –”

“Hey, no. You’re *going* back.” The conviction in her voice mirrors what she feels inside. “You know very well my schedule most nights is flexible to help with Abbie. You have Robyn. My parents are always talking about how they wish they had the kids around more. You have people to help.”

“You can’t just volunteer your parents to help me.” Her voice is colored with an exasperated affection that just makes Caroline’s smile grow wider.

She doesn’t say it because she knows Hannah doesn’t want to rely on her help, but she knows she’s going to do whatever she can to make sure Hannah going back to finish her degree becomes a reality.

vii

Caroline knows if she had some more sense, she would put some distance between them.

She *knows* that. She knows that this is the worst possible path for her feelings to be cliff diving down into.

But it's more than that, it's not just all about these feelings. It's also about the way Hannah tells her one night, "I haven't had a friend like you in my entire life."

And how she says it back because it's true.

Kris tells her, not unsympathetically, when they have dinner the following week, "I'm glad you're friends with her. That's great." She takes a sip of her water before she gives Caroline a knowing look. "You're going to be so fucked, and not in any fun way."

Caroline realizes just *how* fucked she is on Memorial Day.

Caroline goes to pick up Hannah and Abbie for her brother's barbeque, frowning when there's no excited footsteps to answer the door. Abbie always runs to answer the door when she knows Caroline's coming. And honestly, she adores it. There's a special spot reserved in her chest for the grin Abbie shoots her every time she sees her.

When she knocks on the door for the third time, she's feeling pretty damn concerned that something has happened because neither Hannah nor Abbie have ever forgotten plans. Hannah hasn't answered her calls, either, which – she hates this gnawing feeling in her stomach, but, like, she's almost ready to knock the door down.

Before she can do something drastic, though, the door opens slowly.

Caroline's eyes widen at the sight of Hannah. With bags under her eyes and her hair haphazardly sticking up, she looks unlike she's ever seen her.

And for a moment, Hannah looks confused to see her, too. Before a moment of dawning clearly comes over her. "The cookout." Her voice is nasally, clearly congested. It makes sense with how run down she looks. She shakes her head, her cheeks pale and eyes watery. "I'm so sorry. I

meant to text you, but we were up most of the night and I've been letting Abbie play on my phone all morning."

Abbie, she learns, came down with the bad cold yesterday morning that was going around her school. And by the sound and the look of it, Hannah is sick with it, too.

"I'm sorry." Hannah says again, leaning against the doorjamb as she covers a yawn. "Tell your family thanks for inviting us? Abbie's going to be so upset when she realizes she's missing it."

She does tell her family thanks. She also tells them she can't make it, either.

"It can't be easy taking care of a sick kid at all, let alone when you're sick yourself," she tells Hannah softly but firmly when she weakly protests Caroline staying.

Hannah puts up as much of a valiant fight as she can before she gives in and goes to nap in her bed. Caroline tiptoes around the living room, trying to avoid waking Abbie where she lays on the couch as she cleans up tissues.

Her heart squeezes in sympathy when Abbie wakes up, looking utterly miserable. She hesitates, ready to go get Hannah for her if that's what Abbie wants. But instead she asks Caroline to sit with her, reaching an arm out for her from under the bundle of blankets she's cuddled up in.

She's had a fairly present phobia of getting sick for years but she doesn't think twice before she settles in with Abbie, who presses her little fevered head against Caroline's shoulder. "Can I play with Norah when I get better?"

Her nose is so stuffy, her *n*'s and *t*'s both sound like *d*'s, and Caroline strokes a hand through her hair, pulling it away from her clammy neck. "Of course. You two can sleep over my place again if you want. We can have a *Chopped* marathon and try to cook our own basket, if you want." She doesn't know where Abbie's Food Network kick had come from in the last month or so, but she's enthralled with all of the competition shows.

"Can we?" There's an excitement there, but extremely tempered. Like she just doesn't have the energy to truly show her happiness.

It's an unfamiliar feeling, this overwhelming sympathy for Abbie and urge to protect her when she snuffles miserably against her. "Of course."

She doesn't mean to realize she's in love with Hannah over chicken soup, while Abbie lays against them, snoring through her congestion.

Hannah holds her bowl of soup – made from a can, Caroline’s mom would be so disappointed in her – carefully balanced in her lap as she lays her head back against the couch. Her eyes are still tired but a bit more alert, as she says, “If you’re not careful, I’ll get too reliant on you saving the day.”

It’s warm but also... there’s a vulnerability under her words. And because Hannah is so very much like a sunset – with all of the layers that make her who she is, every single one of them different and absolutely beautiful, but sometimes concealing what else is in the sky – Caroline can’t quite read all of the emotions under that vulnerability.

But it’s in this moment that things shift into place and her heart pounds with the certainty she has to call these feelings *love*.

Like in this moment, she understands why everything in the world – wars and songs and all of the literature – comes back to this. It makes her think that for once, she understands what she’s been chasing for all of these years. She’s wanted love and she’s thought she understood what it meant.

It’s not until this moment where Hannah looks at her like she’s wearing a cape – where she trusts that Caroline is going to be here during this moment, trusts that she can show her these weak moments – that she’s ever *felt* it.

She didn’t *mean* to fall in love with Hannah at all. But here she is, curled up with a family that isn’t quite hers, and she’s never wanted anything more.

So. Fucked.

viii

Hannah and Michael's divorce settlement is finally agreed upon and signed on the anniversary of D Day – it feels fitting.

Michael will keep all of his family's money – including that non-protected account in Singapore – as well as the two million dollar home in Brookline they'd lived in. She'd dropped the request for alimony per Hannah's adamant demand that she would never live off of Michael's money again and would never give him something to hold over her.

Hannah does agree to accept child support for Abbie with a sigh, acknowledging that she can put away most of that for a future education and other things Abbie might need. Caroline follows Hannah's wishes and pushes for the child support when Michael finally caves and gives up on his vengeful custody proclamation.

Which is a relief to Caroline, because god it's already hard enough for the lawyer in her to walk away from this *knowing* that she could have won so much more for her client. Especially knowing that the client is Hannah, who should have everything.

But in the moment where Hannah turns to her right after they leave the meeting, with a smile bright enough the world could revolve around it, her eyes twinkling up at her as if she's done something magical, she feels more satisfied after a settlement than she's ever been in her life.

“Primary custody,” she says the words with such astonishment, tasting them on her lips, as she holds Caroline's gaze.

She expects a hug and is ready for it when Hannah lifts her arms.

But she instead finds her cheeks cupped as Hannah draws her face up to her own, tugging her to her tiptoes, and the utter surprise moving through her takes her easily with the motion. Hannah's lips are so, so soft. It's all she can think as she finds her cheeks, her chin, her nose, her forehead – everywhere. Everywhere, except for her lips – sprinkled with exuberant kisses.

Her eyes flutter closed as all she can do is experience this: the warmth from their closeness, the smell of Hannah engulfing her, the strength of her fingers buried in Caroline's hair. It all combines together, settling low in her

stomach in such a *wanting* feeling, coupled with a sweet warmth from the moment.

Hannah is so tactile, she's discovered in the last few months, but never anything like this. And Caroline clenches her hands tightly against her own thighs to stop from touching anywhere on Hannah like she's itching to do.

God.

Hannah's laughing when she pulls back and Caroline can only stare as her heart pounds and she hopes everything that is pulsing through her body isn't written on her face.

The three of them plus Robyn go out to dinner to celebrate.

Robyn's nice – in her mid-fifties and carefully watches Caroline, as she's done the last handful of times they've met in passing in the last six months. But she takes it as a measure that Robyn cares about Hannah and Abbie, and Caroline is more than fine with that.

Robyn and Hannah are chatting across the table as she looks at Abbie, who's dragging her spoon through her ice cream sundae dessert instead of eating it. "You better be careful because no ice cream goes wasted at a table I'm sitting at."

She warns with a wink, and dips her spoon into the ice cream for good measure. It's kind of a lie – ice cream is certainly not her sweets weakness and she's stuffed from dinner. Mostly, she just wants to get Abbie's attention, because she's fallen unusually quiet in the last few minutes and she never hesitates when it comes to ice cream.

It works, and Abbie turns to look up at her. After a few seconds, she eventually says, "Even if you're not our, um, lawyer anymore..." She trails off, her face scrunching up in thought and worry, as she slides the ice cream slowly across the bowl. "Are we still gonna see you?"

Her bottom lip sticks out in a thoughtful pout as she turns back to the ice cream she's toying with rather than look at Caroline. Who leans back in surprise – honestly, at what point did everything between Hannah and Abbie become so much more about *them* than the divorce?

She has no idea. But somewhere along the line – maybe everywhere along the line – it happened. And it's been one of the best things that has ever happened to her, period.

“Hey,” she keeps her voice low, until Abbie looks up at her. “You can’t tell me we’re done hanging out; we haven’t even gone on a duck boat yet.” She purposefully brings up the activity that Abbie always mentions when they see them around the city. It just hasn’t fit into their schedule yet, plus when she inevitably gives in, it’s going to hurt her Boston pride to do something so touristy.

Abbie’s face absolutely *lights* up.

She realizes only then that the conversation between Hannah and Robyn had fallen quiet at Abbie’s question. Robyn, still with the considering look on her face, gives her a nod with the hint of a smile.

But Hannah’s smile is warm enough that Caroline feels it everywhere. “Good. We’d hate it if you disappeared.”

The Parker family Father’s Day is a lot more eventful for Caroline than it typically is.

First, because when they’re gearing up for their annual father-and-child flag football game, Hannah and Abbie show up.

She grins brightly when she sees them walking up the side walkway, rushing to greet them before they can be bombarded by the other Parker family members. Her family is loud and full of good-natured busybodies, who pester Hannah with questions and comments about her life. She’d warned her, of course, months ago that they’d be like this.

Despite sometimes looking vaguely discomfited by the attention, Hannah always handles the group effortlessly. In private, she’d told her, “Your family is perfect. Besides, I was a trophy wife at events with many more people who were much worse intentioned.”

Which is good, because her mom had immediately flocked to both Abbie and Hannah and now demands they come to every single get together, which floods Caroline with excitement. A *stupid* one, sure, but still.

She finishes tying the green ribbon for the football game around her waist as she meets them at the backyard gate. Dark eyes first do an automatic once-over of Hannah, and when did Caroline develop such a *thing* for her collarbones?

The fact that summer has arrived and with it, a barrage of form-fitting tank tops in Hannah's wardrobe, which has been proving to be both heaven and hell for her libido.

She clears her throat, dropping her eyes to Abbie, who shuffles on her feet as she looks down at the ground. "I didn't think you'd be gracing us with your presence today, Ms. Abbacado."

Abbie's eyes flick up to her as Hannah gently strokes a hand through Abbie's wavy hair. "We thought it might be a good idea to get out of the house for a bit." Hannah tells her when Abbie remains quiet. "Plus, Norah told Ab that she really wanted to hang out with her today, so we figured we would come by for a bit."

Abbie was supposed to have lunch with Michael today. She knows because Abbie had made him a card a few days ago while at Caroline's kitchen table and she is still cleaning up glitter from it. So it either hadn't gone well or it hadn't gone on at all.

Hannah subtly shakes her head – *ah*. She really didn't think she could hate Michael more than she did when she worked with him. But this divorce has shown her that actually, the depths of her hatred will go far deeper when it's not just her that he's wronging. He had a great kid like Abbie and... she clenches her fist tight enough that her nails bite into her skin, before she forces herself to unclench. The man had the perfect wife and the perfect kid – Caroline's dream life – and hadn't given a single damn.

When they come through the gate, she kneels down in the guise of re-tying her shoe, but more so to be on eye level with Abbie.

"Hey, so," she starts, keeping her voice hushed, as she throws a look to her family over her shoulder. "We're about to play a flag football game, and my team could really use a secret weapon. You in?"

Abbie glances over to where her family has their color coded ribbons around their waists. She shrugs and seeing Abbie so subdued gives Caroline a thousand and one ideas for how to get away with Michael's murder. "I'm not really good at sports."

"That's why they'll never suspect that you're our secret weapon," she explains, exaggeratedly rolling her eyes. "Come on, Abner, the team needs you. *I* need you."

She gives Abbie a formal bow and offers her a hand. And there's a certain kind of victorious feeling she gets when a small smile cracks over

Abbie's face. "Okay. If you need me."

That feeling only multiplies tenfold when – about halfway through the game – Abbie gets so into it that a full-on giggle breaks from her lips. By the end of the game, Caroline and Abbie – teamed up with Todd and his two kids, which works perfectly because despite being the brother she gets along with the least, they are both ridiculously competitive – have defeated her other brothers, nieces, nephews, *and* her dad, who had been wearing both flag colors. Like the eight ball of Father's Day flag football.

She hoists Abbie up into the air while she waves the blue ribbons from the losing team at Hannah, her laugh echoing through the air.

Caroline is laughing too, finding herself a bit breathless from the way Abbie throws her arms around her waist at full force when she puts her down. She makes eye contact with Hannah from across the yard, and she's pretty sure she would do just about anything, any day, to be given the look Hannah's giving her right now.

She's never in her wildest dreams imagined getting a card for Father's Day, but she does from Abbie the following day and she puts it up proudly on her fridge.

It's not a huge surprise to anyone when she gets called into the office in the afternoon, but it does lead into the *second* atypical and hugely less positive event of the day.

Chanelle Laurens is the hugely high-profile client whose name she doesn't dare to even hint at representing for the last several months. Laurens as in the Laurens Business Group, who have a hand in more than half of the city's businesses. Who is married to a New England Patriot, clearly famous in his own right.

It's taken the title for the messiest divorce she's *ever* worked on and that's saying something. High drama, hugely contested on both sides, every week it seems like there's a new bit of information coming out – adultery, financial secrets, he-said-she-said over every aspect of their history, custody arguments over their two kids. And all of this desperately being kept from the public is not an easy task.

Chanelle is a lot to handle, it's true, and she's a tough nut to crack. But the fact that there's also a history of domestic violence that Chanelle reluctantly opened up about keeps Caroline's edge invested in this. Chanelle's text reads 9-1-1, which she's never used before, and it's enough to have Caroline concerned enough that she has to actually leave.

She says her goodbyes to everyone just before dinner, hugging her dad extra tight and ignoring the snide comments from Todd.

As she enters the kitchen through the back door, she sees Jared pulling out the condiments needed for dinner and putting them on the tray to bring outside. He has a streak of dirt still on his cheek from the football game earlier which makes her roll her eyes as she smiles.

Typical. As the brother closest to her age – only a year older, whereas Brian is eight years older than she is and Todd is five – they’ve always been the closest in terms of being friends, too.

He shoots her a smile. “Hey, you leaving?”

“You know me.” She rolls her eyes. “Big important lawyer who doesn’t give a crap about family.”

Jared mirrors her eye roll. “Ignore Todd; he’s always going to be pissed you make more money than he does. I’d love to see him feel that way the next time he wants you to watch Erin or Zach.”

She knows. It always grates, but she knows. “Yeah. Anyway. Hope my client doesn’t mind my showing up in jean shorts.”

As she grabs her keys from the hook next to the fridge, Jared clears his throat. “Uh, hey. Before you go, I...”

Caroline turns around slowly, a teasing grin on her lips as she quirks an eyebrow. “You okay? Too intimidated by me kicking your ass in the game earlier?”

She expects her comment to make Jared flip her off with a laugh or something, but he reaches up to scratch at the back of his neck in a trademark move of discomfort. He *does* laugh, but it’s *weird*. “I just wanted to double check. Hannah’s divorced, like, officially, right?”

The question catches her off-guard like a punch to the stomach and she just stares for a long moment.

Jared rushes to explain. “I mean, I just was wondering. She’s pretty – well, *pretty*. And she’s pretty awesome, right?”

“Right,” she echoes, faintly. So faintly, because her heart has plummeted to her stomach.

“Yeah. I just don’t want to make any kind of move without knowing that she’s really, you know, divorced. But they’ve been separated for a long time, right?”

“Right,” she echoes again, staring at Jared and not really *seeing* him.

He squints at her, taking a step closer, which knocks her somewhat out of her stupor. Well, she still feels like she's been slapped in the face at the same time that someone threw a bucket of ice water at her. But she manages to shake her head.

"Um. The divorce isn't final yet, but it will be, soon. It's... all in place."

She can hear her own voice, but can't register the words as she stares at him. *Jared wants to date Hannah.*

God. Ugh. *God.*

How did she miss that? She tries to think about the family gatherings Hannah's been to in the last few months, and... okay, she guesses she knows they've spoken at them. Earlier, Jared had made Hannah laugh while she'd been joining the kids in a rousing game of freeze tag. Caroline remembers because she can pinpoint Hannah's laugh anywhere – the full-bodied one where her smile gets so bright it sparkles. She'd nearly been *out* because she was supposed to have been frozen, but couldn't help but look over at Hannah when she'd started laughing.

She wanted to see the smile that always accompanied that laugh.

She just hadn't factored in the *Jared* aspect of it, and when she thinks about that moment, he had been the one talking to Hannah.

Jared has a small, rare smile on his lips. "Okay. Good."

"Good!" She doesn't even have it in her to cringe at herself for the outburst. Not when she feels this *I want to be sick* feeling inside. She slides her hands to her waist, tapping her fingers there as she forces in a deep breath. "Yeah, I just, I wouldn't take it personally if she doesn't... reciprocate. She's had a tough time."

Caroline *wants* to say that Hannah won't reciprocate. That Jared shouldn't even ask because Hannah is barely out of her marriage. But she doesn't have the right to do that and it's unfair to both Hannah and Jared how much she wishes she had that right.

She flees and has never been so glad to have been called into work on a weekend.

It's painful. It really stings.

She has no right to be upset, which is what she continues to tell herself through the meeting. Hannah is single and *straight*, she reminds herself, and will have men vying to date her as soon as she's ready for it.

And she can't begrudge Jared for having fallen for Hannah, of course. For doing the same thing she's done.

She can maybe, secretly, begrudge the fact that he has a chance with her in a way Caroline never will. But she's only fucking human.

She's wanted Jared to find someone for a long time because she knows her brother really wants to have that complete *family*. And he deserves to find someone good. He'd gone from an irresponsible partier who could barely hold down a job to a responsible adult the second his ex-girlfriend had shown up with a surprise bundle of Norah and left her unexpectedly on Jared's lap without looking back.

And Hannah is... well, she thinks about how amazing Hannah is and how much she deserves all of the time. Every time she sees her.

Her brother wants that complete family, she thinks again, but... does it have to be *this* family?

Her family, her heart seems to say as it aches in her chest. Which just makes everything worse with how untrue it is.

Caroline finally manages to ask Hannah about it a week and a half later, just before a Fourth of July party at her condo.

She's the only one in her family with access to an underground pool. With two of them in the courtyard at her condominium complex, she can pay to reserve the private pool for special occasions. It costs a pretty penny to do so on a holiday, but all of the kids love it.

Her eyes, as usual, are glued to Hannah, who arrived an hour early to help her bring out the food and drinks.

Abbie had a sleepover with Norah so that Jared could bring them both with him to the party today. Which means Hannah had seen Jared last night, and that is all that's been circling her mind since Hannah arrived.

She hasn't been able to bring it up in the last twelve days, even though she's seen Hannah multiple times. Nothing has been off about her at all. She doesn't look like she has a flush of new romance about her and, most of all, she hasn't said anything about going out with Jared to Caroline.

But it's weighing heavily on her mind as she and Hannah make their second trip outside. Hannah's walking in front of her toward the picnic table, a platter of snacks in her hands while Caroline trails her, hauling a heavy cooler. Dark eyes are glued to Hannah's legs – they were just so *long* – on display in her cutoffs.

As she stares, it comes out without her meaning it to.

“Did Jared ask you out?”

Hannah has already made it to the table, rearranging the food there as Caroline is struggling – why didn't she load this stupid cooler full of drinks when it was already *outside*? She pauses her rearranging of the food, though, and turns to look at Caroline.

Her eyebrows are lifted in surprise. “I didn't realize he'd talked to you about it.”

Oh, fuck. He'd really done it. The feeling in her stomach, like she's being punched, comes back full swing.

“He just asked me some stuff.” She forced herself to clear her throat, dropping Hannah's gaze as she readjusts her grip and takes a few more steps forward.

“Okay...” Hannah trails off, her hands coming to rest on her hips. “Well, yes, he asked if I'd like to go on a date.”

It's a perfunctory answer that gives nothing away, her words perfectly measured.

And it does nothing to alleviate this bad taste in the back of her throat. “Oh. Good.”

“Good?” There's an amusement in Hannah's voice as she drags out the word.

“Well, good if you want it. I mean, maybe it's a little weird,” the words escape her before she thinks about them. A dangerous issue she has with Hannah, clearly.

“Weird?” Hannah purses her lips, tilting her head as she *looks* at Caroline. A moment later, a laugh breaks from her lips. “Are you jealous?”

She completely freezes, the cooler she'd been struggling to carry falling out of her hands, narrowly missing falling completely on her feet. But all she can *feel* is that laugh in her chest and – it hurts. Her heart pounds, like Hannah's been aware of her feelings and is now mocking them.

The blood rushes through her head, because she – she can't –

Hannah's hand landing on her arm pulls her back to reality, her face swimming in Caroline's vision and the worry in her gaze unmistakable. Her laughter is completely gone. "Caroline? Are you okay?"

"I –" She searches those gray eyes, looking for any hint that Hannah *knows*. But all she sees is confusion and concern.

And then she berates herself. For thinking that Hannah would possibly do that to her. Even if Hannah knew about her feelings, she knows – mostly, probably – that she wouldn't *mock* them. She's way too good for that.

"I just..." Her throat is dry, though, while her heart rate starts to go back to normal.

Hannah leads her to sit down, a frown on her face as she presses her cool hand against Caroline's cheek. "It's too hot, you've been doing too much."

She swiftly reaches out and grabs some ice from the cooler, wrapping it in paper towels before pressing it against the back of Caroline's neck.

"No, that's not it. I'm fine." She waves her off, but still can't quite relax into Hannah's cool touch, as much as everything inside of her wants to.

"Then what –" Understanding comes over Hannah's face and with it, a new panic in her stomach. "You *were* jealous."

Damn. She should've just accepted the excuse that it was too fucking hot when she had the chance! *Idiot*.

Her heart jumps back into her throat as she shakes her head quickly. "No, I, um..."

But Hannah just gives her a soft smile as she struggles to come up with an excuse. The gentle, affectionate smile. The one she gives to Caroline like it's reserved for her, and even amidst *this*, it makes her melt. "I'm not going to date your brother."

"You're not?" She hates the relief coursing through her. It's not *fair* and she knows it. It's not fair to hope against Hannah finding someone else. But, Christ, she *needs* it to not be her brother.

Hannah readjusts the ice against Caroline's neck and her entire body shivers from it. She can feel her nipples harden against her bikini top with the combination of the ice and Hannah's fingers following it over her skin.

"No. I'm not... I can't date right now." Her eyebrows scrunch up in that contemplative way, those perfect lips twisting into a frown. "It's..."

there's so much..." She trails off, staring at Caroline intently, as if willing her to just *understand* what she's trying to say.

It's something she's certainly picked up along the way with Hannah, the way she struggles at times to put into words what she has on her mind. Whether it's because she doesn't want to share and is so used to keeping everything close to the vest, Caroline isn't sure. But she gets it.

And her relief grows stronger at Hannah's words. She doesn't want Hannah to be *alone*. God, she really hates the thought of that, even if it can't be her that Hannah chooses to be with. But she thinks she just needs some more time to figure out how to shelve these feelings or at least manage them to the point that Hannah being with someone else doesn't make her feel like her heart is being stepped on.

"I can't do it, now." Hannah settles on in explanation, before shifting even closer to Caroline, their bare thighs completely touching. It takes everything she has to show no visible reaction and she isn't even sure if she's managing to do so. Because inside everything lights up, warmth flooding into her stomach. "Not that your brother wouldn't have been a good contender. He's cute at the very least." There's a teasing lull in her voice.

Still, Caroline pulls a face even as she chuckles. "Stop."

It makes Hannah laugh. The kind of laugh that makes any day better just by hearing it and this one is no exception.

"It's true." Hannah insists on saying and they're sitting so close under the umbrella on the picnic table that she can feel the warmth of her breath hitting her cheek. "He has nice dark eyes and rich, thick hair." The smile on Hannah's face turns softer as she tugs a wavy lock of Caroline's own shoulder length hair. "Good genes."

God, she hates the pleased smile that blooms on her mouth and the way her stomach does that little swooping feeling. Hates it almost as much as she loves it. Almost as much as she's addicted to feeling it.

"Stop," she says again, but it's weak.

"But even if I could date," Hannah pauses, doing that thing where she makes sure Caroline is looking her in the eye. "You have nothing to be jealous of. You're one of the most important people in my life; that wouldn't change."

It might, she thinks, when someone else comes along at the right time and just sweeps you off your feet, the way you deserve. And when that time

comes, she will put on the biggest smile and push everything she feels so far down Hannah will never suspect.

For now, though, the grin on her face just grows even more. Wide and relieved and real.

Kris meets Hannah at the Fourth of July party, too.

She was so caught up in the whole idea of Jared and Hannah, she hadn't had the headspace to think about the fact that Hannah was also about to meet her friends. Kris – and Jess, Miranda, and Lacey, the group that had all formed in undergrad – always come over by midday, usually with their partners and/or children in tow.

Hannah fits right in with them, which doesn't surprise her in the least because she can't imagine Hannah not getting along with just about anyone. But she seems to have a genuinely good time as they all sit around one of the tables on the patio.

“I can see why you like her.” Kris allows, begrudgingly, as she follows Caroline up to her condo to grab the meat from the fridge that needs to be grilled. “I didn't want to like her, but I do.”

Caroline's gaze immediately seeks Hannah out, where she's listening to a story Jess is telling. “It's pretty impossible not to.” Even she can hear the *tone* of her voice. The dreamy one she gets with Hannah and only Hannah.

Kris doesn't even know just how far gone she is on Hannah, she doesn't think. She knows more than anyone just how much Caroline feels for her, but she doesn't discuss it actively with her. Mostly because she knows Kris is always just going to tell her she's making a mistake but there's just nothing she can do about it now.

“Babe... you've got it so bad.” Is all she actually says, wrapping her arm around Caroline's shoulders.

Hannah ends the night securing an invite to their annual Hangout Weekend in October, which Caroline is thrilled by. She ends the night with Kris offering to set her up on a date, which is... less thrilling.

She finally makes good on her promise to take Abbie on a duck boat the week after.

They all end up squeezed into one short row, with Hannah insisting she take the window because she'd arranged it all. Which actually results in Abbie sitting on her lap so she can lean over the edge and stare out at the city she lives in like she's seeing it all brand new.

"Why are there so many Starbucks?" Abbie asks, turning enough where she's half sitting on Caroline's lap and half leaning over the side to be able to look at her. "Why do you like coffee so much?"

"Because I'm not allowed to eat candy all day to feed my sugar addiction, so I need something." Caroline tells her, arching a challenging eyebrow. "Besides, there are more Dunkin Donuts than Starbucks."

"No way!" Abbie gesticulates to another Starbucks as they pass, giving Caroline a look so dubious she has to laugh.

"Yes, way!" She purposefully screws up her face at Abbie to match her expression. "Wanna bet? We have to keep count of how many we see, so *someone* has to have her eyes on the prize." She pokes Abbie in the ribs.

"What are we betting?"

"If there are more Starbucks, *I* will buy us cannoli's later. If there are more Dunks, *you* have to admit such a humiliating defeat, you'll probably never recover from it. And be on dish duty after dinner both Monday and Wednesday." She maneuvers enough to offer her hand despite her arm being squished against the side of the duck boat.

Abbie clasps it in hers and gives her a firm shake, her face the picture of determination as she stares out at the streets as they pass by.

She's also staring out at the city as they pass – yes, she's seen it all a thousand times before and unlike Abbie, it doesn't bring her quite a sense of excitement. But she's very much trying to keep herself distracted from having Hannah squeezed onto this small seat with her.

It's July in Boston, so they're both in shorts and tank tops and it's Hannah's entire bare leg pressed into hers, while Caroline has her arm up around the top of the seat to give them more space. She didn't quite wrap it *around* Hannah, but peripherally, it is.

"Your wife and daughter are adorable," she hears someone say, and her determination to pay attention to the cityscape and not turn and get distracted by Hannah is one hundred percent broken.

She turns so quickly she may have given herself whiplash to see the source – a woman around her mother’s age across the aisle looking at Hannah with a gentle smile.

Instead of correcting her, Hannah just smiles back. “They are.”

Of course she knows that Hannah likely just doesn’t want to correct the woman over a pointless clarification. But the sentiment is still something Caroline knows will echo through her for a long time.

At the very least, she tells herself, Hannah accepts someone referring to her as Caroline’s wife with a smile. The word alone makes Caroline’s heart beat twice as fast, her stomach twisting pleasantly. *Bad Caroline.*

“Are you on vacation? My husband teases me, but I have a good eye for these things.” She confides in a whisper, gently nudging a man Caroline presumes is her husband, sitting next to her.

Hannah gives her a sweet smile, eyes still bright and twinkling. “We are, actually.”

“Where are you from?” The woman asks, realizing that Caroline is looking at her, too, and addresses them both.

Hannah now glances at her as well, the look in her eyes mischievous and twinkling. Only for a moment, before she turns back to face the woman. “Maine. Just outside of Portland. We’re down for a little weekend trip.”

Caroline’s pretty sure it makes her fall deeper in love in that moment. Being Hannah’s friend in the last few months has been illuminating for her in a handful of ways. But seeing this side of her, this side full of joking and bright impish smiles is *everything* and it happens more and more frequently as the days go on.

The older woman chats with them a bit, introducing herself and what she’s doing in Boston, but it’s mostly lost on Caroline as her attention half of the time is stolen by Abbie and the other half of it is very much focused on the way Hannah is now relaxed and nestled against her side. As if Caroline’s arm was around her because they are the couple that the older woman thinks they are.

In the end, the woman leaves them with a smile and tells Hannah, “Have a good vacation with your girls.”

She and Abbie happened to be debating where they should get cannoli’s – Abbie did lose the bet, but Caroline can’t resist the cannoli – when the reference cuts her off.

“My girls,” Hannah repeats with a smile, shaking her head at them.
“Did my girls come up with a cannoli consensus?”

There’s an acute pain in her chest at the words, because Hannah just has no idea just how true her words are – just how *hers* Caroline is.

ix

Abbie's birthday in early August becomes its own holiday for Caroline, mostly because for the two weeks leading up to it, she's heard of little else.

"Oh my god, whose idea was it for Abbie and her friends to have a cupcake war decoration party?" Caroline groans, using her forearm to push back her hair because her hands are busy pouring the final batch of cupcakes in the pan.

It's one in the morning and Abbie's party – cupcake wars in the afternoon, morphing into her first full-fledged slumber party – is tomorrow. Or, technically today? Hannah hadn't asked for her help in making the insane amount of cupcakes the kids are going to need for their decorating competition, but Caroline knew that Hannah was going to be saddled with making hundreds of them on her own tonight.

And the relief, gratefulness, and – what she thought was – pure happiness at seeing her that took over Hannah's face when she'd arrived at their apartment was more than worth all of this baking. Abbie had been helping when she'd arrived, but had long since been sent to bed, leaving the two of them to finish up the chocolate batches.

Hannah laughs as she crosses her arms and leans against the counter. "Oh yeah, I wonder *why* she wanted to do this? It couldn't be because her idol told her about her own favorite birthday featuring a cupcake decoration party from when she was a kid."

Caroline adopts as serious a glare as she can at Hannah. Which admittedly isn't a good one, because Hannah has a little streak of chocolate on her cheek and her eyes look almost silver with the smile in them.

"*You're* her hero. I'm merely an adult sized friend." She instead corrects because... well, Abbie *had* gotten this cupcake wars idea from her, but she knows Hannah is her hero. How could she not be?

She closes the oven after sliding the final batch into it with a *snap*, wiping her hands on the dish towel she's had slung over her shoulder all night. When she finally looks back at Hannah again, she halts under one of her intense looks.

Intensely doubtful, but still – Hannah’s scrutinizing gaze has the ability to make her feel *seen* inside and out that is both wonderful and scary. “Caroline. Abbie takes everything you say and do as the gospel truth. When you aren’t with us in the evenings, I spend at least half of the time hearing about you. You have to know that.”

It does nothing to deter the pleased warmth from blossoming in her stomach. “I didn’t realize that, actually.” She ducks her head as she turns to lean against the counter, facing Hannah.

It’s a weird feeling but a good one. Sort of like what she’s always imagined being a mother would be like – wholly loved by one of the kids she loves. But it also makes her feel a little guilty. *Hannah* should be the recipient of that feeling from Abbie, if anything.

“Well, it’s true. If you ask Abbie, the sun rises and sets on Caroline Parker,” Hannah teases as she takes a step closer, reaching for her glass of wine behind Caroline.

Everything inside of her goes into high alert, as it does when Hannah is so close. Tonight has been particularly *something*, because the kitchen in Hannah and Abbie’s apartment is the opposite of spacious. Off of the small space with their kitchen table is a nook that’s lined on both sides with counters and cabinets. The stove is on one side, the sink on the other, and between the counters is about two feet of width.

Basically, she’s been in a tiny enclosed space with Hannah for hours, that smells like cupcakes and Hannah’s underlying peach scent that either comes from body spray or lotion. It’s just this side of comfortably warm, so they’re both flushed from the heat and barefoot.

It was easier when Abbie was awake; she rarely allows herself to get *this* distracted by Hannah, no matter how overwhelmingly hot she is, when she can concentrate on Abbie instead.

But the last couple of hours have gone to her head a bit, so when Hannah’s hand brushes against her side as she places her glass back down, she swears she can feel it all over.

Caroline forces herself to take in a deep breath. What were they talking about? “Must get annoying, hearing about me all of the time. *Caroline’s so amazing, Caroline needs a superhero cape, Caroline is just so good at everything...*” She trails off, teasing to stop this feeling in her stomach from taking her over.

“*Caroline* can’t even bake without making a mess of herself,” Hannah cuts in playfully. She takes another step closer, reaching out to skim her fingers over the lace of *Caroline’s* camisole, just under her breasts.

She’d been wearing a form-fitting suit jacket earlier for work, as usual, that had been shed within an hour of arriving because it was so warm. But her camisole is thin as hell and she can feel the warmth of Hannah’s fingertips almost as if they’re right on her skin.

Caroline’s throat immediately runs dry as her gaze falls to look at where Hannah is tracing her fingers. Sure enough, there’s flour and several streaks of chocolate from the batter she’d been making all night.

She can’t bring herself to feel embarrassed about it, though, because mostly all she can think is *thank god for bras*. The last thing she needs is for Hannah to see how responsive she is to her touch.

Aside from the flush that is very clearly working its way over her chest, that is.

Her heart pounds so hard she can hear it as her blood rushes and she lets out a laugh that sounds just as nervous as she feels. “Yeah. Well. I...”

Her brain is short circuiting with the way Hannah slowly runs her fingertip higher, narrowly missing touching one of *Caroline’s* very hard nipples, tracing the longest streak of chocolate that she’d just sort of whipped out of the mixing bowl by accident.

Hannah’s shaking her head, a smile that might be *Caroline’s* ultimate weakness toying at her lips. “How did you even do this?” She murmurs with mirth written all over her face and voice.

Then she tilts her head up at *Caroline*, obviously waiting for her to finish whatever she was going to say.

Joke’s on Hannah because *Caroline* really had no idea what she’d been aiming to say.

She finally manages to find *any* words. “I guess my baking ability is one thing you’ll never have to hear *Abbie* love about me. It’s just everything else that you’ll have to be annoyed at.”

Hannah’s head falls into a slow tilt. “It *would* be annoying,” she starts, the smile on her lips melting into that endeared one she gets for *Caroline*. “If I didn’t agree with everything she says about you.”

Caroline scoffs, because it’s better to attempt to brush the words off than let them take her even farther into this deep, deep well of warmth she has for Hannah.

Hannah flattens her hand to Caroline's chest. And just like that, her scoff dies on her lips and all she can think is that there is *no way* Hannah doesn't feel how fast her heart is racing.

She can feel it pounding through her entire body.

Hannah's hand – strong, deft, capable – is resting flat against her chest and she's so close and it's all Caroline can do to just control her breathing.

Her voice is quiet and commanding. "If I could have my daughter look up to anyone in our lives, I would choose you." She blinks down at Caroline, the most earnest look in her eyes.

"And you aren't allowed to brush this off." Hannah presses her hand more firmly against Caroline. As if Caroline would possibly have the ability to step away or to remove Hannah's touch from her body.

No, that hand is wreaking havoc on her and she wants it to stay that way, as her stomach flip flops and heat pools between her thighs.

"You're strong and smart and gorgeous and *good*." Hannah expounds, tapping her finger against Caroline with every word she says to make her point. And when she does, she curls her fingers a little so that Caroline can feel them stroke just that small bit against her chest.

She doesn't think she's ever felt more *present* in a moment than she does, right here, right now.

"You're kind of my hero, too." Hannah finishes, her voice barely above a whisper as she confides that bit of information to Caroline.

And when she will look back on this moment – because she *will* look back on it – she'll think that this was inevitable.

From the second Hannah shot her a wink as she'd pulled out a bottle of wine after tucking Abbie in, that they've both gotten a bit of a buzz from. To the heat, to Hannah's bare arms with lithe muscle that her tank top reveals. To the dip into her cleavage that Caroline has tried valiantly to avoid looking at.

The quiet music that plays in the background, with the most delicious smell around them.

But most of all, just Hannah. Her hand on her chest, unyielding and warm, despite the fact that she has to feel Caroline's heart pounding. And the way she looks at Caroline, as if she thinks she can see the same things in Caroline that Caroline sees in her.

She can't help it.

She leans in, as if magnetized, her eyes closing as soon as she can feel Hannah's surprised exhale warm on her lips.

Hannah's hand slides down Caroline's chest to grip the top of her camisole in a tight fist, knuckles pressing against the tops of her breasts. Her skin tingles where Hannah's hand touches and she breathes her own whimper into her mouth, heat spiking down her spine and landing firmly between her legs.

She pauses just before their mouths touch. So *close* and she's holding herself back by the tiniest thread –

“Mom?”

Abbie's voice coming from down the hallway halts everything, crashing through this bubble. In a split second, the world that was blocked out comes rushing back in full swing – starting with the hand Hannah has fisted in her camisole tightening in shock and then pushing so hard, Caroline feels like she's been punched in the chest as her back slams into the counter behind her.

Hannah's eyes are wide, staring at her while her other hand is already covering her mouth as she shakes her head. It's – it's not a positive look at all and everything inside of Caroline starts to fall flat, into this weird zone of shock.

“No. I don't...” Is all she whispers, before she presses her fingers tighter to her lips and seems to cut off all sound.

And Caroline... she has no idea what to do. Her hands lay uselessly at her sides, having fallen from Hannah's jaw as soon as she'd been pushed back.

Her heart is still pounding, the blood rushing in her ears so loudly, she almost feels like she might pass out. Her stomach is already sinking like a stone, falling so quickly from the cusp of the highest high to a strange sensation she can only categorize as stupefied.

Because *what the hell did she almost do?*

There's no time to – to figure out what to say or how to apologize or explain anything even if she could, though, because Abbie is in the kitchen now, rubbing at her eyes.

“Are you done with the cupcakes? I keep waking up because –” She cuts herself off as soon as she sees Caroline, her face lighting up in a sleepy smile. “You're still here!”

Hannah's hand drops from where she's been holding so tightly to Caroline's camisole, as if the contact was burning her and she's only just realized. She fixes a smile that Caroline can tell is frazzled around the edges as she turns to look at Abbie.

"Hon, what are you doing up?" There's the slightest tone in her voice that is just *off*.

"I just said! I can't sleep. I keep smelling cupcakes and thinking about my party tomorrow..." She trails off, staring curiously at the massive amount of cupcakes that are already baked and cooling on the counters as she walks closer.

Caroline wants to swoop in and say *something* that she would normally say, here. Reassure Abbie that the cupcakes are all here and that they aren't going anywhere, because she knows this is likely all rooted in Abbie's mix of excitement and anxiety about having her slumber party.

But the world doesn't quite feel like it's right on its axis yet, and she can't force any words out.

Hannah gathers her composure far better and faster than she can, reaching out to rest her hands on Abbie's shoulders. "The cupcakes are all done and *someone* has to get to bed so that she can wake up early and help decorate for her party."

Abbie fights through a yawn, looking around Hannah at her. "But Caroline –"

"Is leaving, because it's very, very late." Hannah swiftly cuts in, her tone no longer frazzled and is instead firm and steady. She doesn't look at Caroline again and that feels like a whole other hurt that adds heavily to this buildup in her chest. "So, say goodnight again."

Abbie's bottom lip pokes out in a pout, but she acquiesces. "'Night, Caroline. Love you."

"Love you, too," she manages to get out even though she sounds just as dazed as she still feels.

Hannah keeps her hands on Abbie's shoulders, not looking back at Caroline at all as she guides Abbie out of the kitchen and back to her bedroom.

Caroline reaches out to shut off the oven, fighting with the knob as she accidentally tries to turn it the wrong way before finally managing to switch it off. *Caroline is leaving because it's very, very late* sounds very much like Hannah doesn't want to see her when she's done with Abbie.

X

Caroline hasn't had so many nerves about attending a birthday party since she'd *been* ten. But she can't let Abbie down.

It's what she's repeating to herself as she walks into the small park down the street from Hannah and Abbie's apartment, where the party is taking place.

The thing is – she hasn't really gotten any sleep. Every time she'd closed her eyes, she replayed the last ten minutes of her time with Hannah. By the time she'd gotten home, her stupor had faded into a mix of emotions.

Mostly culminating into the stinging hurt of rejection, coupled with a fear that Hannah now feels like Caroline violated the trust they've formed.

Stomach in knots, she forces a smile on her face as soon as she gets close enough for Abbie to see her. And when she *does* see her, the grin that flashes over her face is enough to make Caroline's more genuine. "Caroline! You're finally here!"

Abbie runs to her, abandoning her post by picnic tables, and Caroline puts down her giftbag just in time to not drop it when Abbie throws her arms around her waist.

"Finally? According to my calculations, your party hasn't even started yet." For once, she's early. She'd wanted to give herself enough time to talk to Hannah first.

She retrieves the large giftbag from the ground and takes a moment of comfort as she puts her arm around Abbie's shoulder as she leads her back to the picnic tables.

"This is my grandma and grandpa!" Abbie announces without leaving her side as they get closer to the tables where all of the cupcakes are. She switches her attention to her grandparents, proudly informing them, "Caroline's my friend."

She hadn't noticed them when she'd been approaching, having been too wrapped up in her thoughts. But with their looks and the way they seem extremely out of place standing in this park is – it's easy to see they're Michael's parents.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Caroline Parker.” She offers the older couple, setting down her gift. Which Abbie immediately pounces on, tugging aside some of the tissue paper. Caroline arches her eyebrows and sets her hand on top of Abbie’s head. “Nice try, Ab, but it’s in wrapping paper.”

“Francis Dalton.” Abbie’s grandfather pulls her attention back to him. He’s too far away to casually offer a hand, but looks like he doesn’t want to, anyway. “And my wife, Marina.”

Marina, however, does offer a hand. Very tentatively, it seems, as she keeps her other arm cautiously across her body. As Caroline shakes it, she narrows her eyes. “How do you know my granddaughter? You look a little old to be Abbie’s friend.”

Caroline hesitates – it’s not like she has any shame in dunking Michael in his own divorce. And, honestly, she has no shame in stating it to his parents, either. But it’s Abbie’s birthday party and she’s dealt with enough crap in regards to her father without Caroline rubbing anything in. She can’t imagine it would work in her favor at all to the senior Daltons.

It also doesn’t help that all she is thinking about as they look at her is whatever that *moment* had been with his ex-wife only twelve hours ago.

Abbie, however, doesn’t hesitate. She lugs the gift bag Caroline had brought with her over to the side of the table and says, “She used to work with dad and then she was mom’s lawyer.” She blows out a breath and swipes her hair back from her face in a manner that is entirely Hannah. “And now we’re friends.”

“I guess that about sums it up.” She coughs behind a closed fist, not missing a single note of the displeasure on their faces as they regard her. God, after a night of no sleep and still feeling on edge, she has to get out of here. “Where *is* your mom?”

She finds Hannah pulling the remainder of the cupcakes out of her car parked at the curb, just where Abbie said she’d be.

Just looking at her gives Caroline the same rush it always does, that immediate hit of warmth. Only this time, it’s accompanied by everything else that she’s been feeling since last night, and she has to clear her throat before she can speak. “Hey.”

Hannah’s back is to her and she can’t even let herself take a few seconds to admire the sleek muscles revealed by her tank top.

Mostly because she notices how Hannah immediately straightens out and freezes for a moment, as soon as she hears Caroline’s voice. It’s only a

second, but it's there and Caroline *feels* it.

When Hannah turns around, though, there's a relieved smile on her face. So real that it shocks Caroline wordless, because – *what?* It is so far from the look she'd had on her face last night, so warm in that way Hannah has, that surprise takes over anything else.

Surprise and this little feeling of *hope* in her stomach. This little feeling that admittedly hasn't completely died all night, apparently. Even when she'd thought it had.

"You came." That relief is in Hannah's tone as well, as she puts the stack of cupcake carriers down to shut the trunk of her car.

Caroline's nerves feel so frayed, her hands shake slightly as she tangles them awkwardly in front of her. "Of course, it's Abbie's party." She's in normal summer attire, a pair of high-waisted shorts and a tucked in shirt, but she feels *exposed* as she shuffles from foot to foot. She can't keep the words in. "Unless, you didn't want me here?"

Hannah's eyebrows draw together in what looks like a look of confusion and in that moment, if Caroline couldn't still feel the spot on her chest where Hannah pushed her away, she would've thought she was making the entire thing up.

"Of course I want you here. And so does Abbie. Always." Hannah's smile always feels like a balm, something soothing after a hard day, but it does little for Caroline in this moment.

"Yeah?" She can't control the genuine question in her tone, her heart in her throat.

Well, maybe the certainty behind that smile is doing more than a *little*. There's those pieces of her, the ones that had been terrified that they were going to lose this softness – those parts feel like a tentative calmness is coming over them after spending the night with worst case scenarios.

The smile falters a bit and Hannah steps around the cupcake containers to place her hand on Caroline's arm. She can feel the touch down to her toes. "We will always want you around. And," she pauses, her hand sliding away from Caroline as she tucks them somewhat uncomfortably into her pockets. "I'm sorry."

"*You're* sorry?" She knows she's just repeating whatever Hannah is saying, but she can't help it. None of this is going according to plan of the worst case scenario scripts she'd written in her head.

Then again, maybe she should have expected that. Because in what world did Hannah fall into worst case scenario?

“For, well, dismissing you like that, last night. I just, I didn’t know what to do?” Hannah’s cheeks color in an unfairly – really, really unfairly – appealing blush as she looks down at the cupcakes. She takes in a deep breath before looking back up, gray eyes solid as stone and her voice just as steady as she says, “I don’t want to risk your friendship and I didn’t mean to send you the wrong signal.”

And there it is. That tiny, tiny seed of hope flickered out. It’s nothing she didn’t *know*, but her heart aches with the words just the same. It has no right to hurt and she knows that, but it still *does*.

“You – you didn’t. Risk my friendship, that is.” The words slip out and she thinks about the thousand explanations and apologies that she’d thought of last night. “What happened last night was clearly a mistake. And I...”

Her throat runs dry as she tries to decide what to say – *I never really thought you’d fallen for me the way I’ve fallen for you?*

It doesn’t matter, because Hannah shakes her head and says, “I’m so glad you feel the same way.” Her voice sounds just a little off, but Caroline can fully admit that on a night of no sleep, she could be imagining things. Hannah blows out a deep breath, her shoulders slumping with what she can only assume is relief. “And things can just be... normal.”

“Normal.” She echoes, the word feeling decidedly not normal on her lips.

Normal. She can do normal.
Even if it hurts a bit.

In the next few weeks, things *do* go back to normal. Mostly.

Does she think about that moment way more than she should? Possibly. Probably.

The only thing that *isn’t* normal is that she starts to employ her own subtle steps to recover and move on from these feelings so that their friendship can be just that – a friendship.

She starts making small changes, unnoticeable to Hannah and Abbie. Spending a little less free time with them on her days off, putting just a few inches between herself and Hannah when they do hang out.

She accepts the invitation to go out with a woman who works in the accounting firm on the fifth floor of her office building, Nicola, who has asked her out a few times, just to get herself “out there” in Kris’s encouraging words. It makes her want to roll her eyes, but her friend is right – she has to move on from Hannah if she wants this to be a healthy and lasting friendship for everyone involved.

So, Caroline tries.

The Saturday of Labor Day weekend, she takes Abbie out to go back to school shopping and they’re both laden down with bags as they make their way up to Hannah and Abbie’s apartment.

It’s almost four in the afternoon, which means Hannah should be home by now. She’d apologetically and hurriedly asked if Caroline could keep an eye on Abbie earlier this morning – not a common occurrence for a Sunday – and had been in such a rush, Caroline hadn’t gotten much of an explanation when she’d picked Abbie up.

“We got so much. What do you think I should wear on my first day?” Abbie asks, tossing a look over her shoulder at Caroline as they make their way down the hall.

“I’m not sure, but going into fifth grade is a pretty big deal. How about you try on your favorites for your mom and she can help choose?”

“Okay!” Abbie exuberantly agrees just before she gets to the apartment door and she pauses to look over her shoulder, sending Caroline an imploring look. “And you’ll stay, too?”

Caroline hesitates for a second. Not because she doesn’t *want* to stay, but one of her steps to getting over these feelings has been to spend less time in Hannah and Abbie’s apartment. It, after all, was the scene of the crime.

“For a little bit.” She agrees because she can’t say no to Abbie’s pleading blue eyes. Especially when she wonders if Abbie has noticed she’s been trying to spend a little less time hanging around their apartment.

Abbie grins as she takes her handful of bags and runs into the apartment ahead of Caroline, shouting her greeting to Hannah with a proclamation of, “We went back to school shopping!”

Caroline pauses for only a moment to take a deep breath before she follows – totally normal.

Hannah steps out from the kitchen as Caroline makes her way down the hall, and the sight of her stops Caroline dead in her tracks. Because she's in tailored slacks and a fitted button up, her hair pinned up, and –

And Caroline forces herself to ignore the flutter in her stomach. Ignore, ignore, ignore, and eventually it will stop happening. It's part of her get-over-Hannah strategy.

The fact that Hannah's expression is not her usual affectionate smile, as she crosses her arms, also somewhat helps extinguish the feeling. "You took her back to school shopping?"

Caroline bites her lip before offering a sheepish smile. "Well, yes? I know you meant to do it today, but you were..." She deliberately doesn't drop her gaze to look Hannah up and down as much as it would help her case. "Busy."

She doesn't think it's a big deal, but she can tell by the look in Hannah's eyes that she has to be missing something.

"Caroline, you already do *too much* for us," she stresses those words as her arms slide to cross over her chest. "It's not – you spent way too much on her today." Hannah gestures to the bags in her hands, let alone the ones Abbie took with her to her room. "I didn't ask you to do this." Her voice is quiet and tight with something Caroline doesn't understand.

She places the bags on the floor as they start weighing her down, confusion sliding firmly into place as she shakes her head. "You didn't," she slowly says in agreement, "But –"

"*But* you're going to let me pay you back." Hannah's voice is firm and not meant to be insulting, Caroline can sense that.

So she doesn't know why that feels like a slap in the face, but it does and she recoils a half a step with the feeling of it. "I don't want your money, Hannah."

"Taking Abbie back to school shopping isn't your responsibility." Her tone leaves no room for argument and it *isn't* sharp, not really. Just matter-of-fact.

But Caroline feels the words acutely and for a rare time, she is truly at a loss for words. She doesn't even know where this came from, this push back from Hannah about something like taking Abbie shopping.

“You’ve never had a problem with me taking Abbie out before.” She points out, mostly because it’s all she can say through the confused hurt that is clouding her.

Her feelings must reflect on her face or in her voice or both, because the hard set of Hannah’s jaw almost immediately vanishes. “It’s not you taking her out, it’s... I don’t need you to provide for us.” She pauses for a brief second, gray eyes closing tightly. “For – for Abbie. I *need* to do that, Caroline. After spending so long with Michael and only just now being divorced and truly a single parent – I have to be the one who does that,” her voice so easily melts into a tone that begs for Caroline to understand her. “You know what I mean?”

She... doesn’t. Not really. But Caroline supposes she’s never been in a position to understand where this is coming from, not being a parent and all.

“I didn’t spend that much.” She counters, and it’s not a *total* lie; she’d had to cap their shopping trip eventually. “And honestly, most of it has a specific purpose.” Caroline bends to rummage and quickly pulls out a few items to prove her point. “She needed the extra shorts for when she starts soccer, right? And I got a few shirts and stuff for her to keep at my place, if you don’t mind, because when we cook or bake... well, I think she takes after me on that front.”

She realizes her mistake as her stomach clenches, thinking about Hannah touching the batter she’d gotten on her chest. Hannah’s cheeks immediately pink with the mention of that night, which they have very much avoided mentioning, as do her own.

Just like that, the tone shifts. She almost misses Hannah’s unhappiness with her.

She breaks eye contact, pushing the clothing back into bags, as she clears her throat. “So, um, where did you go today? You look – different.”

Hannah looks down at herself before letting out a self-conscious laugh, one that she used to make a lot more frequently in the beginning of their friendship. It, thankfully, sounds almost foreign now.

“My advisor wanted to meet up with her capstone group this year and she only just sent out the email last night.” Gray eyes roll as Hannah brushes a hand over the thigh of her slacks, that self-deprecating expression on her face, still. “It’s not a big deal to most of my classmates, because they’re all in their early twenties and, I believe, don’t have any kids. But I have Abbie to think about for last-minute meetings. Which I discussed with

her today, so you won't have to worry about stepping in at the last minute like this all semester," Hannah is quick to tell her.

Caroline shakes her head, maintaining eye contact as if it will get the point across this time. "How many times have I told you? I really don't mind."

Hannah's lips quirk into a small smile that reads with both fondness and exasperation. "And I still don't know how we lucked out with you in our lives. But it's also... not just about you." Her voice is quiet, almost more to herself than anything.

Caroline's eyebrows furrow in confusion at that because – she doesn't get what else she is referring to. But Hannah also doesn't seem like she wants to elaborate on it, so she drops it.

"In honor of you going back to school, I have to say..." She bends down to quickly rustle through the bags again before finding the one she's looking for. "We didn't just shop for Abbie today."

Hannah's eyes land on the backpack – navy blue with a peach colored artsy design over it – that Caroline offers her.

In that moment, whatever else Hannah had been feeling prior to this seems to disappear entirely. Her expression softens as her eyes fix on the backpack before looking up at Caroline.

"You are too much, Caroline Parker." Is what she says, in a voice that is barely more than a whisper. This time, "too much" doesn't sound like a bad thing. She gives Caroline a long, considering look before she shakes her head. "And I should have started with this, more than anything – thank you. For everything. Even if I *am* going to pay you back."

Determined to ignore the damning butterflies at the sound and the resonating look on Hannah's face, she shakes her head. "It's just a backpack. And Abbie picked out the design."

Hannah ignores her deflection and steps closer. Close enough that Caroline can smell the subtle, floral perfume she'd worn for her meeting. "It's not just a backpack."

Oh, damn. As Hannah reaches out to take the backpack, she feels the flutter at the smile Hannah gives her. Really, she's been getting the flutter less now that she actively pulls herself away from it. Proof that her recovery steps really can work!

She hopes the slight step she takes back is subtle.

Hannah bites her lip as her grip on the backpack tightens and she holds it closer to herself. Her voice dips to just above a whisper as she admits, “I’ve been on edge all day. I meant what I said, about... some things I just have to do on my own. But more than that – being back on campus, classes starting later this week...” She clears her throat, the look of uncertainty and vulnerability flashing over her face in a look that cuts right through Caroline. “It’s all sort of a reminder that I haven’t been in college for a decade. Things have changed; I could see how it all changed even today, before classes even started. There’s a chance I could –”

“There’s no chance of you failing,” she interrupts, her voice strong. So strong, because she can feel that truth in her bones.

Hannah sighs and the weight of it feels heavy from here. It takes everything in her not to step back into Hannah’s orbit and offer the hug that she just knows Hannah would sink into and take comfort from. The comfort she wants to give.

“You don’t know that,” Hannah points out, biting her lip as she closes her eyes. “I feel like I’m juggling a thousand things and this is... I need this.”

“So, you’ll do it. You will. You’re one of the smartest, most self-sufficient women I know. And you *can* do this.” She can hear her own conviction and she knows that the fire burning behind her words is borne of just that – the belief she has built into her core that Hannah can do anything.

Because in a recovery program for her feelings for this woman or not, she will never back down on that.

Hannah clearly still doesn’t share that belief, but it’s her eyes that smile more than anything else at Caroline in that moment. Softness and warmth emanate from them as she squeezes the backpack before hanging it up on the hook on the wall. “Thank you. For saying that. And for believing it.”

When Hannah reaches out and her hand, warm and soft, lands on Caroline’s arm in an appreciative, gentle squeeze, she can’t immediately step back from it. That would just be rude, right? But she forces herself to squash the flutter in her stomach as best she can and unfolds her arms in a few seconds so that Hannah’s hand falls away.

“You want to stay for dinner?” Hannah asks, as she starts tugging the shopping bags further into the living room. “We’re having pork chops.”

She clears her throat as she feels her cheeks heat up. "I'd like to." She really would. "I can't, though."

Hannah's eyebrows lift as she jokes, "This is the first time you're turning down my homemade food. Should I be offended?"

Caroline offers a small smile, reminding herself that there is no reason she should feel uncomfortable as she says, "Ha. No. I just, I have a date."

No reason to feel uncomfortable, she reminds herself. None at all. Even when a look of surprise takes over Hannah's features, her eyes widening as she stares at Caroline for a long moment. "Oh. I... didn't realize you were, um, dating. Again."

Caroline rocks back on her heels, hating this awkward feeling and knowing it's her own fault. And who knows, maybe Kris is right and she wouldn't even have these feelings for Hannah so intensely if she hadn't cut out dating for the last year.

"Yeah, it's just some drinks with a woman from work. Nothing serious." *And it won't be something serious because I would much rather have pork chops with you and Abbie. But down the line, maybe that won't be true,* she finishes.

Hannah still looks shell-shocked, blinking up at her for a few long seconds before her mouth curves into a smile. "Oh. Good! I hope you have fun."

"Thanks." She hopes so, too, even though she mostly just hopes she won't think about Hannah while she's out.

A little crinkle forms between Hannah's eyebrows as she averts her eyes to the bags in her hands. "If... if you need to go and get ready, I don't want Abbie and myself to be in your way."

"You aren't," she's quick to say because the last thing she wants is for Hannah to feel like a burden. But she does emit a long exhale. "I should go soon, though."

No, it's not exactly what she wants. But it's all a part of Caroline's Being-In-Love-With-Your-Best-Friend Recovery Program and she knows it's for the best.

She has a second date the following week with Nicola, and she feels like it's a success in its own right. It goes nowhere other than ending the

night with a little bit of a flirtation and a new possible friend, which is good because – well, she doesn't need to involve anyone else in her feelings jungle right now.

The good part is that it serves as a reminder for Caroline that eventually, when she's ready and emotionally available, there will be other women to fall for.

She thinks that's really the end of the entire dating aspect of her life for the moment, until she picks up Abbie from school on the September equinox.

"Happy first day of fall," she greets her ten-year-old sidekick, and is ready to indulge in the many conversations Abbie has already had with her about the fall activities she wants to do.

Instead, she's knocked right off her stride when Abbie looks up at her with a contemplative look and asks, "Did you go on a date?"

Caroline almost trips over her own feet just because it's the *last* thing she'd expected Abbie to ask her about. "Where did you hear that?" Because she just can't imagine Hannah bringing it up to Abbie. Not when she hasn't even brought it up to Caroline.

"Norah," Abbie answers immediately and it doesn't stop her from pressing, "So, you did?"

Caroline has to hold in a groan and reminds herself to text Jared later and tell her brother to watch his big mouth. She looks down at the entirely serious inquisitive look on Abbie's face and she can't lie to her. *Why should* she, anyway?

"I did," she answers slowly, dragging out the words.

"And it was with a woman. Right?" Abbie asks, which actually does give Caroline pause. She's never discussed her dating life with Abbie, because why in the world would she? It's never been relevant, especially given her lack of romantic interest – other than Abbie's own mother – for the entire year so far.

Abbie doesn't pause though, she just lifts up her eyebrows quizzically at Caroline when she doesn't say anything. "Because you're a lesbian, so you'd go out with a woman."

The words are so flippant when they leave her mouth, Abbie doesn't seem to have any doubts or questions about it, and Caroline already knew that Hannah has been a fantastic parent. But she is so incredibly relieved

and proud, in a weird way, that Abbie gets all of this goodness from Hannah and none of the ugliness that Caroline had experienced with Michael.

It makes her laugh, nodding and tucking her chin into her light autumn jacket as the wind picks up. “Yeah, I’m a lesbian. I went out with a woman.”

It seems to open Abbie’s floodgates and the questions pour out, so quickly Caroline can barely keep up.

“Where did you go? What does she look like? Where did you meet her? Did you like her? Are you going out again?”

Blowing out a breath, Caroline stares down at Abbie who is staring at her with utter curiosity. And she knows, theoretically, she can tell Abbie that it’s not her business or that it’s “an adult thing” but honestly, she doesn’t want to be one of those adults.

So she indulges Abbie’s questions in short but honest answers and she thinks that will be the end of it, assuming it’s just one of the topics Abbie is curious about as a sharp minded young woman.

It’s not the end.

She fields questions for the rest of the walk home, about a few of her past relationships, giving very light details.

“What’s your type?” Abbie asks as they approach Caroline’s condo.

“My type?” She can’t control the incredulous laugh that escapes her at the absurdity of being interrogated by a ten-year-old about *her type*.

But Abbie isn’t laughing, and she indignantly puts her hands on her hips. “Your type! What does your dream girl look like? What’s she act like? Do you want to have kids?”

Immediately the laughter dies on her lips, because all she can picture is Abbie’s own damn mother. And she certainly isn’t about to say *that*. She clears her throat as she wraps her arm around Abbie’s shoulders and taps her knuckles lightly on her shoulder. “What’s with all of the questions?”

Abbie heaves a sigh before she shrugs. “I don’t know. I have a growing mind.” She gives Caroline a purposefully bright smile, her expression still clearly waiting on Caroline’s answer.

“I don’t have a type,” she dodges. It’s not *untrue*; it’s not like she has a checklist. “But yeah, kids are a plus. Duh.” She bumps Abbie with her hip as she unlocks her door and she grins at Abbie’s surprised giggle.

She’s relieved when Abbie doesn’t ask anymore follow-up questions, though. The line of questioning is a little too close to home.

xi

Hangout Weekend – also known as Columbus Day weekend – has always been a time where Caroline and her friends forego their normal routines.

She’s grinning as she answers their group message about who’s bringing what for when they head up there in two days and she is *more* than ready for a vacation.

“What’s that smile over?” Hannah asks as she shoulders her own backpack while Abbie is gathering her own, ready to go home for the evening.

The sight of it makes her involuntarily grin even wider – because Hannah is thriving as she’s diving back into earning her degree and she loves being able to see it.

Before she shakes herself out of it and holds up her phone. “Just getting ready for the weekend.”

It only dawns on her then that Hannah had been invited to Hangout Weekend. She doesn’t know *how* she’d forgotten that her friends invited Hannah along with them when they’d met her on the Fourth of July, but, then again, she supposes she’s had a lot on her mind in regards to Hannah since then.

She can see in the way gray eyes widen and Hannah brings up her hand to land on her forehead that she forgot as well, even before she says, “I totally forgot. I mean, not that I assume I’m still invited. Your friends were just really friendly and –”

“They don’t invite anyone if they don’t mean it,” she cuts her off in assurance.

What’s not assuring is the near-panic she has at how the *hell* is she supposed to maintain any of her distancing rules from the last month and a half if she and Hannah are spending the entire weekend together?

“I really wish I could come,” Hannah’s voice is colored in genuine regret.

And just like that, she’s hit with relief. It won’t be a weekend of trying to figure out how to maintain her Getting Over Hannah plan while also still cutting loose and relaxing, after all.

“I haven’t had a getaway like that in –” Hannah snorts in derisive laughter at herself, lifting her hands to tug at the straps of her backpack. The one Caroline had bought for her that she actually uses and looks unfairly adorable with. “Not ever. I think it’s really incredible that you still keep in touch with your friends from college.”

Caroline immediately feels like a huge asshole. She knows how isolating Hannah’s marriage had been, how under Michael’s thumb Hannah had lost touch very quickly with just about everyone other than her mother.

“I was just so busy, I didn’t think to make any plans for Abbie. Two nights, last minute, is not the easiest feat,” she adds with a sad smile.

“I’m going to grandma and grandpa’s this weekend!” Abbie announces as she makes her way into the living room from where she was clearly eavesdropping in the kitchen.

She stands between Caroline and Hannah, looking up at them with an expectant stare.

Caroline’s dark eyes lock on Hannah’s and they exchange a quick look where Hannah’s confusion is palpable before she looks back down at Abbie. “No, hon, I haven’t spoken to grandma and grandpa in a few weeks.”

“I called them a couple days ago and asked.” She states triumphantly, blue eyes bright as she looks between Caroline and Hannah. “They’re picking me up Friday after school.”

Hannah’s eyebrows scrunch up together in question as her daughter now has all of her attention. “When did you arrange all of this?”

“Ummm, when you were in the shower Sunday?” Abbie offers as an answer as she zips up her jacket with a quick motion. “You wrote it forever ago on the calendar on the side of the fridge and I saw it when I flipped it to October.” She looks back up at Hannah, giving her a smile that reveals where one of her final visible baby teeth had fallen out just last week. “I figured you forgot ’cuz you didn’t ask me if I wanted to stay with anyone for the weekend.”

“I... I guess you’ve thought of everything, then,” Hannah’s voice reflects the bafflement on her face. “And you sure you want to go to grandma and grandpa’s for the weekend?”

“Yup!” Abbie pops the *p* and turns to Caroline. “When are you leaving?”

“Saturday morning. Coming back Monday afternoon,” she answers slowly as she shifts her gaze to Hannah, lifting her eyebrows in question.

Who holds her eye contact as a slow smile tugs at the corners of her lips. “I guess I’ll be joining you.” Her smile grows wider, as does Abbie’s, when she says, “I haven’t even really left the city at all in years.”

And even if it might mean some steps back in her Getting Over Hannah plan, Caroline really can’t care much in the face of that smile.

Hangout Weekend is always a good time, a mini vacation from real life.

They stay up later than they typically do in their respective lives and they drink a little more, too. They implemented it in their last year of undergrad, with the goal being to take advantage of the long weekend to help maintain their friendship even when they were having to live their lives out of college and in the real world. All of them – Caroline, Kris, Jess, Lacey, and Miranda – go up to Jess’s family’s house on Lake Winnepesaukee and let loose for two days.

They’re the last to arrive on Saturday and her friends all cheer when they see her. “Ay! Always the last one to the party!” Miranda is the one to declare with a laugh as she runs over from her perch on the deck to throw her arms around her shoulders.

Caroline rolls her eyes good-naturedly. “After bringing the majority of the alcohol for the weekend, I feel like I should be getting less shit.”

Miranda winks at her. “You know I love you.” But her attention is already on Hannah. “You came! I’m so glad!”

The tentative smile Hannah has on her face shifts into a more real one, albeit surprised. “I am, too.”

The sleeping arrangements are already made when they get there, Jess informs them as she takes them through the house up to the bedrooms on the second floor. She gives a brief tour as they go, highlighting aspects of the airy, comfortable home that Caroline has spent more time in than she can even remember. She isn’t really listening until Jess says, “You two are going to take Caroline’s usual room. Kris and Lacey always stay in the kids room, the only bedroom with two beds. I figure it’s fine though, it’s a queen

size bed.” She shoots Hannah a wink. “I mean, Caroline’s a sprawler in her sleep, but it’s pretty cute with all her cuddling tendencies, right?”

Caroline comes to a dead stop at the words, even as it feels like her heart is doing double time. They’re *sharing a bed*? Jesus H. Christ. She’d known her whole distancing plan was going to be shot, but not shot as in literally through the eyes and dead on sight.

She *is* a sprawler and a cuddler in her sleep. And that most certainly means sprawling all over and cuddling into Hannah, which... yeah, okay, she loves the idea of it. So much that she hates it.

She notices that Hannah’s steps pause for a slight second, too, and even though she’s always considered herself lucky to be gifted with the second biggest bedroom after Jess’s own, she thinks maybe she should negotiate for the kids bunkbeds for this trip.

Hannah clears her throat as her cheeks blush a bit and she looks between Jess and Caroline before she speaks slowly. “I didn’t know Caroline was a sprawler or a cuddler, actually. But it is fine, of course. Thank you for having us – me, at all.”

Jess laughs, her appealing, rich laugh that always makes everyone want to join her. “God, you are the most polite person that’s ever stepped foot in here. You still like to gossip right? This weekend is always about the gossip.”

Hannah’s laugh is lighter as she follows Jess down the hall. “I think I can manage that.”

“It’s fine. Of course,” she repeats, delayed, before she blows out a low breath and walks behind them. Right. It’s totally fine. Of course.

And it *is* fine after a few hours and a few drinks, when she has managed to let herself forget about the fact that she is sharing a bed with Hannah. As much as she can, anyway.

It’s easy when she gets to lean back and observe after dinner. The way her friends include Hannah right in their stories, the way Hannah’s tentative smiles and nerves faded easily and she just joins right in. She and Miranda talk about her courses after they’d learned that one of her professors used to work with Miranda at Merrimack College, before the conversation turns to family and children, Lacey – as a mother of three – joining in.

“And husbands aren’t allowed here for the weekend? Even if you’ve been together for eight years and have three kids?” Hannah asks, a flush on her cheeks from the wine she’s been drinking as Kris diligently fills cups.

Lacey laughs her own tipsy giggle. “Then who would *watch* the kids?”

Jess chimes in. “It’s women’s weekend, we decided that a long time ago. No boys allowed. We can bring other women friends. Or partners, in mine and Caroline’s cases.” She lifts her cup in a *cheers* motion to Caroline, who returns it with a sly smile.

Miranda, who is definitely the closest to being actually drunk, leans in over the table to state, “Not that Caroline has ever taken advantage of that! Never brings anyone.”

“Until Hannah,” Kris supplies, a wicked grin on her face that Caroline hopes no one else notices as she glowers at her.

“No one?” Hannah asks in surprise. She’s sitting directly across from Caroline and her eyes are trained on her, wide and questioning.

She can feel herself blush and she ducks her gaze to look insistently into her cup. She’s a little tipsy, sure, but definitely not enough for *this*. And there is no universe where she is going to explain that while she’s had several relationships that she’d thought were love, there had never been anyone that seemed like a good fit with her friends. That this weekend is special to her and she couldn’t just bring someone who wouldn’t fit with their whole dynamic.

Lacey playfully tosses some popcorn toward her. “Caroline has a lot of big, fanciful ideas about love. Very high expectations and not very willing to give people a lot of chances.”

Caroline only rolls her eyes, hard, because this is all familiar territory. Everyone else chuckles, before Hannah slaps her cup a little too hard on the table. The chuckles stop, while their pop music in the background plays on, and everyone – Caroline included – startles.

“Caroline *should* have high expectations. She shouldn’t settle for anyone or anything.” There’s a fire in Hannah’s voice that Caroline thinks might be more present because of her alcohol consumption, but regardless, it makes her chest feel so *warm*.

Like she might melt into a puddle here and now.

Instead of turning awkward, her friends do a hearty, “Hear, hear!” in agreement and Miranda pats Hannah’s shoulder appreciatively.

“You know who I liked? Connie. That girl you were dating, who ended up moving to Romania?” Lacey says, narrowing her eyes in thought. “Why did that end?”

“It was Bulgaria,” she corrects, rolling her eyes as she shifts forward to grab a cookie. “And she had plans to leave the country without even telling me until like two weeks beforehand, so. Kind of hard to make that work.”

She can’t deny that she’s glad when the conversation switches away from her love life, though. Especially after her friends run through a few more names from her past, and it occurs to her that it’s actually a good thing Hannah isn’t interested in dating her.

Because there’s a list of women that Caroline has tried to make it work with and yet it *never* has. And when that would inevitably happen with Hannah, she’d be beyond devastated.

Caroline’s never in her life been nervous about sharing a bed before. Not with friends or with lovers.

She can’t even begin to describe the relief she’d felt an hour ago when Hannah had excused herself to go to sleep just after midnight. She’s still a little nervous about waking up with Hannah, but that’s tomorrow morning Caroline’s problem. Now, she just has to sneak into bed and curl up on her side to forget Hannah’s there.

She does just that after she brushes her teeth and washes her face, opening and closing the bedroom door and squinting her eyes in the dark. Hannah’s taken the left side of the bed and from what Caroline can make out, she’s laying on her back, facing the ceiling.

Slipping under the covers, she scoots in as gently as she can, trying not to disturb Hannah at all.

Queen size bed or not, she discovers as she pulls the blankets over herself, it’s not big enough to prevent her from feeling like she’s immediately encompassed by Hannah’s scent. A groan escapes her throat at the realization, even as she inhales.

“Everything okay?” Hannah’s whisper breaks through the dark. Her voice is a little raspy, as it gets when she’s sleepy, Caroline knows. Extremely appealing.

Squeezing her eyes closed, she whispers back, “Shit, sorry. Did I wake you up?”

“No, I... can’t sleep. Why are you whispering?” Hannah asks, her voice still hushed herself.

“Because you are!” She points out, voice still a whisper for a reason she can’t name. It inanely makes the awkwardness that’s built up in her chest dissipate as she starts laughing. She’s still just slightly tipsy, even though she cut herself off and stuck to water over an hour ago.

Hannah’s laughing, too, and even though Caroline has promised herself she is resolutely not going to look at Hannah sharing this bed, she can tell by the rustling of the bed that Hannah has turned to face her. And more than anything, she can feel Hannah’s eyes on the side of her face.

Caroline still stays settled on her back, though. It’s the safest thing for her.

Until Hannah clears her throat, all traces of laughter gone from her voice, as she asks, “Do you – Caroline, do you want to date?”

The air catches in her throat and she chokes on it as her heart skips a beat. “What?” The word leaves her loudly, but it’s beyond her control as she whips her head to the side to look at Hannah.

Who is staring at her, worrying at her bottom lip as she splays her hand over the space on the bed between them. “If you want to date more, I don’t want watching Abbie or spending time with us to hold you back. With her child support now, I should, actually, be properly hiring someone instead of relying on you to give up –”

Fucking idiot, she curses at herself, because of course Hannah hadn’t been proposing that *they* date.

Still, she only has a second to ruminate on that before what Hannah’s actually saying registers in her mind. Her heart plummets to her stomach with the words and that’s when she pushes herself up to lean on her elbow, mirroring Hannah. “No, I don’t want you to find other plans for Abbie. Really, I don’t want that.”

The relief on Hannah’s face is clear now that Caroline has adjusted more to the room only lit by the moonlight coming in from the slats in the window. There’s still a doubtful apprehension there, too, though. “Are you sure?”

“I am,” she affirms, her voice rock steady. Fine, yes, she is figuring out some distance, but changing this routine completely would break her heart. And she isn’t even close to being ready to make that call. She clears her throat, placing her own hand on the mattress between them. There are only a few inches between their fingers, and that’s where Caroline’s eyes seem to be stuck. “I’m not up for seriously dating, right now.”

Hannah's eyes catch hers, the gray looking mesmerizingly translucent in the moonlight and Caroline feels so trapped she can't look away.

"Okay," is all Hannah says, her voice still low and raspy.

And Caroline's gaze finally drops from Hannah's and trails down over her face. Her hair is tousled and she's wearing a tank top that looks so soft and worn, almost threadbare. Her collarbones are proudly on display and so is her cleavage and Caroline's eyes tick back to Hannah's in an instant, before she rolls onto her back.

Yeah, that was why she had chosen not to look in the first place.

She has to clear her throat twice to ensure to herself that it's relatively normal as she asks, "What about you?"

Even though she isn't looking anymore, she knows Hannah's still on her side and looking at her.

"What about me?"

"When do you think you're going to date?" She asks, and then regrets it. She really... she doesn't think she wants the answer.

But Hannah lets out a loud, scoffing laugh. "Yeah, right."

Okay, once again, Caroline can't help herself. She rolls onto her side this time, not propping herself up. Just enough to be able to truly look at Hannah, whose eyes are downcast to the blanket as she draws invisible little designs with her fingertips.

"I know after a divorce it's – hard. To have feelings for someone again or let someone in. Trust me, I know; I'm a professional," she adds with a conspiratorial smile as Hannah's gaze finds hers again. "But you'll get there and you deserve to."

Hannah shifts down into the bed so she's eye level with Caroline and she's not sure if it's her imagination or not, but she feels a bit closer now. There's that crinkle between her eyebrows that she gets when she's struggling to put her thoughts into words. "No, it's not... I know I'm capable of having feelings for someone." Her voice is barely louder than a breath and Caroline unconsciously shifts even closer to be able to hear better. "It's about trust. Like if I can... really open that part of myself. And," she hesitates, seeming unsure of her words, "It's also me, that I don't trust."

She turns to look at Hannah, who is twisting the blanket in both of her hands, then untwisting, before she twists again, tighter. "I lost so much of myself in being with Michael. I lost my independence completely and I'm

only figuring out how to be an independent adult now, in my thirties. I can't risk that."

Her voice sounds both so introspective and pained, the words sounding like a confession. "Let alone taking Abbie into account. What if she gets attached and something goes wrong? What if – It's just, all too much..." She trails off, a frown on her face so deep, like she can't articulate the rest of what's on her mind.

And Caroline can't stop herself from reaching out and finding Hannah's hands with her own, stilling their movements. She covers them and squeezes firmly, trying to figure out what words to let out of what's whirring in her mind. There are a thousand things she wants to say, but she's not sure she trusts most of it to sound platonic and anything not platonic is clearly the last thing Hannah wants to hear.

Chief among them that the only thing that makes her ache more than imagining Hannah with someone else is imagining Hannah being alone.

Hannah squeezes her hand back as she also squeezes her eyes closed. "Anyway. Related to this very fun topic: this is why I couldn't sleep."

The change in subject is both abrupt and not, but she goes with it. "Because you were thinking about our dismal dating lives?"

Everything brightens in the flash moment where Hannah lets out a surprised laugh. "No, Caroline, not because of that. Specifically." She adds with a contemplative look. "But... I haven't slept in bed with someone who isn't Abbie in," she hesitates for a few beats. "A long time."

"Almost two years." She supplies, adding up Hannah and Michael's separation.

Which makes Hannah's smile grow a little tighter around the edges. "Uh, no. We weren't – we didn't sleep together, most nights. There was a guest room down the hall from the master that I started sleeping in when Michael became really..." She trails off, clearing her throat. "So, I would say, closer to four years."

Caroline takes in what she's saying, and just thinking about Hannah trapped with Michael – and all of the lasting effects it clearly still holds on her – makes her ache. She sits up in bed with a determined nod. "I can sleep on the couch."

Before she can move, though, Hannah's hand is around her wrist. "No, please. I don't want you to go, I just..." She takes in a deep breath and tugs at Caroline's wrist, her hand firm and warm. And, really, Hannah tugging

her back into bed is probably the most enticing thing in the world, so there's no way Caroline could possibly say no. Even if she definitely *should*.

She slowly lays back down as Hannah asks, "Are you really a cuddler? Like Jess said?"

Embarrassment tinging at her cheeks, Caroline scrubs a hand over her face. "I mean... yes. It's really a subconscious thing," she's quick to explain. "If I'm sharing a bed with someone, I inevitably wake up cuddled against them. Well. On them, usually."

There's a warm smile on Hannah's face, incredibly soft, as she regards Caroline before she scoots a little closer. And her smile slips just a bit into uncertainty. "Do you mind if I –" She licks her lips. "If we... god, this is ridiculous. I haven't been cuddled or held like that in a long time and if that's how we're going to end up, would you mind if we... before we go to sleep?"

Distance is what she should be thinking about, she reminds herself. It's the goal.

But in the face of Hannah asking to cuddle while sleeping together, knowing that, really, they *are* going to end up that way, anyway.... This weekend is shot on distancing herself from Hannah no matter what. She might as well get some sweet torture while she's at it.

Caroline's throat is dry as she nods. "If you want to. I'm big on cuddling, so." She thinks Hannah misses the nerves in the chuckle that sneaks out of her throat.

They end up in what is Caroline's favorite position to sleep in – sprawled over her bed partner's chest. At Hannah's urging to "cuddle me the way you like to cuddle," she'd slid in against her, burrowing into her side and pressing her face against the soft skin of Hannah's chest.

Hannah's heart under her ear is slow and beats a steady rhythm while her own heart is about to beat out of her chest at the proximity. She has her arm carefully draped over Hannah's waist, making sure to avoid much of the soft skin that she *could* brush against. It's really all she can make herself do in terms of maintaining any sort of distance.

Hannah sighs deeply, sleepily, as soon as they are situated, resting one hand in Caroline's hair and the other rubbing up and down her shoulder. And within moments, she's asleep. Her entire body relaxed under Caroline's, her breathing deep and even.

With her body feeling like it's tingling at every point of contact, Caroline can't imagine sleep will come for her so easily.

She finds the next day that she was pleasantly incorrect, as she realizes that she didn't even have her typical random wake up at five in the morning.

It takes her a few moments before it dawns on her that Hannah isn't in bed with her anymore, but she's entirely engulfed in Hannah's scent because her face is buried in her pillow. And she doesn't even allow herself the extra minute of indulgence she wants to take of burying her head into the pillow again before sitting up. Self-control set to maximum.

"Good morning," Hannah's voice is quiet and Caroline's heart trips as she turns around to find Hannah seated at one of the chairs facing out to the floor-to-ceiling window.

She's cozily set up in the oversized chair, her sketch pad propped against her knees, her hair tossed into a ponytail, clearly unbrushed still. And Caroline doesn't even realize she's staring for a good thirty seconds.

But, god, Hannah looks so good first thing in the morning.

"Morning." She looks away, stretching her arms up above her head before she stands. "Have you been up long? What time is it?"

Hannah's gaze is on her still when Caroline turns to look at her again, a small smile on her lips. "It's after ten. I've been up for a couple of hours, and got a few drawings in of the view from here." She gestures to her sketchpad as she slowly closes it. Gray eyes land back on her as she rests back in the chair, and she arches an eyebrow in question. "I went downstairs for coffee a while ago and was informed by Lacey that I *better be ready for tonight.*"

Because it's Hangout Weekend, she doesn't really get dressed-dressed, just pulls on a sweatshirt and a pair of wool socks because the lake house gets drafty overnight as she contemplates her answer. "Uh... well. Sunday night of Hangout Weekend means we generally over-indulge on alcohol."

"More than last night?" Hannah asks and the incredulousness in her voice is so strong, it makes Caroline laugh.

"Oh, yeah. I mean, last night no one was really even drunk. Tonight... well, it was something we started when we were twenty-one – not to have

leftover alcohol from the weekend.” Caroline tracks her eyes over Hannah’s face before she assures her, “You don’t have to drink. Lacey meant that more as a... they may be a bit obnoxious tonight sort of warning.”

“I don’t think I’ve been more than tipsy in at least ten years.” Hannah informs her quietly, rubbing her hands over the thighs of her jeans, before she pushes herself up to stand. Unlike Caroline, she *had* gotten dressed for the day, the jeans and soft oversized sweater she’s wearing making her look – perfect. “Not since college. Before Abbie.”

She’s about to assure again that she shouldn’t feel pressured to do so tonight, and is even going to offer up not really drinking anything herself.

But Hannah has a little furrow between her eyebrows as she says, “I guess tonight would be the night to indulge.” A small smile settles on her lips as she nods. “As long as you’ll be there to make sure things don’t get too out of control, of course.”

There’s a teasing tone in her voice, which Caroline doesn’t miss. But she’s serious as she nods. “Nothing will happen on my watch.”

Hannah *does* indulge that night. As does Caroline. And everyone else, but Caroline keeps an eye on Hannah just in case, per her promise.

They have a steady margarita mix that they all consume steadily through the evening, well into the night. And as she keeps her eye on Hannah, she notes that while Hannah definitely is flushed and giggly, she isn’t on the verge of anything dangerous. So she eventually sits back and lets herself relax with her friends.

They’d played a few hands of poker, drunkenly made two batches of brownies and are all lounging in the living room by midnight. Caroline’s drunk – the good side of drunk, where everything is light and fun – but she still has enough control over herself to *not* sink onto the couch next to Hannah, even though it’s her first instinct.

Instead, Kris is sitting with Hannah and Caroline is sprawled on a blanket nest on the ground with Jess. She can feel the world buzzing around her, and for all of this self-control she is possessing right now, she can’t stop herself from just *looking* at Hannah.

Admiring her, really. Her hair is sexy and ruffled and her shirt is tugged far more to the left than it is centered, revealing her collarbone and a

fair amount of soft skin. She'd slept there, her inebriated mind has regularly reminded her for the last hour. That's how she knows she's beyond tipsy.

She's so in her own head that she doesn't even realize she's been addressed until everyone's eyes are on her. Caroline shakes her head. "What's going on?"

Miranda laughs. "We *asked*, as the perpetually single woman with the best hookup stories, where are your salacious tales?"

"Come on, Caroline, hit us with the details. You always keep us so well-fed." Lacey adds, wiggling her eyebrows before breaking into her own set of giggles.

She deliberately rips her gaze off of Hannah as she groans and falls back into Jess, who jostles her with her shoulder. "I haven't had sex like, all year. You guys know that."

"Boring," Miranda declares, sticking out her tongue. "Kevin is so...." She wrinkles her nose at the reference to her husband, before she chuckles again. "I mean, I love him and he gets the job done. But it's not *exciting*. You know who was amazing in bed? Patrick, that guy from my Master's program. Remember him?"

Lacey sighs dreamily. "Oh, I remember."

Jess pipes in, mentioning her last long-term girlfriend. "Meredith was really imaginative." Her tone turns mischievous as she bumps against Caroline's shoulder again. "Caroline may have been my best, though. Definitely up there in my top three."

The only thing Caroline hears over the cheering of her friends is Hannah choking on her drink.

She can feel the blush work up her neck and into her cheeks, hot and fast, even as she shoves Jess back and she can't help but send a helpless look towards Hannah. "Be quiet."

She can't help that feeling that settles in her stomach at the way Hannah's staring at her, eyes imploring.

Jess's voice is still full of mirth, but with an underlying note of sincerity as she gives Caroline big, drunk eyes. "I'm being serious! Very in-tune with my body. It was a great Hangout Weekend for sure."

Hannah's eyes now dart between the two of them, her forehead scrunched up. "You two were... a couple?"

Caroline shakes her head quickly, but it's Kris who makes a *pfft* sound. "They'd never last as a couple."

Hannah's stare is on her and only her now, but Caroline can't decipher a thing other than the little crinkle between her eyebrows. "When was that?"

"A long time ago." Is all she manages to get out, feeling far more tongue-tied than usual with the alcohol and the intensity of Hannah's stare.

Probably because she's being questioned by the woman she's in love with about her prior sex life and that's not a position she's really ever been in. That could be it.

"Five years ago! The first time I tried to lure Caroline out to join my firm in New York when she came to visit." Jess chimes in before leaning in and kissing Caroline's cheek. "Why so shy tonight?"

"Honestly! You're never one to shy away from the sex talk," Lacey adds. "Like. Never."

Her friends weren't wrong – Caroline is typically always down for sex talk with little to no embarrassment, even if she's regaling a story of her own misfortune. But it's not something she and Hannah have ever delved into in spite of the months of closeness between them.

There's no reason she should feel nervous or ashamed of the single weekend she'd hooked up with Jess; it's never once felt awkward between them. And it's a lot for her mind to process right now, so instead she lays down with a groan.

She's so incredibly glad that she doesn't have to try to come up with anything to say because Miranda is already over it and asking, "What about you, Hannah? You're single. You have sex stories?"

And even though she *knows* Hannah's sex life is essentially the same as hers, she's still waiting on baited breath for the answer.

"Um, no." Hannah's response is sharp and short before she throws back the half-full margarita glass in her hand rather than expand, and Caroline's rather glad. Actually, really glad.

She's not entirely sure she has enough control right now to not show any reaction to Hannah talking about sex.

Mostly, she's even more glad when the conversation shifts away from sex and she can breathe easy again.

They go to bed at the same time that night, both crawling into their original sides from the night before.

Even as Caroline's mind is still pleasantly reeling – definitely drunk, she thinks to herself with a hum as she tugs the blankets up – she wonders if Hannah is going to want to cuddle again as they fall asleep. She's itching for it in the way that she knows if she were sober, would present her with some quandaries, but right now, she only cares about what she *wants*.

And what she *wants* is to cuddle up against Hannah again and be surrounded by her scent, all warm –

“Do you miss sex?”

The question throws her off entirely and her eyes that had drifted closed with her thoughts, fly open.

“What?”

“Sex,” Hannah repeats. Her voice is raspy again, low and *doing things* to Caroline. “I gathered from the, um, the conversation earlier that you don't typically go for long periods of time without.”

Her voice doesn't slur, but Caroline knows Hannah is also drunk herself. She *has* to be, even more than Caroline herself.

“I miss... aspects of it,” the admission leaves her before she can help it and she wants to take it back. *Don't go down this road*, a small, sober voice in the back of her mind says.

But she's also *not* sober and she's laying in bed with the most gorgeous woman she's ever known and all she can smell is Hannah, as she lays only a foot away.

“What do you miss?” Hannah asks, her voice low and inquisitive.

“I...” She trails off, swallowing hard, swallowing back anything that wants to come out of her throat as her heart immediately starts pounding in her chest.

She can feel Hannah move under the covers, scooting in closer. Still not touching, but close enough that she can feel her body warmth. She's only wearing a thin shirt and pair of shorts, and it burns through everything she's wearing.

“Your friends said you usually love talking about sex and I don't want you to think – you didn't have to hold back on my account. It's just that... I haven't had good sex in a long time. Except for with myself.” Hannah finishes, her voice so quiet at the end that Caroline isn't sure she's supposed to have heard it. Oh, but she *did* and it's such a mental image that

immediately takes up residence. "I've never really had friends who talk about everything. It would be nice to have... that."

It seems that just about anything Hannah wants, Caroline's ready to oblige. She can't help herself. Especially on this topic.

"I miss feeling someone's body against mine. Completely naked, warm skin touching all over. Knowing she wants me the way I want her." The words are pushed out by the enticing sound of Hannah's admission.

She waits for a beat, waiting for Hannah to tell her that's enough, as she stares up at the ceiling in the darkness.

Instead, Hannah sighs. "Yeah, that sounds.... What else?"

Her mind is already running with this, beyond her control, and the words slip out with it.

"Kissing. With purpose. Sucking her lip between mine and grinding down against her, with both of us knowing where this is going. Feeling her body under mine, arching against me when I kiss and bite down her neck."

Caroline's heartbeat pounds in her ears at the release of her words, her hands twisting hard into the comforter on top of her. *God*, she does miss it and her body can feel it. The utter wanting that's been unfulfilled for months, settling between her thighs.

"Oh. Yeah." Hannah's tone is breathless and it makes Caroline start to pulse. "Purpose. I really love that."

"*Yeah*," she echoes. "I miss teasing. Feeling how much she wants me and getting her worked up, touching until she's desperate for more. Feeling her move against me."

Caroline's eyes slip closed of their own accord, and she can picture all of her words as if they're playing out in her mind. Picturing a woman's naked body under her own, writhing against her, hips arching, searching for more. She very deliberately won't put a face on this woman, even though she *knows*.

And her body reacts, as she squeezes her thighs together. It does absolutely nothing but let her realize just how fucking wet she is.

"And that's what you miss most?" Hannah's voice is hoarse. Far beyond her usual sleepy rasp.

Caroline's blood is rushing through her head, still heady and intoxicated, and the alcohol still has enough power over that she opens her eyes again, turning her head toward Hannah as the correction escapes her. "No, mostly I miss making her come."

She didn't expect Hannah to be rolled onto her side, her gaze so intently focused on Caroline. Her face, she knows from earlier, is flushed from the alcohol and it's all Caroline can do to force her hands to stay just where they are.

Hannah's warm breath washes over her cheek as she swallows and asks, "Not coming, yourself?"

Christ. She almost feels like she could come just from those words leaving Hannah's lips. Her hips rock of their own accord, before she forces herself to be still.

"No." Her voice is far more firm than she'd expected with how aroused she is, how much her head feels like it's spinning in wonder at the entire conversation. "What I miss most of all is holding my hands against her hips and pressing her down against the bed. Feeling her dripping against my mouth, how hard her hips press against my face. Her hands in my hair, how desperate she gets, her legs shaking, my name the only thing she can say..."

She has to turn her head away as Hannah's lips part on a strained exhale, clamping her eyes closed.

Which doesn't help her predicament, given that the woman coming undone at her touch in her mind's eye most definitely *does* have an identity.

"Oh." Is all Hannah breathes out. Caroline can feel her shift onto her back, can feel the absence of her stare.

"Yeah." She croaks out in response, whimpering softly at just how soaked she is, how sensitive she feels against her sleep shorts as she shuffles around, trying to find a comfortable position. Not that it exists right now.

No cuddling tonight, at least not until she's dead asleep; she might just come the second Hannah's body touches hers.

"I've never had sex like that," Hannah's confession is so quiet, her voice barely more than a whisper and an octave deeper than normal. "Being wanted that badly. *Wanting* that badly."

Caroline knows she shouldn't. She absolutely knows she shouldn't turn to look at Hannah again or ask the words that formulate in her mind. But she can't listen to that voice right now, not when her clit is so hard. She looks at Hannah. "What do *you* miss about sex?"

"It's not what I miss; it's what I want." Hannah corrects, her eyes on Caroline's for a long beat before they slip closed.

“What do you want?” She’d give anything for this answer, in this moment. She doesn’t care how bad it is for her, she doesn’t care about anything other than knowing just what Hannah *wants*.

Hannah draws in a deep breath and her chest rises with it and even though Caroline shouldn’t, her eyes fall to the swell of her breasts. With the blanket pulled down to Hannah’s hips and the same worn in tank top she’d had on the previous night, it’s obvious to see that she isn’t wearing a bra. And her nipples are so hard, Caroline’s throat is instantly parched.

“What you described is pretty good,” that hoarse sound in Hannah’s voice is back and fuck if it doesn’t give Caroline a *thousand* ideas. “Perfect.”

Pretty good, as in Hannah likes to be eaten out? Or held down while it happens? Both – Caroline’s mind is alight with possibilities and she wants very much to ask them.

The only reason she doesn’t is because only a few seconds later, Hannah is sitting up and pushing the blankets aside. “I, um, have to use the bathroom.”

And within moments, she’s gone while Caroline is left alone in the bed. She falls back into her pillows, utterly breathless.

Jesus Christ.

That’s all she has to say.

They don’t say anything about it in the morning. And Hannah hadn’t been in bed, again, when she’d woken up. Which is good. Because Caroline may have been drunk, but she remembers every second of the conversation with utter clarity.

Hannah grimaces as the radio starts as soon as they start the car after packing it up and saying their goodbyes, immediately reaching out to lower the volume. “I think I’m a little hungover,” Hannah admits quietly, a bit of a blush on her cheeks.

Caroline offers her own smile, giving her the bottle of Tylenol that she keeps in her car for rough days at work.

Hannah murmurs her thanks with a sincere grin, before she settles into the passenger seat and closes her eyes. She stays like that for most of the ride.

It's not *awkward* between them, exactly, but it's not totally normal.

Mostly it's quiet, the soft buzz of music as the main source of sound. And she's not sure if it's because of Hannah's hangover or if it's because she feels Caroline crossed the line after having promised that she would make sure nothing got too out of control.

She's relieved when they stop by Michael's parents' home to pick up Abbie so that Abbie's chatter fills the quiet spaces in the car.

"And grandma brought us to that gross restaurant that only serves seafood. But grandpa got me some pizza for later. From Giovanni's. Fancy pizza." She giggles as Caroline pulls up to the curb to the Dalton's apartment building. "I have to pee," she announces before she unbuckles herself and runs into the building, leaving her bags in the backseat.

Hannah and Caroline both watch her go before exchanging questioning looks.

While Hannah gets out and goes to the back of the car to take her own suitcase, Caroline gets out to gather up Caroline's things.

"Thanks. For bringing me this weekend and," Hannah clears her throat. "Just, everything."

Caroline shuts the door to her car and steps up next to Hannah on the sidewalk, giving her an easy smile. "I'm just glad you had a good time. You *did* have a good time, right?"

The nerves in her stomach as she asks the question surprise her, but really – she is waiting for the moment when Hannah tells her off for everything she'd said.

"I did," is all Hannah says. "I should probably go up, though, because Abbie's going to realize very shortly that the door is locked."

"Right." Caroline nods, watching Hannah closely. Maybe she *doesn't* remember the night before?

She offers Abbie's backpack and duffel bag to Hannah. And as Hannah takes it from her, their fingers brush and as always, Caroline *feels* it. Nothing new, there.

What's new is Hannah's awkward, embarrassed laugh as she tugs the bags away quickly. Her movements are jerkier than normal and she doesn't meet Caroline's eyes as she quickly makes her way inside.

Yeah.
She definitely remembers.

She's carving pumpkins in her kitchen with Abbie the following week after school when Abbie turns to her and asks, "Do you think you can sleep over at my house on Halloween, after you come trick or treating with us? That would be fun, right?"

Caroline's focus on her jack-o'-lantern slips minutely as she shoots Abbie a teasing glance. Abbie's pumpkin is already done, the stenciled ghost carved out and waiting to be lit up, while Caroline is still attentively working on her own; it's really the one craft she actually enjoys doing.

"Where am I going to sleep, huh? I've seen your room, and your twin bed wasn't made for the two of us."

Abbie lets out a long suffering sigh as if Caroline is being *such a dumb adult*. "In mom's room, obviously. She has a bigger bed."

Caroline's mind betrays her by immediately taking her back to sharing a bed with Hannah, her throat running dry at the memory. She kind of still can't believe she'd essentially had in person phone sex with Hannah, because it sounds extremely unlike what she ever would intend to do in the sober light of day.

Mostly because it's impossible to not think about that exchange when she's lying in bed at night.

The sound of Hannah's voice, the timbre of it, sending shivers down her spine. It's so wrong – *so wrong* – but the number of orgasms that start with a fantasy of what could have happened that night if Hannah wanted *her* is embarrassing to say the least and she tries not to think about it.

She clears her throat after nearly stabbing herself with one of the pumpkin carving tools. "Sorry, but I think we should stick to our own beds." And not just for Caroline's sake, either.

But because in the three times that she's seen Hannah since, their interactions are still a bit... off. Nothing is said about it, but she has certainly noticed that Hannah hasn't really touched her since. That she lingers a bit less after dinner.

It's a *good* thing, she always reminds herself, because she should keep more distance. But, well, she also wishes Hannah didn't feel like she had to put it between them.

Abbie huffs back in her seat, a frown on her face before she lights up again a second later. “Okay, if you can’t sleep over, will you come to my school’s Halloween party? My mom is helping bake stuff for it and – and we’re all dressing up in costume! And since you love Halloween, you’ll have fun, too, right? Pretty please?”

Big blue eyes look at her so hopefully, she just can’t say no.

“I’ll be there.”

“Yes!” Abbie’s shout is triumphant as she scoots forward in her chair in a flash, hitting her pumpkin by accident so it rolls onto its side. “You promise?”

“Well, I *do* love Halloween.” Caroline offers her pinky, covered in pumpkin guts and all. Abbie links hers and then giggles when their fingers slide against one another.

Caroline isn’t lying – Halloween is her favorite holiday. It’s the only one she puts decorations up around her condo for, anyway. Abbie had helped this year, delightfully putting up the fake spiderwebbing around her doorway.

She has *plans* for the day. After spending likely all morning, if not more, in a meeting, she’d head home to change into her Dana Scully costume, attend Abbie’s Halloween party, and then trick or treat with Hannah, Abbie, and her nieces and nephews. Free candy was Caroline’s idea of a good time and ever since she had kids to take trick or treating and swipe that candy from, she’d been an active participant.

She definitely doesn’t expect to spend the majority of her day in the Emergency Room.

It all starts with her running late to the office – which is possibly the worst day it can happen, given that it’s not just any Friday; it’s the final mediation between Chanelle Laurens and her husband before they’re going to have to go to court.

It’s a *big* day for her, as Chanelle is the firm’s biggest client to date and Caroline has taken point on everything for the last seven months

As soon as she’d returned home from Hangout Weekend, the Laurens divorce had started to come under fire. It didn’t give her much downtime at all, a lot of late nights and some weekend office hours, needing to ensure

that she's ready to go up against the shark of a lawyer that Chanelle's husband has been working with.

But Caroline's a fucking bigger shark and she just has to prove it.

No time to stop for coffee or even to make herself some – she's running *that* late – she only manages a glance at her phone as she enters the building.

Hannah – 8:31am

*its abbie! Moms dropping me off at school
but I wanted to check that youre coming to
my class Halloween party after school right?*

Caroline – 8:33am

*I'd be there even if you weren't going to
let me steal your milky ways after trick or
treat later.*

Not thirty seconds later is Chanelle essentially on top of her, frosty and commanding, her typical traits even more exacerbated by the anxiety of the day.

Caroline tucks away any thoughts about Hannah or Abbie or Halloween as she gets to work calming Chanelle – it's showtime.

On the plus side, the information Caroline had private investigators spend months working to dig up on Shawn Barclay – Chanelle's NFL playing husband – comes to light and proves very useful. Mostly in that his lawyers know that when they go to court, they aren't going to get close to what he's demanding. That's not even before she comes forward with the medical records she'd finally gotten released from ex-girlfriends of Barclay's that corroborate Chanelle's own abuse records, cementing his history.

And the clincher – his own mistress discussing their proclivities. Sometimes, people really did have the ability to be swayed when given what they believed to be a sympathetic shoulder.

“I'll leave you with the deal my client originally offered in terms of financial supports, asset division, and custody. You might find, now, that it's more than fair.”

On the negative side, Shawn is over two hundred pounds of pure muscle and it's in that moment, as Caroline leans forward to reach into her briefcase, he literally flips the mahogany table.

Chaos erupts in the room and she doesn't have time to scramble back from the impact, only able to raise her arm up to protect her face in the seconds she *does* have.

It's not nearly enough, and her face feels like it's exploding as she blinks up at the ceiling in a daze, the shouting in the room muffled to her ears. It's all she remembers before she's at the hospital.

A sprained wrist and a nasal fracture, accompanied by the physical manifestation of some pretty awful facial bruising, and four hours later, Caroline is sprawled out on her couch. Still wearing the same suit she'd worn all day, she wakes up from a nap, her head still pounding with the world's worst headache.

She should change, she thinks dimly, since her blood – broken noses really *do* bleed like a bitch – is soaked into her shirt, plus it smells like... hospital.

But they'd given her Vicodin before she'd been discharged and Caroline has never done well with pain meds. Namely, they make her head feel fuzzy and the world move a little slower. Chanelle had dispatched one of her personal drivers to take Caroline home, in an unexpected but appreciated twist, and once the driver had helped Caroline up to her door, she'd promptly dropped onto her couch and completely passed out.

She blinks blearily when she hears a pounding on her door – that must have been what woke her up in the first place.

Releasing a deep sigh, she goes to push herself up. Only to groan, loudly, and fall back into the couch. God *damn*, she is sore all over and feels a bit nauseous in addition to the pain and the cloudiness in her head.

She freezes when her apartment door opens, because who the hell –

“Caroline? Your door is unlocked. How many times do I have to remind you to lock your door even if you're home?” It's Hannah, only she doesn't sound like Hannah *usually* sounds. She thinks if she didn't feel like her head was spinning, she'd easily be able to put her finger on whatever's off. “Only what I wonder is what in the world you're doing *here* when you

promised Abbie to be at her party today. Do you know how upset she was all afternoon?”

It’s anger, she realizes. Quite possibly the *most* anger she’s ever heard in Hannah’s tone, directed at her.

Oh, *fuck*. She flicks her eyes to the clock under the television, and – yes, she had entirely missed Abbie’s party. Remorse twists its way into her stomach, winding itself around everything else.

Honestly, in the utter calamity of the afternoon – being rushed to the hospital, dealing with the police that had then *met* her at the hospital to discuss the charges her firm was bringing against Shawn, before being treated and passing out at home – anything else had slipped her mind.

Hannah’s voice gets closer as she can hear her storm down the hall. “You told Abbie so many times that you’d be there and I know you had a big meeting today, but you shouldn’t have promised. She already has one adult who never keeps his promises; you can’t *do* that to her. And this is just what I was afraid of! As soon as you knew –”

Hannah turns the corner into the living room, abruptly cutting herself off and not finishing that thought as her eyes land on Caroline, who sits up, attempting to gear up to push herself up to stand.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to leave Abbie hanging, I swear, I just...” She trails off, helplessly, and on top of the Vicodin-induced dazed feeling she can’t quite completely get rid of and the soreness and exhaustion, it’s guilt she’s completely wracked with but feels helpless in terms of how to excuse it.

Hannah’s cheeks are flushed, either from the chill outside or the anger that had carried her here – or both. But her gray eyes widen as she takes Caroline in, her hands flying to cover her mouth in shock.

“What happened to you?!” From pissed off to panicked in only moments, Hannah’s tone is higher pitched than she’s ever heard it.

Caroline knows she looks pretty horrific; she’d seen the bruises in the mirror at the hospital and now that it’s been a few hours for them to really set in, she imagines they’re even worse.

“I –”

She can’t get another word out before Hannah drops her bag thoughtlessly to the floor and she rushes forward, falling onto her knees in front of Caroline. Her hands come up, but pause just before they actually touch Caroline, as if she’s afraid she’ll hurt her even more.

Caroline is more than positive Hannah's touch would feel like heaven right now. Especially because she hasn't really felt it in weeks. Hannah is so tactile that it hasn't been until Hannah completely limited their contact after the trip that she realized how much she's gotten used to those casual touches.

She's proven exactly right when Hannah's hands come up to cup her jaw moments later. The touch is so light and tender, it makes Caroline feel precious in a way she's certain no woman before her has ever even attempted.

Her eyes fall closed with the relief.

"I'm – your face, your perfect face," Hannah murmurs, "All of these bruises. And all of this *blood*." Her eyes trail to Caroline's shirt before she shifts up closer, her face only inches away from Caroline's, her hands soft and steady.

She sighs into the hold, leaning into the comfort she desperately wants to take and hadn't realized how much she'd needed. That comfort, mixed with Hannah's closeness – her warmth and her scent – makes her feel like she is more than ready to lean back and go into the drifting nap she'd been in.

The urgency in Hannah's voice cuts through that. "God, baby, what happened? Who did this to you? Were you *mugged*? We need to call the police. No, we need to get you to a hospital, first. Hospital and then the police." She strokes her fingers lightly over Caroline's cheeks. "It's going to be okay. You're going to be okay."

The words come out in a whisper as Caroline forces her heavy eyelids to open. "I already went." She lifts her wrist which has a cozy new home for a couple of weeks in a brace. "My meeting went well. Well enough that her husband threw furniture at me, anyway, and that's why I wasn't there. I should have called, but I wasn't, I'm not..." She gestures vaguely to her head before pointing toward the prescription bottle on the table that has one more pill in it. "How's Abbie?"

She'll figure something out to make it up to her, she nods to herself, when she's truly thinking clearly. Tomorrow. And when she figures out where her phone is, she'll call her.

Hannah frowns deeply, her hands not moving from Caroline's face. "Abbie – she was upset, but these are extenuating circumstances. I should have known you would have a good reason for not coming," she mutters,

seemingly to herself. “She’s getting ready for trick or treat with Norah now. I’m sure she’ll be fine after the excitement tonight.”

Caroline frowns, still feeling that guilt low in her stomach, even as her eyes close again of their own volition.

“You should go get ready with her. I don’t think I’m up to it tonight.”

Hannah doesn’t say anything for several beats and Caroline forces her eyes to open again. In order to see the incredulous look Hannah is giving her. “If you think for one single second that I’m leaving you alone like this, you’re insane.”

It makes her feel cared for. In ways Caroline has rarely felt ever since being a kid – neither of her parents were much for overly coddling her or her brothers; she supposed having four kids did that to you. A warm feeling settled in her stomach, washing away much of the ugliness of her day.

So she has to push the words out, “No, you really don’t have to. I don’t want Abbie to be –”

“It’s trick or treat. Abbie’s going to go bananas for it no matter if I’m there or not, especially since she’s with your niece.”

“I’m not going to be good company. I’m...” She gestures at her head again, slumping further into Hannah’s touch. “So tired.”

“I think that’s allowed. I’ll be around for a while anyway. Just in case.” Hannah is frowning at her, anxiety written all over her face as her eyes slowly roam over Caroline’s features. She isn’t sure anyone has looked this closely at her before in her life.

She likes it, even if it is nerve-wracking. Like Hannah can see everything she is. And she forgets for a few long seconds why she doesn’t really want Hannah to be able to see *everything*.

Hannah walks with her to her bedroom and settles Caroline on the bed, going through her draws and pulling out a large, worn Suffolk Law sweatshirt and a pair of cotton shorts. And then she *does* stay.

Caroline isn’t sure how long, because she falls asleep almost as soon as she crawls under the blankets.

She wakes up to a letter on the pillow next to hers –

Call me if you need ANYTHING. Abbie’s being taken care of tomorrow, you just rest. Xxx

Hannah's the one who calls her that night, though.

It's after one in the morning and she's annoyingly awake because she'd just woken up from her seven hour "nap" through the evening. She'd shot a text to Hannah to thank her for staying – and cleaning, fixing Caroline meals for today *and* tomorrow, and to apologize again for Abbie.

She's in a much clearer mindset, now, which she prefers even if it comes with slightly more pain.

Caroline stares at her phone, momentarily convinced she's still not seeing things clearly because... why is Hannah calling her after midnight?

"I'm sorry if I woke you up with my text," she says as she answers, already feeling a little bad about it, but it's the only conclusion that makes sense to her.

"You didn't." Hannah informs her, moving around in what Caroline imagines is her bed, as she can hear blankets rustling. Before she lets out a heavy sigh. "I can't stop thinking about... seeing you today. Like that. Did you take the Advil I left for you?"

Caroline doesn't bother beating back a smile as she settles back against her pillows. "I did. Thanks."

Hannah's silent for a few seconds, just breathing, before she confesses in a voice much harder than her normal tone, "I'm so *fucking* angry." Hearing Hannah swear actually makes Caroline startle because it's just so... not Hannah.

"At me?" Because, sure, earlier was a little fuzzy in her mind, but she seems to remember Hannah granted her day as extenuating circumstances. "I'll talk to Abbie, I –"

"No," Hannah swiftly cuts her off, voice immediately soft again. "Not at you. At the man who – who *hit you*. I just, I've tried to sleep after wrangling Abbie to bed, but I just keep picturing it. I don't know if I've ever felt so mad in my entire life and I'm..." She heaves a sigh, and if Caroline could guess, she is running her hand through her hair in that frustrated motion. "He better not get away with it."

Caroline isn't going to tell her that this man is a professional athlete in the NFL. Not only because of confidentiality, but because let's be honest; men in sports get away with literal murder. Knocking someone out isn't going to merit much.

And while she feels cared for, she doesn't like being the cause of this strain in Hannah's voice. So she injects some deliberate lightness into her

tone. “Well, he didn’t actually *hit* me; he flipped a table. It’s sort of funny. Or, it will be, when I can blow my nose again.”

“It won’t be funny, ever.” Hannah’s voice is quiet and solemn.

“Hey, my career is going to take off from this. That’s one bright side.” And this time, she isn’t kidding. This case was already – clearly – swinging into her favor. Now? She’s going to have Barclay and his lawyers in the palm of her hand.

Hannah just hums, still clearly distracted.

“All right. Tell me about Abbie’s night. Was her Christina Tosi costume a hit?”

Hannah groans, but this time she can already hear how much more lighthearted it is. “As predicted, no one knew who she was. She got some people thinking she was Rachael Ray, which she was pretty grumbly about when I picked her up.”

“Getting hit with that E.V.O.O.” She can’t help but laugh, perfectly imagining the offended look on Abbie’s face.

“If only you had been able to trick or treat with her, because I can assure you that no one would have identified you, either. Per usual, you and Ab would have been two peas in a pod.” Hannah teases back and it sounds like she’s shifting back against her pillows, now. The same way Caroline is.

Her jaw drops in offense. “People *know* Dana Scully! It’s not my fault you’re weird and never watched *The X Files* when you were younger.”

“Suuuure, but I would definitely hedge my bets that most people would be confused at first about who you were.”

“Plebeians, all of you.” She deliberately sniffs, before sucking in a breath at the pain. *Ow*.

“I’m sure *The X Files* is a great show.” Hannah says in a deliberately placating tone, that’s laced with just enough laughter, Caroline can’t take an affront. “Maybe we can watch it.”

“Name the time and place.”

“Now?” Hannah coughs. “I just – I’m too keyed up to sleep. But if you’re tired – actually, you should probably get some more rest.”

Caroline is already reaching for her remote. “No way.”

They watch the pilot episode, Hannah’s commentary soft in her ear the entire time.

“Okay. She’s pretty. I can see why you’d want to be her for Halloween.” Hannah comments as Scully’s first scene is over.

“Beautiful *and* brilliant,” she corrects, comfortably settling her phone on speaker on the pillow next to her.

“Like you have to be in costume to accomplish that.” Hannah scoffs before she draws in a breath and clears her throat. “Do, um, we get to see the aliens?”

Caroline is blinking still, a pleased smile forming on her face at Hannah’s compliment. “I’m not spoiling you.”

It’s after two when she’s settled back under the blankets, her phone warm against her ear. “You see? It’s good.”

Hannah’s voice is raspy and sleepy in her ear. “It is. You’re right.” She yawns, snuggling down into the blankets with a quiet sigh. “Thank you for talking to me tonight. You’re the one who was injured and you’re calming me down in the middle of the night.”

Caroline lays down, too. “Thanks for caring. I promise not to be hit in the face again.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Hannah laughs softly, tiredly. “Goodnight, Caroline.”

“Goodnight Hannah.”

The afternoon is fairly hazy for her when she thinks about it, but there’s something that stands out to her after they hang up the phone.

“This is just what I was afraid of! As soon as you knew –”

It sticks in her mind, a new mystery. What was Hannah afraid of? And what in the world does she think Caroline knows?

xiii

That phone call is the beginning of a new routine for them.

Every night around ten, when Hannah usually goes to bed, Caroline gets a text. And if she's prompt enough – not in the shower or caught up in work – and texts back, she gets a phone call.

It's usually pretty brief, with Hannah's voice soft and tired.

"How are you? Do you feel okay?" is always what comes out of her mouth first, even if Caroline has *seen* her earlier that day.

And she'll roll her eyes even as she feels so freaking cared for, as she confirms. "I'm perfectly fine. Better with makeup now than I've ever been in my life."

When Hannah laughs, Caroline gasps. "I knew it would be funny to you at some point."

The laughter immediately indignantly cuts off. "I – no," she protests, weakly.

It's a short conversation later – maybe ten minutes, maybe twenty – before Hannah yawns widely and murmurs. "Goodnight, Caroline."

She loves it, going to bed with Hannah's voice in her ear. The only thing she can do to exert any control over herself, really, is not let herself *wait* for when ten o'clock rolls around. She forces herself to keep in her normal routines; if she has work to finish, she doesn't let herself take a break. But... it's more often than not that she rushes to answer.

She doesn't get the answer to what Hannah meant when she'd come storming in, about what she was afraid of. She tries to ask a few days after the whole incident, but Hannah brushes it off with a nervous titter. "It – nothing. I don't even know."

It doesn't sound natural at all, but rather, like she very much doesn't want to talk about it. So Caroline drops it, even though it remains on her mind. She's never done very well with unanswered questions.

She finally gets the answer on her birthday.

Honestly, it sneaks up on her entirely because work is *insanely* busy. The Laurens/Barclay divorce is careening forward now, her bosses are pleased, and she's already gotten a few calls from other firms around the northeast, scouting her out. She's been asked to do a presentation at the annual conference for Family Law in Manhattan in December, too.

This is *it*. It's like her career has been on the precipice for the last few years and things have finally hit the tipping point.

It's thrilling, even if it is the busiest she's ever been.

Her birthday plans this year consist of being in the office until likely at least nine. She's contemplating what to order for food – it's only four forty-five, but she'd worked through lunch – when her office phone rings. “Parker.”

“Dalton.” Hannah's voice says back, her tone mockingly serious.

Caroline feels a smile tug at her lips as she rolls her eyes. “Don't mock my business voice. You're the one who called my work phone.” It's only as she says the words that she actually *realizes* it. She frowns, concern threading through her. “Why *did* you call my work phone? Everything okay?”

Hannah hums under her breath in fake-thought. “Is everything okay... is *everything* okay... Abbie, do you think everything is okay?”

“No!” Abbie's voice comes in loud and clear, but it's a chipper sound, much like Hannah's voice is light.

Caroline leans back in her desk chair, a smile on her lips in spite of her confusion. “All right, I'll bite. What's going on?”

“It's your birthday and you didn't tell us!” Abbie shouts. “And you have to come over. Mom's making you dinner.”

Caroline sighs. “Busted.”

“You heard the young lady,” Hannah informs her and Caroline can picture the soft smile on her face. “Come over soon. You aren't allowed to work this late on your birthday.”

“I thought you were going to be busy getting ready for the bake sale tomorrow?” She hedges in, knowing that Hannah's been baking up a storm for the last day and a half in preparation for Abbie's school's Veteran's Day holiday themed bake sale.

“I think I can take a break for this.” Hannah's voice is dry. “No arguments.”

She's never left work early when she has *this* much to do. Her work schedule is her biggest contributor to failed relationships and that's not much of a secret to anyone in her life.

But she can't bear to even think about the disappointed look on either Hannah or Abbie's faces if she says no. And she doesn't want to.

Abbie's arms are thrown around her waist as soon as she steps inside their apartment. "Happy birthday!"

"Abbie!" Hannah's admonishment comes only seconds later, as she appears at the end of the hall, hurrying toward them. "Gentle!"

But Caroline gives Abbie a reassuring smile when Abbie immediately lets go and backs up a step, bit blue eyes looking up at her with worry written all over her face. "Sorry."

It's been like this since Halloween, though Abbie hasn't generally needed any reminders from Hannah to be gentle when she interacts with Caroline. Because Abbie – on first sight – had been very sweetly concerned about touching her and if she'd hurt her.

"I'm totally fine. No need for gentle hugs, unless you're coming for my face." She crosses her eyes at Abbie, which works to wipe off the concerned look there. But even her bruises are fading quickly, mostly gone now. The little cut along her cheek is healing nicely and the swelling in her nose is down so much that Caroline finally believes that there won't be any lasting disfigurement.

Abbie laughs and shakes her head as Hannah steps up behind her. She leans in and narrows her eyes as she stares at Caroline's face. And she thinks there's some relief in Hannah's eyes, too, as she notes with a murmur, "Almost back to normal."

Caroline swallows hard against the immediate feelings of *want* inside of her that stir as soon as Hannah is that close. She clears her throat. "Soon I'm going to have to start wearing a mask to fit in at the clown show again." She snaps her fingers in disappointment, loving Abbie's laugh and Hannah's reluctant smile of amusement.

They have buffalo chicken macaroni and cheese – "It's the tastiest thing I could come up with on last moment's notice." Hannah arches a challenging eyebrow at her.

“It’s perfect.” And she means it – before Abbie helps Hannah clear dinner, both of them making her stay where she is.

Before Abbie brings out a plate of frosted sugar cookies, walking slowly so that she doesn’t stumble. Hannah’s hands are resting on her shoulders and they approach her while singing *Happy Birthday*, a single candle sticking out of the cookie at the top.

Dark eyes are glued on the dessert as her mind immediately flashes back to the moment she’d met Hannah, that holiday party at Wilkens & Granger. With a plateful of these cookies in hand when Hannah had approached her. She’s been pretty convinced that there is no way their meeting was as impressed on Hannah’s mind as it is on hers.

“I love these.” She quirks her head to the side, looking up at Hannah.

Gray eyes meet her own, inscrutable, even as her voice is soft. “I know.”

“Blow out the candle!” Abbie urges, pushing the plate toward her.

Abbie gives her a homemade card. It has hand drawn designs of pillow forts and baked goods and a duck boat, many of their adventures together of the past months, while the inside is inscribed with a note.

Happy birthday, Caroline!!!

Thanks for hanging out with me and taking me places and always answering my questions and never rolling your eyes or anything. You’re my favorite person and I love you.

Caroline loves kids. She’s always wanted kids. But she’s never had her heart so completely melted by one in her life.

By the time seven o’clock rolls around, Hannah has managed to corral Abbie into taking a shower and start winding down for the night.

Abbie uses one last ditch effort to look between them hopefully. “But we could all watch a movie instead? I don’t have school tomorrow, it’s a holiday!”

“But we have your bake sale.” Hannah reminds her. “And we have to be there bright and early to set up the table.”

When Abbie looks like she’s about to argue again, Caroline shakes her head. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to head back to the office. I still have a ton of work to do tonight. We can do a movie next week.”

They both watch in amusement as Abbie makes a dramatic production of grabbing her towels before she heads into the bathroom. Only then does she to look at Hannah, still seated across from her at the kitchen table.

Hannah's already watching her with a frown. "Do you really have to go back to work? You've been working late for over a week. You didn't even take any time off with the... accident."

Caroline sighs. "Yeah... I mean, I should. I have a few deadlines I need to meet." But she doesn't stand up. Just wanting another minute here, with Hannah, in the quiet kitchen.

Even though she *shouldn't* but, whatever. It's her birthday.

Hannah sips at her water, eyes narrowing slightly as she looks at Caroline over the rim of her cup. "Why didn't you tell me it was your birthday?"

"How did you find out?" She counters.

Which Hannah rolls her eyes at. "Dodger. But *because* it's your birthday, I'll tell you. Your mom called and was asking if we wanted to have Thanksgiving with your family in a few weeks. She slipped it into conversation. And that you planned on working all day long."

Caroline rolls her eyes even as she smiles through her exasperation. "That rat."

Hannah gently kicks Caroline's calf with her socked foot, staring at Caroline intently. Waiting for an answer.

Caroline takes a second to indulge – it's her *birthday* – in looking at Hannah. Blonde hair is tousled and loose, falling down past her shoulders. It stands out in bright contrast against her black sweater and looks so incredibly soft. As it always does.

With a deep breath, admits defeat. "My birthday is the beginning of the holiday season," she mumbles with a grimace.

"You don't like the holidays?" Hannah asks after a few seconds, incredulity written all over her voice. "How did I not know this? And *why*?"

"Because I sound like a crazy person whenever I talk about it." She deadpans, but well – she's also serious. The one time she'd rambled about her feelings toward the upcoming season to an ex, she'd been on the receiving end of a *you're being dramatic* look that she did not appreciate.

"Try me."

Caroline presses her lips together, keeping in the words for just one second. But Hannah continues to give her a steady, encouraging look and then it's all over.

"It's the day before Veteran's Day, right?" She arches an eyebrow, leaning forward in her chair as Hannah nods in amusement. "Places are

already playing Christmas music, Christmas candy is all over the shelves, and it's not even Thanksgiving! And speaking of, Thanksgiving starts with all of the forced togetherness. Then comes the spending a ton of money on people for things most people don't even *really* want. Plus! The hours putting up decorations even though they're only really *good* for one day?"

She turns to look at Hannah, sitting up straight, ready to make her final point. "And the holidays also don't like *me*. Every serious relationship I've ever had – granted, there are only three of them – have all ended around the holidays, somehow. It's mutual," she ends her rant, huffing out a breath, feeling a kernel of embarrassment in her stomach.

But Hannah is only regarding her with a look of pure affection, her eyes sparkling with it as she takes a sip of her water again. "I see."

"You *will* see," she narrows her eyes playfully, still meaning her words. "Just wait, the closer we get, *something* is going to happen."

"I bet this year it won't be so bad. Deal?" Hannah sets her glass on the table, offering Caroline her hand.

She doesn't hesitate to take the bet, sliding her hand against Hannah's, shaking on it. She only realizes a moment later that she's offered the hand that's in the brace. Unfortunate for her, since she doesn't get to feel Hannah's actual hand on hers. Hannah doesn't immediately release her, though, instead she turns Caroline's hand in her grasp, tracing her fingers up and down the brace. "Only a week and a half left?"

"Uh, yeah. Next Friday's the lucky day." Caroline has to actively remind herself that she can't actually feel Hannah's light touch on her skin. *Mayday*. She shivers, anyway and tugs her arm back into her lap. "Unfortunately, I really do have to go get some work done."

"Robyn is coming over around eight to help finish up my baking," Hannah concedes, standing with her and walking her to the door.

As she slips on her jacket, Hannah watches her from where she's leaning against the opposite wall. "I wish I had something for you."

"You've done more than enough, seriously. Don't even think about it."

Hannah ignores her, sheer contemplation written all over her face. "When I was younger, my mom used to give me one thing on my birthday. Anything that was within her power to give me, I could have it. I'm not *prepared* for your birthday this year," Hannah pauses to give her a *look*. "But seriously. Whatever you want, within my power, is yours."

Hannah looks so earnest as she offers, Caroline's heart skips a beat. If only that were really true, she thinks, a wistful sigh escaping her. "I'll have to think –"

She cuts herself off, thinking about the words Hannah had said to her on Halloween. The ones that loop in Caroline's mind during her limited downtime. The ones that she just can't *completely* drop.

"This is just what I was afraid of! As soon as you knew –"

"What about the answer to a question?" She arches her eyebrow, her hands stalling on the zipper of her jacket.

Hannah's eyebrows crinkle in confusion in that ridiculously cute way. "A question?"

Caroline shrugs, but her gaze is trained to Hannah's face.

"On Halloween, you said that my not showing up to Abbie's party was *what you were afraid of* and that as soon as I *knew*... but you didn't finish."

She makes herself stop speaking, feeling uncharacteristically sheepish, as Hannah doesn't say anything. Caroline clears her throat. "I mean, maybe it's silly, but I..."

She trails off when she actually looks at Hannah. Whose hands are in front of her now, and she's toying with her fingers.

Oh.

As she stares at Hannah steadfastly looking anywhere but her, cheeks bright red, she can clearly see that – no. It wasn't silly.

Her stomach twists unpleasantly, frowning at the idea that there really *is* something that Hannah thinks has somehow come between them.

Caroline leans forward, trying to catch Hannah's gaze. And she keeps the nerves out of her voice, keeping her tone as low and soothing as she can, trying to coax out the answer. "What is it that you think I know? What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing. It was just – I was angry and my mind was going in a hundred different directions and that just slipped out." Hannah lies. It's so clearly a lie that Caroline feels more than offended.

She narrows her eyes, stepping closer as she once again tries to duck her head to catch Hannah's eyes. "It's obviously not nothing."

"Please don't push this." Hannah finally meets her gaze, her expression pleading, and big gray eyes imploring. "You... you *know*," there's a desperation in her tone. "And I just want it to stay in the box it's in

because as soon as we talk about it, as soon as the box is open – it'll be different.”

But the sharp confusion she feels won't let her drop it. She shakes her head, tossing her hands in the air. “*What* will be different? What do you think I know, because I have no idea what you're talking about!”

“Caroline,” Hannah's never sounded more exasperated, shaking her head as she bites her lip.

She barrels on, her teeth sinking deeper into this. “And what *box* is better left closed? What's better left unsaid?” She hates feeling desperate, it's not something she often feels. But she *is* desperate to know the answer.

In a way, it's what makes her good at her job. This obsessive need to get to the bottom of everything, unable to let something go. On the other hand, it has also been a detriment to her personal life.

Before she can say anything else, Hannah's mouth is on hers.

Just like that, time slows down.

Both of Hannah's hands are cradling her jaw, her lips soft and searching against Caroline's, in spite of the rushed beginning of the kiss.

Caroline's mind is *reeling*, confused beyond belief, but it doesn't matter. All she can feel is Hannah's mouth against hers. All she can smell is Hannah's scent all around them, and she slides one arm around Hannah's waist and slides the other into her hair.

God. Just as soft as it's looked all night.

Just like her lips are. As soft as Caroline has always thought they'd be. One of Hannah's thumbs is stroking her jaw in circles, and she brushes her lips over Caroline's again.

Caroline groans deep in her throat and she pushes forward, until Hannah's back hits the wall. She slides the hand she has in her hair down until she's cupping the back of her neck and she coaxes soft, pink lips with her tongue.

Hannah whimpers, lips parting, and Caroline's thoughts are racing. *How? And what? And is this real?*

But then Hannah's fingers trail down her neck, burning the path they leave behind, and she forgets to care. She just knows she wants more of it.

She grips Hannah's hip as best she can with her hand, cursing her stupid *brace*, rolling her own hips against Hannah and pressing her more firmly against the wall. She can feel Hannah's sharp intake of breath and her gasp makes Caroline weak in the knees.

Hannah's fingers slide to her shoulders, digging in, and Caroline can feel the strength of them from over her coat.

Caroline thinks she hears a knocking sound, but it's muffled under the pounding of her heart in her ears, under the thrum of arousal surging through her body.

But then it happens again, louder, and she realizes – someone is *actually* knocking on the door, two feet to the left.

Hannah freezes, her hands on Caroline's shoulders, and she's so close to her that she can feel the tension crawl through her body as it happens.

Even so, she doesn't move. She stays there, just breathing the same air while her head is spinning. Hannah doesn't shove her away, like she did from their almost kiss in August. Instead, she slumps against the wall, her hands sliding slowly from Caroline's shoulders and she misses the warmth of them.

"Hannah?" Robyn's voice sounds from the other side of the door, before she murmurs something they can't hear and two seconds later, Hannah's phone buzzes where it lays forgotten on the kitchen table.

Caroline reluctantly lets her hands drop, staring at Hannah. Cheeks flushed, lips bruised from her own, and she just looks so *good*. Her own breathing is heavy and all she wants to do is kiss her again.

Hannah tilts her head back, closing her eyes tightly. "I guess it's out of the box."

Caroline opens her mouth but doesn't know what to say. Everything she felt like she knew is tossed upside down and her heart is still beating so hard in her chest.

Robyn knocks again. "If you're going to show up with three batches of my mom's brownie recipe to that bake sale tomorrow, we have to start them soon!"

Gray eyes search her own before Hannah seems to find her voice. It's soft as she says, "I have to get that."

She nods, licking her lips as she steps back. And feels a flash of heat dart through her when Hannah's eyes track the motion. "Right."

Caroline can't go back to work when she leaves.

All she thinks about is the way Hannah's lips looked as she'd said goodbye – still swollen and so pink and Caroline wants more than anything to kiss her again.

Instead, she gets a drink with Kris and doesn't know if she should feel more elated or confused. Her lips curl into a smile as they still tingle from her kiss. No. She definitely feels more elated.

Hannah is attracted to her, and *that* is the best birthday gift she's ever received.

xiv

A year ago, the last place Caroline would have expected herself to visit on Veteran's Day is a holiday themed bake sale in an elementary school.

But Hannah Dalton *kissed* her. Hannah had kissed her and then not called or texted her, as she'd taken to doing every night, and hadn't answered her message this morning, either.

It's all she can think about.

The decorations are really the last thing on her mind as she enters the gymnasium with her mom and dad in tow. They'd had lunch together – a birthday tradition – before mentioning that they were going to support Norah's homeroom at the bake sale.

They'd both given looks of surprise when she'd jumped at the chance to go with them, but she can't help it.

Today, she's on a mission.

Today, the Thanksgiving turkeys and cornucopia replicas don't register. The Christmas themed streamers that usually would make her want to grimace aren't even a blip on her radar.

No, today she only has eyes for Hannah.

Her parents split off from her when they spot her brother and she agrees to meet them when she's done, barely paying attention as she catches a glimpse of Hannah.

Her stride pauses when she sees her across the room. The table she's standing behind with another woman and a man – two other PTA parents, she assumes – is still half full with baked goods that look delicious.

But Hannah looks even more delicious. Her hair is up in a neat chignon and she's wearing a knit sweater and leggings, a bright smile on her face as she laughs along to something the man says.

As she approaches, her steps slow and her mind, which had been so full of racing thoughts last night, empties. She's never felt so *tied up* over one kiss, but she can't let this one go so easily.

Hannah freezes when she sees her, hands hovering over the money box she'd been about to open. The gorgeous laughing smile on her face freezes. "Caroline. Hi."

“Hi.” It feels so stupid falling from her lips, especially after she’d spent the previous night with a thousand questions on her mind. “Stopped by with my parents,” she gestures to where her mom and dad are, over at the booth that Jared helped build for Norah’s class. “After lunch.”

But she holds Hannah’s gaze and doesn’t let it drop for a moment, feeling the energy pulse between them and she knows that Hannah *knows* she’s here for more than that.

Hannah’s mouth opens and then closes. Then opens again after a moment. “Can I get you something?”

Her gaze doesn’t leave Hannah, though. It’s impossible, when she feels like she’s drinking her in. “Um, sure. I’ll take two brownies and... five minutes of your time?”

Hannah blushes – so faintly, but it’s there – as she shakes her head. “I don’t really –”

“You haven’t left this table since you got here three hours ago!” The PTA dad says. “Go and take a break.” He turns to look at Caroline, an easy smile on his face. “Ever since Hannah showed up last year, she’s blown us all out of the water.”

“I believe it.” And she does. Hannah, prior to her divorce, was *the* PTA mom; she’d once told Caroline that she’d taken on organizing every fundraiser at Abbie’s old school one year.

They leave the gym and are walking in the empty hallway moments later and Caroline feels so on edge, she can’t help herself from saying, “You’re attracted to me.” And she can hear the wonder in her own voice.

Hannah’s steps falter and Caroline can hear her blow out a low breath. “You’re just diving right into it.” She shakes her head but shoots Caroline a half-smile, shaking her head ruefully. “Of course you are.”

Caroline can’t help but dive right into it, because *it* is all she’s thinking about. *Hannah wants me* has been taunting her, circling around her thoughts all night and all morning.

“Why in the world would you assume I knew you wanted me?” It sounds entirely foreign coming from her mouth, her tone incredulous. “As far as I know – knew? – you’re straight? And – Jesus!”

She loses her footing, nearly toppling as Hannah forcefully pushes her into the empty classroom they’re walking by. She only doesn’t fall because of Hannah’s strong guiding hold on her arm as she slams the door closed behind her.

Her eyes are wide, surprise shooting through her, any other words entirely forgotten as she stares up at Hannah. They're so close and she thinks for another second that Hannah is going to kiss her again. She *hopes*. Even if it does cause even more confusion.

"We are in an elementary school!" Hannah's voice falls to an urgent whisper, gray eyes boring into her own from only inches away. "Do you know how many little eyes and ears are around?"

Her heart is hammering with their proximity, the *want* so easily sliding through her even as she arches her eyebrows, incredulously. "Well, I wasn't about to have my way with you in the hallway, Hannah."

She can feel the tremulous breath Hannah releases at her words, the warmth of it washing over her own lips and – holy *shit*, she can see it in the way Hannah looks at her – that wanting look at her words.

It is all real. Last night hadn't been some sort of fluke or figment of her very Hannah-desiring imagination. Hannah wants her, too.

She has to clear her throat in order to be able to speak again, pushing past *that* distracting detail. "I just – you took me by complete surprise and I don't..." She trails off, wondering how to explain that just *everything* feels like it's been flipped on its head.

"For god's sake, Caroline," the exasperation in Hannah's voice makes no sense to her until she says, "The night at the lake house! When we..." She swallows hard, taking in a sharp breath. "In bed together and you talked about... I was –" Hannah's cheeks turn an even darker pink as she abruptly stops speaking, mouth moving, though, as if still searching for the words.

Caroline can recognize it, the way Hannah is trying to find the right words, but is flailing.

But all she can *feel* is shock. She thinks back to that night – the night she'd described just how she'd like to make Hannah come. The night she'd convinced herself was crossing a huge boundary, convinced herself she'd made Hannah uncomfortable.

But she *hadn't*.

Hannah had liked it – and not in some sort of abstract way, but as in she liked the idea of Caroline doing all of it to her.

"I want you, too." The admission, something she'd never expected to say, slips out. Her voice is barely over a whisper, the truth of the words cemented in her tone. "That night, and –" She forces herself to stop, because she just *knows*, by the way she *knows* Hannah. It's not what

Hannah needs to hear right now. Instead, she swallows hard, trying to force her body out of overdrive and just repeats. “I want you.”

She wants Hannah every night. All of the time. In every way.

Hannah’s mouth opens, a trembling breath escaping her with the slightest whimper and *fuck*.

Abruptly, the hand Hannah is clutching her arm with drops away, as if she can’t handle having any contact.

“This is just what –” Hannah wheels away, tunneling her fingers into her hair and messing up the cute updo. “I wanted everything to be normal and...” Once again, searching for the right words, but nothing comes out.

“For someone who wants everything to be normal, you didn’t call me last night.” Caroline keeps her voice calm, because the *last* thing she wants right now is to scare Hannah away from this, not when it feels like there’s some sort of hope at having what she wants.

“Because I knew this would come up!”

“*You* kissed *me*, though.” It comes out as a question more than anything, because she just can’t wrap her mind around this. Of course she has questions, when her presumed straight best friend kisses her on her birthday.

Hannah spins back around, the intensity in her eyes captivating her to the stop. It’s... incredibly hot, if Caroline’s being honest. “I know. I know I did. *I* kissed *you*.”

Her voice breaks, sounding honestly pained and Caroline doesn’t know what to do or say or anything, but it doesn’t seem to matter. Hannah doesn’t seem to be looking for her response.

Because for once, she doesn’t stop speaking when she’s clearly overwhelmed. Maybe she can’t, because the words spill out of her.

“I want everything to be normal. I *need* it!” Hannah’s voice, usually so soft-spoken and measured sounds more out of sorts than Caroline has ever imagined it, especially as she lets out a deep breath, her hands gesturing wildly. “I need this normal that I’ve managed to assemble after my life was a total mess.

“I was stuck in my marriage to Michael and in the year after my mom died, I felt like I had *nothing*. Abbie was all that kept me going. And when his affair with Mindy was thrown in my face at that Christmas party, in front of all of those people, something just snapped. And I knew I had to get out or I was going to fade away entirely. And the first year after I left him, I

had to claw at every bit of strength I had. To pay our bills, to get up and go to work, to try to keep it all together for Abbie, and slowly, things started coming together. Eventually, I woke up, and every single day didn't feel like a struggle."

To hear Hannah speak like this, so raw and open and not tongue-tied is something Caroline isn't used to. And *god*, she admires this woman so much. She wants to tell her so, but Hannah doesn't even pause as she paces around the room, her long legs making the child-size desks look that much smaller in comparison.

"I can't handle this *changing* things because my life is finally something good. I have stability and I'm so close to getting my degree and I feel –" A smile flashes over her face and the sheer freedom in it – something she couldn't have imagined seeing on Hannah's face when Hannah had contacted her all those months ago – steals her breath. "I feel actually in control, for the first time in maybe ever.

"My daughter is happy and I'm happy and my divorce is final and everything is *good*, just the way it is. This is just what I'd always thought of, the years I spent thinking about leaving Michael." She turns, her pacing ceasing as she spins to look at Caroline, nailing her to the spot. "And the last thing I expected was to start thinking about you. Kissing you and touching you..."

Caroline's chest feels so full and heavy, from both the pure emotion on Hannah's face and those words are like a double-hit. She has to lean on one of the desks for balance.

"And it's the last thing I want."

Ouch. She feels it like a direct hit to the heart.

"Because I meant what I said at Girl's Weekend, the first night. I don't know how to date right now, without jeopardizing this stability in my life. In Abbie's life. And I know, logically, that keeping this life, our life, the way it is, is what's right." Hannah slumps, sitting on one of the desks opposite Caroline, the energy that wound her up draining right away. "But then I see you or I talk to you, and all of my very good reasons about why acting on this would be a terrible idea are..."

She runs out of steam, it seems, her hands futilely falling into her lap.

The silence between them is ringing, but Caroline is honestly still processing everything. Because – just – she doesn't think she's ever been more blown away in her entire life than she is in this moment.

Hannah props her elbows on her knees, her head falling into her hands, the sleeves of her sweater falling down to her forearms. “And now, I don’t know where to go from here. I need my life to be mine. I need my problems to be *my problems* and figure out how to handle them in my way, by myself. Independently.” There’s a fire in her voice, a certainty that leaves no room for comment. Before she sighs, her voice falling to a whisper, “But also... the box is open.”

The distress in her voice overpowers anything else for Caroline, and she shifts forward, her hand reaching out to touch Hannah’s. She trails her fingertips over Hannah’s knuckles, feeling the tension vibrating in them.

“Okay,” is what comes out of her mouth.

“Okay?” Hannah repeats, lifting her head. Her hair, previously perfectly done up, is mussed and she’s the picture of confusion.

But her hand flips over, and Caroline thinks it’s a subconscious movement, the way it clings to Caroline’s. Hannah doesn’t seem to realize she’s doing it at all.

“I’m not asking you to marry me, Hannah. I’m not asking for anything you’re not ready to give.” She takes a deep breath, shaking her head. “I can’t promise that everything will be totally *normal* because, yeah, this changes things. But it only has to change... what you’re ready for.”

There’s so much more Caroline wants to say, so much more on her mind. Like that she’s in love with Hannah and wants everything with her and for her. That for the first time since developing these feelings, there is a hope blossoming inside of her that she *knows* can’t be curbed now.

But she also knows that she can’t just unload all of that. It’s far too much, far too soon, and the last thing she wants – ever – is for Hannah to be uncomfortable. Or to run away before this can even *be* something.

The smile that blooms on Hannah’s face is small but mesmerizing.

“Okay,” she repeats again.

The most insane thing to Caroline is that their lives really *don’t* change all that much in the following couple of weeks, even though Caroline feels like everything is different.

Hannah Dalton *wants* her. Hannah is attracted to her, yes, but also... *wants* her. Hannah has felt the *moments* that Caroline has been feeling for

months and she hasn't been alone in this. The entire world is different with that knowledge.

And yet, it's not.

She goes to work every day and she picks up Abbie from school several times a week. Hannah works at the café and continues her classes. There's a routine they've built that Hannah is terrified of changing and Caroline doesn't really want it to change, either, necessarily.

She likes this life.

The changes she *does* experience are these:

The desire she has to kiss Hannah every damn time she sees her is sharper and stronger. Especially now that Hannah gives her a *look* every time she sees Caroline.

She notices the way Hannah watches her mouth when she speaks. She catches gray eyes lingering on her when she's leaving a room, Hannah looking hastily away because she'd been *checking her out*.

The craziest thing for Caroline to realize one night, is that maybe Hannah has always looked at her like that and Caroline just hasn't seen it for what it is. Abbie is laying on her pillow nest on the floor, her attention held rapt by the *Masterchef* episode they're watching, while she and Hannah are on the couch.

Caroline's body is on high alert, as it always is when they're so close. Hannah's warmth just barely touching her, because Hannah – who has always been very free with her touch – is very mindful about it now.

She nearly jumps when she feels Hannah's hand land on her thigh. It's a tentative touch and Caroline sucks in a breath as her heart pounds. She turns to look at Hannah, who is watching her rather than the show.

Her fingers stroke over Caroline's leggings and don't stop moving when Caroline can't control the way her breathing hitches. It's nothing inappropriate, not really, but with the way heat settles between Caroline's thighs, Hannah might as well be kissing and sucking at the sensitive spots on Caroline's neck.

God, she wishes.

Mostly, though, she sees the *look* in Hannah's eyes, a stormy gray, before she gives Caroline a small smile and turns to keep watching the TV.

Caroline spends the entire rest of the episode growing progressively more turned on while thinking back on all of the times Hannah has done

this in the last few months. How long has it been something *more* for her than a friendly touch?

Her hand doesn't stop moving.

The biggest change, really, comes in the form of their nightly phone calls.

First, because now Caroline *never* misses one. There's no reason to try to hold herself back from them or force herself to not look forward to them, and it feels so incredibly good. They also last a lot longer than they did before, the fifteen or twenty minutes before bed becoming an hour, sometimes two.

Hannah seems to have an easier time talking on the phone, too. Maybe it's something about not being able to see Caroline that makes opening up about things easier for her. She doesn't really know, but she also doesn't really care. As long as it's happening.

Their conversations range from silly to serious, and she eats up every little bit of information she gets about Hannah and relishes in the freedom she has in being able to speak more freely.

The first night they talk –

"I'm not ready for people to know about... this." Hannah says as soon as Caroline picks up the phone, her voice quiet but firm. Serious.

It gives Caroline pause. "This?"

"This – whatever we're doing." The nervous energy in Hannah comes through the phone. "Abbie, especially. Your family," she adds on, before she groans, softly. "God, sometimes I wish you could be anyone else."

Well that – stings. Honestly, it *really* hurts and Caroline flinches at the words, sitting on the edge of her bed. She doesn't even really know what to say to that at all.

In her silence, Hannah seems to realize exactly what she says, because she gasps. "No, god, I didn't mean for that to – I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

"How *did* you mean it?" How hurt she is, is evident in her voice.

"I mean... you are such a big part of our lives. Abbie *loves* you." Hannah stresses.

“And I love her.” Honestly, Caroline sees it as a good thing. She just can’t wrap her mind around why it would be a negative.

“I know you do. I know you wouldn’t ever do anything to hurt her, on purpose. But what makes this so terrifying is how easy it could be for something to go wrong. And then where will we be?” The stress in her voice is palpable. “Abbie adores you. She loves your family; she hasn’t stopped talking about how excited she is to spend Thanksgiving with them and about how fun it is to have cousins.”

Caroline wants to tell her that nothing will go wrong, because if it *does*, she doesn’t know what she’ll do. Bouncing back from failed relationships is sort of her thing, at this point, but it wouldn’t be like that with Hannah. It would be impossible for her to just bounce back.

“It will *break* her heart if we don’t... if this doesn’t...” She breaks off with a deep breath, her words resolute. “We can’t tell her.”

It’s not exactly what Caroline wants or wants to hear. She *wants* to really be with Hannah. She wants it all with her. But what she wants more is to make Hannah comfortable with them.

Caroline agrees.

But mostly, things are lighter –

“Have there been other women?” She asks one night as she’s brushing her teeth before bed, genuinely curious. “That you’ve been attracted to?”

Hannah is quiet for a few seconds before she hums under her breath. “No. Not really. I mean, I’ve always found women to be... aesthetically pleasing.”

“Agreed,” she adds in with a grin.

She can *hear* the way Hannah rolls her eyes but also can picture the smile on her face. “No kidding.” Hannah blows out a breath. “But I don’t remember a time where I’ve been actively attracted to one. I didn’t really *look* at anyone when I was married.” She pauses, her voice growing contemplative. “Sometimes, I would think about...” But she stops herself, her voice quiet. “It’s just been you.”

Caroline can’t help but smile like a fool, before she catches herself in the mirror and shakes her head. She wonders aloud, “Does it – bother you? How are you doing with... that?”

“Being attracted to a woman?”

She hums her affirmation. “I mean, I struggled with admitting it to myself. I think most people do, it’s totally normal.”

But Hannah's voice is honest and light, "No, it doesn't bother me. I didn't really struggle with it, either. It just is." She can hear her shift around. "Tell me about that. When you came out?"

Caroline sighs, exaggeratedly, as she switches off her light and walks to her bed. "Well, it all started when I was twelve and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* started airing. Sarah Michelle Gellar really did things to me."

Hannah chortles, "Really?"

Caroline hums under her breath, and takes a second to wonder if she should say it or not, but – "Mm, I have a thing for blondes."

Because she can *do that now*.

Hannah's laughter cuts off, her breath catching. "Oh. Well. Continue."

Caroline's smile is satisfied as she settles back against her pillow.

"Are you and my mom fighting?" Abbie asks her the day before Thanksgiving, standing on the step stool in Caroline's kitchen.

They're trying to follow Hannah's recipe for an apple pie, but neither one of them are particularly talented in baking. Caroline knows her mom and their other relatives will supply at least two other pies so she isn't worried; Abbie's having fun and that's all that matters.

She turns to give Abbie an incredulous look. "What? No. Why would you think that?"

Abbie shrugs, her small hands buried in the pie dough they're attempting to make as she stares up at Caroline with her bright blue eyes. "'Cuz you never touch each other like normal anymore. And sometimes you guys don't say things like normal, either. You just... look."

She looks both indignant and puzzled and Caroline just stares for a long moment, because she'd had *no* idea how much Abbie had ever noticed between her and Hannah. She has to choke back the ridiculous laugh that wants to bubble up in her throat.

"And she was shaking her head this morning before school and saying *Caroline*. And she does that to me, sometimes, when she is losing her temper with me." Abbie adds on.

And now she *really* has to hold back a laugh. She imagines that was after she'd texted Hannah to confirm she would pick up Abbie from her half day today, purposefully slipping in a joke about not being sure if she'd even

be awake by then, given how late *someone* had kept her up the night before, as they'd watched a movie together before bed.

Abbie's eyes narrow at her expression. "If you're fighting, you have make up! You *have* to." She looks the picture of serious and her expression is enough to sober Caroline's laughter.

She understands Hannah's not wanting to tell Abbie, she does. And ultimately, Abbie is Hannah's daughter, so it's Hannah's choice. But, damn, a misunderstanding like this would be so much easier to handle if she could tell her.

All she does is shake her head, still grinning – because Abbie with her indignant expression, her hand in braided pigtails that she is sure looked pristine when Hannah did them in the morning but are now messy, with her hands covered in pie crust dough, just is an adorable picture. "We aren't fighting. I promise."

Abbie huffs out a sigh, before she turns back to the dough. "Okayyyy," she draws out. And goes back to the dough while Caroline continues to chop the apples.

When they start rolling out the pie dough on the counter, doing a real mediocre job of it if Caroline says so herself, Abbie announces, "Norah thinks her dad should date my mom."

Caroline freezes. *Again?* Jared hasn't mentioned anything about Hannah since Father's Day and Hannah – who sees him fairly regularly since Norah and Abbie have become best friends – has never mentioned anything again.

"And what do you think about that?" *Danger zone*, her mind says to her, caution written all over her tone.

Abbie wrinkles her nose. "No offense to your brother and I think it would be fun to be sisters with Norah. But no."

Treading very carefully, Caroline resumes working with the rolling pin. "Not ready for your mom to date? It's okay if that's how you feel."

Abbie's face is the picture of concentration as she gently pokes at the crust dough, bending down to see how thinly it's rolled out. "No, she can date. Just... not him."

She's very tempted to ask more questions about how Abbie feels about Hannah's dating life, but bites her tongue. Not her place to ask and she doesn't want Abbie to feel like anything is going on. Hannah would *not* be happy and this kid is far too perceptive.

She's relieved when Abbie changes the topic to her field trip to Plymouth Rock.

She tells Hannah about the conversation that night as she settles back into her bed. She's amused by it, now that she's had time to reflect.

Hannah seems slightly less so, even though she sounds cautiously glad about Abbie being okay with her potentially dating.

Before they hang up, Hannah asks, "What are you wearing?"

Caroline pauses, looking down at herself as the question immediately prompts a million thoughts in her head. *Are they doing this now?* She desperately hopes they are.

"What are *you* wearing?" She cautiously responds to test the waters.

Hannah only seems to realize what she's asked when Caroline parrots the question back. She coughs and Caroline can hear the embarrassment in her voice. "Not – I meant. Tomorrow. To Thanksgiving with your family. What's the dress code? To Thanksgiving," she repeats.

She's both entirely besotted and disappointed all at once, even as she laughs softly. "A dress code? There's not..." She thinks about the fact that Hannah is used to spending Thanksgiving with the Dalton family and she can only imagine that's a formal affair. "It's casual. Jeans, leggings, whatever you want. I don't have an outfit planned. But I'm not going to be wearing one of my business suits, if that's what you mean."

"Hmm. Okay." Hannah murmurs before she clears her throat. "That's kind of disappointing."

She sounds like a very appealing mix of confident and uncertain, and Caroline's eyebrows lift as interest stirs inside of her. "Oh? So... you like me in a suit?"

For a moment as there's silence, she thinks she said too much. Pushed their boundaries too far.

But Hannah blows out a breath and when she speaks, her voice is an octave lower. "I do. Very much."

Heat works through her and she draws in a breath. "I can wear one tomorrow. If you want me to."

"No..." Hannah trails off, and Caroline so wishes she could see her right now. "I like the way you look in everything."

“That’s a coincidence. But if you have any special requests, I would be happy to fulfil them.”

Part of her still can’t believe this is actually happening. Really happening. But her entire body is on alert, waiting for Hannah’s answer.

Which is a short, choked laugh, followed by, “Believe me, you don’t have to fill a special request.” She pauses for a beat, before she confesses, “I wanted to kiss you so badly when I picked Abbie up today.”

Caroline’s heart kicks up, skipping a beat, even as she thinks back to what a total mess she’d been by the time Hannah had arrived to pick Abbie up. “Yeah? Covered in flour and all?”

Hannah shifts where she is in bed and hums her agreement. Caroline would give anything to be able to see her and have a better read on her, but in case Hannah has any embarrassment in sharing, Caroline decides to contribute. “I always want to kiss you. No matter what you’re wearing.”

She gives it a few seconds, wondering where the line is. If she’s crossed it. Hannah doesn’t say anything, though, beyond a faint, “Oh?”

And Caroline takes it as all the encouragement that she needs.

“I want you when you’re in your work uniform. I’d like to toss the visor away and press you into the counter right there, feeling your mouth on mine. I want to kiss you when you pick Abbie up after you get out of class, with your eyes tired but *alive*. I want to kiss you whenever we sit on the couch together. To press you into the cushions and feel the way your mouth opens against mine.”

She closes her eyes, thinking about their single actual kiss. It was only a couple of weeks ago, but Caroline feels like it was simultaneously eons ago and yesterday.

“I want to kiss you when you laugh and feel your lips smiling against mine. I want to kiss you when you look at me like you’re trying to figure me out, to read my mind. When you roll your eyes at me when you’re exasperated.”

A strangled sigh sounds in her ear, her words breathless, “It sounds like you think about kissing me a lot.”

“I do.” She’s had months to think about it. “And more.”

It comes out before she can even think to stop it and she wonders if that was it. If she actually went too far –

“I think about it, too.” Hannah’s voice is a low rasp and the sound of it and the meaning behind her words makes Caroline groan, the thrum of

arousal working through her body.

Okay, Caroline would give anything not just to see Hannah in this moment, but to be there with her. She wants more than *anything* to act on these feelings. To have a moment truly alone with Hannah for the first time in weeks so she can kiss her again.

“We... should go to bed.” Hannah whispers.

And Caroline blows out a low breath, knowing she damn sure isn't about to be able to sleep any time soon. Maybe after she touches herself, she thinks wryly.

But, “Yeah. You're right.”

They say their goodnights and a minute later, she's ready to hang up the phone. She's just about to end the call when Hannah speaks again.

“For the record, I'm wearing the Suffolk law shirt you forgot here once. And my underwear. Goodnight.”

XV

Caroline has never brought someone home for Thanksgiving before. Not that she technically is now, but she *kind of* is.

The thought occurs to her only as she, Abbie, and Hannah are approaching her parents' house, the street lined with cars of relatives visiting their families. The wind is sharp and chilling, the sidewalk caked with the remainder of the orange, brown, and red leaves that have fallen in the last few days.

She hadn't even thought about inviting Amanda last year even though things were fairly serious at the time. Or, she'd thought they were. But good food aside, Caroline didn't see the point. Amanda didn't really fit in with her family, she abhorred eating desserts, and it wasn't like the day was all that "special" to Caroline, anyway.

It feels special today, though, she thinks as she walks up the walkway with Hannah next to her, Abbie several steps ahead, already climbing the porch.

"Abbie, don't just go inside –" Hannah starts to call out to her when Abbie's hand is on the doorknob.

Abbie turns, a pleading expression on her face. "But mom! Tricia said I could! I swear. And Caroline's with us! She's not gonna ring the doorbell to go see her mom and dad."

Hannah sighs but nods in acquiescence and Abbie lights up, opening the door and running inside. Caroline's parents house is expected to be brimming with guests today – Thanksgiving is always their bigger holiday in comparison to Christmas.

A lot of extended family that Caroline likes to avoid as much as possible always stop by throughout the day, culminating in a huge dinner with people squeezed onto every available seating area. And usually, she arrives a little late then ducks into the basement to hang out with the kids rather than mingle upstairs and have to talk about politics and Christmas and relationships – lots and lots of jokes about being a divorce lawyer and being single, always so hilarious, never gets old – with people she only sees a couple times a year, tops.

She and Hannah make their way up the porch steps slowly, and Caroline looks to make sure Abbie isn't in sight anymore before she takes a moment to pause and properly give Hannah her attention.

She's wearing a long-sleeved tawny colored dress that cinches with a tie around the waist and lowly heeled boots that are *really* working for her. And for Caroline. Pale blonde hair is curled and styled.

Really, she looks incredible and Caroline rakes her gaze slowly up Hannah as she tells her, "You look... really beautiful. I wanted to tell you the second I saw you."

But Abbie had been with them, sits unspoken.

There's a pleased flush on Hannah's cheeks as she smooths a hand over the skirt of her dress. "I know you said it's casual but I wanted to, well, make a nice impression."

Caroline arches an eyebrow at her. "My family loves you. My mom would put me up for adoption and take you in, if she could get away with it."

She loves the light laugh Hannah lets out. "Yeah, I think thirty-four was the cut off. She just missed it."

"Too bad she's stuck with me."

"Yeah. Would hate to be stuck with you," Hannah murmurs, holding her gaze as they stand on the porch. Before she breaks the eye contact a second later, shaking her head. "You have to stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

Gray eyes are dark as Hannah arches a challenging eyebrow at her. "Like you're thinking about kissing me. You do it all of the time and now I know exactly what that look is," Hannah whispers, her own eyes falling to Caroline's mouth.

"I'm really not sure I can make that promise," she admits, the truth of it almost alarming. Caroline typically does have a great poker face, when need be. "But I'll try."

There's still a hint of a smile on Hannah's lips even as the look she gives Caroline is serious. "I don't want your entire family to know."

Caroline thinks about the knowing look her mom had given her the day she'd joined them at the bake sale and wants to say there's a good chance she already knows. It's not a big deal to her, not really.

That is new in and of itself; she never has been big on sharing her relationships with her family. She doesn't *hide* them, either, but she's never

fallen for someone so hard that someone would be able to tell with just a look. And now... well she *wants* to share this news. She wants to walk into the room with Hannah and have everyone know that she loves this woman.

That's certainly not where Hannah is, though, so she nods.

"Right. Okay. No looking at you like I'm thinking about kissing you. Because I'm definitely not."

Hannah chortles and opens her mouth, but before she says anything, Caroline's mom startles them both.

"What are you two doing out here? It's freezing; get inside."

It *is* cold, but honestly Caroline hadn't even noticed.

Her mom's dark eyes give them both measuring looks as they step over the threshold. "Caroline, I can't believe you're here before noon!" Her smile is exasperated, the way her mom often looks at her when she runs late. It's sheer warmth, though, as she turns to Hannah. "Your influence, I'm sure."

Caroline's mouth falls open in mock-offense. "Excuse you! I baked a pie for today and everything."

The smile on her mom's face falls as her gaze dips to the dessert Caroline holds up in one hand. She and Abbie's pie attempt had been... something. It doesn't look wonderful, but they made it together and Caroline is still proud of it.

Her mom's gaze is skeptical. "*You* baked a pie?"

"Okay, now that tone is just upsetting. You're going to embarrass me in front of my friend, ma," she purposefully adopts a petulant tone that makes Hannah giggle next to her.

Her mom reaches out to take the pie from her. "Well, I'm sorry, honey. But, I mean." Her eyebrows lift comically high as she stares at the dessert in question. "You know, we could always use more desserts..."

Caroline doesn't have it in her to be actually offended at all. "It's Hannah's recipe, so it will probably taste good even if it doesn't look like much."

Her mom grins, her tone joking even though there is definite relief in her eyes, "Well at least there's that."

Caroline rolls her eyes dramatically at Hannah. "The things I put up with here."

Hannah's expression is bright with laughter, the look of it lighting up her whole face. Happiness on Hannah is addictive to see and Caroline

forces herself to look back at her mom.

She lifts her other hand to show the bag she's carrying, waving it gently. "And I brought wine."

"Oh, thank god." Her mom laughs, taking that from her as well, before she leans in to kiss her cheeks and then up to her tiptoes to do the same to Hannah. "Hannah, come with me to the kitchen. Caroline, bring your coats to the guest room before you disappear."

Her mom waits for her orders to be carried out and Hannah slips off her jacket. Caroline saw her outfit in its entirety when she'd picked Hannah and Abbie up, but still... she looks so good.

She really isn't sure how good a job she's doing of hiding her feelings on her face as she reaches out to take Hannah's coat.

"You're failing," Hannah whispers, her breath warm against Caroline's ear, as she brushes by her.

A few hours later, Caroline is exactly where she usually is – in the basement with the kids.

For once this year, she'd actually wanted to stay upstairs, if for no other reason than to just *be* with Hannah, even if she couldn't *be with* her. She'd made the rounds with Hannah, introducing her to relatives here and there, but eventually they'd been separated. And the third time they'd made eye contact, she realized that perhaps she *was* staring a bit too much.

There's an intense game of Pictionary going on with the kids, though, and she's cracking up as Melissa and Sammy, one of their second cousins, are shouting at each other, trying to get the answer before time runs out.

Abbie is laughing, too, as she's curled up against her side – Caroline is the unofficial judge – and Hannah appears on the stairs to announce, "Dinner's about to be ready! Everyone go wash your hands."

It's an immediate clatter of the kids dropping what they're doing and hustling to go upstairs for the food, as Caroline stretches and watches them go.

Abbie is at the back of the pack, and she watches as she stops and excitedly tells Hannah, "This is the best Thanksgiving *ever*! It's so much better than grandma and grandpa's!"

When they can hear the horde of footsteps running on the first floor, Caroline finally pushes herself up. Hannah is still on the steps and she watches Caroline approach with a look that's thoughtful and amused and something else, indecipherable, all at once.

"I wondered where you'd gone to and I didn't realize when your mom told me that you'd escaped down here to play games that you were the life of the party." There's the amusement.

Caroline smiles at her as she reaches the stairs. "What can I say?"

Hannah's gaze gets more contemplative as Caroline slowly ascends the steps. "Abbie's right. Thanksgiving with your family is the best one we've had in a long, long time."

"Good...?" She comes to a pause on the same step as Hannah, unable to keep her distance. That's a big reason why she'd come downstairs today in the first place.

It brings them so close, their bodies brushing, and she feels it all over.

"It is good. And it's scary," Hannah admits in a whisper, her jaw clenching with a tension Caroline just doesn't understand.

She frowns, searching Hannah's eyes, until Hannah squeezes them closed. "You gave us something here that I don't want to lose. And I'm so..." She blows out a breath, gray eyes opening again, boring into Caroline's. "I just feel like this is a tightrope and I'm scared of falling."

Caroline wonders if Hannah knows that it's too late to go back, now. She understands her fear, she does. But on the other hand, she just wants Hannah to feel this same sureness that she feels. She hates that she doesn't.

Hannah looks over her shoulder quickly before ducking to press her lips to the corner of Caroline's. Too close to her mouth to be a genuine cheek kiss, not enough contact to be an actual kiss.

It sets Caroline's entire body on fire just the same, her breath catching.

"Risk or not, I'm thankful for you, Caroline. Happy Thanksgiving."

The first snow of the season is Caroline's favorite unofficial holiday.

There's something about the way the air feels... crisper and the way it always feels like magic. Before nature takes course and ruins the freshly fallen snow, that is. Anyway, psychologically, she's hardwired from her childhood – she thinks about the thrilling possibility of a snow day, the

snowball fights she could get into with her brothers and the other neighborhood kids, curling up with hot chocolate.

She can feel it coming in the air, she thinks, as she idly walks into the doors welcoming her into Northeastern University's library.

The warmth of the building is a welcome shock to the system and she takes in the surroundings. It's weird, being back in a library after having spent far too long barricading herself in Suffolk's Law Library for days and weeks at a time. Nostalgic, almost, even if it's not the same library. But they all have that same smell.

It's the first week of December and Hannah's final project for one of her courses, in which she has to design and build a prototype for a fully functional building, is due in a week. Abbie has practice for her holiday chorus concert, after which she is being picked up by Jared who's also picking up Norah. And Hannah has been holed up in the library all afternoon with the small group she's working with on her final project.

Caroline checks the time to make sure – yes, Hannah had told her they were all taking a short break at six to grab something to eat and it's six on the dot.

And as she looks up, she sees Hannah sitting at a table. Well, two tables pushed together, covered in organized chaos of papers and what looks like a 3D model of the bare bones of a building. Caroline doesn't quite know what it is, but she's already impressed. She hangs back for a few moments just to observe.

Hannah's hair is up in a bun, strands of it falling over her face as she leans over the table to sketch something on one of the papers, murmuring something that causes the three people she's sitting with to nod in understanding.

She looks... in charge, and not because she's almost a decade older than the others sitting with her. But because, as she speaks words Caroline can't hear, she seems like she just *gets* something that the others with her don't. She looks capable and knowledgeable and sexy.

That near-kiss on Thanksgiving set something off inside of Caroline.

She's never wanted someone in her life more than she wants Hannah. And for the first few weeks after her birthday, it was somehow easy to put the physical desire she has aside. She thinks it's mainly the absolute shock of Hannah being interested in her that helped subdue her.

But now, it's beyond desiring Hannah from a distance or thinking about kissing her. She craves it.

She can feel the hunger now, even as they are surrounded by Hannah's peers. Better than when they are with Abbie, she thinks, as she slowly approaches the table, seeing the small group start to dig around in their bags and pull out containers of food or grab their wallets, likely heading out to grab something quick to eat.

Everyone else sees her first, because Hannah doesn't take a break from what she's doing. And as she reaches the table, she feels somewhat like she's back in school and approaching the popular blonde girl she'd had a crush on.

Only, unlike then, Hannah looks up and a brilliant smile takes over her expression. "Caroline!" The little line between her eyebrows appears as she tilts her head in confusion. "What are you doing here?"

"Hi Caroline," the girl sitting next to Hannah, who has taken out a container of leftover pasta, says and leans back in her chair with a considering look. "I'm Karla."

She knows that these are the people Hannah's worked with in this course all semester so far and she's heard stories about them, especially Karla, who has been Hannah's go-to partner in two classes, but she'd had no idea it had been mutual.

"I've heard about you. Nice to meet you." She gives them a slight smile, before turning back to Hannah. "I was also working a little late and stopped to grab some dinner on my way home. I knew you've been here all afternoon and have plans to be here for a while longer, so I figured I'd drop you off something, too."

And because she knows Hannah rarely takes the time to think of feeding herself when she's at work or, in this case, at school.

And because she just wanted to *see* her. That serotonin hit.

Hannah's smile is still luminous even as her eyes grow wide and soft, watching as Caroline sets the bag of dinner on the table. "Thank you. I just figured I'd be eating leftovers after I pick up Abbie."

"That's what I figured." Caroline rocks back, slipping her hands into the pockets of her tailored pants now that they're empty. She really had come from work and still has more to do for a new case she's taking on, let alone preparing her presentation coming up just before Christmas. And

she's starting to feel a little uncomfortable with the way Karla is smiling at her.

She nods again, this time to herself. "Anyway. I'll talk to you later?" Their late night phone call is unspoken but on the books.

Hannah nods back at her, resting her hand on the food. "Of course."

She takes another look at Hannah – unsure of what she's even doing here, except knowing that she hasn't seen Hannah in a couple of days because of their schedules and she's just missed her – before she offers a wave and turns to go.

Only a couple steps outside, she pauses, a small smile tugging on her lips as she looks up at the sky, the first snowflakes of the season starting to fall. It's barren, no one around her in spite of the fact that it's the end of the term on campus. But then again, she thinks maybe no one else wants to be standing outside in twenty-nine degree weather to admire the snow falling.

Almost immediately, she feels a warm hand wrap around her arm, stopping her in her steps. And she's already smiling when she turns. "Hey, it's –"

Whatever else was about to leave her mouth is swallowed by Hannah's.

The warmth of Hannah's lips are such a contrast to the frigid air blowing around them and a guttural groan immediately escapes her throat. She lifts her hands, brace-less this time *thank god*, burrowing them into Hannah's hair to pull her closer.

Unlike last time, Hannah's kiss isn't soft and searching. It's hungry and it lights Caroline's own hunger. Especially as Hannah's hands slide under her jacket to hold her waist, gripping her and holding her so that their bodies can slide and press against one another's.

Feeling Hannah's body against her own, even if it's through her jacket, Caroline moans low in her throat. *Fuck*, this is what she wants so badly. This is what she's been craving. She wants Hannah, she wants to be able to kiss her, to taste her every single time they see one another.

She scratches one of her hands lightly down the side of Hannah's neck. The answering whimper wrecks her, her knees weak from desire. The way Hannah's hands tighten against her hips only heightens it even more.

She uses the hand she still has in Hannah's hair to take a handful and lightly grip, tugging so that their kiss breaks and Hannah's forced to arch her head back. She can't resist; she wants to be able to taste Hannah and

feel her and she runs her lips down the soft skin of Hannah's neck. Lightly sliding her mouth over her, before pressing closer and planting her lips there.

She can feel how rapid Hannah's pulse is, feel the panting breaths that escape her throat, her hands sliding down to Caroline's hips to hold for purchase.

"I – *god* – I... wait," Hannah manages to get out.

And it takes a second for it to register, but eventually it does and Caroline freezes.

It takes another moment for her to realize where they are – standing outside of a very public building – and she, reluctantly, steps back with the reminder. She releases the hold she has on Hannah's hair, taking a few breaths of the frosty air to force the inferno inside of her to calm down.

It doesn't work, but it was worth a try.

Hannah's hands don't fall from her hips, even as her eyes remain closed, head tipped back. Caroline can't get over the way the snowflakes have landed in her hair, on her eyelashes, making her look almost ethereally beautiful.

Best unofficial holiday for sure.

"A fun fact... Karla has had, what she refers to as, a secondhand crush on you all semester," is what Hannah manages to say after she takes a few deep breaths, tilting her head forward to look into Caroline's eyes. "She has just now informed me that she'd like your number."

A disbelieving snort works out of her throat. "She's barely twenty-three."

"Well, she's very into older women and you are, quote, *way hot*. You bringing me dinner has convinced her that you'd make a great sugar mama." Hannah blinks and the lingering snowflakes Caroline had been admiring are gone, only to be replaced seconds later.

"I guess it's nice to know I still have it," she whispers through a low laugh, unable to stop herself from leaning in again.

Hannah's nose is cold against hers as she leans in again, cupping Hannah's cheeks and stroking them with her thumbs, and reveling in her warm breaths that wash over Caroline's lips.

The grin that strikes over Hannah's face is devastatingly sexy. "You most definitely still have *it*." She ducks her head down again, eyes slipping closed as she breathes out, "I could get so lost in you if I'm not careful."

She isn't quite sure if she was meant to hear that. Somehow, she feels like Hannah meant it more for herself than anyone else.

Don't be careful, Caroline aches to say.

Instead, she leans in and kisses her again.

After that, it feels like every time they're together, Caroline is zapped with an energy so electric, she can feel it all over.

It's not easy, given that just about every time they see one another, Abbie is with them – and Hannah is very, very careful to never hint at any changes between them in front of Abbie – but Caroline knows she isn't alone.

She knows it in the way Hannah waits until Abbie runs to pack her backpack up before grabbing a handful of her collar and dips her head to steal a kiss in the forty-five seconds they have alone. In the way Hannah whimpers and presses her hips into Caroline's whenever she sucks her bottom lip between her own.

Every time they see one another is full of looks so heated Caroline feels like her clothing could melt off and stolen moments whenever they can get away with it.

She's never touched so much in her life. Not even as a teenager. And somehow, it's still the most fulfilled she's ever felt.

Absolutely wild.

XVI

The first night of Hanukkah finds her where it usually does – having a holiday drink with Kris.

When they'd been in college, the two of them had commiserated over a shared feeling of torture on the holidays – Kris lamenting back then about having to alternate between her divorced parents, “Thank fuck there are eight nights of Hanukkah or their divorce lawyers would have seen *blood*.”

Now... well, now it's still much of the same. Just a different location, as they're sitting on Kris's couch.

Her best friend is leaning against the cushions, hand over her eyes. “She's already planning Jason's bar mitzvah. He's a year old!”

Caroline snorts out a laugh, unable to help herself. “Is that better or worse than her telling you she could be dead next year and this could be your last holiday with her?”

“I don't *know*.” Kris groans, before she lifts her hand and narrows her eyes at Caroline, suspicious. “You seem... chipper. Way *too* chipper for the holiday season, actually. You haven't even mentioned your caseload. Who are you and what have you done with Caroline Parker?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.” She thinks she does a good job of keeping her face blank, even if she is bursting at the seams to tell her. To talk about Hannah.

Kris, having known her for over a decade, doesn't fall for it. She sits up, eyes scanning critically over Caroline. “Okay, well, you always generally love your job, so that's out. Nothing's happened with your family, as far as I know, Todd's still being a dick. Hannah –”

Caroline can't help it. She can feel her lips tick into a smile of their own accord and Kris actually screeches.

“*Hannah!* You and Hannah! You – tell me everything and tell me *now*.”

Caroline does. She can't help it. She tells her about her birthday and the kisses and Thanksgiving and there's a smile on her face that's so wide, it might break open. She thinks telling Kris is fine, because who is it going to get around to? Kris and Hannah's only commonality is her.

And she has to tell someone, she realizes after she stops speaking. She's had to revel in the news with someone else, now that she's been sitting on it for over a month.

Someone other than Hannah; someone who knows at least some of the absolute wanting and pining for months.

"I can't believe you're in a relationship with Hannah." Kris looks at her, dumbfounded. "I really thought... wow. And last Christmas, I told you not to call her."

Caroline frowns. "I don't know if we're in a relationship, exactly."

They haven't exactly spoken about what they *are*.

What they are is short, heated moments wherever they can grab them.

What they are is late night phone calls where they do anything from watch *The X Files* to talk about nonsensical things like latte foam art to serious things like Hannah's feelings about her mom's watch that had broken last year and how she still keeps it in her jewelry box.

What they are is dinners and movie nights with Abbie while Caroline will slide her hand over and hold Hannah's under a blanket.

What they also are is Hannah pulling her hand away in a split-second, as if she has some sort of sixth-mother-sense for when Abbie is about to turn and look at them. What they also are is Hannah ending their phone calls when the hour ticks slightly *too* late, where admissions very much want to roll out of Caroline's mouth.

What they are is Caroline very much feeling ready to say "I love you" and *meaning* it more than she ever has, but holding it back whenever the words want to escape. Because she *knows* they will make Hannah run.

Kris gives her a long-suffering eyeroll. "Okay, right. Not a relationship. Sure." She sags back against the couch, a laugh bubbling up in her throat. "You enjoying the holidays. Never thought I'd see the day."

The thing is, Caroline isn't necessarily *enjoying* the holidays, so much as... it's extremely difficult to feel her particular brand of Scrooge when she spends just about every other day – if not more – with her two favorite people, who happen to love Christmas.

Usually, she does all of her holiday shopping online because the *last* place she wants to be is in the overcrowded stores, forced to listen to the

same holiday songs over and over again.

But it's not so bad when she's there with Hannah one Saturday afternoon and they make their way through the toy aisles, Hannah giggling at her while Caroline tries out all of the newest gadgets.

Usually, one of the only things she *doesn't* do as an aunt is go to Christmas choral concerts, because just, no thanks.

But this year, she helps Abbie practice her songs and she's pretty excited to show up to the elementary school concert and surprise them both.

Caroline makes her way toward the front of the seats in the auditorium, knowing that Hannah will want to sit up there to get a good view of Abbie when she has her solo in *Let It Snow* and be able to take an unobstructed video.

It's a whole shared surprise when she approaches – Hannah is clearly surprised to see her and she's surprised to see Michael's parents sitting in the seats next to Hannah.

It's a pleased surprise, she thinks, on Hannah's face. Before she realizes who she's sitting with, and her posture grows tense.

Caroline notes it and doesn't lean in the way she wants to, instead nodding at the Daltons. "Hi, nice to see you again."

The surprise has faded a bit into what she thinks is suspicion. She wouldn't be shocked if they'd heard all sorts of slanderous comments about her from Michael, especially after her presence at Abbie's birthday. But mostly, she thinks they should be less concerned with her appearance at things like birthday parties and choral concerts and less concerned with the fact that their son *doesn't* make an appearance.

Still, as much as a part of her would love to make a veiled comment, she doesn't. She knows Hannah hadn't been planning on them coming, as she hadn't mentioned it, and she doesn't want to make it any more uncomfortable for her.

Marina sniffs, "Yes, well, we weren't sure we'd be in town. But Abbie had been quite excited about it. What are *you* doing here?"

Hannah jumps in before she can answer for herself. "Caroline's niece is in the sixth grade concert."

She *gets* it, but... all right, it doesn't feel great. Of course, Norah *is* in the sixth grade concert and she does plan on taking both Norah and Abbie out to the specialty hot chocolate shop down the street. But she'd come for Abbie, and Hannah knows it.

But, her stomach still sinks even as she gamely keeps a smile on her face. “Yeah. I just wanted to say hi before the show began.”

She’s sure she can track down her parents in the crowd. They prefer to sit somewhere in the back at these events, to make an easy escape – she definitely inherited that trait.

Hannah’s eyes are wide and apologetic on hers. Caroline gives her what she hopes is a reassuring smile even through the slight sting.

Later, on the phone that night, it’s the first thing Hannah says when Caroline picks up. “I’m sorry.” She heaves a sigh, and Caroline can imagine the stormy look in her eyes. “I didn’t know they were coming or that *you* were coming and... this is all a part of what I was talking about, in the first place.”

The turmoil she’s clearly feeling makes Caroline’s stomach twist with guilt and worry and – no. She isn’t going down that road.

“It’s okay.” It’s the truth, it really is, under the immediate reaction she’d had. “I was,” she clears her throat, “You know, it didn’t feel great. But I understand.”

It’s a situation she’s never been in. Not only has she never dated someone who wasn’t already out, but she’s never had to navigate ex in-laws, either. It’s all entirely new.

“Abbie loved that you were there. And I did, too,” she confesses. “I didn’t think you’d want to come. That’s why I didn’t invite you. You know, you said you didn’t like Christmas and so...”

“I don’t. Usually. There’s something about the holidays that feels a little different this year.”

“Oh, yeah? I wonder what it is.” The distress is completely gone as Hannah teases her and it sets her at ease.

“Mm, I wonder.”

Abbie is frowning as they drink hot chocolate a few days later, after she’s done her homework. “Mom says we can’t have a real tree in our apartment, cuz it’s too small.” She heaves a big sigh for her small body. “We can’t even fit all our ornaments on the one we have.” She pokes at one of the marshmallows floating at the top of her mug, before she turns questioning eyes to Caroline. “Can I help decorate your tree, when you put

it up? I'm really good at it, I promise. And I bet mom will give you some of our leftover ornaments!"

Her voice really perked up as she'd continued speaking, the excitement in it taking away from the sad look that had previously been in those big blue eyes.

And Caroline looks around her condo.

It's stylized just to her liking, always has been. She guesses that's one of the only perks of being a single woman who has always lived alone. She's really never had the urge to get a tree, let alone a *real* one with the pine needles that fall off and needs to be maintained. She has zero decorations for Christmas stowed away in her storage closet.

But she turns to look back at Abbie, who is giving her a look so hopeful, she just can't say no to the genuine Christmas joy and excitement there.

"Of course you can decorate my tree."

That's how she finds herself decorating her apartment, pulling out all of the stops, two weeks before Christmas.

It's not so bad, she thinks, even as she is glaring at the lights Abbie had excitedly proclaimed they *needed*. She'd purchased them to make up for the fact that she refused to get an actual, real tree. A plastic tree or bust. She's going to have to do this again next year for Abbie – she *hopes* – so she's going to invest in one she can use more than once.

Abbie is practically dancing around the tree Caroline had just painstakingly wrestled with for the better part of an hour, and the topic of Santa Claus is abound.

Caroline pauses as she's sitting on the floor with the lights, cautiously broaching the topic. She knows that a few of her nieces and nephews still believe and it's something she tries very hard to keep in mind every holiday season. "So... you have high hopes for Santa this year?"

Abbie shoots her such an exasperated look – so serious, especially for someone wearing a headband with reindeer antlers. Caroline has to bite back her grin. "Santa isn't real, Caroline. Mom and dad buy my presents," she informs her, before a sly smile steals across her face. "I bet I'm gonna get what I want this year."

Caroline arches a questioning eyebrow at that. Abbie likely will get everything she asked for and more; Hannah sternly informed Caroline that she was *not* allowed to go “crazy” with how many gifts she was getting Abbie. That she already had to deal with Michael attempting to buy any possible affection, let alone what his parents were purchasing, too.

She’s mostly curious because for a girl whose family does have more money than God, Abbie is generally very well-adjusted and not very spoiled. Once again, points to Hannah.

Before she can question, though, the door to her apartment opens and closes, and she looks up from where she sits just in time to see Hannah walk into the living room.

“I’m so glad it’s the weekend and I am finally done with my finals –” Hannah breaks off, eyes going so wide as she takes in the Christmas explosion in Caroline’s condo.

“Mom! Caroline’s letting me decorate her tree *and* she says we can put up the garlands in the doorways! You want to help? You want to put on the star? I picked it out!”

“In a few minutes, hon, let me settle in.”

Caroline can *feel* the surprise emanating off of Hannah as she takes it all in, before she slowly slips off her jacket. The high-waisted jeans she’s wearing distract Caroline from the fact that the entire population of Santa’s workshop threw up in her living room.

When her gaze finally makes its way up to Hannah’s face, Hannah is staring at her, her face the picture of entertainment. “Well, for someone who doesn’t love the holidays, it sure looks like you are about to host Santa himself here for the weekend. I guess the holidays really do feel a bit different this year for you.”

Caroline glares and sticks out her tongue. “Is it my fault your daughter is *basically* Cindy-Lou Who? Look at those antlers. It’s not fair.”

Hannah tilts her head before she bends down. Her hair falls over Caroline’s shoulder, the scent intoxicating and making her entirely forget about the tangled lights she’s struggling with. “I’d very much like to kiss you right now,” Hannah whispers.

Caroline is hungry for it.

“They said at school that it’s supposed to snow this time next week! Can we go sledding?” Abbie asks, staring at them from across the room.

Hannah straightens up quickly, her cheeks pink. Caroline clears her throat, her heart beating just that much faster.

“I, uh, I wish I could, Rudolph.” She gives up on the lights, just fiddling with them as she gives an apologetic look. “But I have my holiday party for work and I have to put in some face time.”

“Oh.” Abbie’s face is crestfallen as she looks down at the ornament in her hand. And Caroline feels honestly *terrible* for having caused it. Before Abbie shrugs and turns back to the tree. “Maybe Norah and her dad want to go sledding. And that way you can take my mom to the party!” She gives Caroline a far too adult look. “Unless you’re taking someone else?”

A nervous laugh titters out of her. “No, I’m perpetually stag.”

“Mom, Robyn said to you the other day that you *have* to go to more grown-ups only things,” Abbie throws out, casually, as she bends down to grab another ornament.

Hannah’s still blushing even as she narrows her eyes at Abbie’s back. “Abigail, how many times have we talked about eavesdropping?”

“Sorry.” And for her credit, she does sound actually sheepish. “I just thought it would be fun for you.”

Caroline isn’t sure if it’s good timing or not, but her phone chirps from where it sits next to her on the floor. She already has an idea of what it is before she looks at it and – yep.

She heaves out a sigh and realizes as she stands up amidst the Christmas chaos of her living room that she actually really *doesn’t* want to leave it. Still, she wiggles the phone and gives both of them an apologetic look. “Speaking of work... I’m sorry, I told my client I could be available until eight tonight and I really need to consult with him before Monday.”

“Can I finish decorating the tree?” Abbie asks, her voice hopeful as she spins to look at her.

“Of course.” Honestly, she wishes Abbie and Hannah never had to go home. “I’m trusting you to make it as beautiful as the one you have at home, okay?”

Abbie nods excitedly, getting back to work.

She turns to give Hannah an apologetic look; she’s going to miss whatever stolen moment they’d have managed tonight. And more than that, just *this*. Being together.

It turns out, as she returns back home two hours later, she needn't have worried about missing time together.

It's just after nine, and as she unlocks her apartment door, she almost thinks she's in the wrong apartment.

Yeah. Abbie and Hannah had certainly been busy while she'd been gone. The halls have certainly been decked.

The garlands are hung over her doorways and the way they and the lights are artfully arranged, along with several of the wall decorations Abbie had picked out, Caroline can tell Hannah had a careful hand with it all.

The tree is lit up and completely adorned in ornaments in her bay window and... fine. Fine. She can admit it looks pretty good there. And, well, she likes having these pieces of Abbie and Hannah in her home; she's not naïve enough to believe that isn't a huge part of this.

It looks like a family lives here. Like *her* family lives here.

And she is so distracted by the thought that it takes her far too long to realize that Abbie is sprawled over her couch, reindeer antlers skewed to the side, as she sleeps. *Home Alone* is playing on the TV and she feels an absurd happiness at the fact.

Hannah's in the kitchen and she leans against the counter, giving Caroline a soft look when she sees her.

Caroline is sure the surprise she's feeling has to reflect on her face, because she can hear it in her own voice. "You're still here?"

"Abbie very much wanted to see your reaction. She thinks you need the Christmas spirit," Hannah's smile grows even bigger, clearly more amused, as she shakes her head. "And I figured it's not a school night, so what's the harm? There's some leftovers for you in the microwave."

She knows Abbie is asleep only one room away and that she could wake up at any moment. But she can't help herself from walking forward and placing her hands on the counter on either side of Hannah's body, caging her in as she shifts up onto her tiptoes and presses her lips to Hannah's.

It's soft and short and it's not filled with heat so much as it's fueled by utter affection. This is the life she wants, desperately.

"Thank you. I really didn't expect you guys to be here after I had to duck out to work." Though, unfortunately, that is her life sometimes.

Hannah doesn't move to put any space between them. Rather, she lifts her arms to rest over Caroline's shoulders. It's a casually close gesture she relishes, especially as Hannah toys with the ends of her hair.

"It's okay; trust me, I'm used to it."

There's no edge in Hannah's voice at all, so it takes Caroline a second to realize that she's talking about her marriage to Michael. And the comparison is probably the least favorable thing Caroline can imagine, the impact sitting uncomfortably low in her stomach.

She is the one who steps back, a deep frown on her face. "I don't really love the comparison."

Hannah seems to only realize what she'd said in that moment, and she shakes her head. "No, I didn't mean it in..." She brings her hand up to her forehead and rubs, hard, before she looks at Caroline apologetically. "I really didn't mean it in a bad way. Your job is very important to you and you are very good at it." A quick, chagrined smile pulls at her lips. "As I would know and am very grateful for."

Hannah braces both of her hands behind her on the counter and blows out a deep breath. "Mostly what I meant is that, with you... it's different. With Michael, he was always leaving late and claiming it was for work." Hannah's perfectly long fingers reach out and slide along her jaw. "I never knew, really, what it felt like to have someone leave at night and not have any doubt that they were actually going where they say they're going."

Okay. Well. Caroline melts into the touch because she can't *not*. "When you say it like that..."

The holiday party at McGregor and Associates is exactly one week before Christmas and, somehow, it's impossibly more grand than the ones Wilkens and Granger used to throw.

Which is kind of alarming because W&G was already pretty ostentatious.

Caroline is hurrying up the steps of the venue – completely decked out, with what has to be hundreds of people inside – and she's thinking about how much requisite networking she's going to have to do tonight.

There are plenty of other attorneys in attendance who don't even work for McGregor, several actual associates, who have expressed interest in

meeting her after the Laurens divorce. And she's running her mind over just who else she's expecting to be inside, when she reaches the top stop and looks up at the doors.

And she is so shocked, she nearly face plants right there on the steps.

Hannah is standing there, just inside the glass doors and out of the freezing evening air. Blonde hair is perfectly curled and artfully pinned up in a twist. Her neck and collarbones are bare – Caroline has missed them in the chillier months – the dress she's wearing dipping low on her chest. It's a midnight blue, with long sleeves, and clinging to her tall frame in a way that has Caroline *staring*.

The skirt reaches all the way to the floor and it's only when Hannah shifts slightly that Caroline sees the slit in the skirt. Jesus.

And when she sees Caroline, a slow smile slides across her face.

It's the smile that entices Caroline inside, bewildered, as she shakes her head. "What are you *doing* here?"

"I seem to remember you saying you didn't have anyone to join you tonight?" Hannah has the most seductive smile on those lips that Caroline is aching to kiss. But there's a hint of nerves under it, too.

"Yeah, I don't. Of course not. But I didn't think..." She runs her eyes down Hannah's body again, just because – *damn*. Struck absolutely stupid. "I didn't think you wanted to come?"

"Even though we had a long discussion about eavesdropping, Abbie – and Robyn – weren't exactly wrong about my perhaps needing to get out more. So, Robyn is watching Abbie and I figured I could keep you company."

"I'd be honored." Really, it's like Caroline's work holiday party fantasy she never knew she even had.

It's late when they leave.

Caroline isn't one to normally stay until the end of the holiday party because there's really only so much holiday she can take, despite the usefulness of the night when it comes to networking. But being there with Hannah felt like... something entirely different.

No, she wasn't *with* Hannah, outwardly. Their general touches were platonic – her hand on the small of Hannah's back, Hannah sliding her hand

down Caroline's arm – but Hannah just has a certain quality that draws people to her. It's not just her looks, though Caroline obviously knows what it's like to be taken aback by Hannah's beauty. It's just who she is.

And she can't quite believe she had Hannah on her arm tonight. She's still mystified by it as she walks Hannah down the hall to her apartment.

When they pause at the door, she wonders if Robyn is still awake inside. If she'll hear them if Caroline does what she wants and pushes Hannah against the door, kissing her *hard* the way she's wanted to all night.

She wonders if that's also what Hannah's thinking about as she pauses outside of the door, turned half away from Caroline as she fiddles with her key before sliding it into the lock slowly.

Caroline can't resist reaching out to touch the back of Hannah's neck, sliding her fingertip up the elegant arch of it. She swears it's been *begging* for her mouth to kiss and nip there all night. And when she sees the shiver that works down Hannah's body at her touch, she immediately feels her own body respond.

Hannah places a hand on the doorknob, gripping tightly and taking a deep breath, as she turns to look at Caroline. "Abbie is, um, spending the night at Robyn's."

Just like that, everything comes to a stop. They are at Hannah's apartment. It's late. There is no curious ten-year-old inside. Caroline's heart is already picking up pace in her chest, throat dry, as she stares at Hannah, forcing herself not to do everything that immediately assaults her mind.

Push Hannah against the door, mouth against her throat while working her hands under her dress, for starters. Just the mental image has her slowly blowing out a deep breath. "Oh?"

Hannah bites her lip, pushing the door to the apartment open. "Do you remember the night, at the lake house? The second one." She clarifies as if it were necessary.

"As if I could possibly forget it."

Caroline has thought about that night so many times now, especially now that she knows how Hannah had been affected, just like she had. At the very least, she knows Hannah's labored breath and how low her voice had dipped means she'd been turned on.

"You aren't as..." Hannah has to clear her throat. "You talked about..." She huffs out a breath, muttering. "God, I hate how hard it is for me to *speak* sometimes. You were a lot more, *uhm*, aggressive in talking

about what you wanted to do, that night, than you usually are in person.” She tilts her head, a questioning look in her eyes.

Caroline thinks back to describing just how she wants to hold Hannah down and make her come. Which, *fuck*, does she ever. Even more so, now. But Hannah’s right; she does often let Hannah dictate their physical moments. At the very least, until they grow more heated.

“I’m letting you guide us. I don’t want to... push you.” She’s trying so hard not to cross any boundaries, even though with every single day that goes by, she wants more.

Hannah leans back against the door, her tongue sliding slowly over her bottom lip and Caroline’s eyes trail after it, hungrily, before snapping to Hannah’s.

“Push me,” she rasps.

It’s all Caroline can take. It’s like she can *feel* the tenuous hold she has kept on the last of her self-control in the last month just completely snap.

Stepping forward, she reaches up to cup her hand behind Hannah’s neck, pulling her down so their mouths meet. It’s not soft and searching, it’s not a stolen moment that they know can only last so long.

It’s hungry and hot and she licks into Hannah’s mouth the instant she feels Hannah groan against her lips. She wraps her other arm around Hannah’s waist, using it to guide her backwards inside before she kicks the door closed behind them.

Hannah’s hands are in her hair, taking handfuls of dark waves and clutching, as if she’s terrified Caroline is going to back out of this moment.

She doesn’t break the contact with Hannah’s lips as she unwraps her arm from Hannah’s waist and slides her hand between them to pop the buttons on the long wool jacket she’s wearing. God, she can feel her hand shaking from the sheer force of desire already surging through her. Just from the feeling of Hannah’s tongue sliding against her own and the knowledge of what’s going to happen.

Pushing the jacket from Hannah’s shoulders, she presses her against the kitchen counter. She uses her hips to pin Hannah there, breaking their kiss and arching her back so she can look down. *Fuck*, Hannah looks so good.

There’s the smallest smattering of freckles on her chest which, of course, Caroline had noticed months ago. But now she can bend down and

flick her tongue over them, feeling Hannah's heart jackhammering in her chest while her hands fumble with pushing off Caroline's jacket.

She helps, stepping back just enough to slide off both her actual coat and her red blazer, leaving her in the white, lacy camisole she'd worn underneath.

Hannah's pupils are blown, eyes slate dark as they rake over her. "You look –" Hannah's voice, that soft-spoken sound of it, is so low, it skitters along Caroline's spine. "*God.*"

She doesn't elaborate, but she reaches out and pulls Caroline against her again. Her hands light Caroline's body on fire with want, first sliding over her shoulders, then rushing under her shirt to scratch up her back.

"Oh, fuck," Caroline moans before sliding her hand into Hannah's hair and messing up that perfectly done twist as she tugs her back down.

She sucks on Hannah's bottom lip, nipping it with her teeth until she feels Hannah's hips jerk against hers and can hear the sharp, wanting whine that leaves Hannah's throat.

Her throat. That long, elegant arch of it. She wants to taste it.

So she does. She pulls Hannah's head back, feeling the way her back arches against her and presses her breasts into Caroline's chest. She leaves a trail of kisses down Hannah's throat, feeling her moan, the way her nails dig into Caroline's skin.

When she reaches Hannah's collarbones, she bites down, just hard enough to hear the sharp intake of Hannah's breath and feel the way her back arches even harder.

And she needs *more*. She needs all of her.

She slides her thigh between Hannah's only remembering in that moment the slit in her skirt. How could she have forgotten, after being teased by it all night? She barely recognizes the whimpers leaving her throat as she nips at the juncture of Hannah's neck and shoulder, as she slides her hand down, into the slit of the skirt.

Caroline traces her fingers over the soft, heated skin she'd only been able to look at before this moment, before she slides her hand under Hannah's thigh. Gripping it, she tugs it up around her waist and angles her thigh to press against Hannah.

Jesus Christ, she can feel how hot she is, even though her dress and her own pants. The long, desperate moan Hannah lets out is swallowed by

Caroline, desperate to taste Hannah again. To feel the way she pants against Caroline.

Hannah's hips move urgently against Caroline's and she breaks their kiss, her head falling back. "Please," is all that she can say. And she says it over and over, breathless, until it becomes an inane chant.

Caroline is so fucking wet, she can feel herself soaking her underwear. It only makes her push her thigh that much harder against Hannah, reveling in the way she gasps and cuts off her chanting.

She slides the hand that had been gripping Hannah's thigh down, moving so that she lightly touches Hannah. She groans, herself, feeling how wet Hannah is through the barely there lace thong.

She plants open-mouthed kisses up to Hannah's ear, nipping her teeth at her earlobe as she teases her. Trailing her fingertips over her, Hannah's wetness coating her fingertips, and it takes all of the control she has to not dip her fingers inside.

"Do you have any idea how much I want you?" Caroline's voice is reedy, wanting.

And she can feel Hannah's desperation in how she shakes her head. "Caroline, inside. Please, I want – I've wanted you for so long."

The chuckle that leaves Caroline's throat is mirthless as she promises, "Not nearly as long as I've wanted you."

She pulls back, wanting to see Hannah's face as she tugs her thong to the side. Just enough to slip her index finger inside, feeling how fucking hot and wet and – she hisses out a breath as Hannah's breath catches in her throat, her eyes squeezing tightly closed.

It costs just about everything she has, but she slides her hand down, leaving Hannah's heat.

Hannah's eyes open, looking utterly confused. "What – why?"

Caroline's own heart is pounding so hard in her chest, just *wanting* Hannah so fucking badly. She wants to come, but more than anything she wants to make Hannah feel so good.

"I want you to come in my mouth."

The amount of times she's dreamed of it should be embarrassing. Maybe it would be if she had the wherewithal to care about anything else in this moment.

Hannah's lips fall open on a tremulous breath and she nods. "Yes – god, I... yes."

“And...” she pauses, waiting until Hannah’s eyes meet her own, as she trails her fingers over the back zipper of Hannah’s dress, “I want to see you.”

There’s the slightest bit of uncertainty that crosses her features in that moment. And Caroline can hardly believe it, given that Hannah is, without a single doubt, the most gorgeous woman in any room.

Caroline sways closer, her voice low. “You are the sexiest woman I’ve ever been with. Just feeling your hand on my thigh when we’re watching a movie makes me so wet for you.” She trails the finger that’s still damp from Hannah’s own pussy up, ghosting it just barely over her bottom lip. “More than even this.”

And she can’t contain her whimper, doesn’t even try, when Hannah’s tongue flicks out to lick at the top of her finger. She looks almost shocked at herself, before her shoulders straighten. Emboldened.

When Hannah nods, she leans back in to kiss her. Softer this time, less rushed as she takes her time sliding down Hannah’s dress until it hits her waist and pools on the floor.

She doesn’t break their kiss even as she slides both of her hands up Hannah’s sides. Feeling how warm she is, the goosebumps that break out on her skin as Caroline’s fingers map her stomach. Hannah’s arms come to wrap around her shoulders, holding her close. And she touches her slowly, tracing every bit of her abdomen, until Hannah’s body relaxes against hers again.

When she does break their kiss, she slides her fingers down to either side of Hannah’s hips and hooks them into her thong, holding Hannah’s eyes with her own. Hannah’s are barely open, her breath shallow as it hits Caroline’s lips.

“That night at the lake house,” she starts, leaning in to press an open mouthed kiss against Hannah’s collarbone again.

Hannah’s breath hitches, her hips jumping as Caroline starts easing her thong down.

“I was thinking about you.” She works her mouth down, pausing to suck on Hannah’s nipple. God, she hadn’t even been wearing a bra and Caroline hadn’t known all night.

Hannah’s fingers immediately dive into her hair, holding her tightly against her. They stay that way as Caroline eases to her knees, pulling Hannah’s thong until it hits her knees and slides to the floor.

When she looks up, Hannah's watching her and she looks utterly wrecked already. Her lips bruised, chest heaving, fingers clenching in Caroline's hair.

She wraps her hand around Hannah's thigh again, urging it up and over her shoulder, still holding eye contact. Moving in closer, she presses her lips to Hannah's thigh, feeling it quiver at the contact.

"I thought about how much I wanted to taste you. How much I wanted to press your hips down and lick you. Suck you. Feel your clit in my mouth when you came for me."

Her own breath catches in her throat when she's so close she can smell Hannah. The desperate whine that leaves Hannah's throat is all she can handle.

She leans in, licking a path up her slit, before she reaches Hannah's clit. The shout that leaves Hannah's lips at the contact is all she can hear as she closes her eyes and loses herself in the taste and the feeling of Hannah dripping down her chin.

She fucks Hannah with her tongue, pressing her hips against the kitchen counter, even though they continue to rock against her face.

Nonsensical words leave Hannah's throat, getting louder and louder. And Caroline opens her eyes again, just in time to see Hannah arching her back and shuddering her release, as she comes into her mouth.

Caroline had known how desperate she was to pleasure Hannah. She *hadn't* known that the feeling was apparently mutual.

As she'd stared up at Hannah, still kneeling between her thighs, she'd been struck utterly dumb. Hannah was still wearing her heels, she'd only realized at that moment, with her chest heaving, haloed in the light, as she leaned back against the counter, looked nothing short of an utter goddess.

Then she had looked down at her.

And she'd thought maybe Hannah would be timid. Or shy. Or – she didn't know. She hadn't expected the raw desire in her eyes.

Everything after that is a blur at this moment. All she knows is that she's on her back under Hannah, in her bed. And Hannah has two fingers deep inside of her, filling her so *fucking* perfectly.

She's so wet and it feels so good and Caroline digs her fingers into Hannah's back as her warm mouth sucks on Caroline's nipple.

"I love your body," Hannah says as she lifts her head, eyes running down Caroline's body, staring at her chest. She sounds almost dazed. "You look so *sexy*."

I'm going to come, she thinks, but she can't actually form the words right now. All that comes out is, "Don't stop, don't stop."

Hannah *doesn't* stop, and she's curling her fingers just right. But she does lift her mouth. Her hair is still technically up, but so messy and she looks so thoroughly fucked, it only brings Caroline even closer.

"That night. At the lake house. I went to the bathroom and I touched myself."

Caroline groans, working herself against Hannah's hand, unable to slow down while her body feels entirely out of control. "Fuck. Fuck. You did?"

She presses her head back against the bed, moaning long and low in the back of her throat.

"*Yeah*." Hannah watches her move, her mouth open as she pants. "I came so hard, thinking about exactly what you described." There's a whimper in her throat and she fucks Caroline harder.

Caroline shudders. Her body feels like it's – like she's – *so close*.

"Tell me," she gasps, pleading. She just wants to hear more. Hear Hannah. She wants to be completely taken over by her – feeling her fingers filling her up, her scent surrounding her, body against her own.

"I thought about you following me to the bathroom."

"*Yeah*," her voice is a whine high in her throat, moving her hips faster, scratching her nails up Hannah's back. "*Yeah*."

So close, so fucking close.

Hannah's mouth is next to her ear, voice raspy. "And I came with your name on my lips. Exactly like you knew I would."

Her thumb presses down against Caroline's clit and that's –

Her mouth falls open on a silent scream, her hips stuttering then freezing as her thighs shake. She comes so hard, white noise being all she can hear as her orgasm rushes through her body.

She has no concept of how much time goes by before she is fully in control of her faculties. Her heart is still beating hard, but calming down, and Hannah's delightfully naked body is pressed against hers.

Caroline's head falls back into the pillow, body feeling like it's melting into the mattress. After several minutes, they shuffle around, easily falling into the position they'd slept in the first night they'd shared a bed.

Caroline's favorite – sprawled over Hannah, arm slung over her hips, leg over Hannah's. She's still having trouble processing that this is all actually *real* and happening to her.

“Remember when you said that you usually went stag at holiday parties?” Hannah asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

She's tracing patterns into Hannah's warm skin, her usual after-sex drowsiness kicking in just enough to make her warm and so comfortable she never wants to leave this bed. “Yeah?”

“You didn't always.” Hannah draws her perfect, nimble fingers up and down Caroline's back. The sensation makes her shiver and she arches into the touch.

“What?” Her mind isn't super sharp right now, but she's also so content, she doesn't really care.

Hannah's fingers tap against her back, as if scolding her for not keeping up, even though there's a smile in her voice. “You had dates during several of the parties. Well, once it was Jess, I know that now. But I thought she... and there were a couple of others, over the years. At Wilkens and Granger.”

Caroline nuzzles against Hannah, her skin smelling so *good*. A little like sex and sweat, but mostly like *Hannah*. “Yeah. Sometimes, I guess.”

“I just remember, when I had my *why yes, my life is wonderful* smile glued to my face, I'd watch you with your dates. And you always seemed very...” She trails off, clearing her throat.

Caroline definitely feels more awake now, and she lifts her head up enough to see the blush on Hannah's chest and cheeks alike.

“You seemed very attentive.” Hannah's eyebrows pinch together in a thoughtful stare, as her fingers resume their movements on Caroline's lower back. “You would always laugh with whomever you were with. And I just remember thinking... it looked like you and your dates were having an actually decent time. Much better than I was.” Hannah sighs, eyes searching Caroline's. “It's just nice to know that I was right.”

Hannah had watched her, back then. It wasn't in the way Caroline's eyes followed her, sure. But just the idea that she was *there* on Hannah's

mind is powerful enough to push away her drowsiness and replace it with a renewed heat sliding through her.

She shifts her leg, hooking her ankle over Hannah's and using it to slide Hannah's legs open.

Gray eyes catch and hold hers, eyebrow quirking up as Caroline slides her hand between her thighs. Tonight, they have the time, and she doesn't plan on wasting it.

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The thing is, she should have known everything was going a little *too* well. The holidays have been suspiciously quiet this year.

It's officially the winter solstice is already jam-packed, even before the conversation she'd had with Hannah last night –

An aggravated sigh came over the phone and Caroline paused as she packed her suitcase. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm just –" Hannah sighed again. "Michael, of course, changed our plans, last minute. He now wants *me* to bring Abbie to his place tomorrow morning, rather than pick her up tonight. I have work first thing, but of course he doesn't care about that."

Caroline sat on the edge of her bed, lifting her eyebrows in surprise. Hannah didn't often discuss Michael with her. She knew they didn't talk all that much, that Michael wasn't a fixture in her day-to-day life, but still.

He makes "plans" with Abbie maybe once a month, that he breaks or changes at the last minute more often than not. But even when that happens, Hannah doesn't unload it on her beyond cursory, short statements. Even though Caroline actually *wants* to be there for her during these moments. To help her when she's stressed or feeling burdened.

"It's just – it's *Christmas*. He doesn't show up half the time he promises and it hurts Abbie every time. But tonight she was so crushed. For once, during the holidays, he could just – *ugh*." It sounded like Hannah hit her fist against her mattress in frustration. "And now I have to figure out my schedule to make it work, because Abbie is actually looking forward to this. Apparently, he bought – I should say, his *assistant* bought – a day pass for her to go skiing, and she wants to go so badly –"

"I can drop her off." The offer left her before she could really think about it beyond just wanting to make Hannah's life a little easier and wanting to ensure Abbie got to go skiing with her dad. Even if her dad was a jackass.

Hannah's silence had been deafening before she'd eventually said, "I don't want to burden you –"

"It's not a burden. I'll be up early getting my talking points ready for my presentation and then I have to stop at the office before I have to go to

the airport. I'll be up and about anyway."

Hannah had relented eventually, but it had taken a lot more convincing than she'd thought it would. –

She's pulling up a long driveway, her car moving slowly as she joins Abbie in a rendition of *Last Christmas*. Michael's house is... fucking *huge* and imposing. And as she stares up at it, she tries to imagine Hannah living here.

She just can't picture it. Nothing about this place says warm and inviting, not like Hannah does.

As she comes to a stop, parking in the driveway, she turns to look at Abbie. Who is looking out the window, looking adorable in her puffy winter jacket and warm winter hat pulled down over blonde waves. "This is where I used to live," she informs Caroline as she unbuckles her seatbelt.

Caroline gives her a gentle smile. "Yeah, I know. Is it fun, having two bedrooms?"

Abbie shrugs, grabbing her backpack from the seat next to her. "It's fine. But my room here doesn't have most of my stuff in it, anymore, not like my room at home does. It does have a ton of toys my dad puts in there, though. And grandma and grandpa, too. It's all the stuff mom says I shouldn't get all the time 'cuz they aren't supposed to be spoiling me."

Caroline raises her eyebrows. "Why do I feel like you aren't supposed to have heard that..."

Abbie flashes her a bright, guileless grin that explains everything, before she scrambles for the door handle.

Caroline gets out, taking Abbie's adorable little wheeled suitcase out of her hatchback as Abbie hops out, too.

And as she lowers it, pulling up the handle, she hears Abbie exclaim, "Dad! When are we going skiing?" Seconds before she can see him.

Michael Dalton, in all his smarmy glory. His hands are in his pockets, dark blond hair perfectly coiffed back from his face, and he looks just like the spoiled trust fund dick she knows him to be.

He gives Abbie an easy smile but his eyes are on her. And they aren't warm in the least. "We're leaving soon." His eyes narrow at her. "What are you doing here, Parker?"

Irritation zips through her and a retort is on the tip of her tongue, before she realizes Abbie is still standing there. Clenching her jaw, she bites it back and forces a smile. "Hannah had to work. So I'm here."

His eyes narrow – it had always reminded her of a snake and it still does.

And because she can see that he's about to say *something* and she is sure it isn't something good, she turns to look at Abbie. "Why don't you go get your ski stuff ready, Abbacado? You're leaving soon, so you have to be ready. I'll see you in a few days."

There's a frown on Abbie's face and she clearly doesn't want to go. But when Caroline just holds her gaze, unwavering, in a move she'd seen from Hannah several times, Abbie relents. "Okay..." She looks between them again, before sighing and putting her backpack over her shoulders, walking inside.

When she looks back, Caroline gives her a grin and a wave, which gets her expression to brighten minutely.

Caroline's kind of shocked that the move actually worked and her pride swells a bit. She hadn't been quite sure she'd have the parenting chops to pull it off.

Michael's eyes – it's kind of alarming now, to see how they look so similar to Abbie's. Only where Abbie's are excitable and open, his are cold and harsh – haven't left her for a moment, and they poke little pinpricks into her happiness.

"My wife isn't a fucking lesbian." Michael's shoulders are drawn up, tight. Pissed off, aggressive, tense.

She's never really interacted with him out of the office, and she's kind of glad. But like hell is she going to let herself be intimidated.

"I wasn't aware you're currently married," she shoots back, arching a challenging eyebrow.

In that moment, she tells herself that – no. She should not engage, because it's not going to go well.

"Hannah. *My* wife. You think I didn't know you wanted her, all those years? You think I couldn't see the way you looked at her? I don't know what you think you're doing to her, but just because she's going through this fucking phase and losing her goddamn mind –"

Her resolve to not engage falls away as soon as Michael is spewing *crap* about Hannah.

She holds up her hand, fury on Hannah's behalf. And, frankly, insult on her own. For Michael labeling this *thing* she has with Hannah as some sort of "phase" or Hannah losing her mind or – "I don't know who the hell

you think you're talking about here, but Hannah is *your* nothing. She's her own person. Maybe it's about time you get that through your thick skull. And my feelings for Hannah are irrelevant. Her personal life is irrelevant to you."

The vein in his forehead starts popping, his shoulders shaking in his barely concealed anger. "Did you think I wouldn't know? You think I don't have friends at McGregor and Associates, who saw you two together at that party?"

"I *think* it's none of your business," she takes care to keep her voice low, even as she seethes. When he steps closer to her, she angles her head up at him. "Don't even think you can physically intimidate me, Michael. I'm certainly not your anything and don't think *I* don't know that's how you get what you want from women."

"If I knew she'd be having you around Abbie, I would have fought for custody harder. Maybe we'll have to revisit that agreement," he threatens, and she *hates* that he feels he has some sort of upper hand.

"Then maybe you'll be excited to lose millions." Now *she* leans in, dropping her voice to a whisper, "And maybe we'd have your court case against Ava McNeil brought up. She was *extremely* helpful the first go-round. Or maybe we could bring in Sandy Edgars. You think she might have something interesting to say?"

She taps her chin with her index finger in faux-thought, even as she watches him carefully. Ava, a woman who'd filed assault charges *with* bodily evidence, the same year Abbie had been born. Charges were dropped after she'd been wired a large sum from his parent's bank account, but it certainly wouldn't look good for him. Neither would Sandy – a six month long affair, who had actually met Abbie. Not that Abbie was aware of what she'd walked in on, but Sandy had quite the memory.

"Just fucking try it, Michael. If you threaten Hannah ever again, if you badmouth her to Abbie – sexuality or relationship status, included – if you even attempt to breathe a word to contest custody... you don't even want to know what I will do to you." She goes toe-to-toe with him, her voice low and sharp, as her eyes narrow to a glare. "Try me. Because we both know who'll win."

She can see him flex his hands, before he wheels away and kicks at the snow, shoveled up next to the walkway.

He takes a few steps away, toward the door to his house, before he spins around again. His face is brimming red as he seethes. “Stay the *fuck* away from my kid. I don’t want to see you with Abbie again.”

“Well, for that to happen you’d actually have to be around to parent her, wouldn’t you?” She jabs, because the entire *reason* she’s even here this morning is because of him.

He stalks inside and Caroline stays glaring at the front door, jaw clenching so tight. She takes a step back and leans against her RAV4, only feeling the brisk winter air in this moment.

Letting her head fall back, she groans into the early morning air and takes in a deep breath. She already regrets letting him get under her skin. Fucking Michael. And of course, on the first official day of winter.

She takes a deep breath; setting her jaw. The holidays haven’t turned on her yet. And she’s not going to give in to it. Not today.

When she stops into The Bean Dream that afternoon, the morning altercation has mostly slipped from her mind.

She’s had several hours of prepping cases with her assistant and two paralegals. She’s leaving tonight and she’ll barely have any time for herself at the conference for two days. Let alone time to work.

Amidst burying herself in nonstop work for over six hours then rushing home to grab her suitcase and carryon for her flight, she’d gotten a text from Hannah, asking if she could stop by The Bean Dream before she has to go to the airport.

Honestly, it would be Caroline’s pleasure. She’s only leaving for a few days, but it feels like it’s going to be forever without seeing Hannah or Abbie at all. Her dad is driving her to catch her flight and he parks on the street, giving Caroline a quick smile before he says, “Bring me back a coffee? And tell Hannah I said hi.”

Caroline salutes him.

She steps into the café and is immediately thrown back to almost exactly a year ago. The lights and garlands are all tacked up. There’s a menorah in the window, next to a little Christmas tree that’s decorated with coffee-themed ornaments. The cups on display have those little stupid

cartoon lights, and the specials board has little intricate snowflakes drawn on it, but she now knows those were deftly drawn by Hannah.

Bruce Springsteen's *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* is playing over the speaker and this year, she can't feel muster up her typical ire.

She's barely halfway to the register, though, when Hannah's eyes land on her. And it's most definitely the most angry look she's ever received from her.

Immediately, her stomach drops to her feet and she shakes her head. Somehow, she feels like she walked into a trap, as Hannah turns to look at Jo. "I need to take my break."

Her manager just nods, and Hannah tilts her head, indicating that Caroline should follow her. She does, feeling like she's about to be sick to her stomach with every step they take into the back storage room.

"What did you say to Michael?" Hannah demands to know, her tone low, tense and *pissed*.

Caroline shakes her head, immediately thrown back into the morning, guilt swamping her stomach. "Did Abbie hear anything? I had her go inside _"

She thinks there's a subtle softening of Hannah's eyes at that, but then she closes them tightly, hissing out a breath between clenched teeth. "No, I haven't heard anything from Abbie. Do you know how many texts I've had from Michael in the last few hours? And a phone call. About keeping my *girlfriend* and my *sex life* away from Abbie."

"Why would you say *anything* to him?" Hannah demands. "Why wouldn't you just turn around and walk away?"

The same regret she'd felt this morning wells up again and she shakes her head. "I'm sorry. I *am*. And I wanted to walk away; I know I should have." She shakes her head, biting her lip. "It's something I'm going to have to work on." But when she thinks about what Michael had said, she can still feel the residual anger inside of her. "I'm always going to have a hard time hearing someone say terrible things about you or about us, and not saying anything back."

It's just the truth. She shouldn't have engaged with Michael, but –

"I told you, Caroline." Hannah draws her hands through her hair, knocking her visor totally askew, fire in her eyes. "My problems are *my* problems. I need to deal with them, on my own. Michael is *my* problem. If he says something about me, or us, then tell *me*. And *I* will deal with it."

It only occurs to her in that moment what Hannah's saying. And Caroline has to blink from the rapid change of pace, the weight of the misunderstanding moving through her.

"I don't need or want anyone fighting my battles for me. That's not – what I need." Hannah's hands are on her hips, flexing tightly, her expression drawn.

"You're... mad at – me saying, just, something to Michael? Anything at all? Not *what* I said? Not that he," she shakes her head, staring at Hannah in confusion. "Knows about us?"

"Well, I'm not *thrilled* about that part, but I'm not naïve enough to believe Michael would never figure it out." Hannah growls, low in her throat, dragging her hands through her hair again. "You can't *do* that, Caroline. You just can't tell Michael off. I don't want you to step in and... and..."

When she just groans, Caroline knows that she's searching for the words she wants to say but is failing.

And hers bubble right up, unbidden.

"I didn't say anything to Michael to be your savior or try to take any of your independence away from you," they burst from her mouth, far more impassioned than she expects, but she can just *feel* it.

Hannah's nervous, agitated energy immediately stills, as she stares at Caroline. Her eyes are still fiery, her expression still angry, but now that she's started, she can't stop.

"I did it because... I *want* your problems to be my problems. And I want my problems to be yours. I like the idea that you'd come to me at the end of a hard day and know that I *want* to be there for you. And that it doesn't have anything to do with taking anything away from your independence, Hannah, because your independence is something I love about you. One of the many things. Because I just... love *you*."

A laugh wells up in her throat. Giddy, almost, like these words have spent *so long* living as their own entity inside of her and they are so happy to be released out into the world.

"I love that you always put Abbie first. I love that you are probably the strongest person I've ever met. I love how persistent you are, how stubborn, how determined – and I love that all of those words somehow feel *different* when I use them to describe you. I love that you're sweet and warm and sexy and that you can take anything that comes your way with grace, but if

the same thing happens to someone you care about, then you're ready to go to war."

Caroline's heart is absolutely *pounding* in her chest and she is so relieved to say it all.

"I want you and Abbie, every day. I want everything with you and that's... a lot. I know," she admits, the weight of it crushing. "I'm not asking for everything right now. I'm not asking for you to... to love me, to take a leap with me. I only want that when you're ready. I'm just asking to know that you are really in this."

God, she can barely even keep up with herself and she can tell by the wide, shocked eyes that Hannah isn't doing much better.

"I'm asking to know that you trust me," she finishes, and she wouldn't have been able to really put the words to her worries until this moment. "Like, really *trust* me." She feels like an idiot, but she brings her hand up and taps her finger over her chest. Over her heart. "Like, here."

An idiot, she thinks again, waiting in that moment, her heart in her throat, for the answer.

But it's true. She needs, more than anything, to know that Hannah trusts her, after this last year together.

Her heart is pounding and she waits. While Hannah stares and her hands are still caught in her hair, her mouth ajar. Like she's been utterly shellshocked and Caroline wonders if this is really a surprise.

"I just need... a – minute," Hannah manages and her voice is faint, hoarse.

Caroline's breath leaves her in a rush, feeling hollow, and it hurts. That Hannah can't just tell her *yes*, she trusts her, really fucking *hurts*. Her eyes sting and it doesn't matter how much she blinks, the tears just don't *leave*.

Her phone rings and it jars her out of the moment.

"It's my dad," her voice sounds like it's not even coming from her own self, her throat tight. "I have to go to the airport."

"Just. A minute," Hannah repeats, teeth digging so hard into her lip, it turns white as she leans back against the shelves.

Being in New York City the week of Christmas may actually be Caroline's nightmare come true.

Not only always, but especially right now.

Because *a minute* is actually turning out to be a lot longer than a minute. A minute is turning out to be the extra five minutes she'd been able to stay in that storage room at The Bean Dream, before she would have missed her flight.

A minute is turning out to be all of the twenty-second, in which Caroline had attended the full eight-to-five day of conference meetings. She'd been exhausted and fucking *sad* and if she has to hear another rendition of *All I Want for Christmas is You*, she's going to rip out someone's eyes.

A minute also means that Hannah hasn't called her for their nightly talks, either, and Caroline doesn't think she should call her, no matter how much she wants to hear her voice.

It's two days of Christmas-filled misery – everyone at the conference talking about their holiday plans with their families, bumping into all of the tourists on the streets carrying their holiday shopping bags, with even fucking *carolers* on the streets.

If Caroline's Christmas gift this year is that Hannah doesn't trust in her or in them, then... where the hell does she go from there?

Fuck the holidays.

They really are out to get her.

xviii

Caroline gets home on Christmas Eve, at not quite three in the morning.

Her flight was *supposed* to be earlier, landing late on the twenty-third, but there had been a huge, shitty mess of booking on the airline. She supposes that is what last minute Christmas flights simply are – a mess. She'd volunteered to take the next available flight, sticking herself in the airport for an extra five hours.

She feels like she hasn't slept in days, her eyes feeling gritty as she rubs them and kicks her door shut.

As she wheels her suitcase down the hall, she scowls at the décor. The Hannah and Abbie Christmas explosion that she's let in her *home*. She decorated her home, her Christmas-safe sanctuary, for the first time. And seeing it on Christmas Eve, without any Hannah or Abbie around, just – *ugh*.

She gets closer to the living room and sprawling down on her couch sounds really great just about now.

She heaves a sigh, she can see the lights from the Christmas tree already, lighting up her hallway. Exactly what –

She freezes, only realizing as she stumbles into the room that *her Christmas tree lights are on* and she certainly hadn't left them on.

And, her heart feels like it lurches in her chest, as she sees Hannah laying there on her couch. The lights play over her features, soft and relaxed with sleep, curled up against the arm. As if she'd been waiting up and hadn't intended to fall asleep, but couldn't keep herself awake.

It's only been a few days, she has to remind herself. But a few days with no contact feels like it's been forever.

Leaving her suitcase where it is, she walks toward her, eyes trained on Hannah's face as she sits herself on the edge of the coffee table.

Hannah looks... tired, even as she sleeps. And Caroline is loathe to wake her, but she's – Hannah is here, waiting for her? She doesn't know where they go if Hannah doesn't reciprocate these feelings, or feel like she *can* reciprocate them. But if two days feels like forever without Hannah, what is she going to do longer term?

She reaches out, stroking blonde hair back from her forehead, unable to help herself from tracing her fingers down the strong line of her jaw.

And Hannah, the light sleeper that she is, wakes up. Gray eyes flutter open and in the clear Christmas lights, they look mesmerizingly translucent.

“Hey,” she whispers, her lips ticking into a smile of their own accord at the cute, sleepy look Hannah is giving her.

“Hey,” Hannah’s own voice is sleepy and sounding a little confused. Before she blinks a few times in rapid succession and sits up further against the back of the couch. “Hey. You’re home.”

“And you’re here. In the middle of the night,” she adds, tilting her head in question.

At her look, Hannah appears to fully wake up, and she reaches out to turn on the lamp next to the couch. The light makes them both flinch, but Hannah is already speaking by the time Caroline’s eyes have adjusted.

“You just... *dropped* all of that on me and then went to New York.” Her tone isn’t *accusatory* per-se, but it’s a cross between mystified and upset, but is nonetheless very serious.

“I had – a conference. And you didn’t call.” She pauses, swallowing before she admits the absolute truth, “If you called, I would have come back in a heartbeat. But you didn’t... you wanted *a minute*.”

Hannah holds her gaze before she drops it to her lap, her legs drawn up under her. It’s only then that Caroline realizes Hannah’s wearing one of her shirts, and... yeah. One entire sucker for this woman, she thinks, not for the first time.

“I needed a minute because you – God, Caroline!” Hannah blows out a breath, shaking her head. “You made the most intense, beautiful declaration to me and it was nowhere near what I was expecting or ready for in that conversation and I just had to think. To wrap my mind around it. To figure out my own words. I needed *a minute*. And then I realized that I couldn’t really... do this on the phone.”

Her words make Caroline brace for impact, her muscles tensing as if a potential breakup is a physical ailment she’s about to suffer from. *Couldn’t do this over the phone*. She feels sick with the idea of it and – it’s not –

Her own brewing stomach ache recedes somewhat when she looks at Hannah again, searching her face. She looks somewhat embarrassed, and she’s wearing Caroline’s clothing. Which just doesn’t feel like a breakup?

“What couldn’t you do on the phone?” She asks, cautiously, even as her hands ache to reach out and touch Hannah. Anywhere on her.

Hannah’s eyebrows furrow, as she slowly shakes her head. “I... I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. And the thing is yes, I want – no, I need my independence and to be in control of my own life. I need that. But I know that I can...” She trails off, searching for her words, and Caroline knows verbalizing it all isn’t easy for her. “I can, and *have* used that as an excuse, because I’m afraid. Of all of this.”

She opens her mouth and then closes it once, then twice. Before she reaches out to grab the portfolio that Caroline hadn’t noticed, farther down on the couch, and places it protectively against herself.

“Please, just – look through these.” Hannah says, but doesn’t actually offer them yet.

“What is it?” She doesn’t think she could possibly be more curious if she tried, yet, strangely, she still feels like she’s able to wait patiently for them.

Hannah takes a deep breath, dropping her gaze to look at the closed mystery portfolio. “Annette – Dr. Hogan? You gave me her card, last year.”

Caroline slowly nods, easily remembering the car ride. Maybe one of the first tentative moments of something like a friendship between them. “I didn’t know you went to see her.”

“That’s because I didn’t tell you,” Hannah’s smile is quick and teasing and it lights her up. “I... we talked about how I struggle with putting my feelings into actual words, sometimes. She wanted me to journal, which I sometimes wasn’t wonderful at, when it came to summing up all of my feelings succinctly. And she told me I should draw to get some of those emotions, um, flowing, I guess. And then see if I could write anything, along with the drawings. To sort out my feelings. And so, it just became something I started doing. Scribbling down thoughts or –” She blushes. “Yeah. So. You’ll just, see.”

With a deep breath, Hannah slides her the portfolio of her drawings.

“These are... they’re private.” She *wants* to look, so very much, but holds herself back with whatever willpower she has. “I don’t want you to feel like you *have* to give me anything.”

Hannah stares at her, amused and endeared. “They’re mine to share as I see fit. And I... I’d like you to look.”

With a deep breath, stomach in a strange sort of excited butterfly feeling, mixed with what feels like the most anticipation she's ever experienced.

The first image makes her freeze.

"It's... me," she breathes, eyes scouring the drawing.

Like all of Hannah's drawings that she's seen, it's a pencil image – or charcoal? – she doesn't really know. All she knows is that the angles of her face look perfectly proportioned, her nose coming to the little point, the small dimple next to her mouth shaded in what looks like... a mirror image.

It's dated, no words next to it, for early February.

"It is," Hannah sounds sheepish, before she rolls her lips and nods at the other images. "They all are."

"All?" Suddenly *itching* to tear through them, she makes herself go slow. Curious and amazed, she flips the page like it's delicate, to the next one.

Then the next.

And the next.

This one is dated for Easter, and it's Caroline's profile. There's a glint in her eyes as she looks at *something* and she realizes that Hannah must have drawn this one while actually watching her.

I expected her to be from Michael's background. There's something about Caroline Parker that's always come off like she knows just where every conversation is going and she's ready to take on the world. Like she is that smart, that prepared, that sharp.

But her parents live in the projects in Mission Hill. Not that different than where I grew up.

She isn't entitled at all. She just really is that smart, that prepared, and that sharp. She's just the type of person who will take on my case pro bono and work over my paperwork late at night, and make jokes with my daughter the next day. I don't understand her.

And I do.

More and more drawings of her, and Caroline is shaking her head while her heart just *pounds*. She never knew that Hannah paid this much attention to her, this whole time. She'd never even fathomed...

But here she is. Week after week. Her face, her smile, her entire body. Her sitting on the couch, her drinking a coffee, her holding a pen while staring at a brief.

The next one, of her on the Fourth of July, and it's her from the waist up, but – it's almost like she's staring into a camera. There isn't any color, but whatever she sees in her own eyes in this *drawing* makes her mouth fall open. What's written is a short, quick scribble.

Nice dark eyes. Rich, thick hair. Good genes.

An image of her and Abbie, laughing, and it looks so lifelike. Dozens more of them, together. Of her laughing, frowning. From both sides, from behind.

I don't know what we would do without her.

Dated right after Abbie's birthday, and it's her mouth. She really never thought of her own mouth as sensual, but it looks like it here.

In all of the drawings – her lips smiling, pursed, slightly parted.

I can't stop thinking about it. About her mouth. What would happen if she did kiss me? What would happen if I liked it?

And I know I'd like it.

Thank god it didn't happen.

An image of her in September, sketched with a backpack, her hair pinned up.

It's not just a backpack. I feel like this backpack is just like our entire relationship – Caroline is the most naturally thoughtful person and she –

She could have any woman in the world and Any Woman would be the luckiest person in the world.

She flips again, and it's her – sleeping. It might be the most detailed image of her she's ever seen. The blanket is ruffled over her waist, her shirt ruffled, and the skin of her waist is on display. It looks *soft* even in the drawing.

It's the morning after the first night of Girl's Weekend, she realizes with the date. Not drawing the woods from the view from the window at all.

I love her body. I can't stop staring. I get it. The curve of her waist. The fullness of her breasts. Her hands. I just, get it. Desire. True, sheer desire.

Holy... Caroline just feels *breathless* with it all, and she can't stop flipping through them. Every part of her body has been drawn.

It ends on a drawing of her eyes. So detailed, and she stares down, knowing that it's *herself* looking back.

No one has ever looked at me the way she does.

She doesn't even... she doesn't know...

“Hannah...”

“I didn’t –” Hannah’s cheeks are bright red, her hands clasped tightly to her knees, as she rolls her eyes at herself. “I didn’t think about you consciously, that way, until Abbie’s birthday. It – I was so thrown. By how much I wanted you.” She takes a deep breath. “Until I looked through my own drawings and saw that maybe it wasn’t so surprising after all. You’ve dominated my mind for... a lot longer than I even knew. I just knew I was so caught by your face. I always have been,” she offers a quick, honest grin, having to take a deep breath before she continues. “I just didn’t realize until I looked back that I didn’t draw you just like I drew other people. Like a building. I drew you... like I would draw a queen. Like I’m in love with you.”

The words are offered in a whisper, but it’s sure. It’s absolutely certain and Caroline’s gaze snaps up, locking on Hannah’s as her heart races.

Hannah loves her. She hadn’t pushed. She hadn’t stumbled and totally crossed a line.

“Trust, for me, is harder than love,” Hannah whispers, her mouth falling open as a breath trembles out. “I spent ten years playing everything so close to the vest, with a partner who... really wasn’t a partner. I didn’t believe a word he said.” There are tears in her eyes and as she smiles, they fall. “But I do. I trust you. With my daughter and with me. All of me. And I want to take the leap with you, Caroline. Sometimes I might not be able to find the right words, but I feel them.”

She can’t resist anymore. Her hands are itching to touch her and she doesn’t stop herself.

She cups Hannah’s jaw, thumbs stroking away the damp path of her tears, lips soft as they meld to Hannah’s. And she is very, very mindful of the drawings on her lap; she might just have to get them framed. Well, some of them.

After all, there are quite a lot.

She takes care to gently put the portfolio next to her on the table as she feels Hannah’s tongue slide against her lips, stealing a whimper from her mouth.

She spends Christmas with Hannah and Abbie.

There's Christmas music that plays on a loop for hours and she's been tasked with wearing a Santa hat, but she doesn't give a damn.

Hannah sits next to her on the couch, leaning in close, her hand resting on its spot on Caroline's thigh. But it seems that Abbie is far more preoccupied with her gifts than she is with them.

Caroline's pretty sure all of the gifts have been opened when Abbie approaches her, a small box in her hands and a bright smile on her face. "And this is for you!"

Hannah's hand stills on her thigh but, Caroline notes, doesn't drop.

Caroline arches her eyebrows. "I thought I got my presents from you, already?"

She thinks about the small stockpile of gifts she'd been given – several books that she'd expressed interest in through the last few months, a heated blanket for the many times she complained of being cold during movie nights, and her favorite: personalized pens that Abbie had picked out, as Abbie loved to remark on Caroline's "fancy pens" when they worked together at Caroline's kitchen table.

"This one's just from me. Not mom." Abbie nods determinedly as she tells her, bouncing on her tiptoes and back down.

Caroline exchanges a look with Hannah who frowns and shrugs, the hand on Caroline's thigh squeezing lightly and sending a rush of warmth through her.

"Well, you aren't going to hear me complaining about another gift." She winks at Abbie playfully before she opens the box.

The smile freezes on her face, confusion taking over when she looks at the contents. A little green sprig tied together with a red ribbon and Abbie's grin is sly, her eyes mischievous. "It's mistletoe," she informs Caroline needlessly.

Abbie watches them gleefully.

Caroline's face heats and she resolutely does *not* look at Hannah. They are playing this by ear, they'd decided after they'd had sex into the late morning hours yesterday.

She clears her throat, forcing a joking smile, and improvising. "Okay, Ab, get those cheeks ready –"

Only, instead, she feels a hand cup her jaw. Hannah's hand, long fingers soft but firm as they turn Caroline to face her. Surprise surges

through her in the split second she has, because Hannah doesn't even look uncertain.

She looks determined and wanting, and then her mouth covers Caroline's. Soft and warm and tasting like the coffee they'd had only an hour ago. Caroline sighs, melting completely against Hannah, sliding her hands to cover Hannah's own where they still cup her face, stroking over her knuckles.

Abbie squeals, the sound of excited triumph. "I did it!"

Hannah's lips curve into a smile on her own and Caroline *feels* it resonate through her entire body.

Caroline might believe in Christmas magic. Just a bit.

Afterword

You can subscribe to my newsletter [here](#) if you'd like any updates about future releases or any tidbits that may come out!

About The Author

Haley Cass



Haley lives in Massachusetts, where she has a love/hate relationship with the weather extremities, but also can't fathom living anywhere without fall

foliage. She spends her non-writing time hanging out with her friends, reading, watching too much TV, and obeing an overall goober.

Books By This Author

[Those Who Wait](#)

Sutton Spencer's ideas for her life were fairly simple: finish graduate school and fall in love. It would be a lot simpler if she could pinpoint exactly what she should do when she graduates in less than a year. Oh, and if she could figure out how to talk to a woman without feeling like a total mess, that would be great too.

Charlotte Thompson is very much the opposite. She's always had clear steps outlining her path to success with no time or inclination for romance. Her burgeoning career in politics means everything to her and she's not willing to compromise it for something as insignificant as love. Fleeting, casual, and discreet worked perfectly fine.

When they meet through a dating app, it's immediately clear that they aren't suited for anything more than friendship. Right?

[Forever and A Day: A Those Who Wait Story](#)

Good things come to those who wait and now Sutton Spencer and Charlotte Thompson get to reap the benefits. They spent months circling around admitting their feelings, but the time for denying their love is over.

As the world watches, their lives never stop growing. The only thing that's for certain is that through every hurdle that comes their way, they'll face it together.

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