

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace. The man, with short dark hair and a light beard, is wearing a white shirt and a thin chain necklace. He is leaning over the woman, his face close to hers. The woman has long, dark hair and is also wearing a white shirt. She has her eyes closed and a gentle smile. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and white.

Stranded

WITH MY

SECOND
CHANCE

REBECCA WATERS



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Thank you for taking the time to get started with "STRANDED WITH MY
SECOND CHANCE".

I hope by the end you enjoyed reading my book.

Xoxo,

Rebecca Waters



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Chapter One



I looked down at the man in front of me. He was on one knee, gazing up at me with expectation. He opened the small velvet box in his hand, and a large diamond ring was nestled inside. It was everything a girl could dream of.

“Sara...” he said, a slight tremble in his voice as he reached for my hand.

I glanced down at our fingers, now entwined. *I needed to get my nails done.*

“Yes?” I think that was my line. I couldn’t quite remember. It was early, and I was starving.

“Will you marry me?”

My stomach growled. I nodded, and Derrick enveloped me in a big hug. I hugged him back, thinking about hamburgers and tacos the whole time.

"That's a wrap, you guys," Derrick's producer, Hailey, said, coming up to us. Technically, she was just Derrick's roommate who held the camera and edited all Derrick's videos for social media, but hey, if she wanted to be called a producer, that was perfectly fine with me. Derrick was an old friend from work who happened to be an independent filmmaker, and he had asked

me to be in the opening of his short film, *Love: A Farce Across the Centuries*. I had told him to get a real actor, but he was too cheap to do that, and honestly, he could barely afford his rent.

“How was that?” Derrick asked Hailey. “Was it convincing enough?”

“Sara looked a little stale,” Hailey answered with a shrug.

I narrowed my eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You barely got your line right.”

“I only had one line.”

She smirked, “Exactly.”

I bristled. Taking criticism well wasn’t my strength. “How about this time I record, and you put on this tight-ass dress?” I was wearing a little red dress Derrick insisted on as my “costume.” I could barely breathe in it and had to skip breakfast to fit in it. Skipping breakfast was not my idea of a good time.

“Ok, let’s all calm down,” Derrick stepped in between us. It wasn’t as if I was going to hit Hailey, but I was tempted.

“Sara, you’re hangry. Get something to eat. We’ll pick up again in a few minutes.”

“Actually,” I said with a sigh, “I have this thing.”

“Oh, a thing?” Derrick looked hopeful that I had a life outside of work. He was mostly wrong.

“Yeah, my best friend, Robert, is getting married, and we have to do all these random things for his wedding this weekend, like a dress rehearsal or something.”

“Rehearsal dinner,” Hailey corrected.

“Thanks, Hailey,” my voice dripped with sarcasm, “So, were you the one invited to the wedding, or was I?”

“Go, get out of here; I’ll see you later,” Derrick said, cutting in.

“See you Monday,” I waved goodbye and walked quickly to my car, pulling at the hem of the dress. I didn’t have much of a butt, but what little I did have was only inches from falling out. I slid into my car, trying not to flash anyone as I did, and drove back to my apartment, yawning the whole time. I was tired from waking up at the crack of dawn to help Derrick with his movie and wanted to catch a nap before heading out. Not to mention, I needed something to eat and change out of the obnoxious dress I was wearing. The drive to the rehearsal dinner was a little under three hours away. I knew I could make it there before lunch, but a nap was definitely in order. I was already exhausted thinking about the series of events planned for the weekend. I had the itinerary synced to several calendars on my phone, so I wouldn’t forget exactly where I needed to be and when. There seemed to be three different locations for the festivities, with multiple activities occurring at each. It was a lot. I felt like I needed my own personal assistant to keep up with everything. But that was Robert for you. When he was determined to do something, he went big.

I’m sure he was spending a fortune on it. He had even offered to pay for my stay at the resort where the wedding party and guests were scheduled to stay, but I couldn’t do that. Robert was generous to a fault. And if it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t have made it through college, so if he wanted me to attend a million wedding-related activities over a weekend and had a million deadlines, I was more than willing to accommodate him. But first, I needed a nap.

I let myself into my apartment and greeted my cat, Countess, a black cat that thought she was royalty. She tolerated me sometimes and actually let me pet her once or twice this week. I went to pick her up, and she dodged me and disappeared into my bedroom instead. I guess I wasn’t petting her today.

I went into the kitchen and placed a bagel into the toaster oven. I sat on the couch and closed my eyes. What felt like seconds later, my phone rang, and I felt around for it.

“What???????” I mumbled, eyes still closed as I answered it.

“Sara, where are you? I thought you were going to get here early?”

I sat straight up, suddenly wide awake. It was Robert. And he sounded panicked. I looked down at my phone. What had felt like a few seconds had been an hour. I was going to be late. Dammit.

“Robert, hi, hey! I’m on my way,” I said, reaching for my shoes and balancing on one leg, trying to get them on.

I grabbed my purse, the overnight bag I had packed weeks ago, and promised to get there asap, all the while trying not to panic.

“Ok, hurry up. I’m outnumbered.”

Outnumbered, huh? I knew his sister, Robin, would be there as she was his only close family. Then there was me...and Jake. I wondered briefly if he would take time from his busy schedule to attend his best friend’s wedding. I doubted it. Jake wasn’t exactly selfless.

It wasn't until I was in the car for a few minutes that I realized I was still wearing the red dress, and my stomach was still growling. I sighed. I guess I was just going to show up to Robert's rehearsal dinner starving and dressed like a skank. That was a great way to meet his soon-to-be wife's family. Great. Just great.

I sped there, grateful that I knew the way there like the back of my hand. Before it was a resort town, it had been like any other small New England town. Quaint, close-knit, beautiful, with an old-fashion vibe. My parents had always taken us, kids, on vacation there one week out of the summer. It had been a special spot for us growing up-- me, Robert, his sister, and Jake. It felt

like a lifetime ago. And a lot has happened since then. Robert had lost his parents in a car accident a few years ago. The last time I heard, his sister Robin was couch surfing and living the life of a starving artist. And Jake...I didn't try to think about him too much. As far as I was concerned, he was the one dark spot in my childhood memories. Contrary. Stubborn. We always bumped heads, and that didn't stop in adulthood. We avoided each other whenever possible.

When Robert had told me Jake was going to stay at the resort too, I had been tempted just to book an Air BnB in the area, but the pickings were slim at this time of year, and I didn't want to seem petty, but God, Jake got on my nerves.

I pushed thoughts of Jake out of my head and looked at my phone. According to it, I was only ten minutes away from the venue, but running thirty minutes late already. That made me anxious. I hated being late for anything. It made me feel unprepared and out of control. Jake would say I needed therapy because I was such a control freak. But whatever, Jake was a jerk. I pulled up to the venue that looked like a modern take on Downton Abbey and was not surprised to see it was valet parking only. Quickly, I checked my hair and makeup in the mirror, grateful for a moment that Hailey had been so heavy-handed with my foundation, and took a few deep breaths. *I could do this. It was going to be fun.* I didn't feel convinced. The valet politely waited for me to stop staring at myself and opened my door. I slipped out as gracefully as possible, but it was hard to stand and try to keep my legs together so that the hem of the dress wouldn't make its way even further up my legs.

"Thank you," I said as I maneuvered awkwardly out of his way. I couldn't help but wonder if my insurance company covered a stranger driving my car

as I handed my keys over.

Pushing my anxiety to the furthest corners of my mind, I made my way up the stairs that led to the massive entryway, hoping not to be judged too harshly in my current state. That's when I heard someone call my name.

Not just any someone. Jake. The jerk.

I did the mature thing: I pretended not to hear him and went towards the entrance of the fancy resort. As the doors opened, I felt a hand on my elbow. He was quick.

"Hey, Jake."

"That was real mature, Sara. You could have acknowledged me instead of ignoring me."

"I'm not ignoring you."

"So you didn't hear me calling you?"

I shrugged and lied, "No." As I waited for the rebuttal I knew was coming, I studied him and couldn't help the scowl that I was sure was forming on my face. He looked great. Of course. The years had been kind to him. Not a wrinkle, ounce of fat, or gray hair to be seen. Granted, we were only in our early 30s, but Jake looked the same as he did in high school. It was a little unfair that the high school quarterback still looked like he could be a quarterback. He towered over me. What was he 6'3? I couldn't remember, and from how his clothes fit, I could tell he was still working out. Probably daily. He probably ate protein powder for breakfast. The thought of food made my stomach growl. I had been tempted to stop on the way and grab something but hadn't out of guilt of possibly being even later.

Jake, being the gentleman he is, of course, mentioned it, "Was that your stomach or a freight train?"

"Shut up, Jake," I turned away from him and walked towards the front

desk. Jake fell into step next to me, and I ignored him.

“Robert and Krissy’s party, please,” I said to the hostess with a tight smile.

“So, did your dryer shrink your clothes?” Jake asked, leaning up against the counter and staring at me. Why did I have to fight the urge to hit him every time he spoke?

“Jake, I’m not in the mood.”

“And why are you late? Aren’t you, Miss Planner? I expected you to be here hours ago. Telling people what to do. Micromanaging everyone’s life.”

“And I expected you not to be here at all.”

“What type of friend would I be if I didn’t attend my best friend’s wedding?”

"It's a rehearsal dinner," I snapped. Oh God, now I sounded like Hailey. "I'm just surprised that you had the time. Aren't you off conquering the world one app at a time?" Jake ran a start-up that designed and improved apps. Unfortunately, not only was he good-looking, but he was also smart. It wasn't fair. It's like everyone in the world thought he was so great. I still didn't get why no one saw what I did.

“Why do I get the feeling that you resent me for showing up?”

Gosh, I wanted to smack the smirk off his face. He loved to push my buttons. “Because I do.”

I turned back to the hostess and looked at us apprehensively as if she thought we would be in trouble. "The rehearsal dinner is being held on the east balcony, straight down the hall and to your right. Can't miss it," she added nervously.

She was right to be nervous. We were trouble. When Jake and I were together, things didn't go well. We were like oil and water..or more like

dynamite and whatever makes dynamite explode...I was a marketing major, not a chemistry major...we were just highly volatile when together.

“I like the look, don’t get me wrong,” Jake said as we walked down the hall, “But can you breathe in that dress? Looks a little tight.”

“I don’t have time for your jokes today, Jake.”

“The dress leaves nothing to the imagination. Not that I want to imagine any of it,” he shuddered.

That was it. I turned towards him, “This is Robert and Krissy’s special day.”

“Weekend.”

“Whatever. Do not ruin it by being your usual jerk self.”

“So I’m the jerk now?”

“You’re always a jerk, Jake,” I said while peeking through the glass windows on the door leading to the balcony. From afar, I could see the room was full of guests. Yikes, Robert really was outnumbered.

I turned to Jake again and poked him in his chest, “Do not talk to me. Do not even make eye contact with me. Pretend that I’m a shark and you’re a guppy. Understood? Stay far away.”

He pushed my finger away, "Don't flatter yourself, Sara. Believe it or not, the world doesn't revolve around you."

He walked away from me then, pushing the door open, while I hissed, “Are you calling me a narcissist?”

He turned back and whispered, "If the shoe fits..." before greeting the room with an "Afternoon, everyone," throwing a charming smile in their direction. Blah. Charming my ass. I was charming. Sort of.

Robert, who had been sitting in a lounge chair talking to someone I didn’t recognize, stood up at the sight of us and quickly made his way over. He

looked relieved. I couldn't help but kind of hide behind Jake. I didn't do well with crowds or strangers. And I was suddenly surrounded by both.

"Everyone, these are my best friends Sara and Jake," he gestured to the crowd, "And this is everyone."

As smooth as ever, Jake grabbed a glass of champagne from a waiter passing by and actually had the gall to make a toast. I didn't listen. I was good at tuning him out. He was such an attention hog. While everyone was distracted by his blabbering, I made a beeline toward the food and began filling my plate while scanning the crowd around me. I felt a little insecure around rich people. And rich people were pretty much all Robert knew nowadays. Was he a hedge fund manager or a venture capitalist? I couldn't remember. I just knew he was rich. We had all been raised in working-class families but had started careers that were quite lucrative. Even though I made what most would consider "good money," it was probably like pennies and dimes in this crowd. I bit back my insecurity and took a bit of food instead. It was good. Rich people's food. I started piling more shrimp on my plate. I was shy, but not when it came to food.

"Hiiiiiiii Sara!" a voice screeched and enveloped me in a hug, plate and all. I scrambled to stop spilling all my food down my dress as I hugged her back. It was Robin, Robert's twin sister.

She gave me a sloppy kiss on the cheek and said, "Oh my gosh, you smell so good. You always smell so good!"

Uh oh. Someone had already had too much to drink. Maybe. It was hard to tell with Robin, and I couldn't keep up with her moods. Growing up, some days, she wouldn't even come out of the house, and then other days, she was the life of the party.

She took a shrimp off my plate, and I gazed at it longingly as she ate it. I

surreptitiously moved my plate from within her grasp. I hadn't seen Robin in a few years. She looked thinner than I remembered, and her hair was shaved low and dyed bright pink. Her big blue eyes looked even bigger in her now slightly emaciated face. I made a mental note to approach her after the wedding to see if she needed anything. I didn't want to get into a deep conversation here. There were too many people around.

"I love the dress, by the way. Not really your style, but I love how you're trying something new. My life coach said I should do the same. Put myself out there more. Get out of my comfort zone."

"That's great...good," I didn't know what else to say. If I were Robin's life coach, I would tell her that she needs to be more grounded. Take fewer risks. Maybe buy a planner, write out her goals, break them into smaller goals, and actually find a job that pays her...maybe Jake was right; I did like to micromanage.

"So what do you think about Krissy?" she asked. I could tell she was trying to be casual. But the way she said Krissy's name spoke volumes. Uh oh. Someone wasn't a fan of her future in-law.

"She seems nice. I've only met her a couple of times when Robert came into town."

"Nice? She's a bi---"

"Oh my God, Sara!!!" Krissy gasped, popping up from nowhere and enveloping me in a hug. I sat my plate down finally and hugged her back; she was a long hugger.

"I'm so glad to see you here," she said as she finally let go. "Love the dress. Is it Balenciaga?" Krissy looked like a modern-day Cinderella. Her updo was reaching for the heavens and wearing a gown. I could only imagine what her wedding dress would look like.

“Ummm...”

“Not everyone contributes to the toxic fashion industry, Krissy.” Robin really didn’t hold back when it came to animosity. And since when did Robin consider the fashion industry toxic? Wasn’t she trying to become a fashion designer?

“Toxic? I had no idea. I just---” Krissy looked ready to cry, “I just like her dress. My family is a big believer in environmental causes...we would never--”

“It’s fine, Robin was just joking, weren’t you, Robin?”

My comment was wasted because Robin had already moved on to the dessert table and was helping herself to a very delicious-looking macaroon. She saluted Krissy from afar, then turned back to the desserts and started flirting with the attendant.

“She hates me,” Krissy said.

“I’m sure that’s not true---”

“I told Robert it was time for her to grow up, and he needed to stop funding her projects.”

“Oh, really? Then yeah, she probably does hate you now.”

Krissy’s lip quivered. Oh, God, was she about to cry? Why didn’t I have more tact?

“It’s fine Robin will get over it. She’ll forget soon enough and move on to hating someone else.”

“You think so?” Krissy asked; her big brown eyes seemed so innocent.

I lied, “Yeah, positive. She doesn’t hold grudges.” I was pretty sure Robin could write the book on grudge-holding, but I wasn’t going to ruin Krissy or Robert’s day by telling her that. And Robin needed some tough love. Robert wasn’t going to be the one to dish it out. He had always been the perfect big

brother, even though he was only born less than a minute before Robin. The two were inseparable, and after their parents died, Robin became a bit lost...going from one thing to the next. And Robert had made it easy for her by funding her every whim. I was the last person that needed to give out life advice, but maybe Krissy was going to get Robin moving in the right direction.

Robert saw us from across the room and maneuvered his way through the crowd until he reached us. “Hey, my two favorite girls,” he jokingly said, throwing his arms around us.

“Don’t let Robin hear that,” Krissy whispered, looking around for signs of Robin.

“Is she in a mood?” Robert asked, looking forlorn.

“Worse than the time her cat went missing,” I mumbled.

The sound of little bells filled the air, startling me. Krissy took Robert by the hand and said, “Lunch is served, hon. Come on, let’s find our seats.”

I followed them to the table, found my seat, and started chatting with the woman next to me. I was really good at one-on-one small talk. My work as a senior customer success manager required it and my clients loved me. I felt like I was batting one hundred when I felt someone sit down on the other side of me. I looked to my right, a ready smile on my face and the smile slowly disappeared.

“Looks like we’re in this together,” Jake said playfully.

I rolled my eyes. I couldn’t catch a break.

After lunch, the rest of the day was a whirlwind of activity. I finally had the opportunity to change clothes, so I immediately slipped into a pair of pants and a blouse. It was nice to not to walk around worrying about a wardrobe malfunction. I was happily back in my comfort zone, and all felt right with

the world. The air smelt just like I remembered it as a child and a crisp breeze reminded me that it was almost autumn. The leaves would change soon and then this area would truly be a sight to see. I wandered the grounds and found a few others sitting by fire pits that illuminated the forested area that ran behind the massive resort. I was pleasantly surprised to see a s'mores kit and helped myself to a marshmallow and a piece of chocolate, not bothering to melt them over the warm fire. I was pleased with myself: I had survived a meal while seated next to Jake, but it hadn't been easy. He went out of his way to be annoying. It was like high school all over again.

I began to get nostalgic thinking of those days. I didn't know why but I felt sad for some reason. I wouldn't say I liked digging too deeply into my emotions but if I had to hazard a guess, it would be that after watching Krissy and Robert together, I began to realize I was lonely.

I was so tense that my shoulders hurt. I'd been tense all day. I tried to pretend it was just because I was in a new place surrounded by people I didn't know all while being half-dressed, but it was more than that. I could admit that to myself now. This was actually happening: Robert was getting married. It felt like he was moving on with his life without the rest of us. It meant that he had figured it all out. I didn't know what "it" was, but I knew I was far from figuring things out.

And that scared me. I prided myself on always being prepared and having a plan, but I was romantically at a crossroads. Maybe I was going to end up alone. I hadn't really thought about the future regarding marriage or kids. I just figured that all that would eventually fall into place. It hadn't been a priority of mine like my career had been. But then Robert called me and told me he was engaged, and I realized that maybe it was time for me to prioritize something other than my career. Maybe it was time to get serious about

someone. But the only date I'd even had recently was with a man I'd accidentally hit with my car, and I had given him my number if he promised not to tell my insurance company.

I heard a noise in the woods that silenced my thoughts, and I turned in that direction just in time to watch as Robert and Krissy came stumbling out of the woods covered in leaves and dirt and giggling like high schoolers caught making out. I could only imagine what they had been up to. I pretended not to notice them as they walked away hand in hand. There was no mistaking it. They looked happy, and it was happiness I hadn't known. I was envious and felt so much self-pity; it was embarrassing.

And then I heard another sound, a woman giggling and Jake's annoying voice accompanying it. I could only guess he was living his best life, having sex with random women in the woods. Typical.

"Hey, Sara," he said, approaching me with a smile on his face. I even found his smile annoying.

"Don't let me stop you from flirting with random strangers. Just keep it moving."

"She was just asking for directions back to the resort."

"Yeah, right."

"Why do you care what I'm doing anyway?"

"I don't."

"Really? Alright, then why are you so angry all the time?"

"I'm not angry. You're just used to being around women who are at your beck and call and smile all the time because you give them a little bit of attention, and I'm not one of them."

He shook his head, "You think you're so above everyone else, don't you, Sara? Just because I actually like being around people and know what I have

to offer the world doesn't make me a bad person."

"Offer the world? Are you kidding me?" I laughed, "You're an app creator, not a god." I picked up a stick and started needlessly poking at the fire while mumbling, "And you call me a narcissist."

"There's nothing wrong with being confident. About life. About who I am. About the opposite sex. Speaking of which, when's the last time you had sex, Sara?"

I dropped the stick and sputtered, "That's none of your business!"

"You do know what sex is, right? Or has it been so long that you can't remember? Robert told me you haven't dated anyone seriously since---"

"Stop," I stood up. I didn't want to have this conversation. "Good night, Jake."

He opened his mouth to say something when we both heard another noise from the forest, and this time a very inebriated Robin came stumbling out with a bottle of wine in her hand.

"Hey, guuuuys!!" she said before falling over and hitting the ground.

I rushed over to her, "Robin, are you ok? Robin?"

Jake gingerly picked her up and said, "She'll be fine. It's the poor ground that she beat up with her face. Come on; we should get her back to the resort."

I took one arm, slapped it around my shoulder, and Jake took the other. She slept between the two of us, and I welcomed her snores; it made conversation between myself and Jake minimum.

"So this brings back memories."

I ignored him.

"So, you're trying to deny I carried you back to your dorm every now and then."

“It was freshman year, and it was once.”

“It happened more than once.”

“Did you keep count?”

“I should have. So that I can tell your future children.”

“Oh my God, Sara, you have babies??” Robin asked, suddenly raising her head before slumping back over and going to sleep.

I looked at Jake, and he looked at me, and we giggled. It was probably the first time we had laughed together in years. Robert had been the big brother I had always wanted, so I hadn't wanted to share him. Growing up, Jake and I had competed for Robert's attention, so we weren't exactly friends. In fact, the more we competed, the more we couldn't stand each other. By high school, we were sworn enemies, and then for a brief period, we had attended the same college together. Both missing home, we had put our differences aside, at least for a little while. But the peace between us hadn't lasted long.

“Ok,” he said once we had her back inside and at the elevator, “Go through her pockets. Find her key.”

“Does it look like she's wearing anything with pockets?” Robin was dressed in something that resembled a kimono.

“It's probably in her bra. Isn't that where you women keep important documents?”

I laughed, “Documents? She's 31, not 80, and I'm not going to stick my hands in her bra. Come on, let's just take her back to my room. She can sleep it off there.”

We dragged her to my room and then dumped her in my bed. I tossed a blanket over her while she drunkenly looked up at me.

“I love you so much, Sara,” she mumbled, grabbing my hand, “And you too, Jake.” she burped, “I love Robert too, but not that Krissy. She's so

horrible...I'm horrible too...oh, I'm so horrible!!" I couldn't understand the rest of her words, but she had my hand in a death grip.

"Help me," I mouthed to Jake. He reached over and unfolded my hand from Robin's death grip as if it were easy. Robin promptly went back to snoring.

"So what now?" Jake asked, giving me a look I didn't expect.

"Um...you go back to your room."

"Or you could come back to mine?"

I knew he was joking. We hated each other. We would never...

I shoved him as if we were kids, and he caught my hand. I didn't pull away, although my brain told me to.

He smiled at me. A smile I'd seen so many times before. It worked on all the other girls and I wasn't like the others.

"Bye, Jake."

He took his time releasing my hand. I tried to remain impassive, hoping everything I felt wasn't showing on my face. Without another word, he turned and left.

After he closed the door, I stood there, confused by what had just happened. I kicked my shoes off, shoved Robin over, snatched a pillow from behind her head, and laid down. I closed my eyes. He was ridiculous. But then, why did I want to take him up on his offer?

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Chapter Two



I opened my eyes and rolled out of bed, accidentally taking the blanket with me. Robin snored and flipped over. Shaking my head, I tossed the blanket on her and stretched.

It had been a long night, and I was still tired. Sharing a bed with Robin made me feel like we were nine again. When we were young, we had spent the night at her parents' home more times than I could count. Usually, we would build a fort in the living room and fall asleep under it. In the morning, her dad would make the most fantastic pancakes and would serve them with real maple syrup. Actually, I didn't know if it was real or artificial stuff, but I had looked forward to it either way. As Robin lay there, I couldn't help but feel terrible for the pain I knew she must be experiencing. *This weekend must be as rough on her as it is on Robert.* I'm sure they were both acutely aware of their parents' absence on a day that I knew her parents would have loved to see. I missed them. But I'm sure Robert and Robin missed them more.

This wedding weekend was making me nostalgic. I missed when we were all together, carefree and optimistic. At 30 years old, I never thought I would

miss the old days. But I did miss my childhood. I missed seeing all my friends regularly, even if that also meant seeing Jake.

I blushed unwillingly, thinking of what he had said to me last night. That had been a gutsy move. Inviting me to his room. Did he really mean it? No. There was no way. He was just teasing me. Right?

Determined to push thoughts of Jake out of my head, I reached for my phone and checked the time. It was already close to nine, and I was surprised I had slept so late. I was normally the type to rise early and late to bed. I didn't exactly value sleep. It tended to interfere with my plans.

Unable to help myself, I checked my work email. I was surprised, but not really, to find out that all my tasks had been reassigned to various team members. I sighed. My boss had told me not to check my email and to enjoy myself, and not to worry about the deadlines (especially since they were primarily self-imposed). It seemed to ensure I did just that she had divided my work among my colleagues. And she had taken some of my more high-profile cases for herself. Nice. I was being sarcastic. I knew I should be relieved, but I was honestly a little miffed. Work was kind of my everything, and I was looking forward to taking some client calls and checking status updates with my team. I needed a little normalcy right now.

I didn't know why but being here was really throwing me off. I didn't feel like my normal confident self. I felt out of sorts and had a hard time figuring out why. New places made me a little anxious, but I knew what anxiety felt like, but this wasn't the anxiety I was feeling. It was something else. I just couldn't put my finger on it.

I went to take a quick shower, and when I came back out, Robin was still asleep. I quickly dressed, walked over to my phone, and checked the time again. We needed to go. I had to wake her. She would just have to catch a

nap at the spa. She was stretched across the middle of the bed, sleeping so soundly that I almost felt guilty that I had to wake her. Almost. She had always been the moody type, prone to big emotions. In that way, we were opposites. I bottled everything up, and Robin let everything out, whether you liked it or not. I preferred my method. Life was safer when you kept your feelings tucked away until you had to deal with them. Or, in my case, tucked away so deep that you forgot you even had feelings, to begin with.

I poked her, and when that didn't work, I shook her arm. She sleepily opened up one eye and then the other.

"Stop shaking me, Mom," she rolled over onto her stomach and groaned, "You're going to make me sick."

"It's Sara; wake up."

When she opened her eyes, she stared at me hard for a full minute as if trying to figure out where she was, and then, finally figuring it out, she tried to sit up, saying, "Sara...I feel sick."

Promptly she fell back down onto the pillows, "I can't do it. I feel too sick. Just let me sleep. I need an hour or four."

I frowned, "We don't have an hour, Robin. We need to get going, remember?"

A sharp knock sounded at the door. Agitated, I left Robin's side, glanced back to find her back under the covers, and peered through the peephole in annoyance.

Jake stood there. I swore. This day kept getting better and better.

"What do you want?" I didn't bother to hide the animosity or irritation from my voice.

“I come bearing gifts,” he said from the other side of the door.

“No one wants your gifts here.”

“Alright, I’ll take my bagels and fruit somewhere else.”

He knew I was a sucker for food. Grudgingly, I opened the door and stood back for him to walk in. He looked down at me with amusement as he handed me a plate of fruit and an everything bagel. He knew me too well. That was part of our problem.

I mumbled a quick thanks and sat down on the bed across from Robin.

“She’s refusing to get up,” I said in between bites, “I think she’s still hungover.”

“I am...I am...” Robin groaned, “And you all are being too loud. Shhhhh” Jake and I exchanged a knowing glance.

“Just leave her here,” he said. “She needs to sleep it off.”

“Yes, Jake,” Robin mumbled, “That’s a great idea.”

“Great idea?” No, it wasn’t. “We’re supposed to ride together, Robin. What are you talking about? We’re taking your car, remember? I can’t drive a stick shift.” I was beginning to sound panicky, but this morning was not going as planned.

“I can’t go...I’m still drunk.”

“Just go take a hot shower---”

A snore interrupted whatever I was going to say next. She was already asleep again. Annoyance now gave way to stress.

“Dammit, we were supposed to ride together.”

“Why? Ride together where? You brought your own car. And you know these roads as well as anyone.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Jake. But did you even read the itinerary for this morning?”

“Yeah, it said breakfast,” he gestured to my plate, “I got breakfast. You can check that off your list.”

I rolled my eyes. “After breakfast, Jake. Did you bother to read what came after?”

“Why would I?”

“Um, to know what’s going on?”

“I already know what’s going on. More random wedding nonsense. I just follow the crowd and pop up wherever I think I need to be.”

How could he live life like that? Every time he opened his mouth, it was a reminder of how different we were. “I’ll let Robert know you called his pre-wedding activities nonsense,” I put my plate down. I was feeling generous now since I was no longer hungry, and since Jake had been kind enough to feed me, I figured I would explain our schedule for today. “We’re going to another site about three hours from here. It’s some sort of eco-friendly, super-exclusive spa in the middle of nowhere. They’re all about reducing their carbon footprint. They don’t even have a webpage. Robin and I were going to go in her car. They only allow a few guests at a time, including only a few cars at a time. Cars are frowned upon. That’s why Robert needed a head count to make sure we didn’t violate the spa’s car policy, and he submitted Robin’s car info and license plate number already so that they would let us onto the grounds.” I scratched my head, “Although, I think electric cars are an exception. I’m not sure where they stand on that.”

“What kind of hippie-dippy shit is that? Do they expect people to walk to the spa? What the hell kind of business model is that?”

I agreed with him, but that was beside the point. “Robert sent an email about it months ago. Don’t you remember? Asking who would like to participate?”

“Hmm...I think Tiff might have mentioned that. And I’m pretty sure I told her to politely decline.”

I made a face, “Tiff? Who’s Tiff?”

“My personal assistant. She handles my email.”

“Even from friends?”

He shrugged.

I shook my head, “You honestly can’t be bothered to read your own email?”

“I have people to do that for me. I’m a busy man, Sara.” He seemed unapologetic, which made me even more irritated with him.

“Too busy to reply to an email from a friend.”

“And too busy for a morning guilt trip.”

“I’m not trying to guilt trip you.”

“That’s what it feels like from where I’m standing.”

“Oh, so you have feelings now?” *I was one to talk.*

He laughed at me. He had a great laugh. Not that I had ever told him that since most of the time, he was laughing at me instead of with me.

He moved towards the door. I guess for him; the conversation was over. ‘I hope you figure it all out.’ And with that, he was gone.

Figure it all out? I looked at Robin’s prone figure and told myself to just breathe.

There was nothing to figure out. Robin was a no-go. I frowned and nervously began to twist a lock of my curly hair between my fingers. I fidgeted when I was stressed, and I was beyond stressed now. I couldn’t miss this, but I couldn’t drive a stick shift. Robert and Krissy were expecting me to be there. I wasn’t a flake like Jake; I didn’t disappoint people. Now how was I going to get there? I was a sucker for rules. I didn’t break them. I couldn’t

take my car. Maybe they could make an exception? Surely, they would. I was part of the wedding party. I would just explain that to them.

Yeah, that should work, I reassured myself. I reached for the itinerary and called the number of the spa saying to myself asking for an exception just this one time wasn't a bad thing. It was fine. Sometimes rules needed to be bent...just a little. Everything would be fine.

Everything was not fine. A few minutes after my call to the spa, I went to find Krissy and Robert. They sat on a balcony overlooking a lovely ornamental garden while holding hands. They weren't even speaking, just sitting there enjoying each other's company. Couple goals, for sure. They seemed so at peace with one another. Clearly, there were no wedding jitters for those two lovebirds. Too bad I was about to ruin their serenity.

Mustering some bravery, I sat down across from them and grabbed a mimosa from the waiter who was passing by. I smiled at them and said, "You guys are such a cute couple." I figured I'd distract them by starting off with something completely off-topic and then ruin their day.

Robert knew me too well, "Don't take the bait, Krissy."

"What?" Krissy looked confused as she looked from Robert to me and back at Robert.

"I can tell something's up by the look on your face, Sara. What's going on? Stop beating around the bush." At that moment, he sounded just like his father. And now I felt even worse for what I had to tell him.

I tried to find a way to tell him delicately. "Robin's a little under the weather." Now I sounded like someone's mom.

Robert immediately looked concerned, "Is she sick?" Even Krissy looked concerned. I had expected her to look relieved. So, she had a soft spot in her

heart for Robin too? Most people did. She was loveable when she wanted to be.

He stood up, "I'll go check on her."

"No, no, no," I rushed to assure him, "She's just a little hung over from last night. She's sleeping it off."

Krissy shook her head, "I knew an open bar was a terrible idea."

Robin had probably shown up with her own drinks, so open bar or not, she probably would have ended up in the same state: drunk in a hotel room. I didn't dare share that with Krissy, though, not while Robert was listening. He had a blind spot when Robin was concerned.

"It's not your fault," Robert said to Krissy, "I'll run up to check on her. Make sure she at least stays hydrated. Be right back," he kissed Krissy on her forehead and marched away.

"Oh, Robert, wait, she's in my room," I jumped up and raced behind him to give him my key.

He took it from me, pausing as he did to say, "Of course she is."

I lowered my voice, "She was pretty drunk last night. I'm used to her partying, but---"

"She's going through some things, and now with my wedding coming up...I think she misses mom and dad, and it's hard for her."

"And for you too."

He looked down and nodded. "Thanks for taking care of her last night."

"Well, Jake helped. He kind of helped me drag her back to my room."

He sighed deeply and said, "I'm not surprised."

"She'll be fine, Robert." I needed to reassure him, and to make the situation better somehow. But I hadn't. He still looked...sad.

He nodded, "I know. We all will be. I just don't know when."

With that, he took the key, squeezed my shoulder, and made his way to the elevators. As he stood waiting there, his face was tight. He looked worried, anxious even. My heart hurt for him.

Krissy was there now, standing next to me.

“He’s been really concerned about her lately.”

“Yeah, I know. Dustin and Barb meant the world to her.”

“That’s what I heard.”

“They were really wonderful people. I miss them too,” My own parents had been wonderful growing up and still are. My mom and dad now ran their own small business that freed them up to do what they always wanted, which was to travel. When they weren’t working, they spent most of their time cruising from one place to another. But the Watsons had been like a second family to me. I couldn’t and didn’t want to imagine Robin and Robert's pain.

“But it’s your special weekend, so let’s focus on that instead, ok?” I felt like I was ruining the mood. Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned Robin being drunk in my room. I probably should have made up another excuse about why I wouldn’t be able to go to the spa. Oh gosh, the spa. I completely forgot that was my reason for interrupting them.

Krissy impulsively hugged me and then let me go. “You’re so sweet. Are you looking forward to the spa?” She then whispered, “I heard the drinks there are strong. And Sara, this weekend has been a mess. I need all the strong drinks I can get.”

I laughed; I hadn’t expected that much honesty from her. I was growing to like Krissy.

“About the spa, I was supposed to carpool with Robin. And I called the spa to see if an exception could be made to see if I could drive my own car, but it was a strong no.”

“Oh yes, they have a strict policy. Your car has to be in their database to gain entry. I honestly think it’s less about one’s carbon footprint and more for security reasons. I heard they get a lot of A-list celebrities.”

I shook my head, “A-list celebrities? I don’t even understand how they’re even in business. They don’t even have a website, Krissy. It’s almost as if they don’t want guests there. Bizarre.”

“Yep, ultra-exclusive. Robin was the person actually who told us about it.”

Of course, she was. If it was something “off the wall,” it was probably somehow related to Robin.

“You can just ride with us. Most people opted out of the spa. And we’re already taking my cousins. But there should be room for a third in the backseat.”

A third. I had narrow hips, but I wasn’t a toddler. I couldn’t see myself piled into the back of an SUV with two other strangers for hours.

“Uh, I don’t know, three’s kind of a crowd. I’m sure you and Robert don’t want to have to worry about shuttling me around.”

“It’s just one day, it’s not a big deal.”

Jake passed by us on the phone and waved to Krissy.

“Oh! Jake! I bet he can drive a manual. Would you rather ride with Jake? That would make sense. He can take Robin’s place. I’ll let the spa know.”
Wow, so the spa could add another person but not another car? So weird.

“No, it’s ok, I’ll sit this one out.”

My protests fell on deaf ears as she dragged me towards Jake, who looked suspicious at our approach. “Really, Krissy, it’s no big deal.”

“Yes, it is, please come, Sara,” she looked at me with those big brown eyes. I could see why Robert fell in love with her. She was so sweet, innocent, and apparently determined. She was still holding on to my arm. Jake told

whomever he was talking to hold on and looked at me suspiciously as if I was the root of whatever trouble he was about to find himself in. I kind of was.

“Jake, would you do us a favor? Robin’s incapacitated.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“And Sara can’t drive a stick shift.”

Jake looked at me and said, “Are you kidding me? Still?”

“Shut up, Jake. Most people can’t.”

“I guess you’re lucky I’m not most people.”

“Do you want a prize for knowing how to drive a stick shift?”

“Anyway,” Krissy cut in, “Do you think you could drive Sara to the spa in Robin’s car? The reservation is under her car, and I’m afraid it can’t be changed, but I can add you to the guest list. We pre-paid for a party of ten, so we have room for a few more.”

“Why isn’t there a shuttle?”

“They don’t really do ‘modern’ conveniences.”

“Well, that’s just....inconvenient.”

I suppressed a laugh. Jake could be funny when he wanted to be.

“Krissy, I don’t really do spas.”

“See, Krissy; he doesn’t do spas. It’s fine. I’ll just sit this one out.”

Like I said, Krissy was determined and pressed on. “Just this one time. Pretty please. For me?”

I was waiting for the no I was sure was about to come next.

“It’s really no big deal, Krissy. I’m sure Jake has things he needs to do. He barely has time to check his own email.”

I stared at Jake, and he stared at me, and suddenly he smiled and said, “You know what. I’m being selfish. I’d love to go to the spa with you all.”

My mouth dropped open a little, I was sure. Was he kidding me?!

“Anything for the bride-to-be.”

Krissy clapped her hands together and then hugged him tightly. “Thank you so much!”

He awkwardly hugged her back, stiffly clapping her on the back. I would have laughed if I weren’t already feeling sour about spending hours in close proximity to the one person in the world I had spent trying to avoid as much as possible.

Robert walked up as Krissy pulled back from the hug.

“What’s up?” he asked, looking from me to Jake.

“Jake’s going to take Sara to the spa,”

Robert laughed and handed me back my key, “You two in the car? Together? For more than 2 hours? That’s like a death match. We’ll see who emerges alive. Have fun!”

He tossed an arm around Krissy, and together they walked away.

When they were out of earshot, I said, “You know I could just squeeze in between Krissy’s cousins and ride with them.”

He looked annoyed, “It’s too late now. This is all your fault.”

“What! No, it isn’t. You should have just said no,” I rolled my eyes, “Sorry if I’m inconveniencing you.”

“You are, but you’re not sorry.”

“This wasn’t my idea.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

His phone rang, “Be ready in ten. I need to take this.”

Without a word, he turned away. Now that was the Jake I remembered. Jerk. I wasn’t looking forward to the next few hours.

I went back to my room, where I found Robin still sleeping soundly. I reached over and ruffled her hair. “Feel better, kid.”

Her response was a loud snore. Time hadn't changed that. She still snored loud enough to be heard from another room, and I still viewed her like a little sister even though we were all so close in age.

I grabbed my day bag that I had, of course, prepacked and made my way downstairs. I honestly had no idea what room Jake was staying in. Not that I wanted to know. I had no plans to visit him there. I was ashamed to admit that I was still thinking about what he had said the other night. I chalked it up to him, just teasing me.

In college, Jake had been a big tease. All the girls had been after him. They thought he was mysterious and sexy. They had been right about the sexy part, unfortunately. But there was nothing mysterious about being emotionally unavailable.

I stood at the resort entrance and waited for Jake. I looked at my watch. He should be there by now. I knew that Robert and Krissy had already left out. They wanted to get there early...and now where was Jake?

Thirty minutes later, he showed up. He must have seen the look of barely restrained fury on my face because his first words to me were, "Calm down. Take a deep breath. The world won't end just because you're late to a hipster spa visit."

"I am calm. And don't tell me how to breathe."

I walked ahead of him, marching in the direction of the cars. Robin's was easy to spot. It was the only Subaru in the entire lot. At least she picked practical vehicles, I thought to myself.

"Valet, remember?" he said, grabbing me gently by the arm to stop me.

I pulled away from him. Since when had he gotten so touchy-feely? Since when did I start taking count of every time Jake touched me? I folded my arms and waited for the valet to retrieve her car.

“Are you going to be mad the entire time?”

“What do you think?”

“Doesn’t bother me any. I prefer silence anyway.”

Spitefully, I didn’t respond to him. I just looked at my watch again and tried not to freak out that we were later by the minute.

What felt like a millennia later, the valet pulled up with the car, and I tossed my bag roughly in the back seat.

I heard Jake chuckle as he slid in next to me. “What did that poor bag ever do to you?”

“Just drive.”

He did as he was told, a little smile on his face. I hated that he was so smug, especially when I was trying to be openly hostile. Sometimes he brought out the worst in me.

Trying to distract myself and get us back on course, I pulled out my phone and typed in the address I had memorized for the spa. It was an easy address, 355 Memory Lane. I was one hundred percent sure they had produced that address to make a silly impression on clients. I wasn’t easily impressed.

“Ok,” I said, finally calming down, “We’re about 3 hours away.”

“Three hours in the car with yours truly. Are you sure you’ll be able to handle this?”

“It’ll be hard, but at least it’ll be over soon.” I slid my sunglasses on, “I’m taking a nap. Try not to get lost.”

“I thought you were my navigator.”

“You thought wrong. Wake me up when we get there.”

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. I was tired. It hadn’t been comfortable sleeping with Robin. She slept like a wild child. At certain times, she’d had her foot on my back. I’m sure I probably had bruises from her

elbow poking me too. But then again, maybe I was exaggerating because I was used to sleeping alone...which was kind of sad.

Before I knew it, I had fallen asleep.

“Shit,” I heard Jake say before my eyes popped open.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Almost two hours.”

He looked worried. And his hand gripped the gear shift tightly as he watched the car behind us from the rear-view mirror.

“What’s going on?”

“Some idiots behind us are drag racing. Must be drunk or stupid.”

“It’s barely the afternoon.”

“It’s happy hour somewhere.”

I ignored him and looked behind us. He was right. The next thing I knew, the car behind us accelerated, and then I saw a red car coming up close behind that one. They were almost on top of us. It was a two-lane road. This was bad.

“Shit.”

“That’s what I said.”

The red car was barreling toward us, and I didn’t think they would stop. It wasn’t as if Robin’s ten-year-old Subaru was going to outrun them. “We need to get off this road. Ja---”

As the car behind us pistoled forward, I didn’t get another word out. I heard metal scrap against metal as the car side swept us. Robin’s car went spinning across the small two-lane road. My ears roared as we turned. I thought I could hear screaming and realized it was my voice, and we stopped just like that.

I felt Jake’s hand on my shoulder. “Sara! Are you alright? Talk to me. Are

you ok?”

I was ok until I turned my neck, and it hurt terribly. And then I looked at Jake, his head was bleeding.

“You’re bleeding,” I said, reaching out to touch it.

“Can you walk?” he asked, ignoring his own injury. “We need to get out of this car.”

Just then a knock sounded at my window. “Are you all ok?” It was a woman.

I nodded and tried to push my door open. I felt shaky, but I knew that it was just adrenaline and fear. I let my head fall back against the seat. I felt suddenly sick as if I were still spinning. My whole body was shaking, and I found myself suddenly afraid to move.

“I saw when they hit you,” she was saying. Her words sounded far away. Don’t faint, Sara. Don’t faint, I said to myself over and over.

“Sara, are you ok? Can you move?” I could hear the panic in Jake’s voice.

It felt like an enormous effort, but I finally replied, “I think so.” My legs were wobbly, and the door felt extra heavy as I pushed against it. I pushed harder. It still didn’t budge. “I can’t get out.”

Jake came around and tried to open it. It was stuck. I told myself not to panic. I was safe. Everything would be fine. As my internal voice talked me down from having a full-blown panic attack, I could see Jake approaching the driver’s seat again. To my surprise, he reached in, unbuckled me, and lifted me out like I weighed nothing. I noticed then just how large the gash was on his head. “That doesn’t look good.” I felt my stomach turn. Jake was badly hurt. I don’t know why, but I teared up. I was crying. To my surprise, he wiped the tears away. I bit my lower lip, holding back a sob. I was just in shock and scared. But Jake. Jake was a rock.

“You can put me down now,” I said with a shaky voice. I didn’t trust my legs, but I trusted being this near Jake when I was feeling so vulnerable even less.

He ignored my request.

I looked at the car and realized that I was lucky to even be alive. The vehicle that had collided with us had smashed in the back door on my side and part of the passenger door. No wonder I couldn’t get out.

He lowered me slowly to the ground and started checking my arms and legs for bruises. When his hands brushed against my torso, I grabbed them.

“Jake...I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

His hands squeezed mine. And then he stepped closer to me, letting one hand go as he placed the other against my cheek. He rubbed my cheek, as his gaze held mine. “Are you sure you’re, ok?”

I nodded, unable to do anything else. I know it sounded trite but as he touched me the world seemed so far away. As if it was just the two of us, and I admitted to myself then that I preferred it that way.

He smiled. And this time, I didn’t find it teasing. It was reassuring, and it made me feel things I told myself not to feel anymore. I was going into dangerous territory. I couldn’t go down that road with Jake...not again.

“I think I might have a concussion,” I lied, taking a step back. I just needed to put some space between us.

“I called my husband. He’s a mechanic. He’ll get your car towed into town,” the woman said, coming to my rescue. I needed the distraction. She told me her name, took me by the arm, and started to escort me to her mini-van, where two little kids sat in the back. Jake followed behind us.

“Chaundra, Taylor, move over,” she commanded. They promptly did as

they were told while looking at us with wide eyes.

“Come on, let me get you folks to town. It’s only a few miles from here. I got to get you folks to a hospital.”

“No...that’s not necessary,” I protested as I climbed in with Jake’s help. I tried to ignore his hand on my butt. He was making hating him harder by the second.

“Urgent care, mom! You should take them to the one near Earl’s place!” Taylor or Chaundra volunteered. “When I ran into the railing and cut my mouth open, that’s where my mom took me! I barely felt the stitches!”

“And they put in like two billion stitches,” said the other kid. They were clearly excited about another visit to the urgent care.

“They’re right. We have urgent care not too far from here. I’ll take you two there.”

I looked at Jake, and he looked at me. “I guess that’s going to be our only option.”

I settled in the van and closed my eyes while Jake went back to retrieve our phones and my day bag.

“I’m glad you and your boyfriend are ok. Mom says lots of bad drivers are around nowadays,” one of the kids said.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I said to the smaller one. “Is he your husband?” the other one asked.

“Not all girls and boys are boyfriend and girlfriend or husband and wife,” the bigger one said. As if she knew all the ins and outs of the world. She made me smile. She reminded me of myself as a little girl. A complete know it all. I was still the same way. I would just never admit it.

“We’ll take you to urgent care. They’ll take good care of you. Patch you both right on up. And my husband will take care of the car.”

“Thank you so much,” I said.

As Jake settled in next to me, I asked, “Should we call Robert now? Or Robin?”

Jake shook his head, “Definitely not Robin. She needs to get over her hangover. She doesn’t need any additional drama. I’ll just buy her a new car. She’ll be happy. Maybe when we get to urgent care, I’ll give Robert a call. I don’t want to worry him or ruin whatever plans he has for today.”

“He’s going to worry about us if he doesn’t hear from us soon.”

Jake seemed to be considering what I said and then nodded his head decisively, “I’ll just tell him we had some car trouble and are trying to take care of it.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, if he hears we got into an accident, he’ll probably try to do something rash like cancel everything but the wedding to get to us.”

I was sure Jake was right given what had happened to his parents.

The kind family dropped us off at the urgent care in a town that probably had a smaller population than my high school.

We thanked her and the kids profusely and headed inside urgent care. We were the only ones there, and so we were pretty quickly in and out: Jake with a few stitches and me with just a bad headache and a few bruises, but no concussion, thank God.

“So, what should we do now since we’re not going to call Robert to rescue us?” I felt like I was relying on Jake a lot to handle things, and I realized then that I trusted him more than I let on.

“I called my assistant. She’s bringing up another car tonight.”

“Wow, must be nice,” I was going to chide him about being rich until his words sunk in, “Tonight? So we’re stuck here until then?”

He sighed. “Yep...it looks like it.”

Book made for jelliott67@gmx.co.uk

Chapter Three



A short time later, we were assuring Robert that everything was fine and that he didn't need to rush to our rescue. We had only called him because we knew we were going to miss spa day and didn't want him to think something terrible had happened to us. He had wanted us to call an Uber, and we pointedly explained to him that we were in a one-stoplight town. A charming town. But a small one, nonetheless.

We were able to find an Airbnb inside the town and had booked it immediately. At least we would have a comfortable place to stay to pass the next few hours until Jake's assistant came to our rescue. Something about the Airbnb reminded me of the small town my parents had vacationed at when we were all kids. The rental was actually a cottage. It was pretty bare, but there was a small living room with a couch that opened to a kitchenette. There were also two bedrooms and a small bathroom located toward the back of the cabin. I had claimed the bedroom with the bigger bed, of course.

Instead of feeling anxious, I felt relaxed, even in present company. I wasn't itching to run away. Being this close in proximity to Jake normally wasn't

my idea of a good time, but he had taken care of me, taken care of the situation, and I realized that it was nice to surrender some control and not handle everything on my own for a change. I wasn't going to let my guard down completely, but maybe it was time to let some of those walls I put up fall.

Jake was staring out the cottage window, deep in thought, while I rummaged through the pantry looking for something other than crackers and water. I wondered what he was thinking about. Probably his next meeting. I couldn't blame him. I was a workaholic too, but strangely enough, I hadn't thought about work for awhile.

"So, since we're stuck in this town, want to get an early dinner with me?" he asked, still staring out the window.

There was no harm in getting dinner, right?

My stomach growled at the mention of food, and Jake turned to me and smiled, "I take that as a yes." He reached for his coat, "I guess we'll just walk to that diner I saw when we were pulling into the urgent care, Earl's Place; I think it's called. It wasn't far. Like a quarter of a mile."

I nodded. "That's definitely doable."

We made our way down the street as if we had all the time in the world. I knew Jake was walking slowly to make sure I didn't exert myself. Yes, my legs hurt a little, but he was the one with the stitches. I wasn't used to him being so...caring. Maybe he'd changed more than I'd given him credit for. Or maybe I just didn't know him well...at least, not anymore.

"Doesn't this town remind you of college?" he asked, pulling me away from my thoughts.

I smiled. "Our town wasn't nearly as big."

He laughed, "It had more than one stop light, at least."

“I liked it, though, but I couldn’t wait to move back to the city, to be honest.”

“Really? I thought you loved it there.”

“I did,” for a time. I could feel the mood shift. I didn’t want to go down that road. “But you know how it is. The novelty wore off after a while.”

“So, finally, the truth comes out,” He surprised me then by saying, “I missed you when I left.”

I shook my head, “Really? Then you had a really weird way of showing it.”

I could feel the walls that I had just let down building back up. I wasn’t ready for this conversation. And if he could talk about it so nonchalantly about when he had left, maybe I was wrong. Perhaps he hadn’t changed at all.

I ignored him the rest of the way there. He had opened up a door to memories I had rather not think about. Leaving home for college had been hard for me but having Jake around had made it easier at the time. Robert had been there too, but two years ahead of us, courtesy of advanced placement classes and college credit he had earned while in high school. So when Jake left, I felt a little lost. And alone. And I sort of did blame him when I stopped going out, stopped making friends. But I hadn’t wanted any new friends. Mostly, I hadn’t wanted to get hurt again. And part of me had felt abandoned when he had left. Robin had taken a gap year, so she hadn’t been there either. Robert had tried his best to fill in the gaps, but he had been fighting an uphill, complicated battle. To my knowledge, he still didn’t know what had happened the night Jake had left.

Nonetheless, Robert had looked out for me like he always did. He even helped author the grant that paid for my college tuition when my parents had gotten laid off from the same company at the same time at the beginning of my sophomore year. My father had been the facilities manager and my

mother a technical writer for a for-profit school that had gone bankrupt. The layoffs had come as a shock. That had been a rocky moment in my life. I thought I would have to drop out, but then Robert had told me about the grant, and I had applied and got it. Between the grant, a few part-time jobs, I had made it through..., but it had been so stressful, and I had been determined to never get myself in a situation like that ever again. Even though my parents had made it through and eventually went on to start their own small real estate business, I hadn't been left unscathed. I didn't want to rely on anyone. I knew it wasn't the right attitude, but relying on myself seemed safer. Life threw too many curveballs, and I wasn't interested in getting hit by any more of them.

Jake held the door open for me, and I walked into the diner and took a look around. It couldn't be described as quaint or cute. The whole place looked like an afterthought from the mismatched curtains to the awkwardly placed booths and tables. There was a stage strangely in the middle of the diner and a sign that said something about karaoke. It was an odd arrangement to say the least. The chairs looked like they hadn't been swapped out since the eighties and squeaked a bit when we sat down. And the table was made of the type of Formica I'm sure was prohibited by the EPA now.

"A slice of Americana----" Jake joked, looking at me with that smile. I wish he would stop smiling. I preferred scowling at Jake. He was easier to be mad at.

"Yeah, I think I'll stick to microbreweries."

"With the weirdly flavored beers, dry overpriced burgers, gross 'artisan' lettuce, and stools so hard that I worry about my sperm count...no thank you."

I laughed. He was funny when he wanted to be.

He surprised me then as he reached up and tucked a strand of my hair

behind my ear. “When’s the last time we had a meal together, Sara?”

I turned away from him and picked at the crumbling counter top in front of me. “Ummm, just the other night.”

“I mean, just the two of us.”

I knew exactly when...a few weeks before he told me he was leaving college. Transferring. But I pretended to not remember and stared at my menu.

“I can’t remember,” I lied. I was trying not to think about the night he left. I looked up at him then, and we locked eyes. I knew he was remembering the same things I was remembering. Things that I had been trying to forget for longer than I cared to admit.

“It’s too bad I transferred...we were finally becoming friends.”

“No, we weren’t.” I looked around for a waitress. God, I hope he wasn’t about to bring up that night. Not here. Not now. I could feel humiliation just at the surface, threatening to reveal itself.

“We were just two people with a shared childhood. If anything, we were more like acquaintances by default.”

“That’s all I was to you, an acquaintance?”

“Is your pride hurt now?”

“Yeah, I’ll never be able to hold my head up high again.”

I laughed again, more comfortable with humor than the truth. And what was the truth exactly? I shifted uncomfortably in my seat as his eyes held mine once again. What was Jake playing at? Why was he suddenly going down memory lane? Did he possibly have regrets? I didn’t let myself go down that train of thought.

“Sara,” he said, leaning towards me, “I---”

“Hi, folks; sorry about the wait,” said the server, popping up from nowhere.

I was strangely relieved. I didn't think I was emotionally ready to handle a deep dive down memory lane with Jake.

"What can I get you, folks?" He was wearing a kilt and had a long white beard. He looked like a cross between Braveheart and Billy Gibbons.

"I'll take a burger. Fries. Milkshake. Anything that's guaranteed to give me a heart attack," Jake said.

The waiter laughed, "I like you. And you, missy?"

"Same, without the heart attack, though. And make it a large fry. I'm starving."

He smiled, "I like a woman with an appetite. You all staying at that B&B down the street? A couple of hipsters bought it, and I haven't seen them since. I'm not complaining...they give us a steady number of customers."

"Yeah, we're renting it for the evening. We got into an accident on the road to town---"

He grunted and narrowed his eyes, scratching his beard with the same pencil he was using to take our orders, "I saw the mechanic bring your car in. Damn kids drag racing again, weren't they?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Goddamn millennials. When I was their age, I was off fighting wars and shit."

I didn't have the heart to tell him that the kids weren't anywhere near the age of millennials, but I didn't want him to spit in my food. Instead, I smiled and nodded.

"Give me a few minutes. I'll be out with your food. I'm the cook tonight too. My waitress quit. No one wants to work no more," he mumbled as he walked away.

"He's a colorful character," I said when he was gone.

“He reminds me of Professor Horne.”

I laughed, “Oh my god, I almost forgot about Professor Horne. The kilt! You’re so right!” My laughter disappeared when I thought a little more, “Hold on, didn’t he get fired for having affairs with multiple students?”

Jake shrugged, “He was still there when I was there.”

“The girls in my dorm loved his legs. I mean, he was sort of hot in a hipster, metrosexual, intellectual kind of way.”

“So that’s your type, skirt-wearing professors?”

“What’s wrong with that? Is your masculinity feeling threatened?”

“Never. Do I look like the type of guy who has a problem with the ladies?”

“You’ve always been full of yourself.”

“I just know what I bring to the table.”

“And what’s that?”

“I don’t think we have time for the full list.”

“I’ll take a partial one,” I teased. He smiled again and seemed about to say something when the waiter/cook showed up again with drinks in plastic cups.

Any other time, I would have asked for a straw, but beggars can’t be choosy. I thanked him, and he said, “Sure, pretty girl.”

I appreciated the compliment and knew I was smiling from ear to ear as he walked away.

“He’s right, you know.”

I looked up from my drink. “Right about what?”

“You’ve always been pretty.”

I was taken aback but didn’t want to let him know it. “Well, thanks for noticing, Jake. You’ve always been kind of weirdly unattractive.”

We both laughed together, and I realized that I had missed this. This camaraderie. I missed my friends. I knew people had grown apart. That was

just the reality of getting older. And I realized that maybe I had judged Jake a little too hard for not coming home to see Robert more often. It wasn't his fault we all had gotten so involved in our careers and lives that there wasn't room for much else. We all had pretty much gone our separate ways after college, anyway. I had moved back to the city. Robert had spent some time in Europe. Robin had lived in New York. And Robert had told me Jake had lived in California for a while. Yeah, we reached out for birthdays, holidays, etc. But that was more like something you did with acquaintances than friends. What was an occasional Christmas card when you were once best of friends?

But at least I had been there for Robert when he needed me. I couldn't really say the same about Jake. Jake hadn't come to Robert's parents' funeral, and I had never understood why.

Maybe now was the time to clear the air.

"Jake, can we talk---"

"We're already talking---"

"No, I mean like really talk---"

He settled back in the booth and looked at me, "We aren't exactly known for talking things out. This must be serious."

"No, I just---" I lost my nerve. After all, who was I to confront him? "Never mind."

"Go ahead, say what you need to say," at that moment, the cook came back and sat our plates down in front of us.

"Bon appetit," he said, sounding proud of himself for speaking a little French.

"Thanks," we said, and he disappeared back into the kitchen.

Jake picked up a fry and popped it into his mouth. "These are real potatoes.

You gotta try these, Sara,” he held up a fry.

“Jake, I have fries on my own plate.”

He shrugged and said, “You know you want to.”

“Be fed by you? No thanks.”

He dropped the fry in his mouth, and I glanced at his lips. What was wrong with me? Since when did I start looking at Jake’s lips? I knew the answer to that question, but it wasn’t something I wanted to think about.

But it was too late now. All I could think was that I did know the feel of his lips against mine. I knew that feeling all too well.

I was fighting to bury a memory. A memory of his hands on my breasts. His mouth against mine. No one knew. I hadn’t told Robert or Robin. No one. The rejection had been too painful. I had felt shame and embarrassment. And as far as I knew, he hadn’t told anyone either. And so, I pushed it out of my mind. Chalked it up to youthful hormones, home sickness, and bad judgment. And we had returned to being enemies. Barely speaking. Barely seeing each other. Avoiding one another. Or maybe all this time maybe I had been the one avoiding him. And that had been more than enough. Why wasn’t it anymore?

I was struggling with my feelings. Why was something that happened over ten years ago bothering me so much now? I chalked it up to Robert’s wedding. That had to be it. It was making me sentimental, and I wasn’t a sentimental person.

“So, what was it you wanted to talk about?” he asked in between bites.

“Nothing,” I lied. I suddenly lost my appetite and started moving fries around listlessly on my plate. “I was just wondering if you’ve kept in touch with Robert over the years.”

“Of course I do. We go fishing together. We hit up the Bahamas every time

we can spare a weekend. When he was in Europe, we always met up somewhere new. Ibiza was our favorite, though. We even went base jumping last year for my birthday.”

I was feeling a little miffed about not being invited to Ibiza. “Robert went base jumping?”

He nodded and laughed, “Only because it was the only way to get down.”

“So, you guys have been hanging out this whole time and never told me?”

“You get to see him on holidays and whenever you like. I only get to see him like 3 or 4 times a year.”

“But still--” I felt immediately silly. We argued over Robert like he was our child and had shared custody.

“Well, at least some things haven’t changed. We’re still arguing over who should get Robert’s attention.”

He was right. “We’re pitiful.”

“You started it.”

“Agreed.”

“That’s probably the most mature thing you’ve said to me since you arrived at the resort.”

“Are you calling me immature?” I was offended.

“If the shoe fits.”

“Wow,” I said, my pride hurt, “I didn’t know you thought so poorly of me.”

“Are you kidding me? I was just teasing. You’re too sensitive.”

“Now I’m sensitive? That’s sexist.”

“No, sexist would be saying that you’re sensitive because you’re a woman. You’re just being your usual emotional, sensitive self.”

“Emotional? I’m sorry, I didn’t know it was wrong to have feelings.”

“There’s nothing wrong with having feelings. I have lots of them. I just

keep them buried deep down. You should try it sometime. It keeps life simple.”

He took a sip of his drink and then smiled at me. He was trying to get me riled up. I hated how he could so easily get under my skin.

“A simple life for a simpleton. Makes sense,” I said and thought, two could play his game.

He chuckled, and then he sat back and folded his arms, his face growing serious. I found myself distracted by his muscular forearms and tried not to stare. It wasn’t fair. How was he getting more attractive with age?

“So, what’s been on going on with you lately, Sara? It feels like we haven’t seen each other in ages.”

So, he was going to play nice. I wasn’t used to that, but I needed a break from fighting with him all the time. To be truthful, it was exhausting.

“Just work. Nothing much. You.”

“Same,” he paused, then said, “Robert told me you broke up with Sam.”

“Phil.” Why was Jake getting into my personal life? I didn’t want to talk about Phil. We had been together on and off for years. And had finally ended things this year. To be honest, I was relieved. But I felt kind of lost, too.

“And it was a mutual parting.”

“Are you seeing anyone now?”

I wanted to tell him to mind his business, but I remembered his comment about my maturity and decided to take a different route. “No, I am happily single.”

“That’s what all the lonely girls say.”

“Shut up,” I was done being mature. “Ready to get out of here?”

Without answering, he reached for his wallet and tossed way more than we owed on the table. We made our way out of the diner, calling out thank you

to the waiter/cook in the back.

Once we were outside, Jake surprised me by saying, “I got a dog a few months ago, you know.”

“Really?” I fondly remembered his mutt from when we were kids.

“Yeah, this random stray I found while driving outside the city. Turns out she was also very pregnant.”

“Oh my gosh! You’re a doggie grandpa! Congratulations!” I couldn’t help myself. In my excitement, I hugged him. And to my surprise, he hugged me back, wrapping his arms around me. A familiar embrace. I instantly tensed and pulled away.

I took a step back, needing to put some distance between us. My smile was forced as I said, “So, what did you do with all the puppies?”

“Adopted them out. But don’t tell Robert; I saved one for him and Krissy. For a wedding present. He’s going to be the ring bearer. Robin is going to walk him down the aisle.”

“That’s so sweet, Jake. I didn’t know you had a sweet bone in your body.”

“Trust me, Sara. Neither did I.”

“Now you’re making me feel guilty that I just got them random items off their registry.”

“I’m clearly the better friend.”

“It’s not a competition.”

“Life is a competition, Sara. And so far, I win.”

“Damn, if only I could have the confidence of a mediocre man.” I couldn’t help but tease him.

He laughed and said, “You have all the confidence in the world. Strutting back and forth like you’re in charge. You’ve been the same since we were five.”

He wasn't wrong there; I had been a precocious child. I knew what I wanted, and I hadn't been shy about asking for it. And that confidence had served me well throughout most of my adult life...and it paid off mostly, except for men. I was confidently clueless in that department.

Jake's phone rang and he answered it. I overheard bits and pieces of the conversation. It sounded like not-so-good news about the car.

I sighed. After he hung up, I said, "So, I guess we're not getting out of here any time soon."

He shook his head, "Looks like we're staying the night. And my assistant can't be here until morning with the car. Her childcare fell through."

"That sucks."

"Yeah, she's going through a divorce and her husband's a real piece of work."

"I'm surprised you know so much about your assistant's personal life."

"She's been with me since the beginning of the company. Without her, I would have failed a thousand times."

I'm not sure why but the way he talked about her made me jealous. I tried not to think too much about why. I also tried not to think too much about spending the night in such close proximity to Jake.

We went back to the cabin and both of us went our separate ways on our phones. He was making calls. I checked my work schedule, already bored out of my mind. Nothing new. Nothing to do.

I sat down on a bench in the front of the cabin and called Derek. He picked up on the first ring.

"Are you still stranded in small-town America?" were his first words to me.

"Yes," I sighed deeply, "with only an overnight bag." I had texted him while I was in urgent care.

“Oh no! How will you ever make it?!”

I smiled despite myself, “I don’t know...but it hasn’t been too bad so far.”

“Really? You mean you’re not freaking out over missing the spa or where you are in terms of the itinerary?”

“I’m not that uptight.”

“Welllll.....”

“Ok, ok, maybe I am. But believe it or not, I’m actually not hating it.”

“It must be the company.”

I didn’t like Derek’s tone. I quickly corrected him, “Trust me. It’s not the company.”

“Why do I feel like you’re kind of forcing yourself to hate him?”

“No force required. Jake and I are not friends. Never have been. I don’t care what he thinks about me,” I added for good measure.

“You sure?”

“Very.” I heard a sound in the vicinity. “Anyway, I gotta go. I’ll keep you updated. Bye!”

I hung up before he could reply and turned around to see Jake watching me. I wondered how long he had been standing there.

“Did I just overhear you tell someone that we’re not friends?”

“Well, we aren’t.”

He stared at me for a long while, and for whatever reason, I felt bad, a little ashamed. Had I hurt his feelings? Sometimes I didn’t think he had any.

“I’m going to go take a walk.”

Without another word, he left me standing there. He looked angry. What was wrong with me?

I waited a few minutes and then found him just beyond the cabin where a lake sat. He was staring out over the water. He didn’t say anything as I

approached, although I was sure he had heard me. We stood there in silence.

“Hey, are you mad at me?”

“Why would I be mad?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m tired of playing this game, Sara.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The game where we supposedly hate each other.”

“Well, it’s not really a game. Our track record isn’t so good...we’ve been at each other’s throats since we were kids.”

“Not the entire time.”

“Your memory must be bad.”

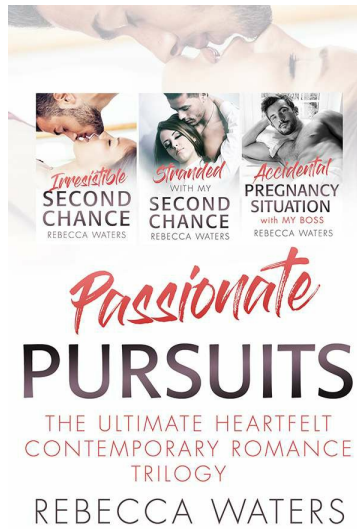
“Your memory is selective.”

I knew what he was referring to, but I didn’t acknowledge it.

Moodily, I said, “I’m heading back to the cabin.”

He didn’t reply or even acknowledge my words, and that was fine. I needed some space; I felt like I was spiraling. I made my way back to my room and closed the door. I lay down, trying to push memories away, but it was too late. I closed my eyes and let myself think of that fateful day ten years ago.

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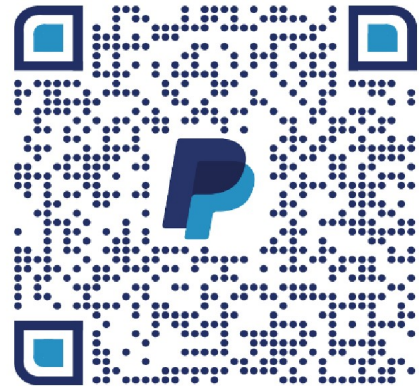


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