



FALLING FOR
my Bully
ALEXA WOODS

Falling for my Bully

A Lesbian Romance

Alexa Woods

OceanofPDF.com

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About the Book:

A powerful CEO. Her new employee, who once was her high-school bully. Fireworks soon ignite – but the question remains: Do people ever really change?

June's life is a dream come true. A confident, successful CEO of her own company, she's so different from the bullied, scared girl she was in high school, sometimes she can't believe those days were real.

That's until one day, she finds none other than Arabella, aka The Queen of Mean, working for her. Why in the world did her old tormentor take a position at June's company of all places?

And how come she's so...different...too?

Fallen from grace, formerly rich Arabella is reduced to a paycheck-to-paycheck lifestyle, and she wants June's forgiveness – and soon, her love. June fights her suspicions and her growing attraction to the woman who once threatened to destroy her – until she can't.

Just as June gives in to her feelings, her company comes under attack, and there's only one suspect: Arabella.

As she struggles to find the truth, June can't help but wonder. Did Arabella really change? Or did she just pretend so she could make good on her old threat to destroy June?

Chapter 1

June

“There’s nothing worse than letting your ex-public enemy number one walk through the front door of the company you built from the ground up. You can’t let her work for you! She could wreck everything. Years and years of work, just gone because she’s a tactless, classless, mean-girl turdbag probably hell-bent on sabotage to make up for the fact that you succeeded, and she didn’t.”

Summer Johnson, June’s best friend and often the only reason she’d been able to hold onto her sanity over the years, especially in high school, had a pained expression on her face. June felt every stab of that pain. She’d been feeling it for the past two hours, ever since Davis Sutherland walked into her office and gave her the files for the new hires.

“Do you remember how people used to make fun of us because we were friends? Because we bonded over our names being Summer and June?”

Summer rolled her eyes. “Now you’re trying to change the subject.”

June wasn’t. She was trying to figure out how to approach the conversation when deep down, she had just as many misgivings as Summer did about her old nemesis breezing her way into her company.

As CEO, June trusted her HR department to make the best possible choices. She’d learned years ago to relax and take a step back so she wouldn’t go completely insane because she couldn’t micromanage every single detail of her company.

Things had started out slow. She’d been halfway through her business degree when, on her way to college, power walking down the sidewalk

because she was late for a group presentation, she'd snapped the heel clean off her shoe. They weren't a cheap pair either. She'd taken off both shoes and run in a freaking skirt suit the rest of the way. Once there, she'd begged a fellow classmate to exchange shoes with her so she didn't have to go up on stage barefoot.

She'd thought about what a waste it was that all those shoes out there, when they fell out of fashion, or someone fell out of love with them, or when they broke, just ended up in a landfill or taking up storage on thrift store shelves where no one would buy them. Plus, there was the whole problem with tons of flip-flops ending up in the ocean. She'd literally been in the middle of giving her presentation when it had come to her - the idea that would change her life.

"June. Are you listening to me? You. Can't. Hire. Her." Summer crossed her arms and leaned against the kitchen counter.

As soon as June realized who her HR department had hired for the director of marketing, she'd grabbed her things and made a fast getaway from her office before she could do something she regretted in places people could see. Like hurtle straight into a very real meltdown. Glass walls, while modern and pretty, were sometimes very, very inconvenient.

She'd sped home, risking getting pulled over and slapped with a speeding ticket, and called June, who came over immediately, also probably breaking the law several times to get there as quickly as she did.

June breezed past Summer, forcing a calm she didn't feel. She went to the fridge and took out a pitcher of homemade sun tea. It was her absolute favorite, her mom's recipe, and one of the only guilty pleasures she indulged in that included real sugar. She poured two tall glasses and passed one to Summer. June downed half her glass without tasting it, but the cold liquid wetting her parched throat was heaven. She hadn't been able to swallow down the lump in her throat for the past two hours, but the tea helped. It hit her belly, cooling some of the acid burning there at the bitter memories that the name Arabella Ferguson evoked.

"I-I know that," June stammered.

Sweat beaded at her hairline as though she'd just been powering through an intense workout. Spin class. God, she hated spin class. Her body burned like she'd just been peddling for her life. She reached up and smoothed her hand over her forehead, wiping away some of the dampness.

Summer winced. "Well, if you know that, do something about it."

"I can't! She's already been hired."

"You're the CEO. That literally means that you can."

"Right," June said dryly. "Because I can really just fire her for no reason. I can't just pull a power trip and get rid of her. It's really, really nice that people are nicer now. That they realize they should be held accountable for their actions. I wanted my company to be a safe place for people to work. I wanted everyone to be treated equally, to be given great opportunities and benefits, a good work environment that fosters positivity. In a woke world, how would it look if June Phillips, CEO, fired a perfectly capable, talented, educated woman without just cause?"

"Duh, there's good freaking cause. She's a mean girl. A *biatch*. A first-class bully."

"Is there any proof of that? Anything documented? Or could she spin things around, twist it to look like yes, we have a past. Yes, we went to school together, but I'm the one with the vendetta. She could tell whatever story she wants. If you ask anyone if she was a bully, they would say she was popular and that all popular girls can be mean, but you know what she looked like on the exterior. Smart. Pretty. Rich. Her family did tons of charity work and she always did her part with a smile."

"That's what made it so much worse. She was disgustingly rotten on the inside. Ugh, it's like getting your favorite chocolate bar only to find it's full of maggots on the inside."

June nearly gagged. "God, that's...that's just wrong."

“I’m just saying. She’s definitely worm eaten under her pretty blonde exterior.”

“We don’t even know if she’s blonde anymore.”

“On the positive side, her hair could have burned off from all that dye.”

June rolled her eyes. “I’m not going to say be nice, and I hate that I’m even thinking it. I’m a big believer in karma. I usually let that take its course. I can’t be mean, even when I should be mean. I can’t stand here and think bad things, even about my worst tormenter. It’s been ten years. If she hasn’t come around by now, she’s never going to, and that’s a shame. Being mean and nasty your whole life would just suck.”

“It does suck,” Summer agreed. “It sucks for you, because now that turdbag is going to be in your office every single day. You think she was bad in high school? Think about all the trouble she could cause there. She probably did her research and found out you were CEO and decided to infiltrate and sabotage, sabotage, sabotage.”

“She’s just part of a marketing team. Any decisions still have to go above her head.”

“I’m not talking about her tanking marketing projects. I’m talking about her infiltrating and taking down the whole company.”

“That would be hard for anyone, even Arabella.”

Summer wrinkled her nose. “I don’t know. She had the whole school on her side way back when. She’s wily and crafty. Cunning like a fox. Or more like a snake in the grass. A pretty, blonde, blue-eyed, stacked, gorgeous snake. Does she still look the same?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see her.”

June didn’t want to think about any of Arabella’s finer attributes. Her attitude had always ruined them in high school, but even back then, even when she was pulling pranks on June like putting stinky meat trays with

congealed meat juice and blood in her locker, trapping her in the bathroom and forcing her to have a freaking clown makeover done by a little squad of popular girls eager and ready to follow any and all orders, or pushing her into a pool at a party they both attended, June always noticed that Arabella had a nice body. It was just there. In her face. All the time. It was there in everyone's faces, all the time. It wasn't June's fault she had eyes and Arabella had nice breasts, a tiny waist, a curvy bottom, and long legs.

Summer's face puckered up. "She said you stank like poverty. Like, all the time. She'd wrinkle her nose, like this." She demonstrated, pulling her best Arabella stench smelling face. June desperately tried not to laugh. It was pretty hilarious, seeing her best friend put on such an unappealing expression. "Anyway, you have to get rid of her."

"I can't just get rid of her. I can see the headlines now." She spread out her hands, mimicking newsprint. "CEO goes from victim to perpetrator, innocent woman fired before a single day worked in a jealous fit of retribution."

Summer snorted. "It would never happen. That's way too long of a headline."

"Ugh, you get what I mean. Getting rid of her goes against everything I stand for."

"*She* goes against everything you stand for."

"If she got the job, then I have to give her the benefit of the doubt."

Summer waved her hands frantically, nearly sending her glass of sun tea flying off the counter. "She got hired because she looks good on paper and is all shiny and nicey-nice during interviews, but that's not the real her."

"If she was hired by my HR team, it was because she was qualified, experienced, and talented."

"For gosh darn sakes, this is Arabella we're talking about."

June ground her teeth as Summer's face turned red. She thought that June wasn't hearing her, but she was. She truly was. She didn't want Arabella working at her company any more than she'd like to clean a public washroom. With her tongue. But she'd already been hired and that was freaking that.

"I don't want to be a hypocrite," June protested.

"You wouldn't be."

"Yes, I would. I can't give everyone else a fair shake and not her."

"You could give her a shake alright. It's called karma and it's about to be a real bitch for a bitch. I mean, what if she lets everyone know you were a loser in high school?"

"What if she does? Then she'd have to confess how she came by that knowledge."

"You said she could spin anything. What if she makes you into the bad guy?"

June considered that. She hated drama of any kind, and she loved having a workplace that was full of hard-working people who were enthusiastic, talented, driven, and kind. They took other people's garbage and it turned it into literal, wearable works of art.

"I think her true colors will shine through soon enough, if that's how she wants to play things. She's so self-centered she probably doesn't even know it's my company she applied to. Even if she does, she must be pretty desperate to consider working for me."

"Or pretty villainous."

June didn't want to think the worst. It made her stomach sour and her blood feel like she was drenched in ice. She didn't want to think about internal problems, about Arabella pulling the same shit she'd pulled in high school. She wanted to believe people changed and that her HR team hadn't

got suckered into making a huge mistake. Besides, what could Arabella possibly want retribution for? She was always the aggressor, the bully, the one in charge, the one with the upper hand.

“Her true colors,” Summer mused when June’s silence stretched on and it was obvious she wasn’t going to contribute anything else to the conversation. “Maybe that’s what you need to do. Get her to show them so you can fire her with good cause. I’d suggest making her life a living hell, but I know you aren’t going to do that, so I’m not even going to go there. Hey!” Summer slapped the countertop and June jumped. She watched her friend run a hand through her wild and untamed bright red hair while her green eyes shone with a spark that could only mean trouble. “The company barbeque. That’s it. I’m coming. You’re bringing me as your date.”

“No, Summer, everyone knows you’re my best friend. And it would look...”

“I don’t give two rat’s bottoms what it looks like. No one will think anything other than that you’re bringing your lovely bestie to your own company function. Everyone else gets to bring a date or their kids or whatnot. I need to come with you. I need to observe this d-bag up close and personal.”

“This is exactly why you shouldn’t be there. Because you’ll end up calling her a d-bag just like now and things will get awkward, and she’ll file a freaking harassment suit against me and that will be the beginning of the end.”

Summer shook her head. “Nope. Not going to give her any incentive to act like the victim. I just want to observe her. From afar, if I have to. I’ll hide in the bushes if you don’t give me an official invite.”

“Good God,” June groaned.

“How can you forget what she did that day? It still makes me furious when I think about it.”

June's throat was suddenly dry and scratchy again. Even though her stomach was churning worse than ever, she picked up her drink and downed the rest of it. "I haven't forgotten anything."

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Chapter 2

High School

June

“Ewww, what’s that stench?” A pair of pink-clad shoulders hit the locker next to June’s so hard the metal rattled. She nearly groaned when she peeked around her open door and saw Arabella Ferguson there.

If people thought their Mondays were rough, they should try one at Fairfield Upper Academy. The private high school catered to Cincinnati’s elite. The tuition for a year cost more than most people paid for college admission. The chances of getting into a good college were increased by attending a good high school like Fairfield, and June’s parents had urged her to take all her brightness and bundle it into applying for a scholarship.

It was rough, going to a new school for her last year. She didn’t know anyone when she’d started and all the rich, spoiled, entitled kids knew she was both fresh meat and hadn’t grown up in the same gated communities and mansions with freaking pools in the backyard and sports cars in the driveway.

Arabella turned to her group of friends, four other girls who were all various shades of blonde. None of them were as pretty as Arabella. They didn’t dare upstage her, and all of them, including Arabella, were on the cheer team.

She held her nose in June’s direction and pretended to gag. “Ugh, it smells like old trash. Rotting garbage. That’s it. Right. Poverty. The stench of little miss ‘call on me in class all day because I’m so smart that I got a scholarship to be here’.” Arabella laughed obnoxiously and Christine,

Charlene, Aberdeen, and Savannah joined in, their forced giggles feeding Arabella's mean-girl giggles.

"I heard your dad's a mechanic. He spends all day working on the cars he'll never be able to afford. Must be hard, wanting something so badly, knowing that you'll never have it. Oh, I have an idea. Maybe I could talk to my dad, and he could come work for us. My dad is always complaining about how his cars need tuning this and fine tuning that and whatnot. Oh, wait. I'm sure he doesn't work on things like that. Probably just the regular junk the rest of the world drives. But if your family needs the help, I could talk to my parents about getting your mom a job as our maid. If she could be trusted not to steal the silverware."

The other girls glanced at each other nervously, but still laughed on command when Arabella was done, like trained monkeys. Fairfield had a strict no bullying policy, but that didn't mean it didn't happen. It happened to June. A lot.

"How very sixteen-hundreds of you."

What was wrong with her? She knew that despite having everything, there must be something. People didn't bully for no reason. There was obviously something in Arabella's life that wasn't right, something she wasn't getting that she needed.

Arabella scowled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, just the silverware comment. It's very old-fashioned." June knew she should just shut up and take it and hope Arabella got tired of bullying her and moved on to someone else. If she didn't react, there'd be no satisfaction in it for her tormentor.

So far, two months into the school year, it hadn't worked.

Arabella scowled, dodged around June's open locker door, and reached in for her biology textbook. She tucked it against her chest and leaned back, a sick smirk on her face. "Thanks for lending it to me. I hope you don't mind

having to replace it when I accidentally drop it into the garbage chute tonight. You know, where you sleep.”

The textbooks weren't assigned. They were purchased. Her scholarship covered her books too, but not if she had to replace one. June knew the textbook could easily cost sixty to a hundred dollars. She worked part time at an ice cream shop and that would easily be two to three shifts to replace it.

She held out her hand. “Please give me back my textbook.”

“But you were so nice to lend it to me because I forgot mine at home today.” Arabella blinked innocently.

June's lips parted. She had been about to say that she'd tell someone about the book, but she knew how stupid that was. She would never tattle on anyone, let alone Arabella. That would be like throwing gas on the fire, and Arabella didn't need more fuel.

“If you're so smart, you won't need it,” Arabella taunted. “You seem to have all the answers in class. I'm sure you can get by just fine without it. That is, if you can't afford to replace it.”

“I need it,” June protested. “You know that my family isn't well off. You're always telling me I smell poor, and you know that I live downtown, not anywhere near where anyone else here lives. I have no idea why you hate me or why you want to make my life hell, except that it's easy for you to dislike what you don't understand, and try to grind down what you feel threatened by so it can't rise up.” June snapped her mouth shut. She'd said way too much. She should have said nothing and just tried to reach out and get her book back. Anger and annoyance had gotten the best of her.

Scarlet crept up Arabella's neck, up towards her pink shellacked lips. “Did you hear that?” she screeched, sounding every bit like a shrill crow.

Aberdeen glanced around nervously. June felt like doing the same, hoping that Summer would come walking over to her locker and save her. Summer was better at dealing with Arabella's aggression. They were on

equal footing, and Summer didn't let anyone push her around. She would have the perfect thing to say. Something snarky and witty, and it would send Arabella on her way because Summer wasn't an easy target and Arabella didn't like to be humiliated or bested, especially not in front of her posse.

Savannah scowled, while Christine stared at June in surprise. It seemed like her growing a backbone had taken them all by surprise.

"Just give her the stupid book back," Charlene, who was almost as fearlessly mean as Arabella was, said evenly. She tossed a mass of blonde curls over her shoulders. "She's so basic it's disgusting. She does smell like trash. She is poor. She needs all the help she can get. She wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for charity. She's a charity case."

"CC," Arabella giggled with cruel delight. "I think it suits. It's better than June. Your parents were so stupid they couldn't come up with a better name? Had to pick the month you were born in?"

June hadn't been born in June, but there was no way she was rising to that taunt.

Arabella's eyes swept over June, so cold and spiteful that she shivered despite her resolve to stand there, her body totally rigid. "You're probably the same size as my little sister. She's in eighth grade and still looks like a boy. When she cleans out her closet, I'll make sure you get her rejects. You could use them. I'm nice like that, you know. Always looking out for other people."

Even if Arabella had been nice and offered something like that for real, June would rather have walked over hot coals than accept. She and Summer weren't even close to the same size—June wasn't curvy and gorgeous like Summer was—but if they were, she wouldn't share her clothes either. She'd feel weird doing something like that. She was so sure everyone would know, because she couldn't afford designer brands and trendy crap.

"Here." Arabella wound up, and before June knew what was happening, her textbook, which probably weighed at least twenty freaking pounds, came flying at her head.

She wasn't athletic in her best moments, and even though she ducked, she was too slow. The book caught her on the lower half of her face. It felt like someone had thrown a water balloon at her, except the bursting balloon was filled with pain, not water, and that wet stuff trickling down her face? She was so shocked she just stood there while her body vibrated with pain. Finally, she realized she should raise her hand. When her fingers came away red, her head started to spin. A dull roar erupted between her ears.

"Oh shit," Savannah whispered.

"Fuck, Arabella!" Charlene hissed. "Why'd you do that? She's bleeding."

"She'll tell on us now," Christine agreed. She planted her hands on her hips, daring June to do any such thing and see what happened.

Aberdeen just stood there, looking decidedly sorry and out of place, but there was no way she was going to risk her status with the popular crowd to say anything. She turned her gaze down to her white gladiator sandals. That was the shit thing about Fairfield. They viewed themselves as progressive for having abolished uniforms, but it just made everything worse for kids like June. Granted, there weren't many scholarship kids, so not many looked out of place.

Arabella looked smug. "She wouldn't tell anyone." She sounded very certain about that. "She's clumsy. She opened her locker and the book fell out right onto her face." She stared June down menacingly, one perfectly waxed and lightened brow raised in challenge. "Isn't that right, Charity Case?"

June said nothing. She bent and picked up her textbook. Her lip was leaking all over the place, and she dipped further into the shadow of her locker in search of a tissue. She told herself that Arabella hadn't meant to hurt her when she'd hurled the book at her. Had she? Was she really that vicious?

Why does she hate me so much? I've never done anything to her.

It was very obvious that June was smarter, but the last thing Arabella seemed to care about was intelligence. School wasn't about academics for girls like Arabella. That was the last thing on their mind.

June sensed she was alone, and when she peeked over her shoulder, Arabella and her mean-girl gang had moved off. June was thankful that at least the textbook hadn't hit her glasses and broken them. That would be the last thing she needed. Her face ached and stung, but she'd already stopped the blood by pinching her lip for a few minutes. She tucked her book back into her locker, shut the door firmly, and walked quickly towards the bathroom where she could clean up and rinse the heat of humiliation and anger from her face with cold water.

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Chapter 3

Arabella

Deep breaths. Count to ten. This is going to be fine. It's all going to be fine.

"This is the lunchroom. Isn't it great? I love the free fruit. You can help yourself to that. And, of course, the coffee is also free."

Tina Rodgers, one of the more junior marketing coordinators, had probably drawn the short straw when it came to the office tour. She did it happily, though, with a genuine smile on her face.

"If you love this, you're going to love the company barbeque coming up. We always wanted to do a potluck, but someone would probably food poison someone else, then someone would sue, so it's always a catered thing, but it's nice. Did they tell you about it?"

Marketing departments could be run differently, but at New Shooz 2uz, seriously the most original, slightly awful name in history, but somehow it kind of worked, the marketing was done by one team.

"Uh, yeah. It was mentioned."

"It's this Friday. We all get the day off with pay. Yay!" Tina looked like someone who would be bubbly, and she was. She was petite, with a bright pink pixie cut, piercings in her cheeks, septum, and lower lip, and a penchant for wearing fun, bright clothes.

"It sounds like it's going to be great," Arabella forced out. The words practically wedged in her throat.

If someone had told her who she would be working for, whose company she'd be working at, and who would one day be her boss above all bosses, there was no way she would have applied. Unfortunately, she'd been so desperate for a position that she'd sent out no less than fifty or sixty resumes to so many different jobs she lost track.

After the investment company she'd been working for had downsized their marketing department, meaning closed it altogether and got rid of everyone but the very senior staff, and even then, they only kept their jobs with major pay cuts, she'd found herself running out of time. She'd even applied to jobs that had nothing to do with marketing.

It might have been shameful flipping burgers, but at least she could have kept the dang lights on. As it turned out, she didn't have to resort to that. She got a great position in her field, a job where she could use her talents and experience. It paid well. It was a great opportunity at a uniquely artistic company. The job had great benefits and promised to have lots of perks, including a great work environment where people didn't hate their lives or their jobs.

After her interview and the phone call telling her she got the position, she'd sat down on her couch and had a good cry. She'd poured herself a glass of water, got out her laptop, and sat down to do the research she should have done ahead of time, learning more about the company – and its CEO.

That's when she'd realized her mistake.

"Well, I've shown you the reception area, the lunchroom, and the meeting rooms. The rest you'll probably learn as you go. Do you want me to take you to your office?"

"Sure. That would be great."

"We all get our own offices here. Isn't that awesome? No cubicles for us! June is really progressive. It's super cool for someone to start a company all on their own while still in college and be really good at it and get successful, and still schlub it at work with all of us, slogging away at the

daily grind.” Tina threw a hand over her mouth as they walked down the hallway from the lunchroom through a maze of offices Arabella knew she’d be lost within a few minutes. “Don’t say schlub. Or slog. She would never think of being here as either of those things. She loves this place. This is her passion. I mean, it’s pretty cool. What’s not to love about this?” She pointed down at her shoes, which were bright red with little bats on the front. “I designed these bad boys myself. Freaking cool, if I do say so.”

Arabella liked them. She liked Tina too, though her high school version of herself would have targeted her like she was a freaking bullseye.

So...back to that mistake.

It turned out that June Erickson, the girl she’d bullied in high school unmercifully and with zero remorse because she was a teenage turdbag, was now a CEO. Of the very company she’d had been hired at. How about them apples? Yeah, she was seriously screwed.

After hours spent trying to figure out how to turn down the new position, Arabella knew she was going to have to take it, at least until something else came along. She had bills to pay and her parents were depending on her. After they’d declared bankruptcy and her dad had barely avoided jail time for the damn scheme he’d been involved in running, they’d turned to her.

Katrina, Arabella’s younger sister, wasn’t an option. She was still in college. She’d had to extend her four-year plan into a six- or eight-year plan, given that she no longer had a fund to help her pay for tuition. She had to work part time and go to school part time. If Arabella wanted to keep the small bungalow where she and her parents lived—her mom and dad in the basement while she took the top floor—she needed a job and she needed one fast.

“Okay. This is it. I hope you like it. I think they look classy, with all that glass, but some people hate it. It makes them feel all exposed and open.”

The office building was located in downtown Cincinnati. June was an Ohio success story, it turned out. She was making change happen all over the world with her innovative ideas and she’d never moved to New York,

LA, London, or any other big, popular, metropolitan city where smart, successful people usually ended up. She'd stayed right there, and her shoes were a massive success in Ohio, more so than anywhere else, because people supported her for being a homegrown girl.

"Yeah. It's great." Arabella stepped in and stared out the massive windows on the one side of the palatial office. They were tinted so that the sun wasn't unbearable. New Shooz 2uz was located on the fifth floor of a twenty or so storey high rise, and the view from where she stood was quite nice. Not too high up to be intimidating, but high enough that the streets and rooflines below were still seen from an interesting angle. The rest of the office was made of clear glass. The whole thing was utterly modern, from the square shelves to the sleek black desk. The desk chair looked like a robot had a baby with a regular desk chair.

"Mine's bright pink," Tina said proudly. She pointed at her head. "Just like my hair. I love it. Can't get enough pink, if you know what I mean."

Arabella shuddered inwardly. She'd worn so much pink in high school that she never wanted to don the color again. She didn't want to be reminded of what a mean-spirited, spiteful, hurtful, controlling, power-hungry, popularity seeking, sick little problem child she'd been. For some people, high school was the best time of their lives. It had been great for Arabella, until she'd graduated and gone into the real world and had time to reflect on how she'd treated people. It took her years, but she was glad she'd changed, even if it meant recognizing and owning the terrible person she was.

"Well, I'll leave you to settle in, then. I know how rough first days can be, but don't worry. We're like a big family here. It's a great place to work. I think I'm super lucky to be part of a team of people who actually care about each other. We have our first meeting at one today. I know it's right after lunch, but don't let that fool you. Morning or afternoon, there isn't any drag here. No complaining or whining allowed," Tina finished cheerfully. "Oh, and I almost forgot! June is going to be sitting in on the meeting. You'll love her! She's so nice and inspiring. Her ideas are amazing, but if you have one too, she always makes sure you feel heard. There are no stupid questions here. Really. I'm sure she's super excited to meet you. We

hardly ever get turnover here. It's just that Dean, the guy you're taking over for, his wife had twins and after her maternity leave was up, they decided to move back to Pittsburgh, where they were from, to be closer to her parents so they could help out with the kids, so his job came open."

"Oh. I-I see. Yes, I'm very lucky. And excited." The words were flat and dry to her own ears, but they were passable to Tina, who just smiled her big, bubbly, bright smile.

"I'm off, then. See you at one. I'll come get you at ten to just to help you find your way there. This place isn't big, but it can be confusing. The hallways don't make a lot of sense. I feel like a mouse always trying to get out of the maze. If the prize was cheese, I'd pass every time. I love cheese."

Oh God, I would have been a beast to this girl in high school. Arabella was glad she was meeting Tina now. She could appreciate her—her lightness, her effortless joy. It would have grated the hell out of her teenage self, but her adult self, the one who had been through the trials of college, of her parents losing their jobs, their house, and her dad nearly going to jail, of having to support her little sister, of being the one to take care of the family, was now humbled enough to be grateful for Tina's wonderful kindness.

"Thank you. I appreciate that. It does look confusing."

Tina raised a hand. Arabella actually waved back too.

"Oh, and I love cheese as well," Arabella admitted right before Tina stepped out of office.

She responded with a big grin that made the two lip rings in her bottom lip twinkle and then she was gone.

Arabella's new office was huge. The lighting overhead was soft, not the harsh fluorescent lights of most places. The windows were huge and a nice touch, letting in tons of natural light. Everything was neat and tidy. A brand new looking, razor-thin laptop sat on the desk on one side and at the far end were two huge monitors and a tower underneath. A white leather couch with

a coffee table and two matching cube chairs filled up most of the other side. It looked like a home office combined with a living room, and she could actually imagine herself working in here and loving it. She could imagine herself working at New Shooz 2uz and loving it too.

Too bad her job would be short-lived.

Once June Erickson found out it was her old nemesis who'd just gotten the new marketing role at her company, Arabella imagined she'd be right out the door. Even if June didn't fire her, it was well within her right, at least karma-wise, to make Arabella's life a real fiery, living hell.

Arabella let out a strangled sigh, shut the glass door, and walked over to her new desk. She found a company manual, a company policies handbook, and an actual map, hand-drawn, with a smiley face, by Tina herself.

She didn't think she'd be sticking around long, and just hoped she could find another job to replace this one. If her high school friends could see her now, they'd say that the mighty had fallen fast and fallen hard, but Arabella knew she'd suck up her pride and not let her ego push her around anymore. She'd do what she had to do to keep her family afloat.

Summoning up her courage and mentally slipping into her big girl pants, Arabella opened the company manual first. Whether she was there for a short time or not, she couldn't change the past. She was going to do her job and do it well, because that's the kind of person she wanted to be in the present.

Chapter 4

June

June was probably the one person in the world who loved meetings, but then, their meetings were anything but typical. She loved sharing and exchanging ideas, the open playground of fresh thoughts and innovative concepts coming together to create something very real. She'd been dreading her meeting with the marketing team ever since she found out Arabella had been hired.

If high school had taught June anything, it was that perseverance paid off. She might be nervous and filled with conflicting emotions, but she was no coward, and she made sure that when she walked into the meeting, right at one so that everyone hopefully had a chance to get there before she did, she had a smile that felt real. As real as she could make it, at any rate.

June entered the room and shut the door behind her, noting that everyone was there. Including Arabella. She gulped down the rising tide of panic that created uncomfortable bubbles in her airway and chest, then turned around and took her seat.

She'd copied the whole equality at the table idea from ancient legend and had gone with an oval design. That way, there was no head or right-hand man or any of that nonsense she didn't believe in. She might be CEO, but she didn't think she was any more important than anyone else in this room. Power trips and egos were gross, and she'd made an effort to make it more than apparent that they had no place in the company.

June carried a thick black notebook, preferring handwritten notes to anything typed. She opened it to her agenda for the day, which was nothing more than a few jotted items so that the meeting could flow, and creativity

could take center stage. At the top was a single name, as if she needed the prompt.

June slowly lifted her eyes. She felt that her smile was in place and hoped it didn't wobble. "Hello, everyone. I'm sure you've already met your new director, but if not, this is Arabella Ferguson." Her eyes swept around the table and finally, because she felt she had to look her square in the face, they came to rest on her old nemesis. "She brings a wealth of experience with her, and I'm sure we're very lucky to have her on board. I'm excited to get started."

After that first brief glance, June tore her eyes away, proud of herself for not really looking at Arabella at all, and even prouder that her voice didn't wobble.

On that note, the meeting was turned over to the marketing team, the table coming alive with conversation, ideas, and laughter. The atmosphere was electric, but June felt it was a little more charged than normal. She might be the only one feeling that extra surge, though.

She carefully lifted her eyes, but kept her lashes lowered and her head angled down. Her fingers clutched her pen, and she felt her hand moving, jotting down notes, even though she had no notion of what she was writing. She hoped it was more than illegible scrawls.

Arabella was seated across the table, to the right, and June's gaze didn't have far to go before it landed right there. Discreetly. She didn't want Arabella to know she was studying her.

From above the table, all that was visible was a white button-down blouse, elegant and flowy, but also simple. It was buttoned up nearly to the top, neatly hiding her ample breasts. Her creamy skin extended from the collar.

Arabella had been pretty in high school, but the decade since had been more than good to her. She was absolutely stunning now, even from under the thick fringe of lashes obscuring June's vision. Her hair was no longer platinum, but an ash, honey color. It was swept up into a loose bun on top

her head, soft tendrils trailing down to frame her heart-shaped face. Her makeup was drastically understated, which was a shock. Oddly enough, the lack of it only seemed to enhance her pink bow lips and carved cheekbones and made her blue eyes pop.

June realized she was staring without appearing to be staring, but staring all the same. She quickly snapped her head down and nearly cursed as a fiery pain shot up her neck. Her hand cramped on her pen, and when she looked at what she'd written, it was indeed a mess. She quickly turned to a fresh, blank page to hide the illegible scrawls.

The meeting suddenly came around to the point where Beth Oddridge, head of the marketing department, asked if anyone had any new ideas that they wanted to share. How it had passed by so quickly without June even tuning in, she had no idea.

“Actually, I do. If-if that’s alright?”

June squirmed at the sound of Arabella’s voice. In high school it had been so filled with venom and forced sugar in equal measure, a syrup that was straight up lethal. Now it was light and...pretty. Like spun sugar.

She was very contained, and when June looked up, Arabella had her gaze trained on her notes in front of her. She didn’t notice June observing her, so she took that moment, stole it, to drink in the strange sight of the woman in front of her. June could almost, *almost* believe this was a dream and Arabella wasn’t real at all.

This wasn’t the Arabella from high school. She had transformed to a woman with modest taste, a contained outfit, and a pleasing voice that had real notes of kindness in it. It was completely jarring and at odds with what June had been expecting. And dreading. June had wanted, deep down, to make Arabella squirm, but now all she could do was stare.

“I did some research this morning. Thank you for the files all in one common drive, by the way. And for setting up my computer for me so everything was right there and easy to find. The meeting minutes, the supplier lists, and the sales reports and spreadsheets were amazing and

super helpful. This is the easiest first morning I've ever had. I did notice that a few pairs of animal shoes, like Tina's bat shoes that she has on today..."

She stopped for a second while Tina pushed away from the table and lifted her feet up to reveal her lovely bat shoes. Arabella smiled a rather unexpected smile at Tina, blowing June away. The old Arabella would have *hated* Tina. She would have been tormented by Arabella for certain because of her quirky style and unique personality, and Tina being Tina, probably would have raised her middle finger proudly and told Arabella to go fluff herself and not be bothered in the least.

"I noticed that the animal shoes are always sold out," Arabella continued. "It was a limited run, so that makes sense. I'm not sure if it was a trial, or how it was structured, but I checked a few of the suppliers and those shoes were best sellers. I think maybe, if it's a possibility, it might be good to look at expanding that line. Possibly making something for kids. I know there aren't any kids' shoes yet, but the demand for them is huge. The suppliers I called to ask about the shoes all said they had huge demand for children's sizes. Everyone from fourteen to people in their nineties are buying these shoes, which is incredible. I'm not very far into this and I could be more than wrong, but I sketched a few quick designs and ran some numbers, just to see how the children's line would work out."

After Arabella's sketches were produced, they were passed around the table and everyone hummed over them. June could have groaned. So far, Summer seemed to be very wrong about her sabotage theory. Arabella moved in like a thunderstorm and took everyone by, well, storm. There wasn't a single person around the table who wasn't already under her spell.

June wasn't sure what to think. She was on her guard, but only because it was Arabella. If she'd been anyone else, June would have been beyond impressed. Arabella stated everything humbly, but with a quiet confidence. Was it her intention to charm everyone and take over that way?

After a lengthy discussion on a children's shoe line, which they had talked about before, but briefly, the meeting came to an end. June let everyone else leave before her. She even took the time to straighten the

chairs at the table before she left the room. Her hopes that she wouldn't run into Arabella were foiled when she spotted her laughing in the hallway just up ahead with Tina. June couldn't dodge out of the way or turn back. She'd already been spotted. She just stood there, feeling awkward, until Tina congratulated Arabella on her ideas and walked off in the direction of her office.

The silence in the hallway sounded like a roar. June's head buzzed with it and her veins felt like they were on fire. Her stomach roiled with nerves. She could actually feel a bead of sweat trickling down the back of her neck from her hairline.

The craziest thing was that Arabella seemed just as uncomfortable. She actually swallowed loud enough for June to hear it. She looked like she thought she was going to be fired.

"Can I...can I see you in my office for a second?" June asked. She wished her tone would stay flat, the way she wanted it to.

"Yeah." Arabella nodded, putting on a brave face. She wiped her palms on her black pencil skirt nervously, though. June's eyes were drawn to Arabella's shoes—plain black flats, not the four-inch heels she'd been expecting. "Sure," she said thickly, when June just stood there.

June shook herself, remembering that Arabella couldn't know the way to her office yet. She started off, the hairs on the backs of her arms standing up at the sound of Arabella's light steps behind her.

June entered her office with far more outward confidence than she felt. She kept her posture rigid as she closed the door. There were no chairs in front of her desk, and she didn't want to sit down and invite Arabella to do the same in the more comfortable conversation area to the right. Every office was set up pretty much the same, unless someone wanted something different. June's wasn't any bigger than any of the others.

Arabella stood awkwardly, cringing, waiting for the hammer of June's wrath to come down and squish her like a sad, helpless bug.

June cleared her throat. She wasn't about to give in to the temptation to give Arabella a taste of her own foul medicine. She wasn't karma itself. She didn't believe in abusing one's power, and grudges were messy and childish.

"I just wanted to say that I don't want to have any problems, between us or in the company. This is a great place to work and I'd very much like to keep it that way. No one needs to know that we knew each other before. As far as I'm concerned, everything's been forgotten." There was obvious tension on June's part, though, and it sounded from her tone like she hadn't forgotten or forgiven anything. She was barely hanging on to a professional thread, and she didn't like it.

Arabella's eyes widened. The blue was so blue it was like falling into the lake where Summer's parents had their cottage. It reminded June how much she loved that place, and how happy she'd be to escape there on the weekend. She was annoyed by the fact that the exact shade of blue in Arabella's irises reminded her of one her favorite places in the world.

"Thank you," Arabella whispered. "Just so you know, I didn't...I didn't know this was your company when I applied. I need the job. Badly. I'm going to do my best here. I really want to be a part of your success."

June searched the words for hidden meaning as her eyes searched Arabella's face for deception, but there was none to be found. Either she was very good at hiding it, or she really meant what she said. The same humility she'd had in the meeting was still present. She looked humbled. Not sassy and high on herself, drunk on her need to have people like her. She was as professional as anyone June had ever met.

And as beautiful.

June ignored that. She didn't like the fire in her belly when she acknowledged that Arabella was gorgeous. She was not going to take that further and let herself notice anything else. Arabella was still tall, curvy, and lethally attractive, but June wasn't going to go there.

“That’s great.” June made sure that came out sounding like she meant it. “That was...your ideas were good. Good work out there.”

“Thanks.” Arabella’s smile nearly blinded June, not because of the straight, white teeth or the perfect plush lips, but because it was full of feeling. Real feeling.

“You coming to the company barbeque on Friday?”

June had already decided she was going to cave and bring Summer. It wasn’t mandatory that anyone attend because that would just be twisted on her part, to demand that employees attend a fun event, but everyone always did come out, at least for a few hours.

“Yeah. I am. I just heard about it this morning, but...yes.”

“Okay.” June walked over to the door, her back burning as badly as the rest of her as she felt Arabella’s hot stare there. She opened it quickly. “See you then.”

Arabella left quietly. She turned right instead of left, the opposite direction of her office, but June quickly closed her door and didn’t correct her. She figured she’d see her in a few seconds, correcting her path. She’d be seeing a lot of Arabella if she continued to work there. The one person she’d always hoped she’d never run into again.

It appeared that Arabella had changed completely, but maybe that was just a front. It was too early to tell, and like Summer, June still had her suspicions, and those wouldn’t be easily dismissed. It would be hard for her to put any trust into her ex-tormenter.

Life had a funny way of twisting things up, turning people upside down, and making a crazy mess of things. June shook her head, not pleased in the least by coincidence or fate or whatever had brought their lives back into orbit.

Chapter 5

Arabella

Gosswin Park contained two man-made lakes which wound their way through the acres of green grass. The small lakes, at their narrowest points, intertwined and flowed past a three-tier flower garden bordered by stones that looked as though they had been dug out of the lakebeds themselves. There were various sculptures done in stone and bronze statues that were set throughout the park. The footbridge was adorable and the water wheel fixture at the far end, attached to a building that was purely there for scenic value and nothing more, was utterly mesmerizing. It was the perfect location for a company barbeque, and the fact that the whole company had come out was unique.

The park was now dotted with blankets, beach mats, towels, and screaming children. Arabella wasn't sure how many people worked at New Shooz 2uz or how many were family members or friends, but the park wasn't small, and it was full.

With so many people laughing and talking, setting out blankets, acting out stories, throwing frisbees and footballs, or running after children to make sure they didn't end up in the water, Arabella had been certain that she could avoid June.

She'd been intent on setting out the old quilt she brought in some inconspicuous spot, hoping she'd be brave enough to introduce herself to the people surrounding her that she didn't know. She'd looked for Tina first, and other members of the marketing department—Beth, Crystal, Payton, Jim, Timothy, or Samantha—but she'd only spotted Tina when she'd entered the park, and Tina liked June, so it made sense that she would want to talk to her at some time during the event, which was what Arabella wanted to avoid. She'd gone the other direction, choosing a shady spot

underneath a huge tree not far from where the two lakes twisted away from each other to meander around the park in different beds.

It couldn't be a nicer June day. The sun was out, but not punishing. There was a slight breeze to keep the heat and the bugs off. The work event was a casual thing, and since Arabella didn't want to get burned, she'd chosen a pair of skinny jeans, ballerina flats, and a long-sleeved cotton shirt. She'd applied sunscreen liberally underneath her foundation, but she'd still opted for a ballcap with her dad's favorite sports team logo on it. She wasn't sure if it was baseball or football. She'd found it a few years ago and it had been a spare, so she'd claimed it and she'd been wearing it ever since.

Arabella's plan to avoid June lasted for all of thirty seconds. She'd been sitting in her shady spot for ten minutes, entertained by a group of kids who looked to be around ten to twelve who were tossing a football around, having some sort of mini game. There were three girls and four boys, and the girls were definitely kicking butt. That amused Arabella. She liked their feisty spirits. All of a sudden, she looked up and saw June heading her way.

Not just June. No, it couldn't just be June. Arabella's luck was apparently just shit as of late. Summer Johnson walked beside Arabella, her flaming red mane impossible to miss. She was wearing an emerald-green maxi dress that matched her eyes and made her tall, curvy frame look like a goddess. Arabella felt a momentary twinge that wasn't regret or panic, though she felt bucketloads of those, but it passed quickly, as soon as her eyes swept to June.

June was tall enough, around five seven. She didn't have the curvy figure that Summer or Arabella herself had. Arabella had made fun of her in high school, saying she looked like a boy. She didn't look like a boy. She looked anything but. Her body might be on the slight side, petite even, but she had gentle, tantalizing curves. Her skin was flawless everywhere, a silky cream that made Arabella's stomach twinge. Something deep in her chest vibrated like a plucked bow string when she swept her gaze over June's funky green shoes, up to the yellow sundress she had on. Dainty straps stood out against all that creamy skin, the sundress exposing legs that seemed to go on forever. While the top was snug, hinting at the swell of her breasts, it flowed from there, hiding a tiny waist and a ridiculously tight bottom.

Arabella was ashamed to say she'd checked June out thoroughly when she'd followed her to her office her first day of work.

June never had been one for makeup, and she wore hardly any at all. Foundation, if that. Her lips were naturally pink, her eyes the darkest brown. Her lashes were thick and long, velvety soft. She had an oval-shaped face, but her chin was angular, her nose tiny, and her cheekbones sharp, giving her more of a fairy-like look. Her hair was jet black and hung in soft curls down her back like a midnight waterfall.

Without warning, both women came and plopped down on the grass on either side of Arabella. She lifted her head desperately, keeping her gaze straight so she wouldn't look panicked at being flanked. This was no more than she deserved. What did she expect? That because June said everything was fine, she was willing to let a year of being treated terribly go, just like that?

"Arabella," Summer purred, a smile on her lips. "It's good to see you again. It's been a long time." She stuck out a hand, and Arabella was forced to take it. She shook gently, without any force, then dropped Arabella's cold fingers. She felt cold everywhere, despite the warmth of the day.

June stared at the group of kids playing football. "Nice day for a picnic," she ground out, barely audibly.

It was beyond clear that Summer had dragged June over. Not physically, but by convincing her somehow. She'd probably threatened to come alone, and June would have been worried that she'd probably make a scene. It wouldn't be the first time she was stuck playing intermediary between Arabella and Summer.

Arabella swallowed the lump in her throat. She wasn't going to give anyone a reason to need a mediator. In her most passive voice, she agreed. "I-it's been a long time. How are you, Summer? Your parents? And your brother?"

"They're good. How are yours? Your parents, I mean?" From the glint in her eyes, it was obvious Summer knew everything. She'd probably looked

Arabella's dad up online. There had been tons of articles about what he'd done, after all.

"Oh, uh, they're..." Honesty was probably the best policy in this case. Summer could be ruthless if she found out Arabella was lying. "They're actually not doing that well. They live in my basement suite. My dad was involved in this scheme a while back. It was bad. I don't know why he did it, but he got caught. He almost got jail time." Arabella lowered her eyes and studied her feet. If June didn't know that, she did now. Maybe Arabella would be fired, which would be a shame. She actually liked the company and everyone she worked with.

Summer's quick, sympathetic expression told Arabella that she had indeed already known. "Oh really? That's pretty crazy."

"Crazy. Yeah. My mom didn't know anything about it. It was hard for her. They had to declare bankruptcy." She reached to the side of the quilt and dug her fingers into the cool blades of grass there. She deserved this. This humiliation. She'd deserve it if Summer made her suffer right now, really ground the salt into Arabella's wounds.

But she didn't.

Because June cleared her throat. "I'm sorry to hear that. Really. That's a terrible thing to have happen. Everyone makes mistakes. Is your sister doing okay?" Her tone was completely genuine, but Arabella was afraid to look up and confirm it for herself.

"She's in college still. She's working part time and studying part time."

"Did you get fired from your last job?" Summer cut in. "For being a witch?"

"Summer!" June gasped. "That's—"

"A perfectly logical question." Now that it was out in the open, Arabella found it was easier to look up, to fold her hands in her lap and acknowledge what she'd done. "No. I didn't. The department downsized and got rid of

everyone but their executive staff. and they barely stayed on. Summer... June...I'm really sorry. For everything that I did. I wish I could make you understand how ashamed I am of how I acted in the past. I was the worst person."

"Why'd you do it?" Summer kept rolling, not sparing Arabella. She'd always been very direct. Some people would call it lacking a filter.

"I don't know. I've thought about that a lot. For a lot of reasons, I guess. Because I was insecure back then. Jealous about others." She looked June in the eye. "I was jealous of you. You were always so effortlessly smart. I would have killed to have your grades. And you were pretty. So, so pretty. And just so unique. Everyone knew you were going to do something amazing after high school. I wanted to be liked. I wanted to be popular. It gave me a rush to be mean, and I'm completely ashamed of that."

"It's been ten years," June said, her gaze shifting to Summer. She tilted her head like she was telling Summer silently to let it go. "We've all changed."

"But you applied at New Shooz 2uz for a reason," Summer pressed.

June made a gurgling noise.

"I swear I didn't know it was June's company," Arabella protested. "I applied to lots of places. I hardly got any calls back. I was going to take something totally not in my field if I had to. I needed to. My parents aren't working right now."

"You're supporting them?" Summer gaped at her.

"Summer, that's enough," June insisted sharply. "Lunch is going to be here soon. I want to get everything set out before the horde of hungry kids runs us over."

Summer scowled at the interruption. She clearly wasn't finished. There was no way she was going to let Arabella's past behavior go just like that. Arabella understood. It would take a lot to forgive what she'd done. And

trust? She didn't expect to just be taken at her word that she'd changed. All of a sudden, Summer's frown left.

"We're going to our family cabin for a girl's trip with my mom and June's mom. Tomorrow. Just for the weekend. It's on Brookville Lake, an hour from here."

"Oh. That would be nice. I've never been."

"No, I don't suppose it was posh enough back in the day." June made another noise of warning and Summer got to the point. "If you wanted to come, you could."

"What? Summer!" June gasped. She was horrified. Her twisted expression said as much, and her tone was little more than a breathy gasp.

Summer shrugged. "I thought it would be fun. We could get to know each other better."

"You mean that you could keep an eye on me, try to figure out if I have sinister, ulterior motives for joining the company, and/or punish my high school version of myself for being a royal turdbag. That is your pet name for me, right? But if you plan to tie me up and interrogate me, you should just stick to the city. I don't want to end up being fish food."

"What?" Summer gaped at her, then burst into laughter. "Oh my God, no. Our moms are going to be there! They wouldn't agree with feeding you to the fish or tying you up and whipping you with a wet noodle. My mom used to threaten me with that all the time, but she never got around to doing it. I don't think it would actually hurt. It would probably tickle. It would be weird though, that's for sure."

"Summer, please," June insisted. She stood up and brushed at the back of her dress. "Let's go." She paused for a second. "I'm sorry, Arabella. She insisted on coming and I let her be my plus one, even though I knew her behavior would be deplorable. I knew I'd never hear the end of it unless she came to see you for herself."

“Hey!” Summer pouted. “That’s rude.” She crossed her arms and stared up at her best friend.

June shook her head, but it was obvious she wasn’t mad. Embarrassed, yes. Summer would always be June’s best friend. More than that, probably. They’d been friends all this time and they probably thought of themselves as sisters.

Arabella could only wish she’d had a friend like that, but none of her high school group had actually been true friends at all. After the shit with her dad went down, no one from her old neighborhood talked to her. Or her parents. They’d lost all of their “friends” as well.

“Okay, it was rude,” Summer confessed, then studied Arabella. “I mean it. You can come if you want. You sound like you’re in need of a good getaway with some people who are going to be real about crap. Plus, it is the whole keep your enemies closer thing.”

“I’m not your enemy,” Arabella insisted.

“That remains to be seen.” Summer stood. “Oh, and if you’re actually out to hurt June in any way, fucking with her company or whatnot...” Summer glanced at the kids and lowered her voice after dropping that f-bomb. “I *will* string you up and whip you with a wet noodle for real.”

“I’m sure that has her quaking in her boots,” June stated dryly.

“I know where you live,” Summer threatened as she brushed grass off her dress. “Well, I don’t, but I can dang well find out. I have friends in high places now.”

“Or June could just check out my HR file,” Arabella deadpanned. “It has my address clearly written on it.”

“Right.” Summer crossed her arms again. “So, we’ll find out where you live.”

“No, we won’t, because that would be completely unethical,” June corrected.

Summer tossed her long hair over one shoulder. “We’ll pick you up tomorrow? At eight? We’re leaving early so we can have the whole weekend. Unless you had better plans?”

Arabella’s head was spinning. She didn’t want to go away for the weekend with Summer and June, but maybe she should. Maybe then she could apologize properly and make amends like she’d wanted to for the past decade. It was a perfect opportunity, and if she didn’t take it, she felt like she’d be taking the cowardly way out.

“Picking me up would involve telling you where I live.” It was kind of funny, and she even found that she wanted to laugh.

“See how sneaky I am?”

“Summer...I can see the delivery van guy over there with an armful of bags. The tables aren’t even set up yet.”

“Do you want some help?” Arabella offered. “Setting up?”

She hadn’t planned on doing that either, but the question came out of nowhere.

June looked surprised. Summer looked suspicious.

“Uh, sure,” June muttered. “That would be great.”

“Tomorrow,” Summer tossed over her shoulder as she spun around. “Eight.”

Arabella found herself rattling off her address. “When you get there, stay in the car. I’ll watch for you. It’s not a good neighborhood. You don’t have to come to the door or anything. And my parents are going to know where I’m going, so if you really plan on feeding me to the fishes ...don’t.”

June groaned. She raked a hand through her hair and looked anxiously at Summer. Her cheeks were pink, and it was clear she didn't want to stand there and have the conversation they were having. She wasn't having fun with it. She felt awkward and wanted to leave. And now her weekend away was going to be ruined.

So she thought, anyway. But Arabella didn't plan on doing any ruining. She planned on doing whatever fixing she could. She just hoped it was enough to make a small dent in all those terrible memories from their past. She wasn't sure that an entire lifetime of good deeds could undo the damage she'd done, and she only had two days.

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Chapter 6

June

June had been very much looking forward to her weekend away, until it was clear that Arabella was going to join them. She didn't share Summer's keep your enemies close sentiment. The ride, while only just over an hour long, had been tense and silent. Summer's mom drove, while June's mom sat in the front seat, and the three girls had the back of the car. At least June was smashed up against the window and Summer took one for the team, trying to rectify her mistake, and sat in the middle.

It didn't help.

The morning spent unloading, airing out the A-frame cabin, and relaxing on the private strip of weed-clogged beach didn't help either.

June's head felt foggy. She could still smell Arabella's perfume. Instead of smelling the lake, all June could smell was the ocean—intriguing, fresh, and clean.

It had been ridiculous trying not to look at her one-time nemesis in a bikini too. June could have throttled Summer. Summer had no idea what she was doing when she invited Arabella.

Yes, she really did want to keep tabs on her. She wanted to figure out why Arabella had really applied for the position at New Shooz 2uz. She was trying to keep June safe. What Summer absolutely wasn't counting on was the fact that no matter how wrong it was and no matter how hard she tried not to, June found Arabella attractive.

She was smoking hot in a bright pink bikini top and cut-off denim shorts, her blond hair naturally windswept, that fresh scent clinging to her skin. On

top of that, she was gorgeous in the way that makes most people sit up and take notice. How could she not find her attractive?

“Well, that’s it for me. I’m officially sizzled like a well-done piece of bacon.” Summer sat up on her towel, rearranging it in the sand, flinging little grains straight into June’s face, since she was downwind of the movement.

June sat up sharply, spluttering, swiping at her tongue. “No wonder our moms stayed inside,” she grouched. “They were the smart ones.”

“Oh, come on, it’s not that hot.”

“If I hadn’t put on lotion, I know I’d be lobster red by now. It’s so hot it’s hard to breathe out here.”

Summer rolled her eyes, stood up, and flicked her towel hard, on purpose, dusting both June and Arabella with a sandstorm. Both of them coughed and gagged and looked murderously at her. She just laughed in her easy way. For someone who was a natural redhead, Summer hardly ever burned. It was miraculous. She had a beautiful tan going on. She stretched, arching up catlike in her yellow one-piece bathing suit.

June had gone for the usual, a black tank top and jean shorts. She had her bathing suit on underneath, a sporty looking two piece, but she doubted it would see the light of day. She didn’t mind tan lines. Even though she tanned well and had enough lotion on to drown a small village, she wasn’t comfortable stripping down. It wasn’t just because of Arabella. She hardly ever did, unless she was swimming, and even then, sometimes she went in with her clothes still on.

“Well, I vote for the boat, then.”

June nearly choked. She stood, snapping up her towel and throwing it over her arm. “Are you serious? It would be a thousand degrees hotter on the water.”

“That’s not true,” Summer protested. “We would be driving, so the wind would be in our hair.” She swept her hand through her long hair, fluttering it in imitation of the wind and batting her lashes.

“I’m up for a boat ride.” Arabella was just trying to be agreeable. If they told her they wanted her to get on a floating dock so they could drag her to the middle of the lake and leave her there, she’d probably agree.

June did doubt that Arabella had any nefarious plans. She seemed too genuine. She seemed contrite, and when she’d apologized at the barbeque the shame on her face and the pain in her voice was absolutely not faked.

She probably just had been looking for a job. She hadn’t thought to check who ran the place until she got hired. If she’d applied at lots of places, and it sounded like she had, it made sense. The whole thing with her parents wasn’t faked. No one would talk about something like that unless it had actually happened. When they’d picked Arabella up that morning, she was right. The neighborhood was seedy, even at eight in the morning.

Summer shot June a funny look, but June ignored it. If she didn’t want Arabella to come boating with them, then she damn well shouldn’t have invited her. June definitely wasn’t up for shitty vengeful pranks like pushing Arabella off the edge.

“Yeah, alright,” June said. They needed to do something to escape the heat. There wasn’t a cloud in sight and the cabin was rustic, with nothing but a small air conditioner sticking out the kitchen window. They couldn’t swim in the shallow part right off the small beach or they’d end up full of weeds and leaches.

“Yay!” Summer threw her towel down and ran down the beach. She jumped over the small rock pile and her feet hit the deck hard. Her steps echoed as she ran, and she laughed as she reached the old aluminum boat and started untying it.

June kept her eyes on her towel as she folded it and set it on the rocks at the far side. She stepped over them and walked to the boat. It might have been ancient, but it was still a console drive, and since Summer had grown

up at the cabin, she was well versed in driving it. The seats were old and peeling and when it got hot, they burned skin and stuck to sweaty appendages, but the old beast could get going, and at the moment, movement to get out of the still, humid air seemed like the most appealing option.

Arabella stepped on daintily and took the seat behind Summer, facing the motor. Summer sat down behind the wheel and in a few seconds, they were pulling away from the dock, leaving the cabin behind.

They stayed silent, but it was mostly because the roar of the gassy smelling engine drowned out all possibility of conversation.

While Summer was driving, cruising at a good pace, her hair flying out behind her like a scarlet flag, Arabella's fingers suddenly started tapping out a nervous rhythm on the back of the boat seats right by June's shoulder. She whipped around on instinct and got a face full of Summer's hair.

"Ack!" June untangled herself, peeling red hairs off her tongue.

When she could finally see, she found Arabella angled towards her, her legs tucked up on the seat, leaning as far away from the back of the boat as she could. Her face was only a few inches from June's, and while that did a number on her in the form of her stomach clenching and her body coming alive with a buzzing energy, she realized quickly that Arabella's face had gone totally white.

"Are you okay?" she shouted over the infernal roar of the smoky, ancient motor. "We really aren't going to drop you off somewhere and make you swim for your life, or anything close. There are life jackets on board too. The boat might be old, but it's steady. Summer's a good driver."

Summer, who probably couldn't even hear half of what June had just yelled, gave them a thumbs-up with her left hand, taking it off the wheel for just a second.

"Mpheeder!" Arabella shouted.

“What?” June yelled back.

“Mider!”

“Murder?” Summer screamed. “No, no, I was just kidding about that.”

“Bliiiiiider!”

June didn’t know what a blider was for the life of her, but she finally got the message when Arabella practically leaped up onto her seat, squatting like a duck chased from the water by a hungry crocodile. She pointed frantically towards the back of the boat.

The boat had been tied at the dock for over a week, since anyone was last at the cabin, and there wasn’t anything that wolf spiders loved more than the dock and the water. That included the boat too. They weren’t choosy. It made a particularly lovely habitat and over the years, June had heard some real horror stories from Summer. One time, they were there by themselves and decided to take a swim. They’d run straight off the dock, leaping without looking.

When they’d surfaced, the whole dock was crawling with huge wolf spiders. It was a good thing they were able to swim around through the weeds and come up onto the beach. They’d only had four or five leaches stuck to them for their effort, which was still better than having a wolf spider leap onto them. The things loved to leap.

“Oh shit!” June panicked, grabbing Summer’s arm hard. The boat jerked as Summer threw back the throttle and ground them to a dead stop. She killed the motor so they could actually hear each other.

“What’s wrong?” Her eyes flew from June’s face down to where her hand clutched her arm in a death grip.

“Wolf spiders. Three. Back. Huge.” June couldn’t make sentences. She panted out the words.

She hated spiders, but it was more of the kind of hatred that meant as long as they didn't climb on her or look at her or come anywhere near her, they would all be fine. If they did, it was game over. She couldn't be responsible for the panic that ensued, the wild slapping, and the high probability of spider carnage, which was a horrific thing to think about in and of itself.

Apparently, Arabella felt the same way. She let out a shriek and climbed a little higher onto her seat. She was perched like a crazed bird, her long legs up underneath her, her arms wrapped around her like wings.

"If one of those gets on me, I'm going to die," she squealed. She curled herself into an even tighter ball and visibly shuddered.

Since Summer was used to the spiders, even if she didn't like them, she took charge. She stood up and went to the front. She came back with a paddle in one hand and a life jacket in the other. There were a ton on board, just in case. June felt a pang. She should have made sure Arabella had a life jacket. They really all should be wearing one. What if Arabella couldn't swim like she and Summer could? She made a note to put the dang things on after. She'd make sure Summer wore one too, even though she'd complain about it.

"You're going to squish it with that?" June protested. "And who wants to wear one of those with spider guts all over it?"

"I'm not going to squish it," Summer said. "Jeez. I know what I'm doing. I'm just going to help them overboard."

"They can swim?" Arabella whimpered. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and worked it between her teeth.

June noticed, and a faint shiver slid up her spine that wasn't spider induced. It wasn't unpleasant either. She made a second note to stop looking at Arabella's lips. They were far too pretty and perfect, and when she worked them between her teeth like that, it did strange, inexplicable things to her body.

“Unfortunately.”

“I’ve never seen a spider that big. They’re terrifying. Nuclear looking. Are you sure they didn’t get into anything? Something we should report?”

Summer laughed wickedly. She was enjoying herself, even though she hadn’t planned the moment of evil. Or maybe she had noticed the spiders when she’d gotten into the boat and said nothing. June ground her teeth.

“No, they’re just that big. Not nuclear. No strange spills in the lake or anything. We won’t find any three-headed, six-eyed fish. At least I don’t think so, but you never know...”

“Just get them,” June shuddered, “before they leap at us.”

Arabella screamed. “They *leap* too?”

“Like a kangaroo trying to win first prize in the high jump,” Summer confirmed. She was having way too much fun with this.

She totally knew the spiders were in the boat when they got in and she’d left them, knowing Arabella would take the backseat. It would have served Summer right if those spiders got a hankering to move on up and landed on her face while she was driving. June smiled at the thought.

As Summer moved in, Arabella stood up on her seat like she was ready to jump overboard if something went wrong. There was a very good chance that it could. June was on board with the idea of jumping ship should those spiders get past Summer.

Using the paddle to prod the first, largest spider, Summer had the life jacket ready. She made the thing run onto it then quickly flipped it over the edge, sending the spider flying. There was an island not far, a small one with rocks and trees, and the spider skated along the water neatly, heading there for refuge. The second one followed suit, heading for the island as soon as it was flipped overboard. The third had other ideas. Summer got it into the water just fine, but instead of swimming away, it turned around again.

“Oh, my God!” Arabella screamed. “It’s trying to come back.”

“We’re about to be boarded,” June yelled. She grasped her seat anxiously, ready to leap up onto it should it be necessary. Leaping into the water was no longer an option.

The last spider was swimming furiously around the boat, some kind of a world record swimming bastard of a determined spider, coming to the back where it was lowest and where it could use the motor to climb out of the water and back up for safety.

“Stay clear, you little beggar,” Summer yelled at it. She leaped over the seat, right past Arabella, and landed in the driver’s seat with a thump. She turned the key and as soon as the engine started up, coughing its regular smoke, the spider skated away on the water’s surface. She waited, not wanting to maim the thing before she got the motor going and carefully moved the boat forward.

“It’s still coming!” Arabella yelled.

If Summer wanted to terrorize Arabella, she couldn’t have come up with a better plan, though June was pretty sure her bestie hadn’t secretly put the spiders into the boat. That would be too devious, and Summer wasn’t that fond of them. It didn’t stop her from grinning devilishly.

“Death wish mother effer,” Summer muttered. She pushed the boat faster and still, June could see the nasty beast sliding over the water at speeds she didn’t know were possible, heading straight towards them.

“Hurry, Summer! It’s still freaking coming after us!”

Arabella climbed higher onto her seat, folding herself into an even smaller ball. “What’s wrong with that thing? It’s possessed!”

“It might be,” Summer agreed. She kicked the boat into high gear so fast that June and Arabella lurched forward. June braced herself with the dash, but Arabella nearly toppled over the seats. She righted herself with ease, a

throwback to her cheerleading days from high school, and cranked her head back around.

Thankfully, the spiders were long gone. They moved out into the lake, away from the small island. She kept going, speeding past the deeper, open waters and cutting through the other side, where a cluster of islands and natural bays usually provided protection from the wind. They didn't have to worry about that. It was so hot there were hardly any other boats out on the lake. Too hot for boating, even with the wind in their hair.

Summer suddenly slowed down and cut the engine between two islands. She moved to the front, dug out the anchor, and threw it over. "Time for swimming, *biatches*. It's too hot for boating."

"I was just thinking that," June said. She glanced over the edge of the boat at the sparkling water.

It looked inviting, cool and wet, but she hated doing this. She was a strong swimmer, but she wasn't into swimming in the middle of nowhere like Summer was.

"Relax," Summer said as June hesitated. "I made sure it's deep, but not that deep. No water monster lurking in there at twelve feet, and also no weeds and no leaches. We'll wear the life jackets. We'll be fine."

June gave Arabella a sidelong glance. She didn't look very certain either. "How will we get back in?"

"The boat's got a swim ladder mounted at the back. It's easy."

"Can you swim, Arabella?" June wanted to be sure. This wasn't about peer pressure. This was just about Summer being Summer and expecting everyone else to be just as comfortable with her wild and adventurous ways.

"I can," Arabella whispered, then winced. She looked like she wished she would have lied.

“That’s what the jackets are for.” Summer, still standing at the front of the boat, dug out the water-skiing life jackets and tossed two towards the back. She shrugged one on, already in her bikini, and without hesitation leaped over the edge. She surfaced a few seconds later, shaking water off her wet hair, peeling the strands off of her face. “Oh, my God, that’s good! Nice and cool, but not frigid. It’s such a relief. Get your buns in here. Both of you.”

“I swear we won’t die,” June muttered under her breath as she grabbed one of the life jackets.

She tried not to look at Arabella, and failed, as she picked up the other. She bent at the waist, her bikini bottoms tight and tiny against her perfectly shaped behind. June nearly swallowed her tongue. She quickly checked the life jacket over for spiders— she’d had a few incidents in the past where she’d gotten nasty surprises—and zipped it on right over her tank and shorts.

“June!” Summer yelled. “Take those off! Come on!”

Arabella zipped up the life jacket. When June turned around, the other woman was standing right behind her, her breasts pushed up from the tight life jacket, her long legs on display. Her hair swirled around her shoulders, and when she bit down on her bottom lip nervously again, June’s legs turned to jelly.

She needed to get her ass into the water before she freaking melted just looking at Arabella. In high school, her meanness had ruined her prettiness, but now... She was older, more mature, seemingly much nicer, and she was smoking hot; totally sexy.

And June’s employee.

There was also a high chance, like somewhere in the ballpark of one hundred percent, that Arabella was straight.

“Get in here!” Summer roared, splashing water playfully.

While June was trying to catch her breath and calm the riot of sensations storming through her body, Arabella went to the side of the boat. She stood there for just a second before she put one foot up on the side and gracefully leaped off. She hit the water in a pencil dive, plugging her nose, and hardly made so much as a ripple.

June took the opportunity to turn her back and let out a small groan of frustration. She could literally kill Summer for bringing temptation incarnate with them. She could also kick her own ass for getting all hot and bothered over someone who wasn't in her league, used to be crazy horrible to her, and wasn't even a lesbian. June never did things like that. She didn't just find random people attractive. Not in the steal your breath, make you gasp, swallow your own tongue, hyperventilate kind of way.

Maybe she was overheating. Her brain was probably getting scrambled in her own head due to the sun. If that was the case, Summer was probably right. A cool dip would fix everything.

There was no way June was shedding her tank and shorts. She was too self conscious to do that in front of Arabella, someone who had once called her ugly and said she looked like a boy. Even if Arabella had changed, comments like that had stuck with June. She wasn't shaped like the glorious women in the water already and they were watching her.

She buckled up her life jacket and leaped off the boat, flipping neatly in midair like she and Summer used to practice. The water rushed up at her, cold and an instant relief against the scorching summer sun.

She surfaced, shaking off the water droplets, swiping them away from her mouth so she wouldn't swallow the lake water.

"This is nice," June admitted.

"It is." Arabella sounded surprised. She treaded water easily, and probably would have without the life jacket keeping her bobbing in place.

Summer swam by on her back. "Told you."

They swam for half an hour, doing laps, chasing and splashing each other, or floating lazily on their backs when they were tired. June had to admit she was shocked at how easy it was for them to have fun. All of them. Arabella included. She wasn't even close to the same person she'd been in high school.

June didn't need any further evidence than Arabella leaping into the lake. The old Arabella never would have done anything that could have ruined an expensive blowout, and lake water would have been a total no-go. She would have wrinkled her nose and snorted and said that lakes were for people who couldn't afford treated swimming pools that didn't have mucky bottoms, murky depths, leaches, and other horrible creatures like fish. Or spiders.

When they got out, Summer went first, demonstrating how to use the ladder. Arabella went next, while June hung back. She tried very hard to keep her eyes busy and not watch Arabella as she got out of the water, dripping wet, the water sluicing off her creamy skin, lush breasts, and ample curves.

She failed.

Arabella stripped off her life jacket as soon as she got into the boat and June's eyes were drawn there like Arabella had her own magnetic field.

June pulled herself up easily on the ladder and took off her life jacket. So what if she was wearing her clothes? They'd probably be dry in a few minutes from the wind and the sun. She went to plop down on her seat in the front, right at the same time Arabella bent over to snatch the life jacket from the bottom of the boat. June got an eyeful of Arabella's breasts. The nipples were beaded, hard through the damp bikini top.

It was like getting punched in the face, and June nearly stumbled back. She tried to tear her eyes away, and then Arabella turned. Giving her a distinct and clear view of her bottom.

Apparently, Summer was also looking. And she spotted it at the same time that June did.

“Oh shit,” Summer groaned, but there was far too much pleasure in her voice. “I said there were no leaches, but they were happy to be prove me wrong.”

Arabella screeched. “Where? How do we get it off you? Show me! I’ve never seen one before.”

June debated throwing herself back into the cold water to knock some sense into herself before Summer noticed that she’d been checking Arabella out all day. She couldn’t do that in the future. For a thousand reasons.

Summer actually choked back her smile. June was proud of her for making the effort. “Oh, it’s not on me,” Summer said smoothly. “It’s actually stuck to your behind.”

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Chapter 7

Arabella

It wasn't just because it was hot out that Arabella couldn't sleep. Though the cabin did have the small window air conditioner, relief didn't reach into the small bedroom at the back. The room was basically a closet, but she'd been given her own room, and that was either a gift from Summer or a punishment.

Arabella chose to think of it as a gift. That was, until she'd tossed and turned for a few hours on the narrow twin-size bed. It wasn't a comfortable mattress, and maybe that was why she'd been given it.

Arabella knew it probably wasn't safe to go out of the cabin and wander the woods at night, but she didn't want to sit in the living room and risk waking anyone up. They would probably be grouchy with her, and she was already at the top of Summer's shit list. She cracked the front door, and when nothing bit her, not even the bugs swarming at the porch light overhead, she closed it behind her and ventured down the steps.

The yard was bathed in shadow, the darkness absolute beyond the porch. It wasn't like the city where a halo of light seemed to surround everything. For a minute, Arabella held her breath, but then she gulped and took a few more steps into the shadow. She should have thought to bring her phone to use the flashlight, but it was back in the cabin.

When her eyes adjusted, she could see a huge tree at the far side of the yard. Its branches moved sinuously in the slight breeze. It was probably still at least seventy-five degrees out. The air was warm, but not close and humid like in the cabin. The night breeze smelled like the trees and the more pungent scent of the lake, but Arabella found that despite not being an outdoorsy person, she liked it. She even liked the dark once her nerves had

settled, and the big tree she walked over to felt like a safe spot to sit and just think. Or not think. Come to think of it, she actually wouldn't mind if her relentless thoughts and worries would give it a break.

She leaned against the rough bark of the tree and sighed. After the sigh, she dragged in a big inhale of the fresh lake air. It felt good, so she did it again. Sighed. Breathed in. Eventually it turned into a regular exhale, inhale and she found herself relaxing, her shoulders melting against the tree through her tank top, even though the bark scratched and bit in.

It was no worse than that leach.

Correction, it was a lot less worse. That leach was horrific. What was not horrific? The feel of June's capable hands—her fingers cool from being submerged in the cold water as they swam—against her skin. They had ignited an undeniable fire in her belly. She was almost more worried about how she would react to that touch than she had been about the leach.

Then again, she couldn't actually see her offender, which was somehow easier. She'd managed not to freak out and June had, after a few tugs, sent the little beast back into the lake. It didn't actually hurt at all, but the feeling of June's fingertips on her behind lingered long after it should. At least she attributed the tingles in that spot to June, and not the leach. It could have been the leach.

Summer took great delight in the whole leach thing, but June had treated the incident passively. She'd been entirely impersonal the whole trip. It was like Arabella was a stranger to her, but treated like any other stranger, with deference and enough kindness. Though she'd caught June staring a few times, she was professionally nice. Distant, but not aloof.

She hadn't been delighted at the leach. There was no glee or distaste in June's face when she'd pulled away. The times she was looking at Arabella could probably be credited to the fact that she was trying to figure out if Arabella was still horrible or if she really had changed.

She'd wanted to return that look, but she wasn't brave enough.

She was musing on that when a great black shadow leapt out of the tree and landed on the ground in front of her. Arabella screamed. She backed up against the tree so fast that the bark ground into her skin painfully, sending burning twinges down her back. Her scream echoed through the night, and she clamped a hand over her mouth as she wobbled to her feet. Whatever the shadowy animal was, it was probably best to be as quiet as possible. Her mind ran through scenarios in an instant. Bat? Bear? Raccoon? No, too big for those. Wasn't it? Her erratic breaths escaped the hand pressed over her lips, sounding like hoarse snorts.

The shadow turned around a second later, and a light flicked on. Arabella blinked into that blinding beam. She relaxed when her brain finally computed that it wasn't a terrifyingly huge animal holding a flashlight on her, but a person. A lithe figure wearing black leggings and a black tank, her hair flowing down her shoulders like ink from a broken pen.

"J-June?" Arabella stammered, blinking against the blinding light.

June lowered the flashlight towards the ground. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"You were up in the tree?"

"I was. It's something I've done for a while now. If I can't sleep, I come out here. Climb the first few branches and sit. The tree's huge, so there isn't any worry about falling out. Even if I did, it's not a long way down. The branches are crazy thick this close to the base anyway."

Arabella spun and whirled around, glancing up at the thick branches. They were huge, extending well out, the leafy bits not until the ends. She judged the climb and figured June was right. It wouldn't be hard to get up there.

"My God," Arabella panted. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Sorry. I should have. I wasn't sure if you were going to stay there. And then I wasn't sure if I wanted to say anything. You looked like you were settling in, so I figured I had better do something. I meant to jump a lot

further away, but I wasn't thinking about how that would scare the life out of you."

Arabella's hands moved to her chest, and she crossed her arms. "You didn't *want* to scare the life out of me? Because it was funny? Because I'd deserve it?"

The flashlight's beam wobbled a little. June slowly shook her head, and even though Arabella really couldn't see her face, she believed her. June had always been like that. She'd probably never had a truly mean or spiteful thought in her life.

"It's hot inside," June said without looking at Arabella. "I think I might just sit under this tree for a bit." She didn't move. "Uh, you can...you could sit out here too if you want."

"Are you just saying that because you're too nice to kick me out of the spot I was already in before you nearly gave me a heart attack?"

It was impossible to see June's face clearly, especially still half-blind from the flashlight, but Arabella could swear that she actually heard amusement in June's tone. "Kind of?"

"Well, I'll take kind of over a hot room. It's a thousand degrees in there and the wind isn't coming the right direction to actually go in the window. At least out here, I can breathe."

June made a noise that wasn't a choke or a gasp or a gurgle, but something in between. "Think out here," she echoed softly. "Yeah. That's about right."

She toted her flashlight underneath the tree, sat down abruptly, and turned it off. Arabella wobbled her way over on unstable legs. It felt strange to be night blind again. She sat down harder than she meant to, adding a bruised bottom to the scrapes on her shoulders.

June sat with her back straight, and Arabella was sure to maintain her distance. She stayed a few feet away, curled around the other side of the

tree. Their backs weren't to each other, but just about.

"I, uh, I'm sorry," June eventually said, so quietly that her voice was like a secondary breeze. "I'm sorry that Summer has, well, that she doesn't trust you and that she doesn't like you. It's pretty obvious."

"Hey. I didn't have to come."

"Why did you come? If that's not too rude? I'm not saying I don't want you here. To be clear."

Arabella nodded before she realized that June couldn't see her. "I know that. You would never say that and probably never think it. Even back in high school you were so nice to everyone." Maybe she shouldn't be bringing up the past, but when it sat so heavily on her, what else could she do? It was the only thing they had in common, the one thing that would forever stand in both of their minds, wherever they went, no matter how far forward they ended up going.

Arabella wanted to apologize again. Properly. She realized it would be better if she had written down a list of all the things she could think of to apologize for. A blanket apology seemed trite and insincere.

"Can I ask you something?" June said. She shifted against the tree and the bark rasped against her clothing. The sound was soft in the night.

"Okay. Sure."

"You'll answer honestly?"

"Yes."

June sighed. "That stuff about your parents. It's really true? You didn't just give us a fake address and go camp out at a friend's house for us to pick you up at?"

Pride was a hard thing to swallow, but Arabella had enough practice at it over the years that she didn't have much difficulty in getting down the sour taste of her own ego now, with all its bruises and mars and scuffs. "I think

that if I was going to lie about something, I'd probably lie about something much better than that. I'd want to say it didn't happen and that we were all doing fine. And then I'd go camp out at someone's much nicer, more expensive house and say it was mine."

June gave an unexpected laugh. "Yeah. True, you probably would. Well, now that I know that you weren't lying about any of that, and that's a rough one, I'm really sorry about what happened. Can I ask you what I really wanted to ask you?"

Closing her eyes, Arabella leaned harder into the tree, pressing her tailbone in until it ached. Foreboding soured her stomach. She knew she owed it to June to be honest, no matter how bad the coming question might be. "Sure. Okay. Go ahead."

"Why did you not say anything that afternoon? You bullied me about everything under the sun, but the one thing you could have nailed me for, you never did. Why was that? I've never understood."

Arabella thought back to that day. She knew exactly which one June meant. It was cold. The wind was biting. Arabella remembered that because she wished that she'd worn her mitts, but she'd forgotten them at home. She was very forgetful that day. She'd left her favorite sweater on the bleachers during cheer practice and then she'd gone to get changed after and had gabbed with all those girls she called her friends, putting in the time. It had always been about putting in the time. She'd been a quarter of the way to her car in the student parking lot when she remembered her sweater. She'd thrown her jacket on over her flowy blouse. She would have just left it, but it was her favorite. She'd turned around and walked back, never expecting to find what she'd found.

When she realized that June was waiting for an answer, and probably had been for quite some time, Arabella forced herself to take a breath. All she needed to do was fill up her lungs and it would be easy to say what she wanted to say, wouldn't it? No, it probably would never be easy. She was so nervous that her hands were actually damp, and she had to rub them on her cotton pajama shorts. She glanced down, surprised to find that she was

wearing the ones with the little dogs on them. Pink with purple and darker pink puppies. She could have sworn they were blue striped.

“You don’t have to answer that,” June said, attempting to be nice, because that’s who she was. She never wanted to cause anyone any pain. She hadn’t gone through her high school years like a full team of guys hell bent on demolishing everyone and everything in their wake like Arabella had.

“No. I-I’ll answer you. Sorry. I was just thinking about it.” Arabella knew her voice was too small. She swallowed hard against the burn at the back of her throat. “I could never have made fun of you for that because it would have been extremely hypocritical.”

“Hypocritical?”

“Maybe that’s not the right word. Maybe ironic would be better.”

“Ironic?”

June still didn’t get it. Arabella cursed herself for her inability to find the right words. “You were so open about who you were. I never got that luxury. I couldn’t. If I had told anyone about me, I would have lost everything. That’s all I had. I don’t know why being popular and liked and being so...God, I don’t know. I don’t know why any of it was important, but back then, it was. It was my everything.”

There was a scraping sound, then the click of the flashlight, and suddenly June was right there, right beside Arabella, shining the light in her face again. Arabella threw her hands over her eyes to try and shield them from the bright retina burning beam.

“Sorry! Shit.” June swiveled the flashlight down. “I just had to see your face right now. Are you shitting me? Because I swear, if you’re shitting me, you’re going to be sorry. You think I can’t be mean? I can be mean. I can spend all night trapping spiders and leaches and put them in your bed. Or something. I would think of something!”

“It’s true!” Arabella yelped. “It’s not a secret now, but back then I would have done anything to keep anyone from finding out. I was such an evil little bratty bitch back then, but even I knew it was wrong to try to cover up my own shit by shitting all over your shit.”

June gaped at her. Arabella’s eyes had recovered enough to see the glint of June’s teeth flashing because her mouth was wide freaking open. “So, you’re saying that you’re a lesbian. If I’m wrong, please don’t make fun of me. I think that’s what you’re saying. Oh, my God, is that really what you’re saying?”

“Yes! Yes, that’s what I’m saying.”

“Oh, my God!” June turned the flashlight up to the sky, illuminating the leaves of the tree and the branches overhead, and a set of glowing, beady eyes higher up, staring back at them.

“What is that?” June screeched.

“I don’t know!” Arabella leaped up and ran as fast as she could away from the tree. If something else was up there, she didn’t want to stick around to find out the hard way. If it landed on her, that would be a hundred times worse than the scare she’d had from the leach and from June leaping out of the tree combined.

June came huffing and chugging away from the tree, her bare feet flashing in the wildly swaying flashlight beam. “Shit,” she squealed. “I have no idea what that was, but I was up in the tree with it without even knowing.”

“Oh, my God, it could have been a bear!”

“Up a tree? Not hardly. I think it was more likely that it was an opossum.”

Arabella’s heart slowed down a few beats and she was even able to smile at her foolish assumptions about the bear. She was thoroughly and truly a city girl. She’d never seen an opossum in person in her life. They were

really cute on videos, though. She wasn't afraid of them, even though they hissed and stuff and that often scared people.

"You're probably right."

"Should we go back inside just in case? What if it wasn't? It's pitch black."

"Maybe we should."

Seeing as they'd just scared each other again, they both rushed up the cabin steps, the flashlight illuminating the way so there wasn't any missteps or accidents. June threw open the door and Arabella followed. They went to their rooms silently, without saying anything further, even though Arabella knew that June probably had a thousand more questions.

Would she tell Summer? It wouldn't matter if she did. Like Arabella had said, it wasn't a secret anymore. She'd come out to her parents when she was nineteen because she just couldn't stand to be fake anymore. Her dad was absolutely fine with it, her sister was okay too. Her mom, oddly enough, took the news hard and it was a good year before their relationship was back to being even half of what it was before, and they'd never been that close. In fact, they weren't close until the whole scandal involving her dad. Arabella's mom had to admit that she couldn't live that lifestyle anymore – the lifestyle of tennis and country clubs and stuck-up friends and charity functions, throwing parties for this or that.

If there was one good thing that had come from the whole situation it was that they were closer as a family than they'd ever been before. When they lost everything, they still had each other. That might be tacky as glue, but it was true for them. They'd held together. So far.

Arabella slid underneath the sheet. The room was stifling, even with the window cracked. Outside, mosquitos buzzed at the screen. She could hear a chirping in the night, far beyond the cabin, and wondered if it was a bug or some sort of bird or even an animal.

What had been up there in the tree?

If it was a bear, would it try and get into the cabin?

Arabella shuddered. She'd never be able to sleep if she thought about a bear breaking down the door and mauling them in the darkness before they could get out and get to safety. Better to think it was an opossum and that it had been minding its own business until they came along. The eyes *had* been pretty small. Bears didn't have small eyes, did they? Likely not.

Instead of driving herself crazy thinking about the wildlife, Arabella thought instead about the day she and June had been talking about.

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Chapter 8

High School

Arabella

Annoyed at forgetting her favorite sweater, Arabella walked quickly through the school and out the back doors at the end of the long, fluorescent lit hall. The school was always warm. It was like it had one temperature and that was hot. In the summer, it was unbearable, even before school let out. No matter how many windows were opened and how much airing out was attempted, the whole place stank like sweaty teenagers and raging hormones.

It hadn't snowed yet, but the air was dry and electric, and so cold and crisp that the snow was probably not long in coming. Pretty much the only thing Arabella actually liked about high school was the cheer team, but she hated doing it in the frigid weather. Just standing on the sidelines screaming her lungs out and waving her pom poms wasn't enough to keep the blood flowing. By the time they did their routines to actually warm the heck up, they were basically frigid icicles. There wasn't anything like trying to split and spread freezing muscles into contorted positions. As much as the other girls hated practice or whined about nailing the choreography and having to practice it over and over, Arabella loved it.

She kept walking, past the end of the school, out towards the track field where they had cheer practice. The bleachers were a lot smaller than the ones surrounding the football field in the distance. The school wasn't known for its track and field prowess, but of course, like most high schools, football was a big deal. Arabella remembered leaving her sweater on the bleachers. She'd only worn it out there because the wind was so crisp and biting. She'd shed it when she was warmed up.

If she didn't have cheer, she'd probably go insane. People said that all the time, but she thought it was the one thing keeping her tethered. The one thing she didn't hate about the whole high school experience. This was her last year, and every single day, she got out of bed, spent hours on her hair and makeup and choosing her clothes, pasted a smile on her face, and faked her way through the remaining hours.

If anyone knew how much she hated all of it, they'd probably be shocked.

That wasn't why she was mean. She couldn't explain it, even to herself. She had enough attention at home. It wasn't that. She'd always been effortlessly pretty and had a body that most people could only achieve through rigorous exercise, a lot of praying, and maybe even a few plastic surgery touch-ups here and there. Her family was well off. They'd given her a brand-new car for her sixteenth birthday. She went on expensive vacations with her family. She had the best clothes, got regular manis and pedis with her mom, and always had the trendy stuff that everyone wanted. She was smart enough. She got decent grades. Mostly B's, which her parents were fine with. She was captain of the cheer team, was dating a handsome football player, and was probably going to be voted homecoming queen.

On the outside, she was like every other popular girl. Put together by a very tenuous amount of glue that could fail at any time, exposing the gaping cracks and the mess of churning, wretched emotions underneath.

Not only did Arabella not know why she was mean, she didn't know why she did half the things she did. She didn't have any explanation for it. She just picked an easy target and didn't let up. It was the expected thing to do and to be. If you were popular, you were generally also mean. That's how most books and movies made it seem. She was just following suit. She was at the top of the food chain, and to get there, you had to crush your way up without mercy.

The wind whipped past Arabella and she walked faster. Her hands were frozen since she'd also forgotten her mitts. She stuffed them into her pockets and felt her annoyance rise at having to walk all the way back out here.

Closer to the bleachers, she heard a soft hum, then ragged breaths and the wet sound of flesh on flesh that signaled someone was making out under the stands where they couldn't be seen. It was a popular place to go and suck face, especially for kids who couldn't do that at home or didn't want to do that at home. It beat the cramped backseat of a car, at least so people said.

Arabella had never tried it. She was actually grossed out at the way most people in the school were so open with their displays of affection. No, not affection. They were teenagers. There wasn't much affection in the desperate groping, the hot for each other handling, or the possessive grasp the guys placed on their girlfriends to show they were their property. The whole thing grossed Arabella out. There wasn't anything special in it.

Maybe she was doing it wrong, because she just didn't get it. Disgust soured her stomach when she thought about having to go all the way with Joe. He'd been pushing her for it for months now. She was barely able to put him off. Soon, he wasn't going to be satisfied with sucking her face or groping her breasts or the things she did to him with her hands. She'd used the whole bad time of the month excuse far too many times and it was starting to be not so believable.

Arabella tried to pretend she didn't hear the soft, feminine moans coming from the spot to her left. At least she thought it was coming from the spot to her left, but the wind must have played tricks, because she turned right to avoid getting any eyeful of things that were private, things she didn't want to see anyway, and all of a sudden, there they were. The bleachers gave way at the tall point to reveal two shapes. Those soft moans weren't coming from one girl, Arabella realized, but from two.

Sarah Walker, classic nerd, straight A student. That was a big surprise in itself, but the bigger surprise? The girl tangled up with her, twisted together so vibrantly and recklessly that they weren't even wearing jackets or sweaters anymore, but were stripped down to their tank tops, was June Erickson. She had her denim clad leg thrust between Sarah's.

Shock rippled through Arabella, and she tried to walk quietly away so that they didn't see her. The stupid twig she randomly stepped on from the line of trees a few feet away from the bleachers had other ideas. It snapped

like a firecracker going off in the dead of night. Arabella froze as June and Sarah broke apart. June scrambled away while Sarah grabbed for something, anything, to shield them. She came up with her jacket and thrust it over her head. As if that was going to hide anything.

June's dark eyes locked with Arabella's. June stared fearlessly, her lips swollen from Sarah's kisses, her pupils still dilated. She was still breathing hard too. And then, as Arabella just stood there, June lifted one shoulder in challenge, as if to say that she didn't care if Arabella would tell the whole school. She did glance worriedly in Sarah's direction though, and it was clear Sarah did care. That she didn't want people to know. It was probably why they were hiding out under the privacy of the bleachers.

Arabella felt something in her stomach that she'd never felt before. No, she'd felt it, but she'd never really admitted to herself what it was. Staring at June, with her mussed hair and huge pupils and heaving chest, Arabella felt desire. It wasn't the first time she'd been turned on by a woman, but it was the first time she'd felt that prickling awareness when it came to June.

Arabella knew all about herself. She knew she wasn't truly into guys. That was the real reason why she didn't want to do anything else with Joe. And she'd called enough girls sluts before that she didn't want to be one herself. She always made it seem like her parents had a curfew for dates. That they were strict. In fact, they didn't care who she dated or where she went. They did, but not anywhere near the extent she made people believe.

She'd known for a few years that she was probably never going to be into guys, but that wasn't something she could risk anyone else finding out. Joe was a good cover, even if he was annoying. She just wanted to make it through the hell that was high school, graduate, and leave Cincinnati behind, and then, she promised herself, she'd be brave enough to admit the truth to herself and her family.

June's black gaze bored through her until Arabella felt hollowed out. She cleared her throat, squared her shoulders like June had done, because Arabella Ferguson didn't get intimidated by anyone, and she never got bossed around. She shored up all her mean-girl courage, but when June just

stared back at her, ever defiant, Arabella let it go. She held her breath, turned on her heel, and stalked away.

She hadn't given a single reassurance that she wouldn't tell anyone about what she'd seen, but she also hadn't fired off a cheap shot at June. Her silence, more than anything, would have come as a shock. It shocked her. She hadn't been able to think of a single mean thing to say. She hadn't even wanted to be mean. Honestly, as she walked quickly away from the bleachers to get her stupid sweater, she knew she couldn't make fun of June for this. She couldn't, because that would be wrong on every level. Arabella couldn't betray June like that because it would be a betrayal of herself.

So, it looked like Sarah's secret, and the possible secret that June didn't look like she minded people knowing, was safe. Not only did she not say anything, she wasn't going to use it as ammunition in the future either. That would be unforgivable.

Arabella snatched up her sweater, finding it exactly where she'd left it, and hurried in the other direction. It meant taking the long way around the school parking lot, but she was overwarm, flushed actually. She could use the cold wind to take the heat out of her skin and the long walk to blame on her pounding heart.

She could think of something else to be mean about. She focused her racing thoughts on that. Just because June had gotten a pass from her today didn't mean she was going to get one in the future about anything else. She couldn't think of any justification for it, but she didn't need to.

She'd keep doing what she always did. Being mean was like a drug. It entrenched her position in the school, in the world, solidified her popularity, and strengthened the bonds of whatever passed as loyalty between her and the girls she called friends. Her world was right when she was at the top and she had no intention of falling off her throne.

If only the next eight months until graduation didn't feel so impossible to get through.

Chapter 9

June

June was exhausted the next morning. Summer, who'd slept peacefully in the hot, sluggish night, was up early, chipper and excited for a day of lake activities. She'd tried to rouse June at six, but June had thrown a pillow at her, then stuffed the other one over her head. Surprisingly, Summer left her alone. She went off to do her morning swim or run or whatever it was that she was so jazzed about all alone.

June didn't go back to sleep. She laid in bed, her eyes squeezed tightly shut against the sting of the morning sun already invading the room. An hour after Summer left, she could hear their moms moving around. The dark, burnt scent of fresh coffee and the smell of sizzling bacon proved their presence in the kitchen.

After struggling with the heat in the room and with what she'd learned about Arabella all night, June was too tired to even think about getting motivated to get up for breakfast. The coffee would still be there when she did roll out and she could take or leave the bacon. She'd been so fired up the night before, so stunned, so amazed, that she couldn't even think about sleep.

Should she tell Summer? It made so much sense now. Why Arabella had never told anyone about seeing her and Sarah. She'd always wondered why her enemy, a person who took such delight in poking any and all pins into her that she could, had given her a pass. Not just any pass. A life-changing pass.

Arabella could have gotten miles and miles out of what she'd seen. Those seconds could have turned into painful days, weeks, and months of torture. At the very least, she could have resorted to bribery and gotten June or

Sarah, who were both known as nerds, to write some papers for her, but she hadn't even done that.

She'd never breathed a word.

June remembered how shocked she and Sarah were when nothing happened. They'd waited, barely daring to breathe. Eventually they'd decided not to tempt fate. Sarah had very religious parents, and for that and other reasons, she wasn't ready for people to know. June, on the other hand, decided to take any power that she could away from Arabella. She'd never cared if people knew she was a lesbian. She'd finally told Summer about what happened.

June had worked her butt off to get that scholarship but she actually didn't care much about her school experience. It was unpleasant, being bothered constantly by Arabella. The things she said stung and burned like hot metal biting into her skin. They chaffed and festered, but they never reached beyond the surface. It was the same thing when June came out. People talked for a week and then they just moved on to something else when it was obvious June didn't give two flying shits what they were going to say or do.

"June!" Summer stuck her head in the room, scaring the shit out of June. She realized that she'd lost herself again, as she'd done all night. She couldn't turn off her brain and she was exhausted from more than just not sleeping.

June groaned. She still had the pillow tucked loosely over her face.

Summer's footsteps were heavy on the wood plank floor. She grabbed the pillow and tore it away, letting all the bright light spill in. "Come on! Even Arabella is up. You can't let Miss Citified City Girl beat you to getting outside."

Should I tell her about Arabella?

There were very few things June didn't share with Summer, but this was going to be one of those things she kept to herself. Arabella hadn't come

forward with the information, but it also didn't sound like much of a secret. It wasn't just because all those years ago she'd kept June's secret. June didn't really believe in giving away information that wasn't hers to give. Life was a lot simpler if one kept the wild gossip to a minimum. She'd always ascribed to that, and she wasn't about to do anything differently. Even if Summer was Summer.

"Okay, okay," June muttered. "I'm up." She swung her feet over onto the floor. It was approximately six thousand degrees, and she was sure it wasn't past eight in the morning.

"Good! I want to take the boat out. We can go swimming again. Our moms said they'd come. Then there's the market at one that we love, and we could get the bikes out of the shed and go for a ride, and..."

June didn't mean to tune out, but as Summer rattled off her list she was so tired she kind of checked out. She agreed to something, maybe a lot of things, and got up and got dressed after Summer left.

She didn't know how she'd have the energy to get through a jam-packed day. Wasn't lake life supposed to be about taking it easy? What did people say about needing a holiday from their holiday? Whatever it was, she figured she needed it. Very. Badly.

After a day jammed so full of activities that even Summer was worn out, June thought she'd be able to fall asleep as soon as she turned out the light. Instead, she stayed in bed, her sheets kicked off against the wet heat saturating the cabin like a sodden blanket. She stared up at the roof, watching shadows and listening to night sounds until she couldn't take it anymore.

Wild animals or not, she was going outside to escape the heat.

When June tried her flashlight, she found that the batteries were dead. She thought about taking her phone but didn't want to risk dropping it and breaking it. She decided on the beach, since she didn't have to be wary

about any wild animals there. Or, at least, she hoped she didn't. It was probably safer than climbing the tree or sitting underneath it and waiting for something to fall on her head.

Since she was so tired and so annoyed that she couldn't sleep even though she was exhausted and had been all day, June missed the strange shadow on the beach until she was almost there and the shadow turned into a living, breathing person with a rush of blonde hair and eyes that looked like black onyx in the dark.

Arabella.

June wanted to turn around and head back to the cabin, but it was too late. She'd already been seen. She could tell, because Arabella smiled and the sliver of moonlight up in the sky reflected off her teeth. Her eyes shone too, wet and glistening. She looked almost ethereal like that, in the moonlight and the shadows, some kind of silver dust fairy that worked their magic in the secret hours of the night.

"This is becoming a ritual," Arabella said softly. She crossed her legs on the beach. She was wearing her bikini, June realized. She very quickly focused on Arabella's face instead of considering the yellow swimsuit. Or more like the assets that it displayed.

"Were you going to go for a swim?" *Right, just point out what you're trying to ignore. That's wonderful. Very subtle.*

"I'm not sure yet." Arabella's eyes raked down June's t-shirt and her pajama shorts. "You?"

"No. I was just...it was hot in the cabin. I couldn't sleep."

"Me neither." Arabella turned her head, her eyes sliding away, giving June a small reprieve from the gaze she probably didn't realize was burning in its intensity. "I thought a midnight swim would be fun, though. The water is probably nice at night. Actually, it was the only thing I could think of to cool down. It's not much cooler out here now than it was during the day."

“Y-yeah. I mean no.”

Arabella gathered up her blonde mane and twirled it over one shoulder. She wound it around her hand, the muscles in her arm flexing. Bathed in the dark, she was the kind of pretty that again reminded June of something otherworldly. It didn't matter that she was watching Arabella's hands or keeping her eyes on her face. Her mind filled in the rest of the information for her, including the lush curves and that small yellow bikini that defined them. The bikini was just a bikini. It wasn't more or less revealing than any other bathing suit, but it didn't matter. On Arabella, it turned into something extraordinary and apparently the images were burned into June's mind.

Her mouth went dry, and heat shot from her belly straight to her upper thighs.

“You didn't tell Summer,” Arabella said.

“N-no,” June whispered, a little too huskily. She didn't like what that note meant in her voice. Her tongue felt heavy and ungainly in her mouth, which was so, so dry.

“It would have been okay if you did.” Arabella laughed, mistaking that tremble in June's voice for a sort of awkwardness. “It's not a secret. But thanks.”

“I...” June wasn't usually one with nothing to say. Even in high school, when Arabella and her crew were at their worst, she'd always had some comeback, or when she'd chosen to stay silent, it was because she wanted to.

“You could stay.” Arabella patted the sand. “There's plenty of room here for two. Or did I take your spot again?”

“No. That's alright. I mean, I wasn't coming to...I was just going for a walk.”

“Well, since you're out here now, we could just relax. Or is it too weird? I could move down the beach if you want. Leave you alone.”

A strange sensation thundered in June's thighs. She felt heavy there, like her legs would be a thousand pounds if she tried to lift them. Her whole body might as well have been cement. She felt like she was frozen to the ground, rooted with a marble base that she couldn't break free of.

She thought that maybe it was best if she kept walking, or if she returned to the cabin, but her manners compelled her to walk towards the beach, her plastic flip flops, a fancy set from her own beach line, of course, clacked with every step. They might have been lightweight, but they would outlast an apocalypse, provided it wasn't too hard core, and they were fully made out of recycled materials.

She let her clip clopping shoes take her to the small strip of sand, then she plopped down totally ungracefully. They just sat there, a good three feet between them, staring out at the moonlight reflected on the purple-black surface of the water.

"The night is almost prettier than the day," Arabella breathed. "Not that it's not pretty during the day, but it's not so hot right now. I think the sunrises out here would be amazing. The sunsets are pretty spectacular. I can't remember the last time I watched one before last night."

"Yeah," June croaked. Further down the shoreline, a real frog croaked, long and low, and the response didn't sound that much different.

"Where did you go to college?" Arabella asked suddenly, the question taking June off guard.

"Uh, here. Cincinnati. I lived at home. It was cheaper."

"I went down to LA. Wanted to do the whole California kid thing. I was spoiled. Right from the get-go. My parents paid for the whole thing, no questions asked. I wasn't even that smart. Didn't stand a chance at getting a scholarship. I wanted to take drama, which I probably would have been good at, but my dad talked sense into me and said I should make business my major and do theatre or other arts as a minor. I'm glad he did, because my God, you should have seen how many people were majoring in theatre. I mean, it was LA after all."

“I’m sure a lot of people go down there for that.” June really had no idea, but it sounded like the right thing to say. Just to agree.

“I would have made a terrible actress, but I found that I had a passion for marketing. It took me until my second year to figure that out. I had to take a few marketing classes my first year, just introductory stuff and it was, I don’t know, I just really liked them. And I was good at them. I’ve always been artsy. I know no one knew that because I kind of never pursued anything but cheer, hair, makeup, clothes, and being a total bitch in high school, but yeah. I was always pretty good at drawing, and it turned out when I applied myself, I could understand concepts beyond basic math. It was a shocker for me.” She laughed easily

June snuck a peek at Arabella. She was still looking forward, her eyes dark, burning coals. She was gorgeous, and so at ease with herself now. She was so, so different. All that beauty was lethal now that she was also nice, and her toxic personality didn’t poison it.

Her hand dove into her hair again, rifling back the strands away from her face. June nearly groaned when she noticed Arabella’s chest rise and fall with the movement, her breasts creamy, the orbs overflowing her bikini top.

Arabella turned fully, her hands grasping at her hair, plaiting the thick strands and spinning them into an effortless braid. “I want to say that I’m sorry I never figured out who I was in high school, and I took that out on a lot of people, especially you. Truly, I was the worst. I’m surprised you didn’t axe me that first day. I would have.”

“I thought you might try to cause problems for me if I did that. Go to some media outlet and let them know what an ogre was running a company that was touted as doing good things.”

One brow arched, but not angrily. It looked more playful than surprised. “That’s the only reason?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, I’m glad you gave me a chance. I did more drawings than what I showed in that meeting. Like this.” She bent forward and reached for the dry sand, swirling her fingers around in it to create patterns and shapes that looked nothing like shoes.

June’s heart began to thunder hard again when she breathed in Arabella’s sweet honey suckle scent. She was sure that’s what it was. Something no one else would wear, but something that suited her perfectly. It reminded her too much of the caragana bushes outside her grandma’s old house.

When Arabella looked up, her eyes were burning, brimming with excitement. She had her bottom lip caught between her teeth in concentration. June knew she should duck her head because what she was feeling was probably showing on her face.

It was hard to admit it, but she knew what it was. Lust. A strange sort of longing. Maybe even wistfulness. She froze, hoping Arabella couldn’t read her face in the dark, but Arabella’s eyes shot straight to June’s lips, turning her stomach into a storm of butterfly wings. She felt...God, she felt a little bit desperate. She ached in all the wrong places. Her nipples were beaded tightly, the only mercy being that her t-shirt was big and baggy and hid them from view. Her breasts felt heavy and swollen.

She knew that if Arabella reached for her, she wouldn’t shy away. Her body was on fire, burning with the strangest desire. Not that she was a stranger to what it felt like to want someone, but Arabella of all people? She was a stranger to not being able to control what she felt and who she felt it for. She’d always thought that when people said they had no control, or they were attracted to the wrong person, that it was nonsense.

June shifted ever so slightly, trying to relieve the pressure building in her thighs, but all she succeeded in doing was rubbing the damp seam of her shorts across her aching clit. She nearly gasped, but bit down on the sound at the last second.

Arabella stared at June with eyes that were heavy lidded. June wasn’t sure who moved first, who reached for who, but suddenly the distance between them was closed and Arabella’s hand was on her cheek and her

hand was on Arabella's shoulder. Her face was tipped up, and she arched her body slightly forward, falling into Arabella as she angled forward, thrusting herself against her, their bodies crushing against each other as their mouths met.

June was rocked back at the blazing, scorching kiss. Knocked completely off her axis. But that didn't stop her from shoving her hand into Arabella's blonde mane and pulling her closer so that their chests were rammed up against each other. Her heart beat out a rapid pounding that was so brutal it felt like it could actually break through her ribs.

She finally calmed down enough to allow herself to succumb to the sensations, to *enjoy* the kiss, and enjoy it she did. She loved the feel of Arabella's lips against her own. They were so soft, so full, so hungry. There was no doubt that Arabella was a good kisser. She didn't so much lead as she danced, sucking softly on June's lower lip, sending a shower of sparks cascading through her bloodstream.

Arabella whimpered softly against June's lips and when June went to echo the sound, she parted her lips and Arabella's tongue traced the seam of her bottom lip eagerly before June buried her fingers deeper in Arabella's hair and angled her face, sweeping her own tongue over Arabella's, and into her mouth. She tasted like bubble gum and mint. The flavor burst over June's tongue, making her head spin and her heart drum even more furiously.

The pounding between her legs increased in tempo as well, and she rose up on her knees, parting her legs eagerly for Arabella's knee, soft, warm, and very naked, to slip between them. She was about to grind down eagerly to relieve some of the pressure building in her core when her name was spoken. Not soft and sweetly from Arabella.

It was shrill. Clipped. Abrupt. Shocked. "June!"

She broke the kiss and stumbled back, losing her balance. She'd been leaning forward, into Arabella and now she was pitching back. She landed on the sand on her bottom, unhurt, but confused.

“Oh, my God, what were you just doing?” Summer was there. Summer, with her eyes wide and a disgruntled look that was something close to disgust on her face. Shock too, but the ugly expression overrode that. Summer pointed at Arabella, who looked incredibly nervous and embarrassed. “How could you have possibly forgotten that she’s the worst? Just. The. Worst. Like, literally, there was no one who was worse than she was.”

“That was a long time ago,” June groaned.

The kiss wasn’t premeditated. It just happened and the rightness of it caught her completely off guard. She wasn’t about to explain any of that to Summer at the moment. Not when she was in the thick of her righteous indignation.

“Okay, I deserved that,” Arabella said quietly. She was staring up at Summer the way someone stares up at the sky trying to figure out if one hell of a storm is about to descend on them and unleash holy hell.

“No, that’s not fair,” June protested. “It was a long time ago. Summer, come on.”

“No, I’m not coming on!” Summer hissed. “You come on! Have you two been...all this time?”

“No!” June scrambled off the ground. “It just happened. There was nothing going on before.” She couldn’t look at Arabella. “There isn’t anything going on. We work together, and I’m not against work relationships, but I’m the boss and that wouldn’t look right.” She finally dared to turn and look at Arabella, afraid she’d see the hurt she’d just wrought unleashed on her face, but instead, Arabella was just sitting there, her expression wiped clean. June reasoned that just because she couldn’t read it didn’t mean there wasn’t something going on. “Summer...” June reached out, but Summer shook her head.

“No. Don’t do that. Don’t try to ‘Summer’ me right now.”

“I’m not trying to ‘Summer’ you. I just need to say that what happened before was before. Arabella apologized and that’s it. I don’t want to think about it or talk about it anymore. She doesn’t deserve to have it held against her for her whole life.”

“No, but a good part of it would do,” Summer rejoined snidely.

“That’s hardly fair. We’re adults. Forgiveness is a thing.”

Summer looked furious. She fisted her hands on her hips menacingly. “Oh, we might be adults, but this is straight up bullshit. She’s playing you. Suckering you in for some big takedown.”

“I’m not—” Arabella insisted, but Summer wasn’t nearly finished.

She shook her finger in Arabella’s direction. “Okay, so she might not be doing that exactly, but she could still hurt you. You think I haven’t seen you get hurt enough by her? She was totally unapologetic and unremorseful ten years ago. It’s easy for her just to waltz in and be all sorry. She needs money. You think she’s not cozying up to you as a way out of her current predicament? That’s what snakes do. They get into bed with you and then they go for the jugular.”

“Holy God,” Arabella said. “That sounds more like a vampire, and I’m not a vampire. I’m also not a snake and I never lied about my family’s situation, but I really wish I had if you’re going to go throwing it in my face.”

June was torn between trying to understand Summer’s anger and trying to defend Arabella. It wasn’t fair to either of them. The only thing she could point out was what she considered to be rational, so that they could all just go to bed. It was obviously too late. Regrettable decisions and horrible things were being said without the aid of alcohol. A good sleep was obviously in order.

“Summer...” June sighed. “I get your point. You’re worried about me. Still, that doesn’t mean you can say hurtful things like that. You invited

Arabella on this trip, so you can't hold that against her now. What happened between us just happened."

"She's not even into girls!" Summer protested, stamping her foot on the sand.

"Actually..." June and Arabella said at the same time.

They looked at each other, sharing a look that lingered just long enough for Summer to catch it. It was the kind of look June often shared with her bestie and Summer got that. She got that she'd been left out of something big. Something monumental. She didn't like that either. Instead of getting mad, her eyes welled with tears, and she stared June down.

"Whatever. You're a big girl. You can take care of yourself, I'm sure." Her eyes tracked to Arabella, and she didn't bother to hide her despair, the still lingering hostility, and the fact that she trusted Arabella about as far as she could throw her, which obviously wasn't very far at all. "You're an adult too. I hope this isn't a nice person act when you're still a mean girl at heart. I don't trust you and I'll be watching. You hurt June at all and, well, expect to meet nasty Summer!"

Summer stormed off, eating up the grass in long, stomping strides. It was easy to see just how pissed off she was, but June knew she was also worried and disappointed and that's how she showed it. She was probably also very stung at the inside secret she thought Arabella and June were sharing together. Not that there really was one. She really wished she'd told Summer about the talk she'd had with Arabella the night before. Was it too late? Could she tell her now? Would she listen?

"I should talk to her," Arabella said. She meant it. June didn't think that Arabella had some diabolical plot up her sleeve or anything. Apparently, she trusted Arabella enough to kiss her. She'd have to examine that later.

June sighed and started walking as soon as Arabella stood and passed her. "I think maybe she just needs some time. Maybe in the morning would be better?"

“Right. We probably shouldn’t wake up the whole cabin.”

“No. Probably not.”

“But if she’s that pissed, you might need to watch her. She might decide to do something diabolical when you’re not looking. Like fart on your pillow or something.”

June smothered a laugh. She shouldn’t be laughing right now. It felt wrong. Arabella was serious about it too, which made her want to laugh even more, which felt like another level of wrong. She was suddenly shy and was glad when Arabella led the way to the cabin. She stopped on the porch steps.

“I’m going to try to talk to her in the morning, okay?”

She could only guess if it was okay or not. It had been a good while since Summer had been mad like she was now, hurt too. Add to that the shock value of what she’d seen, and June wasn’t sure how the morning would go, or if it would go at all. Maybe they’d all have a very stormy early morning ride back home. She’d taken the morning off and allowed Arabella to do the same so that they could stay the whole weekend, but they were still heading back early so they could be there after lunch.

She really hoped Arabella succeeded in whatever she had to say, and that Summer would have an open mind, but with their history, she wasn’t holding her breath.

But then, she had kissed Arabella. She once would have thought that kissing a dirty, nasty, epically gross public toilet seat was more to her taste. So maybe stranger things had happened.

They *had* happened.

When had a nice weekend away gotten so messy and complicated? Right, when Summer invited Arabella to join them. But June couldn’t blame Summer for that kiss one bit. That kiss was entirely on her.

Which meant that after Arabella borrowed Summer for a talk, June really needed to figure out what she was going to say. To both of them.

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Chapter 10

Arabella

Back at work, days after the craziest weekend of her life, Arabella settled into what she was coming to learn was a regular rhythm. Not that it was boring. New Shooz 2uz was probably the least boring place she had ever worked. She always had something to do. Everyone who worked there was so dang brilliant and inspiring.

As a bonus, it wasn't uncommon for someone to bring their dog to work just to say hi and give the office a dose of puppy cuddles, kisses, and cheer. It also wasn't that uncommon for people to bring in their kids if something went wrong with a sitter or if they had a few hours between their partner getting home to be able to provide childcare. Since everyone had an office, it wasn't a big deal.

Which was a big deal in itself.

Arabella had never worked at a place quite like it.

Case in point, when she went to deliver her ideas about the new shoe line for kids that they were thinking about putting into the works, along with her market research, spread sheets, and detailed other reports, she found Beth in her office bouncing a toddler on her knee. The baby, an adorable little girl with a shock of red hair pulled into a tiny ponytail on top her head with a pink bow, flushed cheeks, and approximately three teeth, gummed a fist and grinned at Arabella when she walked in.

"Oh!" Arabella said, surprised and charmed all at once. "I didn't realize...sorry. If this is a busy time, I can come back in a bit."

“No, no, that’s fine.” Beth motioned to her desktop. “You can leave everything there. I’ll take a look at it just as soon as Shannon, my daughter, comes back for this one.”

“She’s adorable.” Arabella set the folder on Beth’s desktop, well away from the baby, who reached for it with chubby hands shiny with drool. “How old?”

“Seven months. My daughter had a thing at Amelia, her oldest daughter’s school today. A parent teacher thing. She was supposed to have a sitter, but they canceled on her last minute. She couldn’t blow off the interview, so I guess it was important. Amelia is six, but she can’t seem to stay out of trouble. It’s because she’s too smart. She gives those teachers the run around and no adult likes to be shown up by a six-year-old kid.”

Arabella laughed. “I can imagine. I hope it’s not too terrible for her. Your daughter, or Amelia.”

“Let’s hope so.” Beth bounced the baby on her knee. “This is Sky.”

Arabella waved. “Hello, Sky. What a pretty name for a pretty girl.” She noted the baby’s huge blue eyes. “A name that definitely fits.”

Sky grinned and cooed, waving her hands frantically. Beth sighed. “I keep telling Shannon that she should change schools for Amelia. School is hard enough without having to worry about teachers trying to bully her.”

“Is she trying to do that?” Arabella wasn’t entirely surprised. Teachers were just human. She’d had more than her fair share that openly hated on kids, but that was mostly in high school, where attitudes were generally shitty all around.

“I don’t know.” Beth sighed. “I’ve been researching schools, but everything is so far from Shannon’s house. They might have to move to get Amelia in somewhere else. The kid is in kindergarten. I didn’t anticipate having these kinds of problems for years yet. Like middle or high school.”

“Don’t I know it?” Arabella muttered under her breath. “Yeah,” she said louder. “High school is a challenge. I think everyone has a hard time with that, no matter who they are. But I feel for you. Kindergarten. That’s rough.”

“I think she might be better off being homeschooled, but Shannon wasn’t planning on taking time off from work. Sky was a, well, a very nice and very welcome surprise. She’ll be going back in six months, as soon as Sky is a year old. I don’t think they can get by on one income.”

“I’m really sorry. I hope they can work it out. If you want, I could do some research on schools and maybe on transportation? I could make time this afternoon or tomorrow. I, uh, I know how rough school can be. Well, no, that’s not entirely true. I guess I know what a hard experience it can be. Sorry, maybe I’m just going on about nothing here.”

“No, no,” Beth said with a smile. “I could give you her address if you really wouldn’t mind looking it up? I love Amelia. She’s a great kid. Doesn’t deserve the half of this. If she could find somewhere that’s a good fit for her, we’d all be so relieved, not to mention the twelve or so years of horribleness it’s going to save her.”

Arabella nodded. “I can definitely look.”

Sky reached for Beth’s blouse and tugged hard at the lapels of the bright pink, flowy shirt. She turned into her, giggled, then let out a belch that ended up being more of a barf. Beth grunted when she realized that she’d just been soaked in baby spit up.

“That’s a thing with her,” Beth explained dryly. “Still.”

“I’m sure she’ll grow out of it.” Arabella stood and held out her arms. “Here. I can take her if you want to go attempt to clean that up.”

“Attempt would be the right word.” Despite the massive amount of upchuck on her shirt, Beth had a smile for her granddaughter as she handed her over to Arabella. “I’ll only be a few minutes.”

“Take your time. I’ll be here.”

“I have a diaper bag under the desk just in case. I wouldn’t try giving her anything to eat, unless you want to wear her lunch as well. Don’t fall for it, no matter how hard she tries to tell you otherwise.”

“I think I can handle it,” Arabella said. She sat back down in the chair in front of Beth’s desk, Sky on her knee. The baby stuck a fist back in her mouth and gummed it. She was probably flushed from the whole teething thing.

When Beth left, Arabella talked softly to Sky as she put the back of her hand on her forehead. She was a little warm, but she seemed happy enough. Content enough too. Arabella just cooed softly to Sky, and she was entertained by that. She didn’t need to look in the diaper bag for toys.

A soft rap at the door startled them both. Sky froze and Arabella turned quickly. She wasn’t sure who was there, but the last person she expected to see was June. Obviously, she was also the last thing June expected to find in Beth’s office. Holding a baby.

“Oh!” June said. She stood by the door awkwardly. “I…”

“Beth will be right back,” Arabella said. She bounced her knees the way she’d seen Beth do and Sky loved that. She grinned up at Arabella adoringly, which melted her heart. She hadn’t had a lot of practice with babies growing up. She didn’t babysit because she never needed the cash, but she’d always liked kids and, oddly enough, they seemed to like her too. She wasn’t intimidated by babies in the least and her limited experience didn’t stop her from wanting to hold them and play with them. “I just came to bring her some reports and she had a bit of a spit up accident. I’m just watching Sky until she gets back.”

“Shannon’s little girl,” June said. Of course, she would know who everyone’s daughter’s babies were. That was just June. Her company was such a great place to work because she’d made it that way.

“Yes.” Arabella planted her hands on Sky’s middle and blew a raspberry at her. Sky loved it, giggling and reaching out for Arabella’s face. She jerked back, then leaned forward and did it again, blowing air in a puff at Sky, then dancing back just out of reach. Sky thought it was a great game and giggled wildly.

Arabella caught June watching them. She was focused more on her than she was on Sky, which slightly unnerved Arabella, because the expression on her face was so hard to read. She was surprised, but she was trying to mask it. June probably didn’t expect Arabella to be good with kids. Not many people did. It still surprised her a lot of the time. June’s eyes were smoky and dark, emotion flickering over her face so fast that it was impossible to read it all. It was impossible to pretend that she wasn’t being watched, so Arabella just smiled back.

“She’s super cute, isn’t she?” she asked. “All that red hair.”

“Shannon’s husband. That’s where she got it,” June explained. “I don’t know if you met them at the company barbeque or not.”

Arabella tried to think back. “I’m not sure that I did. It’s hard when you’re the new one and you don’t know anyone. Next year, hopefully I’ll know everyone.”

It was incredibly presumptuous of her to think that she’d still have a job by then. But June didn’t sneer or scoff. She just nodded and smiled. It was mostly aimed at Sky, but Arabella still found it encouraging.

Out of the three billion or so women in the world, June was so unique. Arabella truly felt humbled and a little bit awed to be in the presence of a woman who had built a multi-million-dollar company from nothing at all. A woman who was so smart, so genuine, so compassionate, a woman who thought creatively, who made a company that was truly a second home to the people who worked there. A company that mattered to the world and really did make a difference.

And I kissed her.

Arabella had firmly shoved thoughts of that kiss onto the back burner. June had made it pretty clear that it just happened, and it wouldn't happen again. She'd drawn the line with the whole boss-employee relationship thing. It was a spur of the moment decision made by them in the dark with a sliver of moonlight on a beach by the lake. Who wouldn't find that setting romantic?

When Arabella had talked to Summer, she'd told her that it was as June said, a split-second decision that neither of them had thought about beforehand and if they had, it wouldn't have happened, and that she did take her job seriously and didn't want to jeopardize it. She wanted Summer to believe that she was sincerely sorry for everything she'd done in high school, and as a result, she'd promised that she'd keep her distance, be respectful, and do nothing to undermine or hurt June again.

She very much wanted to keep that promise, but it was hard not to feel tiny flames start to lick at her insides when June looked at her the way she was doing now. It was clear to Arabella that June didn't know she was looking at her in any such way. She probably had no idea that her eyes were so dark and smoldering, or that her face had a slightly pained expression when she looked at Sky.

It was suddenly quite clear that June didn't just like children, she wanted children of her own. That thought twisted up Arabella's insides. She smiled at Sky, but it was hard for her to catch her breath.

"Oh! Hey!" Beth breezed back into her office suddenly, and Arabella let out a small sigh of relief. Sky imitated her, which made her smile adoringly at the baby. "Sorry, I forgot about our meeting. I mean, I didn't forget, but I kind of forgot. I was a tad distracted." She indicated Sky, who grabbed at Arabella's chin when she leaned in for another raspberry.

"That's fine," June said, but her voice was huskier.

Or maybe Arabella was just imagining that.

"I can take her back," Beth said, holding out her arms. She'd actually succeeded in cleaning her blouse quite well.

“If you have a meeting, I could watch her in my office,” Arabella said. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“Really?” Beth asked.

“Really?” June echoed.

Arabella paused as the two women looked at each other. “Uh, yeah. Sure. She doesn’t seem to hate me, so why not?”

“Okay.” Beth was all smiles. “That would be great. Shannon should be back in an hour. She called me when I was in the bathroom working on my blouse. The meeting will probably take about that long. I can leave instructions at the front to have Shelly call you when she’s here.”

“For sure.” Arabella stood, tucked Sky on her hip like it was natural, and received the diaper bag from Beth with her other hand. She blew another raspberry at Sky, who giggled and cooed happily before nearly tugging an entire chunk of hair from Arabella’s scalp.

She walked to her office, letting Sky bounce on her hip, tugging away at her hair the whole time. She didn’t mind one bit. Sky was a great distraction. It was far, far easier to think about her lovely blue eyes and her adorable face than a set of deep brown eyes and the extraordinary woman they belonged to.

“Well, how about we try to find your sister a good school?” Arabella asked Sky as she sat down with her in her office chair.

Sky let out a burbling coo that sounded like full agreement. She reached for the keyboard, but Arabella was prepared with one of the toys from the diaper bag and tucked that into Sky’s hand. She kept one arm wrapped around the baby to keep her safely on her knee while she used the other hand to type and use the mouse. Sky was enraptured by the whole thing.

Within the hour, Arabella had worked out a bus route that seemed easy and found what appeared to be a great school. She did have two other schools that weren’t as highly rated for their programming, but also looked

like okay options. She printed everything and stuck it in a file folder. She was about to get some of the baby food out of the diaper bag when her phone rang. It was Shelly, letting her know that Shannon was in the reception area to get Sky.

Arabella was almost sad to hand over the baby, who smiled so wide to see her mom that her face could have split. She kicked her chubby legging clad legs and fisted both hands in her mom's long blonde hair. Shannon was very pretty but looked extremely frazzled and very tired.

"I hope it's okay. I was talking to your mom about schools. She mentioned that you were at a parent teacher meeting for Amelia. Sorry, I really wasn't trying to be nosy, but Beth said that you'd maybe want to consider a different school. I had some time, and when your mom had a meeting, I volunteered to watch Sky. I hope that's okay. I do know CPR—"

"Thank you," Shannon said sincerely. "For watching her. I mean it. You and my mom are life savers. Really." Her face darkened. "I most definitely will be looking for a different school after today. Amelia is a great kid and if her teachers can't see that—she's six, for goodness sakes—then I'm not going to send her there. I can't, ugh, I can't even talk about that without getting steamed up. Of all the nerve to say that a six-year-old is too imaginative!"

"I have no idea why someone would say that." Arabella handed over the diaper bag. She patted the side. "I tucked a folder in there with some information on some really great schools that I found. I realize you'll be going back to work soon, so I made sure the bus routes worked with your house."

Shannon's face melted and tears streaked down her cheeks. "Thank you!" She stepped forward and suddenly tugged Arabella in for a tight hug. Sky, who was sandwiched between them, let out a squeal of joy at being so close to them both. "Thank you so, so much!"

Arabella waved to Sky after Shannon thanked her again and walked out. Sky actually waved back.

Arabella had never really thought about a family of her own. She'd been so embroiled in her dad's drama and looking after her parents and sister for the past year, and too busy with work and college before that, to even think about settling down.

Instead of thinking about the new, hollow space in her chest that she'd just discovered, she decided to focus on how good it felt to have helped someone. What she'd done in that hour had made a huge difference to Shannon, and if it worked out, she was glad. She hoped Amelia was able to find a school where she could thrive. Making a difference. Helping out. Being part of something. It felt awesome.

That was the high she decided to chase. The only one she'd let herself think about.

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Chapter 11

June

June had tried hard for three days to banish those images of Arabella holding a baby. It was the most ridiculous thing, but of all the things, she wasn't thinking about their time at the lake, little yellow bikinis, midnight talks under big trees, or kisses on sandy beaches. Now Arabella smiling at a baby who wasn't even hers was firmly entrenched in June's mind.

She'd done everything she could to get it out, but she couldn't be distracted. She wondered what Summer would have to say about that if she told her, but she certainly wasn't going to do that. There was an uneasy truce between Summer and Arabella, and June wasn't going to flip the switch and plunge them all into total chaos by mentioning that she might have a small crush on her employee.

She could admit it. It was a crush.

The most unlikely, terrifying, odd crush.

But crushes went away, didn't they?

On her way to the morning marketing meeting, in which she wouldn't be able to escape Arabella's presence, June decided to look up the meaning of crush. As soon as she read the words on her laptop screen, she felt instantly better. Crush: defined by intense feelings, infatuation, generally for someone entirely inappropriate. According to the internet, crushes were temporary—perhaps even temporary insanity—and they would go away with time. She felt better after that reassurance. The internet rarely lied, after all.

By the time she got to her meeting, June felt much better. She felt comfortable and confident, no longer like she was boiling up on the inside. She only experienced a few twinges when Arabella spoke about her research towards the new children's line.

They were going to have to make a decision about that soon, and she knew that if they went that direction, her marketing department would market the heck out of whatever they put out there. June was privately impressed with Arabella's level of research, her projections, and her designs. She was thoroughly organized. She was also utterly professional and had been ever since that slip up on the beach, which was a massive relief as well. It was easier to avoid temptation if temptation took itself out of the equation.

June tuned out while the footwear line was being discussed by everyone around the table. It was easy for her to scribble things on the notepad in front of her, things that probably even made sense if someone should look over to read what she was writing, but her mind was on something else.

Arabella.

June didn't like the hot prickles that crawled up her spine, the way the hair at the back her neck stood on end, or the fluttering in her chest and the sour clench in her stomach. If she told a doctor about it, they'd probably have a humorous explanation, like constipation, but she wasn't constipated. She was jealous. Jealous from thinking of Arabella with someone else. Being happy with another person. Having her own blonde-haired, blue-eyed babies and looking at them with love and adoration like she'd stared at Beth's granddaughter a few days ago.

"Oh. Shit. I mean shoot. Sorry!" Arabella clamped a hand over her mouth.

The meeting came to an abrupt halt and June's attention was shifted abruptly as well, back to where it should have been all along. Her eyes tracked automatically to Arabella, who was frowning at her phone.

“Sorry, my family only texts me if it’s an emergency and it looks like it is. My dad was just taken to the hospital.” Arabella blushed after saying it, distressed at interrupting their meeting for personal issues.

“That’s terrible,” June said softly. “You need to leave, and that’s totally understandable.” She turned to Beth as soon as Arabella gathered up her things and hurried for the door. “Beth, do you want to take over?”

Beth was more than capable of leading the meeting, even without June. The marketing team met regularly without their CEO. She was just sitting in because of the discussion about the new shoe line.

June tucked her laptop and her notepad into the tote bag she used to carry them everywhere, then slung it over her shoulder, gave Beth a confident smile, and walked out. She had to check on Arabella, but she warned herself to be impartial.

When she reached Arabella’s office and found her in there, pacing around with enough agitation to make the air electric, her impartiality was totally abandoned. She’d never seen Arabella so worried. Her skin was pale, her eyes liquid. She’d raked her hair back so many times it was a wild mess of a mane floating in the air around her face.

“Oh!” Arabella stopped pacing as soon as she saw June come through the door.

“Sorry. The office is glass, so I assumed that you saw me coming,” June mumbled. “I just wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

Arabella’s eyes got wetter the longer she stood there. She didn’t even bother swiping at her tears as they started to fall down her ashen cheeks.

“I’m a terrible person,” she moaned.

“Why would you think that?” June set her tote down on the ground. She’d always liked the idea of glass offices, but right now some privacy would have been a good thing.

Arabella sniffled. "I...the text was from my sister. She said my mom took my dad to the hospital because he was having pains in his chest. His health has been dicey since everything happened. They're at the hospital right now. My sister is heading over. She texted because she knew I was at work and mom was scared that if she interrupted, I might lose my job."

"You can tell them that won't happen." June's assurances seemed little comfort to Arabella. She was worried about her dad, but it was something else too, or she would have flown out that door and gotten to the hospital as fast as she could. "Why do you think that makes you terrible?" June asked softly, trying to dig without digging. She shouldn't, but she couldn't just walk out the door either.

Arabella started pacing again, her face twisted and pinched with anxiety and worry, but at least she wasn't crying anymore.

"We don't have insurance," she finally moaned, her back to June as she stared out the window. "I have no idea how we're going to pay for this. Do they finance hospital bills? What if he has to have open heart surgery or something?" She whirled quickly, horrified with herself. "Oh my God, I'm saying things like that when something could be very wrong. That's what makes me a terrible person. I shouldn't even be thinking about the cost! It's my dad's life here."

"It's logical," June tried to offer. "That doesn't mean that you don't care."

A set of slender hands flew to Arabella's hips. The bright pink of her dress suddenly made her skin look washed out after all the color had drained away from her face. "I'm a terrible daughter," Arabella said, agony in every word. "I'm so exhausted trying to get everything figured out and trying to support everyone. I'm just so, so tired."

June knew she couldn't do anything for Arabella financially. Arabella had insurance through the company, but it didn't extend to her parents. She couldn't offer her some kind of financial aid, because if anyone else found out, it wouldn't be fair to them.

There were other people at the company who had parents who probably weren't well. She could possibly offer Arabella some sort of advance to pay for insurance for her parents going forward, and it could be taken out of her paychecks for the coming however many months, but that wasn't going to help her now.

Arabella shook herself out of her trance, some of her determination coming back. "I shouldn't be standing here. I should get to the hospital. I guess I can do all my worrying there."

"Let me drive you." The words popped out, stunning them both. Arabella's head turned around so fast that she could have given herself whiplash. "You're frustrated and worried," June quickly explained. "It's safer if I drive. That way, you don't have to shell out more money for a cab."

"But, but the meeting..."

"Beth's got it."

"Are you sure? I'm really sorry."

"Don't be sorry," June told her. "It's not your fault. You didn't choose to have any of this happen."

Arabella nodded. "You're right. I really wish that none of it had."

"You can worry about it in the car. If you grab your stuff, I'll take you and I can drop you off at home when you're ready to go."

"Oh, no, you'd have to wait. I might be there for hours."

"That's fine." June knew she should be bailing, not entrenching herself into an extremely emotional situation. "I can wait at the hospital, but we should get there as fast as we can."

"Yeah." Arabella seemed to stare right through June. She was even whiter, her skin so pale that June could almost see the vein running along her temple that leaped beneath her skin, pounding in time with her

quickened heartbeat. Arabella shook her head and her gaze returned to normal. “I mean, *thank you.*”

June had to stop herself from saying that she would do the same thing for any friend, without hesitation. She and Arabella might have discussed the past and put it to rest—Arabella had apologized, and June had believed her and accepted her apology—but did that mean they were friends? She sucked that back and justified her action with the acknowledgment that she would do the same thing for any of her employees. That felt much safer. It *was* much safer.

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Chapter 12

Arabella

It was embarrassing for Arabella to have June drop her off, but she reminded herself that June had seen the house once before. After spending hours at the hospital, did she really even care what the house looked like? Did Arabella? She felt frayed thin, like at any moment that last strand holding her emotions, her sanity, herself together could unravel and that unraveling would be like falling into a deep cavern she couldn't pick herself out of.

June pulled up in the driveway, her headlights flashing on the dilapidated garage. Arabella sat for a moment, trying to figure out how to properly thank June for everything she'd done, but she didn't have the words. It was so late that June offered to bring her straight to the house. She said she'd be by to pick her up in the morning to take her to the office because her car was still there.

Arabella didn't know where June lived, but she was sure it was way on the other side of what everyone liked to call the tracks.

Her brain felt sluggish, her head heavy. There wasn't a whole lot of creative thinking action going on upstairs. All she could think about was her dad. His heart was okay. It was probably just a lot of stress. He was being kept overnight for monitoring, and her mom was staying at the hospital with him. She could barely comprehend what he'd said to her when she'd walked in, and her mom and sister had gone to get a cup of coffee.

"Coffee..." Arabella latched onto that. "Do you want a cup?"

"I..."

“I know it’s not exactly coffee hour, but I feel like it’s the least I could do after you waited at the hospital for so long and drove me all this way. I can’t thank you properly. I can’t even come up with the words. Maybe a mediocre cup of java will do the trick. Or maybe at least it will jog my brain and I’ll be able to come up with something. Some words that are even close.”

June pressed the button on the dash that shut off the car. “Okay.”

Arabella hadn’t expected an agreement, and she was flooded with panic thinking about all the things wrong with the house. She hid it well, gulping down her pride like she’d done over the past few years. She let herself out of the car and walked to the side door. She was glad it was dark and hoped that June, who followed a few feet behind her, wouldn’t notice the trim missing on the house, the eaves half falling off the side of the garage, the paint peeling all along the same side, or the sagging backyard fence. The place might be just shy of depressing, and it needed a lot of work that her mom didn’t know how to do and her dad, well, her dad hadn’t been doing much of anything.

Arabella thrust open the door and flicked on the light inside. The house was anything but open concept. The bungalow was small and outdated, but at least she kept things meticulously clean. She’d been able to save a lot of her parent’s furniture from when their house was foreclosed on and so the furnishings were much nicer than their surroundings. She tried to avoid thinking that it was like putting lipstick on a pig.

“This is nice,” June said politely.

Arabella gave her props for always being so nice, because it really sounded like she meant it.

Arabella nodded. She silently walked towards the kitchen and June followed. She flicked on lights as they went, illuminating old, worn carpets, faded and peeling wallpaper that was nowhere near back to being in style, and an outdated kitchen. The stove and the fridge were different colors, yellow and pink of all things, the cupboards that ugly brown that looked

one step above cardboard, the countertops tiled with seafoam green tiles, bizarrely enough.

“Wow,” June said. “This is pretty cool, actually.”

“It’s like a mish mash with something left over from every decade, but not in a good way.”

“No, I like it.” June pointed to the round globe light above the sink. “That’s pretty sweet. And I like that the stove is pink, and the countertops are tiled. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It’s less charming in the full light of day, I can tell you that much.” Arabella went to the coffee maker, dumped in a few scoops of the delicious grounds that she still splurged for because she just couldn’t bring herself to drink shitty coffee, and filled the machine with water. The coffee maker, like most of the appliances, had also been saved from the house so it was an expensive model.

June pulled out a seat at the table. The thing was crazily overpriced, probably worth more than the lot the house was on. The chairs were black upholstered leather and surrounded a black circular glass table. It was too big for the kitchen, really, but Arabella’s mom had cried when Arabella thought about selling it, so they’d jammed it in instead.

“I like the furniture.” June attempted conversation again, which was awkward because Arabella still had her back to her, angled towards the counter. “It’s really nice.”

Arabella nodded. She bit her bottom lip, working it hard until she tasted the bite of iron and stopped before she did any damage. “I was thinking that I should find a way to get my parents health insurance. My sister is covered through her college, and I’m covered through work, but they have nothing. I talked to the admin at the front desk, and they said that the bills can be financed. They tried to tell me it wouldn’t be too bad, since my dad didn’t have extensive testing done or anything because he refused it, but...”

“But it’s a lot,” June finished for her.

“It is.” *Too much.* Arabella’s hand reached out and clenched the counter. She kept seeing the shame on her dad’s face. Kept hearing him say that he wished he could just die and save them all the trouble instead of drawing it out and being a burden. That, more than anything else, broke her heart.

One second, Arabella was standing at the counter, listening to the steady hiss and drip of the coffee maker, staring at the reflection of the globe light against the small kitchen window behind the sink, the next thing she knew she was sliding down, her legs giving way, her hand not nearly enough to hold her up and keep her steady.

The floor was old linoleum, yellow with orange squares and small sprigs of flowers. Arabella had never really looked that closely at it. She’d actually tried not to because it was so ugly, but now she was getting up close and personal. Her butt was parked there, her legs folded up under her at odd angles.

“Whoa!” June hovered over her, and Arabella turned her face up, somewhat stunned to find her above her. “Are you okay?” June crouched down, eyes bright with concern. She reached out automatically, but then stopped halfway and tucked her hand back at her side.

Arabella blinked. “I-I don’t know.”

Damn it, that wasn’t a yes. You should have said yes. Yes is the only option.

She remembered how proud she’d been in high school. How she never would have admitted to even so much as a nanosecond of weakness. And now here she was, on the floor, blinking in confusion at June because she didn’t really remember the descent down.

God, it was such a long way down.

Not just to the floor.

Arabella swiped her hands over her face as if she could smooth away the stress headache pounding at her temples or the sick feeling in her stomach.

As if she could smooth away her dad's terrible decisions, her own mistakes, the old house they'd had to give up, their old life.

"Arabella..."

"I'm just tired," she groaned, somewhat incoherently.

"I'm seriously worried about you."

Arabella lifted her head and blinked. June's big, dark eyes swam into view. Her forehead had a big worry crease in it and her lips were flattened out. She did look concerned. That was nice of her, Arabella decided. So very, very nice of her. She blinked again, because she swore that June was closer than she was before, but her eyes were grainy and tired, and her brain was so sluggish from all the stress that it almost didn't make sense.

June touched Arabella's knee. She was wearing black dress pants so she couldn't feel the touch, but she imagined she could. Her mouth went dry like she could feel those fingertips on her bare skin. She felt silly, getting all revved up and hot about something so simple as the brush of June's fingertips on top of her clothes. She berated herself for her reaction. That touch was meant to comfort, not to spark flames or make her heart pound. Even if that's what was happening.

Arabella thought that would be it, but when June set her hand softly on her cheek, her heart started to slam even harder. Her eyes shut and she waited. She wasn't going to make a move. She wasn't going to make *any* movement. She'd told Summer she wouldn't. June had drawn a line and she wasn't going to cross it. If June wanted to, it had to be her. It had to be her making the decisions.

She didn't walk across that line. She sprinted. June's hand brushed over Arabella's jaw. Her eyes wrenched open, and she saw June lean in. She might have been miserable thinking about her dad and all her financial problems, but she was also hyper aware of the woman right beside her and that banished just about every other thought from her mind.

She didn't actually expect that June would do anything more than offer a comforting touch. Her mind had yet to compute what exactly was going to happen, which was why she wasn't fully prepared for the brush of June's soft lips.

It was just a brush. Her mouth, asking, searching. Arabella parted her lips and answered that question. She stopped June's search by leaning into her. Her hand fisted June's shirt while the other tangled in her raven hair. Arabella angled her face and June whimpered, her tongue teasing along Arabella's lower lip until they both gave in with a wild fury of kisses that were so hard they left them both panting.

"What about work?" Arabella ground out. She didn't want to bring that up. She didn't want to stop, but it was important to remember who they were and what their situation was.

"We don't have a policy against dating."

"You're not worried that I—did you say dating?" Arabella gulped.

"I was just saying."

"But you did say it."

June blinked. "I did. I was just...if we wanted to, that is."

Arabella gulped. Maybe now wasn't the time to talk about it, but she was glad it was out there as an option. She wasn't even thinking about dating, but she also wasn't going to consider going anything further with June until she knew she was okay with all those lines, professional and personal, being shattered.

"What about Summer?"

"Summer?" June's hand swept over Arabella's jaw, tilting her face again. "Summer is my best friend. She's not my boss."

"You're my boss though."

“Right now, I’m not. If you’re worried about a power thing or getting fired...”

“I wasn’t even thinking that. I don’t even know why I said that. Except...”

“Except?”

“I don’t know. It’s kind of hot. Maybe.”

June’s lips curled into a devilish smile. “Oh. Is it?”

Arabella responded with a kiss. She tangled her arms around June and kissed her until she was seeing stars, probably from lack of oxygen, but also because kissing June was incredible. She realized they were both on the floor, and while the linoleum wasn’t new or pretty, it was clean. It was kind of hot, making out on the kitchen floor.

June’s hands got bold as she kissed Arabella. She explored her mouth, taking the time to do the little things that drove Arabella to distraction. A suckle of her bottom lip, a gentle scrape of her teeth, just the tip of her tongue darting out to taste Arabella before ducking back into her mouth. June kissed like an expert. Arabella responded, her hands tracing a pattern over June’s shoulder and down the front of her blouse. She started to undo the first button, and when June moaned into the kiss, she undid another and another.

June’s blouse eventually parted, all the buttons undone. She took Arabella’s hand and placed it over her breast. Arabella gasped, a shiver of pure, liquid desire racing straight to her core. She palmed the orb over the thin camisole, her fingers brushing against soft silk. She could feel the texture of the lacey bra underneath.

June peeled her blouse away, then ripped her camisole over her head. Arabella did the rest, her hands unhooking June’s bra behind her back. Once June shrugged out of that too, Arabella stared at her boldly. She was haunted again by what she’d said about June looking like a boy. She did *not* look like a boy. She was beautiful, her breasts on the smaller side, but

gorgeous, with darker, pert nipples straining for attention. Her skirt rode up high above her hips, but the top of her tight abs appeared above it.

“Gorgeous,” Arabella whispered. “You are so beautiful.”

June groaned. She fisted her hands in Arabella’s hair when she bent her head to taste June’s nipple. She gasped, arching against Arabella’s face. She laved her with her tongue, tasting the lovely satin skin of June’s breast before she rolled her tongue over the beaded nipple.

“Oh, my God,” June groaned, the sound of her husky voice going straight to Arabella’s core. “God. Yes. Arabella...”

Her name sounded lovely on June’s tongue. She wanted to hear it again, so while she attended to the nipple she’d been laving with her tongue, she cupped June’s other breast. She circled her index finger over the bud, then pinched it gently while she suckled.

Arabella changed it up, suckling June’s other breast into her mouth until June was squirming against her. Arabella carefully guided her back against the cupboards, licking and teasing and worshipping her breasts until June’s back hit something solid. Her legs parted, her heels hitting the floor and her knees coming up to surround Arabella.

“Can I touch you?” Arabella panted.

She slid one hand up June’s satiny leg, starting at her ankle. She was still wearing her heels, little kitten style heels with a solid platform on the front. They were black with silver stars. Funky, and her own design, which made them pretty darn amazing as far as shoes went.

June nodded. She kicked off her shoes, one after the other, and parted her legs so that her pencil skirt inched up far beyond her knees where it usually fell. Arabella got a flash of black lace peeking out from under that skirt and she was instantly so wet that the seams of her clothing rubbed against her sensitive clit when she knelt between June’s legs.

She trailed her hands up June's legs, pushing her skirt up just a little bit more. June let her legs fall open. She cinched down the cupboards just a little bit more. Arabella got real low, intending to kiss her way up June's thigh, but the floor wasn't as low as she figured, or she wasn't as high up, and she ended up banging her chin on the floor. Hard.

"Ouch!" She rubbed at the sore spot, glad she hadn't bitten her tongue when her teeth knocked together on impact.

"Oh, my God!" June put her hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. "Sorry! I swear I'm not laughing at that. I swear, I—"

"This isn't going to do." Arabella pretended to be serious, but she offered June a hand as she stood. She surprised her when she was on her feet by cupping her waist and lifting her onto the countertop. "There. That's much better."

"Oh, my God, you're strong," June laughed. She braced her hands on the countertop and let her head fall back as Arabella stepped between her legs.

"I work out a few times a week. I mean, I do yoga. Not work out, work out. I'm not that ambitious. I wanted to stay flexible and in shape after cheer was done."

"Did you do that in college?"

"No. I wasn't actually good enough to make the team."

"That's crazy! You were so good in high school!"

"Yes, well, that's high school. College is something entirely different." She left that there, another apology of sorts.

June grasped Arabella's blouse and tugged her close. "Well, I think you're strong, and I think it's pretty awesome that you're flexible." She winked as she dropped her hand and worked her skirt up. It was tight, and cinching it around her waist required a lot of shimmying. It was comical, but it was also sexy as hell.

June had nice legs. She had really, really gorgeous legs. She'd always had such a tight, small form with sweet curves. She couldn't be more than ninety pounds even now. She was incredibly petite, but she was still very womanly and the sight of her creamy thighs and that black lace peeking out between drove Arabella straight to the edge. She was now very sure that her pants were also soaked. Her clit throbbed and she was tempted, as she knelt down between June's thighs, to snake a hand between her legs and touch herself just to relieve the ache that was building to a throbbing, blinding intensity.

Up close, Arabella could smell June's arousal, and that sent heat spiraling up her thighs faster than anything. Her belly cramped tightly before she brushed her hand over June's silk and lace core. She was soaked and Arabella thought she'd go insane if she didn't taste her.

June's hand rested gently on her shoulder, the other on her hair as Arabella bent her head. June was sitting right on the edge of the counter, her legs spread around Arabella's shoulders. She breathed in the sweet, deep scent of June as she brushed her panties aside. She was perfect. So wet, her pussy glistening, her clit already swollen. Arabella meant to tease June or attempt some sort of controlled foreplay, but she couldn't make herself wait. She had to taste her.

She kissed her first, hungrily, suckling at her clit gently before she used her tongue to explore all of her. She licked her from her entrance to her clit, teasing her there. Arabella moaned against June, and June responded, wriggling against her, raking her nails over her scalp and whimpering wildly. Her hips bucked off the counter and slammed back down as Arabella thrust her tongue into her tight entrance.

Arabella swore she could do this for hours. Taste June. Lap up her sweetness. She licked her way over her perfect folds back up to her clit, suckling and kissing it, using her tongue until June's hips were slamming on the counter over and over again. Her fingers tightened in Arabella's hair, and she made the hottest noises. She was quiet, quieter the closer she got to coming. Arabella could feel the way June tensed up. She heard the way her whimpers changed, until there was no sound, just hard, deep breaths.

Arabella slipped two fingers into June's tight pussy while teasing her with her tongue. She'd been correct when she thought June was close to climaxing. She came hard, her tight channel clenching around Arabella's fingers. Her hips rolled into Arabella's hand and face as she rode out her climax. She didn't make a sound, except for her harsh breathing, while her hips pumped and her stomach and thighs trembled and clenched tightly against Arabella's shoulders and face.

After, when she was still trembling, Arabella withdrew her fingers and brought them to June's face. She had her head thrown back and her eyes closed tightly, but her lips parted, and she suckled Arabella's fingers deeply inside her mouth, licking her own juices off. It was so hot watching her take those fingers a second time that Arabella could have imploded on the spot.

June's eyes finally opened. She pulled back, then shifted off the counter, tugging her skirt down as her feet touched the floor again. She seemed totally unsteady and had to grip the countertop to support herself.

"Well, that was...Holy God, that was amazing. I have something in mind for you."

"Oh?" Arabella wasn't sure she'd last through two seconds of whatever June had planned. Her clit pulsed and her core ached so fiercely that she thought a single touch would be enough to set her off.

"Do you have a bed? I mean, of course you have a bed." June laughed, a deep, happy, sated laugh. "I thought you might want to go there, take off all your clothes, and show me how you like to be touched."

Oh, my God. She was half afraid that she'd get naked and all it would take was a scorching look from June and she'd come undone. Maybe that was okay. Maybe she could make herself come again while June watched. Instead of salvaging her dignity, she didn't need to be worried about it. If she lasted a second, she lasted a second. She'd make sure June knew it was a compliment.

"And then," June added darkly, in a deeper, huskier tone than Arabella had ever heard, "I'd like to eat you from behind."

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Chapter 13

June

Holy dirty talk alert. June blushed at what she'd just said. She wasn't one for giving orders or being bossy, and she certainly had never really done much dirty talking before. Maybe it really wasn't even that dirty, but it still surprised her, how easily she voiced what she wanted to do. Was it really that racy when she was standing half naked in someone else's kitchen and she wished wholeheartedly that she was fully naked in their bedroom?

Relax. Take a breath.

She was excited. So turned on that her body felt like she'd just taken a few shots of her dad's scotch, which he very much liked, and she very much didn't, but she did agree with him that it would get the blood flowing on a cold night. It was bracing, that scotch, and after a single shot, she could always feel the buzz.

She wasn't just buzzed. She felt like an entirely new being. She'd dated people before. She'd had partners before, but this feeling was a first. She felt- curiously new. Like she was starting over, and not just because she and Arabella had a past. This was fresh. Something they'd created together that was perfect and exciting, a story just being written, those first few words flowing onto a pristine white page.

June realized she was rapidly falling into that area that was above all gray, where the ability to use reason and logic became skewed and emotion took over. She liked logic. She liked being rational. She liked thinking about things quite thoroughly before she acted. But not this. Or maybe she'd thought about this too much, which was why she didn't need to think about it now.

“June?” Arabella was standing a few feet away. Her hand rested on the countertop, her eyes big and blue and shiny with unasked questions. *Are you coming? Did you change your mind? Do you not want this anymore?*

Something burst inside June’s chest. Something wonderful, a feeling of pure joy. She closed the distance between them, not bothering to pick up her clothes or shoes, and took Arabella’s hands in hers. She set them at her waist, then used her own to undo the zipper on her skirt and peel it down her thighs. She shimmied out of her drenched panties, depositing them on her skirt on the floor. Arabella nearly hiccupped.

“Oh,” she whispered. “Oh, I see.”

“I’d like to undress you now,” June whispered back. “If you’d like to show me the way to the bedroom?”

Arabella nodded. She clasped June’s hand and led her out of the kitchen. It was funny, June thought, that she just now noticed the plants on top the counter near the window. She wasn’t a plant person. She didn’t even know what kind they were. Well, one was a cactus. She knew that much because it looked prickly.

Arabella led her down the hall to a small bedroom. She flicked on the light and winced as the twin bulbs in the old square glass shade plunged the room into harsh brightness.

“That’s not—I mean, it’s not that I’m intimidated by the light or that I’m so shy that I won’t be able to, uh, never mind. I think the lamp is just a lot less harsh on the eyes.” She dropped June’s hand to walk over to the nightstand and flip on a stained-glass lamp with a huge shade. The light was soft and muted through the prism of so many different shades of colored glass.

June was still standing by the door, and she switched off the light. She noticed the furniture in the room in passing. A queen-size bed with an upholstered black headboard with little diamond buttons, an expensive, heavy-looking black dresser and a matching nightstand. The furniture was expensive and tasteful, like the table and chairs in the kitchen.

“Did I say that before Dad lost the house, we managed to move out the furniture? This is the stuff we either needed or Mom couldn’t bear to sell.”

“I can’t remember if you said so.” June walked across the room and clutched Arabella’s hands again. “I think it’s all very nice. And you don’t have to explain it to me. I’m sure it sucks talking about it.”

“It does.” Arabella pointed out a plant on the nightstand, three on the dresser in colorful pots, and a few hanging in things on the wall. “Air plants,” she explained. “They don’t need to be in a pot. I also kept all of the ones that were mine. I guess I’m kind of a crazy plant lady.”

“That’s cool. I don’t have any plants.”

“No plants?” Arabella gasped, pretending to be shocked.

“Are you shocked that I have no plants when I’m standing in front of you wearing absolutely nothing? Are you *sure* that’s what you want to talk about?”

Arabella giggled. “You’re right, I don’t want to talk about anything. You could just help me take my clothes off. I feel very overdressed.”

June’s heart thrummed hard, and she vibrated with excitement. She was definitely into that. There was no denying how crazy aroused she was. She might have just had a seriously mind-blowing orgasm, but even thinking about stripping Arabella’s clothes off and getting to touch her, to bring her pleasure, made her nipples pebble and heat blossom between her legs.

She raked her hands through Arabella’s hair, tugging her close so that she could kiss her. She claimed her mouth, savoring her sweet lips, thrusting her tongue into her mouth while their hands worked together, undoing buttons, wrenching clothing apart, tugging at zippers. June felt desperate, which wasn’t a sensation she was used to. She was always sort of in control. She’d never had that experience where she lost herself completely, that moment of abandon.

As she pulled away so Arabella could strip off her pants and rip her camisole over her head, June thought she might be getting close, hovering around the borders of it. Of abandon. Of letting control slip. Of something new and undiscovered. She shivered and let the rawness of her need flow through her unchecked.

Arabella unclasped her bra, revealing her beautiful breasts. They were more than a handful when June cupped one, the dark pink nipples beaded tightly. She moaned when June ran her thumb over one. Her hands hooked under her panties, and she swayed and shifted, removing them with that flexibility and grace she'd been talking about.

June groaned in appreciation when she stepped back and just looked at Arabella. At her long legs, at her flat stomach and the curl of her hips. At her heavy breasts and the mane of blonde hair that flowed nearly to her waist.

"You're beautiful," June whispered in awe. She dropped her hands to Arabella's hips and guided her back to the bed.

She had a white duvet with cherry blossoms strewn across it. When she fell back against it, June just stood there, studying her again, drinking in the sight of Arabella's pale skin and golden hair against the flagrant red blossoms.

She drank her fill, then she climbed onto the bed. She kissed her way down Arabella's stomach, over the soft ridges of her gently defined abs, using her breath to tickle and tease along with her lips and fingertips as she explored Arabella's lush curves and satin skin. Arabella shivered and whimpered, and the noises and movements were so erotic that June felt like she was going to boil from the inside out.

"I want to see you pleasure yourself," June said thickly. "Will you show me?"

She knew she probably wouldn't have been bold enough if Arabella had asked, but Arabella seemed to like taking commands. She shifted her legs, setting her heels on the covers, opening her knees, opening herself. Her

eyes glistened hotly in the lamplight as she watched June watching her. She was totally smooth, and so wet that when her finger smoothed over her folds, she gasped at the sensation and her hips angled up, thrusting into her touch.

She smoothed her index finger around her clit, closing her eyes and throwing her head back against the pillows at the sensation. June's own hand drifted down between her legs, circling her clit slowly, teasing herself as she watched Arabella do the same.

Arabella circled her clit again, smearing her wetness over herself, rocking into her hand. She didn't try to stop herself from making exquisite sounds of pleasure. They fell from her mouth like a rich dark chocolate that June wanted to devour. She loved the sight of Arabella, her pale thighs parted, her hand working herself, almost more than she could bear.

Even though June had planned on watching Arabella take herself to climax, she couldn't wait another second to taste her, or she was going to... God, she didn't know what was going to happen, but she'd never felt such a strong need to do anything before.

"Will you let me taste you?" June rasped. "Please?"

Arabella stopped, and her eyes shot open. She scrambled onto her hands and knees so fast that June nearly giggled. She would have been content to taste Arabella as she was, but she remembered what she'd said in the kitchen. Again, June didn't think that she herself could have been so bold, but when Arabella grasped the top of the headboard, curling her hands into the upholstery, and waited, June's mouth went bone dry.

God, Arabella was perfectly made. She was a goddess, her skin so smooth and creamy that it looked like it had been painted by a master. Her curves made June's mouth water all over again. A stream of saliva jetted over her tongue when she got bold enough to reach for Arabella, smoothing her hand over the curl of her hip, tracing the curve of her bottom. Arabella made a noise that was all pleasure as June parted her legs gently. She positioned herself behind her, getting down on the bed until her face was at

the right angle. She waited for just a second, letting her breath tease the sensitive inside of Arabella's thighs until she whimpered.

June touched Arabella first, running her fingers so gently over her slick folds that she almost didn't touch her at all, but Arabella was so responsive, her hips jerking wildly at the touch, her gasp echoing through the room. June teased her, sweeping her finger over her core again, smearing the sultry, delicious moisture over the inside of Arabella's thighs.

As much as she wanted to, June really couldn't wait any longer to taste Arabella. She kissed Arabella's thighs and then she suckled her tight clit into her mouth. Arabella jerked against her.

"Oh, God," she whispered. "Oh, my fucking God."

June used her tongue, tracing Arabella's slick seam, moaning at the sweet taste of her exploding in her mouth. She open-mouthed kissed her before she used her tongue to torture her. Arabella was soaking, and June lapped up her arousal eagerly. She ate her pussy so eagerly that she didn't even stop to think about being embarrassed about the sounds of it. Arabella certainly wasn't embarrassed, which made it even hotter.

Her hips bucked harder against June's face, swaying and rocking, grinding against air. June knew what Arabella wanted and she gave it to her, bringing two fingers to her entrance and sinking them inside slowly while she suckled and lashed her clit.

Arabella screamed, but she didn't come apart. "More," she begged in a throaty voice that didn't sound like hers at all. "June. Please."

Her body writhed against June, begging, taking, pleading, and June gave her more. She worked her fingers, thrusting into Arabella's tight, slick channel, arching them to find that special spot inside. She raised her head so she could watch herself do it, watch her fingers thrust in and out, stretching Arabella as she took everything, watch her hips sway back into her, listening to the raspy sounds of her breath and the wet sounds of their bodies. Her own hand snaked between her legs again and she worked her clit hard. There wasn't enough oxygen in the room.

“Oh, God...” Arabella panted. “June, I’m going to...”

June thrust hard, and a few seconds later, Arabella shattered around her. Her channel clenched and tightened on her fingers, and she shuddered and moaned as her climax hit. June pinched her clit, so aroused that it was more than enough, and she exploded, her own climax detonating like a bomb inside her while Arabella spasmed around her fingers. She kept pumping, giving Arabella every bit of pleasure she could before the climax was over. The waves of her own pleasure rocked through her, nearly blinding her, making her dizzy.

When it was over for both of them, even though June was more than a few inches shorter than Arabella and built more petite, she pulled Arabella into her arms and curled around her on her side, stroking the damp hair away from Arabella’s temples. She nestled her chin in the crook of Arabella’s shoulder and neck, damp with sweat, and listened to her lovely, erratic breaths gentle out.

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Chapter 14

Arabella

Arabella breezed out of the house. Yes, breezed. It seemed like she was floating down the steps and out to June's waiting car. She was so excited for their first real date that she failed to notice there was someone already riding shotgun in the passenger seat. She didn't actually see Summer until she opened the door and scared the life out of herself.

"Oh. Sorry!" She flung a hand over her chest, sure she'd actually feel her heart trying to tear out as it pumped rapidly.

"We might as well get the whole unpleasantness over here," Summer said. "Since June didn't tell me you were coming, and she obviously didn't tell you I was coming."

Arabella put on a smile and opened the passenger door behind Summer. She slid in and did up her seatbelt. "That's alright. I've never been to a baseball game before. I think it's going to be fun."

"Fun," Summer responded, "is not something that should be associated with sports, especially baseball."

"I don't understand any of it, but I'm sure it will be good."

"At least one of you has a positive attitude." June drove away from Arabella's house, heading towards the stadium.

It was a Sunday afternoon and Arabella had been secretly counting down the minutes until her first real date with June. When she'd asked her Friday afternoon, slipping into her office to speak with her privately, if she'd like to go to the game with her because her parents couldn't use their tickets

since they'd both come down with summer colds and were feeling yucky, Arabella thought it would be just the two of them.

She didn't like sports and she didn't know a thing about baseball, but it had been days since they'd made it clear to each other that they were more than interested, and she wanted to spend time with June no matter what that entailed.

June hit a light and turned around. She was rocking a set of skinny jeans, a jersey in her size, and had her hair up in a messy bun, a big white headband keeping the strands from falling in her face. She looked casual and adorable. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you that the tickets were actually my parents' and mine. I don't even like baseball either, really. I mean, it's fine as far as sports go, but it's something we do together as a family. My mom feels the same way, but my dad is basically a fanatic. It's the one thing he splurges on every year for us to do all together."

"That's pretty cool."

"It's not cool that she artfully arranged for us to have to spend the whole afternoon together without hating on each other," Summer grouched.

Arabella could feel her lips quivering. She wasn't going to laugh, she promised herself. Nope, she wasn't even going to crack a smile.

June made her way to the stadium. She made sure they were early, but finding parking was still crazy. They ended up going down a side street somewhere that felt like miles away and parking there. They walked forever and Arabella was glad she'd worn jeans, a plain long-sleeved shirt to keep the glaring sun off of her skin, a ballcap to shade her face, and sneakers.

The lines to get in were crazy. Arabella wasn't much of a crowds person, but June navigated her way to the section where they were supposed to enter. She'd been doing it for years, Arabella figured. It was still more than hot to see June taking the lead and charging ahead so confidently. Arabella expected that at work, but June outside of work was just as hot.

And no, not just because she kept getting a really nice view of June's bottom in those tight skinny jeans she had on. She'd chosen sneakers as well, and for once, Arabella wasn't sure if they were from the company's athletic line or not. She thought they were, but she wasn't really studying June's feet. Thankfully, Summer never turned around to notice. She was happy to walk beside June and leave Arabella to eat her dust.

Summer wanted a corndog and a drink—she said that was classic baseball fare. They lined up and at the last minute, she changed her mind, opting for popcorn because June got some and it smelled divine. Arabella got a salted pretzel with cheese sauce. It was the biggest piece of dough she'd ever seen.

The seats weren't good, but they weren't terrible either. The stadium was huge, and even though Arabella had felt the press at the start when they were trying to get in, seated, the atmosphere became electric.

They still had half an hour before the game started. Summer dove into her popcorn and June munched on hers. June was between them, effortlessly keeping Summer from losing her mind about getting her bestie outing interrupted.

Everything was going as smoothly as it could until Summer asked the one question Arabella had expected her to ask the entire time. Summer didn't really have a filter, so Arabella figured it was coming.

"How come she's here?" Summer indicated Arabella, who was dipping a piece of the giant pretzel in cheese. She really wasn't a bread person, but after high school she'd lost her fear of carbs, and this was a treat. It was an utterly buttery, delicious, salty, wonderful treat.

"That's mean," June said between munching on pieces of popcorn. "Why not? I had an extra ticket."

Summer scrunched up her face and studied June. She was staring forward at the field, where people walked back and forth, getting everything set up for the game. "No, it's more than that," she huffed. "Does it have something to do with that kiss at the lake?"

Arabella held her breath. She didn't know what June would do. She obviously hadn't told Summer that they were dating.

June nodded. She popped another piece of popcorn into her mouth and didn't turn to look at Summer.

"What?" Summer exploded.

"Shhhh," June hissed. "There are people all around us."

"Yeah, people that are soon going to be screaming and cursing about everything," Summer shot back. "What exactly does it have to do with the lake?"

"Well, nothing," June said. "It has nothing to do with the lake."

"What about the *kiss*?" Summer insisted. "What does it have to do with that?"

"You should be more specific." June wasn't playing around. Arabella wondered if she was buying time.

Arabella tried very hard not to smile. It wasn't funny. This could be so not funny. It could be really bad. She was actually dreading when June told Summer that they'd started dating. God, it still felt so crazy to actually think they were doing that. Arabella hadn't *dated* anyone in ages. And June felt very, very unattainable. She was so super fantastic that it made Arabella's head spin to think she was really her girlfriend.

Thinking about June made her think about the things they'd done at her house, which made her face heat up so hot that she had to pretend to scratch her head just so she could hide behind her arm in case Summer was looking at her. She tried very hard to get thoughts of June in lacy panties and a black lace bra out of her head, but that just made her think about June's lovely breasts and her shapely legs, her perfect...

Okay, stop. Eyes on the prize. I mean, eyes on something else. Think about something else before you turn purple and Summer notices and turns

purple for a whole different reason.

“Are you—oh my God, are you guys hooking up?” Summer all but screamed.

Yup, she was definitely looking at my face just now.

“What makes you think that?” June asked casually.

“Uh, the fact that you’re, like, glowing. And she’s glowing! And, and, you look like you just took a dive into a ball pit but instead of balls, the pit is full of super cute puppies and they’re all licking you at once. You’re not excited about baseball. It’s not that. Plus, *she* keeps cropping up. You could have given that extra ticket to anyone.”

Arabella winced. Summer was being very detailed in her assessment now. June popped another piece of popcorn into her mouth casually. “So, you think that because I’m happy there has to be someone behind it.”

“Are. You. Two. Hooking. Up?” Summer growled.

“Nope. But we are dating.”

“What?” Summer’s yelp could probably be heard across the stadium.

She threw her hands up in the air, but she forgot she was holding a bag of popcorn and it went up too. She managed to hold onto the bag, but popcorn rained down all over the seats in front of them, which were mercifully still empty because whatever poor souls had to sit there were probably still getting herded in or getting snacks of their own.

Arabella sunk lower in her chair. She wasn’t cowering from Summer, but she was trying to escape the dirty looks being thrown their way from the people all around them who had just seen the popcorn incident. A couple a few seats over gave them dark, nasty looks and shook their heads in the direction of the empty seats which were now covered in spilled popcorn. Arabella briefly debated flinging herself over the seats and scrambling to pick up every spilled piece.

“You heard me,” June said softly as Arabella scrunched down another inch. “Yes, we’re dating. We’re dating each other. It’s going really well. I anticipate it will keep being amazing. I’m really happy.”

“But she’s...she’s...”

“Super awesome, selfless, caring, kind, and amazing?” June suggested.

Summer leaned over June and gave Arabella a very obvious stink eye. She tried not to wither away from it. She hadn’t expected Summer to do a happy dance and tell her how much she trusted her and wanted to welcome her into her best friend’s life. No, she’d fully expected a real stink eye and that’s what she was getting. If looks could kill, she’d most definitely be mangled at the moment.

“No!” Summer protested, her look of disbelief switching to one of total defiance. “I was going to go with the word monster, or some variation of that. Why? June? Of all the, like, six billion people in the world, why her?”

“There are only about three billion women,” June corrected, still eating popcorn at a normal rate.

“No!” Summer shook her head. “No. Not her. I’m going to fix this.”

“You’re not,” June told her. She finally set her popcorn down on the ground between her feet. “You’re not going to fix anything, because nothing needs to be fixed.”

“No way! She has to own what she did. All of that, that’s on her.”

“Everything has already been owned.” June plucked Summer’s popcorn safely out of her hands and set it beside her bag, between her shoes. “Enough. I don’t want to hear about that anymore. I’m done with talking about it or thinking about it. Maybe we should try this again. I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you sooner or give you warning. So. Summer, this is Arabella. We met at work. She’s gorgeous, but she’s also incredibly sweet, loves the heck out of her family, works so hard, is very talented, and she likes plants. She does the right thing because doing the right thing is the right thing to

do. Which is why she isn't saying anything to defend herself or combat your horrible attitude even though it definitely needs to be combatted."

"I...she...this..." Summer spluttered. She was so flushed it looked like she was sunburned after sitting outside all afternoon.

June shook her head. "No. This is how it is. You're my best friend, and I know you trust me to make good decisions and to be an informed person and a deep thinker. I know you know I give everything proper consideration, from business to my personal life."

"Business." Summer latched onto that. "The business. You work together. Wouldn't that look bad?"

"No, I don't think so. We're going slow anyway. We're telling people slowly. No one at work needs to know for a while yet. We're not hiding or sneaking, but there's nothing wrong with enjoying your privacy, and our personal relationship isn't going to affect our working one."

"What about the power dynamic? You can't date her because you're her boss!"

June sighed. "You know that I would never fire someone for anything but legit reasons, and even then, it would have to be a crazy reason. I've worked with people I didn't really want to before. Sometimes even difficult people. That's how the world works. If something should ever happen, I know it might be a little bit awkward, but that's not a reason to not take chances. Now. I know you're happy that I'm happy, and you're going to give me the benefit of the doubt because you love me no matter what kind of crazy you think I get myself into."

"But, but..."

"No. No more insults. No more nastiness. No more revenge. You can harbor private doubts but be the Summer I know and love. The Summer who is *happy* for me because I'm happy."

Someone behind them a few rows back let out a long, impatient sigh. Arabella wasn't sure if it was because they'd been listening in and didn't like what they were hearing, or because they were still annoyed about the popcorn, or maybe they were just sighing because it was hot, and they were tired and lazy feeling on the weekend. Arabella refused to turn around. She did move her head just a fraction so she could make sure Summer wasn't going to grab for both the bags of popcorn and spill them over her head.

Arabella didn't know if she was horrified or wildly exuberant and crazy ecstatic. Dating. It was real. They were real. They were really doing this. This was their first real date, and while June looked calm enough when Arabella snuck a glance at her, she could see a flash of thinly masked excitement on her face too.

"Summer?" June asked. "Introduce yourself. Let's have a new beginning and a fresh start."

Summer rolled her eyes. "No. I'm not doing that. That's stupid."

"Alright, then, I hope you can put on a smile, suck back the bad thoughts, and say a few nice things, even if it's about the weather, or about puppies, or about how delicious this popcorn is."

"If you'd give it back to me, maybe I could comment on it."

"Can I trust you not to fling it all over anyone again?"

"That was an accident. You shouldn't surprise me like that."

"Okay. Here." June passed over the half-empty popcorn bag. Summer mumbled something as she took it. "Oh look. They're getting ready to start."

"How very convenient," Summer muttered. She did make an effort to smile, and it was clear there was no underestimating the power of friendship. "Fine. I'll be nice because I love you. You know that. But don't say that I—never mind. I'm cutting that off too." Summer literally went behind June's back and pointed a finger at Arabella. "Hurt her and I'm

going to come for you. If you think the lake had some sinister aspects, I promise that you'll regret it times twenty."

"Only twenty?" June asked dryly. "I thought for sure that murderous impulses would be up there with the times forty or sixty."

"Times a hundred," Summer amended.

"Infinity would be better."

"Fine. Times infinity."

Arabella bit down on her bottom lip, working it while she tried to think of something reassuring, but her brain blanked. Eventually, Summer turned back around, and June resumed eating popcorn and watching the activity on the field like she was actually into it. She was probably the only one who knew what was going on, no matter how much she did or didn't like baseball. When the right words finally came, Arabella twisted around to Summer to say them, but oddly enough, Summer had a small smile in place, and she looked perfectly content with handing out threats and then trusting June to live her own life. It was quite mature of her.

The seats filled up around them, the national anthem was sung, and the game got underway. Summer cheered at all the right and some of the wrong times, clapping and hooting and shouting. She was clearly having a great time, and even if she was forcing it, she was still trying, and that was incredibly good of her. Or maybe she actually had a secret love for baseball that she'd never let on about or she'd just discovered. Whatever it was, Arabella was grateful. She felt warm and tingly inside in a brand-new way.

June had told her best friend that they were *dating*. It was out there. It was real. Someone knew. And Summer was, well, maybe she was going to be okay with it.

Halfway through the first inning, Arabella knew just enough to know what it was called, June slipped her hand under the armrest between them and set it on Arabella's knee. Arabella covered it with her own, and if

Summer noticed the hand holding going on, she didn't mention it even once.

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Chapter 15

June

Summer was the best time for walks in the park. June loved the park they had their annual work barbeque in so much that she often walked there in her free time. After the baseball date went better than she thought it would, she wanted to do something lower key, more private and intimate, something that was just the two of them. Something that wasn't token or cliché like dinner or a movie.

Arabella was more than glad to join her in the park after work and had packed a change of clothes and sneakers so June could drive them there. They both lived so far away from each other that it was the best arrangement time wise. June would drop Arabella back off at the office parking lot after so she could get her car.

June was so darn proud to have her hand curled in Arabella's as they walked through the park. They got a few stares from a few couples, but nothing June would consider hostile. Some people just liked to take a second glance, and that was okay. Arabella was smoking hot, so why wouldn't people want to check her out? She could barely keep her eyes off her at work and not stare herself. They hadn't told anyone they were dating yet, and June tried to keep things low key, which involved not getting slack jawed and drooling whenever Arabella was in the same room, but it was hard.

"I was thinking," Arabella said when they were about halfway around the park. "I was thinking that maybe, if you're up for it, you'd like to meet my parents?"

June squeezed Arabella's warm hand. She didn't want to sound dismissive or trite, but she was also worried about pacing. How fast was too

fast? She realized she couldn't carry that conversation on in her head, or rather, it would be better if she had it out loud instead of trying to sort things out in private.

"I just...I'm not sure it's the right time. When do people usually meet parents?"

"I don't know if there's a timeline. Maybe you're right. It's too soon. I don't know what I was thinking. Actually, I guess I do. I was thinking that my parents are going to notice you coming to the house sooner or later, seeing as they live downstairs, and my mom will be all bubbly and excited and want to come up and say hello. She might ambush you one time when you're over. They don't use their key without my saying they can, and they wouldn't walk in without knocking, but if they know I have someone over, they might keep knocking and not go away."

June smiled at the image of Arabella's parents pounding on the door and peeking in the windows, their curiosity getting the better of them. "Then maybe I should meet them sooner rather than later."

"I'm not trying to force the issue, I'm just saying. Things could get awkward. I want you to be prepared."

"Are you scared of me meeting them?"

"Scared? Or worried? Or excited and nervous?"

"I guess excited and nervous."

"I don't know. A bit, I guess. Who isn't nervous about things like that? I'm not nervous about them meeting you. They'll love you. I'm nervous about you meeting them and them saying something totally embarrassing. Mom never would have dared before, but now she seems more relaxed. I guess after we, um, moved, a lot of the old, forced habits stopped happening. No more fronts. No more pretending. What was the point? That was one of the good things, as far as I can see. My mom isn't exactly happy, but I think deep down she's a lot happier now that she doesn't have to load on the bullshit so thick and deep every single day."

“Being an actress all the time would be hard.”

“That’s what I did in high school,” Arabella blurted. She flushed and looked away when June glanced at her. “I mean, that’s... I know we shouldn’t talk about that.”

They passed by the huge stretch of water and June’s attention was momentarily distracted by a major duck fight going down on the water. She thought it was a fight. Two ducks were quacking the heck out of the place. They were just giving it to each other. They weren’t beating wings or doing anything physical. Maybe it wasn’t so much a fight as a telling each other off. She laughed at the wild quacking and Arabella joined in.

When they’d walked past, June remembered what they’d been talking about. “It’s not that we shouldn’t. I want to make sure you’re okay with it. That we’re not beating a dead horse. You can talk about it. I don’t need to from my end, and Summer doesn’t need to. That’s all I meant before.”

Arabella bit her bottom lip and nodded. “In high school, I was always putting on a mask and pretending to be something and someone I wasn’t. I was so much happier when I graduated and didn’t have to do that. I know exactly how my mom felt. She didn’t leave that life by choice, but when she was forced out, she actually found the other side to be alright. Aside from the worries about other things.”

“How’s your dad doing?”

Arabella hesitated. “He’s okay.”

June wanted to ask about things that weren’t her business, like how Arabella was coping with getting her parents insurance and the hospital bills and if she needed help, but she didn’t want to be nosey or pushy. Arabella wasn’t a proud person, but everyone had their pride, and she didn’t want to go too far too soon. Pacing. But what was the right pacing for wanting to help someone you cared about?

“So. Not meeting the parents this week or next week. Maybe not the week after or the week after that,” Arabella said, bringing them back to her

original question. “But if they ambush you, then at least you’re prepared. If they decide not to be nosey, then maybe in a month we could have a dinner with them at my place.”

“That would be nice. I’d like that. You’ve already met my mom, but I’ll also arrange something.”

“Have you told them? Or would you if they asked?”

“I love my parents,” June said carefully. “But I like to keep my private life private. They don’t ask about who I’m dating because I don’t live at home. They don’t want to pry. If they know that I’m seeing someone, they’ll ask about her because they care about both of us and that I’m happy and that things are going okay. They’re good that way. The best parents. They give me space but not too much space.”

“I can understand that. I don’t know that I’d want to go downstairs to my parents’ part of the house and just announce it. That would be pretty awkward.”

They were silent for a few minutes as they circled the water, watching the birds, and occasionally watching the people watching the birds.

“I think we should brainstorm some fun date ideas,” June said to break the quiet between them. It wasn’t painful silence, but date ideas were always fun.

“Oh. Wow. Date ideas... Can they be cheap date ideas?”

June spun into Arabella and kissed her impulsively on the cheek. Arabella stopped walking and beamed back at her. “I love that you can ask me that. That you’re okay with being open. I love that you don’t need this great big shell around yourself or all that armor you were carrying around before.”

“I was hoping I didn’t need it with you.”

“Never.” June kissed the edge of Arabella’s jawline and ran her lips down her throat, over to her ear. “No armor needed. If you geared up, I would just end up stripping it away to get to the good parts of you. And I can’t imagine putting it on would be easy. It seems like it would be a massive waste of effort.”

Arabella giggled. She looked stunned and a little bit scattered by the public affection, but she also looked happy. June took her hand again and resumed walking.

“Well, I can think of one date idea, but you might think it’s a little bit funny.”

“What’s that?”

“You commented on my plants. And you asked me about my air plants again this morning. I was thinking that if you don’t have any, you might like to get one. Something potted or an air plant. A succulent or a cactus. Something easy to start with.”

“Yes! That’s a great idea.”

“I know a few really good stores that have some great plants. We could go small or large. We could visit a few of them and look at everything before you make your choice. Although, I don’t know that that’s a cheap idea. Plants are to me like candy is to kids, and I’m not sure I could contain myself.”

June wiggled her eyebrows. “I could keep you in line.”

Arabella blushed adorably again. “Oh. Maybe I should act up then. Maybe I’ll be wicked and find lots and lots of plants to tempt me.”

“Maybe we should also go plant pot shopping. And then after we pick one out, the one you think would be perfect for my place—”

“I’ve never seen your place, so I’m not sure what would be perfect.” Arabella’s tone was teasing, but she was right. She hadn’t seen her place,

and June very much wanted her to.

“Well, you know me. You know what would match my personality.”

“I don’t know. I think cacti would match your skill level, or a succulent, but you’re not a prickly person.”

“I suppose that makes sense. Match my skill level with the plant and we could pick out a pot you think would go well with my décor. I’ll describe it to you on the way to whichever store you think is best.”

“And what if I don’t behave in whichever store I think is best? Are you going to take me outside and give me a lecture, deny me ice cream on the way home? Spank me when we get there?”

“Spank you?” June exclaimed.

An old man gave them a funny look as he hobbled along the path beside them, leaning heavily on his cane. June covered her mouth to stifle a rather inappropriate laugh. When she found Arabella doing the same, she nearly lost it.

She waited a few steps before she burst out laughing. Arabella tried to shush her, but it wasn’t long before she was snorting and full out laughing too. She gripped June’s hand and quickly tugged her down the path.

God, if only her high school self could see her laughing like a crazy person, on her way to buy plants because that was an exciting thing to do when you were in your late twenties—or any age because plants were awesome and she wasn’t sure why she hadn’t gotten any before—nearly bent over double, hobbling down the sidewalk because she couldn’t keep it together.

She never would have believed it, but even that made her laugh. Her picturing herself in such total disbelief. She’d probably do everything she could to avoid ending up here, thinking that it was some great big cosmic blunder, and that would have been tragic. She was very glad she couldn’t see into the future. She would have missed out. Big time.

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Chapter 16

Arabella

June's house looked nothing like Arabella thought it would. For one, while it was in a good neighborhood, the earliest any of the houses besides the infills had been built was the 1970s. June's house was a big, sprawling split level that was at least fifty years old, maybe more. The best part of the house? It had been left in all its seventies glory from the yellow and brown floral wallpaper on the walls to the bright red shag rug that actually climbed from the floor up the walls in the living room. The kitchen boasted brown appliances and the globe light fixtures were so old they looked like they'd been beamed down from outer space in a cool, retro sort of way.

"Wow," Arabella said after walking around, June's plant in her hands. "I guess I can see why you were okay with my place. This is...this is actually kind of cool. Like, it's a real time capsule. No one has touched this place in a million years."

"Well, probably a good forty."

"I'm not sure where I should stick this. The living room has nice windows. Although, it's a cactus, and they do well pretty much anywhere."

"Really?"

"I did say pretty much. Don't lock it in a closet and never let it see the light of day again."

"I wouldn't dream of doing that. Poor thing."

"Do the closets have shag rugs in them too?"

June grinned and winked. “You betcha’ they do.”

“Holy crap. I love it.”

“I know. When I saw it, I wanted to buy it, and I had this dream of making everything all nice and modern, but then I really started thinking about it and I thought, why would I do that? It’s so neat the way it is. I went out and bought draperies and antique furniture to match and then I started in on the things that really matter. I wanted to live like I work, not just because I thought people would check, but because it matters to me. I got a brand-new furnace, new windows, put in an all new energy efficient hot water heater. The washer and dryer are high efficiency. I’m going to order retro appliances just so I can finally get back on the right track with the energy consumption. I love the whole aura the old ones give off, but they’re just terrible when it comes to using so much electricity. I don’t want to throw them out, so I’ve already found a place that will take them. I’m not sure what they do with them exactly, but I did look around to find a good recycling place where they wouldn’t just go to the dump.”

“You can buy replica seventies fridges?” Arabella asked, amazed.

“No, the ones I’m getting are more of a replica fifties vibe, and they’re powder pink. I thought it would be a nice compliment to all the yellows and browns.”

“I changed my mind. I think the kitchen might be best. For the cactus. On the window ledge if it’s big enough.” The cactus was pretty small, so she was sure it would fit there.

June gave her a funny look and it took her a second to catch on to what she meant. “I’m not sure which spot is best,” June purred. “But I know what spot is best for you.”

Arabella’s mouth went dry as June stepped close to her and plucked the plant out of her hands neatly, setting it on the kitchen counter. She advanced, all purpose and flashing eyes that were hot on Arabella’s face, and Arabella backed up a step, just because she liked the thrill she felt at being pursued. June closed in on her until she was backed up against the

wall. She bracketed her in with a hand on either side of her shoulders. Even though she was inches shorter and more petite, Arabella still felt excited at being caged that way.

“Don’t you want to know where you’d fit best in here?” June asked playfully.

“Uh, if you say the closet, I might be a little bit afraid. But then again, if it really has shag rug, it might be pretty comfortable.”

June’s lips twitched and Arabella knew she didn’t mind one bit that she wasn’t playing along properly. “I was thinking more like the shower actually.”

“Do I stink?”

June couldn’t keep from laughing. “You could never stink. I think you sweat out rose petals and apricots.”

“That would be quite a sight.”

“I thought a shower would be nice. Warm water with my fancy hot water on demand system. It’s a great energy saver, so we could be a little more frivolous and take a little longer in there than the five minutes I usually allot myself.”

“Do you really have it timed?”

“No, I guess I’m just fast. But I’d like to spend more than five minutes in there with you. Even if the water got all cold and uncomfortable, I don’t think I’d mind.”

“Is your shower super vintage?”

“Brown tile, baby.”

“Then yes. Oh, my God, I’m sold.”

June's gaze clashed with hers. It was almost unnerving, the intensity in her dark eyes. Arabella found herself getting lost in the beauty of them before June leaned in. She gulped as June's hand bracketed her face, her thumb caressing the wild leaping pulse at Arabella's throat.

"That's good," she whispered, gruff at first, but smooth at the end, her voice like sandpaper and melted better all at once. "I would very much like to make you come in there so hard that you forget your own name."

Oh my sweet lord. Arabella's core throbbed at the blissfully erotic intent behind June's words.

June's hands reached out and undid the zipper of Arabella's athletic zip up. She shoved it aside, then worked her hands under the loose-fitting workout shirt Arabella had donned in the bathroom at work in preparation for their walk.

She kissed Arabella furiously, their tongues and lips dancing together as their hands peeled away layers of clothes. Arabella kicked off her shoes while she thrust her tongue into June's mouth. She peeled away June's yoga pants, then worked her t-shirt over her head.

June pulled at Arabella's thong so hard that the fabric burned her hips. She nearly tore June's underwear clean off. June was a master at unhooking even the toughest of sports bras and she made quick work of Arabella's. June's was more difficult and it rasped over her nose so hard that the end of it actually bounced back into place as Arabella frantically tore it off.

"Ouch." June rubbed her nose. "I'm kidding, it's fine."

"Oh, thank goodness. Which way's the bathroom?" Arabella panted.

The air suddenly seemed thin, and Arabella could barely drag in enough air to keep the black spots from dancing before her eyes. June's eyes blazed with heated desire as she pointed down the hall.

"That way." She wrapped her arms around Arabella's waist possessively and tugged her to her. Hard. Their knees clashed and their arms tangled as

they walked backwards, kissing each other feverishly down the length of the hall.

June was steering. She was quite adept at it, and they made it into the bathroom without anyone getting a bruised tailbone or stubbed toe from bumping into something. June flicked on the light.

There was a small window in the bathroom, with the heavy yellow drapes closed for privacy. The shower was a huge, ancient, glass contraption with brown and yellow floral tile. The showerhead had been replaced. It was new and chrome. The floor in the bathroom was tiled too, a yellow, also with flowers, that clashed tremendously with the shower. The sink and toilet were both that burnt yellow color that was supposed to be so warm and inviting in the seventies. It was a big bathroom, and in its day this house must have been the pride of the block.

“I love it.” Arabella gave her praise easily. “I really do.”

June looked darkly at the shower. “My goal is to help you love it even more as I show you all the ways I can make you come.”

Arabella nearly swallowed her tongue. June fixed that for her by kissing her until her pulse beat even harder, echoed like a pulsing drum between her legs. Her nipples were rock hard, and every inch of her body was suffused with desire so thick she felt drenched in it like it was moisture in the air. She never would have guessed before she’d been with June that first time that she liked to take charge. It was magnetic and it drew Arabella in until she was utterly helpless to resist.

The kiss was brutal, June stamping herself on Arabella’s mouth as her hands did wondrous things to her body, roving over her curves and bringing her to life, to a careening halt, to utter awareness and arousal over and over again with every single touch.

June’s tongue tangled with Arabella’s, and while she worked her magic with those deep strokes, her hand cupped Arabella’s sex. She gasped at the pleasure of June’s touch, rolling her hips into her hand hard.

“I love how wet you are,” June whispered. “Wet and ready for me.”

Arabella wanted to say yes, but all she got was a near painful hiss of air scraping out over her lower lip. Her stomach muscles contracted as June carefully smoothed her fingers straight to her clit. Arabella’s legs nearly gave in when June tapped the hard little bud. She whimpered and grabbed for something but came up with air.

“The sink,” June said darkly, spinning Arabella around by the waist so she could curl her hands around the cold pink porcelain.

Her breaths came hard and fast as she bent over it, grasping the edges with both hands to support herself, angling her hips in the air. June’s hand ran over the swell of her backside until it was back tantalizingly between Arabella’s shaking legs. She gathered her moisture there with her fingertip, smearing it over her slick, heated folds.

Arabella tried to suck in breaths, but all she could do was arch into June’s touch and keep making low sounds in the back of her throat. Sounds of approval and fierce, hard need.

“You’re still so wet for me,” June hummed behind Arabella as her fingers found her clit again and started to circle. She teased her that way for a few seconds, then, shockingly enough, used the entire palm and then the heel of her hand against the hard bud. Because June was shorter, it she molded her body to the middle of Arabella’s back as she arched backward, making it even easier for her to reach.

Arabella clawed at the sink and nearly screamed. She managed to contain it and all that came out was a roaring sort of hum at the wild pleasure shredding her insides apart.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” June said as she tapped Arabella’s clit with her index finger. Tendrils of wild, hot pleasure coursed through her at each brief, teasing contact. “So, so beautiful. I love your ass. I love seeing you spread apart for me. I love you leaking all over my fingers and over my hand. I love how it coats your thighs, how I can watch you soak us both before you come on my fingers.”

Arabella's head jerked up and her eyes flew up along with it. She looked at her shocked, flushed face in the mirror, then her eyes tracked straight to June's. It sent a crazy, elicit, erotic thrill through her to see that she was watching her in the glass as well.

June's fingers tapped and circled Arabella's clit again. Her head fell back, and her eyes rolled shut. Her hips swayed backwards, eager for the friction, eager for anything and everything June was willing to give. She held herself steady, leaning hard against the sink, so hard that she hoped the thing didn't tear off the wall, since destroying June's house would be quite embarrassing.

"Do you want my fingers inside you?" June purred. She ran her index finger over Arabella's molten slit, teasing her at her entrance.

"Oh God," she moaned. "Oh, my God."

"I think that's a yes. A yes to my fingers." June slowly pushed two inside Arabella's entrance, filling her so ridiculously slowly that Arabella started to beg on instinct. "A yes to this." June started to thrust, curling her fingers until she found that wondrous, sensitive spot inside. "Yes to you coming so hard you see stars."

"Fuck..." Arabella couldn't quite believe she'd said it, but she wasn't about to take it back. She could feel herself clenching tightly around June's fingers. Her legs shook so badly that her thighs vibrated between the press of June's legs and the sink. Her fingers lost all feeling as she grasped the sink until she was strangling the porcelain.

Arabella bucked hard, riding June's fingers, taking each and every thrust deeper. June curled her free hand into Arabella's hair, fisting it in a great tangle that sent prickles shooting through her scalp, as hot as the fire burning from within.

"I want you to come," June commanded. "Come on my fingers. Shatter for me while I watch you in the mirror."

It was too much. The sensual commands. The heart in June's voice. The utter desire to watch Arabella do as she asked. She wanted to obey. She wanted to do this for June, so that she could watch fully the effect she had on Arabella, so she could watch herself possess her, make her mad, transform her into a twisted-up ball of utter pleasure. So she could watch Arabella become someone she'd never been with anyone else. Only with June. Always with June.

She wanted June to have that. To have all of it. Every secret bit of her. She wanted only her to have it. To have it forever. To keep all that vulnerability, that surrender, every bit of emotion safe.

She gave when June curled her fingers and thrust harder, creating a rhythm she couldn't hope to withstand. She was done and she knew it, and when she shattered, she fell hard into that abyss of pleasure. She let it consume her. She didn't care if she bucked too hard or begged, if she looked funny in the mirror.

Even if it was all those things, she wanted June to have them. She wasn't embarrassed by the depth of her need. A little scared, maybe, but not ashamed. There was no shame between them. She met June thrust for thrust, her body and hips gyrating madly as she broke apart over and over.

She came in great, wrenching waves that left her spent and shaking against the sink. Her arms were numb now too, not just her hands. Still, June thrust inside her, using those aftershocks to take Arabella into a place that was beyond pleasure, expanding what she thought she could take, how much, how hard, until she wanted more and more, until she was greedy with it and astounded all over again at the raw wildness of her own vitality.

June kissed her shoulder, laving the tender spot of her neck with her tongue. "Beautiful. You have no idea how much pleasure it gave me watching you come apart for me."

Their eyes met in the mirror as Arabella's flew open. Her pupils were blown wide, her lips swollen a cherry red, her tongue poking through them in concentration. Her cheeks were scarlet, her shoulders heaving so brutally that her reflection bobbed and swayed in the glass.

“Do you think you can come for me like that in the shower?”

“I was thinking maybe you might want a turn.”

June’s lips arched into a catlike grin in the mirror and her eyes flashed with humor, lust, and unbridled anticipation. “Maybe. Maybe I would.”

“Maybe?” Arabella found some strength in her watery legs. She turned and draped her arms around June’s waist and steered her to the glass shower. “Let’s turn that maybe into a hard yes.”

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Chapter 17

June

June got the glass shower door open and cranked on the water. She tested the spray with a few fingers to make sure it wasn't scalding or freezing before she tugged Arabella under.

The water hit June's sensitive skin, feeling like knives. Arabella gasped too. She twisted June until her back was pressed up against the glass and the water beaded and flowed down her shoulders. Even as it hit them, she could smell Arabella's arousal, maybe her own too, that scent of them, mixed up, joined, delicious, and erotic as hell.

Arabella's hand flew between them, darting to June's sex. She smoothed her fingers over her, groaning when she felt how wet she was. June knew she was almost obscenely wet. She was so turned on after just having Arabella at the sink that she'd never known such pain in her life.

Her core hummed and pulsed and even the slight weight of Arabella's fingers made June throw back her head against the glass. All the air escaped her lungs in a rush as Arabella slowly massaged her clit with her finger. She vibrated at the strain of holding back, her thighs shaking around Arabella's arm. Her hips slammed against the glass once before bucking forward into Arabella's hand.

Arabella grinned wickedly at her and used the flat palm of her other hand to press against June's hip, holding her in place against the glass so that she couldn't move. She knew she wasn't going to last. While Arabella teased her ruthlessly, she bit down hard on her lip to try to distract herself from the pleasure. She was so close, and she wanted to hold out a bit longer.

With a growl she finally had to concede defeat. She plunged her hands into Arabella's hair, dragging her face to hers and plundering her mouth. She barely repressed a sob as pleasure rocked through her when Arabella grasped her bottom and lifted her up. She wrapped her legs around her waist while Arabella fitted her pelvis against hers, thrusting her knee in place against the glass to keep June upright.

June was lost and she knew it. Lost to her lust and the desire that sucked at her, ate away at her control. Lost to forces bigger than either of those things. She ground against Arabella, and her hips thrust back eagerly. When June couldn't keep kissing Arabella because she needed air, she tore her face away and tucked it at the juncture of Arabella's porcelain neck and shoulder.

She loved the curl of her muscle there, all that fine, flawlessly pale skin. She had the urge to do something animal and gave in to the ruthless desire. She sunk her teeth there, biting gently, then licked away the sting when Arabella gasped. She'd always thought doing things like that, hickies and love bites, was in pretty poor taste, and she couldn't believe she'd actually done it, but Arabella had enjoyed it. God, she'd enjoyed it. Arabella strained against her and whimpered, her hips pumping frantically into her.

"June..." Arabella panted. She slipped her hand between them and touched herself. When her fingers came away wet, she brought them to June's mouth. She opened immediately, licking and sucking Arabella's juices off of her digits. "This is what you do to me," Arabella groaned.

"I want you inside me," June whimpered. "I want to come on those fingers."

"Yes," Arabella rasped.

She kept one hand at June's hip to support her, her knee braced between them, and she let June down just a little, so that she wasn't pressed up so tightly against her. When June's toes hit the floor, she angled her body into Arabella, her hips already hitching up, begging for her touch. She gave it, filling June with two fingers until she was slamming against her, her skin

sucking and banging off the glass, arching into every single delicious move Arabella made. Every touch.

She was so full, so close to climaxing. The way Arabella had her pinned, the furious passion that bloomed between them, the way she felt there was no coming back from it, the warm water of the shower sluicing over her tender skin, hitting the tips of her breasts—it all drove her to the brink.

“Holy shit,” June gasped. “I need to come. I’m going to come.”

“That’s it,” Arabella urged. “Come for me. I want to watch you come apart and know it was me who did that for you. I want to give you all that pleasure.” Arabella actually growled the last words, and feeling that sexy vibration on her lips when she kissed June finally made her unable to hold back.

She buried her fingers in Arabella’s hair all over again, tangling the strands so tight and pulling her up against her mouth so hard that their teeth nearly crashed together as Arabella kissed her brutally.

June shattered, her head thrown back against the glass, Arabella’s lips on hers, tasting her cries of pleasure like they were whisky, getting drunk on them right along with June who was already lost. Stars burst everywhere. There was a whole damn night sky in that shower with them, with black holes and milky ways, shooting stars, everything. June went floating through it, the sharp pains and pleasure of her climax making her nearly delirious. She screamed, over and over, the sounds muted by the force of Arabella’s lips against hers. She came until she was boneless and spent and then she melted against the glass.

Arabella held her up, and when June opened her eyes, she slid her fingers away and brought them to her own mouth this time, letting June watch as she licked them clean. It was so deliciously erotic, watching her taste her pleasure, that the vibrations and aftershocks of her climax swept through her all over again. June had to clutch at Arabella’s shoulders to keep herself from toppling over.

She realized, quite after the fact, that the water temperature was changing. It wasn't cold yet, but it was well on its way there. Her hand fumbled for the tap, and she cranked it. Luckily it was the cold she'd cranked and the hot was on its last legs and they didn't get scalded or frozen out.

June hustled out of the shower, grabbing one of the two fluffy pink towels off the rack. She'd bought them when she'd bought the house, chosen just for the shade of pink they were, because it matched the sink and the toilet so perfectly. They'd faded a little in the wash over time, but they were still a close enough match. And they were still fluffy.

She passed one to Arabella, who stood just outside the shower, looking at the fluffy pink bathmat that matched the towels. When she didn't take it, June wrapped it around her shoulders. She seemed to startle out of her trance. She clasped the towel, winding it around her sensual curves, while June wrapped one around herself.

"Was that too much? Was I too much?"

June couldn't believe she'd possibly heard correctly. "What? What do you mean, were you too much?"

"Was I too...I don't know... Is this too much?"

June's pulse skyrocketed. She wasn't sure where Arabella was going with that, and she didn't like the sound of those doubts. Normal doubt was okay, but the way Arabella was asking? The tone of her voice made June's chest hurt. She turned and grasped Arabella's shoulders.

"What exactly are you asking me?"

Arabella blinked, but she made eye contact finally. It was impossible to tell if the rosiness in her cheeks was from what they'd just done or if it was something else. "It's just that I thought I might be too...eager"

"Too eager?" June was amazed. "No! My God, I don't think you can be too eager. Not with me," she said carefully. "Never with me. Is it something

I'm doing that you don't like?"

"No!" Arabella shook her head quickly. "That's not it at all. I love everything you do. I just thought that I might be, I don't know. Too wanton, I guess."

"Wanton?" June didn't mean to laugh, but the sound came out anyway. "No! I don't think you can be too much of that either. I love the way your body responds to mine. I love that you're willing to try new things, but if you're shy, we can go more slowly. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to rush you or push you into doing anything--"

"It's not that." Arabella's hand covered June's on her shoulder. Her lips arched into a warm, honest smile. "God, it's definitely not that. I just wanted to make sure."

June kissed her hard. "I'm sure." She couldn't miss another flicker of doubt in Arabella's eyes as she pulled away. She left it for a moment, but when she turned around, Arabella's voice was soft and quiet again.

"I should...maybe should I go?"

June was near the bathroom door, but she whirled around, her mouth dropping open. "Uh, no! Not unless you want to. Or you have to."

Arabella twisted the end of the towel under her armpit again as it came undone. She studied that terry cloth twist she'd made instead of looking at June. "It's just that we haven't exactly decided on...well, it's getting kind of late, isn't it?"

"Oh, so you're asking how I feel about you staying the night? Or are you asking if I'm ready for more? Because I already stayed at your place, so it makes perfect sense that you'd stay here now, don't you think? Unless you're not ready to..."

"I'm ready, June," she said in a rush. "God, I'm so ready."

June rushed forward and took Arabella's hand. She smoothed her fingers over Arabella's palm before she twisted their fingers together. "I know this is new and there are probably going to be so many awkward moments, but I hope we can laugh about them and get through them and just talk about them if we need to. I'd like you to stay the night. Very much. If you want to. If you're not ready, that's okay. I can drive you back to your car."

Arabella hesitated. "What if someone notices my car was parked there overnight? I also don't have a change of clothes."

"You're right. That makes sense. Not the car. No one is going to be the car police, but the clothing thing. And it would be an early morning before work. I didn't plan this ahead of time. Sorry, I wasn't trying to outrug you."

"What's outrugging?" Arabella asked, smiling now even if it was a little reluctantly.

"Pulling the rug out from under you?"

"Oh, good. I thought it was going to be something far more terrifying."

"Will you come to bed with me for an hour? We could dry off in there. Maybe do some other things..."

"You're insatiable." It was absolutely a compliment. Arabella moved with June, following her to her room.

When they got there, she laughed at the shag carpet that was like a sea of red. It blanketed the floor of the entire room. June's big queen bed and matching black dressers and nightstands—purchased used like most of her furniture because she really did believe in recycling and reducing—looked a little bit lost in that hairy rug and she knew that.

She laughed too, then laughed all over again when she flung back the blankets on her bed and her towel flung off with her movement. She left it on the rug and crawled underneath the covers, delighted and wild with excitement at the rush of having Arabella climb in on the other side.

They inched close to each other, until June put her hand on Arabella's arm and rolled close, nestling her head against the curve of her shoulder. "You know, I was thinking," she said as she stared up at the ceiling. "I was thinking that if the world really is just a series of random events, then we got pretty lucky, meeting each other again."

"Lucky. I was so sure you wouldn't say that."

"I was so sure I wouldn't either but look at us now. Maybe in life the hard things all need to be surmounted and survived, or at least just muddled through in order to get to the best parts. I think all that mud and muck of the past makes the present so much more sensational."

"Because it can be appreciated more?"

June turned her face into Arabella's damp hair and nuzzled her ear again. "I was going to say that, but now it sounds pretty corny."

Arabella twisted, wrapping her leg around June's, threading their arms together, facing her. "It might be, but that's okay. It's okay to sound corny. Sometimes corny is kind of nice."

June stared past Arabella to the nightstand beside the bed. It was fairly close to a few windows. Plus, the nightstand had never had anything on it except one lonely lamp. "Look!" June pointed past Arabella's face, grazing her nose with her index finger. Arabella jolted around.

"Oh, my God," she huffed. "I thought there was going to be something crazy standing over there."

"No, nothing from a horror movie."

"What am I looking at then?"

"The nightstand. I think it's a perfect place for the plant."

Arabella grasped June's bottom, which made her squeal. "Oh good. I'm glad that I could help you find a place after all," she said dryly.

“You most certainly did,” June said every word between kisses planted on Arabella’s nose, her chin, her cheeks. She saved Arabella’s sensual, kiss-swollen mouth for last, but only because some clichés were awesome and true and a person should always kiss the best spots last where they could be enjoyed and fully savored.

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Chapter 18

Arabella

“Two pairs. Strip.”

“Damn it!” Arabella threw down her cards in mock disgust. “You always win. I think you might be cheating.”

June’s nose wrinkled up at that accusation. “It’s not my fault that I have mad skills.”

“Mad skills, my bottom.”

“Yes, I’m going to be seeing that lovely bottom shortly.”

Arabella gave in, wriggling out of her jeans. She was down to her bra, panties, and socks. June had only lost one item, a sock, so far. They’d decided to play strip poker when they saw it on the cheesy rom com they’d put on. The poker seemed vastly more fun than the movie, which wasn’t very interesting.

Arabella gathered up the cards and shuffled. She began to deal a new round when a soft knock at the front door interrupted her.

“Arabella? Arabella, honey, it’s mom. I was wondering if you had any sugar.”

“Jesus!” Arabella threw down the cards and scrambled for her shirt. June was watching her, vastly entertained as she picked up her pants and basically leaped back into them. “I told you this would happen!” Arabella hissed. “I knew she’d corner us one day.”

“If it would make anything easier, I could hide in the closet. Jump out the window. Run down to the basement. Oh wait, that’s where they live.”

Arabella wagged her finger at June. “Just wait. Oh, seriously, just you wait until she’s gone. Hiding isn’t going to do any good. Your car is out there. She knows you’re here. She doesn’t need sugar for anything. My mom is the healthiest eater around.”

“Maybe she has a craving.”

“A craving to ambush us and figure out who you are.”

“How does she know I’m anyone?”

“Trust me. She knows. Don’t moms always know?”

“Mom skills *are* pretty powerful. Not as powerful as my poker skills but...”

A second knock echoed after the first, then her dad’s voice came through the door, muffled and so much softer than normal. “Arabella? Your mom wants to know if you have any sugar.”

“Tell her it’s for a cup of tea.”

“Shhh, Brenda.” Then, louder than the hissed whisper, “It’s for a cup of tea.”

“Ugh. Even though neither of them drinks tea.”

June laughed. “Let them in. It’ll be fine. I’m excited to meet them.”

“Really?” Arabella gaped at her. “What happened to taking things slow and meeting the parents at a pre-arranged time and place of our choosing?”

“Well, they’re out there and they’re probably not going to go away. If we can hear them, they can probably hear us.”

“Oh, my good lord,” Arabella whispered. She could feel herself getting totally flustered as she toned down her voice. June’s observation was obvious, and she had no idea why she hadn’t thought of it. “You’re probably right.”

Arabella checked her clothes and held out her arms for a silent visual inspection. June nodded, but when she walked past Arabella, swatting her bottom gently, it undid all her composure. She hurried over to the door, took a deep breath in preparation for the mom and dad storm that was about to sweep through, and opened it.

“Mom. Dad. What a surprise.” Arabella could barely keep a straight face when she said it.

Behind her, June let out the softest snort, and that alone just about made Arabella burst into giggles. Her parents might have heard her on the other side, but even if they had, they couldn’t tell what she’d been doing. Losing. Badly. At. poker. They didn’t know she’d been sitting there barely dressed when they walked up. That was a secret she shared with June.

“Oh, well, we just wanted to come up and say hi.” At least her mom could be honest.

Her dad placed one hand at the small of his wife’s back and smiled one of the few genuine smiles he’d put on lately. Not that she was annoyed at being interrupted, but it made her parents’ nosey charade worth it. She was glad to see her dad smile. It had been a long time since she’d seen actual happiness on his face.

“Okay. Uh, well, then you probably want to come in.”

“Really? You don’t mind?”

Arabella nearly choked at her mom’s sugary tone. “No, I don’t mind.” She couldn’t help herself. “Are you sure you don’t want some sugar? For your tea?”

Arabella's mom was a fast thinker. She always had been absolutely quick on her feet, and right now, she was dancing on her toes. "I was hoping you'd offer some. Tea. If you did, I wouldn't have to borrow the sugar."

"Tea sounds good," June said. She stepped out from behind Arabella at the door and offered her hand. "I'm June. It's good to meet you."

"And these are my parents," Arabella tacked on as an introduction. "Obviously. I guess we're having tea then. Why don't you come in and we can all visit for a while in the kitchen?"

"Oh, that would be great."

"I'd like that," Arabella's dad added, and again her heart skipped a beat because he sounded like he really *would* like that.

In the kitchen, it didn't take long for her to boil water and get out mugs and a few boxes of black and green teas. She set everything on the table, including spoons, sugar, and honey. She let everyone make their own cups of tea and then she sat down in the empty seat at the round table between her mom and June.

"I have to say, Arabella is...she's glowing," her mom gushed without bothering to even make herself up a mug.

Arabella coughed loudly as she grabbed the box of black tea and threw a teabag into her mug. She poured water and watched the clear liquid turn a deep shade of brown.

"I've never seen her as happy as she has been these past few weeks. We just knew she had to be seeing someone."

"Mom!"

June grasped Arabella's hand under the table and squeezed. "I'm glad. I've been very happy as well."

Her dad was more practical. "Where did you two meet?"

Great. We're getting to all the good questions right off the bat. All those questions that have really awkward answers.

June wasn't awkward at all, though. "Wet met at work, actually."

"Oh really?" Mom clapped her hands. "That's great!"

"You're not going to list off a bunch of things wrong with that?" Arabella realized she forgot cream. She stood up and walked to the fridge and set it on the table before she sat back down.

"Why would there be anything wrong with that?"

"We're very thankful that Arabella has a good job now," Dad said. "Aren't we, Mother?"

"Yes. Yes, we are." Mom nodded.

Arabella squirmed. If her parents found out June wasn't just her boss, but that she was the CEO of the entire place, they'd no doubt have other questions. Or maybe they wouldn't, but if they did, she really didn't know how to answer them.

"We're very happy to see such a beautiful, smart young woman is dating our daughter," Mom went on, oblivious to how Arabella turned a bright red.

Dad nodded. "With a good head on her shoulders. We couldn't ask for anything more than that, and that you treat our little girl right."

"Dad..." Arabella protested. "I'm not your little girl."

"Whether you're my oldest or not, everyone knows that a man's daughters are always his little girls."

Arabella felt her tear ducts starting to work. She blinked back the sting. Because now was the time to get all sappy and sentimental. Her dad gave her the softest look, though, and it was hard to remind herself why she was bothering to hold the tears back. It was nice to sit like this. As a family again.

“Are you guys having tea?” Arabella asked. “Or am I the only one keeping up the charade?”

A chorus of laughter rang out around the table, and everyone got busy making their tea. She was sure her dad didn’t even like tea, but even he made an attempt at it. After they all had steaming mugs in front of them, Arabella’s mom picked up on her line of questions.

“Did you grow up here in Cincinnati, June?”

“Actually, I did,” June responded smoothly. She left it at that, and that seemed to satisfy the question. It wasn’t that Arabella wanted to hide a bunch of stuff from her parents, she would just rather let them in on all the details when they knew June better.

“Do you want a family? Kids? Marriage?”

“Da-ad!” Arabella wanted to move her mug and drop her head smack down on the table. “Those kinds of questions are off limits. We haven’t been dating that long. If you want me to keep having a girlfriend and not scare her off, you shouldn’t ask things like that.”

“Are they hard things?” As if her mom didn’t know the answer to that.

“No, it’s fine.” June freely set her fingers on Arabella’s hand right there on top the table. “I know that forty is the new twenty and more and more people are putting off having kids until they’re older and more settled. They want the career first, all the life experiences before they have a family. I guess I fall somewhere in the middle on that. I’m very career oriented, but I’ve done a lot of the things I’d like to do, and I know I could leave the co—I mean, my position in more than capable hands if I wanted to take a year off or more to start a family. I think I’m just like everyone else in that I’d like to find the right person and get to know them for a number of years and enjoy our time together as a couple before I would like to talk about marriage and kids, but of course I want them.” Her fingers flexed over Arabella’s when she said *right person* and Arabella’s heart started to beat that much faster.

Her tear ducts were acting up again, and so she cleared her throat and sipped at her tea, which was still incredibly hot despite the liberal dousing of cold cream she'd given it. "I think that's enough of the hard questions. How about commenting on how hot it's been or, Dad, you could talk about boring sports, or, or just something that's not about us or about June's personal life."

Her parents were so not into that, and Arabella could tell they probably had a whole list of questions they'd been percolating down in the basement suite for the past few weeks. She was a little worried that said list might contain a heck of a lot more questions than she was ready to answer and that it might make things extremely awkward for her and June, but her mom surprised her.

"It has been awfully hot lately, hasn't it?"

Her dad took it one step further, giving her a soft, knowing smile. "How about baseball? Does anyone like baseball?"

June jumped at the chance to talk about something that was neutral, and also somewhat familiar grounds for her. She commented on the weather, then she talked about the game they'd just been to and rattled off what she knew about the team because her dad was a baseball fanatic.

Arabella sat quietly, enjoying just listening to June talk, loving the fact that she hadn't bailed on her the second her parents knocked on her door. She hadn't panicked. She hadn't run. She'd met the parents and it had gone okay so far. It was going to go okay. It was all going to be okay.

And now she knew for sure that June wanted kids. Which made her feel so warm inside, so tender, so blissfully happy, that she was afraid their beautiful bubble would burst, but then she thought about it and realized they weren't in a bubble at all. They were living a very real life and they'd been as honest with each other as they could be.

June had already seen the worst of her, and she'd already been the worst version of herself. They'd gotten through that to where they were now and that was not an easy thing to do. So, no, they weren't really living in a

bubble. They were being very, very real about everything, taking it slow, like June said.

Arabella guessed it was more that she was afraid of losing the tremendous happiness she felt, but she knew that was also a common fear. Every single person had to be afraid of those things, of their happiness getting shattered, of bad things happening to the people they loved. She worried about her parents daily. No, more like hourly. She worried about her sister. And now she worried about June.

That was just part of life and learning how to let people in, learning how to let go, and maybe even learning how to love.

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Chapter 19

June

Now that they were actively talking and thinking about their new line of children's footwear, June was so excited to join the marketing meetings. Not that she hadn't been before, but she trusted that her team was capable to handle things without her always being present. She still trusted them, but she was so excited for the new shoes they were going to be putting into development shortly that she made sure she always made time for the meetings. She wanted to know everything that was happening, every single second of it.

She told herself she was just excited about the product line, the shoes themselves, all their fun new designs, and the fact that this was something they hadn't done before, an entirely new direction for all of them. June was okay with admitting to herself that she was especially excited because it was Arabella's idea they were developing, her designs, even though they were preliminary.

She was extremely proud of Arabella, but she didn't want to just be excited for her or proud of her. She wanted to be excited for the whole thing and proud of the whole marketing department. She was. She was truly proud of everyone for all the hard work they had put in already and all the hard work they would continue to do, but when she got to the meeting, she couldn't help but feel a rush of pride for the beautiful, smart, talented, driven woman who was her girlfriend.

"This is a very exciting time for us," June said, leading off the meeting. "I can't wait to hear the updates about the new line. Beth, do you want to take over?"

Beth always took over. She always ran the meetings. The marketing department was her baby. June couldn't remember a single time when Beth hadn't been just so stoked for any meeting. She was like that, always enthusiastic, so creative, so truly gifted.

"Sure." Beth reached for the file in front of her and flipped it open. She took over, going over numbers and projections again, getting the team warmed up to talk about how exactly they wanted to put the product out there.

As the meeting went on, June kept watching Beth. She couldn't figure out what it was that was bothering her, but there was definitely something. Maybe she was just stressed. Putting a new product out there was always a risk, and they were going to invest a lot of time and money into this line. Beth would probably feel responsible if the shoes didn't do well, or if they spent money on advertising and a marketing campaign and it didn't pan out.

June promised herself that she'd talk to Beth about it and make sure she was doing okay. She had to know not to get too stressed. She'd done this so many times before, but June would check in anyway and make absolutely sure that Beth knew she had an entire team behind her and that she couldn't take anything personally.

After the meeting, June couldn't help herself. She found herself walking towards Arabella's office, already working on some kind of excuse in her head. A work excuse. Really, she just wanted to talk to her. She couldn't sit in the same room with her for over an hour and not appreciate how divinely beautiful she was. Maybe that was excuse enough. Just a few seconds to tell her that.

Arabella was bending over her filing cabinet, putting away the meeting minutes from the meeting they'd just been in. June admired her organization skills. Well, no, she *admired* lots of things about Arabella, but she definitely *appreciated* that she was organized.

June knocked gently on the glass door, and when Arabella spun around, she smiled. "Can I come in for a minute?"

“Sure.” Arabella shut the filing cabinet and sat down behind her desk. She was very professional at work. She even fooled June most of the time. Her face was always blank and neutral. They’d been dating for three weeks, and Arabella was always very controlled. “What’s up?”

June shrugged. “Nothing. Maybe I just wanted to come and see you.”

Arabella’s cheeks heated up. Her eyes flew to the closed door, then rushed back to June’s face, where they lingered, the heat in them slowly and steadily building since they were alone. “That’s, uh, that’s very...I like that.”

June giggled. “You’re welcome?” She lowered her voice. “I like it too. Anyway, I was just...I wanted to talk to you. I thought maybe you’d like to come over tonight. For dinner, but to stay the night?” She felt hope and fear bubble up in her chest in equal measures.

Arabella grinned widely. There was no hiding her happiness, and seeing it made June feel so incredibly alive. “I’d like that,” she said, so soft and contained, even though her face was radiant.

“I’d like that too.”

Arabella glanced towards the door again. “Good. I’m glad that’s settled, then.”

“I was also wondering if you might like to go for lunch with me today.”

“You mean leave here together?”

She nodded. “People go for lunch together all the time. It’s a work thing. Lots of people here are friends.”

Arabella’s attention fixed on the stapler on the edge of her desk. “But what if someone finds out that it’s more than that?”

June wished she could reach across the desk and touch Arabella’s hand or gather her up in her arms and hug a heavy dose of reassurance right into her. “It’s not a secret, remember?”

“I do, but I guess we should maybe talk about how we want to tell people. The when and the if. If we had a plan, it might make things easier.”

“Definitely. Alright. At lunch? Or tonight?”

“Whenever it feels right.”

June gave Arabella a look that she hoped conveyed all of her joy, her hope, the whole wild elation she felt at this—them—being real. She wanted to reach that next step where it was more than just them who knew. She wanted Arabella to meet her parents. She wanted a real dinner with Arabella’s parents too, with Arabella’s sister there as well.

What June really was ready for was the whole world to know about them. Not just because she was simply ready, but because she couldn’t contain all the wonderful sensations inside her anymore. If the road got rocky when people found out they were dating, and she was sure it really wouldn’t, but if it did, she’d be more than ready to get out the patching equipment and start smoothing over those holes and flattening bumps. She was ready to work for it, to fight for it if she had to.

“So, what were you thinking for lunch?” Arabella asked shyly.

“I was thinking whatever you were thinking.”

“Oh good. We’ll spend the entire hour trying to figure out where to go and come back here starved.”

June stood up and snatched out her phone. “Actually, there’s this little place I’ve been dying to try.”

“Great. I’m in.”

“Just like that?”

“I’m not fussy. You know that.” Arabella paused, then with even more shyness that was completely adorable, she added, “As long as I’m having lunch with you, I could eat anything, even chocolate-covered bugs.”

“What about if they weren’t chocolate covered.”

Arabella gulped. “I guess I would try, but I don’t think they’d go down as smooth. Doesn’t chocolate make everything more appetizing?”

“So does a deep fryer.”

“Eww. Okay, I hope it’s not really bugs.”

“It’s not really bugs. It’s actually this food truck that opened up. They have the most amazing sandwiches, or so I’ve heard.”

“Then we should try said amazing sandwiches.”

June knew she should really get back to her office to tackle the crazy amounts of paperwork she had stacking up, but she paused after walking to the door and walked back to Arabella’s desk. Arabella stood, glancing at the door and the front of her office yet again.

“I was just going to ask if you thought there was anything off with Beth at that meeting?”

“Oh, I-I don’t know. I didn’t really notice anything. Why? Did you?”

“I don’t know. I guess she’s just stressed. She just looked...I don’t know. Different? It’s maybe just because I’ve known her for a long time. I was just going to talk to her and make sure she knew that it isn’t her fault if this thing crashes and burns.” Arabella looked panicked. “I mean, it’s never going to crash and burn. Sorry. It’s an amazing idea and I know people are going to love it. Beyond love it. I could just see that Beth might be taking a lot of this on herself and it’s normal to have doubts about anything that’s brand new that we’ve never done before.”

“You notice everything,” Arabella whispered. Her eyes locked with June’s. “That’s one of the things I love about you.” She seemed to realize she’d used that word only after she’d said it. It was casual, something anyone would say, but it wasn’t that way when Arabella said it.

June softened. She glanced behind her this time, then she grasped Arabella's hand tightly, just for a second before she let it go. "Thank you. There are many, *many* things I love about you too. At lunch, I hope I can tell you a few."

Arabella's face lit up. "I can't wait."

June left Arabella's office feeling like she was floating. She had so much work that she bypassed Beth's office and decided to work on an email where she could properly write out everything she wanted to say. She'd have a few days to complete it, then she'd send it and book a meeting with Beth privately right after. They'd talk it out and everything would be fine. The new shoe line was going to be amazing.

Even more amazing was that they'd both just used that word. That crazy four-letter word that was so hard to say. While it wasn't *I love you*, it was always a good idea to encourage your partner and starting with the things you appreciated and loved about them was a great place to begin using that word.

She'd said it to precious few people in her life who weren't related to her. Yes, she used it all the time, like everyone else did, but just thinking about using it with Arabella, when the time was right, made her feel like she was floating even higher, so high that the spectacular shoes she had on, that so many people had worked so hard on to make a reality, her favorite pair ever, felt like they were miles and miles above the ground.

Chapter 20

Arabella

Beth's face was ashen when she stumbled into Arabella's office. Not walked. Stumbled. She didn't knock and she hesitated, the door hanging open. Her skin was white, not chalky, but waxy. Arabella jumped out of her chair as soon as she looked up and saw Beth.

"Oh, my God, are you okay?"

Beth moved her hand to signify something, what exactly, Arabella wasn't sure. She tried to make eye contact, but Beth's eyes strayed away, darting around the office. "I-I-I need to..."

"I think you should sit," Arabella said when Beth trailed off. She wasn't being impatient when she pointed at the chair in front of her desk. She actually thought that Beth might fall over. She looked truly and utterly terrible and it was alarming.

Hadn't June just asked her a few days ago if she thought something was off with Beth? If the stress was getting to her? Yes, yes, she had. Arabella knew June had booked a time to speak with Beth soon. She'd been so busy lately, but she was writing her an email. Yes, she certainly remembered June telling her that she was writing something, and she was going to meet with Beth in person after she'd had time to digest what she'd written and make sure everything was okay.

Beth extended a hand that looked like a claw. She grasped for the arm of the chair and pulled herself into it, not so much sitting down as collapsing. Arabella watched her, her skin so milky white that the vein throbbing in her forehead was nearly visible. The pulse pounded at her neck, leaping in time to the amount of times that Beth swallowed.

Arabella's first instinct was that Beth had just found out she was sick, and it was something terrible and terminal and she'd come in because she needed someone to talk to. She didn't look well at all. Arabella clenched her teeth against the outpouring of questions she wanted to ask. She told herself to be patient and wait for Beth to talk to her. She didn't want to stand over her, so she forced herself to sit back down in her chair. She nearly missed it and gave an anxious little laugh when it skittered out behind her, and she caught it at the last second before she fell on the floor.

Beth stared at Arabella. Arabella tried to maintain eye contact, but it was getting unnerving. Beth hadn't blinked once, she swore it. She stared, silently willing Beth's eyelashes to flutter. She even blinked a few times herself, dramatically, hoping that Beth would follow suit, but she didn't.

"I-I did..."

Arabella leaned forward. She tried to smile softly, calmingly, encouragingly, but that sentence started with *I did*, not *I am*. Not, "I'm sick." Not, "I just came from the doctor." Not, "The doctor just called me." What had Beth done that was so terrible that she looked like she didn't have a drop of blood left in her face?

Beth's eyes flooded with tears, and then she did blink, so furiously and so many times that Arabella grabbed the edge of her desk. She felt like something was coming at her. It was like sitting in the driver's seat of your car, knowing you're about to be in a wreck, but being virtually powerless to stop it from happening. It was a terrible feeling. She hated the way her heart slammed over and over again, drumming out a sick rhythm that made her whole body feel numb and shaky.

Whatever Beth had done, she was here to tell her, not June, not anyone else. What did that mean?

Beth swallowed thickly and brushed at her tears. "I—Arabella, God, I'm so sorry. I did something and I don't know how to undo it."

Arabella didn't think she was an overly good problem solver, but Beth had come to her, and she would do what she could to help, even if she felt a

disgusting hollowness in the pit of her stomach. It felt like it was growing with every second that Beth didn't say anything. The suspense was a gross thing, a shadowy monster waiting to devour them both.

"Why don't you just try to tell me what it is, and I can help," Arabella said. She gave Beth a watered-down smile that was supposed to be much stronger than it was.

Beth looked away quickly, as if shed been chased by Arabella's gaze, which wasn't a good sign at all. "I'm sorry. I never meant it to get so far. I thought we could still beat them to market. I thought the designs would be useless for them then. They weren't far enough along in the planning stages to actually execute something like that, but they have. They are. They did."

"What are you saying?" Arabella's heartrate was painful now.

"I sold your designs," Beth gasped out.

"Sold my what?" Arabella was so confused that it was like Beth's words hadn't even reached her. She felt like she was in another room or standing outside the glass of her office and it was noise-canceling glass and whatever Beth said never reached her.

"Your designs," Beth whispered. "I sold them. To another company. I only did it because I thought I had time to undo it. I needed money for Amelia. Shannon found this incredible private school, but it's expensive and none of us have that kind of money. It would be a great opportunity for Amelia. I want her to succeed and be happy more than anything. Public schools just have too many kids and not enough teachers. Even if people care, there just isn't enough of that care to go around."

The sky was crushing her. Or maybe that was the office ceiling. Arabella flicked her eyes up anxiously, actually afraid the tiles would be pressing down on top of her head, but nope, it was still up there where it always was.

She was suffocating. The air in the office was in short supply. She realized she was holding her breath. The oxygen in the place was just fine. The crushing sensation she felt wasn't the ceiling or the sky. The building

wasn't falling down around her. It was dread. Terrible, aching dread that curled up inside of her like a feral animal digging its claws into her belly.

"How did you get them?"

"That meeting. Where you had to leave early. You left the folder in the middle of the table with the designs in it. I had all your notes and research from the shared marketing folder."

"But everyone signs an NDA when they start here."

She realized how dumb that was. It was like saying that no one was ever allowed to cheat on a test because there were consequences for doing so. People still took that chance and rolled the dice. If they didn't get caught, their deception would pay off. If they did, maybe they hoped they'd still get out of it. But what about Beth? Wouldn't she have known that she'd get caught? It would have been so obvious if another company came out with all of their designs.

But who would have suspected her?

No one.

So why was she in Arabella's office, confessing what she'd done?

"I did," Beth whispered.

"June's going to find out. I don't know how to fix this."

"She already knows. The ad for the new shoe line came out this morning and she saw it right away. She called me to ask me what the heck was going on. I told her I didn't know. She said that she was going to come talk to you as soon as her morning meetings were over. She's away from the office this morning, which is why I'm here, talking to you now, before she gets here."

Arabella's throat closed up again and she lifted a hand and thumped herself there like she was choking. "What?" she squeaked. "She knows?"

Suddenly, it made sense. It made sense why Beth was there, confessing what she'd done. It made sense that June knew, but that she didn't know what Beth did. Those were Arabella's designs. Designs no one else had access to because she normally kept them locked in her filing cabinet with all the other paperwork. It was an old habit, from working at places where sensitive information was just about always a thing. June wouldn't remember that Arabella had left her folder the day her dad had been taken to the hospital.

June thought Arabella had sold the designs. That she'd sold them to another company for more money. Ultimately, June thought she'd betrayed her. Not just in the sense of the whole working together, business side, but that she'd betrayed *her*. Betrayed her as a person. Betrayed her hopes and her trust. Betrayed her personally. No one knew they were dating. Beth didn't know. She couldn't realize what a big blow she'd just delivered.

It really sucked to feel like she was drowning. She couldn't focus on Beth, even though it wasn't like she was trying to not look at her. She wanted to look at her. She wanted to search her face for some clues, for something else, for a way out of this.

"I'm sorry," Beth said again. The shitty part was that her voice was breaking, and her eyes were tearing up. She honestly sounded truly sorry. "I thought we could get there ahead of them. Or put something better out there."

"But you couldn't have got much for them."

"I didn't." Beth laughed harshly. "That's the worst part. I got a little bit, but not much. I have lots of friends that I've met over the years who work in other companies, and I had lunch with one of them last week. She mentioned how they've been trying to do a kid's shoe line for ages. Something fun and unique. I told her I might have some designs if they were willing to compensate for them. I don't know why I said it. It just came out and then it was out and done and they liked the designs. They paid me more than enough. They're not even a shoe company. They do clothing for kids. It's all for kids, but I still thought we'd be so much further ahead, we'd blow them out of the water."

“By putting out the same designs and sending their whole production into a funk?”

“They don’t recycle anything, so it wouldn’t have been the same.”

“But similar enough that June could have gotten sued.”

“I-I thought I could change them enough that maybe that wouldn’t happen. We would have put ours out first anyway. In my head, I was going to make it work,” she moaned. “I thought I could work it all out, but I didn’t have time.”

Beth wasn’t a dumb lady. Arabella knew that. She was very smart and very capable. If she said she thought she could have worked it out, then she really did think so. She wasn’t being malicious. She wasn’t trying to hurt anyone. She knew that she could, but she had hoped she wouldn’t.

Arabella didn’t understand why Beth had taken the risk, but she did understand one thing. The love that one person could have for their family. That love made people willing to do anything, even if it was crazy or bad or underhanded.

“So, June thinks I did it?” Arabella asked again, just to confirm. She desperately wanted the answer to be no and was actually disappointed all over again when she watched Beth nod.

“She does.”

Arabella desperately wished she could erase the last few minutes and rewind the words Beth had just said. Even if that wouldn’t do any good, she wished she could just go back to half an hour ago when she was planning what creative idea she could surprise June with for date night.

Oh no. God, that’s supposed to be tonight.

What could June possibly be thinking right now? Was she wounded? Smarting? Did she believe the worst? Was she curious, tackling the problem like one would go at an annoying math equation they couldn’t work out?

Would she add it up and figure out it didn't make sense? Or would she think Summer's worst fears had been realized, and Arabella had only been there to betray her all along? Personally too.

She had to close her eyes and force herself to drag in breath after breath. She wasn't going to give in to the stupid sting behind her eyes either. She wasn't going to cower. She wasn't going down like this. She could still fix things. Couldn't she?

"I understand that you need to tell her," Beth said in such a small voice that Arabella could barely hear her through the deep breaths that were doing shit to calm her down. "I know that. That's why I came to you first. I needed you to know that June is coming. I needed you to be prepared instead of being blindsided."

"What?" Arabella raised her head and looked straight at Beth.

"I know you have to tell her the truth. I should have done it. I was just so shocked that I—when she called, I couldn't tell her. I panicked, then I sat and thought about it for a good long while, and I knew I had to come in here."

"I'm not going to tell her," Arabella said.

Beth swayed in her chair and Arabella nearly leaped out of hers, ready to catch Beth if she fell face first into the desk. If she was willing to gamble, she'd place her bets on the possibility of a pass out. Beth grasped the chair's arms and kept herself seated. She blinked, and though she still looked dazed, some of the color appeared on her cheeks again. Arabella was actually relieved, even though seeing Beth's color, her relief, her shock, felt like knives in her own stomach.

"Why? Why wouldn't you tell her? You're going to get fired." Beth spelled that out like she thought Arabella hadn't realized it.

She couldn't think about that now. She couldn't even start to go there. She couldn't start worrying again about how she'd find another job, how she'd afford the mortgage on their house, how she'd afford her parents'

health insurance. She could go there later. She'd have *lots* of time to think about that when she didn't have a job.

Or a girlfriend.

That was too painful to process.

She wasn't a martyr. Honestly, she wasn't. It was just that she'd met Shannon. She remembered how worried and tired she looked. Sky was adorable and her older sister was probably just as amazing.

Arabella wanted to give Shannon's girls an opportunity to go to the right school. To succeed. With the right kind of teachers and encouragement and a setting that was just right for them, who knew what they could be?

She didn't want another girl to have the same high school experience she'd had. Where she hated every single day of it. Faked her way through it. Bullied people because that's what pretty, popular girls did. She hated that she'd stayed at the top of that hierarchy, no matter what. She wanted to spare someone else from having the same terrible experience. From becoming something they didn't want to be. Maybe if Shannon's girls had good teachers and good friends and a great school, those things wouldn't happen.

Also? She knew she owed June one. A big one. And this one wasn't for June. It was for Beth. But maybe, in some way, Arabella figured that she might deserve this. Not deserve it, but that karma or whatever had come back around to her, and this was her chance to try to level the score.

She'd been a terrible person for years. Before June there had been other girls that she'd bullied. She was just incredibly lucky that no one had ever done something terrible over what she'd said or done, but the fact that she'd hurt people over and over, said unthinkable things—god, she'd even drawn blood when she'd thrown that textbook back at June that day—maybe she should do some good when she had the opportunity.

Beth still looked scared. So very scared. She looked truly terrified and horrified. She was afraid for her job. Afraid of where that would leave her.

She was probably afraid June would take legal action too. Arabella didn't think June would ever do that, but she was about to find out. Maybe she'd be so wounded about what she thought Arabella had done that she'd want to make her suffer legally too just to prove she was finally able to stand up for herself.

Arabella couldn't imagine what Summer was going to do when she found out. If a rock went through her car window or through the front window of the house, she wouldn't be surprised. That was old school revenge, and Summer was much more creative, which made it a truly terrifying thing to consider.

"Arabella? I said you're going to get fired," Beth whispered in a strained voice. The kind of voice that came from intense emotion. It sounded like she'd been yelling the entire day and now she had no voice left.

"I know that." Arabella leaned back against the chair, letting the headrest bracket her aching skull. She felt horrible. Sad. Defeated. Bereft. Barren. She wasn't just going to lose her job. She was going to have her girlfriend, her hope, her future ripped away from her. She was going to do the same thing to June, and she was going to have to live that down. "I-I know that. But I keep thinking about Amelia. And Sky. You can't lose your job, Beth."

"Shannon didn't know where the money came from. I told her it was from a bonus at work."

"I don't want to hurt the kids," Arabella insisted.

"But they're not even your kids. You barely know them." Beth was having trouble grasping what it was Arabella wanted to do. Or why she'd want to do it. She didn't know anything about her history with June. Or the new history she was trying to make.

"I know that. But I do understand. I know why you did it. I know you don't know why I'm going to take the blame for it, but you don't need to. You can trust that I'm not going to change my mind and tell June you did it. Your job is safe. Amelia can go to that school now, I assume?"

“Y-yes. I got enough to pay for the first three months. I’m going to get a second job and then Shannon will be back at work by then and they’ll have enough to cover it.”

“That’s good. I’m glad.”

“But, but why?”

Arabella’s eyes were brimming with tears she didn’t know if she could blink away. She was about to come apart, rip right down the middle and expose all of her aches and hurts. She really didn’t want that to happen until *after* she’d talked to June, packed up her office, and done the whole “I betrayed everyone” walk of shame.

It sucked that it was probably still a few hours in coming. At least she could pack everything and have her office cleaned out by the time June got back to talk to her. That would make everything easier.

To keep the tears at bay, Arabella stood. She walked over to Beth, grasped her hand, and helped her out of the chair. She hugged her hard and that was all it took for Beth to break down in sobs. Arabella struggled to hold back her tears and lost.

Oh well. Maybe it was best to get them out of the way before June showed up. Tears weren’t going to change June’s mind, erase the pain coming for her, or help in any way. They might make her believe Arabella was sorry, but if she apologized sincerely, June would likely believe her with or without tears. She was just that way. So nice. So kind. So ready to look for even an ounce of good in someone, even if she should believe that they were all bad. So ready to give anyone a chance.

She gave me a chance and now I have to find the right words to break up with her. Or figure out how to get dumped gracefully.

Chapter 21

June

What would Summer say when she found out she'd been right all along? Strangely enough, it was only a passing thought for June. She didn't want to dwell on that. Right about everything. Right that Arabella wasn't who she said she was. Right that she'd do something totally underhanded to affect the company. Right that she shouldn't have gotten too close.

She'd thought about that all through her meetings, barely paying attention while she drowned in self-pity. Halfway through the last one, she made a decision. She wasn't going to feel that way. She didn't know the whole story. She did know bits and pieces and parts that no one else knew. Arabella's dad. The hospital bills Arabella didn't want to talk about. The health insurance she was trying to get for her parents, but probably didn't come cheap.

It made sense why Arabella would have done something desperate, especially if she'd retooled her designs and thought she could cover her tracks without getting found out. Just because June knew she had to deal with what Arabella had done, didn't mean that she had to take it personally.

She already knew that it wasn't. She'd thought it out, reasoned with herself, gotten over her initial shock and all the hurt and anger that filtered down from that moment she'd seen the ad with the shoes that were supposed to be hers being put out by another company. A company who didn't even recycle a damn thing, for shit's sake.

June pulled into her parking spot at the office and sat in the car for a few minutes. The AC was pumping, so the heat of the outside didn't reach her. She felt bad about wasting energy, just sitting there, but she needed the few

extra minutes to grasp the steering wheel and try to figure out what she was going to say.

No, she knew what she was going to say. She'd spent the better part of her last meeting being unproductive because she was thinking about it, then her mind had gone over and over it while she drove to the office.

She just hoped she could turn her emotions down and remember Arabella was an employee right now and that was it. She didn't want to think about the more personal conversation that was coming. That made her breath come short and her blood feel like it was half ice and half boiled.

Get through this first. Be professional.

June repeated that to herself six hundred times while she walked through the lobby and went up in the elevator. She gave Shelly a nod at reception and walked straight to Arabella's office. She didn't want to get distracted by anyone or cornered somewhere else. She didn't want to draw anything out, or run into Beth, who already knew. She did wrap her arms around herself briefly as she walked, and when she caught herself doing it, she told herself it was because the AC was frigid in the place and not because she was trying to literally hold herself together.

She walked straight up to Arabella's office and paused at the door. It was open, the little stopper at the bottom in place. Arabella was sitting behind her desk, just sitting. Waiting. June's heart plummeted when she saw that the whole thing was spotless. Everything had been tidied and cleaned. There were a few boxes packed up in the corner. None of Arabella's personal things were on her desk. Her plants, the cacti and the aloe that June liked, were all packed away.

What did you expect? She knows what's coming. That's really why you called Beth.

June wanted to think she hadn't taken the coward's way out, but she knew she kind of had. She knew Beth would go to Arabella and tell her that she knew and that she was going to have to have a conversation as soon as

she got back. She could have called herself. She could have talked to Arabella, but she didn't have the lady balls.

Well, she was going to have to have them now.

Arabella stood up. She didn't let June get more than a few feet into the office when she dipped her head. "I know you're mad at me. I'm...I just wanted to say that I'm incredibly sorry. I've packed up my office. Everything that I could file, I tried to file neatly so that the next person could make sense of it. I made sure all the files that anyone might need are in the shared folders. I don't expect a reference. I would never ask for that. I ___"

"I'm going to give you severance," June blurted, cutting Arabella off. It hurt to see the pain on Arabella's face. That pain was real, and June was very sensitive to what other people were feeling. It cut through any remaining anger she might have had and just made her feel utterly exhausted.

Arabella blinked at her. "Why would you do that?"

There was only one answer and June never had a problem telling the truth the way other people did. She always tried to be tactful, but she never skirted away from it. "Because I have to. Because I know you need it. I know you have people depending on you. I know that's why you did this. I also know you didn't mean to do it to me personally. I get that things are rough and that when they get that way, people get desperate. I know you know that since you got found out, that means you don't have a job anymore, but I know you're sorry, and not just that you got caught. I know you're probably expecting the worst from me right now, but I didn't come in here to do that to you. I think you'll beat yourself up enough about all of this."

"I never meant for this to happen," Arabella whispered. She couldn't look at June. She was looking at the floor, and that made everything worse. June wished she had the courage to look her in the eye like she'd done. It stuck her like a thorn, pricking at her already slashed up pride. "What about—what are we going to do?"

June cleared her throat. “I think that’s a conversation we should have later. Privately.”

She glanced behind her, but there wasn’t anyone out gawking in the hallway. Even if the entire office knew what had happened, they wouldn’t have done that. She knew they wouldn’t have. They would have been sad, would have wondered why anyone would do that, and then hoped things would get better for Arabella whatever her reasons were. There wasn’t a single person there who would have lashed out or enjoyed someone being fired. In other offices, maybe, but not in hers.

“You’re right. I-I already have everything packed. I can leave right away. If someone has to search my things or escort me out, I understand.”

“No. Of course not.”

Arabella still couldn’t look up. “How can you still trust me?”

June’s throat felt raw. She’d been scraping down extra hard swallows for hours and she really felt it. “Because I believe in giving people the benefit of the doubt.”

Loud footsteps thundered down the hall and June turned, confused. Maybe someone had heard and was coming for the show after all. An immediate stab of disappointment hit her, but when she saw that it was Beth, she relaxed.

For all of a few seconds before she realized Beth was running. Not just running but flying towards the office. In heels. And a skirt. Her face wasn’t just flushed, it was red. She looked like she’d just run a hard mile uphill in ninety-degree heat.

“Wait!” Beth careened to a halt. “Wait!” She huffed as she pushed through the door. “You can’t fire her. It wasn’t her! It was me. I did it. It was all me. I told Arabella it was me and she said she wouldn’t tell you. I have no idea why, but she was going to take the fall for me, and I can’t let her do that. I just can’t. I sat there and sat there and tried to make myself accept it and move on, but I can’t. I can’t lose this job. I don’t *want* to lose

this job. I love this place more than anything, but I should have thought about that before I did what I did.”

June crossed her arms, because it was all she could do to stay upright after being just about literally bowled right freaking over by that little newsflash.

It was Beth. Beth had sold Arabella’s designs. Arabella was going to lose her job, take all the blame, be the one humiliated, and risk their relationship as well. For Beth. A woman she hardly knew. Why?

Not that June thought Arabella was selfish or only wanted to look out for herself. She’d thought the opposite. That desperation and love for her family had driven her to do something very stupid and sad. Why hadn’t Arabella just told her the truth? Didn’t she trust her?

June kept her eyes locked on Beth. She was the picture of misery. Her flushed face had become very pale, and her eyes were wet with tears which she furiously didn’t allow to spill. Her jaw and hands were both clenched tight.

“I know it doesn’t excuse anything,” Beth said very, very quietly, the strain of keeping her shattered emotions from flying all over the room showing. “But I did it for Amelia. The reason Shannon went to that meeting with her teacher was because Amelia said that someone called her a retard.”

June ground her teeth hard. She hated that word. No one should use that word. Arabella gasped. She put her hand over her mouth and watched Beth, pain and empathy evident on her face. It absolutely astounded June how much Arabella felt for Beth and for Amelia, who she’d never met.

“Kids can be so mean,” Arabella said, heartbroken.

She looked right at June. June tried to understand what Arabella was feeling. What she’d been thinking. Had she wanted to save Amelia from the same thing she herself had done when she found out she was being bullied, or did she want to save Amelia from becoming herself?

“The thing is, Shannon finally got Amelia to admit it wasn’t a kid. It was a teacher.”

“Why?” Arabella croaked. She clearly hadn’t known.

Beth shook her head. “I don’t know. I guess they were frustrated with Amelia. Shannon thinks that Amelia might be on the spectrum. I’m ashamed to say that I don’t know much about Asperger’s or Autism. Shannon just told me after that meeting and Amelia hasn’t been in for any tests, but the meeting was actually between both kindergarten teachers and the school’s principal and it was suggested by the principal that Amelia might need testing. Shannon was still disgusted with the teachers. No adult should ever call a little girl a retard, or say they’re slow, or tell them they can’t be who they want to be or make them feel like they’re not equal to the other kids there.” Beth teared up and she sniffed, but she powered through. “Shannon found this school that would be great for Amelia. The thing is, it’s private. When she goes back to work, they would be able to afford it if they pinched and scrimped in other areas, but they couldn’t afford it right now. I had Arabella’s designs from that day she left the meeting. They were there on the table. I thought I could beat the other company to the punch, or that we could come up with something different enough that we’d be fine moving forward. They were such early drawings, but that’s still terrible. I know it. I can’t tell you how sorry I am. Really.”

June’s racing thoughts pinged off the inside of her skull.

“I can see that you packed your office,” Beth said softly, addressing Arabella. “I’ll go do the same with mine. I’m sorry I even considered letting you lose your job for me.”

“No one is losing their jobs.”

Beth and Arabella’s heads whipped around in unison.

“This is a mess and we’re going to figure it out, but no one is getting fired. I really wish you would have come to me. Both of you.”

Beth's mouth dropped open. "It's not her fault. Don't make Arabella pay for what I did."

"I wish you would have trusted me enough to talk to me," June said. She knew she sounded hurt and maybe it wasn't entirely fair, but she was and that was how it was going to be until she could sort out her thoughts in privacy for a few hours. Maybe even a few days.

"But she's—no!" Beth declared. "She tried to do something amazingly nice for me. If I lost this job, we wouldn't be able to send Amelia to that school. Arabella didn't even know the half of it, but she was willing to help me. That's very...it's so noble. I-I can't thank you. That's not even the right word. Either of you. But please, June, don't be annoyed or mad at her. None of this was her fault."

Maybe June should follow her own advice and employ some of her own truth. She'd been hiding for long enough, and Beth wouldn't understand. She knew what she was going to say wouldn't leave Arabella's office anyway.

"She's my girlfriend," June whispered. "We're dating. That's why I'm just...why I'm off."

"What?" Beth, to her credit, was able to actually hide most of her surprise.

Arabella said nothing. June realized she shouldn't have said it like that, just put it out there without even asking her if that was okay. Arabella didn't want it to be a secret. June knew she was waiting for her to make the first move, especially at work, but she should have done it with far more tact, less sharpness, and more consideration.

"Oh. I see."

"Beth, if you need money for something like that, I want you to know that you could come to me. We could work something out. An advance or something like that. This isn't the first time the idea has come up, either.

I'm actually considering making similar offers for some of the other employees here."

"You are?" Arabella asked softly.

June knew Arabella must be thinking about her dad and his mounting medical bills. She saw a brief flash of her pain cross her face before Arabella neatly tucked it away beneath the surface again.

"Thank you." Beth headed for the door. "I'm going to be in my office. I need a few hours to think about all of this. How to go forward from here, but if you need me..."

"No, that's fine. I could use a few hours myself," June told her.

Beth left much differently than she'd come in. Her color was normal, she walked at a rate that wouldn't put her at danger of breaking an ankle or her neck as she snapped a heel off. She looked dazed, but there was no doubting her relief.

"I guess we should probably talk later," Arabella ventured softly. She hadn't moved at all. Her lovely blue eyes flicked up off the floor and landed on June's face with enough intensity to nearly rock June back.

"That's probably a good idea."

"Are we...are we breaking up? Are you that mad at me?"

"No." June hadn't even considered that. Well, not once she'd calmed down. Even before she got to the office, she hadn't been thinking about how to dump Arabella. She wanted to try to understand, hear her out, and then make a decision. She didn't want to be that person who couldn't get over themselves and made someone choose between their family and her. In a very roundabout way, that would have been what she was doing.

"Okay. We'll talk after work, then?"

"Yes."

“Not date night, though. You could come over if you wanted.”

June wanted to be on neutral territory when they talked but having any kind of personal conversation in public just didn't feel right. She nodded.

“Did you tell Summer?”

“No, I didn't.”

“Did you want to?”

“Kind of.”

Arabella sunk down in her chair and let out a massive sigh. She swiped a few tendrils of hair off her forehead and June realized it was damp. Very damp. Those strands were wet. “I'm glad you decided to hold back until you heard me out.”

“How do you know I wasn't just too busy, or she didn't answer her phone?”

That earned her a shaky smile. “Because I know you. So, thank you. I'll see you tonight. Whatever time works.” Arabella twisted in her chair to face the boxes she was going to have to unpack, then abruptly twisted back. “I spent a lot of years being really shitty and basically cowardly. I want to be better, but I'm not even halfway there.”

“I think you're more there than you think.” June pointed to the boxes. “You better unpack your plants. It's nice that you're a plant person. Most people don't have them in their offices. I'd really miss seeing them when I came in here.”

She left when Arabella nodded. She knew what June was trying to say. That really, she would have missed Arabella a heck of a lot more.

Chapter 22

Arabella

It was hard for Arabella to go home, prepare a meal and uncork a bottle of wine like she normally did. She knew it wasn't a regular dinner, and even though June had said she didn't want to break up, Arabella didn't feel right about putting so much as a jar candle on the table. She didn't go overboard making anything fancy either. Just a salad, half a ham she stuck in the oven to warm up, and mashed potatoes.

June said she'd be there at seven, and like all the other times she said she'd be anywhere, she was right on time. Arabella wondered if June had ever been late for anything in her life. It was just one of the many things Arabella appreciated about her. One of the many.

It was awkward at the door. She didn't know what to say, so she said nothing. June gave her a tight smile and since dinner was ready, the mouth-watering smell of the salty ham overflowing from the kitchen, she followed Arabella in.

They sat down across from each other at the large round table. Arabella had everything set already. The ham was out, sizzling in the square casserole dish. She'd whipped the potatoes with a hand beater, an old trick of her mom's that guaranteed fluffy, creamy mash every single time. The lettuce in the salad was borderline bad with brown, wilting edges, but Arabella had picked out the worst of it and used the rest.

Honestly, she barely paid attention as she filled her plate. She was much too fixated on June. She waited. She didn't want to say the wrong thing or pick up the conversation where they'd left off in the office. She'd hoped June had thought past that already. She knew she had, but she didn't want to just blurt out something if June was on a completely different wavelength.

It was hard being silent and even harder to be patient. Arabella cut the slice of ham on her plate and waited. She dipped a piece in mustard and nibbled at it, hardly tasting anything except the sharp tang of the spicy grainy seeds and the salt from the meat.

When June set down her fork gently, Arabella nearly leaped out of her chair.

Tears pricked at the back of Arabella's eyes, but she kept her eyes wide open and didn't blink, hoping the dryness of her eyes would clear them away all on their own. The pain from earlier was back, radiating from her chest up into her throat and down into her stomach. She felt heavy, and the last thing she wanted to do was eat anything, so she set her fork down too.

Their eyes locked, and June tilted her head a little, studying Arabella. "I don't know if you know this, but there isn't some force out there in the universe that wants to punish you. I think you believe you have all this stuff to atone for and the things happening now are a direct result of things you've done in the past."

"Some people might argue that's the case," Arabella choked out. She didn't expect June to lead with something so very perceptive, but why not? This was June, and her emotional intelligence, let alone her regular intelligence, was off the charts.

"I don't think it is. I know a lot of things are interconnected, and actions have ripples and consequences, but as for some universal, karmic, cosmic punishment? I'm not down with that. I'm not a big believer in you having to beat yourself up about things that happened a long time ago."

"That's not why I was going to not tell you about Beth."

"Then why?"

"I... Because I didn't want Beth to lose her job. Amelia should have the opportunity to go to a good school. A school that's just right for her."

"You were worried she was getting bullied?"

“Honestly, I’m not sure what I thought. I was worried, yes, that she would hate her entire school experience. That she wouldn’t fit in, and she’d always know that. That she’d get picked on and that she’d be unhappy. Or that she’d be so unhappy the only way to bring herself any pleasure would be to turn the tables and pick on other kids. I don’t know. That doesn’t even make sense. I just kept seeing Shannon’s face. She looked so tired. That kind of tired that people get when their loved ones aren’t doing well. I know exactly what that kind of tired feels like. It goes straight down into your bones, and it becomes you. I only spent an hour or so with Sky, but she’s the sweetest. I imagine her sister isn’t much different. I didn’t know about the stuff with the teacher. I just, I guess I wanted to spare someone else because I couldn’t go back and undo the things I did and spare those kids. I wanted Amelia to have a good school experience, so she didn’t have to go somewhere every single day hating and dreading it.”

“Is that what it was like for you? You hated it? Dreaded it?”

Arabella bit her lip and finally nodded. “I guess I did. Being fake all the time is a pretty hard thing to maintain.”

“I think some people don’t have a very hard time of it. I think some people actually like it.”

“That was never me.”

June reached for the bowl of salad and put a few more slices of tomato and cucumber onto her plate. “Do you think you need to punish yourself?”

How was Arabella supposed to answer that? She wasn’t even sure how to honestly answer it for herself. “I don’t know. It wasn’t really about that.”

“So, you were just going to give up your job, your health and dental benefits, and your salary to take the fall for someone else because you knew they needed their job every bit as much as you did?”

From anyone else that would sound totally condescending, but not from June. She asked with a genuine curiosity that invited deeper introspection and meaningful conversation. She wasn’t sneering or pointing fingers or

laughing about how silly that sounded. She wasn't sitting there saying she didn't believe Arabella had it in her to do something good like that just because she cared. Anyone else probably would, but not June. Even if they weren't dating. Even if they didn't work together. Even if they weren't some level of friends, June would still believe her if she thought she was being sincere.

"Yes. I kept thinking about the kids. How can the world be a better place if the next generation has to keep doing what we did, and our parents did, and our grandparents did? How can anyone be better? The world seriously needs a lot of better right now. Like your company. It does a lot of good. If Beth had just stolen my designs and sold them because she wanted some fast cash and put the blame on me because she was an asshole, you better believe I would have stood up for myself."

"So it wasn't that you were scared to talk to me? That you didn't trust me to work things out with you and be fair to Beth?"

Arabella held her breath until her lungs ached, then she slowly released it. June's eyes were so pretty and dark that she just basked in them, losing herself in their softness for as long as she could.

"If there's anyone I trust, it would be you," she said softly.

"Beth stuck you in a hard spot. I'm not mad. It isn't fair for me to tell you that you did something wrong."

"You're not mad at me anymore?"

June's face was soft and a little sad. "No. I was disappointed in your office, but I needed time to think. I shouldn't have been. That wasn't right. I know how new we are and that means that we don't have that deeper level of intrinsic trust, but I hope we can get there."

Arabella found she was fighting back tears again. She reached across the table, past her plate, past June's plate, and grasped her hand. June's fingers clasped back. It felt so astoundingly freeing to be able to do this. To still be able to reach for June's hand and have her squeeze back. To have her here.

To have that piece of her soul and offer hers in response. Arabella had thought that, along with losing her job, she was going to lose June.

That had stung far worse than any of her worries about how she was going to come up with money for the thousand things she needed it for, how she was going to provide and make ends meet. She knew she could do it, even if it meant working at three terrible jobs until she found something that was the right fit. But losing June? There wasn't anyone like her. In so many ways. June was one of a kind.

"I'm sorry I outed us like that." June glanced down at her plate. "Thank you for making this, but I'm not really hungry."

"Would you rather do something else? I can put it in the fridge. I'm not really hungry either."

"I would." June stood, still holding Arabella's hand, and gently tugged her out of her chair. She took a few steps that were as nimble and graceful as a dance being performed and pulled Arabella into a hug.

It was the most wonderful thing in the world. Arabella leaned against June, allowing all the heaviness she felt to flow away. She breathed at the nape of June's neck when she bent her head and set her chin on June's shoulder. She loved the heady tingle that accompanied the action.

"I should have asked you if you were okay with everyone at work knowing about us."

"It's just Beth. She won't tell."

"But still. I'm sorry. The way I said it wasn't very sensitive."

"I've always been okay with anyone knowing about us," Arabella said. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the small things. The way June's thighs pressed up against hers. The silk of her blouse against her fingers. Her deep breaths.

“When I said that we should wait to meet our families and friends, it wasn’t because I was trying to decide if I wanted to be in this. I do. I just thought it would be better to go slow instead of rushing into it. You’ve already met my mom. And Summer’s mom. And, of course, you know Summer. I wasn’t trying to not be involved. The work thing is—I do feel like it makes things more complicated, but I’m okay with people knowing too. I was scared that I would be seen as that boss who was totally unprofessional when I expect a certain level of professionalism from everyone else, but there isn’t a dating policy at work that says that people can’t meet and date each other and fall in love. I know it sometimes makes things messy, but I’m not going to decide that for anyone. It’s not right.”

“I wasn’t mad about any of that. I just thought you needed time. I can appreciate taking things slow and I know the work situation can make things complicated. No one wants to mess things up and then have to work with the person they made a big mess with.”

“That would be awkward.”

“It would be.”

“It’s not going to happen to us. I know that already.”

Arabella’s heart pounded hard, but it was a good hard. “Yeah?” She tilted her head and studied June. June smiled right back at her, which made Arabella’s chest feel soft and warm and ultra squishy. “That’s a good prediction. I like that.”

“I want you to know that I meant what I said. About the universe giving you bad karma. If it turns out that’s a thing, we’ll deal with it *together*. I’m not keeping score. It was never about scores.”

“That’s very generous.”

“It’s very realistic.” June gathered up Arabella’s hair and moved it over her shoulder. She set her hand against Arabella’s chin, brushing her thumb over her leaping pulse point. “I was never a scorekeeper anyway. Actually, I hate sports. You know what I don’t hate? This. Us. Even if it is a little crazy,

even if it is kind of work inappropriate, even if my best friend still has some doubts about you not being a turdbag. She'll come around. I'm super excited for my family to meet you. I'm super excited for everyone to know that we're awesome together and we're only going to get more awesome. I'm really excited because you bring out the best in me and I want to do that for you."

"You already have!"

"Then I want to keep doing it. I want to keep helping you be creative. I want you to keep succeeding. I want to keep learning about who you are and all the things you love. I don't care who you were before. If I did, it would just be to marvel at how far you've walked down a road that wasn't easy. I was walking my own road, but now those roads are going to be going parallel, I hope."

"You don't have to hope. You can *know*. The things in my life didn't change me. I wanted to change myself. Even before my dad and all of that, in college, and after, I tried to be different. Truly me. I guess like everyone else, I seriously needed to figure out who that was and who I wanted it to be."

"I know." June's smile was potent like sunshine. The rays of it were truly lifegiving. "I don't want to scare you or anything, but over the past few weeks, I keep having this thought. About you being such a good fit. No, that sounds horrible. I mean, it feels like you're my one. I should have just said that, but then I panicked and thought that maybe it was way too soon and so I—"

"That's funny," Arabella whispered, leaning into June. "Because I keep having the same thought."

"Do you?"

"I do."

"Does it scare you?"

“It’s terrifying.”

June’s throat worked hard. “Okay, good. Because I feel the same way. About the terror. And the wonder. And the goodness. And the rightness.”

“That sounds like the perfect ad for a new shoe line. Something a little bit edgy, but also awesome.”

June laughed. “This might be the one time I don’t want to talk about shoes.”

“Oh really?” Arabella purposely pushed her eyebrows up as she cast her a dubious glance. “I am shocked.”

June leaned in and kissed Arabella. The same wonderful warmth and the incredible adrenaline surged through her, and she melted against June at the pleasure of it. It was crazy how something so small and simple as a kiss could be so earth-shattering. Every. Single. Time. Arabella wrapped her hands around June’s shoulders and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss.

“I think we should go to the bedroom,” Arabella whispered huskily after pulling away. “To discuss that new shoe line.”

June giggled. She pinched Arabella playfully on the bottom and Arabella squealed with surprise. “That’s what I think about that idea.”

“You could have just said so!”

“You had me at bedroom. If you leave off the shoe part, it would be just right.”

“Okay. We can talk shoes later.”

“Agreed. As much as you want. Later.”

Arabella grinned against June’s lips as she went in for another kiss. “Alright, I agree. There are some things more important than shoes, though I never thought I’d hear the queen of shoes say it.”

“She’s saying it.”

“But later, we’ll discuss it.”

“Later. Much, much later. Seriously later.”

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Epilogue

June

“You know which shoes are my favorites, of all the ones that our company has ever made?”

Arabella grimaced as she sank into one of the office chairs in the meeting room. One of the many that had been dragged into the company’s largest room for the baby shower that was being thrown for Arabella and June. June didn’t miss that look of discomfort that crossed her wife’s face. She gave her a sympathetic look, but Arabella smiled quickly to reassure her that she was okay.

Arabella was as stubborn as June had been when she was pregnant with the twins. She’d refused to stop working until right near the end of the pregnancy. Anyone might think that their relationship was a little strange, but it didn’t matter to them. They knew they wanted a big family and that they would both like to have the experience of being pregnant. It never felt weird for them while they were making that decision, going through in-Vitro, or while they both took maternity leave. June took the full year, while Arabella took six months.

When the twins, who were a crazy handful at the best of times, but a handful of love aside from all their wild shenanigans, were just over a year and a half old, Arabella went through in-Vitro since they didn’t want the kids to be so far apart in age.

“Let me guess?” Beth asked, coming up with a piece of cake on a plate and handing it to June. “It’s whatever pair is going to be gracing those little feet.”

June took the cake and laughed. “That’s exactly right.”

It turned out that even though they waited over a year to put their line of kid's shoes into production after the whole design selling fiasco, it was worth the wait. They were able to come up with even better, more unique designs and better able to put together the best technology they could into making shoes that would fit newborns all the way up to adult sizes. They were a huge hit, and now their children's line of animal and insect-themed shoes were the company's new best seller.

June watched Arabella check her phone, just to be sure that the baby shower, which was being held at the end of the day, wasn't running late. She didn't want to be late to pick up the twins from daycare. Again. She'd already been late quite a few times that month, but thankfully, Annie gave her a break since she knew that being pregnant with a second set of twins, working, and parenting a set of two-year-old toddler boys was tough work.

"We're good for time?" June handed the slice over to Arabella, who looked thrilled at the rich chocolate icing and dark chocolate cake. She'd had the worst chocolate cravings throughout her pregnancy.

"We are." She bit down on a forkful of cake and closed her eyes in rapt delight. "Oh wow. This is good. Seriously. Good. This might be the best thing that anyone has ever handed to me."

Everyone in the huge room, which was jam-packed with just about every employee from the company, laughed in agreement. There were multiple cakes, since there were so many of them, but Beth had known all about Arabella's chocolate weakness and had cut the perfect piece for her first.

Unlike June, Arabella hadn't had a rough pregnancy. June might have gotten pregnant the first time they did the procedure, like Arabella had, but she was so sick throughout the entire time. She never got a break. She wasn't the first woman to barely gain any weight, even when carrying twins, but it had been a rough ride. It was hard going to work every single day when you were so, so sick. She'd had to keep a garbage can under her desk just in case she couldn't make it to the bathroom in time. She hated to think back on how many times she'd had to use it.

She was glad Arabella had only gone through a little nausea during her first trimester. Unlike the first time, they had wild twin boys to look after, and it would have been doubly hard if Arabella couldn't get out of bed most days or scrape herself off the couch like June.

She knew how horrible it had been for Arabella during that time. How much she'd worried about the babies and about her. Not that June didn't worry. She did. God, some days all she did was worry, but she knew they'd get through it.

Everything would be fine.

And very soon they'd go from having two beautiful, extra-boisterous, keep you on your toes constantly little boys to four little boys. Yes. Four. They'd kind of hoped that there would be at least one girl, but they were still thrilled when they went for their ultrasound and found out that both of these babies were boys as well.

Their families might think they were crazy, having four boys under the age of two and a half, and they very well might be, but who didn't have kids and wonder at their sanity sometimes? Both sets of their grandparents absolutely adored the twins.

Arabella's parents were incredibly helpful. They'd sold the old house where they were living after Arabella moved in with June, and they'd bought a tiny condo in a good neighborhood. Arabella made sure their health insurance was paid for, but they hadn't had to use it. Her dad's health had really improved, especially after the twins were born. He liked to joke that his grandsons were like a special batch of medicine, and he was probably right, except it was likely love that was the best medicine of all.

"Oh, you guys!" Arabella exclaimed when a tide of gifts started to flow magically into the room. "We said not to get us anything. We already have a houseful from Luke and Liam."

"That's nonsense," Beth protested as she directed the flow of boxes onto the table. "Boys are hard on their clothes. So hard that I'm sure only our company's shoes survived because they're built super tough and strong."

“Strong enough to last from generation to generation and then some,” Arabella quoted directly from their marketing campaign.

“You bet!” Beth kept waving her arms like she was piloting a plane down a runway, and those boxes kept appearing.

June had to blink back tears when she noticed Arabella was smiling but doing the same. They were loved. They were so loved. Their co-workers weren’t just co-workers. They were friends. They were fellow parents and grandparents, and everyone had cheered them on when they found out they were dating, then when they got married, then when they announced they were pregnant the first time. And the second.

“I can’t wait for the company picnic this year,” Beth said. “Shannon is so excited to talk to you guys about Amelia’s school.”

“It’s coming up,” Arabella agreed. “Just two weeks away.” She stroked her huge baby bump lovingly. “I hope I make it.”

“Those babies will hang on a little longer. They wouldn’t want you to miss the best part of the year.”

Shannon had mentioned to them at the last picnic how well Amelia was doing at her school. It was hard to believe that in the fall, Sky would already be starting kindergarten there herself. June and Arabella thought it was a great idea to send the twins there. Even if it was years down the road, they both knew that they’d go by very, very quickly.

June had to wipe at her eyes before the moisture overflowed and leaked down her face. She couldn’t believe the boys were already nearly two and a half years old. It literally seemed like yesterday that they were in the hospital with them, scared and so incredibly excited to take them home. Both her parents and Arabella’s parents were always saying that whole “blink and you’ll miss it” thing, but they were right.

The next year would be a hard one, with two newborns and two toddlers. It would be busy and filled with a lack of sleep. Only Arabella was taking maternity leave this time, and they were hiring a nanny to help out. The

company was going full steam and June didn't feel like she could take another year off, which made her more than a little bit sad in some ways, but Arabella encouraged her and supported her fully.

They worked together, and that was one of the best parts of their relationship. Arabella knew exactly what was going on with the company at all times, and she'd also agreed that June really couldn't take another year or even six months off. When June suggested a nanny, Arabella had been all for it. They'd interviewed a few people from a few different agencies. Their nanny, who was sixty-two with a ton of her own grandchildren, was the nicest woman in the world. They were very lucky to have found her.

Even though June couldn't take time off, she vowed that all the minutes she spent at home would be minutes she made the absolute most of.

It wasn't long before the cake was finished, and everyone crowded into the meeting room started to root for the mound of presents to be opened. June sat down beside Arabella and took her hand.

They still didn't really do the whole PDA thing at work, but this was technically just after work hours, and this was their baby shower. She brought Arabella's hand to her lips and kissed the back of her palm and the room erupted in cheers.

Arabella went scarlet, and while the cheering and clapping was still going strong, June leaned over and whispered in her ear. "Thank you for making me a one plus one. You're the best wife in the entire world. You made me a mother and you've made us a family. I promise you I'm going to do everything in my power to be worthy of your love."

Arabella leaned to the side as much as her belly would allow her. She wrapped her arms around June's neck and kissed her on the lips. It might have been a closed mouth kiss, but the room still went up in cheers again.

"Worthy?" Arabella whispered back. "Oh, my goodness, you don't have to try. You never had to try. You have always, always been worthy."

I love you so freaking much. I don't know how I can be the best wife if you're the best wife. I'll cede the point that we could be equally best mothers."

Beth approached them with another huge slice of chocolate cake. "Did you leave room for seconds?"

Arabella clasped June's hand tightly. "If it's chocolate, there's always room for seconds." She took the cake. "You can open all those gifts while I sit here and eat, and brew up these babies, can't you?"

"Absolutely, my love." June grinned while she stood up and started for the mound of presents. "I absolutely can."

THE END

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About Alexa Woods

Alexa Woods is a romance author living a quaint life in Massachusetts. After a lifetime of creating stories in her head, Alexa decided to write them down and share them with her readers. Her novels are about strong and fascinating women finding their happily ever afters.

When she's not writing, she is an avid reader of lesbian books or spending time with her family, her troublemaking dog, and her sphinx cat that surely thinks he's a dog, too

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