

A romantic close-up photograph of a man and a woman about to kiss. The man, on the left, has a beard and is wearing a white shirt and a dark blue tie. The woman, on the right, has long blonde hair and is wearing a dark top. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with warm lighting.

# SASHA CLINTON

*Love me like  
you do*

BOOK #3 IN NYC SINGLES SERIES

*Love Me Like You Do*

Sasha Clinton

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First edition

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# CHAPTER 1

Jamie hated cancelling a Tinder hookup. Especially when it happened to be with the hot brunette who'd given him three orgasms last week.

But since all hell was currently breaking loose at the studio, he had no choice.

**Jamie: Have to cancel 2nite. C u next week?**

Without waiting for her reply, he laid his phone face down on his thigh, so he wouldn't be distracted by messages.

"Please tell me this is an April Fool's joke," he demanded, running his hands down his face, almost afraid to look up at Scarlet.

"I wish." Scarlet, the assistant producer of his sitcom, dropped a heavy exhale.

"So Martina's really gonna quit?"

Jamie tried to reign his in panic. Admittedly, it was hard. Martina Lopez played one of the most vital secondary characters in the show—the main couple's daughter. She had fifteen fucking lines in every episode and a ton of screen time. There was no way they could replace her.

"She doesn't have a choice," Scarlet said. "She slipped in the bathroom and injured her spine badly. The doctors say she won't be able to walk again, let alone shoot the rest of the season. It's...horrible—both for her and us."

An actress injuring her spine two weeks into filming the first season of the show...what were the odds of that?

Jamie fired a sigh. A pregnant pause settled in around him, followed by dread, anxiety, and fear.

"Jamie, are you okay?" Scarlet jerked forward, worry painting her face.

"Swell. Thank you for asking." He curled his lip, fighting the heaviness threatening to smother him.

*You're a failure.*

*You're nobody without your famous father.*

*Your luck's over.*

Slapping his arm, he tried to quieten his thoughts. He had to keep it together. He was the damn executive producer of this show. If he lost it, everything would be screwed. And he was *this* close to losing it.

Feeling a monstrous headache prick against his forehead, Jamie leaned back. "What're our options?"

“Picking another actress. Daniel and I tried that already. Didn’t work. Nobody who showed up at the casting this morning even remotely resembled Martina.” Scarlet hesitated. “Daniel thinks rewriting the entire script to remove Martina’s character is the best way forward.”

“*Troubled Domesticity* is scheduled to air nationwide in September. In two months.” Jamie said, more in an attempt to remind himself than Scarlet.

*Troubled Domesticity* was his maiden sitcom and from the beginning, it had been one hitch after another. This was the first time he was doing something independent of his father and Star Studios. Everything hinged on *Troubled Domesticity*’s success—his future as a TV writer, his self-worth, his bank balance—everything.

“This had to happen now, didn’t it?” Exasperation simmered under his even syllables.

Jamie let his fingers fall over his eyelids, blanking out everything from his vision.

Now, in the business of entertainment, things often went wrong, so this wasn’t unusual by any means. Budgets overran, actors threw tantrums, legal suits were slapped, injuries happened...and it all boiled down to one thing.

Scarlett’s fingers grazed the sharp ends of the folder she cradled. “I’ve exhausted every option. There’s no way but for you to re-write the entire script explaining the mysterious disappearance of her character from the second episode on. Just say she died or something.”

“Too late for that. ABC picked up the show based on the pilot featuring Martina. The producers won’t let us change the storyline now.” He angled for a doughnut from the box of Krispy Kremes on the table. Sugar was every writer’s stress medicine. “And we’re already running way over budget. We have no money to pay for re-shooting two episodes, even if we were to change the script.”

Having a show picked up by a cable network was a one in twenty thousand chance. Literally. Not many ideas got past the rigorous winnowing process carried out by studios and network cable executives. There was no way he was blowing his chance because of a missing actress.

“Something’s gotta give, or this show will never get made.” Scarlet chewed on her nails.

“Guess there’s no other way, huh?” Jamie said, wiping donut glaze off his lips.

“Hey, how about sending Lucy on a vacation to Bali? She can be gone for a few episodes.”

“But we’ll have to bring her back sometime.”

Scarlet held his gaze and nodded. “Fine. I’ll leave it to you to decide what you’re going to do. We shoot on Friday, though.”

Burying his head between his hands, Jamie groaned. “And it’s Wednesday already.”

“You can do it.” With an encouraging nod, she slipped out of the writers’ room.

Jamie wordlessly absorbed the million pieces of colored post-its stuck on the storyboard, wishing the answer to his problem was written on one of them. But as he already knew, all that was scribbled on them were story ideas.

Right now, he was feeling sheer respect for his father. No shit. Grant Star must be one tough man if he'd kept Star Studios profitable for twenty years. Hollywood had way more budget bleeders than TV.

Since he didn't have the fortitude to push through her resistance on a near-empty stomach, Jamie decided to finish the re-write for Act Three before the staff writers came in for the day. The commissioning editor had requested some edits on episode four, which the actors were going to be rehearsing next week.

Halfway in, he realized that he was only spacing out, so Jamie stepped out of the writer's room for a break. Maybe he needed to get some fresh air and think about things from a different perspective. Have a few moments of quiet privacy. Ideas often came to him at such—

"Jamie!"

Rosie's high-pitched yell drew out some more of his frustration.

As soon as her electric blue eyes registered his form, she skipped to him, white heels making loud taps on the corridor floor.

Privacy was an impossibility on a set where Rosie existed.

"Jamie, I was looking for you."

He hastily tried to remove himself from where he was, before she could coil her arms around him. But his reflexes were too slow. She latched onto him before he could blink.

In keeping with her character on the show, a rebellious teen also called Rosie, she wore white-heeled boots and a black leather miniskirt that hugged her body so tight, it could have crushed her bones. Her crop top's neck showed off her freckled cleavage while the cake of makeup on her face left her features smothered.

"Aren't you supposed to be rehearsing?" Jamie inquired, trying to get her away.

In some other lifetime, she must've been a leech and unfortunately, she was carrying those memories into this incarnation.

"Nope. Taking a break. Let's walk together." With her hooked onto him, did he have any choice but to go with her?

Now, he wasn't stupid. He knew exactly why Rosie was so 'friendly' with him. Her type was relatively easy to peg—the ultra-ambitious, I'll-sleep-with-anyone-to-get-to-the-top actress.

This sitcom was Rosie's first big role, and she wanted to ensure it wouldn't be her last.

She no doubt knew who his father was, and more specifically, what he could do for an actress's career. Rachel Welch, Tiana Cruise, Adriana Victorelli—Grant Star had turned those obscure faces into A-listers.

"Don't you think I'd be great as Annie in the movie adaptation of *Seventeen Summers*? I look exactly like Rollins describes Annie in the novel—an ethereal beauty with a face that could make angels weep in jealousy. I was born for the role. By the way, isn't Star Studios producing the movie?"

Yup. Right on the money.

"They already signed Lily Adkins for Annie's role." Jamie popped her little bubble.

Rosie didn't flinch. She stuck even closer to his side and squeezed her claws around his arm. "Jamie, you know we're friends, right? And friends help each other. If there's any movie your dad's casting for, you'll tell him about me, won't you?"

He was tempted to inform her that one-sidedly pressuring someone was not friendship.

Instead, Jamie kept his reply sparse. "I don't talk much to him these days."

"But you can talk to him for me, can't you?" She egged, trailing one feather-light touch on his wrist.

"Mmmm."

That was neither a yes nor a no, but it satisfied Rosie. As a producer and writer of the show, his job was to keep everybody happy. Rosie was an important part of the cast. They'd lost one actress already. They didn't need another one walking away.

And Rosie was a pretty good actress, unlikeable as she might be.

"Great. That's what friendship's about." Flashing a wide grin, Rosie let go of his arm.

Since her mission was accomplished, she probably didn't see much sense in hanging around him any longer, so making the first excuse that sprung to her mind, she granted him his precious moments of solitude.

Those moments of solitude were short lived. His ringtone broke the silence.

*Gage calling.* Jamie shuddered and hesitated before giving in.

Gage had once been a child star, who'd acted in his greatest blockbuster, *The Fall*. Jamie had involuntarily taken up the role of his big brother because he'd felt bad for the kid. Six years later, he was still playing big brother. But now Gage was not a sweet, nice boy. He was a wild party animal who frequently had brushes with the law for assault, drugs, and a DUI or three.

"Hello." Jamie dreaded what was coming.

"Brah, get to 13<sup>th</sup> precinct ASAP. The cops hauled me in for battery. The fuckers are tryna lock me up. Get your hands off me, fucker. I don't care if you have a badge!"

With the wall being so close, Jamie couldn't resist banging his head against it.

This was the third time this year that Gage was asking him to make a sudden trip to the precinct.

"Who did you hurt this time?" Jamie barked, letting the rising groan of frustration out of his throat.

"No one. This is all a fucking misunderstanding. Explain it to them, and do it ASAP. Sahara's single release party is at five. Can't miss my girl's big day."

Jamie had the urge to tell him that his girlfriend's single release party should be the least of his concerns. But since no teen liked to hear the reality, Jamie pacified him with an, "I'm coming."

A cancelled date, an injured actress, and a trip to the precinct.

Just a normal day in the life of Jamie Star.

## CHAPTER 2

What were the odds of meeting your future husband at Trader Joe's?

Because that might've just happened. Seriously.

"Hi, I was wondering if..." Bella stammered to the cute guy she'd spotted checking out Brussel spouts.

Tall. *Check.*

Hot. *Check.*

Not texting. *Check.*

Blue eyes. *Check.*

Buys expensive food he's probably never gonna eat. *Check.*

"If you were interested in..."

*Don't, don't, don't.* She wasn't going to make a fool of herself by approaching a random stranger, telling him that she found him sexy and giving him her number. Only desperate women did that.

Well, she *was* desperate. But still.

No, she needed to start a conversation. Flirt up a storm. Get him to ask for her number.

"...interested in telling me where you found those—" Scanning his cart, she named the first item she saw. "...carrots?"

"They're right here," he said, pointing to the heaps of carrots that were right under her nose.

Wow, that was embarrassing.

"Thanks." Bella moistened her lips, hoping that would take his attention off her stupidity. "You know...I'm visually impaired sometimes."

Wait...what was she saying? She wasn't visually impaired. "I mean, I can see well most of the time, but I can't see well sometimes."

"Medical condition?" His voice was sympathetic.

Her nod was embarrassingly vigorous. "Right."

"What's it called?" Interest flickered in his gray eyes. "If you don't mind telling me. I'm a doctor. An ophthalmologist. I've never heard of a condition like yours. I'm curious."

Bella's flirtatious grin slid right off her face. Of everything he could be, he had to be an ophthalmologist, didn't he? Why was her luck so screwed?

"I don't know what it's called...um...are you shopping by yourself?" she stammered, trying to divert him from her medical condition.

Diversion always worked.

He shrugged casually. "With my partner. He's over there."



His gaze darted to a man by the freezer. Equally handsome. Equally gay.

She should've seen that coming.

"Great." Bella's voice dropped faster than the price of stocks in a recession. "Nice talking to you."

Turning on her heel, she almost raced down the aisle, not even stopping for Cookie Butter, which she knew she needed to get. Her lip jutted out as she closed her eyes, and her inner critic started nagging her. She was such an idiot sometimes.

Not paying attention, she stopped when she bumped into something hard.

A shoulder. Someone's shoulder. Before she could blink, he said, "I'm sorry."

The clearest pair of blue eyes she'd ever encountered appraised her, and she tumbled back, involuntarily.

As she sized him up, she wondered how on earth she had missed a guy like this. Young, good-looking, with no boyfriend or girlfriend clinging to his arm. No ring, either.

"No problem." The words somehow left her open jaw.

He wasn't Greek god handsome. But he was cute. In a movie star sort of way. In a Bryan Singer sort of way.

*Do not think about your ex.*

Of course, he could be gay like the previous one, in a committed relationship, mentally ill, have STDs, be abusive, deep in debt, a cheater, or all of the above.

"Hi." Flipping her tone to seductive, Bella took her chance.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Besides, she had a good feeling about this one.

His eyes widened, then popped. "You....you're the one! You're the one I've been looking for."

Clasping her shoulders, he held onto her with his focused gaze.

"Uh? I have no idea what you're talking about."

That had turned weird quickly. All she'd been hoping for was a hi, but this was a lot more than a hi.

Bella blinked rapidly as he cleared his throat, embarrassed, and removed his hands from her. "Today's my lucky day." His face lit up with a childish grin. "Hey, I know I'm springing this out of the blue, but do you have a moment?"

For a moment, the everything else flew out of her mind. The world around faded to black and the sounds died, like that scene from *Love Me Like You Do*, the one where Maddie met Damien for the first time on Wine Beach and knew that he was the one for her. She even heard the metaphoric azure waves crashing against the shore.

Only the guy in front of her remained.

Was this happening?

Was a cute (and kinda sexy) guy trying to talk to her in Trader Joe's?

Maybe all the law of attraction visualizations and positive affirmations she'd been practicing for the last two months were finally working. Had the universe decided it was time to send her the soulmate she'd been praying for?

Although she'd been visualizing Leonardo DiCaprio putting a ring on a finger, she could recalibrate her expectations a little.

Okay, a lot.

"I wouldn't—" Before Bella could finish, he smiled.

Her heart sank to her flabby ankles. There was nothing wrong with his teeth—they were as good as anybody's—but he had dimples.

Bryan had had dimples. After their breakup, she'd sworn not to date anybody who would remind her of Bryan. No cocky players, Don Juans, musicians, artists, painters, poets, or sensitive types. And absolutely no dimples.

"I...appreciate your interest in me, but I'm not single." She flipped her hair back to make a statement.

His eyes stilled in deep surprise. Frowning, he said, "I'm not hitting on you."

"No? Cause it definitely seems that way to me."

He pinned her with his gaze. "Look, this is not how I usually roll, but...I really need you. Your body, your face. It's the exact one I'm looking for. And I can pay you for it...er...I mean the use of it...I mean for you to use it. Fuck, none of this is coming out right."

*And his creep factor just bit the roof.*

Her body. He wanted her body. Worse than a cheat, she'd run into a porn star scout...or a pervert. Or both.

Bella shook her head. Sane, mentally stable, good looking, non-gay, single men did not enter Bella Hopkins's life.

"That's it. I'm outta here."

Jetting past him, she wondered how in the world somebody thought that she could be a porn star. She was a hundred and fifty pounds, for heaven's sake. Didn't porn have standards these days?

Not that she'd ever considered his offer...okay, only for a second. Maybe five. Hey, she could have fantasies.

After the way Bryan had smashed her self-confidence by cheating on her, she really needed the confirmation that she was still desirable. Bryan Singer. That bastard.

Tears fountained up to the rim of her eyes at the thought of him. Today was a bad enough morning without rewinding her memory tape. But she couldn't help it. Every rejection felt like his. Every guy seemed to carry some part of him.

The morning she'd woken up to find his photo splashed across tabloids, making out with a model and claiming her as his girlfriend, her entire world had flipped on its axis. It had been the most miserable day of her life, but she'd needed that cold wake-up call.

And she was never going to forget that.

Her foot hit the corner of a shelf, knocking cereal boxes off. Anxious, she snuck a look back. He was still following her. Drat. The guy was tenacious. He'd probably been in this business for long.

"Leave me alone or I'll call security," she hollered at him, making heads turn towards them.

Crossing the space between them, he dropped his voice and whispered, "I'm sorry about earlier. What I meant was that I want offer you a job. An honest, decent job." He helped her put back the cereal boxes. "I'm not a creep, scammer, or perv. I'm just flustered. I really didn't expect to run into you here."

Her heartbeat stilled.

*Come on, heart, are you going to do this to me after I laid off cholesterol for the entire week? Beat!*

"I don't need a job." She tucked herself into a crowded aisle to escape him.

But her relief was short-lived. She ran right into him when she exited the row between chips and chocolates.

He kept pace with her, twice as eager as before.

"Wait. I should probably start from the beginning." He inhaled ceremoniously, then held out his hand. "Hi. I'm Jamie Star. You can call me Jamie or J or whatever." He laid a business card over the frozen macaroons in her cart. "I'm a TV writer producing a show that's been picked up by ABC."

Bella lifted her eyebrows, a little interested now. "A TV show."

"A sitcom, actually. It's awesome. Brilliant. Hilarious. It's about this couple who..." Seeing the impatience flashing on her face, he cut his elevator pitch short. "Never mind. The point is, I want you to play a character on the show."

"I'm not playing anyone." Bella joined the long checkout line, which snaked halfway across the store.

She was going to have to cut her trip short.

"The part's not hard." Jamie, unrelenting, stood behind her, even though he had nothing to bill. Bella didn't miss the gazes that shot to them when he leaned in a little too close to her. The shoppers around them must be thinking that she and this guy were a couple. "You only have fifteen lines of dialogue in an episode. On average."

"Look. I can't act. I can't." Even the word 'act' broke her out in rashes. "Why don't you look for someone who actually wants to be an actress?"

"To tell you the truth, the actress who was originally playing the character injured herself midway through the show, and you look exactly like her. I need you so I can finish the show. Tell me, how can I convince you to take her part?"

"Sorry, but nothing can convince me to go back to LA."

The entertainment industry was not a place she'd ever go back to. One million dollars and wild horses couldn't drag her back there.

She belonged in her quiet, cozy room on 5 Washington Place, reading Goethe and eating Hershey's cookies and cream; staying away from the spotlight where she could be criticized, picked at, and judged. Where her fragile ego could be shredded like paper.

The words she'd heard from Bryan's friends in LA still echoed in her ears. She'd probably be scarred by them for as long as she lived.

*"Nice ass, Bella. Except, I can't really see it under all the flab."*

*"Those are your legs? I'm sorry, I seriously thought I'd hit a wall."*

*"Here comes Miss Whale!"*

Those words had hurt her, made her cry, but she'd risen above all that through the years. Now, their sting was faint, like the momentary prick of a needle.

"We're filming in New York," he said.

"I have a day job."

"Where do you work?"

"None of your business."

He brought his face closer, until a faint scent drifted up to her nose. "I'll pay you twice as much as you currently make."

Her lips thinned. "I'm happy with what I make."

He scoffed. "You live in NYC. You can't be happy with what you make. Rent is through the roof. The subway isn't cheap. Food's not cheap. A few extra thousand dollars could buy you a lot."

"I don't need a lot." Grimacing, Bella took a step away from him.

"Come on. Be honest. You must want something."

Yeah, she wanted someone who would love her and want her forever. But he couldn't give her that, could he?

"Get in another line," she demanded, feeling uneasy at the judgmental stares around them.

She was 5'6, a hundred and fifty pounds with a double chin and ugly, thick-framed glasses while he was six feet tall and had no obvious physical flaws. Bella could hear what everyone around them was thinking.

*Did she eat his brain, too?*

"Why?" he asked.

"This one's going to move slow. I have a lot of stuff." Bella set her bent elbows over her chest.

He squared her long stare with one of his own. "I can wait."

Her finger shot to the aisle on the left. "That line over there looks empty."

He didn't budge. Being stubborn, was he?

Well, she was stubborn, too. No matter how much he tried to browbeat her into accepting some vague part in a show she was certain did not exist, she wasn't going to fold. She'd folded and bent enough. For her mother, Bryan...that list was going to end right there.

Finally, when it was her turn at the till, she threw stuff from her cart onto the counter, performing the actions a lot more hurriedly than she usually would. She wanted to get out of here ASAP.

As the woman at the till scanned her groceries one by one, Bella stretched her side against the edge of the till. "Look. It's nothing personal, but I don't trust good looking guys."

"You think I'm good looking, huh?" He rubbed his jaw cockily.

Now she'd stroked his ego. Great.

"What I really think is that you should leave me alone now because I'm not interested in being an actress."

"Please." He was groveling. It was fun to watch him grovel, so she prolonged her enjoyment. "Consider it paid charity. I really need this show to get made, and I can't do it without you."

"You're late. I already donated to Red Cross this year." She was sorely tempted to stick out her tongue, but that would be too juvenile, so she restrained.

"Give me five minutes to convince you. Let's sit down somewhere." His hands were clasped in a 'namaste.' "I'll buy you coffee. And muffins...and cake...and fries. Everything."

Bella dug her hands into her hips. "It's not fair to stereotype people based on their weight. I may be overweight but I didn't get to this point by eating muffins, fries, and cake."

"You're not fat. You're...fluffy... in a good way. Homely... that's the word. No...round?" He fell silent momentarily, tangled up in his search for the perfect euphemism.

Bella fired a wary sigh at the cashier.

The one thing worse than being called fat was being called something stupid like fluffy or cute or round. Fluffy and round were adjectives for a beach ball or a teddy bear, not a human being.

He latched back onto his stream of thoughts that had wandered briefly. "But if you want salad, that's okay, too. Any place you want. Jamba Juice's close, I think."

Jutting her lower lip out, Bella twisted her mouth into a determined smirk. "Home's the only place I'm going."

"Sure. We can talk at your place." Not letting up, he looped the plastic bags that contained her weekly groceries over his wrist. Holding her groceries hostage, was he?

She wasn't going to give in.

Fluttering ahead on her wedged sandals, Bella cast him a backward glance. "What did you say your name was again?"

It'd help her report him at the precinct for grocery theft. If that was even a crime.

"Jamie. Jamie Star." Sliding the plastic covers up to his elbows, he tried to get the third one in hand. Those bags couldn't be light.

Bella grinned. She might not have scored her fated soul mate, but it seemed like she'd scored a part-time slave to carry her heavy shopping.

"You're persistent." Bella said, wondering if he really intended to carry this stuff all the way to her apartment. Not that she was going to let him. That would be both stupid and unsafe. However, she would let him carry it halfway, then pretend to listen to him, so he left her alone.

“Very.” He agreed, with easy humor, valiantly adding the last ten-pound bag to his load. “So are you going to listen to my business proposal?”

Bella threw him a haughty nod. “Carry these bags ten more blocks and I will.”

\*

So somehow, she’d ended up at Café Grumpy with Jamie.

Cradling a cold cup of iced coffee between her palms, Bella made an effort to hold onto her composure, which was slipping away faster than money at a Vegas casino.

The little critical voices inside her were bombarding her with guilt. What was she doing here with someone she’d met five minutes ago at the supermarket?

*He’ll think you’re a pushover now.*

“Keep it short. We’re on the clock.” Bella tapped the edge of the coffee table, sliding a glance at her iPhone. She wasn’t in control of the situation, but she could make it seem like she was.

“To recap what I said earlier, I want you to act in my new show. It’s called *Troubled Domesticity*. You’ll have to work five days a week—rehearsals Monday through Thursday, shooting on Fridays.” He paused. “You’ll make seventy-five grand in two months and I’ll get you an acting coach. As a bonus, you get to work alongside great actors like Catherine Martin and eat free lunch everyday.”

“You missed the 401k.” Bella laid her hand to cover her iPhone on the table.

A frown weighed down his lips. “Sadly, we don’t offer a 401k.”

“Too bad then.”

He slammed an impatient hand on the table. “Please—”

“Listen. I don’t even trust you, okay? Why do you think I’m going to agree to act in a show that’s probably a fake?”

“Because you’ll be saving my ass if you do,” There was a desperate note in his voice. “Your resemblance to Martina is unbelievable. Once we dye your hair red—”

“Red?” She pulled one leg from the ground, inadvertently kicking Jamie’s knees. “In your dreams, pal.”

Okay, that hadn’t been entirely inadvertent. But it got her message across. He’d better not start painting pictures with her hair red because she wasn’t giving up her natural blonde for anything. “Besides, what are your credentials as a writer? Written anything I would know of?”

“I’m not in the habit of gloating, but I’ve had a pretty successful career so far.” He fixed a proud grin on his lips—and those hated dimples appeared again. “Mostly movies, though. Only moved to the big apple a couple of months ago. TD’s my first show.”

“Don’t give me vague statements. I want names. Tell me the names of movies you’ve written.” Her nails clicked testily against the side of her cup.

“Google me.” His voice reached over the monotonous music playing in the café. “Then you’ll have names *and* you’ll have proof that I am who I say I am.”

“Don’t think I won’t do it.” She tapped on the touchscreen of her iPhone. “How do you spell Star?”

“S-t-a-r.”

Google turned up one million results with his name.

“Well, let’s see what we’ve got here.” She clicked on his Wikipedia, which showed a guy who roughly resembled the Jamie sipping lemon slush opposite her. “Your Wikipedia entry says you were born on June second. So you’re a Gemini?”

Thank goodness she’d given up on him. Bryan had been Gemini, too.

She was never going to date a Gemini again.

“Is that important?” Jamie asked, mildly amused.

“Not really. Let’s see...you wrote *The Fall*, *Affairs of the Heart*, *Unlocking Alice*.”

They were all pretty famous movies. Pop culture staples. She’d watched all of them and enjoyed more than a few.

Not something he needed to know.

“I don’t—” Bella’s voice got lodged in her throat when she read the name of his debut movie.

Holy shit, Jamie Star was the screenwriter who’d written *Love Me Like You Do*. The ‘Love Me Like You Do.’ Her all-time favorite movie. She could recite every line from the script. It was the best love story ever written. Period. And he’d written it. The same Jamie Star who wanted her to act in his first sitcom and who’d carried her groceries ten blocks.

Also, he was Grant Star’s son.

She scooted closer to Jamie. “You wrote *Love Me Like You Do*?”

In the span of a few seconds, his credibility and likeability had risen exponentially.

He confirmed her statement with a nod. “Not my best, but it was my first, so I was still learning.”

“Are you kidding me? I adore that movie. No, I’m obsessed with that movie. I’ve watched it, like, twenty-five times.” Flapping her fingers, trying to make sense, Bella went into hyper-fangirl mode. “Oh my gosh, when Damien proposes to Maddie...I cry every single time I hear him say ‘You’re me, Maddie. The me I never thought could exist in this world.’ Such deep, deep words. And the scene where her brother takes her surfing? Fuckin’ genius. I can’t get enough of their bond. If there’s a sequel—”

“Wow, wow, wow.” Jamie’s waved his hands. “You went all fangirl on me there.”

“I get really excited about that movie.” Bella kept herself from blushing. So much for composure. “By the way, can I get an autograph?”

“Only if you agree to act in my TV show.” Jamie cupped her hands with his, over the table. “I promise you’ll fall in love with the story. It’s exactly like *Love Me Like You Do*. It has the heart, the feels, but it’s so much funnier.”

The repercussions of her uncontrolled fangirling were now biting her in the ass.

“I can’t.” Bella rattled her mind for an excuse. “I won’t have the time. I have...children I need to take care of. Five of them. I’m a single parent, actually.”

Could she tell a more obvious lie?

“Hire a babysitter. Pre-tax, your pay will be about seventy-five grand, and if we get renewed for a second season, you can renegotiate your salary. That should more than cover the cost of childcare.” He speared the table with the tip of his finger.

“I don’t think it’ll work...” Gulping the iced coffee so quickly it froze her tongue, Bella recomposed herself. “Earlier, I didn’t tell you where I worked, but I actually work in investment banking. It’s a full-time job. I have no time for anything else.”

“If you’re gonna lie, at least pick a convincing profession.” Jamie planted his elbow on the table, and leveled his gaze at her. “You look nothing like an investment banker. And you’re lying about the kids, too. You don’t have any kids. You’re single. My guess is, you work at a well paying white-collar job. You’re trying to lose weight but you have a sweet tooth you can’t control. Something tells me you don’t have a brother and father was absent while you were growing up.”

Bella was so shocked, she held her breath. He’d narrated her entire life story to her in a minute. Without checking Facebook or LinkedIn.

Bella combed through her hair. “How did you guess my father was absent? The rest, you could have deduced from the stuff that I bought at the supermarket. I didn’t buy enough for a family, and everything I bought was healthy, expensive, and stuff only an educated and financially comfortable woman would buy.”

Jamie accepted her comments, sipping lemon slush. With noon approaching, the sunlight’s angle had changed. It now caressed his golden hair, coloring it an iridescent white. Bella took a shaky breath. No, she couldn’t start noticing such things about him.

Clearing his throat, Jamie geared up for Sherlock Holmes part 2. “You get jumpy around men, which indicates you didn’t grow up being around a lot of men. And while you’re not uncomfortable around older women, I spied you getting really tense when you saw that the lady in front of with so many bottles of wine. Mom was alcoholic, I assume?”

“None of your business.” Bella ground on her teeth, curling her toes. Why was he digging up her unsavory past? Recalling her past released a storm of chaotic emotions in her. Her childhood, her adolescence, her teenage years...there were no happy memories that belonged in that period of time.

“Hey, I feel your pain. My mother was a cokehead. Died of overdose. You might’ve read in the papers. Melanie Star.”

Bella remembered Melanie Star’s death. Though she couldn’t have been older than fourteen when Melanie had died, it’d been a well-publicized death.

Melanie Star had been a glowworm—she’d shined brightly and faded quickly.



“At least your dad didn’t let you starve while you were growing up.” Bella hissed, a little too harshly. Self-conscious, she checked her reflection on the window glass. Thank goodness she wasn’t crying. Yet. “You had it that bad, huh?” She didn’t need his pity.

Pity hadn’t changed anything then and wouldn’t change anything now.

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” she ground out through her tight jaw. “Because I’m not going to do the show. Bye.”

“I can get you Leonardo DiCaprio’s autograph.” Jamie slid back to his light-hearted tone. Bella was thankful that they weren’t going to get into any more serious topics. She didn’t know why she was sharing personal memories with him. “And if there are any celebrities you want to meet, I can arrange that, too.”

“Nice try, but no.” Bella dropped her eyelids halfway, in a defeated, worn denial. “I can’t. I have a full-time job already. That part was true.”

University was off for summer and she wasn’t teaching summer school at Harvard this year, but he didn’t have to know that.

Silently, Bella bent to retrieve her plastic bags.

“I’ll carry them the rest of the way home if you want,” Jamie offered.

Bella gave her purse a shake. “Let me check if I got my taser first.”

Offended, he frowned. “Hey, didn’t we just establish that I’m trustworthy?”

“All I know is that you write screenplays, and you’re a Gemini. How is that supposed to make you trustworthy?”

She trusted no one. Especially not him.

Jamie’s father, Star senior, was a prolific womanizer. The genes could’ve carried through to Jamie. She wasn’t going to be the one to take that risk.

“Bye.” Bella maneuvered to door, almost buckling under the weight.

Damn, these bags were heavy.

Jamie opened the door for her. “Tell me your name before you go.”

“Bella.” She waited for him to pick a direction to head in, but he didn’t.

“Family name?”

“Most of my friends and colleagues call me Bella. You can call me Bella, too.” Bella squinted when the sun blasted into her eyes and nearly blinded her for a split second.

“I need your full name to search you on Facebook.”

Bella grunted, “Dude. We met at Trader Joe’s like, an hour ago. I’m *not* adding you on Facebook.”

He laughed, which made butterflies run through her stomach. Stupid reaction, but he had a great laugh.

“If you change your mind, call me. My number’s on the business card I gave you earlier.” Oh, right. That business card, which was somewhere between the cabbage and potatoes. “Have a good day.”

Then he tipped his head forward, and silently strode away.



## CHAPTER 3

Grant Star's Renaissance style townhouse at 494 Greenwich Street loomed ahead of Jamie, its long, rectangular shadow slanting over the pavement and the road. The yellow-brown terraced stone walls were weather-beaten, but not worn. Curtains were drawn, and there was no movement through the windows, which was, to put it mildly, unusual in the Star household.

Without bothering to buzz, Jamie entered the code on the keypad to the left of the Lion-shaped door knocker. The black door swung unlocked, and a whoosh of freezing air gusted over him.

The grand foyer was empty. Jamie spotted several new elements—Warhol paintings, African tribal masks and tall Grecian vases holding stalks of artificial pink flowers. As he walked towards the stairs leading up to Grant's home office, his sneakers were stifled by the blue Persian rug in the living room.

Overcrowded with furniture, the living room was different from what it'd been during his childhood. The brand new, modern light fixtures on the wall cast a sophisticated light over the space. The TV had been upgraded to a 50-inch plasma screen, and there was a mini-bar right next to the TV.

For a few nostalgic moments, Jamie recalled playing hide-and-seek and watching *Noddy* with his father. Grant had once been a good father. More than good—he'd been cool, present, attentive—the kind of father every boy longed for.

He'd always called his father Grant, rather than dad, because they'd been so close, more like best friends than father and son. He couldn't pinpoint the day when Grant had gone from being the best dad in the world to an absent one, who only saw him at dinner with a different woman on his arm every week.

Maybe the day when he'd not shown up for Jamie's high school graduation, or maybe even before that. Water under the bridge now. He'd grown used to the new Grant and his stream of blonde women just as he'd grow used to this new house and the constant changes here.

"Grant?" Jamie called, spinning his gaze around.

Unflinching silence circled him. Wasn't Grant home?

"Grant!" he called again, louder this time.

He heard hustling from upstairs. Snapping his neck up, Jamie decided to take a chance. The bedroom door was ajar with twin shadows dancing in front of the door. He approached the doorjamb with trepidation and knocked.

"Grant?"

"Come in."

Every time he heard that tone of voice, it was almost always followed by some unsavory revelation of the carnal kind.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to come in?”

Amused laughter roared out, vibrating over Jamie’s toes. “I have nothing to hide, J. You know all my vices.”

Throwing the door open, Jamie bustled in, to find a young, hot, naked woman in his father’s arms, her tongue deep inside Grant’s mouth.

His recoil was only moderate.

He’d experienced a few too many re-runs of this scenario over the last years. Enough to desensitize him. Now this was normal.

Like most superstars who’d enjoyed too much free-flowing pussy during the height of their careers, Grant Star had never quite gotten over the delusion that he was Molly in male form. At fifty-six, he had a revolving door of women at his disposal, most of whom were connected to the studio in some way or the other.

Only difference was, he’d updated his repertoire to include some ‘Fifty Shades,’ if the handcuffs and blindfold were anything to go by.

“Hey, J,” Wiping away the moisture on his lips with the back of his palm, Grant’s piercing gray eyes crinkled at Jamie. Those were superstar eyes, alright. They were also father eyes.

Jamie gave a smirk of disgust when Grant reached up to stroke the blonde’s very enhanced butt. While he may have inherited his father’s love for movies, he’d not inherited Grant’s penchant for women who had more plastic in their bodies than a Barbie doll.

Keen to preserve the image of Grant he had in his head as a kind and supportive dad, Jamie didn’t judge him too harshly for it. Grant had a lot of good in him. He’d helped Jamie get in touch with a number of studios to pitch his TV series, and he’d cheered him on at every step of his career.

There were many talented writers out there with better scripts who were struggling because they didn’t have a Grant Star to believe in them.

Which was why Jamie would never hate Grant.

“I can take two.” The woman crouched at Grant’s side said, winking at Jamie.

“Let’s not involve J in this, Sheila.” Grant didn’t look very happy.

Dropping his gaze to the the bottle of Johnnie Walker and tub of ice cubes atop the glass-top coffee table, Jamie grimaced. Scotch whiskey and sex. Surely, that was a combination his father could have come up with.

“Gage is at 13<sup>th</sup> precinct,” Jamie informed, his back half-facing his father. “He needs help.”

In the interest of preserving his modesty, Grant had pulled the sheets to cover half his chest, but the woman with him didn’t see the need for such useless pretensions.

Looking at a naked woman didn’t make him uncomfortable or turn him on, but he turned his gaze to Monet’s water lilies hanging on the wall, framed in gold. Originals his father had paid a mini-fortune for. It had been Grant’s fiftieth birthday gift to himself.

Grant curved his head up. “J, why in hell are you still trying to save that boy? Take my word, son, that boy is never gonna stop. He’s addicted to ”

Jamie tipped his chin at the wall sconce glowing dimly. “He’s in legal trouble, and he doesn’t know how to hire a lawyer. His agent has abandoned him, and his parents want nothing to do with him. Can’t you have one of your lawyers help him?”

Disgruntled, Grant momentarily stopped making love, and a frown weighed down his lips. Sheila or whatever her name was, also frowned at having her pleasure cut short.

“He thinks there are no consequences to anything he does because you’re always there to pick up the pieces for him.” Grant’s voice reached a high pitch.

“Gage is a nice kid—”

“Was. He isn’t anymore. And you can’t save him, J. I’ve seen too many like him. You can’t save them by bailing them out of trouble every time. I mean, he doesn’t even call his parents when he’s in trouble. He calls you, because he knows his own parents wouldn’t let him off so easily.”

Grant had said that a million times over the last three years.

Dismissing his suggestion, Jamie stuck his hand out for a glass of whiskey. “I wish you’d help him, though. He’s only a kid.”

Grant rebuffed his suggestion, casually brushing his thumb pad on the side of Sheila’s arm.

“I can’t,” with a long pause, his dad stretched his arms over the oak headboard, “and you shouldn’t, either. Sometimes, you gotta be tough with the people you love.”

Jamie bent his knee slightly and scraped the edge of an ottoman. “He needs help. If we don’t intervene, he’ll get a crappy public defender and end up having to do months of community service. And as we both know, he’s going to skip on community service and cause us even more headaches in the form of a re-trial. So let’s cut that misery short.”

Clicking his tongue, Grant moved his head in a definite no.

“Last time,” Jamie pleaded.

“Last time was the last time.”

“Grant—”

Chopped off midsentence by the housekeeper Diana’s loud voice, Jamie reflexively whipped his body around.

“What’s is it, Diana?” he shouted to the housekeeper.

“Eve Rosenberg is here to see Grant,” she shouted back up in her thick Newcastle accent.

“Who’s Eve Rosenberg?” Jamie put the question to his father.

Panicked, Grant scanned the entire perimeter of the room, snatching a shirt from under Sheila’s derriere. “Vice-President of Legal and Business Affairs. I need to get dressed, and you two have to leave.” He tapped Sheila.

Judging from Grant’s extreme reaction, Eve Rosenberg was also a woman who had no problem putting Grant in his place. To be fair, none of the studio’s executives let him walk all over them as much as the twenty-something starry eyed interns did, but a woman with as much spine as this Eve was a rare species at Star Studios.

Skimming past the living room, where Eve was now sitting and unhappily watching *Downton Abbey* re-runs with Diana, Jamie observed that she was older than any woman Jamie had ever seen at 494 Greenwich Street, with the exception of Diana.

That must be why Grant hadn't hit on her yet. To quote Grant, "older women were for men who had no options left."

Still, Eve didn't look so bad. Her hair might be graying, but it was still thick and shiny. She had small, expressive eyes in an intriguing shade of amber.

Sheila from upstairs rushed out past him, followed by a put-together Grant who shook Eve's hand.

Jamie decided to follow Sheila out.

Getting out of the townhouse, it took him time to readjust to the humid heat.

Unable to make up his mind about what to do with Gage, Jamie wandered around the entrance of the townhouse, jogging up a few blocks until he was at a subway station.

He needed a desperate dose of something funny and interesting at this moment.

Like that intriguing college professor, for instance.

\*

Until today, Grant could count the number of times he'd been nervous in his life with one hand. Today was the first time he had to use his other hand to do the counting.

Eve Rosenberg made him nervous. Very nervous.

Mostly because she never had any good news for him. All that she ever discussed with him were legal and business problems. But there was something even more disturbing than legal problems that she brought up.

A strange desire. Arousal.

Diana set two cups of Earl Grey on the table with a motherly smile. Diana must be the same age as Eve, but unlike Eve, he didn't even notice Diana. Not as a woman, anyway. She'd worked for him over ten years and he'd always seen her as a motherly figure.

As a rule, he regarded all women over fifty as motherly or grandmotherly figures, a distinction that served him well when it came to keeping his lust away from housekeepers. Gray hair, wrinkles, and sex appeal did not mix. Beyond fifty, a female was practically a relic to him.

Eve was the only exception.

Honestly, he'd never been attracted to a woman her age. Menopausal women had no sex drive, and all he needed was sex—preferably with a tight, hot, and enhanced body.

"Um..." He nodded like a dummy when Eve took a breath between her long explanation.

She picked up the teacup and rested the edge of the porcelain between her thin lips.

Regular trips to the hairdresser were keeping her hair brown, but she must've missed an appointment, because there was a shock of gray around her temples.

Boy, it must be so depressing to grow old as a woman and watch everything you have fade.

What did he see in her, then, Grant wondered?

Eve was so flawed. Her breasts sagged despite the tight bra she wore, and she had a symphony of lines and spots around her eyes and mouth. Not the image of Hollywood beauty, really. Not the image of any kind of beauty, really.

"Are you with me?" Eve prodded, widening her luscious honey-hued eyes. Such a magnificent color.

As unique as the rest of her.

"Have you thought about early retirement?" Grant interrupted, drifting off-topic.

Molding her mouth into a pucker, she gave him a shrug.

Next year, he was going to add in an option for free Botox to her benefits package. On second thought, she would most likely shoot that suggestion down on the basis of being sexist or ageist.

There was no pleasing a woman like her. Melanie—his first and only wife—had been notoriously easy to please. Diamonds and joints did it for her every time. This one was impressed by nothing.

"I don't believe in quitting early," she said, something fiery flaring in her eyes. "I've got a few more years to go before I hit sixty-five. After that, I'm planning to start my own consulting business. You're more than welcome to hire me as a consultant and keep using my services."

A high chuckle climbed out of his vocal cords. God, she was something. Bustling with plans for the future even at this age. Nothing like the demure, easygoing, submissive women he liked. Entirely too ambitious for her own good.

"Don't you want to take it easy?" Grant asked, pretending to humor her.

"Post-retirement life is excessively glorified." She made a dreary face. "I want to live and work until my last breath."

He decided to try the tea, but after seeing it, changed his mind. Diana made horrible tea, which was ironic, since she was British. "Overworking ages your skin faster."

Making a funny sound, she scrunched her face. "What am I going to do with tight skin at this age?"

"What're you going to do with more money, then?"

"It's not about the money..." She became alert. "Actually, while we're on the topic of money, I want to renegotiate my salary for next year and discuss my promotion. Atsushi's retiring next year. I'm the most experienced person in legal. In my seven years at Star Studios, I think I've proven myself enough to warrant a promotion."

"Eve. We've done this before." A tired exhale escaped Grant. Every three years, she got this itch to be promoted. "No."

“Why not? I think I deserve it, Grant. I’ve seen everybody but me getting promoted since I joined Star Studios. I think it’s my turn now.”

Grant picked up the teacup, then bothered by the smell, set it down. “You don’t have sufficient leadership ability. And you don’t put in nearly as many hours as Atsushi does. You want to leave by six on most days. Now, I understand that you have a family and as a woman, that’s your first priority. We’re proud to promote work-life balance at Star Studios. But I have to be fair here. Atsushi works much harder than you, and there are many people in the organization who work longer than you. President is a demanding role. We need someone committed.”

“I’m committed,” she mumbled, visibly upset. “And you’re not right about me working less than the others. Actually, if you total up the number of hours I’ve worked over the last three years; I’ve worked fifty hours more than anybody else. And I’ve shown plenty of leadership.”

She rattled off a number of instances. Grant didn’t have to check to know that she was right.

However, that didn’t mean he could promote her. The board and other senior executives already had a man in mind to be Atsushi’s successor. A man who was, no doubt, less qualified than Eve. But he was young, and Star Studios needed young blood at the top.

“Eve, we have plenty of high-caliber candidates for President. I don’t want to sound harsh, but I think you’re fighting a losing battle here.”

She swept her palms over her red cheeks. “So tell me. How do I show more leadership? Do I need to be more proactive in soliciting deals? Do I need to exceed my targets by more than I currently am? Or do I need to have a penis?”

Grant expected her to apologize, to flinch, take back her words, but she continued to stand by and let those words echo. The word penis was definitely not moving his mind in any fruitful direction.

“I can see you’re passionate about this,” he started. *And I want to fuck this passionate woman.* “I’ll see what I can do.”

“You say the same thing every year. Don’t you get tired of saying it again and again without meaning it?” She stamped a sharp heel on the hardwood floor. “And it’s not even about me being passionate. There is clearly a culture of discrimination against female employees at the organization. Ninety-five percent of promotions in the last three years went to men. Women are grossly under-represented in the top management. Less than five percent of the board is female. Grant, you’ve got to change that.”

Grant squirmed under his skin. Hadn’t this brand of confrontational feminism gone out of fashion in the seventies?

Bracing himself for a tough battle, he rolled up his sleeves. Every salary negotiation with Eve always degenerated into something like this.



“We promoted six women to middle-management last year and recruited our second female board member.” That was his favorite statistic. Because it was the only one. “We’re trying to improve the gender balance at the top. But we can’t promote you just because you’re a woman. That’s not what equality is about.”

“I’m not asking you to promote me because I’m a woman,” she cried. “I’m asking you to promote me because I’m competent!”

“That’s your viewpoint. Unfortunately, not everybody shares it.” Grant clapped, to add a sense of finality.

Stationing her hands on her thighs, Eve met him with a pained gaze. If he had his way, he’d lick the honey in her eyes all the way down to the honey between her legs. That was how obsessed she had him after fifteen minutes of argument.

God save him, though, because in the last year, he hadn’t fixated on a woman as much as he’d fixated on her. He wanted her more than he wanted the tight asses of more willing women. Eve was long past her prime, both professionally and sexually, and he still had many, many years to go before he had to settle for less-than-attractive women.

*Maybe it’s because she’s forbidden. Maybe that makes her exciting.*

No, he’d never enjoyed the chase. For as long as he could recall, he’d preferred easy women. The hard-to-get ones were generally not worth the effort.

Unable to reconcile himself to lusting over an aging divorcee with two daughters, Grant shook his legs. “I have to be somewhere in the next half hour. So if you have nothing else to say...”

“I’ll see myself out,” Eve said, in a clipped voice. Collecting her papers, she stuffed them into her large purse and walked out, head held high.

Proud until the last moment.

Just like him.

\*

Bella ascended the stairs to the third floor of the walk-up where she lived, regret rising in her throat with the altitude.

Another unsuccessful date. Another lost chance.

A too-cold whoosh of air from the air conditioner slithered under her halter-neck top as she stepped into her studio apartment. Goosebumps sprouted all over her chest at the sudden drop in temperature.

Free-falling onto the couch, Bella stared at the empty kitchen, which she needed to clean up before Kat arrived. Shower was pending, too.

*I’ll do it in five minutes,* she told herself.

Looking at her body, she picked her fashion sense apart.

Maybe she'd looked too desperate. That seemed to be a common problem for her. Or maybe she'd appeared too confident. Sometimes she worried about how good she'd become at pretending to be the kind of bold, take-no-shit woman that she really wasn't.

No matter how strong and sassy she was on the outside, inside, she was still insecure and scared.

*No, don't think. You'll just become depressed.*

Against her will, Bella dragged herself to the bathroom.

Skipping in for a quick clean-up, she did quick stretches to open up the clenched muscles in her limbs and stomach and looked at herself in the mirror above the basin. It reflected back her red-rimmed eyes. Her eyeshadow had smudged into a dark puddle around her eyes, and black mascara tears were zig-zagging down her cheeks.

Bella stuck her face under water spraying from the shower head and scrubbed her face.

And thought about her love life again.

It now seemed like her vision of a happy future might never materialize. She was thirty-four already. In a few years, she'd lose whatever little beauty she had. Her soulmate should have come into her life.

Both her best friends had found the love of their lives—Ashley had found love twice—and were heading towards that settled, secure phase in life she wanted to be in. Bella wanted to see them happy, but she was feeling incredibly left out these days. Soon, Ashley would have her first child, and she'd feel even more alienated.

Hot water soaked into her skin and hair. If only water could soak away these clawing feelings...

*Snap out of it*, she scolded herself.

Compared to five years ago, when she'd been struggling to secure a tenured position, a house and pay back her student debt, she was in a much better place now. She'd almost paid off her student loans, and she was an assistant professor at NYU.

And she didn't have an eating disorder anymore.

Thank goodness for that. Without a doubt, overcoming bulimia was the single greatest accomplishment of her life. Her eyes stung when she let the memories of that part of her life wash over her.

Every day had been a nightmare when she'd lived with Bryan in LA. Overeating, then trying to purge it. Uncontrollable temptation followed murderous guilt. She'd gotten tired of that cycle—tired of counting calories, tired of beating herself up over a hundred extra calories, tired of smelling her puke, tired of still being overweight.

But she hadn't stopped, for the fear of losing Bryan's love, his approval. Every time she'd wear something that revealed the marginally thinning shoulders and legs she battled for every day, he would compliment her. And that made all the mental torture worth it.

She'd come close to dying multiple times, but even clinging to life by a thread, she'd never let herself quit. For two or three days, she'd eat normally, then start the cycle all over again.

Images of Bryan's house, the way they'd lain curled up together in his bed, him playing her songs, appeared and disappeared. Letting the recollections drift away, Bella curled her lazy eyelids for a nap while the water warmed her skin. Heaven.

The buzzer beeped.

Sometimes, Kat's extreme punctuality got on her nerves. Seven pm did not mean seven pm. It meant after seven twenty and before seven thirty.

Shrugging into a bathrobe, Bella tied it around the front. Her damp hair pitter-pattered all over the hardwood floor, leaving a trail to the door.

"You're early." She made a mildly-annoyed-at-your-punctuality face at Kat, who was wearing a dress in an electrifying shade of orange.

Thin, toned legs stuck out from under the high hem. Kat's waist had shrunk another inch.

"No, I'm exactly on time." Kat waved the digital watch strapped over her wrist, looking extra-sulky, even for a Wednesday. "Were you having a shower?"

"I'll throw something on ASAP. There's organic orange juice in the fridge. Help yourself."

Dashing to her room, Bella opted for a no-fuss ensemble of shorts and a tank-top. As a rule of thumb, she didn't wear anything this revealing around people. Her legs and arms were her biggest points of insecurity. But with Kat, it should be alright.

Back in the kitchen, Kat was regarding the groceries she'd bought this morning. Bella spotted giant creases between Kat's eyebrows.

"Why do you look like some pervert grabbed your ass on the subway?" she asked.

Kat fiddled with the oven's settings. "Because that happened."

"Shit. You reported it, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I'm trying to forget about it." Tidying up the cans of soup on the countertop, Kat followed her usual stress-relief ritual of going overboard with cleaning. "You need to buy a rice cooker, Bell. And when was the last time you vacuumed around here? I can see dust bunnies under the table."

Bella seized an orange from the fruit bowl. "A month, maybe two."

In reality, it had been three weeks, but a little exaggeration here and there could work in her favor, considering Kat's mood.

"I've told you a million times. If you don't vacuum every week, you'll create more work for yourself in the long run." Kat untangled the cord of the vacuum cleaner and plugging it in, filled Bella's apartment with a loud, electrical buzz. The black head swept over the dust bunnies, swallowing them and leaving a clean, shiny floor.

Bella smiled. Having Kat over saved her the trouble of hiring a cleaner every time. Yeah, she took advantage of her nice friends sometimes, but so did Kat, every time she needed someone to use as bait to get stories.

"Everybody in the world needs a bestie like you," she said to herself, knowing Kat wouldn't be able to hear her over the droning noise.

“You say something?” Kat bent the head under the table, under the couch and into the hard-to-get corners of her house that frankly, Bella never bothered with.

Digging her nails into the fleshy skin of the orange, Bella made a cut with her nail and peeled it back. She crossed her legs on the couch, away from where she could obstruct Kat, and put a single crescent of orange in her mouth, chewing it and spitting out the seeds on her palm.

Fifteen minutes later, Kat stored the vacuum cleaner in the same place she’d taken it from. Such a perfectionist.

“Thanks for cleaning my apartment. I appreciate it.”

The microwave beeped, indicating that the quinoa was done.

“I’m doing it for myself, not for you.” Restless, Kat hurried to check if the quinoa was cooked. “Five more minutes.”

“Are you really okay with what happened on the subway?”

“It’s not the first time. I’ll recover.” True, Kat had endured far worse—such as an almost rape—but sometimes it was okay to vent and be angry, rather than controlling emotions. “Ashley’s sorry she couldn’t make it tonight, but there’s good news. The doctor said it’s a girl.”

“Can they tell so soon?” Bella inquired, something acidic and repulsive spiraling in her stomach.

It wasn’t jealousy. Jealousy burned. This was just...emptiness.

Nodding, Kat’s mouth pushed up in a wide grin. “Aren’t you excited? I’m so happy for her. She’s wanted a baby for so long.”

“Yeah, it’s great. I’ll have to remember to send her a text.” Keen to divert from the topic of Ashley’s pregnancy, Bella turned to the benign subject of Kat’s boyfriend. “How’s Alex?”

“Busy. He has to go to Albany next week.”

“Still meeting him on weekends?”

“Trying to.” Unconsciously, Kat rubbed her wrists. “He wanted to take me to dinner tonight.”

“And you said no?”

Kat nodded.

“Are you crazy? Alex is the love of your life. If he says dinner, you go to dinner. Where are your priorities in life, girl?”

Kat tipped her head up. “But...but I promised to help you make quinoa salad, and you bought all the stuff. I couldn’t bail last minute.”

“Alex is more important than your plans with me. I’m not going anywhere.”

Sometimes she worried for Kat. How could she prioritize anything else over spending time with her boyfriend?

If it was her, Bella would’ve canceled everything immediately to spend the night with Alex. Dating the mayor of New York City was a challenge in itself, but throw in a hectic job and it was wonder how Kat and Alex were

still together. It was their third year together this year, but it was getting tougher for them with every passing year.

Next year Alex would be running for re-election, and they'd have to deal with all the stress that something like that brought into a relationship.

Kat sewed her brows together.

"That's not right, Bell. You're as important to me as he is." It could be a trick of the light, but Kat's red hair seemed to glow brighter. "I'm not sacrificing our friendship for Alex's sake. He can deal with spending time alone. He probably has enough work to catch up on."

Laying the heel of her hand on the counter, Bella inclined herself backward. "If you keep rejecting him, he'll leave you."

Just like Bryan had left her. Every time she was unavailable, he'd flirt with another woman, get closer to someone else, and maybe those little moments had added up at the end. That could happen to Kat, too. That could happen to anyone.

Kat raised her chin confidently. "He can't. He's too hopelessly in love with me." Peeling the outer layers of an onion, she slit it into halves with a swift chop of the knife. "And if he does, I'll still have you, right?"

"You..." She pulled Kat's bony body into a hug. Startled, Kat dropped the knife on the cutting board. "You're too loyal for your own good."

Despite being generally averse to cuddling, Kat didn't rumple her face when Bella smeared tears all over Kat's collarbone.

Free cleaning, free food, and loyalty. What more could she ask for? She might have the worst luck when it came to men, but lady luck was super kind to her in matters of friendship.

"I can't make out if you're being sarcastic or nice," Kat teased.

"Of course I'm being nice." Bella gave Kat some breathing room and gave herself some space, too, fanning her eyes.

"Sorry, I got a bit emotional there. My date today didn't go so well," Bella said.

"It's okay. There's somebody better for you out there," Kat assured, the smell of the onions making her eyes red and watery, too.

"I don't know about that." Scratching her chin with a pensive look, Bella sighed.

Alarm flitted over Kat's face.

"I'm starting to lose hope," Bella said. "I mean; I want it so badly. I want someone who loves me. I've never wished for anything else but that. Why can't I even have one simple thing?"

"Bell, you need to get over this mindset that having a man is everything." Green eyes burning bright, Kat squared her gaze. "You don't need anyone. You're good on your own. You can be happy alone."

Alone. Even that word was depressing. Maybe Kat, who had lots of hobbies and a reliable family to take care of her should something happen, could accept that kind of life, but she couldn't. Her sister was God knew

where, and her mom was never sober enough to remember her name. If her life crumbled someday, she'd have nobody and nothing to fall back on. Feeding cats, playing the piano, and reading books didn't qualify as a secure back-up plan. Having a ring on her finger did.

"Tell me how you did it. Tell me how Ashley did it. How did you two manage to find such handsome, successful, faithful men in this city?"

"Simple. We didn't try." Kat clamped her teeth shut.

"That's not an option for me. I'm too old to sit back."

"You're not old. Actually, I have a great idea. Why don't you take a break from this finding-a-soulmate business for a month? Don't meet new guys for a month. Do something else. Focus on yourself. Travel around the world."

"Write my own eat, pray, love, you mean?" Bella angled her head to the left, considering it.

Not a bad idea. Millions of love stories started with a chance meeting in some exotic city. New York might not be the greatest city to date, but who said she had to stay here? *The One* could be waiting for her in Bali, Florence, Paris...or even St. Petersburg.

Currently, she was on summer break, which was the perfect opportunity to take a vacation. Kat's suggestion couldn't possibly have come at a better time. With her savings, she could easily book a one-month Europe or Asia tour and be gone by the end of the week.

"Not writing eat, pray, love but eat, pray, travel. Remember you won't be looking for love. You'll be focusing on yourself."

"Oh, whatever."

"I'm serious. I think you need to broaden your horizons a little. You've been stuck in the dating pool for too long. As you say, it's not so great out there. So take a break from that toxicity. Even if you don't want to travel, there's a lot you can do. Sign up for an acting class. Or meditation. Actually, I'm doing that. You can sign up with me if you want."

Bella grimaced. "I don't want to meditate. I like the travel the world idea more. Lots of women find husbands abroad. One of my colleagues met her fiancé in Latvia."

"Okay, so traveling is a bad idea. You're just going to be looking for exotic men abroad." Kat stuck a spoon into the bowl of quinoa salad and spooned some onto two plates.

"And what's wrong with that? I know you love me, but you don't understand me. All I want is love. Cuddles, hugs, someone who cares about me and makes me laugh. Even if I go to meditation class, I'm gonna be looking at the cutest guy in class instead of meditating."

"Fine. Do whatever you want," Kat always gave up with the same line, "here's your dinner."

As soon as Bella's tongue touched Kat's quinoa salad, she was in heaven. "It's awesome. I could eat this all day."

"Eat, pray, love," Kat said, sarcastically.

Yeah.

Eat, pray, find love.