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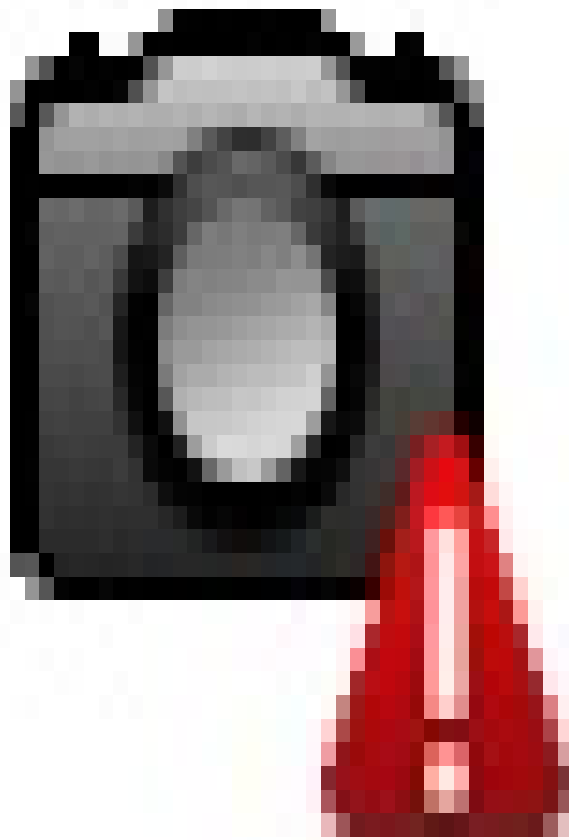
SWEET 💕 INSTALOVE 💕 COLLEGE ROMANCE

It's all about
LOVE

Workers & Queens

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Belle

Looking for a decent guy who appreciates me for more than the momentary fame of my body, I get into an unfortunate situation one night. I am immediately drawn to the unknown hero who rescues me. But when I awake the next morning, he has disappeared, unfortunately leaving no glass slipper behind with which I can identify him. All I am left with is the smell of warm leather in my nose and the memory of being safe in his arms....

Luke

I will always just be the ice hockey-playing version of a male Cinderella. There's no place for someone like me alongside a woman like Campus Queen Belle. No matter what I do for her. But chance plays us a second chance - or is it not chance at all?

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IT'S ALL ABOUT LOVE Workers & Queens

by Emily Emerald

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Chapter 1

BELLE

Every time I step out of the lecture hall building, I see my oversized butt in front of me, hanging on the illuminated billboard. It was clear to me from the start that the shoot for Finnegan Underwear would become a national advertising campaign. However, I had no idea that one of the posters would be hanging on my campus of all places.

Not only do I see my butt all the time. No, all my fellow students and professors see it too. Everyone knows I'm the girl in the colorful shorts because I'm looking over my shoulder at the photographer in the photo.

I can feel their stares following me all over campus, as if I'm walking around in skimpy shorts here, too. It disgusts me that everyone only sees my body.

"Hey Belle," a familiar voice calls from behind me as I hastily move away from the billboard to escape the inevitable voyeurs. "Wait for me."

No matter how annoyed I am, I'd do anything for my friend Raine. I stop and turn to face her. No sooner have I turned on my heel than I notice the leering gaze of a student sitting at a table in front of the coffee shop barely two feet from me, staring at my butt. There's no point in pointing out to him that he's acting like a caveman. I've tried that with others of his kind.

For the first time, I'm seriously thinking about giving up modeling. It's made me good money and financed my art studies - yet I don't want it all anymore. I've never been much for feminism, but I'm beginning to understand why some women are so vehement about it.

"How are you doing, beautiful?" Raine inquires as she catches up to me.

I pucker my lips into a smile, which I don't really feel like doing.

"Just fine, it's just that this campus full of idiots is disturbing my peace of mind."

"It's because of the ad, isn't it?" Of course, Raine has also noticed my butt in front of the building she just stepped out of. It's been hanging there since Monday afternoon, making my studying a pain.

"Yeah, an imposition," I groan.

"But your butt looks really good in the photo." Raine glances back and forth between me and the poster and nods approvingly. "Photoshopped?"

I slap her hand playfully, but I can't stop myself from laughing. Raine has a particular sense of humor. Not overbearing, but it always resonates quietly in the background. She's smart and fiercely loyal. I love her.

"Come on, let's have some hot cocoa and make some dents in your butt." She hooks up with me and drags me along. Past the coffee shop where there would have been anything she wanted. But I've long since known where she's headed.

My best friend has a fondness for this bookstore with the coffee shop and the seating area between the books. Although the coffee isn't very good, she likes it because she can stock up on new romance novels to her heart's content. Raine is an absolute romantic and literally breathes in these books.

Barely ten minutes later, I'm surrounded by books with couples on the cover and naked male bodies. Oddly enough, this puts my butt in a whole new perspective. How might these guys feel whose bodies are supposed to last the years on quite a few bookshelves?

I lift a bare man's chest from the pile and turn the book over to read the blurb. Hot fireman snowed in with nondescript librarian.

"I think you need a steady boyfriend," Raine deduces from the book in my hand.

"The book is just...," I try to explain myself, but I dismiss the idea. It's nonsensical to deny that I long for someone I have a real connection with. Someone who makes my heart beat faster and with whom I can be myself. "Oh, forget it."

"Let me into your head, Belle," she croons like the snake from The Jungle Book.

"I'm just thinking how helpful it would be to have a guy like that hanging on my arm while I walk around campus. Then maybe I won't have everyone staring at my butt. Can you believe my art history professor slipped me his number today?"

"Isn't that that bearded chain-smoking guy?"

"That's the one," I confirm. Professor Falcon is fiftyish and has the skin of someone constantly surrounded by stale heating air and cold smoke.

"It's really repulsive," Raine agrees with me.

"With a friend by my side, this wouldn't have happened to me. But I don't want just anyone, either." I let my eyes wander over the couples' covers. That's what I want. Love, security, and happiness.

"I know you that well by now." Raine raises his brows and nods at me. "Got it, we'll go to the ice hockey team's party tonight and find you a real guy."

She's remarkably quick to come around the corner with this idea—so quick, in fact, that I have to assume she's been planning it all along.

"Ice hockey, of all things? I don't know anything about that," I object.

"It doesn't matter. The guys there are tough guys who can take a few hits like that. One of them tutors with me, so I know they're celebrating season's end today. Come on, let's go!"

If Raine wants to go out once, I can't possibly deny her that wish. That kind of thing only crosses her lips once a semester at the most, because otherwise she's too busy with her books. But if she thinks she needs to bring me around so I can find someone, I like to take that opportunity to have a little fun with her. On the other hand, I think it's out of the question that I'll find a hockey player who isn't just out to get my butt.

"Okay, it's a deal! We're going out."

LUKE

The season ends too soon.

This time we didn't even make the playoffs. That's why the weekly practices and games end before the season officially ends. It gives me more time to study, but it takes away from what I enjoy the most - and my team.

On the rack in my locker, my phone vibrates once again. The other guys want to go for a few drinks to the unofficial graduation party at Cooper. It will be the last time we are all together for a long time. No matter how much these rich people parties go against my grain, I'm going to be there. It forces me out of my comfort zone to mingle with people who can all afford more than I can.

"Luke, get on with it," my team captain Daniel urges me as my gaze keeps going to my smartphone while I'm supposed to be getting dressed. Damn curiosity is going to kill me one day. At the same time, even this news won't change my life permanently. Important news doesn't come via social media - that much is clear.

"I'll be done in a minute. You take care of your hair."

My gaze briefly meets his, and I know my line has hit its soft core. Daniel is hard on the outside and filled with liquid caramel on the inside. His hair is important to him.

I'm sure he'll spend the next three minutes in front of the mirror plucking at it until everything is perfect, because there's no way he's going to show up to this party any other way.

I buy myself time with this cheap trick to check my app like a junkie. Purposefully, I grab my digital lifeline and see what the device wants from me. As almost always, it disappoints me.

A Like on one of my photos on Instagram from an old acquaintance - nothing special. Why should anything exciting happen to me, of all people? There is not much variety in my life.

I study, work, exercise, and sleep. What's going on tonight will be a highlight of my college life. It's not too often that a boy from my area gets to enjoy an invitation to a real mansion. Cooper's family lives very exclusively in Denny-Blaine on a hillside on the edge of Lake Washington, and on this night we have the house to ourselves.

"I don't know what's wrong with you, but my hair is perfect." My captain shrugs and I really need to hurry up now.

"Does the shirt work?" The question is actually redundant, because it's the only t-shirt in my range that isn't washed out on the one hand, and isn't in the wash at the same time. I can't be bothered to do my laundry again until the weekend. I just work too much and it's not the first time I've noticed something like that. Besides, I don't have a change of clothes here.

"Sure. It's just a party," judges Daniel, who cares surprisingly little about the fact that I'm the only player on the team who has to work to afford to go to college. "Everyone will be drunk, and it doesn't matter at all what you're wearing as long as no one throws up all over you."

Heady prospects.

"Let's do this." I raise my hand as if holding a beer bottle in it to toast. "Here's to a great night and no one puking all over our shirts."

"Yeah!"

Chapter 2

BELLE

Cast-iron lanterns magically illuminate the hillside garden of the villa in Denny-Blaine. The sites in this central lakeside neighborhood don't leave much room for individual design. They all have distinct slopes and, despite their exorbitant prices, are not exactly generously proportioned.

Here, the owners have made the most of the opportunities. Local rock alternates with hardy plants. The paths are framed with topiary and the eye always has something to explore.

When my mother was alive, we had a home like this, but after her death, to my displeasure, my father couldn't trade it in fast enough for an apartment in the city. Within a few weeks, I lost not only my mother but also my home.

I tear my gaze away from the past and turn to Raine, who strides up the driveway to the stairs beside me.

"Who lives here?"

"I don't know. Someone on the team, I guess."

She shrugs. I've managed, with some difficulty, to persuade her to wear something from my closet for the occasion. Otherwise, she probably would have come in her usual T-shirt and jeans, which looks just as great on her, but just isn't quite the right outfit for a party at a mansion. She wears her dark blonde hair down and slightly wavy.

My blondere mane is straightened and shines with the moon around the bet. Since I'm trying not to stand out too much, I chose a simple black sheath dress and sparkly black pumps that I feel comfortable in. Who knows, maybe to my surprise I will meet a great guy tonight after all....

As we enter, only a few heads turn to look at us. I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm not at all comfortable with my temporary prominence on campus, and I'm happy for any moment I can disappear into the crowd. My friend waves to a guy who also gestures a silent hello.

"I'll get us a drink," Raine offers. "Wait here, will you?"

Lost in thought, I nod and look around the house. I stand in an imposing atrium with tiny quirks that tell me this building has a story to tell. All old houses preserve memories of the lives that were lived in them. Something like that has fascinated me since I was a kid. Our house was a little smaller, but it too had an exciting history.

A wide curved staircase leads up to the two wings of the upper floor, but I don't plan to go up there this evening. At private parties, there are always couples near the bedrooms who can't keep their hands off each other. That's not for me. I'm not a couple, after all....

After a few minutes Raine is at my side again. She beams over both ears and presses a glass into my hand. "They have real champagne here. Man, that's rad."

I smirk at her comment. Both my job and my family's celebrations often feature champagne, so it's nowhere near as special for me. But her enthusiasm is contagious and I love to see her glee.

"Hey, welcome to our party," a tall dark-haired guy with broad shoulders greets us. "I see you guys already have something to drink. Enjoy the evening and if you need anything, contact our host Cooper..." He points to another tall dark-haired guy standing in the doorway to the kitchen. "Or to me. I'm Daniel, captain of the team."

"Thank you Daniel," I return, toasting Raine. "Here's to a sweet evening."

"That was a sweet one, wasn't it?" Raine asks me as Daniel disappears into the crowd.

It's impossible for me to give a blanket answer to that question. Does she want to know if I think he's good, or does she want permission to adore him herself? I'm not going to make any claims. If there's a spark between me and a guy, I'm sure I'll notice it without worrying about how I feel about him.

"I don't know. Do you think he's cute?"

"I don't know. It's not like I'm looking for a boyfriend." She continues to look around eagerly, but that's not going to solve it. It's

not just the looks that have to appeal to me in a man.

"Don't try so hard, honey," I advise her. "Either lightning strikes or it doesn't. It's as simple as that."

LUKE

"Do you need another beer?" inquires Cooper, who is completely at ease in his role as host.

I nod and try to hide my amazement at the obscene luxury from him. For someone like me, it's not completely normal to move around in houses where the residents wouldn't meet for weeks if they put their minds to it. I come from an apartment building where no one knows each other by name, but everyone can hear everyone's habits through the walls.

I know when the guy on the floor above us has to go to the bathroom and that the fat cat of the neighbor below our apartment always scratches at the balcony door at 2:37 in the morning. How do I know that? Because it's my door he scratches at, because he either has a lousy sense of direction or sadistic pleasure in annoying me of all people. Son of a bitch!

He probably got the biggest kick out of me moving out last summer.

At least no one makes me feel like I don't belong here today. At some point, the mood often tips at these parties. I've seen them pick a victim late at night and finish them off often enough, and I don't plan on putting myself in their crosshairs today. By the time they do, I'll be long gone.

The man from our second-line attack headquarters hands me an iced bottle from some sort of oversized champagne holder, and I toast him.

"Next season we're going for the championship, man!" announces Cooper, putting an arm around Daniel's shoulder, who is just coming back into the kitchen. "You hear?"

Our captain nods. His transfigured look tells me he's already had more than two beers and someone somewhere must have been throwing shots around. I'm not sorry I wasn't around at the time.

Those things turn me into a helpless wreck within minutes that someone has to carry home, and maybe I'll puke on his shirt in thanks for it.

That image Daniel conjured up in the locker room will probably never leave my head.

There are a lot of attractive girls among the guests. Everyone but the three of us seems to have one of them hooked. Being single on a college team can definitely have its advantages, but I'm not one to take advantage.

Until a few months ago, I was in steady hands. Then those hands dropped me for another guy. It's a bitter experience that I've been slow to get over.

She had been the girl by my side since high school until she decided she didn't want to be that anymore. College changed us and I understand that it couldn't last forever with us.

I really do understand.

Still, I think of her often. Especially on nights like this, when I'm standing at a party with a beer in my hand and casual couples form around me. I don't want her back. That much is clear to me by now. I'm not a fan of reheated food - although... really, I shouldn't be so picky about food when it's free.

On the patio, there's a group of guys who aren't part of the team. They're gathered around an attractive blonde. I catch a glimpse of the girl's profile and immediately recognize her as our college belle.

The name says it all.

Everyone on campus knows her. Her body is a little more familiar than her face, but that's probably because her incredible legs and tight butt are the focus of the billboard that takes up the oversized advertising wall in front of the main building.

I have no idea what the photo is advertising, but I'm sure any of us would buy it if we could take our eyes off her. It's just that no one can. At least no one I know.

My mood that night is dampened for so many reasons. There are my teammates who will be spending this summer at various training camps up north, while I have to stay here cleaning cars in the summer heat.

My scholarship is only enough for the tuition fees and the tiny room in the dormitory. I have to pay for everything else myself.

I love ice hockey. The upcoming summer months are a special challenge for me every year. The heat gets to me and I don't have the sporting balance I need when my team isn't practicing. Then there are the upcoming exams, which will have to go much better this semester than last.

Instead, my team will be meeting up with their peers - all rich guys who have a thousand ways to spend their free time. A thousand possibilities that are denied to me. I'm not in the sailing club, the tennis club or the rowing club. At most, I belong to the club of outsiders, although they let me be part of the team during the season.

Whoever is in a good mood under these conditions gets a medal from me.

I let my gaze roam over the guests again and once more get stuck on Belle and her admirers. She walks away from the group on wobbly legs and I don't understand why no one accompanies her. A girl shouldn't be alone in this condition.

Chapter 3

LUKE

As if in a trance, I grab my old leather jacket and follow her. I can only guess where she has gone. Actually, it's none of my business at all.

I don't know what got into me at that moment. I turn the next corner and there I see her.

Belle is leaning against the wall in a daze. Everything about this picture seems out of place to me. I can't imagine her, of all people, drinking herself senseless. I step closer and tap her gently against the shoulder.

"Hey, did you drink too much?"

She's unhealthily pale. I've never seen her like this before.

"No," she mutters, shaking her head so vehemently I can't help but believe her.

"What's wrong?" The strange feeling in my chest increases. Something is absolutely wrong here. "Do you need a doctor? Did you take something?"

Her hands reach for me. One hand misses the fabric of my jacket and I reach out to keep her from falling.

"Please, get me out of here."

I nod and put an arm around her slender waist. A waist I never thought I would one day touch. Belle, who is usually so upright, seems fragile and weak at this moment. It is as if she were a different person. No longer the dazzling model so many guys think of when they shower.

"Can you walk?"

"Not so good." Her words are hard to understand. Only when I focus completely on her do I realize what she's trying to tell me. "My

legs are... funny."

"Your legs are beautiful, but there's something wrong with the rest of you," I mumble more to myself than to her. "Hold on to me."

I have no idea if getting her out into the fresh air will help, but I don't have a better idea at the moment. Together we step out into the garden. It's surprisingly bright outside, even though the sun has long set. My gaze wanders to the moon, which stands radiant in the sky above us. It is a beautiful night by the lake, but the woman at my side is barely conscious.

"Now what?" Slowly, panic rises in me. "I'll call an ambulance."

"No, please don't. Take my car," I hear Belle whisper close to my ear.

Since I don't assume she's going to give it to me, I guess I'm supposed to drive her home in it. That's the end of the party and the end of the season. But the decision is still not difficult for me. I could never leave her to her own devices in this condition. Here she is defenseless.

I grab the key she hands me and stuff it into my pants pocket so I have both hands free again to support her. She finds it increasingly difficult to walk, and that worries me.

We join forces to reach the parking area next to the house and I press the radio remote. Fortunately, one of the carts flashes open and I manage to maneuver her into the passenger seat and strap her in without sexually assaulting her - which sounds easier than it really is.

"Where to?" I ask curtly. I have no idea where she lives, and I'm certainly not going to take her to my place. She'd think something of me tomorrow morning if I did, and I could be looking forward to a disciplinary hearing.

No way. Then my scholarship and my place on the team would be history.

I'd rather park the car outside a hospital and wipe my fingerprints off every surface. I'd still rather be able to take her home and place her in the care of anyone she trusts.

Belle no longer speaks. Either she's fallen asleep or unconscious - in either state she's not much help to me. I reach for her glittery

purse and fish out an ID card with an address. We've got a winner, baby!

The address is close to campus and I know where to go.

Her car has real gears. I'm familiar with that by now thanks to my job. I put it in gear and let the gas come. The car responds lively and my feet tingle. The powerful engine and the chance to drive the car more than a few parking spaces excite me.

Despite the possibly unconscious beauty in the seat next to me, it's fun to drive this car. So at least I get one more pleasure that night. I manage to block out my surroundings for a few minutes. I smile, but then out of the corner of my eye I see the helpless girl next to me again and pull myself together.

I'm sure the evening isn't a highlight for her either. If she hasn't drunk too much or voluntarily poured herself something, I might have been there just in time to save her from a bad ending. Even if she will never thank me, I know I did the right thing.

At the address on her ID card, I park the car in a parking bay.

"Hey Belle, we're home."

She mumbles something and I sigh in relief because I guess she didn't pass out after all. Briskly, I walk around to the passenger side, put her arm around my neck, and lift her out of the seat.

"Come on, help me a little. We're almost there."

She bravely puts one leg in front of the other, even though she is anything but steady as she does so. I use her key and unlock the front door. Wonderful, no elevator!

I have no choice but to take her in my arms and carry her up the stairs. She's light, but I decide to chalk this activity up to exercise anyway. Once upstairs, no one responds to my ringing, so I also open the door to her apartment on my own.

"Hello?" I call into the quiet apartment, hoping to wake up some roommate. But there is no one here but us.

As with Cooper, everything in this apartment is exquisite. The colors of the furniture match and thick carpets muffle every sound of our footsteps. Belle lives luxuriously compared to me, but quite dignified compared to Cooper's parents' house. Either her modeling job pays extraordinarily well or she has rich parents - like so many at Wilson College.

"You're a nice guy," Belle slurs as I lay her limp body on the sprawling sofa in the living room. "Will you give me your number?"

"Yeah, sure," I mumble, doubting she'll remember any of this tomorrow.

I don't want to invade her privacy any deeper by looking for her bedroom. The sofa looks comfortable enough to spend the next few hours on. My gaze grazes a vase decorated with intricate lines on a black sideboard. "And you're sure I can leave you alone? Is there anyone you'd like me to call?"

"It's okay. I just need to sleep."

I'm not entirely sure she's right about that, but I'm not her doctor or her father, so I keep my mouth shut. The evening is over for me, but at least no one threw up all over me.

BELLE

The light of a young day illuminates my bedroom. Even my sleepy brain notices that there is something wrong with this picture. It should not be so bright here. I open my eyes and find the cause of the problem. Instead of being in the bedroom, I am on the couch. But why?

With difficulty I search my memory, but all I remember from last night is the smell of warm leather and the feeling of security. I have no clue what happened or how I got home.

But I am warm and safe on my own couch under one of my cozy blankets. A movie break could definitely end worse.

Even my car made it home safe and sound, and there's a note under the key telling me where it's parked. But who brought me here? And why can't I remember anything?

None of this is on the handwritten note.

My purse is on the same sideboard as the note and the car key. My phone is still there - on it several calls and messages from Raine. In her last message, she even threatens to call the police, so I immediately contact her.

"Belle, what happened?" she greets me.

"Hey," I reply, stretching. My head is pounding a little, something I haven't noticed in the silence of my apartment until now. I put the phone on speaker so I don't have to hold it against my ear.

"Is everything okay?" she fires the next question at me before I've digested the first.

"I think so. Someone must have brought me home last night," I explain, trying to glue together the bits and pieces my head is still spitting out.

"What happened? You were suddenly gone. I was only in the kitchen for a few minutes." I can hear in her voice that she's blaming herself, yet it couldn't possibly have been her fault.

"Raine, it's all right," I assure her, though I don't really know that myself. "I must have had a fainting spell. Must not have eaten all day again."

With that, I serve a prejudice that everyone wants to believe in anyway. Maybe it's true. I try to reconstruct what I ate, but even my memory of the day is in a fog.

"I looked for you, but you had disappeared and no one could tell me where you went."

This is not good news. I had hoped to find out, through her or other party guests, who the mystery guy was who took me and my car home. I want to at least thank him for taking care of me when I couldn't do it myself.

"I'm sorry."

My brain doesn't spit out any images. But I know intuitively that we're both better off believing my story. What must have really happened, I don't even want to imagine.

Fortunately, someone had enough decency and sense to drive me home and make sure I was safe. I pull the blanket tightly around my shoulders because I shudder at the thought of the alternative.

"It's okay, I'm just glad you're okay."

My gaze falls to the clock above the doorframe and my heart skips a beat. I have an appointment to shoot for a client in a few minutes and I can almost feel my agent's ass kicking.

"Raine, I've got to go. Work is waiting. Can you come by this afternoon?"

"Sure, anytime. I don't have anything special planned today. Call me when you get off work!"

"Will do," I return as I slip into fresh clothes and press the button to hang up.

Since I have to change right back on site anyway, it doesn't matter what I wear. A sweatshirt and leggings will have to do. A headache tablet against the unpleasant droning in my skull bubbles in the water glass. A glance in the mirror reveals that I don't look quite as wrecked as I feel. So I can drive off straight away.

Chapter 4

BELLE

I'm completely wiped out when I get back to the apartment after my shoot, but I don't plan on leaving my girlfriend hanging.

Raine will worry about me until she's had a chance to see for herself that I'm okay. She should be here any minute with our dinner. Just enough time for me to jump in the shower for a minute.

On the way to the bathroom, the handwritten note catches my eye again. In angular capital letters, its terse message is written on a sheet of my own notepad. How I wish I knew who he is....

I have a feeling it would be worth my while to meet him. However, I have no memory of his face or name. All I have is the smell of warm leather in my nose and that will hardly get me far.

I let this last memory of the previous night disappear in a drawer of the sideboard. Raine would ask questions about the evening that I don't want to answer.

The hot shower gets me going again a little, but I'm still convinced I won't make it through an entire movie with my best friend on the couch. Maybe we'll just watch a show for dinner and I'll go to bed early.

I'm wearing only a fluffy towel that smells intensely of my favorite fabric softener when the doorbell already rings. I'm used to indiscretions from my job, so I open my apartment door without shame.

"Hey, I'm so glad to see you with my own eyes." Raine rushes in and hugs me while still holding the bags from the Asian takeaway we so often get something from.

"It's really all good," I assure her, "Nothing to worry about. I'm sorry I ruined the party for you with my hasty exit."

"It's okay." She waves it off and the subject is closed. Her eyes slide down me once and back up again. "Do you want to stay like that or put some more clothes on?"

I smirk and warp into the bedroom to put on a suitable outfit for our ladies' night. After a moment's hesitation, I decide on a pair of loose shorts and an oversized t-shirt with a sloth on it to match my mood.

"Unbelievable," Raine declares shaking his head as I step into the living room. "You even look stunning in them."

"Oh, nonsense." I feel anything but stunning. Exhausted and subtly shaken is much more accurate of my mood.

"I guess our plan to find you a suitable guy really went to shit," she sums up as she sinks the chopsticks into the takeaway box. "What now?"

"I don't know." I shrug. After all, she doesn't yet know how much a certain guy has been haunting my thoughts since this morning, whose face I just can't seem to grasp.

However, if I confess to her that I can't remember what happened, she'll worry even more. But if I don't tell her I'm looking for the guy, no one can help me at all. The party wasn't so big that someone can disappear unnoticed. Especially not me.

"Say, Raine, can we do a test?" I start hesitantly, because I'm not quite sure how to finish this train of thought yet.

"What kind of test?" She gives me a confused look, but at least doesn't seem suspicious.

"Can we check how well our fellow students are looking out for each other?" Within seconds, I'm painting a scenario to motivate her to look for my hero, oblivious to my helplessness last night. "Can you tell your acquaintance from the party yesterday that you can't find me anywhere since yesterday and want to know who I disappeared with?"

"Don't you think that sounds a little strange? Like you're easy..." My best friend is the best person in the world and cares more about my reputation than I do.

"Maybe, but I'd really like to know if I really did disappear unnoticed. Someone must have noticed what was going on... How can you go to a party like that again when you know no one cares about you?"

It's mean of me to play on her own concerns, but I need to know. And maybe my objection isn't so far-fetched. What if next time it's her or another girl?

"Okay, if that's what you want. I'll call him." She shrugs and peers into my box. "You're not eating anything."

"Sorry, I'm still totally under the influence," I try to talk myself out of it. Actually, I don't have an appetite, but I can't claim on the one hand that I fell over the day before because I don't eat enough and then eat nothing again. So I start shoveling food into my body. It will be good for something. Contrary to popular belief, I'm not afraid of calories.

Raine pulls out her phone, holds it to her ear, and I listen intently.

"Hey," she greets the person on the other end of the line. "Sorry I'm interrupting, but I'm looking for my friend Belle. She was at your party with me yesterday and has since disappeared. I haven't been able to reach her all day. Do you know if she went home with anyone?"

She's doing just fine, but I'm already dreading the moment I have to tell her the truth. I can't lie to her. She deserves better. At some point, I'm going to have to tell her the truth. It's already gnawing at me.

A few endless seconds pass and I wait anxiously for the answer. Her story matches what she told me about last night.

She was asking around then too, but at that time no one took her question that seriously. Now it looks different.

"Okay, too bad. Can you maybe ask some of your friends for me? Maybe I'm a little hysterical, but I'm afraid something happened to her. She's not usually like this."

Again, she's quiet for a moment.

"Thanks." She sets the phone aside and looks at me urgently, as if she can see inside my head. "So, now you owe me. So how about the truth?"

I tear my eyes open and stare at her.

"Well, do you think I'm buying this act? I played along because it seems important to you, but you don't think I left my brains at the door, do you?"

"Okay, I was going to tell you anyway..." Sighing, I set the box on the coffee table and sink into the cushions. "It looks like someone slipped something into one of my drinks yesterday. I only had two glasses of champagne and I wasn't supposed to black out from that. I did, though. Someone must have found me and brought me home. So I can't imagine anyone didn't notice either."

Raine puts her box down as well and tilts her head to the side, as if she can hear me better then. Absurd, but she does that a lot.

"If they all say they didn't see anything, I don't want you going out with those people again," I clarify. Her questioning look prompts me to elaborate on the thought. "Then they're all in cahoots. I don't want to believe that, but how else can it be explained? They can't be covering for someone who's drugging girls... That's..."

"Unbelievable!" she jumps in for me, and I nod vigorously.

I don't want to have to believe in a world where everyone is hostile. But if no one wants to have seen anything when a campus celebrity collapses at a party and gets dragged out by someone, then I can only believe that they're all covering for the perpetrator. And that my hero might even be one of them....

"Let's wait and see what answers come back. I'm sure my student is pulling out all the stops."

Her optimism transfers at least a little to me and I can breathe more freely again. Still, I march to the window and yank it wide open. I need fresh air and a clearer head. Since yesterday, everything feels like it's been wrapped in absorbent cotton.

"Do you still want to find a boyfriend?"

I can't answer that question off the top of my head. My thoughts drift back to the anonymous Savior. Someone like him is someone I would like to have by my side. But in my current situation, that seems hopeless. I sigh deeply and audibly.

"Yes, I do. But in the current situation, how am I supposed to meet a guy who isn't only interested in my body? At least as long as my butt is on that billboard, I really have to be careful. Something like yesterday definitely can't happen to me again."

When I imagine what could have happened if someone had taken advantage of my helpless situation, I feel sick to my stomach.

I can't possibly accept drinks from a stranger again, or let my glass out of my sight....

"Hmm. That probably only works if your chosen one doesn't know what you look like beforehand."

I'm relieved that she takes my problems seriously. Others would probably think I'm stupid for not wanting to take advantage of my looks in dating. It's enough for me if the well-groomed appearance pays the rent.

Raine puts her finger to her lips and thinks for a few seconds. If my problem is unsolvable even for her, I guess I'll have to wait for fate to intervene.

"Online dating!"

"Nah, I'm not a Tinder dating girl."

"Online dating sites can be so much more than places where people go on dates for spontaneous sex. There are just as many guys who are seriously looking for someone."

"Is that statistic backed up by anything?" I can't help but make this point, but I really don't think a dating site is a good idea. My friend shakes her head with a smirk.

"Are you on one of those dating sites?"

"No, of course not."

"Then why should I try?"

"Because unlike me, you're looking for a boyfriend! And if you sign up with someone else's photo, for example, no one will know you're behind the profile."

That's a point that actually has some merit. I'd be hard pressed to do that offline. Everyone would just see the girl from the poster.

"Can I take one of you?"

"Whatever. Maybe someone will fall madly in love with my pretty eyes..."

"I'm sure someone will soon, but I was thinking of one of the shots we took the other day for my art project."

You can't see much of her face in the photos from a session a few weeks ago. The images glow with colored lights. There's a red spotlight on her from the left, and a blue one from the right. Raine is only visible as a dark shadow. If we had photographed me in this way, probably no one would recognize me either. But safe is safe.

LUKE

"Wake up, kid," my boss admonishes me, because my mind just isn't on the job today. How could I? I wonder if she's okay and what actually happened to her at the party. Maybe I should have called a doctor after all, or at least stayed with her....

Everything seems so unrealistic in my memory - as if I had fallen asleep and just imagined the whole evening, but it wasn't like that, was it?

"There's a luxury car coming, go lather it up!", Sal instructs me. I see the flawless red paint on the classy body rolling toward me.

These expensive cars look nice, but they're always a risk at our facility, which is why my boss insists on washing them only by hand. Their owners are often arrogant bigwigs and get upset over scratches that no one but them can see.

Of course, Sal Giardino doesn't wash them himself. After all, that's what he has employees like me for.

My tension rises every time I have to clean such a car. But last night I rode in one myself and the experience was pretty cool - at least if you block out what the overall circumstances were.

Two girls are sitting in the European limo, talking animatedly. None of them pay any attention to me.

The female driver hands me the amount of money for the laundry out the window and doesn't even really look at me. She immediately turns back to her companion and raises the window.

Maybe it's better if the girls don't scrutinize me too closely during working hours. My muscle shirt is already wet and stained from the first three hours of my shift, and let's face it, the job at the car wash is far from sexy... Besides, like Belle, they're in a league that's out of my reach.

I carefully lather the car's rims with the long-handled soft brush. It vibrates in my pocket.

It's the third time during this shift and I don't get a chance to check who texted me. It almost drives me crazy every time, but work is good therapy to get a handle on this unhealthy obsession.

Maybe I need one of those digital detoxes everyone keeps blathering about. The people who really do it, though, have personal lives to devote themselves to instead of the digital world....

Okay, it's sick and I'm pretty sure I should see a therapist about it, but I couldn't afford one right now anyway. So I remain addicted to this little monster and long for my end of the day to be able to check my messages.

Chapter 5

BELLE

Instead of sleeping early in the evening, as was my plan, I continue to netflix my favorite show Hart of Dixie after Raine's departure and catch myself opening the new app. We set up my profile together on my phone after dinner.

Actually, I'm only doing it because I haven't heard back from Raine yet. I'm still hoping someone will get back to her as soon as possible and provide at least a rough description of my hero.

As much as I doubted him earlier, I now believe that he meant no harm. Would I have such a good feeling about him if he had done anything to me?

No, I believe that he is the good guy in this game and that for some reason he didn't want to be recognized. Maybe he is not stunning looking - that may be so, but it is not the deciding factor. It's the feeling alone that counts, because true love is blind.

This dating app is the opposite of that. Everything is oriented around posed photos. From the profiles, I always get a big picture displayed first before it tells me anything about the person behind the photo.

I narrow down the search to men from the area who are my age. I can't specify my search criteria more clearly at first, because I don't care if he's blond, redhead, or bald. The other filters also mean nothing to me at first.

I quickly encounter familiar faces from the campus. I certainly don't want to get to know any of them better. I know how they look at me and that saliva drips from their chins when I turn my back to them.

It's repugnant to me to be just an object all the time. Maybe there are women who would be happy to be appreciated by a man for their

beauty, but I want someone who sees more in me. And if I'm honest, I have no idea if that's even in me. What if I'm really just this pretty shell and there's nothing more there to love me for?

Beauty is fleeting - no one knows that better than me.

My mother was a beautiful woman until, from one moment to the next, she wasn't. A careless movement. One accident through no fault of her own is enough to destroy everything. Neither she nor my dad could handle that. He left her and she left us. Forever.

When she was beautiful, relied on her to always be. I realize, however, that I won't have that pretty face and slim young body forever. I will spare myself her disappointment and sad fate at any cost, even if it means staying alone.

I continue to scroll through the profiles. One photo finally gives me pause. It's pretty, but that's not why my finger doesn't move across the screen. There's something different. Something in his look is different from the other guys whose profiles I've wandered over before. What it is, I won't know as long as I just stare at the picture.

There's hardly anything about him on his profile. Mysterious - that's what I like.

My alternatives for action on the platform are limited. Either I add him to my favorites, I write him a message, or I do nothing.

Because the first option seems too superficial and I feel I might miss something if I just wipe him aside, I opt for the message.

LUKE

With my textbooks, I squat in our communal kitchen down the hall in the evening and try to focus on the subject matter. The stuff has to get into my head somehow, but there's only room in it for dull thoughts about Belle at the moment.

I scribble illegible notes in my pad and tear the page out again when I realize that nothing on that page is valuable to me. Two of my roommates are also sitting in front of their books, looking only slightly more productive than I am. Diego gives me a look and grins.

"What are you doing?" he inquires.

"Accounting. Is there anything more daunting?" My head is already smoking from all the numbers.

"Yes," he explains, pointing to the cover of his book. "English literature."

Leah also lifts her eyes from her papers and manages to stop me from objecting with a piercing stare.

"Oh, come on Leah!" on the other hand, escapes Diego.

"What is it?" I would have expected her to run off to her room in a huff rather than engage in a war of words with him, but I was obviously wrong about her.

"Relax for five seconds. It's not going to kill you."

"How do you know?" she fires back.

"Unlike you, I know about relaxing."

I've been watching this game between the two of them more often lately and wonder if there's something going on.

My phone vibrates on the table and I see a red circle above the dating app I wanted to delete long ago. Months ago, I signed up there to get over my ex. The app didn't do anything, but I still kind of digested the breakup.

Now I hardly ever look at it anymore.

Actually, I don't care anymore if some girl adds me to her favorites and then hopes I'll get in touch and ask her out to dinner. I know what happens after that. They never get back in touch and that's why I don't play that game anymore.

I'm tired of the gold diggers. For them I am the wrong man!

I pack up my books and leave my roommates to continue arguing on their own. It's not until I get to my room that I look at the app. To my amazement, it's not a new favorites message but a real message. This is definitely special. No one I know bothers to message anyone until they've both favorite each other.

OffbeatSunlight03 writes:

Something about you is different. How is it?

The text isn't very fancy, but at least it doesn't sound like a scam. That's the only reason why I click on OffbeatSunlight03's profile.

On the photo I recognize only long dark hair and a slim figure. Nothing gives me cause for a compliment. Nevertheless I write back.

hey247 writes:

Good. I've been trying to study a little, but I can't get anything in my head right now. How are you doing?

OffbeatSunlight03 writes:

Not really my day today if I'm honest. But it's going to be alright. Sitting at home watching Netflix. My best friend just left.

I like that she's so open about what's going on in her life, even though she doesn't even know me. Maybe she's worth me giving her a few minutes of my time. I don't have anything better to do right now anyway.

I pile my papers carelessly on the cluttered desk that prevents me from studying in my room and throw myself belly-down on the bed.

BELLE

I catch myself smirking and look up from my display. I've only caught the last episode of my favorite show in passing, though not much else can keep me from following the adventures of young doctor Zoe Hart and her men.

It's pretty late in the day, but this stranger is fun to write with. His humor is special and he hits mine.

In his first few messages, I was still afraid he might say something stupid or superficial that would immediately disqualify him. But he doesn't.

I don't get any compliments on my looks - or on Raine's silhouette. So either she doesn't meet his taste or he's not a guy who gives much to appearances. That's the kind of guy I'm looking for, but I know how rare they are - they're the last unicorns in a world full of horses.

So it's much more likely that he doesn't particularly like Raine, but then why is he writing? Because the question won't let me go, I'll just

ask it to him.

OffbeatSunlight03 writes:

What does a woman have to have for you to find her interesting?

Raine is right. I don't have anything to lose. He doesn't even know I'm behind the picture. I could be anyone. Even a hunchbacked bell ringer from Notre Dame. Not 20 seconds pass and a new message from him puts a smile on my face.

hey247 writes:

I like women who don't quantify inner values in dollars.

He is direct. I totally find myself in his words. He is also looking for the unicorn among horses.

I gather from his attitude that he doesn't have much money, but maybe I'm wrong. If he thought I wasn't pretty just because I'm looking for a man who doesn't just find my looks attractive, he would definitely be wrong.

Objectively speaking, I am very pretty. At least my looks earn me enough to afford this apartment and the degree of my choice. That must mean something, but it also doesn't have to please everyone. Whoever is looking for a small black-haired woman will probably not be happy with me if looks are important to him.

Likewise, I could be completely off with my assessment and he could be a super rich guy who just doesn't want girls to chase him because of his wealth. But I don't care what his bank balance says. I'd much rather find out more about his personality....

OffbeatSunlight03 writes:

I'm sure there's a lot of that out there. Why are you still single?

hey247 writes:

There aren't that many and the few I've met so far have had little understanding that there are other things in my life besides just them.

Now it is getting interesting. Maybe I'll get closer to the core here and know for sure right away why I don't want it. Then I can finally go back to daydreaming and fantasizing about the mysterious hero in leather.

This whole dating app thing is not my thing. Just like the party the night before, I only agreed and gave it a shot for Raine's sake. She just wants what's best for me and if she thinks it is, I'll play along.

OffbeatSunlight03 writes:

I see. What are those things?

Not knowing anything about someone else is delightful. Every new piece of information is a discovery and just about anything can happen. Even though I'm not into online dating, I have to acknowledge that this excitement is kind of titillating.

hey247 writes:

Sports, work, my studies. All these things have a high value in my life. Not every woman can handle that. How is it with you? Why are you here?

This counter-question was unavoidable. There are so many ways to answer it that I think for a while for my decision. At some point, I even think about what he might be thinking while I'm not answering... What nonsense!

OffbeatSunlight03 writes:

I'm looking for a unicorn and my best friend thinks I could find one online. I don't know if that's true or not yet. I just signed up today.

It won't be long before I get an answer from my chat partner.

hey247 writes:

And then you write to me of all people? Why?

There was something in his look that caught my attention. In his words I find myself 100%. But there was especially this one

sentence in his profile that convinced me to write him immediately.

OffbeatSunlight03 writes:

Because I don't dance either. Where do you think my name comes from?

Chapter 6

LUKE

On Tuesday morning I hardly slept again, because I was lying in bed with my phone in my hand for far too long, writing to this girl.

If she hadn't said goodnight at some point and stopped responding to me, I might have stayed up all night.

Either my addiction to the phone is now so great that I grasp at any straw, or there's something about this girl that attracts me like a moth to a flame.

This has been going on since Saturday.

Today I lack all energy and am already completely stuck in my second lecture.

"What's going on? Did you go to a party last night that I don't know about?" inquires Diego, who is also in my English class.

"No, but I couldn't sleep."

"Why?" He smells a mystery ten meters away against the wind.

I'm not one of those people who doesn't want to let others keep their secrets-unlike Diego himself. He's one of my best friends, but I still don't know if I want to trust him with the reason for my insomnia.

"My mind was elsewhere," I brush him off for now.

This girl wasn't trying to lure me with her physical charms. I don't even really know what she looks like.

She didn't fall for my little test either, when she could have asked why it bothers me when women are only after money. But she didn't even do that around three corners. Instead, she accepted my statement and asked me what else was going on in my life.

Even today, she occupies all the thoughts I try to focus. It is hopeless. I will not be able to focus in this lecture.

Somewhere around here, she should actually be. She told me she is also a student at Wilson College. Constantly, my eyes scan the room, looking for someone who looks like her.

My search comes up empty. It could be almost anyone and yet I know it is not one of them. If she stands before me, I will recognize her. For some reason, I am firmly convinced of that.

"Are you looking for someone?"

Diego tries again to engage me in conversation and get behind my secrets. If I didn't really like him, I wouldn't tell him anything anymore, but I also know he's completely trustworthy.

He has never told anything that I have confided in him. On the flip side, he's also never blabbed an indiscretion about someone else who was mad at him for it afterwards. Everybody loves him.

"Yeah, kind of."

A hiss sounds behind us. I turn to face a group of striving students who are asking us to be quiet while the professor delivers his monologue at the blackboard. Yet today's material is just a repeat from last month.

"Who?" he whispers, also taking a precautionary look around the lecture hall.

"A girl I met online a few days ago," I admit quietly, not wanting the other students around us to overhear.

"Uhh, a beautiful stranger?" His exaggerated Spanish accent drags the statement into ridicule.

"Oh, forget it," I wave it off. He knows I won't hold it against him. Actually, I didn't want to talk about her anyway, because there's nothing to talk about. I don't know this girl at all.

"No, tell me more about her!" He doesn't let me off the hook. "Come on, let's get out of here!"

As soon as the room door closes behind me in the early afternoon, I pull the phone out of my pocket and text her. She hasn't gotten back to me on her own, which makes me a little uneasy. We weren't dating and I have no idea what our status is, but I'm definitely interested by now.

hey247 writes:

What are you up to today? How has your day been so far?

Several minutes pass with me staring at the display like a zombie. Either she's busy or she doesn't feel like writing me today.

Both would be okay, I try to convince myself. But it doesn't work.

It wouldn't be okay if she didn't want to write me anymore. I really enjoy talking to her. She is something special.

I click on her profile and memorize the features the photo shows. The dark hair frames her soft features. In the shadowy half-profile, I make out a small nose and the beginnings of thin lips.

As I reluctantly get ready for work, I suspect my phone will burn a hole in my pocket if it vibrates even once. It will torment me like my own personal hell loop because I won't be able to check who texted me the entire shift. I'll spend the whole time wondering if it's her or just some guy trying to copy my notes from Chemistry.

When I get into my work boots at the car wash, she still hasn't written. But then the unbelievable happens. The longed-for red icon on the app appears. I click on it immediately.

OffbeatSunlight03 writes:

Just fine. I had class until just now. Are you trying to deprive me of my beauty sleep again today?

"Luke, where are you?" I hear Sal yell after me and I try to brush him off.

"Be right there. I just need to put my shoes on."

Hopefully he doesn't come in and realize that my shoes are doing great, but I'm still tied to my phone. He hates it when I shirk work, which I can kind of understand, but I can't help it.

"Hurry up, the line is getting longer!"

hey247 writes:

I have to work now. Can I call you later? Can you give me your number? Please.

I don't want to beg because that's pathetic, but I need her number.

Tonight I need to hear her voice, want to know what it sounds like when she laughs and want to hear the silence when she ponders an answer.

Damn it, I'm already addicted to her!

If I don't take very good care of my heart, this thing is going to end badly.

"Luke, where are you? The customers are waiting!" growls Sal again in his gruff way and this time he sounds dangerously close.

He doesn't mean any harm, but he likes to mime the guy with the rough exterior.

"I'm coming, boss!", I reply.

The smartphone disappears into my deepest pocket for the next three hours, and I'll be on pins and needles until my shift is over and I find out if she wants to talk to me on the phone, too.

BELLE

"Nothing. Nobody knows anything. If you were really gone, I wouldn't have found you again." Raine sits cross-legged on my sofa. The expression on her face leaves no doubt of her measureless disappointment at the outcome of our experiment.

"This is really unbelievable. Do you think they're all in cahoots?"

I don't want to believe that. That would mean that my hero is one of them. To a crowd that looks the other way when something happens that shouldn't.

"Impossible," she denies vehemently. "I can't imagine that. Maybe they really didn't notice anything. Was it perhaps in a dark corner, or did you go out alone and outside..."

"It's idle to ponder." I can't remember those minutes. I'm missing whole hours.

"Do you think they hate me that much?" I ask the question weighing on my soul.

"Bullshit, why would anyone hate you?"

"I don't know. Envy? Resentment? I don't want to have to imagine it, but I'm afraid what happened to me was a targeted attack. It was in my glass and my body."

Raine is silent. The realization I just formulated shakes me perhaps even more than it does her, and I'm not sure I can really keep looking for a friend under these circumstances.

What went down is wrong, illegal, and highly morally reprehensible. How can anyone condone me being drugged and raped?

Maybe I should give it up for now and try again at another time. On the other hand, the guy I've been chatting with for the past few evenings seems really nice.

After all, I don't always have to have bad luck either. He has no idea who I am. I could be someone else. Pretty or not - he can't judge that from Raine's photo.

I enjoy the chats with him. He understands me and we have a lot in common. We both work to finance our studies.

What exactly he does, he has not told me yet, and I have also veiled the nature of my job. If he knows I work as a model, it becomes too obvious too quickly - I want to avoid that. Only when I feel he could be the one, I want to reveal my identity to him. But I'm already dreading the moment. What if he can't handle who I am?

"But what are you going to do about your unknown hero now?" inquires Raine.

"I don't know. Maybe it's not meant to be... Maybe he's not a hero at all but just didn't have the guts to go through with it. Maybe he's a doer and not a savior?"

LUKE

I can hardly believe my luck when I actually see a sequence of digits on the chat window display after my shift. Slowly, the realization seeps in. Sunlight has sent me her number.

There's no reason she would give a fake number, so I'll have her on the phone when I press dial. I wasn't expecting that.

The pessimist in me was sure that at best she would string me along. At worst, I would never hear from her again.

Now I need a plan. More than ever. I'm certainly not going to call her right away. I can't rush that. First, I need to get home, shower,

and think....

It's pretty clear where our contact is going. If this phone thing works out, we'll meet. Then she'll realize I'm not as good a match as she might hope.

I've done my best to hint at it to her, without making it very clear that I often don't have a penny left in my pocket at the end of a month. There are days when I live on noodles with ketchup until the next paycheck comes.

As soon as she understands the situation, her interest in me will dry up. It's always like that. At least she, too, is part of the working population. Maybe that's why she's not quite as sensitive to the fact that I can't offer her anything.

Chapter 7

BELLE

I turn around in front of the large mirror in my bedroom. Raine is sitting on my queen-size bed, running her delicate hands over the paisley-patterned quilt.

"What have I gotten myself into?"

I have no clue what to wear or if I really want to go to the meeting. He seems quite wonderful to me and somehow, in our hour-long phone conversation last night, he managed to wrap me around his finger so much that I agreed to this meeting. But is it actually a good idea?

"You're meeting a guy. What's the problem?"

I can easily explain that to her, because there's a whole huge problem standing between me and this guy.

"He's expecting someone like you, not someone like me. What if he's disappointed?"

Also, there's this fact that I can only remember bits and pieces of the last time I tried to meet a man. Who's to say it won't turn out similarly today? What was that at that party? Did someone mix drugs in my drink to do who knows what to me? Did I narrowly escape a sexual assault thanks to my savior? Or was it all completely different and I drank too much too fast after all?

"How could anyone be disappointed when they get you?" Raine shakes his head. "You're beautiful and the whole world likes your ass. What more do you want?"

I want so much more than that and she knows it. She's just trying to encourage me to try, and I appreciate that. In my opinion, she should give the male world a chance too - outside of her book world.

"Oh come on, you're just as pretty as me, but you hide it from the world. Sometimes I wish I could be like you. Then I wouldn't have the problem I'm facing now."

I take turns holding two dresses in front of my body, hoping for a definite reaction from her, because I can't make up my own mind.

"Everyone sees me as just a woman they can show off to their friends. But I want to be loved as much as anyone else."

"You'll be fine. Don't worry about it. You'll disarm him with your way, and he's sure to be interested after talking for hours because of more than my beautiful hair."

"You do have great hair," I agree with a grin, knowing she's right. He knows parts of me that I usually hide. Of course, he doesn't know my name or that I've been modeling for years. I finally revealed my major to him yesterday, and the fact that I sometimes struggle with my job is something I confided in him as well. He knows the things that matter, and he seems to like me.

"What do you wear to a fast food restaurant like this? I definitely don't want to appear overdressed there, but just don't want to look like I didn't make an effort either..."

"I've never seen you in an outfit that wasn't totally stunning. Relax and wear what you like best." Raine is my anchor on stormy seas. I would be lost without her.

I make a decision and wear what I'm wearing right now. It's a light boho summer dress with a creamy white base and petrol-colored embellishments, and I wear my beaded Jimmy Choos with it.

"Should I turn my hair up or leave it down?" I ask her advice again.

"It's best to go as you are right now, because you're already going to be late."

I glance at my wristwatch and freeze. She's right. I'm not going to make it on time, guaranteed, and my hair isn't that important now that I'm going to make him wait longer for it.

We leave my apartment and Raine accompanies me until I have to turn off our common path to the restaurant. Her escort encourages me, but as soon as I am alone, he leaves me again.

Through the window of the restaurant I see a young man who looks just like the guy in the photo on the app. He's tall, has short medium blond hair and a well-toned upper body without being as

beefy as our football players. His nose isn't too big and he has a really nice mouth.

The certain something that already appealed to me in the picture is also clearly visible now. Somehow he radiates something rebellious. Especially compared to the other guys on the dating portal he stands out.

They offer themselves to please the viewers and show themselves with things that girls supposedly like. Like cheap copies, they imitate my colleagues who model for magazines. I know each of their poses. Seen them a thousand times....

My date, on the other hand, has a fundamentally solid look that intrigues me. His outfit consists of a t-shirt, jeans and average sneakers. Nothing about him is designed to make any kind of special impression.

Next to him, I feel like a fraud. How am I supposed to explain to him that I've been hiding behind Raine's photo?

For a moment I consider running away, but I can't bring myself to let him suffer from my weakness. I have to own up to the fact that I've been pretending. If I can't do that, it's all been for nothing.

LUKE

I wipe my sweaty hands on my pants. As I pass the poster of Belle's butt and slender legs, she smiles flirtatiously at me over her shoulder. Spellbound, I stare at her.

She's like a goddess, but goddesses don't mingle with mortals. My date with Sunlight is earthly. I still have no idea what her name is, which is why I have saved her number under the part of her alias and always call her Sunlight in my mind. I wonder if she's dazzling like Sunlight, too.

Hopefully she'll show up at all, even though I chose such a poor setting. The fast food place at the south end of campus is cheap and it is within walking distance. So the location won't impress her with either quality or exoticism, but it at least meets my means.

If she comes, I want her to know right away what she's getting into. Perhaps I will never be able to offer her anything better. I could have

borrowed money from an acquaintance, but that seemed like a lie.

However, she probably won't come at all. Sunlight didn't strike me as someone who would be late to our meeting. She is now already ten minutes over time. That's why I'm convinced she won't show up. I have to face it, pick up what's left of my dignity and go home.

When suddenly Belle, of all people, comes up to me, my blood freezes in my veins. How could she find me? Who betrayed me? What will she say?

A hippie dress blows around the tanned legs I stared at so unabashedly just a few nights ago. She marches up to me on tiny high heels and stops right in front of my table.

"Hey, I... Could it be that I'm your date?" she stammers uncertainly.

The words out of her mouth sound inappropriate - uncertainty doesn't suit her. But her voice sounds familiar. Only slowly does the realization seep into my brain.

"You?"

That's all I can bring myself to say in that moment of shock. I've been on the phone with Belle for hours? Belle has written me dozens of messages? How could I not have noticed that?

"The photo might have been a little misleading, I have to admit," she begins.

I have no idea what to believe. We're worlds apart.

"Is it okay if I sit with you?"

"Um, yeah sure," I explain guardedly.

I can only think of two reasons why Belle would seek contact with me: Imputation or a joke. If this is all a silly prank, I still have no clue what's funny about it.

"I was just expecting someone ... else."

The chair makes a pathetic cawing sound as she drags it across the floor. The next moment, Belle is sitting across from me, taking a deep breath.

She is so beautiful and so far from my star system that I almost forget the most important thing.

"I'm Luke, by the way," I introduce myself, extending my hand across the table like a novice.

Okay, I'm a beginner at this, too. I haven't had a first date since sophomore year of high school.

"Belle," she whispers, grabbing my outstretched fingers.

"I know. Everyone here knows you."

She nods and puckers her mouth, which looks as adorable on her as any other expression.

"The photo is of my friend Raine. If you'd rather meet her, I can arrange that. I'd be happy to give you her phone number," she offers.

I shake my head because I can't imagine why I would rather sit across from another woman. I realize, however, that this will remain a one-time event. Belle and I - it would never work.

"Why would someone like you use a fake photo? I mean, you're pretty and all."

Less than eloquent, I shrug.

I can barely form a straight sentence in her presence. If I had known she was my interlocutor on the phone, I probably would have said similarly stupid stuff and she never would have even thought of going out with me.

"I don't think anyone understands why I hide behind another face, but I have my reasons."

Yeah, sure, I think, you want to make fun of guys like me. You've succeeded wonderfully, but I'm certainly not going to jump at your physical charms if that's how you're going to parade me in front of everyone.

I wonder if she remembers anything about that night. Whether she knows that I drove her home? She may not know my name, but she may recognize my face....

Did I do anything wrong? Misbehaved? I mentally go over every second of our encounter at that party and can't find anything. Except that moment of uncontrolled staring. But damn, she's so beautiful. Who wouldn't have looked in my position?

"Sure, we all did," I return without any intention, and start to regret all the things I said on the phone last night. I put weapons in her hand that she can now use against me.

"Shall we eat something?" she asks, and I can hardly believe that the model would let fried food anywhere near her beautiful mouth.

I want to see that!

"Sure, should I get us something?"

She nods and I doubt she'll still be sitting here when I return with the tray. Belle seems like an alien in this shed.

"What do you want?"

"I haven't had a burger in forever," she admits with a sigh. "Will you bring me a Spicy Chicken Burger with Curly Fries and a Diet Coke?"

She surprises me.

Never did I expect to see anything like anticipation in her eyes, even though I've taken her to such an undignified establishment. Belle triggers a roller coaster of emotions in me. On the one hand I feel close to her through our conversations and on the other hand I can't get rid of the impression that she is playing with me.

I order and mourn the hard-earned money that I might be investing in her menu for nothing at all. A glance over my shoulder, however, lets me know that she is still sitting at our table.

Her voice is the one I listened to for hours last night. She's confided things to me that I never would have expected from Belle.

Can this be real? Should this woman have wanted a date with me? Something in me wants so badly to believe that, but I've been through too much crap to get involved.

Maybe I'm getting in my own way while getting the chance of a lifetime, but I can't put my heart in her hands. The risk that she will break it for me is just too high.

Chapter 8

BELLE

I can clearly feel how tense he is. Luke hardly seems like the same person he was on the phone.

"So you play ice hockey," I try to broach a subject where he can relax. "Tell me about it. What do you do?"

"I play first line offense," he replies, still cautious. I have no clue about the sport, but if it excites him, I'll listen. "You've been to a game, right?"

My mouth waters and I finally take a bite of my burger. He'll have to wait for me to swallow the bite for my answer, because no matter where we are, I'm definitely not talking with my mouth full.

"Honestly, no. I rarely have time for extracurricular activities because my job keeps me pretty busy on top of my studies."

"How did you get into modeling?" he inquires, stopping me from continuing to eat. Yet this burger tastes heavenly.

I tell him a bit about my life, but I leave out the dicey details. He doesn't need to know my family history today. I've only told a few people about what really happened at our house. After the cursed fire.

"I've been in front of the camera since I was eight years old. My mom got me into it. She was a model as well. For me, these jobs were always a convenient way to make money to buy the things I wanted, and now it's paying for college."

The burger has waited long enough for me. There's no way it can get cold. I shove it in my mouth and take another bite.

"Aren't your parents paying for that?" he broaches a subject I wish I could have avoided.

The burger doesn't taste half as good anymore when I think about my dad. But Luke seems to be burning up over the topic. He even lowers his food for it.

"My dad would pay for it if I let him. But I won't let him." With that, I end this section of my story, hoping it will be enough of an answer for him.

"And what major are you taking?"

I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm so grateful that he's letting me off the hook for now with this sensitive part of my family history.

I could talk about art, art history, and all things art-related for days, but I'll let him have his say, too. I would love to hear everything from him.

We eat and chat more relaxed now, but something about this date still feels strangely stiff. From our chats and the long phone call last night, I know he can be easygoing and fun. Right now, however, I get the impression that something is holding him back.

I'm sure he doesn't like me.

He wanted to meet someone else. That's what I get now for not being honest from the beginning. In principle, none of this would have been a problem if there hadn't been something between us from the first second.

Since I stepped up to his table, I feel like I'm in a pink bubble. It's probably pure wishful thinking, but now that he's sitting in front of me, I long for him to be the guy who saved me.

It's stupid, but ever since that night, I've felt an attachment to a phantom. I'm wishing so hard to find him that every time I see a guy, I imagine it could be him. Yet I'm not even entirely sure it was a man who brought me home in the first place.

It could just as easily be a strong woman in leather with an edgy script. And it's just as possible that my supposed hero is just someone who didn't follow through on a planned rape.

Still, there's something about Luke that makes me feel safe, though equally unsettled. This guy is definitely not just after my famous butt. Maybe he doesn't even want my butt. Not every guy is into me. That's just the way it is in life.

I wipe my lips with the paper napkin to make any leftover sauce disappear. The burger was delicious, but it will be my last for a long

time. In my job, I can't afford to eat like that very often. I leave the fries on the plate and add the napkin.

He has also finished eating and everything between us seems to be said.

The mandatory part of our meeting ends here, but I don't want to let him go yet. Maybe this is my only chance to get to know this guy better.

"Come on, let's go!"

His outstretched hand is within reach and I reach for it. An electrostatic crackle drives into my fingers. But it's not just that. Our physical contact causes a tingle in my arm and my heart beats faster.

I remember the panic attacks I had after my mother's suicide, but this racing heart is different. I wince.

"Sorry, that happens to me in these shoes a lot."

His comment brings me back to the now. I look down, notice the worn out sneakers with no brand imprint, and see my first impression from the chat confirmed. So he doesn't have as much money as most guys here on campus who think they're better because of it.

I'm terribly embarrassed by my overpriced shoes, which I got to keep after a shoot, at this second. They don't fit us, but taking them off right here on the spot would be ridiculous.

We step out onto the sidewalk together in front of the fast food restaurant. Nothing has gone the way I would have liked on this date. Something isn't right between us. He's not as easygoing as he was on the phone, and maybe I'm not either, but there's no way I want everything to end here.

LUKE

She builds herself up in front of me and reaches for my hands. I look directly into her stunning face and am speechless. What am I doing to deserve her attention?

I didn't do anything she could blame me for, but I also didn't do anything to particularly impress her. I merely walked her home, as any other man should have done.

The way she looks at me sends a shiver down my spine. All I can think about is kissing her, but I can't. Not her.

She seems as close as the moon on a clear night, and yet I know she's light years away from me. Before I knew who she was, I would have kissed her that second without hesitation.

Belle seems to be just waiting for me to make a move. But now that she is standing in front of me in all her beauty, I don't know what to do.

There's a huge difference between kissing some girl I know from the Internet and having my lips touch her mouth, of all things. I hesitate for a moment too long and the chance evaporates before I've come to a decision. She lets go of my hands and takes a step back.

"Look, I can imagine that I've been all over you. You need to come to terms with the changed situation first, but I'd like to see you again. Do you think that's possible?"

Her question shakes everything I believe in.

"After this, are you still up for more?"

I raise my arms and drop them again, powerless. The snack, my shoes, me. The whole package she got that night is not worthy of her. She deserves better. Someone better than me.

"If you think the restaurant or anything about you bothered me, you're wrong. I think a change of scenery might do us both some good, and if you have a night to sleep on it and process that I'm different than you expected, then..."

I break our eye contact, look up at the sky and she instantly stops talking. It's absurd.

All at once I'm sure this is all either a dream or a nasty prank. There's no way she'd bother with complexes or insecurities. That's my job, not hers.

"I don't know."

I shove my hands deep into the pockets of my pants, preparing for an attack. Her basket won't surprise me. She can't give me a low blow because I didn't plan any of this in the first place.

I don't even want to kiss her. She should have understood that by now. The chance was there, I let it pass.

"You're irritated and I understand that. But give me a chance and get to know me. I'm not what everyone thinks I am." One last flare of fight, then she's quiet. She's more persistent than I gave her credit for, and I start to have doubts. Is she serious about all this?

"It's not that I'm not happy that you're you," I relent. I don't want to hurt her in any way, but even she must realize that we are worlds apart. "But I have a hard time imagining you wanting to be here with me."

She shakes her head, confirming my assessment. Of course she doesn't want to be here. I know my place and it's definitely not by her side, no matter what impression our online acquaintance has left on me.

Besides, there's that night that shot me up to my cloud for a few seconds. Just for a moment, I thought she remembered me. For a moment there was something in her eyes.

"I have an idea" She is still standing close enough to me that I can smell her delicate scent of wild flowers. "Tomorrow night is open air cinema in Burlington Square. I'll be there waiting for you. You decide if you're coming, and we'll go from there. Agreed?"

"Okay," I agree and say goodbye with a nod.

I have no idea if I should really go to this meeting tomorrow. Everything about her unsettles me. Will I freeze up less tomorrow with her looking up at me like that? Will I be able to do more than just admire her like a rare animal?

Maybe all of this is wrong. Maybe I should never have met her. But how was I supposed to know it was her, of all people?

I can't believe I really just had a date with our college queen.

It feels so unreal that she was sitting across from me eating a burger. No one would believe me.

I'm even less able to believe that she actually ate the thing than I am that she actually met up with me... Everyone makes mistakes.

Why she insists on seeing me again, though, is a complete mystery to me. I wasn't very nice to her. She deserves a guy who will carry her on his hands.

I still have my hands buried deep in the pockets of my threadbare jeans. I use my index finger to pick at the hole in my right pocket,

through which I'm sure I've lost a few coins.

The walk back to the dorm is short. Too short to find answers to the questions that plague me.

I take a look at the communal kitchen in the hallway, but it's empty.

It's Friday night and half the house is off to some party.

Leah is safe in her room, but I can't possibly talk to her. She's not talking to anyone. Beverly and Michelle are the gossip center of the floor. If I talk to them, everyone in the house knows within hours.

Only one of my roommates is really trustworthy. Without much hope, I knock on his room door.

"Yes?" it sounds from inside.

I'm not quite sure if it's Diego's voice or that of his roommate Sebastian, so I open the door.

"Hey, what's up with you guys?" I inquire when I see them both in the room.

"Not much," Diego admits, sitting at the tiny desk. "I'm stuck on my English homework because Sebastian won't let me copy it."

"You know why," Sebastian blurts out without letting me in on it. "I'm about to leave for the Field Party. Are you coming?"

I shake my head. I don't feel like celebrating. With my fingers, I turn my room key in my pocket. "Not today, no. I have some catching up to do, too."

Diego glances at the display on his phone.

"Man, it's really late. You want to maybe grab something to eat with me?"

"I already ate," I admit. "But I'd be happy to join you."

I'm not going to let the opportunity for some change from the world in my head slip through my fingers. The only thing I don't want to do is go to a party. Diego throws on his jacket and we head back to the stairwell I just came from.

It's not until we're outside that he inspects my entire elevator and looks at my face appraisingly.

"You look like something's bothering you," Diego surmises with frightening perspicacity.

"True. I've had a pretty surreal evening."

"Did you meet your Internet acquaintance and discover she's really an eighty-year-old cat lady?" He puts on the typical grin that has earned him a reputation as the carefree person he certainly wasn't always.

"No, quite the opposite. You'll never believe who she is!"

"Knock yourself out. Who is it and what was it like?" Curious, he looks over at me as we stroll down the busy street.

"It was Belle," I blurt out the headline as a truck whizzes past us. He doesn't immediately jump at it, and I almost don't think he heard me.

"Which Belle?"

"The one from the billboard." Only now does his expression derail. "The model."

"The Belle?" His eyebrows form a mountain range on his forehead.

"I told you. You don't believe it!" I have to laugh at the absurdity myself, having no other outlet for my emotional stress.

"Gross. So how was it?"

"I don't know. Kind of nice, but I also felt made fun of. Why is she dating me, of all people?"

"Because she didn't know it was you. Just like you didn't know who she was."

He shrugs, as if that explains everything.

"But then why does she want to see me again?"

"Does she? That's great."

"I don't know..."

"Don't tell me you're the one guy who would push her off the edge of the bed?" Diego drills his finger deeper into the wound.

"No. She's the shit," I have to admit. The problem here isn't her-it's me.

"Then why don't you want to see her anymore?"

"Because there's no future with us. Look at her and then look at me... It doesn't fit. I can't even take her out for a decent meal, I take her to a cheap diner. How embarrassing is that?"

Chapter 9

BELLE

At the edge of Burlington Square, I look around. Four paths lined with old trees converge on the square. A white tent stands on the large lawn and picnic blankets lie around.

Friends, couples, or groups are gathering everywhere. The leaves of the trees rustle in the light wind. Everything vibrates with life.

No one is alone.

Only I'm standing here waiting for someone who yesterday didn't give the impression of actually considering this meeting.

Today I'm wearing jeans and sneakers so he won't think I'm an aloof princess. I don't plan on sticking around with him. I deleted my profile on the dating site a long time ago, and the movie they're showing on the big screen afterward only marginally interests me. I only chose this event because it had a time and place.

I wanted to see Luke again and give him a chance to get used to the fact that I'm not who he expected. Something is there between us and I'm not ready to give up on him until I really try.

It's cool that he's not freaking out about my butt on the billboard and trying everything to get me in bed, but I at least want to get to know him better. Luke is different, so I want to show him that I'm the same person he's been chatting with and talking to on the phone.

Maybe that's why I'm getting stood up by a guy for the first time today. Everything looks like it. I can't see him anywhere.

It's getting chilly and I regret not putting on a jacket, but I can't just run home and put something on now because I might miss him.

A glance at my phone tells me that it's already ten minutes past the appointed time. I rub my arms and squat down on the edge of a

raised flower bed. Still I don't want to resign myself to the fact that he's not coming.

I let my eyes wander over the people in the decorated square and admire their carefree attitude. No one is afraid that someone will pour knockout drops into his drink. Everyone seems so happy, but is that just a deceptive illusion in the end?

"Hey, sorry I'm a little late."

When I see him standing in front of me with a bouquet of wild flowers in his hand and looking at me with his head down, I jump up from the wall and knock the dust off my clothes.

"I had to get something for a friend and it took a little longer than expected."

"Doesn't matter. The main thing is that you're here."

To both of our surprise, I fall around his neck. My poor victim can't even fight back because of the flowers. I'm not usually this exuberant when I don't know someone well yet, but at that moment something else took possession of me. What is this guy doing to me?

The scent of his leather jacket rises to my nose, awakening a dormant memory. It stirs briefly and then settles down again. I break away from him and look up at him apologetically.

"I was afraid you weren't coming at all."

His words work in my head. Girlfriend. Did he mean girlfriend or his girlfriend? Is that perhaps the reason for his reluctance?

"For you," Luke explains, handing me the small bouquet. "I stole them from a neighbor's front yard. Please don't tell on me."

His confession makes all the tension fall away from me.

He's here, and he wants to spend time with me. Otherwise, he would never have stolen extra flowers.

A soft laugh escapes me and I see its echo in Luke's brown eyes. For a moment, I lose myself in them, forgetting time and space.

"They're beautiful. Thank you."

I lift the flowers to my nose and inhale the smell of fresh blossoms.

"Shall we go for a walk, perhaps?" I suggest. "The botanical gardens are just around the corner, and I hear they're beautiful in the evening."

His gaze rests on me and he seems to be able to see deep inside me. If he knew how much it's already done to me, he'd think I was

crazy. I can hardly believe it myself.

"Don't you even want to see the movie?"

Shaking my head, I hook up with him and, step by step, we move away from the location to which everything on campus is flocking that evening.

We swim against the tide, and I hope we find some privacy in the garden. His hand strokes my bare forearm, where my hair stands on end from the cold.

"Are you cold?" he inquires empathetically. There's definitely something about this guy that I want to explore. Something about him is constantly peeking behind the facade. Could it really be that this fixation of Raine's has introduced me to the one I've been searching for for months?

"Yeah, I didn't want to go home again to get a jacket because I was afraid we'd miss each other."

"Take mine." He stops in the middle of the walk and slips out of the worn leather jacket to put it on me. "I don't need it that bad."

The remnant of his warmth pours out of the fabric, daring me to surrender to the comforting feeling. With him I feel everything much more intensely than ever before and I don't want it to stop.

The cast-iron gate of the botanical garden is never locked, but every visitor must close it behind him to prevent the entry of animals that could harm the rarer plants.

The sounds of the streets are only muffled at first, and a few meters further on they are not heard at all. Instead, only the crunch of our shoes from the ground reaches my ear.

We follow a path through the extensive grounds and enter an elaborately designed mountain landscape. Hardy, gnarled woody plants and prickly shrubs grow between raw rock. A few colorful blossoms add highlights that make the trip here all the more rewarding.

"Look," I draw his attention to the thin stream that forms tiny waterfalls above the rock steps. A bird with an orange belly flies up when I point in its direction.

"Shy animal," Luke comments, smirking. My heart trips at the sight. Again, I hold the small bouquet of flowers to my nose, savoring their scent.

He reaches for my fingers and once again a memory runs through me like an electric shock. For just a second I see it clearly before the image disappears and cannot be retrieved.

Then I see Luke next to me, holding my hand. The place is perfect, my companion is perfect, everything is perfect. We stroll further along the path and reach the tropical part of the complex.

One of the huge greenhouses looms before us, but its doors have long been closed at this hour. Lush flower beds frame the path. Each leaf looks a little different from the neighboring plant. Different shades of green alternate and compete for attention, but I can't tell which one is the prettiest.

They work together and only create their true splendor when they interact. Small delicate flowers and large imposing calyxes provide support for the eye. It's like a masterful painting that manages to capture the magic of this moment.

"It's really beautiful here," I remark. "So peaceful and quiet."

He looks at me with that intensity peculiar to him that makes the ground beneath my feet turn to quicksand. Again, his eyes scan my features as if searching for something he can't find there. I so wish I could offer him everything he's looking for. All he would have to do is tell me.

"You are beautiful," he counters. "None of this can begin to compete with you."

It wasn't my intention to elicit a compliment from him, but I'm pleased anyway.

"I still can't believe a woman like you would want to date a guy like me. This whole thing is like a dream I could wake up from at any time."

I grip his hand tighter. Our bodies are close and I can feel the vibrations of his deep voice on my skin.

"If I let what I'm feeling happen, it could all burst like a soap bubble," he adds in a whisper.

My whole body tenses. I need to know.

"What are you feeling?"

"Do you really want me to tell you?"

Unable to speak, I nod. My tongue seems stuck in my mouth. Usually I'm never at a loss for a line or have any other trouble

expressing myself. Luke does this to me.

"All right, but I'm going to say it quietly."

I feel his fingers dancing on my hands, gently slipping away from my grip. I long so much for him to grab and hold me instead - to take me in his arms and pull the ground from under my feet.

But he does none of these things. His lips come closer to my ear.

"You enchant me, but I'm afraid if I let you get close to me, you'll break my heart."

I feel the breath of air that accompanies his words against my neck.

"I'd carry you in my arms, but that's all I can offer you. I'm just a simple guy who had the incredible luck to cross your path."

I realize he would never just take what he wants. So I do. Determined, I tug at his shirt. My fingers run around his slender waist, and I look up at him and stand on my tiptoes.

"You're something special, Luke. I've never met a man like you before."

LUKE

One second I'm still digesting her words. The next, I feel her soft lips on mine.

Her hands gently run over the fabric of my T-shirt. I pull her tighter against me and dare to really touch her for the first time.

Pure happiness floods my defenses and washes away all reservations. I intensify the kiss and enjoy everything I feel. Her body against mine, her soft lips, her scent and the soft sigh she gives. Everything about her is absolutely perfect. She even kisses like a goddess.

"What's going on here?" some guy I didn't notice earlier in the garden bawls. "Beauty and the Loser..."

Belle breaks away from me.

Her cheeks are flushed and she radiates something vulnerable. Raging anger replaces elation. The guy who interrupted us is going to pay for scaring my girl. I look over at him and realize he's not alone.

Around him is a group of other guys. They're all in college jackets, like they belong to some team.

It's not the ice hockey team, or I'd know them, but I've seen their faces somewhere before. It only takes a few moments for me to make the connection.

"You're that guy from the party at Cooper's the other night, right?" I ask him.

Belle lets go of my hand and I take a step forward so she can take cover behind me.

"Oh, you were the guy who snatched that girl away from me," the other guy notices now. "Otherwise she would have already memorized my name that night. They all remember it once they've made the acquaintance of this one."

He demonstratively grabs his crotch and a dirty grin appears on his broad face. With his statement, he confirms the suspicion I had buried deep inside me since that night. He slipped something into Belle's drink to make her compliant. The only one who doesn't know about it is herself.

"So that's what you need to get a girl to go to bed with you?" I snap at him. "Pretty pathetic, don't you think?"

I spit at his feet. His expression darkens and the guys around him tense their muscles. They're ready for a fight, just like me. Four against one seems unfair at first glance, but the surge of anger in my body will give me a huge advantage.

"You're not one bit better than me. That night, after all, you towed her in my place!" he retorts, crossing his massive arms in front of his chest. "In fact, you should be thanking me for my groundwork."

He turns and gestures for his friends to follow him. Apparently it's not worth the fight to him. It's worth any price to me, though. I want to restore Belle's honor and beat that smirk off his face. How can he boast about his transgressions like that, too?

I wrestle with myself. Stay with her or let my anger run wild?

Belle and I may be fusion cooks - like the mix of spices in our communal kitchen when the Koreans and the Mexicans prepare their food in my hallway at the same time - but I have never consciously influenced her in any way. I don't stupefy anyone.

When I turn around after the guys leave, however, Belle is nowhere to be seen.

"Crap," I shout, slamming my fist into the nearest tree trunk. The pain eases the anger. But I would much rather have punched the face of this guy who so ruthlessly takes what he pleases.

He won't get my girl. However, she is hardly my girl if she is no longer there.

Chapter 10

BELLE

All the warmth that our kiss created in me disappears and my body cools more with each step I take away from him.

It takes time for me to stop hearing her words in my head. I didn't want to run away from Luke, but the situation completely overwhelmed me. I couldn't help it. My legs just started running. Only now they slow down.

I look for a foothold against a wall and lean against it. Part of me already knew that Luke had to be my hero from that night. Another part is still surprised about it.

Little by little, the images emerge in my mind's eye.

The group I'm talking to on the terrace - they're the same ones who were just in the botanical garden. We drink and laugh until I feel dizzy. I want to go to the bathroom. I'm sure I haven't drunk that much yet.

Then it gets darker in my memories.

Someone approaches me. He asks if I need help. That's as far as I get.

Was the guy right? Was Luke trying to take advantage of my condition that night? Did he maybe even do it and that's why he was so shocked when I stood in front of him on our blind date?

I bury my hands deep in the pockets of my warm jacket and come across something. After feeling it briefly, I pull the object out. A packet of tablets appears. But there is more in the pocket. With a second grip, I pull out another kind of pills.

In the darkness, I can't read what's written on the packages, but they're not headache pills. That much is certain.

I turn them in the light of the street lamp and read syllable by syllable. Xanax is the name of one, Prozac the other. I've heard both terms before. In my line of work, you hear way too much about drugs....

What was Luke doing with that stuff and why is he taking it on our date?

He knows where I live, he has my number. I can't hide, but do I want to?

I wish he would come and explain everything and take away any doubt I had. Surely there is a good explanation for everything. There has to be one.

I run my fingertips over my lips, which just a few minutes ago were united with his.

LUKE

Should I run after her and force my explanation on her? But what's there to explain? I probably should have told her right away that we'd met before, but I missed the chance. After that, it never came up again to talk about that evening.

I don't know what else she remembers. Where should I start? Maybe I'd better let her put her puzzle together on her own after all....

As I stare at my smartphone at home and find nothing new to occupy myself with on it, I sink down onto the pillow. What bullshit?

She treated me like a normal person. Someone of value - and me?

It was probably the highlight of my pathetic life and I blew it mercilessly. Belle was wonderful, thoughtful, smart, and so different than I expected her to be.

She's certainly not the superficial girl everyone thinks she is when they see her pretty smile and tight body in the ads. But maybe now she's understood that we're not a good match. Possibly that's why she disappeared....

Better we realize it early enough not to risk our hearts... Although I'm not sure this realization will come in time for me.

I'm already lying awake half the night again. This time not because of our conversations but because I wonder what is truth and what is illusion. Sometimes I doze off briefly and see pictures of us. Then I wake up and wonder if the kiss was real or if I imagined everything.

Can it really be that I've had this freaking luck to meet a hell of a woman who's crazy about me? I think it's much more realistic that I'm blowing it.

The next morning I feel miserable, but I still have to get up. I've barely had any rest and I feel like scum. What if Belle was just scared and needed me by her side?

I wasn't there for her, didn't look for her. Even if that's why she doesn't want to know about me anymore, I still want to explain what she's missing from that night. I probably have what she needs to get the full picture.

hey247 writes:

Are you still there?

A small gray dot next to her username indicates that she is not online. Seconds later, the screen refreshes.

OffbeatSunlight03 (deleted user)

I have her phone number, but I'm not sure that I still have the right to use it under the current conditions. If she has deleted her account on the dating site, she probably doesn't want to know anything more about me.

Sleepily, I shuffle across the hall to the kitchen. Beverly and Diego are already there, eating breakfast together at a table.

"Hey Luke, I was waiting for you yesterday. Where were you? Do you have my stuff?" Beverly inquires immediately when she catches me on my way to the coffee machine.

Boiling hot, I remember what I was supposed to be doing and smack my forehead.

"Bev, I'm sorry. Something came up for me yesterday. I got everything, but my jacket is..."

No, the story doesn't make any sense like that. I don't want to explain everything to her. But meeting Belle was more important to me than bringing Beverly her pills. It was that simple.

After all, she made it through the night without them and probably slept even better than I did. Maybe it will help her realize that she doesn't need the stuff to live like a normal person.

Diego already knows about my second dates, but he doesn't know about the latest twist. I dump fresh-smelling coffee into my favorite yellow cup with the panda print. With a sip of milk in it, I like the look of it and take a big gulp.

"I need those pills, Luke. I'm not kidding." Under her pleading gaze, I wince. I don't have enough money to buy her two more packs, plus I'm sure this is strong stuff that no one will just sell me.

"Bev, I'll take care of it. You get the pills. I gave my jacket to a girl and the packs were in the bag."

Diego raises a brow behind Beverly's back meaningfully.

With my caffeine level slowly rising, I begin to believe that I will somehow get the day over with. First work, and then the matter of Beverly's pills, for which I must inevitably go to Belle's.

While I'm there, maybe I can tackle the problem that's bothering me the most...personally.

The shift at the car wash pushes my mood further toward zero. Sunday seems to be the day every week when most people come in to have their cars cleaned. Or to have me clean their cars.

I scrub car after car and wallow in my misery. The world is mean to me and I let it be. In a way, I enjoy every humiliation that comes my way today because I believe that some part of me deserves it.

At a little before noon, Sal takes me aside.

"What's up, kid?" he asks, gesturing for me to follow him into his office.

His desk is even messier than mine. I don't dare even touch anything for fear an avalanche of paper will slide toward me. The papers have rings of coffee mugs on them. I recognize boot prints on some of the sheets and wonder how they got there.

"Want some coffee? Just put on a fresh one."

"And I thought all you Italians only drank espresso," I quip, nodding.

"But you're not prejudiced at all, are you?" Sal pours me a promotional cup from a car manufacturer and hands me the milk. "So, what's on your mind? Do you need more money? I can give you extra shifts if you want."

"No, I don't think my problem can be solved with money alone, although having more of it would certainly help." I pause to finish the thought. Would it change anything if I had more money? Would anything have gone differently? "Right now, I'm getting by."

"If you don't want to talk, that's fine, but if you need someone, I'm here. You hear me, kid?"

With all the rough shell he wears in front of him like a shield, I sometimes forget what a soft core he has. Since I started working here, Sal has been like an uncle to me who still cares about family. Still, I don't want to bother him with my women's stories. It seems unimportant to me - at least compared to real problems like poverty, illness, death and fear.

Again, I nod silently and look into my cup. Sal finishes his and sets it down on the desk in the middle of a stack of papers, causing the next brown ring.

"Take a five-minute break and then come over to clean the rims."

As soon as he's out the door, I pull the phone from my pocket and check my messages. No message from Belle. It's as if there had never been anything between us.

Sending her a message and announcing my visit I think is clumsy. If she doesn't want to see me, that gives her the opportunity to disappear, but at least I need the pills for Bev. Even if I lost all my luck, I will do my duty, because I promised her. I will just go to her after work and hope she opens.

Chapter 11

BELLE

After my Sunday shoot for an ice cream manufacturer, I'm tormented by hunger. My job does not stop at weekends. I spent the whole day surrounded by ice cream sundaes, croissants and a lot of other temptations, which I didn't give in to professionally as I am. Sweet stuff never tempted me, plus I really had no appetite after last night's events.

I meet Raine at the entrance of the cafeteria, where she is waiting for me with a bag full of books. My stomach growls, but I don't want to eat anything now either.

"Are you going to manage to read them all before you buy the next ones?" I inquire, trying not to let my distress show right away.

"Most of them I do. One of these books takes me about an evening when I'm not tired or studying." She beams up at me.

"What did you get?" I peek into the bag to catch a glimpse of the covers she bought at today's garage sale.

She loves these little events and often stocks up on new books there when there's a good deal. With her consumption, it's no wonder she takes advantage of every opportunity.

"One of these days you're going to get poor at it..."

"They were totally cheap and it's still better than crack or cocaine..." Raine grins beatifically and fishes out the books for me.

Most of them are exactly what I would have expected. Romantic colors, pink and orange covers, some with couples in the sunset, others with illustrations. One book, however, jumps out at me. It so doesn't match the others.

"What's that?" I pick up the book with the somber cover and glance at the blurb. Just as gloomy. A thriller.

"This one's for my roommate. She's still missing this part of the series." She puts everything away neatly again so that no book gets creases and shoulders the bag with the long handles. "Now enough about me. Tell me, how was your date?"

I take a deep breath and think about where to start.

"I don't know."

We hit the sidewalk through the green toward my apartment, where we plan to watch a movie. I've chosen 'The Hating Game' because I hope it will take my mind off things.

"How does it do that?" she asks, just as aghast as I probably would be if I were in her shoes.

"It's complicated," I begin. She's such a tender soul, and I'm sure it would still haunt her dreams if she were now finally convinced that guys are slipping drugs into innocent girls' drinks at our parties in order to pounce on them. So far, that was only one of several possibilities. On the other hand, she needs to be vigilant.

Then I start timidly and tell her everything that, I remembered and how we met the guys yesterday. They weren't even ashamed. Those bastards.

I mention the pills in Luke's pocket, but also the kiss and the blissful feeling I always have when he's near me.

"Okay, you're in love, but you don't know if you can trust him," Raine finally summarizes expertly. I nod and sigh heavily.

"I want to trust him so badly, but I know there are people out there whose intentions aren't pure and noble. Do you have any advice for me?"

Raine isn't practically the biggest expert on relationships, but she has a lot of theoretical knowledge about the subject area. Maybe her books romanticize the situation a bit, but I still value her opinion.

"Hmm, difficult. I can totally understand your worries, but maybe you should give him a chance to explain everything first before you give up..."

"He hasn't even contacted me." I shake my head. "Not once since we had our first date. Not to tell me he was going to be late. Not to explain anything."

It doesn't feel like I'm giving up, but like I've long since lost this fight. Maybe Luke never wanted to kiss me. Maybe I was wrong.

Then again...why did he say such nice things to me?

"Oh man," Raine groans, exhausted.

I'm starting to despair of the situation too, but then I realize she's slumping under the weight of the books. "Do you want me to take this off your hands for a few minutes?"

"You're my hero!" She hands me the bag and I sling it over my shoulder. Immediately, the handles cut into my skin. Man, are they heavy!

"Let that sink in for a bit," Raine advises me. "Maybe he's more reserved than you are, or maybe he needs a few more days. Things have moved pretty fast with you guys now..."

She's right, of course, but I just know he's the one.

LUKE

For more than half an hour I've been sitting in front of the house where I dropped her off that time.

Since I had to do without her key this time, I set up in front of the front door after she didn't respond to my ringing. Either she's playing dead or she's actually not home.

How I wish I could say that my visit is a grand romantic gesture to win her back, but I'm not inclined to do that.

If she wants to leave, I'll let her, even though there's something special about her that makes my head spin. I've never been one to fight for love. Sometimes I even have a hard time distinguishing what is love and when is merely my ego taking a hit. These emotional things are not in my nature.

I'm only here because I need my jacket and the pills. If she wants to talk, I'll still tell her everything. She deserves that. But if she sends me away, I'll leave.

Diego would say I'm acting like a loser, and maybe he's right about that. I'm sure he could get her to give him a second chance. However, since I haven't even earned the first chance, that seems excessive.

It's getting chilly, and I'm out of my jacket because I gave it to her.
Belle. Beautiful Belle...

Just for a moment I give in to the urging of my heart and imagine what this could have become with us.

I am convinced that I have done nothing wrong. I've meticulously analyzed every move I've made over the past few hours.

The guy was wrong. I didn't take advantage of Belle's situation. Not one bit. Nor could I help it if she messaged me on the platform.

Still, nothing could come of it.

She lives in a different world than I do. She is the princess and I am the Cinderella without a glass slipper. However, I do have a leather jacket. I'm at least going to get my outfit back, because it's pretty futile to expect the princess to let everyone on campus try on my leather jacket until she finds the one it fits.

It doesn't even fit me right. I bought it second hand and accepted that it fits a little oddly.

Besides, Belle knows who I am. If she wanted to see me, she wouldn't need a glass slipper. She could just call.

BELLE

"What if I call him?" I try to plan another scenario where I don't have to wait for Luke to come to me on his own.

"You can do that. You're an emancipated woman and you shouldn't expect the man to make the first move. But do you want him to?"

I think about what my expectation is. Men who make the first move I know many. So far, though, none of them have been worth the effort of reaching out to me myself.

"It feels like I'm chasing him, but that's probably bullshit. After all, I was the one running away yesterday too. Maybe I should change direction..."

"Yeah, when you put it that way, all I can do is wish you good luck. I'm sure he's into you. Maybe he just needs a little push."

If only I were so sure about that, too.

My gaze roams over the flowering shrubs around the house. A gardener is watering them diligently so they don't die in this dry summer.

"Who's that?"

I give a mindless, "Huh?"

"That guy in front of the entrance? You know him?"

I follow her gaze and spot someone sitting on the three steps outside my front door. He keeps his head down as if he's fallen asleep, but I recognize him even so.

"That's Luke," I whisper, as fearful as I am pleased. He's here. My steps slow and finally I stop.

"What is it?" inquires Raine, aghast. "You said you wanted to talk to him."

"Yes, but..." All my backtalk sticks in my throat as Luke lifts his head and looks up at me.

He looks exhausted and dejected. His eyes radiate no warmth. My whole body feels what I see. I, too, am broken, and something inside me is broken.

Raine takes the book bag from my shoulder. As if in a trance, I take a step toward him. Luke rises from the stairs and straightens up.

"Hi." His voice is raspier than usual. He clears his throat. "I wanted to..."

Words fail him, too, though I'd love to know what he wants.

"I shouldn't have..." I tentatively start to pick up the ball.

But what am I talking about? What shouldn't I have done? Shouldn't I have run away? I needed time to think.

Raine steps to my side.

"Jesus," she growls. My brave friend tightens her shoulders and points at Luke. "Hi, I'm Raine. We'll get to know each other another time. You guys go in and talk now!" she instructs him. Then she turns to me. "I'll see you tomorrow. Don't watch the movie without me!"

I nod in surrender and put the key in the lock as she marches off with her heavy luggage.

"You coming?"

Chapter 12

LUKE

I never expected to be so blown away by the sight of her. It's more blatant than the first time. More crass than in the snack bar when she suddenly stood in front of me. So unexpected. This time I knew who I was waiting for, but still....

It's Belle.

I had my lines all worked out. I didn't want anything from her except my jacket, but now that she's standing in front of me, that's no longer true.

I don't care much about the jacket, and even the stupid pills hardly matter anymore.

All I want is her.

The stairwell looks different in the daylight. Much friendlier and this time I don't have to drag her up the stairs. She walks herself. On those beautiful legs.

I can't think. Everything inside me is overflowing with feelings. There is no more room for rationality.

Again and again she turns around and makes sure that I follow her. As if I had a choice... I can't run away at all.

"You've been here before, haven't you?" she asks as she pushes open the door to her apartment.

Time for the truth.

"Yes, I have. I'm sorry I didn't tell you right away, but there wasn't a right moment," I admit. "I swear to you, I didn't do anything that was in any way reprehensible."

"I know that. I just wish you would have left me your name and number that night, Luke."

Her voice is soft and gentle. She sits down on the sofa where I laid her that night and taps the seat next to her. It seems like a lifetime since my last visit to this apartment. Yet only a little over a week has passed since then.

"I didn't expect you to want to see me again," I confess, settling into the tight cushion. Even though she asked me for my number, I didn't think it was possible.

"You were wonderful, Luke. You saved me and brought me home safely."

She reaches for my hand and runs her fingers over the rough skin chapped from work. Even a whole tube of hand cream couldn't change that.

"If it wasn't for you, that guy might have... Ew, I don't even want to think about what he would have done."

"You're not supposed to. I'll always be there to look out for you if that's what you want."

I'm endlessly relieved that she got the story straight and didn't confront me with accusations. I wouldn't have known what to say, and I'm sure she would have taken that as an admission of guilt.

"That would be nice."

She leans against my shoulder and I am overcome with the urge to take her in my arms, but then I would have to withdraw my hand from her. For the first time, I gather confidence and just do it. I gently pull my fingers out of hers and put my arm around her body. She presses herself tighter against me in thanks.

"But there's one more thing I need to know."

"Sure, ask me what you want to know."

"What's this about pills in your pocket?"

I suppress a laugh. As I do, an amused snort escapes me. It's a valid question, and it would have worried me if she had taken it without explanation.

"Remember I told you about the acquaintance I had to get something for yesterday?" She nods. "The pharmacist wouldn't give me the pills at first because I wasn't the person the prescription was for. My roommate Beverly needs this stuff. If it hadn't been for her, I don't know if I would have had the courage to show up here today."

"What happened that night anyway? I only remember bits and pieces."

No further inquiry about Beverly. No skepticism.

"You were outside with some guys I didn't know. I was inside with some guys from my team. When you walked away from the group, I noticed your gait was unsteady. I walked behind you because I wanted to make sure you were okay. If you had been, I wouldn't have done anything, but you looked so helpless. I found you leaning against a wall in the hallway, begging me to take you away."

I also tell her the rest of the story with all the details I still remember. How we were looking for her car. That I took her up the stairs and laid her on her sofa.

"You're a really good guy!"

"You said something similar to that to me that night," I admit.

"I felt it. When we met at that party, I felt it. It was you from the beginning. If you had stayed or left me your number, everything would have been a little easier..."

I never imagined this over-romantic scenario even in my wildest dreams. My version of the story certainly would have ended differently.

"Yes, or you would have reported me to campus security for getting too close to you. I didn't want to take that chance. I didn't know you at all."

I smirk and hold her tightly against me with both hands. This girl is not escaping me anymore.

BELLE

The fragile moment of peace lasts a small eternity and I enjoy lying wordlessly snuggled against him on the sofa. That's all I'm entitled to for now, He still has something to do and I'm not going to stop him from doing his job.

"Shall we go?" Leaving the cozy position against his chest, I rise from the sofa.

"Where to?" Luke looks like I've snapped him out of a daydream.

"To your place. Beverly's. She needs her pills, doesn't she?" I remind him in case he's blocked it out in the excitement.

"You want to see me?" Eyes wide, he stares at me.

"Of course." I don't understand why he's so taken aback by this.

"But it's a dorm with dozens of residents. My room is a hole compared to your apartment."

The comparison is lame. Just because you can live in both places doesn't make it comparable. I shrug, still not understanding what his problem is.

"So?"

He backs away a little and looks at me urgently. "You're really something, Belle!"

"Why?"

"A girl like you doesn't belong in a crowded dorm where it smells like the most impossible spice mixes and everyone only occupies a slightly larger shoebox. You need to be bedded on roses and carried on hands."

"As much as I would appreciate being carried on hands by you, I can walk myself, and I'm certainly not too fancy to visit you." I cross my arms in front of my chest, trying not to be offended because he obviously thinks I'm some kind of snob. "So? Are we off?"

"If you want..." he reluctantly relents.

I grab one of my jackets and bring Luke his leather jacket from my bedroom while he waits for me in the hallway. He checks the contents of the pockets and slips on his sleeves. "But promise me you won't disappear again."

There's a soft drawl on his face as he reaches out and touches my chin. I have no intention of ever running away from him again.

"I promise," I breathe back to him, closing the gap between us.

Luke looks down at me and I can't wait to be kissed by him. Fireworks explode in my chest when I finally feel his lips. His kiss is gentle. But as always when he leads, it develops into something different than I expect. What begins gently becomes intense and finally takes my breath away.

Yes, letting him take the lead pleases me greatly, but his slow pace is a real challenge for me. Maybe I'm just too impatient in some respects.

Almost obediently, his hands are on my back, but as they wander lower and lower, I desperately want more. I want to rip his jacket off his body so I can feel more of him, but I control myself and just let my hands wander over the fabric of his shirt. We still have something to do.

"Luke?" I whisper.

"Mhh," he replies, kissing down my neck. That touch leaves me wanting, and I melt like putty in his hands.

"We were going to..."

He pauses and I immediately regret interrupting him.

"Can we continue right here later?" he inquires a little more coordinated than I could at the moment.

"Absolutely!"

We intertwine our fingers and make our way, hand in hand, to Luke's home. I see the campus with different eyes when I see it with him. The sun slowly sets over the city, bathing the world in a fairytale pink light.

"I like you a lot," I whisper, not sure at first if he heard me. He doesn't look at me. Finally, I hear his voice just as softly.

"I like you too, Belle."

At first I think that's all it was, but Luke wouldn't be Luke if something else didn't come if I gave it long enough.

"You're raging like a storm in my head. I can't think, can't sleep - yeah, I can't even cook anymore. Everywhere in my mind is only you."

We pass in front of one of the posters of my butt, but Luke doesn't even look up.

"You've seen so much of me already," I mutter at the sight of my scantily clad body.

"I don't want the Photoshopped version of you. I want you. With all the quirks and scratches you keep hidden from the rest of the world. I'll keep your secrets and protect you with everything I can give."

The seriousness in his voice slows my rapid steps and I stop with him in the middle of the oversized billboard.

"You're unbelievable," I marvel. "And you're quite sure you don't just want me because I have a pretty face and a ... well, quite attractive body?"

"Do you?" Luke smirks down at me and finally does look up at the poster. "Almost slipped my mind..."

"Hey." I grab him by the shoulders and force him to look at me.

"Of course you're pretty, but that's not what life is about at all. It's always about what's in here." His index finger gently presses against my breastbone. "Your true beauty comes from deep inside you and has nothing to do with the outside. When I tell you that you are beautiful, I don't mean your cute nose or your inviting lips. I mean that the things you say or do make you shine from the inside."

I can't help it, I have to kiss him and let the whole world see it. Luke is a person who exudes tremendous intensity at second glance.

At first he's a normal nice guy, but behind the facade of normal guy lies a treasure shimmering between the slats of a wooden fence. I'm so insanely excited to see what I'll find behind the fence once I've earned access to this world.

Chapter 13

LUKE

She really comes with me. Unbelievable!

The dorm with its seven floors looms on the next street corner. Beverly, Diego and everyone else will make eyes when the most beautiful woman on campus shows up in the hallway with me.

Belle, against all reason, doesn't give me the impression that I have anything to be ashamed of. Okay, I don't live in a mansion. My parents don't have a business that I will one day run. And yet, of all people, she wants to be with me.

We climb the stairs and I enjoy the sight of her real butt in front of me. It's so much better than a stupid photo.

How I'd love to just grab it, drag Belle into my room like a Neanderthal, and pounce on her. But she's got it in her head that we're going to do my job together and give Beverly her pills.

I don't think she distrusts my testimony and wants proof. No, in fact, I think she is serious about giving Beverly those pills because she knows it is important to her.

It's probably good and right that we don't get close right away in a bed, but I still find it unfortunate.

We leave the stairwell and I lead Belle down the hall toward our kitchen.

"There's my room," I explain as we pass my door. She slows down and finally stops beside me.

"Will you show me later?" Belle beams at me with wide eyes, and I see a sparkle in them that awakens the Neanderthal in me again.

"If you want it so bad, I'll be happy to drag you to my cave." I pull her close and whisper into her hair, "But don't expect too much in the way of ambiance."

"I don't need ambience when I have you," she breathes in my ear, confirming my hottest desires. She wants it, too. Maybe as much as I do.

After we settle this matter, I hurry to get the subject of pills over with. I want to slam that bedroom door behind us as quickly as possible and lock the rest of the world out of our bubble of togetherness.

In the kitchen, Leah sits with a girl I don't know, poring over textbooks. She barely raises her eyes when we enter. Diego, Sebastian, Beverly, and Michelle, on the other hand, stare blatantly at our interlocked fingers.

Apparently Diego has been tight-lipped and none of the others knew until just now that I had been seeing Belle for the past few days.

I pull the boxes out of the pocket of my jacket and press them into Beverly's hand. I spare myself an introduction of the people and want to go straight back out of the kitchen, but I've done the math without the others.

"Hi, I'm Diego." My buddy is used to contact with beautiful women and the situation doesn't unsettle him in the least. He doesn't even suspect that I want Belle in my room right away. "Welcome to our home sweet home. This is Beverly, Michelle and my roommate Sebastian."

"Hi, I'm Belle." Her smile is absolutely adorable. Then she turns directly to Beverly, who stares at her open-mouthed. "I'm sorry you didn't get your stuff yesterday. It was my fault. I had borrowed Luke's jacket."

"It's okay. I would have gone to the store myself, but I wasn't feeling so well."

"I can imagine," Belle explains sympathetically, putting a hand on hers. "If I'd known what I was keeping him from, I would have sent him to you. I can imagine how you feel."

"Honestly?" Beverly looks up at her with infinite hope.

"Yes, my mother took a similar combination of agents to get through the days and nights. It was never easy for her."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Did she somehow make it out of that cycle?"

"Kind of." Belle takes a deep breath. "She died."

I see my chances for intimacy dwindling. I'm sure she has other things on her mind after this conversation than she did just outside my room, but it's still good to see her fit into my circle of friends. The people sitting at this table are important to me. Each of them in their own way.

"Did you know that clownfish shake their heads to appease conspecifics? I wish that worked for humans too..." Diego manages to change the subject with a silly quip, for which I am sincerely grateful.

"Do you have any stress with anyone?" I inquire.

"There's this group of jocks - no offense to you, bro - some of whom are acting very disrespectful. Remember that party here at the dorm the other night?"

"Sure, I wasn't locked in the storage closet during it," I return, reminding him of the predicament he was in that night.

"Something is said to have happened on the fourth floor. No one is saying anything more specific about it, but one girl hasn't been back since. She left the morning after the party and hasn't come back." Diego is always well-informed. Although I trust him with my secrets without hesitation, he is one of the hubs of the local news world. He knows what to pass on and what to keep to himself. A rare talent. "Rumor has it that four guys in college jackets came out of their room that night."

Belle's nails dig into my arm. His words also remind me alarmingly of the guys at Cooper's party.

"We have to stop them!" whispers Belle not quietly enough.

"Do you know these guys?" inquires Michelle.

"Know is too much of a word. We met more or less because of them. Can I tell?" Belle nods readily and I tell them the story.

Belle intertwines her fingers even tighter with mine and I give her the support she needs.

"You really are a hero, Luke. Why can't all of us have a guy like you?" asks Beverly dreamily. I know for a fact that she's not in love with me. She just wishes for a knight to pick her up on a white steed and ride off into the sunset with her.

"If it helps, I'll report her to campus security. I think that's due, right?"

I nod at Belle, thinking it's for the best as well. There's no way these guys can get away with this. Until yesterday, I had thought the attempt was a one-off, but Diego's story changes things.

"Should we call them?" Diego is immediately fired up about the possibility of bringing these guys to justice. "Can you identify them?"

"I think so," I assert confidently. At least the leader's face is one I won't soon forget. "We ran into them again last night," he says.

"Say, is anyone else hungry? I could eat a whole cow," Belle blurts out, and my roommates burst out laughing. She is so delightfully normal....

BELLE

After two hours, the two men from campus security have disappeared again, taking my statement surprisingly seriously.

I wasn't the first one these guys had a go at, and unfortunately, I wasn't the last. But I was the only one who had a witness by her side, and the only one who wasn't harmed.

We were able to identify four members of the rugby team in the Wilson College student database. Hopefully, thanks to our statements, they will nail these guys. Of course, I would also make a statement to the police if I had to. But whether that will help the victims anymore, I don't know.

The memory of how easy it would have been to fall victim to them as well sits like a thorn in my flesh. I will always be grateful to Luke for not letting me out of his sight that night, even though I was nothing more to him than a strange girl who needed help.

I can only agree with Beverly's wishes for more guys like him, but that quality about him is not why I'm still here.

He has a tremendous attraction that I don't consciously grasp, but thankfully I can still trust my subconscious. He is a unicorn. My unicorn.

The boxes of pizzas we ordered from the delivery service while we waited for the campus cops are the only thing left from the past few

hours. Luke's friends have gone to their rooms and I don't quite know what to do now. Is it even appropriate to stay anymore?

His hand is on the table in the communal kitchen and I reach for it.

"What now?" I ask quietly, so as not to disturb anyone in the brightly-lit building. It's after ten and tomorrow morning everyday life will have us back.

"Are you staying?"

I bite my lower lip and look into his warm eyes.

"May I?"

"I'd love to. But if you want to go home, I'll take you too." There he is again, the reserved guy who puts my safety above his needs. I'm going to have to learn that he's not doing this because he doesn't want to be with me, but because he respects me. This is new to me, but I will internalize it eventually.

"No, I want to stay with you." I run my free hand through the short hair behind his ear.

"I have to warn you," he growls. The low sound creates vibrations in my chest that continue pulsing downward. "I only have a single bed and no couch."

"That's right up my alley. At least this way you won't escape me."

I'm a little surprised that I can still think of such things after all the unpleasant topics. But his touch reminds me that I am alive.

Luke's chair scrapes across the floor. Before I quite realize what's happening, he lifts me up and throws me over his shoulder as if I were as light as a towel.

"Hey," I squeak helplessly, but don't resist in the least. He drags me down the dark hallway and slides the key into the lock with his free hand. The light of the streetlight illuminates the narrow room only a little bit, but it is enough to make out the outlines of the furniture.

Bare walls, a chair, a desk and a closet. My pulse quickens as he sets me down on the bed.

"Don't move from the spot," he murmurs to me, conscientiously locking the door behind us.

We're alone. Finally. Just him and me.

"Come here, my hero," I coax him to join me on the mattress, which really doesn't have much room for two.

Luke swings one leg over my body, lies on top of me, and covers my lips with his.

"You're sure this is what you want?" he inquires tentatively.

"I'm sure, Luke," I whisper in his ear. I let my hands wander under his shirt and pull it over his head. His torso is defined without looking overly muscular. Shoulders and biceps are firm, which explains why he can carry me with such ease.

The grayish light refracts on his skin, tracing the hint of his six-pack. I run my fingers over his chest, enjoying the exploration of unfamiliar territory.

"I only want you, beautiful," he whispers huskily into my hair, kissing my neck with his warm lips. My body rears up to meet him and I pull his pelvis to me. When he presses hard against my pubic, he jerks back, but I'm far from tired of him.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I don't want to overwhelm you just because I can't control my body," he confesses, a little embarrassed.

"Don't worry, you won't overwhelm me, Luke." I've never seen a man so considerate. He runs his fingers along the outside of my body, setting off fireworks. He kneels between my thighs and I relieve him of his jeans. I pepper the underpants across the room and enjoy the sight of the wonderful naked man in the semi-darkness.

"Is there anything you might want to take off me? Something to make up for it?" I tease him. His lips trace a dreamy smile.

"I could think of something," he whispers. He pushes up the hem of my shirt and covers my flat stomach with kisses.

My body burns with desire for him. But he moves so tremendously slowly that I could burn up if I don't take the initiative. It's a dichotomy I've been caught in for the umpteenth time since I met Luke. Should I go with his pace or seize control myself?

I gently take his face in both hands and lure him up to me.

"Would you mind if we postponed foreplay until next time?" I breathe into his ear.

Epilogue

LUKE

3 months later

The stadium is filled to capacity and the ice shines under my blades as I skate in with the team for the first game of the season. I love the feeling of being unstoppable and the fine ice spray on my skin when one of the others brakes in front of me. The grin is literally stapled to my face, but it's not just because of the ice hockey.

We've been training again for two weeks and it's as if the team had never been apart. My colleagues are showing me their new tricks from the summer camps and I'm finally part of it again.

However, there's one thing I haven't told them yet. They will find out my sweet secret after the game at the latest.

Daniel waves us together and we meet in a circle on our half of the field for a last quick consultation.

"Hey, did you guys see who's in the audience cheering for us?" asks Cooper. I suspect what he's alluding to, but don't let on. "Belle's here to see us play, guys. Even at our graduation party last semester, I got the impression she was looking for a player. So guys, how many of you are still single after this summer?"

"Ladies, calm down," Daniel interjects. "First of all, let's play. Do your best to make sure that beauty gets to see a resounding victory, okay?"

On some of the faces around us, I can tell that the presence of campus celebrity is fueling the ambition of my teammates. I let them have the extra motivation because I, too, want Belle's first game to be a highlight. After all, I want her to join me more often in the future.

If my team had looked closely, I'm sure someone would have noticed that Belle is here accompanied by Beverly and Michelle, and at least Cooper and Daniel know that I'm friends with the two of them, but no one draws the right conclusion.

This thing with Belle and I has been going on for over three months now and not a cloud has appeared in our pink sky. She's perfect. I'm the same as always - the walking mess. But it just fits.

I really feel like we could be something serious. She doesn't play games like the girls I usually know. Belle is just herself and says what she wants.

No masquerade, no groping in the dark. With her, I always know where I stand. I can trust her. That is definitely something special.

As always, I stay on the ice with my line for the faceoff. Daniel slides into the center circle and tries to decide the first moment of the game for us.

The referee releases the puck with a whistle. Adrenaline floods my body. I'm fully into it. The ice is my element. I love what I'm doing here.

Daniel wins the duel with the opposing center and manages to pass the puck backwards to me. I slide forward a few feet and pass to Mike, who is playing in our back line, back at the right boards as my opponent moves into my safety zone.

Mike takes the puck and my opponent changes skating directions. My entire line skates towards the opponent's goal. Daniel is in front in the point and holds an opposing player trapped between himself and the boards.

The other two attackers of the opposing team stay back a bit to be able to counterattack quickly if we let them have the puck, which of course we don't intend to do. Mike passes to Sam, my counterpart on the right side, and Sam again passes to Daniel.

Daniel extends and the goalkeeper of the opposing team has to do something for the first time. He holds. We run back to our positions and it continues. After about two minutes of play, we are replaced for the first time and our teammates are allowed on the ice.

Belle is standing on the sidelines and her eyes are shining at me. With her hands, which are in light soft gloves, she forms a heart. I

push up my visor and wink at her. A whole wave of powerful emotion rolls over me as she blows a kiss to me.

She is wonderful and she deems me worthy to exist by her side. However, I have no clue what of all things has earned me her affection. Over the past few months, I've learned not to fundamentally question her feelings - not to doubt her.

No one is going to jump out from behind a box if I let myself fall into my feelings for her and yell "screw you!". She's real and so are our feelings.

I look back at the ice. The tension on the field is palpable and electrifies me. Cooper loves his ice time just as I love mine. With a casual flick of the wrist, he gives the puck a jerk and sinks it into the net. The opponents have no chance. Cooper is a killer. He raises his fist in the air.

The whole bench jumps up and roars out the euphoria. There's nothing like scoring the first goal of the season. I'm in my element here. I'm strong on the ice.

I can hardly believe that I've survived another summer without training. But Belle's company has made the ice hockey-free time very bearable for me this time. First we got the exams over with and then we enjoyed the summer together.

"Did you see the way she was looking at me?" asks Cooper as he comes back to the bench and walks out the third row. "I think Belle has a crush on me."

He points down at his admittedly impressive physique, though you can't see much of it under the gear. But I'm starting to get fed up with his overconfidence and decide to put a damper on it.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but Belle is here for me."

"Don't bullshit me, man," he picks me up, but my gaze remains fixed and that finally unnerves him. "You serious?"

"Yeah, we've been together for about three months," I explain. "But I'd appreciate it if you'd do your best today anyway. After all, it's her first ice hockey game, and I want her to see us win."

Cooper raises his visor and looks from me to Belle, whose gaze is also fixed on us. He has to realize I'm telling the truth.

"Damn Romeo!"

Then it's my turn again and I get my next ice time. We're leading 1-0 and I'm fighting to save at least that lead until the end.

Word has spread around the bench in no time that Belle and I are a pair. The second row relieves us again and I hear my comrades call me only Romeo. Those weirdos...

When the final whistle blares through the hall, we are 5:2 in the lead. We won and played great. At least I thought we were great, but I'm curious to see how Belle liked it.

She waits with the other player friends at the exit of the cabins. Beverly and Michelle congratulate me on winning the game. My girlfriend kisses me in speechless euphoria.

"You were fantastic!" she breathes against my lips as she lets go of me again.

Some of my colleagues probably didn't believe it until this evidence and can't sufficiently conceal their amazement. Both Belle and I notice it. She smirks and wipes my lips with her thumb.

"We're going out for more tacos. Will you join us?"

I nod and let her go. First, I have another beer with the guys. Daniel puts his heavy arm on my shoulders, hands me a cool bottle, and takes me aside.

"Badass, kid." He grins broadly at me. I have no idea if he means the Belle thing or my performance on the field. However, I'm pretty sure he's the only guy on the team who doesn't think about Belle sometimes at night when he's lonely.

There's a dark abyss lurking inside Daniel that requires his full attention.

"I have no idea how you got this girl, but you deserve it."

BELLE

Restlessly, I slide back and forth on the slick chair. My gaze keeps sliding to the front door, hoping to finally see him. It's stupid, because I want Luke to enjoy time with his friends, too.

I really want that, but I miss him and I've seen him a lot less all week than I did during summer break.

"Do you know what you want yet?" inquires Beverly.

"No, I'll wait a minute to order," I decide. "My friend Raine should be here any minute, too."

There's already a whole bunch of Luke's friends at our table, and I wish my best friend and my boyfriend were at my side, even though I know almost all of them by now. There are some of Luke's roommates from his floor in the dorm. Diego and Sebastian were already here when we came. We were also joined by two blondes who invited the two guys over.

Raine wanted to come with her roommate Allie so Luke and I could rope off without her being left behind alone.

We spent most days of summer vacation at my apartment or the nearby park enjoying our togetherness. Now we have to get used again to the fact that there is also an everyday structure around us that we have to follow. Of course, this limits our time together.

Although we both also worked in the summer, we had much more free time together without lectures and his trainings. It was nice and I'll miss it, but I'm sure we can have a harmonious relationship even with a little more distance.

He hasn't said the three words yet, but I have a feeling it will be soon. This time I will not make the first move, but wait until he is ready.

Once it almost slipped out, but I shut my mouth tightly and only his three words can open the invisible lock.

A smile settles on my lips as I see my best friend step through the glass door with her escort. I wave to them and introduce them to the group.

"Hey, nice to meet you guys," Charmer Diego immediately throws himself verbally into a pose and gives Allie a big grin. He really is a handsome guy, but his come-ons are always a little too obvious.

I can't imagine he really wants to find someone and I've never watched him complete a successful flirtation. Girls are into him, but none of them are enough for him to take them home.

Raine takes a seat next to me. The second empty seat is occupied by my bag for Luke. Allie ends up between Raine and Sebastian, but she seems okay with it. The blonde with the dark eyes is really a

feast for the eyes. Sebastian noticed that too, but he's too shy to approach a girl. Diego and he complement each other super.

"Where's Luke?" inquires Raine, reaching for my menu.

"He's having another drink with his team and then he'll join us." I force a smile, but she doesn't even look.

"Can you even stand to be without him?" The tip is not unexpected. I've been neglecting her for the past few weeks and I'm totally sorry.

"Honestly, it's hard, but we'll find our balance and then everything will go back to normal. I promise."

Raine puts the card down and looks at me urgently.

"It's totally okay that you like spending time with him. I miss you, but you don't have to apologize for anything, you hear me?"

I breathe a sigh of relief. She is the best after all.

"I have other friends besides you," she teases me.

"So, who?"

"Well, there's this new student. He's a real celebrity. I think I'd better not tell you his name for privacy reasons." Her eyes twinkle mischievously, knowing I'm firmly on her hook with this.

"Oh, who is it?" Now she's really got me curious.

"Nah, I'll keep that to myself. Maybe I'll tell you when you have another ladies night with me sometime."

"Blackmail it is... Alright. I'm in!"

LUKE

Night envelops the city as we leave the restaurant and make our way home. Hanging on my arm is the most beautiful woman in the world and we stroll through a park to her apartment. Even though my dorm is closer and most of our companions walk home right there, we chose her apartment.

The moon lights up the starry night and I slow my steps to look up.

My pocket vibrates, but the news from the digital world hasn't meant as much to me as it used to. In a few hours, the news will still

be waiting for me, and I'm no longer willing to leave my present for it. Time with Belle is far too precious.

"You know what this sight reminds me of?"

"No, what?" She still hasn't fully recovered her memory of that night. But I was there. I protected her and always will.

"The first time I held you, the moon was just as big and clear."

"I'm sorry I missed that," she murmurs with a sigh. I don't want to let her get sad. So I give her a piece of my memory.

"By the way, did you know you asked me for my number that night?" I tease her.

"No, did I?" She looks up at me, puzzled. I put my hands on her hips and hold her close.

"Yeah, but I didn't give it to you because I thought you'd turn me in or something."

"But why?" Belle shakes her head and I kind of agree. I know her so much better today, and I'm still not sure I would have acted differently with my new knowledge. It was just insanely risky. Anything could have happened.

"Because nothing as good as what happened to us ever happens to guys like me. We're a statistical anomaly, my princess."

"You're the hero in this story. You deserve the princess!" She puts her arms around my neck and kisses me with all her might.

"I love you, Princess Belle." She blows me away again and again. Her pace is rapid, her energy almost boundless. Where I react hesitantly, she already has a plan and takes me with her. Belle expands my horizons and I enjoy every second with her.

"I love you too, Luke."

Backmatter

RAINE

It was only a matter of time before my friend Belle got her Superman, but what about me? Will bookworms like me stay single forever, or will I ever find someone who finds the depths of my personality exciting?

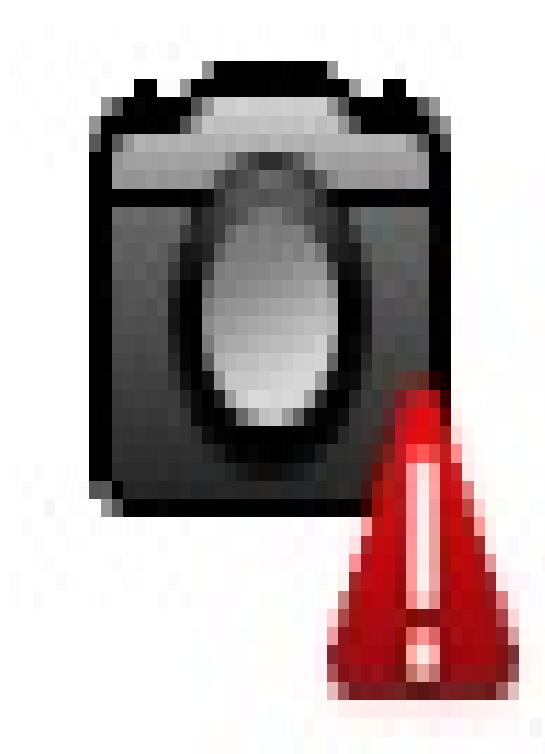
Of course, I want romance like I know from my books, but I'm not willing to pretend for it. When one of my tutoring students asks me to accompany him to a party so that everyone will think I'm his girlfriend, it's an opportunity for me to finally show a different side of myself. Of course, my friend Belle helps me transform into a beautiful swan....

I'm excited to see what develops from this story.

Do we read each other?

It's All About Love: Fake Dates & Superstars

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09ZLT6LJ5/>



Raine

Tutoring him in math is one thing - playing his girlfriend for an evening is quite another. Actually, lies are not to my taste, but after my makeover even star football player Wade Andrews will have to realize that there is more to me than he knows.

This evening is my chance to finally catch the eye of other guys. What could possibly go wrong?

Wade

I never dreamed I would need a fake girlfriend. I'm an athlete - guys like me don't need that. Girls are lining up for a date with me.

But that's the problem.

I don't have time for all this stuff, because my studies are going down the drain and the only person I can always rely on is my tutor. So what could be more obvious than asking her out?

Final Words from the Author

Hey, this is Emily. I'm glad you enjoyed my book. If you don't mind please leave a review and sign up for my newsletter and receive a free bonus story from the It's All About Love universe.

I would love to tell you about Diego's and Leah's little secret...

