

UnConventional

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eISBN 9781623004699

Editor: T. Mitchell

Cover Artist: Mina Carter

Published in the United States of America

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 806

San Francisco CA 94104-0806

www.loose-id.com

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Chapter One

I'm not supposed to be here. I was going to skip ECAC this year, steer clear of New Orleans and the memories that hang from it like Spanish moss from a live oak.

The thought swims through my head as I rush through the vast terminal E of Bush Intercontinental Airport, struggling to make it to my gate. The cord from my earbuds sways as I run, the self-identified anthem of my thirtieth year pumping into my ears: All Time Low's "Weightless."

Expecting to fly out of terminal C, I went through security there, only to discover after the TSA torture that my gate was actually in E—mostly reserved for international departures. But hey, as the joke goes: "Louisiana: third world and proud of it." Even with my first-class priority security access (a birthday treat to myself), now that everyone is funneled through the cancer-making voyeur machines, it took me longer than it should have, and I have to race all the way to the far end of the terminal to gate E21, hopefully before my flight leaves me stranded.

Gripping my bag, grateful I checked my suitcase, I continue my dash. I wish I were taller and my petite legs could cover more ground with each stride. I can't afford to miss this plane, be late to the convention. I may not have originally planned on attending, but now that I've committed, I need to be there.

In the middle of the chorus, my phone rings, interrupting my music with my husband Stephen's characteristic tone, and I manage to hit the button on my cord to answer it without slowing down.

"Look, I'm late—" I leap onto one of the automated walkways, dodging people and luggage who don't obey the slow-traffic-keep-right rule.

"The company's expanding their overseas operations, and they put my name in for an international position!"

I'm almost to my gate, hopping off the walkway, narrowly avoiding an old woman. "Stephen," I say, "I'm about to miss my flight. Can we—"

"I don't know why you're even going to New Orleans. Sometimes the past is better left there. You don't see me going back to Nebraska anytime soon, do you?" Even after ten years of marriage Stephen hardly talks about his childhood. All I know is he spent most of his younger years working on his great-uncle's ranch, where the only difference between him and the other ranch hands was that he wasn't paid, and he had nowhere else to go. Stephen was smart enough to get an academic scholarship when he turned eighteen, his ticket off the ranch, and he never looked back. We each have intense memories associated with where we grew up, only mine are bittersweet, and Stephen's are just...bitter. "Like that novel you're writing. All it does is make you unhappy. I don't understand you."

"That's not true," I say, my voice weak. Nearly breathless, I arrive at the gate, an apologetic look on my face as I hand the gate agent my ticket.

"We thought we lost you," she says. "I'll let them know you're here. Hurry."

I jog up the Jetway. "I have to go. They're holding the plane for me. We can talk about this later. I'll call you when I get to New Orleans." I hit the button to hang up, music immediately surging back into my ears. I mouth *sorry* to the flight attendant as I find my seat—1-B—stash my bag, and sink into it with relief. I'm exhausted, sweaty, and disappointed I've arrived too late for my preflight drink.

I'm shutting off my phone and winding the headphones around it when the man beside me speaks.

"What's a seven-letter word for the victim of adultery? Begins with a c?"

I glance over. He has his long legs stretched out in front of him, the tray table opened, and the airline magazine flipped to the crossword. A pen poised in one hand, he taps it against his thumb, waiting for me to answer.

Without having to think, I reply, "Cuckold."

He fills in the word: firm, deliberate strokes, his letters all caps and neat. I like his handwriting. Then he turns and smiles at me: a big, broad grin revealing teeth that are perfect enough to be the result of years of pain and orthodontic work, yet one slightly crooked incisor on the bottom left suggests they're naturally straight.

"Thanks," he says, still smiling. "I should have known that." His hair is slightly wavy, thick. A deep dark brown with a suggestion of red, conservatively cut but not so short you can't see its natural body or texture. It's the kind of hair that demands a woman pull her fingers through.

"I didn't think anyone actually did those things," I say, pointing to the magazine.

His cheek raises in a half smile as he slips the pen in the pocket of his button-down and folds the tray table back into the armrest. "Now that I have such lovely company, I don't need to." I notice he leans forward at the waist without really moving or bending his legs as he slips the magazine back into the pouch in front of him.

I find my eyes strangely drawn to his legs and feet; he's wearing black, loose-fitting slacks and black leather dress shoes, although they've obviously been chosen more for comfort than formality.

"I always told myself I wouldn't be one of those people who's last to board and holds everyone up. I'm sorry," I say, forcing my eyes to meet his. Reaching for my St. Anthony medal out of reflex, I flush when I catch myself and drop my hands.

"Let me guess," he says. His eyes sparkle, his skin wrinkling just a tiny bit in each corner. "You went through terminal C."

"That obvious, huh?" I say, leaning back in my seat.

He points a finger at me, gesturing with it. "There's actually this little hidden security checkpoint for terminal E nearly no one knows about. It's rarely crowded, especially since it's only open in the mornings."

"You tell me this *now*," I say with a relaxed smile, my head turned toward him.

With an effortless shrug, he returns the grin, and I notice his strong chin, his smoothly shaved, olive-tinged skin that suggests it'll turn the perfect shade of brown if he spends enough time in the sun. He extends his hand. "Santiago Durán."

It takes a moment for my muscles to register that my hand should slip into his, and even after it does, grasping it and completing the handshake is a struggle. My heart is fluttering—yes, fluttering; who thought hearts actually did that? My throat suddenly dry.

"Santiago... Isn't that a city?"

He laughs. A good-natured, genuine laugh, almost as intoxicating as the rest of him. Deep but not too deep. "My parents are Cuban, from Oriente, so I guess they were homesick." At my confused look, he adds, "I'm lucky they named me Santiago instead of Guantánamo; Diego's a much better nickname than Gitmo. Especially nowadays." He grins, his eyes twinkling.

Still not taking my hand from his, I say, "Nadine Monroe. But please, call me Di. I can't stand Nadine." Neither could my mother. I was named after some great-aunt I never met. It didn't take long for her to bestow "Di" as a nickname, inspired by her favorite heroine in a novel she'd read dozens of times. I'm pretty sure the "Di" in the book was short for "Diane" (and pronounced "die,"), but because of the sound of "Nadine," she called me "Dee."

He laughs again, and I think I could spend a lifetime listening to that sound. "So both our parents chose ridiculous names for their children."

I'm finally able to recover my hand, although now I know where the hyperbolic expression "I'll never wash it again" comes from. "I don't think Santiago's ridiculous. I like it."

He smiles and leans his head back, looking directly at me, as if I'm the only woman on the planet. "Then you can call me Santiago. You can call me whatever you like."

I flush. The flight attendant is going over the safety procedure, and though I know it's rude to ignore her, I can't take my eyes off Santiago's, which are this rich milk chocolate speckled with gold, amber, and copper, a swirl of shades as if his irises were created from a blend of colored pencils. I keep expecting to find some new facet to them.

It occurs to me that I'm looking at him far too closely considering I'm married. Is it cheating just to admire and flirt with a hot guy I'll probably never see again?

He's grinning, studying my eyes, occasionally glancing up at the flight attendant to offer her his smile too. I'm not sure what he expects to see in my irises; they're greenish gray, the color of dirty money, complete with dark flecks of dirt.

"So why you heading to New Orleans? If it's Mardi Gras, I'm afraid you're about five months too late." I keep my voice low, trying not to be too rude to the flight attendant.

He chuckles. "A conference. You've probably never heard of it. ECAC. Editors and Copyeditors Association Conference. It's no coincidence that if you pronounce the acronym, it sounds like a noise you'd make after tasting something unpleasant."

"Oh my God," I say, slapping my hand over my mouth, the red in my cheeks intensifying. I cast a glance at the flight attendant, who's finished her presentation and is glaring at me. "Me too," I add in explanation, relieved the flight attendant has disappeared to check the overhead bins and tray tables in preparation for takeoff. "Where do you work?"

After his hot Bush Intercontinental Airport tip, I'm pretty confident (and secretly hopeful) this isn't a connecting flight for him, that he lives somewhere in the vast expanse that is the Houston metro area. Even if he's a fantasy, the idea of coming home and knowing Santiago "El Hunko" is out there will at least give me a little extra fantasy fuel.

"You know *Houston* magazine? I write some of the copy, but mostly I'm the one making sure all the i's are dotted and the t's crossed."

I lean back, stretching my legs and deciding to pull them up into the seat since my feet don't quite touch the ground. I've always wished I was tall and large-chested, but airplanes do make me grateful for my five-foot-one, 100-pound frame.

"What about you?"

Before I can answer, the flight attendant interrupts. Completely ignoring me, she leans in toward Santiago. "We should be taking off soon. You okay? Need anything?"

He smiles at her, shakes his head almost imperceptibly. "I'm perfect, thank you."

Yes you are, I think, then cover my face with my hands, hoping to hide the reflexive pinkening of my cheeks.

It doesn't matter, because I can't help noticing the way she smiles at him. They're totally flirting with each other. I feel myself sink a little. That warm feeling of being singled out is fading. Santiago probably flirts with everyone. I don't blame him. He's totally delicious and far, far off menu for me, even if I weren't married.

"I stashed them in the front closet. I'll get them out for you once we've landed and everyone's disembarked," she says.

"Thank you," he says. He's still smiling, but I notice him rub the heel of one hand over his thigh, an unconscious, nervous gesture.

What is she talking about? Some kind of luggage? I don't have much time to ponder the issue because the pilot comes on the speaker. As usual, his voice is nearly unintelligible, but I definitely pick up something about a delay in our takeoff schedule.

The flight attendant disappears.

"Well, looks like we'll have plenty of time to get to know each other," Santiago says. "I think you were going to tell me about your job?"

"Oh. Yes. I work for an editing consulting company. Basically, it's like organized freelance." I chuckle nervously. "Anytime anyone in the area needs editing or proofreading or copywriting and they don't have an in-house team, they call us."

“Sounds exciting,” he says, and I’m surprised he’s not feigning his interest. Or being sarcastic.

I tap my hand on my ankle. “Not really. My boss is a workaholic, and that sort of trickles down. So I see long hours and bring work home a lot more than I’d like,” I add with a grunt.

Something changes in his face; it’s fleeting—just a fraction of a second before he replaces it with his smile and warm look—but I still catch it. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“Two lowly editors, sitting together in first class,” I say, still gripping my ankle, giving me something to cling to. “I keep asking myself what I’m doing,” I say, my cheeks heating; I hadn’t intended to say that out loud.

He laughs. It’s not his full laugh, but it’s rich and deep and lovely anyway. He winks at me subtly. “I know what I’m doing.”

I arch an eyebrow, my heart thumping.

His eyes twinkle, and he leans toward me when he answers. “Sitting next to the most attractive woman on Flight 1037.”

* * * *

We’ve been sitting on the runway for nearly an hour, waiting for weather conditions to clear enough for takeoff, and I’ve decided this first-class ticket was the best possible birthday gift I could have given myself. Because I’m comfortable—at least, as much as you can be on an airplane—I’ve already had a couple of cocktails, and I’m sitting next to one of the most attractive and interesting men I’ve ever met.

He’s laughing, his head tilted back, looking gorgeous. I reflexively check my mouth for drool. I’m really not that funny. “So you have an actual ‘anthem.’ Is that like a theme song?”

I blush, but it's more from indignation than embarrassment. "I never should have said that. It's just a song to motivate me. You know, like people make New Year's resolutions?"

He's stopped laughing, but he's still smiling. "So tell me about this song. What? It must be important to you."

I shrug. "Do you like punk?"

"Uh, I don't dislike it, but I think Green Day is probably the only band I could name off the top of my head."

"I love it. Judge me if you want. But..." I sigh. "It makes me happy." I shrug. "I know a thirty-year-old woman has no right to love punk—"

He holds up his hand to stop me. "You have a right to like whatever you want." His face scrunches up. "Except maybe if it's illegal." He chuckles. "Sorry. Go ahead."

"There's this song, 'Weightless,' by the band All Time Low. They sing about getting older and feeling like you haven't accomplished anything, and that it's time to face your fears and finally do something with your life. They compare their life to an unread book, wanting to feel 'weightless.' Very carpe diem." I wave my phone. Technically it should be off, even though we're grounded, but I turn it on. "You could listen to it, if you want," I say, powering it on and offering it to him, headphones and all.

He looks at me, one eyebrow raised. "You sure you don't mind me using your earbuds? I could have Ebola. Or bubonic plague." He grins.

I laugh. "I'll take my chances. You can just hold them if it bothers you. I have some wipes in my bag I can clean them with."

He chuckles, wipes one on his shirt, then sticks it in his ear. His smile spreads across his face as he bobs his head to the music, listening intently.

I'm impressed that he actually takes the time to listen to the entire thing—or nearly so; the flight attendant interrupts us.

“Still okay over here?”

Santiago removes the earbuds, cleaning them again before wrapping them back around my phone and handing it back to me. “Excuse me?”

“I just wanted to make sure you were all right. I know our schedule has been interrupted—”

“I’m fine. Thanks,” he says with a slight nod.

God, the woman is obsessed with him. Not that I blame her, but does she really need to check on him every ten seconds? Not counting delivering drinks, she’s come over to ask if he needs anything ten times since I got on.

“That’s a great anthem, Di,” he says sincerely. “So what are you going to try to accomplish this year?”

“Well, my mom and I, we were really close. She passed away about ten years ago—”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” Take a breath. “She loved books... It’s silly, but...she was kind of my cheerleader. Always told me I could do anything, be anything.” I sigh. “That’s another song, by the way.”

“Sounds like my oldest sister, Genie.” He hesitates for a moment. “She’s always been there for me. I can only imagine what losing her would feel like. I know it’s not the same, but—”

A comfortable smile slips onto my face. “But you understand. God...she’s been gone so long, but sometimes it feels so fresh, you know?” I pull my legs up, hug my knees. “Anyway, when I turned thirty, I looked at my life and said, ‘Is this really what she’d want for me?’ And the answer was no.” I blush. “I can’t believe I’m telling you all this.”

His grin sweetens. “I’m told I’m a good listener, although the two old-fashioneds probably helped.”

My blush deepens. He's had one cup of water and that's it. Maybe he doesn't drink? Maybe he thinks I'm a lush.

"Deep breath, Di," he says in response to my flustered look. I grip my knees tighter at his word choice. It's what my mom would always tell me when I started getting worked up. His face softens. "I'm sorry. I promise I'm only an insensitive jerk on Mondays." He grins.

That makes me laugh. "Today's Tuesday."

His face contorts comically. "Hmm. In that case, feel free to tell me to mind my own business."

We smile together.

It feels good, talking to him like this, relaxing into the conversation as if we were old friends. I turn my head, leaning my temple against my knees. "I'm writing a novel. But! Before you ask, no, I don't want to talk about it right now."

He chuckles. "Fair enough."

The captain comes on, mumbling barely intelligibly. I focus on trying to parse out what he's saying and happen to notice Santiago shifting in his seat. He puts his hands on either side of his thighs and uses his arms to push his body back. It makes my heart beat faster, and I have to look away. It was the tiniest of movements, adjustments, but something about it...

"Guess we're finally going to take off, after all," he says, drawing my attention back to him.

I push my legs down, fold them into lotus position. Nod.

"I think it's admirable that you're writing a book."

I laugh. "I doubt it'll be the next classic. Besides. It's a lot harder than I thought it would be." I blow air through my teeth. "Sometimes it feels like I'm slowly pulling off pieces of my soul and patching it into prose."

"Wow, Di. That's beautiful."

“What?” I flush scarlet. “Not really.”

“Even if you never publish it, just writing it is an accomplishment. Most people get set on a fixed path, like the streetcar, and deviating from that isn’t easy. It takes effort and a lot of guts.”

“And what are you, some kind of life coach who proofreads on the side?”

He chuckles, shakes his head, as if trying to find his voice again, smiling broadly. “Hardly. Let’s just say I know what it’s like to feel ‘stuck,’ as your anthem says. Trust me.”

* * * *

The rest of our delay and the flight fly by in more ways than one. Not only is Santiago nice to look at, he makes great conversation, and unlike Stephen, he’s knowledgeable on a wide range of topics and actually seems interested in what I have to say. Before I know it, the plane is taxiing, but all I want is to spend a few more minutes with him, lulled by the richness of his voice.

“Where are you staying?” he asks as I fumble for my phone.

“At the hotel holding the conference. Riverside.”

“Me too.”

I’ve been focused on my phone, head bent, but when I hear those words, my head snaps up, my heart beating a little faster, butterflies floating in my stomach. “Oh, great,” I say, trying to sound disaffected but not sure I pull it off.

“Do you want to share a cab? It’d be cheap—”

My phone buzzes in my hand, cutting him off. “It’s my boss,” I say, looking at the incoming text messages. I sigh, exasperated, typing my response quickly.

“Everything all right?”

I look up; his eyes are filled with genuine concern, particularly surprising since he’s only known me a few hours. “Yeah. I had a meeting with my boss tomorrow

afternoon, but she's moved it up a day, and with our delay, it means I have to race off the plane and make the land-speed record from Kenner to the French Quarter."

He laughs, but it's a softer, more muted laugh than his others. A disappointed laugh, perhaps. "I'll see you later, then? I like to be one of the last off the plane."

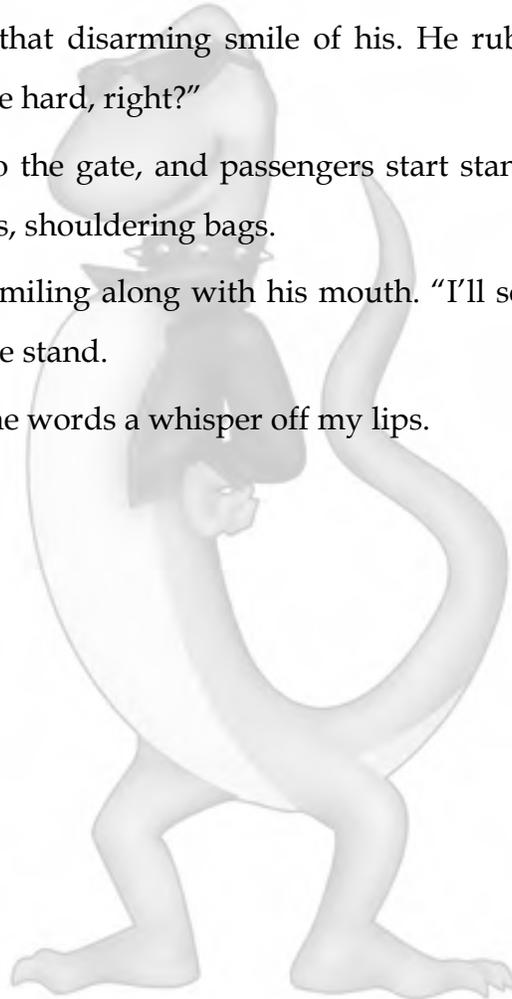
My eyebrows furrow, and I cock my head, confused. "Even when you're in first class?"

He shrugs, flashes that disarming smile of his. He rubs his hands on his pants nervously. "Old habits die hard, right?"

The plane pulls into the gate, and passengers start standing around us, reaching for items in overhead bins, shouldering bags.

He grins, his eyes smiling along with his mouth. "I'll see you soon, Di," he says, offering a hand to help me stand.

"I hope so," I say, the words a whisper off my lips.



Chapter Two

When I'm getting my bags, in the taxi on the way to the hotel, when I check into my room, all throughout my meeting with my boss, I keep thinking about Santiago: picturing his smile, hearing his laugh, imagining what it would feel like to comb my fingers through his hair. Even when I speak to Stephen to tell him I've arrived safely, I imagine Santiago's voice instead.

I'm a terrible person.

I need to unwind. Get my mind off a man I shouldn't be thinking about in passing, let alone obsessing over. So I find myself in the hotel bar, determined to find solace in hard liquor. This hotel hosts a lot of conventions, so its bar is sophisticated, classy, even romantic—if you have someone with you. Stephen never comes with me to ECAC. It bothered me when we first married, but now I see it as a break from him. I know that's a horrible thing to say, but it's the truth. I find myself actually looking forward to a big hotel room all to myself and some girl time with my convention buddy, Melanie.

This year, with the convention in New Orleans—where Stephen and I met—I'm extra glad he stayed in Houston. It was hard enough to return to the city I once called home, which I never thought I'd leave, and which I've stayed away from for over ten years. If Stephen were here, it'd be too much.

The bar is roughly square, with a circle cut in its center. Around the perimeter of the square, fed by a few steps, are the counter-high tables and chairs where Melanie and I sit. Nestling the square and rounding into the circle is the bar itself, gleaming with lights and glass and metal—very modern. Scattered around the floor within this circle, in front of the bar, are lower chairs and tables, draped in heavy tablecloths whose slight shimmer catches the dim light. A piano sits off to one corner. Directly opposite the bar,

on the same level as the circle, is the entrance, the door propped open to entice new customers. No one sits at the piano, but a light jazz plays low over the stereo from hidden surround-sound speakers in the ceiling and walls.

From our perch, we can observe nearly the entire room. Melanie sips her martini—the only thing she ever drinks—scoping the crowd. She and I aren't friends in the traditional sense, considering we live in totally different parts of the country (I in Houston and she in Chicago) and don't really keep in touch, seeing each other at each annual ECAC. It's kind of like that movie, *Cedar Rapids*, where the insurance salespeople all hook up at the conference. We get our nails done at the spa, hang out for a few drinks (usually leaning against each other as we stumble back up to our rooms), sit together at a seminar or two, then each go back to our respective lives. I like Melanie, but she's the type of person who probably has dozens of friends back home, and with four kids and a husband, not to mention a career. It's not like she has time for me.

Melanie is only on her second martini, but I'm pushing past my third cocktail. Neither of us have said much to each other, simply drinking and staring out at the room, observing the few other souls huddled over their drinks. The convention doesn't start officially until tomorrow, so the crowd is a little thinner than normal.

Finally, Melanie leans back in her seat, drink in her hand, and looks at me. "Did you and Stephen finally call it quits?"

"What?" I ask, wondering if I'm already drunk, though I'm not. Although I'm petite, I've never been a lightweight.

She points to my left hand, which holds my drink. Some combination of bourbon and ginger beer and lime. "No ring?"

I glance down at my hand. Shift my drink to my right to get a better look, even though I know what she means and don't need to. "My diamond was loose, so the jeweler suggested I have it fixed right away or I risked losing the stone."

"Uh-huh," Melanie says, eyeing me suspiciously, waving her martini glass. "And what's the excuse for the band?"

"Oh," I say, stroking my left ring finger. "Honestly, it's a little snug in the summer, so I'm having it resized while they fix the other ring."

Melanie laughs. She has kind of an annoying laugh, like a songbird with a bad cough. "Sure. Convention hookup strategy number one: ditch the ring. So, which guy in here you taking up to your room tonight?"

"Shut up!" I say, slapping her playfully on the arm. "I couldn't do that to Stephen."

Melanie scrunches up her face and finishes off her martini. "If he loves you so much, why doesn't he ever come with you?"

We've been through this before, and she knows it annoys me, talking about him. In fact, one of the rules we established early on was to keep talk of family to a minimum. ECAC is about girl time, not the dreariness of our everyday lives. Besides, it isn't like she's ever brought her husband with her, either.

She realizes I'm not going to answer and points into the crowd. "Oooh. What about him!"

I follow Melanie's finger. At one of the low tables toward the center of the circle, three guys sit, two of them drinking beer, the other some kind of deep-brown liquor, perhaps a cocktail or dark rum. Santiago.

"Oh my God," I say, forcing myself to look away, hoping he hasn't seen us pointing and staring.

"What?" Melanie says, joking, attempting to drink from her glass and realizing it's empty. "I'm right? You were totally checking them out!"

"No," I say, pulling her closer so I can whisper in her ear even though no one is remotely nearby to overhear us. "That's the guy I texted you about earlier. From the plane!"

"Which one? The one in the middle?"

"Yeah."

Melanie starts giggling. "You totally need to go over there, then!"

"What? No! Are you crazy?"

Melanie pushes herself up. She can't hold her liquor nearly as well as I can, so she's already a little wobbly. I grab her arm, partially to support her, partially to stop her. "Well, if you're not going to talk to him, then I am."

"No. Wait. You can't."

Melanie is apparently making enough commotion to draw the attention of the three men at the table. Santiago notices me and smiles. Crap. I offer a tense smile in reply, then turn to Melanie, trying to help her back into her seat.

I sigh. "Okay. If I promise to go over there and talk to him, will you behave yourself?"

"I can try," she says, blinking at me and giggling.

I roll my eyes, down the last of my drink, straighten my shirt, and head toward the guys' table. I feel like I'm in high school all over again: the nerd approaching the jocks' table on a dare. Once I'm a few steps away, Santiago's friends seem to get the hint and disperse, so when I sink into the seat across from him, we're alone.

"I wondered how long it'd take you to come over here and talk to me," he says flirtatiously.

"I thought the guy was supposed to approach the girl."

He shrugs. "I'm progressive." Grins. "What're you drinking?"

I nod toward the glass in front of him. "Whatever you are."

He winks. "That's my girl." Signals for the waitress.

I shiver when he calls me "his girl," but immediately feel ridiculous. I'm a married woman and not even the most attractive female in the bar. Melanie, for example, is far more beautiful than me: tall, with long legs and gorgeous, straight, silky auburn hair I'm insanely jealous of. My hair is the blandest shade imaginable, murky like the

Mississippi, and can never decide if it wants to be wavy or straight, forcing me to fight with it every morning just to make it halfway presentable.

“Two more Cuba Libres,” Santiago says as soon as the waitress draws near. She nods and scoots off. So he’s not a teetotaler. Good to know.

“A Cuban, drinking rum and Coke. Really?” I say with a playful grin in spite of myself.

He shrugs. “It’s hard to beat Coke and good, dark rum with a twist of lime.”

As we wait for the waitress to bring our drinks, I lean back in my seat, looking at him. God, he’s something. It’s hard to tell how tall he is, not that it really matters, since nearly everyone is taller than me. Remembering his legs from the plane, I estimate he has to be well under six feet—probably between five-eight and five-ten—certainly shorter than Stephen. Which means kissing might not be nearly as awkward, especially when I’m wearing heels. Fuck. I’m thinking of kissing him. I can’t be thinking of kissing him.

I’m trying so hard to remove the image of our lips pressing together, of his arms wrapping around me, that I shut my eyes tightly and find I’m unable to speak.

“You okay?” he asks with genuine sincerity.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and open one eye at a time, spying the waitress approaching with our drinks. “Just thirsty.”

Santiago finishes his drink and trades it for a fresh one. I watch as the waitress sets mine in front of me and disappears again.

“Well, there you go. Problem solved,” he says with the subtlest of winks.

I nod, still unable to speak, pulling the tumbler toward me, leaning forward, and taking a tentative sip. “Oooh, that’s good,” I say, finding my voice. This is top-shelf stuff.

He smiles. “What can I say? I’m a rum man.”

I want to turn and see what Melanie is up to, but there's no way for me to glance back without being rude. And the last thing I want is to make Santiago think I'm not interested. I down half my drink in one gulp, hoping to loosen my tongue. I wouldn't consider myself outgoing, but I'm not super shy either. Yet, somehow, sitting in this bar with Santiago, the burn of rum hovering in the back of my throat, I'm suddenly hesitant. Especially since he's leaned back in his chair, drink cradled in one hand, looking at me. No, not looking. Admiring.

I feel the heat rising in my cheeks; it could be the alcohol, but I know better. I glance at the door, as if subconsciously looking for an escape, and notice a group of women enter. The convention sluts, it looks like, all dressed in clothes far too tight and revealing to mean anything other than an open invitation. Santiago notices I'm distracted and turns his head to follow my gaze. I watch, in my peripheral vision, to see how long his eyes rest on the long legs and firm breasts of the entering women before returning to my drink, swallowing the rest quickly.

"You know, it's better if you savor it." He raises his eyebrows, a faint smile slipping across his face.

My cheeks are definitely flushed now, my head buzzing. I nudge my chin in the general direction of the bar, where the women have gathered, leaned over, asses in the air, like bitches in heat.

"Why me?" I ask, the alcohol pushing me to blurt out what I intended to only think.

He looks at me with one brow raised, sipping his drink and studying me, clearly amused.

If I didn't have the alcohol dampening my brain, I probably wouldn't say what I say next, gesturing a bit too wildly with my glass, ice tinkling. "I think we both know you could have any woman here if you wanted her."

He leans back, grinning at me. "There's only one woman in this bar I want."

Now I'm definitely blushing, and not just a faint flush from the liquor, either; I'm talking crimson from clavicle to eyebrow. The initial alcoholic euphoria, enough to lubricate my mouth clears, and I push myself up. "Santiago, thank you for the drink, but..." I offer what I hope is a smile. "I have to go."

I rush toward the exit, only pausing to signal to Melanie I'm leaving, and don't look back.

* * * *

The entire elevator ride up to my room, all I can think about is how I've cheated on my husband. It's a sin to lust in your heart, even if you don't act on it, right? I imagined, wished to be kissing Santiago, a man I just met, when I have Stephen at home. Stephen, who's always taken care of me, who rescued me when I was nineteen and has provided for me ever since.

I pull my necklace out of my shirt and finger the St. Anthony medal, an action I've done so much over the past decade I've worn off the inscription. But I still remember it: *So you can always find your way.* I bite my lip, gripping the medal tightly, stifling tears that hover on the periphery of my vision.

I was a freshman in college. Just started my second semester when it happened. It was Mardi Gras season, and my parents had gone to a party. I'd been invited, but now that I was in college had decided I needed to attempt some shred of independence, so I hitched along with some of the girls from my dorm and went to the parades.

I still remember—it was late, I was drunk, and so were my dorm mates—and the streetcar had stopped running, so we were walking toward one of the frat houses not too far from the parade route, hoping to join the after-party. My cell phone rang. It was the first one I owned, something my parents had insisted on when they'd relented and let me move into the dorms instead of living at home. Not everyone had mobile phones back then, so I felt privileged. I hardly used it and rarely gave out the number, so I was perplexed as to who'd be calling me so late. Maybe my parents to check that I'd gotten back from the parade okay?

I know it sounds melodramatic, but my entire world changed in that instant. The voice on the other line reached me in fragments. A car accident. Just off the Crescent City Connection, near Tchoupitoulas. My parents. Killed instantly.

I remember sinking to my knees—right there on the grass of the neutral ground—discarded shards of plastic beads, cups, broken coins parade goers had missed all digging into my flesh. I couldn't even cry. Maybe because of the alcohol, but I think it was more the shock, as if my heart had been suddenly and painfully ripped from my body. Although a few of the girls stopped to check on me, it was like I'd stepped into some strange parallel universe where I was trapped, alone and isolated.

I'm embarrassed to admit I spent the first couple days and nights after that horrific call drenched in drink and denial. I skipped class and spent my nights in whatever bar I wandered into first, staying until I ran out of cash for drinks, dragging myself back home—instead of to my dorm—at five or six in the morning. I'd climb into my parents' bed, inhaling their lingering scent, and cry until I passed out, sleeping off the alcohol and pain.

I had no other family, no siblings, nothing. My mother had been the guiding force in my life, and suddenly she was gone. It was easier to run from my new reality, to walk, hungover, trancelike, through the now empty rooms of the small shotgun in which I'd grown up than to face responsibilities. School. Bills. Funeral arrangements.

Two days after the call, I sat at the counter in a bar not far from the parade route. Packed with college kids, tourists, and the occasional local, partying hard long after the last float had rolled off into the night. I'd gotten there early, using the last of my textbook money, not caring if I passed out at the bar and got hauled away to the drunk tank. At least I thought I didn't care what happened to me. I was drunk enough to have my mind and reflexes dimmed, but not so drunk I couldn't say no.

He wasn't tall—probably only five-seven—but broad-shouldered with thick biceps and bulging pecs that suggested he spent most of his free time on a weight bench. He had his dirty-brown hair cut long, lying against his shoulders, making a

slight S shape along the side of his face. At first he was charming, and I was grateful for the distraction, for getting a couple shots paid for out of someone else's pocket. But then it turned south—fast. He grabbed me, attempted to kiss me, tried to pull me with him, off the bar stool.

"I've got this great place in the Quarter. Come on. I'll take you there, babe," he said, flashing a grin that revealed the slightly yellowed teeth of a chain-smoker.

"No," I said, struggling to push him away, but my muscles wouldn't coordinate, and he was strong—much stronger than my petite self. I felt like a rag doll in his arms, and my struggle seemed so futile I was ready to yield to him, letting myself go weak under his grip, when an arm pressed between us.

"Get your hands off my girlfriend." The voice was very deep.

I remember trying to get my head to move, my eyes to focus, but it was like I was fainting, maybe from the alcohol, maybe from the stress, I don't know. But soon I found my arms had been freed and another set of hands were on me, supporting me, pressing my body against his. He was tall—very tall, my head resting against the edge of his ribs—and thin. He smelled faintly of chemicals, like my high-school science lab.

The blond sized the tall, deep-voiced stranger up. "She was flirting with me," he said, taking a step forward. A challenge.

The stranger said nothing, but he held his ground, squaring his shoulders. He was enormous. Basketball-player tall. Towering at least a foot over Blondie, and clearly not intimidated.

A moment of hesitation passed over the blond's face before he finally decided to count his losses. "Sorry, man." My eyes were shut now, but I could hear his reply was more an acquiescence than an apology. Still, he backed off, fading into the rush of voices, clink of glasses, and music.

"Are you okay?" The deep voice again. He placed me on the bar stool, offered me a glass of water.

I sipped it carefully, feeling sick, finally managing to look at him. He clearly wasn't one of the college crowd, his medium-brown hair cut short and parted on one side, yet slightly mussed. His glasses perched on the end of his nose—a rectangular tortoiseshell frame that managed to look both cute and nerdy. A grad student, maybe; he was at least ten years older than me.

"I don't know," I finally managed to say.

He sighed, drummed his fingers on the bar, as if thinking what to do next. "Do you have someone I can call?"

I burst into tears, leaning my head against his chest. He—hesitantly—embraced me, patted my back.

We stayed like that a moment, until I finally got the strength to look up at him. His gray eyes were soft, his thin lips pursed together, his glasses askew. "At least let me take you somewhere, make sure you're all right."

He offered his hand, and I slipped mine into his, my palm lost in his grip as he helped me off the stool.

"I'm Stephen," he said. "I'll take care of you."

And he did. Stephen's logical, clear head helped me through everything surrounding my parents' deaths. The funeral, listing the house, packing up and selling the belongings and furniture I couldn't keep. Made me realize life goes on.

For the last ten years, Stephen has kept his promise, at least on the surface. We have a nice house, a quiet life; I don't need to work. But lately—this year, especially—I've realized how much I still miss my mom, even after a decade. Stephen's good with managing bills and such, but when it comes to truly taking care of me...

Melanie and I have always joked about the convention sluts. Women so unhappy in their marriages that they come to a convention like this just to have random hookups, only to return home at the end of the week to their husbands, who have no idea that

their wives secretly hate them and fantasize about men they barely know while their eyes are closed during sex.

And now I'm becoming one of them.



Chapter Three

I wake up a little after my normal time—4:30—feeling drained, both emotionally and physically. I managed a couple thousand words before finally crawling into bed last night, but I'm tapped. My body, used to its early-morning wake up (in order to beat Houston's horrendous traffic every day) refuses to submit to more sleep, so I drag myself to the dresser and slip on my workout clothes. I pause to glance at my reflection in the mirror, sighing at the mess of my hair: a tangled, frizzy disaster. I mold it into a bun and secure it with a hair tie. How many people will be using the hotel gym before five in the morning the first day of the convention, anyway?

I grab my earbuds, phone, and key and dash out the door. The hotel is quiet; not even the maid staff is up this early, or if they are, they're out of sight, perhaps preparing their carts for the day ahead.

I follow the signs to the gym, which is on the third floor, apparently above the swimming pool. As I ride the elevator down, a part of me regrets not bringing a suit, not that I love to show off my body. I may be petite, but I have a woman's curves: big hips, narrow waist, and moderate but full breasts. Although I'm no pig, if I didn't exercise every day before work, I could easily cross the line from womanly to fat.

The elevator bell sounds. The doors open, a sign opposite immediately announcing the gym is to the left, with more exercise facilities to the right. This hotel is so huge you need a GPS to find your way around it. The concierge didn't think that was funny when I suggested it.

As soon as I step out of the elevators, I can see the gym. Its big glass doors and walls offer little shelter. Unless you've managed to snag one of the machines toward the back center, in which you're offered some protection from judgmental passersby. Of

course, because of the large windows overlooking the pool, you're likely to be seen from below or the side if not in front. Great.

I stare at the large empty room for a moment, the machines still. A row of flat-screen TVs hang from the ceiling, all tuned to a news network. Either they're muted, or the glass is soundproofed enough to shield me from their assault. A fleeting thought of escape passes through my mind. It wouldn't kill me to skip one workout, would it? This is supposed to be a kind of working vacation, and I'd promised myself, as part of "Operation Thirty," that I'd try to let my hair down, live a little. I never sleep in.

Because I usually can't.

I swallow my pride and open the door, grateful the TVs are silenced, closed-captioning scrolling across the screen. The beautiful announcer—yes, I refuse to call the talking heads who read the news *reporters*—is doing a story about a two-faced goat. Or two heads. Something like that. If you think twenty-four-hour news channels are uninteresting during prime time, try watching them at five in the morning.

The gym is completely empty, which is a small relief, so I pick an elliptical on the edge of one row, slip on my headphones, start my favorite workout playlist, and secure my phone to my arm.

Although listening to punk always makes me feel old, there's just something so awesome about the sound—the whiny, inarticulate voices, the upbeat tempos even when the songs are sad—that I love. Especially for exercising.

Joan Jett's cover of *The Mary Tyler Moore* theme song, "Love Is All Around," blasts out of my earbuds as I pump my arms and legs, working off the four cocktails I had last night. I'm in the zone, singing to myself, when I glance up at the TVs, and in the reflection, I can just make out the doors behind me closing. Someone else is here. Would it be weird for me to slow down to try to see who it is? Finally, I settle for a quick glance over my shoulder.

I've missed them, so I ease my pace subtly, then attempt a second, sideways peek. My heart skips a beat. Not because I almost lose my momentum and stumble, but

because I spy an empty wheelchair. The user is nowhere to be seen, obviously hidden by the rows of machines. They're probably using the weights, and although I catch only a few glimpses at a time, I pray it's a man. Maybe I can get a good view of him when I finish my workout. I could start to walk to the door, then act like I forgot something, giving me a chance to check him out.

Although I can't explain it, I've always found guys in chairs attractive; braces and forearm crutches are even better. It's something I've never told anyone, especially Stephen. But whenever I spot a cute guy remotely my age in a wheelchair, or the even rarer sight of a guy with forearm crutches, my stomach flutters; my heart beats faster. I almost forget about my music, stealing glances at the chair and imagining what its owner will look like. Is he tall? Short? Light- or dark-skinned? Blond or brunet? The chair itself is a nice one, its frame a dark red like an expensive sports car. Two bars spring out of the frame, leading down in a trapezoid, meeting at the footrest, a black plate ribbed with chrome and flanked by two clear casters. The wheels are black, with matching push rims, the spokes like the blades of a fan. This is the type of a chair owned by a guy who takes risks, who probably drives a fast, sexy car and thinks the speed limit is more of a suggestion than a law.

Although I want to keep leering, hoping for even a reflection of the chair's owner, I decide I need to focus and finish my workout. The All-American Rejects' "I Wanna" starts up; it's one of my favorite workout songs because it's peppy and fun and really singable, so I momentarily forget myself, belting out the lyrics as I jog.

The song has only just finished, the first few notes of the next beginning to play, when I think I see something in my peripheral vision. I look over, and the guy in the chair is there, beside me, watching me. I can't get a good look at him, but it seems as if he's trying to get my attention, so I slow my run to a walk, finally coming to a stop, slipping my earbuds out of my ears. My heart sinks into my stomach, the man in front of me too painfully, impossibly good to be true.

He's everything I hoped and imagined he would be.

And more.

"Santiago?"

Suddenly, all the little details I noticed on the plane fall into place. His legs, so straight and still, why the flight attendant kept asking if he needed anything, the way he shifted his weight, being last to disembark. Last night, his chair must have been hidden by the gaudy tablecloth. And I did rush out awfully quick. That would explain why he didn't come to me, perched several steps up with Melanie.

"Uh, you can touch me if you want, but can I at least buy you breakfast first?" He grins.

It takes me a moment; he's referring to the lyrics I was just singing out loud. My entire body turns scarlet. *Oh*. "You...heard me?"

"I think they may have heard you in Jackson Square. But it's okay. You're cute enough to pull it off."

My blush deepens; I have to grip the machine to stay upright.

He laughs that incredible, rich laugh of his. He's wearing a faded tee and loose-fitting basketball shorts that reveal his surprisingly meaty calves, covered in a light layer of dark hair that makes me want to reach out and touch them. *Oh God*. Now, more than ever, I can't think about touching him.

"Sorry. Embarrassing you: probably not the best pickup strategy." He takes a breath. "Let's try this again. I'm Santiago. This is my chair. I don't think we've been properly introduced." He pauses, his hands on his push rims, smiling, giving me a chance to take him—and the chair—in, not realizing I already have. "I promise I only joke inappropriately fifty percent of the time. It's hard to be witty when I'm asleep."

I laugh. My nervousness evaporates.

"Can I treat you to beignets? Maybe you can tell me about that novel you're writing?"

"It might take more than doughnuts to bribe me into talking about that." The flirtation catches me by surprise, but Santiago's eyes sparkle.

He grins. "I still have a few sets, and then I'm going to swim for a bit, but is it okay if I meet you in the front lobby at..." He checks his watch. "Seven?"

I feel as if I'm vibrating with excitement, but Santiago doesn't look at me oddly, so I know the tremor is an illusion. Not trusting my voice, I manage a nod.

He beams. Truly. I mean, light shines out of him and makes the room brighter. His hands on his rims, he's about to turn around when he pauses. "Actually...I've been to New Orleans dozens of times, and I've never taken the streetcar." A part of me loves how he says the city name like a native would—not quite the stereotypic single-syllable *N'awlins*, but close. Not the three syllables of true outsiders, nor the weird four syllables of the news broadcasters. It's closer to one-and-half syllables, and it reminds me of home. But, surprisingly, rather than make me sad, it pulls a smile onto my face. "Let's do that. There's a stop right outside the lobby, if memory serves. That'll take us to Café du Monde."

My face scrunches up in confusion. "You know they aren't...accessible, right?"

One cheek tilts up in a slim smile. "Yeah. That's kinda why I want to do it now, before I can't get in one anymore. Well, I'll let you get back to it," he says with a wink.

I watch him turn, squeezing around the machines, grasping the equipment with his hands to pull himself through the tight spaces. I notice the back of his chair has two little black loops mounted to it. I wonder what they're for. Some kind of luggage rack? And how is he going to manage the streetcar? I suppose I'll find out.

I force myself to look away, back at the display on the elliptical, wondering if it's dangerous to try to continue my workout when my heart's already racing.

* * * *

Want to know what happens next?

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