

5'8"

DAPHNE ELLIOT

5'6"

5'4"

5'2"

5'0"

4'8"

4'6"

A

TOUCH

OF

Wrath

3'8"

3'4"

VICES & VIRTUES SERIES

A TOUCH OF WRATH

VICES & VIRTUES SERIES

DAPHNE ELLIOT

MELODY PUBLISHING, LLC

CONTENTS

1. [Maeve](#)
2. [Oliver](#)
3. [Maeve](#)
4. [Maeve](#)
5. [Oliver](#)
6. [Maeve](#)
7. [Oliver](#)
8. [Maeve](#)
9. [Oliver](#)
10. [Maeve](#)
11. [Oliver](#)
12. [Oliver](#)
13. [Maeve](#)
14. [Oliver](#)
15. [Maeve](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also By Daphne Elliot](#)

[Vices & Virtues Series](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Find Daphne at:](#)

Copyright © 2022 Daphne Elliot All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without prior written permission from the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and events in this book are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Published by Melody Publishing, LLC

Editing by Happily Editing Anns

✿ Created with Vellum

MAEVE

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel while I waited for the light to change. I was so grateful to be headed home early. We wrapped things up quickly in New York, the client was ecstatic, and I was looking at a work-free night ahead of me. I was going to climb into the tub and never leave.

The past few months had been hell. Wedding planning was insane, and getting things tied up at work was even worse. I was so close to making partner, so I had to work over-over-overtime to make up for the fact that I'd be taking two weeks off for my wedding and honeymoon soon.

I watched a family cross the street, a toddler holding his mom's hand and waving at me in the crosswalk while the dad wrangled the family dog. I sighed. That was what I wanted—kids, a doting husband, a lovable, goofy dog.

And I was so close to getting it. The wedding was only three weeks away, and although Tristian and I had been so stressed with getting everything ready, it was going to be perfect.

My sister Sylvie had brought me to the Thompson Farm last spring for the Maple Sugar Festival and I fell in love. A rustic yet chic barn, a fieldstone patio adorned with lights, and a huge outdoor fireplace? It was like every single one of my Pinterest boards came to life, joined forces, and built a family farm in my own hometown.

And every detail would be perfect. I had picked the music, the flowers, the linens, and designed the perfect autumnal,

farm-to-table meal.

I turned into my parking space and saw Tristian's Land Rover. I was so happy he was home. Granted, he was home most of the time, but since I rarely was, I was looking forward to spending some time together.

I opened the door, desperate to get out of this skirt suit. "Tristian, I'm back early," I yelled, wheeling my suitcase through the door.

I looked up, expecting to see my fiancé happy to see me, but instead saw something else entirely.

My vision blurred and my stomach churned.

What. The. Shit.

Tristian was home all right. He was looking quite comfortable on the couch with a blonde woman I didn't recognize perched on his lap.

Breathe, Maeve. Breathe. This is probably a misunderstanding.

"Tristian?" My voice cracked.

He looked up at me and had the balls to look annoyed as he pushed the blonde off his lap. "What are you doing here?" he said.

"I live here. What the fuck is going on?" My hands shook as I walked closer, trying to understand what had been going on in my home.

The blonde sighed loudly and played with her hair. My eye twitched as I tried to place her.

"Babe..." Tristian said, walking toward me.

I held up a hand, my glare daring him to take one step closer. "What is going on? I'm unclear on what is happening here."

I attempted to sound authoritative, as I felt the almonds I ate for lunch rise up from my stomach.

This was a joke. Or a mistake. Or some charming mishap we would joke about with our grandkids. I had NOT just found my fiancé kissing another woman in my fucking home. Nope. Did Tristian have a secret identical twin? Yes, it was implausible, but my sister Alice used to love soap operas and this shit happened all the time on them.

I looked at him and waited patiently for the funny anecdote that would surely accompany this preposterous situation. But instead he just stared at me with his mouth hanging open. Tristian was never particularly articulate.

I continued to stare at him, waiting for some kind of explanation. But nothing came. Instead I heard her breathing and realized that woman was still standing in my space. I turned toward her and looked hard at her. I felt like I knew this chick, but I couldn't place her. She was thin—much thinner than I was—and pretty, with thick blonde hair. She was wearing those really expensive looking workout clothes I would be too scared to actually sweat in.

I tilted my head. “Who are you?”

She shifted, cocking her hip in defiance. “Moira. You’ve known me since elementary school. God, Tristian was right; you really are a snobby bitch.”

Recognition dawned. Moira Cunningham. I should have known. Apples, trees, and all that. She was a couple of years behind me in school, but I had known her older sister.

I glared. “I don’t fucking care if you are my goddamn long-lost twin. What the fuck are you doing in my home and why were you just sitting on my fiancé’s lap kissing him?”

She stood stock-still, glaring at me while Tristian continued to shrink into the background. As much as I wanted to throw down, I had to admit this chick had balls. In another life I’d introduce her to my colorist and take her under my wing. There was something defiant in the set of her jaw and the harsh slant of her nose. Game recognized game.

“Actually,”—I waved a hand at her dismissively—“I don’t really care. Get out.”

I turned my back to her and started walking toward Tristian. His face, tan from lazy days spent at his parents' place on the Vineyard, was pale.

“What the fuck?” I spoke slowly, trying to keep my voice steady. *I will not scream. I will not cry. I will be strong.* I put my hands on my hips and spread my legs—a power position I learned on Instagram—for a dose of extra courage.

He looked down at his feet, not even man enough to look me in the eye. “I didn’t want you to find out like this.”

I blinked several times, trying to ignore the migraine that was brewing behind my right temple. “Find out what? That you were fucking around behind my back? Because that’s what it looks like. Please tell me it’s not what it looks like, Tristian. Our wedding is in three weeks. The wedding we spent a fucking year planning.”

He stared at me blankly. “You know, the wedding that’s already paid for. By me?” I slammed a fist into the wall in emphasis. *Shit, that hurt.*

He shook his head. “Of course that’s what you care about. Your precious fancy wedding.”

I ignored that comment.

“Are you fucking her?”

He nodded.

“For how long?”

I heard movement behind me. Moira, that ballsy bitch, walked over and put her arm around his waist, resting her head on his shoulder. And Tristian, that turncoat motherfucker, put his arm around her bony shoulders.

“We have been together for about a month now. He was never going to marry you. He just never had a chance to tell you he’d fallen for me because you’re never here.”

Apparently she inspired him to find his vocal cords. “Yeah. You’re always working or exercising or doing wedding planning. We haven’t been able to talk.”

“Talk?” I laughed out loud, a cloud of rage building in my chest. “We sleep in the same goddamn bed and have been planning our future together.” I paced toward him and he took a step back, clearly terrified of me. A fizzle of satisfaction ran through me, mingling with the sadness and confusion. *Good. He should be scared.*

I took a good look around the living room, finally noticing the beer cans and takeout containers. They’d been holed up here for a few days, clearly since I left for New York. I looked down to see a ring on the gorgeous mahogany table I bought at All Modern earlier this year and snapped. The fucking coasters were right on the table.

Before I even knew what I was doing, I picked up a full can of beer and threw it at the massive TV Tristian insisted I buy. Since playing *Call of Duty* was “therapeutic” for him, I’d even gotten him the top-of-the-line headset and gaming crap. Now I wanted to enjoy the therapeutic effect of destroying it all.

I enjoyed his screams when the can crashed through the TV screen, and enjoyed crunching the headset beneath my LK Bennett court shoe.

“What the fuck, Maeve?” he yelled as I laughed.

“It’s a TV, Tristian.” I rolled my eyes and walked over to him, his words still swirling around in my mind. “You’ve had ample opportunity to talk to me over the last two years. It just seems like you’d rather be a cheating asshole.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Really?” I shouted, my anger growing stronger. “You could have texted me, called me, or written me a goddamn letter. We know you have a lot of time on your hands, Tristian, what with me paying all the bills while you sit around playing video games with your dick in your hand. So you could have written me a goddamn novel about your feelings.”

“Maeve, you don’t get it, do you? You never make time for me. You work nonstop and never make time for me.”

I threw my head back and laughed. Actually, it was probably more of a cackle. “You are so pathetic. Are you seriously trying to pretend it’s my fault you can’t keep your pathetically tiny dick in your pants?”

He walked toward me. “This is your fault. You put too much pressure on me. You are just like my parents.”

I wave a hand. “I’m not listening to this bullshit any longer. Goodbye, Tristian.”

Ignoring my painful heels, I grabbed my suitcase and tote and walked right out the door, slamming it behind me.

I jumped in my car and peeled out of the parking lot. *Fuck Tristian. Fuck everyone. How could this happen?*

Feelings, dark, dangerous, and intense, bubbled up inside me. I wanted to rage and scream and break things.

I pulled into the parking lot of the gas station, realizing my hands were shaking so badly I could barely grip the steering wheel. I put my head onto the steering wheel, letting all the disappointment wash over me.

Had my life just blown up? Had I just walked into my literal nightmare?

I sat for a few minutes, shaking and attempting to breathe. *What do I do now?*

The logical choice was to head to my parents’, but that would cause more problems. They weren’t exactly supportive on a good day, and in my current state, I could only imagine the damage their judgment would inflict.

And I didn’t have any close friends. Most of my friendships had fizzled as I’d climbed the ladder at the firm.

My entire life had unraveled in a few short minutes. I needed a drink.

OLIVER

I was bone-tired but in need of a beer. I had spent the day with my mom, helping her move into the new assisted living facility we had been waiting two years to get into. She was lucid in the morning, but as the day went on things got more difficult.

It was part of the reason I had moved here earlier this year—the knowledge that Mom could be at one of the best memory care facilities in Massachusetts. Yes, the cost was insane, and yes, it took years and endless paperwork, but she had finally moved in, and I could finally breathe easier.

I only had two friends in town so far—my buddy Declan Quinn, who I had met in the navy when we were cocky kids just out of high school about to get our asses kicked by life, and my partner, Flint, who I had only known a few months but I was growing to tolerate.

Funny enough, the two of them hated one another, a fact that did not surprise me, since they were both antisocial pricks. Sadly, they were both busy tonight, so I set out to blow off some steam alone.

I needed to celebrate the victory of finally getting Mom settled and give myself permission to care about my own life for a few minutes. Being a caregiver drained the life out of me someday. Not that I would trade my situation for anything. It was just Mom and me. Dad had died when I was in my early twenties, and I was an only child. They were both in their late

thirties when they had me, so I had grown up with the understanding that I would be taking care of them someday.

But right now, I wanted a cold beer, maybe a pizza, and at least fourteen hours of sleep. I wasn't working tomorrow, so I planned to crash early and then spend the day working out and catching up on TV.

Yes, I lived in the world's most charming coastal small town—no joke, I bet there is a plaque somewhere declaring that—but I hadn't exactly been living it up since relocating here from Boston almost a year ago. I had been too busy proving myself at work—being the new guy was always so hard—and taking care of Mom.

So although I knew a good place to get a beer, I didn't know anyone other than Quinn and Flint to hang out with. I looked at the whiteboard I had hung next to my door by the shelf where I kept my keys. I picked up the marker and right underneath “adopt a pet”—now faded from being written so long ago—I wrote “make some friends.”



I GRABBED a stool at the Tippy Whale. It was a Sunday night, so it was moderately busy, filled with mostly locals. A few people recognized me, part of the deal when you're a cop, and waved. I greeted Fran, the bartender and owner, warmly and ordered a Binnacle IPA, settling in to watch the end of the Sox game.

By the seventh inning stretch I was growing restless and getting ready to leave when I heard someone approach.

“Is this seat taken?” a breathy voice asked. I turned on my stool to respond but almost fell off in the process. Standing before me was a woman. But not just any woman. She was small and had long dark hair and sad eyes. She was wearing some kind of business suit and looked vulnerable and incredibly sexy at the same time.

All thoughts of a quiet night of beer and pizza evaporated once I saw her face. At my core I was a protector, and the

damsel in distress standing in front of me, batting those gorgeous lashes and flashing me sad eyes and a coy smile, made my heart almost leap out of my chest.

“All yours, gorgeous,” I said, gesturing to the stool. “Fran, this beautiful woman needs a drink.”

I turned to her, taking in her hair, her lips, and her legs in her sensible pencil skirt and heels. “Oliver,” I said, offering my hand.

She took it, returning my firm handshake. “Alexandra,” she replied, taking a seat.

“You look like you’ve had a shit day, Alexandra.”

She nodded, taking a gulp of the red wine Fran placed before her. “Yes. Horrible day.”

I nudged her shoulder. “Me too. Wanna talk about it?”

She tucked her silky hair behind her ears and considered my question for a moment. “No. I really don’t. How about you tell me about your day? What brings you out for a beer at seven p.m. on a Sunday night in Havenport?”

I wasn’t in the habit of spilling my guts to strangers. And I wasn’t really in the mood to talk. But there was something about her. I don’t know if it was the exhaustion she clearly carried with her or the slightly sassy attitude I could tell was lurking beneath the surface, but I found myself wanting to talk.

So we talked. She didn’t offer many details, just that she worked in Boston, right in the financial district, which was my old beat. Small word. I assumed she did something in finance, judging by her fancy clothes and heels, but she clearly didn’t want to talk about it.

After an hour of chatting and laughing about some of the silly calls I’d been on since becoming part of the small town police department, I finally found the courage to ask for her number. I’d never been shy or lacked confidence, but this woman was not just pretty, she was smart as well. I sensed that she was the type that demanded excellence of everyone around

her, especially herself. And I'd be lying if that didn't make my heart beat a little bit faster.

She leaned in, giving me a whiff of a spicy perfume that went right to my head. I was so far gone already—a beer and some conversation and I was on the verge of proposing. I was getting downright silly in my old age.

She placed her tiny hand on my jean-covered thigh and bit her lip. “Do you want to get out of here?” she asked, cocking one brow.

Suddenly, my peripheral vision blurred as I struggled to catch my breath. *Yespleaseyesfuckyes* my brain thought. I forced myself to take a breath. I didn't spend eight years in the navy to lose my shit over a pretty woman. Was she suggesting what I thought she was?

I rotated on my barstool until my legs were flanking hers. I tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, allowing my fingers to linger on her neck. I watched her pupils dilate and felt my cock ache. “I would like that very much.”

MAEVE

My first one-night stand was one for the record books. I was not sexually inexperienced, not by a long shot. But as a lifelong goody-goody, sex had always been in the confines of a serious, monogamous relationship. And at the moment, I didn't want that.

I wanted hot, anonymous sex with a handsome stranger. I wanted to not be Maeve, not be the workaholic who was going to have to spend the foreseeable future canceling all the meticulously crafted wedding plans and explaining to people my fiancé dumped me three weeks before our wedding.

I was going to have to go to work and be the woman with the canceled engagement. And the worst part—I was going to have to tell my parents, who would undoubtedly be humiliated and blame me for Tristian's wandering peen.

So tonight was about me. I went in search of a glass of red wine and ended up with a sexy giant pinning me to his couch while he explored my neck with his tongue. And you know what? I wasn't complaining.

"Fuck, Alex," he growled in my ear. "You are so gorgeous."

Oliver was a cop, new in town, and well over six feet of sexy man. And if the bulge in his jeans was any indication, a very well-endowed new friend.

Yes, I had given him my middle name, but for tonight, I needed to escape. I needed to be a bad girl, the kind who has

hot sex with strangers and doesn't give a shit that her life is imploding around her.

I loved the feel of him on top of me, pinning me to the couch. I wanted to let go, to be dominated for a night. I wanted to be desired and possessed. "Oliver," I breathed as his hands snaked up my thighs, bunching my skirt at my waist.

"Tell me you want me. Tell me you want this," he said, a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

"Yes." His fingers gently moved my panties to the side, lightly stroking my wetness.

He took my lips in a forceful kiss. "Not good enough. Tell me what you really want, Alex."

I felt one of his thick fingers sink inside me, making my eyes roll back in my head. I could barely speak, never mind give detailed instructions on how to get me off. Not that he was going to need much help.

So I blurted out the first words that popped into my head. "I want you to fuck me, Oliver. Hard and fast. Make me forget about this bad day. Make me come and scream your name."

He smiled, lowering his mouth between my legs. "Oh, I will fuck you. But not until I'm good and ready. First you're going to come on my tongue and then my cock. And if you're a good girl I'll do it all over again later. When I'm done you will not remember a single bad thing."

Oliver kept his promise. I forgot about my shitty day; hell, I came so hard I think I forgot my own name at one point. He was that good—his tongue, his fingers, and his thick and hard cock. After the second round, where he bent me over the arm of the leather couch and gently pulled my hair while telling me how sexy I was, I had forgotten Tristian even existed.

A few hours later, I woke with a crick in my neck. We had passed out on the couch, our naked bodies covered only by a colorful afghan.

I carefully sat up, contorting myself into various advanced Pilates positions to keep from waking him. I found my clothes on the floor and admired the sexy beast of a man in front of

me while I dressed. Oliver was massive and yet gentle, laid-back, yet dominant. In another life I'd curl up beside him and start planning our future together.

But I wasn't that woman anymore. I was the freshly dumped fiancée with a wedding to cancel. So I found my shoes and my purse and let myself out.

MAEVE

3 WEEKS LATER...

It was time for action. I was sick and fucking tired of sitting on this couch. Granted, it was a cute couch, denim blue, which matched the subtle print of the wallpaper on the accent wall. The bungalow was from the 1920s and Alice had painstakingly rehabbed it, turning it into a tiny oasis of calm and girliness.

She had a white picket fence and window boxes that overflowed with seasonally appropriate flowers. If she weren't my sister I would barf, but it made her so happy. Just like the baking. Today it was chocolate chip cookies, which had burned the roof of my mouth when I ate them directly off the cookie sheet.

She had just returned home from work, dressed in a bright A-line dress and matching cardigan. Alice was the vice principal at the Havenport Elementary School. She had started her career as a first grade teacher and then moved to administration after getting her master's degree in education. She had a friendly, round face, rosy cheeks, and soft brown curls. In her current outfit, it looked like mice and birds helped her get dressed every day.

She was devoted to her students, staying after school to run every conceivable program and get to know every single child. Although I could not understand her, I admired her. I could never do what she did. I loved numbers and data and the tax code, not *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* and multiplication tables.

“I see you, Maeve. And I see that empty bottle of wine. What happened?” Alice, despite her fairy-princess qualities, noticed everything. I suppose it was the vice principal in her. She looked the same way she did every Friday night, weary and tired. I know the parents, teachers, and kids took a lot out of her.

I threw my hands up. “What happened? What fucking happened? I am taking medical leave.” I make air quotes with my hands. “The partners think I’m ‘volatile right now’ and ‘need a break.’”

“Sit down,” she said, walking toward me and holding out a hand.

I collapsed on the couch.

“Back up,” she said softly. “Start at the beginning. Did something specific happen today?”

I looked away. “Maybe.”

She raised one eyebrow and I found myself spilling my guts. “I’ve made a few mistakes in the past week. You know I’ve been distracted.”

“Of course. But are we talking legitimate distraction due to emotional distress? Or you missing a meeting because you were having one hundred dildos sent to Tristian’s house?”

I rolled my eyes. “That was one time. And it was amazing.” I had paid the teenaged boy next door to unpackage all of them and pile them up on the doorstep. He even took a video of Tristian walking outside and tripping over the mountain of dildos. “The video is doing well on TikTok,” I said, holding up my phone. “It’s hilarious.”

“You know,” I mused. “In hindsight, I shouldn’t have run out. I should have cut holes in all his boxers and ripped all the buttons off his shirts and pants. That would have been great...”

Alice shot me her best “be serious” look and I quieted down.

“Also, today, I maaaay have told a client to stop staring at my tits.”

“What?”

“In my defense, he was. And for years I’ve put up with it, convinced I had to tolerate this crap as a woman in the corporate world. But I couldn’t stand it. I was outlining a strategy to save his company millions and make his shareholders really fucking happy, and instead of listening to my words and ideas he was drooling over my body.”

“I mean, they did sort of get huge,” she offered.

I threw a pillow at her.

“I don’t know how this happened. I gain twenty pounds and all of a sudden I’ve got tits. I blame you. You’re always baking and cooking meals and shit.”

“Yes, Maeve, human people eat meals. It’s okay not to eat protein bars for dinner every night.”

“No, it’s not. I used to be skinny.”

“You are still skinny. But look at Mom, look at Sylvie, look at me.” She patted her ample hips. “It’s the Bernardi curse. The T&A come for us all, eventually.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know. And I just can’t help it. I’m hungry. I spent years dieting and then basically starving for the past six months to fit into my wedding dress.”

Ugh. My dress. Every time I even thought about it, my heart clenched. It was exquisite, and now it would never see the light of day. And the veil. It was my grandmother’s—chapel length, antique Italian lace. It was sitting in its box in the guest room. Next to my laptop.

“Why did you buy it in such a small size?”

“Because of the challenge, Alice,” I scoffed. She was the middle child and sometimes could not wrap her mind around my compulsive overachieving. I got good grades, had an excellent job, nailed every presentation, won every promotion, and did it all while exercising at least an hour a day for the last

ten years. I wore the same size I had in high school. Well, I did, until my fiancé cheated on me right before our wedding.

Twenty pounds later, I was now the owner of a set of D cups, a soft belly, and a jiggly ass. But I wasn't hungry all the time, and that actually felt kind of good.

“So. Refocus. You said that—to his face?”

“Yes. In a meeting with several partners.”

“And?”

“He got really angry, which just proved he really was ogling me instead of listening.”

“Okay. On the one hand, that's disgusting and I'm sorry that happened to you. But on the other, did you handle it in the most mature, sensible way?”

I waved her off; I had no time for her maturity bullshit. “So then Morris pulled me into his office and said the partners were worried about my recent erratic behavior.”

“And I reminded them of my decade of extraordinary work. My billables, my client relationships, and the fact that I'm the chair of not one, but two firm committees. Then they did that thing. You know, the patronizing man shit?”

Alice nodded. “Pretended to be all concerned and spoke to you like a four-year-old?”

“Yup. And then they brought up my broken engagement. Morris was like, ‘I know you've been under a lot of strain, what with your engagement and all.’ And I wanted to tell him I was under strain because I was clocking seventy-hour weeks to make partner in this bullshit boys' club. Not because my ex humiliated me by fucking the town skank.”

What I didn't say was that it had been three weeks and I was still crashing with my sister. I couldn't go back. Tristian was living there, and the thought of even walking through the door made me want to vomit. *Good luck paying the rent on your own, asshole.*

And my parents, unsurprisingly, had urged me not to make a fuss or cause a scene. The broken engagement and canceled

wedding were embarrassing enough for them, so me going off the deep end and demanding he vacate the home I paid for and furnished was a bridge too far. Eventually I'd find my own place, but right now, I liked being here. Alice and I had never been super close, and I enjoyed being roommates with her. She drove me crazy in that way that only a younger sister could, but I appreciated her.

“Don't you think you should have taken some time off?” she asked. “Especially because tomorrow...”

“Was supposed to be my wedding. Yes, I am aware of the date. And no. I have shit to do and goals to crush. Sitting around being sad is a waste of time. I just need a distraction.”

“Let me get the blender out. How about margaritas?” she asked.

“Aren't margaritas filled with calories?”

“Yes. And they are also filled with alcohol.”

“Good enough. Get to work. I think I'm going to get drunk tonight.”

“Maeve Alexandra Watson, I am shocked, appalled, and more than a bit intrigued. Also you might be there already.”

I laughed. I never drank and had never been actually drunk, a fact both my sisters loved to tease me about. Yes, I had a stick up my ass, and I was beginning to realize that maybe it was time to finally remove it. My canceled wedding was supposed to be tomorrow. The elegant, intimate event I had spent almost a year planning. The event for which I lost almost every deposit I had put down. I deserved a night of debauchery.

My mind flashed to Oliver. What he felt like on top of me, inside me. I had thought of little else for the past few weeks. Our night together was seared in my brain and I found myself reliving the scorching-hot moments at the most inopportune times.

“Haven't you heard?” I asked, giving my hair an exaggerated flip. “I'm a bad girl now.”

Alice laughed. “One hot night with Officer Sexypants really changed you, huh?”

Since I showed up at her house at two a.m. with sex hair, Alice had not let me live this down. And I’m not sure I wanted to. My first and only one-night stand was one for the record books and helped me realize all the things I had been missing by being so obsessed with perfection.

By my third margarita, the sadness was slowly slipping away, but rage seemed to be replacing it. I felt even more angry at Tristian—for violating my trust, for humiliating me, and for being a selfish asshole.

Alice squinted at me, clearly a bit tipsy. “Do you think that maybe you were settling? You don’t seem heartbroken about Tristian. More mad about the way he treated you. Not that anger’s not healthy, of course!”

I didn’t even have to think about her question. “Of course,” I replied, almost shouting. “Ugh. I was settling. Did you think that I was madly in love with him?”

Alice winced. She had no poker face. “I guess I sort of did, since you were engaged and all.”

“Not a chance. We got along. So I did the math. I’m thirty-five. Odds are not good I’m going to find another person to put up with me before all my eggs are dried up. And unlike previous boyfriends, Tristian accepted me. He never questioned how much I worked or how intense I was. If I pulled an all-nighter at the office, he was cool with that.”

“That’s a red flag. If he loved you, he would be concerned about you.”

I waved my hand at her. “Whatever. He’s good-looking and of above-average intelligence. He seemed to like kids and dogs and sailing, all excellent qualities for our future family life. He was a good bet. Trust me, I analyzed the shit out of this situation. And if there is one thing I can do, it’s work the numbers.”

“Jesus, Maeve.” She drained her glass. “Do you hear yourself? You were going to marry him?”

“Of course I was. Don’t be dense.”

She took the glass out of my hand, depriving me of the delicious sugary magic. “Stop being such a bitch. I’m trying to help you. But it doesn’t seem like you want to be helped. You want to cling to your delusions and just feel sorry for yourself.”

She was right; of course she was. But anger was so comforting. It wrapped me up in a thick, protective shell and allowed me to avoid all the ugly truths about my failed engagement.

“Listen,” I said, shifting into big-sister lecture mode, “there is nothing wrong with settling. I did the adult thing. I took a look around, assessed my options, and made the best choice given the circumstances.”

Her eyes widened. I could tell she pitied me, which I hated. I needed to make her understand.

“Listen, you could spend your whole life riding a bike and wishing for a Ferrari. But then you’re riding a bike. Or you could just give up the dream, buy a Honda, and be able to drive to work every day. The Honda is nice, it’s dependable, and it has air conditioning and satellite radio.”

“That’s weirdly specific but also not that great of an analogy. You’re drunk and trying to justify marrying someone you don’t love. I’m not buying it.”

“This is why you’re still single. Because you believe in all that true love shit.” Alice was a head-in-the-clouds romantic. She adored Hallmark movies, romance novels, and all that girly shit. She had all sorts of delusions about passion and romance, and shockingly, she was still alone.

“But me, I’m the practical one. I had everything figured out. And now I’m just so pissed. Because it’s not just the canceled wedding or the cheating. He wasted my time. Precious time I spent with him when I could have been finding someone better. I’m thirty-five, and my odds of a husband and family are probably shot. I bill by the hour; time is incredibly valuable to me.”

Later, I lay on the twin bed in Alice's guest room, boiling with rage. Two years. Two years wasted with Tristian. Two years gone. At this rate I'd never be a mom. I'd never achieve all my goals. And she was right, I wasn't mourning the loss of him; I was mourning the loss of the life I envisioned.

And that was why I was so mad. Because I was the one sitting here, suffering and doubting myself and my future, while he was probably holed up in my apartment living his best life.

These last few weeks had been filled with anger and sadness, but right now, all I could feel was rage. I didn't want to feel numb and sad anymore. I wanted to feel powerful.

I wanted him to hurt too. I wanted him to feel this pain—this frustration and loss.

And a plan began to take shape. I tiptoed out of my room to the kitchen, where I helped myself to some more cookies and a glass of wine. I was going to make that asshole pay.

OLIVER

I sipped my coffee, willing it to hit my bloodstream as quickly as possible. I hated night shifts, and this was no exception. I needed extra caffeine to get me through it.

It's not like any exciting calls were coming in. Havenport was the definition of sleepy small town. Not much happened here.

Most days I loved it. Moving here had been one of the best decisions of my life. I needed out of Boston, and Declan never shut up about how great it was here. So when a position opened up in the local PD, I jumped through every hoop to get it. This was the dream—protect and serve in a beautiful, idyllic community.

Six months in, the job was going well. People knew me, and slowly, I was getting to know this town. I visited the elementary school and helped seniors and worked security details for the endless town festivals.

It wasn't glamorous, but it beat the hell out of being in the city. After almost ten years in the narcotics unit in Boston, I couldn't take much more.

Havenport reminded me so much of Bristol, Rhode Island, where I had grown up. Ocean water flowed through my veins. I found a great place near the beach, and every morning I was either running or kayaking.

But even though I outranked some of the other guys, I was still a newbie, so Friday nights were mine. And breaking up

the teenagers who drank and made out in the park every few hours was not enough to keep me awake.

I pulled up to the apartment complex. Ritzy-looking townhomes set on a ridge overlooking the bay. Nice place, well-lit, and, judging by the cars in the parking lot, pretty fancy.

I wasn't sure what the reported disturbance was, but as I slowed down to assess the scene I saw the strangest thing.

A woman, standing next to a car and attempting to take a selfie. Upon closer inspection, I noticed the silver Range Rover had a broken windshield, broken headlights, and had clearly been vandalized.

"I found the vandal," I radioed.

"Do you need backup?" came the response from the dispatcher.

I assessed the situation—just one small woman. She seemed familiar, but I couldn't see her face.

"Not at this time."

I threw the cruiser into park and hopped out.

"Ma'am," I said, walking toward her. I couldn't fully see her face, but she had some kind of stick in her hand and some kind of cape on. Maybe a cosplayer? Despite the ruined car, she certainly didn't seem dangerous.

My training kicked in. "This is the Havenport Police. Please place your weapon on the ground and step away from the car."

She whipped around, and I was distracted by long dark hair and some white thing on her head.

"It's not a weapon," she snapped back.

"Regardless. Please put it down, step away, and put your hands in the air."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me."

“I’m afraid I’m not kidding, ma’am. I got a call about vandalism and possible assault on the premises. Please put the weapon down.”

She placed the stick on the ground.

“Now put your hands in the air and step away.”

She did as she was told, muttering under her breath, and I approached, picking up the stick. I looked up and saw her face bathed in the streetlight’s glow. *Shit*. “Alexandra?” I said. This could not be happening. Did I fall asleep in my cruiser?

Her eyes widened and a look of sheer terror crossed her beautiful face. She went to cover her face with her hands.

“Hands in the air, ma’am,” I snapped. I had to be professional. I had to do my job. No matter that thoughts of this woman had tortured me for the past few weeks. She looked different.

I took a quick inventory. She was wearing pajamas—some kind of flimsy top and and shorts. She definitely was not wearing a bra. Was it the light or did her breasts look even more amazing?

Fuck, Hanson. Focus on your damn job. This is a perp not a potential date.

“What is this?” I asked, studying the stick in my hands.

“It’s a field hockey stick. I scored the winning goal in the state championships senior year with that stick. It’s lucky.”

Her attitude was returning, and I wasn’t sure if I was relieved or terrified. A fucking field hockey stick? What the hell had I just walked into? And was she wearing a wedding veil?

Before I could make sense of this, a man came out screaming.

“That’s her, officer. That bitch ruined my car and threatened me. Arrest her.”

I turned around and found myself looking down at a thirty-something-year-old man wearing Batman boxers. He was

skinny with one of those floppy haircuts that was always in your face.

“That’s my car, and that psycho bitch ruined it.”

“I bought the car, you useless fuckboy,” she screamed back.

I raised my arms. “Sir, please return to your residence. I will take your statement shortly.”

I turned back to the woman. “Ma’am, please keep your hands in the air.”

“Don’t call me ma’am. I’m not that old.”

“She’s a dried-up shrew!” Batboy shouted.

“Sir,” I snapped. I had clearly walked into some kind of toxic domestic situation that required de-escalation. I drew myself up to my full height and glared at him. Thankfully, he cooperated and sneered at Alexandra as he walked back into the house. I radioed for backup and approached her again, hoping to get to the bottom of whatever the hell had happened.

“Mind telling me what is going on?” I asked, admiring how her long hair fell messily past her shoulders. She looked good, even intoxicated and enraged. She looked curvier since the last time I saw her, and the clear “don’t fuck with me” vibe that she was emitting was already giving me a semi.

I had been thinking about her nonstop for weeks. She left my house in the middle of the night after one of the hottest experiences of my life. I couldn’t stop thinking about the way she felt beneath me, the way she cried out my name when I made her come. And that smart mouth and sharp wit. I had been looking for her everywhere, hoping to run into her in this tiny town.

Of course I couldn’t see her at the park or in the supermarket. Instead I had to arrest her? Just my luck.

If I didn’t know better, I’d think I was looking at the future Mrs. Hanson. I felt instantly protective of her. Why was she out here in the middle of the night with a fucking stick? Was that hysterical guy her husband? Or boyfriend?

“So you vandalized that man’s car with a field hockey stick?”

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “You got me. You’re a regular Sherlock Holmes. Havenport’s finest.”

“I just need the facts,” I replied.

“It’s my car. I can key it if I want to.”

“According to the registration, it’s registered to a Mr. Tristian Bramblewaithe.”

“Yes. I let him put it in his name, but I paid for it. It was a gift.”

“That’s not how the law works, Ms...”

She pulled herself up to her full height, which couldn’t have been more than five foot three, thrusting her shoulders back. “Watson. Ms. Maeve Watson.”

My mind spun. “But your name is Alexandra.”

She shook her head. “That’s my middle name.” She held her wrists out. “You gonna cuff me? Gonna haul me down to the station?”

I laughed. Oh how I would love to slap some cuffs on her. But there was protocol first.

Before I could respond, she snapped. “He deserves it. He loves this car more than he loves his mother, and he didn’t lift a finger to pay for it. I was the dumbass who bought it for him. And he cheated on me three weeks before our wedding. The wedding that was supposed to be tomorrow. Oh wait, actually today, since it’s after midnight. Anyway. I’m really only committing a crime against myself.”

I could barely keep track, she was talking so fast. Fiancé? Wedding? I guess that explained the veil. “Please slow down. Do you live here, ma’am? Because if not, you are trespassing. I don’t want any trouble.”

I pulled myself up to my full six feet, four inches. Between my height, the badge, and the uniform, I wasn’t used to people giving me shit. In fact, most people were afraid of me. But not

Ms. Watson here. She looked like she wanted to fight me, and the gleam in her eyes told me she might actually have a chance.

I took a step back, trying to regain my authority in this situation. She was, technically, breaking the law, even though I kind of wanted to kick that guy's ass myself.

"Ms. Watson," I said sternly.

She took a step closer, and I got momentarily lost in her deep-green eyes. Her skin was pale, and her eyes were rimmed with thick lashes. Her mouth flattened into a straight line.

"Listen. I'll go home. And we can just pretend you didn't see anything here." She waived her hands dismissively and gave me a wink. I admired her bravado, as well as the tiny shorts she was wearing, but I was on the job.

"I'm sorry that's not possible." Thankfully, at that moment, Flint's cruiser pulled up next to where we were standing. Thank God. I needed backup badly. I was man enough to admit I could not handle this woman on my own.

"Ma'am. Officer Flint here is going to take some photos of the damage." Flint walked around with his camera, and squinted, trying to make out the words scratched in the paint.

"It says pencil dick," Maeve explained proudly. "I got interrupted so it's not super neat. Sorry. Do you want me to hold the flashlight so you can get a better photo?"

Flint looked confused. "Are you apologizing for not doing a good enough job keying your ex's car?"

She shrugged. "I take pride in my work."

I laughed and Flint rolled his eyes. "I'm glad you haven't changed, Maeve." He looked at me. "I'll deal with the victim. Can you take her down to the station?"

"Are you seriously arresting me, Marcus?"

"I'm not. Sergeant Hanson here is." He shook his head. "Maeve Watson. I would have never thought the day would come."

She raised an eyebrow at him, and I had to look away. I was dangerously close to turned on and could not be so unprofessional in front of Flint.

“We all break bad sometimes. You would know that better than anyone, Marcus.”

Flint’s face paled slightly, and I wondered what the story was there. We had become fast friends since I joined the department, but I didn’t know much about him other than he took his career really seriously and had grown up in this town.

Something told me there was more to the story.

She carefully arranged her veil. “He’s lucky it was just his car. Boo hoo. Get that shit buffed out. I should have thrown some quarters in a sock and started swinging it around...”

“Please do not threaten assault and battery in the presence of an officer of the law,” I interrupted, walking her toward my cruiser.

“You’re drunk,” I said under my breath as I stopped at the rear door.

She cocked a hip and rolled her eyes at me. “No sir. I am tipsy. There is a big difference.”

I shook my head; she was not going to make this easy.

“I was drunk. You know, earlier? But then I had to walk all the way here in the cold, so I’m not anymore.”

“You walked?”

“Yes. I wasn’t going to drink and drive. That’s dangerous.”

“But trolling the streets in the middle of the night isn’t?” I quipped.

She waved a hand at me. “This is Havenport. Plus I brought my field hockey stick. Did you see those headlights?” she whispered. “I smashed the fuck out of them. It was fun.”

“You know you are admitting to a crime right now?” I said.

“I’m no liar, Sherlock.”

After I placed her under arrest and Mirandized her, I headed to the station, trying to make sense of this insane night.

“What is it you do for work, Watson? You are clearly not a career criminal—what with staying at the scene of the crime to take photos on your phone and all.”

“I’m an accountant,” she said primly from the backseat.

“An accountant?”

“Yes. And a really fucking good one too. I know the tax code like you know your donut flavors.”

“Ooh.” I feigned injury. “The bean counter has jokes too.”

“Oh please. You wish you had enough beans for me to count.”

I wasn’t quite sure where this was going, but she was funny and did not let up. Even while cuffed in the back of my cruiser. My crush on her grew a little stronger.

Now, I had never been one of those cops who wanted to bring my cuffs into the bedroom. But hot damn, little Ms. Watson had my mind reeling. Her smart mouth and sinful curves would be making an appearance in my dreams tonight.

“Listen. We’ve all been there. Breakups are terrible. But you can’t turn to a life of petty crime,” I said kindly as we pulled into the station.

“I just got tired of taking the high road. Being the better person. I wanted to hurt him. And he’s such a lifeless loser that his car is really the only way.”

“The car you paid for?”

“Yeah. I know. My logic is shit. But in my defense, I’m kind of circling the drain right now.”

“Well,” I said, helping her out of the car, “let me know how I can help. My job is to protect and serve. And I’ve got a history of mentoring at-risk youth.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Youth? Ha! I’m thirty-five.”

“You are never too old to get on the straight and narrow.”

“Stop trying to help me. Just book me and throw me in a cell. I did the crime; I’m ready to do the time.”

MAEVE

“Pretty please?” I made a pouty face and started jumping up and down. Alice looked unimpressed, but her lip quirked slightly and I knew I’d get my way.

“I’m tired. Work was brutal and I just want to veg out and watch TV. I am not a party girl.”

“Neither am I. But I’ve never gone to the Whale on a Thursday night. And I just want to have a few drinks and let loose a bit.”

“Do you think that’s wise, given your recent arrest?”

I rolled my eyes at her. “It’s fine. Tristian is going to drop the charges, and if anything, pissing off Mom and Dad has been really fun. I’ve never seen them so horrified. I thought they were disappointed when Sylvie said she wanted to go to music school, but nothing comes close to my brush with the law.”

Alice patted my head. “You act like you did five years in the state pen. It was an arrest and I bailed you out two hours later.”

I shrug. “I’m hard now.”

“Sure you are. But I am tired.”

She turned and walked toward the kitchen but I was faster, cutting her off in the hallway. “You’re thirty-two not seventy-two; start acting your age.”

She pushed me aside and rolled her eyes. “I have nothing to wear.”

“To the Whale? Get over yourself.”

“That’s my line.”

“I’m throwing it back at you. Get your butt dressed. I’m buying.”

I hadn’t been back to the Tipsy Whale since the night I spent with Oliver more than a month ago. Not that I was counting or anything. Or constantly thinking about him. Especially how hot he looked in his uniform. And how wet I had gotten when he slapped handcuffs on me. I definitely wasn’t thinking about any of that stuff at all.

Alice greeted the bartender warmly before ordering a glass of wine. “You’ve been here?” I asked in amazement.

“Unlike you, I have a social life, so yes. Sometimes we come here after faculty meetings.”

“Do Mom and Dad know?”

“That I occasionally frequent a bar and drink alcohol at age thirty-two? I have no idea, but probably.”

I nodded, still taking it all in. It was crowded with locals chatting, playing darts, and arguing over selections on the vintage style jukebox. I recognized several people from high school and various other acquaintances, and suddenly, all the bravado I had been feeling faded away quickly.

I noticed a few stares as Alice greeted people and mingled. Shit. The entire town probably knew about my canceled wedding and my subsequent arrest.

I noticed Nora Rossi holding court at a large table with a group of women. I didn’t know her well, but I waved, remembering how terrible I was at social interactions.

She smiled and walked over. “Good to see you, Maeve,” she said, kissing me on both cheeks. “So sorry about your wedding.”

I nodded. “Everyone knows?”

She nodded sheepishly. “It’s Havenport, so yeah.”

I squared my shoulders. This was inevitable. I had to control the narrative. For better or worse, this town was my home.

“But don’t be embarrassed. I heard you attacked his car with a baseball bat. That’s pretty badass.”

I smirked. I couldn’t be ashamed of my arrest if I tried. I felt like I had done something significant. Crossed some invisible boundary and let myself finally be free. “It was a field hockey stick,” I corrected.

“Even better. Let’s go to the bar; I’m buying shots.”

I followed her, trying to emulate the set of her shoulders and the tip of her chin. Nora was beautiful and carried herself like a queen. She radiated self-confidence, and I wanted to beg her for her secrets.

I took the shot of tequila and eyed it suspiciously. I had never taken a shot before. I had certainly seen others do it, but I felt nervous and a bit excited. *Was I the kind of girl who took shots now? Why the fuck not.*

Nora called over some friends and introduced me to a tall, icy blonde named Astrid. Violet Thompson was with them. I froze—Violet owned the Thompson Farm, the place where Tristian and I were supposed to get married. The canceled wedding was not exactly a secret, but I worried I’d never get away from the humiliation. The girl who was left at the (almost) altar.

However, the girls didn’t treat me with pity. Instead they seemed excited to see me and quite enthusiastic about tequila on a Thursday night, so I decided to go for it.

“To Maeve,” Nora said, “For getting rid of a shitty dude. We’ve all been there, and better things are right around the corner.” The other two smirked before clinking my shot glass.

I licked the salt off my wrist as they did and then I tipped the glass back and swallowed, enjoying the spicy burn. My stomach clenched and I worried it would come back up, but

then things settled down and I enjoyed the warmth spreading through me.

Nora handed me a lime wedge. “Here, suck on this.” I put the lime in my mouth and smiled, feeling proud of myself.

Tonight I’d put on a cute dress and dragged myself out to a bar, where I was trying new things and making new friends. Take that, Tristian. I was growing, dammit.

With the lime still in my lips, I turned toward the door and almost choked. Standing there, wearing a sexy grin, was Oliver.

In the crowded room, he stood out, not just because of his height, but the way he carried himself, self-assured and powerful but approachable at the same time. Completely at ease with himself and the world. It was infuriating.

I turned back to my new friends, desperate to avoid being seen. “Another?” I asked, placing my empty glass on the bar.

Violet demurred, saying she had to be up early with her kids, but Astrid came closer. “Yes. Let’s do another. Then we can compare arrest stories.”

Nora registered the shock on my face. “Oh Maeve, you have much to learn. Havenport is home to a lot of badass women. And tonight’s your lucky night, because you get to hang out with a few of them.”



ANOTHER TEQUILA SHOT and two Moscow Mules later, I was dancing with my new friends and having the time of my life. Alice left after one glass of wine, making me promise to call her for a ride home later. It was sort of strange not being the responsible one for a change. Normally it was me looking out for my little sisters, not the other way around. And I didn’t hate it.

But I was tipsy. Okay, a bit more than tipsy. I was an entry-level drinker, and those tequila shots had clearly put me over the edge. And since the first and only time I had gotten drunk

in my thirty-five years on earth had resulted in an arrest, I figured it was time to switch to water.

I headed to the bar in search of hydration only to find myself walking straight into the mountain of a man who had slapped the cuffs on my wrists just a few days prior.

“Watson,” he said, his deep voice sending a shiver down my spine. “Committed any petty crimes tonight?”

I looked up at him. His stubble was thick, and he possessed the kind of annoyingly thick eyelashes that men get and women would kill for. “No. But it’s still early,” I said, trying to sound saucy.

I took a step toward the bar and stumbled. “Had a few?” he asked, steadying me with his annoyingly strong and masculine hands.

“I’m fine, Sherlock. Just getting some water actually.”

He nodded. “Wise choice.”

If he only knew how obedient and boring I actually was. I shrugged and gave him a smile, noticing that his hand was still on my arm.

“So what came first. The hero complex or the badge?” I quipped.

He bit his lip and I almost swooned. “You’re a firecracker, Watson.”

“Most men fear me.”

He leaned in closer. “I am not most men. Now,” he continued, taking a step back and putting some much-needed space between us, “tell me what led you to a life of crime?”

Disappointed that my tongue wasn’t already down his throat, I considered his question.

“I’ve spent my entire life being perfect and dependable. I’ve woken up every day since I was five years old and put my needs and desires aside to make life easier for everyone around me. My parents, my sisters, my teachers. And then the

partners at the firm and my shitty string of ex-boyfriends. And finally Tristian. The world's biggest asshole."

He looked concerned, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "You don't need to do that. You don't need to be perfect."

Of course he would say that. He was a giant with a badge and a gun. The world took him seriously. "But I do. I need to look good and be polite and constantly smiling. People don't like angry women."

I was really getting going. The alcohol mixed with the deep well of rage in my belly and made me even angrier than usual. It didn't help that he was asking questions, trying to get to know me. We were in a crowded bar, but our conversation felt intimate. He gave me his full attention, listening to what I had to say. Totally unlike Tristian, who usually had his face in his phone and rarely asked me questions about myself.

I found myself wanting to talk. And not small talk. Real talk. "And at work, I've got to be assertive, but not too assertive. Be smarter and work harder than all the men, but still wear skirts and refill coffees when necessary. I have to dance this invisible line every day to try and inch closer to equality.

"But you know the truth? I'm not their equal. I am so much better. Smarter. Meaner. And more ambitious. But I can't be a threat. I'd be out on my ass before you could say difficult woman."

He leaned in again, making my nipples stand at attention. "You are so much more than I expected, Watson."

I took a step closer, feeling bold. He smelled good, like pine trees and soap, and I leaned in for more. His shoulders were massive and his thick biceps could probably crush rocks. My body hummed with excitement, my senses drinking in every inch of him.

What is this feeling? The buzzing inside me. The alertness and awareness of him?

I considered for a moment before my drunk brain caught up. Lust. *Good old-fashioned lust.*

He handed me a glass of water and I noticed just how capable his hands looked. I flashed back to how they felt on my body. Those thick fingers tangled in my hair and...Jesus. I clenched my thighs, feeling the pressure build. Since our night together, my lady parts had been on high alert, and I simply could not let this opportunity pass me by.

OLIVER

It was late and I had spent most of the evening sparring with Watson. She was so much more than I ever could have imagined when I arrested her the other night in her pajamas.

She was smart, that was abundantly clear. And hiding behind the pleasant exterior was an absolute shark. Driven, ambitious, and sharp as a goddamn tack. Her mind was sexy as fuck.

But her body, that was pretty sexy too. I wanted to wrap her long, dark hair around my fist and kiss the hell out of her, but that was a terrible idea.

As she spoke, our bodies drifted closer together, and I couldn't help but admire the swell of her breasts in her flowery dress.

I flexed my fingers. It had been ages since we slept together, but I remembered every single detail.

She was just my type—fiery and passionate, with pouty lips and a sharp tongue. Fuck. What she could probably do with that tongue.

I checked my watch; it was past eleven and I hadn't slept last night. "I should probably head out. Do you have a ride home?"

"My sister is going to pick me up."

I signaled to Fran to close out my tab when I felt Maeve forcefully grab my arm. "Wait a minute."

I looked down at her and noticed the fire in her eyes. She gestured for me to come closer. Her lips brushed my earlobe as she whispered in my ear, “Why don’t I come home with you?”

I stood up straight, willing my cock to stand down. Did she just straight-up proposition me? Fuck, I loved how direct she was. And I wanted to take her home and fuck her senseless again.

I cupped her chin and stared into those dark eyes. “While I would love that, I can’t. You’re drunk.”

“Not anymore.” Her face morphed from sex kitten to angry raccoon in seconds.

“It’s not right. And it’s not because I’m not interested. I am. Just not tonight.”

She stared at me for a moment before crossing her arms and pouting. Honest-to-God pouting.

I wanted to take her over my knee and spank that pout right off her face. But I couldn’t take advantage. She had been drinking, not to mention the fact that she was in a volatile emotional state.

“How about this? I’ll drive you home. See you safely to your door.”

She eyed me suspiciously, clearly offended by my rejection.

“I’ll even buy you pizza,” I said, trying to salvage the situation.

“Fine,” she huffed, grabbing her purse and heading toward the door. “I’m hungry anyway.”



AS ALWAYS, you could smell Sal’s delicious pizza blocks away. I picked up my pace. If I was going to keep my hands to myself around Maeve, I needed something to occupy them. She seemed to sober up as we walked, quietly taking in the sights of late-night Havenport.

She looked around with wonder, and I had to direct her to the smell of sauce and cheese.

“Are you sure you grew up here?”

“Yeah. I did. But I’d be lying if I said I had experienced much about the place. We moved here when I was in elementary school and my life revolved around school, playing sports, and violin practice. My parents were super strict, and I left for college and didn’t really visit much.”

“What brought you back?”

I knew the instant the words left my mouth I shouldn’t have asked. Clearly it had something to do with her ex. “My ex-fiancé, Tristian, really wanted to live here. He grew up a few towns over and always loved it here. So when we got engaged, he convinced me to move out of Boston as this was the place we wanted to raise our family.”

“Are you going to stay?”

I noticed that she squared her shoulders before replying. “At first I wanted to leave again. But then Alice convinced me. This is my hometown, and I’ll be damned if I let him chase me away. Plus,”—she looked up at me and winked—“I’m starting to like it here.”

I grabbed her elbow and steered her toward the pizza. “You’re about to like it a lot more now.”

After buying her a second slice—she had devoured the first one before I even returned with napkins—she started to loosen up.

“Fuck, I love pizza. How did I live all my life without realizing this?”

“No idea.” I took a bite of my sausage and mushroom. “If I go more than three days without pizza, I get depressed. You didn’t like it as a kid?” I grew up on a steady diet of frozen pizza after school and delivery on Friday nights. It was one of the only times my family spent time together. We’d sit down to watch TGIF and share a pizza and a bottle of Pepsi while laughing at Steve Urkel. Pretty much nineties childhood bliss.

She shrugged, taking another bite. “I didn’t eat stuff like this as a kid. I’ve been on a diet since I was in grade school. The women in my family all take after my Italian grandmother. My mom calls it the Bernardi Curse. Short with thick thighs and big boobs. My mother trained us to fight it from an early age.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. I didn’t know her well enough to tell her that her mom sounded like a soulless demon, so I just kept eating and let her talk.

“She would scream at me if I ate pizza. When I would go to friends’ houses I’d just pretend I was full and eat the sliced cucumbers she used to pack me as a snack.”

I shook my head, unable to comprehend. “Fuck that. First of all, eat what you want to eat. And second, that’s pretty fucked up of your mother.”

She laughed. I guess she didn’t mind me criticizing her parents. “Yeah. She’s kind of a shrew. I think it’s the decades of hunger. To this day she only eats one meal per day. Just dinner. Both my sisters told her to fuck off a long time ago and have normal relationships with food. But not me. I can’t disappoint anyone.”

“Pizza is not going to kill you, Watson. In fact, it is going to make your life a lot more fun.” This explained a lot about her and why she was wound so tightly. Imagine being hungry all the time and feeling guilty about a slice of pizza. No wonder she reacted so badly to the breakup. “And also, I don’t want to overstep, but I like a girl with an appetite.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What makes you think I give a shit about what you like?” Her tone was indignant, but I could see the corners of her mouth curling.

Ignoring her comment, I leaned closer. “I am so digging this whole bratty thing you have going on.”

She responded by taking a huge bite of pizza and giving me the finger. I took the opportunity to lean in even closer, watching her pupils dilate.

“If you weren’t still drunk,” I whispered, “I’d take you home, bend you over my knee, and spank the attitude right out of you.”

She gasped and instead of punching me or storming off, I watched a deep blush consume her.

“Oh you like that?” I continued, enjoying seeing her speechless.

She looked away and crossed her legs. But she wasn’t fooling me. I knew she was as turned on as I was. A victory for the evening.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, I found myself compelled to ask the question we had been dancing around all night.

“So why’d you do it? Aside from being drunk and angry?”

She chewed for a moment, considering my question. She put her slice down on the plate and daintily dabbed at her lips with the napkin.

“I was mad. Really fucking mad. Still am, actually. And I just needed to do something. Something bad.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Not at all.” She smiled at me. “I got arrested. And under normal circumstances, that would be horrifying, but it felt good. Like I finally got to be a bad girl for once, instead of the good girl who is always trying to please everyone.”

“Sounds like you need to live a little.”

“I’ve lived plenty. I’ve just been living within the confines of a very strict, tiny box. And I’m ready to break out and embrace my inner bad girl.”

Her face was lit up, and she was sitting on the edge of her seat. She really was strikingly beautiful, and combined with her attitude, I was smitten.

“As an officer of the law, I should try to dissuade you from a life of crime.”

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. “I’m done with petty crime. I’m a fucking brilliant accountant. If I wanted to break bad, I’d be laundering money expertly for an international crime syndicate, not wasting my talents on vandalism in this sleepy-ass town.”

I laughed, almost choking on my pizza. “I would expect nothing less.”

“But I think I just want to do some other bad-girl things, you know? Embrace this new side of me.”

“Like what?”

She paused for a moment and then started listing things off on her fingers. Clearly she had given this a lot of thought.

“I really want a tattoo. I’ve always wanted one, and as a bonus, my parents would flip out. And I already checked one item off my list.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yup. Have a one-night stand with a hot stranger. Thanks for the help, by the way.”

I grabbed a napkin and a pen. “Here,” I said, handing it to her. “Your bad-girl list.”

She smiled and looked at what I had written in my messy scrawl. I handed her the pen and she squinted at the paper while tapping it against her temple. She leaned down and wrote a few more things before handing me the piece of paper.

“Keep me honest?” She winked at me, and I wanted to lean in and take her plump bottom lip between my teeth. I watched as she tucked her dark hair behind her ear, wishing I had the balls to make a move but knowing I couldn’t.

“You’re going out with me tomorrow,” I said, tucking the paper carefully into my wallet.

She shook her head with confusion. “Really?”

“Yes. I’m taking you on a date. A real one. We will be sober and talk and consume food.”

She lowered her voice and smiled. “And then you’ll spank me?”

I swallowed, trying to suppress all the desires bubbling to the surface of my brain. “If you behave, I’ll think about it. What else do you want to do?”

“I want to be braver—like stop caring what people think. Talk about periods in public, tell people off who are rude, that kind of thing. Stop trying to be perfect and worry about what everyone thinks of me.”

I nod. I’ve never had those urges, so it’s hard to empathize, but I can see how she’s been held back by this need to present an image of perfection to the world.

“Fourth, I wanted to get drunk. But I’ve already done that. First, on the night I attacked Tristian’s car.”

“Wait.” I ran my hands through my hair, needing to do something to tame the sexual frustration bubbling up inside me. “That was the first time you’d been drunk?”

“Yeah.”

“Jesus. You really have been too well-behaved.”

She threw her hands up dramatically. “Wow. Even Officer Goody Two-Shoes thinks I’m boring. Shit.”

“Sweetheart, it’s Sergeant Goody Two-Shoes, and no, you’re not remotely boring. Maybe a bit uptight, but nothing I can’t fix.”

“You can fix me? Oh please. I offered to go home with you tonight.”

I pulled her close, until she was between my legs. I needed to feel the heat of her body and touch her. I ran my fingers along her jawline, never breaking eye contact.

“Can I tell you a secret?” she asked quietly.

I leaned in closer.

“I usually do hold back. I never say what I think. But around you, I just can’t help being my real self. It’s funny how I’m only a bad girl when you’re around.”

I growled. Did she know what she was doing to me? “I like it. You’re bad, but only for me. Fuck, that’s hot.”

She leaned back and scoffed. “You didn’t want me, remember? I took my shot.”

I pressed a finger to her lips, not wanting to hear another word. “Stop right there, and let me say something. I want you. I want you badly. I want to take you home to my place, spank the bratty attitude right out of you, and then let you ride my face until morning. But instead I’m going to drive you home, make sure you get in safely, and then come back tomorrow for the date you promised me.”

MAEVE

“**R**ise and shine, Watson.”

I rolled over, fumbling for my phone on the nightstand. It was 7:30. Far too early to be awake. “Go away,” I shouted, pulling a pillow over my head.

“It’s a beautiful day in Havenport. Get your cute ass up and let’s go have some fun.”

I knew that voice. It was deep and rumbly and impossibly sexy. This was clearly a dream. I opened one eye and spotted Oliver standing in Alice’s tiny guest room, powerful arms crossed over his broad chest. He had on a tight Navy T-shirt and shorts and looked chipper and stupidly handsome. Ass. “What are you doing here?”

Alice popped her head in the door, looking way too pleased with herself. “I let him in.”

“Does he have a warrant?” I asked, throwing a pillow at her.

“I’m off the clock today, Watson. We’re going on a date, remember?”

I rubbed my temples, ignoring my fuzzy tongue and the eye makeup that was likely smeared across my face. I remembered all right. But I assumed he hadn’t been serious.

Alice handed him a cup of coffee. “Don’t make him coffee!” I snapped and she dramatically rolled her eyes, clearly loving every minute of this. “Go home, Oliver. I feel terrible.”

“No way. It’s my day off, the weather is incredible, and you promised me a date. I’ll give you ten minutes to get dressed. Sporty clothes and layers, no jeans. Okay?”

I looked between him and my sister, both of whom were calmly sipping coffee, and wanted to vomit.

I gestured for them to leave, grumbling that I needed to get dressed. *What had I gotten myself into?* Oliver had shot me down last night, but then told me he wanted to spank me over late-night pizza. And I had liked it. A lot. I wanted to drag him home and climb him like a sexy tree. I was clearly in the throes of a nervous breakdown. This is what extreme psychological stress did to me; it made me horny and dumb.

But my vagina didn’t care. She was psyched to see Oliver, even at this ungodly hour. Traitorous skank.

After I dressed, brushed my hair and teeth, and used half a bottle of mouthwash trying to wash away last night’s drinks and pizza, Oliver led me outside.

“What is that?” I asked, pointing to the orange monstrosity strapped to the roof of his Jeep.

“A kayak,” he replied, opening the door and gesturing for me to jump in. “It’s a small watercraft.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. “I know what a kayak is. Why is it strapped to the roof of your car?”

He hopped in and started the ignition. “Because we’re going kayaking, Watson.”

I looked at him in horror. I didn’t want to be on the ocean in that glorified child’s toy. Especially not this early and with the distinct possibility that the tequila and pizza I consumed last night may make a reappearance.

“We’re going to make a stop first. You need a greasy breakfast sandwich.”



“SO LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT,” I said, watching the large boats drive past us. “We just paddle around?”

“Yup,” Oliver agreed as I glanced over my shoulder. “You can relax if you want; I can do most of the paddling. It’s busy here in the harbor, but once we get out a bit it will quiet down.”

I turned around and watched as he paddled proficiently, working against the current. Even with a life jacket on, I could see the muscles in his shoulders working. His strokes were strong and efficient, cutting effortlessly through the water every time.

I paddled too. I didn’t accept a free ride, thank you very much. But I was choppy and out of sync and clearly not contributing much to the speed we were picking up. However, I’d be damned if I failed at this. So I kept going, paddling until my arms and back ached and my heart was pounding in my chest. Shit, this was a good workout. No wonder Oliver was so jacked.

Eventually, we made our way up the coast toward the wildlife sanctuary. “It’s a lot quieter up here,” Oliver explained. “Motorboats are not allowed, so it’s much nicer. Keep an eye out for osprey.”

“So we just do this?” I asked, trying to keep up with his pace. “We just paddle around, accomplishing nothing?”

I turned to look at him, and even through his sunglasses I could feel his glare. “Accomplishing nothing? Spoken like a true workaholic. Look around—we are getting fresh air, spending time in nature, and improving our physical and mental health. Hardly seems like nothing to me.”

Chastened, I tried to concentrate on paddling. Maybe he had a point. It was a very nice day, and if I knew anything about sea birds, I’d probably be fascinated by the different species everywhere.

“Sorry. I just don’t like doing things I’m bad at. What’s the point, you know?”

“The point is to grow and evolve, Watson. You’re not bad at kayaking; it’s your first time, and you are trying something new.”

Before I could respond, I saw what looked like a dog pop up in the water. I screamed, dropping my paddle and almost tipping us over.

“Calm down,” Oliver said, trying to steady us while I reached for my paddle. “It’s just a seal.”

“A seal?” I looked at the water, trying to find it again, but its dark body had disappeared.

Before I could fully catch my breath, it popped up again on the other side. This time, I didn’t freak out and got a good look at its face.

“They’re kind of cute,” I admitted.

Oliver laughed. “That’s a harbor seal. See the snout, how it looks like a dog?”

I nodded.

“And then there are gray seals out here too. They are larger and have a flatter, elongated head.”

“Are they gray?”

“Not exclusively. The name’s not accurate—most seals are gray or brown or some combination. Telling them apart really comes down to the heads.”

He gestured with his chin toward some others in the distance. There were a few of them all clustered together.

“I think there might be pups. Wanna head over and check it out?”

I gave him a thumbs-up, trying to act cool, while secretly losing it. Seal pups? How fucking adorable, but also terrifying. What if the mama seal got mad and tried to attack our boat?

This whole day was turning out to be very different than I had expected. But I couldn’t say I was bored, and that was something. And the view kept getting better as Oliver paddled, his T-shirt clinging to his shoulders with sweat.

“Okay, but let me paddle. I don’t want your thrashing to scare them off.”

I rolled my eyes, but let him carefully maneuver us through the water.



AN HOUR later Oliver jumped out and pulled the kayak onto a secluded beach. I looked around.

“Where are we?”

“Star Island.” He opened a compartment in the kayak and pulled out a large dry bag.

I unlatched my skirt—the big fabric thing that attached to my life vest and kept water out of the boat—and pulled myself up. I stepped onto the rocky beach and looked around. “I’ve never been here before.”

“It’s one of my favorite places. Quiet and serene, and look at the view of town,” he said.

I looked across the bay and saw tiny Havenport in the distance, anchored by the old lighthouse and the Coast Guard station. It felt so far away.

I wasn’t sure what to say. I had never paddled to a deserted island. But this one seemed quite small and charming. I walked up past the rocks and found a sandy spot to sit. If I was out here, in the middle of the ocean, I might as well enjoy myself.

Oliver followed, handing me a water bottle and plopping down next to me.

“Do you like peanut butter and jelly?” he asked, handing me a massive sandwich wrapped ornately in wax paper.

I nodded, so famished I would eat anything.

I unfolded the paper. “This is a pretty fancy looking PB&J.”

He took a big bite. “Taste it.”

I did, moaning as the subtle sweetness of the jam mixed with the salty peanut butter hit my tongue. “What is this magic?”

“The Havenport farmers’ market. Maxine sells homemade peanut butter—she grinds it to order. And the blackberry jam is from the Thompson Farm.”

“I’ve never been to the farmers’ market,” I admitted, taking another huge bite of awesomeness.

“I’ll fix that. Next Sunday. I know everyone there, but we’ve got to go early, before Lila sells out of donuts.”

I nodded, not caring that he was making plans. Not caring that I was letting myself get pulled into *something* with this giant, confusing man. Because I was content. Sitting on the beach, watching the waves crash to shore, and eating my sandwich.

“I like it here,” I declared, licking the peanut butter off my fingers. “I get why you do this. Because all my problems, they’re over there.” I point toward the town. “And on this beach it’s just me and you and the seals.”

He leaned back on his elbows and smiled. “You get it. Sometimes you just need some space to be you. To do whatever you want. What do you want, Maeve?” he asked.

I paused, not sure exactly what he was asking, because I truly didn’t know. My life had changed dramatically in such a short period of time. I had discovered new things about myself, and every single part of me, down to my cup size, had changed since the night of my broken engagement.

I was a different woman.

But I didn’t know what I wanted. And for the first time, I felt okay with that.

I stood up, brushing the sand off my shorts. “I want to do cartwheels,” I said.

He looked confused. “What?”

“You know,” I said, pulling him up next to me. “I’m feeling all kinds of things right now. And I’m alone on an

island and feeling free and strange and inspired all at the same time. And I'm going to do a cartwheel."

So I did, planting my hands and throwing my legs up in what was probably the most awkward cartwheel ever. But I landed on my feet, slightly breathless and smiling.

"Okay, that was harder than I thought. I'll try again." So I did another. And then another. The fourth time, I was able to keep my legs straight, and the fifth time I actually got good momentum propelling me forward.

"Your turn," I said, catching my breath.

Oliver shrugged and attempted one, falling flat onto his ass.

We both burst into laughter. And before I knew it, he had pulled me down and pinned me in the sand.

I looked up at him, at his long lashes and dark eyes. And I felt a strange clench in my chest. I *liked* Oliver. Which was terrifying. But also kind of exhilarating. Kind of like attempting cartwheels as an adult.

"Oliver," I said, my heart pounding. "What..."

He didn't respond, instead gently lowering his mouth to mine. His kiss was salty and sweet and gentle. I threw my arms around his neck, pulling him closer and deepening the kiss. He followed my lead, picking up the pace, until we were furiously making out and grinding up against one another like horny teenagers.

I tipped my head back, giving him better access to my neck as his fingers traveled up my shirt to the band of my bra. My body responded to his every touch, wanting to feel all of him.

But suddenly I realized where I was and what I was doing.

"Stop," I said and he pulled back, his face concerned.

I admired how protective—how gentle—he could be, even in moments like this. It made me feel safe and cherished.

“I’m not going to fuck you,” I said, regretting the words as they left my mouth. I probably sounded like a stuck-up bitch, and I was lying. I very much wanted to fuck him. But my head was spinning, confused by the feelings growing inside me and the power of his kisses.

He reached down and adjusted his erection. “Who said anything about fucking?”

“I’m just saying,” I started, trying to salvage this moment. “Just because I put out before...”

“I’ll stop you there, Watson. I’m a gentleman. I brought you out here purely for the pleasure of your company.”

A brief look of disappointment flashed across my face, and I knew he saw it.

He ran his thumb along my lips slowly, never breaking eye contact. It was so fucking erotic I wanted to beg him to let me take it back.

“But if you would like a repeat performance we can certainly arrange one for later.”

I thought about it. How easy it would be to just fall back in bed with him. What would happen? Would I get attached? Or would it be bad, the magic of our one-night stand lost forever?

I reached up and pulled him down toward me. “How about you just keep kissing me?”

OLIVER

“Are you sure you really want to do this?” I asked, slightly unnerved by how excited Maeve was.

She crossed her arms and shot me a sassy glare. “Of course. I’ve been planning this forever. Look at my folder!” She shook a portfolio at me which was filled with photos and ideas and sketches. Clearly she had been contemplating her first tattoo for a long time.

“And this place,” she said, gesturing to the sign, “is perfect. Exactly what I want.”

She walked around slowly, taking in the place. Inkspired was a nautical-themed tattoo shop near the commercial docks in town. I had discovered it a few months ago when I was looking for a place to get some new ink. Both Declan and Flint raved about the owner, Bram, and if he was good enough to keep those two moody bastards happy, then he was probably pretty damn good.

It was an airy space in an old Art Deco building. There were ornate chandeliers juxtaposed against old oil paintings of clipper ships and large leather couches. The walls were covered in black-and-white photos of sailors and fishermen—a full history of Havenport shown through ink.

Her appointment with Bram was not for another thirty minutes, but Maeve insisted we arrive early. I settled onto one of the couches, and she sank down right next to me. I took the opportunity to put my arm around her shoulders, and shockingly, she didn’t object.

“You said you got work done here. What did you do?”

“Couple of things.” I lifted my T-shirt to show her the flowers on my rib cage.

“Those are so pretty,” she said tracing the outline with her finger. “What do they mean?”

I pulled my T-shirt down, feeling suddenly uncomfortable with her proximity. Maeve made me feel things and want things I knew were not possible. I liked her, and every time I let my guard down, she tunneled a little bit deeper into my heart. And I feared I would get burned again.

I cleared my throat. “They are forget-me-nots. They are a symbol of dementia and Alzheimer’s awareness.”

I saw recognition dawn on her face. “For your mom?”

I nodded.

“I’m so sorry,” she said quietly.

“She’s in one of the best facilities in the state now. It took years and calling in every favor I could and insane sums of money. But she really is doing great.” I tried to smile and pretend I was okay, but inside I was crumbling. I hated that my mom had to live in a memory care facility. I hated that things were getting worse every day. I hated that sometimes she didn’t recognize me or thought I was my father—a complete asshole who had been dead for almost twenty years.

Maeve looked up at me and reached for my hand, gently squeezing it. We sat in silence while I felt the warmth of the connection between us. She said nothing and asked nothing. After a few minutes she gave it a squeeze.

“I’d be happy to go visit her with you sometimes, if you want,” she said.

I turned and looked at her, my heart about to leap through my chest.

“I’m so sorry. I totally overstepped.” She quickly pulled her hand away, looking flustered. “I do that sometimes, always trying to solve everyone’s problems and inserting myself. I am so, so sorry.”

“No,” I said, grabbing her hand back. I hated losing even this small connection between our bodies. “It’s incredibly kind of you to offer. I try to get over there as often as I can, depending on my work schedule. And I call ahead and speak to the nurses to find out when she’s having a good day. I would love to have someone with me. But I have to warn you. It can be really hard.”

“I’ll support you any way I can. I can’t believe you are doing this all on your own.”

“It has been just me and Mom for a long time. Dad was in and out of our lives and passed when I was pretty young. I’m used to it.”

“I still think you are incredible. Taking care of your mother the way you do, fighting for her and being an advocate. As your friend, I am proud of you.” She smiled at me, and I felt every single last defense I had crumble.

Maeve was bossy and headstrong and liked to get her way. But she also had a big heart and fiercely protected people. She was a work in progress, just like me, and she owned it.

And my stupid heart just couldn’t help but hope that maybe someday, we could be more than friends.



BY THE TIME she was in the chair, having an animated discussion with Bram about what she wanted, I was a wreck. Spending all this time with her had cemented the fact that I was pretty head over heels for this woman, the sassy spitfire with the soft heart and the playful smirk.

So it was a special kind of agony to see Bram, who was a young, fit guy with a trendy haircut who effortlessly oozed cool, put his hands all over Maeve.

I had never desired to wield a tattoo gun, but watching him ink her skin was torture. I wanted to touch her, to possess her, to mark her. Instead this guy got that privilege.

And it didn't help that they chatted amiably throughout, her showing no sign of being in pain at all. Typical Maeve, tough as nails.

I looked at her bright face when he finished. She was flushed, clearly running on adrenaline, and looked so damn proud of herself.

After Bram finished giving her the aftercare lecture, we set out into the Havenport sunshine.

She threaded her arm through mine and looked up at me. "Thank you. For being here with me. I was so scared."

I pulled her a little closer, slowing my pace. "You didn't look scared at all."

"I was terrified. And you being there...this probably sounds silly, but it made me feel strong."

I had to resist the urge to pump my fist. Instead I put my arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, kissing the top of her head. It felt natural, an extension of the closeness we had been building over the last few weeks. The gesture felt more intimate than the night we spent together.

She stopped walking and bit her lip. "It was painful, but not too bad. Just enough to make me focus. To make me think."

I nodded. I understood. The intensity of the experience could bring out a lot of feelings in people.

"And sitting there, I realized some hard truths about myself. I spent years prioritizing the wrong things. I pushed people away and wanted to check every box on some life success list. I lost valuable time with my sisters, I lost friendships, and I lost sight of who I really am."

I gave her a squeeze as we walked slowly through town. I wasn't sure how to respond, but I wanted her to know I was listening.

But she suddenly stopped walking and threw her hands up. "I have been running on a hamster wheel, and what for? To

end up working somewhere I'm not valued and appreciated and engaged to a man who I didn't love?"

"Maeve."

"You don't have to say anything. I want to make some changes. It's going to be rough and take me some time to figure it all out. But I can't go back to who I was before." She paused and took a step closer, winding her arms around my neck. "I want different things now."

And before I could say anything, she pulled me down and kissed me. I pulled her close, letting myself feel her melt into me. I couldn't do anything but kiss her back, trying to match her hunger.

I finally got to taste her again. And I didn't want it to end.

Eventually she pulled away and looked up at me, her face flushed and her eyes wild.

"Do you think we could go back to your place?"

MAEVE

I couldn't do it. I couldn't wait another minute. My heart was pounding and the blood was buzzing in my veins. It was all too much. I looked down at my wrist, at the bandage and what I knew was underneath. A symbol of me. Of my freedom and my desire to live life on my own terms.

Slowly, I was coming around to it. To a life where I called the shots and didn't spend every waking moment trying to be the most perfect woman to ever exist. A life filled with food and orgasms and people that made me happy. A life where I could work to live and not live to work.

And at the center of it all was Oliver. The big, strong stud with a mushy heart who was teaching me more about myself every single day.

And it was time. Time to do this right. Time to make him understand.

We tumbled through the door, my legs wrapped around his waist as I kissed the living hell out of him. His stubble scratched my lips and cheeks and I reveled in the rough sensations. I needed this man inside me as soon as humanly possible, and I didn't care if it was on the tile floor.

He placed me down, putting his hands on his hips. "Don't you rush me, Watson. I want to take my time."

I ripped my T-shirt over my head, revealing my black lace bra. "Nope," I said, unbuttoning my jeans and shimmying out of them. "I call the shots, Sergeant Sexypants, and I want you naked, now."

He tipped his head back and laughed, a sexy, deep laugh that shot right to my core.

“I love it when you boss me around. I am going to have so much fun with you. Especially with you nearly naked in my kitchen.”

He effortlessly picked me up, cradling me in his arms. “But for what I’ve got planned, we need the bedroom.”

He dropped me on his bed, which was neatly made with crisp blue sheets. His room— actually his entire house—was neat as a pin, clearly a holdover from his military days.

Before I could even sit up, he was stripping, giving me the show of a lifetime. His broad shoulders were thick and strong and his chest was broad and covered with a sprinkling of dark chest hair. Fuck, I loved chest hair. I sat up, pulling at his waistband.

“Not so fast, Watson. It’s been a while, but I seem to remember you having the sweetest pussy. Be a sweetheart and let me have a little taste?”

His strong hands pushed me back, pulling me to the edge of the bed and pinning my thighs open. He wasted no time pulling my panties to the side and feasting on me—licking, sucking, and caressing with abandon. “You are something else,” he said, easing two fingers inside of me as I screamed out. “Sexy and dirty and sweet and perfect.”

I broke eye contact, feeling exposed by his compliments more than his actions.

“Don’t look away. You are goddamn irresistible.” He lowered his face again, sucking on my clit until I was thrown over the edge, clenching around his fingers as my eyes rolled back in my head.

I lay there, heart pounding and head spinning, for a few moments until the sound of him unbuckling his belt jolted me from my orgasm fog.

I sat up to see his thick, gorgeous cock right in front of my face. Instinctively I reached for it, wanting to get my hands and mouth on it.

Just like the rest of him, Oliver's cock was big, proud, and full of surprises. He moaned as I took him in my mouth.

"Fuck, Maeve. I've dreamed about this—the feel of your smart little mouth on my cock. Shit, it's too good."

He attempted to push me back but I shook my head, taking him to the back of my throat and reveling in the sounds he made. I squeezed my legs together, attempting to quell the ache, the need for him. It had been weeks but my body remembered.

"Look at you. Squirming as you suck me off. You want this badly, don't you?"

I looked up at him and nodded, my lips still wrapped around his girth.

He took a step back, pulling himself out of my mouth.

"Tell me you want me, Maeve," he said softly. "I need to hear it."

I looked up at him, strong and confident, yet vulnerable.

"I want you, Oliver. More than I've ever wanted any man. I can't stop thinking about the night we spent together, and I worry my mind is playing tricks on me. I've never felt this way before. This all-consuming lust for someone. I think about you and your big cock all the time. You challenge me and confuse me and instead of trying to figure it all out, I just need to feel you inside me again."

I looked up, worried that I said too much, but the fire in his eyes only intensified.

He bent down, cupping my cheek. "You really are such a bad girl," he said softly. "And I'm going to fuck you so hard. I promise, it will be even better than last time."

I giggled as he pulled me up and kissed me hard before turning me around. "Hold the headboard," he instructed, reaching for a condom.

I threw my hair over my shoulder, wiggling my ass. I heard the crack of his hand on my skin before I even felt it.

“That’s for teasing me,” he said, gently rubbing the spot.

“And that,” he said, spanking the other cheek, “is for sneaking out without saying goodbye.”

I bit my lip, loving this, loving his punishments and the liberation of being so sexually free. “Yes,” I cried, arching back as he rubbed his fingers along my seam.

“You are drenched.” He ran his fingers down my spine, lighting up all the nerves in my body as he gently eased inside me.

“Jesus,” he cried out. “Fuck, you are so tight and perfect. I thought I had imagined it. Imagined how incredible you felt wrapped around me.” His thrusts were already hard and deep, and I was holding onto the headboard, reveling in his rough touch.

“Yes,” I cried out, feeling myself tighten around him. “Just like that.”

“Babe, I can do so much better,” he growled in my ear, gathering a fistful of my hair and gently tugging. My head arched back as he snaked his other hand down my belly, finding my throbbing clit. The feel of the pressure on my scalp combined with his large thumb on my clit had me flying over the edge in seconds. As he pounded into me I screamed, throwing my head back and convulsing in his arms. His pace slowed slightly as I came down, sweaty and spent.

“Oh, I’m not done yet,” he said, flipping me onto my back and grabbing my ankles. “I love the feel of you coming on my cock. Do it again for me.”

I wasn’t sure I could, but the sight of him between my legs, holding my ankles as he went deeper than any man ever had before, convinced me otherwise.

I would happily do whatever he told me to. And I was too orgasm-drunk to even consider the consequences.

OLIVER

It was so strange having a girlfriend. It had been years, and I mean years, since I had a woman in my life. And at my age, the word girlfriend just seemed silly. Especially when I thought about Maeve. Everything about her was significant, meaningful.

The rational part of my brain knew she had just gotten out of a long-term relationship. And logically, she probably wasn't ready for anything serious.

But I was head over heels for her already. It had only been two weeks since our kayak date, but we had already fallen into a pattern. Taking walks, going kayaking, and snuggling up and watching movies together. Shockingly, Maeve loved eighties and nineties action flicks, so we had been bonding over our love of Stallone and Schwarzenegger and throwing cheesy movie quotes back and forth.

I had also gotten to know her sisters—Alice, the quiet, bookish one, and Sylvie, the free-spirited musician. Maeve had admitted to not having the strongest relationships with them in the past and was trying to make up for it now, doing fun girlie things with them while I was working. The other night she texted me a photo of the three of them lined up on Alice's couch wearing these jelly looking facemasks and holding margarita glasses.

“Am I ready for this?” Maeve asked, knotting a thin scarf around her neck.

I pulled her into my arms and kissed her forehead. “It’s just GourdFest. Nothing to be afraid of. We will walk around, laugh at some strangely shaped vegetables, eat some food, and come home. Flint is covering for me tonight so I could spend the evening with my girl.”

She looked up at me, giving me a skeptical squint. “Your girl?”

“Yup. I am going full caveman, baby.” I picked her up and threw her over my shoulder, giving her ass a playful smack. “You are mine, woman.”

I ran around the living room as she laughed and squealed. “Fine, fine. I surrender. I’m your girl. But that means you’re my guy.”

I put her down and couldn’t repress the shit-eating grin on my face. “Your man, sweetheart. I’m your man.”

She placed one small hand on my chest and I held my breath. There was a but coming and I knew it. Her eyes were teary and when she looked up at me, I could see her vulnerability. “I like you a lot. But I still need to take things slowly.”

I leaned down and kissed her gently. “I like you a lot too. And I’ll go as slow or as fast as you want, Watson. Just know I’m here for the long haul.”

She pulled me down, kissing me even harder. I knew this was a big step for her, trusting someone after what happened with her ex. I didn’t want to pressure her. But my feelings were big and growing bigger by the day.

“I like this version of you,” I whispered in her ear. “Sweet and vulnerable. I like it.”

She gave me a dramatic eye roll. “Get your shoes. If we’re doing the silly town festival thing, then we’re doing it right.”

I was still beaming, giddy with the knowledge that she was mine. Everything else we’d figure out.



I WAS no stranger to small New England towns. I had grown up in Bristol, home of the oldest Fourth of July celebration in the country.

But I was still adjusting to life in Havenport. This place loved any excuse for a festival, parade, fireworks, road race, or celebration. The most mundane things were turned into events—streets were shut down, businesses were closed, and life ground to a halt. As a member of the police department, it was my job to staff most of these events, and the whiteboard at the station was filled with people moving shifts around to accommodate the constant need for police support.

And this was the GourdFest. One of the stranger events on the town calendar, for sure, but still oozing that special brand of Havenport charm.

Maeve squeezed my arm as we waited for her sisters to join us. “I haven’t been to one of these since I was a kid! I can’t believe I’ve been missing this. They have a category for ‘most likely to succeed.’ What makes a gourd likely to succeed? It’s insanity, and I am here for it.”

I loved her enthusiasm; I also loved the beers her sister Sylvie was carrying as she walked toward us.

“Wyatt says hi,” she said, handing one to each of us. “He finishes his shift at the Binnacle tent at nine, so will find us then.”

Alice walked up, giving us a nod and sipping her beer.

“I missed this,” Maeve said, gesturing around.

“We missed having you here,” Alice replied. “I have to make an appearance at the kids’ contest. Several of my students have entered, and there is some fierce competition.”

I sipped my beer, a bit confused. “What’s the deal with gourds?”

I heard a sharp intake of breath, and Maeve laughed. Sylvie regarded me suspiciously. “Gourds are inherently hilarious. You can’t really eat them, and there are millions of varieties. And also, have you seen them?”

“It’s also kind of a Havenport thing,” Alice explained in her patient teacher voice. “Lots of towns have harvest festivals. Lots of towns have fairs and agricultural competitions. Who grows the biggest pumpkin or whose cow wins the blue ribbon—that type of thing. But in Havenport, we’re all about being authentic and original and defying expectations. So we celebrate gourds. Because why the hell not?”

“And,” Sylvie added, “Havenport has to be extra about it—hence the categories, the judging panel, and the strict entry criteria.”

“Yeah, no one half asses GourdFest; you go all in or nothing,” Alice agreed.

I continued to drink my beer as I looked around the town center. A band was playing live music, and people were eating and dancing and taking selfies with some of the strangest-looking produce I’d ever seen.

Maeve looked happier and more relaxed than I had ever seen her. Being with her sisters brought out the best in her, and her excitement for her hometown was palpable. I loved being the one with her tonight, sneaking kisses between bites of soft pretzels and sips of hoppy beer, swaying to the music and laughing at some of the decorations.

For the first time since I moved here, I felt at home. And I knew it was all Maeve.

After a bit, Sylvie and Alice wandered off to check out the gourd competition, and Maeve pulled me close.

“You look gorgeous tonight,” I growled into her ear. “I wish I could take you home right now.”

Her eyes flashed and my blood heated. My desire for this woman was endless.

“What if we sneak away for a few minutes?” she said, raising one eyebrow. “Maybe,”—she pulled me down and I could feel her hot breath on my ear—“we can check something off my list.”

I was hard in an instant and I stood up, scanning the crowd for some place we could sneak off to. My heart was pounding and I couldn't think straight. I knew what she wanted to do, and there was no way in hell I would ever say no.

OLIVER

Maeve pulled me through the crowd, down toward the harbor. The streets were lit up, and propane heaters had been spaced at intervals to ward off the autumnal chill.

But I could barely stay focused since most of the blood had left my brain. She wanted to have sex in public. It was on her list. And the fire in her eyes told me it was happening and happening soon.

“Over here.”

Maeve pulled me into a narrow alley between old brick buildings. It was so tight we had to walk single file as she pulled me by the arm. Once we reached the back, Maeve pulled me onto the fire escape, and we climbed and climbed toward the roof. Even though she was wearing a wool coat, the sight of her ass climbing the steep steps set me on edge. Fuck, I needed her.

We reached the roof, which was flat and surrounded by a thick brick wall. There were chairs and some flower beds. “Where are we?” I asked, looking around confused.

She winked at me. “My aunt owns this building. I worked at the bookstore in high school and used to come up here a lot. The other floors are apartments. But this roof has the walls, which kind of hides things and looks out at the whole town. I know Sylvie and her friends used to come up here to drink in high school because it was impossible to be seen up here.”

I took a step closer. “So why did you bring me up here, Maeve?” I feigned innocence, trying to control myself.

She pursed her lips and tapped her chin. “Hm...can’t remember, big guy. Sorry!”

I stalked toward her and pulled her close, tipping her chin up. “You want to be bad, don’t you?”

She nodded.

“Tell me, Maeve. Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to fuck me while the whole town is down there. I want to feel the cold air and see the stars while you’re inside me.”

I ran my hands through my hair. Jesus, this woman was going to kill me. I kissed her and gave her ass a hard squeeze. “I’ll make you come, sweetheart. Don’t worry.”

Our kisses were frantic and hurried as we pawed at each other through our layers of clothes. I loved this side of her, untamed and wild. It brought out something in me as well. Something I had been hiding away for so long.

I pushed my hands into her leggings, knowing I would find her wet and ready, but froze when I realized she wasn’t wearing any panties.

“You are a bad girl,” I growled into her ear as she arched against me. “No panties?”

“I planned this. I knew I wanted you up here.”

Just the thought of her planning this out, making the choice to step out of her comfort zone with me, almost sent me over the edge.

Suddenly I couldn’t wait another minute. I turned her around to face the festival below, anchoring her arms on the brick wall, and pulled her leggings down, exposing the ass I loved so much.

“Spread your legs,” I growled.

“Yes, Officer,” she purred, smiling at me over her shoulder.

I unzipped my jeans, freeing my rock-hard cock and taking a moment to appreciate the incredible woman in front of me.

“I hope you’re ready for me. Because I can’t wait another minute.”

I thrust inside her hard, reveling in the feel of her wrapped around me.

“I love it when you’re bad,” I say, gently wrapping one hand around her neck, showing her I possessed her as much as she possessed me.

She threw her head back and gasped. “I’m only bad for you.”

Those words were almost my undoing, as I struggled to regain control. It was just too much—the cold air, her incredible body, and the knowledge that she was mine. Not to mention the naughty excitement of being in public. If I didn’t get a hold of myself, this would end soon.

I focused on her, her ragged breathing, the intoxicating scent of her hair. And I moved my hand down, finding her throbbing clit, hoping that I could make her feel half of what I was feeling right now.

“Yes,” she moaned, grinding against my hand. I felt her tighten as my thrusts sped up, becoming erratic and overwhelming. “Yes, Oliver. This is better than my fantasy.”

And as we both came undone, the entire town below us, I couldn’t help but think Maeve was better than any fantasy I had ever had.

MAEVE

I was walking on clouds. My heart was dancing. And my mind...well, it was full of rainbows and glitter and heart-eyes for the sexy man currently holding my hand as we weaved through the crowd.

Because I was done for. Despite all my cynicism and rage, Oliver had broken through my hard shell, and I had fallen for this sweet and dirty police officer.

Yes, the orgasms were great. And him fulfilling one of my deepest fantasies, OMG even better. But the laughter, the snuggles, and the feeling of contentment and affection were so much more than I could have ever imagined.

We were walking together while searching for my sisters, trying not to look like we had just fucked on a rooftop. We had been gone a while, and I knew they would suspect something.

I kept sneaking glances at Oliver, who wore a huge grin. "Stop," I hissed. "Be cool."

He leaned down and kissed my temple. "Couldn't be if I tried, babe. I'm too happy right now. Who cares if people know we are crazy about each other?"

I elbowed him in the ribs. "That's not what I'm worried about. Fix your hair; Alice may seem harmless but she is a hawk, and she will know what we were doing."

Oliver fussed with his messy strands while I waved to Alice and Sylvie, who were making their way over to us.

“The gourds are epic this year!” Sylvie said excitedly. “Best ever. Totally inspired.”

I smiled while she scrolled through the photos on her phone, showing me some truly insane looking things, when I suddenly saw Alice’s face fall.

“What’s wrong?”

Before she could answer, I heard his voice.

“Maeve. There you are.”

My blood ran cold and I stiffened. What the fuck was he doing here? I didn’t want to turn around but I had no choice. He had not gotten the message so far, so I had to make it clear.

I turned and put my hands on my hips. Oliver stepped behind me and put his hands on my shoulders in a show of support.

I looked him up and down. He looked like himself. Carefree Tristian. A guy who cruised through life and spent most of his time playing video games.

“Go away, Tristian,” I said firmly, praying he wouldn’t make a scene.

He took a step forward, and Oliver cleared his throat.

Tristian glanced at him and shook his head, walking even closer to me. “Maeve, it’s not like that. Why haven’t you returned my calls or texts?”

I glared at him. “Easy. Because I blocked your number.” In the immediate aftermath of our breakup, Tristian made no effort to contact me. But after my arrest, I stopped caring and had attempted to move on. Which, of course, made him obsessively call. I blocked him and didn’t think twice about it. Apparently it had made him very angry. Good.

“I also contacted Alice; did she give you my messages?”

“Nope. She knows I don’t want to talk to your cheating ass.”

“We need to speak, Maeve. You can’t just do all the shit you did and not talk about it. What about your parents? They

came to see me and made a lot of valid points. They think we should talk too.”

I let out a loud laugh. Too loud, but I couldn't hold it in. Did he actually think my parents' opinion would be persuasive?”

I looked at him and felt nothing but disgust. This was the man I was going to marry? The man I had wanted to be the father of my children?

Standing in front of me was a petulant, whiny man-child who lacked any semblance of empathy. He was petty and mean, and how on earth had I wasted two years on him?

Was I that numb? That blind? Was I that desperate for some “perfect” life that I was content to settle for someone who didn't respect me?

At what point in my life had I learned that my happiness didn't matter? Because it did. It mattered the most. This was my life and my choices and my future. I had years of toxic conditioning to unravel and years of boundary setting ahead of me. It would be hard but, looking at the alternative standing in front of me, totally worth it.

When I didn't respond, Tristian grew even angrier. “It's so typical. You've always been a spoiled brat. And you didn't get what you wanted so you're punishing me. You destroy my car, you pull out of our lease—which you know I can't cover on my own—and you won't even have a conversation with me. Spoiled. Fucking. Bitch.”

Sylvie and Alice were by my side in an instant, holding onto Oliver's massive arms. I heard his groan and knew he was close to hitting Tristian. I put my hand on his chest and looked up at him before turning my attention to fixing this problem once and for all.

“Oh Tristian. Thank GOD I didn't get married to you. The fact that I ever even contemplated it is embarrassing enough. Please just go away.”

“Embarrassing? You are the embarrassing one. Walking around with that oaf. And what happened to you? You look

chubby. Are you letting yourself go? I guess I dodged a bullet.”

My sisters gasped, looking murderous. And Oliver lunged forward, clearly wanting to get at Tristian.

“Stop,” I said, grabbing his arm. I raised an eyebrow and shook my head. He seemed to understand and took a step back. Deep in the recesses of my brain, I enjoyed how mad Oliver was. How he wanted to defend me. And at some point, I would appreciate the shit out of it. But right now, I could not have him interfering. As much as I wanted to let him protect me, I had to protect myself.

So I walked right up to Tristian. I wasn’t scared. I wasn’t intimidated. And his verbal abuse could not hurt me anymore.

I poked a finger in his concave chest. “You can just fuck right off, Tristian.”

“You are crazy.”

I laughed and shrugged. “I’d rather be crazy than dishonest and stupid like you are. I’d rather be crazy than a cheater.”

He stared at me with pure hatred in his eyes. “Go back to Boston, Maeve. Go back to your precious office.”

“No,” I said firmly. “Havenport is my home.” I poked him again, so hard he had to take a step back toward the assembling crowd. “Get out. You don’t get to chase me out of my home.”

“You barely spent any time here. If anyone should leave it’s you.”

“Nope. It’s mine now. And you can stay or leave. I don’t give a shit if I see you around, because you are so insignificant to me. You are such a small part of my story, and I truly don’t care.”

I waved him away with one hand. “Go forth and live your shitty, miserable life. I hope you and Moira are very happy together.”

“God, I forgot what a cunt you are,” he snarled, clearly hoping to get a rise out of me, but the longer this conversation

went on, the calmer I became. There was nothing here. And he had to understand that and get the fuck out of my way.

“You know what, Tris? Thank you. Thank you for betraying me, embarrassing me, and disrespecting me. Because the magnitude of that hurt? It strengthened and liberated me. I don’t need anyone’s approval anymore.”

“You will never get your perfect life now, Maeve. No one will marry a dried-up shrew like you. You’re just going to be a miserable spinster forever.”

I shrugged; that didn’t sound so terrible if Tris was the alternative. “I’m fine with that. Because I’m happy now. I do what I want. I eat what I want. I got my sisters back. And, most importantly, I got myself back.”

There were murmurs and cheers in the small crowd, started mainly by my sisters, who were fist pumping and jumping up and down in my peripheral vision.

I turned and began to walk away. But I stopped and turned back. “So thanks for being such a shitty person. Because you really woke me up. And now, I’m more awesome than ever.”

I turned, expecting to see Oliver, but he was nowhere. I scanned the crowd—he should be easy to find since he was a head taller than most people—but I couldn’t find him anywhere. My heart started to race. Had he left? I needed to talk to him. I had so much to say to him. So many things to thank him for.

Before I could panic, Sylvie and Alice were at my sides, linking arms with me, and the three of us walked away, leaving Tristian in our dust.

OLIVER

I had to walk away. I had to get as far away as possible from that shit-stain of a man.

I wanted to punch his smug face and then I wanted to punch it again and not stop until he took back every nasty thing he had ever said, done, or thought about my Maeve. My eye twitched and my fists flexed as I walked back into the crowd, making sure I could keep an eye on Maeve but far enough away that I wouldn't do something stupid.

Because I couldn't do anything. I was an off-duty police officer. Assault and battery on a civilian would not only end my career, but it would compromise who I was as a man.

My feelings for Maeve were so strong I was almost willing to go there, which scared me. So I had to walk away.

I found a spot on the sidewalk where I could still keep tabs on them and shoved my hands into my pockets. Feelings of confusion washed over me as I tried to keep my feet rooted to the spot. Seeing Tristian was just a reminder of how deeply I had fallen for Maeve. And how recently she had been ready to marry another man. A man I currently wanted to pummel with my fists.

I took a few deep breaths, trying to make sense of all that had happened tonight. It felt like Maeve and I had taken a major step forward, and then he showed up, ruining everything.

I watched as their conversation unfolded and saw Maeve turn away, linking arms with her sisters. Tristian disappeared

into the crowd, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Now I just needed to get my head on straight and talk to Maeve.

She found me before I could find her. One of the downsides of being so tall—I'm easy to spot in a crowd.

“Where the hell did you go?” she hissed, crossing her arms over her chest. “You just left me there.”

I could see the hurt in her eyes, and it made me sick to my stomach.

I pulled her close, crushing her into a hug. “I had to walk away,” I said into her hair. “I almost did something stupid. I wanted to hurt that prick, and I knew if I stayed I would.”

“I had the situation handled.”

“I know it. That's why I stepped back because I knew you could fight your own battles. You didn't need some testosterone-fueled idiot fighting them for you. You're the most capable, fierce woman I've ever met.”

She looked up at me with tears in her eyes. “Stop it.”

I took a step back and gripped her shoulders. “Yes, Maeve. You are. It is so hard for me not to swoop in, to want to be the hero, to be the protector. Because I want to protect you, so much. I want to be the man who fights for you and takes care of you. But in that moment, I was not in control, and you were. So I took a step back and let you do what you needed to do.”

“Thank you. I didn't realize...I would never want you to compromise your job or anything.”

I leaned down and kissed the top of her head. “I know, babe, I know. It's just my feelings for you. They make me irrational sometimes.”

She smirked. “Oh really? Sergeant McHottie is not calm, cool, and collected at all times?”

“Not when it comes to you. You know you make me wild.”

I leaned down and kissed her. It was fierce and possessive and probably not fit for a public sidewalk during a town festival. But I didn't care.

MAEVE

Oliver and I walked back to his house, hand in hand. I was still processing all that had happened tonight, and my feelings were bubbling up to the surface. Being reminded of what I had before Oliver—what I had settled for—was filling me with more anger. What was wrong with me? After decades of not knowing my worth I had finally found someone incredible. But wouldn't I just find a way to mess this up too?

"I wasn't in love with Tristian," I admitted softly as we walked down the quiet street.

"I know," he said, squeezing my hand.

"But I think I'm falling for you."

He took a sharp breath and abruptly stopped walking. My heart was racing, and I felt vaguely nauseated. *Had I just said that out loud? What was wrong with me?*

"Sorry," I blurted, trying to recover the situation. "That's silly. I can't fall in love this quickly. I shouldn't have said anything." My cheeks burned and my stomach churned and I looked around, trying to find someplace to run and hide from this humiliation. The showdown with Tristian had loosened something within me. It had been liberating and scary and healing, all at the same time. And now...now I was just blurting out my feelings all over the place.

"Yes you can," he said, tipping my chin up. "Bad girls do whatever they want."

I looked up at his handsome face and the kindness in his eyes. “It’s reckless.”

“Not if it’s right. I’m falling for you too, Watson. Have been for a while now. And I told you I’d never rush you into anything. But I really want you to meet my mom. I don’t know what the future holds for her, and I want her to know the woman I’ve fallen for. The woman I hope to marry someday.”

The breath caught in my chest. This was fast and confusing but felt so damn right.

“Of course I’ll visit with you. I want to know your mom. It’s just...” I paused, uncertain of how to continue. “I have a lot of work to do—on myself. I don’t want to lose myself in a relationship again. I am finally prioritizing me after all these years.”

He pulled me close and held me for a moment. “You take all the time you need, Watson. I’m in no rush. You deserve to do whatever you want to do and be whoever you want to be. I just want you to be mine.”

“I am yours, Sergeant Sexypants. I’ve been yours since you handcuffed me and threw me in the back of your cruiser.”

He picked me up, spinning me around before putting me back down. “And I’m yours, gorgeous. I’ve been yours since you tried to take a selfie at a crime scene.”

“I guess that means we’re stuck together forever then.” I paused, thinking for a moment. “Do you have a passport?” I asked.

He nodded. “Why?”

“Because I’ve got nonrefundable honeymoon tickets that I still need to use. How do you feel about Italy?”

EPILOGUE

6 Months Later

Naples, Italy

“**T**his is heaven,” I groaned, folding another paper-thin slice of magical crust, sauce, and cheese and shoving it into my mouth.

“Yessss,” Maeve sighed, rubbing her belly. “No offense, Sal, but this is pizza.”

“That’s the thing. I’m not sure it is. It’s beyond pizza. It’s some rare superfood with magical qualities seasoned with angel dust.”

“Have you ever considered giving up your law enforcement career to be a food writer? That’s some magical fucking prose right there.” She lifted her wine glass and winked at me.

I leaned forward. “Keep talking, Watson. Once I recover from this food coma I am going to spank that attitude right out of you.”

She laughed. “I look forward to it, Sherlock.”

“You know, I’m surprised you were able to clear customs. What with your criminal record and all...I’m surprised the Italian government didn’t turn you away.” I saw a flash of anger and her cheeks flushed. I wanted to pull her into my lap and kiss her senseless.

“Very funny. Tristian dropped the charges. My record is clean now.” Miraculously, this had happened shortly after he confronted Maeve at GourdFest. He then moved out of town and no one had heard from him since. Apparently he got the message that you don’t fuck with Maeve Watson.

I scratched my chin. “Yes. But the memory of your arrest is forever.”

She stuck her tongue out at me and I blew her a kiss. I leaned back in my chair, feeling the warm sun hit my face. This place was paradise, nothing but beauty and culture and incredible food.

We were on day five of our Italian vacation, previously known as Maeve’s nonrefundable honeymoon. We spent a few days in Rome and then headed to Naples. Yesterday, we hired a driver to take us to the village where Maeve’s grandmother was born. She cried when we visited the church where she had been baptized. I enjoyed watching Maeve connect with her family and her heritage. She FaceTimed her sisters while we were there, and the three of them cried and reminisced about their beloved grandmother.

True to her word, Maeve had been working on herself. She gave notice at her accounting firm and got a job with a small practice in Havenport. Within a week, she had signed several new clients and was already proving to be a superstar. She protected her work-life balance fiercely, and we spent our downtime kayaking to our special island, visiting with my mom, and spending time with her sisters.

Despite the fact that I had asked her to move in with me several times, she was still living with Alice. She said they liked being roommates and were making up for lost time. I was hoping that, after this trip, she would consider it though. As much as I promised not to rush her, I wanted to wake up next to her every morning for the rest of my life.



WANT MORE HAVENPORT? You can meet Maeve's sister Sylvie in [Dad Bod Bartender](#). Keep reading for a sneak peek:

Chapter 1

Wyatt

"CAN we each get a seasonal flight, please?" giggled the woman at the bar. She was in her early thirties and gave me a big smile while her friend nudged her suggestively. I was used to a certain amount of flirting as a bartender; it sort of came with the territory. But I was not in the mood these days. My heart wasn't exactly broken but certainly dented after my five-year relationship fell apart a couple of months ago. No number of flirtatious customers would pull me out of my funk tonight.

"Sure," I replied, ducking down to find more of the tasting glasses.

It was my first Saturday night behind the bar at Binnacle Brewing, and I was loving the low-key vibe here. It was still early, so hard to say for sure, but the crowd was decent and the space was pretty cool.

I had arrived earlier this week from Portland, Maine, to start my apprenticeship with Liam Quinn. I was an aspiring brewmaster, and he was an award-winning brewer who had his own microbrewery down in Havenport, Massachusetts. We met last summer at a brewing industry event, and he seemed so cool. He mentioned his business was expanding, and he was looking for someone to train and groom as his successor.

I had been languishing up in Portland for a few years, bartending mainly and doing odd jobs at the SeaWench Brewery—one of the largest independently-owned breweries on the east coast. We had a staff of hundreds and over a dozen brewers. Despite my best efforts, I just couldn't get the kind of hands-on experience there I had been looking for. But I stayed and poured pints and mopped floors and cleaned tanks, hopeful that things would work out. It was the kind of person I was, someone who accepted what I was given instead of pushing for more.

Not anymore. I was chasing my dream, and so far, Binnacle Brewing was exceeding my expectations. I had learned so much in just one week. Not to mention the kind welcome I had received from the team here and in the small town of Havenport.

Having grown up in Maine, I was pretty well accustomed to the typical New England small towns. But Havenport was something else. Steeped in Revolutionary War history and nestled on a small peninsula near the New Hampshire border, it was bursting with character and life. In just a few days, I had discovered an amazing coffee shop, walked through the historic downtown lined with cobblestone streets, and visited one of the most breathtaking beaches I had ever seen.

It was a picture postcard sort of town, and I felt lucky to be here. Unlike some of the desolate fishing villages I'd lived in, Havenport was a living, breathing place.

Trent came over and clapped a hand on my shoulder. "How you doing, Wyatt?"

"Great. I need to go grab more glasses."

"The stout keg is kicked. Do you mind changing it on your way? I can cover the bar."

I nodded and headed off in the direction of the keg room.

Trent was the operations manager at Binnacle and one of the nicest people I had ever met. He had been training me all week, helping get me situated, and had even offered me his spare bedroom while I found an apartment in town.

So we were temporary roommates as well as colleagues. I liked him immediately. Trent was in his midthirties and always had a smile on his face. He knew everyone and everything and went out of his way to help me.

After changing the keg, checking the others, and swinging by the kitchen for a fresh rack of glassware, I headed back to the bar. It had grown more crowded in the twenty minutes I had been gone. I also heard the distinct sound of someone tuning a guitar. Trent had mentioned live music on the

weekends. I smiled; good music always helped my shifts behind the bar go faster.

I made my way into the taproom and stopped in my tracks. Standing in front of me, on the small stage area, was the most beautiful woman I had ever laid eyes on. She was standing with her guitar, a keyboard, and an amp, biting her bottom lip as she tuned.

She had dirty-blond long hair that hung past her shoulders, dark eyes rimmed with long black lashes, and a slightly upturned nose garnished with a small diamond stud. I watched her as her long delicate fingers adjusted the tuning keys, noting the look of intense concentration on her angelic face.

She wore a loose floral dress that showed quite a bit of leg and worn Doc Marten combat boots. A thin sweater slid down one shoulder, exposing her beautiful neck and collarbones. I could see a floral tattoo snake up one of her wrists and disappear under her sweater. I desperately wanted to see more.

She looked up while tuning and saw me staring at her like an idiot. And she smiled. A toothy, slightly crooked smile that made my heart clench.

I suddenly became aware I was standing in the middle of the taproom, holding a large rack of glasses, staring at a pretty woman, and grinning like an idiot. So I headed back behind the bar, crouching down to hide the fact that my face was tomato red. I focused on stacking and organizing the glassware while trying to mentally recover from the embarrassment.

“Everything okay?” Trent asked, wiping down the live edge oak bar with a rag.

“Yes,” I said a little too enthusiastically.

He smirked. “I see you met Sylvie.” He nodded his head in the direction of the stage.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

“She’s really talented,” he continued. “Plays here on weekends.”

She was probably Trent's girlfriend. He was handsome and charismatic and probably had beautiful musicians throwing themselves at him regularly.

Having been cheated on myself, I felt instantly guilty. "I'm sorry, dude. I didn't realize."

Trent laughed. "Nothing like that. She's single."

"I don't want to step on your toes."

"We're just friends. But you should talk to her after her set."

I would be doing no such thing. I would clean up this bar and studiously avoid making eye contact with her. The last thing I needed was to get lost in those mesmerizing eyes again and make a fool of myself. I was here to do a job—to elevate my career and pursue my dream, a dream I had put on the back burner for too many years.

The bar got a lot busier as the night went on. I was in a groove, pouring beers and chatting with customers while simultaneously cleaning. While I would never call myself a social person, I did enjoy bartending. The Havenport crowd was great, pretty patient and really generous tippers. I had almost forgotten about my earlier humiliation when I heard it.

The most incredible voice.

Melodic and haunting and a tiny bit playful.

I stopped and stared at the stage.

Sylvie was playing "The Sound of Silence," one of my all-time favorite songs. I watched as she played and sang, and I felt the emotion of each note.

Her face was focused, but her body language was relaxed. She was made for this—being on stage and sharing her gifts with the world. Her arrangement of the song was slightly different, folksier and more playful, but still haunting and intense.

I stood, listening to her singing while the noise of the busy bar faded away. Her beautiful voice made me dizzy with

conflicting emotions—loneliness, yearning, and most of all, hope.

Each note hung in the air, more perfect than the last. Every cell of my body pulsed with the need to take her in my arms. I had never even spoken to her—had only just laid eyes on her—but I felt her in my heart.

Her beauty, her talent, had gotten under my skin. And I had no idea what to do about it.

I walked toward the stage, a bar towel still slung over my shoulder, as she sang. She raised her eyes and met mine as she strummed the last note. I took a step back. Something happened. Something major that I couldn't understand or explain. But as I stared into her eyes and she stared into mine, something inside me shifted. My cells rearranged themselves in my body.

And all I could think was “I found her.”



YOU CAN GRAB [Dad Bod Bartender](#) on Amazon and in Kindle Unlimited.

OR CHECK out the rest of the Havenport Universe books, all available to read for free in Kindle Unlimited

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to everyone who joined me in Havenport! This is my ninth published book, and I still can't believe it.

I love an angry woman. And when presented with the chance to write another one, I jumped at it, pushing my publishing schedule around and making room for Maeve and Oliver.

This book would not exist without Erica Connors. Thank you for being my friend, my cheerleader, and the best PA ever. I am so lucky to call you my teammate and friend. I cannot thank you enough.

Ann and Ann, thank you for your thorough editing. Ten projects in and I'm still making lots of timeline errors. Thank you for your continued patience with me.

Thank you to my mother, who always pushed me to do my best and believed in me even when I did not. I am the kind of person who decides to write books in my nonexistent free time because of you.

Thank you to my family for being hilarious and loving and silly.

And finally, thank you to my patient and devastatingly handsome husband. You are my original Alpha Roll.

ALSO BY DAPHNE ELLIOT

HAVENPORT

The Quinn Brothers Series

Trusting You (Book 1)

Cecelia Leary is looking for a fresh start in small town Havenport, Massachusetts. Liam Quinn is looking for a marketing expert to help save his struggling brewery. Sparks fly in this small town, slow burn, friends to lovers romance.

Finding You (Book 2)

Declan Quinn needs a fake girlfriend to keep his well-meaning family at bay, and Astrid Wentworth needs a fake boyfriend for an upcoming work event. It was supposed to be a platonic arrangement. It soon became anything but...

Keeping You (Book 3)

The last thing Violet Thompson needs is a run-in with the guy who broke her heart in high school. And the last thing Callum Quinn needs is to be distracted by a sexy single mom. Can Violet and Callum find a way to trust love—and each other—again?

The Rossi Family Series

Resisting You (Book 1)

Nora Rossi and Lucas Kim usually stay far away from one another. But there is only so much distance in a small town. After they strike up an unexpected friendship, the line between love and hate gets very blurry...

Holding You (Book 2)

Single dad Matteo has no time for a relationship. But when local nurse Eliza loses her job helping his daughter, he finds himself tempted by the fun-loving younger woman.

Embracing You (Book 3)

Childhood best friends Gio and Sam reunite after she returns to Havenport after a health scare. Can they put the past behind them and find their HEA?

Novellas

Rediscovering Us (Holiday Novella)

Josh and Maggie both want a second chance at their marriage. Will one magical Christmas in Havenport be enough to mend their hearts?

Dad Bod Bartender (Novella)

Love at first sight is for fairy tales and romance novels. Or so they thought... Can Wyatt and Sylvie find their way to a HEA?

A Touch of Wrath (Novella)

After she catches her fiancé with another woman three weeks before their wedding, Maeve has had enough of being a good girl. She's embracing her inner bad girl, getting even, and finding a handsome police officer in the process.

VICES & VIRTUES SERIES

All Available on Amazon and in Kindle Unlimited

[A Touch of Lust](#) by Sammi Starlight

[A Taste of Chastity](#) by Kelsie Calloway

[A Touch of Pride](#) by Krysta Fox

[A Touch of Sloth](#) by Layne Daniels

[A Touch of Greed](#) by Matilda Martel

[The Taste of Charity](#) by Tamrin Banks

[The Taste of Temperance](#) by Ember Davis

[A Touch of Envy](#) by Alana Winters

[The Taste of Diligence](#) by Kendall Savage

[A Touch of Gluttony](#) by Euryia Larsen

[The Taste of Patience](#) by Kelsey Kain

[The Taste of Humility](#) by Tracie Douglas

[The Taste of Kindness](#) by Bree Weeks

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In High School, Daphne Elliot was voted “most likely to become a romance novelist.” After spending the last decade as a corporate lawyer, she has finally embraced her destiny. Her steamy novels are filled with flirty banter, sexy hijinks, and lots and lots of heart.

Daphne is a coffee-drinking, hot-sauce loving introvert who spends her free time gardening and practicing yoga. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband, two kids, two dogs, two fish, and twelve backyard chickens.

FIND DAPHNE AT:

DAPHNEELLIOT.COM

daphneelliotaauthor@gmail.com

Stay in touch with Daphne:

[Subscribe to Daphne's Newsletter](#)

[Join Daphne's Reader Group](#)

[Like Daphne on Facebook](#)

[Follow Daphne on Instagram](#)

[Hang with Daphne on GoodReads](#)

[Follow Daphne on Amazon](#)

[Follow Daphne on TikTok](#)