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A MOST wonderful TIME



EASTER KINGSTON



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For all of us who are terrified, and do it anyway.

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PART ONE
Colorado



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ONE

ZOE ZUYDERVELT IS GOING to die.

She's going to die very soon and she's going to do it right here on the road to god-knows-where, Colorado, her hands still clutching the wheel of this foul-smelling minivan, buried under five feet of snow for the remainder of the season until some fortunate family of possums digs her up in spring.

But before she dies, she's going to murder Alma Valdes.

The heartwarming revenge fantasy is the only thing that's kept Zoe going for the last ninety miles of zero visibility. Well—that, and the snowplow she's been trailing. She's fairly sure she has imprinted on it at this point, like one of those orphaned baby ducks Alma's daughter mentioned to her once. It's nearly dark by the time Zoe finally, *finally* spots the distant lights at the end of the road where Alma promised they would be, and she's nearly dizzy with relief.

Silence engulfs her when she slams the car door shut. Snow is still falling, and she imagines she can hear it, now that the engine is off; it's a faint clinking, like a room full of champagne flutes meeting in a toast somewhere far away.

It is an arresting view, she admits. Not that she's going to tell Alma that, or forgive her for taking out the exact files she knows Zoe needs for her pitch to the Swiss investors—the ones that state clearly they are NOT TO BE DIGITIZED—making Zoe chase her company's chief financial officer across

multiple state lines and forcing her to barge in on a private family getaway. “Absolutely not,” Alma told her that morning over a phone connection that was precarious at best. “I’m not cutting our vacation short. You want those files, you can come get them yourself.”

Alma’s so-called cabin is, as it turns out, really a chalet: larger than Zoe had expected and much more modern, with large raked windows casting a pleasant orange glow over the fresh snowdrifts out front. Beyond the chalet lies a breathtaking backdrop of snow-covered mountains and the prettiest indigo sky Zoe has ever seen. The first stars are already blinking into view.

“Oye, mensa!” Standing in the doorway, a dark silhouette framed by warm light, is Alma. Her hair is still soft and wavy, but it’s almost down to her shoulders again. She meets Zoe halfway down the driveway and pulls her into an inescapable hug. “Get in here, you dummy.” Alma is all bones, but her grip is remarkably strong.

“Lovely to see you, too,” Zoe grunts into her best friend’s cardigan. She aims for sarcasm but lands, to her chagrin, solidly at sincerity.

Alma grabs hold of Zoe’s arms and looks her over, her sharp brow softened with concern. “When we heard about the flight cancellations, we figured you’d do the responsible thing and get a hotel in Denver,” she says. “Did you actually *drive* the rest of the way up?” She pauses, blinking at the minivan parked in her driveway. “. . . And bring all six of your fellow dwarfs?”

“It was the last car on the lot.” Zoe glares at her. “And you didn’t leave me much of a choice.”

Behind Alma, another, much shorter form appears, with features just as dark and striking as Alma’s but a smile three times as wide. “You made it!”

Before Zoe can register what’s happening, she’s enveloped in another hug. She notes with surprise she no longer needs to lean down into it; Alma’s daughter Sofia is almost thirteen, and apparently well on her way to surpassing Zoe in height. Not that it takes much, especially once Zoe is out of her heels. Which is something she’d rather like to be right now.

“Are you hungry?” Sofia asks. “Hanna and I made cookies. Would you like some cookies? They have Christmas sweaters on them.”

Zoe doesn’t know who Hanna is—*one of Sofia’s school friends?* But she has to admit the offer is tempting. She’s tired, and hungry, and even though she hadn’t planned on lingering any longer than necessary, she can’t imagine getting behind the wheel again anytime soon. She rolls her

shoulders, trying to release the tight clench of her jaw. “I could actually really use a drink,” she concedes.

“Well then.” Alma smiles at her, then steps aside. “Follow me in merry measure.”



The warmth that greets Zoe when she steps inside is delicious. She was expecting the chalet’s interior to match the cool, clean lines she saw outside, so she’s surprised to find an inviting space that immediately feels like home. To her left, a vaulted ceiling arches over an enormous dinner table with a natural wood top, surrounded by mismatched chairs. To her right, a prominent fireplace forms the centerpiece to a cozy living area, with two comfortable-looking couches facing each other and a couple of oversized armchairs in between. The windows on both sides of the room offer a spectacular view of the mountains on one side, the lights of the town below on the other.

“What’s up, Scrooge?” Alma’s girlfriend Judith is already at Zoe’s elbow. She’s stealthy and sharp-eyed as ever, her natural red hair spiraling out in loose coils that obscure half her face. She takes Zoe’s jacket and hands her a tumbler of Scotch in return.

“Surprised you left me some, Kaplan.” Zoe clinks her glass against Judith’s near-empty one and grins. She remembers a very different Judith, from when Judith and Alma had first started dating; a Judith Kaplan with flint in her eyes and steel in the set of her shoulders. She and Zoe had circled each other like Old West gunslingers for months, both unsure of the other’s intentions, until an exasperated Alma finally sat them down and demanded they talk it out.

Things are better now. Mostly.

Zoe takes a quick sip and lets out a slow breath, closing her eyes against the soft, familiar feeling of *home at last*. Best not to get caught up in that, though; she’s here on business. Time is precious and she is definitely intruding, no matter how welcome she’s being made to feel, no matter how good the spicy-sweet fragrance drifting from the kitchen is, or how attractive the stranger who’s standing in it.

Wait.

This is Sofia’s friend?

The stranger looks like she's in her mid-thirties, like Zoe herself, but that's where their similarities end. In fact her features almost perfectly contrast Zoe's own: the woman is tall, and *built*, where Zoe is short and a fair bit softer than she'd like; her skin is freckled and sun-kissed, while Zoe's pallor betrays late nights spent at work and getting lunch delivered. And where Zoe's ponytail is straight and nearly black, the stranger's hair bounces in blonde, storybook-princess waves down her—frankly unfairly broad—shoulders. She regards Zoe with candid curiosity, throwing her a brilliant smile when their eyes meet. It's so kind, and so bewilderingly genuine, that Zoe instantly panics. Does she know this woman? Why doesn't she remember her?

"Zoe, this is Hanna. I don't believe you've met," Alma says.

Zoe is thankful for the save for about three seconds, until she notices the gleeful way Alma's eyes dance between the two of them. There's a weight to Alma's words that Zoe doesn't understand. *Is that name supposed to ring a bell?*

"Hi!" Hanna strides over, her posture loose but graceful in a way Zoe has always envied in others and never quite managed to emulate herself.

Oh, Zoe would have remembered *her.*

Before she has a chance to say hello, Zoe is engulfed in her third hug of the day. This is more than her preferred annual average, but she notes with some alarm that her reserve falters for a moment. It could be the warm hand at her back that does it, or Hanna's remarkably hard body, buffered by a thick layer of soft cotton, pressing against Zoe's own. It could even be the scent of sugar and cinnamon that now surrounds them both. The hug is quick, which means Zoe is spared the indignity of having to admit she isn't in a hurry to end it, but it also leaves her standing very close to this stranger—Hanna—as she smiles at her, radiating warmth and joy.

Alma is smiling too, regarding them both with an eagerness that borders on predatory. Zoe would wonder at it if she wasn't so thoroughly distracted. Hanna's eyes are Very Blue, and she's holding up two comically oversized cookies. *What do you know? They do look a little like Christmas sweaters.*

"Do you like cinnamon or chocolate?" Hanna asks, eyebrows waggling for no reason Zoe can think of, and Zoe is thinking hard.

But Judith is inexplicably right there again, snatching the cookies Hanna is offering up out of her hands. "Unh-uh," she says. "You've ruined your

appetite enough. No more treats until we've had dinner." She disappears, taking the cookies with her.

Hanna gives Zoe a crooked grin. "Sorry," she shrugs. "She does that."

It's all familiar, like a sitcom playing out live in front of her, so even though Zoe hasn't exactly had a proper example of the way siblings are supposed to interact—she carefully steps away from *that* thought process—she's been given enough cultural references to figure it out. "You're the younger Kaplan," she assesses.

"Yup." Hanna beams at her, and then says, "And you're the younger Zuydervelt."

It sobers Zoe instantly. Even the humor in Hanna's warm, low-pitched voice can't mask the sour note struck by the allusion to Zoe's internationally detested brother. "Oh good," she says, finally wobbling back to her straight-backed, sarcastic self. "You've heard of me. I was worried we'd have to do the whole '*that* Zoe Zuydervelt?' song and dance."

The remorse that registers on Hanna's face, in those honestly implausibly blue eyes of hers, makes Zoe feel like she's never said anything more cruel in her entire life, and she's at least ninety-eight percent sure she has said far, far worse. She feels a ludicrous urge to apologize.

"Hey, awesome, I see we've arrived at the hangry stage," Alma helpfully interjects.

"It's fine," Zoe says, feeling uncomfortably, uncharacteristically off-kilter. "So Alma—about those files?"

Alma's amber eyes are flitting between Hanna and Zoe. "One condition," she says, and Zoe has spent enough time in Alma's company to know she will not be able to refuse. "You stay for dinner."

Well. It's not an entirely unreasonable offer. "Who's cooking?"

Alma grins. "DiGiorno's."

Zoe's stomach growls unsophisticatedly. "We have a deal."

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TWO

IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE a simple frozen pizza dinner, but in Alma's house, this means a properly set table, a mountain of fresh toppings and a bottomless salad on the side. Sofia seats Zoe and the salad bowl at the head of the table and plops down next to her. "Catalina and I got an A on the remote control car," she announces, flushed with pride. "She said to thank you for your help."

Zoe feels proud, too. It's an unfamiliar feeling; a bit like heartburn, maybe slightly less unpleasant. "The solar power project?" she clarifies. "You hardly needed my help with that. Your design was very elegant."

"*You're* responsible for that car?" Hanna laughs, one of those unselfconscious, infectious laughs that has no right to be this attractive. "That thing is awesome! I was hoping Sofia would bring it. I swear it's two screws and a microchip away from learning how to make me breakfast."

"I hope not," Zoe says. "My company's new policies have placed very comprehensive restrictions on the use of artificial intelligence."

Hanna catches her eye, and then winks at her. *Who winks, anymore? Who winks at strangers?* Only years of training, in the form of the psychological warfare her mother would casually unleash on Zoe at family dinners, prevent her from dropping her fork.

Alma is marginally less enthusiastic about her daughter's invention. "Sofia's STEM teacher was a bit surprised at the high-quality materials they

were able to get their hands on," she grumbles, one eyebrow quirk away from genuine disapproval.

"Hey, it's not my fault public schools are so grossly underfunded," Zoe protests mildly. "And I made sure the whole class had access to those materials, didn't I?"

Alma squints at her. "I'm pretty sure you didn't grant the entire class access to Austra Biogenics' *dry lab."*

"But my amá is the boss," Sofia says. "I get to have some perks." Zoe pointedly clears her throat, and Sofia rolls her eyes. "Fine. *Semi*-boss."

"And you never let me forget it," Alma laments.

"Don't I?" Zoe swirls the wine in her glass. It's a truly excellent Cabernet; Alma is as discerning when it comes to choosing her wine as she is making financial decisions for Zoe's company. "And yet here I am, in your dining room, out in the middle of nowhere, chasing after files you absconded with when you know I need them for my pitch to the Swiss."

Alma gestures broadly at the window facing the mountains, making the silver bangles that encircle her slender wrist jingle. "What better way to prepare for the Swiss than to get on their literal level?"

Judith glances at Alma's glass. "How many of these have you had, babe?"

Alma side-eyes her girlfriend, but she puts the glass down. "Look," she tells Zoe, "your meeting isn't until the end of next week. How was I supposed to know you would spend your holidays going over information you could probably recite backwards and upside down?"

"Bullshit," Hanna says, smiling like she walked straight off the set of a toothpaste commercial when all eyes fall on her.

"Thank you," Zoe says, a little startled, but grateful for the backup.

"Language," Alma warns, prompting an eye-roll from Sofia.

"Sorry," Hanna says. She leans forward on her elbows. Beneath the long sleeves of her t-shirt, Zoe can see her muscles flex. "Bull *crap.*" Hanna's eyes are on Zoe now, confident and intent. "I've heard enough about you to know you're an incurable workaholic. I doubt Alma genuinely expected you to take a break over the holidays."

"She didn't," Zoe agrees. "This is a setup."

"Fine," Alma sighs, picking her glass back up. "I love you, and I thought maybe you'd like to try having a good time for once. Sue me."

"I might," Zoe says. "I almost died driving up here."

"Did you?" Hanna asks. "I mean—drive all this way?"

Zoe chews her last bite and swallows. “I made it as far as Denver before they canceled all remaining flights. It’s a miracle the rental agency had any cars left.”

Judith grins. “Zoe Zuydervelt, flying commercial. I would love to have seen that.”

Zoe stares sullenly into her glass. “I’m sure by tomorrow the footage will have found its way to social media.”

Hanna coughs, her cheeks reddening. “Really?” she asks. “Are you that big of a deal?”

God, Zoe really hopes not. It’s been almost five years since she helped put her brother behind bars, but the new Netflix docuseries coming out this Spring has once again made Zoe’s public reception dangerously unpredictable. Even at the airport, with everyone focused on getting to their final destinations, there had been a sort of appetite to the crowd; a quiet clamoring for eye contact Zoe had found deeply unnerving.

“You’re not trending on Twitter,” Sofia assures her, turning her phone so Zoe can see. Another Instagram celebrity has fallen from grace, the Gävle goat has survived this season’s second assassination attempt, and the European parliament takes a surprising third place.

“No phones at dinner,” Alma reminds her.

Hanna nudges Sofia. “Also, dude, did you literally steal every single olive from this salad? What kind of kid likes olives?”

“Not a kid,” Sofia says.

“The kind of kid who went through a two-month-long sashimi phase in first grade,” Alma answers for her.

“I happen to have a very sophisticated palate,” Sofia claims.

“Sure you do, Miss Chicken Fingers With Applesauce.” Alma starts stacking up their empty plates and hip-checks her daughter out of her chair. “Go wash up. It’s late.”

Sofia makes a face. “It’s not my fault Aunt Zoe was late for dinner.”

“Órale, mija.”

Judith refills Zoe’s glass. “C’mon. Take this to the living room. Put your feet up. Consider it a vacation.”

Hanna trails after Zoe with her own drink. “Are you joining us, Jude?” she asks her sister.

“Let me just get these out of the way first,” Judith calls back from the kitchen.

“Can’t relax when there’s dirty dishes on the counter,” Hanna explains to Zoe. Then she calls over her shoulder, her voice dripping with sarcasm, “I wonder where you get that from.”

“Perla,” Judith admits, rolling her eyes over at Zoe. “My mom. She can never actually kick back and relax though. I’m nowhere near as bad as that.”

Zoe smirks, observing how Hanna has already made herself comfortable, a collection of loose, sculpted limbs practically dangling upside down in one of the armchairs. “Let me guess,” Zoe tells her. “You take more after your father.”

There’s a tiny snag in Hanna’s joyful expression. “I do, you’re right,” she says, her voice a little lower. “But Judith and I actually don’t have the same parents. Biologically speaking.”

Zoe has only known Hanna for five minutes, and she’s already prepared to beat herself up over broaching a topic that might be painful for her. You would think that, as the orphaned, adopted, turned (surprise!) bastard child of the late business magnate Richard Zuydervelt, Zoe would know better.

“But really we’ve been sisters since Sunday school,” Judith calls out, grinning as she scrubs at a cutting board.

“Our families went to the same temple,” Hanna explains. “The Kaplans adopted me when I was ten, but Perla always made it clear I had a home with them, even before I lost my parents.”

“That’s—great?” Zoe would have gotten a pedicure if she’d known she was going to shove her entire foot into her mouth today. “I mean, I’m adopted, too. Kind of. And I wouldn’t describe—” she frowns at herself, embarrassed. *How* do *you describe spending your life feeling ungrateful for thinking your adoptive family never treated you as one of their own before discovering, upon your father’s death, that the true reason for their reserve was that you were his mistress’ child?* “What I’m trying to say is that I know a thing or two about complicated families.”

“I’d say your family is a *bit* more complicated than ours, though,” Judith argues.

“Yeah.” Hanna smiles at her sister. “I got lucky.” And then she blinks back over to Zoe with wide-eyed remorse. “Not that I’m implying—” She grimaces. “I’m sorry. I don’t always know when to keep my mouth shut.”

It’s funny how often Zoe finds herself in the company of people who have that problem. “It’s fine, Hanna,” she says. “I suppose at this point

anyone who has glanced at a media outlet has heard about my brother's crimes."

"Sure." A smile tugs up only one corner of Hanna's mouth. "You're about ten times more interesting than Alexander Zuydervelt, though."

Zoe forgets how to swallow for a second, which is inconvenient since she's just taken a rather large sip of wine. "What could possibly have given you that impression?" she sputters.

Hanna watches her with that same unsettling focus Zoe is starting to think is typical for Hanna Kaplan. "Well," she says. "My sister has told me a couple of things about you."

Judith is finally settling down on the other couch. Zoe's eyes find hers, immediately suspicious. "Oh relax," Judith tells her. "I shared only the horrible stuff. Just the truly heinous anecdotes."

"Not sure I agree with you anyway, Hanna." Alma joins them, sliding down the back of the couch and folding herself around her girlfriend's body in a gymnastic maneuver Zoe thinks she may have seen in a modern dance performance once. "Say what you will about Xander, but at least he made for fascinating tabloid fodder. Zoe here is pretty dull, with that cloistered little crusade she has going to end the world's organ shortage."

Zoe frowns at her. "Thanks for making it sound like *I'm* the killer, there."

Alma blinks. "I'm not. I'm talking about the shiny new heart valves Austra Bio rolled out this year." She shoots Hanna a pointed look. "Zoe does look better than her brother in an evening gown, though."

Zoe successfully convinces herself she only imagined Hanna glancing down Zoe's body at that remark.

"Also," Alma says, "Sofia would like all of you to know she loves you very much, even though we're super ageist for not letting her stay up with us tonight."

Zoe smiles. She loves Sofia too, she thinks. As the diminutive version of her mother, she makes it impossible not to. Which, of course, doesn't mean Zoe hasn't been perfectly content staying on the sidelines of her life. When Alma first introduced Zoe to her bossy toddler, Sofia had not only taught her that pajama pants pair surprisingly well with layered tutus and paper crowns, but also that Zoe lacked all but the most distant echoes of a maternal instinct. "Isn't she supposed to be entering that sullen, silent teenager stage right about now?" she asks.

Alma shakes her head. “That’s what I keep hearing. Clearly I’m doing something wrong.”

“She’s a great kid,” Hanna says. “You must be dying of pride.”

“Thanks,” Alma says with an easy grin, “but I think I prefer Perla’s term *kvelling* over *dying*, these days, all things considered.”

“Shit.” Hanna flusters. “Right. Sorry. Obviously.”

“And please don’t let Sofia hear it. I’ve been informed it is ‘profoundly cringe.’”

Judith leans her head back onto her girlfriend’s chest and looks up at her. “You tell her often enough.”

Alma smiles back down at her, as soft as Zoe has ever seen her. “I try.”

“You’d better,” Zoe warns, and Alma answers her with a heavy look that reassures Zoe Alma will never repeat the mistakes their own mothers made.

So Alma really did choose a very excellent Cab, and Judith is never stingy with her pours. Zoe shouldn’t be surprised when the evening’s end finds her snuggled up tightly into the pillows of what is possibly the most comfortable couch in recorded history, her legs tucked under her body and covered by a soft quilted blanket. Her belly is full, her mind quieted by alcohol and her body warmed by the fireplace. The burning wood is cracking right along with her resolve to not overstay her welcome.

Hanna’s attention has been on Zoe pretty much nonstop since she arrived, so when Hanna seems fascinated by something on her phone instead, Zoe is almost shocked.

Alma has noticed, too. “Present company not interesting enough for you?” she nudges.

“No,” Hanna says without looking up. “I’m just seeing for myself whether Zoe really looks better in evening wear than Alexander does.”

Zoe guffaws at that, a full bark of startled laughter. She blames it on the Cabernet, this looseness in her chest. “So what’s your verdict?” she asks before she can think better of it. The wine has her cheeks and the tips of her ears burning already. Now is the perfect time to be bold.

Hanna glances at her, her eyes catching briefly somewhere around Zoe’s collarbones. “There is literally an article here,” she says, “called *Which Zuydervelt Wore It Better?*”

Judith dribbles a little bit of wine down her chin trying to laugh and swallow at the same time. Zoe just smiles knowingly and closes her eyes, nodding.

“Do they have Alexander in evening gowns?” Judith asks, wiping her chin.

Hanna holds out her phone to her sister, and then tugs it back, apparently having changed her mind. “I don’t actually know if I should show you,” she says, a funny little wrinkle of consternation appearing between her eyebrows. “You may just be too gay for this.”

Judith swats uselessly in the general direction of Hanna’s phone, until Hanna takes pity on her sister and hands it over. “Holy shi—shingles,” Judith exclaims, prompting a loud snort from Alma. “Zoe fu—uh . . . fun-loving Zuydervelt, are these three piece suits? Is that a *waistcoat?”*

Zoe just drinks deeply from her glass.

“Hold on to your hearts,” Alma says, taking Hanna’s phone. When Judith gasps at something she pulls up on her screen, Hanna abandons her armchair in favor of the armrest of the couch Alma and Judith are lounging on. “That, my babies,” Alma says, “is Zoe Zuydervelt wearing a bow tie.”

Judith makes a dramatic attempt at swooning that makes Zoe hope Judith never had any acting ambitions. Hanna’s eyes are glued to the screen of her phone, her face a picture of perfect wonder.

“So Hanna,” Zoe dares to drawl, surprising herself with the rich smooth tone the late hour and the long day have given her voice. “What do you say? Do I win?”

Hanna blinks very slowly, very deliberately back up at Zoe, long lashes bouncing off pink cheeks, as though she’s waking from a dream. She holds Zoe’s eyes for a beat. “I—I don’t know,” she says. Zoe is already smiling triumphantly when Hanna’s mouth curls around the words, “Your mom is pretty hot.”

Zoe winces. But there’s a bright side: it looks like she won’t need to murder her best friend, like she’d promised herself during the long drive up. Alma dies right there, of an acute case of hysterical laughter, and Judith will probably follow her into the grave.

“Is it too late to change my mind?” Alma howls. “Jude, I’m so, *so* sorry to do this, but Hanna, will you please marry me?”

“I guess that depends,” Hanna deadpans. “How good do *you* look in a suit?”

The jokes bounce back and forth between them for a while, their easy laughter never fading away entirely, and Zoe is warm and content and kind of never wants to get up off this couch again for the rest of her years. Who

needs a company or a career when she has these soft, perfectly arranged pillows?

“Cozy there, honey?” Alma asks her gently.

Zoe knows she’s close to dozing. She can feel the glow of the fire on her cheeks, the way her shoulders feel softer against the cushions than they do after she’s had a massage. “The house is gorgeous, Alma,” she says, blinking over at her with tired eyes. “I’m sorry I never visited before.”

“Not for my lack of trying to get you here.”

“Seven years she’s had the place,” Judith tells Hanna.

“Seven years of midsummer getaways and winter break invitations, and nothing.” Alma shakes her head.

“I like to work through the holidays,” Zoe protests weakly. “An empty office, free of interruptions or distractions. I also just—never understood the point of celebrating the seasons changing.”

“You wouldn’t believe it, listening to Ebenezer here,” Alma tells Hanna, “but getting the cabin was actually Zoe’s idea. We wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for her.”

Zoe remembers it well, the way her best friend had sailed into Zoe’s lab shortly after joining Zuydervelt Scientific’s financial department. It was a couple of days before Christmas, and Alma had mourned the loss of New England winters, crying about how she’d never get to build a snowman with Sofia again.

“I told you to take a holiday,” Zoe points out. “Instead you went and bought yourself a house.”

“I’m so glad you did,” Judith says. “It’s a miracle you ever leave this place.”

“Speaking of which,” Zoe says with a reluctant glance at her watch, “I should be heading out.”

Zoe rises along with the volume of their protests, escaping to the darkened hallway for a bathroom break before having to head back out into the cold. When she checks her makeup in the mirror, she’s surprised to find she’s smiling.

When she steps out of the bathroom, Alma is waiting for her in the hall. “Here you go,” she says, mystifyingly handing Zoe the quilted blanket Zoe had been snuggled up under on the couch. “This should keep you nice and warm tonight. Do you still sleep with two pillows?”

Zoe has taken the blanket from Alma before she fully understands what's happening. "I'm sorry," she says, "what's this?"

"Oh, did I forget to tell you?" Alma reappears with the pillows, shooting Zoe a look that tries very hard to look innocent. "You're staying with us tonight."

Zoe rolls her eyes. "Alma—"

But Alma is already climbing the stairs to the second floor landing, leaving Zoe standing at the bottom step, too dignified to call after her and too stubborn to follow her up.

Hanna appears at her shoulder, smiling serenely. "You don't snore, do you?" she asks, and before Zoe can process the question, or work out Hanna's reason for asking it, "It's fine, I mean, if you do. I'm a deep sleeper. And I can always use my earbuds—"

Alma's voice comes from upstairs, clear as a bell. "Zoe doesn't snore."

Hanna's eyes are dancing with mirth. Without breaking eye contact with Zoe—and exhibiting none of Zoe's reservations about yelling after Alma—she calls back, "And she doesn't, like, sleepwalk, or randomly stop breathing, right? Or insist on sleeping naked?"

Zoe would really appreciate it if they would stop talking about her and listen to what she's saying, instead. Also if Sofia could stop giggling from her bedroom, that would be great.

"I don't do any of that," Zoe claims, because even though she does at least that last one quite regularly, Hanna certainly doesn't need to know about it.

Hanna has the widest eyes Zoe has ever seen on an adult woman. "Never?" she asks. "Not even, like—wait. Are you a never-nude?"

Zoe huffs. "Honestly I don't see how it is any of your concern."

"Well, we'll be sleeping together." And while Zoe's brain does a hard reboot, Hanna brightly clarifies: "Didn't you hear? We're roomies!"

Hanna takes the quilt from Zoe's hands. Zoe just stares after her as she carries it briskly up the stairs.

Next up is Judith, apparently. She nudges Zoe's shoulder with her own and holds out her hand. "Give me the keys to the van."

Zoe scoffs. Surely Judith is still on her side in all of this. "Judith, I swear to god—"

Alma appears at the top of the stairs. "Zo."

"Come on," Judith insists, "I'll put it in the garage."

“Guys, I really can’t.”

Alma gives Zoe one of her—frankly unfair—mothering looks. “You’re going to drive back in the dark?” she asks. “In the snow?”

Judith adds, “While angling for a DUI?”

“No, of course not.” Zoe frowns. “That would be irresponsible. I’m getting a hotel room in town.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Alma has made up her mind, Zoe knows that tone. “The guest room has a perfectly comfortable and perfectly empty second bed.”

Sofia has appeared next to her mother at the top of the stairs. “Or,” she says, “if you don’t want to sleep with Hanna,” and Zoe takes a moment to die a little bit inside, “you can bunk with me!”

“I wouldn’t,” Judith mutters under her breath.

“Why are you up?” Alma asks Sofia, incredulous.

“Her room has an actual bunk bed,” Judith says.

“You’re all very loud,” Sofia states simply.

Judith shudders. “She gets these terrible, absolutely otherworldly evil sleep-farts.”

“You can have the bottom bunk!” Sofia calls out to Zoe, excited.

Zoe has one last, heartfelt protest left in her. “I refuse to intrude on your family vacation,” she sighs.

Alma smiles beatifically at that, knowing she’s won. “Guess what, asshole,” she says. “*You’re* my family, too.”

Zoe lets out the last bit of indignant air left in her lungs, clenching her jaw. “Fine.”

Hanna pops back up at Alma and Sofia’s side. “So are you bunking with this one,” she asks, pointing two unnecessarily long and flexible forefingers at Sofia, “or sharing with me?”

“I’ll opt for the latter,” Zoe tells her with a tired glance at Judith, who shudders again.

“Boo,” Sofia says, defeated. “See you in the morning then, asshole.”

Alma’s jaw drops. “Sofia! Language!”

Sofia gapes. “But you literally *just*—”

“Ya!” It’s the most maternal sound in Alma’s repertoire, and honestly, Zoe is relieved it wasn’t aimed at her. It’s followed by an exchange in Spanish too rapid-fire for Zoe to follow, though she’s pretty sure it’s Alma threatening to take her daughter’s phone that finally wins her the battle.



In the small upstairs bathroom, Zoe finds the obvious signs of Hanna having stayed here for a few days already. There's her electric toothbrush (Alma has handed Zoe a manual spare), a red tube of cinnamon-flavored toothpaste, floss and mouthwash, two packs of differently-sized toothpicks, and a Waterpik. It explains why Hanna's smile looks like the ones on the posters at her dental hygienist's office. Zoe wonders absently how many hair products Hanna must keep tucked away somewhere.

The pajamas Alma has handed her are almost as soft as the look she gives her whenever she believes Zoe is being too hard on herself. They also manage to somehow be both much too large *and* far too small for Zoe to wear with any sort of dignity. Alma's top fits Zoe not unlike a shift dress, long sleeves dangling down well beyond the tips of her fingers, while the waistband of the pants won't stretch beyond the first swell of her hips. Zoe opts out of the pants and rolls up her sleeves, and then she takes a breath, leaves the bathroom, and heads down the hall.

The guest room is cozy, but there's a bite of chill in the air. It's almost enough to make Zoe shiver when she glances at Hanna, whose attention is quite obviously no longer on the novel in her hands, but on Zoe's bare thighs, instead.

"Good book?" Zoe asks her pointedly.

The tips of Hanna's ears turn pink, but her eyes linger for an absolutely maddening second and a half longer before snapping up to meet Zoe's own. "Lovely," she hums, mouth twitching into something not quite a smile.

Zoe climbs into the other bed, feeling like she's all limbs, and the sheets are somewhere around minus five-hundred degrees. "Is it always this cold in here?" she demands, shivering and indignant, as if her plummeting mood is part of her autonomic nervous system response.

Hanna puts her book down. "You're cold?"

"You're *not?*"

Hanna's smile is lopsided. "I don't really get cold."

"Lucky you." Zoe is actively shivering now, goosebumps prickling at her arms and legs. They make her itchy. She kicks her legs out, stretches them, then pulls them back into her chest.

Hanna is looking at her again.

“I’m very uncomfortable,” Zoe says, by way of apology-slash-formal complaint.

“I imagine the thread count isn’t quite what you’re used to.” Hanna puts her book away and reaches for the chest at the foot of her bed. “Here.” She throws Zoe an extra blanket, which she accepts eagerly. “Though I’ve heard that whole thing was designed just to make high-end furniture stores more money.”

Zoe considers a dignified response to this and then blurts, forgetting about the cold for a minute, “Sounds like something a person who’s never actually experienced high-end bed sheets would say.”

Hanna lets out a short laugh, an unpolished, pleasant sound, as she slips fully under her own covers. “You know,” she says after a beat, “this is kind of nice. I haven’t had a sleepover since eighth grade.”

Zoe considers this. “I went to boarding school. My entire high school experience was one big sleepover.”

“My condolences.” Hanna’s eyes spark with something that is decidedly not the sympathy she pretends to offer.

“Well.” Zoe shrugs. “I *am* a lesbian,” she says. “So.”

Hanna’s whole face splits in half with the power of her smile. “Yeah?” She squints at her. “In that case, well done.”

“Thanks.”

Hanna is quiet for a moment. It stretches between them. “Still doesn’t seem like you got the true sleepover experience, though,” she says eventually. “If you want I can, like—braid your hair, or something.”

Zoe snorts, a horribly undignified sound she hopes never to make again in her life. “No thank you.”

“Probably for the best,” Hanna says, turning off the lamp on the bedside table with a decisive *snick*. “I should get some sleep. We’re going skiing tomorrow.”

Zoe can still make her out clearly, even with the lights off. “My condolences,” she quips.

Hanna smiles, but doesn’t open her eyes. “Not a fan, huh?”

“The Zuydervelts went to St. Moritz every year for Christmas until I turned sixteen,” Zoe laments. “Not a fan, no.”

“You must be good.”

Zoe has a low chuckle for that. “You would think, right? But you’d be wrong.”

Hanna hums. “I don’t believe you.”

“Are you asking for a demonstration?”

The answering smile in Hanna’s voice is exactly as warm and nearly as irresistible as the blanket she tossed Zoe. “Sign me up.”

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THREE

ZOE ZUYDERVELT IS FEARLESS.

As the CEO of a multinational biomedical tech company, she has destroyed men's careers—and occasionally their marriages—with little more than a single critical glance. She strikes billion dollar deals (after, fine, months of careful deliberation; Zoe may be brave but she's not a fool) with a bold-yet-graceful stroke of her favorite fountain pen. Zoe is a force to be reckoned with: someone who sees what needs to be done, and personally makes sure that it is.

Zoe Zuydervelt is also freezing, and she refuses to forgo another hour of sleep just because she doesn't want to risk waking up the woman in the bed next to hers.

Wincing at the stiffness in her shoulders, Zoe rolls over and glances blearily over at the woman in question. Hanna is sprawled belly-down in bed. Her face is turned away, her shoulders rising and falling in an enviably relaxed rhythm. She's an oblivious Cerberus to Zoe's Eurydice, the chest of extra blankets at the foot of her bed the only way for Zoe to escape her frigid torment. So she takes the type of breath she usually reserves for entering a hostile boardroom, pulls her quilted blanket around her shoulders and flings her body forward blindly, reaching the source of her salvation in two frantic, graceless hops.

The chest is empty.

So this is how it ends then, after all: with Zoe dying of hypothermia-induced sleep deprivation on the side of a mountain at the tragically young age of thirty-four. She spares a thought for the family of possums that will go hungry this spring, now that she will perish inside this icebox masquerading as a luxury chalet instead of at the side of the road, as originally intended.

Maybe Hanna can make a meal of her, instead.

Zoe can see her more clearly now. The pale light passing through the curtains casts a silver luster on the skin of her arms and shoulders, accentuating the sort of muscle definition Zoe has only ever seen on the flexing fuckboys at the company gym. It takes her an embarrassing amount of time to realize, with a kind of confusion that borders on rage, that Hanna has kicked her own covers down, her careless comfort forming an audacious contrast to Zoe's suffering.

Hanna is hot.

Right, *obviously,* but also—and much more pertinently—hot in the sense that she doesn't need the blankets she's so thoughtlessly cast aside. Hot in the sense that it wouldn't be a problem if Zoe took one for herself. Driven by the realization she can no longer feel her bare feet on the hardwood floor, Zoe grabs for the blanket Hanna has pushed down to her hips and tugs, internally high-fiving herself for finding such a tidy solution to her problem.

Before she can claim her bounty, however, the woman beneath it stirs.

"Zoe?" Hanna blinks up at her, mortifyingly awake, her eyes black in the low light of the room. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," Zoe whispers, embarrassed. "I was trying not to wake you. I'm just—so cold, and you're obviously not, and it didn't look like you'd mind if I—"

"If you climbed in with me? No, of course not," Hanna says, as if it isn't the most preposterous suggestion ever made.

What, Zoe tries, and probably *No, of course not, don't be ridiculous*, but her voice falters on a violent shiver. Her body has registered the heat rising from Hanna's own and is directing her toward it without her permission, goosebumps prickling up from the back of her neck to the tops of her toes.

"Come here." Hanna moves over to make room for her, looking like she's already half asleep again. All of her blankets are now tucked securely under one perfectly sculpted arm. Zoe bites her lip; first at the lost opportunity,

and then at the bizarre-yet-dangerously-tempting option of actually getting in beside her.

She's insane to even consider it, right? The thought alone is absurd.

Zoe gets in.

It's a move she instantly regrets.

Because what Zoe, in her half-frozen state, has failed to realize is that lying down in Hanna's bed means lying down in Hanna's *arms*. The twin is a snug fit for two grown women, especially when one of them has a set of unreasonably broad shoulders. Unless Zoe is okay with falling off the side of the bed as soon as one of them takes a deep breath, there is simply nowhere else for her to go. Zoe has chosen, for modesty's sake, to lie down on the side facing away from Hanna, letting out an involuntary sigh of relief at the touch of warm cotton against her skin. But then Hanna tucks her into her body, her chest pressed fully against Zoe's back, her ass fitting perfectly, shamelessly, in the cradle of Hanna's hips, and for a moment Zoe is convinced she can actually feel the ice melting in her bones.

"Gosh, you *are* freezing," Hanna murmurs groggily, warm against the top of Zoe's head. She still smells faintly of cinnamon. It's horrifyingly tender, being held like this, being *felt* like this, and Zoe fears she won't survive it.

Why, she laments, is Colorado so intent on bringing about her untimely end?

Hanna hooks her legs into Zoe's own, noses into her hair, and promptly starts snoring. Zoe doesn't know if she's in heaven or in hell, or exactly what she's done to deserve this, but she doesn't have time to wonder long before she too sinks down into blissful unconsciousness.

~

She wakes up in an empty bed, a reluctant streak of morning light squinting through a gap in the curtains. The room is somehow even colder now she's alone, and faced with the impossible task of throwing off the covers and exposing herself to the serious risk of developing frostbite on the way from the bed to the bathroom. But she steels herself, and is rewarded with the kind of euphoria only a hot shower with perfect water pressure can provide.

Zoe will have to make it through the rest of her life knowing the feeling doesn't hold a candle to the experience of falling asleep with Hanna Kaplan's body wrapped tightly around her own.

Zoe is an idiot.

She's a prepared idiot though, grateful for the emergency stash of skincare products she keeps in her purse. It's a leftover habit from when her mother would routinely make her cry in the middle of her workday. What Zoe failed to anticipate, however, was for her usually sleek dark hair—accustomed to silk pillow cases and carefully controlled humidity—to fly up like zero gravity in the Colorado winter static. She settles on keeping it semi-contained in a half-updo, after checking every drawer and cabinet and finding no scientific explanation for Hanna's Disney-princess waves. In the shower, as an absolute insult to Zoe's own meticulous haircare routine, she had found a single bottle of store-brand shampoo & conditioner *(Two in one? You have got to be fucking kidding me),* because that hair apparently just grows out of Hanna's head like that.

It's considerably warmer downstairs. Sofia has parked herself on the couch closest to the fire going in the hearth. Zoe is surprised to see she's watching a cartoon channel, still in her pajamas, her blankets and pillows piled as high as her shoulders. Zoe struggles with a brief but powerful urge to burrow in right alongside her. "'Morning, Sofia. Is your mom up yet?"

Sofia makes a noncommittal sound. "Was kind of a late night for them. They're probably still asleep."

Zoe glances at the time. There go her hopes of making it back to the airport before noon.

There's a loud, metallic clanking coming from the direction of the kitchen, along with the enticing scent of fresh coffee brewing. Zoe isn't sure how she's supposed to face Hanna, considering the unexpected intimacy of last night's sleeping arrangement, but. It's *coffee*.

"Hey roomie!"

Zoe barely stops herself from mirroring Hanna's blinding smile when Hanna's dumb, handsome head pops up from where she was crouched behind the counter, digging through the kitchen cabinets.

"Thought you'd be sleeping in," Hanna says genially. "You looked like you needed it."

"How flattering." Zoe is feeling overdressed in yesterday's blazer and pencil skirt, with Hanna looking so rested and relaxed in sweatpants and a sleeveless top. *Sweet god in heaven, the sight is even more dizzying in daylight.* Zoe wouldn't mind being conscious next time those arms are wrapped around her.

Fuck.

She has got to stop allowing Hanna into her personal space like this. Combined with last night's surreal transaction—perhaps not a fair term, considering it was exclusively for Zoe's benefit—Zoe is going to end up sending her the wrong message entirely. It seems like her own body has already misunderstood, judging by the way she can feel it leaning into Hanna's presence. It's embarrassing how effortlessly she's been charmed; a handful of friendly exchanges and one six-hour-long hug, and Zoe finds herself having very foolish thoughts.

It's disgraceful. She's going to call her therapist as soon as she gets back to LA.

"So," Hanna says, reaching across Zoe to grab a ladle from the rack by the coffee maker, "you like blueberry pancakes, right?"

Zoe smiles reflexively. "Well," she admits, "I am human."

"Oh good," Hanna says, sounding greatly relieved, "I wondered," and if Zoe didn't know any better she would swear Hanna's eyes linger on her collarbones again. Zoe shifts experimentally, tilting her shoulder as she leans back against the counter Hanna has claimed as her cooking surface, and watches as Hanna's eyeline shifts a subtle couple of inches lower.

Noted.

Sofia joins them in the kitchen, handing Hanna a gallon of milk. "Can you make some with chocolate chips as well?" she asks. "They're—"

"Jude's favorite! Yeah, of course!"

Hanna adds a generous amount of milk to the batter she has started. Sofia observes the process with a critical eye. "How are your animal shapes?" she inquires.

"Best in state," Hanna boasts.

Which is how Zoe finds out Hanna Kaplan is an outrageous liar, as well as a terrible cook.

Hanna's African elephant comes out looking more like the African continent. She also attempts a bear, which she then tries to pass off as a turtle, but even at her most forgiving, Zoe can't see anything beyond a sad-looking blob with blackened edges. When she takes a tentative bite, she discovers it tastes rather sad, as well.

It's an odd kind of relief, finally discovering a way in which Hanna Kaplan isn't perfect.

“See?” Hanna smiles, interpreting Zoe pausing her chewing as something indicating pleasure. “I told you they taste better than they look.”

Zoe swallows bravely. Tippy Zuydervelt may not have raised her daughter right, but she did instill in Zoe a crystal-clear and comprehensive set of manners that prevent her from emptying her mouth into the sink. “You did,” she says thoughtfully, “and you were wrong.” With Hanna looking comically devastated, Zoe continues, “Sofia, do we have any more eggs?”

Sofia sets them down in front of her a moment later. Zoe is already whisking away at a new batch of batter. “Salt, please.”

“I used a mix, you know,” Hanna tries to defend herself. She’s honest-to-god pouting, her bottom lip plump and indignant.

Zoe grins, not at all kindly. “You realize that only makes your failure to produce something edible more tragic, right?”

“Wait.” Hanna freezes. Then she asks, preposterously, “Are you edging me right now?”

Zoe stops whisking, stops moving, stops breathing. “Am I *what* now.”

Hanna huffs. “You are totally edging me! You know, that thing men do where they insult women so they’ll forget that they’re too good for them.”

Sofia giggles. “That’s negging. You know, from saying something negative?”

In perfect synchronicity, Hanna and Zoe turn to Sofia, worried. Zoe tries her best to be delicate and reassuring, but her voice wavers dangerously when she asks, “Sofia, sweetheart, did someone do that to you?”

Sofia shrugs. “Not really. Amá told me about it so I will recognize it if it happens, I guess,” she says. And then, brightly, “Have you guys ever had someone gaslight you?”

“Here,” Zoe evades, moving Sofia over to the griddle. She grabs a couple of smaller spoons and a set of chopsticks, arranging them as if she’s setting up a laboratory bench. “Let’s give this a whirl.”

Zoe may not have made an animal pancake before, but she does have an above average understanding of the way matter behaves under a broad range of circumstances. Becoming increasingly giddy and confident with each successful attempt, Zoe manages:

1. a perfect giraffe (complete with markings);

2. a unicorn with a beautifully textured mane; and, finally, as her pièce de résistance,
3. an almost fully anatomically correct T. rex skull.

Hanna smiles delightedly at the first, becomes speechless at the second, and guffaws at the third. “Now you’re just showing off.”

“Well, obviously.” Zoe shoots her a cheeky grin and watches as Hanna’s eyes land on her lips and linger there.

They set an untidy table, including plates for their absent hosts. Zoe is beginning to think Judith and Alma are familiar with Hanna’s cooking and have opted out of breakfast on purpose. She sits down at the table with a fragrant cup of coffee that may, on second thought, actually be a soup bowl, but whatever.

Sofia is marveling at the artistry that is her breakfast. “I don’t want to eat these.”

“More for me then,” Hanna says. And then, ignoring Sofia’s horrified expression, she swipes the unicorn off of Sofia’s plate and bites off its head.

Zoe can only watch Hanna’s face journey as she realizes her mistake. Zoe winces in sympathy as the burn registers, in spite of herself, in spite of the fact that Hanna is a barbarian with no respect for fine art or private property.

“Are you okay?” Sofia asks, truly worried.

The faces Hanna makes as she tries to minimize contact between her mouth and the angry pancake inside it *should* help make Zoe’s struggle with her ill-advised infatuation a little easier. Sofia slides over her cold glass of milk, and Hanna empties it right away. “Why did you let me do that?” she asks Zoe, like a child.

Zoe raises a cool eyebrow. “You didn’t consider the possibility that food fresh off the griddle might be hot?”

Hanna is pouting again, gingerly poking her fork at the beheaded unicorn she’s dropped on her plate, cutting off the tiniest bite and warily taking it into her mouth. “I don’t think you’re a very nice person.” But then she begins chewing, and her face lights up like a burst of sunlight breaking through clouds. “On an unrelated note,” she says reverently, “will you marry me?”

“I thought you got engaged to Alma last night.” Zoe jumps when Sofia lets out a loud squeak in response, making Hanna snort. “It’s a joke, sweetheart,” Zoe hurries to assure her. “Of course your mom—”

But Hanna and Sofia aren’t hearing her, sneaking meaningful smiles across the table. Zoe must be missing something.

Sofia’s cheeks are pink. “Are we telling her the secret?”

Hanna grins. “Obviously.”

The words burst from Sofia like long-held laughter. “Jude is going to ask amá to marry her.”

In the kitchen, the tap drips. Zoe realizes belatedly that it’s snowing again, or that maybe it never stopped.

Judith is going to propose to Alma.

Impossibly, Zoe finds herself blinking back tears, completely blindsided by Sofia’s announcement and the resulting heat that blooms in her throat. She’s thinking of Alma and Judith entwined on the couch last night, Alma looking down at her girlfriend with complete adoration. She’s thinking of the unwavering support Judith offered both Alma and Sofia all through Alma’s treatment, and how instrumental she had been in helping them build their new normal.

Hanna is watching her, an affectionate, knowing look on her face. “Come on,” she tells Sofia gently. “Hand me those chocolate chips. We’re not done here.” As she gets up from her chair, her warm hand lands on Zoe’s shoulder and squeezes. “Zoe’s going to teach us how to make those giraffes.”

When Zoe rejoins them, a long moment later, she surprises herself by pulling Sofia into an abrupt hug. It’s almost clumsy, but Sofia giggles, and Zoe breathes her happiness into the teenager’s hair. Zoe is sure now: she loves her. She loves all these women, and the family they make. She’s never felt it quite as acutely as she does right now.



Judith and Alma finally come out at the tail-end of Zoe’s impromptu pancake workshop. Judith is sporting the most impressive fiery-red bedhead Zoe has ever seen, and Alma is looking suspiciously pleased with herself. “Something smells good,” Judith remarks with surprise. *Definitely familiar with her sister’s cooking, then.*

“Looks even better,” Sofia says, holding up the T. rex she saved for Judith to admire.

Judith steps closer, stunned. “Okay, I know Hanna didn’t make this.”

Hanna, who has yet to produce a recognizable giraffe despite Zoe’s extensive tutoring, only mutters out a weak protest.

Alma likes her turtle best. “I didn’t know you could do this.”

Zoe smiles at her, feeling flattered and foolish. “Neither did I.”

“Of course.” Judith scoffs. “You know what, Zuydervelt, I often do not like you at all.”

“I understand the feeling,” Hanna jokes, but she’s looking right into Zoe’s eyes as she says it, and her expression indicates an altogether different stance.

Zoe isn’t sure whether she’s relieved or disappointed there’s no time left to further examine this strange pull between them. “Alright,” she announces, “that’s the sound of me having officially overstayed my welcome. Alma, Judith, I appreciate your hospitality and your unparalleled taste in wine. Get a space heater for the upstairs bedrooms. Sofia, it was lovely to see you as always. Please stop getting taller, I need my low-altitude buddy.”

Sofia begins to say something, but stops when Alma sends her a stern look for talking with her mouth full.

“I thought you were going to teach me how to ski!” Hanna protests.

“I made no such promises.”

“You said you were going to show me how bad you are at it.”

“That does sound like you,” Alma points out delicately.

“Right,” Zoe decides. “As wonderful as it’s been getting roasted by you all, I need to get myself to the airport before I lose my seat.”

“Been trying to tell you,” Sofia says, finally having made her way through a mouthful of pancake and strawberry jam, “they closed the pass because of the snow. They kept interrupting my show with updates on avalanche warnings.”

Zoe blanches. *Please let that be a joke.* She rushes over to the TV, finds a weather channel and unmutes.

“. . . pass closing just about four hours ago,” a reporter enunciates gravely. “State Patrol confirms multiple vehicles were trapped in that slide. There are no reports of any injuries yet. CDOT says they don’t know how long it will take to get the road open.”

Zoe massages her forehead, suddenly feeling the effects of last night's overindulgence. "You have *got* to be fucking kidding me."

Alma sucks her lips disapprovingly. "Language."

Well, this is just great. Zoe looks up at the ceiling and considers her options. *Private jet?* No, she's sent both of her pilots on leave to spend the holidays at home. *Rent a chopper?* Probably not with this relentless snowfall, and hardly feasible if she can't vet the companies and their employees first. "I'm never going to forgive you for this," she promises her best friend. "How long do these things usually last?"

Alma smiles placatingly at her chagrin. "Snow day?" she tries in an overly cheerful voice.

Hanna is dancing in the kitchen while putting their dishes away. "Sounds like our ski lesson is back on," she sings.

"Not with those avalanche warnings it's not," Judith argues.

Hanna shrugs and keeps dancing. "What's life without a little risk?"

"Stop talking," Zoe grouches. "I'm calling my assistant."

"Ooh, let me speak to her!" Alma skips over. "Linh owes me twenty bucks."

Zoe knows better than to ask. "Will do," she deadpans, "right after I inform her I'm being held hostage."

"Oh, don't!" Judith calls out, sounding genuinely concerned. "That poor girl. I think she's still traumatized from your last abduction."

Hanna freezes mid-Dougie and blinks slowly over at Zoe. "Your last—"

Alma helpfully clarifies, "Abduction. Kidnapping?"

Judith shrugs. "Never made sense to me to call it that when it's an adult that's been taken."

Hanna gawks at Zoe. Zoe gazes back calmly, her phone to her ear. "I think you might still be underestimating exactly how hated my family is," she tells Hanna.

Judith snorts. "Or how rich."

"True," Zoe allows, "that one time it was about the money, but—"

"That *one* time?" Hanna is yelling now. "How many times have there been?"

Zoe glares down at her phone, her shoulders tight with frustration. "I can't get a signal."

"Figures." Alma is looking out the window, where the gusty winter tableau Zoe previously thought picturesque now makes for a much more

malicious display. “You could try your luck at the library downtown,” Alma suggests. “They have a landline you can use, and their Wi-Fi tends to be pretty reliable too, even with inclement weather.”

Zoe’s practically out the door already. “Where are my keys?”

“You are not taking the minivan,” Judith rules. And at Zoe’s stunned silence, “No snow chains.”

“You’re shitting me,” Hanna says. “I know: ‘Language!’ I’m sorry. But how did they even allow you off the lot in Denver without snow chains?”

“And what is that smell?” Judith demands. “Is there a body in the back? I was afraid to check last night.”

Zoe seriously considers it. “You know, there might be. It *is* a rental.”

“I’ll drive you,” Hanna decides. “I actually have a quick errand to run, so it works out.”

Zoe says it before she realizes it. “Please tell me you forgot to bring hair products and need to stock up, too.”

Hanna’s eyes are wide and confused. “. . . No? I ran out of this one kind of floss I like—”

Zoe glares at her. “Of course.”

Hanna raises a hesitant hand to her own head. “Is there something wrong with my hair?”

“No,” Zoe spits as if she’s insulting her. “It’s perfect.”

Hanna preens under the compliment anyway.

Zoe shoots a deadly look at Alma’s delighted laughter. At least *someone* is entertained.

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FOUR

THE DRIVE INTO TOWN is short. It occurs to Zoe it's the first time she and Hanna have been alone since last night's encounter, and she finds herself intimidated into reticence, afraid of making things awkward. But Hanna doesn't seem to mind the quiet. Zoe admits it is kind of nice, after the constant clamor of a house full of friends. Hanna is a skillful, confident driver, even in these calamitous conditions, and Zoe is struck by how safe she feels with her behind the wheel.

The shopping area downtown is—and Zoe Zuydervelt doesn't use this word lightly—adorable.

"I mean, it looks like a movie set," she tells Hanna, exasperated, observing the fairy lights strung along the streets as she walks beside her, frowning at the Christmas villages that continue from one store's window display to the next. "People actually live like this?" It's an honest question, Zoe thinks. She's not just venting. The holidays are no more than a silly social construct. What is it about them that causes people to lose their minds?

Hanna is distracted, making faces at a tiny child ambling towards them with its parents. The child in question is wearing a Santa hat and a white scarf made to look like a beard. Zoe rolls her eyes. Hanna smiles at her, eyes sparkling with the reflection of the fairy lights. "Why are you so angry?"

Zoe deflates, feeling like a reprimanded child. She's not *angry*. It's just—"The lamp posts are wearing scarves, Hanna." It makes Zoe—whatever. *Impatient.*

"They do that in my old neighborhood, too," Hanna says. "At least I think they still do it. I had to kind of get that tradition started, but it really took off."

Zoe stares at her, incredulous. "You put scarves on lamp posts."

"Well, winter coats, mostly. They're a little more effective."

"Why would a lamp post—"

"They're for the homeless population," Hanna explains. "And for those who don't want to be seen or aren't allowed at Goodwill, anymore."

Oh. That's actually . . . "Oh."

"Yeah."

Zoe bites her lip, but ultimately can't resist. "This town has a large homeless population, then?"

Hanna rolls her eyes, but smiles while she does it. "No. Here it's mostly just to be ridiculous and have fun. Come on."

The library is actually pretty impressive, and Zoe notes it wouldn't be a bad place for her to get some actual work done. The Wi-Fi connection rivals the one at her office in both speed and reliability, and Zoe manages to send not just a quick word to her assistant (who immediately texts her back, telling her to **take a vacation you dick**), but also to answer a few of the more urgent emails she finds in her inbox. When she's done, she tracks down Hanna in the children's section, engrossed in a well-loved copy of *The Story of Ferdinand.*

They spot the faint glow of a Walgreens sign just down the street, and while Hanna goes on a search for her very particular brand of floss, Zoe fills up a basket with several unfamiliar brands of hair and body care products. Their prices inspire little confidence in their effectiveness, but they will have to do for the duration of her stay.

The clerk that rings them up is wearing a sweater that urges them to MAKE CHRISTMAS GREAT AGAIN. Zoe narrowly avoids punching him in the face, throwing aside her would-be purchases and making a run for it. Hanna seems to understand the impulse. She steps closer and gently nudges Zoe's shoulder with her own. It helps: Zoe breathes and eases down her temper. *Best not to make enemies of the locals,* she tells herself. God knows how long she'll be trapped in these mountains.

It’s a sobering thought. The idea alone of having to make it through even one more night of slowly freezing to death makes Zoe shiver instinctively.

Unless, her body suggests, the prickle of goosebumps on her skin evoking a powerful sense memory of the comfort she had found in Hanna’s bed.

Unless.

“I need to get some warmer clothes,” Zoe announces sharply. “Maybe a few scarves. Or some blankets.” Her tone betrays only a fraction of the panic spiking in her chest. “Do you want to go back to the library? It may be a while.” She makes a beeline for the nearest store with a mannequin in the window. Hanna rushes after her, perplexed.

It’s a self-defensive move, of course. Zoe *cannot* fall for the temptation of that warm embrace again.

The shop they’ve walked into is a tourist trap. There’s really no kinder way to put it. The smell of pine is so strong it bites, the lights are blinding. Zoe counts six Christmas trees in a single glance and almost reflexively turns on her heel, intending to walk right back out the door. But then she sees it: a sign advertising thermal underwear.

She has come to the right place. Not only will the atrocities on offer keep her warm, there’s also absolutely zero percent chance she’ll be feeling frisky while wearing them. “Sold,” she tells Hanna, grabbing a convenient three-pack. They’re printed with:

1. dancing Santas,
2. prancing reindeer and
3. candy canes.

The sight of them makes Zoe very, very irritable.

They’re perfect.

Hanna stops her from taking them straight to the register. “Aren’t you going to try them on?”

Zoe stares at her. “It’s underwear.”

Hanna still looks troubled. There’s a tiny divot right between her eyebrows, a scar from chickenpox maybe, and it twists into a charming little crease when she frowns. “But how will you know if they fit you correctly?”

“Hanna, I don’t care, it’s not like it’s a—”

“You girls need help with anything?”

Hanna twirls around at the saleswoman that has ambushed them. “Yes!” she states before Zoe can stop her. “My friend here isn’t quite sure what size she needs.”

You’re not my friend, Zoe almost says. *I have no idea what you are.*

“Oh! That’s not a problem. We can measure you real quick.”

“No no,” Zoe tries, “I don’t need—”

But apparently nobody in the entire state of Colorado cares about what Zoe Zuydervelt does or doesn’t need.

Zoe is used to having her clothing tailor-made. What she isn’t used to is having a complete stranger’s hands around her chest while Hanna watches with a broad grin on her face.

“Oh, yeah, for sure,” the saleswoman says. “We’re going to need to get you at least one size up.”

Zoe once again finds herself breathing through an intense episode of righteous indignation. “I hate you so much right now,” she tells Hanna tenderly as soon as the saleswoman walks away.

Hanna holds up a small stack of pajamas in a variety of colors and materials. A peace offering, it seems. “I found you some other options you might like better,” she says. “They look a little warmer to me.”

Warmer is good. Zoe would rather be charbroiled inside her own bed tonight than end up in Hanna’s again.

She feels ridiculous. She has known Hanna for less than twenty-four hours, and in that time has managed not only to sleep with her, but also to allow Hanna to knock her so thoroughly off-balance that she’s willingly enduring the indignity of undressing in front of a full-length mirror, bathed in lights one hundred times brighter than the sun and twice that unflattering, while squeezing herself into off-the-rack sleepwear.

One of the items Hanna has handed her is a one-piece. Zoe hardly would have given it a second glance if the fabric didn’t feel so impossibly soft between her fingers. But wait. *What—are those fucking antlers?*

“Is this—Hanna!” Zoe demands. “Did you just hand me a reindeer costume?”

“It’s not a costume,” Hanna says, sticking her head around the curtain without warning or apparent sense of propriety. “It’s a onesie!”

Zoe is too stunned to protect her modesty.

“Gosh, your skin is so pretty,” Hanna sighs, looking at her unselfconsciously and a little dazed. “It’s like mother-of-pearl.”

Zoe laughs. It's a bitter, sarcastic sound. "Striated and translucent?" she deflects, desperate to take Hanna's attention off of the feature she just tried to compliment, very aware it's rapidly flushing pink from her cheeks down to her chest.

Hanna's eyes are large and pleading. "Just try it on. You'll never want to take it off."

Zoe zips it up as Hanna watches her, and then faces the mirror along with the inconvenient truth that Hanna is not wrong. Zoe looks like a character from one of Sofia's cartoons, but never before has an article of clothing so successfully emulated the feeling of being hugged.

Hanna has the audacity to reach for the antlered hood and pull it over Zoe's head, as if her hair hasn't been terrorized enough. At Zoe's thoroughly unimpressed glare, Hanna lets out a delighted bark of laughter.

Zoe folds her arms in front of her chest. "I'm glad you find my suffering so hilarious."

Hanna looks dangerously pleased with herself. "But are you comfy?" she gloats.

Zoe strokes the soft fleece, trying not to look at Hanna's face. "Whatever. This had better not be some fetish thing, Hanna. I know what a furry is."

Hanna's smile is pure sunshine. "I promise you won't regret this."

Zoe hands her the three-pack of long underwear the saleswoman so impertinently exchanged for the ones Zoe had originally picked out. "Get these a size down for me?"

Hanna frowns. "I thought these were the right—"

Zoe waves her away. "They'll be baggy. I need something skin-tight."

Hanna blinks a few times at the adjective. "Well, I mean. Not to, like, person-who-is-used-to-colder-weather-splain to you? But it actually helps to have a bit of room between the fabric and your skin."

And Zoe knows this. She's a literal genius, okay? She understands the science. But, "The idea is that I'll be able to wear these under my regular clothes. I won't be walking around in a reindeer costume all day."

"Reindeer *onesie*," Hanna corrects her. "And that remains to be seen."

By the time Zoe finishes getting dressed, Hanna is at the register, swiping her credit card. Zoe is mortified.

"What are you doing?"

"Well." Hanna shrugs. "I figured, I didn't get you anything for the holidays, and we're friends now. Sisters, even!"

Zoe winces at the words, making sure to file them away for later. In case the added layers of clothing don't provide enough of a barrier between herself and another Very Dumb Idea.



After Zoe's ordeal at the tourist trap, their trip to the grocery store is a comparatively quick and painless affair. Even though Hanna is apparently one of those people that likes to go down each aisle and taste every single sample on offer, her hands tucked under her arms as if she's barely holding herself back from digging them into the open bags of seeds and grains.

She also insists Zoe try out the unforgivable degradation inflicted upon a perfectly fine bean Starbucks calls "pumpkin spice," after she discovers—with an honestly excessive outcry of surprise—that Zoe has never tried it before. "No wonder you hate the holidays," she says, practically in tears. "What is there to celebrate if you don't enjoy delicious seasonal treats?"

By the time they pull into Alma's garage, several hours have passed. It's still snowing. Zoe fears she may never get out of here. She may actually not even make it out of the car; when she tries to undo her seatbelt, the mechanism catches, and Zoe is trapped.

"Wait," Hanna says. "Can I just—?"

Before Zoe's brain is able to properly register what's happening, Hanna is leaning across her body. Her face is hovering in front of Zoe's, Hanna's mouth mere inches away from her own, when it finally sinks in.

Hanna is about to kiss her.

It's—a little abrupt? A little awkwardly timed, perhaps—but it's also alarmingly *welcome*, and Zoe finds herself unwilling to intervene. In a moment, Hanna's scent is all around her. With a distant twinge of dismay, Zoe realizes it's the sweet fragrance of the shampoo & conditioner combo she'd found in their shower this morning. Hanna is devastatingly close, her breath warm against Zoe's lips, and Zoe tilts her head slightly, her eyelids fluttering closed.

So this is happening.

It's embarrassing how ready Zoe is for her. Her lips have parted without her conscious intervention, and when Hanna murmurs "Is this okay?" and presses a deliciously firm hand into her thigh, Zoe's legs fall open, too. Hanna's touch is so *sure*, and Zoe feels it everywhere. She vividly recalls

the arm Hanna had slung over her body to keep her from tumbling out of bed; how it had grown increasingly more possessive as the night went on. Zoe's body wants exactly that, wants *more of that,* damn the consequences, damn the fact that Hanna manages to push buttons Zoe never even knew she had.

Zoe is eager to find out in which new ways Hanna will push her next.

"Got it!" Hanna whoops, nearly giving Zoe a heart attack. She realizes belatedly her seatbelt has released her, and then, that it was Hanna's doing.

Right.

Zoe practically throws herself from the car, getting as far away from the source of her mortification as quickly as she can.

Zoe Zuydervelt is going to die.

Hanna Kaplan is going to kill her.

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FIVE

ZOE ZUYDERVELT HAS RARELY witnessed a crueler thing than Hanna Kaplan taking off both her jacket and her sweater—leaving her only in that cursed sleeveless top—before gathering up all their grocery bags with an entirely too satisfied-sounding grunt and carrying them inside the house.

It's an excruciatingly casual show of strength and beauty. Hanna is briefly, perfectly framed by the warm yellow light pouring from the doorway where she pauses, somehow managing to balance all of her bags on one arm as she raises the other to touch her fingers to what Zoe now realizes isn't a home security device, but a small, new-looking white ceramic mezuzah. The light itself takes on an almost reverent quality. It turns Hanna's hair and skin a glinting gold, casting stark shadows into the dips between her more prominent muscles and highlighting the soft hair on her forearms. Zoe thinks she sees a faint dusting of freckles there.

But it's not as if—Zoe isn't watching her, or anything like that. Zoe is actually quite studiously *not* looking at Hanna as she follows her into the house, so Alma has no reason to quirk an eyebrow as if she's caught her doing exactly that. Or to saunter up to them, smiling like the cat who got the canary, and remark, "You two were out for a while. Did you decide to go and have fun without us?"

Zoe narrows her eyes at her friend, now flat-out suspicious. Alma blinks innocently back.

“We stopped to stock up.” Hanna has hopped up on the kitchen island. She’s digging into the grocery bags that surround her, looking like a child on Christmas morning. “You know, since we’re snowed in and all.”

“Did you buy out their entire inventory?” Alma demands, holding up a large tin of Iranian saffron in one hand and the box with the Bamix Gold Crown blender in the other. “This is a little excessive, even for you.”

Zoe delicately plucks the items from her hands. “You are aware I am a literal billionaire.”

Alma snorts at that. “Not for much longer. Not if you keep running those free clinics and funding every non-profit that asks.”

“Do you, really?” Hanna asks, her curious intensity entirely too much for Zoe to handle after the kind of day she’s had. Zoe needs those layers she so carefully picked out, but Hanna hasn’t given her the bags from the boutique since pronouncing them a gift.

“I assure you I’m a good while away from needing you to buy me clothes,” Zoe says dryly. She aims a pointed eyebrow at the bags in question, hoping Hanna can take a hint.

Alma’s eyes bounce between the both of them. She’s wearing the exact same expression she does on the nights Zoe will have a few too many drinks and attempt to explain to her best friend the intricate psycho-sociological model Zoe has constructed to prove that, deep down, Tippy Zuydervelt is right about Zoe’s character flaws and the ways in which she has failed both as a daughter and as a businesswoman. “You bought Zoe clothes?” Alma blinks.

Hanna shrugs, sniffing at a net of Jerusalem artichokes. “Just some underwear. Hey, are these truffles?”

Zoe observes sharply as Alma chokes on air, looking entirely too thrilled for someone who is unable to breathe.

Zoe is tired.

Alma is a little *shit.*

Hanna reaches behind her back, taking the brightly colored bags that contain the physical manifestation of Zoe’s latest coping mechanism and holding them out for Zoe to take. “They’re a gift,” she informs a still faintly wheezing Alma, as if that will clarify the matter.

Zoe holds out a hand to take them from her, but then she hesitates. “Are you sure there isn’t a tree somewhere you want to put these under?”

Why is she arguing? *Take your layers and run, Zoe.*

Sofia, previously unnoticed only because she's buried herself in her blanket nest by the fire again, calls out: "*Someone* decided we're not getting a tree this Christmas."

Alma clears her throat, having finally recovered. "Funny," she tells her daughter. "I distinctly remember yours being the deciding vote to celebrate Hanukkah this year, instead."

Judith appears out of nowhere just behind Zoe's shoulder, like the ninja she is, the skin around her brown eyes crinkling at the way it makes Zoe jump. "I told you we should do both," she tells Alma. "Sofia just saw a loophole where she wouldn't have to wait until the 25th to exchange gifts."

"Not true," Sofia argues. "I enjoyed the dreidel games, too."

"You certainly enjoyed my gelt," Hanna calls to her. And lower, to Zoe, "First time this kid plays, and she takes me for everything I'm worth."

Judith bites into an apple. Then she confesses, "I may have coached her on strategy and spinning techniques, just a teensy bit."

Hanna looks utterly betrayed. "I guess sibling loyalty means nothing anymore."

"Okay, look—"

Hanna holds up a stern hand to her sister, shaking her head sadly. "I will only hear your apology if it comes in the form of cheap, tinfoil-covered chocolate."

"I've got you, babe." Judith kisses her sister's cheek. "Day after Valentine's."

"You'd better." Hanna holds out the bags to Zoe again. "Happy belated Hanukkah. Or early Christmas. Whichever you prefer."

Zoe prefers padding her whole entire body against both the cold and Hanna's relentless charm. Still, manners. "I didn't get you anything," she points out.

Hanna sighs dramatically. "Awful," she says, leaning into Zoe's space conspiratorially, her closeness alarmingly reminiscent of the seatbelt incident earlier. "You have failed me as a friend."

Zoe's eyes land on Hanna's lips, the way they twitch and curve before they stretch into a smile. *I'm failing you much worse as a "sister"*, she thinks, but doesn't say. Not with Alma looking at them like she wants to forcibly shove their faces together and tell them to kiss.

Judith has started putting the groceries away, occasionally wrestling her sister for a couple of the more immediately edible items. "I don't think we

have enough room in the refrigerator to store all of this stuff."

"No way," Hanna says, jumping nimbly off the kitchen island and then, disastrously—with an appreciative pat on what Zoe supposes might be the sleek metal rump of the thing, if fridges had rumps— "look at the size of this beauty. It might be a tight fit, but I bet she can take it."

Zoe never thought she'd be able to pinpoint the exact moment her gray hair would begin to grow in.

"So," Hanna says brightly, "who else wants hot chocolate?"

Alma smiles like the devil nobody ever believes she can be. "Zoe is looking pretty thirsty."

Fuck it, Zoe decides. She doesn't need to subject herself to any more of this.



Zoe is upstairs, cursing the world while attempting to squeeze herself into one of those infernal sets of long underwear, questioning every single decision she's made in her life, particularly the ones that led her to board a plane to Colorado in the middle of fucking winter and somehow become inextricably entangled with Hanna Kaplan.

Much in the way she's now entangled in a piece of festive, unyielding underwear.

There's a knock on the bedroom door. Oh, she's respecting her privacy *now,* is she? "Hanna, I swear to god," Zoe calls out, "if you open that door, I'm charging you admittance. You've seen enough of me naked today."

"Oh really?" Alma asks, gliding into the room and making herself comfortable on Zoe's bed. She's brought a bag of mini marshmallows and pops a couple into her mouth, looking pleased with herself. "That's my girl. Moving fast! Good for you."

"Shut it, Valdes." Zoe has come too far in life to have her suffering serve as someone's entertainment. "It's your fault I had to get an entire winter wardrobe just to survive the arctic temperatures this bedroom reaches at night."

Alma hums, looking over at Hanna's bed. "Maybe you could push these two together," she gestures with her finger, "keep warm that way?"

Zoe pauses her current struggle with a stubborn sleeve to glare at her. "Stop it. I know what you're doing."

Alma laughs. “Oh thank god.” She looks Zoe up and down, appearing unimpressed by her efforts to willpower her way into an outfit Zoe will never admit may simply not have been made to fit her body. “You have no idea how exhausting it’s been, waiting for you two idiots to figure it out on your own.”

Zoe narrows her eyes at her. “Is the pass even closed? Or did you pull some strings at CDOT?”

Alma throws a marshmallow into the air and catches it neatly between her teeth before swallowing it. “The snowstorm was a happy coincidence,” she says. “I was going to sabotage your car.”

“Just out of curiosity,” Zoe says, “what exactly is your interest in this?”

At that, Alma gives her one of those looks Zoe really doesn’t like. “Honey, how long has it been?” she asks. “Since Lovis?”

Zoe goes rigid at the sound of her ex-girlfriend’s name. “You swore never to bring her up to me again,” she warns.

Alma drops it immediately. “Fine. But I think you need to get laid, and I happen to know first-hand—no pun intended, of course—that Kaplan women have some truly extraordinary abilities.” She has the audacity to make an attempt at jazz hands while she says it.

Zoe takes a calming breath. “Okay. One, you’re disgusting, and two, Hanna and Judith aren’t even genetically related—”

Alma furrows her brow. “I thought we agreed genetics don’t determine who we are.”

Zoe gives her a tired look. Alma is well aware those words don’t quite carry the same meaning they did when they were in grad school. Back then, they’d been a comfort to them both: Alma needed to believe that Sofia would be equally unencumbered by her father’s DNA as Alma was by her own mother’s, and Zoe was still trying to prove she was a true Zuydervelt, despite Tippy’s constant reminders that she’d never quite measure up.

Alma admits, as an afterthought, “I also have a lot of money riding on this.”

Zoe nods. “Linh.” Of course her assistant would be involved.

Alma hums in the affirmative. “Judith, too.”

Now *that* Zoe refuses to believe. “You’re telling me Judith is complicit in your plot to set me up with her sister?”

“No.” Alma snorts. “Obviously she’s with Linh. They’re both betting against you. Linh thinks you’re physically incapable of the kind of

loosening up that would be required, and Judith insists Hanna isn't your type."

Zoe has been looking around hoping to find a pair of scissors, or maybe a hydraulic rescue tool to help loosen this soft cotton torture device, but she clings to Judith's judgment like a drowning man. "She's right," she says. "What makes you think I even find Hanna attractive?"

Alma laughs at her. She actually throws her head back and pulls her knees into her chest and full-on cackles. "I'm sorry," she says, sobering a little at Zoe's pissed-off expression, "but honey, you're not fooling anyone but yourself."

Zoe catches a glimpse of the state she's in, courtesy of the small mirror by the door, and resumes her brave endeavor to wriggle a second leg into the strangling grip of the long underwear bottoms, which, Zoe now supposes, may just be Colorado's latest effort to end her life. "Whatever," she says, eloquent as always. "For your little self-serving set-up to work, you'd still need Hanna to actually be interested in me that way. And at this point, I'm not even convinced she likes women."

"Please," Alma says. "You've seen the way she looks at you. Which, who can blame her, right? Look at—" Alma takes in the sight of her, standing there looking like a sad sausage, half-clad in underwear obviously tailored to someone with the body shape of a piece of linguini. ". . . this present situation excluded," Alma amends, "you're fucking gorgeous. Hanna stares at you the same way she stares at Perla's banoffee pie. In what universe is that a woman who isn't interested in you?"

Zoe patiently waits for Alma to pour another handful of marshmallows into her mouth, biding her time until Alma is about to swallow. Then she adds, perfectly casual, "I spent the night in her bed. Kind of think she would have made a move then, if she wanted to."

Breaking her vow to pretend it never happened is worth it, just to watch Alma choke on corn syrup and gelatin.

Alma's eyes are wide as saucers. "You *what?*"

"Don't get too excited. She was asleep the entire time."

"No mames," Alma groans to herself. "Hanna, I was rooting for you."

"Anyway," Zoe decides, "Judith wins, and good. She needs the money more than you."

Alma looks appalled. "Jude's a heart surgeon!"

“And you’re the CFO of the company that owns the research hospital she works for.”

Alma goes oddly still. “It may very well all be hers soon, anyway,” she says, suddenly hushed, suddenly serious.

A chill takes hold of Zoe’s heart at the change in Alma’s energy. She sits down beside her on the bed, nervous. “Honey,” she says, “is there something I need to know?”

“I’m fine, I’m sorry,” Alma says, understanding in an instant where Zoe’s mind has gone. “My scans are still clean. All I have is like, a shit-ton of anxiety right now. And this . . . ring.”

From an inside pocket of her long cardigan, Alma has produced a black velvet box. She pops it open and stares, a little apprehensively, at the beautiful piece of jewelry inside. “I’ve been thinking of proposing to Jude before we return to LA,” she says, breathless, looking terrified, “and I need you to talk me out of it.”

Zoe Zuydervelt once beat her formerly-undefeated father in a celebrity poker tournament to raise funds for charity. She’s had to walk into a courtroom to testify against her once very favorite brother, knowing she would be putting him away for life. She’s even managed to smile graciously through an awards ceremony with her mother at her side, like the eagle to Zoe’s Prometheus, the cameras pointed at them holding Zoe in place as efficiently as shackles would as Tippy purposely pecked away at her self-confidence. But she will count this moment, right here—keeping her composure at the priceless revelation that her favorite-bully-slash-best-friend is going to be outplayed by her soon-to-be fiancée during her own marriage proposal—as her proudest accomplishment to date.

“Alma,” she says, kindly, just the right amount of pleased surprise in her voice, “you’re asking Judith to marry you? That’s wonderful!”

Alma is visibly spiraling. “Am I? Is it?”

Zoe is a little confused. “Are you?”

“I’m—I’m pretty sure. I mean, I might. I want to. But do you think I should? Is it a bad idea? Ay *no*, it is, isn’t it?”

Alma looks genuinely distressed, and Zoe instinctively shifts into supportive-best-friend mode. “Okay,” she says, “Just—to be clear. You’re asking me if proposing to the woman you love, affirming what has to be the most nauseatingly healthy relationship I have ever seen you in, is a bad idea?”

Alma looks younger and more timid than Zoe has ever seen her look before. ". . . Yes?"

Zoe blinks, gentling her tone. "Where is this coming from?"

Alma closes the ring box and tucks it back into her pocket. "It's *Judith*, Zo," she says. "She's amazing. I don't think I'll ever want anything more for myself than to spend the rest of my life with her."

Zoe wants to grab Alma and shake her, that's how happy she feels for the two of them. "So tell her that!"

Alma looks ashamed. "But that's a pretty shitty deal, isn't it? Considering I can't promise I'll still be around in like, three years? Or five? Or ten?" Her voice shakes on the last word, as if she's scared to even dream of thinking that far ahead.

But who can promise that, really?

"Alma." Zoe lays a soft hand on Alma's knee. "Your scans are clean."

Alma shakes her head, casting her eyes down. "It's not a guarantee. And what if Jude thinks this is all about Sofia? That I'm just setting her up to take over for me when . . . *if* it comes to that?"

Zoe thinks about it. And then she asks, maybe a little too forward, "*Is* that why you're proposing?"

"No." Alma takes a second. "Yes? It's part of it, if I'm being honest. But how could it not be? They adore each other. We're already a family. I feel like we were family from the moment they met."

Zoe can't deny that, even if it stings a little. When Alma first started chemo, Zoe had floundered trying to step into the role of caretaker, unused to being more than Sofia's indulgent-but-mostly-hands-off aunt. Judith had entered stage right by some divine miracle—or more specifically, via a chance encounter involving an understaffed night shift, a disconnected ECG lead, and a very pointless crash cart—and promptly captured the hearts of both Valdes women. Their growing relationship meant more than merely a welcome distraction; it had helped them envision a new life, a shared future. And even though Zoe had been relieved at the time, happy on their behalf, she'd also felt the pangs of a more familiar and far less pleasant feeling.

"I'm just not sure it's fair," Alma says, "to ask Jude for this big of a commitment."

Zoe sighs, taking one of Alma's slender hands in her own and giving it a firm squeeze. "That's not up to you," she says. "Judith deserves to make

that choice for herself. That's how this works: you ask the question, and she gives you an answer."

Alma is looking marginally more optimistic. "So you don't think I'm being selfish?"

"You're proposing, Alma!" Zoe wants to shake her for entirely different reasons now. "Stop acting like this wouldn't be a mutually beneficial arrangement. Judith adores the both of you. Here you are, talking about the way Hanna looks at me, *allegedly*, but have you seen the way Judith looks at you? Have you forgotten about everything you bring to the table?"

Alma blinks at her, and for a moment Zoe almost thinks her best friend is blushing. "God," Alma whispers, "I really may have gotten way too far into my head about this." She rakes a hand through her hair, looking relieved. "Thank you," she tells Zoe. "That helped." She sounds a little too surprised by it for Zoe to consider it strictly flattering.

Alma finally regards *Forbes* "30 Under 30" honoree, certified genius, billionaire business woman and triple Scorpio Zoe Zuydervelt clad top-to-bottom in pine-green long underwear adorned with snowflakes and tiny prancing reindeer. Alma's face is a picture of perfect childlike wonder when she asks, "What in god's name are you wearing?"

Zoe grits her teeth. "Armor."

~

By the time Zoe and Alma join the rest of them downstairs, Zoe has smoothed a new pair of sweatpants and a soft sweater over her thermal underwear. The initial discomfort of their restrictive fit has settled into a pleasantly warm, pleasantly corseted feeling, and Zoe feels vindicated.

Hanna is in the kitchen, piping whipped cream directly into Sofia's mouth. "Hey," Sofia sputters when she spots them settling down by the fireplace, "Aunt Zoe still hasn't tried your cookies!"

"Oh sweetie," Judith calls out to Sofia, "be sure to bring her a napkin too? We don't want to get crumbs everywhere."

Zoe blames catching the tail end of Judith's warning look only *after* she's taken a bite on the fact that Hanna is now casually gripping her own elbows above her head in the kitchen in a wholly-unnecessary stretch that puts entirely too much of her golden skin on display. For a moment, Zoe forgets

she lives in a universe where Hanna Kaplan can't be trusted with any combination of flour and sugar.

So *huh,* Zoe notes, the cookies *taste* a lot like Christmas sweaters, too; or at least what Zoe imagines a Christmas sweater might taste like, had it been doused in cinnamon and then baked in a hot oven for approximately seven hours. "Yummy," she manages for Sofia's benefit, trying her best to mold her mouth around the word without allowing any more of the dry (and somehow salty?) crumbs to touch her tongue.

When Sofia turns away, her attention on her phone, Zoe shoots a panicked look at Judith and Alma. Alma snorts indelicately. Judith already has her napkin handy for Zoe to empty her mouth into.

Fuck Mother's manners.

"I tried to warn you," Judith points out.

"Oh my god," Zoe heaves. "They're bad, right?"

Judith shudders. "So bad."

Zoe ventures a look at Hanna, huddled together with Sofia at the kitchen counter, happily munching on a cookie of her own while cooing at what Zoe assumes is a TikTok featuring some kind of baby animal. "How does Hanna make it look like they're the best thing she's ever tasted? God, the woman is a saint."

"Oh, no," Alma interjects, already cocky again, no trace of the anxiety Zoe had witnessed upstairs. "I'm pretty sure she genuinely likes them." Smugly, she adds, "That woman just loves to *eat.*"

Judith shoves a sharp elbow into Alma's ribs.

Alma giggles.

Zoe ignores them.

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SIX

NO ONE ARGUES WHEN Zoe announces she's cooking them dinner that night, but Zoe is a little disappointed when Sofia barely responds to Zoe's statement, blushing at her phone and angling it away when her mother becomes too interested in what she's doing. Zoe assumes she'll have to make do without a sous chef, until Hanna bounces over and asks, "How can I help?"

Hanna appears unreasonably excited at the prospect of food. *Any* food. Zoe notes with displeasure, as she ties her hair up in a more convenient bun, that the woman truly must have an oral fixation when she catches Hanna attempting to bite into a raw piece of turmeric root. She has the gall to look wounded when Zoe tells her to put it back where she found it.

Once Zoe sets her up at the cutting board, though, she also discovers Hanna takes instruction rather well. She slices and pares the peppers Zoe gives her quickly and confidently as Zoe sets a large pot of water to boil. Zoe can't stop sneaking glances at Hanna's hands as she works. They're elegant, but strong; broad palms, long fingers. Her nails are clean and clipped short.

Stop it, Zoe tells herself, aware Alma and Judith are watching them, talking too quietly for Zoe to understand. She says, in an effort to explain away her appreciation of Hanna's fingers, "You're a quick study. Did you and Judith help your mother out like this?"

Hanna blushes. “I’m actually not allowed in Perla’s kitchen anymore.”

Zoe laughs. “I have a feeling there’s a story there.”

“Nope,” Hanna says. “Nothing happened ever, at all.”

“Really? I guess I’ll have to ask your sister about it.”

“Please don’t.” Hanna looks so distraught that it takes all of Zoe’s presence of mind to keep from taking her handsome face into her hands and swear solemnly to never bring the matter up again.

She shows Hanna how to separate the eggs next. Then she watches serenely as Hanna runs a victory lap, collecting high fives from the others after her first successful attempt. When Hanna returns to her, she has a suspicious look on her face. “Why does that already smell so good?”

“Garlic and onions,” Zoe explains. “Effortlessly impressive.” The oven timer beeps. “Get those out and wrap them in tinfoil for me?”

As soon as Hanna gets her oven mitts around the fragrant dish, Zoe sees they’re going to have a problem. Eyeing the roasted peppers greedily, breathing in deep, Hanna asks, “Do I have to? Can I just eat them, instead?”

“Hanna,” Zoe warns.

With a swiftness Zoe is pretty sure defies the laws of physics, Hanna has already popped half a pepper into her mouth. And for the second time that day, Zoe can only watch as terror and regret register on Hanna’s reddening face.

Zoe fills a glass with water and hands it to her. “Is this something you’re going to do at every meal?” she asks. “Should I start keeping an oral ice pack handy?”

“I’m sorry,” Hanna mouths, looking properly embarrassed as she watches Zoe fold the foil around the dish, hiding the peppers from view. “They’re really good.”

“Watch these,” Zoe says. And then, with another warning glance, “And no touching until I tell you to.”

Hanna stands up straighter at that. “Yes ma’am.”

Zoe has already poured oil into a frying pan by the time something occurs to her. “I know your sister doesn’t keep kosher,” she says, “but do you have any restrictions that are different from hers? I can make some adjustments, if you do.”

Hanna squints her eyes at her in a sweet little smile that also scrunches her nose in a way that is almost maddeningly cute. “I would have said

something earlier," she assures her. "You're fine. No pork, no shellfish, that's it."

"Fresh pasta?" Zoe confirms. "Cheese in the sauce?"

"Yes and also please."

While the oil heats up, Zoe gently massages a little more pepper and salt into the steaks she'd set aside to marinate, before lowering them into the pan. "Keep an eye on these?"

There really is no need, Zoe assesses, for Hanna to pass behind her as closely as she does when they switch places. Zoe's body follows Hanna's excruciatingly slow progression with keen interest—the fleeting, almost phantom touch of hands on her hips; thighs brushing against her ass; breath tickling the hair at the back of her neck. Goosebumps race up Zoe's arms, covering her shoulders and her chest, and an almost aching warmth spreads behind her ribs before thumping down heavily between her legs.

Zoe barely manages to contain the shuddering sigh ready to spill out at the sensation. It's such a *move*, and it's infuriatingly effective, leaving Zoe practically swaying on her feet. If Hanna is paying attention, she can't possibly have missed the effect she's having on her now.

And if she is genuinely not trying to get into her pants, Zoe would greatly appreciate it if Hanna would stop seducing her.

With renewed resolve, Zoe uncovers the roasted peppers and begins peeling them. The repetitive motion requires attention and delicate control. Zoe finds it soothing.

Hanna regards her curiously from her place at the stove. "Why do you know how to do all of this?"

The question surprises her. "Why do I know how to cook?"

"Yeah. I mean." One corner of Hanna's mouth curls up in a cheeky half smile. "Rumor has it you're a billionaire. Don't you have people to do this for you?"

"I did," Zoe admits. "My family had this truly excellent chef the summer before I went to college." The words tumble out as if they've been waiting for an excuse to do so. "Sandrine was—kind. French, and the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, at sixteen. She always looked like she was dancing, the way she whirled around the kitchen. Like she was performing magic, and not just the culinary kind."

Zoe's heart is pounding, remembering her. She attempts to ground herself, feeling the knife in her hand, the wood surface of the cutting board,

the slippery, yielding texture of the peppers beneath her fingertips.

"She had this adorable four-year-old I'd see in pictures," she continues, "but Mother would never allow her to bring him by the house. I spent as much time with her in that kitchen as I could get away with. She told me I had a natural gift for cooking, that it was a shame I'd already chosen to go to MIT." She lowers the heat for the steaks and tilts her chin at the pan. "Could you add a chunk of butter and the rest of the garlic and baste those for me?"

Hanna does as she's told, moving the knife in upward increments until Zoe nods. "Sounds like someone had a crush," Hanna teases as she makes the cut.

Zoe knows she's blushing. "I hope not," she says. "In retrospect, I think I just wanted her to be my mom. She was patient with me. I cut myself once, a blunt knife, and she fussed over me for the better part of an hour."

Zoe doesn't know why the faded images suddenly appear so vividly. She's almost breathless at the memory of feeling seen, of being taken care of. Her eyes flicker over to Hanna's. She feels foolish, utterly unused to sharing like this.

But Hanna just regards her with open understanding. "My parents' accident happened a couple of weeks before Rosh Hashanah," she says, her voice soft. "I couldn't sleep, wouldn't eat. After the funeral, Perla suggested we try to make medivnyk together, for the holiday. It's this traditional honey bread from Ukraine—that's where my family is from. Perla and I spent days figuring out the exact recipe my mom must have used when she was still alive. The flavor . . ." She pauses, shaking her head, patiently scooping and pouring the melted butter. "I didn't come up for air until half of it was gone. And then I nearly fought Jude for the other half."

The wave of tenderness Zoe feels for the woman standing in front of her might drown her. "It was a taste of home," Zoe says, swallowing down the emotion in her voice. "I'm sure your sister understood."

Hanna smiles down at her, her expression alarmingly intimate, her gaze impossibly knowing. "Sure, that was part of it," she says. "But I think what really made it matter was feeling someone still cared enough to go to that kind of trouble for me. It made me feel . . . cherished."

"Yeah." Zoe nods. "Yeah, that's the thing, isn't it." For a moment, they're just looking at each other. Zoe feels oddly settled, until she remembers the steaks are ready to come out of the pan.

“So,” Hanna says as Zoe adds a last dash of pepper and sets them aside to rest. She winks. “Did your mother end up firing Sandrine to get rid of the competition?”

If only. Zoe grimaces. “Actually, a few weeks before I was due to leave for Cambridge, approaching autumn, I got sick. Just, intense headaches, fevers. Stomach cramps. Tippy—who is my *step*mother, technically, though our attorneys prefer I don’t talk about that—thought I was being dramatic. But then I developed this charming rash around my mouth, and her dermatologist suspected an allergy, and it turned out Sandrine had actually been poisoning me.”

Hanna’s face falls, and for a second, everything goes still. “Oh my god,” she gasps. “I’m—”

“Don’t,” Zoe says, already deeply regretting her silly little tangent. “It’s just one of those things that happen when you’re—well, *me*. It’s in the past.”

“Is it?” Hanna prods gingerly. “Do you know *why* she . . . ?”

Zoe shoots her a dark look, hoping Hanna can read minds so she doesn’t have to say the next part out loud.

“It’s okay,” Hanna course-corrects. “We can talk about something else. Tell me—tell me about turnips. What is the point of those? I’ve always wondered.”

Zoe’s body is swaying toward Hanna again, a warm, magnetized pull in her chest. “We never found out who hired her,” she says. “We suspected one of my father’s competitors for a while, but—Sandrine died, before she even made it to trial. And I never—” Stirring the pan is a ruse; the sauce requires no assistance melting the cheese. But Zoe has to look away from Hanna’s kind, patient gaze. “She never said.”

“I’m sorry,” Hanna says. She brings a hand to Zoe’s shoulder, sliding it gently down her arm. When she reaches the joint of Zoe’s wrist, she hesitates. Zoe wonders for a moment if Hanna is about to hold her hand. “I don’t even know how you would be able to trust someone again, after that.”

Zoe needs to physically take a step back in order to compose herself. *It’s too hot*, she thinks—the oven and the stove, her carefully assembled layers of clothing and their reciprocal compassion. Zoe feels like she’s melting from the inside out. “I just don’t like having other people handling my food, now,” she says with a shrug. “And I was lucky to get off without nearly any

lasting nerve damage. I had to put MIT off for a year to recover, but who wants to be a sixteen-year-old freshman anyway?"

Zoe becomes aware that she's smiling a tad manically, and hastily tucks it back in. "Sandrine's little boy was the only true victim," she insists. "I hope she was doing it for him, you know? That she intended to use her thirty pieces of silver to send Ludovic to college, to give him a good life. I don't know."

Judith has come up behind them, startling Zoe again. "Ludovic?" she asks, her nose wrinkling in distaste. "Are you guys talking about that legal intern Alma's always complaining about?"

Hanna's eyes find Zoe's with renewed intensity. Zoe is pinned by them. "That's not a very common name," Hanna notes.

Zoe blinks too quickly an obnoxious amount of times. *So much for that poker face.* "It may be more common than we think," she tries, very deliberately slanting her lashes down to the sauce simmering on the stove.

Alma has risen too, roused by the name of her adversary. She makes a show of popping her shoulders and knees as she joins them in the kitchen. "God, I can't stand that guy," she groans. "Too charming. Has everyone in that office fawning over him. And he definitely has someone pulling strings for him—the best schools, the top programs, prestigious internships. Boy does have some real talent, though. I wouldn't be surprised if he's the one running things in ten years."

Judith and Alma take over the conversation, collecting plates and glasses and setting the table. By the time Zoe is slicing the steak, Judith is bickering with both Valdes women about which playlist should serve as the soundtrack to their dinner. But Zoe still feels Hanna's eyes on her.

Taking advantage of a particularly loud outburst at the table, Hanna leans in close again. She says quietly, her lips almost brushing Zoe's ear, "You're a good person." Then she's gone, joining the others.

It takes Zoe several moments to shake the electrified rush she feels all over. Her heart is pounding again. It feels like it's taking up too much room inside her chest.

"This looks like something from *Top Chef,"* Sofia exclaims when Zoe sets her plate down in front of her.

Hanna's eyes have gone completely black. "Wow," she breathes as Zoe sits down beside her, "this smells amazi—"

“Stop.” Zoe manages to catch Hanna’s hand this time, a steaming ribbon of sauce-covered pasta dangling dangerously from her fork. Hanna looks at Zoe, the full force of her hungry gaze suddenly directed right at her, and, oh, *now* Zoe sees what Alma meant, maybe. “You’re going to burn yourself again,” Zoe says, her voice shaking hardly at all. “I want you to repeat what I say.”

Hanna blinks. “Okay?”

“I’m aware,” Zoe recites slowly, as if addressing a preschooler, “that this food is hot.”

Hanna’s eyes have a dangerously amused gleam to them. “Are you serious?”

“Repeat after me,” Zoe demands, a little more stern than strictly necessary.

“Hot food,” Hanna concedes. “Gotcha.”

Zoe glares at her, but allows it. “And I will be careful,” she continues, “no matter how good it looks.”

Hanna smirks. “I’ll be careful.”

Zoe tilts her chin at her. It’s a practiced move. “No matter how good it looks,” she warns.

Hanna’s eyes track the line of Zoe’s jaw, but she hasn’t stopped smirking. “You have a sadistic streak.”

Zoe drops Hanna’s hand as if she’s the one who’s been burned.

“You would think, right?” Alma says, leaning forward on her elbows, her dark eyes glinting. “But, interestingly—”

“Finish that sentence, Valdes, I dare you,” Zoe says, but Judith has it handled.

Zoe suffers through dinner, trying very hard to focus on the Christmas classics Sofia has picked out for them. They do nothing to block the downright pornographic sounds of satisfaction Hanna insists on making as she inhales her food.

Zoe is never cooking for her again.

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SEVEN

THE EVENING ENDS MUCH like the one before, with Sofia in bed and the rest of them scattered around the fire, drinking wine.

What's different tonight is Zoe feeling like her body has been set to a low simmer, a vivid, curling, restless kind of heat sitting low in the cradle of her hips, urging her to close the distance between Hanna and herself. They're sitting on opposite sides of the same couch—Alma having helpfully thrown them a single quilt to share—and Zoe can feel the warmth between their bodies blend and build in a powerfully pleasurable reminder of the night before. It has her hanging on to her armrest with the white-knuckled grip of an anxious flyer.

The Kaplan sisters are exchanging harmless barbs with Alma, their back-and-forth reading like a favorite game, familiar and fond. It occurs to Zoe this is the first opportunity she's had to watch Hanna without being watched in turn.

Had she been sober, Zoe would have followed a far more respectable scientific method to study the rare phenomenon that is Hanna Kaplan and the effect she has on her. But Alma really does have a very excellent taste in wine, so Zoe lazily reverts to the tried-and-true tactic of poking at the unfamiliar thing until she provokes some kind of response.

When Hanna announces her intentions to never leave this house, saying she could open her own bakery, Zoe laughs. "A bakery," she repeats.

“You’re kidding, right?”

The little crease between Hanna’s eyebrows deepens. “What do you mean?”

Zoe looks at her, tired. “Hanna. You’re a terrible chef.”

Hanna has the gall to look offended.

“She’s right, Hanna,” Judith concurs. “I love you, but I think it’s time we ban you from our kitchen, as well.”

“Unless Zoe needs you to give her a hand, of course,” Alma amends, trying (and, in Zoe’s personal opinion, failing) to make it sound suggestive.

“I haven’t even thought to ask,” Zoe says. “What *do* you do for a living?”

“That’s a boring question,” Hanna answers, surprising her. “We need to stop buying into the idea that someone’s occupation determines who they are as a person.”

“Let me guess,” Zoe says with a languid smirk. “You’re a writer.”

Hanna looks up at her with wide, desolate eyes. “Thanks a *lot*, Jude,” she sulks.

Judith’s face is a picture of perfect innocence. “I didn’t say anything!”

Alma laughs. “That was harsh, Zo, even for you.”

Zoe laughs too, delighted. But then a terrifying thought occurs to her. This almost irrepressible urge she’s been feeling to expose herself to Hanna—both literally and figuratively—is that a result of careful questioning? A conscious building of trust? Zoe bristles. *Is that what this is?*

“Are you a reporter?” she asks Hanna. It comes out sounding a little sharp, like a musical note that doesn’t hit quite the way it was intended.

“Oh, no, never,” Hanna assures her. She adds, with an easy smile, “I’m an English teacher.”

“*And* a novelist,” Alma says, sending Zoe a look of gentle reproach.

“Trying to be,” Hanna corrects.

“Which I honestly think is equally admirable,” Alma argues. “Most people don’t have the courage or the discipline to commit to their personal goals the way you have.”

“Yeah, well.” Hanna slouches a little, picking at a piece of lint on her sock. “It’s not exactly going the way I’d hoped.”

“Fortunately art is one of the few career paths where suffering may actually lead to something good,” Judith comforts her sister. “Whereas in my field, they torture us for absolutely no good reason.”

Alma gives Judith a fond look. “You know, the offer to bring you on board still stands.”

Zoe wholeheartedly agrees, now that her heart has had a chance to settle back down. “We’d be lucky to have you,” she tells Judith.

“Thanks,” Judith says, mirroring the soft smile on her girlfriend’s face. “But I like what I do.”

“For what it’s worth,” Zoe says, addressing Judith and Hanna both, “I couldn’t do it. Not either one of your jobs.”

Hanna gives her a dubious look. “You’re off growing organs made from human cells,” she counters, “but what, the sight of blood makes you faint?”

“Is there that much bloodshed involved in teaching?” Zoe asks, amused.

“You’d be surprised,” Hanna sighs.

“It’s mostly her own,” Judith clarifies.

“Reassuring.” Zoe winks at Hanna, unaware that she’s done it until Hanna’s cheeks flush pink.

Hanna doesn’t look away, though. In fact, in a near-cataclysmic move, she holds Zoe’s gaze as she tucks her bottom lip between her teeth and bites it.

Zoe clears her throat, dragging her eyes back to the older Kaplan sister for the sake of preserving her own overall health and sanity. “I’ve actually always thought the mechanics of cardiothoracic surgery would be quite enjoyable,” she tells Judith.

“But not the people,” Alma points out.

Zoe raises her glass to her best friend as if she’s making a toast. “Thank god the Zuydervelt empire comes with that convenient ivory tower.”

“Please tell me you’re not trying to say your highly stressful career is actually a crutch,” Hanna laughs, incredulous.

Zoe has a feeling she’s being baited, so her smile is a little bitter when she puts down her glass. “That’s me. Limping up the Fortune 500, slouching toward the top of my field.”

Alma chuckles. “An appropriately apocalyptic image.”

Hanna ignores her, pinning Zoe with her steady gaze. “You’re making it sound like you took the easy way out,” she tells her. “As if doing what you do isn’t incredibly challenging.”

Zoe considers that for a moment. “No. I suppose if I never left my comfort zone, Austra Biogenics would still be called Zuydervelt Scientific, and I’d be down in the basement labs, getting my hands dirty.”

From the corner of her eye, Zoe sees Alma making another attempt at jazz hands. Judith calmly covers them with her own and pushes them down, a long-suffering look on her face.

“But you’re not,” Hanna says. “You’re up here, calling the shots.”

“It’s not as if I had a choice,” Zoe says. “If I hadn’t stepped up, the board of directors would’ve just hired a fixer. Someone to keep the dividends high and ensure the illegal human trials my brother ran stayed buried.”

“The board respects you a whole lot more than they ever respected Xander,” Alma points out.

“‘Respect?’” Zoe’s brow furrows with deep skepticism. “They tolerate me, at best. And that’s just because I’m the only thing standing between them and a RICO indictment.”

“Please,” Alma says. “Our stock hasn’t looked this good since your father was still alive. We’re drowning in new talent applications, and Austra Bio and the FDA are on such good terms again they’re like, one step away from taking a pottery class together.”

“Uh, also, hang on a second,” Judith says, “Hanna, you have no idea how ridiculously awesome it is, what these guys are doing. Right now, heart transplants are a temporary fix. Zoe’s living implants will be an actual *cure.”*

Hanna’s eyes haven’t left Zoe’s face. “So you’re balancing the scales,” she gathers. “Picking up the pieces, putting them back better. Turning your company into a restorative force, instead.” She unfurls one long leg, nudging Zoe’s knee with her toes. Zoe can’t help but notice the lean outline of muscle flexing beneath the quilt. “Saving lives?” Hanna presses. “Come on, that’s huge. You should let yourself feel good about it.”

Zoe resents the way in which she is unable to get through one damn conversation with this woman without being completely thrown off-kilter. She’s flustered, and tries to hide it behind her glass, mumbling into her wine as she tells Hanna, “You’re making it sound like I’m some sort of saint.”

“Nah, you’re too well-dressed for that.” Hanna’s toes press into Zoe’s knee again. There’s a devastatingly fond glimmer to her smirk. “But I’ll give you mensch, which I think is actually a much higher bar.”

The sisters decide it’s time for popcorn after that, and since Hanna is no longer allowed in the kitchen without supervision they leave Alma and Zoe alone by the fire.

Alma waits until Judith and Hanna are out of earshot. Then she turns urgently toward Zoe and says, “If you don’t kiss that woman, I will.”



Zoe Zuydervelt has felt more sober.

She considers herself in the mirror as she brushes her teeth. Much of her hair has fallen from her bun, her lipstick no more than a distant memory. Her mascara has smudged into a lewd smokey eye, completing a look that, if she’s being completely honest? Zoe actually thinks is pretty fucking hot.

If this is what she was serving Hanna all night, then maybe—

Zoe spits, runs the faucet, and blots cold water on her face.

Hanna’s comment about them being like sisters earlier was brutal, but Zoe has to admit it wasn’t completely off the mark. Alma and Judith are engaged—even though they don’t know it yet—meaning Hanna really *is* part of her family, now. Zoe needs to shake whatever this sort of lustful vulnerability is that she’s been feeling around Hanna, because she can’t think of a mistake with more devastating consequences than hooking up with a woman in a short-lived frenzy of sexual infatuation and then having to spend every birthday, graduation, every *wedding*, *god*, avoiding her.

Maybe Hanna has already come to that conclusion herself. It would explain why she has done nothing to consciously instigate an escalation of what Zoe has to believe is a mutual attraction. Zoe has had Hanna’s attention—and even her hands—on her, and her brain and her body both are having a tremendously difficult time not interpreting that as romantic interest. But Hanna has given no indication she means to take it further than mere flirtation, and if Zoe tries to be sane about the situation for a second, she can see how that is the smart thing to do.

She opens the door to their shared bedroom carefully, hoping maybe Hanna is already asleep. But she’s awake, regarding Zoe expectantly as she walks into the room, as she makes her way over to the far side of it, as she climbs into her own bed, and turns off the light.

It’s quiet for a minute.

Then Hanna speaks up. “I feel like I’ve offended you again.”

Zoe frowns into the dark, frustrated with herself. “You haven’t, Hanna,” she says. “You’re—” She falters. *Lovely,* her brain suggests. *Clever. Kind.*

Fucking built like a Greek god. “You’re something else,” she decides, before reluctantly adding, “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Yeah,” Hanna says after a while. “I wasn’t expecting you, either.”

Zoe can’t go a moment longer without addressing at least part of the elephant in the room. “Thank you for—sharing, last night.” She winces at the awkward wording. “That was very generous.”

“I am,” Hanna says simply. “But it was my pleasure, truly.”

Zoe breathes through it, through this overwhelming need to just—bare all, to not leave it all unsaid like this. To just cross the distance between them like she had last night and lie down beside her, and have Hanna’s hands on her again.

But she knows so much better.

Zoe Zuydervelt is a certified genius.

She’s capable of making *one* fucking responsible choice.

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EIGHT

ZOE WATCHES AS THE bread rolls she prepared begin expanding in the oven. They're rising too fast, flowing into one another, a mountain of bread dough taking up the full sheet. What was she *thinking?* She watches as it presses up against the glass, starts to panic when it squeezes through the seams of the oven door until it bursts open and dough is spilling out all over the kitchen floor, fat and pale and glistening.

It won't stop rising. With horror, Zoe realizes it's going to envelop the whole house and everyone in it, and it's because of her one, stupid mistake.

There's only one thing to do: she's going to need to eat it all, before everyone finds out what she's done.

Zoe is shoving it down her throat without chewing, drawing it into herself until she feels ill. She's not fast enough, she can't keep up, and she can hear them coming; they're all going to know it was her, and no one will ever take Zoe Zuydervelt seriously again.

But it's only Hanna who walks into the kitchen. She looks at Zoe, and at the mess she's made. Then she grabs a handful, takes a big, happy bite, and smiles.

"Zoe." Hanna is pressing on her shoulder, but she's also pressing on her mind. It's very uncomfortable. "Zoe, shhh, you're okay."

With reluctant effort, Zoe blinks awake.

“You were having a nightmare,” Hanna says. “Breathe with me for a minute?”

Zoe realizes she’s hyperventilating, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. Hanna is on the floor next to Zoe’s bed, her hair a halo in the silver light coming through the window. It’s a cloudless night. Zoe wonders absently if that means she will actually be able to escape this town today.

“Hey.” Hanna’s hand squeezes around her shoulder, then moves to cradle her jaw. She tilts Zoe’s face until she’s caught her eyes, and Zoe sighs at the tenderness of her touch. “That’s it.” Hanna’s smile is grateful. “You’re fine.”

“I’m sorry,” Zoe says, eyeing the diffident goddess kneeling by her bed. “Did I startle you?”

Hanna shakes her head, looking relieved. A careful thumb strokes Zoe’s cheek, but as Zoe watches her, Hanna seems to become aware of what she’s doing and removes her hand.

Zoe realizes too late she’s leaning forward in an unconscious effort to prolong the touch, and disastrously, Hanna appears to have noticed it too.

Her hand hesitates.

Zoe is still a little drunk, but she’s never bought into the excuse that alcohol makes people act wildly out of character. Her mother has never had a drink too many and confessed to harboring warm feelings for her husband’s only daughter. None of the men Zoe does business with have gotten caught at strip clubs funding scholarships for the dancers—at least not without expecting something in return. No far-right member of the European parliament has ever gone on a hedonistic rampage through Brussels swearing drunken oaths to uphold equal rights for all.

So when Hanna asks her, all patient and kind, her hand still hovering so close Zoe can feel its warmth, “Do you want me to lie here with you for a minute?” Zoe can blame absolutely no one but herself when she says, after only a nanosecond of hesitation, “Please.”

The mattress dips below Hanna’s weight as she slides in between the sheets and stretches out next to her. Zoe doesn’t know where to put any of her limbs. Their knees knock together, and Zoe feels stiff trying to keep her body from careening into Hanna’s, unbalanced by what she can’t decide is simply gravity, or the ever-mounting magnetism between them.

A stray lock of hair has fallen over Zoe’s face. She’s afraid to move it, because that would very definitely mean having to move the arm that’s

currently wedged between Hanna's breast and her own. Hanna fixes it for her, her finger grazing the shell of her ear as she tucks the hair behind it. It's intimate and tender and Zoe feels it all over, but particularly in the hidden, humid places Hanna will never touch.

They're closer than they were last night, it seems, with Hanna in front of her. Zoe can see the freckles on her face, the divot between her eyebrows, the soft creases at the corners of her mouth. Hanna's eyes are on her, earnest and intent and ruinous to Zoe's presence of mind.

"You're shaking," Hanna mutters, the words tiny puffs of air against Zoe's lips. "Can I put my arms around you?"

Zoe nods, on some sort of misguided self-preservation instinct to get those inquisitive eyes off of her. Hanna folds herself carefully around Zoe, and for a moment she thinks she's okay. *This is fine.* She sends a prayer of thanks to whatever demon manufactured the thermal underwear she's wearing. It's uncomfortable, sure, but it would be about four hundred percent worse if she was being made to survive this moment with nothing but a few flimsy pieces of cotton separating them.

But then—with a smooth effortlessness Zoe fights very hard not to find alarmingly arousing—Hanna curls one strong arm around Zoe's back, gripping her waist with the other, and pulls her in until Zoe is laying half on top of her. One of Zoe's thighs ends up draped over Hanna's hip, connecting their lower bodies in a way that's deeply detrimental to Zoe's sanity.

Zoe lies very still, watching a few strands of the blonde, wavy hair that has tumbled over Hanna's shoulder move with the quick cadence of her breath. The low simmer of her body has been brought to a rolling boil. She's only a faint glimmer of modesty away from rolling her hips into the delicious firmness of the thigh that's wedged between them. She wonders if Hanna has noticed the heat between her legs; whether the slickness Zoe can feel there has managed to breach the barrier of all of those layers yet.

"What do you need?" Hanna asks, making matters infinitely worse. "How can I help?"

Now would usually be the time for Zoe to use one of the grounding exercises her therapist has taught her. But something tells her that mindful body awareness might actually, at this particular instance, be diametrically opposed to her wellbeing.

"Do you want to tell me about your nightmare?" Hanna asks. Her voice is a smooth, calming thing, a low rumble against Zoe's cheek that does

absolutely nothing to ease Zoe's predicament. "What was it about?"

Oh, Zoe thinks, remembering, relieved, *well, that might just do it.* "Bread," she says firmly, proud of herself.

Underneath her, Hanna tenses up as her breath catches in her chest. She's trying not to laugh. She doesn't quite manage, but Zoe appreciates the effort. She breathes out slowly as some of the tightness between her legs abates.

Hanna begins to say something, falters, then tries again. "Was it, um. Were you—"

"I was baking it," Zoe says. "And then, well." She deflates a little, realizing how deranged she must sound. "Eating it."

"Oh," Hanna says after a moment. "Mood?" The lilt of humor in her voice is less teasing, more warm. "I mean. Gluten, right? I hear you. So terrifying. So tasty."

Hanna squeezes Zoe closer on the final word. Zoe's mind can't decide if it's an unconscious move, but her body understands perfectly. The secure confinement of Hanna's hold strikes a familiar, lascivious chord low at the base of her spine, and Zoe is gone. Her body goes slack and pliant in response, and she barely manages to swallow the moan that results. She turns it into a hum she isn't a hundred percent confident could be interpreted as polite acquiescence.

It's silent for what feels like hours, Zoe listening only to the sound of her sanity slowly rubbing down until a mere handful of threads remain.

The hand Hanna has on Zoe's hip begins painting a debilitating pattern onto Zoe's skin. "I wonder if maybe . . ." Hanna stops, starts over. "I kind of want—" Then she falls silent.

Zoe is breathless, fearful, doomed. She feels like she's standing on a precipice, waiting for Hanna to form a fucking sentence. Her need is pulled taut like a string, waiting for the musician's hand. All she needs is a word, one gesture of acknowledgement that Hanna wants this, too.

". . . I don't want to be insensitive," Hanna says.

Zoe fists her hand into the fabric of Hanna's shirt. "Just tell me."

"I think maybe you already know." Hanna hesitates. "I feel like you're already mad at me for it."

Zoe sighs, watching it blow Hanna's hair against the strong line of her throat. "The only person I'm angry with is myself." She tries to raise up on

an elbow so she can see Hanna's face, but Hanna tightens her hold again at Zoe's words.

"Why?"

Zoe feels both brave and stupid when she says, bluntly, "Because I want it, too."

Hanna releases her hold, turning her head so abruptly Zoe feels dizzy. Hanna's eyes are large and hopeful as she looks at her, as she asks, "Do we have all of the ingredients?"

Zoe's thought process stumbles and halts. ". . . Par—pardon?"

"For fresh bread." Hanna's smile is blinding, even in the sparse light of the moon. "Do you think we could make some in the morning?"

Zoe blinks at her. She imagines she can hear the heavy bubble of sexual potential burst between them with the disappointed little pop of cheap gum.

A crazed, compulsive giggle tickles up in Zoe's chest. Because *of course* this is what happens. Zoe just doesn't understand how this is the second time in the two minutes she's known this woman that she has ended up entangled with her like this, the second time she's ended up making a complete fool of herself.

Zoe flies out of bed. She grabs the first piece of clothing she can find and begins tugging it on over her thermals, realizing belatedly and with a perfect absence of surprise that it's the reindeer onesie.

Of course.

Hanna sits up in bed, confused. "Wait—where are you going?"

Zoe zips up, pulls on a pair of socks and opens the door. "I'm going to bake some fucking bread."



Because Zoe is—*fine*—a masochist, she only does the initial mixing of ingredients before handing Hanna the task of kneading the dough. Before she gets started, Hanna pushes up the sleeves of the cardigan she's thrown on over her sleepwear, completely oblivious to the hungry look Zoe gives her forearms.

It's the altitude, Zoe decides, the unfamiliar change in atmospheric pressure that is causing this unprecedentedly quick ignition of her feelings for someone who is, in every way that counts, still a stranger. Under normal circumstances, her interest in Hanna would have halted at a reasonable

admiration of a beautiful human specimen. If Colorado would just, you know, let her *breathe*, Zoe wouldn't be dealing with this smoldering heat liquefying the very foundation of her.

She certainly would not be having to deploy new, creative methods to cope with this baffling fondness blossoming in her chest.

"Make sure you do it thoroughly," Zoe instructs with a disaffected air. "Really get in there." Then she finds the bottle of bourbon she'd stashed away after their grocery run yesterday and begins preparing two cocktails, taking her time caramelizing the sugar and charring the fruit as she watches Hanna work with blatant appreciation. Because fuck it, she's tired and horny and angry at herself, and too sober to deal with any of it.

Hanna is putting in her best effort, clearly excited at the prospect of fresh-baked bread. She's pushing into the dough with the full strength of her upper body, her shoulders rising and falling in a mesmerizing motion. She's digging in her thumbs, closing her fingers around it, bending and stretching it and then pushing down again.

Zoe allows herself some time to speculate what it would feel like to have Hanna handle *her* like that. As a result, Hanna is flushed with exertion by the time Zoe finally tells her she's done. "There," Hanna says brightly, before giving the pale rounded bun in front of her a flat-handed, resounding smack. It trembles at the punitive touch.

Zoe observes it all, aching and weary, one tired eyebrow raised. She observes, too, Hanna's hands as she runs water over them. They're strong but elegant, bones and tendons dancing beneath the skin. The water catches the low light of the kitchen, making her long fingers glisten. Zoe wants to put them in her mouth.

She hands Hanna a cocktail, instead.

Hanna sniffs at it, looking curious, then pleased. "Pretty. What is it?"

"It's an old fashioned. An old favorite."

Hanna smirks at her. "Do you smoke cigars, too?"

Zoe leans back against the counter and takes a sip. She holds Hanna's gaze as she says, "Rarely."

Hanna is still looking a little flushed. She blows an imaginary strand of hair from her face. "Smoking isn't very good for you."

Zoe would like to show Hanna exactly what it is that is good for her.

"I have my share of bad habits," she says, swirling her drink, watching the light play in the glass.

Hanna's lips twitch into that already-familiar half smile. "Like what?"

Zoe takes another sip, catching Hanna's eyes again. "I drink too much."

Hanna looks at Zoe's lips as she says it. Maybe she does feel guilty, having them both down here at four o'clock in the morning. "So what happens next?" she asks.

Zoe looks over at the dough she's covered with a towel, sitting in a bowl on the counter. "We wait," she says.

Hanna steps closer, and Zoe is sure she's going to reach for the bowl and take a bite the way she had in her dream. She's reaching out an arm to stop her before she realizes the bowl doesn't seem to be Hanna's destination at all. "What are we waiting for?" Hanna asks, crowding her, her hushed tone completely incongruous with what Zoe had believed to be the topic of their conversation.

Zoe's throat is dry as she watches Hanna reach out a hand to her and then stroke her fingers lightly down the length of Zoe's arm.

Hanna giggles. The cocktail must be getting to her. "You look so cuddly," she says. There's a high blush on her cheeks. It makes her look like one of those happy characters in a Hallmark movie, the kind where the love interests keep getting pushed together and pulled apart before they finally kiss.

Zoe can't relate.

"You have something in your teeth," Zoe gestures with her pinkie finger.

Hanna is penitent. "I guess you're not supposed to eat the orange slice," she says.

The dough rises as they move around each other, as they talk in low voices, careful not to wake the rest of the house. At one point, Hanna brings out a board game and teaches Zoe so well, so patiently and precisely, that Zoe beats her in their very first round.

Zoe is the one who shapes the rolls, measuring out fifteen even strands and knotting them neatly before setting them aside. Hanna has drifted into her space again, close enough to crowd her. "Give me some room to work, Hanna, god."

"I can't help it," Hanna says, stroking the fabric over Zoe's lower back this time. Hanna's eyes have lost their watchful apprehension. They're still alert, but there's a guilelessness there now, something that makes her blink more slowly. Her gaze is heavier as it lands on Zoe's lashes, as it tumbles down to her mouth and then to the collarbones that are only partially

obscured by Zoe's long underwear. "You're like a grumpy teddy bear," Hanna says. "It just makes me want to touch you."

In one of the empty tumblers on the counter, the ice clinks as it melts down. Zoe shivers.

"Are you cold?" Hanna asks immediately. "How much longer do those need to rise? We can lie down in bed for a while, if you want. You know, to keep warm."

She's reaching for her again, and this time Zoe's lust-muddled mind almost manages to convince the rational parts of her there's a different kind of purpose behind it. She has some idea of what she must look like, barefaced and sleepless, her hair the kind of chaos that would make Helena Bonham Carter proud, drinking bourbon in someone else's kitchen at six o'clock in the morning while dressed as a stuffed animal. But Hanna is looking at her the way she does when there is delicious food in front of her. Her voice is well-worn leather and silk when she says, "I think we could probably—"

"*What* is happening here?" Judith's voice sounds out, booming and bright in the hushed half-light that has characterized their night as it crept slowly into morning. "Why are you people up?"

Zoe screams.

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NINE

ZOE ZUYDERVELT HAS FOUGHT more than her fair share of battles. She's a woman in a man's world. The last living principled member of the Zuydervelt family, and a bastard to boot. On Saturday mornings, she fights her entire musculoskeletal system trying to master the arabesque in her cardio ballet class. She does not give up, and—unless it's under a *very* specific set of circumstances—she does not surrender.

But leave it to Colorado to finally bring her to her knees in a most unenjoyable way.

Zoe's been battling her long underwear for twenty minutes when she finally accepts she's not going to be able to escape its confines by herself. And since she's in dire need of a (cold) shower, she has no choice but to do that thing she always has been too proud to do, that hellish curse of the human condition that is asking for help.

SOS, she texts Alma. **Wardrobe emergency. Bring power tools.**

There's a knock on the bathroom door not a minute later, and Zoe opens it gratefully just as a text message pops up on her screen.

It's from Alma.

Hanna is standing in the doorway, holding a pair of scissors.

You're welcome, Alma's message says.

Zoe may not have thought this through.

“Top or bottom first?” Hanna says, cheerfully snipping the scissors in the air.

“. . . No,” Zoe manages.

“C’mon,” Hanna insists, stepping inside and closing the door behind her. “It looks like you’re wearing, like, a straitjacket or something.”

Zoe has one hand outstretched in front of her, maintaining the distance between them in the close quarters of the bathroom. “I’m just—” She clenches her jaw. “I’m going to go ahead and convert to Mormonism, I think.”

“Turn around,” Hanna says. “I’ll be gentle.”

It’s such a simple, self-assured command that Zoe has obeyed it before she’s made a conscious decision to. And it’s not fair, because when Hanna hooks her thumbs under the hem of her shirt and starts sliding it up Zoe’s frame, it’s effortless; it’s actually almost fucking smooth.

For a minute she almost wishes Hanna had used the scissors instead. The feeling of cold metal against her overheated skin would have been easier to handle than the feeling of Hanna’s fingers sliding boldly up her waist, stroking over her ribs, brushing the sensitive skin under her arms. The top slides over her chest like it’s easy, the sleeves peeling off her arms like silk until Zoe is finally, blissfully free, and the way Hanna smiles at her in the mirror, that cocky tug at the left corner of her mouth, it’s really—*it’s all just very annoying, okay?* And Zoe is not going to indulge it.

Hanna is shamelessly ogling Zoe’s chest. “You sleep in a bra?” she asks with obvious disapproval.

Zoe huffs and grabs a towel to cover herself. “I was literally unable to take it off, Hanna.”

“Whatever,” Hanna says. “I’m still unconvinced about this never-nude thing.”

Zoe folds her arms and waits for her to leave, but Hanna just looks at her, her attention slowly drifting south again.

“So do you need help getting out of your pants, or—?”

Zoe opens the bathroom door and pushes Hanna out. “I can handle it from here,” she says. “*Thanks.*”

Judith agrees wordlessly when Zoe tells her, still damp-haired and wrapped in four layers of clothing and two blankets, to drive her down to the library so she can work.

Judith is as capable a driver as her sister is, but where Hanna's hands had rested loosely on the wheel, happily pointing out particularly gorgeous views, Judith keeps hers firmly at nine and three, her eyes on the road, sharply vigilant. "Sorry I scared you this morning," she says.

Zoe snorts. "No you're not."

"No, I'm not." A tiny smile pinches at the corners of Judith's mouth. "It's just fun to see you ruffled."

If that's true, Judith must be having the time of her life this week. "Alma is a bad influence on you," Zoe informs her.

"She's a turd," Judith readily agrees. "I can't believe you're her friend."

Zoe turns her head to regard Judith fully. She raises one eyebrow and says, "You're the one who's marrying her."

Judith laughs, looking surprised more at the sound she just made than at Zoe's words. "Sofia wasn't supposed to tell you that."

"Oh, it wasn't easy, getting it out of her," Zoe fibs. "I had to use some truly terrifying interrogation techni—"

"She blabbed the second she saw you, didn't she."

Zoe hums. "First chance she got, yup."

Judith shakes her head, untroubled. "That girl has no chill."

"Stick around," Zoe says smoothly. "Some of your cool is bound to rub off on her."

Judith looks pleased. "I intend to."

Zoe tries to sound a normal amount of interested, not at all like she's looking for a way to get back at her best friend as she asks, "So do you have a ring for her yet?"

Judith laughs again, a short airy sound. "Uh, yeah. I don't want to leave it at home where Alma might find it, but it's doing a number on my nerves taking it everywhere. I'm terrified I'll lose it."

"You could always give it to Sofia for safekeeping," Zoe teases.

Judith interrupts her steady gaze on the road to give Zoe a skeptical look.

Zoe looks out at the snowy mountains surrounding them. "Or I could hang on to it for you," she suggests, carefully casual. "If it would make you feel better."

“Zoe Zuydervelt.” Judith sounds scandalized. “Are you angling to be my best man?”

“I figured that position had been filled.”

“Oh, Hanna can’t decide whether she wants best man or maid of honor. She may actually be grateful if you break the tie.”

Zoe pulls her hair over her shoulder, displeased to find it frizzy as it often will be when she allows it to air-dry. “I can take the ring back to LA with me,” she suggests. “You could just give me a call when it’s time, and I’ll send a courier.”

Judith is quiet for a moment. Then she says, “I actually hope to do it before we head home. Like, maybe—maybe Christmas Eve? Sofia mentioned this ‘tiniest present under the tree’ idea that sounded, I don’t know.” She shrugs. “Kind of sweet, I guess?”

Zoe smiles to herself as a plan begins to hatch. “Sure,” she says, keeping her tone carefully neutral. “If that’s what you think is best.”

Judith’s shoulders sink. “Alma’s gonna hate it.”

Zoe hums. “She’ll be fine.”

“You’re so full of shit, Zuydervelt.”

“No, it does sound romantic,” Zoe lies. “But a little . . . domestic, maybe?”

Judith rolls her eyes at her. “You think I can do better.”

“I mean.” Zoe winces as if she feels bad for overstepping. “When’s the last time you had a night out together, just the two of you? Candlelight, live music, and dancing, and no doing dishes after dessert?”

Judith huffs. “This thing is terrifying enough without an audience. Dining downtown isn’t exactly private.”

Oh, Zoe relishes, *this is going to work out perfectly.* “How about you let me take care of that for you?”

Judith’s fingers flex around the steering wheel as she considers the offer. “Okay,” she says at last, exactly as Zoe expected. “Yeah. Yes. I mean—thank you. I appreciate that.”

“You’re welcome,” Zoe says graciously. And then, after a moment, “I really am happy for you two, you know.”

It might be the first time Zoe has ever seen Judith blush. “Well,” she says. “Let’s see if she says yes, first.”

“You know she will.”

Judith’s smile is blinding. “I do.”

Zoe is still wondering about one last thing, however. “Your sister sure is —something,” she fishes. “Very . . . friendly.”

Judith’s eyes shift to her briefly, but she fixes them firmly on the road again.

“Very enthusiastic,” Zoe presses.

“Oh,” Judith says. “Yeah,” she adds. “*Psh,*” as a very important modifier. She takes a few seconds, and then comes up with, “She always has been, you know, like that. With everyone.” There are her eyes again, checking if her words are having the intended effect.

Zoe just watches her flail, enjoying herself in an only mildly nefarious manner.

“It confuses people sometimes,” Judith continues when she doesn’t get the desired response. “They’ll be like, ‘Are you into me?’ And Hanna will be all clueless and innocent, like ‘Haha, um, no?’”

Judith is beginning to sound a little hysterical. Zoe deduces Alma has not informed her girlfriend that Zoe is aware of their bet. *A turd, indeed.*

Judith parks her car behind the library. She opens the door for her as Zoe grabs her laptop and her briefcase, but she hovers awkwardly by the car after Zoe gets out, both blankets trailing behind her like a train. Judith digs her hands deep into her pockets. “Will you be okay here for a couple of hours?”

Zoe waves her off. “Go home. Have Alma pick me up by sundown. I’ll make us dinner again.”

“Sweet.”



The library is empty except for the woman at the information desk. Zoe allows herself to be led to a cubicle covered in college recruitment posters, pictures of smiling students covering the walls. She sets up her laptop, spreads out the files Alma so inconveniently borrowed, and pulls out her phone.

Linh Hùng picks up on the very first ring. “You’re fired,” Zoe greets her.

“Good morning to you too.” Linh is slightly pixelated, but her voice comes through clear. She’s not wearing her glasses, and her hair is down. Squinting at her phone screen, she says, “I see your vacation is going well. Are you at a dentist’s office?”

“Stop pretending we’re friends,” Zoe tells her. “I know what you did. I’m never speaking to you again.”

“Could you start now?” Linh inquires, yawning discreetly. “It’s 7 a.m., and since I’m a recent member of the unemployed masses, I’d really like to go back to sleep.”

Zoe ignores her. “I want in on that little bet you and Alma and Judith have going.”

Linh’s poker face is actually impressive. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“What are you betting on, exactly?” Zoe wonders out loud. “Alma said you already owe her money. Is it *whether* I’d be hooking up with Judith’s baby sister, or *when?”*

Linh makes a face. “You make it sound so distasteful.”

“Oh no,” Zoe says. “Betting on your boss’s sex life is totally above board.”

“The bet is off,” Linh decides. “The subject has become self-aware. As a woman of science, you should know that means it’s time to terminate.”

Zoe is clenching her jaw again. “Try telling Alma that,” she says. “But fine. I propose a new bet. And not a word to Alma *or* Judith.”

Linh is suddenly looking very much awake. “Let’s hear it.”

~

Zoe’s biggest hurdle in getting work done turns out to be the fact most of her messages are answered by automated out-of-office replies. By the time noon rolls around, she isn’t just most of the way through the work she had figured would take her the entire day; she’s also starving. She’s yearning for one of the bread rolls she left at the house, but knowing Hanna’s insatiable appetite, they’re likely gone by now.

By some kind of miracle, Alma shows up with a bright smile and a bag in her hand that mentions both bagels and beans in a creative crest, and Zoe needs both, *right now, very much, thank you.*

Alma stares at her until she’s taken her first bite. Then she points out, “You left early, this morning.”

“I had a lot of work to do,” Zoe says with a mouth full of bacon and rye.

Alma scoffs. “That’s a lie.”

Zoe wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, because she's sophisticated like that. "Not everyone celebrates Christmas, Alma."

"You're telling me," Alma says. "But most of the rich white jackasses Austra Bio does business with, do."

"You're aware the whole reason I drove up here was to make sure I could prepare myself for that meeting I have Thursday," Zoe reminds her.

"Right," Alma says. "So you fleeing the house couldn't possibly have anything to do with the younger Kaplan sister."

"Mmhm," Zoe hums. "Or with the fact you sent her upstairs to undress me this morning."

"You're the most stubborn person I have ever met," Alma says fondly.

"And you're the dumbest," Zoe counters. "I don't see how you could think this setup was a good idea."

Alma gives her the stern look she usually saves for when she's making Zoe tell her what manner of vitriol Tippy dumped on her this time during her quarterly phone call. "I told you two years ago the two of you would get on like a fucking distillery on fire," she says, "but you were too mired in your own misery to let me introduce you. So I think what you are trying to say, Zoe Zuydervelt, is *thank you*, Alma Valdes, for your tenacity and determination and for being such an incredible, good-looking friend."

Zoe narrows her eyes at her. "What do you mean, two years ago?"

Alma blinks. "Yeah," she says thoughtfully, "you may have been drinking bourbon that time, too."

And then it occurs to her, the way Alma brought up Judith's "bicurious" sister one drunken night, shortly after Lovis betrayed her, and Zoe had bewailed her ability to bring out the worst in people and how she would never find the kind of connection Alma and Judith had.

"You suggested setting us up," Zoe says, mortified. "I think you actually told me to go," she raises her hands in disgusted air quotes, "'pop her girl-on-girl *cherry.*'"

"I'm a dick, I know," Alma admits graciously. "Also it's come to my attention that cherry has definitely already been popped, so to speak."

"Stop talking," Zoe snarls, pushing her hand into Alma's face. "You're revolting."

Zoe admits there may be a small chance she's projecting, considering the circumstances. Even in the throes of drunken heartbreak, two years ago, she

had understood how bad of an idea it would be to hook up with the sister of the woman who was quickly shaping up to become Alma's One True Love.

If only wisdom came with age.

Zoe drops her head in her hands and groans. "You've been sitting on this terrible, stupid, absolutely atrocious idea for two years."

Alma's eyes and teeth are glinting with glee. "Imagine how much I've looked forward to the moment the two of you would finally meet."

"I hate you."

"You like her."

"She's ridiculous."

"But hot, right?"

Zoe slides down further in her seat, her forehead thumping gently against the desk. "She's delectable," she breathes, defeated.

"Hey, dummy," Alma says, leaning forward so their heads are pressed together. "'Tis the season. What are you waiting for? Strike the harp. Join the chorus."

Zoe huffs at the lascivious pitch of Alma's voice. "Do you think the original version of that song had a verse about hooking up with people you'll have no chance of avoiding for the rest of your life?"

Alma waves it off. "You don't have to worry about that with Hanna," she says. "She's cool. Solid as a rock. I mean, emotionally speaking, as well as the more obvious, physical assets."

"Lies," Zoe mumbles into the polished wood. "She's Judith's sister. And a *writer."*

"A novelist," Alma emphasizes. "Not some gossip rag reporter." She nudges at Zoe's head. "Try dialing down the paranoia a little bit, Zo. She's nothing like—*you-know-who."*

Zoe sits up just so she can glare at her best friend properly. "You know perfectly well this isn't just about Lovis."

"I know she hurt you," Alma insists. "I know you blame yourself. And I know you get spooked now when something looks like it's too good to be true."

"Yeah, well." Zoe starts wiping at the table, using a napkin to gather some stray crumbs. "You can't deny there's a bit of a pattern there."

"So break it!" Alma argues. "You can't let the worst possible outcome decide every single choice you make. It's bad business strategy, and a terrible way to live your life. Isn't that what you just told me yesterday?

Good things have an end date, too. That doesn't mean you should avoid them."

"You are not allowed to use cancer logic on me." Zoe frowns. "But that does actually remind me—we should be talking about you, and that proposal you have planned."

Alma rolls her eyes, but she relents. Zoe listens to her hem and haw about her options for a while, until she interjects with her own—perfectly innocent and uniquely appealing—suggestion.

When they finally leave the library, Alma's smile is grateful.

Zoe's is sly.



It's 3 p.m. by the time Alma and Zoe pull into the driveway to the chalet. Zoe is feeling energized, invigorated by the large cup of coffee, the exclusive Ritz-Carlton reservation she's managed to arrange, and the tantalizing prospect of giving her best friend a taste of her own medicine.

Alma stops the car abruptly when their windshield is hit by a big clump of snow. After a moment of stunned silence, Alma says "Oh, it's on," and jumps out of the car.

Zoe is left behind. She watches as Alma throws herself behind the nearest snowbank, moving like she's an extra on *Band of Brothers*. After a baffled moment, Zoe spots Judith and Hanna and Sofia, closing in from all sides.

Zoe considers her options. Then she folds her blankets over the top of her head, throws open the car door and starts sprinting for the house.

She's immediately caught in a near relentless onslaught of snowballs, pelting her from every direction. Zoe takes their hits with pride and poise, taking elegant, even strides up the driveway. She's not at all struggling with the weight of her blankets, or the cover of snow coming up to her knees. She's not at all dizzy, or panting, or losing.

It's all extremely dignified.

Oh, *fuck it*, it's an absolute mess. After slugging forward for three, four steps, a particularly forceful hit to her back nearly pitches Zoe face-first into the snow.

It's time to fight back.

"Get behind me!" Alma screams at her, apparently oblivious to the fact that they're completely surrounded. She's been constructing snowballs at an

impressive rate; a large stack of them is piled by the snowbank she's chosen to die on.

Zoe takes a risk and takes a peek behind the back of the car. Hanna is advancing on them from behind, her cheeks and her nose pink from the cold. She's dressed in ski gear—minus the skis—and sporting a white beanie with a menorah print saying LET'S GET LIT.

Zoe's throwing arm may not be very strong, but she's dead accurate when she tries, and Hanna is completely surprised when it hits her.

"Yes!" Alma whoops. "Right in the mouth!"

Hanna is uncomfortably cute when she's rubbing snow out of her eyes and pouting. "That wasn't fair."

"How was it not fair?" Zoe shouts back. "Am I meant to just sit here and take it?"

But Hanna is already advancing again, and Zoe realizes there's a definite downside to this kind of close combat. She won't pretend to have ever been the fastest runner, in any race, but the snow and the clothes she's wearing—even after throwing her blankets off in a frantic, self-defensive move—impede her progress significantly.

Hanna, however, doesn't seem to be affected at all.

It's a five second chase, tops. They're five horrible seconds, during which Zoe has enough time to let her survival instinct go to war with the part of herself that *wants* Hanna to catch her, that's so, *so* curious about what will happen when she does.

As five second pursuits go, it doesn't last very long. Suddenly Hanna is on top of her, Zoe lying face-down in the snow with Hanna's heavy weight on her back, and—it's good, it's actually great, and, *god,* what are they doing? The next moment, Hanna is laughing in her face, and Zoe is pulling in hard breaths, because Hanna has grabbed her shoulder and flipped her onto her back and she's *still on top of her,* now pressing her hips down with her own, and it's everything Zoe has tried very hard not to want, except they're outside, in the snow, with an audience of

1. an actual ninja
2. a cheeky teenager and
3. a best friend who is far too invested in this entire thing.

"You need to get off me," Zoe instructs Hanna, who answers, "What, before I do this?" and then shoves an entire handful of snow down the front of Zoe's sweater.

Zoe is gasping, stunned. She has never been one for temperature play, and she just got warm and comfortable, and half of the clothes the snow is soaking icy water into are her two layers of thermal underwear. Which will now refuse to come off for the next three months, or until Zoe loses all of her winter weight, probably. “I can’t believe you just did that,” she wheezes.

Hanna is so cocky, and so close, looking like she won, like Zoe is the loser here. And Zoe just—well, she can’t let that stand, can she? So if she allows her lashes to rest just a little lower over her eyes, and drops her voice an octave when she says, “You got me”—if she tilts her jaw up just so and tucks a smirk into the corner of her mouth, and says, “What do you plan to do with me now?” And then licks her lip? *Clearly* that’s meant just to distract her, to stop Hanna from looking at her like that.

And it gets exactly the reaction Zoe thought it might: Hanna has gone apoplectic, staring at Zoe’s mouth like it’s a winning lottery ticket.

But then she sways a little, the plank she’s holding over Zoe’s body faltering, dropping her down closer. Hanna’s lips are parted, and Zoe sees it just slightly too late—she’s going to *kiss* her, this handsome idiot.

From above them, Zoe hears a cooing sound and then Sofia’s cherubic voice, singing “Zoe and Hanna, sitting in a—”

Zoe rolls Hanna away from her and scrambles upright just in time to see Judith looking queasy and Alma pressing her glove against her daughter’s mouth, successfully cutting her off.

“Sorry about that,’’ Alma says. “By all means, carry on.”

As soon as Judith has spun Sofia away, Zoe flips off Alma’s smug face with both of her middle fingers.

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TEN

DINNER PREP THAT EVENING is a fairly straightforward affair, with Zoe deciding on a simple risotto. It's also an infinitely stranger one than the previous night. Where the evening before Zoe had felt almost lonely in the kitchen until Hanna had volunteered her help, tonight she finds herself having to shoo people away.

Judith in particular seems very interested in placing her body in whatever space there is between her sister and Zoe herself. But it's making Alma grumble and frown in her seat at the kitchen island, so Zoe doesn't mind.

"Who wants to cut these into half rings for me?" Zoe asks, waving a couple of leeks, and already three people are volunteering. Judith wins, pointing out Hanna's glass of wine is empty and therefore neither she *nor* Sofia should be handling knives.

"Always looking out for everyone else, my big sister," Hanna says, pleased, petting Judith's head a little roughly.

"Back off," Judith warns her. "This thing is very sharp."

"Hanna, parsley, fridge," Zoe instructs.

"Jude started teaching me life's important lessons when I was eleven," Hanna tells Zoe over Judith's shoulder. Her sister seems to be deliberately taking up space at the counter, wedging them apart.

Zoe looks at Judith, amused. "Is that so? And how old were you?"

"Twelve," Judith confesses, "but wise beyond my years."

“Hey,” Sofia protests, turning toward Judith so furiously Zoe ends up with some of the teenager’s ponytail in her mouth.

“Like this one!” Judith amends, reaching behind Zoe to poke at Sofia’s ribs. “Lots of wisdom in this one, too.”

Hanna tosses a bag of greens over Judith’s head. Zoe is proud of herself for catching it. After a moment’s consideration, she tosses it back. “Parsley,” she tells Hanna. “That is baby spinach.”

Hanna hums, opening the refrigerator again. “What was it you told me? That I was not very brave, or all that funny—”

From her barstool, Alma snorts. “That was the professional assessment of Ms. Killjoy over here? I’m amazed.”

“*You* can shut right up,” Judith tells her sweetly.

“. . . and that I didn’t run very fast,” Hanna continues.

“Still true actually, that one,” Judith pontificates with the beer bottle she’s traded for the knife in her hand. “Meet us at the park any given Sunday morning and watch her eat my dust.”

Forcibly pushing past her sister this time, Hanna presents Zoe with a bunch of leafy greens. “I asked for parsley,” Zoe says. “This is basil.”

Hanna frowns, takes it back, and heads for the fridge again.

“And you seemed plenty quick this afternoon,” Zoe remarks pointedly. “If that’s called ‘not very fast’, Judith, I may just have to take you up on your offer. It’s time I get this useless body back in shape, anyway. Hanna, are you seriously trying to hand me a bunch of carrots right now?”

Hanna isn’t listening. She’s too busy checking her out, taking Zoe’s words as permission to let her eyes roam freely over Zoe’s form—or what’s visible of it beneath her many, many, *many* layers of clothing.

Sofia is frowning at Zoe. “You should be kinder to yourself,” she says. “All bodies are good bodies.”

Alma’s eyes light up when Sofia’s words sink in and she sits up, pointing at her daughter with both hands, victorious. “Eso!” she cheers. “I knew I raised this kid right.”

“Also,” Sofia adds, “that booty. Damn.”

Alma blinks at her daughter, slowly dropping her arms. She takes a pull from her beer bottle, swallows, and then says, “I’m going to have to give up my principles and transfer you to a private school, aren’t I.”

“She’s not wrong, though,” Hanna chimes in, adding, with another heavy look down Zoe’s body, “you look like you’re in fine shape, to me.”

At that, Judith too takes a deep drink from her beer.

The thing is, Hanna said it casually, easy as breathing, and she's not even looking at Zoe anymore, instead digging a fork into one of the Jerusalem artichoke chips sizzling in the frying pan Zoe has been stirring. She looks exceptionally handsome, with the warm light on her face, her fingers graceful against the glinting silver, sucking on her lip in anticipation of tasting something she knows is going to be good.

Zoe isn't staring so much as she's collecting scientific data. She needs to figure out the baseline for this woman, or she'll continue driving herself crazy wondering if Hanna is actually interested in her, or just an idiot.

Hanna burns her mouth again. So it's likely the second thing.



After dessert, with everyone lingering at the dining room table, Alma switches out their wine glasses and beer bottles for tumblers and sets a bottle of Bowmore down between them. "A mimir, mija," she tells her daughter. "Papi's about to get her drink on."

Sofia sneers. "Gross." She seems happy about getting to skip the dishes, though, hurrying upstairs before Alma realizes what she's done.

"That girl's getting some serious texting action this week," Alma remarks when her daughter is out of earshot. "Has to be a boy, right? Has to be. She won't tell me, though."

"Ew," Judith says. "Boys," before pouring them all two fingers of Scotch.

"Hey," Alma says. "In this house we embrace the full spectrum of sexual attraction." She takes her glass and holds it up as if in a toast. "No kink-shaming allowed."

"Are you calling heterosexuality a kink?" Zoe asks, amused.

"No," Alma says, "I call that an abomination. Love thy ace, bi and pan neighbors, though."

"Cheers," Judith says, kissing Alma's cheek and smiling at her sister.

"I do worry," Alma says. "Sofia's not that much younger than I was when I started making some very bad choices."

"I think you might be doing a slightly better job than your mother did trying to keep you on the straight and narrow," Zoe tells her.

"Oh god, I would be so thrilled though if she was crushing on a girl instead," Alma says. "Is that horrible? I figure I deserve to have at least

another thirteen years before she gets to make *me* a grandmother." She cringes. "Even if at that point I'll be getting up there a bit."

Judith makes a face. "Don't you dare," she says. "You're younger than all of us, and I have six years on you. None of us is 'getting up there.'"

"Yeah?" Alma says. "Someone may want to give my breasts the memo."

"You have beautiful breasts!" Zoe and Hanna protest, passionately and in perfect sync.

After which a couple of things happen at once.

First, neither one of the women who praised Alma's (honestly pretty fucking spectacular) breasts are the one who's currently dating her, so a series of significant glances is exchanged. Judith gives Zoe a warning glare, almost as a reflex, while Alma throws a flirtatious wink at Hanna, who raises her eyebrows and her glass to her. Then Judith does a slack-jawed double take at her sister, while Alma flashes Zoe a self-indulgent grin.

"Been a while," Alma leers at Zoe from under her long lashes. "Not sure you're still able to give a correct assessment."

"Did you see my girlfriend naked?" Judith asks her sister, incredulously, at the same time Hanna pipes up with "Wait, you two used to date?"

Alma smiles in that dangerous way she sometimes does. "Oh honey," she says, "the stories I could tell."

Zoe tries to stare her best friend down without being too obvious about it, which is how she usually ends up trying to look aloof while Alma brags at length about her romantic endeavors. Which—as Hanna correctly deduced—include the handful of times Zoe and Alma slept together in grad school, shortly after they met.

Judith gives her girlfriend a very tired look. "Babe," she says. "Kindly consider *not* making me listen to you talk about your best friend's favorite strap-on again."

Hanna's eyebrows nearly disappear into her hairline. Zoe doesn't even try to intervene; she just shakes her head, resigned, exasperatedly familiar with the unstoppable force that is Alma Valdes. Alma shoots a wolfish grin at what she chooses to perceive as Zoe's acquiescence, and then glints her eyes at Hanna. She holds her hands about a foot and a half apart and mouths, "big."

Zoe sighs. She *could* murder Alma, but that would mean losing the bet she made with Linh that afternoon. And then she'd have to pay her assistant twenty bucks, so Zoe's at a pretty impossible impasse.

Hanna's laughter is loud and unrestrained. Her head is thrown back, and Zoe stares at her, fascinated by the way the exposed lines of her throat somehow manage to look vulnerable and strong at the same time. Zoe shakes with the tremendous effort it requires to keep herself from reaching out and running her fingers along that stretch of tender skin.

"Alma," —it's Judith— "how many times do I have to remind you—"

"That you're no fun?"

"—to leave at least *some* small part of your sex life to the imagination?"

Alma pouts. "But then how will my friends know how awesome I am?"

Judith huffs. "I'm only saying I would very much like to never have to go to dinner again with people I have never met before in my life, and hear you casually discuss our latest toy purchases or make wagers on which one of you does most of the topping."

"Oh, I love topping," Hanna sighs, and Zoe can't help but look over, a little scandalized. But Hanna follows it up with a dreamy "Raspberry swirl is my favorite, but plain vanilla can be pretty amazing too," so now Zoe can't decide if she's talking about sex or food.

Alma seems to have no such problem. "Amén, little sister," she says with a broad grin, raising her glass before drinking deeply.

"So, wait a minute," Hanna tells Alma, looking suddenly very intrigued. "Between the two of you . . ." she leans toward her while giving Zoe a shit-eating grin. "I guess that would make Zoe more of a—"

"Not. Another. Word," Judith says, her tone so low and threatening that the whole table goes still for a moment. Zoe tries to catch her eye so she can convey her gratitude, but Judith isn't looking at her—her eyes are boring into Alma's.

Alma straightens. "Right! I don't kiss and tell," she informs Hanna primly, making Hanna frown at her sister and surprising Zoe enough that she just barely manages to not spit her sip of Scotch back into her glass.

"Since *when?*" she blurts, like an idiot, ignoring the look of delight it puts on Hanna's face.

Judith says sweetly, looking proud of herself, "Since I explained to her it's distasteful and not everyone needs to hear about everyone else's private business."

Zoe can only blink. "What." *Impossible.* "I've been trying to get that into her head for almost a decade. How did you manage to—?"

"She said no orgasms for a week next time it happens," Alma blurts.

Judith goes nearly as red as her hair, and then Alma gets nervous and apologetic, and it becomes this whole comedic routine that goes on for a while. Zoe can't help but laugh, mostly thanks to Hanna, who's giggling bonelessly in a way that might be more contagious than the flu strain Zoe played around with in grad school. Her neck is *so* lovely, and right there—

When Hanna catches her looking, her laughter halts on a soft, breathless hum. Her eyes hold Zoe's, looking sharply amused, until Zoe looks away. "But, wait," Hanna says again. "Is this, like—a *cumulative* kind of punishment, or . . . ?"

Alma looks ecstatic at Hanna finding her a loophole. "No!" she yells, then looks, chastised, in the direction Sofia disappeared to. She continues, in a much quieter voice, squeezing her girlfriend's hand in apology but ignoring her answering glare, "The damage is done. What do you want to know?"

Zoe raises an eyebrow and her chin in a double-whammy-*Kill Bill*-siren-warranting move that men with twice the strength and stature of Alma Valdes have failed to recover from. "Alma," she warns.

But Alma is not so easily intimidated. "C'mon," she says in a smooth, almost seductive voice. "You have nothing to be embarrassed about. We're all friends here, right?" The way her eyes flit pointedly from Zoe to Hanna and back is so brazen Zoe forgets to be indignant.

"Hang on a second," Hanna says, turning to face Zoe fully and leaning in a little. Or, a lot.

Zoe meets her gaze headlong, feeling vulnerable, and fine. *Let's hear it, then,* she thinks, *lay it on me,* sure in this moment she'd willingly unfold it all for her, every depraved inch of herself, every exquisite cruelty she's wanted Hanna to inflict on her.

Hanna stares at her. When she's this close, under the spotlights above the dining room table, Zoe can see her blue eyes sparkle and flash. She can count every freckle on her face, every pale, individual hair of her eyebrows. Hanna's mouth twitches before she licks her lip. The flash of pink of her tongue is telling Zoe to relinquish life and await her redemption in death.

"I've been getting the impression—" Hanna halts, and Zoe has the distinct feeling she's been in this exact moment before, probably because she has, "—and if I'm wrong, I apologize, but I have to ask."

The whole table goes still. Zoe is utterly captivated by the determined way Hanna is holding her gaze, moving only to flicker back and forth

between Zoe's eyes, but Zoe is also very aware Alma is watching them, holding her breath. Judith is white-knuckling the bottle of Scotch. She looks primed to pour it out right over Hanna's head, but she's frozen for now, watching them like one would one of those *Seconds From Disaster* documentaries.

After a brief moment, during which Judith ages ten years, Hanna finally asks, "Are your eyes actually two different colors, or is that just a trick of the light?"

Alma exhales.

Zoe Zuydervelt needs a drink.

Fortunately Judith is already there; Zoe only needs to hold out her glass for her to fill it with a smug look on her face. Alma is rubbing her own temples as if she's trying to get rid of a headache.

"Okay, so," Hanna says after Zoe has finished explaining what sectoral heterochromia is and Judith has finished refilling the rest of their glasses, "what is the most embarrassing thing you've all ever done for a crush?" And Zoe is still dying a little, because clearly Hanna isn't quite willing to let go of that particular thread, although Zoe's grateful to her for steering the conversation towards slightly safer territory.

Alma has her answer ready. "Joining a hot yoga class." She snorts with distaste. "Never again."

Hanna squints at her. "Did you injure yourself or something?"

"No," Alma says. "It was just. God, that place reeked. I was turned off of people in general for like. A week."

"I find that very hard to believe," Zoe says smoothly.

"That's hardly embarrassing," Hanna declares. "Try enlisting your entire cheerleading squad to help you convince your high school principal that mounting your friends is 'the cool new way to say hi' after a teacher catches you making out with your co-captain."

Zoe chokes. "You did not."

"Longest two weeks of my senior year," Judith says. "Couldn't turn a single corner without witnessing some of the hottest girls I've ever seen before *or* since, publicly humping each other in the halls in order to help her sell the story." She shakes her head.

Alma gives her girlfriend a fond look. "What about you, babe?"

Judith frowns down at her drink. "Oh, you've heard this one: coming out to my friends and family before I was ready, because she didn't want to date

someone who was ‘scared of herself.’” She takes a deep drink before adding, “And then getting dumped anyway because she wasn’t interested in showing a newbie the ropes.”

“I mean,” Zoe muses, “I guess I can understand her perspective?” Judith glares at her. “Alright, okay, *ugh,”* Zoe amends. “Women. I’m sorry we suck so much.”

“I’m not,” Alma quips.

“Boo, too easy,” Hanna heckles her. “Zoe, let’s hear yours.”

Zoe runs her forefinger over the rim of her glass. “How about getting in bed with one of my most highly respected peers, only to have her steal my intellectual property and walk away with a six-month head start on a competing product?”

Alma breathes out cautiously. “Lovis was a little bit more than a crush.”

Zoe cocks her eyebrow. “Maybe to me.”

“Wait,” Hanna says. “Are you talking about Lovis Lindström? From Linden Industries?” Her tongue trips on a failed attempt at the correct pronunciation of Lovis’s last name. “You two were involved?”

Zoe hums. “A couple of years ago. I had only just started receiving event invites again. Xander had been in prison for a while, the victims’ families were being compensated, thanks to Alma’s hard work”—her best friend gives her a small salute, Judith taking her hand when she’s done so she can press her lips to Alma’s knuckles—“and everyone was talking about our new heart valves, which performed so well in trials we were told to wrap up early so the control group could benefit too.” Zoe pauses to take a sip, in a fruitless attempt to wash down her hateful admiration of her ex’s clever timing. “Lovis approached me at a premiere party,” she says. “We dated for a while.”

“I’d say nine months is a while, yeah,” Alma adds.

“It was,” Zoe agrees. It was shamefully long, actually, considering the ever-growing number of red flags their relationship required Zoe to slalom through.

Hanna is looking at something on her phone again. Zoe hopes she’ll find the photos that were taken that first night she and Lovis were introduced; that emerald backless dress Zoe had worn had made her shoulders and her ass look fantastic.

“Hang on a second,” Hanna shouts. “You had a *speaking part* in a *Batman movie?”*

“That’s an exaggeration,” Zoe waves it off. “The lead was dating an employee of mine at the time, and we had brunch on set one morning. They got me to say three lines on camera, tops.”

Alma is watching her with that familiar, soft look in her eyes Zoe wishes she would use only when Zoe is in need of a good cry. “I’m sorry I didn’t see what Lovis was doing,” she says.

Zoe attempts a smile, but she knows how bitter it must look. “I forgive you,” she smarms. “You were a little busy beating cancer, and I thought I was in love. You could have shown me live footage of her emailing herself our clinical data, and I still wouldn’t have wanted to believe you.”

Hanna looks as if her own heart is breaking. “She never actually loved you?”

Zoe shrugs, keeping her eyes on her glass. “No more than she would have loved any other lucrative opportunity. A fistful of unencrypted files to cram onto a USB, so she could gloat over the negative data later and tell herself, ‘Not as brilliant as she pretends to be.’”

The table has gone quiet. When Zoe looks up, everyone is staring at her with varying expressions of empathy. Judith looks an alarming amount like she’s about to get up and hug her, as if she’s just barely holding herself back.

Zoe swipes her hand over her face. “I have a lot of baggage involving trust and intimacy, okay.”

Alma reaches all the way across the table to grab her hand, and smiles. “Don’t forget about the mommy issues,” she says encouragingly. And then, to what Zoe is sure is no one in particular, “And she’s single, ladies!”

“Which is for the best,” Zoe insists, glaring when Alma pouts in response. “Lovis could have destroyed me, *and* Austra Bio, and everything we worked so hard to build. I don’t think we’d survive another PR nightmare.”

“That doesn’t mean you should take yourself off the market altogether,” Alma wheedles. “You just need to put some sort of vetting process in place.”

“For the last time,” Zoe sighs, “I am *not* using an escort service.”

Alma grins at her, then winks at Judith and lies, in a loud whisper, “Bad experience. Don’t ask.”

Judith and Alma’s laughter is so loud they miss Hanna’s reply. But Zoe hears every single low-pitched word as Hanna says, “I find *that* very hard to believe.”

Against her better judgment, Zoe chances a glance at her.

When their eyes meet, the lines around Hanna's eyes smooth out as her expression shifts from amusement to dark interest. It's something Zoe isn't sure she's seen so far. Hanna's pupils are so wide her eyes are almost completely black, even under the bright lights above the table.

It's a look Zoe recognizes. A look that tugs at her, pulling that string inside of her tight again. Waiting for the musician's first bold move.

"I think we all need to take a break and drink some water," Judith decides, pushing herself up out of her chair. "I, personally, would prefer not to feel like death in the morning."

"Agreed," Zoe says, blinking up at her. "Please have a pitcher waiting for me when I come back." She leaves the kitchen, slowing her stride so it doesn't look like she's making an escape, careful to take measured breaths, attempting to calm her hammering heart.

The light in the hallway bathroom is dim and forgiving. Zoe thanks a number of deities from various religions for the small mercies they're still willing to bestow upon her, in spite of her numerous sins.

At least, Zoe thinks, smiling at her reflection in the mirror as she washes her hands, it looks like she isn't the only one involved in this queer little entanglement who's interested in a few rounds of no-strings *sinning*.

She exits into the dark hallway, closing the bathroom door behind her, preoccupied with the possibilities, with all the ways she might have Hanna in her bed again tonight. It's a little distracting, so when suddenly there's a firm, broad hand at her hip, she's caught off-guard. It's a pleasant kind of capture, though: there's Hanna's breath, glancing off her cheek; the brush of her hair on Zoe's collarbone.

"Sorry," Hanna says, in a way that makes it very clear she's not sorry at all. She also doesn't back away.

Zoe lifts her eyes to Hanna's in a slow, appreciative glide, after lingering perhaps a tiny bit too long on her lips. "What is it now?" she asks, a little too loose, a little too salty in the way she gets when she's been drinking Scotch instead of wine. "What do you want this time? Do you need me to bake you some cookies? Is it time for your second dessert?"

For a moment Hanna looks like she's genuinely tempted by the offer. But she recovers quickly, meeting Zoe's eyes and her insolence head-on. Her lips part. Then she says, "I think you know what I want."

Zoe feels hot all over at the words, but she's been fooled too many times already and she forbids her body from falling for it again. She may just sound the faintest bit hostile when she asks, "Then what the fuck have you been waiting for?"

But Hanna doesn't seem intimidated, just thoughtful. "It's something Jude said."

That bitch.

"You know they have a bet going?" Zoe says. "She and Alma. And my assistant, too."

Hanna's mouth curves up in a curious smile. "What kind of a bet?"

Zoe clenches her jaw. "What did Judith say?"

Zoe can think of a thousand pieces of ammunition Judith Kaplan could have used to curtail Hanna's interest in pursuing her. Zoe Zuydervelt is a jaded member of America's royalty, fallen from grace; an out of touch, world-weary snob. She's damaged and in denial. She doesn't always follow standard gowning protocol when doing her five-minute-walkthroughs of Austra Bio's basement labs.

Hanna's lips are twitching. "She said you like to be in charge."

That BITCH.

Hanna shrugs. "So I've been waiting, I guess, for you to make the first move. But you wouldn't, and so I figured maybe I was misreading—"

"Hanna." Zoe does manage to sound commanding just there, an echo of the queen-among-men brand of authority she's perfected as part of her professional visage.

Hanna stops talking abruptly, regarding her with slight apprehension.

"Your sister was lying," Zoe says, stepping closer into Hanna's space.

Hanna watches her advance, her eyes alert. "I'm beginning to realize that."

"So let me ask you again," Zoe continues, now directly addressing Hanna's mouth. "What do you want?"

Hanna's tongue slides slowly past the space between her lips. "I want to kiss you," she says.

Zoe tilts her chin, slanting her eyelashes up to meet Hanna's gaze again. "So kiss me."

And Hanna leans in to do just that.

At least, that's what Zoe thinks is happening, until Hanna stops and keeps Zoe from closing the distance remaining with only a whisper of space left

between them. “Aren’t you going to make me say it?” Hanna asks, a teasing lilt in her voice.

Zoe frowns in confusion, her brain working hard to process the sudden reality of Hanna’s body pressed close—and, finally, with unmistakable intent—against her own.

“I’m aware,” Hanna says slowly, laying a heavy hand on Zoe’s waist, “that you’re hot.”

Oh no.

Hanna steps into Zoe’s body, her hand now a firm grip on Zoe’s hip, and begins walking her backwards until Zoe feels the wood paneling of the wall behind her. “And I’ll be careful,” Hanna continues, leaning down and nosing into her hair, into the sensitive skin just below the hinge of Zoe’s jaw. “Even though you smell delicious—” She breathes the final words directly into her ear. “Even though I know you’ll taste divine.”

Zoe Zuydervelt doesn’t think she’s ever been angrier at herself for wanting to fuck someone, and she’s survived a prolonged, crippling sexual obsession with one of her brother’s girlfriends. “Oh my god,” she groans, bringing up a hand to rub her brow, “I cannot believe—”

But Hanna swats her hand away, presses it into the wall next to her head, and slants her lips against Zoe’s.

Hanna kisses exactly the way Zoe feared she might—with focused intent, confidence and impossible sweetness—and already Zoe knows this can’t possibly be the last time it happens. She wants infinitely more of exactly this, but also, maybe, a little extra, perhaps with a layer or two less of her beloved-slash-loathsome thermal underwear.

Zoe brings up her free hand to tangle it in Hanna’s ridiculously perfect hair and drags the tip of her tongue over the crease between Hanna’s lips, making Hanna gasp and then push back with her own, soft but a little messy, teasing, exquisite. Zoe bucks back against Hanna’s unyielding frame, her legs going wobbly to the point of bonelessness when Hanna runs a large hand over her ass and squeezes her closer.

“Why didn’t we do this sooner?” Zoe asks, breathless and unsteady.

“Because we’re idiots,” Hanna answers.

True as that statement may be, Zoe is still too intelligent to ignore the fact Judith and Alma will understand what’s happening if they linger in the hallway for much longer. She attempts to calculate the odds of Alma popping around the corner to ask if they want to borrow one of her straps,

but math feels hard, and Zoe is too busy surrendering her lips to Hanna's and melting at the feeling of her licking into her mouth to bother much with it.

Maybe—maybe it's fine. Zoe may even take Alma up on the offer, if it comes to that, especially if Hanna keeps pawing at her body the way she is now. Zoe is almost mournful when one of Hanna's hands leaves her ass, but she sighs when it settles on her breast, stroking her with a firm thumb. Zoe realizes she's clutching Hanna's shoulders, and takes the opportunity to dig her fingers into the flexing muscles she's been very absolutely not lusting after, when Hanna rubs her lower lip over the edge of Zoe's own in what feels like a very deliberate move to smudge her lipstick.

Zoe breaks away to touch her fingers to the smear. "Did you have to do that?"

"Yes," Hanna says. "I've wanted to do that since the moment we met."

Zoe is torn between annoyance and the need to kiss her again. "I can't go back out there looking like this."

"Then don't." Hanna's eyes are positively burning now. "I'll tell them you had too much to drink."

"Alma will see right through that," Zoe says, thinking. "Tell her I have a migraine. She'll know to leave me alone for the rest of the night."

Her words sink heavily down in the space between their bodies. Zoe licks her lips. She really needs Hanna to kiss her again.

"Go on," Hanna says. "I promise I won't keep you waiting long."

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ELEVEN

ZOE DOESN'T BOTHER WITH the bathroom mirror as she brushes her teeth this time. She keeps the lights off as she washes up and makes her way to the bedroom, feeling flustered and reckless. It's cool there, and quiet. Inside Zoe is bright, and hot, and loud. It can't be the alcohol, she knows. She routinely drinks three glasses of Scotch just to get from work to sleep mode. Yet somehow Zoe doesn't think she's ever felt more intoxicated than she does right now.

A wave of fluttering, almost giddy anticipation washes over her when Hanna enters, clicking the door shut behind her. She looks hauntingly handsome, like the cover of a Harlequin novel, only one hundred percent (or fifty percent?) more gay.

She also has a bag of frozen peas in her hand.

Hanna regards her, and it, sheepishly as she tosses it between her hands. "Alma sent me up with it."

Zoe raises one eyebrow. "I guess you really sold the migraine story."

Hanna drops the bag on the dresser and takes two long strides across the room, and then they're kissing again. Hanna's hands come up to cradle Zoe's jaw, and they're *oh god they're so cold.* Zoe gasps at the frigid touch, but Hanna only sees it as an invitation to press her tongue past the precipice of Zoe's lips, finding her own and tracing it delicately. The heat of her

mouth forms an exquisite contrast to the chill of her fingers against the pulse at Zoe's throat.

Maybe Zoe is one for temperature play, after all.

"Stay there," Hanna says, planting a steady hand on Zoe's hip as she moves around her. Zoe hums when strong arms encircle her waist from behind. Hanna's fingers press against her firmly, trying to compensate for the ridiculous amount of clothing Zoe's wearing. Her thumbnails glance the underside of Zoe's breasts, her words hot against Zoe's ear. "I wanted to do this when you first climbed into my bed."

She pulls Zoe close, warm and solid along her back, the way she had been that first night. But this time her hands dip under Zoe's sweater, and her undershirt, and her thermal underwear, before thumbing into the padding of her bra. Zoe is sensitive there, and even with the sensation muted like it is, she swoons. Her head rolls back, gratefully supported by the firm comfort of Hanna's shoulder.

So Hanna is smooth, Zoe thinks, *but she's also a liar.* "Is that why you slept so soundly through the night?" she feels the urge to ask.

Hanna reaches one hand up to brush Zoe's hair out of the way, her knuckles tracing the curve of Zoe's shoulder. "I dreamed about you."

Zoe has to roll her eyes at that. "Oh please," she says.

Hanna just hums approvingly. Her voice is tinged with dark amusement when she says, "You're already begging. I'll take that as a good sign."

"Don't be a dickh—" Zoe says, unable to stop herself, but the last part of the word is cut from her breath when Hanna's fingertips brush over the back of her neck, right where it meets her hairline. There's a shock of sensitivity there, surprising them both. Hanna seems to approve, repeating the caress, and Zoe bites back a moan, blushing as her body shivers and bucks.

"Don't do that," Hanna says. "I want your voice. I want to hear what I do to you."

The words and the tone in which she's said them hit Zoe like a shot of tequila, heat pooling between her legs and lingering there. "We're in a house full of people," she points out, almost unable to gather enough breath to say it.

"Have you heard a peep from the other bedrooms?" Hanna asks. "I'm sure Alma and Jude get up to all sorts of things at night. And Sofia snores like a trucker."

Zoe breathes out a laugh, and then just breathes, as Hanna's fingers slide over her nape again. It sends a lascivious frisson down her back, thudding down deep, and this time Zoe does moan, helpless and stunned. She feels like a conduit, the electrified feeling on her skin that happens right before goosebumps rise, every inch of her on high alert. Every part of her where Hanna is lights up and sparks; everywhere she's not trembles and *wants*.

"Do you want me to use the scissors, this time?" Hanna asks, like a boob.

Zoe shoves a half-hearted elbow into her ribs. "You did just fine this morning."

"That's what I thought," Hanna says, sounding pleased with herself. The smug confidence in her voice makes Zoe clench with equal amounts of arousal and irritation.

"Don't sound so proud," Zoe warns her, "I may still change my m—"

Hanna puts her tongue against the spot her fingers had found earlier, licking up to just below her ear. The pleasure is so immediate and so distinct it makes Zoe shudder and gasp; first with relief, and then with urgent need. Hanna responds eagerly, almost greedy, fisting a hand into the hair at the back of Zoe's head and tilting it to expose more of her neck. Her mouth is so hot Zoe feels it like a brand wherever it touches her skin.

In a much more enjoyable repeat performance of this morning's bathroom encounter, Hanna hooks her thumbs under the hem of Zoe's thermal underwear top and slips it off, taking her undershirt and her sweater with it. Her fingers are warmer now, deliberately stroking her skin, taking their time. Zoe shivers when Hanna traces them up her spine, tracking the lines of the tattoo on her back before hesitating at the clasp of her bra.

"Zoe," Hanna says, now sounding clearly affected, her voice slightly raspy, "are you sure about this? We can cool this down if you want, and talk —"

"I don't want to talk." Zoe turns around to face her, Hanna's fingers never once losing contact with her skin as she moves. "What I want," Zoe enunciates, "very much," with a firm hand on Hanna's chest and not a trace of modesty, "is for you to fuck me."

Hanna stares at her, blushing, her lips forming a perfectly rounded *o*.

Zoe moves her hand down, splaying it over one of Hanna's breasts, applying gentle pressure there before moving down further, skidding over what she realizes has to be a set of clearly defined abs. "Assuming you would be . . . amenable to that," Zoe emphasizes.

“I’m, I—” Hanna says, blinking with obvious effort, “Yes. Please.”

Zoe raises an amused eyebrow. “And I thought I would be the one doing the begging.”

“Only if that’s—” Hanna says, her eyes moving wildly between Zoe’s. “I mean.” She straightens. “Not if you don’t take off your bra. Right now.”

Zoe smirks charitably. Her hand is already at her back, undoing the clasp in a practiced two-finger move.

She’s never seen Hanna’s eyes look so large, or so hungry, before.

Zoe only has time for a brief triumphant smile at the look on Hanna’s face before the cold air hits her chest, making her shiver and ramping up her sensitivity by about a thousand hertz per picoampere. When Hanna finally stops staring and starts touching, Zoe’s already half gone.

Hanna is clever hands and harsh breath and wet heat, her fingers tracing the curve of Zoe’s waist, lightly scratching the back of her arms before grazing her breasts. Her mouth is slick along the length of Zoe’s throat, down her collarbone, the side of her breasts, never quite reaching the subtle ridges and creases at their crest where Zoe needs it most.

Zoe isn’t sure if Hanna is teasing her or trying to pace herself. She’s not so much kissing her as she is dragging her bottom lip along her skin and flicking out her tongue, sometimes sucking, sometimes grazing Zoe’s skin with her teeth, as if she’s genuinely just enjoying the taste of her. She keeps coming back and starting over as if she’s distracted, as if she’s already half out of her mind.

It’s graceless, it’s messy, it’s completely unselfconscious, and it’s undeniably, bewilderingly hot.

Hanna seems perfectly content to limit herself to the parts of Zoe that are already uncovered, but Zoe doesn’t think she can stand this directionless grazing much longer. There’s a slow thrumming, low and heavy between her legs, and it gets louder with each touch of Hanna’s tongue. She needs—*more*, she wants—

“Your mouth,” she manages, blinking away the thick fog of arousal briefly to find her words. “Please, I need—” and mercifully, Hanna doesn’t need her to say any more before she’s moved down and closed her lips around one of her nipples. Zoe arches into her, sighing at the shocking spike of pleasure and relief.

Zoe finds it hard to believe she’s still standing, that her trembling legs are capable of supporting the full weight of her desire.

As soon as the thought occurs to her, Hanna is fitting two broad palms around her ass and lifting her up. *Lifting* her, like it's nothing, like Zoe wasn't frowning at herself in the mirror just this morning and making urgent plans to maybe begin taking advantage again of Austra Biogenics' gym on nights when she doesn't have a better excuse to stay at the office late.

It's disorienting, and also actually quite wonderful. Zoe doesn't think she's been carried by another human being since she was four, when the Zuydervelt family took her in.

"Your place or mine?" Hanna smirks up at her, not a trace of exertion in her voice.

Hanna may not be completely human, Zoe thinks.

She's okay with it.

She doesn't really want to answer her either way, reveling as she is in the sensation of being so thoroughly held. It makes her feel light and heavy at once, light in her head and heavy in the place between her thighs, where she's pressed against Hanna's abs. She runs her fingers down Hanna's shoulders and upper arms, gripping the muscles there. Hanna seems perfectly willing to indulge her.

"Yours is closer," Zoe says eventually. "So take me to mine."

Hanna laughs and walks, perhaps a bit slower than strictly necessary, to the bed at the far side of the room. She kisses Zoe again, deep and wet, making Zoe whimper and sigh, her thighs twitching restlessly around Hanna's waist.

Hanna lowers her gingerly down onto her bed. But Zoe doesn't want her gingerly—they've been holding themselves back long enough, and Zoe can't bear it a moment longer. She glides her hands behind Hanna's neck, tangling her fingers in that stupid, perfect hair, and digs her heels into Hanna's lower back until Hanna comes down heavily on top of her, both of their breaths leaving them in a huff.

Hanna blinks down at her. "I'm sorry about that," she says.

"I'm not." Zoe feels hypnotized, mesmerized, drunk. All of her focus is zeroed in on the places where she has Hanna: on the way Zoe's captured her securely between her thighs, her calves pressed against Hanna's ass; on the magnificent weight of her, pushing Zoe down, solid and sure, trapping her between Hanna's warm body and the cool mattress at her back.

Hanna's tongue is in Zoe's ear. Normally this would make Zoe want to jump out of her skin, but with Hanna it just makes her want *more*, her hips bucking gracelessly in a desperate search for friction. Hanna grabs the back of her thighs, lifting Zoe's hips to grind their bodies together. Zoe feels the tension in her lower back slacken at the authoritative gesture, the slow drag of Hanna's hips between her own setting off an increasingly insistent throbbing between her legs.

"Who even *are* you right now," Zoe wonders, a tiny bit piqued at the tremor in her voice. "Where have you been hiding all of this?"

Hanna answers by finally slotting a firm thigh between Zoe's own, in a mirror image of the way they had been entangled here this morning. Zoe's hips jump forward reflexively, a strangled moan wrenching itself from her throat. This time, Zoe doesn't have to hold back. This time, she allows herself to roll her hips up into Hanna; searching, gasping in relief, reveling in the slow, deliberate motion of their bodies, and the way they fit together.

She bites down on Hanna's shoulder and gets a mouth full of soft wool. Absently, she realizes she should be grateful for not having to explain at breakfast tomorrow why there's a perfect imprint of Zoe's teeth on Hanna's collarbone.

"Tell me what feels good," Hanna says, breathing the demand into the sensitive skin just below her ear. What feels good? It all feels good. *Right there,* she wants to say each time Hanna moves, and *just like that,* but all she can think to vocalize is *kiss me, touch me, push all of yourself against and around and inside of me.*

"Need you," she manages, "I'm close, I don't—"

And she is, she realizes, with some bewilderment, and this is not how—Hanna is still fully dressed, Zoe naked only from the waist up. Why are they making out like high school students in the back of the auditorium? More importantly, why does she feel so tightly wound, whimpering helplessly at every drag of Hanna's thigh against her, so close already she fears one more well-timed press of Hanna's hands on the back of her thighs could set her off, bringing this entire thing to an end before they've even gotten started? Before she's even properly touched her?

Hanna's voice is thick, reminding her exactly how perceptive Hanna is, even now, when she asks, her lips brushing Zoe's, "Can you come like this?"

“I’m—I’m not sure,” Zoe says, absolutely certain now that she can but not sure she wants to, not ready for this to be over. “I want to feel you. All of you,” she adds, tugging at the collar of Hanna’s sweater.

“You will,” Hanna promises, pressing a kiss against her lips. Zoe feels Hanna’s smile against her mouth when she follows it with, “Gonna make you come, first.”

And, well. *Sweet mother of god,* and all of that.

Hanna takes Zoe’s moan as permission to begin driving her in earnest, cradling Zoe’s hips in her hands, setting a steady pace at which their bodies meet and part, dragging Zoe’s body up and down her thigh.

“Good Christ, *Hanna.”* Zoe feels as if she’s somehow both running behind as well as rushing ahead, stretched taut between warring desires. Release is a mere whisper away, but she wants so much more, had sort of hoped Hanna might tease her, hold her suspended for a little longer, had been ready for Hanna to have Zoe worship her body the way it’s been asking her to before finally allowing Zoe her own release.

Zoe whines, high and breathless. “I’m going to—I need—” She grinds aimlessly up against Hanna’s thigh, feeling wired, strung taut, stunned.

“Here.” Hanna moves her hands, freeing up one of them to stutter down to the buttons of Zoe’s jeans. Zoe swats her away, undoing them all at once with a sharp jerk of both of her hands, and then Hanna is groaning as she pushes her fingers down between their bodies, past every single barrier Zoe has put between them.

Zoe realizes she’s so wet there almost isn’t any friction when Hanna slips between her. Hanna is breathing hard, telling Zoe how good she feels as she glides her fingers in a few long, confident strokes before finding her. She circles her, two, three times, then drags the pads of her fingers over her, and Zoe is coming—going over in spite of herself, helpless to hold off any longer, bucking and rolling and committing blasphemy on various divine beings, including Hanna herself.

After a few long, drawn-out beats, Hanna extricates herself lazily from Zoe’s hold. She stretches her arms above her head and rolls her shoulders as if she’s just woken from an afternoon nap. Beneath her, Zoe feels leaden and weightless.

Newton’s Law of Gravity is clearly a lie.

Hanna is watching her from where she’s straddled across Zoe’s hips, smiling and flushed, looking slightly rumpled but also extremely pleased

with herself. Zoe watches her right back, watches Hanna squinting at her, smiling, as she lifts her hand and sucks the tips of her fingers into her mouth.

Zoe shudders at the sharp tug of what she believes to be an aftershock, and then flushes all over when she realizes the release Hanna just granted her hasn't eased her arousal at all. *Seriously, what in god's name?*

But Hanna may not actually mind, considering the hungry way she's eyeing Zoe before she lowers herself, the way she smiles when she's hovering over her again. "Knew you'd taste good," she mutters against Zoe's lips, and then she proves it by kissing her deeply, languidly, her hands playing a tantalizing little tune on Zoe's skin that makes her hips twitch up at her again. "I'm going to take these off, alright?" she asks, splaying the fingers of one hand over the roundness of Zoe's belly, the other paused at the waist of her jeans.

"God, please, here," Zoe says, lifting her hips, but Hanna has her, lifting her up again like she's weightless, as if she's a flimsy, insignificant thing. It makes Zoe feel weak and trembly, even more so than the wildly out-of-character climax she's just experienced.

Hanna pushes her thumb past the waistband of Zoe's underwear. It's almost rough, seeing how it's been functioning like a fucking corset all day. When Hanna continues to pull them down, it's relief and pleasure and *Jesus-is-it-fucking-cold,* all rolled into one. But combined with the touch of Hanna's fingers, and her tongue licking out at the crease of Zoe's thigh, it turns into that exquisite kind of discomfort that smolders, slick and salacious, between her legs.

There's a moment of stillness, once Hanna gets Zoe's pants off, once Hanna has her laid out naked before her. She's looking at Zoe the same way she did when she was eyeing the Jerusalem artichoke chips. "I'm going to go down on you now," she decides, the words landing soundly between Zoe's legs, adding to the pressure that's building there again. Hanna kisses her breasts, sucking, nipping at them gently. "Is that okay?"

"Yes," Zoe says, before adding *"fuck,"* for emphasis, hoping it's enough. Just when Zoe thinks Hanna will put her mouth where it's wanted, where it's required, really, at this point, she moves away, making Zoe sigh out a protest and reach for her. But Hanna stands up, grabs the backs of Zoe's knees and yanks her down to the foot of the bed. Then she kneels down

before her and, in a move Zoe fears might be incompatible with life, dips down and puts her mouth on her.

It's—*Christ.* The second coming, pun fully intended.

As Zoe shudders and sobs, surrendering to pleasure, Hanna hooks her arms under her thighs and holds on, pressing Zoe's hips into the mattress to keep her still. It's liberating, Zoe thinks, through the haze that must be her spirit departing her physical form; freeing, to be so taken, so caught by her. She wants Hanna to hold her down and keep her there forever, touch her until Zoe is no longer able to remember where else she would possibly want to go.

After, Hanna shimmies up next to her, cradling Zoe in her arms. Zoe feels smaller than their height difference justifies, and tender to the point of liquefaction.

It also occurs to her Hanna has yet to shed a single article of clothing. Zoe isn't tall enough to check, but she's fairly certain she may actually still be wearing her shoes. "You know," Zoe says, "I'm beginning to think you've been projecting, with the never-nude thing."

Hanna is trying to somehow be delicate about pressing what has to be one of Zoe's hairs out of her mouth with her tongue. It makes Zoe want to kiss her again. She plucks at Hanna's sweater, instead. "Are you ready for this to come off?" she asks.

Hanna helps Zoe pull it off her, and then she steps out of her—yup, shoes—and her pants, and for a moment, regarding her, Zoe doesn't know whether to weep or fall to her knees. Hanna, in moonlight, nude, is a piece of art, and seeing her like this is nothing less than a numinous experience.

Zoe doesn't understand why she's not already running her tongue all over Hanna's body. As she climbs into her bed again, Zoe tries to grab her shoulders, ready to prostrate herself at the shrine of Hanna Kaplan. But Hanna's hands are quicker than hers, and this time they catch Zoe's wrists.

Hanna's eyes are the deep indigo of the sky at dusk when she smiles down at her, teeth glinting. "No touching until I tell you to," she says. She lifts Zoe's arms above her head, grasping her wrists in one hand. She skims the fingertips of the other down Zoe's arm, down her body until they're resting at the top of her thighs. "I want to be inside you," she rasps into Zoe's collarbone. "Can you go again?"

"God," Zoe says on a shaky exhale, "remind me never to tell you what edging actually is."

Then she gasps, feeling Hanna's hand slide down, trembles when she cups her in her warm palm, wails, low and wretched, when she feels Hanna push inside, curling her fingers, deep and full, and Zoe is *flying*. She closes her eyes against the onslaught of sensation and is grateful for the reprieve it allows her—from the near-debilitating sight of Hanna, naked above her, straining; from the terrifying reality of what it is they're doing, and where they're doing it; from Hanna's determination to coax every sound from her Zoe is capable of making as she twists and tightens around her fingers—and, Zoe finds, it's a little easier to let go, a little easier to submit when she's not looking up at the elf on the shelf above Hanna's dresser.

Under Hanna's unwavering, exuberant attention Zoe comes apart, completely and without restraint, and, she's sure, beyond all hope of repair. When she opens her eyes again, much later, still trying to steady the roaring thunder of her heart, Hanna is gazing at her as if she's the only thing left in the world. She presses their foreheads together, nothing between them but their panting breaths.

Hanna's voice is gruff, her fingers greedy. "Again."

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TWELVE

IF ZOE ZUYDERVELT HAD known dying would feel this good, she would have done it sooner.

It's impossible to say how much time has passed, with her and Hanna alone together in this room. Part of her feels as if she's been in Hanna's arms forever. It's dark out, still, but less so than it was before, and exhaustion has settled over her like a weighted blanket, turning her movements languid, her mind syrupy-slow.

Hanna appears to have no such problems.

She's pressed close against Zoe's back with her arm slung low over her hips, breathing encouraging depravities into Zoe's hair as her fingers move inside her, slow and deep and insistent. Her other hand is drawing an incomprehensible pattern across Zoe's chest. Her fingers are wickedly twisting one moment, her palm a gentle caress the next, every move she makes driving Zoe closer to another inevitable peak.

In a distant past, an hour or two or so ago, Zoe had been sure Hanna was finally winding down, and Zoe had been more than ready to treat her to her personal—hopefully much more enjoyable—brand of Zuydervelt Retribution™. But Hanna hasn't given her the chance, not once, and it's beginning to injure Zoe's pride.

Zoe can't die before she tastes her. It would be an injustice of the highest order.

She turns in Hanna's arms until she's mostly on her back, trying to untangle herself. She winces when her skin sticks and skids gracelessly against Hanna's. The movement dislodges Hanna's hand from between her legs, but Hanna simply adjusts it, cupping her gently instead. "Are you okay?" she asks, her expression soft with concern.

Zoe smiles blearily back at her, taking a moment to thoroughly enjoy her view. Hanna is flushed from her face down almost to her stomach, her hair a gorgeous mess. Her shoulders are rising and falling with quick, shallow breaths. It's light enough now that Zoe can see that her freckles continue all the way down her chest, and Zoe wants to kiss every last one of them, follow them until she can dip her tongue into her belly button, paint a wet stripe down to the junction of her thighs. "You're perfect," Zoe tells her, reaching up to brush her fingers over the sloping muscle of Hanna's shoulder and down her collarbone, "but it's my turn now."

Hanna moves the hand she has between Zoe's legs again, experimentally, fingertips dipping shallowly inside her. "I don't think I'm done with you yet," she says when Zoe gasps, her lips quirked in that infuriatingly cocky half-smile Zoe has become far too familiar with.

But Zoe has learned she's incapable of focusing on anything else when Hanna is touching her, and she can feel sleep tugging at the edges of her consciousness already. If this night is a one-time thing—and she sternly reminds herself that it has to be—she can't allow Hanna to gain the upper hand again. "Jesus, Hanna." She halts Hanna's movement with a gentle hand. "I told you I wasn't expecting you, before. But I definitely wasn't expecting *this.*"

"Yeah?" Hanna grins. "So you're telling me you weren't looking for a holiday fling when you hopped into bed with a stranger?"

Something heavy loosens and thuds in Zoe's chest at Hanna's choice of the word 'fling', the squeezing sensation she's been feeling there each time she looks at her finally easing up a little, knowing Hanna hasn't lost sight of what this is. Zoe smirks. "I wasn't trying to get into your bed," she reveals. "I was stealing one of your blankets. You practically dragged me in."

Hanna stares at her, blue eyes wide, startled. "Then wha—*why?* If—"

She's absurd, Zoe thinks, observing Hanna as she flounders. *How can one person be both this adorably clueless and so preposterously confident at the same time?* She draws a lazy, contemplative circle around the blushing peak of one of Hanna's breasts, not counting on her forming a proper sentence

anytime soon anyway, and smiles when Hanna trails off in response, her breath hitching. It makes Zoe feel lightheaded. A little warm, a little proud.

It also makes her feel tremendously foolish for feeling these things.

“Tell me something,” she says, continuing her gentle exploration, biting her lip when Hanna hums unsteadily. “The other day, when you were helping me with my seatbelt. Did you mean to make me think you were about to kiss me?”

Hanna lets out a shocked laugh, looking delighted. Zoe retaliates with a firm pinch, and Hanna moans, her hips stuttering against Zoe’s thigh. Her eyes are a bit darker when she looks at Zoe again, her voice rough. “Would you have let me kiss you?”

Zoe’s hand trips down Hanna’s abdomen. Hanna is surprisingly soft for someone so solid, though Zoe can feel the hard muscle jumping under her fingers, flexing against her as she moves closer. Hanna is tracking her movements with the focus of a cat stalking prey.

“I wanted you to,” Zoe says. She knows she’s being stupid, but it feels too good, giving in to this sweet vulnerability Hanna inspires in her. “If I’m being honest, I think I would have let you kiss me that first night in our room.”

Hanna regards her for a moment, looking stunned and slightly cross-eyed. “I didn’t think you liked me at all.”

Zoe feels a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth. “I believe we’ve established we’re both idiots.”

Hanna looks at her for a few moments longer before leaning closer, bumping their noses together before pressing her lips to Zoe’s, slick and a little messy. She tastes like salt, she’s been working so hard; she’s fragrant with want, and warm, and so, so soft. She nudges her hips into Zoe’s again, releasing her breath on an almost startled, halting huff when Zoe flexes her thigh to offer her something firmer to grind against.

Zoe leans in, wanting to get even closer, pressing her body up against the cobblestones of Hanna’s abs. But when she moves her hand down between their bodies, Hanna takes her wrist and stops her. Zoe lets out an undignified huff, her voice and fingers trembling. “Are you ever going to let me have my turn?” It sounds petulant, even to her own ears.

“I don’t know.” Hanna’s tone is teasing, her smile flinty. The gravel in her voice sparks something bright and hot between Zoe’s legs when she suggests, “Maybe you could try asking me a little nicer.”

Zoe blinks up at her heavily. With the negligible amount of sleep she's gotten over the past forty-eight hours, it's an effort not to let her eyes drift closed. She licks her lips and counters, with a smidge of scandalized defiance, "Are you asking me to beg for you?"

Hanna smirks, then breathes the answer right back into Zoe's mouth. "I absolutely am."

Zoe holds her breath for a moment before bouncing it back between them, puffing the word against the softness of Hanna's lips. "Hanna," she voices, hushed, like a prayer, like it's been waiting to be let loose from her chest, "would you *please* let me touch you?"

Hanna's hips roll against Zoe's thigh in response and Zoe sighs when she feels her, finally, sliding hot and slippery wet against her. Zoe rocks back into her, pressing more firmly between Hanna's legs, deeply gratified when Hanna groans.

Hanna's eyes flutter shut as Zoe's fingers trip up the impossibly soft skin on the inside of Hanna's thigh. When Zoe slides her hand between their bodies, Hanna melts into her touch, soft and wet and yielding against the pads of Zoe's fingers.

"There you are," Zoe mutters, before ducking down to slide her tongue over Hanna's collarbone, up toward the hinge of her jaw. Her teeth are on the blushing skin of Hanna's throat, a freckle under her ear demanding all of her attention, irresistible. When Hanna sighs, her thighs squeezing around her own, Zoe hums, charmed. "You like my mouth, don't you?"

Hanna groans, her back arching to grant Zoe easier access to her body. *"Yes."*

Zoe's strokes are more deliberate now, drawing harsh gasps from Hanna on every exhale. "Will you allow me to put it to better use?" she asks her. And then, bringing her lips to Hanna's ear, she hums, "Would you like to come on my tongue?"

Hanna goes rigid at the words. "Fuck, *Zoe* . . ." Her eyes are squeezed shut, her hips stuttering against Zoe's hand, and in one frantic, uncoordinated move Hanna cants her hips *just so*, and just like that, without intending to, two of Zoe's fingers have slipped inside her.

They both gasp on the same breath, at the shock of it, at the sensation of Hanna's body throbbing and tightening around Zoe's hand. Zoe wonders for a moment whether it's too much, too soon, but when she tries to move

away, Hanna doesn't let her. Her hand closes around Zoe's wrist, holding her still. "Don't," she rasps. "You feel good."

"Yeah?" Zoe asks, nudging her nose against Hanna's throat, bolstered by her words. "You should see what I can do when I'm actually trying."

Hanna opens her eyes to grin at her. "You know, for someone who claims she doesn't like to be in control, you seem pretty reluctant to let someone else take the lead."

Zoe smirks back at her. "What do you plan to do about it?"

Hanna gives her a darkly appraising look. "Thinking I may need to tie you down," she murmurs, a flutter of pressure around Zoe's fingers as Hanna seems to savor the idea. "I wonder what you'd look like, all sweet and spread out for me like that."

Hanna's suggestion hits Zoe like the third glass of wine, making her reckless, heat coiling low in her belly. "Maybe you should find out."

"Maybe I will."

The words are thrilling and evocative, inspiring a litany of images, things Zoe wants to do, wants Hanna to do to her, a promise of good things still to come—but then Zoe remembers herself, a somber resolve muffling the bright spark of excitement blooming behind her ribs. *A fling,* she reaffirms. *'Tis the season, and all that.*

Zoe swallows her despondence down before it gets its claws into her throat, before she *cries,* god damn it. She leans in closer, attempting to mask her momentary sentimental lapse with a kiss, but Hanna pulls back, watching her far too knowingly. "Kiss me," Zoe demands. She no longer feels strong enough to beg for it. Hanna's eyes are brighter now, a lighter shade of blue, illuminated by the light of morning peeking through the curtains. *When did that happen? Wasn't it just midnight?*

"I kind of like you like this," Hanna grins. "I wish I'd realized sooner how pretty you sound when I make you wait for what you need."

Zoe flushes and huffs, a little heated, a little relieved. "Judging by how this night has transpired," she points out, "I'm not sure you have it in you."

There's a beat where Hanna just looks at her, heavy and already deeply entertained. It takes Zoe a moment more to realize what she's done. The potential for a Very Bad Joke hangs over them like Damocles' sword, heavy and inevitable.

"Don't," Zoe warns. She arches the sternest eyebrow she can muster in the current situation, but she fears, from Hanna's gleeful expression, it will

not be enough.

Hanna looks at her, pinching her lips, and drops her eyes to the place where their bodies intersect. Her eyes bounce back to Zoe's again. "I mean," she says, "I think you would know better than anyone—"

Zoe groans. "Hanna, don't you dare."

But Hanna won't be stopped. "In fact I'd say at this moment in time you're the leading authority on what is, and is not, *in*—"

Enough. "Finish that sentence," Zoe growls at her, "and I will throw you out of this bed, I swear to god."

The words are a prophecy, because the next second Zoe is doing exactly as promised, and Hanna hasn't even said another word.

Instead, there's a sound that's infinitely worse.

Someone is knocking on their bedroom door.

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THIRTEEN

HANNA LANDS ON THE hardwood floor on the other side of Zoe's bed with a thud that sounds like it's going to leave a bruise. Zoe would feel bad, but she's a little busy panicking right now.

"Zoe honey, are you alive in there?"

It's Alma.

"Yeah!" Zoe squeaks, once her heart starts beating again. "I'm getting up!" she says, and in a much softer but just as urgent whisper, "Jesus Christ, what time is it? Hanna, please tell me you locked—"

Alma opens the door.

"Don't come in!" Zoe wraps her sheet around her and shoves her blanket onto the floor, hoping it will hide at least some of Hanna's body.

Alma pauses in the doorway, giving Zoe a look of deep concern. Hanna is blessedly hidden from view by Zoe's bed, pressing herself against the floor, quiet as a mouse. Zoe is grateful, considering it must be freezing and Hanna is completely nude.

"I'm sorry," Alma tells Zoe, wincing in sympathy. "Are you still actively dying?"

Zoe *is*, in many ways, none of which are the aftereffects of the faked migraine Alma is referring to. Zoe squints up at her from her pillow, very dramatically and with only one eye. "I'll feel better once you bring me a glass of water and some ibuprofen," she improvises.

“You got it.” Alma turns to leave, leaving Zoe lightheaded with relief, but then her eyes fall on Hanna’s bed. It’s perfectly made, which makes sense since Hanna hasn’t touched it since yesterday morning. Zoe freezes. Alma frowns. “Hanna’s up?” she asks. “I didn’t see her downstairs.”

Think fast, Zuydervelt. You’re an intellectual.

“Uh,” Zoe says.

Masterfully done.

Alma hums. “I hope she’s not planning on making us breakfast again.”

Zoe can almost feel the indignation radiating off of Hanna’s body, and sends a prayer she’ll be capable of reigning it in and for Alma not to insult her further. “She um, she may have offered to run into town for me?” she says. “The Ritz-Carlton contacted me about an issue with your reservation for tonight, but I couldn’t get through.”

“Zo!” Alma hisses. To Zoe’s horror, she strides further into the room, now four, three, two steps away from spotting Hanna. “Did you *tell* Hanna I’m proposing?”

Hanna squeaks.

Zoe panics. “Don’t,” she says, almost sitting up before remembering she’s not wearing any clothes. “Don’t come any closer,” she pleads, scrambling for a logical explanation for her desperate request. “I got really sick last night.”

Alma stops. Her eyes narrow. Zoe attempts to breathe like a normal person. On the floor beside her, she feels rather than sees Hanna trying to do a slow-motion, crab-like scuttle in an attempt to maneuver herself under Zoe’s bed.

“Alma,” Zoe says, trying to sound grave, holding her gaze like a snake charmer, “I am in great amounts of pain.”

Alma instantly softens. “Sorry. I’ve got you. I’ll be right back.”

As soon as Alma has closed the door behind her, Zoe is hanging off the bed, her hands on Hanna’s body, checking for injuries. “Oh god, I’m so sorry, are you—”

“I’m okay!” Hanna pops up like one of those creepy clowns-in-a-box, the blanket sliding off her, her hair looking the most chaotic Zoe has seen it thus far. She’s blinking, looking dazed. “So, not to be rude or anything, I couldn’t help but overhear, and maybe I misinterpreted, but did Alma just say she’s *asking my sister to marry her?”*

Zoe hushes her. “You are not supposed to know that.”

“Well, apparently I do!” Hanna has lowered her voice but she’s on her feet now and pacing, deeply dismayed. Also, still perfectly naked. *Nakedly perfect?* “Apparently I’m off this very second, making arrangements to help her do it!”

“It’s all taken care of, don’t worry,” Zoe assures her. A little peevish, she adds, “I thought it was a very elegant explanation for your absence, actually.”

Hanna stares at her. “But Jude is supposed to be proposing to Alma!”

Zoe nods. “That’s the plan, yes.”

Hanna stops pacing. “There’s a plan?” She furrows her brow. “You have a plan? A plan that’s *your* plan?” She blows at an errant strand of hair that’s fallen in her face and plants her hands on her hips. “What’s the plan?”

Zoe turns her head decisively, away from the picture of magnificence that’s manifested in front of her, and tugs her sheet more securely around herself. “Nope.”

“Zoe.”

“Absolutely not! This entire thing is supposed to be a secret. Help me find my pants.”

But Hanna is just gathering steam. “I’m excellent at keeping secrets! Jude told me she was going to propose, didn’t she? She trusted me with that, and I didn’t tell a soul.”

Zoe just looks at her from the bed, giving them both a moment to let those words sink in.

Hanna shrinks a little. “Okay, but this is different.” *Is she blushing?* “Technically it was Sofia who told you,” she grumbles.

“Right,” Zoe says faintly. “And who was it that told Sofia to—”

Hanna misunderstands, scandalized at the implication. “Judith told Sofia! She asked her for her permission! . . . And also for her help.”

“I know that.” Zoe reaches for her, clasping Hanna’s fingers in a placating gesture but dropping them again when she remembers something Judith said. *Ugh, of course.* “You’re the one who gave Sofia the idea to incorporate a Christmas tree in Judith’s marriage proposal, aren’t you?”

Hanna shrugs. “A yalynka, actually. Sofia was really bummed about not getting a tree this year. I figured, two birds with one stone—”

“Sure,” Zoe waves her off. “Plans have changed.”

Hanna looks grief-stricken. “We’re not getting a tree?”

Zoe narrows her eyes at her. “You’re Jewish.”

“You and Alma are Catholic,” Hanna counters.

“Recovering,” Zoe clarifies. “And I believe Alma identifies as more of a heretic, these days.”

“Well, in *my* family, the New Year tree was a treasured holiday tradition.”

“A proposal is supposed to be about two people making a decision about their future together,” Zoe tells her. “Not some dumb ‘holiday tradition.’”

“I think it’s romantic,” Hanna pouts.

Zoe scoffs. “Holidays aren’t romantic.”

It’s Hanna’s turn to give Zoe a significant look, and Zoe’s turn to blush. “I bet my assistant I could get Judith and Alma to ask *each other,*” she admits, just to move them past the moment. “At the same time, without either of them knowing what the other is about to do.”

Zoe watches Hanna’s face light up, delight dawning slowly but then almost blindingly bright. “Oh, my god,” she whispers. “Jude is going to be dealt the ultimate metaphorical Uno reverse card during her own marriage proposal.”

Zoe blinks. “I understood maybe twenty-five percent of what you just said.”

Hanna waves it off. “So, the awesomeness of all of that aside, this is still going down this week, right? Under the twinkling lights of a lovingly decorated tree, as friends and family clap and cheer?”

“It’s happening tonight,” Zoe corrects. “Under the stars, while being allowed their perfect, appropriate privacy, on the heated rooftop terrace of the Ritz-Carlton hotel downtown.”

Hanna blinks at her a few times, then whistles low. “Fancy.”

Zoe shrugs. “Hardly. But it sure beats hunching around dying foliage in their living room.”

Hanna sends her a pleading look. “Can we at least get them one of those horse-drawn sleighs to take them to the restaurant?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Never pretended otherwise.”

Hanna gives Zoe another three whole seconds of what she must believe is a disapproving glare but comes across more like a sad little pout, and then she drops the matter entirely with an untroubled shrug. “Whatever, Ebenezer, I’m going to take a shower.” She waggles her eyebrows at her, like a dork. “Wanna join me?”

Zoe lets out a shocked laugh. “Uh, no? We have to find a way to get you out of here before Alma finds out you never left?”

“Zoe.” Hanna’s expression is far too fond for someone who fucked all night and didn’t get to come even once. “We’re all adults here. It’s probably a good thing Alma didn’t find me naked in your bed, but why don’t we just —go downstairs, and fess up? It doesn’t have to be a big deal.”

Zoe stares at her. “Have you met Alma?”

Hanna blinks back, then bites her lip in a failed attempt to hide a grin. “So it will be a little, tiny bit of a deal.”

Zoe clenches her jaw. “Please,” she says. “I thought we were on the same page about this. Hanna, they can’t know.”

It’s only when she sees Hanna’s smile falter, then fade entirely, that Zoe realizes she may not have communicated that as clearly as she thought.

“Oh,” Hanna says, blinking rapidly. “Okay. Sure! If that’s, yeah, I mean —we can keep it clean, so to speak, if you want. Just—” She clears her throat. “Pretend it never happened, or whatever.” She looks lost, and embarrassed, and like she’s trying very hard to be understanding.

Zoe hates it. Especially that last one. She’s struck by a tremendously irrational urge to make it better, to smooth out that crinkle in Hanna’s brow. But why should she try to explain herself further, when it seems Hanna got the message quite clearly?

“I don’t mean it like that,” she hears herself say, bewilderingly. “I’m only —” Zoe fumbles around blindly for an explanation that doesn’t require disclosing that Zoe Zuydervelt—pragmatist, empiricist, logician—is convinced that, when it comes to love, she’s been cursed with an equally devastating variant of King Midas’s touch.

The answer comes to her in a stroke of inspiration sparked by pure despair. “Remember that bet I mentioned they have going about the two of us?” she says, feeling both relieved and irritatingly contrite. “About us—” she gestures between their bodies.

Hanna stares at her for a long moment. “No way,” she says eventually. “You can’t be that petty.”

And fine, maybe it does make Zoe look petty. But *petty* is better than *poisoned.* “Your sister bet we wouldn’t,” Zoe points out, presenting her words like a lure on a fishing line. “Do you remember what she said about me? How she lied to you on purpose, to keep you from making the first move?”

Zoe watches, gratified, as realization dawns on Hanna's face. Raising her eyebrow in what she's fully aware is a perfect, triumphant arch, Zoe inquires, "Feeling a little petty yourself, now? A little vengeful, perhaps?"

"But she lost," Hanna says. "Why would I want to keep that a secret?"

Zoe shrugs a cool shoulder. "I'm sure you'll be able to find a way to use it to your advantage."

There's a beat. And then Hanna's whole demeanor changes, from small and hesitant to gleefully vindictive. "Do you think that window opens?" she asks.

So it's possible Zoe oversold it just a tad. "Are you insane?" she demands. "That's a two-story drop."

"Snow is soft, right?" Hanna already has the window open, examining the ground below. "I can climb out on the ledge here," she says, "make my way over to Sofia's balcony, I think, and slide down the side—"

Zoe regards her, freckled and golden and dressed only in sunlight. "You may want to put some clothes on first."

Hanna looks sheepishly down at herself. "Yeah, yeah. Good idea."

Five minutes and a fully padded, neon-green-and-pink snowsuit later, Hanna has one leg out the window, and Zoe is attempting to help her, harried and still half-naked, when Hanna freezes.

"What?" Zoe asks.

"There's—" Hanna huffs. "How could I possibly have gone into town? All of our cars are here."

". . . Fuck."

There's another, much less gentle knock on the door.

"Fuck."

The words are whisper-yelled right into the wood of the door: "Hanna? I know you're in there."

Judith.

Zoe and Hanna stare at each other.

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FOURTEEN

IN HER RELATIVELY BRIEF time on this Earth, Zoe Zuydervelt has had to mastermind some sophisticated escapes. By the time she was nine, Xander had already helped her perfect the art of slipping smoothly from church pews, holiday galas and Tippy's gin-fueled rages. Three weeks after Lovis left her, Zoe had spotted her at a conference and gracefully managed to disappear offstage in the middle of her own presentation, without anyone noticing something was amiss. But none of these escapes, in retrospect, seem quite as daunting as the one she's facing now.

"Open up before I kick the door down," Judith hisses.

Hanna looks genuinely torn. After a moment's consideration, and with an apologetic look at Zoe, she climbs back inside.

"Hanna, don't," Zoe demands, mortified. "What are you doing?"

But it's too late to intervene. Hanna has opened the door just the smallest crack, but it's wide enough for her sister to slip through. Judith is shielding her eyes, her face the color of murder. "Are you both even decent?" she demands, before peering through the space between two of her fingers, clearly unhappy to see Zoe standing there wearing only an unbuttoned shirt. In her other hand, she's holding a glass of water and a bottle of acetaminophen. "I assume you don't really need these," she growls.

Hanna reaches for the water. "Actually—"

Judith shoves the glass into her hand. "Oh, gross, get away from me."

Zoe's been on the receiving end of some truly threatening gazes, but she'll never get used to the one Judith trains on her as Hanna finishes the water in a single gulp. Zoe tries, though; squares her jaw and says, far braver than she feels, "You should have known better than to bet against me, Kaplan."

Judith's lip twitches with disdain. "Should have known better than to count on you two to keep it in your pants, you mean."

"Right!" Hanna claps her hands together, her face lit up in much too bright of a smile. "Now that the pleasantries are out of the way, maybe we can consider how to move ourselves past this super-comfortable and totally emotionally sound little situation?"

Judith regards her sister with suspicion. "You mean you're not going to gloat?"

"About you losing that bet? In spite of you playing really, really dirty?" Hanna purses her lips and cocks her shoulder. "Saving that for later."

"Wait, seriously?" Judith takes a moment longer to scrutinize her, puzzled and more than a little wary. "Whatever, I'll take it—anything, literally, to keep your bullshit from getting in the way of my proposal tonight. Just—let me lead, and say as few words as humanly possible." She straightens, looking them over like they're military academy cadets. "Zoe, for the love of god, put some clothes on and go distract Alma. We'll follow you down in a few minutes. Hanna, please tell me you weren't about to climb out of that window."

Hanna shrugs. "Snow is soft, right?"



Zoe finds Alma in the kitchen, frowning at yesterday's coffee grounds. "Reading your fortune?" she asks her.

"Yes," Alma says. "See that sort of F-shape, right here? What do you think it stands for? Failure? Falsehood? Fatality?"

Zoe wisely keeps the first word she thinks of to herself.

Alma looks her up and down. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Much." Zoe is in fact feeling much worse, and absolutely asking Judith later to outfit her with a coffee IV drip in order to get through the next twelve hours without falling over, but Alma doesn't need to know that.

Alma looks about as good as Zoe feels. Zoe waves a hand at her slumped shoulders and clearly distressed hair. “What’s happening here?”

Alma looks at her. “I am panicking, Zo, have you not been paying attention?”

Zoe gets two soup bowls and fills them with fresh coffee. “The weather’s looking better. Are you thinking of going up the mountain today?”

Alma groans. “I’m mostly thinking of throwing up. Jude is in a really weird mood this morning and it’s kind of freaking me out, especially with what’s supposed to go down tonight.”

Zoe congratulates herself on the disaffected sound she manages to make, considering she has a pretty good idea what Judith’s weird mood is about. “I’m sure you’re just projecting,” she tells Alma. “It might help if you stopped being such an obvious wreck.” She sets Alma’s coffee down on the table in front of her and gently squeezes her shoulder. “Want me to make you some eggs?”

Alma sighs deeply. “Two, over easy. And I want avocado toast.” She dolefully sips her coffee, pouting. “You’re an awful best friend.”

She doesn’t know the half of it. Zoe kisses the top of her head. “I’ve been telling you this, but you never listen.”

Judith and Hanna join them just as the toast is beginning to brown.

“Look who I found in the garage, trying to get your snowmobile started,” Judith announces brightly, presenting her sister with the subtlety of an amateur magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Zoe groans internally. Fortunately, Alma just looks relieved at her girlfriend’s cheerful tone.

It’s too early for optimism, however. Judging by the ecstatic look on Hanna’s face, Judith failed to relay to her sister the exact details of their cover story, and Hanna blurts, “You guys have a *sno—?”*

“*This* one,” Judith silences her by jabbing a not-very-subtle elbow into her ribs, “apparently discovered it in the garage yesterday and decided she couldn’t wait another minute to take it for a spin. Too bad it hasn’t worked since last winter.”

Zoe apprehensively checks Alma’s response to the obvious lie, but Alma is too busy scheming to notice anything amiss. She winks at Hanna, blissfully ignorant of the wool being pulled over her eyes. “Zoe could give you a hand,” she says. “She’s got magic fingers, could fix that right up. You should take her for a ride.”

“She does.” Hanna is grinning like a Cheshire cat. “I bet,” she says. “I’d love that.” Her smile grows wider with every word, until Judith jabs her again, sharp enough this time to make her sister flinch.

Alma is too busy gloating to notice their painful exchange.

Hanna is still rubbing her side when she notices the food Zoe is preparing. “Ooh, breakfast!” she rejoices, leaping forward like she’s ready to start eating the eggs right out of the pan.

“Not unless you lose that snowsuit first,” Zoe tells her, stepping in front of Hanna to block her access to the stove. “That thing is loud enough to trigger another migraine.”

Zoe watches the conflict playing out on Hanna’s face as they size each other up, the temptation of making another awful joke about Zoe asking Hanna to take off her clothes going to war with the prospect of a home-cooked meal. They’re standing a little too close to be strictly friendly. Judith looks ready to strangle them both, but Hanna’s appetite wins out; her sister barely needs to nudge her out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

When Hanna and Judith are out of earshot, Alma tiptoes up behind Zoe. “So,” she fishes, clearly attempting to sound casual but coming off suspiciously eager, “since Hanna couldn’t confirm the reservation, I assume dinner at the Ritz is a no-go?”

“Linh has it handled,” Zoe fibs, knowing there never was an issue in the first place.

“Oh, that’s just great,” Alma scoffs. She turns, rakes her fingers through her hair and stops at the kitchen island, leaning forward on both hands. “So does literally *everyone* know?”

Zoe turns off the stove before she faces her friend fully, folding her arms and tilting her chin in what she knows is a truly formidable disapproving expression. There’s only enough room in this beautiful friendship for one of them to be a disaster at any given time, and currently Zoe is barely holding it together herself. “Alma Maria Florencia Valdes,” she says, watching Alma straighten instinctively at the use of her full name, “are you getting cold feet?”

“Um, obviously?” Alma frowns at her. “I thought it was clear to you by now what a coward I am.”

Zoe’s eyebrow barely twitches, but it gets the message across.

Alma slowly pushes out a breath. “Please tell me at least my girlfriend is still in the dark.”

“I guess that depends,” Zoe says, pretending her sanity doesn’t depend on her best friend’s answer to the question she’s about to ask. “Do you think Hanna is capable of keeping a secret?”

Zoe observes as Alma’s face drains of all color. She straightens, clearly spooked. “She wouldn’t tell.”

“If you say so.” Zoe gives her a sideways glance. “You know her better than I do.”

“Did they go upstairs together?” Alma’s sudden grip on Zoe’s arms is like steel. “Judith?” she calls out, her voice shaking. “Come get breakfast, babe!” And to Zoe, furtively, “Come up to the ski lodge with us today. You’re like, Hanna Kaplan catnip. You can help me keep them separated.”

Zoe laughs without a trace of humor and pulls away to grab a knife. She makes a smooth, decisive cut into one of the avocados. “No way never, it’s like you’re *trying* to get me killed.”

Alma follows her like a bullheaded puppy. “You can borrow Sofia’s boots. I had to get her new ones this year.”

“No.”

Alma peers around the corner and down the hall. “Mi vida,” she yells, a touch of hysteria in her voice, “your eggs are getting cold!” Then she bounces back over to Zoe. “The lodge has a restaurant. It has a really nice sundeck.”

“Oh, well.” Zoe rolls her eyes. “Count me in, you know I adore burning to a crisp in the company of drunk middle-aged men.”

Alma bites her lip and takes a deep breath. “Come up with us and I promise from here on out I’ll personally deal with the Papastathopoulos account.”

Now *that* is a truly desperate bid. It can only mean one thing, and Zoe isn’t sure how to feel about it.

“That’s it,” Alma decides, “I’m going up there. I bet Hanna’s telling Jude right now.”

“They cleared the pass, didn’t they?”

Zoe notes her question sounds disappointed even to her own ears, but Alma doesn’t seem to notice. She just stares at her, her mouth a rigid line, her eyes wide with panic. When Zoe moves toward the living room to search for the TV remote, Alma blocks her path.

Zoe fixes her with a level gaze. “Alma.”

“Zo—”

“Are you guys gonna wrestle?” Sofia has been hiding in her blanket fort on the couch again. Zoe is happy to know Sofia is using the ninja stealth she’s obviously picked up from Judith for *good*, unlike her future stepmom.

“Sweetheart,” Zoe tells her, “be a friend and find the local news channel for me?”

“Actually mija, could you go find Jude?” Alma shoots her daughter a desperate look. “Ahora mismo, porfis?”

Sofia blinks at them, unmoving, then slowly lifts the remote.

Alma’s tone turns sharp. “Sofia, I’d like to remind you I’m still in charge of your wardrobe. I can make sure to purchase some *truly* bold statement pieces for when you go back to school next month.”

Sofia’s finger hesitates.

“Ignore your mother, sweetheart.” Zoe points out smoothly, “I can buy you all the graphic tees you want.”

Sofia smiles slyly at that, clearly tempted but still very carefully weighing Zoe’s offer. She inquires, “Would a dress for the Spring semi-formal be included in this deal?”

“Jeez, babe, what’s the rush?” Judith has entered the kitchen behind them, rounding the counter to bite into a piece of toast. “Oh hey, Zuydervelt, did Alma mention they cleared the pass?”

Zoe lifts a pointed eyebrow at Alma.

Alma sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. “You can’t go yet,” she says, and Zoe watches calmly as her best friend scrambles for an excuse to keep her within reach of Hanna Kaplan’s charms. “You’re recovering from a migraine,” Alma tries. “Doesn’t that affect your ability to drive?”

Zoe pauses, buying time to weigh the pros and cons of allowing Alma to persuade her to stay another day. It would help her ensure her friends’ proposal happens as planned, securing her win.

It would also give her another night with Hanna.

Considering how unexpectedly complicated it’s turned out to be for Zoe to hide her indiscretion from their friends—not to mention her intensifying infatuation with the woman involved—she isn’t sure if she should mark that last one down as a pro or a con.

“Not . . . *that* much,” she defers.

“But if you’re leaving, who’s gonna feed us?” Sofia asks.

“Here you go,” Judith says, handing Sofia one of the plates of eggs and toast she’s carried over and plopping down next to her on the couch.

“Actually,” Zoe announces, as if it’s a surprise instead of the proposal opportunity she’s privately discussed with each of them, “I got you two a dinner reservation at the Ritz-Carlton tonight. A thank you, for being such *courteous* hosts.”

Both of them freeze for a full five seconds. Judith and Alma are terrible liars, but fortunately they’re too focused on keeping their own secret to notice the other is keeping one too. They both swallow nervously, exclaiming “That’s so nice!” and “Zoe, you shouldn’t have!” in perfect, exaggeratedly delighted sync.

Sofia is pouting. “What about me and Hanna?”

Zoe smiles at her, genuinely wistful. “I was going to suggest the drive-in for burgers and shakes,” she says. “But I’m afraid I’m going to have to take a rain check.”

Sofia’s despondent expression serves as a perfect mirror to Zoe’s own heart. She steels herself against it. *Suck it up, Zuydervelt. Muster some of that stone-cold, unshakable resolve.*

As if sensing her hesitation, like a shark detecting blood in the water, Alma ushers Zoe back to the kitchen where Sofia and Judith can’t overhear. “One more night,” she begs. “Help me keep Hanna occupied until dinner at least.” She’s practically pouting now. “Please? It’s Christmas Eve.”

Zoe snorts. “No it’s not.”

“It’s as close to it as we’re gonna get. All of my favorite people are here.”

And that’s, well, *very* unfair. “Fine,” Zoe says. But as she sizes up her best friend, who has worked very hard to get her into an impossibly complicated but also unequivocally pleasurable situation, Zoe can’t resist one final jab. “Probably best I’m here to pick up the pieces when Judith inevitably breaks your heart.”

Alma’s distress is immediate, and highly gratifying. “Why would she do *that?”* she hisses.

Zoe gives her a smug look. “Because you are a *lousy* host, and you have an outright evil propensity for emotional blackmail.”

Alma blinks back at her slowly, thoroughly unamused. She mimics taking a cap off her middle finger and makes a show of running it across her mouth like it’s lipstick, all while maintaining vengeful eye contact.

If Alma is surprised this is all it takes to persuade notorious workaholic Zoe Zuydervelt to tack an extra day onto her involuntary vacation, she takes great care not to let it show.

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FIFTEEN

“YOU ALRIGHT THERE, CHAPARRITA?” Alma calls out.

Zoe Zuydervelt needs a nap, or a gurney, or maybe a shoulder to cry on. It’s barely 11 a.m., and she’s nearly fallen face-down in the snow five times already. It doesn’t help that Sofia’s old boots are at least two sizes larger than her satin Manolos, and honestly probably equally unsuited for traversing the hundred yards from where they parked their cars to the aerial tram that will take them up to the ski lodge.

Why did she agree to this, again?

“You can grab on to my arm,” Hanna offers gallantly, and then she continues in a softer—but much more lascivious—tone, close to Zoe’s ear, “I recall that really worked for you, last night.”

Zoe does not shiver at the tickle of Hanna’s breath on her skin. If goosebumps do happen to rise from her neck down to her chest, it’s clearly due to the fact that Colorado’s freezing temperatures are incompatible with human life. “I’m fine,” she barks, trudging bravely ahead.

Judith is hanging back impatiently, ready to pry the two of them apart. “So Hanna,” she yells, plucking her sister off of Zoe like a stubborn weed and shoving her forcefully toward Sofia and Alma, “do you think you’re going to try snowboarding today?”

“Oh hey,” Alma says, performing some impressive choreography in an effort to put as many bodies as possible between the Kaplan sisters, “Hanna

and Sofia could take a class together! Haven't you been wanting to try that, mija?"

"Not when it was just me and a bunch of three-year-olds," Sofia says. "But if Hanna's in, a huevo, me apunto!"

"I'll allow precisely one of those, today," Alma grumbles. "I hope you enjoyed that."

Zoe stumbles for the six hundredth time that morning, and Hanna is at her side in a second.

"Maybe you should let Hanna carry you," Alma suggests.

Zoe blushes. Judith sneers. Hanna's grin can be seen from space.

"Fuck you all very much," Zoe growls.



It's not the snow, or the cold, or the posturing jocks that make Zoe hate skiing. Or, you know. Those aren't the things she hates *most.* The worst part by far is the undiluted terror of being hoisted up a mountain, a single hauling cable the only thing keeping her from tumbling to an icy death, all while her would-be fellow victims *ooh* and *ah* over the stunning views the gigantic windows offer of the ground below.

Zoe Zuydervelt isn't fond of heights, let's say.

The aerial tram is packed. Zoe hasn't been crammed this close to a bunch of strangers since that one party she got dragged to in college. They haven't taken off yet, and Zoe is getting antsier by the minute, praying furiously the mechanical defect that must be the cause of their delay will be enough to derail the day's plans altogether.

"Would you relax?" Hanna is pressed firmly into Zoe's personal space, having stubbornly refused to get jostled from her side during the rush of people boarding. The same cannot be said for the rest of their small group, their faces and voices lost in the din of the swarm. "I swear my jaw is cramping up just looking at you."

Zoe regards her skeptically. "Really," she says, "you think *that's* why your jaw is cramping up?"

A firm thumb digs gently into the muscle at the small of Zoe's back, startling her, but then she sees Hanna's smile and recognizes the warmth of her, even through her coat, and her sweater, and both of her undershirts. It's

comfort, reassurance, support—everything Zoe has taught herself not to need.

"So you're not scared," Hanna says, smiling impishly.

Zoe is indignant. "Why would I be scared?"

The tram swoops into motion, lifting them up, and Zoe is unable to contain a squawk.

Hanna chuckles, leaning in close. "So elegant," she says. "So brave."

Zoe straightens and glares at her. "I don't like you at all."

Hanna leans in, her breath washing over the electrified spot at Zoe's nape she had discovered the night before, and Zoe shivers involuntarily. "Liar," Hanna breathes.

Zoe hates that she's so sure, that Hanna *knows*, that Zoe has told her as much. Hates, too, that it's as close as she's going to get to telling Hanna how she truly feels about her. Hates that what she feels is afraid—of leaving, of losing.

Of wanting like this.

Hanna inches even closer, pressing herself along her back and looping one arm around her waist, resting a hand on Zoe's stomach. "Close your eyes," she says.

Zoe Zuydervelt has, historically, faced her various potential final moments with steely-eyed dignity and determination, so the idea of following Hanna's direction seems ludicrous. "Why would I want to do that?" she huffs.

Hanna's fingers twitch against her belly, instigating a quick flicker of interest a good few inches further down. "Just be here with me for a minute," Hanna urges.

"I'm fine," Zoe lies, irritation spiking hot at the tremor in her voice.

Hanna's words glance warm against her jaw. "Then why are you not breathing?"

Vindictively, Zoe sucks in a deep breath and then lets it out, the movement pushing her belly more firmly against Hanna's hand. Hanna inches it down slowly, splaying her fingers, humming, and the sensation is distracting enough Zoe realizes a moment too late her rigid shoulders have melted back against Hanna's chest. "That's better," Hanna says. "Isn't that better?"

Zoe is acutely aware of the touch of Hanna's hand as it continues slowly on its downward path. "Hanna," she warns, staring resolutely ahead, still

aware of where she is but now significantly more worried about dying of mortification rather than traumatic aortic transection, “what are you doing?”

“I’m distracting you,” Hanna mutters. “Is it not working?”

Zoe slants her lashes surreptitiously at the strangers standing nearby, boisterously ribbing their friends and exclaiming loudly about the view. She finds herself beginning to relax at the realization no one is watching them—and then she meets the full force of Judith Kaplan’s homicidal glare.

She looks more than willing to inflict a little aortic trauma, herself.

Judith is the first one to reunite with them after the doors of the tram slide open to spit its passengers out onto the slopes. The ski lodge is settled snugly against the side of the mountain, its pale wood paneling gleaming in the sunlight. Zoe can practically taste her first sip of Zinfandel already. If she’s learned anything over the past few days, it’s that it’s always wine o’clock in the mountains.

Judith is so mad she can barely breathe, blushing furiously as she pulls them aside. “Would you two stop groping each other for five damn seconds?”

Zoe bristles. “Uh, excuse me—”

“We were being discreet,” Hanna argues, which is precisely not the point Zoe was about to make.

“Right,” Judith spits. “For fuck’s sake, I have more important things to worry about than babysitting the two of you. Could you try to muster a speck of self-control?”

Hanna giggles. Zoe seethes. “Bite me, Kaplan,” she sneers.

“Um,” Hanna interjects hastily, “which Kaplan sister did you mean to address there? Because I believe I’m much better suited to the—”

Zoe shoves her.

“Yes. Good. Better,” Judith says. “Let’s see more of *that* energy.” She glares at her sister, who smiles serenely in return. She asks Zoe, gesturing at Hanna, “Would you just, I don’t know, keep her restrained or something?”

Zoe can’t resist. “Not *exactly* what I had in mind,” she answers suavely, gratified when two jaws drop in response.

“What has gotten *into* you?” Judith asks, stupidly, perfectly, as Hanna beams, looking proud.

“I didn’t think you’d want the specifics,” Zoe deadpans.

Hanna whoops, high and joyful. Judith is looking marginally less impressed than her sister. “Act your age, Zuydervelt,” she grumbles.

Zoe spots Alma and Sofia waving, making their way towards them. She puts a respectable distance between Hanna and herself, stepping closer to Judith. “You could try showing a little gratitude, Kaplan,” she tells her quietly. “I’ve handed you the perfect setting for your grand romantic proposal. All you have to do is work up the courage to actually ask.”

“No,” Judith grits out. “What *we* need to do is make sure Alma never finds out she won that stupid bet.”

Fair enough. “Agreed,” Zoe says, matching Judith’s solemn tone. “Or we’d be hearing about it until we’re both in our graves.”

Judith’s mouth twitches into something almost resembling a smile, her dark eyes glinting. “I’m glad we understand each other.”

Hanna watches them, baffled. “You both need therapy.”



Alma wasn’t lying about the lodge’s restaurant. The outside terrace is heated, suspiciously uncrowded, and bathed in sunlight save for one shaded spot in the far corner. That’s where Zoe installs herself, arranging her blankets and her laptop and her files around her, content in her own little approximation of an office. Hidden behind her sunglasses and an indecently large glass of wine, Zoe settles in for the afternoon.

Burying herself in her work is a comfort, almost meditative. She’s at ease with facts and figures and enjoys arranging them in a more accessible form. Zoe admits Hanna was right—it does feel good, allowing herself a bit of pride as she reviews Austra Biogenics’ small triumphs and successes, acknowledging how well her company has managed to recover from her brother’s high-profile manhunt and eventual arrest.

The view is unexpectedly distracting. The mountains are breathtaking, sure—and now that Zoe’s feet are on solid ground again she’s actually able to appreciate them properly—but Zoe also has a straight shot to the beginners’ class Hanna and Sofia have signed up for. Zoe finds it very hard not to let her attention wander when Hanna is goofing off in her peripheral vision, looking like someone threw a bucket of kindergarteners on her. It’s clear Hanna has the snowboarding coach, as well as the handful of parents not treating the class as a babysitting service, thoroughly charmed.

“Oh, that’s more like it,” Linh Hùng grins appreciatively, taking in Zoe’s surroundings over a crystal clear video call connection. And then, a little

jealous, “Why doesn’t the sun ever shine like that in LA?”

Zoe peers critically at her laptop screen. Linh is looking suspiciously flushed, and while she’s talking, a guy Zoe has never seen before walks into frame, wearing nothing but shorts and a pair of AirPods. When he pauses behind Linh to take a selfie in front of what looks like a full-length mirror, Zoe narrows her eyes at her assistant. “Are you at the gym?” she asks, incredulous.

Linh hums noncommittally. “It’s called working remote, maybe you’ve heard of it? My boss pretty much started the trend when she took off on a ski trip giving absolutely zero notice.”

Zoe’s attention snags briefly on Hanna’s acrobatics again. She’s somehow managing to follow along with the coach’s instructions without dropping the clown act, falling on her ass dramatically before turning the practice maneuver the coach just demonstrated into a silly-yet-effective, knees-and-elbows-swinging dance routine.

Pulling her eyes back to her screen, Zoe glowers at her assistant. “You know just as well as I do I’m being held here against my will,” she reminds her.

“Really?” Linh’s smile looks dangerously smug. “Because I subscribed to CDOT’s updates, and I heard they opened the pass this morning.”

Zoe keeps from blushing through sheer force of will. Down in the snow below, Hanna is making a theatrical production of chasing after a runaway snowboard, navigating her own board down the practically non-existent incline balancing on one leg while the kids shriek and cheer. “I still have a bet to win,” Zoe informs Linh primly.

Linh takes a deep drink from her water bottle. “There’s no way you’ll get them to propose at the same time,” she says when she comes back up for air. “Too many variables. One of them is bound to chicken out at the last minute.” And then she says, in the same breath, “So did you sleep with her yet?”

Zoe sighs. She pulls up a new email in the screen they’re sharing and starts typing.

Linh frowns, confused. “What are you doing?”

Zoe doesn’t look up. “Emailing HR to file a complaint against you.”

“Right! *So,*” Linh deflects seamlessly, “about those emails we’ve been getting from Papastathopoulos’s legal team . . .”

They get down to proper business, then, but not before Zoe glances down to the snowboarding class one last time. Hanna has taken Sofia’s hands and they’re spinning leisurely down the ramp together in a slow but joyful pirouette, laughing so hard Zoe can hear them clearly.

Hanna is a fool.

An absolutely lovely, undeniably gorgeous fool.

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SIXTEEN

IT'S MAYBE AN HOUR and a half later when Zoe stretches and yawns, ready to take a break. Linh has brought her fully up to date, muting her mic occasionally to do a couple of reps on various intimidating-looking machines. They're wrapping up their call just as Alma and Sofia saunter up.

"Is that Linh?" Alma asks. "I want to talk to her. Sofia, go get us some food please, I'm starving."

"Can we get hot chocolate?" Sofia asks.

Alma sinks down in the chair next to Zoe, propping her feet up on the table and pulling off her gloves. "Um, obviously."

"Some ice cream, too?"

Alma groans indulgently, leaning her head back against the chair. "Why not."

"Fries?"

Alma waves her off. "Lo que quieras, mija."

"Bye Sofia!" Linh calls out, and then she waits patiently until Alma gives the all clear. "So did they sleep together yet?" she asks as soon as she has it. "Zoe's not telling, but she's looking eerily relaxed."

"I'm recovering from a migraine," Zoe retorts, worried there might be some truth to Linh's statement. "I'm on a lot of drugs." She holds up her half-empty glass. "Also Alma's appalling behavior is driving me to drink."

“You don’t need anyone to drive you,” Alma counters, taking the glass from her hand. Zoe chokes on a high-def vision from last night that proves quite the opposite. “By the way, Linh,” Alma continues, “thank you for smoothing things out with tonight’s dinner reservation.”

To Linh’s credit, she needs only a brief nod from Zoe to pick up her cue. “No problem,” she says smoothly. “I hear congratulations are in order. Although, are you absolutely certain you want to go through with this? I hear divorce rates are—”

“Bye Linh, thank you!” Zoe sings, and hangs up. Alma snorts. Zoe side-eyes her. “Children, both of you.”

“We love you,” Alma says, reaching over to pat Zoe’s cheek. “We both want you to be happy.”

Zoe swoops her lashes dismissively, before realizing the gesture isn’t very effective when half her face is hidden behind her sunglasses.

Alma sniffs at Zoe’s wine before taking a sip. “You do realize, with this whole hermit thing you’ve got going on, you’re essentially robbing other people of the privilege of your friendship, right?” She hands Zoe back her glass. “That’s not very humanitarian of you.”

Zoe feels her mouth twitching in spite of herself. “Friendship, huh? Is *that* what you’re hoping will happen between Hanna and me?”

Alma regards her tiredly. “I’d settle for it, at this point, honestly. It’s exhausting work. I could use a backup BFF.”

Zoe knocks back what’s left of her wine and studies the mountains, the snow, the ridiculously bright blue sky above them. It’s an almost exact match to the color of Hanna’s eyes. “Where are Judith and Hanna, anyway? I thought you were afraid to leave the two of them alone.”

Alma winces, steering Zoe’s attention to the slopes with a tilt of her chin. “You try keeping up with those two. It’s like a dick-measuring contest out there.”

Zoe peers out over her sunglasses, raising a hand as a shield against the unrelenting sunshine. Amidst the constant stream of people coming down the mountain, exhibiting varying amounts of finesse, Zoe makes out two tiny figures that are clearly racing each other, one on skis and the other on a board. “Are they—is that *them?*”

Out of the two Kaplan siblings, it’s obvious Judith has had more practice; her movements are razor-sharp and quick, her balance absolutely impeccable. But Hanna is a sight to behold. She’s flowing down the

mountain like she's made of water, demonstrating a sort of languid, almost heavy poise, and she's only marginally slower than her sister.

In fact Zoe wonders, watching Hanna come to a stop inches from her sister and spraying her with a perfect arch of snow, if Hanna didn't allow Judith to win just so she could do exactly that.

Zoe's mouth is dry. Other parts of her are decidedly less so. "Didn't Hanna learn how to snowboard literally five minutes ago?" she asks.

Alma shrugs. "She's like that. I don't know how."

Zoe blinks. "She's not human, I think."

"That would explain it."

Zoe blames the wine for her soft heart, for the way it's squeezing in her chest, urging her to clarify she recognizes Hanna for more than just the perfect physical specimen she is. An apology, a defense. "She's kind," she says.

"She is," Alma agrees.

Zoe takes a breath and holds it for a long moment before letting it go. "She can do a lot better than me."

Alma rolls her eyes dramatically. "Not this again."

"It's true though, isn't it?" Zoe asks, not even sure anymore why she said anything at all but clumsily seeing it through. "You said it yourself: I don't let people in, anymore."

"Which is a *choice*," Alma points out.

Zoe picks at the sleeve of her sweater, avoiding her best friend's eyes. "It just feels like this cruel, karmic merry-go-round. Lovis and Xander, and Sandrine, and even—" she glances at Alma's faded port scar, a pale, jagged line below her collarbone. She swallows. "At some point, you have to acknowledge that it can't be a coincidence. That there's just something wrong with me that makes people—"

"Don't you dare," Alma stops her. "If anyone's responsible for Xander's moral turpitude, it's that horrible woman who insists you call her Mother. And—I'm *not* done." Alma holds up a finger in warning when Zoe tries to protest. "It was Xander who made you such a perfect mark. You were a brilliant, beautiful, emotionally compromised woman, put haphazardly in charge of a multibillion-dollar company. *I* was dying," Alma gestures dramatically. "Honestly, I'm impressed Lovis was the only one who managed to take advantage of that nifty little situation."

“I should have recognized what was happening sooner,” Zoe says, feeling the bitterness twist her lips. “With Lovis and Xander both.”

Alma throws her hands up. “Why are you still carrying around all that guilt? You testified, they cleared you of involvement, and you cleaned up Xander’s mess. You are working harder than anyone I know to give people a chance of living a happy, healthy life. Why is it so hard to give yourself the same kind of—ay, te pasaste!”

A clinking of plates, accompanied by Sofia’s triumphant voice, have announced the arrival of an outrageously lavish lunch. Zoe can’t quite tell from Alma’s tone whether she’s impressed or genuinely trying to tell her daughter she went a bit overboard.

Before they dig into Sofia’s eclectic selection, Alma leans in close again and gives Zoe a final, heartfelt look. “Life is a goddamn gift, Zo,” she hushes, “and exactly none of us got to be here because we earned it. You deserve to be happy. And not because you’ve suffered a sufficient amount, but because you’re human, and you’re alive.”

Zoe needs to turn away and take a moment before she’s ready to show her face again.

Alma is right. Zoe realizes this.

Zoe Zuydervelt may not have the best track record when it comes to choosing the people she entrusts with her heart, but Alma Valdes is a miraculous exception.

~

For two people already committed to each other and clearly eager to enter the next chapter of their lives together, Alma and Judith are awfully skittish about the business of proposing. Zoe is beginning to wonder seriously if, had she not chosen to interfere with their affairs, they would have managed to get it together enough to ask each other at all.

They all hang out in Alma and Judith’s bedroom while the brides-to-be get ready to go to dinner. Sofia and Hanna are lying belly-down on the bed, kicking their legs in the air, and Zoe is propped up in the doorway. They pass a bag of kettle corn between them, watching Judith and Alma sprinting back and forth between their walk-in closet and the master bath in an awe-inspiring, one-time-only performance of perfectly synchronized panic.

It would be hilarious, had Zoe not had a stake in the evening's events taking place exactly as planned.

"Zoe, do you have some concealer I can borrow?" Judith pleads. She's sporting black slacks and a bra, and the most tightly tensed-up shoulders Zoe has ever seen. "I need something to cover up this hideous burn." Her nose and cheeks are barely flushed, just a faint memento from the afternoon sun that only makes her look younger and a little less severe, but Zoe doesn't dare disagree with her.

She nods. "In the bathroom, upstairs."

Alma has methodically tried on every single outfit she's brought to Colorado, and has now moved on to putting them together in creative and horribly misguided combinations. "You know you'll just end up wearing the gray pinstripe Armani," Zoe tells her. "Stop stalling."

Alma drops face-first on the bed next to Sofia. "I'm going to take just, like, a tiny little bit of a nap," she nuzzles. "I think it will help me feel better."

When Zoe finally gets them out the door, only twenty minutes late, it feels like a triumph. "Have fun, kids," Hanna tells her sister with a quick peck on her cheek. "Use protection."

Alma pauses on the steps. "Zoe, are you sure the suit is okay? I think the turquoise dress might be more—"

Hanna closes the front door on the rest of Alma's sentence, stepping close into Zoe's personal space in order to do so.

"Don't you kiss *me,"* Zoe warns her.

Sofia snorts. Hanna grins. "Maybe later," she says. "Burgers first."

The local drive-in is busy, evidently a major draw even this time of year. Browsing the menu through the rolled down window of the car, Zoe tries not to think of the grilled eggplant with cumin confit she could be having instead, bravely deciding to go for deep fried chicken wings and a baby spinach salad and—at Sofia's insistence—a supersized, seasonal *Mint Master Blast.*

Zoe has a feeling she'll be regretting her choice later. Her stomach is already churning, trying to digest the unfortunate combination of relief and mild depression that comes with knowing her job is done here, and this night with Hanna will be their last.

"You're going to taste delicious," Hanna grins into her hair while Sofia relays their order through the intercom.

Hanna's order is a chicken sandwich with extra pickles, fries with chili cheese, mozzarella sticks, a double cheeseburger with garlic sauce, and a serving of onion rings. "You, maybe not so much," Zoe teases.

The food takes half a century to arrive. By the time Sofia and Zoe are finished with theirs, it's almost 10 p.m. Hanna is still eating, the mountain of food in her lap enough to keep her occupied for at least another twenty minutes. "We should head home," Zoe suggests.

Hanna sucks the tips of her fingers exactly the way she did when first tasting Zoe, the night before. The memory hits her like a shot.

"You in a hurry to get to bed?" Hanna asks, her eyes sparkling with humor.

"*I* am," Sofia says from the backseat. "I'm exhausted. I hardly got any sleep last night, with the way the wind was moaning around the house."

Zoe's heart goes still in her chest. It had been a perfect, starlit night. The only sounds Sofia could possibly have heard would have come from their bedroom.

"I wouldn't know," Hanna breezes. "I slept like a baby."

"Sure." Sofia rolls her eyes. "Lucky you."

"I sure hope so," Hanna says, giving Zoe a wildly obvious wink.

Zoe can't stand it a moment longer. "Get out," she tells Hanna. "You can eat while I drive."

Hanna coos before doing as she says. "I've never tried *that* one, before."

Later, at the hospital, when attempting to explain to Sofia's mother exactly how she traumatized her child, Zoe will throw Hanna under the bus without a moment's hesitation. It *was* her fault, after all; if Hanna was less of a messy eater, if she hadn't made an urgent request for napkins while Zoe was supposed to be watching the road, there would have been no collision at all. There would have been no tires skidding, no frantic swerve. No sudden, eerie silence. Hanna wouldn't have her hand on Zoe's breast, probably, at least not in a reflexive protective gesture.

And there definitely wouldn't be a lifeless shape lying in the middle of the road a few feet ahead, illuminated by the headlights of their car.

Sofia is the first one to speak. "Holy shit, dude," she whispers, her voice strange in the perfect stillness of the moment.

"Language," Zoe says absently, preposterously, her heart having fallen to the floor, rolling around somewhere between the gas pedal and the brake.

Hanna’s hand is still on Zoe’s chest. “I would like to state for the record that bad things happen when you refuse to let me take the wheel,” she says.

Zoe stares blankly ahead at the figure in the road, still hearing the thudding sound it made when she hit it with her car. *Is it alive? Is it human?*

Wait.

. . . is it wearing a Santa hat?

“Uh, Aunt Zoe?” Sofia asks. “Did we just kill Santa Claus?”

Excellent, Zoe thinks distantly, *there’s another one to hang over the Zuydervelt family mantel.*

All this time, she’d been expecting Colorado to take her out once and for all.

Never once had Zoe Zuydervelt considered she might actually be the one *doing* the killing.

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SEVENTEEN

ZOE ZUYDERVELT IS GOING to go to prison.

Of course even prison will be a relief after the drawn out, sensationalized Zuydervelt family circus trial that's bound to precede her sentence. She's going to have to speak to that despicable stain-on-mankind lawyer her father always favored, the one who has a perplexing ability to turn Tippy into a blushing, eyelash-batting "Oh, *you"* version of herself Zoe finds profoundly disturbing.

"Are you alright?"

Zoe is distantly aware Hanna's hand has moved from Zoe's chest down to her thigh, making sure both are now generously coated in garlic sauce. Then it's gone, reaching for the child in the backseat, the child Zoe's sworn to her mother to protect—her best friend, Alma Valdes, the three-stripe white belt Jiu Jitsu ("Which is far more impressive than it sounds, Zo!") badass who's going to murder Zoe with her bare hands once she gets word of what happened here tonight.

So maybe Zoe will be spared from having to deal with her father's lawyer, after all. She should text Linh to send Alma a thank you gift basket while she still can.

Hanna's voice sounds out again, warm and gentle. "Sofia, are you all in one piece back there?"

“Yeah, I was wearing my seatbelt.” Sofia’s voice sounds okay, if a fair bit louder than Zoe’s grown accustomed to. Loud enough for Zoe to hear despite the ringing in her ears. “Did we just kill Santa Claus?” Sofia asks again.

“I’m sure he’s fine, sweetie,” Hanna assures her, without a trace of irony. Gingerly, as if careful not to startle Zoe, she turns on the hazard lights, painting the snow around them a lurid red. “Zoe?” she enquires again.

Just a little way down the mountain, Judith and Alma are having their fancy rooftop dinner under the stars. They’ll be clinking their champagne glasses and laughing, plotting out the rest of their lives together. Zoe’s eyes are locked on the shape lying in the road. It still hasn’t stirred. She can’t breathe. If she tries, she’ll probably vomit.

Sofia’s foot gently prods the back of Zoe’s seat. “Try using your words, Aunt Zoe.”

Zoe swallows, straightening her shoulders, and lets it out. *“Fuck.”*

Hanna’s hand finds Zoe’s knee again and squeezes. “. . . perhaps try using different words?”

Zoe blinks, nodding. Right. *Language.* “I’m going to prison,” she corrects.

“No, look, we’re alright.” With the hand that’s not currently occupied, Hanna reaches to release her own seatbelt, yanking hard when it refuses to budge.

Zoe is really not “alright.” “I’ll have to pick up chess again.”

“Everything’s going to be fine.” Hanna struggles some more. “Would you actually mind giving me a hand?”

Zoe sighs. Hanna would never understand. “I loathe chess.”

Hanna tugs at her seatbelt again. “You’re fine,” she says. “I mean, it doesn’t actually look like we hit—” she pauses, holding her breath for a second as she peers out through the window. “We don’t think that’s actually Santa, do we?”

Zoe sets her jaw, a spark of resolve blooming inside her. “Maybe this time I’ll just try to get really buff, instead.”

Hanna freezes. “Wait a minute. *This* time?” She stares at her. “Are you saying you’ve been to prison before?”

Zoe tears her eyes away from the crumpled mass in their headlights for the first time since they stopped and focuses them on Hanna, instead. The

remains of Hanna's strawberry milkshake are dripping slowly down the front of her jacket and onto the passenger seat.

Hanna is never getting her deposit back.

"You're aware Santa Claus doesn't actually exist, right?" Zoe asks.

Hanna is attempting to maneuver herself out from under the seatbelt without undoing it, somehow. "Maybe—um. Maybe you should get out and check to see what we've hit."

"Me?" Zoe looks at her, appalled. "Why do *I* have go out and check?"

"My seatbelt is stuck!" Hanna yanks at it again, a touch more frantically this time. "And also I thought maybe you'd, you know. Dealt with . . . ? This kind of thing, before?"

Zoe can barely speak, she's so baffled.

Hanna is wide-eyed, but Zoe can't figure out if her expression is apologetic or genuinely fearful. "Don't look at me like that!" Hanna demands. "I don't know what billionaires do with their free time. You just told me you've been in prison!"

And, you know, that's the thing; everyone *thinks* Zoe Zuydervelt is toothsome, at first glance, pretty and clever and rich and a good liar when she needs to be, but there's a limit to how close she can allow people to get before they're caught up in the chaos that inevitably erupts around her, and they either leave or become part of the problem.

Zoe was just starting to believe Hanna might be different.

Fuck, part of her believes it still.

Zoe works her jaw, blinking a couple of times before she reaches over Hanna's far shoulder, assuring they're now both covered hip-to-neck in strawberry shake and garlic sauce. Hanna's breath is on Zoe's lips, syrupy-sweet with just a hint of chili cheese, and Zoe knows she'd still kiss her, if Hanna wanted her to. The thought that she may never do so again turns her disappointment into anger. "Jail," she says. With a quick flick of her wrist, she releases the catch of Hanna's seatbelt. "Pretrial. The charges were dropped."

"Thank you." Hanna's gaze is as open as ever. Zoe is close enough to see the small specks of gold around her pupils, the stray freckle at the corner of her mouth.

Zoe extricates herself from her with a great deal more reluctance than is strictly appropriate, considering their current predicament. "I'm not a bad person," she hears herself say. She's struck by how small the words make

her sound; they barely manage to strangle their way out of her throat, leaving it painful and swollen as if they're stuck there still.

"Oh, hey, I know that!" Hanna throws her arms around Zoe without a moment's hesitation. Zoe chooses to ignore the various foodstuffs seeping into her shirts in favor of taking in the warmth of Hanna's embrace, the comfort of her words. "I never thought you were!" She's brushing her hand down the back of Zoe's head in a manner deeply detrimental to Zoe's ability to maintain her composure. "I'm just—finding out all these new things I didn't know about you."

Zoe sniffs, horrified to find her nose is running, and then that there are actual tears in her eyes. "You've literally known me for two days, Hanna," she blubbers through trembling lips.

"So that ink I saw the other night," Hanna mumbles into her hair, "Am I right to assume those are actually prison tats? Because that would be pretty freaking—"

"Hanna!" Sofia's voice calls out to them, far quieter and decidedly less coming-from-inside-the-car than it was before.

Zoe and Hanna part quickly. *Right.* There's the small matter of her possible manslaughter, and the child she just endangered. Zoe blinks back her tears—back to the reality of Sofia no longer being in the back seat. Her eyes follow Hanna's as she looks up through the windshield and finds Sofia standing in the road ahead of them, stooped low over the lifeless shape crumpled there—or, more accurately, doubled over, shaking, her eyes closed tightly.

Hanna is out of the car and at her side in a flash. *Is Sofia crying? Is she throwing up?* Every muscle in Zoe's body is telling her to go to her, but she can't seem to remember how to move her legs.

In the red-tinted lights of the car, Zoe watches as Hanna hugs Sofia to her chest, before she joins her in what Zoe now recognizes as unrestrained *laughter.*

"Hey Aunt Zoe," Sofia calls out, a critical look aimed up at her phone, "this light is really washing me out. Do you think you could turn it off for a minute? Just while I make a quick video?"

“It isn’t funny,” Zoe grumbles. She’s staring at her hands on the steering wheel. She’s been trying to get them to stop shaking for almost ten minutes, but they’re out of control, adrenaline clearly taking its sweet time leaving her system.

Sofia has tried explaining it to her three times now. Zoe can tell from the way Sofia’s fingers are fiddling with the wet Santa hat she’d plucked from Zoe’s faux fatality that her patience is waning. She’d realized right away, so she says, seeing the fractured snowman on the road; the Santa outfit, the carrot. Some sort of TikTok challenge. Teenagers risking strangers’ lives for clout. A prank. A *joke*. The perpetrators clearly hadn’t wanted to stick around to deal with the aftermath.

“It’s not,” Hanna agrees, sounding properly castigated. “Someone could have gotten hurt.”

Sofia rolls her shoulders. “I know,” she admits. “I feel the way I did the day after they had us do the Cooper run in PE. Are you guys sore too?”

“We’re taking you to the hospital,” Zoe decides, renewed alarm bringing her to her senses instantaneously.

“Switch with me,” Hanna says. “I’ll drive.”

“Actually there’s a small, tiny problem,” Zoe confesses. Hanna looks her over, all bright-blue-eyed concern, until Zoe blurts, “I can’t walk.”

Hanna’s expression blooms into a grin. “I’ve noticed that about you.”

“Shut up,” Zoe snaps, scandalized at Hanna’s tactlessness in light of her condition. “Can’t you see I’m in shock?”

Hanna takes it in stride. “Come on.” She’s already bent over and pushed into Zoe’s personal space, sliding a warm, confident hand underneath Zoe’s thighs. “You helped me with my seatbelt, now I’ll help you with your legs.”

Zoe should definitely have just crawled her way out of the car. The way she’s feeling now, she probably could have comfortably slithered out of her seat and onto the asphalt. But instead, for the second time in twenty-four hours, Zoe Zuydervelt is lifted up in Hanna Kaplan’s arms, feeling both light-headed and leaden. Her hair whips around Hanna’s face in the snow-freckled breeze, like she’s some sort of damsel in distress, the love interest to Hanna’s square-jawed hero. As if Zoe deserves Hanna’s protection. As if she’s still worth saving.

Hanna drives. Extra carefully. It’s excruciating.

Zoe sits in the backseat, an anxious hand on the back of Sofia’s neck, feeling more like herself with every mile that passes at the speed of an

elderly person driving to church. “I could *run* faster than this,” she gripes.

Hanna chuckles softly. “I doubt that.”

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EIGHTEEN

THE EMERGENCY ROOM IS bright and loud, and packed—apparently an intoxicated group of friends on a weekend-getaway-slash-bachelorette-party decided it would be a splendid idea to go skiing on an unlit ramp, so the wait is a bit longer than Zoe thinks should be allowed.

Hanna has an arm wrapped around Sofia's shoulders and her eye on the food cart parked just outside the nurses' station. "If I say my neck is sore too, would I get to have one of those pudding cups?"

The receptionist tosses her a clipboard along with a thoroughly charmed smile. "Fill these out, and I'll see what I can do."

Hanna looks a little forlorn at her quest for dessert being suspended, and having been given a homework assignment instead.

Zoe holds out her hand. "Give it to me."

Hanna's pout melts away, making way for a mock-scandalized expression. "What," she asks, "here?"

Zoe breathes, practicing patience. "Hanna."

Hanna is glancing down the hallways as if she's checking out their options. "I suppose we could find an on-call room or something. I mean they do it in Grey's Anatomy all the time, right?"

Sofia snorts. Zoe suffers. *"Hanna."*

"Sorry." Hanna straightens and hands over the clipboard apologetically. "Just a joke, Sofia. See, some of us use humor to defuse stressful

situations.”

Sofia doesn’t seem fazed. “I have to pee,” she announces.

Hanna begins fidgeting immediately. “Gosh, me too. Let’s go find a bathroom.”

Zoe is left to entertain herself with the insurance forms. As a properly prepared aunt who takes her duties very seriously, she’s made sure all of the information she needs for a situation exactly like this one is included in an easily-accessible-though-thoroughly-encrypted file named The Good Aunt Rulebook, just a convenient couple of clicks away. Eyeing the names on the staff in/out board behind the front desk, Zoe’s fingers hesitate over her messenger app, noting the late hour, before pulling up the ongoing conversation with her assistant.

Linh’s reply pops up on her screen moments after Zoe has delivered the forms back to the receptionist. **ER doc on duty=June Park**, it reads. **Graduated 2009 CU Med. 2 formal reprimands for what looks to me like speaking her mind to disruptive patients. Overall favorable reviews. Single, 1 cat. Impeccable credit score. GREAT taste in shoes.** And then, in a separate message: **r u ok?**

Zoe makes a note to give Linh another raise as soon as HR will allow her to do so again. **All good**, she tells her. **Just a check-up.**

Linh replies almost instantaneously. **I don’t think you understand what a vacation is.**

Zoe allows her head to fall back against her seat and closes her eyes. What she really needs is to lie down and not get up for seven hundred years. The lack of sleep from the past forty-eight hours is finally catching up to her, and she’s at that stage where she has a tiny dream every time she blinks. The current one features the deserted streets of a tiny Tuscan town just after an early morning rain shower, with no one around to recognize her except for Hanna, who shimmers gold in the first rays of sunlight. She’s wearing a Santa hat.

“Hey, I know you.”

It’s some guy seated in chairs on the other side of the aisle, dressed sharp but red-eyed, sweating at his temples. He’s swaying slightly, propped up by the police officer at his side. “Zuydervelt, right? As in Zuydervelt Scientific?”

Zoe stiffens at the mention of her company’s former name. “You’ve got the wrong man.”

“No, no, you’re the brilliant bastard’s sister, I know you are. I’d recognize that pretty face anywhere.” He throws her a look that’s probably meant to be smoldering but comes off rather more lethargic. When Zoe fails to look charmed, he puffs out his chest. “I’m—”

“Drunk?” Zoe suggests with a pointed eyebrow.

He looks a little hurt as he tries to offer her his hand, his effort foiled by the cuffs around his wrists. “. . . Martin Rooney.”

She looks down at his predicament. “That’s nice. Listen, Mr. Rooney, I hope you don’t mind—”

“Not at all, it’s a pleasure. And please, call me Marty.” Zoe doesn’t miss his eyes lingering on her—still milkshake-stained—chest, before pulling back up slowly. “How about you let me buy you a drink?”

Zoe sighs. “You know, I’m actually good? Seeing as how we’re in an emergency room, and you appear to be under arrest.”

“Didn’t think that would matter so much to someone with your last name,” Rooney leers.

Zoe freezes, taking a beat longer than she’d like to formulate a comeback. Then, blessedly, Sofia pipes up behind her. “Ooh, hey Hanna, did you hear what that man just said?” Her voice rings out like a bell, cheerful and clear and audible to everyone in the waiting room. “*That* is negging.”

Rooney’s face turns a ripe-chili-pepper red. The doctor, who has chosen that moment to appear, offers Sofia a high five. “Dr. Park,” she introduces herself to her. “You are looking far too well to be my next patient.”

Dr. Park checks Sofia over, thoroughly and professionally and then, at Zoe’s insistence, patiently does it all a second time after everything comes up perfectly fine. She offers Sofia a lollipop when she’s done. Hanna ogles it greedily before aiming an impressive pair of puppy-dog eyes at the doctor. “You know,” she says, “my neck—”

“You *just* ate what I’m pretty sure amounts to a five-course meal,” Zoe snaps.

“I also think the lady at the front desk is holding one of those pudding cups for you,” Sofia points out. Zoe would tell her not to talk with her mouth full, like the responsible aunt she is trying to be, but Sofia is helping her make her point, so she’ll allow it.

“We all cope with stress in our own ways!” Hanna argues. “*You* forgot how to *walk!*”

In an instant, Zoe finds herself under the unexpectedly heavy weight of Dr. Park's scrutiny. *Uh oh.* "Were you stumbling, after the accident?" she asks.

Zoe shakes her head in a manner she believes is most counter-indicative of a brain injury. "I'm perfectly alright," she promises. "I'm just tired."

But the doctor has already pulled out her flashlight again. Zoe flinches when it's pointed directly into her eyes. "That's fine," the doctor says, "but I'm hearing balance issues and low energy, and I'm seeing some irritability and light sensitivity as well. Can we be sure you didn't hit your head?"

"No," Hanna interjects before Zoe can answer, helpful as always, and the doctor gestures for Zoe to take a seat on the exam table while she procures a percussion hammer. It's their unpleasant encounter with the thermal underwear saleswoman all over again. Zoe will never forgive Hanna for putting her through it a second time.

"Can you tell me your name?" the doctor asks.

"Sofia!"

Zoe sends a silent prayer of thanks to whichever forgetful god may still be listening, because the panicked shriek means Alma is finally here to end Zoe's life. Hopefully she'll do it before the doctor gets the chance to measure the circumference of Zoe's chest, or something more medically relevant but equally humiliating.

Alma is wild-eyed and frantic, bringing to mind the image of a deer unexpectedly trapped in a small space—all skinny, infinite limbs and zero sense of direction. She sends a kidney basin clattering to the floor, narrowly avoiding knocking over the entire instrument tray, before stopping herself inches from throwing her arms around her daughter. She gentles her hands to cradle Sofia's face instead. "Are you okay?"

Sofia glares at Hanna, deeply annoyed. "I told you not to call Amá."

Zoe squashes the ridiculous urge to step in between them to shield Hanna from Sofia's chagrin. "I called her, sweetheart," she soothes. "I had to. It's in the Good Aunt Rulebook."

This makes Sofia frown at her mother, instead. "Where's Jude?" she demands.

Alma has let go of Sofia's face and is now patting down her arms and her back, checking her for injuries. "She's parking the car. Mija, en *serio* estás bien?"

“I gave her a clean bill of health,” Dr. Park assures Alma. “You’re free to take her home.” And then, taking Zoe’s hands in her own, “Squeeze, please.”

Alma hugs her daughter tightly against her at last, sending Zoe a furious look over Sofia’s shoulder. “What the *fuck* happened?”

Sofia’s words come out slightly muffled by her mother’s scarf. “Aunt Zoe murdered a man.”

Alma freezes. “I—*what?”* She blinks down Zoe’s face, her body, finally seeming to realize she’s in the middle of a medical exam. Zoe watches as the outrage on Alma’s face melts down to profound concern.

“Maybe it’s worth mentioning the man in question was made of snow,” Hanna hastily clarifies.

Alma deflates. “I hate all of you, so very, very much.”

The next disturbance is provided swiftly and effectively by the booming voice of Judith Kaplan, MD, threatening to sue the hospital as well as everyone on duty if she isn’t shown to Sofia’s room right this second. “I’m a doctor!” she yells, and when that doesn’t yield the desired results, “You have my daughter!”

“Someone should probably go calm down my *mom,”* Sofia snorts, held fast in the strangling grip of her (other) mother’s arms. Hanna is already on her way. Judith doesn’t quiet down until her sister is dragging her backwards into the exam room, still yelling at some unseen adversary as she’s being pulled through the door. “That’s my wife in here!” she shouts. “Almost! Whatever! *Soon!”*

Alma is silent. Her ears are pink but her expression is oddly guilty, and she is now purposely avoiding Zoe’s eyes. Zoe looks down at her best friend’s hand, and then at Judith’s. Both of them are curiously—alarmingly—engagement ring-free.

Oh shit.

It didn’t happen.

They didn’t fucking *ask.*

Alma keeps Judith from repeating Alma’s own theatrics in making sure Sofia’s alright, folding her into their hug briefly before pointing out they’re done worrying about Sofia. “We’re now waiting to find out whether Zoe will survive the night.”

“I’m fine, by the way,” Hanna says pointedly.

Judith steps into Zoe's space, waving a hand in front of her face. "How many fingers?" she asks, when really? *She should know so much better by now.*

Zoe merely raises a silent eyebrow in response. Hanna purses her lips and blushes discreetly. Judith looks like she wants to dropkick them both regardless.

"Yes," the doctor says, less-than-charitably, "that's a *much* more trustworthy test than the ones I've been trying to run."

Judith scowls at her. "For your information, that was me testing blink-to-threat *and* ruling out double vision." She straightens her shoulders. "I work fast. I'm a cardiothoracic surgeon."

Dr. Park rolls her eyes. "Why am I not surprised."

Hanna is looking a little skeptical herself, trying her best to gauge how well Zoe is performing all of the doctor's little tasks. "Aren't you going to do some sort of scan?" she asks. "Like, I don't know, one of those MRI things?" Zoe notices Hanna's fingers twitching in her direction, like she's keeping herself from reaching for her. "She's got a *very* fancy brain in there, we shouldn't be cutting corners."

"We may need to do a CT," the doctor says, which is just brilliant, just fantastic, thank you Hanna, "if I can't properly rule out—"

Enough. "I don't have a head injury, Hanna," Zoe bursts out. "Sweet Christ, I'm irritable and I'm tired and I'm dizzy because I've been working eighteen-hour days for a month, and you haven't allowed me to get any sleep for *two. Nights.* A lesser person than me would be showing symptoms of psychosis by now."

It gets real quiet, after that.

And it doesn't even need to mean anything. *Right?* The migraine excuse is right there, right? Except Hanna is now beet red, and Zoe is pretty sure she is too, and Judith's face has taken on a similar-yet-decidedly-angrier shade.

Don't look at Alma. DON'T look at Alma.

Zoe's pretty sure they're all looking at Alma, whose eyes are beginning to go awfully wide, flitting between all three of their guilty faces.

"So!" Hanna yells, way too loud and far too joyful. "Congratulations, Mrs. and Mrs. Kaplan!"

As Hanna's distraction tactics tend to be, Zoe is learning, it's about as efficient as it is catastrophic. Zoe watches it happen in slow motion, like the

helpless air traffic control room, seconds from disaster. “Hanna,” she hisses, “Shut—” she aims for Hanna’s shin and lands the kick, but Hanna doesn’t seem to feel it.

“Reflexes look to be in fine working order,” Dr. Park remarks with a smirk.

Hanna moves to grab her sister’s shoulder jovially, extending a hand to Alma. “I bet you didn’t think you’d be celebrating your engagement in the emergency room, huh? Ha! Ha!”

“Engagement?” Alma squeaks, admirably, considering she looks like she just swallowed her own heart. “You know Jude just *said* that, right? For the, something, to get access—”

“No but,” Hanna stutters, “I thought. The fancy dinner, the ring—”

“*Ring?* Ha! Ha!” Judith’s hysterical laugh is so perfectly like her sister’s it’s hard to believe they don’t share any genetic markers. “There’s no ring. I don’t have a ring. Do *you* have a ring? What’s a ring?”

For a moment, Judith and Alma just stare at each other, frozen in a bubble of mutual, outrageously ineffective deception.

Alma looks the most frightened Zoe has ever seen her, and she’s seen her through some objectively scary times. Against almost this exact same backdrop, in fact; except Alma had been the one on the exam table, then. Zoe shivers.

Alma, however, seems determined to power through. “You mean *you also* got—?”

Judith looks like she needs a drink. “You?” She blinks a couple of times. “You were going to—?”

Alma is the first to pull herself together. She always was the bravest of them all. “Was there something you wanted to ask me, mi vida?”

“I mean.” Judith lets out a wobbly breath before attempting a smile. “Not if *you—”*

“Oh, my god. Will one of you just fucking propose already?”

And so it’s Sofia, in the end, who saves them from further mortification. They’re all thankful, Zoe thinks—even though Alma lifts a disapproving eyebrow at her daughter’s language, even though her outburst means Zoe just lost her bet with Linh.

Judith regains some of her usual swagger, a tiny smile playing around her lips. “Alma,” she says, stretching out the vowel in a teasing lilt, “is your daughter actually proposing to me for you, right now?”

“Actually, *Judith,*” Alma tells her, stepping forward to put her hands on her girlfriend’s hips, “I think she’s proposing for the both of us. If you want to get technical about it.”

“I think you’re right,” Judith admits, dark eyes blinking up at Alma almost shyly. “So, um. Do you want to?”

Alma’s smile is radiant; peaceful and exuberant, all at once. She leans her forehead against Judith’s, nudging their noses together. “Yeah,” she says. “I want to.”

Zoe is lost in the moment, present there with them, but now also unquestionably outside of their little circle. It’s a happiness that hurts, a transitional sort of nostalgia, a homesickness for a place where Zoe never *truly* belonged.

She startles violently when the doctor in front of her pointedly clears her throat. “I have your results, if you’re still interested,” she announces.

Hanna comes over, giving the newly engaged couple and their daughter some privacy and Zoe a warm side-hug and a lopsided smile. “I hope you’re not about to tell her she’s pregnant,” she tells the doctor. “That would be a true holiday miracle.”

“More like a holiday curse,” Zoe corrects her tiredly, not minding anything much anymore after witnessing the scope of her friends’ happiness.

Alma and Judith are too preoccupied exclaiming over their respective engagement rings to hear them, anyway.

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NINETEEN

THE HOUSE IS AS welcoming as it was the very first night Zoe entered it. It glows like a beacon against the snow-covered mountains and the star-speckled indigo sky. But Zoe feels more than ever like she's intruding; no matter the contented smiles her best friend sends her way, or the wink Judith gives her, along with a glass of the bourbon Zoe was sure she'd stashed where no one would ever find it. No matter Hanna's warm hand, low on Zoe's back when she shoos her sister away, still fussing about the possibility of the doctor overlooking signs of a concussion and insisting Zoe doesn't add alcohol to the mix. No matter Sofia's contagious laughter, trailing after her as Alma follows her upstairs to bed. It's all familiar, now, and it's lovely; but it has never made Zoe's chest feel quite as sore as it does right now.

"I thought we'd seen our last hospital visit for a while."

Zoe finds Alma standing in the doorway of Sofia's bedroom when she exits the upstairs bathroom, ready to turn in too. She feels more jetlagged than she did after that extended business trip to Singapore. She nudges Alma's arm with her shoulder, both of them watching Sofia as she sleeps. She whispers, "I'm so sorry, Alma."

The self-deprecating laugh Alma sends Zoe's way is a little tearful. "I know it's dumb," she admits. "She was wearing her seatbelt. I know she's okay."

“She is.”

“We’re okay.”

Zoe smiles. “We are.”

“I kinda have a, uh.” Alma plays with the ring on her left ring finger, looking extra bright-eyed with the tears still clinging to her lashes. She bites her lip, then beams down at her. “A fiancée.”

Zoe rests her head against Alma’s shoulder, taking her hand to bring it closer. She hums. “It’s much prettier than I gave Judith credit for,” she remarks.

Alma pushes Zoe’s head away, but she’s gentle about it. “Zoe Hélène Zuydervelt,” she enunciates, “did you *know* Jude was going to propose to me tonight?”

Zoe huffs out a breath. “I mean. *Did* she propose? I did everything in my power to make sure you *both* would, but it looked to me like Sofia ended up doing most of the asking.”

Alma looks at her daughter again, now serenely drooling onto her pillow, and smiles fondly. “If you want to get technical about it.”

Zoe sighs. “A crushing defeat.”

Alma pauses. “You made a bet with Hanna, didn’t you?”

Zoe sags back into her side, now unapologetically resting most of her bodyweight on her best friend’s shoulder. “With Linh, actually,” she says. “I think Hanna’s much too good to want to take part in a wager over her loved ones’ happiness.”

Alma rolls her eyes so hard Zoe can feel it. “Ay caray,” she exhales. “Qué familia.”

Zoe feels her heart breaking a little bit, again, at that final word. She peels herself away from Alma’s lengthy frame. “Goodnight, Alma,” she says softly. “Thank you for everything.” Even standing on her toes, she needs to pull Alma down a few inches to press a kiss onto her cheek. “I’m leaving early tomorrow. Please sleep in. I love you.”

Alma hesitates, looking a little confused, a little unsure. “Isn’t Hanna joining you?” she asks eventually.

Zoe is so tired she must just look clueless enough to fool her best friend. “Hanna?” she asks. “I didn’t think she was going to bed yet. Why?”

Alma looks sad then, much sadder and far more tired than she should, on a night like tonight. “I love you too, Zo,” she says. “Please take care of yourself.”



It’s Zoe’s first night between these frozen sheets all over again, kicking her legs in an effort to get warm while goosebumps rush up and down her sides. Hanna takes her sweet time, but eventually Zoe hears the sound of her (bare, because Hanna isn’t human) feet on the floor outside their room.

Then she knocks.

Zoe resists the urge to throw one of Sofia’s snow boots at the door. “Come in, you idiot.”

“I was hoping you were asleep,” Hanna whispers back, entering and quietly pressing the door shut behind her. She’s wearing sky-blue pajamas with tiny yellow ducks printed all over, a pattern Zoe hadn’t thought would come in adult sizes. “You looked like you needed it.”

“So you’ve mentioned,” Zoe says. “Come here, you oaf. I need you to warm me up.”

Hanna does the most unexpected thing Zoe has ever seen her do in the entire two days she’s known her, and there have been some surprises along the way: she hesitates.

Zoe pushes upright, allowing her blanket to slide off her shoulders, revealing she’s not wearing her cursed thermal underwear or, as a matter of fact, anything at all. “What’s wrong?”

Hanna quickly averts her eyes, as if she’s never seen Zoe naked before. “I don’t want to like, assume that’s what you’re asking—”

“I’m asking you to get into my bed.” Zoe shivers violently, pleased when Hanna’s gaze drops to her chest seemingly without Hanna realizing it, and sticks there.

“—but I don’t think we should have sex tonight.”

Zoe blinks. *Oh.* “. . . Okay.”

Hanna flusters. “It’s just that—I don’t think you can give consent, if you have a concussion.”

Zoe practices patience, again. She’s really getting quite good at it. “I don’t have a fucking concussion,” she growls, patiently.

“And also, I’m your primary caregiver now. Unequal distribution of power, and all that.”

Zoe rubs her face in a last last-ditch effort to stay awake long enough to see the end of this exchange. “Hanna,” she says. “It’s okay if you don’t

want to have sex with me. I'd still really appreciate it if you could help me not die of hypothermia, however."

"Okay." Hanna is at her bedside immediately, then freezes again when Zoe lifts her blankets to let her in. "Do you think—" she gestures down Zoe's body. "Could you maybe put some clothes on?"

Zoe comes close to pulling on the reindeer onesie, just for old times' sake, but she's well aware the comfy fleece combined with the heat of Hanna's body would roast her in her sleep. She grabs a faded band t-shirt Hanna has thrown over a chair, instead. "Bananarama?" she asks, frowning down at the print on the front. "As in 'Venus' Bananarama? How do you even know this stuff?"

Hanna huffs out her righteous indignation. "Uh, I believe you mean 'Cruel Summer' Bananarama," she says. "And *you've* heard of them. Clearly they have staying power."

"Xander is ten years older than me," Zoe counters as she tugs on the shirt and pulls up her hair. "I grew up listening to his albums."

Hanna furrows her brow, making Zoe immediately regret bringing him up. But then Hanna says, "I'm having a very hard time imagining Alexander Zuydervelt with posters of Bananarama on his bedroom wall," and Zoe relaxes.

"He was more of a Cindy Crawford man, actually," she recalls, noting Hanna's happy blush as she climbs back into bed. "I remember a bright yellow swimsuit, I think?" Zoe almost laughs. It's a strangely exhilarating thing, talking about Xander as the boy he was once, free from the context of his crimes. She nudges Hanna's knee with her own. "So what's your excuse?"

"Why would I need an excuse for having great taste?" Hanna says. "'Cruel Summer' is a banger. Even my seniors agree."

Zoe grins. "Those kids must love you. I don't recall hearing a lot of music in my Honors English class."

Hanna effortlessly replicates their most comfortable position to date, with Zoe splayed across her chest, their hips slotted together. *It's nifty,* Zoe thinks. *It's good.* Zoe is feeling much warmer, and only mildly tempted to remind Hanna that sex is still on the table, as far as she's concerned. Just, you know, to make sure Hanna knows she has options.

"I'm actually kind of a hardass, believe it or not," Hanna alleges. She pouts when Zoe can't help but laugh. "I'm serious! I only play music to get

them to class on time. I use stuff they probably haven't heard before—you know, Robert Johnson, Joni Mitchell, The Sugarcubes—and have them do a freewrite as a warm-up."

Zoe finds herself trying to visualize what Hanna might look like when she's in teacher mode. She pictures her pouncing around the classroom, patient, passionate, proud of her work. "I imagine you've received your share of love letters that way," she quips.

Hanna huffs out a quiet laugh. "Fewer than you'd think. Most times they just end up roasting me or my musical selection," she admits. "But for some reason 'Cruel Summer' became kind of a sensation. I started getting requests. Students added it to their own playlists. One time I heard it coming down the hallway, and when I came out to remind them of our headphones-only rule, five of my kids skipped toward me in perfect sync, waving and clapping their hands like they were in the music video."

Zoe is feeling several phenotypes of affection toward the woman beneath her. And more than a little at a loss for what to do with them all, now that settling herself in between Hanna's legs and not coming up for air for a few hours isn't in the cards.

It occurs to Zoe this isn't something she's ever had to deal with before. No one has ever asked Zoe Zuydervelt to *put on* clothes before she took them into her bed. But she's learned a lot of things about herself this week. For instance, apparently she's into blondes, now. *That's new.* Also, nearly-fully-clothed late-night conversations? Far more intimate than sex. *Who would have thought?* (Her therapist, probably, who Zoe really needs to start seeing more frequently.)

Hanna squeezes her tightly and nuzzles the top of her head. "Feeling okay?" she checks.

Zoe hums. "You'd better not be planning on taking this concussion thing any further," she warns. "If you wake me up in an hour to check my pupillary response, I reserve the right to claw your eyes out."

"I wouldn't dare," Hanna says. "You're so sleep-deprived the doctor thought you had brain damage."

"You're the one who gave her cause to suspect it. And thanks *so* much for that, by the way."

Hanna's sigh sounds a little too long-suffering for Zoe's taste. And then she hears her say, "I like you, Zoe—"

Zoe's panic is immediate and complete, not waiting for Hanna to finish her sentence, zero to one hundred in point-two-seconds flat. It's not an unusual occurrence; Zoe's been dealing with episodes like this since her early teens. But she's never experienced it in the arms of a far-too-familiar stranger who feels like she's exactly what Zoe needs, telling her exactly what Zoe doesn't want to hear.

"—I really wish you'd take better care of yourself," Hanna finishes, before Zoe is able to fully finesse her tailspin.

Zoe releases the breath she was holding and wills her blood to return to her extremities. "Alma keeps telling me the same thing," she admits.

"Of course she does." There's a smile in Hanna's voice. And then she says, casually, like it's not the thing that will bring about the end of Zoe's carefully constructed idea of who she is and what kind of life she deserves, "We love you."

Zoe thinks so long about the correct way to respond to that, listening to the sound of Hanna's heart, thudding steadily, fearlessly beneath her, that she's asleep before she finds it. When she wakes up, feeling miraculously rested, marvelously *recovered*, especially considering the room is still shrouded in the low light of early morning, Hanna is gone.



Hanna is outside, with Sofia, wearing her absurdly colorful snowsuit and her LET'S GET LIT beanie. Zoe watches her, unseen from the kitchen window, a bowl of steaming coffee clutched tightly between her freezing fingers.

Hanna is putting snow chains on the minivan.

She wants Zoe to be safe.

Zoe Zuydervelt is nothing if not thorough. Before giving the go-ahead on any major business decisions, she makes a point of speaking with consultants from various fields, often searching for the third, or fourth, or fifth side of a story before bringing the hammer down. So naturally, during the forty-five minutes she's been up, she's checked CDOT for updates on the weather six times already. She knows that her gas tank is full, and now, that the minivan is still running. Alma apparently chose not to follow up on her threat to sabotage it so Zoe might extend her stay. Zoe's even gone so far as to make sure there's no actual migraine looming; blinking into the

early morning light now pouring in through the window, taking a whiff of the sharply lemon-scented detergent underneath the sink.

The truth is, no one here requires an excuse for Zoe not to leave today. Except for Zoe herself—and she already has a pretty good idea why she's so reluctant to get into that van.

It only has about fifteen percent to do with its interior's putrid smell.

It's just that, when she looks at Hanna—when Hanna looks at *her*—everything inside Zoe feels as warm as this coffee, as bright as the sun's first rays peeking out over the mountain range. And she can feel it all dimming the more she readies herself to leave this place behind, to return to Los Angeles, and to Austra Biogenics' eager arms.

"Don't jump!"

Zoe screeches and flings her beverage, and the bowl right along with it—somewhere, anywhere, her reflexes frantic to free up her hands so she can face the threat.

It's Judith, obviously, and she's clearly offended by Zoe's reaction. "I told you not to jump!"

Zoe presses her hand against her chest in an urgent attempt to restart her heart. "Aren't you supposed to *save* people's lives?" she yells. "You just took another two years off of mine!"

"Sorry. Habit." Judith crouches down, her ruddy cloud of curls following her only after a half-second lag, and begins picking up the pieces of Zoe's bowl. "Mazel tov," she says, grinning up at her.

Zoe huffs and joins her, waiting for Judith to clear the shards before deploying kitchen towels to soak up the tragic remains of her coffee.

"You knew Alma was planning a proposal herself," Judith says, observing her, her voice much milder now. "So what was the rush? Why the theatrics?"

Zoe pulls herself upright, facing her sister-in-law-to-be head-on. "Because I'm just like you," she retorts. "A stubborn asshole with a worryingly dysfunctional idea of friendship."

The look Judith gives her in return is uncommonly knowing and devastatingly fond, and once again, Zoe swears she can see the family resemblance. "For the record," Judith says, "between the two of us, Hanna's the better adjusted one."

"Really?" Zoe deflects. "And you set such a high bar."

“Fuck you, Zuydervelt.” Judith rolls her eyes, but there’s no bite in it. “Just—you should know that my sister isn’t wired the way we are. Whatever it is you want from her, you have to be upfront about it. She can handle it. But don’t insult her by freaking out and pulling one of your disappearing acts.”

Zoe can’t look at Judith as she says it. Because she wishes, with a fury that borders on despair, that she had a right to ask for what she really wants.

But Hanna deserves better.

Zoe will forgive herself for indulging this acutely insatiable urge to offer herself up to this goddess of a woman, to come undone in the palm of Hanna’s hand. But trying to force it beyond the confounds of the happy little bubble they’ve established here—to see how this unconditional kind of frankness and whole-hearted acceptance holds up in the real world? *No.* Zoe can’t imagine putting herself through that again. She needs to end this cleanly, and shield Hanna from the destructive forces at work in her life.

That is how Zoe Zuydervelt takes care of herself.

Judith sees her out into the driveway, shrugging on her coat. Zoe feels more unsteady than ever in her trusted Manolos, but she’s forgone her original pencil skirt in favor of her new favorite—though still faintly garlic-scented—jeans for the journey home.

Hanna’s smile is as kind as always, creasing the corners of her eyes. She holds Zoe’s gaze a little longer, like she’s in on a secret Zoe herself is too afraid to tell. “This should make sure you get to Denver safely,” she boasts, patting the hood and kicking a tire for good measure before presenting Zoe with the keys.

“Thank you, Hanna,” Zoe says. “I’ll see you around.” She smiles, as if she’s trying to make a joke. “At the wedding, for sure.”

Hanna looks briefly stricken, but recovers quickly. “Perhaps a little sooner than that?” she asks, throwing her sister a wink. “Jude here likes to plan ahead. She may take a year just drafting the guest list.”

Zoe doesn’t quite manage to meet Hanna’s eyes, for fear of being met with the earnestness of her gaze. It already feels like Zoe is breaking, like she’s going to do something foolish, like cry, or ask Hanna for a hug. “This was fun,” she assures herself as much as she’s assuring Hanna. Zoe is like Judith, picking up broken glass, the careful way in which she’s choosing her words. “It was really good to meet you.”

“Yeah.” Hanna sniffs, digs the heel of her boot into the snow. She nods. “I had a good time, too.”

It feels like a cruelty in itself, for Zoe to not at least attempt to explain. But it’s hard enough to do that even without Judith solemnly observing their exchange. On a wild impulse, Zoe digs into her messenger bag for one of her business cards, and scribbles her private number on the back before shoving it between Hanna’s uncharacteristically clumsy fingers. The speculative furrow in Judith’s brow makes Zoe regret it the second she does it, but it’s too late to take it back. “We could—talk, some time,” she tells Hanna. “If you want.”

“I will.” Hanna’s smile looks a little brighter when she takes the card.

Zoe looks down at their hands, attempting to breathe past the moment.

“Stay warm out there,” Hanna says, her voice soft and gentle, like the hug Zoe wants her to pull her into.

“I will try,” Zoe promises her instead, shoving her hands into the pockets of her jacket, tracing the car keys with the index finger of her left hand. They stand there, about a foot too far apart, the distance small but impossible to cross. It’s stunted, awkward, like a piece of music cut off right after the bridge.

Zoe leaves, after hugging Sofia, and Judith, and even a surly bathrobe-clad Alma complaining it’s much too early for anyone to be awake.

She leaves.

It’s quiet on the ride back, incrementally colder the further away she gets from the chalet, and Zoe fiddles with radio stations until settling on the least offensive holiday classic she can find—which Zoe thinks might actually be the very definition of offensive, now she’s listening to it more closely. Instead of her usual justified anger, however, she only feels wistful.

How can you do these things to me?

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PART TWO
California

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TWENTY

ZOE ZUYDERVELT IS GOING to die alone.

She's not catastrophizing. She's a reasonable woman, making a responsible choice. She prefers singlehood; the safety, the simplicity of it. She had decided on this solitary trajectory long before Hanna Kaplan barged into her life, pushing every single one of Zoe's buttons and her entire world off-kilter before leaving it just as abruptly—not calling, or texting, or even granting Zoe the courtesy of letting her know she made it out of Colorado alive.

Zoe assumes she survived. The last week of Austra Biogenics' fiscal year has her on long conference calls with Alma every day, sometimes several times a day, and Zoe imagines her best friend would probably have mentioned something if her fiancée's little sister had tumbled down a mountain and broken all of her bones, or—in a much more likely scenario—finally burned her mouth so badly it led to her dying of hypoxia.

It was a mistake, Zoe understands now, as she slides into the backseat of the white Lexus waiting for her down in the parking garage. A moment of weakness, giving Hanna her number. She's grateful Hanna seems to have recognized that too. Zoe is actually really impressed with her; clearly Hanna is handling this whole thing much better than Zoe expected she would. She hasn't called, and Zoe—who's barely managed to survive a week of feeling her stomach twist itself in knots each time she checks her

phone, unsure if she's hoping for a missed call or an empty inbox—should consider it a mercy. A clean cut; wasn't that what she'd wanted? Zuydervelts, even the one born from a respectable man's lustful lapse in judgment, aren't meant to maintain meaningful connections with others.

Besides, Zoe notes as she inspects her make-up in the mirrored doors of the private elevator taking her up to her office, it's not as if she's had time to dwell on their quaint little entanglement. She doesn't *miss* her, obviously. She's spent literal hours in Hanna's company. There's simply no way any one person would be able to impact her so profoundly in such a brief amount of time. Zoe has more important things to attend to: most pressingly, at the moment, the intimidating stack of files Linh is carrying to her desk, along with Zoe's 8 a.m. Monday beet-and-ginger smoothie.

Her assistant is scrutinizing Zoe through a pair of semi-rimless glasses, a large reusable Starbucks cup in her other hand. Zoe adjusts the collar of her shirt, her knuckles ghosting past the long-faded bruises Hanna had kissed into her skin, and doesn't think of the pumpkin spice latte Hanna had her try. She does *not* remember the sugary goodness of it, or relate it to Hanna's own demeanor, or to the soft creases that appear around Hanna's eyes and her mouth when she smiles.

Zoe takes a heartening sip of her smoothie and flinches when the flavor hits her tongue, an unexpectedly unpleasant contrast to the sweetness of the memory.

The eyebrow Linh raises as she appraises her boss is perfectly executed, and Zoe wonders—not for the first time—if perhaps she has taught Linh *too* well. "Something wrong with your breakfast, Ms. Zuydervelt?"

"Stop that," Zoe chides. "If you're comfortable enough to call me a dick over text, you can address me by my first name in the privacy of my office."

Linh narrows her eyes at her, a compact and impeccably-dressed picture of undisguised disapproval. "Those vacation days were wasted on you," she decides. "You look more high-strung now than you did before your little overnight adventure."

Zoe gulps down another stubborn mouthful of what is supposed to be one of the few treats she'll allow herself this week, and pretends Linh's choice of words didn't just bring to mind a crystal-clear memory of Hanna hooking her arms underneath Zoe's thighs and savoring her. She regrets her decision

immediately when she's met with another blast of blinding zest, rather than the sweet earthy flavor she thought she'd grown so fond of.

Zoe's mood brightens considerably when she realizes the documents Linh has brought her all boast Papastathopoulos's pompous letterhead. Normally this would have made an already miserable morning infinitely worse, but today—for what is likely the first time in recorded history—the sight sparks a genuine smile.

"I won't be needing these," Zoe says, sliding them back over to the far edge of her desk. She sinks back into her chair, proud and petty and pleased with herself. "Alma will be dealing with the Papastathopoulos account exclusively from now on."

"Ms. Valdes?" Linh's eyes go round with wonder. "What do you have on her," she asks, "and how will you help me use it to my own personal advantage?"

Zoe smirks, contemplating giving her smoothie another chance but deciding to relish her victory instead. She sets the paper cup next to the files for Linh to remove. "Clearly you're *both* far too invested in what your boss does with her personal time."

"I'd argue we're invested in making sure any of your time is personal," Linh says primly, ignoring the fact neither she nor Alma has a proper grasp of what "personal," as a concept, might entail. She reaches for Zoe's cup, the sleeve of her turtleneck pullover tugging up just enough to reveal a rose gold watch with an elegantly embossed navy blue dial.

That's definitely new.

And also preposterous.

"Is that—are you wearing a *Patek Philippe?"* Zoe yelps, grabbing her assistant's wrist and, when Linh only hums and preens a bit in response, a small private smile twitching around the corners of her mouth, "*How?* Are you freelancing for another overindulgent billionaire on the side?" Another, far worse possibility coming to mind, Zoe lowers her voice. "Linh Hùng, please tell me you're not dating another Hollywood actor."

"No." Linh wrinkles her nose. "I'm an independent woman," she says, tossing her hair over her shoulder dramatically. "I buy my own toys."

"You know," Zoe confides, staring shamelessly at the beautiful piece of jewelry adorning Linh's wrist, "I got an email from Yadid in HR. They said if I give you another raise, you'll actually be earning more than me."

Linh has the gall to laugh like she deserves it, but she sobers and straightens when she sees Zoe's deadpan. It's a beat too late to be entirely convincing.

Zoe sighs. "I do pay you too much, don't I?"

"Probably, in all fairness, yes." Linh takes in a fortifying breath. "Though I should maybe mention at least half of this was funded by you and your handsome best friend's *exceptional* pigheadedness."

Zoe gawks at her. That can't possibly be true. "I only bet you twenty bucks I could get Alma and Judith to propose simultaneously. Either that watch is the most exquisite knock-off I've ever seen, or Alma gambled away Sofia's entire college fund."

"I know." It's gleeful. "Alma's confidence in your thirst and her sister-in-law's charm is a thing to behold."

Zoe drops Linh's hand and curses far too colorfully for such a bright early morning. "You bet *that* much money on me not getting laid?"

"Mmm-hmm." Linh lovingly strokes the bezel with her thumb. "It's like Alma doesn't know you at all."

Zoe wilts a little at the words. Alma knows her far too well, is the problem, and the only reason Zoe's managed to convince her she doesn't is that her best friend trusts her too much to even consider Zoe might lie to her about who she has or hasn't slept with. The revelation that Judith still hasn't informed her fiancée of her victory either is surprising, although Zoe supposes Judith, Hanna and Zoe may all have simply landed on the same page: that it's best to act as if nothing happened, so they can all get on with their lives.

Zoe should feel relieved. The absolute worst-case scenario she had imagined—the one that had almost successfully convinced her to keep Hanna at arm's length—was for their little ill-advised hookup to ruin things for everyone. And it hasn't, not at all; Alma and Judith are so wrapped up in their post-engagement-pre-wedding bliss they barely venture out of their little cocoon, Sofia flits in and out of Zoe's periphery, texting her science problems and perplexing memes, and Hanna is where she was before, which is very simply not a part of Zoe's life.

Zoe should be happy.

When she looks back up at Linh, her assistant is openly looking her over, apparently having picked up on the shift in Zoe's mood. Her expression

softens some. “Was it really so awful,” she prods gently, “spending some time with friends, away from work?”

Zoe is hit with a sudden lash of longing. It’s like a bruise inside her chest, like the breathless thudding ache of being shot while wearing a bulletproof vest. She remembers the crackling fire, Sofia marveling at her pancakes, Alma choking on marshmallows and the fond grin Judith had given her as she picked up shards of glass in the kitchen. She remembers Hanna’s hands, warm on her stomach, and her voice against her ear on the aerial tram, quietly coaxing Zoe away from the onset of a panic attack.

She lets out a breath. “No,” she admits. “It was actually . . . unexpectedly wonderful.”

The truth seems to come as a surprise to them both. The smile that blooms on Linh’s face in response warms her—that’s definitely it, Zoe is certainly not blushing at her own confession—and Zoe surprises herself a second time when she suggests, “Maybe next time you should come,” before considering the impossible implications of a *next time.*

Linh sizes her up, gauging the air between them, and then smiles, her dark eyes glinting dangerously. “Since I have my prize money already, *Zoe,*” she says significantly, “maybe next time *you* should, too.”

Zoe wishes she’d held on to the rest of her disappointing smoothie, just so she’d have something to throw at her assistant’s hastily retreating back.

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TWENTY-ONE

A MONTH PASSES, AND Hanna doesn't call, and Zoe's okay with it. She's *fine*. After all, Zoe Zuydervelt is a woman of business. She doesn't have time to reminisce; she has obligations.

She may have forgotten all about Hanna Kaplan, in fact, if it wasn't for Alma Valdes, who—as if she has sensed Zoe's resolve—decides to launch an honest-to-god, utterly unnecessary, unholy crusade in a fresh effort to make Zoe lose her mind.

It starts with a subtle uptick in Alma's Instagram posts.

Zoe only has the app on her phone because Sofia installed it for her, along with Twitter's echo chamber of despair and the lawless bewilderment that is Snapchat. Zoe uses all of them under an unverified alias—her front-facing profiles are carefully curated by Austra Biogenics' PR team—and checks them only when she's feeling reckless (occasionally) or bored (rare), or when she's skipped dinner and her last glass of Scotch of the evening hits a little too hard (often).

Alma posts sunsets and prettily arranged breakfasts, mostly; views of the city taken on a morning jog, with the odd **#DTLAEats** popping up here and there. Judith makes an appearance or two, silhouetted by a candlelit dinner, a close-up of their hands showing off their engagement rings, three heads of hair—one copper and two dark brown—poking out beneath a comfortable-looking duvet. Alma doesn't generally do selfies, so when late one

Thursday night in March *(is it really March already?)* Zoe takes a sip of her drink and opens the app to a perfectly clear image of Alma's wide grin, Zoe is surprised.

Her surprise turns to shock, and then into a violent coughing fit, when she realizes the person in the picture with her—blonde hair and light eyes forming a pleasing contrast to Alma's beautiful dark features—is Hanna.

She has more freckles than Zoe remembers, but everything else is exactly the same. Including the sympathetic pull Zoe feels at the corners of her own mouth at the sight of Hanna's genuine smile, and the heat curling further down as her eyes track the arm Hanna doesn't have wrapped around Alma, where the delectable curve of Hanna's bicep stretches the fabric of the t-shirt she's wearing.

Zoe bites her lip. It's the shirt Zoe had slept in, their last night together—the one with the Bananarama print.

boot camp with my bestie! Alma's caption boasts. **this girl's endurance will give you a hell of a workout!**

Zoe's finger was already hovering over the "like" button—a treacherous reflex—and at some point during her desperate struggle for breath, it has turned the exact same shade of red as Zoe's profound mortification.



It's only the first shot fired. A warning, a courtesy really, before Alma begins waging an all-out war.

Apparently Alma no longer goes on those morning runs alone. Every Tuesday and Thursday, like clockwork, there's a new distracting image of Hanna, stretching her hamstrings, or flushed, drinking a Gatorade, the line of her throat lit lovingly by the amber morning sun. Zoe fastidiously avoids the little heart at the bottom of these posts, careful not to make the same mistake twice, but she knows her silence is just as damning, and Alma absolutely knows she's watching.

Zoe Zuydervelt is renowned for her impeccable professionalism. During her impressive career she has bravely and elegantly navigated stock market crashes, failed product launches and the discontinuation of her favorite brand of nitrile gloves. Even when Alma walked into Zoe's lab six years ago and privately presented her with a fat stack of files containing irrefutable evidence that her brother—the very same Alexander Zuydervelt

who once had his little sister flown halfway across the globe, just so she could celebrate her twenty-first birthday with him—was running unmonitored phase-one trials and suppressing clinical proof that the treatments triggered lethal cytokine storms, Zoe barely missed a beat. She got to work, doing what needed to be done to not merely mitigate the damage he had caused, but to make reparations wherever possible.

Zoe is conscientious, imperturbable, and she carries on.

But her equilibrium has never once in her career been tested like *this*.

Now, in between drawn-out business meetings and boardroom brawls, there's Hanna, rewarding herself with an ice cream cone at 7 a.m., a glimpse of her pink tongue setting the metaphorical roots of Zoe's hair on fire. There's Hanna in low-slung sweatpants and a crop top, the v-line of muscle trailing off beneath her waistband doing no doubt lasting damage to Zoe's cardiovascular system. One Saturday morning, just after dawn, when Zoe is chugging coffee in the backseat of her Lexus on the way to cardio ballet, Hanna joins Alma for her Jiu Jitsu class and is this time captured, lamentably, on a seven-second video reel. Zoe plays it twenty-one times in a row, before freezing and frantically googling whether Alma can see how many times she's watched it and then—reassured—watching it another twelve times for good measure.

It's torture, pure and simple. How Alma has thus far evaded trial at the international criminal court, Zoe does not understand.

Speaking of crimes against humanity, Tippy manages to ambush her in the middle of one of these momentary lapses. The incoming call screen pops up one evening just as Zoe is staring down at an uncharacteristically modest close-up of Hanna's downcast eyes. She's cradling a tiny Labrador puppy to her chest. **look who made a new friend this morning!** Zoe reads, right before the first bars of Carmina Burana—the ringtone Alma had chosen for Tippy, and Zoe had never found reason to change—make her nearly bounce her phone out of her hands in a scramble not to drop it along with her drink.

"Mother," Zoe manages to answer evenly, gracefully sidestepping the pool of bourbon that's now slowly spreading on the slate tiles of her kitchen floor. She's blinking fast to dispel the lingering visual of Hanna's enamored expression, but her mother's disaffected timbre sobers her instantly.

"I'm surprised you still have my number," Tippy muses. "I can't recall a single instance where you've found reason to dial it."

“You know how it is,” Zoe counters coolly, dropping a dishcloth to soak up the remains of her drink. “Long days at the office, trying to keep the family business afloat after the golden child tries his hardest to sink it.”

Tippy takes a moment before responding, but Zoe knows better than to believe she has so easily won. It’s been a minute since Zoe has had to face her mother in the flesh, but she’s able to picture her without any trouble at all: her striking silver hair kept defiantly long but immaculately coiffed; her face a perfectly smooth mask of detached appraisal.

Tippy hums. “I’m sure you’ll manage to turn things around soon,” she says. “Once you finally find your sea legs.”

A lesser adversary-slash-more-well-adjusted adult would probably balk at her mother’s condescension. But Zoe’s extensive practice navigating the obstacle course that is Tippy’s idea of casual conversation has made her nearly as adept at parrying as her youth-circuit fencing training. She calmly reaches for a new glass, pouring herself a double this time. “Would you like me to put you through to my chief financial officer to discuss the record profit Austra Biogenics turned this year?” she asks Tippy genially. “Since you clearly had better things to do than to read the annual report?”

Tippy makes a faint sound of distaste. Zoe wonders if she’s going to call Alma insufferable again, or remind Zoe what an imbecilic decision she thinks it was to fire Alexander’s CFO and hire her best friend instead. But her mother settles for a curt “No, thank you.” And then, as if it isn’t one of the furthest-out-of-left-field curveballs Tippy has ever punted her—and there is an objectively storied history of them—she continues, nonchalant as ever, “I think it’s time for you to start dating again.”

Zoe stands in the wide expanse of her open-plan kitchen, a half-full tumbler clasped perilously between her fingertips, staring out at the inky void of the Pacific Ocean. “*What.*”

Tippy sighs impatiently. “You’ve been single for an unflatteringly long time, dear. People are beginning to wonder what’s wrong with you.”

A voice in the back of her mind that sounds suspiciously like Alma urges her to tell her mother *you are what’s wrong with me*, but Zoe takes a deep drink, and it fades away obediently.

Tippy seems to take her silence as petulance. “Don’t tell me you’re still mourning that little Sapphic sideslip you got so caught up in,” she croons. “What was her name? Lilith?”

“Lovis.” Zoe sends up a silent-but-passionate thanks to whichever benevolent god was listening when she prayed for her mother to never find out about the corporate espionage. Though she realizes that, too, was largely due to Alma’s efforts.

“Isn’t that what I said?” Tippy asks, studiously aloof. “No matter. What’s important is that it ended over two years ago. I will not allow my daughter to wallow so publicly any longer.” She takes a breath, then huffs it out briskly. “Consider this an intervention.”

“You never publicly dated anyone again after Father.” It’s a blurted thing, a Hail Mary. Zoe barely understands where it came from.

Tippy’s voice seems to crisp at the corners. “I’m a widow, dear. And a powerful woman in my own right. Not all of us have earned the privilege of enduring singlehood.”

“And yet you make it sound so easy,” Zoe mutters into her glass.

“Stop mumbling,” Tippy chides. “Honestly, Zoe. Rebellion may have been a good color on you when you were young, but your excuse of youthful foolishness expired years ago.”

Tippy’s voice fades out for a moment. When it returns, it’s closer and more clear, as if she’s right there, her intimidating frame towering over her daughter. “I’ve forwarded you an article you may find . . . *motivating*,” her mother says vaguely. “And I trust you’ll show up for your next charity fundraiser. Maybe this time consider taking your stylist’s advice about asymmetrical designs. They’re so much more flattering for someone of your size. It may even save you from having to attend this event without a date.”

Zoe grits her teeth, feeling the muscle of her jaw working. “Why bother trying to outshine you, Mother?” she wonders. “I hear your outfit made quite the impression at the Children’s Hospital luncheon last month.” According to Zoe’s Google alerts, Tippy had shown up wearing her Gucci blouse styled the wrong way around, the buttons running down the front rather than the back. The tabloids had called it a catastrophe.

“That was *intentional*,” Tippy snaps, and Zoe smiles at finally having managed to chip away some of her mother’s stony façade. But she doesn’t get to enjoy her small triumph for long. “I did have the committee put a stop to the ridiculous donation that incompetent CFO of yours signed off on,” her mother continues, as if it’s barely significant enough to mention. “What would the shareholders have thought if that had been allowed to go through? You ought to keep that woman on a shorter leash.”

Zoe grips her glass so tightly her knuckles turn white. “People are counting on Austra Biogenics’ donation,” she says, wincing at the irritation coloring her voice. “Some of those funds have already been allocated. There was an official announcement.”

Tippy tuts, her voice dripping with disapproval. “You should have considered that before making promises you can’t keep.”

“Consider what?” Zoe demands. “That Zuydervelts can’t possibly do something that benefits someone other than themselves?”

Her mother’s voice takes on a faux-warm tint, only making Zoe’s hackles rise further. “You can’t give it *all* away, Zoe,” Tippy soothes. “People might take it as an admission of guilt.”

Zoe laughs, a sharp, humorless bark. “Oh no,” she mocks. “What could be worse than acknowledging the truth?”

“You could stand to be a little more grateful,” Tippy says, “considering you’re still enjoying the benefits of Alexander’s so-called *crimes.*”

Zoe breathes through an almost overwhelming impulse to scream and/or trade in all of her Austra Bio shares for NFTs. “Multiple counts of second-degree murder,” she says instead. “Clinical fraud. Witness tampering. Wire fraud and money laundering. Would you like me to continue?”

Tippy hums. “And are you still staying in that ostentatious penthouse on Ocean Avenue?” she needles. “You always had expensive taste. I hear Franklin is still your chauffeur. Such a *loyal* man.”

Zoe flinches. On the other end of the line, Tippy takes a sip of her own drink. Zoe imagines it’s champagne.

“Oh, look at the time,” her mother says. “I’m going to have to cut this short. Some of us have social engagements on Friday nights.”

“Pity,” Zoe says flatly. “It was such a pleasure.”

“Remember what I said, dear,” Tippy presses right before disconnecting the call. “Tick tock.”

Zoe sinks down onto the white leather couch in her living room, knocks back the rest of her drink, and breathes.

She needs Alma.

She needs other friends, *better* friends, now that her best one has recently been too blinded by her own bliss to acknowledge the fact Zoe has already been tasted—wait—*tested*, and deemed unlovable, even by what could objectively be considered the most promising romantic prospect Zoe’s encountered in years.

She could call Linh instead, but her assistant is a little too flippant to entertain Zoe's need for validation. The last time Zoe tried was when Tippy had delicately pointed out Zoe's hair looked 'a tad flat' in her latest *Forbes* profile, and Linh had very unhelpfully suggested that maybe Zoe was developing a bald spot from a combination of stress and her chronically tight ponytail. It had made Zoe capital-P-Paranoid for weeks, obsessively googling the benefits of topical treatments vs extensions vs surgical intervention. When she'd eventually asked Linh to book her an appointment with an endocrinologist to discuss the possibility Zoe was entering premature menopause, Linh had sighed and silently put her through to Alma, instead.

The article her mother sent her isn't an article at all. When Zoe opens the attachment, she finds herself squinting down at a picture of National Enquirer's latest print edition, featuring a paparazzi picture of Zoe. The words RECLUSIVE BILLIONAIRE in the headline are underlined twice by her mother's red fountain pen.

Zoe swipes it away impatiently, and there, still open on her screen, is Hanna. Each individual lash and freckle is perfectly, almost lovingly captured, courtesy of the high-resolution sensor of Alma's phone camera; another one of Austra Bio's patents Xander is at least peripherally responsible for.

"You're a good person," Hanna had told Zoe, that bafflingly genuine look on her face. And Zoe had almost believed her.

Idiot.

Zoe manages to hold out for four more fingers of bourbon, but in the end she calls Alma anyway, draped over her living room couch, one arm slung over her eyes, tired with life.

"Alma," Zoe says the moment the call connects. "I think I want to sell my company."

Alma sighs out a low chuckle, as if Zoe didn't just drop a bomb. "You know," Alma says, "I'd happily take it off your hands myself if I hadn't just lost a wad of cash on what I was led to believe would be an excellent investment."

"About that," Zoe remembers, frowning. "How worried should I be that my chief financial officer gambled away her daughter's entire college fund in one reckless bet?"

“Eh,” Alma shrugs, “I have a rich fiancée. I’m a kept woman now.” And then, after barely a breath, “What *is* Tippy up to, these days?”

Zoe narrows her eyes at Alma’s cocksure tone. “How did you know?”

“We’re nearing the end of first quarter, and you’re in hardcore self-destruct mode. It’s not hard to figure out. Is she still talking to the board behind your back? Ooh—did she give any more indication she’s sleeping with that skeezy lawyer?”

Zoe rubs her forehead. Sometimes she thinks a migraine might be preferable to having to deal with Alma’s antics. “I am at this point *begging* you to stop bringing that up.”

“Okay. Go on, let’s hear the psychological wounds she doled out this time.”

Zoe takes a deep breath. “She told me I should start dating again.”

“No mames.” Alma lets out a shocked laugh. “Your *mother?* There’s no way.”

“Apparently the National Enquirer called me a hermit last week,” Zoe explains. “She says people are going to figure out there’s something wrong with me.”

“Fuck people,” Alma suggests, which is—bewilderingly—pretty much the exact same message Tippy seemed to be conveying to Zoe during her phone call. “There’s nothing wrong with you, and you looked hot, anyway. You know what those yoga pants do for your ass.”

“You saw the article?” Zoe is a little annoyed. “And you didn’t tell me about it?”

Alma is quiet for a moment. “Since when do you care what the tabloids are writing about you?”

Since Hanna might be reading them, Zoe realizes. She feels her stomach tumble to the floor at the thought that Alma may have shared it with her already, during one of their very many, very sweaty athletic endeavors. “Surprisingly,” she says, “my mother had no comments on my ass.”

“I’m still mad they never released your mug shots,” Alma sighs. “I bet you looked amazing in those, too.”

Zoe thinks of the picture on her driver’s license, and how some things should never be shared with Alma, no matter how many times she builds her back up after Tippy tears her down. “I’m sure Mother would disagree. She essentially called me an aging ingénue.”

Alma snorts, and Zoe can practically hear the corner of her best friend's mouth ticking up in a crooked smile when she says, "That reminds me. Will there be a big birthday celebration this year? It's her seventieth, isn't it? She must hate that."

Zoe feels her own mouth twitch in spite of herself. "Maybe we should throw her a very public party."

"You know," Alma drawls, stretching the words out about three seconds longer than necessary, "if you're interested in a little malicious compliance, I know just the person you should bring as your date to Xanthippe Zuydervelt's *Platinum Birthday Extravaganza."*

Zoe almost laughs, imagining introducing Hanna to her mother. She can imagine it perfectly; Tippy's stoicism and sharp appraisal, facing off with every joyful, golden inch of Hanna's blonde athleticism and her unpretentious "my teaching career is very rewarding but publishing a couple of books would be amazing" humility.

Alma's glee is contagious, but Zoe feels the blunted knife of *but she doesn't want me* sliding into her ribcage. Her amusement wilts away until only a cold void remains.

"I know what you're doing," she tells Alma. "And it has to stop. Consider this your cease-and-desist."

"Is that why you've been giving me the silent treatment?" Alma asks. "It's been almost two months since you reached out to me for anything other than to talk shop."

Zoe tries not to take it as the sulking teenager Alma's observation makes her out to be. "I'm allowing you your space as a newly engaged woman."

"And I'm doing my job as your second in command," Alma counters. "Keeping an eye out for the bottom—" she pauses significantly, "—line."

Zoe groans. "I should have known *so* much better than to make my ex the CFO of my company. It makes you far too powerful."

"I'm not your ex," Alma argues. "I'm your very current, very best, and very handsome friend, and I miss you." The words are simple, genuine. "This newly engaged woman still needs you."

It rubs at Zoe, at the little raw patch inside of her chest usually reserved for fond memories of her brother. She hesitates, gnawing at an already torn cuticle. "Actually, Alma," she decides, her heart beginning to pound in her chest. "I've been meaning to tell you—"

—*everything*, Zoe intends to say, getting ready to tell Alma every single embarrassing, vulnerable thing; how Hanna knocked the wind out of her with her kindness, fucked her more earnestly and devotedly than Zoe Zuydervelt expects to ever be fucked again, and how they'd both decided—Hanna a little more cleanly than her, but still—to leave it at that. Because then Alma will stop, knowing the whole thing has already played out and ended, and Zoe will be able to look at her notifications again without risking an aneurysm.

But Alma interrupts her, clearly misreading what Zoe is about to say. "Save it," she says, "it's okay. I just want to remind you that you are allowed to do things—and people!—for fun, sometimes. But I get it—I need to stop trying to tell you how to live your life." She pauses, seeming to reconsider. "Except you're coming over Sunday morning. I'm taking you and Sofia hiking."

"Absolutely not," Zoe scoffs.

"You can borrow Sofia's old boots! She just grew into a new pair."

"Alma," Zoe tells her kindly, "I say this from the bottom of my heart: no."

"Come on," Alma pleads. "Don't you think it would be good to spend some time with normal people?"

"Sure," Zoe says, pretending to consider her suggestion, "but I don't think I know any of those. Do you?"

Alma exhales impatiently. "Fine. Breakfast at our place then. Sofia's been asking after you too. We've all been worried."

"Really," Zoe remarks dryly. "Judith. Has been *worried* about me."

Alma takes a moment too long to answer. "Sure."

It's not the worst way to spend her Sunday morning, Zoe thinks. She does need to talk to Alma, and doing it face to face—soberly, this time—may be a better idea anyway. "Okay," she says. "But I'm cooking."

"You're also bringing the groceries," Alma informs her. "We've been . . . busy."

Zoe is almost proud of her best friend for insinuating rather than oversharing, this time.

"Also wine," Alma continues.

Zoe smiles. "I thought we were having breakfast."

"We live on a hill," Alma explains. "It's always wine o'clock."

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TWENTY-TWO

ZOE BLINKS AWAKE THAT Sunday from an already half-forgotten dream-memory of Hanna's mouth, hot against her thighs. Her phone informs her it's at three percent battery power, that it's 6.43 a.m., and it's empty, blissfully, peculiarly, in the space where the notification that **papi_alma just posted a photo** would usually be.

In retrospect, that really should have set off a number of alarms.

Zoe takes a shower, grabs the groceries she had delivered yesterday, pours herself a mug of dry cheerios she can't remember ordering and snacks on them in her little BMW i3. She opts against the freeway, driving *(herself, Mother, thank you very much)* down the boulevard instead, cutting through the beach towns—still mostly slumbering on this early Sunday morning, save for the early-bird surfers—before the winding cliff roads eventually lead her to the gates of Alma and Judith's Spanish colonial home.

Zoe grabs the paper bags with groceries from the trunk, sets them on her hip to knock on the door, and waits.

She knocks again.

There's no answer.

Zoe fumes for a minute, filled with righteous irritation and with no place to put it. For a second, it's so quiet she can hear the birds that tend to gather in the trees in their backyard.

And then she hears yelling from inside the house.

It spurs Zoe into action immediately, her instinct to freeze conquered at long last after so many life lessons learned. She leaves the groceries by the door, avoiding the windows as she soundlessly rounds the house, relieved when she finds the door to the back patio unlocked. She opens it as quietly as possible and steps into the kitchen. It's not breaking in, she tells herself, not exactly; not if she's acting out of concern for her friends.

The kitchen is cool, empty, pristine. "Alma?" she ventures, hushed. "Sofia?"

Another sound rings out, and Zoe is upstairs in the space between two heartbeats when she recognizes it as Sofia's voice.

"Leave me alone!" Sofia yells, and for a moment Zoe hesitates, unsure now whether Sofia is actually arguing with some unseen assailant or if it's Zoe herself who's being addressed. But then someone is behind her, grabbing her arm, and Zoe whirls around, panicked, ready to scream, wishing she'd taken Alma up on her offer to teach her some self-defensive moves—

It's Judith.

"Judith." *Of course.* "Jesus Christ."

Even through her boneless, breathless relief, Zoe is aware of Judith's downtrodden appearance. Her hair is sticking up on one side, like she hasn't seen a mirror since she first got up, and she's still in her pajama pants, barefoot. Zoe notes with tremendous glee Judith's toenails are painted a particularly garish shade of pink.

She's also wearing her tank top backwards and inside out.

Judith keeps a firm grip on Zoe's arm, as if she's afraid Zoe might run if she lets go. "Zoe," she hisses, sounding more desperate than Zoe thinks she's ever seen her before. "Thank *fuck.*" She begins maneuvering Zoe down the hallway, closer to Sofia's door, explaining absolutely nothing.

"I told you to leave me alone!" Sofia yells.

Zoe freezes abruptly, prompting an unhappy grunt from Judith when she stumbles into her back.

Judith sighs. "Sofia, baby," she pleads sweetly through tightly gritted teeth, still clinging to Zoe like she's a life raft, "I can't help you if you don't tell me what's going on."

"I don't need your help," Sofia yells from her bedroom, "and I'm not a baby!"

“Um, so, here’s the thing,” Zoe says softly, now a mere two feet away from Sofia’s door, “I’m here for breakfast, and also maybe to mentally unravel a little bit? But it sort of sounds like there’s already enough of that going on.”

“Don’t you leave me,” Judith warns. “Please. Alma was supposed to be back half an hour ago, but I’m beginning to think I made a mistake, giving her a heads up about—” she glares at Sofia’s bedroom door, “this whole situation.”

Zoe hesitates. “This really feels like more of a family matter,” she tries.

Judith is regarding her like she’s irked at her for trying to escape her clutches, or maybe she’s just generally not very fond of her right now. Zoe supposes she understands, what with Zoe sleeping with her sister and all. Though Zoe was sure Judith was coming around to the idea, the last time they spoke.

Judith blows a coiled lock of hair from her face. It’s glinting a fiery red in the early morning light. “Don’t act like you aren’t part of this family, Zuydervelt,” she grits out.

And it’s just—Zoe knows Judith is only saying it to get her to not run out the door and drive straight back to her apartment and return to her bed, but *god damn her,* it’s an effective move. A small seed of joy sprouts in the hollow of Zoe’s chest, burrowing tiny tendrils of warmth into her coldest, darkest parts.

“Besides,” Judith glares, “You owe me one. I’m still mad at you.”

Zoe frowns. “What are you talking about?”

Judith ignores her. “Sweetie,” she calls out, “your aunt Zoe is here to see you.”

Zoe sighs, collecting herself. She steps forward and taps her knuckles gently against the door. “Hey Sofia,” she calls out softly, “good morning.”

Sofia is quiet for a moment. Then Zoe hears a tiny, slightly watery “Hi.”

Zoe traces a knot in the wood with her thumb. “You know, I’ve just had the worst week,” she confides. “Do you think maybe I could come in and talk to you about it?”

“*Your* week was the worst?” Sofia asks dubiously. “Why? Did someone call *you* a freak and talk about you behind your back?”

Zoe grimaces. “That—actually pretty much exactly sums up what happened,” she admits. “So trust me, I understand why that would make you so upset.”

“I’m not *upset,*” Sofia insists, her voice shrill and snotty, and sometimes Zoe entertains the thought that maybe Alma lied to her about her daughter’s parentage, that maybe Sofia has a bit more of Zoe in her than can be explained away by prolonged exposure alone. It’s a much more preferable scenario than facing the unfortunate possibility that Zoe has the emotional maturity of a thirteen-year-old.

Judith sighs. She slumps to the floor beside Zoe, eyes closed, feet planted in front, and lets her head thud back against the wall.

“Catalina is supposed to be my best friend.” Sofia sniffs. “But she’s such a freaking *noodge.*”

Judith revives at that, looking up at Zoe and crossing her fingers. “So this isn’t about—” she asks, wincing as if she’s being actively tortured, “the boy crush?”

It’s quiet on the other side. Judith holds her breath, visibly frozen between hope and terror.

“No,” Sofia says in a small voice.

Judith drops her hands, her entire body sagging with relief.

“. . . Aiden’s not my *boy crush,*” Sofia says. “He’s just the one boy in our grade that’s worth talking to.”

Judith lets her head loll forward, groaning softly.

Sofia continues, oblivious to the psychic damage she’s just dealt her future stepmom, “But Catalina decided that means I’m into him, and she wouldn’t shut up about it, and his friends said—and now he won’t even—” Her voice cuts off with a sob. “He’s ghosting me.”

Zoe blinks back blankly at the bedroom door. Her heart aches—with sympathy, and with the tremendous effort it requires to ignore that parts of Sofia’s lament hit almost uncomfortably close to home.

“Whatever,” Sofia trudges forth, “he’s a fuck-faced dickwad. A liar, and a coward, and—” She seems to steel herself. “He isn’t worth my time.”

Judith’s eyes find Zoe’s. She looks like she’s aged five years since she first sat down. “You know,” she tells Zoe softly, “I’d tell her to cool it, with the language, but that’s actually a surprisingly accurate description of the kid.”

Sofia’s voice sounds closer to the door now, and marginally less agitated. “You’re making fun of me,” she accuses.

“Oh, sweetheart, no, we would never,” Zoe soothes. “Honestly, this Aiden guy sounds like a real jerk.”

Judith is still looking up at Zoe, but her expression has shifted from tired to downright weary. “Right,” she says, too low for Sofia to hear. “Why get all torn up about someone who’s too chickenshit to have an honest conversation?”

Zoe isn’t sure what to do with that, so she drums the tips of her fingers against Sofia’s door. “Fortunately I have just the thing that I think will make us both feel better,” she gambles.

To Zoe’s pleased surprise, the lock snicks, and then the door opens just enough to reveal Sofia’s pale, red-nosed little face. “Pancakes?” she chances.

Zoe grins at her, and then tucks her tightly to her chest. “Even better,” she says, pressing a kiss into Sofia’s hair. “*Animal* pancakes.”



They regroup in the kitchen, Sofia still looking a bit raw around the edges, Judith like she’s just come home from war. Zoe brings in the groceries while Judith texts Alma again, and when Zoe starts mixing ingredients, Sofia starts talking, and then just kind of doesn’t stop.

Zoe Zuydervelt has been called a mathematical genius before. She holds a doctorate in computational engineering and a master’s in management of drug development, the latter of which she gritted her way through in under a year when her brother’s questionable business ethics first became apparent. She’s fluent in German and Mandarin to the point where she can conduct business with Munich and Beijing subsidiaries without the aid of an interpreter. In boarding school she’d been briefly infatuated with her drama teacher, familiarizing herself with the ins and outs of stage direction, choreography and major versus minor character dynamics, in an effort to gain her teacher’s approval.

Yet even with this objectively impressive list of qualifications, Zoe is no match for Sofia Valdes’s breakneck narration of the modern social tragedy playing out over a single week at Terrace Ridge Middle School.

Sofia manages to lose Zoe approximately two run-on sentences and seven characters in. Fortunately Judith appears to be at least marginally more familiar with the names Sofia mentions—half of which seem to be some sort of variation on the name of former-boy-crush, current-fuck-faced-dickwad Aiden—so Zoe can focus on creating the most spectacular

breakfast the world has ever seen. It's important work: Sofia's mood lifts a tiny bit further with every pancake Zoe puts on her plate, her frantic energy settling down a little more with each scoop of strawberry jam Judith adds onto it.

By the time Sofia's plate is empty, she is smiling. "So," she says, turning to face Zoe and narrowing her eyes in question. "Who's the jerk who called *you* names?"

"Um," Zoe barely has time to stammer, before there's the sound of the front door opening.

"Honeys, I'm home!" Alma calls out from the hall.

"We're in here," Judith calls back, and then Alma is in the kitchen, greeting Zoe with such thrilled delight it can only mean catastrophe is about to strike.

"We stopped to get coconut cream shakes," she grins, not taking her eyes off Zoe. "Jude's texts made it seem like it might be a matter of life and death."

. . . *We?*

Hanna steps out from behind Alma, her eyes on the tray of milkshakes she's carrying. "There's literally nothing a coconut cream shake can't fix," she says brightly, before spotting Zoe and promptly depositing a gallon of it on Judith's previously pristine kitchen floor.

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TWENTY-THREE

IT’S—

Well.

It’s about as bad as Zoe had anticipated it would be, seeing Hanna again.

First, there’s coconut cream shake absolutely *everywhere;* splashed onto the Saltillo tile floor, splattered up against the kitchen counters, trickling slowly down the tan skin of Hanna’s sculpted, downy legs. Zoe is being made to perceive Hanna is wearing gym shorts—a well-worn, soft-looking pair that’s loosely held around her hips by a drawstring Zoe’s fingers twitch at, even from where she’s standing, twelve feet and three months of silence stretched wide between them.

In a raw, heart-stopping moment, Hanna’s eyes catch Zoe’s own.

Zoe takes a breath, and watches as Hanna does the same. The top she’s wearing is lamentably sleeveless, and just tight enough around her chest that Zoe can make out the first set of abs that lies beneath. Zoe is completely normal about it, although it does take her a moment longer to become aware of the chaos that’s erupted around them.

Alma and Sofia both got caught in the splash zone, and are having very different reactions to that fact. Alma is cracking up while her daughter is yelping, slip-sliding on socked feet to the kitchen sink in order to rinse off her cream-covered sneakers.

Judith is absolutely not having it. “Take that to the back porch faucet, thank you very much.” In between ushering Sofia out the patio doors and sending nervous looks between Hanna and Zoe, she is shooting absolute daggers at Alma—who is, at this point, nearly pissing herself laughing.

Hanna hasn’t moved. She’s anchored amidst the anarchy, staring at Zoe like a dying man in the desert. Zoe *feels* like water—dense, and briny, and possessing unusually high surface tension.

“I’m sorry,” Hanna stammers, and Zoe has a feeling it’s not about the shakes, which is the only thing she thinks Hanna should be apologizing for. “I didn’t realize,” Hanna says. “Alma didn’t mention—”

“I bet she didn’t,” Judith snarls from the sink. She lobs a wet mop at her fiancée’s head—for the milkshake or the accident Alma is about to have, Zoe isn’t sure—and although it’s aimed right at Alma’s obnoxious mug, she manages to catch it as if it had been a lovingly blown kiss. “Love you too, babe,” she winks, before bending down to wipe off her sandals.

Judith is fuming, an uneasy ally to Zoe’s own ire. Hanna is still staring, cheeks almost as pink as Judith’s toenail polish. Every beat that passes silently between them makes Zoe feel more out of place. Why is she even here? What was she thinking, allowing herself to fall back into the delusion that, within this perfect little biosystem Alma has created for herself, Zoe could ever be anything other than an outsider, an external object, waiting for the foreign body response to kick in and reject her?

“It’s fine,” Zoe lies, reverting to her usual icy poise. *Zuydervelts wobble, but they don’t fall down.* “I wasn’t told you would be joining us today, either.”

“No kidding,” Judith says, with a tired roll of her eyes that Zoe doesn’t understand.

“We, um.” Hanna’s remorseful eyes flit from her sister back to Zoe as she pulls at her own fingers, mesmerizing Zoe briefly with the interplay of tendon and bone beneath the skin. “We do yoga, Sunday mornings.”

Zoe is *achingly* aware.

And therefore also furious with herself for so feeble-mindedly wandering right into Alma’s trap.

“So,” Hanna smiles, a little uneven, a little unsure, still dripping ice cream onto the kitchen floor, “how have you been?”

And no. Zoe is absolutely not doing this. Not with *her.* Because it’s *Hanna,* and her ludicrous hair, and her eyes, and her—*everything else.* Zoe

doesn't even think she has it in her—a deeply insulting, thoroughly bewildering realization—to perform one of those stilted, awkwardly polite exchanges with someone she'd believed to be so painfully genuine.

"Busy," Zoe says simply, pointedly, keeping her gaze level and guarded. "I imagine you have been, too." *Too busy to pick up the phone, even.*

Hanna starts fidgeting again, her expression just edging towards worry when Alma jumps to her aid. "Hanna is off *building* worlds," she winks, clueless bastard that she is, "while Zoe is ensuring our current one's continued existence."

Hanna grins at Zoe at that, her eyes crinkling at their corners. "Ever the hero," she says, and it's *too. Fucking. Much.*

"I should go," Zoe says, gracelessly. There's something inside her chest that's not working as it should, something chafing and grinding where it should be smooth, and the way Hanna's face falls in response to her announcement is the exact opposite of helpful.

"Hey, no, wait," Alma tries, taking a precarious couple of steps toward her on the ice rink that is now her kitchen floor.

"Let her go, Alma," Judith says sharply. "You've done enough."

Zoe sends her a grateful look, but Judith meets it with narrow-eyed rancor. It reminds Zoe of the way she used to treat her when Judith and Alma first started dating; brimming with distrust, bordering on outright hostility. The realization that their hard-won camaraderie can be so easily rolled back makes Zoe blink at the sudden heat prickling behind her eyes.

Sofia steps in front of her, looking between the four of them and frowning. She wrinkles her nose. "Why are you all being so weird?"

Zoe gives Alma a withering look before slanting her lashes over at Sofia. "Because your mom is both a liar *and* a noodge, sweetheart," she says. "And she needs to learn when to take no for an answer."

Judith looks at her, alarm and scandalized reproach flickering on her face in quick succession. She puts her hands on Sofia's shoulders, gently steering the girl out of Zoe's warpath. "What—" Sofia asks, but Zoe is already gone, storming down the hall.

Alma's footsteps slap after her, wet and sticky on the terracotta tile. "Come on, Zo, stay," she barters. "I'm sorry. Look, I didn't mean to set you up when we talked on the phone. It just worked out so well—"

"Nothing is *working out well*, Alma," Zoe snaps, spinning around with one foot out the door. Alma catches the latch to keep it from slamming into

her chest. “Because she doesn’t—”

Zoe presses her lips together and clenches her jaw. A couple of strides behind her best friend, Hanna has stepped into view, somehow managing to look both guilty and confused at the same time.

“We’re not having this conversation here,” Zoe decides. “Enjoy your Sunday.”

“Zoe, please.” They wrestle for the front door a moment, but Alma won’t let go, so Zoe just leaves, stomping down the driveway and back to her car.

Before she slams the car door shut behind her, Zoe hears Alma call out to her fiancée, “A little help?”

“Oh, we’re not helping you clean *any* of this up,” Judith answers her. “This is *your* mess.”



Zoe doesn’t talk to Alma for a week and a half. She removes Instagram from her phone, ignores Alma’s calls to her private number, leaves her messages on read and instructs Linh to only allow her to be put through to her office if Alma can provide physical proof that it’s a work-related emergency.

Which is why it’s such a shock when on Wednesday morning, 11 a.m., Zoe is startled out of her bubble of quiet concentration by her office doors being thrown open wide and Linh—tiny, furious, perfectly put together—blazing through, followed closely by Alma Valdes. Her best friend saunters in with her hands in her pantsuit pockets, casually surveying Zoe’s office before making herself comfortable on Zoe’s couch, crossing her legs at her ankles and picking up some decorative trinket to play with.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Linh yells. She’s marched all the way up to Zoe’s desk, holding out her phone in clear accusation. “*This* is the woman Ms. Valdes has been trying to set you up with?”

Zoe almost has to roll her chair back to keep her assistant’s phone from colliding with her face. She smooths her features into a mask of perfect indifference before she glances at the screen, which is—much to Zoe’s private consternation—displaying Hanna’s personal Instagram account. The one Zoe had bravely resisted visiting, in spite of Alma tagging it incessantly.

“Really, Linh?” Zoe says, pointedly returning her attention to her work. “Cyber stalking? I thought you’d given that up for Lent.”

Alma snorts.

“Ms. Zuydervelt,” Linh says solemnly, “I swear on baby Jesus, if you’re not going to fuck this woman, I am.”

Zoe rolls her eyes up at her assistant with severe skepticism. “You told me you were a Kinsey zero.”

“Well not anymore, obviously.” Linh is looking at her phone like it’s a new religion. “Holy shit.”

“So Zoe,” Alma finally speaks up, smiling benevolently. “How are you doing? You look well. Very open, very accessible.” She sweeps her eyes over at Linh. “Not at all like you’re in emergency meetings all day and unable to take my calls.”

Zoe picks up her landline, fingers hovering over the speed dial. “You have ten seconds to leave my office,” she says.

Alma smirks. “Or what?”

“Or I’m calling security to have you both removed from the premises.”

Alma has the audacity to laugh. “I own half this company.”

Not exactly true.

Linh actually looks a little intimidated, her eyes flitting between Alma and herself. “And I . . . know things,” she blurts.

Unfortunately that is one hundred percent correct.

Zoe gazes at her assistant a moment longer, but when Linh sets her jaw and bravely meets her eye, Zoe relents. “Alright,” she says. “You can have it, it’s all yours. I’ve been meaning to move anyway.” She closes her laptop and grabs her purse from underneath her desk, pulling it into her lap. “I was thinking Canada,” she muses. “I’ll go off-grid, renounce the Zuydervelt name. People will know me only as the wicked witch of the woods.”

“The West,” Alma corrects her, bafflingly.

“What?” Zoe frowns. “No. Canada’s up—”

“No, it’s *The Wicked—”* Alma shakes her head. “God, never mind. But while we’re on the topic of your evil nature—Linh, on a scale of one to *what the actual fuck*, where would you rank Zoe giving Hanna a fake phone number?”

Zoe’s stomach swoops so dangerously at the preposterous accusation it distracts her entirely from her dramatic exit strategy.

Linh flicks her eyes up at Zoe, sharply suspicious. “You gave her your number?”

Zoe freezes, trying desperately to think of a way to make a conversational U-turn. She blinks. Way too many times. “Hanna?” Blink. “. . . No?” Blink-blink. *Oh for fuck’s sake, Zuydervelt.*

Linh stares at her, silent. Alma just waits, tossing the trinket in the air and catching it again.

Zoe deflates, sweeping an inconspicuous hand over her eyes. “Fine. Yes.”

Alma sighs, deeply disappointed. “Oh, Zoe. That’s cruel, even for you.”

Zoe flusters at the implication. “I didn’t give her a *fake one!* I’m not—is that what she told you?”

Alma purses her lips in dry disapproval. “Jude is never going to forgive you for making her have the ‘she just wasn’t that into you’ conversation with her sister.”

Had *that* been the source of Judith’s animosity when Zoe was at their house last week? “Alma,” she swears, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about you getting that poor girl’s hopes up for absolutely no reason.” Alma eyes her. “Seriously, who *raised* you?”

“I did no such thing,” Zoe contends, bristling at Alma’s nerve to even hint at Tippy’s influence on her character.

“Oh really?” Alma’s brow knits in defiant disbelief. “Then why was I forced to sit through that sad, awkward family breakfast last week, desperately trying to steer the topic away from how Zoe ‘superhero’ Zuydervelt is probably far too busy to date at all, and even if she wasn’t, so far out of poor little old Hanna’s league that she may as well be from a different planet?”

“That was your fault, putting me on the spot like that,” Zoe says, feeling vulnerable and fraught. “And you’ve got it all wrong. I did give Hanna my number,” she glowers at Alma, “my *real* number. And she never used it.” She sets her shoulders and juts out her chin. “If anyone is entitled to a modicum of friendly commiseration, it’s me.”

And, *oh.* Now that Zoe’s said it out loud like that, it looks like there might be a slight possibility she does feel a little hurt—a tiny bit burnt, maybe, just around the edges.

The corner of Alma’s mouth tugs up in a small, disbelieving smile. “Fuck,” she says. “I knew it. I *knew* you’d fall for her.”

“Wait,” Linh says. “So you’ve been waiting for her to call, and all the while this living, breathing thirst-trap selfie has been silently pining after you?”

“Would you stop?” Zoe begs her. “Hanna isn’t *pining.*”

“She certainly hasn’t been doing it silently,” Alma says, her dark eyes sparkling. “She brought you up six times on our flight home from Colorado, and our seats were nowhere near each other.”

Zoe stares at her, incredulous. “Then why didn’t she just call me?”

Linh, pragmatic as ever, doesn’t miss a beat. She holds out her hand. “Give me your phone.” Zoe glances at the one on her desk, but Linh glowers at her. “Your *private* phone.”

Zoe slides it from her purse, hesitating before handing it over, feeling stupid.

Linh taps furiously at the screen until she turns it to face her, displaying Zoe’s own number. “Write it down.”

Zoe flounders. “Linh, I don’t—”

Linh is unyielding, giving the pen on her desk a quick pointed look. “Write. It. Down.”

Zoe frowns, but dolefully jots her number down on the back of something unimportant, sliding it over when she’s done.

Her assistant rolls her eyes so hard at her inscription Zoe almost flinches in sympathy. “You see?” Linh scoffs, turning to Alma, then back at Zoe. “You *see?”*

Zoe doesn’t see.

Linh jabs the paper with one very tiny, very furious, perfectly manicured index finger. “This. Is not a four. This is a *nine.*”

“Um.” Alma frowns, joining them at the desk. “No,” she says, pointing at a different digit, “*that* is how Zoe writes a nine.”

“That is actually a seven,” Zoe sighs, pinching her brow, realization dawning.

Linh does an alarmed triple-take between Alma, Zoe’s handwriting, and her phone. Alma drops her forehead in her hand. “Zoe Zuydervelt, ladies and gentlemen,” she groans. “The world’s first illiterate genius.”

An email notification pops up on Zoe’s screen minutes after she’s finished wrestling a gloating Alma out of her office, Linh conscientiously returning to her desk. It contains only ten digits, and the words **Learn to write, chaparra.**

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TWENTY-FOUR

HERE'S THE THING: ZOE Zuydervelt doesn't like making the first move. Growing up believing the lie that she wasn't *actual* family may have been rough, but it also allowed her a little bit of latitude. As Alexander's so-called "adopted" baby sister, she was never asked to take the lead or to pioneer anything; never assumed to aspire to the kind of greatness her brother had always been expected to attain. Richard Zuydervelt had preferred his daughter docile: perfect, but pliant; unmatched, but polite. Even in fencing, evasive moves were where Zoe really shined. Toward the end, she'd become so renowned for her phenomenal stop hits that Tippy had begun calling her a one trick pony.

Zoe may have adjusted excellently after taking over her brother's role as CEO, fast learner that she is, but she has always preferred tackling issues as they arise. Given a choice in the matter—shameful as it may be to admit—she'd choose reaction, rather than action, any day.

So Zoe drags her feet. For days. She stares at Hanna's number, leaning against her kitchen counter completely sober or sitting on the bench at the foot of her bed, two tumblers deep. She digs her thumbnail into the rubber of her phone case as she stands on her balcony at night, her high heels discarded, the ocean breeze whipping her hair around her face.

She knows she needs to call Hanna. She has to let her know that, although Zoe really *is* a Zuydervelt, and therefore in possession of a

congenital capacity for cruelty, she never intended to inflict it on Hanna. *But,* Zoe considers, *that was this time.* What is going to happen when she really messes up?

If their brief, catastrophic exchange at Alma and Judith's house last week taught Zoe anything, it's that she had been right to consider Hanna off-limits in the first place. Not only has Zoe lost the ability to be in the same room as her without acting like an idiot—an affliction she apparently shares with Hanna—she's also been offered a nasty appetizer for the situation she will find herself in when things inevitably go sideways.

Hanna's crestfallen, coconut-cream-covered confusion now makes Zoe ache with guilt, especially in the context of the picture Alma had painted of Hanna excitedly hopping down the airplane's center aisle to gush about her, only to return home and discover the phone number she'd been given didn't exist.

And then there's Judith, who looked ready to disavow her last Sunday, no questions asked. Zoe is intimately familiar with Judith's protective streak, and privately thrilled Alma and Sofia have someone like that in their corner. But Zoe has been on the receiving end of it once before and she's not ready to end up there again. Plus, in this current situation, Zoe barely carries any blame. How much will it cost her when Zoe inevitably ends up actually hurting Hanna? What will Zoe have left when things turn ugly, and Alma is forced to pick a side?

In the end, Zoe decides a text message is heroic enough. Her fingers are trembling when she drafts it, her heart beating so fast autocorrect almost sabotages her effort entirely, but she's feeling far more settled now that it's clear to her what she has to do.

She has to forge a friendship with Hanna.

It's the only solution Zoe can see. Surely Hanna will agree. They can navigate their way back to safer terrain and find a place where they feel comfortable in each other's presence again, without the looming threat of cross-wiring expectations and people getting hurt.

She writes, **So it has been brought to my attention that I may have given you a wrong number.** It's clean, concise, and unpresumptuous. *Good.*

Much to Zoe's disorientation and distress, Hanna responds almost immediately.

Zoe?

Breathe in peace. Exhale stress.

Yes, Zoe confirms. **I believe I owe you an apology.**

No bubbles appear to indicate Hanna is writing her back this time, and for a moment Zoe almost relaxes, allowing herself to believe in the tranquil fantasy that maybe they'll be able to leave it at that. Guilt absolved, balance restored.

But then an incoming call pops up, nearly stopping Zoe's heart.

Inhale stress, breathe out—wait—

Zoe fumbles blindly behind her for the back of her couch, walking backwards until she finds it. She plops down onto it, digging her fingernails into the leather, and answers, eloquently, sounding only a tiny bit breathless, "Hey."

"It's okay," Hanna says, her voice mild with mercy and no small measure of relief. The sound of it hooks into Zoe's lower belly and tugs. "I figured something was fishy when you called me 'baby' and tried to sell me a gram of cocaine."

Zoe blinks. *". . . Excuse me?"*

Hanna chuckles, a sound so warm and familiar it returns Zoe to their bedroom in Alma's chalet in an instant. "I mean, we haven't really graduated to pet names, so that was a dead giveaway I wasn't texting *you*. And even if we had, I couldn't see you going with 'baby.'"

Darling, Zoe thinks, unbidden, struck by how immediately right it feels. It sweeps her inconveniently off-balance, already overwhelmed by having Hanna's voice in her ear again after months of trying very hard not to remember what that was like. Just like that, it's all rushing back—the sensation of Hanna's breath, whispering tender words against the shell of her ear, her mouth hot at Zoe's nape, her tongue moving down between—

Friends, Zoe reminds herself sternly, moving her strangling grip from the couch to the meat of her thigh. "What's wrong with 'baby?'" she demands, distracted and a little too argumentative, a ham-fisted attempt to claw her way back to shore.

Hanna hums in brief consideration. "Nothing," she allows, casual and light and not at all preparing Zoe for the absolute annihilation of her composure when Hanna continues, "just kind of feels like that would be my thing, instead."

Hanna hinting at a situation in which she might call Zoe "baby" brings about a wave of lunacy so lascivious it threatens to tip Zoe backwards over

the couch, rolling her onto her hand-knitted, Scandinavian wool rug. She drives her nails deeper into her skin, now hanging on for dear life, covering her gasped response both to Hanna's suggestion and the painful pinch with a laugh that comes out far too breathy to not sound at least moderately flirtatious.

It only encourages Hanna. "I missed you," she blurts, because she gets to just say these things and pretend they don't knock Zoe's entire world out of orbit.

"Hanna," Zoe warns, closing her eyes against the squeezing sensation in her chest. *It's impossible*, Zoe thinks. They've known each other for *days.*

"I was afraid that maybe—" Hanna hesitates. "I thought you'd given me a wrong number on purpose."

"I'm sorry," Zoe says, and, in a foolish bid for fraternal vulnerability, "I did wonder, why you never called."

"You thought about me?" On the other end of the line, there's a soft intake of breath. Zoe thinks of Hanna's chest rising with it, thinks of her pink lips parting. "Did you consider finding a way to contact me?" Hanna asks, brutally candid in her earnestness.

Zoe swerves, a little inelegantly. "I was telling you the truth, the other day," she says. "I really have been swamped at work."

"Oh," Hanna says. "Oh, yeah. I can imagine."

It's uncomfortably quiet for a beat. Zoe grabs at the first thing that comes to mind. "I'm sure you can," she says, keeping her tone light, friendly. "How is your writing going?"

It takes her a moment, but then Hanna huffs out a harsh, stuttered breath. "Better than yours," she says, teasing. "What kind of person loops their sevens?"

Zoe's heart takes a concerning little tumble when the words sink in. "You kept my card?"

Hanna clears her throat awkwardly, a rustling sound coming down the line. "I mean, yeah."

Zoe lapses, stricken, unable to brace herself. "You thought about me," she skids, half question, half confirmation.

"Zoe." Hanna sighs, imploring. "How could I not?"

Zoe attempts to resist the dangerous affection Hanna's words threaten to trickle into her chest, like a wild beehive dripping golden honey. She flexes her hand, roughly rubbing her thumb over the stinging, now definitely

bruised flesh of her thigh. The soreness of the previous weekend's misunderstanding lingers like that, no less tender and every bit as real.

"I think," Zoe says carefully, reasonably, "that we should cool things down a bit."

Hanna falls silent. Then she says, "We haven't talked for three months."

"Not—" Zoe huffs. "Not like that. I mean we should be friends. Don't you think we could be friends?"

"We *are* friends," Hanna insists, and bluntly, like it's fucking easy, "I like you a lot."

Zoe pushes herself up off the couch at that, suddenly in desperate need of a walk. She doesn't stop until she reaches the bar. "Good," she affirms, her voice far steadier than she feels. "I like you too." Thank god they're not having this conversation in person. Zoe's not sure how well her concealer would have held up against the force of her blush. "That's a great place to start."

Hanna sighs out her reply, a soft, almost wistful sound. "You mean it's a great place to end up at."

See? *Good.* This is going well. Hanna is getting it. "Yes," Zoe says decisively. *Before anyone gets hurt.* "I think that would be best. For . . . everyone involved."

Hanna rallies. "Friends," she reiterates.

Zoe nods. "Friends."

"We should go to lunch."

Zoe falters at the conversational whiplash Hanna has just delivered. "Lunch?"

Hanna hums. "Friends have lunch, right?"

Zoe reaches for her nearest bottle of Laphroaig. "Right."

"I know a great place," Hanna says, her enthusiasm quickly gaining momentum. "I'm trying to get Jude to have them cater the wedding. Are you free tomorrow?"



Zoe absolutely isn't free that following day—obviously—but she doesn't manage to delay the inevitable for very long; two weeks and three days, to be exact, during which Hanna single-handedly manages to cultivate an objectively impressive text chain.

I know you lied about that Batman movie, by the way, Hanna starts, later that same night. **There were three scenes, not one, and you may not have had much dialogue but your outfits were extremely eloquent.**

Zoe makes a face. *So Hanna watched it.* **I thought that corset was very modest,** she types.

Tell that to tumblr, Hanna replies. **There are gifsets, Zoe.**

Alma dials her bullying way down, apparently satisfied now that Zoe and Hanna are communicating directly, and Zoe is happy to discover that receiving Hanna's pictures straight from the source makes for a much more tolerable experience. For one, Hanna hardly ever purposely puts any of her physical assets on display. She opts instead for pictures of cute animals found around her neighborhood, and plants, and trees, and sunrises, and a lot of trashy food.

She also texts her inquiries like, **Do you ever get that dream where you have to return to high school because they found out you missed an assignment in ninth grade?**

Zoe leaves most of Hanna's pictures on read—which Hanna seems to be fine with—but she always makes sure to answer messages like these promptly, like the good friend she aims to be.

Could that be your brain warning you that you work too hard?

Hanna shuts that down quickly, responding **try telling that to your mirror, thank you very much**, along with a string of emojis Zoe doesn't even attempt to decipher.

In one particularly puzzling exchange, Hanna shares she's been unable to stop humming something she calls "The Edge of Greatness" for four days, and when Zoe admits she has no idea what that is, Hanna announces their next friendly get-together should be *She-Ra* night at Zoe's. **You do own a television, right?**

Zoe ignores Hanna's cheek and wonders what a night like that might look like. What she would wear, where they would sit. She's had a couple of glasses of red wine with dinner, so she also imagines how she might direct Hanna's attention to the pale skin of her cleavage, the line of birthmarks along the hemline of Zoe's dress. She can almost feel the warmth of Hanna's palm on the inside of her thigh, the possessiveness of her grip. Zoe sends up a quick prayer for forgiveness before picturing, at long last, watching Hanna come apart below her mouth; the way Hanna's abs might twitch and flex at the deft slide of Zoe's tongue, how Hanna might arch and

buck into the tight seal of her lips until finally, gloriously—perhaps while stammering Zoe's name—letting go, and going over.

That night is a late one. Zoe is just blowing off steam, of course, but it's still a good thing, she thinks, absently wiping her fingers on her sheets as she comes down, that they've agreed to go somewhere very public for their very *friendly* lunch.

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TWENTY-FIVE

TWO WEEKS GO BY quickly, and for someone with a walk-in closet the size of what she's been told is the average person's living room, Zoe sure doesn't seem to have a whole lot of workable options when it comes to what to wear to this particular event.

It's lunch. With a friend. Surely Zoe Zuydervelt has had lunch with friends before. So why can't she remember a single one? Is there no one Zoe has associated with who hasn't at one point been in her bed?

It takes Zoe two hours and a quick call to her very tired therapist to make it out the door. By the time she gets to the sunny street corner where Hanna suggested they meet, she's somehow still twenty minutes early.

It's a sunny spring day. The trees are all in bloom, the late-morning sunlight glinting off the traffic that's died down some in the lull between breakfast and the lunchtime rush. Zoe is familiar with the neighborhood; it's where she takes the ballet class she decided to skip today. When asked, last year, Linh had found her five different dance coaches perfectly willing to tutor her privately, but Zoe had dismissed them all in favor of a small studio run by a retired Moscow National Ballet veteran, a diminutive drill sergeant who conducts her classes in rapid-fire Russian and reminds Zoe fondly of the dance tutor she had as a child.

Zoe doesn't need to wait on the corner for long: Hanna is early, too.

Zoe finds herself admiring the shape of her before her brain fully registers who she's looking at. Hanna is buoyant and broad-shouldered as ever, the dappled sunlight filtered through the trees setting her blonde waves ablaze. She's a study in magnetism, Zoe thinks, the way she repels and attracts. Hanna's imposing build and serene self-confidence allow her to stroll down the sidewalk unimpeded, her fellow pedestrians automatically moving out of her way, but her disarming smile diminishes the effect significantly. In the short time Zoe is afforded to watch her undetected, Hanna is cheerfully greeted by multiple street food vendors before crouching down to cuddle a passerby's dog, engaging its owner in what appears to be a lively discussion of their pet's excellent good looks and character.

When she finally spots Zoe, Hanna looks so merry and bright Zoe can hardly accept it's all for her. When she calls out her name in pleased surprise, Zoe feels it in at least fifteen different ways at once. And then she stands before her, beautiful and a little out of breath.

She's wearing glasses, Zoe notes with some confusion. It's a horn-rimmed pair of simple, practical, and yet somehow absurdly flattering frames.

And oh—Hanna doesn't look like a friend at all.

"Wow." Hanna's wide eyes trip down Zoe's body, then quickly stutter back up to her face. "You look . . ."

Decidedly overdressed, Zoe notes with displeasure. Hanna is wearing sandals and jeans that are frayed at the knees and rolled at the ankles, and a buttonless, robin-egg-blue blazer that vaguely matches the faded print of the t-shirt underneath. Zoe's white lace top and tailored pantsuit and her nude designer heels seem frumpy and overly keen in comparison. *Damn it, Zuydervelt. This is a friendly get-together, not a high-profile publicity event.*

"You too," Zoe says, deftly sidestepping an opportunity for some mortifyingly flattering exchange. Hanna flusters regardless, fidgeting with the pockets of her blazer, apparently not yet having realized they're fake. Zoe finds it impossibly charming.

"So," Hanna starts. "How would you feel about going grocery shopping with me?"

Zoe blinks.

Hanna blinks right back, mute.

"Aren't we going out to eat?" Zoe asks cautiously.

“Yeah so, here’s the thing,” Hanna says. “I remember how you don’t like it when other people prepare your food. So I thought maybe we could, you know—prepare it ourselves?” She sucks in her lips. “At my place?”

Zoe’s mind is having a hard time keeping up. “Your place.”

Hanna nods. “I live right over there.” She points at a mid-rise residential building. “The one with all the . . .” She waves her fingers, wincing. “. . . Pigeon poop.”

It’s entirely too much for Zoe to handle all at once, so like a good mathematician, she resorts to breaking up the problem into smaller, more manageable parts.

1. Hanna Kaplan is a culinary menace.
2. It’s an honest-to-god catastrophe waiting to happen, putting Zoe in close private quarters with Hanna the way she is suggesting, with the way she’s looking at her now.
3. Remembering such an insignificant character quirk and attempting to navigate around it is possibly the kindest thing anyone has ever tried to do for Zoe Zuydervelt, virtually friendless pariah that she is.

(“Have you considered the possibility that you find it easier to make yourself vulnerable physically than you do emotionally?” her therapist had asked when Zoe had vocalized her concerns that morning. Zoe had tapped her pen against the clipboard in her lap and weighed her options. Perhaps it’s time for her to find a different therapist, since this one’s beginning to catch on.)

So Zoe walks her nude Jimmy Choos down the produce aisle of Sprouts, picking out lemons, scallions, kale, all while she grills Hanna suspiciously. “You do own a blender, right?” she interrogates. “Do you have a strainer? Will we need to get you orzo pasta? Olive oil? *Salt?*”

Hanna just hums happily, steering their shopping cart with one hand while using the other to dutifully add every single item Zoe mentions to the shopping list on her phone.

Hanna's place is slightly more spacious than Zoe had assumed, looking at it from the outside. The windows—admittedly slightly speckled with pigeon poop—are large, allowing generous amounts of light to fall on the plants that appear to take up every last corner of the space. The studio is clean, but cluttered; a well-maintained bicycle is parked just inside the front door, books and papers and colorful rugs are scattered about. Hanna has managed to somehow fit both a counter-height kitchen table, surrounded by eight barstools, and a sectional couch into the limited amount of space available. It's clear that having room for guests is one of her top priorities.

Hanna sets the grocery bags on the table and then moves to take Zoe's jacket, well-mannered as she is. Decidedly less polite is the way her fingers tremble against Zoe's skin as it slips off her shoulders, leaving only her strapless white lace top. Zoe turns just in time to catch Hanna staring, her cheeks darkening, her eyes slowly drifting south.

Zoe glances down at herself. *Oh. Huh.* Without the jacket, the top really does seem a little too revealing. Zoe hesitates, wondering for a moment if it would be prudent to ask Hanna to put her jacket back on, but then Hanna is shrugging out of her own blazer, unveiling the sculpted arms beneath. When Hanna superfluously starts rolling up her already short sleeves, Zoe loses her train of thought entirely.

Zoe can tell she's leaning in, almost reaching out in an autonomous effort to touch. But then—distantly, providentially—she becomes aware of an unfamiliar odor. She pauses, wrinkling her nose. "Is someone cooking?"

Hanna looks at her floor. "Um, right," she says. "Mrs. Gorecki, my downstairs neighbor. She celebrates some sort of weekly cabbage-related holiday, I think." She grins. "She keeps trying to feed me, as thanks for me helping her with her shopping, but she hasn't been able to wrap her head around the idea that I don't eat bacon."

"Oh," Zoe says.

Hanna hops up on her kitchen table and starts unloading the groceries. "Don't worry," she says with determined optimism. "After an hour, you'll barely even notice the smell."

"No, I mean, it's Saturday," Zoe clarifies. "Doesn't that mean you—"

“. . . enjoy a day of leisure? Spend time with loved ones—cherished friends?” Hanna winks, and Zoe has to take a deliberate breath to still the fluttering in her chest. “Not that strict of an observer, remember?” Hanna explains, before continuing, her voice low in mock warning, “Jude’s Shabbat dinner is non-negotiable, though.”

Strange odors and weekly family dinners, Zoe thinks. *How different our lives are.*

“Do you have neighbors?” Hanna asks, as if having read her mind.

“I . . . don’t know,” Zoe says, frowning slightly. She imagines she does. She’s just never considered them before.

Hanna is looking at her, fingering the corners of the bag of what portends to be Authentic Imported Italian Orzo. “You know I find you a little intimidating,” she admits, off-handed and apropos of nothing.

Zoe thinks she could probably spend a lifetime with this woman and still never manage to adjust to her brand of unfiltered honesty.

“My place smells like other people’s food,” Hanna continues in what Zoe hopes will turn into an explanation. “I have pigeons roosting on the windowsill. And you—” Hanna waves her fingers at Zoe, gesturing down her body, her gaze briefly snagging on Zoe’s chest again before bouncing away. “You probably attend, like, gallery openings. I bet you own a fancy espresso machine and books about wine.”

Zoe does indeed do, and own, all of those things. But. “My apartment looks no different than it did when I first moved in,” she says. “This place actually feels like someone lives in it. It feels like you.” Zoe picks up one of the ceramic pots that are pushed to the back of Hanna’s countertop, vivid primary colors set against a deep black base, and grins. “Though I have to say I expected your style to skew a bit more modern.”

“You’re not completely off,” Hanna admits, her gaze bouncing between Zoe’s eyes and her teasing smile. “It’s a little . . . louder? Than I’d usually go for. But it is ‘me’, in a way. It’s folk art. Ukrainian. A taste of home, as you would say.”

Zoe’s fingers ache with a sudden terror of dropping the pot. “These belonged to your parents?”

“Oh,” Hanna says, “no. They didn’t get to keep—” She pauses. “We left in a hurry, just before the Soviet Union collapsed. My parents sold what they could and left the rest behind. This stuff is new.” Hanna gives her one

of those lopsided grins Zoe didn't realize she'd missed so much. "Etsy," she shrugs.

Zoe traces the outline of one exuberant blue flower with her thumb. "They're beautiful," she says, leaving the *and more like you than you realize* unsaid.

"Sometimes it feels a little like I'm trying too hard," Hanna says. "I was like, a day old when we left. I've never even been back. I always figured I would, when the time was right, you know? But Russia's hostilities just kept ramping up, and I knew I couldn't do that to Perla. Jude would have chained me up in her guestroom personally to make sure I stayed put."

"Alma would have provided the handcuffs," Zoe quips. "She's a pretty big fan of yours, in case you didn't know."

Hanna smiles at her words, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"Do you—have family, over there?" Zoe asks, cautious.

Hanna shakes her head. "My grandparents passed away years before my parents left." She watches Zoe's careful fingers as she puts the pot back down. "It's a weird thing," Hanna says, "feeling a connection to a place you've never been, a culture you have no ties to anymore." The corners of her mouth tug down briefly in a self-deprecating grimace. "The art is . . . a start."

Zoe hums, thinking she understands. "The tattoo you asked me about, before?" she says, waving a finger at its approximate location. Hanna's eyebrows twitch up when she remembers. "I got it believing I was honoring the woman who gave birth to me. Branding myself as hers, in a way. I thought I needed physical proof of who I belonged to." Zoe huffs, giving Hanna a half-smile. "I realized a little too late it didn't change anything. We carry the people who made us inside us." *For better or for worse.* "If the things we *own* determined who we are as people, I'd be whatever my interior designers believe I am."

"That's not what I meant," Hanna clarifies. "It's not *just* your fancy espresso machine that intimidates me. It's more, like." Hanna looks around her loft, blowing out her cheeks. "Like I bet you've actually read *One Hundred Years of Solitude."*

Zoe cocks her head. "You haven't read *One Hundred Years of Solitude?"*

Hanna grabs the bag of pistachios, avoiding Zoe's eyes. She tears it open and cracks a shell between her fingers. "No."

Huh. "Aren't you an English teacher?"

Hanna holds up a finger, chewing, looking serious in spite of the fleck of pistachio skin stuck to her plump bottom lip. “*English* Lit.”

Zoe feels her expression soften into a smile she’s unable to contain. “Aren’t you an author?” she asks.

Hanna huffs good-naturedly. “Not yet.”

Zoe steps closer to Hanna’s dangling legs, tracing her fingertips over the divots in the wood. “You know, it occurs to me I’ve never even asked you about your book.”

Hanna’s smile is forgiving, her blue eyes devastatingly fond. “You’ve known me for a week, technically speaking.”

She’s right, Zoe thinks as she drops her gaze. *So why does all this already feel so dangerously familiar?*

Hanna’s kitchen isn’t much larger than Zoe is used to seeing in the suites she stays in on her business trips. It has a functional oven and a stove, blessedly, but counter space is a bit of an issue. They end up commissioning the table as their workspace, Hanna laying out knives and cutting boards, as well as every vegetable, freshly rinsed. Zoe picks up a serrated knife and a tomato.

And then she pauses, looking down at herself.

Hanna, too, is looking apprehensively between what remains of Zoe’s spotless white outfit and the tomatoes, the kale, the blender by the sink.

Zoe may not have thought this through.

She slides her eyes up at Hanna. “Would it be too optimistic to hope you have an apron?”

“It would. But.” Hanna chews the inside of her cheek. “I do have some clothes you can borrow.”

You know what, fine. Whatever. The day’s already weird enough.

Zoe follows Hanna into a sectioned off area at the back of her studio, hidden behind a curtain she courteously holds aside for Zoe to pass through. On the other side, Zoe is met with the sight of Hanna’s decadently comfortable-looking king-size bed and even more plants, vining up an artfully arranged collection of open wooden picture frames screwed into the wall. Rather than a wardrobe, there’s a fashion rack of clothes on hangers, pushed against the curtainless window. Zoe begins to understand why most of Hanna’s clothes look so fashionably faded.

Hanna picks out a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants for her, holding up the latter in critical assessment before handing them over, and then cheerfully

leaves Zoe to change. And *well, would you look at that*—if it isn't the last place Zoe had expected to find herself in today, stripped down to her underwear in Hanna Kaplan's bedroom.

The sweatpants Hanna chose for her are soft and stretchy, and they smell like her, Zoe notes, bending down to roll up the ends to keep from tripping on them. The t-shirt she picked out is the Bananarama one, because of course it is. When Zoe takes it off the hanger, she notices something that somehow escaped her attention the last time she'd worn it: there's a print on the back, as well.

Zoe holds it up so she can see it better. Pictured is a large group of teenagers grinning at the camera. Nearly all the girls and quite a few of the boys have teased their hair in a dramatic eighties style. Some of them are wearing colorful headbands. The print beneath the picture reads, in a bright electric blue, IT'S GOING TO BE A CRUEL SUMMER WITHOUT YOU, MS. KAPLAN – CLASS OF 2022.

Zoe grins at it. She was right: Hanna's kids obviously adore her, no matter how much of a hardass Hanna believes she is.

Any lingering traces of stumbling awkwardness on Hanna's part seem to disappear along with Zoe's original outfit. Hanna appears much more relaxed when Zoe resurfaces, moving around her home with handsome, familiar ease. She ties up her hair in a bouncy ponytail but keeps her glasses on, and before resuming her duties as Zoe's jeopardous sous-chef, she grabs a box of candy powder packets from one of her cupboards and generously offers Zoe some.

"No thank you," Zoe tells her, grimacing when Hanna proceeds to rip open three of them at once, pouring the powder directly into her mouth before crunching down on the sticks. "I don't understand how you can put that into your body and still look the way you do."

"Probably the same way you can put all of this in yours," Hanna says, wagging a bundle of kale and sending water droplets everywhere, "and still taste the way *you* do."

It's a shot to the heart of Zoe's carefully cool composure. She stares at Hanna, scandalized, sure her face is burning.

Hanna smiles impishly back, the tip of her tongue trapped between her teeth. It's stained a vivid purple. "Too soon?" she asks sweetly, looking far too smug to be convincingly remorseful.

Zoe straightens. She will *not* be caught squirming. She clears her throat, hoping it will also clear her head. “Maybe just a little,” she huffs.

They make it through most of the rest of their meal preparation relatively unscathed. And then Zoe learns that, just because Hanna owns a blender, doesn’t mean she knows how to use one.

Zoe doesn’t realize what’s about to happen until it’s too late to intervene. “No wait, Hanna,” she still tries, “not so—” But the damage is done. The lid has blasted off the jar, and everything—the kitchen counters, the walls, and a fair portion of Hanna herself—is covered in fragrant, vibrant green goop.

Such is life with Hanna Kaplan, Zoe is learning.

She flicks a single stray drop from her lashes. She and Hanna’s Bananarama t-shirt appear to have been largely spared. Hanna, splattered green and lemon-scented and standing altogether too close, licks out at the corner of her own mouth. “Not bad,” she observes calmly. She reaches for Zoe and plucks a piece of pistachio out of her hair. “Bet you’re happy *now* you let me talk you out of that white suit.”

So lunch is a bust, unfortunately. Hanna withdraws to the bathroom for a quick shower and a change of clothes, promising Zoe she’ll take her to the Vietnamese food truck just down the block, where Zoe will be able to watch her food being prepared.

The casual consideration warms Zoe all over again.

“Don’t clean up,” Hanna calls out to her from behind her bedroom curtain. “Though if you feel like putting on some coffee, I wouldn’t be opposed.”

Zoe wipes down the walls and the counters at least, setting the blender in the sink. She only remembers the coffee when she hears the sound of the shower turning off, quickly grabbing two mugs from the cupboard and placing one under what she assumes to be a coffee maker but what, after Zoe turns the crank to start—admittedly an interesting mechanism—bafflingly deposits a gumball into her cup, instead.

Zoe blinks at it.

“Hanna,” she calls out, warily, “why do you own a gumball machine?”

Hanna saunters back into the kitchen barefoot, her blonde hair soaked a deep brown. It drips icy water onto Zoe’s shoulders when Hanna leans in behind her to grin at the contents of Zoe’s coffee cup. Zoe shivers and tries unsuccessfully to move away, trapped as she is between Hanna’s body and

the kitchen counter. “Did you take a *cold* shower?” she asks, disbelief clear in her voice.

Hanna shrugs. “Hot water kind of comes and goes around here,” she explains. “I’m used to it.” Standing as close as she is, Zoe can tell her skin is rosy, likely from the freezing water. When she reaches past Zoe, brushing their arms together, Zoe can feel every tiny hair on Hanna’s forearm tickling the sensitive skin of Zoe’s own.

Hanna turns the gumball machine crank again, and this time a small plastic capsule falls out. Zoe huffs out a laugh and says, faintly, inanely, “Lucky you.” She tries to swallow down the heart that hammers in her throat when Hanna hums into her ear, pleased.

Hanna takes her prize between the fingers of both of her hands, fully enveloping Zoe—shamelessly? obliviously*?*—and twists it open with a soft pop. It contains a tiny snow globe on a chain, a miniature cabin encased inside, sparse flecks of white fluttering through the water when Hanna’s fingers twitch.

Oh, come on.

“The machine’s a gift from Judith,” Hanna says, her voice almost as delicate as the tiny toy held in her hand. “When I moved in with the Kaplans, I had just lost . . . everything that made me happy. But Jude noticed that the gumball machine at the mall still managed to make me smile.” She shakes the little globe again, on purpose this time, and Zoe watches as the snowflakes whirl through the water. Hanna’s voice is warm when she continues, “She bought me my own when I moved out, and it’s been with me ever since.”

There’s a beat, during which neither one of them moves. Zoe tries to ride out the urge to lean back into Hanna’s warm and solid body, to turn around and put her arms around her shoulders and hang on tight.

And then Hanna says, simple and straightforward and breaking effortlessly through every barricade Zoe has so carefully erected between them, “When I find something that brings me joy, I make an effort to keep it around.”

Zoe’s heart is now thudding so loudly she can hear it, the whooshing in her ears strangely reminiscent of the tsunami sirens along the Pacific coastline that Austra Bio’s funding reinstated. *Move out of the water,* she thinks. *Seek higher ground.* Instead, she turns around slowly, goosebumps rising as she moves in the loose cradle of Hanna’s arms. Hanna doesn’t

move away, keeping her body close to Zoe's own, her posture open and inviting. For a moment they just look at each other, Hanna's eyes dancing between Zoe's own.

"I've never met anyone like you before," Hanna says quietly. "Sometimes I'd talk to Alma or Jude about you just to make sure I didn't make you up."

The confession leaves Zoe breathless, her heart cracking open like the plastic capsule at the pressure of Hanna's fingers, which are now resting gently at Zoe's hips. Zoe's jaw drops, her lips parting before she's even sure what she's about to say.

It definitely isn't "Good morning loser, which Facebook cooking hack are we debunking today?"

Judith is standing in the doorway, leather-clad, a keychain in one hand, motorcycle helmet in the other and a look of slowly dawning horror on her face.

"Jude!" Hanna greets her sister cheerfully, not moving an inch. "I didn't know you were stopping by."

Judith stares at them. Zoe is tragically aware of what they must look like, pressed together at the counter as closely as they are. "You left your badge at our house last night," Judith says faintly. "I texted you." She fishmouths for a moment, then finally manages a feeble, "What are you doing."

"We're eating out," Hanna announces, still joyously standing her ground. "We just decided."

Zoe recoils in shock, pressing her hands to Hanna's forearms in an effort to put some space between them. "No, we're not."

Hanna returns her focus to Zoe at that, immediately taking her hands off Zoe's hips, looking devastated. "We're not?"

Zoe's heart lurches. Being the cause of Hanna's disappointment is nearly unbearable. But how could Zoe ever consider herself capable of being anything else? If there's one thing that's certain in this world, it's that Zoe Zuydervelt will always, always, ultimately fuck things up. "It's not—like that," she promises Judith. "We're having lunch. As friends."

"And showering," Judith observes dryly with a look at Hanna's hair, then raising an eyebrow down Zoe's body. "And wearing each other's clothes. As *friends.*"

"Zoe," Hanna says gently. She takes off her glasses and sets them down on the counter. "Don't you think that maybe we—"

“No,” Zoe says, now nudging Hanna’s body more firmly out of her way, “no. This isn’t how this day was supposed to go at all.” She manages to duck past Hanna, putting seven feet and the kitchen table between them. The water droplets on the lemon rinds glitter in the noontime sun, serenely refracting light.

Hanna and Judith are both looking at her, eerily similar expressions on their faces. “Oh,” Judith says. “I should go.”

“No, you should stay,” Zoe asserts, making a beeline for her purse. “I’ll go.” She briefly debates the merits of a detour to Hanna’s bedroom to grab her clothes, but ultimately decides it will take too long and also look preposterous.

She’s embarrassed enough already, wearing rolled up sweatpants with her Jimmy Choos.

“This was fun!” she announces, like a deranged person, fingers already fumbling for her phone to call her driver before she remembers she’s her own chauffeur, these days. “Maybe refrain from trying to cater the wedding, though.” She attempts a smile, but something in Hanna’s expression tells her she doesn’t quite manage.

Hanna sends her off with a befuddled little goodbye.

As the door clicks shut behind her, she hears Judith demand, “What just happened?”

Hanna sounds a little forlorn. “I don’t know.”

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TWENTY-SIX

ZOE DOESN'T PLAN TO flee the city.

Tippy has her lawyers file a federal appeal on Xander's behalf, claiming Netflix's docuseries has unearthed new evidence that promises to exonerate him entirely. Zoe doesn't believe for a moment the argument has merit, but she knows public opinion requires a response. And even though she could technically have sent her legal team to DC, or chosen to handle the crisis from the relative safety and comfort of her office, she decides to fly out personally.

It's the most professionally prudent choice, Zoe rationalizes. Even if her brother's argument is nonsense, the FDA will be legally required to do an audit, and Zoe volunteering to lead the briefing herself is the best shot she has at preventing her study being placed on a clinical hold.

It's not as if she's going out of her way to avoid Hanna. Zoe even makes sure, like the good friend she still believes she can be, to let Hanna know right away that she will be very busy for a while, and that perhaps it's for the best if they postpone their next get-together indefinitely, you know, just until things settle down.

And Hanna agrees with her, understanding as she is: after that last exchange, their text chain stutters to a halt.

Zoe spends her time in DC prepping for her inevitable subpoena. Her lunch breaks are taken up by calls from spooked investors and hospital

boards, all demanding to be personally assured that their investments as well as their products are still safe.

Every meeting feels like an interrogation. Like Zoe's right back where she started.

The fact that she no longer wakes up to new portraits of freshly unfurled monstera leaves only adds to her desolation. Hanna sends her no new updates on the pigeon eggs that are surely about to hatch. No mystifying non-sequiturs await her when Zoe returns to her suite, exhausted, face-planting into her bed at the end of every day.

Zoe is frustrated with herself, knowing she's the culprit of their dwindling communication but unable to think of a way to talk to Hanna without confusing matters more. *Maybe it was too soon*, she thinks. Maybe they're too raw, the nerve of their attraction still exposed. Zoe hates it, this constant tightness in her chest. Why should it be so uncomfortable, so hard, when she and Alma had segued effortlessly into friendship a decade ago?

The whole thing ends up being, as Tippy would phrase it, "nothing but fuss and feathers." At the end of the second week, when a letter from the U.S. attorney's office arrives, it isn't the subpoena Zoe's legal team has been anticipating. Instead, Zoe finds herself staring down at a notification from Victim Services.

A STATUTORY VICTIM, the letter calls her. NO EVIDENTIARY HEARING OR TESTIMONY REQUIRED, it says. *We acknowledge your innocence,* Zoe interprets.

Zoe returns to Los Angeles that next Tuesday night, late in the evening, and finds her best friend waiting for her in her lobby. Alma is wearing jeans and a soft sweater and a contrite but hopeful smile on her face.

Zoe drops her shoulders along with her hard-won composure as soon as she spots her. "The judge denied Xander's appeal," she says. "I'm officially off the hook."

"I know, honey," Alma says as she enfolds her in a hug. "It was about damn time."



"I'd like to state for the record that I could have come to gloat," Alma says when she follows Zoe into her penthouse apartment. "But I'm actually here

to apologize.” She raises the bottle of Viñedo Chadwick she’s carrying and asks, “Will you accept a drink from a very remorseful friend?”

Alma lies down on her sofa as Zoe walks the wine into her kitchen, kicking off her heels and shrugging out of her blazer before finding two Bordeaux glasses and filling one a little too close to the rim. She hands the other to Alma and sits down by her head, waiting as Alma wriggles over to put her head into Zoe’s lap.

Alma looks up at her, soft. “I’ve been a shithead, haven’t I,” she says.

“Yes.” Zoe brushes a lock of hair from her best friend’s forehead and admits, “But there’s been a lot of that going around.”

Alma bites her lip. “Will you tell me? All I know is that two of my friends are sulking. Hanna keeps insisting everything is fine, but her eyes twitch every time I mention your name. And Jude refuses to talk to me about it anymore because she seems to think it’s somehow all my fault.”

Zoe studies the movement of the wine swirling in her glass. “We aren’t sulking,” she says. “We’re trying our best to get along. And *you,”* she chides at Alma’s skeptical expression, “don’t get to act like you’re innocent in all this. You’re the one who practically threw me into her bed that first week in Colorado.”

“Uh, I distinctly remember you telling me you climbed into it all by yourself, that first day,” Alma says. “And I don’t understand how you go from that to this—” she wiggles her fingers, “perplexing awkwardness.”

It’s quiet for a moment. In the distance, lost in the glittering sprawl between Hollywood and the skyscrapers of downtown LA, is Hanna’s neighborhood. She’s back there somewhere, probably typing away at her laptop, blissfully undisturbed in the odorless interlude between two Cabbage Saturdays.

“We’re not lovers,” Zoe insists. “I’m trying to be her friend.”

Alma looks at her from Zoe’s lap, her eyes dark and knowing. “You may want to tell that to your face. I haven’t seen you look this starry-eyed since we first got word of successfully-developed artificial antibodies.” She waits, tapping a finger against her glass. “I know something went down the weekend before you left for DC. Tell me.”

Zoe tugs at her own ponytail until the pins dislodge and massages her hair down with one hand, sighing with relief as it tumbles loose over her shoulders. “We met for lunch,” she offers. “Things got—messy.”

Alma raises her glass over her head to tink it against Zoe's own. "*That* I am willing to believe."

Zoe laughs humorlessly. "We didn't have sex," she says.

One of Alma's eyebrows twitches up at her. "You didn't?"

Not this time. "See," Zoe hedges, still on the fence about owning up to everything, "this, right here? Is exactly why they tell you not to sleep with your friends."

Alma gives her a significant look.

Zoe groans, rubbing her temple, beginning to feel the strain of jetlag and nine days sequestered in a conference room with a small army of lawyers and regulatory consultants, going over every last bit of clinical data from the past ten years to prove Xander's "controversial" methods have been properly purged from their protocols. "Alright fine," she says. "This is why I shouldn't have slept with the sister of the fiancée of the only real friend I have, in what I'm sure my therapist would label a 'self-destructive effort to oust myself from your family' because it's less painful than waiting for you to do it yourself."

Well. That's—hmm.

Zoe frowns and subtly sniffs at her wine, almost wondering whether her best friend could have slipped her something stronger. Zoe wishes *she* had a neighbor with a love for fragrant food, just so she might have something to distract Alma from the things she's just disclosed.

Alma's brain seems to snag on Zoe's steamier admission, her eyes and her smile widening triumphantly at the revelation that Zoe did sleep with Hanna. But when the rest of Zoe's message sinks in, Alma sobers instantly. "Hey," she says, circling gentle fingers around Zoe's wrist. "You *are* my family. No one is getting *ousted."*

Zoe's mouth twitches in derision, a bitter pebble in her throat. "You say that now."

"Wait," Alma says. "Are you serious?" She sits up, careful not to jostle Zoe's wine, then sets both of their glasses down on the coffee table before turning her whole body and every single one of its outrageously gangly limbs toward her.

"It's okay, Alma," Zoe tells her, aching and a little hoarse, trying not to feel the weight of her world pressing down on her. "You're getting married. And I'm thrilled for you. But I'm also *scared—"*

Zoe is interrupted by an abrupt closure of her throat, the smooth pebble lodged there growing large and painful. The last word comes out a mangled, embarrassing sound, and Zoe slams a hand over her mouth in an effort to suppress it. She stares at Alma, scandalized and bewildered and trying desperately to prevent the sudden tears in her eyes from spilling over.

Alma lays her hands on Zoe's cheeks, then starts stroking her hair, uncomprehending. "What, Zo?" she asks, worried. "What is it?"

Zoe squeaks out—because that's apparently a thing she now does— "I'm losing you."

Within a second, Alma's eyes turn to jet. "I've told you this before and I will tell you again right now," she says, her voice now low and almost dangerous. "I am not going anywhere."

Zoe Zuydervelt can count on one hand the times she has truly been afraid, and she's lived through kidnappings, assassination attempts, and her mother's annual Easter brunch. The truth is that she has never particularly feared meeting her own end. She's been anticipating it, in fact, ever since that summer Sandrine had ripped out her heart along with some of her stomach lining. But once upon a time, in the not-too-distant past, the person who matters most to her in the world—who, until recently, had considered Zoe to be the most important adult in hers—was being told by a soft-spoken, kind-faced oncologist that, without medical intervention, she might have less than a year to live. Zoe had held her best friend's hand as they listened to him patiently discuss her prognosis and treatment goals, and for what had seemed like the first time in her life, Zoe had felt a feral, suffocating dread.

Tonight the woman in question sits in front of her, a couple of years along the line, happy, healthy, miraculously recovered, and Zoe is losing her after all.

"You don't understand," Zoe croaks, attempting to pull her French cuffs down over her hands, feeling juvenile and deeply unattractive. "You're about to have a wife. A real family. What would you need to keep me around for?"

Alma stills, then gasps, tears springing to her own eyes. "Oh," she soothes, "Oh, mija." She's gripping Zoe's hair now, in what Zoe is sure must be the world's most unflattering pair of pigtails. "Is that what you think love is?" she asks earnestly, but also a little like she believes Zoe is an idiot.

When Zoe fails to answer, not understanding what her best friend is asking, Alma tugs her into an uncomfortably tight hug. One of her knobby knees digs hard into Zoe's thigh. Alma sighs, "Sometimes I forget you never had family, before."

Zoe protests, mouthing into Alma's sweater, "It's not as if you were so much better off."

"Listen," Alma says, pulling away to look Zoe in the eye. "I will always —" she squeezes Zoe's shoulders, then shakes her. "*Always.* Make room for you." She ducks her head when Zoe tries to look away, stubbornly maintaining eye contact. "Do you hear me?" she pushes, loosening her grip only when Zoe nods obediently.

Zoe sniffles, surreptitiously wiping her eyes on her already lipstick-stained cuff. "Has anyone ever told you you're a bully?" she asks.

Alma takes Zoe's hand in her own and starts massaging the muscle of her thumb. "You're my family whatever you decide to do," she promises, "but I still think you should try to work things out with Hanna. She's awesome, and there's something there, I think you know it, too, and Zoe, I understand how hard it is for you to believe this, but you deserve good things."

Zoe manages to suppress a fresh surge of feeling, swallowing hard and waving the hand Alma isn't currently holding at the room, indicating the designer sofa Alma's thoughtlessly put her loafers onto, the original art on her walls, her magnificent ocean view. "I have good things."

Alma rolls her eyes at her. "Good *people.*"

Zoe can feel her smile wrinkling her nose. "Apparently," she says, "I have you."

"You know what," Alma says, smacking Zoe's knee, "you're right. You don't need sex or romance, you need therapy."

Zoe takes a deep breath, relenting. "I know."

"You still need to talk to her." Alma's voice is stern. "She's sad and confused. If you're really her friend, you will do something about it."

Zoe reaches over to the coffee table to retrieve both of their glasses, but Alma waves hers off. Zoe settles in next to her, her own wine glass in hand, and leans her head on her best friend's shoulder. "I know."

"Consider it a personal favor to me," Alma presses. "I'm going to be stressed out enough about the wedding. I don't want to have to worry about your drama on top of everything else. My mother is coming, did I tell you that?"

Zoe gasps, clutching her imaginary pearls. “The legendary Vicki Valdes?”

Alma grimaces. “In the flesh. She’s already sent me pictures of the dress she’ll be wearing.”

Zoe sips her wine. “Is it white?”

Alma snorts. “No. A classy burgundy red.”

“That’s *my* color,” Zoe frowns petulantly.

“Wear it, I don’t care.” Alma’s shrug lightly jostles Zoe’s head. “I’m sure you’ll outshine us all.”

Zoe rubs a thoughtful thumb down the stem of her glass. “So does that mean you’re not putting me in a bridesmaids’ dress?”

Alma looks down at her, raising her brows. “You would let me do that?”

“Probably not.” Zoe finishes her wine in one last, decisive gulp before taking a deep breath. “I’m not sure what to tell her,” she confesses quietly. “Zuydervelts don’t apologize. They double down.”

Alma’s grin is wide and groundlessly confident. “I’ll help.”

Zoe laughs at her. “Great,” she says. “The clueless will follow the fool.”

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TWENTY-SEVEN

ZOE ZUYDERVELT MAY NOT know how to apologize, but she's had some practice making reparations. She texts Hanna, two days after she speaks with Alma, **Are you free for lunch next Wednesday? There's a place near my office that serves these mini spring rolls I think you'd really love, and they require far less cleanup than kale pesto apparently does.**

When the incoming call comes through this time, Zoe's screen lighting up like a beacon inside the fading twilight in her bedroom as she's stepping out of her dress, Zoe hardly even flinches. She simply leaves the garment pooled on the floor of her dressing room and picks up the phone.

"So the strangest thing happened yesterday," Hanna greets her, voice pitched high with exaggerated wonder. "Maintenance came by to repair our building's water heater. No more random shut-offs."

Zoe is pleased, but not surprised. "Really." She sits down on her bed, absently tracing her thumb along one of the clips securing her garter belt to her stockings.

"You made a call, didn't you?" Hanna asks. "You didn't have to do that."

"Yeah, I did." Zoe fiddles with the clasp as she considers confessing she'd done a little more than that; that she had spoken to the landlord personally and insisted on an immediate inspection of the failing heating system; how she hadn't even bothered to wait for the landlord to get his

crew on it, simply sending in her own team of engineers to make sure it received a full overhaul. “That’s what friends are for,” she tells Hanna instead.

“Friends,” Hanna repeats, gently. And after a moment, just as gentle, “Is that really all you think we can be?”

Zoe takes a fortifying breath and closes her eyes. She thinks of needing, and failing; of losing and leaving. Thinks of Xander, and Lovis, and the nebulous memory of a loving mother, taken from her before Zoe had learned the word for grief. She thinks of everything Hanna has already come to mean to her, and all the reasons Zoe has been given to believe she’s bound to screw it up.

“It’s what I’m able to offer you,” she answers eventually, decisively, pressing the garter clip into her skin. And then, small, weak, useless lesbian that she is, she amends, “. . . at least at this point in time.”

“Okay.” Hanna’s voice is still kind, but steadier, as if she’s resolved something for herself.

Zoe closes her eyes and tries to keep her tone light, casual, not like she’s tearing at the messy stitches that hold her heart together. “Relationships aren’t exactly my forte,” she confesses. “Friendship is already a fairly significant ask.”

“I think it’s going to be a bit of a learning curve for me, as well,” Hanna says with a flicker of mirth in her voice. “I’ve never had a friend like you before.”

Zoe bites back a smile. “Repairing the water heater was a matter of public safety, Hanna,” she softly rebukes. “Someone could have gotten hurt.” (Someone *will* still be getting hurt, Zoe knows: Hanna’s landlord, who is about to receive a “difficult-to-refuse” offer from Zoe’s legal team.)

Hanna hums. “And the sex?” she asks, amusement now fully saturating her words. “Was that a safety issue, as well?”

The way the allusion alone is enough to set Zoe’s heart racing has her seriously considering making an appointment with her physician. “It may very well have been,” she says, making a mental note to talk to Linh about scheduling an early annual checkup. “You did save me from freezing to death out there.”

On the other end of the line, Hanna chuckles; a low, familiar sound.

“But,” Zoe proceeds, bravely pushing past the effect it still has on her, “much like I hope the heater repairs will be—the sex should stay a one-time

thing.”

There’s a beat, long enough for Zoe to become aware of the sound of a pair of seagulls gliding by outside her window, their wings reflecting the bright light of her living room. Then Hanna says fondly, “I don’t regret what we did.”

Zoe nods to herself, one errant thread tugging loose inside her chest. She breathes cautiously into the space it frees up. “Neither do I.”

“Good.” Hanna sighs deeply, as if waking from a refreshing nap. “So. No matter what it was, sending those plumbers, a friendly gesture or whatever —” *(atonement,* Zoe thinks, but doesn’t say), “I’m grateful. Showers are a huge part of my writing process.”

Zoe lets out a mocking *Hah,* relieved at the subject change. “No they’re not.”

“I mean it,” Hanna insists. “If I get stuck somewhere, I take a shower about it. Ninety-nine percent of the time the issue is fixed before I even have time to get completely lathered up.”

“Well,” Zoe rasps, definitely not picturing the image Hanna has just painted of herself in resplendent 8K. “In that case I will be looking for my acknowledgement when your novel finally comes out.” She pauses, wondering if she’s earned the right yet to tease her like this. Then she remembers Hanna, forward and flirtatious in her loft the last time she’d seen her, and avenges, “*If* your novel ever comes out. You still haven’t told me a single thing about it, and I’m beginning to think you’re slacking off.”

“Maybe that’s for good reason,” Hanna says, not the least bit fazed. “What if you decide to run off with my manuscript the same way you ran off with my favorite shirt?”

Zoe grimaces at the reminder of her graceless exit. “Considering I technically traded you for the suit,” she argues, “I say you got a bargain.”

“You can’t put a price on comfort,” Hanna pouts. “Or on eighties band tees.”

Zoe sighs regretfully, splaying her hand over her duvet until her fingertips touch the soft cotton of said shirt, currently tucked under her pillow where Zoe left it before her shower that morning. “Fine,” she says. “We can make the trade next Saturday, when you meet me for lunch. And then you’re going to tell me absolutely everything there is to know about this novel of yours.”

Hanna laughs. “It’s a deal.”



Minutes before her alarm goes off the next morning, purple and peach streaking the 5 a.m. sky, Zoe's private phone alerts her to a new text message from Hanna. It's a picture of a shabby nest, rather more of a random collection of twigs in her window, now home to a pair of plump infant birds. They look like wet cement, dark gray and naked save for a sparse smattering of bright yellow lint. Their beaks remind Zoe acutely of the Bad Dragon™ novelty dildo one of Lovis' more flamboyant friends had presented to her on her birthday.

Aren't they ADORABLE? Hanna demands.

They are, objectively, the ugliest things Zoe has ever seen in her entire life.

She doesn't hesitate to tell Hanna exactly that.



Zoe Zuydervelt has made some questionable decisions throughout her relatively brief time on this earth. There's the horseback riding accident she orchestrated when she was ten, breaking her arm in an effort to get out of spending the summer away at camp. She wanted to spend it with Xander, home from college, instead. But Tippy had shipped her off anyway, forcing her to spend four hellish, humid weeks painting one clumsy mug after another while everyone else was off having an adventure. There's the prominent tattoo on her lower back Zoe had acquired on a sleepless whim just after her father died, when Zoe had unearthed his letters from her birthmother; a chunky, halfhearted triple spiral she doubts she would have chosen today. Hell, she's often wondered whether deciding to take over the family business after Xander's arrest and attempting to steer it toward a brighter future—rather than just taking her cut and running for the hills—might not, in fact, be dysfunctional behavior indicative of some unresolved childhood trauma.

And still, out of the many mistakes Zoe Zuydervelt has made, choosing to befriend Hanna Kaplan might just be the most ruinous one to date.

It's to Hanna's credit that she takes Zoe's petition for friendship in earnest, following her instructions almost to a fault. When they meet,

Hanna’s hugs are as warm as ever, but they no longer linger a moment too long. When she invariably offers Zoe a bite of her food—whether it’s the spring rolls Zoe recommended, or the fish tacos Hanna had raved about for weeks—she doesn’t try to do something ridiculous like feeding it to Zoe from her fork or from her fingers, instead simply cutting or tearing off a bite-sized piece for Zoe to take.

Hanna’s conduct is as wholesome as the button-down shirts and chinos she seems to favor, as comfortable as her flat oxford shoes. And, Zoe realizes, not noticeably different from the easy affection she’d become accustomed to in Colorado, in the lead-up to their brief affair. The only difference is that Hanna now keeps her glasses on and her overtures chaste. Save for a few slip-ups—which are so subtle Zoe can easily convince herself she’s imagining things—Hanna seems to have settled into a casual, undemanding kind of amicability that Zoe is finding increasingly difficult to match.

When it’s Zoe’s turn to decide where they’ll see each other next, they sit down in swanky establishments near her office, popular with businessmen trying to impress potential investors; all starched white linen and crystal chandeliers. When Hanna gets to choose where they go, she brings Zoe to her favorite dog park for breakfast, making faces at the fresh-pressed vegetable smoothies Zoe brings them. Or she leads her, with barely contained excitement, to a Korean street food vendor for a mid-summer, late-afternoon treat, sitting them down on a shaded bench where Hanna watches the ducks while Zoe watches ice cream slowly drip down Hanna’s fingers.

Whatever they do, wherever they meet, two things remain constant: there is always food involved (at Hanna’s insistence) and it’s somewhere public (by Zoe’s own unspoken design). They talk about things that never seem to matter much in the moment, the boring details of their everyday—a product failure, a press release, the sweet nostalgia of an abandoned pigeon nest—and then, weeks later, Hanna will recall some careless, throw-away comment Zoe had made and since forgotten about, and Zoe will feel entirely upended.

“It’s no wonder your mother is so frustrated with you all the time,” Hanna will say for instance, casually devastating, her mouth half-full, honey ginger glaze smeared red and sticky along her bottom lip, “all of your best qualities are the exact opposite of what she wants you to be,” and Zoe will

hide behind her sunglasses, citing photosensitivity—not a total lie—and pretend she isn't thinking about pulling Hanna in by her collar and licking the sweetness straight from her mouth.

The easier Hanna makes it look, smoothly moving past their romantic chemistry, the harder it becomes for Zoe to ignore. Zoe is the one who finds herself fumbling along the fringes of their friendship. Zoe is the one who needs to remind herself repeatedly—in a stern inner voice eerily similar to her mother's—to sit up straight and stop fidgeting with her food, to *stop staring, for heaven's sake, you're being impolite.*

It's hopeless. Hanna is a spray of golden ochre on a grayscale canvas, the way she stands out from the board members and bland businessmen Zoe is usually made to associate with. She's never shy about showing her appreciation for her food, or her genuine delight at seeing Zoe again. But while Hanna shows up hungry whenever they meet in a very real, very literal way (the amount of food she can put away in a single sitting is awe-inspiring), it's Zoe who is famished, never getting quite enough of what she's starving for.

Out of all the private epiphanies Zoe Zuydervelt has had to come to terms with—realizing why she gets flustered by powerful women, discovering tequila brings out a latent proclivity toward stripping in public places, learning she's actually her thought-to-be-adoptive father's biological bastard child—finding out she can't be trusted to be left alone in a room with a kind-faced, beefy blonde is by far the most perplexing.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

TIME CRAWLS PAST AN endless summer, claws its way through fall, and then it's November; an early autumn evening, cool and dry following an afternoon of intermittent rain. Zoe is in front of her dressing room mirror, popping her lips and critically appraising their freshly painted Louboutin Velvet Matte tint as she answers her best friend's call on speakerphone. "I don't have time to talk, Alma," she says. "I'm about to head out."

"Ooh, that's right," Alma sing-songs. "The Symphony Gala is tonight." *Unfortunately.* "You must be so excited."

Zoe huffs, lowering her dramatically kohl-lined lashes. To say she's dreading the evening would be an understatement. She's never been fond of these events, but they've been near-unbearable since she's been expected to attend them without her formerly only-mildly-megalomaniacal brother and the life raft of his snarky running commentary. Tonight Zoe will be alone—adrift in a sea of bedazzled opportunists and self-loving men gathered like a shiver of sharks ready to frenzy at the first whiff of blood on the water—and she'll only have her mother left to stand guard: Xanthippe Zuydervelt, a stoic sentry, untouched upon her perch, silently overseeing it all.

Zoe makes a last-minute detour to her bathroom, grabbing a pair of tampons in case her period chooses this evening to show up. "I'm still mad you bailed on me tonight," she calls out to Alma.

Alma hums, as if in complete agreement. “Imagine how mad I’d be if you were to bail on my bachelor party.”

“Stop.” Zoe doesn’t have time for more of Alma’s badgering tonight. She has urgent matters to attend to: most importantly, whether the dress she’s wearing is extravagant-yet-unpretentious enough to hold up to her mother’s sharp-tongued scrutiny. “I never said I wasn’t going,” she tells Alma, shoving one foot into an elegant stiletto heel. “And you promised me your absence tonight wasn’t an effort to extort me into accepting your invitation.”

“I told you,” Alma says. “I have things to do. Future-wifely duties to fulfill. Plotting a wedding is a lot of work.”

“Plotting, are you?” Zoe remarks, balancing her weight against the vanity while she slips on her other heel. “Taking your usual Machiavellian approach, I see.”

“It’s why you hired me,” Alma reminds her. “Speaking of which, you and Hanna are on good terms now, right?”

Zoe pauses at the unexpected question. “We are,” she recovers. “We’re—friendly.”

“Friendly.” Zoe can hear her best friend’s smile, a tiny wet snap as her lips stretch and part. “So you’re not avoiding each other anymore?”

“Absolutely not,” Zoe says, indignant. “We have lunch.” *And breakfast. Dinner, sometimes.* And a surprise brunch, two weeks back, when Hanna had discovered it was Zoe’s birthday and security had called Linh to inform her a woman carrying a cardboard box—the contents of which had been searched thoroughly and deemed harmless, though metabolically ill-advised—was refusing to leave the lobby until she’d spoken to Zoe Zuydervelt personally. Zoe still feels warmth blossom in her chest at the memory of the cupcake Hanna had lifted from the box, sticking a small, solitary candle into the icing. Zoe had barely managed to stop her from lighting it, remembering her office’s fire safety measures just in time.

“So your reluctance to give me an RSVP on the bachelor party invite,” Alma says, “that doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that Hanna will very likely be there too?”

Zoe bites the inside of her cheek, turning sideways to inspect the way her dress gathers at the small of her back. “Of course not. Listen,” she urges, “you’ll be on standby later tonight, right? I’ll need you to stop me from

doing something drastic when Tippy introduces me as her derelict daughter again, or tells me I'm wearing an 'interesting' dress."

"I'm sure you look spectacular," Alma reassures her. "Did you go with one of the low V necklines I suggested?"

Zoe thumbs carefully down her duchesse lapels, giving herself a final once-over in her dressing room mirror. "The black tuxedo dress," she confirms, "with the lace sleeves and back."

"And the thigh slit." Alma whistles. "Hair?"

Zoe touches it to her neatly twisted chignon. "Up and out of the way."

"Excellent," Alma croons. "She'll be rendered speechless."

"Maybe." Zoe smiles wryly. "I'm wearing all twelve of my diamond stud earrings tonight. If I play my cards right, Mother might have a stroke before the auction even starts."

"And if not, she'll have one soon after." Alma laughs, infectious enough to make Zoe grin. She really will miss having Alma there. No one else attending the gala tonight—Tippy least of all—is aware how much of Austra Bio's money, traditionally set aside for the Zuydervelt family's personal expenses, has already been allocated to the starting bid of this year's assumed-to-be-less-popular items, ensuring all of Zoe's favorite charities will receive a sizable donation this year. Watching her mother stew in silent outrage would have been far more fun—and perhaps marginally less life-threatening—with her best friend at her side.

Zoe is in her private elevator and on her way to the basement parking garage before Alma finally stops marveling at the thought of Tippy's imminent demise and seems to remember herself. "Just to confirm, though," she reiterates, "you're okay with me inviting both you and Hanna to the party?"

Zoe takes a deep, patient breath. The air is thick with humidity, even this far underground, even at this time of night. "Yes, Alma," she repeats. "We're adults, in case you hadn't noticed."

"See I know that you *think* you are," Alma says gently and, inexplicably, in somewhat of a rush, "and that's why you're always pretending to be far too busy to have fun"—Zoe huffs at this—"but I'm worried Hanna may take it personally if you run again."

The elevator dings, signaling Zoe's stop. "Fine," she says, stepping out into the garage, ready to hang up. "I'll come to your stupid bachelor party.

Tell Linh to clear my schedule that evening.” She pauses for a moment, considering. “Maybe the morning after, as well.”

Zoe’s phone goes dark, the connection severed. Zoe looks at it, confused.

Then Alma’s voice echoes out, “Consider it done, boss.”

Zoe blinks up. In the place where her Lexus should be parked—a neutral white, tasteful, subdued—is a hot pink Hummer limousine the exact opposite of every single one of those things. Theodore—her new driver—already has his hand on the door, as if this is the sort of thing he deals with every day. “Ms. Zuydervelt,” he says calmly. He’s wearing a tiny pink party hat.

Standing next to him, in full makeup and dressed in a black sequined cocktail dress, is Alma, hastily tucking her phone into her bra while glinting her teeth at Zoe. She looks frightfully excited.

Zoe stares at her blankly. “What’s happening?”

Alma pouts, looking disappointed in her best friend’s deductive skills. “What does it look like?” she asks. “We’re abducting you.”

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TWENTY-NINE

SO IT TURNS OUT her mother was right all along: Zoe is an embarrassment to the Zuydervelt name.

Years of experience in being kidnapped or targeted should have honed her reflexes to the point of a sharp-tipped dagger, but in reality they're more like the blunt button at the end of her fencing foil. Stunned into pliancy and caught completely off her guard, it takes Alma approximately three seconds and little more than a gentle nudge to maneuver Zoe out of her comfort zone and into the back of the waiting Hummer.

It's like being invited inside Barbie's Magical Mansion. The gaudy interior reminds Zoe of mandated playdates with her elementary school classmates, precisely as pink and sparkly, and—once the door slams shut—exactly as claustrophobic. A chorus of friendly excitement erupts when she slides into the heart-shaped pleather seats, Alma squeezing in behind her. Zoe is shuffled toward the loveseat in the back, where she's faced with an impressively well-stocked built-in minibar and—of course—her good friend Hanna Kaplan.

And it's fine, right? *This is fine.* It doesn't even matter that Hanna is looking particularly handsome in a starched white button-down and leather suspenders, her blonde hair slicked back in a bun and those ridiculously attractive glasses framing her soft features just so. In fact, Zoe hardly even notices. She's been micro-dosing Hanna's good looks for the better part of a

year now, after all, inoculating herself against the effect they once had on her. Zoe has grown as a person, and Hanna is her friend.

So Zoe is fine, and it's friendly, the way Hanna lights up like sunshine itself at her arrival and reaches for her immediately, moving in for what Zoe assumes is going to be one of their perfectly cordial, carefully rationed hugs. Hanna stops herself at the last minute, though, her eyes widening at the plunging neckline of Zoe's dress.

"You look," Hanna wheezes, her extended arm landing on the armrest behind Zoe's shoulder, fingers twitching, "uh—"

"*Very* fancy." It's Linh, the unrepentant apostate, lounging in the seat across from them, spinning a glass of sparkling wine between her fingers. She's zippered into a stunning deep-blue flapper dress, her hair twisted around a rhinestone-studded headband.

Zoe shoots her assistant a look of deep disapproval, wondering whether plotting against your boss with your other boss can be considered corporate conspiracy. "I assume you had a hand in all of this?" she demands.

Alma hums her mild dissent, sparkling tip to toe under the dizzying strobe lights. "A couple of fingers, at most," she says.

"Please," Linh tells her, "I planned this entire event. We'd be on a private plane to Vegas right now if I'd let you call the shots."

Zoe keeps her posture ramrod straight. Hanna's hand lingers like a flat iron at her back, close enough to scorch through the delicate lace of her dress. "You're *my* assistant," she points out. "A little bit of a heads up would have been nice."

Judith snorts at her from the other side of the minibar. "And give you the opportunity to schedule another convenient business trip?" Turning to Linh she needles, "Is she in charge of a biomedical tech company, or a military superpower? How difficult can it be to pencil us in for dinner every once in a while?"

Zoe blinks at her soon-to-be sister-in-law. "Assuming this is, in fact, your bachelor party," she asks Alma, "Why on earth did you bring your fiancée?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Alma says. "*All* of my best friends are here."

The movement of the car jostles them all slightly as it pulls out of the parking garage, tossing Zoe back into her seat. It leaves her pressed firmly into Hanna's unresolved one-armed hug and with no way to subtly extricate herself again. "You have my deepest sympathy," she huffs, folding her arms in front of her chest before grumbling out one final protest to her villainous

best friend. “My mother isn’t going to be happy when she realizes I’ve skipped out on another public appearance.”

“Honey.” Alma leans in close, her eyes gleaming violet under the pink neon lights. “I think it’s time you realize Tippy isn’t going to be happy no matter what you do.”

Before Zoe has time to fully digest that remark, someone presses a glass into her hand. It’s Judith. “Drink up, Zuydervelt,” she says. “You look like you need it.”

Zoe looks down at the drink she’s been served. It looks good. Smells pretty amazing, too; citrusy and crisp. But the weight of it is off. She frowns, tapping the glass with a fingernail. “Is this plastic?” she squints.

“It is,” Judith says, passing a drink to Hanna as well.

Hanna’s thousand-watt grin is far too close and entirely too tender. Zoe feels her heart break into a sweat at the sight of it. “Have you ever even seen a disposable cup before?” Hanna asks, her eyes squinting with joy.

“I would lap this off the floor if I had to,” Linh gushes. “This is tasty stuff.”

Alma snorts, presenting a bottle that boasts a golden letter “S” and tilting it to top off Linh’s glass. “I should hope so.”

Zoe grabs Alma’s arm, dizzy with dawning realization. “Hold on,” she says. “Are you serving Salon Cuvée S 2007?” She yelps, “In disposable cups?”

“Just to be on the safe side.” Alma waves a pinkie finger between Zoe and Hanna, as if in explanation. “The two of you together are remarkably accident-prone.”

Zoe ignores her, sniffs her champagne again, and suffers. “This hurts me.”

“It’s a good thing you’re a masochist then.” Alma clinks—or rather clicks—Zoe’s glass with her own before Zoe can stop her, then holds it out to the rest of her friends. “To love’s exquisite torment.”

Torment sounds about right. Nestled as she is now into Hanna’s side, it takes every single trembling fiber of Zoe’s rapidly dwindling resolve to not simply let herself melt into it. It’s an involuntary response, this sudden weakness. A reflex, or an allergic reaction. Zoe supposes she can blame no one but herself. Because while she may have built up a tenuous sort of immunity to the *sight* of Hanna, she’d been careful to keep her distance,

sparing herself the effort of attempting to resist the feel of Hanna's body, the tickle of her breath.

In a flash, Zoe can see with perfect clarity how this evening is going to turn out. The drinking, the dancing, the company, all merrily whacking away at Zoe's carefully reinforced resistance.

She takes in a private fortifying breath. *This is it, then.* With the wedding a mere six weeks away, this must be Zoe Zuydervelt's Twelfth Labor; the final, most dangerous challenge of all. In order to arrive at Alma and Judith's ceremony with her dignity and pride intact, she will need to survive a night of drunken debauchery without once propositioning Hanna Kaplan.

Linh ducks in close to Zoe, resting her forearm on Hanna's thigh to do so, and appearing momentarily distracted by the hard muscle Zoe has worked very hard to forget is there. Linh blinks. Then she hushes, "Please don't fire me again. I promise I negotiated her down from a far less manageable celebration. Alma's starting bid was a week-long bar crawl in Berlin."

Zoe takes a heartening sip of her champagne, glad for the reminder that all suffering is relative and things could be infinitely worse. "Honestly," she admits, "speaking as someone who has lived through this type of scenario before? I'll gladly take drinking from a disposable cup over having a gun pointed at my face."

Linh looks suddenly inexplicably terrified. Not saying another word, and without breaking eye contact, she tosses back the rest of her drink.



Linh is absolutely, one hundred percent, not-a-single-doubt-in-Zoe's-mind fired.

It turns out their sparkly-pink tribulation's final destination isn't some fancy dance club downtown. Linh pulls them out of the Hummer and into a dark, cobblestoned passageway just off the side of it instead, where moths and mosquitos circle a single flickering bulb, and Zoe finds herself grateful for Linh's glittery headdress, guiding their tiny crew like the stars at sea.

Zoe almost trips when one of her stiletto heels gets stuck between two cobbles. She slaps Alma's helpfully outstretched hand away and promises her, "If this is the abduction that ends with me dead in an alley, I'm coming back as one of those ghosts that buries all of your silverware in your backyard."

“I think I saw a horror movie like this once,” Judith says grimly, and then a little louder to Linh, “are you absolutely sure you know where we’re going?”

But of course she is.

And it’s a motherfucking arcade.

Zoe contemplates making a run for it, but she doubts she’ll survive another stroll down Murder Street with both of her ankles intact.

Hanna, gorgeous idiot that she is, doesn’t immediately catch on. “Did you take us to a fetish club?” she asks Linh, eyeing the—admittedly eerily anthropomorphic—cartoon animals depicted on the light box sign over the entrance. XTREME ADVENTURES, it forebodes. Hanna is teetering on the edge between wide-eyed excitement and slack-jawed awe.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Zoe mutters.

Hanna skips over, leaning close to make sure only Zoe will hear. “Don’t take this the wrong way,” she whispers, her breath glancing off Zoe’s jaw. “Because you do look stunning, in that dress—” Her eyes stutter down Zoe’s retrospectively indefensible amount of cleavage, and linger where the gown of her dress splits, high on her right thigh. Zoe almost trips again. Hanna’s grin brushes her cheek when she catches her, devastatingly casual and casually cruel, when she continues, “—but I think you should have worn that reindeer onesie I bought you. This looks like the type of establishment where it would have been a hit.”

Hanna is right, of course; even if it’s for the completely wrong reasons. The onesie would have been a far more practical choice. Because what they’ll be doing tonight, to Alma’s endless amusement and Judith’s near-orgasmic delight, basically amounts to scaling an obstacle course in five thousand dollars’ worth of formalwear.

For hours. In the dark. While strangers try to shoot them.

That part, unfortunately, doesn’t sink in until after Zoe’s talked herself off the ledge of another exit plan. As they make their way through the din of dance music and high-pitched sound effects and into a curved corner booth, Zoe spots a surprisingly impressive bar and thinks *faking food poisoning can wait.* At least until she has a couple of drinks in her.

“Sofia can never know about this,” Alma says. She drives her hip into Zoe’s in a forceful demand to give her more room, not caring that it pushes her well into Hanna’s personal space again. “She’d never forgive us for not bringing her along.”

“This place isn’t for kids,” Linh points out. “Adults only.”

Zoe can see why. If it wasn’t for the bowling lanes bordering the well-populated dancefloor and the colorful machines that line the balustrade along the second story, the place could almost pass for a regular nightclub.

“Where *is* Sofia tonight?” Zoe asks Alma, not at all distracted by Hanna’s solid, clean-smelling form, fidgeting next to her.

“I left her with your doorman,” Alma deadpans. “I told him she could have her very first alcoholic drink.”

Zoe shoves her, watching with satisfaction as Alma falls back in her seat, grinning and rubbing her arm.

“She’s spending the night at a friend’s,” Judith says. “We were expecting the evening’s activities to skew a bit more boozy.”

As if summoned, a waitress appears at their booth carrying a tray of mojito shots in one hand and a tablet in the other. She’s blonde, athletic, perky. “Hi!” she says. “Welcome to Xtreme Adventures. My name is Piper. If you’re here to have a good time, we’re going to get along great tonight.” She double-checks her tablet, then peers back up at them. “You’re the, um.” She looks a little pained. “‘The Hung Bachelorettes?’”

Alma spreads out in the booth, her arms around Judith and Zoe, and gives the waitress a liquid grin. “What gave it away?”

“It’s pronounced more like ‘hoong’, actually,” Linh corrects.

“But also,” Alma amends with an illustrative wave at their group, “obviously—yes.”

Piper grins back, her leisurely gaze dragging over all of their outrageously inappropriate outfits before seeming to snag on the plunging V of Zoe’s dress. “Right,” she drawls. “Obviously.” She winks at Zoe with such a complete absence of shame that she feels her ears turn pink. But something else happens, too, and it’s far more interesting than their host’s audacious flirting: it’s the way Hanna reacts.

Hanna has been practically bouncing in her seat since they sat down, begging to go exploring. But their waitress’s too-familiar overtures have made her grow silent and stiff, save for a hard thigh that twitches against Zoe’s own before jumping away again.

Zoe has put her hand on Hanna’s knee before she’s fully aware she’s done it, in some sort of instinctive effort to soothe. It’s effective, and it’s sweet, Zoe tells herself, both the familiarity of the gesture and the way Hanna relaxes in response. Zoe should take their comfortable connection for the

benchmark of friendship that it is, instead of fighting the temptation to thumb the muscle beneath her hand.

Piper seems determined to run them through the house rules, as if they aren't all adults. There's no alcohol inside the arena, she tells them, which is fair, and it's not like Zoe was planning on leaving their booth anyway. There's also no running, which is no problem because why would Zoe ever want to, and certainly not in these heels. But then Piper cites a statute against climbing or crawling, and Zoe thinks, *wait*, and when their waitress follows it up with a firm "No tampering with your weapon," Zoe blinks.

"Weapon?" she sputters out.

"Yeah!" Piper eyes her, her smile dimming a little before she pushes it back into place. "Did no one tell you? You're playing laser tag!"

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THIRTY

LINH IS A SADIST. Hanna is *pumped.* Zoe hates everything and everyone, but especially herself, for not pulling out her pepper spray the moment she spotted that distasteful limousine.

They're in the green room, or the briefing room, in the basement, of which the arena is rumored to take up the rest. Zoe isn't too clear on the details. She'd knocked back her shot after receiving word of her impending demise in an effort to face it with at least a semblance of courage, and it's entirely possible she missed most of the video relaying their instructions.

It doesn't matter, anyway.

Judith is strapping Alma into a contraption that vaguely resembles a bulletproof vest, if bulletproof vests also sometimes doubled as billboards on the Las Vegas Strip. "Why don't we ever do this anymore?" she laments. "Have we become boring?"

Alma just grins down at her, swaying slightly as Judith yanks at her straps. "I'd say no," she says, "Considering the practiced ease with which you're doing what you're doing right now."

Linh is ogling Hanna, in particular the way her shirt stretches across her shoulders, which, who can blame her, truly, but then she comes right out and says, "I think you should take your top off."

There's a lot of gawking and sputtering, in response. Hanna's eyes also flick to Zoe, for some indiscernible reason, before returning to stare down

at Linh again. “Um,” she says.

“It’s all black-light in there,” Linh explains. “You’ll stand out like a beacon.”

Piper is back, stepping close into Zoe’s personal space. “The bachelorette party, right?” she confirms. “So which one of you is the lucky gal?”

“These two boring dorks.” Linh gestures at Judith and Alma, who roll their eyes at her as Hanna obediently begins unbuttoning her shirt. “The rest of us are happily unattached and free to do whatever the hell we want tonight.”

Piper purses her lips at that, pleased. Zoe’s gaze is bouncing between things to look away from—Piper’s flirtatious stare, Alma’s knowing smirk, Hanna stripping in the corner.

Piper follows Zoe’s gaze, sucking in an appreciative breath when she sees Hanna in all her heather-gray-tank-topped glory. “Good to know,” she croons.

“Someone’s working hard to earn their tip,” Zoe grumbles the second their host is out of earshot, likely off to flirt with one of the other groups they’ll be sharing the arena with tonight.

“I don’t know, Zoe.” Alma looks thoughtful. “She’s pretty hot, don’t you think? Kind of figured she’d be your type.”

Zoe drops her head into her hands and groans. “Somebody shoot me.”

Judith’s voice is rich with evil glee. “Oh,” she savors, “I intend to.”

There’s a renaming ceremony, next. PAPI is already on the digital scoreboard above their heads, and so is BRUISER, which is the name Linh has put in for herself. Warily observing her assistant’s familiarity with the clasps of her vest and her—what had the video called it? A blaster? A taser? *Anyway*—Zoe begins to suspect Linh has actually earned the title.

Hanna is back to her bouncing self again. “I want to be *Ripley,*” she says. “Or maybe *Atomic Blonde?* Ooh, I know! *The Bride!* Wait—that’d probably be confusing.”

It’s an act of mercy when Linh chooses for her. “Let’s go with *Supergirl,*” she suggests, and Zoe assures herself she’s merely imagined Linh’s reverential glance at Hanna’s muscle definition.

It’s Zoe’s turn to choose, but she hesitates. She can’t enter *Zuydervelt.* It’s not like it’s going to be just their private party in there. Zoe knows she needs something anonymous, but she’s unable to think of anything.

"Chaparra?" Linh suggests, helpful fingers already at the buttons. "Remind me, is that with two p's, or two r's?"

"Don't you dare," Zoe tells her. "I'm taller than *you."*

Alma considers her, smirking at the way Zoe is studiously avoiding looking in Hanna's direction. Zoe is distantly aware she isn't succeeding very well—she sees enough to know Hanna's eyes keep finding her, to know she keeps giving her little reassuring smiles, and Alma has apparently noticed it, too. "We could call you *Kryptonite,"* she grins.

"I could call you a shithead," Zoe retorts.

Hanna has missed their brief exchange, busy as she is now staring slack-jawed at the board. "I am not calling you *Commander!"* she huffs at Judith.

"Sorry, *Supergirl,"* her sister snarks. "Rules are rules."

"It suits you, Kaplan," Alma tells her smoothly.

Judith nods her head back at the screen. "That's *Commander* Kaplan to you."

Alma is smug. "Not for much longer."

Judith tilts her chin and regards her fiancée through her lashes. "I never agreed to take your name."

"Okay." Alma swaggers up close, flirtatious. "How's this?" she suggests. "We play to win tonight. Loser yields their naming privileges."

Zoe rolls her eyes. "Yes, because making a bet is a totally sane and level-headed way to decide your future."

Alma looks at her pointedly, as Linh inches closer with a bedazzled Kevlar of Zoe's own. "Honey," Alma says as Zoe tries to back away, "I say this with only love in my heart: no one in their right mind would trust *you* to determine what 'sane' or 'level-headed' means."

Zoe tries not to struggle as Linh pulls the polyester vest over the delicate fabrics of her dress. "Any damages will be coming straight out of your paycheck," she tells her. "Couldn't you have abducted me during my morning run?"

"Figured you'd be a better runner when you're wearing your heels," Linh says. "They've certainly seen more action than your athletic shoes."

"Two minutes to start," Alma calls out, her eyes on the board. "Time to stop crying, princess fussy pants."

Linh's fingers have hit "confirm" before Zoe can even blink. "We have a winner."

Alma leads them all in a final toast, raising their *phasers,* Zoe remembers now, in lieu of drinks. “To my favorite people,” she says. “I love you all, in spite of your many, many faults.”

After that, the shooting starts.



Slight correction: Zoe’s assistant isn’t fired. Zoe is murdering her, instead. Once she locates her, that is. It’s pertinent she deals with three minor obstacles first.

One: Zoe is lost. The basement arena is large, labyrinthine and almost completely dark, save for some scant strips of neon here and there which, to her great vexation, keep blinking out at random only to reappear elsewhere entirely.

Two: her friends have abandoned her. They all took off in different directions as soon as they were given the go-ahead, which happened right around the time Zoe’s fight-or-flight response had finally kicked in. She’s alone in a room full of hostile strangers, ducking from cover to cover, practicing her mindful breathing techniques while figuring out a way to outlast the timer without getting tagged.

It’s not that she could care less about her final score. In fact she envies the dead, and would gladly join them in the upstairs afterlife. She’s sure the bar there is serving consolatory drinks. But Zoe would have to drain all of her health points to make it there first, and each time she’s hit, both her phaser and her vest vibrate and flash, making an awful racket, and it’s doing great damage to Zoe’s non-virtual heart and overall presence of mind.

Oop, there it goes again. *God damn it.*

And that’s the third thing: Zoe is pretty sure some friendless dork is targeting her specifically.

“*What* is your problem?” she yells out into the dark, and then Hanna jumps out from where she’d apparently snuck up right behind her.

Hanna’s eyes are wide and apologetic above the ghoulish blue gleam of her vest, broad palms turned up in surrender. “I take it back!” she rushes out. “I wasn’t aiming for—”

Zoe doesn’t hesitate. She just lines up her shot and takes it. FIRST BLOOD! her display rejoices. It’s almost as rewarding as the wailing of Hanna’s phaser and the look of utter devastation in her eyes.

“You shot me,” she pouts.

“You shot *me*,” Zoe reminds her. “Isn’t that what we’re supposed to be doing here tonight?”

But then Hanna’s vest flashes a second time, mirrored by Zoe’s own a moment later. YOU ARE TAKING FIRE! her display warns, for what is probably the twenty-seventh time this round. Zoe’s shriek becomes muffled when a pair of chiseled arms folds her into a more easily transportable shape, before depositing her behind the nearest half-wall. Hanna doesn’t let go completely, even after putting her down. She just crouches beside her, laying an urgent finger to Zoe’s lips.

Zoe knocks it away before she can do something stupid, like biting it off or licking it into her mouth. “What do you think you’re doing?” she hisses.

Hanna is close enough that her breath tickles Zoe’s lips when she tells them, very seriously, “I think someone is following you.”

“No kidding,” Zoe says. “Isn’t it you?”

Hanna blushes hard. “No,” she says. “Or, maybe. A tiny bit. But there’s also someone else. They’ve been on your—um.” She trails off, then recovers. “Pretty sure they’ve been trailing you from, like, the beginning of the round.”

Zoe watches her. Hanna seems antsy, like she’s struggling to keep her gaze from flickering back to Zoe’s mouth again. It makes Zoe feel a little reckless. “You’ve been watching over me, huh?” she teases, because she’s clearly not thinking straight. “I hope you enjoyed the view.”

“I’m just saying,” Hanna huffs, furrowing her brow as if she believes it will hide her fluster. Her cheeks are purple now in the blue glow of her vest. “We could make it official and form an alliance.”

Zoe laughs at her audacity. “Didn’t you just shoot me?”

Hanna shrugs. “You shot *me*. We all make mistakes.”

Zoe drops her head against the wall and sighs, her heels squeaking on the rubber-streaked linoleum. It’s the night of the Symphony Gala. She’s supposed to be sipping champagne in the ladies’ restroom, hiding from her mother and listening in on sad women going into far too much detail relaying their latest plastic surgery mishaps.

She rolls her head sideways to blink up into Hanna’s eager eyes.

For a moment, it almost looks like Hanna may do something reckless herself. But then she’s pulling Zoe up, strong fingers carefully cradling her wrist, like she’s an actual superhero.

“Are you okay?” she asks when Zoe half-tumbles into her, gravity doing that thing it tends to do when Zoe Zuydervelt is in close proximity to Hanna Kaplan. “I know you have little to no natural talent for walking,” Hanna says, tugging her lips between her teeth as if trying to hold back a smile, “and those shoes can’t help matters much.”

Zoe glares at her. Hanna wouldn’t understand, would she, wearing her characteristic oxford flats, though it looks like a new patent leather set.

Hanna just winks at Zoe’s glare. “Come on,” she says. “Hold on to me.”

It’s as bad of an idea as getting into her bed was, back in Colorado half a lifetime ago. But just as she had during that frigid first night, Zoe fails to produce a good enough excuse to resist Hanna’s offer. Don’t friends allow friends to keep them from falling in battle? Would it not be a more significant, more vulnerable thing, to refuse?

“Fine,” she drawls. “Save me, Supergirl.”

And that she does.

For the next five minutes Zoe’s phaser is blissfully quiet, her vest beautifully still. It isn’t even anything guns-blazing dramatic, the way Hanna carries Zoe through the rest of the round. She’s just a bit more tactical, a little more deliberate about where she guides them next. It’s also pretty obvious Hanna was actually paying attention to the instructional video, muttering things in Zoe’s ear about downtime countdowns and shielding her sensors and saving their ammo.

It’s preposterous how safe and grateful it makes Zoe feel. She finds herself landing a little closer to Hanna each time they fall into cover, and Hanna’s hands catch her a little more liberally every time she does, pressing their bodies together, her hand palming Zoe’s hip. And if Zoe finds herself privately reliving memories of the last time Hanna had her pinned against a wall, that’s nobody’s business but her own.

There’s about a minute left on the timer and Zoe is seriously beginning to wonder whether she might actually be having a good time.

And then Judith ambushes them out of nowhere, making Zoe practically jump out of her own skin.

“Nice dodge back there, Supergirl,” she mocks after the combined shrieks of Zoe and their gear have died down some. The glint of Judith’s most winning smile is tinted bloody by the red light of her vest. She looks at them for a moment, Zoe clinging close to Hanna still, and asks, “What’s going on here?”

So Zoe shoots her.

It’s more of a reflex than anything else, but Judith takes it as a personal affront, going from cheerful to vengeful in point-two seconds flat. “I will destroy you,” she growls.

Zoe ducks, miraculously managing to make Judith miss her shot, and then books it. “Hey! No running!” Judith calls after her. “Why are you running!”

“Wait,” Hanna calls out after her, sounding bewildered and afraid. “*How* are you running?”

Zoe doesn’t look back, just zig-zags on relevé and yells, “It’s called survival fucking instinct!”

And that’s when the buzzer sounds, indicating the end of the round.

“Thank god,” Zoe sighs bonelessly, resisting the urge to lay down face-down on the floor.

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THIRTY-ONE

BACK IN THE GREEN room, Zoe doesn't give a single thought to the expensive dress she's wearing, tugging herself free from her private polyester prison while her friends chatter excitedly about their greatest victories.

"What a brilliant idea this was, Linh," Zoe snarks. "Wasn't I just complaining how I haven't had a gun pointed at me in a while? I was beginning to feel neglected."

Hanna stops smiling and stares at her instead. "I wasn't even—crap. How long?"

Zoe is taken aback by the genuine concern wafting her way. It's not just Hanna. Alma and Linh are both eyeing her warily, and Judith is looking at her like she's just swallowed her own heart. *Fuck.*

"Oh, don't look at me like that," Zoe demands. She's fine, she was just being a cantankerous brat.

"I'm sorry," Linh blurts. "You're always so nonchalant about it, I didn't think—"

"Forget it, it's fine," Zoe says, trying to make it sound breezy enough to relieve the guilt coloring her assistant's features. "Come to think of it," she muses, "it may actually have been kind of satisfying, getting a chance to shoot back for a change."

Hanna's lips twitch up at that, but her voice is still a little cautious when she says, "I actually don't recall you doing much shooting of your own."

Alma is already grinning, already back to her usual insufferable self. "Well," she says, "if Zoe's as fine as she says she is, she'll have plenty of time to make up for that in the remaining rounds."

No. *Oh, no no no no.*

Zoe scrambles after Alma as her best friend takes the stairs up to the bar two steps at a time. "Wait," she urges, "*Remaining* rounds?"

There's two more of them scheduled tonight, apparently, spaced apart to give them time to drink and recover. Alma has the gall to refer to the black-lit Armageddon they've just survived as "a promising practice round." She rubs Zoe's back in consolation as they make their way back to the bar, where a large LCD screen lists the evening's rankings thus far. PRINCESS FUSSY PANTS languishes somewhere near the bottom. Number 1, Zoe notes with no small measure of alarm, is JESUS, with BRUISER following unsettlingly close behind.

"Don't take it too hard," Alma coos. "Even if you don't improve, you'll still be the world's best-dressed loser."

"If it's a shared title, maybe," Linh says. "Because I promise you yours truly will be the only winner here tonight, and Hanna's over there looking like she walked straight off the set of *Terminator: Dark Fate."*

Zoe doesn't need to be reminded. Hanna's starched shirt is dangling loosely from her hand—likely creased beyond recognition—and she's still in her racerback top, an immediately life-threatening amount of golden skin on display. Her suspenders make the effect even more devastating. Zoe realizes what she'd assumed were vintage galluses are actually a harness: glossy black leather straps buckled securely around Hanna's waist and over her shoulders, meeting at an O-ring at her back.

Hanna fidgets a little under Linh's and Zoe's scrutiny.

"Well," Zoe croaks, suddenly feeling alarmingly thirsty. *Must be all that running around.* "I guess it's good some of our personal styles lend themselves so well to navigating a simulated warzone."

"And some of them look better on the dance floor," Linh announces, walking backwards away from them while holding out a grabby hand. Zoe waves her off, but Alma happily obliges, Judith following them in search of a bathroom.

It’s just Hanna and herself, then, carrying their drinks back to their table. Hanna slides into the booth behind Zoe, and even with all that space available to her, she sits almost as close as she had before, when Linh and Alma had been crowding them. Zoe really rather wishes Hanna hadn’t, but she also doesn’t make an effort to rectify the situation.

They’ve been in the trenches together, after all. It creates a bond.

Zoe feels herself relax the longer she sits there. Hanna is breathing calmly, quiet beside her, while the adrenalin leaves Zoe’s system and the thrum of alcohol sets in. Linh and Alma are busy making a mockery of themselves on the dancefloor, and somehow still attracting the attention of more than a handful of strangers.

Zoe looks back at Hanna only to find Hanna’s already looking at her. Zoe smiles. “They look like they’re having a good time.”

Hanna is smiling, too. “Why don’t you join them?”

“Someone needed to assume custody of these drinks,” Zoe says. “Why don’t you?”

“I would if you came with me.”

Zoe looks at her, looks at those gorgeous freckled arms, the fresh pink flush to her cheeks, and nearly snorts at the suggestion. “No.”

Hanna regards her, a little curious, a little amused. “Why not?”

Zoe speaks her answer straight into her glass. “Because I’ll only end up embarrassing myself.”

Hanna laughs, a rich, melodious sound that Zoe savors as if it were resonating inside her own chest. “Didn’t you say you take dance classes?”

“I do cardio ballet,” Zoe corrects her. “I can temps levé for hours, but I promise you nobody wants to see that.”

Hanna playfully nudges Zoe’s knee with her own. “Come on,” she goads, her voice rumbling perilously close to a purr. “Are you seeing Linh and Alma out there? No one’s expecting you to be flawless.”

Zoe looks at Hanna, thinking she’s the epitome of flawless, simply reclining there, and she can’t help the appreciative look she drags down Hanna’s frame any more than the fondness that blooms inside her chest. “That is not what I’m worried about,” she laughs mournfully, not quite realizing what she’s said until long moments after the words have left her mouth.

Oops.

Zoe reaches for her drink, but her fingers are shaking. Also, her glass is empty.

Hanna nudges her again, supportive, friendly, clueless, the full length of her thigh now pressing firm against Zoe's own. She ducks her head until Zoe meets her eyes again, and gives her an encouraging smile. "What are you worried about?"

Zoe sustains their intimate eye contact, not strong enough to break it, too weak to laugh it off. The moment stretches between them until Zoe's heart is pounding, until Hanna is no longer smiling, until her question has answered itself.

Silence settles heavily between them, and it's there, just like that—everything Zoe didn't mean to admit to, all she tried so hard not to let happen.

She watches as Hanna's gaze darts to her mouth again, feeling the tiny movement echoed thickly inside her, something twisting taut between her legs. She parts her lips experimentally, allowing a small breath to escape.

Hanna's eyes focus sharply on Zoe's own when she realizes she's been caught staring. She fiddles briefly with her glasses, but instead of pushing them more firmly onto her nose, like Zoe is expecting, she starts to slide them down instead.

Before anything else world-shattering can happen, Judith pushes into their booth. "So," she says, scooting in on Hanna's side, "did anyone else just get propositioned by our host, or is that a bride-only privilege?"

Zoe recovers before Hanna does. "She hit on you, too?" she gasps. "Whatever happened to respecting the sanctity of marriage?"

Alma has no idea what's happening but, as usual, confidently inserts herself in Zoe's business anyway. "Zoe," she chides, scooting in next to her, "let's do everyone a favor and leave our Catholicism at the door tonight."

"Uh, please do not," Linh interjects as she slides into the booth behind Alma. "All that repressed anger is really going to help us out tonight."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Zoe says. "I don't have any repressed anger."

Alma clasps a firm hand around the back of Zoe's neck and looks at her with infinite affection. "Zoe," she says. "Honey. Buttercup. Completely non-romantic, at least ninety-eight percent platonic love of my life."

"Hey!" Judith objects. "Future wife, sitting right here."

Alma sighs. “This is why combined bachelor parties are such a terrible idea.”

Linh scoffs. “It was your idea.”

“Which might explain why it was so terrible.” Zoe says, before signaling their host, in desperate need of a distraction.

“Hey,” Alma says brightly, “I just had another one.”

Zoe groans. *That grin only ever means one thing.* “Please don’t say tequila.”

Alma yells it, instead. “Tequila!”

Piper returns to their table with two trays of shots, winking at Alma this time as she tells them the first one is on the house. After Zoe knocks hers back, Alma expertly switches her still-full glass for Zoe’s empty one.

Zoe frowns at her, still grimacing at the taste in her mouth. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” Alma asks innocently. “I’m enabling you.”

Zoe narrows her eyes at her best friend. “You are a bad influence, Alma Valdes.”

“No,” Alma holds up a finger while she hands Zoe the shot, “I’m a hedonist. There’s a difference.”

“A hedonist who is consistently more sober than me,” Zoe points out.

“Not my fault and don’t look now,” Alma says, “but I think you have an admirer.”

“Is it our host?” Zoe asks, finishing off Alma’s second shot for good measure.

“Please,” Alma scoffs, “that woman is admiring all of us. I’m talking about someone all your own.”

Zoe follows Alma’s eyeline and squints to find an unfamiliar strawberry-blonde woman at the bar, frozen in the chaos going on around her. “Is she just—standing there, staring at me?” Zoe’s nose twitches in distaste. “That’s weird, right?”

“People stare at you wherever you go,” Linh points out, clearly unimpressed. “Hanna is staring at you right now. Fuck, so am I. Have you seen a mirror lately?”

Hanna sputters into her drink, and when Zoe looks back over after making sure she’s okay, the woman at the bar has disappeared.

“Maybe you scared her off,” Alma suggests. “Your eyebrows always had a way with words.”



Time flies when you're having drinks, and all too soon Zoe finds herself descending the stairs into their jolly torture chamber for round two.

Hanna's voice is soft in Zoe's ear. "Stick with me this time," she says, shoulder bumping gently into hers. "I'll keep you safe."

"Already developing a savior complex, are we?" Zoe asks in an incredibly lame attempt to mitigate the magnetism that's swiftly rematerialized in the small amount of space left between their bodies. She's beginning to regret knocking back those shots. Letting her guard down in public like this is irresponsible enough. Doing it around Hanna? That's positively moronic.

Piper is handing out two-way radios in the briefing room. "Alright!" She says brightly. "So for the next round, we're going to ask you all to pair up."

Linh takes one look at their little group, pops her gum and promptly walks away. "I'm out," she decides, not looking back as she gives them a little wave. "You dorks have fun." Zoe watches her as her assistant catches the attention of an admittedly remarkably messianic-looking nearby man, nodding pointedly at the digital scoreboard advertising her ranking. "So," she says matter-of-factly, "Jesus, right? I'm Bruiser. You wanna team up?"

Hanna is smiling warmly at Zoe, no doubt very happy her plan is working out so well, but then an unexpected arm wrenches itself almost painfully tight around Zoe's own.

It's Judith. "You're with me, Princess," she announces.

Zoe honestly can't say if she's feeling flattered or just profoundly perplexed.

"But." Hanna pouts. "Alma is your fiancée. And Zoe and I kind of—"

Judith raises a critical eyebrow. "Kind of what? Alliances are fleeting, Supergirl. We've all read *The Hunger Games.*"

Hanna looks back and forth between the brides, crestfallen and confused, but Judith is all steely-eyed determination, and Alma looks delightedly triumphant rather than hurt.

Alma bumps her shoulder into Hanna's. "Looks like it's you and me, kid."

In the field, Zoe discovers Judith has all of her sister's cleverness and courage and absolutely none of Hanna's charm.

"What on earth are you doing?" she demands, dragging Zoe behind cover seven minutes and at least fourteen miles into the round, when Zoe's kill count still sits proudly at zero while Judith is rounding up her targets with the intensity of a hyperactive cattle dog.

"I'm trying!" Zoe tells her, gasping for air. "My phaser. Something's wrong with it, I think. It's like it's not even transmitting half the time."

Judith puffs out a breath and takes Zoe's hand. "It won't work unless you use both hands," she tells her. "Like this. Did you not watch the instructional video?"

Zoe glares at her. "I was a little busy trying to not have a panic attack, thank you very much."

"Here you go," Judith says, a little gentler, folding Zoe's fingers along the bottom of what Zoe supposes would be considered the phaser's barrel. "Try it now."

They poke their heads out of cover in perfect synchronicity, observing for a moment the pandemonium playing out in front of them. Off in the distance, someone who sounds an awful lot like Linh roars, "Eat it, nerd!"

"Get the guy with the neckbeard," Judith instructs, already lining up her own shot. "I'll get his buddy in the Dylan t-shirt. How much do you wanna bet he couldn't name more than three of his songs?"

Judith's man goes down instantly. Zoe's target takes a little longer. Three, maybe four attempts.

Which is, in all fairness, the point where Judith decides to shoot him for her, because he's about to duck out of view entirely.

"Thanks," Zoe says sheepishly.

Judith's face is a storm cloud of confusion. "So explain to me what's happening right now," she says. "Didn't you win an Olympic medal in sharp shooting?"

Ah.

Zoe hums, nodding in understanding. That's why her best friend had looked so pleased when Judith had picked Zoe as her partner. "Alma tell you that?" she asks innocently.

Judith's brow furrows further, but she nods.

Zoe purses her lips to keep from smiling. "I qualified," she says. "Never actually competed. Also it was fencing, not shooting."

Judith throws her head back and sighs, "Motherfucker."

She goes a little easier on Zoe from that point on, with her expectations thoroughly squashed and her sights now set firmly on revenge against the woman she's about to marry. Zoe still gets her cardio in for the next five to seven years, but Judith makes for a passable drill instructor. She's far less careful with Zoe than Hanna had been, her playstyle confrontational rather than avoidant, taking on opponents preferably in close combat, but Zoe has to admit her personal ranking is looking a lot better for it.

Like most good things in life, it doesn't last.

With twelve minutes left on the clock and their ranking steadily climbing up the top ten, it's as if everywhere they go, wherever they move to, they're tagged the very moment they rest. They're pressed back to back now, Judith sharply vigilant, Zoe so twitchy she's shooting at everything that moves; which, in a black-lit neon funhouse, means pretty much everything, period.

As Judith drags them around another corner, their vests announce yet another dent in Judith's honor. "Oh," she snarls, "now I'm mad."

"I think we're a target," Zoe wheezes, "because we're a threat. We could. You know. Sit out. The rest of the round? Maybe then they'll leave us alone."

Judith looks at her as if it's the smartest thing she's said all night, and Zoe is at least halfway sure she'd been joking.

So. For the remainder of round two, Zoe Zuydervelt is *bait.*

It isn't exactly Zoe's favorite thing, being a sitting duck, but she does appreciate the break it grants her from running and hiding and the occasional bout of screaming. Judith's voice is grainy and jubilant over the two-way radio strapped to Zoe's chest, tagging Zoe's would-be adversaries from a sniper hideout somewhere above her. Just before the five-minute mark she single-handedly pushes their tentative twosome to number 5, and Zoe feels almost proud.

"Stay where you are," Judith grunts as she climbs down from her invisible perch. "I want us to meet Alma as a team when the buzzer sounds. I can't wait to see her loser face."

Zoe almost relaxes, but then she sees the light from someone's vest emanating around the corner. "Judith," she hisses, "Do you have eyes on

someone just up ahead?”

“Negative,” Judith answers. “I’m dodging fire. Fucking *Supergirl*. Give me just a minute.”

“You may want to hurry,” Zoe tells her. “I think I’m about to get killed.”

“Just do what you do best,” Judith instructs. “Run and hide.”

And Zoe does, but after her third evasive maneuver it becomes obvious her pursuer won’t be so easily deterred. *“Jude?”*

“ETA unknown.” Judith is panting. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Zoe bites her lip, feeling acutely vulnerable without a human shield. “I’m actually freaking out a little,” she confesses. “Hanna thinks someone’s been following me since our arrival. What if—”

Zoe turns the corner glancing anxiously back over her shoulder, and finds herself chest-to-chest with a stranger who looks at her as if Zoe isn’t the only one whose heart has just jumped into her throat.

Zoe recognizes her as the woman Alma had pointed out in the bar. She’s frozen, her face contorted in shock. She barely seems to notice when Zoe readies her phaser with shaky hands and awkwardly takes the shot.

Judith would be proud.

“It *is* you,” the woman breathes, barely audible over the noise erupting from her phaser. “I mean. You are Zoe Zuydervelt, aren’t you?”

And, shit. *Fuck.* Zoe has been compromised. *This is bad. This is trouble.*

As if the lit-up vest strapped to Zoe’s chest hadn’t made her enough of a target already.

Zoe Zuydervelt is used to being an object of people’s ire. It used to be about the size of her family’s fortune, and the decidedly less-than-philanthropic way her father’s forebears had acquired it. Then, between Xander’s disappearance and his eventual arrest, Zoe became a public scapegoat for the systematic malpractice that defined his leadership. By the time her attorneys had successfully proven her innocence, Zoe had learned it doesn’t matter whose finger is on the trigger: the bullet will hit her just as hard.

Judith’s voice is shrill over the radio, urging her to respond. But Zoe is a little too busy negotiating with her potential assailant to come to the phone right now.

“Look,” she tries, raising her hands in surrender. “I don’t know if it’s my brother or my money that you’re after—”

The woman doesn’t get to hear the rest of Zoe’s sentence.

Because Judith tackles her to the ground.

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THIRTY-TWO

THERE ARE ACTUAL TEARS running down Alma's face. "And so I run over, right," she cries laughing, "and there's Jude, wrestling with this perfectly harmless-looking blonde—I'm talking full-fledged Boucher cherub—and Zoe's in the corner just *shaking*, she's so mad—"

"Her name is Ellie Brewer, and she's a full-grown human woman," Zoe interrupts, taking a stiff little sip from her drink. "And I wasn't mad."

Zoe notices her fingers are still trembling when she sets down her glass. Hanna has noticed, too. She's further away now, with Zoe bookended by the brides-to-be, but her foot finds Zoe's under the table, tapping it three times as if to check in. Zoe gives her a wobbly little smile. She wishes the animated arm currently slung over her shoulder belonged to Hanna, and not Alma.

Alma giggles and ignores her, entirely undeterred. "And then!" she continues gleefully, "With a completely straight face, this beautiful infant looks over and says to Zoe—'I love you.'" Alma swoons exaggeratedly on the last three words, falling into Zoe's shoulder belly-laughing as the rest of the table reacts to her dramatic rendition.

Hanna's response is outraged disbelief. "What?"

"'I love you,'" Alma squeaks, wiping at her eyes. "After which she immediately tries to backpedal, of course. As if the damage isn't already done, she goes, 'I mean I love your work.'"

“Boo,” Linh judges, clearly disappointed in this stranger’s lack of game.

Zoe pushes Alma off her shoulder. “She was referring to Austra Bio’s advancements in induced pluripotent stem cell technology,” she explains. “She’s hardly, what did you call it—a *fangirl.”*

Judith is unconvinced. “She told you she envies the ‘stability’ of your ‘macromolecule substrates,’” she says, with an unnecessarily pointed set of air quotes.

Hanna blinks. “Well,” she says. “That’s—specific.”

“Let me guess,” Linh says, sipping her cocktail through a crazy straw that loops out the word BITCH. “You hired her on the spot.”

Zoe feels her ears burning. “I offered her an interview,” she rectifies.

Alma softens a little. “You need to stop acting like everyone who treats you with anything less than outright hostility is entitled to financial compensation,” she says. “You aren’t somehow in her debt just because she didn’t actively try to hurt you.”

“Jude might be for hurting this Ellie person, however,” Hanna points out.

“She was fine,” Judith waves her off. “I’m a medical professional. I know how to take a person down without breaking the Hippocratic Oath.”

Linh spins her straw into the air like she’s trying to rewind their conversation. “So hang on, wait a second, is that why you had me fast-track a grant approval to a Dr. June Park in Colorado, nine months back?”

“Listen,” Zoe says, steepling her hands on the table in front of her. “Dr. Park’s proposal was very impressive.”

“Sofia’s doctor at the emergency clinic?” Judith inquires with disdain. “She’s a GP!”

“She’s an ER doctor. But more to the point,” Linh argues, “there was exactly zero overlap between her submission and Austra Bio’s research priorities.”

Alma shakes her head. “No, I’ll allow that one. I mean if someone saves my daughter’s life—”

Zoe breathes, letting the conversation filter in and out until the remaining tension of the hectic encounter has bled away. Hanna’s foot is still pressed against her own, and it grounds her. She wonders if there’s danger in this letting go, this breathing out, this sitting back and letting her friends support her.

She’s also realizing she’s missed Hanna, and that she’s actually missing her still, with the whole half hour they spent apart, the way she’s sitting so

far away. Before tonight, Zoe had forbidden herself from indulging in any of the senses with which she'd experienced Hanna almost a year before, and their reintroduction has made Zoe hungry: the feel of her is urging Zoe to take in her scent; the scent of her is tempting Zoe to *taste.*

Zoe's suddenly feeling ravenous.

So when what feels like only a brief moment later she finds herself locked in a cage, Hanna's fingers circling loosely around Zoe's wrists as she tells her quietly to spread her legs, Zoe Zuydervelt is far less surprised than she probably should be.

"Good," Hanna hums into her ear. Her warm breath spills over the back of Zoe's neck, one hand coming down to splay wide over her hip. "Now bend your knees, and remember: chicken wings."

Zoe nods. *Right, right. Wait.* "What?"

Hanna's smile is infinitely patient. "You want your elbows up, so the bat comes down at the correct angle."

Right. Zoe re-centers herself, tuning into the moment—the crowd around them, the disjointed carnival jingles occasionally drowning out the dance music—and bounces her arms a little, testing the weight of the baseball bat that rests firmly in her grip. "Like this?"

Hanna steps away and eyes her critically. "I think you've got it! Now, let me show you how you swing."

Zoe watches as Hanna demonstrates. She's a pro, of course, endlessly at ease. It reminds Zoe of another night, a hundred years ago or so, when she had watched as Hanna intently manhandled a batch of bread dough in Alma and Judith's kitchen. Zoe had been thirsty then, too, and mildly inebriated, equally aware of all the reasons she shouldn't kiss her and growing similarly unconvinced of their importance.

Hanna turns to her again, casually spinning the bat with the fingers of a single hand. "Are you ready? Or do you want to watch me one more time?"

Zoe sizes up the pitching machine in the back of the cage, still feeling intimidated. "You know," she says, "I just remembered I have a board meeting first thing Monday morning. And I bruise like a peach."

"I remember," Hanna says with a laugh, and then she freezes, apparently not hearing the words until they've left her mouth. "I mean. Hang on."

She returns with a bright red helmet, still looking a little flushed. "So the machine is set to only 40mph, and I can personally guarantee no balls will go anywhere near your face. But if it makes you feel better—"

And then Hanna watches, mesmerized, as Zoe takes her hair down so Hanna can help her slip the helmet over her head.

The outfits Hanna has seen her in, Zoe swears to god.

Zoe looks up at her from behind the bulky metal faceguard and gives her a wry smile. “I know. Hot, right?”

Hanna wets her lips before she laughs a little, the tips of her ears bright red, but she doesn’t look away. “Smoking.”

They end up facing off with the pitching machine together, Zoe allowing herself to be turned this way and that, wiggling back into Hanna’s body a bit as Hanna slides her fingers over Zoe’s own, wrapping them tight around the bat. Hanna guides her movement until Zoe strikes, the clean crack of it reverberating up her arm. Hanna follows the movement of the ball with her body, taking her with her, and Zoe’s a little dizzy, a little giddy, and completely unaware her center of gravity has shifted until she’s steadying herself against Hanna’s chest and watching the world tilt off its axis.

“I got it,” Zoe laughs, a little disbelieving. “Did you see that? I actually hit it!”

“Did I see it? Are you kidding me?” Hanna’s beaming pride is contagious, and Zoe allows herself to bask in her buoyancy as she clumsily drops the bat and begins to remove her helmet. “That was a line drive to left field!” Hanna raves, taking the helmet from her. “The short stop wouldn’t have even had time to get to that!” She reaches out with one hand, still mid-rant, and pushes Zoe’s hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear. “You’re amazing.”

Zoe stills. The tender familiarity of the gesture, and the way Hanna seemed to do it without giving it a second thought, stir something inside of her—low, deep, yearning—and she’s moved closer before she’s made a conscious decision to, swaying on her feet. Hanna’s free hand falls to Zoe’s waist again, heavy and warm, as if she’s steadying her still. But instead of holding her in place, she tugs her closer.

In a breathless moment, Zoe feels their foreheads bumping, Hanna’s nose brushing against her own. Hanna is a blazing furnace. Zoe just wants to come in from the cold.

But Hanna pulls away abruptly, looking genuinely apologetic. “Shit,” she says. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

Zoe is reeling from the sudden shift in mood. “Hanna—”

But Hanna doesn't hear it for what it is. "I know," she says, shaking her head, a deep crease between her brows. "That wasn't okay. You were so clear about what you want this to be and I keep overstepping. I keep getting it wrong."

Before Zoe can even attempt to intercept Hanna's spiral, Linh walks up carrying two bottles of Gatorade. "You guys look like you need Jesus," she observes, eyeing them both.

Zoe blinks. Hanna does too.

"He tells me he's a masseur," Linh clarifies. "Could clear all this tension here right up. And what's that about, anyway?" Her eyebrow ticks up meaningfully. "It looked like you were just about to score."

"What's this?" Zoe asks, ignoring Linh's loaded remark in favor of the bottles she's brought them.

"Time to hydrate," Linh explains as she hands them over. "We can't win a war on alcohol alone. Seriously though, where were you headed, second base? Third?"

"You saw that hit?" Zoe asks, a foreign, almost childlike sort of pride overruling her annoyance at Linh's jokes. "That was impressive, right? I mean, Hanna did most of the work, but—"

"Mm-hmm." Linh looks her over with a significant glance. "Good for you."

Zoe flusters at her assistant's insinuation. "Stop putting words in my mouth," she instructs.

Linh says, "Even this one?" and promptly deposits a crazy straw spelling out BOTTOM into Zoe's Gatorade.

Zoe removes it with a glare before taking a deep drink directly from the bottle, frowning when a spilled drop makes its way down her chin. She lifts a thumb to catch it, pressing it between her lips. She makes the grave mistake of looking up at Hanna as she tries not to think of all the places she could be pressing it, instead.

Hanna has dropped the helmet, apparently without noticing she's done it, and she's looking at Zoe as if she's hypnotized, her gaze locked firmly on Zoe's mouth. Her other hand is clenched so tight around her own bottle that Zoe fears for its structural integrity. Hanna only blinks back into awareness after long moments pass, her cheeks turning pink as she catches the knowing look on Linh's face. She wobbles a little, and begins to slowly back away. "I should just—go over there," she tells them. "To the—thing."

Linh suggests helpfully, “The bathrooms?”

Hanna picks up speed, still fully walking backwards. “That,” she says. “Those.” She takes off at a near run.

Linh nudges Zoe. “What are you still doing here?”

Zoe frowns. “I’m rehydrating.”

“You’re procrastinating,” Linh says, slowly as if addressing a stubborn child. “She’s clearly waiting for you to come after her.”

Zoe snorts. “No she’s not.”

Linh rolls her eyes and huffs. “Suit yourself then, Princess,” she says. “I’ll see you both back in the pit.”



Linh is a liar. When Zoe enters the restroom, it’s immediately obvious Hanna was not expecting her at all. She’s leaned forward over the sink, staring into the mirror, looking furious at herself. When their eyes meet across the glass, she jump-turns to face her, pulling her hands behind her back as if she’s been caught doing something shameful.

Except she’s standing in front of a mirror, so Zoe can see—well, practically all of her: the little golden flyaway hairs that have tugged loose from Hanna’s bun, glinting in the fluorescent light, and her abs, rippling under her tight cotton top; the way the fabric gathers at the curve of her spine, and the deep crease of consternation between her brows; and her fingers, clutching each other in a grip so tight her knuckles have turned a stark white.

“Zoe,” she says. She’s still not blinking. “Are we—” she untangles her hands, moving them to grip the counter behind her instead. Her Gatorade bottle sits beside them, now mostly empty save for a crazy straw looping out the word STUD.

Fucking Linh.

Hanna swallows. “Is everything okay?”

Zoe takes a few tentative steps forward, letting the door fall closed behind her. “Don’t ask me,” she says cautiously. “I’m not the one who ran off.”

Hanna snorts, strategically averting her eyes. “I didn’t run,” she lies. “I just, you know. Needed—” she releases one hand to wave awkwardly at the stalls.

“Oh.” Zoe falters. *Use your words, Aunt Zoe,* she remembers. “It’s just that, back there in the batting cage,” she pushes through, “I thought for a moment that we both wanted . . . but then, when you stopped me—”

“Wanted . . . ?” Hanna says faintly. Then her eyes flick back up at Zoe’s as if she’s just grown a second head, and Zoe knows Austra Biogenics is nowhere near ready to take that step in human reproductive cloning. “Stopped you?” Hanna reels.

The force of Hanna’s surprise almost knocks Zoe over. *Oh,* she thinks. *This was a bad idea. This was a tequila-fueled idea.* Also entirely Linh’s fault, rewarding her employer’s generosity and apparent gullibility by luring her into this trap. “Nevermind,” Zoe orders succinctly, turning on her heel.

But Hanna halts her retreat, her fingers catching Zoe’s wrist, tugging gently until Zoe looks at her again. When she does, the forwardness of the wanting in Hanna’s gaze hits Zoe like a fist. “Wait,” she says. “You wanted me to kiss you?”

Zoe takes a shallow breath and contemplates her answer.

No would be an obvious lie.

Yes an understatement.

“I never stopped wanting to kiss you,” she blurts. Something wound tight within her tugs loose with the confession.

Hanna pushes off the sink, darting closer before stopping herself. Her gaze flicks back and forth between Zoe’s eyes a couple of times, as if she’s searching for something, before drifting inevitably back down to Zoe’s lips. Zoe wets them with her tongue, to show off the soft pink heat that could be Hanna’s, if she still wants it the way Zoe wants her.

Hanna swallows again. Zoe watches the movement of her throat as she waits.

Two beats pass.

Hanna’s hands are on her before Zoe ever sees her move. Confident fingers brush against the sensitive skin of her nape, familiar and intent, and it’s like a match being struck: fire races down Zoe’s back, burning low at the tip of her spine, heat blooming low in her belly, and in an instant Zoe forgets everything she’s ever learned about using her legs to remain standing. Hanna catches her smoothly, pulling her in until their hips connect and spinning them around until Zoe is half-sitting on/half-pinned against the counter. It helps with the standing part, a little, but it also creates this

whole other problem, where Zoe now has trouble remembering how to breathe.

"Hanna," she says, trying—failing—not to tremble. "Please."

Hanna's eyelids droop a little at the final word, her gaze dropping down to her thigh, where Zoe knows her dress has been pulled aside to reveal her garters. Hanna's fingers twitch at her waist.

And then she throws Zoe into one of the toilet stalls, slamming the door in her face.

"Jude!" Zoe hears Hanna sing out cheerfully on the other side. "What brings you here?"

There's a pause, during which Zoe inexpertly maneuvers her body onto the toilet seat until she's certain her feet wouldn't be spotted if someone was looking under the door. And then Judith hisses, "Hanna, what do you think you're doing?"

One day, Zoe is going to murder this woman.

"Um," Hanna says, sounding like she's not entirely sure herself. "Peeing, I guess? What, um. What did you think I was doing?"

"Don't play dumb with me," Judith says. "I'm talking about what's been happening out there." Zoe flinches at the scowl in Judith's voice when she accuses, "You've been flirting with her all night."

Hanna panics audibly, almost backing into the stall where Zoe is hiding. "I'm n—wait. I mean, what?" she fumbles, and then, disastrously, "Zoe isn't—"

Fortunately, Judith's anger travels quicker than Hanna's inability to lie. "Hanna," she says dangerously. "What did we agree on, the last time we talked about this?"

It's quiet for a moment. Zoe thinks she sees Hanna's shadow shift her weight from foot to foot. She says, in a small voice, "I'd really prefer not to get into this right now."

But Judith isn't having it. "I need to hear you say it."

Hanna mumbles, after a sigh, in a monotone so soft Zoe almost misses it, "We agreed I'm going to respect Zoe's—"

"—Zoe's boundaries," Judith says with her, to Zoe's shock. "That's right. And what does that *not* look like?"

Hanna is whispering now, and so flustered Zoe is sure Judith will catch on to Zoe's perplexed presence any second. "Look," she hushes, "managing my expectations is not as easy as you made it sound when Zoe's—" she

stops herself, squirming. “Also Alma isn’t exactly helping me maintain a respectful distance. Have you considered maybe your fiancée is the one in need of a lesson about boundaries?”

Hear hear, Zoe thinks. She’s impressed, and also, her left foot is now skidding slowly, inevitably, off the side of the toilet seat.

Judith’s voice is kinder when she speaks up again, but her message is no less pointed. “She told you ‘no’, Hanna,” she says. “She’s trying to be your friend.” There’s a pause, during which neither sister speaks, and Zoe hangs on for dear life to the pipe above the tank. And then Judith concludes, devastatingly, “She’s my friend, too. I don’t want to see either of you get hurt and go radio silent again.”

Well damn.

“That’s—actually really thoughtful, Jude,” Hanna agrees quietly. “I love you too, you know.”

“Yeah yeah, whatever,” her sister waves her off. “Go wash your hands and get out here. Final round is in ten minutes and Linh says it’s a team-against-team death match. We need to discuss strategy. Where *is* Zoe, anyway?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Hanna says as they exit the restroom together.

Zoe’s foot slips to the floor the moment the door slams shut behind them, but she hardly notices anymore. She sits on the seat, reeling, feeling flustered, and wet, and a little dazed, and also decidedly, inexplicably, unjustifiably *kissed.*

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THIRTY-THREE

IT'S SOMETHING, ZOE THINKS, taking on what feels like the entirety of Los Angeles's late-night, mild-to-highly intoxicated population with a fondness for violent gunplay, as well as her own near-insurmountable desire to drop out of the game and onto her knees before the world's goofiest Greek goddess.

It's something, she thinks, and that something is *agony.*

To the deep detriment of Zoe's sanity, Linh has their team spread out over the dimly lit basement for the final round. Zoe is granted only the occasional glimpse of Hanna, brief flashes of glory and golden grace. Zoe watches her—when she isn't scrambling for cover or firing her phaser—much in the way she imagines the Achaeans once watched Achilles on the battlefields of Troy.

They've cruelly been denied an opportunity to talk, or, more optimistically, to find themselves a dark corner where Zoe can drag Hanna's hand up her dress and press her fingers between her legs. Their communication is limited entirely to their team's open channel, where every single one of their friends would be privy to each incriminating word exchanged between them.

"Yo Princess," Linh's voice crackles through the device strapped to Zoe's shoulder, "what's taking so long? Did you fall asleep back there?"

Zoe rolls her eyes before venturing briefly out of cover. She's meant to be tagging flags for the green squad while the others focus on taking out the four opposing teams, but so far it's proven to be a somewhat Sisyphean task. "I'm up against your buddy Jesus," she gripes. "He's taking them back the moment the one-minute lockout expires." She growls when she spots him, peeking out over a half-wall just a couple of feet away—then yelps and takes a frantic dive when she realizes his next shot is aimed directly at her.

"I'm disappointed in you, Bruiser," Alma's voice cuts in. "I thought you were going to bring him around to our side."

"Hell no," Linh sneers, her breath coming out in short huffs. "Guy's a total loser. Completely abandoned me in the arena last round and then, just before we went in for this one, had the nerve to claim he'd been *carrying* me." There's a short pause, filled by the faint but unmistakable sounds of an enemy player being eliminated. "Fuck him."

Zoe pokes out of cover again, careful to keep her vest shielded this time as she lines up her shot. She smiles, pleased with herself, when the flag lights up green on her very first try.

And then she realizes the lamb of god is nowhere to be seen, and two more previously green flags have turned red.

"Son of a bitch," she seethes. "Why am I doing this, again? For a tacky plastic trophy boasting our embarrassing team name and a free bucket of Buffalo wings?" She plots out a course for better shelter and bolts, tagging another flag along the way. "I can buy every one of you a hundred of those things," she pants, "without risking my mental health and professional reputation."

"It's a *bottomless* bucket of wings," Hanna corrects her, her voice tinted with a sort of ardent devotion one would usually reserve for an unexplained, perhaps magical phenomenon. "I'll come and give you a hand," she offers. "Just stay where you are."

Yes, please. Zoe is already tugging at her dress and smoothing back her hair, ready to fall into her hero's arms once more. But Linh throws a swift wrench in her plans. "Negative, Supergirl," she decides sternly. "We need you in your sector. Commander, do you read?"

Zoe's shoulders sag, though she knows it's probably for the best. She's at least seventy-five percent sure Piper mentioned a rule against physical contact in the arena.

“Loud and clear,” Jude answers. “Princess, what’s your twenty?”

Zoe blinks. “Come again?”

Jude heaves out an impatient sigh. “Where are you?”

“Um.” Zoe squints at her surroundings, feeling foolish. “At the corner of . . . blinky pink and that large, lime green something-or-other?”

“She’s in sector four, west corner, near the far wall,” Linh clips in. “About fifteen feet from your position.”

Zoe promptly shoots Jude when she arrives. She doesn’t feel particularly bad about it, either. She’s actually really enjoying this new dynamic, where she gets to open fire on Jude every time she startles her.

“Watch it!” Jude hisses. “Friendly fire!”

Zoe shrugs. “Consider it payback for years of sneaking up on me like that.”

“Whatever,” Jude grumbles, acknowledging Zoe’s improved form with reluctant respect as she joins her behind cover. “At least you’re actually hitting your targets, now.”

Zoe should hope so. She has, after all, at this point spent approximately nine hundred years in this basement practicing. “All but the one that truly matters,” she says gravely. “Are you going to help me take him down?”

Jude grins. “With pleasure.”

Sadly, the prince of peace seems to have gone into hiding upon Jude’s arrival. “Smart,” Jude remarks. “Stealth is half the game.”

They both jump when someone starts shouting just to their left, accompanied by the hateful wails of phaser fire. “Hey asshole! Over here!” a familiar voice bellows out. “You thought you’d get a piece of this? Yeah, go on, córrele con tu *amá!”*

It’s Alma, of course. She lands behind them with a thud, her vest and phaser still shrieking and flashing in obvious distress.

Jude blinks down at her. “Though clearly that tactic isn’t for everyone.”

“What’s up, my babies?” Alma smiles up at them from where she’s sprawled out on the floor. “Have we won yet? The suspense is killing me. You know, in addition to the unrelenting gunfire.”

“Seriously,” Jude sighs, grabbing her fiancée’s arm to help her to her feet. “How are you still alive?”

Alma huffs. “I do *not* know. I’ve got—” She checks her phaser and grunts. “Fifteen HP left.”

“And of course you’ve brought half the red team down upon us,” Jude says, taking a quick glance around the corner. “Damn it!”

Alma nudges her shoulder with her own. “It’s okay. Always figured I’d go out looking young and gorgeous. What better way to do it than sacrificing myself for the greatest good?”

Jude may tear up a little. It’s such a rare sight Zoe doesn’t quite trust her own eyes.

“Listen,” Alma says. “You two should make a break for it. I’ll give you cover fire and take that slippery bastard out once and for all.”

“I’m with you,” Jude promises solemnly. “Until the very end.”

The brides-to-be move in perfect sync, exchanging one last, loaded look before throwing themselves recklessly into the line of fire. As Zoe bumbles across the battlefield between them, one arm pressed close across her chest for support, she finds a moment to envy their auspicious choice of attire. Judging by their surprise when they arrived, Alma and Jude were just as unprepared for the evening’s activities as Zoe had been, and yet—

Zoe slows, absently putting down an advancing enemy with a single, distracted shot.

Funny, she thinks, how Jude just so happens to be perfectly styled for this classy carnage, her chic-yet-comfortable black romper complemented by a pair of thick-soled suede high tops. How especially hilarious, the way Alma “Papi” Valdes, Zoe’s BFF and the world’s most abominable brat, is—sure—wearing her dangliest silver hoops above her sequined cocktail dress, but the seam running down the back of her stockings disappears into a perfectly practical pair of *running shoes.*

The words “You fuckers” have barely made it out of Zoe’s mouth when Alma’s vest lights up a dramatic red before going entirely dark, her phaser blasting out a final, mournful sound. Jude catches her around the waist as if to keep her from keeling over, caught up in the theatrics of it all.

“Yep,” Alma says, utterly nonchalant, glancing down at her display. “Guess I’m a goner, huh?”

Jude clenches her jaw so hard Zoe can see the muscle moving. “So is Jesus,” she promises, grim. “He just doesn’t know it yet.”

Alma grins at her. “Aw, mi vida,” she says, endeared, “are you going to avenge me? Have *so* much fun with that.” She touches a thumb to Jude’s cheek before kissing her, raising her hand to her temple in a final salute and turning on her heel. “If you want me, I’ll be in the bar.”

“Ten-four,” Jude says, and then Zoe is alone again—Alma ascending to a better place, Jude storming forth, off on her own heroic character arc.

“So Ms. Zuydervelt,” Linh comes in, sounding a little unsure, and not just because of the tinny connection. “If I asked you very nicely not to panic—”

Zoe panics instantly. “Spit it out, Hùng.”

On the other end of the line, her assistant audibly gulps. “It’s our new friend Ellie,” she says. “She just tagged your official account on Twitter. There are pictures.”

Of course she did. Of course there are.

Well, Zoe thinks, *that’s fun.* She’s looking forward to seeing what her mother will have to say about it. The pictures can’t be flattering; it’s not like they had stopped for selfies after Jude had so helpfully wrestled Ms. Brewer to the ground. They likely show Zoe cowering in a corner, much like she is right now, looking like she’s hiding, miserable, morose. The thought rubs at her, chafing at her pride.

She scowls.

Zoe Zuydervelt doesn’t cower or capitulate. She studies her competition, cool and calculating, and then she *kills* it.

Her friends’ voices fade out, after that. It’s possible Zoe just doesn’t hear them anymore. She’s on a mission of her own now, ready to do some actual damage, to set the record straight.



It turns out to be a bit trickier than Zoe expects. With less than ten minutes left in the game, the crowd has thinned out a lot, likely having fallen by the wayside of Jude’s warpath. The only real resistance Zoe encounters comes from a terrifyingly tiny brunette who moves like quicksilver, dancing out of the way of Zoe’s shots. Once Zoe deals with her, every flag she tags for their team stays green.

“Nice work!”

Zoe’s fingers twitch against her weapon as she whirls around, trying to find the origin of the sound. It was Hanna’s voice, unmistakably, unmangled by radio static.

Zoe finally spots her high overhead, swinging feet-up from the rafters like a radioactive bat.

“Lucky shot,” Zoe deflects, frowning. “How on earth did you get up there?”

Hanna answers her with a grin and an upside-down shrug, silky flyaway hairs fanning out around her head in a perfect approximation of a halo. “I thought I was the last one left,” she says. “I’m surprised you’re still standing.”

Zoe can’t hold it against her; she’s pretty shocked herself. “Through no fault of my own, I’m sure.”

They regard each other for a long, electric moment. Zoe notes there’s no trace of the nervous, almost jittery energy Hanna had given off in the restroom earlier. In its place is a pleased, almost insolent sort of self-confidence. The last time they were alone, Zoe had been desperate to have Hanna’s hands on her again, and Hanna clearly knows it.

Zoe fears she’s savoring it.

“I can see your work from up here,” Hanna says. “You’ve left a trail of green flags in your wake. It’s impressive.”

Zoe bites the inside of her cheek to keep from saying something stupid, conscious of the radios strapped to their chests, transmitting every word they say directly to whatever teammates they have left.

“You haven’t seen the others?” Zoe fishes. “Haven’t . . . heard, from anyone?”

“No,” Hanna says, glancing up at her vest. “My radio went dead a while ago. I know Linh is out.”

“Alma is too,” Zoe says. “I’m not sure about your sister. She’s been quiet for some time, but—she does that.”

Hanna huffs out a laugh as she nimbly extricates herself from the rafters. “She’s probably just in stealth mode.” She lands on her feet beside Zoe, solid but weightless, like a broad-shouldered bouncy ball. Zoe sways at her unexpected nearness, before realizing Hanna is only leaning in so she can use her radio. “Jude?” she tries, and then, after a deep breath, rolling her eyes at Zoe dramatically, “Come in, Commander?”

Zoe is mesmerized by the bright blue intensity of Hanna’s eyes. Something feels different, in the air between them, the reality of what’s been confessed laid bare like a live wire, dangerously exposed.

There’s no answer from Jude, not even a crackle of static on the line.

“Do you think,” Hanna muses, her breath glancing off Zoe’s cheek, “it might just be the two of us now?”

Zoe gnaws at her bottom lip. “If that’s the case,” she mutters, “may god have mercy on us all.”

Hanna laughs. “Aw, baby, no,” she coos, letting the endearment slip with not a single thought to the fate of Zoe’s immortal soul. “Don’t tell me you forget,” she says, smoothly and with uncalled-for emphasis, “how *good* we are, together.”

Zoe stares at her, her heart banging against the bars of her ribcage. She swears even the freckles around Hanna’s nose are taunting her.

“Stop it,” she says, far too tender and a little wild, her hands finding the front strap of Hanna’s suspenders, tucked just behind her fluorescent vest. She folds her fingers around the warm leather and tugs, hard. “Just shut up and—”

“Come in, Supergirl!” An urgent voice crackles in through Zoe’s radio. “Princess! Can you hear me?”

Hanna halts, her eyes widening in shock, her lips a delicate inch away from Zoe’s own. “Linh?” she says with furious incredulity. “I watched you get killed!”

“I am, unfortunately, very much dead,” Linh confirms. “And so are Papi and the Commander, both of whom I have here with me.”

Alma’s voice is all cheer. “Hi guys!”

“Hi,” Zoe whispers wistfully, gazing up into Hanna’s eyes before blinking down at her mouth, so close and yet completely out of reach.

“However,” Linh continues, “There is a very shiny bright side. My radio didn’t switch off when I was eliminated. Some sort of malfunction, I guess.”

“They cut mine instead,” Hanna realizes. “I’ve been unable to communicate from the moment you went down.”

There’s a sly smile in Linh’s voice. “Which is how we can still win this thing.”

Linh lays it out succinctly. According to the livestream and stat screens in the abandoned briefing room, only the red and blue teams still have players left in the game. “They no longer consider us a threat,” Linh explains, “and they’re so focused on shooting each other that they’ve completely stopped bothering with the flags. There’s only twenty five of them in the arena and, thanks to Zoe, we currently hold six.”

“Just a little less than half,” Alma says, and Zoe sends up a quick prayer for Austra Biogenics’ financial future, seeing how Alma is her most trusted

numbers man.

"A little less than half of *what's required to win,"* Linh clarifies. "We need just seven more. If you capture them close enough to the end of the round—without getting slaughtered, obviously—we win the game."

"They'll never see it coming," Jude relishes. "Not until it's already too late."

"We have a chance." Hanna sounds awed, staring at Zoe with stars in her eyes, no doubt thinking about those Buffalo wings.

Zoe is a smidge more skeptical. "So you're asking us to double our flags, somehow—while in the middle of an active combat zone—and you expect us to take them all within the final sixty seconds?"

"You could take the first two a little earlier than that," Linh allows. "They're far enough away from the enemies' positions. But you have to save the other five for the final minute, yeah. We can't risk the other teams stealing them back as soon as their sixty-second lockout expires."

Hanna puts both of her warm palms on Zoe's shoulders. "It's us, remember?" she says, squeezing gently. "You and me. We can do this."

Zoe blinks back at her dumbly as her whole entire being—body, soul, everything—simply *dilates.*

"Maybe," Alma says. "I mean, Zoe has plenty of ammo and HP left, but Hanna, you're running low on both."

"Oh shit," Jude mutters, ominously. "Zoe has to be the tank."

"Affirmative," Linh agrees. "Hanna can do the tagging, but Zoe, you have to defend her at any cost."

Zoe studies Hanna's hopeful expression, focusing on her comforting grip on Zoe's arms. "God," she says. "Okay."



As the timer ticks down to the last five minutes, Linh steers them expertly toward the stage of their final battle. She was right: Red and Blue are so wrapped up in each other they barely notice their approach. Things heat up a little as they inch closer to their targets, but mostly they're okay. Zoe gets hit a couple of times, drawing fire away from Hanna, but she does her best not to let it bother her. It's kind of thrilling, actually, no longer having to worry about herself, focusing all of her attention on Hanna's safety, instead.

They capture the first two flags easily enough, with Linh's permission and three minutes left on the clock. When they fall into cover—one last time before the final push—they're both breathing hard, but grinning.

They make a good team, Zoe thinks.

"This is it, soldiers," Linh says. "Ninety seconds to the final countdown. Five more flags, and the game is ours."

Jude says solemnly, sounding a little hoarse, "Good luck, Supergirl. And Princess Fussy Pants—it's been an honor, fighting at your side."

Hanna bumps her shoulder into Zoe's own. "Ready?"

Zoe blows out a fortifying breath. "You'd better not be recording this," she warns Linh.

Her assistant laughs. "You couldn't stop me if you tried."

Zoe blinks back at Hanna, admiring the lines around her eyes, the soft downy hair at her temples. She asks, "Any last words of advice?"

"Yeah," Hanna says, fixing Zoe with a blazing intensity. "Don't get killed."

And then, of course—

Hanna gets killed.

Zoe watches it happen as if in slow motion. It's the good shepherd himself, arising out of nowhere, taking them all completely by surprise. Zoe finishes him with a shout, exacting the most furious vengeance she can muster—which is dreadfully anticlimactic, due to the undignified *pew! pew!* of it all—before throwing herself down onto Hanna's prone, lightless form. "Don't you die on me!" she orders as Hanna grunts beneath her. She claws at Hanna's vest as if she believes static electricity might spark it back to life.

"Aw." Hanna winks at her. "I didn't think you cared."

"Not to interrupt, guys," Linh interrupts, "but we're fast approaching the final minute here."

"Dale, en chinga!" Alma yells. "Move, move, *move!*"

Zoe sniffles. "Fuck off," she tells them. "We're done."

Hanna grabs her by the front of her vest, frantic. "Zoe, no. You can still save us."

Zoe stares, shocked, at the absolute conviction written on Hanna's face. She clenches her jaw. "How long do we have?"

"Thirty-eight seconds to countdown," Linh says, "and we're now seeing multiple hostiles closing in on your location."

“It’s not possible,” Zoe argues. “I can’t do it on my own. If I get shot, even once—”

“Come on, Zuydervelt,” Alma goads her. “Do you want Twitter to call you a quitter? Or are you going to go out a hero, guns blazing?”

“We ran into battle for you,” Jude chimes in gravely. “We don’t expect a victory. We only ask that you honor our sacrifice.”

Hanna is still holding her gaze, but she’s released her grip on Zoe’s vest, her fingers now pressed lightly against the material. When Zoe hesitates, Hanna’s solemn expression blooms into a confident grin. “No,” she says. “Zoe’s going to do more than that. She’s going to get us those bottomless wings.”

Their friends respond with affectionate skepticism. Zoe would laugh along with them, if she wasn’t so utterly captivated by the fire smoldering in Hanna’s gaze.

Hanna moves her hand a little higher on Zoe’s vest, where the polyester meets her collarbone, and strokes a single fingertip along her skin. “Just imagine how hungry I am,” she goads her, before digging her teeth into her own plush bottom lip. She sends a heated, lingering look down Zoe’s throat before capturing her eyes again. “Think how grateful I will be.”

Zoe licks her lips. “Fuck losing with honor,” she rasps. “We’re going to win.”



It takes Zoe only a single second to regret her libido-driven lunacy.

“Final countdown commences now,” Linh rushes her. “Two enemies, straight ahead.”

Zoe already has eyes on them. One player is directly between her and the flag, blocking her path. The second whirls around when he spots her, shouting a warning to his teammate.

“Shit, shit, shit. Fuck.” Zoe ducks on instinct before remembering there’s no time to hide. She adjusts her aim, surprising herself when she takes them down, almost blindly, in two consecutive blasts.

“Nice,” Linh intones. “Watch your ammo though.”

Zoe barely pauses for breath, tagging the flag with a third shot.

Green.

Good.

Distantly, grainy over the radio, Alma roars out in pride.

“Four left,” Linh announces. “Forty-two seconds.”

“On your six!” Jude cuts in, frantic and shrill, just before Zoe lets loose an ear-piercing series of shots on a player approaching from the left. She drops down, low, but not quickly enough to avoid the shooter behind her. YOU ARE TAKING FIRE! her phaser points out helpfully. Zoe curses again, then takes off in the direction of where Linh told her the next flag should be.

“I said on your six!” Jude scolds her. “Have you seen a clock before?”

“Back off and be quiet,” Hanna shushes her sister, finally joining them in the briefing room. “She can’t chat and shoot at the same time.”

Linh’s voice comes through like a balm, cool and soothing. “You’re doing just fine, Ms. Zuydervelt,” she says. And, addressing Jude, “She can’t be hit a second time within five seconds, alright? She’s using her temporary invulnerability to get to where she needs to be.”

Zoe is already there. But the bastard she just put down is crouched directly in her path, hoping to slow her down.

Zoe doesn’t think about it. She won’t even remember making a conscious choice. She just becomes aware of what her body is doing when she’s already in the air. She explodes off the ground, extending her legs in what feels a bewildering lot like a perfectly executed grand jeté.

If Tippy could see her now.

Someone is cheering for her on the comms—*is that Jude?*—as Zoe hits the ground running, glad to have both of her feet steady and strong beneath her again.

Almost there. Just a little further, and then—

Green.

She breathes. *Three to go.*

Jude is bickering with Hanna again, lobbying for Zoe to stay in cover. “She can’t afford to get hit anymore,” she says. “There isn’t enough time.”

“No time to sit still, either,” Alma points out. “There’s twenty-nine seconds left on the clock.”

“She’s got this,” Hanna says. “Just watch.”

“Three more flags.” Linh takes a breath. “You’ve got fifteen ammo left. But Jude is right. If you get hit, it’s over.”

When Zoe doesn’t answer them, doesn’t move, Hanna’s confidence begins to waver. “Zoe,” she implores.

Zoe closes her eyes and breathes. “Could all of you *please* shut up for a moment?”

She rises carefully, staying low while she slips off her shoes. She wiggles the feeling back into her toes, testing the resistance of her stocking’s silicone grips against the linoleum floor. She has a clear view of her last two targets, one red, one blue. *Either it’s never, or it’s now.*

Zoe takes a breath, propels herself out of cover, and lines up her first shot. She hits her mark perfectly, without hesitation.

Green.

Two more.

As she leaps out of the way of enemy fire—now coming from three different directions—Zoe realizes with a detached sort of clarity that she’s no longer scrambling or tripping over her own feet. She’s practically flying, feather-light and fearless. She knows with absolute certainty her friends won’t hold it against her if she fails. That Hanna will forgive her, even if Zoe ends up disappointing her, even if she costs Hanna her coveted Buffalo wings. The only unforgivable thing, Zoe knows, would be for her to keep pretending that none of it matters.

The remnants of their enemies’ armies are waiting for her now. Zoe fears they’ve caught on to what she’s going for, lining up their shots so she will run straight into their sights before she can reach the last two flags. They’ll take her down as soon as she gets close enough.

Zoe decides she won’t give them the satisfaction.

She goes down on her own terms: voluntarily—deliberately—and with as much control as she can muster. She folds one ankle around the other knee as she begins to slide on the heel of her left foot, hoping against hope her momentum will break her fall.

Zoe Zuydervelt doesn’t slouch toward victory. She *sails* there.

She aims while she goes. She shoots.

Green.

Only one more left to go.

For a long second, Zoe feels weightless. *Not another concussion please,* she prays. They’re such boring bastards to recover from and she hates the brain fog that seems to persist a little longer each time.

Of course a wrist fracture is hardly preferable. Especially tonight.

She manages to land sideways somehow, sliding, her momentum carrying her much further than she’d estimated. By virtue, perhaps, of the expensive

fabric of her dress. She readies her phaser one last time, aiming it at the bright red beacon of the final flag.

Zoe takes the shot moments before she finally comes to a halt, the stained linoleum streaking by beneath her, smelling of corn oil and sweaty sneakers, and—finally—sweet, sweet victory.

Green.

The sound of the buzzer is drowned out entirely by the deafening screams of her friends. Zoe blinks up breathlessly at the scoreboard.

THE HUNG BACHELORETTES, it announces. WINNER.

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THIRTY-FOUR

HANNA FINDS HER FIRST. She slings her arm around Zoe's waist as the others catch up with them, jaws slack and staring as Hanna helps her to her feet.

"Holy shit," Linh breathes. "You're a freaking superhero."

"Damn, Zo," Jude agrees. "You've been holding out on us."

Alma launches herself at her, jostling Zoe wildly when she starts jumping up and down. "Suck it, Elon," she whoops, apropos of nothing Zoe is immediately able to decipher.

Her best friend's joy is contagious, though, and Zoe figures, *why not indulge in it a little bit?* It's not as if she's in danger of making any more of a spectacle of herself than she already has. So she throws her arms around Alma before hugging Linh and accepting a fist bump from Jude. Hanna keeps her arm wrapped around Zoe's hips, pleasantly grounding and exquisitely warm. When the others pull away, Zoe presses into her more firmly, subtly signaling her consent.

"Are you okay?" Hanna asks, her voice soft with gentle concern. She breathes the words almost directly down the slope of Zoe's throat, sending waves of goosebumps over the sensitive skin of her shoulders, rolling down her back, her sides, kissing the tops of her thighs. "That final dive looked like it might have hurt."

“Uh, that was an expertly executed bent-leg slide,” Jude argues. She pokes Zoe’s arm with an accusatory finger. “I’m bringing you in on the hospital’s baseball team.”

Zoe laughs, boisterous and unrestrained, the sound a little alien to her own ears. “Absolutely not,” she says, allowing Hanna to help her out of her powered-down vest. “After tonight, I’m joining a monastery.”

“Pretty sure you’d burst into flames upon entering a house of god, looking the way you do,” Alma says with a significant look at Zoe’s chest. “For goodness’ sake, woman, cover yourself.”

Hanna starts spluttering, following Alma’s eyeline, and *oh, wow, would you look at that*—Zoe’s dress appears to have lost one of the two buttons that stand between her honor and a citation for public indecency. *Thank god for fabric tape.*

“I’m fine,” she tells Hanna, having finally taken careful stock of her limbs and finding all of her bones unbroken. “I think I need about a gallon of water, though. And maybe, um.” She tugs at her lapels, glancing around fruitlessly for the missing button. “A safety pin?”



Zoe Zuydervelt doesn’t handle compliments well. Just last month, her new dental hygienist had voiced her admiration for Zoe’s “robust and well-aligned” wisdom teeth, following it with a concerned offer to sedate her when Zoe had promptly started tearing up. So it’s safe to say she’s feeling a little wobbly at the onslaught of relentless praise and unconditional devotion her friends lob her way when they’re settled back into their booth.

“That shot right there, after you take off your shoes?” Hanna’s eyes keep flitting back and forth between Zoe and the video looping on Linh’s phone. “The whole *Black Widow, Warrior Nun* type thing?” Hanna makes a series of gestures that tell Zoe about as much as Hanna’s pop culture references do, which is absolutely nothing at all.

“Ooh,” Jude comes to her aid, “You mean that crouched landing, with one hand on the floor and one leg extended?” As Hanna nods, enthralled, Jude eyes Zoe, sharply curious. “Yeah—where *did* you learn how to do that?”

Zoe smiles to herself. “That’s just what’s known as a passata-sotto in fencing,” she says, feeling flustered. “It’s a fairly straightforward move.”

“Oh, sure, that old thing,” Jude says, fondly exasperated.

“And the—?” Hanna trails off, her index finger drawing an elegant arch in the air.

“The grand jeté?” Zoe guesses. “I’m kind of glad you got that on video, actually. I think my dance coach will get a kick out of it. Although I’m sure my mother would have some notes on my technique.”

As if on cue, Zoe’s phone chirps, the sound significantly muffled by Zoe’s cleavage. “Speak of the devil,” Zoe says after she fishes it out, peering warily at the screen. The series of texts Tippy has sent her provide an immaculate timeline of the evening’s events, starting with mild exasperation and petty jabs before escalating to livid accusations and perplexed reproach.

“I can’t tell what’s making my mother angrier,” Zoe muses, “Austra Bio’s bids on the charity auction, or my audacity to act like an actual human being for once.”

“She should withhold judgment until after she’s seen the footage,” someone chimes in. It’s their host, Piper. She’s brought a tray of cocktails and water bottles to their table, but—to Hanna’s immediate consternation—there are no Buffalo wings or gaudy trophies in sight.

“You are the highest scoring team,” Piper cheers. “Congratulations! Unfortunately, you’re all disqualified.”

They stare at her, dumbstruck. Then Hanna blurts out, “What?!” Her devastation is palpable.

Piper sighs, looking a little disappointed herself. “Dude,” she says, “we love your enthusiasm and your team spirit is aspirational. But you broke, like, every single rule we have.”

Linh smooths a careful hand down Zoe’s arm. “So,” she addresses Piper in her most professionally menacing voice. “I assume Twitter told you who this woman is.” Her eyes catch Zoe’s own for a moment, checking in, before flitting to Piper’s again. “Did you also happen to notice her account has nine million followers, give or take?”

“Linh,” Zoe begins to protest, but her assistant perseveres.

“I’m just saying,” she says, giving first her phone and then Zoe a significant glance. “Perhaps an informal endorsement would change some minds?”

Piper looks intrigued, and Zoe considers it. A plastic trophy, Hanna’s gratitude, and the infinite ire of her mother. Zoe ponders the video still

playing on Linh's phone.

She looks like an undeniable badass.

She nods, once, decisive. "Post it."

~

The video—with a shout-out to Xtreme Adventures in the caption—goes viral within the hour. Some uncredited editing savant manages to enhance the quality of the footage to a flattering 1080p, syncing it, in the process, to an epic instrumental track.

"That's the theme of *Dragon Age Inquisition,*" Jude observes. "Nice choice."

By the time Hanna is polishing off their fourth bucket of Buffalo wings, **#ZoeZuyderveltForCatwoman** is trending worldwide, and Zoe's notifications have just alerted her to a startlingly eye-opening message from none other than Lovis Lindström.

"Give me that," Alma demands when she sees what it is that has Zoe gasping with bafflement. She tugs the phone from Zoe's fingers and waves it at her. "You can have this back when you're sober."

Zoe is actually feeling remarkably clear-headed. She's been sticking with water since their return to the bar, in an attempt to counteract the intoxicating nearness of Hanna's body. They're being careful, sitting far enough apart that it doesn't set off Jude's bullshit detector, but still a lot closer than the size of their booth requires.

Zoe feels the heat building between them just the same. She's pretty sure Hanna does, too. Zoe's damaged dress caught on the velour upholstery of their booth when she scooted in, stretching the thigh slit taut around her leg, revealing a patch of black lace at the border of her stocking as well as a garter strap. Hanna almost took a bite out of her glass when she first noticed, and her eyes haven't stopped wandering since.

Unfortunately Zoe's lack of inebriation also leaves her unbuffered against the sounds of Hanna's excessive gratification, at the sight of her sucking her fingers and licking her tongue along the corners of her mouth.

Linh is watching Hanna as well, looking a fair bit more perplexed than the rest of them. Zoe remembers her assistant had been, up until tonight, unfamiliar with Hanna's oral fixation. "That good, huh?" she asks, a little disbelieving.

Hanna answers her only with a very lascivious, very *grateful* moan.

“Really,” Jude deadpans, as Zoe fends off an immediate impulse to self-immolate. “I don’t think they warrant that level of enthusiasm.”

“Tastes like victory,” Hanna hums, slapping one hand down on her own leg. Zoe jolts when Hanna’s knuckles brush against the side of Zoe’s silk-sheathed thigh. Hanna doesn’t look at her, but the touch lingers, removing any misgivings about it having been an accident.

“Ooh, Hanna, speaking of,” Alma says. “Have you had the pleasure of tasting Zoe’s absolutely divine—” she pauses, perilously, waving her hand as if it will help jog her memory, while Zoe tries very hard not to react to the feeling of Hanna’s knuckles, slowly dragging their way up her leg. “What is it, again?” Alma asks, looking to Jude for help, oblivious to the events transpiring under the table and to the amused-yet-darkly-suggestive look Hanna sends Zoe’s way. Alma presses, “That tender, juicy—”

“Korean crispy chicken,” Zoe bites out, her heart fluttering at the open hunger in Hanna’s eyes.

Hanna gives Zoe a lazy grin. “Actually,” she tells Alma, offhandedly initiating Zoe’s inevitable demise with the intrepid touch of a single pinkie finger, “Zoe hasn’t offered me anything to eat that she’s personally prepared since that week in Colorado. But I never stopped having vivid fantasies about her”—Hanna sucks her lips around another, sauce-covered, fingertip —“amazing pepper pasta.”

Zoe sighs at her words. It’s a quiet surrender. Her legs have already fallen open, chasing Hanna’s touch. It’s a clear signal, a bright flare across a midnight sky, and Hanna receives it loud and clear. Her fingertip glides smoothly up Zoe’s stocking until it reaches the band of lace at the top, just at the inside of her thigh, and stills there, teasing. The bare skin above it is prickling in anticipation of Hanna’s touch. Just half an inch further and she’ll—

From next to Alma’s elbow, Zoe’s phone blares out a brassy discordant note. Hanna’s hand grips Zoe’s thigh, hard, startled, causing Zoe—and with her, the entire table—to jump. Linh leaps forward to keep their cocktails from spilling, while Jude growls out a loud, “What the fuck, Hanna?”

“I didn’t!” Hanna splutters, tugging her hand back into her own lap. “I wasn’t—”

Alma glowers at Zoe’s phone, scowling when she recognizes Tippy’s ringtone, blasting out the first bars of *O Fortuna.* She rolls her eyes

dangerously up at Zoe. “Please let me block her number.”

Zoe says, petulant, mourning the loss of Hanna’s hand, “If only it was that easy.”

“No. You know what?” Alma says. “I’m done being nice about it.” Her fingers begin tapping at Zoe’s phone. It’s fruitless, Zoe knows. The protection on her mobile devices gives even NASA’s security a run for its money.

“Alma,” Zoe says, wishing Hanna would return her hand to her thigh, half considering putting it back there herself, “give me the phone.”

“Do you remember what I was doing three years ago?” Alma asks, stubborn fingers still stabbing at the screen.

“Kicking cancer’s ass,” Jude answers easily, as if it’s a script she’s lovingly familiar with.

“Damn right.” Alma halts her efforts to break into Zoe’s phone in order to press her lips to Jude’s in a quick but tender kiss. “So there I am,” she continues, “practicing positivity and doing my little Pac-Man exercises and trying to be a loving presence, in case—you know.”

Zoe swallows as Alma’s fingers fan out in a gesture of hard-earned nonchalance.

“But fuck did I ever have hatred for Tippy,” Alma spits out. “I kept wondering, ‘Why am I the one who’s dying? Why does that monster get to live?’”

Linh raises her empty glass to her in a pitiful toast. “Must be those mysterious ways we heard about in catechism.”

“Please,” Alma says. “If me having to regrow all of my hair from scratch was part of his plan, then god can eat my entire ass.”

“Aw.” Jude smooths down the back of her fiancée’s shoulder-length bob, and starts playing with her still slightly wavy hair. “I kinda liked those cute little chemo curls.”

Alma leans back into Jude’s gentle ministrations. “Date a woman who’s able to put the words ‘chemo’ and ‘cute’ together in a sentence and somehow make it work.”

Jude tilts her chin at her, grinning. “*Marry* a woman who does that.”

“Thinking I might,” Alma tells her, before leaning in to give Jude a proper kiss.

“Gross.” Linh slides out of their booth gracelessly, a little unsteady on her feet. “If we’re getting into the emotional stuff, I’m gonna need more

drinks.”

“You’re the one who mentioned catechism,” Alma warns. “You’re buying.”

When Linh returns with their drinks, she chooses to scoot in next to Hanna instead. She fusses and frowns, crowding Hanna, until the three of them are crammed together like a marvelously well-dressed tin of anchovies.

She’s looking markedly more intoxicated than she did just twenty minutes ago.

“Zoe.” Her assistant smiles at her when she hands Zoe her water, drawing out the *e*. “That’s a pretty name.”

“Thank you,” Zoe says, confused. “It was a birthday gift.”

Linh snorts, still leaned in close across Hanna’s body, blinding them both with her glittering headband. “That’s funny,” she says. “You’re funny.” She plucks at the cuff of Zoe’s sleeve, pensive. “Why does everybody else think you’re such a bitch?”

Alma barks out a laugh in shocked delight. Hanna chokes on her drink, and Jude just purses her lips, as if she can think of a couple of answers to that question.

“Ouch,” Alma says. “There go your dreams of winning *World’s Most Beloved Bleeding Heart.”*

Linh wrinkles her nose. “Ignore her,” she says sternly. “You’re Zoe fucking Zuydervelt. You can do whatever you set your mind to.”

“I’m not sure I’d go that far,” Zoe says mildly.

Linh snarls at her in response. “Don’t talk about my boss like that,” she warns, raising her—blessedly near-empty—glass in a wobbly toast. “To Zoe Zuydervelt,” she shouts out to the bar at large. “Our one and only ho!”

“I’ll l’chaim to that,” Jude concurs. Zoe looks up in shock as good-natured cheers ring out from other tables, too.

Linh drains her glass and sets it down blindly on the table behind her before wrapping both of her fists around Zoe’s lapels. “You are fucking incredible,” she slurs, pulling a little for emphasis, probably tearing a brand-new hole in Zoe’s already battered dress. “I am in *awe* of you.”

Hanna grins down at Linh, who is now effectively straddling her lap. She says, “I can see why Zoe likes you.”

Zoe blinks back tears of profound confusion. “I’ve never seen her like this before.”

Linh looks at Hanna as if she's only now noticed who she's sitting on. "You're really buff," she yells, loudly and directly into Hanna's face.

Hanna squints at her, smiling. "Thanks?"

"Yeah! What do you lift? Bet you could bench press me no problem."

Hanna's eyes skid gingerly down Linh's body. "Probably? You're pretty tiny."

"Ooh!" Linh straightens, bracing herself against Hanna's chest. "See if you can lift Zoe," she suggests. "She's *much* heavier than I am."

Alma studies Linh for a moment, then checks her non-existent watch with an exaggerated expression of surprise. "Look at the time!" she hams. "Alright gays, Jude and I are gonna bounce. It's been fun, but we need to get home to our sitter."

Hanna eyes her suspiciously. "You said Sofia's at a friend's."

Alma relents. "Okay, but consider this: There's this smoking hot chick who wants me to be her last hook-up before she gets married."

"Gross," Hanna gags.

"Are you guys leaving already?" Linh pouts at them. "The party's just getting started!"

"It's nearly 3 a.m., sweetie," Alma tells her. "Hangovers are a bitch once your age hits double digits. You'll find out in time." She turns to Hanna and Zoe, entreating. "Don't make us take her home. Please. Consider it your wedding present to us."

"Not yours, Zoe," Jude clarifies. "Sofia's betting on you buying us a private jet."

"Whatever," Zoe says. "But we're taking the car. You two can find your own way home."

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THIRTY-FIVE

LINH'S BUILDING IS BARELY two blocks away, and as promised—and to Linh's endless delight—Hanna lifts her from the limo with hardly any effort at all, jostling her slightly as she steps onto the curb.

Hanna whistles low. "This is a fancy place."

Linh is looking suspiciously smug, suspiciously alert. "Ms. Zuydervelt makes a point of paying all of her employees a livable wage," she says.

Hanna huffs. "I think you and I have very different definitions of the word 'livable.'"

While Hanna carries Linh to the master bedroom ("Don't you live alone? How many bedrooms do you need?") Zoe fills a tall glass with water and digs up a bottle of ibuprofen from Linh's medicine cabinet.

"These units are actually quite affordable," she tells Hanna. "And the building is certainly safer than yours."

"I'm sure it is," Hanna says. "But I definitely couldn't afford a place like this."

"Really?" Zoe is a little skeptical. "I mean, I'm aware teachers don't get compensated fairly for all they're expected to do, but surely—" and then Hanna interrupts her to tell her what she makes a year, and Zoe blanches. "Tell me you work part-time," she prays.

Hanna patiently pulls back Linh's duvet so she can crawl into her bed. "Nope," she says. "Upwards of sixty hours a week, most times."

Linh backs her up. “Teachers don’t get squat, Zoe. Shit, my sister’s district doesn’t even provide them with a curriculum.”

Zoe frowns, both at Linh’s sober-sounding eloquence and the state of the country’s educational system. “How is that possible?” she asks. “Was union membership not very strong on your campus?”

“They did okay,” Hanna shrugs, tucking in the quilt covering Linh’s bed as she settles in. “Are you going to be alright there, Bruiser?”

“I’m fine,” Linh waves her off. “Get out of here.”

Before she pulls Linh’s front door closed behind her, Zoe catches a final, incongruent glimpse of her assistant through her open bedroom door. She’s sitting up against her pillows, having pulled her hair out from her headband and into a ponytail. She’s typing away at her laptop with rapid, precise strokes.

Curious.

Zoe gets nervous when the elevator starts its slow descent, acutely aware of the crossroads that lies ahead. She knows that, by the time they reach the car, she and Hanna will either go their separate ways—after a doubtlessly awkward goodbye, which will leave Zoe self-hating and sleepless until she takes matters into her own hands—or choose to see the evening’s heavy flirting through to its long-anticipated consummation.

In a completely inane attempt to delay having to deal with the situation, Zoe begins to babble.

It’s not so bad, at first. Just the standard Miss America spiel about teachers being the true leaders of the nation, shaping young people’s minds, etcetera. But when Hanna stays silent beside her, looking sharply amused, Zoe feels compelled to launch into a flustered diatribe about how politicized public education has become, citing the movements to discredit both science and history and the concerted push toward privatization. By the time the elevator reaches the ground floor, Zoe has arrived at the constant threat of gun violence and its impact on students as well as staff.

When they finally step out into the damp and chilly first blush of morning, Hanna is staring at her with an unreadable look in her eyes.

Zoe cuts off abruptly, her heart taking a figurative little tumble when she realizes they are, for what is arguably the first time tonight, alone. “What?” she asks nervously.

The tilt of Hanna’s shoulders is loose, the lopsided smile she gives her as cocky as ever, but Zoe doesn’t miss the outline of tightly clenched fists

stretching the pockets of Hanna's pants.

"I'm sorry if I'm crossing a line, saying this," Hanna says, making Zoe's heart pound, "but I don't think I've ever been more attracted to you than I am right now."

Zoe stares at her, marveling at the simplicity of her words, their fearlessness. Hanna gazes back, waiting, her pupils blown.

A beat passes between them.

And then Zoe throws an arm around Hanna's neck, and kisses her.

It's like throwing a switch. Hanna takes control of their collision immediately, kissing her exactly the way Zoe remembers, single-minded and sure, though unmistakably giving. She licks into Zoe's mouth as she nudges her backward, her eager thumbs digging into the soft flesh just inside the jut of Zoe's hips. Zoe gasps at the feeling of frigid concrete at her back. Hanna takes the opportunity to duck down under Zoe's jaw, sliding her tongue—*holy mother of god*—hot and wet over the skin below Zoe's ear.

The shocking reality of it, of the shape of her, pressed along the front of Zoe's body—after almost a year of doomed self-denial—is almost too much.

Zoe slips both of her hands around the back of Hanna's head, an anchor, a lifeline, and digs her fingers into the ruins of Hanna's bun. Hanna exhales sharply when Zoe tugs at the roots of her hair, her hips stuttering and tilting against Zoe's own. She tears her mouth away, her hands coming up to cradle Zoe's jaw before she rests their foreheads together. She's blushing, breathing hard, sheltering her eyes behind her long, delicate lashes.

It's raining again, Zoe realizes. It's a persistent drizzle, cloaking the city street in a muted purple haze. It has already begun to stain the silk of Zoe's lapels. But it doesn't matter; Zoe is fine right where she is, content to cant her hips into Hanna's, sharing breath until the fine mist turns the locks of hair she's pulled down from Hanna's bun to golden ringlets.

Hanna's breathing is still erratic. "I think we should maybe—" she says, "—talk about this."

"Sure." Zoe mumbles it into Hanna's mouth, trying to nudge closer again, but Hanna slows her approach with a firm hand at the hinge of her jaw, allowing only a ghost of the touch Zoe had been aiming for. It's no more than a leisurely drag of Hanna's kiss-slick lips against her own, but Zoe feels it like an electric current sending sparks across her skin.

Hanna moves her hand down to curve around her neck, a possessive thumb resting against Zoe's throat as she gently nudges them apart.

Hanna says, "You told me you wanted Colorado to be a one-time thing. I need to know you're not doing something you're going to regret."

Hanna says, "I don't want to be a mistake you think you're making."

Zoe looks at her, Hanna's blue eyes solemn and a little bit crossed at their close proximity. She's so earnest, and so brave, and so endlessly endearing. Zoe looks at her and sees—*everything*, she thinks, everything she's made herself do without, offered up to her as if it's easy, as if Zoe could claim it, and *keep* it, if she could think of the right words to say.

"I don't regret anything," she offers at last. "Anything we did."

Hanna slides her thumbs down to Zoe's hip bones again, her fingers splayed wide over her ass. The movement makes the material of Zoe's dress slip off her leg, the slit up her thigh happily complicit in Zoe's undoing. "So is this real?" Hanna asks. "Are we actually doing this?"

The moment feels so loaded, and yet so impossibly frail, that Zoe experiences a fierce, ridiculous desire to put it behind glass. She wants to tuck it away safely, maybe into one of those miniature snow globes like they had found in Hanna's gumball machine. She wants to be able to hold it between her fingers and shake it, and watch all of her fears, all of her desire, all of her stupid resolutions fall down around them like the rain.

"Hanna, please," she begs, knowing full well she's asking for far more than she deserves. "Can it be real tonight?" It's cowardly and craven, and it feels like a lie, but the truth feels like conjecture, an unproved theory, lacking the statistical evidence required to hold firm in the face of Hanna's questions.

Hanna's fingers flex against Zoe's skin, her tight grip faltering, and for a moment Zoe believes this is it, this is the moment she's seen coming from the start—the moment Zoe Zuydervelt ruins everything.

But Hanna seems to resolve something for herself. She looks at her, licking out at her own bottom lip, eyes dancing back and forth between Zoe's. "Okay," she says. "Yeah, alright. Of course." Her hands grow sure again at Zoe's waist, pulling her in. She brushes their noses together before capturing Zoe's bottom lip between her teeth. "Tonight is good," she rasps into her mouth. "Tonight is perfect."

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THIRTY-SIX

ZOE BARELY SURVIVES THE drive home. Hanna kisses her, in the pink leather loveseat in the back of the limousine, and then all the way up in the elevator, full and all-consuming, strong hands kneading at the soft flesh of Zoe's thighs. Zoe's GioBagnara sculpture nods them on with unequivocal enthusiasm when Zoe puts a firm hand on Hanna's chest and shoves her into the sideboard, so she can finally close her front door behind them.

She really, really needs Hanna to stop teasing her and start taking off her clothes.

Hanna looks a little lost, squinting past the motion-activated night-light in her kitchen, peering down the hall. "Where are we going?" she asks, and Zoe remembers Hanna hasn't been inside her penthouse before.

"Hell," Zoe says, "hand basket," before leaning in and up, and slotting both her hips and her mouth against Hanna's again.

Hanna grunts and turns them. Her firm fingers grab the curve of Zoe's ass, and then Zoe is suspended in the air for the second time tonight.

She's granted only a brief moment to enjoy it before Hanna hoists her onto her kitchen island. The black marble countertop is cold against the back of Zoe's thighs, but she's well past pretending she isn't more than a little bit into the shock of discomfort it provokes. The sensation blossoms out until it's throbbing slick and heavy between her legs.

Hanna rucks up Zoe's dress as she steps in close between her dangling calves, running her broad palms up the inside of Zoe's thighs. She hums, pleased, when her fingers find the straps of Zoe's garters. "You are the most gorgeous thing I have ever seen," she says, smiling, her teeth pressing against Zoe's lips. She traces the band of lace at the top of Zoe's stockings, her hands precariously close to where Zoe is trembling for them, nudging her thumbs against her garter clips without making any serious effort to undo them. Zoe's thighs twitch each time Hanna's fingers graze her skin. "You're like a sexy present that's too pretty to unwrap," Hanna says.

It's a step up from a grumpy teddy bear, Zoe reminds herself. "Well then," she decides, ever the impatient pragmatist, "allow me to—"

Hanna grabs Zoe's wrists in a quick, resolute hold, stopping her. She pushes Zoe's hands down on either side of her hips, pressing them flat against the countertop. "No," she tells her, and Zoe swallows at her authoritative tone. "They stay on," Hanna whispers, close against the shell of Zoe's ear, nuzzling the diamond studs that adorn it, "until I've seen what you look like, wearing them, when you come against my mouth."

Zoe is pretty sure the world stops spinning, after that.

Hanna presses down on Zoe's hands one final time, for emphasis. "These stay here," she instructs.

Zoe nods in silent surrender, already shaking with the effort to comply.

Hanna's hands begin to roam again. This time they don't stop until they've reached the apex of Zoe's thighs, where all that separates Hanna's fingers from Zoe's flustered need is a flimsy, soaked-through scrap of silk. Zoe holds her breath, caught between anticipation and despair, failing to suppress a choked moan when Hanna's fingertips brush low against the fabric. "These may be a problem," Hanna observes.

"Looks like you'll have to undo the garters, after all," Zoe suggests, sounding a little too breathless to be convincingly cheeky.

Hanna gives her a darkly entertained look, her perfect Cupid's bow stretching into a mischievous smirk. "This isn't a lucky pair or anything, is it?"

Zoe blinks at her, baffled. "You can't be serious."

Hanna traces Zoe's contours through the silk, her careful fingertips making Zoe twitch and gasp, hands clawing uselessly at the countertop. "Can I?" Hanna asks.

Zoe nods again, in spite of her skepticism, and Hanna wastes no time locating a weak spot in the delicate garment, before ripping it apart with both hands.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Hanna.”

Hanna laughs softly, satisfied, before slipping her fingers between her.

Zoe almost sobs with relief. She arches into the sensation, letting her head loll back, her hips stuttering up into Hanna’s hand.

Hanna groans. “I forgot how good you feel,” she grinds out, and Zoe’s breath catches on a soft, helpless moan when Hanna’s fingers find her right as she sighs out the adjective.

Liar, Zoe thinks, trembling at the blatantly intimate familiarity with which Hanna touches her. She knows exactly where to find her, how to push her, when to wait and build and tease, omitting any unnecessary exploration in favor of driving Zoe immediately out of her mind. She whimpers in protest when Hanna’s fingers leave her, brushing slickly down her thigh, grazing the top of her knee. Zoe jumps at the contact, her breath hitching, and Hanna looks at her, checking in. Zoe gives her an embarrassed smile. “Tickles,” she explains.

“Good to know,” Hanna says, the wink she gives Zoe a little wicked. “Lean back for me? On your elbows, please.”

She does as she’s told, her heart punching behind her ribs in restless anticipation. Hanna spreads Zoe’s legs against the countertop like it’s an easy, offhanded thing. She yelps when Hanna leans down to kiss a lurid bruise into her vulnerable skin, high up on her inner thigh.

Hanna releases her with a wet pop. “Did that hurt?” she asks, her confidence briefly wavering. “Or—was that a happy sound?”

Zoe fixes her with a look, feeling vulnerable, but safe. “Both,” she confesses, melting a little when Hanna meets it with curiosity rather than squeamishness.

“Good to know,” she says again, her thumb rubbing gently at the still stinging mark. Zoe swallows at the heady emotion that colors her voice this time.

She’s beginning to think she’s the one who’s out of her depth, here. Hanna has her lightheaded and debauched already, and she has barely gotten started. She’s teasing Zoe still, running first the tip of her nose and then the slick of her mouth up the crease of Zoe’s thigh. Hanna’s all hunger, grazing the sensitive skin with her teeth, then actually nipping, sucking the

tender flesh between them, her unyielding grip still pinning Zoe's legs apart.

Zoe fears she might be moments away from complete disintegration. She grabbles unsuccessfully for leverage against the marble, laid out before Hanna like an offering, like a sacrifice on an altar. Hanna breaks her apart between her thumbs like a peach, humming as she finally, *finally*, takes Zoe into her mouth.

Zoe falls back onto the countertop at the first soft touch of her tongue, unable to hold herself up any longer.

Hanna groans out her approval, as laudatory as her response to the Buffalo wings had been. Zoe twitches and bucks beneath her, choking out whimpering sighs. Hanna isn't rough, but she's not gentle with her anymore, either, honing in on the places that make Zoe shudder, holding her fast when Zoe attempts to twist away. It only makes Zoe burn hotter, the confidence Hanna possesses in her ability to give Zoe exactly what she needs, even when it isn't what she's begging for, even if it's more than Zoe believes she can stand. It's torture and it's bliss, and Zoe doesn't know how or why she has denied herself of it for so long.

"You're so beautiful," Hanna whispers into the heart of her, gazing up from between her legs. "You look gorgeous like this, so soft and needy for me." And then, "I dreamed about you. About having you like this again. Sometimes it was all I could think about."

Zoe squirms, frustrated at the loss of Hanna's tongue. She huffs, "I thought you said those fantasies were about my cooking."

Hanna mutters, her breath hot and humid against her, "Not exclusively," before resuming her mission to undo her with ravenous enthusiasm.

She seems to sense it when Zoe is approaching her limit, even before Zoe realizes it herself. Her thighs are shaking against Hanna's hold and she's trembling against her tongue, soft, whimpered pleas stuttering out of her on every exhale. Hanna's eyes are on her still, catching her own intently each time Zoe glances down, and Zoe has the distinct sensation that it's no longer just her body that's between Hanna's teeth—it's her heart.

"Here," Hanna urges her, yanking one of Zoe's legs over her shoulder. Zoe uses it as best as she can to make up for the lack of the use of her hands, pulling Hanna in, urging her closer, leveraging it to arch entirely off the countertop in a futile bid for some control. Hanna responds by hooking one forearm around her hip, fingers digging into her belly, and that's—

Zoe goes rigid, grinding up against Hanna's mouth as much as Hanna's hold allows. She almost forgets herself, her hands flying to the blonde hair spilling out over her hips. She corrects their indiscretion in time, slapping them back onto the countertop, her fingers skidding over the icy surface. There's a string stretched thin inside her, and for a long, terrifying moment, Zoe fears Hanna may only keep stringing it tighter, keeping Zoe suspended, taut to the point of breaking until she surrenders the last shreds of her sanity. But then Hanna lets out a low, pleased hum, the sound rumbling down into the cradle of Zoe's hips, and the string snaps—*finally*—sending Zoe soaring into her release.



Hanna is humming to herself, tugging at Zoe's garters. "These are going to come off, now," she says.

Zoe nods at her, thickly, still catching her breath. "Yeah," she says. "That—good."

Zoe discovers there's something strangely erotic about being helped out of her shoes. Hanna digs her thumb into the arch of Zoe's foot, her touch gentle again, and Zoe moans, wondering if it's the illicit allusion to the scullery maid's crystal slipper, or the relief of feeling the circulation returning to her pinkie toes. It echoes the sweet shock that follows the removal of a pair of butterfly clamps.

Zoe fears she may be, at present, delivering the final, fatal blow to the salvageability of her dress.

Hanna smoothly tugs Zoe's stockings down her legs. But when she moves on to take off Zoe's dress, her fingers begin to fumble. Her expression shifts from raw hunger to slight exasperation to straight-out puzzled wonder. "Where's the—wait. How are you—?"

Zoe sighs out a laugh when she realizes it's the fabric tape that has Hanna so stumped. She rolls her eyes, not the least bit embarrassed. "Excuse me for not anticipating the turn this evening would take."

Hanna is staring down at Zoe's chest, incredulous, plucking helplessly at her dress. "Are you glued into this outfit?"

Zoe lifts a little on her hands in an effort to get her hips closer to Hanna's own again. She tucks Hanna's hair behind her ear and purrs, "Why don't you find out?"

Hanna looks at her, a little smitten. She brushes a single knuckle along the skin beneath Zoe's collarbone, slipping just barely underneath one of her lapels and dragging it slowly, almost leisurely, down the curve of her breast. It pops loose with just a gentle tug, and Zoe finds herself staring at Hanna's face as it lights up in a grin. She's so eager, such a source of inexhaustible joy.

After the fabric tape, Zoe's dress now hanging open before her, Hanna meets a new adversary—the boob tape Zoe had opted for tonight, lacking a bra that would flatter the plunging neckline of her dress. Hanna runs her fingernails over it lightly, the skin underneath puckering at the gentle touch. "It doesn't hurt, when you take it off?" she asks. "Is it like a Band-Aid?"

Zoe shakes her head. "Not this brand. Not if you're careful."

Hanna's eyes flutter up at Zoe. She asks, her thumb now running small circles over her breast, "Could *I—?*"

A warm wave of affection swells inside Zoe's chest. "Let me get the corners first," she says charitably. She rolls the first inch down experimentally, testing the state of the adhesive, reassured when it comes away easily. "Go slow," she instructs.

Hanna watches her progress with such rapt and close attention Zoe can feel her exhale when she giggles, her breath hot against the skin her fingers have uncovered. "I feel like I'm peeling you," she says. "Like you're the world's most beautiful banana."

Zoe groans. "You're the worst," she tells her. "I can't stand you." But then Hanna's mouth follows the path of her fingers, a bold tongue lapping at the sensitive skin she has revealed, and Zoe amends, silently, unspoken, *You have ruined me.*



The second time Hanna takes Zoe apart is a much more tender affair. Hanna lays her out on her sofa, her full weight warm above her, burying her face in Zoe's neck as if she's breathing her in. When she slips inside, it's with an infinitely gentle hand, her touch almost wistful. The breadth of her is breathtakingly familiar, Hanna's attentive ministration exactly as worshipful and brazen as Zoe remembers. Zoe sighs, feeling full to the brim, devoured, as her whole world begins to expand outward in slow, infinite waves before setting itself right again.

As Zoe bobs on the surface of an ocean of calm, every muscle in her body languid and loose, she realizes the luminous, unfamiliar feeling that has settled in her chest is *joy.* It's accompanied by an utterly unprecedented absence of regret and a simple, blinding clarity.

Hanna is on her feet already, having carefully extricated herself from Zoe's hold. She looks like a religious icon, framed by sunlight, the city skyline behind her gleaming gold in the first rays of dawn. Zoe frowns in consternation when she realizes Hanna has located her rumpled shirt, and that she's using it to cover up this breathtaking resplendence, her clever fingers cruelly slipping the buttons back into place.

Zoe pushes herself upright on the sofa, still feeling a bit floaty. Her voice comes out far too affected to properly convey her disapproval when she asks, "Are you leaving?"

Hanna turns with a small, private smile, allowing Zoe to pull her back in by the waistband of her pants. She looks down at Zoe's hands, stilling them with her own. Her blue eyes are hidden behind her lashes. "It's late," she says, before meeting Zoe's eyes with a suggestive tug of her lips. "And you were looking pretty blissed out, there."

Zoe gazes boldly back at her as she slips her fingers under Hanna's clothes, splaying them wide over Hanna's delectable abdomen. "I was thinking we could take *this,*" she says, gently scratching her nails down Hanna's skin until they hook under the elastic of her underwear, "into the bedroom."

Hanna twitches at the touch, her hips jumping once before she stiffens. She's looking at her as if she's searching for something—as if she hasn't already unearthed every secret desire Zoe tried so hard to hide.

"Oh," she says. "Um. No, thank you."

It thuds into Zoe's chest, this easy, casual rejection, hitting the very center of her newfound joy.

"I'm good," Hanna continues when Zoe fails to respond. "I don't really —" She pauses, looking a little embarrassed, a far cry from the woman who had ravished her, who had pinned her down, twisting and keening, inflicting exquisite torture on her not too long ago.

Zoe moves her hands to her lap, feeling like a reprimanded selfish child. "Hanna," she says, "you could have told me if you'd really rather I don't touch you."

Hanna's eyes grow wide and urgent. "No, it's not like that," she says. "Zoe, I loved what we did. Tonight, and before. I just don't really—do that."

Zoe regards her skeptically, one eyebrow raised. Hanna laughs at it a little, sounding relieved.

"I mean yeah, I do *this*," she says, gesturing between them. "But not—" She waves her hand down Zoe's naked body, her gaze stuttering here and there. "You know. *That.*"

Zoe carefully maintains eye contact, pausing her private downward spiral to broadcast what she hopes is the same intrigued encouragement Hanna had shown her when it had been her own heart on the butcher block. "You don't—come?" she ventures.

"I come," Hanna huffs, flustered. "Just. Not very often with other people. It's a lot of pressure, and I get into my head about it." She pauses, her eyes briefly drawn to the place between Zoe's legs, looking like she might be feeling peckish again. "I love making you feel good, though."

Zoe gives her a fond smile. "I'm very happy to hear that," she says mildly. "But I hope you know I feel the same way about you."

There's a beat, after which Hanna's eyes fly back to Zoe's, almost startling her with their sudden intensity. "You—do?" she asks cautiously, as if she doesn't quite believe her. "About . . . ?"

Zoe almost snarls. The audacity, the gall, the absolute *indignity* of Hanna assuming Zoe Zuydervelt doesn't reciprocate. She leans back on her hands and crosses her legs in an obvious tease, schooling her voice into something a tad more appropriate for the current situation. "Would you like me to tell you about the things I've imagined doing to you?" she purrs. And then, slowly running her foot up the inside of Hanna's calf, "Do you want to know how exactly I picture you, when I touch myself?"

Hanna stares at her, her lips parted and her pupils huge, in spite of the light pouring in through the floor-to-ceiling windows. But just as Zoe is sure she will finally get what she wants, Hanna steps back, blinking fast. When she meets Zoe's eyes again, her expression has shifted into a firm resolve. "It's vulnerable for me," she says. "I can't be that way with just anyone."

The bluntness of the statement almost makes Zoe gasp.

And then Hanna makes it even worse. "Not," she says, "unless it's real."

Zoe almost slides off of the sofa, almost falls at Hanna's feet. She remembers Hanna in the arena, winking at her from the floor, saying, *I didn't think you cared.*

It *is* real.

Zoe *does* care.

She doesn't move.

The words are right there. Zoe can taste the shape of them on her tongue, trace the sharp edges of their hard candy sweetness. She just—

She just needs a moment.

There is a lifetime of miserable lessons in the marrow of Zoe Zuydervelt's bones. Caution and detachment form the very foundation of the person she has taught herself to be. A harsh punishment has followed each unguarded moment, every attempt to let someone in—be it due to Zoe's family or because of her own shortcomings, or simply by fate's even-handed intervention.

Zoe just needs a minute to, like, grind all of that down.

On an utterly imbecilic impulse, Zoe's eyes flit to the clock on her oven. She wonders if her therapist is in yet, if he would be available for a quick impromptu session.

Hanna follows her eyeline.

6:47 a.m.

"Anyway," Hanna says. "I should let you get on with your day." She smiles, but it's a little halting, a little uneven. "I hear saving the world is early work."

She's still calling her a hero. Zoe Zuydervelt: bearer of Buffalo wings, high-powered humanitarian, and, at present, an absolute coward.

It would be unforgivable, to keep pretending it doesn't matter.

"Hey," Zoe says, at long last, her heart leaping, like Hanna, who's already halfway out the door. "I really—" she stops, reconsiders. "Tonight was—"

It's us, Zoe remembers. *You and me, we can do this.*

"I know." Hanna throws her a last glance, a final full-strength sunny smile. "It was," she says, before she gently closes the door behind her. And then she's gone.

Fuck, Zoe thinks. *This is it, soldier.*

She takes a breath.

Ready?

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PART THREE

Colorado

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THIRTY-SEVEN

IT TURNS OUT HANNA Kaplan can be surprisingly slippery when she tries.

Zoe Zuydervelt wishes she had her talent. It would be immensely helpful in her current endeavor to dislodge the unnamed toddler who has wrapped himself around her leg, screaming at the top of his lungs about something called a “nummy”. His mother stormed off to the airport restrooms a while ago, and his father looks on from his place in line at the car rental counter, sporting a manly pout and a complete absence of desire to intervene. Zoe wonders if the agent behind the desk could be persuaded to lend her his clipboard, so she can sort of very subtly scrape the child off.

She can’t say Hanna has been avoiding her. She hasn’t, not really. Their text chain is as active as ever, and they’ve talked, over the phone. But Hanna has developed an eerie ability to wrap up their chats right before Zoe can delve into more serious topics, like the night they spent together, and the feelings Zoe’s been having about it. Last Sunday marked the third time Hanna canceled their plans for lunch, blaming it all on last-minute wedding prep.

And, okay. Zoe gets it. Or—she tries to. Preparing for your sister’s wedding is probably a lot of work, right? *A lot of, whatever, emotional labor and stuff.* Honestly, Zoe has no idea what all is involved. She’s grateful Alma had been fully aware of this fact when she made Zoe her best man.

Zoe has been given all of the honor and almost none of the responsibilities the role usually demands. Only her presence is required. Which might actually be big enough of an ask in itself, considering the brides' inexpedient decision to have a destination wedding in the middle of the Colorado mountains right as ski season is ramping up.

So Zoe is here, for the second time in as many winters, trapped in an overcrowded airport looking at display screens that show mostly canceled flights, trying to arrange alternative transportation to the very same town she was held captive in last year.

The frazzled car rental agent looks up at her with eyes too tired to convey the full extent of his despair. "I can give you a minivan," he says.

Zoe blinks at him. She wonders if it's the exact same vehicle she rented last year. She wonders if someone has bothered to clean it since then. If Nietzsche's demon was right, and the rest of this weekend is going to unfold precisely like the one she spent here last December, *every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh,* Zoe isn't sure whether to gnash her teeth or thank him for this blessing.

"Last car on the lot," the agent urges at Zoe's hesitation. The toddler's father gives Zoe a look of alarmed desperation. *Now* he sees her.

Zoe ignores him and takes the clipboard she's offered, clicking her pen. "Lucky me."

And then a familiar voice pipes up from just behind her. "I can give you a ride."

It's Hanna. Hanna is *here,* in all of her bright-eyed, blonde-haired, broad-shouldered glory, wearing snow boots and jeans and a faux-fur-lined parka. Zoe loses her breath for a moment, dizzy with it. She doesn't think she'll ever get used to being on the other end of that relentlessly fascinated gaze, the way Hanna lights up like a Christmas tree each time she sees her. Zoe wants to throw her arms around her and breathe her in, bury her face in that preposterous hair of hers. The compulsion is so strong her whole body hurts from not having done it yet.

But Zoe is a little bit—anchored to the ground, at the moment.

Hanna's eyes track down Zoe's leg to the hollering toddler still attached to it. "Cute," she says, and with a wink, "Yours?"

Zoe rolls her eyes at her, fondness blooming in her chest. "You know he's not."

Hanna attempts a friendly wave at the boy's parents, who have immediately resumed arguing upon the mother's return. When they ignore her, Hanna sinks down to a crouch beside the child. "Hey, bud," she says gently. The boy seems so shocked to be directly addressed he promptly stops wailing. "I'm Hanna, and this is my friend Zoe. Do you want to tell us your name?"

The child's grip doesn't falter. "Wuh— Waldo," he hiccups, tragically.

Hanna looks thrilled at the revelation. "That's such an awesome name!" she says. Zoe fears she's serious. "How old are you, Waldo?" She sends a secret smile up at Zoe, then holds up a closed hand to him. "Can you show me?"

Impossibly, the strangling hold he has on Zoe's leg only grows tighter. He hesitates, pouting at Hanna. "Three."

"Three!" Hanna's smile is dazzling. "What is that," she tries again, "this much?" She holds up two fingers for him and the child—Waldo, poor creature—removes one arm from Zoe's leg to grab Hanna's fist, instead. Hanna mirrors his gasp with exaggerated surprise when the finger he peels back in an effort to correct her comes up to reveal a shiny toy car.

"For me?" Waldo asks, his gray eyes large and pleading and still shiny with unshed tears.

Hanna smiles at him, kind and genuine. "Tell you what," she says. "If your parents say it's okay, we can trade." She pats Zoe's thigh with a warm palm and leaves it there, just over where Waldo is squeezing it. Zoe wants her to keep it there forever. "You can have the car," Hanna tells the boy, "if I can have Zoe's leg."

Hanna shrugs at the look of perplexed gratitude Zoe gives her when the child releases her at last, running back to his parents to show them his prize. "Car rental agent let me borrow it," she explains, nodding over her shoulder at a petite brunette blushing at her from behind the other counter. She winces. "I don't think I was supposed to give it away, but—"

Zoe looks at Hanna as she pulls herself and her heavy duffel bag up to face Zoe fully and thinks *Thank you.* Instead she blurts out, "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be at the rehearsal dinner tonight?"

"Got held up in LA," Hanna says. "Jude is ready to kill me."

"That makes two of us," Zoe sighs. "Linh flew in this morning, but I had —" she waves her hand dismissively. "Stuff to sort out, at work."

"Cool!" Hanna grins. "Maybe we can share a burial plot."



The weather isn’t all that bad. The drive should only take them a couple of hours, and Hanna easily talks through the first half of it, when she isn’t scarfing down pastries like a starving man. “So do you still object to any and all expressions of holiday festivity,” had been her first words when they pulled out of the parking lot, “or can I get us some jelly donuts?”

She’s taken off her parka, her hair spilling out in soft waves over her shoulders as she drives, and it’s taking every ounce of Zoe’s carefully cultivated self-reproach to not lose herself in the movement of the muscles in Hanna’s forearms. She looks loose and happy, chatting excitedly about her sister’s big day, her knuckles dusted with a fine layer of powdered sugar, and it suddenly feels profoundly selfish for Zoe to wedge herself in there, to make the moment about how she feels, what she wants.

Zoe maintains deliberate eye contact with the bullfrog bobblehead attached to their dashboard and does not think about the dreams she’s been having, the ones that leave her wide awake and aching.

“My American dad was actually named Jeremiah,” Hanna says with a grin, following Zoe’s eyeline.

Zoe blinks between Hanna and the bullfrog, trying desperately to understand Hanna’s non-sequitur. “He was?”

Hanna’s energy dims a little. “Jude will be missing him tomorrow.”

Zoe runs figurative fingers along the outlines of old scars inside her chest. There’s a dull ache there when she remembers Richard, who was her father, and never told her, and now is dead. He will never again clink his glass to hers in the privacy of his office, never celebrate another one of life’s milestones with her. Zoe nods along with the bullfrog for a moment, before asking, “And you?”

Hanna shrugs. “I never actually—got to know him very well?” she says. “He checked out a year and a half after the Kaplans took me in. He has a new family now and everything. Hurt Jude pretty badly.”

The ache in Zoe’s chest flares a little brighter. She tries to imagine Hanna—even younger than Sofia is now—just beginning to rebuild after losing her entire universe twice over, only to be abandoned all over again. “I’m so sorry,” she offers, rattled by the realization Hanna’s life hasn’t been any

easier than her own, despite the breezy way she speaks about it. “That must have been hard. For all of you.”

“Oh, Perla is a rock,” Hanna assures her. “I think you’ll really like her, actually. Alma reminds me of her a lot.” She adds, after a beat, “Maybe don’t tell Jude I told you that.”

“I can see how they’d have a couple of things in common,” Zoe considers. “Being able to somehow navigate all that loss, while still managing to raise such amazing women.”

“We *are* pretty terrific, aren’t we?” Hanna winks.

But Zoe’s mind has snagged on how the similarities between Hanna’s old wounds and her own only emphasize the difference in how well they’ve managed to heal from them. She frowns down at her fingers. “We’ve been there, you know, with Sofia,” she says. “When Alma first got sick. She just—Alma was so honest with her, so practical. I was a wreck. I just couldn’t explain to Sofia why, if she did nothing wrong, this terrible thing was happening to her.”

Hanna gives Zoe a tender look that manages somehow to both brace Zoe and capsize her entirely. “Bad things happen to good people too,” she says gently. “Perla taught me that. And the trick isn’t trying to figure out why. She said the question we should be asking is, ‘what do I do now?’”

Zoe tries to imagine it—that care, that love, how dedicated Perla must have been, to support Hanna while also dealing with her own grief. “She sounds like nothing short of a miracle,” she says at long last.

“She’s a blessing,” Hanna agrees. “I wouldn’t be who I am now if she hadn’t been in my life.” She returns her attention to the road ahead. “Some of us thrive thanks to the people who raised us,” she says, and then, in that perfectly casual way Zoe will never grow accustomed to, “and some of us become our best selves in direct defiance of them.”

Zoe swallows around the sudden tightness in her throat. *Her best self.* It’s almost unbearable, how earnest Hanna is, how brave. “You give me too much credit.”

A tiny worried crease appears between Hanna’s brows. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bring us down. Hey, do you want to choose our next playlist?”

“You didn’t bring us down,” Zoe says. “You couldn’t.”

It’s never or it’s now.

Zoe straightens on a fortifying breath. “There’s—something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.”

“Wait!” Hanna yelps. There’s a beat, during which Zoe stares at her, bewildered, mute, and then Hanna says, looking panicked, “I love this song. Don’t you just love this song?” She turns up the volume, already singing along with the intro, already bouncing in her seat, thumping her fingers against the wheel. “Come on,” she coaxes, “you know this one.”

It’s Fleetwood Mac’s “Everywhere,” so Zoe obviously does, but also, “For goodness sake, Hanna, I’m trying to have a conversation with you.”

Hanna stops her unintentional serenade abruptly when she finally hears the words she’s singing, her mouth snapping shut at the tail end of a surprisingly beautiful belted note. Her ears turn pink.

Zoe can’t help it, taking in Hanna’s uncharacteristically petrified little face, the complete absurdity of their situation. She snorts, that heinously uninhibited sound only Hanna ever seems able to draw out of her. Something other than laughter—but adjacent to it—is rising in her chest. Something that tastes like courage, tastes like—

“Hanna,” she says. “Please stop the car.”

Hanna bites the inside of her cheek, her eyes fixed on the road. “But we’re only half an hour away,” she says. “If we keep going, we might still make it in time for dessert.”

Zoe almost feels bad for denying her that. She reaches over, running careful fingers over Hanna’s jean-clad thigh in an effort to at least slightly sweeten the deal. “There’s something I have to tell you,” she says, her voice as soft as her heart, “and I don’t want you driving us off the road in an attempt to keep me from saying it.”

Hanna seems to deflate, her cheeks flushing like a perfect peach. She takes a breath, checks the time, their gas meter, the rear view mirror, and then—finally—she pulls over.

And then she blurts, “My novel is getting published.”

The radio plays on in the background, filling the car with the simple truth still unspoken between them, while Zoe struggles to catch up to Hanna’s conversational curveball. She says, very kind and extremely understanding, “What the fuck, Hanna?”

“Yeah,” Hanna says. “I have an agent and a contract and everything.” She keeps looking at her, her expression caught somewhere between caution and

awe, as if she's afraid Zoe won't believe her, as if she can't quite believe it herself. "I'm sorry—"

Zoe wants to shake her, she's so proud. "You're sorry?" she asks, laughing again. "You're getting published! Oh, my god. That's—" And then she stills, wondering. "How long have you known?"

Hanna looks a little guilty. "They signed me the week after the party," she says. "I wanted to tell you. I wanted to, right away."

Zoe tries not to feel wounded. "You dodged every opportunity we had to talk."

Hanna nods, twisting her fingers in her lap. "I know. I wanted—" she grimaces at herself. "It's dumb when I say it out loud."

Whatever it is, Zoe thinks, it can't be worse than what is about to come out of her own mouth. Maybe she'll take a page out of Hanna's book, and just start singing along with Christine McVie.

"I know what you're about to tell me," Hanna says. "I just didn't want you to say it yet."

Zoe is almost indignant. "That can't possibly be true," she says. "I've barely figured out how to say it, myself."

There's a thread of defiance in Hanna's voice when she says, "I wanted to see your face when I told you about the offer. I wanted you to look at me—the way you look at me when it's just the two of us. But I didn't want to do it before . . ." She huffs, frustrated.

Zoe feels like her chest will burst wide open if Hanna says so much as another word. *Darling,* she thinks, but it comes out sounding a little bit more like, "You're right. That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

Hanna flashes her a deeply disgruntled look. "Dimples," she says, as if she's calling out an illegal move in a game of chess.

Zoe blinks. "What—"

"You get them," Hanna waves her fingers at her own face, furrowing her brow. "When you smile. When you seem, I don't know. Genuinely happy? And sometimes it feels like—" There's a heavy pause. Hanna is flushed a deep red now. She swallows, looking uncharacteristically nervous. "Sometimes when you look at me, I feel like—"

"You make me happy."

It takes Zoe a second to catch up to the fact that she's actually said it.

Fucking finally.

Hanna blinks back at her, her eyes flitting between Zoe's own, shiny with sudden tears. Zoe feels like there's still something she's missing, still something she doesn't understand. She wants to crawl into Hanna's chest, and squeeze her whole body around her big, beautiful heart.

"Yeah." Hanna breathes it out. "It feels like that. And I know it's not—I could see what you were thinking, that morning after the party, before I left your place. That you knew it wasn't going to work for you that way. And I mean, I get it, right? Why would you want a friends-with-benefits situation with someone who won't even let you—return the favor, or whatever?"

And, oh, *no*.

Oh god.

Zoe Zuydervelt really *is* a bad person.

Zoe's head spins with the reality of exactly how thoroughly she's turned Hanna around, how confused she's allowed her to become. "I'm so sorry," she says, squeezing Hanna's thigh, bringing her other hand over for good measure, "But that's not at all—"

Hanna closes her eyes, shaking her head decisively, balling her hands into fists. "No," she says, "I'm the one who should be apologizing. I was stalling you on purpose. I thought maybe if I could stop you from ending this . . . whatever you want to call what's been happening between us, then at least this weekend I could still have you." She falters, taking in a quick breath, her bottom lip trembling. "Even if you don't—even if I don't get to keep you."

The feeling rises inside Zoe again, even stronger this time, unstoppable as a wave, or an avalanche. "Darling," she says, almost lightheaded with the relief of finally letting it spill out, "you *make me happy."* She grabs Hanna's fists, pulls them into her belly, anything to have her closer. "It's all you. It's been you from the start. You've been so kind, and *so* patient, all this time, and I—I haven't been fair to you at all."

Hanna is just looking at her, uncomprehending, tearful, her fingers now clutching Zoe's own.

"I've been acting like an idiot," Zoe admits, angry at herself. "I've been so focused on the ways I've been hurt before that I treated you like a liability instead of the extraordinary person you are. I hurt you, and told myself I was protecting us both. I was wrong, and I'm so terribly, terribly sorry."

Hanna's eyebrows tick up. She shakes her head, almost imperceptibly, as if she can't decide whether to argue with her or ask for clarification. "So, that first weekend," she says, "at Alma's cabin—"

Zoe is crying now, too. "God," she says, bringing Hanna's hands to her face, pressing her lips to her sugar-dusted knuckles. "I wanted you, so much. I want all of you, if you'll still have me."

"Zoe." One of Hanna's hands twitches out of her hold, but instead of moving it away, like Zoe fears, she uses the pad of her thumb to trace the outline of Zoe's bottom lip. The gentleness of it makes Zoe shiver. "How could I not?"

Zoe can feel her last defenses failing, bringing down the already fractured walls around her heart. She allows herself to be buoyed by the kindness in Hanna's expression, the soft creases around her eyes and mouth, that familiar, solitary freckle at the corner of her lip. Zoe is bolstered by the certainty she finds there, that seemingly boundless grace. "I don't think," she confesses, "that I've ever wanted anyone the way that I want you."

Hanna is quiet for a moment. And then she rasps, "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"I was scared," Zoe concedes, surprised by how easy it is to say it, after hiding it all this time. "I don't think I've ever met anyone like you before. But there have been people that made me *feel* the way you do. And there's always been a point where trusting them ended up nearly costing me everything I had. And Alma, her family—they're the one thing I've managed by some miracle not to mess up. I couldn't imagine jeopardizing that, just because I'm—"

Yours.

"—so inexorably drawn to you."

Hanna's eyebrow crease is back in full force. "I don't know what that means."

Zoe giggles wetly, pressing a kiss into Hanna's palm. "You're an English teacher."

"Soon-to-be published writer, actually." Hanna winks, still tear-streaked but looking sturdier by the moment. "But why would us being together jeopardize your bond with Alma? Alma loves me. And she seems pretty fond of you as well."

"Okay, so," Zoe says, "please know I am in therapy, and I'm not using this as an excuse for the way I've behaved towards you. But even if it

wasn’t anyone’s fault, even if things between us simply didn’t work out, and one of us got hurt, or felt resentful—”

“Then we’ll deal with it, like the intelligent, well-adjusted adults we are.” Hanna’s smile is so patient and generous that Zoe barely believes it’s meant for her. Hanna strokes her cheek before adding, “Also, I know this is a crazy thought, but hear me out: maybe we *don’t* start out expecting the worst?”

Zoe lets out another laugh, giddy with the relief of it. “You can’t say I didn’t warn you,” she says. “I told you relationships aren’t my forte.”

“Maybe you just need practice,” Hanna quips. “You didn’t seem all that capable of handling yourself in a laser tag arena at first, either.”

“Would you mind if—” Zoe pauses, checking herself. “I don’t want you to think I intend to date you in secret,” she stresses, “or that I’m keeping my exits clear. But do you think we can keep it between us until after the wedding? You know Alma can get a little . . . dramatic, about these things.”

Hanna’s smile is easy, her posture loose. “You’re right,” she says. “This weekend should be about her and Jude. No distractions. We can take things slow, right? One step at a time?”

Zoe is in her lap a heartbeat later, not entirely sure how she made it there, and she’s kissing her, deep and messy and laughing again, their mixed tears salty on their lips.

When Hanna finally pulls back onto the road, a song or two later, she places a warm hand just above Zoe’s knee and squeezes. “I did bargain Waldo for it,” she winks. “So it’s technically mine.”

And it is, Zoe thinks. All of it.

Hers.

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THIRTY-EIGHT

EVENING IS INCHING INTO night by the time they reach the resort. Zoe is deeply relieved to discover no aerial tram ride is required to get them there. The main building lights up against the star-speckled sky like a beacon of warmth. Zoe understands instantly why Jude and Alma chose this venue; it looks like an oversized version of their chalet, exposed wooden beams and gigantic windows and a modern-yet-welcoming vibe.

The lobby is hot when they enter, a fire crackling in the hearth just past the front desk. Linh is waiting for them there. “You missed dinner,” she informs them. “Also, did you happen to bring a gun? Ms. Valdes’s mother needs to be shot.”

Zoe blinks at her. “Victoria?” she asks warily. “I know she can get a little . . .”

Linh holds up a hand and counts on her fingers, “Delusional? Entitled? Self-obsessed? That woman is completely detached from reality.” She waves them toward the restaurant. “Leave your luggage. We’ll have to get all of that sorted later.”

The restaurant is empty save for a couple of after-dinner stragglers, and the lights have been dimmed, but it’s clearly ready for a fairytale winter wedding. Zoe takes it all in, a little surprised. “The place looks—”

“Like a Pinterest explosion, I know. Wait until you see the flowers.” Linh rolls her eyes mildly before leading them out to the terrace, where a couple

of comfortable-looking daybeds curve around a blazing fire pit. They're covered in pillows and quilts in the colors Zoe recognizes from the wedding invitation, navy and burgundy, with subtle accents of white and gold. An ocean of fairy lights surrounds them.

"I thought Alma said they were keeping it small," Zoe says, tugging a quilt over her shoulders before joining Linh by the fire. Hanna skips the daybeds, wandering over to the edge of the terrace to admire the moonlit view of the mountains beyond.

Linh looks up at Zoe, propping her feet up on the broad stone rim of the fire pit. "Consider what 'keeping it small' might mean to one of LA's wealthiest women who is also madly in love."

Zoe blushes. She can't help it, with the way Linh's words hit right at the heart of her, the way her assistant may as well have just described Zoe herself. Zoe's eyes lift to find Hanna, still standing across the deck, and she startles when their gazes lock. Hanna's expression turns questioning, and then warm, and then molten. Her lips twitch, fingers twisting around the railing behind her. Zoe breaks into a light sweat at the sight of them, remembering exactly what those hands are capable of. She returns Hanna's smile, something inside her feeling like it's unfurling, a muscle stretching after a long period of disuse.

"Oh my god," Linh says. "Holy shit."

Zoe jumps at the sound, tearing her eyes away from Hanna, but it's too late. Linh is half out of her seat, her delighted gaze bouncing back and forth between Hanna and Zoe like she's following a tennis match. "Did you two finally—"

"*Fuck,*" Jude's voice sounds from behind them, hushed with breathless awe. "Zuydervelt, I knew I could count on you to bring the good stuff." Her eyes are intent on the label of one of the bottles of Yamazaki Zoe left at the front desk.

Zoe gives her assistant a warning look. Linh smirks at her for a moment but keeps her mouth shut, nimbly excusing herself to find them some tumblers.

"Your timing is perfect," Jude announces, already deftly unwinding the tin foil covering the stopper. "You're too late to have to suffer through dinner with Mexico's most beloved daytime TV villain Vicki Valdes, and just in time for happy hour."

Zoe forces herself to stop looking at Hanna, taking a moment to bask in the heat rolling off the fire. Jude hugs her sister and then tugs her down onto a daybed, covering their legs with a quilt. Hanna leans into her, looking handsome and softer than Zoe remembers ever seeing her before. Both sisters gleam in the firelight, their red and golden hair aflame.

Zoe smiles at the tableau. “The place looks beautiful, Jude.”

Jude makes an airy, self-deprecating sound. “Well, you know,” she says. “You say you’re not going traditional and the next thing you know you’re trying on white dresses, and fussing over centerpieces, and your sister is hand-painting your ketubah.”

Zoe’s eyes fly over to Hanna’s, surprised. “You paint?”

Hanna squirms a little, awkward, and Zoe can’t tell if it’s modesty or genuine embarrassment that colors her cheeks. “Yeah,” she says. “I do, a little.” She hides behind her lashes, but Zoe catches a peeved look from Jude.

“‘A little,’” Jude mocks. “It’s a masterpiece. I’m not kidding about you selling them, like, professionally. You would make a killing.”

Linh returns with a handful of tumblers. “Maybe Hanna should have charged you for yours.”

Hanna purses her lips at her sister, looking cheeky. “Is it too late now?”

Jude pours the whisky. “That depends,” she says. “Did you intend to pay me back for that expensive suit you’re wearing tomorrow?”

Zoe is looking forward to seeing Hanna in said suit, but she also feels a little guilty. “I didn’t know you were an artist,” she says. “You never mentioned it.”

Hanna blinks back up at her, her gaze like a physical touch, like careful fingertips plucking at resonant strings inside Zoe’s chest. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me yet,” she promises, and then she adds, casually, taking her eyes away before the moment lingers between them too long again, “Jude also tried to make me ghost-write her wedding vows.”

Jude snaps to wide-eyed fury like a switch has been flipped, shushing her sister frantically, looking around to see who else may have overheard. “That was supposed to be between you and me.”

“Maybe if you’d paid me.” Hanna winks.

Jude settles back into the pillows, still a little ruffled. She grumbles, “All I asked for was some minor editing.”

Hanna gives her a hard look. “You can’t edit an empty page.”

Jude sighs. “Don’t tell Alma.”

“*Her* vows are a tearjerker, by the way,” Hanna informs her. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“She can jerk all she wants,” Jude quips. “I don’t cry.”

Hanna snorts. “Uh, not true. You cried through the entire series finale of *The Good Place.”*

“Okay,” Jude allows with a dramatic roll of her eyes, “I cried at a piece of extremely well-crafted media one time.”

“Right but it was, like, embarrassingly hard.”

“That’s what she said.” Alma has sauntered out through the patio doors. She looks good, happy, healthy, but also like she could use a quick little four-hundred-year-long nap. “Hello people who are late,” she says, pressing a kiss to the top of Hanna’s head before depositing herself into Zoe’s lap. “Does anyone happen to know what the cutoff age is for getting yourself emancipated from a parent?”

“Pretty sure you’re there,” Zoe says. “Misplaced loyalties notwithstanding.”

Alma gives her a dark look. “Look who’s talking.”

Another lanky, dark-haired figure appears in the doorway. It’s Sofia, looking ten feet taller than she did the last time Zoe saw her. She’s in her pajamas, a thick down coat and new winter boots pulled on over them. She’s also wearing a knitted reindeer hat.

“Mija,” Alma says, “what are you doing up? We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“Lo sé,” Sofia says, matter-of-fact. “That’s why I need to talk to Hanna and Aunt Zoe. *Alone.”* She eyes her mother meaningfully, some sort of serious, silent exchange transpiring between them.

Alma nods. “Go. Be quick about it.”

They follow her to the chairs set up by the fireplace in the lobby, where Sofia directs the two of them into a loveseat before sinking down in the armchair across from it. It occurs to Zoe how much Sofia resembles her mother, in the moment; all business and professionalism when she wants to be. In spite of the outfit she’s wearing.

Hanna seems to pick up on the gravity of the moment as well. She clears her throat. “You know, Sof,” she says, “Starting tomorrow, you’ll be required by law to call me your aunt, too.”

Sofia looks dubious. “Maybe. That’s kind of what brings us here.” She lets her gaze drift from Hanna to Zoe as she continues, “Considering you’ll be becoming my aunt, and *you* already *are,* I want to ask you both for your blessing.”

“You’ve got it,” Hanna says easily. “But also, what for?”

Sofia takes a breath, and then announces, “Tomorrow, after the ceremony, I want to give Jude the papers she would need to sign to officially adopt me.”

The volume of Hanna’s overjoyed response almost throws Zoe from their seat. Hanna bridges the distance between herself and Sofia in a single leap, scooping her up in a tight hug.

But Zoe freezes. Over Hanna’s shoulder, Sofia’s eyes have gone wide with alarm. Zoe asks, “Why is the hair on the back of my neck standing up?”

She turns.

Jude is standing in the doorway to the restaurant, mimicking Sofia’s expression, holding her breath.

“Shit,” Sofia says.

“Language,” Jude whispers, moving only her lips to do so, and even those just barely.

Hanna lowers Sofia carefully back to the ground.

“Amá!” Sofia says sternly when she has landed, loud enough to wake the dead.

Alma appears in the doorway next to Jude not a nanosecond later. “What’s going on?”

Sofia pulls her hat off of her head and shoves it in the general direction of Hanna’s hands. Her jaw is set with the same cool determination Zoe has witnessed in Alma’s more formidable boardroom moments. *She’s almost fourteen,* Zoe realizes. *How do these things happen so fast?*

“Judith—*almost* Valdes,” Sofia revises smoothly, “would you do me the honor of officially becoming my mom?”

Jude’s entire body jerks with what appears to be an enormous effort to not start sobbing. She holds it together, staring at Sofia like the girl is made of miracles before rolling tearful eyes up at Alma. “I can’t believe this is the second time your daughter has proposed to me,” she croaks, “and you haven’t even done it once.”

Alma gives her a glittering smile. “*Our* daughter,” she says.

And then Jude genuinely begins to bawl.



They regroup around the fire outside, after Alma and Jude finally return Sofia to her bed. They talk, and drink, and smoke, though Alma is sober tonight—not trusting herself not to overdo it with her mother in such close proximity—and only she and Zoe indulge in the occasional puff from the Habanos Alma passes around to honor the occasion. Linh explains smoking makes her nauseous, and Jude turns down both the one she is offered herself and the one Hanna is about to accept with a very decisive, very motherly hand.

"I can't believe this is my last night as a single woman," Alma says from where she's draped over Jude's lap. "I'm never going to fuck, like, *anyone* else, ever again."

Jude gently knocks her glass into Alma's head, her eyes still glossy and faintly red. "You haven't been single for years, you doof."

"Sure," Alma says. "But by this time tomorrow, I'll be off the market for good." She stretches out one of her unreasonably long legs to dig a sharp toe into Zoe's hip. "Kind of expected you to fight for me a little harder there, chaparrita."

Zoe is barely paying attention, captivated by the way Hanna can't seem to stop looking at her each time Zoe brings the cigar to her lips. Hanna is seated right across from her, staring, cheeks pink, as Zoe releases delicate tendrils of blue smoke into the chilly evening air.

"No thanks," Zoe says on the exhale. "You're too high-maintenance. Jude can have you." She puts her cigar down, careful not to knock off the ash, and adds, "I think I need someone who's made of stronger stuff. You took one look at my issues and fled."

Hanna is looking a little loopy at this point. She's not blinking, fixated solely on the movement of Zoe's hand, unresponsive even when Zoe says her name. It takes her sister's pointed elbow to bring her back to planet earth.

"I wasn't!" Hanna blurts, apropos of nothing.

Zoe looks at her, quirking an eyebrow, and slowly strokes a fingertip along the length of her cigar. "Do you want to try?" she asks, her voice dipping dangerously close to temptation.

The moment turns heady quick. Too much so, perhaps, considering their present company. But Zoe's defenses are down, and she's not in a hurry to bring them back up, not with the way Hanna is looking at her right now. She's all dark wide-eyed hunger, and Zoe can picture it perfectly: Hanna kneeling down in front of her, blinking up, as Zoe brings the lipstick-marked side of her cigar to Hanna's waiting lips.

But Alma, happily oblivious, looking half-drunk from the feeling of Jude's fingers in her hair, interferes. She reaches back over her shoulder and says, "Here."

Hanna glances down at Alma's cigar as if she doesn't understand what Alma is offering. But then it's between her fingers, and Jude is warning her sister urgently not to inhale, and Hanna explodes into a coughing fit anyway. Zoe is made to watch as the whole thing turns into a slapstick comedy instead of the seduction she'd imagined.

Linh's nose is twitching, her dark eyes flitting sharply between Alma and Zoe. "I'm sorry," she says, "but the image of you and Alma as lovers—"

Zoe sputters. "Well stop picturing it, god."

"We work way better as friends," Alma tells her warmly.

"That's true," Zoe agrees. "You were an awful lover."

Alma squawks. "Fraud and defamation."

Zoe takes one final draw before setting the cigar aside, content to let the rest of it burn away. "No, I'm serious," she says. "You should be concerned, Hanna. Your sister really is getting a shitty deal."

Alma is still grumbling in Jude's lap. "Slander," she says. "Outrageous lies."

"Speaking of shitty deals," Jude sighs. "Thanks to Alma's mother, we're short a room."

"Ugh," Alma spits. "'Why put me en la cabaña, Alma?'" she mimics, the pitch of her voice dipping and rising in an uncanny approximation of her mother's theatrical delivery. "'If you didn't want me at your wedding, you should have saved us both the trouble and just left me at home.'"

"Which we'll admit was *kind* of the idea?" Jude points out. "But still, c'mon. It's like, a ten-minute drive."

Zoe's mind provides her with a quick but powerful reminder of the dreams she has been trying so very hard to forget. Her subconscious has been busy conjuring new ways of wanting Hanna—her hand between Zoe's shoulder blades as she rocks into her from behind, whispering depravities;

Zoe beneath her, urging Hanna up her body so she can guide her down onto her mouth.

Alma's "cabaña" had featured prominently in most of these fantasies.

Zoe blurts out, "Well, if Victoria doesn't want to stay there—"

Hanna understands the implications, but it takes her a moment, which means her eager "We can share!" lags a couple of moments behind Linh protesting, "I am not staying in a *cabin* if the resort is an option."

"That works out, then," Jude decides, relieved, already rising and pulling Alma up from the daybed. "Hanna and Linh can take the two-bedroom suite, and Alma will drive Zoe to the house."

"Oh, no," Zoe tries.

But Alma, her best friend and most stalwart, most clueless tormenter, swiftly intercepts her protests. "You've all been drinking," she points out. "It's no trouble."

Hanna stares after them, pouting, making confused-yet-urgent eye contact as Alma whisks Zoe away. Zoe sends her significant looks in return, feeling stupid and flustered, unsure how to fix the situation without outing them to all of their friends.

Linh rolls her eyes at both of them, looking like she's profoundly over it all.

"Thank you for this," Jude tells Zoe as she drops her bags into the trunk. "We had the cleaners come in this week, the master bedroom is all made up for you. The ensuite has a 72″ bath. You will love it."

Zoe just keeps nodding, feeling like the bullfrog on the dashboard of Hanna's car.

Bobblehead Zoe Zuydervelt.

Maybe Austra Biogenics should market them.

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THIRTY-NINE

ZOE DOESN'T UNDERSTAND WHY her texts to Hanna keep refusing to go through when she had zero trouble ordering DoorDash.

She's in the chalet's kitchen, setting up, her hair still wet from her bath. The formerly undisclosed floor heating in the living room is working with the fire in the hearth to bring the temperature up to a cozy seventy-eight degrees. Zoe is luxuriating in it, wearing only an oversized cable-knit sweater and a thick pair of socks.

There's a knock on the door, and there's Hanna. She's holding her bag in one hand, and her Waterpik in the other.

She huffs. "Your assistant is a menace."

Zoe basks in it for a moment. The pleasure of seeing Hanna here, alone, in the place where it all started, is something akin to pure relief. "I thought you'd be my food delivery," she says.

Hanna perks up immediately. "You ordered takeout?"

Zoe hums as she steps aside. "Something like that."

Hanna closes the door behind her and sets her luggage down. Her eyes flicker between Zoe's state of undress, her bare face, the water droplets still clinging to the ends of her hair. Hanna sucks her bottom lip between her teeth, seemingly unaware that she's doing it.

"I took advantage of that bath," Zoe explains. "Don't judge. It took you seven and a half years to get here."

Hanna is looking hungrier by the minute. “I don’t mean to intrude,” she says, looking back at her duffel bag. “Or assume I could just—” She sighs. “I never get reception here,” she says. She holds up her phone. “I tried to ask.”

Zoe pushes herself up against Hanna’s body, lifting up on the balls of her feet to make up for their height difference. Hanna smells like the chilly winter air, a hint of wood smoke still clinging to her hair. Zoe curls her fingers around the back of her neck and says, “Darling. I was hoping you’d come.”

Hanna’s nose brushes softly against Zoe’s as she runs her thumbs along the bottom hem of Zoe’s sweater.

And then there’s another knock on the door.

Hanna manages to look both thrilled and disappointed at the contents of the bags. “These are groceries,” she observes. “Also, did you just give that guy a five-hundred-dollar tip?”

“You have a good eye,” Zoe teases. “I can’t believe I never figured out you were an artist as well as a wordsmith.”

“There aren’t any vegetables in here.” Hanna looks elated at this discovery. “What are you making?”

They’ve drifted back into each other’s space. “I felt bad about you missing dessert,” Zoe tells Hanna’s mouth.

“And when you say dessert,” Hanna says, her tongue licking out at her bottom lip.

“I mean the kind you eat.” At Hanna’s dark look, Zoe clarifies, “With a spoon.” She twists out of Hanna’s tentative grasp, raising an eyebrow at her answering pout. “Do you still remember how to separate an egg?”

Hanna slides her hands into her back pockets as if she’s trying to keep herself from reaching for Zoe again. “And, so, would that be the only thing on the menu, tonight?” she asks. “Or . . .”

“We’ll see,” Zoe hums, her cheeks warming a little at Hanna’s intensity. “One step at a time, right?”

The corners of Hanna’s mouth curve up, sharp. “We’d better get to work, then.” Her eyes are still drifting, lingering at the hem of Zoe’s sweater.

Zoe smirks at her. “Are you going to ask me to put on clothes again?”

Hanna scoffs at the suggestion. “Not a chance.”



They make two-hour tiramisu, because it's almost midnight and Zoe isn't that imaginative, and she hadn't been able to stop thinking about licking cream off of Hanna's fingers the entire time she was sitting in Alma's car.

Hanna is distracted, too. And not just by the proximity of the savoiardi cookies she isn't allowed to eat, or the old fashioned Zoe gives her, or her view of Zoe's legs. She's moved her bag to a chair by the kitchen table, and she keeps looking over at it as if she's afraid it will try to escape.

They play cards while their dessert is setting in the fridge. Hanna wins three hands in a row—*fortuna favet fatuis*, as Xander used to sneer—and says, the cocky rumble in her voice sending a rush of goosebumps down Zoe's back, "If I had known my luck was going to be this good, I would have suggested we make things a little more interesting."

Zoe stops shuffling, lifting an eyebrow in response. "I'm not taking any more of my clothes off," she bluffs.

Hanna's eyes flit to her duffel bag again. And then she suggests, "Maybe we can trade secrets, instead."

"Sure." Zoe considers it for a brief moment, setting the cards aside. "I sleep with an occlusal splint."

Hanna just stares at her, vaguely startled and comically confused.

"You know, a night guard?" Zoe bares her teeth and waves a pinkie finger at them. "Dentist was worried I'd grind these down to nubs."

Hanna blanches. "What?"

"What, 'What?'" Zoe winks, grinning. "We're exchanging secrets, right?"

"Right." Hanna blinks. "Yes."

Zoe leans forward on her elbows and crosses her arms, feeling gratified when Hanna tracks the movement up to the wide cowl neck of her sweater, the way it gaps in front to reveal the skin beneath. Zoe says, her voice lilting low, "Not the kind of secret you were hoping for, maybe."

When Hanna looks up, her gaze is like a brand. "Maybe not."

Zoe reaches across the table, where Hanna's hand is gripped tight around her glass. She slots her fingers between Hanna's knuckles in a feather-light caress.

Hanna swallows.

“What’s in the bag?” Zoe asks. And then she watches, intrigued, as Hanna’s ears turn a furious pink.

“So . . .” Hanna squirms a little. “I brought, um.” She clears her throat. “Well, first, I don’t want you to feel like we have to use it. I mean, I don’t even know for sure if you—enjoy that sort of thing.”

Zoe feels warmth pooling in her lower belly, smart enough to understand what Hanna is very carefully not saying. “You came prepared,” she deduces.

Hanna’s cheeks are burning, but so is her gaze. She nods slowly, searching Zoe’s eyes for any sign she may have overstepped. “I’ve been thinking about it ever since that first night,” she says. “But, only if you want it—” She reconsiders, turning her hand palm-up and entangling her fingers with Zoe’s own. “Only if you want me that way.”

There aren’t many things in this world Zoe Zuydervelt has allowed herself to want. She’s learned from a very early age that it’s best to take a minimalist approach to her own needs. Relying on others to meet them is a weakness which, to a Zuydervelt, is an unacceptable risk. But Zoe reminds herself of what exactly it is that Hanna is offering her, tonight and on a greater scale, and *wants*, very very, very *very* much.

She’s about to make a joke about what a relief it is that they won’t need to borrow one from Alma’s collection, when the kitchen timer beeps.

Zoe aches as Hanna floors her with endless, devastating praise, digging her spoon into the layers of soaked cookies and cream with rapturous murmurs and satisfied sighs, every breath and every word she utters met with an answering throb between Zoe’s legs. She has to press her thighs together under the table to stop them from shaking.

The awareness of what’s in Hanna’s bag sits between them like a promise, telegraphed clearly each time Hanna catches her eye. Hanna had brought it for her, to use on her—had likely imagined them using it together. The idea of Hanna thinking about her like that, of wanting her like that, this clear statement of Hanna’s desire for her, especially in the context of their mutual resolve to build something strong enough to last, is intoxicating.

Zoe follows Hanna to the kitchen sink when they’ve finished up, stepping up close beside her as she turns on the faucet. Hanna has peeled off her henley, leaving only a white undershirt. Zoe runs appreciative fingers over the freckles on Hanna’s upper arm before smoothing her whole hand over

the blade of her shoulder. She marvels at the strong and steady shape of her, at the feeling of Hanna's muscles moving under her palm as Hanna starts soaping up the silverware. "You do like your sleeveless tops," Zoe observes.

"I like the way you look at me when I wear them," Hanna says casually as she reaches for Zoe's bowl. "You didn't finish your dessert," she notices, a hint of offense in her tone.

"Guess I got distracted," Zoe says, digging in her thumb.

Hanna hums, pleased. Then she dips a long middle finger into Zoe's bowl, swiping up the last spoonful of cream. "More for me," she says with a wink. But before she can bring it to her lips, and before Zoe is fully aware of what she's doing, she has captured Hanna's hand in her own and taken Hanna's fingertip into her mouth.

For a moment, there's nothing; only a distant ringing in Zoe's ears, a burst of sweetness, and the feeling of the pad of Hanna's finger pressed against her tongue.

Hanna lets out a shuddering breath.

It may just be the most beautiful sound Zoe has heard from her yet, and there have been some very strong contenders. Her finger twitches, and Zoe sucks her in a little further, swiping at her with her tongue before releasing her with a wet pop.

Hanna stares at her for a beat, completely transfixed.

And then they're kissing, already wrapped around each other.

It's urgent, and breathless, and wet, and nowhere near enough to satisfy the pressure built up between them. Hanna has slung what feels like her entire body around Zoe's own, an insistent hand at the back of her neck, a steady arm around her waist. She's tugging at Zoe's sweater, pawing at her ass, pulling her into her body until Zoe is up on her tiptoes again. One of Hanna's thighs is wedged hard between her own, making Zoe whimper into their kiss.

"What are you wearing tomorrow?" Hanna asks in a rough whisper, pressing a thumb against Zoe's jaw and turning her head to expose her neck. She tugs at Zoe's sweater, freeing her shoulder, and grazes the skin she's exposed with her teeth. "You bruise so easily," she explains. "If I leave a mark . . ."

Zoe clenches at the thought. "It has a Victorian collar," she rushes out, her fingers already tugging at Hanna's hair at the feeling of Hanna's breath

against her throat. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure?” Hanna’s tone is teasing. “Is it one of those lacey ones you like so much?”

Zoe blushes, because of course it is, but she tightens her grip in Hanna’s hair, gratified when it makes her gasp. “I don’t want to hold back anymore,” Zoe tells her. “And I don’t want you to, either.”

Hanna’s mouth moves down Zoe’s collarbone, hot and wet, and when she combines a bruising kiss with a slow thrust of her hips, Zoe almost sobs. “Sweet merciful mother of god.”

Hanna hums at her own craftsmanship. “Do you want this?” she asks, rolling her hips into her again, the coarse fabric of her jeans dragging against Zoe in an exquisite tease. Her breath is hot against Zoe’s lips. “Do you want me?”

Zoe knows it’s a significant moment. She’s aware she has a lot to make up for, a whole year of confusion and cowardice to put firmly into their past, and she’s going to try her very best to convey to Hanna every day how lucky she feels to know her, how thrilled she is that Hanna wants her still. But right now, all the blood that usually delivers oxygen to her objectively brilliant brain has pooled somewhere decidedly further south, and the only things she’s capable of saying are “yes,” and “please, just, please—”

Hanna pulls back just far enough to look at her face; her eyes, her mouth. Mostly her mouth. “Tell me,” she says, with another devastating roll of her hips. She brings her lips close to the shell of Zoe’s ear and breathes, “Tell me what you want me to do to you.”

Zoe swears she can feel the words themselves trickling like thick honey down her spine. She closes her eyes against the sensation. “*Fuck*, Hanna.”

Hanna hums in approval. “And how would you use that word in a sentence?”

Zoe breathes through a near-irrepressible urge to stomp on Hanna’s toes, furious at herself for falling for this categorical fool. “Fuck you,” she huffs out on an involuntary laugh. She tries to shove at Hanna’s shoulder, but it’s like shoving at a goddamn refrigerator.

One of Hanna’s hands slides up to where Zoe’s sweater has pushed up her thigh, splaying her palm possessively over Zoe’s hip. “If you want,” she hums. She looks far too pleased with herself when Zoe shivers at the sensation of Hanna’s fingernails scratching at her skin; gentle at first, and

then slightly less so. Hanna ducks in close, teeth nipping at the lobe of Zoe's ear before she continues, "If you're asking me to."

"Hanna," Zoe groans, "please, just, fuck me or let me—*oh.*"

Hanna has slipped her hand down between their bodies, groaning when her fingers find her. Zoe melts into her entirely. Hanna seems equally affected, her forehead knocking into Zoe's.

Hanna's voice is a hoarse, almost broken sound. "You're wet for me already," she breathes. "Like you can't wait for me to be inside you." She takes her hand away, needing both of them to hoist Zoe up around her hips. She starts walking them out of the kitchen, nosing down Zoe's throat, muttering into her skin. "You feel so good," she says. "I'm going to make you feel so *good.*"

Hanna lets Zoe down on the bed in the master suite.

And then she walks away.

Zoe is worried for a moment, sitting up self-consciously. But Hanna saunters back into the room, pantsless and fiddling with a fistful of black leather straps.

Zoe's heart hits each and every single one of her ribs on its way down to the low cradle of her hips at the sight.

Hanna stops in front of where Zoe is sitting, naked from the waist down, the signs of her arousal clear as glass, and Zoe has to know. She *has* to ask. She stills Hanna's hands with her own.

Hanna looks down at her, gentle. "Hey," she says, "if you would rather we don't—"

"No," Zoe hurries to assure her. "I want this. God, I do. But . . ." She slides one of her hands around the solid curve of Hanna's thigh, making sure Hanna has plenty of time to stop her if she needs to. "I want this, too."

Hanna blushes, her fingers twitching at her sides, but the look she gives her is open, dark. Honestly, she looks like she's more turned on than Zoe is, which Zoe knows is objectively impossible.

Zoe presses soft kisses against the tops of Hanna's thighs, sighing when Hanna's hips twitch into the sensation. "Is that something you would like too?" Zoe whispers against her skin. "Do you want to feel my mouth on you?"

Hanna nods urgently, licking her lips, her brow furrowed. "Yeah," she says, the thick timbre of Hanna's voice doing unconscionable things to the purity of Zoe's heart and mind. "I want you, want your mouth."

Zoe maintains careful eye contact as she sinks down to her knees in front of her.

Hanna sighs, swooning when Zoe presses her nose against damp curls, breathing her in. When Zoe looks up at her again, Hanna's eyes are heavily lidded, a flush high and bright on her cheeks. "I need you," she rasps, "Zoe __"

"I'm here," Zoe tells her, stroking a comforting hand down and up the back of Hanna's thigh. "I'll do whatever you want me to do."

Hanna bites her lip, eager. And then she moves her fingers to the back of Zoe's head and nudges her into her.

Even the most vivid of Zoe's fantasies didn't do Hanna justice. Her scent is heady, and so hot Zoe finds herself grabbing Hanna's ass in a ravenous bid for more, lost in her from the first ragged breath Hanna lets out. Zoe parts her with her tongue and takes a long, indulgent moment simply to enjoy the taste of her.

Hanna's hips stutter helplessly beneath Zoe's hands. She's chasing Zoe's mouth, her fingers tightening in Zoe's hair, pulling a little in a plea to for a firmer touch. Her knees buckle when Zoe hums into the sensation. "Oh," Hanna sighs. "There, that's—" Her moan is just this side of desperate, just this side of demanding. "That's so *good*, you're so—"

Zoe pushes up Hanna's tank top, groaning out her appreciation. The sight of Hanna taking what she needs, caught up in her own pleasure, is intoxicating. Her brow is furrowed, her gaze a hot electric blue, fixed firmly on Zoe's face. The hard plains of her abdomen roll and twitch, each movement echoing inside Zoe's own body like an erratic, aching pulse. By the time Hanna's hips begin to buck, Zoe is dizzy with desire. Every single one of her senses is attuned to Hanna's body, consumed by the need to see her unravel.

But Hanna cants her hips away abruptly, her hands falling to Zoe's shoulders. "Zoe, wait," she sobs.

Zoe blinks at the sudden loss. "I'm so sorry," she says, though she's not quite sure what happened.

"No, you're—" Hanna combs a hand through her own hair. "*Fuck*, you're amazing. I just—" She releases a shuddering breath. "I don't think I can keep standing if you keep—keep doing that."

Zoe climbs back onto the bed and pats the comforter as enticingly as possible. She expects Hanna to lie down next to her, but Hanna reaches for

the harness instead.

“Oh,” Zoe says, unable to hide her surprise. Hanna has brought a strapless model, Zoe sees now, with a bulb at one end for the wearer. “I didn’t think—”

“I find it—communicative?” Hanna’s smile is almost shy. “It’s pretty unwieldy on its own, but with a harness . . .”

“Can I help?” Zoe is reaching for it already.

Hanna nods immediately, and then chokes out a plaintive moan when Zoe bends down and seals her lips around her again, sucking gently as she slips it into place.

At Zoe’s insistence, Hanna finally strips off her top. Zoe breathes at the visual when she pulls back; the soft pink of Hanna’s nipples, the sharp cut of her hipbones, the strap jutting out from between her legs. “God have mercy on me.”

Hanna’s eyebrows twitch together, the tiniest whisper of movement. “Begging for mercy so soon?” she teases. She looks in complete control again already, one corner of her mouth ticking up as she slips the harness on. “I haven’t even started.”

Zoe’s chest rumbles on a low, indulgent laugh. “Am I going to regret telling you all of that?” she asks. “You’re much too cocky already.” Zoe hears herself say it and winces, preparing mentally for Hanna’s inevitable joke.

But it doesn’t come. Instead, there’s a firm hand at the hinge of Zoe’s jaw, a finger hooking behind her ear. Hanna’s voice is a smooth, treacherous thing when she asks, “You don’t think I’ve already thought of a hundred ways to use your own words against you?”

It’s a match thrown in a puddle of oil, the way it sets Zoe aflame. She’s torn off her own sweater and thrown Hanna down onto the bed before Hanna has time to blink. Zoe straddles her, hungry.

Hanna looks up at her as if she’s something sacred; reverent, almost disbelieving. She gasps when Zoe grabs for her. “Hey,” she says, shuddering. “Hey, easy.”

Zoe stares down at Hanna’s body, at the way it’s rippling beneath her own. The movement of Hanna’s hips and the blush that runs all the way down to her chest express an altogether different message. It makes Zoe want her more, makes her want to see what Hanna looks like when she loses control entirely.

“No,” Zoe says. “I want you hard.”

She sinks down onto her, roughly, perfectly, their breath leaving them both in a rush at the way their bodies come together. After a brief, aching moment, Hanna runs a hand up Zoe’s spine and pushes herself up to a sitting position, slinging an arm around Zoe’s waist and bracing Zoe’s hips with her calves. The movement presses them together more firmly, and Zoe sobs at the exquisite feeling of opening herself up to Hanna like this. She can’t remember vulnerability ever tasting so sweet.

Hanna’s lips are at the sensitive skin just beneath Zoe’s ear, her breath coming in short, rough bursts as her hips start rolling up into her. “You always sound so pretty,” she rasps. “I love the way you moan for me—how soft and needy you get.” One of Hanna’s hands is on Zoe’s breast, her fingers stroking gently one minute, kneading and pinching the next. It makes Zoe feel reckless, wild, and scattered, failing to focus on a single sensation at a time. Hanna’s voice is at least eighty percent breath, and at least ninety-nine percent the reason Zoe’s mind completely unravels when she says, “I want to hear you come, Zoe. Will you come for me again?”

Zoe moans, a ragged, desperate sort of sound that only distantly resembles the word *Please*, and Hanna sets to it with a single-minded determination. She tilts Zoe backwards until she’s leaning back on her hands, slinging both of her arms around Zoe’s waist. They find a steadily building rhythm—a little deeper now, a little faster—until their hips are canting into each other at an almost frenzied pace.

Hanna presses a thumb down between their bodies, just resting it there, teasing. Zoe feels like pure pleasure itself. She can’t remember a time before Hanna where she was ever this vocal, doesn’t think there was ever an occasion where she felt safe enough to allow herself to be. But she does with Hanna, and she needs it, now; she doesn’t believe she’s ever needed anything as much as she needs this, right here, with her.

“You feel so good,” Hanna whispers, enraptured, “I can tell that you’re close,” and then she says ardently, “I can’t wait to taste you next.”

And that—the casually confident mention of a next time, before she even sees Zoe through this one, the clear indication that Hanna isn’t planning on going anywhere soon—that’s what ends up bringing Zoe to the edge.

Zoe teeters there for a brief, endless second. She’s thrown into an unexpectedly vivid, long-forgotten memory: of Xander and her, as children, by the frozen lake at the Zuydervelt estate; how he had promised her she

would be okay, she was so tiny after all, at five years old, the ice would hold her easily, and she had trusted him, skidding across the smooth mirror of it for a few perfect moments before she noticed the cracks; before it had given way beneath her, and she'd been plunged into agonizing, breathtaking terror.

Hanna only holds her tighter. "Let go, baby," she breathes with a wet, decisive swipe of her thumb. "I've got you."

Crashing through the surface of her pleasure, as vulnerable as Zoe's feeling, is as powerfully terrifying as slipping under the ice had been. But where the frozen lake had filled Zoe with suffocating dread, today, right here—safe in the strong cradle of Hanna's body—every single one of Zoe's synapses fires in a rapturous reward. Pulsing, sparking pleasure radiates from the center of her down to the very tips of her toes, and Zoe is gasping, breathing in lungfuls of air, lungfuls of Hanna, who is all around her, holding her close.

Xander had watched her sharply, at her bedside; the dutiful teenage brother, not quite convincingly remorseful. Hanna is smiling down at Zoe with joyful awe and open adoration, melting away the bitter memory with her soft gaze.

She starts wriggling out of their embrace as soon as Zoe can sit up on her own again, as if she intends to make good on her promise right away. But Zoe tightens her arms around her, keeping her from moving away.

Hanna asks, curious, "Do you need more?"

Zoe does. But it isn't her own pleasure that she's after. It's so obvious, how tightly wound Hanna is. Zoe can see her, and smell her, but the things Hanna had said before also makes sense, now; Zoe can *feel* her, twitching inside. She rocks her hips into Hanna's experimentally, and melts all over again when Hanna shivers and gasps in surprise. Hanna's body tugs at her, subtle, rhythmic pulses, like a frantic heartbeat. She releases a sweet, startled whimper that makes Zoe want to do anything Hanna might ask for.

"What do you need?" Zoe asks. "What can I do?"

What Hanna needs is to lay them down, and to stretch herself out on top of her. What Zoe can do is to keep her sheathed inside.

"What did you think about?" Hanna asks her, sounding absurdly bashful considering their current circumstances. "When you would—um. When you __"

Zoe chuckles, a low, sinful sound, rocking her hips up into her. “When I made myself come to the thought of you?”

Hanna nuzzles into her neck, breathing her in for a moment. She bites down gently on the tendon there, before soothing the same spot with her tongue. “Did you really think of me?”

Zoe sighs, tilting her chin to give Hanna more room, offering herself up to her. “I did.”

“Is this,” Hanna asks, her own hips grinding down to meet Zoe’s movements, amplifying their effect, “what you would think about?”

Zoe lets out a breathy hum at the pleasure zipping up her spine. “I don’t think there’s a way in which I haven’t imagined you by now,” she admits, biting at her lip.

“Tell me,” Hanna urges with another slow thrust of her hips. “How did you touch yourself when you imagined it was me?”

Zoe tells her everything. Everything she’s done, and everything she’s thought about; everything she hopes will still unfold. She makes sure to elaborate on the fantasies that make Hanna twitch a little harder inside her, going into eloquent detail about the ones that make them both fluster and sigh, until Zoe’s voice starts to fracture and Hanna is rocking into her again, letting out sweet little whimpers each time she exhales. Zoe’s heart squeezes at the sound. She almost aches with how much it makes her want her, the way she’s far more fond of Hanna than she would ever have thought possible.

“Could come—just like this,” Hanna sighs. “Just from your voice. Knowing you wanted me so much you couldn’t help yourself.” Her teeth graze the overheated skin of Zoe’s shoulder as she presses in slow and deep. It makes Zoe flutter around her. Hanna can clearly feel it: she rewards Zoe by grinding into her a little harder, a snap to her hips that wasn’t there before. And then she starts babbling; more to herself almost than to Zoe, maddening little things that leave Zoe dizzy with heady affection. “So beautiful,” Hanna mutters, “so pretty, so *good*, so greedy for me.”

That’s when Hanna begins driving her in earnest. And, oh—Zoe was not prepared for this.

There’s an inexplicably effortless sort of finesse to Hanna’s movements, a seemingly innate ability she has to move her body exactly how it needs to, even when she’s overwhelmed by her own pleasure. It makes Zoe think of the way Hanna had looked on her snowboard, on the slopes that first week;

that heavy, graceful poise she'd exhibited, flowing like water down the mountain.

Hanna comes, wonderstruck and a little wild, with a beautiful, broken sound Zoe is sure will feature in her favorite fantasies for years to come. Zoe folds herself around her, feeling Hanna pulse against and between and inside of her. She sighs at the sensation.

She keeps Hanna close as she rides it out, holding on to her until Hanna's breathing evens slowly out. Then she gently rolls Hanna onto her back, so she can see her, so she can gaze upon this marvelous, mystifying creature that has so upended Zoe's entire sense of self.

Hanna lies there, breathing, beautiful, and doesn't open her eyes. "Don't fall asleep," she warns Zoe, the back of her hand slapping against Zoe's hip. She sounds a little drunk when she says, "M'not done with you yet."

Zoe thinks she might cry, with how heavy the feeling is inside her chest, how large. "Promises, promises," she quips.

She strokes her fingers over the soft skin at the inside of Hanna's arm, gently, wrist to elbow, up and down. After a few minutes of comfortable silence—during which Zoe tries and fails to find better terms to describe this tremendous fondness that's blossomed inside her chest—her ears pick up a faintly familiar sound.

She glances up at Hanna's face, and finds her snoring softly beside her, dead to the world.

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FORTY

SLEEP LIFTS LIKE FOG on a cold winter morning. Sunlight is pouring in through the window, setting every gleaming surface in the room aflame; the top of the dresser, the bronze knobs of the bedframe, the planes of Hanna's body, her hair. Zoe basks in it—naked still, beneath the sheets, and deliciously sore—and she feels revived, feels forgiven, feels as if some of Hanna's brightness, some of her joyous warmth, must have somehow seeped into her during the previous evening's activities.

Zoe's heart leaps with the promise of the day. Alma is getting married. There's going to be a party. It might be the first one Zoe Zuydervelt has ever looked forward to.

Hanna groans, nuzzling into her pillow, miles away on the other side of the bed. "'Morning," Zoe tells her, sounding much groggier than she feels.

Hanna rolls over on her back and stretches, looking like a big, happy housecat, digging her toes into the mattress, her spine curving off the bed. She moans, and then grins, luxuriating, satisfied. "This is the best bed I've ever slept in," she sighs. "Can we never leave?"

Zoe wants to run her tongue over all the glorious skin Hanna's movements have just revealed. "You'd get hungry," she says, trying to keep herself from doing so.

Hanna scoots closer, looking suddenly much more awake. "You're right," she says, and Zoe shivers at the intensity of her gaze when she adds, "I

should eat."

On the nightstand Zoe's phone chirps, twice in quick succession.

Fuck.

They are. *So* late.

Alma has called her twice and sent her approximately fourteen hundred texts.

"Speaking of breakfast," Zoe says. "I'm afraid we've missed it entirely."

Hanna sits up, immediately distraught, grabbing for her own phone. "What? No. Jude was supposed to—" her shoulders slump. "Shoot." She looks at Zoe, grief-stricken. "I don't get reception here."

Zoe wishes she was that lucky. Hanna sprints to the upstairs bathroom—after Zoe makes the wise, executive decision not to share the shower in the master suite—and Zoe quickly scrolls through Alma's texts while she pees. There's a couple of inquiries about Zoe's whereabouts and general wellbeing, and then:

Zo.

Is Hanna with you.

Zoe I think Jude KNOWS

Linh says she kept Hanna up all night and that's why she's missing breakfast???

ZOE

Your assistant is a TERRIBLE liar

My betrothed is going to spend our wedding day trying not to picture her baby sister banging her wife-to-be's ex-girlfriend in her own bed.

I hope you're happy ♡

Zoe thinks about it, in the shower.

I'm so, so sorry, she sends back, **we're on our way now**, and **I think I am.**

She adds, as an afterthought, just in case, **Happy.**

When she steps out of the bathroom, naked and still dripping, Hanna is already dressed. She's standing in front of the bedroom mirror in a gorgeously cut pair of navy slacks and a white button-up, fastening a tie around her neck the exact shade of Zoe's burgundy dress.

Hanna's reflection meets Zoe's eyes. She opens her mouth, and then closes it. She tries again. "Zoe," she breathes.

Hanna's Windsor knot is almost perfect. Zoe decides to fix it for her anyway. The wool of Hanna's pants is scratchy-soft against her bare thighs

when she leans close to do so, and Hanna's hands drift to Zoe's hips immediately, her thumbs stroking mesmerizingly gentle from Zoe's belly up to the underside of her breasts.

Zoe shivers. "Stop that,'' she warns. "Unless you want us to miss the wedding dinner, as well."

Hanna smirks at her. "There's always DoorDash." But she removes her hands, folding them obediently behind her back.

Zoe tries to hurry, but by the time she steps into the kitchen, where Hanna is tidying up, it's almost eleven.

Hanna looks at her as if she'll need at least another fifteen minutes just to pick her jaw up off the floor.

"It's a little dramatic, I know," Zoe admits with a sheepish gesture down her velvet dress. "I promised Alma I would do my best to upstage her mother."

"That's—quite a challenge." Hanna steps in close when Zoe grins at her, smoothing a thumb over Zoe's cheek, looking deeply endeared. *Dimples*, Zoe remembers.

"I can take her." Zoe tilts her jaw, and Hanna cups it, her eyes tracking up the Chantilly lace-covered slope of Zoe's chest and shoulders, the clear line of her throat.

"Yeah, um," she says, "so. This does absolutely nothing to conceal—"

"I don't care," Zoe huffs out decisively. "Jude already knows, and so does Linh, apparently." She waves her phone. "Alma definitely knows. They just don't know that everyone else does, too."

Hanna's eyebrows tick up, surprised. "And you're okay with that?"

"Yes," Zoe says, "I am." And then, thickly, blinking at Hanna's lips, "I've been so stupid."

Hanna's expression is soft. "Hey," she soothes. "Don't do that."

"I like you so much," Zoe tells her, contrition clawing at her belly. "I've wasted so much time."

Hanna tucks her into her arms and under her chin, warm and secure. "We have plenty of it left." She tries to press a kiss into Zoe's hair, but the angle makes it awkward.

"We can't know that," Zoe whispers. *Alma's proven as much.*

There's a light drum of laughter against Zoe's chest. "Then we'll hit the ground running."

Alma texts her back as they're getting into the car. **You know**, her message reads, **it wouldn't kill you to admit I was right.**

Zoe smiles, and answers, **How can we be sure of that, if it's so entirely unprecedented?**

Hanna takes off her glasses, rummaging through the glove compartment for her aviator sunglasses instead, but she doesn't put them on yet, and she doesn't start the car. She puts her hand on Zoe's thigh instead and says, gently, "Listen—I know it's too soon for me to say it. And I don't want to rush us into things. But I want you to know—" She rubs her other thumb absently over her own chest. "I feel it."

Zoe prepares herself for the inevitable wave of panic.

It doesn't come.

"Okay," she says, soft but certain.

Hanna looks pleased at that. "I'm here," she says with a last squeeze of her hand before she moves it to the wheel. "You just let me know when you're ready to hear me say the words."

They pull up to the resort with plenty of time left to beg the brides for forgiveness before the ceremony starts.

"So," Hanna says, grinning as she offers Zoe her arm, "are you ready to meet my mom?"

And only then does Zoe Zuydervelt have a teeny tiny heart attack.

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FORTY-ONE

ZOE ZUYDERVELT LIVES.

In spite of Hanna Kaplan's persistent efforts to take her breath away.

Hanna's mouth tastes like the fruit gummies she was supposed to throw at the brides. One of her hands is fighting with the tiny satin buttons at Zoe's nape, while the other is veering dangerously further south.

"I can't wait to get you out of this dress and into my bed," Hanna mumbles into their kiss. "I want to feel you come around my fingers the way you came around my—"

The door behind them swings open, the brass knob banging hard against the tile.

It's Jude, because—well, who else would it be?

"Oh," she groans, "you have got to be fucking kidding me." Her glare is intimidating even when she's encased in embroidered white chiffon, but there's a warmth to her exasperation that borders on affection. "Seriously?" she asks. "At my wedding?"

Hanna adjusts her glasses, her face a picture of perfect innocence despite their indisputably compromising positions. "We just needed some air."

(They're in the women's restroom, for the record.)

Jude is all teeth. "What you two need is a chaperone," she hisses. "You had one job today, Hanna, remember? *One* job!"

Hanna looks wounded. "Two jobs," she points out, pouting.

Jude furrows her brow at that. “What?”

Hanna’s pout turns plaintive. “I’m the one who makes the hora happen!” she cries.

Jude sighs, rubbing her brow, furiously winding her finger in the air. “And . . . ?”

Hanna’s hurt expression fades as realization dawns. “I keep Vicki off the stage,” she whispers.

Through the open bathroom door, they hear the faint but unmistakable sounds of Alma’s mother delivering the final exuberant refrain of “La Vida Es Un Carnaval.”

“Oh,” Hanna hushes, mortified. “Victoria, *no.*”

“As always,” Jude grits out, “Victoria *yes.*”

Zoe tugs on Jude’s sleeve as she hurries them into the hallway, making sure to look appropriately penitent. “Would you mind not telling Alma about this little encounter?” she asks her. “I know you two are married now, but. She gets a little—”

“—much?” Jude scoffs. “You think I don’t know that? Why do you think I never came clean about losing that stupid bet about you and Hanna?”

Zoe’s fingers fly to her nape when Jude gestures at it. Zoe obediently slides the buttons back into place. Apparently Hanna’s efforts were a little more successful than she thought.

Alma and Linh are in a seating area just outside the ballroom. Linh bounces upright when she spots them, smiling far too knowingly. Alma stays where she is, collapsed in her chair with her skirts draped around her, looking like a deeply traumatized merengue.

“There you are,” Linh says, sliding her hand around Hanna’s bicep. “You know it’s bad manners to leave your date alone at a party, right?”

“So this is a date, huh?” Hanna winks down at her. “Does that mean you’re going to buy me a drink?”

Linh rolls her eyes affectionately. “It’s an open bar.”

Hanna puts her hand on Linh’s where it’s curled around Hanna’s arm, patting it gently as they walk away. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Zoe and Jude grab Alma, hoisting her up by her elbows in a slightly-less-dramatic approximation of a crutch carry.

“How are you doing, honey?” Zoe asks as the three of them make their way back to their table arm in arm.

Alma takes a resolute breath. “I’m actually awesome,” she decides. “Watching my mother use my wedding as a platform to try and kick off the North-American stage of her career has dealt me extensive emotional damage, but I am also, just, profoundly—no, ecstatically—married.”

Zoe huffs out a laugh. “It really is a beautiful wedding, guys.”

Jude smiles. Alma beams. “I know,” she says. “Thank you so much for picking up the tab.”

Zoe halts, stopping all three of them in their tracks. “Pardon me?”

“Well.” Alma shrugs. “You do owe me twenty grand.”

Zoe sputters. “You lost that money to Linh, not me,” she argues.

Jude’s head whirls around at her so fast Zoe fears she’s given herself whiplash.

“Technically I didn’t *lose* at all,” Alma points out.

Jude is staring at them. “The bet from last year? About these two absolute —?” She’s pale now, gasping. “You gave Linh *twenty grand?”*

Alma slips out of Zoe’s hold, sliding a loving hand around Jude’s waist. “We’re married now, mi vida,” she says. “So technically *we* gave Linh twenty grand.” Then she taps her heel to Zoe’s, nodding to where Hanna and Linh are standing together at the bar. Hanna is leaning in, smiling as Linh presses a napkin to her mouth. Alma says, “I think your assistant is trying to steal your girl.”

Zoe sighs. “Stop calling her that.”

Alma glints her teeth at Zoe’s response, her eyes sparkling dangerously. “Is there a different term you would like us to use?”

Zoe rolls her eyes up at her. *“Linh,”* she says pointedly, “is our *friend*, not just my assistant. Also I’m thinking a promotion may be in order. Maybe we can make her our chief operating officer.” She looks at Hanna, who has turned away from Linh and is now searching the room, looking almost painfully handsome in her bespoke suit. When their eyes meet across the crowded room, Hanna’s face lights up like sunshine, and Zoe feels that familiar wave of affection rise up in her chest again.

Jude says, “Maybe it’s time we call *all* things by their proper name, Zoe.”

Alma blows her wife a tender kiss. “Brava,” she says. “Encore.”

Victoria is seated at a table at least twenty feet away, but her head still ticks up sharply at Alma’s words.

“Hey,” Zoe says, bumping her shoulder softly into Alma’s and catching Jude’s eyes. “You know I love you both, right? You and that implausibly

well-adjusted daughter of yours."

The look of endearment they give her is one Zoe is very accustomed to getting from Alma, but it's an entirely new phenomenon to see it mirrored on Jude's face. For a moment Zoe almost thinks Jude might hug her, but her wife beats her to it.

"Go tell Hanna that, you sap," Alma says, pressing a kiss to the side of Zoe's head. "I'm proud of you."

When Zoe reaches Hanna and Linh, Sofia has found them too. Zoe worries for a moment, eyeing the glass of champagne in her hand, but Sofia hands it over immediately with a hurried, "I was just smelling it, I swear."

Linh's hand is smoothing down one of Hanna's lapels, but she removes it when Zoe joins them. She says, with emphasis, "Ms. Zuydervelt."

Zoe side-eyes her, but ignores it, catching the teasing glint in Linh's smirk. "Linh," she says. "Hitting on Hanna, again?"

Sofia giggles. Hanna flushes pink, her lips already parting in protest. But Linh says, "Obviously."

Zoe steps close into Hanna's other side, sliding her hand up Hanna's shoulder and into the soft hair at the back of her neck. She watches Hanna's eyelids flutter against her cheeks. Zoe presses a kiss to the pink skin below. "I can't really blame you," she tells Linh. "This one's a keeper."

Hanna is watching her closely as she pulls away, looking—hopeful? Zoe's lipstick has left a faint mark on her cheek.

"Come on, Sofia," Linh says, grabbing the girl's hand and tugging her away. "Let's leave these two lovebirds alone."

Zoe watches them make their way to the dancefloor, where they take turns twirling for a few moments before an impromptu high-energy dance lesson ensues. Alma and Jude are over by the wedding cake with Perla—who is exactly as tremendously lovely as Hanna described—gushing over the framed ketubah displayed there. Hanna has embellished it with a somehow delicate explosion of color, an intricate design featuring the blue thistles and red ranunculi Alma and Jude had picked for their bouquets. The brides are laughing, leaned together close, and radiant.

Zoe takes Hanna's hand and pulls her into the swirling crowd.

Hanna is surprised. It doesn't delay her hands though; they've already slipped around Zoe's waist. She says, "I thought you didn't dance."

Zoe rests her arms on Hanna's shoulders, relaxing into the security of Hanna's grip as their bodies start to sway. "My therapist says I need to

expand my comfort zone.”

Hanna’s face is as radiant as her sister’s. The Colorado midwinter sun has brought out her freckles. Zoe lifts her hand to them, but instead of swiping her thumb over the mark her lips have left, like she’d intended, she finds herself removing Hanna’s glasses.

It shouldn’t feel so significant, this simple gesture, sliding them down Hanna’s wrinkling nose and tucking them into the pocket of her suit jacket, but it reverberates inside Zoe like the crack and shift of continental plates. Kissing her, after that—in public, not caring who can see—is like nothing at all. Hanna lets out a sweetly startled hum when Zoe licks into it a little, running the tip of her tongue over the seam of Hanna’s lips.

“Mm.” Zoe pulls away, bringing her fingers to her own mouth, puzzled. She furrows her brow and asks, “Why do you taste like pumpkin pie?”

Hanna’s features brighten impossibly more. The small specks of gold around her pupils sparkle and flash. “It’s flavored lip balm,” she explains. “It’s a seasonal thing. I have them in sugar cookie and candy cane, too.” She rummages in her jacket pockets, digging up three little festive-looking tubes. “Do you want to try?”

Zoe looks down at them, and then she looks at Hanna, and Zoe loves her. She loves her. It’s unstoppable. It can’t be helped. So she kisses her again, pulls her in by her dumb hair and kisses her until not a hint of pumpkin spice remains, until Hanna is staring at her, breathless and a little dazed.

“Yes,” Zoe tells her. “Go on, put it on. I want to try the cookie-flavored one.”

Hanna sways toward her slightly, giving her one of those squinty smiles that always make Zoe feel uncomfortably squishy.

There’s a promise in that smile. And Zoe doesn’t think it’s too soon to say it, anymore. They’re here together, where it all started, surrounded by their friends, drinking another one of Alma’s excellent wines.

“Well?” Zoe says, grinning. “I’m ready.” She slants her lashes up at Hanna, tugging gently on her tie. “What are you waiting for?”

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Grounded astronaut Beck Sterling sees Audra Bancroft as all that is wrong with the new billionaire space race: a privileged technochauvinist who was handed everything Beck had to work hard to earn. But when the two are trapped together for the months-long media circus surrounding the "first all-female voyage" of a new space tourism venture, their mutual disdain gives way to white-hot chemistry and a devastating secret.

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About the author

Easter Kingston is an author and illustrator who picked an *interesting* time to relocate from Europe's cool shores to the sun-scorched American Southwest. Her work has been included in a number of anthologies and digital publications, exploring subjects like grief, agency, radical joy, and queer identity. Her other creative projects include miniature interior design and an undisclosed number of attempts to grow her own salsa ingredients around the cozy, urban heat-island home she shares with her wife.

A Most Wonderful Time is her first novel.

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