

Chapter Five

Afternoon Delight

The man sitting on the other side of the desk has square frame glasses and long brown hair parted in the middle, exposing a thinning scalp. It's not a flattering hairstyle for him. Or for anyone, really. He also hasn't made eye contact with me since I walked in the door. No wonder Tina was so adamant that Clayton wasn't my type. If he were an actor, he'd be perfect for playing a creepy serial-killer-type dude.

His gaze seems to be focused on my hands while I describe my new business to him. He says that he can help me get the whole thing set up and do my taxes and bookkeeping so that I don't have to worry about anything other than planning events.

As we go back and forth, each of us asking questions and giving answers, I tuck my hands under my arms to see if he'll finally meet my eyes. Instead, he looks down at his own hands.

I take my hands back out and his gaze returns to them. I fight the urge to tuck them away again just so I can see how many times I can get him to look back and forth between my hands and his own.

I look down at my hands, wondering what could possibly be so interesting. Maybe it's the ghosts on my fingernails. He must think my hands are haunted.

When the meeting is over, I head over to Tina's. I hold my breath when I spot Oliver's truck parked behind Tina and Ryan's cars in their driveway. I groan. I didn't know he would be here, but I guess it's just as well. I haven't heard anything from him about what Ryan is planning. This might be a good chance to find out.

I park my car on the street and head to the front door. I let myself inside. I follow the sound of voices to the living room. Oliver and Ryan stop talking when they see me. Tina isn't with them. I glance at Oliver for only a second before I look at Ryan. I can feel Oliver's gaze on me like it's something tangible.

"Upstairs," Ryan says with a nod before I can ask where Tina is.

I smile. "Thanks!"

I head upstairs where I know I'll find Tina working out in her home gym. She's on the treadmill when I get there. She's facing the other way, so she doesn't see me come in, and she's wearing headphones, so she can't hear me either.

"Tina!" I call out. She continues running, unfazed. I cup my hands around my mouth and call her name louder, but she can't hear me.

Her other home gym equipment is situated on either side of the treadmill, making it impossible for me to come up next to her so she can see me. I step up right behind the treadmill and

call her name a third time, but still nothing. I reach out to tap her, but since the treadmill is elevated, all I can reach is the back of her leg as it kicks back while she runs. She reaches down and scratches her leg, probably thinking that my finger is a bug.

I climb onto the back of the treadmill, intending to scale the side of it until I'm next to her, but I trip and lurch forward. I catch myself by grabbing onto Tina, but since she doesn't know I'm behind her, she screams and flails. Her leg comes back and kicks me in the shin, and as she tries to turn around to see what's going on, she throws herself off balance. I reach for her shirt in a desperate attempt to stay upright, but it's no use because Tina is already falling, and we both get launched off the treadmill. We both scream as we crash to the floor.

I look at each of my legs and arms to make sure they're not mangled, and then I feel my ribs for any broken bones. Tina does the same. Once we're sure that neither of us is seriously injured, we both burst into laughter.

I wipe tears from my eyes, trying and failing to contain my laugh.

Tina is on her side, literally rolling on the floor laughing. She is the epitome of the ROFL acronym.

"I think I just peed my pants," she declares. Tears are streaming down her face as well.

After we've calmed down a bit, she manages to hoist herself up and lean against the wall next to me.

"What the hell were you thinking?" she scolds me.

"I called your name so many times, but you didn't hear me," I tell her.

"So your next best option was to jump on my back?"

We both snort again, fighting another laughing fit. "I tripped, okay? I was only going to come up next to you."

"Remind me to not let you dance in my flash mob," she says. "You'll knock everyone down like dominoes."

I smirk. "Oh, believe me. No one wants to see me dancing."

I think about what Oliver said the other day about my dance moves when he picked me up. My smile fades a little.

"How was your date with Clayton?" Tina asks.

I roll my eyes. She's been referring to it as a date ever since I asked her if she was trying to set me up with him. Now I know why she thought the idea was so funny.

I hold my hand out in front of us. "I think he was terrified of my ghost nails."

"But they're so cute." She holds her hand up next to mine, comparing our manicures.

"Who's Clayton?"

Oliver's voice startles me. I look up at him. He asks the question flatly, but with a hint of skeptical curiosity, like he's not sure if he really wants to know. He stands in the doorway, his body taking up most of the frame. His arms are crossed.

"None of your business," I say before Tina can explain that he's my new accountant. "Why are you eavesdropping?"

"I heard commotion. I came to investigate." He looks around the room, his eyes landing on the treadmill, which is still running. He looks back at me and Tina. We're still sitting on the floor behind it. "Do I even want to know?"

"Probably not." I push myself to my feet, then help pull Tina up.

"Isn't it a little early to be done with a date on a Friday night?" Oliver checks his watch. "Must've been a shitty date."

"Guess you've never heard of a little afternoon delight." I

move past him through the doorway. I keep my eyes on him, watching his expression harden.

“Clayton is her accountant,” Tina says. She follows me out of the room, but stops in the doorway to show Oliver her phone.

He smirks, then looks at me and shakes his head. “Yeah, sure. A little afternoon delight with that guy. I can see it.”

I grab Tina’s hand, making her turn her phone in my direction so that I can see what she’s showing him. It’s Clayton’s website. There’s a picture of the man himself front and center. The photo really captures all the same quirky awkwardness he possesses in real life.

I give Tina a look that I hope conveys how annoyed I am with her for ruining my act. Then I look back at Oliver. “He’s cute,” I say defensively.

“Oh, honey,” Tina says with a sigh. “Not even a little bit.”

She pats me on the shoulder in a gesture that says, “you tried” before she passes me and heads downstairs.

Oliver starts to follow her, but pauses when he reaches me. He still has that smug smirk on his face. “You know, if you’re that desperate to spend the afternoon with someone, you could just put a blindfold on me.”

It takes a minute for his meaning to sink in. When it does, my face turns red and my blood feels hot. I want to grab his face and force that stupid smirk off. “I will never be *that* desperate. And why would I need to do that with you when I have a super-hot boyfriend like Clayton?”

His smirk turns into a genuine smile. He nudges my shoulder with his. Every nerve ending in my shoulder stands on edge, feeling where his touched mine. I look down at my shoulder, then up at him. He’s behaving strangely. I can’t

remember the last time he smiled in my direction without an ulterior motive. I don't trust him.

"I'm guessing since Ryan hasn't tried to kill me yet, you must have kept your word," he says.

"I'm guessing," I say, mocking his tone, "that since Tina hasn't fired me yet, you must have kept your word too."

He shrugs. "What can I say? I'm a trustworthy person."

I snort, thinking about how I was literally just thinking the opposite. I cross my arms. "So am I."

"Tina and Ryan might disagree."

I ignore that. "Do you have any updates for me? When does Ryan plan on proposing?"

He grimaces. "About that..."

"Come on," I complain. "Don't tell me you changed your mind."

"I'm not going to help you sabotage Ryan's plan, but I do have a proposal for you," he says.

"Oh yeah? You were inspired by Tina and Ryan and now you want to get married too?"

He rolls his eyes. "Not that kind of proposal."

I cross my arms. "What do you want?"

He clears his throat. "Ryan came by the other day to drop the ring off. He wants to plan something big for Tina. I offered to help him."

I frown. "You came up here to tell me that I'm competing directly against you now? I'm not sure what you're proposing here."

He tucks his hands into his pockets. "I thought maybe we could coordinate our efforts."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugs. "I just don't think Tina is going to beat Ryan to

it. You might as well do some of the things you're planning for Ryan instead. I could—"

I laugh, cutting him off. "Seriously? Let me get this straight. You volunteer to help him, and now you want me to help you? You do realize that Tina is paying me to arrange this for her, right? Why on earth would I help Ryan beat her to it *and* let him use her ideas?"

He does this annoying thing with his face where he smiles and frowns at the same time, like this is the most ridiculous thing he's ever heard—as if he didn't just hear the words coming out of his own mouth. "Who cares?" he says. "She'll still be getting all the things she wants. They'll just be coming from Ryan instead."

"That's not the point." I can't believe I have to explain this to him. "Her mom—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," he interrupts dismissively. "I think you might be a little obsessed, though." He pauses, and his eyes wander over me. He smirks. "You tend to get that way sometimes."

My mouth hangs open. I can't believe he's bringing up what I said a year ago. The conversation I just had with my dad yesterday doesn't help either. I can feel my blood boiling. The longer I stand here in front of him, the closer I come to losing my sanity. I picture what it might be like to wrap my fingers around his neck and squeeze.

"Whatever, though," he says with a shrug. "Good luck planning something that will never have the chance to happen."

He steps past me and heads down the stairs. I take a moment to breathe, cooling myself down before I follow him.

I find Tina and Ryan in the kitchen. Tina has both doors of

her refrigerator wide open while she rummages through the freezer. Oliver stops at the far side of the island counter while I stay on this side. I turn my attention to Tina and Ryan to avoid looking at him. I force a smile so that Tina won't notice how angry I am.

"Sounded like you two had a hell of a workout up there," Ryan says.

"Just a little crash course on treadmill safety," Tina says, still facing the freezer.

"Something tells me there wasn't anything safe about what the two of you were doing," Oliver says.

My eyes slide to him involuntarily. He's watching me. I frown and turn away from him, returning my attention to Tina and Ryan. There's a prickle at the side of my head. I can feel Oliver's stare pulling me back, but I fight it.

Tina finally turns around and sets two tubs of ice-cream on the island. "Do you want any?" she asks.

"Of course." Ice-cream might be just the thing I need to help me cool down. "What kind?"

"Chocolate and strawberry," she says, sliding them in front of me.

I grab the strawberry tub and open it. "You can never go wrong with strawberry," I say, licking my lips.

"Boys?" she says, looking at Ryan and Oliver. "Want some?"

They're still on the opposite end of the island, talking quietly now. Oliver looks up at Tina and shakes his head. "No thanks."

"I'm lactose intolerant," Ryan reminds her.

Tina rolls her eyes. "As if that's ever stopped you before." Then she shrugs. "More for us, then." She hands me a spoon,

then opens the chocolate tub and digs in without putting it in a separate bowl first. I stare at my spoon, then shrug and follow suit.

“Mmm,” Tina moans. “This is so good.”

“So good,” I agree. I don’t realize that I’m moaning too until I open my eyes in time to catch a weird look on Oliver’s face. My cheeks flush. I clear my throat.

“You girls really seem to be enjoying that ice-cream,” Ryan remarks with a smirk.

“I’m having a mouth-gasm,” Tina says. I almost choke on my ice-cream. “It’s almost as good as getting eaten out. Maybe even better.”

It takes a second for her meaning to hit. “Tina! Gross!” I scold, shocked.

She laughs. “What? It’s true.”

“I wouldn’t kno—” I cut myself off, realizing that I’m about to admit to never having experienced what she’s talking about. I pivot, saying, “I wouldn’t compare it to that.”

Nothing gets past Tina, though. “Oh, no. Priss. Please don’t tell me you’ve never had a guy go down on you before.”

She laughs. My face turns redder.

“Wait,” she says, suddenly serious. Her eyes go wide. She glances at the guys, then lowers her voice so they can’t hear. “You’ve never,” she begins, then finishes the sentence by silently mouthing, “been eaten out?”

I make the mistake of sneaking a peek at Oliver. He’s frowning at Tina, but his stare switches to me almost as soon as I look at him. He raises an eyebrow like he’s waiting to hear the answer. I wish I could crawl into a hole and melt away. My face is so hot that I feel like I might. I take a bite of ice-cream to

cool myself down, but all I accomplish is reminding myself of what Tina said about it.

"Of course I've done ... that ... before." I whisper so the guys can't hear, but I'm still ashamed of how unconvincing I sound.

Tina shakes her head. "You poor thing. We need to find someone who can fix that for you."

I don't want to have this conversation. Not in front of Ryan, and certainly not in front of Oliver. I don't care if they can't hear us or if they're having their own conversation. They already know what we're talking about. I should be used to the crass things Tina says by now. I already know that she has no filter. It's one of my favorite things about her, but when it's directed at me, I wish I could crawl away and hide in a hole. I stare at my ice-cream so that I don't have to look at any of them while I muster up the courage to speak again.

"Who needs that anyway, when this ice-cream is clearly so much better?" I ask with a shrug. I eat another spoonful, but I think that Tina might have ruined ice-cream for me.

"Do you want to go to a Knicks game on Sunday?" Ryan asks loudly from across the kitchen.

I'm grateful to him for coming to my rescue, even if he doesn't realize he has. It takes me a moment to realize that no one is answering him. I look up and realize that he's watching me expectantly. Even then, it takes a few more seconds for it to register that his question is directed at me. I look from him, to Tina, and to Oliver. Tina raises an eyebrow. Oliver is still watching me, but he looks away when I meet his eyes. His face looks a little pink. I wonder if I'm imagining it. I return my attention to Ryan.

"Me?" I ask, confused.

"I have four tickets," Ryan clarifies. "I figured we could all go together."

I shrug. "Yeah, sure. Isn't that in the city?"

"We can make a day of it," he says. "We can all drive down together."

I feel my gaze returning to Oliver. He's watching me again, his expression unreadable. His eyes narrow ever so slightly. I feel like he's trying to tell me something, but I don't know what it is.

"Sounds like fun," I say to Ryan.

"Great," he says. He brushes his hand across Tina's back as he makes his way around her, then heads out of the kitchen toward the garage. Oliver follows him out of the room.

Tina skips around the island until she's right next to me. "Oh my God," she whispers. "I can't believe you agreed."

I frown. "To go to a basketball game? Is that so surprising?"

"No," she says, dragging out the word. "To go on a double date."

"That's not what I agreed to."

"Sure it is. Me and Ryan in the front seat. You and Oliver in the back." She says this in a sing-song voice. "The four of us together at a game."

I roll my eyes. "It's just a game. Besides, I fully expect you to sit in the back with me the whole way there and back. Ryan only invited me so that he can have bro-time with Oliver and you won't feel left out."

"Not gonna happen," she says. "And this was Ryan's idea."

I turn my head to look at the door where Oliver and Ryan disappeared. "Ryan suggested a double date? Since when has he been into that sort of thing?"

"I was surprised too," she says with a shrug. "Please don't

back out because of that, though. It will be fun. And if you have an absolutely terrible time with Oliver, then I'll ride in the back with you on the way home."

"Are you kidding? I'm not gonna let Oliver get in the way of me having a good time."

She purses her lips the way she always does when she disagrees with something I've said.

"What?" I prod.

"I mean, you kind of let him get in the way a lot over the last year. The two of you are constantly bickering. Sometimes it seems like you're just looking for reasons to hate each other."

"Exactly," I say, because she does have a point. "I'm done allowing him to stop me from having fun. I'm over it. I'm over him."

She raises an eyebrow. I wait a moment, but she doesn't say anything.

"What?"

She shrugs.

"What was that look for?" I ask.

"Nothing," she says, shrugging again. "There was no look."

"Yeah, there was. Tell me."

Tina sighs. "Well, I wasn't going to say anything, but..."

I roll my eyes. I wait for her to continue because I know that she will, even though it's clear that she wants me to beg.

She leans a little closer and lowers her voice so that she's almost whispering. "You know you can tell me if you still like him, right?"

I'm caught off guard by her question. I frown, parting my lips, but I stammer for a moment, trying to think of why she might think I still like him. The only reason I liked him a year ago was because I didn't know him well enough.

"I don't." I hope that my voice is stern enough that she takes me seriously. "And even if I did, I'm not sure I *could* tell you. You tell Ryan everything."

"Not everything," she says with a wiggle of her ring finger. "I think I'm pretty good at keeping this little secret. I could keep yours, too."

"There is no secret to tell." The thought that she doesn't believe me makes my body feel hot. My face turns red.

"Fine. Whatever. Pretend all you want." She reaches for a wine bottle and pours us each a glass. She hands one to me and then heads into the living room.

"I'm not pretending," I say, following her.

Just as I'm sitting down in one of the two white leather armchairs that match the couch, Oliver and Ryan come back through the door and join us in the living room. Ryan sits next to Tina on the couch, and Oliver sits in the armchair opposite me.

"What were you guys doing in the garage?" Tina asks.

The guys exchange a glance before Ryan answers. "I was just showing Oliver my new rims."

"Pretty sweet," Oliver says.

Tina smirks. "You boys and your toys."

I look at each of them, just now realizing it was a little weird how they both walked out of the room without a word as soon as I agreed to go to the game on Sunday. That, and the way they looked at each other before Ryan answered Tina.

My gaze lingers on Oliver for a minute. He's not looking at me, but he glances at me once before quickly averting his gaze. Only then does it occur to me that this isn't a setup for me and Oliver at all. This should be a relief, except it's not. If Ryan isn't trying to set us up, the only other reason I can think of for him

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wanting me there is that he plans to propose to Tina at the game. The way Oliver avoids my eyes all but confirms it.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I look away from Oliver to see who texted me.

TINA

You're staring an awful lot for someone who is
TOTALLY over him ;)