

# **The Fiche Room**

By Suzie Carr

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**For my Chum.**



## Chapter 1

Everything had to be elaborate with Colin—a flashy proposal, a ten-tier wedding cake, even that useless tissue paper between the invitation and the reception card. I just wanted to get the day over with as quickly and easily as possible.

He had insisted that I listen to our potential wedding singer’s angelic voice. So he had arranged for me to meet her on a Saturday morning. I’d much rather have spent the start of my day relaxing over my easel, feathering the final brush strokes onto my latest painting, than have to listen to some want-to-be pop singer raise her voice high enough to hit the notes in *Ave Maria*.

But being the good fiancée, I decided to go.

As I drove down Main Street, I snuck a peek into my favorite art gallery. Oil paintings hung under the ochre glow of soft lighting. I envisioned an entire wall dedicated to my work, my name, Emma Hill, hanging on a plaque above it. One day I’d get my paintings in there.

*One day.*

I peeled my eyes away from the blissful scene and back onto the road. A scruffy yellow dog stood directly in my path. I panicked, of course, and slammed on my brakes, sending my car screeching into a swerve. Clenching the steering wheel, I managed to straighten out and stop.

That’s when all hell broke loose.

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Tires screeched behind me.

The faces of pedestrians hung in panic.

Then, came the crash; the jolt forward, the crunch, and the head bob.

With my hands still clenched around the steering wheel, I opened my eyes in time to see the dog sniffing the ground as he scurried away untouched by the mayhem.

I managed to climb out, shaken and a bit nauseous from the smell of burnt rubber.

“Are you okay?” Someone asked from behind.

I turned. An attractive woman rushed my way. Her dark auburn waves sprung up in unison with each of her strides.

“I’m just a little shaken.” I met up with her at my rear bumper. “I’m sorry I stopped short on you.”

“No, I take full blame,” she said. “I wasn’t paying attention. I saw the dog crossing the street, and I couldn’t help but watch him. Next thing, I accidentally bumped into you.”

She smelled like she had just stepped out of a bubble bath.

“Well, at least the little guy got away.”

“He was adorable with all those yellow curls.” A smile blossomed on her face, accentuating the hazel color of her eyes.

I stood silent, mesmerized by her beauty and her polished, straight teeth.

“Are you hurt at all?” She touched my arm, and my insides fluttered. I shifted back a step and her hand dropped.

“Hurt? No, not at all.”

A few horns honked behind us.

People gathered by the curbside.

The stench of burnt rubber overpowered the usual smell of crabs and fried food.

She examined my car. “There’s a small dent. The insurance will take

care of it.”

I reciprocated the examination, checking out hers as well. “Yours is a little bent up, too. I’m sure we can even settle out of insurance so our premiums don’t get jacked up.”

The woman placed her hands to her slender hips and gazed into my eyes. “It’s a rental car. I took out their insurance, so we’ll let them take care of everything.” She hesitated before loosening her fix on me.

I gulped in response.

“Are you from Annapolis?” she asked me.

“No, I’m from the next town over. I take it from the rental that you’re not from here, either?”

Horns continued to honk and there we stood in the middle of the road like we owned it.

“I’m from Denver. I’m here on business and am headed to a meeting down the street. I still haven’t had my morning coffee and I’m about to go insane from caffeine withdrawal.”

“Caffeine withdrawal isn’t a good thing.”

“Two things I can’t go without are chocolate and coffee.” She giggled. “Do you know of a place to get a good cup?”

“Yes, I do. In fact, there’s a small café a couple of blocks from here that’s a local favorite.” I hesitated before spilling the directions. Maybe I could treat her? How much harm could one cup of coffee cause? So I’d be a few minutes late for the appointment? The woman’s relaxed, easy-going quality intrigued me. I craved that type of lightheartedness at the moment. My whole existence had come to center around my extravagant wedding and the stressed-out people planning it. “You can follow me, if you want,” I boldly proposed. “With the morning I’m having, I could use another cup.”

“Wonderful! The least I can do is buy you a cup.” She winked at me.

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“We can park down the street.”

We both climbed back into our respective cars, and drove off. She followed a safe distance behind me, but not too far that I couldn't catch a glimpse of her silhouette in my rear-view mirror.

A few minutes later, we arrived. The café, brimming with tourists shouting fancy coffee orders to the attendants behind the green, marbled counter, energized me. The aroma of nutty and robust flavors stimulated my appetite for my delicious morning necessity.

I led her over to the shortest line.

“I'm a boring coffee drinker. I get the plain stuff, medium coffee with a squirt of cream. How about you?” I asked as I reached into my pocketbook to get my wallet.

She wrapped her lotion-soft hand around my wrist. “This is my treat.”

I would've countered the offer with more challenge had I not been so weak from the woman's caressing hold. I cocked my head to one side in agreement and one of my golden tendrils swept across my eye. I left it there momentarily, comforted by its protective shade.

She loosened her grip, letting her hand slide off my wrist in a slow, methodical movement. I forced a giggle, camouflaging the awkward moment.

As we waited, she commented on the wall paintings. She liked how they added to the seaside charm of Annapolis. She looked around as though she had entered a whole new world and saw sailboats and fishnets for the first time.

When our turn arrived, she charged forward ordering our coffees.

“For here or to go?” the woman asked.

“For here, please,” she said.

“I might need mine to go,” I said. “I have an appointment that I need to get to in about,” I glanced at my watch, even though I knew exactly how

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much time I had to spare, “fifteen minutes.”

“Plenty of time. That is if you can chug?” she asked, winking as she scanned the café for a spot to sit.

“Oh, I can chug.” I looked at the order girl. “We’ll drink them here.”

“There’s a table by the window,” she said. “Want to grab it and I’ll bring our coffees?”

I dashed off to save it.

I settled into the two-topper table alongside the bay window. From there, we’d be able to enjoy the quaint pink, yellow, and other bright houses hugging the cobblestone street. The scene always reminded me of a town in America’s *olden days*, the kind of town where the local doctor made house calls and knew your dog’s name. But the influx of tourists on a daily basis ensured that the lantern-lit street, although structured historically, remained as much a part of contemporary times as Park Avenue in New York City did.

The woman walked toward me with two bright-colored, oversized mugs in hand. Her polished waves bounced off her bohemian collared red blouse with each step she took. She had her black leather coat draped over one arm and her red leather pocketbook, with a black and gold appliquéd floral design, dangling from her other. She walked toward me with an energizing skip. With the wide-eyed look of a child on Christmas morning, she scanned the paintings and artifacts covering the walls. Laughing at her own clumsiness as she bumped into our table, she appeared to be a woman in love with life.

“So,” she said, setting the cups on the round table and plopping into the chair across from me, “What’s your name?”

“Emma. And yours?”

She extended her hand in formal gesture. “My name is Halendula, but please call me Haley. I have no idea why my parents wanted their first-born daughter’s name to sound like a botanical herb.”

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I shook Haley's hand. "Sounds like a refreshing botanical herb, at least."

"At the rising rate that I've been bashing my car into others, the name is not living up to itself."

"Well, here's to a safer driving future for us both." I raised my mug in a salute gesture.

She clanked my mug. "I'll toast to that."

I cradled the coffee cup with my hands, massaging its smooth rim with my fingertips, hoping it might relax the nervous jitters in my tummy. "So what brings you into town, Haley?"

"Business." She stirred her coffee. "I work for a clothing designer in Denver and I have a meeting with a well-respected client this afternoon. That means I have to succeed at entertaining her or not dare show my face back at my office come Monday morning."

"Sounds stressful," I said.

"I love it." She wrinkled up her nose. "So how about you? Stress-free job I take it?"

"Nothing as glamorous as the designing world. Just a mundane accounting firm that has lots of white-collared-shirt yuppies waltzing around with their ties too tight."

"Mundane." She sipped, taking that in. "Do you like it?"

"My dad owns it. So I've turned it into something I can like."

Haley leaned in closer, eyes intense with curiosity and whispered, "What's it like working in an accounting firm?"

"You don't want to know," I leaned in closer to her, too. "You're just being polite."

She squinted, appearing to consider her answer carefully before allowing it to escape out of her mouth. "You have me figured out already, don't you?"

I slid forward even more in my seat, suddenly craving to be closer to

the woman's energy. "Let's just say, I'm good at pinpointing certain qualities."

"The observant type I see."

"That's the investigator in me," I said.

"I guess numbers aren't your only forte."

"I'm fairly effective at investigating most anything."

Haley reached into her briefcase and pulled out her business card, and then she handed it to me. "Well, just so you don't dig up too much dirt on me should you decide you need to reach me for anything, I better hand my info over to you. I'd hate to see you uncover my secrets."

How much would she hate for me to do that? By her flirty tone, I seriously doubted at all. I examined the vibrant and colorful card. It was flowery just like her. Corporate Sales Manager — just as I had guessed.

I dug out my card. "I'm afraid, in comparison, my card is just as plain as an accounting firm can get." I handed her the white card with black sans-serif print. "Sorry, it's kind of bent and worn-looking."

She glanced at it before sticking it in her pocket. "My ex-girlfriend worked in the world of finance too."

I drew my hands from the table, folding them tightly on my lap. I shifted, trying to avoid the amused look on Haley's face at my sudden need to close in on myself. "I do need to get going," I said.

"Of course." She rose and extended her hand to me. "Emma, I enjoyed *bumping* into you."

I shook her hand. "The pleasure was all mine." I clutched my pocketbook strap to my shoulder, and then I turned to leave.

"Good luck at that appointment," she called after me.

"Thanks, Haley, you too. Have a safe trip back to Denver."

Pushing the door open, I walked out onto the sidewalk. I walked with a relaxed stride past the window. Her stare penetrated through the glass and

excited my heart. When I cleared her view, I broke into a sprint. I was already ten minutes late for the appointment and still five minutes away from the singer's studio.

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After accomplishing my list of appointments and to-do items that day, I relaxed in a warm bubble bath preparing for the long night ahead. The scent of lavender ran wild through the steamy air and brought images of Haley to my mind. All day, I wrestled with banishing that sweet smile, that sexy-confidence, and that alluring fragrance from my memory.

I'd always secretly been attracted to women and admired them at a distance. None had ever sent ripples through me like Haley had. The magnetic pull was both weird and wonderful. Of course, I wasn't free to indulge in that kind of behavior, regardless how innocent in nature. In fact, I enjoyed very little freedom with running here, there, and everywhere, playing the good fiancée.

The night ahead would prove the most demanding of all.

Our wedding was a little less than a year away. Planning consumed a lot of time. So that evening, to escape the stress, Colin took it upon himself to arrange for us to dine out with old friends of his and their wives. To him, such a social situation was relaxing—to me I'd rather calculate my tax returns. But his two friends were in town for the weekend, and he wanted me to meet them. I hated first meetings. I'd pull myself together though and brace for the night because, hey, I was the good fiancée.

So I scooped myself up and climbed out of the bath. I attempted to tame my wild blonde curls with gel. After that, I refreshed my makeup, climbed into a new outfit, and opened the door to the bathroom.

Colin stood at my kitchen counter, reading a newspaper, oblivious to

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my presence. The guy was blessed with thick brown hair, steel blue eyes, intelligence, and confidence to match. Since my college freshman year, he remained by my side. Now, at twenty-eight years old, I was ninety percent certain I could commit to him for the rest of my life. Ten percent of me still worried if I had decided right when I said yes. Of course, a few months back, when he proposed I didn't hesitate. That might've been largely in part to the hundred people staring at me waiting for an answer. Colin loved being in the spotlight, so logically, he proposed to me with a wide audience of his peers from our office.

My dad had invited the entire firm to a company awards dinner at Lucio's, a swanky restaurant downtown. Well, that awards dinner turned out to be our proposal celebration instead, orchestrated entirely by Colin.

When my dad called Colin up to receive his employee award, he handed him the microphone instead of a plaque. Colin, buffed in his tuxedo, began his oratory with a respectful smile in my direction. He requested that I join him on stage to accept his award.

I've always hated attention, and he knew that. So he couldn't have been surprised when I glared at him for putting me on the spot. However, he had a way of coaxing me with his charming grin. So I inched up to his side. When I got there, he bent down on his knee, took my hand in his, looked deep into my pathetic watery blue eyes and, with perfect articulation, so the crowd could hear, he asked me to be his wife. Under the observant eyes of my co-workers, a wave of pride washed over me. After all, Colin Briggs, a man with respected stature, just asked me to marry him. With tears streaming down my face, more from embarrassment than anything else, I managed to whisper yes. The rest of the evening, we celebrated our engagement in style as we ate, drank, and danced the night away.

My life had not been the same since.



We arrived at the restaurant bar and met up with the other two couples.

A blonde-haired man, at least a few inches taller than Colin's six foot frame, planted a good ole' boy tap on Colin's back. "Hey, man, what's going on?"

Colin stepped back, taking in a full view of his friend. "You're missing something there, Gary." Colin jabbed his friend's well-toned stomach. "Did you stop drinking beer?"

His friend poked his finger into Colin's rock hard abdomen. "Look who's talking. I see you're still spending every second you have on sit-ups."

He rubbed the finely knit cashmere sweater over his stoic stomach with a smug look of pride. "Got that right." Then, he turned to his other friend and embraced him. "Jodes, what's going on, man?"

Jodes, the same height and athletic build as Colin, grimaced and let out an exaggerated grunt, then turned to me. "Who do we have here?"

Colin reached behind his back for me, casting me forward like a puppy he wanted to show off. "Here's my sweetheart, Emma."

I stood vulnerable in front of him, grasping his hands behind my back. Gary and Jodes looked like designer models who stepped off a Paris runway. I cursed myself for opting to let my springy curls run wild. I should've sleeked them back into a poised twist.

Gary swept me into a warm hug. "Emma, Sweetheart, nice to finally meet you." Everything from his Rolex watch down to his Armani Mania cologne, added to his style.

I giggled for no other reason than to release some of my nerves. "Nice to meet you too, Gary."

When he loosened his grip, I turned to Jodes.

"Hi, Emma." he said, extending his hand and pulling me in to plant a

kiss on my cheek. His deep green eyes stood out against his sun-dewed skin. “Don’t worry, I won’t squeeze you. Unlike some people, I have my manners.”

“Ouch,” I said, exchanging a playful look between the two men.

Jodes reached behind him and tapped a woman with dark-auburn hair on her shoulder. “Stacy, come meet Emma.”

Stacy moved forward into our circle. “Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” I said right back to her.

The other wife moved in at that point. Her chunky golden highlights rested on her dark hair so perfectly. She stood taller than Colin. She traced my outfit with a judging eye. “I’m Rachel, Gary’s wife.”

“Nice to meet you.”

We exchanged pleasantries before they turned inward on themselves again.

I turned back to their husbands.

“Emma, what’ll it be to drink for you, Sweetheart?” Gary asked.

“A glass of wine would be perfect,” I said.

“I’m getting a little jealous that you’re calling my fiancée sweetheart,” Colin said, reaching for his wallet. “I’ll buy this round.”

“Oh no you don’t. No using your good-boy charm on the women here. This is my round,” Gary said.

Colin backed down.

“Hey, Colin, I have a treat for us. Brought our favorites,” Jodes handed him a cigar.

Colin placed it under his nose and slid it back and forth sniffing it. “Thanks, buddy. I’ll look forward to enjoying this after dinner.” He stuffed it in his breast pocket on the inside of his sports coat.

Cigars. Could anything be worse? What a turn-off to see puffs of dirty smoke clouding his face. I never understood the lure. I tried a drag of one

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once at a bachelorette party and got sick to my stomach.

Colin winked at me.

I forced a smile.

He pulled me in to him, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I’m fine.” I forced my voice to sound sing-song.

“Lighten up. It’s a cigar.”

I wanted a nice dinner, not a fight. So I swallowed my complaint and kissed his cheek.

“Hmm, we’ll pick up at this spot later,” he said in a husky voice, pulling me closer to him and glancing up to wink at the boys.

I pulled away in time to grab a glass of red wine from Gary. I hoped to end up tipsy in case Colin had cigar breath later.

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Through dinner, the conversation went from one bad topic to another as the guys started their one-up routines while debating local politics. The women wrapped themselves in a deliberation about the world of yoga, which I knew nothing about. So with my lack of contribution, I could’ve choked and they wouldn’t have paid me any less mind. So I fell into a fog, wishing I could rest my head on the table and take a nap while they all finished their boring repartee.

I wanted to go home.

Then, the conversation got even more painful, as the men and women catalogued their latest career accomplishments—Gary became a partner at his law firm, Stacy sealed a contract with Washington’s premier developer to add a half a million dollar addition onto her spa, Rachel, a psychiatrist, appeared in a recent *New York Times* article as a leading expert, and Jodes planned a campaign to run for Senate.

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In between shoving pieces of bread in my mouth, I panicked. A horrible scene played in my head; one where I had to tell them my life story, the one that included my title, my nick-named title — fiche girl. Yeah, no matter how much I could've colored the truth on that one, I couldn't deny the lack of glory in pulling account statement records in the fiche room at my dad's firm.

I didn't plan on being fiche girl forever. I was an artist. But I needed someone to take notice and offer me my big break.

Colin busied himself in nursing his brandy. He missed my flushed face and averted eyes.

I relaxed into my bowl of noodles when they started talking football. Blocking out the table around me, I drifted my eyes around the restaurant. I couldn't take another minute with those people who lived in a world so far from my reality.

I excused myself, though no one noticed. I walked toward the ladies' room, and my eyes focused on a table of two college-aged women, with long, flowing, silky hair. They were leaning across the table entranced in their conversation. They laughed, the kind that originates deep inside, as one of the women spit a little of her drink onto the table. They looked comfortable, down-to-earth and fun, like Haley.

I entered the regal bathroom, with its brass-trimmed mirrors and granite basins, and walked into a stall. I closed the door and leaned against it. My mind drifted to the woman I'd met earlier that day and how different she was in personality from those two snobby women who sat at my table that evening. Her spirit refreshed me. With her, I had been witty, likable, and even surprisingly more comfortable than I'd imagined I could be in that circumstance.

I also felt sexy. When had I last felt that way?



## Chapter 2

Monday morning, I merged onto the clogged Beltway to enter the rat race. I crawled toward Silver Spring, pondering Saturday night's dinner the entire time. Nothing, outside of morphing into a high society woman, could've prevented the night from being a total emotional blowout.

To impress, I would've had to lie, to fake interest in the women's intense yoga diatribe, or pretend to be an avid fan of political rhetoric. Yoga was yoga, and I knew all I wanted to know about the activity, which in my opinion consumed too much of my memory already from the little I'd heard. I didn't care that Stacy could maintain her one-footed stance for five minutes, up from three minutes the week before.

I hated to fake interest.

Colin loved it.

When he cared to get to know someone, he always managed to appear intrigued with everything that person said. In many ways, he manipulated people, getting them to believe he cared about their opinions.

Me? I didn't have it in me to pretend like him. That's why I liked working in the fiche room. Contained within its small confines was my private office, my oasis.

I entered the room an hour later, checking the mail slot for research requests before venturing to my desk. Five reps requested information on accounts, enough to keep me busy without interrupting my real goal of the

workday — to complete my sketch for Tatiana, my best friend Goldie’s little girl.

My passion for drawing and painting started when I finger painted as a little girl with my mom. Now as an adult, I craved art, and studied about brush strokes and shading every chance I had. I brought my sketchbook into work every day and drew in between research requests.

Before I dove into Tatiana’s sketch though, my dad walked through the door. He rarely visited me in the fiche room. If he wanted to see me, he usually summoned me to his cushy office suite upstairs.

“Emma!” He opened his arms for a hug.

I fell into them. He smelled like fresh aftershave. “What brings you down here, Dad?”

“I needed a reason?” He stepped back. He fit the mold of a typical businessman, dressed in a tailor-made Ralph Lauren suit that emphasized his healthy, six-foot frame with exquisite perfection.

“What’s going on?” I asked, cautiously.

“Colin and I talked the other day.”

I circled my fingers around my sapphire earring, easing into what I surmised would follow his statement. “And?”

He placed his hands on my shoulders. “You need to move upstairs.”

I pulled away from him and walked to the window. “Dad, we’ve talked about this already.”

“I’m closing in on retirement, Em. Colin and I both agree that it’s time.”

I spun around to face him. “I don’t like that you discuss my career with him.”

“He’s eventually going to play a major role in this company. So he needs to be brought in on these types of discussions.”

“I understand he should be in on employee discussions, but I’m not comfortable with it being mine.”

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“I’m sorry. This is business. Colin’s input is valuable to me.”

I squeezed my arms around my chest, digging my fingers into my sides. “I don’t want to move upstairs, Dad.”

“It’s best. You’ve been wasting your time down here for too long.” His voice echoed off the barren walls.

Moving upstairs was not an option for me. Being an accountant was his dream for me. Certainly, not mine. The more I avoided propelling forward with his dream, the harder he pushed.

“I’m not wasting my time, Dad.”

He shifted his sharp blue eyes around the room with a look of disgust, as though caged within the confines of a dirty, rat-infested prison cell. “Why do you like being trapped in this dungeon?”

“You wouldn’t understand why I like it.”

I could illustrate all day in my secluded refuge. Working in the fiche room allowed me to earn money while pursuing my art. The view out of the window, the large workspace, and the isolation inspired me. How could a number-driven professional ever understand that?

His brows lowered over his puzzled eyes. “I don’t want my staff to assume that this is as good as it gets for you. How could this be enough?” he asked.

My mouth flew open. “You’re embarrassed of me?”

“I don’t get it, that’s all.”

The humming sound of the fluorescent lights covered the silence as I struggled to gain footing. “I’m happy with what I’m doing for now.”

“How can you be happy thumbing through a bunch of microfiche, being behind the scenes, and having no face within this company?”

“It’s enough for me. I don’t need the glory.”

“You deserve glory. You deserve to be visible and in a role that accentuates your intelligence. I didn’t send you to college so you could stare

at microfiche all day.”

One day, I'd have all the glory I needed, once someone discovered me. Until then, I'd strive to make the dream a reality in the comfort and privacy of my fiche room. One day, I'd make my dad proud—my way.

“Don't worry, Dad. I won't stare at microfiche for the rest of my life. I promise.”

“I want you to be happy, Emma. There's an office waiting for you upstairs when you're ready to get serious.”

He had no idea what brought me happiness. I knew which office he meant, and for me to move into that fishbowl would bring me ultimate misery. In there, everyone could monitor my daily routines; when I ate my morning apple, when I ventured to the bathroom, and when I put on lipstick. But most troubling, I'd have to work with numbers all day.

“Let me get through tax season and the wedding first, Dad.”

“Don't sell yourself short. Promise me, after tax season at least, you'll consider the move?”

Inwardly, I groaned, but countered his request with a cheerfulness that would comfort him. At least, I owed him the hope that he had a daughter who gave weight to his opinion. I always saved face with him. With the facade of a person in contemplation, I winked at him. “I promise to consider it, Dad.”

“Good enough. I've got to get back upstairs. I'll see you later,” he said, then kissed my cheek.

As he turned to leave, I watched my steel-haired dad walk away, leaving in his wake his familiar fresh scent. Even at his most unreasonable, I adored him.

I hated to let him down.

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As the day progressed, I raced through each research request, hoping to make up some time to sketch. With each completed assignment, a new one barged in and robbed me of downtime. By five o'clock, with my eyes red and swollen from glaring at the microfiche machines, I left the fiche room. Even though I hadn't finished Tatiana's picture, I decided to stop by Goldie's anyway. A visit with her always lightened me up.

As I got in my car, I realized Colin hadn't been in to see me at all that day. I drove out of the parking garage, and veered off to the back of the building where I could see his office. Driving past his window, I noticed that the gold and green desk lamp I'd given him as a Christmas present two years ago lit the room, which meant he hadn't left work yet.

In the past three years that we worked together, no matter how much work buried him, he never failed to visit or call me during a workday. Maybe I had embarrassed him the other night. I didn't complain about the dreadful night. In fact, I led him to believe I had a great time with the snobs. What else could've I done?

As usual, I ignored the urge to confront him. Instead, I pressed my gas pedal and drove on by. Whatever problem lurked, it would resolve itself over time. It always did.

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I arrived on Goldie's street and shimmied into a tight spot outside her front door. She didn't live far from the café where Haley and I had coffee. I closed my eyes, sealing in the memory, experiencing all over again the allure of her teasing smile; her sweet smelling perfume; the way her hips moved side to side in perfect rhythm.

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Snapping back, I climbed out of my car and breathed in the misty, mild February night air. Besides an isolated dog bark, the street sat quiet.

When Goldie buzzed me into the stairwell, Tatiana whipped open the door to their apartment and jumped down the steps two at a time to meet up with me. The little girl squealed, “Tia, I have something to show you.” When within my reach, she grabbed my arm and pulled me up the stairs. “Come on. Hurry!”

“What? No hug for your Tia?” I planted my feet on the bottom step, not allowing the bubbly little girl to budge me.

Tatiana turned and threw her small arms around my hips and squeezed me. “Guess what?” she asked, her voice muffled by my suede skirt. “I’m going to be in a ballet recital.”

I smoothed her wild curls away from her forehead and tucked them behind her little ears. “Can I go and see you dance?”

“Well, I don’t know. I only get two tickets and Mama’s boyfriend might want to come too,” she said, leading me up the staircase again.

I stopped short. “Mama has a boyfriend?”

“Yup, Charlie,” she said, yanking harder on my arm.

Once I entered the apartment, the delicious aroma of Goldie’s signature dish, Tamales, caused my mouth to water. She fiddled around in the kitchen wearing a red, chili-peppered apron. She offered me a nod, and her kinky, dark-brown hair, piled high on top of her head, flapped in unison.

Tatiana pointed to her newest piece of furniture, looking like one of those models on *The Price is Right*. “Tia, try out my new bean bag chair.”

I plopped down on the spongy green and yellow plastic, sending a whoosh sound through the room. It momentarily drowned out the noisy cartoons. “Ah, this is so comfortable. Mind if I take a quick nap?” I closed my eyes and pretended to snore.

She giggled and pushed me off the lumpy sack onto the pine board floor.

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Then, she hopped back on it before I had the chance. I surrendered to my knees and crawled over to the black leather couch.

“Emma, can you come in here, please,” Goldie called from the kitchen nook.

I walked in to find her standing on a chair, stretching her five foot body to reach the top shelf of her cupboard. Exasperated, she jumped down and landed perfectly on her high heels with a poignant thud. “Can you please help me get the glass bowl from up there?”

I braced my hands on the back of the chair and propped up, then steadying, retrieved the bowl. “Why didn’t you tell me you have a new boyfriend?” I handed the bowl down to her.

“And ruin the surprise?”

I scrutinized her, arching my brow to play up a critical eye.

“Don’t give me that *I’m disappointed in you* look,” she said.

“Is it serious?”

She strained against the question, rolling her dark-brown eyes back.

“Well?” I searched her face for a hint.

She lolled her head up and down. “Kind of, Em. I like this one.”

She never admitted that she liked any of the guys she dated. “Can I meet him?”

“Hang on.” She dashed off down the hallway leading to her bedroom. Her leather pants squeaked with each step she took.

I ventured back into the living room and sat with Tatiana who had settled in to watch the cartoons on the television. She wrapped her small hand around mine and pillowed her head against the crook in my arm.

Within a few moments, Goldie emerged from the hallway with a tall, big, scruffy-looking man behind her. He wore his long hair pulled back at the nape of his neck exposing a coarse, disheveled beard that blanketed his face. He sported black leather boots, ripped jeans, and a faded orange t-shirt

with a smiley face on the front. The man didn't look at all like the handsome Latino men Goldie had dated in the past.

“Emma, I'd like you to meet Charlie. Charlie, this is Emma.”

I rose, and he stepped forward and shook my hand. His smile revealed his crooked teeth. “It's finally nice to meet you,” he said.

Finally? How long had it been going on for? I studied him until Goldie threw me a covert warning. I cleared my throat. “It's finally nice to meet you, too.”

“You two sit and get to know each other. I'll finish getting dinner together.” Goldie rushed back into the kitchen nook, leaving us to fend for ourselves.

Glasses clanked as Goldie rummaged through her cupboard for pans. Meanwhile, I sat with the stranger watching cartoons. Baffled, I kept glancing at him out of the corner of my eye.

He laughed when Tatiana laughed, which intensified her giggles.

Tatiana liked him.

She drew her little face away from the screen to watch him laugh. In between chuckles, he'd glance over at me and offer an awkward smile.

One thing was obvious; we both didn't enjoy first meetings. That commonality facilitated the first run of words to escape from my mouth with more ease than normal. “So Charlie, what do you do for fun?” I finally asked him.

He turned to me, “I'm a guitarist in a local rock band, Wayside.”

I rocked my head back and forth to appear interested. “A rock band, huh?”

“We play in small bars around Elkridge, Savage, and Laurel. If you ever want to come hear us, tell the bouncers that you know me and you'll get in for free.”

“Thanks, that's nice of you to offer.” Then, itching for more info, I

asked, “How long have you been doing that for?”

“Long enough time to know playing music is what I love to do.” He left Tatiana on her beanbag chair and joined me on the couch. “Goldie tells me that you’re an artist?”

I shook my head up and down, surprised to hear someone call me an artist. “I just doodle.”

“Tatiana showed me a bunch of sketches you drew. They’re good.”

A smile blossomed on my face. “Thanks.”

“Do you sell your work?”

His ridiculous question caught me by surprise. “God, no! I’m not there, yet.”

“Not there, yet? What are you waiting for?”

“Well, it’s not easy to make a living as an artist. Though, I’m trying.”

“I know I don’t look like the type, but I visit art museums all the time and collect pieces. You should promote your work at a museum. Start out at those starving artist showings.”

I couldn’t hide my pride. Under that rough exterior, he knew how to massage a woman’s ego.

Tatiana jumped on his lap, pooling her strawberry colored skirt around her legs as she got settled. “Tia says she didn’t even go to school for art.”

“Oh, really?” He directed the question to her earnest eyes.

“I learned everything from reading books and studying other art,” I explained.

He lunged forward on the couch, shifting Tatiana to his other knee. “Even more talented than I suspected, then. Maybe I could contract you out for a job I want done?”

I blushed. No one, besides Tatiana and Goldie, ever paid that type of attention to my work before. My dad and Colin referred to my love for art as a fanciful fascination. They never understood my passion for it. They

never even asked to see any of my art. They had no idea what kind of art I created.

“What kind of a job?”

“I have this view overlooking my terrace that would look incredible as a painting. I live on the Patuxent River and so the backdrop is a wooded scene with all my birdhouses and even a small tree house I built for my son, Cliff. How much would it cost me to have you draw that scene for me?”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“Completely.” He lifted Tatiana off his lap, and she hopped on one foot over to her beanbag.

I never charged anyone for my artwork. I couldn’t name a price. “I can’t charge you.”

“Five-hundred?” he asked.

My mouth dropped open. “No, I could never charge you that. I’m an amateur, Charlie.”

“I’ve seen your work. You’re not an amateur.”

In the dim-lighted living room, his face softened.

Goldie ducked her head around the kitchen corner, “Em, you’re staying for dinner, right?”

I consented with a smile. “Sure, why not?”

“Do you want to see if Colin is brave enough to come over and visit with us too?”

Anyone who ever observed Goldie and Colin in their respective worlds would understand that they could never get along. They differed way too much. No way would I invite him over for dinner. Colin wouldn’t give Charlie the time of day. I could hear his condescending, judgmental comments. I could never picture Colin discussing nine irons and Wall Street with him.

“He’s busy tonight. I’m flying solo,” I said, then turned back to Charlie

to talk about the drawing he wanted me to create.

~ ~

The next morning when I entered the fiche room, I shot straight to the back. I couldn't wait to get started on a sketch. I sat at the table toward the back of the room, facing the door. A pile of old files sat in front of me, hiding my work. I opened to a fresh page and began drawing. I sketched some roses. As I shaded the petals with a hue of pink, I pictured the bright pink house in Annapolis, the one from the café window's view. Stopping mid-sketch, I turned to a fresh page and began drawing the house, with its scalloped trim and sharp roof pitch. I recreated the home just as I remembered it, charming and welcoming.

I imagined Haley sitting in the café, viewing the house. I opened to another new page and drew a sketch of Haley at the same café table where we sat that day sipping coffee. I sketched her big smile and the dimple on her right cheek. Then, I penciled in her big, expressive seaweed-colored eyes and wavy hair falling in soft layers on her shoulders. Next, I drew the locket that hung around her neck, just as I remembered it, heart-shaped with a smooth surface and diamond-cut edges. I added the silhouette of her shoulders and collarbone line.

A defined collarbone on a woman was so sexy. Haley's was definitely well-defined.

I stared at her sketch. She looked pretty and just as I remembered her.

With my finger, I traced her cheekbone. Then, I moved down to her neckline and to her collarbone. I could smell her perfume, clean and refreshing. I imagined the enticing jolt that would result from touching her smooth skin. I closed my eyes to drink in the flutters, the quivers, and the wetness between my legs.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

I slammed the book shut.

I jumped up, shoved the sketchbook back into my bag, and sprang to the door.

I needed to take a walk, get out of the fiche room, and grab a cup of coffee at the cafeteria. Something to bring normalcy back to my reality.

I set off, barreling down the hall to get that coffee. I smiled at every guy that passed me. And as though they'd be able to sense the short, erotic ride I ended moments earlier, I avoided all eye contact with every woman.

I was not normal.

How could I be normal? Those weird bouts popped up a lot. But not like the latest one. Haley was real, not some fantasy in a magazine.

My head whirled in a tailspin from her.

I started liking girls when I was in eighth grade. I developed my first real crush on a girl named Alison. She sat diagonally in front of mine. She had shapely calves and well-defined arms. She'd wear tight t-shirts that enhanced her developing breasts. I'd stare at her, admiring her eloquent profile as the teacher droned on about algebraic formulas. Then, she had caught me staring. I could never meet her eye again. I fought the urge to stare at another female since.

I had a definite affinity to females. I couldn't deny the attraction. In movies, watching two women kiss left me wanting in on the action. On the flip side, watching a woman and man kiss, left me wanting to take a popcorn break.

I thought about going to a gay club one night, kissing a woman, and getting the whole thing out of my system before the wedding. I wanted to experience kissing and pleasing a woman. I fantasized about that all the time. I could imagine the horror I'd cause if my dad, Goldie, or Colin knew about that inner secret. So instead of experimenting, I did what I always did when those cravings crossed my mind, I denied them.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

I wanted to protect the wholesome image as much for them as I did for myself.

~ ~

Within a few minutes, coffee in hand, senses back in check, I returned to the fiche room vowing to stay focused on work all day.

I checked the slot for new requests. One stared me in the face. In big red lettering, Shawn Esposito scribbled, URGENT, at the top of page with a lopsided smile.

I headed straight to the microfiche file cabinets for the daily reports dating back to five years prior. The drawer for the earliest ones I needed was located on the bottom, which meant I had to kneel on the dirty floor while I fished out the packets. Bent over the drawer, I began my ordeal.

Then the telephone rang—two short rings melded together—which signaled an internal call. Climbing to my feet, I ran over to answer it.

“Research Room,” I said.

“Did you read my e-mail, yet?” Colin asked.

I hadn’t heard from him since our date Saturday night. “Good morning to you, too.”

“Well, did you?”

“I haven’t gotten around to even opening my inbox yet.”

“I sent a request down to you that needs top priority. I have an angry client threatening to send his lawyers after me because he claims we were wrong with his balance sheets for the past two years. I worked this case. I’m confident I didn’t screw up anything. I need to see his history anyway.”

“I’ll log in right away.”

“How long will this take?” he asked, softening his tone.

“Is half an hour okay?”

“I’ll come down and get it,” he said. “Love you, Sweetheart.”

I went to my computer and logged into e-mail. Fifteen new messages. I clicked on the button to check new messages and deleted the daily newsletter, the morning meeting notes, the announcement for recent merges. Then, Haley’s name popped up on the next one.

My heart flip-flopped. I leaped from my seat and paced the floor.

Haley had emailed me.

Did I intrigue her, too? Maybe she had mistook my being nice for flirting?

I stopped in front of the computer and stared at her name on screen.

I was a teenager again, goofy and giddy, acting ridiculous.

Vying for control, I skipped her message. I continued my search for Colin instead. After printing his request and retrieving the appropriate microfiche, I settled into research mode. I scanned for history details on John Peterman Jr.’s balance sheets. As I scanned financial details, Haley’s unopened e-mail continued to tease me. The longer I resisted reading the message, the more curious I became.

I had to read her e-mail.

I surrendered and opened the message, releasing her words onto my screen.

“Just checking in to see how you’re doing. I enjoyed having coffee with you the other day. Maybe next time I’m in town we can grab dinner? I’m coming back to Maryland in two weeks to seal that contract. Looks like I succeeded at entertaining that client. I opened with the story of my mid-morning fender-bender. My boss was happy and I was too, seeing I still have a job and even earned a few brownie points. Anyway, I hope we can “bump into” each other again in two weeks.”

The last sentence, sitting three-dimensional above the rest, set my heart racing. Maybe I did have something to be concerned about, after all.

## Chapter 3

Colin stood in the fiche room glaring at the history statements I had printed for him minutes before. Shaking his head side to side, he scratched the red blotches that sprouted up all over his freshly-shaven neck and face.

I ran my hand along his forearm. “Why are you so worried?”

He studied my face, “There’s a big mess.”

“I’m sure everything will be fine.”

Dark circles pulled at his eyes. Frown lines formed along his forehead. “Come here,” he said, pulling me into a tight hug.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He squeezed me tighter. “I may have calculated Peterman’s statements wrong, cutting the guy’s profits by over twenty-five thousand dollars. I can’t find the money trail anywhere.”

I forced myself free and stepped back. “How did that happen?”

He looked out the window at the runners in the park across the firm’s front yard, avoiding my stare. He wore his proficiency like a suit. He didn’t know how to screw up.

“There’s tremendous pressure, Em. I’m trying to impress your father, trying to gain credibility amongst my peers, and I’m trying to do this at the same time that I’m carrying a heavier client load than ever before.”

He could always handle pressure. That was the one trait I adored about him, the one trait I wished more than anything else I possessed. How could

he screw up what came so natural to him? “It’s not like you to overlook something this important.”

He swung back at me. “That doesn’t help me.”

I clutched his hand. “I’m sorry. This can be fixed. I’ll help you get through it.”

He never cowered under pressure. But with each second that passed, his lips trembled. The miscalculation scared him more than he admitted. When I expected him to recant the helplessness of the past few minutes, he surprised me and continued to confess his troubles. “I’m not sure how your dad is going to react. I don’t want him to find out.”

If he weren’t engaged to me, my dad might’ve fired him on the spot. A twenty-five thousand dollar mistake at Hill Financial would not slide by unnoticed for just any employee. As his daughter’s future husband though, my dad would work it out. He’d sweep the situation far away from them. We were both aware though that a piece of my dad’s respect for him would disappear along with it; respect that Colin labored to earn and aspired to keep sacred. Under all his expensive clothes and fine jewelry, I could tell, that Colin felt about as secure as a clumsy person on a tightrope.

I swallowed my unease. “Everything will work out. Remember, you’re marrying Emma Hill—the boss’s daughter.”

His strong fingers wrapped around my wrist. “Promise me that you won’t say anything to him until I figure this out myself?”

“This is a big deal. Shouldn’t he know about it?”

“No, he doesn’t need to know.” His fingers caressed the skin along my arm. “I want a chance to straighten this out on my own.”

“Why did you tell me, then? You know I don’t like to keep things from him.”

“I told you because I need your help in researching into this more. You know these machines and microfiche better than anyone does. I need you to

find out where that money went.”

Something amazing had just happened. He saw purpose in my work. He needed me. As swift as a brush stroking canvas, I switched gears from fiche girl to trusted partner. “I’m sure there’s a trail for it. There always is. I’ll get started on this right away.”

He cradled his tamed hands onto my shoulder and gazed into my eyes. “I love you so much, Em.”

“My father better not get into trouble over this.”

In his customary way, he kissed the tip of my nose, my left eyelid, and my right one. “You have my word. Everything will turn out fine.”

Everything always turned out fine when it came to him.

~ ~

Once he left, I reread Haley’s email again. Her carefree attitude spilled over into her words. I could picture her bouncing her fingers on the keyboard just as she bounced on air when she walked.

What a refreshing woman.

A dinner with her would be a treat.

Could I control myself?

Should I even consider it?

What if we hit it off?

How could I not go, though? The dinner would be a harmless get-together.

I couldn't miss it.

So I settled on yes.

I typed my response, setting my words free.

I enjoyed having coffee with you, too. And I’d love to have dinner when you’re back in town. I’ll take you to a local favorite. Oh, and congratulations

on keeping that job of yours. Though, I seriously doubt you needed to cash in on any brownie points! I'm looking forward to having dinner. Emma.

Without hesitating, I clicked SEND and returned to my research, struggling to keep a big smile from taking over my entire face.

~ ~

Like most frustrated people, I experienced most of the sexually-charged scenes in life vicariously through characters in books, movies, or television. I'd yet to experience mind-blowing sex with Colin or anyone for that matter.

When I first met him, he courted me with late phone calls, fancy dinner dates, and surprise visits at my dormitory. He was the good-looking, impressive guy on my arm; someone I could be proud to take home and show off to my dad. I won my dad's respect and approval being with him.

I lost my virginity with him. When he rolled off me my first time, I wanted it to be my last. Something went wrong because I didn't experience any of the things my friends spoke about, the gasping for breath, the bucking, and the great sprint toward that moment of euphoria. None of that. In fact, I never wanted to have sex again.

During our college days, he'd sneak into my room nearly every night to have sex. Each time, I waited for that intoxicating pleasure everyone talked about. It never came. I yearned to experience an orgasm, but it never happened. Not with him, anyway.

I learned early on how to create bliss for myself. In the quiet depths of my candlelit bath, I'd relax and sink into satisfaction as I explored my own body. I'd fantasize about the soft lips of a woman caressing my nipples, circling them with her tongue until they hardened. I imagined the warm breath against my skin as the mystery woman traveled delicately down my tummy to my navel, teasing as she nipped my skin and hovered over the area

inches from where pleasure waited.

When Colin wanted to be physical, I'd close my eyes and attempt to ignore the rough facial hair that scratched at my skin. I'd imagine caressing a beautiful, gentle woman instead. When I'd kiss his chest, I'd imagine sucking on a woman's nipple. My secret fantasy would send my fingers clawing and my back arching. Then, snuffed out by guilt, the joy would fizzle right before entering the depths of intoxication.

Our intimate needs didn't match. He showered me with affection, and I withdrew from it. He loved holding my hand when driving in the car or when walking through the mall. I searched for any reason to claim my hand back, like with a scratch or a fake sneeze. I found no comfort in holding his hand.

Colin offered companionship; someone I could go to the movies with, eat out with, and spend holidays with. He fit into my life, in the sense of having a boyfriend. I could envision having a family with him and living at the end of a cul-de-sac. I'd be on the PTA, and Colin would coach our kid's soccer games.

I had a great friend in him despite our bickering, which occurred more frequently with the stress of the wedding.

The big problem for me — I lacked the silly fun that came with the friendships of girls. Sure, I had Goldie. But she was more the discerning type. We'd been friends since we were ten-years-old. I could trust her. She was the friend I turned to when I needed firm ground, a wake-up call, and a reality check.

Sometimes though, I craved to let loose. Which is why, when Haley's e-mail reply alert popped up on my screen a few minutes after I sent my email, I sprinted to my desk to read it. I tried my best to take in a full breath of air, but couldn't.

I suspected she could let loose.

With my throat dry and head spinning, I clicked into her message.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

“Hey Emma, dinner at your local favorite restaurant, what could be better?”

My body temperature spiked. I typed, “Well, I don’t know, Haley, what could be better than that, huh?”

A second later, she wrote, “I can’t say at this moment that anything sounds more interesting than spending a night dining with a gal from Maryland. I can’t wait to hear all the fun stuff that goes on in the life of a Marylander.”

I needed to breathe. I began to short circuit. I inhaled deeply, scanning my desk for something normal, something common to focus on. I plucked up the picture of me and my dad eating king crab legs together at a company party the summer before. We each had on those plastic bib-aprons, and we smiled for Colin as he took the picture.

Crabs and beer. Perfect. “Oh, you mean like how we love to have a few good laughs over a table of crabs and beer?”

“The closest I get to eating crab around here is when I have to pay overly-inflated prices for supposed fresh crab. Or when I stroll by my neighborhood grocery store freezer and fog up the windows as I try to find the crab with the most recent date on it. Of course, the crab is always the bottom box toward the back,” she wrote.

“I had a nice place in mind to take you if you had accepted my invitation. But maybe I should dump that idea and bring you straight to a local favorite crab restaurant. I’d have to warn you, though. It’s dingy and in the basement of a banquet hall.”

“Hmm, the choices are tempting—dark restaurant crawling with crabs or a nice place. How about both?”

“How long will you be in town?”

“I’ll be free one night this time around. Then, I come back a month and half later for another business meeting, so I’ll be free another night at that

point.”

“Well, then, it’s settled. I will take you to the nice place the first night and the dingy crab place the second time around.”

“We can do the dingy place first,” she wrote.

“I don’t want to leave you with the impression that Marylanders are savages dining without plates, bashing crabs with an actual hammer and sucking the juices from meager meat-filled legs the first time out on the town. I need to break you into that slowly so when you go back to Denver and tell all your friends about us here, you’ll be able to tell them we’re a classy bunch.”

“I can already see that. You’d make any Marylander proud.”

I leaned back against my chair and looked to the drop-ceiling tiles, trying to steady myself against the breathless spinning. I stared at the big dipper one, as I liked to call it. The unique tile rested directly above my head, and when I reclined and stared at it long enough, the tiny crevices formed the big dipper.

Sitting upright again, I typed. “Well, I’m anxious to have you tell me all about how Denver gals have fun. That is when you’re not chatting with a stranger from across the country.”

“Oh, we’re past the stranger phase now. Right?”

The question spun another release of euphoria. What a tease. “I like to think so.”

“You don’t sound convinced,” Haley wrote. “Let’s see. How can I fix that? Let me tell you a little more about how we have fun here. You should know that I hold the title for the longest winner in Lou’s Café’s Karaoke contest.”

“Is this the Denver karaoke spot or some fly-by-night establishment for amateurs?”

“This is the place to sing. Winners get their pictures taken and are added

to the Great Wall of Winning Singers. My picture embellishes the center of the wall, with a ribbon that Lou created for me that says Our Best Winner Yet.”

“Wow, I’m impressed. The most I ever got for winning any karaoke contest is applause and a few lingering claps from an audience member, drunk against the back wall. Wait. I take that back. I did once win twenty-five bucks! I sang ‘Anticipation.’ What’s your song?”

“Promise me you won’t judge me on my artist selection. I’m asking because I like you. I don’t want you to never email me back for what I’m about to reveal,” she wrote.

“I promise. Now let’s have it.”

“I’m a John Denver freak. Yes, I know, I got the whole country thing going on, but I like it. Can’t deny it. His music speaks to my heart.”

“I had you pegged for more of a Dave Matthews Band fan, but I can understand the whole John Denver thing. You want to know something funny? I have John Denver’s entire collection,” I wrote.

I opened my desk drawer. My John Denver CD sat on top of my others. I stared at the picture of him with his guitar strung over his shoulder singing to a crowd. His Greatest Hits CD remained my favorite.

“I happen to have a few DMB CDs right in front of me as I type this out to you. So you were spot on with me.”

“So which one of Denver’s songs do you enjoy to sing the most?” I asked.

“I have three. ‘Calypso’, ‘Rocky Mountain High’, and ‘Annie’s Song’.”

“Three of his absolute best. I could listen to ‘Calypso’ over and over again. When you come to town, I may have to drag you out so I can hear this winning voice first-hand.” I removed the CD from its case and placed it in the CD player. I went right to song selection twelve to hear John’s voice and the whistling rhythm of the open sea fill the room.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

“I’m warning you that I’m a ham. Once you get me up on stage, there’s little anyone can do to get me down, aside from physically throwing me. If you’re up to that challenge, I’m in,” Haley wrote.

“If you start singing John Denver, you may find that people will throw you off the stage. But I promise that I’ll try my best to catch you. Though, I wouldn’t take too much comfort in that. I mean, I practically fainted when you bumped into my car. I can’t imagine what I’d do if you came flying through the air at me.”

“Hopefully, you’d step out of the way so that I don’t mess with that pretty face of yours.”

My face flushed. I played with my springy curls, imagining her sitting in front of me and gazing at me with those big, playful eyes.

“How nice of you to say. But I couldn’t stand there and watch your pretty face crash into the floor either. What kind of a host would I be?”

“I’d still come back for another visit.”

I opened my briefcase and removed my sketchbook, opening to the picture I drew of her. I smoothed my hand over the drawing. What about her piqued my interest so much? She was a fun character to draw with that bouncy hair and long, sleek neck. Imagine her up on stage singing and getting the crowd going? What a blast that would be. “I should take you there after we have our crab fest, the second time you come. We’ll have had a few beers by then, so you’ll be loosened up to sing your heart out.”

“So you mean in case I get thrown to the floor, any backlash I get from the crowd will blur from the beer buzz?”

“Yes, of course,” I joked. “I meant that I want to hear you sing without limits.”

“Even if I had the worst voice in the world, which of course my picture hanging at Lou’s proves to me I’m far from that, I’d sing freely even without the help of beer.”

“Ah, a bold one, I see,” I wrote.

“Totally.”

Just then, the door opened. I minimized my email screen in one quick move. Then, I swiveled in my seat to face the mailroom guy.

He flung the interoffice envelope on the counter before leaning his body up against it in his usual swaggering stance. “Hey Emma, what’s going on?”

“Hey, John.”

The guy could talk if I let him. Most days I enjoyed his visits, but at that moment, I wished he’d go plop mail on someone else’s desk. So I averted his eyes, rising and walking to the counter at the far end of the room. I pretended to rummage through some paperwork. “I’ve got so much work today that it’s crazy.”

He tipped his hat off and wiped his forehead clear of sweat. “It’s slow for me. Want to go grab a coffee?”

“You know I’d love to, but,” I opened my arms to show him the pile of work I pretended I had to plow through. “I’ve got all this to deal with.”

He didn’t move. Instead he picked up the Wall Street Journal that remained folded in its original form on the counter. My dad had subscribed every employee at the firm to it, including me. Of course I never read it. John did though. He turned each page with curiosity, tearing one page by accident. The crinkling noise drove me batty as I waited for him to leave. He sure did enjoy it that morning.

“Wow, did you know that this recession is forecasted to last even longer than expected?”

Why of all days did he suddenly go from average mail guy who used to give me hack guitar lessons in the mailroom after work to economy buff? Couldn’t he see more important things occupied my mind?

I turned my back to him and looked out the wall-length window. Cars rolled by into the parking garage. After ten grueling minutes, he finally

stopped flapping the pages. “Sorry I couldn’t visit longer, Emma, but I need to get going. Maybe tomorrow you’ll have more time for that cup of coffee.”

Usually, I looked forward to our spontaneous coffee runs and frivolous chats about how he mastered the opening riff to Pink Floyd’s “Wish You Were There” or how his difficult girlfriend objected to his goatee. So when he let the door slam behind him, a pang of guilt traveled through me. Usually, I longed for someone to talk with as much as him.

For once, I had something more exciting happening than a stroll down to the cafeteria.

His leaving usually signaled only six more hours to get through in the workday, but that day, it meant so much more than that. It meant one glorious thing, more emailing. I walked back to my desk and maximized my screen again.

“Sorry, I was MIA. The mailroom guy likes to come in here and stay a while every morning. Getting back to our conversation. Thanks for preparing me on your uninhibited personality style. I can see we’re going to have a great time.”

As I waited for her response, I glanced around my work area, trying to figure out how I’d motivate myself to start on the pile of research requests blanketing the once empty slot. I had zero interest in researching.

Finally, the little slender envelope icon appeared in the bottom right-hand corner of my computer screen.

“I suspect we’ll have a great time. Can we email like this all day?” Haley asked.

“I could easily, but then I’d have a bunch of angry accountants to deal with.”

“I could see the potential for hazard there. With me, if I don’t get these dresses out to the public, well, I’d hate to see what would happen to fashion trends. I guess we have responsibilities to face, huh? But hey, don’t be shy.

If you ever need an extra break, I'm here."

"I thoroughly enjoyed spending my break with you."

"I'm just a few key strokes away," she wrote.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"I hope so."

Her charisma amused me.

"So I guess that means we'll chat more before your visit?" I asked.

"I'm counting on it. Who else is going to listen to me brag about my singing ways or teach me the finer points of dining over crab legs?"

"You got a point there."

"Well, until our next break then."

I didn't want to stop.

"Until then," I wrote.

For the rest the day, I continued to convince myself that emailing with Haley was harmless. She was a female after all. A harmless female, who happened to intrigue me a bit.

No harm at all.

## Chapter 4

When I returned home from work that afternoon, I didn't stop to cuddle my cat, Snickers, or bother to check my answering machine as I usually did. I went straight to the tub and filled it with warm soapy lavender bubbles. I spent my first hour at home replaying the email exchanges I shared with Haley.

The reverie was short-lived.

As I swept a razor up my lathered calf, my cell rang. I glared at it, annoyed that I'd left it sitting on the vanity halfway across the room. By the fourth ring, I had managed to climb out of my soapy haven and slither over to it. Iridescent bubbles gathered at my feet.

"I'm starved," Colin said. "Will you will be ready in half an hour?"

When hunger pangs erupted in him, all hell broke loose. If he didn't get food fast, his head would begin to spin. "I'll manage it."

In less than twenty minutes, I sat beside him in his Jaguar. We headed to Blue Lagoon's Seafood Restaurant outside of Baltimore. Bits of my emails with Haley played like a great summer read in my mind. I reeled at the possibility of seeing her again.

"So your dad invited me to go on this golfing trip with him Saturday," he said as we drove.

"Oh, really?" I mumbled, staring out the window at the cars whizzing by, clinging to the tail end of my daydream as though my life depended on

it.

“Are you listening?”

I heard something about golf, about dad, and not a word more. “Yup, I heard you.” He could’ve told me he had won the lottery and bought me a studio and I couldn’t have cared any less. I loved the emotional concert playing inside me too much to care about anything else.

~ ~

Once we entered the restaurant and the sizzling, mouth-watering smell of steak hit me, my stomach began growling. The Sous Chef worked his magic in the open kitchen area, flipping, sprinkling, and sautéing hunks of prime meat. Plumes of smoke sailed up from the grill, releasing great vats of garlic, onion, and cilantro into the air. The Maitre’d sat us alongside the window, treating us to a great view of the center hearth.

While waiting for our waiter, Colin reached across the table for my hand. “What’s going on with you tonight?”

I pulled back to the present, brightening my eyes. “I’m fine.”

“You’re a thousand miles away.”

How I wanted to be. Seventeen hundred miles to be exact. “I guess I’m not in the mood for this kind of fanfare tonight.”

He laughed. “You never are.”

I pulled my hands from him and crossed my arms over my chest. “Please don’t judge me.”

He sighed and pulled back. “Here we go.” He shook his head.

“Here we go?” I hated that he could so easily piss me off.

“Why didn’t you tell me you didn’t want to come here?”

“You’re always rushing me. Besides, when do I ever get a say?”

He pushed back against the chair, pressing his hands into the table. “Are

you getting your period?”

I glared at him.

His steel eyes blazed over me. “You need to see a doctor and get on some medicine. We have to go through this every month. I don’t know how to talk to you when you get like this.”

Time to fight.

“You can ignore me,” I said. “In fact, you’re good at that. You caught onto that just fine yesterday.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You work one floor above me. Thirty steps separate us, yet you decided to ignore me all day and wait to call me when it was convenient for you.” The words spewed out of me like lava shooting from a volcano, unpredictable and unstoppable.

“I was working. You can’t expect me to drop everything I do.”

I wanted the fight. “How silly of me to expect that, right?”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re being a bit touchy.”

He’d never empathize with me. He simply couldn’t. “You don’t understand.”

“I don’t. You want me to guess your mood from now on. Then, you want me to guess how I’m supposed to react to it? How can I do that with any precision?”

“Why does everything have to be so black and white for you? So clearly defined?”

“Because that’s how I think,” he said. “If there’s an issue I address it head on. I don’t like to guess. I like to take the facts and create a solution. What the hell is wrong with that?”

I wanted to be home curled up on my couch with a cup of tea and big hunk of chocolate.

We sat in silence as the world went on around us. A couple to my right

cuddled together on the same side of the table. A family of four stuffed their faces with calamari. A table of business execs laughed too loudly in the corner by the bussing station. I fiddled with my napkin, placing it on my lap and rearranging it until all four of its corners had a chance to cover my left knee. Poisonous energy swarmed between us.

As we stewed in silence, a truth settled in. He was right, as usual. I got upset and didn't tell him why. He had no clue what he did wrong. Hell, I didn't even have a clue.

I couldn't take another second of the bad energy.

"I don't want to fight anymore," I said.

He exhaled for an eternity.

I countered with a deep one myself.

Finally, he looked me in the eye. "How am I supposed to deal with you when you're like this? Especially this insecurity issue you're dealing with. It's such a turn off."

"A turn off?"

"A complete turn off."

If I were such a turn off, why would he want to be with me then? If I repulsed him that much, why did he bother pushing forward with planning our future? What did he see in me that kept him hanging on? I couldn't even speak.

Just then, the waiter barged in. "Can I start you off with a drink from our bar?"

I wanted to snap at the happy-faced waiter and tell him to go away.

"I'd like a scotch, straight up please, a double if you can?" Colin asked.

The waiter stared at me with his perfect white-teethed smile. "And you ma'am?"

"Just a water, please."

The penguin-suited man nodded and trailed off to the bar.

Carr—The Fiche Room

Another five minutes of silence drifted by.

The pressure grew too heavy, and I was acting unreasonable.

“Colin,” I said, reaching for his hand. “Can we start this evening over?”

He hesitated. “Can I explain something to you?”

“Of course.” I sat up taller.

He took back his hands and folded them in front of him, like about to approach a business dealing with me. “There are going to be times when I’m stressed to the max at work and I’m not going to want to let you see me like that. I’ll be the first to admit, I get ugly. I snap. It has nothing to do with me not wanting to be around you.”

I swallowed the last bit of pride I owned in that moment.

“Yesterday I found out about that case I had you research for me today, the Peterman one. I spent the day locked in my office, poking through files trying to figure it out before bothering you with it.”

Now I felt like a jerk. “You could’ve told me what happened. I could’ve helped.”

“You couldn’t have done anything. I made a mistake. I found a math error on the reports you printed for me.”

“A math error?”

“It was my fault. I’m going to take care of it.”

I reached out for his hand. “Tell my dad. He’ll know what to do.”

“The last thing I want is trouble with your dad. I’ll work it out. I promise.” He stroked the side of my face. “I don’t want to fight with you, either.”

“Good. Then, let’s start over.”

His face softened, “I love you, even though you can be a pain in the ass.”

“You’re an even bigger one,” I joked back. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him I loved him at that moment.

“Maybe this weekend, we can go back to McGinnis’s. We haven’t been there in so long.”

I planned to take Haley there. I pictured sipping Apple Martinis with her at one of their cozy tables. To that, my natural smile returned.

I glanced around for the waiter, praying for that big, tall glass of water.

~ ~

I couldn’t fall asleep that night. I lay in my bed staring at the lava lamp Colin had brought me when I had my appendix removed. He assumed the lava rolling around in the pointy cylinder would help me relax. It didn’t work back then, and no way in hell did it work now.

I counted my blinks.

The clock ticked.

I touched my arm in the same spot Haley had placed her fingers at the café. Her slender fingers were laced with the smoothness of silk. What would it be like to have those petal soft fingers touch the rest of me?

I struggled to steady my breath. I rolled on my side and stared at the blaring red numbers on my alarm clock. When one-thirty turned to one-thirty-one, I rose. Screw quality sleep. It would not happen that night.

I headed to the twenty-four hour gym.

I could run for hours. With my homemade mix of cardio CD favorites playing on my portable player, I turned the treadmill up to level six and ran. I concentrated on matching my running pattern to the beat of the music, blocking Haley as she snuck in my mind. The more I nurtured those erotic thoughts, the less likely I was to build a fulfilling life with Colin.

After an hour of running, I ventured over to a bench and lifted free weights. With each exhale, I imagined squashing Haley’s bouncy hair, bright eyes, slender neckline, and vivacious personality from my mind.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

I had to banish her from my memory.

August twenty-fourth of that year my identity would change to Mrs. Colin Briggs. I should've been flying high with wedding bliss, fantasizing about my descent down the aisle, about our first dance as husband and wife, our honeymoon, and the years of marriage we'd happily live together, not about Haley's next email to me.

God, I couldn't wait to see her. What would I wear? How should I style my hair? What shade of nail polish should I choose?

I should cancel. I should concentrate more on my real life, not get sidetracked by the fantastical one.

I wanted to be sidetracked by her, though.

Ever since we started talking, I vibrated at an energy level different than ever before. The air was lighter, the days brighter, the nights not as lonely with the company of my secret fantasies.

I owed it to myself to go to dinner and enjoy my new friend.

~ ~

The next morning, I dragged.

Hill Financial had monthly "cattle-call" meetings where my dad and his executive cronies rounded the gang together for motivational priming. "It's important to make sure everyone knows their opinions matter," my dad would tell me when I moaned about having to attend. Complaining never worked. He always countered my resisting by asking, "How's it going to look if the boss's daughter doesn't show? The one person everyone expects to see?"

With little sleep, I struggled to stay alert during my dad's speech.

"This month I'd like to see every team's captain attend the budget meeting scheduled for the third Monday."

## Carr—The Fiche Room

I blocked him out. How could all those people get excited at listening to such boring news? I wished I had brought a notebook so I could at least doodle. The longer I sat there, the stiller and more stagnant the air became. When I breathed in, the overpowering combination of perfumes and colognes, not to mention the serious coffee breath on the man sitting next to me, stung my nose.

Within an hour, my throat burned and the room spun. My eye still hurt from my mascara fiasco that morning when I stabbed it with the applicator tip. All my hard work with the eye shadow and eyeliner went to waste as it dripped down my cheek. I had considered peeling my heels off my feet and climbing back into bed at that point, but my dad's voice echoed in my mind, *you really need to attend*.

Colin sat up front in between my dad and Leo, the Vice President of Sales and Marketing. He watched my dad, his boss, with keen interest as he spoke about the company's plan to acquire a new client that would raise the funds necessary to give every employee the bonus he or she deserved at the end of that year. As the room broke out in applause, nausea crawled up my throat.

I jumped from my seat and ran out of the room.

I sprinted down the hall toward the bathroom. By the time I pushed open the bathroom door, my stomach convulsed. Meeting or not, I left for the day.

When I arrived home, I tossed my sweater and dress pants in a heap on the floor. Then, I climbed into my nice warm bed.

I never took a sick day. That day I needed one.

A few hours later, my phone rang. I shot up. The room spun like a violent amusement ride.

I moaned when I answered.

"Are you okay?" Colin asked.

"A little dizzy," I managed to mumble.

Carr—The Fiche Room

“I saw you run out of the room. I didn't know where you went. I figured you went to the fiche room. I know how much you love these meetings.”

“I'm not feeling well.”

“Well, I figured that out when you hadn't showed up for our three o'clock meeting we had you scheduled to attend.”

I squinted at the bright numbers on my bedside alarm clock. “It's four-fifteen?”

“My parents are coming over in about two hours.”

My head pulsed. “What are you talking about, Colin?”

“Tonight my parents are coming to my apartment for your famous lasagna.”

“When did this all materialize?”

“We made these plans last week with them.”

I'd never forget volunteering to cook lasagna for his parents. The dread from something that unbearable would've prevented me from ever forgetting such a commitment.

“I'm in no shape to drive, let alone cook a full-course meal. There's no way I can entertain them.” Just to talk hurt my head.

“You don't have to entertain them. They're my parents.”

He had no idea what being in the same room as his parents did to me. I'd rather sit in a classroom with twenty-five children scratching their nails up and down the chalkboard than sit for ten minutes with his judgmental parents. Besides his mom's revolting funeral home, flowery smell would cause me to hurl.

I squeezed my eyes shut trying to shade the bright, setting sun peeking through my lacy curtains. “I can't. I'm not feeling well.”

“Please, Sweetheart. I don't want to do this alone.”

“Tell your parents I said hello. Take them out to a nice restaurant and enjoy some quality alone time with them. If you'd like to stop by later to see

if your fiancée is feeling okay, you're more than welcomed. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to lay my head flat down before I get sick."

I hung up the phone and ran to the bathroom just in time.

By morning, the nausea subsided. Still, I refused to go to work. And because Colin hadn't bothered to call me back the night before, I refused to call him. Even when he spoke through my crackling answering machine that morning, leaving his second message, I still didn't answer. I wanted the guilt to jab at him a little for abandoning me when I needed him. If it had been him sick, I would've dropped my plans and catered to him the entire night. That wasn't his style.

When I called Goldie that morning I asked her, "Why does he not get that if he were a little more sympathetic, I wouldn't turn into such a monster?"

"He's a guy with an analytical mind. He's not going to be that sensitive guy you want him to be. You tell him that your stomach hurts, and he tells you to take some antacid and deal with it. That's how he shows you he cares."

I balanced my phone between my ear and my satin nightgown, trying my best to keep it from slipping as I stirred sugar into my cinnamon apple tea. "He didn't call me last night to check on me."

"You're sinking into self-pity mode. The guy is going crazy planning your wedding. Something you should be taking an interest in doing. Did you know he's planning this big surprise for you at the wedding? He called me, which of course surprised the heck out of me. He never calls me."

I took a sip of the tea and burned the tip of my tongue. "He called you?"

"He needed some information. And don't you dare ask me about what."

"Come on, humor me and tell me what he wanted."

"He wants you to be happy. Give him a chance. He's a guy. He's learning."

Carr—The Fiche Room

“Since when are you on his side?”

“Since my best friend decided to marry him.”

I had been harsh with him the night before. He did try calling me twice that morning. Goldie was right; he’s a guy. Guys fixed things. They didn’t obsess.

“He did try calling me twice this morning.”

“He did call?”

“Yes, he did call,” I said, mimicking her high-pitch.

“I’m glad we’re not in a relationship together.”

“Gee, thanks. I’m sure you wouldn’t be too peachy to be in one with either with all that negative criticism you like to dish out.”

“At least I’m always honest. Which, if I can be frank with one last comment, you need to stop expecting more than he’ll ever give you and be satisfied.”

I did have it good with him for the most part. “I suppose.”

“Trust me; it’ll get easier if you learn to appreciate what you have with him.”

Goldie always justified my actions and set me straight. So I asked her, “Is it cheating if I go to dinner with a gay woman?”

“Who do you know that’s gay?”

“A lady who rear-ended me on Main Street the day I met with the wedding singer.”

“Does she know you’re straight?”

“The topic didn’t exactly come up for me to announce it to her.”

“The opportunity for her to tell you she’s gay did?”

“She said it in passing.”

“Unless you’ve suddenly become turned on by women, I can’t see how it would be cheating.”

I imagined what Goldie would say to me if I informed her I did find

Carr—The Fiche Room

Haley attractive. *Don't be foolish. A person doesn't wake up one day and decide she's gay. Can you really imagine sleeping with a woman?*

“Are you turned on by them?” she asked.

“Of course not.” Thanks to my quick lie, the perfect opportunity to tell her flew away from me like a loose paper in the wind.

“Just don't lead her on to assume differently. Maybe you should dress like a bum, not wash your hair, and not wear makeup that night. You don't want to give her the wrong impression, now do you?”

Wrong impression? “Goldie knows best, doesn't she?”

“I'm psychic. Of course I do.”

Now was not the right time to challenge my all-knowing best friend.

“Sure you do.”

“You don't think so, but I do. I know you better than most any other person on the planet.”

## Chapter 5

My dad stepped into the fiche room at eight-thirty sharp on my first day back to work after being sick. “Are you busy?”

Another visit meant one thing—he’d harass me again about the office upstairs. “Not yet. I haven’t even had a chance to turn on my computer.”

He walked past me with his hands behind his back, toward the window. He left a trail of refreshing, woodsy fragrance behind. “Good, because there’s something I need to discuss with you.”

I braced myself against the counter for one of his talks. “What’s on your mind?”

He sharpened his gaze on me as he peeled off his eyeglasses. “I’m considering retirement sooner than originally planned.”

“That’s great.” I inspected his concerned look. “Or isn’t it?”

“It’s a big decision.”

“Well sure it is. Now you’ll be able to travel to all those places you and Mom talked about visiting. You’ll be able to have time to trek through South America.”

“Your mother always dreamed of that. She spoke Spanish, I can’t. She always drove me crazy trying to get me to learn. She taped those silly flash cards to every piece of furniture, every appliance, every condiment in our cabinet. Sadly, I still don’t know the words to salt, toaster, or soap.”

“How sad,” I said. “How do you get by in life?”

“Without your mom, I have no idea sometimes. We always talked about the day we'd be able to leave the business behind and act like a couple of empty-nesters traveling the country in a Winnebago.”

“It's about time you take a break from it. I don't know about the whole Winnebago thing though. I can't picture it. I do, however, see you finding quaint bed and breakfasts in nice small towns and talking the ears off all the other guests.”

“I'm getting tired, Emma. It's time I start enjoying a bit of life before it's too late, but I'm concerned.” He gazed out the window.

“About what?”

“That I'll get old and be bored to tears once I decide to slow down. I counted on your mom to be there with me to enjoy this time in our life. I don't know what it's going to be like. How much fun will it be to travel alone?”

“Dad, it's been twelve years. You're a handsome man. There are many pretty women that I'm sure would vie for a sliver of your attention. It's about time you shower them with some of your good charm.”

“I don't have the energy or desire to court another person. I couldn't be so lucky to find perfection the second time around. Besides, I'm content with my solitude.”

“I have the perfect image of Mom engrained in my mind too. But Dad, no one's perfect.”

“I am.” He struggled to keep a straight face.

“Sure you are.” I shook my head. “Tell me how it was, Dad. When you first married Mom, what did you plan for your life together?” I rested my elbows on the counter and snuggled my cheek in my hands.

“Having children was the biggest plan. I wanted three, she wanted five.”

“And you wound up with just me?”

“Because we took one look at you and couldn't imagine sharing our

love with anyone else.”

I beamed at his melodramatic lie. The cancer in her ovaries blocked their plan for more kids.

“How did you know you loved her?”

“For me, I loved the littlest things. Like the way she’d jump at the sight of a spider and turn to me for safety. When she didn’t think I saw, she’d pick those damn ugly insects up with her bare hands and not flinch. She loved to show me how much she needed me. I loved being with her and ached when I wasn’t. Still do. This is why I’m afraid of retiring. I’m afraid of having too much time on my hands.”

“Then, why are you? You’re only in your sixties. You still have a couple of good years left in you.” I winked at him.

“The board of directors has asked me to consider it. They think it’s time for a change with some fresh leadership.”

“Can they do that?”

“They’d never kick me out, but maybe it’s in the best interest of the company. I see that fiancé of yours shining. If handed over the control, he’d be brilliant. I want him to dazzle the board with his ability. He’d be my choice for successor.”

Would he still be his choice if he had known about the twenty-five thousand dollar mistake? Could Colin manage the company as successfully as my dad? Although intelligent, I doubted he could fill the shoes of my dad, Roger Hill. My dad loved his company. He lived to create a successful organization where people could earn an income from his efforts and support families of their own. That goal catapulted him out of bed every morning. Helping others to achieve had always been my dad’s driving force. Colin dashed out the door every day for more selfish reasons — climbing the ladder. He loved to outsmart and outshine. Looking his best drove Colin. He was too independently focused to lead.

“Wow, working for Colin.”

“Maybe he’ll be better able to convince you to escape the stronghold of the fiche room finally.”

I had to set my dad straight. I had to prove to him that I belonged in the fiche room for now and that accounting would never be the right place.

“Come with me.” I led him over to my briefcase. “I’m going to share something with you.” I pulled out a sketch of us. “I drew this from an old photograph we had.”

“It’s incredible.” He held the sketch up close. “You even managed to get my crooked smile right.”

I had never been brave enough to show him my serious work. To see his face light up as it just had supplied me with more courage to continue showing him others. I reached into my briefcase and pulled out another. “Here’s one I drew of Mom planting those mums she so diligently did every spring.”

“She sure knew how to pretty up our house. No other neighbor’s house could compare.”

“The morning I took this picture, she had found out I won the scholarship to attend Rhode Island School of Design’s summer art program. She had been proud of me and promised that after she planted, she’d take me out to buy all new supplies. I still have the portfolio case we bought that afternoon and even my first charcoal set of pencils.”

“She bragged about you that day, saying your artwork would adorn the halls of every fine museum in the country. I’m sorry you never got to go.”

“I wanted to spend as much time with Mom that I could that summer. I’m glad I did.” The memory of that last summer still ripped at my heart. We bonded over the gardening and painting we did together in our backyard.

I pulled out another one. “Here’s one I drew of our home on Wenscott Ave. I used to think this place was haunted.”

“Every night before you slept, your mom urged me to tell you that no ghosts were present. She fed into that fear and I’d disagree with her vehemently about that. But I’d cave every night because she’d give me this look that told me I had no choice.”

“I still sometimes get a head start running from my bathroom and leap onto my bed so my legs don’t come too close to the underneath for someone to grab. Then, I glance under my bed. I can’t be too sure.”

“If she were still alive, she’d have to add an ‘I told you so’.”

I handed him another one. “Here’s one of you at your desk.”

“Look at that old calculating machine,” he pointed. “You always wanted to play with it, but your mom would scold you for touching it.”

My mom dueled with my dad for my attention. My dad would try to steal me away from my own easel, and my mom would stare him down until he caved and walked away unsuccessful. She talked endlessly about the art studio we’d have together. I vowed to make that dream a reality someday. Nothing would stand in my way.

“She didn’t want me playing with numbers did she?”

“No, she didn’t,” he confessed under a deep sigh. “She wanted you to create pottery and sew clothes. To do girly things. You were her little diva.”

“What would she say if she knew I worked with numbers?”

“I’d get scolded for priming you toward it.”

“She had a point.”

“Nonsense. She knew I was right. She was just stubborn.”

Both of them were stubborn. They wanted their little girl to appreciate what they did in life. My dad still didn’t lose hope that his little girl would learn to love numbers as much, if not more, than he did. “You do believe you’re right, don’t you?”

He nodded. “I’m assuming you’re showing me all these pictures to prove a point?”

## Carr—The Fiche Room

“I wanted the chance to show you where my heart is and what I’m determined to accomplish.”

“I know you love art. But making a living at it would be extremely taxing if not impossible. As would staying in the fiche room.”

“I’m not wasting my time in the fiche room. Without stress, I can create. My fiche room doesn’t stress me. That’s why I like it. Colin doesn’t understand this. I need you to.”

“You’re asking me to see something that I don’t fully understand. I worry that you’ll become a slave to this hobby and have your heart broken. Working here is a sure thing. You’re too smart to be a hermit in this basement.”

“Dad, leave the worrying to me.”

“I’m going to have to do that. I’m also going to need to count on you to keep an active view on the business once I leave. I built it for you. I trust Colin, but I trust you even more. I want all the sacrificing that we did over the years to mean something. I don’t want it to disband when I walk out the door.”

“What exactly are you asking of me?”

“To stop fantasizing and focus your attention on this business.”

I wanted to please him. I couldn’t sacrifice my passion to do that, though. My heart wasn’t in the business. “Dad, no one is going to be able to love this business like you do. When you walk away, you need to without looking back at it. If you can’t do that, you shouldn’t leave.”

“Are you saying I can’t count on you, Emma?”

“I just—”

“It’s okay.” He planted a quick kiss on my cheek and walked toward the door. “The pictures are nice, Emma. You should place them in scrapbooks for safekeeping. Someday, you and your kids can look through them and you can tell them how when you drew them, you dreamed of a day when dreams

could come true without screwing up real life.”

He closed the door.

For minutes, I continued to stare at the steel door, willing for it to open and my dad to come back in again so I could tell him I could not, would not, live the life he wanted me to live.

My art choice scared him. Looking at me he saw his wife. I had the same slender body frame, same long legs; same defined waistline and curved hips. My mom even had the same style in dress: refined, classic-style Ann Taylor type clothes. With a paintbrush and easel in front of me, he would've seen a mirror image of his wife in all of her healthy glory. To witness me go down the same path as her would be painful. If I abandoned my art, maybe the pain of his loss would go away for him finally.

~ ~

Stunned still by my dad's words, I welcomed the easy-going email conversation I had going on with Haley later that afternoon.

“If you've never been on the skis, how do you know you wouldn't like it?” she asked.

“I like safety.”

“Yes, well, safety can be boring. Just as opting for sugar-free, fat-free ice-cream instead of a pint of Ben & Jerry's can be.”

“Sailing down a mountain side on two sticks attached to your feet and savoring a spoonful of delicious, creamy ice-cream are way different things.”

“Same principle though. You know what you're missing if you've had the Ben & Jerry's or if you've enjoyed the wind in your face as you breeze down a snowy trail. You have to have it again and again.”

“You're from Denver. Of course traversing down a forty-five degree

snowy slope is natural to you. Now snow-shoeing, that's something I could see myself enjoying."

"Have you ever?"

"Once I did, in Maine. I went on a ski trip. Set to tackle the bunny slope, I chickened out as soon as I attached myself to those skis. I tore them off before moving an inch in them and headed back to the lodge. I sat next to a group of middle-aged women who were talking about snowshoeing at a place down the road. I asked them if I could tag along and, to this day, we still keep in touch."

"Well, if you ever venture out here to Denver, I'm taking you skiing. I'll get you up on those skis if I have to drag you up the hill myself. I promise that you will fall in love with the sport."

"I've never been to Denver. Though, I have to tell you, I've dreamed of visiting the Rockies since being a kid."

"You have a free invitation anytime. I live right at the foot of the Rockies."

If I weren't so scared of my attraction toward her, I'd fly out there the next day and trek through the mountains with her.

"I'll keep that in mind should I ever crave to jump on a plane and get out of town for a while. After the conversation I had with my dad, that offer just might get accepted."

"Parents can do that to you."

"No, you don't understand. My dad is capable of bringing me to the brink of a nervous breakdown with his guilt trips."

"It's a parent's responsibility in life to challenge our emotions like that. I turned into an avid risk-taker because my parents threw danger in my way to teach me how to deal with it. My father is a retired Marine Sergeant. My house resembled boot camp. I still fold my damn shirts three by three."

"My dad wouldn't make it past the haircut of a new recruit. The closest

he ever came to military treatment was when he was a Boy Scout. My dad's been pampered all his life. His idea of roughing it would be staying at a motel instead of a five-star penthouse."

"Have you ever slept under the stars?"

"Without a tent?"

"A tent is for sissies," she wrote.

"I'm not afraid to admit that I'm a sissy. Let's say I have a thing against insects crawling on my skin and getting comfortable in my hair."

"Once in your lifetime, you need to sleep under the stars. Nothing in this world is as humbling, especially in the Rockies. When the sun has set, the night sky comes alive with a brilliance. My jaw drops every time. You'll never see stars as big, bright, and close to you."

I imagined asking Colin to sleep outside under the stars without a skylight window above. He'd laugh in my face at such an absurd request. He'd ruin the whole experience, amplifying my fears of insects and wild animals with his own unease. But with Haley beside me under a backdrop of stars, with her fingers within centimeters of my own and her taunting magnetism reeling me closer, all trace of fear would disappear.

"I guess having a militaristic upbringing has its advantages."

"It's helped me to take risks without vulnerability. I have thick skin now."

"A plastic spoon could do damage to me."

"I'll help you develop a tougher exterior. We'll work up to it slowly."

Haley possessed that extra layer of strength and that carefree attitude that I always wanted. Maybe being gay helped a person carve out her own path, a path straight people wouldn't dare travel on out of fear of judgment. Whatever the path, I wanted to find one just like it so that I, too, could have that same fearless mentality that made her so damn magnetic.



Colin had arranged for us to meet the harpist that would play at our wedding ceremony.

In one of the practice rooms at the University of Maryland, I sat back and watched the woman adjust her hair in a makeshift bun using a pencil. I always wanted to know how to pull a crop of heavy hair up with a simple twist of the wrist and secure it with a six-inch stick. When I wanted to pull up my hair, I had to go to a stylist and spend fifty dollars and have her use a noxious amount of aerosol hair spray and two, if not three, dozen bobby pins. That woman flung it up in two seconds and looked like she could walk down a runway.

She ran her slender fingers up and down the strings like they were part of the instrument themselves. The chiming sound echoed in the acoustically designed room with its cathedral ceilings, sprouting goose bumps on my arms. The theme to *Ice Castles* took on a new level of beauty.

“Brilliant.” Colin rose from the seat next to mine and applauded the perfect-haired woman. She bowed her head and looked up at him from under her long eyelashes, embarrassed at the attention. “I can tell my fiancée likes what she heard, too. You’re definitely free on August twenty-fourth, right?” he asked her.

She nodded like a shy kid afraid to say the wrong thing.

“We’d love to have you play at our wedding.”

That’s how we decided on things as a couple. Colin approved first. Then, so as not to appear egocentric, he’d bring me into the loop. Finally, he’d take it upon himself to assume I agreed with his opinion. Then, he’d place the final verdict himself.

The day I told him I wanted to buy a used Jeep Wrangler, he showed up three hours later with a new BMW for me instead. When I told him I still

wanted the Jeep he replied with, “They’re unsafe. They flip over if you round a corner too fast. And the way you round that corner on the I-95 on ramp, I’ll be sure to get a call from the hospital. You need something safer.”

So from then on, when I favored something, I didn’t bother getting his opinion. I simply showed it to him after the purchase, which is exactly what I did the next day.

I had decided I wanted a new kitty for Snickers to play with. So I went to the animal shelter later that Sunday afternoon and came home with a little black and white fur ball named Spitfire. I realized why the shelter honored him with such a name as soon as I released him into my apartment. He sure did have a fire in him. He climbed, leapt, ran, dove, and moved in every way but a slow crawl.

I’d break my newest family addition to Colin gently, with a picture first, then formal introduction. So first thing the next morning, I rode the elevator up to the main floor at Hill Financial with the photo in hand.

As I turned the corner near his office, I spotted him talking with Meredith Green, a fresh-out-of-college accountant with a smile that would light up a whole city. He mirrored her gaze and grinned while the woman strategically placed her hands on her hips, projecting her big chest closer to him. He looked at her with eyes that sparkled and showed his sexual prowess. He had yet to show me that side—a flirty Colin, an even sexier Colin.

He stared at the woman’s lips as she spoke, mesmerized. He never looked at me that way.

Before me stood a man who loved me enough to marry me. He always took great care in showing off his love for me to anyone willing to look. Yet standing in his glass-encased office, he flirted with a woman who had breasts twice the size of mine. Curious spectators peered around cubicle walls and witnessed as I watched my fiancé lock his lust-filled eyes with someone

other than me.

His eyes flirted with the young woman with her sleek, black flowing Rapunzel hair and deep brown eyes. Meredith touched his sleeve when she laughed, and he didn't mind.

How dare he disrespect me like that?

My knees melted into the floor, as if stepped out of a scalding shower.

I was deeply embarrassed.

As if he could sense my looming gaze, he tore his attention away from the woman and landed his eyes straight on me. His face turned red. As though instinct took over, he raised his arm and waved at me, like he hadn't seen me in months.

Meredith bowed out of the room and floated by me, peering up at me through her long eyelashes.

Shaking, I turned and walked away, stuffing the new photo of Spitfire into my pocket. If he wanted to see the new addition in my life, he'd have to get past my front door first.

"Emma, wait." He called after me, his tone way too enthusiastic.

I raced toward the stairwell. Before I could get through the door, he blocked me with his arm. I clawed at his silken dress shirt, trying to get past him.

"It's not what it looked like."

I eyed him. "Then, enlighten me."

"She's a flirt. I can't help that. I'm not into her like that. Right now, she's a great ally for Hill Financial. She smooth-talked Peterman about the miscalculation. Seeing that no actual money got lost and he hadn't spent profits, he left here understanding. She even talked him into having dinner with me next week."

"I'm sure she did."

"Sweetheart, I was just being polite." He poked me in the side, "Let's

go grab a cup of coffee and forget about this silly little insecurity.”

Just like that, he assumed I should shut off the anger.

“I don’t have time. I’ve got work to do.”

“I’ll stop down if I get a chance, okay?”

“Sure.” I slipped by him, and before he closed the door I said to him, “By the way, you might want to brush off Meredith’s long strand of hair from your shoulder. Don’t want to give anyone the wrong impression.” I winked and ran down the steps.

I barely got to the fiche room before the tears poured down.

“I don’t understand men,” I wrote to Haley.

“Men are easy to figure out. That’s why I don’t bother with them. They’re too simplistic and predictable.”

The moment of truth had arrived. I had to tell her about Colin at some point, preferably before our visit. “I’m engaged to one of the most predictable. I’m not sure if I told you that already or not,” I wrote, trying to sound nonchalant in my delivery.

“Engaged, huh? When’s the big day?!”

The exclamation point jabbed at me. Her words sounded bright and cheery, like my engagement thrilled her.

“August twenty-fourth.”

“So what did he do to piss you off?”

“He doesn’t understand me most of the time.”

“He doesn’t have the wiring to.”

“Could that be just an excuse?”

“Emma, it’s a fact. A chemical and biological fact.”

“I need a night away from his antics. I can’t wait for our dinner on Friday.”

“I’ll be ready to go by seven. Have we decided whether we’ll be dining with hammers or forks?”

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“Let’s go for the forks this time around,” I wrote. “By your next visit, we’ll chug beer and eat like savages. If you’re ever here again, I can surprise you even more with other Maryland traditions.”

“Did I tell you I like surprises?”

“Did I tell you I’m full of them?”

“I suspect you are,” she wrote.

She couldn’t have pinpointed her suspicion any more accurately. Surprises overflowed in me, the biggest one being the growing affinity toward her.

## Chapter 6

Everyone had always told me how shades of lilac brought out the sparkle in my eyes. So when I spotted the lilac blouse with willowy three-quarter length sleeves and a revealing neckline in a storefront window, I entered and bought it.

I would wear it on Friday night. I wanted to look and feel my best with Haley.

Ever since my first meeting with her, I walked around flirting with a sexy vibe, sensual to my own touch, and alive with an energy force that could grow a field of wild, exotic plant life.

People paid more attention to me. They threw that second glance my way as I walked by them in the grocery store or through the mall. The new confidence and attention intoxicated me.

~ ~

When Friday arrived, I strode into Colin's office and told him that I had planned on meeting Goldie at the mall to shop. Then, I'd head home and go to bed.

"A night with Goldie. What could be more fun?" He painted a sarcastic grin on his face.

"Why would you say that?"

“I’m kidding. You need this time with your friend.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Work a bit longer. Then, I’ll grab a drink with some of these guys.”

I wondered if by these guys, he also meant Meredith. “Can I ask you something?”

He nodded not looking up from his laptop.

“Are you attracted to Meredith?” I hoped in some selfish way that his answer would free me from any guilt for my upcoming night with Haley.

He stopped typing and met my eye. “Do you ever wonder what I find most appealing about you?”

His gaze weighed heavy on me as I searched his face for help in answering his question. “Tell me.”

“Your confidence. Please don’t lose that about yourself.”

He was a smart man who handled my tactless question with stride. Of course he was attracted to Meredith. Who wouldn’t be? The woman was hot. “I can’t get that image of her rubbing your arm out of my mind.”

“If I wanted to be with her or anyone else, I’d be.”

And he would be. What Colin wanted, Colin pursued. He was honest in his ventures, which was more than I could say for my deceitful self at that moment.

“Good. I appreciate your honesty.”

“It’s what keeps our relationship alive.”

He lusted for Meredith. I witnessed that for myself. But some things in a relationship were better left unsaid, not admitted. “I’m going to let you get back to work. I’ll call you later tonight.”

“So which mall are you meeting her at?”

“Columbia Mall.”

Oh hell. Why did I lie to him?

So what if I met up with Haley? Dinner with a woman wouldn’t have

## Carr—The Fiche Room

sent up a red flag for him. Though, in the back of my mind, that flag waved at me with a fury strong enough to set a windmill into motion.

“Good. You need to get out. You’re always cooped up in that apartment of yours doodling. Get out and have some fun every once in a while.”

I loved hanging by myself. Alone time offered exceptional opportunities to reflect.

Someone like Colin would never understand that.

Usually, when he said something like that, it angered me. Not that time. That time, I took that comment and ran with it. I ran in the opposite direction of the Columbia Mall and straight to Haley’s towering hotel near Baltimore Washington International Airport.

~ ~

There she stood, waiting for me, curbside.

Her radiant smile flooded me with ripples.

She climbed in, and I nearly fainted from the rush. Her freshly shampooed hair filled my car with the fragrance of exotic flowers. Her full lips shined with gloss and her satin skin glowed. The deep green spokes of her eyes latched onto mine.

She placed her hand on my arm. “It’s nice to see you.”

We shared a gaze, one long enough to jolt me. “Nice to see you, too.”

“So where are you taking me?” she asked.

“I thought you said you liked surprises.”

“I do.” Her voice reached out to me in one long, sultry whisper.

I steadied my fluttering hands against the steering wheel. “Then sit tight.”

“A woman in charge. I like it.”

Me? A woman in charge? That was a first.

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I reached above my head to grab a CD from my sun visor holder. “Well, as the woman in charge of this evening, let's enjoy some pre-dinner music.” I glanced at the CD. “I know you're a John Denver freak, but would you settle on Train?”

“‘Drops of Jupiter.’ One of my all-time favorites.”

“You're not going to start singing already are you?”

“You have to get to know me better.”

Having no argument against that, I simply nodded. The two of us followed the lead singer's vocals, matching every inflection and pitch with precision as we coasted along with the masses on the road.

“Is it always this hectic on the interstates here or is it because it's a Friday night?” she asked.

“Are you kidding? We're talking major tie-ups any day of the week.”

Red brake lights glared in the distance.

“I saw on television right before leaving my room that there is a major delay on one of the roadways. I hope this wasn't it.”

The lights coiled like a snake, disappearing into the bend in the road. “It may have been. This stretch of highway is one of the only areas where traffic flows smoothly, even in rush hour. So if it's backed up, there is a problem.”

“I'm in no rush, are you?”

“We might miss our dinner reservation if it doesn't let up soon.”

“So what?” Haley asked.

Yeah, so what?

“We can switch to plan B if so,” she said.

“I don't have a plan B.”

“You don't operate by the five P's?”

“Five P's?”

“Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance. Marketing 101.”

“You're a saleswoman,” I said.

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She rubbed her nails against her shirt, as if cooling them. “If I must say so myself, a damn good one at that.”

She gifted me with a sexy sidelong glance, sending more ripples loose. She caught me so off-guard that I had to fight to maintain control of the car, even at five miles an hour. “I can see that.”

“I have lots of funny stories I can tell you to support my claim.”

“We have all the time in the world at the rate we’re moving,” I said.

So for the next hour and a half, as we moved a mere one-hundred feet, she entertained me with some of the funniest clips from a day in the life of being her. When the traffic unsnarled, I had to raise my hand up in surrender to her theatrical satire so I could drive. “Where do you come up with these random thoughts?”

“You mean to tell me, when you’re sitting in a meeting, you’ve never heard the stomach conversation?”

“I’ve never thought of a stomach growl as a conversation before,” I said. “Now, thanks to you, if I do hear even the tiniest rumble, I’m going to have to excuse myself from the room. I wouldn’t want to laugh outwardly at anyone.”

She craned her neck closer. “I can still hear your tummy.”

I placed my hand across it. “What’s it saying this time?”

“It’s asking what plan B is because we missed plan A.”

“It’s eight-forty-five on a Friday night. Do you prefer metal or plastic forks?”

“If metal forks mean another hour to eat, then I’m opting for the plastic fork choice,” she said.

“Then, I know just the place.”

I drove us straight to Baltimore’s Inner Harbor and pulled into a parking garage. The above-average temperatures for March brought out the crowds. A musician, playing the fiddle on the open quad of the harbor, entertained a

group of onlookers with his rendition of Charlie Daniels Band's song "The Devil Went Down to Georgia." He tapped his foot wildly, and the crowd clapped their hands in unison.

In the distance across the harbor, the reflection of the miniature lights on the Rusty Scupper restaurant danced on the calm water. Within sight, the water taxi drifted toward the landing dock. It would empty a few dozen more people into the buzzing shopping area.

As we entered the shopping complex, I led her up the stairs to the food-court.

"What would you recommend?"

"A sandwich wrap. Of course followed up by a big slice of homemade fudge from a place we'll pass downstairs."

"I love being a tourist," she said. "Show me the way, baby." She latched onto my arm.

She possessed a refreshing, open-minded attitude.

I dangled my arm in hers, relaxed, natural, leading us forward. A woman in charge.

"What'll it be, ladies?" The man behind the counter asked.

His striped over-sized baseball hat and matching shirt made me smile. How fun it would be to wear something happy to work instead of boring business attire. He wore joy like an accessory, one that matched his upbeat outfit. "Two turkey wraps with ranch dressing, tomatoes, and green and red peppers," I said.

After ordering our wraps, I led Haley downstairs and down the hall to where they made the fudge. "You can't come to Inner Harbor and not witness the most fun display of baking you'll ever see." In the distance, voices chimed. "Do you hear them?"

"Are those the fudge bakers singing?"

"You'll see." I tangled my arm in hers again and pulled her forward,

wrestling through the crowd. As we approached, I turned to her and saw that same wide-eyed look she had in the café the first time we met. I left my arm planted around hers as we watched the bakers. She didn't seem to mind.

The fudge artists wore white baker's hats and colorful suspenders over white shirts. One handed out samples on a toothpick. Another poured gooey fudgy liquid onto a giant stainless steel countertop. And another rolled the fudgy mixture into shape. The one poking his head in and out of the giant oven sang the loudest. They harmonized, appearing to create the song lyrics as they went along. They sang about the process of baking and had us cheering. Their voices filled the open area, attracting people as they moseyed on by. Once through singing a song, they insisted we all try a sample and leave with a big, delicious chunk of Baltimore's finest fudge. We were first in line to get ours.

"Where should we eat our wraps?" she asked, as we continued walking again.

"I should take this snow-laden Denver gal on a walk so she can bottle up as much balmy Maryland air as possible. We can find a bench along the harbor and sit while we eat. What do you say?"

"We just had fresh powder fall this morning. So I hoped you'd suggest that we enjoy this sweltering sixty degree weather."

We wandered down to the end of the harbor walkway and settled on a bench facing docked boats. Our legs hugged against each other. Neither one of us moved. Tingles pulsed through me.

We sat in silence watching the water taxi make yet another run across the harbor.

"What's going on in your mind right now?" she asked.

How could I tell her that I loved sitting so close to her without sounding weird? "How pretty the skyline looks."

"What else?"

I inched closer. “How easy it was to move onto Plan B.”

She turned inward toward me, draping her arm over the top of the bench. Her hand rested close to me; close enough that if she wanted, she could’ve easily twirled her fingers in my hair. “What was Plan A, anyway?”

“Plan A—” I paused. Plan A was something Colin would’ve conjured up to impress his guest. This easy-going woman didn’t need such an elaborate show. Her lighthearted attitude is what appealed to me. “Plan A was to take you to a stuffy restaurant where turkey wraps and homemade fudge were not on the menu.”

“Thank God for curves in the road,” she said.

“Yeah, I’d consider this curve a good one.”

“I’ve never come across a curve I didn’t like.”

Under the soothing caress of her admission, I softened. “I suspect you haven’t.”

The slight seductive look in her eye sent my head spinning.

“Let’s talk about you,” she said.

I braved even closer, crossing my leg over my knee and inching it precariously near hers. “What do you want to know?”

She rolled her gaze down to it. Then, she slowly swept her eyes back at me. “So you’re getting married? How’s the planning going?”

I didn’t want to talk about the wedding. I didn’t want Colin popping up into my night. Most of all, I didn’t want Haley to focus on the fact that I was engaged. “It’s still months away. I haven’t been doing too much with it at this point.”

“You’re going to be a bride. You should be bubbling over with details.”

Why did she want me bubbling for Colin? “The problem with so many new marriages is that the bride and groom focus too much on planning. When it’s over, the excitement that kept them soaring through their engagement fizzles quickly. You know? Like the way the smell of a new car

fades.”

“Wow. I never thought of it that way. Kind of takes the romance out of it.”

“People put too much emphasis on the big day.”

“I’m sorry if I’m getting too personal, but I have to ask something.” She paused and stared deeply into my eyes. “Are you happy that you’re getting married?”

The answer was apparent and easy to divulge to her soft, waiting eyes. “I’m not sure.”

We stared at each other in silence. She circled her gaze around my face. I followed her roaming eyes, yearning for her to land her lips on mine.

“That’s normal,” she said.

“I’m sure it is.”

“What’s causing your confusion?”

Well, for starters, the fact that I wanted to kiss her.

Secondly, the fact that I was more attracted to her in that moment than to anyone else I could ever remember. “A few things that, I’m sure with time, I’ll figure out.”

“Can I ask you an even more personal question?” she asked.

I nodded not letting go of her gaze.

She traced her fingers along the curl hanging on my face. “Are you as attracted to me as I am to you?”

Moisture pooled between my legs, sending quivers where I’d never felt them so strong before. Her outspoken, bold persona inspired me and frightened me at the same time. I could only manage to drop my eyelids and breathe.

She wrapped her finger around the curl. “You don’t have to answer.”

I opened my eyes and followed her mouth as she spoke, not uttering a word.

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“I want you to think about it,” she said.

She uncoiled my blonde spiral, easing it onto my cheek. She leaned in closer and hugged me. Her sweet breath washed over my face as she caressed my cheek with her soft lips. As she drew away, she whispered, “I think you are.”

I melted.

~ ~

On the ride home from her hotel, I retraced the feathery tickle of her lips against my cheek. A cascade of sweet emotions tickled me throughout. I craved more. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to flirt with her soft tongue. I wanted to get drunk on her airy breath.

I was completely attracted to her.

What could I do with those feelings? It’s not like I had the freedom to explore them in any real sense.

Poor Colin. I lied to him. I betrayed his trust. And worst, if Haley had kissed me, I wouldn’t have resisted. I couldn’t have resisted. I would’ve allowed myself to taste her sweetness. I couldn’t deny the craving that lurked to taste so much more of her. That truth scared me.

I couldn’t be a cheat. Not me. I prided myself on being true.

Cheating first started with lies.

I lied to him.

What next?

I had a great guy who simplified my life. Yet I complicated it by nurturing fantasies of that beautiful woman. Ever since meeting her, I distanced myself from Colin. I imagined five years from then. Would I live to regret cheating if I indulged in my curiosity? The consequence would be losing Colin. Then what? Would I be with Haley? Could she respect me

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knowing I cheated on my fiancé? I'd never trust me. How could she?

My marriage to Colin was real. She was a fantasy. If not careful, I could lose him and ruin what I did have.

I had to salvage our relationship. I had to refocus on him. I had to change back into the good fiancée. I had to become honest again.

I'd love him like he deserved to be loved. If only I could figure out how.

~ ~

Surprisingly, I lasted the whole weekend without showing my guilt. Colin and I spent the entire time together planting seeds, painting my patio, cleaning the interiors of our cars, and cuddling up at night, with Snickers and Spitfire, to watch movies. We had a wonderful weekend together. When I climbed into my bed Sunday night, a freedom from the intense emotions I had experienced Friday night lightened my heart.

My Colin had come back again.

I had regained control over my life.

Then, my phone rang at ten o'clock that night.

"We need to talk," Goldie said, sounding edgy.

"About what?"

"I'm driving to your apartment right now, so answer your door."

"Is something wrong?"

"I'd say that's putting it mildly," she said.

She hung up, leaving my entire body numb. Had Colin found out I didn't go shopping with her or even had plans to? No. Colin had been fine all weekend. Goldie's intuitiveness freaked me out. She wasn't often right with her predictions and interpretations of me. Still, I worried because she accurately pinpointed other people's lives. How could I hide from her prominent gaze if she questioned me? I envisioned her studying tarot cards

with incense burning and mantra-style music setting her trance, reading vibes from my euphoric night with Haley.

If she had caught on to my energy nuances, how would I explain to her that a woman turned me on? I couldn't even look my mother in the eye the day she sat me down to explain menstruation.

If for some strange reason Goldie questioned my sexual aura, I'd deny the whole thing.

Again, the guilt reappeared, even stronger than before. Poor Colin had no clue that while he thought his humble, trustworthy fiancée was out shopping, a woman seduced me with a peck on the cheek and a stroll along the harbor. He was a good man, having a few innocent drinks with the guys from work as his deceitful wife-to-be indulged in witty banter with a woman. A woman, if circumstances presented themselves, I would've kissed.

Would Goldie understand? Would she hate me? Would she be weirded out?

How could I keep that from her? Surely, she couldn't disown me. She'd reassure me that the feelings were normal and that she and every other woman, though they wouldn't admit it, have had them. With that validation, of course I'd find it easier to turn away from the temptation and go forward with my heterosexual life, putting aside my silly fantasies for good.

I was fully convinced I'd tell her everything. Until she knocked. At that point, my heart constricted and I couldn't draw a full breath. As I looked through the peephole and saw her stern face, my throat dried.

I opened the door, and she brushed right by me and straight into the living room. She peeled off her white windbreaker and plopped herself into my over-sized recliner. She wore hot pink spandex pants and a black tank top looking like she stepped out of an eighties Jane Fonda aerobics video. She twisted her frizzy hair up into a ponytail and buried her face in her hands.

“Okay talk to me. Help me to make sense of what is happening,” she

said, looking up at me.

I eased onto the couch. “Make sense of what?”

“I’m not sure what to make of it, Emma.”

She fidgeted with the strap of her quilted multi-colored pocketbook.

“Make of what?”

“I don’t know why people can’t be satisfied with what they’re given. Why test the water when you’re already so set in your way of life?”

How the hell did she know I’d been testing the water? How dare she judge me and tell me what I should or shouldn’t be satisfied with? “Well that’s a hell of a way to open the conversation.”

“Well, it’s true. You’re scared that Colin will be the last person you will ever be intimate with. Am I wrong?”

She had taken her judgments too far. “Why are you asking me this?”

“He wants to marry me.”

My head sorted through the jumbles. “Are we talking about Charlie?”

“Yes, Charlie. Who the hell else?”

The room stopped spinning and my heart unclenched. “Well, that’s wonderful, isn’t it?” I asked, back on track.

I waited for her blank face to lighten.

“So I’m guessing you’re questioning his proposal. Why?”

“I want to make sure I’m making the right move. I don’t want to ruin a good thing.”

She liked the freedom of single life. She was content in her little apartment with Tatiana and shied away from commitment. When she found out she was pregnant with Tatiana, she dumped her boyfriend, determined to handle the situation alone. Since then, she dated. But never seriously. Getting married was huge news.

“Goldie, there’ll always be water tempting you to touch it. But testing it together can be much more fun than alone. I like Charlie. I can’t imagine

a better person to swim with.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re so melodramatic sometimes.”

“What? You’re the one who started with the whole water symbolism.”

“Do you ever get the urge to be with someone else?” she asked.

The honesty door opened. Her question dangled in front of me waiting to be answered.

I froze. I struggled to form the words. “I’m content with Colin.”

“Content? God, I hope Charlie never uses that lame word to describe his feelings for me.”

“Why is it lame?”

“Content is something you say about your car or your house, not your mate.”

“How would you describe your feelings for Charlie, then, Miss Wordsmith?”

“Electrifying.”

My pale face must have flushed twenty shades of crimson at her dramatic delivery of the word. “Electrifying?”

“Absolutely.”

How could she not bolt down the aisle with that perfect man? “Marry him, then.”

She let go of her pocketbook and leaned back in the chair. “He’s a great catch and Tatiana loves him so much.”

“Then, there’s no issue. Why would you question if you should marry him?”

She stared at me.

“Tell me you’re going to marry him.”

“I’ll tell you that under one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You tell me what secret you’re keeping from me right now.”

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The blood drained from my face. “What are you talking about? I don’t have a secret.” I jumped up/ and walked over to Spitfire and picked him up in my arms. Then the kitty wrestled his way out of my grip, leaving me without a barrier to protect me from her stare.

A smile crept on her round face. “You had that dinner Friday night with that lesbian. I want to hear about it.”

“Did Colin call you? Because I told him we went shopping.”

She wrinkled her forehead. “No he didn’t. I want details.” She scrunched up her face. “Why did you have to lie to Colin about going?”

Some things were better left unsaid, even between best friends. “We’re talking about Colin. Mister Control Freak. I couldn’t tell him that I was dining with a stranger in Baltimore. You know how he is.”

“And I know you. I can tell you’re keeping something from me.”

“There’s nothing.” I did everything to keep my face serious.

“That’s not what I see?”

I avoided my friend’s smirk. “What you see is a woman glowing about our upcoming weddings.”

“I know you better than that. Whatever it is, the sun is shining all around it.”

“Who is getting melodramatic now?”

“I’m just calling it as I see it.”



## Chapter 7

One of my nightmares came true the next day when I entered my fiche room.

An overly-bubbly, middle-aged woman greeted me. Her hair, a brassy mess, had been teased into submission and flattened to her head with super stronghold hairspray. It smelled pungent and a lot like the crap my grandmother had used.

“Hi, I’m Sharon, the new temp.” A big, goofy smile danced on her face. “I just started today.”

“Are you sure you’re in the right place?”

“Yup, your dad told me you’d be a bit surprised.”

“I bet he did.” I rounded past her to my computer.

“What should we tackle first?”

I plopped my bag down on my chair. “I’ve got to tackle something upstairs. Feel free to go get yourself a cup of coffee.”

~ ~

When I went upstairs to confront my dad, he acted surprised. “You don’t like her?”

“This isn’t about whether I like her or not, and we both know that.”

He tucked his hands into his pockets and turned his back to me. “Give

it a few days. It'll go fine."

"It's fine to you because you're not going to be stuck with her all day."

"You don't have to be stuck down there with her. I told you, you have an office up here waiting for you."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Oh, I get it now."

"She's well-qualified. She used to be a librarian's assistant."

"Did Colin put you up to this?"

"I make my own decisions."

"You two didn't scheme this plan together to drive me out of the fiche room?"

"I don't scheme, Emma. I made a business decision. Colin had nothing to do with this. In fact, in his defense, he told me you were going to be upset with me if I hired her."

"So he met her too?"

"We both interviewed her. He didn't think you'd like her, so he recommended I not hire her."

"But you did anyway?"

"She's got a fun side to her. She'll bring light into that room."

"Just so you know, whatever you had planned with this little Sharon act, isn't going to work. I'm staying in the fiche room."

"I hoped that you would until she's trained enough to be on her own, should you decide to come aboard upstairs."

I squeezed the door handle as I turned to leave. "I can't believe you." Then, I slammed the door, sending a loud bang echoing through Hill Financial's conservative, over-stuffy environment, alerting everyone that Emma Hill wasn't happy with her dad.

~ ~

## Carr—The Fiche Room

Sharon brought light all right. Bright, blaring, stadium-style light, the kind that if you stared at it too long, a migraine soon followed. When Sharon Collier first barged into my world that morning, I wanted nothing more than to run upstairs and work from atop the center table in the center aisle, rather than spend five minutes alone in the fiche room with her.

Within ten minutes, I had received the woman's entire work and family history, including the reason she preferred eating spaghetti on Tuesday nights rather than Wednesday because she liked to follow the traditions of her grandparents. And how, if on any given Saturday, winter or summer, she didn't share a cup of hot chocolate with her five year old son, they had to double their intake the next day to wash any superstitious mishaps. Worst of all, she went into how she almost missed the interview because of a gynecologist appointment.

My fiche room turned into hell.

My dad was a smart man. He always figured out how to get what he wanted.

That lady smashed into my peaceful world and threatened to starve it of tranquility with that piercing voice and over-bearing personality. If I had anything remotely resembling a rope, I would've tied the woman, with her flowery, potato sack of a shirt and dog-barking laugh, to the fiche machine to calm her down.

How would I ever be able to draw, email with Haley, or simply enjoy solitude? On the drive in that morning, while dodging bumpers, I couldn't wait to get to work as fast as possible. I wanted to concentrate on the email I planned to type to Haley as I sipped my morning cup of coffee. Now though, under the scrutiny of Sharon's impatient stare, eager to learn as much about microfiche as she could, I couldn't focus.

She stuffed a piece of an egg bagel, overloaded with cream cheese, into her mouth. And with it still full, she talked to me. "The spread of bagels in

the cafeteria is amazing. Did you see they even have strawberry seasoned ones? And the cream cheese—”

“Sharon.” I had to stop the woman. Her voice cut right through me.

She paused, then said “What is it, honey?”

I needed her to shut up. So I granted myself a moment of space. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

“Okay, I’ll wait here for you.”

When I came back, I found her with her finger pressed against the window, examining it like she’d never seen a window before.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

She lifted her finger from the glass and brought it close to her face. “I’m playing with this daffy ladybug.”

“Well, I’ll just be a few minutes. I need to get settled in, so feel free to continue playing.”

As I logged into my terminal, she walked over to the chair next to me and sat, with ladybug in hand. “Don’t mind me. Pretend like I’m not even here.”

I turned to my computer and waited for my inbox to load. In my peripheral view, the woman’s eyes bore down on me like a red-hot poker branding a cow. And when the morning couldn’t possibly get any worse, the woman started humming show tunes.

I typed Haley’s email to Sharon’s rendition of “I’m Gonna Wash that Man Right out of My Hair” from South Pacific.

“Did you enjoy your flight back to Denver?” I wrote.

I pretended to read the daily reporting charts on the company’s intranet site while waiting to see if Haley would respond. When Sharon squirmed in her seat, I squinted to appear super focused on the task at hand.

“Do you wear glasses?” she asked.

“Why?”

“You’re going to ruin your eyes staring at that machine all day. Look at me for a minute.”

I looked at her.

“Honey, your eyes are already red and irritated and the day has only just begun. You need to take better care of them.”

I touched the skin under my eye. “They’re red?”

“Tiny little red lines running all over them. Hang on.” She eased the ladybug on the counter. Then, she picked her pocketbook off the floor and stuck her hand in it. “I have some eye drops in here somewhere. A little dab’ll do ya some good.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “They’ll be fine. They’ve lasted twenty-seven years already.”

“Are you afraid of a little drop in your eye?”

“I’m not good with sticking those in my eye.”

She rose with eye drops in hand. “Tilt your head back, hon.”

“Sharon, I—”

She grabbed a hunk of my hair and pulled my head back. “Open your eye.”

I attempted to keep my fluttering eye open long enough for her to get the drop in it. As the squirt splashed my eye, my computer chimed to alert me that a new message had arrived. I sprung up in my seat and knocked the bottle out of her hand and under the desk. “Sorry. I’m waiting for sort of an important email.”

She got on her hands and knees to reach the bottle. From under the counter she yelled out, “Don’t go opening that left eye now. Keep it shut so the drop stays.”

“It’s shut.”

She backed out from under the counter and crawled to her feet with the dusty eye drop bottle. “I better go wash this while you tend to your email

then.”

Once the door closed, I opened the new email.

“I spent the entire flight competing with the guy next to me in back-to-back games of Solitaire. Turns out he’s one of those slackers who plays the game all day at the office while he lets his work pile up. He maintained a prideful smile over that.”

“So I gather you lost to him?” I asked.

“I had to buy him a drink at the airport bar once we landed in Denver.”

“Lucky guy. Was he at least cute?”

“The woman tending bar was cuter.”

A twitch of jealousy pinched me. “I hope you got her number then.”

“I don’t kiss and tell, baby.”

Her privacy intensified the jealousy. “Of course you don’t.”

“So have you thought about my question?” she asked.

How could that woman grab hold of my heart and twist it in a million different positions? The question dominated my mind since she had asked it. How could I confess that I was attracted to her without being untrue to Colin? She waited in hunger for my answer. How could I not tell her?

“Which question?”

“I don’t remember leaving more than one question open for thought.”

I drew in a shuddering breath, playing with the bait. “Give me a hint.”

“Am I the first woman you’ve ever found attractive?” she asked.

I welcomed the writhing warmth between my legs. “You’re the first woman who’s ever been so bold to come out and ask me to verbalize that I am.”

“You’re not verbalizing. You’re writing.”

I laughed into the empty fiche room. “Bold and technical.”

“I tend to be bold.”

“I see that. I like that actually,” I wrote.

“You like that I’m bold? Then, hopefully you won’t mind if I tell you something.”

That piqued my interest. “Tell me.”

“I wanted to kiss you.”

I swallowed hard at the sudden change in blood pressure. “Why didn’t you?”

“Would’ve you let me?”

My breathing stopped mid draw. Where would she take things next? How far should I take things?

I couldn’t turn back now with some petty rhetorical answer. “I honestly couldn’t think of too much else when we sat on the bench.”

“Then why didn’t you kiss me?” she asked.

“Because I’m not as bold as you. Now why didn’t you kiss me?”

“Because you’re engaged.”

Her words served as a harsh reminder of the dangerous trap I climbed into each time I flirted with her.

Before I could take back what I had admitted, in an attempt to defend myself to her as a trustworthy person incapable of cheating, John the mailroom guy entered the room. His arms were filled with boxes of stationary and envelopes that I had ordered for the fiche room.

“Good morning, Emma. Nice day to —” The boxes fell from his arms as if in slow motion, one tumbling down on top of the other. The boxes lost their tops and the papers and envelopes flew to the ground in one big heaping pile.

I jumped to my feet and ran to his aid. “Let me help you.”

As we gathered the fallen stationary, Sharon barged back in the room, snapping bubble gum. “Oh dear me. Can I help?”

I handed her a box and a pile of envelopes. “Here, can you put these back in their box?”

“Sure, honey.”

We continued to clean the mess until we placed every last piece back in the boxes. When I climbed to my feet, I saw Sharon planted in front of my computer, reading my email.

“What are you doing?” I barked out to her.

She circled around to face me. “I didn’t think you’d mind if I went on the Internet to check my email, seeing as you left it open. It looks like you have a new message.”

“I better be going,” John said, raising an eyebrow. He turned and walked out the door.

“Why are you reading my email?”

“Look, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Even I’ve kissed a woman before.”

My blood boiled. “No. This is over. You are over.”

“Honey, wanting to kiss a woman is a beautiful thing.”

I headed to the door and opened it. “I’m not discussing this with you. You need to leave.”

“Leave? I don’t want to leave.”

I waved my arm out toward the door. “I’m not going to say it again. You need to leave.”

Panic etched on her pathetic face as she headed toward me. “Please don’t have me fired. I need this job.”

“You should’ve thought about that before you snooped into my email.”

She bent down to her knees and pulled at my linen skirt. “Please. I need this job to pay my rent. I will do what it takes to keep it.”

I flicked her clawing hands away from me. “You have a hell of a nerve.”

“I’m not here to turn you into an enemy. I’m here to feed my little boy.”

I slammed the door, sealing us into the room. “Don’t you dare do that.”

She rose to her feet and wilted her pale eyes at me like an abandoned

puppy dog at a shelter. “Do what, honey?”

“Throw the guilt on me when you were the one who screwed up.”

She stood with her shoulders hunched, looking pathetically remorseful. “Look, I’m sorry I read your email. I’m nosy. I can’t help it. I’m not a bad person. I was just curious, is all, honey.”

“You overstepped a big boundary.” I stared her down. “No one can know about this.”

She stepped in closer to me. “I’d never.”

“How can I be sure?”

“Because I’m desperate. I need this job. And if I told anyone, I’d be fired.”

I gripped my hips. “You’re damn right you’d be.”

Her eyes pleaded. “Please let me keep this job. There’s gotta be some sort of doohickey where you can put a password on your email if you’re worried. Do anything, but please don’t fire me.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

She pulled me into her arms. “Oh, honey, thank you. Thank you so much. You will not regret this. I promise. We’ll have fun in here together. I promise, you being a lesbian is safe with me.”

I broke free. “I’m not a lesbian!”

“Honey, it’s no big deal.”

My body temperature rose again. “But I’m not.”

She winked at me. “Okay. I’ll play along with you. You’re not. Now, let’s get to work. What do you say?”

I refused to defend my sexual preference to the clueless bimbo a second more. So I led us into work mode. “Let’s start by going over the research bin requests first.”

“Oh, do you want to respond to your friend on the computer first? Don’t get mad, but I read ahead. She wants to know if you want to talk about your

being attracted to her and wanting to kiss her and the whole engagement thing.”

I couldn't comprehend her lack of social grace. “You read everything, didn't you?”

She bit her lip. “I did.”

At least she was honest. And understanding. “Let me send her a quick email.”

“Take your time, honey.”

~ ~

That night, I scrubbed my kitchen and bathroom floors by hand, polished my brass bed frame, and even realigned my can goods so that I could read their names at first glance.

When I finished cleaning and organizing, I poured a glass of merlot and sat in my oversized recliner. I had exactly one hour before Colin would arrive with Chinese take-out. I stared at my cell phone wondering if I should follow through with calling Haley. I had promised her in my rushed closing email that I'd phone her that night. As I pressed the numbers into the keypad though, I wondered how I'd cool what I started that day at work. I had taken it too far. I regretted saying too much.

The delicate line between right and wrong challenged me in ways it never had before. If I crossed it, my entire future could be destroyed.

I was so damn curious.

What would it be like to indulge?

Would I ever be the same again?

Would I ever be able to stomach sex with Colin again?

Haley was a nice diversion from all the wedding hoopla. A diversion. An innocent crush. Who wouldn't crush over her?

Carr—The Fiche Room

I hovered over the send button. Screw the line. I pressed it.

With each ring, my heart pounded harder. By the fourth one, she answered.

“Hey, stranger. I was hoping you were going to call.”

I melted into my chair at the sound of her voice.

“I was hoping you weren’t going to answer. But now that I hear your voice, I’m glad you did.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

I picked up the candle from my end table and inhaled the relaxing lavender scent. “I’m nervous to talk to you.”

“Don’t be silly. Why would you be nervous to talk to me?”

I sat up straighter in the fluffy chair. “Because of everything I told you today. I don’t want to be nervous, but I am.”

“I’m flattered that you’d be nervous, but there’s no need to be. I’m glad you told me that stuff. If you’re uncomfortable, then let’s leave it out and talk about something else for now. Like, what are you doing right now?”

“I’m waiting for Colin to bring me dinner. And you?”

“I’m waiting for someone to bring me dinner, too.”

“It’s not that cute airport bartender is it?”

“Would that bother you if it was?”

My heart sank. I saw a pretty, longhaired blondie satiating Haley’s appetite with mouthfuls of scrumptious gourmet food, spoon-feeding her until their mouths met in a deep, erotic kiss. “No, of course not.”

“It wouldn’t?”

“Maybe a little. If seeing her makes you happy, then that’s what’s important.”

“Can I ask you something?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you happy with Colin?”

Carr—The Fiche Room

I sipped the smooth, dry wine. “I can’t complain.”

“Well, you know what they say when you find that special someone who doesn’t make you complain? You better snatch him up before he gets away.”

Even though her comment pointed toward the truth, it irritated me that she'd tease me about it. “Come on now. That’s not fair.”

“What’s not fair about it?”

“You’re laughing at my relationship with him.”

“I’m trying to understand it, that’s all.”

“What do you want to know?” I asked.

“Are you in love with him?”

I drummed my fingers on the cream, cushy leather of my chair. Of course I loved him. He was my fiancé. He’d be my husband, the father of our children, the son-in-law my dad hungered for to be part of his family. “Yes, I love him. He’s a remarkable person. He’s handsome, charismatic, just all-around great husband material.”

“Yes, but are you in love with him?”

I rested my neck against the arm of the chair, swinging my feet over the other arm. “I think so, yes.”

“You think so? Shouldn’t you know?”

“How does anyone define being in love with someone? I mean, I care about him. I want him to be happy and successful.”

“Does your heart skip when you're with him? Do you ache when he’s gone for too long? Can you never imagine your life without him?”

“That’s a bit Hollywood, isn’t it?” I asked.

“It’s not Hollywood when you’re in love. So I take it you could live life without him and still smile?”

I swept a chunk of hair behind my ear. “We’ve been together for seven years. The magic fades over time. There’s no way that level of desire can

maintain itself over the course of career decisions, marital planning, doctor appointments, fevers, tiffs, or whatever else life throws in front of us.”

“So you’ve felt this type of burning passion for him at one point, but it’s gone now?”

Never. My heart never skipped around him except when he took me on marathon training runs with him. When he worked out for hours at the gym, I relished in his absence, reading books, soaking in long hot tubs, watching sappy, girly movies. “Maybe not at that intensity.”

“You’re marrying him anyway?”

“He’s a great guy.”

“A great guy?”

I sat up in the chair again, taken aback by her sarcastic tone. “What are you getting at?”

“You’re getting married in a few months. Yet you’re hinting that you’re attracted to me. I was curious about what’s going on inside.”

I circled the rim of my wine glass with my finger, comforted by the smooth repetitive motion. “There’s a lot going on inside right now.”

“Do you feel the chemistry between us, too?”

Tingles shot through me. “Do you?”

“I asked you first,” she said.

“I do,” I whispered.

“Me too.” Her low voice crawled out to me.

My heart inflated. “What do we do about this?”

“Have you ever felt this way about a woman before?”

I bit my lower lip considering my answer. “I’ve felt attracted to women in the past. But I’ve never felt this type of chemistry before.”

“How about with a man?”

“Never at this level,” I whispered.

“Are you concerned?”

“Deeply concerned.”

“Do you want me to stop emailing you?”

No amount of concern could ever make me want that to happen. “No.”

She sighed. “I’m glad you said that.”

I breathed in deep, matching her relief.

“What’s going on inside your mind right now?” she asked.

I frowned. “How much I don’t want Colin to walk through that door right now.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He’s going to be here any minute.”

“You go get ready for your date. We’ll chat more tomorrow.”

“Do you have a date?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I wrapped my arms around my folded legs, sinking into them like they’d protect me from the sting of the truth. “With the bartender?”

“Yes.”

I didn’t want her to go out with the bartender. I didn’t want to picture her in an intimate setting with someone other than me. “Why does that make me jealous?”

“Because you’d rather it be you.”

“That boldness is going to get you in trouble one of these days.”

“It’s a crush we’re experiencing,” she said. “Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out.”

“Okay. I’d tell you to have a good night, but honestly, I don’t want you to,” I said.

“I don’t want you to either. Be good okay?”

“You too,” I said.

I hung up my phone. Instead of sipping the wine, I guzzled it.

## Chapter 8

I had never mastered the use of chopsticks. Colin could meticulously guide the slivers of rice to his mouth in one strategic swoop. Me? Not so graceful. I practiced manipulating my fingers around the sticks, but to no avail. I'd always end up resigning to the plastic fork.

That night, I sat beside Colin on the leather couch watching a *Friends* rerun. I once again tried my luck at the wooden sticks for no other reason than to concentrate on something other than Haley's date with the cute bartender.

When I took my last bite of Chicken Chow Mein, I leaned back against the couch. I placed my hands on my stuffed belly. "I can't eat another bite."

He handed me a fortune cookie. "You have to eat your fortune cookie."

"I can't, Colin. Seriously, I'll blow up."

He placed it in my hands. "Let's at least read our fortunes."

"Fine." I broke the thin cookie shell, and as it crumbled, a ring fell from it. "A ring?" I held it up between my thumb and pointer finger.

He leaned into me, resting his arm around the crook of my neck. "Do you like it?"

I placed it on my right ring finger and straightened my hand out. The pear-cut sapphire sparkled in the dim light. Two diamonds accentuated each side. "It's beautiful. I love it."

"I knew you would. What woman doesn't love her birthstone?"

## Carr—The Fiche Room

I moved my hand from side to side to examine the cut in different shades of light. “What’s the occasion?”

He ran his hands through my curls. “I met Sharon. I feel bad for you. She’s going to add a level of difficulty in that fiche room. I’m on your side with this one.”

“You bought me a sapphire ring because of Sharon?”

“Well, I know how much you’ll miss your privacy. The fiche room was our spot to be alone together and steal mid-morning kisses.” He kissed me. “You deserved something special.”

He did everything so elaborately. When his mother’s gall bladder erupted, he sent her four dozen roses. When she asked why he didn’t show up to visit, he said flowers were even better—and she had an entire room filled with them to prove it.

He didn’t understand simplicity. “You’re spoiling me.”

“You had better get used to being spoiled. I don’t skimp.”

“I can see that. But you didn’t have to. You know how many of our wedding guests could be fed with the money you used to buy this ring?”

He kissed my cheek and slid his lips down to my neck. “Yes, but I’m not trying to get action from our wedding guests.”

I giggled to disguise my unease, wrestling my way free of his nuzzling. “There’s always a motive.”

“Of course there is.” He moved in closer. “Now, stop talking and kiss me, will you?”

As he kissed me, I pictured Haley making out with the cute bartender. The more intense he pressed his lips on mine, the more I wanted to gag. A moment later he carried me to my bedroom.

~ ~

## Carr—The Fiche Room

Haley certainly didn't kiss and tell. For weeks, I tried to pry out of her whether she had a good time with bartender. She gracefully eluded each attempt. That led me to one conclusion. She must have had a great time.

Thankfully, her next trip would soon arrive. It would be my turn with her.

"If you get up and sing a song that night, then I will tell you everything you want to know," she said.

"Be prepared to talk because I'm just as much of a ham as you are," I said into the phone.

"I can't wait to see this."

~ ~

For weeks leading up to that night, we had emailed daily and talked each night. Our conversations were silly and friendly, leaving me with cravings to talk to her more. We connected like two magnets.

Every morning, I'd race to work, eager to message with her all day. Now that Sharon worked in the room, too, I had even more down time. She had caught on quickly, and eagerly accepted the workload as I piled it on her. Despite my initial reservation, Sharon wasn't that bad after all. By her third week, I considered her almost normal. Almost because she still hummed songs, stretched her legs, and dove into strange callisthenic exercises from time to time. For the most part, she kept to herself. My dad's plan had backfired.

Of course, my getting along so well with her could've had a lot to do with the nature of researching in the fiche room. The fiche machine was located on the opposite side of the room. So when she volunteered to take on a laborious request, I obliged. Behind the enormous wall of file cabinets that separated the computers from the fiche machines, I was free to sketch

and email. One day I had drawn Sharon on a stage with her mouth wide open in opera style. When I showed it to her, she grabbed it and hugged it to her heart. “Can I keep it, please?”

“Of course you can.”

She swept me up into one of her bear hugs, choking the oxygen from my lungs as she squeezed. She was an over-sized bundle of happiness, harmless, like a big, goofy, affectionate dog. She grew on me, treated me with respect, and showered me with attention. She talked endlessly about her little boy and all the mischief he got himself into every day. The stories took my mind off the tempting thoughts sneaking up the back alleys of my mind.

~ ~

Across phone lines and Internet connections, I could sweep the growing affinity out of the way and remain strong. In nine more hours, I’d be face to face with her again.

“Remember to dress casual tonight, okay?” I said before ending our call.

“Yes, baby, I’ll remember.”

I loved when she called me baby. “I’ll pick you up at seven, then?”

“Seven it is,” she said.

When we hung up, I still had a half hour before Sharon would get in to work. So I decided to check out the sketch I initially drew of Haley and see if I could clean it up in any areas. I planned to give it to her that night.

Earlier that week, when I first told her I was an artist, she showed immediate interest. “You have to draw me a picture.”

“I already did.”

“What is it of?” she asked.

“You.”

“Get out of here!”

“Do you want to see it?”

“It had better be in your car Friday night.”

I couldn't wait to show it to her. With coffee by my side, and in an empty fiche room, I polished it.

When Sharon strode in thirty minutes later with a box of powered donuts for her and a bag of oranges for me, I glanced one more time at the completed picture.

She lifted a magazine from under her arm and handed it to me. “I brought in *Vogue* for you.”

I flipped through the stylistic pictures and ads and balked at all the sneaky hooks advertisers sandwiched in those pages. Temptation was everywhere, grabbing at my limbs and pulling me toward it. The lure of “newer,” “better,” “more improved” called out to people like me to abandon our old ways of viewing the world and take on more gratifying ones. Those advertisers were smart. They zapped me with their emotional pitchforks, hoping I'd become a slave to pushing their products ahead in the marketplace. They went straight to people's hearts, because human beings constantly sought pleasure. Me, like most people, feared that if I passed up an opportunity, it might well be the last one I ever got.

The same had been true for how I felt about Haley. I experienced the lure of the exciting, newness—the exhilarating ride of euphoria—every time she popped up in my mind. How naughty of me, indeed. That didn't stop me. I feared the end more than I feared the repercussions.

I wanted to stoke the fire.

I flipped through the pages, and nursed a beautiful image of us — me sleeping in her arms while her soft skin brushed against mine. I imagined waking to her kiss, to her tender lips. I fantasized about guiding my lips along her neckline, drinking in her flavorful skin and breathing it deep into

## Carr—The Fiche Room

my soul. With each breath in, her spirit would fill me. With each breath out, I'd release mine into hers. We'd become like one seductive force of nature, making love to each part of our bodies until our souls connected as one.

Then, we'd snuggle against each other. I'd be comforted by her smooth, velvety skin, while stroking her silky hair as she drifted off to sleep. When we woke, we'd watch *E!*, drink flavored coffees in bed, pour over fashion magazines, and share the pleasantries that arose from being lazy together all day in the warm bed. Life would be simple, rare, and oh so beautiful.

~ ~

That afternoon, I met Colin in the cafeteria for a late lunch. I spotted him standing next to the awards display cabinet when I pushed through the oak double doors. Besides a woman in the corner with her nose stuffed in a book and a janitor wiping down a dirty table, we were alone. The smell of chemicals masked with lemon fragrance hung in the room. The gate to the food service area sealed tight with a padlock. "Good thing I ran back in my apartment this morning to get those pretzels I almost didn't take," I said.

"I can do better than that." He took me in his arms and kissed my lips. Then, he kissed my eyelids, the left first, and then the right.

I eyed the clock out of the corner of my eye. "It's only 2 o'clock. Did you know they were closed this early?"

"Yeah, they close at 1:30."

I narrowed my eyes. "What do you have up your sleeve then?"

"I'm taking you on a date."

"A date? Right now?"

"Yes, right now."

I would not miss my dinner with Haley that night. "A lunch date?"

"Why do you look so frantic?"

I wriggled out of his arms, smoothing my skirt. “I have a lot of work piling up downstairs. I need to be back in time to get through it.”

“Sharon’s helping you now.”

I cradled my hands around my hips. “She’s not quite there yet.”

“Relax. We’re going to be gone for two hours, at most.”

“Okay,” I said, aware of my slow, leery tone. “Where are we going?”

He took my hand. “Come on.”

Within ten minutes, we sat across from a perky, cute, and highly recommended travel agent. “So as you requested Mr. Briggs, I took the liberty of drawing up the contract for your Paris trip. Great choice if you ask me.”

“Paris?” I asked.

Colin took my hand in his. He brought it up to his mouth and kissed it, lingering his gaze over me with his pewter-colored eyes. “I’m taking you to Paris for our honeymoon, Sweetheart.”

“We’re not going to Hawaii?”

“Paris is so much more romantic, and it sounds more refined when someone says it,” he said.

“Your fiancé told me how much you love art.” The travel agent chimed in.

“He did?”

“Oh, he did. He requested that you stay within walking distance of the Louvre.”

I treated him to a genuine smile. “You told her that?”

“I want this trip to be memorable. It’s our honeymoon, after all.”

He wanted to go to Hawaii. He talked about learning to surf and staying at a five-star hotel on the beach. He had planned the itinerary within weeks of our engagement. In the mornings, we’d rise and take a long run on the beach, followed up by massages in the hotel spa and a hearty fruit breakfast.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

During the day we'd bathe in sunlight on the fine, white sand beach and at night dance the night away in one of the many clubs.

He chose Paris. Not for him. For me.

I hinted to him that I always wanted to go there. I told him about my desire to see the Mona Lisa. I wanted to drink strong coffee from a real French café and indulge in French pastry. Once he started talking about Hawaii, I let it go. I hadn't mentioned Paris in months.

"I can't believe you chose Paris."

The lady peeked through her plastic maroon-framed glasses. "Would you like to see the hotel he picked out for you?"

I glanced from Colin back to her. "Yes, please."

The lady strode across the floor to a file cabinet. She stood on the tips of her toes, exposing her well-toned calf muscles. "Even in two inch heels, I struggle. They don't design office equipment to accommodate short people."

We sat on the edge of our seats watching her. "Should we help her?" he whispered.

"I'm used to this. Thanks, anyway," she said to him. Then, apparently noticing the bewildered look on his face as she walked toward us and sat again, she added, "Acoustics are great in this office because of the high ceilings. You should hear some of the things people whisper to each other while sitting here. They don't realize I can hear everything. Once, I heard the entire lowdown on how one couple planned to ditch another couple they'd be traveling with."

We waited for her to continue. Colin moved forward in his seat. "Well, how did they?"

"They booked a different hotel way across the island and planned to pretend they did so accidentally. The week after, the other couple barged in here demanding that I refund their friends their money for the hotel."

## Carr—The Fiche Room

“How did you handle that?” I asked.

The woman adjusted the strap on her navy tank dress, as if beckoning me to sneak a quick glance at her lacy bra. “I handled that the way any smart businesswoman would. I cried and they fed right into my emotional state.”

I laughed. I liked the travel agent.

Colin looked to me and raised his eyebrows. “Well, then, how about you show my fiancée this great room?”

I leaned in closer to the desk to view the brochure the pretty agent placed in front of us both. “He told me he wanted the best room for his sweetheart.”

“I’m so blown away right now,” I said.

Smiling, he dropped his gaze from my face to the brochure. “This room is a luxury suite with a Jacuzzi right in the room. We’ll have an oversized deck overlooking a flower garden where we’ll be able to eat scones and drink espresso as we people-watch from our deck chairs.”

The woman opened her drawer and pulled out a file. She snapped back into business mode. “I’ve booked it as you requested—non-smoking, top floor, end unit.” She placed the contract on the side of the brochure. On the shiny pamphlet sat a picture of a man and woman in white terry bathrobes, sipping champagne from flutes next to a tub filled with bubbles.

I twirled a lock of my hair as I absorbed the news. Colin spoiled me with luxuries that most people only got to see in movies. I looked to the travel agent. She stared at me like an intense spectator at a tennis match. “The room sounds perfect.”

“Great. Mr. Briggs, if you could please sign the contract and select your method of payment, I can secure the trip for you.” She over-articulated her words, emphasizing even the silent consonants.

As he signed the contract, the agent spoke directly to me. “You know where I went on my honeymoon?” She pulled her chair closer into her desk so that her over-sized fake chest propped up nicely in front of me. “He took

me to his aunt's house in North Carolina. Auntie Ro cooked our meals and tidied up our bedroom. She treated us like guests at a fancy bed and breakfast.”

“That sounds romantic of your husband to go through all that to make it special for you.”

Then, slipping into a more casual tone she added, “Are you kidding me? Auntie Ro is famous for her ill attempts at cooking most anything. For lunch one day she prepared canned soup for us and she overcooked it so badly, the noodles disintegrated.”

“Well, you won't have to worry about soggy noodles,” Colin said to me.

“I wouldn't care. I'll be in Paris.”

“Your accommodations will be better than mine were,” the agent said, taking off the glasses and revealing her tiger-like eyes.

Why would she want to hide them?

“A bed and breakfast style honeymoon still sounds nice despite the noodle thing,” I said.

“We stayed in the next room over from hers. Of course, they had record heat that summer, and the AC died right before we got there. A jam in the only window in the room prevented us from opening it. The sweltering hole was like hell. I divorced him shortly after.”

“Because of the honeymoon?” I asked.

“Because, honey, that was the highlight of our marriage. Three husbands later, I gave up looking for that prince charming. I see you snatched one up though. Now I have hope that there are still gentlemen out there.”

“I hope I didn't snatch up the last one on you.” I cuddled Colin's hand in my own.

“Mr. Briggs, if you don't mind me saying, you're the last decent guy left on earth.”

## Carr—The Fiche Room

Colin softened. “I’m sure one will fall right into your lap when you least expect him to.” He reassured her with a smile. “When I met Emma, I was at the top of my game and happy. As a sophomore college kid, I didn’t want to be committed to a woman. I had a whole field of beautiful flowers from which to enjoy, but only one grew taller and stood out among all the others. She fell into my lap, just like that. Swept me up, and I’ve never been able to resist since.”

I listened to his interpretation of our meeting. I had an altogether different experience. I handpicked him as the boyfriend I’d have one day. In my first semester as a freshman, I had seen him around the campus. He had a tanned, toned body, glistening dark hair, eyes the color of pewter, and a go-getter personality that told me he’d be perfect boyfriend material. I chased him from a distance, admiring him interact, thinking how great it would be to have him by my side. One day, when I got the nerve, I approached him about some rally for the homeless that I supported. I handed him a flyer, and he stayed with me ever since.

“Colin, do you have any brothers?”

“I’m afraid I’m the one and only Briggs.”

“What about you, Emma? Were you looking to avoid Mr. Right when you met your prince?”

She looked to me for hope. “He fell into my lap, too, when I least expected him to. He’s been there ever since.” I wished I had more of a romantic tale to match his.

“Maybe I’ll get lucky and some cute guy with lots of money will walk in here without a woman already on his arm. Until then, I’ll continue doing what I do best, smiling and getting you rich guys to keep signing these contracts.”

Colin chuckled as he read the contract.

My focus filtered to Haley. Our meeting couldn’t have been more

unexpected. I'd heard all of my life that when you least expected it, it would happen. She'd probably be flying over the Midwest at that moment anxious to arrive and meet up with me in a few hours. I pictured her shiny, glowing skin and the way her teasing interjections sprang me to life. I involuntarily grinned.

Why now? We had set the wedding plans into motion. The honeymoon would be booked in a few minutes. A great man sat by my side ready to tackle life with me. Yet I selfishly still wanted more.

“Emma, you're the luckiest one I've gotten in here so far.”

“What do you mean?”

“All the trouble he went through to find the perfect place so you could be your happiest would melt any woman's heart. I've never met someone so eager to please his wife-to-be. How does it feel?”

My throat swelled by guilt. I forced a smile and answered the deafening question. “Lucky.”

## Chapter 9

When Haley walked through the door swinging her arms and legs with the confidence of a runway model, I buckled at my knees. I was totally screwed. Since watching Colin sign his name on the trip contract that afternoon, I vowed to concentrate on the good times ahead for us. Now, seeing Haley and her adorable charm, all my focus unraveled.

As soon as she climbed into my car she asked about the picture. “Where is it?”

A warm tingle traveled through me. “Where is what?”

Her rich, dark waves shimmered in the yellowy car light, bringing out her auburn highlights. She tilted her head back slightly. “Don’t give me that. You know exactly what I’m talking about. Now let’s see it.”

I reached behind my seat and grabbed the framed picture. “Now remember, I’m an amateur.”

She took it from me and lifted the box top. Her eyes widened. “Oh my God.”

I stayed silent, absorbing every ounce of her joy.

She turned to me. “You drew this for me?”

I smiled, and pride sprouted from every cell in me.

She touched the necklace, rubbing its smooth surface in between her two fingers. “You even got my necklace exact. How did you remember all these details?”

“How could I forget?”

She drew in a sharp breath and closed her eyes. “Wow.”

Did I freak her out remembering such painstaking detail? “A sketch like this is no big deal. It took me thirty minutes max.”

She cradled her hand on top of mine. “Don’t make light of it. This is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever done for me. Thank you so much.”

I liquefied at her touch. “You’re welcome.”

She squeezed my hand, and I didn’t fight it off. “How could you call yourself an amateur?”

“Well, I’m not a professional.”

“We have to see to it that you are, Ms. Humble Heart.”

“I can’t help being humble.”

“Well, you can have humility and still be confident. You’ve got to know that you’re good.”

I didn’t know what to do with the accolades. So I revved the engine. “You better buckle up. I wouldn’t want anything happening to my new art manager.”

“True. Your manager is hungry.” She clasped her seatbelt. “Let’s go hammer out some dinner for ourselves.”

Within twenty minutes we arrived at the crab restaurant. Haley dressed trendy and sexy in a lime green, silky cropped shirt that swooped low at the neckline, a pair of low-waisted blue jeans that flared slightly at the cuff, and a pair of sling back heels. She carried the most adorable pocketbook I’d yet to see. The box-shaped leather satchel, the color of cotton candy, flirted with my appetite for style.

We walked toward the entrance and she stopped short of the door. “I have to give you a hug.” She wrapped her arms around me. I buried my face in her soft, sweet smelling waves.

After a few moments, I pulled back, steadying myself as we headed

toward the basement entrance. A gaudy sign above the door read, “Crab-eaters Enter Here”.

The open room smelled like it had witnessed one too many beer spills. The combination of crab, beer, and usual basement moisture scents dulled my other senses. “Can you see why I didn’t want to take you here on your first visit?”

“I trust your judgment,” she said, rubbing the top of my arm.

That move filled me with warm, gooey pleasure.

The place buzzed with the chatter and the crunching of people feasting. They were smiling as they refilled their beers from pitchers to plastic cups and sucked on crab legs. We were surrounded by a room filled with hungry crab-eating savages.

I tried to swallow my laughter.

Haley nudged her elbow into my side. “You can’t keep that giggle all to yourself. What’s so funny?”

I angled my focus to the crowd. “Are you sure you’re up for this? We can go someplace—”

“Someplace else? No way. This is perfect.” She latched onto my arm and pulled me forward. “Let’s go grab that table in the corner near the window.”

We laughed as we headed over to the table, crunching crab shells with our feet.

A few minutes later, our waitress dumped a dozen crabs in the middle of our table.

Haley picked one up from its leg and dangled it in front of her face. “So what do I do with this thing?”

“I’ll show you.” I picked up a hammer, placed the crab in front of me, and hammered it in the belly region. Then, I tore at the shell and yanked on the meat until it came loose. I continued to wrestle with it until all the meat

piled to the side. “It’s a bit of work, but it’s so worth it.” Then, I cupped the pile of meat and passed it to her. “Here you can start with this.”

“What fun would it be if I let you do all the work?” She ignored the pile of meat, picking up the hammer instead. She pounded away at her crab. Juice, meat, and shells flew everywhere.

We continued hammering the crabs like a couple of construction workers securing nails on a rooftop, helping to fill the room with even more laughter. We chugged beer from plastic cups too.

After destroying the twelve crabs and littering the ground near our table with shells, we put down our hammers.

“I’m full,” I said.

She smiled at me. “Come here.” She picked up a napkin.

I leaned into her.

“You have a bit of crab on your face.” She gently wiped the corner of my mouth with the napkin. When she pulled it away, she paused, holding my gaze. I closed my eyes to soak in the swelling of my heart. When I opened them again, her eyes still poured desire into mine. I looked to my left to contain the silly grin creeping on my face.

“You’re cute when you’re giddy.”

“I’m not giddy.”

She rolled her eyes and smirked.

“Okay a little, but that’s only because of the beer.”

“Yeah, the beer.”

“Yes, the beer,” I assured her.

She glanced down at her watch. “It’s nine o’clock. The night is still young. Let’s go.”

I decided to take her to a bar not far from the crab restaurant. It’d been a long time since I’d gone there. Goldie dragged me there a few times before. They had karaoke, and the fun crowd livened the place back then. “Now bear

with me. I don't get out much these days, so I can't be sure if this is still a decent place or not."

"You took me to a basement filled with people hammering innocent little creatures, and you're worried of what my impression will be if this place turns out to be a dive?"

"Innocent little creatures? Is that how you treat innocent little creatures?"

"I have a rough side to me, didn't I tell you?"

"We might need it in here if it turns out this place is a dive."

"The more a dive, the better," she said with confidence as she climbed out of the car.

The bass of the rock music shook the air around us. "Sounds like a live band. Could be a rough crowd. You want to put that cute little pocketbook in the trunk along with mine?"

She unhitched its silver buckle and dug out her license and a wad of loose bills. She stuffed them in her front pocket. "Good thinking."

I opened my trunk and we tossed our pocketbooks next to the emergency roadside kit that Colin bought for me.

Minutes later, the bouncer checked my ID with little scrutiny, but then got to Haley's and stared at it as if he'd never looked at a license before. "Wow, we get chicks from as far away as Virginia and PA, but never from Denver."

"Chicks?" An amused grin bounced on her face.

"It's a compliment, I assure you," he said with toying eyes.

"I wouldn't take it any other way."

"You're such a flirt," I said as we walked in and headed toward the bar. She laughed, mischievously.

"Now, about that deal we made with each other about you telling me about the bartender," I said. "There's no karaoke here. So why don't you end

the suspense and tell me all about it?”

“Just because there’s a band, doesn’t mean a woman can’t still work her way up to singing a song with them. It depends how valuable the news is to you.” She lifted her eyebrow to me.

I looked to the stage where five hippy men rocked their heads back and forth to the beat of the music. “I wouldn’t know how to sing one of these songs.”

“Not that important to you, huh?” She turned to the blonde guy tending bar. “You know how to make a Blue Martini?”

He moved up closer to the counter, wiping it with his dirty rag, not taking his eye from her. “I’m a fast learner.”

She wrinkled her nose. “In that case, two Vodka Cranberries will be fine.”

“You got it, beautiful.” He flashed her a wink before turning his back to make the drinks.

“Do women throw themselves at your feet the way all these men do?” I asked.

“Throw themselves at my feet?”

I laughed at her attempt to be humble.

“Emma!” A familiar voice called out from behind me.

I spun around. “Goldie, Charlie! What are you guys doing here?” I welcomed my friends with a hug.

Goldie eyed Haley, “I could ask you the same thing. Where’s Colin?”

“He’s out with the guys.”

“Who’s your friend?” She didn’t take her eyes off Haley.

Urging them to move in closer, I turned to Haley. “Haley, these are my friends Goldie and her fiancé, Charlie. Guys, this is my friend Haley.”

She took hold of Charlie’s firm grip and matched Goldie’s reluctant loose shake. “It’s nice to meet you both.”

“Are you the woman from Denver?” Charlie asked.

I shook my head at him. Then, I shot Goldie a glaring look. How dare she tell him about her?

Goldie punched his bulging tricep muscle, causing him to jump back.

“I’m sorry. Did I say something wrong?” Charlie asked.

“No, Charlie. Of course not,” I said. “Yes, this is my friend from Denver. She’s in town for another meeting. I decided to take her out to the only place I knew. It turns out it’s changed quite a bit from what I remember.”

“This is where my band plays. We’re going on right after these guys.”

“Say Charlie, do you ever let stragglers from the audience get up on stage and sing a few lyrics with you?” Haley asked, passing a playful grin to me.

I grabbed her arm. “Oh no you don’t.”

She turned back to Charlie. “Emma wants to sing. That’s all she talked about since we’ve been out tonight.”

“You’re such a jerk,” I said to her, squeezing her wrist, not caring about the discerning look that had sprung up on Goldie’s face.

“Charlie, look at her,” Haley said. “She’s dying here to make her debut. What can we have her sing?”

“My band can play most anything.”

“Charlie, she’s kidding around,” I said.

Haley came close to my ear, “If you want to know, you’ll have to sing.”

“Goldie, help me out here.” I pleaded with my friend.

“I’m kind of with your new friend on this one. I’d like to see what you’ve got in you.”

Of all times for Goldie to be accepting.

Haley high-fived them. “It’s a consensus. Give it up. You’re singing.”

I turned to Haley. “I will get you back for this.”

Drawing her attention away from me, she asked Goldie, “You know her. Should I be concerned?”

Goldie shrugged.

By the time Charlie’s band began playing, Goldie taught Haley how to order their next round of drinks in Spanish as well as recite the alphabet forward and backward.

Goldie turned to me and asked in Spanish if Colin knew I was out with Haley.

“You’re the psychic. You should know the answer to that one.”

Goldie studied me. “Interesante.”

“Oh, please.” I rolled my eyes.

A second later, Haley placed her hand on my shoulder. “What did she say?”

“She asked if you’re always this much fun.”

She draped her arm over Goldie’s shoulder. “I love this lady.” She squeezed her tightly before releasing. “So you’re a real live psychic, huh? They always intrigued me. Tell me what it’s like.”

Haley’s dynamic nature could even put Goldie at ease. Always excited when someone other than a skeptic asked her about her trade, she jumped into discussing her early history with it. She loved to talk about how it evolved over the years. Haley, charming as ever, listened with the attention of an awe-struck fan and asked the right questions.

When Charlie’s band ended their rendition of “We are the Champions” by Queen, he announced, “I have a friend who wants to get up on stage and sing us a song tonight. Emma, why don’t you come on up now?” He waved me up on stage.

My head spun. “I can’t do this.”

“You look like you’re ready to faint,” Haley cuddled me. “You said you were a ham.”

“I used to be.”

She rubbed the small of my back, then turned and walked toward Charlie. Within moments of climbing under the bright stage lights and whispering to him, the band played the introduction to “Let’s Give Them Something to Talk About” and soon, Haley chimed in with her beautiful, soulful voice. She played to the crowd’s enthusiasm, prancing around the stage like she owned it. She flipped her bouncy hair, eyeing her new fans. She even bent down to touch their hands.

“She’s good. I’ll give her that,” Goldie said.

I swelled with pride for her. “She looks like a star up there.”

I locked my eyes onto her as she returned from the stage. “I can see why your picture graces the Great Wall of Singers at Lou’s.”

We spent the next few hours laughing and carrying on like people who knew each other for years. Then, after one last round of drinks, Haley asked, “Are you ready to get out of here?”

I didn’t want the night to be over. I didn’t want to drop her off and go home to my empty apartment. “If you’re ready.”

As I drove her back to the hotel, my heart sank. She didn’t have any more visits planned. No more fun to be had.

I pulled into a spot in the hotel parking lot. I gripped the steering wheel and buried my face into my arms.

“I know.” She sighed. “It went by too fast.”

I faced her. “I don’t want this night to end.”

She placed her hand over mine. “Why don’t you come up for a bit?”

If I went up, I’d return a cheat. “Hmm, I don’t know, Haley.”

She squeezed my hand. “For coffee.”

I wanted it to be more than coffee. “Coffee does sound good.”

“Come on.”

Moments later, we stood outside of her room.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

Once she unlocked the door, she stepped aside to let me pass through. The room had her light, romantic scent. A lounging area toward the window bathed the room in a soothing openness. Its milk chocolate colored couch and lighting accents added a romantic flair.

Adrenaline shot through me with being on her turf.

“I’ll put on some coffee.”

I sat on the edge of the couch. She fumbled with pouring the water into the small opening of the coffeemaker. Within seconds of turning it on, the metal carafe sizzled against the hotplate.

She came over to the couch and sat close to me, crossing her legs. “Goldie is such a riot.”

“When she started in on that psychic talk, I cringed.”

“Why?”

“Not everyone gets it.”

“Psychic stuff intrigues me. Just from reading my palm, she knew I had a twin.”

A twin? I still had so much to learn about her. “Is she identical to you?”

“No, he’s not.” She pointed to a deep groove on her palm, she said, “Look, she told me that this line here is the one that indicated I will have good health.”

I opened my palm to see if I had a similar line, which I did. I never let Goldie read my palm or my cards. She freaked me out once, and I vowed never to let her freak me out again. She had experimented with me reading tealeaves, and she blurted out that she saw an accident. Two days later, I rode my bike into a parked car and flipped over the entire length of the sedan, breaking my leg.

Haley touched the deep line on my hand with her finger, tracing it lightly. She swirled it softly around the different lines, then up and down each finger, sending waves of pleasure through me. Her sensual touch

caused me to topple forward over my lap and onto our encircled hands. She continued massaging my palm with her fingertips until I raised my head and looked into her eyes. Longing hung on her face.

Our gaze locked, and I dizzied from the blood rushing through my veins. She gently pulled her fingers from mine, and brought her hand up to my face. She touched my cheek with the tips of her fingers, seductively tracing a line from my cheek, then down my neck.

I closed my eyes to drink in her teasing touch. I wanted to make love to her more than anything else I'd ever wanted in my entire life.

She let her hand fall to her side, and let out a deep sigh. "I guess I'd better go check on that coffee."

I breathed in a deep gulp of air. "Okay."

She steadied the carafe over the porcelain coffee cup. The coffee streamed down into it, releasing a cloud of steam. "Cream and sugar?"

"Sure."

She handed me my cup and walked to the window. She opened it, letting in the warm gentle breeze. Then, she settled in on the couch next to me, with more of a buffer of space between us.

"I'm sorry about that," she said, not looking at me as she took a sip.

I clenched the cup between my hands. "It's okay."

It wasn't. We both knew it.

We sat in silence, staring at our coffee cups.

"What's on your mind?" she asked.

I leaned back against the oversized pillow, bending my knees. My feet rested within inches of hers. I moved my left foot closer until it touched her bare foot.

Her eyes grew larger.

I sloped my head to the side. "Call me obsessed, but I'm still wondering about that bartender girl."

She stroked my foot with hers. “A deal’s a deal. You didn’t follow through.”

“Oh come on. Why can’t you tell me?”

“Because, in all honesty, there’s nothing to tell.”

“Nothing?”

“Nope.”

I continued to lock eyes with her. “You’re so secretive.”

“Ask me anything.”

Did she melt inside too? Did she want to cuddle up to me as badly? Did she think about me all the time as well? “Tell me something about yourself that I don’t already know.”

“I make a damn good cup of coffee.” She took another sip.

“What about your family? You never talk about them. I had no idea you were a twin.”

“My family is a sore subject.”

I couldn’t imagine someone with her personality not being happy with her family. “You’re not close with them?”

“I’m close with Todd, my twin. My parents, we haven’t talked in a number of years.”

“What happened?”

“It’s a long story.”

I rubbed her foot more. “I’ve got all night to listen.”

She dropped her eyes, staring down at her cup of coffee again. “I brought Alicia, my girlfriend at the time, to dinner one night. I had told my parents I wanted them to meet someone special in my life. When I walked in with Alicia, they told me to leave and never come back.”

The breeze blew across my skin, causing the fine hair on my arm stand. I shuddered. “That’s horrible.”

“I’m better with it now.”

Carr—The Fiche Room

How could she be? “Really?”

She rubbed her necklace. “Well, maybe not.”

“You haven’t spoken since?”

“Once we did, when Todd graduated from Harvard Medical School. Todd begged me to go. I love my brother. So I went, even though my parents had disgusted and hurt me with their judgments.”

“What happened?”

“They ignored me.”

I pulled my foot away, hugging it close to my chest. “I couldn’t handle that.”

“It’s hard.”

“How do you deal with that?”

“I made the choice to live my life for me and not for them. The moment I realized that, I set myself free. They’re welcomed back into my life anytime. It’s not up to me. The choice is theirs.”

I shivered.

I couldn't lose my dad.

She rose from the couch and walked over to her bed. Taking the cover off, she pulled it in her arms and walked over to me. “You look cold.” She covered me with the soft comforter.

I leaned my head against the side of the couch and closed my eyes, humbled by her convictions. She knew what she wanted. She wouldn’t let her own family dictate any different. I, on the flip side, catered to everyone else’s desires but my own.

When I finally opened my eyes again, the sun filled the room with warmth and Haley sat on the floor beside me, stroking my hair, watching me. “Good morning.”

I squinted at the bright sunshine as it cast its rays in the room. “I fell asleep?”

“You look beautiful when you sleep. Especially when you let out that gentle little snore.” She continued to run her fingers through my hair.

“I snore?”

“You’re adorable when you do.”

I buried my head under the blanket.

She pulled it down and leaned in closer to tickle my belly. “Why are you embarrassed?”

I giggled and wrestled my way out of the tickle. She didn’t relent. So I tickled her, too. Before long the two of us had fallen into a big heap on the ground, laughing, kicking, and wriggling our way free from each other. I rolled up onto my elbows and rested my chin on my folded hands. “I have to get going,” I said, reluctantly.

“I’ve got to get ready for that meeting as well.”

We paused, staring at each other. “When am I going to see you again?” I asked.

She touched my cheek. “You’ve got a wedding to plan, baby.”

I put my hand over hers and closed my eyes. “I know.”

“I wish I understood why, though.”

I wanted to understand too. I removed her hand from my cheek and brought it to my lips. I kissed her velvety skin. “I wish it didn’t have to be this way.”

“Then, why is it?”

If I didn’t have scruples, I’d fling my old life aside and run wild. But my conscience grounded me. I rose, letting my hand slide from hers. “Because it has to be.”

She followed me to the door. Before opening it she pulled me into my arms. “Promise me something?”

“What’s that?”

“Promise me that if you don’t marry this guy, I get to be the first woman

you kiss.”

“How about we make a pact that even if I do marry him, we get to kiss.”

“You’re that kind of woman, Emma.”

“I meant in the future.”

“How far in the future?”

“When we’re eighty,” I said.

“When who’s eighty? I’ll reach it a couple years before you.”

“Well, then you, of course.” I pulled back, “For now you can savor this.”

I kissed her cheek.

She touched the spot where my lips had touched. “That’s not going to hold me.”

I sighed. “I know. That’s all I’ve got for now.” I opened the door and stepped into the hallway. “Now go get ready.”

“There is something so wrong about all of this.”

“Wrong about all of what?”

She leaned her head against the door. “About there not being a *you* and a *me*.” She began closing the door, slowly disappearing from my view.

How I wished I could abandon my principles and still live with myself.



## Chapter 10

In less than five months, I would marry Colin. Yet I couldn't stop thinking about the cute way Haley's lips curled when she smiled. Or the way her eyes twinkled when something excited her. Or the way she tilted her head back when she laughed.

No one would ever understand the depth of my desire for that woman.

Goldie might irrationally go back in time and assess my actions toward her. She'd try to figure out if I had ever showed signs of attraction toward her when we did things together. She'd think back to the times we went bathing suit shopping or sunbathed topless on her rooftop. She'd freak out wondering if I, her oldest and closest friend, was a pervert wanting to grab her boobs. She was like a sister to me — a little older, wiser, and too hard-nosed to find sexy. She'd be more freaked out than understanding. Our friendship would change. She'd probably be afraid to leave me alone with Tatiana for fear I'd turn her into a lesbian.

My dad would be the biggest obstacle. He'd never approve. How could I ever tell him? I couldn't handle the disappointment I'd cause him. He couldn't stand my working in a fiche room; what would he ever think about me being gay? Nope, I could never tell him. How could I ever be happy with someone like Haley if the most important person in my life would never be able to share in that happiness?

And Colin. The enormity of my confession would devastate him. He

wouldn't be able to get past the fact that I found someone else more sexually stimulating than him, someone with whom he'd never be able to compete. He'd walk away. And away with him would go my chance at a normal, socially respected life—the life where I could walk down the street holding hands with a man my dad would be proud to call his son-in-law.

He was someone others liked—strong, confident, and masculine. Gone would be the potential dad that would play baseball in the backyard with our kids and hold the limousine door open for our daughter on their way to the father-daughter dances. Gone would be the man who would dance to “Daddy’s Little Girl” at our daughter’s wedding and a few years later, the favorite granddaddy, sneaking candy and reading stories to a small audience of his grandchildren by the fire.

Yes, everyone admired Colin, the man with great potential.

I had to marry him. I had to have that life. It had to be enough.

I was meant to marry him. Right?

Then, why did my heart throb for someone other than him?

When did I turn into such an unappreciative, selfish person?

Goldie had to straighten me out. I had to toss my fears aside and trust in the strength of our friendship. I needed her to yell at me, to set me straight before I screwed up my life with Colin.

~ ~

After parking my car, I phoned her.

“Goldie, I need to talk to you.”

“I knew you’d be calling me. My intuition kicked in.”

“I don’t need your psychic interpretation. I need a friend.”

“Of course, come over right now and I will have some chamomile tea waiting, okay?”

“I’m right outside your door.”

~ ~

I sat on the edge of her sofa with my hands clenched. She fretted with the tea bags and commented on the therapeutic properties of chamomile tea on a weary soul.

“They say natural herbs can sometimes heal better than prescribed medicine. Did you know that?” She stirred brown sugar into my tea with an over-sized tablespoon.

I needed to confess at that moment or I wouldn’t at all. “I need to tell you something, but I don’t know how to start.”

She continued to fix my tea, turning it taupe-colored with creamer. “Spill your guts, Sweetie. God knows, I’ve unloaded on you many times so it’s payback time for me to be the listener.”

“Something is happening to me that is strange and if I don’t talk about it with you and have you straighten me out, it may ruin the rest of my life.”

She stopped stirring. “You’re starting to get the gift too?”

“The gift?” I asked.

“Yes, the gift. Like I have?”

“Is everything in your life focused on auras?”

“I wish you’d take my life burden more seriously.”

Burden? I wished I had some mystical power to tell me what to do with my life. “How can you even consider your psychic power to be a burden?”

“So you do believe that I have psychic power?”

“Yes, I do. I take it seriously.” My confession sat in my mouth pressurizing, ready to explode. “Now, about my burden—”

“Wait. I’ve waited forever to hear you say you believe in—”

I latched onto her hand unable to bear the burden alone another second.

“I might be a lesbian.”

There, I said it. I used the words I and lesbian in the same sentence. I put the sentence out there to be pushed around and examined. Maybe by getting it out of my head, it could never come back in again.

She sat in silence, staring at me.

“Well?” I asked.

She raised her eyebrows. “Wow. I didn't expect that.”

“What did you expect?”

“Not for you to blurt out the fact that you're a lesbian.”

“Correction — I might be a lesbian.”

“You're not a lesbian, Emma.”

“I'm attracted to Haley in a way I've never been attracted to anyone.”

“Who wouldn't be flattered after receiving a little attention from her? She's sexy and alive with so much spirit.”

I expected to hear reprimands, threats, even nasty insults. Not agreement. “You think she's sexy, too?”

“Not in a way that I'd ever consider myself a lesbian.”

I wished I could admit the same. “I know,” I groaned.

“Did you kiss her?” She crossed her legs under herself, ready for the juicy details.

“No.” I matched her position. “But I wanted to.”

“Have you ever kissed a woman before?”

“Never.”

“That's your problem, right there. You're not a lesbian. You're a horny woman who never acted on a normal fantasy.” She spoke with such dryness that a bystander not hearing the full context would think we were discussing something as trivial as hair coloring.

“Normal?”

“Yes, most women want to know what it would be like to kiss another

woman. It's deemed taboo by archaic societal terms, so it's a temptation that is preset into our systems. What you can't have, you want. It's as simple as that. I kissed a woman once."

My heart leaped. "You did? What was it like?"

"I was sixteen years old, playing spin the bottle. My boyfriend drooled as Angie kissed me. The thrill of having my boyfriend turned on by my kissing a woman sent me reeling into his raging hormonal arms after they all left."

Nothing about my fantasies of Haley had to do with turning on Colin.

"Did you like it?" I asked.

"It was fun and harmless. I had wondered a little what it would be like, and I found out. It was no different from kissing a guy, in a sense there's a tongue and a set of lips touching mine. Now, I don't have the curiosity. I got it out of my system," she said with the clinical voice of a doctor.

When I kissed Colin, he was no more than a set of lips and a tongue in contact with mine. "So you think this is a silly fantasy that, because it's gone by unrealized, is perpetuating itself?"

"You're curious."

"Why don't I desire Colin?"

"Have you ever?"

"Not like I do for Haley."

"You need to kiss this woman and get it over with. Once you've tried it, you will stop obsessing and it'll most likely enhance your sex life. You'll see that it's not that exciting. Then, you'll be able to push forward and concentrate your efforts on him."

"Wouldn't that be cheating if I kissed her?"

"Let's put it in perspective. It's a kiss. You'll be doing him a favor if you do this before you get married."

"Seriously?"

“Let me put this in terms you’ll understand. You’re on a diet. You’ve avoided all traces of sugar for a week and lost a few pounds. You’re in your living room studying for a big exam. There’s a plate of chocolate chip cookies in the kitchen that you’re trying to avoid. Every time you read a sentence, you think about the cookies. They call out to you. They tempt you. You can’t get past the same sentence you’ve read thirty times. Your concentration is gone. If you took a bite, you’d be able to concentrate again and go on with your studying and ace your exam.”

“You’re comparing my life to a plate of cookies?”

“That’s the level of seriousness at which you should be taking this. Your wanting to kiss Haley is like that plate of cookies. It’s tempting you. Until you sample it, it’ll continue to tempt you. There’s still time before the exam. Be done with it already.”

I had no idea if the opportunity to see her again would occur. Though, if she felt even a morsel of the way I did, we’d undoubtedly be seeing each other again.

“What if this kiss turns out to be more than a kiss to me? What if I can’t resist the rest of the cookies on the plate? You know how weak I am with sweets. What’s to say that I’m not that weak with women?”

“It’s good to find out before you walk down the aisle.”

I trusted Goldie and her judgment more than my own at that point. I expected yelling and finger pointing, but got understanding instead. “You’re not weirded out by this?”

“It takes a lot more than my best friend telling me she wants to suck face with another woman to weird me out.”

“So this is harmless?”

“Just don’t be eating more than one cookie. I know you. You like cookies. You’d eat the whole plate if given the chance. Use your self-control and you’ll see how quickly this silly fantasy will pass.”

Carr—The Fiche Room

“What if I don’t want to stop eating the rest of the cookies?”

“Then, we stop talking in cookie language and get serious. Deal?”

“Here’s to sticking with cookies,” I said, clanking my teacup to hers.

~ ~

A few weeks had passed since Haley returned to Denver. We had emailed every day since. We were crazy about each other. Neither one of us knew what to do with that. Then, on one of our nightly calls, she surprised me.

“Today, my boss and I went to a convention and I met the most incredible person.”

“What’s her name?” I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Actually his name.”

“His name?” My voice sprang out an octave too high.

“Yes, his name.”

“Who did you meet?”

“Ken Chartier.”

“The Ken Chartier?” I asked. “The life coach with all those CDs and books?”

“Yup. I’ve got two tickets to his upcoming sold-out seminar in a few weeks here in Denver. Are you up for a trip?”

“Me? You’re inviting me to go with you?” My heart pounded. “You think I could use some coaching?”

“Yes, yes, and yes.”

I jumped up and down in my living room, celebrating my excitement like a teenager who heard snow closed my school for the day.

I loved Ken Chartier. He helped me through so many of my down-in-the-dumps days. Through his coaching, I learned to pursue my passion for

drawing. I realized, because of his lessons, that I had a gift that could improve my life as well as the lives of others. But my true excitement had nothing to do with Ken—I was going to see Haley again.

“I’ve listened to him in my car. I’ve read him in the bookstore. I can’t believe I’m going to meet Ken Chartier!”

“I knew you’d be excited.”

“How did you know I’d be a fan of his?”

“I’m a saleswoman. My job is to be aware. I saw his CD on your backseat the day I bumped into your car.”

How did the woman remember such a detail? I was lucky if I remembered my own birth date. “I’m impressed.”

“So what do you say?”

I didn’t care what I had to do or what lie I had to tell, nothing would keep me from going to Denver. “I’m there.”

“It’s on a Saturday and Sunday so you’d need to fly in on a Friday night and take off on Monday. Is that doable?”

“I’ll make it work.”

“I’ll arrange for everything and send you the air ticket via email. I have credits from my traveling that I can apply. Also, I have an extra bed or I can reserve a hotel for you.”

I wouldn’t travel to Denver and stay at a hotel separate from her. “I’ll take the bed. No need to spend the extra money.”

“Great. It’s a date then.”

~ ~

Colin arranged a meeting with our new realtor. He insisted we purchase a house instead of throwing money away on renting. He’d finance it in his name so we could purchase investment properties in my name down the

road. He always planned ahead.

That day, I didn't want to house hunt with my fiancé.

But after a couple of dozen house viewings, Colin and I stood inside the beautiful new home that would become ours. The home had four bedrooms, a finished basement, even a room above the garage that could serve as an art studio if I could persuade him. As I stood in the foyer of my new home, I stared up through the skylights.

How could a roomy, spacious home trap me as tightly as it did?

Did I decide wisely when I accepted Haley's invitation to go to Denver? Over emails and phone lines, I easily remained innocent. Face to face, I would struggle to maintain that kind of strength.

In a few weeks Goldie would walk me into a room filled with people showering me with house-warming gifts picked straight from my bridal registry. I'd bring those shiny new well-wishing gifts to our new home and fill my drawers and cabinets and linen closets with them.

Colin held my hand and stared up at the enormous staircase that graced the foyer in elegance. "This is all ours, Sweetheart."

How would I ever tell him I planned to hop a plane to Denver? He despised Ken Chartier, and referred to him as a psycho babbling fool. I'd find a way to tell him the next day. I didn't want to cloud the day with a fight. "It sure is," I said, slipping my arm around his waist.

~ ~

The next day at work, I slipped my news to Sharon about my trip to Denver.

"I hear this time of the year it gets hot during the day and real cold at night," Sharon said, piling a chunk of blueberry muffin into her mouth.

"I'll be inside a convention hall the whole—"

The doorknob jingled. Above the pile of boxes I had put on the counter that morning, I saw the top of Colin's head.

He walked over to me, and handed over some requests from upstairs. He offered Sharon a glance. "So Sharon how is it going down here? Is my fiancée treating you well?"

She wagged her red face up and down, not taking her eyes off him. "Oh yes, she's been fabulous!"

"I've heard nothing but the same about you."

The time arrived for me to tell him about Denver. I motioned for him to follow me out to the hallway. "Let's grab a coffee."

"Well, it's been a pleasure seeing you again." He extended his hand to her.

"Likewise." She flashed him her crooked smile. "If I don't see you, enjoy Denver. I know Emma's got one foot on the plane already."

*What a freaking idiot.*

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Emma told me about your trip to Denver this weekend." She turned to me, "I'm sorry, honey, was I not supposed to say anything? Is it a secret trip?" She cackled and held a finger up to her lips.

Right then, the redness rose on his cheeks. Colin hated to look stupid.

"I was about to tell you about the trip, Colin."

"What trip?" he asked.

I held the door for him and ushered him out before Sharon could say another word. "Let's go."

As the door slammed, his eyes bore down on me. "We're going to Denver?"

"I'm going—alone."

"You're going to Denver alone?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes, I am."

Carr—The Fiche Room

“You told that loud-mouthed woman before me?”

“I happen to like that ‘loud-mouthed woman’.”

“She’s obnoxious, Emma.”

He had a point. But I liked her now, even if she did come across as abhorrent at times. “She’s grown on me.”

He rolled his eyes back. “What’s in Denver?”

“I’m going to Denver this weekend because I’m attending The Ken Chartier seminar. I won a free ticket on the radio. All expenses paid.”

I hated to lie. What choice did I have, though?

“How did you win?”

“I called in an answer to a question.” I spoke slowly as I conjured up a question they would’ve asked me.

“What was the question?”

My mind whirled. I couldn’t think up a question.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Then, I came up with, “They asked who sang a certain song.” Then, my mind drew a blank as to what song.

“Which song?”

“Unchained Melody,” I barked.

“They asked you who sang one of the most popular songs of all-time? Doesn’t sound like the type of question that would warrant winning a trip.”

He could see right through me. I panicked. I didn’t say anything. Colin continued with his barrage of questions.

“What station were you listening to?”

I sank deeper into the lie. “An oldies station. I don’t know the name.”

“Which hotel are they putting you up in?”

“I don’t know the name of that either.”

“Which airline are you flying?”

He didn’t believe me. He could see right through my lies. “Colin, I don’t

know anything other than I'm going to the seminar. When I get more details, I'll share them with you.”

“Why are you getting so defensive with me?”

“Because you act like you don't trust me.”

He backed down. “Well, it's weird that you wouldn't have told me right away. Seems like kind of a big deal, Em.”

We walked toward the cafeteria in silence. I needed to craft a more believable story. I never hopped on planes to places like Denver by myself before. How could I expect him to believe such a ludicrous lie?

“I need you to be understanding about this. I've been so stressed with the wedding planning that I kind of need this break.”

“I know you do, Sweetheart.” He rubbed my shoulder as we walked to the gourmet coffee station. “It's been stressful lately for me too.” He poured coffee into a mug. Without even glancing up, he said, in a low voice, “This trip is what we both need right now. I'll join you.”

“Join me?” I panicked. “That's not possible. The show is sold-out.”

He fixed his eyes on me, as though reading my mind. “It's not the show I'd go for.”

I would not let him destroy my weekend. “What would you be going for? You're going to fly seventeen hundred miles to have dinner with me?”

“I don't like the idea of you flying out to a strange place by yourself. I'd like to go with you for safety's sake.”

With safety brewing in his mind, he'd never give up the argument. “I don't see the point. I'm going to be gone ninety-five percent of the time. I'll be secure in a convention hall.”

“Why do you want to go and sit in that conference hall listening to some guy drone on about the big secrets in life? How did these secrets slip by the rest of the population, yet miraculously planted themselves in his brain? He's a scammer looking for money. How can you find him motivating?”

“See, this little mocking attitude is exactly why I don’t want you to go. I’ll get back from an uplifting day, and you’ll squash all my progress with a comment or a snare, or something else pretentious.”

He looked away and focused on the worker wiping a puddle of spilled milk from a table next to us. Then he turned back to me, “Do I do that to you?”

“Sometimes, yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Colin, you do. All of my wants are frivolous to you.”

He motioned to the now clean table. “Can we sit?”

I sat across from him.

“Why would I believe your interests are frivolous?”

“You never act interested in my ideas. You’ve never asked to see one sketch I’ve drawn since we’ve been together. Not once. Do you even know what I draw? Do you even care why I draw?”

“You don’t talk about drawing to me. How am I supposed to know you have all this pent-up passion for it?”

I wanted to lash back at him. To tell him he failed for not noticing the passion. But how could I? I never talked to him. How could he know? I assumed he’d knock it down. I never offered him the chance to lift it up.

I shrugged in defeat.

“No wonder you want to go on this trip alone.” He took my hand in his. “We need to change whatever’s going on here. I’m not out to get you. I’m also not attacking your ideas. In all fairness, you have to let me in on them. I know I need to work on this for you to get to that comfort level. I don’t want you to jump at the chance to get away from me for a weekend. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, not chase you.”

Why couldn’t he be a jerk so I could walk away from him guilt-free? “Colin,” I said, searching for the right words to match his, “Thank you for

saying that.”

His face softened. “Listen, if you still don’t want me to go, I’ll understand. But we need to work this out. You need to help me work this out.” He squeezed my hand, “I want us to be happy. I want what’s best for you. If going away without me to Denver will make you happy, then maybe you should. I just don’t want you to get used to doing things like this alone, without me. I want to share my experiences with you and I want you to want the same.”

A good fiancée would’ve kissed him to reassure that the commitment to the relationship remained solid. But I was selfish because the other part of me wanted my weekend alone with Haley.

I teetered on the edge of unknown territory.

The man wanted to support me. So I snapped out of my self-centered ways. “That is the most sincere thing I have ever heard you say to me.”

“Think about it, and let me know what you decide.” He brought my hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it. “I love you, you know?”

“I know.”

I could learn to love that Colin. Couldn’t I?

## Chapter 11

I first lied to Colin during spring break of my senior year in college. I had gone on a cruise to St. Thomas, St. Maarten, and San Juan. I told him I'd be going with my two high school friends—girls he had never met—Kate and Abby. I had gone with Thomas and Matthew, a gay couple I had met in my ceramics class the semester before. Colin didn't like them because, although he'd never admit it, he was homophobic. Thomas and Matthew had invited me to join them, and I desperately wanted to go. Something about their relationship excited me. So I told Colin a harmless white lie and had the time of my life.

I prayed the second lie would turn out just as successful.

Haley wasn't thrilled that he was coming. "Aren't you the least bit disappointed he's coming?"

"Of course I am. You've turned my world upside down. The second I read an email from you or hear your voice on the other end of the phone, bliss bubbles up inside of me."

"It does?"

"No one's ever bubbled me up with bliss before," I said.

"Then why are we not exploring this? Can you even imagine how incredible this weekend could turn out if we were alone and free with each other?"

Colin could offer things that she never could. "I'm not free though."

“Yet curiously, if Colin hadn’t asked to join you, you planned to come out alone?”

“I do love Colin. Not in the exploding, blissful way I should, but I do. Now, he asked to come with me and how can I say no?”

“I see.”

“What I’m doing with you isn’t fair to him or to you. I’ll understand if you don’t want me to come this weekend.”

“I still want you to come.”

“Even with Colin?”

“Even with Colin,” she said.

“You want me to come even if that means I’m telling you that nothing can happen with you and me?”

“A friendship can, right?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“We’ll make the best of it. I’ll leave your seminar ticket in the lobby and meet you there. I’ll do whatever I can to help. We can book you a room at the Radisson, the same hotel where the seminar is being held. The show is sold-out.”

“Colin can’t stand self-help motivators. He’s going to bring some work to do while I’m at the seminar.”

“Colin still doesn’t know I exist, right?”

“Right.”

“At some point you might want to introduce me as the new friend you met at the seminar?”

If she agreed to be my friend, then Colin should meet her. The arrangement could work. “You’re the greatest.”

“We’ll make the best out of this situation.”

So we set the plan into play. Colin and I sipped our Starbucks coffee as we embarked on a much-needed reprieve from our routine in Maryland.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

When we landed and checked into our hotel, the calm reassurance that I'd made the right decision bringing him and forgoing my original plan to be with Haley had remained. I needed the trip. I needed it to clear my doubtful mind.

Later that evening while he rested peacefully in bed, I glanced out the wall-length window onto the city of Denver.

Where, among all those dazzling lights, did Haley live? I stared out over the city until my eyes grew tired, searching the landscape for a clue.

The next morning as he lay in bed finishing the pancakes delivered by room service, I kissed him goodbye for the day and bounded toward the front desk to get my ticket to the conference.

In a few moments, I'd see Haley again.

My heart fluttered.

I spotted Haley standing by the concierge desk. Our eyes met, and a tidal wave of euphoria swept over me.

Flutters twirled in my stomach.

I walked toward her in slow motion. I could do the friendship thing. Yes, we could be friends. Why not? Nothing had happened between the two of us other than harmless flirting.

"Welcome to Denver," she said with a big sunny smile. She jumped right into that perky personality that I first admired.

"Thank you." I hid the giddy rush.

She opened her arms and welcomed me into them. The embrace sent shockwaves right up my spine. My heart raced. She smelled like earth, sweet and spring like. I let go, and she continued to hold me at arm's length. Her plum shade of lipstick brought out the gold speckles in her eyes. Her hair was swept up in a claw barrette, exposing her elegant profile.

"Well, baby," she said, her voice sultry and teasing, "Shall we?" She offered her arm.

Chills ran wild.

Thank God I brought Colin because otherwise I'd be in serious trouble. He'd unknowingly be buffering me from her magnetic hold.

~ ~

We sat in the last row of seats behind a group of middle-aged women. Their laughter echoed through the room. One lady talked about her dog, Elmo, raiding her garbage can that morning and leaving a trail of soggy napkins, paper plates, and coffee grinds behind. Another lady chimed in about how her cat clawed at her new potted plant and spilled dirt all over her new taupe carpet.

Haley broke our silence first. "How's everything?"

*A total wreck!*

Everything I had planned — my new love for Colin, my peaceful mind, my new married life ahead, even my plans for a dynamic friendship with her, lay victim to my emotions. Looking into those lush forest-green eyes, everything had gone from settled to debatable once again. "Do you honestly want to know?"

Her eyes traveled to my lips and back to meet my gaze again. "Give it to me straight up."

"Nerve-racking."

"I think so too," she said.

"We're two strangers stuck behind a group of the most annoying people in this whole room," I whispered.

"I know. What's up with Elmo?"

I laughed. I loved her silly side.

We glued in on the women as they talked about how their annoying co-worker Zoe always talked through her nasal cavity. They mimicked her and

began laughing out of control again. We looked at each other and burst out into our own laughing tirade.

“Would our situation pass the popcorn test?” I asked.

“The popcorn test?”

“Picture yourself sitting in a movie theater in the perfect spot, and the person next to you is chomping away on his popcorn. If the only empty seats are in the first few rows, would you get up and move to the horrible seats, or stay and deal with the unnerving munching, regardless of how annoying it became?”

She sat back in her seat, considering the question.

“I’m a ‘deal with the hand I’ve been dealt’ kind of girl. Why should I have to move and sit in the front row and get a neck ache? I have as much right to be in the perfect seats as the popcorn chomper does. So I’d face the problem. I’d ask the person if he could kindly keep it down.”

“What if he didn’t?”

“Then, I’d do the only other logical thing and buy myself a bag. With each of his chomps, I’d throw a handful of popcorn at the back of his head. He’d get the point after a while.”

“You would not do that!”

She scrunched her petite nose. “Of course I would.”

The spotlight shone on the blue curtain on the stage, and the overhead lights dimmed. A dramatic drumbeat replaced the Baroque classical music that filtered through the speakers, hushing the chatter of the room.

I whispered, “You didn’t play fair. You’re not supposed to make up answers.”

She whispered back, bathing me in her warm breath. “To me, both options are failing. To move to the front and lose your perfect seat is running from your problems. To stay and sit next to the chomper is resigning to an unpleasant situation. Neither of those work. I want a perfect seat and peace

and quiet—especially if I paid ten dollars for a ticket!”

We both giggled.

“You have to create your own solutions to get what you want. That’s how every major deal is settled upon in negotiation.”

“Is that what you were hoping for when you asked me to come here?”

She tossed me a look with a white-flag finality to it, before turning her eyes to the stage.

The show began. Ken Chartier, geared up with a hands-free microphone, warmed up to the crowd with witty, insightful remarks. Each head that I looked at faced forward, fixated on the man who would repair their broken dreams, mend their promises to themselves, and offer new hope to finding their purpose.

Each person had a story to tell. The man to my right, mid-thirties, long side-burns, stylish clothes, was probably a consultant of some sort sent here by his boss to refine his presentation skills. The blonde woman, wearing what appeared to be a Talbots dress, sat upright with perfect posture, laughing on cue to Ken’s deliberate speech. I pictured her as a manager in search of finding peace in her chaotic, unfulfilling role of leading a bunch of egotistical men and women up the ranks of corporate America. Most everyone in the room sought answers to life’s toughest question, *now what?*

Everyone, I guessed, had the same question I had in mind. *What the hell were we going to do with our lives?* I wouldn’t find that answer in the stuffy conference hall. I needed to talk with Haley so I could sort out my feelings and put them to rest.

“Haley,” I whispered.

She raised her head and looked straight at me, breaking away from Ken’s psychobabble. “What is it, baby?”

“Thanks for inviting me.”

“Are you having a good time?”

I nodded.

“That’s not too convincing.”

“I am, really,” I said, lamely. Then, I turned my attention back to the stage, even though she still gazed at me.

She rested her hand on my wrist, stopping my heart mid beat. “Can I be honest?”

I cocked my head to the side.

“I want it to be lunch so we can talk.”

“Me too,” I said, twirling my hair around my finger. “I want to talk with you so badly.”

“What are we doing in here, then?”

“Do you want to get out of here?”

She shrugged. “We have the perfect seats. We can sneak right out this back door.”

“What about the tickets? I mean isn’t that failing the popcorn test?”

She shot me a playful look. “Baby, this is the part where we throw the popcorn.”

We rose and tiptoed out of the room, releasing ourselves from the heavy psychology neither one of us wanted to absorb. We shot straight into freedom for the day.

We escaped through the hotel’s side entrance like two kids bunking first period of the school day.

Traveling in her sports coupe and trading Ken’s analytical words for the resonating vibes of The Doors’ *Break on Through*, we loudly proclaimed each word with no inhibitions. We raced along the out-stretched roads of Denver, passing the Coors brewing plant as she followed the route into the Rockies. In the sky above, like colorful raindrops from a sun shower, dozens of parasailers were drifting along the wind currents of the Colorado Rocky Mountain skies.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

Relieved, now we could finally indulge in something fun and less serious. Even if only for an afternoon. Having a beautiful woman sitting by my side and riding around the most picturesque landscape I'd ever seen, transported me to a place where I could have fun and be myself.

We talked about all sorts of topics. I found myself once again mesmerized by her sharp wit and intellect.

"If a person is going to judge me on eating beef while he's standing there talking to me in leather shoes, then he better tell me the material that's keeping his feet sheltered is synthetic," she said.

"What about those people who claim to be for environmental reform and it turns out their trashcans are filled with soda cans and empty ketchup bottles?"

Our topics of conversation went from frivolous political issues to serious discussions on life. I freed myself to be open in a way that I never had before. Her accepting attitude nurtured and valued all opinions.

"I want to make sure that I'm always clear on my purpose," she said.

"How do you do that?"

"Taking a few steps back to focus when life gets a little blurry."

"That's what my problem is most of the time. I become overwhelmed because I analyze things to death with tired eyes," I exhaled. "What's your trick?"

"My trick is to retreat to that place of peace that sets my mind free."

"How did you find such a place?"

"I let it find me."

"How did it find you?"

"Let me show you."

Within ten minutes, she parked her car beneath a cluster of trees in a spot secluded from humankind.

Climbing out of the car and venturing to the clearing a few feet away, a

sense of peace spread through me. The clearing revealed the most breathtaking view of the mountains and the city below.

“This is your place?”

“This is my place. I come here when I need to escape the real world and need to be reminded of how insignificant my problems are in comparison to the abundance of life found right here.”

“How did you discover this spot?”

“I was out on a drive one summer afternoon, needing to clear my mind. I had just ended a three year relationship with Rob.”

“Rob? A guy?”

“Yes. I was confused once, too.”

She sent me a knowing smile.

“I drove for a while that day unsure what I’d do with my life from that point on. I followed the Colorado River up the steep roadways, crying like a baby. I had gotten to a point when I couldn’t see anymore because the tears were blinding my vision. So I pulled off the side of the road and took the path that we just took. I parked my car right there where it is now and hugged my steering wheel. I prayed to God that day asking him to help me find my way. I let out years of frustration in that hour or so that I cried, until I had no more in me to unleash. Then, a calmness washed over me. God’s hand reached down and comforted me. He placed the answer I sought in my heart, Thy Will be Done.”

“I have goose bumps. Look,” I said touching them. “You really heard him say that?”

“In my prayers, yes. Then, I stepped out of the car and sat right here on the ground and hugged myself knowing I’d be okay. Ever since that day, when the pressure of life crushes me, I come back here and regroup. I take solace in knowing that things will be as they should be. I swear, every time I come, God is with me, reassuring me that I’m exactly where I need to be

and that life will be okay.”

“Wow. That is one of the most incredible stories I’ve ever heard.”

“Do you have a place you retreat to?”

Of one thing I was certain; I had been graced with such a place too. “My fiche room.”

Her smiling green eyes dropped on mine with the swiftness and balance of a bird in flight. “The fiche room?”

“Yes.”

“Even with Sharon there now?”

“I usually get there a half hour earlier and stay a little later. I use that time to sketch or paint or sit and think. It’s the one place that I can be me. There’s something about the room that comforts me, especially when I keep the overhead lights off and the monitor lights up the room. Then, it’s peaceful.”

“If you stop and listen,” she cradled her hand loosely on my arm, “You’ll hear the sound of nature at its most peaceful.”

Encircled in the warm security of her company, I turned toward her. “I don’t hear anything.”

“That’s the simple beauty of this place.”

I closed my eyes, drinking in her soft touch and fresh breath against the side of my neck. We stood close, in silence, breathing in the fresh mountain air together.

“I’m glad I could share this with you,” she whispered, as though afraid to disturb the sleeping woods. “When I look around and see life in full bloom, it sends a message through my soul that life is good. Life is really good.”

“Were you hoping that this spot would open my eyes like it does yours?” I asked.

“I’d love nothing more than that. But I brought you here for more of a

selfish reason.”

“Oh?” I asked. My heart started racing.

“I need to ask you a favor.”

She could ask me to do just about anything at that moment and I wouldn’t protest. “Sure.”

She let go of my arm, “Excuse me for a minute.” She ran over to her car and opened the trunk. She stuck her head in and mumbled, “I’m not even sure if I bought the proper supplies.” She pulled out a paper shopping bag and handed it to me.

“What’s this?” I held the bag at arm’s distance examining it.

“Look inside.”

I peeked into the bag and saw colored pencils, charcoal pencils, a sketchpad, and some Hershey kisses.

“I came prepared. Can you draw me a picture of my favorite place on earth as seen through your eyes?”

“Are you serious?”

“Completely.”

I opened the bag again, plucked out one of the kisses. I placed it like a present in the palm of my hand. “And the chocolate?”

“Inspiration.”

I chuckled. “I’d be thrilled to draw you a picture. What will you do while I draw?”

“Watch you.”

None of the flowers, cars, houses, or fancy dinners that Colin spoiled me with could ever match the magical intimacy of having her watch me draw. “Watch me draw? No one has ever watched me draw before.”

“I want to watch you create a piece of you, a piece of your heart, and a piece of your interpretation of the world. I love the picture you drew for me. It sits on my bedside table. When I look at it, I can’t imagine how you turn

a blank page into such incredible art. I want to see how it all happens.”

She had touched a place in my heart that had never been touched before.

“You had this all planned?”

“When you told me Colin was coming, I assumed I’d never get this opportunity to get you here. I came prepared anyway. And seeing as the adventurous side of you came out, a side I’m glad did, I want to witness firsthand how you create this piece of your heart. I’ll be hanging this on an empty wall in my house. So, in other words, you’re not leaving this mountain until you sketch me my picture.” She laughed.

“Is that a threat?”

“If it has to be, it’ll be.”

“Should I be scared?”

“Hardly. I may look tough on the exterior, but inside I’m a softy.”

I imagined she was soft on the inside.

I positioned myself on the ground and drew my interpretation of Haley’s favorite place on earth. As she watched me with intensity, I poured my heart into what would become my best drawing.

As my pencil moved, my heart soared. The woman took me on the ride of a lifetime, and I didn’t want it to end.

## Chapter 12

After Haley dropped me off later in the afternoon, I pounced up ten flights of steps in the hotel, two at a time, to release some of my energy. I still had stamina when I got to my floor.

The first time I ran a half marathon, I gulped a can of Red Bull energy drink to ensure I had enough vitality to make it through at least one quarter of the race. There had been people on the sidelines cheering me on. They had sponsored me with a good chunk of their weekly spending allowance to help support the Breast Cancer Awareness event. I didn't want to disappoint them.

But as I mounted that last hill much like a cheetah on the hunt, the energy drink had only partially propelled my feet forward up the steep, unforgiving slope. The other catalyst? The sound of girls, strangers to me, encouraging me with their cheers. They yelled out a motivating mantra: "Girl Power." I ran up that hill with more energy than I started the race out with, so much so that my feet barely touched the ground. I flew to the finish line as though an angel had come down and swept me up into her wings. I flew to the end.

The same rush of running on air and being superhuman accompanied me all the way to my hotel room.

My body resonated with an energy that electrified me, sent me reeling, and launched me straight to the peak of bliss.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

I went straight to Colin and kissed him. Our usual greeting peck turned into a warmer, sensual kiss. He would've been disappointed if he discovered my true stimulus, Haley. The way she laughed, the way she cradled my arm, the way she looked at me as I drew, and the way she embraced me as we said goodbye. My whole body trembled as a result of my heart beating in sync with hers. The delicious warm sensation between my legs as we walked back to the car still drenched me.

As he kissed me more hungrily now, I kept my eyes closed and imagined Haley's curvy lips against mine. I dreamed that her soft tongue played with mine. As he placed me on the bed and caressed my bare skin, I imagined surrendering in spirit, not to him, but to her.

~ ~

Even at dinner that night, a flowering sensation blossomed deep within. When I walked past the crowd of people waiting to be seated, their eyes followed me. I pranced by them with a spring in my step and a shake to my hips, as I capitalized on the new, sexy attitude.

As much as I tried to keep my secret fantasy of Haley under wraps, a glowing smile rose on my face in the most inopportune times. Like when the waiter asked if I wanted water or when Colin talked about a mishap he had with spilled coffee that morning. I blamed the silly grin on funny moments that happened at the seminar that day.

"It looks as though coming to this seminar is working. I've never seen you look sexier." He leaned in and grazed my lips with his own.

I blushed. "You think I'm sexy?" That silly grin grew, and I couldn't shrink it.

"It's like they injected you with chemical sex juice. I've never seen you so sexually charged." His gray eyes twinkled at me in the candlelight.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

I sharpened my gaze on him. “I can sign up for more of these seminars.”

“What did they do to you at this seminar?”

“They taught me about life.” The surface of another lie brought me back to reality.

“That’s a bit vague.” His inquisitive tone pinpricked the fun vibe.

I didn’t want my guilt or his questioning to cloud us. “I meant, they taught us how to look at life differently. Surrender ourselves to accept that which falls into our laps and use it to greater serve our purpose and the purpose of others.”

His easy-going smile reappeared, lighting up his chiseled face. “I’m glad you learned the great secret to life. Certainly gives you an advantage. Just don’t go losing it. I like this new side of you.”

“Me too.” Seeing his satisfied grin, I wished I could’ve given him some credit.

~ ~

Later when we returned back to our room, I snuggled up to my fiancé, working hard to rekindle a piece of that sensuality that took over me just hours ago. I cradled my head against his chest, unable to stir those tender feelings for him.

The next morning, I woke to the aromatic flavor of fresh coffee, the minty scent of soap, and the soothing sound of running water.

I rose, gathering the silky bed sheet and wrapping it around my shoulders. Its cool, soft texture cradled my skin in comfort. I poured a cup of coffee and curled up on the loveseat.

From my hotel window, I could see the breathtaking Rockies rising above the skyscrapers, softening the city’s backdrop.

A whole new day faced me. A day to explore with Haley.

With Haley.

The sound of her name sent a wave of excitement percolating through me. Being around her awakened my senses. It rekindled a sensuality that had remained hidden for so many years.

Looking into the mirror on the far wall, I saw a pretty face staring back at me. It was the face of a woman whose curly hair had more highlights and shine and whose eyes had more sparkle.

Haley had enhanced my life, and even more so since spending the day with her. Having a beautiful woman attracted to me lifted me to a higher level of freedom.

The newfound liberty created a sexier connection with Colin too. All along, I attributed my lack of sexual desire for him to be his fault. He bore no fault. I did. Now that I tuned into what turned me on, the spark grew to a flame. It burned bright with its unfaithful glow as it sought out Colin's hungry kindling.

The way the flame burned alive in me though, that kindling could've been the waiter with the turquoise eyes that smiled at me. Or it could've been the older gentleman in the elevator who winked at me. I basked in the euphoric glow of the overflowing supply of sexual energy filling my every cell. That natural flow of life ran through me like fire in dry woods, igniting everything in its wake.

As I kissed him goodbye for the day, any trace of guilt disappeared. I soared with happiness. My internal engine would once again charge to life by the energy derived through Haley.

I'd found the secret to a happy life with Colin. I could keep my flirtatious friendship with Haley as an innocent fuel for my newly discovered sensuality, and I'd make him my husband. Why couldn't it work? Flirting could be innocent. Everything could potentially fall into place seamlessly because no one would get hurt that way.

Thy Will be Done, I whispered to myself as I walked through the lobby.

~ ~

Haley Verano looked stylish in a coral fitted jacket that accentuated her toned waistline. She stood next to the lobby door and looked more beautiful than ever. As I approached her, she gave me the slow, once-over approval glance, wandering from my head to my toes and back up to meet my eyes with a confident smile.

That suggestive woman could sure melt my insides.

“Look at you,” she said, scrunching a handful of my curls. “How do you keep this beautiful hair so shiny?”

“Lots of gel.”

“It’s so soft and springy.” She let her hand slide back down to her side. “When I use gel, my hair lays on my shoulders pathetically stiff and motionless.”

“When I don’t use it, I look like a troll, big and fuzzy.”

She laughed. “I bet you’d still look adorable.” She wrinkled her nose playfully before finishing with a wink.

I blushed. Her compliments filled me with an unending desire to fish for more with her. “So how was your night last night?”

She took my hand and started walking toward our secret back door. “Wonderful. I went shopping.”

“Browsing or actual purchasing?”

“I never shop just to browse.” She hovered her gaze over me for a dramatic few seconds. “I become extremely happy when I spoil myself.

“That is a good opportunistic view on spending.”

“I only face the downsides when I have to, like when my monthly credit card statement makes its way into my mailbox.”

“So what did you buy that’s going to keep the employees at your credit card company employed this month?”

Her lips curled upward as she pressed her back against our secret door. She held my hands, pulling me into her close. With her face inches away from mine, she spoke in a slow purr. “It’s a surprise.”

Her breath washed over my face in one gentle seductive sweep. My knees buckled.

She backed us out of the door. The combination of the balmy morning air and the loss of her grip on me instantly cleared my mind.

“Tell me what you bought.”

“You’re so cute.” She blinked her lashes in an exaggerated motion.

“Oh no. It doesn’t work that way. You can’t throw in a phrase like that and avoid my direct line of questioning. Fess up. What did you buy?”

“Want to see for yourself?”

“Of course I do.”

“It’s at my apartment. Do you mind?”

I’d catch a glimpse of her inner world. I struggled against squealing in delight. “Not at all.”

Her probing eyes swung away from me and to the bright blue sky. “We’ll be quick so we can get out and enjoy this beautiful sunny day.”

“Of course we will.” I didn’t care if we hung out in a cave all day, as long as we were together.

~ ~

Nestled in the center of a bustling city street, her two-bedroom apartment rose above the clutter of surrounding buildings. Her kitchen window opened up to a picturesque view of the metropolis. I stood in the appetizing nook that was accentuated with savory green and admired the

detail of the accessories.

“Where did you ever find such unique curtains?” I held the fern-colored fabric.

“I made them.”

“I’m impressed. I can’t even sew a button.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t even color in the lines.”

We both laughed.

“Follow me,” she said, taking me by the hand and steering us into the living room.

The picture drew my eyes directly to it as I walked through the archway. I took a long, deep breath. “Oh my God.” I cupped my hands over my mouth. “You didn’t.”

“Do you like it?”

I stared at the picture that I drew of her special place. The forest green mat and the grandiose etchings on the cherry oak frame captured the depth in the picture and created an impression of richness. “That is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done.”

“It looks perfect above the mantle, doesn’t it?”

Words escaped me. No one had ever honored my work with such prestige.

“Come here,” she pulled me over to the couch. We sat close and stared at the picture.

What an honor to not only see my picture hanging on her wall, a wall she’d be staring at every day, but also an honor to be sitting in her living room, in her personal space.

I wanted to learn everything about her.

From my vantage point, I saw picture collages filled with some smiling and some goofy faces. She collected angels. She had poems framed and strategically placed around candleholders, around funky table lamps, and

around shelves alive with greenery. I had so much to discover in her and only one day left in Denver to do so.

She leaned in close to me. “So,” she whispered with our faces inches apart.

My heart galloped ahead. “So,” I whispered back, my voice shaky. I didn’t take my eyes from her moist, welcoming lips. Goldie’s voice echoed in my mind telling me one cookie at a time and no more.

If I had one, I wouldn’t be able to stop. My life would then turn into one big crumbled up heap of cookies.

“What do you think of my place?” She asked edging even closer to me.

“I’m glad you brought me to see it,” I managed to say as she circled my face.

“Me too.”

We stared into each other’s eyes and I studied her — on how perfectly female she was.

I’d love to glide my fingers along her face, snuggle up against those shiny waves falling gracefully on her shoulders, and melt into her curvy lips.

She tore away from our glance. “We should go.”

“Yeah, we should.” I looked back at the picture, calming the surge with a deep inhalation.

She rose, fumbling to set a fallen pillow back into place, “I’ll get our lunch packed.”

“Mind if I use your bathroom?” My voice still shook and my body still trembled.

“First door there on the right.”

I almost made it past the couch. But she tugged at the back of my shirt.

I turned to face her radiance.

“I don’t want anything to be awkward between us today,” she said.

“Are you feeling awkward?” I asked her.

“No.”

“Neither am I,” I said, then shot her a coy smile before heading off to the bathroom.

Once I closed the door, I slid my back against the oak, all the way down to the floor. I allowed myself to experience the sheer intensity of the moment. I sat with my hands tucked in my hair until my breathing stabilized and my floating spirit grounded.

~ ~

I waltzed out of her apartment soaring to the beat of an invigorating rhythm orchestrated solely by the pure sexual chemistry flowing between us. I quivered as the ticklish vibes pumped through me.

Not until we arrived at the walking trail did I have my emotions under control. My silky ivory-colored pants and sling back sandals didn't exactly match the hiking plans. But she promised to trade in her original plan of rocky, uphill terrain, for a more subdued, paved trail suitable for a lazy morning stroll.

“From a person not familiar with this place, what is one of the first elements about it that you like the most?” Haley asked.

“Well, besides you,” I said, lowering my eyelashes slow, and dramatically, “Colorado settles my anxiety with its fresh air and peaceful safety. Well, except for the mountain lions I've heard about. Could they leap from behind a bush and eat me?”

“A mountain lion wouldn't eat you,” she said all serious.

I laughed. “No? Why not?”

“They like to munch on the locals. He'd take one look at you and know that you're not from around these woods. You're too pretty to be a woman of the mountains.”

“You’re so goofy.” I shook my head laughing.

“A life without goofiness is like an ocean without fish, unnatural and unspeakably harmful.”

“Right,” I said, continuing to laugh.

She punched my upper arm, “Stop laughing at me.”

I reciprocated. We continued the silly banter and arm nudging for the entire walk, which lasted the remainder of the morning.

As it neared midday, we returned to her car to retrieve the picnic basket and find a secluded area to eat. She knew all the tourist-free areas and led me over to the perfect hidden spot where no one would bother us.

“I made this quilt myself,” she said, swooshing it up in the air and letting it fall gracefully to the ground.

“Where did you learn to be such a whiz with sewing?”

“My grandma taught me. Look around you. What else is a girl to do in these woods?”

“I don’t know. Clean horse stables?”

“Which is why I took up sewing.” In one poised move, she lowered to the quilt and tucked her feet neatly under herself. “Don’t get me wrong. I love horses and ride them often. But who wouldn’t avoid the unpleasant task of shoveling hay to sew and chat with a woman eager to reveal decades of stories?”

I lowered myself down to the quilt. “Is she still alive?”

“My grandma, no. She passed away just under a year ago. She was in her nineties and died a happy woman,” she said, taking the snacks from out of the basket.

“She must have been thrilled that you took up a career in clothing design sales.”

“She celebrated my landing this incredible job right along with me. She danced in circles when I first told her. She leaped in the air like she had a

trampoline under her feet. I want to live my life as happily as she did.”

“Yeah, me too.” I placed slices of cheese and a few plump strawberries on each of our plates. “We have to see to it that we do.”

I held the wine glasses as she poured the Merlot wine. Then, setting the bottle back into the basket, she took her glass from me. “Here’s to seeing to it, then.”

We clanked our glasses together and took a sip.

“I wanted to dip these strawberries in chocolate for you because I know how much you crave it. But I didn’t want them to turn gooey on us.” She bit into one.

“They’re perfect.” I bit into the juicy fruit, and the sweetness trickled down my throat.

“I want to ask you something.”

“What? Why I talk with a funny east coast accent?” I hesitated then asked, “Or what I’m doing here in the middle of the national forest sipping wine with you?”

“Yeah, something like that.” She spilled her words out lazily.

“Something like what? Which one?”

She gazed at me as she lifted a strawberry from the basket and placed it to my mouth. “Why you talk so funny of course.”

I bit into it, and juice dribbled down my chin. Haley dabbed it with a napkin. She didn’t take her eyes off me.

“That’s not what you wanted to know.” I squinted at her. My tummy fluttered.

“Don’t give me that little look.”

I licked the remaining juice off my lips. “Fine, if you’re not going to ask me your real question, then you’ll never get the answer to it.”

I wanted her to ask me something personal and deeply intimate. I didn’t want to talk about funny accents, horse stables, or Denver scenery. I wanted

to explore her interesting mind and understand her emotions.

Too preoccupied to eat, I set my plate to the side and lay down on the quilt. I stared straight up through the tree ceiling to catch a glimpse of the bright blue sky.

She sat and watched me.

“What are you feeling when you’re with me?” she asked.

The question sent shock waves through me and loomed in the air like a balloon slowly inflating with helium, building momentum and force, waiting to be addressed and dealt with. I turned my head to her. “It’s not an emotion that I can put into words.”

“You’re on my mind all the time.”

I closed my eyes, digesting the weight of the words that gave rise to a tantalizing whirlwind within me. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“So do you feel it as intensely as I do?”

I nodded, not taking my eyes from hers. I craved to touch her skin. I blindly searched out her hand and cradled my fingers around it. She lowered herself onto her side, letting out a relaxed sigh and laying her head down close to mine. Our hands remained entwined as she turned onto her back and looked to the sky. I continued to stare at her, watching her chest rise and fall with each breath, drinking in the beauty of her long, sleek neck, and perfectly manicured face.

She spoke to my heart without saying a word.

Slowly, seductively, I stroked her fingers. She joined in. Her electrifying fondling sent my head spinning. Just when I didn’t think my body could tremble any harder, she proved me wrong when she propped herself up. She cushioned my head in her arm and brought her lips within reach of mine. “What’s going on in that heart of yours, right now?” she asked, resting her fingertip in the center of my chest.

In one extreme sensuous urge, I rested my finger up against her lips,

causing her to moan, which further fed my arousal. Her feminine curvy lips against my finger sent delightful sensations through me, each pulsation more exhilarating than the one before it. The warmth pooling between my legs grew even hotter.

I lowered my gaze to focus on her full, fleshy lips. Yearning to feel them against mine, I slid my head closer. Her lips were now a mere inch away from mine.

She brushed her lips against mine and spoke in a low murmur, “I want to kiss you.” She stroked my cheek, sending a sensual wave through me. “I’ll stop now if you want.”

“Don’t stop now,” I whispered into her mouth.

She opened her mouth to speak, but I, unable to control the impulse any longer, stopped her with my lips.

Her mouth was warm, moist, and delicious. She tasted like fresh strawberries. I sought out her velvety tongue with my own. Our tongues circled each other, and we fed off each other’s stimulating sensations. Every stroke of her soft tongue against my own sent delicate quivers of pure delight down my spine.

We explored each other eagerly. Our breathing harmonized. One breath of hers turned into one breath of mine, intensifying the flow of freedom, beauty, and wholeness between the two of us. With each turn, each passing, each twirl going on inside, I grew hotter and eager to discover more of her.

Eventually we slowed to feathery caresses. Our tongues released and our kissing turned into gentle grazes. Dizzy and breathless, each fluttering sweep of her lips against mine sent me floating. Connected to her spirit, every ounce of my being tingled at a level I’d never before encountered.

As our lips parted, I kept my eyes closed, wanting to suspend the moment—the moment I’d dreamed of and waited my whole life to experience.

Carr—The Fiche Room

She brought my quivering body into her arms, and I melted into her embrace.

## Chapter 13

Resting my head along her chest, I stared up into the cloudless blue sky and enjoyed the beautiful sound of her gentle breathing. She ran her fingers through my hair, stopping to twirl a loose curl around her fingers. I wanted to remain cuddled up against her for eternity.

She kissed the curls on top of my head. “I’ve never experienced a more incredible kiss.”

“Me either. I could lay here like this forever.”

She pulled me in tighter. I continued to melt, resting in her arms. I basked in the intimate glow, until we both drifted off to sleep.

~ ~

My cell rang. I woke in a panic and shot up to my feet.

“Shit! It’s 6:15.” I straightened my shirt and turned my back to Haley as I answered. “Hello?”

“Where are you?” Colin asked.

From his flat tone, I suspected he knew I wasn’t holding hands in unison with a bunch of self-help seekers in the hotel conference room. “I’m having coffee. Where are you?”

“I’m waiting for you at the hotel bar.”

“You sound angry,” I said.

“I’m worried.”

“Don’t worry. I’m fine, hon.”

“I’ve been sitting here for the last forty-five minutes, listening to a bunch of babbling idiots go on about how much they enjoyed the seminar and wondering where the hell my fiancée is. Who are you having coffee with?”

“I’m having coffee with a woman from the seminar. I’m sorry. I lost track of time.”

“How far away are you?”

“How far away am I?” I repeated, looking to Haley for guidance. She held her fingers up into a three and a zero. “I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

Driving through the winding steep declines of the Rockies, my hand clutched the Oh Shit Handles of her car as it hugged the Colorado River’s edge. I had no clue how to delve into the emotions of the new world surrounding me. One moment I flew like a butterfly with new wings, fluttering around like I owned the sky. The next moment, I returned back to the ground like a caterpillar.

I wanted to be in her arms, laying on her handmade quilt and soaking in her peaceful beauty.

My life would never be the same now after that kiss.

“I don’t want you to go back,” she said.

I stroked her face. “I don’t want to go back either.”

“Then don’t.”

Life was not so black and white for me. Colin didn’t deserve to be hurt by my selfish actions. “I have to. He’s waiting for me.”

“Stay in Denver with me.”

“I wish things were different so that I could.”

“Imagine, we could come back to this place over and over again.”

I’d love to experience that afternoon repeatedly. But I had that one

major obstacle blocking my path—my promise to Colin to be faithful. I never wanted the man I would marry to turn into an obstacle. But after that kiss, he turned into a gigantic one.

He was strong and confident. I didn't want to picture him any other way.

"Haley—" I lingered on her name, not sure how to explain that I couldn't ever be the person she deserved.

"You're reluctant." Panic lined her words.

"I can't stay here. You know that." I tried to sound logical.

"Why can't you?"

"I'm getting married. The wedding is planned. The house is bought. The honeymoon is booked. Everything is set. I can't walk away and move to Denver."

"Sure you can. It's your life isn't it?" Her voice rose beyond casual civility.

"Why are you being this way?"

She looked straight ahead, hugging the turns in the road. "Can you honestly look me in the eye and tell me that you've ever experienced what we did today with Colin?" Anger now spilled from her eyes.

"No, of course not. We experienced something unique, incredible, and beautiful today."

She turned her attention back to the road. "Yet you're going to marry him?"

I didn't expect to have to change my entire future on the car ride back to the hotel. I could now see rising up in the distance. We drove past a convenience store where Colin and I had bought snacks the night before. "I can't call off the wedding."

"No." She smirked. "Of course you can't."

"I need some time. So much is rushing at me, so fast."

"So what's your plan? Revel in the good times while you can? Then,

pretend none of this happened when the timing deems that necessary.”

That bitter side jumped out of thin air without warning, like a tornado, carrying with it shards of anger.

“Am I right, Emma?”

She called me Emma. I was no longer baby. My limbs went numb.

She rounded the corner and entered the lobby entrance driveway. Colin stood in front of the lobby door talking with an older gentleman. He had his sports jacket swung over his shoulder in vogue fashion as he leaned in toward the man. He peeked up at Haley’s car through his sporty sunglasses.

“You have to do what’s right for you, Emma,” she said, coming to a stop.

“I don’t want to leave it this way.”

She stared down at her perfectly manicured fingernails. “Me neither.” Her voice had softened.

“I have to go.” I motioned to Colin. “That’s him.” He shook the man’s hand.

She glanced up through the window at him. “Just as I pictured him to look.”

“I wish we had more time to talk about this.”

“He’s walking this way. I don’t want to meet him.” She snapped her gaze straight ahead. A few tears trickled down her cheek.

I ran a finger across her hand as it clutched the shift. It would be the last time I touched her. “You don’t know how badly I want to drive off with you right now.”

She turned and looked at me. “I can’t play this game. You’re either ready for me or you’re not. I’m not going to be a mistress in your marriage.”

“A mistress?”

“That’s all I am to you right now.”

“That’s not true and you know it.”

Carr—The Fiche Room

“Emma, he’s coming closer. Please get out of the car.”

I resented his presence, lurking about the car like a captain ordering me to come ashore. “We need to talk about this, Haley.”

She looked at me for a moment and waved me away, turning her head out her driver’s side window.

“Haley?” I cried, softly.

He opened the door and offered me his hand. Before I could close the door and avoid the awkward moment of my two lovers meeting, he popped his head in the car, “Hi, I’m Colin, Emma’s fiancé.”

She shook his hand.

“Haley Verano. Nice to meet you,” she said without effect.

“Well, it was nice of you to take Emma out to a local coffee shop. She loves her caffeine. I tried to get her off the stuff, but her head spins around like Medusa every time. So I learned to back away from that fight.”

“Well, good luck with that.” She smiled weakly at him and met my eyes. “Have a safe trip back, Emma.”

“Thanks,” I whispered.

He closed the door and she drove away, leaving me with an empty heart.

“She wasn’t the friendliest person I’ve ever met,” he said, taking my hand in his and directing me to the lobby door.

I snapped back at him. “Why do you always have to be so damn judgmental?”

“I was being observant. What the hell got into you?”

I bit down on the inside of my cheek to stop the tears from breaking through. “Nothing. I’m tired and need a hot shower.”

While in the shower minutes later, I cried under the spray of hot water. The day had been so beautiful—the best of my entire life—and yet it ended on such a devastating note. A big, empty hole replaced the happy heart I had that afternoon. How would I ever get on that airplane and fly away from her

not knowing if I'd ever see her again?

Now I had to face an evening with Colin.

When he jumped into the shower with me, I all but cringed at his sight and hungry touch. I couldn't deal with his clawing hands and ravenous kiss. The urgency behind his advances annoyed me. I bit into my hand to ease the pressure of his presence. I was grateful to be in the shower so the water could mask my tears. Instead of bringing me closer to him, the sex of the moment tore me apart. I wanted to escape the unnatural world that was so familiar to me just that morning.

Once done, he let me alone to finish my shower. Finally, I had a moment of solitude to deal with the cloud of anguish hovering over me.

I needed to talk to Haley. I couldn't leave that way. I had to call her and hear her voice.

"Hey Colin," I yelled to him from the bathroom.

"What is it, Sweetheart?"

"When you're dressed, how about going down to talk to the concierge about dinner plans. He'd probably have some great places to recommend. I'm in the mood for Italian."

~ ~

Once the door slammed shut, I called her. When she answered, my heart plummeted in grief, fearing I'd never experience that enticing woman again.

"Haley?"

"How are you?" she asked.

I wiped the tears as they fell from my eyes. "I'm scared."

"I don't know what to say, Emma." She sounded distant, cold, and detached already. And she called me Emma again.

"I want to be back on the quilt with you and forget the past hour

happened.”

“I was serious. I’m not willing to be your affair. Or the girlfriend who no one knows exists. Or the mysterious friend you visit once or twice a year.”

“You’re not my affair. You’re someone I care about. You’re my friend, Haley.”

“Friend,” she scoffed. “I can’t just be your friend. If you’re not ready for more with me, we should go our separate ways.” Her voice had a finality to it that sent a shudder through me.

“That’s it. You’re willing to say the hell with our friendship?”

“I wanted this to be more than a friendship.”

She infuriated me. How dare she expect me to toss my feelings aside?

“This is you not getting what you want,” I said. “You’re so used to people falling at your feet that you have no idea how to deal when the cards don’t fall in your favor. There are more people than us at stake here. You’re being self-centered.”

“I’m not self-centered. Far from it. You know what I am Emma?” She paused. “I’m in love with you.”

I closed my eyes to let her words sink in. The dead silence hung heavy in the steamy bathroom. My head swirled. “Do you mean that?”

“Baby, I’m in love with you.”

My heart leaped from my chest and settled in my throat. It swelled, blocking my breathing. “Oh my God, Haley.”

“The connection we have is strong and something I can’t ignore. But after seeing Colin, I realized how unreasonable all of this is if you remain with him. Before, he was just a name. Now, I see that he’s a real person, one who looks like he stepped out of GQ. Seeing him hit me like a ton of bricks. I finally found the one person in this world I could connect with on a deep, intimate level. I can’t have her because she belongs to someone else. I’m heartbroken.”

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“I’m heartbroken, too.”

She let out a deep sigh. “I’m even more disappointed to hear you say you are too. That wasn’t the response I wanted to hear.”

I hung my head in my lap, defeated by the situation. The silence broke as Colin unlocked the door to the suite. “Haley, Colin’s back in the room. I have to hang up. I’m so sorry.”

“I am, too.”

The phone clicked off.

He tried to open the bathroom door. “Em?”

I cleared the tears from the back of my throat. “I’m going to the bathroom, hon. Hang on.”

I stuffed one of the fluffy hand towels into my face and let the buildup of tears crash down.

~ ~

Throughout dinner I forced myself to pay attention to him. My mind drifted in and out of our conversation as flickers of my date with Haley broke through. Maintaining my concentration became so difficult that I suggested we go to a movie. Then, I could be alone with my thoughts and let the sadness swim around inside of me.

Later that night, he fell asleep first. I stared at his chest go up and down as I lay next to him, watching him. The night had been a series of forced dribbles of conversation, not to mention lies about the seminar.

Throughout the night, memories of the day overtook my mind. The day was perfect. Haley was perfect. The only thing that wasn’t perfect about the day was how it ended, with her alone in her apartment bedroom and me laying next to a man who I betrayed more and more each day.

Throughout my life, I took solace in knowing my tough situations were

temporary and, with a little time, things turned around and the situations always changed for the better.

Not with this situation.

Laying in the dark hotel room next to him, I admitted to myself that the situation was far from temporary. We weren't arguing about something that the next day would repair itself over a gin and tonic. We weren't compromising on which china to select for our gift registry. I hadn't nagged him about leaving his cups all around my apartment. Those insignificant problems could be overlooked with time. This couldn't.

An amorphous body now wedged between me and Colin, one that I couldn't toss aside and deal with later. It surrounded me like a dark cloud, cutting my breaths short, squashing my appetite, and rendering me physically unable to fight and overcome. This was no fleeting moment of unhappiness. No, it was more like a lifetime of packing away a little unhappiness here and there. Now, that bad packing job threatened to buckle from too much weight. I had to decide to either toss away my baggage or break the packages free and finally deal with their messiness.

Both situations had painful consequences. I couldn't have both. It would've been so easy to stay with Colin and keep a special friendship with her on the side. After our kiss though, that would be impossible now.

~ ~

I slid into the airport ladies' room. With no thanks to security checkpoints, I only had ten minutes to talk before my plane boarded. "Goldie, I'm in trouble," I cried into the telephone.

"Where are you? Sounds like you're echoing. What kind of trouble are you in? Are you in prison?"

"Prison?" I asked annoyed. "I'm at the airport in Denver. Goldie, I'm in

deep trouble. I'm drowning in it. I don't know what to do."

"Denver? Okay, I see now what trouble you're in. Just how deep are you?"

"It was no innocent kiss, Goldie."

"How awesome was it?"

I let out a nervous laugh.

"That awesome, huh?"

"Yup, pretty much."

"We'll get you through this, Emma. What time are you getting into BWI?"

"My flight gets in roughly at three o'clock. Colin arranged to have a limo there to bring us home. Can you come by around five? Colin's going into the office to catch up on some work then."

"You bet. I'll be there," she said. "Em, don't worry. We'll figure this out together."

She was my guardian angel and remarkable friend. A friend I desperately needed more than any other basic necessity at that point.

~ ~

Usually, I stressed about the appearance of my apartment when anyone came by for a visit. But after spending the last seven hours in airports and on airplanes, I didn't care about my piled up luggage in the corner of the living room or the dust on the coffee tables. When Goldie entered, she paid no notice to the disorder. Instead she looked right into my swollen eyes and asked me straight out, "What was it like?"

"Better than I ever imagined," I said.

"Really?" She touched the puffy circles under my red eyes. "What's going on with these eyes, then?"

“I had my one cookie. Now, I want more.”

“More? Listen to you. My greedy little Emmie.” She laughed and poked my side.

“This isn’t a joke. Goldie, I’m freaking out. I’m scared.”

“It was a kiss. You kissed a woman. It’s the trendy thing to do these days. You’re sexually liberated.”

“I’m far from liberated.”

She grabbed my shoulders and spoke directly. “You need to put it in the context of your reality now. It was a kiss, nothing more. There’s no need to get freaked.”

“It was so much more. I care about this woman.”

She took my hand and dragged me into the kitchen, speaking over her shoulder to me. “Okay, this woman knocks your socks off more than Colin does. That’s why you’re freaking out here. Trust me, honey, it’s not her. It’s the situation. It’s the newness of it.” She walked over to my refrigerator and pulled out the milk, then reached up into my cabinet for glasses. “Good thing I’m throwing you a bridal shower in two weeks. These glasses are disgusting. They’re all cloudy.”

“A bridal shower. Oh God,” I moaned.

She poured us both a glass of milk. “Relax. You and Colin are under the gun with stress. Cut yourself some slack. After the wedding is over, you’ll be able to concentrate on building the most amazing marriage, that, I have no doubt, will fulfill you.”

I reached for my glass of cold milk. “Colin has never excited me the way Haley does.”

“Come on, you and Colin have been together for so long now. Fireworks aren’t flashing to life like they did when you first started dating in college, but that’s natural. Now you’re in the comfort stage of love. This woman stirred sexual tingles in you, but you have to remember that Colin did, too.”

She defended him as though she cared about him. I looked down because I was afraid to admit that I was never attracted to him sexually.

“Emma,” she started, “Colin will give you a life of luxury, comfort, and security that most women would drool over. I’ve been stuck in that damn hole in the city most of my life, trying to eke out a living. God has handed you a silver platter. You’ll have that perfect little house in the suburbs with a dog and a couple of kids, gorgeous ones, I might add. He’s someone you can be proud to have by your side. Hell, I get weird looks when I introduce Charlie to people. I love him, Em, but sometimes it’s hard to break people’s prejudices. You’ll never have to do that. You’re about to embark on the ultimate dream of so many people. You’re getting married. Not to just anyone. You’re getting married to Colin Briggs. He’s perfect for you and you for him.”

I stared at her, numb and speechless. She painted the perfect picture of what every straight woman dreamed.

She took a stern tone. “Don’t blow this over some sexy kiss that you had with a woman from Denver. It’s ridiculous to even consider calling off a wedding over someone so obviously wrong for the lifestyle you have.”

“The lifestyle I have?” I asked.

“Come on Em, get your head together. Can you imagine your dad? How would you explain a lesbian relationship to him? I don’t see it for you.”

“Of everyone, I hoped you’d understand.”

“You want me to validate what you’re feeling? You want me to tell you to call off the wedding and run off with some woman you met, as she crashed her car into yours? I won’t do it. I won’t stand by and watch you throw your life away over a silly sexual experience.”

“You have no idea what I’m feeling right now. Do you know how badly I want to jump on another plane and see her?”

“Seeing her again would be the ultimate mistake.” She placed her now

empty glass down on the counter.

“She told me she loved me.”

She placed her hand over her mouth and stretched her eyes wide. “She told you that?”

“This wasn’t some one night stand with someone I met at a bar. It was an intimate moment with a person I care about deeply. So don’t judge me.”

“Em, I’m not judging you.” The look of shock still blared bright on her face.

“Look at you. You’d think I told you I robbed a nun.”

“I’m your best friend. Just because I don’t understand what’s going on in your heart, doesn’t mean I won’t be there to support you in your decisions.”

“You have a funny way of showing support.”

“Your entire aura says you’re confused. To me, that’s a red flag. I caution you against making any life-altering decisions.”

“Marriage is pretty life-altering, Goldie.”

“That’s not what I was referring to and you know it.”

I walked out of the kitchen and back into my living room, collapsing against my couch. “What do I do?”

Trailing right behind me, she plopped down next to me. “Only you know.”

For the first time, I counted on her psychic guidance. “Do you see anything around me that tells you what I should do?”

“Why are you asking me that? You don’t believe in my psychic abilities.”

I rested my head on her shoulder. “I don’t know what I believe anymore.”

“You’re in love with her, aren’t you?”

I nodded.

“You had to wait until two weeks before your best friend planned your bridal shower to come out to me, didn’t you?”

I cracked up at that. The catharsis cooled me like a rushing waterfall.

“We’ll figure this out, Emma.”

~ ~

In the days following our trip, Haley dodged my calls and emails. Each night I’d leave a message on her voicemail asking her to call me back. And the more my phone didn’t ring back, the angrier and more resentful I grew. Goldie would hear it every night.

“Why are you tormenting her by calling her?”

“Tormenting her?”

“Well, you’re not telling me to call off the wedding shower this weekend. That sounds like torment to me.”

“I wanted to make sure she’s okay.”

“You want to make sure that you’re okay. Guilt is clouding your view and you can’t stand that.”

“You’re right.” I missed her. I missed our late night calls. I missed our daily emails. I wanted to hear her voice again. “Goldie, if she loves me so much, why would she ignore me like this?”

“Under the circumstances, this is how I’d expect her to act. If she’s in love with you, she wants you to be happy. If you had wanted to be with her, you would be. She knows that. So she’s logically concluding that Colin is the person who makes you happiest. She knows there’s room for only one lover in your life. She’d confuse you if she continued with your friendship. She knows this.”

“I never looked at it that way.” By getting on that plane in Denver, I had made the choice to remain with him, not her. Now, she gave me the room I

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needed to soar with him. If I was to soar with him, I needed room.

“Surely with time, this intense attraction for her will subside and your feelings for Colin will grow stronger. Trust me. In time, you’ll look back on this and remember it as a moment in time. That’s it.”

“I hope so, Goldie.”

I didn’t want to look back to see Haley. I wanted to look ahead and still see her sprinkling her charm into my life. I also wanted to preserve the good life I could have with Colin at the same time.

I wanted both.



## Chapter 14

The night before my bridal shower, I sat next to Colin on his couch watching a rerun of *Friends*; the one where Rachel and Monica wrestled on the floor so that Monica could place eye drops in Rachel's eye. Normally, that kind of hot scene would send me reeling. But that night, I only experienced the not so wonderful rush of a panic attack. I struggled to hold back the tears as I sat next to the man I was about to marry. The man who had no idea of the internal anguish I suffered. With Haley voided from my life, the future was unimaginable and unbearable. It left me aching like a death occurred. By choosing Colin, I may have had my last taste of euphoric passion—ever.

I loved knowing her intimately. I loved seeing that special smile that only came out for me when we stared into the depths of each other's eyes. I loved that little sparkle that came out when we flirted.

I loved that playful woman. I craved to know more of that side of her. I also loved the energy between us. We entered a plane of dimension where we vibrated at a different level than the rest of the world in those tender moments when we let our hands and lips touch.

The melding of our spirits shone brighter than anything I'd ever experienced. Not even an orgasm could produce that same feeling. It was different. It was surreal. It took my breath away. I was no longer solid matter. If I could dedicate myself wholly to her, I had no doubt the intimacy would

blossom into the most amazing coupling of love ever experienced. The two of us together would be incredible. We'd soar and be free.

Life was so short. Why did it have to be so complicated? Why couldn't I enjoy Haley and be a good wife at the same time? Colin's ego would surely get plenty of massaging from other women, namely Meredith. I saw firsthand the way he glowed in her presence. He wouldn't lack for attention. Neither of us would.

Haley breathed life into me with her witty tales and sometimes warped interpretations on society and value systems. I missed her.

I had failed myself and now failed both of them. Poor Colin. He was innocent to my selfish indulgences. What would he think if he knew only a couple weeks prior that my lips had passionately flirted with Haley?

I looked at his lips. Had he ever kissed Meredith with them? Was that normal; two people who were supposedly in love, searching outside the sacred territory for pleasure? I had anticipated that one day I might be the victim. I never imagined I'd be the perpetrator. I acted like the rest of the smutty society who ignored morality.

I could fool others, but I couldn't fool myself.

I should be honest with Colin and redeem any trace of innocence left in my veins. How could I walk down the aisle with such a heavy lie hanging over my veil like a cloud of dust? It would choke me and fill me with impurity. Every time I looked into his eyes, remorse stifled my breath.

If I could spill my load of lies onto him right there and then, maybe we could go forward together stronger and more determined to work as a team. Didn't I owe him that part of my soul?

Digging deep for the bravery, I swallowed hard.

"Colin," my voice echoed with the remnants of his name bouncing around in my head.

He turned his body toward me, but kept his eyes glued to the screen. I

tapped his leg. Then, he turned to look at me. “Your eyes are all watery,” he said.

That was my chance to let it out, to come clean, and to be redeemed. I could blurt it out. I kissed a woman. Four words. They sat right there on my tongue ready to be propelled forward into the air. Those four spoken words could be my ticket to salvaging my guilty spirit.

Instead, I asked, “Are you excited about marrying me?” Mentally, I kicked myself for bailing.

“Aren’t you?” His forehead wrinkled as he raised his eyebrows.

I had the chance to tell him everything in my heart. “Of course,” I said. “I’m a little nervous. Aren’t you?”

“I’m marrying one of the last sweet women around. The thing that makes me nervous is that I might screw that up.”

At that moment, I’d be willing to give up chocolate for the rest of my life if he confessed to an even greater sin than I committed. He could let me off the hook easily by admitting that he slept with Meredith. I could walk away and be free without having to explain my decision to my dad. He’d back me if Colin had cheated. I could live the rest of my life guilt-free, knowing I at least gave it a chance.

“How could you screw it up?” I asked.

“Not love you as much as you deserve to be loved. I’m always fearful that I’m not giving you all that you need. I never want to lose sight of your happiness.”

I didn’t expect his response. “That’s the most romantic thing you’ve ever said to me.”

He stared into my eyes. “I mean it with all my heart.”

Why didn’t the romantic gesture send my heart spinning and leaping? His words didn’t fill my head with bliss. I stared into his eyes searching for a connection.

None existed.

I smiled at him, unable to match his heartfelt expression.

I could never be honest with him about my feelings. He committed himself to me. I made him happy somehow. Shouldn't that sprout some happiness? Most women would be thrilled.

Then again, I wasn't like most women.

~ ~

"She still hasn't called me back, Goldie." I slipped into my new white knit dress. "I've left her a message every night since getting back from Denver. I understand her reservations, but now she's being plain rude."

"You're dressing for your bridal shower. Worrying about her isn't appropriate at this point."

I brushed my cheeks with bronzer, and then I powdered my nose and temples with it. "I've turned angry with her now."

She refastened a loose hairpin from my twist. "Maybe she had planned that all along."

"To piss me off?"

"I like the woman. She's showing a lot of class ignoring your calls."

I snapped around on my heel to face her. "Just whose side are you on?"

"Think about it. She's doing you and Colin justice. She's forcing you to appreciate him and to put all of your attention into him."

I slipped into my satin, white sandals. "Ridiculous isn't it? How I'm obsessing over her?"

"If you say so."

"I do." I stepped in front of my full-length mirror to steal one last glance at myself. "Let's go. I have a bridal shower to attend."

In the time it took for us to get to the Classic Restaurant from my

apartment, I convinced myself that I'd enjoy my day as the bride-to-be. But as I entered the restaurant's foyer and the talkative group of women hushed their voices in preparation for my arrival into the room, I turned to Goldie in a state of panic. "I don't want to go in there."

She grabbed onto my arm and pinched it, faking a smile. "Of course you do."

"I don't. I don't know any of these people. They're friends of Colin or my dad. Not mine. They don't want to be here anymore than I do."

"Well, I worked hard at planning this shindig so you better do your best acting."

"Everything's one big act, isn't it?"

"You'll break a leg in there or I'm going to break it for you afterwards."

I laughed aloud at the threat. "With that karate you took twenty years ago?"

"I can still kick your ass if I wanted to."

"I doubt that." I held her arm as we entered the room of cheering women, applauding me for becoming Mrs. Colin Briggs; my big accomplishment in life.

I spent the day smiling, unwrapping gifts, and making small talk with a bunch of strangers. I was never more grateful to have Goldie by my side. By my side, she remained all day. Right up to the point the last of the new acquaintances left and Colin came to help bring our gifts home.

He walked straight toward me. I stood knee deep in kitchenware, towels, and linens. When he got to me, he didn't welcome me in his arms. He didn't kiss me. He didn't acknowledge Goldie. Instead he asked me matter-of-factly, "Did you forget something at my apartment last night?"

I searched my memory and drew a blank. "What did I forget?"

He reached into his pants pocket and in his hand rested my cell phone. He cradled it in my hand. "You need to change that annoying song it plays

when it rings. I don't want to hear Beethoven at two o'clock in the morning."

My heart twirled. Had she called me?

He turned and walked away toward the men's bathroom.

"Your white dress has more color than you right now. What's wrong?"

Goldie asked.

"Haley called me last night, and I had left my cell at Colin's."

I checked my call history.

Goldie was my last missed call from the day before. A lump formed in my throat. I checked my incoming call log and sure enough there sat Haley's number. "He picked up the call. He talked to her, Goldie."

"Stop being so damned paranoid. How do you say that so confidently?"

I scrolled through the call's history log. "They talked for ten seconds."

I turned and saw that Colin had come out of the bathroom. He walked out of the room with a stack of glassware boxes. "What do you think they said to each other?"

"How the hell do I know? Do I look psychic or something?"

I dropped my shoulders. "You pick the worst times to joke."

"Knowing Haley, she most likely heard him answer and apologized for having the wrong number. Ten seconds Emma."

"Wrong numbers don't typically have a name associated with them on caller ID."

"You have her named in your phone book?"

I nodded.

"Check your outgoing calls."

The blood drained from my head in one fast motion, leaving me dizzy. "This is horrible. He knows something's going on, Goldie."

"Give me your phone." She tore it out of my clenched hands. She scanned the call history. Then, she looked up at me. "I don't want you to panic."

## Carr—The Fiche Room

I grabbed the phone back from her and looked at the screen. “He called her back! Goldie, they talked for three minutes, twenty-two seconds.”

“Wow, Emma,” my dad yelled out, “look at all these gifts.”

I forced a smile on my face and looked back at Goldie desperate for her guidance.

“There must be over a hundred gifts here.” He leaned over a pile of crystal, securing his hands behind his back.

“You have some generous friends,” I said, hugging him.

“This will get you guys off to a good start. I remember when your mother and I sat for our first dinner in our new place; we had to use our fingers to eat because we realized that we didn’t have any silverware.”

“We have plenty of that. Mrs. Bonnifer gave us enough sets to host a thirty person dinner.”

My dad flinched and grabbed his chest.

“Dad?”

“It’s nothing. I get this little twinge once in a while. I’m just worried about my little girl being all grown up.” He grimaced and squeezed his fingertips on his left hand together.

“More pain, dad?”

“It’s nothing, I think—” he dropped to his knees wincing in pain, grabbing his chest.

“I’ll call an ambulance.” Goldie grabbed my cell.

My dad hugged his knees to his chest, curled in a fetal position on the wooden floor.

“Colin,” I screamed loudly. “Colin!”

Colin ran through the door and toward us. “What happened?”

“I think he’s having a heart-attack.”

“I’m calling for an ambulance,” Goldie said.

Colin got down on his knees and watched my dad writhe in pain. We

were helpless.

“Daddy, hang on. They’re coming.” I dropped my head close to my dad’s, hugging him. “I love you so much, Daddy.”

“We need to do something,” I yelled to Colin who stared at my dad with a blank face.

“The ambulance is on the way.” Goldie joined us on the floor.

My dad moaned.

“Colin, we have to do something,” I repeated.

“Panicking isn’t going to help.” He placed his hand on my shoulder.

I looked up at him through my teary eyes. “My dad’s in pain and you’re telling me not to panic? I can’t deal with you right now!”

“I’m going to look out for the ambulance.” Colin rose to his feet and wandered off.

“Honey, that was harsh,” my dad managed to say.

“Shh, Daddy, don’t worry about me right now.”

I couldn’t lose my dad. I couldn’t be left in the world parentless. He couldn’t die. He had to see me get married. He had to see me succeed in life. I needed more time with him. More time to make him happy and proud of me. Nothing could happen to him.

Once the ambulance arrived, they asked me to step aside and let them work. I hung onto Goldie, and they secured him to the stretcher and carried him off. The three of us jumped into the truck Colin had borrowed from his dad and followed the ambulance, leaving the insignificant presents and empty restaurant hall behind.

In the waiting room, I sat in silence between them. Goldie stroked my hair. Finally, a doctor emerged and gathered us into a small, windowless room, around a round table. “Your dad’s going to be fine. He had some chest pain due to a blockage in two of his arteries. We’ve put a stint in them. That should keep his heart ticking healthy for years to come.”

“He’s going to be okay?” I asked.

“He’ll be fine. The warning pain saved his life.”

I breathed a deep sigh of relief and broke out into fresh tears again.

“Emma, come on, Sweetheart. He’s going to be fine. There’s no need for crying.” Colin placed his hand on my shoulder, attempting to comfort me.

Goldie shushed him with a wave of her hand.

“I’m emotional.”

She put her arm around me. “Of course you’re going to cry. Let it out.”

“Thank you for taking the time to explain everything to us,” Colin said, shaking the young doctor’s hand and walking out of the room with him.

“Let’s get you home and get those big, black mascara streaks off your face.” Goldie stood and helped me out of my chair.

“I’m not going home. I want to see him first.”

Colin entered the small room again. “Ready to get going? We can stop by the restaurant and pick up the rest of the gifts, then head back to your place and rest.”

“She doesn’t want to go home. Why don’t you go, I’ll stay with her. Then, later on you can come back and get us.”

“He’s going to be fine, Emma.” He brought me into his arms and kissed my eyelids. Then, he kissed my lips.

I pressed against his chest and started crying all over again.

“What time do you want me to come back for you?” Colin asked.

“I don’t know. Just come back when you’re ready. We’ll go when it feels right to,” I said.

Colin let go of me and ran his hands through his thick, dark hair. “It’s not a good idea for you to sit around a hospital all night, Em. He’s fine here. There’s nothing you’re going to be able to do being here. You may as well be at home, resting. You’ve had a long day.”

Goldie jumped in. “I’ll go with you to get my car at the restaurant, and then I’ll come back to be with Emma. This way if she wants to hang out for a while still, I’ll be able to stay with her.”

“You don’t mind?” he asked.

“You’re not coming back?” I asked him.

“Emma, he’s fine. There’s no reason for us to be here now. He needs to rest.”

“I’m staying,” I said.

“You should come with us. We’ll get something to eat. Get cleaned up a bit. There’s nothing you can do for him right now, Sweetheart.”

“I want to stay. Just go, Colin. I’ll be fine. I need to be alone right now.”

“I’ll be back in a little while,” Goldie said, patting the top of my back as she walked out of the room following him.

I closed the door to the room as they left and I immediately called Haley. If Colin came barging back in the room at that moment, I wouldn’t care. I needed to talk to her. I needed to hear her reassuring voice.

“Haley, thank God you answered,” I said after she said a soft hello.

“Wow, it’s good to hear your voice,” she said. “I’m so sorry about last night.”

“I don’t care about that right now. Something happened.”

“What happened?”

“It’s my dad. He just got out of heart surgery. He collapsed right in front of me today...” My voice trailed off.

“Is he okay?”

“He’ll be fine.”

“Are you okay?”

“No.” My voice cracked. “I’ve never been so scared.”

“I understand. Of course you’re scared. Is anyone with you?”

“I wanted to be alone.”

“Baby, no you don’t.”

Her intuitiveness comforted me. Hearing her call me “baby” again sent a surge to my heart. “I miss you, Haley. I miss hearing your voice.”

“I miss you, too.”

“You were the only person I wanted to talk to as I sat awaiting news on my Dad.”

“I’m glad you called then. So he’s going to okay?”

“The doctor said he’ll be fine.”

“You must have been so scared. Were you alone when it happened?”

“No. Goldie and Colin were there. We were cleaning up after my bridal shower.”

“Bridal shower, huh? How did that go?”

“Completely insignificant having a bunch of strangers shower me with gifts. You know from the night we went out last time you were here, I can’t stand being the center of attention.”

“No, you don’t?”

Hearing her friendly voice planted a smile on my face, the first genuine smile of the day. “Haley, why did you finally call me back last night?”

“It was the first night that you didn’t call and leave me a message, and it sort of freaked me out when I realized you might never call me back again.”

I loved her. “Sorry about that. I left my cell at Colin’s house.”

“I know. He told me.”

“What did you talk about? We didn’t talk about what happened. My dad collapsed before we had a chance to address it.”

“I called you and when I heard him answer, I panicked. So I hung up. Thirty seconds later, I see your cell on my caller ID. It was late, I wasn’t thinking. I assumed it was you. So when I answered, I said ‘Did I get you in trouble?’”

I winced. “Oh no.”

“So he says back to me, ‘Are you the Haley I met in Denver two weeks ago?’ When I heard his voice, I freaked.”

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘I’m sorry, I thought you were Emma. Yeah, I’m the woman you met.’ He asked me what trouble I could be getting you in. I told him I meant ‘trouble for calling so late.’ He bought it because he got friendly and asked me how I liked living in Denver.”

“What else happened?”

“We ended the call by him telling me he’d give you the message that I called.”

“He didn’t. He told me my cell rang late last night. Did he ask why you hung up on him?”

“I told him I had the wrong number. Do you think he was suspicious?”

“Right now, I don’t care. He’s not exactly on my good side. You’d think my dad had a common cold the way he’s taking it so lightly.”

“Hmm, I see,” Haley mumbled.

“I know, I get what I ask for in life.”

A moment of silence passed between us.

“It’s not healthy for us to talk every day, Emma.”

Her honesty twisted my heart and caused it to throb. “I know.”

“I want to be here for you. I do. But—”

“I hate buts.”

“Me too. But,” she lingered on the word. “In all seriousness, if marrying Colin is what you want to do, you need to be able to count on him before me.”

“You’re right. I do.”

“I want you to be the happiest you can be. Selfishly, I want to be there to see to it that you are, but I respect your decision and will support you in

as healthy a way as possible.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, go give your Dad a big hug and do what you can to make him proud and happy. Because I know that’s what you’re trying to do. That’s noble of you.”

“Really?”

“Just as long as making him happy makes you happy.”

“It does.” I hesitated then asked, “So will you answer my calls from time to time?”

“Don’t focus on me. Focus on your new life, on new chances, and on being as happy as you can.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ll be doing the same.”

She offered me closure to move ahead. What a selfless, pure woman.

~ ~

I’d take her advice and make my dad proud. One week after coming home from the hospital, I decided to offer my dad what would make him happiest and most settled. As I walked up to his front door, I put to rest my own selfish desires and prepared to live more responsibly for once in my life.



## Chapter 15

“Dad? Where are you?”

“I’m in the library, Emma. Can you help me?”

I found him with one foot hanging from the top step of his library ladder, as his fingers traced the spines of old classics. “I promised my secretary I’d bring in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Fin* for her to read. That promise is about two months old now. But seeing that retirement is coming up quickly, I figured that I had better get it to her. Turns out she’s just as crazy about my book collection as I am.”

“Any romance brewing there?” I asked, taking in a long, conscious whiff of the old book smell permeating the cozy, knotty-pine room.

“None. You know how I feel about that.”

I steadied my eyes on him. “When are you ever going to let yourself be free, Dad?”

He laughed, keeping his balance as he climbed down the metal, creaky steps of the ladder. “I like being caged I guess.”

I understood the comfort of caged security too. “Like father like daughter.”

“I like to think so, but not in being caged.” He flashed me one of his best assets, his strident grin. He could move people with that smile. But since the heart scare a week prior, a film of weariness blocked that brilliant smile.

“Well, I’d like to change that,” I said.

“Oh?” he asked, squinting at me with his tired gray eyes.

“I’m ready to move out of the fiche room, Dad.”

He rested the book against his front waist, cradling it between his two hands. “Hmm.”

I expected a big, happy hug. “That’s it? Hmm?”

“Your timing is a bit contrived, don’t you think? I don’t need guilt right now, Emma.”

His assumption that I reduced his illness to a mere opportunity to smear guilt made no sense. “You think I’m trying to douse you in guilt?”

“I’m offended that you’d think I wouldn’t see the bad timing.”

I darted my eyes to his, unable to hide my irritation. “I resent that, Dad. I came here to make you happy and you take it as an insult?” I stormed toward the door, as a sign of withdrawing my offer to give up my freedom for his stupid financial kingdom.

“You want to make me happy?” he called after me. “Stop blaming me or Colin for keeping you from your passions and start proving to us that you have them. If you want to be an artist, then damn it, be one. Don’t file yourself away with the microfiche and blame me that you’re not an artist.”

I stopped so suddenly that my sandal skidded and left a thick, black line on the laminated wooden floor. “How dare you say that to me? For so long, you and Colin have tossed your erroneous beliefs on me that I’ll be a failure in life if I pursue my frivolous art. And now you have the nerve to throw all those years back in my face by telling me it’s my own fault that I’m not an artist? I’m an artist, Dad. A damn good one if you’d take the time to see for yourself.”

He flung the book to the side, sending it smashing against the edge of his desk. “I never referred to your art as frivolous.”

I opened my mouth, ready to set him straight by pointing out all the times he did insinuate the absurd wastefulness of my passion. But his eyes

cradled a sadness that I hadn't seen before. A weaker, aged man stared back at me. His sixty-year old body appeared fragile and tired. I hadn't come to his house to add stress to his already taxing existence. I came to offer him peace of mind. Here I went again, fretting over my own selfish ideals.

"You might not have come right out and said frivolous, but I know that's what you meant," I said as calmly as possible.

He went over to the book, now laying misshapen on the floor. He stooped to pick it up and dropped to his knees. He fumbled to replace the book's jacket. The tired skin of his hand smoothed over the cover in a gentle, loving sweep. "You're so much like your mother. She'd say the same thing to me."

I lowered my gaze.

He rose and with outstretched arms, leaned into his desk. "I failed her. I never gave credence to her passions the way she did mine. It tears me up that I'm doing the same to you now."

His eyes drooped. I didn't want to see that side of him—the vulnerable side—where I rose above him in righteousness and he fell below. I didn't want to one-up my own dad. He was always the patriarch. I needed him to be stronger. I relied on him to be stronger.

"Dad, I know you want the best for me. Our ideas on that are just different."

He turned toward me, peering into my eyes. "I have my own selfish reasons for wanting you to follow in my tracks. I can brag about you being a fine accountant. I can't brag about you being an artist because I don't know the first thing about art. I mean, look around the place. I can't even align pictures properly on a wall."

I looked to the three pictures hanging haphazardly off center from each other on the wall above his desk. He tried to create a sophisticated look by staggering them. His attempt failed.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

Episodes of my life flashed through my mind. Him attempting to create a sandcastle with me on the beach and it collapsing from poor construction. Him painstakingly helping me design a science project of the solar system and seeing his dismay when he punched the holes of the stars too big. He never acquired great spatial ability. So he avoided building or creating things whenever possible.

Once, I directed a talent show in my senior year of high school and I asked him to help with set design. I asked him because four students failed to show up the day before the show ran. Well, he panicked like I'd asked him to build me a house.

I placed my hand on his wrist ready to agree with him that, yes, he was selfish for wanting me to live his life of choice. But his eyes softened. The softness pulled at me. I pitied him. I wanted to emulate him, not pity him. I shook my head trying to erase the new weaker image of the man I admired.

“Let’s make a deal. I teach you how those pictures above your desk should align on the wall, and you teach me what I need to know to succeed in the firm.”

“You don’t want to be an accountant any more than I want to be an artist.”

“Making you happy is more important than anything, Dad.”

“If you’re not happy, I’m not going to be.”

Fearing that I’d disappoint him further, I lied. “Dad, I want to give it a try.”

“What about your art?”

The smile returned to my face, knowing he cared enough about me to ask that question. “Don’t worry about my art. I’ll create enough pictures for you to get plenty of practice aligning them on your walls.”

“I’d love that.”

“As far as accounting, I’ll give it a try and see if I like it as much as

you.”

“If you’re not happy with it, I want you to get out of it.”

Even though his words were what I’d always wanted to hear, his weary eyes didn’t match them. He wanted me to find happiness in what he considered a real career. “I promise that if I’m not happy, you’ll know it.”

“That sounds like a deal.”

“I need you to promise me that Sharon will remain in the fiche room.”

“Will she be a suitable replacement?”

“Definitely. I can’t imagine a more suitable replacement.”

“She hasn’t driven you crazy yet?”

“No.”

“I gave it a week before you came begging for a position upstairs.”

“I know you did. But I’m stubborn too. I vowed to stick it out regardless how crazy she drove me. You couldn’t outwit me there.” I winked at him.

“I’m sorry I put you through all that.”

“I’m glad you did. She lets me be me. She’s a great lady.”

“You have always had that ability to look past the superficial and see into a person’s heart. I wish I could be more like you, seeing the good side of people. See right there, that’s why I’m proud of you. You can see beauty in everything.”

“That’s the beauty of art.”

“How about we start with my first lesson? Care to teach this old man more about that artful eye of arranging some pictures?”

“If the student is up for the challenge?”

“Right, oh wise one,” he said, bowing to me.

I bowed back.

No doubt, my dad adored me. Especially when I fit the mold he created for me. I could’ve lost him. Now, his happiness was more important than my own. The time away from the fiche room might give me the separation I

needed to move ahead of the memories I created with Haley in that room.

“Dad, can we eat something first? I’m starved.”

“Well, Daddy’s got just the remedy for that growling tummy.”

He swung his arm around my shoulder and walked down the hall aisle with me toward the kitchen, just as he used to when I was a child. Only now, instead of fighting to claim my position as a grown-up, I allowed myself to be his little girl.

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Later that day, as I walked from the parking garage to Goldie’s place, I carried with me a newfound appreciation for my dad and my blessed life.

“Do you want rice and beans or pizza tonight?” she asked me before I had a chance to dump the armload of invitations onto the coffee table.

“I want pizza,” Tatiana called from the hallway.

“I was asking Tia,” she reprimanded her.

Using yarn to draw lines, she created a hopscotch. “Want to play?” she asked me.

I laughed at her resourcefulness.

“Tatiana, let her breathe. Tia and I have a lot of work to do tonight.”

I frowned at Goldie, and then I turned back to Tatiana. She stared up at me with wide, hopeful eyes. “Please, Tia.”

Unable to resist my goddaughter’s persuasive ways, I threw my arms in the air, surrendering the dinner choice to Goldie while we played hopscotch.

By nine o’clock, after a few more rounds of hopscotch than promised, and after three generous slices of pizza, Tatiana’s eyes fluttered to sleep. As Goldie tucked her into bed, I poured two glasses of blush wine. I spread the wedding invitations out on the table and began surveying the list of attendees.

“Over five hundred guests,” I said to her when she walked up behind me.

“Charlie’s coming in any minute. Can we summon his help?”

“I was hoping he’d be around tonight. I like him. How are things going between you two?”

A big smile sprouted on her face. “I love him more each day. I’m so giddy in love with him. All he has to do is look at me and I melt.”

I grabbed a pile of envelopes, a gold speckled calligraphy pen, and the first page of guests and placed them in front of Goldie. “Start writing.” I gulped some wine. “I’m so happy for you that you found love.”

“Me too. Hey, you know what I realized? Colin’s never met him.”

It was a matter of time before she would mention that. “Well, my wedding is only eight weeks away. So we know for sure they’ll meet soon enough.”

“I was hoping we could all meet up before that. Like, maybe you can have us over for dinner one night.”

“Yeah, we should do that,” I said, not committing myself totally, knowing Colin wouldn’t agree to it easily. “So how long will it take us to get through writing these things?”

She placed her hand on the small of my wrist. “I have to be honest with you about something that Charlie said to me.”

I raised my eyes motioning her to continue.

“He said he’d rather get together with you and Haley as a couple than you and Colin.”

“Really?” I laughed. “What horrible things have you said to him about Colin?”

“I prepped him about Colin’s high-class attitude. I may have jaded his opinion.”

“You think?”

“He’s met Haley. She’s a likable woman. Of course he’ll be more inclined to want to hang out again with her versus Colin. Will they get along?”

“Honestly?”

She arched her eyebrows, waiting for an answer.

“No, not likely. You know that Colin isn’t down-to-earth like Charlie.”

“Or Haley,” she added.

I tried to block the grin creeping on my face, but couldn’t. Haley was likable. I was confident that she’d win over anyone I introduced her to. “Yes, or Haley.”

“Em, your face lights up when you talk about her. I’ve never seen that happen with Colin. You’re glowing just like you were the night we talked about your kiss. You’re still in love with her, aren’t you?”

Love. The word sent a swirl of euphoria through me. But I quickly squashed it. “I’m trying to do the right thing, Goldie.” I pointed my finger at her, trying to create an expression of threat. “No confusing me.”

“What if marrying Colin isn’t the right path for you?”

I triggered my finger at her. “You’re not doing this to me.”

“Have you told her that you’re in love with her?”

“It was just a kiss, remember. That’s what you told me. It’s just a kiss.”

I scrolled a stranger’s name onto the ivory envelope.

“Have you talked to her since that day at the hospital?”

I wanted to. I hovered my fingers above my cell every night before going to sleep, but resisted the urge to press the key pad. I hoped with each new night that the temptation would pass, but it grew. “She doesn’t think talking is a good idea.”

“I can tell by the way you’re fidgeting with your pen that you don’t agree.”

I stopped fidgeting. With great effort, I folded my restless fingers in

front of me. I slid into uncertainty again. Where had all the strength I had summoned within me gone? “Goldie, I don’t want to get into this.”

“You’re not good at acting strong, my friend. I can see right through you.”

I caved into submission. “Fine. You want to know the truth? I’m afraid. I’m afraid to let go. I’m afraid if I do, she’ll move forward without me.”

She pushed toward me and moved in close by my side. “What are you going to do about this?”

“Nothing, Goldie. I can’t do anything about it.”

“I know it hurts,” she said, placing her arm around my shoulder.

I fell into her embrace. “I miss her so much.”

“I know you do.”

“I’m trying to move forward, but I can’t. She colored my life. Now, my life is like a pencil outline drawing, filled with emptiness, devoid of color or shading.”

“That’s not the way a bride is supposed to feel.”

“I’m attempting to change that. Just today I told my dad that I’d move on from the fiche room to upstairs at the firm.”

“That doesn’t sound like progress.”

“Goldie, he looked so damn pathetic laying on the floor, clinging to life. I owe him to try it. Besides, leaving the fiche room will help me to move forward.”

“You’re going to hate life soon.”

Her words stung.

In my dreams, I saw a studio where I could retreat to everyday to draw and paint. Then, on weekends, the studio would be filled with hungry art buyers, eating up my work. On nice days, I’d venture outside and use the backdrop of the Blue Ridge Mountains in West Virginia as my muse. That would be the ultimate life. Actually, the ultimate would be venturing to the

Rocky Mountains with Haley by my side acting as my muse.

Instead, my life would become days spent indoors, sandwiched in between other glass offices where my view would be a bunch of cubicles filled with people in suits. The result of that would be a closer relationship with my dad, things more in common with Colin, and a breakaway from my past. A past that surely couldn't suit my lifestyle.

"It's time I get out of that fiche room."

"But you like your fiche room."

"It's laced with too many memories that I need to put behind me. I have to get this fantasy life out of my head. It's destroying me inside. I can't eat. I can't sleep. I'm getting these dark circles under my eyes." As much as I tried, I couldn't control the tears welling up. I leaned my head into my friend's and let the tears fall.

"Why are you torturing yourself like this, then?"

I twisted my mouth.

Jingling keys interrupted the brief silence. Then, the front door creaked as it opened. Finally, Charlie emerged in the living room. I didn't fight his welcoming arms as Goldie slid out of place and he moved in. "Hey, Curly, what are all these tears about?"

"She's heartbroken," Goldie said to him.

"He can see that," I said. I laughed from behind my tears.

"She doesn't realize I'm as observant as I am." He flashed her a teasing smile.

"She's not happy with Colin."

I jerked my head to her. "Goldie!"

"What? He knows you're not. Any fool can see that."

"She just called me a fool," he said to me with a smirk.

"She's called me much worse. Just wait until you know her a little longer."

She sat atop the arm of the couch and kissed the top of his head. “Charlie knows he’s a fool already. That’s why I love him so much.”

He turned his attention back to me. “I battled a similar situation when I met my first wife.”

“You didn’t tell me that, Goldie,” I said. Then, turning back to Charlie, “You were in love with another man?”

“Not another man, no. By similar, I mean someone else prior to marrying my wife. I choose my wife. Obviously, I chose wrong. We divorced less than a year later.”

“And the other woman?”

“Here I am,” Goldie said, waving her hands in the air like a fool herself.

“What? You knew Charlie before all this? Why didn’t you ever say anything to me?” I asked.

“He was an engaged man. How would’ve you reacted?”

“I would’ve told you to stay away from him.”

“You would’ve been fixated on the fact that he promised his heart to someone else, and I stood in the way of that.”

“I would’ve said that too. Now look at me. I’m just as guilty.”

She stretched her eyes in an exaggerated attempt to prove she was always right.

“How did you meet up again?” I asked him.

“I picked up the phone and fortunately for me, Goldie hates change. She still had the same phone number from years prior and we picked up right where we left off.”

“That is the sweetest story.”

“If you have your doubts, don’t walk down that aisle,” he said.

I plucked a tissue from the plastic canvas holder perched on Goldie’s end table and dabbed at the corner of my eye. “Colin isn’t as bad of a guy that Goldie makes him out to be.”

“If you’re choosing to marry him, I’m sure he’s not,” he said.

“I told Emma we should all get together. Once we all hang out and have a great time, you’ll feel better about everything.”

“Would he care to hang out with this burly man?” He asked me. He had such a refreshing carefree attitude that I couldn’t imagine someone not wanting to hang out with him.

“Of course he would,” I said.

How could anyone not like those two quirky people? I could never understand Colin’s aversion to Goldie. Why did her quick wit and brutal honesty not intrigue him? Convincing him to go would prove challenging. With Haley, having a good time with them was a given. You could pair Haley up with a couple of doorknobs and she’d figure out a way to have fun. Colin was different. “I’ll set it up.”

“Why don’t we put these away for now,” she said, gathering the invitations and putting them back in the box.

As each one piled on top of the other, the reality struck me that I was far away from a clear mindset. I didn’t want to look at another one of those model-perfect invitations that day.

~ ~

If Colin had snapped his head toward me any harder, I would’ve bet my life that it would’ve broken. “I don’t want to spend a night with her, Em. Just tell them that I’m busy.”

I flew to my office door and closed it, attempting to gain what little privacy I could in the see-through glass cage. “No, I’m not going to tell them that you’re busy. If you ever want me to go out with your friends again, you better drag yourself and a smile out with us.”

He lounged back against my new office chair, resting one foot on the

edge of my mahogany desk. “Why? What’s the point?”

“The point is they’re my friends and Charlie wants to meet you.”

“I’m not looking to make new friends, Emma. We have enough friends already to fill our calendar.”

Throughout our relationship, he had always referred to his friends as our friends. They weren’t my friends. “They’re friends of mine.”

He shot up straight in the chair. “That friend of yours is weird. When I brought her back to get my car from the hospital, you know what she did? She threatened to put a curse on me.”

I couldn’t stop the laugh from escaping. I could picture Goldie waving her hands and murmuring some silly nonsense curse at him. “A curse?”

“She said she’d make it so my hair fell out if I ever left you alone at a hospital again.”

She’d have to put an awfully potent curse on him if she expected his thick crop of hair to fall out cooperatively. “Serves you right. You did leave me there by myself.”

“Emma, you didn’t need to be there. You couldn’t have done anything for him. The doctor told you he would be fine.”

I resisted his advancement from the chair to my side by backing into the corner between my new filing cabinet and conference table. “That’s comforting to know that should I end up in a hospital someday, you’ll go along with your routine and ignore my suffering.”

He draped his arm over the top of the cabinet, peering down at me. “You can be so overdramatic. If your dad had been suffering, of course I wouldn’t have left. But he didn’t even know we were there. He was probably groggy.”

I crossed my arms to my chest. “I still think it was wrong.”

He plopped down into one of the new conference table chairs. He sat forward, using his thighs as a stoop for his elbows. “What do you want me to do?”

“Come out to eat with my friends.”

He scoffed. “I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

I baited his mocking scoff with one of my own. “Yes, you did.” I slipped into the seat across from him. “You didn’t think I could outsmart you.”

With willing eyes, he stared at my lips, mesmerized by the fresh coating of lip-gloss I applied before he entered my office. “It’s because you drive me crazy.”

I used his distracted mind as leverage to maintain control over the issue. “Then, you’ll come?”

When he didn’t respond, I raised guarded eyes. “Well?”

“I’m choosing the place.”

I feigned casualness in his surrender. “Just don’t make it too fancy.”

“Are they bringing the kid?”

My eyes flew at him. “The kid?”

He took a sip from his water bottle. “I forgot his name.”

“Her name,” I said, frustrated.

He took another inflated sip. “Well, is she coming?”

“No, Tatiana isn’t coming.”

Walking over hot coals barefoot would’ve been easier and less painful than the little coaxing drill I had to go through. From then on, when he wanted us to go out with his snotty friends, I vowed to put up a stink. If he could, I could. Nevertheless, I’d make the best of the sure-to-be fiasco.

## Chapter 16

Six weeks before the wedding, I finally dragged Colin out for our double date with Goldie and Charlie. If it weren't for Goldie's insistence that him and Charlie meet, I would've canceled. We'd meet them at The Snapper Bar and Grill, Colin's choice.

He made no effort to hide that he was in no way looking forward to spending the evening with a couple of hippie people.

Maybe Colin would surprise me and everyone would end up having a great time.

We sat at the bar to wait for them. Colin nursed a scotch. I guzzled a martini. When Goldie and Charlie finally arrived in jeans and matching sweatshirts, I silently vowed I'd never conjure up a blatantly foolish scheme like that ever again.

"You've got to be kidding me," Colin whispered, motioning toward our dinner dates. "Didn't you tell them what kind of place this is, Emma?"

"Wow," Goldie said, drinking in the atmosphere with wide eyes. "We're underdressed."

"Nonsense," Colin said, rising to usher her into the inside seat against the wall. "Don't worry about a thing. They're lax with the dress code. I won't let them throw you out onto the street. At least, not without having a cocktail first."

"They may start asking us to clear the tables," Charlie said. "We better

get us a drink, and fast.” With his thick-bearded face and small hole on the edge of his back pocket, he flagged the bartender with the confidence of a man in Armani.

“You have to admire a man with a smart plan,” Colin whispered sarcastically into my ear.

Annoyed, I flashed him a warning. “Can you at least act like you’re having a good time tonight?”

He’d never be capable of having a good time with someone like Charlie. Colin would never be able to win him over in his usual way of flashing his dazzling smile or one-upping through intellectual insight. Sensitivity impressed Charlie. A willingness to expose weakness to uncover the gems within also ranked high in Charlie’s mind.

Colin sipped his Scotch looking about as comfortable as a man waiting to go into a job interview would. He flexed his jaw and thwarted all eye contact with my hooded-sweatshirted friends. By the time we sat at our dining table, Colin was drunk.

The menu didn’t list prices. Etiquette rules dictated never to ask in an upscale restaurant like that one. Goldie never did care about rules. So when she blurted out the omission, Colin interjected. “The price isn’t important,” he said to her, gritting his teeth. Then, turning to the waiter, he said, “I’m taking care of this.”

“Oh, in that case,” she said, “I’ll take the Filet Minion. Can I have that cooked so that the cow is good and dead?”

I giggled under my breath. I had to hand it to my friend. She sure knew how to handle herself and put people in their place. She played Colin like a finely-tuned instrument, testing his nerves. She tested him best when she ordered three different a la carte salad choices just so she could sample the different salad dressings that the waiter, in his well-rehearsed mantra, spieled out to her. Charlie sat next to his adoring fiancé with a sly grin on

his face, enjoying the show as much as me.

“So Colin, Emma tells me you’re a fan of Denver,” Charlie said, not flinching from the kick in his shin that I bestowed upon him.

Colin shook his head up and down. “I wouldn’t go as far as to call myself a fan. But I enjoyed visiting the place.”

“It would be great to camp out under the stars in one of the National Forest Parks up in the Rockies,” Charlie said, looking to him for agreement.

Only one experience could cause him even more discomfort - camping.

“I suspect you’d like to.” Colin scanned the room, drawing in a labored breath. Then his eyes landed in the bar. “Listen, would you excuse me for a minute? I see someone I know.”

Of course he did. He knew someone wherever he went. As soon as he cleared out of earshot, I turned to my friends. “I’m so sorry. He can be such a snob.”

“I know a cure for that,” Goldie said.

“Honey, no scheming. We should leave him alone,” he said to her. “I’m sure he’s trying. We’re not his type, that’s all.”

“Like hell he’s trying. Emma knows I don’t sugarcoat anything. He’s acting like a complete ass. I say we throw him in the fire while it’s hot.”

“And the fire being?” I asked.

“You’ll see,” she said.

I didn’t push the question any further. Maybe she’d forget about it.

Twenty minutes went by and the three of us had scoped out every person in the place, guessing their age and marital status.

“That man is not her husband,” Goldie said. “Look at the way he stares into her eyes as though he’s seeing her for the first time. And the way she swings her hair behind her shoulders. They are totally on a first date or having an affair.”

“Maybe they are madly in love with each other after twenty years of

marriage,” Charlie said as the waiter placed a steak in front of him.

What a romantic. “Goldie, you’re so lucky. Do you even realize how much?” I asked.

“Ma’am would you like fresh ground pepper on your salmon?” the waiter asked me.

I nodded and continued when she didn’t answer me. “Seriously, how many men would state such a tender comment?”

“Yeah, I know. I’m lucky.” She turned to the waiter and said, “Please don’t put pepper on his entrée,” motioning to Colin’s steak. “If he wants pepper, he can ask for it himself if he ever returns to the table.”

Goldie kissed Charlie — a sweet lingering kiss.

“How are your three salads, Goldie?” I asked.

She dug her fork into one, then the other, and then finally the last. She got three good helpings of each on her fork before stuffing the exotic lettuce into her mouth. She ate like a kid, and I loved watching her enjoy herself. “Yum,” she mumbled.

Charlie reached for my hand. “We’re sorry we showed up in clothes you’d wear to a baseball game. Truth is, I don’t even own a tie. They choke me. I could never understand how a guy could get used to having that collar around his neck all day, cutting off his circulation.”

I patted his hand. “I love you guys so much. I’m sorry I put you through all of this.”

“Honestly, I’d rather be chomping on stale pretzels and chugging a pitcher of beer at the bar where Haley sang,” he said.

“The fire is calling.” Goldie widened her sly smile.

“Oh no,” I said, realizing her plan.

“Oh yes.” She winked.

“Hey, they’re doing karaoke tonight. That’s easier than singing with a band,” Charlie said. “So will you get up and sing this time?”

A surge of bravery swelled in me. “You’re looking at the karaoke princess here,” I said, pointing to myself. “I won contests in my earlier days.”

“Let’s be truthful here,” Goldie said, “Do I need to remind you the reason you won those contests?”

“Give me some credit, Goldie.”

“I was the damn judge! You could’ve shattered glass, and I would’ve still handed you the twenty-five dollar prize.”

“I’m sure she can sing,” Charlie said.

“Okay, maybe one song, she’s got down. Emma, do you remember the night Jay had you MC for the night?”

I winced. “You had to bring up ‘Anticipation,’ didn’t you?”

“It was dreadful,” she said to Charlie. “The crowd was shy that night. Emma’s job was to keep the singing going. So when no one sang, she had to belt out the tunes and get people enticed. Well, she enticed them, for sure. Right out the door.”

We broke out into hysterical laughter, eliciting a few annoyed looks from the elitist clientele at The Snapper Bar and Grill.

“I sang ‘Anticipation’ and the place emptied. Seriously, I was that bad.”

“Well, this place isn’t too critical. You can sing every single note off-key and people will still cheer for you.”

“I like the sound of that,” I said.

We ate our entire meal without Colin. From time to time, he’d slip me a flagging finger signaling his return. But he never came back to the table while the entrees were still warm. Conveniently, as the waiter returned to clear our plates, so did he. “I’m sorry guys, I ran into an old friend from college.”

I couldn’t even look him in the eye. He disgusted me at that moment.

“Sir, would you like me to clear this?” the waiter asked him.

“I’m not hungry anymore. You can take it away.”

“You’re going to throw it away?” Charlie asked him.

“I’m not hungry anymore, so yes.”

“Could you place it in a doggie bag for me?” Charlie asked the waiter. As the waiter walked away with the plate of uneaten food, he added, “I’m not too proud.”

I tapped his calf with the tip of my foot. I couldn’t have asked for a more fitting way to end the stuffy evening.

“Colin, I’m going out with them now. If you’d like to join us, we’re going to a karaoke bar.”

“I don’t think so. Charlie, can I count on you to see to it that Emma gets home safely?”

“You’re not coming?” he asked.

“I’m not a big fan of karaoke. In fact, I’m surprised you’re able to get Emma to agree to go. I didn’t think you liked dive bars.”

“I do when I’m with the right people.”

He squared off with me, creasing his forehead and narrowing his eyes. “I should go, then. I’m not so sure I like the idea of you being there without me.”

“That’s the spirit.” Goldie slapped his shoulder blade.

“Fine, let’s go.” Colin rose first and headed toward the door. I followed, and when I looked back at Goldie and Charlie, they both winked at me.

I broke the silence first as Colin sped down the highway as if in a getaway chase. “Can you slow down a little? They’re never going to be able to keep up with you.”

“That’s my whole strategy.”

“So this is how you want us to be. I squeeze into your lifestyle and ignore my own? Do you have any idea how much of an ass you made of yourself tonight?”

“These people are different. I have nothing in common with a man who doesn’t know how to shave his face or—” he hesitated.

“Or what? Make as much money as you do? Converse as well as you do? Because tonight, a slug could’ve carried on a more interesting conversation than you did.”

“That’s nice,” he said.

We drove in silence. Then, he finally spoke when we pulled into the parking lot of the bar. “This is ridiculous. Why did you agree to come here?”

“Colin, just go.”

“Someone’s got to protect you in here.”

“From?”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Let’s get this over with.”

“I can’t stand this side of you,” I said to him.

“Likewise. These people turned you into a reckless fool.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“Let’s forget it.”

“No. We’re not forgetting this. We’re going to sit here until you tell me why you said that.”

“This right here—” he waved his arms at the air in between us, “—this aggressiveness—it’s not attractive. It’s not you. Since when do you go to karaoke bars? This is not our style.”

“Our style? More like your style. It’s always about your style. Tell me, when did my style suddenly need to become your style?”

“We’ve always liked the same things.”

I always pretended to like the same things as he did. I had finally suggested something out of the realm of normality for us. “There’s a lot about me that you don’t know.”

“You’re being asinine, Emma. I know you better than you know yourself.”

Carr—The Fiche Room

“You have no idea who I am. This is the real me coming out to you; the one who is tired of sacrificing my ideals to replace them with yours.”

“If that’s the case and you’ve been hiding who you are this entire time I’ve known you, then I’m the one who should be upset.”

We both stared straight ahead, not saying a word.

Then, like water in a desert, Goldie broke the awkward silence by banging on my window. “Come on, guys. Are you ready?”

“Are you coming in?” I asked him.

“I’m not letting you go by yourself.”

As we entered the bar, memories of Haley flowed through me — her lingering fragrance, her wavy hair, her almond-shaped eyes pouring secret messages, and her touch. People were singing aloud, music drowned out quiet conversations, and couples danced. The scene aroused that same sexy energy from the night we were together.

She had seduced me with her flirtatious quibbles and playful touches. She was gifted with the ability to encapsulate a moment and enjoy it wholeheartedly. How could someone with so much charisma be alone in the world? Or was she still? Was there someone else who piqued her interest? Did she shower her with the same enticing attention she had given me? I lost my breath when I pictured her with another woman. A stifling reality hit me. She was free to flirt, seduce, kiss, and make love to someone other than me. That killed my heart. Anxiety cut off my breath, drowning me.

“I could use a drink,” Colin said.

I latched onto his belt loop and followed him. “Me too.”

After a few drinks, Goldie stirred up the crowd when she sang “I Will Survive.” The crowd roared with each rising note. Haley had won the crowd over too, but differently. The crowd cheered for Goldie’s bravery to sing a song way out of her voice range. When Haley sang, the crowd cheered because they witnessed a sexy, moving performer that filled the bar with

music like never before. Haley breathed life into the airless room, just as she breathed life into everything she touched. The place lacked that night. It lacked her presence. It hung bland, like my life did now.

As soon as that song ended, Goldie whispered into the MC's ear. Then, into the shrieking microphone, she called out to me. "Come on up here, Emma Hill."

I shook my head from side to side fighting off her order to join her. I jumped when Colin's hand clenched the small of my back. "You're not going to embarrass yourself, right?"

"I'm not going to embarrass myself. I'm going to finally enjoy myself for the first time tonight." Putting words to action, I wriggled out of his pitiful grip and flew on stage with my friend.

As I climbed up next to her, the crowd encouraged me with handfuls of clapping. "Got "Desperado?" for my friend here?" Goldie yelled to the MC.

The gum-chewing, redheaded MC winked at us and played the music. We had the audience in our hands, dancing, singing lyrics along with us, even some climbing onto stage with us to sing backup. As we approached the end of the song, Goldie stared right into my eyes. She held my hand and sang the hook to "Desperado" directly to me, emphasizing that part that says I had better let somebody love me before it's too late.

When we finished, the crowd cheered.

I drank in their vivacious, uninhibited energy. They accepted me, even in my black Nordstrom turtleneck and tailored skirt. No one judged anyone in that crowd. It didn't matter if I was a lawyer, a janitor, a failing businesswoman, black, white, or Hispanic. Everyone treated each other as an equal in that place. Everyone had the same goal - let loose and have fun.

Only one man judged. He stood against the back wall with a scowl on his face. He lifted his chin higher than everyone else. He revealed a hideous side of himself that I doubted he could ever redeem after his disastrous ill-

Carr—The Fiche Room

fated attempt to ‘get-to-know’ my friends. I’d given up my identity for the sake of pleasing him. And why? So I could make my daddy proud, be a normal person, and be socially acceptable to a group of people I didn’t like?

I stared across the bar room at a stranger. A man I was deeply embarrassed of now. A man I lost respect for in a matter of minutes that evening. That man, once charismatic and worldly to me, didn’t exist. The woman I pretended to be for him didn’t exist either. I wanted nothing more than to escape that stranger’s demoralizing stare and flee to the one familiar person who accepted me, Haley.

## Chapter 17

Colin had zero regard for Goldie and Charlie as they stood across the parking lot by their car. They waited for him to finish pitching his reprimands toward me so they could take me home. He paced the gravel in front of his Jaguar, hands on his hips, shaking his head in disbelief that I'd act so foolish and disrespectful toward him all evening.

We both hurled curses with dagger-sharp points at each other. We had never fought so badly. We had never tossed such horrific, hurtful, insulting accusations at each other. With flared tempers and hurt feelings, the words snapped out of us both like bullets from a machine gun; one right after the other, without the least bit of hesitation. Once we finished arguing, the shells of the loaded words couldn't be taken back without leaving scars.

"You'll never drag me out like this again," he said to me.

"Oh, don't worry. There'll be no more nights like tonight," I said, whirling around on my foot to flee to Goldie and Charlie.

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me to him. "Is that a threat?"

I wrestled out of his grip. "Take it the way you want."

"You acted like a complete idiot tonight, prancing around that stage like a tramp in heels. You did that in front of a crowd whose primary interest in life is how much beer they can chug."

"Well at least they don't have their noses stuck to the damn ceiling."

"I'm not going to listen to your ridiculous insults." He clicked his car

remote and started his engine. “I’m leaving.”

“Good. Leave.”

I crossed my arms to my chest and tapped my foot, waiting for him to embark on his self-absorbed journey home.

As he walked past me, he stopped, lifted my chin, and glared into my eyes. “This little attitude needs to go away.”

I narrowed my eyes on him and slapped his hand away. “This little attitude is who I am. So get used to it.”

He latched onto my wrist again, that time squeezing it tight between his strong fingers. “Let’s not make a scene, okay?”

“Why, Colin? Afraid my friends might see a real person with real issues emerge from that tough exterior you so diligently polish every day before waltzing out your door?”

His eyes shot flames at me like a blowtorch. “I’m going to get in my car and pretend I didn’t hear that.”

I clenched my hands into a fist. “That’s right. Just keep pretending. It’s worked perfect for us all these years.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” he asked.

A lump barged into my throat. “You have a distorted image of me if you think I haven’t pretended.”

He blinked and cocked his head in a dramatic simultaneous move. “Care to explain that to me?”

I looked up to the sky. “Look up at the stars. You know when you look at one indirectly, it sparkles, but the second you stare at it directly, you can barely see it any longer?”

He kept his eyes on me. “What’s your point?”

“The Emma you think you know is that star you stare at indirectly. That Emma shines like a brilliant gem in your eyes because you’re only looking at me partially. If you could stare at the real me, then that gem you created

in your head would no longer exist. You don't know how to look at me straight on and see who I am.”

“Whose fault is that?” he asked, conceding to the truth.

I could blame no one but myself. All those times I massaged our relationship with my lies, I disheveled it instead. He had no idea how I'd rather eat pizza instead of a choice cut of tender steak. How I bit into my cheek to avoid wincing every time he made love to me. Or how I despised his need to be the best at everything.

Grief pinched my throat. “Mine. It's my fault.” I bowed my head and kicked the tiny pebbles at my sandals.

He pulled me toward him. “Let me in so I can help you deal with whatever is going on inside of you.”

I cautioned against his sincerity. I wanted more fight. His eyes held tenderness. His embrace did too. He brought me into him and cradled me in his arms.

Colin would never love the real me. Colin loved the perfect me. He loved the me who aimed to make him look good in front of friends and employees. He loved the me who feigned attraction and satisfaction and who squashed ideals to cater to his.

Would he ever respect my desires? Would he ever have a picture I painted framed and hung in our home? Would he ever honor me the way Haley did? I blossomed under the shower of her attention. Her interest in Goldie and Charlie, in my artwork, in her attraction to me, lifted me higher than ever before. Colin, he had no clue how those things caused me to soar.

I loved the me who emerged in his absence, the confident, sexy, and real me.

Goldie's words echoed in my mind, *why are you torturing yourself like this?* I didn't love him the way I should, and I suspected he didn't love the person underneath all the fake smiles, laughter, and satisfaction. So why

torture myself?

Ten, twenty, thirty years from then, would it be any different? Would I have to spend the rest of my life pretending to happy? I didn't want to pretend. I wanted to live the reality. I didn't want to be cooped up like a caged bird, shackled to Colin's dreams and ideas, abandoning my own.

I didn't like pretending to love fancy dinners, to enjoy pointless small talk with snotty girlfriends of his uppity friends, or to be excited about moving into an elaborate home. Goldie would never be comfortable visiting such a home.

If I wanted pizza, I didn't want to settle for a steak. If I wanted to run, I wanted to refuse to walk. If I wanted to quit my job and pursue art on a street corner, then damn it, I didn't want to settle on anything but that.

With Haley the world shifted around us, like draped silk. Sparks flew between us, connecting our souls when she looked into my eyes, touched my skin, and kissed my lips.

With Colin, I couldn't create a spark with him any better than I could from a wet piece of wood. No matter how hard I tried to find the magic with him, my efforts never amounted to anything. The attraction didn't exist.

As long as I married Colin with only his intentions in mind, I wouldn't be free to love him the way he deserved to be loved. He couldn't love me in the same way, either. I readied to claim the love I deserved. I'd only be able to claim that love if I stood up for myself finally.

But when I pushed off his chest and looked up at him, the confidence in his deep gray eyes jabbed at my courage. I wanted to be that person he admired. I wanted to look at him with the same confidence. I wanted him to appeal to me sexually. He appealed to so many other women. Not a stroll through a mall, restaurant, or any other public place happened without at least a dozen stares from interested women. Why didn't I see what they saw?

Standing still in the dark parking lot, I steadied myself against his

stronghold. The rock music from the now lonely building disappeared along with the crowd. Goldie and Charlie had long since retreated to the sanctity of their car. My thumping heart and the thudding raindrops pounding the pavement remained the only filler in an otherwise silent parking lot.

I sniffled, breaking the awkward silence. He raised my head with a lone finger braced under my chin and revealed a flowing of fresh tears leaking from my eyes, splashing my face with salty moisture.

He traced his fingers along my cheek. “It’s okay. The life I’ll give you soon will overshadow this little bout with insecurity. Once we’re married, living in our new home, throwing great parties, walking the dogs we’ll adopt, and staring into the bright, hopeful eyes of the kids we’ll have, all of this will be irrelevant. You won’t have time to worry about such things anymore. You’ll have purpose.”

“I already do have purpose.”

He ran his hands along my back. “You can do better than hanging out in bars with friends that look like they stepped out of a bad eighties movie and drawing up sketches with your pencils, Em.”

“Firstly, don’t ever insult my friends like that again. Secondly, stop turning my passion into a joke. Do you mean to tell me that Picasso and Van Gogh didn’t have purpose through their work?”

“I can’t believe you would be pretentious enough to compare your work to that of famous artists, Em.”

“I thought you’d like me being a bit more like you — ostentatious.”

“When it’s fitting, sure.”

“You don’t believe in me. That’s a big problem.”

“Of course I believe in you in many ways. Art just isn’t my fancy.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to presume it doesn’t have purpose for me. The world doesn’t center around Colin and his ideals. There’s more to life than number crunching.”

“Purpose is having a real job like you do now at the company. It’s socializing with people who can help forage measurable results, like capital and valuable networking connections. It’s having a plan to raise well-behaved kids who will have a bright future by sending them to the best schools and involving them in stimulating activities. That’s purpose, Em. That’s the purpose we’ll build and share together.”

I struggled to release myself from him. “That’s your idea of purpose. Not mine.”

He looked at me boldly. “We’ll make it ours.”

I looked back at Goldie’s car then back at Colin, sickened by his lack of diversity. “I have to go. I’ve kept them waiting long enough.”

He placed his hands around his waist. “You’re still leaving with them?”

“Yes, Colin. I’m still leaving with them.”

His eyes swept my body, seemingly searching for a trace of familiarity within me. “I’ll bring you home. I need to go back to your place to get the invitations anyway.”

“I’ll mail them tomorrow morning.”

“You promised me that last week. They need to go out first thing in the morning.”

“They’ll get to where they need to be in plenty of time, Colin. I promise.”

“Let me drop you off,” he said curtly.

“No, Colin. They’ve been waiting this whole time for me.”

“So tell them we’ve settled our differences.”

“I don’t think we have,” I said, backing up from him. “I’ll see you later on tomorrow.”

“Fine, we’ll talk about this more tomorrow then. By the way, we’re going out with Dean and his wife.”

I stopped walking. “Who the hell is Dean?”

“Dean, our realtor, Dean. He wants to talk to us about some investment property. It would be good for us to get to know someone like him better.”

“It’s always about who can do what for you. No wonder you don’t like Goldie or Charlie. They can’t do anything for you.”

“I don’t like them because I find them offensive,” he whispered. “Would you keep your voice down so they don’t hear you?”

“Why do you care if they hear you or not? You don’t like them because there’s no joint venture that you can work out with them. They’re no use to you anyway. Isn’t that what you said?”

He tightened his lips and spoke through his clenched teeth. “You’re right. I don’t see the point in being their friend.”

“What about the fact that I like them?”

“Why do you like them? What can Goldie offer you other than psychic gibberish? And Charlie? He’s in a band. What can he possibly do for you?”

“Colin, do you realize how selfish and stupid you sound?”

“I’m not thinking any differently than how ninety-nine percent of the world does. I’m brave enough to say it. Life is about strategy, Em. She’s a liability to you.”

My eyes went wide. “A liability?”

“You and I both know there’s going to be a day in the future when someone calls her bluff and her scheme of reading palms will come crashing down on her. Who will she run to when the electric company threatens to cut her off?”

His lack of compassion stunned me. How could someone so insensitive make it so far in life and someone like Goldie, who opens her heart to anyone, lack?

“She’s my friend. I’d help her without question.”

“Having a rich friend like you is an asset for her. What can she provide you with that would have any value?”

“Compassion, understanding, a shoulder to cry on, a trusted advisor, should I go on?” I circled my hand in the air, welcoming in his response.

“You don’t get it. You don’t think like I do.”

I raised my arms in the air in praise. “Thankfully!”

“I’m not saying this to be a jerk. I’m saying this because you need to branch out with your friendship base. She’s the only friend you have.”

“Not the only one,” I snapped.

“Name me one more person you can call your friend. And don’t say Sharon from the fiche room? She’s another liability.”

A clever smile took over his face. The shrewdness in it exacerbated my anger toward him. How dare he claim that I didn’t have friends?

“I happen to have a good friend besides Goldie.” I bounced my hand against my hanging pocketbook.

He laughed. “Who? An imaginary friend?”

His shrilling cackle caused my temples to pulse. How dare he laugh at me? “Haley. Haley is a great friend of mine.”

“Haley?”

“My friend from Denver.”

“The aloof one you had coffee with?”

I swallowed, trying to calm the storm brewing inside me before it unleashed a fury on him. “She’s far from aloof.”

“Okay, in what way is she an asset? She lives in Denver. What can you possibly do for each other?”

More than he could ever do for me. I bit the words sitting on my tongue before they lashed out at him. “You wouldn’t get it. You know why? Because you don’t think like me.” I shoved the same dialogue back at him that he had used moments earlier on me, only mine held a meaning far different than he could ever imagine.

“Okay, well let’s break it down my way. What does she do for a living?”

“She’s a sales manager for a dress designer.”

“So she can get you deals on dresses?”

“Colin, friendships are not about what people can do for you.”

“She sounds capable and financially sound,” he said, dismissing my comment. “So she’s not a liability to you. But,” he let the word roll out slowly, “Are you to her?” He squinted his eyes, lending a light-hearted approach.

“She appreciates art. So I’m most definitely an asset to her,” I said, yielding to his game with biting sarcasm.

“So you can draw a picture for Haley? And Haley likes pictures.” Colin scratched his chin. “I’m not convinced of the strategic alliance. What fuels your need for each other?”

Just hearing her name, tingles ran wild in me, bathing me in pleasure as I stood face to face with my unknowing fiancé.

“Plenty fuels our need for each other.” My heart thundered through every cell in my body, as I indulged in the provocative bliss of bringing Haley alive in my mind again. “More than you’ll ever be able to understand with that financial mind of yours.”

“Try me,” he said with assurance.

“Let’s just say, I look at my friendships as color palettes not spreadsheets. I find the complements in people, not the comparisons. Haley’s colorful in personality so she’s easy to be friends with.”

“Well, if that works for you, then good for you.”

“Yes, it is good for me.”

We stared blankly at each other. An airplane flew overhead, filling the space with its deep engine growl.

“Let’s put this behind us so when we’re dining with Dean and his wife tomorrow night, there’ll be no left over angst. What do you say?”

“I planned on us having dinner with my dad, Colin.”

## Carr—The Fiche Room

“I’m seeing Dad in the morning. We’re going to meet to go over some business he needs to discuss with me. I’ll tell him we’ll move it to Sunday.”

My heels hurt from the unsupportive sandals I wore and my emotions were spent. I wanted to be alone. I wanted to get away from him. I wanted to think about Haley. “Fine. We’ll do things your way as always. I’m too tired to argue,” I said walking away from him.

He yelled to me, “Don’t forget to mail the invites.”

I waved my arm at him before dumping my tired body into Goldie’s backseat where “I Will Remember You” by Sarah McLachlan blared from the backseat speakers. More distraught than ever about my future with Colin, I was grateful for the music. It drowned out the mounting tears that rammed their way up the back of my throat.

My eyes followed a lone raindrop traversing across the window. At first, it rolled slowly. Then, once it found a groove, it sped horizontally across the window. It reminded me of an ice-skater dancing across the smooth, shiny surface, with an eye focused on her destination. Haley operated in the same manner. She knew what she wanted and went after it. The day she bumped into my car, she wanted to treat me to coffee, and she wouldn’t take no for an answer. With her assertive nature, she dazzled people. She magically helped them succumb to what they wanted—to be around her.

I ached for her to be sitting by my side in the backseat of my best friend’s car. The night would’ve been far more fun and ended so much better than it did with Colin. The four of us would’ve had a much better time alone. We would’ve all jumped up on stage together and entertained the crowd. Haley would’ve buzzed them into laughter with her contagious humor.

We would’ve celebrated the night in style, making fun of the stuffy ambiance at the restaurant and melding into the crowd at the bar. The best part, we would’ve finished the night off in my cozy living room, cuddling and being accepting of each other.

## Carr—The Fiche Room

When we were together, passion brewed with intensity and real emotion. When she was with me, I sat a willing participant in the sweetness of the present moment, enjoying her for all she offered.

“Curly, is everything all right?” Charlie asked, lowering the radio volume just as Sarah finished singing the fitting lyrics.

“I have a lot of thinking to do.”

“Em, Colin acted like a pompous ass tonight, but we were to blame slightly for that. I mean, Charlie and I were a bit obnoxious too.”

I unbuckled my seatbelt and slid up, sticking my head in between the two bucket seats. “Bullshit. You were because he was. I won’t accept how he treated us tonight.”

“I don’t know how you can stand him, personally.” She threw Charlie a glance. “If you ever treat me like that, you better know enough to get packing.”

He didn’t flinch at her brashness. Instead a sweet smile crossed his bearded face. “I’m not like that. But that’s who he is, Emma.”

“That’s who he is,” I said back to him. “I wish he could be different.”

“You mean more like Haley?” Goldie asked.

The air to my lungs cut off. I plopped backward against the leather backseat in defeat. “If only he could be.”

“But he’s not, Curly.”

I had a life waiting for me that I didn’t want. Colin’s enthusiasm favored him, not me. He planned my future like he’d have it — practical and efficient. “No, he’s not.”

~ ~

When I closed the door to my apartment after being dropped off, I walked through my living room quickly. Then, I headed straight to my

bedroom where the pile of invitations rested on my nightstand.

I climbed onto my fluffy bed of floral print and stared at the elegant scrolled letters on the envelopes. I picked up a stack of them and clutched them to my chest. Then, I lay my head against the pillow. Within minutes I fell fast asleep.

I woke up the next morning with them littered around me. Six weeks from then, if plans went according to Colin's well-organized schedule, he'd be playing golf with the groomsmen, while I sat at Ricardo's having my hair and makeup done. I'd be slightly giddy from the Mimosas Goldie and I would be sipping. We'd sit, side-by-side, enjoying the lavish pampering before I entered a life of disappointment.

Life moved too fast. I couldn't keep up with its pace. The day that once loomed so far off into the distance, now raced at me with lightning speed. My mind whirled with anguish as I turned onto my back and stared at the ceiling. I had to face the hard reality. I had no other choice but to.

## Chapter 18

I sighed deeply as I parked my car alongside the curb of Colin's street. My feet were dead weight, like cement blocks in the ocean. Struggling to stand, I stepped out into the pouring rain. I stood exposed. I allowed the rain to drench my weary soul, hoping it would wash away the despair that seeped through my veins. The anticipation tortured me. After standing still against the cool metal of my car with the water soaking through my clothes, I decided I had to get it over with.

I arrived at his front door, dripping. I hesitated, then formed a fist and courageously knocked.

I couldn't breathe correctly. The air entered and left before it had a chance to filter into my lungs. My heartbeats were strong. Too strong. They pounded in my chest, as if dueling for control over me.

His footsteps drew closer to the door.

Finally, he opened it. He stood silent, eyeing me from head to toe. When he completed his scan, all the pent up pressure of the last desperate moments came tumbling down as I collapsed into his arms.

He held me without saying anything; just stroked my hair. Every few seconds he'd squeeze me a little tighter, until he hugged me so tight I couldn't move.

Standing still, braving to take a deeper breath, I traced my fingers along the back of his neck and up through his hair—the hair I had run my fingers

through over the course of seven years. I had memorized every cowlick on his hairline, every wiry piece that stuck out when cut too short, every last detail.

The tick of the clock echoed in the living room with each second that passed. The sharp tapping reflected stabs, poking the air. It reminded me I came with a purpose, and no matter how many clicks the second hand made, I had to eventually deal with the inevitable.

I wiggled free, ready to face him.

I still gripped the soggy invitations in my left hand. Their water dripped onto the hard wood floors below. He held my hand as I stood before him with the tears streaming down my face, mirroring his.

“I couldn’t mail them,” I managed to say weakly.

He squeezed my hand in his, prompting me, securing me to continue explaining.

“I stood at the mailbox, holding the invitations in the open latch. I couldn’t let go of them.”

“Why not, Em?” he asked.

“It’s not you. It’s me.”

“What’s you?” He pulled his lower lip into his mouth, but I could still see the trembling in his chin.

“I can’t do it.”

“What can’t you do, Em?”

“I can’t marry you.”

His mouth dropped open. He let his hand slip away from mine. He walked over to the couch and sat, placing his head in the palm of his hands.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, coming to his side.

The clock continued to tick loud and abrasively against the murmur of traffic passing by the street below.

“We can fix this,” he finally said, meeting up with my eyes. In them, I

saw devastation and pain.

“No, we can’t. This isn’t something that we can rearrange by switching a few things around. We can’t fix this, Colin.”

“Trust me, we can fix this. This is all normal pre-wedding stuff going on here.”

“It’s more than that for me.”

“This is about last night, right? My acting like a complete ass?”

His admittance shocked me. “Colin—”

“It’s hard for me to have a good time with people I have nothing in common with. But I promise that I’ll hang out with them if that’s what’ll make you happy. I’ll change my attitude. I’ll find a common ground between them and me.” He sounded desperate.

“Will all this make you happy? Being married to a woman you don’t understand, who has friends that you don’t get either?”

“We can make this work. We have for the past seven years, haven’t we?”

He wouldn’t take no for an answer. “Colin, there’s more to it.” I took his hand in mine.

“More to it?” he asked.

“Yes. Something’s happened to me and I don’t know how to tell you.”

“It’s somebody else, isn’t it?” he asked, matter-of-factly.

I swallowed hard. I could walk away from that moment without telling him about Haley. If in his position, I’d want to know the truth. I owed it to him. Colin, the man used to getting everything exactly as he wanted, would struggle his whole life wondering how he could’ve done things differently to save the relationship.

I shook my head in agreement, closing my eyes and bowing my head to avoid seeing his pain.

“How serious is it?”

Carr—The Fiche Room

I looked up at him. “I never cheated on you.”

“So a certain affinity is brewing toward this person? Maybe you flirted a little? That’s it?” he asked me cautiously.

“We kissed, but that’s as far as anything went.”

He exhaled. “Do I know him?”

I hesitated, summoning up the courage to divulge my secret. “Her.”

He snapped his hand back from me. “Her?”

I couldn’t look at him. I stared at the navy curtains that covered the sliding door. “Yes. It’s Haley,” I said, meagerly.

He stood and hovered over me like a hawk ready to attack. “Haley? You’re willing to call off our wedding because of this Haley woman from Denver?” He picked up his newspaper from the table and flung it clear across the room. “This isn’t real.”

I remained stone-faced. “It’s real, Colin.”

“How real? Are you in love with her?” he asked with disbelief.

“Yes, I am. I’m in love with her.”

His eyes flared. “Emma, you sound ridiculous. You’re in love with a woman?”

“Yes.” I rubbed the tears from under my eyes. “Colin, please don’t hate me.”

“These are the types of things that happen on talk shows, not to me.” He walked over to the slider and kept his back to me.

“I’m sorry, Colin. This just happened. I didn’t intend for it to.”

“Just happened? How can one just slip into becoming a lesbian?”

“I’ve had these feelings for women my whole life, but didn’t realize their intensity until I met Haley.”

“But you’re attracted to me.”

“Not the way you deserve.”

He scoffed. “You waited seven years to tell me this?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“So what are you going to run to Denver now and live happily forever with... a woman?”

I hadn’t talked to Haley since my dad’s surgery a few weeks prior. For all I knew, she could’ve already been with someone else. “I’m not sure, Colin. I never meant to hurt you.”

“Hurt me?” he snapped around, his face laden with a cocky grin. “If anyone is going to get hurt here, it’s you. You’re choosing to walk away from the best thing in life you ever had. I would’ve given you so much more than this fucking woman ever will. I would’ve given you children, a beautiful home, and lavish vacations. Hell, I would’ve given my damn life for you if you asked. There would’ve been so much. You lost everything.”

The finality in his words knocked me down. Jabbed at me like an upper cut to my gut. I couldn’t turn back now.

“Maybe I’m making the biggest mistake. I’d be making an even bigger one if we went through with the wedding. There is a better person out there for you that will love you the way you deserve to be loved. I can’t love you that way. I’ve tried, but I can’t.”

“So all those times you told me you loved me, you didn’t mean it?”

“I didn’t pretend to care about you. But I’m not in love with you. You deserve to have someone love you.”

“You’re not doing me any favors. How dare you? You’re not going to be happy without me in the end. This choice will eventually explode in your face. You’re not a lesbian, Emma. You’re foolish.”

“Foolish, why? Because I’m freeing myself to find happiness?”

“Happiness, huh? I’d like to hear how happy you are when you’re forty years old without a child because you chose to partner up with a woman, incapable of performing the natural order of preserving life. I’d like to hear how wonderful you think it is to walk along a romantic beachfront and not

be able to stop and kiss and hold hands because of social stigma. I'd like to see how happy you'll be when you finally realize that you'll never experience the bliss of a wedding where everyone attending is thrilled for your loving relationship. How happy are you going to be when your own dad turns his back on you?"

He exposed my weakest areas. He forced me toward the door. "Get out."

"I realize you're upset with me, but can you step outside of your ego for moment and try to understand instead of judge? Throwing the negatives back into my face is so typical of you. You always have to be right. Your view never fails. It's a shame up to this point you've never had the chance to experience loving someone so much that all those things you mentioned don't matter. I can have children. I can have a commitment. I'll always have my dad's respect. You're so closed-minded and have no idea that people can have happiness in ways other than you can. You're wrong, Colin. I can have everything without you."

He stared at me with watery eyes.

I paused to catch my breath. I went too far. But I tired of others trying to run my life for me. I was ready to stand for my choices. "Just remember one thing; if you live your life worrying about what everyone else is thinking, then you're not living up to your potential. Me, by walking out this door, I'm choosing to ignore what everyone else has planned for me and carving my own path. The path I see for myself, not the one you, my dad, or anyone else for that matter, envisions. The one I envision. That is the only one that matters to me. I suggest that you do the same."

"Go then. What the hell are you waiting for?"

I picked up the soggy invitations from the counter and slammed the door shut. I walked straight to the dumpster. I stood in front of it, letting the rain wash over me. The ink bled from the envelopes and rolled down my arms. My tears spilled, and I took a deep breath. In one big freeing heave, I tossed

the soggy invitations into the giant metal trash cage, creating an eerie thud.

It was over.

I was a free woman.

~ ~

I ran through the airport gateway, dodging people and their luggage. I ran past the long lines at the fast food stands, which buzzed with weary people who looked as though they had arrived via foot across mountains and deserts. In sharp contrast, I plowed by as though flying effortlessly through the air. I carried with me a brilliant smile that kept me floating all the way through to the security checkpoints and to my taxicab.

“Eleven-eleven Ventura Boulevard, please,” I directed the driver. As he sped off down the road, I prayed that Haley didn’t have plans to be out that night after work. If she wasn’t back from work when I arrived, I’d wait. I’d wait out on the terrace all night if I had to.

I sat on her terrace for two hours before spotting her car rounding the corner. My heart swirled. I prayed she’d welcome my surprise visit. The last time we spoke, I had decided to get married and move forward, setting her free. As her car pulled into her reserved parking spot, I could barely steady my breathing.

My giddiness erupted the moment she climbed out of her car. I dashed down the stairs with my feet barely touching the steps, floating on adrenaline.

She scooped out her briefcase from the backseat, and I snuck up behind her. I tapped her shoulder, and she looked at me.

She dropped her briefcase to the ground. “Oh my God!” Her beautiful face shined in disbelief. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t—” I trailed off as tears welled in my eyes. I didn’t have to

say another word. She swept me in her arms without question.

She smelled fresh, like she had bathed in a garden of flowers.

Our breathing steadied and synchronized as we continued to hug.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” she said. “Why didn’t you call me and warn me? My heart is going to explode.”

“I couldn’t do this over the phone. I couldn’t tell you what I’m about to tell you and not be able to touch you.”

“What do you want to tell me, baby?”

I wanted to apologize for dragging her through so much. I wanted to tell her about the fights with Colin. About throwing away the invitations in the rain. About how I wanted to spend my life with her. About how each and every second of every day I wondered what she was doing and who she graced with her smile. But none of those things came to my mouth. I simply whispered, “I missed you so much.”

She placed her hand over my heart.

I cradled her fingers.

Her eyes welled with tears. “You have no idea how much I dreamed of something like this. You showing up one of these days.”

“I love holding you. I’ve been dreaming about this hug. I’ve also been praying that you wouldn’t see me and run the other way.”

She stepped back from me. “Run away from you? Look at you. How could I ever run away from someone so pretty?” She stroked the side of my face with her fingers. “No. That would never happen as long as you stand before me.”

“Well, here I am, standing before you,” I said, spinning around and ending curtly, my face inches from hers.

She moved in closer and brushed my cheek with her lips. “Baby, does this mean what I think it means?”

“It means it’s over. I’m a free woman now.”

“Hmm,” she moaned as she moved in even closer. “Free to be with me?”

“Free to be with you,” I whispered. “I love you.”

“I love you so much, too,” she said to me, with tears streaming down her cheeks. She slowly brought her lips to mine, where they landed softly. As she kissed me, the adrenaline pumped through me. My legs grew weak with the taste of her. That time our kiss was free, laced with unbridled passion.

“Welcome back, baby,” she said as our lips parted.

I hugged her tight. “It’s nice to be back.”

“Wow. You’re really here. Did you really call off the wedding?”

“Yup. I told him that I loved someone else.”

“Did you tell him who?”

“I told him. He knows everything. In time, he’ll move on and be much happier.”

“I don’t know how. I couldn’t ever get over you. I missed you,” she said.

I giggled, unable to control my giddiness.

“I missed that giggle,” she said, swinging her arm around my shoulder. She led me into her apartment.

“Are you forgetting something?” I asked, motioning to the briefcase still laying next to her car.

She doubled back to it and grabbed it. “No one would’ve stolen it. But probably best to take it inside anyway.”

“Safe neighborhood?”

I wouldn’t dream of living anyplace but,” she said.

“Must be nice, huh?”

“Tell me something,” she said, “Do you like snow?”

“I can get used to it.”

“Good, because it snows a lot here.”

Carr—The Fiche Room

“Is that an invite for me to come back in the winter?”

“Come back? I was hoping you’d stay.”

“That depends on whether you’re willing to keep me warm during those cold winter days.”

She led me up the stairs and through the front door. Closing the door with her foot, she pulled me into her arms and whispered, “Welcome home, baby.”

Not letting her go, I let her lead me into the bedroom and guide me to her bed. I melted into her traveling, sensuous kisses, as she slowly, lovingly caressed my whole body and spirit with her love.

## One Year Later

Haley had arranged to have my most beloved family and friends gather with us to help celebrate the big event. Over a hundred people were expected to show for the opening.

“Are you sure we’re going to have enough shrimp?” I poked my head between Goldie and Charlie’s shoulders.

“Get out of here!” Goldie said. “I told you. Don’t worry about the food part. Just worry about looking pretty, smiling a lot, and selling as many of those paintings as you can.”

“Is my little girl still bugging you guys?” My dad asked, entering the studio’s back door with a dozen red roses.

“Dad! You’re here!” I ran up to him, throwing my arms around his shoulders and planting a kiss on his cheek. “You brought me flowers?”

“I brought you two other things instead. These flowers are for Haley. It’s her birthday in two days, right?”

“You remembered?”

“When I called and got her on the phone last week, it sort of slipped that she was approaching the doomed age of thirty.”

“What two things did you bring me?” I asked, peering up at him with my best daddy’s little girl expression.

He placed the flowers on the table next to him, reached into the inside pocket of his sports jacket, and took out an envelope and a velvet box. He handed me the velvet box. “This belonged to your mom.”

I opened the box. Inside sat a diamond pendant necklace. “This was Mom’s? I never saw her wear it.”

“I had her engagement ring turned into a necklace for you. I figured I should stop holding onto the past. Start moving forward. Why keep such a beautiful ring in a box all these years when you should’ve been enjoying it? That’s what she would’ve wanted.”

“Thank you, Dad,” I said, taking it from the box and handing it to him, “Do you mind?” I asked, turning my back and pulling my hair up so he could easily fasten the clasp.

“She would’ve been so proud of you, Emma. I wish she could see all of this.”

“She can, Dad. She’s here. She wouldn’t miss this for anything.”

Turning back to face him, I asked, “What’s in the envelope?”

“A letter from Colin.”

My heart flip-flopped. I took it with a quivering hand and opened it. I removed a crisply folded piece of Colin’s monogrammed work stationery.

I read the letter.

*Dear Emma,*

*About a month ago, I noticed a new painting of the Colorado River hanging in your dad’s home office. So much passion stirred inside those brushstrokes. The scene pulled at me and drew me closer. I had never looked at a painting the way I looked at this one. Your dad told me you’d painted it.*

*For the first time, I opened my eyes and saw the beauty in your passion. I can’t help but wonder about all the other beautiful parts of you that I may*

*have overlooked.*

*It's been a year already and I often ask your dad how you are. He tells me you're happier than ever. Truthfully, I'm jealous. Though, I'm proud of you for finding your passion and pursuing it. You've taught me a lot about myself in the past year, without even knowing. Thank you. I'll continue to look up at this beautiful painting of the Colorado River, which now hangs in my office, and think back to our special memories. Love always, Colin.*

I folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope. A wave of relief washed over me. I wanted all the best for him, too. I knew he would have it.

When I looked up, my dad and I exchanged a knowing smile. The past had been put to rest and now we were both moving forward with our futures, savoring the memories and ready to create new ones.

Haley walked through the French doors leading from the studio. She looked elegant with her hair tied up. Her red dress hugged her toned body perfectly. “Wow, you look gorgeous,” I said. Then I turned to my dad. “Dad, doesn't she look incredible?”

“Not bad for a thirty year old,” he said, winking at her.

She went to him and hugged him. “It's nice to see you again,” she said, then stepped back and squeezed his cheek between her fingers. “Looking good for a fifty-something year old.”

I melted at the sight of my girlfriend and dad joking around together. Over the past year they had gotten to know each other well. Never did I think my dad would come to accept Haley as my partner. And here they were, looking as much like a father and daughter as he and I did.

“Are you ready to be introduced?” she asked me.

“I'm set.” I took a deep breath, as I placed my arm in the crook of hers.

My grand opening sat before me. That night, I'd showcase my entire Denver collection of paintings. Haley believed I'd no doubt be famous for

my work not just locally, but eventually nationwide. She had arranged the entire event, promoting me like a prized artist. With her by my side, I had no doubt that together, as a team, we'd achieve all we set out to make happen.

Freer than ever, I looked up to the ceiling and smiled. My mom joined me with her loving spirit. Then, with my dad, Goldie and Charlie, Tatiana, and Haley by my side, I walked out of the French doors to my studio filled with supportive, admiring patrons waiting to catch a glimpse of me, the Artist.

**THANKS FOR BEING PART OF THE GIVING**

As with all of my books, I enjoy giving a portion of proceeds to Hearts United for Animals: [www.hua.org](http://www.hua.org). Thank you for being a part of this special contribution.

**CAN I REQUEST A SIMPLE FAVOR?**

If you enjoyed reading this story, I'd be so grateful for your honest review of it on your favorite online retailer site. Just a sentence or two saying what you liked about *The Fiche Room* will help others discover it and help me to serve you better with future books!

**WANT TO SEE WHERE HALEY AND EMMA ARE TODAY?**

If so, you're in luck! [The Pet Boutique](#) will publish on March 1, 2019 and include cameo roles for Haley, Emma, and Goldie. See where they are ten years later!



## About Suzie Carr

Suzie Carr is a contemporary novelist, podcaster on the Lesbian Talk Show, avid blogger, and Director of Membership for the Golden Crown Literary Society. When she's not writing, conducting hands-on research, exercising, or blending a green smoothie concoction, she's likely engaged in the sweet memory of her beloved boxers, Sunshine and Bumblebee, enjoying a few giggles over their funny antics and embracing their loving spirit as they undeniably watch over her from the Rainbow Bridge.

Whether it's writing fiction books about love and life, inspiring new authors, advocating for LGBT equality and animal welfare or blogging about community awareness, positive living, taking action and inspiration, Suzie remains passionate in her beliefs!

Suzie's love for the written word started back when she was a child. She enjoyed visiting the library every Saturday to spend hours reading. Books quickly became a constant companion to her and remained as such throughout her childhood.

Soon after graduating from Rhode Island College, Suzie wrote her first novel, *The Fiche Room*, a coming-of-age novel about two women falling in love. Over the years *The Fiche Room* grew from its humble e-book origins to an Amazon Kindle best seller receiving glowing reviews. Her upcoming

Carr—The Fiche Room

novel, *The Pet Boutique*, revisits with Emma, Haley, and Goldie from *The Fiche Room* as they join a new cast of characters in their cameo roles.

With twelve bestsellers on Amazon Kindle, Suzie continues to enjoy writing about the beauty of love and life.

Suzie Carr believes strongly in giving back to the community. She donates a portion of book sale proceeds to the Hearts United for Animals.