THE BOYFRIEND CANDIDATE

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For my dad, who proudly read each book.
I will love and miss you forever.

1

Alexis Stone Is Not a Mouse

I'll say one nice thing about my ex Chris Tuttle: the man was the entire reason I was here, standing at the entrance to the sultry Fleur de Lis hotel bar, wearing a red dress so plunging I kept it in the back of my closet for fear of scandalizing visitors, on the verge of reinventing myself. The memory of Chris and the still-fresh psychic wounds he'd left me were like a marching drum line urging me forward as I'd left my apartment, Ubered downtown to the Fleur de Lis, and cut a determined path across the lobby to the bar, a place with a reputation as Austin's Grand Central Station of hookups. Unfortunately, now that I was standing at the entrance, the sight of all the laughing, drinking, dazzling people—dressed to the nines like me, but looking much more at ease about it—had me momentarily cowed.

I thought back to what Chris said the day I discovered he was cheating on me (for the second time): "I *do* have needs you can't satisfy. You should really learn to be more adventurous in bed, Lex. You're like a timid little mouse. It can get really boring." Remembering those words, I straightened

my shoulders, took a deep breath, and stepped inside. I was *not* a boring mouse—or at least I wouldn't be one anymore. Starting tonight, I was going to be a new version of Alexis Stone: as bold and adventurous as my flaming-red dress.

I tried to soak in the beauty of the bar while beelining through the crowded tables, anxious to leave the peculiar spotlight of being the only person standing among a bunch of cozy, seated people. But then I realized new Alexis wouldn't care if everyone's eyes flitted to her as she walked across a room—in fact, new Alexis would welcome it, because she'd spent nearly an hour straightening and then recurling her hair into movie star ringlets, and maybe that effort should be appreciated. I forced myself to slow and look up at the bar's gorgeous glass ceiling, shaded a twinkly blue thanks to the night sky. Real palm trees lined the circular perimeter, fronds reaching toward the stars. They made the bar look like a very urbane urban jungle, which actually wasn't too far off the mark.

My older sister, Lee, and her friends liked to roll their eyes at the entire downtown bar scene, calling places like the Fleur de Lis "meat markets where you go to spend thirty-five bucks on a martini while beating back horny yuppies" (Lee's words). They preferred the hipster bars on the east side of Austin, where the clientele was cooler yet dirtier (my words). *I* thought the Fleur de Lis was romantic, so it made sense to come here tonight for my critical but one hundred percent private mission: I, Alexis Rosalie Stone, was going to have my first one-night stand. I was going to sleep with a man with no strings attached, no stakes or expectations: just one night to do whatever felt right. Alexis the unadventurous bore? I'd killed her and buried the body.

The gleaming brass bar was crowded, but I managed to slip a

shoulder between two men and catch the bartender's attention. "Vodka martini," I said, feeling a sudden rebellious compulsion to do anything that would raise my sister's eyebrows. By the time my drink came, I'd completed a full three-sixty swivel in my barstool to survey the sea of men for potential candidates. How exactly did one negotiate a one-night stand? Did you lead with it in conversation so all your cards were on the table ("Hi, I'm Alexis; you might be interested to know I'm trolling for a stranger to ravish me"), or did you hold back, let your intention slip out at just the right moment ("I see you're ordering an Uber home; could I interest you in going splitsies back to my place for a wild night of sex")?

I braced a hand on the bar, taking a fortifying sip of my martini. Even if I made a complete fool of myself tonight—even if I was roundly rejected by every man I spoke to—coming here alone at least meant Lee and her crew couldn't witness my flop, then use it to skewer me for all eternity like the jackals they were.

A whistle cut through the bar's ambient noise, followed by a loud, "Now *that's* a dress." Out of nowhere, a man appeared and sidled up beside me. One look at him and my mind blurted *forehead!* Probably because his was shiny as a disco ball, framed by waggling eyebrows, and tilted all the way to the side. The next second, I realized his head was turned that way so he could get a clear view down my dress.

"Thanks." I placed a protective hand over my chest and swiveled in the opposite direction. Hoping my body language would signal my disinterest, I took another sip of my martini and studied the empty corner of the room like it was fascinating.

No such luck. "I'm Carter Randall," the man said, jutting out his hand. "What's your name?"

My deep desire for him to go away warred with my silly lifelong compulsion to be nice. "Um..." I twisted back to shake his oddly moist hand and searched for inspiration. My gaze snagged, as his clearly had, on my dress. "*Ruby...*" The next word came unbidden. "Dangerfield. Ruby Dangerfield." Curse my polite hardwiring that had me sitting here inventing a new name instead of dismissing him with something cool and clipped like, "Not interested."

Carter gave my hand a little squeeze. He was twice my age, probably well into his fifties. Well-dressed, with a massive gold watch on his wrist, and—now that I squinted—a strangely sweaty face, like he'd just done a lap. Was he on party drugs? He used his sleeve to mop his forehead and I pulled my hand away, resisting the urge to wipe it on my dress. Carter's eyes drifted down the length of my body yet again. "Well, Ms. Ruby. Can I buy you a drink? A stiff one?" He grinned.

"Oh," I said. "That's very nice. But—um—no thank you." Inside, I burned with the fire of a thousand suns. Saying no to anyone, even a stranger, stretched the limits of my bravery.

"Aw, come on." Carter leaned in closer and I scooted back so fast I nearly tipped over. "Look at you, sitting there in that dress. Clearly fishing for attention. Well, you caught me. Let's get you drunk and see what happens."

Apparently, I was going to get a lesson in how *not* to proposition someone tonight. But my cheeks were burning, because in a small way Carter was right—I *had* come here to put myself on display and find someone, just very much not him. *Be the new Alexis*, I urged myself. *Stop prioritizing this stranger's feelings and tell him to leave you alone*. But I couldn't—at the slightest provocation, old, sad, doormat Alexis had quickly jumped back in charge.

"I'm not trying to be rude," I said carefully, feeling my heartbeat spike. "I would just like to be by myself tonight." Well, shoot. Now that I'd committed to that, would I have to leave the bar so Carter didn't catch me talking to anyone else later? My palms started sweating.

"One drink—" he started.

"Oh, for *fuck's sake*," came a voice, tinged with an accent I couldn't place—British mixed with Texas panhandle? I nearly knocked over my martini. "She said *no*, mate. Get it through your thick skull and leave the poor woman alone."

Carter spun to get a look at the man who'd interrupted us, and without his body blocking the view, I got a clear line, too. My stomach flipped over and released a conservatory's worth of butterflies. Even wearing a look of contempt, the man on the other side of Carter was stop-in-your-tracks, tongue-tyingly handsome. He was around my age, maybe a little older—he certainly radiated an older person's authority—with a head of dark curls cut close and tight, brown eyes that were currently blazing, and thick eyebrows arched, waiting to see how Carter would respond. He had on a dark suit like most of the other men in the room, but he'd taken off his jacket and hung it on the back of his seat. He was sitting hunched over his drink in a white dress shirt with the sleeves messily rolled back, wearing a dark slim watch that was the antithesis of Carter's flashy gold one. The wrinkles in his suit, creases under his eyes, and day-old stubble gave the impression of a weary business executive after a long, hard day at work. His eyes flitted to mine for the briefest moment before returning to Carter, but the charge that ran down my spine was enough to root me to my chair.

Carter shifted his weight. Apparently, he was going to play the tough guy. "Why don't you mind your business, pal?"

The beautiful, tired man rolled his eyes. "Oh, good. You're one of those." He got to his feet so fast his barstool made a screeching sound as it scraped across the floor. "Then let's go ahead and get this over with, because I've had a shit day and I would like to kick your ass and get back home at a reasonable hour. So come on. You're the one campaigning for Most Punchable Man in the Bar. Let's have your prize." The dark-haired man spoke calmly and quickly in his hard-to-place accent, like he invited people to get their asses kicked at least once a day. He made a little "come on" gesture that conveyed utter boredom.

People around us had stopped talking to watch. The extra attention only made me feel like I was going to melt into the floor at twice the speed. But if I had no idea how to respond to this turn of events—what to say or even where to put my hands—Carter was even more clueless. I could see his eyes dancing, doing quick calculations. On the one hand, Carter was thicker around the middle than the dark-haired man. On the other, the dark-haired man had revealed himself to be tall and well-built when he stood up.

"Nah, man." Carter put his hands up. "We've got no problems. Just making new friends like you're supposed to at a bar, for Christ's sake."

"Great," said the dark-haired man. "Then kindly fuck off as suggested."

Carter didn't wait to be told a third time. As he hightailed away from the bar, a woman nearby muttered, "What a douche." And with that judgment rendered, the room dialed back to a normal volume.

"Thank you," I said to the dark-haired man. He waved me off with a grunt and settled back in his barstool, leaning comfortably over his drink, apparently hoping to resume his night like nothing had happened.

I stared at him. The adrenaline was draining out of my system, which left me feeling hollow. I should have been the one to tell Carter to fuck off. I should have had the guts, but instead I'd tiptoed around and this man had to step in and do it for me. How humiliating. It hit me like a ton of bricks: from the moment Carter arrived, I'd been unequivocally *mousy*. Exactly like Chris said.

As an introverted Virgo, I often had to remind myself to not let speculations and anxieties about other people's thoughts and feelings derail my life. In general, I was used to it taking a long time for my brain to let go of a hurtful comment. But Chris's words had far exceeded what any rational person would consider their rightful expiration date. It had been two years since I first discovered Chris was cheating on me, and a year and a half since the second time, which came with his humiliating accusation. In all that time, I hadn't been able to shake it. On the rare occasions when I went out with someone new, Chris's words hummed in the back of my mind, whispering that no matter how well my date and I hit it off, the moment would come when we got into bed and I revealed what a disappointment I was. It was bigger than sex, though. After more than a year of being haunted by the words *boring* and *timid*, it finally hit me that the reason I couldn't shake Chris's words was because deep down, I believed them.

Little did my ex know that I'd long suspected there was something lacking about me—that when it came down to

it, I simply wasn't very interesting, smart, or bold, and this deficiency was the reason I could never quite measure up to my headline-making sister, the second-youngest woman ever elected to the Texas state legislature. Or move forward in my career, or make a solid group of friends, or keep someone romantically interested, no matter how hard I tried. Chris had no clue he was speaking my secret fear into life, that when he suggested there was something wrong with me, I wouldn't argue but agree. Of course there was. It wasn't hard to see when you put me next to Lee, who was brave, ambitious, and take-charge, doing important things to change the world, with a vibrant love life and ride-or-die group of friends to match. People like Lee inspired loyalty: everyone wanted to be around them. I'd known from a young age the differences between us, but I'd never been resentful. Lee might've become a hero to a lot of little girls, but she was my hero first. She was the North Star I'd pointed my life toward since I was young.

So it was almost a mercy Chris had the guts to tell me I was a dud in bed. While surely not the only thing lacking about me, it was at least something I could fix. After months of wallowing, I was finally ready to take the bull by the horns and become someone worldly and exciting. I'd be bold in bed if it killed me—which, quite honestly, judging by how this night was going, it might.

I'd now been staring at the dark-haired man for an embarrassingly long time, but he didn't seem to notice, focused as he was on his drink. So I summoned all my courage and thought WWLD: *What Would Lee Do?*

"Sir," I said. Oh, bad start. Was I twelve? Try again. "Um, you there, in the shirt. With the—sleeves. I'd like to buy you a drink."

2

The Gamble

Surprised, the dark-haired man turned to me, and there it was again: the electric reaction, lightning through my body. "Not necessary." His voice was gruff. "Sitting next to that guy was ruining my night, too. It was a self-serving act, trust me. Besides, he wouldn't have fought me. Guys like that fold when challenged."

"Oh, okay," I said. "Great." I was smiling and nodding like he'd just said something terribly agreeable instead of outright rejecting me. Oh, God: he'd *rejected* me. Confident he'd already turned back to his drink, I looked down at the bar and widened my eyes in silent horror at my reflection in the brass.

"Uh," he said. My head snapped up. He was, in fact, still watching me. His velvet-brown eyes tracked from my frozen face to my hunched shoulders. He rubbed contemplatively at the stubble on his jaw. "Okay. Yeah, you know what? I'll take that drink. Thanks."

He would? "Bartender!" I called, a little desperate. The bartender was heading to the other side of the bar, meaning

I'd have to wait in excruciatingly awkward silence next to the dark-haired man if I didn't make this happen now.

Thankfully, the bartender stopped and nodded. "Another martini?"

"Yes. And a—" I glanced at the man.

"Whiskey, neat. Whatever's cheap works." When the bartender shot off, the dark-haired man turned back to me. "I'm Logan, by the way." The way he said it and then watched me, as if waiting for some reaction, threw me a bit, but I smiled anyway. "I'm—"

"Ruby. Yeah, I heard. Kind of impossible not to, sorry."

Oops. Did I correct the lie and look like a weirdo? A thought occurred to me: It might not be too late to make this night what I wanted. Maybe I could still *be* who I wanted—which, to be clear, was anyone other than the old Alexis. "That's right," I said, settling back in my barstool. "Ruby Dangerfield."

Logan's mouth quirked, but at least I hadn't had whatever reaction he'd been bracing for, because his shoulders relaxed. "What brings you out among the goons and buffoons tonight, Ruby?"

"It's the two-year anniversary of the night my ex cheated on me," I said, shocking myself. It turned out Ruby was forthright.

The bartender slid our drinks across the bar. Logan picked up his tumbler and tipped it in my direction. "Well. Cheers, then. It's the one-year anniversary of the night Arsenal crushed Tottenham on their home turf."

"What?"

"Sorry," he said. "Just trying to think of something equally depressing."

Laughter burst from me. "Yes, I'm sure that must've been very hard for you." Okay, the soccer reference told me I'd been right about his accent: the man was clearly British.

"Damn near crushed me. Come on." Logan slipped off his barstool, nodding toward the crowded tables. "A table just opened. If that's the reason you're here, you're clearly looking to tie one on. Been there myself. We can't have any more jerks bothering you while you're on a sacred mission to wipe some fucker from your memory."

He took off without waiting for me, just scooped his jacket and marched in the direction of a small table in the corner, nearly hidden under the fronds of a sweeping palm. I didn't think twice. Given the choice between sitting alone at the bar—technically, what I'd come here to do—or remaining in the cocoon of this strangely acerbic man, I chose the cocoon.

I dropped into the chair across from Logan and he rested his elbows on the table, leaning over to tip his drink at me. "A real toast this time. To fresh starts."

I clinked his glass, feeling the butterflies swoop and dive. I was closer to him now, separated by nothing more than a small circular table, so I could see the tiny details of his face: the soot-dark lashes tipping toward his strong brow, the amber ring around his pupils, the Cupid's bow of his upper lip, topping his wry smile. I shifted underneath the table and my knee slid against his, rubbing the smooth fabric of his pants. I jerked it away and took an overlarge sip of my drink.

"So," I said, once I'd nearly drained the martini. "Do you come here often?" He didn't seem the type, but what if the

Fleur de Lis was his routine hookup spot same as everyone else?

Logan paused midsip and grinned, teeth dazzling. I realized what I'd said and could actually *feel* myself turning red. "That's a pickup line, isn't it?"

"One of the oldest in the book. You know, if you leave now, I think you can catch up with your friend Carter."

I groaned, covering my face. "I was genuinely curious!"

His smile remained wolfish. "No, I come here never. But it's only a few blocks from my office, and I had a long day at work. Needed to drown myself in whiskey somewhere within stumbling distance. Voilà, the Fleur de Lis." He glanced around. "Turns out this place is a scene."

The bar had grown even more crowded since we'd left, and the overflow milled around us, people waiting their turn. One guy in particular seemed oblivious to our presence behind him—he kept edging so close his butt brushed my arm. Logan eyed him disapprovingly.

"Working on a Saturday, huh?" He had to be what, an investment banker? A lawyer like Lee's boyfriend, Ben? Some high-stakes corporate job with no work-life balance. He looked the type.

Logan rubbed tiredly at his eyes. "If it wasn't my dream job, I'd have quit ages ago. Oi," he barked suddenly, just as the hovering guy knocked my arm. "Watch it!" The guy glanced back at us sheepishly and moved away.

I leaned over and braced my elbows on the table. "You really have no fear, do you? You just say whatever you're thinking."

"Sorry. Born this way, as my mum likes to say. Big fan of Lady Gaga, her."

"Your mum...far away in England?"

His mouth quirked. "Here in Texas. My mum's Belarusian and my dad's British. They both emigrated from the UK a year before I was born and set up shop down in Odejo."

"Ah." *That* explained his accent. It was clear, crisp, lilted enunciation one moment and growled twang the next. England meets Texas. Wholly unique and beautiful to listen to.

He sighed. "Yes, I'm one of those classic British Texans you see everywhere. My childhood home was a hobbit hole on a cattle ranch and we ate nothing but fish, chips, and brisket growing up."

"Be careful or I'll believe you."

"Odejo tried its damnedest to make me a cowboy, I'll admit, but I guess some Britishisms stuck. Mostly, my mum's slang and my dad's obsession with the Hotspurs."

"That's another soccer reference, I presume."

He looked affronted by my ignorance.

"For what it's worth, I think your bluntness is kind of amazing."

He drained his drink and dropped it on the table. "Yeah, well, please inform my colleagues. Pretty sure it's shaved years, if not decades, off their lives." He copied me, leaning over and placing his elbows on the table, lacing his fingers together. Our clasped hands were mere inches apart. I could easily lift a finger and stroke the back of his hand. Was his skin soft? He had long, elegant fingers but callused knuckles. The sudden vision of his hands moving roughly up my stomach to cup my breasts sent a stab of electricity through me. I crossed my legs tighter under the table.

"So what, then?" Logan's gaze grew more intense. "You're

not in the habit of speaking your mind? A woman with a name like Ruby Dangerfield, who goes out to celebrate dumping her ex, wearing that dress—I smell bullshit."

I glanced down. "You like the dress?" Technically Carter had liked it, too, but the compliment was different coming from Logan.

Our eyes locked across the table. He cleared his throat and half stood, shoving back his chair. "Yeah, well—you want another drink?"

"I thought you were trying to get home at a reasonable hour?" Companionship aside, I'd feel bad if I ruined Logan's night after he saved mine.

He shrugged. "One more won't kill me."

"Then I'll have what you're having. Whiskey."

His eyes jumped to mine, and he looked like he wanted to say something. But all that came out was, "Right back."

I watched him elbow his way through the crowd and make it to the bar in record speed, laughing to myself as he flagged down the bartender's attention ahead of half a dozen people who turned to him in outrage, which he roundly ignored. It was amazing: I'd managed to find my polar opposite. But our differences weren't aggravating: in fact, simply being around Logan felt like taking a mental vacation. Without anyone nearby to judge, I let myself study him, lingering over the lines of his body, his face in profile. He wasn't bulky, but his white-collared shirt pulled taut across his shoulders, tightest over the swell of his biceps as he leaned against the bar. His shirt was tucked smartly into belted navy pants that were fitted enough to show—oh. His ass was round and firm, the kind you found on baseball or soccer players, men who worked for it.

I bit my lip—who *was* I right now? I never lusted like this. I hadn't even realized I was capable of it. When I met a guy, I certainly noticed whether he was attractive or not, but I'd never had this kind of visceral reaction. Was it Logan's brashness I was responding to, my body soaking it up and reflecting it back like a mirror? Or had I simply morphed into a caricature of a sex-deprived woman? Either way, it felt *good*, like someone had flipped a switch to remagnetize me, the sudden buzzing attraction proof that I was very much alive. Even better that Logan was so wildly out of my league: I could simply sit back and admire him for admiration's sake.

I was still contemplating this when he turned, two whiskeys in hand, wearing an expression of such great annoyance it was like he'd heard my inner monologue. Despite his expression, my chest warmed at the thought that he was making his way back to me, out of all the people in the bar.

"Assholes," he pronounced, sliding my drink to me. "Up there at the bar complaining about having to refurb their company's oil rigs because of environmental rules. Boo-hoo, it's going to cost you a little extra money in exchange for not poisoning the planet. Get over it."

He sounded just like Lee, which I found endearing. I grinned and sipped my drink, prepared to hear all about it, but his eyes followed the drink to my mouth and his annoyed expression dropped, replaced by a guilty smile. It made small wrinkles frame his eyes like commas. His eyes were such a warm, rich brown. It was amazing how much he could convey with them. Now they radiated a sly, amused knowing.

"*Any*-way," he said, drawing it out. "On to more important things. I've told you about me. Now I want to know everything about you, from the day you were born to the moment you walked into this bar. The good, the bad, the ugly, the exes. Unpack yourself, Ruby Dangerfield. I'm prepared to be fascinated."

I laughed to cover the sudden sharp ache. *Alexis Stone, the bore.* I wanted so badly to impress this magnetic stranger. But obviously, my real life wouldn't cut it. A wild hare struck me. "You mean...you want to hear how my parents conceived me on a motorcycle tour around America, and my mom gave birth to me at the mouth of Niagara Falls?"

Logan's eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

My heart raced. Just like that, I was fascinating. Sure, I was lying, but what did lying matter on a night I'd specifically carved out to be a blip in reality, an island of time disconnected from every other day? I would never see Logan or any of these people again. I could do anything. Why not try on another life for a few hours?

"Wait until you hear about my siblings," I said, settling back in my chair. "I'm the oldest of six, and one of them is an honest-to-God international spy. Another knows Oprah."

I proceeded to talk more in one straight shot than I ever had in my life. I told Logan story after story—it turned out it was much easier to talk when I was pretending to be Ruby. During one stretch I ran out of ideas and had to borrow plotlines from the first book that came to mind, a popular children's fantasy novel about dragon hunters (one of the hazards of being a children's librarian), simply praying Logan hadn't read *Charlie Cooper and the Hunt*

for the Mystical Dragon's Egg. Mostly, though, I found myself telling him true stories, with the edges blurred—my past actions more heroic, my comebacks wittier, me the star of the shenanigans and my siblings the sidekicks, all the ways I'd wished life had gone. It was exhilarating to be on this side of the storytelling for once.

Unsurprisingly, Logan was not a passive listener—he burst in with questions, forced me to stop when he laughed so hard he shook the table, and made me pause midsentence so he could go fetch another round, then another. Time dilated into a warm fuzzy stretch until before I knew it, the lights in the Fleur de Lis had dimmed and the crowd had thinned to us and a man who'd fallen asleep in his barstool, snoring like a bear.

"Shit." Logan wiped his face and glanced around. "What time is it?" I pointed at his watch to remind him he was wearing one, and he jerked it to his face, then blanched. "Do you want the truth, or—" He grimaced. "A lie that makes you feel better?"

I sighed and leaned back in my chair, feeling the plunging V of my dress pull tight against my chest. Logan cleared his throat, dropping his eyes. "Honestly," I said. "Give me the beautiful lie."

"Come on." He rose to his feet and extended a hand. "I'll walk you out."

I seized his hand and he yanked me with more strength than I'd expected. Instead of stopping upright, I sailed forward so fast I had to grip his shoulders so I didn't end up flush against him. "Whoa there," he murmured, looking down at the small space between us. He dipped his head, his nose brushing mine.

"Sorry." I released him and stepped back. "Lost my balance." I turned to pick up my purse and shivered, a full-body reaction to having been that close to him. When I turned back, Logan was holding up his navy suit jacket.

I shook my head. "I'm okay—"

He shook the jacket so the sleeves danced. "Come on. I can see your goose bumps."

Obviously I couldn't tell him the goose bumps were the result of meeting the mere tip of his nose, so I dipped inside the jacket. Logan draped it carefully over my shoulders, letting it trail like a cape. It was shot through with his scent, which had to be an expensive cologne: subtle but playful, not just woodsy cedar but notes of something sweeter, like berries. Everything about him was a mix of unexpected things. I took a deep breath and wrapped the jacket tighter. Logan tipped his head in the direction of the door, his eyebrows raised in question.

My heels made quiet clipping sounds as we strode across the empty lobby. The inside of the Fleur de Lis was all marble floors and ornate brass-piped ceilings, like a cross between a cathedral and a fancy, old-time bank. I sighed.

"What?" Logan glanced over as we walked.

"I just love this place. It's so romantic."

It was funny, but as we neared the large glass doors that separated the hotel from the street, I realized I was happy. Almost giddy. Even though I hadn't succeeded at the one thing I'd come here to do, there was something about the last few hours spent talking, being the sole focus of someone's attention, that left me feeling the way I'd hoped a one-night stand would: confident, interesting, and liberated. In an unexpected way I was leaving with exactly

what I'd come for. Was it possible to have an emotional orgasm?

Logan stopped by the glass doors and shook out his hands—which, if I didn't know he wasn't the type to get nervous, I'd call a nervous tic. "You calling an Uber? Want me to wait?"

I shook my head. I'd already eaten up so much of his night. There was no way I'd continue to impose. "Don't worry about it." I tugged off his jacket and let it hang off the hook of my finger. Logan shrugged it back on and paused, head tilted. He smiled. "It smells like you now. Flowers and lemons." He tapped a finger to his temple. "Strategic thinker."

I cracked a laugh. Flowers and lemons, meet woods and berries. A veritable forest between us. We stood looking at each other for a moment. "Well..." I rocked on my feet, awkward again.

"Right." Logan rubbed his jaw. "So, did it work?"

"Did what work?"

"Did you forget about him? Your ex?"

I smiled. "Yes. Thank you. Quite a charitable service you provided."

"Well, then." He stepped close and cupped a hand to the back of my head. "Good night, Ruby." He pressed a quick kiss to my forehead, his lips there and gone.

Maybe it was the alcohol, or the intoxicant of being stood up for and then listened to, but before my mind could catch up, my body was reaching out for something I had no business hoping for.

"Logan." I took a deep breath and pulled his sleeve, turning him back around. And then everything happened

quickly: I brought my hands to cup his face, his eyebrows lifted in surprise, and I kissed him, tasting the warm softness of his mouth, feeling the scratch of his stubble. I pulled away and looked up, heart drumming, waiting for his response. He blinked at me for an excruciatingly drawn-out moment and then bent down, wrapped his arms around me, and pulled me to him with a grunt, canting his mouth over mine in a wordless *yes*. His hand found the back of my head as he chased my mouth, deepening the kiss. *More*, his touch said, and the next thing I knew he'd lifted me off the floor, bracing an arm against my back to keep me close, his other hand tangling in my hair.

His tongue in my mouth shot white-hot electricity through me, all the lust that had been simmering all night boiling over, and I thought, *He would kiss like this. Exactly how he talks*. I wrapped a leg around his knee, urging him *closer*, every inch of my skin charged, nearly tortured with sensation. He kissed me back so hungrily I had to break away to gasp for air.

I'd done it: I'd become a different person. Old Alexis, who never would've kissed someone with such abandon in a public place, had burned to ash, giving rise to a new Alexis whose only care was kissing this brash stranger as much as she could before he left.

The clack of approaching footsteps on the marble floors, however, worked like a bucket of ice. I wrenched back from Logan, managing to say, "Public," even in my breathlessness. He nodded, agreeing with my good sense, then immediately tossed it aside, kissing me so fiercely I tipped backward.

His eyes were molten when we righted. "What do you want to do?" he whispered.

Well—I was Ruby Dangerfield tonight. So I answered honestly, pressing the words into the column of his throat. "I don't want to stop."

"Mmm," he hummed, and I felt the vibration against my lips. He wrenched back from me, casting a sweeping gaze around the lobby. I felt a momentary disappointment at the new space between us that ended when his eyes fell back on me, burning with a question. "Then please tell me," he said thickly, "that you want to get a room."