



AVON
IMPULSE

THE BAD BOY BILLIONAIRE:
**WHAT A
GIRL WANTS**
MAYA RODALE

Author of *WHAT A WALLFLOWER WANTS*

The Bad Boy Billionaire: What a Girl Wants

MAYA RODALE



AVONIMPULSE
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Dedication

*For all the girls like Jane.
For Tony and my urban family.
For New York City.*

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Chapter One

Bar Veloce, New York City

“THIS,” I SAID angrily, waving my iPhone. I wanted to slam *this* down on the table, like I had done with the paper invitation to my high school reunion earlier this summer. But I wasn’t about to risk breaking my iPhone over the Paperless Post invitation intruding upon my inbox.

I settled for firmly placing my phone on the bar. It just wasn’t the same.

Roxanna reached for it, her red manicure a sharp contrast against the black screen.

“No way!” I snatched it back. “I’m not falling for that again.”

Roxanna just grinned. “You’re welcome for setting you up with the love of your life.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, pursing my lips and fighting a smile. It was the polite thing to say and I was always polite. I suppose I did owe her a thank you for her prank Facebook post announcing an engagement between me and Duke Austen, infamously known as the Bad Boy Billionaire. At the point of said announcement, he and I had met (and kissed) just once. That didn’t stop us from a sham engagement, which led to a secret romance. Now we were really, truly in love.

“What is it this time?” Roxanna asked, flipping her red hair over her shoulder. She was perched on a bar stool and sipping bourbon on the rocks. I took the seat next to her and sipped from the chardonnay she’d gone ahead and ordered for me.

“*This* is the invitation to the party celebrating the IPO of Duke’s startup.”

“How fabulous. Where is it?”

“That’s not the point. It doesn’t even matter, because it’s at the same time on the same night as my high school reunion.”

Roxanna raised one eyebrow. It was one of the traits of hers that I was jealous of, in addition to her carefree attitude, her amazing alcohol tolerance that which allowed her to drink copious amounts of whiskey without getting ridiculously drunk and her ability to talk herself into restaurant tables without a reservation.

“Are you actually torn between which event to attend?” Roxanna asked incredulously. “The hottest party in the city, celebrating the hottest business launch possibly of all time, with free booze and fascinating people. Oh, and your hot boyfriend. Or a party in an old gymnasium with the same old bores you’ve known for half your life. They’ll probably just want to talk about their kids.”

“It’ll be on the terrace at the Milford Country Club,” I replied, but unenthusiastically.

“Oh,” Roxanna sighed. “The country club. Someone get the velvet rope to keep out the riff raff.”

I sighed. “I know Duke’s party will be more fabulous. But why do I have this angst about missing my stupid high school reunion? I could just go home and hit the pizza parlor on a Friday night and it’d be the same conversations with the same people.”

“Might I point out that you don’t ever have to go back to the pizza parlor on a Friday night? But I get it, Jane. This night is like some sort of finish line you have to cross.”

“Exactly,” I said. “That, and we had a deal. I would pretend to be his good girl fiancée and keep him out of trouble. In return, he’d be my hot and successful boyfriend on a night I’ll sorely need a confidence boost. But we can’t be in both places at the same time. And I held up my end of the bargain.”

“You could go alone,” Roxanna said, demonstrating that she was ballsier than me. “Since you do, in fact, have a hot successful boyfriend *not to mention* your numerous bestselling books. You shouldn’t need the confidence boost, Jane. You’re fabulous already.”

“Thanks,” I said with a smile. “I know this is all silly.”

“Have you talked to Duke about it?”

“Of course not,” I replied. “That’s the mature, logical thing to do.”

“Are you not a mature, logical person?” Roxanna queried. I took a long sip of wine before answering.

“I am the kind of person so desperate for a date to my high school reunion that I faked a relationship.”

“Point taken.” Roxanna said before taking a sip of her bourbon.

My phone, still on the bar between us, buzzed and lit up with an incoming text message. I picked up the phone quickly in case it was something sexy from Duke. He was known to send Snapchats of himself without his shirt on or other flirtatious and naughty texts.

“Is that your bad boy billionaire lover?”

I frowned. “No, it’s Sam. He’s been texting me a lot lately. This one says, ‘How do you feel about second chances?’”

“Weird. Has he forgotten that you two broke up?”

“I have no idea what’s going on with Sam lately,” I said with a sigh. “He was up for these two jobs and I’m not sure if he’s gotten them. I have no idea what’s up with him and Kate.”

“Your nemesis.”

“Grrrr.” I growled just thinking about Kate Abbott who teased me all through high school, and then the minute Sam and I broke up, she swooped in and claimed him. Not that I was too bothered about it these days. My breakup with Sam had nearly destroyed me, but already I could see that it was the best thing that could have happened.

“Are you going to answer him?” Roxanna asked.

“Maybe later.” I got rid of the text and looked back at my email. The invitation was still there, awaiting an RSVP. “I have to talk to Duke about this party. But he’s got a big trip to San Francisco coming up. Might not be a good time.”

He tended to be really, really devoted to his business. It could be hard to tear him away from work but once I did, that same intense focus was aimed at me. My toes curled in my black patent wedge heels just thinking about it.

“And he’s not whisking you away with him?” Roxanna asked.

“No, you don’t get the apartment to yourself,” I answered with a laugh. “He’s just going for a day or two and I have to work.”

Roxanna’s iPhone buzzed with an incoming text. Like me, she snatched it up right away.

“Is that from your mysterious millionaire lover?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. I tried to raise one eyebrow in an “I’m intrigued” sort of way, but I think I only managed a weird face. Either way, Roxanna was too busy smiling as she texted him back.

“Do tell,” I said, sipping my drink.

“Oh no. I won’t have my romantic entanglements serve as fodder for your next book.”

“Please?” I gave her my most sorrowful expression. “I have no idea what to write and I have a deadline looming.”

My first two historical romance novels had been easy to write, since my real life provided all the inspiration I needed. The heroines of those two novels—loosely based upon myself—had a friend, Prudence, who needed a story too. Also in my inbox: emails from readers asking when Prue’s story would be available. I didn’t have an answer for them. What I had was a bad case of writers block and no cure.

“Your own romance isn’t inspiring you?”

“Nope. My love life is wonderful, which doesn’t exactly make for a very exciting romance novel. There’s no confflamma,” I said, using our made up word for the awful mixture of conflict and drama. It was essential to any great story—the happy ending wouldn’t be as sweet without it.

“Don’t get all sappy romantic on me.” Roxanna punctuated that with a big sip of her whiskey. “You have to promise not to turn into one of those awful, smug couples.”

I laughed. “Well—I suppose there is some conflict. The dueling parties where he has to decide what matters more—his big night or mine.”

“OR YOU have to decide what matters more,” Roxanna pointed out. “Or which party is simply more fun.”

My phone buzzed with another text. I hoped this one was from Duke. We planned to meet up this evening but hadn’t confirmed when or where. I picked up my phone and frowned.

“Another text from Sam?” Roxanna asked after seeing my frown.

“Yeah.” This one was weird and I didn’t want to think about it so I put my phone in my bag.

“Still haven’t found your ring?” Roxanna asked, gesturing to my hands where I was absentmindedly trying to twist my cubic zirconia “engagement” ring around my finger. Except it wasn’t there.

“No,” I sighed. “I could have sworn I left it in my jewelry box. You know me—I always put things away. But it wasn’t there and I can’t imagine where I might have lost it.”

“Good thing it wasn’t real,” Roxanna remarked, with a grimace.

“Yeah. It still had sentimental value though.”

Roxanna's mystery love texted again. She smiled as she tapped a response with her red manicured fingernails.

"I have to go. It's for work," she said. But neither of us could keep a straight face because it may have been her boss texting her, but it was definitely not about work. We both burst out laughing.

Roxanna and I parted ways outside the bar. She went off to meet her mystery lover and Duke texted, inviting me to join him and some of his team for drinks at a bar on the Lower East Side.

Since it was a gorgeous end-of-summer evening, I decided to walk.

I slipped on my headphones, played *Empire State of Mind* and started heading over to the bar where we agreed to meet. There was nothing like walking through New York City—letting your route be determined by red and green lights, dodging pedestrians on the sidewalk, flowing around cars stopped in the streets, moving in time to the city's unique rhythm—all while listening to a great song and getting lost in my thoughts. Tonight, I was thinking just how far I had come.

A few months ago I had arrived here a total mess. My boyfriend of twelve years, Sam, had dumped me when I was expecting him to propose. Oh, and I had gotten fired that day, too. I had to move out of the house we shared. Rather than stay at home with my folks and tired of too many awkward conversations with meddling neighbors at the grocery store, I declared I was moving to New York to write a novel.

Madness, that. I just wanted everyone—especially myself—to think I was running *to* something instead of just fleeing the wreckage of my life.

Then I met Roxanna, whose practical joke on Facebook got me involved with Duke, and my relationship with him provided the inspiration I needed to write not one but two historical romance novels I published to great success.

With Sam I had my life all planned out. And to think . . . I would have missed living and loving in New York City if everything had gone according to plan.

I pulled open the door to the bar on Elizabeth Street and spotted Duke right away. There was just something about him—confidence, determination, drive—that declared him Someone Important even though he tended to wear free T-shirts from other startups, perfectly broken-in Levi's and sneakers.

He glanced up and caught my eye. God, that smile. So roguish. So mischievous. It was a smile that made a girl believe in once upon a time and heroes who swept a girl off her feet. It did things to me every time. He stood and strolled through the bar toward me. The crowd just melted out of his way.

If I had gotten the life I had always planned, I would have missed *this*: Duke pulling me into an embrace. His mouth crashing down on mine for the kind of deep, passionate kiss that left no doubt as to how he felt about me or what we would be doing tonight.

Later I would think about this kiss and remember it as the one sparkling moment where everything was just *right* and my biggest problem was which party to attend. It was the moment before my past reared its ugly head, making happily-ever-after seem unlikely. It was the moment before the storm hit, leaving unfathomable destruction in its wake. It was the moment before I

got an idea for a new story—but at a price I didn't want to pay.

Chapter Two

A few nights later
258 West 15th Street, Jane and Roxanna's apartment

AFTER A LONG day working at the New York Public Library, I came home to write for a few hours before heading over to Duke's apartment. I wanted to see him before his flight to San Francisco—if it was still on. A hurricane was expected to hit the city and already tons of flights had been canceled.

It should be noted that “by writing for a few hours” I meant staring at the bright white screen of a Word document devoid of any actual words other than *Untitled Wallflower Novel #3*.

I added *by Jane Sparks*.

Then I deleted it and replaced it with *By Maya Rodale*. That was the pseudonym I published under.

I drummed my fingers lightly on the keyboard, which only served to draw my attention to the fourth finger of my left hand, which only served to remind me that I had lost my fake engagement ring for my fake engagement with Duke.

I stood up and checked my jewelry box—I could have sworn I'd left it there! I looked under the bed, in pockets of various handbags and in my desk drawers. It was gone, and with it—all my good luck.

No ring. No idea of what to write.

I had more bad luck, too: The dry cleaner had lost my favorite cashmere sweater-set. The train line I took to work was under construction so my commute was more hectic. We had a new neighbor who loved to blare club music really loudly, really late. I had forgotten my mom's birthday. My book sales were leveling off. Ok, tapering down.

It seemed I was on a losing streak.

Duke, on the other hand, was on a winning streak of epic proportions. Soon he wouldn't be the Bad Boy Billionaire who had foolishly lost a billion dollars thanks to some bad decisions and bust of his first two companies. He wouldn't be the guy who was a startup failure—twice. It seemed the third time was a charm—this company was a success and built to last.

Third times a charm. *Untitled Wallflower Novel #3*.

I decided to check Facebook. Perhaps that would provide some inspiration.

Sam Chase: Wondering what it's all about.

2 Likes 1 Comment 0 Shares

Milford High School: *Just a few more days until the big anniversary celebrations!!! Make sure you RSVP ASAP!!!!*

53 Likes 14 Comments 1 Share

Kate Abbott: *Love life sucks but work life is fantastic!*

Miranda Sparks: *Thank you for the lovely birthday wishes!*

22 likes 8 Comments 0 Shares

Sam Chase: *Losing Streak.*

0 Likes 0 Comments 0 Shares

When my Facebook newsfeed became a deluge of wedding and baby pictures, I shut the browser window and checked Twitter instead.

@NYCGOV: Hurricane #Geoffrey expected in New York City TONIGHT. Check out these storm prep tips. <http://on.nyc.gov/1aGWYqz>

@RoxannaLane: Congrats to my friend @Jane_Sparks for her book hanging out in the top 100 historical romances on Amazon.

@Jezebel: Is Maryville, Missouri the Next Steubenville? <http://bit.ly/1aGWT6g>

@LizaPalmer: 11 Pieces of Advice From Amazing Women <http://bit.ly/1aCeptH>
#amwriting #writingtips #pubtip

@Accuweather: Get ready, New York City! Hurricane #Geoffrey is expected to be category 4 hurricane.

@KatharineAshe: Stilettos: the 21st-century equivalent of the whalebone corset.

@DukeAusten: Only one week until Project-TK's IPO.

@RTBooks: New Review: The Wicked Wallflower! <http://bit.ly/1alkm9T>

@LadyMissPenny: Just lounging in my statement necklace.
[instagram.com/p/jZoJL9R8rW/](https://www.instagram.com/p/jZoJL9R8rW/)

@NYTimes: Scientists agree global warming is to blame for super storm #Geoffrey.

@Jane_Sparks: Writers block is The Worst. THE WORST!

@Gawker: Just what you wanted to read during #Geoffrey: a tell-all book about

@DukeAusten by his ex-girlfriend.

Of course I clicked that link. I mean, really. I didn't expect to read anything new. After all, I knew the man. Intimately. But how could I not read it?!

Secrets of the Bad Boy Billionaire: The Duke Austen Nobody Knows

One of Duke Austen's many ex-girlfriends, Felicity Prescott, is writing a tell-all book about the Bad Boy Billionaire. Prescott reportedly dated Austen while they both worked at the now defunct startup, Friendly. Her book details why that oh-so-promising startup totally went bust, starting with Duke's wild behavior and their tortured relationship.

My reading was interrupted by the arrival of a text message from Sam.

Sam Chase: I'm in town. Need to talk. Can we meet for a drink?

I hesitated. Sam had been weird lately—lots of confusing text messages, Facebook posts and long emails philosophizing about life choices and a man's role in the modern world. Or something like that. I'd just been too busy to figure out what he was talking about to compose an appropriate reply. That, and I just didn't really want to deal with it. I cared about him deeply, but I wasn't too keen to be his therapist. Or his drinking buddy on a night like this.

But I had loved this man deeply for a long time. We'd been high school sweethearts and I thought he would be my husband and the father of my children. It was his idea for us to break up. Though it hurt like hell for a while, I was now *glad*. My life was so much more amazing because of it.

So even though he was acting weird, I had loved him and he seemed to be in a rough patch. We could still be friends, right?

Besides, it's not like I would get much writing done anyway.

Another text message interrupted me, this one from Roxanna.

Roxanna Lane: Working late. Might swing by with you know who. Don't be there? XOXOXO!

Well that settled that. I was going out. After one drink, I'd head over to Duke's place. I doubted that his flight would be taking off after all and it'd be nice and romantic to ride out the storm together.

One glance at Twitter told me this had better be a quick drink.

@NYCGOV: Batten down the hatches! Subway is closing at midnight. Bridges and Tunnels will be closed at 10pm. #Geoffrey

I texted Sam back.

Jane Sparks: Let's meet in 20 minutes and make it quick—storm's a-coming!

Sam Chase: I'm at that bar we met at before. Our place in the city.

I decided a quick outfit change was in order. I looked through my closet for the perfect outfit that said "FRIEND ZONE!" I settled on boyfriend jeans, black patent ballet flats and my second favorite sweater set, a charcoal grey cashmere shell and cardigan.

Since I would be heading over to Duke's afterward, I quickly tossed some things into a bag: a change of undies and some toiletries along with the usual phone, wallet and keys. I grabbed my bag and trench coat and dashed out, down the four flights of stairs to the front hall and then down the very steep front stoop. From there, I headed downtown. Hopefully, I wouldn't encounter the storm tonight.

But I did, oh I did.

Chapter Three

Employees Only, Hudson Street

SAM AND I had met up here once before. It had been the night of a party celebrating Project-TK's \$150 million dollars of investment funding. I remembered it as the night things with Duke went from make believe to real.

Sam and I didn't have many places in the city that were "ours." Not like we did back home anyway, where every spot in town held some memory: the high school where we met, the bleachers at the stadium where we'd made out (and a bit more); Fiorello's, the "fancy" special occasion restaurant; Armetta's, the pizza parlor for casual Friday night dates, the movie theater where Sam had worked as an usher one summer and the library where I had worked until I was fired.

That was another reason I had to leave Milford. Too many places triggered too many memories and that made it impossible to move on. New York City was a blank slate where I could reinvent myself.

When I arrived at the bar, it seemed no one took the storm warning seriously. The place was packed. I saw Sam in a red plaid shirt, hunched over the bar and nursing a pint of beer.

"Hey there," I said, resting my hand on his shoulder. He startled.

"Jane. Hey." He smiled faintly. I smiled too, hoping that it hid my shock at how bad he looked. The red plaid shirt looked and smelled like it spent the night on the floor after a pub crawl. Dark stubble covered his jaw, which was a big change from the clean shaven man I had kissed nearly every night for twelve years.

It seemed the pint in his hand wasn't his first.

I ordered my standard glass of chardonnay and sat on the barstool next to him. *One drink. Be a friend.*

"So what brings you into the city?" I asked, kicking off what I hoped would be a bright, friendly conversation. "Especially with the storm coming."

One drink. As a friend. Then I would go. I wanted to be nice. And I didn't want to upset him anymore.

"Just wanted to leave Milford for the day. I had to get out."

"What did you do today?"

"Walked around, mostly." Sam shrugged. OK, so he wasn't in the mood to be conversational.

But then why did he ask me to meet him? I concealed my annoyance with a sip of wine. I could be at home, writing. Or I could be at Duke's, having orgasms.

"Is everything ok?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. And then, "No. The gig at NYU fell through."

"I'm so sorry," I said, reaching out to touch his arm lightly. It was habit. He was tense beneath my touch. "What happened?"

Sam lifted his head and looked at me instead of the half empty pint in his hand. He asked, "Are you really sorry?"

"Of course," I said cheerily. "You were really excited about the position. It would have been a great move for your career."

His eyes searched mine. What was wrong with what I had said? What was going on with him? Had I done something wrong?

Okay, so I wasn't totally sorry. I'd been a bit dismayed at the possibility that Sam would be living in my neighborhood. Truth be told, I wasn't sure this town was big enough for both of us.

"But what about us?" Sam asked softly.

I took a sip of my drink, biting back the words "There is no us anymore."

One drink. Be a friend. He's obviously hurting.

"What about us?" I echoed. Then, I tried to keep my voice gentle as I added, "We broke up, Sam. You broke up with me. And I'm with Duke now."

"So it's not just a fling? Or a fake relationship?"

It was a fair question, but I was annoyed all the same. After publishing a romance novel where the hero and heroine embark on a sham engagement—which happened to be based on my own sham engagement—everyone doubted that Duke and I were a real couple.

"I don't have a *pretend* boyfriend," I said, trying to laugh it off.

Sam downed the rest of the beer—almost half a pint—and set the empty glass down on the bar. He motioned to the bartender for another.

"We just have so much history, Jane," Sam lamented. "Doesn't it seem like a shame to throw away so much of our past?"

Sam put his hand on my knee.

Once upon a time that was the sort of casual, affectionate gesture between a boyfriend and girlfriend. Once upon a time it was a sweet, innocent gesture. Tonight it felt invasive.

Tonight I realized I didn't want Sam to touch me anymore. This alone was a revelation, because I had spent so much of my life loving him. I thought he was The One. I had picked out the names of our unborn children. Until a few weeks ago, I still harbored fantasies of getting back together.

But tonight I knew we were over. The question was, did he?

His hand was still on my leg. I shifted my position. He took his hand away. I felt relief.

"What about the history, Jane?" Sam asked.

"We can still be friends," I said. Right? Ex's were friends all the time. But next time I hung out with my *friend* Sam, I'd make sure Duke was with me. Or Roxanna. Or anyone who would make this less awkward.

“Yeah,” Sam said bitterly. He obviously didn’t believe me.

I took a big sip of my wine. The sooner this glass was empty, the sooner I could politely make my excuses and leave.

“What about UC Berkeley? Have you heard from them?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“No.”

“Oh, well perhaps you’ll hear soon . . .”

“They said no.” He took another long swallow of his pint.

“Oh.”

“Everyone has said *no* to me Jane.” He glanced nervously at me. The sadness in his brown eyes kind of broke my heart.

“You just need one yes,” I said, trying to be encouraging. “You’ll get it.”

“How are your books doing?” Sam asked.

“Really well,” I said. Then I thought maybe I should have downplayed my success for him now. But then I thought: *fuck that*. It was Roxanna’s influence that I was thinking in swear words, and her influence that I was no longer putting the men in my life before myself. It was also thanks to her influence that I was dating a great guy, published and basically being more successful and *happy* than I’d ever imagined.

Maybe Sam ought to be having drinks with Roxanna instead.

But it wasn’t all due to her. I had typed—and imagined and felt—every word of my novels. I offered up my heart and soul—aka my novels—to the world and that had been *terrifying*. I weathered the good reviews and the bad. Everything wasn’t always perfect with Duke, either, but I held on and had faith.

So I was sorry Sam was having a bad time, but I didn’t want to apologize for my own success.

I sipped more of my wine and couldn’t help but note how the tables had turned. Sam had once been the darling of the Montclair University English Department who mocked women’s fiction and other genre authors so much that I kept my romance novels hidden under the bed. I didn’t dare let my guy see the real me. Until now.

“That’s great Jane,” Sam said. I breathed a sigh of relief. Too soon. “Well, all those desperate housewives in the red states need something to get them off. Your book is as good as any I suppose.”

I spit out an ill-timed sip of chardonnay, spewing it over my jeans. *Curses!*

I couldn’t let that dig at romance readers slide.

“Sam, all kinds of women read romance novels. Red states, blue states. Happily married, or single. Young, old. Lots of education. Or a little. There are too many of them to fit neatly into that stupid stereotype.”

He ordered *another* beer. I eyed him nervously.

“Sam, did you take the bus into the city?”

“No, I drove.”

“Are you staying over? Because drinking and driving is a bad idea and they’re going to close the bridges and tunnels before you can sober up.” I checked my watch. “In an hour, to be exact.”

“I don’t know if I’m staying over or not. Am I, Jane?” He lifted his head and fixed his

darkened gaze on me. In all our years together, I'd never seen him so wounded, haunted, troubled. I wasn't in love with him anymore, but my heart ached for him all the same.

"What's going on Sam?"

He shrugged those broad shoulders of his. He sighed wearily.

"Everything in my life has gone to shit since you left, Jane. When we were together, I knew who I was and where I—we—were going. We had a house—a fucking *home*. I had someone to come home to. I was the rock star of my English Department with all the promise in the world. Then I lost you. Then I lost my job and now I've got nothing and you . . ."

He stopped talking then. Just laughed bitterly.

I had blossomed since we broke up. But Sam had clearly stumbled. And fell. On his face.

"Sam . . ."

"Now you're a successful published author and dating a fucking billionaire. And I need you back. So tell me how to win you back."

"Sam, I don't think that's in the cards for us."

"You're not wearing your ring," Sam pointed out.

"I lost it."

That, at least, made him laugh. A bitter laugh that made me cringe.

"You lost that rock? Jesus, it must have cost what, a hundred thousand? More? That thing was huge. Bigger than anything I ever could have gotten you. But he'll just buy you another won't he? Won't even notice a few hundred thousand missing in his bank account."

"It was insured," I lied. I didn't want to explain that it was only a cubic zirconia piece of gift shop junk—that would have prompted too many questions. I just wanted to leave. Sam was wearing me out. All I wanted was to rest my head against Duke's chest as he held me. I wanted to get out of here and get to Duke before the storm hit.

Was it rude to go so soon? Sam still had half a beer to go. I glanced at my phone again—the minutes were ticking by way too slowly. The storm was getting closer. Soon there'd be no way out of the city for Sam and already the island of Manhattan felt too small for us both.

"You know what else?" Sam asked.

"What?"

"Even Kate dumped me."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"No you're not. You hate her."

"I don't *hate* her. And gosh, Sam. Just because we're not together doesn't mean I wish you ill."

"Jane . . ." He sighed and put his hand on my thigh. I pushed it away.

"No girl. No job. No house."

"No house?" I echoed. "What happened with the house?"

"Payments. Moving back with the folks. Etc., etc."

We had lived in that house on Court Street for years. We had loved there. I had left out bridal magazines on our coffee table. He had written his dissertation at the kitchen table.

Gosh, when it rains it pours doesn't it? He'd always been the golden boy and now he was crashing hard. Of course he was a wreck about it.

"I'm really sorry, Sam. I'm sure this is just a rough patch. You'll be fine. You're smart and good-looking and you'll be fine."

"Yeah," he said dryly. His head was still bent over his pint.

"I'm going to go now," I said. "I have a thing."

"I'll walk you home. It's the gentlemanly thing to do. Especially with this storm coming."

It seemed like he was really searching for a place to crash and there was no room at the apartment I shared with Roxanna. That, and I wasn't going home—I was going to Duke's apartment and there was no way I was taking Sam there with me. That, and I was kind of done with Sam for the night.

Or so I thought.

"I'm fine," I said. "The streets are well lit. But I'll just get a cab. It's safe. Stay, finish your beer."

Sam chugged the last of his pint. I threw down some cash—hopefully enough to cover whatever enormous bar tab he had racked up.

"I don't need you to pay for my drinks," Sam said, eyes flashing. Was that *anger* at a gesture of generosity?

"No worries! My treat!" I said brightly. "Goodnight Sam."

"Take your money back, Jane. Or is it your boyfriend's? Either way, I don't need it." He grabbed a bunch of it in his fist before throwing it back down on the bar in frustration. He was drunk. And mad. This wasn't the man I knew.

I wanted to leave, desperately, and I already regretted coming out tonight.

"I have to go," I said, leaving the money on the bar and pushing my way through the crowd of New Yorkers who seemed oblivious and/or unconcerned about the looming hurricane. Honestly, it was the least of my worries at the moment.

"Jane . . ."

He grabbed my wrist. I shook it off. I didn't want to be rude, but I really wanted to get away.

I pushed through the doors and out onto Hudson Street and started walking uptown. Sam was right behind me on the street. My heart started to pound, and not in the "Ooh he might kiss me" kind of way. Strange but true: I was scared of a man I knew. I walked away at a brisk pace.

Sam caught up with me on the corner of West 10th Street and grabbed my wrist.

"Jane, I just need another minute with you."

"Sam, let me go," I said, trying to keep my voice firm.

"Please, Jane." Then his other hand closed around my upper arm. "Come with me."

What was happening? His fingers gripped me so tightly that I winced from the pressure.

"I have to go," I repeated firmly.

He tugged me onto the side street. Before I knew it, I was up against a brick wall.

Sam was tall, dark, and handsome. Women tend to have a thing for tall, dark, and handsome. But right now I was so over it. Because he was tall, towering over me and making me acutely aware of how small I was. He was dark—not in the handsome way—but in the dark, twisty, slightly dangerous way.

Sam pressed his weight against me. I felt the cold, rough brick wall hard up against my back.

"Jane . . . I need you."

I was reminded of all the times we made love and he'd whisper those words. It was romantic then.

I was reminded of all the times we made love and he *hadn't* said that because we had become comfortable old lovers together.

I didn't want him anymore. I didn't want *this*.

"Sam, you have to let me go," I insisted, trying to shrug his hands away. "We broke up. We're over. I don't want this."

"I *need* you."

It was as if I hadn't spoken. As if I didn't matter.

"Stop it, Sam." I struggled. I tried to push him away. But his hands had enclosed around my arms, grasping with a force that would certainly leave bruises in the morning. His chest and hips pinned up me against the brick wall, leaving me stuck. And powerless. Tears stung my eyes.

One drink. Be a friend. I knew I shouldn't have come out with him. I should have heeded all the red flags—the strange and cryptic text messages indicating someone had gone off the deep end, all those pints he'd been downing.

This is what I get for trying to be kind to the former love of my life.

This is what I get for being fucking *nice*.

Nearby, a police station was lit up. I could see it halfway down the block.

"Sam, let me go or I'll scream."

He didn't release his hold on me so I opened my mouth to holler for help. I wasn't kidding, and I was no longer feeling like being a friend to him. I was going to scream and cause a scene.

But Sam's mouth crashed on mine for the worst sort of kiss. One-sided. Unwanted. Eyes open. Bad taste of beer in my mouth. His stubble was like sandpaper against my cheeks.

I struggled and I thought of statistics: Was it one in four women in the United States? Hadn't I read somewhere that women were most likely to be assaulted by a current or former partner? I couldn't remember exactly. I just knew I didn't want to be another nameless, faceless number.

Nearby, people walked along Hudson Street rushing home to beat the storm. They laughed and chatted and walked at the brisk New York City pace and generally didn't pay attention to girls pinned up against brick walls on side streets by their crazy ex-boyfriends.

His tongue, plumbing the depths of my mouth, erased any memory I had of tender kisses between us. I had once welcomed the weight of Sam's body over mine. Now I felt smothered. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't think, other than *no*.

I struggled. I bit his tongue and he swore at me. I shouted out for help. This was the West Village for fuck's sake. It was still early. There was a police station in sight. Wouldn't someone help me?

Sam's hand, closing over my breast, grasping for a feel. I felt Sam's fingers struggling with the button on my jeans as I tried to writhe away from him.

"No, Sam. STOP."

The button on my jeans popped open. His hand slid down. I tasted something salty: tears. I gagged as his fingers brushed against the waistband of my underwear and . . .

. . . Driven by fear, and revulsion, and determination, I heaved my knee up and slammed it

into his balls. I had said *no*.

“Fuck!” Sam hollered. “What the fuck, Jane?”

He backed away from me, doubled over, clutching his precious balls. I stood, sucking in big breaths of cold air. My heart was pounding so hard I couldn’t hear anything else.

Sam looked up me. Accusatorily. As if I was the guilty one!

He stepped toward me.

I planted the heel of my hand in his face and *ran*.

“We’re not done, Jane!” Sam shouted after me. “We belong together!”

I felt the first drops of the hurricane hit my skin as I ran away.

Chapter Four

I RAN, BLOCK after block, without stopping. My lungs were burning. The raindrops were cooling. Within a few blocks I was totally soaked. My wet jeans and sopping sweater set clung uncomfortably to my limbs. I wanted to take these clothes off and burn them. I wanted a long hot shower until I felt clean again.

When I hit Fifth Avenue I had to slow to a walk. I glanced wildly behind me. I didn't see Sam. Or anyone. The streets were strangely desolate. Didn't help my pounding heart. Or the heaving of my lungs. Or the panic coursing through my veins.

What the hell had just happened?

That was Sam . . . *Sam*.

I couldn't reconcile the man I loved with the man who had assaulted me tonight. Assaulted—it was such a technical word. Attacked. Molest. Batter. Grope. Paw. Fondle. Destroy.

I kept walking, thinking up synonyms and euphemisms for what had happened because I could *not* process what had just happened.

Someone I knew—

Someone I trusted—

Someone I had loved—

I followed the news. I knew the statistics. I just never thought I would be one of them.

I spat out the raindrops that had found their way into my mouth. I wanted the taste of him gone. I wanted to get on with pretending that had never happened.

But I knew that bruises would remind me in the morning. I would have to tell Duke, and he wouldn't let this go. There would be no forgetting.

Finally, I arrived at Duke's building at Bowery and Bond. The doorman let me up, no questions asked. When I stepped into the elevator I pressed the button to whisk me away to Duke's penthouse apartment where I would be safe. My back thudded against the wall of the elevator, my knees buckled and I sank to the ground, my back sliding against the walls.

When the *ping* announced my arrival, I struggled to my feet.

The elevator doors opened directly into Duke's apartment and he was there, waiting for me.

He looked so innocent. He had no idea what had just happened to me. He wore a Google T-

shirt. Dark blue jeans. Bare feet. Tussled hair. So comforting. The next-to-worst thing had just happened to me and Duke was still Duke. Not dressed up for the occasion. Smiling charmingly as if he didn't think such things happened to girls he knew. It was oddly comforting.

"I was just about to call you, Sweater-Set. I just got home. My trip to San Francisco was canceled because of the storm. Which I see has started."

He eyed my wet jeans and wet sweaters clinging to me. My hair plastered to my head. I probably looked like a madwoman. Hell, I felt like one.

I stepped into the apartment and the elevator door closed behind me. I was safe. Sam couldn't reach me now. I could proceed with a hot shower and try to make sense of a world that had been turned upside down.

I could not find words to talk or to explain what had just happened to me so I just nodded numbly at Duke and padded down the hall to the master bathroom.

"Why did you walk here in the storm, Jane?" Duke asked, following behind me.

I stood in the middle of his grey marble bathroom suite.

"Do you have a toothbrush?"

Eyeing me curiously, he handed me one of the heads to his electric toothbrush. Then, taking note of how demented I was, he added toothpaste and handed it to me. Finally, I started to get the taste of Sam out of my mouth.

With one hand, I brushed my teeth. With the other, I turned on the shower, waiting until the water was scalding and then stepped in. I did not undress. My clothes were already wet, so what did a little more water matter?

Duke's eyes darkened as he watched me act like a lunatic. Arriving unannounced in a hurricane. Stepping into a shower fully clothed. With a toothbrush in hand.

"What happened Jane?"

I could hear it in his voice: *Tell me, Jane. Don't lie to me, Jane. Whatever this is, I will fix it, Jane.*

All I could say was: "Sam."

Sam was what had happened to me. Sam was why the top button of my jeans was still undone. I heaved at the thought.

"Did he hurt you, Jane?" His tone of voice was nervous, cautious and thick with tightly coiled rage.

"I got him to stop before . . ." I couldn't say it. Before he raped me. Before it became more than "just" assault. Or whatever. It was awful and it was wrong. I felt violated and defiled and this hot water wasn't enough.

"FUCKING HELL, JANE," Duke swore because I didn't have to say much for him to understand. Eyes dark. Mouth firm. Jaw clenched. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter."

He was drunk and god forbid—driving. But at this point, I doubted he would make it out of the city. The bridges and tunnels were closed. We were trapped on this island together. Me and my insane, psycho ex-boyfriend.

I shuddered. In the hot water, I shuddered.

“It fucking does matter,” Duke said, slamming his fist against the marble wall. I knew he wasn’t mad at me but the intensity of his anger was too much for me now. I closed my eyes.

Duke questioned me anyway. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know. You won’t find him and . . . just let it go tonight.”

“Jane . . .” he reached out to touch me. I flinched.

I had opened my eyes for that, so I saw the agonies in his eyes when I didn’t respond to his touch.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“OK.”

“Let’s call the cops.”

“No.”

“No?”

“What can they do? There were no witnesses. It’s his word against mine, and I doubt they’ll believe me. If they do, I doubt they’ll even find him.”

“Jane, what he did was wrong. Whatever he did to you, it was wrong.”

“How will the cops and pressing charges make it right?” I asked. Duke didn’t have an answer for that. “I just want to forget it ever happened.”

“Let’s talk about this in the morning,” Duke said, his voice strained and weary.

The hot water came down over my head. It wasn’t enough. I started to peel off my cardigan. I needed to clean every inch of my skin. But did I want to be so exposed? I was aware of Duke’s darkened gaze on me.

He was my guy. I didn’t have to be scared.

But you thought Sam was your guy . . .

Duke stepped into the shower with me. Fully clothed. He clasped my hands lightly in his and gazed into my eyes.

“You are safe now, Jane. Let’s take care of you.”

I didn’t respond, other than to nod. Just let the water rain down on my head.

“Do you want to go to the police?”

“No. Not now.” I didn’t dare say *maybe not ever*. It was one bad night—wasn’t it? Did Sam deserve jail for a one-time drunken lapse in judgment? I didn’t know. Did I want to wreck his life? Or had he been the one to wreck his own life? I didn’t know. Why did I feel so guilty, so responsible?

“We won’t go to the police tonight,” Duke said.

Tonight. Maybe tomorrow. But there was that hurricane . . . The police had bigger issues tonight.

Duke and I both stood in the shower, fully clothed, soaking wet. Then, as if understanding, he handed me the bar of soap. When I had lathered up and rinsed and repeated a few times, he helped me wash my hair. I brushed my teeth until he took the toothbrush away.

For a minute he disappeared and returned with a pair of navy blue pajama pants of his and a grey T-shirt that said “Instagram,” both of which were too large, as I discovered when Duke left

me alone to change.

It was still *me* looking at myself in the mirror. I looked the same, but everything felt different. I had been hurt and attacked by someone I had loved and trusted. There was a chanting chorus of *what if* questions echoing in my head. What if I hadn't hit him? What if I hadn't run? I closed my eyes, tried to ignore the thoughts. I left the room.

Duke was in the living room. Pacing.

"Can you tell me what happened? I'm going crazy imagining the worst, Jane."

I told him about the drinks. The awkward texts. The emails. I told him how I tried to be a friend—the curse of a good girl. I told him about what happened next. I could tell Duke was ready to go out into the hurricane, find Sam, and beat him until there was no breath left in his body. I wouldn't have stopped him—except I didn't want to be alone right now. If I was alone, I would think. I would go over and over and over and over in my mind all the moments where I played my cards wrong and ended up screwed.

"What if this was one of those books of yours?" Duke asked. "What would the good guy do?"

"If I were a girl in Regency England and I had been assaulted or raped, what would have happened? The same thing as so many girls in third world countries today. I would have been forced into marriage with my attacker because of some sick and twisted notion of honor."

I paused, imagining the horror of that fate. No matter what, I would avoid that. A blessing.

"What would the hero have done if this happened to his girl?" Duke asked softly. Because of course there was a hero, and his girl had been wronged.

"You would meet him in a remote corner of Central Park at dawn with pistols at fifty paces."

"Or I could hack into his email and social accounts and ruin his life forever with a few posts mentioning his lack of concern for a woman. I could make it so he never worked again, never got a girlfriend again . . ." Duke paced around his living room, muttering about all the ways he could destroy Sam's online reputation and thus his prospects in real life. He'd maybe never get a job again. Any prospective date would Google him and see that he got drunk and attacked a woman—and hopefully know better than to go out with him.

I knew he could do it, too. With just a few lines of code he could ruin another man's life. I could just say the word and Duke would do it.

"Or just hold me," I said. I wasn't sure if that's what I wanted, but then Duke's arms lightly enclosed around me and I tensed. Then, with a deep exhalation, I softened. I breathed him in and the familiar scent soothed me as it always did.

"Let's just go to bed tonight."

Hand and hand we strolled down the hall to his bedroom. There was a large king bed flanked by bedside tables. One wall was nothing but floor to ceiling windows. Outside, the hurricane raged. Raindrops splattered against the terrace where we had once made love.

"You're safe here, Jane." His voice was soothing. I was tired—but still ready to fight. I noticed a suitcase open on the bed that he quickly removed.

"Going somewhere?"

"San Francisco, remember? Doesn't matter, my flight was canceled along with every other flight out of Manhattan. There's no way to leave the island. Not that I would leave you now,

anyway. So I'm here, Jane."

Duke said all these lovely words while gazing into my eyes. I knew he wanted to reassure me. But I also sensed that he needed reassurance that I was okay. Or that he hadn't failed me by letting this happen.

By now I was tired—bone tired, soul tired. There were questions plaguing me: Had I asked for it by meeting him? Had I drunk too much? Did I belittle him by paying the bill? *Was it my fault?*

Why did I think it was my fault? He had assaulted me. If I had extended the same friendly thinking toward, say, Roxanna, she never would have hurt me like that. It wasn't my fault.

But it felt like I was.

Duke tucked me into his bed and climbed in beside me. I closed my eyes, shutting out the thoughts and the questions. The raindrops and wind provided a soothing sound, along with Duke's steady breathing beside me. Something bad happened, but I was inside, safe and warm. I drifted off to sleep.

I WOKE UP in the middle of the night, seized with an idea for a story. My own throwaway line from earlier in the evening had worked its way into my dreams: *If I were a girl in Regency England and had been assaulted or raped, what would have happened? The same thing as so many girls in third world countries today. I would have been forced into marriage with my attacker because of some sick and twisted notion of honor.*

That is, if anyone knew.

But what if this awful thing had happened to a Regency girl and she *hadn't* been discovered? What if she had to keep this secret? Given that a woman had to be a virgin on her wedding night, it would prevent her from marrying—or feeling like she could. And if a woman did not marry? Then she was a failure. A spinster. No man would want her—right? Or so she would believe. It was stupid, but true.

Suddenly, I knew Prudence's story.

"Prudence, I'm sorry," I whispered.

But I'll give you an unimaginably wonderful happily-ever-after.

I slipped out of bed, taking care not to disturb Duke, and I tiptoed through the bedroom, and walked down the hall and into the large living/dining/kitchen area, where I found Duke's laptop. I opened up a Google Doc so I could access this later from my own computer and started to write.

The words came easily. Too easily.

Are you there God? 'Tis I, Prudence.

Her voice wavered. Her knees buckled and she sank to the ground, her back sliding down against the wall.

God didn't answer, which was just as well. Prudence didn't have the words to describe this thing that had just happened to her . . .

I wrote and wrote and wrote while the storm raged outside. My brain wanted to shut down every time Duke asked me a question about what Sam had done. I couldn't even imagine trying

to make sense of what had happened, and why, and how I would ever feel alright again. But as Prudence, I could explore all those knotty feelings. As Prudence, I could examine what would keep happening to me if I let this trauma close its cold bony fingers around my heart.

The hours passed. I had written pages upon pages of a new novel. They were messy, confused, full of fragments and in dire need of revision. But the words were on the page and that was all that mattered.

Everyone once in a while, I was interrupted by a notification from Duke's Twitter. People were up late reading and tweeting articles about his ex-girlfriend's tell-all book.

I ignored them all. Then I gave in, clicked the link and started reading.

Their relationship began over late nights at the office . . .

I cringed, knowing how many late nights Duke still spent at the office.

. . . and carried over to business trips and more. They fought constantly and, according to the book, "had the most fantastic make-up sex."

I immediately clicked away the browser window. I did not need to see anymore. In fact, I quit Tweetdeck and email and all the other distracting Internet things until I was just left with the Google Doc of my novel. I tried to focus on Prudence's story, but still, I wondered . . . how well do we really know those who we love? Sam was not the man I had known and loved. What did I still have to discover about Duke? What didn't Prudence know about her hero?

Earlier tonight I had felt helpless. Weak. Silenced.

Now, with my fingers waltzing across the keyboard, giving voice to the dark, twisty, scary feelings, I began to feel stronger. As the story took shape and as I controlled every thought, every breath of my characters, I felt powerful. There was no feeling more empowering than capturing a bad thing in words and beginning to shape it into a beautiful love story.

At some point, the power went out.

There was a soft sound as all the appliances shut off. Little lights vanished—the clock on the Microwave, the red power light on the flat screen TV, the soft glow of a charged appliance. The streetlights darkened.

It never really gets dark in Manhattan. Even when you turn the lights off and close the curtains, there is still light from the streets, neighboring apartments, and bright neon signs. You can still see in the dark. Tonight was different. The city was dark, and quiet, except for the rain and occasional wail of a siren.

I kept writing until the laptop battery died.

Chapter Five

WHEN I AWOKE the next morning, it was still raining. The power was still out. Sam had still hurt me—I hadn't forgotten or imagined it. There was an ache in my muscles and bones and bruises on my arms and breasts. Someone I loved had hurt me. That hadn't changed.

I closed my eyes, foolishly hoping that would make it all go away when I opened them again. But the memories were still sharp and fresh: the taste of beer, the stubble scratching my skin, his weight bearing down on me, the hard brick wall at my back. Thank God he stopped before it went further.

But what if he hadn't stopped?

I'd be wrecked.

Rolling over to my side, I noticed Duke wasn't in bed. I got up, found his Stanford sweatshirt, put it on and went out to the kitchen.

"So I got up early to make coffee with the idea that I would bring it to you in bed," Duke said. "But the power is out."

"I know."

We both turned to stare at the machine.

"I need coffee before I can figure out how to make coffee without the machine," Duke muttered, pushing his fingers through his hair and mussing it up.

"There must be a way. People have made coffee for hundreds of years without electricity," I said, staring blankly at the machine. "We'll have to improvise. And while we're at it, we might as well cook up everything in your fridge. That is, if your stove still works."

"It's gas, so as long as we have matches it should." Duke ambled off to find some. I rolled the waistband of the pants he'd given me to wear; they were giant and falling down.

Then I opened the refrigerator and my heart sank.

There was *plenty* of beer. One carton of organic milk, three quarters full, fortunately not expired. There were also delivery leftovers that I was not yet desperate enough to try—who knows how long they'd been in there? I smiled when I saw a bottle of the wine I liked. Fortunately, the Britta filter was full—but it was all the water we had for the foreseeable future.

In the cabinets, I found a few boxes of cereal. In the freezer there were a few frozen meals.

“Why don’t you have more food?” I called out to Duke. “We’re going to starve.”

“We’ll just order some take out,” he said with a shrug. In Duke’s world, food only came from restaurants or Seamless.com.

“With what cell service? And power?” I asked.

“There’s got to be some service,” he grumbled as he walked around the apartment with his iPhone out, searching for a few bars.

“Shouldn’t you turn that off to conserve the battery?”

Duke looked up at me, with a wounded expression as if I suggested we drown kittens for fun.

“Turn it off?” he gasped. Well, someone had to be the voice of reason. I smiled faintly and rolled my eyes. He kept walking around the apartment with it, looking for service before finally conceding that we were totally cut off from contacting the rest of the world.

Just like Prudence and her hero, Castleton.

Dejected, he joined me next to the coffeemaker. We stared at it. If wishes and will power were enough we’d have a freshly brewed pot.

“If only you could come up with an idea of how to make the coffee,” I said.

“What did people do in days of yore in your books?” he asked.

“They asked the servants,” I answered.

Yes, I wrote historical romance novels. But most readers, like me, were more interested in the emotional turmoil of the characters—and let’s be real, the sex—than the details of housekeeping and coffee-making. In the end, we poured boiling water over the grinds, making two strong and steaming hot cups of coffee with milk.

We curled up on the couch with our mugs, under a blanket, huddling together for warmth. We stared out the window at the rain.

“It doesn’t look so bad,” I said. Being in possession of an active imagination, I had assumed the worst of a Category 4 storm. I had pictured glass windows of Fifth Avenue shops shattering, tree trunks snapping and falling into buildings, or flooding that sent cars floating down Broadway and into the Prada store. This looked like any other rainstorm.

“Before we lost power last night, I checked Twitter,” Duke said. “Because the storm hit at high tide, there’s a lot of flooding in lower Manhattan and in the subways.”

“How long do you think this will last?”

Duke went to check his iPhone for the answer and he swore when seeing the blank black screen. We had no connection to the outside world. We had no new information. It was just us. Unplugged.

“The last report I saw said rain until this evening.”

“I wonder how long the power will be out,” I said, glancing longingly at the computer. I wanted to know how much of manuscript I had lost. And I wanted to keep writing.

“I’m sure it won’t be too long,” Duke said. Neither of us believed him.

“What should we do until then?”

“I have an idea,” he murmured.

His idea was kissing.

His mouth brushed over mine and instead of opening up to him, I found myself pressing my

lips into a closed line and turning away. I *wanted* to kiss Duke. There was so much longing inside of me, bottled up and wanting release. But even Duke's sweet, loving kiss reminded me of the night before. I remembered the taste of stale beer and fear, Sam's stubble abrasive against my cheeks, my heart pounding so hard I felt like I was choking.

Duke then reminded me why I loved him. When I was scared and uncertain, he laced his fingers through mine and just held my hand.

Later that day

THE HOURS PASSED. The rain kept falling. The power did not return.

Duke picked up his Kindle and I tried reading the few paper books he had—all of which were about business, sales or web development. Not exactly riveting stuff. My mind kept straying to the novel I had started last night. My heroine, Prudence, had suffered horribly. It was something she'd been able to push to the dark corners of her mind until a looming school anniversary party would force her to recognize what had happened to her and how she couldn't move on.

Rather than stay in London, this wallflower ran away. She found herself stranded at a country inn during an epic rainstorm.

Her hero was there with her. John Roark, Lord Castleton, had a secret past. Perhaps not unlike my own hero—I hadn't forgotten about that tell-all book about Duke. Oh, how I wished I had stayed at home and read the rest of that awful article or even bought the book and took it to bed.

Speaking of books, Duke was very happily reading his. I desperately wanted to be writing mine. I glanced over at his laptop with the dead battery.

"I think I'm going to have to write the old fashioned way. Do you have pen and paper?"

We both glanced around his sleek, modern apartment. There was no clutter and no paper lying around. He didn't have a lot of stuff.

"Oh my God, you don't even have paper," I muttered. It made sense; he read everything on his phone or Kindle, probably never printed anything at home. Even his light bulbs and TV were controlled by apps on his phone.

"I'm sure I do somewhere," he said. A few minutes later, after looking through closets and drawers, he returned with a Moleskine notebook emblazoned with the logo of some startup or VC firm I didn't recognize.

"I got this at a conference," he said. "I'm sure there is a pen around here somewhere."

Sheepishly he glanced around his apartment, which probably held as many pens as the Regency-era inn where my characters were stranded.

"I always carry one in my bag," I said. I found my handbag near the elevator. Amongst all the crap I carried around, I found one blessed pen.

As Duke reclined on the couch with his Kindle, I sat beside him and wrote the old-fashioned way. By hand, with pen, on paper.

My characters were eating lunch. A freshly made lunch, the likes of wish I would have killed

for right about now.

“Would you care for some wine?” Roark asked.

“No thank you,” Prudence replied politely. She was always polite.

“Just a sip?”

“My friend Olivia’s mother says it makes a Lady forget herself,” she said.

“Is that such a bad thing?” Sometimes he wanted to forget himself. Wine helped. Whiskey reliably got the job done, too.

“Yes, it is a bad thing. At least for ladies,” Miss Merryweather informed him. Then she pointedly took a sip of water.

“And what does wine do to gentlemen?”

“It makes them more foolish and at a higher volume,” she answered primly.

He laughed. “Spot on.”

“Sometimes, it makes them beasts,” she added. There was something in the darkness of her voice that brought an end to his smile and laughter. He pushed his wine glass to the side.

“How was your day, darling?” John asked, changing the subject.

Her lips quirked up in a faint smile. “Uneventful.”

He thought about mentioning the encounter on the stairs this morning. Her panicked reaction raised questions in his mind. Not wanting to send her running again, he didn’t ask.

“How was your day?” she asked.

“Wet.” He explained about taking care of the animals in the stable, and his two horses, named Snow and White.

“How imaginative of you,” Miss Merryweather said dryly. “Why did you name them that?”

“I didn’t. I won them in a game of cards,” John explained. He’d managed an invitation to a bachelors- only house party at Lord Collin’s country seat where they drank excessively, dined exquisitely and when they weren’t winning and losing fortunes over cards, they were availing themselves to the prostitutes who’d been invited. Well, the others did. John kept his drinking to a minimum and his eyes on his cards. That’s why he left that party with two prize-winning stallions and three hundred pounds richer.

“A gambler, are you?” Miss Merryweather asked with the disapproving look of a temperance-minded matron, which oddly made him grin.

“You could say that,” he answered. The extent of his gambling was possibly unparalleled. His was also not something he was prepared to let known.

“You’re one of those,” she said. “I should have known.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are the lords who tend to their estates,” she explained. “And then the ones who gamble them away.”

And then there were the ones, like him who—John didn’t even finish that thought on the off chance that Miss Merryweather had mind reading capabilities. He didn’t fit into her either/or view of Lords, but wasn’t about to enlighten her.

So just grinned and asked, “Can’t a rogue have it all?”

I GLANCED OVER at Duke—his head, hair tousled, was bowed over his Kindle. He reclined on the couch in his fabulous penthouse apartment, a girl by his side. He was unimaginably successful on his own terms. That rogue certainly did have it all . . .

He glanced up, caught me staring and gave me that smile of his that had a way of making me feel

“Hey girl,” he drawled. I had to laugh. Just gazing at him made me happy. There was something wonderful about being alone with him during this storm. I felt connected to him. And yet, I couldn’t shake questions about that tell-all book . . .

“What is it?” Duke asked.

“Nothing,” I replied, shaking my head.

“Aw, c’mon Jane,” he teased. “I can see when your imagination is at work. You’re thinking about something.”

“I was just wondering how well I knew you.” It was as much about that new book about him, as it was about Prudence’s mysterious hero.

“Is this research for your book?” He eyed the notebook open on my lap, full of probably illegible cursive.

“Maybe.”

“And does this have anything to do with Felicity’s book?” Gawd. Her name on his lips made me cringe. That somehow made her real and not just someone the tabloids invented.

“Maybe,” I said. He moved over to sit next to me, gaze into my eyes and hold my hand.

“Here’s what you need to know, Jane,” he said. “I was a fuck-up until I met you. Yeah, I accomplished a lot but what does that matter if you throw it all away and don’t enjoy it? All I want now is to just be with you.”

A LITTLE WHILE later we took a break to heat up on the frozen food that was currently thawing in the uncooled freezer. We fried up Applegate Farms chicken nuggets on the stove and tried to heat frozen pizzas from Amy’s over the burners. It was not ideal. I missed the microwave. And the oven. And come to think of it . . . I missed electricity and hot running water, too.

We sat down to lunch. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

“How is the book going?” Duke asked.

“Good. The hero and heroine are trapped at a small country inn during a torrential rainstorm.”

“Have you ever considered drawing on your real life for inspiration?” Duke asked dryly. I gave a little laugh. My “inspired by real life” stories had gotten us into trouble before. But sometimes, you just can’t make this stuff up.

“The heroine was . . . attacked,” I added softly. “That makes her not the typical, innocent romance heroine. But I had to write about what happened to me.”

“Did Sam . . .?” Duke asked, his voice low.

“No. But I think he would have. He unbuttoned my jeans,” I said my voice cracking as I remembered. I didn’t want to remember. “His hands . . .” I couldn’t even say it. “Then I kneed

him in the balls, hit him in the nose and ran.”

It was the vague and distant look in Sam’s eyes that struck me as I recalled that night. Sam hadn’t been Sam. That had been terrifying.

“That’s my girl,” Duke said softly, smiling slightly. But there was tension in his jaw and sadness in his eyes. I could see that it was burning him up inside that he hadn’t been there to protect me. But he was stifling that because this wasn’t about him. It was about me. “I wish I had been there for you. I could have stopped it. Hell, it never would have happened.”

“I know. Me too,” I said in a small voice. “I thought I could trust him.”

It wasn’t just the violence of what Sam had done. It wasn’t just the pain and the fear. The betrayal of it all cut the deepest. Someone I had once loved and trusted with my safety and happiness had violated my body and violated my trust.

“It makes it hard for her to be alone with the hero,” I said, my voice faltering slightly. I used my characters as a way to talk about *me*. Perhaps I should be in therapy for that. “She wants to. But she’s not quite ready.”

“Are you OK now, here with me?” Duke asked. The concern in his eyes was reassuring.

“Yeah,” I replied softly. “I feel safe with you.”

“Good. You should feel safe,” he said firmly, holding my hand and gazing into my eyes. “I’ll never hurt you Jane. I couldn’t.”

I knew he wouldn’t. What Sam had done to me wasn’t about insatiable, uncontrollable passion. I knew he stopped lusting after me a while ago—years before we broke up, even. What he had done to me was just about power. He must be feeling so helpless—alone, living with his parents, his career prospects dim, and all the rejection of Kate and the jobs he’d applied for. By overpowering me, he could feel like a man again. Or whatever.

I understood it, rationally. That didn’t excuse him. Or justify it. Or make me ache any less. Why should I bear his burdens?

But Duke . . . he’d been down, he’d been up and he’d been walking the razor’s edge of complete disaster or unfathomable success. And he did it all with a bone deep confidence and certainty in himself. He didn’t need to bring anyone down to raise himself up. *That* is what made him so damn sexy.

I gave that confidence to Prudence’s hero. It wasn’t his wealth or title that attracted her. It was his certainty, his kindness and his consideration of her. That, and his sparkling blue eyes that were a lot like Duke’s.

After lunch, Duke went back to reading and I went back to writing. We were never far from each other and Duke was generous, as always, with small, gentle caresses and other little signs of affection.

I kept writing until my hand started to cramp and I had to pause to shake it out. How did people write so much in days of yore?

Then Duke’s Kindle battery died.

With nothing much else to do, we stood in front of the floor to ceiling windows and looked out at the rain.

“Do you think the rain is easing up?” I asked hopefully.

“Hard to tell,” he said. But really, the answer was no. This storm wasn’t going to end any time soon.

“It’ll be dark soon. I don’t suppose you have candles?”

“Of course not,” Duke said grimly. We both fell silent, presumably thinking about all the Storm Prep Tweets and articles that he’d ignored. It went without saying that my apartment was pretty well stocked with candles, matches, flashlights, food, bottled water, and fully charged appliances.

“What about a flashlight? That’s a gadget. Do you have one?”

“On my phone,” Duke said grimly.

I couldn’t help but smile. My billionaire tech entrepreneur was *so* out of his element.

“I’m sorry, Jane. I’ll go out. See if a store is open.” It was just the sort manly, heroic protective thing a guy would do. Offer to venture out into a category 4 storm to get a girl some chocolate. It was also ridiculous.

“Are you crazy? The city has shut down.” I pointed outside. “Look. Everything is shut. It’s pouring rain.”

“It’s New York City,” Duke said. “Someone is making money off this. Look—there are still taxis driving around.”

I looked and indeed, every once in a while a yellow cab slowly cruised through the desolate streets. It was comforting, that. No matter what happened, the city carried on. Maybe I could, too.

We had a long kiss goodbye, as if he were going off to war or something. My guy was venturing out into the unknown. If something went wrong, there’d be no way of knowing. Using the last of his phone battery, he used the flashlight function to light his way down the pitch-black stairwell. I didn’t envy his walk back up to the penthouse—hopefully with bags full of food and candles.

My phone still had a bit of battery since I had sensibly switched it onto airplane mode last night. I kept checking the time while Duke was out. First he was gone for a half hour. Then an hour. Then I started to panic. In addition to checking the time, I also watched my dwindling battery.

Then another hour passed.

I was alone. The apartment was getting darker and darker as the hours passed. Eventually the sun set, taking daylight with it, leaving me alone in the dark.

The rain kept falling.

Eventually, I decided a glass of wine was in order to soothe my nerves. *Where the hell was he?* In fact, I wanted wine to soothe my temper. *What was he thinking to go out in the damn storm?* In the dark, I made my way to the kitchen. On my way, I collided with someone.

I screamed. Bloody-murder-call-the-cops *screamed*.

I felt a man’s hard wet chest. I felt a man’s hands close around my arms . . . just like last night. Suddenly I couldn’t breathe. I struggled to free myself and stumbled backwards.

“Jane! It’s me, Duke.”

His voice didn’t register. I tried to break away. I wanted those hands *off*. We stumbled

together in the darkness, all tangled up until my back hit the wall.

“Jane it’s me. Duke. It’s ok.”

But it wasn’t. This felt all too familiar. The wall at my back, the man’s weight against me and arms blocking me in. His mouth, inches from mine. His hands, holding me up. I couldn’t tell what was real and what was my memory. I couldn’t *breathe*. My heart was pounding. I felt trapped, suffocated.

It could have been ten seconds or ten minutes, I don’t know, but I wrenched myself away.

“Jane it’s just me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know,” I gasped. “Just . . . flashback.”

In the dim light I saw Duke’s jaw tense. Then he turned and slammed his fist into the wall. He didn’t even flinch, he was angry at the situation. I knew that. Seeing such a display of violence didn’t exact soothe my nerves or calm my racing heart.

“You scared me,” I said in between gulps of air. “When you came in. And when you grabbed me. And when you nearly punched a hole in the wall.”

“I’m sorry. I just hate that I wasn’t there to protect you and I hate I haven’t been able to give him the beating he deserves.”

“You might get the chance,” I said. “I’m pretty sure he’s somewhere in Manhattan.”

The truth of that made me shudder

“You’re safe here,” Duke said firmly. “You’re safe here with candles and tons of junk food and candy bars.”

“You found a store?”

“Yeah. I didn’t have much cash and of course credit cards and ATM machines aren’t working, so I had to promise some stock in Project-TK. Some bodega guy just got real lucky. And now we have tons of supplies and prepared for the storm.”

“Some good news,” I whispered.

“I told you, I have enough good luck to spare,” Duke said.

“Unless my bad luck rubs off on you.”

“Nah,” Duke said easily. “Come on, let’s open a bottle of wine and eat all this crap while you tell me what people in days of yore did to amuse themselves without TV and the Internet.”

We did just that—sipped lukewarm white wine and dined on potato chips, pretzels, and candy bars.

“In Regency times, people often played cards after dinner,” I said as I indulged in a bar of Green & Black’s organic dark chocolate.

“Strip poker?”

“No,” I said laughing and rolling my eyes. “They played whist. Or vignt-et-un which is basically the same as Blackjack.”

“Do you fancy a game of strip vignt-et-un?”

“You and the stripping! It’s too cold in here for that,” I said, shuddering for emphasis as a Regency heroine might have done. Without heat or even sunlight to warm the place up, the chill had seeped into my bones and I began to have a new appreciation for laments about drafty ancestral estates.

“I’ll warm you up,” Duke murmured, sliding his hand around my waist and pressing a kiss against my lips.

“Or they danced,” I whispered. “But we don’t have any music.”

“We don’t need music,” Duke whispered. He stood, and clasping my hand, pulled me to my feet.

With one hand around my waist and the other clasping mine, at his lead we began to dance. Neither of us knew the steps to a quadrille or a reel or any other days-of-yore dances. I tried to teach him how to waltz but in the end, we relied on instinct and somehow just knew how move together in the same rhythm, at the same time.

For some moments I wanted to rest my head against his chest, close my eyes and forget everything except the beat of his heart and our bodies moving in time together. But the moment was always ruined by the recollection of Sam . . .

I tried hard to breathe. I closed my eyes, hoping to shut out the memories of Sam’s assault . . . the way he grabbed me . . . holding my arms . . . holding me close . . . his body pressed against mine . . .

I wanted to enjoy this moment. But it was *hard*.

Breathing. It was difficult at the moment.

But I didn’t want to lose my future to one dark chapter of my past. So I opened my eyes and gazed up at Duke. He looked at me with affection and lust, with kindness and promises. Perhaps even love. With all sorts of good things.

My heart was pounding. This could be the moment that I panicked, ran away and let walls go up between a really good man and me.

Or this could be the moment that I choose love instead of fear.

So Duke and I danced around his kitchen, banging into the countertops and tables because the candles didn’t provide much light.

I let him lead me down the hall to the bedroom, dancing all the while.

After crossing the threshold, we both paused. It was unspoken, but understood: I wasn’t sure I was ready to make love or let myself go enough to enjoy it.

“Don’t be nervous,” Duke said softly. “Don’t be scared.”

He looked so earnest. I believed him. I had so much faith in him that I could exhale the breath I’d been holding and even breath normally. But then I glanced up and noticed Duke was biting back words.

“What is it?”

“I will wait for you, Jane,” Duke said plainly. “As long as it takes.”

“But . . .” The protest was a rush of breath over my lips. *It could be forever*. I might *never* be ready. A wave of sadness hit me as I considered the prospect of never being able to make love with abandon again. What a bleak existence was ahead of me if I let Sam’s rough touch possess me forever.

I couldn’t.

In fact, what if I could take it back? My heart started to pound. What if I could reclaim me, for myself? It was a question I couldn’t answer. I couldn’t even think about it because what Duke said

next took my breath away.

“I want to touch you, Jane. I want to erase all the bad memories and remind you of pleasure.” I was uncertain, scared and not so pure and not so innocent. I was a mess, but still, Duke stood there and promised me love.

Was I really going to live the rest of my life without a lover’s touch? Was I really going to let Sam have this power to take away my pleasure? I couldn’t. Just couldn’t. I knew that.

But that didn’t mean letting go was easy.

“But I don’t want to hurt you,” he continued. “Or scare you. I just want to touch you.”

Duke’s blue eyes smoldered at me. There was no denying it: He wanted me. He knew what had happened, and he was willing to wait for me to be ready. I wasn’t damaged in his eyes. To him, I was still desirable.

Would I ever find another man like him? Probably not.

Would I ever have another chance to try to reclaim myself? Of course—as long as I didn’t allow fear to hold me back. But why not start now? Why not seize this moment? I thought of excuses but dismissed them.

“How? How would you touch me?”

“I would start by pushing aside that strand of hair that’s been falling in your eyes all day,” he said softly. “And I’d let my fingertips graze your cheek as I did.”

That was gentle. That was safe.

“Like this?” I asked, as I enacted the movement he described. My hair was soft. How many times had I pushed my hair away from my face? Countless. And how many times had I noticed that the skin of my cheek was soft and sensitive and responsive to a light and gentle touch? Once. Now. The slight caress of my fingertips against it sent a little shiver down my spine.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Like that.”

“What else?”

“What do you want?”

I didn’t know what I wanted. I glanced around the room, looking out the windows at the darkness beyond. The faintest bit of moonlight illuminated the bed, the bedside tables, Duke’s suitcase on the floor, and a dresser with opened drawers. One was ajar, and a certain grey silk tie haphazardly spilled over the edge. I had bought him that tie . . . but I had been the one to wear it.

I trusted him, truly I did. But I couldn’t shake the thought of tying his hands. I reached over, picked up the tie, and asked for Duke’s permission with my eyes.

“If that’s what you want, Sweater Set,” he whispered. We knelt before each other on the bed as I wrapped the length of grey silk around his wrists and tied it tightly. Duke was a strong man, this wasn’t a real restraint. But it was something . . . Tonight I was only going to feel what I wanted to feel, and from my touch alone.

“Tell me how you want to touch me,” I whispered.

“I would drag my thumb across your lips, to rub away the bad memories.”

I did just that, imagining that I could wipe away the past, as I felt them tingle from the friction.

“What would you do next?”

Our gazes locked. I focused on his familiar features: the blue eyes and dark lashes, the strong line of his jaw and the dramatic slant of his cheekbones, his firm mouth that often curved into a smile that made me feel warm inside. In this moment, I felt undeniably connected to him, even though we weren't even touching. Just kneeling opposite each other on his king-sized bed.

"I would run my fingers through your hair," he said softly. "And cradle your head in my hands."

I slid my fingers along my scalp, feeling that lovely sensation of fingers delicately running through soft strands of hair. I closed my eyes and imagined it was Duke's touch. My lips parting, awaiting a kiss.

"I would kiss your neck first, just where it curves into your shoulder."

"I can't do that."

"Imagine it, Jane."

"Would you kiss me now?"

"No." His voice was low and rough with desire. I felt the vibrations of it deep inside.

"No?"

"No. Next I'd want to kiss you all along the curve of your shoulder."

Keeping the touch of my fingertips light, I dragged them back and forth along my shoulder, and down across my décolletage. Duke's eyes darkened with desire. His hands moved as if he wanted to touch me, but they remained bound by that grey silk tie. I remained in control.

My skin, it had to be noted, was warm and soft and responsive to my touch. It felt the same as *before*.

"I would want to touch you lower. Feel your breasts in my palms."

I touched myself like that, cupping my breasts in my hands, feeling the soft cotton of his T-shirt between my palms and bare skin. But I really wanted to feel everything. And I wanted to test Duke's control. So I stripped off the shirt and let it fall to the side.

He wanted me. I could see it in his eyes. I might have felt dirty and damaged, but to this man I was still beautiful. And as my fingers roamed over my abdomen, my breasts and all over, I had to note that I felt the same. Perhaps I felt *more* because I appreciated every little touch. And it wasn't just a little touch; I was taking myself back.

"I would touch you with my hands . . . my mouth . . . taking the center of your breasts in my mouth. Teasing you with my tongue . . ."

My fingertips made slow circles of ever-increasing pressure around the center of my breasts until my nipples were stiff peaks and suddenly more sensitive. I inhaled sharply.

"Yes," he hissed as my fingertips traced along the swell of my breasts to find the pink peak in the center. I knew it was right because I felt a spark of electricity rocket through me. Duke gave me more instructions: "Circle slowly. Yes. Like that."

I couldn't help it, but I moaned. Because I knew what that felt like and I could imagine it so well that it *almost* felt real. Almost. I needed, I wanted the real thing.

"God I want to feel you . . ." Duke groaned. His hands were clasped hard together and I could see him struggling slightly against the silk tie.

I bit back the words "I'm sorry."

“Don’t you dare say the words,” he growled, reading my mind. “This is about you. And it’s turning me on.”

I glanced down. He was aroused. That only turned me on more.

“I want you to touch me,” I whispered as my fingers toyed with the knot I’d made in the silk tie. “But I’m not ready yet.” I started to loosen the knot. “I want you to touch yourself. If you want.”

He reached out for me as the tie fell slack onto the bed, but then he stopped himself. There was nothing holding him back now, other than his self-restraint.

“Where do you want to touch me?”

“Your stomach. My mouth. Kisses.”

I imagined his head, with the dark unruly hair, bent over my belly pressing his mouth there. He’d be so close to my breasts. He’d go lower, too. I knew how all of this felt because we had done it before. Any trepidation I felt about being touched was starting to pale beside the fiery hot need I was starting to feel all over.

I touched my belly. It wasn’t as flat as most models. But it was lovely all the same.

“And then what?” I asked, my own voice sounding rough now.

“You tell me,” he said. I lowered my gaze to his hands, around his cock. My own hands went lower, past my belly, down a little further.

“Lower?”

“Lower.”

The pressure building inside of me. My temperature was surely rising. I felt the heat building, scorching away all the bad memories, leaving nothing but desire in its place. I knew how hot this fire could blaze and what would happen as the pressure intensified to the point of explosion.

There was no turning back now.

“Close your eyes,” I told him.

“Yes ma’am,” he growled.

“You can’t yes ma’am me at a time like this,” I protested, eyes opening to see him on his knees before me.

“Yes, Miss Sparks,” he murmured.

He was so close, and he could just reach out and touch me or just *have* me. But he didn’t because he loved me and wanted me to feel pleasure on my own terms. I felt another surge of desire.

“That’s more like it,” I murmured.

“Where are your fingers, Jane?” His voice was lower now, rougher now. He sounded positively tortured. But I was in a state of bliss.

“I can’t say.” But I touched myself around where Sam had tried to violate me. I knew just where to stroke and tease. Every little touch made me feel hot and electric.

“Slow circles,” Duke murmured. “Use a light touch. Feather light. So light you can hardly feel it. Just how you like it.”

“Yes,” I gasped. That was just how I liked it.

He groaned. “How does it feel? Please, tell me how it feels.”

That was desire in his voice. I cracked my eyes open, glancing at him in a heavy-lidded haze of pleasure and self-discovery. Everything about him was dark and hard and tense. He *desired* me and this—my own pleasure—was arousing to him.

“Tempting,” I said. “And wet. I feel wet.”

He groaned and said, “Keep going, Jane. Please.”

As if he had to ask.

I kept going with the light circles around this magical place of insane feeling not because he asked but because something instinctive compelled me to keep going.

“I want to kiss you there,” he said. “I want to taste you. I want to tease you until you just can’t help but cry out.”

He wanted these things, and I did too. But it was only my hands on my body. My fingers were bringing me closer and closer to the brink.

“Jane, what do you feel? Tell me.”

“I feel like I can’t breathe. I can’t think. I can’t stop.”

“You’re close. God, you’re close. Press harder now, Jane and *let go*.”

I pressed harder, groaning under the pressure of my touch and the pressure of something building inside of me. It wasn’t a bad pressure at all. It was lovely, like fireworks on a hot night and because he said to let go and I trusted him, I let go and then—

The force of it took my breath away. Vaguely, I heard him cry out too. There was *nice* and then there was pleasure so intense and overwhelming that it took my breath away, cleared my thoughts and ricocheted over every last inch of my body in the most exquisite way.

Chapter Six

WHEN I OPENED my eyes the next morning I saw that the rain had stopped and the sun was shining. Unfortunately, the power hadn't come back on—which meant the heating hadn't either. I burrowed down under the covers, and snuggled up against Duke for warmth. He wrapped his arms around me, held me close and we slept like that for a few more hours.

Yesterday morning I couldn't have imagined enjoying this kind of intimacy, but last night I had reclaimed some of myself, and my desire, and I saw that I could trust Duke not to hurt me when I was vulnerable. So I savored the warmth of his embrace.

But eventually the sunshine won. I wanted to see the city after the storm.

Also, I wanted coffee.

After Duke and I managed to make coffee, we stood around the kitchen, leaning against the counters with our hands wrapped tightly around the steaming hot mugs.

“Up for an adventure today?” he asked, his blue eyes sparkling.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Venturing out into the world. See what survived Hurricane Geoffrey and if we can get any news.”

I smiled. “You just want to see if you can find cell service.”

“Is that so wrong?” Duke asked. He grinned and gave me puppy dog eyes that made it impossible to be annoyed with him.

“What's a few flights of stairs?” I mused, thinking about the long walk down and back up to his penthouse apartment. I was used to a fourth floor walkup. At least we weren't stranded on, say, the 50th floor.

“That's my girl,” Duke said with a grin. “Let's get dressed and go.”

My jeans had dried from my mad dash through the rain and fully clothed shower the other night. Under any other circumstances I would have thrown them away—after what happened I didn't want to wear them again. But my desire to get out and see the city was stronger. I paired the jeans with my black patent ballet flats and one of Duke's Project-TK T-Shirts and his Stanford sweatshirt that I had decided belonged to me now.

Then we ventured out, down numerous flights of stairs in utter darkness, with only the light

of a candle to guide us. Once out on the street, we joined a crowd of people who had come out to see how the city had fared in the storm.

“It doesn’t look like the zombie apocalypse I was expecting,” Duke said as we strolled up the street. He sounded disappointed.

“Expecting, or hoping for?” I quipped. He just squeezed my hand.

The city was coming back to life. Wet green leaves had fallen from the trees and were plastered all over the sidewalk and streets. A few tree branches had fallen, but it seemed most of the trees in our neighborhood had been unscathed. It was so strange to see the streets devoid of traffic—and the cars that remained seemed to find it a challenge to negotiate intersections without working stoplights. Most of the stores and restaurants were still closed. The bodegas were doing a brisk business and one bar had actually opened, lit only by candle light, but packed with people.

“Let’s get a drink,” Duke suggested.

“It’s not even noon!” I protested.

“This is a special occasion,” Duke said. “And we’re not working today. Besides, I bet the bartender is full of information. Duke grabbed my hand and led me into the little dive.

A bunch of other people had the same idea—the bar was fairly crowded, considering that it was a weekday morning. But Duke was right—this was a special occasion. It’s not every day that the entire city had a day off, or that this town functioned without electricity. There was a lovely sense of camaraderie in the air—we had all weathered the storm together and we were all enjoying this strange moment before the city bounced back to normal.

We found two spots at the bar and squeezed in.

“What can I get you two?” The bartender was a big guy with tattooed arms and lots of piercings.

“I’ll have a beer,” Duke said. I winced, remembering the taste of beer from Sam. Then I shook my head, chasing the thoughts away. I would *not* let him take over my thoughts, all the time.

“A glass of white wine for me,” I said.

“That’ll be fifteen bucks,” the bartender said. “Cash only. And those drinks will be warm.”

Duke and I exchanged concerned glances, not about the temperature of the drinks, but the cash to pay for them. I dug into my handbag and with fives, ones, and assorted change, spent the last of our money on booze.

“I’m Duke,” he said, extending in his hand.

“Frank,” the bartender replied. The two guys shook hands and then started talking.

“So is power out all over the city?” Duke asked.

“I heard that everything is in working order above 39th Street. Below that, no power.”

“Electricity might be the one thing that gets me to go above 14th Street,” Duke said, referring to his aversion to Midtown.

“Be prepared to walk if you head up there,” Frank said. “The subways are fucked and probably will be for some time. Cabs are hard to come by. And cash only. Everything is cash only.”

We all glanced at the pile of coins and crumpled dollar bills on the bar in front of us. The last of our money. I took a sip of warm white wine and wondered if Frank and random cab drivers

wanted stock in Project-TK. Probably not.

“We’re stranded,” I said glumly. “We’ll be stuck without power for days, possibly weeks. Maybe months.”

That meant no hot water. No flushing toilets. No properly cooked meals. No phones, no computers, no contact with the rest of the world. It would be like living in the Regency era, but without fireplaces or servants. Ugh.

“We can walk uptown,” Duke said. “It’s only forty blocks.”

I glanced down at my shoes. Yes, I wore ballet flats. But their soles were paper thin and would probably be worn through by the time we hit 39th Street.

“These are probably not walking 40 blocks uptown.”

“Girls and their ridiculous footwear.”

“Hey, when I put these on I thought I was meeting an old friend for a quick drink at a bar near my apartment.”

“They’re cute,” Duke said, grinning. “You too.”

“That’s more like it,” I murmured, sipping my chardonnay.

“Any word on when the power will be back on down here?” I asked Frank. *How much longer until I can check on the first quarter of my book? How long until I can have a hot shower and a cooked meal? How much longer until life gets back to normal?*

“There was an explosion at one of the power stations. Everything is really damaged. Definitely days. Maybe longer. We’re assured they’re working on it around the clock.”

“God bless those guys,” the guy to my left said. He was bald with thick black-rimmed glasses.

“Seriously. Them, and all the cops and firefighters,” a guy with a thick beard and flannel shirt chimed in. “They had a rough night and have more rough days ahead cleaning up after Geoffrey.”

“Any disasters?” Duke asked.

“The front of a building collapsed on Eighth Avenue,” the bald guy said. He pulled out his iPhone and showed me a picture he’d saved from Twitter before the power went out.

“Oh my God!” I gasped. “That’s right next to my building!”

“Good thing you were with me,” Duke said, leaning over and wrapping his arm around me as we looked at the picture of a building missing its front wall, leaving all the furniture within exposed as if in a doll house.

“Indeed,” I murmured, sipping my drink. I was so glad I didn’t have to weather the storm on my own. By storm I meant Geoffrey *and* Sam.

“How do you hear all this?” I asked.

“There are a few patches of cell reception along the river,” the bald guy said, and Frank agreed, adding, “that is, if you have any battery left.”

“Good to know,” Duke said. “God, I miss my iPhone. And the Internet.”

I imagined he missed them the way a smoker missed cigarettes. Or a junkie missed heroin. Or a teenage girl missed texting. I knew we would be walking over to the East River after these drinks to see if we could get service and check in with the rest of our friends. I had to let my mom know I was okay—she was probably freaking out. And I hoped Roxanna was safe as well.

Duke and the guys kept chatting but I tuned out their conversation and soaked up the atmosphere. This was, perhaps, what a tavern in the Regency era would have been like. This place had rough-hewn wood floors, tables, benches and a bar. But it was the light that made it seem like time gone by. No flickering fluorescents or bright bulbs. Just a mixture of daylight and candlelight. Everything seemed softer. I'd even say I felt like I was in an oil painting. I kept my eyes open and took in all in, taking advantage of this opportunity to experience life in a tavern without electricity, and planning to write about it later.

And then someone said something that caught my attention.

"I'm wondering when they'll reopen the bridges and tunnels?"

"No one is going in. And no one is going out," Frank answered.

Sam was still on this island. He was here, perhaps only blocks away. The thought of it made my skin crawl. But even worse was the thought that he might have gotten in his car to drive home in the storm when he'd been drunk beyond reason. Perhaps cops caught him trying to leave, gave him a sobriety test and put him jail for the duration of the storm. I had no idea what had happened. I only knew that he was out there, and angry and I was afraid to see him.

I glanced at Duke as he chatted with Frank. He'd be pissed to know that I was actually worried about Sam after what he'd done to me—and what he tried to do. I was kind of pissed with myself for caring. But I was a nice person who cared about others, particularly people I had loved with my whole heart for twelve years. And I did not want to lose my ability to experience empathy because of one awful experience.

I still didn't want to see him. I still *hated* the idea that he was somewhere on this island.

I tuned back into the conversation about all the ways in which the city was shut down or barely working but still carrying on.

"Wait—if the power isn't on and there's no way out of the city, what are we going to do about your IPO day and my reunion?"

"We'll figure something out," Duke said confidently—and too quickly. We hadn't had that mature, logical conversation I was supposed to initiate. Now was as good a time as any, right?

"But we should come up with a plan," I said. Because that's what I did—planned. Outlined. Prepared.

"It's too soon to plan," Duke countered. "We don't know if there will be power or if we can get out of the city. We might end up spending the night eating cereal and drinking warm beer in my apartment."

I made an unladylike face. And then persisted in making Duke share my worries.

"But if the power comes back on," I started, "your party is at the same time as mine."

"We'll go to both," he replied with an easy shrug.

"How? Logistically, it's practically impossible. Both events are from six to nine, with an hour and half drive in between them."

"I don't know, Jane," Duke answered, completely at ease and unconcerned by an issue that was kind of consuming me at the moment. "I'll figure something out. Let's not worry if we don't have to and don't imagine the worst-case scenarios."

"I'm writer. It's my job to imagine worst-case scenarios," I muttered. I also had a brain for

imagining dramatic events, and hosting imaginary arguments and falling for the luscious fantasies I made up. What served me well in writing fiction could complicate things in real life.

I knew it was a bit ridiculous to worry about these two parties right now—or even at all. I mean really, what a fabulous problem to have! Do I go to the hottest party in Manhattan with my billionaire boyfriend? Or do I show up at my reunion, full of people who dumped me and fired me, with my billionaire boyfriend by my side? And let's not forget my popular romance novels and the killer dress I would buy with my royalty money . . .

What worried me was old issues between me and Duke resurfacing. I knew he had feelings for me. I knew I wasn't just any other girl to him. But I didn't know that, if he had to choose, he would pick me over his work. I wasn't crazy to worry about that—it had already happened before.

Somehow, we made it work. But sometimes I wondered if he thought his work and his stuff were more important than mine.

After we finished our drinks and gleaned every last bit of info from the bartender, Duke and I headed out, holding hands as we walked toward the river.

“Are you OK?” Duke asked. “You've been really quiet.”

“What's going to happen when Project-TK IPOs?”

“I'll be a billionaire in truth, so people can finally stop calling me the Bad Boy Billionaire with all that snark.”

For Duke, the success of Project-TK was intimately tangled up with his two previous and massive failures. He'd had a billion bucks and lost it. Built one company, only to have it fail spectacularly. Everyone had written him off. This was his chance at redemption.

But what about *after* redemption and triumph?

“Will you be crazy busy?” I asked.

“Probably,” he said, squeezing my hand.

“Too busy for me?” That was really the question on my mind. My heart.

“I'll make time for my girl,” he said firmly. Then he smiled that infamous, roguish smile and his blue eyes sparkled and still . . . still . . . he took my breath away.

Then I tripped over the sidewalk and lurched forward.

“Careful,” he said, catching me.

“I'm a little tipsy. And I had just one glass of wine.”

Like the other night. Just one glass.

“Do you think it was my fault?” I asked suddenly, as the awful thought occurred to me. Had I somehow *asked* for what happened to me?

“What are you talking about?” Duke asked, confused.

“The bad thing that happened with Sam. I had been drinking. Just a glass of wine, but I hadn't eaten so I was probably a bit tipsy. Was it my fault?”

Duke stopped. He turned to face me, placed his palms on my cheeks and made sure I was looking into his eyes when he replied.

“No, it was not your fault,” Duke said firmly. “No woman deserves what happened to you, and I don't care how much she's had to drink. He's a pathetic ass and if I ever see him, I will beat

the crap out of him. You did not deserve what happened.”

“It was just one glass,” I said in a small voice.

“Even if it had been ten,” Duke said, “it shouldn’t have happened. Either way, Sam is to blame.”

“Thank you,” I said. I knew it, logically. But those awful girl doubts crept in. Duke chased them away. I inhaled and exhaled and resolved to not to doubt myself so much.

“Are you sure you don’t want to involve the cops?” Duke asked, anguish in his voice.

I knew I should. I knew what Sam did was wrong. But the more I thought about it, the more I couldn’t see the point. Would the police even believe me? I had the bruises on my arms, but no one had seen the assault and I doubted we could track Sam down with the city in such a mess. The police were probably busy with other stuff right now.

Sam was going through a rough patch. A trip to jail wouldn’t help. I had loved him once and didn’t want to ruin his life over a stupid thing he did when drunk.

But then again . . . how many men went through rough patches and got drunk and didn’t assault women who cared for them? Plenty. But how could I have loved someone who had this capacity for violence lurking inside of him? It was hard to reconcile and I quickly gave up trying. I just wanted to forget.

We got to the East River after crossing over the FDR. Lots of people were out, competing for a patch of cell service. We wandered until our phones started vibrating with incoming messages.

Sam Chase: I’m sorry

Sam Chase: R U ok?

Mom: Just want to check in on you! Let me know you’re all snug as a bug and ok!

Sam Chase: Please let me know you’re ok.

Sam Chase: I’m so sorry. I don’t know what came over me.

Roxanna Lane: I’m with mystery man at his place. Are you ok?

Sam Chase: Jane . . .

Sam Chase: Please Jane. I’m sorry.

Mom: Janie! I’m so worried about you. Let me know that you’re ok.

I replied to my mom and Roxanna letting them know I was fine and with Duke. I deleted all the messages from Sam—it felt so good.

“Any news?” Duke asked.

I shook my head no. “You?”

As we walked home, he told me all about his team, where they were stranded and how everyone was making plans to meet up at apartments of those with power. So they could keep working. The world went on. Even without power.

LATER, DUSK WAS falling and we faced another cool evening lit by candlelight. I sat on the couch

gazing shamelessly at Duke. He stood, hands in his pockets, staring out the window.

“Another romantic night in,” Duke said, turning to me.

“Is it wrong if I say that I’m tired of romantic nights in?” I replied, shutting my notebook and shaking out my hands. Seriously: how did people handwrite so much?

Duke took my hands in his and started to massage them, rubbing out all of the tension. I sighed. Bliss.

“What do you want to do tonight?” he asked.

“Take a shower. A long, hot shower.” It was the truth. It was also impossible. There was no running water this high up without the electric pump working.

“And your second choice?” Duke asked with a wry smile.

“I want my own clothes. And a proper meal. And real light. And toilets that flush.”

“Not loving your taste of Regency living?”

“I love how flattering candlelight is,” I conceded. Everything little thing was so soft and lovely when lit by candles instead of overhead fluorescents. “But I confess: I want my modern conveniences back.”

“I could boil water on the stove and make you a bath.”

“We don’t have water,” I grumbled. Buildings this tall required electricity to pump water to the higher floors. Running water wasn’t an option. God, I missed it.

“We’re really screwed aren’t we?” Duke said, grinning, even though there was nothing amusing about his. Still, his amusement was kind of infectious and I couldn’t help but smile and sigh and lament my tragic fate of having my hands massaged by my hot, devoted boyfriend after a day of writing what felt like a truly great book.

“I told you. I had the worst luck lately.” But maybe I was kind of lucky. Because I had found a man I loved and work I loved.

“And I told you I’m lucky.”

He pressed a kiss on my lips. Just a quick little press of his lips against mine. I wanted more. I didn’t want to feel Sam on me anymore. I wanted new feelings to wash away the old ones.

“Since we’re living it up Regency style,” Duke began, “why don’t we play cards, drink brandy and make ridiculous wagers?”

“How do you know all that?”

“I read your books, Janine,” he said, calling me a wrong version of my name, as he did to be cute sometimes.

Not being a Regency gentleman, Duke did not have brandy stashed in his apartment. Unfortunately, he didn’t have cards, either. He did have a bottle of really good whiskey.

“Now what do we do,” I asked after we settled on barstools at the kitchen counter with our drinks. A mass of candles were scattered around, illuminating this little corner of the world.

Before he answered, Duke checked his iPhone. Of course it was off, and he was having a phantom phone moment. “Damn it. Habit,” he said. “What did people do before the Internet and Twitter?”

“I once read about an eighteenth century house party in which all the guests would write and exchange little notes to each other after supper. It was like instant messenger before the Internet.”

“Are you trying to get me to write you love notes?”

“Maybe. Or perhaps I have another ulterior motive,” I said. Without waiting for his response, I ripped out a sheet of paper from my notebook and wrote something across the top. Then I folded the paper and slipped it across the counter to him.

How did you meet Felicity?

“It’s been on my mind,” I confessed.

He scrawled a quick response and pushed the paper back to me: *I knew you were going to ask me about her.*

I pursed my lips, annoyed. That wasn’t an answer. I gazed at him for a second and then wrote: *Is anything in her book true?*

Duke grinned and wrote quickly: *She does mention that I’m the greatest lover she’s ever had.*

Finding that it’s easier for me to write how I feel, rather than say it out loud, I wrote:

I don’t want to hear about you with other lovers.

“Me neither,” Duke said softly. We gazed each other. The candles flickered. No one spoke, no one wrote. But something was understood.

Duke wrote something on our little sheet of paper and pushed it over to me.

I read it: *Where do you see yourself in five years?*

“What is this, a job interview?” I said with a laugh. He just shrugged and pointed to my pen and paper. I was supposed to answer. For a second I tapped the pen against my lips, thinking. Then I wrote the truth:

For the first time, I have no idea where I want to be. I have no plans. I want to be happy. Writing makes me happy.

And then I hesitated because this was, possibly, a big question with a big answer. Then I added one more line:

You make me happy.

It was as close as I could come to saying that I wanted to be with him in five years. Or maybe forever.

Duke then started to write what seemed to be a novel. I watched him as he wrote. Dark tousled hair falling forward into his eyes, fixed on the sheet of paper. His hands strong and determined. His lips parted slightly and I imagined kissing him.

We—me and Felicity—had a thing. A relationship. But we were too young and had too much money, which led to too much trouble. She wasn’t good for me and I wasn’t good for her. We broke up years ago. She’s writing the book because she needs money for her brother’s medical bills. I offered to pay because if it weren’t for me fucking up the company, as employee #4 she’d be a millionaire. But she wanted to do this for herself. So I don’t care what she says about me. I owe her this. If you trust me, those old secrets can’t hurt me now.

But I want you to know the really important stuff: I just want to be with you.

I scanned the words, letting out a deep breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. I knew him . . . maybe not all the details . . . but I knew the real man underneath it all and he was good. He was kind. He was generous. And we were in love. There was only one response to what he had written.

I leaned over and pressed my lips to his. It was a slow, gentle, tentative kiss. Kind of like a first kiss when you're still young and unsure. After what had happened . . . this was like starting over.

My body responded to this kiss, to Duke, just like it had before. I felt everything in me soften, and I felt warm from the inside out. He reached out for me, sliding his fingers through my hair and lightly cupping my cheeks in his palms. I felt cherished. I felt loved.

We kissed there until the candles burned down to nothing. Then we moved to the bedroom, hand in hand. We kissed—just kissed—late into the night. There was something so sweet, innocent, patient and pure about it. Tonight I needed sweet, innocent, patient and pure. So I indulged in the particular loveliness that is an exquisite and epic kiss. Just a kiss . . . but I felt it all over.

Chapter Seven

I WOKE UP the next morning in Duke's king-sized bed—alone. Reluctant to leave the warmth but curious about where he was, I pulled on more of his clothes—which didn't fit at all—and padded out to the kitchen.

"Duke?" I called out his name a few times. No answer. I checked all over the apartment. There was a pot of coffee on, but it had gone cold and he was gone. He must have left hours ago.

"Could have left a note," I grumbled as I heated up the coffee on the stove.

At first I figured he'd just ventured out to the store again—perhaps he found more cash or had more stock options to give out. I sat down with my notebook, pen and mug of coffee and began to write. But when an hour or two had passed and Duke hadn't returned, I began to get nervous.

Where was he?

Another hour passed. I got annoyed. So annoyed that I couldn't concentrate on writing. I started having imaginary fights with him in my head—upon his imagined return I would rage at him for disappearing without leaving a note. That is, when I wasn't alternating between imagining some tragedy having befallen him. What if he had fallen down the dark stairwell and broken his neck? What if a tree branch fell on him as he was searching for an open bodega?

Curses to the mind of a writer!

My annoyance turned to anger mixed with serious worry. I had resorted to pacing and looking out the windows for signs of him when he finally returned later in the afternoon.

"Where have you been?" I thundered the minute he stepped into the apartment.

"Exploring," he said with a grin, as if he wasn't aware that I was now furious for having been left alone, clueless.

"You could have left a note!" I said sharply. "I didn't know where you had gone or what had happened to you. I was worried! Now that you are obviously fine, I am just pissed off!"

"Shhh, Janet . . ." he murmured, using one of his pet names for me. "Stop freaking out. You want to hear what I did."

I folded my arms over my chest.

"What did you do?" I grumbled. He crossed the room and pulled me into his arms. I softened

against him.

“There’s a room at the Lowell Hotel uptown waiting for you. It has hot running water, toilets that flush, heat, light, and Wi-Fi. And room service. It has every modern-day amenity. So pack your bags, Sweater-Set. We’re going uptown.”

He had me at hotel room. Everything else was icing on a cake.

“Where exactly is this paradise?”

“Sixty-third and Madison,” he answered.

I walked past him, put on my ballet flats and picked up my purse.

“I’m packed. Let’s get out of here.”

“I’m not. Give me a few seconds to get some clean T-shirts and stuff.”

I followed him to the bedroom. He pulled a backpack from his closet and stuffed it with a bunch of his T-shirts, clean underwear, socks and other necessities. That was the thing about Duke: He was insanely rich and lived in a fabulous apartment. But he kept everything else simple. Within minutes we were packed and on our way uptown.

“I don’t suppose this hotel has clean clothes for me?”

“It could,” Duke answered. “The shops uptown are all open. It’s like the hurricane never happened up there. Or we could stop at your place on our way.”

“Isn’t my place out of the way?” Fifteenth and Eighth wasn’t exactly in the path of Duke’s place and this magical luxury wonderland awaiting me at Sixty-third and Madison.

“Maybe a little. But it’s really only, like, three miles,” Duke said. “I’m sure we can handle it. Especially if you change into more practical shoes.”

“Elizabeth Bennett walks three miles on her way to Netherfield,” I said. “If Elizabeth can do it, so can I.”

“I don’t really know what that means, but you can explain it to me on the way,” Duke replied.

I just grinned and asked, “How badly do you want to Google it?”

He grinned right back. “Let’s walk faster. The sooner we get uptown, the sooner I get Wi-Fi.”

IT WAS AN easy walk over to my place through Washington Square Park and up Greenwich Avenue. We saw the building where the entire front wall had fallen off. The sidewalk had been roped off and police officers milled about.

Just after that, we turned the corner to my street. We’d only gone a few steps when my building came into view.

I stopped in my tracks.

“What is it?” Duke asked, looking at me and then following my gaze.

Sam was sitting on the front stoop of my building.

“Jane!” Sam called out my name when he saw me. Duke’s head snapped up sharply. He dropped the bag he’d been holding and lunged toward Sam.

First his fist slammed into Sam’s jaw and his head snapped back. I might have screamed. Then Duke planted another punch in Sam’s stomach and he doubled over as he fell to the sidewalk.

“Stop!”

Duke just dropped down and kept throwing punches. A crowd gathered—where had they been the other night when I needed help? Some of them whipped out their phones and began to take pictures and record the fight. I felt my blood start to boil. Duke did not need the consequences of a public brawl right now—his reputation in the media was fragile enough and his IPO was just days away.

I didn't really care about Sam's reputation. Or the black eyes and bruises he was going to stumble away with.

Sam raised his hands to shield his face—but I think that was instinctive. He didn't hit Duke back because he knew he deserved this pain. That realization only made me more pissed.

He knew better.

He did it anyway.

The words "Stop!" and "Enough!" were on the tip of my tongue. For a moment, I bit them back. But then logic and reason made their appeal. Duke needed to stay out of the news and Sam needed to get off this island and out of my life.

"Stop! Duke, stop!" I cried out.

I grabbed the back of Duke's T-shirt and pulled him back just as police officers from around the corner started to push through. The crowd thronged around them.

"Oh hell," I muttered.

"Is there a problem ma'am?" The officer leveled a stare at me. I felt myself instinctively shrinking in the face of authority. What could I say? I glanced down at my current boyfriend, whose hands were a swollen, red mess and my ex-boyfriend, who was a bruised and bloody mess writhing on the sidewalk.

"Not anymore," I told the officer.

I did not fancy a trip to jail right now. I wanted a trip to that uptown hotel wonderland Duke had promised me. But first, I wanted to head up to my apartment for clean clothes, make up and other little frivolities and forget all about this drama.

After some negotiating with the officers, they eventually left and the crowd dispersed. Sam had clambered to his feet. He wiped his bloody nose on his sleeve.

"I thought you two were fake," he said, glancing from me to Duke and back again. As if that explained *anything*.

"And I thought we were real," I replied softly. By "we" I meant me and Sam. I thought we had really loved each other. I thought we mattered to each other. But I didn't know about that anymore.

"I just wanted to apologize," he said. "I was drunk. In a bad place. I'm sorry, Jane." Sam reached out for my hand. Duke lunged forward, Sam and I jumped away from each other.

"We're done, Sam," I said softly, standing behind Duke's tall form.

"I'll see you around, I guess," Sam said with a nod. "Maybe I'll see you at the reunion on Friday."

On the spot I decided that I wasn't going to the reunion after all.

Chapter Eight

AFTER CLIMBING THE steep front stoop and another four flights of stairs, and undoing the two locks, Duke and I entered the apartment I shared with Roxanna. Everything was just as I had left it. It seemed Roxanna had weathered the storm with her mystery man at his place. I changed clothes, packed a few things (clean underwear! Make up! My own clothes! My laptop!). I found some extra emergency cash I had stashed in my jewelry box. An empty space stared up at me.

“I lost our ring,” I said sadly.

“What are you talking about?” Duke asked.

“The fake engagement ring I got for our charade. I lost it.”

“It was just cubic zirconia, right?”

“Yeah, but it had sentimental memories. I feel like my luck went bad as soon as I lost it,” I said with a sigh.

“Jane . . .” He was looking at me earnestly. My heart started to thud. He seemed larger than life in this small room.

“What is it?”

He hesitated. And then said, “I’m sure it’ll turn up. Let’s go get you a hot shower and room service.”

“Just let me leave a note for Roxanna.” I found some paper—the back of a credit card bill—and scrawled a quick note.

Heading up to The Lowell hotel at 63rd and Madison with Duke. Come over. Hope you survived the storm.

With a bag packed, we went back down the stairs and tried to get a cab but didn’t have any luck. I’d seen more available cabs during a rainy rush hour. So we walked more than 50 blocks. Still, it wasn’t as far as the distance Elizabeth walked to Netherfield.

THE LOBBY OF the Lowell Hotel was, in a word, fancy. I was, in a word, completely unpresentable. It’d been a while since I showered. Days had passed since I had applied make up or even combed my hair. I had just walked, like, fifty blocks. All I could think about was how close I was to a hot

shower, a hot meal and clean underwear. *Heaven.*

“Good afternoon, Mr. Austen,” the posh lady at the front desk said when we walked in. “Your room is ready now.”

We took the elevator up to the tenth floor and walked down the hall to our room. Duke opened the door and we stepped into a massive suite.

The spacious sitting room was decorated in understated neutrals—blues, greys, beige. There were big couches you could sink into, a gleaming wooden dining table that could seat eight, a big flat screen TV, plenty of light from large windows and French doors that opened to a private terrace that overlooked a quiet courtyard. To the right I saw double doors leading into a master bedroom with a king-sized bed made up with crisp white linens and loaded with pillows. Opposite was another room with two double beds—in case Roxanna wanted to crash with us, Duke explained.

Everything was gorgeous, luxurious, and I wanted to weep with relief and gratitude.

“Don’t cry yet. Not until you’ve seen the bathroom. And the shower.”

The bathroom was a large expanse of grey marble with a deep soaking tub and a separate glass walled shower. Freshly fold white towels were stacked on a rack, and fluffy terry cloth robes were hung up on the door.

Heaven was a five-star hotel.

Duke took my bags out my hand.

“Why don’t we get you into a luxurious, hot shower,” he said, leading me back to the bathroom. “You take as long as you want and don’t worry about me. I’ll keep myself amused with the Wi-Fi.”

I smiled. “You and your Internet obsession.”

“My Internet obsession is paying for this room,” he said with a grin. Then he said, “Enjoy,” and shut the doors behind him.

I turned on the water. When the glass walls began to steam up, I stripped off my clothes and took a good look at myself in the mirror. The bruises on my arms stood out. They had faded to a gross yellow-ish purple. But if I looked past the marks of that bad thing, the rest of my skin was lovely. Pale, smooth, soft. My breasts were still firm and round. I was still pretty slender—all that walking around the city and the Hurricane diet. I was still pretty. Except for that haunted look in my eyes.

I wanted to let it go. On the other side of the door was a man who cared for me. He took care of me. He loved me. He would never hurt me. I wanted to revel in that. I did not want to be caught up in bad memories of an attack I didn’t deserve by a man I no longer loved.

I stepped into the shower and let the hot water wash over me. I unwrapped a fresh bar of soap and I lathered up. I tried to wash it all away. What had happened would never leave me. But I didn’t want it to define me. So I washed my hair—twice. I scrubbed and washed until I used up that little mini hotel bar of soap.

Eventually, I felt clean. Refreshed.

I had put all my heartache and troubles onto the page—literally, that notebook was tucked into my bag—so I didn’t need to carry it around any longer. And I had washed away Sam’s cruel

touch. I hadn't done anything wrong. But I had a lot of things going right.

I wrapped myself in one of those fluffy robes and I blow dried my hair just because I could. Then, having washed my past down the drain, I went out to my future.

"Hey," I said, pressing a kiss on Duke's cheek. His head was, as usual, bent over his phone *and* laptop. But he looked up at me, blue eyes sparkling. "Hey you."

"I feel better."

"You look good. Really good."

"I think I might lie down for a moment," I said, giving him a coy smile over my shoulder as I strolled into the bedroom. A king-sized bed beckoned.

"I think I might join you," he said, shutting his laptop and setting aside his phone.

"But the Wi-Fi might get lonely . . ." I murmured.

"Fuck the Wi-Fi," he said as he stood and followed me into the bedroom.

He caught up with me, pressing a kiss on the back of my neck. I sighed and turned my head to kiss him. Duke's hand stretched around to untie the knot of my robe before pushing it to the floor.

Totally nude, I turned to face him.

His gaze darkened when it settled on my bruises.

"Duke," I whispered. "Make me forget everything."

"As my girl wishes," he murmured. "Tell me what you want."

And then he gazed leisurely at the rest of me. I was achingly aware of his attentions focused on my breasts—my nipples hardened into stiff peaks from his attentions. Then his gaze traveled lower, to the curve of my hips and lower. A fire started in my belly. I was naked, but I wasn't cold. Not when my lover looked at me like that.

"I want you," I whispered.

His gaze smoldered. I felt it everywhere, from the curve of my calves, to the soft skin of my thighs, and higher and higher.

"Kiss me," I whispered.

His mouth crashed down on mine for the kind of kiss that made a girl weak in the knees and forgetful of everything. I fisted my hands around the jersey cotton of his T-shirt, pulling him close to me, feeling the fabric brush against my breasts. I might have moaned. The Facebook T-shirt he wore soon hit the floor and my palms skimmed across the muscles of his chest, going lower, until I hit the waistband of his jeans. I undid the button, the zipper, and pushed his jeans down his hips.

His erection was freed and I took the hot, hard length of it in my hand, stroking in a firm, steady grasp. His head rolled back, eyes closed, a murmur across his lips.

He wanted me.

But I was in control. That made me feel incredibly sexy and ready.

I strolled over to the bed, an inviting glance over my shoulder. Duke followed. We lay side by side on the bed, just kissing as if it were the end all, be all.

I ran my fingers through his hair.

He caressed my breasts and their sensitive peaks with his hands and mouth until I was

gasping with almost intolerable amounts of pleasure. Almost.

“Tell me what you want,” he whispered again.

“I want more. Lower.”

His hand slid lower, to tease me further. His hands, which I noted out of the corner of my eye, were bruised from the fight earlier today. Hands that had hurt Sam so badly earlier in defense of my honor were now stoking the fire burning inside of me, making me forget all other thoughts. I just wanted to feel . . .

. . . his fingers, expertly touching me in the most sensitive place with a gentle but insistent pressure that was driving me crazy.

. . . his lips against mine, his tongue tangled with mine.

. . . his body, all firm muscles and soft skin, pressed against mine.

I breathed in deeply, savoring his scent. I threaded my fingers through his already tousled hair wanting more of him.

“I want you,” I whispered. It was only then that he reached for a condom, put it on and pushed inside of me. I gasped and arched my back. With Duke inside me and his arms around me, I stopped thinking and started just feeling each and every strong thrust. There was the fullness of his cock inside of me, moving in a steady, relentless rhythm. And I couldn’t get a decent breath of air. My heart was pounding. The heat and tension within were building . . . pushing against the boundaries . . . my skin was hot and insanely sensitive. He reached down, touched me there, pressed a kiss on my mouth and I couldn’t take it anymore. I cried out. He came with me, thrusting hard as he shouted my name.

Afterwards, I lay in his embrace on a king-sized bed with luxuriously soft sheets in a five-star hotel room. So what if I had lost my cubic zirconia ring? I could buy another. So what if I had lost my pages? I could rewrite them. I was damn lucky after all, because I was safe and protected and warmed by the arms of a man who loved me.

The perfect moment was interrupted by a knock at the door.

Chapter Nine

I PULLED ON my robe and opened the door to our hotel suite. A familiar face grinned at me.

“You’re not room service,” I said.

“You ordered room service?” Roxanna echoed. “Fabulous. I’m starving. I walked from downtown.”

“I take it you got my note,” I said as she pushed past me into the hotel room.

“Yup. Wow, look at this place!” Roxanna said as she dropped her bag in the middle of the living room and peered around. I quickly shut the doors to the master bedroom where Duke was sleeping. “Duke may not spend his money on clothes but he’s not a cheap bastard when it comes to hotel rooms.”

“Priorities. He has them,” I said, with a satisfied smile.

“So how was your hurricane?” Roxanna asked. “Mine was fantastic.” She smiled in a way that suggested she spent the whole time drinking and having phenomenal sex with her mystery lover.

“It was fine,” I answered.

“It seems more than fine,” Roxanna said, eyeing me. “You have sex hair.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, trying to sound innocent. But I felt the tousled and slightly knotted strands of my hair and understood what she was talking about.

I was saved from replying by Duke’s arrival. He’d taken a quick shower and put on clean clothes.

“Hey, Roxanna,” Duke said.

“Hello Mr. Austen. Hope you don’t mind my crashing your love nest.”

“Please, make yourself at home. I got a room for you,” he said, with a nod in the direction of the second bedroom.

“You’re too kind,” she said, slinking off to the spare bedroom, where she left her bags and changed into a robe. In the living room, Duke just gave me A Look.

“You were right to get a second bedroom,” I said.

“I know,” he said, grinning.

“Let’s talk about room service,” Roxanna said. Duke and I did not disagree. We all conferred over the menu and then called in our order of tuna and avocado tartar, mixed green salads, a

hamburger for Duke and two orders of steak frites for Roxanna and I.

We chatted about our time during the hurricane—she had crashed with her boyfriend at his Soho apartment. She did not elaborate on how they kept themselves entertained, but I had an idea. Duke and I told her about our adventure—complete with a woeful lack of supplies, dancing without music, and lamenting the loss of electricity.

“Question,” Roxanna said, kind of changing the subject. “What was your ex-boyfriend doing on our front stoop with a bloody nose and black eye?”

“Is he still there?” Duke and I asked this question at the same time—his voice was angry, mine was weary.

Duke turned to me: “Are you sure you don’t want to call the cops?”

“I might. Though I think you doled out one hell of a punishment. Darling.”

“The cops?” Roxanna echoed. Then, with a firm command, she said, “Spill.”

“There was just . . .” I didn’t know the right words. “There was a thing. With Sam. The night of the storm.”

“A thing?” Roxanna asked flatly. She glanced from my grim expression to Duke’s and then back to me. Pursing her lips, she strolled into the kitchen—of course this massive suite had a complete kitchen—and found the stash of mini alcohol bottles so quickly one had to wonder if she had a finely honed radar for alcohol.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Do you know how expensive things from the mini bar are?”

“In two days’ time that guy will be a billionaire,” Roxanna said, pointing at Duke. “I think he can afford some miniature alcohol bottles from the mini bar.”

“I can,” Duke said. “And get me one.”

She chucked a small bottle of Jack Daniels his way. I sighed and gave in.

“Is there chardonnay?” I asked.

Wine and whiskey in hand, Duke and I explained what had happened with Sam. Roxanna’s eyes got wide with shock. Then they narrowed angrily. She might have paced around the room while I told her about the drinks, and what happened up against the brick wall after the drinks.

“That fucker,” she swore. I suspected there was more to her tirade, but it was thwarted by the arrival of room service. We all dug into what was our first proper hot meal in days. There wasn’t much talking until the plates were clean and Roxanna and I were devouring the last of the French fries.

“Do you ladies mind if I head out to the office? I have to get my new lawyer up to speed since the previous one made a mess of everything.”

“Go ahead,” I answered. “We’re fine here, thanks to you.”

He gave a goodbye kiss, grabbed his laptop bag and headed out.

“A thing,” Roxanna repeated.

“An assault-type thing. Whatever. It was horrible. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay. So don’t talk about it,” Roxanna said. Because sometimes, things were just that simple with her.

“So I’m not going to the party. Obvs.”

“Yes, you are,” she said firmly.

“Are you crazy?” I asked, aghast.

“Are you a pansy?” she challenged.

“How can you call me that for simply wanting to avoid my crazy ex-boyfriend? God, it’s just basic safety. I shouldn’t be alone in his presence.”

“Point taken. But let me remind, there will be other people at this party. And Jane, let me remind you what you did to radiate awesomeness while attending this party. You faked an engagement. You fell in love. You busted your ass to write fucking novels so you could keep your word. You can’t let your douchey ex-boyfriend scare you off from enjoying your night of triumph.”

“But Duke can’t go and I don’t want to go alone,” I protested.

“Can’t or won’t?” Roxanna challenged, with a lift of her brow.

“I suppose it depends on when the power comes back downtown, if Wall Street opens and the place where they’re having the party . . .”

Roxanna cut me off.

“None of that matters. You want to go to this party, Jane.”

I did, even though I knew it wouldn’t be a great party. Just a little thing in my hometown with all my friends who had married and had babies and lived the life I had imagined for myself. The food and the wine would be bad. But I would show everyone that I wasn’t the failure they thought I had become for a hot second there, when my boyfriend had dumped me on the same day I got fired from my job.

Also, Sam would be there.

“It’s a stupid little party,” I said. “You said so yourself just two days ago.”

“Well now I think you should go, looking superhot,” Roxanna declared. God, I envied her confidence. “And you look that fucker in the eye and let him know that he doesn’t own you, he doesn’t hurt you, or fuck with you anymore.”

“Won’t that be rubbing everything in? He was pretty messed up about being homeless, jobless and single. Seeing me hot, successful, and in an amazing relationship might just be salt in his wound.”

“Don’t hide your light under a bushel,” Roxanna retorted, and I was momentarily rendered speechless. We exchanged shocked glances. She couldn’t believe what she’d said either.

“Did you just quote the Bible?” I gasped.

“I’ve been drinking,” she muttered.

“You have a point. Maybe. I’m also just scared to go alone while I’m having such shitty luck. First I lost my ring. Then my favorite sweater-set. And then pages of a new manuscript I wrote on Duke’s computer before the power went out. How can I go into such a fraught situation with such bad luck?”

“Don’t be afraid even when you’re afraid,” she said with a shrug. As if it were that simple. But what if it was?

“Since when did you get so philosophical?” I asked. “What are you drinking? What happened to my friend?”

“Being above 14th Street is warping my brain,” Roxanna said. Then with a mischievous grin

that made me nervous, she added, “For what it’s worth, I think your luck is about to change. Now let’s go buy you a totally fierce dress. Barney’s is within walking distance.”

Chapter Ten

The night before the parties

THE POWER WAS back on in Lower Manhattan. It was said that cheers erupted when the lights finally flashed on. I would have loved to hear it—but not enough to trade in my luxurious uptown digs. For a few days, Duke, Roxanna and I had commuted to our offices by foot. At night, we watched movies and got room service. Then Duke and I slipped off to our king-sized bed and made love. From his every little touch, to his generosity, the man made me feel like a princess.

That didn't mean everything was perfect.

Because the power was back on downtown, it meant that Duke and the Project-TK team was still scheduled to ring the opening bell at the Stock Exchange tomorrow morning.

As planned, they would celebrate their \$20 billion IPO with an early party that night. Much as I wanted to go, Roxanna was right. I needed to go to my little party with my head held high. Then I'd scamper right back to the city and no longer look back at my life in Milford.

Duke, however, had a different idea.

"I don't think you should go alone," he said after a room service dinner for just the two of us—Roxanna had gone off with her boyfriend.

"So go with me," I replied. It was that simple.

"I can't go with you," he said, anguished. "I want to, but I can't. I want you to come to my party with me."

"*Won't*. You won't go."

He was the boss. He was a flipping billionaire—or he would be by this time tomorrow. This was a man who won and lost fortunes. Crowds parted to make way for him. I didn't believe for a second that he *couldn't* do something he wanted to. But then again, he had gotten to this pinnacle of success because he put his company and his team before himself.

"People are counting on me, Jane. Not just all the people on my team, but hundreds and thousands of investors. Twenty billion bucks are on the line here. It's a big fucking deal. I can't just ditch it."

I got that. Truly. And his party did sound more fun, but if this relationship was really going to make it, there were some things that needed to be said, like:

"Your stuff is always more important than mine," I pointed out. "The stakes are always higher. There's always more money involved. And it's always about *your* dreams. Well, what

about mine?”

“Is your dream really attending your small town high school reunion? And with your fucking douche of an ex-boyfriend there, too. What’s up with that, Jane?”

“I want to show him that he didn’t ruin me,” I said, head held high.

“Awww,” Duke replied sarcastically and my brows shot up, shocked. “Why didn’t you call the cops, Jane?”

“I’m thinking about it. But I just don’t see the point—will they even believe me now? He’s going through a rough patch. How will the cops help? How will a criminal record help him? He knows he fucked up. You made that pretty clear. And I won’t be in his life anymore. I think that’s clear to everyone, even Sam.”

“What about the other girls?” Duke asked.

“What other girls?”

“Do you think you’re the first, the last, the one and only that Sam will do this too?” Duke asked angrily.

That cut deeply, and my temper flared at the suggestion that I was just another girl, that I wasn’t special. But then again—what happened was about Sam’s issues. It could have been any girl.

Oh God, what if he did that—or worse—to another girl? I swore under my breath at Sam. Was I supposed to act in my own best interests? His? Or for some hypothetical sisterhood?

“I’ll think about it,” I said to Duke. “I promise.”

I couldn’t think about it now while he was all tense and glaring at me across the dinner table.

“And the party? How will potentially putting yourself in harm’s way at this party help anyone?” Duke asked. I could see how he got shit done at Project-TK. I felt myself wavering under the intensity of his focus. But I took a deep breath and reminded myself that he was my *partner*, not the boss of me.

“I won’t be alone,” I said. “I’ll have friends with me.”

“I don’t want you to go,” Duke said softly. “Not when I can’t protect you.”

We both glanced down at his hands. They were still bruised and swollen from the beating he’d given Sam the other day.

“So come with me,” I said. Again.

“I *can’t*.”

I laughed bitterly. “We had a deal, you know.”

His eyes flashed. He winced. He remembered.

“We had a deal,” I repeated. “I would pose as your fiancée to help you score that investment funding if you would be my hot date for this reunion. And now you’re renegeing on the deal we made. You wouldn’t have your big party if it weren’t for me. Because you’re so notoriously unreliable, aren’t you? Don’t hold up your end of the bargain, do you? Maybe if I was some big-shot investor or whatever.”

I was so angry that he wasn’t going with me, that he had broken a promise, that his big shot job always came ahead of mine, and just . . . argh! I stalked off to our bedroom and slammed the door behind me.

“Jane . . .”

“I’m going,” I shouted at the door. “With or without you.”

DUKE WOKE ME up the next morning. He’d gone ahead and ordered room service breakfast—a steaming pot of coffee along with pancakes, bacon, and a side of fruit.

“I’m sorry,” he said sincerely.

“This is quite an apology,” I said, eyeing the feast before me. He poured me a cup of coffee, added some milk, and handed it to me.

“I figured you’d be more amenable after you’ve had coffee and something to eat,” he said.

“You are a genius, aren’t you?” I said after a sip of coffee.

Duke just grinned. God, he was so handsome, especially when he grinned like that. Like a charming, devil-may-care, up-to-no-good-and-he-liked-it rogue. I couldn’t quite resist. I was still a little mad at him from our fight the night before. But the romantic gesture of breakfast and his smile started to make me feel better. Slightly.

“I’ve been thinking and I had an idea. Let’s go to my party. Wait—drink your coffee and hear me out,” he said when I opened my mouth to protest. “And then we get a car to take us out to yours.”

“That’s sweet, Duke, but it won’t work. I mean, just the tunnel traffic alone could take hours. I’ve thought about this. You go to yours and I’ll go to mine and then we can meet up later and tell each other all about it. In bed.”

“If we’re in bed, we’re not going to be talking.”

Our eyes met over the breakfast table. I had wicked thoughts. I know he did, too.

“I want to be there for you,” he said.

“I know,” I replied. I did want him there with me.

“Well,” he sighed. “If that’s really what you want.”

“I think it’s best.”

“I’ll get a driver to take you out there and bring you back to me.”

“Thanks, Duke.”

“Will you come down to Wall Street to ring the opening bell with me? It wouldn’t have happened without you Jane, and I can’t imagine that moment without you by my side.”

“Of course,” I said, smiling. This was a great reason to be late for work. “I’ll be there.”

“Thanks, Babe.” Then Duke checked the time on his phone and swore. “Shit, we have to leave here in thirty minutes.”

“So much for this breakfast,” I said with a sigh as I headed off to the shower. After blowing out my hair, I dressed in one of my sweater sets, a pleated skirt and black patent wedges. It wasn’t the most practical of outfits, but Duke’s driver would pick us up or we would just get a cab—right?

Chapter Eleven

EVEN UNDER IDEAL circumstances, getting from the Upper East Side down to Wall Street would be time consuming. We were not under ideal circumstances. The subways were still shut down. Cabs were scarce. Buses were slow, crowded and confusing.

“Where is your car and your driver?” I asked as we stood on the corner of Sixty-third and Madison with our hands in the air, trying to hail a cab.

“The Tesla is in a lot downtown and my driver can’t get into the city from his place in Queens.”

“Don’t you have a backup car and driver? Aren’t you a billionaire or something?”

“Not yet,” he said through gritted teeth, after glancing at the time on his phone again. “The backup car and driver are also stuck in traffic.”

“What about Citi Bike?”

“Good idea, Jane.” He gave me a quick kiss on the lips, grabbed my hand and we rushed over to the nearest docking station, in front of the Plaza Hotel at Fifty-ninth and Fifth Avenue, just south of the park.

“Aw come on!” Duke shouted at the empty docking station. “My luck has fucking run out.”

I winced. That was my fault. Maybe. I looked around, hoping to spot a cab. Everyone was unavailable or off duty. *Oh hell and damnation.* He couldn’t miss this! And then my gaze landed on something unexpected: the Regency answer to transportation. A horse and carriage, empty, and awaiting a customer.

“Excuse me, sir, can you take us down to Wall Street?” I asked.

The driver laughed in my face. “I can’t leave the park, lady.”

“Please,” I begged. “He’s got to get down to Wall Street by 9 a.m. to rig the opening bell. His company has a \$20 billion IPO this morning.”

The carriage driver looked over at Duke, with his disheveled hair, Project-TK T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. He burst out laughing. Again.

“I’ve seen plenty of fat cat business men and he ain’t it, honey. Cute story, though.”

“I know what you mean,” I said to the driver. “When I first met him, I thought he was an out-of-work actor tending bar at some hovel in Brooklyn. But it turns out, he’s the founder and CEO

of Project-TK. Which, as we mentioned, is about to have a \$20 billion IPO this morning.”

The driver eyed me and Duke.

I turned to Duke: “Can’t you offer him stock options or something?”

“If he’d believe me,” Duke muttered.

I glanced around, hoping for *something* to just . . . work. My gaze settled on an old man on a bench reading a copy of the *New York Post*. Duke’s picture was splashed across the front with the headline declaring him the Brawling Bad Boy Billionaire. The accompanying photograph showed Duke throwing a punch at Sam. I snatched the paper out of the old man’s hands, apologized profusely, and held it up next to Duke’s face.

“See! He’s about to be a billionaire and he’s very generous.”

“And dangerous,” the driver muttered.

“Jane . . .”

“No, this is your moment,” I said. “I can’t let you miss it. And neither can this driver who I will immortalize in my next book as either a hero or a villain, depending on if he’ll drive us downtown or not.”

For a moment, he thought about.

“You’ll cover the fines I’ll get?”

“And *more*,” Duke said. He held out his hand to shake on it.

“Climb in, kids,” he said gruffly. We did.

Before we could get comfortable on the red velvet upholstered seats, the driver cracked the whip and the black horse burst into a trot and pulled us out into traffic. We rode down Fifth Avenue, past Tiffany’s, the Prada Store, the line outside the Abercrombie store (Or more to the point: the line of girls waiting to have their picture taken with the scantily clad model with his six pack abs and low slung jeans). We passed Saks, St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Rockefeller Center, the New York Public Library where I would have to work a few hours from now, and then down past the Empire State building.

Around Madison Square Park we got caught in a snarl of traffic. The police cars and fire engines I saw suggested we might be parked here for a while and time was running out. I drummed my fingers along the side of the carriage, trying to calculate how many blocks we’d have to run in order to make it on time. I looked over at Duke; his head was bent over his phone.

“What are you looking at?”

“A YouTube video on how to ride a horse.”

“Why?”

“Because I think we have to do that next if we’re going to make it.” Duke then leaned forward to chat with the driver, Gregory, who would certainly appear favorably in my next novel.

“What’s this horse’s name?” Duke asked.

“Scout,” Gregory answered.

Before I knew it, Gregory had climbed down and was unhitching the carriage from Scout and giving Duke instructions on how to ride.

“Ready?” Gregory asked me.

“No! I don’t have the right outfit for this,” I grumbled. Heels and a skirt were not ideal for

riding astride. I had not factored horseback riding into my outfit selection this morning. I was wearing a skirt for lord's sake.

But ready or not, this was our only chance to get downtown in time. Gregory cupped his hands, indicating that I should step there to launch myself up onto the horse.

"You're kidding," I said flatly.

"You paid for a horse, not jokes," Gregory replied.

I climbed atop the horse and Duke climbed on after me. We both held onto the mane. Then Duke dug in his heels and we were off. On horseback. Through Manhattan.

The horse galloped down Broadway, past Houston, past Canal Street, past City Hall. Its hooves clattered on the macadam. The cars didn't seem to bother him at all. In fact, the horse seemed happy to be untethered from the carriage and exploring the city. Horns blared at us, people shouted at us, pedestrians got out their phones to take pictures and video. I held on tight, curled my toes in my shoes to keep them on, and held my breath.

By some miracle, no one was hurt, including the horse.

By some miracle, we arrived on time.

After being rushed through security we found ourselves on the podium at 8:59. A sea of guys in suits—traders—stood on the floor before us. Duke squeezed my hand. After a quick kiss on my lips, he rang the bell and the day of trading began.

By the end of the day, it was official: He was the Bad Boy Billionaire with the cash in the bank to prove it.

Chapter Twelve

The Milford Country Club Jane's high school anniversary reunion

THIS TIME YESTERDAY I had been so sure of my decision to attend this stupid party on my own. And now I was definitely regretting it. I stood off to the side of the main ballroom in the Milford Country Club checking Twitter. There were tons of tweets and twitpics from Duke's party. Everyone looked deliriously happy and utterly triumphant.

I was anything but deliriously happy and utterly triumphant as I strolled through the crowd of my former classmates on the terrace of the country club. For a moment I paused to watch the golfers on the course that lay just beyond the big, perfectly manicured and unnaturally green lawn that was probably loaded with toxic chemicals.

I sipped my warm chardonnay and glanced around for someone to talk to. I recognized a bunch of people from Facebook, but so many people were strangers. If I hadn't talked to them in high school, what did I have to say to them now? I shouldn't have come.

"Hey Jane."

I turned to see Steve Prewitt, a longtime friend of Sam's who was branch manager at the local bank, coached the Little League and had married an elementary school teacher. He and Sam often got together to watch football games and do the sort of guy stuff I tried to avoid. But he was a nice guy, so I smiled and said, "Hi Steve."

"That was a dick thing you did to Sam," he said abruptly.

"Excuse me?"

"Calling the cops on him when he's already having a rough time of it," Steve said, as if I were an idiot for not knowing what he was talking about. I hadn't involved the cops—but I had decided to call a hotline to find out what my options were. I wanted to be counted. I was told investigators would follow up with Sam. It would be less confrontational than calling police. I wanted him to understand what he did wasn't okay, and that he should get help. I wanted to do something to make it sure it didn't happen again, to another girl.

That was all—for now. I wondered how he found out.

"But . . . but he attacked me," I sputtered in response. How was I the one in the wrong here? I hugged my wine glass against my chest.

"Like he needs more problems," Steve said. "Especially after your 'boyfriend' beat the crap out

of him. Did you know his nose is broken? I was in the ER with him.”

I mumbled a sound of sympathy and then asked, “Is he here tonight?”

“Why, so you can call the cops on him? What, did you get a restraining order, too?”

I wished Duke were here. Steve’s confrontation was making me feel sick—my heart was racing and my palms were sweating. I just wanted to get away. But then I could hear Roxanna in my head: “What a dick. Are you seriously going to let him talk to you like that?”

“Mind your own business, Steve,” I said, forcing my voice to be strong. Then I walked away. It was just small town gossip. It was just Steve defending his friend in his own bone-headed way. But I still turned away, shaken.

I started heading toward the bar thinking I’d have one more glass of warm chardonnay and then get in the car and have the driver Duke hired take me back to the city. Everyone was looking at me and whispering. It seemed everyone knew what had happened, and were, unbelievably, taking Sam’s side. But then again—he was one of them and I wasn’t. Not anymore. It was time for me to go.

Skipping that last drink, I headed toward the exit but then I was interrupted by a pregnant blonde woman.

“Jane Sparks, is that you?”

After a second I placed her name.

“Allison! I haven’t seen you since seventh period algebra.”

“Don’t remind me,” she said. “How is the writing going? I’ve been reading your books when I’m up late feeding the baby,” she said, rubbing her belly in that way pregnant women did.

“Already?” She only looked a few months along.

“Oh, Dakota who is a year old, and Madison, who is 3.”

“Wow. You must be so busy.” If I had stuck to my life schedule, I’d be pregnant with my second now, and working part time. I could not fathom it. I felt that I was exactly where I needed to be in my life. I also felt that I didn’t belong here anymore.

“Oh, I am. I’m sure it doesn’t compare to your fabulous life in the city,” she said with a laugh. “But I’m happy. We’re happy.” She smiled radiantly. I didn’t doubt her joy for a second nor did I think she was at all jealous of my “fabulous life” in the city. We were right where we were supposed to be.

“Well, I can’t imagine fitting all those kids in an NYC apartment,” I said.

“Are the rents as crazy as they say?” A woman I vaguely recognized from U.S. AP history asked, cutting in. I couldn’t remember her name at all.

“Let’s just say I could have a three-bedroom house here for what my roommate and I pay in Chelsea.”

“I don’t know how you stand it there, Jane. All the noise, and commotion, and rats!” Allison said. “Everything is so expensive. And dangerous.”

“It’s pretty safe,” I said. I couldn’t say that the city wasn’t a huge noisy commotion with rats. It was. I loved it. I was totally, madly, completely in love with the city. Why had I come to this party when I could be with the guy I loved in the city I loved?

“But what about what happened with you and Sam?” Allison asked, lowering her voice.

“What happened with you and Sam?” The woman from U.S. history asked. Was her name Melinda? Melissa?

“Nevermind,” I said at the same time Allison said, “I’ll tell you later.”

“That could have happened anywhere,” I said, though inside my brain was shouting *what does that have to do with anything? Why does everyone know? Can this party get any worse?*

The answer to that last question was yes. This party could get even worse. And it did, with the appearance of the sort of tall, gorgeous, mean blonde woman who tended to make everyone else feel so inadequate, otherwise known as Kate Abbott.

“Hey Jane,” Kate said, striking a pose, as she looked me up and down in such a judgy way.

“Hi Kate,” I said, mustering a smile. I stood a little taller in the “totally fierce” black satin heels and “totally hot” little black dress that Roxanna persuaded me to buy at Barney’s, both of which were totally uncomfortable and a little too done up for this crowd. In this moment, the dress and the shoes were totally worth the splurge and discomfort.

Then Kate made a big show of looking to my left, then to my right, and then all around. She was obviously looking for someone.

“Where’s your billionaire boyfriend?” Kate asked, the question oh-so-cutting. “I don’t see him.”

I gave a tense smile. “He’s at his own party tonight, so he couldn’t make it.”

Allison, Kate, Arwen Kilpatrick, Melissa (Or Melinda?) and a few others all pulled faces of disappointment. They clearly were hoping to meet the Bad Boy Billionaire tonight.

I didn’t know if I was madder at Kate for being so provoking, or with Duke for not showing up for me when *we had a deal*. It was for moments exactly like this that I had wanted a hot, successful guy by my side. But the looks and the money didn’t matter now. I wanted my guy who I loved, who loved me back, to hold my hand and say something devastatingly romantic and to show the eternally vexing Kate Abbott that she couldn’t bully me.

“Are you sure he’s not your pretend boyfriend?” Kate, of course, burst into laughter because she was so funny. “I read on the Internet that the whole thing was a sham!”

“If you read it on the Internet, it must be true,” I murmured.

“I was just so surprised when I heard about it,” Kate said. “Little busty bookworm Jane Sparks with the hot billionaire tech guy. You just can’t make this stuff up. Or can you?”

“We were hoping to meet him,” Allison said.

“We all thought you would bring him,” Melissa (Melinda?) said.

“I’ve never met a billionaire before,” another woman added. I recognized her as Kelly Wheaton who had snagged the starring role in *every* school play and musical.

“I wanted to see if The Ashbrooke Effect was real. Is it real, Jane?” Allison asked.

“Or is that something else you made up?” Kate asked.

I kind of sighed, because Kate was starting too fixated on this. Plus, I gathered she hadn’t actually read my books, otherwise she’d know that I named the mean girl of Regency London after her.

I wasn’t the only one finding Kate a bit tedious—Arwen Kilpatrick, a girl I’d been friendly with, rolled her eyes, which made me smile.

“So when is the wedding?” Melissa (Melinda?) asked. “I heard you were engaged.”

“Arwen does weddings now!” Kelly exclaimed. “She’s a big deal wedding planner in New York City. She’ll have to do yours.”

“I’d be happy to!” Arwen replied.

“We’re not engaged, but I’ll definitely keep you in mind if he pops the question,” I said. “You can make my Pinterest board a reality.”

She laughed and said, “I do that all the time.”

“I thought you were engaged. I wanted to see the ring,” Kelly said with a pout.

“We called it off,” I explained. God, why couldn’t he have just showed up for me? I should probably tell Arwen there wouldn’t be a wedding because I was going to murder/maim Duke for not being here right now.

“But now you’re back together,” Melissa (Melinda?) said.

“Yes.”

“But he’s not here. Is it because of what happened with Sam?”

And then I kind of snapped. “You know, there’s more to me than my boyfriends, past, present and possibly future. I write books. I have friends. I have a job. You could tell me what you have been up to since we graduated. Why does it always have to be about men?”

My tangent kept going, but no one was listening. Their attention was fixed on an ever-increasing commotion behind me. The wind picked up, whipping everyone’s hair into a frenzy. I turned: a helicopter was landing on the lawn. It was the churn of its blades that had drowned out my rant.

I soon gave up speaking and gave in to the same pangs of curiosity affecting everyone present.

Who would arrive at the Milford High School reunion in a helicopter?

Once it touched down on the ground and the blades stopped spinning, the door opened and

...

Duke stepped down.

I smiled as I heard the voices all around. “It’s him! It’s the Bad Boy Billionaire.”

It’s my guy.

He wore a black Project-TK T-shirt, stretched across his broad shoulders and chest. His well-worn Levi’s were low slung on his hips. His hair was perfectly mussed as always, making me want to run my fingers through it as I pulled his mouth to mine.

He strolled across the lawn like he was Somebody. Everyone melted out of his path. Except for me. I stood there, feeling all heart racing, weak in the knees, dizzy in love. He was *here*. As he had promised. And he had left his big night of triumph for *me*, showing that I was more important to him than his billion dollar business. Heart melting stuff.

“Hey Sweater Set,” Duke said, standing in front of me.

“Hey you. What are you doing here?”

“I promised,” he said simply. Because it was that simple. Then he gave me that grin—like rogues in a romance novel. And, like a romance hero aware that *everyone* was watching, he swept me into a dramatic embrace and dip before he kissed me deeply.

“You look hot. But you’re missing something,” he said. I caught a mischievous gleam in his

eyes.

Before I could ask what, he placed my cheap but sentimentally priceless cubic zirconia ring in the palm of my hand.

“Where did you find this?”

“I didn’t find it. I stole it,” he confessed, with one of those don’t-hate-me-grins. “I was aided and abetted by Roxanna. Don’t be mad at us.”

“But *why*?”

“So I could have this made for you,” Duke said. He dropped down to one knee and held up a ring that was identical to the cubic zirconia one in my hand—except it sparkled a hell of a lot more because this one was *real*.

“Jane, today I achieved everything I ever wanted. But I realized it was meaningless without you by my side. And it wasn’t *everything* any more. You’re my girl. I love you. Will you marry me?”

Of course I said *yes*.

Of course tears stung my eyes as he slid the *real* ring onto my finger and then swept me into a kiss.

Of course I delighted in everyone’s cheers. But they didn’t compare to the fireworks I was feeling.

“Do you want to stay here or head back to the city?” he asked.

“Take me home,” I murmured.

We waved goodbye to everyone and then climbed into the helicopter where Duke had a bottle of chilled champagne and glasses waiting. He popped the cork, poured us two glasses, and we toasted to our future happiness.

“Are you ready?” The pilot asked in a British accent as he turned around to face us.

“Ready,” Duke confirmed. But I was speechless.

“Is that Prince William?” I finally managed to ask in a very low, trying-to-be-cool voice. Because *OMG*, I think that was Prince William.

Duke just shrugged. And grinned. And said, “I called in a favor.”

“Who are you?” I asked incredulously.

“The Bad Boy Billionaire. The love of your life. Your real life romance hero. Your one and only . . .”

“Oh shush,” I said, laughing as I grabbed a fistful of his Project-TK T-shirt and pulled him in for a long, slow, deep kiss that lasted until we were nearly back in the city.

Soon enough the Manhattan skyline, all lit up, came into view. It was a breathtaking sight. And now it was my home. I grabbed Duke’s hand so he could share in this moment with me. But I saw he was focused on something on his phone.

“What are you doing?” I asked. Really, what could be so important online that it couldn’t wait ten minutes? “You’re missing the most amazing view.”

“Just updating my Facebook status,” he said with a mischievous grin. Then he held out his iPhone for me to see:

Duke Austen is engaged to Jane Sparks.

Author's Note

AS I EMBARKED on a series of interconnected historical and contemporary romances (the Bad Boy Billionaire books and my Wallflower novels), I was fascinated to discover all the links between the Regency era and our present day (turns out the computer is one of them!). But one unfortunate similarity is sexual violence and the stigma and suffering of its victims.

This story, and its historical counterpart, *What a Wallflower Wants*, were influenced by all-too-frequent accounts of sexual violence against women in the news today. These heartbreaking and enraging stories impelled me to put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) to write about girls—Jane and Prudence—who suffer from sexual assaults but find love and acceptance anyway. I also wanted to write about heroes who defy convention but are heroic in all the ways that truly matter.

Regency romance readers know that to be caught in a “compromising position” is to find oneself proceeding immediately to the altar. It’s all quite romantic—unless it isn’t. In parts of the world today, women are still forced to marry their attackers to preserve “honor.” Or, just as horribly, they are murdered by their own families in some twisted notion of “honor.”

The alternative was—and tragically still too often is—to be considered “ruined” and face social ostracization, harassment, slut-shaming, being blamed, or not even being believed. Many keep their assault a secret. Many are driven to suicide. None of this is okay.

Romance novels are an escape, a fantasy, a pleasure. But these novels are also inspiring, empowering, and have the potential to change hearts and minds with portrayals of two individuals finding healing and happiness in love. I wrote this story to perhaps provide hope. And as with every romance novel I have written, I write the change I want to see: relationships based on mutual trust, respect, and love.

Keep reading for a sneak peek at

WHAT A WALLFLOWER WANTS,

**the third historical romance novel based on
Jane's romance with the Bad Boy Billionaire.**

An Excerpt from

WHAT A WALLFLOWER WANTS

Miss Prudence Merryweather Payton has escaped a highway robbery and is trudging toward the nearest town, alone and dangerously unchaperoned, when the oh-so-dashing Lord Castleton happens upon her . . .

SHE CARRIED ON, walking another mile or two or twenty. It felt like twenty. The thick white clouds had begun to darken considerably. A thick rumble of thunder disturbed the birdsong. A storm. Perfect. While the rain might be cooling, she didn't fancy trudging along when this dirt road turned to mud.

And then the sweetest sound in the world reached her ears. It was the sound of a carriage approaching. The clip of the horse's hooves was unmistakable.

"Please let this be a lady and her maid," Prudence prayed, setting down her valise. "Or a kind family. Or an old dowager."

Prue turned to look and see if her prayers had been answered. An exceedingly fine—and fast—carriage rolled toward her, cloud of dust behind it, and pulled by two pure white stallions. Unfortunately, the carriage was driven by a man.

As the carriage came closer, she saw that he was a large man. A young man.

Then the carriage rolled to a gentle stop beside her.

She noticed his boots first: large, shiny black Hessians that reached his knee. His valet must have spent hours polishing them to such a high shine. Her gaze then traveled up, inevitably, to muscular thighs clad in very fitted kerseymere breeches. His waistcoat was a pale blue silk, the color of the sky approximately three hours earlier, before the sun reached its peak in the sky.

His jacket was green, like the pine needles in the forest that had softened her steps as she made her escape. Of course his chest and shoulders were broad.

And when she lifted her gaze higher still, to his face?

To hell with you, God.

This man's face, with his blue eyes and easy smile, made her think of *once upon a time*. Once upon a time when she still believed in heroes saved the day. Once upon a time, when she still believed that somewhere, out there, was a man who would love her. Once upon a time, when a young girl's dreams came true and happily-ever-after was just within reach. That was a long time ago. These days, Prudence knew better. She knew that wolves wore rogue's clothing and they had

a taste for young ladies.

“Good afternoon,” he said with a tip of his hat and a smile that revealed a slight dimple in his left cheek. He was entirely handsome, from his slightly unruly brown hair down to the tips of his shiny black boots. And he was smiling at her in a way that made her feel like fireworks inside: hot, shimmering, sparkling explosions that took her breath away with their beauty.

Prudence managed a tight smile, wanting to be polite but not encouraging.

“Would you like a ride somewhere miss? I’d be happy to oblige,” he offered.

Of course she wanted a ride somewhere. At the moment, she wanted nothing more than to sit on the upholstered carriage bench, under the shade of the carriage top. She wanted to set down her bag and sigh with relief. She wanted to sit beside this impossibly handsome man and gaze up at his blue eyes and think about falling in love rather than being accosted and left for dead, or worse.

She knew about worse.

So even though this handsome man smiled at her kindly and had magically appeared during her hour of need to offer her a much-desired ride, Prudence said no.

To be more precise, she said, “No, thank you.”

This was punctuated by another rumble of thunder.

The man, drat him, lifted one brow curiously and looked impossibly handsome whilst doing so.

“It’s a hot day to be out walking,” he remarked.

“I am well aware of that,” she replied dryly and he laughed. To her vast irritation, it was a warm, lovely sound that she might have enjoyed under other circumstances or in another lifetime or if she were another person entirely.

“It’s also likely to rain,” he gesturing toward the thick, dark clouds. There was another rumble of thunder so perfectly timed she wondered if he had a way of commanding the weather.

“How refreshing.” She glanced down the road. A plume of smoke was rising up, far off in the distance. Was that a town just ahead? And could she walk there before the rain started? Maybe. If this man would leave her to trudge along.

“I beg your pardon, I haven’t properly introduced myself. I’m Castleton,” he said with the lordly authority that Prudence recognized from all the haughty peers she knew in London—and strenuously avoided.

She ought to introduce herself. Which name should she give him? *Prude Prudence*? Or *London’s Least Likely To Be Caught In A Compromising Position*? Not being a complete ninny, she wasn’t about to give her real name to a strange man she encountered on the side of the road.

“I’m Miss Merryweather.”

“Miss Merryweather, I’d be more than happy to drive you into town. It’s just a mile or so ahead.”

Oh, thank God.

“I’d prefer to walk, thank you,” she told him. To prove her point, she started trudging toward town. Her feet throbbed. Her back ached. In her gloves, her hands were positively raw from carrying her bag. But there was no way she was going to put herself at the mercy of a man she

didn't know.

"Would you like company?" he offered, not at all taking the hint that she wasn't the slightest bit interested.

Correction: She was interested. But she had no intention of indulging in her interest of him and what he offered. Her life had made it plain that men were brutes not to be trusted and God had made it abundantly clear that she was not to have love or marriage. There was no point in her furthering her acquaintance with this man. Nothing good could come of it.

"No, thank you," she said.

"Are you quite certain you don't want a ride, Miss Merryweather? I'd feel like the worst sort of gentleman if I left you on your own by the side of a desolate country road with a rainstorm imminent. I'd be much obliged if you let me drive you into town."

"And I'd be much obliged if you left me to proceed in peace." She couldn't stand the temptation much longer and she could. Not. Get. In. That. Carriage.

Not for the first time did she curse The Beast.

If it weren't for him, she could have climbed into that carriage and let herself fall in love. If it weren't for him, she'd probably be happily married to a wonderful man with a baby or two. She wouldn't be here—escaping alone from a highway robbery, aching and scared on the side of the road refusing the offer of a handsome man.

"As you wish. Enjoy your walk. Good day," Castleton said with another tip of his hat and flash of his smile. Then he flicked the reins, the stallion picked up a trot and Prudence was left behind in the dust.

Spoiler alert: Prudence and Castleton find each other stranded at an inn together, alone, with secrets . . .

About the Author

Maya Rodale began reading romance novels in college at her mother's insistence and it wasn't long before she was writing her own. Maya is now the author of multiple historical and contemporary romances. She lives in New York City with her darling dog and a rogue of her own.

Please visit her at www.mayarodale.com.

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