

**Neighbors 1**

**NIGHTMARE  
NEIGHBOR**

Lusy Adams

# CHAPTER 1

## MADDIE

“I swear to God, Madeline, I’ll hurt you if you thank me one more time,” Meredith said, her eyes hidden behind a pair of huge sunglasses glued to the road ahead. Her rising irritation filled the car like a heavy perfume.

I shut my mouth, swallowing other words of gratitude even though I owed her a thousand more. If it weren’t for her, I would go mental in a matter of days. A hotel wasn’t a great environment for productivity, and I desperately needed to write for two simple reasons—I was way behind on my schedule, and I needed something to occupy my mind so it would quit reminding me of the colossal disaster that was supposed to be my twenty-sixth birthday party two weeks ago.

Events of that unfortunate night made me pack my bags and leave the comfy apartment in the middle of Sacramento, where I’d spent the past fifteen months. It was one of several properties belonging to my mother. Although she offered I could live there because she wasn’t using it anymore and refused to take any money from me, I was suddenly a freeloader. Since I didn’t have anywhere else to go, I stayed in the overpriced hotel a few blocks away, hoping to find something permanent soon. I didn’t. I toured plenty of places, but nothing seemed right. That’s when Meredith stepped in. By a stroke of luck, an apartment in her house in San Francisco opened up, and she was more than happy to rent it to me. I owed her a big time.

“You won’t.” I didn’t doubt she could. She might have been three inches shorter than me, but she also did Muay Thai several times a week. She could snap me like a twig without breaking a sweat. “I’m your favorite client.”

“You could still write with your legs broken, you know.” She sounded earnest. “In fact, you would probably be a lot more productive. Don’t tempt me.”

I shook my head, smiling. I’d worked with Meredith since the start of my literary career when she took a chance with my first manuscript and got me a publishing deal in no time. Almost four years had passed, and since we were close in age, we became good friends. Apart from my younger sister, Libby, she was about the only friend I had left. I wasn’t crazy popular in high school, being a bookworm and at the top of the class. Things improved in college, mainly because of my now ex-boyfriend Jeffrey, but I lost touch with most of the group we hung out with after graduation.

“Earth to Maddie.” Meredith snapped her long fingers in front of my face. “We’re here. Get out.”

I climbed out of the air-conditioned car into the stroking heat. It was mid-September, and the summer still had a firm grip over the city, the peak day temperatures reaching well over eighty. Today was particularly hot, the sun knowing no mercy. Hiding in the shade of a nearby tree, I inspected the house in front of me. It matched my vision of the typical home in San Francisco to the letter—a two-story Victorian building featuring massive windows and a handsome facade. Its light green color stood out among the red, brown, and beige overflow, and the location was to die for—close enough to the city center but not too busy. Several grocery stores, restaurants, coffee shops, and a small park were within walking distance.

“What do you think?” Meredith joined me by the trunk of her squeaky clean white SUV, which held my whole life packed into four duffel bags. While I instantly turned into a sweaty mess, she embodied pure perfection. Her alabaster skin was flawless, her body curvy in all the right places. Her copper-red hair cascaded down her shoulders in waves, standing out against her beige sheath dress. Oh yeah, and she was wearing bright red lipstick and sky-high heels because who didn’t like to drive in heels, right?

“It’s perfect.”

“I hope you still think that after you find out how much your rent is.”

I wasn’t worried about money. My first two books sold better than I could ever dream of, and the pre-sales of the third one, which was coming out next month, also skyrocketed. A big part of those earnings was sitting in my account since I didn’t have to pay bills while living at my mother’s place. My personal expenses were pretty much nonexistent, as I was the embodiment of a homebody. “I spent two weeks in a hotel that charged me a weekly food budget of a small family for each night. However much you want, I’m still saving plenty. So name your price; it’s yours. I’m willing to give you my spleen if it means I get to sleep in my own bed tonight.”

“Keep your spleen, but I could use a new liver. I celebrated a big book launch with one of my coworkers over the weekend, and we got a bit carried away. I’m still hungover.”

“It’s Tuesday!”

She moved her glasses on top of her head and wiggled her eyebrows at me. Her hazel eyes gleamed with mischief. “Exactly. I look forward to your housewarming party. You’ll never recover.”

I wished she was kidding, but I knew better. “You’re evil.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet, sweetie.”

“Can we get out of this heat now? My toes are sweating.”

She popped open the trunk, and we dragged my bags up the short flight of stairs to the frosted-glass front door. Once I entered the spacious lobby, my jaw hit the floor. The interior looked completely different from what I expected based on the exterior. The ceiling was high, the dark floor hardwood, and the off-white walls decorated with abstract paintings. A wide wooden staircase with iron railings was located across the front door, a long corridor running underneath it, original architectural details and charms wherever you looked. It was like I walked into the home of some famous actress.

I turned to Meredith with my mouth still agape. "You said it was an old house."

She closed the door and dropped my bags on the floor. "It is. It sat empty for years, so I renovated it to increase the appeal and market value before renting it out. Great location wouldn't cut it; nobody wants to live in a shack."

I knew she inherited the place from her parents, but she shut me off whenever I brought up the subject. I figured they were both dead, and it was still too painful for her, so I didn't pry. "You did a damn good job; I've only seen the hallway so far, but it's amazing. Why don't you live here? Is it because of your job?" The literary agency she worked for was in Sacramento. I wouldn't want to make a two-hour round trip every day either.

Corners of her mouth turned down like she tasted something disgusting. "I couldn't wait to leave this place growing up. I'm not going back."

Yeah, something terrible had happened here. Before deciding whether I should press for more details, she pointed to the staircase.

"Your apartment is on the first floor, but how about I introduce you to your new neighbor first?"

She didn't wait for my answer, moved to the sturdy white door on our right, and pounded it with her fist.

"Alek! You in there, pumpkin?" More pounding. "Open up!"

No response.

She dropped her arm with a shrug. "You'll have to handle the introductions without me."

Her indifferent tone made me uneasy. "You told him I was moving in today, right?"

"I called him yesterday. He can't wait to have another lovely girl living under the same roof."

A funky echo in her tone caused my wariness to rise even more. "Have they dated or something? Is that why she moved out? Because they had broken up?"

She snorted. "Definitely not."

I raised my eyebrows. "Did you?"

"Me and Jess? Nah. I'm not her type."

"I meant you and Alek."

"That would also be a no."

I kept quiet, waiting for her to elaborate. She sighed dramatically. "We hooked up once back in high school, alright? But we quickly realized we were better off as friends and have been besties since. He moved in two years ago, right after the reconstruction finished."

"What does he do for a living?" I felt stupid questioning her now when I should've done it right after she told me about him, but better late than never.

"He recently started his own marketing firm, so he pretty much sleeps in his office these days. Fitting, isn't it? Not a thing around to distract you from writing! If you do good, I might even let you join us on the traditional Saturday chill-out."

"Saturday what?"

"I guess normal people would call it a barbecue. Alek and Jess started to host them about a year ago. If the weather allows, we come over in the afternoon and hang out in the back while Alek grills the best damn steaks you'd ever had. We try to meet every other weekend but can't always make it happen."

"This place has a garden?"

"It's more of a yard. Come on; I'll show you around."

I followed her through the hallway to the back part of the house. She gestured toward the doors on our left as we passed them. "Bathroom, laundry room, storage."

We reached the end of the hall.

"Yard," she said as she slid open the big glass door and moved aside.

I ventured onto the small raised terrace with an outdoor seating area and a gas fire pit. A pair of wooden lounges rested on the neatly cut grass, and green gardens lined the wooden fence around the yard—I noticed some vegetables and plenty of herbs. Flower pots stood all over, giving the place a unique charm.

To say it impressed me would be an understatement. "Who takes care of all of this?"

"Mostly Alek, manual labor is his therapy. It's also quite the show during the summer since he usually cuts the lawn shirtless. If the weather holds, you might still get lucky. Your bedroom window looks right over the yard; you'll have a first-row seat." She winked at me.

I was still trying to absorb everything when she grabbed my hand and pulled me back inside. We returned to the lobby, took my bags, and climbed the stairs to my apartment.

The first look at my new home took my breath away. Like the rest of the house, it was modern and airy. I entered the living room and dropped my bags onto the thick rug close to the creamy sofa. The room was pretty small, but the dark hardwood floor, high ceiling, and light walls made it appear spacious. I stepped toward the arched window with built-in seating that let in upscale lighting, inspecting the chest of drawers and tall, most likely plastic palm that occupied the wall close by. That spot was perfect. "Would you mind if I put a desk here?"

"Suit yourself. Chuck all the furniture out and keep just the desk, if you please. All I care about is my next book. And the next. And the next. You get the point."

"Interesting idea, but I don't know... I might need the bed."

"Jesus Christ, Madeline, you're a writer. It's common knowledge writers don't need sleep. They live off of alcohol and dark thoughts."

I chuckled. "I can give it a shot, but I can't promise what I write will be any good."

"Fine, keep the bed." She moved to the wooden sliding door that took up a significant portion of the wall across the window and pulled the two panels apart, revealing the bedroom. "I hope your majesty finds her new accommodation fitting."

My mouth went dry. The king-size bed was marvelous. There was also a small walk-in closet and an en-suite bathroom. Could this place get any better? "It will do."

Meredith took me through the living room into the gourmet kitchen with white cabinets, dark quartzite countertops, and stainless steel appliances. The afternoon light coming in through the massive window showered the small dining area with a round table. The apartment was missing the tiny details that would make it into a home, but I loved it nevertheless.

"Mer, this is amazing. Thank..."

She pointed her finger at me with narrowed eyes. "Did I speak Klingon? From now on, I accept gratitude in written form only, and it'd better involve some sexy faeries."

I bit my cheek, trying not to laugh. God knew why she enjoyed reading smut so much when she got plenty of action in real life, but I wasn't one to judge. We all had our kryptonite. Mine was Netflix. "Noted."

"Speaking of your writing... How is the spin-off going? Do you have an outline yet?"

Not even close. I hadn't written in weeks, too caught up in the family drama, but she didn't need to know that. "I'm getting there."

If she could tell I was full of crap, she didn't let it show. Her expression remained filled with professional curiosity. "Are you still going with Darryn and his new bae standing on opposite sides of the civil war?"

Darryn was a fae prince, one of the supporting characters of my first fantasy trilogy, *The Edge of Darkness*. I fell in love with him while writing the last parts of the story, so I made him the main character of a spin-off series. "That's the plan. Why? You don't like it?"

"My opinion doesn't matter, sugar. It's exactly the kind of sappy romance your fans will eat up, forbidden love and stuff. So chop, chop. Stop slacking and start writing. And do something with your hair, for God's sake. You look like that homeless guy who lives on the bench near the Central station."

"Yes, Mom." It was supposed to be a joke, but that innocent word left a bitter aftertaste in my mouth. Growing up, I wasn't close to my mother. I was always Daddy's girl—right to the point when he filed for a divorce and moved back to England when I was fourteen, leaving me and my broken heart behind. After that, there was no one to shield Libby and me from Mother's impulsive need for perfection. For the next decade, I did my best to please her since she was the only parent I had left, but it was never enough. When I stopped trying, so did she, resulting in an ugly argument that left our relationship in pieces.

Meredith raised her eyebrows. "Your sour expression tells me you two haven't made up yet?"

"We haven't talked since the Big Bang. It was..." I shook my head, trying to get rid of the memory before it rubbed more salt into the open wound in my chest. "You heard all about it. She made pretty clear she wanted nothing to do with me anymore." Kind of like my dad, who couldn't be bothered to call more than once a year, too busy with his new family.

"Is that the reason you have writer's block?"

Yeah, she saw through my bullshit, alright. "I don't have one. I'm just not in the right frame of mind to write."

She studied my face for the longest time, considering the best approach. Finally, she shrugged. "That makes everything easier. We just need to cheer you up."

She put her arm around my shoulders, tugging me toward the door.

"It's barely one," I reminded her since I knew her usual way of cheering up. "I'm not going to the bar."

"Believe it or not, alcohol isn't a solution for every problem. Well, mine is, but you require a different approach. You, my dear, need to be pampered."

I dug my heels into the floor. "I'm not going to a strip club either."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't worry; your innocence will remain intact. I'm taking you to my favorite beauty salon. The day always seems much brighter with clean skin and a new manicure." She inspected my messy bun with a crumpled nose. "Hopefully, they can do something with the bird's nest on your head."

"Hey!"

"We'll be in the best hands, promise."

"We? You said you could just show me around real quick and had to return to work."

"Screw work. I can't leave my favorite client to hang out to dry, can I?"

"I'm sure it has nothing to do with the manicure you're already picking out in your head."

She flashed me her brightest smile. "I don't have the slightest clue what you're blabbing about."

# CHAPTER 2

## MADDIE

A relaxing afternoon with Meredith was precisely what I needed to get my groove back. We spent a couple of hours in a beauty salon, then grabbed an early dinner, avoiding all touchy subjects. My mood improved rapidly, and by the time Meredith dropped me off in front of the house, I couldn't wait to start writing.

The bags on the living room floor almost killed my mood. To escape the annoying feeling telling me I should unpack, I rushed to the nearby coffee shop and hid in the corner with a giant caramel latte. Characters were coming alive underneath my fingers as words flew out of me, and before I knew it, the first chapter was complete. I moved to the second one, not wanting to interrupt my streak. After a couple of minutes, a nervous young barista came to my table to tell me they were closing. I drank my cold coffee with burning cheeks, left a generous tip, and ran home, determined to use my writing momentum while it lasted.

A beat-up black jeep parked in the short driveway leading to my house caught my attention. It had to belong to the mystery downstairs neighbor. My stomach did a somersault. I forgot all about him.

I climbed the stairs and entered the lobby, heading straight for his door before losing the courage. A muted television noise reached my ears. I held my breath to figure out what my neighbor was watching. My best guess was some sport, perhaps football? I wondered who played tonight...

Okay, now I was stalling. I raised my arm to knock and hesitated with my fist inches from the wood, regretting Meredith wasn't here to make the introductions. I didn't do well with strangers. For God's sake, I still had trouble calling my doctor without rehearsing the conversation in my head first. And don't get me started about school... You'd never tell from looking at me, but every time I stood in front of the class to perform anything, I was so nervous I almost threw up. It was one of the reasons I would never make a great lawyer, no matter how badly Mother wanted me to follow in her footsteps. While she thrived under pressure, I hated being in the spotlight.

I lowered my arm again, not feeling up for the challenge. It was after eight already anyway, too late to bother someone. Alek would for sure consider me rude if I disturbed him at this hour.

What could I do? I'd have to say hello in the morning. Or afternoon.

I climbed the stairs to my apartment as quietly as possible, carefully shutting the door behind me. Once again, I ignored the bags in the middle of the living room floor, hopped onto the sofa, and

began writing. My fingers danced on the keyboard, barely able to keep up with the flow of my thoughts. I chuckled at things I considered funny and bit my bottom lip at the emotionally tense parts, leaving reality behind as I dove into the story forming underneath my hands.

It was long past midnight when I finally placed my laptop on the coffee table. Even though I skipped a few scenes and I would have to tidy some things up once I'd done the outline, I made tremendous progress. I deserved some sleep.

I got comfortable on the sofa, not bothering to move into the bedroom since I didn't even own a pillow, let alone sheets. I was so not sleeping on a bare mattress. After closing my eyes, I returned to the story in my mind. I fell asleep long before I came up with the sweet surprise destiny had in store for my main characters in the next chapter.

\* \* \*

## **ALEK**

The most important day of my career began like any other. I woke up before sunrise, ran five miles, and took a cold shower. Then I sat by the kitchen island and read the newspapers while sipping a protein smoothie, barely able to stay still. My body hummed with endorphins from the exercise and adrenaline caused by the oncoming meeting with Sierra Cabot, a rising star of natural cosmetics. She'd founded her company #loveyourself about two years ago and climbed to the top of the field in a record time. Although she was only twenty-five, her net worth was guesstimated to be over ten million dollars.

She was launching another collection of lipsticks next spring and was looking for the head of the campaign. I busted my balls to get on the shortlist of candidates considered for the job. I knew jack-shit about makeup and had no desire to expand my knowledge, but I would make the sacrifice to score that position. Apart from the mushy personal reasons, my company (which comprised me and me alone) could use a big-shot client like that. Sure, I was doing fine, but I'd have stayed at the international marketing company where I slaved away for over a year if that was good enough. After they handled my promotion to some protection kid, I decided fine wasn't cutting it. I risked my savings and future by starting my business, and I needed a huge breakthrough to shut up the voices in my head telling me I had made a terrible mistake. Landing a job for #loveyourself would do that. I had to get it.

I left my apartment determined to achieve that goal—even if it meant kissing Sierra's ass until I had my nose brown. I usually headed to work before seven because the streets were still empty, and there was no risk of getting stuck in traffic. Scratch that—there was only a slight risk of getting stuck in traffic. I drew a short straw today. Some drunk asshole got himself tangled with a garbage

truck, blocking the main road to my office, and I couldn't go around because of the ongoing construction. It took ages before the fire department freed the road, and the fifteen-minute trip lasted for over an hour.

When I finally parked in front of my office building, I thought the shit part of my day was over, but I'd gone out of the frying pan into the fire. A pipe burst during the night and flooded the first floor. My office was in the worst shape as the leak happened directly above it, and everything got soaked beyond salvation.

I spent half an hour on the phone with some pencil pusher from the insurance company until he agreed to come to write my statement and look at the damages. He assured me they would compensate me in full for everything I lost, but the repairs couldn't start until the room was dry. I argued with the building manager for the next hour, explaining that having my office out of order for two months, which he demanded for the repairs, was out of the question. Once I started threatening legal action, he came to his senses and agreed to have it ready in three weeks.

I left the building, so pissed-off steam was coming from my ears. When my phone rang, I had to resist the urge to hurl it against the nearest wall.

"What?" I answered without checking the caller ID.

"Where are you, man? You were supposed to get here at nine. I dragged myself out of bed for your sorry ass."

Mason's question made me stop and check my watch. I swore and picked up the pace, rushing to my car. It was almost half-past nine; my meeting with Sierra was at one. I meant to stop at Mason's beforehand to go over my proposal. His knowledge of cosmetics was even worse than mine; however, he had a business degree and could smell a good deal for miles. He was also like a brother to me, so I trusted his opinion and judgment, knowing he wouldn't let me go out there looking like a complete idiot.

"Sorry, I'm running late." I unlocked my jeep and climbed inside. "My office got flooded overnight, and I had to deal with it. Give me twenty."

"You're lucky it's my day off. I don't feel like doing shit, so I don't mind the wait."

"How generous of you."

"I'll cash it out later."

He wouldn't. He never did, whether he lent me twenty because I forgot my wallet or picked me up at three am on the other side of town because I was too drunk to remember my address. The latter happened once during college, and I wasn't proud of it.

I put my phone into the holder on the dashboard and switched to the speakerphone to free my hands. When I turned the keys in the ignition, the engine barked twice and died. I gritted my teeth, taking a deep breath through the nose to control my rising temper. I tried to start the car again, but still no luck. Clenching the steering wheel, I banged my head against it several times. This wasn't happening.

"Everything okay over there?" Mason asked.

Not even close. "My car won't start."

He stayed quiet, but I'd known him for almost two decades. Even over the phone, I could tell he was dying to say a smart-ass comment. "Spill it."

"I told you last week it sounded weird when you shifted gears. You should've taken it to the shop. Better yet—to the junkyard. It's an old piece of crap; I'm surprised it's still running."

I knew that. I'd had this car since I was seventeen, and it was a pain in the ass from the beginning, but I still remembered how Dad glowed when he took me to the dealer shop, helped me pick it up, and taught me how to drive a stick. The sentimental part of me wouldn't let me get rid of it, even though the repairs cost me more than a new car would by now.

I noticed the weird sound Mason was talking about a while ago, but I had my hands full with the meeting with Sierra. I planned to drop it in the shop tomorrow when things settled down, and I had a nice fat paycheck in my pocket. Hopefully. "Thanks for the advice, asshole."

"Somebody is all sunshine and rainbows today."

"Can you blame me? This morning sucks."

"Are you wearing your lucky suit?"

I straightened my tie using the rearview mirror. I'd worn this suit when I landed my first contract, and it had been my lucky charm ever since. "Yes."

"Then stop freaking out. Everything will be fine."

I wished I had his confidence.

"Are you still coming over?"

"Without a car? Hell no, your house is across town from the restaurant where I'm meeting Sierra. I'm not risking being late." I paused. "Maybe you could swing by my place? It's halfway."

"Alek, buddy, I'm a busy man. I don't have the time to—"

"You just said it was your day off, and you didn't feel like doing shit."

"Fine. Give me half an hour."

I hung up without saying goodbye and called myself an Uber. Fifteen minutes later, I got off in front of the coffee shop close to my apartment. I needed a kick, but I had to make do with coffee since it was too early for alcohol.

The coffee shop was mostly empty during this time of day. I walked to the counter and waited behind a short blond in a pink tracksuit who couldn't decide whether she wanted a blueberry or lemon muffin with her pumpkin-spiced latte. I signed and glanced around, seeking distraction.

A young brunette sitting in the corner captured my attention. She was in her mid-twenties, wearing a simple black T-shirt and jean shorts, not a trace of makeup on her pretty face. Her dark hair brushed her shoulders, half of it pulled up in a messy bun. Her long tanned legs caught my eye, but something about the way she stared at the laptop in front of her was even more attractive than bare skin. Whatever she was doing had her undivided attention, her eyebrows drawn together in concentration. She didn't tear her eyes off the screen even as she reached for her cup, raising it to her full lips.

"Good morning; what can I get you? Sir?"

It took me a while to realize somebody was talking to me. I turned to the young barista and ordered a double espresso, stepping aside. The blonde in a tracksuit stood by the counter, waiting for her order. She gave me a once-over and batted her eyes at me.

Not a chance, missy. I pulled out my phone and got busy scrolling through my Instagram feed. The blonde smacked her lips, grabbed her order, and hurried away. I kept scrolling. Lots of babies and engagement photos, as expected. Since I turned thirty a couple of months ago, it was like somebody flipped a switch, making my peers all about getting married and starting families. I wasn't opposed to either; I haven't found the right girl yet.

Tiny hair on the back of my neck rose, informing me somebody was staring at me. I glanced around and came across a pair of big brown eyes watching me with interest over the brim of a ridiculously oversized mug—the girl with the laptop.

I smiled. Maybe this morning could still be salvaged.

She lowered her eyes immediately, put down the mug, and began writing on her laptop with great enthusiasm. A disappointment pricked me close to my stomach, but I wasn't about to interrupt her. I went back to scrolling.

"Double espresso for Alek."

I thanked the young barista who called my name for no reason since nobody else was waiting at the counter. As I reached for my coffee, the phone in my other hand rang. I checked the caller ID, and all the blood in my body froze. Jenna. She knew I had an important meeting, meaning she wouldn't call unless it was an emergency.

I swallowed to clear my throat and put on my best smile. "Would you mind if I left my coffee here for a bit? I need to take this."

The barista was maybe nineteen; my charm worked like a... Well, like a charm. She shook her head, blushing. "Not at all."

I smiled at her and headed for the hallway leading to the bathrooms, desperate for some privacy.

"What happened?" I asked as soon as I picked up, my heart racing.

"Good morning to you, too, Alek. I'm doing great. Thanks for asking."

How could I bother with manners when... I took a deep breath and forced myself to play nice. "Hi, Jenna, lovely to hear you. Your voice always brightens up my day."

She laughed. "Much better."

Okay, that was enough. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine; Jillian is enjoying the sun in the garden. She is in a great mood today."

"Then why are you calling me?"

"Make a guess, grumpy. I wanted to wish you luck with your big meeting."

A thousand pounds dropped from my shoulders at once. "Jesus, Jenna. You scared the crap out of me."

"I'm sorry, I didn't think that... Hold on one sec." Somebody spoke to her on the other side of the phone, his voice too low to understand. "I have to run. Break a leg. Love you."

The line went silent. I slid the phone into my pocket, returning to the main room of the coffee shop. The girl with the laptop was by the counter, grabbing her order, and I couldn't help but smile. I usually didn't chat up women during work hours, but I knew a sign when one hit me in the face.

I approached her, trying to come up with a witty opener. If things went well with Sierra, maybe we could celebrate tonight. And if not... Well, she could comfort me instead. Something told me I would enjoy it equally much.

# CHAPTER 3

## MADDIE

It was just before ten when I entered the coffee shop. The morning rush was over, but two customers stood by the counter. I joined the line, drooling over the displayed goods while awaiting my turn. It took a great deal of self-denial, but I ignored the chocolate cake as a responsible adult and ordered a ham sandwich along with another sinfully sweet drink.

With coffee in one hand and a boring sandwich in the other, I sat at the same table as yesterday, for once eating breakfast without my eyes glued to the computer screen. I caught maybe five hours of sleep last night before being startled awake by a loud slam of the front door. It was ungodly early, but sleep refused to come back, so I used the extra time to unpack the bags in the middle of the living room. It took me about forty minutes to put my belongings in their new rightful place.

I returned to the sofa and dug a notepad from my handbag, writing a list of things I needed to buy. I'd have to make a trip to Target later today to get the essentials, but most items could wait. Libby promised to stop by after her morning class on Friday to help me settle down, and she would happily drive me, her only sister, to the mall to pick up the rest of the stuff.

Satisfied with my plan, I showered, put on clean clothes that didn't make me look like a tired college kid who lost all will to live, and headed to the coffee shop. I needed at least one cup of coffee to kick-start my day, and I didn't have any at home.

Once I finished my breakfast, I took out my laptop, determined to complete the first scene of the next chapter before going home. Darryn was about to get into a fight, and I dreaded writing those since I knew nothing about fistfights, let alone sword fights. I was much more comfortable with banter and romance, but fantasy books needed some action now and then, as Meredith kept reminding me. It was the main reason I contemplated writing romance increasingly more often. The pressure to have a great word-building and adventurous story would disappear, allowing me to focus on the characters and their relationships, which was the best part, anyway. But my fans knew me as a fantasy writer, and the possibility of disappointing them and having my book flop scared me too much to take a chance with a different genre.

I got writing and was done with the opening soon, stopping right before Darryn threw the first punch. I sipped the coffee, watching my surroundings over the edge of the mug as I considered how to continue.

A dark-haired man by the counter distracted me from my thoughts. I didn't see his face, but he was at least six feet tall, wearing a well-tailored gunmetal grey suit that hugged his muscular body

in the most flattering way. He handed the young barista a bill, stepping aside to wait for his order. A petite blond in a bright pink tracksuit in line in front of him must have found his face quite appealing since she was eating him up with her eyes. He didn't pay her any attention and pulled out his phone.

His head snapped up, and his gaze flicked over the room. His face was perfectly symmetrical, with an angular jawline, a long nose, and thick eyebrows arched over light-colored eyes. The blondie was right to ogle him.

He looked straight at me, and a dazzling smile touched his lips. All the blood from my body rushed to my cheeks. Busted.

I lowered my head, putting down the coffee. My fingers swiftly moved across the keyboard as I imagined Darryn wearing that very smile right before he attacked. I reached for my cup, bringing it to my lips again, only to discover it was empty. Damn it. A constant sugar intake during a writing spree helped to keep me going.

I sprinted toward the counter and ordered another coffee. The chocolate cake on display called my name, but it wasn't even noon yet; I couldn't order a cake. Mother would have a heart attack if she knew I even considered it.

Too bad I was done trying to be the perfect daughter. "I'll take a piece of that cake as well, thank you."

I watched the barista as she prepared my drink, keen to get back to work. A small paper cup stood on the counter, presumably belonging to the guy in the suit since he was the last customer in line. Maybe he went to the bathroom? I tilted my head to the side, trying to decipher the name on the cup—God knew why I cared. The handwriting was illegible. The first letter could be an A. Or an O?

"Here you go."

I straightened up and thanked the barista, taking my order to the table. At least I tried. I spun around and hit a concrete wall that pretended to be a man's chest. I jumped back with a squeak, followed by the loud sound of shattering dishes. Spilled coffee splashed my bare legs, burning my skin. My dream cake ended up smeared all over a white shirt.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry!" I grabbed a handful of napkins from the counter to clean the chocolate disaster, but my efforts spread the stain instead. "I didn't see you."

"Stop it," a low male voice growled. "You'd done enough."

I dropped my arms and raised my eyes to the man I'd collided with. He stood tall, taking advantage of every inch he had over me. The smile that appeared on his face a short while ago was

gone. His ice-blue eyes burned with anger, making me wish the ground would split open and swallow me whole.

“I said I was sorry,” I muttered with a hint of irritation. Sure, I crashed into him, but I hadn’t done it on purpose. There was no need to act like a jerk.

“Your apology won’t clean my shirt.”

My face was literary on fire at that point, my rising temper not helping the situation. I bit my tongue to stop myself from snapping at him. One of us had to remember good manners, or this would go south fast. “I’ll pay for the dry-cleaning; that’s the least I can do. If you give me your number…”

“Forget it. Just watch where you’re going next time.” With that, he headed toward the bathroom.

Under different circumstances, I might have found the situation funny once the embarrassment wore off. I always thought silly meet-cutes like this happened only in romantic movies, and here I was living one out. I was too annoyed to appreciate the irony. I helped the young barista clean up the mess, left some money for the broken dishes, and packed up my things. Since the perfect writing atmosphere was ruined, I could return home.

As I left the coffee shop, I glimpsed the man in the suit coming out behind me in a store window. I kept my eyes locked in front of me, determined to ignore him until we went our separate ways. Except we didn’t. I turned around the corner, and his steps still followed me, too close for comfort. My stomach tightened as terrifying memories flashed in front of my eyes.

It happened during my last year of law school, right before graduation. I’d just left the library where I was cramming for the finals, dead tired. It was late, the campus already deserted, but I’d made the quick trip to the parking lot a hundred times before. I thought nothing of it when I passed a guy in a hoodie—until I heard him change directions abruptly, his steps growing faster, catching up to me. He grabbed my arm, trying to pull me into the shadows of the alleyway between buildings. I screamed at the top of my lungs, the sound lasting only for a fraction of a second before he pressed his cold palm against my mouth to silence me. Luckily, campus security patrolled nearby and heard me. They came running, and the attacker bolted before he had time to finish whatever he intended to do.

I hadn’t seen his face, but his dark figure haunted me. It took months of counseling before I could walk outside alone after dark again. More than a year later, I still had nightmares about what could have happened if those security guys didn’t show up when they had. I also carried pepper spray wherever I moved ever since, even if I just went to take out the trash, not willing to take any chances.

This wasn't a mugging or a rape attempt; however, I still couldn't shake off the terror spreading through my body. What was he up to? Did he actually intend to exact some kind of revenge?

I picked up my pace, listening to whether he'd done the same. Nothing. I shook my head, embarrassed that I'd let fear get the best of me, yet when I turned onto my street, I didn't slow down until I arrived at my house. Before I headed up the stairs, I glanced back down the road I had taken, and my heart skipped a beat. The man from the coffee shop was coming toward me, quickly closing the distance separating us.

What the hell did he want from me?

My first instinct told me to run into the house, lock the door and call the police, but the rational part of me understood that would be quite the overkill. It was broad daylight; we were on a busy street, and he didn't look like a psycho who would attack me with several people to witness it. I could deal with him on my own.

I shoved my hand in my bag, gripping the pepper spray tight just in case as I waited for the jackass. The panic inside my chest rose with every beat of my heart. It was going way too fast.

"What's your problem?" I asked once he approached me, sounding pissed and terrified at once.

He stopped a few feet away, his eyebrows drawn together. "Excuse me?"

"What. Do. You. Want? If you're trying to scare me to get back at me..."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, nor do I care," he interrupted, looking more annoyed than anything else. He got moving again, heading straight for me.

My pulse skyrocketed, my body entering panic mode. I pulled out the pepper spray on autopilot and aimed it at the stranger's face, my finger halfway into pressing the button. "Don't come any closer!"

He froze, eyes wide. Anger promptly replaced his shock. "Are you out of your mind, lady? Put that away before I call the cops! You can't go around pepper spraying people; that's an assault!"

Okay, I might have slightly overreacted. Too late now. I stood my ground, pushing my chin up, keeping the spray ready to be used. "I'm allowed to defend myself."

"Against what threat?"

"A creep."

"So I am a creep now? That's rich, considering it's coming from a wacko."

Oh no, he didn't. The urge to pepper spray the crap out of him skyrocketed just for saying that. You never called a woman crazy. Never. "You've been following me since the coffee shop." I did my best to remain calm and failed miserably. "I don't know you; therefore, I had no way of guessing your intentions. I was concerned about my safety."

"I wasn't following you," he said through his teeth. "I happened to head in the same direction."

"And where exactly were you going?"

"Home—not that it's any of your business. I live here." He jerked his head toward the building on his right.

My heart stopped as the realization struck. My arm dropped, the pepper spray suddenly weighing a ton.

"Alek?" I asked in a tiny voice. The universe had a sick sense of humor.

He frowned. "How do you know my name?"

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath through my nose to fight nausea. It didn't help.

I looked at the rude man, who was my new neighbor, again and made myself smile apologetically. My face felt incredibly stiff. "I'm Maddie."

"Should it ring a bell?"

"I moved to the first-floor apartment yesterday. Meredith said she told you about me."

He swore under his breath. "Perfect." Apparently, that was the end of our conversation because he strode toward the house.

I tossed the pepper spray back into my bag and followed him to the front door. When we stepped into the lobby, I wanted to run straight to my apartment and forget this unpleasant encounter had ever happened. But since we were supposed to coexist, I tried to clear the air.

"I'm truly sorry about ruining your shirt. And about everything that happened afterward. Could we..."

He unlocked his apartment, walked inside, and slammed the door in my face.

Anger filled my body, spreading through my veins like acid. He got to be kidding me! I fought the urge to shout at him through the door and hurried upstairs. The embarrassment caused by our unlucky meeting alone was enough to wish I'd never have to see him again. Add white-hot fury to the mix, and I was *this* close to packing my things and leaving. But a nice place to live was hard to find, and a hotel wouldn't cut it anymore. I'd lose both my sanity and life because Meredith would murder me if I didn't get her a finished manuscript soon.

Apart from the rude idiot living downstairs, everything here was perfect. I couldn't give it up. I wouldn't. If I managed to deal with my mother for over two decades, I could handle one annoying neighbor for sure.

\* \* \*

## ALEK

I shut the door behind me, silencing Madeline's angry voice. Was it a wise thing to do? Nope. But I had enough on my plate without fighting with her, and I didn't trust myself to remain civil if she kept getting on my nerves.

I dropped onto the couch with a heavy sigh, loosening my tie. How could my day go off the rails so quickly?

Mason texted he was at the front door five minutes later, and I buzzed him in. He wore his usual faded jeans and a plain grey T-shirt, his tattooed arms on full display. Thanks to his tall, muscular frame and short beard, he could easily pass for a gangbanger, even though he was one of the most decent guys I knew. Lately, the lousy impression was multiplied by a freaking beanie he'd chosen as his preferred piece of accessory. It was still too hot to wear a hat other than a baseball cap, but I knew better than to make fun of him. Dental care was expensive.

"Sorry, I got..." He stopped talking once he noticed the shit brown stain on my white shirt. "Did you get into a food fight? Or do I need to teach you how to use utensils properly?"

It took everything I had in me not to slam the door in his face. "I met my new neighbor," I said, letting him into the apartment.

His confusion deepened. "What?"

"We ran into each other in the coffee shop around the corner. Literary."

He pressed his lips together, fighting to keep a neutral expression. It was useless. His shoulders shook with silent laughter. "You must've made quite the impression if she threw a cake at you."

I shot him a warning glare that made him raise his arms in surrender.

"Not in the mood, got it. But before we move on, I have one more question."

Of course, he did. "Go on."

"Is she hot?"

His knowing grin made me roll my eyes. She was nice to look at; no argument there. Her personality sobered me right up, killing off any signs of attraction. “The biggest nutcases always are, aren’t they? They have to make up for the craziness somehow.”

That asshole laughed. “That should keep things interesting.”

“Are you done?”

He used the back of his hand to wipe tears from his eyes. “Yes, please.”

“Great. Now shut up, sit down and listen. I have about two hours; I won’t waste another minute.”

\* \* \*

I could tell the meeting would be a bust the second I laid my eyes on her. First, the small, curvy woman that approached my table was no Sierra Cabot. In her late twenties, she wore a dark pantsuit, her tightly pulled-back blond hair bringing attention to her sharp features. Her face looked like made of ice, and the bright red lipstick gave her pale skin a sickly tint. Second, a poorly hidden disapproval filled her grey eyes to the brim.

She greeted me without a drop of warmth. “Good afternoon, Mr. Kowalski.”

I stood up, shaking her hand. I was almost a foot taller; her hand was tiny in my palm. She squeezed it way too tight like she had something to prove.

“My name is Helene Iseman. I’m the HR Director of #loveyourself.”

Iseman, huh? Fitting.

I flashed her my best smile. “Nice to meet you.”

She dropped my hand like a hot potato, irritation flashing across her face. “Sierra sends her apologies, but she won’t be able to attend your meeting.”

My heart dropped into my stomach, and the bitter taste of disappointment filled my mouth. I did my best to hide it. “No problem, we can reschedule.” Come to think of it; it was for the best. Today sucked. “I’m sure we can agree on a new date...”

“That won’t be necessary,” she interrupted. “Sierra sent me to hold your interview instead. Should we sit down?”

We took chairs on opposite sides of the table. Helene stayed quiet for a long time, judging me. It was uncomfortable as hell, but I didn’t move a muscle. She was trying to throw me off my game, and I’d be damned if I let her win this little staring contest.

The waiter approached our table and saved me. It was supposed to be a lunch meeting; however, Helene ordered nothing but coffee, so I followed her lead. The bad feeling in my gut kept increasing.

Once the waiter left, Helene took out a thin folder from her shiny black handbag. "Let's not waste any time. My next meeting is in fifteen minutes."

I clenched my teeth so hard a few of them might have chipped. Fifteen minutes? It seemed I was fighting a lost battle, but I wouldn't just throw in the towel. "Of course."

She flipped through the folder, looking unimpressed. "Sierra went through your campaign proposal and saw some... potential." The last word got stuck in her throat, almost choking her. "Please, tell me more."

Her face revealed she didn't give a crap about what I had to say, but that didn't stop me. I prepared for this moment. I'd dazzle the shit out of her if it were the last thing I did.

Or so I thought. I was talking for maybe two minutes when Helene closed the folder firmly. "That'll be enough, thank you. It's apparent our visions are vastly different. We're looking for a bit more... feminine touch."

My blood was boiling, but I kept a level voice. "As you can see in my resume, I have plenty of experience with marketing products targeting female audiences."

"Oh, yes, of course, the lingerie." Her lips curled up in a grimace I suspected was supposed to be a smile. "I've seen those adverts. I'm sure objectifying women is a successful marketing strategy; however, it isn't what we want for our brand."

What the hell... How did I objectify anyone? The damn slogan was: You deserve it!

She stood up. "I'm very sorry, but you aren't the right fit."

I forced myself up, fighting the urge to give her a piece of my mind. "I understand. Thank you for your time, Ms. Iseman."

"Please, order anything you want. It's on us."

She shook my hand and walked away, crossing the restaurant to approach a young redhead. Her expression shifted, and her hard look melted, her smile sincere. There wasn't a piece left of that stuck-up woman I'd met. I couldn't tell whether her issue was with me personally or my gender in general, but it was apparent she came here already decided I wasn't the right person for the job. I never stood a chance.

I sat down, dropping my head in defeat. It was over. I bombed.

The waiter took pity on me and returned despite my coffee being intact. "Would you like anything else, sir?"

To hell with it. I worked my ass off, and the Ice Queen brushed me off like dirt from her shoes. I deserved at least a good meal for my troubles. "Whiskey, neat. And a menu, please."