

THE SHOE-IN

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Chapter One

I FEEL like the little mermaid. Hell, I am the little mermaid. Ariel can suck it! She's a hoarder.

I'm a collector.

There's a difference. I've watched three seasons of *Hoarders* to know which category I fall into. While she has whozits and whatzits and some random dude's statue, I have what matters the most--the perfect vintage Valentino satin peep-toe pumps with snakeskin trim in my hands. It's a mouthful but it is gorgeous. And mine. All mine.

All thanks to my favourite online fairy godmother: eBay.

I bump the door close with my bum as I step into my pristine apartment.

"Kelly, are you home?" I call out, listening for a peep or squeak from my roommate.

A slight disappointment fills me when I don't hear anything but the faint cacophony of downtown Toronto traffic. I've come up with the perfect excuse to say to her. What a waste. Kelly has stopped supporting my addiction...errrr...collection, stating I've spent way too much money on impractical "torture devices". Oh well, I'll reserve it for when I win the next eBay auction.

"Look at my stuff," I warble, twirling and turning around the living room, like I'm a thousand-feet under sea level instead of six floors up a condo tower, hugging the parcel close to my heart, swinging my not-red-hair to the beat I hear in my head. "Isn't it something?"

"Neat!" a thunderous voice booms from behind me, making me yelp.

My inner ninja surfaces, and I use the next available item--my parcel--to hurt my attacker. Unfortunately, I lack throwing prowess and coordination requisite of a true ninja. The package slips from my arms and slides to a stop on the engineered laminate floors as it hits Davin's toes.

"Youshhhh! Why'd you do that?" I flatten a hand over my parka. "You scared the shit out of me!"

"You were singing the wrong words." Davin scoops a

spoonful of cereal and milk and shoves it in his mouth. What a neanderthal. He continues, talking around a full mouth and circling his spoon in the air. "It's neat. Isn't it *neat*."

"What?"

"You're butchering a perfectly good song. The song goes..." He pauses. Scoop, shove, slurp. I cringe. For a successful entrepreneur, he lacks proper social etiquette. But then he sings the opening stanzas in his overtly manly rendition and perfect pitch, and all disgusting manner is forgotten.

"That's what I said," I huff and stomp toward him, bending down to pick up my box.

I flush as I realize how close my face is to his crotch. So close I can feel the heat of his skin seeping through his designer jeans. Clasp the parcel to my chest, I ogle his naked feet and wonder how toes can be so sexy? It's not a particular fetish of mine. Davin is just pure perfection--from head to toe. I straighten as fast as I can before I pass out by his feet. That would be the very definition of mortification.

"Nope. You didn't," he argues again and belches on top of my head. Ugh. Okay, maybe not pure perfection. Davin is beauty, brains, boorishness.

Raising a hand to my hair, I exaggerate wiping the silky

strands, like he's actually spat milk on it. My hand comes off dry.

"You're a beast."

I have to step back and tilt my head so I can squint right into his face.

"And you're still short." His smugness knows no bounds.

"Big things come in small packages," I proudly argue with the mantra I've been saying since my last growth spurt at age twelve.

"Sure." He shrugs like I've already bored him. He nods at my chest. "What's in the box?"

"Nonya." His strong brows pinch. "Nonya business." With a chin tilt, I tell him who's won this round.

He's speechless for a moment, spoon held in mid-scoop.

"Wow. You come up with that all on your own?" He chuckles drily. Jerk.

I result to teenage behaviour and roll my eyes at him, then down to four-year-old as I stick my tongue out, too.

"What are you doing here anyway? You don't live here anymore," I remind him as I retreat to my bedroom, dumping the box and my parka and purse on the bed.

"Ran out of milk."

He's the worst.

Poking my head out my bedroom door, I yell, "Don't you have a delivery service? And a grocery store in your super posh condo building?" Not to mention the minions in his office who are willing to do any and all of his biddings.

There's no reply but I hear water running from the kitchen faucet. He's doing the dishes at least. Good. Davin might lack decorum but he's still a neat freak. I return to my bed where I've set the box, ripping the packaging like it's Christmas and I'm a little girl again who's expecting to receive the limited edition Lego Death-star I'd asked from Santa.

That year, Saint Nick received five letters from me. I even attached photos of it from toy catalogs and store flyers, and sent coupons with a couple of them, in case he wanted to save a few pennies. A learned at a young age the power of determination, perseverance and a little persuasion in the right direction.

I sigh a little, recalling when Christmas morning came, and I opened my gift, seeing my wish come true. Dad and I spent four hours putting it together after a quick breakfast. It still sits on a shelf in my old bedroom, a stark reminder that life is short and fleeting. Dad passed away the day after Valentine's Day weeks later.

I push nostalgia aside, pinching my nostrils--a proven way to keep the tears at bay--and continuing with the package. As soon as I see the shiny crimson satin, I fish the shoes out of the box and run to the third bedroom-come-walk-in closet Kelly and I share. I raise the shoes over my slightly bowed head, presenting it to the rest of my collection. A rainbow of pumps, stilettos, ankle and knee-high boots, wedges, sling backs, mules and kitten heels greet their new friend in awed silence.

With a giggle and a booty shake, I sit on a padded bench and slip off my boots. On a normal day, I wouldn't dare try on shoes after work, knowing how much my feet swell.

But this is Valentino day.

I slip them on and the trumpets of heaven blow. They're gorgeous and perfect on my feet. My stockinged toes peep out a little in the front. Such a fashion faux pas but I ignore it. Kelly and I went to get our nails done two days ago. I picked red nail polish to match these shoes. I stand in front of the full-length mirror, admiring the curve of the sole, the pristine snakeskin trim coiling, creating the scalloped edge around the top of my feet. I ooh and ahh at how they make my ankles seem smaller, my calves curvier, and my bum perkier. Worth every penny. Running to my side of the closet, I fetch the dress I intend to wear

tonight, return to the mirror and drape the dress over my office attire.

"That's not a dress, is it?"

I jump again at Davin's voice, and shoot him a death glare over my shoulder. "Could you stop doing that?"

He's leaning against the doorframe, hands in his pockets, looking relaxed and at home. He's twice my size. How is he so sneaky? I look at his bare feet. If he has been wearing shoes, I would've heard him from the hallway, but Davin has this weird thing about wearing shoes inside the house.

"And FYI, it is a dress. I'm gonna look so damn good tonight."

"Got a hot date for Valentine's Day?" He adds a snicker.

He knows I haven't had a date in months. Okay, years. I've been busy. Too busy building my career. It's a decision I'm glad I made. The sleep deprivation, very few days off and sometimes bouts of loneliness are worth it since I am now the youngest junior hedge fund manager in my firm. It has been a steep hill to climb, steeper still when you're a woman.

"If you must know--" I swing around still holding the dress over me. "--I do have a hot date tonight."

He covers his mouth with his hand as his eyes drop to my feet. If I don't know any better, I swear I saw his

smirk turn into a frown. Is he sad to know I have a date? But that's wishful thinking. I've had a crush on Davin since forever. He's hot, so hot he worked part time as a model to fund his own university fees. Thick hair, gorgeous come-hither eyes, and those damn lips. Ugh. Apart from the teasing, he's caring, smart and thoughtful.

Why are all the good men taken, gay, or my best friend's brother?

It's not like Kelly doesn't know about my little infatuation. One drunken night, I spilled everything, and she laughed and laughed and laughed. I laughed a little, too, knowing Davin and I will never happen. I'm a foot too short and enjoy a lot more carbs than his usual dates.

"You do, huh?" he finally says after a few awkward moments. I guess it's "be extra intrusive day" today.

As long as I've known him, Davin doesn't date on Valentine's Day. One of his weirdo rules, amongst don't date the same woman for longer than six months, don't take any woman home to meet his family ever, and never wearing shoes or socks inside the house. Oh and the golden rule: keep a copy of our apartment keys without telling us, so he could invade our spaces whenever he so chooses. But when asked, he'll say he did it for our protection. Sure.

I roll my eyes again. "Yes. I have a date with a beautiful, sexy, smart and funny person."

"Is there a Smurf convention in town?"

I feign laughter. "No, nerd."

That's all I can say. It's hard to continue arguing with him when his eyes have this glazed look on them, like he's studying me, like I'm naked. One side of his lips twitches but a smile doesn't materialize even though I call him *nerd*. Because he is a nerd. A sexy nerd with long legs, thick arms and the biggest nerdiest brain. He's successful because of it.

I return the dress to its hanger and leave it hanging on a side hook, above the shoes that I lay on the floor. Standing back, I sigh, admiring the whole attire. I'm gonna look so sick in it.

"If you must know, Kelly and I are celebrating Galentine's Day. We've been planning this since I got my promotion." We're also celebrating that but I don't let him know.

"So you're wasting a sexy still-not-a-dress to go to dinner with my sister?" His lips twist a little.

I want to argue that it is *so* a dress but I can't ignore that he also called it sexy.

"Not a waste. Your sister is the best! She's taking me to that new harbour-front restaurant."

"Hmmm..."

Walking out of the closet, I try not to touch him as I pass. Without high heels on, it's hard to ignore our huge height discrepancy.

"You can stay here but don't you dare touch the Dom in the fridge. Kelly bought that for the two of us." I open the fridge once I enter the kitchen, checking to make sure he hasn't done so already.

"Okay, I won't touch anything you don't want me to, Maya." I hear him say from behind me.

I'm thankful for the chill the fridge provides when I feel my face heat up in response to the low timbre of his voice and the dirty, filthy way I interpret his words.

After grabbing grapes, cheeses and a bottle of sparkling water, I turn around. He's got his hands in his pockets again and his eyes have darkened. What's up with him?

"Are you getting sick? What's wrong with you?"

I busy myself preparing a cheese plate, reaching for the baguette, slicing it in pieces and adding to the snack. Dinner isn't for another two and a half hours. Need sustenance now.

Davin takes the grapes and washes them for me. He brings them back on top of a folded paper towel. He picks a couple and pops one in his mouth, and offers the other to me. I eye him warily but take the grape. He

winks at me. He's definitely not feeling well. It's not so out of character for him. Davin is a big flirt, but I've only observed it from afar when he does so with other women.

"There's tea in the pantry."

"No, thanks."

"There's a ginger and lemon tea if your throat's getting itchy. It's got antioxidants."

"Don't need it. My throat is fine. What's that one?" He changes the subject by poking at the Danish cheese I discovered last month.

"Only the best cheese in the world."

I slap his hand away. But I pick up a slice and offer it to him. Leaning one arm on the countertop, he ducks his head down and opens his mouth. Cue another eye roll. I feed him the cheese and pull my fingers between his lips. My throat dries up. I wipe my hand on the edge of the paper towel and add the grapes to my plate. Ignoring his appreciative moan--the cheese is that delicious--I carry my plate to the living room. Davin follows and sits beside me, stealing another cheese off my plate. He props his long legs, one ankle over the other, as he takes over the length of the couch and leans his back against my side.

"Seriously, Davin. Your house is twice the size of this."

And his couch is much bigger, too, able to sit four Davin-sized people. "Why on earth are you here?"

"Told you. Ran out of milk."

"That's a dumb excuse. Why don't you admit you're lonely in your man cave?" I don't know what I'm saying. Half the time I don't pay attention to the words coming out of my own mouth, unless if it's work-related.

"You're right. It's sad there. So sad. I'm lonely." He turns on his belly and props his arms on the little space between us, looking at me with the most pathetic display of fake sadness. "I'm so lonely, Maya. Hold me." Then he stretches his arms and wraps them around me, his face burrowing into my neck. He snuffles.

"Get off, ass!" I struggle but he doesn't let go. He snuffles again but it sounds awfully like he's actually smelling me, taking in my scent instead of acting overly dramatic. Closing my eyes, I let my mind wander to fantasyland. He moves a little and I feel his lips ghost over my skin. My legs tremble, and I'm lost in this fantasy.

Somewhere in the condo, a phone trills. Davin doesn't move off me right away, but with a quiet curse against my neck, he stands abruptly and heads back into the kitchen. I swallow a whine, and shiver, my body already missing his heat.

While listening to him answer his call, I gulp the whole

fizzy water down. Damn. My fantasies get hotter each time. I'd have to file that for later when my lady parts need servicing.

Reaching for the remote control, I turn the TV on and watch a daytime show, only half listening to Davin from the other room now. He sounds very covert, only replying with "yeah", "nope" and "uh-huh". Davin owns his own marketing and advertising firm. It's his pride and joy. He built it from the ground up while still in university, and after uni while he crashed on our couch for a few months until he got his first big client and was able to afford his own place.

Much like what I did, his main focus was his business, and the only relationships he tended to were those that relates to work. None of his romantic relationships flourished. I didn't even try. But now I'm ready to make space for love.

When Davin returns, he reclaims his spot on the couch in the same position and shares the rest of the cheese plate with me.

"Everything okay?" I ask. He's tensed. I can feel the muscles of his back in a bundle against my shoulder.

"Yeah."

"Work stuff?"

"Nope."

"It's not work-related? Sounded serious."

"Nope. What makes you think it is?"

"I dunno. You're all tight."

He chuckles. "Tight."

"Yeah. Tight."

"You're tight...tight ass," he cajoles.

I snort. "I don't know why I bother with you."

"Change the channel. This is boring." He doesn't wait for me to do so, instead he grabs the control off the table and surfs until he finds a sports network.

I remain silent, eating my cheese and bread and grapes, not caring about any sports news, while basking in the leather, mint and woody smell I find so sexy. Davin's signature scent. I almost feel bummed that I'll be changing out of these clothes. After his forced hug, I smell like him. I'm so giddy I end up choking on a grape. Davin slaps a hand on my back.

"You okay?"

I nod, tears burning my eyes when I start coughing, dislodging the pesky grape from my throat and spitting it on a napkin. Davin brings me a glass of water and more napkins. I take them and sip and dab.

"You're supposed to chew your food first before you

swallow," he tells me, no ounce of joke in his voice. Is he admonishing me? Bossy.

I sip water again. "Well sometimes I just swallow." This time, he coughs. Looking up to him, I knot my brows, and I offer him water. He holds a hand up and uses that same hand to rub over his face.

My phone vibrates on the entry way table. When I grab it, I see messages from Kelly. How did I miss them? Have I been so focused on the Dumont in the condo that I'd forgotten about the other Dumont that should matter? I'm reading them while I walk back to the living room.

**Kelly: We might have to reschedule
Galentine's Day.**

My heart sinks.

**Kelly: I'm sorry, this meeting is taking
longer than expected. Should we cancel?**

**Kelly: I called the restaurant. They won't
let me cancel. And I gave them my credit
card for reservation. They'll charge us no
matter what.**

Then her final two texts send my head spinning.

Kelly: Just had a thought. Maybe you should go with Davin?

Kelly: Called him. He said yes. So sorry you're going to get stuck with my obnoxious brother instead of your awesome, genius and perfect C-cup bestie. I'll make it up to you. I told him to behave. Gotta go. Hot boss is glaring.

"What?" I read all her messages again. "That was her on the phone with you?"

I'm standing in front of him, shoeless, and he's sitting straight as an arrow on the couch. We're almost the same height, and I can look him straight in the eyes, although his attention remains on the TV.

"Yup."

"Why did you say yes?" My stomach twists at the thought of the two of us at dinner. People will think we're on a date. On Valentine's Day. Like a normal couple. And I'll be wearing my sexy half dress and vintage Valentinos.

He slowly turns to face me, staring directly into my eyes looking serious, like what he's about to say something profound.

"It's a free meal."

My jaw drops. "You really are an ass. And cheap! Is this why you never go on dates on Valentine's Day?" He half shrugs and reaches for my cheese plate. "Figures. I don't know why women fall at your feet."

"I have other unique talents they're more interested in." His mouth widens into a grin, and my eyes dip down to his crotch even as my mind is saying *dontlook dontlook dontlook*. Before he says anything else, I turn away and stomp back to my bedroom.

"Does this mean I can have the champagne now?"

"Hell no! Don't you dare!"

I slam my door and within the safe confines of my room, I let out a shudder at what I think I saw when I glanced at his lap.

Kelly had to shop for Davin once. She got him expensive runners. Apparently, Davin had been wanting them forever but never had time to get them. It's so wrong to know my best friend's brother wears a Size 13. Big feet. Big shoes. Even more wrong when I think of what other part of his is *that* large.

"I need a shower." I don't stink. I smell divine, but my thoughts are dirtier than the sewers of gothic England.

Chapter Two

THANKFULLY, Davin has decided he needs to change for dinner. I refuse to call it a date. He's just a shoe-in. At least this is what I tell myself so my heart would calm the eff down.

I didn't think he needed to change out of his cashmere sweater and dark jeans, but I was happy for the reprieve. He promised to be back soon, and I reminded him that I hate being late for anything.

I'm slipping my dainty feet into my Valentinos when a knock comes at the door. Huffing a frustrated breath, I wait for it to go away. Chances are it's Davin and he's either being a jerk or finally decides to be polite and not just let himself in with his own keys. But the knock continues.

Sliding a hand over my dress, I step back to check the

final product in the mirror. I've decided to wear my hair down with the big bouncy curls at the ends. At first I was going to downplay my makeup, but the dress and shoes call for more. That's all, nothing else, not like I feel a responsibility to look better now that I'll be seen out with a guy like Davin. Not at all. I've always done stuff for myself--a treat to my femininity and kicking ass at work while doing so.

My brown eyes pop with some gold dusting over the lids, my lashes thick with mascara, my lips are the reddest I've ever seen them. The dress does some wonderful things to my breasts, waist and hips. I'm a sexy vixen on Valentine's Day. Rawr.

Nope. Wrong. It's still technically Galentine's Day. Davin's just there to enjoy the free food. The knock gets louder this time. If it's him, I might just wring his neck.

"Okay, hold on. I'm coming!" I call out and run to the door.

In four and half-inch heels, it's not an easy feat. When I open the door, I suck in a quiet, raggedy breath. *Holy mothballs, batman.* Davin's in a bespoke, dark navy suit that's a shade darker than his eyes. He's slicked his hair back and yet, it still manages to look soft, unlike some of the guys at my work who are a bit too hair-gel-happy. His crisp white shirt has tiny patterns I can't quite figure out from this distance, top two buttons undone,

and even without seeing his wrists, hidden on his back, I'm sure the shirt requires cufflinks. He completes the look with polished caramel brogues. Semi-formal, ready for runway, hotter than a menopausal woman having a hot flash. He smiles slowly and spreads his hands a la Vana White, presenting himself to me. There's a hint of wickedness in his eyes.

"Wow," I say. It sounds more like *woohowwww*. "You look..." hot, gorgeous, beautiful, totally doable. "Not cheap." Way to save face, Maya Angela Ramirez.

His smile falters a little and an indentation appears and disappears on his between his brows, but if I've hurt his ego, he quickly recovers. "Thanks. I thought you'd say that. You look..." Eyes up then down, then up again. I'm the equivalent of whole five Subway footlongs, plus shoes. His perusal doesn't last that long but it feels like an eternity.

I straighten, trying so hard not to bristle, and wait for a compliment but nothing comes. My shoulders sag a little.

"Got you something." He reaches for something he's hidden at the side of my door.

"Oh really?" I say flatly, thinking it's going to be some kind of a lame joke like a rubber chicken with a bow tie. But when he straightens from bending slightly, and produces a big ass bouquet of the reddest roses with

the longest stems, all wrapped in a satin red bow the same shade as my Valentino's, I forget how to breathe.

"My God. Those are beautiful." I reach for them and hide my giddy smile in the blooms, taking a whiff of its perfume. "You shouldn't have. This must've cost you a fortune." No kidding. It's Valentine's Day. Each rose in any flower shop jumps ten times the usual market cost.

"I wouldn't know..." he says, closing the door behind him, "I stole it from the back of a delivery truck out front."

"What?" I turn so fast the roses get whiplash and I nearly lose my balance.

"Relax. It's a joke." His shoulders shake. How drôle.

"Davin, you're a horrible human being." It comes out of me before I can stop myself.

His teasing grin falters, then disappears altogether, and we're stuck staring each other down. His lips flatten. His eyes turn to the colour of the ocean at midnight. And he shoves his hands into his pockets. I think I've hurt his feelings. This is going to be one hell of a dinner. I clasp the roses tighter to me, wondering how I can recover from this, but he saves us both the awkwardness and speaks first.

"We better go."

"Ah yeah," I say, breathing a bit better. "Let me just put these in water."

I walk into the kitchen and set the roses on the peninsula, turn to the cupboards in search of a vase big and tall enough to hold the bouquet. I see one on the top shelf.

"Damn it." It's too high for me to reach even with my heels on. Either the roses will have to wait and wilt a little, or I grab the folding steps from the storage.

Davin decides for me--option C. He reaches for the vase, his long arm over my head, and his body almost flushed to mine. "There you go. You could have asked."

Taking the vase and turning the tap on, I fill it with water. "I'm not used to asking."

"You just expect the case to fall on your hands? Like magic?" He leans his back against the counter, hands stuffed in pockets again. Seems to be his favourite position today. I wonder what other positions he likes.

Oh my god, Maya, stop.

My eyes feel like they're bulging out of my head while I chastise myself, and halt my thoughts before they get to filthy depths. I focus on the roses instead, grabbing them and quickly snipping the ends with kitchen scissors before putting them in water. With the bouquet

nearly arranged and my horny thoughts quelled, I head to my bedroom to grab my purse and coat.

"Shoot, I forgot to get an uber," I say more to myself than Davin as I return to the living room.

"All taken care of," he says with a small smile.

In shock, I look up at him, but his focus is on his phone. "You did? Oh okay. Thanks." He's quite prepared for tonight despite it being thrust into his hands at the last minute. Is this the same guy who said earlier he came over because he didn't have any milk?

"Yeah, so change into winter boots and we'll head out."

I'm in complete shock. I stare at him, mouth gaping, my mind trying to decipher what he's just told me as if he's posed his own theory on existentialism.

"What's wrong with my shoes? They're so pretty." I drop my gaze from the tall, gorgeous man before me to the petite, gorgeous shoes on my feet.

"I didn't say they weren't, but it's fucking cold out and slippery. You'll catch your death with those on."

One of my hands fly to a cocked hip. "You sound like my mom." He huffs, eyeing me wearily. "We're going from this condo to the car into the restaurant, and the same way back again. We're not going on a jaunt." I don't even argue that he didn't come with a coat on. His

silk suit is barely an armour from the harsh Toronto winter.

He waves a hand in the air, dismissing my hairiness. "Fine. Suit yourself." He takes my coat from me, gives it a quick shake and holds it up.

I slip my arms in. "Your sister wouldn't give me this much shit." In fact, she'd wear almost the same thing.

"Good thing I'm not my sister or..."

"Or what?" I spin around, tying my belt in a cinch.

"Or nothing." He also takes my scarf, folds it in half and wraps it around my neck, feeding the ends through the folded loop. "I didn't say anything," he adds, although it feels like that's exactly what he wants to do--add more, say more, even do more--judging by the way he's looking at me with those dark ocean depths. He cares enough to adjust my collar when he deems my scarf is tight enough and save me from pneumonia. He steps back, gives me a last once over, and bites down on his bottom lip.

I can't help but preen a little. Davin's never given me this much, this kind of attention before. It almost a bit...weird. When I'm uncomfortable, I rely solely on sense of humour.

"Yeesh, Mr Ogle, ogle much?" I laugh a little but he only raises one eyebrow. "C'mon. Delicious food is

waiting." He sighs behind me as I open the door, and continue on to the elevators, knowing full well he's got his own set of keys. He can lock up for once.

The elevator arrives as soon as he gets to my side, and we step in together.

"Hi, Davin!" an all too cheery voice greets.

I haven't been paying attention so I crane my neck behind us to see a girl dressed in her workout clothes, high ponytail, full makeup, making her way to Davin's side. I can't resist rolling my eyes. The several times I made it to our condo gym, I threw on my old high school sweatpants, a t-shirt I got from a cereal box when I was ten, and a naked face and greasy hair. I'd intended to sweat. There was no point in making myself look presentable.

"Hey," Mr Oh-so-cool Davin greets back. Five bucks says he doesn't remember her name. But it proves my earlier point that he's always at our place. I don't even know her and I've lived in the building for more than five years.

"You look good. Going somewhere fun?" She weaves the end of her long ponytail between her fingers.

To my surprise, Davin places his hand on the small of my back. "Yeah, Maya and I are going out for dinner."

I smile at her because I'm a polite Canadian, and take note of the envious way she regards me.

"Oh fun," she says, and quickly adds, "I love your shoes!" And I think maybe we can be friends.

The elevator arrives on the second floor and Davin's friend wishes us a fun dinner. Fun. Not romantic. I wave a bit at her and tells her to have a *fun* workout.

As soon as the door slides to a close, Davin chuckles.

"What?" I snap.

He shakes his head. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were jealous of Tabitha." Well, what do you know, he does remember her name.

"You're right," I huff, "You don't know any better." He chuckles low, and I can't ignore the patch of heat on my lower back where his hand is spread.

Davin ushers us to the front of the building, and out to a waiting black car. It's not Uber. The driver is dressed to the nines, complete with one of those fancy chauffeur hat, which he tips to me and Davin as he holds open the back door. Sliding in, I thank him and try my best not to flash him and Davin my goods.

There's already sparkling rosé in two flutes, and the bottle is chilling in an ice bucket in front of us. I doubt Kelly planned our Galentine's Day like this. This is all Davin, but why? Is this all because I called him cheap?

The roses, a town car, sparkling wine? Yeah, it's his way of proving me wrong. Well, he can suck it. I'm going to enjoy him proving me wrong all the way to dinner. Taking the glasses, I offer him one when he's settled, and I lean back, raising the flute.

"To Galentine's Day!"

Davin clinks his glass to mine but doesn't say a thing. I down mine in one crisp gulp and look out at the beautiful city. Despite the bite of what's been a horrendously snowy, cold winter, the streets are alive, sparkling with lit patio lights, and ambient lamps shining through the front windows of some restaurants.

"Want more?" Davin offers, lifting the bottle out of the ice bucket. I shake my head, and he takes the glass from me. He continues to sip his, while I watch the city pass us by.

I'm just beginning to relax in our companionable silence when we arrive at the restaurant. Once again, our driver--whose name I didn't get--opens the door for me and guides me out of the car with a hand. In no time, Davin reaches my side and tells the driver he's got it, meaning me.

The hostess pushes out her boobs when she sees Davin approach, ignoring me. He gives her *my* name and she nods at him, and tells him to follow her. I'm invisible. He may as well be entering the restaurant by himself.

My sudden superpower continues as we walk through tables full of women checking out Davin, whether they're with a man or other people.

So this is what it's like to be out with him. I have to admit, it's a little unnerving. In uni, I dated my share of good-looking guys. And I work with a few handsome men, in all ages, with the biggest egos. But that's besides the point. Davin is a planet. Women are like moons orbiting him. And I'm but a speck he'd picked up along the way.

But this is still sort of my night. I remind myself that if it's not Davin in front of me, Kelly would have been. Apart from Galentine's Day, we're here to celebrate my promotion, too. The hostess finally stops ogling Davin and retreats to her post, but I have a good view of her to see that she's still staring at him.

Our server appears out of nowhere and lets us know how dinner tonight will work while he fills our glasses with water. It's a fixed menu, but he asks again if either of us have allergies. We both shake our heads. Then he offers us the first drink for our dinner. He leaves.

Reaching for my second drink of the night, I'm suddenly reminded that Davin is not much of a drinker. "We have wine pairings," I tell him. "You don't have to drink everything."

"I'm fine." He's not looking at me but he's fiddling with

the napkin on his lap, I think. I can't see much from my vantage point. For all I know he's jerking off.

Whoa, there, Nelly! Where did that thought come from?

I hide a snicker behind my wine glass and he eyes me curiously. "What's so funny?"

"What? Nothing...I...nothing." I snicker again, openly this time.

"Is this how you treat all your dates, Maya?" He sounds bemused.

"I don't date so ha!" I mentally facepalm myself.

"I can see why."

Despite my efforts, I try not to show him how that affects me, but I fail and pout. "I don't date because I have life goals, unlike the girls you date."

Davin leans forward, a hand on the table, his fingers almost reaching mine. "How would you know? You've never made an effort to befriend any of the women I've dated."

Yeah, I've met almost all of them, because Davin has had a bad habit of taking them to our apartment when he invades our privacies. "Why should I bother? None of them will last longer than six months." Kelly doesn't talk to them much either, but I don't add that.

His strong brows furrow, and his jaw tightens. He's looking right into my eyes as if he's trying to send a coded message through telepathy. I break the unnerving standoff, and glance down at our fingers, still not touching, but mine tingles. His index finger twitches and I retract my hand after feeling a zap. How weird is this night going to be?

Our server appears at our side again and presents us with an amuse bouche and sets a plate of sliced bread on the table. As soon as he leaves, I exhale hard.

"I'm sorry. That was unfair for me to say." I offer him the plate of bread as an olive branch. He takes two slices, and shrugs.

Davin pops the amuse bouche into his mouth and takes a sip of wine. Then he reaches over and takes the third slice of bread, leaving me with one. I begin to protest and he smiles crookedly at me. Everything's all right with the world again. I lean back and relax.

Chapter Three

DINNER IS as amazing as it's promised to be. I'm sad that Kelly isn't there with me to enjoy it, and play the "guess the secret ingredient" game we play whenever we go out for dinner. But Davin is not bad company. Okay, he's fabulous company. All his jokes are funny, his brain is beautiful whenever he talks about work and his passions, and he's getting more gorgeous as the time passes and the alcohol is pruning my liver. I'm not brave enough to finish all my drinks but I have what I can tolerate.

Davin asks me about my childhood, my mother and her new family, my late father and if I've ever wanted to visit the town in the Philippines, where he was born. He considers each of my replies and has a follow-up question at the ready. He's met my mom and adores her cooking.

By dessert time, we've discussed grades 2 to 8 of my life, and about to probe into high school when nature calls. I excuse myself and promise him an embarrassing story when I return.

I don't realize I'm still smiling while I use the facilities. "Calm down. It's not a real date," I murmur to myself. Before I step out of the stall, I slip my phone out of my purse to check if Kelly has send a message. Nothing. Then two women slip into the bathroom, and I decide, Kelly must still be busy at work.

"He's so hot. I thought I recognized him when he came," one of the women says.

"He's funny, too," the other one says. "Did you see the size of his hands?" I roll my eyes at that addition. What's that got to do with anything? Maybe I shouldn't be eavesdropping. I'm about to go out when they continue.

"I met him at a party once. He was dating a friend of a friend, obviously he's single again."

"You should give him your number."

"I sure am! Davin's not gonna know what hits him. He should be with someone like me."

Hearing his name hits me like a battering ram. They're talking about Davin? My Davin? No...he's not exactly

mine, but they assumed he's single, which he is but hats besides the point. And why should he be with someone like her? I peek through the small space between the stall door and the wall. Both women are pretty, but the other one is taller and slimmer. After applying lipstick, she reaches into the top of her dress and rearranges her breasts, making her cleavage look more appealing. I step away from the door, my ears warming up from anger. What's wrong with me?

Chin up, I exit the stall and stand in front of the two women, ignoring them, and taking my damn time to wash my hands. I don't re-apply my lipstick. I don't fix my dress, or hair or boobs. I shake my hands and when they jump from, God forbid, getting soaked from the water off my fingers, I simply say, "Oops, my bad." Then I head back to my table.

Dessert is set and there's a new glass of white wine on the table. I reach for it and tip it to my mouth.

"Everything okay?" Davin asks and I glance at him beyond the glass.

"Yup. What's for dessert?" I slam the glass on the table and rub my hands, focusing on what looks like a chocolate orb on a shallow bowl.

"I think it's chocolate," Davin replies, and he reaches for my hand, squeezes it. I look down at our clasped hands.

He does have ginormous hands, but it's hardly a surprise. It would be funnier and more note-worthy if he has dinky hands.

The server returns and he pours a thick liquid over the orb and it melts, opening itself to a stack of more chocolate and cake and fruit within.

"Are you sure everything's okay? Are you feeling sick?" Davin asks again, his thumb circling over the top of mine.

I brace myself and look up at him, letting a smile spread. "Yup. All good."

His eyes are full of concern. He doesn't believe me one bit. He may as well call me a liar.

Then from my peripherals, I see the two women from the bathroom returning to their table--to their dates!--watching us. If anything, I feel protective of Davin. If that woman offers her number to him while she's on a date with another man, what does that say about her character? Davin may not be mine, and he may date a lot, but he's strictly monogamous, and unless he's different behind closed doors, he's respectful of the women he dates from what I've observed.

I tug at his hand, and gaze at him. "Kiss me." I suck in a breath.

"What?" He laughs a little.

Tilting my head a bit, I repeat my sort-of request, "Kiss me, now." And if that isn't enough, I add, "Like you mean it."

Davin laughs again, but he quiets down when he sees what's probably fierce determination in my eyes...that or psycho glare. It must be the first one for he trails his fingers up my arm, to my jaw and cheek. Thank God he's tall because he leans in, over our dessert plates, without any excessive effort, and teases my lips with his. A funny fluttering wakes in my belly.

My eyes are wide open, and I try to focus on his pupils-deep, dark navy with specks of gold. And he's kissing me, his lips sucking on my bottom lip. I taste wine and salt and sweet and Davin. His tongue probes a little, a teasing or a permission. Either way, I let him in, and I close my eyes.

I've kissed many guys. Some are good. Others need a whole lot of practice and maybe less spit. But Davin...

A low moan escapes from within me. My lower belly tightens, and I cross my legs and grip the edge of the table. His hands cup my jaw, his thumbs rubbing the smooth skin in front of my ears. His lips are warm and soft. Somewhere far, far away, a throat clears, a fork jangles. Then there's murmur, laughter and music.

Suddenly, I'm all too aware that we're not alone, we're in public, at a restaurant where people--other women--have watched Davin the entire night. With one final press of his lips, he pulls away and exhales warm breath along the seam of my mouth.

Well blow me away. That is one hell of a kiss. I bat my lashes, not to flirt with him more, but to refocus. I'm all of a sudden too shy, and find the hem of the table cloth interesting. Yup, what neat serge edges. Meanwhile, I'm screaming profanities in my head in different languages, because those are the only words I know to translate.

"Hmmm this is good." Davin's voice tugs me back to his presence. He's slipped a spoonful of dessert into his mouth but there's a teasing smile in his eyes.

"Yeah, it sure is." I raise the spoon with a trembling hand and pray I don't spill whatever this dessert is on my lap. I taste the cake, decadent dark chocolate with a hint of raspberry and salted caramel. Yum. Delicious, yet, it's still not as divine as Davin's kiss. I chance a glance at him and find him looking entertained.

"Shut up," I say and stick my tongue out. How mature.

He laughs at me and sticks his tongue out too, but not in the same way. He does it like he's tasting his own lips. Or whatever was on his lips. He must like it for he bites down on his lip and smile wickedly at me.

I can't resist rolling my eyes. But my belly flips, and I know it's not from the food. I take a couple more bites of the dessert before I surrender, too full, too alert, too excited, too jittery, too whatever. It's all Davin's fault, plus the wine, and sugary finish to our dinner. Our waiter returns once again, taking our plates and offering us coffee or tea.

"There's coffee at my place," Davin tells me and the waiter.

Uhhmmm.

Tilting my chin, I smile at the waiter. "I guess that's a no for coffee. Thanks. Just the bill please." Picking up my napkin off my lap, I told it and place it on the now clear table.

"That's already been taken care of," the waiter informs me.

"Oh really?" Kelly must've paid for it ahead of time. "Well, thanks. Everything was great!"

"You're welcome. I hope you folks have a great night ahead."

"We intend to," Davin says across from me. He slouches on his seat with a cock-sure attitude, staring at me, almost encouraging me to say more or argue his point. I just prop my elbow on the table, and fold my hands on top of each other.

"Do we now?" I challenge from behind the safety of my folded hands.

"Yup." He stands and buttons his suit jacket, then he offers his arm to me.

With a small smile, which is secretly a full-on grin, I stand and slip my hand into the crook of his arm. We stop to reclaim my coat from coat check and he helps me into it once again. Taking my scarf, he wraps it loosely twice around my neck, and fixes my collar as he's done so before. All the while his eyes bore into mine. He's not saying a thing. And neither am I. Coffee at his place? Sure! Why not? Maybe it comes with a side of another of his kisses. But don't tell my mind that because it's on a different dimension, a much more filthy world.

"Ready?" Davin asks, his gaze fall to my mouth.

"Yup." Whatever takes over me is quick and hard to fight. One of my hands grab his suit by the lapel and the other curls on the back of his neck. With a rapid inhale-exhale, I tug his head down and kiss him.

I moan against his lips, and I giggle when he does the same. "We better get home fast. That coffee's gonna get cold," he tells me as he pulls his lips away, but he doesn't tug away from my hold.

"We can always make a new batch."

His features turn serious. "Are we talking about just coffee or..."

I tilt my head, laughing at the silliness of it all. "We have to work on our euphemisms. C'mon."

To my surprise, the town car we rode in earlier is waiting for us outside the restaurant. I keep my distance inside the car, eyeing the rosé in the glass. I've had enough liquid courage for tonight. Whatever's about to happen when we reach Davin's condo won't be because of alcohol. It's all because of desire, and my readiness to start dating, now that I've reached a major career goal. I still have a long ways to go for the end game, but I'm more than willing to have fun and get involved with someone while I strive for it.

Davin understands this. At least, I hope he does. He's never made a move on me. I've never been so delusional as to think he's attracted to me at all. I've only been Maya, his sister's best friend.

That thought alone is enough to give me pause as we arrive to his condo building not long after. Silently, and from the warmth of the condo lobby, I watch him have a quick chat with the driver and if I haven't been keenly paying attention, I'd have missed him handing the driver a tip. He returns to my side and spreads his hand on my back, just as he did earlier on the elevator. I feel the weight of his hand, a little push, as though he can sense my hesitation.

We stay silent throughout the short elevator ride to his floor. I list the pros and cons in my head, which bottle down to two: I like him (pro), and he's Kelly's brother (con). But if he's not her brother, I doubt we would have met at all. I doubt he'd notice me even if we went to the same school, or took the same classes. He's in business. I'm in finance. It's not a far reach, but he's the travelling, runway-walking, jock dude entrepreneur to my pajama-at-home, number-crunching, albeit kick-ass, nerd whose only weekly excitement is if I win an eBay auction.

Him being Kelly's brother should be discouragement enough for me not to go to his apartment for (cough) hot coffee (cough).

Too late! He's already unlocking his door. He opens the door for me, and waits. And waits. And waits.

Davin ducks his head, watching me through his lashes. "You can come in or you can tell me to take you home. It's up to you." He walks in. "I'm making coffee." And does just that, slipping off his shoes and leaving them arranged on the side before heading to his kitchen.

While I listen to him whistling inside his kitchen, hearing the faucet go on and off, clanging of what might be cups off a cupboard, and eventually smelling the aroma of coffee beans wafting out to the hallway, where I'm still standing, I look down at my shoes. What pretty shoes for Galentine's Day.

I remember waiting patiently for the auction to end, day in day out, for weeks. I was determined to have them. For them to be mine. I knew they'd be perfect on my feet.

The previous Valentine's Day, I bought pink platform pumps and wore them with a blue suit at work. No dinner. The one before, I had on black sling backs, which I paired with a favourite LBD and simple pearls, to an art gallery with Kelly. It was Jimmy Choo ankle boots three years ago, an impulse buy because the cute salesperson said they looked great on me. He hadn't been wrong but I had no business spending that much money on shoes when I should've been buying stocks--because that's what I do for others. These shoes are my treasures. I wear them anywhere, to anything. They're not there to replace any feelings or attention I've been lacking or missing.

So why do these ones feel extra special?

My sight blurs a little when one of Davin's socked foot nudge my toes peeking out of my Valentinos.

"Coffee?" He offers me a cup of black coffee. "I have cream and sugar in the kitchen, but you'll have to come in for that." His smile is polite but confident. When I don't say anything, he adds, "Or I can do that for you if you tell me how you take your coffee."

"One cream, two sugars, please." I ignore the way my

heart stutters at his smile. Something I've seen thousands of times, but now feels strange. Unfamiliar. Exhilarating.

He tips his head back and chuckles. Shaking his head and muttering something only he can hear, he heads back in. A minute later, he returns, both our cups in hand. This time I take the coffee from him. He regards me with barely restrained laughter. I take a tentative sip. Perfect. He leans against the wall in his hallway, crosses his ankles and drinks his coffee, watching me with unfettered fierce intensity.

He slips one hand in his pocket. In his relaxed stance he might as well be in a photo shoot with his bespoke suit and what I assume are extra large socks. "How's the coffee?"

"Hot." I sip, staring at him over the cup. "Sweet."

"Just the way you like it?"

"Yup."

He turns slightly, his shoulder the only thing leaning against the wall, and he manages not to uncross his ankles. He tilts his head, resting it on the wall.

"You know this is weird."

I chuckle drily at my cup. "You're telling me."

"I've had a bit more to drink, but I can get you an Uber if you want to go home."

I don't want to admit that His words brings a surge of disappointment. But I don't say a thing. I can't. Call me wuss. Maybe I'm not ready, after all.

He sighs, broad shoulders rising and falling. He tips his cup up and finishes his coffee. "Let me get my phone."

"Okay," I say to my shoes. I hear him sigh again. When I look up, he's gone. I drink the last bit of my coffee and give myself a bit of pep talk. It's just coffee. It's just Davin. Yeah, right. He's never been just Davin.

I push forward, pausing to wonder if I should remove my shoes, but decide not to. Slowly, he turns to me when he hears me approach, his phone in his hand. I hand him the cup.

"It should be here in five minutes." A lot can happen in five minutes. The stock market can collapse in five minutes. I've lost eBay auctions in less than that. It could feel like an eternity.

"Cancel it." I step forward.

"Are you sure?" He sets the cup to the side.

"Yes."

Another step. My heart jumps to my throat. Another

step. His Adam's apple bobs up and down. Another step. He's got my bottom cupped in his hands. My fingers are in his hair. His lips are on mine, and my legs are around his hips. My heels digging into his back.

"My shoes," I murmur the quick second he lets me catch my breath.

"Leave them on." His mouth is on my neck.

"Are you sure?" I breathe in his ear.

"Wouldn't have it any other way. They're sexy on you." He's walking us to his humongous sofa.

"I know, right?" The couch oomphs when he sits with me on top.

"You're sexy without them, too." Davin plays with one of my big bouncy curls, as though he's mesmerized by them. "You're sexy all the time."

He catches my gaze and locks me in. My breath is a in-and-out stutter. I'm feeling something come alive on his lap. My pulse is beating so rapidly, so loudly I'm afraid his whole floor can hear it.

Davin rubs his lower lips against my top lip. "Maya..."

"Yes, Davin?"

"Happy Galentine's Day."

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