

UNHINGED

A Dual-POV Novel

Working Manuscript — Draft 3.0

Fictionalized Branch — Chapters One–Twelve

Chapter One

HIM — UNHINGED

I met her on Hinge. I wanted to start the story differently. Trust me, I really did. I would love to have some cute story about how they met in line at a theme park, because those stories are true too. But I met her and became unhinged.

Before I tell you what caught my eye, I should probably explain what I was doing on Hinge in the first place. My life was still in shambles. Not destitute. Just very much under construction. I had done fairly well for myself given the opportunities I'd had, and I had enough saved to give myself some runway while I figured out what came next. I had skills. I had a plan. I wasn't a failure.

My adult life had mostly been sales. Enterprise deals. Consulting. Long cycles where I could walk into a room full of executives, figure out what mattered to everyone, and move a complicated decision forward. I knew how to do that job. I knew I could probably get another one. The more uncomfortable question was whether I wanted to.

I had also started wondering what would happen if I took the part of myself that disappeared into books, stories, and my own imagination seriously. I liked the idea of writing. I was less accomplished at finishing things. So for the moment it lived somewhere between aspiration and private experiment while I kept doing the responsible thing and looking for work.

I was also watching that runway get shorter through a divorce while I waited for the right opportunity. So I wasn't worried, but I was also terrified, if that makes sense. I was going through a divorce. I didn't have a job. I was trying to start something new. And somehow, somewhere in the middle of all of that, I had reached the point where I wanted to start dating again. Even if it was just for the sake of meeting people and having friends.

I had been in therapy talking about dating for around six months. I had other priorities in life, obviously, but I also didn't want to let my life pass me by anymore. I felt like I could start meeting people.

But I was also looking to explore, because I never really did much of that before. I got married young and only had a few girlfriends beforehand, so I had spent most of my adult life inside one relationship without ever having to decide what kind of relationship structure actually fit me.

I'd been working through that with my therapist because I wasn't trying to pick an identity so much as figure out what actually felt right. Monogamy? Polyamory? Some version of openness? My plan was to try to date some people who were polyamorous and then go on some dates with people who were monogamous, and just kind of see who resonated and what felt right.

If I went on multiple dates with somebody who was monogamous, I wanted to be clear that I was still dating other people and wasn't ready for exclusivity yet. But I also didn't want to date a monogamous woman while secretly hoping I could convert her to my way of thinking one day.

Monogamy sounded very convenient.

Having one person who was close enough to what you needed, compatibility-wise, that you were happy spending time with them. Someone where, even when you fought, you liked the way they handled it best. No one was ever going to be perfect. But maybe they could just be compatible. I wasn't sure if the level of compatibility that I required as a human being was so high that no one person was ever going to fulfill it.

Maybe that meant I needed multiple people. Or maybe I had just never met one person where enough of the pieces fit. That question wasn't entirely theoretical. There was more history underneath it than I wanted to put on a dating profile, and more than I needed to explain before I had even met the woman. So I was fretting over how to create my profile. How to position myself. How much to disclose. How honest to be about complicated parts of a sexual and relationship history that involved other people too.

I wanted to tell the truth without dumping my entire life into a stranger's lap before she'd even decided whether she liked me. Which, for me, meant I spent an absurd amount of time thinking about a dating profile. Then I saw hers. What caught my eye in her profile was, first, aerial yoga. Second, her short hair. Third, her alternate, kind of edgy vibe. It was all very me. Something about her had a beautiful combination of femininity and masculinity. I could see a ferocity in her just from her pictures, a kind of spice for life. Someone provocative on purpose.

And then she was also doing aerial yoga, which is something I think is fascinating. I've done it a couple times, and it really helped open up my shoulders and hips in ways that regular yoga never did. I've been wanting to go back and try it for years.

It was her main hobby, and she did it for nervous system regulation. She also described herself as neurospicy. Autistic and ADHD. And so I started to wonder if maybe I had just imagined this woman and I was dreaming, because it was starting to seem not real. And I hadn't even really met her yet.

She mentioned being neurospicy in her profile, and that's what I commented on, along with the aerial yoga, when I messaged her. Clearly that piqued her interest too, because we started chatting and very quickly were sending each other long, multi-paragraph, deep explanations of who we were and opening up in ways that you don't normally with somebody you haven't met in person yet.

We talked for a week. I was on a cruise in Europe for the first time in my life, and I can objectively say two things were true. One is that I had been looking forward to this for a very long time. It was my first time in Europe, and I was so excited to see everything. But it is also true that I kept choosing to spend some of that time talking to Morgan.

Despite being in Europe for the first time. I realize now that that's kind of meaningful. There were moments when it became almost ridiculous. My favorite place on the ship was the hammock on the balcony, hanging over the water while I drafted another long message to a woman I had never met. In Italy, I took a handmade pasta class. I rolled out my own pasta, and the instructor gave me this little nod and told me she was genuinely impressed. I was proud of myself.

And through the whole thing, part of my brain kept wanting to check my phone to see if Morgan had messaged me. I had crossed an ocean to collect once-in-a-lifetime experiences, and somehow one of the things I wanted most was another paragraph from her.

I was objectively in an environment where novelty should have owned my attention. Countries I had never seen. Places I had only seen in movies and read about in books. An entire continent that had existed in my imagination for most of my life was suddenly real and right in front of me.

And yet this woman's mind kept competing with it. The conversation had started on Hinge, but a couple days in we moved to WhatsApp. Her first message there was unexpectedly honest.

"I guess I just don't want to pop the bubble of what has felt like the most real and easy conversation that I've had in a while."

I understood exactly what she meant. Changing apps should not have felt meaningful. It was functionally the same two people typing words into rectangles. But it did. There was something about moving the conversation one small step closer to real life that made both of us suddenly aware we could ruin it. I told her I felt the same way, but that I thought it might actually be less awkward to make the switch before I got home.

Then, the next day, she asked what kind of meditation I did. This was a tactical error on her part. I had been in therapy, becoming increasingly fascinated by the way the mind processes experience through sound, visualization, body sensation, memory, and all the strange little doors I had started finding into myself. So I did what I do. I wrote her a dissertation.

I told her I had never been very good at traditional meditation. I overthought whether I was doing it correctly. I got distracted. I got bored. Eventually I discovered that bilateral music and guided reflection worked differently for me. I described an experience where music, emotion, memory, and imagery seemed to braid together until old material surfaced and something in my body finally let go.

Then I realized how much I had written and tried to save myself. I told her there was a much longer and stranger version of the story, but I was trying not to pop the bubble by sending an entire dissertation before we had even met. Her response came back:

“Are you kidding me? I live for this shit. That’s keeping us IN the bubble. Once you start asking ‘how was your day’ or neglecting to send full dissertations on my favorite topics and/or your experiences with the depth of your humanness...then it will have popped.”

I stared at that message. I had to sit with that. I have spent a lot of my life worrying that there is too much of me. Too many words. Too much intensity. Too much analysis. Too much need to understand why something happened instead of simply letting it happen. This woman had just filed a formal complaint that I might eventually become less intense. Then she made it worse.

“I look forward to hearing the longer and stranger version of the story at whatever point and in whatever form you want to share it with me. If I get a vote tho I would choose hearing your voice tell the story while feeling the in person energy associated with it.”

Now I really wanted to meet her. I asked whether she wanted to talk on the phone or video first. She said she would rather wait and meet in person. Then she gave me another piece of information that would turn out to matter later:

“If you’re open to it, I would love to leave the choice of activity to you. I love a good surprise and my brain is currently mush.”

Then, as if she had decided to hand me the operating manual in installments:

“Also as it relates to my verbal tendencies...I have two main settings

1) almost completely silent

2) won’t shut the fuck up

Sooooo I will never judge you for being verbose”

I told her I had the same two speeds. The next day she sent me some aerial videos. This is where the conversation first acquired a small electrical problem. I told her:

“That is so cool! And kinda hot 🥵. I want to install one of those in my house. I have a foam pad for stretching, but I feel like I could get so much more out of that.”

She replied:

“It’s definitely useful for all kinds of things lol”

I understood the assignment.

“I was hesitant to install one in my bedroom because no one would believe I even use it for exercise...


She answered with a single smirk. It was the first genuinely sexual signal between us. Technically mine. Which feels important to establish because a few days later her chaos gremlin would get all the credit. I liked that we left it there. The possibility could exist without either of us immediately grabbing it by the throat and making it perform. We kept talking about ordinary things too. Food. Travel. Music. What felt regulating and what felt overwhelming.

At one point she told me, “I am a sucker for a really good sandwich.” I remembered it. Then I got to Ibiza. I was in the middle of one of those ridiculous once-in-a-lifetime nights where the surroundings should have been the entire story, and somehow Morgan and I ended up talking about my social anxiety.

I told her I could be good with people once I felt safe, but approaching someone new could make my body act like I was walking into mortal danger. Heart racing. Head pounding. Too quiet or suddenly talking too much because half my processing power had been requisitioned by fear.

I really don't know what I was afraid of. I was just afraid. Rejection, sure. Being mocked. Being made fun of. Mostly things that were never going to happen. But I was also afraid to be a bother. I could be so sure somebody would be annoyed if I struck up a conversation that I never even gave her the chance not to be. She asked good questions instead of trying to reassure me out of it.

Then, while I was surrounded by an enormous show on an island in the Mediterranean, she asked the question that suddenly mattered more than the show:

“Do you think you will experience that anxiety when you meet me?”

I told her yes, but differently. With her it would be less about approaching a stranger and more about hoping she liked me in person. Hoping I did not say the wrong thing. She wrote back:

“For whatever it’s worth, there are a lot more right things to say to me than wrong ones. And I can be very forgiving if there are hugs that involve compression.”

I loved compression hugs. A little later I told her, “I kinda want that hug now. A compression hug sounds mighty nice.” Somewhere in that same conversation she asked a question about my traveling companion, who was a female friend. She didn’t assume that we were together.

When I clarified that there was nothing romantic there, Morgan told me the important part plainly:

“Truth be told if I had any inkling that you were, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

That told me something about her too. She could be sexually open-minded without being ethically vague. That distinction mattered to me. By the end of the cruise the conversation had turned into actual plans. We picked a daytime date. Then I got greedy and asked for a second one that same week. She agreed to both. Then, before we had ever occupied the same physical room, she sent me:

“I’ve got a bit of a crush on you, Miles. It’s kind of cracking me up. What have you done to me?!”

I woke up the next morning and answered with the part that mattered most to me:

“I think I’ve got a bit of a crush too. And that’s the best part. I’ve been myself...”

More than the crush itself, that was what landed. I had not built a polished dating version of myself for her. If anything, I had done the opposite. I had sent her the kind of messages I would normally worry were too long, too strange, too earnest, too much. And somehow that was the version she had developed a crush on. Then I landed back home, and theoretical attraction suddenly acquired geography.

Morgan messaged me that she was excited we were finally in the same time zone, but that her mouth filter was deteriorating.

“In the interest of keeping my freak on a leash for now, I’m going to not message you until I’m in a different headspace. I don’t want you to wonder if I’ve lost interest or something.”

I had been about to tell her that our already scheduled date suddenly felt impossibly far away. So I told her that, and then told her I would respect the space. She replied:

“It does seem far away. My thoughts were in the same spirit but much less...innocent. My chaos gremlin is trying to stir the pot.”

There it was. Not the first sexual joke between us. I had opened that door with the aerial rig. But it was the first time she had deliberately introduced me to that part of herself as a part. Chaos gremlin. I told her I liked the requested space substantially less now, but I would still respect it. Her response was:

“You are oozing good character and I fucking love it”

Which was a deeply inconvenient thing to say to somebody already trying not to get ahead of himself. A few minutes later she offered to see if we could find a time to get together before the date we already had scheduled. Neither of us seemed particularly committed to waiting.

The next day became coffee. By the time I met her in person, I think my nervousness was more about the fact that I knew her too well without having ever met her in person and experienced her physically. There is a strange intimacy in knowing someone's stories before you know how they move through a room. I knew pieces of her history. Things she had learned about herself. Things she wanted. Things she did not want anymore.

But I didn't know the ordinary things yet. What her face did when she was thinking. What happened to her voice when she got excited. What silence felt like with her sitting across from me instead of waiting behind three little dots on a screen. I got to the coffee shop first and discovered that the place I had chosen did not actually have an indoor seating area. Excellent work, planner. I sat under the covered patio and waited for the woman who had been living in my phone for a week to become three-dimensional.

So, yes, I was really nervous when we met for coffee. But I also really enjoyed the experience. She was even more beautiful in person than in her photos. I think this is partially because she's generally smiling in her photos, and the wide range of her expressions is so much more interesting. A simple smile is beautiful, and hers certainly is. But all the other expressions — the types of smiles, the fierce smiles, the provocative smiles she has — all of them.

I just enjoyed the experience of her, where her expressions alone were like a whole other language. And I find it fascinating. It's easier to listen to her. The way she communicates is kind of cool. But if you think about it, listening is not just audible. When you are experiencing another person, you are experiencing something with more than one sense. Listening also includes body language. Visible cues. The way somebody moves closer or farther away. The way their face changes before the sentence catches up.

All of that is a form of listening. Because I could experience her more fully, I felt like I could listen better. I could see that something had landed before I necessarily understood why. At least, that is how it felt. One of the things I would learn later is that reading a signal and understanding what it means are not the same skill. I can read Morgan really well. That does not always mean I understand her really well.

Sometimes I can sense tension without knowing what emotion is underneath it. Sometimes I can see that something moved through her before either of us knows what to call it. Sometimes I am probably just wrong. But from the first time I sat across from her, I could tell there was more information coming off this woman than I was used to receiving from another human being.

When I looked at her face, her eyes lit up and her smile seemed to have a million different facets. As she was saying words, I felt like I could get some of the message behind the words too. Even sometimes when the expression seemed to conflict with the words coming out of her mouth. Her expressions deceive her, and I love her for it. Or maybe that is not fair. Maybe her expressions don't deceive her at all.

Maybe they just tell the truth faster. I didn't try to kiss her on the first date. I'm a coward. I admit it. Afterward I sent her a message saying I had enjoyed meeting her and apologizing if I had monologued too much.

Before we met, she had specifically told me she wanted to hear the longer stories in my voice, in person. I still needed confirmation anyway. She gave it to me:

“Don’t apologize. I enjoyed hearing your voice.”

I told her I had enjoyed hers too. That hearing it had actually been one of the first things I noticed. I had spent the entire date worrying that I was talking too much. She had been listening after all. I left wanting to see her again. That part wasn't complicated at all.

Chapter Two

HER — CHAOS GREMLIN

I was tired of dating. Which was impressive, because I had really only just started doing it again. I had made a Hinge profile against my better judgment. I was having more fun on Fet anyway, where at least everyone was relatively honest about the fact that they were weird. I liked weird. Normal sounded exhausting. I tried to make that clear on my profile. Cute pictures. Aerial yoga. Short hair. Enough personality that somebody paying attention might understand what they were getting into.

Neurospicy. That ought to eliminate a few people. I wasn't looking for somebody to change my life. That sounded miserable. I had spent too much time putting my life back together to immediately hand somebody else the keys. I liked the life I had built. I liked the people already in it. I liked aerial. I liked having nights when nobody needed anything from me. I liked knowing that if I had experienced enough humanity for one day, I could shut the door and stop participating.

That had taken work. A lot of work. Divorce will teach you things. Some of them useful. Some of them expensive. I wasn't interested in relearning the same lessons. So the plan was simple. Find someone interesting. Spend time together when it felt good. Have sex if that felt good too. Go home. Continue being myself. Clean. Easy. Adult. I had recently become suspicious of anything that required another person to make my life complete.

That seemed like one of those beautiful ideas people told themselves right before everything became codependent and exhausting. I already had a complete life. Maybe somebody could add to it.

When convenient. That seemed healthy. Which was not exactly the life I'd once imagined. There had been a version of me that assumed partnership meant doing life together. Going places. Trying things. Having somebody who actually wanted to experience the world with me, not just build a stable life adjacent to mine. I had learned that wasn't necessarily realistic. People could love you and still not want to do the same things. They could provide, work, show up, and still leave you lonely in categories that mattered.

So I stopped building my life around the hope that another person would eventually want the same experiences I did. I learned how to do them myself. I didn't need somebody to rescue me. Financially or otherwise. I was already capable of taking care of my life. What would have been destabilizing was somebody who wanted to be there for the ordinary parts and also wanted to go experience things with me.

Somebody who wanted the mundane and the adventure. Fortunately, I had already decided not to expect that. That seemed healthy too. Then this guy messaged me about aerial yoga. And autism. And somehow he had noticed both. I looked at his profile again. Cute. Maybe slightly man-child. Not necessarily in a bad way. There was something earnest about him that I couldn't quite decide whether I trusted yet. Men could manufacture earnest.

Men could manufacture almost anything for a surprisingly long period of time if they wanted something badly enough. But there was also something slightly ridiculous about him. The ridiculousness felt more believable. He said he was autistic and ADHD too. Then he said he'd done aerial yoga before. Sure you have. I stared at the message. Okay. Maybe. At the very least, he had noticed something I actually cared about. That already put him ahead of a statistically significant percentage of the male population.

I responded. I had become much more intentional about the way I communicated. Not dating with intention. God. That phrase made dating sound like a corporate retreat. I wasn't trying to optimize my romantic outcomes. I had just finally stopped apologizing for existing. There was a difference. For a long time I had edited myself into versions that were easier for other people to consume. Less intense. Less sexual. Less strange. Less honest.

Less needy. Less independent. Less whatever-the-fuck the person in front of me seemed uncomfortable with that day. It hadn't worked. So I had stopped. This was me. Take what works. Leave what doesn't. I wasn't going to negotiate myself into another relationship and wake up five years later wondering where the hell I'd gone. What I valued most was this: Clarity. Not perfect clarity. I wasn't enlightened. My body still occasionally reacted to a completely ordinary situation like someone had released a tiger into the room.

But I could see it happening now. I could feel the machinery. Sometimes noticing it was enough. I had even developed a fairly good working relationship with the less civilized part of me. I called it my chaos gremlin. That part had been difficult when I treated it like a prisoner. Much easier once we negotiated visiting hours. My chaos gremlin could flirt. It could fuck. It could be inappropriate. It could have fantasies that did not need to become a five-year plan.

It could want things. It just couldn't drive the whole fucking car. This arrangement had been surprisingly successful. I thought we were doing great. Then Miles started messaging me from Europe.

At first the distance made him convenient. There was an ocean between us. An actual one. I could enjoy the conversation without having to decide what it meant in a room. Then we moved off the dating app, and I was the one who admitted I felt squirrely about it. That annoyed me a little. Not him. The fact that a change in messaging platform had enough emotional weight for me to notice it.

I had become pretty good at watching myself by then. Not judging every response. Just noticing when something changed. Something had changed. Then he sent me the meditation message. It was long. Really long. Normally, receiving that much interior life from a man I had never met could have felt like being handed a backpack I had not agreed to carry. Instead I got to the end and wanted more. Which was inconvenient.

His intensity did not feel like a demand that I manage it. It felt like an invitation into a mind I actually wanted to explore. So I told him not to shorten it. I told him the dissertation was the bubble. And when I said I wanted to hear the longer version in his voice, in person, I meant it. Probably a little more intimate than I needed to be with a man on another continent.

Fine. I was curious. I was also still skeptical. Those things were allowed to coexist. He could be unusually interesting and still turn out to be full of shit. I could want to meet him and still have no intention of reorganizing my life around him. I had spent too long learning how not to confuse fascination with obligation.

When he asked what I wanted to do when we met, I handed the choice back to him. Not as a test. Mostly because I genuinely did not want another decision. But I noticed I liked the idea of seeing what he would choose. I wasn't asking him to entertain me. I wanted to see whether he could take one small piece of the mental load without making it weird. Then I sent him aerial videos.

He called one of them hot. There it was. The first sexual signal between us came from him, not me. I nudged the door open another inch with the comment about the rig being useful for all kinds of things. He made the obvious bedroom joke. I answered with a smirk and let the conversation keep moving. He did not treat one sexual opening as permission to convert the rest of our conversation into sex.

I was very capable of sexual conversation. I was also increasingly tired of men who could not survive any other kind once they realized sex was possible. Later, while he was out in Ibiza doing something objectively more exciting than talking to a woman he had never met, he told me about his social anxiety. Not a polished version. He described what it did to his body. How it stole processing power. How he could go quiet or talk too much because fear had occupied the room first.

I understood more of that than I wanted to. So I asked the question I actually cared about. Would it happen with me? His answer was basically yes, but because he wanted me to like him. There was something vulnerable in that kind of honesty that ordinary confidence didn't have. So I gave him the compression-hug loophole. Then he told me he wished I were there. I blushed. Rude. A little later I asked about the person he was traveling with.

He misunderstood and thought I was concerned because he was traveling with a woman. He proceeded to explain how they were just friends and sort of working together on a project. But I also told him I was not going to become the woman participating in somebody else's relationship without knowing it. He clarified immediately. I appreciated the immediate clarification and the openness behind it. The conversation kept getting easier. The ease was probably what bothered me most.

Easy had never been particularly trustworthy. I had done enough work to know that intensity could be chemistry, trauma, novelty, hyperfocus, projection, or simply two weird people delighted to finally have somebody who wanted the footnotes. There were plenty of explanations available. I did not need

to choose one yet. Then we scheduled one date. Then a second. And somewhere in there I decided to tell him I had a crush on him.

That cracked me up. I had not met his body. I had not watched him navigate a room. I had no idea what silence with him would feel like. But I knew what happened when his name appeared on my phone. I wanted to read the message. Sometimes I reread it. Sometimes I answered faster than I intended to. It was enough information to admit the crush without turning it into a prophecy.

His response made the whole thing more dangerous. He said the best part was that he had been himself. I believed that more than I wanted to. Not completely. Words could still be manufactured. But if this was a performance, it was an oddly specific one to sustain from the other side of the world. Then he came home. The distance disappeared and my body responded before I had assembled a mature opinion about it.

So I told him I was putting my freak on a leash for the evening. I was not trying to punish him with distance. I was regulating myself. There was a sexual current in the conversation now, and I wanted to know I could feel it without letting it make every decision for me. Then he told me he did not particularly like the space anymore but that he respected it. The combination was exactly what I was looking for without quite knowing how to say it yet.

Want me. And still be able to stop. So I told him he was oozing good character. It was also, inconveniently, why I wanted to see him sooner. So I offered.

Wednesday had seemed perfectly reasonable until he was home. Suddenly it did not. Coffee would do. I was nervous before I met him. That's not particularly meaningful. I'm nervous before almost everything. My body likes to pregame. I was curious too. Curiosity mattered more than nerves. Then I saw him sitting under the covered patio. And the strangest thing happened. He was real. That sounds stupid, but until that moment there had been a version of him that only existed in language. Paragraphs and profile pictures. Ideas arriving on a screen from somewhere impossibly far away.

Now he was standing in front of me, attached to a body, looking nervous too. Good. I trusted nervous more than polished. There is always an awkward little negotiation when two people who already know too much about one another meet for the first time. How familiar are we allowed to be? Do we hug like people who've been talking all week, or greet each other like strangers because technically that's what we are?

The conversation answered faster than either of us did. It picked up. Not perfectly. Not magically. Just easily enough that I stopped monitoring every second of it. He watched my face when I talked. Not in the ordinary way people make eye contact because they have been told eye contact means they are listening. He paid attention. There were moments where I could almost feel him catch an expression before I had decided what I thought about the thing that caused it.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Part of me liked being noticed that closely. Another part wanted to tell him not to get cocky. Seeing something and understanding it are not the same thing. Still, meeting him in person had not reduced my interest. That had been the only question coffee really needed to answer. It did not simplify things. He did not kiss me when we left. Probably for the best.

We had just met. There was no reason to turn a good conversation into a referendum on chemistry before either of us had figured out what our bodies thought. The less civilized part of me reserved the right to revisit that analysis later. Then, after the date, he apologized for monologuing too much. That made me laugh a little. I had literally asked him, before we met, to tell me the long strange stories in his voice.

So I told him the truth. I had enjoyed hearing it. The man was still careful. Verbal. Observant enough to be slightly dangerous and self-conscious enough not to know what to do with half of what he noticed. But he was not a text-message invention anymore. He remained interesting. Only now he was real.

Chapter Three

HIM — DOWN THE ROAD

The deli date actually started the night before. We had already pulled coffee forward because waiting had become unacceptable, and now we were figuring out what to do with the daytime date that had originally been the reasonable one. Morgan had told me during the cruise that she was a sucker for a really good sandwich. I remembered. The conversation briefly detoured through Legos first. She asked:

“Will there be Legos?”

I immediately started figuring out how to produce Legos. She had been joking.

“I’m just kidding about the Legos but I love that you would make that happen for me.”

That felt like useful information about both of us. Then I did what I normally did and gave her options. Several sandwich options. She stopped me.

“I do love sandwiches and would be over the moon if you picked and just told me when and where to show up 😊”

Oh. Right. Instructions. So I picked the deli and told her noon. Her response:

“I love it. Thank you for taking the lead on that”

Decisiveness, it turned out, did not require a personality transplant. Sometimes it was just choosing the sandwich. The deli was close to both of us. Ridiculously close. That was another strange part of all this. We had been moving through the same few square miles for years without knowing the other person existed. And this woman who seemed like she had been made for me in a test tube had been somewhere just down the road.

So we went to this little German delicatessen, and the sandwiches were excellent. It was the kind of place with little German foods and knickknacks on the shelves, pale pickled asparagus in jars, cookies, and things that looked like they might have been sitting there for twenty years. You couldn't really tell. The drink selection was basically one refrigerator of Arizona iced tea and some beer. Maybe that was just really German. I don't know.

I ordered their big club sandwich and, because I was weirdly hungry for a date, a bratwurst too. Usually anxiety suppresses my appetite. Not that day. She ordered a Reuben. Good choice. I also deliberately sat beside her instead of across from her. Tiny adjustment. Slightly more proximity. I was trying. All the things they tell you to do in a seminar — face the person, stay open, actually listen — I just did naturally when I talked to her.

But more, I enjoyed experiencing a different version of her. She said she was in a little bit of a funk that day and was feeling extra tired. I could tell, but it wasn't a bad thing. It was a softer version of her. Her eyes looked a little darker and less bright, and even the way her eyelids moved seemed slower and

more deliberate. But somewhere behind the tired exterior I thought I could see this heightened little fire keeping watch.

Almost like not all hands were on deck, so whoever was still working had been reassigned to security. I didn't feel like that caution was directed at me. Or at least that was how I read it. I was still learning the difference. We still had great conversation, and I could see little moments where her energy came back up while we were talking. I think I saw it as a little bit of a challenge. She had shown up even though she wasn't feeling great, and I wanted the time to feel good without making her perform being okay for me.

My goal was basically to have the best quality time we could for as long as it still felt good to her, and then let her go the moment it didn't. That made me feel really good. Then she realized she had to leave for a follow-up refrigerator repair appointment. Someone had already been out once and the problem had not been resolved. The follow-up had only become part of her day that day, which was why it had not been in the plan when we made the date.

Leaving took longer than it should have. The guy working checkout was on break, and the place was so low-key they weren't even completely sure whether I'd already paid. They had to ask me what I ordered. Every extra minute felt like one more thing for my nervous system to evaluate while the goodbye got more rushed and more awkward. By the time we finally got outside, she was already a little too far away for a natural hug. We kind of looked at each other and left.

That gave the darker little voice better ammunition: See? You got a hug after the first date. You didn't even get one after the second. You should have kissed her. You messed it up. I'll admit I was actually a little disappointed because I had quietly imagined the date might turn into more of the afternoon. I hadn't told her that. I had not necessarily given her a locked-down plan. She had given me her window of availability, but that wasn't necessarily mine to interpret as all mine.

She had to get up in a bit of a rush to leave, and it just didn't feel right to kiss her. I think I had read that part correctly. She was tired. She was rushing. Whatever I was sensing, that particular moment did not feel like the moment. But I was sensing something else too: caginess. At the time I didn't know how to separate caginess from retreat, timidity from disinterest. I could feel the difference in her, but I didn't know what it meant yet.

I probably could have, and it would have been fine. But I'm glad I didn't, because it made our first kiss so much more special. I left there a little bit in my head, with one of those darker little parts of me whispering: Maybe she just made up the repairman to get away from you. It didn't make much sense. She had just spent two hours talking to me. There had been no dip in the conversation. Nothing about the interaction suggested she had spent the entire lunch planning an escape.

But uncertainty is creative. Give an anxious mind one missing piece of information and it will happily write an entire screenplay around it. The older version of me might have taken that story seriously. This time I mostly noticed it. Maybe she had a repairman. Almost certainly she had a repairman. Maybe, in some alternate version of events, she had simply reached the end of what she had available for the day and needed to leave.

Honestly, I didn't care. If she needed an exit, she was allowed to have one. I didn't need to know the private reason for every boundary in order to respect it. That realization felt new too. Everything with us seemed to track back to the mind and the body. It was a fascinating common interest for us. I was already starting to feel like it might even become part of the foundation of whatever this was.

Afterward, I was still a little in my head, but I wasn't taking the darker stories super seriously. I had a fairly level head, which was surprising because normally I could spiral out about those kinds of thoughts. But I still had a lot of confidence in our connection. A lot. There was also another problem. I still hadn't kissed her. That made two daytime dates and zero kisses. I'm a coward. I admit it.

I had never kissed somebody on a first date during the day. Only nighttime dates. That sounds like an absurd distinction, but my nervous system had rules. I'm used to being a teenager where you go see a movie and when it's really dark, you start to hold hands, and then you slowly lean in for a kiss, and the next thing you know you have no idea what movie you're even seeing.

That's my movie move. Okay? I'm good at it. I know I'm good at it. But in broad daylight, sitting across from a woman at lunch, I have, like, no game when it comes to initiating physical contact in subtle, natural ways.

When I'm around a woman I want, I get so stuck in my head that I overthink everything. Which is strange because I don't think I've ever been rejected from a kiss.

If I have, I blocked out the memory so succinctly that it dare not exist. Maybe it has happened. I don't know. But it doesn't feel like the thing holding me back is exactly fear of rejection. It's a deeper thing. Why am I rejectable? I don't expect everyone to like me. It's the reminder that there are things about me that are objectionable that hurts. That old little question underneath it: maybe I'm not worth it.

I know that sounds like a lot to attach to a kiss. That's why I had a therapist. I had worked through those wounds quite a bit, and progress still left me capable of spending two dates analyzing the logistics of touching a woman I very clearly wanted to touch. I felt like I needed to do something small to let her know that there was a spark there on my end.

That was a conscious choice. So after the date, I messaged her.

"I had a really good time with you again today.

I also realized afterward that I really wanted to kiss you, but between you feeling tired and having to rush home, the timing didn't feel right.

No pressure attached to that at all. I just figured clear words might be better than making you guess where my head is.

I'm really looking forward to Friday."

Basically: you're on notice. I am interested in you. I want to kiss you. I am just going to turn getting there into a committee process. I had actually run the idea through my little writing-coach thing first. I gave it the situation, a stream-of-consciousness version of what I wanted to say, and asked whether being that direct was likely to land the way I intended. It told me, essentially, yes. Based on everything I'd said about her, she would probably appreciate the directness.

All right. Send. Then she messaged me back with about the best thing she could have told me.

"I had fun too. I appreciate the transparency as well. I agree that the timing didn't feel right for that but it's not unwelcome.

For whatever it's worth, I would not recommend waiting for an invitation because I will always run. I don't know why but it's a pattern.

It could be related to my need for polarity in my relationships. This is probably a whole other rabbit hole. I need a dominant partner. I think maybe I run because my nervous system needs a partner capable of catching me.”

Basically, I was going to have to just do it. I loved that she gave me that insight instead of making me learn it the hard way. That was the missing piece. Timidity did not automatically mean disinterest or rejection. I could respect the no in the moment without deciding it was a no to me.

I answered:

“I had a feeling that might be the case, which is why I wanted to give you fair warning. 😊”

I can be a little hesitant initiating physical contact with someone new, but once I know it’s welcome, the hesitation disappears pretty quickly.

I’m naturally direct, dominant and physically confident. 😊”

She replied:

“I love to hear it. I’m free after 5pm on Friday. Looking forward to seeing what you come up with for us.”

Now I had instructions.

Friday was already on the calendar. This time I basically booked the whole evening.

Chapter Four

HER — USEFUL DATA

I almost canceled the second date. Not because of him. That distinction would become important more often than I expected. I was tired. Not cute tired. Not the kind of tired where you put your hair up and somehow become more attractive because you're pretending not to try. Actually tired. A little flat. A little off. The kind of day where I had already spent more of my internal budget than I wanted to and I was not interested in pretending otherwise.

There was a version of dating where I would have canceled for exactly that reason. Not because I didn't want to see the person. Because I wouldn't have wanted them to see me like this yet. First you show somebody the articulate version. The funny version. The sexy version. The version that slept enough and remembered to eat and could maintain eye contact without also tracking the refrigerator hum and the conversation at the next table and whether the lighting was slightly too bright.

Then, after they are sufficiently invested, you reveal that sometimes you are a mammal with finite processing capacity. Very romantic. But I had recently decided I wasn't doing that anymore.

If somebody only liked me when I was operating at one hundred percent, that was useful information. So I went. The deli was close enough that the whole thing still felt statistically ridiculous. We had been passing through the same little radius for years without knowing the other person existed. Subtle, universe. Very subtle. I told him I was in a funk. I wanted that information out early. Not as an apology.

More like a weather report. Current conditions: low battery, scattered clouds, chance of gremlin. He did not seem disappointed by me. I noticed that almost immediately. He noticed the difference in me too. This man watched my face like there was going to be a quiz later. But he did not start trying to fix it. He did not ask me every four minutes whether I was okay. He did not act wounded because my energy was not matching whatever fantasy he had built after the first date.

He just kept talking to me. And, against my better judgment, I started feeling a little better. Not because heterosexual romance had healed me through the mystical power of sandwiches. Let's not get carried away. The sandwich probably helped too. But there was something easy about sitting across from him while not performing the best version of myself. That was useful data. He had now seen me by text, animated in person, and quiet enough that I could feel the difference in myself.

He did not treat the quieter version like a malfunction. I did not know what to do with that yet. So I did not do anything with it. We ate. We talked. Then I realized what time it was. I had a follow-up repair appointment for the refrigerator. This was not the first visit. The first repair had not solved the problem, and the follow-up had only landed on my radar that day.

It is important, for reasons I could not possibly have known at the time, to establish this clearly. I had a repair appointment. The refrigerator still needed work. There was no elaborate exit speech involved. At least, not from my side of the table. Sometimes a refrigerator is just a refrigerator. His face changed a little when I said I had to leave. Not dramatically. Just enough that I wondered whether he had quietly imagined the afternoon going longer than the window I had given him.

He did not tell me that. I could have been reading him wrong. But if he was disappointed, he tried not to make it my problem. There is a difference between someone wanting more of your time and someone believing they are entitled to it. I liked the first one. I had learned to run from the second. I had to leave quickly once I realized the time. For a second there was that little shift people make at the end of a date when both bodies become aware that a decision might be approaching.

Hug. Kiss. Nothing. Something. He did not kiss me. Again. I got in the car. My chaos gremlin had opinions. Seriously? I ignored that part of me. It had been the right call. I was tired. I was rushing. My brain had already moved halfway home to the repair appointment. A first kiss deserved more attention than I had available in that moment. That was the mature analysis. There was also another one.

Did he not want to kiss me? Annoying. I did not enjoy that question. Not because I needed him to want me. I had done enough work on myself to know the difference between wanting validation and wanting information. This was information. Then my phone gave me some. He messaged me after the date and told me, in effect, that it had not felt like the right energy to kiss me before I left, but that he definitely had wanted to.

Oh. Good. The lack of a kiss had not been a lack of attraction. It was exactly what I was starting to suspect about him: he could notice an extraordinary amount and still get tangled up deciding what to do with the information. I liked that he told me. The directness mattered. So I returned the favor. I could be cagey. I could run.

If he waited for me to make every invitation perfectly obvious, there was a decent chance I would retreat before I ever gave him one. That did not mean he was supposed to ignore a boundary. Quite the opposite. It meant that hesitation and disinterest did not always look the same in me, and that if he wanted something, at some point he was going to have to risk being direct. Basically: you're going to have to just do it.

There.

Now the man had instructions.

He answered that once he knew physical contact was welcome, the hesitation disappeared pretty quickly. Then he described himself as “naturally direct, dominant and physically confident.” I answered, “I love to hear it.” I meant it.

Friday would tell me whether that sentence existed only in his phone. Sexual chemistry still had a question mark next to it. He was attractive. I liked talking to him. I liked the way his mind moved. I liked that he seemed genuinely interested in mine. But careful was still winning. He had an enormous capacity for thought. This was becoming obvious. I was beginning to wonder whether that capacity might occasionally become a traffic jam.

I wanted somebody who could make a decision while the rest of the committee was still reviewing the minutes. Still, I wasn't done. If I had left the deli feeling relieved that the date was over, this would have been easy. Instead I found myself thinking about him afterward. Not obsessing. Thinking. There is a difference. Probably. I wondered what he thought of the quieter version of me. I wondered whether he had noticed that I was tired because I told him, or because he really was as observant as he seemed.

I wondered whether his carefulness was insecurity, respect, or simply the way he moved through something he thought might matter. That last possibility was dangerous. A man afraid because something mattered was very different from a man afraid because he could not act. I didn't know which one he was yet. Useful data requires more than one sample.

Friday was already on the calendar, and I had no intention of canceling it. This time, at least, he knew I was not asking him to wait for perfect certainty. This time, we were giving him enough hours to figure out whether he knew how to kiss me.

Chapter Five

HIM — THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

When she told me that I was basically going to have to kiss her, it felt like a challenge. And it felt like relief too. I had spent the first two dates trying to read an invitation from a woman who was now more or less telling me that waiting for an invitation was going to be a terrible strategy. That was useful information. I felt like next time had to happen no matter what.

And I needed it to happen earlier rather than later. I didn't want to spend another entire date waiting until the last five minutes, running simulations in my head about whether this particular facial expression constituted sufficient legal authorization to touch her face. I knew I was going to have to be the one to initiate. That's pretty standard. What was different was that I was starting to realize I could read her very well, and I could also sense that she was cagey.

Her confirming that gave me a lot of comfort to proceed with more dominance. Or what I thought dominance was at the time. I'm still figuring that word out. So I decided to plan the whole evening. I threw what I knew about her and her interests into my writing coach and started looking for activities. I'm pretty handy with AI. I wanted something interactive first because an activity gives you reasons to touch somebody without making every touch into an international incident.

Pottery. Candle making. Something like that. But I was also in the process of starting a business and looking for my next career role, so I was trying to be mindful of my funds. It's not that I wasn't willing to spend money on her. I had reserved a reasonable amount for the date. I just didn't see the point in

spending two hundred dollars manufacturing entertainment when we were perfectly capable of talking to each other for four hours without remembering to look at the television.

I had spent most of my career in enterprise sales, and I knew I could go back to it. I was less certain I wanted to. There was a part of me that had started wondering whether the next thing I built could come from my own imagination instead of another company's quota. That was still a dangerous thought, so I mostly kept calling it figuring out what came next.

So eventually I settled on something much simpler. A walk down the Canal Walk. At 5:30 in the afternoon. In Virginia. In summer. Not ideal. Richmond's Canal Walk runs along the old canals beside the James, threading brick, murals, and old industrial bones through downtown. It was exactly the kind of place that made wandering feel like an activity even when the real activity was talking to her. I don't like the heat. I don't like sweating. I certainly don't like doing it around pretty women that I want to kiss. But I figured we'd take a quick walk and kill some time. Then I had a reservation around seven at a rooftop bar where we could watch the sunset. After that, I had a few open hours we could fill depending on what came up in conversation.

And if we were still together at ten, I had another rooftop reservation at the Commonwealth Hotel with a view over downtown and the river at night. I was basically planning how I could spend as much time with her as possible without saying: Hello, I have reserved your entire evening. Please do not be alarmed. Normally I would have given her options. A lot of options. My natural inclination is to say: We could do this, or this, or maybe this if you prefer, or we can change everything, or what would make you happiest?

Some of that is people pleasing. I don't love that about myself. But some of it is also that I genuinely don't care very much which restaurant we go to or what activity we do. I like good company. If the company is good, I can have fun doing almost anything. Still, I was focused on acting more like a man and making decisions. That's the language I would have used then.

I think what I actually meant was that I was practicing decisiveness. There is a difference between taking responsibility for an experience and controlling another person. I was trying to learn it.

Wednesday night, I answered the obvious part:

“5pm it is 😊”

Friday morning, I sent the version of the plan that made me sound much more confident than I felt:

“I'll pick you up at 5 so I can take care of the driving and we can bounce around a little. Send me wherever you'd like me to get you, or we can meet there if you prefer.

Wear something cute but comfortable. I have a few different possibilities planned for us.”

Her reply was immediate:

“I will happily be a passenger princess 🙌🙌🙌”

Then she sent me her address and added, “See you at 5!” She seemed to like it. I made a note of that. Sometimes being a man wasn't perceived as a bad thing. Sometimes it was wanted. I just needed to pay attention and figure out which was which. There was also a component of the message that was me trapping myself. Locking myself into a contract. I had now behaved like somebody who knew what he was doing.

Future me was going to have to figure out how to live up to present me's confidence. Good luck, asshole.

I was supposed to pick her up at five. At 4:37, I sent her:

"I may be a few minutes late picking you up. I didn't realize how badly my work truck needed cleaning until I pictured you sitting in it 😊"

I'm jumping in the shower now. Thank you for being patient with me—I'll keep you posted on my ETA."

She answered, "Ok thanks for the heads up 👍" I told her I would be there at 5:15. Absolutely not. I had pieces of the damn thing apart in the driveway earlier trying to get everything cleaned and put back together. It wasn't good enough. I got it good enough. The funny thing is that the version of me before Claire probably would have thought the truck was fine. Fifteen years with her had domesticated me in a lot of genuinely useful ways.

I can joke about things like learning to change my sheets more than quarterly, but the truth is that she helped me grow up in plenty of places. Then I picked her up. Cute. Comfy. Exactly as requested. I liked the whole thing. I also liked picking her up. The first two dates we'd met at the location. Something about driving there together already felt slightly different. More like a date. A real one.

A nighttime one. My specialty, apparently. We got to the Canal Walk and started walking. It was hot as fuck. But we talked. We had already covered autism, ADHD, nervous-system regulation, parenting, divorce, personal growth, consciousness—the standard introductory material. You know. Normal stuff. What we hadn't really discussed were the messier details of how we'd gotten here. Family structures. Earlier partners. The relationships before the relationships. So I told her about Keegan. About his mom.

About Wolfie. About the marriage I was currently leaving. I had Keegan when I was twenty-two. His mom and I had never built a long-term relationship together. Then I spent the next fifteen years with Claire. Whatever else my history looked like on paper, I hadn't spent my adult life bouncing from person to person. She told me more of hers. Different stories. Strangely similar injuries. We had both made choices we weren't necessarily proud of. We had both stayed places too long. We had both hurt people and been hurt by them.

That gave the conversation a strange safety. Neither one of us really had enough moral high ground to build a house on. There was something relieving about that. I think she felt it too. I wish she didn't have some of those experiences. But I also wish more for whatever circumstances brought her to me.

Both of those things can be true.

On the way back, a young woman practically launched herself into our path to save the animals. Or get a donation. Possibly both. She was enthusiastic. Extremely. We listened. I tried to be polite because she seemed sincere even if the pitch wasn't particularly effective. Eventually she got around to asking us for money, and I politely told her it wasn't a great time because we were on a date. We escaped.

There was an awkward silence. Then Morgan burst out laughing. The poor girl had made approximately seventeen tactical errors in her pitch and Morgan had been mentally rewriting it while the woman was talking. Which made me laugh harder. We spent the next few minutes dissecting the

interaction. I remember liking that. Not because we were making fun of the girl. We weren't, exactly. It was more that another person's behavior could become this little puzzle we both wanted to take apart.

Why did she say that? Why did that part make us uncomfortable? What would have worked better? That's one of the things Morgan and I do. We explore each other's minds by exploring everything else.

Eventually we went inside and sat down. I got some colorful spritzer-looking drink. I like nice cocktails, mocktails, and mixing weird flavors together at home, so the drink itself was very me. It was also objectively funny that I was sitting there with a very fun-looking, vaguely girly drink while trying to become this dominant man and preparing to kiss her sometime within the next four hours. Low bar. Our table faced the courtyard, so there was plenty of people-watching available. More and more, though, we kept disappearing back into our own little bubble.

We kept talking. And somewhere around there, something changed. For all the depth we'd covered, there had been this one enormous category we had almost completely avoided. Sex. There had been the chaos-gremlin joke before our first date. There had been light joking. There had been attraction. But we had not sat across from each other and talked about our sex lives. Not once. Until then. Morgan opened the door. She started talking about BDSM.

Power exchange. Predator and prey. And I was very intrigued. As she brought it up, she straightened a little and put her arms forward like she was bracing herself against the table. Her shoulders shifted as if she were preparing to say something she knew might change the conversation. She had this slightly sheepish grin, but there was confidence in it too. Her voice seemed to get a little higher and more girlish for a moment, but it still had an edge.

Her eyes did that thing I was already getting fascinated by, where they seemed to darken slightly and add another sentence underneath the one she was actually saying. A little bit of: I've earned the right to know what I want. Maybe even: Don't you fucking judge me for it. She didn't say those things. That's important. I can read Morgan really well, but that doesn't always mean I understand her really well.

I was reading an expression. An energy. A current underneath the words. My interpretation was still mine. But I remember seeing something fierce there. Like whatever understanding she had reached about her body had been earned. And she wasn't giving it back. I liked the fierceness. Probably more than I should have. She had written something on her Hinge profile about liking to be respected and manhandled. I remembered. I smirked and told her I had already had an inkling that we might have some compatibility in that department.

She hadn't realized how much attention I'd paid. I had. I pay attention. Sometimes too much.

Her openness made me want to give her something back. I had imagined this part of my history coming later. Fifth date. Tenth date. Somewhere after we'd figured out whether we even liked each other enough for it to matter. But the combination of her openness and how safe the conversation felt made me want to tell her much more than I had planned. So I told her the part of my story I hadn't put on Hinge.

The question about monogamy wasn't theoretical. My marriage had included swinging. Then openness. Then discussions about polyamory. It was complicated. This was the first time I'd had to tell that story from this side of dating. The last time I'd had an awkward disclosure with somebody new, it had been some version of: I'm actually in an open relationship. Now I was single, sitting across from a

woman I liked, and trying to explain how I had gotten there without even being able to tell her what conclusion I'd reached.

I tried to be careful telling the story because every story involving another human belongs to more than one person. I could tell Morgan what I experienced. I could tell her what I believed. But I couldn't hand her my ex-wife's interior life as though I owned that too. I explained that our sexual chemistry had always been complicated. That for a period of time, exploring with other people had genuinely seemed to improve things.

The pressure changed. Sex became more playful. One part of the experience complicated the story I told myself about why I liked it. For about a year, there was another couple we spent real time with outside the bedroom too. Dinner. Boating. Kids around each other. Ordinary friendship. I found myself wanting more time with them, more involvement, not simply more sex. That was part of why I still couldn't tell whether what I wanted was sexual variety, polyamory, or just more kinds of connection than my marriage had learned how to hold.

There were parts of each other we accessed differently. At one point, though, I started feeling like my wife might be participating more for me than for herself. So I stopped. That part mattered to me. Sex being good for me because another person is tolerating it isn't particularly interesting. What turns me on is the other person's experience. The more mind-bending it is for her, the better it is for me.

I told Morgan some version of that. And I could see that land. At some point after we'd started talking about swinging, a woman walked by with a giant pineapple on her shirt. I pointed her out. "See? You see them everywhere. And you always wonder." Morgan looked after her. "Do you think they really are?" I didn't. It looked like a woman wearing a pineapple shirt. God, I hoped so. Interesting.

We got so lost in that conversation — her sexual history, mine, and all the questions branching off both — that we almost missed our seven o'clock dinner reservation. We arrived around 7:15 and went up to the rooftop bar. It was still early, so it was pretty quiet. Good service. A nice view. Enough calm around us that we very quickly fell back into the same natural groove and kept talking.

At some point the conversation shifted from relationship history into personal growth. She was complimenting me on how much work I had done and how far I had come. I smirked again. That same sheepish little grin I seemed to make whenever I was about to reveal something private that I wasn't entirely sure how the other person would receive.

"Honestly, I think it's the reverse," I told her. "I'm really impressed with you because you've done all this on your own. Mine has been very much psychedelically assisted."

I had been very stuck before I started seriously exploring psychedelics. This wasn't a new fascination or a party-story version of drugs. I had been exploring them for a long time, and I had found real benefits in the way they helped me get underneath things I could understand intellectually but couldn't seem to reach emotionally.

More recently, I had realized how much trauma I had buried and how much those experiences could help me unravel it. I also wasn't under the impression that every revelation I had while altered was automatically true. That would be a terrible system. The useful part was that something buried could surface. Then I could look at it later, sober, and decide whether it actually held up. I wasn't trying to give the psychedelics all the credit either. They didn't do the work for me. They helped me get access to things I had been stuck behind. What I did with that afterward was still mine.

I was telling her because if she was going to be impressed by my growth, I wanted her to know what had actually helped me get there. It was one more part of myself I could have hidden until later, and one more thing she was allowed to decide was a red flag.

She stayed. And because by then we had decided nothing on this date was too personal, we talked about that for quite a while too. Then I told her the harder part. What was missing from my marriage had never really been just sex. That's what it seemed like at first. Our sex life did get better. It just didn't fix all the other things. Communication. Shared interests. How we handled conflict. How we responded to each other's needs.

We went to therapy. We tried. There are ways I told this story then that I would tell differently now. I know that. It's really easy when you're hurting to describe your partner's failures more clearly than your own. I did that too. What I understand better now is simple: I had hurt my ex deeply by wanting the open relationship at all. Whatever my intentions were. Whatever problems already existed. Whatever ways it temporarily helped.

That request carried pain. I didn't fully understand the weight of that at the time. And by the time I was sitting across from Morgan, I still didn't know exactly what the experience meant about me. I didn't know whether nonmonogamy was something I fundamentally needed in order to be fulfilled. Or whether the prior relationship had been missing enough things that supplementing it with other relationships simply made it tolerable. A lot of times it felt more like the latter.

But I couldn't know for sure. That was the awkward predicament I'd been in when I started dating. I had intended to find out. Go on dates. Meet different people. See what resonated. I even told Morgan that there was a part of me almost disappointed to have met her when I did. Which is a spectacularly strange thing to say to a woman you are actively trying to date. What I meant was:

I was supposed to be collecting data. Then one of the first people I met was becoming inconveniently interesting.

She didn't judge me. At least not visibly. If anything, she had curiosity. Honestly, I couldn't ask for more. I wouldn't have wanted her to immediately say: Oh my God, that's exactly what I want too. That would have been weird. We were on our first nighttime date. But she wasn't not curious. She had questions. She remained playful. I could almost see new calculations happening behind her eyes. And I had no idea whether they were good calculations.

But she was still there. That helped. We kept talking. We weren't touching much. I would lightly caress her arm. At one point she had her feet propped up over me, but not particularly close. It was like our bodies had slowly started participating in a conversation our minds were still pretending was intellectual. That happens. The body gets information first sometimes. I've come to think of it as the first line of defense.

There are things your conscious mind understands while some older, more protective part of you says: Absolutely fucking not. Which is exactly what happened next. Because at one point Morgan told me she kind of wanted to jump my bones. Not necessarily in the sense that she was asking to have sex right there. She clarified that she literally wanted to climb into my lap. I knew she wasn't joking. In my mind.

My body said: No. That's insane. This woman wants to climb into your lap? This woman you've been thinking about constantly? This woman who basically told you that you're going to have to initiate?

Sure. Sounds fake. Otherwise I would not have been an idiot or a coward. I would have pulled her on top of me right then.

But honestly, I also had to pee.

And I knew that once I had her in my lap, I wasn't going to want to let her go. So my bladder saved us from whatever happened next. Temporarily. I did tell her I wanted that too. I told her I had to pee, but that we could cash out, go find somewhere nice to cozy up, and she could sit in my lap while we kept talking. At least now I had said the obvious part out loud.

Chapter Six

HER — INTRIGUED, NOT IMPRESSED

He finally planned a date. An actual one. Not coffee. Not a deli. A date. Progress. His message gave me enough information to know what I needed and very little that required me to make another decision. He told me when he was picking me up. He gave me a rough idea of the evening. And he told me to wear something cute and comfy. The exact line was: "Wear something cute but comfortable. I have a few different possibilities planned for us."

I noticed that. My chaos gremlin noticed it too. There was a tiny growl at being told what to wear. Just a little one. Excuse me? But underneath it was something much more inconvenient. Relief. He wasn't ordering me into a dress I didn't want to wear. He was paying attention. Weather. Walking. Comfort. What I actually liked. He told me what he wanted and somehow what he wanted was also what I wanted.

That was different. I had spent enough of my life carrying the mental load. Sometimes it was nice for somebody else to make the fucking decision. Let me be the one in the passenger seat for a while. Literally, in this case. I hate driving. I would much rather sit in the passenger seat and let my mind wander while somebody else handles the road. That's such a small thing. But small things are what life is made out of.

If I were going to have somebody who felt like an equal in my life, maybe that was something he could bring to the table. Not money. I didn't need somebody else's money. I had already done the life where providing could become the argument for why everything else was acceptable. I wasn't doing that again. I wanted experiences. Presence. Someone who actually wanted to do things. Someone who could make one part of my life lighter simply by taking responsibility for it.

So, yes. He could drive. I would allow it. Generous of me. I told him, "I will happily be a passenger princess 🙌🙌🙌."

He picked me up fifteen minutes late. He warned me first, so I forgave him. A little before five he had texted, "I didn't realize how badly my work truck needed cleaning until I pictured you sitting in it 😂." My ADHD gets the best of me too. The truck had been in substantially worse condition a few hours earlier because he had looked at it and suddenly decided there was no universe in which I was getting inside like that.

That was cute. Slightly ridiculous. But cute. He was nervous. I could tell. He was also in good spirits. He talked a lot. That wasn't new. What I was noticing more was that when I talked, he stopped.

Actually stopped. He listened like what I was saying was information he wanted, not simply a space in the conversation he was waiting to refill. That was valuable. The man was thoroughly confusing me.

Every interaction seemed to produce more questions than answers. I knew he wanted to kiss me now. That problem had technically been solved. What I did not know was whether the confident person inside his messages actually existed in person. His text had been direct in a way that he wasn't. I wasn't sure what to make of that. I like to be respected. I also like to be manhandled. I put versions of those words directly into my profile for a reason.

So far I had a man doing extraordinarily well on the first half. The jury remained out on the second. My chaos gremlin was intrigued. Not impressed yet.

We walked the Canal Walk. It was hot. Very. I wore a baggy T-shirt and shorts. Cute and comfy. Exactly as requested. He complimented me. I liked that. The conversation wasn't perfectly easy at first. That was okay. We were starting to get into material that actually required context. Children. Previous relationships. The structures of our families. The mistakes that came before the people sitting there now. He told me about his older son.

His son's mother. His current divorce. The almost-four-year-old. I told him mine. There is always a dangerous moment when a man starts telling you about a "crazy ex." Sometimes what he means is: I treated a woman terribly until she became dysregulated and now I use her response as evidence that the problem was her. I was listening for that. I wasn't going to pretend I wasn't. The stories were messy. Some of them definitely made me raise an internal eyebrow.

This man was full of red flags. Even he knew it. I'm not sure he knew quite how many there were. But there was something disarming about the fact that he wasn't selling me a spotless history. And he had very little room to judge mine. That made the conversation easier. I wasn't going to let him judge me anyway. But it was considerably more pleasant not having to fight about it. There were things in my past I wasn't proud of.

There were also things I had become proud of precisely because I'd survived them. I was proud of what I learned. I was proud of the person I'd grown into. That was why I came with nonnegotiables now. They were hard-earned. The lesson wasn't: Never love anyone again. The lesson was: Don't give yourself up for another person again. That one I intended to keep.

On the way back, a girl jumped in front of us and attempted to save several species through an extraordinarily questionable sales pitch. I wanted to disappear. Miles stayed polite. He listened. Actually listened. Even though I could tell he wasn't particularly interested in handing over money. I watched him while she talked. That was data. How someone behaves toward a person they do not want anything from tells you useful things.

He didn't mock her. He didn't get irritated. He didn't bulldoze his way out of the interaction. He gave her space to say what she'd come to say and then politely declined. Fine. Point for him. We walked away. I made it several seconds. Then I started laughing. She had made so many mistakes. So many. I almost wanted to turn around and coach her. He laughed and asked me why. Not defensively.

Not assuming I was being cruel. He actually wanted the analysis. So I gave it to him. And then he climbed right into the rabbit hole with me. That was becoming a thing. I liked it.

Eventually we sat down inside. He got some bright, colorful spritzer-looking drink. We talked. And I started feeling the pressure of the remaining question. We had covered an absurd amount of human existence already. Autism. ADHD. Nervous systems. Parenting. Divorce. Trauma. Personal growth. There was one conspicuously empty category. Sex. My chaos gremlin had been patient. Patient-ish. It was time. So I found an opening and told him. BDSM. Power exchange. Predator and prey.

Things I wanted. Things I knew about myself now. I felt confident saying it. Maybe even a little defiant. Because some understandings cost you pain. Once you've paid that bill, you don't particularly appreciate someone wandering in and telling you the thing you learned isn't valid. I knew that my body deserved to be part of my happiness. Not a service I performed for somebody else. I knew I cared deeply about sexual compatibility.

I knew I needed safety and structure and clarity. I also needed novelty and excitement. Those things can sound contradictory if you've never had the right combination. They didn't feel contradictory to me. I wanted a partner who could be safe, patient, reliable— and still surprise me. Challenge me. Somebody my chaos could bounce off without knocking the entire relationship over. I wanted to be able to run sometimes. And know I could be caught.

Not because my boundaries didn't matter. Because they mattered enough to be understood. There is a very particular feeling in knowing: If I do this, then this will happen. Clarity. Predictability inside play. Freedom within structure. I didn't explain all of it to him that night. Not in those words. Some of those words came later. But the understanding was already there. It had been earned. And I was not negotiating it away.

So I told him enough to see what he would do. There are a lot of bad responses a man can have when a woman tells him she likes BDSM. Judgment is one. Performing expertise is another. Immediately treating the disclosure as permission is probably worse. Instead, he smirked. Interesting. He said he'd had an inkling. He'd paid considerably more attention than I'd realized to the part of my profile about liking to be respected and manhandled.

I remembered him mentioning it once. I hadn't realized he'd kept it that clearly. This man had been quietly collecting data about me from the beginning. Then he surprised me.

He had experience. Not just interest. Swinging. Open relationships. Polyamory. Oh. My chaos gremlin sat up. Several new pieces rearranged themselves. That explained some things. It created several more questions. He told the story carefully. Maybe too carefully. I knew I was hearing his side. Every divorced person has a version where the sequence makes sense from inside their own head. I'm sure his wife had her own story of these events.

One I might understand disturbingly well. The truth can live somewhere between two people. I knew that. Still, I listened. He talked about sexual incompatibility in his marriage. About exploring swinging. About discovering that he enjoyed the woman's pleasure more than almost anything else about sex. That got my attention. A man preoccupied with making sex as mind-bending as possible for me? Color me intrigued. He also told me there had been a point where he thought his wife might have been participating for him rather than because she wanted it.

So he stopped. I respected that. Did I completely trust his version of every event? No. I had met this man three times. I'm not an idiot. But I didn't think he was lying to me either. And there was something about the way he talked about sex that was important. The woman's experience mattered to him. Not as

a slogan. It seemed woven into what turned him on. That aligned rather spectacularly with something I had taken a long time to learn:

Sex was for me too. My chaos gremlin approved of that part. She was considerably less certain about the sharing. That opened a new question. This man had arrived with an entire category of options we had not been considering. Options I didn't know that I wanted. Options I certainly didn't know that I needed. But intriguing options nonetheless. Annoying. We got so lost in the conversation that we almost missed dinner. He had a seven o'clock rooftop reservation. We got there around 7:15. It was still early and quiet, which I liked. We sat down, and within minutes the conversation picked up exactly where we'd left it.

The story kept going. Swinging had helped parts of his marriage. Then it hadn't. Other problems remained. Communication. Resentment. Needs that weren't being met. Therapy. Eventually he had considered a genuinely open relationship because he loved his wife and didn't want to leave her, but also didn't believe he could continue living the way they were. That part was harder. A woman had been hurt. I could hear that even through his version.

And somewhere in the background was a very obvious question: If I become this man's partner, is he eventually going to tell me I am not enough either? I didn't ask it that directly. Not then. But it existed. At the same time, he wasn't selling me polyamory. That was the difference. He seemed almost confused by his own history. Like he had experienced something that worked enough to force him to reconsider his assumptions without actually giving him an answer.

And now he was sitting across from me. Collecting more data. Apparently I was data. Cute.

We kept talking. Somewhere along the way my feet ended up near him. He touched my arm lightly. Still careful. Always so fucking careful. The annoying thing was that I liked that about him. It made him safe. The other annoying thing was that I was becoming increasingly certain I needed him to stop being quite so safe. Not unsafe. Never that. I wanted certainty. There is a difference. I wanted a man who could understand where the edges were well enough that he could move confidently inside them.

He was standing at the edge staring at the map. So eventually I gave him more information. I told him I kind of wanted to jump his bones. Which, in retrospect, seems reasonably clear. Apparently not. I clarified. I wanted to get in his lap.

There.

Data delivered. His conscious mind received the message. I could see that. Something else inside him absolutely did not. He looked at me with that same fascinating combination of wanting and disbelief. Like reality had presented him with evidence his nervous system had decided was fraudulent. And he still didn't do it. My chaos gremlin was very interested in this problem. Less impressed. But definitely interested. Because now I knew something I hadn't known at the beginning of the evening.

There was more to this man than timidity. How much more? Still unclear. But I had started pulling at the thread. And I wasn't particularly interested in stopping. Then he finally gave me a practical reason for not pulling me into his lap immediately: he had to pee. He also made it clear that he wanted me there. He suggested we cash out, find somewhere more comfortable, and I could sit in his lap while we kept talking.

Fine. That was at least a plan.

Chapter Seven

HIM — WIT GOT OUT

I had a plan. It was even a reasonably good plan.

Morgan had told me she wanted to get in my lap. I had told her I wanted that too. I had also told her I needed to pee first, which is not exactly the line a man imagines delivering at the turning point of a romantic evening, but it was true.

So the plan was simple: bathroom, cash out, find somewhere comfortable, put the woman in my lap like she had very explicitly asked me to do. Instead, after I came back, I sat her on a barstool with her back against the wall and faced her. I really should have found somewhere to sit down and pull her into my lap. I did not. She was trapped. I knew it. She knew it.

Not trapped in the sense that she could not leave. She could have stood up, told me to move, changed her mind, or ended the night. She had already given me an invitation for something greater than a kiss and stayed exactly where I put her. But after spending part of the evening talking about predator and prey, the geometry felt fitting. Her back was to the wall. I was in front of her.

And somehow I still took too long. It's just a kiss. Well, this one wasn't. But most of them are. She had told me she wanted to sit in my lap. She had told me not to wait for an invitation because she would run. She had told me she needed a dominant partner capable of catching her. What the hell else did I need? And yet some part of my nervous system was still running simulations.

Does she want this? Yes. Is this the right moment? Probably. Am I about to ruin the whole thing? Shut up. I do not remember how much longer we talked. I only remember finally becoming aware of how ridiculous the delay had become. Fuck it. This is taking forever. You're just stalling. That was when Wit got out. I call that mischievous part of myself Wit, after a character who wanders through Brandon Sanderson's books acting like he is joking around while quietly moving pieces on a board nobody else can see.

I know Wit is me. I do not think there is a separate little man living in my head plotting romantic coups. But personifying that part of myself gives me a way to recognize its signature.

Wit is the part that sometimes sees through my fear faster than conscious me can. The part that gets tired of watching me evaluate something I already understand. He can be wrong. He only has the information I have. But when he shows up, the message is usually much simpler than the committee meeting happening everywhere else.

Move. Now. And in that moment it was: We're doing this now. No more playing around. So I kissed her. And I really kissed her.

I reached my hand up and touched her face firmly but softly, somewhere in between. I lightly gripped her jaw while I caressed her chin and pulled it toward mine. I kissed her while I smiled, and so did she. Our teeth touched and we smiled more. Then I felt her tongue moving around in her mouth, so I opened mine. I played with her tongue a little, explored hers with mine, and let her explore me back.

The strange thing is that once I start kissing somebody, almost none of the anxiety remains.

I am a really good kisser.

I know how arrogant that sounds coming from a man who needed three dates, a writing coach, explicit instructions, a bladder break, and a fictionalized subconscious troublemaker just to get to the starting line. But kissing itself has never been the problem. It was one of my favorite things to do when I was a teenager. I loved the communication of it. Pressure. Teeth. Tongue. Breath. The little adjustments that tell you what the other person wants without anybody having to stop and explain.

And with Morgan there was immediately more information than I was used to receiving.

I ran my fingers through her short hair while I kissed her and discovered another completely new sensory detail. I had never kissed someone whose hair felt prickly in places the way mine used to after a fresh fade. I liked the texture of it under my fingers.

But the biggest sensory experience was happening somewhere else entirely. The second I kissed her, my mind wiped into brilliant prismatic white light, a fountain of facets of colors that all combine into white.

Prismatic white.

One moment there had been darkness and five different simulations running in parallel. Then there was everything. Color. Power. Silence and noise at the same time.

I knew where some of the imagery came from. Brent Weeks built the magic system in the Lightbringer books around color, emotion, and the way different colors seem to carry different psychological textures. I had always loved it because it resembled things I had experienced in my own mind.

Maybe my brain simply reached for a symbol it already had available. I did not care. The symbol fit. I had spent the entire evening trying to think my way into the moment. Then I kissed her and thinking disappeared.

We kissed for a long time. I mean, it had to be more than a minute. Maybe two. It felt longer than that. It also felt like nowhere near enough.

Eventually Morgan surfaced enough to point out something she had noticed about herself. She normally did not like PDA. Normally she would have become uncomfortable with this much public kissing long before now. She was not asking me to stop. If anything, she seemed mildly fascinated that the normal alarm had not gone off yet. I found that interesting too. We were sitting in this strange mixed public space at Foundry Market, a converted brick warehouse near the riverfront, where there could be people drinking nearby and families with kids still wandering through, and we were just straight-up making out on a barstool near where we had bought my ridiculous spritzer earlier.

We stopped. Talked. Looked at each other's mouths. Kissed again. I think we restarted two or three times. It became increasingly obvious that both of us were talking while wanting to be kissing. The way we looked at each other's mouths like hungry wolves. I could feel the correction happening in real time. Earlier in the evening, I had still been the guy who could discuss dominance more easily than embody it.

Now at least one part of me had finally stopped asking permission from every old fear at once. I was not magically transformed. That matters. One good kiss did not erase every inhibition I had collected over a lifetime. What I should have done next was take her hand into the parking lot, put her against the side of my truck, and kiss her again like I had finally understood the assignment.

I did not. The gentleman in me was still arguing that I should not be the guy trying to push a woman toward sex on the first nighttime date. There was nothing wrong with that instinct. I was just starting to understand that respect and desire did not have to live on opposite teams. I was growing with her. And I loved that she was there for the experience.

We got into the truck. And immediately encountered one of the least romantic pieces of automotive engineering ever created. My center console is enormous. Like a foot and a half wide. Ironically, it is one of the reasons I liked the truck. There is storage everywhere. Excellent for tools. Terrible for making out. We kissed across it anyway, but there was so much stupid truck between us that every attempt to get closer became a geometry problem.

I knew I could keep escalating the night. I did not know if I should. I am glad I did not. At some point I could see Morgan getting tired. Her eyelids were heavier. Her posture softened. The energy that had carried us through hours of disclosure and attraction looked spent. I interpreted it as more than ordinary end-of-night tiredness. We had covered a lot. Family. Divorce. Sex. BDSM. Nonmonogamy. Personal growth. Psychedelics. Attraction. A first kiss that had turned into a public make-out session.

It had been a lot for me too. She finally said she thought she was ready to go home. I knew it was coming. And I was glad I had not tried to turn the night into sex simply because I probably could have kept moving in that direction.

When we got back to her house, I wanted to get out, walk her to the door, and kiss her good night. She stopped me.

“I don’t want you to come out and kiss me good night and walk me to my door.”

Then she added:

“Because I will drag you inside.”

I could picture the entire thing immediately. Us kissing toward the door. Her telling me I could not come in. Her opening the door. And then some less regulated part of her deciding that apparently I lived there now. It was adorable. It was also a boundary. I believed both halves of what she said. She wanted me. She also wanted to go to sleep. One did not make the other less true.

So I respected the request. We kissed in the truck, separated by that damn center console, and then she went inside. I was disappointed I did not even get the full-body hug I wanted. But I also felt good about the decision.

Later I told her that when we did finally have sex, I wanted her at the top of her game. That line did not come from my writing coach. I did not need to workshop it. I knew it was true. And for once the version of dominance I was trying to become did not feel like taking more. It felt like knowing when to wait. I wanted her at the top of her game.

Chapter Eight

HER — THE CORRECTION

Fine. He had a plan. Then he went to the bathroom and came back and put me on a barstool. I had specifically said I wanted to sit in his lap. This was not his lap.

Before he kissed me, I had been trying to solve a very specific problem. Mental compatibility was no longer the issue. He could talk with me for hours. He could listen. He could follow rabbit holes instead of waiting for me to come back from them. He could make parts of my mind that had felt like too much in other relationships feel interesting instead of exhausting. That was rare. It was also not enough.

I had learned the hard way that sexual compatibility mattered. A man could be kind, smart, safe, and still not be the person I wanted to hand any real power to. I did not need another relationship that worked beautifully in every category except one I had spent years learning to stop minimizing. So the question was not whether I liked him. I did. The question was whether the man underneath all that carefulness actually had enough certainty in him to meet me where I lived.

Still, there was something different about the way he positioned us this time. My back was against the wall. He was in front of me. Close enough that the entire conversation about predator and prey had become less theoretical. I could leave. That was important. I also did not want to. That was important too.

The problem with Miles was never that I could not tell whether he wanted me. I could. The problem was that desire kept getting routed through seventeen layers of analysis before his body was allowed to do anything useful with it. I had already told him I would run if he waited for the perfect invitation. I had told him I needed polarity. I had told him I wanted in his lap.

I was running out of increasingly explicit ways to make the point without issuing written instructions. And then something changed. He stopped thinking.

His hand came up to my face. Firm, but not rough. He held my jaw and guided my chin toward him like he had finally decided that the information available was sufficient. Then he kissed me. Not the careful version of a kiss I had begun expecting from the careful version of him. He kissed me like he had been thinking about doing it for days. Which, apparently, he had. I smiled into it.

He smiled too. Our teeth touched. We smiled more. And then the kiss stopped being funny. Not serious exactly. Focused. There was a confidence in him that had been missing from every attempted beginning before it. That was the correction. Not that he had suddenly become some different man. Not that one kiss proved every claim he had made about himself. But the physical version of him finally matched something I had been hearing in the words.

The kind of dominance I cared about was not volume or aggression. It was clarity. He had information. He made a decision. He moved. And when his hand closed around my jaw, it did not feel like he was taking a choice away from me. It felt like he had finally stopped making me carry the whole decision. I had started the evening wondering whether his carefulness meant there simply was not enough force underneath it.

I was wrong about that. Careful did not necessarily mean empty. It might mean contained. It might mean he had spent so much time learning not to overrun another person that he had forgotten he was still allowed to move when he was wanted. That was a much more interesting problem. I could work with that.

I also became aware, eventually, that we were making out in public. Not kissing. Making out. Tongues. Hands. Starting again every time one of us had theoretically decided we should resume behaving like

adults. I do not particularly like PDA. That was not a new boundary. Normally I would have become self-conscious about the people around us much sooner. I told him that. Not because I wanted him to stop. Because I had noticed that I had not wanted him to stop soon enough.

That was unusual. I liked unusual when it taught me something. Every time we pulled apart, I could see his eyes fall back to my mouth. Mine were doing the same thing. The rest of the room would return for a few seconds and then disappear again. There had been a question mark beside sexual chemistry all evening. It was not a question mark anymore. That did not mean every question had been answered.

It meant the category had changed. He was no longer simply the fascinating man who might be a very good friend and might be too careful for me sexually. He had teeth. Finally.

What mattered almost as much as the kiss happened afterward. He did not treat the fact that I wanted him as permission to decide everything else for me. We got into the truck and kept kissing around an absurdly large center console that seemed specifically engineered to prevent intimacy. And eventually I was done. Not done with him. Done with the night. My body had reached capacity. I had spent hours opening doors I normally opened much more slowly. Divorce. Sex. Kink. Old pain. Personal growth. Attraction. Things I wanted. Things I was not sure I wanted yet.

I wanted him. I also wanted sleep. So when we got back to my house, I made the boundary explicit.

“I don’t want you to come out and kiss me good night and walk me to my door.”

I could see the disappointment. Then I told him why.

“Because I will drag you inside.”

That was not a coy invitation disguised as a boundary. I meant the first sentence too. I knew what would happen if he got out of the truck, closed the distance again, and kissed me all the way to the door. My regulated adult had made a decision. My chaos gremlin had filed an appeal. I did not trust the appeals court. So I removed the jurisdiction. He stayed in the truck.

He respected it. And somehow that made wanting him feel safer rather than smaller. That combination was more important than either half by itself. A man who could move when I wanted movement and stop when I wanted stopping. Initiative without entitlement. Desire without pretending desire erased capacity. I had spent too much of my life believing I had to choose between being fully autonomous and being able to surrender anything at all.

Maybe the point was not surrendering autonomy. Maybe the point was being able to use it deliberately.

Later that night, his message lit up my phone:

“My chaos gremlin did not like leaving... 😊”

I answered:

“I know. Mine didn’t really like it either but I appreciate you respecting my request.”

That was the part I wanted him to understand. I had not left because I wanted less of him. I had left because I knew exactly how much more I wanted, and I wanted the right to decide when I was resourced enough to choose it. Then I made another request.

“Could you please refrain from telling your ex anything about me? Like personal details or where I live etc.”

This relationship was still new. His divorce was still real. My privacy mattered. He answered without arguing with the premise or asking me to justify the boundary.

“I could tell that was for the best. I would much rather us both be energized. And absolutely. I respect how important that is to you.”

Good. That was what I needed the night to prove more than I had realized. Want me. Move when I want you to move. And when I tell you where the edge is, believe me.

The next morning I sent him the simplest version of the truth:

“Good morning Miles. I had a lot of fun last night. Thanks again for a delightful evening. You made me feel valued and respected and it went a long way with me.”

He responded by doing the thing he was rapidly becoming incapable of not doing: analyzing my face. He told me my expressions could oscillate from positive engagement to “wild animal about to cut and run,” but that now that he understood me better it was not confusing. Fascinating. So I asked him what his theory was about the wild animal. His answer was annoyingly good.

He thought one part of me had been present, curious, enjoying myself, while another part periodically checked for the nearest exit just in case. He said it did not feel like I wanted to leave. More like my nervous system wanted everyone to remember that it remained an independent contractor.

I laughed.

“Maybe it’s just that I am not, in fact, domesticated.”

He liked that answer. Naturally. He told me he had always considered himself a hunter and had not realized the metaphor might become so literal. That opened another door. I sent him information about primal play and tried to explain something I had only recently found language for myself.

“I do not have a particular ‘role’ that I feel like fully encapsulates my sexual identity but I would say that ‘primal princess’ is pretty spot on. I hate the term princess but in this context the implication is less ‘entitlement’ and more ‘selective submission’.”

Selective was the important word. I was not interested in being domesticated. I was interested in choosing where I yielded.

Chapter Nine

HIM — THE LAST WEEK OF SUMMER

Our fourth date was planned for the following Friday. It was the last week of summer, and I had been trying to spend more time with my son Keegan. He’s fifteen now, which makes me feel old. That boy is growing up, and he’s getting fairly close to being an adult. I feel like I’ve made a lot of mistakes as a father. I also feel like I was a really good dad.

Both of those things are true.

I think I was made for being a father in ways that I didn't fully appreciate until I had to be one. But I can also see all the places where I tried to correct something from my own parents and maybe overcorrected, or went in a different direction that also didn't work.

I was already a firm believer in the importance of regulating your nervous system and the impact that has on human development. What I was still learning was how consistently to apply that understanding as a parent—especially when my instinct to protect started stepping on somebody else's autonomy.

Lately I had been trying to open up to Keegan more about my own experiences and growth. We had started to actually talk more, which had been really nice. I had also just come back from the cruise and had not spent that week with him. And there was another reason the time felt important. He still didn't know that Claire and I were getting a divorce. Claire isn't his biological mother, but she has been in his life since he was five. Now he was fifteen, and our family was about to change again.

So I wanted him to have one last good week of summer to enjoy himself and be a kid before I had to explain how his life was going to be changing.

The Saturday after my first kiss with Morgan, we went to Soak City at Kings Dominion, which is one of Keegan's favorite places to go. His girlfriend came with us, along with her parents. It was kind of a fun day all together, but I also got to spend time with Wolfie and Keegan as this little guys' day threaded through it. And it was awesome seeing Wolfie and Keegan interact. Keegan is such a good big brother, and Wolfie is such a vivacious, lively, wild-spirited four-year-old.

Seeing them together brought me such joy. At one point Wolfie was picking up shells. I kept scolding him because shells stick to your feet and can cut you. It made sense as a parenting rule. But he was having a good time. And it was where all the shells were. So I stopped myself. You know what? You're a kid. I'm going to let you be a kid. I told Wolfie he could just have fun.

Beside me, I heard Keegan quietly whisper one word.

"Autonomy."

I don't know if he even intended it for me. But I heard him. Autonomy was one of the things we had had a long talk about recently. One of the ways I could have shown him more respect as a parent was understanding where his autonomy actually began. There were times I probably gave him too much freedom. There were other times when I thought that because I was the parent, it was simply my right to decide for him.

I did not always respect the autonomy he did have in the situation. And I was so pleased to hear that word come out of his mouth because Keegan does not talk a whole lot. He had been listening. It was one of those little moments where I could feel something click into place. Not because I suddenly became a perfect father. More because I could see that maybe the work was moving through both of us.

And very quickly I realized who I wanted to tell. Morgan. Next thing I knew I was sending her a write-up of what happened. I may have sent pictures too. I honestly do not remember anymore. What I remember is that I wanted to share my life with her. And she responded in a way that made me feel seen and included. I could tell she liked that I was having a good day.

She liked that I wanted to share it with her. That made me happy. I tried to spend more time with Keegan throughout the week, but I remained consistently excited to see Morgan. I knew I was going to have a hard time waiting until Friday. Especially once Keegan went to his grandmother's house and I did not have him around as a distraction. Fortunately, Morgan and I had started developing this little routine.

Sometimes, when she was getting ready for bed but was not asleep yet, after her kids were asleep, she would sneak downstairs and let me come over for a goodnight kiss. Just a kiss. I think it is super hot and adorable. There is something mind-blowingly cute about driving a mile down the road late at night just to kiss somebody before they go to bed.

Who does that?

Apparently we do.

And I love that it lets me see her multiple times a week. I think I would prefer seeing her once a day for a few minutes over seeing her one day for an hour. But I want both. Let's be clear on that. Those little kisses helped me keep my anxious side at bay. I was confident I could be rational and wait until Friday. And I did. I did a pretty good job.

But somewhere inside all that waiting, I started realizing that what I was waiting for had changed. I was not just excited for another date. I was developing real feelings for her. And we had not even had sex yet.

Chapter Ten

HER — A MILE DOWN THE ROAD

One mile, it turns out, is close enough to become a problem. Not a serious problem. A logistical problem. A man-who-keeps-reminding-you-he-is-only-a-mile-away problem. Miles liked seeing me. This was not subtle. He had discovered that my house was close enough to his that a visit did not need to become an event. No dinner reservation. No plan. No four-hour block carved out of an already overfull day. He could drive down the road, kiss me, and go home.

In theory. The going-home part occasionally required supervision. At first I was not entirely sure what to do with how much he wanted those little visits. His eagerness was flattering. It was also pressure. Not pressure in the sense that he was doing something wrong. That distinction mattered. He did not sulk when I said no. He did not make me reassure him. He did not turn disappointment into a debt I had to repay later.

If anything, he kept going out of his way to remind me that I could tell him no. I had no particular difficulty with that part. I had worked too hard to become a woman who could say no clearly to start pretending otherwise now. But another person's desire can still have weight even when they are carrying it responsibly. I knew he wanted to see me. I knew he would probably say yes if I invited him.

I knew that if I did not invite him, he would be disappointed and survive. That was actually part of what made the situation feel safer. He wanted something from me without behaving as though wanting it made it his.

Useful.

Annoyingly useful.

At some point I tried to explain what I thought my nervous system was responding to. I told him it was his energy and transparency. His interest in me felt like it existed on a stable and predictable wavelength. That was unusual enough that I noticed it. He was not intensely interested one day and mysteriously unavailable the next. He did not create uncertainty so I would chase him. He did not seem to be rationing affection because some dating podcast had told him scarcity was attractive.

He just liked me. Consistently. And somehow managed to make that very obvious without requiring me to do anything about it. I told him he was positioning himself as a safe and exciting place.

Safe and exciting.

Those two words were becoming increasingly important. Safe by itself was not enough. I had done stable. I knew what it was like for security to become the argument for why other categories of a relationship did not matter as much. Exciting by itself was definitely not enough. Chaos is exciting. So is a house fire. I was not looking to rebuild my life around either. Safe and exciting was different. A place my nervous system could approach without having to choose between regulating and feeling alive.

Miles told me he thought he could maintain that because it was not a performance. It was just who he was. I told him I liked it. Then, because my body had decided to become involved in the conversation, I added:

“I would enjoy another visit.”

There.

I had asked. No appeasement required. No elaborate negotiation. I wanted to see him. That was new data.

One of those nights he sent me a little “Say When” image. The coast would be clear soon. He sent me “Kiss the Girl.” Ridiculous. Effective. I hearted it. Then I told him:

“You can come whenever you’re ready.”

There is a very specific kind of vulnerability in inviting a man over for something that is intentionally small. A date has structure. A date has an activity to blame. You are both there because you agreed to dinner or drinks or a walk or whatever else adults use to pretend that spending time together is not itself the point. A goodnight kiss has almost no camouflage. Come here. I want your mouth.

Then leave. That was the activity. It also gave me something I did not expect. A boundary around the experience. We were not beginning an evening. We were ending one. The children were asleep. I was going to bed. He was going home. The fact that the ending was already built into the visit changed the middle. There was less to decide. I did not have to keep checking whether kissing him meant I had accidentally agreed to an entire escalation ladder.

I could just kiss him. And I liked kissing him. A lot. Eventually I told him the most accurate phrase I had for it:

“Kissing you feels luxurious. Like being savored.”

That was exactly what it felt like. Not consumed. Not hurried toward whatever came next. Savored. There was something almost absurd about how complete the experience felt on its own. I told him that

too. Something so innocent could feel like its own experience and not just an appetizer. I had spent enough of adult life treating physical intimacy like a sequence. Kissing leads to this. This leads to that.

At some point the beginning becomes valuable primarily because of where it is taking you. With him, the kiss could stay the kiss. That did not make it less sexual.

If anything, knowing he was leaving occasionally made the kissing worse. Better. Whatever. He could get much more physically confident once he knew where the boundary was. I was beginning to see the same pattern from the first real date night. Give the man uncertainty and he would convene a congressional subcommittee. Give him a clear perimeter and another version of him showed up. That person was significantly more interesting. His hands were more certain.

His body stopped apologizing for taking up space. He could kiss me hard enough that my regulated adult began filing complaints. And then he would leave. Usually. There were moments when I had to remind both of us that the point of a goodnight kiss was eventually the goodnight. I am not yet prepared to decide what exactly I liked about that. Some questions deserve better data. But I knew I liked the combination.

Intensity inside structure. Desire that did not require surrendering the right to end the interaction. That was beginning to feel suspiciously familiar.

The strangest part was that the visits were not only sexually regulating. Sometimes they were just regulating. He told me once that having me cuddled into him felt calming. I understood what he meant. I had started noticing something similar. There were moments where our bodies seemed to make tiny adjustments around each other without either of us doing anything particularly intentional. Breathing settling. Muscles softening. The amount of internal noise lowering slightly.

I told him:

“I think we may be intuitively co regulating when we are together.”

That may have explained some of the immediate connection. He immediately wanted to know whether that made the connection more meaningful or less meaningful. That sounded like him. The man could not simply receive an interesting piece of information without asking it to testify before a grand jury. I told him I did not think it carried a connotation of meaning. I thought it just was. That was important to me. I did not need every pleasant nervous-system response to become evidence for fate.

My body could like being around another body without the universe issuing a certificate of authenticity. It explained something. That was enough. It explained why being around him could feel unusually natural. Why the transition from text to person had been so easy. Why I could be tired around him without always feeling like I needed to perform my way back into being interesting. Why the physical closeness sometimes made me feel less depleted instead of more.

That last part would take me longer to trust. I had spent years learning that when I was tired, I needed fewer humans. Fewer questions. Fewer needs. Fewer people in my space. That was a reliable rule. Then Miles kept becoming an irritating exception.

At first I wanted to see him despite being tired. Then sometimes I wanted to see him because I was tired. Those are not the same thing. There were nights when I was completely out of spoons and still caught myself wanting to crawl into him. Attach myself to him like some exhausted little spider and let my nervous system stop holding every part of itself up alone for a minute. That was not dependence.

At least I did not think it was. It was also not nothing. I had built a life where solitude was one of my most reliable forms of regulation. Now there was a person who occasionally made my system quieter too. That deserved attention. Careful attention. Not prophecy.

The mile itself started to mean something different. At first it had been Miles's argument. I am only a mile away. I can come for ten minutes. I can kiss you good night. I can leave. And I had to decide whether I wanted the access he was offering. Then, without either of us really announcing the change, the mile became mine too. I could be the one who sent the message.

I could be the one who decided the coast was clear. I could be the one who wanted the visit. That mattered more than I expected. He did not have to manufacture scarcity to make me miss him. He did not have to disappear so I would chase. He was simply there. Predictably. Close enough that I could choose him. And increasingly, I did. It was only a mile. But more and more often, I was the one closing it.

Chapter Eleven

HIM — ON THE RECORD

I had a problem. The story was already becoming important enough that I did not completely trust my future memory of it. That sounds dramatic. It was also practical. Memory is not a security camera. It edits. It colors things with whatever happened afterward.

If Morgan and I worked out spectacularly, there was a version of future me who might look back at these first few weeks and decide I had always known. Of course I loved her. Of course this was different. Of course every little moment had been pointing toward the ending the entire time. That's how stories work once you already know the ending.

There was another version too. If we eventually hurt each other badly enough, memory could do the opposite. It could flatten everything. Rewrite the joy as projection. Turn the beginning into evidence that I should have known better. I had already lived enough relationship history to know how aggressively the present can colonize the past. So I wanted evidence. I wanted myself on the record.

Around that time, I started recording my first real journal entries about Morgan. Not just sending her a long message. Not talking to my therapist. Not asking my writing coach what it thought. I wanted to hear myself say the words while they were still true in the present tense. I remember thinking that future me should be able to come back and hear this version of me before he knew anything else.

I was not trying to write a book. Not then. Calling myself a writer still felt like claiming a title I had not earned. I was recording because I wanted to remember. If some part of me was already turning experience into story, I did not yet understand what that meant.

Before sex. Before exclusivity. Before whatever this became. I wanted to be able to listen later and say:

Yep.

That is how you felt. You captured it in the moment. You said it before the rest of the story had a chance to influence the testimony. So I started talking. And one of the things I wanted on record was

simple. I was developing real feelings for this woman. That had become obvious. We had known each other for a couple of weeks. We had seen each other in person only a handful of times.

We had kissed one evening. That was absurdly little evidence by normal relationship standards. And yet so many of the questions I normally expected to spend months evaluating were quietly failing to become problems. Could we talk? Yes. Could she follow the way my mind moved? Apparently she wanted to. Did I enjoy the way her mind moved? Constantly. Did I find her attractive? That question had become embarrassing. Did our bodies seem to like each other?

The prismatic white light had filed an opinion. Could I be honest about ugly or complicated parts of myself without immediately feeling like the relationship was in danger? So far, yes. Could she tell me no? Absolutely. Could I hear it without falling apart? So far, yes. None of that guaranteed anything. But it was enough that I wanted to preserve the feeling before sex got a vote. That part mattered to me.

I did not want future me deciding that I had confused excellent sex with love if the sex turned out to be excellent. I wanted the evidence timestamped before then. Whatever this was, it was already important.

I had been thinking a lot about dating with intention. I don't mean dating with intention in the way people say it when they have a spreadsheet of desired partner attributes and a five-year plan for marriage. I mean actually paying attention to what you're doing while you're doing it. There is a strange problem with trying to show somebody the best version of yourself.

If the version is fake, you are marketing. If the version is real but unsustainable, you are still creating a future problem. But there is another possibility. What if you deliberately practice being the version of yourself you actually want to become? Not pretending.

Practicing.

That was what I was trying to do. More decisive. More honest. Less afraid of saying what I wanted. More respectful when somebody else's want was different. More willing to notice my own anxiety without handing it to another person and calling it their responsibility. I was not always good at those things. That was the point. I was trying to become better at them while dating someone who seemed to make that version of me easier to access.

And I was paying attention. Maybe too much. Probably too much. But the thoughtfulness itself felt valuable. Caring about the process of falling in love changes the experience. You notice things you might otherwise lose. You ask why a particular moment mattered. You catch yourself constructing stories and have a chance to ask whether the story is true. And sometimes you deliberately save the good ones.

I started thinking of those memories as core lore. Mythology. Not mythology because it was fake. The opposite. Lore because I wanted something true enough that later emotions could not easily erase it. I knew the relationship would not always be this pretty. That was important. There would eventually be a day when one of us was tired and selfish. There would be a misunderstanding that did not resolve itself with a kiss.

There would be moments when one person's pain was so loud that the other person's pain became temporarily difficult to see. I knew that because I do that. I can be reactive. I can become so focused on what something means to me that I stop being adequately curious about what it means to the person in

front of me. I had spent years wishing that when the storm passed, the person I loved would come back and repair.

I had also spent years failing to repair well enough myself. So I was not writing core lore as armor against Morgan. I was trying to build something both of us could theoretically use. A set of memories from regulated moments. Evidence that said: This person is not your enemy. This relationship contains more than the thing hurting right now. You have been happy here. You have been safe here. You have been seen here.

You have also been wrong here before. Maybe wait until both nervous systems come back online before rewriting the entire history of the relationship. That seemed useful. Maybe slightly unhinged. But useful.

There was another reason I liked the idea. My childhood memories are strange. There are huge pieces that feel vague or missing, while random images and tiny moments remain with almost photographic intensity. For a long time, I treated memory as something that simply happened to me. Now I was experimenting with participating in it. Savoring. Revisiting. Writing something down while the emotion was still available. Not to make it bigger than it was.

To keep it from becoming smaller later. That distinction mattered. I could feel myself doing it with Morgan already. The first message from Europe that made me stop what I was doing. Her face at the coffee shop. The deli. The repairman my anxious brain briefly turned into a conspiracy theory. The way she told me I was going to have to catch her. The first kiss. The brilliant white. The center console from hell.

The fact that she wanted me enough to tell me not to walk her to the door. Keegan quietly saying “autonomy.” Realizing she was the person I wanted to tell. Driving a mile for a kiss. These were not proof that the relationship would work. They were proof that those moments had happened. That was enough.

The dangerous thing about lore is that eventually you can start worshipping it. I knew that too. There is a very thin line between: I want to remember this woman accurately and I have created a character in my head and now I need the real woman to keep performing the role. I did not want that. Morgan was already more interesting whenever she violated my prediction anyway. She was not supposed to be a polished answer to everything I had ever wanted.

She was a person. A complicated one. I wanted to know her. Not finish her. That is easier to say in hindsight. At the time, I was still learning the difference between being fascinated by someone and turning fascination into certainty. But I was at least aware enough to know that the story in my head needed to keep submitting itself to reality. I could read her really well. That did not always mean I understood her really well.

The expression was information. The interpretation was still mine. The lore had to remain editable. The facts did not.

That was why the recording mattered. I could change my interpretation later. I could learn that I had misunderstood something. Morgan could tell me a moment that felt profound to me had felt entirely

different to her. The relationship could change. I could change. But I could not honestly tell myself I had not felt this way. I had said it out loud.

Before sex. Before the easier explanations. Before I knew whether she was going to become a girlfriend, a lesson, a heartbreak, a friend, a chapter, or the woman I spent my life with. I did not know the ending. That was the whole point. I was trying to preserve the beginning without pretending it was a prophecy. So I put myself on the record. Whatever happened next, this woman already mattered to me.

And now future me would not be allowed to lie about that.

Chapter Twelve

HER — A SCARY KIND OF HOPE

The problem with being seen is that eventually you have to wonder what the person looking at you thinks they are seeing. Miles watched me. Closely. He noticed expressions I did not realize I was making. He remembered small things I had said days earlier and brought them back like evidence. He could look at one shift in my face and produce three theories, two metaphors, and a nervous-system model before I had decided whether I was annoyed or hungry.

Sometimes it was delightful. Sometimes it was confronting. Usually both. At one point I told him the simplest version:

“I am delighted but skeptical.”

That remained accurate. I liked what was happening. I also had no intention of surrendering my critical thinking just because a man was being unusually good at making my body happy. He had become a fucking mystery box. Every time I thought I understood the category he belonged in, another compartment opened. Timid. Then not timid. Overthinker. Then physically decisive. Divorcing. But unusually reflective about it. Experienced with nonmonogamy. But not trying to sell me on it.

Intense. But weirdly willing to stop. Needy in ways I could feel. But often disciplined enough not to make the need my job. There were too many contradictions. I liked contradictions. They made people more believable. They also made them harder to predict.

The way he looked at me became its own problem. I told him once that I could not decide whether I felt privileged or afraid. He wanted to know why afraid. Because it was confronting. There was a level of focus in him that I had always wanted from a partner in theory. The feeling of being specifically chosen. Not generically appreciated. Not loved because you occupied the position labeled wife or girlfriend.

Seen.

Desired.

Paid attention to.

He offered that with an intensity I had always craved and never really received in the same way. Which sounds wonderful. It was. It was also vulnerable as hell. Receiving something you have wanted for a

long time does not only produce relief. Sometimes it reveals exactly how much you could lose. There is a strange safety in expecting less.

If you already know nobody is going to fully meet you there, you do not have to organize your life around the possibility that somebody might. Miles kept making the possibility harder to dismiss. That was where the fear lived. Waiting for the other shoe to drop. The internal work associated with having something to lose. I knew how to survive disappointment. Hope was proving more complicated.

There was another problem. He was writing stories about me in his head. I knew that before I knew he was literally keeping a record of us. He could not help it. His mind connected things. A facial expression became a pattern. A pattern became a theory. A theory became a metaphor. Then he would come back twenty minutes later with a completely unrelated idea that somehow turned out to be connected to the first one through four invisible threads.

It was one of the things I liked about him. It was also exactly why his attention could feel like pressure. I told him that too. Not that he was pressuring me. He was not. I wanted that distinction clear. He gave me room. He repeatedly told me I could say no. He seemed to mean it when he said he did not want me performing for him. But I could still feel the size of the story growing.

And I was not sure I would live up to whatever story his brain was telling him about who I was. That scared me more than ordinary rejection. Ordinary rejection is clean. Someone meets you. They do not like some part of you. Fine. Filed away. Idealization is more dangerous. Someone falls in love with a version of you that never existed, and eventually the real person becomes the disappointment. I had no interest in competing with an imaginary woman inside somebody else's head.

Especially when the imaginary woman had my face. Miles told me he knew he still had a lot to learn about me. He said he did not need me to live up to some idealized version in his head. I believed he meant it. That did not mean either of us knew whether he could actually do it yet. Meaning something and having the nervous system skill to live it are not always the same.

He should know that by now. So should I.

The timing made everything more complicated. His divorce was real. Very real. He was still living inside pieces of the life he was leaving. There were logistics. Children. A house. History. A woman he had loved for a very long time. Pain that clearly had not finished moving through him yet. I did not need him to pretend none of that existed in order to make me comfortable. That would have been worse.

But honesty does not automatically remove risk. Several things could be true at once. He could be genuinely done with the marriage and still grieve it. He could be completely sincere about me and still discover six months later that he had moved too quickly. He could think he knew what he wanted and then realize he had barely had time to be single enough to find out. He could still be answering the monogamy question he had started dating specifically to explore.

He could theoretically reconcile. He could not reconcile and still carry so much unprocessed relationship history that I ended up dating the divorce with him. None of those things had to be predictions to be variables. And I had survived enough to respect variables. I was not interested in controlling him into certainty. That was not autonomy. I wanted him to choose whatever he chose because it was actually his choice. I also wanted the freedom to protect myself while he figured it out.

That meant not allowing chemistry to become an argument against pacing. Unfortunately, the chemistry had hired excellent counsel.

The speed was strange. Calendar time said we barely knew each other. Experiential time disagreed. We had communicated constantly. Not only flirted. Communicated. Long messages. History. Sexuality. Family. Fear. Autism. Divorce. How our bodies worked. What we wanted. What we were afraid of wanting. Then we had seen each other repeatedly in small doses. Coffee. Lunch. A long date. Goodnight kisses. The relationship had accumulated more contact than the number of weeks suggested.

That did not mean time was irrelevant. Bodies need time too. Patterns need repetition. Anybody can behave beautifully for a few weeks. Including me. But I also could not pretend the connection was ordinary simply because the calendar told me it was early. That felt dishonest in the opposite direction. So I tried to hold both. This is fast. This also feels natural. This could hurt me. I also want more.

Both of those things can be true.

Apparently that phrase was contagious.

The thing that kept pulling me forward was not certainty. It was that I did not feel like certainty was being demanded from me. I could ask a question and not have an answer yet. I could notice something without deciding what it meant. I could tell him I was skeptical and he did not immediately launch a campaign to eliminate the skepticism. Well. He sometimes launched a dissertation. But he was learning.

So was I. At one point I told him:

“I am at least a medium amount of comfortable with not needing to understand.”

Medium amount. Let's not get reckless. But that was progress. I did not need to know whether co-regulation meant destiny. I did not need to know whether the intensity would last forever. I did not need to know whether he would ultimately decide he wanted monogamy. I did not need to know whether this relationship was healing something in me or simply revealing that something had already healed. I could collect information.

I could pay attention to my body. I could keep my boundaries. I could enjoy him. That was enough for now. The uncomfortable part was realizing how much “enough for now” had started to contain.

I had built my life around a rule that had saved me. Do not need another person to make your life work. It was a good rule. I still believe that. I do not want to need a man in order to pay my bills. I do not want to need somebody else's permission to travel. I do not want to make my emotional stability another adult's full-time job. I do not want to hand over the steering wheel of my identity and hope the person driving likes the same destination.

I had already learned what happened when too much of myself became negotiable. Never again. But maybe I had accidentally attached a second rule to the first one. If you do not need someone, needing nothing from them is safer. That rule was starting to look less useful. There was a difference between dependence and interdependence. I knew that intellectually. Experiencing it in my body was something

else. I could be entirely capable of standing on my own and still enjoy the feeling of a person beside me.

I could prefer his arms without losing the ability to sleep alone. I could let him drive without becoming incapable of driving myself. I could choose to surrender something without surrendering the right to choose. I could want him. That did not make me less autonomous. Maybe autonomy was not the absence of attachment. Maybe it was being able to decide what I attached myself to. That possibility was beautiful. Which was exactly the problem.

Beautiful things create hope. And hope creates stakes. I knew how to handle fear. Fear tells you to cut and run. Fear is simple. Hope asks you to stay long enough to find out. That was much scarier. Especially when the thing I was beginning to hope for was not some fantasy that another person would complete my life. It was worse. I had already completed it. I liked my life. I liked myself.

And now there was a man a mile down the road making me wonder whether a complete life could still become larger. That was a scary kind of hope. A dangerous one. I was a medium amount comfortable with it.