

*“To my real life happily ever after Husband, CJ
and our sweet boy, Theo”*



The Husband Trainer

By

Marikah Baran

Story by

*Marikah Baran
and
Eryn Rea*

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Prologue: The Girl With The Big Heart



Once upon a time, in the small town of Bellingham, Washington, there lived a young twelve-year-old girl named Kate. She had long, flowing brown hair with golden highlights that shimmered in the sunlight and eyes as green as emeralds. Kate was known for her kind heart, gentle nature, and wild imagination. Every day, she would spend hours in her backyard meadow, surrounded by vibrant wildflowers, lost in the pages of her favorite fairytale books, daydreaming of one day meeting a Prince Charming of her own.

Closing her eyes, Kate lay in the soft grass and let her imagination run wild, conjuring images of her perfect prince. His eyes would be as deep as the ocean, with a mischievous twinkle in his gaze. A

smile that could light up the darkest of nights, striking a delicate balance of sincerity and mystery. She imagined their hands intertwined as they lay beneath a canopy of stars. She dreamed their union would be predestined, a seamless fit. *Soulmates*.

Kate couldn't help but wonder how and when she would meet him. Would he appear unexpectedly, as if plucked from one of the pages of her cherished fairytales, or would their meeting unfold as a serendipitous tryst orchestrated by fate itself? With each passing year, the anticipation grew, igniting a spark of hope within Kate's heart. For in the meadows of Bellingham, amidst the tapestry of wild-flowers, she believed that her prince charming was out there, somewhere, waiting for her too.

Chapter 1

The Girl with the Broken Heart



As Kate's thoughts wandered in the embrace of her daydream, a familiar voice pierced through.

The voice called out, "Kate," jolting her back to her current reality.

Asleep on the couch in her Los Angeles apartment amidst the clutter of clothes and scattered mess, now a twenty-nine-year-old woman, Kate was momentarily transported back to her childhood, envisioning the charming prince she had once conjured up in her backyard meadow long ago. But as she returned to the present moment, the illusion shattered, revealing her comforting and wise older sister Claire standing before her.

“Kate,” Claire repeated. “Earth to Kate. Are you there?”

Kate blinked, her mascara slightly smudged from earlier tears, her mind still half-lost in the traces of her daydream. She shifted her gaze from the imaginary prince that had lingered in her mind to her sister's smiling face, with the blurred glow of the TV screen displaying the message: *Are you still watching Friends? Ask again later, play without asking again, or I'm done?*

“Ugh. I'm done. Hi, my sister,” Kate responded weakly, her voice carrying a term of endearment that held special meaning between the two of them.

For Claire and Kate, addressing each other as “my sister” was more than just a statement or title representing their family roles; it was a cherished, intimate phrase that encapsulated their deep connection and sisterly bond. This unique salutation had become their way of affirming not just their sibling relationship but also the unspoken understanding, shared history, and unwavering support they offered each other. Whenever they used “my sister,” it was a reminder of their journey together through life's highs and lows, a symbol of their love and trust.

Claire looked at her sister with concern as she

placed Kate's favorite Tiki Thai order in front of her. "Eat this. You're withering away to nothing."

Kate looked up at Claire, her eyes reflecting gratitude as she reached for the container. "Thanks, Claire. You always know how to make me feel better," she said softly.

Kate was unrecognizable. It was as if the light that previously gleamed within her had somehow dimmed. She was undeniably beautiful, with a warm, effortless smile that could soften even the hardest hearts and eyes that reflected quiet kindness. There was an easy confidence in the way she carried herself. Still, it was her small, unguarded moments that made her unforgettable—the way her laughter surfaced at just the right time or how she absent-mindedly toyed with her necklace when lost in thought. Those subtle quirks made her all the more captivating.

Despite her striking appearance, there was a down-to-earth quality about Kate. An unexplainable familiarity that made even strangers feel as if they'd known her forever. People were drawn to her vibrance, not because they envied her, but because they simply felt good being in her presence. She could turn someone's day around or make someone feel better about themselves just by spending five

minutes with them. She had a way of building people up, lifting them to their highest potential, and making them shine. Even if it meant it would sometimes dim her own light. She was okay with that because she loved making people feel good. She was the friend who would offer a listening ear, the stranger who smiled at you on a bad day. She was beautifully and unapologetically real, with a heart made of gold.

Kate's personality was as captivating as her looks. Stubborn, but in the best possible way. She was witty and intelligent—but never in a way that overshadowed others. Instead, she had a talent for making people feel valued and heard. Her humor was never at someone else's expense, and she often laughed at her own endearing clumsiness or the small mishaps that life threw her way.

Kate's one flaw—if it could even be called that—was her need to fix things. But not everything broken wanted mending, and not every person needed saving. She couldn't help it; she saw potential where others saw resignation, solutions where others saw dead ends. It wasn't about control or ego—she simply believed people deserved better, even when they didn't believe it themselves. But sometimes, in her quiet determination to make things

right, she forgot that not every wound wanted healing, and not every story needed rewriting.

Knowing this only made it harder for Claire to witness Kate in her current state of sadness. She was a shadow of the vibrant “Kate” she used to be.

Kate pulled the chopsticks from the Tiki Thai paper casing as she contemplated her level of hunger. It was low, as usual these days. She set the chopsticks back down and instead decided to check her phone again to see if what she had seen earlier was just a dream or if it really had happened. Opening her phone, she pulled up the Instagram photo that Luke, her now ex, had just posted. It was a photo of his picture-perfect wedding day with his new wife, everything Kate had ever wanted with him. She turned the screen around to show Claire.

The caption read, ‘My life changed for the better the day I met you. *Really, really.*’

“I guess six months was enough time for him to *Really, really* figure things out,” Kate said with a bitter tone.

Six months ago, Luke's words, “I need some time to figure things out,” had shattered Kate's world. She couldn't comprehend what needed figuring out. In her mind, they were perfect for each other. Luke was the prince charming she had dreamed about as a

little girl in that meadow. She was woven into the very fabric of his life, an integral part of his family, especially his sisters. Her dedication to him was unwavering. She would have done anything to make him happy.

For Luke, a fitness instructor slash struggling actor whose career had finally just begun to unfold, largely due to Kate's constant support, "figuring things out" had been a delicate euphemism for a choice he couldn't make. It was a decision between Kate, the woman he had loved and known for years, his anchor and support, and Gia, his co-star whose flirtatious and calculating nature had insidiously tempted him away from Kate while filming his first lead role in a film.

Despite Gia's seductive allure, next to Kate, she felt like the diet version—a watered-down imitation of the real thing. While Kate was a brilliant firework, Gia was merely a flickering candle. Though younger and perhaps possessing a certain freshness and brightness in appearance, Gia's features lacked the striking allure that made Kate unforgettable. Her personality, too, was almost a muted version of Kate's vivid charm. Gia was basic, while Kate was so much more. However, despite these contrasts, Gia held a peculiar spell over Luke, luring him in like a

spider with her web over the month of filming together.

Kate had been Luke's rock through everything—the ups and downs of the last four years, especially as he chased his dreams of becoming an actor. She was there, tirelessly helping him rehearse lines, spending hours recording his self-tape auditions, and being his greatest cheerleader and source of encouragement. She'd believed in him, especially when he didn't believe in himself. Luke was arguably a better man because of Kate, and she'd dedicated years of her life to making it so.

If Luke had occasionally grumbled that Kate treated him like a child while Gia saw him as a capable man, it was only because Kate had shaped him into one. She had pushed, corrected, and occasionally coddled—not to belittle him, but to make him better. Stronger. He might not have liked it, might have resented the way she sometimes hovered or second-guessed his choices, but wasn't that the cost of someone caring enough to see his potential and demand he live up to it? She hadn't done it to hold him back. She'd done it for the greater good... hadn't she?

"He stole your *really, really?*" Claire interjected. "What an Asshole!"

In Kate and Luke's world, "Really, really" wasn't just a phrase; it was their thing. It had started off as a silly repetition during one of their early dates after watching *Shrek* together, when Donkey asked Shrek, "Really, really?" It had somehow evolved into their signature go-to line whenever they wanted to know for certain that the other person was telling the truth. Eventually, it grew into the way they simply said "I love you" with the utmost certainty. If one of them asked the other, "Really, really?" it was their way of asking, "Do you really, really love me?" If one responded with, "Really, really," it was all the confirmation they needed—a quiet, unwavering proof of just how deep and genuine their love truly was.

Within their private world, the phrase "Really, really" served as a cue for one to ask the other if they "Really, really" loved them, prompting a response with a heartfelt "I love you." If the response was not given in an adequate amount of time, the punishment varied yet often entailed a playful tickle attack from the other, continuing until they finally submitted and said the words.

Every time they said it, it was like reliving all those moments—the endless giggles, the inside jokes, the way they could communicate a whole story or thought with just a look. It was theirs, a

special part of their relationship that no one else could touch. Except perhaps Shrek and Donkey. Until then, it had belonged solely to Luke and Kate—just the two of them. But at some point, perhaps without even realizing it, Luke had transferred that sentiment to Gia.

Seeing that he'd used their phrase in the caption of the photo with Gia felt like the ultimate betrayal to Kate. It was as if he had taken a piece of their history, their connection, and given it away as if it meant nothing.

Claire could see the depth of hurt this had caused Kate. The phrase was more than just words. It was a piece of Luke and Kate's story, and Claire could see how much it hurt Kate, knowing he recycled it with the very next woman he met.

Kate continued, her voice filled with disbelief, "It took him six months to say 'I love you' to me. And he's married to her six months after our breakup! Four years of my life, Claire. I gave him four years. And not just any four years. He got my good twenties! The early twenties are a mess, you know? But mid-twenties... that's it. You sparkle! They're gone now. Forever. He stole my sparkle, Claire."

Claire reached out, gently placing a comforting hand on Kate's. Her voice was soft, filled with a mix

of understanding and a hint of indignation. “Kate, he didn't steal your sparkle. Nobody can do that. You still have it. It might be a little dim right now, but it's still there—I see it. And about the time... yes, those years are important, but they haven't been wasted. They've made you who you are: strong, amazing, and, yes, sparkling. You'll see, this isn't the end. It's just a new beginning.”

Claire's eyes held a fierce kind of loyalty and optimism—the kind that only a sister could offer. In her presence, Kate could almost believe that the sparkle wasn't gone. It was just waiting for the right moment to shine again. Kate took comfort in her sister's words as she sank deeper into the couch, her gaze distant and thoughtful, lost in a long moment of silent contemplation.

“I guess I just thought Luke and I were meant to be. Soulmates, you know?” Kate murmured, breaking the silence with a pathetic exhale. Her gaze then drifted towards the freezer with a sudden shift in thought. “Is there any of that cookie dough ice-cream left?”

Claire checked the freezer and then turned to Kate with a regretful look. “It's all gone.” But seeing Kate's disappointed expression, she immediately grabbed her phone. “No worries, I'll order more,” she

said, quickly navigating a delivery app. As she ordered, Claire's voice softened. "I know this is hard, Kate. But I promise you'll get through it. Time heals everything, just like Nanna always used to say."

Setting her phone down, Claire reached for the TV remote, ready to shift the mood. "Okay! What should we watch? *The Notebook* or *I Love Lucy*?"

Kate, looking utterly exhausted, gave a half-hearted shrug. "*I Love Lucy*," she muttered, her voice lacking its usual spirit.

Yet, Claire noticed a tiny smile flicker on Kate's lips. It wasn't much, but for tonight, that subtle hint of joy was a significant win.

"*I Love Lucy* it is!" Claire declared, snatching the last egg roll from the Tiki Thai container and popping it into her mouth.

As the familiar theme music began, she cast a side glance at Kate, noticing her lifeless expression. Claire's eyes darted back and forth between her sister and the TV, her mind churning as she munched on the egg roll.

"What?" Kate asked, sensing the gears turning in Claire's head, a familiar sign that her sister was concocting a plan.

Claire, still chewing, replied, "I just hate seeing you so down. You need something to shake things

up. A distraction.” A moment of inspiration struck her as she finished her egg roll, licking her fingers clean. “Ooh! I know! I know!” Claire said, her voice brimming with excitement.

“What?” Kate asked, torn between eager anticipation and reluctant dread.

Chapter 2

Sister Trip



“**H**ow about a sister trip to Cabo?” Claire exclaimed with zest. “A total escape, just to clear your head and get away for a while.”

Kate took a moment to contemplate, a tinge of longing in her eyes. “Claire, I appreciate the thought. I really do. But there's no way I could get time off work. You know how Mallory is. She'd have my head if I even suggested it.”

Kate hesitated, her thoughts drifting off as she thought about her job at the well-known, bustling, and fancy Glamour & Grace Editorial Headquarters, where she spent her days surrounded by the latest trends in dating advice, beauty products, and lifestyle tips. It was a world brimming with glitz, celebrities, and non-stop action, a realm that

demanded everything from her. This especially applied to dealing with her boss, Mallory, a 40-year-old alpha leader whose appearance was as meticulously maintained as her professional demeanor.

Mallory was the epitome of a woman who knew precisely what she wanted. Her decisiveness was clear, marked by little to no hesitation in making her demands known. She navigated the high-energy environment with an air of unshakeable confidence, commanding respect and attention in every meeting and on every project. Her presence was both awe-inspiring and intimidating, a constant reminder of their industry's relentless pace and high stakes. Amidst this demanding, high-pressure setting, Kate worked tirelessly, putting in extra hours and effort, fueled by her ambition to secure a promotion and prove her worth.

"Besides," Kate continued, "I really need this promotion. I've been working so hard. I want to be the one writing those articles, not just proofreading them." Her voice held a mix of determination and frustration, the dream so close yet seemingly so far out of reach.

Claire leaned in, her gaze unwavering. "I get it, 'Mean Mallory' and all. But this is important. I've never seen you like this," she insisted. "I'm pulling

the sister card, which you can't ignore." Claire pointed her finger at Kate. "We made a pact, remember? And honestly, Mallory's so self-absorbed, she might not even notice you're gone. Plus, I'm sure you can manage proofreading clickbait remotely in Cabo while sipping a spicy margarita."

Kate's mind began racing with all the reasons why a trip to Cabo seemed impossible. "What about my Art For Alzheimer's volunteer program on Saturdays? They count on me to be there. Especially Elvin," she continued, her voice softening. "I can't just leave him. I'm his only regular visitor."

Claire concealed an amused smirk, her expression sympathetic yet practical. "Kate, no offense, but I doubt he'll even remember you missing a week by the time you're there the following Saturday. You need to take care of yourself too, sis. Elvin would want that for you. We can even call him to explain, so he won't worry—if it will make you feel better."

"Really?" Kate's voice was small and hopeful.

"Absolutely," Claire affirmed. "And when was the last time you actually took a break? You need this. Same for me! We need this! It's perfect."

Kate, now actually considering this crazy proposition, gave Claire a look that almost dared her to persuade her further. Making one final attempt to

find a way out, but secretly hoping Claire would come up with a rebuttal, Kate asked, "But what about Natalie and the kids? Do you really think she can manage them all by herself?"

Claire's expression softened at the mention of her family. Natalie, her wife, was the cornerstone of her world. Together, they had built a life filled with love, laughter, and the delightful chaos of raising two energetic kids. Their journey hadn't always been easy, especially from the start, dealing with all that comes with a homosexual partnership, but their love was filled with moments that made every challenge worth it. Claire's trust in her was absolute. She knew that if anyone could handle the whirlwind of their household, it was Natalie, with her constant patience and knack for making even the most demanding days seem effortless.

Claire responded with certainty, "Nat will be totally fine." She leaned in closer, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Think about it, Kate. Just a quick, teeny-tiny trip, and you can come back with a tan. And maybe even a new man."

She playfully nudged Kate, giving her a dorky wink. Kate, despite her reservations, felt the corners of her mouth twitch upwards into a reluctant smile.

Claire's face lit up. "Is that a smile I see?" she

exclaimed, her voice a mix of triumph and playfulness.

"You rhymed," Kate replied, the hint of a laugh in her voice softening the words.

Since childhood, Kate had adored rhymes, alliterations, and every playful twist of language.

"So, is that a yes?" Claire's eyes sparkled with hope.

Kate looked down, feeling torn between her desire to escape and her sense of duty.

"Come on, Kate," Claire urged, adopting a playful animated Disney character voice. "Adventure is out there!"

Kate froze, a flicker of recognition crossing her face. "What did you say?" she asked Claire as her mind drifted elsewhere.

With a grin, Claire repeated herself, her voice infused with more gusto, "Adventure is out there! You know, from *Up!* Your favorite! I actually just watched it with the kids yesterday. I meant to tell you. They loved it," she added.

Suddenly, a rush of memories flooded Kate's thoughts, taking her back to the joyful days spent with Luke.

Chapter 3

Up Moment



Kate rewound to a time when her apartment remained impeccably clean—her vibrant best self, the Kate that most knew and loved. She saw Luke reclining on the soft cream-colored linen bed, clad in a wife-beater and baggy designer sweatpants he had been gifted from one of his fitness influencer events, displaying his effortlessly chiseled physique. He was the perfect embodiment of hunk and goofball. Very much a man, yet even more so perhaps, very much a child...

Kate and Luke snuggled as Disney's *Up* played on the TV in the background. The familiar line echoed softly in the room, "Adventure is out there!"

Cocooned in the embrace of Luke's arms, Kate

lovingly glanced up at him and whispered, “Really, really?”

“Oh, you're gonna 'really, really' me right now?” Luke countered with his irresistible grin.

“I'm so 'really, really-ing' you right now,” Kate shot back.

Luke leaned in, his finger tracing an “I” on Kate's forehead, “love” down her nose, and quickly tapping her lips, followed by a tender kiss for “you.”

Kate melted but said nothing, aware that she was breaking the rules of their little game.

“I'm waiting... Five, four, three...” Luke began the countdown, his hands ready to tickle her.

Kate paused, testing the limits until she finally caved. “I love you!” she interjected with a laugh.

“Too late!” Luke exclaimed, launching into a tickle attack as Kate squealed and laughed.

“No! Stop! I said it! Truce! Truce!” Kate pleaded between laughs.

“Okay, fine, fine. I'll stop,” Luke relented, pausing before playfully resuming the tickling.

Amidst her laughter, Kate managed, “I can't believe you've never seen *Up*. Weirdo.”

“I can't believe you're making me watch it. Dork,” Luke retorted with a grin, then lovingly bopped her on the nose.

"I can't believe you didn't cry in the first five minutes! You can't *not* cry in the first five minutes of *Up*. Is your heart made of stone?" Kate bantered.

"Okay, okay, you caught me—I'm secretly a robot; no tear ducts installed." Luke began moving in a robotic manner and continued to speak in a robotic voice, "But don't worry. I'm fully programmed to hug you, love you, aaa...aaa...aaaa...nnnnnd—" Luke lifted his hand back in the 'tickle torture position,' ready to go in one last time, but then acted as though his hand was malfunctioning, like a robot abruptly shifting gears. Kate froze and begged for mercy as he dropped his hand and relented, returning to speaking in his normal voice. "I'm just teasing. Get in here," Luke conceded, pulling her back close into his arms. As they embraced, Luke's demeanor shifted—a moment of bliss as they held each other.

"I've been thinking," he began.

"Uh oh, he's thinking things," Kate teased lightly, her curiosity piqued.

"I don't know if I want to act anymore," Luke confessed, his tone now serious.

"Wait, what? Seriously? That's kind of a big statement. Why?" Kate paused, her brow furrowing as she absorbed the gravity of his words. She looked at

him thoughtfully, the wheels turning in her mind. "Have you thought about what you might want to do instead?"

"I honestly have no clue what I want to do, but... I do know that whatever I do, I wanna do it with you," Luke confessed, melting Kate, leaving her stunned. As Luke's words hung in the air, Kate's heart danced with anticipatory butterflies hanging on his next words. "Would you ever consider moving back home to New York with me?" he continued. "Starting a new life together?" Luke awaited Kate's response with hope.

The idea of leaving everything behind sent a wave of uncertainty through her. "I don't know... LA is my home, and New York is such a big city. What would I do there? I mean, I'm sure we'd make it work, but at the same time, it feels a little crazy to just uproot my entire life that I've spent years building here in LA to move to New York with my boyfriend. And with no real job lined up and no set plan," Kate admitted, her voice a mix of uncertainty and bubbling excitement at the possibilities ahead.

"Well, what if I wasn't just your boyfriend?" Luke's words left Kate stunned, her mind racing with the thought: *Did he just propose?* He looked at her earnestly. "Would that change anything for you?"

Before she could respond, Luke's phone rang, interrupting the moment.

"Shit, my agent," Luke muttered, getting out of bed to answer the call as Kate waited anxiously.

On the other end of the line, Jim's voice crackled with a precise, almost clipped enthusiasm. Jim, Luke's agent, was the epitome of professional Hollywood chic—always impeccably dressed in the latest designer suits, with every hair meticulously in place, as if he'd just stepped out of a GQ photoshoot. His demeanor was always polished, bordering on obsessive, and his tone carried an underlying intensity that masked what some might suspect was a subtle, unspoken crush on Luke.

"Luke, it's Jim! I've got some incredible news for you," he began, his voice vibrating with excitement.

"Yeah?" Luke replied, pacing slightly, already having made his way into the other room, leaving Kate behind.

"The lead actor for the Napa film dropped out. Apparently, he's not comfortable riding horses. They need someone who can handle the saddle, and they remember you mentioned you were a confident rider." Jim paused, a suggestive smirk evident in his tone.

Oblivious to Jim's innuendo, Luke's voice rose

with excitement, carrying a slight teenage-boy crackle. "Wait, seriously? I mean, I may have embellished my horseback riding skills a bit, but—"

"Oh, it's fine! There will be trainers on set. They want you for the part! Can you start next week? It shoots for a month on location in Napa."

"Yes, definitely!" Luke replied, pausing for a moment to consider his teaching schedule. "I'll need to arrange coverage for my classes, but I'm all in for sure!" A broad smile spread across his face. "Thanks, Jim. This is huge!"

"No problem, Luke. I'll send over the details. Congrats! You're gonna be a star!"

Luke hung up and continued pacing, his excitement palpable, running back into the room to tell Kate.

"Babe, remember that audition you helped me with?"

Kate looked at him with a questioning expression, as if to say, "Which one?" She had helped him with too many auditions to count.

"You know, the one that shoots in Napa where I would be a cowboy and ride horses?"

Kate paused for a moment, then nodded, acknowledging the memory.

"I got the part! I'm gonna be a *cowboy*, baby! *Your*

cowboy!” Luke announced, his Southern accent adding flair to the news.

“That’s amazing!” Kate exclaimed, enveloping Luke in a tight embrace as they both absorbed the thrilling turn of events.

“This might be the break I need, Kate,” Luke confessed, his tone a mix of excitement and uncertainty.

“When do you start shooting?” Kate asked.

“Next week!” Luke replied with a grin.

“Wow, that’s soon!” she responded, eyes widening. “Do you know how long?”

“Jim said about a month.”

Kate’s smile faltered slightly, and Luke clocked the noticeable shift in her mood.

“But we’ll obviously visit each other as much as possible,” he reassured her. “Plus, I know your birthday is in a couple of weeks, so I want to make sure we do something special for it.”

Kate’s expression brightened as her concern quickly melted into genuine happiness for him. “See! All this talk about not wanting to act anymore. Look at you! I’m so proud,” she said, her voice filled with warmth as she motioned for their signature secret handshake.

"I love you so stinking much," Luke declared affectionately as their hands intertwined.

"Love you more," Kate responded.

"Not possible," said Luke, his eyes adoring her.

He finished the shake by linking their pinkies in a promise, then kissed each side of their thumbs. He pulled her in, releasing her hand, and went straight for her lips, sealing it with a passionate kiss.

"Really, really?" Kate asked tenderly.

"Really, really," Luke affirmed.

Pure bliss. At that moment, they were perfect.

In hindsight, the cracks were already there. The boyish enthusiasm that once drew her to Luke was beginning to lose its charm, overshadowed by his constant need for validation and an insatiable desire for change. What once felt spontaneous and exciting now seemed restless and insecure, leaving her wondering if she had mistaken his energy for depth.

Chapter 4

The Beginning of the End



The next few days were a whirlwind. Luke scrambled to find instructors to cover his classes, memorize his lines, and pack for the trip. Kate was by his side every step of the way, helping and motivating him in every way she could, making his life just a little easier and more effortless as he prepared for his first big role.

When he occasionally accused her of being a mother hen, she dismissed it as nothing more than stress talking.

As Luke packed his bag for his flight to Napa the following day, Kate sat beside him, reading lines. She meticulously went through each scene from the stack of scripts, marked with written notes and

highlighted passages, ensuring he was well-prepared.

When she reached the last scene, Luke interrupted her. "We don't have to do that one. I know it pretty well already," he said, a hint of unease in his voice as though he was trying to cover something up.

Suspicious, Kate tilted her head. "Why not? I don't mind." A moment later, realization dawned on her. "Ooooh, is this the scene you have with that girl? You have to kiss her, don't you?" Kate tried to play it off as a teasing joke, as if she didn't care, when clearly she did.

"Yeah, but it's not a big deal. It's just one kiss at the end."

Kate's composure wavered.

"It's just a peck, really, and I'll be imagining it's you when I do it," Luke added with a charming grin, trying to ease the situation.

"It's fine. I get it. Just part of the job, I guess." Kate paused, considering. "Is she pretty? What's her name? Can I see her?" She feigned jealousy, though a twinge of real envy colored her tone, she hid it well.

"They sent me the cast list, and I saw a photo of her. Honestly, she's like a less attractive version of

you.” Luke chuckled nervously. “She’s kinda got a Midwest country, ordinary vibe. She’s got nothing on you though, that’s for sure. I’m not even remotely attracted to her.”

Kate remained silent for a long moment. Had she tied so much of her own purpose to Luke that she couldn't even last one month without him? The thought unsettled her, gnawing at the edges of her resolve.

Luke walked over to Kate, gently lifting her chin and guiding her gaze to meet his. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I just have this strange feeling like everything is about to change, and I don’t know why, but I know I don’t like it.”

“Kate, nothing is going to change. You’re my girl! You’re it for me. I love you,” Luke said, his voice filled with reassurance as he placed a soft kiss on her forehead.

As he looked into her eyes, any trace of fear or doubt melted away, dissolving into the warmth of his touch.

That last night together, they held each other tightly, and Luke fell asleep in Kate’s arms on the couch. As he slept, Kate couldn’t resist doing a bit of secret research to find out who had been cast for the

lead female role opposite Luke. She found her—a stunning woman who seemed tailor-made for him. Her mind spiraled into a series of unsettling thoughts, but as she glanced down at the man sleeping peacefully on her chest, she shook her head, reminding herself, *What am I doing? Luke and I are perfect together. Nothing can tear us apart. He's probably even going to propose after this shoot!*

With renewed confidence, she gently stroked her hand through Luke's hair, feeling the warmth of their unbreakable connection.

The next morning, Kate drove Luke to the airport, her hands gripping the steering wheel a bit tighter than usual. That strange, indescribable feeling she had the night before crept back into her chest and the pit of her stomach. Luke got out of the car, and they shared a quick kiss goodbye at the curb as the airport traffic control hurried them along.

"I'll call you when I land. Love you!" he said, his voice filled with warmth.

"Really, really?" Kate asked, her tone a blend of playful and earnest, seeking reassurance at that moment.

"Really, really," Luke replied with a certainty that calmed her nerves.

With a final wave, he turned and headed toward

the terminal. Kate watched him go, her heart heavy with a mix of emotions. As she got back into her car and drove away, she had no idea that this moment marked the beginning of a shift in both of their lives. Everything was about to change, and nothing would ever be the same again.

Chapter 5

The End of Luke and Kate



One month later, Luke's movie had finally finished filming. Kate was picking him up from the airport, seeing him for the first time since she'd dropped him off there a month ago. There had been no visits as he had promised. No birthday proposal as she was hoping for. In fact, Luke had completely forgotten her birthday altogether. It was as though he had been swept away into another world and forgot who he was. Forgot who they were.

Kate had sensed him drifting further and further away as he got more enveloped in the shoot, and with each day, he seemingly ignored Kate. Gia, on the other hand, posted photos and stories of her and Luke behind the scenes, cuddling, laughing, and

wearing matching cowboy hats while Gia jokingly wrote in the caption, “Ugh, I have to kiss him AGAIN today,” the sarcasm proving she was clearly not minding the on-screen affection.

For Kate, it was torture watching the man of her dreams slip away, powerless to stop it. She began grieving the loss before their relationship even ended, deep down knowing the inevitable.



A MONTH LATER, a frail, tired, and much thinner, Kate drove to the airport arrivals to pick up Luke. She immediately spotted him chatting with Gia. Upon seeing Kate, they quickly and awkwardly hugged goodbye. Gia did not acknowledge Kate.

Luke weaved through the crowd, his duffel slung over one shoulder, and a suitcase in the other hand, a tired but easy smile on his face.

The moment he reached her, she instinctively reached for the bag. “Here, let me—”

“I got it,” Luke said, shifting away before she could take the strap.

She frowned. “You’ve been traveling all day. Just let me help.”

He let out a short laugh, shaking his head. “Kate, I

don't need you to mother me. It's a bag, not a broken leg."

The words stung more than they should have. She hesitated, then dropped her hand, forcing a light smile. "Fine. But if you collapse from exhaustion, don't expect me to carry you."

Luke smirked, oblivious to the way her fingers curled into her palm. "Deal."

He silently got into Kate's car with his bag—no kiss, no hug, nothing. It felt strange to kiss him now, knowing the last person's lips his had touched were Gia's. The thought settled like a weight in her chest, unspoken but impossible to ignore. As Kate drove away from LAX with Luke beside her, they avoided eye contact, and the silence between them was palpable. He reached for her hand, but she pulled away.

"I told you, I'm sorry I forgot your birthday," Luke murmured.

"It's her, isn't it?" Kate's voice trembled.

"Who, Gia? Don't be ridiculous. There's nothing going on between us. I admire her talent as an actress. That's it. She's not you, babe," Luke replied.

"Then why do I have the 'rotten blood' feeling right now? Like something is seriously wrong. My stomach is in knots," Kate confessed.

The term 'rotten blood' was another one of their unique inside expressions, conveying the feeling of deep distress, as if the very blood in their veins had soured, thick with an unbearable heaviness. Akin to receiving a gut punch, it was their way of describing the utmost level of emotional turmoil, a profound sense of unease that left one feeling physically ill.

"Yeah, I feel it too," Luke admitted. "Let's talk about it later, okay?" he suggested.

Kate held up her pinkie to initiate their secret handshake, hoping to salvage the conversation, but he wasn't in the mood.

"This month has been crazy. I think I just need some time to figure things out," Luke explained.

The words penetrated Kate like daggers. "What do you mean, 'figure things out'? You mean like a break?" Kate barely got the words out as she stifled her tears.

"Yeah, maybe. Like a break. I just need some time," Luke replied reluctantly but coldly, almost harshly, just enough to ensure he wouldn't be convinced to change his mind.

They drove in heavy silence, those words continuing to echo in Kate's mind, her eyes welling up with tears.

Chapter 6

The Break



The time Luke had requested to “figure things out” had not been spent in solitude or reflection but rather in the constant company of Gia.

Watching the endless stream of videos and posts from Gia’s account was pure torture for Kate—Gia taking Luke’s classes, the two of them helping each other with self-tape auditions, growing inseparable in what felt like an instant.

On set, the distinction between what constituted “cheating” and merely being “in character” had blurred, leaving no room for ambiguity.

With the film’s conclusion, the veil of pretense was lifted. This was real life, and the unfolding events were undeniably genuine, marking a stark

departure from their scripted reality. Every burst of laughter, meal shared, and newly discovered inside joke drew Luke closer to Gia and further away from Kate, their once-strong connection diminishing with every passing day. The gap that had initially seemed bridgeable gradually widened, signifying not only a physical distance but also the emotional disconnection that would ultimately result in the complete dissolution of what Kate and Luke once shared.

Did Luke actually cheat? That remained a matter of interpretation. Yet, those acquainted with their story could draw a clear picture of how things had transpired. After all, “A picture says a thousand words.”



“DID YOU HEAR ME?” Claire’s voice broke through the silence of Kate’s flashback, vibrant and cheerful. “I said the kids loved *Up!*”

Kate sat beside her sister, her gaze fixed on the picture of Luke and Gia’s wedding, which had taken place just six months after Luke said he needed time to “figure things out.”

She stared at the wedding photo, Luke and Gia beaming in their perfectly staged happiness. The whole

thing felt more like a performance than a commitment—two people who spent their lives playacting, unable to distinguish real emotion from rehearsed affection. The laughter, the stolen glances, even the way they held each other—it all seemed curated, like a scene crafted for an audience rather than a marriage built to last.

Tears welled in Kate's eyes as memories flooded back, pulling her deeper into the ache in her heart.

Startled back to reality, Kate forced a smile. "Aww, really? That's nice," she replied, trying to mask the turmoil swirling within her.

Claire sat beside her sister, unsure of what else to say. All she could do was remain by her side.

"Do me a favor, and just please consider Cabo?" Hope threaded through Claire's voice.

Kate paused for a moment, then responded softly, "Okay, my sister."

Satisfied with Kate's reply, Claire settled into the comfortable, sister silence, and the two of them spent the rest of the evening watching TV. After tossing a blanket over a sleeping Claire, Kate glanced at the wedding photos once more.

She exhaled slowly, setting her phone back on the table with careful precision, as if touching it too long might leave a mark on her skin. The air in the

room felt thinner, pressing against her chest, but she refused to let it settle.

Let them have their perfect, scripted love story.

She turned away, blinking hard, and walked to her bedroom, leaving the phone—leaving them—where they belonged. Behind her.

Chapter 7

Life Without Luke



Six months had felt like six days to Kate as she struggled with the heartbreak and loss of Luke, especially after the recent news of his wedding.

She went about her daily routine alone in her apartment. The day began with the battle against the alarm clock. There were two types of people in the world—those who set a single alarm and got up the moment it sounded and those who set multiple alarms, hitting snooze after each one. Kate was a “snooze girl.” The first alarm ended quickly as she sought refuge in just a few more minutes of sleep. When she slept, she was no longer aware of her current reality, and that brief escape was a comfort, however fleeting. The alarm's persistent ring announced the second round, then the third, and by

the fourth, she finally conceded, forcing herself out of the warm tangle of sheets.

Clutching a mug of coffee—her morning salvation—Kate faced the daunting pile of laundry on the chair in the corner of her room. There were two types of people—those who immediately put their clothes in the laundry bin or hung them back up after use, and those who had a special place for clothing that wasn't quite ready for the hamper but also not entirely fit for the hanger. These people had a designated spot for such items: *The Chair*.

Kate had never been a “clothes on the chair” type of girl. If something was dirty, it went in the hamper. If it could be worn a second or third time, she hung it back up. Simple as that.

However, her current state had quickly turned her into a “clothes on the chair” person. She fumbled through the pile, selecting her outfit—the creases and wrinkles in every fold a dead giveaway of where they had been left. She attempted to smooth them out with the palms of her hands, but to no avail. Dressing quickly, she moved to the bathroom mirror. The reflection that greeted her was one of disappointment—a stark reminder of the contrast between her past and present self.

Yet, she gathered her resolve along with her

rumpled attire and essentials, stepping out the door into the day ahead.

Entering the office lobby, Kate's disheveled appearance stood as a silent testament to the morning's struggles. The familiar sound of a name cut through the murmur of the bustling space.

"Luke!"

An office worker's voice—meant for someone else—drew her attention. She turned instinctively, only to see two colleagues from another department exchanging a greeting. One of them bore the name from her past, a coincidence that struck with sharp, unexpected force.

Settling into the anonymity of her cubicle, Kate faced the day's work with a detachment that bordered on apathy. Her fingers moved over the keyboard in a lackluster rhythm, each tap echoing her disengagement. The tasks failed to capture her interest, her mind drifting far from the articles and emails that filled her screen.

The morning dissolved into an indistinct blur, and when lunchtime arrived, Kate decided to take her meal to a nearby park. She sat there, feeling almost lifeless, her gaze hazy and unfocused on the distant horizon. Around her, life carried on—happy couples strolled hand in hand, children laughed, and

co-workers shared lighthearted conversations. The scene was peaceful, yet her mind was anything but.

Glancing up, she caught sight of a man whose profile bore an uncanny resemblance to Luke's. A flicker of hope, unbidden and foolish, tightened in her chest. Compelled by curiosity and something deeper—something painful—she approached cautiously. But as the man turned, her stomach dropped. It wasn't him.

With a heavy sigh, Kate discarded her untouched lunch and made her way back to the office.

Once inside the sanctuary of the office bathroom, she locked herself in a stall and leaned heavily against the door. Pulling out her phone, fully surrendering to self-destruction, she navigated to a video Luke had made for their first anniversary—a montage of their happiest moments together. Laughter, stolen kisses, bike rides, painting sessions—each scene unfolded before her, stabbing deeper into the ache she had tried so hard to numb.

Tears blurred her vision as memories crashed over her, relentless and unforgiving, each one a painful reminder of all she had lost.

In a moment of desperation, Kate contemplated calling him, her finger hovering over his contact name. Yet, she thought better, reminding herself that

he was now a married man, a harsh and stark reminder of her new reality, turning instead to the masochistic ritual of checking his social media. The latest post was a celebration of Gia's new project with Luke, a sequel to the first film they had made together, already green-lit to stream on Netflix.

"Seriously?" she whispered to herself, disbelief and pain mingling in her voice as she shoved her phone back into her purse aggressively.

Forcing herself to move on, Kate wiped away the tears and the streaks of mascara marring her cheeks, murmuring a pep talk to her reflection, "Pull it together, Kate."

Kate walked out of the bathroom back into the frenetic energy of the office's overworked and underappreciated staff. Ignoring the chaos, Kate sat back down at her desk and opened her phone to send a text to her sister, Claire.

Chapter 8

Moving On



“So...Cabo?” Kate typed to her sister with a ‘shrug’ emoji.

The response bubbles immediately appeared on Kate's screen as Claire responded with enthusiasm.

“LET’S GO!!!!” Claire typed, accompanied by a funny GIF of a sister Sombrero dance.

Claire’s response was a small beacon of light in Kate's gloomy day.

“Okay, I’m in. When should we go?” Kate responded.

“This weekend too soon? Nat has off work and can be with the kids. We’d need to leave Friday, though, if that’s alright—I have to be back for ‘Sunday Funday’ Fam Day,” Claire replied with speed.

Kate contemplated for a moment, had a look

around her office, soaked in the bleak atmosphere, and responded, “Okay. Let me see if I can get Friday off.”

Kate nervously filled out a request for time off form online, her hands trembling as she typed. It was just a single day, but even that felt like too much to ask. Printing the paper and folding it in half, she straightened her jacket, steeled herself, and approached Thea—Mallory’s gatekeeper assistant, known for her razor-sharp stare and an unshakable “zero fucks” demeanor. With her ever-present resting bitch face, Thea was both feared and respected in the office.

Pale and clammy, Kate extended the form.

Thea took it, scanning the request with an expression that barely flickered. Then, arching a perfectly sculpted brow, she remarked, “Submitting things on paper now?”

Kate blinked. “So... it’s fine?” she asked, unsure.

“I suppose. I’ll still have to run it by Mallory, but it’s just one day—I doubt she’ll even notice you’re gone. No offense,” Thea said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

“None taken,” Kate replied quickly, eager to keep things light.

“Make sure you’re available remotely, though, in

case of an emergency,” Thea added, already shifting her attention to her screen.

“Of course. Absolutely,” Kate agreed, feeling equal parts relieved and anxious.

Just as she exhaled, a sudden, sharp outburst shattered the moment.

“No! I said no socials! Call his publicist immediately! Shit!”

Mallory’s furious voice cut through the office, muffled only slightly by the sleek glass walls of her corner office. Thea winced but quickly composed herself, popping a Xanax as if this were just another Tuesday.

She gave Kate a pointed look. “You can go now,” she said, flicking her fingers in a shooing motion.

“Right,” Kate muttered, stepping away briskly, though she couldn’t resist tuning in as she passed Mallory’s door.

Inside, Mallory prowled her office, her Louboutin heels clicking against the polished hardwood floor. She was, as always, impeccably put together—her skin-tight blazer hugging her frame, her pencil skirt flawless, her nails freshly manicured, and her sleek bun pulled so tight it could double as a facelift.

She ended her call with a sharp tap of her screen

and exhaled through gritted teeth. Crossing to the floor-to-ceiling windows, she surveyed the city stretched out below her, muttering under her breath, “This town is full of idiots.”

Without missing a beat, Mallory grabbed her phone and said, “Send a text to Romeo.” After Siri’s response, she dictated, “Strong drinks. This weekend.”

Kate pulled back into the shadows before Mallory caught her snooping. *Romeo*.

He must be the new boy-toy. Intriguing, indeed.

Chapter 9

Cabo Baby!



That weekend, Kate and Claire found their laughter growing louder and their conversation more animated as they thoroughly enjoyed themselves, lounging on bar stools, sipping chilled, spicy margaritas. With each sip, they became increasingly tipsy, all the while soaking in the picturesque view of the hotel's poolside bar in Cabo. The resort was a sanctuary of relaxation and laughter, where the blended scents of saltwater and sunscreen filled the air. In this pocket of paradise, the burdens of the world and Kate's heartache seemed to dissolve ever so slightly, granting her a temporary reprieve. It was an idyllic interlude, a transient haven that tenderly offered promises of peace to Kate's troubled heart.

Standing before them was a sexy bartender whose effortless charm and casual allure made him as integral to the scenery as the palm trees swaying gently in the breeze behind him, as if he had walked straight out of the reality show *Too Hot To Handle*. Unbeknownst to the sisters, the mysterious bartender found himself inadvertently eavesdropping on their conversation, his curiosity piqued by the snippets of their exchange.

“Maybe it's time to start recycling,” Claire suggested, her voice cutting through the ambient sounds of clinking glasses and distant laughter.

With a wry smile, Kate remarked, “I mean, even if I wanted to recycle, I couldn't. Literally every guy I've been with is now married.”

Her words hung in the air as though she was coming to terms with this reality for the first time herself.

Claire skeptically pressed on, “Not every guy. There's no way.”

Kate playfully challenged, “Shall we review the ex-files? First up, my college boyfriend, Will. He's married with a kid.”

Claire paused to recollect and then burst into laughter. “Ha! Oh my God! Wrinkle Willie! I remember him!”

The playful jab at Wrinkle Willie whisked Kate away from the bar and back to her college days in a wave of nostalgia. During her time dating Will, Kate had taken it upon herself to introduce him to the power of a clothes iron, rescuing him from his perpetually disheveled state and teaching him the value of a well-pressed shirt.

There was Will, awkward and forlorn, his shirt a testament to his indifference. Yet, through Kate's intervention, a remarkable change had occurred in him, and in time, Will became the epitome of dapper. It was a testament to Kate's influence—she had not only coached him for his dream job interview but had also ensured his suit was perfectly pressed on that important day, helping him land the position.

Will had taken a new job and declared he was ready to be on his own. The phrase lingered in Kate's mind—*be on his own*—unsettling her in a way she couldn't quite shake.

It was as if she had raised him, not dated him—as if their relationship had been more about guidance than partnership. But that wasn't her fault, was it? She had only ever wanted to support him, not become his caretaker.

As the memories of Wrinkle Willie surfaced, they

soon dissolved, pulling Kate back into the present and her conversation with Claire at the bar.

Lost in these reflections, Kate barely noticed the pause before she responded to Claire, “Yep, I taught him everything he knows. I swear he got that job because of me. And what did he do the moment he started it? Dumped me for his secretary and married her not long after,” Kate said, confirming her story with a mix of pride and bitterness.

Claire stared blankly, taken aback.

“Shall I continue?” Kate asked, counting on her fingers. “And then there's Luke, of course. Now married to Gia.”

Kate's mind wandered back in time once again to when she had dropped off a very nervous Luke at an audition. She'd run his lines with him one last time, kissed him goodbye, and shouted, “You got this, babe! I believe in you!” Fast forward to a recent memory of a photo Kate had seen on social media: Luke, now at the height of his career, posing on a red carpet at an event with Gia, their newlywed bliss evident to all as photographers captured the moment.

Kate interrupted her own thoughts with, “Oh! There was also Ten Minute Tommy.” Her next revelation prompted a curious glance and a raised

eyebrow from Claire, to which Kate quickly clarified, “*Not* what you're thinking...”

Kate chuckled, then explained to Claire, “Tommy was late to everything. It sounds silly, but it actually began to have a serious negative impact on his life. He missed out on several work opportunities and disappointed family members and friends because, for whatever reason, he just couldn't get his shit together and was consistently ten minutes late to everything! But I found a trick for him that completely turned his life around,” Kate concluded with a proud grin.

Claire, intrigued, asked, “What did you do? I need that trick for myself.”

“It was simple, really,” Kate declared. “I trained him to adopt punctuality as his new mantra. I reset all his clocks to be ten minutes early so he'd never be ten minutes late again. And believe it or not, it worked!”

“Wow,” Claire admitted, impressed. “So where is he now?”

“Married and always on time,” Kate replied with a touch of sarcasm, a smile playing at the edges of her lips, proving her point yet again.

Wait, hadn't Tommy said something similar to Will's declaration during the breakup? *I'm ready to be*

on my own now, he had declared, like a kid finally mastering his training wheels. Was that what she did—raise them, only to watch them leave? No. That was just a coincidence.

“Oh, and how could I possibly forget Acro-Yoga Anthony?” Kate said with a dramatic flair, catching Claire’s attention. “I dated him briefly before Luke. Remember? The adorably plump and very in touch with his feminine side guy who loathed the gym but was desperate to shed some pounds?”

Claire narrowed her eyes in thought, then lit up with recognition. “Oh, was he the one who loved getting mani-pedis with you?”

“That’s the one,” Kate confirmed with a laugh. “Anthony enjoyed those mani-pedis a bit too much. I mean, alarm bells should have rung when he got overly excited about choosing my nail polish colors for me every time.” Kate paused, a mock-serious look on her face. “Anyway, in an attempt to help him slim down and boost his self-esteem, I dragged him to my favorite hot yoga class. The instructor was so good and made working out feel fun. Anthony got hooked. He went all the time and became a regular, even going on his own without me. His body transformed, and he became so much more confident and happy, all thanks to me.”

Kate reminisced about a particular yoga session where the instructor got a tad too close to Anthony for a pose adjustment. He'd pressed up against Anthony's sweaty body, and Anthony didn't seem to mind one bit.

"He's married now?" Claire interjected, eyebrows raised.

"Yep! Married and living it up in Palm Springs—with my hot yoga instructor, Brad," Kate replied, her tone a mix of disbelief and amusement.

Why had she ignored all the signs that Anthony was gay? Maybe because it was easier that way—no pressure, no real risk of getting hurt.

Claire chuckled. "You can't make this shit up!"

"But wait, there's more," Kate continued, adapting the voice of a salesperson, sweeping her hand for effect once again. "Psycho Chris eventually found tranquility and got hitched, all thanks to a little push from me towards anger management and therapy."

Kate's storytelling had Claire hanging on every word at this point.

"And last but not least, let's not forget No Post Pete," Kate concluded. "He wouldn't post a single photo of us. I know social media can be vapid and shallow, and whatever you want to call it, but the

fact is, people notice that shit. They judge and wonder why one person is posting, and the other isn't and conjure up stories and gossip in their minds about you. It's so childish and stupid, and I know I shouldn't have cared, but it really hurt my feelings. When I voiced how much it mattered to me, what did he do? He deleted every last photo and his entire account. Digitally vanished. Then, after we broke up, he met someone new, got married within the same year, and suddenly resurfaced on the internet. Now his entire feed is inundated with pictures of him, his wife, and their adorable little Bichon puppy," Kate said with a hint of disdain.

Why hadn't she broken up with Pete the moment the posting fiasco happened? Instead, she'd wasted months on him, hoping she could change him, clinging to something that had already unraveled.

Claire was captivated by Kate's tales. "Wow. I don't know what to say. You have a gift." She paused, a realization dawning upon her. "Also, I forgot how many guys you've dated. My sister, the little slut!" Claire teased as Kate rolled her eyes.

"What can I say? I'm no spring chicken. And apart from Luke, none of them were long-term," Kate defended herself.

Then Claire remembered. “Wait, what about pilot guy? What happened to—?”

But before she could finish, their conversation was unexpectedly joined by the hot bartender, whose presence was as striking as his interruption was sudden.

Jay had an undeniable allure that made him seem instantly familiar, much like Kate. He had dark features accented by thick eyebrows and the most adorable dimples, creating an image that was nothing short of dreamy.

“You’re a husband trainer,” Jay declared casually, tossing out the phrase as though it were common knowledge, a term everyone should instantly recognize and understand.

Kate, caught off guard, managed only a bewildered, “What?”

Jay, unfazed by Kate’s surprise, continued in a tone both deep and sultry—a quality Kate couldn’t help but notice. “You’re a husband trainer. You date these men, teach them a thing or two, and in doing so, mold them into perfect husband material. Then, they inevitably leave you and go be that perfect husband for the next person they meet.” His confidence wrapped around each word like a cloak. “Husband Trainer,” he finished, a shit-eating grin

spreading across his face, proud of his own revelation.

Kate mulled over his words, her thoughts a whirlwind.

Claire, unable to resist, reluctantly added, "Mm. He's got a point."

A little too tipsy for her own good, Kate leaned into the bar close to Jay, equally defensive and flirtatious. "And how do you know so much about this stuff, Mr. Sexy Bartender?"

Claire smirked and shook her head at her sister's antics. "Ah, the margarita's effects are in full swing. And what's your real name?" she inquired, trying to play it cool and not blow it for her sister.

Jay offered them a charming half-smile, his dimples deepening, "I'm Jay. Nice to meet you, ladies. As for your question, I tend to overhear a lot of conversations from behind the bar."

Feeling bold, Kate gave Jay a thorough once-over, finishing her drink with a loud slurp and playfully licking the remaining salt from the rim of her glass. "Hmm. You're cute."

Jay, amused and flattered, replied, "Well, thank you."

Claire stared wide-eyed, shocked at her sister's

uncharacteristic behavior, as Jay decided to clear the air.

“As flattered as I am, full disclosure, I have to tell you that I’m gay,” Jay declared.

“Ooooh. I should’ve seen that coming,” Claire observed with a hint of revelation.

Kate’s brow furrowed in contemplation, her face a canvas of confusion. “But you seem so...”

“Not gay?’ Jay offered, completing Kate’s thought with a gentle smile, his voice laced with an understanding that suggested this wasn’t the first time he’d encountered this assumption.

“Yeah,” Kate admitted, still puzzled.

“I hear that often. My vibe can be somewhat ambiguous, which actually works in my favor here behind the bar.” He motioned to his tip jar. “Piece of advice on the house. Just remember, you’re supposed to be a partner, not a parent. If you keep raising the men you date, don’t be surprised when they outgrow you. But just so you know, I find you genuinely charming and lovely, Kate. One day, some lucky guy is going to sweep you off your feet and wife you up,” Jay assured her, his belief in his own words unwavering.

Kate deflated slightly. “At this rate, things aren’t looking so great.”

Jay chuckled, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"What's so funny?" Kate inquired, a slight irritation in her tone.

"You rhymed," Jay pointed out, laughter dancing in his voice, the tiniest dash of his flamboyant persona now shining through.

Kate groaned playfully. "Ugh, I love rhymes! Why can't you be straight?"

Jay, not missing a beat, played along. "Wouldn't it be great if I were straight?"

Unable to resist, Kate burst into laughter, finding a kindred spirit in Jay.

Claire, ever the realist, brought them back to the present. "This has been lovely, but it's time for a shower. I'm all sticky from the margarita and beach air." She began to stand, signaling it was time to go.

As they started to leave, Jay called out, "Hey, I'm off this Saturday night. How about we hit up this new salsa dancing place in town? Nine o'clock, meet back here at the bar, and we'll go together?"

Kate exchanged a look with Claire for approval and then beamed, "Thanks for the invite. We'll be there with delight!"

Her enthusiasm was adorable. It was as if the spark that had faded in Kate was finally beginning to re-ignite. Claire couldn't help but feel a wave of

happiness wash over her, seeing glimpses of the sister she adored making a comeback.

He offered a goofy wink and executed a 'finger gun' salute, infusing the moment with geeky charm. As Kate and Claire walked away, their laughter blended with the evening's sounds while the promise of Saturday's adventure hung in the air. It was the perfect ending to an unexpected chapter of their vacation.

In the delightful fog of tequila, Jay's advice slipped into her mind, "You're supposed to be a partner, not a parent."

She lingered on the words only briefly. She was on vacation, and tomorrow there was dancing. There'd be time enough later to work on her relationship problems.

Chapter 10

A Moment of Weakness



Kate and Claire returned to their hotel room, the night air still buzzing with the remnants of their laughter. Claire headed straight for the shower while Kate, wrapped in the hotel's plush robe, reclined on the bed, absentmindedly scrolling through her phone as she waited her turn. The conversation about her past still echoed in her mind, mingling with the lingering effects of booze and nostalgia. Feeling a reckless mix of bravery and tipsiness, she impulsively decided to call Luke—making the call private, so he wouldn't know it was her right away—to finally say what had been weighing on her: how she had practically “husband-trained” him.

The phone rang, her pulse quickening with each

second. Just as doubt crept in and she was about to hang up, a voice answered—*but it wasn't Luke's*.

"Hello?" Gia's voice came through, casual and unsuspecting.

Kate froze.

In the background, she heard Luke's voice—warm, familiar, and utterly shattering. "Babe, who is it?" he called out from a distance.

A cold silence stretched between them.

"Hello?" Gia repeated, now sounding slightly puzzled.

Still, Kate said nothing. She couldn't. The sound of him calling another woman *babe* sent a visceral blow straight through her, like a fist tightening around her ribs. *The rotten blood feeling*.

Gia exhaled, now more annoyed than confused. "Is anyone there?"

With a sharp inhale, Kate ended the call in a swift, desperate motion. She clutched the phone to her chest, her eyes burning as tears threatened to spill. She had come so far, yet just hearing his voice had yanked her back to square one—like opening a wound that had barely begun to heal.

Her fingers trembled as she unlocked her phone again. Staring at Luke's contact, she hesitated, then typed in bold, capital letters: DON'T CALL.

“Goodbye, Luke,” Kate whispered to herself, the words carrying a fragile mix of sorrow and cathartic release. Saying them didn’t magically erase the ache, but it was something—a small attempt at closure.

The bathroom door swung open, and Claire emerged, wrapped in her robe, striking a dramatic pose. “It’s all yours, darling! The towels are *divine*,” she announced in a regal tone.

Kate quickly straightened, schooling her expression into something neutral. But Claire, ever perceptive, immediately sensed the shift in the air. Her playful grin faded slightly as she studied her sister.

“You good?” she asked, her voice laced with concern.

Kate hesitated for only a fraction of a second before forcing a breezy smile. She was too embarrassed to admit what had just happened, even to Claire. What was the point? It didn’t matter anymore. It *couldn’t* matter. She was done with Luke now. *Forever*.

“Yep, all good!” she chirped, masking the sting still clinging to her chest. Then, in an effort to steer the conversation away from herself, she smirked. “Took you long enough.”

Claire scoffed. “Let’s see how long *you* take in there with all that sand in your hair!” she shot back,

then added with a grin, “Oh, and the conditioner smells amazing—like coconut candy.”

Kate mustered a soft laugh, rolling her eyes as she grabbed her things. Without another word, she disappeared into the bathroom, eager to wash away not just the sand, but the moment of weakness that had almost unraveled her.

Chapter 11

Pilot Guy



As the new day unfolded, Kate and Claire lounged by the pool, basking in the sun and indulging in some leisurely day drinking. The warmth of the day matched the easy comfort between them, but the conversation soon turned back to their encounter with Jay the previous evening.

“Damn. Jay would have been perfect for you,” Claire said bluntly, her tone carrying the weight of honesty.

Kate, half-joking, replied, “Why are all the pretty ones gay?”

Claire raised an eyebrow. “Why, thank you!” she shot back, humorously highlighting her own sexuality with a grin.

“Jay was a close call, but honestly, maybe that’s a good thing,” Claire continued, her voice light but thoughtful.

Kate turned to her with a deadpan expression, clearly unimpressed. The word *Really?* was written all over her face.

“Let me explain,” Claire said, holding up a hand in mock surrender. “It means you’re on the right path to finding *the one*. If someone as great as Jay exists, then surely there’s a non-gay version of him out there somewhere, right?”

Kate shook her head. “No, because straight guys don’t groom themselves like gay men do,” she quipped with dry sarcasm, but her remark quickly dissolved into a soft laugh. She exhaled slowly, her voice softer as she confessed, “I honestly don’t know anymore. Maybe it’s just not in the cards for me to find *my person*. Not everyone is meant to have a significant other, you know? Some people end up alone, and many of them are perfectly content with it,” she reflected, her tone almost wistful. “Especially if they have cats,” she added matter-of-factly. “Maybe I should get a cat,” Kate mused, half-serious.

“You don’t actually believe that. I know you, my sister,” Claire replied with conviction. Then, in an attempt to lighten the mood, she added, “But if you

want to get a cat anyway, I fully support that decision.”

Kate’s voice turned serious again as she pondered, “I mean it. If it weren’t true, then why has it been so hard for me? It was easy for you. You and Nat met in college, fell in love, and that was it. Your life’s a fairytale.” Her voice carried both affection and a hint of envy, the words tumbling out before she could stop them.

Claire shook her head, her expression softening with sincerity. “My life is far from a fairytale, Kate. Do you remember the struggle of having to come out to Mom and Dad? Or the endless hurdles Nat and I faced—IVF, donors, and then eventually adoption?”

Kate remained silent, guilt creeping over her like a slow tide.

Claire leaned in, a rare vulnerability surfacing in her eyes. “Can I share something with you that I haven’t told anyone else?”

“Of course,” Kate murmured, her earlier jest forgotten as the air between them grew heavier.

Claire took a steadying breath. “I love being a mom and a wife. I really do. I wouldn’t change it for anything in the world. But sometimes...” She hesitated, choosing her words carefully. “It’s *fucking*

hard.”

Her exhale was deep, as if releasing the weight of an unspoken truth. “The other day, Hunter and Veda were both crying. Nat was at work, the house looked like a tornado had ripped through it, the oven was beeping, and the fridge alarm was blaring because the door had been left open. And me? With my perpetual *mommy brain*, I somehow managed to use dish soap instead of laundry detergent. Within minutes, suds were overflowing into the laundry room.” She let out a dry laugh, shaking her head. “I completely lost it. I had to lock myself in the closet just to get thirty seconds of silence—to breathe, to just *be alone*. Sometimes, I feel utterly clueless.”

Claire’s eyes met Kate’s, raw honesty reflected in her gaze. “And yes, my marriage is wonderful. But it’s not some fairytale—it’s hard work every single day. We both *choose* to love each other and to keep working at it. Relationships can be tough, but they’re so worth it, I promise. To have someone by your side, to just *do life* with—the ups, the downs, the mundane in between. *That’s* the real magic. *That’s* the fairytale.”

Kate opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, her phone rang, shattering the moment.

She glanced down at the screen, then back up at Claire with wide eyes.

“Who is it?” Claire asked, leaning in.

With a shaky hand, Kate turned the screen toward her. The caller ID read Bryan—followed by a string of airplane emojis.

“*Pilot guy?*” Claire’s voice shot up an octave, brimming with excitement.

Kate nodded, her body practically vibrating with a mix of nerves and anticipation.

“Answer it!” Claire urged, bouncing in place.

Kate inhaled deeply, collecting herself before pressing the phone to her ear, striving for a tone that was effortlessly cool and composed.

“Bryan? Hey, stranger,” she said, her voice casual.

Beside her, Claire clapped her hands in silent glee, barely containing her excitement. Kate playfully shushed her, stepping away to find a more private spot.

Meanwhile, across the line, she pictured Bryan standing in the shadow of a sleek private jet, moments away from piloting another flight. At six foot four, with dark hair and deep chestnut-colored eyes, he possessed an air of effortless confidence—his full lips and smoldering gaze giving him a magnetism that was undeniable. Even through the

phone, there was something about him—something that sent a quiet thrill down Kate’s spine.

To Kate and Claire, he was known fondly as Pilot Guy—a nickname that barely scratched the surface of their complicated history. Bryan wasn’t just a fleeting romance; he was the one chapter in Kate’s life that had never truly closed. Among all the connections she’d made, beyond even Luke, Bryan was the singular force who had always managed to stir something deep within her—an irresistible magnetism she had long ago dubbed “The Pull.”

“The Pull” was another Kate-ism, a term understood only by her and those closest to her. It wasn’t just attraction—it was something deeper, a force that tugged at the very core of her being. It wasn’t quite the butterflies people talked about. It was something more grounded, more consuming—like a gravitational pull she had no control over. The PG-13 version of butterflies, as she liked to call it.

Her fling with Bryan had been brief, yet it had etched itself into her memory, leaving behind the lingering question of *what could have been*.

Bryan said, “Hey, hearing your voice is a nice surprise. I wasn’t sure you’d pick up.”

“Maybe it’s the tequila talking, but it’s really nice

to hear yours too,” Kate blurted out before she could stop herself, warmth creeping into her tone. Realizing her sudden openness, she quickly pivoted, eager to regain control of the conversation. “Guess where I am?” she teased, injecting a playful lilt into her voice.

“Well, you’re drinking tequila, so it has to be somewhere fun...” Bryan replied, sounding intrigued.

“Cabo!” Kate announced with a laugh, still half in disbelief herself.

“You’re kidding,” Bryan said, his voice tinged with surprise and amusement.

“Nope, really in Cabo.” Kate chuckled.

“That’s crazy. I fly there tomorrow for a client,” Bryan revealed, his tone shifting, now more speculative. He was clearly fishing for information, trying to gauge her situation without being too obvious. “I was actually calling to see if you wanted to catch up in LA before I left. But if we’re both in Cabo... I mean...”

A flutter of excitement bloomed in Kate’s chest, the kind that sent little shockwaves through her stomach. This was the *other* kind of butterflies—the *G-rated, giddy little girl kind*. But just as the thrill settled in, reality followed closely behind, casting a

shadow over her excitement. They only had one more night in Cabo.

"We're not here long," she admitted regretfully. "We leave early Sunday morning." Then, realizing her use of *we* might lead Bryan to assume she was there with a guy, she quickly clarified, "*We*—I mean, my sister Claire and I—are on a fun sister trip."

"Well, I'd hate to intrude on sister time," his voice lifted, lighter now. He was obviously relieved by the revelation. "But if she wouldn't mind, I'd love to steal you away for dinner tomorrow night. I know it's your last night, but it'd be too crazy for us to both be in Cabo and *not* meet up," he suggested, hope evident in his tone.

Kate hesitated, her mind racing. Overwhelmed by the moment, she impulsively grabbed a sombrero from a nearby tiki hut selling souvenirs, plopped it on her head, and broke into a goofy salsa dance, locking eyes with Claire across the way. The shop owner shot her a bewildered look but seemed amused enough to let it slide.

Claire watched, bursting into laughter, her curiosity about the phone call reaching an all-time high.

Regaining her composure, Kate—still donning the oversized sombrero—decided to play it cool.

“Okay, I guess you have a point. Sounds fun. Let’s do it.”

“Great. I’ll text you later tonight when I land with the details. Text me where you’re staying so I can pick a spot nearby,” Bryan said, his smile practically audible through the phone.

“Perfecto!” Kate responded—then immediately cringed.

Perfecto? Seriously?

She hung up and shook her head at herself. “Perfecto? Unbelievable,” she muttered, still kicking herself for the ridiculous reply.

Shaking off her moment of awkwardness, she hurried back toward Claire, giddy, slightly embarrassed by her theatrical public display, but undeniably thrilled about the unexpected dinner plans.

A moment later, the shop owner cleared his throat behind her, standing patiently until Kate noticed.

Claire gestured toward him, barely containing her laughter.

Kate turned and immediately let out an embarrassed yelp—she was still wearing the sombrero. Hastily, she removed it and handed it back, offering a sheepish grin. “So sorry. Thank you.”

The man shook his head but smiled, muttering under his breath, “Tourists.”

Claire’s eyes sparkled with anticipation. “Spill it! Give me the tea! I want every juicy detail—now.”

Kate practically bounced with excitement. “Bryan is flying here *tomorrow* for a client, *and*—he wants to take me to dinner!” Her voice hit an octave higher than usual, bubbling over with glee.

“No way!” Claire gasped, her expression a mix of shock and delight.

“Eeee!” Kate could hardly believe it herself.

But then, reality hit. “Oh, but that’s our last night here. What about Jay and salsa dancing?”

Claire waved off the concern without hesitation. “Go! Jay and I will have a great time without you. You’ll be missed, of course, but don’t even *think* about skipping this. You *have* to go.”

“Are you sure?” Kate asked, torn between excitement and guilt.

“Absolutely. Go on your date,” Claire insisted, leaving no room for debate.

Kate’s excitement faltered slightly as doubt crept in. “But what does Bryan even want? Remember what happened last time he and I tried to date?”

Claire’s response was swift and full of conviction. “Kate, that was over four years ago. And besides, he’s

the only guy aside from Luke who's ever given you The Pull." She shot Kate a knowing look punctuated with a playful wink.

"Ugh, I know! You're right. When I'm with him, I just... *melt*. Like I'm putty in his hands. I don't even know how to describe the feeling."

Claire smirked. "It's *The Pull*." Her voice held both wisdom and encouragement. "It doesn't happen often, but when it does? *Mmm!* So good." She leaned in, her tone shifting from playful to sincere. "Just go with an open mind. Have *zero* expectations. Just enjoy yourself, like you're reconnecting with an old friend." Then, her smirk returned. "And *if* you happen to make out with that old friend by the end of the night, well... so be it."

Kate laughed, mischief twinkling in her eyes. "You make it sound so simple," she said, a blush creeping into her cheeks at the thought. "But alright, I'll try it your way—open mind, no expectations... and maybe *a little* fun with an old friend."

The nerves were still there, but the excitement was winning.

"And don't stress about missing our last night. I've got a whole day planned for us tomorrow," Claire added proudly. She gave Kate a pointed look, her expression softening into something more

knowing. “And the best part? You don’t have to fix him. You don’t have to parent him. Bryan is already his own person—you just get to show up, be you, and have fun. No baggage, no projects, no trying to mold someone into who they should be.” She nudged Kate playfully. “For once, just let yourself enjoy the ride.”

At that moment, Kate’s heart swelled with gratitude. More than anything, she realized how lucky she was to have Claire by her side. “Thanks for everything, my sister. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Claire grinned, dramatically flipping her hair. “What can I say? I’m the best!” she declared as if she had just won the Best Sister Ever award.