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A THEORY  
*of Love*

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## **Dedication**

To AG, my champion in spectacles, who has worked with me for nearly a decade to make sure I don't let fear of what *might* be keep me from what *could* be.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Table of Contents**

Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen  
Chapter Fourteen  
Chapter Fifteen  
Chapter Sixteen  
Chapter Seventeen  
About the Author

## Chapter One

Eva DeMarco sat at the bar, trying not to stare too obviously at a group of women playing pool in the next room. This was her first time at a women’s bar since college, and while hairstyles and clothing had changed in the past decade, not much else seemed different. The women around her were still mostly in their twenties, still cradling pint glasses and the occasional bottle of beer, still interacting mainly with each other and sending anyone else in their vicinity guarded glances. Just sitting here adjacent to the scene drama, Eva was remembering why she had stayed away for so long.

Of course, her now-defunct hetero marriage probably had something to do with her extended absence from the queer social scene, too.

“We don’t have to stay if you don’t want to,” Alexis said, leaning in to be heard over the top 40 music playing throughout the Thistledown, one of Seattle’s sole remaining lesbian bars.

“No,” Eva said, and forced a smile at her best friend. “This is fine. It’s good.”

*One drink*, she promised herself, letting her gaze wander again.

Earlier that day, she had been thrilled when Alexis had suggested they blow off a writing session for dinner and drinks on Capitol Hill, Seattle’s alternative neighborhood. She might have been less elated if she’d realized where the drinks portion of the evening would lead, but when their after-dinner stroll brought them past the Thistledown and Alexis had lifted one perfectly plucked eyebrow at her, Eva had nodded gamely. *Why not*, the pint of Elysian IPA coursing through her bloodstream had seemed to ask.

Oh, right—because she was a recently divorced thirty-something academic who hated the bar scene, her mind had supplied only after they were seated. Still, it was better than a non-gay bar.

Straight men had always flocked to Alexis, drawn in by her warm brown skin, springy curls, and the perpetual smile on her face. They rarely stuck around for long, though. Like Eva, sunny-seeming Alexis was a proud nerd whose conversational repertoire revolved around Marxist theory and the status of women's labor under capitalism. Most guys hitting on women in bars wanted to discuss these topics about as much as they wanted to talk about someone else's children. Or their own kids, for that matter.

The music washed over her, and Eva sipped her second IPA of the evening as Alexis guided the conversation toward familiar topics: Alexis's husband, Tosh, and his two kids from his first marriage; Eva's mother and her continued adjustment to life in assisted living; the upcoming fall quarter at their respective universities; and, of course, their current joint research project: cultural attitudes toward readers and writers of romantic fiction.

Eva wasn't sure which fact startled her more these days—that her marriage had failed or that she'd abandoned her Serious Research Interest in the visual arts to study the contemporary romance novel. As an untenured assistant professor, it would have been safer to stick to what she'd been hired for. But the losses of the past few years had piled on one after another, and she'd awakened one day to realize that the world around her no longer looked or felt the same. Light and color seemed darker, and somewhere along the way she'd lost pleasure in the things she'd once loved.

Soon after that, Alexis had dragged her to a therapist who had assured her that the profound emptiness she felt was to be expected and would one day pass. In the meantime, whatever distraction helped get her through her grief was perfectly acceptable: taking anti-depressants, bingeing TV shows, reading romance novels.

Eva had been with her up to that moment. But—"Romance novels, really?"

"And what exactly is wrong with romance novels?" Gayle, the therapist, had asked, gazing at

her over the top of her tortoiseshell glasses.

“You know.”

“I’m not sure I do.”

Eva had huffed aloud, irritated that she was being forced to confront yet another uncomfortable truth about herself. Which was arguably the point of therapy, but still. She already felt badly enough about her life. Did she really need to interrogate her culturally-instilled attitude about a widely disparaged form of fiction? As Gayle continued to stare at her, Eva had realized that yes, in fact, she did.

That night, Gayle had emailed her a list of novels and authors to try, and Eva had chosen a title at random: *Outlander*, the first book in Diana Gabaldon’s time-travel series about a World War Two-era woman who ends up stuck in the eighteenth century Scottish Highlands. The novel was intriguing, well-written, and sympathetic. In other words, nothing like Eva had expected of the genre. After one too many of her exhortations to give the novel a read, Alexis had finally succumbed. Soon they were sending each other articles to help “unpack” their culturally-conditioned biases toward romantic fiction, and voilà: two Serious Research Interests left by the wayside in favor of the defense of women’s reading and writing.

Their drinks were nearly empty when Alexis’s gaze narrowed on the other room.

“What?” Eva asked, glancing over her shoulder. “Do you see one of your students?” The bar was twenty-one and up, but that rarely stopped a determined underage drinker.

“Sadly, no,” Alexis said.

Sadly? But of course—as a straight, married woman with tenure, Alexis had nothing to fear from being seen at a lesbian bar in downtown Seattle. The resulting gossip would probably only

inflate her scores on RateMyProfessors.com.

“Don’t look,” Alexis added, “but there’s a woman at the pool table who keeps staring at you.”

With difficulty, Eva tamped down her kneejerk reaction to glance around again. Instead, she took another pull on her beer and only then let her gaze wander toward the pool table where a group of athletic-looking women was socializing. She didn’t see anyone glancing her way—until, suddenly, she did. The woman in question was tall and attractive, short blonde hair falling over her forehead in a way that looked casual yet artful, dark blue button-up rolled to her elbows, skinny jeans hugging what appeared to be long, muscled legs. Their eyes met and Eva quickly looked away.

“How do you know she’s not staring at you?” she countered, because that was a common enough occurrence in their shared history.

“One way to find out.” Alexis slid down from her bar stool. “I’ll be right back.”

“Wait!” Eva caught her shoulder, fingers digging in. “You are not going to talk to her!”

Alexis glanced at her. “Of course I’m not. I do, however, have to pee. If I’m right, *she’s* going to come talk to *you*.”

Before Eva could wrestle Alexis back onto the stool, she slipped out of reach and all but skipped away.

Fantastic. Now Eva was alone in a lesbian bar with a hot woman eyeing her from across the room. She peeked toward the pool table again in time to see said hot woman pass her cue stick to someone else. Wait, was she heading this way? Oh, god, she was.

For one absurd moment, Eva considered fleeing. But Alexis had left her purse behind, and the odds of Eva being able to safely extricate herself from the bar stool with both of their purses in hand seemed fairly low. Instead, she took another drink from her pint glass and stared down at her

phone, even though she already knew there were no new texts or emails. Unlike some people in her department, Eva had checked her email religiously while on leave for the past year. She'd published, too, a paper that she and Alexis were scheduled to present at a conference and a book chapter that was in the final stages of revision. Publish or perish, or so the saying went.

Out of the corner of one eye, Eva saw the attractive woman pause beside her.

"Could I get another Alaskan Amber?" she asked, her voice low and surprisingly soft-spoken.

The bartender handed her a bottle of beer. "What's the name on the tab?"

"Cass," the woman replied. "Thanks." She stepped closer to Eva. "Excuse me, but you look familiar. Have we met before?"

Even as Eva looked up into the woman's striking blue eyes, she inwardly cringed at the cheesy pick-up line. "Um, no, I don't think so."

"Really, I think I might know you from somewhere. Do you hang out here a lot?"

"This is actually my first time," Eva said, trying to bite back a smile. "So no, I don't come here often."

The stranger—*Cass*—was smiling now too, and lo and behold, she had a dimple. No wonder her pick-up game was terrible. All she had to do was flash that smile and any would-be object of her affection would promptly melt at her feet.

"I'm not trying to pick you up," Cass said. "I promise."

"In that case, I'm not sure if I should be relieved or offended." Eva clutched her pint glass, mildly amazed at herself. Was that actual flirting? If so, then kudos to the makers of the Elysian IPA, really.

"Not that I *wouldn't* hit on you," Cass backtracked. "I mean, I'm sure anyone would be lucky

to get to know you.”

“You’re sure of that, are you?” Eva crossed one leg over the other and hid another smile as Cass’s gaze dropped to her skirt before skittering quickly back up. “All right, then. Maybe we have met. What do you do?”

“I coach rugby.” The other woman’s eyes took on a fixed quality that implied she was steadfastly refusing to look at Eva’s legs.

Rugby—was that the one where the ball looked like a football but the players didn’t wear pads? “I’ve never been to a rugby game,” she admitted. “So it can’t be that. Where are you from?”

“San Francisco.”

“I’ve never been there, either.”

“What do you do?” Cass asked, picking at the label on her beer bottle with a neatly shorn fingernail.

“I teach,” Eva said automatically, even though she hadn’t been in a classroom in more than a year.

“Where do you—?”

Before Cass could finish the question, an even taller brunette bumped into her from behind, arms sliding around her waist.

“Cass,” she all but whined, “you said you would be right back.”

“And I will be, Amy,” Cass said, her voice unreadable as she slipped out of the new arrival’s grasp.

Eva glanced down at her pint glass. It would seem Cass already had a date, which meant she really hadn’t been hitting on Eva. Yep, not embarrassing at all.

The brunette cut her gaze to Eva before turning away. “Don’t be too long,” she cast over her shoulder.

Silence reigned as they both watched the other woman sashay away. Finally, Cass said, “Sorry about that.”

“No problem.” Eva swallowed the rest of her drink in one go and slid carefully from the barstool, hand on her purse. “I actually have to go.”

“You do?” Cass asked, her brow wrinkling adorably because of course, everything about her was adorable from the tip of her perfectly coiffed head down to her old-school Converse sneakers.

“Yes. My girlfriend isn’t feeling well,” she announced, and then paused. She and Alexis had referred to each other as “girlfriend” more than once, much to the dismay of Alexis’s easily embarrassed pre-teen stepdaughter. But the term took on different connotations when invoked in conversation with an actual gay girl at a lesbian bar.

“Your girlfriend,” Cass echoed.

“Alexis,” she supplied, because her brain had decided that verisimilitude would make the lie more believable.

“I see.” Cass’s focus shifted to a spot beyond Eva’s shoulder, her expression unreadable again.

*Crap*, Eva thought as her “girlfriend” materialized beside her. So much for a quick escape.

“Hi,” Alexis said, the wattage of her friendly smile immediately casting Eva’s sick-girlfriend excuse into question.

And this—this right here was why Eva didn’t do the bar scene. But in for a pound, or whatever the stupid saying was. “Hi, honey,” she said, sliding her arm around Alexis’s waist.

To her credit, her best friend's expression didn't change. "Are we heading out?"

"Yes. I was just telling Cass here about your headache." She gazed meaningfully at Alexis, who barely hesitated before nodding. They had used this excuse too many times to count in the early days of their friendship in New York's Greenwich Village.

"Silly migraine," Alexis told Cass as she reached for her purse. "Probably it was the disco lighting."

"That can happen." Cass's gaze returned to Eva. "You know my name, but I didn't catch yours."

"Oh, sorry. It's Eva." She waited for the inevitable comment about Adam, but it didn't come—maybe because they were in a lesbian bar.

Cass's eyes narrowed a little, and then she smiled again and held out her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Eva."

"You, too." Even Cass's hand was lovely, with smooth skin and a callused palm that probably came from throwing a rugby ball around all day. Did she wear little shorts that showed off her—attributes? Eva squeezed her hand without meaning to and then quickly let go as Cass's eyes flew up to hers.

"And I'm Alexis," Alexis added cheerfully, still not working very hard at selling the migraine story, in Eva's opinion.

Cass bowed her head slightly. "Nice to meet you, Alexis. I hope to see you both again soon." And with that, she flashed her killer dimple at Eva one last time, turned her adorable attributes around, and walked away.

Alexis waited until they were out on the sidewalk, the noise and light of the bar receding

behind them, to inquire, “Do you want to tell me what that was about, *honey?*”

Eva hunched her shoulders as they paced toward Twelfth Ave. “Just me being me.”

“I’m going to need a little more context.”

Eva sighed and began ticking off the key conversational points. “She said I looked familiar, I accused her of picking me up, she insisted she wasn’t, I refused to believe her, and then a woman who I’m pretty sure was her date showed up to stake her very obvious claim.”

“At which point you invented a girlfriend to save face?”

“Exactly.”

“Oh, Eva, I love you,” Alexis said, laughing as she wrapped her arm around Eva’s neck and tugged her close.

Eva hid her face in her friend’s shoulder as they walked. “See? This is why I’m better off alone.”

“No way. Your first time back out on the dating scene and a gorgeous woman chats you up? I would say tonight was a complete success.”

“And I would say you’ve lost your ability to interpret reality,” Eva said.

But she didn’t argue any further. Cass the rugby coach might not have been her type (or vice versa) but she had certainly been attractive, and for a few minutes there, Eva had felt a long-dormant part of herself threatening to awaken. Maybe life after divorce wouldn’t require her to live alone with a clowder of cats, as Alexis had put it. Her dog Harvey would probably have something to say on the matter of sharing their home with feline interlopers, anyway.

“Not to change the subject,” Alexis said, “but you’re still coming to movie night this weekend, aren’t you?”

“As long as it isn’t *Captain Underpants*. I’m not sure I can handle that many fart jokes again.” Alexis’s stepson might be Eva’s favorite seven-year-old in the Seattle metro area, but his taste in films was abominable.

“In that case, consider yourself lucky...” Alexis paused and then finished, “that the only male in your household currently is Harvey. How’s he doing, anyway?”

“Good. I think he’s finally stopped waiting for Ben to come home.” Eva didn’t comment on the subject change. She knew that having a conversation with her could be like walking through a minefield. Mostly she was glad that Alexis was willing to keep trying. “Speaking of, I think I might head out.”

Alexis slipped her arm through Eva’s, trapping her at her side. “Not until we’ve sobered you up, my friend.”

Which, right. It had been ages since she’d consumed enough alcohol to have to worry about driving herself home.

For the next hour, they traipsed all over Capitol Hill because, “Studies show that exercise helps your body metabolize alcohol, Eva.” Once they were suitably exercised, they stopped for coffee at one of the dark, eclectic shops on Broadway because supposedly consuming caffeine also helped you sober up. When Eva asked Alexis why she knew so much about mitigating the effects of alcohol, her research partner reminded her that while both the University of Washington and Edmonds University were known for their top-notch academics, U-Dub was also legendary for its students’ partying ways.

At last Alexis deemed Eva sober enough to make the drive back to the Seattle suburbs, and they backtracked to their cars parked on a side street near the Elysian Brewery, where their night out had begun.

“So,” Eva said as they paused beside her ancient Subaru Legacy. “Thanks for tonight, even if I did make an idiot of myself at the Thistledown.”

Alexis tilted her head, curls falling to one side. “I still say that woman was into you.”

Eva paused, remembering Cass’s eyes on her bare legs and the warmth she had felt wash over her at the idea of someone as attractive as the rugby coach being even a tiny bit interested. But then she remembered the second woman, Amy, glaring at her. Even if Cass had been interested, she wasn’t free any more than Eva, still nursing her divorce wounds, was.

“I don’t think so,” she said, shaking her head.

“We could go back sometime soon,” Alexis suggested. “You know, see if we run into her again?”

*Yes*, Eva’s mind supplied. “No,” she said. “I do not have the time or energy to get involved in some ill-advised entanglement, and you know it.”

“Ill-advised entanglement?” Alexis shook her head. “Methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

“Seriously, Lex, let it go, okay? Pinkie swear you won’t bring it up again.” She held out her hand, pinkie extended challengingly, and smiled as Alexis emitted the distinctly unfeminine guffaw that had first drawn Eva to her in graduate school a dozen years earlier.

“Eva,” she whined, covering her mouth as she always did after one of her graceless laughs managed to escape.

“Let’s go, Hammond. Time’s a-ticking.”

Sighing in what Eva hoped was amused exasperation, Alexis hooked their pinkies together. “Fine. I swear.”

“Word of honor?”

“Oh my god, white people are so weird! *Word of honor.*”

“Excellent,” Eva said, and turned to manually unlock her car door. The power lock had been broken for close to a decade. Probably she should get around to having it fixed one of these days.

Alexis’s goodbye hug was as warm as ever, and Eva didn’t want to let go. But eventually, she had to pull away and climb into her car, where she waited to turn on her engine until Alexis was safely inside her Volvo wagon three spaces away. Then, with a final wave, Eva headed for the freeway.

As she drove the thirty minutes north to her house in the Edmonds Bowl, the popular neighborhood just up the hill from the ferry terminal, she didn’t, for once, dwell on how strange it felt to be heading home by herself. For the first time in recent memory, she didn’t think about what she’d lost or about the dreams that would never be realized. She thought instead about the warmth of Cass’s palm against hers, of the deep blue of her eyes in the low light of the bar, of the odd weight in her voice as she’d said she hoped to see her again soon.

Even though Cass appeared to be involved with someone else and their brief meeting had ended in actual shenanigans, Eva couldn’t help wishing that they really would get a chance to see each other again. She couldn’t remember the last time another person had sparked even a frisson of interest, let alone the genuine attraction she’d felt toward Cass. As she pulled into her driveway from the alley and parked under the carport, Harvey’s whines audible through the back door, Eva conceded that maybe Alexis’s suggestion they make a return trip to the Thistledown wasn’t a completely terrible idea. And then she was entering the neat and orderly bungalow, and Harvey her forty-pound lapdog was slathering every inch of available skin with kisses.

She dropped her purse and key on the kitchen counter and herded him into the living room.

There, she collapsed on the couch and urged him up beside her, winding her arms around his neck to keep him from bathing her face, too. A boxer-Boston terrier mix, he could sometimes be an irksome blend of high-strung and bully breed.

“I missed you, too, buddy,” she said, smiling as he wriggled impossibly closer.

Alexis was right. She was lucky to have Harvey, lucky that Ben hadn’t fought her for custody of the dog they had rescued together. She wasn’t sure she could have taken such a battle—which was probably why Ben had let her keep him.

She leaned her head on the back of the couch, rubbing Harvey’s smooth, fawn-colored coat. At least memories of her failed marriage didn’t hurt as much as they once had. The sensation reminded her of when she’d had her wisdom teeth removed in college. The initially bloody, painful gaps had eventually healed over, but for years she had noticed a sense of loss when she poked her gums with the tip of her tongue. Until, one day at last, the empty spaces had felt like they’d been there all along.

“We’ll get there, Harve,” she murmured, rubbing the white blaze on his chest, and was rewarded with an onslaught of kisses to her chin. One of them wholeheartedly believed it, anyway.

## Chapter Two

“Why am I going to this shindig with you, again?” Cass’s brother asked as she shooed him out of his house and into the passenger seat of her Jeep.

“Because Maya got stuck at the hospital and told me to make sure you didn’t bail to play *Legend of Zelda*,” she replied, depositing the bakery bread and quinoa casserole on his lap.

Matthew settled the dish more comfortably. “Yes, but what I’m wondering is why *you* don’t want to bail to play *Legend of Zelda*.”

Cass had to admit this was a valid question, seeing as they had whiled away many a late night engaged in such endeavors. Often Maya, his significantly better half, joined them when she wasn’t working a late shift.

“One word, my dude,” she said as she rounded the front of the Jeep. “Potluck.”

Not only would there be free food and booze at this shindig, as her brother had called it, but it would also be nice to spend some quality time with colleagues in a beautiful setting. Not that she had a certain colleague in mind, because she didn’t.

“Where’s Amy?” Matthew asked.

“She flew back to Oakland this afternoon.” Cass turned the key in the ignition.

“I thought she was staying for a few more days.”

“She had to get back early.” Cass guided the Jeep away from the curb, stubbornly refusing to meet her brother’s gaze.

“Let me guess—even though you were clear about not wanting a commitment, she asked for one. Am I right?”

Cass responded with her usual maturity when it came to his irritating smugness: “Shut it, asshat.”

“I told you, Cassiopeia, very few people do casual well. When are you going to learn to listen to me, baby sister?”

She rolled her eyes both at his nickname and at his chosen term of endearment. Pejorative? Whatever. He was all of 16 minutes older than she was, a fact he never let her live down. “I don’t know, bro. Maybe when you learn that I don’t need relationship advice from someone who married his college girlfriend? I have more experience with women than you do, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Hard to forget when you remind me so much,” he grumbled. “Sometimes I really wish you were a guy. Then we could just measure our dicks and be done with it.”

“Ew!” She wrinkled her nose at him. “Kindly keep your dick comments to yourself.”

“I thought polyamorous people weren’t uptight.”

“I’m not poly. I just don’t want a committed relationship right now. There is a difference, you know.”

“Sure, Jan.”

She wanted to smack him—let’s be honest, she usually wanted to smack him—but they’d arrived at the banquet facility, and it wouldn’t do to be seen brawling by the people they worked with. She parked the Jeep and headed toward the entrance, not waiting to see if Matthew followed. She loved this event space. Located on a bluff overlooking Puget Sound, the Eagle’s Nest featured concrete floors, rustic wood beams, and an oversized fieldstone fireplace with a natural wood mantelpiece. It also offered a veritable wall of windows with sweeping views of Whidbey Island and the Olympic Peninsula.

Cass had attended several events here since moving to Edmonds the previous summer, and had to admit that views like these, along with loads of quality time with her brother, had helped ease her transition to Washington State. When she'd first arrived, she'd missed San Francisco and her old life there like crazy. Now, more than a year later, she no longer obsessed about going back to California the way she once had.

"Food first, conversation second?" Matthew asked as they entered the banquet facility's main room.

"Go ahead. I'm going to have a look around."

"Suit yourself," her brother said, and headed toward the banquet tables arranged at one end of the building, potluck offering in hand.

"And don't tell everyone you made the casserole this time!" she called after him.

His only response was an evil laugh. Typical.

Cass surveyed the crowd. Couples and families were seated at round tables while others stood in small groups near the fieldstone fireplace. She'd been running late after the rugby team's first preseason scrimmage, so she wasn't surprised to see most of the tables already occupied. She wasn't the only one who enjoyed a good potluck.

"Cassidy," she heard a familiar voice call, and turned to see her boss beckoning to her from beside the fireplace. She sighed inwardly even as she started toward him. This was supposed to be a social event, but no doubt he had a burning techie question that couldn't wait until Monday. That was the thing about working for Baby Boomers. They often expected their employees to not only accept but actively enable their unhealthy approach to work boundaries.

"Glad you made it," Steve Henry said when she reached him. "How was the scrimmage?"

She winced. “Don’t ask.” The women’s club team was only in its third season, and while they had made gains since Cass had arrived the previous year to help Mike, the head coach, they still had a ways to go.

“Well, I’m sure they’ll improve under your tutelage,” Steve said.

“At least they have nowhere to go but up.”

They chatted about the current gorgeous weather and the rugby team’s fall match schedule, and then Steve appeared to zero in on someone in the distance.

“There she is,” he said to Cass. “I was hoping to introduce you to someone I don’t think you’ve met yet.”

At that moment, the crowd parted and Cass glimpsed a woman approaching, plate of food in hand, gaze trained on the person beside her. A person who, Cass realized, was Matthew.

“Eva,” Cass’s boss said, waving at the petite, dark-haired woman.

Eva glanced in their direction, and as the smile on her lips froze, Cass felt her own heart rate pick up unaccountably. Or not entirely unaccountably. Because, holy crap—it was her.

Until that moment, Cass hadn’t been certain that the woman from the Thistledown was, in fact, Dr. Eva DeMarco, junior faculty member of the Edmonds University Department of Sociology. Her photo on the department website showed her from a distance atop a rocky summit, dark brown hair gathered in a ponytail, sunglasses hiding her features. A Google search had turned up only a private Facebook page with the same picture and a pixelated group shot from a university event. Dr. DeMarco wasn’t big on social media, it seemed.

Steve touched Cass’s elbow, leading her forward to intercept the pair. “Matthew, how are you?”

“Good,” her brother said as he shook the hand that Steve, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, extended. “I was actually bringing Eva over to meet my sister. Cass, this is Eva DeMarco from Sociology. Eva, Cass is in her second year in the Master’s program in your department.”

“This is the graduate assistant I was telling you about, Eva,” the dean put in. “Cassidy, Dr. DeMarco is rejoining us after a year away. I believe she might require some assistance with the new college website.”

There was a pause during which Eva continued to eye her, expression still frozen. Tentatively Cass held out a hand. “Hi, Dr. DeMarco. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Um, right. You, too.” Eva bobbed her plate momentarily before taking Cass’s hand.

Her skin was as soft, her hand as small and perfect in Cass’s grasp as it had been the week before at the Thistledown. She let go as quickly as courtesy allowed. Crushing on a professor was not a good idea, especially not when the professor in question had a gorgeous girlfriend.

“You two have been in touch before, haven’t you?” the dean asked.

As Eva’s eyes widened, Cass hurried to say, “I think we emailed a few times last year, didn’t we, Dr. DeMarco?”

As the graduate assistant (GA) for Edmonds University’s College of Arts and Sciences, Cass had been tasked with helping port the HTML-based college and department websites into the university’s new dynamic content management system. She had emailed everyone in the Sociology Department during winter quarter while completing the bulk of the site transfer.

“That’s right.” Eva nodded, her expression settling into something minorly less alarmed. “Please, call me Eva,” she added.

“Okay. My friends call me Cass.”

Eva didn't respond, only looked down at her plate, which Cass noticed carried a generous helping of the quinoa casserole she had made the night before.

As the silence once again lengthened, Matthew gave Cass a look she could easily read: *Why are you being such a douche?*

"No Maya tonight?" the dean enquired.

"Unfortunately not. She had to work late at the hospital."

As he and the dean chatted about the time constraints on labor and delivery nurses at Swedish, one of Seattle's largest hospitals, Cass stole a look at Eva, only to find her gazing up at her from under her eyelashes. Cass's pulse accelerated again. She could honestly say she'd never met a professor as attractive as Eva DeMarco, with her deep brown eyes and her shiny dark curls cascading over her shoulders.

"So, Cassidy, do you have any time to spare for Eva this week?" the dean asked. "I'd like our faculty to be up to speed with the new systems before classes start, if possible."

Cass tried to salvage her already meager professionalism. "Um, yeah. No problem. My mornings are open this week. Is there a day that works better for you, Dr.—um, Eva?"

"I'm sure that isn't necessary," Eva said. "I wouldn't want to trouble you."

Before she could explain that it was her job to train faculty and staff members on the university's new systems, the dean interceded again, his usually laidback tone firm.

"There are some tricks to getting your schedule integrated with the new learning management software, Eva. Fortunately, Cassidy here is a real whiz with computers. Talk about fortuitous timing—we got lucky when she decided to do her graduate work at Edmonds."

Matthew elbowed her subtly, his way of saying he was pissed their mutual boss was singing

her praises and not his, and Cass once again resisted the urge to smack him. She *was* a whiz with computers, thanks to her years of working in the tech industry. If Matthew had ever deigned to think about something other than astrophysics, he might be able to customize Drupal modules on the fly, too.

“In that case, I’ll have to check my schedule,” Eva said, her voice as stilted as her smile.

“Excellent.” The dean’s gaze sharpened again. “There’s Ron. Enjoy yourselves, everyone. And again, Eva, welcome back.”

He moved away, but Cass barely noticed. She was too busy pondering the faint flush tingeing the professor’s olive skin, the muscle twitching in her jawline. Was she massively closeted, or was she simply annoyed that a student knew more about her than she wanted?

Matthew glanced between them again, brow creased. “Do you guys already know each other?”

“No,” they said quickly, almost in unison.

“Only from email,” Cass added, careful not to look at her brother. One look in her eyes and he would know she was lying.

“Riiight.” His voice dropped suddenly. “Wait. Cass, tell me you didn’t... I mean, she isn’t...?”

As Eva’s gaze flew to him, Cass followed suit. Only her look, she was sure, carried more irritability than alarm. Freaking twin telepathy. Though she hadn’t used names, it was clear now that she should never have told her brother she’d run into an Edmonds professor at Seattle’s best-known lesbian club.

“Weren’t you going to get a plate, Mattie?” she asked. As he started to protest, she grabbed

his elbow, her grip punishing. “Maybe you could get me one, too.”

After a thankfully short, entirely non-verbal battle of wills, he nodded disgruntledly. “Whatever you say, *sis*.” He started to turn away but stopped. “It’s nice to see you, Eva. Really. I’m glad to hear things are going well for you.”

“Thanks, Matthew,” she said, her voice softening slightly. “It’s good to see you, too. Tell Maya hello for me?”

“I will.” And with a last scowl at Cass, he turned away.

The fact that her brother knew Eva wasn’t surprising. With only 7,000 students, Edmonds University was hardly the largest school around. But physics and sociology were highly divergent fields, as Cass well knew.

“Don’t worry,” she said as her brother disappeared into the crowd. “He’s not going to tell anyone where we met. I’m not, either.”

“Well, that’s good to hear.” Her voice was uncertain, her eyes less warm and sparkly than Cass remembered from the bar. “I thought you said you were a rugby coach?”

“I am. I’m the assistant for the women’s club.”

“Why do you need a graduate assistantship, then?” Eva asked.

“Part-time assistant coaches don’t qualify for tuition remission.”

“Ah. Sounds like it’s a good thing you have those legendary computer skills to fall back on, then,” Eva said, and then looked away as if the semi-flirty comment had surprised her, too.

Cass gazed about the banquet room, wondering if Eva’s girlfriend was nearby. “I’m sorry about the Thistledown,” she said, though she wasn’t entirely sure what she was apologizing for.

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” Eva said. “I’m the one who... Anyway, I appreciate

you keeping the details to yourself. As open-minded as Steve might be, that's not a conversation I want to have with my boss."

"I know what you mean." Cass hesitated. "So is your girlfriend here? Alex, was it?"

"Alexis." Eva paused, small white teeth worrying her lower lip. "Actually, I have a confession to make—"

Whatever she was about to say was interrupted by the blurred human form that chose that moment to crash into Cass.

"Yo, yo, didn't you hear the locomotive coming, Trane?"

What was it about people invading her personal space any time she tried to have a conversation with Eva DeMarco?

"Jace," Cass said, smiling despite her irritation as she slapped hands with her overzealous greeter. The smallish guy was beaming up at her, his glasses slightly askew as always, fleece zipped all the way up to his chin also as per usual.

Jace MacKenzie grinned sideways at Eva. "Hey, Eva. It's good to see you."

"You, too, Jace. I wondered if you'd still be on campus."

"What? Of course! Although I only have a year left to finish, so I guess it's this year or never."

Eva appeared to rein in a smile—a common enough expression around Jace, Cass had learned. "And on that note... It was nice to officially meet you, Cass. I'll email you about getting together. For the training session, I mean," she added.

"Absolutely. I look forward to it." Outwardly Cass's smile remained steady, but inwardly she face-palmed. One didn't typically look forward to a work training. It wasn't a date.

Eva's head tilted slightly but she said only, "See you both soon."

"See ya, Eva." As she drifted away, Jace turned back to Cass and thumped her shoulder enthusiastically. "Dude, how was your summer?"

"Really good. You?" she asked, but she was staring after Eva, replaying their brief conversation in her mind as she watched the other woman take a seat at a nearby table occupied by several other members of the Sociology Department. Cass could hear the group's greetings from here, tinged with warmth and something else she couldn't quite identify.

"Can't complain," Jace said. "Got a ton of research done up in Alaska for my thesis. So, Trane. Hanging out with Professor Hotty McHotty, hmm?" he asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Don't be a jackass."

"What?" Jace held up his hands. "I didn't come up with the nickname."

"That's so not the point."

She tamped down on the impulse to ask what Jace knew about Eva. When it came to university politics, it was always better to hold your cards close to your chest. Cass had learned this from years of watching her parents maneuver through a variety of faculty and administrative positions at Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University. Matthew was also in the family business—*The Academy*, as they all pronounced it in suitably stodgy tones—along with several of their cousins. That was one reason Cass had decided to go back to school. She was tired of being the only Trane of her generation without a graduate degree.

Jace, however, didn't need to be asked to volunteer what he knew: "Eva and her husband split up a while ago. I heard by the time their divorce became final, Ben was already living with Tina Gardner from Psychology. They were the resident faculty scandal until Flesche got accused of

harassing that girl.”

“Wait. She was married to Ben *Miller*?” Cass asked, automatically checking the room for the history professor. He was a faculty rep on the Edmonds University Tech Committee, which Cass served on as a grad student rep. He’d been the first committee member to befriend her, and she’d even tagged along with Matthew and Maya to a dinner party at Ben and Tina’s house over the summer.

“She and Ben were a spousal hire right before I started,” Jace said. “I don’t know who the university wanted more, her or him. Although he already has tenure, so you do the math.”

Jace was an excellent source of college and department gossip. A part-time employee of the university’s IT department, he’d been trying to finish his Master’s in environmental science for the past six years. Given that students only had seven years to complete a Master’s degree at Edmonds, he would be cutting it close.

At that moment, Matthew returned with a plate of Cass’s favorites—quinoa casserole, kale salad, Asian noodles, and even a chocolate chip cookie from PCC.

“Oh, I love those!” Jace said, already edging away. “Later, Trane twins!”

Matthew didn’t bother replying. He simply leaned into her shoulder and murmured, “Eva DeMarco? Seriously?”

“What? I didn’t do anything.” She shoveled a forkful of noodles into her mouth.

“Why do I find that hard to believe?”

She fixed a smile to her lips and all but hissed, “Seriously, can we not do this here?”

“Fine. I’m going to mingle,” he said. “I’ve only got an hour in me tops, though.”

“Mom and Dad wouldn’t approve of your attitude, Dr. Trane.”

“Good thing they live three thousand miles away.”

Cass couldn't help but agree.

Without Maya to guilt-trip them for their eat-and-run tendencies, they completed a brief circuit of the room and then left the party, though not before convincing the student bartenders to hand over unopened bottles of Alaskan Amber on their way out. Cass had assumed they would head home for an evening with her video game console, but her brother apparently had other plans.

“Want to break into the planetarium?” he asked as she started the Jeep.

“Want to be unemployed?” she countered.

“I have a key...”

“It's not breaking in if you have a key, dolt.”

“Is that a yes?”

She sighed, pretending she wasn't thrilled by the idea. “I guess.”

“Nerd.”

“*I'm* the nerd, Mr. Married-with-a-PhD-and-tenure-track-position-before-thirty?”

“You're just jealous.”

Cass laughed as she guided the Jeep up the hill toward the campus observatory. “That'll be the day.”

“Penis envy is a real thing, Cass.”

“Dude! I already told you to stop talking about your dick! Besides, if you had ever taken a humanities course, you would know that Freud was wrong about anything having to do with women.”

“I know,” he said, smirking. “I just like to piss you off. Freud would call that, what, sibling rivalry?”

“No, that was Alfred...” She realized he was messing with her yet again and flipped him off. Not as satisfying as smacking him, but she was driving along a rather tall bluff. Better to be safe than smashed into tiny bits on the rocks below.

A few minutes later, Matthew was silently exhorting her to tiptoe past the observatory front desk where a student worker was glued to his phone, and Cass was questioning her life choices. *Were* they breaking in? Could they lose their jobs if they got caught? Maya would blame her, no doubt. She’d said more than once that Cass was a bad influence, and Cass was pretty sure she hadn’t been joking at least one of those times. Matthew had his wife conned, just as he’d convinced their parents that he was the golden boy and Cass the classic black sheep. Sadly, their parents hadn’t taken much persuading.

“Tell me that’s not a skeleton key,” she whispered as Matthew tried and failed to unlock the door to the planetarium.

“Shh,” he shushed her. Which, she noticed, was neither confirmation nor denial.

The key finally worked, and after giggling their way past the squeaky outer door and into the inner sanctuary, Cass stared up at the dome while Matthew headed for the projector situated on a podium behind the last row of seats. The circular room was lit only by a thin line of red lights that stretched beneath the arced ceiling from one marked exit to the other. Cass didn’t mind the dark, though. The cool hush of the space reminded her of snowy nights at Vassar College, where she’d done her undergraduate degree what felt like a hundred years ago now.

Vassar’s observatory, a gift from the Class of 1951 back when the Seven Sisters school was still all women, had been one of her favorite places to visit when school got to be too much. The

observatory might not have a planetarium, but it did offer weekly open nights when visitors were encouraged to gaze at the stars through the two large reflecting telescopes, each in its own separate dome. Cass had loved looking up at a tiny corner of what she understood to be a nearly incalculably large universe, her own problems immediately dwarfed by the sense of gargantuan perspective the view afforded. That was one of the things she'd missed while living in San Francisco—starry skies. Here in Edmonds she was fortunate to see stars often. Or, at least, when the Washington skies were clear enough to afford a view off-planet.

“Here we go,” Matthew said, his voice tinged with excitement.

“Are you sure we should be doing this?” she asked, looking back at her brother. “Mom and Dad will kill me if we get in trouble...”

Matthew nodded as he made his way down the aisle toward her. “It’s fine. I actually just got asked to cover Astronomy 211 this quarter, so I can come in here anytime under the guise of course planning.”

*Jerk*, she thought, for letting her worry like that. Then again, he had invited her to a private planetarium show, so he wasn’t all bad.

In the middle of the center row, they popped the caps off their beer bottles and leaned back in the comfy chairs. The dome lit up with a 3-D map of the universe while the speakers vibrated with Neil deGrasse Tyson’s deep tones, and even though it wasn’t at all how Cass had expected the night to go, it was pretty great. Just as well then that Maya had gotten stuck at work. If she’d come to the potluck, Cass doubted Matthew would have proposed ducking out early. But some woman caught up in the messy, often dangerous process of becoming a mother had needed help, so Maya had stayed late as she often did.

The space show was in an instrumental section, images from NASA’s Saturn probe, Cassini,

playing overhead in black and white, when Matthew said, “Cass.”

“Yeah?” She didn’t look away from the video feed of Saturn’s hexagon-shaped cloud system. Really, how did such a geometrically perfect object exist in nature?

“Be careful with Eva DeMarco,” her brother said.

Now she looked at him, taking in the serious angle of his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“It’s not my story to tell. Just, trust me, okay?”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Cass assured him. “I’m only here for a few more months. Besides, she’s a professor and I’m a grad student. We’re not actually allowed to hang out.” She didn’t mention Alexis. No one seemed to know about her, and Cass wasn’t about to out Eva, not even to her brother.

Matthew waved a hand. “You know that policy is meant to prevent sexual harassment and power imbalances. Relationships between professors and grad students are a time-honored tradition. Just, not her, okay?”

Before Cass could reassure him that she had zero intention of getting involved with anyone at Edmonds, the narration resumed, drawing her attention back to the dome. As an animation showed the Cassini probe’s Grand Finale, the spacecraft’s suicide descent into Saturn’s atmosphere, Cass forgot about Eva DeMarco and other earthly conundrums. This was compelling entertainment, watching the NASA folks who had worked on the same project for two full decades tearing up as they witnessed the purposeful destruction of the machine they had shaped their careers around.

It wasn’t until later, after she and Matthew had returned home and chatted with Maya about college gossip and the latest obstetrics case, after she had made the brief walk to her apartment in her brother’s detached garage and settled in for the evening, that she remembered Matthew’s cryptic

warning. Ben was a friend of his. Was Matthew simply referring to the messy end of Eva and Ben's marriage? Either way, it wasn't any of Cass's business. She had come to Seattle to get her life back together; she couldn't afford to get distracted at this stage of the game.

The last few years had been challenging, it was fair to say. First, she'd been laid off from the tech firm she'd worked at since moving to San Francisco. Then she'd blown her shoulder and had to quit the All Blues, her pro rugby side, in what was looking more and more like a permanent end to her playing career. At least she'd had COBRA to cover her medical costs. Otherwise she would have been considerably worse off. But even so, with the dissolution of her longest-term relationship since college following close on the heels of her injury, she'd been only too happy to take the coaching gig at Edmonds, especially when Matthew offered to help her get into graduate school. Not only had being here allowed her to rehab her shoulder and enjoy some quality time with her brother and Maya, it had also, as a plus, gotten their parents off her back. A Master's might not compare to a PhD, but it was a graduate degree. Hopefully they would finally stop dropping hints about her failure to live up to the family name.

Their expectations were a bit unreasonable, Cass had always thought. Fewer than ten percent of Americans earned graduate degrees, for Christ's sake. At least Matthew had never bugged her about education. That was why she hadn't hesitated before accepting his invitation to live in his garage while nursing her assorted wounds. And in fact, it had been lovely to hang out with him and Maya again, especially now that he wasn't in grad school. The fact that she was helping them out financially by renting out their garage apartment only made the whole endeavor more palatable. Her presence in Edmonds had come with an expiration date, though. As soon as she finished her coursework in winter quarter, she would be heading back to the Bay Area to look for a job while she finished writing her thesis.

Despite this longstanding plan, none of her California friends seemed to believe she would

return. Boone, her best friend from the All Blues, had said to her during a video chat recently, “You’re totally going to fall in love with some girl up there and stay, I can feel it. You’re never coming back to the Bay Area, are you?”

“Of course I’m coming back,” she’d replied, forcing herself to sound positive. “Seattle is temporary. My real life is there.”

That may have been the case when she’d left Oakland the previous summer, but was it still true now? She wasn’t sure anymore. Recently, she’d felt happier in Edmonds than she could ever remember being in California, but that was probably because Matthew and Maya lived here, too. Besides, the life she had built in the Bay Area had essentially crumbled around her, so it wasn’t a fair comparison. She might prefer forests and mountains to cities, but Western Washington simply wasn’t her style.

Whenever she said that in Maya’s earshot, her sister-in-law would tease her, “Oh, so you’re too cool for this school, huh?”

And she would reply, “Basically,” while dodging her brother’s attempt to flick her as hard as he could.

It wasn’t that she was too cool, though. It was more that she’d grown up in the suburbs and had fought hard to escape her hometown’s judgmental, closed-minded attitude. Edmonds didn’t have anything close to a vibrant queer community, and while downtown Seattle was only a half hour away, Cass was too busy with school and rugby for anything but an occasional night in the city. Then again, she would be done with school soon, which would give her more time to explore Seattle and its surroundings. This past summer had been awesome, working normal hours on campus during the week and taking weekend ferry rides to the Peninsula or camping out on the flanks of Mount Rainier with her brother and Maya, who were still learning their way around Washington, too. The Pacific

Northwest was as beautiful as Matthew and Maya had promised. There was nothing to say she couldn't stick around spring quarter or possibly even a little longer to experience more of what the area had to offer.

An image of Eva DeMarco standing atop a rocky outcrop, the Cascade Mountains or possibly the Olympics stretching green and white behind her, flashed into Cass's mind. Resolutely, she pushed it away. If she was going to return to her old life stronger and healthier, her mojo and her shoulder both fully restored, she didn't need to be thinking about a woman who was not only already taken but also a dozen different kinds of wrong. The last thing either of them needed was a messy affair.

Assuming someone like Eva would even be interested in her. And that, Cass thought as she opened Twitter for one last pre-bedtime scroll, was an awfully large assumption.

## Chapter Three

Eva loved her office. Old Main, with its classic Renaissance Revival style and ivy-covered brick facade, was the iconic face of Edmonds University. As the oldest building on the Frederick Law Olmsted campus, it had housed classrooms and administrative offices since the university's founding as a normal school in the 1870s. For Washington State, Edmonds U was practically ancient. That was one of the things Eva loved about the school. She had grown up in the Northeast, where cobbled streets, Gothic architecture, and other remnants of the eighteenth century were commonplace. The Northwest, meanwhile, was strip malls and bungalows, conspicuous design and industrial neighborhoods, rustic decor and misappropriated native art. To her, the university felt like an island in an ocean of clashing construction.

Not that the campus didn't have its own share of mismatched buildings. It had been around long enough to collect an assortment of Renaissance-style edifices with the occasional sleek, glass-walled structure juxtaposed against a Gothic tower. The sometimes eclectic architecture reflected the school's changing focus over the decades. Ed U, as the locals called it, may have started out as a seminary to educate teachers, but by now most of the departments on campus looked down their noses at the School of Education. Education was not considered a "truly academic" field of study the way history and literature, chemistry and physics were. The same could be said of sociology. Like education, Eva's chosen field occupied a gray area in the academy. That was the real reason she and her colleagues had been marooned on the fourth floor of Old Main, where the air conditioning was flaky and some of the classroom windows hadn't been cleaned in years. But Eva didn't mind. She wouldn't have liked the industrial architecture of the art building, or the modern glass and concrete slickness of the biology and chemistry buildings, connected by an intricate walkway designed to resemble DNA and RNA chains.

When she'd first considered extending her leave the previous year, she'd checked to see if Steve would give away her office. The room on the fourth floor of Old Main might be small, but it faced the arboretum to the east and received abundant sunlight—when there was sunlight to be had. In Western Washington, sunbreaks were nowhere near as plentiful as Eva was used to after decades on the East Coast.

“Of course I won't give your office away,” the dean had promised, gazing at her across the conference table in his spacious suite in College Hall, the lines of his face arranged in the familiar expression of sympathy she had grown to both appreciate and detest. “It's here when you're ready to return, and so is your position.”

He hadn't been dean of the College of Arts and Sciences for very long. Otherwise, he might well have given away both her office and her position. The state and federal medical leave acts had only protected her for six months. Mostly, she knew, she had Steve Henry, “the man with two first names” as she, Ben, and Tina had always jokingly referred to him, to thank for the university extending her leave as long as they had.

Today, though, instead of the pleasure she usually took in climbing the creaky stairs to her floor, each step felt almost shaky, as if her nervousness had somehow spread to the building. Her customary beginning of the year jitters felt more intense this time around. She'd always loved teaching, even as a lowly graduate student tasked with grading the huge introductory sociology courses at New York University. But the last couple of years had changed her so much that now she wondered if any of her former self had survived. Did teaching rely on muscle memory? Would it come back as easily as pedaling a bicycle did? She wouldn't know until she actually stood in front of her first class the following morning, and that was the unnerving part.

As she made her way along the wide, high-ceilinged hallway, she clutched her bag tightly,

squinting in the near distance. There. A figure in black jeans and a gray collared shirt stood outside her office, arms folded, gaze fixed on the nearby notice board. Like the hallway, it too was almost empty, but soon enough it would be besieged with brightly colored notices of environmental club meetings, scholarship notices, and international travel opportunities, oh my.

As Eva approached, the dark-clad person turned and smiled at her. Cass, early for their meeting. Eva tried to catch her breath—from climbing four flights of stairs, not from the prospect of spending the next untold minutes with Cassidy Trane. Her horror at discovering that the attractive woman from the Thistledown was in fact a student from her own department had abated somewhat since the potluck, but it still lingered in the back of her mind.

“Eva,” Cass said. “Good morning.”

Her cheeks were pink, her hair swept back in a casual style that Eva imagined either took two minutes or two hours to get just right. With her sleeves rolled up to the elbow, she seemed ready to tackle the day. Eva was a morning person herself, but she was accustomed to academic types who had picked their line of work not only for the chance to be immersed in their intellectual passions but also because the hours were, frankly, attractive. Then again, Cass was probably used to early morning workouts. Eva didn’t imagine that the women’s rugby club team had much sway when it came to scheduling practice times.

“Good morning,” she replied, and smiled briefly before focusing on her door lock. Like the rest of the building, it was ancient and mysterious. The trick to turning the reluctant mechanism seemed to shift weekly. She inserted her key and jiggled it for a good ten seconds, keenly aware of Cass looking on. But the other woman didn’t say anything, and Eva was grateful. Ben would have taken the key from her with an impatient huff, certain he could do a better, faster job. Usually, he could.

At last the lock succumbed to her ministrations, and the door swung open. The mingled scent of lemon, lavender, and books greeted her, and she paused in the doorway to breathe it in. She still couldn't believe sometimes that this was her life, that she actually got to do what she loved best—teaching—while studying whatever academic puzzle captured her interest.

Behind her, Cass waited quietly, as if sensing her happiness tinged with mild terror at returning to start a new quarter after such a long leave. *Happiness*—there had been a time when even her office in Old Main hadn't made a dent in the pain and rage spiraling through her, bringing her down, down, so far down. But she knew her own strength now, and that, she had decided, was the silver lining in the storm cloud that had temporarily swallowed her.

“Come on in,” she said, waving Cass forward. “Thanks for making time for me this morning. I tried to follow the instructions in your email, but alas, I am definitely not the technical type. That's why I have a Mac.”

Cass stopped inside the door, glancing around the small space. “A Mac? In that case, I might need your help navigating. I'm a PC woman myself.”

She'd called herself a woman. Okay. Eva hadn't wanted to make assumptions about her gender identity given the way Cass presented, but there'd been no obvious opportunity to ask about pronoun preferences. At least Eva wouldn't have one more thing to trip over. She very much wanted to respect other people's gender identities, but she was still getting used to employing they/them as a singular. After a year of being either mostly alone or with people her mother's age—other than her regular Saturday movie nights at the Hammond-Nakamura residence—she was definitely rusty.

Eva pulled her spare office chair up to the desk and motioned Cass into it. “Do you need my password?”

Cass settled on the hard-backed chair that Eva had liberated from a classroom her first year at

Edmonds. “No, you’ll be doing most of the typing. I find that people usually retain things better if I talk them through the motions.” She paused while Eva sat down beside her on the padded swivel chair. “Besides, you’re not supposed to give out your password, Professor. Don’t you read your Edmonds Tech Committee minutes?”

As she turned the computer on, Eva willed away her blush at Cass’s teasing tone. “Only if I absolutely have to.”

“I’m shocked,” Cass said.

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not.”

A moment later, the home screen flickered into view. Eva logged on, and Cass began to explain the mysterious ways of the university’s website. While she might not know her way around a Mac, Cass appeared to be accomplished at simplifying the steps needed to navigate Edmonds’s new content management system. Eva had no idea what a Drupal module was, but Cass’s clear explanation and insistence that Eva take notes on important processes—like how to update her biography, CV, and the list of publications on her department profile—meant she didn’t need to.

Only fifteen minutes later, Eva’s profile had been updated, her personal page was populated with her fall quarter teaching and office hours schedule, and Cass had even managed to link her Canvas and Drupal modules. Whatever that meant. Probably Eva should have listened more closely to why that was important, but it wasn’t her fault that Cass smelled like vanilla, or that her skin emanated the sort of warmth that Eva wanted to sink into, or that in the light from the window, Cass’s eyes were even more bewitching than the night they’d met.

Eva closed her eyes briefly, remembering that she had all but accused the woman beside her—the *student* beside her—of trying to get into her pants. She had also made up a girlfriend, but

that was easy enough to fix. In fact, as soon as they were done, she would whip out the awkward semi-apology she had practiced on her way to campus, one that didn't include admitting in any way, shape, or form how attractive she found Cass.

“So that should do it,” Cass said, her voice rising at the end in a slight question.

Eva snapped her eyes open and smiled weakly. Jesus, she needed to get a grip here. Alexis was right. She had been a shut-in for far too long.

“Hey, you!” As if she had been magically conjured, Alexis chose that moment to appear in the doorway, her easy greeting breaking off as she stopped and stared. “I’m sorry, am I interrupting something...?”

“No!” Eva said way too forcefully, and scrambled to her feet. Her decision to not tell Alexis about Cass’s presence at the potluck was returning to bite her in the butt—as it was always, she could now see, going to do. “Cass here was just helping me with my university accounts. We’re done, aren’t we?” she added, swinging back to Cass.

“Yeah, we should be.” Cass rose and smiled at Alexis, extending her hand. “Hello again. Alexis, right?”

Alexis stepped farther into the small room and shook Cass’s hand, a shit-eating grin hiding just out of sight, Eva could tell. “That’s right. It’s nice to see you again, *Cass*.” She shot Eva a veiled look that let her know she had a serious amount of explaining to do.

Normally, Eva loved it when Alexis stopped by, especially this week when she could use all the support she could get. Right now, though, she was questioning that aspect of their friendship.

“So do you work on campus, too?” Cass asked.

“Not this campus. I teach at U-Dub. I was just swinging by to drop off Eva’s favorite

Northwest treat.” She held up a small box decorated with the pink and brown Cupcake Royale logo.

How had Eva failed to notice this all-important item? The shop around the corner from Alexis’s house in Madrona made a salted caramel cupcake to die for.

“What do you teach?” Cass asked, her brow slightly furrowed.

“Sociology,” Alexis said, as if she were stating the obvious. Her eyes flew to Eva, full of silent questions.

“Is that how you guys met?”

“Yes. We met in grad school,” Eva said, hoping her own look told Alexis to let her do the talking.

“NYU, right?” As both women looked at her, Cass gestured toward the huge Mac on the small desk. “It’s on your profile.”

“Oh, right. My profile.”

Alexis lifted her eyebrows at Eva and tilted her head toward Cass with an easily interpreted non-verbal exhortation. She was right, of course. This would be the perfect opportunity to resolve the misunderstanding Eva had prevaricated the night they met. She could explain that she had invented a fake girlfriend to extricate herself from an embarrassing social situation, reference a research point on the prevalence of lying among strangers, and they could all laugh it off. More importantly, they could move on with their lives and never again speak of The Dread Thistledown Incident. The speech Eva had rehearsed, however, was not something she wanted to have an audience for. Bad enough Cass would have to hear it.

Cass’s phone buzzed. “Excuse me,” she said, and headed out into the hall where Eva could see her typing rapidly with her thumbs.

Unfortunately, she could also see Alexis in the foreground staring at her, eyebrows still raised in another easy-to-read demand: *What the freaking hell?* Eva ignored her, choosing instead to watch Cass pocket her phone and return to the office that had never felt quite this small.

“Everything all right?” Alexis enquired.

“Yeah. Surprisingly, the English Department skews more Luddite than technical. I should probably head over there.”

“Not before you try a cupcake,” Alexis announced, opening the box and holding it out to her. “There’s salted caramel, triple chocolate, and red velvet.”

“That’s kind of you, but I shouldn’t,” Cass said, her avid stare fixed on the box belying her words.

“Come on,” Alexis said, smiling. “If you don’t take one, then one of us will have to eat two...”

“Really,” Eva added, nodding. “You’ll be doing us a favor. The last thing I need today is two cupcakes.”

“Well, in that case...”

Cass’s gaze seemed to linger on Eva a tad too long before she reached into the cupcake box. Eva watched to see which pastry she would claim and almost sighed in relief. Red velvet. The perfect choice because Alexis was a chocolate connoisseur and even Cass’s adorable dimple wouldn’t have saved her if she’d dared to steal—*ahem*, if she’d chosen the salted caramel.

Eva watched as Cass bit into the cupcake, vanilla frosting and tiny red and white sprinkles adorning her lips before she licked them away. And, right. Eva looked back at the box in Alexis’s hands, trying to blot out the image of Cass’s mouth.

“Oh my god, this cupcake is *amazing*,” Cass said.

Okay, but was that slightly breathless hitch in her voice really necessary? Eva reached into the box and selected her own cupcake, hoping the salty sweetness would be enough to distract her from untoward thoughts.

“Told you,” Alexis said smugly around a bite of the triple chocolate.

“Seriously,” Cass said as she glanced between them. “How do you guys not weigh like a thousand pounds?”

“Willpower,” Alexis said.

Something Eva needed to work on developing more of herself.

“I have to run,” Cass said a little while later, still licking cupcake crumbs and icing from her fingers. “But thanks. I think that cupcake made my day.”

“Glad to be of service,” Alexis said with a typically nerdy bow.

“Thanks again for the computer help,” Eva added, smiling. Then she held up a hand to her mouth, remembering that she probably had chocolate crumbs in her teeth.

“You’re welcome,” Cass said, her own smile warm. She glanced at Alexis as she moved toward the door. “And nice seeing you again, Dr...?”

“Hammond. But please, call me Alexis,” she added. “I hope we meet again.”

“So do I.” Cass turned away, but then she paused in the doorway. “Actually, if you guys aren’t doing anything next Saturday, we have our home opener against Portland U. It’s a double header with the men’s team, and it would be nice to have a crowd for the women’s match. Besides, there’s usually a pretty decent community showing at our matches.”

It took Eva a moment to realize that she meant the LGBTQIA community. Another

opportunity to right that wrong impression...

“We’ll be there,” Alexis promised.

“Awesome. Good luck with classes tomorrow, Eva. Let me know if you need any help.”

“I will,” she said, ignoring Alexis’s *I bet you will* snort that she prayed only reached her ears.

With a final smile, Cass left the office, her shoes squeaking against the newly polished floor that Eva knew would lose its sheen as soon as the student body returned to campus in full force.

Not that she should be thinking of any student’s body.

As Cass’s footsteps faded, Alexis turned on Eva, her delighted grin finally escaping. “Um, hello? Do you perchance have some news to share? Something to do with, oh, I don’t know, the hot woman from the bar hanging out in your office?”

Eva slumped in her ridiculously expensive ergonomic chair and expelled a long breath. “I was going to tell you...”

“No, you weren’t,” Alexis interrupted, laughing, “or you totally would have! What was she doing here? Spill immediately or I am no longer your best friend.”

“Lex,” she whined, peeking up from under her lashes.

“Nuh-uh, missy,” Alexis said, dropping onto the small love seat near the window. “That look doesn’t work on me. Now give me the dirt, or I won’t ever bring you cupcakes again.”

Cupcake deliveries were nothing to joke about. Eva straightened in her seat. “Fine. Remember the department potluck you cancelled on last minute?”

“No! She was there?”

“Yep.” Eva shared the story, leaving out the part about Cass’s brother apparently figuring out

how they had met. The less said about that, the better.

“Carly has such bad timing!” Alexis exclaimed when she’d finished. Her stepdaughter had picked the previous weekend to request Alexis’s help for the first time ever in their relationship. True, it had been for academic assistance on a project she’d left until the last minute, but who didn’t procrastinate?

Well, Alexis, actually. And Eva. That was one of the things they’d bonded over in graduate school—completing projects on time. Or, you know, early.

“Now it all makes sense,” Alexis said. “She really did think you looked familiar that night, didn’t she?”

“It would appear so.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but it would also appear that she still thinks you and I are a couple. Why haven’t you told her we’re not?”

“I was just about to when you showed up with your stupid cupcakes,” Eva grouched.

“How dare you. Cupcake Royale cupcakes are not stupid!”

“Fine, I take it back.”

“Good.” Alexis cradled the meager remnants of her cupcake. “I would never let anyone besmirch your name, *mon petit chocolat*.”

Accustomed to her best friend’s weirdness, Eva brought the conversation back to her own disaster of a life. “I still can’t believe I flirted with a student. In my department, no less.”

“Are you kidding? This is perfect.”

“How is me making a fool of myself with a student perfect, Lex?”

“You didn’t make a fool of yourself. Although you have carried the fake girlfriend bit a tad too far. But even with that minor hiccup, the big picture is nearly ideal.”

Eva stared at her. “What are you even talking about?”

“Hear me out. We’ve got several tropes going on here,” Alexis said in her excited researcher voice, and started to tick them off on her fingers. “The meet cute, check. Forbidden relationship, check. The jock and the nerd—”

“Lex!” Eva was not generally a violent person, but she slapped her friend on the arm. “My life is not a series of tropes! Jesus. I never thought I’d have to say this to you, but you’ve read too many romance novels.”

Alexis pushed up her glasses. “Very funny. But come on. This is kismet at work, Eva. Can’t you feel it?”

The thought might have occurred to her once the shock of seeing Cass at the potluck had worn off. But: “Even if she was interested, I can’t risk getting involved with a student. The dean and my chair have been incredibly understanding, but as you know, I was supposed to have my tenure review last year. That means I have to be on perfect behavior this year.”

Alexis waved a hand. “She’s interested. Trust me.”

“Why, because you’re such an expert on lady love?”

“I have queer friends!”

“Name one.”

“You.”

Eva scoffed. “I meant queer friends in actual queer relationships.”

“Tom and Angelo.” At Eva’s skeptical eyebrow, she added, “They’re neighbors. You don’t

know them.”

“Neighbors? Let me guess. They’re middle-aged tech executives with teenage twins.”

Alexis’s eyes widened. “How did you know that?”

“Seattle demographics, my friend. And unlike you, I actually am queer. But whether or not Cass would ever think of me that way, it wouldn’t work. She’s a grad student, which means she probably has no intention of staying in Edmonds.”

“I’m not saying you should marry the woman,” Alexis said. “In all honesty, a short and sweet affair might be just what you need.”

“Alexis!” Eva felt her cheeks warm. “I don’t do short and sweet affairs, especially not with students when I’m under tenure review!”

“There’s always a first for everything. Besides, I still think you’re taking the student thing out of context. She’s not in one of your classes, and she’s what, twenty-nine or thirty?”

Eva shrugged as if she hadn’t abused her Banner access only the day before and looked up Cass’s date of birth in the university database. She’d turned 31 on the 14th of July—Bastille Day.

“And you’re not advising her thesis, are you?” Alexis pressed.

“You know I’m not advising anyone’s thesis right now.”

“Then seriously, the rules don’t apply here.”

Eva sighed. “Lex, I need you to listen to me. Can you do that? Because I cannot risk getting involved with Cassidy Trane, and it would be great if you could support me on this.”

Alexis stared at her for a long moment, and then, at last, she capitulated. “All right. I hear you, and I support whatever you choose. You know that.”

Eva did know that. In fact, she was absurdly grateful for Alexis’s support over the past few years. Without her best friend showing up to drag her out of bed at times and merely out of the house at others, Eva wasn’t sure she would be back at work now—or, possibly, ever. It sounded dramatic, and Eva normally wasn’t about the drama, but Alexis had remained at her side throughout the Series of Unfortunate Events, as Eva darkly referred to the occurrences that had recently beset her. Ben, meanwhile, hadn’t known what to do with her grief, a fact that irritated Alexis to no end. That was why even though Eva had let go of her marriage with both hands, Alexis was still harboring what amounted to a sizable grudge.

Which, if Eva was being honest, was fine with her.

“Thank you,” Eva said, and rose, pulling Alexis up and into a hug. Her friend melted against her with a surprised laugh. “See? I do appreciate you, even if you did somehow manage to turn me into a hugger.”

“It wasn’t easy,” Alexis allowed. “I swear, you are the literal definition of a WASP.”

“Hey! My people are Episcopalian, not Protestant.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Alexis pulled back and patted her cheek. “Those are the same thing. So. It turns out I have the morning free. Any chance I could convince you to go over the latest round of *Trollops* edits Penelope sent?”

Penelope Graves and Tristan Van der Streek were co-editing the book Eva and Alexis were writing a chapter for, *The Romance Novel in the Academy: Tropes, Trollops, and the Rhetoric of Romance*. Their own chapter title was *Romancing the Canon: Pride, Prejudice, and Patriarchy in the Denigration of Women’s Fiction*. They had advocated for a different subtitle—*The Phallus-y of Pride and Prejudice in the Denigration of Women’s Fiction*—but in the end Penelope and Tristan had rejected it. Eva and Alexis still referred to the chapter as “*Phallus-y*,” and one or both of them would likely find a way to include the original

working title in an interview or conference panel. As Alexis liked to say, you couldn't keep a good subtitle down.

Eva started to calculate how much time she would need to get ready for the two classes she was scheduled to teach this quarter, "Research Methods: Design" and "The Sociology of Popular Culture." Then she stopped. She had been mostly ready for both classes to start for weeks now.

"I believe I could be persuaded," she told Alexis, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

"You are such a nerd."

"Hello, Pot. Kettle here."

"You know you just made my point, right?"

Eva opened the desk drawer that contained her special stash of red pens. She was a pen snob, Ben used to say. She only used Pilot gel rollers, a fact that Alexis, also a self-professed pen snob, claimed to appreciate.

Soon they were seated side by side on the love seat that took up most of one wall, matching chapter print-outs on their laps. Eva tapped her red pen against her thigh as she read through the comments Penelope had forwarded them from the requisite three peer reviewers. Writing an academic book chapter was nearly as complicated as taking part in a College of Arts and Sciences curriculum development meeting: difficult to get anyone to agree about anything. Penelope and Tristan had already asked for two rounds of edits, and now the peer reviewers were basically infighting amongst themselves. Eva could genuinely say she had not missed being forced to submit to consensus decision-making during her unofficial sabbatical.

And yet, despite the final editing hoops they were currently maneuvering through, Eva was excited about this book. Romance novels, which consistently sold more copies than any other type of

fiction, constituted the only genre written, edited, published, and read predominantly by women. At the same time, it was the genre most derided by critics and other readers, the lone genre whose audience's intelligence and ability to separate fantasy from reality were regularly maligned. Eva was a trained sociologist and a long-time feminist, and even she had fallen prey to those cultural assumptions.

Like Eva, Alexis had started her career focused on an acceptably academic research interest. Her doctoral thesis on the immigrant experience in the urban north had been rock-star quality, and a follow-up book on the American-born children of immigrants had earned her tenure at 34. But while Steve had supported Eva's shift in research interests almost from the start, Alexis had said more than once that her dean probably would have tossed her out on her ear if he could. As the lone black woman in her department, she should be studying the school-to-prison pipeline, he'd lectured her more than once. Or the impact of American slavery on the splintering of contemporary African American families. And so on and so forth, never recognizing his own racial bias.

Beside her, Alexis nudged her and pointed at a comment that took up three quarters of the margin. "Is this guy serious with his 'readers shouldn't be encouraged to fantasize about a hero they would put a restraining order on in real life' bullshit?"

"I know, right?" Eva said. "It's like he's not comfortable with women fantasizing about men who are fundamentally unlike him."

They exchanged a look, a matching smile starting at the corners of their mouths. "Fucking straight white men," they said in unison, shaking their heads. And then they turned back to the print-out, red gel roller pens held at ready.

Really, though, had Eva been any better in the beginning? It still made her wince to remember how she'd had the gall to lecture her therapist about why romance novels weren't worthy

of the title *literature*.

“They’re formulaic and overtly sentimental,” she’d argued during that first session, parroting the criticism she’d absorbed at some unknown point. “And talk about predictable. Girl meets boy, girl loses boy, girl gets boy back, and they ride off into the sunset, happily ever after.”

“I’m afraid I don’t see what’s ‘wrong’ with enjoying a fantasy that at its heart revolves around unconditional love and happy endings,” Gayle had said. And then she’d moved in for the kill: “Have you ever read a romance novel, Eva?”

She’d hesitated before admitting, “No.” As Gayle continued to stare at her, eyebrows raised, Eva had realized that she was holding onto a culturally-conditioned bias for no reason other than that it was familiar. Like a freshman in an intro sociology class who refuses to acknowledge their own racial bias, she was defending widespread attitudes about the value of romantic fiction without conducting her own research.

A week later during her second session with Gayle, she’d recognized another truth: “Romance novels are stigmatized.” And then, unexpectedly, tears had sprung to her eyes. “Like...” She’d trailed off. Therapy sucked. Better to go through the world ignoring the hard things—or so her mother’s side of the family had always counseled.

Gayle had handed her a box of tissues. “Like?”

Eva sniffled and hunched forward, a tissue clenched in one fist. “Like me.”

“In what way?”

“A romance isn’t really literature just like a woman who can’t bear a child isn’t really a woman.”

“I know plenty of women who would disagree with both assertions.”

“No, it’s the culture asserting that, not me.”

Gayle had looked at her over the top of her glasses, her voice gentle as she asked, “Are you sure about that, Eva?”

Later, Eva had slid into the passenger seat of Alexis’s car and let herself be driven back to Edmonds, where Harvey was waiting alone in the house Ben had recently moved out of. She and Harvey weren’t really alone, though. Alexis had appeared on their doorstep shortly before Eva’s first therapy session, armed with a suitcase and Tosh’s blessing to stay for as long as she needed to. A weekend had turned into a week and then into two despite Eva’s attempts to kick her out. Alexis wasn’t having any of that, not since Eva had admitted that she’d considered the idea of suicide. Theoretically only, you understand. Just an academic interest, a sort of *hmm, wonder how I would do it*. An entirely hypothetical question.

She would never actually take her own life, she’d tried to assure her friend. She was aware that suicide destroyed the lives of those left behind in a cruel ripple effect, one that she would never want to be responsible for. But whether or not her interest in the topic was anything more than academic, Alexis had given her the option of either (1) checking herself into a psychiatric unit for seventy-two hours; or (2) starting therapy, taking the pills her doctor had prescribed, and being babysat by her best friend for the indefinite future. Eva had chosen option two.

There was a reason, she’d soon learned, that people took anti-depressants to get through a bad patch. She’d never dreamed she would be one of those people, but in hindsight she was glad she had agreed to go on meds because within just a couple of weeks, the world had begun to regain some of its light and color. Not a lot, but enough that she could look back on the moment she’d considered the supposedly academic question of how she would go about ending her life and shudder at the darkness that had threatened her so guilelessly. Now, almost a year and a half later, she was

drug-free and felt more resilient than ever. For that, she owed Alexis more than a heartfelt thank-you. Really, she'd often thought, she owed her friend her life.

Straightening on her office couch, Eva tried to refocus her thoughts. That was the flip side of building your career around a topic that was personally gratifying: Sometimes the political could become almost too personal.

“You okay?” Alexis asked beside her.

“Fine,” Eva said, offering her a smile before turning back to the work at hand.

These days, she was pretty sure she meant it.