



THESE THINGS
About Us

Laura Beege

These Things About Us

A Novel

By Laura Beege

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New Adult Contemporary Romance

Intended for mature audiences, 17+

Sexual situations, strong language and heavy subject matter are used throughout

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Dedication

To everyone I promised this to.

Thanks for believing.

One

I never thought a place called The Dirty Dungeon would be my last glimmer of hope. I never thought I'd end up somewhere in London with no destination either. But my trail had gone cold. My mother's former neighbors had told me that she had remarried and moved to this neighborhood. It just turned out this neighborhood was big and ugly and I'd never find her without further information. I couldn't just ring every doorbell and ask for Theresa Lawrence.

From the outside The Dirty Dungeon looked exactly like what its name promised. The windows were darkened, a faint yellow light glowed above the door and even the prospect of going in there twisted my stomach into knots. But a shabby old sign read *accommodations*. If they had rooms, they surely had a phone I could use and more importantly, a phone book.

I tightened my grip on the suitcase handle. I was here to get a normal life. Leave that old, wrecked one behind. Going into a pub wouldn't mess that plan up. It wasn't like I was going to get drunk and dance on the bar. I would just call my mom.

I pulled my tattered turquoise suitcase through the door into a loud, small bar that smelled bitter like beer and wood and salty like something to eat. My stomach grumbled at the idea of food. I wasn't here to eat, though. I had half of a sandwich waiting for me in my backpack.

Most tables were taken and the air buzzed with people chatting and laughing as I approached the bar. There were two men behind the bar, undeniably related with their square chins. One looked like your average late 40s guy with greying hair and a loose blue shirt. The other was a blond train wreck. It was impossible not to stare at the rows of rings through his earlobe, the giant spider tattoo on his neck and that spiked leather cuff. He leaned on the bar, talking to a black-haired girl who looked like she popped out of the TV straight into real life. Her skin was smooth, her dress hugged her curves perfectly and I would have killed to know her secret to keeping the frizz at bay. It wasn't hard to decode her leaning forward, her open-mouth smile and that hair-twirling, though. Someone was looking for attention and got it.

"What can I get you?" The older bartender stopped to get my order and his smile wavered just a little when he looked at me.

I couldn't look great after a day of running through London. Plus, I had the appearance of a fifteen-year-old. I didn't fit in with the usual customers – which seemed to consist mostly of guys wearing leather and either Mohawks or mullets.

"Hi, uhm..." I breathed and ran my fingers through my curls. Best to get it all out there as quickly as possible. "My phone died and I really need to call someone, but I don't know their number. Do you happen to have a payphone and phone book?"

"Of course, Darling." He pointed to a corner at the far end of the bar. An old payphone hung at the wall and a man clutched the speaker and yelled into it. In French. "That's Jean. He should be done in a few minutes, after his wife hangs up on him and he calls her again to apologize." The bartender scratched the dark beard that framed his mouth. "Can I get you anything while you're waiting?"

I inhaled and took a look at the board over his head. They mostly served alcohol. Only few other drinks were listed. Then there were a couple of desserts that sounded like sugary heaven and a few more dishes that either sounded plain disgusting or didn't sound at all like anything I knew.

Again, my stomach growled. I grimaced and dug into my pocket for the coins I'd pushed into it earlier. That money was supposed to feed me through tomorrow, too, but I could hardly come into a bar and ask to only use the phone. I spread the coins on the counter and tried to count the foreign money.

“Is there any way I can get a really, really small portion of those potato wedges?”

“What are you drinking?” the bartender sighed.

“Oh, uhm, just water from the tap, please.” I scratched the back of my neck. He’d throw me out any second. Nobody wanted a broke girl in their bar. A girl who demanded the only free drink.

“Put the money away, girl.”

“No, look, I can pay for a coke but then no potato wedges. This is enough for a coke. Don’t throw me out, please.”

“Put it away.”

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

I scrubbed the coins together and pushed them back into my jeans. I’d find some other place. Just because I couldn’t find a pay phone with a phone book, didn’t mean I couldn’t find another pub. Preferably one with a bartender who didn’t kick me out.

I stole another glance at Jean, who still argued with his wife, and only swiveled back around to the bartender when a glass clicked against the wood of the counter. It was filled with coke.

“It’s on the house,” he smiled.

“What, but... No, I can’t. Seriously, I don’t need a pity drink.” I slid the glass back across the bar.

“What’s your name, Darling?”

“Tony.”

“Well, Tony, it’s common in The Dirty Dungeon that first time customers get a drink and a meal for free. So, potato wedges?”

I brushed my sweaty palms against my pants. I shouldn’t take him up on that special offer. It was obviously so not common. His soft brown eyes and the encouraging smile made it hard to say no, though. I bet very few people said no to this guy. And I bet I would need all the money I had if I didn’t find my mother soon.

I nodded.

“Sit down, Tony.”

Again, I couldn’t say no, so I climbed onto a bar stool and folded my hands between my knees. I earned an approving smile from the bartender.

He looked over to the train wreck bartender, as he got out a grey plate. “Trace, stop seducing our customers and grab me the phone book from the office.”

Trace didn’t stop flirting, he just frowned at my bartender then turned back to the girl who was patiently waiting for his attention. I didn’t want to stare. I didn’t want to be more impolite than I already was, getting free food and having someone ordered around for my benefit, but my eyes were glued to this guy.

“Trace, the phone book. Now.”

A vein in Trace’s neck popped, but he didn’t protest and wrapped up his little talk with a short kiss on the lips from the girl. He then quickly disappeared through a door, presumably to get the phone book.

“Here you go, Darling. I’m Alex, by the way, you just call if you need anything, okay?” A pile of steaming hot potato wedges sat on the plate in front of me, two little pots of dip on each side of the potato mountain. It smelled delicious.

“Thanks,” I croaked.

I hadn’t realized just how much I wanted to eat something that didn’t taste like cardboard. Something that would warm me from within and keep me fed for more than just an hour or two.

Alex returned to his other customers and I dived into my food. It wasn’t fancy, but it was heaven with the first bite. I mentally slapped myself for almost turning down his offer to give me free food. However, unconditionally getting taken care of was strange. I would have to repay him once I found .

place to stay, preferably my mother's house, and a job.

"Is this for you?" A raspy voice asked.

I looked up to find Trace holding a thick phone book, cocking a pierced eyebrow at me.

I nodded, my tongue busy with food. Trace's green eyes travelled over my face. Every inch of it. From my forehead to my eyes, down my nose, over my lips to my chin. I felt like an animal in the zoo. Hot blood rushed up my neck, setting my ears on fire.

He made a suffocated noise in the back of his throat, curled his lip and dropped the phone book onto the counter, then turning swiftly, he high-tailed for the back room again.

I disgusted him. I had never met this guy, but he only had to take one look at me and it made him bolt. I wanted to fish my hat out of my suitcase and pull it down over my face.

Weren't people with tattoos and piercings supposed to be open-minded and not into the whole super skinny, extra long legs and perfect face crap? If I made a complete stranger bolt, how could I expect to make another complete stranger take me in? Just because she was responsible for half of my DNA didn't mean she had to help me.

I tried to erase his gagging noise from my mind the second Jean headed for a corner table. I grabbed the book and dashed for the phone. My mother was not going to find me disgusting. She might not be overly happy, but she was not going to make a sound like she was going to throw up.

I thumbed my way through the book until I found the Ls. Her former neighbors had told me that she moved away after marrying some Aaron Lawrence. Really, how many Aaron and Theresa Lawrences could there be in London?

Oh.

Shit.

Way too many. Calling all of them was going to cost me a lot. I swallowed, pushed some coins into the phone and dialed the first number.

A man, presumably called Aaron, answered and when I said I was looking for a Theresa Lawrence, he said there was no Theresa at this number. The chance for the first number to be the right one was basically nonexistent, right? So I dialed the next and the next Aaron until I came to the Theresas.

"Theresa Lawrence, hello?"

I swallowed. That voice, that light-hearted voice might belong to my mother. The woman whose picture I carried around in my pocket.

"Hello?"

"Hi," I mumbled, scratching my temple. "Uhm, I'm looking for a Theresa who lived in Tucson, Arizona, in the early to mid 90s."

"I'm sorry, Miss, I've always lived in London."

"Okay, thanks anyway."

"Good luck." She sounded sincere. As if through the phone line, through the two sentences we spoke she could detect my growing desperation, and I wished my mother sounded like that.

"Thanks."

I hung up and dialed the next three numbers. One wasn't available at the time, one was a Theresa who had lived in France in the 90s and loved talking about the great wine there. The last one picked up, and I heard the click and then silence. A TV was running in the background.

"Hello?" I asked.

"Good evening," a little girl answered. "Are you the tooth fairy?"

"No." I drew my eyebrows together. "Who are you?"

"I'm Theresa."

Great. The last number belonged to a little girl. Who on earth got their child – who still believed in the tooth fairy – an own phone number?

“Is your mom called Theresa, too, by any chance?”

“No-hoh. Mummy's name is Emily.”

“Okay, bye Theresa.”

“Goodbye,” she chimed, and I punched the phone into the hook.

Deep breath, I reminded myself and inhaled, slowly counted to four, exhaled. I massaged my temple and continued the breathing exercise until I was almost okay. There was no way I was going to remain completely calm, but I'd try my best, doing all the breathing exercises. This was not the end of the world. My last chance was that person I called who *was not available right now*. I could call her again tomorrow. Or I could go to that address listed with the phone number. I'd just have to survive the night and solve all my problems tomorrow.

I took one last deep breath before I went back to my seat and poked at the cooling potatoes. I'd have to ask Alex if I could have them wrapped up to have something left for tomorrow. I'd have to spend enough money on not being homeless for tonight, on a bed. I couldn't stuff myself with yummy potatoes. I wondered just how long I'd last with my remaining 156.30£.

“So you're why Trace has me working tonight.”

I blinked up at a boy, younger than Trace, my age or close, and definitely related to Alex and Trace as well, with his hard edges and the small nose. Most of his light brown hair was swept to one side of his head. He looked like he'd been hit by a hurricane.

I tried to make sense of his words. Trace had sent him out because he couldn't even stand being in the same room with me?

“I thought he'd throw up on me.” I fidgeted with my sleeve, tugging it over the back of my hand, over the birthmark.

“That's no reason to look so miserable. He's an ass.”

Gee, that made me feel so much better. I didn't care if even his relatives thought he was an ass. It still dragged me down even deeper to know I was so repulsive I could chase away a bartender.

“Come on, cheer up, Sour Lemon.”

“No,” I huffed, “There's a lot going on and I'm basically homeless. I deserve to be a sour lemon.”

“You need a room for free?”

“What?”

“Are you legal?”

“Yes.”

“Mind if I check?”

I had no idea what he wanted to check my age for or what he meant about a free room, but I was happy to shift my focus to finding my passport for a few moments. I pulled my backpack up and carefully unzipped the side pocket, reaching in and slipping the passport onto the bar.

The boy snatched it up and scanned the info. His full lips twitched, and I knew what line he was reading. Finally, he handed my papers back.

“Well, Antonia Ainsley from Tucson, Arizona... Belated Happy Birthday.”

I shoved the passport back into the bag.

“Thanks,” I sighed.

“This is the most depressing 18th birthday party I've ever seen. I'm Wes, by the way.”

He stretched his hand over my plate and smiled at me, his wide mouth splitting his face in two and flashing a bottom row of crooked teeth. The smile was so honest, I couldn't help but smile back. I hesitated a moment, then placed my hand in his. His long fingers easily folded around mine wholly.

“Tony.”

“Come on, Wesley, I'm not paying you to stand here and make friends. Get moving.” Alex slapped a dirty dish towel against Wesley's shoulders and Wes grinned at the older bartender.

“Dad, you're not paying me - period. Plus, I'm not making friends, I'm trying to hire you another waitress. ~~One that Trace won't feel the need to fuck at the first chance he gets.~~”

I choked on my coke and furiously hit myself in the chest to keep from dying on spot.

“What?” I squeaked.

“You’re a girl who needs a room. We have rooms and need a girl. The way I see it, we’re a perfect match.” Wes shrugged and stole a potato from my plate. Alex tore his eyes open at his son’s lack of respect, but I couldn’t stifle the giggle that bubbled up my throat. Wes winked at me in response.

Alex rubbed his hand over his chin and looked at me like he had to solve a Sudoku between my eyes. I was pretty certain I wasn’t a walking Sudoku.

“I’m sorry, Darling, I’d love to help, but we don’t need a girl but a woman who can handle a couple of pissed prats.”

I furrowed my brows.

“Wasted idiots,” Wesley assisted.

Oh, okay. It would have been weird for a waitress to take care of men who pissed themselves. You never knew, though. When in Rome... - Hold up, I was not going to do as the romans do. I wasn’t even planning on staying longer than absolutely necessary, meaning one night tops.

“I really just need an affordable bed for tonight.”

“Dad.” Wes’s voice was thick with an unspoken warning.

British men were weird. First the free meal and now Wes tried to shove me down his father’s throat. What was wrong with them? Did they all sport a serious case of helper syndrome? Trace’s gurgle popped into my head again. Maybe not all of them tried to help.

Alex sighed and fixed his eyes on me. “Do you need a job?”

My lips already parted to decline, but the words didn’t come out. I scratched the back of my hand. What if I didn’t find her? Or worse: What if I found her and she’d tell me that she left me with Dad because she didn’t want to have me in the first place, and she still didn’t want me now.

Plus, I hadn’t planned what to do once I met my mother. College wasn’t really an option. Most of my photography equipment had been lost, so no future there. And I had barely any money left in my pocket as it was.

“Yeah,” I breathed. “And I’m pretty sure I can handle a few... pissed prats.”

“You don’t have a visa, do you?”

I shook my head, pulling another sigh from Alex’s chest.

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“Well, at least we can work with that. Let me figure out the rest. Wesley, get her bags up to the top floor.” He motioned for a waiting customer to hold on another moment.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Wesley hissed, barely loud enough for me to hear.

“You wanted it like this, you take care of it.”

Was *it* me? Wes grabbed my bags, and I felt like an obedient little dog, trailing behind him down a narrow hallway, past the restrooms and up a steep, old staircase.

“Why is the top floor a bad idea?” I asked.

“Trace and I have our rooms up there.”

“Oh.”

I wouldn’t have been too happy about sharing the floor with the illegal waitress/broke American/teenage girl that made my brother sick either.

Wes led me to a door, unlocked it and opened his arm for me to walk in first. It was a simple bedroom. There was a double wide bed with white bedspreads in the middle, a dark chest of drawers against the wall and a small table with two worn chairs under the window.

It was more than I'd expected. Harry Potter under the staircase and all that.

Wesley walked in behind me, making the room infinitely smaller. He arranged my suitcase on the drawer and pushed his hands into his pockets, sent me an unsure look with his shoulders drawn up high.

I raked my brain for something to say. "Do you regularly invite complete strangers to stay down the hall from you?"

"There are two more floors filled with strangers right beneath our feet. I'm long over the fear of being stabbed during the night."

"I just..." I didn't want to look like a complete idiot. "You seemed pretty insistent."

"Don't wreck your brain. We really do need a waitress, unless I am supposed to blow off school so I can help out."

"Okay." Selfish reasons. Those, I could understand. They didn't seem as crazy as helper syndrome.

"Thanks anyway."

Two

Wes hadn't told me where the bathroom was. I tiptoed out of my room and plucked at the shorts, so they wouldn't be swallowed by the oversized shirt. I didn't need anyone thinking I was a slut, running around half-naked in semi-public. Not that I hadn't specifically chosen a time unlikely for any run-in. It was late. Or more accurately: really early.

Gripping my toothbrush like a mighty sword, I tried the first door – locked. Light spilled out from the second door, so I tried the last one. It led to the room right next to mine and easily swung open into complete darkness. My naked feet hit the plush carpet. Carpet. Definitely not a bathroom. Damn it. Oh god, what if Wesley was sleeping just a few feet away. This could get really embarrassing. “Looking for something?”

I shrieked and jumped around at the voice, coming face to face with a very naked, very wet and tattoo-covered chest. I blinked at the naked skin for a moment, then dragged my eyes up to meet Trace's green stare. Those eyes were hard and cold. They sent an icy shiver down my spine.

“I'm sorry,” I whimpered. I was pressed into the doorway. “I didn't know this was your room.” Unfortunately my gaze fell and fell down to the grey towel that was loosely wrapped around his hip. A filigree tattoo trailed down his side and disappeared beneath the fabric.

Oh holy... He was almost naked. “Sorry,” I repeated, “I didn't want to.” This was bad. No more sexcapades was part of the whole fresh start thing. Leave it to Antonia to stare at naked men first chance she gets.

I was here to leave Antonia behind. Here, I was going to be Tony. I screwed my lids shut and twirled to the side, pressing my forehead into the wall.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I, my room...” I wanted to explain, but I couldn't look at him. Not with this little fabric covering him up. So I smacked my hand over my eyes like a kid playing hide and seek, although I just wanted to hide and never be sought. “My room is over there.” I blindly pointed at my door.

For a second, when he didn't respond, I thought I might have stabbed him with my index finger, but then I heard the hammering. I opened my fingers to peek at Trace crashing his fist into the locked door.

“Wesley!” he boomed.

I watched the door being opened slightly and a sleepy Wesley poking his head out. His hair was all over the place. Trace didn't give him the chance to find me perched across the hallway; he stormed into Wes's room and banged the door shut. He started yelling right after but it was incomprehensible from here.

Poor guests downstairs who had to endure that noise.

Oh no. Wes was the one to pity. He was the one who got crap for talking his father into letting me stay. Oh no, no, no, no. I should have declined. Now, I couldn't just let him take all the blame. I pushed myself off the wall and charged right after Trace into Wesley's room.

Trace's fist blew into Wes's jaw. The smack rippled through me, flesh on flesh, bones just underneath. Wesley's head flew back, he lost his footing and bumped into his desk. A couple of pens clattered to the floor and my toothbrush fell from my hand.

Trace was crazy. If he didn't want me on his floor, fine, he could just say so.

“Shit,” he grunted and shook his hand, vaguely glancing at me over his shoulder.

Wes clutched his face, shock still glazing his eyes when they fell on me.

“Tony, get back to your room.” He uncurled himself from the desk and ripped me from my paralysis.

I wanted to leave, flop down on my bed and unsee that punch, instead my feet carried me deeper into the dimly lit room. Before it even trickled down to my brain what I was doing, my hands gripped Trace's biceps, and I tore him further away from Wesley.

He stumbled back a single step before realizing he was much stronger than me and could easily stop my feeble attempt. He yanked his arm free and glared down at me.

“Tony?” He spit my name out. Great, even that disgusted him.

“I think you're the one who should go back to their room.” The steadiness of my voice surprised myself, although I knew there was not a drop of fear in my veins.

“You don't have a bloody say in what I'm supposed to do.” Trace worked his jaw. “You're not welcome here. You're not-”

“Trace!” Wes cut him off and pulled me back by my shoulders. My back collided with his chest. I wasn't sure if he was trying to protect me or himself.

“What? You scared I'd hurt her?” Trace threw his arm in my general direction, and I couldn't help flinching. Wes tugged me behind his arm although I doubted that would be much of a protection.

“Actually, yes.” Wesley seemed calm, but his fingers trembled on my elbow.

“Fuck!” Trace screamed and ran his hands through his hair as he turned his back on us. “Fuck you, Wes. Fuck you!”

He bolted, banging the door shut and a moment later banging the door across the hall. We waited for another few seconds, neither of us breathing a word. Trace didn't come back and I didn't hear any sign of him throwing my suitcase out of my room, so he was probably calming down in his own room. Maybe I should teach him the breathing exercises my therapist taught me. They usually helped with the anger.

“Are you okay?” Wesley searched my face for traces of fear.

“I'm fine. I've been screamed at before.” I turned out of his hold on me and fell two steps back, putting a safe distance between us. “That punch looked terrible, though.”

“Nothing to worry about. Brothers fight.”

I finally had the last blank filled in. The similar features had suggested it but I'd seen cousins who looked like twins. Trace didn't just hit a relative, he hit his little brother.

“I can leave, you know. I don't know why Trace hates me, but I don't want to come between you. Family's important.”

“Tony, he decided that he gives a damn about family a long time ago. This isn't your fault. These days anything will make him explode.”

“Oh.”

“Would you mind? I'd like to get back to bed.”

“Oh, yes, sorry. Sorry.” I twirled around and awkwardly waved at him before slipping out the door and into my room as quickly as possible.

I spent most of the night staring at the ceiling, trying to figure out what time it was in Arizona. My phone was still dead – London had weird sockets that didn't work with my charger – and I still sucked at math, which made my watch pretty useless in this regard. Finally, around four, my body decided that it would be okay to fall asleep now. Well, my body didn't take my new neighbor into regard.

I heard the voices outside my door first, the low murmur that was Trace and a high-pitched, giggling companion. Not too long after that, I decided that earplugs were desperately needed. But I was not going to complain. I was not going to annoy Trace more than I already did. I was not going to be a pain in the ass. If he wanted to hook up with loud girls, he could hook up with loud girls. None. Of. My. Business. None at all. I would just press a pillow over my head and pretend that I didn't still hear them through the earplugs.

~~Alex wanted me back by three, so we could fill out some paperwork. I still hoped that I might be out of here by then. Living under a roof with a crazy man wasn't exactly my idea of fun, but I'd have to come to terms with that if I couldn't find Mom today.~~

I had called the last remaining number from the phone book about five times already but still nobody answered. Which meant I had no further clue, which meant I was most likely homeless for another night unless I worked for my accommodation.

The subway was a puzzle I wasn't keen on taking on, so I rode the bus again, going back to the last specific address I had. The one on my list just above where it says 'Moved to Clapham with Aaron'.

I liked the old houses, and on any other occasion I would've taken the time to appreciate the ornate carvings on some of them and the way the stone crumbled off others, but I couldn't spend too long on the beautiful doors and tall windows. I had a tight deadline.

Yesterday, I'd only been able to talk to the neighbors. Maybe I could get a hold of the new residents. Maybe they had the new address for forwarding mail. I crossed the street and almost got run over by a black car. Stupid traffic rules. Couldn't everybody just drive on the right side of the road? I ran my fingers through my curls and jogged up to the right house.

You had to knock on the door, using a big iron handle because they didn't have a door bell installed. I had to remind myself that there was no time to marvel at the antiquated way of life. I took a deep breath and brought the door knocker down hard. Once, twice, three times.

"Please, be home," I whispered, kneading my fingers behind my back.

The door swung open and a girl with the biggest grey eyes and dreadlocks in all colors of the rainbow grinned at me. "You're not the mailman girl, are you?" She knotted her arms in front of her chest and poked her tongue into her cheek.

"Uhm, no. Is this your place?"

"Oh lord, please do not tell me, you're here about the noise? I swear to Mother Nature that it's not us. It's those bastards from the house on the street out back."

"I'm not here about the noise either. My mom used to live here..."

"Oh, you're here to grab the last box? Come in."

I could tell her the truth, but the image of the box popped into my thoughts and the idea of having something that belonged to my mother clawed itself into my mind. She left something and it could be mine in a matter of minutes.

I stepped up and the girl closed the door behind me, dozens of bangles jingling on her arm.

"I'm Sabrina."

"Tony," I replied and outstretched my hand.

Sabrina swapped it away and pulled me in for a short, but very tight hug. I couldn't help checking if my purse was still in my pocket afterwards. There had been a time when I knew exactly when somebody wanted to steal from me, but my little tricks were fading from me. They left along with the other things that made *Antonia* an unbearable person to be.

"Come on up." She waved me to the stairwell and jogged up in front of me, "Jon just made vegetable lasagna. It's delish. You have to try it. I'll be right there with your stuff. Get comfy. We love having people over."

Something was terribly wrong with all these people here. I didn't mind being treated uber-friendly, but this was just taking a spin towards crazy.

She pushed me into a high-ceilinged kitchen that smelled of herbs and something similarly earthy. I tried to ignore that smell, tried not to notice the penetrating odor of Jon as he pulled me into a hug, too. He looked like Jesus in a wide white linen shirt, his dark hair falling to his shoulders and a beard framing his jaw. I doubted Jesus was stoned, though.

"I'm Jonathan," he whispered, "You can call me Jon. Or Moon Shadow."

That guy oozed weed. *Calm down, calm down*, I reminded myself. I wouldn't get upset because a stranger was on drugs. This was okay. Nobody expected me to share a joint with Jon. I just had to wait for Sabrina.

"Tony."

"Cool. Do you want lasagna, Tony?"

I looked at the cheesy goodness on the table. Most likely there were some special, secret ingredients in that, and they were not legal in this country.

"I'd love to, but I just had a burger on my way here," I lied.

"Tony, did you know the romans just ate until they threw up and when their stomach was empty again, they continued eating. You can eat as much as you want to, here. The toilet is on the third floor."

"I'm not really into bulimia."

Jon spread his arms in a 'suit yourself' gesture and plopped down in a chair just when Sabrina came carrying a small box. My stomach sank to my feet. It was a tiny shoe box. What if all there was in it was a pair of pumps? What if all there was in it was Christmas tree decoration? You couldn't put much in a freaking shoe box. It wasn't even big enough to hold documents.

"Here you go." Sabrina pushed the box into my arms. It was fairly light. It definitely didn't contain much.

I plastered on a fake smile. "Thanks."

I had ruined my chance to ask for the address for a pair of old shoes or yellowed postcards. If I asked for an address now, they would go stoner-paranoid on me. The dutiful daughter picking up her mom's stuff is supposed to know the address. I couldn't use the police getting involved in this. In the end, I'd be shipped back to the United States.

"Are you staying for the lasagna?" Sabrina smiled, flashing a piercing under her upper lip.

I shook my head.

"Too bad. Listen, we're organizing this really cool party for next weekend. Basically everyone is invited. Here's my number. Text me if you're interested and I'll tell you when and where to show up."

That was so not going to happen, but I smiled and took the scrap of paper from her. She sported a marijuana leaf tattoo on her middle finger.

I had to get out of this hellhole, get away from the heavy smell and Jon and the memories that I still had under control, wrapped up and stashed away. Far away.

"Thanks," I breathed, "I'll see you around. It was so nice meeting you." I scurried for the door.

Sabrina followed me to the stairs, called after me, "Say hi to your mum, she's such a nice lady."

I couldn't let her keep me. I had my mother's things. I had something. She probably had no idea where my mother was or how I could reach her. Otherwise she would have sent the box, right? Nothing was keeping me here for one more second.

On the bus ride back to The Dirty Dungeon, my fingers cramped around the box, while I spent half an hour inhaling and exhaling on the count of four. If I hadn't been in public, I could have done some more breathing exercises, but these were enough to steady my legs until I reached my room and set the box down on my bed. My composure didn't even crumble the least bit when I changed from my cardigan into a plaid button down and tight black jeans, one of the last pieces of clothing I still had from *then*. The pants had studded pockets front and back and were ripped over my knees. I hoped they were convincing enough in terms of being able to deal with *pissed prats*. God knew my beige flats weren't intimidating.

Finger-combing the mess that was my hair into a low ponytail helped a little, too. Now, I looked more like sixteen instead of fifteen. I'd take what I got.

Alex didn't hide his surprise at my somewhat edgier appearance, then gave me a wide grin and two thumbs up, before showing me around. It was a very basic bar with an old cash register and zero computer input, and I didn't even have to do much besides waiting tables and heating food. Someone would always be behind the bar, taking care of the drinks.

I filled in a form and we made the arrangement that I could keep the tips, and my payment for the work itself was the room upstairs. It was the best deal I'd made in a long time.

"Are you good to go, then? We're opening in ten minutes."

"I'm okay." I unfolded the black apron and tied it around my waist, following Alex out of the office.

"Wow, last night, I thought the whole shirt and no trousers thing was hot but clearly I have never seen you as a working girl. Tie that bow one more time. Please."

Wesley's grin was crooked thanks to the swollen lip with a purple bruise spreading over his jawbone. You saw worse on TV every day, and he didn't seem to hurt a lot, but the sole certainty that this wound was my doing – indirectly – made nausea explode in my stomach.

I swallowed back the bile. "Very funny."

Alex crumpled his forehead at us, and I guessed he wouldn't stop staring unless this situation – mostly his son's state and words – was explained.

"And I wore pants," I added quickly.

"I didn't see any," he chuckled.

Oh, God. Hadn't he sold me as the waitress who Trace would not sleep with? Did he really want me kicked out for his amusement now? My face was burning. His father had to think I was a total tramp, losing pants on my first night here.

"I did. The shirt I sleep in is just really big, okay?"

"Okay."

Thank God, finally Alex chimed in again after clearing his throat, "What happened to your face?" Or not 'thank God'.

"Shagged a girl, she had a boyfriend, he wasn't happy. Whatever. I'm off."

I wished my hair was open. It was easy to hide behind a curtain of curls and pretend you didn't just witness a big fat lie being told to a parent. I busied myself with cleaning a glass that had a bright pink lipstick stain, avoiding Alex's eyes. I felt his heavy gaze.

"Listen, Darling, I don't mind helping you. I actually prefer to know a young woman safe under my roof instead of on the streets, but I'm always a father first."

"I'm sorry." Alex knew that Wesley's bruises were no angry boyfriend's doing. Of course he knew I was responsible. "I don't know why your son hates me. Trace that is, not Wes. Wes is really nice. But Trace took his hatred for me out on Wesley, sorry."

"Trace did that?"

"Oh. You didn't-"

"I was about to ask you not to shag either of them."

"Oh. Oh, no. You don't have to, I mean, uhm, I wouldn't ever. No. Just..." I shook my head rapidly.

"Okay." Alex chuckled. "Now that that's sorted, how about I open the door and you pick the first CD?"

Anything to steer away from a conversation about my sex life. I rushed over to the black stereo system. All of the CDs were very classic rock mixes, so old even I knew the bands simply because everyone knew the bands. I pulled a CD with a blank cover from low in the stack. The CD itself was blank, too. It might hold no songs at all but I was willing to try my luck with that instead of choosing a particular band and then be judged by my taste in music. Or the lack of it.

I pushed the disc in and listened to the spinning before the bass and the violins kicked in. My head was a moment away from bobbing frantically with the unknown beats, when a hand reached around

me and the music was stopped.

“Not that one,” Trace murmured.

I jumped. He was closer to my ear than I’d even noticed. Not that I’d noticed him creeping up on me in the first place. It was stupid, really, because he smelled strongly like soap and a darkly deep, male smell, that could make you forget that this chest heaving against my shoulder was that of a lunatic. I couldn’t help brushing against him, when I staggered to the side.

“Sorry,” I choked and watched amazed as he carefully handled the disc in his fingertips and firmly closed its casing, putting in another CD with as much attention. It was hard to imagine those same hands bashing in Wes’s face, but I’d witnessed it. “Wesley lied for you, to your Dad. He looks terrible.”

Trace cocked his eyebrow at me and hid the blank CD in the drawer beneath the stereo. “Am I supposed to feel bad?”

“Yes.” I couldn’t believe I had to explain basic humanity to this guy. “He’s your brother. You don’t just go around and punch people who love you. You don’t go around punching people period. Unless they’re really big, giant douchebags who did some very bad stuff.”

He smirked. “Very bad stuff, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“He keeps you around. It can’t get worse.”

I swallowed and counted to three – silently, obviously, but it barely helped to keep down the anger – before I opened my mouth again. “I work here and live here now. You should deal with that, because I’m probably stuck for a while.”

Speaking those words sent a dagger through my chest. I wouldn’t find Mom today and the rest of my search depended on the contents of a tiny shoe box and a last telephone number that belonged to a very unavailable person.

“You’ll be gone in a week. That’s a promise.”

“I hope so.”

“Good.”

“Fine.”

Three

Wes had taken over for me around midnight. I'd never been more grateful. Not a cell in my body was not exhausted. I was actually pretty sure most of them had already fainted, because they'd barely rested in days. The second I flopped down on the mattress my eyelids dropped shut. Something nagged in the back of my mind. Something about a box that needed to be opened, but I couldn't even open my eyes anymore. They were sealed.

That was until I heard them again, or rather heard her, because I didn't hear Trace. And the 'her' was a different 'her' from last night. Last night had been all 'Oh, God, oh, God' and tonight he had a girl over that cursed worse than a sailor. By the third "motherfucking hell" I was out of bed, by the fourth I was out in the hallway and pounding at Trace's door.

He could hit me, for all I cared. At least then I might be out and able to sleep soundly. The girl didn't stop the string of cursing, so I assumed they were still going at it. My fist collided harder with the wood. I was going to kill this son of a-

"Tony!" Wes whisper-shouted from his doorway. Apparently I'd gotten a few hours rest if he was already back up here, but I still wanted to sleep through the night without disturbances. And that was only going to happen if Trace kept his bedfriend in check.

I ignored him and kept knocking.

"Tony, bloody hell, get away from there."

Wes grabbed a fistful of my shirt and yanked me back. I gagged at the sudden pull on the collar, but my legs caved in and I stumbled back into his room with him. He slammed the door shut and flipped the lights off. His arms caged me by the door.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"I was trying to get some sleep. Trace has a very loud girl in there."

The knocking picked up again, across the hallway and since I was not the one hammering my hand into other people's doors that left only one option: Trace was punching away at my door.

"Get into my bed. Cover up." Wes pushed me deeper into his room.

"What?"

"Trust me. Let me handle this, okay?"

The other option was facing his brother, so I tried not to think too hard about what Wesley probably did in his bed, as I crouched and felt my way over the mattress until I found his blanket and slid in under it. I pulled it up to my chin.

I heard him sigh from across the room, then he pulled the door open and light poured in. Wes was wearing nothing but a pair of boxers.

"Man, what are you doing out there?"

Trace raised his voice, probably for me to hear through my room's door, but I heard him just as clearly in here. "That bitch just interrupted us. She wants a fight? She can have one."

"I'm sure she didn't."

"Stop that shit, Wes."

"I'm not shitting you. I'm saying *I am sure* she wasn't interrupting you."

"Is she hiding in there?"

"Trace, don't-mph"

Trace shoved Wes into the door and stalked into the room, he was as naked as Wesley. His eyes were wild as they scanned the room and finally found me cowering under his brother's blanket. The way his gaze travelled over me and the crumpled sheets, I knew what Wesley had done. He'd given me an

alibi. The worst possible one in my opinion, but I could see Trace putting it together.

~~“You knocked on my door,” he said, but his voice was falling apart.~~

“No, I didn’t.” I had to sound firm where he was second-guessing things. Because I was suddenly very keen on not being knocked out by his fist.

“Man, you probably heard your own bed. Stop staring at Tony already.”

“We weren’t in bed.”

“Well, maybe you heard my bloody bed knocking against the wall. Stop staring at my woman, before I kick your ass.”

“I’m naked under here,” I spluttered.

A muscle in Trace’s jaw flipped and he reluctantly turned to face his brother. They were having another argument, this one completely fought through stares that I couldn’t decipher. Maybe I didn’t want to. In the end Trace shot me a last sad look before he stalked off. Surely I’d imagined the disappointment in that look. It must have been anger about his defeat. But he looked let down not beat down as he left with slack shoulders.

Once Trace had audibly made his way back to his room Wes flipped on the lights and crawled onto the foot of the bed.

“Tony, he’s very easily triggered. You have to keep out of his way.”

“Yes, well, he pulled my trigger, too. He should keep his girlfriends quiet if he has to bang someone every night, because I need to sleep some time. I can’t do that if he makes them scream.”

His mouth quirked up. “Next time, you just scream back.”

“Oh yes, because I am your woman now. You would obviously make me scream. Especially when we’re not even in the same room while we’re supposedly having sex.”

“We’re in the same room now. You can give it a go.”

“I’m not sleeping with you.”

“Scream. He can hear you. Believe me, I hear his girls all the time.”

I smirked. Despite the fact that I was kind of disgusted by the fact that Trace had girls over all the time, I actually liked the idea of giving him a dose of his own medicine. „You want me to scream your name, or...”

“Hell no. We’re doing this right. It’s payback time for that asshole. Get up.”

I followed his request, because he was making his way around the bed. He grabbed the footboard and started shoving the bed into his wall. Granted, it wasn’t a very big bed and couldn’t be very heavy, but Wes didn’t look like he was trying very hard either. I was so captured by his rhythm that I jumped when he moaned, “God.”

Oh. Oh, we were doing this. We were having fake sex. He raised his eyebrows at me, and I responded with a way too giddy “Wesley!”

Wes cracked and bit his lip in a failing attempt not to laugh, but he kept the thumps coming. I couldn’t do this. I’d had like an orgasm or two in my life. I’d watched When Harry Met Sally. Trace’s face popped into my head, the image of the punch and the sound of his stupid ass female friends. So this time I let my breath come from deep in my throat and moaned loudly. It wasn’t even a word I moaned. I just kept up making some loud sex noises.

They did earn me an approving grin from Wesley. After a couple of minutes he nodded frantically and made some very loud sounds himself. He pushed the bed quicker. This was our peak. I jumped up on the bed. I didn’t look at Wesley, I stared at the door, as I jumped up and down on the mattress and screamed Wesley’s name and basically all the variations of ‘Yes’ I could think of. To serve the chick in Trace’s bed, too, I let out a last shrieked curse word and collapsed on the mattress mid-jump.

Wesley shoved his bed one last time, before falling back on the floor and holding a hand in front of his mouth to silent his laughter. His chest vibrated. I let my head fall back onto his pillows and let out

a loud sigh.

I hoped Trace had heard. I hoped he'd be wide awake not getting the image of his brother in action out of his head. It would serve him just right.

There was just one more thing. "I promised your Dad that I wouldn't hook up with you."

"He won't know. He moved in with his girlfriend last year." His breathing was still shaky.

"Then I just had the best fake orgasm ever."

"See, even faking it is fun with me." He winked at me and propelled himself up, clawing his way back into bed. The mattress dipped to the side and I just so managed not to roll into him. "I like you, Tony."

"Uhm... Wesley, I like you, too, but in a completely platonic way. I mean, the fake sex was great, but I'm not... I'm only in London to find my mother."

"Of course only platonic, Jesus, but Tony..." He furrowed his brows and plucked at the blanket. There was something on the tip of his tongue that wouldn't come off just yet.

"Wesley."

"Trace won't like this." That was obviously not what he'd meant to say, but I couldn't push him. We'd barely known each other for 36 hours. It felt more like days, with Wes being this easy-going, nice and kind of strange guy who adopted me as a friend.

"It's none of his business who we sleep with. We're both adults. You are eighteen, right?"

"Yes," he laughed, "I'm twenty."

"As adults we can have as much fake sex as we want to."

"Are you asking for a round two?"

"Not tonight. I'm going to rock a stride of pride now. Thanks, Wesley."

I quickly slipped out the door and then enjoyed every single one of the three steps it took me to get to my room. This was better than knocking Trace's door down and screaming at him. Everyone should have some of Wesley's free fake orgasms sometime. It was a lot more fun and a lot more satisfying than a fight in my PJs.

Four

My stride of pride had turned into a walk of shame the next day. My tired brain had thought of the bogus affair as a good idea, but now I felt Trace observing my every move as I hurried past him from the bathroom back to my room. The extra attention made my ears turn into flames.

I worked my wet hair into a tight braid and slipped on the most decent clothes I'd brought. The skirt and the collared shirt were fit for Sunday services. It was the perfect outfit.

I had to remember that I was different now. I was skirts and cardigans and breathing exercises, not fake sex and rock'n'rolling in torn jeans.

The box sat in the center of my bed, waiting to be opened, waiting to reveal its secrets, but all I did was stand in front of the bed and rub the back of my hand. Maybe the birthmark, a tattered photograph and this box were all I'd ever see of my Mom.

I filled my lungs with air and stretched for the lid. My fingertips brushed the edges, when my door swung open and Wes widely smiled at me. "Time for breakfast. What's that?"

I crinkled my nose at the box. "Remember how I told you I came here to find my Mom? This used to be hers. I went by her old place yesterday and the girl living there gave it to me. I don't really want to open it, though. What if it holds nothing important at all?"

He kicked the door closed and examined the box without opening it. "What exactly do you need to be in it?"

"An address. A phone number. An email address. A library card? Anything to help me find her."

"Do you want me to check?" He shook the box and I immediately latched onto it. Even if it was just a Christmas tree decoration, it was still my mom's Christmas tree decoration. I'd like to have something of hers.

"No. Just leave it. You said something about breakfast." The rest of my sandwich was gone by now and I had last night's tips to buy me a proper breakfast. And coffee. I desperately needed coffee.

"Yes. Time to eat!" He snatched my wrist and pulled me up, hardly giving me the chance to grab my bag on our way. Down in the bar he let go off my wrist, instead guided me past Alex and a guy checking out and past Trace by my shoulders. Wes's hands were heavy on them, but not as heavy as his brother's glare.

He couldn't still be angry that we interrupted him or kept him up. He could stop throwing firey daggers at me through his eyes. For god's sake, I already knew he hated me.

I let out a sigh of relief once we stepped out of the gloomy pub and into the bright morning sun. "I need coffee."

"And coffee you will have."

"Hey!" The door swung open again, making us jump to the side, unless we'd wanted to be crushed by it. Trace shielded his eyes against the light. "Breakfast?"

I nodded and Wesley shrugged.

"I'm coming with you." It wasn't a question for permission that I could decline.

Wesley nudged me and turned to go.

"Where are you going?" Trace sounded irritated at Wesley's choice of direction. It really wasn't that important where we got breakfast. I just needed something to eat and I didn't care if it was down this or that road.

"We're not getting bagels. *Tony* wants coffee." I did. No need to pronounce my name like I was the one at fault for choosing the directions.

"We can get bagels, if you want bagels. I bet I can get a cup of coffee to go anywhere." I shrugged.

Trace's confusion didn't wear off. He just stared at me again like I was a zoo animal. This time the gagging sound didn't come until he reached my skirt. We were definitely not getting bagels, especially not if he needed them to survive.

I grabbed Wes's elbow and turned him back to the way he originally wanted to go. He snatched my hand up and wrapped it around his arm. Being linked to him made it a little harder to not fall down, because he was walking fast and his long legs allowed him to make giant strides that I had to match with twice the amount of steps. I was basically jogging next to him.

Trace, unfortunately, didn't have a problem to keep up. I heard him right behind us the entire walk to some place called Coffee Donna. It was a cozy little coffee shop in a run down building. There were only three pink tables with plush green chairs, all of them empty.

The barista took our orders, we paid and then she asked us to get comfortable. Of course Wesley obeyed and I couldn't dodge a bullet called Trace by taking my breakfast back to my room. I took the seat opposite from Wes, and Trace twirled a chair around and sat with his arms up on the backrest.

"Why leech off us?" he demanded. "Didn't anyone else take you in, poor little girl?"

"Excuse me?"

"Seriously, Trace, that's why you came? To interrogate?"

"Shut up. I asked her a question."

Against my better judgment, I didn't just tell him that I didn't answer to rudeness, instead I knotted my arms over my chest and squinted at him. "I'm not leeching, I work for your Dad. And I didn't specifically choose your Dad's bar. I just looked for a place with a phone and a phone book, so I could call my mother whose number I don't know by heart. As it happens, your father needed a waitress that you would not jump into bed with, and since I disgust you so very much, I'm the perfect choice. You brought this on yourself, buddy."

The waitress called out our order, so before I could work myself up any more, I shoved back my chair and hurried over to curl my hands around my coffee. Smelling the steam made it easy to hide my practiced breathing from Wesley. He shot me a light smile and relaxation came easier than normally. Not that I usually had a pierced idiot poking around in my life. Even without Trace's comments, I knew I'd have to thank Alex big time once I figured out... everything.

"He's an ass," Wes whispered and grabbed my plate, too, carrying it back to our table and abandoning Trace's tea and Panini.

I had to remember that I was the nice girl here. It really was Trace who behaved like an ass, not me. So I balanced Trace's order with my coffee and wobbled over. At least I made sure to clonk his stuff down hard, almost making the tea spill.

He grumbled something that didn't sound like thanks.

"You're welcome," I said anyway.

"You're not," he said.

My therapist had said to avoid toxic situations and toxic people to have the best possible fresh start. I wondered if she meant people like Trace, too, or only people like my father. Criminals. Then again, violence was a crime, so Trace was toxic. I'd have to find a way to move around him, and I'd have to keep that in mind before I'd run over to his room to confront him again.

Nobody said a word for a couple of minutes. At least the chewing and sipping excused the lack of conversation, until Wesley's phone rang and he jumped out of his chair.

"Okay, you two have to promise not to rip each other apart. I've got to run. A friend needs to see me before class." Wes carried his plate off, grabbed his paper cup and stepped around the table to press a quick kiss to the top of my head. "See you later."

"Uh... yeah. Bye." Apparently we were still playing this game. My fake One Night Stand turned into a fake relationship and I hadn't even been noticed.

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