

**The Wedding Date**

**by Jasmine Guillory**

## Chapter One

Alexa Monroe walked into the Fairmont hotel in San Francisco that Thursday night wearing her favorite red heels, jittery from coffee, and with a bottle of Veuve Clicquot champagne in her purse. She took out her phone to text her sister Olivia, upstairs in one of the guest rooms.

*Getting on the elevator!!!*

It was always good to give Olivia a little more advance warning than most people. It didn't matter that Olivia had just made partner at her New York law firm, some things didn't change.

*Oh no was just about to get in the shower.*

Alexa got Olivia's text just as she stepped into the elevator. She laughed out loud as she pushed the number of her sister's floor, the laughter calming her nerves. Alexa couldn't wait to celebrate with her older sister, despite...no, maybe because, their relationship was still tricky after all of these years.

The elevator glided in the air, in that smooth noiseless way that elevators in expensive hotels do, while Alexa checked her purse for the third time to make sure she'd tossed the fancy crackers and brie in there. They would need a pre-dinner snack to soak up all of that champagne, after all. She wished she'd made the time to make brownies the night before, Olivia loved her brownies.

She spied the cheese and crackers in the corner of her purse, tucked away from the heavy champagne bottle. Just then, the elevator stopped with a jerk. A second later the lights went out.

“What’s going on?” she said out loud to herself.

A few seconds later, a dim light came on, but the elevator stayed motionless. She looked up and around, and jumped to see a man with a suitcase in the opposite corner of the elevator.

“Were you here this whole time?” she asked.

“What am I, a genie?” He grinned back at her.

“I guess you don’t really look like a genie.” He was a tall white guy, with tanned skin, rumpled dark brown hair, and about a day’s worth of scruff where a beard would be. She had a sudden urge to rub her hand on his cheek to see how prickly it was. How exactly had she missed seeing *this* man get on the elevator with her?

“Thank you, I think. But isn’t that what a genie would say?” he asked. “You’re not claustrophobic, are you?”

“Um, I don’t think so. Why, were you going to bust us out of here with your genie powers if I said I was?”

He laughed.

“I guess you’ll never know if I’m a genie now,” he said.

“Well, there was that time I got an MRI,” she said. “Being inside that tiny machine wasn’t much fun.”

“Sorry, you already lost your chance to see my powers.” He moved to the front of the elevator and picked up the emergency phone.

“Let’s see if they can give us an ETA on getting out of here.”

She tried not to stare at him in the dim lighting, but she couldn't miss the opportunity to check out his butt in his perfectly fitted jeans. It was as good as the rest of him. She tried to wipe the grin off of her face in case he turned around.

Stuff like this never happened to her. Not the stuck in the elevator thing, her life was full of crises like that—no, it was being stuck in an elevator with a hot guy that was the unusual part. She was always the one sitting on an airplane next to a chatty toddler, or a knitting grandma, or a bored college student; never a hot guy to be found.

After about a minute of him saying “Okay...okay” in progressively more tense tones, he hung up the phone.

“Well...” He paused and smiled at her. “Wait, I don't even know your name, my new elevator friend.”

“Alexa, and you, Genie?”

“Drew. Nice to meet you, Alexa.”

“Drew, it's a pleasure, but...”

“Right, these circumstances are not ideal. So, the bad news is that there's a power outage in the whole hotel.”

Her phone lit up just then with a text from Olivia.

*My power went out, where are you??*

“Ahhh, yes, I was just alerted to that.” Alexa held her phone up before she texted Olivia back.

*Whole hotel, I'm stuck in the elevator.*

“At least that means they were telling the truth,” Drew said. “The good news, or so they tell me, is that they have generators, so the elevators should start moving shortly.”

She slid down to the floor, placing her purse gently on the floor beside her. It would be a tragedy to break that champagne bottle.

“We might as well wait in comfort,” she said. Her favorite red heels were relatively comfortable for the first five hours, but she’d been wearing them for nine plus.

He shrugged off his leather jacket, gifting her a glimpse of his stomach muscles as his grey t-shirt shifted. Mmmm. Hot funny guy who occasionally flashed his abs. Was it her birthday?

“So are you a guest here, Drew? Where are you coming from?” she asked him so she wouldn’t stare.

“Just flew in from L.A. And you?” He sat down next to her.

“Oh, I live here. Well, over in Berkeley, anyway. I’m just in the hotel visiting someone.”

He glanced at her phone, her shoes, and back up at her.

“A pretty special someone, with those shoes on, and all of that smiling you were doing when you didn’t even notice someone else got on the elevator with you.”

“A very special someone,” she said, and his grin got wider. “Wait no, not *that* kind of special someone! My older sister! She’s in town from New York for work.”

Yep, this was how she usually acted around hot guys. Scared to make eye contact, stared at his abs, said something awkward.

“Ahhhh.” He laughed. “Okay, yes, I did think it was *that* kind of special someone. Do you two have a hot night in the city planned?”

She crossed her legs and adjusted her black wrap dress so she didn’t accidentally flash her underwear at this dude on top of everything else.

“Sort of, we’re celebrating. She just made partner at her law firm!” Alexa smiled down at her purse full of treats before looking back up at him. Not even cheese could compete with this dude.

He narrowed his eyes at her. Light brown eyes, with a really dark rim around them. His eyes were so pretty that she looked away again. Thank God her brown skin meant her cheeks couldn’t get too pink, otherwise he’d be able to see them glow in the dark.

“Okay, I’m happy for your sister, but what is in that bag? You keep looking at it like it holds the Holy Grail.”

She laughed.

“Just champagne and a few snacks. The plan is to drink the champagne here, and then go out to dinner...well, that was the plan, but we’ll see how long we’re stuck in this elevator.”

Drew scooted closer to her and looked in her purse. Alexa pushed it towards him, so he could see better in the dim light. She never let people poke around in her purse, but hey, this was a cute guy and a weird situation.

“Okay good, we have sustenance if we’re stuck here for hours. Champagne is so convenient because no corkscrew is needed, and then we’ve got...oh look at that, cheese and crackers, the perfect stuck in an elevator snack.”

She leaned back against the carpeted wall.

“Have you been stuck in an elevator before with a variety of snacks and been able to determine which ones are best for this situation?” she asked.

“No, but come on, cheese and crackers are obviously the best possible stuck in an elevator snack. First of all, you had the foresight to bring a soft cheese, so we won’t need a knife to cut it, we can just use the crackers to pull off bits and spread with our fingers. And second:

have you never not enjoyed cheese and crackers? Ever not thought ‘Oh boy, these cheese and crackers are exactly what I need right now?’”

She considered for a moment.

“Stop, no, stop even thinking about it,” he said. “You know the answer is no. Cheese and crackers are objectively the perfect snack.”

She laughed and pried his fingers away from the box of crackers.

“Okay fine, you’re right. But you didn’t manage to talk me into sharing Olivia’s ‘You made partner’ cheese and crackers with you, you know.”

He stretched his legs out along the floor and took another glance into her purse.

“I was afraid of that. Well, I can only hope that we’ll be here so long that you’ll take pity on me.”

She slipped her shoes halfway off, just enough to relieve the pressure on her toes.

“No offense, Drew, but my goal is not to be stuck in this elevator with you all night.”

Although those abs... no, remember Olivia? Her sister? Right, Olivia, okay, yes, Olivia. Time to ask him another question so she’d stop staring. “Don’t *you* have plans tonight? What are you doing here in San Francisco for the weekend anyway?”

He made a face.

“Wedding.”

She made a face back at him.

“Don’t say it like it’s a prison sentence.”

He slumped against the wall.

“If prison sentences lasted for a weekend, this one would qualify. Okay, fine, a prison in a cushy hotel, but still.”

She looked around at the dim still elevator.

“Not so cushy right now. What’s so terrible about this wedding?”

He threw his hands in the air.

“Let me count the ways.” He held up one finger. “One: it’s my ex-girlfriend’s wedding.”

Alexa winced. She’d been there. Exes’ weddings were always a trial, even in the best circumstances.

Second finger. “Two: she’s marrying one of my best friends from med school.”

Alexa covered her eyes. Okay, he maybe had a point.

“Were they…”

“No, she wasn’t cheating on me with him, but…let’s just say I wasn’t particularly pleased about how it all happened, shall we?”

“Ouch. Well, I understand why you—”

He held up a third finger. “THREE.”

She sat up straight.

“There’s another of the ways? A third finger?”

“Oh yes.” He waved his middle finger in the air. “As a matter of fact, this is the worst of the fingers. Three: I am a groomsman.”

She swung around and faced him, mouth wide open.

“Are you kidding me? A groomsman? What? Why? How?”

“Yes, you are asking the important questions. The ones that Josh, Molly, and I all should have asked before this nightmare of a wedding weekend started. What and why indeed. *What* could have possibly inspired him to ask me to be a groomsman? *Why* would he do that? *Why*

would she allow it? *WHY* would I say yes? *How* did this happen? All of those questions should have been asked, and yet, here we all are.”

“Oh my God, Drew. That’s almost enough for me to give you some cheese.”

He patted her shoulder. Cheese, hell. If he’d let his hand linger there for a few more seconds, she would have given him a hell of a lot more.

“Alexa, I’m touched, I truly am. And then,” he waved another finger in the air, “there’s four.”

“Oh good lord, what could four possibly be? Are your divorced parents coming to the wedding with their spouses too or something?”

He laughed.

“No, but good guess, what a nightmare that would be. No, four is that I am not only a groomsman in the wedding of my ex-girlfriend and former best friend, but I am a dateless groomsman in the wedding of my ex-girlfriend and former best friend. My date bailed on me at the last minute, so I’m going to look pathetic and I’ll probably get drunk and hit on a bridesmaid, the whole thing is going to be a nightmare.”

She brushed that off with a wave of her hand.

“Oh please, you’ll be fine. Weddings are great places to meet people, it’s better that you’re without a date. As my friend Colleen always says, ‘Don’t bring a sandwich to a buffet.’”

He let out a bark of laughter.

“I’m definitely going to steal that saying. And while in most situations I would say that your friend Colleen is totally right, this is that five percent of situations where a sandwich would save me from all of the food poisoning and land mines in the buffet. I’m going to get so many pitying looks, you have no idea. And the worst part is that I RSVP’d with a plus one, so it’s

going to be a missing seat at the head table and ‘What happened to your girlfriend, Drew, couldn’t make it?’s and I’m going to have to smile and take it but there’s like a thirty percent possibility I’m going to have one too many glasses of bourbon and go rogue.”

She touched his hand and tried not to linger there.

“Okay, yes, sometimes a sandwich is a necessary security blanket. I’m sorry that yours bailed on you.”

He looked down into her purse again.

“Alexa, I’m going to need you to stop talking about sandwiches if you don’t want me to steal that cheese.”

She grabbed her purse and moved it to her other side.

“Now temptation is farther away, isn’t that better?”

He looked at her, at the purse, back at her. She smiled and kept her hand on the strap.

“So, Drew. What happened to your girlfriend?”

He narrowed his eyes at her, and she laughed again.

“Okay first of all, Emma wasn’t my girlfriend. We were just hanging out, that’s all.”

Alexa frowned at him. This guy had to be in his thirties like her. Hadn’t people stopped “just hanging out” with people by their thirties?

“Don’t look at me like that! I’m not a girlfriend kind of guy! And when I could tell that she might want something more serious, I ended it. I was nice about it! I don’t do girlfriends, I haven’t had a girlfriend since…” he sighed, “Molly. Anyway. Except I forgot that I needed a date for this damn wedding.”

Alexa pointed to the fourth finger that he’d raised in the air.

“Wait,” she said. “How, exactly, is that your date ‘bailing’ on you?”

He shook the finger at her.

“Don’t do that! Don’t blame this on me, it’s not my fault. It’s not her fault either—she was going to come to the wedding with me anyway, but her dad’s having surgery tomorrow, so she couldn’t come.” Those ab muscles moved in a lovely way when he sighed. “And of course, I’m sorry about her dad, I don’t blame her for that at all. I do, however, think this is just more evidence that I’ve been cursed when it comes to this wedding.”

Alexa laughed and relaxed against the wall. If she happened to move closer to Drew while doing so, that was just an extra benefit. Hey, it’s not like she was in danger of becoming this guy’s not-a-girlfriend, she could at least get a few accidental touches of his arm in before this elevator started back up again.

“You probably did something to deserve it.”

Drew reached around her and grabbed her purse.

“Oh really? I pour out my heart to you about this nightmare of a wedding and how now I won’t have a date and all of the terrible things that will happen to me because of that, and when you hear my tale of woe, you tell me that I did something to deserve it? Just for that, I’m taking some cheese.”

He reached into her purse, but hesitated for a second and raised his eyebrows at her. She sighed and nodded.

“Okay fine, you can have a little cheese, but you’d better save some for Olivia. And no tearing it off with your fingers, what kind of a Neanderthal do you think I am? There’s a knife in there.”

He beamed at her. Good lord, that was a dangerous smile. She looked away and found the butter knife so she wouldn’t throw herself at him.

He'd just bitten into his third cheese-laden cracker when the overhead lights came on and the elevator started with a jerk.

"Wow, are we actually moving?" She sat upright.

"Looks like I won't have to tackle you for the champagne next." Drew got to his feet and reached out a hand to help her up. Was it just her imagination that his hand lingered in hers?

Probably. She had a very active imagination. It helped make up for her current lack of a romantic life.

In no time at all, they reached the 16<sup>th</sup> floor. Alexa was treated to one more glimpse of those abs as he pulled his jacket on.

"Looks like your sister and I are on the same floor," he said, as they got off together.

"Looks like it." She smiled up at him for a second before she had to look away from those eyes again.

"Which way is she?" They both looked up at the arrow signs by the elevator bank.

"This way," she said, pointing to the left.

He consulted his room key.

"Ah, I'm that way." He pointed to the right.

They smiled at each other and didn't say anything for a moment.

"I can honestly say that I've never had a more entertaining time in an elevator, thanks for that." He reached out a hand.

"Likewise." Alexa shook it. "Good luck at the wedding."

He laughed and grimaced.

"Don't remind me. Congratulations to your sister."

She thanked him and walked down the hall towards Olivia's room. She wished knew what else she could or should have said to keep talking to him longer. She sighed and kept walking.

"Alexa. Wait." This was crazy. Drew knew, objectively, that what he was about to do was crazy. But as she turned to walk away he shouted for her to stop a split second later.

"Yeah?" She turned. "You can't have the rest of the cheese, not even as a parting gift."

Okay, here was his opportunity to play it off, pretend that that's what he was asking for, banter with this cute and funny woman with the great cleavage one last time, then turn around and go to his hotel room and get ready for this brutal weekend... Well when you put it like that, maybe this wasn't so crazy.

"You... you wouldn't be free this weekend, would you? How long is your sister in town?" No turning back now.

"She leaves tomorrow after her deposition. I'm working on Saturday, I have an event at—"

"Working on Saturday, what about Saturday night? Even...Friday night?" Oh please let her be free, now that he'd gone that far.

"Well, I have to—"

"Be my date this weekend? Please? The wedding isn't until Saturday night so that would work, right? If you can't do Friday night I understand, but if there's any way you could come to the rehearsal dinner with me, I would... I don't know what I would do. Really appreciate it? Buy you all the cheese you wanted?" How did he go from zero to babbling and pleading with this woman in thirty seconds flat?

“Drew, I... are you sure?”

He smiled. With that question, he knew he'd almost got her.

“Positive. Come to the wedding, be my sandwich, protect me from poisoning and disaster. It'll be your good deed for the year. And it's only May, look at you, getting your good deed for the year done before the year is even half over!” He was so close to victory, he could tell by the smile in her eyes as she looked up at him. “Come on, Alexa.” He touched her shoulder. “Save me.”

She took a deep breath, and he held his as she considered.

“When you put it like that, what else can I do? I'll do it.”

He pulled her into a hug. Her champagne bottle laden purse clanked against his butt, and they both laughed.

“You won't regret this.” He pulled back and grabbed his phone out of his pocket. “Wait, give me your number.”

He typed in her number as she recited it.

“There, I texted you so you have mine. I'll send you all of the details later.” He turned to leave before she could say anything else.

“Okay, but Drew, are you...”

“See you tomorrow, Alexa. Congratulations again to your sister!”

He sped down the hall with his suitcase, not giving her a chance to back out.

## Chapter Two

Alexa stared at Drew's back for a few seconds. Had that really happened? Had that cute stranger just asked her to be his date for a wedding? And had she really said yes?

She turned and raced down the hall to Olivia's room and knocked on the door. Olivia threw open the door and pulled her into a tight hug.

"Get in here!" They grinned at each other and hugged again. It was great to see her sister, it really was.

"Your hair looks amazing," Alexa said. "The pictures on Facebook do not do that 'fro justice."

Olivia looked her over and frowned in that way older sisters can.

"The outfit is great, and I love the shoes, but I thought you were going to get blonde highlights? What happened?"

Alexa shrugged. "Sorry, I chickened out. I didn't think I could pull off the blonde."

Olivia made a face at her.

"Haven't we been over this? Look at Beyoncé!"

Alexa laughed. “I know I’m the same skin color as Beyoncé, but me in her blonde weave wouldn’t go over too well during city council meetings. Even though I work in Berkeley, I still work for the mayor, you know.”

Olivia plopped down on the bed.

“Oh please, you could get away with some blonde highlights, easy. But then, you always were the risk averse one.”

Alexa opened her mouth to argue but thought the better of it. She was here to improve her relationship with her sister, remember?

“Look what I brought you!” she said instead.

She pulled the champagne and the cheese and crackers out of her purse. “Not quite sure how cold the champagne is anymore, but we still have to drink it. And I heroically saved most of the cheese and crackers from the guy I was stuck in the elevator with, so we’d better enjoy them.”

“Well, of course we still have to drink that champagne! Gimme.”

Olivia grabbed the hotel water glasses as Alexa pulled the foil off the champagne bottle.

“I can’t believe you were stuck in the elevator all that time. And why weren’t you texting me back, was your battery out?”

“Okay, there’s a story there, but let’s toast to you before I get into all of that.” She twisted the metal tie open and pulled out the cork with a gentle pop. After she poured a healthy amount into each of their glasses, she held hers up.

“To Olivia Monroe, the first black female partner at Palmer, Young and Stewart in over ten years. To a brilliant lawyer, but most importantly the best big sister a girl could have.”

“Are you trying to make me cry?” Olivia said. “It’s not working, I don’t care if you see water in my eyes, it’s just because I’m allergic to this carpet.”

Alexa smiled and clanked her glass against Olivia’s.

“Cheers to you.”

They both drank, hugged again, and drank some more.

“What time are our dinner reservations, are we going to be late?”

Alexa took another sip of champagne, and checked the time.

“Reservations are at 8 and it’s not even 7 yet. Have some cheese.”

Olivia reached for the champagne bottle and refilled their glasses.

“Oh wait, what was the story from the elevator? Why weren’t you texting me back? I was worried that you were like, eaten by the elevator monster or something.”

“Elevator monster? Olivia Grace, you couldn’t come up with a better fake worry than the ‘elevator monster’?”

“The champagne is already going to my head, and I had a six hour flight today, give me a break. Tell me this story immediately.” Olivia set her glass down on the nightstand and gave her a stern look.

“Damn do I feel sorry for whoever you’re deposing tomorrow. Does everyone you give that look to automatically spill their guts?” Alexa took a fortifying sip of champagne.

The real Olivia slipped out from behind the lawyer face as she grinned.

“Basically, so start spilling.”

Alexa took a deep breath. It had just happened a few minutes ago, and this story still didn’t seem like it had happened to her.

“So, the other person in the elevator with me was a guy.”

Olivia nodded.

“Obviously, otherwise you would have texted me back.”

Alexa kept talking so she wouldn't lose her nerve.

“A cute guy.”

“Come on, am I an idiot? Of course he was cute, he wouldn't have even known the existence of the cheese and crackers in your purse if he wasn't. But I feel like that's not the end of this story. Wait.” Olivia looked Alexa up and down. “That dress looks like it's easy to get in and out of, I am going to be SO proud of you if you had a quickie in the Fairmont Hotel elevator!”

Alexa gasped.

“OLIVIA, eww no.”

Olivia sighed.

“I knew that was too much to hope for. My prude of a little sister strikes again.”

Alexa's hand tightened around her glass. Now she was a prude for not throwing her clothes off for a stranger in an elevator?

“I'm not a prude, but thanks for that.”

This always had to happen, didn't it? Whenever they got together her hopes were high, but within the first five minutes either she would manage to say something passive aggressive to her sister, or Olivia would somehow make her feel inadequate.

Olivia nudged her once and again when Alexa didn't look up the first time.

“It's not an insult, Lexie. You know you've always been the well-behaved one.”

Olivia hadn't called her Lexie in a long time. She forced herself to smile.

“Anyway.” Alexa stood up and poured the rest of the champagne into their glasses. The bubbles would cheer her up. “You should get ready, even though you are in San Francisco I don’t think you want to show up to dinner in that robe.”

“I bet I could make it the latest style.” Olivia grabbed a dress out of her suitcase and pulled it over her head.

“Zip me up.” Alexa jumped up behind her. “You distracted me with that whole sex in the elevator thing, what’s the rest of the story?”

“Excuse me, *I* distracted *you*?”

“Semantics. Continue.” Olivia reached into her purse for a lipstick.

Alexa slid her now much more empty purse over her shoulder and her right foot into a shoe.

“To make a long story short: I’m going to be his date to a wedding this weekend.”

“WHAT??”

Olivia froze in place, with lipstick only on her bottom lip.

“Well.” Alexa smiled. “I shocked *you* now. That’s a first.”

## Chapter Three

Drew tossed his bag on the hotel bed and grinned at the view out his window. He pulled out his phone and texted his buddy in L.A., Carlos, who had heard everything there was to hear about the saga of this wedding.

*Found a date for the wedding.*

Thirty seconds later his phone buzzed.

*Didn't you swear off women? Like, specifically because of this wedding?*

Oh right, he had done that, hadn't he?

*Ok but this is an exception.*

He investigated the sure to be overpriced mini-bar. What the hell. He opened a beer and sank down on the bed.

*Uh huh. Where'd you find this one, in between SFO and your hotel? Nothing about you should surprise me. And yet.*

He knew Carlos would appreciate this.

*IN my hotel, if you can believe it. In the elevator.*

Drew took a long drink of his beer and pulled off his shirt.

*Let me guess, tall, blonde, big fake boobs.*

Well, this would definitely surprise Carlos.

*Short, black, real boobs.*

Drew stripped and jumped in the shower, bringing the rest of his beer with him. This morning he had cursed his Friday breakfast meeting in Oakland with his mentor that forced him to get to San Francisco on Thursday night. Now he thanked whichever God that had inspired Dr. Davis to schedule that meeting so early in the first place. And also the one that made him follow Alexa onto that elevator.

Even though he was paranoid about running into another member of the Rogers/Allen wedding party, he took a chance and left his room to get a burrito from his favorite San Francisco taqueria. He pulled his hoodie up over his head as he crossed the hotel lobby, though. No need to take too many chances. Luckily, he made it there and back scot-free.

Fate wasn't as kind to Drew the next morning. As he got off the elevator in the lobby, he almost bumped into none other than Josh Rogers, who was holding a cardboard tray with two big Starbucks cups in it in one hand and a paper bag in the other.

"Drew! Oh man, it's so great to see you!" Josh said, a wide smile on his face.

"Yeah, man, same," Drew lied, happy at least that Josh's hands were full and they couldn't do the full bro hug that he could see Josh wanted.

"You just get here? I just got coffee for me and Molly, come up to the room and say hi? We're a little crazy with wedding stuff, but I know we'd both love to catch up with you!"

"Oh man, I wish I could." Josh was so nice and cheerful that lying to him was like lying to a puppy. Easy and mean all at the same time. "I have to run, I'm heading out to have breakfast with Dr. Davis, he's at Children's Hospital in Oakland, you know."

"Wow, that's great! I'd love to hear more about what you're—"

“Sorry Josh, I don’t want to be late. I’ll catch up with you later?”

“Yeah, yeah, definitely. See you tonight at the rehearsal. Oh, Molly said you rsvp’d with a plus one? New girlfriend?”

“Yeah, new girlfriend, she’ll be there tonight.”

“Awesome, man! I can’t wait to meet her. Do me a favor and text me how to spell her name? For the place cards, you know.” Josh smiled with a dreamy look in his eyes. “Molly’s been asking.”

“Oh right, of course, of course, I’ll let you know. Gotta run, see you tonight!”

Drew was halfway across the Bay Bridge before it hit him. New girlfriend. Shit.

Alexa stumbled into her City Hall office at 7:25 Friday morning, hung over from that bottle of champagne and all the cocktails she and Olivia had had at dinner. As she pushed open her office door, her work phone and cell phone rang simultaneously.

She dropped her bag on the floor, set her full cup of coffee down on her desk, and shook her head. “Not today, Satan. I’m not falling for your tricks today, my coffee hasn’t even had time to cool.”

“Talking to our coffee again?”

Alexa looked up to see Theo, the mayor’s communications director and one of her best friends, standing in her doorway.

“I cannot be expected to talk to anyone except for my coffee this early in the morning. I blame you for this.” She blew on her coffee in the futile hope that it would cool faster.

“I know you do. Sorry for the early morning meeting, but the boss gets on a plane to San Diego at eleven, and we’ve got to...”

She waved her hand, stopping him.

“Yeah yeah yeah. You did bring me doughnuts, didn’t you?”

He grinned.

“I did not bring *you* doughnuts, I brought doughnuts for your boss the mayor, who should not eat doughnuts but loves them almost as much as you.”

She pulled a few files out of her bag, grabbed her laptop and the coffee, and they walked towards the conference room.

“Yes yes, but, did you —”

“Yes, I saved a glazed with rainbow sprinkles for you, what are you, a six year old girl? You’re the mayor’s chief of staff, you should be eating a chocolate croissant or fresh fruit and granola or something.”

“Six was a wonderful time in my life, I try to keep it alive at all costs, thank you very much,” she said. “Have I ever told you that you look just like a black Clark Kent?”

Theo adjusted his glasses.

“Yes, every time you’re trying to sweet talk me into being your cheerleader. I’ve got your back during this meeting, no need to butter me up.” He frowned at her. “Today, that is.”

She grinned at him and snagged her doughnut, just as the mayor and his secretary walked into the room.

“Why, exactly, are we here this early, Theodore?” Mayor Emmitt boomed out, before investigating the pink doughnut box.

“You have a trip to San Diego scheduled for the climate change conference this afternoon, and so—”

“Yes yes I know, let’s get on with it. Alexa, what’s this thing about delinquent teenagers?”

She locked eyes with Theo, took a long sip of her coffee, and flipped open her laptop.

“Well, sir...”

An hour later, she finally managed the second bite of her doughnut as the mayor walked out the door on the way to his next meeting.

“Lex, you know how he is, it’ll take a little time.” Theo handed her the now lukewarm coffee as they got up to walk to their offices.

She shrugged and tried to smile.

“I know. Thanks for the support in there.”

“Anytime. Did you talk to your sister about this idea last night? You said before that you thought she might have some ideas for you.”

Alexa shook her head. She’d almost brought it up a few times, but each time she’d gotten too nervous to say anything.

“It wasn’t the right time, Theo. We were celebrating, and...anyway, it wasn’t the right time.” She changed the subject. “Did you go out with whatshername last night?”

He rolled his eyes.

“Most boring date I’ve ever been on. That woman and I had *nothing* to talk about. Buy you more coffee and I’ll give you the highlights, such as they were?”

She fought back a yawn.

“Definitely.”

Alexa checked her phone when she and Theo got back from their coffee run. A text from Olivia about her hangover, a few from her best friend Maddie about the book they'd both been reading, and one from an unfamiliar 310 number.

*2 things: 1) we're still on for tonight, yes? 2) what's your last name?*

Elevator guy. Tonight. Oh dear God. That hadn't been some sort of alcohol-induced hallucination?

Shit. A rehearsal dinner and a wedding at the last minute? What was she going to wear?

*Yes. Monroe. And if I'm coming to this thing, I need some details about when/where/etc.*

"Etc." meant "what the hell am I supposed to wear???" but she supposed she couldn't text that to a guy, let alone one she didn't even know.

*Rehearsal dinner @7 at Beretta in the Mission. Wedding @6 tomorrow, palace of fine arts. Btw I told josh you're my new girlfriend, just fyi.*

She stared at the phone for two full minutes. His new girlfriend? She had to pretend to be his girlfriend?

*I had too much alcohol last night for this.*

She had a reply almost immediately.

*You and your sister celebrated her partnership in style, I see. Did she enjoy my cheese?*

She couldn't help but laugh.

*It was HER cheese, and yes, she loved it. Why did you need to know my last name?*

She reached for her coffee cup and took a gulp. Thank God she'd gotten the largest size they had.

*1) I should probably know my girlfriend's last name, right? 2) josh asked for it for the place cards*

She looked up at the knock on her door.

“I was going to check to see if you needed coffee, but I see you’re all set,” her assistant Sloane said.

She almost asked Sloane to get her a pastry before she remembered she still had a doughnut sitting on her desk. She took a bite of it. Maybe the sugar would help her figure out exactly why she was going on a fake date with a strange guy tonight.

Oh right, because she’d accidentally said yes, and then Olivia had accused her of being a prude, so now she had to go.

*Drew is short for Andrew, I assume? I should know that if I’m your fake girlfriend. I thought you didn’t do girlfriends?*

She scrolled through her emails and answered the easy ones as she mentally went through her closet to try to figure out what she was going to wear to this wedding. A few minutes later, Sloane poked her head back through the door.

“Oh hey, your lunch meeting just called to cancel, I rescheduled you for Tuesday.”

“God bless you.” Alexa checked her calendar and saw she was free almost all afternoon.

“She already has,” Sloane said on her way out the door.

*Short for Andrew yes (don’t call me that). And, well, long story. Wait, do you work in SF? What do you do? I should know this about my girlfriend.*

She took a sip of coffee and another large bite of her doughnut.

*No, I work in Berkeley. For the mayor.*

Wait, should she really be eating this doughnut if she was going to have to be in a cocktail dress in a few hours? Shouldn’t she be drinking vitamin water or green juice or something?

Eh. She took another bite and went back to her emails.

*Are you a lawyer like your sister? I'm a doctor, you should probably know that too.*

She laughed. Did this dude think she hadn't listened to every word that had come out of his mouth the night before?

*The whole "wedding of my ex-girlfriend from med school" thing kind of clued me in there, yeah. I am a lawyer, practiced for a while, am now the mayor's chief of staff.*

But seriously, what the hell was she supposed to wear to this wedding? Time and venue was helpful, but that didn't tell her everything.

She hadn't been a bridesmaid a million times for nothing. After a few quick searches of wedding websites for the names Molly and Josh, and Saturday's date, she came up with their wedding website.

Black tie optional?

Alexa groaned and put her head back down on her desk. Her closet definitely was not built for black tie optional. After a few seconds she sat up and scrolled to Maddie's name on her phone—if anyone could save her, her best friend the professional stylist could. Who knew non-celebrities used stylists? Not her, until Maddie had started her business.

*Long story but I have a sort of date tonight; wedding rehearsal dinner, going with a guy I hardly know (and that's putting it mildly), and also the wedding tomorrow (I don't even know). I will tell you the whole story you know I will but the important thing is WHAT DO I WEAR, HELP ME.*

Then she shot Drew another text:

*Black tie optional wedding with a day of notice. Why am I doing this again?*

Because, the voice in her head said, he's hot, and you haven't even had a fake date in over a year.

*You're not going to back out on me, are you?* Drew sat in a Berkeley coffee shop, blocks from where he now knew she worked. *Please don't back out on me. Don't make me go to the buffet.*

Of course she was going to back out, she was cute and funny and smart, and he oozed desperation. He didn't usually have trouble getting girls to go out with him. But finding a date for this wedding had been such a nightmare it was like his own personal punishment for everything wrong he'd ever done to or with women: first there'd been everything with Emma, when he called Julia she had a new boyfriend, and Carlos's sister had laughed in his face when he'd hinted at her coming with him.

He had resigned himself to dealing with what a disaster the wedding and the aftermath would be. Then one power outage and malfunctioning elevator had saved him, he'd thought. He'd maybe jumped at that solution a little too eagerly, as usual.

*Not backing out. Even though...*

Oh thank God. Sometimes his crazy impulses worked out. He sighed in relief, and his thumbs flew over the keyboard.

*No even though don't even though me. I will owe you so big for this you'll have no idea. There will be a new Alexa Monroe wing in every hospital in the state. See you tonight then?*

*I'll be there. Please just text me ahead of time if we become fake engaged in the next few hours, ok? I'll have to borrow a ring.*

*What, you think I wouldn't buy you a fake engagement ring? You obviously don't know Drew Nichols very well.*

*Since I didn't know your last name was Nichols...*

He laughed and downed the rest of his coffee.

*Point to you, Monroe.*

Another text flashed on his screen as he stood up.

*; ) Running to a meeting. See you later.*

Alexa had looked so flabbergasted when he'd told her the details of the wedding. Everyone else in his life knew most of the Josh/Drew/Molly backstory, so he had kind of forgotten how crazy it was that he was in the wedding. And the worst part was that he hadn't even told her the whole story; he'd actually seemed like a good guy in the story that he had told.

There was no point in telling the girl you were stuck in an elevator with for probably only a few minutes that you'd broken the heart of the nicest person in the world, the snowball that had started this whole avalanche, and you probably deserved all of the looks you'd get all weekend, right? It wasn't like he'd lied to her, everything he said was the truth, just not the whole truth. It wasn't like he'd made Josh or Molly out to be evil, had he?

Well maybe a little bit, but it was only because this no date for the wedding thing had driven him out of his mind. He should have just bailed on the wedding and looked like even more of a bad guy.

But now he had Alexa Monroe to come along with him and play the adoring girlfriend. He'd forgotten to tell her that adoring part, but maybe he could help that along some by playing the adoring boyfriend and she would get a clue? Shit, he really was going to have to buy her a hospital wing or something.

“I can’t believe you, Alexa. Where are all your cute dresses?”

Alexa’s “meeting” was with Maddie—first at Alexa’s house so Maddie could inspect her closet, then at the closest mall when her closet was not miraculously stocked with black-tie optional dresses. Alexa had opened her mouth to plead that she had too much work to do for a shopping excursion in the middle of the day, she could just wear her one little black dress that was sort of wedding appropriate, but when she saw the look on Maddie’s face she closed it. There was no point in arguing with Maddie when she had that look.

“I have a million cute dresses!” Alexa said, as she drove them out to the mall.

“Yes yes, of course you do,” Maddie said. “Cute WORK dresses, but those don’t count right now. You need cocktail dresses Don’t you ever go to weddings? I know you do, where are all of your dresses from those?”

“I’ve been to ten weddings in the past three years,” Alexa said. “I’ve been a bridesmaid in seven of those. I never get to buy cute dresses for weddings, they are pre-selected for me. And when do I ever need a cute non-work dress except for weddings?”

“What about the other three weddings?”

“I wore that black halter dress that you vetoed to two of them, and to the third I wore a fantastic gold sequined dress that I rented for the weekend.”

Maddie sighed.

“I remember that dress. It looked incredible on you. Well, obviously this mysterious date happened at just the right time, we clearly need to build up your cocktail dress wardrobe. Okay. Now. Who the hell is this guy you’re going to a wedding with?”

When she told the story without all the adrenalin and champagne, it sounded even more ridiculous. She finished just as she pulled into the packed mall parking lot. What were all of these people doing here in the middle of the afternoon? Shouldn't they all be at work? Shouldn't *she* be at work?

"This is crazy. Why am I doing this? I should not be dragging you all over town in the middle of the workday and spending money on dresses to go to a wedding with some dude I talked to for fifteen minutes in an elevator yesterday, what am I thinking?" She pulled into a parking space and reached for her phone.

Maddie took the phone away from her.

"Nope. You're not allowed to cancel. I'm not letting you talk yourself out of this opportunity for a practice, no stress date that just landed in your lap."

Alexa sighed and opened her car door.

"The thing is, Mad... this guy is out of my league, okay? He's hot, he's funny, he's flirty, he's a doctor. I'm your standard short black girl with big boobs and hips who can barely look him in the eye without looking away. I don't even have the right clothes to wear on a date like this, this is how far out of my league this is!"

The problem with trying to talk about this with Maddie was that the words "out of my league" had never applied to Maddie. She was at least 6 inches taller than Alexa, with a body like a Barbie doll, light brown skin that always seemed to glow, and hair that looked perfect no matter if she left it curly or blow-dried it straight. Alexa, on the other hand, was short, what people who liked her called "curvy," and had more than once turned down social invitations because she didn't have the energy to deal with her hair.

Maddie steered her towards the entrance.

“That’s exactly why you have to go. Nothing is riding on this! Look: you don’t know this guy, he doesn’t live around here, none of this matters. This way you won’t overthink things in that way you and I both know you do. You’ll just dress up, eat free food and drink free drinks, and look fucking hot the whole time if I have anything to do with it.”

Alexa rolled her eyes.

Maddie smacked her on her arm.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“I saw that eye roll, and you will look hot, I promise you. And plus, you’ll get two great dresses out of the deal.”

Alexa opened the Nordstrom door and gestured for Maddie to precede her.

“I have one weekend where I don’t have a ton of work to do and this is how I waste it?”

Maddie threw her arm around Alexa.

“You’re not wasting anything, it’s practice, remember? Plus, from those text messages you showed me, this dude will freak out if you bail on him now.”

When Alexa saw the armfuls of dresses that Maddie brought into the dressing room, she thought about bailing again.

“Maddie, these don’t look—”

“Don’t argue with me. Try them on.”

She was officially an unwilling participant in that Pretty Woman shopping scene. Except she was going to have to use her own credit card at the end of it.

She sighed and stripped down to her bra and panties and pulled the first dress on.

“No, next.” Maddie barely glanced at her in the dress before she vetoed it and pulled another dress from a hanger. “How’s it going with your arts program?”

Maddie knew everything about the program that Alexa had proposed to the mayor that morning: a pilot program for an arts and writing diversion program for at-risk youth. Alexa had been wanting to start a program like this in Berkeley for years, and now she was finally trying to make that dream a reality. It would be a place for teens who had gotten into some trouble to come and find their gifts, to find adults who believed in them, to work hard on something they loved to do, and get their feet on a different path.

“Well, I proposed it to the mayor this morning, but he didn’t say much. I’m not sure what he thinks. I’m worried.”

She posed in front of the mirror in dress number two. She sort of liked it, but Maddie shook her head.

“Was Theo there? What did he say?”

“That this is just how he is and I should wait and see, etc. And I’m sure he’s right, I’m just impatient. You know how important this is to me, Mads.”

“I know.” Maddie unzipped dress number three without even commenting on it. “I bet Theo is right, though. You know how your boss can be.”

When Maddie looked at her in the fourth dress, she smiled and pointed to the shoes that she’d ordered Alexa to bring along with her. Then she spun her finger in a circle, forcing Alexa to twirl. When Alexa caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, her eyes widened.

“Holy shit, I look hot.”

“Mmmhmmm, what did I say?” Maddie had that smug look on her face, but Alexa couldn’t even be mad at it.

How did one little dress make her look like a movie star? It was red, with a neckline that showed just enough cleavage, and a full skirt that floated as she twirled and somehow made her waist look tiny.

“Mads, isn’t this color too bright for a wedding? Doesn’t it make my hips look too wide? Isn’t it too...boob-y?”

Maddie shook her head.

“Nothing, it’s too nothing. It may be too expensive, but we’re not going to worry about that right now, this is an emergency. It’s the perfect color on you and your hips are just the right amount of wide. And all that ruching around the waist means you don’t have to wear Spanx, I know how much you hate them. Do you or don’t you look hot in that dress? Did I not tell you I’d find you one?”

“You don’t have to be so smug about it,” Alexa said, still staring at herself in the mirror.

“Yes I do. Okay, well that’s obviously your dress for the wedding, and thank God you have the perfect shoes for it, those gold ones you bought to wear with the gold sequined dress. Now we just need to figure out tonight.”

Twenty minutes later, Alexa handed over her credit card for both dresses and tried not to wince at the bill.

“Thanks for this, Mads,” she said. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“I don’t know what you’d do without me either,” Maddie replied.