



Make Me Yours
Kendall Ryan

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My editor, Tanya Saari is a rock star and a half. Thank you for making my story sparkle.

To readers everywhere. I heart you!

Dedication

To my husband, the best man I know. I am lucky to be yours.

Chapter 1

No matter how you sliced it, being the third wheel sucked. I scooted to the opposite edge of the picnic blanket, eager to distance myself from Ashlyn and Aiden's very public display of affection. I reached my limit when Aiden leaned over my friend and hand fed her a strawberry, kissing her lips as she chewed.

Gag me.

They'd been dating for a year now after meeting during an amnesia research study. Aiden was the patient and Ashlyn, as a fellow Ph.D. student, was studying him. It was considered risqué at the time but I'd come to accept that they were good together. That didn't mean that they weren't sometimes nauseating to be around. I put up with it because I loved Ashlyn like a sister, and she was happy. However that didn't mean I needed to be cock-blocked by them at every turn. And the cutie playing football in the park with his equally delicious friend was my next victim.

I threw a grape at Ashlyn to get her attention. She was somewhat distracted, with her tongue currently lodged inside Aiden's mouth. The grape bounced off the back of her head and she turned to me, confused.

"Hey, look at that fine piece of man meat. Two o'clock." I tilted my head, motioning to her right. Ashlyn snuck a glance and grinned. "The blonde? Blue shorts?"

I nodded. He threw the football through the air in a perfect spiral and into the waiting hands of his friend.

"He looks a little young," she said.

I rolled my eyes. "His friend's not bad either. Both of them together might be fun."

"Just be safe." She shrugged and gave me a wink. "Go for it, babe. We'll wait here."

I hadn't even had time to think about my next move when the ball Mr. Adorable and his friend were throwing landed at my feet. This would be easier than I thought. Like taking candy from a baby.

I stood and brushed off my jeans, leaning over casually to retrieve the football. With it tucked against my hip, I sauntered toward them. They watched me approach. The friend was smiling, but Mr. Adorable was more guarded.

"I think you dropped this." I tossed the ball into his capable hands. He caught it easily. Thanks to my older brother, I actually knew how to throw a football. I figured he'd invite me into their game, or make some suggestive comment about touching his ball, but instead he just smiled.

"Thanks." He turned and tossed the ball to his friend who was still watching me and missed the pass entirely.

Are. You. Kidding. Me?

Whatever. Rejected, I walked back to the picnic blanket and slumped down.

Ashlyn caught my mood and shifted closer to me, abandoning Aiden for the moment. "Are you

seeing Professor Gibson tonight?” she asked, trying to draw me into a conversation. I appreciated her effort to distract me from that epic fail as well as keeping me from feeling like I was intruding on a private moment between them.

“Nope. He has his son tonight. And call him Stu—‘Professor Gibson’ is just creepy.”

“Have you met his son?” Aiden asked.

“Definitely not. We’re not dating. We’re fucking,” I clarified.

“All righty then,” Ashlyn laughed and shook her head. “You’re more emotionally damaged than I ever realized.”

“It works for me.” I shrugged. It was the simple truth. I wasn’t looking for a relationship and Stu, whose divorce was still fresh, certainly wasn’t either. It was the perfect arrangement. He was thirty-six, recently single with a four-year-old son, and a professor in the business college, so our paths didn’t cross in the academic world. Which was good. It kept things from getting complicated. We had good sex. It was as simple as that. I’d met him at a charity function the university sponsored and I’d been seeing him a couple times a week for the last month. It was nice, regular sex with a nice, normal guy without any drama or expectations beyond enjoying the moment. Okay, so it was my twisted version of perfect, but I knew it was all I was prepared to handle at the moment.

After a few more unsatisfying minutes of watching Ashlyn cuddle with Aiden and being ignored by the guys on the lawn, I grabbed my purse and told them I was taking off, getting a vaguely halfhearted wave goodbye in return.

It wasn’t a long walk back, just a few short blocks. Not even enough time to dig my cell phone out of my purse to distract me.

I rented a large townhome on a sizable corner lot in a beautiful neighborhood in the city. I had the first and second floors all to myself and I knew the owner had been slowly been working to restore the remainder of the building—the top floor—to its former 1920s elegance.

Rapid footsteps coming up behind me caught my attention, and I spun around. The cutie from the park was jogging in my direction.

Aw, he’d come to make amends. He probably just didn’t want to share me with his friend.

I had reached the wrought iron gate at the walkway to my townhouse, so I stopped and waited, placing my hand on my hip, watching as he sprinted the last few paces.

He had stripped off his T-shirt and was now in just a pair of gym shorts slung low on his hips and running shoes. His chest and stomach were smooth and toned, reminding me strangely of one of those kids’ slip-n-slide water-play toys. He slowed to a stop and bent over, resting his hands on his knees. His chest rose and fell with each deep breath, pulling me into a trance as I watched.

I was formulating a witty opening line when he rose up and looked at me. His eyes were a gorgeous shade of deep blue, and his summer tan had yet to fade away, giving his skin a nice golden glow. He held the football under one arm and his T-shirt bunched up in the other hand. He could have been a freaking Ralph Lauren model. I didn’t often feel out of place, or lost for words, but he had not. I was flushed and momentarily silenced by just his dominating physical presence.

He rose to his full height—standing several inches above me. I smiled up at him and pulled in

breath, recovering slightly. “Stalking me now?”

His eyebrows pulled together in confusion. “Oh, right. You’re the girl from the park.”

No shit.

“I live here,” he said haltingly, still trying to catch his breath.

“You live where?” I asked, seeing as how we were standing in front of my house.

“Up there.” He pointed to the third floor, with its steeply pitched roof and minuscule octagonal window.

“Someone can live up there?” I didn’t mean for my face to scrunch up in repulsion, but when I saw his expression fall, I knew I had offended him.

“Not someone. Me. And yes, I live there. It’s small, but it’s clean and it’s enough.”

I had no idea that the attic space was for rent. No one had lived up there in the two years I had rented the house. “Oh,” I said, recovering. “I guess we’re neighbors then—I’m the first and second floors.”

He glanced at the house again, with its wide front porch, big wooden door and spacious layout. “All that? Just for you?”

I nodded. It was too much for one person, but I liked having my space. And since my parents had both funneled a large sum of money into my savings account to keep it away from each other in the divorce, I might as well live somewhere I liked. I’d decorated it with simple, yet stylish furnishings that I’d loved bargain hunting for. My townhome could now rival an upscale furniture catalog.

“Well, I guess I’d better go up and grab a shower. It was nice meeting you...”

“Liz.”

He smiled. “I’m Cohen. And since we’re neighbors, let me know if you ever need anything.”

“Sure. Likewise.” I returned his easy smile and watched his sexy back as he made his way around the side of the house to the staircase leading to his door. Oh yeah, I’d be looking forward to needing his help one day soon.

Chapter 2

I stayed up too late working on a research paper, skipped dinner and instead fueled up on a bottle of red wine and a bar of dark chocolate with sea salt, my all-time favorite. By the time I fell into bed I was exhausted and still slightly buzzed. Which is why when I woke up suddenly a couple of hours later, I didn't trust that my eyes were working properly.

A dark object swooped and circled above my bed, casting bizarre shadows in the moonlit room. What the...?

The object stopped moving and perched itself on the edge of the light fixture hanging from the ceiling. I blinked rapidly and squinted in an attempt to see more clearly. Then it stretched out a pair of wings and I let out a shriek. It was a bat!

I jumped from the bed, kicking my way free from the covers. I ran from my bedroom like I was fleeing a crime scene and only stopped when I was standing on the front porch, my heart thundering against my chest.

I rolled my shoulders back, trying to shake the creepy-crawling feeling from my skin. I looked down at my bare feet, realizing I was outside, dressed in just a black tank top and tiny pink shorts in the middle of the night. Not the smartest move. A dog barking in the distance brought my attention back the moment, and figuring out what to do next.

It was too late to call the landlord. My cats were worthless and couldn't be counted on to kill a spider, let alone catch a bat. Maybe I could go upstairs and ask my hot new neighbor to come down with the animal. He'd said to let him know if I needed anything, and I figured this definitely qualified.

But I couldn't venture up to his apartment dressed in practically nothing. I gave myself a pep talk and dashed inside, grabbing a pair of jeans from a laundry basket in the hall and sprinted back to the porch, slamming the door behind me. I quickly stepped into the jeans and pulled them up my legs, buttoning them overtop of the shorts.

I straightened my shoulders and marched up the stairs to Cohen's third-floor apartment. It was cool outside and the wooden steps under my bare feet sent a chill up my spine. Well that, and the idea of waking a complete stranger in the middle of the night to ask for a favor. But I had no other choice. There was no way I could go back into my apartment, let alone go back to sleep with a bat flying around in there.

I reached his door. It was the same solid dark wood as mine, with a decorative brass knocker in the center. I knocked on the door loud enough to wake him. I wasn't sure if he was a heavy sleeper, but I didn't want to take the chance. I normally felt safe in my neighborhood, but the combination of waking up to an animal in my room combined with being outside at this hour lent a creepy vibe I couldn't shake.

I was about to knock again when the door opened and a sleepy, shirtless Cohen stood before me.

"Liz?" he croaked.

"Can I come in?"

He moved away from the threshold so I could come inside. “Did something happen? What wrong?”

I nodded and paced his tiny living room. “There’s a bat. Downstairs.” I pointed to the floor.

“In your apartment?”

I nodded again.

“Christ.” He ran his hands over his face. “Okay. Wait here. I’ll take care of it.”

He retreated to what I assumed was his bedroom and returned a minute later dressed in jeans and a fitted gray T-shirt. His hair was rumpled from sleep and he looked adorable.

“What are you going to do?” I asked, hoping he had previous experience in bat removal.

“I don’t know.” He went to the closet near the front door and pulled out a tennis racquet.

“Wait.” I jogged to his kitchen and grabbed a pair of oven mitts from near the stove and a plastic shopping bag from the counter. “Here.”

I handed them to him. He put on the oven mitts and held the tennis racquet defensively in one hand, the plastic bag in the other.

“Okay. You’re ready.”

We both laughed at the ridiculousness of this situation.

“Just sit tight. I’ve got this.”

I grinned at his confidence. “Thank you.”

He nodded and disappeared out the door.

I bit my lip and I hoped he wasn’t mad about me waking him up. But the way he’d laughed about the oven mitts before heading downstairs put me at ease. I sunk down onto his couch and waited.

His apartment was tiny, but it was clean and neat, and furnished simply with comfortable pieces. The living room consisted of a worn leather couch, along with a beat up trunk for a coffee table. His dining nook held a round kitchen table laden with various textbooks stacked in piles and was surrounded by several mismatched chairs. Definitely homey and inviting.

A few minutes later, Cohen was back.

“Well?” I jumped to my feet.

He shook his head. “I couldn’t find the little bastard.”

For just a moment I wondered if I had dreamed the bat, but no, I was certain I hadn’t.

He shucked off the oven mitts and returned the tennis racquet to the closet by the door. “I assume neither of us will be getting back to sleep now,” he mumbled, running a hand along the back of his neck.

“Sorry about that.”

He met my eyes. “Don’t be. I said to let me know if you needed anything, and I meant it.”

Now that the bat episode was behind us, my adrenaline plummeted. I rubbed at my temple suddenly realizing how crappy I felt.

Cohen stepped in closer toward me. “Are you okay?”

“Too much wine earlier. I’m fine.” I waved him off.

He headed into the kitchen and returned a second later with a glass of water and two white pills. He dropped them in my palm. “Here. Pain reliever for your headache.”

“Thanks.” I took the pills obediently and finished the glass of water before handing it back to him. It was room temperature and tasted like it had come straight from the tap, but I wasn’t about to complain. It was a nice gesture. I’d never talked to my neighbors much, and it was nice to think that someone I could count on lived above me.

I noticed a university sweatshirt hanging from the back of a chair and nodded to it. “You go to school here too?” DePaul was just down the street, so I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised, but this really wasn’t a student housing area.

“Yeah. I’m a junior. You?”

“I’m in the second year of my Ph.D.”

“Wow.” He stared at me as though seeing me for the first time. I could practically see him trying to calculate my age. I knew I looked younger than my twenty-five years, and telling people you were studying for a Ph.D. had a way of intimidating them. But Cohen didn’t seem thrown off, just impressed and curious. I liked his honest reaction. According to his grade, he was probably twenty or twenty-one.

I wondered what to do now. There was a bat loose in my apartment, and it was too early—or too late, depending on how you looked at it—to call my landlord.

Cohen stood silently studying me, and I was suddenly self-conscious about my appearance. I had fallen asleep without washing off my makeup, so I was sure to have smears under my eyes, and my hair probably looked like it’d been styled by a raccoon. Way to make a great second impression.

“Liz? As in Elizabeth?” he asked, softly.

“Nope, Liz as in Eliza. But everyone calls me Liz.”

“Eliza,” he said thoughtfully. The word rolled off his tongue in a way that was both foreign and reminiscent of long ago.

It reminded me of the past too much, and a pain stabbed at my chest. “Call me Liz,” I corrected.

Cohen was silent for a moment longer, then took my hand and pulled me toward the door. “Come on, Easy E. Let’s go get your hangover fixed up.”

Easy E? “Where are we going?”

“Breakfast. And don’t argue. Bat hunting makes me hungry.” He grabbed a long-sleeved T-shirt and yanked it on over his head.

I laughed and followed him to the door.

I noticed him attach something to his belt loop and when I got closer, I saw that it was a pager.

I followed him down the stairs and fell in line beside him as we began walking down the block. He made a point of eyeing the pager strapped to his waist, cocking an eyebrow at him in question. “Nineteen-ninety-six called and wants its pager back.”

He chuckled low under his breath, shaking his head. “I need it for work.” He adjusted his T-shirt so that the obtrusive object was concealed.

“Are you a pimp?”

“Nope.” He smiled.

“A drug dealer?”

“Um, no. I’m a volunteer at the Chicago Fire Department.”

“You’re a firefighter?”

“Yeah.”

Wow. That would explain his insanely muscular body. “How often do you...”

“Get a call?”

I nodded.

“I’m always on call, and attend a training every Monday night for two hours.”

That was interesting. I’d never known a volunteer firefighter. I wondered if that was a lot to manage with school and studying.

We reached a small diner at the corner. Despite living nearby for two years, I’d never been to this place. It always looked a little too shady. A flickering neon sign announced that it was open twenty-four hours, and bells above the door chimed when Cohen pulled it open and held it for me. Walking by him, I got a lovely whiff of fabric softener and what had to be his own masculine scent. Mmm. I wanted to stop and press my nose into his chest, but I kept walking. The sign said to seat yourself anywhere. I chose a pleather booth near the window.

Cohen slid in across from me. He lifted the two menus from the napkin holder and handed me one.

“Thanks.”

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Sure. I can eat.” I could always eat. I wasn’t one of those girls who pretended not to eat. I liked food, so kill me. And I think if you really asked them, most guys liked a few soft curves on a woman’s body. Besides, wine and chocolate hadn’t been the most filling of dinners.

“The pancakes here are awesome.” He folded his menu and stuck it back in its place.

“Okay then.” I smiled and handed him my menu too, and he placed it neatly beside his.

The waitress sauntered over with a sweet smile for Cohen. He ordered two stacks of pancakes and, after pausing to ask me if I’d like coffee too, he ordered us both a coffee as well.

He was adorable, and even having only just met, I somehow felt totally comfortable around him.

Cohen's gaze drifted from my face to my chest, and he suddenly shifted in his seat and tuned his face to the window, his expression uncomfortable. Had I done something wrong?

I looked down and for the first time, remembered my braless state. Crap! The air conditioning had turned my girls into brazen hussies begging for attention. This tank top wasn't exactly full coverage either. I adjusted the shirt as best I could and caught Cohen's reflection in the glass. A smile tugged at his lips.

The waitress delivered two mugs of steaming black coffee to our table.

"Cold?" He smiled slightly, sliding my coffee towards me.

"Shush," I warned, accepting the coffee and dumped a heap of sugar into the mug, stirring it with more force than was necessary.

"Here." Cohen pulled his long sleeve T-shirt over his head, leaving him in just his T-shirt, and he held it out to me across the table.

"Thanks." I shrugged it on. It was still warm and smelled like boy. Delicious boy. Boy that had already turned me down once today. Or was that yesterday now? Not that it mattered. I wouldn't be throwing myself at him again. Period.

I rolled up the sleeves of Cohen's shirt and tried to avoid inhaling the scent of it.

The waitress was soon back with our pancakes, and left a plate in front of each of us. The pancakes were as big as dinner plates and stacked several high. A scoop of butter melted in the center and the scent of warm vanilla wafted in the air.

"Wow. This is bigger than I expected."

Cohen slid the syrup toward me. "Think you can handle it?" His smirk was naughty, playful.

Ugh. Why did he have to be so hot?

"Oh, I can handle it like a Goddamn champ." I cringed. What was I even saying?

Cohen chuckled and scooped the heap of butter off his pancakes and onto the saucer beside his plate. I guess you didn't get a body like that from eating globs of butter.

I had no such worries. And I freaking loved butter. I used my knife to smear the melted puddle all over mine.

"You have a girlfriend?" I asked after swallowing a delicious bite of melt-in-your-mouth pancake.

He nodded, taking another bite. "I've sort of been seeing someone."

"But she wasn't over tonight?"

"She doesn't stay over," he commented, wiping his mouth.

That was curious. Was he the kind of guy that refused to allow a girl to sleep over? Hm. Cohen seemed to provoke more questions than answers.

“What about you? Boyfriend?”

“Nope,” I said, a little too proudly.

He chuckled. “I have a feeling there’s a story there.”

I shrugged. “Not much to tell, I’m just not looking for a relationship. Besides, once I get my doctorate in another year or two, I’ll probably be moving on. I want to have fun and not take things too seriously.”

“Hm.” Cohen looked down, fumbling with his napkin. Had I said something to upset him?

I focused on my breakfast, or whatever meal you called this, given that it was three in the morning.

I realized Cohen and set down his fork and was watching me eat. “What are you studying?”

“Psychology,” I answered, my tongue darting out to lick a drop of syrup from my bottom lip. “What about you?”

His eyes followed the movement of my tongue, and he swallowed roughly before answering. “Business. I figure it’s generic enough that I’ll be able to get a job doing almost anything.”

I nodded. I continued nibbling on my breakfast, while Cohen talked. I learned that he went to school part time and worked as a bouncer at a bar downtown in addition to being a volunteer firefighter.

After breakfast, Cohen walked me to my door and stood with me on the covered porch. The moonlit night and chirp of crickets in the night air had a dreamy, calming feeling about it.

We stood facing each other. The shadows turned him into an even more handsome creature than before, if that was even possible. He was tall and lean, not an ounce of fat on his body. Square jaw, full mouth, gorgeous blue eyes and short hair.

Cohen hesitated at my front door.

“Thanks for breakfast,” I murmured.

He nodded. “Anytime.”

I stripped myself of his oversized long-sleeved shirt and handed it back to him. His eyes wandered south to my chest for the briefest of seconds, but enough for me to register he liked what he saw. What can I say? I was blessed in the boob department. Full C’s, yet still perky. And currently sporting hard nips again. Damn. This time it had nothing to do with the chill in the air and everything to do with the look on Cohen’s face. He was a boob man. It was clear as day.

He cleared his throat. “Will you be okay?”

Oh yeah. There was a fucking bat in my apartment. This wasn’t a date. It was a pity-outing with a neighbor. That was all. Damn. Delusional much, Liz?

I shook my head. “Well, I’m not sleeping in there.” No way, nuh-uh. “I’ll just have to wait a few more hours until I can call the landlord to come over.”

Cohen frowned. “What are you going to do in the meantime? It’s...” He glanced at his watch. “...way too fucking early.”

I laughed. "I'm a big girl. I'll be fine. Thanks again."

I turned for my door, but Cohen grabbed my wrist. "Come on. You're coming upstairs with me."

"I am?"

He pressed his other hand into my lower back and guided me to the staircase. "Up you go."

I blanched at his presumptuous behavior, yet obediently started up the stairs, relieved that I wouldn't have to wait alone.

When we reached the top, Cohen unlocked the door and pushed it open for me to enter. His apartment was tiny compared to mine. Now that I wasn't all frazzled from the bat incident, I noticed how quaint it was. The pitched ceilings were architecturally interesting, but made it too low for him to comfortably walk in certain spots of the room. The floors were wooden and creaky. I was surprised I had never heard him walking above me before. He tossed the shirt he'd given me on the back of the sofa.

"Are you tired?"

I shrugged. "Might as well try to sleep, otherwise I'll be a real bitch tomorrow."

He laughed. "You're honest. I like that."

"Thanks?" I wasn't sure, but that sounded like a compliment. I looked around at the tiny apartment wondering where I'd sleep. "Won't your girlfriend be mad if I'm sleeping over?"

He shrugged. "I'm not worried about it."

I bit my lip to avoid smiling.

He disappeared into his bedroom and I wondered if I was supposed to follow, but before I could decide, he returned with a bundle of blankets and pillows in his arms. He dumped them unceremoniously on the couch. "You can take my room. I'll sleep out here."

I surveyed the length of him. "And how tall are you?"

"Six-two. Why?"

I made a *tsking* sound. "Yeah, that's what I thought. You will not be sleeping on this couch. There's no way he would comfortably fit."

He laughed softly. "I'll be fine."

"Nonsense. Go to bed. I've got this." I began unfolding the blankets and arranging them on the couch.

His hands found mine, and he stopped me. "You're the guest. You should take my bed." His voice was solemn, sweet.

I couldn't resist placing my hand on his chest. Yep, just as solid and warm as I expected. "I'm not a guest, sweetheart, I'm an annoying neighbor with a bat problem who woke you up in the middle of the night."

He smirked.

"Now go to bed." I patted his chest.

He held me in his gaze. “You’re a feisty little thing, aren’t you?”

“Damn straight.”

He laughed out loud. “And how do you know I’m not a serial killer?”

“Yes, because serial killers usually wear oven mitts for intimidation and buy their victims pancakes before tucking them into bed.” I rolled my eyes for effect.

His mouth twitched in amusement. “Valid point.” He turned to head to his room. “Just let me know if you need anything—or if you spot any bats. I’ve got the oven mitts ready.”

A noise from the other room caught our attention. Cohen’s face registered recognition.

He shook his head with a smirk on his face. “There’s just one problem.”

I waited, unsure where this was heading. Maybe his girlfriend had decided to come over after all.

“Bob usually sleeps here.”

Before I had the chance to ask who Bob was, a dog the size of a bear came barreling down the hallway, headed straight for me.

I let out a gasp while Cohen laughed and steered the dog away, stopping him from mauling me. He held the dog’s wiggling body in place and scratched behind his ears. The dog’s tail walloped against my thigh.

“He tries to sleep in my bed, but I don’t usually let him. He’s a cover hog.” Cohen smiled.

“What the hell is he?” I took a step back so I was out of the firing line of his tail. He was a enormous fluff ball of curly apricot-colored fur.

“A Labradoodle. Non-shedding.”

“Oh.” *A what-a-doodle?*

Bob leapt onto the couch and flopped himself down onto the blankets I’d just arranged, lying with his head against the armrest as he got into a comfortable position.

Cohen chuckled at the sight of him. “Unless you’re a real dog lover and wouldn’t mind cuddling up with this guy, I suggest you come to my room.”

I had no desire to sleep on a couch that doubled as a dog bed, and nodded my consent.

Cohen led the way to his bedroom. It was large and tidy, with king-sized bed in the center. The roof pitched steeply on each side, giving it an intimate feel. He had one small chest of drawers and a single night table that held some loose change and an alarm clock.

He bed was unmade with charcoal gray sheets and a fluffy white down comforter. It looked very inviting.

Cohen studied me for a second. “Do you...need anything to wear?” He looked down at my jeans.

“Oh. No thanks.” I remembered I had on my sleeping shorts underneath the jeans, and began removing them.

Cohen dropped his eyes, seemingly uncomfortable with watching me undress. I folded my jeans neatly and laid them on the floor beside the bed. I started to crawl into the bed when Cohen's hand on my elbow stopped me.

"The other side, sweetheart."

Oh. I scooted over to the other side of the bed, nearest the wall.

He yanked his T-shirt off over his head and stripped down to his black boxer briefs. I caught a glimpse of his smooth, tanned skin, just before he crawled in next to me and covered himself with the sheet.

I sensed something had changed between us; the air felt thick and heavy. "Sorry, I didn't know I was taking your side," I whispered in the darkness.

"It's okay. I'd prefer to sleep closest to the door. That way if anyone breaks in they have to go through me first."

Aw. It was a strange notion, but I liked his protective instincts. He was a sweet guy. I didn't usually hang out with many of those. Maybe it had to do with him being a firefighter.

I rolled over on my side and pulled the comforter securely around me, settling in for the night.

Chapter 3

The next morning Cohen stood guard while I dashed inside my apartment to grab a change of clothes and my laptop. We didn't see the bat, but I was glad to have him with me just the same.

He didn't have class until later, so I thanked him for the previous night, and he headed back upstairs to make coffee, while I began the twenty-minute walk to campus.

Despite only getting a few hours of sleep and overindulging on wine, I felt more well-rested than I usually did. Cohen's bed was ridiculously comfortable. And I felt safe with him there. I was used to living alone, but that didn't mean that occasionally I wasn't woken in the night by an unknown noise and was unable to get back to sleep. And was he an absolute gentleman—staying on his own side and pretty much ignoring me completely. I'd slept like a baby in Cohen's bed. Which was strange, since I'd made it a point not to stay over with guys I slept with. I might fall asleep after sex, but I'd always wake in the middle of the night and slip out of bed unnoticed. Maybe that was why I'd been so comfortable staying with Cohen, because we hadn't been intimate. I shrugged the thought away.

I spent the entire day working in the library on my research paper, only stopping for coffee refills and to grab a sandwich from a deli across the street. By six o'clock I was hungry again and in need of a long, hot soak in my jetted tub.

I secured my laptop bag across my chest and set off for the walk home. I checked my phone for messages again, hoping to have an update from my landlord about the bat situation. I was scrolling through text messages when I collided against something solid. I let out a groan and quickly looked up to see who—or what—I'd run into.

It was Cohen. He was out for a run with that damn dog. Bob. It was panting loudly and wagging its tail.

"Hey, Eliza." Cohen reached out and steadied my shoulders.

"Liz," I huffed, righting myself.

"Sorry, Bob got excited when he saw you." Cohen pulled back on the leash, tightening it to hold the dog back from me.

"No—my fault. I was trying to see if I had any messages from our landlord."

"Oh, he stopped by today. We couldn't find the bat, but we sealed up your chimney flue."

"We?"

"I didn't have class at the time, so I helped him. You have a really nice place, by the way."

"Oh, thanks."

We stared at each other for a few seconds. He looked adorably sexy in his loose-fitting grey shorts and vintage band tee.

"So the bat could still be in there?" I dodged Bob's overeager advance toward me.

Cohen tugged his leash to keep him in line. Bob sat on the ground at our feet. "Could be. But I

probably got out the same way he got in.”

“Okay. Well, thanks. I guess I get to sleep in my own bed tonight.”

“Guess so,” he said. I couldn’t help but notice his voice was laced with the slightest bit of disappointment.

When I got home, I did a room-by-room check for the bat, then fed Sugar and Honey Bear who were circling my ankles and meowing eagerly for their dinner. I needed to make myself dinner, but figured a nice hot bath would relax me first. I grabbed a handful of almonds to tide me over and made my way upstairs, munching as I went. I filled the porcelain tub and added my oatmeal lavender bath salts and sank down into the water.

I rested my head against the edge of the tub and breathed in the lavender scent. As the warm water caressed my curves, I couldn’t help my mind from wandering to the apartment above mine and the certain off-limits hottie who resided there, seemingly just out of reach.

My few interactions with him had left me curious and wanting more. I wondered about the girlfriend he spoke of, and about his job as a firefighter. Picturing his buff body dressed in a fireman’s uniform sent a tingle across my skin, and I closed my eyes, sinking further into the water to enjoy my naughty daydream.

After my bath I felt refreshed, busied myself in the kitchen. I loved to cook, but rarely made anything elaborate for myself.

I gathered armfuls of ingredients from the fridge and cabinets while my mind wandered upstairs to Cohen and wondered if he’d eaten. I could cook for him as a thank you for dealing with the bat and sealing up my chimney flue. But I didn’t want to seem too overeager, and I was sure he had better things to do than spend time with me.

I set a pot of water to boil on the stovetop and set the flickering flame to high before dumping a palmful of sea salt to season the water. I wrestled my seldom-used food processor out from a low cabinet and added in handfuls of basil leaves and pine nuts, before topping it off with a splash of olive oil and setting it to purée. Once the water was boiling, I dropped in the linguine and set the timer, then popped a frozen loaf of my favorite French bread in the oven to bake.

I’d been unconsciously making enough for two. This was silly; I’d just go up and invite him for dinner.

Halfway up the stairs, I hesitated and stopped. What if his girlfriend was over? Or maybe he already had dinner plans. I didn’t want to sound like I was desperate for company. Maybe I could just ask if he had any plans before bringing up the elaborate dinner waiting for us downstairs.

I shook my head, reminding myself that the first step was seeing if he was even home. I continued up the stairs and when I reached his door, I could hear music playing, and knocked loud enough to be sure he could hear me. A second later, the door swung open.

Cohen stood before me in dark fitted jeans and a baby-blue cotton Henley that made his eyes look amazing. “Easy E!” He pulled me inside. He was holding an acoustic guitar in one hand, and I realized that was where the music had been coming from. “Want a beer?” He took a sip from a bottle of Red Stripe and before I could respond, Bob came charging down the hall and launched himself through the air with enough force to knock me to the ground. He landed squarely on my chest.

Ompf. A gust of air escaped my lungs at the contact.

“Oh, shit. Bob, get off,” Cohen pulled the dog back from me, but not before he got in a few sloppy kisses.

I wiped my face with my sleeve and took Cohen’s outstretched hand.

“Sorry about that. He’s bigger than you and he just gets excited.”

I released a sigh and rubbed my aching tailbone. “It’s okay.”

Cohen brushed off my backside and helped to straighten my tank top. His fingers brushed against my waist, and the heat of his hands through my top caused my heart to thump in my chest. Bob’s indiscretion was forgiven and the only thing I could concentrate on now was Cohen and how amazing his deep-blue eyes looked, highlighted by his baby-blue shirt.

As if realizing his hands were still against my waist, Cohen dropped them and stepped back. “How about that beer?”

“Actually I was wondering if you had plans tonight.”

He took another swig. “Not unless you count drinking alone and messing around on my guitar.”

I smiled. “Well I was cooking dinner downstairs and made enough for two. I thought I’d invite you over as a thank you for all that bat business.”

“Sounds great.”

He returned his guitar to its stand in the corner, ducking from the pitched ceiling as he did so. He patted Bob’s head then followed me downstairs with the bottle of beer still dangling from his hand.

As soon as we entered my apartment, the vibe felt all wrong, like I was trying too hard. There were candles burning on my fireplace mantle, and soft jazz music playing in the background. God, was I old or what? I needed to remember that he was a college kid, more likely to listen to the latest indie band or hip hop sensation. I contemplated blowing out the candles and changing the music, but instead decided to shrug it off. I didn’t want to call more attention to it, and Cohen didn’t seem to mind in the least, wandering ahead of me through the apartment.

I crossed the living room, following Cohen through the rooms I’d meticulously decorated with light earth tones in creams and browns to coordinate with the dark wood floors.

When I turned for the kitchen, Cohen followed dutifully. The kitchen was small but well remodeled before I moved in, and boasted state-of-the-art fixtures and appliances. I cringed when I remembered I’d also lit a few candles on the center granite slab island.

“Smells awesome. What’d you make?”

Of course his mind was on the free meal, not the ambience. *God, get a grip, Liz.*

“Basil pesto pasta with grilled chicken.” I opened the double door fridge and pulled out a bottle of white wine. “Would you like some?” I held the bottle up for Cohen to inspect.

He drained his bottle of beer and set the empty next to the sink. “Sure. Where do you keep the glasses?”

“Behind you.” I nodded to the mahogany wine cabinet on the far side of the kitchen that held numerous bottles of wine and had racking where the wine glasses were stored.

He retrieved two of the glasses, while I concentrated on uncorking the wine.

Cohen’s hands met mine on the bottle of wine and corkscrew. “Let me.”

I stepped back and allowed him to open the wine, taking the opportunity to watch him uninterrupted. His hands were large, tapering to long, slender fingers with neatly trimmed nails. The backs of his hands were lightly covered in fine blonde hairs I could see when they caught the light. Everything about this man was attractive. From his clean cut features, to his broad shoulders to his flat stomach. Something about the idea of being with him excited me. But I had never felt so unsure before in the presence of a man. He was friendly and polite, but he didn’t seem overly interested.

While Cohen poured us each a healthy glass of wine, I pulled the serving dish of pasta from inside the oven, where I’d set it to keep warm. I removed the hot loaf of French bread next, and placed it on the stone block to slice. Cohen helped me move everything over the barstool seating area at the end of the long island. I grabbed the butter and a green salad from the fridge and joined him on a stool.

He removed his pager and set it beside him. “Hopefully I don’t get a call tonight.” It was strange to think that at any moment he could be summoned away, his evening interrupted. “Cheers.” He clinked his wine glass with mine and we both took a sip. It was my favorite white wine, San Margherita Pinot Grigio. It was crisp and refreshing and paired perfectly with the light pasta meal.

I watched Cohen take a bite and chew. He closed his eyes just briefly, savoring the bite of crisp basil pesto and pine nuts, balanced by the heavy cream. “You’re a great cook,” he offered after several more bites.

“Thanks.” I relaxed a little more in my seat and began eating.

We kept up an easy conversation during dinner, pausing to tease each other, or smile and sip our wine. It was nice. Though I enjoyed cooking, I rarely did so for myself. It just seemed like too much of a hassle for one person. I usually ate a bag of microwave popcorn or a bowl of cereal for dinner instead, but it was nice having someone to cook for.

Cohen’s pager rattled noisily against the granite island. He picked it up and frowned as he read the message.

“What is it?”

He shook his head. “I can’t go on a call if I’ve had more than two drinks.”

Oh. “Is it okay if you miss one?”

He nodded. “I don’t like to, and I have to make it to at least fifty-percent of all calls to stay active, but it should be fine.”

He turned off the pager and went back to eating.

Cohen suddenly dropped his fork against the side of his plate, the clinking sound startling me. “Are there nuts in this?”

I looked from the pasta to the panicked expression on his face. “Um, yes, there are pine nuts in the sauce. Why, what’s wrong?”

He leapt from his seat, his napkin fluttering to the floor. "I'm allergic. Where's the bathroom?"

I was too stunned to answer and instead pointed down the hall. Cohen took off jogging in the direction I'd indicated. The first door he opened was a broom closet. I quickly followed behind him and steer him into the guest bathroom farther down the hall. He fell to his knees over the toilet bowl and threw up nosily.

Eek. I cringed away from the sound of him coughing and vomiting. I felt terrible. How was I supposed to know he was allergic to pine nuts?

Once he was finished, he wiped his mouth with a wad of toilet paper and sank to the floor and slumped with his back against the wall. I reached over and flushed the toilet. Cohen's eyes met mine and he groaned. I don't think he'd realized I was still in the room with him. His skin was pale and he was covered in a thin sheen of sweat.

"Are you okay?"

He nodded. "I think so." He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the wall. I took a washcloth from the basket near the sink and wet it with cold water. I wrung it out and knelt down next to Cohen. I pressed the cool washcloth to his forehead.

He briefly opened his eyes. "Thanks," he croaked.

"I feel terrible, Cohen. I didn't mean..."

"You didn't know. It's okay. I should've asked, but I didn't see any nuts." He closed his eyes again and relaxed against the wall while I continued to dab the cool cloth against his flushed skin. He really was beautiful. I'd never recalled thinking of a man as beautiful before, but Cohen truly was.

He opened his eyes and studied me. I realized I'd stopped moving the cloth and was just staring at him. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing." I moved the cloth to the back of his neck.

He dropped his head between his knees, giving me better access. "That feels nice."

A pain sprang through my chest and I stood abruptly, suddenly needing some space away from this tender moment.

Cohen stood a minute later. "Sorry I ruined dinner."

"Are you kidding? You do not need to apologize. I could have killed you."

He chuckled. "I'm not deathly allergic. I just get really sick. Seriously, I'm fine now. And the food tasted really good."

"Before you threw it up?" I said wryly.

"Exactly." He smiled.

I rolled my eyes. *Boys*. "Do you want to go lie down?"

"Ah, sure. If you'll come with me." He grinned. "We can watch a movie."

"Sounds good."

After we quickly cleaned up the kitchen, Cohen led the way back upstairs to his apartment where Bob was eagerly awaiting our return. Cohen kept him from mauling me, and I made a halfhearted attempt at petting him, but it was so obvious I wasn't a dog person, Cohen just laughed and told Bob to go lie down. Bob flopped himself unceremoniously onto the wood floor and laid his head on his paws.

I looked around the living room for the first time noticing there was no TV. Before I could question how we were going to watch a movie, Cohen led the way to his bedroom.

There was a large flat screen television mounted on his wall across from the bed. "This okay?" Cohen held up the DVD case for a romantic comedy I hadn't yet seen.

I stifled my surprise that he owned the movie, and nodded instead. "Sure."

"Okay, pop it in. I'm going to go brush my teeth."

He tossed me the case and I caught it easily. "I'm on it."

I put the DVD in and settled on his bed and began watching the previews. I scooted over to the side, the side of the bed farthest from the door, remembering his notion that he'd protect me if anyone broke in. I scolded myself thinking a side of his bed was mine.

Just when I was starting to wonder what was taking him so long, I heard the sound of water running and a shower curtain being pulled back. Dirty thoughts flashed through my mind. Was that an open invitation to join him in the shower? Other than the odd lingering glance, Cohen hadn't indicated he wanted to be anything more than friends. I had never really had a close guy friend, so this was sort of new territory for me, but I liked it.

A few minutes later, just as the previews were wrapping up, Cohen came back in the room dressed in a pair of loose-fitting gym shorts and a white V-neck T-shirt. He settled onto the bed next to me, folding the pillow in half under his head and punching it into place. "Sorry, I decided to take a shower too."

"No problem." I looked over at him and smiled. His tan skin was delicious against the white cotton shirt. And he smelled like crisp, clean soap and a hint of spicy cologne.

I shifted closer and breathed him in.

"What?" He smirked.

"You smell good."

"I do?"

I nodded. "Like soap...and..." I leaned in again to try and identify it.

He smiled. "Come here." He held out his arm until I scooted against his side. He was warm and the firm muscles of his body felt amazing pressed against mine. It was times like this I couldn't decipher his motivations.

The movie started but I was too distracted to concentrate on it, instead noticing Cohen's bare feet which were long and tan, with fine light hair sprinkled on the top. Why had I never noticed before how sexy a man's bare feet could be?

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