

# Shifting Gears



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# Chapter 1

THE INTERCOM ON ELEANOR'S DESK crackles with her assistant's voice for the fourteenth time today—Eleanor's been counting, making a frustrated mental mark every time it interrupts her train of thought.

"Miss Cromwell?" "Your three o'clock is here."

"Send them in," Eleanor says absently. She doesn't lift her eyes from the report she's trying to focus on. She's been trying to reread it since lunchtime in preparation for tomorrow's board meeting, and with the frequency of today's interruptions, her progress has been irritatingly slow.

Words like *underdeveloped land* and *potential for growth* catch her attention. Even as Kayla and Ashwin stride into her office, she keeps reading. They can wait a minute or two.

*Manufacturing operations in Bracken County, Ontario, were closed by CromTech CEO Robert Cromwell in 1996 in favour of outsourcing. Land was not sold due to depreciating value.*

Eleanor chews at her lip. Her father probably hadn't thought twice about shutting down 45 percent of the jobs in a region in one fell swoop, causing widespread unemployment on a whim. It had saved him money. But now it's presented Eleanor with the perfect opportunity. Underdeveloped land still owned by CromTech with potential for growth is just what she needs.

*No surveying has been undertaken, but aerial maps show—*

Kayla's manicured hand waves in front of the page. "Earth to Eleanor?"

"Just a minute," Eleanor mutters, batting it away.

She hears Ashwin's low chuckle. "Even when we book a meeting as her executives, she doesn't have time for us anymore."

Eleanor sighs. It takes a concerted effort not to roll her eyes, but she tosses the report onto her desk for the moment, giving her full attention to her friends turned business partners. They're standing on either side of her desk. Ash is tapping his foot anxiously. Kayla's arms are folded like a disapproving mother.

It's only when there's no hope of escape that Eleanor realizes she's being ambushed.

"Eleanor. Honey," Kayla says in the kind of soft and careful voice a person might use when approaching a feral cat, "you're working yourself to death."

Ashwin has his worried face on, the one where his thick, dark brows almost knit together. Eleanor remembers it well, having seen it at least weekly in university when he'd tried valiantly to be the fake boyfriend she needed to convince her father she wasn't a total disappointment.

It had benefited both of them, in her defense—he needed the cover as much as she did at the time, though his closet door had always been pretty transparent. His family had been ready to buy Eleanor a ticket to Mumbai for an engagement ceremony by the time she and Ash agreed the arrangement had run its course.

Eleanor's affection for Ash's expression—one as familiar to her as her own reflection—is tempered by her annoyance at the subject matter he and Kayla are bringing up.

"I'm fine. This really isn't the best time to discuss it," she says, pulling up the agenda for tomorrow's meeting on her laptop while they continue staring. She might be giving the presentation of her career in the morning, and her friends chose today of all days for an intervention. Tomorrow needs to be perfect. She needs to get it right.

"I know for a fact that you've slept at the office three times this week," Kayla fires back.

Eleanor slams her laptop closed. "How did you—"

“Even your assistant is worried about you.”

The distant *whirr* of the printer on said assistant’s desk is extra audible in the awkward silence the room has descended into.

“I’m fine,” Eleanor repeats, knowing even as she says it that her friends won’t believe her.

“Kayla is right.” Ash leans against Eleanor’s desk and crosses his ankles together. His coiffed hair is a little unruly, as if he’s run his hands through it. “Ever since you took over as CEO, you’ve been running yourself into the ground. Your blood pressure is high, you’re losing weight. You never stop working. You have no social life.”

“I don’t need a social life,” Eleanor interrupts. “I never have. You know that better than anyone.”

Ash and Kayla roll their eyes in tandem. Eleanor studiously ignores them.

It’s Kayla who finishes Ash’s point—he’s always had less stamina for arguments. Kayla is unmatched in her stubbornness; Eleanor’s known this since they were teenagers. She’d been the queen of one-woman protests back then, outlasting their private school administration over everything from inadequate course offerings to the gendered dress code. “You barely sleep, we never see you eat. You’re going to make yourself sick. Just like your father.”

Eleanor nudges her untouched salad container and three empty coffee cups to a less visible spot on the desk. She’s forgotten to eat lunch yet again, focused as she’s been today on preparing. Her friends might be right, but that doesn’t change the reality of the situation: Her father is gone. He passed the company to Eleanor, for better or for worse. When the options presented to her five years ago had been to either liquidate his shares or abandon her beloved position in Research and Development to take on his CEO role, Eleanor’s heart and mind had pulled her in opposite directions.

Sure, Eleanor misses using her brain for more than just PR and profit margins, but she’s never been one to disregard the logical solution for the emotional. She took up this mantle, heavy as it is. She even managed to poach Kayla and Ash from their respective careers in corporate real estate and investment banking to shore up her executive team.

Though at times such as this, Eleanor occasionally regrets the choice to hire her friends.

“I’ve put everything into this company. I didn’t ask for this, but it’s my life now,” she says. “What do you expect me to do?”

Kayla’s answer is so quick and definitive that Eleanor is sure she and Ash have rehearsed this exact conversation.

“Take a break.”

For a few seconds, the sentence doesn’t fully process. When it does, it strikes Eleanor as completely ludicrous. “Very funny.”

“Every CEO I know besides you takes a summer vacation. Your father used to take several.”

Kayla’s point is one Eleanor must concede. While Robert Cromwell was the hardest worker Eleanor has ever known, five times out of ten, if Eleanor needed to contact him, he was working out of a villa on some Caribbean island with his wife du jour. He rarely seemed to be actually enjoying himself, though, instead spending the whole trip glued to his phone or computer deep into the night.

But the point stands.

“Executives are like schoolchildren,” Ash pipes in with a wry smile. “If schoolchildren got overwater bungalows in the Maldives.”

“You want me to go to the Maldives?”

“We want you to go literally anywhere that isn’t here,” Kayla says. “Leave us in charge and disappear somewhere for a few weeks. We can spin whatever story you need us to—just go take care of yourself for a change. Please.”

It’s the most earnest Eleanor has seen her best friends in a long time. Even Ash, the perennial jokester, is looking at Eleanor with an uncharacteristically serious expression. It’s almost enough to make Eleanor consider their proposal.

Almost.

“You’re both being ridiculous.” She pushes her chair out and brushes past Kayla, snatching her laptop and the abandoned report as she goes. She has a presentation to finish; with Kayla and Ash occupying her office, she’ll have to work in the conference room.

“Eleanor, you’ve only been running this company for five years and you’re going grey!” Kayla follows Eleanor to the door with Ash

trailing behind. “You’re barely thirty! You can’t keep going like this. You’re going to burn yourself out.”

Eleanor runs a self-conscious hand through her long hair. She’s been noticing the occasional silver thread amongst the dark strands lately, but going to a salon is dead last on her list of things to accomplish. She pushes through the door, grabbing blindly at the paper waiting in the printer. “My hair colour really isn’t your problem, Kayla. I have work to do.”

“Think about it, will you?” Ash shouts after her.

Before the door swings closed behind Eleanor, she hears Kayla’s weary sigh and a snippet of their conversation.

“What are the odds on a nervous breakdown before the end of the year?”

“I’d say one in three,” Ash mutters.

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Eleanor doesn’t sleep at the office that night. She’s not sure going home will give her any brownie points with Kayla and Ash, considering she ends up holed up in her home office over half-eaten takeout instead, but she makes an effort.

This presentation is more important than most. Though she’s been shot down and undermined by her own board of directors on the subject for as long as she’s brought it up, Eleanor has been wanting to branch CromTech into sustainable eco-technology for years. The problem, as always, is funding. Research and development are expensive in new and untested industries, as the board constantly reminds her.

Before she can push for this passion project, she needs a profitable venture to fund it—a distraction with a big enough profit margin that even her father might have approved.

Eleanor would much rather be on the design team she’s trying to fund than spearheading the funding effort itself, but if she can make this new project profitable enough, maybe she can at least get the satisfaction of finally watching her work blossom, though from the sidelines. She can make her mark in a CEO position she’s never felt

she's deserved, point the company in a new direction, and earn even a fraction of the respect her father commanded.

This presentation needs to be watertight.

Eleanor is putting the finishing touches on her PowerPoint when her phone starts to buzz. The name flashing across her screen is familiar, if perplexing.

"It's been a long time since you called me in the middle of the night," Eleanor says in lieu of greeting.

She's met with a light laugh.

"Hello to you, too," Lydia draws. "I've always appreciated the way you skip the pleasantries and get right to it."

"If you're calling for the usual reason, I'll cut you off at the pass." Eleanor tucks the phone into her shoulder and continues to fuss with the wording of her bullet points. "I still don't have time."

"Not even for a quick backslide with an old flame? I heard you could use some stress relief."

Eleanor's fingers freeze over her laptop keys.

"Heard from who?"

"Ash might have sent me a message."

At this hour, Lydia is probably leaving a party downtown. Fitting Eleanor in between social commitments, as usual—Eleanor's condo is close to her usual stomping grounds. Heels are clicking on expensive floors in the background of the call, and Lydia covers the receiver to call out to someone in Vietnamese while Eleanor considers how best to punish Ash.

She presses her fingers to her temples. The slowly forming headache she's been fighting for a few hours is worsening, and she grasps for the nearest bottle of ibuprofen. "Of course he did. What did he offer you to show me a good time?"

"Nothing. It was more a gentle encouragement. He's worried about you."

"You're not going to start caring about my feelings now, are you? After all this time?"

"No. I appreciate our relationship for what it is," Lydia says with a low chuckle. "But I can't stop them from worrying."

Eleanor takes a swig of cold coffee to accompany the painkiller, wincing at the bitter aftertaste. “Ash needs to learn that not everyone fixes their problems with sex.”

“It’s a winning strategy in my book,” Lydia says. Eleanor has always valued her matter-of-factness, along with her discretion. “It’s not serious, Eleanor. Just a night of fun. That’s what we do.”

Eleanor sighs. Her casual, businesslike arrangement with Lydia is the closest thing to a steady relationship she’s had since university, and yet even such a simple and strings-free physical agreement had been too much of a demand on Eleanor’s time. They’d decided amicably to take a break months ago, though Lydia had assured her that the bedroom door was always open.

As satisfying as a bit of uncomplicated sex might be right now, the last thing that Eleanor needs on the night before her presentation is a distraction.

She lays her head down on the desk, closing her eyes and waiting for the faint imprint of her computer screen to fade from her retinas. “It’s tempting, truly, but I have a lot going on. I really don’t have the energy.”

“Can’t say I didn’t try.”

“This is getting ridiculous,” Eleanor mumbles. “I’m fully capable of managing my own stress.”

“You should talk to your friends if you want to scold someone,” Lydia says, reliably disinterested now that sex is off the table. “Just let me know if you want to hook up, okay? You know my number.”

The line cuts out, and in the ensuing silence, Eleanor decides that it’s high time she went to bed.

\* \* \*

The board meeting is just shy of catastrophic.

It’s been this way since the beginning, in fairness. Eleanor’s father had shocked everyone when he left his majority shares in CromTech not to any of his trusted business partners or even his newest wife—all of whom sit on this very board—but to his daughter. He’d encouraged Eleanor to pursue an advanced degree in business when his health started to decline, but he’d given no other indication of his intent.



Five years later, Eleanor has fought tooth and nail just to get her father's group of disapproving middle-aged men to listen to her. That fight has always been an uphill battle against tradition and profit, and it's only been getting harder.

"Since when are we an electric car manufacturer?" Renée Cromwell snaps the moment Eleanor's pitch ends. While she's technically Eleanor's stepmother—the last in a line of six such women over the course of Eleanor's life, each more distasteful than the last, and still clinging to her married surname—the fact that Renée is only a few years Eleanor's senior has always made their relationship difficult.

She's been Eleanor's biggest adversary at every board meeting since the beginning. Renée had tried to buy her late husband's shares early on, and Eleanor's decision to keep them and take on the CEO position herself had cracked a rift between them that has only grown over the years. In contrast to some of her father's previous wives, Renée is ambitious and sharp, armed with a business degree, and backed by a worryingly large section of the board; Eleanor isn't sure how Renée managed it, but she suspects a combination of blackmail and pure force of personality.

"Not vehicles," Eleanor explains with as much patience as she can muster given her lack of sleep last night. "I'm proposing we branch out into more sustainable transportation and fuel solutions. Carbon reduction. Biostimulants."

Renée scoffs. "The environmental sector in Canada is a money pit."

"But it has potential," Ash says. "There are tax benefits and subsidies. We've entered into new markets before. Diversifying is an important—"

"There's diversifying, and then there's throwing away time and cash on electric cars."

Eleanor breathes out slowly through her nose. "Like I said, cars are only one corner of the market. I've been working on new types of recycled biofuels, as well as on integrating other sustainable energy and transport solutions."

"*You've* been working on it?" Renée sneers. "Another one of your vanity projects?"

“A joint effort with the R&D department,” Eleanor says sharply.

Kayla’s voice cuts through. “Maybe you can’t come up with an original idea to save your life, but Eleanor has every right to present her own projects. She’s a fully qualified engineer.”

Kayla and Ash are usually Eleanor’s only backup in these meetings. Kayla has always been the ambitious one in their little trio, pursuing her degrees voraciously and fitting into the business mould more easily than Eleanor ever did. Ash always sat in the middle, mostly relying on charisma and good connections, and Eleanor has always been the brains, the quiet one. She’d never wanted to get tangled up in the kind of corporate hell that’s become her day-to-day. Even though Eleanor practically sprinted away from Ash and Kayla yesterday, she’s grateful for their presence now.

A few suits in the room shift in discomfort, but only Renée speaks up.

“And how are you suggesting we fund this?” Renée asks, not even bothering to open up the folder on the table in front of her where she might have found that information. “Saving the environment is very noble and all, but how are we supposed to absorb those costs?”

“If you’ll turn your attention to the presentation I’ve provided,” Eleanor says, gripping the remote with a tight fist, “I’ve outlined a possible solution.”

Eleanor’s PowerPoint flickers to life.

“CromTech used to operate nickel mines and manufacturing plants in Bracken County, Ontario,” Eleanor continues slightly more loudly as Renée opens her mouth again. “The region experienced an economic depression after we started outsourcing instead. We still own a large parcel of property there. It’s worth next to nothing right now, but with some work, we could buy up the cheap land around it, develop it all to increase value, and sell at a major profit. Those gains would easily fund the R&D projects I’m proposing.”

“Rural real estate development is your solution?” Renée interrupts yet again. “We’re a tech company. In *Toronto*.” But the rest of the room seems to have perked up at the words *major profit*.

“Kayla was one of the best developers in the city before she came to CromTech. She’s been instrumental in the planning phase,” Eleanor says, confident at least in this part of the proposal.

“And how do you think the locals will respond to us swooping in? Do you think we’ll be welcomed with open arms?”

“There are, of course, potential issues if the locals still hold a grudge, but I think it’s at least worth looking into. Surely the betterment of the county will be their priority, no matter who’s responsible.”

“How do we determine that? Are we sending someone to do street interviews?” Renée says snidely.

This meeting is turning into a one-on-one duel. Eleanor gathers what remains of her patience.

“I’m proposing a motion to conduct a feasibility study,” she says through gritted teeth. “We send someone to the area for a few weeks to do a preliminary survey and a cost/benefit analysis of renovating the property. They’ll draw up a development proposal and create a report to present in quarter four.”

“Seconded,” Ash says quickly, before Renée can attack. “All in favour?”

Just over half the board raises their hands. Renée looks sour, but the numbers speak for themselves.

“Seven for, and six against,” Eleanor says wearily. “Motion passed.”

The meeting wraps up soon after. Everyone files out, Kayla and Ash included, but Renée takes her time gathering her things. Usually when she dawdles, it’s because she wants to scold Eleanor for something—last time it had been a critique of her clothes, the time before, a short and insufferable lesson about presentation etiquette—but this time Renée simply swings her purse over her shoulder, knocking Eleanor’s coffee cup across the table.

Eleanor doesn’t move to clean it up after the click of Renée’s heels has faded. Instead she leans forward on the table, hands planted, and watches the dark liquid creep across the lacquered wood. In it, she can see her own wavering reflection.

Ash and Kayla are right, to Eleanor’s chagrin. She does look tired, even under a layer of makeup. Whether caused by stress or by pure

lack of sunlight, her pale skin is pastier than ever, and the contrast with her dark hair throws the bags under her eyes into stark relief.

She looks uncomfortably similar to the way her father did in the last few years he headed this company. Run-down. Exhausted. *Miserable*.

Eleanor should be thrilled that her proposal was approved, even if only by a slim margin. The first step in her plan is complete. Instead there's a lump in her throat as she stares down at the physical proof of her stress. It's an insistent ball of tension and anxiety, rapidly threatening to turn into the breakdown Kayla and Ash predicted, and she's running out of energy to swallow it down.

"Well, that was painful," a voice rings out.

Eleanor jumps, whirling around and finding Kayla. She's standing in the doorway, offering Eleanor a handful of napkins.

"More so than usual," Eleanor admits. She clears her throat, tossing the napkins onto the coffee and letting it absorb. "But I know my green-tech projects are a hard sell. I need to throw the board a financial bone first."

"Development takes time. A lot of time. You won't be seeing profit for years."

"I know," Eleanor sighs. "Right now the bigger problem is finding someone willing to go to the middle of nowhere to do this feasibility study."

Kayla sweeps the soaked napkins off the table and into a garbage bin. Her smile is far more confident than Eleanor feels.

"About that: Ash and I have an idea."

## Chapter 2

“THAT’S THE LAST OF IT, Miss Cromwell.”

The sweaty man in charge of the moving crew closes the truck, gesturing for his co-workers to climb into the cab, and Eleanor relaxes incrementally. The morning has been loud and a little overwhelming with the loading and unloading of boxes and the long drive from the city. She’s looking forward to a bit of solitude.

“Thank you,” Eleanor says, politely ignoring the dampness of the hand he extends. The handshake is brief, at least, and Eleanor resists the urge to wipe her palm afterward. “I appreciate all of your hard work.”

What Eleanor wishes more than anything is for this conversation to be over. She’s paid them and the job is done, and now he’s trying to make small talk when all Eleanor wants is to go inside, lock the door, and not interact with another human for as long as possible. It’s a great relief when he finally climbs into the truck and trundles back down her long gravel driveway.

Once the smell of truck exhaust has eased, Eleanor takes a deep lungful of clean air. The May warmth around her is nice without being too hot, there are birds chirping, and she can hear the soft sound of the nearby water lapping at the shore behind the house. Besides that, no other sounds permeate the woods—no car horns, no wailing sirens, no loud voices.

It’s quiet.

This whole endeavour feels a little hare-brained. Kayla and Ash theorized that the only way to force Eleanor to take a vacation would

be to give her a project to do while she's away, and the need for someone to do a feasibility study presented the perfect opportunity. Eleanor had agreed not because she intends on vacationing but because it's as good a way as any to make sure this gets done *right*. If she's going to succeed in her goal of pushing her environmental projects through, she'd rather oversee every step of the process than leave it up to someone who might screw it up.

The house she's decided to rent is rustic and simple, a reddish-wood-cabin exterior with a bright and lofty open-concept design on the inside. The large windows at the back face a gorgeous bay fed by a wide river. The property is mostly engulfed by woods, and the back porch has a long set of rickety stairs leading down to a small private dock and an empty boathouse. It's also stunningly isolated. The closest neighbouring house is several kilometres down the road in either direction.

Eleanor toured dozens of similar cottages while she prepared this trip. For some reason, this is the one that stuck. There's nothing particularly special about it, or about Riverwalk, the closest piece of civilization to the house she's renting. In fact, the town is completely, totally unremarkable. It looks like it never quite left 1998 and probably saw its peak in the '80s. Around the time, in fact, that CromTech still operated in the area. It has potential, though. Before she's even started her study, Eleanor can imagine a dozen improvements that could make life better here.

It's small and anonymous and perfect. An ideal place to disappear.

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Eleanor's transition into her newfound isolation is bumpy at first.

At Kayla and Ash's prompting, and despite what she'd told herself about using this trip for work, she gives herself some time to relax before she plans to start her survey, but by the end of the first day, she comes to the realization that she might have forgotten *how*. She sits in the fresh air, tinkers with old research and designs she hasn't had time to look at in years, and cooks for herself rather than living on takeout, but by the third day, the guilt of such prolonged unproductivity is eating her alive.

Since this trip is supposed to be a vacation with a small project to keep her busy, there are no meetings for Eleanor to attend. No day planner, no phone ringing off the hook, nobody knocking on her office door. She doesn't even need to leave the house for a few days, and yet she still calls Kayla or Ash every few hours to check up. She insists on being kept in the loop, now filling her usual working hours with research on local construction or pricing labour and materials.

Even so, it feels good to have a routine that doesn't involve sleeping at the office. Every day, Eleanor wakes up to the warm, yellow-painted walls of her new bedroom, makes coffee, and has breakfast on the porch overlooking the sunrise on the water. She works until her body protests as per usual, but she falls asleep with a book in her hand instead of at her laptop.

It's a comforting little cycle. It's significantly healthier than her routine back home, at least, with much less human interaction, and that's enough of an improvement.

As much as Eleanor enjoys her solitude, it's only so long before she needs to leave it. She's running low on food by the start of the third week, and so, armed with a credit card and a grocery list, she ventures into Riverwalk.

The supermarket is tiny, all fluorescent lights and linoleum flooring that looks like it's been there for generations. Eleanor explores it aisle by narrow aisle, lamenting the limited produce selection, and once she's filled her cart, she checks out with the only available cashier—a bored-looking teenager chewing gum with gusto as she expertly zips Eleanor's groceries across the scanner.

The girl is only halfway through the cart when, out of nowhere, she points at Eleanor's hands, her tone startlingly accusatory.

"You a fan of CromTech?"

Eleanor's stomach drops.

"What?" Eleanor glances down at where the girl is pointing—where she has her wallet in one hand and her keys in the other. She's infinitely grateful that nobody else is in the store on a Monday morning. The last thing she needs is to fumble this impromptu interrogation in front of an audience.

She's already regretting leaving the house.

“Your key chain says CromTech,” the girl says, glowering at her as she types in the code for Eleanor’s tragically unripe bananas. “That company’s a sore subject in Riverwalk.”

“Oh,” Eleanor says, swallowing past the tumult happening in her stomach. She tucks her keys into her purse, branded key chain and all. “No. I...got it for free. They give them out at conferences.”

It’s not a total lie—it is the same key chain CromTech uses at tech fairs, and Eleanor put it on her keys so long ago that she’d completely forgotten it was there. She could kick herself for forgetting to remove it.

“Yeah, well, half the town lost their jobs because of them,” the cashier says, shoving Eleanor’s groceries toward her. “Lost their homes, lost everything. Piece of advice—if you don’t want people to assume you support ’em, take the key chain off.”

“Right,” Eleanor says. She takes her bags quickly after tapping her card, giving the girl a polite nod as she prepares to bolt. She’d known that the company might be less than beloved here, but this level of dislike, even so many years later, is unexpected. “I will. Thanks.”

Eleanor rips the key chain free as soon as she’s in the car. She shoves it into the glove compartment under a pile of napkins, making a mental note to add a line to her report—*PR intervention needed*.

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After restocking her pantry and fridge and taking a little time to calm down from the confrontation, Eleanor sets out on her first preliminary inspection of the area.

The county is even more beautiful than she first thought. The forests are blooming in the late-spring weather, and she even drives with the windows down to breathe in the fresh air until a stray wasp flies through and she spends ten minutes shooing it out of her back seat.

From the aerial maps Eleanor has studied, three old manufacturing buildings remain on the land that CromTech still owns. Two are abandoned but intact while the third and closest to Riverwalk seems to have been damaged at some point and is mostly just the foundation. A sale record shows a huge parcel of land nearby that was bought by a foreign development company ten years ago before it was abandoned.



It might end up being a useful purchase to add to CromTech's portfolio, but the GPS signal is so unreliable out in the woods that even after a full day of searching with the coordinates in hand, Eleanor can't actually locate it on the ground. Everything is overgrown. Eleanor's rental house is similarly isolated for such a gorgeous location, with few people taking advantage of the scenery.

Overall the township is underutilized. Rife with potential.

As beautiful as it is, though, it's also run-down. Many of the back roads connecting the various townships in Bracken County are unpaved and littered with potholes, with some of the street signs that might have helped Eleanor find her way either missing or faded. With strategic incentives to the county to fix simple things like that in preparation for construction, Riverwalk's locals will no doubt welcome the coming improvements, even if CromTech is behind them.

By the time she's finishing up for the day, Eleanor feels both accomplished and deeply frustrated. She's starving, her feet are sore from hobbling across gravel in heels to squint up at the road signage, and her contact lenses are drying out. She wants nothing more than to curl up with a book and a glass of wine for dinner.

So, naturally, Eleanor's car breaks down on the way home.

"Great," she sighs, turning the key in the ignition repeatedly, only to hear a weak sputtering. "Just fucking fantastic." Thankful for the complete lack of other vehicles on this back road to witness her embarrassment, Eleanor unbuckles her seatbelt.

"Stupid piece of overpriced junk," she mutters, kicking the front tire with her Jimmy Choo as she walks by to prop the hood up and do a cursory glance at the engine. Nothing looks immediately out of place, which means that it lies outside of her abilities. If given some time and the right research materials, she could probably figure it out, but right now, looking at a sea of oil-caked and smoking parts, Eleanor needs help.

A slow and begrudging internet search provides her with one mechanic within a fifty-kilometer radius, conveniently located in Riverwalk. Her Porsche is hooked onto a battered tow truck bed soon after by a tall, stocky man with dark-brown skin and a neat goatee whose name tag introduces him as *Owen*. He looks to be about

Eleanor's age. He's wearing a cap over his bald head with a sports logo on it, and he removes the hat politely before he shakes her hand and then hitches the car.

"You new around here?" Owen asks when Eleanor has climbed up into the raised truck. His voice is a deep, friendly baritone. He brushes a few empty pop bottles onto the floor and turns the radio down a few notches while Eleanor settles gingerly onto the seat. A country song she doesn't recognize is playing.

Small talk and country music. Fantastic.

"Yes. I moved in a few weeks ago," Eleanor says, hoping her short answer will deter further inquiry.

Unfortunately Riverwalk tow truck drivers seem to be tenacious. Owen nods, his large hands resting responsibly at ten and two on the steering wheel. "Where you from? We don't see a lot of visitors here anymore."

"Toronto."

"Big city, eh?" Owen says, flashing a bright smile. His tow truck takes the uneven roads better than Eleanor's poor car. It's still bumpy, but the bumps are less uncomfortable than the awkward conversation.

"Mhmm," Eleanor says, unsure of what else to say in response. Her voice is made uneven by the truck's movement. Owen resumes speaking almost before she's finished.

"You here on a vacation? Got a cottage up the road?"

Eleanor drums her fingers on the seat. There's a hole near the seatbelt clasp that feels like a cigarette burn. It reminds her of the passenger seat of her father's favourite vintage Cadillac—he'd been partial to cigars, and there had been a similar singed hole in the leather that Eleanor used to dig her finger into when he took her on long drives. That car was his favourite place to remind her that she wasn't meeting his expectations.

Eleanor digs her fingernail into the burn, twisting it through the aged seat padding. "Something like that."

It's nice that Owen is trying, but Eleanor has never felt confident befriending strangers, and especially after her encounter at the grocery store, she's not feeling comfortable now. She's been told enough times that she comes off as rude, so she doesn't see the point in trying to

pretend otherwise. She's not even sure how she ended up with the two friends she does have.

The auto shop is technically on Riverwalk's main road but tucked away near the town's edge. Eleanor stares out the window to avoid conversation, and as they drive, she sees details that she hadn't noticed before: a few of the shops they pass have *For Lease* signs in the windows. The rest—such as an off-brand pizza place, a single restaurant, and what Eleanor suspects might be the last actual video rental store still in existence—need work done on the exteriors. Not quite shabby, but obviously aging, with old bricks or faded signs.

The building they pull up to is exactly what Eleanor was expecting. It's old, too, but well-maintained—exposed cinderblocks covered with white paint just on the edge of starting to peel. Two garage doors are thrown open to reveal the mess of cars and parts piled inside. Above the chaos, a faded baby-blue sign reads *Cooper's Tire and Auto*.

All Eleanor can do is sincerely hope that someone here knows what they're doing.

"One of the owners is finishing up with another job," Owen says once he's parked the truck and guided her into the building. "It'll be just a minute."

Eleanor's first impression of the person Owen points out is one of surprise, as much as she's ashamed of herself for it.

The mechanic is a woman.

It's not that Eleanor is surprised that female mechanics exist. She's dealt with enough skepticism over her own qualifications to last a lifetime. But she's never met one, let alone one who co-owns her own shop, and she especially didn't expect something out of the norm in a small, rural town like this. Eleanor can't see much beyond the thick, dark-blond ponytail visible between the woman's shoulder blades, but she seems very capable as she finishes putting on a new tire.

When the woman turns around, Eleanor has to smother her second reaction, as shocking as it is.

The mechanic is also *hot*.

It's not in the way Eleanor is used to, exactly. Eleanor's type has always been strictly defined, governed by her own self-imposed rules as well as her father's expectations. Clean-cut, presentable, and educated.

Discreet and unattached enough not to expect much from her. Once she finally decided to do one small thing for herself and started dating women exclusively and openly, that criteria didn't change, although it seriously narrowed her dating pool.

This woman is so far the opposite of every point as to be almost comical.

She's wearing a jumpsuit, for starters. An army-green mechanic's jumpsuit—horribly stained and unbuttoned so that the sleeves hang around her hips—with a similarly dirty ribbed white tank and a scuffed blue ballcap. Eleanor idly wonders why one would even bother wearing white in an auto shop, considering it's almost not recognizably white anymore, but before long she's distracted by what's underneath the shirt.

Beneath her tank top and faded tan lines, this mechanic is muscular. And sweaty. And, frankly, *broad*. She's taller than Eleanor by a few inches, and solidly built in a way Eleanor isn't used to. Her wide shoulders and thick midsection are offset by the slight swell of her hips under the jumpsuit when she strides forward. When she reaches up to remove her hat and wipe at her brow with her forearm, a defined bicep flexes appealingly.

Eleanor tries very hard not to be affected by that, or by the adorable red line the cap leaves across the woman's forehead.

"Hi! I'm Dani. Owen said your Porsche gave out?"

Dani reaches a grimy hand out to shake, and Eleanor hesitates only for a moment before taking it in her own. She expects it to be sweaty from the warmth of the garage, but despite the dark shop residue staining Dani's pink fingertips, they're dry and just a tiny bit calloused.

"I'm...Nora," Eleanor manages to say. She pulls her hand back when Dani lets go, clenching it at her side.

Eleanor hasn't gone by *Nora* since she was seven, when her father told her it sounded too common. She's *Eleanor*. She's named after her paternal grandmother, a woman her father made sure to remind her was the reason he grew up to be so strong-willed. A woman whose ambition was halted only by the restrictions of her time, who instilled

that ambition into her son, and whose name shouldn't be tarnished by nicknames.

It's a name Eleanor has never quite been able to live up to.

Once Eleanor has said it, *Nora* feels like the right choice in the circumstances. She doesn't need anyone recognizing her by name, as unlikely as that might be. Part of her project here is to determine if the locals could be persuaded to welcome CromTech's presence or if they're going to need to fight against a reluctant population, and given the grocery store clerk's reaction to a simple key chain, Eleanor would rather not pursue that question further right now.

"Nice to meet you," Dani says, seeming unbothered by Eleanor's attitude.

"You as well." Eleanor clears her throat. "Can you fix it?"

"I can fix anything," Dani says with a wink.

Eleanor swallows hard. Dani's eyes are a startling greyish blue, and her smile bright and earnest. There's an uneven black smudge across her cheek, curving down to the strong line of her jaw. Her hair is coming loose from its ponytail and sticking to the side of her neck. When she puts her hat back on, Eleanor can see that its bill is frayed and dusty.

She's not Eleanor's type in the slightest.

And yet.

"She's not lying," Owen says, startling Eleanor out of her thoughts. "I've never seen Danielle Cooper find anything she can't put back together with her bare hands."

Eleanor tries to ignore the accompanying image. She absolutely does not need to know what Danielle Cooper can do with her bare hands.

Eleanor gives Owen a tight smile and follows Dani across the shop floor, ducking under a row of hanging tools and picking her way across stacks of tires and piles of oil-stained rags to where Owen has backed the Porsche into the garage. Dani moves easily—as if navigating the chaotic layout is second nature rather than a gauntlet of tripping hazards—and Eleanor can't help but focus on the rhythm of the mechanic's movement.

Dani takes up space. She leads with her shoulders, shifting her body around obstacles without engaging much in her hips, and, yet, never losing balance. A confident, grounded way to move through the world.

In contrast, Eleanor has almost fallen three times before she makes it to the car.

Dani lets out a low whistle when she approaches the Porsche, tapping a gentle finger on the hood. “Sweet ride. Not often that I get to treat something this expensive.”

“It gets me from A to B.”

“I think we have very different A’s and B’s,” Dani says, grinning as she reaches inside the open window to pop the hood. Her shoulders shift under the ribbed tank. “Let’s take a look, eh?”

Eleanor’s hand clenches hard around her keys.

The diagnosis goes quickly. Dani explains the issue in a way that lacks the condescension Eleanor is used to from most mechanics, and she seems pleasantly surprised to find that Eleanor can keep up. The problem is the transmission, apparently. Luckily the part required is generic, and Dani can take care of it right away.

“Pretty rare that we see a machine this nice come through Riverwalk,” Dani says, sliding out from underneath Eleanor’s car on what looks like a wide skateboard. Eleanor hands her keys over to Owen and tries not to wince as he climbs onto her leather seats in his shop-stained pants to back the car onto the hydraulic lift.

“It seems like it’s mostly trucks and tractors out here,” Eleanor quips. She’s oddly gratified when it makes Dani laugh. Dani’s teeth seem brighter against her smudged skin. The bottom ones are crooked, but the imperfection only makes her more endearing.

“Mostly! It’s nice to handle something so fancy for a change.”

Eleanor knows that Dani is referring to the car, but when she says it without breaking eye contact, it’s hard not to feel an answering twitch at the thought of all the very fancy things Dani could handle.

According to Kayla and Ash, this rural venture is supposed to be Eleanor’s summer of rest and relaxation. An easy project with a distant deadline and a chance to decompress in relative isolation. Not, em-

phatically, a chance to fuck the town mechanic in the tiny village she's ended up in.

No matter how much Eleanor tells herself that, she can't stop looking at Dani's capable hands and imagining all of their practical applications.

In the end, Dani fixes the transmission in less than an hour. There's no waiting room at the shop, just the open floor and a small office area at the back, so Dani chats away to Eleanor about what she's doing as she works; she shows Eleanor the tools and parts she's using and even encourages her to peer through the hood and help with the installation as Dani highlights the broken part with a flashlight.

By the time Eleanor's payment is being processed, she's pretty sure she could fix the issue herself next time. Looking down at the receipt Dani hands her, though, Eleanor frowns.

"This doesn't seem like very much for all the work you did," Eleanor says, hesitating before signing her name at the bottom of the invoice.

"Oh, I only charged you half for labour."

Eleanor's pen veers off the paper at the end of her signature. "What? Why?"

"First-time customers get a discount."

"You don't have to do that," Eleanor insists, trying to give her card to Dani to charge more, but no matter how hard she tries, it still ends up back in her own hand. "I can pay."

"Don't worry about it. You did half of it yourself, so consider it wages for your hard work," Dani says, flashing a quick wink. Her grin is altogether too charming. "See you around, Nora."

Dani squints at the invoice before she puts it in the cash drawer. As her eyes dart over Eleanor's signature, over her full name spelled out in black and white, a thread of fear winds its way around Eleanor's ribs. The girl at the grocery store had been so confrontational—Eleanor doesn't want to think about what it would be like if Dani looked at her with that kind of disdain.

But Dani doesn't react. She shoves the paper into the drawer with the same friendly smile she's had since Eleanor arrived and sends her

off with another handshake, making no mention of Eleanor's last name.

Eleanor leaves the shop relieved, with a car that runs better than ever and a sensation in her stomach like she's missed a step on the stairs. And in idle moments over the following days, she keeps thinking about Dani Cooper. More than she should.

Eleanor thinks about that friendly grin and Dani's surprisingly light regional accent. She thinks about the light sheen of sweat that covered Dani's skin under her thin tank top. She thinks about Dani's hands, strong and calloused under layers of oil and engine grime. She thinks about wide shoulders and the strength in Dani's arms as she hefted heavy car parts effortlessly.

She thinks about full lips, a bit chapped but probably still soft, and exactly how they might feel against her own.

It must be because she's going stir-crazy. It's been months since her last tryst with Lydia. She's been on edge ever since she turned the most recent proposition down, and now she's cooped up in the middle of nowhere. It's perfectly natural to casually fantasize about the only attractive woman she's seen in this town.

But even a week later, when Eleanor has run into several other attractive women—the spitfire redhead who runs the local restaurant, for example, or a stern but striking auburn-haired woman at the grocery store who sports oil-stained hands just like Dani's—she still only thinks about one.



## Chapter 3

“YOU MET A HOT FEMALE mechanic and you didn’t get her number? Have you gone straight on us?”

Ash’s voice is tinny through the shaky Wi-Fi, but the familiarity of his scolding warms Eleanor all the same. She takes a sip of wine, pulling the blanket up higher over her legs to ward against the chilly evening air.

“Also, why won’t you video chat?” Kayla chimes in.

Eleanor sighs, rubbing her freshly moisturized face. “I look like shit.”

“You probably look better than I do with all that rest you’re getting.”

Eleanor highly doubts that since Kayla consistently looks like she’s ready to walk a runway with her willowy frame and angular face. Still, she appreciates the sentiment.

“The service is bad out here,” Eleanor says instead. She’s three glasses of wine deep and dressed in her pyjamas to watch the sunset from her deck. A long video conference is the last thing she wants, even with her best friends.

“Can we get back to the hot mechanic, please?” Ash says. “And Eleanor’s truly startling lack of game?”

Kayla latches on before Eleanor can protest. “Yeah, what’s with that? You’re there till, what, July probably? Why not try to have a little fun?”

“I doubt she’s interested. I don’t even know if she’s gay. Besides, I didn’t come here to get entangled. It makes things too complicated.”

The last of the day's light fades over the treeline, and Eleanor sighs as the mosquitoes start to descend.

"I'm not saying you should get entangled." Kayla's voice cuts out slightly as Eleanor gathers her blanket and wineglass and escapes the great outdoors. Slamming the sliding glass door shut behind her, she drapes the blanket over the back of her couch and sinks onto a soft cushion.

"I dunno, entanglement can be fun if you use the right rope," Ash says. Eleanor can almost see the wink he would have thrown if he were here.

"I don't think Eleanor could handle maintaining your Rolodex of Grindr tops," Kayla says. Eleanor hears the reverberation of a playful smack. "Ow—what? Eleanor doesn't have it in her to be a joyful gay tramp like you."

Ash huffs, but he has no retort.

"All I'm saying is that a summer fling might do you good," Kayla says much more rationally. "You'll never know if she's gay if you don't flirt a little. Relax, hang out, make some friends, get yourself laid, and unclench. You don't need to submit a formal request."

Eleanor groans, flopping back onto the throw pillows. It's not like she's inexperienced by any far stretch. Casual connections are her bread and butter. But a *summer fling*? Honestly, "submitting a formal request" isn't far off from Eleanor's usual style. Her relationship with Lydia was governed by strict rules on both sides to eliminate any need for conflict or hurt feelings. It stopped just short of including a written agreement.

Lydia had deemed it unnecessary when Eleanor made that suggestion.

"I'm going to keep to myself like I said I would," Eleanor tells her friends.

"Suit yourself, Mother Theresa," Ash scoffs.

"If you guys only called to make fun of me, I'm hanging up."

"No, no, I'm sorry," Kayla cuts in. "We tease because we love. We want you to have the best vacation possible."

"You said I needed rest and relaxation, and I'm getting some."

"Doesn't sound like you're *getting some*," Ash mutters.

Eleanor rolls her eyes. Before either of them can protest, she's already disconnected the call.

She continues with her night uninterrupted after that, throwing together a quick pasta for dinner and luxuriating in a long, hot bath. She settles into bed, window shades thrown open to let the moonlight filter in, and reads three chapters of the latest book in her years-long backlog of unread novels. But the conversation stays with her.

Her intention for the summer was isolation. It's what she's craved for years, what she's missed the most from her life before her shift to CEO—the ability to retreat to somewhere quiet and work in peace. But her brief interaction with Dani, and the way it's stayed in her mind, does point to a surprising yet persistent desire to do something besides work, a pull to see the blonde mechanic again.

With an easy month and a half remaining on her project deadline, Eleanor branches out.

She starts venturing into town more often, increasing her frequency the more she realizes that Dani is surprisingly hard to pin down. She makes up more and more far-fetched excuses to herself—she forgot something from her grocery list, she needs a specific type of copper wire for a project, the coffee she brewed isn't good enough and she absolutely needs to get one from the gas station or the little café in town—but despite her hopes of seeing Dani again, it never lines up.

Dani seems to work constantly. Eleanor only gets glimpses of her—always visible by her blue ballcap—through the open garage doors whenever she drives past the shop. She's sure that Dani is too busy to see it, but Eleanor can't help but hope that once or twice, Dani notices the Porsche passing by.

No matter how much Eleanor wishes it would break down again simply for the excuse to see her, Dani's skillful fix keeps the car in tragically working order.

\* \* \*

Less than a week later, Eleanor gets desperate enough to drag herself to the local bar.

She's driven past it before, but until now, she's never considered stopping. Eleanor prefers to do her drinking in private, and indulging

in domestic beer with the owners of the dozen pickup trucks in the parking lot isn't generally her idea of a good time. But it's the only establishment in town. There's a chance, however small, that Dani could be there.

With her nerves steeled by the pep talk she gives herself in the car, Eleanor heads toward the illuminated neon sign for The River Run.

The bar is small, unassuming, and inexplicably attached to the town's pizzeria. The smell combination of beer and decades-old cigarette smoke hits her nose at the same time as the scent of baking bread and cheese. It's strange but not completely unpleasant.

The decor is more jarring than the warring scents. The bar is partially carpeted, a decorative trend that Eleanor previously thought had died in the mid-'90s. The tables and chairs are mismatched and purely functional. One table even has a plastic lawn chair for seating, and Eleanor can see that the wooden tabletops are scratched and carved with graffiti. The only part of the place that seems new is the bar top itself. It's shiny and well-kept and tended by a scowling young woman whose white-blond hair is streaked with neon blue.

Eleanor sweeps her eyes over the row of hunched backs huddled on the bar stools, most of them watching what looks to be a game of curling on the television hung above the shelves of liquor, but none of them have Dani's dark-blond ponytail. In fact, none of the tables seem to hold the woman Eleanor is looking for.

She's about to give up and head home after a mere fifteen seconds in the bar when the door to the women's washroom swings open, and out walks the person who has been haunting Eleanor's thoughts all week.

"All right, pal. Now that I don't have to pee so bad I can't think straight, let's play," Dani says, picking up a pool cue and heading toward the faded pool table in the bar's back corner.

"Again?" A pale, wiry man with fluffy, brown hair sitting with one of the larger groups nearby groans, hanging his head. "How many times do you have to beat me before you get tired of it?"

"I'll get tired when I finally lose," Dani says with a grin that goes right to Eleanor's toes even though it isn't directed at her. She's wearing that same ballcap from the day they met, over the same ponytail,

but this time it's paired with loose jeans and a much cleaner white T-shirt. The denim has more than a few frayed holes and hangs low on her hips. Her work boots make her footfalls sound heavy on the carpet.

The look absolutely should not be working for Eleanor, and yet her body undeniably heats up as Dani leans back against the pool table to wait for an opponent.

Once again, Eleanor is struck by the ease of Dani's movement. It's like she's never known a day of uncertainty in her life—Dani walks with a loping grace, holding herself with an easy, gentle sort of masculinity that only makes her more appealing. Confident without being cocky. Open and warm and strangely enticing.

The way the T-shirt hugs her frame doesn't hurt either.

"Come on, leave Ryan alone," a deeper voice says. Eleanor recognizes Owen, the tow truck driver from Dani's shop, when he slings an arm over Ryan's narrow shoulders. "Let the man drink in peace."

Dani sighs, setting the cue down and leaning on it like a walking stick. "Fine. One of these days, I'm going to find someone who puts up a challenge."

Ryan looks relieved to be released from duty. He empties his glass in a gulp, and Owen refills it from the dregs of the pitcher sitting on the table between them.

"Can we get another pitcher for the sore loser?" Dani calls to the bartender, who doesn't spare her a glance.

"Go fuck yourself, Cooper," the bartender calls back, but she's already grabbing Dani's order.

"Thanks, Jenny," Dani singsongs.

Laughter ripples through the bar. Dani is clearly well-known and liked here. Eleanor, in contrast, has rarely experienced anything but indifference, awkwardness, or outright hostility in a large group like this.

And that moment—as Eleanor is staring like an idiot at Dani and her friends—is when Dani notices her.

Inexplicably Dani's eyes brighten. She sticks a hand in the air, eyes still on Eleanor, and waves.

"Nora! I didn't expect to see you again!"

The whole table turns to look at Eleanor.

The warm, pizza-scented bar suddenly feels unbearably hot. Eleanor briefly considers running for it, turning on her heel and sprinting back out to the car and pretending this never happened, but Dani is already gesturing her over and Eleanor's feet seem to be moving of their own volition.

"Dani, hi," Eleanor says as she draws even with the table, nodding politely at Dani's friends. "I was just...stopping by for a drink."

Eleanor hates how breathy her voice sounds to her own ears. Nobody comments on it, though, and Dani's smile is bright enough that Eleanor might have felt relaxed if she didn't now have a whole new group of people to socialize with.

"Come sit with us!" Dani insists. Eleanor waves awkwardly as Dani pulls out a chair for her. "You know Owen already, but this is Ryan. Ryan, meet Nora! I fixed her car the other day."

Owen flashes a warm grin, and Ryan waves jovially, halfway through chugging Owen's beer.

"He's terrible at pool, but Ryan's our resident tech expert as well as a beer thief," Dani says, clapping Ryan on the shoulder. "He's the only IT game in town. Mostly meaning that the retirees call him to fix their email."

"Hey! I help everyone," Ryan protests, sitting up straighter and setting down the empty glass. "Who fixed your computer last weekend, Dani?"

Dani refills his pint, but only halfway. "And who fixed the alarm system at the shop after you set it off so bad the firefighters came in from Wyvale?"

"...you did," Ryan admits, slowly deflating back into his seat as a new pitcher lands on the table. "Damn. I was hoping everyone had forgotten about that."

"My memory is as solid as my pool game," Dani says, throwing her arms wide in a confident shrug. "I'm unbeatable."

Eleanor has no idea what possesses her to say it. Maybe it's the hot, stuffy air of the bar making her lose her sanity or the way Dani is smiling at her in that cocksure but somehow still kind-hearted way

that makes Eleanor's knees a little weak, but before she can stop herself, she's opening her mouth.

"I doubt that."

A chorus of *oooohs* ring around the table. Owen slaps the wooden surface gleefully and points at Dani. "That sounded like a challenge!"

"It sure did," Dani says, and the impressed look on her face is almost worth Eleanor's temporary mania. "Wanna play?"

Five minutes later Eleanor is standing across the pool table from Dani with a cue in her hand, about to start a game she's never tried before.

Eleanor knows the rules (after a covert and frantic Google search while Dani set the balls up) and it's not like it's a terribly physical activity. It's hitting things with a stick. Analyzing speed and trajectories. Physics, at its basic level, and a bit of hand-eye coordination. It's not rocket science.

"So you're new in town, huh?" Dani asks, breaking the triangle of balls and sending them scattering across the felt. Two solid colours sink into the holes. Eleanor takes quiet note of Dani's posture, the way she holds the pool cue, and adjusts her own position.

"Is that everyone's first question?"

"Riverwalk is a pretty small place. When someone new comes along, people get curious. And most people here don't see a lot of Porsches," Dani says, sinking yet another shot. Her third misses, though, and Dani concedes the turn to Eleanor gracefully.

Eleanor laughs despite herself as she surveys the table. "I guess I stand out."

"In more ways than one."

Eleanor can't stop the nervous laugh that erupts at the unexpected compliment. She knows she's blushing, but thankfully Dani is mostly looking at the pool table.

"When you brought your car in, I figured you were just passing through," Dani continues, blessedly changing the subject as Eleanor lines up her first shot. "We don't get a lot of long-term stays."

"I'm renting a place on the bay." Eleanor hits the ball she's aiming for but slightly too hard and at the wrong angle. It knocks into her

intended target crookedly and ends up far away from where it needs to be.

She frowns as Dani lines up a new shot, mentally adjusting her technique for next time.

“Down by the island?” Dani says, whistling low and hitting another good shot. She’s confident with it, quick and practiced. “Pricey. Although I’m saying this to the woman with the nicest car in town, so I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Dani doesn’t look put off, or even jealous. She looks impressed. And she looks even more impressed after her next miss, when Eleanor snaps her cue and, with devastating precision, sends a striped ball falling into place down the pot.

Dani’s eyebrows raise. The approval Eleanor sees in her bright blue eyes as she sinks another before missing again is invigorating.

“I didn’t realize I was playing a pro!” Dani lines up a simpler shot. Eleanor can’t take her eyes away from the arch of Dani’s back as she leans over the table, the way she chews on her lip as she concentrates. The skin comes away red and a little wet, and Eleanor has a sudden and overwhelming urge to bite at it herself.

“Would you believe me if I told you I’ve never played before?” Eleanor asks, swallowing that impulse down. She tries to distract herself by staring at the action on the table, but said action skids to a halt at her words.

“No!” Dani says incredulously. She straightens and leans on her pool cue, shaking her head. “Is this seriously your first time?”

“I prefer chess.”

Dani laughs, lining up another shot. “Well, your talents are wasted there. You could clean up at a pool tournament.”

Dani takes her shot as she says it. She winces when the ball bounces off at a bad angle, spinning across the table and nudging one of Eleanor’s instead. “Shoot. Looks like you’re up.”

A few minutes later Dani is removing her hat in respect as Eleanor sinks her final ball with a flourish while one of Dani’s remains on the table. The ponytail underneath the hat is messy and endearing. She looks like she’s about to congratulate Eleanor on the win, but she’s interrupted by her friends.



“She kicked your ass, Cooper!” Owen crows, clapping loudly and startling Eleanor out of the Dani-bubble she’s been suspended in for the whole game. She’d completely forgotten that there were other people in the bar until just now.

“I don’t know who you are, Nora, but if you can keep beating her winning streak, I hope you come back every night,” Ryan says, clapping Eleanor on the shoulder. His hand slides off soon after, but Eleanor’s usual urge to shrug off the physical contact is strangely absent in the company of Dani’s friends. Ryan is clearly a few steps past intoxicated, but the invitation is flattering all the same.

The rest of the night passes pleasantly. Eleanor stays for one drink, contributing as often as seems polite, but most of her time is spent looking at Dani. How her smile makes her eyes crinkle at the corners. The softness of her lips, which she tends to chew at like a fidget when she isn’t talking. The way she always manages to catch Eleanor’s eye and wink whenever Eleanor’s starting to feel a little lost in the conversation.

It’s all a little absurd. Eleanor doesn’t daydream. She doesn’t pine. Physical attraction is something she either ignores or deals with through a mutually beneficial casual arrangement. But the idea of asking Dani for something like that when they hardly know each other doesn’t feel right, given the circumstances.

Dani leaves around 10 p.m., citing work in the morning, and Eleanor ducks out with her despite the protests of the table that the night isn’t over. While Dani’s friends have been exceedingly nice to her so far, staying after Dani has left isn’t what she came here for.

Her decision is validated when Dani opens the door to let Eleanor through first and Eleanor glances back to see that a few other people have joined the table. The jukebox volume has been cranked up, and Ryan is being hoisted up onto Owen’s shoulders. His head comes worryingly close to intersecting with a ceiling fan.

“Sorry they’re so crazy,” Dani says as Eleanor passes her, letting the door shut behind them. She rubs the back of her neck under her ponytail. She almost looks nervous, which seems completely implausible to Eleanor. “They can be a lot, but they’re good people.”

“I had a great time,” Eleanor assures her. “I’m grateful you’ve all been so kind to me.”

They take simultaneous deep breaths as they meander across the parking lot. Eleanor is used to the smells of the city—car exhaust, hot pavement, a hundred different restaurants all cooking at once. Riverwalk is so different. It’s all running water and cut grass and a hint of distant woodsmoke. Cool and fresh.

Dani catches her eye on the exhale and chuckles.

“I’ve always loved the way the air smells out here,” Dani says, leaning against a nearby truck that Eleanor assumes belongs to her. She can’t see any distinguishing features in the dark, but it looks older than most of the others.

“I’m learning to like it,” Eleanor admits, fiddling with her car keys. “I didn’t realize how suffocating the city was until now.”

“City air blows.”

Eleanor snorts, not quite covering her mouth quickly enough to hide it. Dani grins.

A stretch of silence grows between them. Eleanor knows what she wants to say—she wants to ask to see Dani again. To ask for her number. To ask *anything*, if it means the conversation doesn’t have to end here. But she doesn’t. She lets the silence grow until Dani pushes herself off the truck, unlocking the driver’s side door manually.

“I better hit the road. We all had a really great time hanging out with you,” Dani finally says, opening her truck door and pulling herself up into the seat. “I hope I’ll see you around?”

“Right, yes.” Eleanor backs out of Dani’s way and prepares to bolt to her car to scream her frustration out in private. “Of course. Have, uh—have a good night.”

Dani’s tires crunch on the gravel as she pulls out onto the street, disappearing in a left turn two blocks down.

For hours afterwards Eleanor curses her own hesitation. She curses it as she drives home, as she washes off the bar smell in the shower, and as she climbs into bed and slips into dreams that leave her sweaty and distracted long into the next day.

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# Shifting Gears

BY JAZZ FORRESTER

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