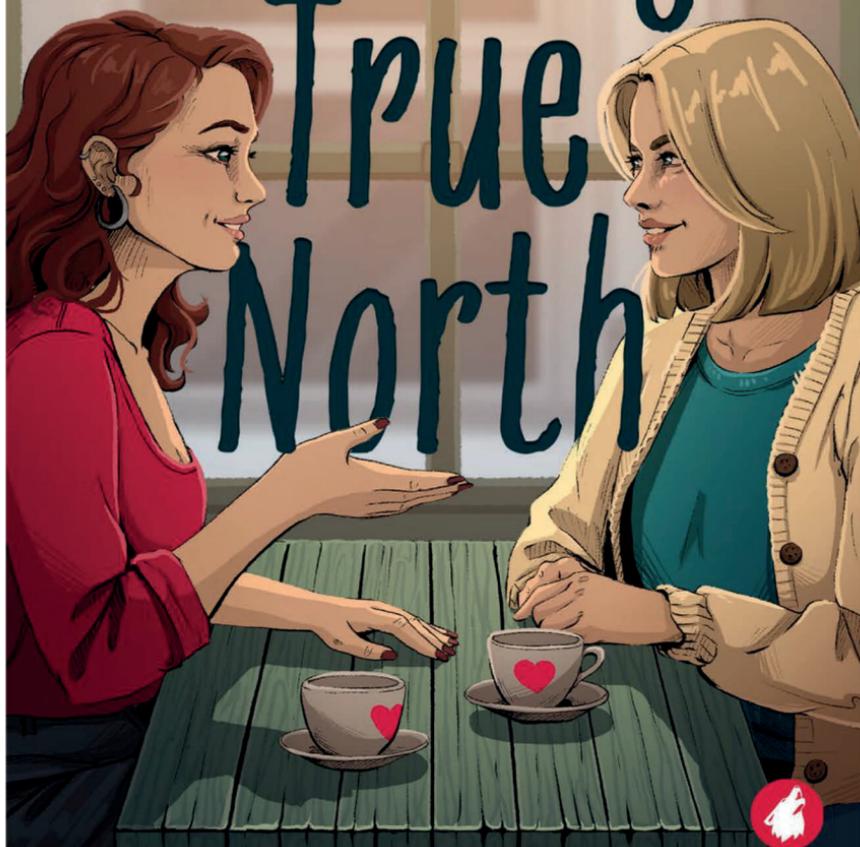


# Finding True North



Emma Weimann



# Chapter 1

## The Shag and the Sigh

Emily Oldman had just turned forty-four. She was appropriately ambitious, single, and in need of neither a girlfriend nor a sex toy. At least, that was what she told herself.

So, naturally, her best friend Linda had just slapped an expensive gift voucher in her hand (with a grin that bordered on cruel) and dragged her here: to a sex shop. Called The Shag.

“Consider it overdue self-care,” Linda had said with an entirely unsubtle wink. “Spend big.”

With sleek blonde hair, sharp cheekbones, and striking blue eyes, Linda was the kind of woman everyone turned to look at. But her best friend, in town for a brief visit from Washington, had been married to her wife for five years now. Their happiness, the kind so sweet it practically turned Emily’s teeth a little gray, made her feel like a disappointed kid with a candy stash she couldn’t touch.

Just great. Of course, the voucher and the shop were everything she avoided: impersonal, awkward, painfully unromantic.

She sighed, long and deep, before turning to Linda. “My love life’s a barren desert, as parched and uninspired as a legal briefing for a merger nobody cares about.”

“But it doesn’t have to be,” Linda replied. “Maybe you can find an oasis in the desert.” Her smile was wicked. “Come on—you’ve been living on dry toast for months. Don’t you think it’s time for a little sugar?”

Emily sighed again. It had been ten months since anyone's touch had lit her skin—or sparked anything close to a real connection. And she honestly didn't see that changing anytime soon. The idea of being vulnerable again? Yeah, that made her flinch. Too raw, too risky for a girl still piecing herself back together after being burned.

Today was her forty-fourth birthday. And Emily Oldman, ambitious PA and reluctant birthday girl, wanted nothing more than to sprint from The Shag before even entering. She would have, if it not for Linda. "I don't know."

Linda rolled her eyes with a flair worthy of an Oscar.

Before her friend could launch into her usual "self-love" spiel, Emily blurted out, "Hey, did you know there are sex toy parties? Like Tupperware parties, but for...toys?"

Linda's brows shot up in genuine surprise. "Seriously? Where'd you even hear about those?"

Emily shrugged, cheeks hot. "No clue. Who cares?"

Honestly, she'd probably stumbled onto some forum one lonely night, lost in her head and browsing weird corners of the internet.

Linda chuckled softly. "Come on, we're going in. Nobody's gonna bite—unless you ask them to."

With a playful smirk, she disappeared inside, leaving Emily on the sidewalk, feeling like a teenager about to get caught sneaking out.

She sighed one last time and tried to brush away her nerves. She pushed imaginary glasses up her nose, a habit still unbroken even though she'd ditched glasses for contacts last week.

Emily shot a glance at the shop window, which glowed in soft rose light, its mannequins draped in delicate lace and satin that hinted at more than they revealed. Between artful displays of silk restraints and glossy books on love and desire, bottles of massage

oil and crystal vials of bath salts shimmered like promises waiting to be unwrapped.

This didn't look half as bad as she had feared. But still: nope. If she had her way, she'd be celebrating her birthday at her favorite café. The one just around the corner from her apartment with the perfect coffee and a cozy corner where she could watch the world go by.

Instead, here she was, sweating outside a sex shop. Linda always had wild ideas. One year, she'd hired a flash mob to surprise Emily during her lunch break downtown. Emily had been mortified; Linda insisted it was "performance art."

Emily's blood boiled at the reminder, just a little. She loved Linda—really—but her friend, fairy godmother, chaos agent, and most loyal partner-in-crime couldn't just accept that some things weren't for Emily. She crossed her arms, feeling that familiar defensiveness kick in. Today was *her* day. She didn't want to go inside that shop. The fact that Linda had already gone in? That was her problem, not Emily's.

Decision made, she spun on her heel. She'd head to that café she liked so much, then shoot Linda a quick text message, "Where are you?" and just wait. Sure, Linda might be annoyed or even mad. But again...that was her problem.

A little weight lifted off her shoulders. She took a deep breath, feeling the tension ease.

A few steps later, she paused in front of a bookstore with a cozy-looking display. Viola Davis's biography sat next to a stack of Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* series, her favorites. She'd lost count of how many times she'd escaped into those distant galaxies, into battles and alliances she'd never see in real life.

Oh, why hadn't Linda just bought her a bookstore voucher? That would have been the easiest fix. Or wine. Or...something

nice. Her eyes drifted to a small book titled *The Best Friends*, its cover whispering, “Come, escape with me.”

Damn. A sharp surge of guilt hit her. After everything Linda had done—traveling thousands of miles to see her, supporting her through her darkest days—here she was, about to ditch her best friend over a sex toy shop. Over a vibrator, for crying out loud! Seriously, Emily?

No, she couldn’t leave. Linda was her confidante, her rock. Even after all the messes of the past, even after Emily had moved halfway across the country, she owed her.

Muttering under her breath, she spun around, marched back toward The Shag, and stopped in front of the door.

*You got this, Emily Oldman. You’re a high-functioning assistant who’s navigated legal landmines, charmed impossible colleagues, and survived Bea from Accounts and her ten-month hummus diet. You can handle a boutique sex shop. Besides, it’s for Linda.*

With a level of resolve she didn’t quite trust, Emily pushed open the door and stepped into the unknown.

And instantly...*what?*

Whatever she’d been expecting, it wasn’t this.

Instead of a sketchy, dimly lit den of tawdriness, she was greeted by warmth. Deep reds. Gold accents. Rich wood. Gentle lighting spilled over everything like a soft filter on a very confident Instagram account. It was tasteful. Inviting. Kind of beautiful, actually.

The air smelled of something exotic. Herbs, fruit, maybe leather, and just the faintest whisper of rubber.

Emily unbuttoned her coat, unsure whether the warmth in her chest was from the heat or her steadily decreasing anxiety. Okay. Not awful. So far, so good.

She tried to look casual. Cool. Normal. As if she wandered into upscale adult boutiques all the time.

In one corner, two women were kissing. Not a peck. Not casual. A real, hungry, beautiful kiss. Her face went hot. Too hot. She glanced away but not before that tiny spark of envy lit up in her rib cage.

God, she missed that.

*Focus, Oldman.*

Her eyes landed on Linda, who was chatting up the woman behind the counter as if they were old friends at a wine bar. And wow, that woman! Mid forties maybe, with waves of reddish-brown hair, a posture that said *unbothered and thriving*, and a face that made Emily's stomach do a weird flutter.

Linda spotted her and beamed. It was that smug, told-you-so grin she always wore when she thought she was dragging Emily into something "life-changing." Great.

Emily offered a tight smile and turned her focus to the long wooden table in the center of the store. Her game plan? Browse. Pretend to be curious. Buy something vaguely respectable. Escape.

But what should she buy? It wasn't just that most of the merchandise looked like props from a bad sci-fi movie, it was that all this seemed so far from the kind of intimacy she really longed for—if she allowed herself those feelings. She wasn't against toys, exactly.

But then she saw the table.

Oh. She liked this one. Like, really liked it. She'd been searching for this kind of table for weeks for her apartment. Deep red wood, sturdy legs, elegant grain. Perfect. It was the first thing in this store she actually wanted to touch.

Could she ask if it was for sale? Could she use Linda's gift voucher on furniture? Was that breaking some kind of unspoken adult store code?

Her gaze wandered to the nearby display. Glow-in-the-dark condoms. Neon green. Why? Who? She picked up the box, blinked, then set it down with a soft snort. At least they had a sense of humor in here.

Next: handcuffs. Shiny, heavy looking, kind of intimidating.

Emily tilted her head. The only people she wanted in cuffs? The overly confident lawyers at her office who talked over her in meetings and bragged about their Peloton stats.

Her lips curled slightly. Maybe this place wasn't a total lost cause.

Then came the gags. Not *those* kinds of gags. Well, yes, technically, those kinds. But her brain immediately reimagined using them in conference rooms. A visual she tried very hard not to enjoy too much.

"Hi."

The voice wafted over her like a soft breeze: low, warm, and completely derailing.

Emily turned, and there she was: the striking woman from the counter. Up close, she was even more magnetic. Warm eyes the color of wet concrete: light gray with flecks of mischief. And those tattoos...black ink curling across a forearm like vines, half hidden by a rolled-up sleeve.

"Welcome to The Shag," the woman said, her tone soft but direct. "Your friend said it's your birthday. So—happy birthday."

Emily's chest went warm again. "Thanks." Her voice was smaller than she meant it to be.

*Cool. The sexy shop goddess wishes you a happy birthday and you answer as if you're a squirrel.*

The woman smiled. "She also said it's your first time here. So my name is Tanit, and if you'd like help, I'm happy to—"

"No, that's okay," Emily said quickly, just a bit too loudly. "Is your table for sale?" she blurted out and then pointed. At Tanit's

surprised look, Emily cringed at herself and shook her head in embarrassment. "I mean... Sorry, I'd rather just...browse. On my own. For now."

"Of course." Tanit gave her a friendly nod and turned back toward the counter.

But Emily's eyes didn't turn away. Leather pants. Confident stride. Subtle tattoos. That smile.

*And I asked her about the goddamned table.*

Right on cue, Linda popped up beside her like a rom-com sidekick. "Nice view," she whispered.

"Jealous you'd never fit into pants that tight?"

Linda's grin went full throttle. "Jealous? Yes. And not just because of her pants."

An unfiltered giggle slipped out of Emily; sharp and surprising and... When was the last time she'd giggled like that? "You're terrible," she muttered.

"True," Linda said brightly. "Also married. But if she wanted to join us in bed, I'd call my wife right now and ask nicely."

Emily choked on another laugh. "Boundaries, Mortimer."

Linda nudged her with her elbow. "So, what are we looking at first?"

With a sigh, Emily straightened. "We are not looking at anything. I am. Alone."

A frown appeared on Linda's face. "Oh, come on. Just pick something out already."

"I will. I don't need an audience."

"You're being dramatic."

"I'm being a person who likes to shop for awkward objects without my best friend breathing down my neck like a well-meaning chaperone."

Linda crossed her arms. "We were supposed to have fun together."

Emily took a deep breath. "Right. But this is not fun for me. And I'd rather do it solo. You understand that, don't you?"

Linda's face shifted. Just a flicker. She got it. "Fine," she said at last. "That new café you mentioned earlier that you want to try one day? I'll wait for you there. Send me the address. Text me when you're done here."

Emily nodded. "I'll come as soon as I'm done here. And we have a table at the restaurant tonight for six o'clock."

"Three hours," Linda confirmed, pulling out her phone. "You better not back out."

Emily smirked. "I won't. Pinky swear."

Linda pouted, then gave Tanit a quick wave, along with some unnecessary eyebrow waggling, before gliding out the door.

And just like that, Emily was alone. In a sex shop. With a voucher. And the most attractive woman she'd seen in maybe years.

No pressure.

# Chapter 2

## A Little Red Friend

The two women who'd been going at it in the corner were gone. Hallelujah. Now all Emily had to do was buy something, anything, for three hundred dollars and get the hell out of here.

She scanned the store. A shelf of absurdly large dildos caught her eye. One in particular looked as if it could double as a traffic cone. No sane woman actually used that...right? She stepped closer, reading the label aloud under her breath: "Lifelike Huge Dildo."

Lifelike? In what dimension? And bright blue? Unless you were into colossal Smurfs, that thing wasn't fooling anyone. A small shudder ran down her spine. Sex was great. With the right person. And there was nothing wrong with flying solo either. It was simply self-love, personal time, whatever the current euphemism was. She wasn't a prude. She masturbated. Well, she used to. If she wasn't too exhausted or too emotionally fried to bother. Lately, she mostly fell face-first into bed and woke up what felt like ten minutes later to her alarm screaming at her.

But if she was being honest—and lately, that was a slippery slope—she missed it. Sex. Touch. Warm skin and quiet laughter and the scent of someone curled around her in bed.

She missed connection.

But that longing had nothing on the solid concrete wall she'd built between herself and the idea of anyone getting close. That wall was reinforced with ten inches of steel, barbed wire, and a neon sign that read: *Do Not Enter. Not Even With Snacks.*

Tem months ago, she'd walked out on Patricia—and everything else in Washington.

Just thinking about her ex made her stomach knot. That's why she couldn't even contemplate dating, much less sex with another human. She didn't trust herself. Not after the Patricia debacle. She'd lost every last shred of good judgment, fallen headfirst into a whirlwind of sex, late-night texts, and laugh-out-loud chemistry.

No, she couldn't change the past. But she could at least try not to screw up her future.

Which brought her here: to Springfield. To this wildly overstimulating sex shop. On her birthday. Hunting for something to spend a three-hundred-dollar gift card on. Preferably not a blue dildo the size of a baseball bat.

She wandered over to another wall of items. Wooden paddles. Whips. Chains. Tempting. Especially if she could use one of the paddles on her boss. Fully clothed, of course. She wasn't a monster.

But in the bedroom? With another woman? Hard pass.

She kept browsing. Edible underwear? Absolutely not. Two words: *yeast infection*.

Her eyes landed on a sign that made her stop in her tracks: *Vagina Door Handles—Molded from Real Vajayjays*.

Emily blinked. *How... What... Why?* She didn't even want the answers. Just...no.

Had she always been this vanilla? She didn't think so. But in a store full of rainbow-glitter kink, her own sex life looked downright beige. Maybe connection and touch were boring now. Outdated. Had she missed the memo? She tried to shake off the feeling, but it clung to her like static. Sex had never been a problem in her relationships. Not with Linda, when they'd hooked up years ago. Not even with...

Ugh. Patricia. Emily groaned quietly. Ten months later and the woman still lived rent-free in her brain. Was she ever going to stop being haunted?

She glanced over at the front counter. Tanit was still there, reading. Her stance was casual but focused, one hand propping up a paperback. No doubt something spicy. Emily imagined it was called *Bound in Velvet* or *Confessions of a Latex Librarian*.

But when Tanit closed it and laid it down, the cover surprised Emily. *Winter's Bone* by Daniel Woodrell. That was unexpected.

"That's one of my favorites," Tanit said, seeing her studying the cover. "I don't even know how many times I've read it."

Emily had read it too. Ages ago. Gritty. Dark. And if she remembered correctly, some subtle but clear lesbian subtext between the protagonist and her friend. So Tanit loved books. And nuance. And, well, vaginal door handles, but maybe that was just an occupational hazard.

Emily hesitated. But the panic of spending the next ten minutes pretending to be intrigued by anal beads pushed her forward. "Could I take you up on your earlier offer?" She walked up to the counter. "I'm not really sure what I'm looking for. And nothing has exactly called out to me. At least not in a good way."

Tanit smiled, setting her book aside. "No problem at all."

There was something about the way she said it—easy, confident, not even a whiff of condescension—that made Emily relax. A fraction, anyway.

Tanit stepped out from behind the counter and tucked her hands into her back pockets. "Mind if I ask you a few questions? Nothing too invasive, I promise."

Emily's insides screamed *abort!* But on the outside, she just crossed her arms and nodded. "Sure. Go ahead."

And just like that, she'd officially surrendered her secret, sad dry spell of a sex life to a beautiful stranger in a sex toy shop.

“So,” Tanit began, her voice as smooth and nonchalant as a yoga instructor on chamomile, “are you looking for something to use with a partner or something just for you?”

“Just me,” Emily said. The words came out a little less awkward than she’d expected. Victory.

“Perfect. That’s a great starting point. Let’s check out some of our best vibrators. You have any experience with those kinds of toys?”

“Yes.” Emily walked with her toward the far end of the store.

As they passed a cupboard full of clamps and mystery straps, Emily did her best not to stare. Honestly, some of it looked less like sex equipment and more like the clearance aisle at a hardware store. Was that a tiny winch?

“This is our vibe zone.” Tanit stopped in front of a wall of products that reminded Emily more of modern art than anything explicitly sexual. A rainbow of sleek, silicone shapes greeted her—some discreet, some less so.

“Some of these are small enough to toss in a handbag,” Tanit explained. “Others are better kept at home unless you’re really into living on the edge. Pro tip? Stick with rechargeable ones. You do not want a cord dangling around in mid fun. But if you go with batteries, always keep spares. They will die at the worst possible moment.”

She gave Emily a knowing shrug. “A second vibrator and backup batteries; that’s the new survival kit.” Her grin was effortless. Devastating.

Emily wasn’t ready for that grin. But the handbag thing? That sent her spiraling. She imagined it: herself in a client meeting, in mid pitch, digging for a pen in her oversized tote, and then suddenly, *bzzzzzzz*, out rolls a bright-yellow vibrator across the polished boardroom table.

She blinked. “No vibrator to go,” she said quickly. “Strictly home use, please.”

Tanit chuckled. “Vibrator to go. That should be a product line.” She pointed to a medium-sized, elegantly curved toy in a deep cherry red. “There is this one. Five settings, adjustable speeds, quiet motor. Vibrates like a dream. It’s one of my favorites.”

Emily did not want to imagine Tanit using it; she failed miserably. “That sounds great,” she said, voice tight. “I’ll take it.”

“Excellent choice. Red, white, or baby blue?”

Red. Easy. It had always been her favorite color. “Red, please.”

Tanit pulled a matching box from the shelf and handed it to her, then paused. “How about something different to go with it? I have a feeling you might appreciate this.”

*A private demonstration at your place?* Emily mentally smacked herself on the forehead. *Focus.* “Sure.” She tried to sound casual.

Tanit held up a small bottle. “Relaxing bath oil.”

Of all the things she’d expected—whips, blindfolds, maybe something with suspiciously fluffy tails—bath oil had not been on the list. It was normal. Gentle. Lovely.

Tanit gave her a soft smile, all quiet warmth. “Sex should be fun. Sometimes fast and wild is exactly what you need. But sometimes...” Her smile widened. “It’s a glass of wine, a long bath, music you forgot you loved. Foreplay for the soul, if you will.” She winked. “Let your imagination wander. Let your clit lead the way.”

Emily almost dropped the vibrator box. Something in Tanit’s voice—kind, calm, utterly unfazed—hit her right in the chest. It was the kind of thing Linda might say. Only this...Tanit saying it...felt better. Deeper. Like Tanit wasn’t just selling her something but reminding her of something she’d lost. Joy. Play. Touch.

For the first time in a long while, Emily felt genuinely seen. And safe. And a little turned on, but that was another problem entirely. “I’m not just taking the vibrator,” she said, a spark of something returning to her voice. “I want the bath oil. And maybe... Do you sell relaxing music? CDs or something?”

Tanit's grin lit up again. "We do. Go ahead and pick a bath oil"—she gestured to a nearby display of dreamy-looking bottles—"and I'll grab you a couple of my favorites. Also, you should sign up for our newsletter. It's not just about product drops. There's amazing content. Tips, ideas, fun challenges. Great stuff."

Emily's sex life just about qualified as a fossil these days, but she did have two capable hands and a brand-new vibrator the color of confidence. "Sure," she said. "Why not?"

She turned toward the shelf of oils, already picturing it: warm water, soft music, something lavender-scented maybe. A long, quiet soak. No meetings. No exes. Just her, her body, and this sleek, little red toy that looked like it might actually change her life.

Loving herself.

Yeah. She could give this a try.



As the shop door clicked shut behind Emily, Tanit let out a soft sigh.

Now, that had been an interesting woman. Smart. Beautiful. Mysterious. Those stormy blue eyes that flickered gray when she was flustered. That crisp blonde bob. Those cheekbones that looked engineered for slicing fruit. An appreciation of fine furniture. And the way she kept pushing up imaginary glasses? Adorable.

How was someone like that single? The question buzzed beneath Tanit's skin. And why hadn't she seen her before? In a queer community this size, new people stood out in Springfield. But Tanit had been working nonstop these past two years since The Shag opened, barely venturing out. Her social life and the

community came to her now, mostly through checkout lines and awkward product questions.

Still. Someone like Emily should've been a blip on her radar, at least.

Tanit thought back through the conversation. Emily had softened—gradually, cautiously—like a book spine cracking open after years on a shelf. And whatever that was between her and her friend, Linda? Not current. Probably an ex. Emily had said she was single.

Tanit's mind wandered, uninvited, toward the bath oil, the candles, the little red vibrator. To Emily relaxing, all alone, letting go of whatever weight she carried around on those square shoulders. A quiet moan, not of awkwardness, but of actual pleasure. Not performative. Not for anyone else.

Tanit flushed. Okay, enough of that. She scrubbed the thought away with a swipe of the counter.

"Why are you staring at the wall?" Mia's voice came from behind her. "Are you okay?"

Tanit jumped at the appearance of her cousin. "Mia."

"You looked as if you were thinking about something very intense," Mia said, stepping closer, a bag of gummy bears in her hand. Her hair caught the light, faint blue streaks glinting against natural brown. "Your face got red. Are you embarrassed?"

"No," Tanit lied quickly. "I was just...thinking."

"About the customer who just left?" Mia asked.

Tanit hesitated, then sighed. "Yes."

"The one with the clipboard?"

"She didn't have a clipboard."

"She stared at everything as if she wanted to sort things out or do a stock take," Mia clarified. "What did she buy?"

"A vibrator."

Mia blinked. "Oh. Why?"

Tanit frowned. "What do you mean, why?"

"She looked like someone who has everything organized. A calendar for when to wash her sheets. People like that usually have systems for sex too."

"That's...not always how it works," Tanit said.

"She walked as if she had not made a sudden decision in years," her cousin continued. "I thought she wouldn't buy anything here. But she did. So I'm confused."

"She's a person," Tanit said, half amused. "People get curious. People have needs."

Mia nodded seriously, considering this. "So she is curious and stressed. That explains her face."

"Her face?"

"Well, her facial expression. She looked like she was carrying an invisible but heavy backpack," Mia said plainly.

Tanit couldn't help laughing. "That's...not inaccurate."

Mia studied her. "Do you like her?"

Tanit froze. "What?"

"Your pupils got bigger when you said her name," she said. "And you were smiling at nothing."

Tanit groaned, grabbing the nearest soft cloth and tossing it at her. "You're impossible."

"I'm accurate," Mia said, catching the cloth easily. "Also, you said recently you miss people. Maybe that is part of this."

Tanit's hand stilled on the counter. "Yeah. I do miss people." Particularly her old friends, time spent in The Labrys. Fun.

"Then see your friends," Mia said matter-of-factly. "I can take care of the shop while you are gone."

"You could?" Was that a good idea? A lot of people couldn't cope with Mia's bluntness and unasked-for observations.

"Yes, I could. But not on Fridays," Mia added. "That is when the leather couple usually comes in. They ask too many questions

about things I can't answer. And not Saturdays. Saturdays have way too many customers."

Tanit smiled despite herself. "That's fair."

"You should go anyway," Mia said. "You stay here too much. You were a lawyer. Now you only talk about silicone."

Tanit let out a surprised laugh. "I...guess you're right." Maybe leaving Mia in charge for a couple of hours one or two days a week wouldn't be so bad. So far, her younger cousin only helped out a few hours each week. Getting more responsibility might be good for her. And it would give Tanit a bit of time for herself.

"I usually am," Mia said without irony. "Also, I am joining a community theater group."

Tanit blinked. "Wait. Theater? You?"

"Yes. It is pretending to be other people. I want to try it. It seems useful."

"Useful for what?"

"For when people ask me things I do not want to answer," Mia said simply.

Tanit stared at her for a beat, then laughed, warm and bright. "That's actually amazing."

She shrugged. "I spend all day either at home or here, with vibrating products. Shakespeare might balance that."

"Are you okay?" Tanit asked gently.

"No," Mia said, unbothered. "But it's okay. I can deal with it."

Tanit nodded slowly. "Fair." She knew that Mia wouldn't lie to her, and she'd learned to give her space and not crush her with questions, as concerned as Tanit might be at times.

"So," Mia said, popping a gummy bear into her mouth, "you go out and talk to people again. I'll keep the shop standing."

Tanit laughed, a laugh that felt lighter than usual. It echoed through the quiet shop like a promise.

Maybe, just maybe, things were shifting for the better. She'd love to get some of her old life back.

# Chapter 3

## Ex-Press(o) Yourself

By the time Emily slipped out of The Shag, the winter sun had already ducked behind the buildings, leaving the street in that grayish-blue glow that made everything look a little cinematic.

She clutched her plain black shopping bag as if it contained state secrets. The delicate red roses pictured on it screamed innocence, but the contents? Not so much.

Her phone buzzed. Linda.

*At the coffee shop. Amazing sandwiches. Cake to die for. Hurry.*

Good timing! Emily smiled and picked up her pace. She'd never visited this café, but she'd heard that it was "the" place to go, and Linda loved to discover special places.

Five minutes later, Emily stood in front of a sleek little café that practically whispered, "You can't afford this, but we'll let you pretend."

The moment she stepped inside, she felt it: This wasn't a café. This was a lifestyle experience wrapped in reclaimed wood and anxiety. It smelled like roasted beans and generational wealth. Every surface gleamed as though it had been curated by a minimalist influencer. Since when had cafés turned into luxury boutiques with espresso machines?

She glanced up at the chalkboard menu and gasped. Eight dollars for a drip coffee! Drip. No oat milk. No froth. No gold leaf. Just bean water.

Who was paying these prices? Hedge fund managers? Retired tech bros? Emily squinted at the sandwich list. Fourteen dollars for a cucumber sandwich so small it looked like it had been emotionally neglected. She half expected someone to whisper, "Our croissants are ethically sourced and come with a financial advisor."

God, this place was so expensive, she felt she needed to show proof of income just to order. But whatever. Linda was paying. And if there was one person who wouldn't blink at a nineteen-dollar turmeric latte, it was Linda.

Who, of course, was lounging in a corner booth as if she owned the place. To be fair, she probably could afford it, if her wife decided to be generous.

Emily slid into the seat across from her, dropping her not-very-suspicious-at-all bag onto the extra chair.

"So?" Linda asked, eyes gleaming, "did you buy something spicy?"

"Just a coffee for me," Emily said, dodging the question. "I want to be hungry for dinner."

"You mean the Ethiopian place you keep raving about? What do they even serve? Spicy mystery stew and heartbreak?" Linda grinned and raised an eyebrow. "And are you gonna tell me what's in the bag?"

"Nope."

"You do realize I'm staying two more days and that I'm not above low-key snooping, right? Nightstands don't lock themselves, babe."

Emily raised an eyebrow. "Good to know. I'll barricade the door tonight."

A waiter appeared, all pleasant smiles and peppy barista energy.

"Double espresso, please," Emily said.

"Nothing to eat?" the waiter asked.

"No thanks."

Once he left, Linda leaned in again, as though about to spill state secrets. "All right. Since you won't tell me what you bought, tell me about the shop girl."

Emily blinked. "What?"

"Oh, please. That woman was smoking hot. And totally your type."

"I don't have a type," Emily replied automatically, her stomach tightening like it always did when Linda shifted into matchmaker mode. Which was often. Too often. But...okay, yes. There had been something about Tanit. A flash of connection, maybe. Or maybe just her body remembering what attraction was after ten months of emotional hibernation. Either way, it had hit fast and deep, as if someone had yanked her into the present.

"You absolutely do have a type," Linda said, sipping her coffee. "You fall for women who look as if they've either just broken out of art school or prison. Confident, a little intense—classic you."

Maybe Linda wasn't so wrong. "She has tattoos," Emily blurted out.

"She has tattoos?"

Emily regretted saying anything. "Yeah. Arm. Forearm, actually. But I'm sure there are more I didn't see."

Linda practically glowed. "God, I love being right. And she was clearly flirting with you."

"She wasn't flirting. She was just being nice."

"Oh, honey." Linda leaned back, victorious. "She was interested. And if you weren't still stuck on that manipulative ex of yours, you'd admit it."

Emily stiffened. "It's not about Patricia."

Linda's smile softened. "Maybe. But don't let her ruin you. Your ex doesn't get to have that kind of power."

Emily looked away. She didn't want to talk about Patricia, about what she hadn't told Linda—such as the fact that Patricia had been married. Was still married. And that Emily had known. Eventually. And stayed anyway. That kind of shame didn't wash off easily.

Even now, Emily felt a little sick remembering it. And what made it worse, so much worse, was that the affair hadn't stopped there. They'd kept going. Kept sneaking around. And for what?

A rush? A delusion?

She hated what she'd done. Hated the person she'd let herself become with Patricia. The guilt was a stone in her chest. Not heavy enough to crush her, but just big enough that she never quite forgot it was there.

"So..." Linda said gently, "Ethiopian tonight, and tomorrow, I booked us tickets to that arty little indie cinema."

Emily narrowed her eyes. "What are we seeing?"

Linda grinned. "Relax. Not porn this time."

"You say that every time. And then we ended up watching that movie."

Linda feigned innocence. "It was a cinematic masterpiece. *Erotic Awakening*, remember?"

"You quoted it for months."

"It had depth!"

"It had...zero depth. Just lots of moaning and weird lighting."

"Exactly! Iconic. Admit it, you laughed more during that movie than you have in ages."

Emily sighed and then sipped her espresso. "You're a menace."

"And proud," Linda said with a wink. "Besides, someone has to inject a little fun into your tragically overorganized life."

“Work life. My personal life is anything but running smoothly.”

“That’s true.” Linda took a sip of her coffee. “Your apartment back in Washington mirrored your desk at work: all precise, all organized, all clean and neat. I do like your new apartment. It looks more homey. But it surely is not organized on the level your former one was.”

Emily frowned. Linda was right, but she simply didn’t have the energy or the will to organize her home as she had back in Washington. Yes, it didn’t look like a model unit anymore, but it had become her refuge, her shelter. The one place where she truly felt she could be herself. “I love it as it is. The only thing I would change is my job.”

“Well, it’s up to you to change that.”

“Easy for you to say when you don’t have to work at all, let alone put up with an evil boss—and I can’t just swap him for a new one in such a tight job market. I can’t just wave a wand and fix it.”

“True, I don’t officially work now, and I have no job title.” She paused as if thinking about it. “Though I prefer *freelance joy curator*. And Clara agrees.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. And what does your wife say when you’re planning all this ‘joy’?”

“She says it keeps me from turning into a bored, rich houseplant. Besides, she’s too busy saving whales or sitting on billion-dollar boards to notice if I spend a little time with my best friend, dispensing my incredibly helpful advice.”

Emily smiled despite herself. Sometimes she envied Linda—her unshakable ease, her confidence, her access to yachts and private chefs. Not that Linda came from money. But falling in love with Clara had changed all that. A meet-cute on a lesbian cruise. Of course it had been a cruise.

“Do you ever miss it?” Emily asked, genuinely curious. “Working. Having something to do besides planning spa weekends?”

Linda’s expression turned thoughtful. “At first, yeah. It was weird. Like, ‘What’s my purpose now, besides wearing linen and drinking twenty-dollar smoothies?’ But eventually I realized my purpose is joy. Clara’s joy. Yours. Especially yours. I mean, look at you. You’re hoarding sexy purchases like it’s contraband.”

Emily choked on her espresso. “I am not hoarding them.”

Linda grinned. “Just sayin’. If you ever want to show me what’s in that bag...for research purposes, of course.”

Emily laughed, her cheeks warming. “You’ll never know.”

# Chapter 4

## The Grind

The ceramic of Emily's office coffee cup sat warm against her palms. The coffee, however tasted as if someone had brewed defeat, filtered it through a used gym sock, and served it lukewarm in a very flashy mug. Every sip was a reminder that her job, like this coffee, was sweet at first but burned bitter on the way down.

How did a firm with ten floors, high-end ergonomic chairs, and a lobby waterfall that probably required its own maintenance team still serve coffee that tasted like scorched dirt? They had machines that looked like NASA prototypes. But decent beans? Apparently out of reach.

At home, she started her mornings with real coffee: strong, rich, and almost offensively good. Sometimes, if she was feeling fancy (or fragile), she'd splurge on one of those eye-wateringly expensive pour-over masterpieces from the hipster café near the courthouse. But here? Here it was always the same bitter sludge.

And didn't it just fit her work life? Eight months at this firm. Five with her current boss. And not a single day that she had looked forward to.

The office was a sea of gray: walls, desks, moods. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead like angry hornets. The open-plan layout was a purgatory of muffled chatter, passive-aggressive typing, and the occasional assistant breakdown disguised as a bathroom trip. The phones never stopped ringing. The meetings never stopped meeting. Her nerves never stopped fraying.

Some days, she questioned everything. Why did she leave her old job? Her home? Her city?

Patricia. That's why. Patricia and The wife she'd failed to mention for six whole months. Emily had been the secret. The side dish. And worse—Somewhere deep down, she'd known it was wrong.

Before she could spiral into another round of "what-the-hell-am-I-doing?", her phone rang.

Mr. Bose. Her boss. Great.

"Ms. Oldman, please come to my office," he said in that clipped, all-business tone that managed to sound both polite and utterly irritated.

Emily's stomach flipped. Of course. Something was wrong.

She arrived at his office with her legal pad in hand and a practiced smile on her face. "Yes, Mr. Bose?"

He didn't even look up. Just gestured vaguely at his screen as if she was a barista who got his order wrong. "These travel arrangements to Frankfurt," he said, his voice laced with thinly veiled condescension. "You've booked a connecting flight through London. Why not direct?"

Because magic isn't real, she thought. Aloud, she said, her voice calm and professional, "All direct flights in business class were either fully booked or double the budget. The London layover is short, and you'll arrive in Frankfurt early. Just in time for your eight a.m. meeting."

He leaned back in his leather chair, steepling his fingers like a Bond villain. "Ah, yes. But we must prioritize efficiency, Ms. Oldman. A connection is hardly ideal. Perhaps you overlooked some better options."

*Overlooked.* The word struck her with the force of a slap. No, she hadn't overlooked anything. She'd checked every flight,

every airline, every permutation of departure time, budget, seat availability. She'd practically summoned planes from the ether.

But she nodded, biting back her retort. "Of course. I'll recheck."

And then she turned and left, her smile gone, plotting a slow, satisfying revenge involving the office espresso machine, mysteriously set to sputter and flood at the exact moment Bose needed his caffeine hit.

Back at her desk, she exhaled slowly. This man was a masterpiece of entitlement wrapped in a Brooks Brothers suit. Bose was only thirty-six, a full eight years younger than she was, but carried himself as though he'd been delivering legal wisdom from the mountaintop for decades. A legacy brat through and through, with attorney parents (naturally), attorney siblings, and probably a golden retriever named Habeas Corpus. He'd arrived from New York with the smugness of a man who believed his assistants should have mind reading skills.

She worked her ass off for him, as she had for every boss she ever worked for—nearly flawlessly, always relentlessly. Even for the ones she didn't respect. But she was good. Her many lists helped. She was organized and meticulous.

He responded by second-guessing everything she did. Every flight, every calendar item, every briefing packet was an opportunity for him to gently imply she wasn't quite good enough. Not that he ever said it. That would require the kind of directness he didn't deal in.

Emily sighed, rubbed her temples, and pushed her imaginary glasses up her nose. The gesture was weirdly comforting. Her mind drifted to Tanit and what she'd said about self-worth. About owning her desires. But how was she supposed to "love herself" when her job made her feel invisible and her private life was an emotional bomb crater?

She'd hoped that moving to Springfield would be a start. It had cut the cord with Patricia. It had offered distance. But she hadn't done much with it. She hadn't made friends. She hadn't put down roots. She hadn't lived. Not really.

Maybe that could change.

First, though—Bose's stupid flight.

After what felt like half an eternity, she finally found a seat on a direct flight. All she had to do was pass the CAPTCHA to prove she was in fact human. Twenty blurry bicycles and eight phantom traffic lights later, the site froze and reset the search. It was double the cost and technically outside policy, but it checked every box on his insufferable list. And he'd already left for the day, which meant she had plausible deniability and zero interest in waiting for his blessing.

She booked it.

Then she sent him the confirmation with a delightfully neutral subject line: *Updated Frankfurt Itinerary—Per Your Preferences*. Translation: *You're welcome, Your Majesty*.

Satisfied—not happy, but less murderous—she closed the browser. Then she picked up her cell phone and opened a tab.

The Shag's website.

Emily stared at the screen for a long second, then clicked the Subscribe button on their newsletter.

One small thing.

One little move toward maybe...more.

Maybe she could find a few friends. Real ones. Maybe even Tanit could help, if not be one herself. Emily didn't know.

She didn't need to know.

She just needed to try. One quiet, courageous step at a time.



Emily came home to the scent of garlic and onions gently sizzling in olive oil, an aroma so comforting, it practically wrapped itself around her like a blanket. It was a smell her kitchen rarely wore on a weekday, and tonight, it unraveled the knots in her shoulders in record time.

Linda was stirring something on the stove, swaying offbeat to some lo-fi indie track humming from the phone speaker. The scene was so familiar, it made Emily's throat tighten, in that strangely sweet way that only home-cooked food and good memories could manage.

"Hi there. That smells amazing." Emily leaned against the doorframe, shedding her workday shell.

Linda glanced over her shoulder with a grin that could melt steel. "It will be amazing. And when I visit next time, I expect—no, demand—at least two more visits to that Ethiopian place. I've been fantasizing about their injera and doro wat as if they were a long-lost lover." She sighed dramatically, hand over heart.

Emily laughed. "Funny, considering how hard you judged me for picking that spot in the first place."

Linda waved a dismissive hand, then expertly sliced a bell pepper. "Please. That was before I knew food could transcend space and time. You're a hero for introducing me to it. Your legend lives on. Not just due to Ethiopian cuisine, mind you." She sent Emily a sly smile. "You were also my gateway to sapphic pleasures back in college, remember?"

Emily rolled her eyes, cheeks warming. "You're incorrigible."  
"True. Now come chop something, legend."

There was something grounding about cooking with Linda. The clatter of knives, the rhythmic chopping, the warm scent of simmering tomatoes. It felt less like work and more a shared language between them—intimate, comforting, and just the tiniest bit chaotic.

“Seriously, Em, you need better knives,” Linda said, holding up one of Emily’s sad, dulled blades. “This thing survived a pirate mutiny.”

“It’s vintage,” Emily said, stirring the bubbling pasta sauce. “And, honestly, if I splurged on fancy knives, I’d probably be tempted to use one on my boss.”

“Oof. Blunt-force trauma would be more deserving, though.” Linda dumped the chopped mushrooms into a bowl. “Pasta goes off in five. Don’t let it get mushy. I’m not emotionally stable enough for soft pasta.”

She paused, then turned to Emily with that too-perceptive look of hers. “So...how are you really settling into this new life of yours? And don’t give me your usual work-chat deflection. I want actual truth. Are you living? Or just, you know...existing?”

Emily froze in mid stir. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to answer. It was just hard to tell where the answer even started. “It’s...fine. The apartment’s great. The city’s okay. Still figuring out where things are. Mostly coffee shops and the grocery store.”

Linda arched a brow. “Mmm. The essentials. But what about people? You used to have people. A tight little squad of sarcastic introverts. Are you building anything similar here? Or are you just stockpiling houseplants and new vibrators?”

Emily groaned. “Linda.”

“What? It’s a valid question.”

She looked away, focusing on the bubbling sauce. “It’s hard. I don’t trust myself right now. After everything with Patricia it’s as if I’m emotionally short-circuited. I think about putting myself out there, and my stomach goes full gymnastic routine. I feel like I’m walking around with a blinking sign that says *Warning: Contents May Be Broken*. And honestly? Who wants to deal with that?”

Instead of answering, Linda slid a colander into the sink and waited.

Monster, Emily's sleek black cat, chose that moment to stroll in with maximum drama, brushing against her legs as though he hadn't been fed in weeks. He hopped onto a stool, giving both women the regal once-over, tail flicking with imperious flair. Emily scratched behind his ears, grounding herself. Monster had been her constant through the darkest parts. The nights when she couldn't sleep; the mornings when she couldn't breathe.

Linda nudged her hip gently. "Honey, everyone has broken bits. That's what makes people interesting. You're not broken. You're just...bruised. A little out of practice. Similar to a very chic, emotionally suppressed tortoise."

Emily laughed, a soft, surprised sound. "A chic tortoise?"

"Absolutely. The Prada of reptiles. But, Em, you can't live in your shell forever. You moved here. You started over. That's huge. But now you need to live the life you built, not just survive it."

"I know." Emily sighed, then added, "It just feels like I'm trying to build something new with scraps. Like rebuilding a house with duct tape and IKEA parts."

Linda's eyes softened. "That's still building. You don't have to be perfect. You just have to show up."

There was a beat of silence before Emily admitted, "Okay. I did...one thing. I signed up for The Shag's newsletter."

Linda's jaw dropped. "You? Signed up for The Shag! Look at you! My little tortoise is getting adventurous!"

Emily snorted. "It's just a newsletter. But, yeah. It had some actually thoughtful stuff. Like self-care, finding your rhythm, that kind of thing. Not just, you know, toys."

"Exactly!" Linda beamed. "That's what I'm saying. Baby steps. You're taking them. And that's enough. For now. Ooh! I know! You could have a party!"

Monster let out a dramatic meow, as if he, too, had been emotionally impacted by this conversation.

Emily looked at him. "Even the cat's judging me."

"Nope, Monster's totally in favor. Of course, he just wants you to throw a party so he can ignore even more people."

Emily smiled. "Maybe I'm not ready to host a party...but I might be ready to buy a proper knife set."

Linda whooped with delight and threw her arms around her. "Whatever gets you moving, babe. Just keep going. Because Springfield isn't ready for the real Emily Oldman. But she's coming. I can feel it."

Emily held onto that moment, that warmth, that truth. And for the first time in a long time, the ache in her chest didn't feel quite so heavy.

"Now," Linda said, stepping back, "hand me the piri piri before I faint. I'm starving, and this sauce needs a dramatic plot twist."

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