



The
Love
Factor

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Chapter 1

April 30, 1997

MOLLY SUCKED IN A BREATH and held it. She fixed her gaze, unblinking, on the television. Nearly thirty minutes into the hour-long episode, the scene was building in a halting but unmistakable crescendo to the long-awaited moment.

On screen, Ellen Morgan leaned forward, unknowingly hovering above a microphone as she confessed out loud, for the first time, that she was gay.

Molly laughed while Aditi's squeals pierced her ear through the receiver. Ellen, played by Ellen DeGeneres, had just become the first openly gay leading character on television.

"Suck it, homophobes!" Aditi shouted.

"Shhhh. I want to hear."

Aditi managed to keep quiet until the commercial break, when she resumed her celebrations. "First Melissa Etheridge and now this. It's amazing."

"This is history." Molly sat back and exhaled. "We're watching history."

"It's a lesbian revolution! I'm calling it." Aditi paused. "Too bad you're trapped in a conservative hellhole."

"It's not a hellhole. My department leans Republican, I admit, and the town is rather small, but there are a couple of decent dive bars. And property values are low, so the rent is cheap." She didn't mention that as a grad student, she could barely afford her studio apartment. Aditi was probably sipping wine on her leather sofa while Molly slurped ramen noodles from a mug, using an America Online promotional CD as a coaster.

“I just feel bad for you,” Aditi said. “We used to have so much fun in New York, and now you live in the middle of nowhere. You study all the time, and you’re broke as hell. I wish you had taken me up on that gig at NOW last year. We could be working together, fighting the patriarchy.”

“That gig was an internship.” Molly supported the National Organization for Women, but a worthy cause wasn’t enough. “And we’re not in college anymore. I’m almost thirty years old. I need to do something more with my life. Political science might not be as exciting as activism, but when I’m done, I’ll have a PhD and a good job. I need that. I need to be responsible.”

“Okay, babe. How many years do you have left anyway?”

“Well...” Molly hated doing the math. “I’m almost done with my first year and then about five more.”

Aditi gasped. “Oh, wow. I just hope it’s worth it.”

“It’s worth it,” Molly echoed, glad that Aditi couldn’t see her face. “At least I get to study issues that matter to me. Speaking of broke, this call is costing me twelve cents per minute. I’ll email you, okay?”

After their goodbyes, Molly dropped the phone into its cradle and settled back on the sofa. As the show resumed, her mood lifted. Aditi was right—the homophobes could suck it. Weeks of backlash and even a bomb threat hadn’t stopped ABC from airing the episode. It was a decisive victory.

Sometimes, things really do change.

Could she really be content watching social change on television while others did the hard work? Or would she end up regretting her decision to study politics with scholarly detachment?

She ran her fingertips over the scar on her forehead, a permanent reminder of what had happened last time she’d tried to make a difference. *Not worth it.* This time, she was staying out of trouble.

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Carmen Vaughn perched on her suede loveseat, pensively watching her television. A stack of her students’ homework assignments sat untouched, her red pen forgotten on the side table ever since Ellen Morgan had announced her sexual orientation to an airport terminal and the world.

The cast appeared to be having a great time. You’d never know that news of the character’s sexuality had unleashed calls for boycotts, fiery

sermons, and apoplectic letters to the editor. In TV fantasy land, coming out was apparently joyful and hilarious.

At the commercial break, she swirled the red wine in her glass and tried to imagine telling the truth about her identity. She could picture her colleagues' reaction all too well. The pervasive sexism at work was bad enough, but if they knew that the political science department's tenured bitch was a practicing lesbian, not a frigid shrew, mere sexism would seem like a treat. No, she'd never have some ridiculous coming-out scene in her own life.

She considered her friends and acquaintances in more liberal departments and sighed. They might not personally have a problem with her sexuality, but she knew better than to risk gossip spreading throughout the university. As for her devout Roman Catholic family—they were in the dark for their own good.

Phoebe would tell her she was being dramatic, that her fears were overblown. But Carmen wasn't inclined to give her girlfriend's opinion much weight on a night when she was absent yet again, having dinner with her sister. Supposedly. Carmen tried to quiet her nagging suspicions.

If she didn't trust Phoebe, there was no point in staying together. But it was hard to imagine throwing away two years of dating. Without Phoebe, she would have no one in her life who really knew her. That was the downside of keeping a secret.

On television, the fictional Ellen was confiding in Oprah Winfrey, who was playing her therapist. Oprah congratulated Ellen for acknowledging her sexuality, then asked what she would do next. Ellen waggled her eyebrows and declared she was going to Disneyland.

Carmen shook her head and reached for the remote.

Chapter 2

August 26, 1997

THE FIRST DAY OF MOLLY'S second year of graduate school was balmy and breezy, with no hint of the approaching autumn. After their morning seminar, Molly persuaded her friend Tina to accompany her on a walk to the strip of shops and cafes at the edge of campus.

They bought coffee at a donut shop—a small for Tina, a large for Molly—and took the long way back to the department, strolling along a winding footpath that took them past the student center and the massive university library. On days like these, she appreciated the sprawling campus of brick and column buildings interspersed with oak trees and bronze statues of historical figures.

And while she lamented the end of summer break, she was happy to be reunited with Tina, her closest friend in the program and the only other woman left in their cohort. Tina looked tan and rested from her month back home in San Antonio. Her black hair was even longer than Molly remembered; it swished around her elbows as she walked.

Tina swallowed the last of her coffee and chucked the cup in a trashcan. “So are you ready for this afternoon?”

“I’m ready for stats,” Molly said. “I’m just not sure I’m ready for Carmen.” The intel on the advanced statistics instructor was that she had impossibly high standards, showed no mercy, and lashed out at any suggestion that a concept was unclear.

“I know I’m not ready.” Tina raked her fingers through her hair. “I

heard a rumor that she once flunked an entire class. One of the fifth years told me.”

Molly believed it. “Remember when that visiting scholar couldn’t explain his own research methods and Carmen just eviscerated him? I honestly thought he was going to cry. I do not want to be on the other end of those tongue-lashings.”

“You’ll be okay. You’re so good with numbers. Me, on the other hand...”

“We’ll both be okay. You help me with international relations, and I’ll help you with stats. Same deal as last year.”

“What do you think we should call her?” Tina asked. “I mean, I know we’re supposed to call the faculty by their first names because we’re ‘colleagues now,’ but *Carmen* just feels a little...informal for someone like her. What if she’s like Grayson?”

Molly’s body recoiled from the mere mention of Brett Grayson. “Ugh. He’s so full of himself. He probably makes his own mother call him *Dr. Grayson*. Carmen may be tough, but I don’t think she’s that pretentious. Still, just to be safe, I won’t call her anything. From everything I’ve heard, our best bet is to stay off her radar as much as possible.”

They reached the doorstep of Edelman Hall. As Tina pushed open the door, Molly clapped her hands. “Let’s go kick statistics’ ass!”

She stepped inside to find Carmen Vaughn regarding her with a raised eyebrow and tight lips.

“Oops,” whispered Tina.

Molly silently cursed her fair skin as she slunk into the classroom, her cheeks hot. She and Tina chose the seats farthest from the front of the room, but the tables were arranged in a tight square, leaving nowhere to hide.

The remaining second years—Brian, Wyatt, Gabe, and Chris—filed in, dressed in their usual Frat Pack uniforms: polo shirts, khaki pants, and shag haircuts. They nodded to each other as they sat down, but no one dared to break the silence.

Carmen stood at the front of the room, reviewing her notes. Her appearance, as always, was impeccable—unlike her male colleagues, who favored ill-fitting tweed or even jeans. Other grad students sometimes mocked Carmen’s tailored suits and dressy blouses as over-the-top, but Molly secretly admired Carmen’s style.

Today she wore a sleek navy pantsuit that hugged her ample curves, paired with a cream blouse. Her dark brown hair was swept into a high, flawless bun. Molly's eyes lingered on her full, rosy lips...until she realized she was staring and forced herself to avert her gaze. As a rule, she did not ogle other women. Sure, she was a lesbian, but she did not believe in objectifying anyone—no matter how breathtaking.

When the clock hit the hour, Carmen looked up and scanned the classroom. She took a long sip from her oversized coffee mug. Molly shifted in her seat as the moment stretched on. Brian opened his mouth and then closed it. Tina kept her attention on the desk, twisting her pen between her fingers.

Finally, Carmen addressed the class. "This is Political Science 495, Advanced Statistical Research Methods. You are here because you passed the first two courses, so we will not be reviewing basic concepts in probability and statistics. I am not going to hold your hand and teach you about drawing red balls and blue balls from a jar."

Gabe and Brian both twitched at *blue balls*, but no one dared to crack a smile.

Carmen's two-inch heels clicked against the floor as she paced the front of the room. "If the instruction in your prerequisite courses was inadequate, you should take the initiative to visit the library and address any gaps independently." She surveyed the class for a moment, then nodded as though satisfied that the students were suitably intimidated. "Each week, you will complete a problem set as a homework assignment. In addition—yes? You have a question?"

All eyes turned to Chris, who had stuck his hand in the air. "Um...I was just wondering if we can work together on the, uh, homework?" His voice faded out, as if he regretted the question already.

"This isn't college," Carmen said sharply. "You're all adults. Work together. Work separately. I couldn't care less."

Tina exhaled and whispered, "Thank God."

Molly shot her friend an encouraging smile. Gabe gave Wyatt a discreet thumbs-up.

"But," Carmen said, her tone warning them not to relax, "anyone planning to freeload on the efforts of his or her classmates will be in poor shape for the final exam."

She took two slow, deliberate steps toward the board and plucked a piece of chalk from the tray. “You will learn in this class that the vast majority of social science research, including published research, relies on a host of statistical assumptions that collapse under scrutiny; in fact, they are often violated so egregiously that the findings are worthless.”

Molly suppressed a smirk. Political science was full of bogus studies, and her other professors pointed them out frequently. But somehow only Carmen had a way of speaking that made it sound as if the authors should be ashamed to live.

“For your term paper,” Carmen said, “you will obtain the raw data from a published article, replicate the analysis, and test the assumptions.”

Carmen turned her back to the class and began to write on the chalkboard. Molly’s eyes drifted to the smooth curve of her ass until she caught herself a second time. *Feminism*, she reminded herself. *Feminists don’t stare*. She directed her attention to the chalkboard, where Carmen had written *Paper—due November 10* in flawless cursive.

“You may use an article based on publicly available data, or you may contact a published author and request his or her data. But if this is your intention, I suggest you reach out now. Extensions will not be granted because you don’t have data to analyze. In fact, extensions will not be granted for any reason at all.”

She paused to allow the students to finish scribbling in their notebooks. “All right. Introductions. Tell me your name and your prospective dissertation topic.” She pointed to Molly. “Let’s start with you.”

Molly looked up in surprise. There were students on either side of her. Was Carmen singling her out because of her earlier remark? Highly probable. But how was she supposed to come up with an intelligent-sounding dissertation topic on the spot? Second years like her were supposed to be learning the discipline and preparing for comprehensive exams. The program director had personally assured them that there was no rush to commit to a topic. But now, with Carmen’s eyes boring into her, Molly felt as if she was about to flunk her first test.

“Hi, um...I’m Molly Cook. I study American politics. I’m still deciding on my exact dissertation topic, but it will probably have something to do with activism and policy outcomes—like, what really makes a difference

against powerful corporations. You know, saving the world or something.” She attempted a smile.

Carmen narrowed her piercing brown eyes. “If you intend to save the world, you are absolutely in the wrong place. You are training to be an academic researcher and a professor of political science. I hope that was made clear to you when you applied.”

“Yes, of course,” Molly said in a rush. “I know I’m not here to be an activist. I meant, uh, the academic study of how other people are saving the world.”

Carmen pursed her lips but then, mercifully, made eye contact with Tina.

“Hi, I’m Tina Diaz. I study international political economy from a feminist perspective...”

As Tina spoke, Molly replayed the interaction in her mind. *Way to go*. She had wanted so badly to make a good impression. Instead, she had established herself as a foul-mouthed, indecisive hippie.

August 29, 1997

The first homework assignment was brutal. Molly had always excelled at algebra, but now they were using something called “matrix algebra” to calculate the relationships between variables.

After two days of working independently, Molly still had half the assignment left to complete. Tina was stuck on the second problem. They convened in an empty classroom at the department building on Friday morning with their textbooks, coffees, and a pile of snacks.

“Carmen didn’t explain this at all,” Tina complained. “And the textbook is just confusing.” She gestured to the open pages, which were a soup of equations and proofs.

“It makes no sense.” Molly ripped open a candy bar. “I must have spent two hours trying to decipher this book last night.”

Tina squinted at the book. “I will never understand how you can enjoy this stuff.”

“Well, I will never understand your interest in IR theory.” Molly bit into the chocolate bar, her mouth filling with gooey caramel.

“Are you kidding? International relations is fascinating. It’s about war

and peace and power.” Tina’s eyes brightened as she spoke about her subject. “And when I’m a famous scholar, people will realize it’s about gender too. Well, unless I flunk statistics.”

“Hey, no one is flunking statistics.” Molly crumpled the wrapper. “Come on, we’re two smart women. And I’m now on a sugar high. We can conquer the scary lady’s problem set. Let’s start from the beginning.”

By late afternoon, they had filled the chalkboard with equations. The table was littered with snack wrappers, crumpled scratch paper, calculators, and open books. After a slow start, they were almost finished with the problem set.

Molly punched her calculator and beamed when the answer appeared. “I got the same answer as you. This has to be right.”

“Phew.” Tina leaned back in her chair. “We might actually finish today.”

“Damn right, we’re going to finish today. Because we’re hella smart, and we’re gonna slay this bad boy like Buffy.” She stabbed the air with her pencil. “You know, like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?”

But Tina didn’t laugh. She was staring at something behind Molly, something that made her straighten in her chair. Molly turned to see Carmen peering at them through the open doorway.

* * *

Carmen took in the crowded chalkboard and the mess on the table. Molly Cook resembled a mad scientist with her sleeves rolled up, chalk dust on her shirt, and her hair tied haphazardly in a scrunchie. Tina Diaz had a pencil behind each ear and another in her hand.

Molly blushed and offered a sheepish shrug. “Hi, Carmen... Dr. Vaughn...Carmen.”

Carmen fought the urge to smile. “Ladies.” She turned and continued down the hallway, pondering what she had just seen and heard. She was pleased to see Tina working hard on the problem set despite her evident anxiety about math, which was all too common in female students.

Then there was Molly. Carmen’s original impression of her was that she did not belong in a PhD program. Many students misguidedly studied political science to advance their own political causes, and those students typically dropped out when confronted with the academic rigor of graduate school. Still, Carmen was impressed with Molly’s effort and secretly amused

by her cocky enthusiasm. It was refreshing to have a student who didn't treat her class like drudgery. Perhaps Molly would make a decent researcher after all.

September 9, 1997

Molly and Tina scored a respectable eighty-nine on their first problem set. Nobody shared their scores, but based on the wincing and grumbling she observed on the other side of the room, Molly guessed that their male classmates had not fared as well.

As they left class, she was still ruminating on the one problem they had answered incorrectly, but Tina was elated.

"Right now, this second, I have a passing grade in statistics," she said, smiling at Molly. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"That's not true," Molly said. "But you're going to explain structural realism to me when I call you tonight...right?"

"I got you." Then Tina's expression soured. "Are you going to Grayson's presentation?"

Oh right. That was today. "Ugh. I don't know. I see enough of his smug face on the news."

"Tell me about it. He's like the darling of right-wing media these days. But we both know it looks bad to skip these things."

Molly groaned. *Great*. An evening with her least favorite professor, learning about his "research" that always just happened to support conservative views. It was hard to imagine a less appealing department event. "I guess we should go. We have to show the faculty that we care about their research...even research produced by that pompous blowhard."

"Exactly." Tina sighed. "I hate to give an attention seeker even more attention, but I'll go with you. I'm going to need sustenance, though."

After a quick stop at the vending machines, they headed to the department conference room, where faculty and grad students were assembling. Most professors sat in the comfortable chairs at the table, while grad students sat in the smaller chairs that lined the walls.

Molly and Tina selected two seats off to the side.

Grayson stood at the front of the room, towering over the assembled audience. Molly noted that he hadn't bothered to dress up for the occasion.

Like most academics, he was a sloppy dresser, favoring pit-stained, button-down shirts that were ten years out of date, and today was no different. If anything, he looked worse than usual. His stringy blond hair had been slicked into distinct ridges and clumps around his receding hairline, and his face was frowning and flushed.

Grayson's research assistant, a fourth-year named Sebastian, sorted a stack of overhead transparencies and fiddled with the projector while Grayson sat back and waited. Finally, the title slide came into focus:

Interpersonal Contact and Opposition to the Homosexual Agenda
Brett Grayson and Sebastian Lott

"What the hell," Molly whispered as Grayson rose to speak.

"Good afternoon. Thank you for coming. I trust most of you caught my recent appearance on cable, but for those who missed it, I'll catch you up."

Molly shot a look at Tina, whose mouth quirked in response.

"Many of you are familiar with the social contact hypothesis, the idea that spending time with members of a particular group increases support for that group." Grayson flicked his fingers at Sebastian, who changed the slide. An academic citation appeared on the screen.

"These two liberal psychology professors—Herik and Capitanio—found that socializing with homosexuals increases support for homosexuality." He paused. "That's the University of California for you." A few people chuckled. Molly's eyes darted to Carmen, who wore an unreadable expression.

"Now, some activists have seized upon these findings to argue that those who do not accept homosexuality—those who believe in traditional values, traditional marriage—just haven't had enough experience with homosexuals. They must be ignorant hicks who don't know any better."

Sounds about right. Molly clenched her jaw. Even if she hadn't known his political views, Grayson's slow, sneering enunciation of *homosexuals* made his feelings clear. A quick glance at Tina indicated that her friend was just as furious.

"However, previous surveys only asked about *feelings* toward gay people. They did not ask about *support* for the political goals of the gay agenda."

He regarded the audience with a smug smile, as though giving them time to absorb his astounding revelation.

“We find that Americans who have social contact with one or more homosexuals actually express greater *opposition* to so-called ‘gay marriage.’ We interpret this to mean that while these people may feel sympathy for individual homosexuals, they also become more aware of the threat posed to their families if alternative lifestyles were to be legitimized with special rights.”

Molly fidgeted in her seat and attempted to steady her breathing. Her classmates were staring at her, probably wondering how the lesbian would react. She’d come out to them at orientation, just to get it out of the way. Reactions had ranged from enthusiastic support (Tina) to an awkward recitation of a Bible verse about not judging sinners (Brian, who meant well). But now, as she contemplated speaking up in defense of her community, Molly was suddenly conscious of the fact that she was also surrounded by faculty, including professors she would like to serve as her dissertation advisors. The smart choice would be to keep quiet or to ask an innocuous question about methods.

As Grayson spoke, however, Molly’s anger filled her chest and flamed in her face. He treated each overhead slide as a big reveal, becoming more arrogant and gleeful with each finding that supported his hypothesis.

Screw the smart choice. She might not be an activist anymore, but she couldn’t listen to this and stay silent.

As soon as Grayson finished his presentation, Molly’s hand shot up. Soon, every person in the room was watching her. Sean, one of the third years, also raised his hand, but when his eyes met Molly’s, he slowly lowered it. Grayson acknowledged her with a brusque nod.

“Thank you. I would like to know if you have considered how offensive it is to suggest that people who have gay and lesbian friends want their friends to be second-class citizens? Gay rights aren’t special rights, and they don’t threaten families at all—”

“Miss, this is a scientific study.” Grayson brushed her comment aside with a dismissive wave. “We simply asked the question; we had no control over the results. Now, our conclusions may not support your personal beliefs, but that is hardly a valid criticism of our study.” He pointed to Sean, abruptly ending the exchange. “Yes?”

Molly watched their discussion with her mouth hanging open. She was furious, but she also knew that Grayson was right. She had not responded with a legitimate critique but with emotion. If friendships with gay people really did reduce support for gay rights, that was depressing but ultimately not his fault. Still, she knew that something was wrong with the study. The conclusions were ridiculous. She wished she had been able to think of a better question.

Grayson wrapped up his answer to Sean and searched the room for another question. Carmen Vaughn, who had been observing from her seat in the back of the room, raised a single manicured finger. Grayson ignored her for a moment and pointedly scanned the room for an alternative questioner, but nobody else volunteered. All eyes were on Carmen.

“Yes?” Grayson huffed, already sounding annoyed.

“Thank you, Dr. Grayson, for this interesting presentation,” Carmen said coolly. Molly could see in her professor’s eyes that shit was about to go down. “If I understand correctly, your conclusions are based on a single coefficient that appears to be statistically significant in your particular specification of a logistic regression model.”

Molly and Tina exchanged a glance. This was going to be good.

“As I am sure you are aware, parametric models of observational data are vulnerable to a number of threats to internal validity. For example, omitted variable bias. I’m curious as to how you were able to determine that every conceivable variable that could possibly impact the outcome just happened to be included in your survey?”

Tina started to laugh but covered it with an exaggerated cough.

Molly was doing her best to keep a straight face. *Yes, just how did you account for every possible variable?*

“I’m quite certain...” Grayson cleared his throat. “Obviously, we had limited resources, but...you have to understand the theoretical framework...”

Molly sat back and imagined herself munching popcorn as he stumbled through an incoherent response.

“So, to summarize,” Grayson said, “the um... Oh, I think Tom had a question.”

“I’m not finished,” Carmen said. “I also noticed the absence of

interaction effects in your model, which one would expect in public opinion research, and I'm wondering how you decided to exclude them?"

"You know, I don't have that data in front of me," Grayson said through gritted teeth. "But I can assure you that we looked at everything very carefully."

"I'm sure you did, but I would be remiss if I did not bring up the strong possibility of heteroskedasticity induced by ambivalence. Perhaps you missed Alvarez and Brehm's recent paper on the subject..."

Carmen methodically dismantled Grayson's analysis, without raising her voice and without breaking eye contact. Molly watched breathlessly. Carmen was like a predator encircling her helpless prey. It was an epic takedown and, truthfully, hot as hell.

"If true, your findings would be quite interesting," Carmen said, "but I am afraid more work is needed before any serious methodologist would accept your conclusions."

Molly couldn't believe it. Carmen had essentially called the study worthless.

Grayson's cheeks reddened. "Well, *Carmen*," he said, emphasizing her first name, "The peer reviewers for the *American Political Science Journal* found it quite persuasive. It might not meet your high standards, but, then again, nobody does."

Molly's eyebrows shot up. Was that a dig at Carmen's marital status? Carmen narrowed her eyes but said nothing.

The department chair, James Linden, cleared his throat. "I want to thank you all for a lively discussion," he said, not sounding especially thankful.

Grayson sat down and scowled while Sebastian jumped up to collect the overheads.

Molly and Tina didn't speak until they reached the parking lot. "Holy shit!" Tina said. "That was intense. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. More than fine. Grayson is a homophobe and an ass, but Carmen was brilliant. I could have watched her destroy him all night. I wish I had it on tape." Molly had seen Carmen rip apart shoddy methods before, but she had never seen her so focused and ruthless.

Tina giggled. "It was pretty great. I wonder why she was so harsh, though. Seems like there could be history there."

Molly had been wondering the same thing. Was Carmen offended by the homophobic premise? Or did she have a personal grudge against Grayson? Maybe both. Molly sensed that Carmen was a liberal or at least a Democrat. For some reason, the thought that Carmen might share her politics made her feel warm.

“All I know is that my respect for Carmen just skyrocketed. And best of all, I found the perfect article to replicate for my statistics paper.”

September 10, 1997

Molly stood in front of Grayson’s office, taking deep breaths. The door was cracked, and a beam of fluorescent light indicated that the office was occupied. She could also hear the faint sounds of a television or radio. After a few more breaths, she rapped her knuckles on the doorframe.

“Come in!” Grayson boomed.

When she entered, Grayson was facing a small television that sat on the edge of his massive desk. Molly realized he was watching a tape of his own appearance on *Charlie Rose* a few years ago. *Obsessed with yourself much?* Behind the television, a dusty frame contained a photo of Grayson on a sailboat with Tom Orta, the department’s Congress scholar. There was also a photo of two teenagers, but none of a partner. She had heard that he was divorced, which she supposed was fitting for a staunch proponent of traditional marriage.

When Grayson looked up at last, Molly forced herself to smile. Grayson met her eyes and immediately scowled. “Hi, Dr. Grayson.” She kept her voice bright, deliberately ignoring his hostile expression. “Do you have a minute?”

Grayson paused the tape with obvious reluctance. Then he leaned back in his creaky desk chair and rested his hands on his gut. “Here to share some more riveting thoughts on how my research offends you?”

“No, absolutely not, and I wanted to start by apologizing for my comment last night.” Molly did her best to summon an earnest expression. “You were right. All you did was ask an important research question, and I can’t blame you just because I don’t like the answer.” Grayson was eyeing her skeptically, but she pressed on. “In fact, I came here because I’m very

interested in this topic, and I was hoping that you would allow me to take a look at your data.”

His bushy eyebrows flew up. “You...want me to give you my data?”

“Just as a learning experience,” Molly said quickly. “I’m just a second year, so I’m new to data analysis, but I was hoping—”

“Hoping to impress Carmen Vaughn by discovering some fatal flaw in my work?”

Damn. Molly had hoped that he wouldn’t connect her request to Carmen. She should have known better. “It’s not like that,” she lied. “We have to replicate an existing study for our final project, and we are supposed to request the data from a published article. I thought your presentation was very interesting, and since you already published the results—”

“Forget it,” he snapped. “I did not spend eight months and several thousands of grant dollars fielding a nationwide telephone survey to provide fodder for class projects. You clearly have an agenda. You want to discredit my work. Maybe you even have fantasies of publishing a rebuttal. Well, missy, it’s never going to happen.”

Molly flinched at the “missy” but otherwise remained composed. “Respectfully, Dr. Grayson, my understanding is that academic researchers have an obligation to make their data available for replication and peer review.”

“You are not a peer. You’re a student. And I’m not sharing anything with you!” He smacked his desk for emphasis, causing Molly to jump back. “Now, if there is nothing else, kindly vacate my office before I make you leave.”

Molly opened her mouth to argue, but his face told her that it was hopeless. She turned and retreated to the hallway. What the hell was that? Grayson was a grump and an ass, but she had never seen him display outright aggression. His behavior was almost threatening.

Grayson didn’t like to be questioned. The previous evening had made that clear. But was there more to his refusal? She knew that some researchers fished for a certain result, crunching the data in countless different ways until the results supported their theory. Maybe his reaction to Carmen was more than irritation that she had dared to criticize him. Maybe he had gotten angry because he knew she was right.

She glanced down the hallway. Carmen’s door was ajar.

Acting on impulse, she strode over. “Excuse me, Dr. Vaughn?”

“Ms. Cook.” Carmen gestured to an empty chair. Molly closed the door before she sat down, prompting a raised eyebrow from Carmen.

Molly had never been inside Carmen’s office. The stark white walls held only a framed diploma from Stanford University. Carmen’s desk was sparse, with just a few impersonal decorations. She had a leather cup holding pens and pencils, a geode serving as a paperweight, and a glass award that read *Best Research Paper 1989*. Beside the desk, three towering bookshelves were packed with academic books and journals, almost as if she had intentionally placed them there to loom over visitors. The office smelled strongly of coffee; steam emanated from a large ceramic mug.

Carmen was watching her expectantly. Molly took a deep breath. “I want to replicate Grayson’s new article for my class paper. But I asked him to share the data with me, and he said no.”

“I see.” Carmen regarded her with a cool gaze that reflected only mild interest in Molly’s announcement. “Why this particular article?”

“Because it’s offensive, and because I don’t think the findings are right. Having gay friends should result in more support for gay rights, not less. I think Grayson was motivated to get that result and just kept trying different models until he got it. Like you said yesterday, he should have checked all of his assumptions, and I really don’t think he did.”

Carmen studied her. “Well, you asked for the data, and he said no. Aside from your political motivations, is there any reason you can’t replicate another paper that uses similar methodology?”

Molly blinked. She had expected Carmen to share her outrage. “Well, of course there are other articles that analyze survey data. But I’m very interested in this paper, and Grayson has an obligation to share the data. I mean, it’s a best practice.”

“Yes, all researchers should make their data available.” Carmen’s voice was calm. “But unfortunately, many do not, and there isn’t much you can do.”

“He called me *missy*,” Molly said suddenly. “He’s sexist.”

A hint of emotion played across Carmen’s face, and Molly thought she had broken through. But Carmen’s gaze became stern. “Yes, he is sexist. I assure you he has called me much worse over the years. But you have to

choose your battles, especially as a woman in this field. Grayson isn't worth it."

"Then why did you go after him last night?"

Carmen's mouth curved into a little smirk. "Well, if I have to listen to his sanctimonious drivel for an entire hour, I'm at least going to have a little fun." Then she turned serious again. "But asking impertinent methods questions at a presentation is one thing. Analyzing his data to prove that his findings are bunk... That's a hornets' nest you don't want to poke, especially not as a grad student."

"Okay." Molly sighed. She didn't seem to have much choice. "I'll pick another topic for my paper."

"Good. And how are you finding the class?"

It was a normal, innocuous question, but Molly was surprised to be asked. Carmen's reputation made it hard to imagine that she would give a damn about the answer, but she seemed sincere.

"It's going pretty well. I admit I struggled with the first problem set, but in the end, I learned a lot. After spending three days figuring it out, I'll never forget how to calculate a regression coefficient."

As soon as the words came out, Molly was afraid that it sounded like a complaint. But Carmen nodded her approval. "That was my intention. You're off to a good start."

Molly managed to keep her expression neutral until she left the office; then she broke into a big smile.

Chapter 3

October 15, 1997

MOLLY PACED THE DEPARTMENT HALLWAY. She had a 2 p.m. meeting with Tom Orta, but his door was locked, and the light was off.

It didn't look good, but she couldn't leave. She had chased Tom for two weeks before securing a slot on his calendar, and she couldn't afford to procrastinate on her thesis much longer. If she didn't finish in time, she wouldn't receive her master's degree at the end of the year along with her classmates. And she would be late in starting the next phase of the program, comprehensive exams and the PhD dissertation. She plopped down in the hallway to wait.

This was the downside of Molly's plan to write her thesis on Hillary Clinton's ill-fated healthcare reform effort. She wanted to work on something that mattered to her, and she was still upset that it had failed to gain support in the US Congress. Unfortunately, her topic meant that her thesis advisor had to be Tom. He was a renowned Congress scholar, but he was also ancient, crotchety, and notoriously unreliable.

After nearly fifteen minutes had passed, Molly startled when Tom's door opened from the inside. He appeared in the doorway, looking ruffled and...sleepy? He rubbed his eyes and squinted at the bright lights in the hallway.

Molly jumped to her feet. "Hello! Thank you for meeting with me."

Tom scrunched his face. "We had a meeting?"

"Uh, yes...about my thesis?"

"Ah, right. Okay. Go on in. I just need to visit the little boys' room."

Molly forced a smile. “Great! See you soon!” She picked up her bag and entered Tom’s office.

As one of the oldest professors in the department, Tom occupied one of the largest offices. Inside, it was like a mini library. Massive wooden bookshelves lined the walls, each one packed with political science books. Most had creased or faded spines, but there were also a few brightly colored paperbacks mixed in. Six overstuffed filing cabinets were topped off with stacks of newspapers in various shades of yellow.

Tom returned, grumbling to himself. For a split second, he seemed surprised to find Molly in his office, but then he flopped into his chair and leaned back, resting his feet on the desk.

“So.” He peered at her. “What have you got?”

“Just an outline so far.” Molly pulled a few folded pages from her bag and passed them across the desk. “I want to write my thesis on why the Health Security Act failed in Congress.”

“You mean Hillarycare.” Tom scanned the outline. “What’s your theory?”

“My theory is that health insurance companies crushed any hope of reform by funding a massive campaign to scare the public with lies. Plus, they gave loads of money to members of Congress, essentially buying their votes. So, we won’t be able to seriously overhaul healthcare until we get money out of politics.”

“Well, that’s obvious.” He scratched his bald head. “I mean what’s your political science theory?”

Molly stared at him. “Uhh...”

Wheeling his chair to the left, Tom scanned his bookshelves. He selected three books and handed them to Molly. “Here you go,” he said. “Theories of legislative organization. Read these books, and figure out where Hillarycare fits in.”

Her arms sagged as they took on the weight. They were hefty tomes, two of which looked suspiciously as if they had once belonged to the university library. “So, um, which one is the best?” she asked, hoping for a shortcut.

He wagged his finger. “Now, I’m not going to spoil the fun. Off you go! Study hard!”

Molly rose from her chair. “Thank you so much for your help.” She

lugged the books into the hall and set them down on the floor to regroup. *Great.* So much fun.

October 23, 1997

On Friday afternoon, Carmen crossed the street to the sociology department building for a meeting with Seth Miller. The week had been long and tiring, but she was pleased to be ending it with her friend and research collaborator, discussing a project that she enjoyed.

When she arrived at his office, she was surprised to find Seth packing up his book bag. His wavy brown hair was disheveled, and his thick, rectangular glasses had been discarded on the desk. “Hi,” she said. “I thought we had a meeting?”

“We do. But I was hoping we could move it to the bar. I’ve had a long-ass day.”

A drink was exactly what she needed. “Sounds wonderful.”

They set out on foot for Unaccustomed Wine, an establishment near campus that attracted few undergrads due to its upscale theme and corresponding prices. They kept their banter light until they were safely ensconced in a secluded booth in the back of the bar.

“So, how’s the department?” Seth asked. “Heinous as ever?”

“Worse. Brett Grayson’s star is rising. He was on Fox News the other night, lamenting the demise of the nuclear family.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “I don’t know how you stand him. I don’t know how you stand most of them, to be honest. I mean, sociology has a couple of Republicans, but your group is almost as bad as the economics department.”

“Have you seen Brett’s latest project?” Carmen asked. “He’s got some wretched model that supposedly proves social contact with gays and lesbians reduces support for gay rights. It’s getting him a fair amount of attention in right-wing media—which is all he wanted in the first place.”

“Fucking ridiculous. Oops, sorry.” Seth apologized to the young waitress who had appeared with their wine: pinot grigio for Seth and cabernet sauvignon for Carmen. They clinked their glasses together, and Carmen savored her first sip.

“You should go on TV to refute him,” Seth suggested. “Or you could write something and send it to a newspaper.”

The very thought caused her pulse to quicken. “You know I can’t do that. Women can’t get involved in politics like men—not in my discipline. Not if you want to be taken seriously.”

“What do you care if they take you seriously? You’ve got tenure. You’re smarter than all of them put together. Do you really need approval from the crusty old cranks?”

“It’s not just them.” Carmen waved her hand. “It’s the entire discipline. I want to keep publishing in top journals. I want to be promoted to full professor one day, and it’s not going to happen if I’m known as some loudmouth feminist.” She paused to sip her wine. “I worked my whole adult life to get tenure. I’ve had to keep my head down, keep my mouth shut, and work twice as hard as any man. My colleagues may not like me, but they respect me. If I start saying whatever I want all the time, I’ll lose that respect. We both know it.”

“But think of the fun you could have pissing them off.” He grinned. “Hell, when I get tenure, I plan to teach in flip flops and study *Baywatch*.”

“Ah, but you’re a sociologist. You could do that right now.”

“Speaking of *Baywatch*,” Seth said, “I’ve got an idea for our study.”

“Oh?” Carmen leaned in.

“So, currently, we’re looking at the impact of TV news on social attitudes. But what about scripted shows? Don’t you think they influence Americans just as much? Take Ellen DeGeneres, for example. I’d bet anything that her show has increased support for gay rights among viewers.”

Carmen felt her shoulders tense. “Perhaps...but I think it’s all self-selection. Homophobes aren’t watching *Ellen*.”

“Hmmm.” He sloshed the wine in his glass. “Why don’t we find out? We have room for a couple of new questions on our survey. We could add one about *Ellen*, and a few more about attitudes toward gay people.”

Carmen traced the base of her glass with her finger. “I suppose the results could be...interesting.”

“And it would contradict Brett Grayson. We’d be looking at exposure to a television show, but still. Viewers will see that lesbians are just normal people. They’re good people who deserve acceptance and love, just like anyone.” Seth held her gaze for just a moment too long before taking a sip of his wine.

Carmen bit her lip. Seth didn’t know about her; at least she didn’t think

so. But something in his tone made her wonder if he suspected. Anxiety trickled through her. This was an opening, a natural opportunity to come out to a friend who was guaranteed to take the news well. *Just say it*, she told herself. But no words came.

“Well,” Seth said at last, “I guess we should get to work.” He unzipped his backpack and pulled out a notebook.

Carmen was relieved but also oddly disappointed. *Too late now*. The moment had passed.

November 5, 1997

Was there anything more demoralizing than a department faculty meeting? As Carmen sat cross-legged at the expansive conference table, drawing sharp zigzags in the margin of her notepad, she couldn't think of anything.

The typed agenda was deceptively short, but Carmen knew better. Faculty meetings were never short. Any topic raised for discussion, no matter how trivial, would be debated to death, resuscitated, debated again, and finally tabled or assigned to a doomed subcommittee. Usually, by the time they reached the second agenda item, all hope was lost.

Sure enough, that's exactly what happened. James began the meeting by vowing to end on time. Then he attempted to dispense with the first topic quickly—something about parking regulations during football games—but the usual cranks derailed the conversation until they were irredeemably off schedule.

Carmen clenched her pen as her zigzags became darker, slicing through the page. She just wanted to go home. Phoebe was coming over after several days apart, and they needed to have a serious talk. As much as she loathed confrontation in her personal life, the anticipation was somehow even worse—especially when she was at the mercy of her long-winded colleagues.

James finally moved on to the next compelling topic: canceling class on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, an unsanctioned but widespread practice. He held up a memo. “Melinda Bishop is cracking down.”

Ah, the new dean of Liberal Arts. That's why this was suddenly an issue.

“The university requires fifteen hours of instruction per credit hour,” James said. “If you don't want to teach on the Wednesday before the

holiday, you need to build the extra minutes into your class schedule from the beginning—which I know that none of you have done. Therefore, class cancellations will not be permitted.”

“Well, that’s a load of horseshit,” snapped Tom. “I can cancel a class if I want. I’ve been setting my own schedule since the sixties, and some power-hungry dean isn’t going to stop me.”

“Melinda doesn’t get her pretty panties in a twist when I cancel class to go to a conference,” said Nick Zalewski, who wore his usual dickish sneer. “Last year, I went to France for a week.”

“She probably didn’t know about that,” James pointed out.

Carmen found herself watching Bianca Hahn, the only other female faculty member in the department and one of the few professors who did not yet have tenure. Bianca’s expression was pained, but she said nothing.

Meanwhile, the griping continued. “The new administration is out of control,” Grayson said. “Charlie never gave a damn how the faculty ran their classes. Melinda is a glorified paper pusher who thinks her title gives her license to act like a total bitch.”

That was enough for Carmen. “Dr. Grayson, do you think it would be possible to avoid calling Dean Bishop a bitch in our department meetings?”

“Oh, my apologies.” He gave her a smarmy smile. “I know it’s a sensitive word for you.”

Carmen was done. She slammed her notebook shut and stood. “Excuse me.” James called for her to sit back down, but she was already pushing through the double doors to exit the building. James would corner her for a lecture the next day, but Carmen didn’t care. She had tenure; there could be no real consequences. She stepped into the crisp autumn air, closed her eyes for a moment, then turned toward her car.

* * *

At home, Carmen peeled off her suit and changed into casual slacks and a fitted gray T-shirt that read *STANFORD* in block letters across her chest. She exchanged her contacts for round, oversized glasses and undid her bun, letting her hair fall to her shoulders.

In her spacious, modern kitchen, Carmen chopped onions, stir-fried ground beef, and poured a can of crushed tomatoes into a wide saucepan.

She lowered the heat and settled on the couch with a glass of red wine. A glance at the analog clock confirmed that, as usual, Phoebe was late.

She could hear Phoebe's voice in her head: *I'll be there. Just relax.* As though everyone had the same flexibility afforded a professional artist.

Okay, that wasn't fair. Phoebe also held down a barista gig that required her to get up at five in the morning. And she'd never pretended to be anything other than a free spirit, starting with the day she handed Carmen a latte with her phone number scrawled on the cup.

So why was Carmen so irritated over fifteen minutes? She supposed they had been fighting so much that she was starting to resent every little thing, which was an ominous sign for their relationship.

As Carmen drained the last of her wine, she heard a faint scratching sound coming from her front porch. She opened the door to find a large brown tabby cat with patches of white on its face and chest. The animal locked its baby-blue eyes on her and let out a high-pitched, plaintive meow.

"Where did you come from?" She crouched to check for a collar. In response, the cat nuzzled her ankle. Carmen hesitantly reached out and scratched behind its ears. The cat purred and pushed its head into her hand.

Based on the absence of a collar and its scraggly right ear, Carmen surmised that the cat was a stray but had been socialized to trust humans at some point in the past. "Are you a runaway?" she asked, stroking the animal's head. "Or did someone let you go?"

After a moment, she stood. "Thanks for stopping by little fellow...or lady." She closed the door and started back to the couch, but she could hear the cat mewling through the door. It was just so pitiful. She turned toward the kitchen.

She located a few old cans of tuna in the back of her pantry. After scooping a few spoonfuls into a bowl, she filled a small saucer with water. When she set the dishes outside, the cat ran over and hungrily tore at the tuna, emitting satisfied smacking sounds.

Carmen returned to her couch to wait. A few minutes later, Phoebe breezed into the house and shrugged off her crimson wool coat, revealing paint-splattered cargo pants and a black turtleneck. She slipped out of her clogs and greeted Carmen with a light kiss. "Hi, love. When did you get a cat?"

"It's just a stray," Carmen replied. Then after a pause, "How are you?"

“I’m fine. The same. I sold another painting this week. The one of Valles Caldera.”

“That’s great.” Carmen softened at the memory of their trip to New Mexico and the lazy afternoons spent outdoors, soaking in the spectacular landscapes. Phoebe with her sketchpad, Carmen with her backpack full of books. Now that she thought about it, the trip was the last time Phoebe had seemed happy.

Phoebe helped herself to a generous glass of wine while Carmen brought dinner to the table. “How’s work?” Phoebe asked between thirsty sips.

“My colleagues are vile. Half of them should be lined up and shot. Or at least punched in their smug faces. But my statistics students have turned out to be adequate. This year, the women are smarter than the men. One of them is perhaps the most tenacious grad student I’ve met.”

“Uh-huh.” Phoebe piled spaghetti and salad onto her plate.

Carmen waited to see if she had anything else to say. Evidently not. *Why ask if you don’t care?*

Throughout dinner, they alternated between small talk and silence. Carmen’s stomach churned as she tried to decide what to say. *I barely see you twice a week. You’re always distracted or pissed off.*

What she said was, “Phoebe, is there someone else?”

Phoebe dropped her fork and looked at Carmen with searching eyes. She opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again. Finally, she said, “There was. For a few weeks, there was someone else. But it’s over.”

Deep down, Carmen had already known the truth, and yet she found herself wholly unprepared to hear it. Her chest flooded with hurt and then another emotion. Rage. Phoebe had just *sat there*, eating dinner as if it was nothing, as if she hadn’t just— “Get out of my house,” she choked out.

“Carmen, let’s talk about this.” Phoebe reached for her hand. “Don’t you at least want to understand?”

Carmen yanked her hand away. “I understand that you’re a liar and a coward. And I understand that I never want to see you again.”

Phoebe flinched. “I know I’m a liar. I’m a liar and a cheating piece of shit. But you’re the coward. You’re thirty-nine years old, and you won’t tell your family about me. I’m not allowed to set foot on your campus. We have to fly all the way to New Mexico just to be seen in public together.”

Carmen pushed back from the table and stood. “Unlike you, I have a real job. I have a professional reputation. You think everything is so easy.”

“And you’re so fucking condescending.” Phoebe rose to her feet. “Here’s some news. Your obsession with your job is not healthy. You spend fifteen hours a day on your damn research, even during breaks. No wonder we never see each other.”

“That’s because it’s important! What I study matters.”

“Oh, yes, it’s terribly important that you produce another boring journal article that twelve people will read. Face it, Carmen, your precious research has never made a difference and never will.”

Murderous urges pulsed through her, but she kept her voice calm. “Phoebe, get out. Get out of my house right now.”

Phoebe wordlessly slung her coat over her shoulder and stepped into her shoes. She turned back once to glance at Carmen. Then she shook her head and left.

As soon as the door closed, Carmen sunk into the sofa. *I should cry. I should be crying.* She imagined herself releasing all her heartache and fury in wet, gasping sobs. But no tears came. She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. Her house was silent except for the hum of the heater and a distant dripping faucet. She closed her eyes and rested her head on her knees.

November 6, 1997

One of the perks of Carmen’s job was that she could take the morning off without informing anyone. The night before, she’d turned off her alarm, intending to spend the morning blissfully unconscious. Instead, she woke up early, too restless to stay in bed. She cleaned her kitchen, scrubbed the floor, vacuumed every square inch of carpet in her house, and finally got dressed for her afternoon statistics course.

Soon after she left home, she hit traffic, a rare occurrence in Bainsville outside of rush hour. As her Mercedes inched toward the university, Carmen finally realized the cause. A traffic light was out on the main road leading into campus, snarling traffic in all directions. She squirmed as she watched the minutes tick by on her dashboard’s green digital clock.

She finally pulled into the parking lot at 1:13 p.m. As she rushed into the building, she wondered if the students would be waiting for her. Undergrads boasted of a ten-minute rule, but she hoped that graduate

students would be more professional. Plus, they had all struggled with the last homework assignment; none of them were in a position to skip class.

As she approached the classroom, Carmen was relieved to hear her students' voices. Then she heard her name.

"Carmen takes sadistic pleasure in flunking us. She doesn't teach us shit, and then she gives us impossible homework. She's the worst." The voice belonged to Wyatt.

"She's just a stuck-up bitch who needs to feel smarter than everyone," Gabe agreed. "Probably because she has no life. Vaughn desperately needs to get laid, for all of our sakes." A few students laughed.

On any other day, Carmen would stride into the room and give him a look that would cause him to wet himself on the spot. But she was still raw and disoriented from the night before, and she found herself frozen in place.

Then she heard Molly. "Could you please shut the fuck up? Carmen may be tough, but she's a good teacher. She doesn't spoon-feed us the answers because she actually gives a damn about our ability to be independent and figure things out."

She let out a breath. Before anyone else could speak, she entered the room, announcing her presence in a loud voice. "Good afternoon, and apologies for the delay."

She noted from their lack of panic that Gabe and Wyatt didn't realize she had heard their remarks. Molly, however, turned red. Carmen found it endearing that Molly's fair skin flushed at the slightest provocation—when she got an answer wrong, when she got an answer right. The poor woman was doomed to display her emotions on her open, heart-shaped face.

Carmen gave her a subtle, appreciative nod. "Ms. Cook." Molly smiled in response.

"All right." Carmen summoned her authoritative professor persona. "I have graded your problem sets, and clearly, we need to review maximum likelihood estimation..."

November 7, 1997

Molly typed the word *Conclusion* and centered it on the screen. *Almost done. Thank God.* Her statistics paper wasn't due for three days, but she was

determined to turn it in before she left campus, even though she'd already been working for hours.

She leaned back and rotated her neck, giving her a panoramic view of the windowless room with dingy carpet, buzzing fluorescent lights, and keyboards full of crumbs. *The most depressing place on campus.*

Well, the grad student computer lab did have a few charms. The yellowing walls were unartfully decorated with tacked-up *Dilbert* cartoons, clipped newspaper articles, and printed signs that said, with utter futility, *Absolutely NO eating or drinking in the computer lab!!* One of the signs was splattered with coffee.

It was a strange place to spend her Friday night, but the lab computers had enough memory to process the large dataset used in the published article she had chosen for the assignment.

There were plenty of flaws in the study, a straightforward analysis of the 1992 presidential election. She had more than enough material for her paper. She just wished she were writing about the flaws in Grayson's work instead.

In conclusion, Brett Grayson's article is poorly conceived and incompetently executed, proving once and for all that he is a loser.

Oh well. She'd never get to write that paper, but at least she had done a good job on the assignment.

She could have finished a week ago. But while her other class papers were hastily written and minimally proofread, her statistics paper was painstakingly constructed and had been through multiple rounds of revision. On some level, she recognized that her desire to impress Carmen was becoming a fixation, but she rationalized that at least she was learning.

Molly finished her paper just before 6 p.m. She read through it one last time, checking her spelling and grammar before she finally pressed Ctrl+P to print. As the printer churned, Molly leaned back and stretched her arms, groaning with relief. Then she ripped open a celebratory candy bar. She was done. She would deliver the paper directly to Carmen's office, and then she would be free until Monday.

* * *

Carmen shook her pen and scribbled on a sticky note, but it was useless. She had depleted another ballpoint with her copious note-taking.

She chucked it into the bin and scanned her desk for her pencil, then realized it was hanging out of her mouth.

Most women would probably eat ice cream and watch *Lifetime* movies, but Carmen was spending her first Friday night as a single woman in the office, studying the 1994 midterm elections that had flipped the US Congress to a Republican majority. This way, she could channel her anger toward Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, a target just as deserving as Phoebe who didn't remind her of her own failings as a girlfriend and person.

A knock on the door jolted her out of deep concentration. She called out, "Come in!" and the door opened, revealing Phoebe.

Carmen jumped to her feet. "What in God's name are you doing here?" she hissed, struggling to keep her voice down.

"Carmen, I'm sorry. I feel horrible." Her ex-girlfriend wore workout tights and a baggy T-shirt. Her blonde hair was tousled and frizzy. "And I miss you."

Carmen pulled her into the office and slammed the door. "Jesus Christ, Phoebe, someone could see you."

Phoebe winced. "Is that all you care about?"

Carmen detected a slight slur in her voice. "Have you been drinking?"

"Some," Phoebe said. "But I'm not drunk."

"How did you get here? You didn't drive, did you?" For a split second, Carmen had a horrifying vision of her disheveled ex plowing her station wagon into a monument.

"I took a cab. I went to your house first, but you weren't there." Phoebe looked around. "You have a nice office. Spartan, but nice. Your diploma looks fancy. I guess you never hung the painting I gave you."

Despite her anger, guilt stabbed at Carmen. A few months into their relationship, Phoebe had gifted her an abstract painting to hang in her office. The painting was beautiful, but Carmen was, perhaps irrationally, fearful that someone would notice the contrast with the rest of her office and start asking questions. It was stuffed under her bed behind a row of shoeboxes. "No, I didn't hang it."

Phoebe sighed. "I should have guessed."

Carmen rubbed her temples. "Why did you come here?"

"I hoped you would be ready to listen to me. I know that I made a mistake, but I still love you. I just want you to understand."

The word *love* pierced her heart. She longed to be loved. But even if it were true, even if Phoebe really did love her, Carmen could never forgive infidelity. “I don’t want to know the sordid details. You lied to me. You betrayed me. What else is there to say?”

Phoebe closed her eyes. When she opened them, they glistened with unshed tears. “I know it was a betrayal, and I know there’s no excuse. But I was lonely. You won’t go anywhere with me. You act like you’re ashamed to even know me. I know it’s because you’re afraid, but I don’t deserve that.”

It was true. She had treated Phoebe like a shameful secret, and their problems were partly—maybe even mostly—her fault. But it also didn’t matter; she could never trust Phoebe again. Quietly, she said, “Come on. I’ll drive you home.”

Carmen turned to reach for her coat. A shuffling sound came at the door. When she turned back around, Phoebe stepped forward, wrapped her arms around Carmen, and captured her mouth in a bourbon-flavored kiss.

Before Carmen could react, the door creaked open. She tore her lips away from Phoebe’s to see Molly Cook standing before them, her mouth hanging open.

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THE LOVE FACTOR

BY QUINN IVINS

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