

**EPILOGUE HOT DOG
SUMMER**

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EPILOGUE

HENRY

“It’s literally like you’ve never met me before,” snapped Natalie, my manager Alice’s best friend. I was standing in the foyer of the pretty little house the two women shared next to white porcelain umbrella stand filled with an inordinate collection of blue and white striped umbrellas.

“Why? Because I told my client that he could crash on our couch for three days?” Alice asked.

“Yes.” Natalie exclaimed clearly exasperated. “Why would you do that without talking to me? You know I need to be prepared for things. You know how upset I was the last time you did this.”

Alice propped her hands on her hips and rolled her eyes at Natalie. “Are you really going to try to argue that the last time I invited someone to stay here it was a problem.”

“I am,” Natalie whined.

“Really?” Alice said her voice laced with sarcasm as she quirked her head at her friend.

The door behind me opened, and the knob smacked me right in the butt.

“Whoa,” said a male voice. “Sorry, Dude.” Turning to

take in the bearded fellow, I remembered Alice mentioning that Natalie's fiance also lived with them.

Feeling awkward about everything around me, I offered him my hand and said my name as a hello/introduction combo. "Henry."

We shook hands. His grip was stronger than mine. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him.

"Carter," he offered and then leaning in whispered, "What am I walking into right now?"

"Lover's quarrel?" I suggested, cheekily. He seemed like a decent guy.

"Oh so, the norm." We shared a little chuckle before he turned to the women beyond us and said, "Hello my lovely ladies, I could be wrong but it seems like we might be dealing with something explosive. What I'm wondering is do you think my presence is going to diffuse or exacerbate the situation?"

Alice smiled sneakily before she said, "Nat was just going to explain to me how terrible it was the last time I invited someone to stay with us."

Carter took a step towards Alice, crossed his arms over his chest and said, "Is that so?"

Natalie looked instantly sheepish. "She's twisting my words."

"I'm not," Alice said. "Right, Henry? Didn't she just say the last time I invited someone to stay here it was an issue."

Not wanting to be in the middle of this mess, I said, "I can sleep in my car."

Alice's face drooped with disappointment, and then she dryly scolded me "Henry, be a man. Tell Carter that his fiance - wants to argue that the time I asked him to stay here is proof that I should never feel free to offer our couch to a guest."

I held my hands up and argued, “Nah, I’m good. I’ll choose ball-less-ness and let you ladies duke this one out on your own.”

“Chicken,” Alice chided.

“Balck, balck.” I replied.

Carter laughed and then he stepped between Alice and Natalie and taking his girl into his arms, he cooed, “He seems pretty cool, babe. I think maybe, it’s okay if he’s here.”

Natalie looked up at him. In his air space, the panic and stress that seemed etched into her expressions started to ease off.

“Of course, it’s okay,” she said softly. “I just need to know. She just needs to talk to me about things.” She lifted her hand pressing her fingers to the space between her eyebrows like she needed to relieve a pressure headache. I felt for Natalie. Alice was a ball buster, a fast moving doer. She wasn’t asking permission for anything ever. I liked that about her - it made her a killer manager, but I could see how that could make her a complicated friend. It made me anxious around her constantly.

“Okay,” Carter boomed. “Alice, you are sorry for not talking to Nat about Henry’s stay, and Nat you love Alice and are happy to have Henry sleeping on your couch.”

Both women huffed.

“Ladies,” Carter sighed.

“Fine.” Alice said. “We agree to disagree but choose to be civilized.”

“Yes, Fine.” Nat sighed.

“Now,” Carter smirked. “Talk to me about dinner.”



WE WENT to a tiny dive bar in Edgartown and sat in a booth in the corner. Apparently post spats Alice and Natalie liked to drink beers and eat fries. The place was as you'd expect a lot of wood and brass and photos of famous people who passed through, but the walls were also covered with signed music posters - both small and big acts - who had played live on the tiny stage in the back of the room. Towns like Martha's Vineyard where rich people like to congregate, were weird places because if you had the clout to be there, you could be in the shittiest shit hole and still you might just find yourself sitting next to a grammy winner or the guy who invented google.

But sitting there with Alice, Natalie and Carter, I could have been next to the Queen of England and I wouldn't have known it, because the place was busting with people. The whole town was overrun because the Martha's Vineyard music festival started the following day, It wasn't the world's most well known festival, but it was a festival that Alice had strong ties to so she was able to get me a few minutes on stage, and she thought it would be a great place for me to make connections. So that was the deal. A long weekend in Martha's Vineyard, networking.

I was not a networker.

I was a musician. I liked to spend hours tuning my guitar and jotting down lyrics. I liked small dinner parties with people I knew well, who didn't care if I said anything. I liked one on one connections about real things. It wasn't that I didn't have things to say. I did. But mostly, I liked to sing them. Big groups and strangers made me wary. Talking about myself made me anxious. Pleasantries made me uncomfortable. Ideally, I just skip all that and jump right into the deep end. Put me on a mountain top with a guitar and an endless jar of peanut butter and I'd probably be

good for life. But you know, I tried to adult like a normal person. So, as practice for the next few days, I found myself asking Carter and Natalie about their lives.

I had to raise my voice because the bar was loud. “How did you two meet?” I asked.

Natalie’s eyes twinkled when she said, “I don’t remember not knowing Carter, really. When you’re born on this island, you just kind of always know each other, but we were bitter enemies most of those years.”

“You make it sound like we were warring factions,” Carter said and then took a sip from his icy looking pint glass.

“Oh you were.” Alice joked. She turned to me, “They were one of those hate me because you love me couples.”

“Is that really a thing?” I scrunched my nose, not liking the idea at all.

“Trust me, it’s a thing.” Carter and Natalie said in union.

I shrugged, “Okay, so how did you get past the hate thing?”

Alice answered again, “I invited Carter to stay at our house.” I laughed suddenly understanding a lot more about the spat earlier in the evening. Alice added, “Proximity. the magic cure all for schmucks who can’t see what’s right in front of them.”

“That’s right, Alice.” Natalie shook her head, and her voice was laced with sarcasm. “You solve all the problems.”

Carter leaned back and put his arm around Natalie before saying, “Arguably she solves a lot of them.”

Alice smiled and winking at her best friend she admitted, “Nat solves the rest.”

“Sure does,” Carter said. Natalie blushed. She was an odd duck. Somehow commanding and forceful and still shy

and humble. I'd never encountered that combo in a single person before.

"And so, now you're engaged?" I asked. "Is that a cute story?"

Carter grinned. "She asked me."

His happiness was infectious. I found myself grinning back at him when I said, "Oh yeah?"

"It was totally out of character." He leaned in towards me, taking on the role of storyteller. Next to him Natalie seemed to blush more and her embarrassment literally made her cover her face with her hands. He began. "I'm sure you've already noticed that my girl plans everything."

I nodded.

"So, I know I want to marry her, right? But I'm trying desperately to figure out how to plan a perfect engagement for the girl who likes plans, and more specifically she likes to plan the plan. Not into surprises at all. Right?"

Natalie was still hiding her face. Alice reached across the table and pulled her hands down. Sweetly she says, "Come on, Nat, stop hiding. You love this story."

Natalie looked adoringly at Carter and said, "I love this man."

Carter pulled her into his arm pit and kissed her forehead before going on, "So anyway. I'm stumped. The only thing I've thought to do is get a label maker and put a label on the ring box that says engagement ring because as you'll figure out over the course of the weekend, Nat labels all things and since I'm a giant dork, I think that this label I've made is hilarious."

Natalie interrupted him and said to me, "I found it. We share a closet." She looked up at him all glowy. "Sometimes I think he wanted me to."

“I swear, I didn’t.” He said, more to her than to me. Then, definitely to me, he says, “She finds the thing in the closet and she’s in her bathrobe for Christ’s sake, but rather than pretend she doesn’t know or wait for my plan, she takes action. None the wiser, I’m standing in the bathroom brushing my teeth and in she comes with the damn label maker.”

“His mouth was all filled with toothpaste, “ Natalie laughed.

Relaying their conversation he said, “ I asked her, ‘What are you doing?,’ and she says, ‘Come here,’ kind of turning my body to face her so she can stick two labels on my forehead. Mind you, the toothbrush is still hanging out of my mouth.” While he talked, he moved his hands showing the sticking of the labels to his head and miming the existence of the handle in his mouth. “She points to the mirror over the sink and says look, so I turn to face my reflection so I see the labels, which read, ‘Say’ and ‘Yes.’ Confused, I turn back to her and she’s on the floor on one knee holding the ring box.”

I can’t help but glow with them. The story is achingly cute and personal and it just makes me want to know them forever.

Natalie shakes her head. “It was a terrible thing to do. What if you had a plan? I could have ruined it.”

Carter laughs, “Babe, you are the plan. However, Whenever.”

Next to me Alice shifted in her seat, sitting upright. I looked at her and realized her focus had shifted away from her friends’ story, which she clearly must have heard a thousand times. Following her gaze, my eyes landed on a tall guy with long hair, a curvy dark haired woman, and a guy with dirty blond hair who was looking at his phone. Alice was

staring so intently at them that I found myself asking, “Who’s that?”

“LSA records,” she responded. LSA records was one of the most successful recording companies in the US - and it had recently been through some major upset in ownership. I didn’t know the details. Maybe I should have, but I was never that interested in headlines or the business side of the music industry.

“Like those are the people that run the company?” I asked.

Alice nodded.

“Are they friends of yours?” I was really just wondering aloud.

She shook her head no. “Not really. See the guy on his phone.” I nodded. “He’s their in house manager. There’s not a lot of room for other people’s clients to work with them.”

“That seems limiting.”

“Totally,” she said, suddenly standing and heading in their direction.

Instantly nervous, I looked at Natalie and Carter. “What’s she doing?”

Natalie answered, “Most likely solving the problem you just vocalized.” That was terrifying. I couldn’t imagine just jumping up and talking to people I didn’t really know, let alone assuming I could change how they functioned, and I hated the possibility that I inspired her. And the longer she stayed talking, the more nervous I got. I needed air.

“Can you guys excuse me a minute?” I said as calmly as I could to the lovebirds sitting across the booth from me. They answered affirmatively, but I didn’t really stay to listen. I pushed my way to the door of the bar and burst outside, like the place was on fire and I was suffocating.

Pulling heavy swaths of fresh sea air into my lungs, I

shoved my hands into my pockets and strolled towards the water. The people on the street were mostly in small groups heading in the opposite direction. The general mood was jovial, echoes of laughter and chatter still chasing me even though I'd escaped the bar crowd. I knew I was a weirdo. But if I could find silence for just a few minutes, I'd be fine.

So, I walked until I reached the water and then I kept walking until I was sitting on rocks surrounded by darkness and the crash of waves on the sand. It wouldn't take long for my nerves to settle, maybe ten minutes. Boldness like Alice's made me so uncomfortable. I hated to think of imposing on strangers. I couldn't help it. So, I sat on the rocks breathing and gathering the strength to not only to make my way back to the bar and what would most likely be a cold burger, but also to face the entire weekend of strangers expecting me to be bold like Alice.

I started to hum a song I was working on. My music always made everything feel still and calm. So far this song was just a riff, but it would grow. I repeated it about ten times and then behind me a woman sang the tune I was repeating but with her words, "I feel the walls closing in again."

I didn't have words yet, but now, those were the ones I wanted. I turned to look at her. She was backlit by a street lamp more far away than close, so it was hard to make out much more than her shape. I could tell by the sound of her voice that she was young. I guessed in her early twenties.

She didn't approach me, but she said, "Hum it again."

I don't know why I did what she said but I did. She sang with me. "I feel the walls closing in again." Only she kept going. "It's getting darker, and we might not win."

And then as if she unraveled something in my brain, I

sang, "I touch your hair and I kiss you now. Keeping tomorrow..."

"Keeping tomorrow," she harmonized.

"Keeping tomorrow in the wind."

We were silent for more than a beat.

Then she laughed and started moving towards me with her hand out. "Hi," she said brightly. "I'm Eddy."

The light shifted and I could see her. She was Eddy Meyer. Eddy fucking Meyer. Her very first release hit the billboard charts and she'd been doing it ever since.

I swallowed down my fear and stuck out my hand to shake hers but I didn't seem to get any words out.

"And you are?" She asked awkwardly, suddenly seeming a bit uncomfortable. My oddness was making her uncomfortable.

"Fuck, sorry. You're Eddy Meyer." I pointed at her, like an idiot. Then scrambling to attempt normal, I pointed at myself. "I'm Henry Davis. I'm a musician."

She laughed again and then with a clear and sturdy voice, she clarified. "You're a songwriter, Henry."

I nodded vigorously. "Yeah and uh... I play guitar."

"Me too." She had a sweet smile, soft. I'd seen pictures of her. Lots of them. But she looked different in person, more girlish and less angry. I liked looking at her face but I like how easily we unraveled the beginnings of that song even more.

I was hesitant and phrased it as a question when I said, "I think we just wrote a song together?"

"I think we did." She grinned at me again. Then she turned, stepping over and away from the rocks. I stayed where I was and she looked back over her shoulder at me. "You coming?" She asked.

“With you?” I questioned. She nodded. I was kind of stunned. “Where?”

“Back into town,” she said matter of factly. “I have to meet my manager and the people that own my recording company. I’m late, but I thought maybe we could hang more.”

“Yeah,” I said, confidently, already moving over the rocks in her direction, completely forgetting that I was ever freaked out.

When I was next to her, her feet began to move and she said, “Let’s go again.” There was a beat and then beating the rhythm on her chest with her hand she sang, “I feel the walls closing in again...”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lola West writes short, sweet, smart, silly, sexy romance. With a PhD in women's studies and a flair for the dramatic, Lola likes to keep it real. Her loves are cotton candy, astronomy, kitten heels and small-town hunks. Lola's heroes make you swoon and her heroines talk back. Also, she believes that consent is always sexy, even in books.

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