

# SIGNS OF LOVE: SPRING

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ANYTA SUNDAY

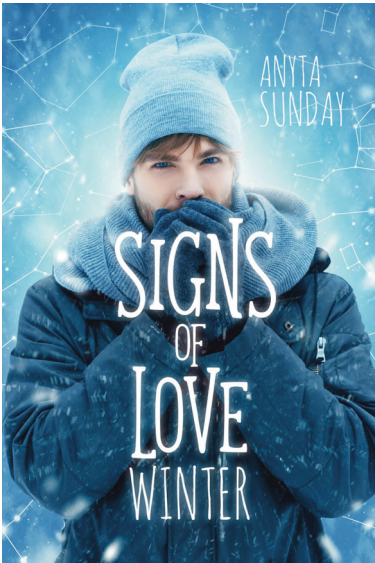


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## Signs of Love: Spring

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*Life loves to spring starry surprises.*

Writing flowery love horoscopes is not something Flynn Reilly ever saw himself doing. But when he's hired to package them up with extravagant bouquets and deliver them to his slick, always smiling Sagittarian frenemy . . . well, a struggling florist must do what a struggling florist must do.

Luckily for this Leo, where every rose has its thorn, every thorn has its rose. These horoscopes aren't *technically* from him. So . . .

who says he can't let out a little snarky subtext?

Only now, his Sagittarian frenemy has him making up flowery love horoscopes in response . . .

He hasn't spent this much time around those soft, sexy smiles since . . . they were best friends.

*Keep it professional.*

But . . . could this sow the seeds of something special?

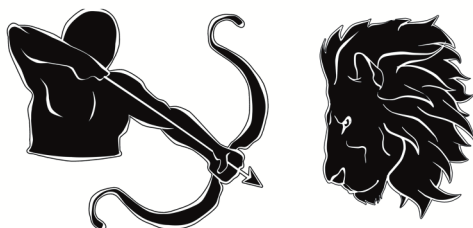


*Dear Slow Burners, this is not the last book in the Signs of Love series but  
a short prequel set in the same universe.  
Sagittarius and Libra will get their own novel.*

*Can be read as a standalone.*

## Chapter One

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**F**resh flowers. The loamy scent of soil. The morning sun haloing porcelain buckets of red, cream, and lavender roses. Barely-opened tulips. Two felt birds in love, perched on a branch.

None of it worked its usual calming magic.

Flynn Reilly misted buckets of chrysanthemums, catching his frown in the glass. Across the street, the rustic coffee joint bustled. Two beefy tables with wrought-iron stools perched



under brick-arched windows. A colorful chalkboard promised rich, aromatic espresso.

The café was open.

His frown deepened.

Blurring movement to his left startled him. The bell jingled as Cute Caspian and his best-friend-and-lover-of-three-years Eli waltzed through the door. They erupted in greetings and questions about which flower had that most beautiful scent.

Absently he arranged a small birthday bouquet, pricking himself on a thorn despite his gloves. The café kept tugging at his concentration.

“What are you staring at?” Caspian asked, following Flynn’s next wayward gaze.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Caspian and Eli exchanged looks.

“Seriously. Nothing. Jack didn’t come home last night. Didn’t open this morning. He always opens.”

“Jack from Jacked Up Coffee, Jack?”

Of course. Who else?

Caspian’s eyes glazed as if he was reminiscing about their high school years. “Don’t you hate him?”

“I have . . . ambivalent feels for him,” Flynn said, shrugging. “Hate is far too passionate.”

Movement outside snapped his attention toward the café. Just a mother pushing a stroller.

Eli rocked a brow. “Ambivalent, eh? That’s why you know he didn’t come home?”

Flynn tied a tight knot around the bouquet. “It’s not my fault he lives above his shop. I miss—”

“Him?”

“—ignoring him while tending my tomatoes. It’s become an evening tradition.”

Caspian and Eli shared another silent conversation. “Well,

you know, the broad shoulders, the height, the chiseled features—”

Flynn scoffed.

Eli laughed. “Come on, Jack’s handsome.” He darted a glance to Caspian. “But he has absolutely nothing on you, Cas.”

Caspian wrapped him into an amused hug, one arm around his shoulders. A soft kiss to his cheek.

Ridiculous. Jack resembled the toad he was. Might as well have been green and slimy for all Flynn cared.

Besides, he was straight.

“He’s charming, too,” Caspian added. “Makes the best coffee around. I’m surprised you two aren’t closer. You usually like everyone, and so does he.” He frowned, turning to his boyfriend. “Do you remember what happened there?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure they used to be friends.”

“Was it the trashcan incident?”

“No, that was Jack Jenkins, not Jack Ashford. The pot stashed in his car?”

Flynn snapped paper around their bouquet. “I’m right here, guys.” He paused. “It was neither of those things.”

Caspian smiled. “I suspect teasing isn’t allowed.”

Flynn grumbled. “It . . . disturbs the flowers.”

“Is that right?”

Flynn narrowed his eyes and Caspian laughed.

“Take your bouquet.”

“I haven’t paid for it yet.”

“It’s on me.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.” He handed it over. “No more joking about Jack.”



FLYNN FUMBLER HIS PHONE AGAINST HIS EAR, PICKED UP HIS spray bottle, and slunk to his spot among the chrysanthemums. Jack . . .

Looking haggard, Jack strode down the tourist-clogged street in his usual uniform: dark jeans, sturdy boots, and a coffee-themed T-shirt. The crumpled shirt was the same one he wore yesterday: *But First, Coffee*.

Jack stopped abruptly outside the coffeehouse, letting patrons pass. He rubbed at two fat rings on his left hand and they glinted in the sun.

Despite Jack's sun-weathered skin, he was pale, hair darker and messier than usual. If hair that short could even give off a messy vibe.

He held himself stiffly, almost favoring his left leg.

". . . about the fundraiser at the end of the month," his client, Cynthia, continued in his ear.

Had Jack got in a fight? "Hmmm."

"I called you about it last week."

"Right."

"It's an important event. Tickets in the three and four digits. We're gifting each participant a bouquet as a thank-you. Are you distracted or what?"

Flynn jerked his gaze away from the coffeehouse.

"Sorry. Just . . . checking something."

"Checking something. Checking out a guy?"

"Ha. Never in a million years. I mean, not this guy."

"So there is a guy."

"In the strictest sense of the word. How can I help you?"

"Well, I had another request. A personal one. You see, I've been crushing on someone. For over a year, actually, but since the divorce, I've decided I can go for it."

"Oh? Who?"

"You'll probably know him. We met after I discussed the fundraiser flowers with you last week."

Jack surveyed the narrow brick road between them, his expression grim.

"He runs the café across from your store. Best coffee in the state."

Her words hit him the moment Jack caught him staring. He inclined his head in the way he always did when they accidentally locked eyes.

"Jack, his name is."

Flynn smiled tightly through the blow to his stomach, raised his spray bottle, and got trigger-happy.



"YOU WANT ME TO WHAT?"

"You heard me. You'll do a great job of it. Always had a knack for words."

"Again. *What?*"

"I'll pay you extra. I know your store needs it." She laughed. "What would you do without me? Go under, I suppose."

She wasn't wrong. Before she'd swept in offering to use him for all her fundraising work, he'd been *that close* to the heart-breaking decision to close for good. She was literally keeping him afloat. Not a client he could afford to lose.

But this . . .

"Such a beautiful specimen. Want to breathe him in. Bottle up that musky masculine scent. What flowers do you think say how *ommpf* he is?"

"The birthwort."

"That doesn't sound sexy."

"Oh, it fits him."

"Anyway, I'll leave you to decide the flower—not the wort one—and write the horoscope. A love horoscope."

He and horoscopes didn't make a great match. He was technically Leo, but riding on the cusp of Cancer, he only occasionally read a horoscope that fit him. "I'm not qualified to—"

"Oh, make it up. I'll drop by the café in the afternoon and sooner or later he'll figure out we're meant to be."

"I don't even know what sign he is."

He did. He wished he didn't, but he did.

"Let me check, I wrote it down."

Jack had long ago ducked into his coffeehouse. Flynn caught glimpses of him when he served someone near the window; exhausted he might be, but he always knew how to pull out a laugh.

He was a chameleon. Drop him anywhere and he'd be right at home. The type to make friends at the drop of a hat.

*But making and keeping . . .*

Cynthia's voice chirped down the line. "Sagittarius."

"The heart-breakers of the zodiac."

"Bad experience, huh? But hun, Sagittarians in love are *fun*. They have big dreams, they're intense and attentive, and they love growing. You'd never get bored. It's true though, they take their time to commit. But I'm patient, Flynn. I'll pay you to send as many horoscope bouquets as it takes."

His stomach dropped. "Jeez, that sounds—"

"Fun. I know, right? I love creativity in romance."

"And you want me to write the horoscopes."

She didn't catch his sarcasm. "Leo and Sagittarius are meant to be a fabulous match."

"I can assure you that is not true."

"You're being dramatic."

"Me?" Well. Maybe sometimes he *was* rather Leo-like . . .

"This won't be charged to the company account. Start a tab for me and I'll pay in cash when I visit."

Flynn closed his eyes and swallowed down a groan.

“Be on the lookout for me later.” She squealed with delight. “This’ll surprise him.”

She hung up.

Jack peered out the coffeehouse window and their gazes caught. A crooked smirk lifted one side of his lips. Flynn turned his back. “This’ll surprise him, all right.”



FLYNN STARED AT HIS MOST EXPENSIVE ROSES—IF HE HAD TO do this, Cynthia could fork over the money—and re-read the horoscope.

He needed someone to deliver it. He usually hired a bike courier to do his deliveries, but Jason would laugh at him if he called him in for this . . .

“What do you mean you won’t drive across town to walk these flowers thirty feet?”

Down the line, his sister Becky also laughed. “I love you. But not that much.”

He sighed. “I miss you.”

“Especially right now?”

He laugh-cried. “Yes.”

“I’ll be in as per usual tomorrow.” She hung up.

Flynn tried to sweet talk a passerby, but instead made them trot away faster.

“Looks like it’s just you and me,” he whispered to the roses. “Also, I’m very sorry for this.”

Flynn turned his door sign to *Back in ten minutes*, sucked in a lungful of damp morning, and crossed determinedly onto the side of the road he’d spent the last eighteen months avoiding.

The air tasted of nutty coffee and vanilla, and it was harder to cross the threshold than he’d thought.

His stomach rose and fell, like the sidewalk was a ride at an

amusement park; all he wanted was to catch up to gravity, hand over the flowers, and leave with his dignity intact.

The rasp and whine of the coffee grinder hid the sound of his approach. Jack was chatting with someone vaguely recognizable at the long counter arrayed with espresso machines and coffee carafes. Was that Andy? He'd grown up.

Did he *have* to make his way to the cash register, or could he beg one of the newspaper-reading patrons to pass the bouquet the last six feet?

Too late. Jack thumped his brother's shoulder and turned.

Flynn shoved the bouquet up to cover his face, but those brown eyes landed on him. Jack jerked and winced, as if the surprise had cost him.

"Flynn. Never thought I'd see the day."

Reluctantly, Flynn lowered the bouquet with a wan smile.

"Yet here you are. With roses, no less."

Jack had crossed the space between them and stood tall, thumbs tucked into his belt loops. Flynn took it all in, one big punch back to school.

*Give him the flowers and flee.* "What happened to your leg?"

Andy set two lattes beside them. "You hurt yourself, Jacky?" He patted Jack's leg. "Looks okay to me."

A fleeting wince crossed Jack's face before he smiled. "It's fine." Jack gazed at him, longer than he did before.

Flynn flushed under the soft scrutiny and offered the bouquet. "Should we talk care?"

"Rather not."

"You'll want to trim the stalks before you place them in a vase. Lukewarm water is best, and don't forget to add the nutrients."

Jack rubbed his jaw, studying him.

"It has a note, too. Now, if you'll take them, I'll be on my merry way."

"Just a minute."

Jack's curious appraisal rippled across Flynn's nerve endings.

"Hmm."

"Hmm?"

"You're shorter than I remembered."

Flynn straightened to his full height. "Maybe it's your boots."

"It's been difficult to gauge from across the street."

"I'm sure you have better ways to spend your time." Flynn flagged Andy. "Can you pass me a large glass with water?"

Andy produced one, and Flynn zeroed his attention on caring for the flowers.

"Thought you had to cut the stems?"

"I did that not too long ago, I'm sure it'll be fine. Okay, there. Goodbye."

"Hold up. You didn't take off the wrapping."

"My job was to deliver a bouquet from a secret admirer, not undress it."

Jack's expression shifted into understanding. "You still hate me."

"Not at all."

Jack stared at him.

That time at school had been the best in his life before it'd been the worst. A better person might have forgiven and forgotten, but . . . well. He *was* a Leo.

Jack, even more successful now than eight years ago, brought all those tender adolescent feelings surging back. He felt embarrassed at himself for ever thinking . . . "Sit down. Take the pressure off your leg. Get someone to look at it."

Jack leaned against the counter instead. "Can I grab you a coffee?"

"Nope. I'm good."

If Jack had pointed to a stool and demanded he sit, Flynn would have obeyed.



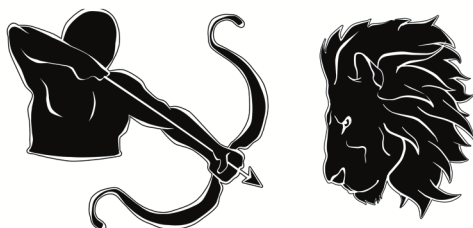
Disoriented by Jack's proximity and those pesky emotional punches of their past, he scrambled toward the exit, blocked by incomers.

"Sagittarius"—Jack read aloud. *Out the way, out the way, out the way*—"spend a few long moments listening to your heart, and you may discover that it needs tremendous work. If you want love, ever, you'll need to open your eyes."

Jack's call followed Flynn's squeezed escape out the door. "Is this supposed to be romantic?"

## Chapter Two

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Flynn's stomach sank as he wrapped up the most disappointing call of the day. A client for an autumn wedding had pulled out hours before signing their contract. Probably more disappointing for the groom-to-be but a blow to Flynn's business too.

Pushing back panic, he crunched numbers over a microwave dinner in his apartment above Floral Point. If his arrangement with Cynthia passed without a hitch, he'd scrape

by another year.

He leaned back on his chair, balancing it on its back legs, and stared at the ceiling. “Shit.”

The chair legs snapped on the floorboards, echoing through his quiet apartment. His potted plants gave his home a cozy feeling, but over the last months they’d failed to mask the absence of company.

He cleaned up and found refuge on the balcony. The sky had deepened to a rich violet, and the apartments along the other side of the street were lit up.

Jack’s included.

Flynn could see right into his home. The mirroring balcony led into a large living area that mimicked the rustic theme from the café. Not enough plants. Just a lone fiddle-leaf fig in desperate need of care.

Jack hobbled across the room with a tumbler of whiskey and sat on the couch.

Overwhelmed by the urge, Flynn pulled out his phone and found the number for Jacked Up Coffee. He’d seen Jack take business calls from his personal phone, so maybe—

“Hello?”

Flynn swallowed.

Jack glanced at his screen before placing it at his ear again.

“Who’s there?” His soft voice suggested he’d guessed.

“I saw your car. You had an accident.”

Jack lifted his head.

The lights behind Flynn were on. He would be a silhouette between his tomato plants, all expression concealed.

“You saw my car,” he murmured.

“You always park behind the deli. I walked past . . .”

Fright had jumped up Flynn’s throat when he noticed the fender had been beaten up on the driver’s side. He’d been holding back from calling all day.

“You saw it on your way back from Gene’s Espresso.” Jack paused. “Which you visited after leaving my coffeehouse.”

He’d needed the caffeine. “How do you know?”

“The same way you know where I keep my car.”

“I’m not stalking you!”

“Neither am I.”

No. Why would he? It was small-town-like around here. Everyone knew everyone’s business. “You didn’t drive drunk, did you?”

“Is that how little you think of me?”

No, he didn’t believe Jack would do that. He just . . . hadn’t known how to continue the conversation. He should hang up now. “Why didn’t you get checked out at the hospital?”

“I’m a little stiff. I’ll be fine with rest.”

“Your car looked like it hugged a tree.”

“A boulder at riverside bank. Looks worse than it was. I’ll get it fixed tomorrow.”

“Your leg?”

“The car.”

“If it’s a cost factor, I can scrounge something up. . . .”

Jack stared at his ceiling. His quiet breathing slipped down the line.

“Jack?”

“It’s a kind offer, Flynn.” The soft words were almost impossible to make out. Jack cleared his throat. “Cost is not a factor, the café is doing well. I’m fine. Or I will be, after a night’s rest.”

“Then . . . I guess you should do that.” Another long pause.

“Flynn—”

Flynn ended the call.



“YESTERDAY WAS ENOUGH.”

“Well he *was* admiring the roses, and he was genuinely pleasant, but I think it’ll take a few more horoscope-bouquets and accidental run-ins before he *understands*.”

“You don’t think talking to him . . .” Silence. Flynn blinked at the silk arrangements on his back wall. “I suppose you want me to write it again?”

“Oh, would you? Such a doll.”

Becky entered the store, and relief soared through his veins. Deliverance.



*Sagittarius, the planets are lining up to hint that someone in your circle is into you.*



Cynthia rang again. “More.”



*Sagittarius, plenty of opportunity for transformation in your love life. You might have to poke around to see who is returning your interest today.*



*Sagittarius. Dark hair and a pretty face. A warm smile and a generous spirit. Have you figured out who is crushing on you yet?*



A DAILY ORDER FOR A LOCAL RESTAURANT, AN HOUR inventorying, a few calls from potential customers, and two bouquets. Not a bad start to the day.

While Flynn was crouched behind the counter sweeping, the store bell rang.

“One second,” he called out.

“Take your time.”

The familiar voice stilled him.

Shit. Jack.

This was . . . unprecedented.

His heart pounded at the base of his throat. He eyed the storage room door. Could he crawl over, shut himself in, and stay there until Jack grew bored and left?

A shadow landed over him. Heavy boots and jeans appeared. “What a pretty store you have.”

Flynn looked up to an amused grin and gently crinkled eyes.

Slowly, he unraveled from his crouch, gripping the shovel-full of end stalks and leaves.

Jack was wearing a red shirt with a picture of a coffee cup against a backdrop of greenery. Flynn gaped and stared at Jack’s dimpling jawline. “Jack.”

“What am I doing here?” Jack’s smile widened. “I had the privilege of chatting with your sister the last three days. She said she wouldn’t be around today for what’s becoming my traditional morning delivery.” Jack wandered near the shelf of giftware and bushels of flowers. “She thought it was funny how terrified you seemed at the thought of delivering the bouquets yourself, and I figured if entering my coffeehouse is so tough, I’d help you out.”

“I never said terrified.”

“It was implied.”

“I’m not afraid for your coffeehouse.”

“What are you afraid of?”

Flynn jerked toward the trash and dropped the contents of the shovel inside. Flustered, he stowed away the brush and wiped his hands on his dark grey waist apron. His gaze kept shooting to Jack's leg. He didn't seem to be favoring it anymore.

He breathed out. "What do you want?"

"My horoscope. But first, I want to order a bouquet of my own." Jack appeared overly at ease in his store.

Flynn frowned. Didn't the surroundings squeeze him like they did to Flynn in Jack's café?

*Like they are now, in my own magical store.*

He squared his shoulders and nodded. "Birthday? Anniversary?"

"I want to reciprocate the gifts I'm receiving."

"You want to send your secret admirer a bouquet?"

"Yes."

Cynthia must have done a number on him. "What kind of flowers do you want to send?"

"What are the most expensive?"

"Hmmm. Does most expensive say I genuinely like you? Maybe something simple and in season. Tulips are bold and beautiful."

Flynn felt Jack's stare like a prickle along his profile.

Carefully, Flynn gathered a bouquet.

"Would you add a note from me?"

"Of course. What do you want to say?"

"Leo—"

Flynn's head snapped up. "You know who your admirer is?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you say something. Stop this charade?"

"This charade is fun. Neither of us is quite ready for it to end, I think."

Flynn groaned. "At least I'm earning an income from it."

“You’d earn more if you’d let me pick your most expensive flowers.”

Flynn flushed and stammered.

Jack winked and dictated. “Leo, it’s time to talk about your feelings to someone who could be special. It might be a challenge as it will involve a certain emotional intimacy, but it may open doors to new relationships.”

Cynthia would accept the challenge, which thankfully meant this horoscope-bouquet-ploy might end soon after all. Flynn and Jack could return to careful observations and avoiding one another’s eye.

Or would the horoscopes turn sexy? Flirting through his flowers far into the future?

Flynn’s stomach rose, fell, and twisted.

Jack jotted down the address he wanted the flowers sent to, and after he paid, he leaned his forearms against the counter. “Your turn. You’re due to deliver me one.”

Flynn plucked a premade bouquet from a bucket. He needed this done, fast. The oxygen was too thin with Jack in here. “This one.”

“The note?”

“Is it necessary?”

“Absolutely. It’s my favorite part.”

Flynn picked up his pen. *Sagittarius, everywhere you go, you leave someone feeling off-center like you’ve stolen their gravity.*

“Much better.”

“Maybe,” he spoke slowly as he continued writing, “figure out who’s affected the most and do something about it so poor florists can be left alone.”

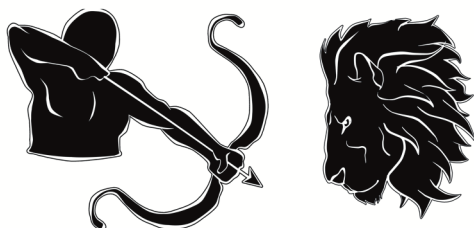
Flynn handed Jack the bouquet with a flat smile.

With a wince, Jack stared over the flowers at Flynn. “I regret that bet, Flynn. I’ve regretted it since the moment my stupid sixteen-year-old ego agreed to it.”



## Chapter Three

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“How do you know him, anyway?” Flynn asked Cynthia the next day.

“He bought a ticket to my first fundraiser for child cancer awareness and we talked. Every time I run something for the kids, I ask if he’s interested and he always finds the money.”

“He does?”

“Very big heart, you know.”

Flynn groped for the counter stool and sagged onto it.

Becky was a child cancer survivor. In high school, they'd held fundraisers to help finance her treatments. He'd been sixteen; Becky, thirteen.

*Sorry, Flynn. I'll be sitting with my friends today.*

He shut his eyes.

"I loved the roses you've been sending, Flynn, but could we mix it up? Maybe a spring-themed bouquet? You know, symbolize new beginnings?"

He opened his eyes to a haze of colorful flowers. A tender memory resurfaced of sitting in Becky's recovery room surrounded by a thousand gerberas because she'd said they were her favorite and the school had gotten every student to donate one . . .

"You sure he's not too young for you?"

Cynthia laughed. "How cheeky. What's fifteen years? It's fine if it's the other way around."

"Right." He swallowed.

"If you could deliver it in the next half hour, that'd be perfect."

"Right."

Again, he called Becky.

"You'll be fine. What is it about Jack that has you acting like this? You used to be friends."

"No, we weren't."

"Well, you acted like friends."

"Act being the keyword there."

"What happened?"

Flynn slumped on his stool, staring out toward the coffee-house. Maybe if he told her, if he let it out . . .

"Flynn?" Her concern funneled into him and he cracked.

"He was captain of the football team. I was the boy who helped the caretaker tend the garden. I should have known it wasn't authentic."

"I remember the way he looked at you when he stayed for

dinner. He visited me in the hospital. There was nothing fake about his interest.”

“Trust me, there was. He visited you in hospital?”

“Um, yeah. All those gerberas? He and his football mates brought them in. I told you.”

Flynn frowned across his store at the blue, pink, and yellow flowers. “You told me people from school dropped them off.”

“I’m sure I said names, but you were distracted. Sad. Maybe you weren’t listening.”

Maybe he hadn’t been. He’d been lost in his own emotions that day, slammed with guilt that he couldn’t get over himself for his sister. He’d sat on the guest chair and stared at the colors until they blurred with his tears. “The day before he’d brushed me off when I suggested seeing a movie. I thought he was busy, so I suggested another day, and another day. It took me longer than it should have to realize he wasn’t interested. I was dumb enough to ask what I’d done wrong.”

“Oh, Flynn. You never said anything. What did he say?”

That it was a mistake to bet with his mates that he could turn Flynn into a jock. That he’d pay up and be done with it.

It’d been a blow, but somehow Flynn still hadn’t believed it, and in the cafeteria, he’d walked up to Jack moving with his tray. *Sorry, Flynn. I’ll be sitting with my friends today.*

“We were never friends. It hurt so much because I desperately wished we were.”

“Did you crush on him, Flynn?”

“In all the agonizingly pathetic ways.” Flynn laughed hollowly. “Never looked at a straight boy again. So, lessons learned and all that.”

“Ah. I understand.”

“It’s not hatred, Becky.” Not if he was honest with himself. “It’s embarrassment.”



THE AROMA OF ESPRESSO AND THE TINGLE OF SPICES FILLED Flynn's nose. Several patrons lined up at the counter, so Flynn reluctantly settled onto a high stool at the other end. Only Jack was working the counter today and though swamped, he kept an easy cool, gracious and energetic.

Jack glanced at him and inclined his head, signaling he'd serve him shortly.

Flynn took in the décor, straightening. The small vases holding single flowers were new.

New, and familiar. This was his last bouquet, put to elegant use. He supposed Jack needed somewhere to put all the flowers he'd been receiving.

Jack delivered his last double-shot hazelnut latte, the fat rings on his fingers winking in the light. Flynn averted his gaze from Jack's hands the moment Jack turned toward him.

Things had ended abruptly yesterday. After Jack had expressed his regrets, customers had needed Flynn's attention, and Jack had retreated, leaving him to it.

"Gerberas?" He raised a brow as he leaned over and sniffed them.

"They don't have a scent," Flynn said. "Best kind of flower if you have allergies."

Jack sat on the stool beside him and their knees knocked, jolting Flynn with electricity. He clenched his jaw against the sudden, unwanted intensity.

"You're looking good," Jack said. "Nice pink in your cheeks."

Flynn flushed. "Your flowers. Take them."

Jack didn't. He sprang off his stool and wound around the counter.

"Coffee. You haven't gotten your daily fix yet."

"I'll get it later—"

"You've spent most of your break waiting for me. I'll make you one."

“It’s fine. I don’t need—”

Jack delivered him a gently arched brow from behind the chrome espresso machine. “Stop fooling yourself. You know you want to try my beans.”

Flynn studied the gerberas, aware of Jack shifting around, frothing milk, banging metal carafes against hard wood.

“Let me guess. Full milk double shot cappuccino, am I right?”

Right.

Jack set the coffee before him and took the flowers.

“A good coffee won’t change my feelings about you.” Flynn sipped, and paused. “Well, maybe it will a little. What is *in* this thing?”

Jack laughed.

Nutty, rich, and creamy with a hint of spice. Cardamom? He sipped again, and again, and again.

“Sagittarius, the admirer you meet every day wants to advance from acquaintances to the first stage of meaningful friendship. If you’re up for it, ask them out. This may be your path toward a happy end.”

Jack’s voice twisted into a chuckle. “Well. This one is my favorite so far.”

Flynn gaped in horror. “I meant toward a happily ever after, not a *happy end*.”

Jack scrubbed a palm over his prickly jaw as he laughed.

“Cynthia will kill me.”

Jack tempered his amusement. “How about I keep that part between you and me?”

“Would you?”

Jack took his empty cup and peered right into his eyes. “In fact, I’d prefer it that way.”



AT THE SOUND OF THE BELL, FLYNN GLANCED UP FROM THE roses he was handling with a practiced nod and returned to—

His head shot up again. He dropped a rose.

Jack. In his store. Again.

He marched between roses and petunias, his purpose clear. His eyes locked on Flynn and held all the way. He wore another punny coffee shirt that clung to his broad, muscular form. He added espresso to the perfumes of the store.

As Jack moved nearer, Flynn was transported to last night on his balcony. The strange minutes they'd gazed toward each other's place. Always avoiding direct eye contact, but aware of the other looking.

Fright shot through him. But surely, Jack hadn't seen that. He'd shut his curtains, tight. Had made sure all the lights were off . . .

Jack eyed him slowly, and nodded. "One of us has to start the conversation."

"Conversation?"

"I haven't slept properly in over a week."

"So you're overtired. That explains the visit."

"Being overtired only partially explains the visit." There was a knowingness in his look that Flynn refused to decipher.

Jack scrolled a hand through his hair, sighed. "Another bouquet. Same address."

A patron loitering outside caught Flynn's eye. He watched the young man, and sighed. "Just a sec, Jack."

He moved to the open doorway and folded his arms, staring the gangly teen.

"Out of luck, man. I saw you."

"Saw me what?"

"Stuff that red rose down your pants."

The teen jutted his jaw out stubbornly. "You accusing me of stealing?"

"That's precisely what I'm doing."

“You have no proof.”

“Except, I can see the stalk poking out of your waistband. Also, brave choice. Those thorns can be nasty.”

“Sharp or . . . poisonous?”

“Poisonous. Absolutely.”

The boy’s eyes widened. “How poisonous?”

“It depends how long it’s against your skin. Should be fine if it’s less than a minute.”

The teen pinched the stalk and pulled at his elastic waistline.

“Pull it out carefully, then shower as soon as you get home.”

Thirty seconds later, the rose was back in its bucket, nary a petal lost, and the teen was sprinting home.

Jack grinned. Under the light in the store, his dark hair gleamed with streaks of copper.

“Are they really poisonous?” Jack asked.

“Not in the slightest.”

Jack’s rumbling laugh, deep and melodic, skittered warmly over Flynn’s skin.

“Tulips again?” Flynn’s voice caught. He cleared his throat. “Or the flower with the best return for me?”

“The second, of course.”

Flynn moved purposefully around the store, plucking the best flowers.

“Does that happen a lot?”

“Teens stuffing roses down their pants? More often than I care to admit.”

“You handled it well. I’d have called the cops on them.”

Flynn shrugged. “It’s kind of romantic.”

“Romantic.”

“They want to give it to someone they love, and they’re usually either embarrassed or broke. Committing a crime to

make someone else happy . . . I don't know. I can't get too mad."

Jack's gaze on him felt warm at his nape.

"Some fern and I think you have something special."

"Special. Yeah. It is."

Flynn gathered the flowers into a stunning bouquet. He should have done it faster, but he felt clumsy with Jack nearby. Fingers fumbled and dropped greenery, and the wrapping paper refused to fold to his will.

He heated.

"What do you want the note to read?"

"Leo, it may be taking us a while, but don't doubt we are on the right path. Sometimes it's better to let things play out and deepen the attachment day by day. Never fret, happier times are on the horizon."

Nice sentiment. Cynthia would be pleased.

Note attached, Flynn set the bundle aside to box for delivery.

Jack didn't immediately leave.

Flynn was the first to break their long eye contact. "Guess you need to hustle back to work."

"Yes. But mostly because you're due to deliver me another bouquet."

Flynn turned to the counter behind him. "I was finishing it when you came in. Give me a sec, and you can take the flowers with—"

"See you soon, Flynn." The bell dinged.

Flynn whirled around with the bouquet, but Jack was already crossing the street. He chased after him, stopping only to twist his *Back in ten* sign and lock the front door.

He stormed into Jacked Up Coffee.

Jack stood at the espresso machine, working the nobs. His brother was serving again.



“What was that about?” Flynn glared at Jack over the bouquet.

Jack’s gaze twinkled with a satisfied gleam. He poured two shots into a mug and frothed milk. “I hoped you’d follow immediately.”

“I had them right there.”

He poured milk from the carafe and used a thin metal stick to draw into it. A smirk bowled into Flynn, and Jack set the coffee before him, a rose crafted into the froth. “For you.”

Oh.

Um.

He gripped the base of the bouquet hard.

“Gene’s won’t be happy they’ve lost a regular.”

“I don’t care. You get your coffee here from now on.”

“It is . . . decidedly the best coffee I’ve ever had.”

Jack beamed.

“I’ll start a tab.”

His smile waned. “You’re not paying for it.”

“But—”

“Let an overtired man get his way on this one.”

Flynn shook his head, grinning, and passed over the bouquet.

“Actually, I have a favor to ask,” Jack said.

Flynn’s brow rocketed to his hairline.

“My car is still in the shop. I figure, since we live so close, when you head to the grocery store we might go together? Give me a lift?”

“I shop Thursdays. Tonight.”

“I know.”

Flynn swallowed and stared at the beautiful design on his coffee. Almost too beautiful to drink. “Sure. Thanks for the coffee.”

He drank while Jack procured a vase, trimmed the stems, and dumped the sachet of nutrients into the water.

He was almost disappointed to drink his last sip, but he needed to return to work.

He hesitated, not sure whether to wave or hike off.

A patron snagged Jack into conversation, and Flynn moved toward the door.

“Wait.”

“Yes?” Flynn said, spinning back toward Jack, breathless.

“You forgot the horoscope.”

Flynn blinked blandly. “Did I? Sorry.”

“You don’t sound very sorry.”

“What can I say. I’m imperfect.”

“Aren’t we all?” His weighted words sank meaningfully into Flynn’s chest.

Jack let the moment pull, then continued, “Bring it this evening. Meet you at six out front.”

Flynn’s belly lurched strangely, and it lurched again as he bumped into an elegantly dressed Cynthia on his way out.



THE YEASTY SCENT OF WARM BREAD MADE FLYNN’S STOMACH rumble. Jack did a doubletake.

“Skipped lunch,” Flynn said, tossing a loaf into his cart.

“Right. Tomorrow I’ll feed you along with your coffee.”

Flynn almost plunged the cart into an elderly woman and halted abruptly.

Jack paused, lips twitching in amusement—as they had been since they’d met up that afternoon. The car ride here had been full of clumsy stalls on Flynn’s part, something he’d not done in years. At Jack’s chuckle, he had glared and turned up the music.

Easy-listening tunes played lightly around them in the store.

“So,” Jack said conversationally, gaze sweeping sideways

toward him and dropping to his pocket. “When will you give me the horoscope I see poking out there?”

Flynn cursed silently and stuffed the card deeper into his pocket. “What horoscope?”

Hoping Jack might give up, Flynn tried sounding bored; unaffected.

“I’m a determined guy, Flynn. When I see something I want, I go for it. I want what you’re hiding in your pants.”

Flynn was socked with images of Jack fishing out what he wanted from his jeans—and it wasn’t the stupid horoscope. He shook off the thought and hurried into the frozen section.

“That’s a lot of frozen meals,” Jack noted.

Flynn set another one into his cart. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I live alone.”

“I’ll cook you dinner tonight, in return for that note.”

“Seriously. What note?” Maybe the cocky lift of his brow was too much.

Jack’s expression flickered with purpose and Flynn felt it shiver through him. He took one last frozen meal for good measure and strode toward the checkout.

Jack took the lane next to him, and even with his plethora of fresh vegetables and meat and pasta, finished before him.

In the burgeoning darkness of the parking lot, they loaded the trunk and Flynn shut it.

Warmth creeped up against his back, pinning him to the car, and Jack’s chuckle hit his ear.

A firm hand cupped his hip and slid around into his pocket.

Flynn’s heart pounded in his throat and he stiffened—everywhere.

“Told you I get what I want.” As suddenly as Jack was there, he was gone.

Flynn whirled around but Jack was already rounding the car, opening the passenger door.

He collected himself, jerking fingers through his hair. These reactions were juvenile. Jack was the last person Flynn needed to be worked-up about.

Shit.

He slipped into the driver's seat and started the car without looking over.

Jack's gaze warmed his cheek.

"Sagittarius—"

Flynn groaned, and zipped onto the main street. "Could you not?"

"But they just get better and better."

Flynn shot him a look. "There's no happy ending on that one."

"But there's 'the promise of new relationships of all forms on the horizon.' I can't help but wonder if that means friendship too."

The intensity of Jack's stare demanded Flynn's attention. At the next red light, their gazes held.

Flynn tore his away first. "Cynthia told me how you two met."

"Are you close with her?"

"She's basically the reason my business is still alive."

"Ah. She'd love that, I bet."

Flynn frowned. Not the tone he'd expected from Jack.

Jack added, "She loves saving people. Fixing things. It's her thing."

"Not a bad trait in a partner. How close are *you*?"

Jack reread the horoscope. "I asked my secret admirer out. I was more nervous than I thought I would be."

"You? Nervous?" Flynn scoffed.

"I'm afraid of messing up."

They grew quiet. The roads passed with little traffic. Light rain sprinkled against the windshield.

“The gerberas.” Flynn cleared his throat. “When Becky was in hospital, you and your mates brought bushels of them.”

Jack jerked his head toward him. “That was forever ago.”

“Did the school ask you to deliver them?”

“Not the school.”

“Our teacher?”

“No.”

“Did my parents put you up to it?”

“Everyone liked Becky. It was easy to convince people to donate a dollar for flowers.”

“You made that happen,” Flynn whispered, the truth sinking deeper. “It was your idea. Because you liked Becky.”

“I liked your whole family.”

Flynn nodded, and blinked back the sudden sting in his eyes. “My family.”

“You.”

It took all of Flynn’s control to keep a steady driving hand. Neither of them spoke as they parked in the underground lot. The engine died and they stared across the rows of sleeping cars.

“No,” Flynn said. “You didn’t like me. It was a bet.”

“It started that way.” A regretful expression darkened Jack’s face.

“You ended things.”

“I came clean. I owed you space. You didn’t look at me again, and I respected that I’d ruined us.”

Flynn recalled that one afternoon after school. Jack had jogged away from his mates and met him in the school parking lot. He’d asked for a ride and Flynn had told him to forget it.

“I guess we were both idiots.”

Jack huffed a consolatory laugh. “We were.” He unclicked his belt, reached over, and pushed the button on Flynn’s. The strap shriveled over his chest. “It doesn’t mean we have to be now.”

“What are you saying?”

“I can’t bear the thought of you microwaving your dinner.”

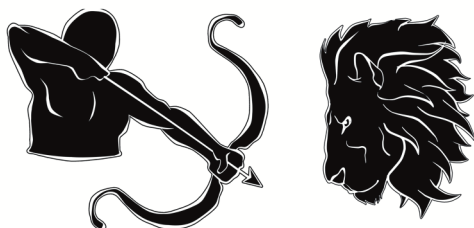
Flynn looked over, puzzled.

Jack grinned and tapped the horoscope against his thigh.

“Drop your groceries off and head over to my place?”

## Chapter Four

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Flynn's stomach was one tangled knot. He crafted three different texts—excuses not to go over—but shook his head and deleted them every time. It was just dinner. They were adults now. Flynn could put this tenderness behind him.

Besides, this way he could talk up Cynthia and help her land her dream guy. When they married, they'd hire him . . .

Flynn groaned and did what any good procrastinator

would do: leafed through his unopened mail. Bill, bill, another bill. Something from his landlord. Shit, that couldn't be good.

Distraction from his riotous belly?

He grabbed a knife and cut into it.

For fuck's sake. Worst decision ever.

He grabbed his phone and prepared another excuse. Before he could send it, his phone vibrated.

**Jack: Your living room light is on and your curtains are open. I can see you thinking how to text your way out of dinner.**

Flynn's head shot up. Framed in one of his windows, Jack stood. Another buzz.

**Jack: Don't text your way out of dinner?**

**Jack: My door is open.**

Reluctantly, Flynn filed the letter, grabbed a bottle of wine, and choked its neck all the way into the rosemary-scented warmth of Jack's home. He toed off his shoes and called Jack's name, following the delicious herbal aroma and familiar indie music.

The narrow kitchen was pretty, all natural woods and turquoise ceramic tiles, overflowing with baskets of fresh herbs. In the center of the room, Jack orchestrated pots, pans, and boards of prepped vegetables like a conductor.

His hips swayed to the chorus and he hummed along to the gentle beats from a speaker at the open window.

Onions sizzled in a pan, and Jack poured in a jar of pureed tomatoes, quelling the sound.

Flynn stared from the doorway, his grip on the wine bottle



loosening, and admired Jack's ease; the same coolness he'd admired at school.

Jack smiled. "What are your thoughts on garlic?"

"The more the merrier."

"Excellent. We'd never make it, otherwise."

Flynn moved to the counter and set down the wine. A quick survey of the utensil jars, and he found the corkscrew. "Your plants are looking healthy."

"You sound surprised."

"The fiddle-leaf in the living room is crying for attention."

Jack plucked a watering can off the top cupboard and filled it with water. "Take care of stirring the sauce."

When Jack returned a minute later, Flynn raised a brow. "I would've watered it."

"I didn't invite you over here to work, Flynn."

Flynn dropped his gaze, stomach fritzing. He eyed the wooden spoon. "Better hand this back, then."

A laugh.

"Where are the wine glasses?"

"Bottom left."

Flynn poured them each a generous glass.

Jack eyed the amount. "Nervous are we?"

"And depressed. Cheers."

Flynn clinked his glass to Jack's stilled one.

"Depressed?"

Flynn waved it off. "It's nothing. Don't worry."

Flynn downed half of his wine.

"Okay, it's not nothing. Something's wrong."

"I've never seen your kitchen before. It feels strange, being someplace new." Flynn gave a self-deprecating laugh. "And then my mind jumped to imagining what my kitchen will be like next year. Where I'll be. Then I started fretting the idea of a commute. All of that in the space it took you to tend your fiddle-leaf."

“You’re moving?”

“I’ll have to. Received a lovely letter from the property owner today. In three months, my rent goes up by fifteen percent. I might be able to keep the store, but I’ll have to sublet the apartment to keep up payments.”

“The shop that tight?”

Flynn laughed, then shrugged. “I’ll do the numbers again. Maybe Cynthia has more events for me.”

“Cyn—you don’t want to rely on one source,” Jack said. “Diversify. Think outside the box.”

“I’m trying.”

“Have you thought about offering discounted services through funeral homes?”

“No?”

“What about also offering candles, or chocolates?”

Not that, either. “I didn’t come here to feel stupid.”

Jack softened. “Sorry. I want to help.” Jack angled his head toward the door. “Let’s move this to the dining room and eat. We can brainstorm.”

Flynn stared at the pot of sauce and pasta. “Why do you care, Jack?”

“I like your store.”

“You’ve been in it twice.”

“I recommend it to everyone.”

Flynn followed Jack to the dining room, frowning into his wine.



DINNER WARMED HIS STOMACH. JACK HAD BACKED OFF FROM the topic of Floral Point’s finances after one long look at Flynn’s stinging eyes, and the consideration warmed him even more.

Dishes stacked in the dishwasher, Flynn hesitated. They'd eaten. Now what?

Jack wiped his hands on the dishtowel, settled his large palms on Flynn's shoulders and squeezed. "I hope you're not planning your escape."

"Debating it."

"Well, I'm against. It's early yet, and it'd be nice to have someone to watch mindless things on Netflix with."

"What are you watching?"

"I don't know yet. Something light."

"Lead the way."

For the first time, Flynn entered Jack's living room.

His gaze jumped from the landscape paintings to the mounted TV, the watered plant, the warm rug under his feet, the couches. He'd seen this room from afar countless times, yet the space felt unfamiliar. There was a woody scent, rough and smooth textures in the upholstery. The air tasted sweetish.

Jack's chuckle beside him added another weight to the room.

"It's strange having you in here, not just gazing from afar. This is even better."

Flynn hauled in a steadying breath, and the whiff of Jack's aftershave overloaded his senses. He marched to the couch and sat, gripping the arm and hoping his palm didn't sweat against the leather.

He'd sit here for one episode and not be drugged into too much relaxation by all the sensory input. God this couch was comfortable.

Jack set up the TV, fiddled with remotes, and settled onto the center of the couch. He scrolled through options and at Flynn's perked interest in an eight-episode series, turned it on.

They watched, both laughing at the same parts. Taking turns throwing out ideas who would end up with whom and who was the most interesting character.

Jack scoffed. "I wish they'd show a gay relationship. Doubt it though, sorry."

Flynn shrugged, then pointed to another character. "Oh my God, it's Cynthia with longer hair."

"How is it Cynthia?"

"She's obsessive."

Jack's eyebrows shot up.

"Sorry, uh, determined."

"I thought you liked Cynthia."

"She's keeping my business alive. I kind of love her."

"But . . .?"

"It's nothing."

"Flynn."

Flynn stared resolutely toward the TV. "She's . . . insistent about these bouquets, and drops in to flirt with you every day. If you weren't enjoying it, I'd think it was a little . . ."

"Obsessive."

"Yeah." He paused. "But then, I'm sure you've talked about it. It's all part of your courtship or something. It's fine, ignore me." Another pause. "If she liked you as much as she proclaims, wouldn't *she* be the one writing the horoscopes. At this point, they feel more like we're the—"

Flynn cut himself off.

"They feel more like what?" Jack asked.

"Never mind." Flynn stood, too fast. "Piles of laundry to do. Thank you for dinner."

"Sure you won't stay another hour?"

Jack's gaze held his warmly, beseechingly, a cute quiver of one eyebrow asking him again.

"Um, I . . . tomorrow?"

*Tomorrow?* Where had that come from?

Jack straightened. "Yes. We'll do this all over again. Dinner and the next episode."

Flynn nodded, throat bulging on a swallow. “That’s, uh . . .” He shot toward the door, laughing at himself. “Yep.”



*Leo, opening up and trusting those close to you will help you through times of worry. One man in particular is there, should you want to lean on his shoulder.*



*Sagittarius, you can be sure your crush appreciates your generosity and amazing coffee. They may be taking their time flirting with you, but real emotions are simmering underneath.*



*Leo, you’re full of laughter when the lights are dimmed and you’re in caring company. Keep doing what makes your heart beat faster. You need more smiles in your life.*



*Sagittarius, a seemingly innocent evening with an old acquaintance might escalate more firmly into the friendship territory. Eggplant parmigiana could be a delicious way to start this new phase. Oh, and during the day, your crush will make a not-so-surprising appearance.*



*Leo, a healthy, open discussion of what is happening between you and your man could be fun and sexy. But you are not quite ready for the next levels of development. Look within yourself and start asking what you want and need. Your man will wait patiently.*



*Sagittarius, ask yourself what you want out of a relationship. If your secret crush is special enough, perhaps you should spend more time with them.*



THE WEEK PASSED. IN THE MORNINGS, JACK STOPPED BY FLORAL Point, bought a bouquet, and dictated Leo's love horoscope for Flynn to write out. Right after, Flynn crossed to Jacked Up Coffee to have his words read back to him.

Today's words bit Flynn with more jealousy than he'd intended. He was happy that Jack was working with him on establishing a friendship; he didn't want to muddy the waters with pesky attraction.

He downed his cappuccino and was about to leave when Caspian slunk next to him at the counter. He eyed the vase of gerberas Flynn had brought over. "How very Leo of you."

"They aren't from me. I was delivering them. To the coffeehouse."

"Not to the guy you're unabashedly gazing at?"

Flynn snorted. "Hardly."

Caspian's brow shot up.

"Where's your best friend and love of your life, anyway?"

"Grabbing some books next door."

Caspian caught Jack's gaze and ordered two cappuccinos to go. While Jack worked the machines, attention focused—seemingly—elsewhere, Caspian ducked his head close. "Maybe not so *ambivalent* anymore, huh?"

Jack's gaze flicked over, catching his. He looked away. "He's on the brink of dating someone," he said under his tongue.

"Too bad," Caspian said.

A ruckus behind them drew their attention. A young guy

had tripped in the entrance and landed in a heap on the welcome mat, his bike helmet rolling across the floor. He pushed himself up—moderately tall, tousled dark hair, bright blue eyes—and laughed good-naturedly as he scooped up his helmet. “Good trip.”

Jack planted two paper cups before Caspian and rounded the counter. “Dash, right?”

“You remember!”

“Hard not to, don’t you think?”

“True. Look. It took me a lot of sleuthing to figure out where you worked.”

Jack folded his arms.

“I’m sorry about what happened. I was trying to avoid hitting a possum.”

“You almost killed yourself.”

Dash grimaced. “Yeah, I shouldn’t have been given a license. I’ve been riding the bike ever since.”

“Probably for the best.”

“I know you’re upset. Your poor car took a walloping, and I know you said you knew someone who’d fix it cheap and that was to calm me down because I’m broke, and I . . . well, I wanted to thank you again for your quick thinking, jerking your car to my side of the road . . .”

Flynn held his breath. That was how Jack had ended up hurt and smashed his car? He’d saved this clumsy-ass?

“Anyway, so I wanted to figure out a way to repay you?”

“Learn to drive safely, that’ll be enough.”

“Yeah, definitely. But also. Maybe I can work off the cost of repairs?”

“That’d take a while.”

Dash’s face fell. “I could work here a couple hours every day after classes? Do dishes? Sweep or something?”

Jack eyed him. “You want to earn it off?”

“Yes. Please. I feel so guilty.”

“Fine. Come back after Easter break and I’ll teach you how to make a proper coffee.”

Dash brightened. “Thank you so much,” He stumbled toward the door and caught himself. “I am genuinely sorry.” He waved and bolted from the coffeehouse.

Jack shook his head. “Good lord, that guy is a walking accident.”

Something Flynn didn’t want to name—or even acknowledge—stirred in his chest. He murmured a farewell to Caspian and was standing in front of Jack before he could process it.

Brown eyes met his questioningly.

Flynn’s mouth dried. “You saved . . .” He let his breath fizzle out and nodded. “I gotta get back to work, but are we still on for tonight?”

Jack’s lips twisted into a sexy smile.



HIS BELL CHIMED, AND CYNTHIA GLIDED PAST THE FLOWERS, shopping bag in hand. Short hair, short dress, short all over. Her heavy eyeliner made her grey eyes pop while her red lips promised fun, exhilaration. A firecracker, always ready to blast.

Anyone could tell a mile off she was a Leo.

Smile lines appeared around her eyes and mouth, even when she wasn’t smiling.

Her gaze hit him with quiet force, and guilt bubbled low in his gut. “Cynthia.”

“Flynn.”

He picked a rose from a bucket and held it toward her nose. “Sentimental rose.”

“Something smells fishy.”

He jerked the rose back. “What do you mean?”

“I had a conversation with Jack a few days ago, and—never



mind. I'm visiting him again today. Got a little something that might make him see sense."

She rummaged through her shopping bag and pulled out a pressed, expensive-looking buttondown.

"Is that something he wants?" Flynn asked lightly as his stomach rioted.

"It's something he needs." She eyed him again, frowning. "You know Jack well, don't you?"

"I don't know I'd say 'well.'"

"You like him."

"He's a good man." Flynn flustered and Cynthia stared at him for a long beat.

"Yes, he does seem to be." Her lips twisted and she inclined her head. "I'll head over now." The bell rattled as she opened the door and paused. "Oh, and stop the bouquets. We're moving on from that now."

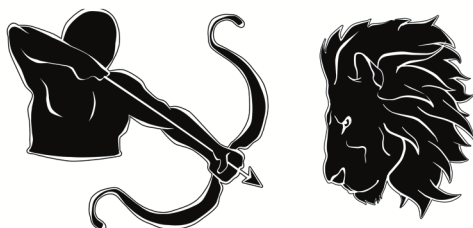
"Stop the bouquets." The door shut behind her.

Flynn breathed in the perfume of the sentimental. He should be relieved. It'd been weirdly obsessive and silly, and those notes . . . he swallowed.

Fine. It was fine.

## Chapter Five

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After they had cooked and cleaned that night, Flynn curled up on his side of the couch more glumly than usual, while Jack lounged in the middle, arms slung casually over the back.

Fingers prodded his shoulder. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“Try again.”

“Cynthia came in today, before heading to you.”

Jack shifted. "Okay. What did she say?"

"That you're moving on from the bouquets."

"Ah. Yes. We both thought it was time."

Flynn nodded and nodded. "That's cool. Yep."

Jack hesitated. "Did she say anything else?"

"She asked how well I knew you and showed me the present she bought for you."

"Right. The shirt."

Flynn's jaw clenched. "She's trying to change you."

"Do you think I'd let someone do that?"

Flynn's gaze dropped to Jack's coffee cat T-shirt. "Maybe not."

"Don't worry about that."

Flynn squirmed with an indecipherable frustration. "You have other options, you know."

Quietly. "Is that right?"

"I've seen some of the women you've dated. You like them short."

Jack cocked his head. "Huh. Never realized. But they have been, yes."

"There are a lot of short people out there who might be a better fit. Someone who likes you the way you are."

"As I am?"

"You know, outrageously social, easy on the eye, successful, smart, kind, caring, compassionate. I mean, you could have anyone."

Jack's fingers drummed over the back of the couch. He seemed like he wanted to say something and was forcibly holding himself back. Maybe he wanted to defend Cynthia.

"Like . . . who?" Jack murmured.

"Like . . . like . . . my sister. In fact, my parents are visiting this weekend. They're staying at Becky's, but I invited them for dinner tomorrow. You could come over."

Jack's fingers froze mid-drum. He blinked. "Becky?"

God, fuck. Why had he ever suggested her?

Eyes narrowed. "You mind the idea of me dating Cynthia, but you wouldn't mind me dating your sister?"

Flynn gulped. "I mean . . . I can handle it."

Jack's expression grew pensive.

"You're upset."

"No." Jack smiled. "Actually, I'm glad."

"You *are*?"

"Yes."

Jack smirked, and Flynn turned his back to the arm of the couch, knees tucked to his chest. They went back to watching their show. Had he harbored feelings for Becky in high school? Shifting colors lit his profile, turned his hair red and then blue. "Yes?"

A sly, sideways glance. "Wishing me into your family . . . You've definitely forgiven me."

"Well. I don't always like my sister that much, so . . ."

Jack ruffled a big hand through his hair. "You like me." His hand dropped, skating over Flynn's ear, drifting briefly over his knees. "I like you, too."

Flynn struggled to keep his voice from cracking. His heart throbbed. "Then you'll help me cook."



FLYNN'S TINY TABLE WAS LOADED WITH ROAST CHICKEN AND vegetables. His warmly smiling parents hadn't stopped asking Jack questions about how he'd been.

Becky twirled her wine glass and held Flynn's gaze with more probing questions. *I thought you didn't like each other? Why is he here, Flynn?*

Flynn needed extra gravy to help swallow the potatoes.

Jack's eyes flashed with a twinkling smile. He engaged in

conversation easily and appeared to be enjoying himself. “Good there, Flynn?”

Flynn shook out of his stare. “Excellent. This roast is only as good as it is because Jack took over in the kitchen.”

“Sounds like a handy man to have around,” his mom said.

Flynn’s belly heaved, but here was his opportunity. He palmed Jack’s broad shoulder and looked at his sister. “He’s not only amazing in the kitchen.”

Dad choked on some chicken and his mom thumped his back.

Becky’s eyebrows skyrocketed.

Flynn heated at the accidental implication. “I *meant*, he’s also great at his work, and has a great sense of humor.”

Mom nodded, green eyes like his glittering. “I’m thrilled for you, honey. I hope you’re happy together.”

Happy together?

Wait, *what?*

He was pimping Jack out for Becky, not . . . oh God.

They thought he was introducing them to his boyfriend.

Flynn wilted into his chair, mortification robbing him of his voice.

His mom continued talking, suggesting they join them for bowling tomorrow, which Flynn had unsuccessfully tried to weasel himself out of every year. He groaned.

A warm hand landed on his thigh under the table and Flynn jumped.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” Jack said, nodding toward the only other room Flynn had—his bedroom.

Great. He needed to discuss this little mishap. Probably wanted to politely shut it down. “Sure.” He shot out of his chair and hoofed to his room.

Jack followed and shut the door. He leaned against it and took in the balcony and the view of his apartment. “Looks different from here.”

Flynn paced the end of the bed, to his peace lily and back.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"For assumptions going on out there."

"You mean your family thinking I'm your boyfriend?"

Flynn dropped to the bed, laughing tightly.

"Is it that bad?"

Flynn shot him a look. "You're not upset?"

Jack sat beside Flynn. "Not in the slightest."

"You seemed anxious to talk. I thought I didn't correct them fast enough."

"You didn't correct them at all."

"I was in shock. Sorry."

Jack waved it off. "Let them think whatever they want to think."

"It honestly doesn't bother you?"

"No. The reason I wanted to talk to you was to suggest you don't correct them."

Flynn gaped. "Why not?"

"I saw how little interest you have in bowling."

"That obvious, am I?"

"You wear your heart on your sleeve, Flynn."

Flynn laughed dryly.

"I thought," Jack said, "if we continue letting them believe we're together, we'd have a better chance of getting you out of it."

"You'll help me get out of it?"

"There will be a catch."

"What is it?"

"Nope. You'll find out if you play along."

Curiosity tugged at his stomach. So what if his parents and Becky thought he was with Jack for a day or two? "I could live with faking it for a bit. Shouldn't be too hard."

Jack leveled him a disapproving look for his cheek, and

Flynn smirked. Warmly, their upper arms touching, Jack touched his hand, metal rings a cool bite in contrast to warm fingers. His cleared his throat. "I think, for the sake of appearances, we should . . ." He rubbed his fingers over Flynn's knuckles, eliciting a wave of goosebumps up Flynn's arm.

Flynn swallowed and flipped his hand. He'd held hands with guys many times and was no virgin to dating, but his heart hammered like this was a first. Their fingers slid together; electricity thrummed through him when Jack squeezed and rubbed his thumb over the back of Flynn's.

"Shall we?"

Flynn stood, each step light and ticklish as they walked to the door.

"They already think we're together," Flynn whispered. "We probably don't need to hold—"

Jack tugged him into the living area, fingers warm and tight around his.



HIS PARENTS AND BECKY EYED THEIR KNOTTED FINGERS.

Mom and Dad smiled at each other. Becky's eyes almost popped out of her skull.

"We'd love to have you along to bowling too, Jack," his mom said, starting right where they'd left off. "We do it every Easter Sunday."

Jack squeezed his hand and let him go so they could re-seat themselves. "That sounds fabulous," Jack said. "But I can't. My parents are popping by."

"Oh, yes. Of course you'll have your own traditions."

Flynn pleaded with Jack silently. Jack took his time, sipping his water.

"Actually, I was hoping to kidnap Flynn for the day," Jack said, and Mom and Dad beamed. Becky furiously tapped a

message on her phone, and a second later Flynn's pocket buzzed. "I'd love it if I could introduce him to my family."

Flynn whipped his head to Jack. Was *that* the catch?

He wanted Flynn to meet his family? Why? As a buffer to avoid conversations of his own?

Would the Ashfords remember him?

Jack looked at him expectantly.

Right, yes. Flynn nodded. "That's right. I'm very nervous to meet them."

Jack laughed. "They'll love you, Flynn."

"They will?" Flynn couldn't stop frowning. The butterflies in his chest were not listening to the flashing sign that this was all an act.

Jack leaned toward him, stirring the air with his scent. "No doubt about it."

Mom sighed. "Well, we'll miss you at bowling, but we'll be thinking about you."

Becky cleared her throat and cast him a funny look. "We'll be thinking about you, all right."



**Becky: What the hell is going on?**

**Becky: I thought you said he was straight?**

**Becky: I knew he wasn't! Knew he crushed on you back at school.**

**Becky: How did you figure it all out?**

**Becky: I mean, finally, Christ. But . . . how?**

**Flynn: You've got it all wrong.**



**Becky: ?**

**Flynn: Focus on Mom and Dad. I'll tell you next week.**



JACKED UP COFFEE WAS OPEN OVER THE EASTER WEEKEND, AND Jack and his brother were working hard to keep up. Flynn didn't want to add another cappuccino—that wouldn't bring Jack money—to his workload, so he resigned himself to an instant coffee in Jack's kitchen.

He'd let himself in to start prepping food for dinner tonight with Jack's parents.

Jack had been evasive about his reasons for inviting Flynn, merely saying the idea popped into his mind. That didn't make sense, since Jack had promised there'd be a catch, which meant he had to have known what he was asking.

At that level of inquisition, Jack had studied him long and hard, and abruptly turned away. He needed help prepping dinner since he had a long shift, he'd said, and this way his darling mom wouldn't stay so long. He loved her, but she didn't know when to end the night, and Jack was exhausted.

Flynn surveyed the vegetables and scanned the instructions Jack had left behind. Yep, better get started.



MR. AND MRS. ASHFORD GREETED THEIR SONS AT JACK'S DOOR with wide-open arms. Jack and Andy embraced them, laughing, and Flynn admired the easy display of familial affection from his position at the entrance to the dining room.

"Come into the dining room. Dinner's mostly set. Flynn's hiding around there too. Remember what I said on the phone."

“We’ll be on our best behavior,” Mr. Ashford said.

Mrs. Ashford had short-cropped hair dyed red and a warm, funky countenance, and she was beelining toward him.

“Oh,” Mrs. Ashford gushed. She pinched his cheek fondly. “Flynn, lovely to see you again.” She engulfed him into a perfumed hug. “I was so sad when you stopped visiting. My poor boy cried over you for weeks.”

“Mom!” Jack said sharply.

Mom made an *oops* expression and grinned. “Anyway, it looks like that’s behind you now.”

Flynn felt a strange prickliness blanket him. Jack had cried for him? Beloved by his jock teammates, always in control, star of the football field, Jack?

For weeks?

None of Flynn’s memories accommodated this new puzzle piece, and he stared at Jack, who caught his gaze and held it quietly.

A sharp breath lanced through Flynn. His voice came out steadier than he felt. “We’ll try to avoid anything that leads to pain in the future.”

“Good to hear it, son,” Mr. Ashford said with a pat on his shoulder. He passed into the dining room, Andy right on his heels, winking at Flynn.

The long table was laid with freshly baked bread and cheeses, olives, sundried tomatoes, hummus, tapenades. Mrs. Ashford happily filled their wine glasses.

Jack ambled in last, pausing with Flynn in the doorway. His smile had a new quality to it—part nerves, part overwhelming joy. It hit Flynn like a shock to the chest; his heart thumped wildly, and thoughts that he shouldn’t be thinking seeped into his mind.

Imagine if this were more than an excuse to have an early night? Imagine if Jack were showing him off to his parents?

Jack might be as nervous as he was, and they’d fumble

through the night together. It wouldn't be the first time Flynn had met a boyfriend's parents, but it would be the most nerve-wrecking. They'd known him as a sixteen-year-old, briefly waving them hello before hoofing up their staircase to squirrel himself in Jack's bedroom.

Flynn smiled and rubbed Jack's bicep. "Shall we join your family?" he whispered.

"Right. Absolutely."



"MUST BE HANDY LIVING JUST OVER THE ROAD," MR. ASHFORD said over the last mouthfuls of coffee, after they'd eaten a third course and dessert.

To say they were all exploding at the seams was an understatement. The coffee was delicious, though. Jack had ducked into the café to make it, and Flynn had melted at the first touch over his tongue. Then melted more when Jack had whispered in his ear, "I missed making you your regular today."

Flynn smiled over at Mr. Ashford. "It is a wonderful location. I love living so close to the store. Makes mornings bearable."

He'd miss it if he had to move, which was becoming more likely every time he crunched the numbers.

His face must have fallen, because Jack leaned toward him, speaking under his tongue, "I had inspiration on this subject today. Remind me tomorrow."

Another pleasant hour passed, full of amusing, semi-embarrassing kid-Jack stories—mostly from Andy, who loved turning Jack pink—and then they were once again hugging, and parting.

Jack closed the door behind them and leaned against it, breathing out deeply. "That went perfectly." Brown eyes smiled at him. "Thank you for all the cooking."

"You did all the difficult parts." Flynn scored a hand through his hair. He and Mr. Ashford had washed the dishes together. Nothing left to be done. No excuse to stay longer. "I guess I should head."

He stepped toward his shoes and Jack pushed off the door. "Or . . ."

"Or?"

"I know it's late, but we could do another episode?"



HYPERAWARE OF HIS OWN BREATHING, FLYNN COULD BARELY concentrate. Two inches separated him from Jack and it might as well have been none. Flynn felt his radiating warmth, every shift of the cushion when Jack moved. Laughter stirred the tips of his hair.

An ache in his belly grew as the minutes ticked by.

This was the last episode. Their nightly show was ending, along with the bouquets. And Jack was moving forward with Cynthia. Would she occupy his evenings soon? Would they end up greeting each other as he pathetically came in for his daily coffee?

"Flynn?" Jack murmured with gentle concern and reassurance. "There'll be a second season."

He lurched to his feet.

Jack scrolled through the Netflix offerings. "There's this one."

Flynn watched the trailer, not sure he could trust what he thought was happening.

"It has six seasons."

Jack wouldn't suggest it if he didn't intend to follow through. "Six?" That was a lot of episodes. A lot of cozy nights tucked up—"Let's do it."

"Wait. There are other ones you might like better."

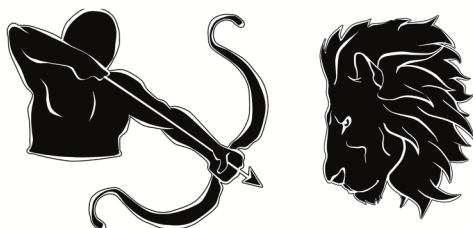
“Six seasons is great.”

Jack rested the remote on his thigh. It jumped as he jiggled his leg. “This can be our groove, Flynn. We don’t have to stop—and we can decide on something we both enjoy.”

A wave of heat washed over him. He’d been far too obvious. Embarrassment was there but relief was stronger. “Okay.” He pointed to the screen. “Show me that trailer . . .”

## Chapter Six

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Flynn barely slept. He tossed and turned and told himself to ignore the million butterflies lashing about in his chest.

He couldn't. There were too many moments between him and Jack that Flynn couldn't explain. He still felt the press of Jack's arm against his neck where he'd sunk back on the couch and accidentally touched.

His breath had suspended and Jack hadn't pulled away.

Neither had Flynn.

He opened his store ten minutes late, much to the disapproval of a harried customer who needed to get to work. When they left, he began his daily chores distractedly.

Now he was staring into space, flowers hazy around him. He closed his eyes and tried to center himself through the delicate perfumes of his store.

The bell dinged and refreshing spring air gusted inside, along with the subtle scent of coffee and confidence.

His eyes shot open to Jack, tousled and tired despite the fresh T-shirt and jeans. His booted step hit the floor with purpose, not stopping until he stood before him. "Morning, Flynn."

"I noticed your light on most of the night."

"I noticed yours."

"Couldn't sleep much."

"Neither could I." Jack turned toward the array of flowers. "I need a bouquet."

"I thought you were moving on from love horoscopes?"

"We are, I hope."

"Why the bouquet?"

"I'd prefer to wrap this part of our relationship up nicely. One last one."

Flynn's stomach twisted, undecided which emotion to settle on.

He took his time making the bouquet, elongating Jack's visit. He poised his pen to the card and swallowed. "What do you want it to say?"

Jack spoke softly, deliberately, and Flynn felt each word skip through his veins like maybe, just maybe they were meant for him.

"Leo, your man has enjoyed every second of your company. He loves how much you notice the little things about

him. He notices the little details about you, too. Always has. If you open yourself up to it, a bright future awaits the both of you.

His fingers shook as he dealt with the till, and Jack leaned in and told him to keep the change.

He was halfway out the door when Flynn found his voice. “Wait. I think . . . I think Cynthia would want you to have one more too.”

He turned around. “If she’s not paying for it—”

“She’s bought so many. It’s on me.”

Jack smiled. Big, wonderful—like something he’d wished for was coming true. He winked.



THAT WINK FILLED HIM WITH LIGHT AND KEPT HIM RESTLESS.

Flynn kept having to start over; he couldn’t concentrate. That cheeky, sexy wink. Jack had stood, framed by the door, spring breeze gusting through his short hair.

He scrubbed his face and cursed at the violent emotions being excavated.

None of his usual excuses worked to bury them again, and he didn’t want to.

He played over every meeting with Jack, reminisced about the months before that, the games of gaze-tag from their balconies.

He upturned his face and thought of Cynthia.

God, how would his business survive this colossal mess-up?

Revealing his secret would mean giving up his biggest client, hurting his business even more. Hiding it would eat at him every day until he was nothing.

On a burst of adrenaline, he called Cynthia.

She picked up on the third ring, and he blurted, “I can’t. I



can't do it. I can't hold this in. I'll pay you back for all the flowers. I'm so sorry."

"What are you sorry for?" she asked, not nearly as startled as he'd expected.

"You wanted me to give Jack love notes from you. Trivial romancey things. I couldn't do it. Every word I wrote was a story. It was our story, Jack's and mine." He drew in a panicky breath. "I hated having to see him at the beginning, but maybe . . . maybe not even then. When these bouquets became a thing . . . God, I looked forward to it every morning. You were paying for the flowers, but the notes were mine. I wanted so badly for him not to fall for you. But I needed those bouquet exchanges as much as I wanted them to stop. I can't . . . You liked him, and I had to go fall—I'm sorry. I've ruined your trust in our relationship."

"Flynn—"

"I was mean-spirited, thinking of you with him. I accept the consequences. I'll still arrange the flowers you need for next week's event. Pretty Pollen is a wonderful florist."

"Flynn—"

"I'm sure you'll get good deals with them in the future."

"Flynn. Shush for a minute."

Flynn tensed, awaiting her response with a churning gut. Surrounded by petunias, he stared at Jacked Up Coffee, catching glimpses of Jack through the windows.

Cynthia sighed. "I'm not an idiot. I suspected you liked him after I read a couple of your horoscopes. I wasn't sure, so I had you send more to figure out the mystery myself."

"You knew I was falling for him?"

"The way you paled when I bought him that shirt sealed all my suspicions. By then Jack had already made it clear he wasn't interested in me."

"He had?"

"Yes. I told you, we agreed to move on."

“From each other.” Not on to the next level . . .

“He gave me hints he wasn’t interested in me from the start, to be honest. But he always smiled at the flowers and he could never bring himself to ask me to stop sending them.”

Gravity plunged through him.

“Later, he mentioned there was someone, but he still couldn’t tell me to stop. I knew then, of course. In retrospect, I knew that he was dating someone else—”

“Don’t,” Flynn whispered. Those words weren’t hers to guess at.

“I hid things from you, too, Flynn. I’m happy to overlook your errors in judgement if you overlook mine.”

Flynn would have sagged against the wall if there was any free space. Instead, he croakily ended his call and picked his way through the store, plucking gerberas and roses and every flower he’d ever given Jack.



FLYNN’S HEART RACED LIKE THE FIRST TIME HE’D ENTERED Jacked Up Coffee. Only this time the swirling feelings in his gut had a name—and it wasn’t hate. Nor ambivalence.

He held the flowers at his side, breathing in the wonderful promise of coffee by the man who was smiling at him.

Shivers raced from his scalp to his toes.

“Perfect timing. This one will be for you.” Jack drew something onto a cappuccino. Flynn took it and bit his lip. A gerbera was carefully crafted in the foamy top.

Jack wiped his hands on his apron and leaned against the counter. “So listen, about that idea I had for Floral Point.” He grabbed a coffee-stained notepad from under the counter, removed the pen attached to the top, and flipped the pages. “Here it is.” He positioned it for Flynn to look at. “Basically,

I'm in the process of expanding. Two more coffeehouses by the end of the year, and I'll be branching into catering."

Flynn scanned the notes. "You want to offer packages with catering and floral arrangements?"

"They'd be cheaper than purchasing separately, and people like the simplicity of not having to work with different companies for their big day."

"This is . . . thinking outside the box. I was also planning to pitch you an idea."

Jack looked intrigued, delighted. "Pitch."

"I noticed you pull apart my—Cynthia's—bouquets to decorate your tables. It looks good. The patrons seem to like it." Flynn swallowed. "I could get you a deal—"

"Sold. You'll supply for all three coffeehouses." He grinned playfully. "Now give me my bouquet."

Flynn clutched it extra hard. Nodded. "I—"

The door whipped open behind him, sending in a gust of air and a "whoops" followed by the sound of wood smacking against the wall.

Dash. Again with a lopsided grin and tumbling apologies.

Jack groaned under his breath, but it was nothing to the sound Andy made walking out of the kitchens carrying smashed avocado toasts with poached eggs. "The hell are you doing here?" Andy said.

Dash turned toward Andy slowly. He paled and glanced at Jack. "I'm here to start work."

"Jack!" Andy's dark eyes landed insistently on his brother. "Can I have a word?"

"Jesus," Jack said under his breath. "Be back in a sec, Flynn."

Andy dragged Jack into the kitchens. Dash swore under his breath and slumped against the counter.

Flynn had almost screwed the courage to pass the bouquet

over, and now the wait was making him nervous. Was his horoscope asking too much?

He reread the note. It was how he felt; it was what he wanted. But it was missing—

He grabbed the pen Jack had left behind. A brighter blue next to his dark navy scrawl.

That. Yes.

He let out a long breath as Jack returned with tight-faced Andy.

He winked at Flynn and spoke to Dash, handing him a key on a long rod. “Wash your hands and we’ll get started. Staff bathroom is at the end of the patrons’.”

Dash skittered off.

“What was that about?” Flynn asked.

Jack gestured at the flowers, smiling. “I’m more interested in my horoscope.”

The café bustled around them. Sun settled over tables and on the backs of his calves in elongated blocks. A golden quality to the air highlighted the copper in Jack’s hair, deepened the comma around his mouth.

He reached over, bringing their noses within a whisper of each other, and eased the bouquet out of Flynn’s hands. He studied the flowers first, each one shifting his expression.

His fingers sought the card, and Flynn’s chest was in his throat.

*“Sagittarius, it’s time to be blatantly honest about your feelings with your secret crush. And time to expect it in return.”*

Jack’s gaze sharpened on him.

“Andy,” he said without breaking eye contact. “Show Dash how to use the coffee machine. I’m on an early lunch break.”

Whatever Andy said was lost on Flynn. His heart beat too loudly in his ears, and then he was reduced to the feeling

of Jack sliding a hand into his and leading him to his apartment.



SHAKILY, FLYNN TOED OUT OF HIS SHOES AT THE DOOR. JACK unlaced his boots and did the same. The air around them was loaded with questions. Jack found a vase and tended to the flowers.

Flynn paced the length of the living room. He could see so clearly into his apartment; he liked the thought Jack had . . . needed the view, too.

Jack moved into the room behind him.

“Where are you sending Leo’s flowers?” They weren’t for Cynthia. That much he’d figured out.

*They were for me.*

Air stirred close to his side and Jack stopped beside him. “Andy,” he said simply, openly. “He knows how I feel about you.”

“How you feel about me.”

“I think you know, too.”

Flynn paused. He wanted to say no. Wanted to hear Jack say it. But it was true, Flynn felt the answer in his bones, and if he hadn’t, Jack’s face would have said everything. Flynn stared across at his balcony. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re bisexual?”

“Honestly, I didn’t want to scare you off. We had a past to work through. We needed to get to this point organically.”

“What point is that?”

Jack’s voice dropped lower. “This, right now.”

“When did this happen for you?”

“The first time, at school.”

Flynn frowned. “I was a bet with your friends.”

“Only to begin with. You were the most hopeless pick they could imagine for a jock, they wanted to see if I could coach it

into you. But over the months, I got to know you, Flynn. I liked you. Very much. Even before the bet you'd always caught my eye. Something about you. The way you didn't care what anyone thought about you helping the caregivers with the garden during your lunch hour. The smiles you always bestowed on people, even people like me who you didn't really know. Your eyes twinkled, you'd always say hey. Nothing ever fazed you."

Flynn swallowed. "Except you."

"Except me. I was miserable after telling you the truth. I hated myself for making you believe we were truly friends when it was a lie. Except it wasn't all a lie, Flynn. I knew it then, but I understood it later. Those feelings I had with you, I had again. Lesser, but similar. I had them when I broke up with girlfriends. When I broke up with boyfriends." Jack let out a long breath. "I knew I'd messed up, that I had to learn and move on. I assumed those feelings were lost in the past."

The air between them was so thin.

"Then things changed," Jack continued. "I moved into the space across from your flower store. I caught glimpses of you every day. My favorite part?" Jack leaned closer, words brushing his ear. "When you started peeking back."

Flynn turned, facing him.

"For the last year you've been in my peripheral vision. A thought that lingered when the lights were out."

It was like Jack had opened his mind and plucked out his secret thoughts.

"Then you strode in with your roses and a scowl you couldn't hold." Jack smiled. "The thought became a question, and the questions became hopeful understanding, and that hopeful understanding has led us to this."

Flynn breathed in, the words cleansing every part of him like purest air. He recalled Jack asking for a ride to the grocery store, visiting the store every morning, the beautiful coffees he

made, the way he'd linked their fingers in his bedroom, clutched his hand . . . "Those feelings you had for me." His voice softened. "They were never lost."

"Dormant."

"Came back to life."

"Yes."

"We were never pretending in front of my parents."

"Or mine. Not really, not under it all."

"I was jealous of Cynthia."

Jack chuckled, and Flynn caught his twitching lips as he tried to temper it.

"You knew."

"I wanted to reassure you there was nothing between us, but I was afraid of pushing you into any realizations. Afraid you might resist them and dissolve this thing we had. I couldn't let it dissolve again, Flynn."

"You're right. It might have freaked me out. It's still freaking me out, to be honest."

"What are you afraid of?"

"That I'm dreaming it all. That you might turn around at any moment and say it was all another bet you've won. To make me fall in love with you again."

Jack wrapped his strong arms around Flynn, a cocoon of warmth, security. "There's no bet, Flynn. It's me returning every ounce of those feelings."

Flynn stayed locked in Jack's arms for a long minute, his nose and forehead pressed against soft cotton and hard muscle. God, he'd wished for this . . . forever. He sank against him, absorbing his strength, his warmth. Relishing the fond way Jack rubbed his back.

He slowly met the gaze of his dark eyes.

"What happens next?"

Jack touched his jaw. Fingers and the brush of cool rings skated along the curve to his chin. Their eyes met and Flynn's

breath suspended as Jack pressed their lips together. He pulled back, searching his eyes.

Flynn stared, and then his body was moving. He clasped a hand behind Jack's neck and lifted on his toes. His return kiss was not as soft. It was firm and wet, an exclamation to their declaration.

Flynn tasted coffee, passion, and decision.

Yes. *This* happened next.

They'd been building to this for years.

They moved with unsteady, overly excited steps toward the one room Flynn hadn't stepped into before.

Daylight bathed the room and Jack, a haloed beauty, stole all his attention.

Pulling his clothes off in front of him was easy. Desire had been burning so long that this fire felt inevitable. The intimacy, though . . . the closeness, their shared uneven breaths, the gentle scrape of fingers at his waist and thighs as Jack helped him out of his underwear . . . that made him light-headed.

He'd told Jack the maddeningly obvious truth that had been plain for Jack to see this entire time, and . . . he wanted to laugh.

Jack stripped himself until every inch of his skin, every strong line of his body, called for Flynn to join him.

Flynn stepped up to Jack and their breaths sharpened as they pressed close. Their kiss was slow, unhurried, a revelation in this moment. Them, naked, on the edge of exploring all the lines of each other's bodies.

Flynn was shorter and slimmer than Jack, but he was familiar with the steps of this dance. Knew how he liked it. He urged Jack toward the bed and Jack lowered himself onto it, hand grasping Flynn's waist, taking him along.

At every point they touched, a million nerve-endings surged on overdrive. Flynn shifted methodically and Jack's



large hands roamed his back, assisting with every thrust. They were garbled groans and fleeting questions.

“I like it both ways. All ways.”

“Guess Sagittarius and Leo are compatible.”

Jack laughed. He rolled them over and that delicious, hairy-chested, muscled canvas anchored itself on Flynn. He groaned. God, he was so big, everywhere. Heart most of all.

Jack rummaged for an awkward half minute in his bedside table, and then a lubed hand cuffed them both, pulled torturously at their aching lengths. Over and over—

Flynn moaned, soft lips brushing his ear, and Jack responded; fingers played at his ass, rubbing it nice and wet. Flynn wriggled into the intense touch, sighing when Jack sank a finger, deep.

They peered into each other's eyes, shared the vulnerability of the moment, exchanged lusty promises of what was to come.

Big fingers worked at his tiny hole, stretching him carefully. Jack's damp breath was heavy through his hair. Flynn felt fabulously engulfed in passion, reveling in Jack's need to feel Flynn around him.

Jack grunted, cock bumping up against entrance, begging to be let in.

Flynn helped him into the condom, angled his hips and clutched at the tight globes of ass.

Jack braced his weight, eyes blown the darkest brown, lips swollen. Sparks of pleasure shot through Flynn at every eager bump against him. Their gazes tangled and knotted as Jack pushed into him, and Flynn gasped.

Jack stooped and kissed him and Flynn kissed back, piercing his lips with his tongue.

Always able to read Flynn, Jack basked in the kiss before surging the rest of the way into him. He stroked Flynn's

pulsing cock and Flynn murmured how full he felt, how much he loved it.

Jack drew back a little and pushed in again. Pleasure rippled over his face.

“If I thought I couldn’t love being with you any more . . .”

Flynn laughed.

“You all right?”

Flynn nipped his shoulder. “More than all right. A dream coming true. Multiple.” He wrapped his legs around Jack, and clenched. “Show me how big and strong you are.”

Jack pulled out and filled him again. His ring spread and contracted, welcoming him in with every deep thrust.

The bed shook around them, the blankets grew damp under Flynn’s back, a glorious layer of sweat sheened Jack’s skin.

Flynn cried out for more and more, pleasure rolling in and mounting.

He wondered if everyone in the café below could hear them. He laughed, not caring, demanding more still.

Jack plunged into him with a relentless rhythm that made Flynn soar, those big balls banging against his ass.

“Fuck,” Flynn cursed. It was an expletive of pleasure; it was a demand.

Jack’s jaw clenched in raggedly handsome determination and Flynn’s cock was so hard between them that just a few more thrusts where Jack’s abs rubbed against his tip . . .

Flynn gasped, coming hot and hard between them, and Jack’s eyes rolled back in ecstasy as he thrust deep three more times and convulsed inside him with a grunt.

Pleasure tingled through his body, stretching for long, glorious seconds.

Jack dropped for a kiss, slipped out of him and rolled onto the bed, breathing hard as he tied the condom and placed it out of sight. “You’re fire in bed, Flynn.”

“Right back at you. Wow.” Jack’s flushed, lazily smiling face had Flynn grinning. “It’s a good thing you’re magic with caffeine.” Flynn slithered atop of Jack and kissed him. “I see in both Sagittarius and Leo’s futures we’ll be needing it.”

Jack’s laughter tickled, and warm arms embraced him tenderly. “When do you have to be back at Floral Point?”

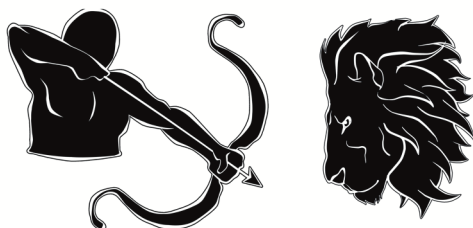
“When do you have to be back downstairs?”

They grinned, and their lips locked into another deep kiss.

## Chapter Seven

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~ ONE YEAR LATER ~



“Oh my God. Tell your brother to close his curtains.” Flynn finished watering the English ivy and the peace lily at the window. Jack closed the distance behind him on a wave of coffee.

“Hmm?”

Flynn laughed. “I don’t want to see him and—” An alarming thought punched into him. He spun around to Jack

peeling off his T-shirt. “You can see *everything* from here at night.”

Jack smirked as he unbuttoned his jeans. “And you always used to keep a light on.”

“My curtains were shut.”

“Not always. Never all the way.”

Flynn opened his mouth to protest Jack’s past perviness and stopped. “Yeah, neither were yours.”

Jack laughed and shut their curtains extra tight as Flynn undressed to his bed attire, which was nothing.

“You don’t regret subletting to Andy, I hope?”

“Well . . .” Flynn winked. “Kidding. It’s been fantastic having your family close. Alternating cooking dinners. I like it. Becky too, judging by how often she’s accidentally in the area.”

Jack smiled and pulled him close. Flynn melted against him and warm fingers touched the ring on his left hand and twisted it. “Family means everything. I’m glad you’ll be a part of it.”

Then, as they had for over a year, they sank into bed in a tangle of needy, loving limbs.



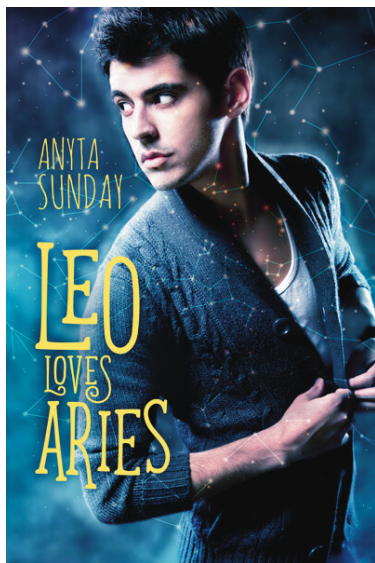
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***Signs of Love #1***



**LEO LOVES ARIES. IF ONLY LEO'S CLUELESS ASS COULD SEE IT.**

Theo Wallace—fun, lazy, **Leo**—needs a friendship that sticks. That thrives. That helps him leave past pains behind and look toward the Bright Future.

Mr. Jamie Cooper—level-headed, motivated, **Aries**—seems to be a possible and convenient match. *Real* convenient. Like written-in-the-stars, he's-his-newest-roommate convenient.

Things are fun.

Things are *better* than fun.

But what's with those long looks Jamie keeps giving Theo?

And what's with the quivery feelings in Theo's stomach?

**Clueless Leo will need a clever Aries to figure it out.**

. . .

*"LEO LOVES ARIES" IS A FLIRTY, SLOW BURN, ROOMMATES TO lovers MM romance with a heartwarming HEA. This New Adult, college, friends-to-lovers novel is the first book in the Signs of Love series.*

*THE BOOKS IN THE SIGNS OF LOVE SERIES ARE STANDALONE romances, and can be read in any order.*

**LEO LOVES ARIES** (*bi-awakening, friends to lovers, clueless as fuck*)  
**SCORPIO HATES VIRGO** (*boy next door, fake-enemies to lovers, mistaken identity*)

**GEMINI KEEPS CAPRICORN** (*fake fiancés, friends to lovers, off-limits lover*)

**PISCES HOOKS TAURUS** (*marriage of convenience, opposites attract, age-gap*)

**CANCER SHIPS AQUARIUS** (*manny, widower, opposites attract*)

## Leo Loves Aries - Chapter 1

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Theo Wallace stood in front of the mailbox, pinching a gold-edged card, his throat constricting with a rush of betrayal. Rain drummed over the card, making the ink of Samantha's name weep.

A year ago last January, he and Sam were making snow angels right here in front of his two-story Victorian rental. His sister Leone and her boyfriend Derek had joined them. They had laughed so hard he'd felt it in his gut for the rest of the day.

Out of nowhere, Sam slammed him with the truth. She would prefer to spend her life with someone else. Someone easier to live with. *Derek*.

Theo swallowed and closed his eyes on the memory, focusing on the rain slithering down the gaps of his jacket hood rather than the emptiness he felt. A right sad sack he was. Fuck.

He moved to the trashcan at the curb, lifted the freezing, wet lid, and then slammed it down again.

The card still lay clutched in his hand.



He couldn't bring himself to toss that damn embossed card away. Because...because... it was addressed to him *and* Leone.

Yeah. That was it.

He rolled his shoulders and tucked the card with the other two minor annoyances that had arrived with the mail. He splashed up the white stone path to the front door and let himself in.

"Leone?" he called over earsplitting indie electropop.

He toed off his shoes and slid them into the shoe rack, making sure to tuck the laces away. "You're gonna want to hear this." He hung his wet jacket.

"I'm in the living room."

Theo rounded into the main room of their house. The previous tenants had knocked down a few walls, making a great room and open plan kitchen.

He found his sister in a pair of yoga pants and tank top, using one of the heavy wooden pillars that studded the space to stretch out her calves. She picked up her phone from the base of the pillar and spoke. The music pumping from the sound system faded.

Cola-brown hair swung with her ponytail as she turned in his direction and sniffed. "You smell like rain, bro."

"I'm drenched. You didn't hear it pounding out there?"

"Thought it got a bit darker," she said. "But I wasn't sure."

Dragging her hand over their navy-blue couch, she moved toward the kitchen.

It didn't look like she had to count every step. Didn't look like she had difficulty pulling a black mug from the white cabinets and filling it with water.

Didn't look like she was legally blind.

Water guzzled, Leone plunked herself onto the armchair. "What am I gonna want to hear?"

Theo pulled out the mail from under his arm and set it on

the coffee table. He flung himself onto the couch, tipped his head against the arm, and pinched his nose. "It came."

"It came?" Confusion edged Leone's voice, and then she breathed in sharply. "It came." Taut silence followed, then, "When is it?"

"It's the square card on the end closest to you. I was tempted to throw it out."

But he obviously had masochist tendencies, because some part of him wanted to suffer its contents.

Leone asked, "Are you doing the honors? Or do you want me to stick it under my magnifier?"

Theo rolled onto his side and plucked the offending card from the table.

Scrawled in large, now bleeding cursive at the top of a soft gold-and-cream card were the stomach-clenching words:

SAVE THE DATE.

SAMANTHA ROYCE & DEREK JOHNSON.

"Middle of May." His voice cracked and his throat felt like he had swallowed fire.

Leone made a choking sound. Her light-green eyes filmed over with tears.

Theo tossed the card onto the coffee table and slid onto the armchair next to her. Her head cradled against his shoulder as he stroked a stray lock behind her ear. "Fuck 'em, right?"

"Not anymore," she said.

Theo let out a raw laugh. "I guess you're right."

Derek had been Leone's boyfriend for three years and Samantha—Sam, Sammy—had been Theo's girlfriend for two.

A week after the snow angels, they'd discovered the two had fallen out of love with them and in love with each other.

He thought he'd gotten over the pain.

Seeing them together last Halloween, a twinkly rock bedazzling her ring finger, was hard enough.

Now this invitation...

His stomach knotted.

"I wish I could hate them," Leone said.

"Me too."

But Theo couldn't. Sammy and Derek hadn't snuck around or cheated on them. Bit by bit over all the weeknights, weekends, and holidays Theo and Leone had them over, they'd become close. While Theo had focused on other things—programming, marathon training, rewriting papers—and Leone on her thesis proposal, Sam and Derek had fallen in love.

They'd both cried when they confessed they had feelings for each other.

Over and over they apologized.

Leone had been sitting on the armchair and Theo had been stretched out on the couch flipping yoghurt raisins into his mouth like he didn't care. But he did.

He hadn't touched a yoghurt-covered raisin since.

Nor had he found another girlfriend.

Flings, yes—he liked sex—but there had been no one he trusted enough to call his girlfriend. No one he thought would care for his flaws.

His sister hadn't re-entered the dating pool, either.

"What do you say about ordering in tonight?" Theo suggested. "We could get that sun-died tomato and chicken calzone you like, crank up some sappy music, and bitch until morning?"

Leone chuckled. "Sun-dried, Theo."

He knew that. Had known since the tender age of *last fucking year*. He'd bought a jar and laughed at the misspelled label.

"Whatever." He kissed her forehead, climbed back onto the

couch, and picked up the envelope from their mom. “The sun dried all those tomatoes dead. Sun-died made a lot of fucking sense.”

Leone snickered. “Are you reading the rest of the mail?”

“Yep. Kick back and get ready to scoff. Mom sent us our yearly horoscope.” Horoscope, singular, because he and Leone were twins.

Theo unfolded the page their mom had torn from her favorite astrology magazine and read it aloud. “It’s a new year, Leo. Resolve to make big changes in your life and use your pride and stubbornness to see them through.”

Theo knew horoscopes were made-up crap meant to make you feel like life had a bigger purpose. Nevertheless, his neck prickled.

Easy to see how the horoscope might apply to him. Him and Leone both.

He cleared his throat and continued reading. “A new person will enter your life early in the year; look past any moments of frustration they might bring and laugh, Leo—this could be the start of a thriving friendship.”

“A roommate, perhaps?” Leone said, tucking a leg under her. “Our first interview is Monday morning before classes, by the way.”

“Before classes? I’m a hot mess in the mornings.”

“Ain’t that true,” Leone said. “Stop giving me that face.”

“How do you know what face I’m giving you?”

“I wasn’t blind the first fifteen years. I *know* you.” She grinned and waved a hand. “Go on, go on.”

“If you feel overwhelmed during the early spring, take a deep breath and let someone close to you be the rock you lean on. Friendships may evolve in later spring, and you may receive news that will shock you—but fret not, this could be the news you need to hear! The heart and the head may not be in sync

the first half of this year, Leo, and there's potential to overlook the obvious. Listen hard to your inner voice and if confused, talk it through with a loved one. Fear not rejection and heart-break, Leo. Hold your head up high, be your glowing, fiery self, and the right people will gravitate to you; maybe even a soul mate among them."

At Leone's request, he reread the last paragraph.

She hummed thoughtfully, then leaned forward to the coffee table and felt for the save-the date card.

Theo frowned as his sister carefully made her way to the fridge and stuck the card to it. "What are you doing?"

"I think, this time, our horoscope might be right."

A hollow laugh. "There was no warning for how screwed up our love lives turned out last year. Don't get your hopes up." *Tsk.* "Soul mate!"

"That's not the part I care about." She rolled her shoulders and lifted her chin. "We need to fear not rejection and heart-break. We need to move on."

The edge of the horoscope crinkled in Theo's grip. "Go to their wedding? Dance and laugh and not care that they left us?"

"That's right," Leone said. "We'll take our own dates. It'll be great."

Theo looked from the save-the-date card to the bottle of Zinfandel on top of the fridge. "I need a drink."



"LET'S MOVE PAST THIS," THEO SAID.

At the bottom of the Zinfandel bottle—and after two calzones and five mopey love songs— Theo fished for his phone to change the music.

Leone laughed. "Let's."

But when he skipped the slow song, Leone used her phone to turn the music off. "Let's move past *them*."

"Isn't that what we are doing?" he said.

"No, but we will. We are going to find each other dates for the wedding."

"Why don't we find our own dates?"

Leone chuckled darkly. "Because we suck. Otherwise we wouldn't be here, brother and sister, drowning our sorrows on a Friday night."

She had a point.

Theo grabbed his laptop and logged onto Facebook.

Leone hiccupped, legs hanging over one arm of her armchair, shoulders resting on the other. "Who do you know that might be a match for me?"

Theo had hundreds of "friends," people he'd met once or twice in passing. He made friends easily. Keeping them seemed to be the hard part.

He scrolled through the list of guys he knew-knew and winced when the total number came to three. Alex, Ben, and Kyle.

That was sobering.

"So? Anyone?"

Theo bit his lip. "I'm still looking."

He went back to Ben's wall and stared at the photos of the two couples. All smiles and flushed cheeks, Ben and Kyle flanked Sammy and Derek in front of snow-capped trees. The post revealed that they had gone for a weekend trip to Lake Erie.

Theo eyed the empty wine bottle on the coffee table, then remembered the freezer in the kitchen might hold some vodka.

"What do you want in a guy anyway?" Theo asked.

Ben's pictures drew him back.

To think, just a year ago, Theo would have been the one in this photo gazing at Sam.

“Honesty? Understanding,” Leone said. “I want someone who doesn’t make me *feel* blind. I want fun and I want to be swept off my feet.”

The worst thing about breaking up was realizing his friends were in fact her friends.

“Strength, too,” Leone continued. “Physical and mental.”

Theo hummed his nod. “Strength, honesty, understanding. Got it.”

He and Ben used to shoot the shit all the time. Hang out at bars. Take turns kicking ass at gaming.

“Also compassion. And blind loyalty,” Leone laughed. “See what I did there?”

“You word-playing mastermind, you.”

She felt for a cushion and whipped it in his direction. Theo batted it away.

“There are too many guys here to choose from,” he lied. “I’ll need time to narrow it down.”

“We have until May.”

He hopped to Alex’s profile, the guy in his marketing course who Theo was doing web work for. The first picture to pop out at him was taken five minutes ago. Alex was dancing at a club with his girlfriend.

So. Yeah.

No match there, either.

The thought of telling Leone he had no matches made heat claw up his neck.

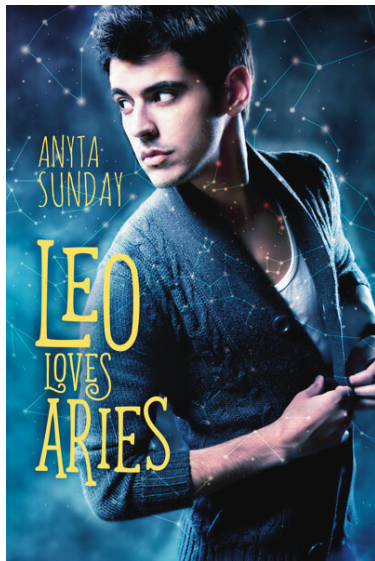
Things in the friends department fucking sucked but that was going to change. Not because his horoscope said it would, but because he was going to make it change.

Finding Leone the perfect date just turned personal.

. . .

ANYTA SUNDAY

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