

One

THE NIGHT I became the youngest person—and the only female ever—to win the Austin Fire Department’s Valor Award, I got propositioned by my partner.

Propositioned.

At the ceremony. In the ballroom. During dinner.

By my partner.

There we all were, the entire B-shift from Station Eleven, in our dress uniforms, using salad forks—and there I was, in my crisscross tie, getting more and more nervous at the prospect of having to walk up on that stage in front of all those people under all those lights. The winter before, a busload of schoolchildren had slid off an icy road into a ravine, and I had climbed inside to push the kids out through a window, one by one, as the water rose. That’s why we were here. The newspapers were calling me the School Bus Angel.

And Hernandez, of all people, chose this moment to hit on me.

Hernandez, my partner of three years. Hernandez, who I’d never once thought of that way. Hernandez, who was so perfectly, mechanically handsome that he didn’t even register as handsome anymore.

He was like a Latino firefighting Ken doll—so bizarrely perfect, he wasn't even real. He lifted weights, and flossed, and preened, and he used his washboard stomach and perfectly aligned white teeth to snare more unsuspecting ladies than I could count. He wasn't just in our department's calendar—he was on the cover. Picture-perfect Hernandez, the last guy on earth I would ever think of as anything other than a health-food-eating, CrossFit-training ladies' man, leaned over close to my ear, right there at the banquet table, and asked me to spend the night with him.

"Maybe tonight's the night," he said.

I kept chewing. I honestly didn't see it coming. "Tonight's the night for what?"

He looked at me like, *Duh*. "To finally do something about all that sexual tension."

I looked around to see if the other guys had heard him.

He had to be joking.

Somebody had to be making a video, or taking a photo, or poised to jump out and start laughing. There was no way this was anything but an epic firehouse *Candid Camera* prank. I surveyed the rest of the crew. Pranksters all.

But everybody was just sawing away at their chicken.

I decided to call Hernandez's bluff. "Okay," I said. "Great idea."

He lifted his eyebrows and looked delighted. "Really?"

I gave him a look like, *Come on*. "No. Not really."

"I'm serious," he said, leaning closer.

"You're not."

He gave me a look like, *And who are you to judge?*

I gave one back like, *You know exactly who I am*. Then I said, "You're never serious about anything. Especially women."

"But you're not a woman. You're a firefighter."

"Yet another reason I'd never go home with you."

"I think you want to."

I shook my head. "Nope."

"Deep down."

“Nope.”

“I could dare you,” Hernandez said.

I never backed down from a dare. But I shook my head, like, *Not even that, buddy*. “I don’t date firefighters. And neither do you.”

“This would hardly be a date.”

I tilted my head. “You’re like my brother, dude.”

“I can work with that.”

I flared my nostrils. “Gross.”

“Seriously. Why not?”

I squinted at him. Was he serious? Could he possibly be serious? I glanced up at the stage. In a few minutes they were going to start the awards ceremony. This was a big night for me. Huge. The biggest night of my career. Did we really have to do this now?

“We work together, man,” I said. I shouldn’t have even had to say it. Firefighters don’t date other firefighters. It’s not just against the rules, it’s against the culture.

He didn’t care. “I’d never tell.”

“That doesn’t change anything.”

He gave me a serious, evaluating look. “You need to let yourself have some fun.”

I shook my head. “You’re not my kind of fun.”

He leaned in a little closer. “You never date anybody. How is that possible? It’s such a waste of a good woman. Stop holding back.”

“I’m not holding back,” I said, like we were discussing the weather. “I’m just not interested.”

He glanced down at himself, approvingly, and then met my eyes. “You’re interested.”

I shook my head.

“You’ve thought about it,” he said.

“Pretty sure I haven’t.”

He lowered his voice. “You’re thinking about it now, though, aren’t you?”

“Not in a good way.”

“You need to stop living like a nun,” he said. “What if I’m the cure for all your loneliness?”

That got my attention. I stabbed a carrot in my salad. “I’m not lonely.”

He frowned like I was certifiably insane. “Guess what? You’re the loneliest person I know.”

To be honest, that smarted a little. I pointed at him with my fork. “I am *self-sufficient*,” I corrected. “I am independent. I am in charge of my own life.”

“You are also in need of some . . .” He gave a meaningful pause. “Company.”

I refused to take his meaning. “I don’t have time for company,” I said. I had my shift at the station, my second job as a self-defense instructor, ten hours a week of volunteering with Big Sisters, a marathon to train for, and weekends helping my dad build an addition to his house. I barely had time for sleep, much less “company.”

“Whose fault is that?” Hernandez asked.

Was that a real question? “‘Company’ is not a priority for me. I’m not romantic.”

“This is not about romance. It’s about warmth. Connection. Human closeness.”

“Sounds like romance to me,” I said.

“Call it what you want. You need some.”

What was happening? This was *Hernandez*. There was no way he could be serious. And yet his face looked so earnest. I kept scanning for some tell—maybe a little side smile, or a spark of mischief in his eyes—but all I could find was that intense, unwavering, weirdly earnest gaze.

I hesitated. “You *are* kidding, right?”

He had to be kidding.

It was beyond off-putting for this person I’d been in mutual disinterest with for so long to suddenly, out of nowhere, claim to be interested. It was as if we’d agreed to play checkers and he suddenly announced it had been chess all along.

He lifted his hand to the edge of the table and absentmindedly

touched his finger to my unused knife handle. “What if you’re wrong about your entire life?” he asked then, lowering his voice almost to a whisper. “What if I’m exactly what you’ve needed all this time? Don’t you want to find out? Won’t you always wonder if you don’t?”

I repeat: This was *Hernandez*.

This was the guy whose favorite joke was to try to throw me on the couch and fart on me. There was not one moment that had ever passed between us that could be classified as flirty or suggestive—or even *personal*. But now he had me locked in this crazy conversation. His intensity with women was a famous hypnotic force. I’d seen him use it on countless targets with near-perfect success. He’d just never tried it on me.

I should have been immune. But I was a little off balance, in this fancy hotel, anticipating walking up on that stage. It’s a hell of a thing to be recognized, to be *honored*, and it was clearly stirring my emotions in unexpected ways. And truthfully, Hernandez wasn’t a hundred percent wrong about me. Despite everything I knew about him, and life, and fire-fighters, and myself, I confess: Something about his whole shtick right now wasn’t entirely *not* working.

I guess you can’t keep your guard up all the time.

Maybe I was lonelier than I’d realized. Maybe I did need something more. Maybe nothing in my life was quite what I thought.

The problem was, he’d just said things that were surprisingly true. Which seemed unfair—to know me so well and then use it against me. Trapped in this strange moment, I was suddenly blinking at my entire life through a different lens. Was he right?

Maybe I didn’t even want to play checkers.

It was the strangest moment of all the time I’d spent with him. Stranger than the disco party, and stranger than the pie-eating contest, and stranger even than the karaoke night that went off the rails.

Hernandez. Of all people.

We both watched his finger on the knife handle. He pushed it closer to me. “You’re tempted.”

I wasn’t. Or maybe I was. Just a microscopic fraction. I thought about

my sad, spartan apartment and its neat little row of herbs on the kitchen windowsill. I thought about my bed, always made with military precision, hospital corners and all, and how I'd never once had anyone in it besides me in all the time I'd lived there. I thought about how quiet it would be when I got back, just the tick-tick of the kitchen clock.

I knew exactly what going home to that apartment tonight would look like, and feel like—the slight tightness I always felt on my face after I'd washed it with soap, the whiff of my laundry detergent as I slid my pajama top over my head, the sound of the sheets as I pulled them back and slid between them and tucked them carefully under my arms. The same bedtime routine, over and over, endlessly—as safe and repetitive and dull as always. I could play it out to the minute in my head.

I could even tell you what I'd think about as I fell asleep. The same thing I always did: I'd imagine making chocolate chip cookies, each step in soothing detail, from mixing in the butter to adding the vanilla, from cracking in the eggs to stirring in the chips. I'd watch the mixer blades spin, and scrape the sides of the bowl with a rubber spatula, and scoop the dough with little half-sphere tablespoons, dropping them one-by-soothing-one onto the cookie tray in neat, perfectly spaced rows.

I hadn't baked cookies in years. But I thought about doing it every single night.

What would it feel like to shake up that routine?

You're the loneliest person I know, Hernandez had said.

Suddenly, I knew that was true.

But that wasn't a reason for me to sleep with him. Sex was hardly a cure for loneliness. More likely the opposite.

Hernandez. It was like if your high school chemistry partner suddenly propositioned you. Or your dry cleaner. Or your doctor.

I was not, absolutely not, going to sleep with Hernandez. That would definitely never happen.

Probably.

Without even realizing it, I held my breath.

And then, off to the side, three seats over, across the table, I heard a familiar, distinctive, telltale sound: the muffled, closed-mouth snort

that our engine operator, Big Tom, always made whenever anybody got pranked.

My eyes snapped toward it.

There was Big Tom, hand clamped over his mouth and nose, hunching down into a guffaw that he couldn't contain any longer.

I'd seen him do that a hundred times. He was the one who always broke.

"Oh, my God," I said, turning away.

I scanned the rest of the table. The guys from our shift were all there to cheer for me on my big night. They'd been perfect gentlemen all night long, chewing with their mouths closed and everything. But once Big Tom broke, they all broke. In one scan, I saw it on every single face: glee. Triumphant, practical-joke-infused glee.

They'd gotten me.

I turned back to Hernandez and punched him on the shoulder. Hard. "Seriously?"

They'd never gotten me before. And not for lack of trying.

What can I say? Nobody's perfect.

Once the guys' restraint collapsed, it collapsed hard. They all started pointing. And raising their arms in victory. And cackling so hard they made the table shake. Reichman, Nolan, Trey, Big Tom, and especially Hernandez—now hooting with delight, leaning back for air, turning red.

I let them have a minute. They'd earned it.

Then I started laughing, too—at the relief of it—as the world shifted back into a recognizable pattern and became familiar again. I took a deep breath of comprehension: Hernandez had not propositioned me. He had *pranked* me.

Only a prank. Thank God.

When Hernandez finally settled enough to talk, he pointed at me. "You totally bought it."

I punched him in the shoulder. "You freaked me out, dude! Tonight, of all nights."

"We thought you could use a distraction," Hernandez said. Then he pointed at Big Tom. "You torpedoed me, man! She was about to say yes."

“I was not,” I said.

“You were,” Hernandez said. “If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s getting girls to say yes—”

“I’m not a girl. I’m a firefighter.”

“—and you were *one second* away.”

I threw a dinner roll at him. “You wish.”

But he’d made some good points, I’d give him that. Maybe a few too many.

Hernandez dug into his pocket for his wallet. “Man! I just lost twenty bucks.”

The other guys pulled theirs out, too. “Never bet against Hanwell,” Big Tom said, giving me a wink.

The money came out and got shuffled around the table as the guys paid up, counting bills and collecting them.

I watched Hernandez pay out and punched his shoulder again—harder this time. “You bet against me?”

He shrugged with a sly smile. “I know what I know. I’m irresistible.”

Up onstage, the program was starting.

An emcee fired up the mic as the waitstaff cleared away the plates and people rerouted their attention to the stage. “It’s my great pleasure,” the emcee said, “to help honor our city’s fire and rescue heroes here tonight.”

A huge cheer roared up from the room. Then the guys at my table started chanting, “Cassie! Cassie! Cassie!”

I shushed them and made a “cut” gesture at my neck.

But I smiled anyway. Knuckleheads.

I gave Hernandez one last glance. Just a prank. And it had been a good distraction.

Then we all got quiet, I sat straight in my chair, and all my nervousness roared back. I clasped my hands together on my lap, noted how cold they were, and then took a second to appreciate the ridiculous fact that nothing scared me—except, apparently, stages at banquets.

I stared straight at the podium as they started calling up the honorees—fully dreading the moment when I’d hear my name.

I was wearing pumps, of all things, with my dress uniform, and I was having a few issues with balance. I was not exactly a person who loved the spotlight. Plus, I'd have to speak. We'd been given two minutes each to say our thanks at the microphone, and two minutes seemed impossibly short and impossibly long at the same time.

I had conscientiously typed out a paragraph I figured I could read out loud. How hard was reading, after all? Though as I watched the other honorees come up and read their prepared remarks, I started to think it must be harder than I remembered. They stumbled, mumbled, lost their place, and tripped on simple words over and over. I found myself wishing I'd practiced in advance.

Because I was the youngest-ever honoree for my award, and a female, of all things, and because this was the most prestigious award the department gave, and because the 'School Bus Angel' was all over the news, they'd saved my award for last. I was the grand finale of the night. The mayor himself was going to come out, hand me the award, and bask with me in the glory.

I counted down as all the others walked up and then back to their places, my chest feeling tighter and tighter with nervousness.

Finally, it was my turn. Almost done. I just had to get through the next five minutes, and I could go home to my plants and my smooth sheets and my quiet, locked apartment.

"Folks, we've saved the best for last," the emcee said, as the guys from my shift all started whooping and drumming on the table. "Our final honoree is the top of the top, and to present this last award, we've got a very special treat. A VIP is joining us tonight. We had hoped to have the mayor with us, but even though he got called away at the last minute on city business, never fear! We've got the next best thing! It's now my pleasure to cede the podium to Austin's very own homegrown city councilman—"

The emcee turned to gesture toward the side of the stage, and in that second's pause, I heard myself say, "Oh, shit."

Not the mayor.

This was bad.

Because I just knew—somehow—the name he was about to say next. I felt it coming.

And I was right.

“Heath Thompson!” the emcee called then, in a loud, *Price Is Right* announcer’s voice as if some lucky audience member had just won a new washer-dryer.

And then it was like everything downshifted into slow-mo. The sounds of the words got deep and syrupy, and the clapping started to sound like five hundred people beating on snare drums, and I watched in disbelief as the guy himself, Heath fucking Thompson, walked out from stage left to join the emcee there.

Actually, “strutted” was more like it.

I’d know that strut anywhere: The utterly infuriating gait of a man who fully believed the world would always let him have anything and everything he ever wanted—and had never once been told any different.

Should I have seen it coming? Should I have known better than to dare to want something for myself? Should I have assumed from the start that life would find a way to ruin this moment?

Because I didn’t. I hadn’t. I was so gobsmacked to see Heath Thompson step onto that stage that I forgot to breathe. Entirely. Until Hernandez saw me frozen there and slapped me on the back.

Then, everything I knew blurred into one tiny pinprick of comprehension: At the proudest moment of my entire life, one that was supposed to honor everything I had worked so hard to achieve and become, I was going to have to receive my award from Heath Thompson.

Heath. Thompson.

The only person in the world who could ruin it.

Two

AS HE TOOK the stage—commanded it, really—the roar of the crowd mutated in my head into a howly, wind-on-the-moors sound that drowned everything else out.

The change in sound was so real, I wondered at first if something had gone wonky with the sound system. I looked around, but nobody else looked disturbed. Nobody else looked like something crazy—something impossibly insane—was happening before their eyes.

Everybody else was fine.

That's when I decided it had to be a nightmare. There was no way this moment was actually happening. As I embraced that idea, the weird howl in the room became comforting proof that I must be fast asleep, tucked in bed, making it all up in my head. As usual.

I wasn't really here in a hotel ballroom at the proudest moment of my life about to receive Austin FD's highest service award—from *Heath Thompson*.

Life couldn't possibly be that unfair.

But there he was. Still. Talking into the microphone, up onstage, in the lights, like reality was his birthright. I blinked again, as if I could

clear my eyes. He was a thousand miles away. My eardrums started to throb, and then, just as I heard his distant, almost unintelligible voice call my name, or thought I did, I felt nausea welling up through my torso—from my stomach to my rib cage to my collarbones to my throat—

Hernandez poked me on the shoulder.

I turned to him and, in slo-mo, he pointed at the stage and waved me toward it.

I looked around. Every face in the room was trained on me. Smiling. Clapping. Cheering. The guys on my shift stood up for a standing O, and the rest of the room followed. My next move was clear: I'd won an award, and now all I had to do was one simple thing: Walk up to the stage and take it.

I swallowed, and stood. Mind over matter. Just stand, walk, take plaque. Simple. *Simple*. I swallowed again, then stood, cursing those ridiculous pumps, and moved through the crowd, winding past the tables like a blinking fish through a coral reef.

Somewhere between my seat and the stage, I dropped my prepared remarks. I felt them flutter from my fingers, but it was like it had happened to somebody else. *Oh well*, I thought. *No speech, then*. Least of my worries.

There was a step at the stage. Then another, then another. My ankles wobbled on those dumb heels. Then I was approaching the podium, my stomach feeling heavy inside my torso, like a water balloon tied to my rib cage.

I wouldn't look at him, that's all. Or touch him. And I wouldn't stop moving. I'd keep in motion like a shark, and I'd keep my eyes averted at all costs. Get in, get out. Don't stop. Don't look back. Pretend it's not happening.

Just take it and go. Take it and get to the back of the stage. I coached myself through this the way I'd coached myself through every other hard thing in my life. The way I'd add just one more mile to a ten-mile run, or one more set of reps in the gym. I'd navigated a collapsing staircase. I'd held a dying man's skull together. I'd jumped from a collapsing roof. I could do this.

I stopped in front of the podium, eyes fixed on the plaque itself, trying to mentally Photoshop the person holding it out of the frame.

Was I actually going to have to shake Heath Thompson's hand?

No. No way.

I could make myself do a lot of things, but I wouldn't make myself do that.

I saw the plaque come my direction in slo-mo and clasped my fingers around it, trying to ground myself by focusing on how solid and heavy it was. *What wood was that? Oak? Walnut?* It weighed a ton.

Take plaque, move away. But before I could, Heath Thompson—*Heath Thompson*—grabbed my free hand. To shake. The way every other presenter had done for every other recipient.

Except he wasn't every other presenter, and I sure as hell wasn't every other recipient.

Heath Thompson had made sure of that.

The shock of his touch was like a burn from an electrical wire—sharp and mean and fast. It registered as pain somehow, and then, in response, on instinct, I looked up into his face.

There he was. older and beefier and more hair-sprayed than he had been ten years ago, and wearing a smug city-councilman expression, as if the entire world existed for him to grandstand in.

I knew in that instant: He recognized me.

He'd just read my name out to three hundred people, so it stood to reason.

But I'd changed a lot—my hair was darker, and shoulder length now, and I'd worn it down when I was younger but now wore it tight back in a braid or a bun every day. I'd gotten contacts. And I had about twice the muscle mass I'd had in high school. Not to mention my dress uniform, its blazer buttoned all the way up with its padded shoulders and little crossover tie.

Something about that combination—his beefy, self-satisfied face, his pompous grin, his self-serving posture, and then, finally, the recognition in his eyes . . . Let's just say it altered my emotional landscape. In a flash, my insides shifted from cold shock to burning rage.

There must have been a photographer there, because Heath Thompson was squeezing my hand, holding me in place, smiling offstage, and holding a pose.

Somewhere far off, I heard Big Tom from the crew shout, “Give ‘em hell, Cassie!”

And then, just as I was congratulating myself for holding it together—for coping with such grace under the most astonishingly horrific circumstances—I felt something pressing against my butt.

Not just pressing against it, like I’d backed up to the podium or something. *Cupping* it.

The only thing it could possibly be was Heath Thompson’s other hand.

The fact of it hit, the flashbulb popped, and then that hand gave my butt-cheek a bold, entitled, proprietary squeeze.

And I lost it.

Given everything, it’s a miracle I didn’t literally kill him.

There was nothing else I could possibly have done. I turned and whomped Heath Thompson on the head with my oak-and-metal plaque so hard, I knocked him unconscious and gave him a concussion.

I NEVER WANTED to be a firefighter.

There are people who dream their whole lives of becoming firefighters. There are little kids who ogle fire trucks, and wear toy fire hats, and dress up in bunker gear for Halloween.

Boys, mostly.

I was not one of those kids.

In fact, on career day in kindergarten, I famously announced my goal of growing up to be the Tooth Fairy. Which I still think would be a great job.

I never even thought about being a firefighter before it happened.

And it happened essentially by accident.

I was on my way to med school, in fact, planning to be an ER doc. I was a freshman in college looking for a campus job, and I got recruited by a cute guy in my dorm to work as an EMT for the university. It was

an easy sell. I needed practice working in medicine, and I also needed a job. Done.

Once I started working as an EMT, I didn't want to stop—like I didn't even want to go off shift. I loved everything about it, from the medical training to the sirens to the life-or-death moments.

It wasn't just the adrenaline. There was something profoundly satisfying about helping people—about stepping into these terrible moments over and over and making things better. The feeling of doing something that actually mattered was addictive. I'd had lots of jobs over the years—dishwasher in a pizza joint, lifeguard, dog sitter—but I'd never had a job like that.

My roommate, in contrast, had a campus job serving fro-yo.

No comparison.

Being an EMT was a whole new world. It was glorious. I stuck people with needles, and pumped chests for CPR, and reset bones. My first week on the job, I helped save a physics professor in cardiac arrest with a defibrillator.

Not bad for ten dollars an hour.

All to say, it just turned out I had a knack for it.

When I wasn't on shift, I was waiting until I could go back on shift. I worked holidays. I covered for coworkers. I dreamed about lights and sirens.

I did that for two years before my supervisor recommended I get certified as a paramedic and go to work for the city. All firefighters are EMTs—firehouses handle far more medical calls than fires, in fact—but not all are paramedics. It takes a year of extra training to get your paramedic certification, and you have to really love medicine to do it, or be “forced” because the department needs you.

I really loved medicine.

I worked as a paramedic for a year, and then, after graduation, another supervisor talked me into applying to the Fire Academy.

Things just kind of snowballed from there.

Somewhere along the way, I realized this was what I was born to do.

There are lots of qualities that make a good firefighter. It doesn't hurt

to be big and strong, because that makes it easier to handle all the equipment. It's nice if you're good-natured and low-key, because it's the textbook definition of a high-stress job. Wanting to help people is a plus. And if you happen to deal with anxiety by running around in your underwear, or dumping water on people's heads, or wrapping toilet bowls with Saran Wrap? Even better.

You'll fit right in.

Oh, and if you can be a guy, be a guy. That's definitely an advantage.

I was not a guy.

But I was a really good firefighter.

Maybe that sounds cocky, but you just know when you're good at something, you know?

For one thing, I was the top student in my graduating class at the academy. The number one top student. I knew the Merck Manual backwards and forwards. I could start an IV in my sleep. Plus, I was strong—for a girl, and even for a lot of guys—and I didn't get offended easily. I was totally comfortable in the firehouse with the guys. I wasn't shy. I didn't get scared. I never panicked. I had a single dad who was a high school basketball coach—so I grew up playing hoops constantly, and talking trash, and beating the boys at everything.

All that helped, but what really made me a good firefighter was a funny little personality quirk that I never even knew I had until I started using it. It takes guts to walk into a burning building or staunch an arterial bleed—no question. But it also takes a special kind of brain. Firefighters think differently from other people, and this is especially true of me. Because when everybody else is panicking, when the entire whole world is freaking the heck out—that's when I get calm.

It's like some circuit in my brain is reversed.

Everybody in the fire service has this reverse wiring to some extent. When herds of panicked people are running out of a burning building, that's when we're calmly strolling in.

But I've never met anybody who has it like I have it.

Normal humans see the explosion, or the flames, or the twenty-four-

car pileup and think: *Run!* My brain just thinks: *Huh. Cool.* Everybody else is sprinting away, wild-eyed and shrieking, because that's what evolution wants us to do—get the hell out of there. I just slow to a stop and look around.

I must get a tiny squirt of adrenaline—but only just the right amount. Enough to make me beautifully, brilliantly alert. Everything comes into sharp focus and gets quiet, and I can see what's happening with exquisite clarity. For everyone else, it's a blur, but for me, it's details, textures, colors, connections. Insights.

Sometimes I feel like that's the only time I ever see anything clearly.

Anyway, that's why I didn't wind up an ER doc. You don't want me *just after* the emergency. You want me *during* the emergency.

It's a strange thing to know about yourself, but there it is: I'm at my very best when things are at their very worst.

And so, even though my dad was sure the “fireman thing” was “a phase,” four years later, here I was, still at Station Eleven in Austin, still the only girl on B-shift—except for our badass female captain—and still loving every impossible minute.

THAT'S WHY THE night I got the valor award should have been just another easy, inevitable step in my unblemished, pure-hearted firefighting career.

But I have to confess something. I didn't just hit Heath Thompson, city councilman, with that wooden plaque when he squeezed my butt.

I beat the crap out of him.

I pummeled him. I *mauled* him. Even after I'd cracked his head with the plaque itself, I landed a punch to the face, a knuckle strike to the windpipe, and at least one jab to the solar plexus before adding few good kicks to the ribs with my pumps after he hit the floor. Nobody saw it coming, not even me, so his reaction time was a little slow—which worked to my advantage.

I cut my hand on his teeth, but it was worth it.

I don't remember this part, but according to Hernandez, the whole time, I was shouting, "Touch me again, douchebag! Touch me again and see how long you live!"

He did not touch me again.

Lucky they didn't book me for assault. I could have—should have—spent the night in jail. It's no small thing to pummel a city official into a bloody, quivering pulp on a stage in front of three hundred of the city's bravest public servants. That kind of thing just doesn't happen every day. Or ever.

Of course, it's no small thing to grab a firefighter's ass, either.

They whisked us both off the stage and bandaged his face and my hand while the emcee tried to get everybody to sit back down and finish their desserts. The police came, but Heath Thompson refused to press charges. "It's fine, it's fine," he kept saying through his swollen lips. "Just let her go."

I bet he wanted them to let me go. There were news cameras out in the lobby. And a thousand bucks says I wasn't the only thing he had to hide.

In the end, they snuck us both out the back door. I don't know what kind of strings he pulled, but nothing about it showed up in the papers. I'm not sure, ultimately, if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Later that night, after I was home, and had showered and bandaged up my hand in my quiet apartment, Hernandez showed up at my door.

I saw him through the peephole—holding my cell phone in one hand and my plaque in the other. In all the commotion, I'd left them behind.

It took me a minute to undo all the dead bolts. When I swung the door open, he held out the plaque—tied in a plastic bag.

"It's pretty bloody," he said.

I nodded as I took it. Then I reached for my phone, but he held it back, out of my reach.

"What just happened?" he asked, not crossing the threshold.

I looked at my phone held hostage in his hand. I shrugged.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded.

“Do you want me to stay for a bit?”

I shook my head.

“You knew that guy in high school?”

I nodded again.

Hernandez assessed me for what felt like a long time. Then he said, “Am I guessing right that he has something to do with why you never date anybody?”

I held his gaze until he had his answer.

Then he nodded, like, *Okay*. He let out a definitive sigh. “Nice work, by the way. They took him to the hospital.”

I gave a tiny little smile. “I try.”

“My offer still stands, you know,” Hernandez said.

“Offer for what?”

He gave a little shrug. “For company. *Actual* company.”

I knew he meant well. But I shook my head. “I’m better always on my own.”

Next, still holding my phone, he opened his arms to offer a hug. “Come on. Bring it in. If anybody ever needed a hug, it’s you.”

I would have said no to that, too. But just then, my phone rang.

That was it. The moment was over. He held out the phone to me, I took it—and then I used it to salute a farewell before I re-dead-bolted the door and answered it.