

VEILED IN BRICK by Eliza Modiste

EXCERPT

A bottle floats in the ocean, the letter haphazardly rolled and stuffed inside of it hiding a message for a select few deemed worthy to read. It pitches and yaws through the waves, safely holding the contents as it aimlessly wanders. Storms pass. Lightning strikes. And yet the bottle remains the same, protecting the fragile sheet of paper from the elements. The bottle is impenetrable. The waves crash and the rain pours, but it remains the same—unyielding. Bobbing along as if the glass is unbreakable.

Until someone comes along, grabs the bottle by the neck, and throws it to the ground.

The seemingly everlasting protection that was once in place is shattered to pieces, and the letter is stolen. There's no telling if it's in good hands. It could be ripped to bits in the blink of an eye—soaked in acetone rendering the ink unreadable—burned until it's reduced to ash. Of course, not all things are what they seem...but the possibility of the letter being destroyed sounds more likely than any other outcome.

I'm biased, though, because it's me. I'm the bottle. And I just wanted to be left the f**k at sea.

Ugh. I'm being dramatic—I should rewind to the point where I stopped recognizing my life. I could go as far back as when I was packing up my belongings to follow my best friend, Claire Branson, to Salem, Virginia. The venture across state lines from North Carolina wasn't what caused my head to spin, though, for our lives were both as normal as they could possibly have been.

Normal. We got an apartment. We had jobs. She fell in love with her bartender coworker, Luke Turner. Her ex-boyfriend and old accomplice Colton Langdon blackmailed her for a heaping pile of money that she didn't have, leading our newfound group to set up a sting operation for the drug dealer to whom Colton was indebted. We watched a man die.

You know. Typical girl things.

Traumatic as those events were and as often as I unintentionally revisited the horror in my mind, they weren't what caused my world to feel like it turned upside down. It was the *goddamn men*—and I was currently sandwiched between the two that most often sent my mind reeling.

“I found a nice place to get dinner—”

“*This* shit again?”

The voices came forth from either side of me, and I slowly returned my empty bottle of cider to the counter. I took my time, rotating it atop the coaster as if I wanted to view the label. I swallowed the last sip that I held in my mouth and looked toward the second voice, Liam Cohen.

My dear friend and across-the-hall neighbor's mouth was twisted in an amused grin that stretched the scar above his upper lip. The expression softened my annoyance, but only just. I

shoved his brawny shoulder, and I was certain that the resulting sway of his body was one that was put on for show.

“Will you *be nice?*” I admonished him, and his dark eyes damn near sparkled.

“What is it,” Liam leaned forward to speak past me, “the fiftieth time that you’ve asked her out?”

I sighed, clamping my teeth together to prevent myself from responding sarcastically, *‘This week.’*

“She said no, Jay,” Liam added. “She doesn’t do—”

“Dates,” I finished Liam’s sentence for him as I twisted myself to look at James Turner. “I don’t *do* dates.”

The grimace on James’ face that was clearly directed at Liam vanished as I looked into his grey eyes. He smiled, his crooked nose scrunching up, and he tucked his hair behind his ears.

“I know,” he replied, confidence unwavering. “You’ve said so before.”